

The Last of Our Days

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Abstract

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This is an exploration of character and the depth of trauma. Sectioned into three parts to help guide the reader along, this book works to mess with the reader's expectations and perhaps toy with their heartstrings. It is a science fiction exploration influenced by both personal experiences and dream-inspired artifacts. Much of this work was created through conventional means such as a character generator and the building of sculpted aliens.

Part 1

Cory wasn't sure what life would be like two years post-undergrad. She did not envision herself debating whether to start a "comedy" podcast on how it was the literal end of the world. Two years of studying to become a library assistant landed her exactly where her mother expected her to be at 28 years old: an unemployable nobody with a roommate trying to make ends meet. She checked her wallet again, only 1 pound left for groceries this week it seemed. She and Eleanor were yet to pay the eclectic bill and her bank account only had 5 pounds left in it. She was slowly slipping through society's gaping cracks of infrastructure and depression. Well, at least the podcast ran well in its fifth episode, and she was determined to at least get something right so she could rub it in her mom's wrinkled, old face. She was still suspended in disbelief at the fact that no one seemed to freaking care that their lives were all on the final chopping block. The threat of World War IV hung in the air, and scientists suspected it wouldn't be long before Ilvad launched some sort of biological weapon on the entirety of the Western world.

She spent the last week and a half trying to find a grocery store that still sold bananas, with no luck. The air was too hot, and there wasn't enough rain to sustain most plants for cultivation. Smoke from the summer wildfires still hadn't lit up, even with the start of winter frost set in over the northwest. Everyone had been hoping for some rain with it being the start of October, but there was not even a drizzle, and it was already the 15th. *Three weeks of constant smoke from the fires; hopefully three weeks of rain will get rid of it*, Cory thought, as she passed by a baker's stand. He had the portable air conditioner beside him, blasting air well onto the street. He was undoubtedly trying to entice more customers with the scent of freshly baked bread and pastries, but all it did

was blow the smell of smoke around. Cory could practically see the specks of dark black blobs bobbing up and down with the light-sifting breeze. She silently thanked herself for buying another box of surgical masks from the store the other day. She couldn't understand how people were walking around without them with all the black specks looming in the air like flies. Some people occasionally covered their ears from an unseen noise. Cory's ears were faintly ringing. Still, everyone was taking them in by the mouthful, unfazed.

Almost everyone stopped wearing masks when the post-secondary pandemic hit. So many people were numbed to it at this point. No one was making jokes about robbing banks or pointing fingers at the girls in town, who were still insistent on covering their hair and faces. The last part she was particularly thankful for.

She stopped for a moment, taking a breath.

It can't really be the end of the world. Can it be?

Are no more bananas at the market a sign of the apocalypse?

Nope, I do not think so.

Her thoughts raced and raced, contradicting themselves as they crashed into each other like speeding trains. Eleanor kept reminding her that she was too deep a thinker. Eleanor also said that it would be a promising idea to go back to therapy.

The news was broadcast in a shop across the street. The mobile radio bot played as it hovered in the air next to the newsstand owner at the edge of the interaction. It had been three weeks since the minor airstrike in Syfolk Tamruk, and torched bodies were still being displayed across the newsfeeds of the bots nearby. Singed and mangled corpses were pulled away from the rubble of demolished buildings. Black specks floated

in the air and caught in Cory's lashes. There were times when she suspected that they were not bits of ash from the commits that somehow managed to land in Wesling. The news was interrupted by a weather forecast; evidently, the debris was making its way further north, even to Sivren and onward to Hydnir. A gust of wind whistled past Cory's ear and her ears started ringing again for the fifth time today. Still, no one seemed to notice how odd the air was. Even though they never had to deal with such poor air quality.

Cory walked past a fruit stand, and one of the pairs of casual shoppers was whispering under their breath. It was a pair of ladies dressed in drab grays, around forty-five or so. Cory could have sworn she heard something about stipends for working at the local grain mill. One of the ladies scoffed, clutching her brown shopping bag.

"Yeah, but that's outdated now. With the developments in the field, you need a degree in bioengineering! You can only buy a piece of stale bread from the market for 500 piastres."

It seemed that local politicians' attempts to bribe the general populace back to work were not looking so great. Cory thought back to the news feed broadcast in the early morning stating that 90 percent of the populous living in the country were now considered to be living below the poverty line. On the news the other day it was. It was all almost laughable, this slow-playing collapse of resources and the job market. Cory wished the world would end sooner. Only so she would not have to watch everyone fight over what little scraps were left. Still, it's no use complaining about how fast the world decided to keel over and die. Anyway, all of this was secondary in Cory's mind. Or at least it should have been.

Why no bananas? Why?! Cory's stomach gurgled in anticipation of the long-craved banana bread. By Allah, she could taste the moist crumbs and butter on the tip of her tongue. She wandered through three stores. And then to one questionable black market behind an old grain mill on the eastern flank of the town. Still no bananas. Cory momentarily reconsidered calling Eleanor to report the failed culinary mission but then thought better of it. It was no use bothering them at work when they had more important calls to manage at the station. The walk to the old house was uneventful; the whole town had gone into a bit of a slump with the poor air quality. Fewer and fewer people were leaving their houses to go on walks. The whole neighborhood was quiet this past week where there would normally be children running down the street laughing and screaming.

Cory and Eleanor's next-door neighbors had not been outside in the past five months. Although Cory suspected that it had something to do with Mr. Sayyid's recent decision to take a hiatus from his clinical practice, Mrs. Sayyid's parents died suddenly of pneumonia. They had also recently lost their beloved orange cat, Mishmish, who used to lay on Cory's back porch. The cat's need to come over so often was undoubtedly a less-than-subtle ploy for treats and head scratches from Eleanor. Who was, in the best way possible, a sucker for cute furballs. Keying into the house, Cory noted that she should stop by the neighbor's house when Eleanor gets off work.

Shuffling through the doorway, the door groaned and scraped against the gray sand and lime bricks. This thing never did sit right in the door frame. Gingerly toting off her shoes, Cory strolled down the small hallway and took a left turn into the kitchen.

The small square window above the kitchen sink had opened a crack, and black specks floated lazily. About a dozen or so fell into the sink. Other black spots floated across the kitchen and stuck themselves in the refrigerator. The kitchen island. The countertops. They littered the floor in its entirety. Cory's ears rang faintly so quietly she almost didn't notice it as she made her way to the window.

Every step Cory made resulted in a squelch and a pop. The sound was like that of a balloon squeaking against a wet surface and popping. Cory shut her eyes so tight she was sure they were sinking into her gray brain matter. Her whole body gave a sudden, involuntary twitch, and her hands clenched into fists at her sides. *By Allah, the merciful, that noise hurts.* Cory contemplated shouting obscenities but opted to clench her jaw, run across the kitchen, and slam the window shut. It was painful to sweep and mop up, with every step ringing through the otherwise quiet kitchen.

Finally done and feeling peculiarly drained, she took off her jacket and let it sit pooled on the kitchen countertop. Strands of tight curls fell into her eyes and tickled the bridge of her nose. Half-heartedly, she attempted to comb them back behind her ears, knowing they would not stay there unless she collected an army of bobby pins to keep the uncooperative strands nailed to her head.

Trudging down the hall into the living room, she tugged off her socks, trying to ignore the cold feeling of the floorboards draining what little warmth was in her feet. The bottom of her once light, fluffy teal socks were now oozy ink black and smelled of fungus. She turned the offending garments inside out, wadded them into a ball, and tossed them aside. She noted that she should take them to the laundry room later before unceremoniously flopping onto the old beige couch and lifting three blankets from the

side compartment Eleanor lovingly called “the box of winter fluff,” which housed all the spare and collected blankets. She quickly wrapped herself in a blanket of chrysalis.

It was quiet and dark; Cory could have sworn that she heard a pin drop. Startled, she opened her eyes, half expecting to find herself sprawled on the living room floor, having fallen off the couch in her sleep. While she did find herself on the ground, it did not feel as smooth as the living room flooring usually is. The ground felt gritty and rough under her fingers. She could have sworn that bits of gravel had somehow managed to get under her fingernails.

Standing up and brushing herself off, Cory took a moment to notice that the air was heavy, making her head pound and her lungs constrict. The room was pitch black, and Cory’s eyes refused to adapt to the lack of light. She stumbled about the room, arms stretched out in front of her, before taking small, shaky steps like a toddler. She was half-convinced for a second that she would manage to hit her foot on the edge of the coffee table and land face-first on the ground, but instead, she continued stumbling toward the end of the living room. Rather than the room ending with the archway that opened to the hall leading to the house entrance, Cory’s left hand let go of a cold metal knob on what felt like a wooden door.

Her stomach dropped as her mind reeled in a list of frightful possibilities. *Somebody* must have drugged her while she was asleep and brought her here; the realization hit that she didn’t know where she was. She felt a cold sweat trickle down the back of her neck. Her hand shook as she turned the handle, half expecting to be met with either a dark, twisted ascending staircase or an empty warehouse instead.

The door parted with an ear-ringing screech so loud that Cory flinched back a couple of steps and nearly grasped her ears in protest. Ice-cold air rushed into the room and tossed her short curls back wildly. The doorway led to a sudden crumbling drop. The wind was howling so loudly in her ears. Everything was too loud, too cold, and too dark. She shut her eyes for a moment, trying to catch her breath. Opening her eyes, her head felt empty, like someone had dumped out all her thoughts. Her heart was pounding, and her ears rang so loud that even if she could think straight, she suspected she would not hear her thoughts.

Lightning flashed in the distance, and the silhouette of a black structure was a little brighter than a burning star. The flash was just enough to gauge that the building was a castle; its massive silhouette was sturdy and imposing against the dark storm clouds surrounding it. In the breath of the wind, she thought she could hear a scream or a mix of voices crying in the wind. One of the distant castle's towers fell with a loud crash that shook the ground.

The stone brick beneath her feet groaned and cracked; dust and debris fell into her eyes and hair. Her chest gave a shutter, and she gave a spluttered cough, allowing more dust into her lungs. She hacked some more before her knees gave out unexpectedly with a rattle from her lungs or the ground beneath her feet; she wasn't sure which it was. Cory's chin hit the ground with a loud thud, rattling her teeth. Her nails grasped at the crumbling stone, her hands shaking as she could feel the blood drip from her chin and trail down her neck.

She let out a shuddering breath as she woke up on the living room floor, her chin aching, and Eleanor dragging her half-asleep body back onto the couch.

“That's the fifth time this week I came home to your face planted on the living room floor. Are you ok?” Eleanor asked as they softly folded Cory's blanket and gave her a couple of light concerned knee taps. Cory's head was still reeling from the apparent visual dream. She gingerly grasped her jaw and moved it gingerly from side to side, hoping it wasn't dislocated. To her surprise, it wasn't, and her hand came back free of blood, but the skin felt tender, and she suspected that it would grow puffy and bruised in no time.

“Yep, I'm fine. Just the usual dream, nothing special.” Cory could feel Eleanor's eyes scanning her face for any signs of deception, and she seemed to find none. The other girl let out a quiet sigh, muttering something under her breath that Cory couldn't catch, and still blurry-eyed with sleep, she decided not to push it.

“So, how was work?”

“Fine, office day, just manning the desk, as usual. No one called in any emergencies, which I was surprised by given how much the chief kept going on and on about the drought and the amount of ash in the air,” Eleanor said, untying her long black hair and running her fingers through it before taking a seat on the ottoman beside the low, sitting coffee table.

“Do you think you're going to be able to sleep okay tonight given the nightmare and the fact that you slept so long?” For a quick second, Cory wasn't quite sure what Eleanor was talking about until she remembered Eleanor's work shift at the fire station for the day was until 9:30 p.m. Glancing out at the window overlooking the backyard, Cory couldn't make out the forest beyond their small, open yard.

Cory scratched her head, glancing out the window, trying to gauge when the sun would have set. The lawn was tiny, and the denseness of the trees was ominous given their size and density. They lacked a back fence but given the overgrowth of blackberry bushes and thicket of trees, they didn't see a need for it; the only barrier between them and the outside world was the grove of trees and neighbor's fences. There was a soft brush of wind that rustled the tree branches just enough for Cory to hear the creaking of the branches in the wind. For a moment, Cory thought she saw a flash of something in the low bushes closest to the lawn, but just as fast as a blink, it was gone. *Probably a raccoon or coyote*, Cory noted thinking about the Sayyids' missing cat.

“Cory, *hey Cory?* You spaced out on me again?”

“What? Oh yeah, I think I should be fine... Do you know where Aya went? I didn't see her when I came home.”

“Oh, yeah, I took her to work with me. I figured you'd be out all day. I thought it would be best if one of us kept an eye on her. I think she's still chilling in her bed in the laundry room. Those meds the vet gave her wiped her out!”

“Are you sure you gave her the right amount? You know we're supposed to measure the stuff based on her weight right? - Not the breed she is.”

“Yep, though I don't get how we'd give her meds based on pedigree. What would we do exactly, just add a bit to her food based on what percentage of GSD, Rottweiler, and whatever other breeds she might be mixed with?”

“I'm sure they'd have a separate system for mutts if that's how they wanted us to administer it.”

"Yeah, well, I'm hungry and need to unwind. Any ideas for dinner?" Eleanor stretched and plodded over to the kitchen.

Cory sighed as her stomach grumbled. The nightmare had left her feeling more tired than when she accidentally fell asleep, and her appetite had all but disintegrated despite her grumbling stomach.

Dinner was a reasonably quiet affair; the room was filled with fairly pleasant silence as Cory and Eleanor sat across from each other. Cory was actively maneuvering the lentil rice and elbow noodles on her plate in an attempt to convince herself that she had consumed more than half her usual small serving of food. Eleanor's green eyes felt like they were drilling themselves into her head as she stared at her dinner plate.

"So how is the new episode going?" Eleanor inquired quietly. The pregnant pause between Eleanor's question and its registration in Cory's ears was so palatable that it soured the food particles still in her mouth. It felt like bits of dust and fungi had slipped into the food and were now sitting on her teeth and beneath her tongue.

Cory let out a couple of breathy sighs, pressing the heel of her right hand into her temple, trying to produce the right words. "I've hit a bit of a roadblock recently, and I'm not quite sure how to navigate around it." Cory looked up briefly from her plate as she spoke.

Eleanor's brow was furrowed in concern, and she had placed her utensils down; her fingers twitched while resting on the small round dining table. Normally, Cory would expect Eleanor to gently reach out and grasp her hand comfortingly. Eleanor was always the kind to reach out instinctively; it was an under-the-table expected reaction at this point. Cory felt a little more surprised by it.

“Would you like some help? Anything I can do? Would-”

Eleanor’s fingers kept tapping on the table when a loud thump reached Cory's ears. A weight like a large sack of potatoes leaned against her legs. Glancing down under the table, she was greeted with big brown eyes. A set of “hyena ears,” as Cory was often fond of referring to them. A wet nose brushed her knee as the animal in question stared up at her. Usually, those big ears were cottony and covered in velvety black fur. Now the skin was scabby with flaking bits of skin and had irritated, red scratch marks. It seemed Aya still managed to keep scratching them somehow, despite the soft cone of shame on her neck.

“Hi sweetie, decided the laundry room was too boring? You wanted to come out and socialize with Mama, didn’t you?” Cory asked absent-mindedly, running her hand against the dog's side. The skin on the poor mutt felt paper thin, and bits of fur were coming off in tufts as she combed her fingers through them. She could feel the distinct ridges where the poor pup’s ribs would be. Cory’s heart sank into the pit of her stomach.

“You think going to the vet or the emergency clinic might be a good idea?” Cory asked, risking a glance at Eleanor, hoping her face would not reflect too much of what she was trying to avoid saying—what she was ultimately trying to avoid thinking. Aya’s large, fluffy black tail was thumping hard against Cory’s shin; they were both sure to have some bruising tomorrow.

“I can take her to the clinic tomorrow after work, but they’ve been busy these past few days. Lots of animals are having breathing issues and serious infections. I-”

“Are you trying to say that it’s not serious? Her ears are scabbed over again! Do you know if she ate anything at your work while you were taking phone calls?” Cory felt the urge to clench her jaw and her fists; her neck and back felt stiff.

“Of course, she ate at the office! I wouldn’t just let her go without food! Why are you so-”

“Well, why can I feel her ribs? Huh, Eleanor? Why do I feel her fucking ri—”

“There’s no need to swear at me. I’m just as upset about this as you are!”

“Are you? Are you really? Why the hell did you leave the kitchen window open then? Do you know letting all that smoke will just make her sicker? Why wasn’t Aya’s water bowl in the kitchen when I got home? Where’s her dog food, for crying out loud? I didn’t see it when you were wandering around the kitchen, opening every drawer and cabinet, pulling just about every pan, plate, seasoning, and ingredient around, making this!” Cory shoved her plate across the table, and her fork clattered.

“I threw the old dog food out, Cory! I called the vet while I was at work. *They recommended* I change the food brands! You know in case she’s allergic to something in the food!” Just as the words registered in Cory’s ear, everything clicked.

“You put the dog food and her bowels in the laundry room so she would not have to walk across the house to get something to eat.” Cory immediately slumped back into her and rubbed her knuckles against her forehead.

“Yep, and for the record, I didn’t open the kitchen window.”

“What do you mean you didn’t open the window?” Cory felt her stomach twitch, and she resisted the urge to look up and scowl. Eleanor didn’t answer and instead went back to eating quietly, seemingly ignoring the question.

Cory didn't remember seeing the kitchen window open when she woke up that morning and made herself breakfast. She shook her head, trying to decide whether she opened the window or unlocked it while washing the dishes in the sink. She had a foggy memory of absentmindedly opening the window before heading out to run the usual errands.

Cory looked down at her lap and noticed Aya had opted to lie down on her feet despite the chaos the humans were causing. Cory gave the dog a gentle scratch on her muzzle, which was rewarded with a soft, content sigh. No longer caring to finish eating, Cory opted to gather Aya off the ground. The dog made no protests when being lifted and carried upstairs to Cory's bed. Aya seemed pleasantly surprised at being granted permission to sleep on the bed, and her tail wagged aggressively. Cory guessed that the pup would keep it wagging all night if she managed to keep her energy up. Cory stayed awake under the covers, debating whether or not to help Eleanor with the dishes and attempt to finish their conversation like adults.

