

*Le Morte d'Americana*

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## Preface

Studying at Oxford University was a dream of mine that came true in my junior year. I studied Arthurian romance in my tutorials, read and wrote essays in historic libraries, and walked about this medieval town every day. The study abroad experience was idyllic in the way that King Arthur had planned for his kingdom to be in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. However, when I heard about the hate crimes, the defacing of 'Black Lives Matter' posters and anti-black rhetoric on Snapchat, which happened in October 2017 at Boston College, I was reminded of the injustices woven into the fabric of American society. I had thought I wanted to write a critical thesis about Arthurian romance, but then I realized that I wanted to write a narrative that intertwines the Arthurian themes with injustices in American society.

I have mainly focused on Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* and Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, using characters and themes from these texts to craft *Le Morte d'Americana*. Arthur and his knights and the violence that surrounds them translate into the issues of police brutality, gun violence, and toxic masculinity. Arthur's desire to secure his brotherhood, the Round Table, and the ideals of knighthood—chivalry and honor—make him incapable of seeing that his knights cannot uphold his idealism. He is helpless when his queen, Guinevere, has an affair with Lancelot, his best knight. He is helpless against the rising quest for the Holy Grail, which turns knights from earthly pursuits to spiritual ones, which dismantles his Round Table. Arthur can only give into violence, which destroys the orderly society he has so scrupulously constructed.

In the medieval and Victorian versions, the Holy Grail was a male quest for salvation. However, in my novel, the quest for the Holy Grail is a feminist tale—five female quests that intersect as the women search for their voices to speak against injustices. Elaine is no longer the crestfallen, meek lover who pines after Lancelot who is already in love with Guinevere. In this novel, Elaine is Lance’s daughter, a high school student who stands up against injustice and helps her father navigate his role as a parent. Sir Galahad, Lancelot and Elaine’s son and the knight who achieves the Holy Grail in the original tale, is now Gabby, Lance’s daughter and Elaine’s sister, a young police officer who openly questions her superior’s view of the world. Guinevere, often portrayed as hated and traitorous in the original tale, is now Gwen, a high school English teacher, who searches for and eventually earns some measure of redemption. Vivien, the sorceress who beguiles the wizard Merlin, is now an aspiring journalist who uses her cleverness to spur a personal agenda along with her advocacy work. Enid, forbidden by her husband, Sir Geraint, to speak, is now Erin, an outspoken blogger.

As the women gain strength in this novel, the men crumble under Arthur’s ideals of knighthood, while some of them achieve some measure of redemption. However, this healing is dependent on the momentum of the female narrative. Arthur loses himself in his pursuit of order. Merlin, the wizard in the original tales, is now Melvin, Arthur’s friend who becomes increasingly disillusioned as Arthur refuses to listen to his counsel. Sir Balin le Savage inflicts the “Dolorous Stroke” on the Grail King with the spear that pierced the side of Christ. This wound can only be healed when the Grail is achieved. In my novel, he is the troubled cop, Bailey, whose fatal gunshot exposes corruption within the police department. Sir Gawain, whose wrath seals his death in Malory’s story, is

Gavin, a cop who embodies the ruthlessness of violent policing in today's society. Sir Lancelot, Arthur's best earthly knight, is now Lance, an officer whose loyalty to duty distances him from his family and whose disloyalty to his chief, Arthur, manifests in his affair with Gwen.

The timelessness of the Arthurian tradition lends itself to adaptability: hundreds of authors over the centuries have inherited the tales and adjusted them to his or her society's needs. Sir Thomas Malory lived during the War of Roses, a period of upheaval and violence. While imprisoned, he wrote *Le Morte d'Arthur*, which was inspired from the French romances. He emphasized the ideals of chivalry, brotherhood, loyalty, and order, which had been eroded in contemporary society. From Malory's stories, Tennyson created *Idylls of the King*, resurrecting a medieval world to edify Victorian society. Through Guinevere's affair, Tennyson attempted to revive the idea of courtly love and the importance of pursuing the purest form of love, which he juxtaposed against King Arthur who was the model gentleman for Victorian society. My novel carries on the tradition of taking the most important pieces of the Arthurian tradition and weaving them together with the most pressing issues of modern American society. It is a bridge between the past and present.

## The Coming of Arthur

Arthur Long relished the sound of quiet. Whenever he was on patrol, he often wandered from his self-assigned beat, cruising from the north end of town to the southern tip because he liked to see how far the quiet stretched across town. This morning, he took his favorite route, turning the car from High Street onto winding Madeira Road, a narrow street canopied by the sunlit leaves of white oak trees. Big colonials posed on groomed lawns. Picket fences and flower gardens garnished the grounds. Vacant driveways. Parents were at work and children were at school. The only detectable movement was the shuddering sprinklers spraying jets of water.

Clarkston was a small and quiet ecosystem, and Arthur took pride in its quiet. Crime was rare other than minor infractions such as parking in “no parking” zones or speeding. He’d had to bust several high school booze-fests in the woods at the edge of town, but that was to be expected during teenage rebellion years. Arthur was about to pass a light green house with black shutters at the end of Madeira Road. Several years back, after being tipped off by neighbors, Arthur had busted seventeen-year-old Bobby Miller in that house when he threw a secret graduation party complete with beer and a new stereo system. They were on good terms now. Sometimes when Bobby returned from his job in New York, he would find time to crack open a beer with Arthur.

He made a left on Madeira Road, turned onto Milk Street, and immediately spied a yellow “slow school zone” sign hanging from a telephone pole. Bryant Elementary School stood halfway down the block. As he drove closer, he could see kids dangling upside down on the red jungle gym equipment and throwing sand at one another in the

sandbox. The teachers stood with their arms crossed, watching quietly until someone would inevitably start crying.

Arthur slowed the car and rolled down his window, waving at the third graders playing soccer on the school playing field. Breaking into grins, they ran to the chain-link fence. Their light-up shoes flashed red and blue like siren lights as they bounded over to the fence. Their tiny but strong bodies bent the fence as they leaned against it. Some of them pointed and shouted, "It's Chief Long!"

"I wish I could play guys, but I'm on duty right now!" Arthur waved once more, and then pressed harder on the gas pedal, pulling away from the school. Some of the kids pointed their finger guns at him, making him chuckle. It had taken him almost a decade working in the police force in Clarkston for him to be accustomed to kids not being afraid of cops.

Kids who had grown up in Clarkston liked him. From a very young age, they talked to him whenever they had a chance to. During crosswalk duty, he liked when the kids crossing the road would jump to give him high-fives on his outstretched hands. Then they'd run for the playground, and he would watch their backpacks, decorated with puffy decals of cartoon characters, bounce up and down. When he came to their classrooms to give talks about his job, many of them asked him about this gun and if he used it on bad guys, but he'd tell them it was for emergencies only. The younger ones especially liked to point finger guns at him.

Growing up in Maben, one of the poorest and most diverse districts of Boston, Arthur had never seen a kid running up to a cop and throwing finger guns at him. In the playgrounds, kids had played hopscotch on faded chalk-drawn squares. They had shot

basketballs through hoops with ripped or missing nets. No one cried much and no one lingered by the fences for too long. Older kids who ditched middle school and high school would walk by, cigarettes in their mouths, pretending to threaten to burn anyone who had their fingers curled around the chain-links.

Kids in Maben had heard and seen bad guys and innocent people alike killed by guns. In his high school, Arthur remembered a mural spanning from one end of the cafeteria to another. It was a painting of an enormous oak tree with roots shooting out of the ground like tentacles. Phrases like “kindness,” “acceptance,” “diligence,” and “courage” sprouted from the tree like leaves. In the clouds, the names of kids and the dates they were killed in their homes or on the streets were painted in gold. A couple times a year, a janitor would bring a ladder into the cafeteria and clamber to the top with a tin of gold paint and a paintbrush clamped between his teeth. He’d redo some of the older names or he’d add a new one.

Maben was the sort of place that people who lived in Clarkston would be weary about driving through at night. It was the sort of place that they would occasionally see in local newspapers and skim over to read the sports section. It was the sort of place where it wasn’t unusual for group homes to be at full capacity. Arthur had grown up at a group home called Maben House, a building filled with empty Lysol spray bottles, dirty bathroom mirrors, and a rotating staff that policed everything from hygiene to TV time. When he was eight, a short, plump caseworker with thinning gray hair like cotton candy and a sweaty forehead, and a tall, thin woman whose default expression looked as if she’d tasted something sour came to visit him. After dabbing the sweat on his forehead with a tissue, the caseworker gestured to the woman and told Arthur that that his troubles

were over, that he would go live with this nice woman named Judy, and that he would be moving in tomorrow, so he'd better start packing.

Judy's large nose and beady eyes made her look birdlike, as she scanned Arthur from top to bottom, noting the holes in his jeans and ketchup stain on his sleeve. When she finished, she turned and bent to whisper in the man's ear, as he smiled and said, "Yes, you'll be compensated, Miss Wakeman." Satisfied with the answer, she straightened up and bore her gaze at Arthur.

"Don't be late," she said before turning and leaving the meeting room. As she walked, Arthur saw her dig through her purse and pull out a bottle of green hand sanitizer.

The next morning as he waited for Judy, Arthur was in the living room, playing go-fish on top of his suitcase with one of the staff members, a thirty-year-old woman who liked to wear colorful cable-knit sweaters. One of the orange-shirted volunteers, a seventeen-year-old girl, led Judy, who was dressed as if she were attending a funeral, to him. Judy walked into the living room with her nose wrinkled as she looked at the deflated couches and dirty carpet. Her ill-fitting black dress hung on her wire-thin frame. Wisps of graying hair curled like serpents around her long face. Pausing in the game to look up at her, Arthur saw a Medusa-like glare that made his muscles rigid and his blood freeze. She walked over to him, knelt down, and brushed the cards off the flat top of the suitcase and into her hand before handing them to his go-fish opponent. She picked up the suitcase and carried it like a shopping bag.

During the drive to her apartment, Judy barely spoke a word to him, flashing suspicious looks from her rearview mirror. He later learned that after Judy's alcoholic

husband beat and left her, she now had to raise Thomas on her income as a hairdresser. She knew that fostering Arthur would earn her a daily stipend and a clothing allowance every three months, along with compensation for birthday and holiday gifts—all of which would be more than enough to make ends meet.

They arrived at her apartment, which was in the basement below her salon. In his room were a small dresser and a stained mattress with moth-eaten sheets on top. He unpacked his small suitcase, a black one with a broken zipper that one of the Maben House staff members had found in the basement, and laid out five pairs of clothes, some books he had stolen from Maben house, and a toothbrush. Arthur sat on the floor, fearing that making the floor creak would send him straight back to Maben House. Suddenly, he heard the lock click. Arthur jumped up and began twisting the doorknob in either direction to no avail.

“Let me out please!” He begged.

“Sorry. Losers don’t get dinner,” replied a boy’s shrill voice.

“Thomas! What are you doing?” Judy shouted from the other side of the apartment. Arthur heard footsteps and a scuffling noise, followed by a yelp from Thomas. Judy opened the door, looking icily at Arthur.

“Dinner’s ready. Don’t close your door again.” Arthur walked out tentatively, seeing a blonde boy with knobby knees and elbows rubbing his right arm while giving Arthur a glare.

When Arthur moved in with Thomas and Judy, Thomas was thirteen and had joined a gang to escape his mother’s tyranny. He got involved in small thefts and smoked weed. When Thomas did come home, a lot of times, it was because Judy had bailed him

out of jail, which would force him into a short period of feigned good behavior. Even though he followed Judy's rules, Thomas took every opportunity to lock Arthur in the bathroom for hours or vandalize his room. Arthur never fought back because his anger could never outlast Thomas's.

Thomas's anger allowed him to thrive in Maben. Their neighborhood boys were mostly black and Latino. They wore oversized hoodies and jeans that sagged below their hips. They liked to hang out in the parking lot of Rudy's Convenience after school, terrorizing the younger kids who walked past on their way home. Insults rolled out of their mouths like balls of fire and when words failed to terrorize, their fists finished the job.

Though they used to bully Thomas for being white, he fought back with a rage that made him seem unpredictable and deranged. When they realized they could not beat his anger into submission, they allowed him to be one of them, and soon he began to dress like them. His speech sharpened like the knife he liked to carry around with him. He didn't spend much time at home, but when he did, Arthur watched as Judy, her voice hoarse from crying, begged for him to stop hanging around the neighborhood boys, to clean up his act because she didn't know how much longer she could keep bailing him out of jail, though he would never listen. Thomas believed anger was the unbreakable bond between him and his friends. But Thomas, who was angry with his father for abandoning him and his mother for her controlling nature, failed to understand that being a resentful white boy wasn't the same as being a resentful black boy in Maben.

In 1986, Maben was on the brink of the War on Drugs. Many of the kids who terrorized the streets were afraid themselves. They had seen police storming into their

homes in the middle of the night, claiming to be on a drug raid, while pointing guns at them and their family. They had seen their parents still in pajamas dragged from their homes for minor or nonexistent crimes. Afraid to take their anger out on the police, they directed their fury at anything vulnerable.

By this time Arthur was thirteen and wasn't to be controlled by Judy, and as long as he wasn't involved in gang activity, Judy loosened her tyrannical grip. Arthur was no longer afraid of wandering beyond the one-mile radius from Judy's apartment and his school, especially now that he had a friend, Evan Long, to walk with him. Evan and his parents, Chinese immigrants, lived in an apartment in downtown Maben. Evan was so skinny that if Arthur were to accidentally rub elbows with him, he would bruise. His shirts were always tucked tightly into his jeans, which was a good enough reason for kids at school to beat him up. However, Evan continued bringing his mother's noodles for lunch, which wrinkled other kids' noses, reading his favorite comics during free periods, and refusing to fight back when kids tried to stuff his face down the toilet.

After school, they often frequented Red Dog Comics, down the block from Evan's apartment. It was an old store with a peeling window decal of a red Labrador carrying a rolled-up comic in its mouth, but Arthur and Evan easily lost themselves among the blue crates of one dollar battered and dog-eared comics.

One day, as they left the store, a burly white police officer stormed past them, whacking the bell that hung over the door. He strode towards Tony, a forty-year-old African-American cashier, and demanded that he be allowed to search the back closet for drugs. Without waiting for Tony to respond, the officer brushed past him, tore the storeroom apart, and found a small amount of marijuana. Tony had marijuana in the

closet, but he was no “kingpin” or big-time dealer. Arthur and Evan hadn’t seen him since he was hauled out of Red Dog in handcuffs.

Thomas was the only white boy in his band of brothers, who were black and Latino, but because he failed to see that crucial difference, he believed in the indestructible bond of their friendship. That all changed one day at Rudy’s, as the boys munched on potato chips and jeered at strangers, a time-honored ritual. There were five of them. Two patrol cars pulled up and the cops swarmed around the boys, trapping them against the brick wall of Rudy’s. They were to be taken to the station for questioning for possession of marijuana, but none of them were big time dealers, just scared eighteen-year-olds. Thomas yanked his arm away when the officer began to handcuff him. The officer’s alarm told the other cops to expect the other boys to resist. Soon, two of the boys were spread-eagled on the pavement with their hands twisted behind their backs. The other two were pressed against the brick wall. Thomas remained standing with his arm yanked in an uncomfortable angle behind his back. Arthur and Evan were walking to Judy’s place when they paused to investigate the assault. Despite the countless times that Thomas had terrorized Arthur, he could not help but stand up for him.

“Hey, that’s my brother. Please let him go.”

The word “brother” felt like sandpaper on his tongue, and even Thomas’s face twitched at the word. The officer holding Thomas gave Arthur and Evan a long glance, eyeing their tattered comics tucked under their armpits, and decided that he could let Thomas go. But the cops herded the others into the patrol cars, and as they passed Thomas on their way to the vehicles, the boys glared at him in the way they used to

before he joined their gang. Thomas's whiteness protected him, and now he was an outsider to them.

After that, Thomas fought incessantly and violently with Judy, throwing anything he could find whenever they got into an argument. He became an even bigger menace to Arthur who was terrified of Thomas jumping him in the daylight. Arthur began losing sleep at night, fearing that Thomas would suffocate him in his sleep. Some of Thomas's friends never returned to the streets, and the ones who did refused Thomas's reconciliation. Arthur began to spend more and more time with Evan, even though Evan could not protect him any better than he could protect himself, but it was comforting to know that he had someone who cared about him.

"I want to stop being a coward," said Arthur one afternoon as they laid with their feet propped up on Evan's wall and their backs on his bed. Arthur looked up at the plastic glow-in-the-dark stars plastered on the ceiling, then let his gaze wander to the poster of Batman above their feet. He turned over and stared at Evan intently: "I want to stand up to Thomas."

"You aren't a coward."

"You're my friend. You have to say stuff like that."

"No, I mean it." Evan sat up and stared a spot in the corner of his bed. "You keep hanging out with me, which makes you brave." Arthur was surprised; he had always admired Evan's composure and how he never let the other kids beat his true identity out of him. Evidently, he didn't know or didn't want to be anything other than the Asian kid who loved his mother's cooking and related more to comic book heroes than the thirteen-year-olds around him.

“You’re the brave one. You don’t let those other kids change you,” replied Arthur.

“I like who I am. Why would I change that?” They sat in silence for a few minutes before Evan continued: “If you really want to stand up to Thomas and Judy, you should just come live here.”

“Isn’t that running away from my problems?”

“Only if you see it like that. See it as giving yourself the best chance possible.”

Arthur thought about how Mr. and Mrs. Long treated him as if he were their son. They always had an extra pair of slippers waiting for him at the doorway because they insisted that he would get sick from walking on their floors while wearing only his socks. Mrs. Long always set an extra place at the table in hopes that he would stay for dinner, which he often did.

Later that evening, Arthur left Judy’s basement apartment in the dead of night, shivering as he stepped out onto the sidewalk. Gripping the small suitcase that he had taken from Maben House, he walked towards the crosswalk and heard a clatter as he knocked into a trashcan. Stooping down for the lid, he prayed that Judy wouldn’t come rushing out of the house to catch him. He glanced across the street and saw a figure half a block away carrying a backpack and slouching towards the bus stop.

