

Sophia

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Abstract

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My short novel is about a female protagonist who is shown in a braided narrative, meaning that it goes back and forth between the past and present. My characters find subtle looks at enlightenment, the shimmering presence of beauty, and times of connecting to a new sense of happiness. In my fiction I use minimalist realism that explores the limits of what can be known: in the self, others, and the world. I'm interested in what is manifest but not said, and the inner/outer distinction. There is much about how illness is handled, and the private nature of that. I think there is a sense of the everyday, and an absence of exposition. I think that if my novel is successful at all, it will be because I have taken what can be known or said with much restraint to portray the world with a simple (though not simplistic) worldview and this notion also defines my realism and minimalism as a whole.

SOPHIA

Seattle, 2024, Green Lake

Sophia couldn't figure it all out. She was in her mid-thirties, she had expected for there to be more happening in her life.

And sometimes she wished for more parties, like in her twenties. To be single at this age was a new, different thing, and entirely surprising. She had never had a problem meeting guys until now, and she'd had some disappointing dates on the apps and she almost deleted them. Perhaps there was something wrong.

It was the day after Christmas, and that day was also an odd anniversary because of an incident involving her mother when Sophia was a child. It was the anniversary of her mother's breakdown that had occurred when Sophia was a little girl. Her mother had only attempted just once. Her father found her in the tub. Sophia didn't understand a single thing during the event, but when she asked during college, her father told her that she had tried to die in the tub, and that it was a long time ago.

It had chopped up her childhood. Every December Sophia thought about it, though she had very little information.

She lived with Sarah in a two-bedroom apartment near Green Lake and Sophia went to a Mexican restaurant on the street that circles the lake, and she met Jessica that night. Jessica

came over and they had tequilas. Jessica said that The Little Red Hen was around the Green Lake corner. Sophia had never been in, and Jessica wanted to go because she wanted to dance.

Sophia was surprised to see the older people outside, and noticed that she'd never seen the bar before. Inside it was busy, and there was an eight-dollar cover charge and a country band playing in front of a dance floor that was under red light. People were *really* dancing together, there was a kind of simple courtship and friendliness, in the way that they danced to the country music, and there were many people her parent's age. She had never thought of dance like this: simple, and people liked it, and they looked good. She decided to not dance because she didn't know the dances, but she liked watching the ceremony of the dancing, the elegance, the connection, and the chivalry.

A charming guy older than Jessica teased her and joked about having a dance. He told her that she wouldn't want to be sitting down watching people have fun all night. Then he started holding her shoulder with a funny voice. Sophia and Jessica started laughing, and Jessica went with him to dance. Sophia watched a little enviously and listened to the music. As she watched, she felt a respite from life outside the bar, like she was in a faraway place in this rarefied bar.

People were taking others onto the dance floor. She thought it was nice to see older couples, and then there was a spontaneous pair with a boy who looked like he was in college and a young blonde woman who looked much older who wore an all-black baseball cap. She clearly liked it, though he didn't know what he was doing, and his friend came over and showed him some. Then the two danced the way she wanted to.

Later, two beers in, another man asked Jessica to dance and she said yes to a slow tune. His friend asked Sophia, and she decided to dance, and said that she wasn't prepared, and he showed her the steps slowly. The dance was simple, and after she knew some of the steps, he used his body to show her how he would lead, and quickly showed examples all around the room. When she could play along, he took her into the dance with the same serious face the whole time. The music swirled around her. They all danced a couple of songs, and Sophia was surprised to miss her ballet dancing that she had dropped in college.

When Jessica left with Sophia, they were both drunk. They were too drunk to settle anything into a real conversation, but the bar had somewhat thrilled her. Jessica and Sophia had left after an hour and a half, and then Sophia suddenly said, "My mother was a coward." She laughed.

Her father had slightly opened the door and yelled at Sophia to go away. She ran to her room and hid. She began to cry. She could hear her father crying and some splashing and then just crying. Her father called 9-1-1 and she heard the words mental breakdown. She had never heard those words before.

She remembered being confused by her father's wet arms and wet clothing when he found her in her room. She had hidden in the closet and under a blanket. She went out when the ambulance and police came, and the lights went round and round as her father explained. She went back into her room and sat on the bed, while her father told her to stay in her room and then she heard her mother sobbing and leaving.

Her grandparents looked over her that night, and soon she was in bed, with the type of explanation you give to a child, and a child's imagination.

Her friend laughed and said, "What?"

"She nearly killed herself when I was a kid."

"I didn't know that."

They walked back to Sophia's place.

"Do you think you'll date?" Jessica asked. "You really deserve it."

She laughed. "I'm going to take a break."

"Not too much of one." She smiled. "If you're into girls you can tell me." She poured more, and the last, of the red wine. "Are you into me?" she smiled.

"No," she said.

"Did you never call that guy back from the bar two weeks ago?" Her friend looked sincerely worried.

"I forgot to."

Her friend rolled her eyes. They drunkenly ate some chips. Jessica slept on the couch.

She went into her room. She turned off the lights and fell into bed, drunkenly ruminating about her mother, and remembering everything below the bar's red lights.

She woke up the next morning with a hangover. She had a headache.

Would she always be alone? The prospect seemed suddenly more than just logical. She hated the dating apps and she didn't have any dating goals. She didn't always like talking to other men, and the messaging was worse than that.

Jessica had gone, and Sophia's roommate had left a note on the kitchen counter on what to get from the grocery store. It was mostly vegetables, and fruit from the nice local grocery store co-op. Everything else was from a big brand grocery store. Her roommate was going to make a soup that night, and she was a good cook.

The next day Jessica wanted to go to a matinee, and they had ramen in the short curved street of parking before going to the film, which had an interesting shot in the end of cars chasing while going up and down the hills. This friend had recently become pregnant, and Sophia had no interest in children and never had.

When the film got out, they got some coffee in Green Lake, and then Sophia went alone to the Queen Anne park facing downtown. Her parents had their marriage picture there. She had seen it recently, and now she was, oddly, the age that they were in the picture. Her mother was so done up in the picture and pretty. Her father was somewhat skinnier. Behind them was the same view but during the day. It was the picture of simpler times. They separated soon after the breakdown, but lived in the same house early on because they didn't have the money. Then, after a year they got back together.

That night Sophia went to a dive bar where her older friend Kim was a bartender. It was not well lit, and had two tables of pool and karaoke on Wednesday, and she got a gin and tonic. They went outside and smoked a cigarette.

“Slow night,” she said. “But, the pay is alright. My sister is a nurse and she doesn’t even get much. How’s it going?”

“I thought my thirties would be fun,” she laughed. “I had fun in my twenties.”

“I partied too much in college and got pregnant,” she laughed.

She took a drag and the bartender did, too.

“How’s waiting tables?” the bartender asked.

She had just gotten the job. “It’s the same as here.”

“I want a boyfriend,” the bartender said, “and to really build my life.”

They kept smoking. It started to snow. A snowstorm had been going on for a couple of days and not many cars were out. The street was quiet.

“It never snows in Seattle,” the bartender said. “My daughter loves the snow.”

Sophia looked at the street and snow became something magical for her. Suddenly, she wanted to date again.

The bartender said, “I felt that I had a choice to do what I wanted in life, but then my mental illnesses have become the most determining and limiting factor. Where others can make their lives, it happens differently and more strangely for me. I have to make myself, and make

my mental illness with all of its medications and side effects, too. Like it's a different person. I oftentimes become full of so much dread."

Sophia didn't know what to say to this. "Sounds tough."

The bartender laughed. "I feel so lost at the moment, but I'm not passive."

"One of my cousins is the same way, and he hasn't taken the medication."

They kept chatting, and then went back in. Sophia got another free cocktail.

She walked back through the snow to her car. Sophia had never experienced a suicide attempt, a manic episode, or psychotic break. The snow was crunched under her boots. She got in the car. After pulling out, she immediately slid and felt drunk. She parked again, and had remembered that she had the number of a guy she sometimes hooked up with who lived right nearby.

"Hey," she said when he picked up.

"Hey."

"I'm at the bar across the street. The driving is too rough."

"Come on up," he said.

"Okay."

He gave her a beer. She liked his apartment. It was decorated with pictures of different philosophers. He was watching a football game. She had another beer. After a while, the roads were still dicey. She decided not to risk it. She was too drunk anyway. She smoked a cigarette on the deck. She spent the night on his couch and then in his bed.

In the morning it was sunny, and at home Jessica was watching Netflix at their apartment with two friends. Jessica smiled and Sophia told her who it was. Jessica didn't know him.

"I thought you had died," her roommate laughed.

"I tried driving, but the snow and icy roads were crazy."

"What's his name?"

"Ben."

"How was it all?"

"Fine." She took a hot shower. She went to her room, and put a record on. It was "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat" by Charles Mingus about the death of saxophonist Lester Young, famous for the eponymous hat. It was a mournful song, and she was surprised that she hadn't listened to something lighter. She had many records. When it was over, she played it again. The day had turned cold and snowy again. She thought of nothingness while listening to the song, and then when it finished, she saw nothingness everywhere.

Whidbey Island, WA, 2004/2025

At the risk of less solitude, Sophia went with her father's side: cousins and her family and the cousins' kids to Whidbey Island for New Year's at a nice, big, Airbnb. The next day, they went to the 19th century defense fortification and oceanfront Fort Casey, full of fields, old cannons, and the blue land in sight. The kids ran around and they went through the dark, fun pitch-black spaces and paths in the bunkers. The fort was part of a triangle of forts to defend the Puget Sound. She tried to avoid the present. The wind came through, and she walked behind them. Other families were around. The nephews were having fun, and she followed with the adults. She went and ran around with them for a while, and she forgot about her grievances. There was a fun moment in a short and thin bunker passage when it was pitch-black and you couldn't see even right in front of you.

She got back to thinking about things and her emotions ran away from her.

That night she brought a pack of cigarettes. It was hard to light the cigarette in the wind. Then she drunkenly sat down onto a log and lit another cigarette.

Wasn't it so good, looking back over senior year when they had danced at prom, and partied later at Malcolm's? It had to be perfectly simple, actually, and she was just getting nostalgic. She had remembered at Malcolm's how some girls who ran track wore just compression shorts and a top. She remembered being medicated for social anxiety senior year, too. She took medication for it: lorazepam and propranolol.

She slowly smoked a cigarette. The smoke disappeared in the wind, and she looked out at the stars, and remembered her college's view out in the country. She remembered one of her

best friends from college Andrew being home for medical leave after his first manic episode. And, she knew that it had been fifteen years since his last girlfriend.

The family usually talked about the kids when they gathered. They were long past the days when her and the cousins and their girlfriends would play board games. Now, it was teaching Monopoly to the oldest of her nephews.

Sophia was single. It had been three years.

When she went back to the Airbnb, she went to her room upstairs, and she lay in bed.

Later, she went downstairs for some juice.

“Everything okay?” her older sister asked.

“Yes, everything’s fine.”

“I didn’t know you smoked?” Her head tilted in interest. “You smell.”

“I don’t, just some packs recently.”

“Oh.” She sounded concerned. “Well, you missed dinner.”

“Okay.”

“Jack’s wife is a great cook, it’s still hot.” Her sister opened a book and sat at the table.

Sophia filled a plate and she sat down at the dining room table. Starting a family felt odd.

She couldn’t afford it at this point.

The kids wanted to play another game. She was listening to her cousin explain how Go

Fish is played. Sophia feared that she had angered her sister. Sophia went and took a shower.

She watched Sportscenter downstairs. She hung around a little longer.

Sophia went to her room, undressed, and got into bed. She deleted her dating apps on a whim. The next day, she got on the ferry, and when she parked, she took the stairs up. She got Sarah's text: she would meet friends on Capitol Hill in a little while for Jessica's birthday. She remembered the front of the ferry as a kid, and she went out and lit a cigarette there. It was windy and hard to light the cigarette, and no one else was out.

Southcentral Montana, 2003, Little Bighorn River

As a seventh grader, Sophia's father took her to the plains where the Battle of Little Big Horn had occurred—Custer's Last Stand—in southeastern Montana when it was a territory. He had black hair combed over a full head of hair, tall with broad shoulders, and rarely talkative, though military history brought it out in him. She had gone with her father on a number of trips like this, and they were never very conversant. She would read in the car until she didn't want to anymore, and they said little at the restaurants. The drive was many hours from Seattle, and they stayed in a hotel the first night, she wore pajamas and watched basketball with her father. He snored at night in the two-bed hotel that they stayed at. They were touring other battle sites, but Custer's was the most thrilling for her father, and it was the biggest battle in the Plains Indian Wars.

In the morning, they ate a small continental breakfast at their hotel.

When they walked to the Ranger's building and lecture area, they came to the very end of a lecture done by a Ranger. And so, they walked to Last Stand Hill, where Custer and his men had died. There was a stone monument.

They read the Last Stand monument's marble obelisk that had the names of the fallen soldiers. You could see some of the sweep of the battle from there, and its dramatic vista as well as the Big Horn River, the trees and the place where so many Native Americans had been encamped. Interstate 1-90 was seen behind Little Bighorn River, and it was a bit odd to Sarah how the two could be juxtaposed, the old and the new.

Her father looked around, and he began to talk to her about the battle.

“The battle occurred during June 25-26, 1876 between Lieut. Col Custer’s federal troops (including Crow, and Arikara scouts) and the North Plains Indians led by Sitting Bull.” There was the dry and yellow plains grass, and the sun was hot during that afternoon. The battle site included the long ridgeline, the steep bluffs that led to the trees and the ravines of the Little Bighorn River, and the meadows beyond where the horse herds would have been.

He looked out over the cut of land. “This was all started because gold was found in the nearby Black Hills. An expedition led by Custer’s 7th Cavalry was there when the gold was found. Illegal settlers came there. The Native Americans had been promised this land in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 also known as the Horse Creek Treaty, and the Second Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 and this was really where the root of the conflict was.” He still wasn’t looking at her. “This was part of the Great Sioux War of 1876,” her father said, “When the Northern Plains Indians were defending the territory given to them in the treaty from miners. Custer had already massacred a Cheyenne village, killing mostly women, children, and the elderly.” He still was looking at the site.

Sitting Bull had an auspicious and prophetic vision of victory during the Sun Dance ceremony and it was of soldiers toppling from the sky off their horses. They fell like grasshoppers without ears (signaling a victory) into his camp.

They drove from the monument where Custer was overwhelmed and died. Crazy Horse had helped to annihilate a whole regiment. Her father had khaki pants on and a light and dark gray vest. Her father evoked the situation: “It’s peaceful now, but it was not during the battle, there was: the smoke, gunfire, the yelling, screaming, cursing, ‘More ammo! More ammo!’”

Her father said, “Let’s drive to Reno’s position. Reno was a separate group because Custer had quickly split his army. Some say it was Custer’s ego that he went with a split cavalry.”

She got into the car and turned up the AC. The car started to go down the quiet road along the ridge.

“Very quiet out here,” her father said. “Native Americans had no notion of territory as being cut off land.” She looked out at the land to the left, more yellow grass. Then, to the right where, past the bluffs the Native Americans had been waiting by the river.

Her father said, “This is the worst thing that the US government ever did, this genocide of the Native Americans.”

Then they drove across the ridge to Reno’s position, on the other edge of the ridge where a position could possibly be held. No one passed them coming the other way. There was a wind. It had been hours of driving from the hotel.

Driving towards the other side of the battle, a number of cows were in their way for a moment. It would’ve been a long walk.

Then they came to where Reno’s company later retreated, and their ill-fated fighting the position at the end of the ridge. Reno had gone with three companies south to attack the Native American camps, and Benteen diverged farther at the south with another three companies. It was a disaster. Where Sarah and her father were was back at the ridge line where Reno and Benteen eventually joined up. He said, “Reno held this position well after attacking the tribes below the river, and retreating to the higher ground, where Benteen eventually met him. This position was more sustainable.” They were able to hold off attacks, and then the battle ended.

Again, below the ridgeline were the trees and then the river. Her father pointed down to where the Indian encampment was by the river. The wind blew over them, and the grass moved with it. The sky was gray, and outstretched in a way that it did not in the city. Again, her father narrated what people thought happened, the different versions.

“We’re almost done,” he said. “You know, Hitler took inspiration from how we treated the Indians. How we pushed and fought going west with manifest destiny and then put them in reservations.”

She looked at her father. He walked down towards where the encampment had been. She knew he’d be gone forever. As he descended to a different part of the battle, she followed behind him.

“It’s interesting to finally be here,” he said. “You get a real sense of the geography. I would’ve never guessed how you couldn’t see Custer from Reno’s position. Across the ridge, they weren’t visible to one another.”

After a while, they went back up to the car.