Cory couldn't remember going to sleep. She peeled her eyes open as light seeped through a crack in the shades and landed on her squinted eyes. A distinct weight was missing from the bed. Cory woke up quickly, remembering she had brought Aya to bed with her. Her heart sank when she glanced around, not seeing Aya lying on the floor of her bedroom, and sent an ache into the pit of her stomach. She ignored it, slowly peeling herself from her bed covers and getting dressed for the day.

Creaking in the floorboards of the room across the narrow hallway informed Cory that Eleanor was awake. Instead of going to the bathroom and freshening up she

grabbed a spare hairbrush from her dresser and combed it through her short, tangled hair.

Moments like this left her feeling detached; she imagined her mother combing her hair back when it was longer and avoiding her father as he got ready for work. Her mother would sit with her, combing her long hair, for a good forty-five minutes before asking Cory what she wanted for breakfast. She'd list off ideas in a vague manner: warm food or cold food, with milk or without? Something on a plate or in a bowl? The questions would spiral out until they came to a short list of options, and then they'd head downstairs just as her father would head out the door. No "Have a nice day," no kiss on the cheek. Just a silent exit from the house into the working world. Avoidance was her mother's favorite strategy when it came to disagreements. Avoid, avoid, avoid. Cory didn't think it was possible to turn out like her mother, despite all the conscious steps she took to avoid it. Still, on her bed, she sat, brushing her hair while going through lists of possibilities for breakfast.

A quiet knock on the door startled Cory mid-brush. She yanked the brush out of her hair so fast that she thought the bristles had dug into her scalp. Eleanor's green eyes were soft and pale-looking. Cory wasn't sure what to make of it. She half expected her to walk into the room and claim space on the bed. But instead, Eleanor just stood there, their eyes glistening as the light from the window shone through a gap in the window curtain. She swayed lightly in the doorway as if quietly asking to be let into the room, Cory didn't speak; her mouth became a trap door, her hands were idly messing with her brush, and her mind was still listing off possibilities for breakfast. Cory felt a slight

tingling in her throat and a taste in the back of her mouth similar to peppermint. She swallowed the urge to cough.

“Did Aya go into your room last night?” Cory absentmindedly placed the brush on the bed beside her. She rubbed her thumbs against her fingers, looking down, awaiting an answer.

“I don’t think so. She wasn’t in my room earlier. I think she hobbled downstairs,” Eleanor answered emphatically as the bedroom doorway creaked. They leaned against it and looked down the hall to the stairway.

So much for the avoidance tactic. Not that it would have been able to last throughout breakfast if Eleanor’s shift had moved back like it seemed to. Normally Eleanor would be out the door by now; heck, she’d probably be at the office, answering phone calls and doing her usual work stuff.

Cory went to ask what Eleanor’s work schedule was. There was a graininess grinding between her teeth like sand particles. Her tongue glided over her teeth to dislodge the grains.

“I don’t have work until 11:30 today. Marie picked up an extra shift at the desk. I’ll just be waiting around.”

Cory nodded silently, still trying to work the nonexistent grains from her back molars. Eleanor then quietly went down the hall and stairs, leaving Cory to finish her morning routine. Cory put her brush back in its place on the nightstand. Then she went into the shared bathroom and brushed her teeth. Her dark eyes looked almost empty, staring back at her through the mirror. Most mornings, still blurry-eyed, her eyes always seemed so dark and hollow. She paced the bathroom absentmindedly as she brushed her

teeth, avoiding looking into the mirror at her still scraggly hair and hollow eyes, with their dark circles partially causing them to sink into her face.

Walking around her body felt like a tense rubber band about to snap. The muscles in her arms, back, and neck were taut. *God, why do mornings have to stink so much?* She finished up in the bathroom and made her way downstairs. She found Eleanor in the kitchen. She got out of the waffle maker and was in the process of finishing making the batter for raspberry waffles. Cory was tempted to ask if Eleanor needed any help when she noticed that Aya wasn't in the kitchen.

“Was she in the laundry room?”

“I don't know. I didn't check. Maybe she went outside to roll around in the grass.”

Cory immediately retreated to the kitchen entranceway or hallway and glanced down into the living room. The blinds on the sliding door were closed. She couldn't get a look into the backyard, but there weren't any fresh tracks on the entrance mat. *Maybe she's chilling in the laundry room with the toys and blanket.*

Entering the living room, she gingerly walked past the coffee table and Eleanor's velvet olive-green reading chair. The doorway to the laundry room was in the corner of the living room, about 20 feet from the sliding door. Cory momentarily debated moving all of Aya's things into the living room to give her a shorter distance to walk between heading outside, going to bed, and eating her meals. She moved along. Her main goal was to check on the dog.

The laundry room was about half the size of Cory's bedroom. Against the wall to the left of the open door was an eighteen-year-old washer and dryer set, followed by an industrial-size sink. Across the room, they kept a hanging rack for their recently washed

clothes; they also had a box filled with donated clothing in the corner of the laundry room. Aya's bed was stationed against the bare wall; its fluffy daisy yellow complemented the pattern of the linoleum-scattered forget-me-nots.

Aya hid under her lime green blanket and contorted her body into the most awkward-looking pretzel. Her head rested on her shoulder, and her pink tongue hanging out of her mouth almost draped over her right eye as she snored. Her big ears were squished against her head. Cory snorted; she covered her mouth with her hands hastily and attempted to smother it before it became hysterical laughter. She did not succeed, not in the slightest. One second she was muffling a snort; the next she was doubled over laughing so much her ribs began to ache. The smell of raspberry waffles filtered in from the kitchen as Aya woke up with a snort, shook her head, and de-pretzeled herself.

Eleanor came back to the house with a stack of letters as long as her arm. A majority of them were, not surprisingly, addressed to Cory. She meticulously sorted through them as she sat at the coffee table. Some were letters from listeners of the podcast, and there were a few spam letters from a local landscaping company. A letter from her student loan servicer and a large stack from her mother, which she tried her best to dispose of before Cory could see the name attached to the return address.

“So—” Eleanor exclaimed with a heavy sigh, watching as Cory unceremoniously tore up and dumped her mother’s letters into the trash can.

“So what?” Cory answered, and the sound of shredding paper reverberated in the room for several minutes while Eleanor tried to come up with the right words.

“Are you going to ignore her forever?”

“Ignore who?”

“Ignoring your mother, who else?”

“As long as I need to, until she stops mailing me.”

“Don’t you think that’s a bit harsh?”

“HARSH?! Harsh, Eleanor, don’t you talk to me about being harsh after all the shit she’s pulled. I’m sick and tired of it!” Cory grasped the remains of the mail in her hands and tore the offending paper until the pieces were like little bits of confetti.

“Look, I’m sorry if I misspoke.”

“Understatement of the century.”

“I just think that holding this grudge over your mother’s head is a bit much.”

“You try not being interested in marriage and having her force her conservative lifestyle choices onto you; see how that makes you feel in a week.”

“I never said I think you should give marriage a try. You know I’ve always supported your desire to stay single. I just think-”

“You didn’t have to say it. It was written all over your face.”

“You know what I meant.”

“No, Eleanor, I’m not sure I did.” Cory let out a sigh and dropped the rest of the letters into a stack of papers set to be burned in the winter.

“If you want to be alone for the rest of your life, that’s fine. I just think you’re putting yourself in a box because you’re afraid. Don’t let your parents’ failed relationship keep you from finding happiness.”

“Yeah, whatever you say,” Cory said, trying to put aside the conversation as she headed upstairs to her room.

Cory waited in the cool sterile room on the bed seat in the doctor's office. It was, of course, a new office and a new doctor. Cory reexamined her notes and questions to ask the doctor. *What was their name again? McClenon, O'donal, it was something Celtic sounding.* Cory shook her head as the doctor knocked on the door.

"Come in!" she called

The doctor opened the door and walked in. She was stocky and small with a little bit of a limp in her left leg. The blinking light at the side of the Doctor's temple informed Cory the doctor was actively recording the appointment. Her hair was long and dark, rather thick and wavy. She took a seat in the swivel chair in the corner of the room.

"Now Cory Morrow, is it?" she asked sweetly

"Yes ma'am."

"Well, what brings you in today? I see you're overdue for your pelvic exam but we'll get to it later."

"I don't know if that's necessary. I'm not sexually active and I-"

The doctor's brows rose in surprise. "Oh okay, that's good to know. Do you anticipate being sexually active any time in the next six months or so?"

"No, don't anticipate having sex ever actually."

"I'm curious. Would you mind sharing why?"

"Yes, I do mind. I like my privacy if I'm being honest."

"Perfectly fine. As you know confidently we are not required to report to family members or anything unless there's a danger of bodily harm"

"Yeah, I know. All the same, I'd rather not get into it."

"Good, good. Well, what have you come to the office with today?"

“I’ve been experiencing a range of strange symptoms lately. I figured I’d check if it’s something to be concerned about.”

“Smart choice.”

“Thanks anyway-” Cory opened her notebook and glanced at the page. “My ears keep ringing whenever I go outside for anything. Sometimes they start ringing when I’m inside the house for seemingly no reason.”

“Have you been listening to loud music or watching TV with the sound systems blasting?”

“No, I rarely ever have the TV on and I don’t like listening to music all that much.”

“Okay, continue.”

“I keep getting these sudden chills. Now and then I’ll get this weird taste or feeling in my mouth almost like sand but not”

“Could you explain more? What do you mean by ‘like sand but not’?”

“It’s grittiness between my teeth like if you get a mouth full of sand but it has a different taste like overripe fruit or spoiled vegetables.”

“That’s certainly odd. I haven’t heard that one before. I’ll give you a good cheek swab to see if I can catch some of this gritty stuff.” She grabbed a small spatula and a test from the drawer beside her.

“Okay open up wide.” The cold metal scraped sharply against Cory’s cheek and down to her gums. The doctor scraped the sample into a test tube which she sealed with a plastic cap. “You’ll get the results emailed to you in about a week. Come back if the results indicate anything alarming or if you have any follow-up questions. As far as the

ear ringing, I'm not sure what can be done about that. Have you got your hearing tested this past year?"

"Yes, I did everything came back normal"

The doctor sighed. "Well, I'd suggest keeping to your routine and not listening to anything too loud, it could very well just be stress-related. Have you been stressed at all since the symptoms started"

"Well, I have been having a hard time finding a stable job."

"I'm willing to bet it's just stress-related. Go to therapy if that doesn't help. I don't know what to tell you other than it might be tinnitus, which is of course treatable with cellular therapy. If the symptoms don't clear up in a couple of months of therapy, schedule a follow-up appointment with me." The doctor handed Cory her business card.

The doctor inquired about any last-minute questions Corry simply stated that she had none. The doctor patted Cory lightly on the knee before heading out, smiling kindly at Cory as she left. Cory left the clinic fifteen minutes later feeling uneasy and strangely dismissed. Her arm hurt from the blood draw. She felt rather queasy on the drive home. Cory napped the rest of the day when she got home. Before Eleanor got back home, she checked on Aya who was lying in her bed in the laundry room. In the next week, she got her test results which reported no abnormalities in the cheek swab. She spent the afternoon feeling dejected and confused.

Part 2

Cory just spent four hours in the late afternoon attempting to choke out the 12th episode of the podcast. She gave up. Angrily, she wrestled her short hair into a ponytail, threw on a jacket and a pair of gloves, and decided she needed a break from being stuck inside the house. It was only natural for her to take Aya out for a walk. So that's what she settled on doing as she put on her olive green coat and sneakers and took Aya's collar off the coat rack beside the front door. It was so cold outside that Cory was surprised that it wasn't snowing. Her hands were now red and numb. Her ears, despite being covered with her headdress, tingled with the toughness of the cold air, like someone was pressing heavy buckets of ice against them.

Aya was bounding in front, her tail wagging high and her nose to the ground, aggressively sniffing away. The park trail was steep and bumpy, with lots of turns and dead ends. Cory let Aya lead them on their walk, something she started to regret as the realization snuck in that she had no clue how to get back to the parking lot. What did it matter in the grand scheme of things? The dog's health was still unstable. She deserved the day to frolic in the park, as it would probably be her last walk in a while.

Cory guessed that eventually, she'd be able to bump into someone who would be able to direct her back to the parking lot. It was shaping up to be a long day. This morning's letters were burning a hole in her pocket. Her mother's neat cursive scroll was unmistakable on the written address.

How did she manage to get my address, anyway? Did she suddenly get wickedly good at tracking IP addresses? Now she's probably hired someone to go snooping around the internet. Maybe she watched a couple of episodes of the podcast.

Aya suddenly jolted forward so aggressively that Cory nearly face-planted into the gravel trail. Aya was just moving forward, her eyes laser-focused ahead of her, barking madly and jumping forward with her entire body weight and a kind of energy that Cory was not sure the dog had been capable of in weeks.

“Hey, hey, you want to slow down a bit, maybe take a breather?” Cory asked, trying to refocus the dog's attention.

The dog continued to push forward, dragging Cory with her toward the dead end of the gravel trail and into the forested bush. Cory was half tempted to shout at the dog to heel, but something in her gut clenched when the dog dragged them both into the thistles of blackberry bushes. The forest was thick with thorns and cottonwood trees.

Cory's knitted sweater was getting snagged on tree branches and thorns everywhere she turned. Her legs were also getting torn through her jeans. Looking at Aya, a couple of scratches arched downward from the top of her muzzle down to the corner of her lips. Her tail was snagged on the tendrils of the thorn-covered bushes, but still, she pushed onward, as aggressive and fixated as a laser. Cory was half sure that her arms would be ripped out of their sockets. The other half of her was sure that one of them was going to have a coronary when they stopped this aggressive march to, who knows, where?

After about fifteen minutes of trudging through the thorns and trees, they finally reached a small clearing. A large evergreen must have fallen a few months ago; its stump was actively rotting away. There were patches of grass and dirt thirty feet from the rotten log.

Behind the rotten timber was a large black mound about the size of a yoga ball, with little indentations and several mounds the size of Cory's fist attached to it. A silver hue bounced off the *thing* where the light reflected off it. It pulsated globally, and the movement was not dissimilar to the water rippling in a loose water balloon.

Besides the large blob, a black strand-like gob slivered into the air like the tendril of a plant. It grew steadily and coiled in the air until it was about a foot and a half taller than the black blob next to it. The reaching tendril puffed up at its tip, much like a stuffed pillow. A couple of feet away, Cory could make out the form of a collapsed tendril of black and silver.

Cory's gut sank when she realized that Aya was completely fixated on the large bulb behind the rotten log and still pulling tight on her leash. Cory called for the dog to heel, but Aya continued pulling so tightly that Cory was practically digging into the ground. She tried tugging back on the leash and pulling her weight to stop Aya from dragging them closer to the strange masses, but the patches of dirt were moist and held little to no traction for her feet to grip on. The tension in the lead was so tight that Cory could feel its fibers tearing into her skin as Aya dragged them forward right as the dog climbed onto the log. Cory lost her grip, and her momentum sent her falling backward into the mud.

For a moment, Cory thought she had hit her head on a large rock. The back of her head was throbbing, and black spots clouded her eyesight. Blinking a couple of times, she sat up and rubbed the back of her head, looking for a gash or a cut, only to find none. Black specks floated in the air like confetti; some bits were as small as a grain of sugar, and others were like large black snowflakes drifting down into the ground. Her

ears and headache naggingly. Just where her head hit the ground, small bulbs molded together and pulsated the same way as the big mound. Little root-like structures sank into the mound and pulsated. Cory resisted the urge to gag when one of them spouted from their indentations a dozen little black flakes.

Just then, a shredding sound reached Cory's ears, like the sound of meat being torn off the bone. Cory looked back at Aya. The dog had torn a massive chunk out of the blob. It was still pulsating and was spouting so many black *spores* (Cory couldn't think of any other word to describe them). So many black flecks were floating in the air that Aya was practically being swarmed with them, covering her face, the back of her ears, just everything.

The hole where the chunk was torn from it had a black, shimmering glow. Aya shook the chunk still in her mouth, growling and rubbing her chest. She clawed at the thing like it stole her breakfast. The black, silvery liquid was smeared onto her muzzle and dripped from her shut mouth. Cory's heart raced as she commanded the dog to return and drop the glob in her mouth. Aya stopped her rampage and turned to Cory, a growl still rumbling in her chest.

"NO! Aya, that's enough; back here now!"

The dog dropped her prize and kicked the blob with her back right foot, her back paw sinking into the torn-out cavity with a splat before trotting over with her tail high in the air like a whooshing black flag. Cory watched closely as the dog came back to her side. Her ears were dry, the skin was cracking, and brownish blood was coating the inside of her ears as they hung from the sides of her head like little satellite dishes, and her long, usually pink tongue was lulled out the side of her mouth, dripping black. She

jumped over the log, black droplets dripping from her front paws and back leg. Aya sat beside her, waiting for Cory to grab the lead. Cory took a breath and closed her eyes for a moment. *How will I explain the mess in the house to Eleanor if they get home early?*

The walk home was not nearly as exciting as the initial walk through the park and forest had been, but Cory made due by keeping her lovable mess of a dog entertained by letting her off the leash every so often to check on a well-thrown stick or two. By the time they got home, it was already well past 3:30 p.m., and Cory really just wanted to take a nice, calming bath and light a couple of incense sticks. Sadly, she still had Aya to attend to and freshen up. Guiding the dog upstairs wasn't easy to do, and Cory cringed as bits of dried gunk speckled off Aya's paws and tail, sinking into the creme carpet as they walked up to the shared bathroom.

The next hour and a half had been a blur, after which Cory sank onto the bathroom tiles and spiraled out like a dead starfish, a grimy, damp towel covering her face. Aya had left the bathroom as soon as she was released from the tub, half haphazardly brushing and drying.

Cory remembered passively that the Sayyids had invited her and Eleanor to dinner tomorrow. Cory thought about the conversation about the couple's missing cat. After six months of absence, the orange tabby was still missing. No one had seen the tomcat in several weeks. Cory offered to hang up and put out fliers around town, but the couple didn't seem interested. Any mention of the cat seemed to cast a cold blanket over the couple.

Mariam Sayyid's posture became particularly subdued whenever the cat was mentioned; her shoulders slumped ever so sluggishly downward. The poor woman

looked so small that her dusty pink shawl suddenly seemed to cover her entirely, masking her figure and disguising her body language. Cory couldn't tell at the time if she was upset by the questions Cory was asking or just irritated and angry. Now, thinking back on the conversion, Cory couldn't help but notice how tired the other women looked. The young lady's dark brown eyes were sunken in. She had large bags that hooded her lower eyelids, barely hidden by a rushed mask of concealer and foundation.