Under the streetlight’s halo, Thomas paced back and forth, chewing his fingernails. His blonde hair was tousled as if he hadn’t slept in days. Arthur assumed that maybe he was done being angry, and all there was left to do now was stop fighting and disappear. Arthur knew that Judy had grown accustomed to her son’s anger; without him lashing out, there would be no way for her to be connected to him. Arthur didn’t want to

think too hard about how Thomas's running away would destroy her, and he began to walk in the opposite direction towards the Longs' house. The forty-nine bus came from the opposite direction, its headlights stunning Arthur for a second before it passed him. He heard it slow and hiss as it pulled up to the bus stop where Thomas was waiting. Arthur gripped the handle of his suitcase, telling himself not to look over his shoulder.

The radio in his patrol car crackled to life, plucking Arthur from his memory. A flash of purple appeared in his peripheral vision, so he pulled to a stop at the intersection of Borthwick Street and Milk Street, and smiled at a jogger wearing a purple sweatshirt with her golden retriever bounding across the road. After making it to the sidewalk, she paused and checked her Apple watch as her dog ran circles around her legs, ensnaring her with the leash.

Arthur took a right on Borthwick Street, which was where Clarkston High was located. As he drove past the school, he heard the second-long blare of a siren. It was Officer Lance Shen patrolling his usual beat. Arthur always assigned Lance to this area because he knew that Lance liked dropping his daughter off at school in the mornings. He gave Arthur a wave as they passed one another. Arthur's car shook as he drove over a pothole, and the silk dragon hanging on his rearview mirror quivered from the impact. Mrs. Long had given it to him when he passed his driver's test. It was one of those Chinese dragons, a "long." Its golden body resembled that of a snake more than it did that of the traditional dragon. Blue spines and green plumes were embroidered along the length of its twisting body and tail. Red, green, and blue clouds curled at its feet. When she picked him up after the test, she handed him the "long" and smiled warmly: "Wang zi cheng long. My son become dragon."

## Merlin

Arthur brought the patrol car to a stop in the parking lot of Circuit Diner. This 24-hour joint had been in Clarkston long before Arthur moved to this town. It was a haven for teenagers to gossip after school, families to avoid cooking for themselves, and loners to satisfy midnight cravings. Veiny cracks marked the gray asphalt of the parking lot. Stainless steel siding formed the shell of the building, supporting a neon sign that read “Circuit Diner,” whose lights had burned out ages ago. Faded forest green canopies drooped over the windows and doors.

When he stepped inside, jingling the bell on top of the door, he could feel the scent of burgers and fries saturating his lungs. He could imagine the grease in the air clinging to his arms like a layer of sunblock. Jack the manager stood behind the counter, waving at Arthur. Over the years, Arthur had seen many workers come and go, usually high school students who left to go to college. But Jack had been there since the beginning of time, and he knew Arthur’s every order at every time of day. For breakfast it was always an iced coffee, no matter the weather, and a sesame bagel with cream cheese. For lunch it was an “Atomic Burger,” a patty topped with two slices of cheddar and two slices of bacon, and a diet coke. Arthur never ate dinner there. For a late night patrol, a jelly donut.

He chose his favorite booth in the corner near the window facing downtown. Rips decorated the cushions and engravings of hearts and initials garnished the table. He drummed his fingers on the dull wood, thumping to the beat of “Take On Me” as he waited for the Wizard to arrive.

The “Wizard” was the nickname he gave Melvin Coyle, his best friend from police academy. In their first meeting, Melvin instantly reminded Arthur of Evan. Melvin was ten years older than Arthur when they entered the academy in 1993, and he was skinny and prone to fits of asthma. He had a bachelor’s degree in economics and after failing to get into graduate school, he worked as a cashier at Shaw’s before deciding at the ripe age of thirty that he would pass the Law Enforcement Entrance Exam and enter the academy.

“Art!” Bellowed a voice from the door. Arthur couldn’t even hear the jingle of the doorbell over the sound of the voice. Melvin was fifty-five and he credited his figure to the slowing of metabolism rather than his frequent carb-loading. Flaps of flesh bulged from the sleeves of his blue and pink Hawaiian shirt, which was a size too small. On the other hand, Melvin’s lower body had not changed too drastically, and his legs swam in cargo shorts that had a waistline big enough to fit his hips. Faded splotches of sunspots and mysterious moles peppered his face. The ends of his white beard looked like fraying wires. He plopped down across from Arthur, inflating the far end of his bench cushion with the weight of his body.

When Arthur started at the academy, he was twenty-two and had recently graduated from community college with a criminal justice major, and all he knew was that he wanted to be a police officer, one of the good ones. He didn’t want to be the sort of cop that the neighborhood boys in Maben feared. For six months, he lived in a dorm with three other men, and he shared a bunk with Melvin. Every morning at 5:00, Bart Benson, an ex-college basketball star who didn’t get drafted to play professionally, would slam a hand on the alarm clock and bark at the other men to get out of bed. Though he

was afraid of heights, Melvin had insisted on having the top bunk because he was older than Arthur and needed his privacy, and during the time it took for him to slink down the ladder, the other three men would already have finished preparing the room for inspection—folding their sheets, organizing books on their desks, and clearing dirty laundry. Then, the 120 recruits had to do a ten-minute run, which was followed by weightlifting or circuit training on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, they would do the run for a full hour. Classroom sessions followed the physical training. Curfew was set promptly at 8:00. There was no talking at meals or in lines for meals. Standing at attention became second nature.

Arthur was by no means a “top dog” in the class, but he knew not to flinch when an officer screamed at him for having lint on his uniform. He would never dream of breaking the rules to lie on the ground for a break if an officer wanted twenty-five push-ups. Every morning, the cohort would be split into four groups and each group completed their circuit training in separate rooms. The men who had previous military experience or had been training in their basements for the academy occupied the front row. Arthur, the only one who was ever kind to Melvin, stayed with him in the back. Officers heckled at Melvin as he did push-ups while staving off the asthma attacks, which earned him the nickname “Wheezy.” The other recruits were no kinder to Melvin than the senior officers. They often shoved their way past him in the lines for meals, leaving him with the gross leavings at the bottom of the serving trays—the burnt pieces of toast, the wilted pieces of spinach, the deflated grapes. Melvin’s undergraduate background in economics made him inclined to weigh costs and benefits, and he knew it was better to conserve his energy for the physical training than to unleash it on the other recruits. He also profited

from Arthur's altruism, for Arthur never failed to sneak some of the best bits of his meal onto Melvin's plate.

However, whatever resemblance Melvin bore to Evan quickly dissolved when it came to classroom learning. What Melvin lacked in physical ability, he made up for in intelligence. They learned things like defense tactics, firearms care and safety, and arrest and booking procedures. They had two tests every week, and Melvin always got the highest marks. Some of the many things that Melvin was exceptionally good at were mock traffic stops and building searches and arrests. The DEA, which had launched a training program called Operation Pipeline, was apparently on its way to having more than 25,000 officers trained in using and lengthening traffic violation stops to search for drugs and weaseling consent to search from reluctant individuals. Though Melvin was weak in physical training, he was a brute in role-playing in the classroom. He had a knack for memorizing the DEA's "drug courier profiles," under which anyone who fit the description for a potential carrier was liable for a drug sweep. These profiles included anything from travelling alone, travelling with luggage, travelling without luggage, driving a rental car, driving a car that needed repairs, dressing too casually, acting too nervous, and the list goes on. As the senior officers sat in the front of the classroom, pretending to be passengers who were pulled over on the side of the highway, Melvin never held back from raising his voice at his tormentors.

It turned out that Melvin was never angry; he just knew what sort of game the academy was playing. One night, early on in their academy days, Arthur and Melvin laid belly-down in their respective beds studying for their tests the next day. Bart and the other guys were studying in one of the classrooms. It had only been a week, and Arthur

couldn't stop thinking about how when he was a kid, he'd dreamed of going into the police force to rid of assholes like the ones who assaulted Thomas and his friends. This wasn't the sort of policing that he had set out learn. He rapped his knuckles on his temple, debating whether he should drop out.

Arthur leaned his head out and saw Melvin's gray-socked foot floating above him. He whispered, "Hey Melvin, why do they make us do all of this—the mock traffic stops, the profiles? I even heard that they were going to teach us how to use drug-sniffing dogs in a few days. I mean sooner or later everyone and their mother are going to be locked up tight." He heard the springs above him creak, and two feet appeared on the topmost rung. Melvin shimmied down the ladder and plopped down next to Arthur on his bed.

"OK, here's what you need to know. In 1988, some officer named Edward Byrne was shot to death while he was guarding a drug-case witness's house, and the Reagan administration started a program to memorialize the man. Then, millions of dollars in federal aid flowed into state law enforcement agencies to encourage them to join the War on Drugs." He paused, checking Arthur's face to make sure that he was still listening.

"Then, lots of law enforcement agencies started freaking out and competing for federal aid. The money could be used for funding, equipment, training, and they sometimes even got to keep what they didn't spend. State law enforcement had quotas to meet if they wanted the government's money to keep coming. You said you're from Maben, right? Did you think the majority of those arrests were big time dealers?" Arthur shook his head. He remembered the day the cops pinned Thomas's friends to the ground or the wall and seeing their half-eaten bags of chips scattered on the ground.

“See, you’re getting it kid. It’s all economics. There’s a scarcity of actual big crime lords. I mean there are plenty of them running around, but there are way, way more petty offenders and people who haven’t actually committed any crimes. Officers have to make shit up to meet demands.”

“But this is the kind of policing I’ve grown up seeing all my life. I don’t want it to be this way,” replied Arthur, “Reagan’s policies are giving cops too much money and too much arbitrary power.”

“Well, if you don’t follow training protocol, you won’t even graduate academy let alone become a cop. So what if you don’t agree. Hell, I think this is stupid as shit and dampens all kinds of credibility for law enforcement, but this is what it takes to become a cop these days. Just shut up, do the traffic stops and memorize the profiles so you can earn your badge. When you’re chief of police, then you have the power to decide how much force officers should be using.”

A drop of ketchup was smeared on Arthur’s beard, and he wiped it away with a napkin. He looked at his burger, which had two bite-marks, and then at the remains of Melvin’s basket of chicken tenders, which he had reduced to meager crumbs.

“Still watching that health, Wiz?”

“What do you mean?” said Melvin, popping three fries into his mouth at once. He gulped his diet Coke, making a swallowing sound that hurt Arthur’s own throat, and said, “This is diet. Sometimes I lift, smartass.”

Arthur chuckled as he said, “I just have to make sure. What would I be doing without you?”

“Well, for starters, you wouldn’t be a police officer.”

“Fair. But at least it wasn’t the pepper spray test that killed my chances.”

“Twenty-seven years later and you’re still giving the kid with asthma shit.”

Melvin smirked and raised one of his bushy eyebrows. “So chief, how’s the crusade going?”

Arthur sighed, rubbing his palm against his forehead. “Wiz, how long have we known each other? And you’re still asking me the same damn question. You know I haven’t had to wage any battles since I started this gig.” After the academy, Arthur was stationed in Westerly, thirty minutes away from Maben but the same sort of troubled town. His field-training officer, or FTO, put him on parking duty for a few weeks. One afternoon, Arthur spotted a Corolla parked by an expired meter and as he was placing the ticket under the windshield wipers, the angry owner spotted him and began running and screaming profanities at Arthur. When the man attempted to remove the ticket from his car and throw it at Arthur, Arthur had the man’s face planted on the roof of his car before he could even extend his arm. Arthur had never felt stronger or safer than he did in that moment, as the heat of anger flooded his body. Later that night, as Arthur lay in bed, he repeatedly murmured to himself that he was merely doing what was expected of him, as if he could hypnotize himself into believing it.

After telling his FTO about the incident, Arthur was put on the drug control unit, the busiest unit in patrol. Even in a slow shift, the team would be able to make about ten arrests. As the cops made more busts and dealt with perps pointing knives and guns at their faces, Arthur began to understand that cops couldn’t help but be anxious, to fear anyone who walked with hands hidden in pockets, who wore hoods over their heads, who smoked and lurked in the alleyways. A majority of their arrests were black and Latino

men, who often made Arthur think about the boys loitering in Rudy's parking lot. Now that he was older, he felt less sympathetic towards them. The neighborhood boys' ruthless taunts and hyena laughs made him feel vulnerable every time he passed them on the way home from school. Now, he was no longer afraid of swaggering boys; instead, he was afraid of black men smoking on dim street corners and black men blasting music while driving at night. He gave into fear, which meant more arrests and more respect from his superiors. Arthur made countless arrests, but he was never unnecessarily violent—at least he never believed he was—and he only used force if he thought he would be in danger.

“You know, the quiet is good for me. There's nothing to fix in Clarkston. I've been here for ten years. Now it's 2018 and nothing's changed.”

“Ah, poor Art had all his hopes and dreams sucked out of him,” said Melvin, leaning back against the booth, “I understand though. It happened to me the minute I got pepper-sprayed in the face. Let's just say it was a roundabout way for me to find my true calling.” In the years after he dropped out of the academy, Melvin ate and ate and ate to cope with his depression. Though his body suffered from high blood pressure and cholesterol, his mind never withered. He eventually realized that SAT tutoring suited him. The test was a game, and he knew how to use logic to play.

“No, Wiz. I just grew up. When I'm in Clarkston, I'm just not afraid anymore. It's a really good feeling.” Arthur thought about the kids with the light up shoes prancing towards him when he drove by the playground, the way their fingers curled around the chain-link fence as they ogled at his patrol car.

He stiffened as the radio crackled into life.

“Calling all units. Gunfire at Clarkston High.”

Melvin said, “Spoke too soon, my friend.”

“Copy,” said Arthur into the radio. “Fuck, Wiz, you’re coming with me.”

Without looking into their wallets, the two of them threw random bills on top of the table and burst out of the diner. As Arthur whipped the car out of the parking space, the tires screeched. Pressing hard on the gas pedal, Arthur ran past traffic lights and swerved onto the opposite side of the street if cars were slow to get out of his way. Through the headache-inducing sound of the siren, Arthur thought about his wife and hoped that she was still alive.

## Balin and Balan

The roaring of the jackhammer gave Officer Bailey Watt a horrific headache. He stood with his back to the construction workers, letting the cars coming from his right move into the opposite lane. After about seven cars, he held his palm out to the oncoming cars. Then, turning to his left, he waved at the waiting cars, signaling them to continue along their lane. He glanced at the brown leather watch on his right hand, willing the hour hand to reach one o'clock so that he could head off to lunch.

Watt was the newest officer in Arthur's squad, which meant the chief always delegated construction duty to him. Aside from the headaches, he didn't mind too much because he liked talking to the workers and he respected Arthur too much to ask for any sort of promotion. The Clarkston police department was more a part of the community than it was a reactionary force to punish miscreants. Bailey was a favorite among the kids whenever it was "Career Day" at the elementary schools. At twenty-five, he was tall, well built, and in his opinion, not bad-looking. Unlike the older officers, he didn't seem to take himself too seriously and always had a store of jokes for the kids. Even when he was out of uniform and running errands around town, kids never failed to recognize him, and would eagerly run to him, demanding high fives.

Bailey chuckled at the thought of being a favorite and muttered under his breath, "You should see me now big bro."

His big brother Ben, who was seven years older than him, was the indisputable favorite in his household. They grew up in a housing project in Maben with their mother, who worked two part-time jobs—cashiering at Dunkin' Donuts and waitressing at the Ninety-Nine—to support her sons. Their home was brick building with gaps in the walls

from bricks having fallen out in some places, taped up broken glass on some of the lower floors, and yellowed walls with handprints on them. After walking home from school, they'd climb four flights of stairs, panting by the time they reached their apartment because the elevator had been broken for a long time. Ben was one of the brightest students, being exceptionally good at math and physics. While other kids struggled with derivatives, he studied quantum theory on his own for fun. He didn't have many close friends, which meant that when he wasn't studying, he was cooking for Bailey and tutoring him. Unlike Ben, Bailey spent much of his free time reading comics and drawing superheroes.

However, Ben knew that the only way to get through to Bailey was through his stomach and art. One night at exactly six o'clock, Bailey came out of his room to see Ben setting two steaming bowls of mac drizzled with ketchup and hot sauce on the table. The geometry textbook, which was usually on the table as well so Ben could tutor Bailey after dinner, was nowhere in sight.

“Hey Bailey, wanna grab your comic books, bud?”

Despite his initial confusion, Bailey soon realized that Ben wanted to show him that geometry was an inherent part of comic books. Soon, they were finding the angles created by intersecting lines and the circumferences of circles. Bailey soon became immersed in the worlds of his comics in a way that he had never been before. From then on, Ben designated every Wednesday night to be “geometry and mac and cheese” night.

Thinking about Ben reopened a poorly healed wound in Bailey's mind. Bailey was nine when the cops barged through his door in the middle of night in January. Their mother had gone to stay with her sister in the next town over. Ben had told him to stay

put in his bedroom, holding his fingers to his lips before closing Bailey's door, but Bailey remembered cracking open the door and seeing flakes of snow peppering the cops' jackets and boots. When Ben refused to let them in without a proper search warrant, they shoved around him and began ransacking the apartment. Bailey heard the creaking of the couch as the cops lifted the cushions and the opening of drawers and clanking of silverware. He heard the sound of his comics spilling out of the crate he stored in the living room. Apparently, an informant had told the cops that someone had a massive supply of heroin in their apartment. Falling objects sounded like gunfire as the officers rummaged through the living room and kitchen. Amidst the scuffling, Bailey heard Ben's protests, which were duly ignored.

A dark shadow swept towards Bailey's direction, and he shrank back into the bedroom.

"Hey! Don't go in there!" shouted Ben. His footsteps pounded as he ran towards Bailey's room. Bailey heard the bangs of two gunshots piercing through the air, followed by a loud thump. Bailey, holding his knees and shivering in the corner of his room, felt as if his heart were trying to crawl out of his throat. He heard muttering and a gruff voice say, "The ambulance is coming. It's gonna be all right. We just have to say it was self-defense. Jesus, what a stupid kid. What are you guys doing standing around for? Hitch, don't just stand there like a dumbass. Finish the fucking sweep!"

Through the gap between the door and the floor, Bailey watched two feet approach his room. The bedroom door groaned open and Bailey met the gaze of his brother's murderer—Hitch. He was about twenty-five years old, freshly shaven with smooth pale skin, a new cop who was attempting to hide the fear that was making his

body quake. He saw Bailey and bent down, offering him his hand to help him stand, but Bailey coiled his arms tightly around his legs.

“I’m sorry about him. Was he your brother?”