They went to the battle site bookstore, then the small restaurant and gift shop. They were invited to a pow-wow by the Crow woman who was the owner. Sophia bought a small buffalo carved out of wood, and stained dark. As they got into the car, her father said that he thought this woman had thought that they were Crow, though her father was Chinese and her mother Caucasian.

After Little Big Horn, they went to Fetterman’s Massacre in northern Montana. First the museum at Fort Phil Kearney, then the trail off of the fort that led to the attack. They were alone

the whole time. That battle had actually happened ten years earlier than Custer's battle. The sun was going down and there was an orange and red sunset. It was where ten Native Americans including Crazy Horse took advantage of a steep drop off next to the trail to ambush U.S. soldiers, killing all eighty-one. Crazy Horse was well respected as the greatest warrior. He had good medicine, her father said. They would go out and have spirit quests. The only way that they killed him was when he was coerced to a jailhouse in Fort Robinson Nebraska while under the impression he would be talking to authorities, and after seeing the trick, he fought and a private mortally bayoneted him.

There was a porcupine on the walk. The ridge continued, and some of the surviving soldiers had retreated along the ridge to different positions.

Finally, they went to a part of Fetterman's Massacre that was a higher elevation on the ridge. It was the final spot where the soldiers had retreated to. There was a steep drop-off where the Indians (who were on the bottom) could attack with bow and arrow. Soon, many Sioux overran the soldiers, after the soldiers had probably shot only one shot with their muskets and were likely reloading after. It was where the battle ended. She noticed the sky again.

They stayed there for a little while, entirely in silence. Then they walked down back to the car and headed home.

Seattle, 2025, Capitol Hill

It was almost ten at night on a Saturday when Sophia got on the light rail at Roosevelt. There were some people, a homeless man. She was listening to Prince on her AirPods because a friend was an enthusiast of his. She loved the melodicism and romance.

She was still a bit tired and unsure about going out. She had had a bad time with a friend from high school last week. He was a scientist and had talked down Cormac McCarthy (who he had never read) when they shared an Uber. Perhaps he was too drunk, but he asked a lot about McCarthy's knowledge of where his books were. He also talked a bit of the common application of scientific theory in daily life.

Capitol Hill was not far away. She found the bar, and Sarah and Jessica were there in a wooden booth. Andrew was busy and planned to see them later. Sophia said, "Do they clear out the homeless on the light rail?" "They do, they push those guys around," Sarah said.

"Oh, I didn't know," Sophia said.

"It's because they don't have to pay," Jessica said.

They chatted. Sarah had had a Tinder date yesterday at a dive bar, and had asked for his number in the end. Jessica had the same boyfriend since college.

"I'm so sick of the apps I deleted them," Sophia said.

Sarah nodded.

“No, don’t delete them, just take a break,” Jessica said, playfully hitting Sarah.

“I guess,” Sarah said.

Sophia picked at their fries and ordered a beer. They were playing loud music. She took a sip. A drunk guy came over to flirt, and the girls just shook their heads. They each had two beers and then they went outside.

They went to Linda’s, and went to the outside section. Sophia noticed some guys she liked.

“Andrew is a born-again virgin,” Jessica said to Sophia.

Sophia laughed, “He is.”

“I want to see how good his game is,” Sarah smiled at Sophia.

“He’s only on Bumble?” Jessica asked Sophia.

“Yes,” Sophia said.

When he showed up, they set up a Hinge account and picked photos. Jessica wrote his profile quickly.

They all ended up dancing at a bar in Capitol Hill where Sophia had never been. Jessica and Sarah got straight into the packed bar’s crowd of dancers, Sophia watched and Andrew got a beer and one for her. Jessica and Sarah were very good dancers—it was how Sarah met her boyfriend. They moved in sync to the very loud soul music.

After they all danced for a while, they went to the bar and closed their tab.

They went to another bar and they did karaoke there.

On their walk home a bar caught Sophia's eye, it was playing EDM music. Sophia decided to go, but the others left with things to do in the morning. She sat at the bar, and looked at Instagram. She listened to the loud electronic music and got a beer from the bartender, Sophia couldn't help but notice her. She wore a neon yellow sports bra and matching tights for shorts. She took some orders, and she was already talking with someone. She said, "I like cocaine. Everyone has their vice."

Sophia finished her beer, and closed her tab. Then she took the light rail home. When she got home, she undressed and got into bed. She looked at the ceiling, getting the spins. She thought about the bartender carnally in a way she never had with a woman.

Seattle, 2008, Ravenna

Sophie's father's service had been in a rented, non-religious, event space in 2008. Afterward, her two older cousins and her sister stayed and chatted with everyone. Later in the afternoon, they went to her mother's house to move a few things. There, they had some tea, and the homemade banana bread from the kitchen. His death had been a slow decline, hard to watch. They eventually went to her childhood basement, looking at the last thing to decide over, his enormous record collection with thousands of neatly tucked albums shelved in plastic cases. Her sister and her cousins just shook their heads, laughed and walked out—glad that Sophia was the musical one. She went and packed up the boxes.

She had played trumpet in the her high school jazz band at a nationally ranked school, and had initially chosen to go to music school for the first year before transferring after transferring after two weeks to Hampshire College. It was a defeat she could not admit to anyone. But, she had kept in touch with her high school jazz bandmates when she came home for breaks and got drinks with them. She started listening to jazz as a fourth grader and now when she listened to jazz, it always felt cleansing. It always felt that way after not listening for a long time.

Sophia decided to play a track as she packed the records that she liked away and the ones she didn't like for Goodwill in other boxes, and she played "Going to California" by Led Zeppelin. It was their only song that she really loved, an acoustic song and she put the other Led Zeppelin in a "keep" box.

She had good enough music sense to know most of the albums, but her father was an eclectic and thorough listener. She spent some of the afternoon and evening listening to different albums to see if she liked them.

Lastly, she took three boxes including all of the blues records in a box and into her trunk along with the stereo system and speakers. She had had an odd common enjoyment with her father about the blues. She liked it when he put on that music, which was sometimes crackly. She labeled the boxes of music she didn't want and carried them to her car to be donated.

Seattle, 2025, Ravenna,

Her apartment faced Cowan Park in the University District, close by her childhood home. She had met her roommate and friend Sarah at their small liberal arts college in Hampshire College. It had since announced its closing. Sarah had always wanted to live in Seattle. She wanted to be on the West Coast and had a notion that the grunge scene somehow still subtly lingered. Sophia had had a hard time with the records because they brought up her father, and so they had stayed in storage the last seven years. Sarah was interested in them, and so she and Sophia picked up the boxes and went home.

They got pizza for dinner on The Ave. Then, back home, Sarah looked through the albums curiously. She had short blonde hair, an indie rock aesthetic. She wore a tight striped shirt and no bra, just two small points that met the shirt.

“Blondie?” Sarah said.

“Yeah, I know, there are good ones.”

“There’s some cool stuff.”

“Do you want to go out tonight?” Sarah asked. It was a Friday.

“I don’t know yet.” Sophia looked at herself in the mirror and she put her hair to one side.

Sarah spent the afternoon playing different records and Sophia went for a walk just to clear her head. Her white shirt had some holes in it and when they later went out, she decided to put on some makeup and a new black blouse she had just bought with a leather jacket.

They went to Ballard to meet some friends at some bars. She hadn't been to Ballard for a long time, but some friends had moved, many blocks off the strip. The light rail didn't go there, and parking was sparse.

They did some shots at her friend's apartment. Then they went to a nice bar and got cocktails, and then they got beer and fries at the next bar.

She had some matches on Bumble that she started going through and Sarah looked at them with her and they both commented on the profiles. Sophia wanted a relationship, maybe something serious. After a couple of beers, she felt solemn, and they walked around Ballard, and they went to one last bar. On their way home, they stopped to smoke cannabis at a park. It made Sophia paranoid at first.

It reminded Sophia of her first days of smoking cannabis during ninth grade. They decided to walk to their friend's, and by then it was very late. They snacked when they got there, and turned on a show that a friend swore by because of the handsome male lead.

Sophia had strangely never cried about her father, and she didn't cry until she was at home alone listening to Son House's "Death Letter Blues": *You know, I didn't know I loved her until they began to let her down/... You know, I didn't feel so bad 'til the good Lord sun went down/And I didn't have a soul to throw my arms around.* Suddenly she completely lost it and cried. lost it and later walked to Cowen Park by herself with a quilt and a book. She put the book aside and went on her stomach and couldn't stop crying.

In West Seattle, her mother often watched her sister's boys. The whole family got together about every other week in West Seattle for a dinner. The family WhatsApp stream was full of photos and videos of babies.

On a Saturday, Sophia and Sarah went to Capitol hill to Nacho Bravo in a booth. After three beers Sophia called it early that night, and Sophia went through the escalating throng of people in Capitol Hill and took the light rail to Roosevelt where she had gone to high school, and walked the few blocks to their place. Sophia was looking for a job. She'd done a lot of work in childcare and she didn't want to stay there. Then, she poured some wine. She started the last season of "Curb Your Enthusiasm," and suddenly felt out of sync. Then she had some more wine.

The next morning, she decided to do some baking. As a girl, she had always liked to listen to her father's jazz collection when she baked with her mother. She was kneading some dough and she was enjoying the process, and talking to her aunt on the phone about how they were done clearing out her parent's house of her father's things that had to go. After all of the remorse and mourning, she kept pushing into the dough.

She remembered how much cannabis she had smoked early in high school, how much she went out. Now, she often went to the park with Sarah, especially when the sun was out, which was common to Seattle summers. She was reading, and Sarah was laying down on a quilt. There was the bright and clear day: the High Moons, the White Claws. Sophia liked the feel of the sun touching her body.

Brooklyn, 2025, New York

Sophia was heading to a wedding in Brooklyn later in the day. She had known the groom in middle school. Andrew was his friend as well. There were also some friends to see in New York, and Andrew's ex, Abigail.

She knew that Andrew was still financially dependent on his family.

He once said that he still sometimes thought about how when he was manic, he had done strange things that other people would never forget.

He had run right past an old high school friend the other day, and Andrew hadn't seen him until they were both up close. They both had looked away, though Andrew laughed a little in the moment, and the moment hadn't really meant a thing.

The city felt inviting. It was Autumn in New York, just like the song. Her friend getting married had converted to Islam more seriously now, and his now wife had been very accommodating and agreeable.

The wedding had a comfortable shimmering price—their friend was something like Lebanese royalty. This friend was a jazz musician and his friends played in a wedding band that was off to the side. The band played through part of the ceremony, and after the ceremony there was a great performance, and Sophia and Andrew listened to the music. Sophia had turned the groom on to jazz in seventh grade and they joked about it once she saw him and hugged. But, she mostly talked to his mother, or other people she barely knew in his family, and then afterward the group of friends went to a small bar. When she chatted finally with the groom

some more, he said that she had the longest relationship there and that it was “beautiful,” and she saw how freed he was. Then Sophia and Andrew had to catch an Uber after a little while because they did not know the trains.

Being driven back by an Uber, she felt some kind of remorse from being broke and single.

Hours before the wedding, Andrew had gone very quickly through the MoMa, seeing every piece. When Andrew had been ill once, he had “Les Demoiselles du' Avignon” on his oncampus housing wall. He’d never seen it in person, and now that he was fine, he saw it as it was. His undergraduate advisor said that he always thought that mental illness was interesting because his advisor never saw it. Andrew had written poems about a Picasso painting at the Smith art gallery, incorporated it in short stories that made no sense—then less and less sense.

He had once gotten lost briefly behind the college in the woods at night, after receiving God’s direction. The forest was getting dark when he lucked upon another person in the woods that he yelled to for direction. The next day, he climbed up to the ridge next to the school for the same reason, but he was in the snow and he ruined the nice suede from ex-girlfriend shoes he wore.

Autumn in New York made Sophia wonder: isn’t there no divinity? If she had had time she would’ve seen the Met again, but she was there for just two days and they had social commitments with the bride and groom the second day. She would’ve walked Central Park, and perhaps seen lovers on a bench.

At the last minute on their second day, they set up a drink with Abigail. Sophia had met Abigail with Andrew, who had dated her and hooked up with her some in high school, though Abigail never committed to seeing the relationship out. The three of them met at a Mediterranean restaurant in Brooklyn. They hadn't talked except for a couple of times after high school. Sophia knew by then that you only reunite like this once. They sat outside, and it was warm and not at all busy. Some of those outside covered spots from COVID were on the street.

Abigail was the same: petite, and beautiful. Now she let her hair curl and tangle some as it naturally did. Her green t-shirt was rib-knit in very thin vertical lines and was tight against the line of her bra's right cup. Her dress was black with an African print. She said that all of her friends were African—from Africa, she clarified. She went to Afro-Caribbean dancehall parties. She joked that she had Googled Andrew. Andrew did not have much to say, and Sophia talked for the most part.

It was the way she said that high school was a big experiment, was she getting at Andrew, he wondered?

Sophia sometimes found Brooklyn to be her ideal place to live, sometimes hugely vertical, dense, colorful, full of things to do on the weekend, museums to visit, music and always profoundly too expensive.

Sophia went to meet someone Andrew didn't know, and Andrew had never taken the trains alone, but he braved them back to the hotel. Andrew later told Sophia on the plane that he felt that perhaps he shouldn't have listened on the trains to a song from a mix CD that was from

Abigail, given to him in ninth grade. The song was “America” by Simon and Garfunkel. He said that it was a time of flux: smoking cannabis for the first time and then often, doing mushrooms once, breaking away from school, leaving to a public school the next year, and smoking cannabis more, and all the fresh fondness for her. She saw how the song was a call to the opportunity of that time and the confusion of his former tenderness.

Seattle, 2008, Ravenna

After graduation, Sophia was in her room when her mother came in and was laughing with the man she'd brought over and they were about to have a nice dinner they made. During prom, the night had started out with a fight that her friend had with her boyfriend. Her friend spent the night with her back up against the wall talking with him, but Sophia and her group of closest friends had danced all night.

Now, all she could think of was the last album her father played at the hospital on the Bluetooth speaker, *Parchman Farm* by Bukka White, which is about a notorious prison work farm located at an old plantation where White had done time. The conditions were terrible, and one of the songs was called "When Can I Change My Clothes." Her mother couldn't get him to listen to anything else that day. Sophia had listened to the album and its stories silently with him, and turned away for a moment, still listening. When she turned back, he was dead.

Carnation, WA, 2025

Sophia had seen St. Vincent play at the Thing festival at Remlinger Farms with Dan, an old college friend who'd come up from Prescott, Arizona. Dan had just gone through a divorce when he hit thirty-five after ten years of marriage. They'd all met as philosophy majors in a Meetup when Dan moved to Seattle after being at Pullman. He had driven to Seattle to see the band, and then he'd go down to LA to live with friends. When the show ended, they walked back to her car. His ex, from college was already dating someone else, he showed her on Instagram.

When they walked back to Sophia's in the darkness, Dan told her something new: that he was slowly going blind. He'd soon need some kind of machine to help him read.

"I got nostalgic about Sarah, and I went by WSU," he said.

"You need to move on," Sophia said.

"I know," he said. "I'm just tired of everything."

"Okay," she said. Then, "I knew a girl in college who once during a summer high school job dropped the chlorine for the pool, and it all went up her nostrils and she completely lost her sense of smell." She waited, then she remembered something else. "I knew a guy who went to Green Lake, and jumped drunk off a dock and hit his head and was paralyzed from the waist down. He was a great dancer at parties." There was a brief silence. "Sometimes the punishment is too much," she said.

Dan wanted to stop first at a liquor store, he got a handle of Jack Daniels. When they got to her home, they finished most of it while watching TV. He mentioned the blindness a lot. She didn't know what more to say. They spent most of that night talking about it. He thought the universe was meaningless and he was reading Schopenhauer, which matched and, she thought encouraged, his thoughts and mood. He slept on her couch and she gave him a blanket and a pillow.

The next morning, he was missing. Then, that night, his family got the call that he'd been found. He was smoking cigarettes and shooting beer bottles near Moses Lake on his way to WSU. He'd finished the whisky, and he was halfway through an eighteen pack of Miller High Life bottles. When the cops talked to him, they said that he was wasted, and then he just kept laughing really hard and he couldn't stop.

She watched a Netflix show about dating while she was in bed smoking a joint. She watched another episode, and then they turned out the lights.

Then, she closed her eyes and wondered about his blindness. When she closed them she saw the colors, shapes, patterns, movement and everything else you can see when you close your eyes. She had a friend in ninth grade and when he was stoned during lunch he said he liked going to sleep and closing his eyes and looking at the colors when he was high. Any of her friends who felt like it had smoked a lot during lunch that year in a tucked away tiny parking lot next to houses on Capitol Hill where her high school was.