Cory half-heartedly tried running her fingers through her hair, which was a short, tangled mess of curled knots. Taking off the moist towelette from her head, she turned to her side and begrudgingly peeled herself off the floor, still exhausted. If she was being honest, the bathroom tiles were cold and drab-looking. The grit in the space between the tiles was lightly stained and almost crumbly, so she made a mental note to touch it up in the next couple of weeks or so. She had half a mind to shower in case any of the black spores were still entangled in her hair. Instead, a few minutes later, she opted to give it a quick wash with some pine-scented shampoo. About fifteen minutes later, Cory was wringing the excess water out of her hair the best she could in preparation for quickly blow-drying it.

Cory took a glance at the clock in the living room. It was nearing midnight and Cory turned her head working out the kinks in her neck. She just finished writing the last line for the next episode of her podcast. Eleanor was still not back from their date which had her feeling a bit jarred and anxious. Cory heard the car screech into the driveway, then the sound of stumbling feet and the door being opened.

“Do you think Cory’s still awake?” a baritone voice asked.

“Yeah, she’s probably in the living room working on the next episode of the podcast”

“Well, do you need anything from me? I can stop by tomorrow. Wait, it's past midnight, isn't it? Shit, I have work at 6:30.”

“You can spend the night here if you want.”

“Thanks but I think the cats will have a panic attack or ransack the place if I don’t come home soon. Seriously, do you need anything? I can drop off something after my shift at work.”

“Naw that’s fine. I’ll be taking the bus back down to the auto shop tomorrow and that's between the fire station and the grocery store so I should be fine but thanks for the offer.”

“Oh, that’s right, you have work too. Should I go say hi or just—”

“You can just head out, I’m sure she’s pretty busy at the moment.”

“Okay well tell her I said hi. Are we three still up for the new exhibition at the museum on Saturday?”

“Oh yeah, definitely wouldn’t miss it.” She heard Eleanor kiss him on the cheek before he started back out the door. Eleanor wandered into the living room, unbound

their hair from the bun it was messily placed in, and took a seat on the couch beside Cory.

“How was the unexpected date?”

“It was pretty great! Yeah, after I called you about the car breaking down, Ishmael stopped by the fire station. He was doing some grocery shopping and decided to drop by. Invited me to dinner with his parents. We ate, talked, and played some board games. It was fun.” Eleanor was blushing a bit and combing her fingers through her hair absentmindedly.

“How is his family doing?”

“Oh they're all doing well, his brother got a new job working at the harbor in Trivil as the new dockmaster”

“That’s neat. What kept you out so late?”

“After a few board games, we headed out and a friend of his called about his apartment flooding. We helped drain the place using some buckets and a couple of mops. It took us a bit longer than expected cause we couldn’t initially tell where the water was coming from but we figured it out. Had the landlord turned off the water to the apartment and they’ll have someone over there tomorrow to hopefully fix the issue.” Cory noticed now that Eleanor’s pants were still damp from the mid-calf down.

“That sounds less romantic than I expected, I honestly thought you went to a drive-in movie theater and made out or went to Felrow Hills for a little bit of *alone time*,” Cory said playfully, wiggling her eyebrows and giggling a bit.

“Yeah, no. Friendly reminder, we are not hormonal teenagers”

“Yep of course.”

“I’m gonna hit the hay in a bit, I’m pretty beat.”

“Sounds good, talk more in the morning bestie”

Cory sat at her desk, pen in hand, her hands gray and shaking. The writing utensil kept slipping from her fingers as she attempted to start the letter.

Dear Mother,

I hope you are doing well. As you may know, I have been avoiding your phone calls and letters.

Fucking idiot, of course, she knows you've been avoiding her. Even she can't be that dense! Cory tapped her pen against her jaw before starting up again.

Dear Mother,

I hope you are doing well. ~~As you may know, I have been avoiding your phone calls and letters.~~ It has been a long time. How is the rest of the family doing?

She is doing everything rather violently, pressing the pen so hard against the paper that it gashes straight through the thin sheet. She could hear the tip of the pen scraping against the cedar grain of the desk in a manner as violent and volatile-sounding as nails scraping a chalkboard. Letting out a growl, she dropped the pen, tore up the paper into bits, and tossed them into the garbage can next to her desk.

Sitting back, she let out a frustrated sigh. *"I can't write the next episode of the podcast; I can't write this stupid letter. What the hell is wrong with me?"* Cory restlessly tapped her feet against one of the legs of the desk, trying to clear her head a bit. She debated for a moment about going back outside for another walk before checking the time. 4:58 pm The clock blinked in a blue neon digital glow. Glancing out the window, the sky was dark, and Cory's stomach grumbled. She leaned forward and rested her forehead against the sharp edge of the desk.

It's just as well; I guess there's no point in trying to mend smoldering bridges.

Cory turned her head and glanced at her recording headset, which sat on her unopened laptop. A thin layer of dust covered the headset's ear cushions and head strap. It had been a week or three since she worked on the last episode of the podcast. A brief chill traveled up her spine as she absentmindedly stuffed her hands into her brown, oversized turtleneck.

Her stomach grumbled obnoxiously. This was a reminder that she had not had anything to eat since last night. She suddenly got a craving for her mom's mashi. She could almost taste the stuffed grape leaves and eggplant, making her almost nauseous. *There is no way asking for the recipe will not end in some kind of fight and a demand to move back in with her.* Still, her stomach did not seem to care that fulfilling the craving would mean an inevitable call to her mother. She groaned as the craving slowly started to turn into nausea.

Why does my mother have to be such a boundary-trampling, irritating, narcissistic person? A knock at the window interrupted her thoughts. Glancing up at the window, she nearly fell out of her chair in shock. A large black blob about the size of a football crawled over the window and out of view. She could make out pinchers connected to a round head with eyes barely viable on the sides of it. The beast had a bulbous body with three spider legs on one side of its abdomen. A tentacle tail followed its pustule-like body. The tail moves jerkily behind, helping it grip the slippery, wet window.

She felt her stomach lurch, and she could feel last night's dinner in the back of her throat. Her left eye felt blurry like something got stuck in it. She felt as though she

was slipping out of her chair. Her thoughts drifted away from her. *My God, what was that? Do I need to get checked into a psychiatric ward?* She sat up shakily and momentarily made a move toward the window to open it up and scope the side of the house to get a better look at the thing. *Don't be a dumbass! That is how white cheerleaders end up dead in horror movies! Did Halloween horror movie marathons teach you nothing?*

Okay, maybe Mom was right. Maybe I'm psychotic and need to be medicated? Don't be stupid! Ok, maybe not medicated, but definitely in need of a psychologist, if not a psychiatrist, and a social worker to check if I haven't gotten batshit.

“Oh, come on, it is not any of that; I just need to have something to eat and some water. A lack of fluids and sleep can make people hallucinate, right? Right? Great, now I am talking to myself.”

“Maybe I need to take a nap? Do I need to take a nap?”

“I must be overeating a bit.”

“Yeah, I'm overreacting, just a tad bit.”

Shakily taking a seat by the foot of her bed, Cory took a couple of deep breaths, trying to avoid looking out the window in favor of looking in the opposite direction, towards the doorway of the bedroom and the hallway leading downstairs. The smell of dinner wafted into the room, and Cory's stomach grumbled in agitation rather than craving comfort food. The distinct smell of garlic and roasted vegetables told Cory that Eleanor had made a pot of lentil soup for the night's dinner. Cory suspected that they would be adding a lot of cayenne pepper to it. Garlic and cayenne pepper were always the combo of seasonings Eleanor leaned towards when they wanted comfort food. It

frankly did not matter if she was making a soup, pasta dish, or casserole, just if it had a bit of cayenne and garlic. Enough to make you start coughing the moment you took a bite.

Cory did not go downstairs for dinner and instead nervously continued working on the letter to her mother, which she was sure would result in receiving a new bombardment of phone calls and letters from her mother. The next morning, she got up very early to deliver it, making sure not to wake up Eleanor or Aya. Afterward, she went on a long walk, noting that the air quality was still poor and agitating her lungs. It seemed like whenever she went outside, her mouth filled with a gritty texture, like grains of sand were stuck between her teeth. Her ears rang too but that was just agitating background noise to her by this point.

Cory wandered down the stairs, feeling rather chipper after all that had been said and done. She had just finished writing up the script for episode 13 of the podcast and was headed downstairs to make herself a large plate of crepes and strawberries. She and Eleanor had been lucky on their last trip to the market; the strawberries in question had been on sale and an easy snag for the both of them. The only thing that was questionable about them was the black bulbs growing on the stem bases, which Cory was happy to chop off with the assistance of a paring knife.

The kitchen was quiet and vacant when she walked in and got started on breakfast. She was sure the smell of cooking would draw Aya right into the kitchen in a matter of minutes. Cory quietly hummed nursery rhymes in the meantime. When she was taking in her meal, she grabbed a lemon from the fridge. *This will do nicely.* She diced the fruit in half, squeezing some over the folded crepes, and grabbed some honey from the pantry to drizzle over the confectionary platter. All the while humming “Ring Around the Roses” and “I Hope It Rains Today.”

Halfway through her meal, a faint wheezing sound came to Cory’s ears. She looked up from her plate, expecting to see Aya standing in the hallway, her fluffy tail wagging. Instead, what she was greeted with was a large black face with multiple empty eye sockets staring at her. She nearly fell out of her chair in a panic. Just as soon as she saw it, the thing was gone. In its place, Aya stood in the doorway to the dining room, gagging, black foam dripping from her mouth. Her eyes were dull and vacant before she collapsed on the ground.

Cory rushed forward and placed her ear near the dog’s muzzle. There was no sound, and she quickly ran upstairs to get her cell phone from her desk. A few hours and

a distressed car ride later, Aya was put to sleep in the quiet office of the emergency vet clinic across town. The ride back home was deathly silent. Cory's hands gripped the steering wheel so tightly that her knuckles turned white. Eleanor tried their best to console her but to no avail. Within a couple of minutes of the car ride back home, rain began tapping the windshield of the car. *Great, now I have to dig wet soil. That should be a fun way to spend the afternoon.*

Once they got into the house, Cory immediately set to work, throwing away all of Aya's old things in the garbage bin. When that was done, she moved everything out onto the driveway to be picked up by the garbage people the next afternoon. Then came the grueling task of burying the body. She found a nice spot behind a blue spruce about 20 feet from the house. Cory knew if she buried the remains in the backyard, there would be talk around the neighborhood, and Allah knew she didn't need the HOA on her back. Cory managed to hold back her tears and anguish as she set out her work. By the time she was done, it was late in the evening, and her clothes were soaked and caked in mud. She resisted the urge to scream as she hosed herself down before going back to the front of the house.

It was so quiet sitting on the iron bench, which rested on their front porch. The air was stagnant and unmoving. It was almost like it was suddenly compacted into a dome so dense that Cory was stuck breathing air through a straw. The sound of a train whistle pierced the air so loudly that she covered her ears with her hands to try to muffle the noise. A couple of leaves drifted over the black brick and floated over her hiking boots. They were still slicked with mud, and Cory's feet were cold from the wet socks sticking to her skin. She had no energy to take off her socks and boots to go inside. *Why*

bother? The house will be just as cold anyway—just as filled with that hollow silence she was hoping to avoid by sitting outside on the porch.

For a moment, she couldn't remember if she threw out the dog food, the bed, or the dog toys. Her ears rang as she sat up and brushed up her pants a bit. The train whistle was gone, and she figured she could finally hear herself think a bit. She went inside and gathered everything to put on the sidewalk for the garbage pickup tomorrow. Glancing out across the lawn, she saw it. *Oh, that's right*, Aya's fluffy yellow bed was still there, sitting on top of the trash bin, with blotches of black and red covering it. The hail and rain were pouring down harder, and Cory could see the black and red dripping off the bed and onto the tin cover of the garbage can. Muddy lines slid down the sidewalk and soaked into the concrete.

One of the neighbor's doors slammed shut, and for a second, Cory mistook it for a bark. Turning her head towards the sound, she was half hoping she'd find a wagging black tail and hyena-like ears. Instead, she was simply greeted by the sight of rain and hail. Slowly, the front door creaked open. Something touched her shoulder, and she flinched slightly, startled.

“Hey, you want to come back inside? I made some Umm Ali; it's your mom's recipe and I think, ”

What is Eleanor doing here? Should she not be

Cory's thoughts halted. She called Eleanor to come home after finding the body.

“How did you get my mom's recipe? I never wrote it down. I don't remember talking about it.” Cory's fingers were starting to feel cold, like something was draining the warmth out of them.

“I called her,” Eleanore replied. Her lips were cracked, and her voice was wispy as she scratched the back of her neck, her hands and feet shifting and scuffing against the porch floorboards.

“You *called her!*” Cory could feel her eyes twitching as she shouted.

“You were upset and I just wanted to help. I thought you’d be tired when you got back. I thought-”

“I thought we put in those boundaries for a reason. I told you not to talk to her!”

“I was just trying to be helpful! You were so upset when I came home. I don’t like seeing you so down like that.”

“I don’t care! It was a boundary we set together, and you didn’t even bother respecting it!”

“It’s not like I asked you to talk to her!”

“That’s not the point, and you know that!”

“I didn’t give out your number! I told her you didn’t want to talk! I told her to stop sending these damn letters,” Eleanor finally said, grabbing Cory by the shoulders and giving her a single firm shake.

For a moment, Cory couldn’t process what Eleanor had said; the words she was ready to shout at them a moment ago but the words had died somewhere between her breath and the edge of her teeth. A gush of air whooshed out of her lungs, hissing out from between her lips like a deflating balloon. Her shoulders slumped involuntarily, and she could feel her legs shaking. The smell of mold and copper entered her nostrils, and she felt the sudden urge to vomit. Her ears started ringing again, and she shut her eyes as tightly as she could, feeling them sting beneath their lids. Eleanor whispered

something to her before guiding her inside the house. In a blurry, incoherent 15 minutes, Cory found herself sitting at the dinner table, small spoon in hand, staring down at the steaming bowl. The puff pastry was golden on top, and she could see a bit of the heavy cream underneath. It had been sprinkled with pistachios and raisins. She could almost taste the mix of coconut, cinnamon, and nutmeg. Taking in a couple of breaths, she dug in, watching the moist pastry fall into the pool of cream.

They continued to sit quietly at the table after they both finished their portions of Umm Ali. Cory hoped that the silence would burst like a bubble before the room became dense with tension, but Eleanor didn't say a word. Cory didn't say anything either, but she was sure Eleanor had something on their mind—something that they were going to say in the morning when they went to work that morning. Something while they were packing their lunch and finished placing Cory's breakfast on the table. But still, nothing. Cory's stomach was content with the dessert, and the smell of baking was still lingering in the air. Cory opened her mouth to deliver a thank you, but the words stayed logged in her throat and sat there gritty like sandpaper.

“I know you avoid people to cope. I get that comes with having to grow up with the responsibilities you had and the kind of woman your mom is, but sometimes.” Eleanor let out a sigh and clutched their spoon so tight her knuckles turned white. “Sometimes it's just so freaking irritating. I really think that it'd be good for you or both of us to go into therapy together because this lack of proper communication isn't healthy for either of us.” Eleanor took a breath, their words hanging in the air long and imposing.

Cory's mouth felt like it had been suddenly filled with sand at the thought, and she resisted the urge to gag. Her mind wandered to what she had planned for the next episode. She wrote up some of her initial responses to the news of the recent tech industry layoffs in Syfolk Tamruk and the recent uptick in missing pets. While the latter wasn't as pressing to discuss, Cory suspected much of her audience would appreciate her addressing her concerns on the matter, as opposed to saying nothing and letting everyone speculate that she didn't care about it. *Yeah, we are not trying to be perceived as a heartless monster who could care less about missing animals.*

"Sometimes I wonder why we moved out here." Eleanor placed her spoon in her cobalt blue ceramic bowl. She walked back into the kitchen. A soft clank signaled that she put the bowl into the sink rather than the dishwasher.

Cory glanced back down at her bowl. The last drops of cream had pooled at the bottom of the blue ceramic bowl. Her nose gave a sudden twitch, and she covered her mouth with her elbow as she let out a sneeze that made her chest rattle. Uncovering her mouth, black speckles covered the sleeve of her teal shirt.

Well, I'm predicting a doctor's appointment.

She was putting her dishes in the dishwasher. Resigned to putting away all of the leftovers covering the small pot of Lahma bi Bamia into the top rack of the fridge, she saran-wrapped the Pyrex pan with the leftover Umm Ali onto the bottom rack of the refrigerator. She was half-tempted to snag another bowl of the cooled dessert just for added comfort.

Going to therapy might be a good idea. Let's see. Unpacking and digging up all the junk about Mom and Dad's divorce. The trauma of growing up with her habits

forced us both into isolation whenever she did not agree with my studying habits, my choice of friends, and my hobbies. Her nagging and overall neglect, her choice to come up with excuse after excuse to keep us isolated from the outside world twenty-four-seven.

God, it's a wonder I managed to become a semi-functional adult. Yep, I'm definitely a functioning adult. What functional adult is convinced the world is ending, doesn't communicate with their roommate or best friend for weeks on end, and can't keep a job with stable pay and structured work hours?

As Cory's thoughts wandered, debating the pros and cons of going to therapy, she drifted out of the kitchen and into the living room, sitting in the living room. The house was pretty cold for the start of winter, and Eleanor had started the pellet stove to warm up the house a bit. The window into the furnace was glowing softly behind the gray-tinted glass. Under normal circumstances, Cory would have picked up a crochet hook to make a scarf or some other simple craft, and Eleanor would be reading a cozy book huddled under an arsenal of blankets in their soft green reading chair. At the same time, Cory would be stretched out on the couch.

The lack of Eleanor's presence suggested that they had gone upstairs, supposedly to bed. *So much for me being the queen of avoidance in this house; if they wanted the title so badly, they should have just said so.* Cory sat down on the couch, sinking into the cushions. She momentarily chastened herself for being so harsh and cold toward Eleanor; it's not like they had malicious intentions in calling Cory's mother. No, they were trying to be comforting and kind.

Cory grabbed a couple of blankets from the bin beside the bed and curled up on the couch, not feeling particularly up to going upstairs. She woke up the next morning with a start as something crashed through the backyard fence.