Bailey noticed Hitch’s crooked smile, the calluses on his hands, and his dark messy hair; Bailey wanted to trust him but all he could do was stare back at the officer, refusing to touch him. Hitch sighed and reached for a blanket on the bed, wrapping it around Bailey. As the soft fabric touched Bailey, he flinched as if it were burning him. Hitch placed a finger to his lips.

“Just stay here and be quiet. I won’t let them touch you, OK?”

Bailey sat there, staring at the slopes of snow gathered in the corner of his window, stupefied by the way the white crystals glistened underneath the moonlight. He wanted tears to come out, wanted to curl into a ball on the floor and scream, but he was frozen. He knew that the officer’s wet footprints would eventually dry, and his presence would be erased from the room. After Ben’s death, their mother bought an area rug for the hallway to cover his bloodstain on the wood floor. A few days later, Bailey learned that the informant had given the cops a false tip: the drugs were stored in an apartment on the floor above them and the residents had cleared the room a week ago.

Bailey should have been afraid of the police after that night, but he grew curious about how fear could produce such a visceral reaction in someone who appeared to be so kind. At nineteen, he went to police academy in 2012, a year fraught with instances of brutality. March 2012—After a 911 caller falsely reported that two black men had robbed him at gunpoint, policemen chased Kendrec McDade, a nineteen-year-old in Pasadena, and shot him seven times. Ervin Jefferson, shot to death by security guards. Nehemiah

Dillard, died from cardiac arrest after being tasered. The academy switched over from “military policing” and began championing “community policing.” Officers were encouraged to think before reacting, to place their focus on trust and partnership with the community. But now it was 2018 and the instances of police violence only seemed to have spiraled out of control.

Bailey looked down at his watch, feeling a swell of joy because it was finally 1:00. He waved to the workers and strode to his patrol car, but when he opened his car door, a voice crackled through the radio: “Gunfire at Clarkston High.”

“Copy.”

Bailey arrived at the school around the same time as all the other officers. Arthur hurriedly shouted at his men to follow him towards the main doors. Near the front of the swarm, Bailey gripped his pistol as they scurried through the hallways. Posters announcing the auditions for *Macbeth*, the new eco-pledge made by the student government, and the football game next weekend fluttered on the bulletin boards as the cops marched past towards the gunfire, which resonated from a classroom in the north end of the school. Bailey’s eyes darted from classroom to classroom as the officers rushed down the hallway, but all the doors were locked and their shades were pulled down. He half expected to see blood seeping out from underneath the doors.

When the officers had located the classroom, Arthur led his men charging through the door with their guns pointed, immediately meeting a barricade of bodies; students who had attempted to escape lay lifeless with their arms stretched towards the open door. The smell of blood made Bailey’s entire body ache. He threw up slightly in his mouth because he hadn’t seen a dead body up close since he watched paramedics take Ben out

of their apartment. Bodies leaking blood lay across the floor; some were slumped over chairs and desks. Others sat quivering underneath their desks, cowering in fear of the young black boy sitting on a desk in the middle of the room with a nine mm pistol clutched in his hand.

Arthur bellowed, “PUT YOUR GUN DOWN NOW!”

Blood was smeared on the boy’s gray hoodie and splattered across his cheek. The boy turned around, his eyes empty, and he slowly trudged like a prisoner on death row towards the cops. Bailey felt the moisture from his palms on his gun, and he thought he saw the kid staring at him with dark, unreadable eyes

Arthur thundered again, “STAY WHERE YOU ARE!”

The boy paused. Bailey’s mind raced as he watched the kid bending forwards, setting the gun down or getting ready to lunge at the cops. He didn’t want to find out until it was too late.

A bullet pierced the boy in the chest, and he fell backward. Arthur looked to his left in bewilderment when he realized that Bailey had fired the shot. Bailey still gripped the gun so tightly that his knuckles were white, but his eyes were fixed on a pool of blood leaking from a girl’s stomach in front of him.

## Elaine

Harry Webster was the boy who killed and was killed. He was one of the only kids Elaine Shen liked in Mrs. Long's junior English class. He could sculpt poetry in a way that made his thoughts seem vibrant and alive, and though he was a quiet student, he would deliver his poetry in front of a class with an unwavering, booming voice. Being in front of the class, poem in hand, was the only place where Harry seemed like himself, the only time he spoke in front of others without stuttering as he looked down at his feet. Once, when he accidentally left his red spiral notebook in Mrs. Long's classroom, Elaine grabbed it, intending to return it, but she could not help peeking at its pages. Along with the poems that he shared with the class, there were also darker poems about self-harm and death scratched like curses and hexes in the margins. Aside from Elaine, most people did not know that Harry was severely depressed, except for Mrs. Long who probably knew the greatest extent of Harry's troubles. Elaine had often seen him slouching out of Mrs. Long's office looking like he couldn't decide whether to put his fist through the wall or curl up on the floor and cry.

Reading Harry's poems allowed Elaine to see how drastically different life was outside of Clarkston. He was from a town called Maben, only thirty-five minutes from Clarkston. After reading Harry's poems, she truly understood that she didn't know what it was like to try to fall asleep to the sound of gunfire. She didn't know what it was like to learn that a friend had been stabbed in some alleyway because he had missed the earlier bus to go home.

For a year and a half, the Clarkston Public School Board had focused its energy on diversifying its schools. The board had expanded some of schools, hired and trained

new staff, and implemented new technologies, and with the new infrastructure in place, it decided to participate in the METCO Program, which allowed students from certain districts, usually poor and more diverse, to attend schools in more affluent communities. The Clarkston Public School Board wanted to diversify the student body; each grade in the high school accepted about twenty-one students from various neighborhoods in Boston.

The majority of students in METCO were black and Latino, and generally kept to themselves at school. They claimed a long table in the corner of the cafeteria, and the white students who lived in Clarkston were happy to steer clear of it. Many of the METCO kids came from troubled backgrounds, and were bruised in one way or another by negligent parents, financial struggles, and abuse. The white students at Clarkston could not even begin to comprehend their experiences, so avoiding them was easier than attempting to understand them. Harry rejected both groups by spending much of his time alone writing poetry in the library. From what Elaine could gather from his poems, Harry's family life was turbulent; as the only child of two alcoholics, he could only find comfort in his writing but even then, he was still lonely. Afraid of being accused of reading his work, Elaine arrived early in class the next day to surreptitiously slip the notebook back on his desk. From then on, whenever Harry delivered his work in front of the class, Elaine could not help but see the palpable pain behind his eyes that no one else seemed to notice.

She should have reached out to him the moment she realized how depressed he was. She really should have.

On Friday, she saw that the seat two rows in front of her, which was where Harry usually sat, was empty, but no one else seemed to care or notice. Jack Peters, the quarterback, and his cronies plotted their cheerleader conquests for the party on Saturday. The theater kids mumbled under their breaths, chanting their lines for *Macbeth* like prayers. Without Harry, there were only three students of color in a classroom of twenty-four: Joy Lopez and Jasmin Mendez, Latina students from the METCO program, and Elaine Shen, one of the few Asian kids in the school. Joy and Jasmin, joined at the hip, chattered away in Spanish, making sure to reapply their lip-gloss every ten minutes. Elaine drummed her fingers on her desk, willing for class to begin because she actually really enjoyed the creative writing for the class. She liked writing fiction more than she did poetry because she never felt that the bulk of her thoughts could be properly expressed when restrained by meter and rhyme, a problem that Harry never seemed to have.

The door groaned slowly open. Harry walked in with his mouth twisted in a deep grimace and his eyes looking empty, but Elaine was the only one who even noticed him. He wore an oversized gray hoodie and clutched a bulky object in his right pocket, and slowly approached Jack Peters' desk. Harry's shadow loomed over Jack, whose voice trailed away when he noticed Harry staring intently at him.

"Can I help you with something?" Jack asked, his voice laced with annoyance. He rose when Harry continued staring at him.

"What the fuck is wrong with you? You wanna serenade me or something with your poetry?" Jack raised his arms, preparing to give Harry a violent shove, but Harry quickly whipped out a gun in his right hand and shot Jack in the forehead. He fell back

into his chair, and blood spattered onto the desks behind him. The other jocks stared at the abysmal hole in Jack's head and his lifeless eyes, and began backing away from Harry with their arms raised.

"Please, don't," whimpered David Penn as tears dripped from his eyes. Harry stared at the cowering white kid who used to initiate freshmen on the football team by making them chug gallons of Gatorade and run naked in the fields behind the school, but Harry was not open for negotiation. The bullet torpedoed through David's head, and his body crumpled. The force of the explosion rattled the entire class, prompting everyone to either scramble towards the door or hide under their desks.

Harry shot everyone who tried to escape, his bullets penetrating their bodies and ricocheting in the hallway as they exited flesh. Elaine cowered under her desk because she was sitting too far back in the classroom to make any escape possible. She tried to calm her panting, and gripped onto the metal legs of the desk with her sweaty palms. In her panic, she could make out Joy and Jasmin sitting under their desks and gripping onto each other to her right. Some of the kids had smeared blood on themselves, attempting to play dead. Suddenly, there was silence, for Harry had finished shooting the escapers, and he turned his attention to rest of the classroom. The gun clicked as Harry reloaded his weapon, and he waded through bodies and puddles of blood, pressing toward the back of the classroom. Every few steps, he would stop and shoot at someone's head, making sure that he or she was actually dead.

Pressing her chin to her knees, Elaine tried desperately to keep her breathing shallow and muffle the deafening thumping of her heart. Suddenly, she realized that

Harry was staring straight at her. The gun was at his side now, but she saw his arm tensing as if he were deciding whether to shoot or not.

Though her throat was dry, Elaine mouthed, "I'm sorry." His arm stopped quivering. "I'm so sorry about everything. Please, Harry, please." She tasted the salt from the tears that had run into her mouth. His expression softened into that look of thoughtfulness that he had whenever she saw him in the library writing poetry. His arm hung limply by his sides.

"I saw you that day," he said, kneeling down to meet Elaine's gaze under the desk. "That day you put my notebook back on my desk." She could see the sweat glistening on his forehead, the spatters of blood on his gray hoodie. Eyeing the gun in his pocket, she prayed that she wouldn't make any sudden movements. She gulped, thinking that he was going to put a bullet in her head for snooping in his notebook.

"So you know," he said drily, looking at the ground, at the blood pooled around his beat up black sneakers.

"So you knew this whole time?" Elaine flinched as his voice rose. She tried to keep her eyes on him instead of the gun.

"Yes, yes, I'm sorry, Harry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry about everything you go through. I'm sorry I was too much of a coward to say anything, to be your friend. Please, Harry. Don't do this, please." Her voice shook and she tried not to whimper. "Harry, just look around you."

He stood up, squishing blood under his feet as he moved, surveying the room. She watched his thumb rub the grip and his jaw clench every time his eyes met one of the bodies sprawled on the ground. Then, he leaned against one of the desks, huffing as he

sat on top of it, his legs dangling. With his gun still in his hand, he pressed his face into his palms and sobbed. Elaine saw red on the rubber bottoms of his shoes. He heaved silent sobs for at least five minutes, and Elaine would've gotten out from under the desk to comfort him if it weren't for the gun in his hand.

“PUT YOUR GUN DOWN NOW,” bellowed a voice from the front of the classroom. She saw Chief Long, his brows furrowed and sweat dripping down his temples. Her father, Lance Shen, stood on Arthur's left with his gun pointed at Harry, but his eyes scanned the room wildly, hoping to catch sight of Elaine.

Harry slid off the desk, wiping the tears on his face. His arm was down with his gun pointed at the ground, and he walked towards the dozen cops in a daze. His shoulders were slumped in his usual posture of defeat and submission, a look that Elaine was accustomed to seeing whenever she saw him walking in the hallways.

“STAY WHERE YOU ARE!” Harry knelt down, putting down his gun on the floor. BANG. His body jerked, and a splotch of red blossomed on the upper back of his hoodie. He wavered for a moment before falling backward, crashing to the ground with a definitive thump.

“Shit, Bailey,” muttered Chief Long.

“Chief, he was coming at us. I had to stop him.”

“We'll figure that out later.” Chief Long turned his attention to the students. “You can all come out now. It's clear.”

Elaine emerged cautiously from under the table, and saw Joy and Jasmin shaking and holding onto one another, gaping at the sight of their murdered classmates. Amanda, the costume designer for the theater department, appeared from under her desk heaving

with sobs. Greg, Matthew, and Dean, the robotics kids fell out from their hiding place in the closet. Elaine felt muscled arms wrapping around her and breathed in the scent of her father's aftershave. His body vibrated with his sobbing, and he ran his fingers through her hair, smoothing every stray strand into its proper place. She shifted her weight, feeling the squish of blood underneath her sneaker. She closed her eyes, but could not stop seeing the red blossoming across Harry's back.

## Guinevere

Kevin Laghari, the AP chemistry teacher, sweated too much whenever he was trying to hide the fact that he was flirting with her. He leaned with his left elbow against the fridge, revealing a sizeable stain on his light blue button-down shirt. She tried to keep her nose from wrinkling whenever he breathed in her direction. Gwen Long smiled politely as he rattled on about his plans to go rock climbing during the weekend; she hoped that her coffee would cool down faster, so she could finish it and return to teaching her English class, which she was fifteen minutes late for.

“So, Gwen? You up for some climbing?”

She had to hide a wince because she knew the question was coming, perfectly timed on each Friday afternoon. Before she even registered that she was speaking, she told him that she and Arthur were going to visit her parents over the weekend, her automated excuse.

“Ya sure? It’s gonna be a lot of fun.”

“Yeah, you know me. Family first.”

“It’s fine, you know my offer always stands.” Kevin, with his shoulders slightly slumped, walked towards Todd Shepherd, the American history teacher, to talk about sports. Relieved to finally be able to drink her coffee in peace, Gwen leaned against the island across from the refrigerator, and reveled in her first moment of quiet since she entered the break room.

Gwen knew that she was beautiful; it was a natural, effortless beauty that had attracted men since she was a teenager. She had dark brown hair that was almost black; pale, blemish-free skin; and blue eyes, cool and still like frozen lakes. Friends in college

had often told her that if she wanted to drop out of school and pursue modeling or acting, she'd definitely make it. In college, she spent more time rejecting guys at bars or clubs than going home with them. Gwen thought she had mastered the art of rejection and making excuses to thwart unwanted male attention, yet Kevin never seemed to take a hint.

It had been a year since Arthur had gone with her to visit her parents. That dinner turned into her father taking his plate with him to the living room so that he wouldn't have to look at Arthur for the rest of the night. Her parents had disapproved of him since the beginning of their relationship. They said things like, twenty-three was too young to get married anyway. She barely even knew him. He's too busy working to invest time in a relationship. Nonetheless, Art never tried hard to win their approval. He rarely offered to wash the dishes after dinner. He'd always drink too much wine at dinner and make underhanded comments to her dad about his beloved oil paintings and how they looked like "one of those Jackson Pollock ones." Gwen knew that he couldn't stand being in the same room as her parents for even a couple of hours. However, her parents were right about some things. Though she could usually count on Arthur on being home for dinner, Arthur was often gone early in the morning and sometimes returned late at night, after she had already gone to bed.

She chuckled sadly, Kevin Laghari, the mailman, the sixteen-year-old barista at Starbucks, and her ex in college who still messaged her sometimes asking to "catch up" were among the many guys who vied for her attention, but all she wanted was Arthur, for him to look at her the way he did when he first approached her at a bar, the way he made her believe that being with him meant certainty, stability.

She downed the rest of her coffee, which was still hot enough to sear her taste buds, but as she began to walk out of the break room, something that sounded like firecrackers reverberated through the hallways. The five other teachers in the room broke away from their conversations, frantically looking at one another, waiting for someone to make a move, and no one daring to say the word gunfire.

“Fuck, is this seriously happening right now? OK-uh-uh-what do we do? What do we do?” Kevin whispered loudly, the sweat now visible on his forehead. “We’re supposed to be with the kids. I swear to fucking god if I get shot while going back to the classroom I will fucking murder someone.”

“Shut up. Close the door. None of us are going anywhere. Those kids are old enough to know how a lockdown works. We’re not doing them any favors if we’re dead anyways,” said Todd.

“Are you crazy? I’m going back to my students. The gunshots sounded like they were coming from the opposite end of the hall. I can totally make it back to my class,” responded Amy Levitt, the band director. As she snuck out of the door, two other teachers scurried after her, praying that they would survive the trip back to their classrooms. Gwen remained by the door, weighing her options. Either she returned to her class, which seemed to be toward the direction of the gunfire, and risk being shot, or she stayed in the room with Kevin and Todd to save her ass but let her students get hurt.

“So what’s it gonna be Gwen? You with us or you gonna risk it?” Todd asked.

For a minute she deliberated, but then she pushed the door shut, hearing the click of the lock echo through her entire body as it were hollow.

“That’s a girl,” said Todd, pushing past her to jam a metal chair under the doorknob, and joined Kevin who was huddling on the far end of the room. They sat against the wall facing the back of one of the couches. The room looked like it was shrinking, and Gwen was tempted to put her feet against the couch and push against it.

“Clarkston High is under lockdown. Lock your doors. Do not come out,” said a quivering voice over the intercom.

“No shit,” said Todd.

For about fifteen minutes, they sat in silence, hearing nothing but their thumping heartbeats, pulsing against the sporadic sounds of gunfire. Todd checked his watch every thirty seconds, wincing every time he heard a gunshot. Kevin’s shirt was now a darker shade of blue, and his face was glistening with perspiration. Whether it was the result of her guilt or fear, Gwen kept rubbing her arms, attempting to smooth the stubborn, erect hairs. She thought about her students, hoping that they had enough sense to lock the doors, turn off the lights, and hide in the back of the classroom.

“Oh god, oh god, oh god. What if those are my students? Fuck, I should be with them. What kind of teacher am I?” Kevin, who was on the verge of a panic attack, started walking towards the door.

“Sit your ass down, Kev. You made your decision and I’m not gonna let your stupidity get me and Gwen killed. The cops are gonna be here soon, so be an adult and sit down before I knock you out.” The fury of Todd’s words shattered Kevin’s sudden resolve to protect his students, and he resumed sitting in fetal position between Todd and Gwen. Reading about school shootings in newspapers had never given the teachers the visceral horror that they were feeling now. Violence was much easier to swallow when it

was in the form of words or pixels on a screen. Though the teachers and students had to go through the lockdown procedures every year, Gwen dreaded herding all of her students into the corner of the room, only to hear them berating her for the ridiculousness of the lockdown under their breaths, as if she were the one who came up with the protocol.