Then she thought the whole thing was a little funny.

Seattle/Telluride, CO, 2025

Later in her thirties, she was hiking with Sarah in Telluride, Colorado. They were there to snowboard, but they both found work early, before the snow season. It was sunny, a short hike. Sarah was looking to meet someone in town later. They had been partying with their friend from college. Sarah said that she couldn't believe how drunk she got. They were both hungover.

Again, the light on the mountain, the town below, the blues festival below, the sound from the music festival below, the memories of stopping smoking cannabis around late junior year or senior year, and how Sarah and her always joked about Sophia's constant grievances about the single life even though Sophia was pretty like Sarah, and how she griped about her status as single, and they both laughed because Sophia wasn't dating someone and it had been a while.

Sophia suddenly felt complete silence and she thought it was mostly the hiking. High school was so long ago and she now knew that preteen cannabis smoking can help to cause mood disorders. She didn't have a mood disorder, and pulled out a joint from the local dispensary as they sat on a bench. Andrew did, though, and he smoked in high school and she knew very little about that.

Her mother hadn't ever spoken about her attempt during Sophia's childhood, though her father filled in some of the blanks in college. Sophia was happy these days, and still in many of the relationships out of her early twenties.

They eventually went down the trail. Below there was still so much life, you could see the festival goers individually and hear music.

They had some water. They almost had gotten acid that they would take later that night for the headliner, a country musician Sophia knew, which was the initial reason for the trip. They went to a bar.

On the hike, some small feeling of peace had come to Sophia, and she briefly saw Sarah and the world anew. She looked down at town, where they were going. They returned to the plodding of hiking down.

Seattle, 2008, Ravenna

The snowstorm had shut down the city, but Sophia and her high school friends made their way to a party. It was New Years, and her old friends all kissed each other, and she kissed Andrew—always curious about how a kiss with him would feel. Later, they danced together, and she straddled him in the living room, dancing into him.

Her house was a long walk from there, and she, Andrew, and Simon had no car that could make the trip over the large hill to where she lived. They were very drunk when they started the walk. Once they were over the hill, they stopped talking and Sophia looked down over their Seattle neighborhood and she looked at the whiteness that covered everything. Simon peeled off and they went to Andrew's house.

Seattle, 2025, Gasworks Park

Andrew and Sophia sat on the grass at Gasworks Park, and Andrew had been foraging for mushrooms. Sophia was burnt out on doing drugs. They were next to the huge gasworks that were rusted behind a chain-link fence and barbed wire. Some guy had recently climbed up them just to fall to his death. They decided not to sit near the top of the short hill that looked over Lake Union and downtown. They had found a good spot, and there was another small lookout next to them. There were girls next to them reading. Andrew pulled out a bag of mushrooms.

“When did you get these?” she asked.

“I went foraging for them a couple weeks ago.”

“How do you know they’re not poisonous?”

“I have a book that’s a guide.”

But, getting high was all he was doing these days aside from work though she read online that psychedelics are some of the least addictive drugs.

Even though she was tired of tripping, she ate some, and he said, “Chew them a lot.” She chewed for a long time. They tasted like popcorn.

They knew that they would take a while—around two hours, but Sophia was getting bored and tired of it. When they hit, they laughed a lot. She eventually felt some sense of being settled from the mushrooms, and some wavy visuals.

“Do you want to come to my place?” he asked.

“Sure,” she laughed. She was still high.

When they walked to his place, they ordered pizza, and when they went to bed, he went straight to his room and she followed. They stayed up until four, and the mushrooms were much more of a laid-back experience than her last one.

Sophia decided to walk around Green Lake at night on a Sunday. She'd been keeping up with the Mariners playoff run at bars. The bartenders who were women liked dressing in usually purple crop tops with UW and Seattle sports apparel.

Sophia went around the lake on the path, and thought how pretty the black lake was, and the lights coming from the other side reflected on the water and came like an impressionist painting. She only went past a small number of people because most of the traffic happened during the day. She listened to some music, and she walked briskly. Lately on Saturdays, she would go for this walk, always at night.

She kept walking, noticing: these are the things that she had to do to clear her head. Sophia knew Sarah never dwelled on the past. Sarah often went out, and she would bring Sophia even though it wasn't exactly her crowd.

At a nearby gas station, Sophia bought Lucky Strikes. In her apartment room, Sophia opened a window and sat down in a chair and blew the cigarette smoke out of the window.

During her first psychologist appointment, Sophia was looking out the window from Westlake onto Lake Union in her therapist's office. She saw perfectly normal, good-looking people paddleboarding.

She tried slowing her drinking from six beers a night. She tried making new friends at the Green Lake pickleball pickup games. As she looked at the lake, she decided to go to a Meetup on Aristotle, but people ended up just talking about themselves.

Sarah and Sophia met up with Jessica who had done so much coke in college that there was a hole in her septum, and they talked about how another friend had to do skin draft surgery on her gums from using cocaine in high school. The doctor told her that he knew what she was doing. Jessica once tilted her phone's flashlight and it illuminated the hole, which was a little bigger than what Sophia expected. Jessica had partied a lot after college, too. She worked as an elementary school teacher, and once she did cocaine, she liked to keep partying with it. She didn't get the plastic surgery.

Seattle, 2025, Westlake

It was a Friday night in high school, and there were the three high school girls and the man, whose place it was. Jessica wasn't around, and so her younger sister Anna was desperate for booze. Jazz was coming through the speakers on the ceiling. He was needlessly ordering a pile of magazines in his apartment that looked over Lake Union. He was much older than Anna, and one of her friends, Cat, mentioned that she thought he had plugs. The girls were a little stoned. The apartment looked over Lake Union. It was so clean that Sarah wondered if he had just moved in. Anna was simpatico with him at work as a coworker at a local grocery store off Phinney and also Aurora where she cleaned the deli, and he'd been nice enough to say he'd buy her booze, no problem.

Anna's jeans were ripped—the medium sized cuts down each leg. Cat had a crop top with mom jeans. Lilly just a bright green bra in pajamas and an open white sweatshirt. The man put the eighteen pack on the counter. PBR. Cat hated PBR.

It was nearing the end of senior year and there were a lot of parties. The man seemed like he was about to say something. Lilly gave a look to the other girls saying that this was awful and that she wanted to go. She whispered how much she hated jazz. The girls eyed each other.

He put his finger to his face in contemplation. "Kind of Blue," he said.

The girls just looked at him with cow-like eyes.

"I play the upright bass," the man said. "The bass play on this is exquisite. Every note is right on the beat. He's really one of the greatest. Paul Chambers might be my favorite. I really do cherish his sound. What a sound."

The girls were silent for a moment and they all looked at each other again.

“My dad plays the trumpet professionally,” said Anna. “He had a show at the Triple Door last night.” She was trying to be a little nice.

Cat went on her phone and looked bored.

“I’ve heard this before,” Anna said, weakly.

Anna looked at the beer on the counter, and she felt like they were so close. She felt for the cash in her pocket, and she checked the time on her phone.

“Do you want to smoke? I mean, some weed?” he asked.

“We just did,” Anna said.

He laughed. “I think I can tell. It’s super weed.”

The girls didn’t say anything. Anna didn’t really know what that was. Then Anna said, “No thanks” cordially.

The man was then whistling with the John Coltrane solo. He went to the kitchen. Cat looked at the girls with bulged eyes, like she couldn’t stand another second.

He grabbed the eighteen pack of PBR and Anna met him halfway, and he handed the beer to her, and Anna gave him the cash.

“I used to sub at high schools recently,” he said, laughing, “I think it’s crazy how you girls dress these days. I feel like you’re either completely covered in baggy clothes, or not wearing anything. In my day, you wanted to buy clothes that were your own.” He laughed.

Anna laughed politely and the others didn’t. She thanked him alone as well. “See you Monday,” she said. He gave her the thumbs up, and she saw how he was an awkward and lonely

person. At work, other workers would say that he didn't have a lot of friends. Right before she closed the door, he said, "I can do this again anytime," and she replied, "thanks!"

The other two had quickly said goodbye without a thank you. When the door closed, Lilly mentioned any other option for getting alcohol. Outside, they joked about how awful he was and how the music was dumb while Anna saw how high they were. They had smoked weed in the car, and you could still smell it. Lilly turned the old car on: rap played softly.

Anna looked out the window. She was in the backseat behind the passenger seat. Her father was drinking when she left. Now, he only drank after seven. Lately he was drinking when she got home as well and her mother these days would keep an eye on him. He wasn't a bar drinker. "I can't wait till college," she said. She liked the music, and how soothing it was while she was high. She looked at Lilly driving, she had driven high a lot—drunk, too. She thought about Jacob because he had just broken up with Chelsea and she hadn't told anyone she liked him. She and her friends Cat and Lilly were the coolest girls at their high school, and Cat had a job to just sit at a bar and socialize. They smoked cannabis and did other drugs sometimes, and they drank socially.

The party was in a basement. Anna looked at the high girls on the couch watching TV. She was given a beer. She looked at the vinyl playing. They did not know, but it was a costume party, cowboys vs. Indians. Someone gave her a bandana that she tied around her neck. She went outside to the deck to smoke cigarettes, and she brought her beer. There was a hookah on a small round glass table and it became a big party.

Through the night, she had chatted with Jacob a lot, but she didn't like how cocky he was. He was drunk and she also couldn't help saying to Cat and Lilly how many times he kept saying it was their "Golden years," which they laughed at.

At two in the morning, after the party, a circle of four played strip poker. After a while, Jacob had got naked because he had wanted to. Anna was in her bra and jeans. Frank was in his underwear. Lilly was in her underwear, too. Frank kept talking about Jacob, and also about Anna in her bra. Frank tried to get Anna a room, and picked her up, but she didn't want to. Later, Jacob invited the two girls to a room, Anna and Lilly hurried home. They woke up Cat on the couch.

Lilly drove them home, and they were quiet, and halfway there Olivia Rodrigo's "déjà vu" played and Lilly turned it up.

When Anna got home, her father was still in the lay-z-boy chair watching a recording of the football game, beer in hand, and he didn't look over at her. There were many empty bottles of Miller High Life on the table in front of the TV. The TV was the only light in the room.

She went upstairs to her room. It felt great to come from such a party and her parents were pretty lax.

Her mother had told her once as a girl that they had met at a jazz club where she was a waitress at the time. She said that she had fallen in love when he played "I'll Be Home For Christmas" at a holiday themed event. Then, while she had told her this, she hummed the melody and did a little twirl in her dress.

Her father put on his favorite song from his vinyl record collection downstairs. It was Louis Armstrong, "Star Dust." Because it was his favorite song, she'd heard it since she was a

girl. She heard the lifting melody, and wondered if her mother would be woken up, and about her father. She heard the rough voice when it sang: “The stars are bright and you are in my arms.” She had changed out of her clothes and was in bed. She listened to the rest of the song, and when it was over, he took the needle off.

“John,” her mother said after opening their door next to Anna’s. “Anna’s home, can you come up to bed? Will you, please?”

In high school, Sophia was invited by Jessica to go to the Wenatchee National Park, where Jessica had a small cabin. They had packed for lunch and two days of being on a trip. At night, too drunk, Sarah said that she was bisexual as she poured more whiskey.

“What?” Sophia asked.

“You know, I like girls, too.” She laughed really hard, and nervously.

“Who have you told?” she asked with a surprising desperation.

“No one.”

“Is that why you wear that Carhartt jacket every day?” Sophia laughed.

“I don’t think so,” Jessica laughed. She sat down on the couch next to Sophia and they drank some vodka. “You can’t tell anybody,” she said very seriously.

“I don’t even care. I won’t.”

“Promise?” she asked, a little scared.

“Promise.” Her voice was soft, but definite.

They talked about it. Sophia didn’t really care, which surprised Jessica. All of the prepared things she had to say she let go of, and it eased her burden.

There was a small river that didn’t go too deep and was without a current, and they walked into it in their underwear. They both tread water. The sun was on the mountainside and soon they were in the sun. Downriver there was more light on the forest and the river curved away while upriver there were some logs to cross to go up the short mountain.

“Do you love me?” Sophia asked, smiling casually, not thinking about it.

“No.”

The river was cold. Then they were looking at each other.

“Who do you love?”

“Nobody. Nobody yet.”

Sophia mentioned another lesbian at a private school she knew.

“Actually, I know that girl and I wanted to meet her,” Jessica said.

They didn’t talk much after that. They went inside, and dried off with some towels.

“Was that okay?” Jessica asked, a little desperate.

“Yeah,” Sophia said, and Jessica smiled.

They each had a can of chili for dinner with some beers.

“Is something wrong?” Sophia asked.

“I think I did it the wrong way.”

“Coming out? There’s no wrong way.”

They were reading on the couches, and Sophia went for a walk. When she came back they both read outside on a quilt.

The next day, Jessica wanted to drive home, but Sophia convinced her to stay one more night. That night they had some beers on lawn chairs in the dark after spaghetti with ground beef.

“I know it’s not true, but I feel that people will judge me,” Jessica said softly.

“Not our circle of friends.”

“But is it my business to tell people all the time?”

“If you don’t like that way, do it another way.” It began to drizzle. “I’m just so bored all the time. It’s an awful feeling.” She had another beer.

“Hm,” Sophia said. “You could rock climb with me.”

“I hate rock climbing.”

They started to talk about who had hooked up with whom. There were some new relationships in their friend group, and some that had ended. They smoked cigarettes, and looked at the river. They both had another beer.

When they got back, Jessica didn’t fully come out for weeks to her closest friend group of Sophia, Sarah, and Andrew. Something nice had occurred from the cabin trip with just the two of them, though, and they had become much better friends, and they were spending more time together.

Jessica eventually met someone at a house party who did work with kids at an afterschool program in Greenwood. Sophia asked her if she was her type and she said yes, and

Sophia saw that she was very nervous—her cheeks were red and her face was drained, but Jessica got her number.

Seattle, 2025, Capitol Hill

Sophia joined a co-ed softball team for fun and to meet friends, and played first base. The games were on Capitol Hill and it rained on her first game. The public toilets had needles everywhere. Happily, she made a few social connections. Early on, she put up her hood and watched as the ball lazily reached the hitter who hit it out of the cone limit. Her team was getting trashed.

After the game, everyone went to a beerhall that was big and very open. She had a couple of drinks. She liked a couple of the girls on the team a lot. Everyone else was in their twenties.

This group had some house parties, and they played beer pong and flip cup. She drank a lot of cheap beer, and did shots and played a drinking game that was new for her. She felt good when she was drunk and smoking a cigarette on the roof deck. Then she sat down at the artificial fire pit.

“What do you play?” someone asked. He had a Mariner’s hat and a blunt. He was texting someone.

“First base. Today the ball was hit straight to my face and I caught it.”

Another man nodded his head, and she ended up smoking for a little while. The guy she liked was talking to another girl who was a teammate. Sophia drunkenly hated it, and her emotions came up so clear and viscerally. She made another beer pong table, and played a

couple of games. She never knew if she would be very paranoid after smoking, but she felt fine, and too drunk to be bothered badly by the cannabis.

A new guy from the team named Hank hadn't played yet, she liked him and they got to know each other. He was from Texas, funny and tall. He was in good shape and with him on the team, they said they did better. He was quiet, and she found it hard to speak with him because of his shyness. She laughed at how high he was, and how red his eyes were. When they went up to the fire pit, there were more people around the flames. It was getting windy and when she sat down, she liked the heat of the fire.

He didn't have a girlfriend, and she drove him home after the last game of beer pong was over and made out with him on his couch. They hooked up on his futon that was on the floor.

In the morning they sat down at his small circular table and they had their breakfast.

He said, "I played high school football as the quarterback and I had to follow some great teams. I was nothing great, and people got on me about that."

"That sucks."

"It was fine, I just don't like playing sports as much anymore."

"You seem pretty neat," she said looking around.

"When I think I might have a guest in my room I clean it, it's not always this clean."

"Do you have many guests?" she smiled.

"No," he laughed. "Do you remember much about last night?"

“Of course,” she smiled. “Do you?”

He moved his head from side to side to say kind of. “I don’t usually do that,” he smiled.

“Really? I had a good time.”

“I’m not a big drinker, I guess.”

“I am,” she laughed. “You were good at that,” she nodded at the room.

“Oh thanks, it’s been a while,” he smiled.

“Do you want to keep doing a friends-with-benefits thing?”

“Yeah,” he smiled.

“Good. I can see you next weekend.”

“I’d like to see you sooner,” he smiled.

“I’d love that, let’s stay in touch.”

The next week she considered not going to the game because it was raining and she was tired, but she liked hooking up with Hank and the rest of the group. Again, she had a good time, even getting a nice single. After getting to know Hank, she no longer felt weary of pursuing men. After the game they all went to a bar, and he kissed a girl not on the team right in front of her, and Sophia left as people were chatting about going to the next bar.