Cory tried holding back the vomit sitting in the back of her throat as she watched, frozen, looking out the sliding glass door. The whelp's four front legs dug aggressively into Eleanor's well-kept rose bushes. Their massive four-and-a-half-inch-long black and silver shimmering claws made short work of the thorny bushes. The poor rabbit was screaming bloody murder from inside its burrow. The curd's empty silver eye sockets were fixated on the sound of its prey. Within less than a minute, it had the rabbit's body in its jaws. The poor rabbit was screaming pathetically and thrashing with its life depending on it. In an instant, there was a crack as the beast's jaws crushed the rabbit's rib cage. Blood dripped down the dog's tar-black maw and splattered onto the grass. Cory bit her tongue to avoid screaming just as the creature started thrashing about with the rabbit still in its jaws. It shifted a bit to the side, and Cory could make out a couple of fungus-like bulbs on its back and neck. A couple of white ribs broke through its liquidy black side, showing a livered cavity in its seemingly rotting body.

It's like a demented dog with a chew toy! Blood and one of the rabbit's back legs splattered against the sliding door. Cory screamed out of shock; the monster's eyes fixed on her as if noticing her for the first time.

Ok, maybe it doesn't hear or see well, like a T-rex? Something half-dead like that can't have much in the way of senses, right? For Allah's sake, it doesn't have any eyes, how is it supposed to see me?! If I just stay still, the thing will not have me for a snack, right?

Just then the beast's many empty eye sockets narrowed into slits, and the mutt gave a guttural growl, its hackles raised. One of its two tails whooshed back and forth like a giant black flag, a signal of upcoming death. Its second cat-like tail moved wildly like a whip. It opened its mouth impossibly wide for a dog, and it jumped through the sliding door, abandoning the rabbit corpse in favor of a bigger meal.

Cory screamed and tumbled over to the other side of the living room sofa in what she could only call sheer dumb luck. She ran, skidding across the hardwood floor. As the monster trailed closely behind her, she ran practically sliding down the hall, past the kitchen. Cory raced up the stairs, hoping to make it to Eleanor's bedroom. Bolting the heavy door would give her a minute to grab Eleanor's pistol and shoot the thing in between a pair of its eye sockets.

Just as she made it to the top of the stairs, the monster bit her left ankle and dragged her violently down the stairs. Red-hot pain shot from her shin up her leg as the dog shook her leg once, twice, and three times. Cory was sure that her leg would be torn from its socket. Under normal circumstances, she would have been trying to find a way out of this mess, but her vision was quickly starting to blur, and she could barely manage to keep her eyes open, much less think straight.

In a haze, Cory's mind began to drift away.

Eleanor's not going to be happy when they get home-

Now's probably not the best time to worry about Eleanor's reaction to the house being covered in blood-

Dying single, childless, and with only my best friend attending my funeral sounds like the opening to a sick joke. I hope I get the chance to write it down sometime.

Maybe if we installed more security around the house, this could have been avoided-

The funeral should be nice in any case, right?

Mother probably would not make a good speech

Eleanor would not let her come, right?

Wasn't it decided we'd go with cremation and not a lengthy open-casket procession?

Part 3

Staying in a hospital for a while messes with your sense of reality. Cory had been barred from using her laptop for work for the past week and a half while she recuperated. Her left leg was hanging from a sling, and the stitches under the apple-green cast were itchy like crazy. *Too bad I can't ask for a ruler or something pointed to sachet at it.* While the bed was comfortable and warm, Cory desperately wanted to get out. She could hear the rain tapping aggressively on the patient room window; perhaps it wasn't quite so reasonable to go outside in the downpour with the rain being so intense. Still, there was nothing in the hospital room to occupy her attention; there was no TV. Eleanor refused to bring their laptop so she could at least brainstorm ideas for her next episode.

"Nope, we went over this, Cory. I am not bringing your laptop," Eleanor said as they unpacked a bag of clothes for the next week on the hospital bed. They removed a stack of old shorts, placed them on the bed, and let out a sigh. "I know you are bored here when I'm at work, and there's not a lot to do except count the dots on the sealing. But your mom is coming over in a day and a half to help out, and I hope she'll be able to keep you entertained while I'm at work. So let's just try to make the most of it." Cory resisted the urge to gag at the thought of her mother staying in the same room as her for a minute, let alone three months.

"Besides, I know you'll just use work as an excuse to strain yourself. For god's sake, your leg is broken, and you have a concussion. I'm surprised your jaw isn't shattered with how many steps it must have hit. For god's sake, I found you unconscious in the living room covered in blood!"

“So no, you will not be getting your precious laptop until I get an okay from your doctor. I do not want to come back from work to find out that you’ve practically starved yourself to death because you can’t seem to remember what time it is.”

The words still rang in Cory’s ears, or maybe that was just an insistent ringing in general. The front desk phones were going off constantly, at-home accidents were becoming more frequent, and a lot of people were making calls about strange animal attacks. Granted, she didn’t hear a lot, but with people being wheeled in every few hours looking like they had a run-in with a monster truck with fangs and nurses not being so good at whispering in the hallway, it wasn’t too hard putting two and two together. Cory took a moment to glance at the analog clock. At 2:48 p.m., her lips suddenly felt super chapped. Doing her best to turn on her right side without having her still bruised right arm pressed into the cushion, she looked over at the nightstand only to realize her water bottle was empty. *Huh, weird. I could have sworn it was full just a second ago.* She grabbed the call button on the bed control, which was strapped to the bed, when a knock came at the open door. Cory looked up, apparently a bit too fast. Some pixelated floaters flashed across her vision like a couple of microbes under a microscope lens. It took a few seconds to attempt to blink them away before she gave up and tried to focus on the figure in the doorway.

The first thing Cory thought looking at him was that the gray scrubs made his umber complexion appear waxy, almost distorting the undertone of his skin, so it looked like he was dead on his feet, only slightly warmed up to room temperature. His hair was cut super short in a manner that almost reminded her of a military cut.

“Hi, I'm just here to check on you.” He took a momentary glance at his clipboard. “Cory, I see you could do with a refill. Did Claria come by to ask about your lunch?” He had a yellow laminated menu, which he tucked under his arm with his clipboard as he walked in. Cory shifted uncomfortably for a moment. *Who the f was Claria? I don't think anyone has come by since I woke up.* The whole day until that point, suddenly felt like an empty blur with nothing tangible or specific to grasp and try to remember. Nothing beyond the sound of rain, occasionally sipping water from her water bottle, and the sound of ringing phones

Cory let out a nervous laugh in an attempt to hide her embarrassment. “Yeah, I don't remember I don't think I-” Just then, her stomach grumbled. They both let out a chuckle. Cory did so out of nervousness, and she guessed he was following her lead by feeling awkward.

“So I guess that answers my question then.” His voice was not quite as deep as she half expected it to sound with the mask muffling it. He was a fair-board guy, sure, not quite the size of a linebacker or a gym addict, but he wasn't as small and skinny as some of the interns who looked like they'd break something if they looked at a pillow wrong, much less attempted to lift anything more than five pounds. “Do you have anything in mind at the moment? Today seems like a bit of an egg day for most of the patients, so we might have to substitute something else if you pick an omelet or quiche. I hope that's okay.”

“Yeah, that's fine.”

From there, the rest of the day was an honest blur until Eleanor came around dinner time with a tub of Ta'miya, Ful Medames, some onion, peppers, and flatbread for

sandwiches courtesy of the Sayyids. They didn't have an accessible microwave to warm them up in, so they chose to eat them cold as is, which was strangely comforting in an unconventional sort of way.

Cory woke up with a start. Sweat pooled around her despite wearing only a tank top and shorts with no blankets draped over her. It was another nightmare. In the dream, something was in the house with her. The sound of something breathing heavily beside her made her shiver. She tried all the doors and windows to get outside but they were all boarded. Every room in the house was dark and she nearly fell down the stairs. Her cast thudded against every step with a loud bang. Something was following her, breathing down her neck. Any time she looked around there was nothing to suggest anything had been standing behind her. Making her way into the living room, she felt around for the couch and sat down on the fluffed-up cushions. It was cold. She would have checked the thermostat but her legs were suddenly stiff. She couldn't get off the couch as hard as she tried. There was the sound of creaking behind her like something heavy moving behind the couch. She turned around. Nothing was there. Then out of the corner of her eye came the light from a burning candle. Cory and Eleanor never had candles in the house. They both didn't want to pollute it with the smell of smoke. Cory turned around to see a large faceless bear staring at her, its eye sockets hollowed out and dripping blackish goop. It made its way toward her on all fours, put its front paws on her legs, and opened its mouth wide to reveal jagged massive teeth just as it was about to bite off her face when she woke up.

She shook and shook. Her muscles spasmed in shock. Her blood felt like it was boiling in her veins. She opened her mouth to scream or cry but no sound made it past

her lips other than a guttural moan. She sat up still shaking and made her way into the kitchen to get herself a glass of water. The morning sun just barely made it through the mist, outside of the house was foggy and dreary looking. Black speckles floated lazily in the air. *Not a good day to go for a walk, I guess.*

The rest of the morning was quite fair with her mother and Eleanor casually moving about the kitchen; they all ate baguettes with milk and tapioca pudding.

The nurse shone a light into Cory's eyes, moving it from left to right watching her eyes dilate. The nurse was a tall kind husky with black wiry hair and hazel eyes. He pocketed the light and straightened up.

"Can you tell me the date please?"

"Is it April, not May or is it June? I'm pretty sure it's the 13th. It has been a couple of months since I was brought in here. I know the year is 2185."

A nurse aide bot moved beside Cory, clamped down on her upper right arm, and took her blood pressure.

"No need to strain yourself. I was just asking to see if you remembered this all."

Cory nodded, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

"Of course, I know routine questions."

"Exactly, you don't need to worry about a thing. Everything's fine."

Cory suddenly felt the urge to yell that nothing about this situation was okay, not when— her stomach was tied into knots. The nurse jotted down a few notes and left the room along with the nurse aide.

Cory woke up to the sound of crunching and the crinkling of what she assumed would be a bag of chips. Blurry-eyed and sore, she turned slowly towards the sound of the noise and opened her eyelids just a tad, trying to avoid the onset of a headache. She might have groaned a little in agitation and muscle fatigue, but she wasn't feeling the violent urge to break the sling holding her left leg hostage.

"Hey, scraggly squirrel, are you ready to leave here and head home?" Eleanor was sitting on a hard brown plastic waiting room chair, digging into a bag of corn chips. She had a couple stacked up on a side table in front of her like a bunch of little pointed hats. Cory's stomach lurched suddenly; she covered her face with her hands to keep from vomiting all over herself. There was a bit of rustling, and then Eleanor placed the rim of the small gray trash can under her chin.

"Okay, clearly, dinner isn't quite sitting well with you," Eleanor said with a chuckle. Cory grasped the trash can with wet, shaky hands.

She did her best to ignore the taste and texture of the vomit as it plopped out of her mouth and into the plastic lining of the trash bin. Her hair fell into her face, and her nose gave a couple of twitches. *Oh god, please don't sneeze! Please don't sneeze particles of vomit across the room!* Cory shut her eyes to avoid looking at the brown, granular blob at the bottom of the trashcan. She could hear Eleanor's sneakers rush out into the hall to get a nurse or something to help. Cory was not sure if she should wash her hands and rinse them out. Not that she could do much; her hands were a bit too preoccupied with holding up the trash can to her face in case she couldn't manage to hold back a sneeze pulse. Pressing down on the call button by contorting herself over the

side of the bed didn't sound like it could end any other way than getting vomit on her face.

It was about a minute and a half later when Eleanor came back with a bottle of water and a bundle of moist paper towels. She placed the water bottle on the round side table. A couple of chips fell onto the ground, only to be crushed under Eleanor's feet as she took the trash bin from Cory's vomit-caked hands. To her credit, she did not flinch at the strong smell of warm, half-digested Ta'miya, onion, and mustard. She quietly handed Cory a few of the wet towels, which she gratefully used to wipe up her hands before tossing them in the trash, while Eleanor opened the bottle of water and handed it to her. Cory swished and downed a couple of mouthfuls of water, trying to get rid of the taste and texture around her tongue and in her teeth, before tightly capping it back up and placing it beside her on the bed.

"You know, I think the surgeon said something about reporting any stomach upsets you might end up having and adding more days to your inpatient observation."

"No, no, nope, please don't. I don't want to be stuck here for another week and a half, please!" Cory sat up and went to drag her leg out of the sling. Eleanor let out a small chuckle. Short and kind of snotty, Cory was half out of the sling, and her arms were killing her.

"Oh, *you have got to be kidding me!*" Cory shouted, throwing a pillow in Eleanor's face as the girl dubbed over in uncontrollable laughter.

Just then, the tight squeaking of wheels pierced the air, and their laughter came along with a knock on the door. The nurse from the other day, with his military cut and gray scrubs, stood a bit awkwardly, steering the wheelchair.

“Good afternoon, ladies. It's great to see you're both having a good time.” He quietly parked the wheelchair beside Cory’s bed. He stopped for a moment, taking stock of Cory’s leg half out of the sling, grabbing for the remote attached to the sling pulley, and slowly lowering the sling and Cory’s leg onto the bed. “We don’t like having our patients remove their legs from slings that way, generally speaking. You could end up tearing up or pulling something.” His tone of voice was light and calm, with a sort of faint smile in his dark eyes, but his posture left no doubt that he wasn’t waiting for an explanation. Another nurse came in to help transfer Cory into a wheelchair.

Within about fifteen minutes, Eleanor had all of Cory’s things and was collecting all of Cory’s paperwork from the front desk with Cory parked behind her. Sadly, or rather fortunately, the nurses would not let Cory take control of the wheelchair herself. They cited *accidents*, such as the possibility of sliding down any of the slopes leading to the parking garage. *God forbid* she tear something in her arm, much less chip a nail.

The ride home was quiet. Cory found out early into the car ride that Eleanor had been given the day off from work to help her get situated. Cory was already envisioning challenges getting up the stairs to her bedroom. Eleanor insisted that Cory be put on some sort of light bedrest as she adjusted to using crutches to get around the second floor and then moved on to getting up and down stairs. *Life is going to stink as long as I have this stupid cast*. Cory scratched at the offending plaster, trying to ignore how empty the house would feel when Eleanor went to work the next day.

“We need to talk about what it’s going to look like these next couple of weeks.”

Cory nodded her head sipping her dark chia.

“Yeah, of course.”

“You want to avoid talking about this forever, don’t you?”

Cory could feel her stomach twist uncomfortably

“We’ve been over this, Cory,” Eleanor said, running their fingers through their dyed hair.

“Yep, I know.”

“There isn’t enough room.”

“Yeah I get it,” she responded, taking a sip of tea and looking out at the cars passing by the cafe.

Eleanor sighed and grabbed Cory’s tea. Cory pulled back and nearly fell out of her chair.

“What the freaking he—”

“You can’t keep ignoring this forever. It’s happening whether you like it or not”

“Well, why don’t you just get it over with and leave already?”

“I’m not abandoning you for god’s sake!”

“Could have fooled me.”

“What is it going to take for you to stop being mad at me?”

Cory took a deep breath, broke eye contact, and looked out on the street again.

“I don’t know.”

“I think you do. You just don’t want to tell me.”

“Can we move the conversation back to something else please?”

Eleanor ran their hands through their hair.

“Okay, whatever you want, Cory, I’m too tired to continue this anyway.”

They moved on to talk about the plan to have Eleanor’s older brother over in the next few days.

The stairway and hall leading to the living room did not look like a crime scene or the stage set for a tacky horror flick. Most of the blood had been lifted off the carpet stairs, leaving the yellowish outline of a former blood trail leading from the stairs. Down the hall, it transformed into dark streaks over the woodgrain towards the back sliding door. All in all, the damage was not as horrific or noticeable as she expected. The door was replaced two days after Cory's admission to the hospital. The new glass was bulletproof; it had also been coated in a privacy film that gave the impression of stained glass. It cost them, overall, about 3,500 dollars. When Cory thought back to the attack, it felt like a hazy dream. Several times, she caught herself staring out the sliding door quietly, attempting to figure out when they managed to install stained glass and where they got the money for it. Then the past few weeks hit her like a freight train.

She had about another two weeks with the crutches and cast. Once it was removed she was going to be off to physical therapy. The idea of putting any weight on her left foot still sent an electric phantom pain up her ankle and into her hip and spine. God, she wanted to go for a long walk, but using the crutches for more than thirty-five minutes left her feeling exhausted and frustrated. Tapping the heel of her foot against the living room couch, she sat back again, trying to get into a relatively comfortable position to read. The cast was bulky and difficult to maneuver. She wanted so badly to sit cross-legged on the couch that tucking her right leg under her didn't cut it, and for a good minute and a half, she debated saying screw it and sawing off the offending plaster herself. *Screw the added recovery time; I just want to read comfortably on my damn couch!* She leaned back extra hard in exasperation, hitting the back of her head against the frame of the sofa. Her head rattled a bit. She looked back down at the floor, hoping

to avoid vomiting again. The creases in the floorboards were speckled with little black dots. Eleanor tried a couple of times to vacuum and scrub them all, but they just kept coming back. Cory suspected that it was a fungus or mold of some kind and that they would have to replace the flooring in a couple of weeks. More money they did not have was going down the drain.

There was a loud squeak that sounded from the sliding door—the kind of squeak you get when wiping down a wet mirror with a towel. Cory sat up and grabbed one of her crutches to get up and get a bitter look at the situation. The first thing she noticed was the large silhouette at the door, with a large body and head with rounded ears protruding from the sides. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end. She shakily positioned her crutch under her arm, putting most of her weight on it, as her right leg shook so violently that she was sure she was going to fall. She tried to take as much of a step back as she could, trying to retreat from the room.

The dark silhouette lifted a paw; its large claws scraped against the glass door, screeching as it scratched a long crack through the glass. Its black tongue continued licking at the glass, and the dog's hot breath further fogged up the glass. Cory's stomach flipped, and she continued to try and make her quiet retreat from the living room. *Oh god, why me?! I have to be the biggest loser on the planet!* The hound's two black tails were both wagging violently behind it, and it let out a loud rubbing sound that reverberated from behind the glass and ended in a sound that was like a cross between caterwauling, a howl, and an aggressive cough. *Screw it, ignore it, and it will go away. Please let it find something else to maul to death soon.* She was startled by a light tap on her shoulder.