Dozens of boots stamped past the break room, thundering on the tile floor. Knowing that Arthur was leading the charge made relief flush some of the adrenaline out of Gwen's system. Soon after officers passed the room, the hailstorm of bullets stopped, and it became silent for about five minutes.

"Do you guys hear that?" Todd asked.

"What?" Replied Kevin, quivering.

"It's quiet. You guys think it's clear?"

BANG. One last shot sounded followed by a hollow silence.

"What the hell was that?" Asked Todd.

"Please let this whole thing be over now," whimpered Kevin.

"I think we should wait until the police tell us it's clear," offered Gwen quietly, hoping that Arthur would emerge from this unscathed. Todd shrank back into the darkness, knowing they should not be taking unnecessary risks.

After another painfully long fifteen minutes, there was a resolute knock at the door, jolting the teachers from their horrified trance.

"It's clear. You can come out now." Gwen sighed with relief, feeling the tension melt from her shoulders, when she recognized Arthur's voice. Tripping over her own feet, she ran to open the door. Arthur's expression turned from gravity to shock, and then

to relief, and he stepped forward to embrace her, gripping her in almost the same way he used to when they first started dating, only with much more desperation. She burrowed her head in his chest, breathing in the smell of his sweat and cologne, and began to cry uncontrollably. He kissed her scalp as she sobbed; she couldn't tell if she was crying with relief at the fact that they were alive or with sadness because it was the first time that they had hugged like this in a long time.

“Gwen, it was your classroom. One of your kids was the shooter.”

“What? That can't be. They're all good kids.”

“His name was Harry Webster and he's dead now. Bailey shot him.”

Gwen felt as if her blood had seized up. After all the times that Harry came into her office, his jaw clenched and his eyes bloodshot, how could she not have to done more to help him? She thought that he was going through a phase but no—he was like crumpled paper, scrunched up so tightly that he felt as if he wouldn't ever be restored to a pristine form. She was capable of sympathy, but Harry needed was understanding that she was never fit provide him with, even though she was the only one he trusted enough to talk to.

“How many are dead?”

“Seventeen. We got there before he could move onto other classrooms. But it seemed like he was just targeting his classmates.”

“Oh god,” whispered Gwen, running her hand through her hair, “This is my fault. I should've been there. How could I have been so selfish?”

“You couldn't have known and couldn't have done anything anyways. I'm just glad you're OK,” said Arthur, cradling his wife the way he used to. Just as she was

getting accustomed to the feeling of his arms around her, he broke away. Pointing to the left and right, he divided his men, but before joining one of the groups he turned to Gwen and said, "I'll see you soon."

She nodded and watched the men march down the hallways, their boots thundering on the tile floor. As Gwen numbly trudged out of the building, her body propelled forward by the weight of frantic bodies behind her, she reached the lawn and watched impassively as more and more students and teachers emerged from the school. Some of them shook as they cried and hugged, some had blank expressions, some called their loved ones, and some who had been injured in the stampede out of the building needed help with standing. Gwen scanned the crowd for her surviving students.

She spotted Elaine Shen sitting and picking at the grass near the parking lot, and waded through the crowd to sit with her.

"Are you OK?"

"No."

"I'm sorry," said Gwen, searching for Elaine's eyes, but they remained fixed on the grass.

"Where were you?"

"I don't know. I was away. I'm sorry." Elaine remained silent, uprooting grass around her black Converse, which had blood spattered the white sides. Gwen thought that if Kevin hadn't been flirting with her, she would have been with the students. She might have been able to talk some sense into Harry. But then again, she might have been killed.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Gwen probed gently.

“Harry just came in and started shooting at people.” Her voice quivered, wavelenghts of emotion. “He looked right at me, and I thought I was going to die.” She looked up at Gwen, “Harry’s not a bad kid. He was just so depressed, so lost.”

“I know. I could see that every time he spoke in front of the class,” said Gwen, not wanting to admit that she had been his only confidant.

“No. But you actually knew,” said Elaine with her voice shaking. “You knew more about him than the rest of us did. I’ve seen him coming out of your office before. Many times actually.”

Gwen couldn’t look at Elaine anymore and fixed her gaze on a patch of dirt on the lawn. “I just didn’t know how to help.”

## Merlin

Melvin twisted in his bed, stretching his arms above his head, and releasing a whale-like yawn. Though the sunlight streamed through his blinds, Melvin had slept until 11:00 in the morning and woke up to a gnawing hunger in his stomach. He looked at his stomach, hoping that he would finally be able to see the tops of his toes but when he couldn't, Melvin debated if he should even continue his workout regimen, which had lasted for about a week.

After the shooting, he cancelled all of his tutoring sessions for the week; there was no way he could return to preparing high school students for the SAT after the massacre. Instead, he spent the week prowling the streets at night to replace his midnight trek to the refrigerator for leftover mac and cheese. The streets of Clarkston were devoid of life at 11:00 at night, just enormous colonials with dark windows and dead leaves across lawns and sidewalks that made sounds like crunching animal bones whenever he stepped on them. On the day of the shooting, he waited in Art's car, glad that he never became a cop. Because Art had driven him, he had to wait until the school was secured, the survivors evacuated, and the paramedics cleared the bodies. No matter how far he walked at night, he could not escape the memory of body bags wheeled and piled into the ambulances.

After wiping the sleep from his eyes, Melvin reached for his phone and saw the reminder, "Circuit Diner with Art at 12," light up on the lock screen. Breathing a deep sigh, he heaved his legs over the edge of his bed and stood up to get dressed.

Melvin parked his car, checked his watch—12:30—cursed, and rushed into the building, hoping that Arthur had already ordered his usual for him. Arthur sat at their

booth with his fingers intertwined, brooding over an empty table. He had dark craters underneath his eyes and his skin was pale with a grayish tint. Yet, he still managed to shave so that he could appear as if he were truly holding it together. Melvin slid into the booth, his presence jolting Arthur from his trance, and he flashed his friend a sympathetic smile.

“Hey Art, how you holdin’ up? Haven’t seen or talked to you in a while. You haven’t forgotten me right?” The corner of Arthur’s mouth rose slightly in amusement, but faded as quickly as it had appeared. Refusing to give up on his friend, Melvin knew the best way to get him to talk was through his stomach, so before Arthur could protest, Melvin had walked to the counter and ordered a burger for Arthur and for himself, well, he decided that he could indulge in a stack of chocolate chip pancakes.

In the thirty minutes after their food arrived, Arthur had nibbled a couple of the fries on his plate while Melvin had devoured three-quarters of his pancake stack. His mouth was now covered in a syrup gloss.

“Hey, bud. C’mon, the food’s gonna get cold.” Melvin nudged Arthur’s plate closer to him.

“I’m not hungry.”

Melvin slammed his fist on the table, clattering the silverware and causing some of the other customers to swivel around in their seats.

“Damn it Art! Why’d you call me here, if you’re just gonna stare at the table?” Arthur reached for a fry and poked it into the dollop of ketchup on the edge of his plate and his once grave expression softened to a cloudy and conflicted one.

“I’ve just been thinking for the past week about whether I made the right choice.”

“Whaddya mean by ‘right choice’?”

“Well, Bailey Watt shot that kid, Harry. God, Bailey. I have no idea what possessed him to pull the trigger. I wrote in the report that he did it out of self-defense. He said the kid was coming towards us but I don’t know—I’m not so sure what I saw anymore. The press has been going crazy and I’ve just been feeding them Bailey’s words. Clarkston can’t be on a front-page scandal story, Wiz. It can’t.”

Melvin sucked in a long breath, “Art, this is crazy deep shit. A kid got killed by one of your own men. You can’t go making shit up.”

“What happened to the guy who told me that I had to use force if I wanted to be a cop?”

“Fine. But I also said that once you got your badge and are in place of power, then you have the power to decide what policing looks like in this country. Isn’t that what you wanted all along, to do away with brutal policing?”

“I got my men and a town to think about.”

Melvin couldn’t even recognize Arthur anymore as he watched his friend’s expression, calculating and cold, and felt sharp regret—he had no idea that Arthur would misunderstand him so badly.

“It’s 2018 and you can’t go around shooting black kids and expect no consequences. Art, look at yourself, you’re even more of a sell-out than you were when you first settled down in Clarkston. I don’t even know who you are anymore. You’ve got power and you’ve been sitting on it for over twenty years since you became chief. Please don’t abuse it.”

“Do you want to know who I am? I’m the chief of police, and it’s about time I remembered that,” Arthur paused and lowered his voice, “there are about to be some major changes in the police department and this town.”

“What sort of changes?”

“Can’t say yet. I haven’t told my men yet. Plus, this is my crusade, and you don’t seem like you’re gonna be supportive of it.”

“I’m not gonna support you doing the wrong thing. C’mon, this isn’t you! I can help you, if you just tell me.”

“Some things got to stay within the department,” Arthur said coldly, “Look, it’s been great meeting up with you, and I don’t care if you don’t want to support me. I’ve made up my mind.”

Arthur stood up and threw a couple of bills on the table as he left the diner—his burger remained mostly untouched. Melvin heaved a sad sigh, realizing that whatever shit Arthur planned to bring to Clarkston would be his own fault.

## The Round Table

For as long as he had been a cop, Bailey had never been out of his uniform for this long. After the shooting, Arthur made him take two weeks off, and today was the first time he wore something other than his pajamas in a long time. He couldn't bear putting on his uniform, which would only trigger memories of shooting the kid. While off duty, Bailey lived on pizza delivery. Aside from his daily interaction with the pizza guy, he refused to talk to anyone on the force. He didn't answer any of Arthur's concerned voicemails or Gavin's invitations to the Salty Heron, a local pub. If Ben could see him now, he would definitely be disappointed—his little brother had become like his murderer. Only, Bailey had killed a black kid, and if the truth ever came out, well, then Bailey didn't want to think about that. What was the truth? Was Webster trying to surrender? Bailey couldn't fully remember the details, only the fear of attack.

Wearing a blue knit sweater and jeans, Bailey walked up to Arthur's front door, noting the squat stone wall surrounding his lawn. Arthur's house, though small, had the details of a typical Victorian—sturdy brown gables, bay windows, and one hexagonal tower—but aside from that, its only unusual detail was a strip of stone mosaic siding framing the front door. Though Arthur liked all of his officers, he had never invited them to his house, so Arthur's invitation had surprised Bailey. But he knew that Arthur must have had something important to share to make him invite all of his full-time employees over to his house.

He rang the doorbell and a woman wearing a purple sweater dress opened the door with a warm smile on her face. His breath caught in his throat for a second. Even though she was forty, from what he'd heard, she looked ten years younger. She had no

makeup on her face, which made her freckles stand out against her smooth pale skin like cookie crumbs. Her eyes were an icy blue like a midwinter sky.

“Hi, I’m Gwen. Come on in. The food’s almost ready!” He jolted at the sound of her voice, annoyed at himself for staring too long.

“Hi Gwen, I’m Bailey. I’ve heard so much about you from Arthur. Nice to finally meet you.”

They were speaking as if he hadn’t shot a kid in the chest. On the day of the shooting, after everyone evacuated, Arthur put in Bailey in charge of overseeing the students and teachers because he didn’t think Bailey could escort the paramedics to get the injured and dead. As he scanned the crowd, he saw Gwen, whom he had seen Arthur hugging in the teacher’s lounge, sitting with a girl by the parking lot. He felt guilt bubbling up his throat like bile as he processed what he had done to make a woman and a young girl look so immersed in their grief. In all his years of being a Clarkston police officer, he had enjoyed the relative languidness of construction duty and the occasional thrill of busting shoplifters, but he had never killed. Up until now, Bailey was sure that he could never kill.

Bailey walked through the main hallway, noting the blue and white Chinese porcelain vases displayed in the alcoves, and wondered where Arthur or Gwen’s taste came from. He smelled the butter and garlic from the roast chicken the minute he walked into the dining room. Most of the officers, who were used to only interacting with each other while on duty, didn’t seem to know how behave themselves, especially around their chief and at his house. Almost of all of the full-time employees stood stiffly around the food on the massive round table, attempting to make conversation with each other. Kyle

Garcia, whom everyone could always count on for bad jokes and long-winded stories, was unusually quiet, standing alone and staring at his phone. Bailey found it strange to see his coworkers out of uniform, especially Arthur, who now approached him while holding a massive bowl of Greek salad in his hands.

“Hey, Bailey. Welcome! How are you holdin’ up?” asked Arthur with worry crumpling his forehead.

“I’m doing all right, Chief. Thanks for having us over.”

“Hey, we’re off duty right now. Call me Art, OK?”

Bailey nodded, but Art had already left to set down the salad and returned to the kitchen to retrieve yet another dish to fit onto the table.

Out of nowhere two massive hands gripped his shoulders, causing Bailey to jump. He turned around to see a muscular blonde man who lived off of protein powder and pomade.

“Easy there, Bailey. It’s just me, Gav.”

Gavin Fowell was easily everyone’s least favorite member of the force. At forty years old, he was perpetually waiting for a promotion that would never come. He and Lance had both been working to be Arthur’s lieutenant, but now that Lance filled that position, Gavin had to find other ways to compensate for his professional failings. When he wasn’t on duty, he was either at the bars or in bed with his conquest of the week. For some reason, maybe because he believed Bailey was young and impressionable, Gavin ceaselessly tried mentoring him in the ways of women, giving him raunchy, unsolicited advice. Bailey disliked his attempt at playing the role of an older brother, which made Bailey dislike him even more.

“Hey Gavin. No need to scare me there,” said Bailey with as much edge in his voice as he could muster.

“Just playin’ around, bud, don’t get your panties in a twist. I was getting worried that you weren’t going to show up. You’ve been ignoring all my calls. C’mon, we gotta go out together one night. You *promised* that I could be your wingman, get you home with a nice girl, right?” said Gavin with a wink.

Jesus, what is with everyone pretending that I didn’t just kill a kid?

“Look, I’m not in the mood to socialize.”

“You’re here now aren’t you? Speaking of which, isn’t it weird that Chief invited us to his house? I mean, I’m not complaining about the free food and all, but yeah this is kinda weird.”

“OK, boys! Looks like everyone’s here, so dig in!” Arthur exclaimed. Bailey breathed a sigh of relief at not having to extend his conversation with Gavin any longer, and strategically sat across from Gavin at the enormous circular table.

On either side of him, Tristan and Kyle worked their way through the roast chicken and margarita flatbread, but Bailey was not in the mood to eat. He stared blankly at his plate, wondering if he was the only one who remembered what had happened two weeks ago. Arthur clinked his wine glass, drawing all ten of his officers’ attention.

The smile faded from Arthur’s expression, replaced with seriousness, almost like the look that he wore after examining the carnage after the shooting.

“Thank you all for coming here tonight. I wanted all of us to come together to process what we should do in the aftermath of this tragedy,” he paused empathically,

watching his officers nod in agreement, “We have to improve the way things run in our department, in our town so that this doesn’t happen again.”

Arthur looked down at the table, scrunching his eyebrows together in disappointment, “I’ve been too complacent for too long, and as chief, I’ve failed in protecting this town. Starting from now, we are going to maximize security at all schools. As officers, we need to be suspicious of everything and everybody. No one enters school grounds until they’re checked for weapons. We will need to tap into the 1033 program and homeland security grants and make sure that we have right equipment for dealing with situations like this.”

“Chief, you’re thinking about searching elementary school students?” Lance asked.

“Lance, we can’t afford to have accidents. Everyone has to be checked,” said Arthur with a hard finality in his voice.

Lance wasn’t done: “1033? We’re talking about militarizing the department? C’mon, Art. What are people gonna say when they see cops walking around with grenade launchers? What are kids gonna think when they see cops patrolling the hallways with rifles in their arms? Chief, my daughter goes to Clarkston. What is she gonna think?”

“Are you putting your personal issues above the public’s safety?” Arthur seethed at his lieutenant. “Obviously, we aren’t shooting at the kids. These are preventative measures.” Lance shrank back into his chair and stared down at his plate.

Arthur looked fiercely at all of his officers, “I’m not asking for you guys to agree with me. In fact, I don’t care if you agree with me or not. If you want to keep your jobs, I suggest you do what I ask.”

Eyes zigzagged around the table, wondering if anyone would dare to defy Arthur, but no one spoke.

“Chief, what about Webster?” Bailey asked, finally finding his voice.

“What about him?”

“Well, the town is still recovering from its losses, but with the media and Black Lives Matter stuff, a cop killing a black kid is going to be a headliner.”

“You said it was self-defense.”

“Well, I don’t know. You’re the chief. You should be the one calling the shots, not me.”

“The official police report says it was self-defense, and we’re keeping it that way. From now on, no one talks to the press. They’ll blow it all out of proportion. We have to control the truth, what we believe the truth to be. We can’t have an attack on our credibility. It’s my job to protect my boys, and the best way to do that is to get our story straight. Webster approached us after we told him to stop. Bailey shot him in self-defense. End of story.”

Had it really been self-defense? Was Webster hunching over, preparing to pull a fast one on the cops? Or, was he really kneeling down to put down his weapon? Bailey alternated between the two realities in his head, trying to figure out which one fit most seamlessly into his memory, but they only just muddled together like paint.

What sort of violent power did a sixteen-year-old have to drive him to murder? The kid had a gun. But then again, so did Bailey. Would he have done the same if it had been a white kid? He didn’t have the answers to these questions. In the moment, killing felt instinctual and for the first time, Bailey understood that cop who killed his brother,

the fear he must have felt when he saw Ben charging at him. It didn't justify Ben's death, but Bailey understood now.

Seeing that there weren't any more questions from his officers, Arthur's expression softened and he gestured towards the food, inviting everyone to proceed normally. All of the officers looked at each other with hesitation at first, except for Gavin, who eagerly reached for another chicken wing. Bailey tried his best to chew his food, but the chicken felt too rubbery in his mouth and the flatbread felt like sandpaper on his tongue.

When most of the dishes were cleared and the men were chatting, Arthur stood up from his chair, "Hey, you boys wanna get some beers out back?"

Gavin rose, "Don't have to ask me twice."

Leaving all their plates behind, the men filed after Arthur onto his back porch. Bailey stayed behind, watching Lance and Gavin hand out bottles from the cooler, and hearing the cacophony of popping caps. He couldn't stand the suffocating feeling of normalcy, so he left the table and headed for the front door.