Sophia and Sarah read on Sarah’s family speed boat as it stopped to an idle out in Lake

Washington. They relaxed in the summer sun. They didn't speak, and there was just the soft water sounds rocking against the boat. Sophia got a ding from Bumble saying someone liked her.

Afterward, Sophia drove home by herself. On the way, she played *Surfa Rosa* by the Pixies. It was violent and harsh music. She had once listened to it in Hiroshima on a trip with her mother to Japan during the summer before her senior year. She was running over a bridge near the T-bridge which was the bomb target. She saw the building with a dome that had withstood the blast even though the bomb had been dropped right next to it.

Seattle, 2025, Golden Gardens

During the summer, Sophia's therapist suggested Madison Park's beach because the beach was relaxing for her. On a nice day she went and she lay on her back on a quilt in the crowd. Later, she looked at the water and read. The sun was hot on her skin.

Her mother had become religious in the last couple of years and had become Catholic again, and Sophia refused to go to church.

She watched as two pretty girls waded into the water, they were talking and laughing to each other. She knew the water would be cold. There was something about how they laughed, and how their hair was in the wind.

Sophia had gone to Madison Park's beach the sunny day after prom and she had gone in in her underwear with the other three in her car. They didn't have a bathing suit then, and they had to strip down from their dresses and rented tuxes, and she just went into the water briefly in her black underwear and the beach was full of people.

Seattle, 2008, Madrona

Sophia sometimes remembered eighteen when she was smoking a lot of cannabis every day, to the point that she felt a dumb sober if she took a day off. She was worried about that, and two friends who smoked more than her laughed and reassured her. Her mother had decided to move to her new boyfriend's lavish house with a view of the water in Madrona during Sophia's senior year. His name was Bob. Sophia and her mother fought about it mainly because Sophia thought it was too soon since her father's death.

Sarah and Sophia smoked on their way to a gas station for snacks. Bob didn't like the cannabis, but her mother got nowhere with her.

There was a nice deck with a view of Lake Washington at Bob's house. He had two children.

The older brother was named Henry, and the younger one was Jeff, who had severe autism. Jeff was thirty. The older brother had a nice frame and was very strong. He was handsome and when he and Sophia were introduced the first time, he gave her a fist bump.

The bell rang and Henry motioned someone in. It was a woman who looked like she was in her late thirties and she was Jeff's caretaker. She had a lot of tattoos. Sophie and the caretaker said hi to each other.

"I'm always around," the caretaker said to Sophia, laughing. She was excited to see Jeff. "Hey, handsome guy!" she said to Jeff, she rustled his hair. "Look at how perfect his hair is!" she said.

“It’s feathered!” Henry replied.

“You’re right,” she said, she was smiling.

“Snack please,” Jeff muttered. He rarely spoke, and usually in a cycle of repeated utterances.

“Yes! Snack time. You remember! Let’s do that then get going,” she smiled. “We’re going to the zoo today.” She moved into the kitchen.

“Zoo,” Jeff said again in the same way.

She put some chips on a paper towel. “What are your guys’ plans?” “I’m going to a baby shower with Natalie,” Henry said.

Jeff made an “Oooooooooohhhhh” sound and his facial expression sometimes jumped around from moment to moment.

Henry put a hand on Jeff’s shoulder. Henry smiled warmly and patted him on the back.

“Okay, okay,” Jeff muttered, again changing facial expressions.

“He’s excited, aren’t you Jeff?” she asked.

Jeff laughed and so did she and the older brother.

“We can get some ice cream at the zoo,” Maria said.

“Ice cream,” Jeff said with echolalia.

The older brother slapped his back one more time. “That sounds like fun.”

“Fun,” said Jeff.

“What flavor are you going to get?” Maria asked.

“Chocolate,” Jeff muttered.

“That’s what he always gets,” Henry said to Sophia.

Jeff ate the chips. He wore black socks dotted with weed plants.

“We’ll be back around three-thirty,” Maria said.

“Awesome, I love the zoo,” Henry said.

Maria lit up, “I know, I take my daughter there all the time! It’s so fun.”

When Jeff finished the chips, she helped him with his shoes and took his drawstring bag that had his medication. Henry followed Jeff and Maria out, expecting someone. Natalie, Henry’s girlfriend, had pulled up in a black Porsche with the roof down.

There was a pool in back. There was a cleaning machine in it that went around underwater that looked like a vacuum.

Sophia and Sarah sat down in the two hammocks, passing a bong back and forth. It was fashioned out of a two-liter Sprite bottle and a wooden pipe.

“Do you think Julie’s hot?” Sophia asked. That was a track friend of hers.

“Of course.”

Sophia lay down and was relaxing in the hammock, looking at the sky. It was the first nice week of the Seattle summer.

“Everyone knows you like Andrew,” Sarah said.

“But, Andrew might hook-up with Abigail more.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it, if you had wanted to, you would.”

“Maybe.”

They kept filling the bowl.

After a while, they went to the deck out front again. There were outdoor lounging chairs that you could lean back in; the sun on them.

They took their time on the deck and its view of Lake Washington.

“This house is sick,” Sarah said, still admiring the view.

Sophia nodded with her eyes closed.

After a while in the sun, they drove to a grocery store for beer. Sarah had a good fake ID.

When they went back to the house, the sun was going down and the sunset was orange, and Sophia watched it stoned.

Jeff was inside playing a simple ABC puzzle and Maria was helping with encouragement. Their mother was finishing making dinner. When she was done, she suggested that Sophia and Sarah eat out back, which was nice as the sun went down. She told the girls that Jeff was going to be gone all of tomorrow.

They went out back to a wooden table and ate.

That night they got drunk at a friend’s house party. Sophia did some cocaine, and she liked it, it was fun. After coming home and getting into bed, she saw the dawn. Sophia was now

certain that her mother had moved too quickly to Bob after Sophia's father passed. Sophia never helped to take care of Jeff. His noise had somehow already driven her crazy. She already didn't feel obligated to do anything for anyone in this house.

The next morning, her mother was gone. They were able to get some cocaine, and after doing the cocaine, they smoked cannabis, having heard that the combination was like acid. Then they sat outside at the table in the back in the sun, and finished the cannabis. They went to Sophia's room and had some of her Klonopin. Sophia remembered when three of her guy friends in seventh grade each drank a whole bottle of cough syrup to get loaded.

They lay on their backs in the flat lounge floaters in bikinis. After a little while, Bob glared at them again after seeing the bong they'd forgotten to put away.

The girls started laughing.

"Is this really trippy for you somehow?" Sophia asked.

"Yes," Sarah laughed.

Then Sophia got out and did a dive into the pool and it was cool on her body. She opened her eyes and it was blue and the light played on the pool in places in crooked white lines that danced. She stayed for a brief moment, not thinking, and then she swam to the surface, haggard.

Seattle, 2025, Capitol Hill

Andrew had dated Jessie for a couple of months, and they'd gone on about six dates. It took a long time to kiss, four dates. He had already sent a text telling her his feelings. "Look," he had said at the end of one, "I don't know why I've been so awkward about this, but I really like you like I said, and I want to kiss you."

She replied, "I've been awkward, too." She had come to him from against her car. He noticed that her lips were tense and pressed tight, and her eyes were wide open. She kept stopping, and so he had to say "again," after the first kiss and second.

She walked to her car, and he looked back at her. He felt the spark the first time he saw her on their first date. It was something he'd never felt.

On their next date, they had gone to an Italian place that had a deal on noodles and wine. They drank more than he was used to.

They had gone out for ramen for the first date. Her bangs cut slightly over her forehead; better than her pictures. She worked as an elementary school teacher, and he had done paraeducation work with kids with special needs. She thought that some of his thoughts were interesting, because she had wondered a little about the special education rooms.

The playoffs for the Mariners had started when they went on their first date, and the team kept advancing, and they went to some sports bars to watch the ALCS games. They would have a couple of beers, and the games were riveting. The Mariners hadn't ever been to the World

Series, and they were the only baseball team to not go to the World Series. They would cheer, and chat about things, and watch the games.

He said he played the saxophone still since elementary school, not as anything more than a hobby. He had some friends who played jazz at The Ravenna Brewery, and they went one Wednesday. They drank and he talked a little during the set and afterward he chatted with the drummer, a friend from high school.

When they walked to their cars, they kissed again, and again she felt resistant and her lips were tight.

On their last date they saw a long movie, and his legs were twitching nervously in the dark because he was used to seeing films alone. When they got to the parking garage, they went to his car. He had to clear his throat and once he did that, he thought they shouldn't kiss, so he went to his car, and she went to hers. The parking garage was empty of people and suddenly the whole scene was unromantic: the bright lights, the cars. And when he drove off, he realized that he should have walked to her car and kissed her anyway, or say something.

The next day, she sent him a text, saying they had no romantic connection. He didn't think it would take long to recover, but he watched as it did. As he went to sleep, he was reminded of the fact that he had felt alive, like himself, for about three weeks when the dates were going well.

He had feelings for her still. He felt strongly that he'd botched it, especially because they didn't kiss the last time. He couldn't believe that he could've put more effort in and saved it, though his inexperience had gotten in the way again. He couldn't believe that it still stung,

partially because he had missed dating in his twenties, and he knew they should've been more physical, and how he only got so many go's at girls he really liked on dating apps.

The Mariners also eventually lost in the ALCS, but Andrew didn't care anymore. He didn't even watch the games without her. In the beginning after they stopped seeing each other, he absurdly thought he would see her around every corner, and he thought that they'd run into each other naturally somehow. He didn't know why he expected to see her or hear back from her. Everyday, he felt like she might call.

In high school and college, relationships had been an easy thing. Now, it had been fifteen years since he'd had a girlfriend after his illness.

His psychologist later said, "I'm sorry, that sucks. People have a fixed idea in their head of who they want. Do you think he opened up about his personal life?"

"No, like life details?" He was confused and he hadn't thought of this.

"Yeah, like details or feelings that were personal."

"No, I don't remember that."

"Well, this is too bad, but at least you got great experience," she laughed in a supportive way.

They talked about moving forward, and soon they were out of time.

Andrew noticed that briefly getting close with her showed him how much happier he was with someone and how much better life could be—the sweetness.

Issaquah, 2025, Issaquah Alps

In a couple of weeks, Sophia went on a hike up Tiger Mountain with Sarah and Andrew, and Sarah asked, “Okay, so you went on some dates.”

“Yes,” Andrew said.

Sarah laughed. “I wouldn’t even know what romantic connection means exactly.” “You know, being cute, and having moments of affection,” said Sophia.

“You think you need that right away?” Andrew asked. “I tried. I guess it was beyond me. Or, she just said that.”

“I guess you didn’t make things romantic in general,” Sarah concluded.

“Who knows,” Sophia said.

“No. I want more of a connection, too,” he said.

“Okay,” Sarah said.

They hiked to the top, and then came to not much of a view. The summit was bare and so was a lot of the view, which featured large areas of clear-cut trees.

“It seems like you really liked her, though,” Sarah said. They all sat down.

“Yeah, but I didn’t convey that enough,” he said.

“Did you want to be more physical with her?”

“Of course.”

The three started joking about how terrible dating was these days.

“Do you ever think about meeting your true love?” Sophia asked.

“I never used to,” said Andrew.

They looked around and eventually turned back after they took a selfie in the wind.

Seattle, 2008, Green Lake

Then there was a time in high school at Susan's small party to go to the West side of Green Lake where the theater, beach, and two docks are, and they drunkenly piled into cars. TPain on the radio. They all went to the water's edge and stripped down to their underwear, and they waded into the water, eventually going under and then swimming to the dock with the diving boards. At one moment, on the dock the girls teased the guys. After seeing each other, they all jumped off the dock back in. Then, they eventually went back to Susan's and drank some more.

Sophia went to a UW house party and after a couple of drinks she was feeling good. Jessica came and met up. They danced later in the living room. She looked around at the moving women's hips, and she drank from her beer. Then, she started to dance again, and it took her till 1:30 a.m. to finish partying.

In the morning, Sarah wanted to try some hair of the dog, and she and Sophia made a Bloody Mary, and it was a nice day, so they went for a walk, already drunk. And then, she decided that she wanted to go to Hampshire (she had only gotten in to also Seattle U) because she didn't want to be just a partier, she wanted to find something new inside herself, suddenly. She remembered the portraits of philosophers in the house of the guy she hooked up with during the snowstorm. That night they got trashed again, but she remembered this new inclination.

Seattle, 2025, Wallingford

There was a pretty girl inside the entrance to the bar/restaurant “Korochka Tavern.” She had long lashes, and a well-defined nose that cut a subtle line. She wore a leather jacket, baggy and hip. At least she seemed pretty from her quick glances, Sophia tried not to stare. The girl had a strap for a bag that repeats the word baggu on it.

Sophia had come in at a whim, a small Russian bar and restaurant, and it was low lit and she wandered in alone on a Saturday night. She sat at one end of the bar that was a “U” on these annoying plastic-that-look-like-light-wood stools that swing out and then back easily.

The girl seems to be waiting for her order for pickup. Her head was down in her phone. Then Sophia talked to the waitress, and was ready to order. A beer and some dumplings. Tonight, Sophia was wondering some about messaging on dating apps, only to remember the realization recently that she was probably losing them because of her job as a paraeducator rather than her conversation, appearance or physique; or, it seemed very much that way. She knew now that she was supposed to be more flirtatious, be more physical.

The two opposite main walls that line the bar were dark and floral. The girl left kindly with a to-go order, perhaps for a lover, perhaps alone as the bag is not huge. What does Sophia know? The cocktails of others were made in front of her and the many liquor bottles as her mind was carried away, like when she read.

Seattle, 2025, Fremont

Sophia told Sarah and Jessica that she had gone on some dates with a guy and it hadn't worked. The three of them were both at The Pacific Inn, a dive bar. As they drank, the details had also added up that Andrew wasn't going to go to grad school in philosophy at the UW. It hadn't become a serious suggestion from Jessica to move with her to New York as a roommate, and Sophia was tempted to see if in New York she could have a boyfriend there right away, and many of her friends lived in New York. Jessica could afford it, but after the mad scramble against the competition to see some places, she settled back in Seattle, which she found she adored, full of trees and Lake Washington, the Cascades and Olympics, and what she could get in Seattle with the same amount of money.

"I'm so tired of the seasons," Sophia said. "From October to March."

"The dark ages," Jessica said. "Dark at four." "It

takes it out of you," Sarah said.

"You need a daylight lamp," Sophia said.

Jessica looked at her phone, looking up such a lamp, and she found one that was also an alarm. "I sometimes wonder if I get seasonal depression," Jessica said.

"My mother gets that," Sarah said.

“I use one,” Sophia said. “It doesn’t work for me. I also read with music for concentration and that doesn’t fully work, either.” She laughed.

“What works?”

“Always going outside to feel the outdoors on your face.” “So, you’re some kind of monster inside?” Sarah said.

“Oh, go to hell,” Sophia laughed.

They had some beers and fries while watching the TV and analysis of the Mariners in the playoffs.

Sophia had a new paraeducator job at a different school. She soon found work in an elementary school setting as a paraeducator, but the head teacher didn’t like her work, and she eventually had to quit.

She got into her car and punched the steering wheel and really went at it. She had been fired a lot recently. Sophia couldn’t get unemployment benefits because she quit and wasn’t fired, though she had tried to cut a deal to be fired.

Sophia knew that since his episodes, Andrew needed lots of financial help from his parents. His parents were always moving funds in when his account was at zero or below.

He needed a good job or degree for a career soon because he didn't want to be dependent upon his parents forever, or working jobs where he had to do things like clean and take out the trash.

He worked at a grocery store as a cashier. He soon had gathered enough money with his parent's help to find an affordable apartment in Seattle.

When Sophia sat down to her first date in a while, they were at a nice restaurant that had a view on Lake Union and downtown. It was not a high-end restaurant but it was more elevated than many of her dates felt and it was still very nice. The Ivars Salmon House was wooden decor and Native American style, and she was pleased to be there with him. The light in the sky was a bit low.

"So I saw you did some work at High Crest Elementary," he smiled, and she liked his relaxing presence.

"Yes, I worked there as a 1:1 para."

"I was at Jacobson Elementary for a year as a second-grade teacher. That's hard work. Did you have to do toiletries?"

"Yes," she laughed.

They looked at the menu. They chatted a bit about working at an elementary school and how his class was too chatty.

“I like the salmon here,” he said. “I’ve been working in Massachusetts and I really missed the salmon. See anything good?”

She smiled. “Yes, I think so, I’m looking.”

A waitress came by and they ordered some wine.

Then, he said, “Have you been here before?”