“Hey, are you doing okay?” Eleanor asked, peering over Cory’s shoulder inquisitively; she had a soft smile on her face and a bag of groceries in hand. It took a moment for the question to register as if it had formed from Eleanor's lips, then took a detour around the house before entering Cory’s ears and sinking into her scrambled brain.

“Wah, oh-” Cory took a cursory glance back at the sliding door to find no menacing shadow or condensation on the door, at least as far as she could tell from standing in the doorway. “I, um, I think I just nearly had a trip after moving the coffee table a bit.”

Eleanor squinted, analyzing Cory’s expression methodically. Cory thought for a second that Eleanor was not buying it and was going to cart her back to the hospital for another workup. The back of Cory’s neck began to prickle and perspire when the other girl smiled lightly and patted her shoulder.

“We should take it easy these next few months while your leg heals up. I don't think we can afford another three weeks' stay in the ICU.” She slowly hobbled her way into the kitchen.

Cory stood in the hallway momentarily, looking out the glass door. No beast was standing here, and the dark condensation that had been building up in the glass was gone as well. Cory could feel her throat constrict and her knees buckle. She took a couple of steps towards the living room when Eleanor called from the kitchen.

“Hey, did your mom call you to let you know what time we should be expecting her over?” Cory hobbled into the kitchen, the muscles in her right arm spasming as she worked her crutch.

“I have her phone on the block, remember?” Cory said, leaning against the closest countertop and feeling the beginnings of a migraine bloom in the back of her head like a couple of wildflowers. Looking out of the kitchen at the back fence, there wasn’t any evidence that anything had been burrowed under or charged through it; *at least if it was real, it didn’t get in the yard from this side.* She could only imagine how much it would cost them to fix the fence a second time this year. At this rate, with the bad luck they were having, *will the roof cave in on us next week? If it does, I want it to crush me, so I don’t have to see the bill we are going to have to pay to get it fixed. Good god, we will be in debt up to our necks.* Cory shook her head to clear those half-hearted thoughts from her mind. Cleaning her throat just as Eleanor finished putting away the groceries, she excused herself to retreat upstairs and sleep the rest of the day away.

Cory lay awake in bed, unmoving, silently wondering how long it had been since she last took a shower. *Did I take one on Monday? No, Eleanor had to drag me out of bed to eat dinner on Monday. Yesterday then? No. I couldn't get out of bed yesterday either. Does it even matter when I last took a shower?* Cory tried for about five minutes to come up with a reason to take a shower. Nothing sounded or felt like proper motivation.

She had talked herself out of caring about her appearance, whether she worked on her podcast or if she and Eleanor talked at all anymore. She mentally talked herself into not caring about anything, which isn't that hard when you have the right motivation. Lying in bed, she wondered if she would still feel this way once spring hit. If it did, would Eleanor have the time, energy, or patience to continue dragging her out of bed?

Will she move out, block me from everything, and never speak to me again? Cory wanted to say, "Of course not," but her stomach sank all the same. Her mother would not come, and her mom never came when Cory needed her. No, she only went to Cory when it was convenient, when *she* was having a tough time and *her* life was falling apart, not when her daughter needed support to feel protected and secure. Cory rolled over onto her stomach and pressed her face into her pillow, letting out a muffled scream of irritation and anger. She shut her eyes, imagining herself being compressed down to the size of a grain of sand. Compared to her body, her repressed thoughts and feelings felt as big as a walrus or a whale shark. Her stomach twisted agitatedly, and she wanted to bury her hands in her abdomen and squeeze until she couldn't register the pain anymore. Nevertheless, she recognized even in her state of anger and wrathfulness that

attempting any of this would land her in a hospital under suicide watch at best and at worst in a psychiatric ward. More than anything, though, she just wanted to sleep. Sleep with the slight possibility of not getting up the next morning. Her thoughts continued drifting.

Should it matter, though?

It's not like I'm some miraculous clog in the mechanism running the universe.

It's not like the world will stop functioning without me here.

Still—

Should the expectations and reputation surrounding my mental health be the only thing keeping me stable?

Probably not-

I could stick it out for a bit longer and see if I can find the motivation to keep going

The rain was cold. There was a sort of lodged discomfort in between Cory's ribs that made her muscles ache as she sat on the cool concrete of the back porch; it was half-shaded overhead in a sort of hang-out place with a few chairs and a large green circular table made of wood. Her bad leg was splayed in front of her. Somewhere between the nightmares and doctor appointments, Cory felt like a walking zombie. She blew another cluster of bubbles out onto the terrace. They popped almost as soon as they met the rain pop, pop, pop, they went on bursting quietly. She wasn't really paying much attention to the rain or how cold it was outside; it was just background noise to fill the space of her thoughts and doubts.

She took a deep breath and looked up from her seat on the porch. In the rain, a few feet from her was the hound. It was rolling around in the grass like a carefree puppy. It had something in its mouth that Cory couldn't quite make out. Small wisps of back fumes whipped up into the hair around the hound's face as it held the object in its mouth. Cory's stomach clenched and her body started shaking. She tried grabbing at the calming techniques she was taught in therapy but none of them seemed to be working at the moment. Her heart leaped up into her throat and was pounding in her ears. She scooted back attempting to get into the house without drawing too much attention to herself. Suddenly the thing shut up and came barreling toward her stiff body and she barely held back a scream as she felt the weight of the creature on top of her. There was a soft thud beside her head. *This is it. I guess I'm monster chow. I guess there are worse ways to go out.* She shut her eyes and waited for the onslaught to begin. The dog's hot breath was on her face now. *Any second now.* Something warm and wet slid along her cheek and she peeled her eyes open. The thing was licking her face. *Tasting before it*

bites off my head? She grabbed the back door. The beast backed up off of her and sat patiently on the porch, its two tails flicking and wagging. Cory quickly used the opportunity to open the door and stumble inside dragging her left leg. The dog grabbed what vaguely looked like a backless picture frame into the house, and followed her into the house placing the strange object on the ground. The thing sauntered into the laundry room. Cory caught her breath, closed the sliding door, and tried grasping at what the hell just happened.

There was a string of loud knocks at the front door, and the doorbell rang a couple of times as well. Cory could make out the sound of Eleanor walking down the hallway. Using her feet, she slid the backless black picture frame under the couch. She hoped no black fumes would start spewing out of it any time soon. She grabbed the massive dog by the scruff of its neck; several eye sockets blinked indecorously, and it let out a surprised yep. Turning its head around 45 degrees, it lured out its long black tongue, swiping up her arm in a playful reproach. Cory resisted the urge to gag and scream bloody murder as the trail of blackish, semi-transparent saliva streaked her arm. The front door opened with a creak as Cory dragged the massive dog across the living room, its limbs flailing wildly, and it let out a couple of cuffed sounds in the back of its throat as its tails flailed and its massive claws scraped against the hardwood floor. Finally dragging the beast into the laundry room, she shut the door after letting it go, barely able to avoid slamming the door into the dog's massive paw as it tried to jam it into the doorway when Cory slammed the door shut and locked it behind her.

“It is so good of you to come down on such short notice, Mrs. Morrow. It has been a hectic couple of weeks, as you can imagine.” Eleanor’s voice rang through the hallway. Followed by heavy footsteps leading into the kitchen.

“Oh, nonsense, no trouble at all. I just hope little Cory hasn’t given you too much trouble. She has always been a bit moody whenever she is under the weather.”

“Oh, it hasn’t been too bad. She’s just had a hard time staying off her feet.”

The two voices were slowly silenced as the two of them made their way further into the kitchen. Cory slumped against the laundry room door. Her braced leg let out a thud against the floorboards, and a bone-rattling sensation went up her leg and settled into her ribs. *How in the hell am I going to keep them from noticing a literal Shaitan living in the fucking laundry room? Not to mend the wooden frame of hell sitting under the living room couch.* Cory hit her head against the wood door to dislodge any possible innovative ideas from somewhere in her empty attic of a brain. Meanwhile, *Shaitan* was scratching at the door, letting out a series of barks and yowls, and sniffing at the door aggressively.

Shakily getting back up to her feet, Cory hobbled over to the couch, suddenly painfully aware of the thin screen of black smoke and speckles of black that were floating out softly from under the bed. *Please don’t let her come into the living room! I must figure out how I’m going to get this mini-death portal and the dog monster out of here before it changes its mind again and decides to have me for lunch.* Cory’s stomach lurched and grumbled as if unable to determine if it wanted to regurgitate Cory’s breakfast or if it was craving a chicken sandwich. Cory turned to her side and pressed her face against the couch cushion. Hoping neither her mother nor Eleanor would

retreat to the living room to socialize. *Aren't the Sayyids supposed to come over tonight for dinner? Yeah, I think that should be fun.* Cory couldn't wrap her head around the thought of the quiet couple facing down her mother's constant nosiness. *God, I hope I'm able to pass out before dinner. I don't want to have to suffer trying to keep my mother from crossing personal boundaries in the name of "maternal curiosity."*

A few hours later, Eleanor, the Sayyids, Mrs. Morrow, and Cory were seated at the small dining table, eating Macarona Bechamel. Cory picked at the layer of penne and ground beef; the creme sauce had cooled down and was pooling over the pasta and meat. Cory was half-listened as Eleanor and Mrs. Sayidd talked about gardening and work struggles with the recent budget cuts in their work sectors. *Mom's been unusually quiet.* Cory risked a glance up from her dinner plate. Her mother was staring at her intently, her expression curt. The lines of her face were half-edged into shadow and her gray hair was tied into such a tight bun Cory was getting a headache just looking at the strands of hair pressed against her mother's scalp. She was dressed in a dark gray turtleneck and a soft button-up baby blue cardigan with pink and white flowers knitted into the collar.

"Do you have something you would like to talk about, Mother?" Cory did her best to keep from clutching her fork any tighter than necessary.

"Oh, no, just thinking. You share the very likeness of your father, mashallah. Even with that embittered look on your face. He always had a way of holding his heart on his sleeve." She had a soft, placid smile on her face, and there was a twinkle in her eye. The words fell from her mouth like soft flower petals. Cory could feel a muscle in her jaw jump as she closed it.

“I’d assume she looks a bit more like her father after seeing you, if you don’t mind my asking so,” said Mr. Sayyid lightly with a chuckle.

“Oh, yes, she does! Especially with that coiffure! Oh, I do wish you would grow it back out darling.” Mother laughed heartily, placing her hand on her chest as she became slightly breathless. “Goodness, the spitting image of him at 18! Oh, and with his chiseled jawline, dark curly locks, and sepia complexion. He stood out in the crowd. And to think I wound up with such good luck to land him and a child with his pretty face.” *Too bad she had to botch her pretty curls and behave just as badly as a teenage boy. Oh, sometimes I wish I had a boy; everything would have been easier!* While it was left unsaid, Mother certainly had her ways of making her opinions known to everyone.

Mother continued describing her and Father’s meeting to Mr. Sayyid. To the man’s credit, he listened and appeared slightly interested in Cory’s parents’ short-lived relationship. Well, at least the budding honeymoon phase of what would later become a toxic dumpster fire of a “relationship.” Cory resisted the urge to vomit and chuck her fork across the table, aiming for her mother’s eyes. *Too bad there are witnesses. I’d like to wipe that smug look off of her wrinkled little face.*

“So, your in-laws didn’t consent to your marriage?” Mr. Sayyid cut lightly, his brow furrowed quizzically as he glanced briefly at his wife beside him. She gave him an inquisitive stare, her eyebrows furrowed in curiosity.

“Yes, well, you know, his family preferred he marry someone with more spiritual devotion—to phrase it delicately. You could say we were rather unruly and foolhardy in those days.” Her lips pinched together briefly, so puckered up they looked like they dissolved from her face behind her teeth. Her voice drawled on. In a flash, the strange

expression was replaced again with a fixed, placid smile. “Alas, what’s life without a little *drama*, as some say? It is all water under the bridge now. They are all gone, so why should a couple of bracing words said 29 years ago trouble me now?” The room suddenly became quiet, as if, with those last few words, she had drained the life out of the room.

The conversation between Eleanor and Mrs. Sayyid came to a halt when Mr. Sayyid took her hand gently under the table. Mrs. Sayyid’s face was now drooping, and her eyes became clouded.

“Forgive my wife for her sudden change in disposition. We recently had a loss in the family.”

His eyes were hard, daring us to try and start asking inquiries; his tone was cold and to the point of leaving no room for questioning; and his mouth was drawn into a thin line, appearing as hard as a stone. Mrs. Morrow’s eyes were glistening with malicious curiosity. She took a breath in preparation to start spewing out a string of invasive and insensitive questions to the couple. Just then, Eleanor cleared her throat. The couple and mother all turned their heads toward Cory.

“Well, I’m not sure about everyone else, but I think now would be a good time to go to the living room to have a cup of tea, don’t you?” Eleanor glanced at the couple and Ms. Morrow’s for confirmation before her eyes met Cory’s. Her eyes asked quietly and passively, *“Do you need a minute or two by yourself?”* Cory placed her fork on her plate of half-eaten food before getting out of her chair.

“Why don’t you all go into the living room while I put some stuff away and get the tea ready?” She did her best to smile and hoped it did not appear like a pained grimace.

Everyone filed slowly out of the small dining room. Mother opened her mouth to say something. Cory was not really paying attention to taking note of what tactic Eleanor used to get her mother's attention and guide her out into the living room. Within a couple of moments, the space was empty and silent. Cory spent twenty minutes getting everyone's plates washed, refrigerating what little leftovers they had, and getting started on the tea. She had turned off the lights so that the last remnants of daylight were all that stood between her and a pitch-black kitchen. It was the last few minutes before the sun would dip below the horizon.

Cory stopped mid-bite of her Umm Ali.

“Hey,” she called across the table Eleanor and Ishmael looked up from their dessert. Ishmael had shaggy brown hair and an oval-shaped face. His eyes close-set, dark and downturned, and framed by thick eyebrows. His skin was a dark tan and he had a bit of stubble from not shaving the last two days.

“I’m sorry about last week.”

“What about last week?” Eleanor asked as they took another spoonful of Umm Ali.

“The thing at the coffee shop.”

“How many times do I have to tell you? There are no worries we’re good”

“Seriously, I shouldn’t have been so bitchy.”

“When are you going to let that go?”

“I just feel so-” She cut herself off before she could make more of a fool of herself and she got the feeling that her insistent apology was making her sound like an ass somehow.

The trailing apologies stopped there and they moved on to plans to visit with Ishmael's parents and younger siblings next week.

Physical therapy had been grueling. Cory had spent a good hour and a half trying to bend her knee to a 90-degree angle with no luck. The muscles stiffened and strained, but nothing happened. Any attempts at putting weight on it hurt so bad that she wished she could just chop off the leg and call it a day. The physical therapist wasn't much help. The old lady meant well, of course, but if she heard the words *breathe through it* one more time, she was going to throttle someone. Her mother leisurely walked into the room just as Cory was about to sit down for a minute.

“Oh good, you're taking a break. I was just thinking maybe we could take a trip next door to invite the Sayyids for a good board game night.” Cory resisted the urge to roll her eyes and cleared her throat while dabbing at her sweaty forehead with a towel.

“I'm still a bit busy, Mom; have you asked Eleanor if they're busy tonight? They might have some—”

“*Oh*, of course, I asked her if she had any engagements! Who do you think I am calling people over without asking if everyone is too occupied for a bit of company?” Cory could feel the muscles in her neck beginning to twinge as she got up, getting ready to lead the nurse out of the house. *Hopefully, she won't hear my blood-curdling screams as she walks to her car.* Cory was certain that this *conversation* would likely lead to a screaming match with her mother. Just then there was a scratching at the back sliding door, and Cory briefly turned around. There was the softest flicker of a silhouette retreating into the back of the yard.

“We can talk more about this later, Mom. Ms. Ibrahim needs to head out to see her next client, and I have some work to do in the garden,” Cory said through gritted teeth as she slowly started leading them out.

“Oh, no need to lead me to the door; I know the way out by now, and you could use the rest,” Ms. Ibrahim said as she gathered her things to leave.

Cory's eyes cracked open slightly as the bright sunlight shone through the open curtain of her bedroom window.

I don't remember leaving those open last night.

Cory closed her eyes again and rubbed them harshly with the heel of her palm. The corners of her eyes stung, and the back of her head felt like it had been hit about five times with a brick. Grating her teeth to avoid letting loose a groan, she dragged herself into a seated position, where she was semi-comfortable. Glancing across the room at her work desk, seated quietly like a vulture craning its neck over a carcass, her dark eyes were intense, and Cory's heart felt like it had stopped for about fifteen seconds while her brain processed the fact that her mom infiltrated her room in the middle of the night. Cory resisted the urge to scream and buried her head under her pillows. Instead, her body just froze, and anything that she could say to her mother to get her to leave either sounded stupid in her head or dissolved into some kind of microbial speck.

The tension in the room was not interrupted for about five minutes. The two women just sat and stared at each other, waiting for something to happen. A soft banging and scuffling sound came from just above the window frame. Cory suspected that a bird of some kind was making a nest in the soffit.

“Why in the world did you cut your hair like that? You look so much like a boy—you always used to love braiding your hair, remember? This look isn't flattering at all deary,” Mother asked, tucking a strand of gray hair behind her ear. Cory thought for a moment that her mother looked so much older with her hair tied into a sophisticated bun that her aging wrinkles had nowhere to hide behind. “You'd just sit in front of the TV on the weekends and braid and braid; oh, you were so sweet.”

“I cut it because I think it suits me better, and I don’t need to hear your opinions, Mother.” Cory barely managed to get the words out without scowling.

Of course, Mom would say I look like a boy.

Well, does she have a point?

It’s not like your tits have grown a lot since middle school? —That’s beside the point; she’s

“Why does everything have to turn into a fight with you?” The old lady croaked as she wrinkled and curled her leathery hands into bony fists. The muscles on her neck jumped, and her cheeks flushed.

“I’m not starting a fight here. You decided to-”

“I’m only telling you the truth, Habibi. You are only hurting your own feelings.”

“Oh, so I guess I must have heard the *wind* tell me that I look like a boy and not a dainty little princess.”

“Now I never said you have to look like a princess; I just wish you’d...”

“Take more care of my appearance, is that right?” Cory resisted the urge to curl her fingers against her scalp and momentarily thought of buzzing it all off just to see the horrified look on her mother’s sagging face. A muscle near her collarbone jumped, and she grabbed a pillow behind her.