"Leaving so soon?" Gwen asked from the top of the staircase in front of the door.

"Yeah, I'm tired. Thanks for the meal, though. It was great." Gwen smiled gently and walked down the steps so that she was level with Bailey. He could count the freckles on her face.

She stared at him sincerely, "I'm sorry about what happened with you and Harry that day. He was a good kid, an amazing writer, but was incredibly depressed. I just wanted you to know that."

Bailey stared at his sneakers, not knowing how to respond other than to apologize to Gwen. She nodded in understanding, not forgiveness, and opened the door to let him out. When he stepped into the cool fall air, tears trickled down his cheeks, and he sat on the doorstep, cradling his face with his palms.

## Vivien

The smell of rotten eggs consumed the hallway of the Amberwood Motel in Clarkston, making Vivien Hyde scrunch her nose as she searched for her room, number twenty-one. A ceiling light flickered sporadically, giving the empty hallway a haunted feel. Seventeen, nineteen, yes, twenty-one—she slipped the key into the lock, twisting it to the left until she felt a promising click. A flick of the light switch revealed a small room with a rustic appearance not because it was an earthy artistic statement, but because the room was really that old. On the bed was a plain faded brown duvet paired with a single flattened pillow. The oak drawers and bed frame were scarred and slightly dusty. The room smelled of old newspapers. Still, this crappy motel in a wealthy suburb was a step up from the cramped apartment that she shared with her roommate in Boston.

Vivien left her small suitcase next to the drawer and flopped on top of the bed, making the bed springs squeak and causing a small cloud of dust to explode from the duvet. She rubbed her eyes, knowing that she wanted to take a long nap, but she couldn't as long as her dream of becoming a full-time journalist was within reach.

None of her supervisors knew that she had gone rogue. She told Manny, the editor-in-chief at *Emporium Weekly*, that she had a family obligation to attend to for the week but really, she wanted to get the scoop on Clarkston before anyone else could. She was twenty-five years old, had a journalism degree, but nothing to show for it. Before working at *Emporium*, she interviewed for many different companies—online fitness magazines, culture and style magazines, and some small newspapers—while working as a Starbucks barista and paying to stay in an acquaintance's basement. Since graduating, all she ever wanted to do was hard-hitting, investigative journalism, yet even after

working for *Emporium* for a year and a half, she was no closer to a promotion. After *The Boston Globe*, *Emporium* was probably the second biggest newspaper that covered Boston and its surrounding areas; some big shot *New York Times* writers got their starts in *Emporium*. However, Vivien was a fact-checker and, frankly, was too good at it. Despite telling Manny that she wanted to write, he explained that he couldn't afford to lose such an efficient fact-checker by promoting her to reporting. If Manny didn't want her to write, then she would have to take matters into her own hands.

Two weeks ago, after a long day at work, Vivien flopped onto the couch with a bowl of hot Cheetos. All day, the office was abuzz with talk about a shooting at Clarkston, twenty or so kids killed, and some murky rumors about a black kid shooting up his classroom, and now she could finally get some facts from watching the local news. She turned on Fox 25 to see photographs of paramedics pushing stretchers with bloodied students out of the main doors of the school, students crying and hugging one another, and cops with guns guarding the evacuees. Then the image of Harry Webster, the sixteen-year-old shooter, dominated the screen. It was a school picture; he wore a button-down shirt, had a soft smile on his face, and his dark hair freshly cut. A photograph of a cop in his mid-twenties followed Webster's headshot: Bailey Watt, who had apparently killed Webster. He posed in his uniform, his blonde hair neatly combed, and his mouth set in a smile. After the broadcast was over, Vivien learned that seventeen kids were dead, Watt had shot Webster in self-defense, and Arthur Long, Chief of Police, declined to give any more information to the press. The broadcast voiced many more rumors about Webster than facts about the shooting itself. Webster was from Maben and was allegedly involved in or associated with members of a prominent gang in the town. An unnamed source

claimed that he acquired the gun from one of the gang members. Someone else said that he was simply a troubled kid, who picked his dad's safe and stole his gun.

Vivien scoffed at the TV, throwing Cheetos at the screen in frustration: "Of course no one investigates the cop!"

There had been too many instances like this. July 2014—Officer Daniel Pantaleo put Eric Garner in a chokehold and killed him for allegedly selling cigarettes illegally. The Staten Island grand jury declined to indict Pantaleo, who was just demoted to desk duty. August 2014—Officer Darren Wilson, on patrol, spotted Michael Brown and his friend walking on the street at night. After a physical confrontation, Wilson chased Brown down the street until Brown turned around and allegedly charged at him. Wilson shot twelve bullets. Brown was hit at least six times. The St. Louis County grand jury declined to indict Wilson. Now, death had hit home. Vivien knew that she couldn't continue fact-checking stories about up-and-coming entrepreneurs of the Boston area or the building of new apartments in the North End when there were stories like this to be told. If the chief had declined to give a full statement to the media, there had to be more to the story. If Watt hadn't killed Webster in an act of self-defense, Vivien wondered, whose crime was worse—Webster massacring his classmates or Watt killing Webster?

There was a loud knock. "Housekeeping," said a voice on the other side of the door. Vivien snapped out of her thoughts, looking at the digital clock on the nightstand. It was already 2:00.

"Give me ten minutes!" Soon, Vivien heard the wheels of the housekeeping cart squeak and stop at the room next to hers. She got up from the bed and began rummaging through her purse to make sure that she had the spiral notebook that she had filled with

interview questions. She needed to get the truth from Chief Long, and better yet, Officer Watt.

Twenty minutes later, she pulled her beat-up but trusty Toyota to a stop in front of the police station. She smoothed her skirt, checked her red lipstick in the rearview mirror, and rehearsed her questions at her reflection until her lips felt dry. According to her professors during her undergraduate years, reporters were supposed to build relationships with their sources before pursuing their story. She had a sneaking suspicion that the chief wouldn't want to speak with her, but she'd get the truth out somehow—if not from Arthur, then from another officer.

Vivien walked into the lobby of the police station and made her way to the bored receptionist, a young man who looked like he was fresh out of college. He was picking his ears and examining the gunk on his fingers. The loud clicks of Vivien's heels jolted him to attention and made him blush.

“Hi, can I help you?”

“Yes, I'm Detective Hyde. I'm here to see Chief Long about the series of burglaries happening at the Stop & Shop.”

“Uh, Detective Hyde, do you have a scheduled appointment? Hold on, let me check our files.” Fumbling with the keyboard and mouse, the receptionist wore a worried expression as he scanned through files on the computer.

“It's a back-logged case, Mr...Shea,” she said, squinting at his nametag, “I made some recent progress and didn't have time to set up an appointment. Anyways, knowing everything that's going on, I didn't think it would be wise to distract the chief with a low priority case with all the recent chaos. You understand me right, Mr. Shea?”

“Um, yeah Detective Hyde, I guess. This isn’t our usual protocol, but I guess I can let it slide. Let me check to see if the chief is in his office right now.”

He squinted at the screen, using his finger to trail down the glass, “Ah, yes. He’s here. Go around this corner and make a right at the very end of this hall.”

“Thank you for being so understanding, Mr. Shea,” she said with an air of urgency, walking away from the desk before he could question her any further.

Arthur’s door was closed, and as Vivien was about to knock, she paused with her knuckles an inch from the door, realizing how ludicrous her plan was. But she couldn’t back out now, so she rapped her knuckles against the door.

“Come on in.”

When Vivien walked into the room, Arthur was hunched over his paperwork and an intense tension seemed to have gathered in his shoulders. Vivien shut the door and took the seat across from Arthur, suddenly aware of the darkness of the room. Besides the sunlight coming through the half-open blinds, there were no other sources of light in the room.

Arthur stopped writing and looked up, his expression turning quickly into confusion.

“Hi, Miss. Can I help you with something?”

“Hi, Chief Long. My name is Vivien Hyde. I work at *Emporium Weekly*.”

Arthur’s eyes narrowed as he realized another publication was trying to weasel a story out of him.

“Look, Miss Hyde. I’m really busy, and I am not interested in talking to reporters,” Arthur said, hunching over his paperwork again.

“Look Chief Long, I don’t want to pester you for long. I’m technically not a reporter and not exactly here on an assignment from *Emporium*.”

“Then spit it out. What are you here for?”

“I’m a fact checker, trying to break into reporting. But I’m not here to twist your words or anything. I just want to hear your truth about what happened at the high school two weeks ago.”

“Haven’t you watched the news lady? Kid shot a bunch of classmates, and then got shot himself. End of story.”

“Well, why’d you decline to give any more details?”

“Because sometimes, things are just as simple as that. The kid was a threat to the community and to my men. We had to put him down. Goddamn, you relentless reporters.”

“Where’s Officer Watt?”

“That is none of your concern.”

“Has he left the force permanently?”

“Miss Hyde,” said Arthur, leaning over his desk to bring his face closer to hers, “Let me give you a nice dose of reality. You’re never gonna be the reporter you want to be, just like I never became the cop I wanted to be. The sooner you learn that the better. Now, please, get out of my office.”

But Vivien was relentless, “Do you think you’ve failed in your responsibilities as chief?”

There was a knock at the door, stopping Arthur from unleashing his wrath on Vivien.

“What is it now?” Arthur snapped.

“It’s me, Art. Can we talk?”

“I’m kind of in the middle of something, Wiz. Can this wait?”

“Look, I don’t understand why you’re so mad, I’m coming in,” said the voice angrily, “Art, you gotta stop shutting me out.” A pudgy, older man, probably in his mid-fifties, let himself into Arthur’s office, his bushy eyebrows furrowed in frustration. As soon as he saw Vivien, his expression softened into embarrassment.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m Melvin, nice to meet ya. Sorry about Art, he’s not much of a charmer is he?”

“No he isn’t,” said Vivien, trying to hold back a grin.

“You know what, Wiz,” said Arthur with gritted teeth, “I have an idea. You can help me by helping yourself and this young lady out of my office. NOW.”

“Aww Art, this isn’t how you treat a lady,” said Melvin, wagging his finger.

“NOW.”

“But—,” started Vivien.

“C’mon, young lady. Let’s go before Art blows a blood vessel,” said Melvin, offering his arm to her. Vivien stood up slowly, gave Arthur an annoyed expression, and skirted around Melvin to leave the room.

As she walked towards the lobby, Vivien cursed herself for foolishly believing that she would be the lucky journalist who Arthur wouldn’t turn down. Stupid. Stupid Stupid. Footsteps sounded behind her, and before she knew it, Melvin had lumbered next to her.

“Hey, I didn’t catch your name, Miss.” God, was this guy seriously flirting with her?

“Vivien. Vivien Hyde,” she said brusquely, hoping that he would leave her alone.

“What are you doing down at the station?”

“Trying and failing to be a reporter.”

“Bye, Detective! Have a nice day!” Shea said, when the two of them passed the front desk.

“Detective?” asked Melvin.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said as soon as they exited the building, walking briskly so that he would get that she didn’t want to waste her time talking to him. “The point is, I’m just a naïve fact-checker who thought that she’d be able to crack the story of the Clarkston shootings.”

“You wanna story?”

She stopped in her tracks. “You know where I can get one?”

Melvin grinned, “Well, sure. With me of course. I’ve known Art since we went to police academy together. How ’bout we talk some more over lunch?”

Was this a date? Vivien inwardly shuddered at the thought. But if she could get a story out of him, surely she could get through one date. Vivien nodded. Melvin offered her his arm again, and she hooked hers around it, letting him lead her to the parking lot.

## The Death of Merlin

Vivien had never seen someone eat a hamburger so fast. Melvin wiped his mouth with a napkin, which just pushed all the crumbs onto his beard. Vivien gingerly picked up a fry on her plate, and nibbled it, wondering if she should go on a juice cleanse after this meal.

“You’re not hungry?”

“Not really. Diner food isn’t really my thing.”

“You gotta be kidding, Circuit has the best fries.”

“You can have mine, if you want,” said Vivien, pushing her plate towards Melvin. Without hesitation, he began grabbing fries off her plate. She wondered when he would launch into a story about Arthur, but seeing that he was preoccupied with her fries, she knew that she had to take matters into her own hands.

“So, Melvin...can I call you that? Do you often invite women out on lunch dates?” She smiled at him, leaning forward and resting her chin on her right hand.

He looked shyly at her. “No,” he paused, chuckling nervously, “you’re actually the first one.”

“Wow, I guess I’m a lucky gal then,” she said, making Melvin blush.

“No-no-no um, well, actually, you’re doing me a real favor here Miss Hyde.”

“Call me Vivien.”

“Well, Vivien. I just haven’t been myself in the last few weeks. The shooting just put a bullet through my relationship with Art and my life in general. I think I really just need somebody to talk to right now.”

“Well, you can tell me anything you are comfortable sharing,” she said, extending her right arm so that her fingers nearly grazed Melvin’s greasy hands, which made Melvin’s eyes widen slightly at her almost-touch. “Absolutely anything,” she emphasized, trying to ignore the way the grease gleamed on his fingers.

“Wow, Vivien. Uh, wow. You know, this is the first time I’ve ever been caught speechless. You really are something.”

“So why don’t I help you out,” she retracted to her side of the table, reaching into her bag to pull out her small spiral-bound notebook and a pen, making Melvin deflate as she moved away from him. “How did you and Arthur meet?”

“That’s an easy one. ’93 at police training academy.”

“But you’re not an officer? A big and strong guy like you? I’m slightly confused.”

“Had asthma and failed the pepper spray test. But hey, no hard feelings. I don’t think I have the stomach for the job.”

“What made you realize that?”

“The shooting. It made me glad that I never became a cop. It really messed with my head.” Melvin’s voice lowered, “After Art drove us to the school, I couldn’t even get out of his car. The paramedics wheeled so many bodies out of the school that day. I’m an SAT tutor for a living, and I used to teach some of those kids—Jack Peters, Meghan Blanford, and Jane Werner.”

Vivien started feeling bad for making Melvin relive these memories, but now was not the time to give into sympathy.

“This must’ve been so hard for you, Melvin. I’m sorry that you had to go through this. It’s all right if you don’t want to continue, but I’d really like to understand your

perspective better,” she said, reaching across the table to touch his hand, making him jump slightly. She batted her eyelashes for good measure.

“No-no-no. I’ll go on.”

“If you’re willing.”

“Of course,” he said, “and you know why?”

“Tell me.”

“You remind me of the Arthur that I met back in police academy. Smart. Kind. Wanting to do the right thing. Nowadays, I think he’d still be on the right path if he hadn’t met me.”

“Wow you’re being really hard on yourself, Melvin.”

“But it’s true. I think I ruined him.”

“Why do you believe that?”

Melvin looked sadly at his now empty plate, “Back in police academy, I told him that to become a cop, he had to follow the rules of training. We lived in the shadow of Reagan’s War on Drugs, and cops were expected to be suspicious of everyone and use force whenever they felt it was necessary. But at first, Art didn’t want any of that. He was a good kid who had grown up seeing the damage that policing did to families and to kids in his neighborhood. Then I gave him this ultimatum—do what’s expected of you or don’t become a cop at all. Once he got to a place of power, I thought he’d be on his crusade to get rid of unnecessarily violent policing. But Clarkston’s not the place for it. It’s too safe and it’s made Arthur too comfortable to improve law enforcement tactics. After the shooting, I think Arthur’s in a place to decide what law enforcement is going look like, but I think he’s going to choose violence over anything else. It’s what he’s

known growing up. Somehow, I think he forgot why he wanted to become a cop in the first place, to protect people instead of hurt them for no good reason.”

“Wait, who’s Arthur going to hurt?”

Melvin face sagged, his wrinkles becoming more pronounced, “Well, he clearly doesn’t give a shit about me anymore because I called him out on his bullshit. I’m pretty sure that Officer Watt killed that kid in cold blood, but Art’s pulling the self-defense card to save his own ass.”

“I figured as much,” she replied.

“I’m also worried about he’s gonna do to the police department and this town.”

“What do you think he’s going to do?”

“I’m not sure, but my bets on him going full-on military on this town. Art’s been keeping a lot of secrets from me because he knows I’m not going to be his yes-man. All of his cops are loyal to him too...well, maybe except for Bailey.”

“Bailey Watt? The one who killed Harry Webster?”

“Yeah. I actually saw him on the way into the station today. Poor kid was on desk duty. Seemed like a nice guy and he even offered to get me a coffee. Really didn’t seem like he was capable of killing. I could see the defeat and sadness in his eyes. I bet he’s about to leave the force soon. You might be able to get some information out of him.”

“Wow, thanks Melvin. This is has all been super helpful.” Vivien put her pen down and stared at Melvin’s bleak expression.

“No worries.”

“So, where does all of this leave you?”

“Well I’m not much of a sticking-to-it type,” he said pointing to his stomach, “I mean look at me. I’ve tried and failed to go on so many different diets. It’s just not the lifestyle for me. I couldn’t stick through police academy. Now, I won’t stick around trying to change someone who doesn’t want to be changed.”

“Where are you going to go then?”

“Hmmm...I was thinking California. I got a few cousins there,” he said. “There’s room for one more in the car if you wanna tag along?” He looked at Vivien semi-hopefully, reaching for her hand, but she pulled it away before he could touch her. Vivien suppressed a shudder as she thought that maybe she had flirted with him a little too well.

“Look, Melvin. I didn’t mean to lead you on...I’m sorry if I gave off that impression. But I’ve got a story to write, and it’s here in Clarkston not in California.”

He looked bewildered, as he were trying to figure out if he had been misreading her signals for the past hour, but then he gave her a look of sad acceptance. “I understand, Vivien. Sorry if I was being too forward.”

“It’s fine, Melvin.

Melvin heaved himself out of the booth, “Well, I’m off. Got my bags ready in the car. Seeing that Arthur didn’t want to talk to me today made my decision to leave Clarkston so much easier.”

“Can I get you something for the road? A milkshake? It’s the least I can do for you.”

Melvin paused for a moment, considering her offer, “Why not? I can always start that juice cleanse by the time I reach California.”

## Excalibur

Arthur swiped his badge on the scanner in front of the arms closet, and pushed open the heavy door. As he walked into the room, the motion-sensor lights flicked on immediately. The smell of lemon-scented disinfectant put him at ease as he glanced around the arms closet. Not a speck of dust to be seen anywhere as well. Stretching across the left wall was a black metal locker stocked with ammunition, magazines, shotguns, several AR-15s, Tasers, the typical things you might normally find stored in a local police station. Walking forward, he almost tripped over a stack of locked black cases on the floor.