“On my father’s birthday there is a discount he gets and we come here.” She looked over Lake Union to the Space Needle, the Queen Anne neighborhood, and the Museum of Pop and Culture.

Still, he had the same casual smile. “Are you from Seattle?” “Yes,”

she said.

“I am, too.”

“Where did you go to high school?” she asked.

“I went to Garfield.”

She faux gasped. “Roosevelt. We’re rivals!”

“We are!”

She noticed throughout the date that he had really strong opinions. He had very strong opinions about what was the right wine, what they should get as appetizers, or what were the best

albums of the year, and even stocks. She knew more than he did about stocks from her father. She spotted a high school friend's mother's houseboat on Lake Union, and she remembered the big party he had when suddenly because of too many people, the houseboat sank some and the houseboat started to submerge itself.

She went to a movie by herself because she couldn't get her friends together.

The next weekend, it was sunny and she went for a walk with a friend around Green Lake on a nice day. They lay down on the beach next to the theater for a long time.

That night she met with Jessica and Sarah on Capitol Hill. They settled on a bar that was loud and busy, and ordered drinks. Sophia had a big bag of stuff from a dispensary.

"Are you getting high a lot?" Sarah asked.

"Kind of, recently," Sophia replied.

"I know that you like it more than beer," Jessica said.

"It's just for fun."

After two hours, they smoked the joint Sophia had and walked around Capitol Hill.

"Are you still single?" Jessica asked.

"Yes. I just went on a promising Bumble date that didn't work out," she said.

“Do you really want a boyfriend bad?” Jessica said.

“Yes, I do, but I’m tired of the messaging,” Sophia replied.

“I think everyone feels that way,” Sarah said.

One night, Sophia, Jessica and Sarah went to a bar called The Duchess, which was just a short walk from Jessica’s family house, next to a graveyard. It was no longer packed and lively like during the Mariner’s playoffs.

The three stayed late, did shots, and had more beers. A guy approached Sarah, and they talked a little, but she came back shaking her head, doing a swing and a miss with a bat motion. But later, Sarah got someone’s number.

Seattle, 2008, Ravenna

When Christmas had come their first year in college with the heavy snowstorm in Seattle, everyone had to walk to the parties. Sophia, Sarah, and Jessica went on the walking Ravenna bridge that went over a park, and went to a bookstore. Then they got coffee there and sat down.

“How’s John?” Sophia asked.

“The same,” Sarah said. “He’s trying to sell his Pokémon card collection, and he has one good card that he’s hoping will sell for a lot.”

They chuckled.

“He told me that he hated his job,” Jessica said.

“Sometimes he feels that way.”

Sophia could see the sensitivity of the conversation, and John wouldn’t be there for the holidays, though she suspected that she would see him often.

“Are you guys doing well?” Sophia asked Sarah.

“Not really,” Sarah muttered.

“Why?” Sophia asked, looking out the window at the snow.

“He’s lazy, and he just wants to play video games and drink with his guy friends.”

“Hm,” Sophia said.

“You’re better than that,” Jessica said.

“I know,” Sarah replied. Then Sarah was on the phone with him and was talking a mile a minute and Sarah was drinking her coffee.

The snow was so heavy you couldn’t see through it very far.

They all chatted at the café until the bar was open downstairs, and afterwards they walked back along the walking bridge and the snowstorm kept coming, and Seattleites were all out with their kids on sleds and whatever else would go downhill, and everyone was going down hills together as the parents watched. The three of them walked past multiple scenes like that. They walked to Sophia’s and Sarah’s because it was close by. Once inside, they had some tea and sugar cookies. Sophia put on a record by Howlin’ Wolf. It was from the blues box that she had increasingly cherished, and the record was electric and rough.

Putting the cups and the cookies away later, Sophia and Sarah walked with Jessica to her place, which was a bit of a hike. Sarah had mostly texted or was on Instagram a long time at Jessica’s place. Sophia and Jessica talked about Jessica’s boyfriend and Jessica wondered out loud if she was staying with him partly to avoid being single.

Seattle, 2008, Queen Anne

Abigail had driven with Andrew to one of the Queen Anne parks with a view. She turned the car off and they kissed. He always thought it was odd that everyone instantly knew that she and Andrew had hooked up senior year in high school because someone who was a friend must have talked to everyone about it.

The first time of Abigail being with Andrew in high school, it was in his room and he waited as she got ready in his bathroom with the door closed, and he played the recently released *In Rainbows* by Radiohead and he turned off the lights. There was a blue light from his grandfather's old stereo that was on the ground at the head of the bed. There was the electric aura of the album. The front of her shirt was tied up high to show off her torso.

Seattle, 2025, Ravenna

Sophia looked at the prom photo when she went with Andrew. She was digging through her storage that her mother had moved to Bob's garage. They looked so young, then. They were already drunk, just having come out of a party bus that had a stripper pole.

Sophia had wanted to settle down more, which she knew her friends Jessica, Sarah, and Andrew understood. At thirty-five, this might have sounded sardonic, but it wasn't. She had gone on dates with men and they had always gone fine, but she wanted to feel something special.

She tried flag football. She went with a running group at a running shoe store, she joined a dodgeball group. She tried a philosophy Meetup, but she didn't learn anything because everyone talked about themselves.

She went on some more dates. One lasted for a couple of weeks.

Out on Capitol hill, her friends wanted to stay out, and they went dancing at the same bar, again. She took a break from the dating apps because she could only think of the unforgiving statistics that one would be amiss to not know about your chances with dating apps.

Seattle, 2025, Ravenna

Sophia's new job at a local bakery where she'd been to her whole life was still going well. She liked her hours and the women that worked there. The other women thought that being single might be better. It was nice to have work friends, and to go out for drinks. She'd never worked somewhere like that. They always got beers after work.

But, even so, after a couple of months, Sophia was starting to think that there was more to life than a bakery. Still, she wanted to stay at the bakery, get drinks, and now practice her trumpet that she had played since elementary school and hadn't picked up since she stopped in tenth grade.

At a bar on Capitol Hill, she was drinking with coworkers. She didn't mind missing weekend parties, bars, and clubs anymore. She had a knack for never feeling lonely as long as she had a good show to watch on her laptop or a novel. But recently she'd noticed having to call more to go to the party, and most of her friends had kids.

Mount Ranier National Park, 2025, Cougar Rock Campground

Sarah, Sophia, and Jessica went car camping, and started a small fire in the pit. They had smores, and had some beers. Andrew had just flown to Hampshire.

“When is Andrew coming home?” Sarah asked.

“Just a couple days,” Sophia said, “I told him to just go home and not go back to school. It was a bad idea, because anybody would get bored and lonely going alone back to their old college.”

“Has he?” Sarah asked.

“Yes,” Sophia said.

“Why did he do it?” Jessica asked. “He shouldn’t have done that. He went all alone?”

“I know!” Sophia exclaimed. “I hope he gets along fine.”

“He’ll be fine,” Sarah said.

“He’s so impulsive,” Jessica wondered.

Nobody had more to say and they watched the fire. The others could see the deep strain in Sophia’s face when she talked about Andrew.

When she got back home, she lay down on the couch and fell asleep. She was messaged because a friend from the bakery's kid had started talking early, and now she was saying funny things.

Sophia wanted a big quiet house in the countryside, alone. No kids. She still liked the jazz shows that she went to at Ravenna Brewing. This time they played a song she knew, "Lonely Woman," by Ornette Coleman. She was at a small round table, and she was alone. The song had always sounded to her starkly like a lonely woman. It was a favorite of hers, how she got her friend in New York who was just married into jazz in seventh grade—at first he hated Coleman ("All that non-harmony" he had said in the art class). She quickly moved him over to the album "Free For All," which made him transition to jazz, and his profession as a jazz musician. Ornette Coleman's song had such an exquisite misery it.

At home, she put on some Charlie Parker. It was a Greatest Hits compilation that she had liked of his, and she played her favorite, "Scrapple From the Apple." It was the CD that happened to be in the CD player. She remembered how she'd played the same CD in her room next to Andrew's on the night of Andrew's first episode in college after he went into the ambulance for the psych ward.

Seattle, 2008, Madrona

Sophia was high more and more these days with Sarah in one of the hammocks in the backyard just past the small pool. A lot of the time, Sophia's mother had dinner with her in the back and Bob would go to the front deck with Jeff. Today, Bob wanted everyone to come and have dinner together.

Sophia told them that she was going to meet Sarah to get pizza and she took her car. The windows were down, she put sunglasses on, and the wind blew her hair around while she listened to the radio and they went to the park. They sat with crossed legs on the grass, and Sarah let the great plumes from her vape come out lazily.

Sophia wanted to watch the sunrise, and there was a park on the south side that had a good view of 1-90 and the east.

They slept in the hammocks and were woken up too early by Jeff.

"Fuck my life," Sophia said.

Sarah had noticed that her meanness was getting worse.

Sarah laughed really hard, but they couldn't get back to sleep because of him. It was early in the morning when they started to vape cannabis. Then they took some city electric scooters out and the cool morning wind blew through their hair and they were out for a while, winding through parking lots and local streets, both feeling relaxed and feeling a tingling.

When they came back, they went back to the hammocks. Then later, Sophia's mother came out.

“Where were you? Are you two high again?” her mother asked.

Sophia shrugged.

Then her mother said, “He’s trying. I’m trying.” “I’m not trying,” Sophia said.

“I know.” Her mother walked out saying, “Please don’t get so high while you’re driving. I saw you on those scooters.” “At

least I’m not retarded.”

Sarah didn’t say anything.

Her mother walked inside.

When Sophia was high, it all bothered her less. She could tell how disappointed her mother was. She knew that her mother really wanted it to work, but Sophia was entrenched in her opinions.

Her mother came out again. “We need to talk,” she said.

“Mom, I get that Bob is successful and that you two have things in common, but I hate Jeff and that’s never going to change. I don’t ever want to be around him, and I don’t want to eat dinner with him. He’s fucking annoying.”

“I’m sorry, but you don’t have to be with him all day.” Her voice was soft and patient, almost caring and loving.

“I don’t want to be around any of them. Bob doesn’t know how to talk to me.”

“Are you giving him a shot?”

“No, and I prefer dad’s!” She was too angry to look at her mother.

Later that morning, when they were vaping weed on the hammocks, and Bob came by and was very angry.

“This is against my rules. You can’t smoke pot here like this.” Sophia didn’t say anything.

“I saw you smoking already earlier today.”

“If I have to stay here, I’m not going to do it sober.”

Jeff walked out. He liked playing with a puzzle on the table in the back. Bob turned around and walked back in. “I made a cake last night if you want any.”

She was distracted by Jeff’s noises, and she asked to bring him inside. Bob shook his head slowly in disbelief, but he brought Jeff back in.

In the afternoon, Sophia called Josh, a friend from high school. They met at one of the open parking lots in Magnuson Park on the southeastern side, and they got in back of his car.

At home Sarah came over, and they joked about it. Sophia and Sarah went to the dinner table with everyone for dinner that day. But, Sophia didn’t really say anything, and Jeff wouldn’t sit down. Sophia put her head in her hands.

Seattle, 2025, Capitol Hill

“I like this place,” she said at the bar. “My softball team would come here after games. How about the cute girls, want to try your game?” she teased Andrew.

“I don’t have any game,” he smiled.

She laughed. “I guess I don’t either.”

“It’s not so bad not having any game.”

She laughed. “You look young; you’ll find somebody.”

“It’s been a long time.”

“I know.” She looked at him with pity. “Don’t worry about it!” she slapped his shoulder. She laughed, trying to help.

They spent the rest of the night going to bars. The music was often loud. They spent a little time at each spot, and Sophia really liked the male bartender at the last one, but she was too shy, and Andrew couldn’t push her into it even though she was very drunk. When they left for the light rail, they had a cigarette. They both went north on the light rail and sat down.

Sophia drunkenly asked, “Are you okay?” “Yes,” he returned.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” he said.

Then, they talked about being in love for the whole trip on the light rail until their stops. Sophia had more to say than Andrew, but when Sophia got up for the next stop, she thought that thinking about love while in her inebriated state was a bunch bullshit, and she said that. Andrew looked quizzical.

“No, it is good because we are simpatico.”

She laughed, not knowing why. And when she walked home, she agreed.

At a party, Sophia said to Sarah about Andrew, “I like him, still.” Sophia laughed.

“Like in high school?” Sarah asked. “What will you do?”

“I don’t know.” She laughed again. “It feels so natural when we’re together.”

Sophia took him to her place on a day she was finally settled in her new apartment, and went on the deck with two beers. After chatting and finishing their beers, she invited him into her room to look at some rare vinyl records that father had that she thought he might find interesting. After they talked about it, she went to him and they kissed, and after a little while, she started to take her clothes off without saying anything and he just looked very surprised and undressed also, and she took him into bed. She lay next to him and kissed him.

That warm night they drank wine and sat outside on the deck.

She said, “Did you know that “Starry Night” was made from Van Gogh’s asylum room?”

“No.”

“I think it’s interesting to hear things like that.”

“Sometimes,” he laughed.

“Don’t say it like that,” she said.

“Sorry.”

There was a moment of silence between them as Sophia thought of what to say. She said, “Do you think a lot of people live happily like you?”

He chuckled, “I mind the extra work of making myself and my life, but I do mind the angst.”

“Angst?”

“Yes, often.”

She laughed. “Hm.”

“Existential angst.”

When he said that, she thought he looked far away.

They ended up drinking wine till late. She wanted to have sex, and they started making out as they touched each other’s bodies.

After that night, they both wanted to hook up regularly. The next time sleeping together was better. They were in her room again.

“Did you have psychosis in college?” she asked afterwards as they lay on their backs, and then turned toward each other.

“Yes.”

“Did you see a school therapist?”

“Yes, but eventually he hated my psychiatrist and the psychiatrist hated him, so I fell through the cracks because of some petty agreement. But, my Hampshire therapist never mentioned that he didn’t like the psychiatrist before I went. I at one point asked for lithium, but my psychiatrist didn’t think I was sick when I was floridly manic.” “That’s fucked up,” she said.

Then she moved her hands across his body and kissed him again.

Seattle, 2025, Lake City

Sophia remembered when she had just turned twenty-one. She had gone out during the night, and the three girls got drinks at Jessica's house where they celebrated. Sophia was the youngest. They chatted over some beers. Sophia went to the jukebox and she selected a song and the beginning guitar strokes of the song came on and The Rolling Stones song, "Beast of Burden" played. The song reminded her of when Andrew played it often in his car in high school. Also, when they were alone in his room.

After shots and beer, everyone left and they smoked cigarettes outside of the bar.

At the bar, she heard a psst sound, and a girl was beckoning her over when she got a shot on the house. Sophia's friends were leaving and they waved goodbye. The girl kept beckoning her over.

"Do you want to have a threesome?" she asked Sophia.

"Not really."

"My boyfriend loves it." She was beaming.

"I don't think that I would like that, sorry." "Don't

be so square, dude," the girl joked.

After splitting ways, Sophia talked to the girl on her way out.

She went up to this couple's apartment, and in their bedroom, she took off her clothes down to her underwear. It was very apparent that they didn't care about the decor of the place.

"Please, sit," the woman said. "Ron will be home soon. I love how slim you are!" she said with a smile.

"What do you do?" She hoped that hadn't come out as she felt it come out.

"We're both painters."

"Where?"

"I finished school, met him, and we travelled a lot." She took all of her clothes off, and so Sophia did as well.

But soon, Ron came home and he was more gangly than Sophia had anticipated and he also had a beard, and they all showered together, and they were all naked on the bed. He turned first to the other girl, but grabbed Sophia's breast. They were giggling and talkative, and this girl wanted him to go down on herself. Suddenly hoping for some sort of contact and pleasure in the world, Sophia found herself interested. After a lot of kissing the other girl, Ron was quickly on top of her. The sex looked okay. Then it came around to Sophia who felt shy, and afterward the other girl wanted Sophia as well. It felt like doing a drug for the first time.

Sophia actually invited them to her apartment the next week and they loved her place.

She was more turned on than she thought she would be after wine and a movie on the couch, when they got into it again. It was clear that the couple were interested in the run-up to the act. This time Ron started with Sophia and it was very noticeable that the other woman wasn't jealous.

The next day they all got high and went to the park because it was a sunny day outside. Sophia noticed Ron sneaking glances at her, and a new jealousy from the girl. Sophia talked about how she didn't care much for mushrooms because she found the grandiose thoughts of universal love from her previous experience boring. After an afternoon with no sex, but conversation, she decided to stop seeing them.

Sophia and Sarah went on a walk with her in Discovery Park, and went down to the lighthouse, and walked the beach. They didn't talk much, and Sarah was worried from talking with Andrew.