God, I wish I had the gumption to whack her with it and whip that arrogant look right off her face.

There was a knock at the door then. Eleanor was peering into the room from the doorway, a nervous look sealed on their thin lips. They wore a soft pink dress with a white floral print and some white stockings that made them look about an inch and a

half taller and complemented the soft sweep of their shoulders. Their hair was tied in a loose braid.

"Hi, I just thought I'd check if you both were ready for dinner." Eleanor let out a breathy, nervous laugh at the end of her question.

"Yes, dinner sounds lovely. Thank you, Eleanor." Her mother then left the room, not before giving her a cold side eye that made the back of Cory's neck prickle with agitation.

Who the hell does she think she is?

Giving me the stink eye in my own house!

Eleanor let out a soft sigh as Mrs. Morrow could be heard walking down the hall toward the kitchen. "Take your time coming down; I know it's probably a rough adjustment having her here, but we'll try to make the best of it." Eleanor smiled a bit then, and Cory almost forgot for a moment that Eleanor was talking about her mother.

Cory wound up taking a bit longer than usual to get dressed and head downstairs. A warm breakfast was still waiting, with her mom and Eleanor making gentle small talk. As she took her seat at the small table, her mother's stiff posture and puckered expression told Cory everything she expected it to.

Try to make the best of it, indeed.

Cory felt her heart drop into the pit of her stomach as she was handed a couple of white tablets to swallow with a glass of milk. Her mother stared at her all the while as she slowly took the pills from Eleanor's open palm and insisted on inspecting the inside of her mouth as Eleanor put the dishes into the dishwasher. Cory felt the urge to gag

every time her mother's bony finger probed under her tongue and between her cheeks and gums.

The drugs, of course, did not help, but her leg still hurt with a phantom pain that eased with painkillers, and her chest felt like it was filled with bits of gravel. Coming home from the hospital seems to have complicated her life, especially with her mother watching her every move like a hawk. Indeed, she had become a helicopter parent of the worst kind. She asked Cory questions they both knew the answers to in hopes that maybe Cory would slip up.

Cory woke up with a massive headache and her ears ringing so loudly she could barely see straight. The window to her bedroom was wide open and black specks were floating lazily around the room like bits of dust or pollen. The blue and yellow curtains flapped quietly as the breeze drifted in. She got up shaking her legs and arms protesting. She wandered downstairs into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water. Chugging the bottle down as she slid down to the ground with her legs spasming, she nearly hit her head against the open fridge door. There was the sound of someone keying into the front door and a bit of chatter at the entrance of the house. The rest of the afternoon was a blurry haze of half-remembered conversation and dinner was tomato basil soup with grilled cheese sandwiches.

Cory was about ready to die. Just drop dead. It didn't matter that Eleanor and her mother would cry or that her death. She wasn't sure how much longer she had but frankly, it didn't matter, her corpse was just going to be another body in a sea of bodies. Nothing would change the fact that the world was still silently ending. Ironic given that she had been writing up a comedy skit for her last episode of *The World is Ending: What to Do With the Last of It*. Did it matter if she died now, here alone, or if it was going to happen 10, 15, 20, or 35 years from now? It was all semantics. There was no point in calling it anything else. Still coughing up little black specks of lung tissue was not the sort of sensation one would equate with soft, sun-kissed evenings spent with a peer drinking tea with one's long-lost love. By Allah, she desperately wanted some sweet hibiscus tea.

"Honestly, Eleanor, I don't understand how you can put up with such a dramatic life day in and day out. For goodness' sake, you heard what the doctor said, which is the same as mine. It is just a head cold with a little bit of congestion. It'll clear up in a few days if she takes her medicine as the good doctor ordered."

"Well, I would not go so far as to dismiss all of Cory's concerns as being hypochondriac in nature. Maybe there is some validity to her fears here." Eleanor responded softly through the door to Eleanor's bedroom. Mom was never good at managing the volume of her voice.

"Oh, pee wee, I say! She was always that girl who always had a chip on her shoulder and an attitude to boot. I don't suppose she ever told you about what it was like when she first moved into the dorms at college. Oh, my word, she was getting into so much trouble that I had to bail her out of jail five times. Five separate times, because she

kept getting into fights with this boy over a simple misunderstanding." Cory attempted to hold back an instinctive eye roll. *Misunderstanding my ass.*

"I think she did mention something to that effect, but I don't think that—" Eleanor didn't get the chance to finish speaking before the sound of the bedroom door opening interrupted their speech.

"Well, it was a pleasant talk, but I really must get to the laundry now. It has been waiting to get done all day now, and these things don't just finish themselves."

Cory could hear her mother sauntering down the hall; luckily or not, the dog was no longer in the laundry room. Where it was, Cory was not sure, and frankly, she didn't care, at least not at this very moment. She just wanted as much avoidable household space between herself and her mother as possible.

Night terrors played in the back of her mind on repeat. Cory closed her eyes and took a deep breath, hoping the thoughts would clear, but they didn't. It was still the same. The attack in the living room involved trying to reach for the gun and finally passing out. She had recovered quite a bit in the past few weeks; she just had her cast removed and was now using just a simple knee brace and an old wooden cane, but by now the house felt like a change, and with the fact that the thing that attached her somehow made its way under her bed, she felt more sick and angry than ever. As usual, no one listened—not really.

Guttural snoring and the scraping of claws against wood rattled the bed. Cory resisted the urge to shiver as she glanced underneath. The *dog's* many empty eyes fluttered open slowly. It gave a big guttural yawn, its jaw opening so wide she could see several rows of white teeth before it lulled out its large, viscous tongue from its mouth

and lowered its lips and jaws, shutting them like a steel trap. Its decapitated tongue writhed on the floor for a few seconds before melting into a puddle of goo, only to liquefy and melt into one of its shimmering claws. Cory barely resisted the urge to vomit.

The thing and she stared at each other for a few seconds before it turned its head away and closed its many eyelids lavishly, like a blob of void under Cory's bed. *If only we could all sleep so soundly*, she thought half-heartedly. Suddenly, it occurred to her that she needed to get dressed if she was going to work in the garden like she planned to. The only problem was that her arms suddenly felt as stiff as plywood, and her gut felt all twisted and hot, like someone had stuck a handful of burning hot nails in it and was actively twisting them into a hot soupy mess.

"We're sorry; your call cannot be completed as dialed please try again. BEEEEEEEEEEEEEP"

Cory hung up the phone and tried again the same audio message played. Again. Again. Again. And again. Until Cory had to stop because her head was hurting. She sat back down on the living room couch. Done with her pacing, her stomach was tied into knots.

Why won't any of my calls go through?

Maybe you're inputting the number wrong.

Don't be ridiculous, she didn't change her number.

She could have done it without telling you.

She wouldn't do that!

Or would she?

You never understood Mom all that well anyway.

There was no point in calling someone who didn't want to be reached.

Cory was in the woods. She wasn't sure how she got there or what business she had been doing there. She was limping along, cane in hand, stepping through blackberry bushes, large ferns, and other shrubbery. There was a warm orange glow a few feet away from her. The rain started pouring down like chilling bullets from the sky. She struggled to walk faster until she reached a clearing in the trees. There was a small meadow and in the middle of that meadow amongst the tall swaying grasses there was a fire warm and beating like a heart not moving or spreading. The rain continued pouring down but the fire kept going. She made a few steps toward it, entranced by its warm glow. Just when she reached the edge of the fire's light, the spot where the grass met the warm glow of the fire. She saw something move in the corner of her eye. She barely held back a scream when she looked up and saw what used to be a herd of deer staring at her with dripping back bodies, multiple heads, and empty eye sockets. The antlers of the Bucks had grown massive and corpses of rabbits, raccoons, and possums all dripping back with dead fleas hanging off their bones. They dangled off the antlers in great numbers. One of the bucks gave a playful nicker and trotted over its mouth wide to reveal pointed teeth.

She woke up with a start covered in a sheen of sweat and panic.

Eleanor walked past the doorway carrying an empty cardboard box up to her room. Cory called out into the hallway.

“What do you think about eating out today?”

“What?” Eleanor asked as pushed out a filled box into the hallway that appeared to be filled to the brim with books.

“I said, what do you think of going out to eat?”

“Sounds like a good idea. I don’t think I could work on anything for dinner with all this packing and I’m sure you're busy working on the next episode of the podcast.”

Cory nodded her head silently leaning against her doorframe.

“Yeah, exactly.”

“Okay, I should be ready for dinner in a few minutes. I just need to start packing a few things from my desk.”

“Do you need any help?”

“Neh I think I got a handle on it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yep, hey, I’m leaving the waffle iron with you we got one as a wedding present and I don’t think we need two”

Cory glanced into Eleanor’s bedroom There was a clutter of boxes and half-packed/stacked items scattered around the room; her bed was dismantled with its wood frame and mattress leaning against the wall.

“Are you going to take the bed with you?”

“I guess, so I mean we’ll need a bed for the guest room and this one is still pretty good.”

Cory moved back into her bedroom and grabbed her jacket.

“Okay, will you be ready to head out soon?”

“Yep, just give me a minute,” Eleanor said, retreating into their room and moving aside a few boxes seemingly headed toward they’re desk at the far end of the room.

“Okay, Cory, what would you like to discuss today?” The therapist spoke from the hollow graph displayed on her phone on the coffee table.

“Well, I started having bad dreams again.”

“Dreams about what?”

“A lot of things.”

“Things like...”

“Monsters chasing me. My mom and Eleanor are only they’re not *Mom and Eleanor*”

“Can you expand on that more?”

“Sure, they look and act like them but there's always something. I don't know how to phrase this, something just feels *off* like they'll check all the boxes and suddenly I'll see something out of the corner of my eye like— I don't know how to even describe it”

“You can try your best.”

“Something weird like their shadows being too long or the color of their hair will shine a little differently than it should or something like that. Then the mask that they're wearing will slip and they'll turn into something else, something large oozing, and black. It will come toward me and swallow me up when I try to get out. It squeezes me, crushing my bones and I'll wake up shaking like a leaf.”

“That sounds rather scary.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Have you been feeling unsafe at home lately?”

“Not particularly, no.” She wasn't sure why but her voice cracked a bit and the hairs on her arm stood up on end.

Her therapist nodded.

“What is your nighttime routine like?”

“Well, I usually pray maghrib and isha.”

“And does that help relax you for bed?”

“Yeah, usually it does. Sometimes it kind of amps me up and makes it difficult to fall asleep.”

“Well on those nights you are having trouble going to sleep, might I suggest doing a grounding exercise, reminding yourself that you are at home and safe and no one is going to hurt you.” The therapist’s voice droned on quietly. Cory thought it over in her head momentarily. *What would be the point?*

“I already do something similar every night and it doesn’t exactly help.”

“Well, there are medications we can try to treat the nightmares if they affect your sleep.”

“Yeah, they are.”

“I suggest you make an appointment with Ana, our psychiatrist to see if she can prescribe something for you.”

“Okay, thanks for the suggestion and advice.”

“No trouble. Do you have anything else you would like to discuss this session?”

“Honestly, I don’t know.”

“Would you like to start where we left off last session?”

“I guess that’d be a good idea.”

“Let me access the recording so I can gauge what we talked about last week.” She tapped her temple twice and there was a slight whooshing sound over the holograph.

“Yes, so it looks like we were discussing the effects of your father’s choice to walk away from you and your mother.” Cory’s stomach clenched tightly. She calculated her next words carefully.

The bath water was cold and the bubbles that overflowed from the tub were all gone. Still, Cory couldn't bring herself to get out of the tub. She looked down at her thighs, her left leg was marred with scar tissue raised and pale and jagged wrapping around her leg in a lightning-like pattern. She had gained about 45 pounds in the last month adding stretch marks around her knees. The water distortion seemed to add more weight to her legs and stomach where they were submerged in the deep tub. Some days she could barely recognize her body. It had failed her so many times in the last few months that she wondered if she'd ever be able to walk again without her left leg screaming for her to just sit down. It was almost like her body wasn't hers anymore. Like it had become this thing she wanted to get rid of. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and leaned back until she was completely submerged. She stayed under the water for about two minutes before coming back up for air.

Cory walked out of her bedroom, closing the door behind her as she went out into the hallway. The length of the corridor had lengthened to the point that she couldn't see where it ended and the stairs leading downstairs began. She felt a cold shiver run down her spine as she stared down the long narrow and dark hallway. It was lit by candle sticks posted on the wall at a forty-five-degree angle; the eerie blue light emitting from the tips of the candles gave Cory a sense of unease as they flickered to and fro. The hallway creaked and groaned almost as if the house was breathing in and out; some windows must have been opened either in the bathroom or Eleanor's former bedroom because black specks were lazily floating in the air. Cory's ears prickled a little. She wandered down the corridor for what seemed like twenty minutes. The end of the hallway didn't seem to be getting any closer. She debated making her way back to her bedroom but when she tried to turn around, her feet wouldn't cooperate. Something grabbed her ankles and dragged her down. She snapped awake, feeling jarred and a little dizzy.

Cory was seated on a wooden chair in a small coffee shop. Eleanor was seated across from her. Eleanor's dark hair had grown back out and was a little ways past their shoulders now. Most of their dyed hair was chopped off; only the tips of their hair had a bit of drained yellow.

“So how was hanging out with the inlaws last week?”

“Oh, it was nice. His cousins Ibrahim and Samia came over and we played board games most of the day and chatted. They were a bit eccentric but fun to hang out with.”

“Glad to hear you had a good time.”

“What's been new with you?”

“Nothing much. found an office job at a software company working a bit in advertising.”

“That's great, anything else?”

“Same old, same old. Still have nightmares. Still going to therapy.”

“Have you talked to your psychiatrist about taking meds for the nightmares? They seem to be affecting you a lot.”

“I don't want to add another pill to the long list I take every day.”

“I get that but it might help.”

“I don't want *might help*. I just want everything to go back to normal.”

“You've been through a lot. You can't expect everything to just magically go back to the way it was before the accident.”

Cory clenched her hands around her chain resisting the urge to throw it on the ground and stomp like a freaking child. She took a couple of deep breaths and tried to change the topic of conversation.

“What do you say we will go to the park after this?” Eleanor gazed up from her cup of coffee.

“Yeah, sure, can we maybe walk around for a bit? I need to get my daily steps in.”

“I think that it's a great idea to be able to look at the scenery and take in some fresh air.”

“Do you have any plans for next weekend?”

“No, not really, why do you ask?”

“I was thinking you should come over. We can just chill watching movies together playing board games or crafting. You know the stuff we used to do together.”

“I should be free next weekend. Are you sure you're fine with me stopping by?”

“Of course why not?”

There was a lull in the conversation. They talked a bit more for a few minutes before leaving the warmth of the cafe in favor of a cool walk in the park. Leaves were dancing off the branches of the trees and the grass was wet with afternoon dew drops.

Cory jolted upright in a trance somewhere between awake and asleep; she could hear the heart monitor beside her bed. She was vaguely aware that she was still at home. Her bedroom window was open, and the yellow blinds with forget-me-nots decorating the edges were opened to reveal a startlingly pink sunset. There was a knock at the door. Cory turned her head to see a stranger standing in her bedroom doorway wearing blue scrubs, holding a tray with a whole grain turkey sandwich with lettuce, tomato, and a side of orange juice. Cory's stomach growled, and a brief wave of sudden confusion came over her.

Cory sat up stiffly and turned her head quickly, trying to get a sense of the room again. Her bed was replaced with a stiff portable bed with rails on the sides and a remote controller that sat to her right. *What is a hospital bed doing?* She blinked again. There was a sharp, prickling sensation in her hand. She looked down. An IV had been inserted into the back of her hand, and from the looks of it, she had just ripped it out. Blood was seeping out of the vein over her knuckles. She looked up at the doorway, but there wasn't a doorway to speak of anymore; it had been replaced with a yellow curtain with blue forget-me-nots painted on it. The nurse's brows were knit together in concern as she stepped forward. Cory clutched her bleeding hand, and then her stomach was overcome with a wave of nausea. She promptly vomited the contents of whatever meal she had last. The graininess of it told her it was something that had carrots. She struggled a bit to place the other upturned flavor violations on her taste buds. The only thing else she could taste was salt, or maybe it was the metallic taste of copper coating her tongue to the point where she wanted to gag. Whatever it was, it coated her mouth

in its entirety. She opened her eyes to find a sea of jam-red coating the white blankets draped over her with speckles of black, brown, and orange.

At first, all she could do was stare. Just stare in confusion, horror, and disbelief. *No, this can't be happening. This isn't real; someone get me out of this nightmare!* The nurse leaped forward like a wild panther, her dark eyes glowing with what Cory could only assume was bloodlust and hunger. She tried curling herself as small and tight as she possibly could. The nurse grabbed her firmly by the arms and gave her a soft shake. The woman's red lips moved, but no sounds came out. She couldn't hear anything except a faint ringing. Cory covered her ears as she felt tears beginning to prickle her eyes. She opened her mouth to say anything to try and get herself out of this situation. Beg for mercy; plead for some form of forgiveness from a higher power. Nothing could come out of her mouth the way she wanted it to. Letters trampled over themselves, over her tongue, and past her lips, like a train wreck. She was being forced to watch as a passenger was in a car in front of the tracks.

The nurse scrambled away, and then there was a host of commotion from behind the half-parted curtain, with various people in baby blue scrubs rushing about here and there like a bunch of worker ants directing food to people in similarly styled beds to hers, but most were not restrained in the particular manner she seemed to have been. Cory's chest felt like it was caving in on itself, and her throat seemed to constrict itself to the point where every breath in or out made a soft whistling sound like a bird being strangled. She unconsciously leaned back, and her eyelids quickly became heavy to the point she could hardly keep them open. In a moment and a half, she felt someone grab

her hand and startle her awake. Blinking away the fog, she could see it was her mother; her gray hair was sticking out in odd directions, and her normally pressed and polished clothes were rumpled and shaggy-looking.