He looked around the room, mentally designating the places in which all the new equipment would go. He's always had a love for order, for preparation. When he was in high school, he used to work in a candy store, running back and forth between the store and the storage room, toting bags of gummies and chocolate to fill plastic candy dispensers. He remembered the boxes sitting on metal racks, all of which were filled with bags of sour strawberry belts, milk chocolate-covered nuts, pool ball-sized speckled jawbreakers. He remembered the smell of lemon-scented disinfectant and the lack of dust on any square inch of the room. He'd had to ensure that every week, each piece of inventory wouldn't be expired or that it would last for the week. Without him, the store would slowly dwindle away into a mausoleum of plastic candy dispensers filled with nothing but sugar crystals and chocolate dust.

After glancing around the armory, he brushed his hand against the cold plastic shell of the topmost case on one of the stacks. No, he never imagined that he'd go from

organizing candy to lethal weapons. But without this equipment and a new level of organization, the Clarkston police force would be nothing more than a name.

A beep from the other side of the door sounded, and Gavin walked in with Lance trailing behind him. Gavin's eyes gleamed, while Lance bit his lip and looked worriedly at the stacks of cases on the ground.

Arthur said, "Where the hell is Bailey? This shit isn't going to organize itself."

"Chief, we tried to get him, but he refuses to leave his desk. Maybe we should give the guy a break. He's been through a lot," said Lance.

"The kid's been on break for long enough. Everyone needs to pull his weight. Gav, tell him to get his ass over here now."

"No problemo," said Gavin a bit too eagerly as he left the room. Lance surveyed the armory, surprised at how much excess equipment the military had to spare. Arthur had unlocked one of the cases and was examining the M16 inside with the concentration of a scientist in a lab.

"So what did we get, Chief?"

Arthur looked up suddenly like he remembered that Lance was also in the room with him. "Some M14s and M16, surveillance cameras, night vision goggles, magazines, riot gear," said Arthur, "it was all free, so I figured why not?"

"You don't think this might be a bit extreme?"

"Seventeen kids got shot, and you're accusing me of being extreme? This town is in a state of emergency, and we need to be ready if anything like this ever happens again. I don't know about you, but the choice was easy for me—ask the government for free equipment or scrape the bottom of our budget for funds."

The door burst open, and Gavin swaggered into the room with Bailey trailing behind him with a defeated expression on his face.

“Thank you for finally joining us Officer Bailey,” said Arthur, “When I ask you to do something, you better do it.”

“Chief, I don’t think this is good for me.”

“I need all hands on deck now. This town is in a state of emergency and everyone needs to buck up. The massacre was a hiccup on our part, but we won’t let it happen again,” said Arthur, gesturing to the cases on the floor.

“Please, Chief. Don’t ma— ”

Arthur put up his hand to stop Bailey from continuing, “You know what? I want you to have the honor of putting our first new piece of equipment in the locker.” He held the rifle to Bailey who stared at it numbly. The fluorescent lighting glinted off the sharp angles of the gun.

“Chief, come on. Bailey just shot a kid. Don’t make him do this,” said Lance.

Arthur turned around, shooting Lance a glare. “Did I ask you?”

“C’mon, Bailey. Stop being a pussy,” said Gavin, which earned him a hard jab from Lance.

After a moment, Bailey slowly reached for the M16, his hands quivering. He grimaced as he gripped the hand guard like it was burning his hand.

“That’s my boy,” said Arthur, “go on now.” Bailey slowly walked over to the locker, and placed it in one of the racks with a soft clatter. He looked down at his hands, as if he were searching for raw burn marks, and then he turned around to face the other officers, looking like he was going to throw up.

“Ok, Chief. He did what you asked. Gav and I can take it from here,” said Lance.

“God dammit! I don’t know what is with all of you today, but I don’t want any more insubordination,” said Arthur. “Get unpacking. Everyone.”

Realizing that he couldn’t push Arthur any further, Lance knelt down on the ground and unlocked another case—night vision equipment. He held out a pair of goggles to Bailey, mouthing, “You can do this.” Bailey smiled weakly, and took the goggles.

## Enid

In 2009, Erin Carr was eighteen and moving into her freshman dorm at Columbia University with her mother. They fought their way through the heavily manicured quad, past the crowd of freshmen and parents wearing Columbia t-shirts and hats, apologizing every time they accidentally elbowed someone. John Jay Hall, a red brick fortress, was taller than any apartment in her hometown neighborhood. Erin squinted and looked up so that she could get a better view of the top. Since everyone was moving in at the same time, she didn't want to fight her way into the elevator. She had a suitcase and two boxes so between her mother and herself, she knew that they could carry her belongings to the fifth floor of John Jay hall. By the time they reached her room, 510, she and her mother placed all of her belongings on the ground, flopped on top of the bed, and looked up at the ceiling, which only had a few hairline cracks. Erin wondered if she'd able to get away with putting a poster or some glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling. A bare room, clean wooden furniture, and a window overlooking the campus and city—a fresh start.

“I thought that working out all summer would whip me into shape...I was wrong,” said Erin.

“Same baby, I'm gonna need an ice bath when I get home,” said her mom as she ruffled Erin's curly black hair.

“Don't leave, Momma. I'll miss you too much.”

“Oh, sweet,” said her mom, kissing her forehead, “Boston isn't so far from New York. You'll be back home for Thanksgiving before you know it.”

“I know...I am excited for this year though. I really needed a change of pace.”

Her mom smiled, always an elegant curve instead of a toothy grin. Erin inherited almost everything, except for her smile, from her mother—her flawless skin, her almond-shaped eyes, and the playful point of her nose. Her mom ran her hand through Erin’s hair, reminding Erin of how her mom used to brush her hair into a bun before ballet class when she was a kid.

Her mom said, “You deserve this, baby. You’ve worked so hard. Your dad would be so proud.” The two of them fell into a silence, knowing that if Erin’s dad were in the room, he would be annoyed at them for lying on the bed instead of exploring the city.

“Yeah, I miss him,” said Erin, breaking the silence. During her junior year of high school, she was preparing for her SATs one night and was about to tear out the pages of her practice book because she couldn’t seem to improve her score on the reading comprehension section. Seeing her in distress, her dad suggested that they go for McDonald’s for a study break at 11:00 at night.

As they drove the closest McDonald’s, her dad noticed that the gas tank was almost empty and made detour to the Shell, which was about three minutes from McDonald’s. As Erin waited for her dad to pay in the gas station convenience store, she watched two cops angrily march into the store. They were both burly white men—one balding, the other had a thick mustache and sideburns to match. The one with sideburns grabbed her dad’s shoulder, shouting at him. Erin could almost see the spit flying out of his mouth as he barked at her dad. She remembered the advice that he had given her since she was a kid: “people like us need to be careful around cops.” But when her father threw the cop off him, the cop shot him. Rushing out of the car in a panic, Erin sprinted towards the store.

“WHAT DID YOU DO!?” Erin screamed as she pushed open the glass door of the store.

“STOP! GET ON THE FLOOR NOW!” The bald cop who didn’t shoot her dad shouted at her, pointing his gun at her.

“What?” she said, bending down on to the cold floor of the store. “That’s my dad, let me see him.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. Her father was lying three feet away from her, his empty eyes staring back at her. She watched the blood from his chest slowly wash over the dirty tile floor. By the time the paramedics arrived, the cops realized that she wasn’t violent and allowed her to stand. Her mother arrived minutes later, tears pouring out of her eyes, as she held Erin outside the convenience store and whispered over and over again that things would be OK. Apparently, the cops had received a call from a house next to the Shell that a black man had robbed them minutes before Erin and her father arrived.

There was a knock, followed by the creaking sound of the door opening. Erin and her mom sat up from the bed and came face-to-face with a lanky girl with her blonde hair pulled into a tight ponytail. She had on large black square-rimmed glasses that were too big for her face.

“Hello! Welcome to John Jay Hall! I’m Jessica Newman—Jess for short. I’m your R.A. this year!” She stuck out her skinny hand, flashing a half-moon smile at Erin and her mom.

“Hi? I’m Erin,” said Erin, shaking her hand.

“And I’m Alice, Erin’s mom.”

“Well, It’s so nice to meet you Erin and Alice. I’m so excited to get to know you and all of my residents! I just wanted to let you know before I dash off that I’m running spa night on this floor this Friday, so please come by if you can!”

“Yeah, OK,” said Erin, trying to hide the sarcasm in her voice.

“OK! Great!” Jessica said, waving as she left the room.

Erin looked at her mom, “When are white girls gonna stop thinking that cucumbers actually do anything for your skin?”

“Why do they always have to be excited for everything?” Her mom asked. “Don’t their voices ever get tired from staying in that pitch all the time?” They both laughed, collapsing back onto the bed again.

Throughout her undergraduate years, Erin realized how much more comfortable it was to live in the chaos of New York City than it was to live her less densely populated but troubled hometown, Westerly. Being surrounded by so many people made it easier for her to blend in. She was more willing to walk alone in New York, making a weekly pilgrimage to Basil n’ Peel, her favorite pizza place, than she was to walk alone in Westerly when she was back for Christmas. Her family lived in an apartment in the outskirts of Westerly, away from the thick of crime and violence but close enough that Erin heard many stories. The place she lived in was a bubble within Westerly, containing all the places and people that constituted her favorite childhood memories. There was Wendy’s Salon, where Wendy would do her cornrows and give her beauty tips, Danceline, where she practiced ballet for four days a week, and Ashton Park, where she and her parents used to play Frisbee and picnic when she was a kid. After her dad’s death, she couldn’t walk anywhere in Westerly without her eyes darting around every

street corner searching for cops. As a kid, her dad had always told her that if a cop were ever to stop her to not make any sudden movements, not argue with the cop, and have her hands visible at all times. She wished that her dad had followed his own rules.

Although being in New York made it easier for her to be unseen, she felt heard at Columbia. In her first week, she joined BSO, the Black Students' Organization. They met on Monday nights in the Malcolm X Lounge whose namesake would become one of her idols. Malcolm X who had been long gone found his way into the consciousness of all of the students in the BSO. They quoted songs in which rappers name-dropped him—2Pac's "Ghetto Gospel," The Game's "Red Nation," Nas's "Halftime." Many of them had tapes of his speeches handed down to them from their parents, some of whom were former Black Panthers, and they drank in his words in "Message to the Grassroots" and "The Ballot or the Bullet" like poetry. She met people who had grown up reading Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston. People who loved Ella Fitzgerald and Aretha Franklin as much as they loved Beyoncé and Alicia Keys.

Many people had grown up in a world that was conscious of black power but also stymied it. They grew up on shows like "That's so Raven" and "The Proud Family," in which teachers like the psychic Raven Baxter and fourteen-year-old Penny Proud taught kids and young teens about contemporary African-American life. But at the same time, they had grown up with stories of black people being brutalized by the police, disproportionate numbers of blacks being locked in jail, and countless black families being evicted from their houses.

The black world expanded before her. Some of her peers had come from backgrounds similar to hers, others lived in quiet suburbs without ever feeling like they

belonged in their predominantly white communities, some were from other countries. Though they had all come from different backgrounds, they joined together in this body of students to make sure that the black student voice was heard.

Outside of the BSO, New York was a place for her to discover the beauty and strength of the black body and mind. Though she majored in computer science, she loved writing and literature. She was hungry for books, for poetry, for knowledge to confirm that the black body didn't exist to be broken down. She hopped from bookshop to bookshop, spending the money saved from her barista job on books by Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Langston Hughes until they began spill off her bookshelf. She found poems that resonated with her like Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage," Langston Hughes' "Harlem," and Margaret Walker's "For My People." She would walk out of Columbia and into the rush of the city to find lectures, book signings, and poetry readings. She sat at open mics with her friends, watching as black poets bellowed. She began writing her own poetry, trying to make sense of her place in New York, memorializing her dad, and coping with her pain. Though she believed herself to have written a lot of bad poetry, she hoped that one day, she would be able to write something of consequence.

Now it was 2018. She was twenty-seven and when she heard that a shooting happened in her hometown, Clarkston, she didn't want to feel helpless like she did when she was forced to lie on the ground and watch her father die.

Erin took a sip of her coffee and shuddered as the bitterness hit her tongue. She hated the taste of coffee, but wanted to stay awake to keep writing her blog. Except for the living room, everywhere else in the house was dark. She looked across from the

couch at the fireplace, which they didn't use. Framed photos of her husband, Garrett, and her decorated the mantel—pictures from their vacation to Banff, their wedding day, her with Garrett's family on Christmas. Most of the decorations in this house didn't feel as if they belonged to her. There was the glass coffee table, the black leather couch, and white ceramic vases from IKEA that her husband and his mother had jointly decided would give the room a modern feel. There were the succulents that her mother-in-law thought were trendy, so she bought five terrariums for them. Erin always felt like she was in a hotel room whenever she sat in this living room.

Garrett was already in their bed, his snoring coming through the door like the sound of a muffled leaf blower. Though she spent her days teaching computer science at Brandeis, she could still muster energy to work on her blog, "Written in Black," which had taken off since the shooting at Clarkston High. It had been about a month and half now since the shooting and during that time, word was circulating that the white cop, Officer Bailey Watt, had killed Harry Webster while he was defenseless. No one acquitted Harry for massacring his classmates, but people needed to understand why black lives were always under attack and why they were always deemed disposable.

She began the blog because she needed a place where she could think aloud and find people who wanted to listen to her. People living in Clarkston were the ones who started following her but as they shared her posts on Facebook, Twitter, and through email, she suddenly found herself talking to an audience of over 3,000 people on the Internet. People across the country messaged her about their loved ones who had died at the hands of the police. They wanted to know who she was and how was it that she had so much authority to speak on the subject of police brutality. Yet she wrote anonymously

under the name, ewriter18, partly because she wasn't confident enough to own up to her beliefs, even if it was on the Internet, and partly because she couldn't risk her husband or his fellow officers from finding out about her blog. Garrett didn't like to talk about uncomfortable subjects. She remembered when he came back home after the shooting, his entire body drooping with fatigue and gravity.

“What happened? I heard there was a shooting. Are you OK?” She said, rising from her seat to check on him.

“It's fine. A black kid shot up his classmates. We had to put him down,” he said, refusing to look at her.

“What? Why?”

“Look, I've had a really long day, babe. Can we not talk about it?” he said, planting a kiss in her hair and walking towards the bathroom so he could shower. He had been taking many long showers since the shooting to avoid talking to her.

When Erin knew that she wasn't going to get any answers from Garrett about what really happened to Harry Webster, she decided that that the only way to find answers was to write until she found them. She categorized the blog as one of things that she could not share with Garrett because he was white and wouldn't understand.

During their senior year they met in Columbia at a frat party—he was best friends with one of the brothers and was visiting from Syracuse where he was studying art history. She was about to attempt an escape from her friends; she would've rather been in bed than trying to lift her feet off the sticky floor every time she tried to jump to the beat of the music. As she was about to make it out of the basement of the frat house, a boy

with a half unbuttoned blue shirt, flushed cheeks, and matted light brown hair blocked her path.

Erin wasn't sure why she accepted a drunken request from a white boy to go out on a date. Maybe she liked that he was tall and muscular. Maybe she just liked the attention, so she put her number into his phone without expecting him to ever call or text her. But the next morning, she woke up to a text, asking her if she wanted to get pizza. Over a margherita pizza at the Basil n' Peel, she realized that they both could rap most of Eminem's songs, loved cheesy Christmas movies like *Love Actually*, and were both Harry Potter nerds who were still convinced that their Hogwarts acceptance letters were going to be delivered any time soon. But as they got more serious, she realized how much she loved staying up for hours talking with him on the phone, hunting for the next best pizza place with him, and simply just lying in bed with him.

Of the few things that they did not do together, going to the BSO meetings was something she could never bring herself to invite him to. When BSO members found out that Gemma Thompson, the treasurer of the BSO, was dating a white boy, Erin often saw Gemma walking to meetings alone, without her usual posse of other BSO executive board members. When Garrett brought her to meet his friends at Syracuse who were mainly white, Erin had no problem crashing their video game or beer pong marathons, but she could never bring him to a BSO meeting, nor did she ever tell him that she was a part of it or how she was engrossed with poetry and literature of the African diaspora. She never even told him about how her dad died. She knew that Garrett would understand, but not in the way members of the BSO or those black poets in coffee shops and bookshops would be able to.

But she couldn't say no to him when he asked her to move into a small studio apartment in Queens with him after graduation. And she couldn't say no to him one night as they were lying in their bed in their new apartment when Garrett said, "Erin, I'm going to go to police academy in a few weeks."

Erin lifted her head off his chest and stared at his face, waiting for him to break into a grin and tell her that he was only joking, but it never came. She looked down at his chest, noticing the dark shadows in the contours of his muscles. Garrett had been going to the gym more often and watching his diet, but Erin didn't think anything of it. But now more than anything, she wanted to tell him not to do it, to work at an art museum, to be an art history professor, to teach kids how to draw, to work as a garbage man for god's sake, anything but a policeman.

"Everything OK?"

"Yeah. Why wouldn't it be?"

So for weeks Erin drove him to the academy, picked him up on weekends to come back to their home, and cheered for him during his graduation from the academy. When he wasn't home, Erin felt as if the pressure building inside her from all the secrets that she had been keeping from him was fizzling. She wrote poems and essays, only to shred and throw them away before she picked him up on Saturdays.

Erin scrolled through her latest blog post, and her eyes widened at the sight at the statistics—thirty shares, 235 likes, and forty-three comments. This particular post was about the issue of solving social problems with police force. She had received some DMs from followers from Clarkston who mentioned that Harry had severe depression. She had written, "Did the cop who shot Harry Webster cure the depression that prompted him to

kill his classmates in the first place? No—that cop was no better at helping Webster than the school’s ineffective counseling program.”

A message notification suddenly popped up in her screen—a message from a user named “vivhyde327.”

Hi ewriter18,

My name is Vivien Hyde, and I work for *Emporium Weekly*. I’ve been reading your blog for the past few weeks and love your writing and passion. I’m interested in writing about the Clarkston shooting, but not so interested in turning it into another story where it all ends nicely for the cops like it usually does. I think you and I can work together to turn your blog into something more. It could really spark activism—successful activism—in this town. People seem like they want to see it happen, but they need a little inspiration and organization. What do you think? If you’re interested send me an email at [vivhyde372@gmail.com](mailto:vivhyde372@gmail.com) and we can figure out where to go from there.