That night, Sophia decided to drive around Seattle to blow off some steam. A friend of hers who was a therapist suggested mindfulness, checking in to understand her emotions. At home alone, she sat on the couch, and she was slightly aware of her emotions. She tried it, but backed out once she saw herself.

She took a hot shower. She hadn't been sleeping recently.

When she and Andrew had hooked up a lot during the summer before college, it had started as a day laying in the sun together on Kite Hill in Magnuson Park and then that night she threw a party.

Seattle, 2008, Madrona

In the summer, Jessica and Sarah were at Sophia's in Madrona.

Jessica got on top of a floatable unicorn in the pool and Sarah got in. Sarah blew up another unicorn floatable, and Jeff had come home. Sophia despised him, and Sarah watched. Jessica, Sarah, and Andrew had talked about this. He was making sounds, and his caretaker took him to the kitchen area and he had a snack.

They started practicing a dive, though none of them were swimmers. Sarah had inflated a unicorn, and floated on it.

Then Jeff had put her favorite Seahawks hat on and was making more sounds. Sophia was irate. She slammed his fists into the water, ran in and took it off his head. Her mother was there, and had just come home. Sophia screamed at him and hit him with the edge of her palm and he fell back on the floor of the house. The caretaker jumped on Jeff to secure him, and her mom started screaming.

“What are you doing?!” her mother screamed.

“He put my hat from dad on his disgusting head!” she screamed. “Now I have to buy a new one!” She pointed to the caretaker, “And you’re fucking paying for it!”

The caretaker brought Jeff into the kitchen and was making sure he was okay, he was whimpering a little.

“It’s fine, he can’t ruin the hat,” her mother said. She went to the kitchen to check Jeff and talk with the caretaker. “I have no idea what to say to Bob.”

“Yes he can! I don’t want to wear it again with his disgusting head touching it! You owe me a hat!”

“Just put it in the wash.”

“You can’t do that with hats!” She was screaming, still. “That’s a novelty cap that dad got me.”

“Can’t you buy another?”

“No, it was from a vintage Mariners game!”

“On Ebay?”

“Maybe, mom, for fucks sake....” She stopped yelling. “That means he went into my room.” Jessica and Sarah saw Sophia and her mother go in. Inside the room, they talked for a while and Sophia screamed some more. They could hear Sophia yelling about how her mother had moved on instantly. Then, her mother left. She asked the caretaker to take Jeff to the park or something and apologized.

After a little while, Sophia came out, shaking her head.

“Aren’t those fire?” Sophia asked.

“Yeah,” Sarah chuckled.

“Do you have any weed left?” Sophia asked.

“No.”

“You smoke on your own?” Jessica asked.

“Sometimes,” Sophia said. Sophia closed her eyes while floating on a pool chair. Bob was home and came out.

“What’s wrong with that?!” he yelled.

“Because it’s disgusting!” Sophia replied.

“It is not! He doesn’t have lice, or fleas.” He threw his hands up.

“Don’t ever let him in my room again, or I’ll move. There’s going to be a new lock soon!”

He shook his head and turned around.

Then, Sophia drove all her friends to Home Depot and bought a lock.

When it was dinner time, Sophia, Sarah and Jessica went to a pizza place. They had gotten high. They all went to the Madison Park beach to sit and vape.

Sophia wouldn't take the lock off, and her mother didn't know what to do anymore.

Sarah took her dog to her favorite dog park in Seattle in Magnuson Park. In high school, there had been a keg in a small abandoned bowling alley building. Then Sarah had come, and they all smoked the purp cannabis outside on the stairs that faced the fields where Jessica had played frisbee at her other school. Sophia hit it a couple times and the far-off trees became funny two-dimensional cutouts. It hit stronger than normal cannabis she'd smoked. An older friend from Sophie's childhood happened to be there, and she went with this friend and this friend dropped her him off at her house where she watched SportsCenter stoned.

She went to a party the next day that was David Bowie themed, and the large space by Lake Union was packed and everyone was dancing.

Jessica was petite and on the cross-country team and had bloomed into a pretty girl during junior and senior year in high school. Sophia remembered her freshman year yearbook photo. Jessica naturally knew how to really dance senior year. Andrew knew that nobody taught her that or if she practiced alone, whipping her hair back, not conscious, seemingly, of anyone watching her.

Seattle, 2025, Tangletown

Sophia went out with a Bumble date on a Friday night for sushi, and the bar afterwards was fun. In the morning, they went out to the outside deck to smoke cannabis.

“Would you like to do this again sometime?” he smiled.

“Yes, I think so,” she replied.

They went on a hike. He was from Maine, and he talked about how his father had won the moose permit lottery, and how he had taken the meat out, and how it tasted softly like the berries that the moose ate.

When they got to the top, he said, “Are you having fun now?”

“Yes,” she said.

“I’m glad you like hiking, I love it, it puts me right out there in a good mood.” He was looking down at the view.

It began to rain lightly then heavily, and so they went straight back down, and at the bottom she was drenched and he stopped before they left the trail to his car and kissed her.

Seattle, 2025, Wenatchee National Park

Sarah decided that before New Years, they could go to her cabin again, just the four of them because the weather was going to be nice for a couple of days. They drove down in the morning, and they had sandwiches that Jessica had made and chips. They all had some beer. Dinner was spaghetti with red sauce and some ground beef, and they drank vodka and were all very drunk when Sophia said, “Andrew, why aren’t you dating?”

Sarah and Jessica got quiet.

“I lost a lot of time to my illness, and didn’t know how to do everything.” He started to laugh a little. “I missed my whole twenties. I went from the age of twenty-one in relationships, to twenty-eight without any experience”

“Don’t bother him,” Sarah said. “Andrew’s getting the hang of it.”

“What happened to your last girl?” Jessica said.

“We went on six dates,” he said.

“That’s a long time,” Jessica replied.

Everyone nodded their head, and then, Sarah said, “What do we want to do this trip?”

“I just want to take it easy,” Sophia said.

“Are you saying I should have a girlfriend?” Andrew asked Jessica.

“No, I just thought you would. Let’s just go into the river,” Jessica said.

They went to the river and went in in their underwear, and Andrew went first.

Later in the afternoon they climbed the short mountain over the river at a good crossing spot. They sat down at the top where all of the trees had been cut. There was the forest below, the road, the dotted cabins, their cabin and the winding river and as they looked down, Andrew's mind went silent.

Back in Seattle, Sophia went to a bar with Andrew, and noticed some cute girls. She pointed them out. They got some beers and sat at a table. He didn't say anything.

"It's just for fun," she said.

He finished his full beer and went up to some cute girls and she saw them just shake their heads, and laugh before he could say anything.

"They said there's a fun bar over there I should try," he said to Sophia.

It was a nicer bar with karaoke. She danced a little, and he got two vodka tonics.

When she came over, she said, "You won't dance."

"No. I don't like to dance."

"We did in high school. I freak danced with you. What's the difference?" She had put her hips into him and bent over. "You can still grow." He laughed and took a drink.

"You can meet someone."

He took a drink. "I don't know...."

They had more drinks and she went to dance while he slowly drank his last cocktail. Then he joined her and the music had a nice pounding and consistent rhythm and they were so crowded that they felt more alone, and she could see how Andrew did not feel so terrible anymore. Then they freak danced, just like they had in high school as she put her hips into his and started to grind.

After dancing, she said, "It's been so long since I've danced like this," and laughed.

He laughed. "It's a leg workout."

"It is!"

When they left the bar, they drunkenly kissed in his car, and then they went to her place.

Seattle, 2008, Medina

They had all gone to a party senior year in high school, and it was in Medina on the water with a big mansion full of original and recognizable art with a Henry Darger painting, and three original black and white Rorschach paintings. Sophia recognized some people from high school parties and she thought of leaving, but they all drank and smoked cigarettes outside. There were some lights on the other side of the water. It was a guy named Jack whose house it was. He went to a nice private school.

“I feel like I’m in the *The Great Gatsby*,” she said. They were all on the lawn before the water.

“Then you’re Daisy,” Jessica said, “I want to be Jordan.”

“I am not Daisy,” she laughed.

“Jack is definitely Gatsby,” Sophia said and they laughed.

“I can’t believe this group called Andrew a leech or whatever it was, so cliquish,” Jessica said.

“He is on the outside, though,” Sophia said. “I knew that I wasn’t always that fun for this clique. Those guys just want girls at the party to fuck.” “And you aren’t into that?” Jessica laughed.

Andrew had heard and came by. He was drunk, and said, “I could be a better partier, but I’m in love with Abigail,” he laughed.

Sophia laughed again. "She likes you, too."

Andrew nodded. "Whose house is this?" Andrew asked

"Jack's." Sarah said. "Have you guys hooked up yet?"

Andrew nodded and they cheered.

There was loud music and they did some dancing. After dancing, Sophia set up a new hookah with three hoses and they smoked that, taking the peach flavored smoke into their lungs. Sophia watched a good-looking guy as he talked to some girls.

Andrew was talking about how having a hookah and smoking it constantly had made him senior year addicted to cigarettes. "The good ol' days," he laughed.

Then, the liquor hit Sophia as she sipped her second cup of Gatorade and vodka from her Solo cup. She hazily looked around. She went to the hookah and stayed there for most of the night, and occasionally people would come by and smoke with her. Later, she went in to dance.

Sophia enjoyed the hookah drunk. They all stayed at the table for the rest of the night, Andrew placing new coals on the punctured aluminum foil and packing the peach flavor below it in the bowl.

Jessica drove Sophia home.

"That was fun," Sophia said.

"I didn't have fun."

"Because you won't socialize," she laughed.

“Sorry that I’m not having another The Great Gatsby conversation.”

“No, it’s fine,” they laughed.

“Sarah said you had a crush on Andrew back all the way in middle school?” Jessica said.

“Yes.”

“I did, too.”

She drove through their old neighborhood back home. Abigail had recently told Andrew that she had commitment issues now that she was out of a long-term relationship with a guy a couple years older than her.

Amherst, MA, 2025, Hampshire College

Andrew knew the moment he got plane tickets to visit Hampshire College that it was a bad idea. It would be closing next fall. He had talked with his doctors about a trip to his old school. They asked why and decided against it, but he just *felt* like he needed to go, and once there, immediately regretted it.

It was a quiet Monday afternoon in the first semester. The trip was impulsive, he had quit his job at a pizza place and he wanted to look around, experience the old memories. He thought he might say hi to an old main advisor, but he wasn't there anymore. He instead found that he was not extremely nostalgic like he expected.

He rang the graduation bell in front of the library and some students smoking watched. The people came and went and it felt a bit like the wrong time. He had a quick meeting with one of his two advisors who was there. As an undergrad during his last episode, and in floridly manic state, he had left campus suddenly and ended up driving to Troy, New York on accident. He thought he was meeting a famous actress that he liked. His mind was playing great tricks upon him during those days. And he would later call the police because he saw in a glimpse that he was insane. Then he went to the psych ward.

He had seen a girl with brown hair and lovely features while ringing the bell, and she was in a skinny white shirt, wearing high waisted bell bottoms. She was talking and sitting on the concrete opposite the library building, and he ended up sitting next to her in front of the library where he was, and a British guy from Amherst started to talk to her about their class that they

took together, and what authors they didn't like. She was a creative writing major and he was an English major, but he was enthusiastic and engaged her and they chatted, and he left with her.

He went to the library and opened his thesis: "Ludwig Wittgenstein's Middle Period" and flipped through it a bit. It was something he was proud of. He walked the short indoor bridge from the library to The Bridge Café, where he bought soda and a panini. It overlooked the basketball court where he played a lot of frisbee when the weather quickly turned the snowy fields unplayable. He strolled past the living areas outside out of curiosity, and then that was it. And so after seeing everything, he walked to the housing complex called Enfield where a small area of small buildings had housed him at one point and saw the faces go by. A girl with really baggy jeans and a neck tattoo of a lightning bolt went by.

He decided to do the short walk through the small woods. In the snowy plucked and flattened corn field, he saw his breath, and his life seemed to be on one set of rails uncontrolled by him. He looked over the clearing. The light was tending toward the evening and the sun was going down. He sat down.

He remembered Easter Keg Hunt when people hid kegs out in the woods the night before Easter, and then everyone looked for them around eight in the morning, and he remembered home tournament playing frisbee, and he remembered the deep snow in the clearing past the woods where he was, and how he walked the forest outline with his girlfriend once.

He remembered in the deep snow in a spot he could see where he had played with his three best friends (one guy and two girls) during his first year and they all had wrestled down each other.

He stayed a little longer, watching his breath, before he got too cold and got up, and then walking back through the trees.

He went back to his Airbnb, having gotten the answers he wanted in this pastoral valley.

When he returned to Seattle, he couldn't stop the games he played in his head, and he started to spend all night playing video games with some old friends who were in town. He also had a hard time sleeping and started to see things.

He played the strange *Pink Moon* by Nick Drake over his speakers in his room one morning. The music was probably making it worse, he thought. Then, it ended. He had a moment of clarity and he admitted himself to a psych ward, just like Nick Drake had after the recording. When the intake personnel asked why, he said that he was manic, and had hallucinations and depression.

Seattle, 2025, U District

It had been a year since Sophia saw the cherry blossoms for the first time at the UW, and she was walking to them from her place. She walked past a church in his neighborhood, the University District. She noticed a priory. She saw a monk in white robes. She went up some stairs out of curiosity to a small winding pathway next to the priory. It had stone pictures on wooden posts depicting the stations of the cross in this small area. She decided to go inside the church. Its ceilings were vaulted, its colored glass glowing. Some people were sitting. Someone gave him a pamphlet. It read: "The Order of Sung Mass for The Fifth Sunday of Lent," and "17 March 2024 The Church of the Blessed Sacrament." People took water from a small pool and crossed themselves. She did, too, though he didn't really believe in it anyway. A guy came and crossed himself. She stayed a couple of minutes, then she went to the cherry blossoms, which went out of season shortly after.

Seattle, 2008, Madrona

At home, senior year, Sophia was reading. Jeff had hit his head on concrete while playing at a park with his caretaker. He and his caretaker were in the kitchen, playing the slightly absurd game of trying to understand how hurt he was without him being able to speak English. He seemed fine, and Sophia didn't care. She went to a hammock and read. She liked the sun, and she wore sunglasses. Jeff came outside with Bob and they went into the pool. Jeff flopped around a lot, and Bob helped him. Sophia left and walked to a park. She went to a bench with a book. Where there was a soccer game being played by children.

Sophia had recently learned about the wealthy world of the tech industry from dates. She'd been on sushi dates with Amazon workers who were young and had money to throw around. She wasn't sure she liked it. She mostly noticed their robotic temperament.

She didn't want to go home and she kept reading. That night she went to a film with Jessica. It wasn't very good.

"I found someone," Jessica said as they went down the escalators.

Sophia said, "Congrats!"

"We've been on a couple dates. I love him."

"Wow!" she said. "Why have you kept this secret?"

"I haven't wanted to mess it up. I guess I was superstitious."

The next morning, she got a text from Jessica to hang out with her and this new guy. They just wanted to go around Green Lake, and they walked around the lake and got fish 'n chips. Sophia went to a bar with them later.

She had been on the front deck of Bob's with her headphones. Her mother came over.

"We need to talk," she said.

"Okay." Her mother looked sad and tired.

"Things aren't working out. I know you're unhappy but things never worked out with you and Jeff. I was mourning your father when I met Bob, which I thought wouldn't bother you so much, but I don't think you ever got past that."

"I just can't stand Jeff."

"I know. Trust me I know."

Then her mother walked away.

Shoreline, 2025, Shorewood High School

Once, when Sophia had been working as a paraeducator in high school, she was commuting there and she was late as usual to her job at a public high school. It was her first paraeducator job. She had her coffee in her mug, and her ID card around her neck. She lived twenty minutes away from the high school. She'd been working as a paraeducator at a high school as a one-to-one student support with a girl with down syndrome for nearly the whole school year. It was April.

She had just had three bad dates in a row, and a mix CD from Andrew was still in her car player. She changed songs.

Her student was stubborn, and didn't like working with her, and this hadn't changed all year. She usually yelled at him. Sarah took notes on her student on a computer in every class. There were always issues. Teachers had complimented Sophia's patience.

One new thing about her was that she was trying to meditate, but she was struggling. She'd met a Buddhist Zen priest, and had learned the proper way: she sat down in a group, now, put her hands in her lap, and counted her breaths to ten, trying to stay in the moment until she was supposed to return to the number she counted with the breath. Twenty minutes a day. She wanted to be less anxious. She was always anxious. And, less angry. She was catching that with herself recently. She would mess something up, and she would get mad, and she would *hear* it, and she would think, *It's not worth getting mad about.*

That's when she saw it. It was like something you might be ashamed of. Something *too* private in public. A man and a woman were standing and kissing on the sidewalk as cars went by. It was 7:20 a.m. The woman had red hair, and she was kissing an Indian man, and she could see a bald spot in back as they kissed. As she approached and drove past, they stayed, standing and kissing, and the woman smiled. Sarah couldn't believe it. There were cars all around, and people too.