“Hi Habibti, How are you doing?” Her voice was matching her age now; her cheeks were hollow; and her eyes were clouded, like she was not looking directly at Cory. It was as if she were looking through her. Cory’s stomach tightened, and she shut her eyes tightly. *It’s not Mom. It is not Mom.*

“Honey, please talk to me. We always used to enjoy talking to each other, right?” Cory shook her head and covered her ears so tightly that she thought her head would split open. *Not real, dead, remember? Rotting like an apricot in the summer heat, it becomes overly soft and mushy on the inside while the outside wrinkles and withers.*

Her eyes were still shut, but her brain kept telling her to open them again, like it was some kind of game show where she had to open them and win a prize. A prize that would come in the form of some carnivalesque horror show, and she’d scream, but no sound would come out of her throat. She kept picturing it in her head—her mother hanging from the ceiling of the open hospital floor. No, that wasn’t grotesque enough. Eleanor sat on a chair beside her with a scalpel ready to gouge Cory’s eyes out as soon as she opened them. Always the three of them playing this endless game of cat and mouse. Cory wondered, frightened of when exactly it would end but hoping it would soon. Her heart was sitting in the back of her throat, ready to burst. Something grainy caught in between her teeth.

"Oh, honey, it's okay; they are just nightmares. Do you want to go for a walk? Will walking help?" A sweet, gentle voice sounded near Cory’s left ear. She turned her head

and opened her eyes. It was a nurse with dirty blond hair cut into a short bob. This was the kind of look that Cory was sure would be hard for most girls with boyish looks like her to pull off. She smiled kindly at Cory. That honey-sweet tone of voice made everything inside her want to suffocate. No, she couldn't go on a walk. No, no, no. The thought of getting up sent her into a tailspin. What if she fell and broke something? What if she coughed, sneezed, or twitched wrong? She felt like she was one moment away from turning into a pile of ash.

So she laid there and laid there. Trying to see the end of a dream that didn't seem to want to end, her muscles twitched from a lack of fluids or nutrition, and every strand of tissue ached. In this state, Cory's dazed and frankly drugged-up mind only confirmed the pain of the nightmares rather than being part of a cycle of psychosis or a lapse of judgment. She knew she left something in the house. Something that could answer everything, but every time she tried to think of what the object looked like or where it was in the house, it was as if someone had put on blasting umbonate music in her ears. The sounds you'd play at night when you weren't sleeping well— the sort of soft-toned white noise that most people find soothing— made Cory feel her hands and entire face start to twitch as she resisted the urge to scream. That's all she remembered from the first night in the hospital before passing out again.

Two nights later, she woke up in her bedroom with an IV connected to her arm and a heart monitor strapped to her chest with an assortment of colorful wires. Turning her wrist over to examine the IV, she saw a gash on her left arm, tearing up from her wrist to her elbow in a jagged line. The skin is slightly pink and elevated. The room was quiet, quiet in the way you would expect a funeral service to be. All the same, Cory's head was pounding so hard that she could barely think straight. *Is this a dream too?* She thought dizzily, sitting upright. Her bones ached and popped, almost snapping back into place as if she had dislodged each joint in her sleep. She opened her mouth to speak, but in the end, all that came out of her was a breathless groan of agony. Eleanor walked into the room slowly and quietly, avoiding eye contact like she was trying to approach a skittish cat.

"Hi, how long was I out for?" Cory managed to ask after about five minutes of silence, in which Eleanor said nothing and did nothing aside from handing Cory a cup of water to sip from.

Cory watched from the corner of her eye as Eleanor ran their hands through their now oily, shoulder-length dyed blond hair. It was puffing out in all directions and definitely needed some shampooing and detangling.

Eleanor took a deep breath. Their hands were shaking in the absence of holding onto the glass cup they kept offering Cory to drink from.

"Well, about a day and a half, I guess, which is good because the doctor really emphasized that sleep would be important in making the transition back home."

"What do you mean back home?" Cory could feel her stomach dropping, and this weird sinking feeling just kept spreading up her arms, down her legs, and into her head,

where it felt as though she was suddenly being dragged through a dark tunnel. Her vision became cloudy and hazy as Eleanor answered her. She had this sort of earth-shattering sensation of being both inside and outside of her body at the same time, peering at herself as she watched the conversation with Eleanor unravel like a disintegrating blanket or a car accident.

"Well, you kept saying you wanted us to go out for dinner because you recently finished the last episode of the podcast; no, wait, it was the first season; you finished the final episode of the first season and wanted us to celebrate by going out to eat."

"I don't remember any of this; did I tell you what the episode was about?"

"Something related to rising rates of depression in current teenagers or something like that?" Eleanor said, scrunching up their hair as they talked. *That must be a new tick or something. I've never seen them this lethargic.*

"Anyway back on track, your mother and I went shopping just before we were going to go out and found that you had locked yourself in the bathroom and wouldn't let us in."

Flashes of pain came back to Cory's memory—this feeling like her left arm was being torn open. She looked down at her blanket and saw her arm fileted like a fish. Warm, deep red was pooling all over the blanket. She quickly tugged at the sheets to wrap them around her arm to scratch the blood flow. More of it just kept coming and coming. She opened her mouth to shout at Eleanor to get her a towel or something. Instead, what she was met with was a cold, almost unfeeling expression dawning on Eleanor's face.

"What the heck are you doing?"

“I was—I was—the blood, it’s every—” Cory grasped Eleanor’s arm to try and keep her from detangling the blankets, but her attempts were for nothing. Eleanor uncoiled the sheets and blankets from around Cory’s arm like she was swaddling a newborn to inspect and weigh them. Her rough, fire-burnt hands grazed over the scar tissue on Cory’s arm delicately, as if half expecting the wound to reopen. Cory could still feel and see the blood pooling.

“It’s alright; it healed up pretty quickly given how fast we got to the hospital and how fast the doctors were able to stitch you back up.” She gave the arm a comforting squeeze, and with that, the flesh and skin slowly began to mend back together. Cory bit down on the meat of her right wrist to keep from screaming in pain and terror as she watched the bits of torn tissue and blood move all back into place and felt the tendon snap back against her wrist like a rubber band.

After it was done, Cory leaned back into the bed, her wrist still in her jaws. Eleanor calmly grabbed her right hand and removed it from her clenched jaw. Taking a shaky breath, she leaned back into the chair beside the bed. Cory’s hand was still collapsed in hers, so Cory had to turn to her side so that she could avoid pulling on her sore muscles.

“Ya know what? I don’t think I should have said any of that. Just please try to get some sleep, and we’ll talk more in the morning.”

Cory’s heart was pounding in her chest so loudly that she could barely hear Eleanor. Her stomach tied itself into knots as she leaned back down, and Eleanor softly pulled the covers over Cory’s shoulder.

The summer heat was sweltering, and she could feel sweat pulling down the ridges of her back as she sat quietly on the back patio. She almost wished she had some bird seed for the little red-chested robins and the song sparrows. Cory has found it nearly impossible to sit still in the house all day in the last few days. Even as she was sitting on the porch, her right knee was bobbing up and down. Trying to sit down and work on anything almost immediately resulted in a head-splitting headache. Sometimes she just wanted to bury her head in a pillow and scream until she couldn't breathe. She was sure, though, that if she tried that, she'd be forced back to the hospital and never be allowed home without being drugged out of her mind. Sighing, she rubbed her forehead for the fiftieth time. *It's a wonder that I haven't lost feeling in my scalp or my fingers at this point. I'm pretty sure there's a dirty joke hidden in that train of thought, but I'm too tired to care at this point.*

Something large and dark ran swiftly across Cory's peripheral vision; her joints reflexively stiffened, and she could feel the blood in her veins begin to burn like she needed to get up and run. Standing up swiftly, she could hear her knees and hips pop. She was thankful for the fact that she could finally move around without her leg brace. Her right arm was bandaged rather lightly, and she didn't seem to have any trouble lifting heavy objects or performing everyday tasks. Still, she felt as though her leg and arm were too much of a risk to resume regular workouts. So she settled for talking on short walks around the house in the afternoon. The air was cleaner than it had been in

the fall, with no smoke to speak of, and it had rained for the past week. The back door slowly opened with a soft creak.

“I was just going to ask what you want for dinner tonight and if you plan on coming back inside any time soon.” Eleanor’s voice sounded strained and as rough as sandpaper.

“I’m not all that hungry at the moment; I think I’ll—”

“You can’t keep skipping meals. The doctor said that-”

“I know what the doctor said, Eleanor. I was there in case you forgot.”

“I didn’t think you were in a very present state of mind when we left the hospital.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Cory could feel her ears turning red as she and Eleanor scrutinized each other; the air became stiff and heavy until Cory finally broke eye contact in favor of looking out at the rose bushes.

“Only that it was a very difficult transition back home. That’s it.”

Cory let out a sigh and rubbed her forehead with the back of her hand, feeling another headache coming on.

“Ok, well, in any case, I’m not that hungry, so whatever you make, I’ll just have a little of it if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind. I’m just worried about you.”

“I’m okay eating plenty; I snacked on some trail mix and pumpkin bread just after lunch.” Cory let out a sigh as she shimmied her way behind Eleanor and into the house.

"Okay, then could you hang out in the kitchen? I want to cook something."

"Yeah, sure. I was thinking about just sitting around and reading the Quran."

She chanced a glance over her shoulder at Eleanor. They looked pale and cold in their t-shirt and olive green overalls, and their bare arms were forming goose flesh. Cory shook her head to rid her mind of the sad image and grabbed the red leatherbound book from her side table.

Do not trust them

She scribbled it out in Sharpie and then shut the journal before retreating into her bedroom and locking the door. She could hear what sounded like the crisp chopping of vegetables against their old wooden cutting board. She suspected that, for a salad, Eleanor was cutting up the last vegetables left in the fridge. Just as suddenly as Eleanor started cutting the vegetables, the noise stopped, followed by hasty steps out of the kitchen towards the upstairs bathroom. Cory snuck a glance out of her bedroom. Eleanor was standing before the bathroom sink, and the medicine cabinet was wide open. Eleanor's right hand grasped a now-red-stained white hand towel as their left hand probed the cabinet for bandages.

“Do you think it might need stitches?” Cory asked as she noted the blood continuing to pool on the hand towel.

“What—” Eleanor stared briefly at Cory before continuing to look in the cabinet for a suitable bandage. Cory retreated into her bedroom to grab her keys from the bedside dresser.

Cory stared at the hospital wall picturing a horde of little gremlins dancing around a campfire.

“I don’t think I will be able to stop by on the fifth due to wedding planning. We still have to go to the cake sampling. Hey Cory, *you hew! Earth to Cory!*”

Cory blinked and the image faded away like a blurring watercolor painting.

“Wh—sorry I was distracted for a minute,” her voice cracked and she continued staring at the wall.

“I was talking about wedding plans. Why are you always zoning out whenever I mention the wedding? Are you thinking of backing out as maid of honor? If you want to be a regular guest, I won’t be disappointed.”

“No, it’s not that weddings just aren’t my thing, I guess.”

“Not your thing since when?”

“Since forever. Look, can we just not talk about it.”

“I would prefer if we talked this out. What’s the matter?”

“Nothing, I’m fine.”

“No, you not, any time I bring up the wedding you get this look on your face like-”

“Like what?”

“Like you’d rather be somewhere else, like you want the world to swallow you up.”

“Yeah well, maybe that’s how I feel whenever you bring up the fact that you’re getting married?”

“Why are you jealous? You know we’ll always be best friends right, my getting married doesn’t change that.”

“I know that it’s just”

“Just what?”

“I’ll never have that okay?! I’ll never be able to find someone for *me!*”

“What makes you say that?”

“I just don’t feel sexual attraction,” she muttered, her hands clenched in her lap.

There was a knock at the door. Eleanor opened the door begrudgingly and with an emphatic sigh. A nurse assistant bot came in with a tray of food. Its screen was shining bright yellow with a closed-eye smile framed in pixelated v shapes. It rolled in with its track belts creaking. The conversation paused as the bot set down the tray on Cory’s lap before rolling back out of the room. Eleanor ran a hand through her short clipped hair.

“What did you say? I couldn’t quite hear you.”

“I said I don’t feel sexual attraction.”

“What do you mean you don’t feel it?”

“I mean I don’t feel attracted to people *that way*. I don’t want to do anything with anyone except maybe hold hands and drink coffee together. The idea of having sex is just I don’t know, unappealing is the lightest way I can put it.”

“You realize this doesn’t mean you’ll end up alone. I’m sure there are dating sites for—”

“Mother would never allow it, you know how she is and I don’t want to do anything behind her back.”

“I didn’t say you have to do it behind her back. If you don’t want to that’s—”

“I can’t help but think everyone wants me to have sex because it is so important to them and I just don’t get it.”

“I can only speak for myself. I just want you to be happy. I’m sure it's the same for your mom.”

“You don’t hear the way she talks about wanting grandchildren and for me to get married”

“Getting married and having sex makes most people happy. It's not necessarily the same for everyone. If your mom doesn’t get that then it's on her, not you”

Cory nodded, doing her best to blink away the tears in her eyes.

“Do you want a hug?”

“I don't know.”

“Okay, I won't force one on you.”

The dog dragged the wooden frame out from under Cory's laundry basket. She wondered silently how the thing got into her room. When she had seen signs of it, the thing had wandered out of the house. Her hands shook, trembling at the handle of her clothes door. Ink-black blobs pooled on the floor as the Shaitan dragged the wooden frame across the bedroom floor. The mutt finally laid down on its side, breathing heavily, before the large puddle migrated towards the frame, only to be sucked into the dark wood. The object sizzled and smoked. In about a minute and a half, there was no sign that there had been a demonic dog hanging around Cory's bedroom. Instead, there was a pile of blackened bones. Based on their size and shape, they appeared to have come from a variety of different animals. Cory could feel her stomach sink as she knelt on the cloth, her entire body shackling. *So this picture frame is how the shaitan kept getting around the house without me knowing*, Cory thought to herself. She made her way to the center of the room and grabbed the frame, only for it to be so hot that she could hear and feel the skin of her fingers being signed.

Cory woke up and promptly vomited while trying to crawl out of bed. The stench of the sweat-drenched sheets made her continue to gag long after the contents of her stomach had been emptied. Most of the vomit was clear like water, but with little black splotches scattered throughout. For a second, she thought she might have been coughing up bits of lung. *Doesn't lung tissue turn that color when it dies?* Cory looked up at her nightstand only to find the backless picture frame sitting there. Black porous bulbs pulsed on its sides, and several tendrils coiled and shimmied along its sides. Cory reached out to grasp it, but her vision doubled and her hand shook so much that she couldn't touch the thing, much less get a decent hold on it. The thing stayed just outside her grasp as her vision became foggy and hazy on its edges before it was completely covered in darkness.

Cory held back the vomit sitting in the back of her throat. As she got up, her head was spinning so much that she had to brace herself to keep from toppling back onto her back. Her IV was still lightly inserted into the back of her hand, which was now showing signs of bruising. Looking up, she saw a tray of food had been left for her. A cold omelet with spinach and mushrooms was served with a side of tapioca pudding and a glass of milk. Cory resisted the urge to vomit as the smell of eggs hit her like a freight train.

“Well, look who’s finally up to grace us with her smiling face.”

Cory turned her head to find her mother and Eleonor seater side by side, gabbing with the newest attending nurse. The young man had dark, curly hair and an angular face. His wide-set eyes were particularly strange, with a dark brownish color that one could get lost in; they were keenly punctuated with the length of his nose and the width of his wide cheekbones.

“We were getting a little worried that the meds knocked you out for good,” the young man said as he took a cursory glance at the heart monitor and IV line.

“Yeah, those meds knocked you out, girlie,” Eleanor said with a corked smile. Cory looked at her left arm, and it seemed like there had never been a scar; there were only a few bruises from what Cory could only assume were blood samples taken to test whatever virus was floating around her system. The hospital was fairly quiet despite it being late afternoon on a holiday. Cory resisted the urge to ask for her copy of the Quran to read in her now-lengthy downtime.

“So what are you planning for today?” she asked the two ladies as they sat together eating tomato soup.

Oh, nothing really, just going shopping for some groceries and the mobility aids your doctor requested for you,” Cory said, too tired to imagine herself in a wheelchair. Her stomach felt queasy at the thought of not being able to get around the house on her own anymore.

“What did the doctor find anyway?”

The conversation came to a screeching halt, as though someone had sucked all the air out of the room. Eleanor and Cory’s mother both became pale and clammy-looking. Cory wondered if she should have avoided asking the question.

“Everything came back normal; just a simple case of the flu is all,” Mrs.Morrow said nonchalantly. Her expression was strained, and Cory knew for sure that her mother was lying. Cory could feel her body slowly start to shake, a sort of grittiness between her teeth, and a coppery tingle entering the back of her throat. She only barely resisted the urge to vomit as her vision became hazy.

Cory woke up with a start. Her heart was pounding, and she was covered in a cold sweat. She couldn't remember what she had just dreamed except that it gave her a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. She was still in the hospital room, and her pajamas felt itchy against her dry skin. She resisted the urge to cry and scream; for what reason, she wasn't sure. The doctor came in quietly and asked politely if there was anything she needed. She resisted the urge to use a razor so she could slit her wrists.

She hummed sea shanties quietly to herself, hoping to gain some kind of relief from her body aches.

"You are expected to have a couple of guests this evening. Are you excited?" Cory absent-mindedly nodded her head, not paying much attention to the doctor as they read through her medical chart.

"We'll check in again after the visits are over. How does that sound?"

"Sounds good," Cory answered, still in a daze, before resuming to quietly sing the tune of *Drunken Sailor*. It had been three days since she was put on a sticky liquid diet. She refused to eat any food the hospital staff provided her with. Most foods had recently gained a kind of gritty and metallic texture and flavor combination, almost as if she were eating raw meat.

It felt like it had been days since she had any visitors come to the hospital to check on her. The last time she had seen Eleanor was over two weeks ago, when they

announced their engagement to Ishmael Awad. Cory resisted the urge to cringe as her dear friend went on and on about the wedding planning details.

By Allah, sometimes I wish I could find it in myself to be as happy as she is if someone wanted to marry me.

The doctor's words hung in the air like smoke, choking Cory's voice box and slowly suffocating her. From the incoherent clinical jabberwocky, she made out the words. Blood loss, complications, and severe hemorrhaging. She couldn't make out much else. She spent a good amount of time just staring at the doctor as he spoke, unable to process the words he was saying to her. She felt as if something was boiling inside her. Like a monster ready to dig its claws into the nearest person and tear out their tonsils. A gritty texture filled her mouth until it spilled out. Her clothes were soaked in dark red, with clumps of black spots scattered around. The Doctor rushed out of the room, and the next moment, Cory once again passed out.