Best,

Viv

Turning her blog into a mechanism for change—now that was certainly not something Erin had planned on when she started her blog. However, more intrigued by Vivien Hyde than fearing what she had in mind, Erin took another swig of her coffee and began to draft an email.

## Elaine

Flakes of snow powdered Elaine's hair and coat as she stood in line outside of the school, waiting to be searched by an officer. It was the end of November and the chill of the early morning had weaseled its way into Elaine's coat. Her hands hurt because she had left her gloves at home. As she waited in line, Elaine wondered if she'd make it to the door of the school before getting frostbite.

"Damn, I just want to go inside. It's so fucking cold," said her friend, Maya Renalds, who was behind her, shivering and teeth chattering despite the fact that she was wearing a thick winter parka. Maya clutched the fur-lined hood with her gloved hands. She was one of the few black kids at Clarkston who actually lived there, which made her a floater, not white enough to be close enough to the white students, but suburban enough to make the METCO kids think she wasn't black enough. Elaine liked her because she wasn't afraid to speak her mind. Throughout elementary and middle school, Maya had fended off the bullies for both of them. She was there when boys on the playground snuck up behind them and clawed at their pigtails. She was there when girls in the middle school locker rooms whispered to their friends behind cupped hands right in front of them. She tried to be there for Elaine after the shooting—calling her every so often to check up on her and offering to talk about it with her—but this might've been the one thing Elaine couldn't allow her friend to help her with.

"If we do this every day. I'm gonna go crazy," said Maya with another emphatic shiver.

"We're almost there," said Elaine. The line shifted forward so that the two of them were only two bodies away from the officer. This one usually manned the body

searches on Tuesday mornings. She remembered him by his severe underbite and not his name.

A blast of warm air pummeled their faces as they stepped through the main door and came face-to-face with Underbite. She tried not to stare too long at his protruding lower jaw, which made his face look like it was stuck in a permanent snarl. Knowing the protocol, Elaine opened her backpack so that he could prod through her belongings with a baton. After seeing that all she had in her backpack were a laptop, a notebook, and pencils, Underbite nodded at her to signal the next step of the protocol, so she shrugged off her coat and handed it to him. After he went through her pockets, he patted her down, making her wince as his enormous hands ran down her waist and legs. Underbite nodded one last time, signaling that she was clean, and waved for Maya to come forward.

When Maya opened her backpack for him, he stuck his hand into the bag, clawing at her belongings. A stray tampon fell on the ground as he ravaged her backpack. “Aww, c’mon. Careful with those! I don’t have many of these left. That stuff is expensive,” said Maya.

“Coat,” said Underbite. As she handed him the jacket, he looked at her feet and said, “and shoes.”

“What this isn’t part of the drill? I got fuzzy socks on. Do you think I have room for a lethal weapon?”

“Shoes, now.”

Maya kicked off her red rain boots that she liked to wear whenever it was snowing, no matter how much it was snowing, and handed them to Underbite. As he shone a flashlight into her boots, Maya rolled her eyes. He then searched her as well,

patting her ankles and inner thighs. After throwing the backpack into her arms, Underbite let her go and she joined Elaine who was waiting by the lockers.

“Of course, the Asian kid always gets off easy,” said Maya, jeering at Elaine, “but never the black kid. This is ridiculous. Do you see these skinny jeans? How the hell am I gonna fit a gun in them, let alone a pocket knife without everyone and their mother seeing a lump coming out of my leg. God, cops are so dumb.”

“This sucks. My dad told me they were also searching elementary and middle school kids.”

The whites of Maya’s eyes expanded, “What the hell is a kindergartener going to do? Safety-scissor everyone to death?”

As the two of them turned to go their first period class together, AP Chemistry, Elaine saw her dad standing by the classroom with a rifle cradled in his arms.

“Hey, Laney,” said her dad, stepping forward but stopping as he realized that he was still holding a gun in his hand. “Have a good class.”

“Thanks,” said Elaine as she tried to stare at her dad’s face rather than his gun. His five o’clock shadow had thickened in the past week and dark bags hung underneath his eyes. Since the shooting, the two of them had been tip-toeing around each other as if they were trying not to step on broken glass. Elaine used to enjoy riding in the patrol car with her dad in the morning, both of them listening to Hozier and talking about nothing and everything at the same time. But now Elaine had been catching rides with Maya who had her license but was clearly still working on remembering to stop at stop signs. Her dad had become mysteriously quiet and elusive since Chief Long made all of the officers

take on extra shifts, which made the house even quieter than it was after her sister, Gabby, left for college or after their mother had died from lung cancer.

Elaine and Maya filed into the classroom and found their seats on the side closest to the window. Mr. Laghiri stood in front of the whiteboard, drawing electron orbitals, and revealing the amount of sweat he had produced within a span of thirty minutes. As Elaine zoned out during the class, his voice sounded like that of a muffled cartoon character—he was clearly making sounds but Elaine couldn't discern any of them in her daze. After class, Elaine realized that she hadn't copied any of the notes or drawings on the board, so she tapped on Maya's shoulder, "Hey I totally spaced again. Can I copy your notes later? I promise this won't happen again."

"Yeah, totally. What's up with you lately? This isn't the first time this has happened."

"Nothing," said Elaine as she stood and began to pack up her notebook and pencil, "I'm just going through a lot."

"You know that you can talk to me, Laney? You never told me about anything that happened, you know, on that day," said Maya as they walked out of the classroom.

"I don't know. I just don't really want to talk about it. It just all feels kind of surreal, like over half the class is empty, and Mrs. Long always looks like she's gonna cry or something. And all of a sudden there's police officers carrying rifles in every hallway and we have to wait in the cold to be searched by them. Like, I understand where they're coming from, but still..."

"Yeah, I get what you mean. Clarkston High is just a completely different place now. But let me know if I can do anything to help."

Elaine smiled weakly at her, hoping that she wouldn't probe anymore. They parted ways at the end of the hallway to get to their respective classes, and Elaine knew that since chemistry was the only class that she shared with Maya, she would be pretty lonely for the rest of the day. As she went from class to class, she noticed how the officers loomed like gargoyles from their posts. Kids kept their heads down, refusing to stare directly at the police, as they maintained a healthy distance from the cops. It had been about a month and a half since the shooting, but people were still mourning their losses.

In the weeks following the shooting, Elaine spent most of her days in church pews, watching as family members of victims tried to keep their voices from breaking as they talked about the lives of their sons, their daughters, their sisters, their brothers. She saw the colors of stained glass windows on polished coffins like washes of watercolor paint. At the funerals, she watched her classmates being lowered into graves, turning around to avoid breaking down, and seeing another group in the distance lowering another coffin into the dirt. She had attended a vigil at Clarkston, huddling with all the survivors on the school lawn as they held flickering candles in the darkness. She sat down in the same spot on the lawn after the shooting, and watched a group of students who worked for the school newspaper embracing one another as they mourned the loss of Bella Davidson, their editor-in-chief. Elaine picked at the grass, thinking about Harry because if she didn't, no one would.

They were weeks of past tenses.

“He used to tell the best jokes. I always laughed until I hurt when I was around him.”

“She was my older sister, my inspiration.”

“I wished I hadn’t screamed at him that morning before he left for school.”

“They were all supposed to be here now.”

Now as she walked through the school, she felt a jarring jump from past tense to present tense. Seventeen lockers were decorated with sticky notes with messages and photographs, but Harry’s was bare. Elaine tried to walk by his locker on the way to each of her classes because it felt like she was trying to remember him, while everyone was trying to forget. Ever since she saw the cop shoot him, she tried to talk to Jasmin or Joy, anyone who was still alive, to make sure that she hadn’t gone crazy and that he was trying to put down his gun when the cop killed him, but no one wanted to defend a school shooter and no one wanted to talk about that day anymore. As she sat through her classes and tried to pay attention to her teacher, she couldn’t wash the image of red blooming across the back of Harry’s hoodie from her mind.

Fourth period came and Elaine trudged to Mrs. Long’s class. Sometimes, she still thought that Jack Peters and his cronies would be in the corner making raunchy jokes or that Harry would be at his desk, furiously scribbling poems into his notebook, but whenever she walked into that classroom, she couldn’t erase the memories of blood and bodies covering the floor. The seven kids who survived the shooting filled the entire first row of the classroom, leaving an army of desks that loomed like ghosts behind them. Flopping down onto her usual seat between Dean and Amanda, Elaine pulled out her notebook and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, knowing that she would be too distracted by her thoughts to take notes during class.

During the class, Mrs. Long lectured rather than taught the novel, saying things that could've been pulled from SparkNotes. Jasmin had been overtly online shopping on her phone for twenty minutes, but Mrs. Long hadn't cared enough to call her out for it. Elaine's notebook remained closed and though she stared at Mrs. Long, she couldn't help slamming her with accusations in her mind. Why are you acting like everything is OK? Don't you see that over half your class is dead? Don't you see that you failed Harry and all of us?

Elaine had read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* way before Mrs. Long started teaching it, but all that had stuck in her mind was the line "all art is quite useless." None of this pretended normalcy, Mrs. Long's attempt to teach literature, helped students cope with their pain and trauma. No amount of creative genius could save Harry from his depression. A grimace stretched on Elaine's face as she wondered how this woman could stand up there and pretend that everyone was fine just like she had probably pretended that Harry was fine. The bell rang, signaling the end of class and the beginning of lunch, and Elaine rushed out into the hallway, hurrying to one of the music rooms where she liked to hide during lunchtime nowadays

Clarkston High reminded her of a picture book that she had as a kid. On each page were two pictures of Disney characters that looked nearly identical because there were subtle differences in each one that she would have to identify. Clarkston High before the shooting and Clarkston High after the shooting looked similar, but the differences between them were not subtle. The morning searches, the cops in the hallways, the seventeen decorated lockers, Mrs. Long's nearly empty classroom—all of it

was suffocating Elaine. And so she would hide in a music practice room during lunchtime because it was a vacuum, empty of the noise of pretended normalcy.

On the drive home, Maya would often ask her where she would disappear to during lunch, and Elaine always made the excuse that she was catching up on work or copying notes that she should have taken during class. Because Maya knew that Elaine had been falling behind in schoolwork since the shooting, she didn't question Elaine's excuses. Since the shooting, a thick tension had settled between the white students and black students, METCO or not. Maya often complained to Elaine about her recent falling-outs with her white friends, petty dramas that were actually rooted in greater misunderstandings. But by isolating herself from her white friends, Maya often had an open seat waiting for her at the table where the METCO kids sat. Busy with these growing friendships, Maya didn't have the time to worry about where Elaine was.

Elaine hadn't talked much to anyone about the shooting, but at the same time no one pushed her to elaborate either. Maya was her ever-bubbly self, flitting from one friend group to the next. Elaine's father was almost never in the house anymore because he was busy with work. Nonetheless, Elaine found comfort on the Internet, specifically on a blog called "Written in Black" that was run by an anonymous writer named ewriter18. He or she had written a lot about the Clarkston shooting and other instances of police brutality in America

Elaine fixated on this website because she was hungry for information, starved for an understanding of why Officer Watt killing Harry was part of a greater pattern of violence in society. Even if no one in Mrs. Long's class wanted to talk about it, Elaine was certain that Harry was putting down his gun when Officer Watt shot him. A day ago,

Elaine had sent a message to this person, saying that she was a student who had been in the classroom during the shooting. She assumed that since this blogger had been posting every two days, maybe this person was as ravenous for answers as she was. She opened her laptop and a notification banner materialized in the right corner of her screen.

Hi Elaine,

First off, I'm sorry for everything that you've gone through, and thank you for having the courage to speak up. I'd love to hear anything that you're willing to share. I'm currently working with a woman named Vivien Hyde, who's connected to *Emporium Weekly*, to turn this website into a vehicle for change in this town. Your story could be an asset to our project. The two of us are going to meet at the Trembling Cup Café next Monday at 4:00 if you would like to join us. Looking forward to meeting you.

Best,

Erin

Erin. Elaine's blood quickened at the name like it was a passcode into a secret society, a magic word that might be able to fix things. It's just a cup of coffee. Don't get your hopes up, Laney. Elaine bit her fingernail, wondering if she should meet up with Erin and Vivien. She thought her dad, the way she had been breaking him, piece by piece, with her silence and cold stares; would she be lost to him, if she joined up with these women? Then she thought about all the times she'd been afraid to stand up for anything. The way she let Maya defend her. How she never reached out to Harry, even though she

knew that he was suffering. She wanted this fear to become past tense: “She used to be afraid.”

## Lancelot

Elaine was never one of those kids who were embarrassed by her own father. She never made him drop her off a block away from the movie theater when she met up with friends. When she was in elementary school, she often asked him to chaperone their field trips. But the look in her eyes now was worse than embarrassment—Lance was sure that Elaine was ashamed of him after she walked into her chemistry class with her head down after barely saying “hi” to him.

He patrolled the hallways at Clarkston High four days a week and assumed that it was because Arthur kept him on such a busy schedule to punish him for his insubordination, so now he kept his mouth shut and his head down. He was really failing at being a father, especially after having made so much progress. After his wife died, he and his daughters had gotten much closer. Before Gabby went off to college, he’d look forward to driving her and Elaine to school in his patrol car. During these morning rides, he would listen to Gabby complain about college applications and rattle off the names of boys she’d go with to prom with the ones she definitely did not want to go with. He listened to Elaine talk about the book that kept her up for the past few nights and the new piece of fiction that she wanted to submit to a contest somewhere. However, sometime in the past few weeks, he’d lost her. He no longer saw the yellow glow coming from the crack underneath her door when she’d usually be reading at late hours of the night. He never had to go into her room to remind her that she had to get some sleep.

He and Elaine both knew what had really happened to Harry Webster. There was no denying it, and he was angry with Arthur for trying to cover up what Bailey had done. Lance remembered how after the shooting, he bought grocery store sushi for the two of

them for dinner and watched as Elaine miserably pushed the rolls around with her chopsticks on the plastic carton. It reminded him of the months following Sarah's death—many quiet dinners over microwavable or store-bought meals.

Lance put down his chopsticks and looked pleadingly at her. "Laney, talk to me."

Elaine looked him with a hard expression. "I'm not crazy, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"That cop killed Harry Webster when he was defenseless."

Lance paused. He had been sticking to Arthur's story for so long that he had to stop himself. "Yes. Yes he did. You're not crazy, sweetie."

"Are you going to say something, then?"

Lance scratched his head. "You know, it's not really my place. I need this job. I need to do what's best for us."

"Wait, you're gonna go back to the force? It's not right, Dad."

"I know, I know. But we need the money and you know how hard I've worked for this job."

"Mom would be so disappointed if she were here right now," said Elaine before she stormed away from the dinner table. When he heard her door slam, he placed his head in his hands. Elaine remembered her mom who died when she was seven. He'd always be pitted against her; all his shortcomings were her strengths. He could imagine Sarah sitting across from him right now, giving him a "look-at-what-you did" expression—widened eyes and lifted eyebrows—and follow after her daughter.

"What do you want me to do?" Lance asked the empty air in front of him.

Since that night, Lance couldn't bring himself to come home, especially in his uniform, knowing how ashamed Elaine was of him.

When the bell rang to signal the end of the period, Lance watched as Maya and Elaine walked out of the classroom without so much as a nod in his direction. His arms were starting to cramp from holding the M16, but he couldn't set it down because he knew that Gavin was at other end of the hallway. Gavin had been after his position since the day they both started working in the Clarkston police department. Every time Lance took an extra shift, so would Gavin. Every time he volunteered to do traffic duty, so would Gavin. Lance spent his first few years in Clarkston in an almost constant state of paranoia, repeatedly looking over his shoulder to make sure that he was always a step ahead of Gavin. He needed the promotion, especially after his wife died and he had to send Gabby to Boston University. Arthur finally promoted him instead of Gavin because Lance was more levelheaded and able to handle situation like settling a fight between spouses or dealing with irate residents complaining about property disputes while Gavin, who was more of a firebrand, would worsen any situation that he had to fix. After Arthur had snapped at Lance for questioning his decisions in front of Gavin, Lance knew that Gavin would do anything to further wreck Lance's credibility.

Lance looked to his left because he knew Gwen would be walking from her class to the break room and hoped to catch her attention as she walked by. He knew that on Tuesdays she would go to the break room during second period because she knew that Kevin Laghiri, the chemistry teacher, would be teaching then and was doing everything in her ability to avoid his flirting. She was wearing a dark purple sweater dress that

hugged her slender, vase-like figure, making a part of Lance want nothing more than to follow her into the break room, but he couldn't risk Gavin snitching on him to Arthur.

The day Art invited all of his men to his home and told them about his plans to militarize, Lance felt sick, as if he had been sitting in rush hour on a hot commute. As Art invited them all to have beers in the backyard, he helped carry the cooler outside before telling Art that he had to go home to his family. As Lance was about to leave through the front door, he heard sniffing coming from the dark living room. A small figure lay curled on the couch and as he approached, Lance realized that it was Gwen. He turned on the flashlight on his phone to see her face better. Though smeared mascara and shiny rivers of fresh tears thinly masked her face, Gwen was the woman, apart from his wife, Sarah, who Lance thought was beautiful in a long time.

When Sarah was diagnosed with lung cancer, Lance felt helpless during every hospital visit, as she was vomiting and losing her hair because of the chemotherapy, and as she slipped away into death. After Sarah's death, he could, at times, feel waves of grief whenever he looked at Elaine or Gabby because all he could see was their mother. But they didn't just look like their mother—they were the sole possessors of the inside jokes and secrets that they shared with her, a society that Lance was never invited to be a part of. Gabby was going through high school at the time and even after raising one daughter through high school, Lance still struggled to figure out how to do it with Elaine.

But somehow in that moment, as he looked at Gwen, Lance felt closer in understanding to his daughters than he had been in a while. He remembered when Gabby began dating when she was fifteen, despite his strict rule of no boys before college or when he caught glimpses of "ES + JD" framed in hearts in the margins of Elaine's math

notebook when she was a freshman. He had no desire to find out who JD was and why his daughter, who had never shown interest in anyone, at least to his knowledge, was suddenly vandalizing her notebooks with lovesick doodles. Gwen was beautiful in that instantaneous, vulnerable high school crush way. Maybe he thought he could help her in the way that he couldn't help Sarah when she succumbed to lung cancer and in the way he couldn't support Elaine the way Sarah knew how to.