It wasn't just that they were kissing. The woman was *lost* and dreamy-eyed. It was as if they were alone: no cars going by, no world watching. And, the woman was a bit pretty, and she didn't see the man's face, but they were so *ordinary*. The two were lightly embracing one another. It was like they were in their own living room, slow dancing to a song of theirs.

Recently, she'd put down the social media, the dating apps. Maybe she would just pour a drink tonight and not meditate. Maybe she would just watch TV, the dating shows. Something light. She didn't know what to think of love.

Seattle, 2008, Madrona

Sophia's mother was getting rid of stuff that had piled up at her place, and while cleaning, she asked Sophia to take what she wanted from her childhood room. There was an old folder that said, "Senior Year 2008." She had gone through a phase then with a digital camera, and Andrew was the first picture at a park, high. She looked at all the printed pictures. She wished she hadn't seen it because she saw Andrew smiling. She went through everything else, and she headed to Madrona with the box of pictures. In her room, she looked at each one for a moment again.

Seattle, 2025, Ravenna

Jessica came over and told Sophia that she was happy, and she was now never bored, enviably. Jessica was getting married and was pregnant. She had just got a promotion at Amazon working on ads. They all celebrated.

Later, Sophia had some wine and when she headed to bed she saw that it was romantic love that she craved. But, she would always have another chance and if she had a boyfriend then she might see things aright again.

She had decided to run again like in high school, and she went to the YMCA to lift weights. She went into the locker room and changed. Her sets were getting better.

She pulled away from the parking lot and thought about her first date that evening. He had invited her to a wine bar that night. She smiled when she saw him. She hadn't had butterflies like this. She liked that he had called her to set up the date, how he always paid, and held doors for her.

Oregon, 2025, Cannon Beach

Then, before the summer ended, Sophia and Jessica wanted to drive down to the Oregon coast, and when they got to Cannon Beach it was overcast, and they walked the ocean line. Jessica was still pregnant.

“Do you want kids when you’re older?” Jessica asked.

“No, never have.” Her face was solid and blank.

“I don’t know why. I really want this more than anything in my life all of a sudden.”

“Seriously?” Sophia examined her with a glimpse.

“Do you not want them at all?”

“No. You know, I never did. I really don’t, and I never have even thought of it,” she said.

“I know,” she said. “I’m just asking.”

There was a wind that blew Sophia’s hair sideways and into her face and she pushed it out of the way. She looked at Haystack Rock, and the ocean.

Sophia had noticed when they got on the beach that Jessica was in a good mood.

They walked down the beach, never returning to the subject, and she liked the walk, carrying her flip flops and feeling the sand and the water when it came out to them.

They decided to drive back through the night instead of an Airbnb. They drove along the ocean and then they drove the whole way up and they didn't really say anything. When they got to Sophia's place hours later, Sophia popped the trunk and she brought her things in. They said goodbye and Jessica drove off.

The next day at a bar, Sophia saw Sarah and Jessica.

"Jessica's still baby crazy," Sophia said to Sarah.

"Really?" asked Sarah.

"Yes!" Sophia said. "She might have another kid." "Have you had a change of thought?" Sarah said.

"No, I just haven't talked much about it." Jessica said.

"Can you afford a child?" Sarah asked.

"Yes."

That night, Sophia watched Netflix in bed. She wondered if she would ever be a mother. She had liked driving back home with Jessica because Jessica was a big talker, and they always had something to talk about, and when they finished many CDs, they arrived in Seattle.

Seattle, 2008, Madrona

During the summer, Sophia couldn't have cared less about clashing with her mother's boyfriend. She hadn't talked to her friends too much this week.

That night Sophia and Andrew were alone at her place, and smoked hookah on the deck. They didn't talk much. He knew that she was nervous about college because she was worried about making friends.

It was a humid night and she didn't want to sleep with him though they did in the end.

Seattle, 2026, Capitol Hill

Things were going well with Sophia with someone who she'd met on Bumble. They had gone on some dates. She felt the relationship calm her and revive her spirits in an unexpected way and it filled her. They were getting a deal on Capitol Hill with pasta and a bottle of wine. She liked the wine and it was far better than the wine she usually got, and she listened to him talk about his job in electrical engineering. It was interesting at first to listen to him describe what he did, but it droned on. She felt slightly bored in the way you can during dates, waiting to say something good.

She remembered old memories of playing ultimate at college. How good it had made her feel to compete and feel her endurance, like she was right back to when she had played and travelled with Andrew and the team. Now, she sometimes worried about him. She called, but he didn't answer and so she'd call him at another time.

"How have things been?" her date asked.

"Fine, I just am pushing through this novel I'm reading." She was happy to not be speaking about his occupation anymore.

Sophia decided to stop dating on the apps and the next day she went for a run, and it cleared her head. She listened to hardcore bands. She felt the good strides of a strong runner.

She had only worn a sports bra and short shorts and someone from a car cat called her. She had run track well in high school.

Later, they all met at a dive bar.

“I walked all around,” Andrew said. “I went through the library, the indoor basketball courts, saw a professor I knew, and then walked through the short forest loop. The air was nice and crisp.”

“Was it interesting to go back?” Sophia asked.

“Yes, but it wasn’t worth it because I couldn’t see my main advisor. He’s in England, now. And it would’ve been nice to go with someone.” Sarah and Jessica nodded to that.

“It was less exciting or interesting than I anticipated. I thought I would feel lots of emotions, but after ringing the graduation bell, I didn’t have much to do.” He sounded very matter of fact. “I wanted to ring that bell so badly because I was ill in Seattle when I graduated.” That was when he couldn’t function and stayed in bed for a year.

Seattle, 2026, Ballard

She was on a slow-pitch team and they always brought a keg. She had never played softball, but she drank from the keg like everyone else, and hoped for the best when she was at first base or up to bat. She didn't care about the score, and they barely eked out a win last week. She took her cleats off, and put on her shoes, and she felt shy. She wanted more friends, and she started clamming up. Someone said good job, and then everyone high fived each other.

After the game, they brought the other team to their dugout and brought out the keg and they all got drunk. She drank till the keg was finished.

Then, she drunkenly remembered something when she was drunk in high school. It was her dancing with Andrew in the big Magnuson Park hanger. There was the loud music, his body against hers, and how she could really dance, and how they were like that all night.

Sophia and Andrew were together during senior year in high school and during the summer. He had had enough of Abigail's indecision.

Many of her friends had gotten married by now and had kids. She was now working as a bartender where her friend worked, and her parents didn't need to help her anymore.

Then, one Saturday, Sophia heard that Sarah was hiking by herself just outside of Seattle, and an Indian man was coming down. They started to chat, and they set up a date. He told her

that he would have to work with his family who wanted an Indian woman. When they became serious, she had to learn how to cook like one. She learned about the class element to courting in India.

Once Sarah had proved to his parents that she was fit for a wife, they moved in together and she stayed at her job at the elementary school. Sarah's family had gotten on very well with him. Sarah and him had started to plan the wedding. Sophia went home for Christmas, and she saw the two together at Pacific Inn. They planned to marry very quickly and the marriage now had a date soon. They all did a cheers with their cups. The next night, Sarah had heard about Sophia's line dancing, and Sophia taught her at the bar, and they were both laughing because Sarah was bad at it, but Sophia could see how happy she was.

Washington, D.C., 2008, National Mall

In college freshman year, Sophia's van that was heading to an ultimate tournament in Savannah, Georgia, walked the National Mall at 2:00 AM because they had to stop for an hour for insurance reasons. The National Mall was surreal in the spring night with no one around. There was a buzz to the act of walking it and the element of discovering. Sophia was with her best friends and a boyfriend, and they all went slowly from station to station. There was such history, but they talked without inhibition. It was surprisingly fun, and the group was excited and curious despite the time of night.

She looked closely at the Vietnam memorial as her friends went past. Her father didn't have to enlist because he had asthma and poor eyesight, but he once said his friends came back different. Sophia knew someone who staked out a perimeter and slept in a tent in the woods while unable to sleep in the family vacation house.

She felt calm going up the steps to the Lincoln memorial with everyone. She read the Gettysburg Address. Someone took a picture of her for Facebook. They had gone so slowly and meticulously in their own way as they had gone past the monuments. They all sat down on the steps and took a group picture.

She had been in the middle of a spring fling with Phillip who was a third year. They had met at practice. She studied philosophy and he studied science, though she didn't know the details. They had hooked up after an ultimate party had finished, and he had stayed behind because he said that he caught her looking over a lot. He had just come back from Thailand.

She hadn't seen him much of first semester. They would stay together in bed for a long time. She had kissed him on the cheek as he finished reading the Gettysburg Address. Seattle, 2025, Wallingford

After the wedding pictures, everyone sat down at the white tables under the white tent, lit with candles, and best friends told stories, and the groom danced with his mother and the bride with her father. When Sarah went back to her table, she looked around to see how people were enjoying themselves. The dinner was Indian style.

When everyone started dancing at the end, Sophia talked to friends, and everyone was drunk at the end, and she knew of there being at least one guy going for her. Sophia started to dance with Sarah, and she drunkenly thought about how they still felt like friends.

The music and dancing kept going late.

Jessica had been partying a lot recently, constantly going to clubs or bars with friends, expanding a nightlife, doing new drugs.

After a couple of months of practicing her trumpet, Sophia went to a laid-back jam session with her teacher. She was able to work her way through the changes on the chart, and play some of what she was hearing. Sophia was a bit proud of herself.

When the musicians were packing up to leave, a rotund Asian man who played tenor came over to her, and she told him that she practiced every day, and he said to her, “You’ve just got to keep blowing.”

Seattle, 2025, Ravenna

When Sophia talked on the phone with her friend in Brooklyn about the competitive housing game in Brooklyn, she finally let go of her dream of living in New York. She had lived in Brooklyn on a friend's couch for the summer after her senior year, working two jobs, going out to enjoy the nightlife and it was profoundly expensive.

In Seattle, she now had a one room apartment because Sarah had moved in with her husband, finally.

That night, the rain was beating down on the house, and Sophia couldn't read. A recent bad date had gotten rid of another guy from the dating apps. She decided to take a break because she didn't know what she was looking for, still.

Seattle, 2008, Madrona

Now that Sophia had fully moved into Bob's, which was a big fight, she sometimes spent time in bed during the day. Sophia's mother knocked on her door one night and came in and sat at the foot of the bed. Sophia's new room was on the first floor. Jeff's room was next, then her mother and Bob's. Sophia didn't know her mother would take everything so hard, but she put her head in her hands. "I know I'm older than you and I'm your mother, but I would like to be in a relationship, maybe that's just my personality." She paused. "There is the downstairs room for you if you eventually prefer, and if you hate everyone this much, I'm sorry."

"Ok. What do you like about Bob?"

"I thought his sense of humor was unique, he had a similar career—both from Microsoft a long time ago in the beginning, and I liked his positive energy, and now I even like his house...I liked everything about his personality on our first dates. I don't think you've known him long enough to know his personality."

"I can't stand Jeff!"

"I know, but you never tried."

"I tried the first day!"

"Okay." Her mother was completely done with the conversation, Sophia could tell, and her mother got up and went to her room.

On a Saturday night, Sophia went for a long walk and she was in the mood for a house party that was happening that night. It was a friend from high school's house, and it was packed,

and there was beer pong, a hot tub with naked people, and a keg. She found her friends who had just arrived inside and she had some beers, and smoked some cigarettes outside. Someone was smoking cannabis laced with opium and offered her a pipe, and she smoked. She drank another beer, and she wandered inside. She called Andrew, but he didn't pick up. Her friends wanted to stay late, and they later dropped her off as she was still like in a dream.

Seattle, 2025, Phinney Ridge

The four stoners were at a park next to Sophia's high school as she drove by. They sat in the grass in a circle of four, and one was packing the pipe. She rarely smoked now, but during the earlier years of high school she had done it almost every day. These days she didn't want to relive the intense paranoia that it used to often bring up. She had been one of them, once, when she couldn't stand not smoking for a week.

Sophia had hated school. By ninth grade, during school and after school, she would smoke cannabis. They were always sitting in some circle in Cowen Park, or Phinney Ridge at a small park after school.

There was her friend's house where they usually went. His father was an architect. The house was always unfinished like a construction site. People partied in his room, and drank and smoked cigarettes, too. It would often get full. His dad never checked on them except when the one girl who got too drunk and loud got in trouble sometimes. Nothing was on the walls, just wooden construction walls. It was completely barren. The bed was on the floor. There was no color or life to the space, both the one room and the house. You could get shots of cheap whisky from the father. Andrew got high or drunk there, or both. But, the house never was finished being built or filled in.

Seattle, 2025, Ravenna

She was finding ways to remember her father. His favorite record was *Exile on Main Street* by the Rolling Stones, and she played it with some candles, incense, and she smoked a joint. She journalled for a little while. She turned it, and just closed her eyes. Sophia turned it up. She missed him, and how they'd sing in the car on trips down to Portland where he had some old college friends. They'd turn it up, roll down the windows and just belt it—first songs from this album, and then others.

She played his other favorite albums and closed her eyes and lay down on her rug.

When she woke up it was just morning, the needle was up and the vinyl record was done playing. Sophia had a new roommate. She suddenly hoped for a deeper friendship, which surprised her. She could hear her getting ready for work. She could also hear the birds singing.

Amherst, MA, 2008, Hampshire College

Sophia had gone out and had fun with her friends during most of college in the first year, partying and meeting people. She knew what she wanted, but didn't date or hookup right away. She was meeting people and her friends were having hookups and getting drunk before Sophia met a tall basketball player named Jesse who she talked to at a party. He was from Amherst, and he laughed when she asked if he was uptight.

She went to her friends' the next day at noon and they were on acid, and had just come down from a short trail in the woods, and they were excited to tell her that they'd been lost. Her friends were tired and they went to the dining commons. She thought about Jesse, and their short conversation.

She spent her Sunday night at the library at a carrel.

"Mind if I sit next to you?" he asked.

"C'mon over," she said. She smiled. "How's it going?" "I'm just a little burned out with partying," he said.

She got her books out, wondering if it would be awkward or hard to focus. But, he put headphones on immediately and worked in the carrel next to her. And after they studied, they went to a Himalayan restaurant. Then they went to his big house off campus where they partied. He said that he liked his classes, but not his classmates as much. He lived with mostly UMass Amherst students. She'd loved some of their parties there.

Before she left for winter break, she wanted to see Jesse because she had aced her test in her 300-level class on Epistemology at Amherst. She went to his big empty house, and walked quietly to surprise him, smiling, and then she saw his room's door was open and a woman with milky white skin was riding him and the white blanket and sheets gathered around her. She had a svelte back and his head was on the white pillow, and his eyes were focusing heavily on her, his brows furrowed. She had brown hair that went mostly down her back.

She got into her car and just drove. Three days later she felt like she wouldn't mind at all if she didn't ever see him again.

Seattle, 2025, Madrona

Sophia now sometimes came by the Madrona house, and she was there for dinner. She often came over for dinner on Sundays for laundry. Anna often went, too. Bob was grilling ribs, and Sophia made the bag of Caesar salad. Her mother came home, and Sophia put on some music over the Bluetooth speakers when her sister arrived. Sophia put the salad on the table. The cake that she was cooking in the oven needed more time. Then she got the spindrift, and Bob got the ribs. Jeff went outside, making noise and muttering. Bob had him sit down. Her mother had forgotten the bottle of wine in the kitchen, and she opened it with a corkscrew and put it down on the table, and everyone had some, even Jeff.

“Jeff has something new he likes,” her mother said.

“Oh?” Sophia said.

“We went on a hike last week.”

“Even though it was cold,” Bob smiled, “he’s pretty funny.”

“What happened to Henry recently, again?” her sister asked.

“They got divorced and then got back together, and are renewing their vows today.”

“Harold’s girlfriend is pregnant,” her mother smiled.

Sophia didn’t say much.

Afterwards, she walked into the backyard where she had spent so much time. She messaged someone on Bumble—she had many suitors—and he mentioned religion, and she back

tracked to his profile to see that he was Christian. She quickly went to something else. She had put in that she didn't want kids, she saw. She hadn't even remembered. She changed it to wanting kids. She checked "Looking for short or long relationships," and took out the short part.

The dinner had been brief, and the album was finishing. A song about how the good times were wearing you down with so many drugs, and it reminded her of how she and Sarah in the backyard.