Cory woke up feeling like her head was going to split open. Taking a glance around, she noticed she was now not just hooked up to an IV drip but also to a blood bag as well. The paint of blood hung over her head like some gory Eid decoration. Eleanor was sitting beside her. Cory guessed she didn't have much sleep the night before. Her eyes were bloodshot and draped with heavy, dark circles under them. She caught a whiff of the vegetable soup waiting for her on a dinner tray and nearly started to vomit. The smell was too strong.

Allah the Most Merciful, I wish I could get out of here. Go for a swim or a walk. Frankly, anything would be better than wasting away here in this dump. Eleanor smiled patiently and helped her eat. Cory could feel her face turn into an unpleasant expression as the vile soup slid down her throat. The soup in question tasted like sandpaper. Eleanor noticed the sour look on Cory's face and patted her back reassuringly.

"I know it sucks feeling so out of it, but I can assure you the soup is perfectly fine." She said this with a chuckle as she lightly tapped and rubbed Cory's back to be comforting. Rather than being soothing, it made Cory's already sore and tense muscles jump in pain and agitation.

Cory grasped onto the hospital bed's railing, steadying herself as she positioned herself (rather shakily) to get out of bed.

"Wow, wow, wow. What do you think you are doing, Cory?" Eleanor asked, grabbing hold of Cory by the arms and keeping her from getting out of bed.

“I—I—I— ju— I just want to go for a quick walk.” Cory’s entire body was shaking at this point, whether from the searing, burning pain of her blood coursing through her veins like wood chips through a water hose. The fear from the night terrors erupted in the back of her mind.

“The doctors said you need to take it easy while you are on this new cocktail of medications. We don’t know if you’ll experience any of the side effects yet.” Eleanor protested as she gently positioned Cory back in bed.

“Where’s Mom anyway?”

Eleanor's lighthearted expression faded away abruptly, as if Cory had asked a poorly worded question.

“You don’t remember what happened, do you?” Eleanor asked cautiously

“Don’t remember what?” Cory asked, feeling suddenly off-kilter.

Black spots were clouding her vision. The conversation suddenly died there when the doctor stepped in from behind the floral curtains to check on Cory’s vitals and ask a handful of questions about some of the symptoms she might experience as side effects of the new slew of medications. The usual things, like:

How's your appetite?

Are you sleeping well?

Any aches or pains?

On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your level of pain or discomfort?

By the time the questions were over, Cory felt like she was ready to pull out her hair and maybe start screaming.

Of course, I'm not doing well.

I feel miserable, and all of you 'medical professionals' have been no help in diagnosing the problem, much less getting it fixed.

The rest of the afternoon was spent with Eleanor narrowly avoiding all of Cory's questions and Cory trying to get a grasp of what's been going on since she was last awake and semi-sane enough to form a coherent sentence.

Cory slowly got up to her feet. She felt woozy, like her head was filled with cotton and needles. She pressed her hand against her head to try to stop the pounding. It came back warm and slick with blood. She was about three steps away from reaching the car when her vision became hazy. Something loud and heavy, like the breath of something heavy hanging in the air. Cory stumbled around. For a second, she thought she saw something big and dark, about the size of a bear, staring her down. The edges of her vision grew hazy, and the next thing she knew, she was back on the ground before everything went black.

Cory woke up with a start. She was in the back seat of a vintage 2020 Ford minivan, and Mom was gabbing with Eleanor. They were on Route 25, with pine and cottonwood trees bushed by. There was a dark overcast, and it was hailing. The little pellets hit the windshield with echoing taps. The car smelled of peppermint tea and brownies. Cory wasn't sure why that smell was stuck so faintly in the back of her mind.

“So what do you ladies say about going out to lunch today? I finished all of the leftover Lahma Bil Basal. I think we can afford to fudge an afternoon on unnecessary carbs.”

Cory felt ready to cry as her mother gave Eleanor a pat on the shoulder. The radio was vaguely playing “Over the Rainbow” with Judy Garland.

Cory was in a daze, listening to her mother and Eleanor talk about dinner plans and wedding arrangements. Something twisted in the pit of her stomach—an aching sort of stabbing sensation so bad her body was shaking as she unbuckled her seatbelt. Something large and dark raced in front of the car. Cory found her hand gripping the steering wheel and forcing the car to turn left off the road and into the ditch beside the road. There were two screams, then a crunch. Cory's head hit the steering wheel, then the dash. She couldn't remember much else.

It was dark and quiet lying in the cool wet grass of the backyard. The sun was just starting to rise, turning the dark gray clouds rosy pink like someone had painted blush over them. Black specks were floating in the air and Cory's ears were buzzing. Cory let out a soft sigh and watched as the stars twinkled out of sight with the oncoming gray clouds and fog. Cory got up to her feet and the ground gave a squelching sound as she walked back across the lawn and to the house sauntering into the kitchen and grabbing a mug from the cabinet she searched the pantry for some black tea to put on the kettle. Not finding anything she retrieved her phone from her pocket ready to call Eleanor. Then she remembered.

Eleanor isn't here.

Absent-mindedly she put her unused cup in the sink and sank to the floor.

Should I call in sick at work?

Well, you already called in sick twice in the last two weeks, best not to make it a third time.

“Are you guys having a good time?” Cory asked, looking up from her DM board. She had managed to wrangle Eleanor, Ishmael, and the Sayyids into a retro in-person campaign of dungeons and dragons. At the moment the party of adventurers was hanging out at a small tavern gathering information for their next quest.

Ishmael was the first to look up from the table.

“Yeah, I think the game is going great! Thanks again for hosting,” he said before grabbing his cup of lemonade and taking a sip.

“No problem, I think I’m gonna call a break so we can take a bit of a breather and chat. Does that sound good to everyone?”

Everybody nodded in agreement to the proposal.

Eleanor exited the coffee table and grabbed a bag of yogurt-covered pretzels from the couch.

“So anything new going on with anyone?” she asked, opening the bag of yogurt-covered petals.

Mrs. Sayyid looked up from her place at the far end of the table across from Cory.

“Well, I have recently gotten a promotion at the publishing house. You're now looking at the chief editor for the Newbur Press.” She smiled shyly and half hid behind her cup of tea.

“That's great news!” Everyone gave a resounding cheer and Mr. Sayyid gave his wife a firm kiss on the cheek.

“I’ve also taken up a bit of knitting, well in preparation for—” Mrs. Sayid blushed and grasped her husband's hand, while he perked up and smiled broadly. “Well, why don’t you tell them you look ready to burst,” she said with a chuckle, cupping her

husband's cheek. "We're expecting and dear Mariam wants to make some baby blankets, stuffed animals, and the like in preparation for the little one"

Eleanor gave a little squeal of delight and Ishmeal laughed and congratulated the couple. Cory couldn't bring herself to do anything aside from smile and nod.

"When is your due date?"

"Towards the end of December"

"Have you figured out a plan for the nursery?"

"No, not yet."

"I assume you are going to take some maternity leave."

"Yes, my work gives me five months of paid maternity leave and I'll probably start it in November just in case the baby decides to come early."

"That sounds like a good plan."

Cory decided to cut in.

"Do you have any plans for child care once the baby's here?"

The Sayyids gave each other a wide-eyed glance.

"Surprisingly, we haven't made a definite plan yet," the couple said in sync.

"I could come and babysit on my days off. Do you guys get weekends off?"

"I do get most weekends off." Mrs. Sayyid announced, placing her hand on her husband's as he leaned into her side.

"We'd be happy to have you come and babysit whenever you are available, Cory. Well have to talk more later about payment but it should-"

"Oh there is no need to talk about payment Mr.Sayyid"

“How many times do I have to tell you? There is no need for this Mr. and Mrs. Just call us Yusif and Marriam please,” Mr. Sayyid said with a good-natured laugh.

“Of course Mr. Sa- I mean Yusif, it's gonna take me a while to get used to using your first names. My mom had a bit of a thing for public decorum and all that jazz”

There was a lull in the conversation then which only lasted about half a minute but felt like a lifetime of silence.

“So knitting, how is that going for you Mariam?” Eleanor asked inquisitively

“Oh, it is going well. I still can only do squares and rectangles at the moment. Doing much of anything in the round is still a little difficult and confusing and increases and decreases just confound me at the moment but I know most of the basic concepts. ”

“It all sounds really fun and exciting.”

“It is.”

They continued updating each other on life’s new achievements and challenges.

Ishmeal was having his cousins from across the ocean in Ibril come over in the next week and had a lot of scheduled fieldwork coming up. Eleanor had received a lot of prank calls in the last week at work. She had her suspicions of who it was that kept dialing the fire station with false alarms but was told by her supervisor to “just let it be ”. The rest of the evening was fairly quiet and relaxed. Everyone went home at around 10:45 (which was a bit later than expected) and there was the promise of getting together again in two weeks to continue the campaign. Cory was rather tired at the end of the day but also very satisfied.

Cory raced into the bathroom and locked the door behind her. Her hands were shaking as she went through the medicine cabinet and the drawers below the sinks.

Looking for anything sharp, she finally found an unopened pack of razors.

Maybe you should take a breath and calm down. She thought to herself.

Calm down, I might be dying for Allah's sake!

I can't just calm down damn it!

Just ask Eleanor and Mother to take you to the hospital.

No time.

Time.

Time?????

No time.

Have to search, have to search.

Have to see for myself how bad it is.

She broke apart the hand of the razors to get to the small blades, finally retrieving one from its former casing she grabbed it with her right hand and dragged it along the length of her arm. It had to be somewhere inside her already. She watched as the blood pooled across her arm and into the blue-tiled floor she resisted the urge to gage as black specks bubbled up in the mix of red. There was pounding at the door. Someone called out her name but Cory felt so lost and far away. Like her body was slipping away from her pretty soon everything went black.

The moving truck was parked in the driveway. A group of movers were collecting boxes and carrying them out of the hallway into the vehicle. Cory and Eleanor stood together in the hallway watching passively as the movers went about their work.

“I’m just five minutes and a phone call away. You know that right?”

Cory nodded half listening, distracted by the packing of the boxes into the van which would be going to an unfamiliar house and an unfamiliar side of town. Something twisted in her stomach she blinked back tears for the fifth time in the last five minutes.

“What do you say about going into the kitchen while they work on packing everything up?”

Cory nodded silently and they made their way into the kitchen. The rest of the afternoon was spent talking about work and organizing their shared plans for the next weekend. By three o'clock the truck was retreating from the driveway and on the way to Eleanor’s new residence. Cory spent the rest of the day failing to be productive and ultimately sitting on the couch contemplating every choice that led up to this moment in time.

It felt like it had been at least three months since she had taken a full breath—not that she could keep track anymore; the days blended like muddied oil paint. The air sat stuck in the back of her throat each time she tried to take a new gulp. She wondered if her windpipe was now permanently constricted because it hurt so much. Her stomach grumbled and seemed to boil. Stomach acid bubbled up to the bottom of her throat, and she couldn't get her hands to stop shaking. Her wrists were bruised from straining against the straps that anchored her arms to the posts of the hospital bed. Every moment sent a new wave of agony through her tense muscles. Every twitch and twang from her fried tendons and muscles made her head spin so badly that she kept gagging long after her stomach was empty of all that blackened, gritty bile.

No more. No more help.

No more doctoral intervention.

Either let me die or, for God's sake, stop bringing me back!

She shut her eyes, hoping it would make her head stop hurting. But it only made it hurt more. Sighing, she leaned back, stared up at the ceiling over her head, and tried to count the black dots floating on the ceiling tiles above her hospital bed.

What's the point of living if you've died more times than you can count?





















Poetics Statement

In this poetic statement, I will discuss various subject matters relating to my thesis. Firstly I will be discussing the formatting of my work and how the sectioning of the book is supposed to guide the reader. I will be discussing the unconventional choices I made concerning character building. In addition, I will also note my choice to work with artifacts as well as clarify why I opted to work within the realms of science fiction rather than fantasy. And lastly, The influence or lack of influence that my emotions played into some aspects of writing my thesis.

In terms of its formatting, the book is roughly broken down into three parts: the events leading up to the death of the dog Aya, the death of the said dog, and the events after the dog has passed on. This book needed to be in three portions not only to maintain a clear-cut distinction between the beginning, middle, and end but also to mark certain changes in the story's narration. Part three is easily categorized by the nonlinear timeline of events. This makes the third part more distinct than parts one and two in which events happen more in a linear perspective. In addition, I wanted to give the reader a rough start, middle, and end points of the story to help better navigate the text.

I was greatly influenced in my opening of this book by Jeff Vandermeer's *Wonderbook: The Illustrative Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction*. The book was filled to the brim with advice and tips for writing. I was and am overwhelmed by it. The major no-nos for starting a story are generally beginning with a flashback, a dream sequence, a bit of dialogue, or something from the point of view of a minor character. Starting a story with one of these manners usually results in the reader feeling confused, cheated, or not as grounded as if you started a book with a simple piece of in-time interactions between characters and their environment. For these reasons,

The Last of Our Days starts with the main character simply going through the market. A little more specifically we open on the main character contemplating where her life is headed as she wanders through the market to hopefully buy some bananas for some banana bread. The scene devolves into Cory observing her environment. Having the story start with this seemingly mundane task allowed for an overhead view of the setting's political, social, and technological standing.

Mathew Salesses's *Craft in the Real World* and Jeff Vandermeer's *Wonderbook: the Illustrative Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction* suggest following writing prompts that ask questions regarding the character you're creating things such as name, physical characteristics, likes, and dislikes, their personal goals, and possible internal conflicts etc. While this method of data logging and collecting may be effective for creating characters, it has the downside of being rather monotonous and time-consuming. Due to time constraints while working on this book, I made a random character generator that gave me the names, occupations, and general descriptions of each character with the easy roll of a pair of dice. Constructing the characters was very simple but, in some ways, a little more fun than my usual process of simply writing down general descriptions of the characters in the opening introductory scenes. It felt very much like playing a mini tabletop game as opposed to working on creating a character. Conducting the task of creating my characters through a generator made it easy to get a rough outline of my main characters without doing much of the brain work that it normally took to construct them. This simple change to my writing process left me a lot of time to mentally map out their personalities and quirks which I would keep in mind when writing out scenes and interactions between the characters.

Early on I knew that I wanted to make artifacts that would relate to the work I was writing. These artifacts eventually turned out to be sculptures, which inspired many scenes in the thesis as they unfolded. The artifacts greatly affected how I'd later go about writing descriptions for them. Apart from the wooden picture frame, the idea for the artifact came before I knew where or how I was going to write it into the story or if it would even make it into the final draft. Aside from that, the first thing I knew was that I wanted to work with aliens. Why aliens rather than an already constituted race such as those found in fantasy? Maybe it was the allure of being able to make something new and original that seemed to be the most compelling. Exactly what the aliens would look like or how they would communicate was very difficult to figure out in the beginning. I quickly landed on the idea of alien fungus. The idea of fungus being able to reanimate the dead in disturbing ways stuck with me. So I set out first to construct the fungus, how it would look, and the way it would appear when not attached to a host. I set myself on describing it as a black speckle-like debris, supposedly from a meteorite landing far away from the setting of the story. The book *Fantasy Creatures in Clay: Techniques for Sculpting Dragons, Griffins, and More* by Neal Deschain became essential reading when faced with the need to display some of the hosts of the alien fungi. *Fantasy Creatures in Clay* was very helpful, mostly due to its addition of photographs and well-written instructions for each section titled after different body parts a person could use to construct a fantasy or sci-fi creature. This advice on how to add unique textures and features was particularly helpful in the task of constructing the artifacts.

I did not intend to write a character that related so much to my personal experiences and trauma. While writing the scenarios my main character was facing, I couldn't help but ask myself, "*What would I do if this happened?*". I opted to write the character making choices in

opposition to the kinds of choices that I suspect I would make in the same situation. In the past many of the stories I wrote centered around characters with an absent parent (usually a mother). Maybe it's part of the reason I identify as Ace—not wanting to commit myself to a romantic relationship out of fear it might fail. In any case, I just can't stand the thought of ever creating a child who might end up struggling through the same hardships I did growing up. I also felt, and at times continue to feel, as though I don't fit the Muslim American mold that I was always responsible for projecting out into the world. Before July 6, 2023, I never got into praying five times a day or memorizing verses from the Quran like my cousins and brother Alhasan. I also wasn't interested in romantic relationships like everyone else was in high school. Everyone talked about sex like it was just as important as breathing, but I couldn't and still can't stand the thought of giving my body over to someone who could use me any time they wanted to. All these things made me feel broken in a manner that I still cannot put into words and probably will never be able to communicate in a clean-cut way.

Often, healing from trauma comes in stages, similar to the sequences of grief. I spent a good portion of my time working on this thesis denying anything wrong going on in my life. The result was a case of writer's block that dominated my attempts at working with the characters I created. In Charlie Jane Anders, *Never Say You Can't Survive* she discusses that the hardest things a person can face often spur writing as a means of self-preservation for many writers. Charlie Jane Anders writes that anger, in particular, can be a great asset for writers working through writer's block.

While in the beginning stage of my work, I didn't think of Anders's work as particularly relevant to what I was working on as I was trying my best to avoid writing with my emotions as much as possible. Anders encourages writers to write with their feelings and let their emotions

flow onto the page. I held myself back in an attempt to keep some semblance of control over the narrative of the story. I feel that a lot of the things I was going through in my second year affected the work I was creating with my thesis. At the time I simply attributed my writer's block to having little ideas of where I wanted my story to go rather than a reflection of the fact that things at home were getting more and more tense. I built up a lot of anger before my psychosis, anger at myself for not being as good a Muslim as I was taught to be. Anger at Alhasan (my brother) and my father for letting their relationship crumble under the weight of Alhasan's possible gaming addiction. It added up to a lot of resentment that I didn't know what to do with, considering I didn't want to write any of it into the story. At the time I was certain that if I let myself get too lost in my emotions while writing this piece I'd end up resenting the work and deleting everything in an angry fit thinking that my overflow of emotions tainted the characters' responses to everything that was happening in the story.

In conclusion, I endeavored to format the book so that would be easier for the reader to understand the rough order of events. Made a character generator as opposed to writing all my character's traits on a piece of paper. I discussed how my desire to write something original led me to write about aliens and a science fiction story as opposed to something fantastical. I noted how my lack of desire to rely heavily on my anger as a source to fuel my work impacted the speed and direction in which I wrote my story.