She got into her car, and rolled the windows down and put on some sunglasses. She had a sense that she had made her life, more or less.

Seattle, 2025, Ravenna

A friend from high school texted Sophia the other day. She said they'd all been looking for her. They wanted to reunite. It was three girls from Roosevelt High School who had been old friends. She'd found them sophomore year and they partied, and she was friends with them until around senior year. The girls were often a part of the private school crowd Sophia sometimes mixed with. Two of the three girls were closer to that group than Sophia—they were from the same neighborhood. At one point in high school, two of these girls had Topsy Tuesdays with a guy and one had sex with him every time, and then they did Wasted Wednesdays, too.

They were pretty much the same, as two of them walked around Green Lake with Sophia, and one in particular had all of her nice charm and had an easy way of having fun in conversation, and of smiling with white teeth. Sophia told her that she'd seen her at a grocery store one time, and hadn't said hello. She was shocked, and they laughed. They couldn't believe that they hadn't seen her in Seattle and hadn't seen one another for fifteen years. It was a reunion, they all joked.

When Sophia went to their Memorial Day potluck, one had an eight-year-old girl who went by a nickname. Sophia felt like they were all making their way through things. Another one of her friends mentioned wanting children in their next relationship. Sophia wasn't the type. Sophia met the boyfriend who was the father. The girl went into the hot tub.

They all talked about this reunion they were having. Sophia had texted another friend of theirs because she had been excited too. She was a professor in Austin. This girl who'd get high

before AP American History with Sophia, and now she was teaching Public History at a university.

“Do you remember being at parties?” one said to Sophia. They were sitting down at a wooden table and they had salad, hotdogs, and chips on their plates.

“I remember the craziest one the one with all of that high-end modern art.”

She was able to name the artists. “Then somebody broke a fifteen-thousand-dollar vase.”

“I remember.”

“Do you remember how you would leave parties with me?”

“Not at all.”

Her old friend laughed. Her friend was very stylish, and worked in fashion at Nordstroms. So did the other friend who had walked around Green Lake.

“We would be at a party,” she said, “and I would be like, ‘Okay, this is fun, I’m going to do this party thing,’ or whatever, and you would come over and say, ‘this is lame, let’s get out of here,’ and then we’d go to a park across the street or something, and smoke cigarettes on a bench.”

“I hope you didn’t miss out on anything.”

“No! No! You made me realize that it was not a cool party!”

Maine, 2009

Sophia was invited to one friend's cabin in Maine during midwinter break, during her freshman college year and there were four girls total. It was a warm night. The first night after a day of hiking and moose in the back of pickups (the moose permit lottery in motion that day).

Someone brought out some more beer and they sat on the dock in outdoor camping chairs to see the sky in the country. They saw some shooting stars. The trees, the lake, and the stars gave her a nice peaceful feeling. They talked about their dating lives.

They had all got into their swimsuits, but it was too cold outside. They started a fire inside that they sat huddled around in towels. A small part of Sophia wanted marriage, and she even contemplated motherhood. The other girls in the cabin were dating someone, and she had looked around at them for a moment, picking up how their athletic bodies were bent gracefully at their torso.

Andrew eventually came by.

She went out to the dock with Andrew after they had some wine and smoked pipe tobacco from the artisanal wooden pipes from a real tree texture that were in the cabin.

"I guess some people might never see this many stars," he said, and Sophia agreed.

It would end up being almost a swan song of Andrew's health, and one of her favorite memories of him.

The stars reminded Sophia of "The Night The Stars Fell," a 100,000 meteor per hour meteor shower, and it was something her dad once mentioned, which was annotated by the

Native Americans amongst others all over North America. They kept chatting and laughing, and when they went inside they got even more drunk.

Amherst, MA, 2025, Hampshire College

When Andrew had first been ill during his second year, hyper-religiosity had become a familiar aspect of his life. Sophia remembered the scene in Andrew's room when her friends had discovered that his recent strange behavior had been some mental illness, and how he had to face up to it. She saw little because it was distressing, and went into her room next door when he left on the ambulance.

She later visited him in the psych ward. He was in a shared room. He wasn't himself. He had just seen his girlfriend, and he looked genuinely into Sophia's eyes and said with great peace, "This will all be good." She hugged him again and left, because she didn't ever want to see him like that.

Whidbey Island, 2025, Washington

On New Years, Sophia, Andrew, Sarah, and Jessica had gone to the new cabin that Jessica's family had built. Everyone had some beers, and then set off some fireworks on Jessica's dock, and ran away. The fireworks went off overhead and then more were lit.

Andrew had always been a good friend, which Sophia had talked with her mother about. Recently, her mother had revealed some information from her attempt. She was drunk and was planning on harming herself fatally, and was so unhappy, and had been for so long that she just didn't care, though luckily Sophia's father had just come home from seeing friends, and Sophia heard all this the first time and her mother added that she had no career, no friends, and that they didn't have much money, which Sophia didn't know.

In her thirties, she had passed the times when it was sometimes hard for her to find more friends or to date someone. She knew how to jump right into some milieu if she wanted to meet people by doing group type activities, and putting herself out there. She had some Bumble dates coming up soon, and she was excited about that. But, tonight came easily, and she didn't have to put it together. They lit some more fireworks.

She watched everything with her friends, the pop and expanse of the showers of light overhead. Their fireworks and others' went on for a long time, and something felt lucky, and she hadn't felt lucky for a long time.

Adam Shen Poetics Statement

In my fiction I use minimalist realism that explores the limits of what can be known: in the self, others, and the world. I'm interested in what is manifest but not said, and the inner/outer distinction. There is much about how illness is handled, and the private nature of that. I think there is a sense of the everyday, and an absence of exposition. My characters find subtle looks at enlightenment, the shimmering presence of beauty, and times of connecting to a new sense of happiness.

As a realist, I use prose to portray the world through mimesis with the hope that I might see the world aright, and write as clearly and simply as possible. I try my best to illuminate the everyday, and show how people find resolution through ordinary action. I like to have familiar scenes that depict people in a way that is natural and often surprisingly simple.

As a minimalist, I am interested in my writing only focusing on the essence of a state of affairs. It is a way of finding the most crucial details so that the essential elements of the story come through subtly. It is usually a simple result because I mostly have straightforward pictures of things in my mind, and I just have to find the best way to interpret those pictures. And while things might be simple on the surface, much of the weight of the pieces often come from deeper implications. I allow the reader to enjoy filling in the gaps in my work so I just want to pick the key points. For example, my goal is to have dialogue between characters must be indirect,

and they must not speak directly to each other. Readers like to fill in the gaps, it is part of the joy of reading literature.¹

I work on the inner world and its connection to the external world. In a sense, it is an epistemic question: what does this character know, and how does that explain their actions. How do we maneuver what we know and share communally, and what is private versus what is public.

By using language, I am constantly delimiting my novel, and carving out a vision. My writing is a way of juxtaposing these questions in a common space to learn about the characters' lives. In this novel, I chose a close third person narrative, which locates Sophia as a third person, but with lots of insight into her character.

I was once told that the German philosopher Gottlob Frege once said that language assumes a common world, a common objectivity with referents.¹ How we are connected epistemically to the world helps me to shape the realist and minimalist style. In addition, the opposite interests me: what do we not have epistemic access to in the world. This mixed well with the braided narrative approach that I used in which we go between 2008 in the back story to 2025 in the front story (with a few exceptions), because the older chapters gave so much subtext for the front chapters.

¹ Gottlob Frege. "On Sense and Reference." *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, translated by Max Black, edited by Peter Geach and Max Black, 3rd ed., Blackwell, 1980, pp. 56–78.

Two main questions are: “what is a writer in the world?” as well as “who am I as a writer in the world.” The first question is universal, while the second is personal. We go from the private to sharing in a community.

On the question, “what is a writer in the world?” I would respond that a writer is someone who writes in solitude and then ultimately shares their work with a community. Writing’s final step is sharing. And so, I think that a writer in the world is writing, as Faulkner once said, “an oratory out of solitude.”² The state of the world also affects us writers, as William Faulkner noted in his Nobel Prize speech when he said that the Cold War made it difficult to write.

As far as “who am I as a writer in the world,” I would say that I am a constant viewer of the world and that writing is just to paint some dream of this. I didn’t pick my realist and minimalist approach—there was a sense that it picked me, or that this was just my imagination’s most natural state. It is how I’ve always been oriented in terms of inspiration, what I see in my mind’s eye. Even in high school and undergrad I had this perspective. It is what makes sense to me, and it is what gives purpose to my writing.

² “Books of the Times; Oratory Out of Solitude.” *The New York Times*, 31 Jan. 1977, New York Times article.

The process and inspiration for my thesis project was different than any other writing that I have ever done. I had to find characters that were completely aside from my experience because I wanted something new, though I did end up adding old pieces. I had used up all of my past in previous material over the course of the year. As Richard Ford once remarked, he tries to make his books be about the most important things he knows³. In this case, I had previously used everything I knew, and it was a little bit of an unsteady feeling. I would later add from pieces I'd written previously. I was very struck by Ford's book Women with Men and the lineage of writers influenced by Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, and John Updike. A fresh draft brought a new territory. Through the braided narrative, I had created an organized way of going between the past and present that felt fluid.

My approach to starting the project was writing a "vomit draft" to get everything on the page in the longest possible draft of two hundred pages, and then I greatly reduced just that draft by deleting what was implied as well as using mainly consolidation with some expansion, and eventually around eighty pages were cut. My use of implication comes from an essay written by Peter Selgin, "In Storytelling: Never State What You Can Imply." He shows a first page scene, and then edits it so that it does not include what can be implied, from 341 words to 111. He also

³ Ford, Richard. "Author Richard Ford on Writing About Important and Mysterious Things."

YouTube, uploaded by the video's channel name, publication date,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfgZK0IDGTI>

at one point references “Hills Like White Elephants” by Ernest Hemingway, which is about abortion, though the word never appears. It is a rule similar to “show don’t tell” that is at work in my mind whenever I’m editing.

Because the novel came from a search for new material, as I revised, it came into focus that I was writing about a main character named Sophia. In my first drafts, I drew from Sally Rooney’s *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, because I had four characters that I wanted to mix and weave into one complex narrative as she does. I eventually folded most of those four characters into Sophia because they just didn’t say enough.

It is also about Sophia’s compromise while moving into her mother’s boyfriend’s house. Those scenes also are about her alienation with the housing situation. I was a paraeducator for two years, and I decided that she would be the opposite of how most people treat people with special needs. I had done some work with adults with special needs, and so I added Jeff, who was something like an amalgamation of these adults. Sophia’s perspective created an unexpected and nice tension.

The process of constant revision was what I always returned to while drafting, and that’s what brought this project into more focus. This is something that I do daily, and I believe that constant revision is the only way that my writing improves.

To understand where my life as a minimalist and realist writer began, I was a senior in high school when I became interested in literature and started writing. I loved Hemingway, Faulkner, Cormac McCarthy, and Pynchon. I found them to be magical windows into something

else other than school. I often return to Hemingway the most and I've gotten a lot of my minimalism and realism from him. Some of my first writings have the same style I use now.

As I Lay Dying by William Faulkner was also what I had in mind for this polyphony that I was pursuing in my earlier drafts. In his work, there are multiple characters who each show their perspective. I read Faulkner's novel when I was seventeen on a trip to Japan. When I ultimately consolidated my characters into Sophia, I found a focus. At that point, I let go of a novel structured like Faulkner's.

Mrs. Dalloway is my favorite work that I read during my audited classes or the program. Her use of polyphony through her stacked consciousness approach (rather than stream of consciousness) was baffling to me in her technique. Mrs. Dalloway goes out to get flowers for her party, and the dense and entangling trip, all of its descriptions, and perspectives, and world that is created has made a big impact on me. It gave me an experimental picture that I wanted to catch, somehow. I do like my similarities with the Dalloway character who goes out for flowers because I think my main character, Sophia, goes through a search for her own meaning.

I had a writing teacher at Hugo House who mentioned Jhumpa Lahiri's "small combustible moments." [teacher, footnote of name] I think that I do something like that. I go for something similar, I wish to show things subtly and yet active. I often give characterization in the back sections of the braided narrative to make the combustible moments meaningful and more subtle.

Someone else who I admire with this type of approach is Raymond Carver, whose Eastern Washington beginnings were used to frankly depict the life of the people there. When Gordon Lish edited Carver's work there was an edge to his minimalism that I have greatly

admired. I learned from a favorite story like “Why Don’t You Dance?” how to use restraint, and how much can be depicted in short scenes. “Why Don’t You Dance?” is a brief story, and reminds me of “Hills Like White Elephants” because so much goes unsaid. The story is about a man whose living room is on his front lawn and a woman has just left him. Everything is for sale when a young couple come by, and they all talk as the couple buys things. The man eventually says that they should dance, and it ends with the girl talking two weeks later about his ownings being trash. It is so multifaceted without feeling like you’re being pushed around.

Realism was important for me to read. I read *Middlemarch* for an audited class and got a sense of the scope of Eliot’s use of realism. Her vision was so vast and precise that I got a larger sense of what you can do with realism. Also, her characterization of her subjects’ psychological state was interesting.

The themes of my novel came as I was writing the piece, and I wasn’t intentionally searching for answers to these questions. I think that my writing generally doesn’t have a direct answer to a direct question. It might be more that answers to the themes should be manifest in my work rather than addressed directly.

Place is also very important, and nearly all of my chapters are about Seattle neighborhoods. This is just an example of writing what you know. I am not the kind of writer who likes to spread themselves out and go places they don’t know. That wouldn’t be true to me.

Some of the tension in the novel is subtle. Andrew is obliquely dealing with mania, but the book doesn’t focus much on this big topic. Just as Sophia doesn’t as a character remind us over and over again that her mother attempted suicide when she was a girl. Or how the bartender is seen only once, but articulates the thesis of the novel: people with mental illness

change and have existential burdens, and it is part of their lives to push through with good faith, as the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre once said.⁴

Music is a constant aspect of this work. The stories behind the blues and jazz ended up being a way of expanding upon the scene and adding richness to it. I played jazz for a long time, and at a very high level, and I've always been interested in the lexicon and world of the blues. I've naturally listened to these two genres and so I've also read about them a lot and have seen documentaries about them. I use music to magnify the vibe of the scene. It's a way of bringing out a little more in the character in how they are in scene. I think that I often introduce vinyl records into scenes rather than just streaming music because it slows everything down and feels more organic. Also, Sophia naturally does this because of her father's vinyl collection

Another additional plot to Sophia's is Andrew's world. I wanted him to nearly never express emotions so that his illness wouldn't be sensationalized. I wanted him to find a lot of remorse in his acts, but give a surface level approach in which the word "mania" only happens once, and after which his suffering gets little light. I just didn't want him to be front and center the whole time, though he does get a lot of meaning out of his trip to Hampshire.

⁴ Sartre, Jean-Paul. (2007). *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Translated by Carol Macomber. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

I went to Hampshire. It is a small alternative school in Western Massachusetts, and by my second year, I had my own serious illness. I didn't want to return in writing back to Hampshire, but it's necessary to understanding Andrew's character. Like the rest of the drafts, I wanted to have a subtle touch to things, and I didn't want to get trapped in nostalgia. Like I said, I didn't want Andrew's history or current illness to rise to the top entirely, but we do have some things in common. Unfortunately the school is now permanently closed.

The subjects that I address are these evocative pictures that come to me. Joan Didion offers a similar experience: "When I talk about pictures in my mind I am talking, quite specifically, about images that shimmer around the edges."⁵ That is where I start with my writing. I see this shimmering image and write it, which sometimes requires editing what's in the picture. As these pictures tie me along, my story begins to take shape.

When Sophia is in 2008, she grieves for her father. Later, Sophia also is often dealing with what it means to be in your mid-thirties and to still have many unanswered questions about life, like your social life. I guess that some of this is part of my own world, but Sophia's particular struggles are not my own. She often desperately seeks connection, usually in the wrong place.

⁵ Didion, Joan. "Why I Write." *The New York Times Book Review*, 5 Dec. 1976.

I generally have a simple approach to sitting down and writing. I don't think that I lack an imagination, and so I always have projects that fill quickly. Because revision is such a crucial part of writing, I am usually revising. It sometimes feels like I'm always revising.

Because I consider my characters to be constantly epistemically motivated, I was happy with the manifested philosophical questions that I brought up that don't ask the reader to directly solve anything. In any given scene with a group, people know to different degrees what's going on beneath the surface. In addition, our inner/outer relationship is always complex, and I also take that relationship epistemically. I think that if my novel is successful at all, it will be because I have taken what can be known or said with much restraint to portray the world with a simple (though not simplistic) worldview and this notion also defines my realism and minimalism as a whole.

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