“What’s wrong?” He sat down next to her, a foot away in case any of the other officers walked by.

She sniffed, chuckling softly, “It’s nothing. Sorry. This is embarrassing. I’m just being silly.” She rubbed her eyes and began to stand up, but Lance touched her wrist, melting at the smoothness of her skin as he beckoned her to sit back down on the couch.

“It’s OK. You can tell me if you want?”

She paused, considering his offer, “I don’t know. I was eavesdropping on your conversation at the table. I wish I hadn’t been.”

“Oh, you heard that…”

Gwen cleared her throat and lifted her eyes sharply. “I’m no genius, but I know that killing Harry was no act of self-defense.” Lance remained silent, staring at the specks of moonlight coming through the window, which were splattered on the floor like paint.

“I’ve tried to get through to Arthur, but ever since he became chief, we just haven’t talk about anything important. And now, he’s even worse. Once he’s got his mind set on something, there’s no changing him.” Her voice cycled through breaking down and building up with every sentence.

“I want to help you, Gwen,” said Lance, almost stuttering as he said her name. “I don’t agree with Arthur either. You heard him shut me down. I’m not sure he wants to listen to anyone.”

The two of them sat in silence, listening to cars passing by the house. Lance looked around the room, staring at photographs of her and Art in the glass cabinet in the corner. He had never seen Art smile—eyes wrinkled and lips stretched into a half-moon—the way he did with Gwen’s arms snaked around him as they sat on a large rock at the beach. He looked over at Gwen who seemed to be looking at the same photograph. C’mon dude. Say something. Say anything.

Gwen stood up and smoothed her sweater dress, pressing the wrinkles against her narrow frame. Lance caught himself mentally tracing her outline in the moonlit living room.

“Let’s go for a drive. That always calms me down,” said Lance, trying to keep the nervousness out of his voice.

“Wait, what? You’re not serious, are you?”

“Of course. C’mon, I’ll have you back before anyone notices.”

Gwen’s mouth twisted uncomfortably as she debated with herself. “Ok...” she said, “Where were you thinking of going to?”

“There’s this spot by the pond that I used to go to with Elaine when she was little. We used to come stop and feed the ducks, talk, or read books.” He chuckled, “To this day, she still has her head buried in books and is always working on poems, essays, or whatever,” Lance paused, “She used to talk about your English class a lot to me actually.” Gwen blushed because she had always liked Elaine. Though she was one of the

quieter students, she was a talented writer, but ever since the shooting, it seemed that Elaine would spend the hour-long class trying to bore a hole into Gwen's head through her glaring. Gwen looked at Lance's eyes, a deep walnut color, an exact copy of Elaine's eyes, but devoid of anger and blame, instead softened by sympathy and tenderness.

“Used to?”

Lance scratched his head awkwardly, “Well, ever since the shooting, we haven't talked as much as we used to. I could really use someone to talk to also if you're up for it?”

They drove to Lancaster Pond, which served as the border between Clarkston and a neighboring town of Reading. Because of the dense fog, Lance drove slowly, simultaneously trying to see through the windshield and recall the layout of the streets. Condensation was creeping up from the corners of the windows, which made it even harder to see until Lance turned on the heat and started using his windshield wipers. Gwen lifted her hands to her mouth, cupping them to catch the warm air she was exhaling. He wanted to say something, but he wasn't sure what he could say to diffuse the tension as Gwen sat stiffly in the passenger seat, staring blankly out the window.

C'mon, man. Say something. She's obviously upset, and you said that you'd help her. Who are you kidding? This was a stupid plan. Why did you even ask her out on this drive in the first place? You should just drive straight back before Arthur notices and fires you. Lance paused in wrestling with his thoughts—wait, why would Arthur fire you? You're not even doing anything questionable. Right? You're just talking. Just talking.

“Do you want anything to eat? I think I have some chocolate,” said Lance. God, that was such a dumb thing to say. Chocolate? Really?

“Um...sure actually. That would be nice,” said Gwen.

Lance reached into the compartment between the seats, attempting to fish out a candy bar amidst the numerous wrappers. He and Elaine had stowed candy here so that they would have something to nibble on their countless drives. As he pulled it out, he felt guilty about taking candy out of the stash with consulting his daughter.

“Here ya go,” said Lance, offering Gwen a candy bar.

“Oh! Milky Way. That’s my favorite. I haven’t had it in so long. You don’t mind right?”

“No go ahead!” Reel it in, Lance.

“Mmmmm...this is so good. Thank you,” she said, mid-chew and with strings of caramel sticking to her teeth. She leaned back into the seat, placing her head against the headrest. “How much longer till we’re there?”

“We’re here now, actually,” said Lance, pulling the car gently to a stop in an empty parking lot adjacent to the pond.

The two of them sat on a rock at the edge of the pond, underneath the stars that crumbled across the dark sky. A thin layer of ice covered the pond like a frosted window. A house across the pond glowed yellow from the inside. Evergreens like spears stood like soldiers around the bank. The night was quiet except for the hum of crickets and the crunching of pebbles whenever they shuffled their feet.

“I used to bring Elaine here a lot after my wife died and her sister went off to college. It was just the two of us, but I had to be there for her. When we came here, it felt

like the world just went away, and it was just two of us,” said Lance. He remembered how sometimes they went swimming whenever it was too hot in the summer and would come out with fingertips looking like prunes.

“I’m sorry about your wife.”

“It’s OK. It’s been nine years now.”

“Ah, I see. I’m guessing Elaine misses her a lot.”

“Yeah. I’m not much of a role model for her these days. She’s pretty ashamed of me, especially since I told her that I had to go back to the force after everything that’s happened.”

“I’m sure you have your reasons.”

“Yeah. I need this job, more than anything. That’s the thing about being a parent. You’re always caught between so many hard decisions.”

Gwen looked pensively, rubbing her elbow as she stared at the ground, “I wish I knew what it felt like to be a parent.”

“Does Arthur not want kids?” asked Lance. “Sorry, if I’m being too nosy. You don’t have to answer that.”

“No, it’s OK. Years ago, he kept saying that he was busy and we would start trying once he’s ready, but we just kept putting it off. I’m forty right now, and I just don’t think children are in the cards for me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. And I do love Art. I just wished he wouldn’t be so focused on himself sometimes, you know?”

“Yeah, I do.”

Gwen lifted her head, staring at Lance. “I think I got married when I was too young. I had not a single clue of what I wanted and he seemed to know what he wanted for himself—to be a successful cop, to build a future for us in the suburbs. But if I could do it over, I think I would’ve said no when he proposed to me.”

Why was she saying this to me? Lance searched Gwen’s face for a sign like he was a palm reader, searching for a glimpse of the future. Before he could talk himself out of it, Lance leaned forward, pressing his lips against hers, thinking that the last time he had kissed a woman like this was when he was with Sarah.

After that night, they had both promised to never do anything like that again, and they hadn’t seen each other until Lance began patrolling the school hallways. Whenever Lance stood at his usual post, he noticed Gwen walking by him several times during the day, casting long glances in his direction. Sometimes he asked Tristan to change places with him so that he could be closer to her classroom, just so that he could hear her voice through the door. One of these times, as she walked out the door after all of her students had filed out, she was staring at the papers in her hands when she nearly bumped into him.

“Um, hi. Sorry,” said Gwen, trying to scoot around him.

“Wait,” said Lance, blocking her from moving forward. He would’ve let her go if the hallway was busier and Gavin were patrolling an adjacent hallway. “We need to talk.”

“What do you mean? There’s nothing to talk about.”

“I really can’t stop thinking about you.”

“Shh...” said Gwen, sharply. “Someone’s gonna to hear you.”

“I know you feel something. I’ve seen you walk by me multiple times in the hallway.” Gwen looked at her shoes, refusing to confirm Lance’s assumption.

“Look, if you don’t want to talk about it right now, that’s fine. But Arthur’s working late tonight at the station. I’ll be at your house at 8:00 tonight. If you don’t come out to meet me, I’ll know where you stand.” Lance stepped aside, clearing the path for her. She looked at him worriedly before walking down the hall, turning back to stare at him longingly.

At 7:58 that night, Lance sat in his car, agonizing over the moment when 8:00 would appear on the digital clock. He held a half-eaten Milky Way bar in his right hand, one of the several candy bars he had stress-eaten on his way to Arthur’s house. All the lights in Arthur’s house were off, giving the house an abandoned, empty feel. Then, front door opened as Gwen clambered down the stairs and then down the path that cut through the lawn. She turned her head to the left and to the right as she walked briskly down the path. When she got to the passenger side window, she crouched down so that she was eye-level with Lance who had rolled down the window. She spied the half-eaten bar in his right hand, along with the other wrappers he had failed to completely hide underneath his seat. She smiled mischievously at him, “Got any left for me?”

## Guinevere

As Gwen rested her head on Lance's chest, she watched white lights intermittently flash through the cheap Greenwich motel curtains. The room had a lingering musty smell and every time she touched a wooden surface, her finger would be covered in a layer of dust. However, she didn't mind the scratchy sheets as long as she could feel Lance's breath against her hair and the rise and fall of his chest under her head and fingers. His arm was draped over her bare shoulder, and he occasionally rubbed her skin with his fingers. Their legs were intertwined underneath the sheets, so that she couldn't tell where he ended and she began.

"Hey, beautiful. What are you thinking about?" Gwen liked Lance's coarse, post-sex voice and more importantly, whenever he spoke to her this way, he would always transport her to a place out of time. The world would go away and would be replaced by a false reality. The shooting never happened. She wasn't married to Arthur. There wasn't guilt. With Lance, she could pretend she was in high school again, a girl discovering what it was like to feel desired.

"Nothing. I just feel good," she said, lifting her head to kiss his lips, "I just wanna stay like this for a little longer." Gwen knew that the moment she left that motel room, the real world would come stampeding.

"We're gonna have to go back at some point. Didn't you tell him that you were just going out for dinner with Kathy from the math department?"

"We could be going out for drinks. Who's he to say when my curfew is?"

Whenever she was with Lance, Arthur's name would turn to "him." But "he," as far as Gwen knew, didn't question her when she was going out to dinner every single

week with some member of the faculty at Clarkston High, and she was sure that he just assumed that her sociability was signs of her recovering emotionally from the shooting. But in reality, everyone at school believed that she was still a victim. Every time she walked into the teachers' break room, the bright chatter in the room would change color, transforming into muted conversations about sports or the weather, as people tried to not offend her. Gwen suspected that Lance felt the same way about her. She felt it in the way he made love to her, as if he were afraid of breaking her, in the way he was trying so hard to be everything that Arthur wasn't—attentive, gentle, and loving. But she didn't feel like a victim because she felt that she deserved everything that had happened to her. Maybe if she had taken Harry's depression more seriously, she could have saved his life along with her other students'. Maybe if she had demanded that Arthur invest more time in their marriage, she wouldn't be in bed with Lance. When they were making love, the guilt would suspend in the air, but when they stopped, it would pour over her like acid rain. He was a temporary escape; she told herself over and over that each time would be the last.

Gwen felt him shift underneath her, making the bed squeak and disturbing the stillness. She sat up, but as soon as she detached herself from Lance, she felt the bone-crushing weight of her shame, so she hugged her sheet-covered legs for support. Lance's callused fingers ran comfortingly down the ridges of her spine, pausing every so often to rub small circles on her back.

“Are you sure you want to keep doing this? Like I said, we can stop anytime that you want.” Lance's offer was hollow, one that he made several times out of chivalrousness, as if he had convinced himself that she was the only one who needed this escape.

“No. I want to. We’ve been careful and need to keep doing that. We *cannot* get caught. There’s other people to think about,” said Gwen.

“OK, if you’re sure. I just want to be sure.”

Gwen swung her legs over the side of the bed, leaving the protection of the sheets and sensing Lance’s eyes pinned on her naked body. She walked towards the dirty mirror on top of the dresser and leaned in. Her lipstick and eyeliner were smudged, mascara formed spider webs around her eyes, and dry patches of skin were exposed on places where her foundation had come off. Reaching into her purse, she grabbed a pack of makeup wipes and cleaned her face. Then, she took a shower as quickly as possible in order to get home, scrubbing frantically at her body to wash off Lance’s cologne. She emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a towel, clouds of steam emanating from behind her, and blushed as Lance made a loud exhale as he absorbed the sight of her.

“He’s a lucky man,” said Lance as he winked, making her blush even more.

No he’s not, thought Gwen, he’s got a cheating wife and a disloyal cop on his hands. She picked up the clothes that she had discarded on the ground and began to spray them with her body spray. She then walked over to the mirror on the dresser and began to reapply her makeup.

When she was finished, she shrugged on her coat and purse, and walked over to Lance’s side of the bed. She leaned down and tried to give him a quick peck on the lips, but he cradled the back of her head, pressing it down towards his face, as he deepened the kiss. They finally broke away, breathless and grateful for one last moment of pleasure.

Gwen asked, “Are you going to go soon?”

“Yeah, you go ahead. I just need a few minutes.” Though Elaine was home, she had been giving Lance the silent treatment since the shooting. He didn’t like to talk to Gwen about his relationship with Arthur, his daughters, his late wife. Every time it seemed like any of these topics would come up, he’d change the topic or interrupt her with a kiss. But Gwen had seen Elaine ignore his attempts to talk to her in the hallway, the way he refused to call Arthur by his name, the way he carried his rifle at school as if it were going to burn him. Lance’s kisses always felt like they were designed for anybody, any woman who could help him forget.

“OK, same time next week?” Gwen asked.

“Of course. Have a good night,” said Lance, flashing her a soft smile.

Gwen walked out of the motel and shivered as the cold air slashed her face. Reaching into her bag, she pulled out her body spray again, closed her eyes, and sprayed her face and hair, hoping to mask any of traces of Lance’s scent from their last kiss.

She barely paid attention to the roads she took from Greenwich Motel, which was a couple towns over from Clarkson, and by the time she was at her front door and had her key in the keyhole, she still wasn’t ready to go in her own house.

After releasing a long exhale, she unlocked the door and pushed it open, revealing a dark hallway at the end of which was the faint glow coming from the kitchen. She felt as if the sound of her heartbeat were echoing off the walls, and hugged her jacket closer to her chest as if she could muffle the sound.

“Hey, I’m home,” Gwen called into the darkness, trying to smooth the tremor in her voice.

“In here,” said Arthur from the kitchen. Gwen swallowed. It’s fine. You’ve done this many times before. Just go in there and act natural. She took off her heels and padded down the hallway, the wooden floor chilling her feet as she walked.

When Gwen emerged into the dim kitchen, Arthur, who was in a white t-shirt and sweatpants, was leaning against the kitchen counter, a glass of water in his right hand and his phone in the other, barely looking up when she entered the room. “How was dinner? Um, with, who was it? Julie? Yeah, how was that?”

“Um, I thought I told you that I was a dinner with Kathy? I ended up going to a bar with her afterwards.” She tucked a strand of loose hair behind her ear, trying to do anything that would keep her hands from shaking.

“Oh, right. Sorry.” He grew silent, staring at his feet as if he were trying to remember what Gwen had actually told him.

“Did you eat yet?” Gwen asked, even though she saw some dishes in the sink.

“Yeah, just some leftovers from yesterday,” he took one final sip of water, “I think I’m gonna go to bed, though. Long day.” He gave her a quick peck on the cheek and dissolved into the dark hallway. All the dirty dishes were still in the sink.

Well, washing the dishes is the least I can do. After turning on the faucet, she held her hands under the water until it was warm enough to turn her hands pink. Then, she began scrubbing the clumps of mac and cheese off a plate.

When they first started dating, they’d spent so much time at his apartment. As a twenty-two-old she had jumped at the chance of any reprieve from the overheated, messy box of her college dorm. That fact that he was seven years older didn’t bother her, although it made her parents and friends raise their eyebrows. He had the charm and

confidence that guys her age didn't; he was romantic and steady in the way that guys her age weren't. It was the domesticity that lured her to him. They ate home-cooked meals over glasses of wine instead of microwave meals and wine in paper cups. They'd spend the night, cuddled under a blanket, drifting off to sleep as the TV hummed with quiet chatter. During these nights, while he snored as she hugged him tightly, Gwen imagined what it would've been like to have a house of their own—a small blue cottage with black shutters and white trim, a rose garden in the front, a lawn big enough for their kids, a girl and a boy, to run through sprinklers in the summer.

She paused in the middle of washing, listening to the silence shrouding the house; no sense of reprieve came to her like it would've after finally putting a bellowing child to bed. Here she was pretending to be a dutiful, obedient wife, she thought bitterly to herself. Maybe in some miniscule part of her, she wanted Arthur to find out about her and Lance so that Arthur could be impassioned about something that wasn't his job. But she couldn't do that to Lance—he needed his job. Gwen also didn't want to explode Arthur's assumption that he had his life, his career, and this town under control. The five cups of coffee that he drank every day, staying away from alcohol like it was poison, running at 5:00 am several times a week, and mostly the power to re-discipline the Clarkston police department were the only things that gave Arthur a sense of control these days.

Soon after the shooting, Arthur made sure to be home promptly at 6:00 so that he could make and eat dinner with her, and as they ate their food, he would probe her about her day. During those days, Gwen was transported back to when they first started dating and how she was enamored of this older man who made her the center of his world. But

then she lost him again. He began to seclude himself at work, calling her and promising that he would be back in time for dinner, but returning only after she'd gone to bed.

Maybe this was the isolation that Harry felt whenever he visited her in her office. The last time Harry came to see her was two weeks before he shot his classmates. Gwen had been sitting at her desk grading papers and bouncing her foot rapidly in her impatience for her lunch break. She was down to the last two papers, and wanted to feel the satisfaction of having her Friday free of everything but just two classes to teach. A soft knock had sounded on the wall of her cubicle, and Harry's top half peeped from the other side of the wall.

"Hey, Mrs. Long. Do you have a sec?" Based on their previous meetings, Gwen knew that when Harry's eyebrows were furrowed and he bit his bottom lip more often than normal, he wasn't worried about classroom related issues.

She hesitated, thinking about the chicken and pesto pasta that she was going to have for lunch. "Umm...Harry. I have some big deadlines to meet. If this isn't about the work, could you come back sometime in the next two periods. Or after school?"

"I don't have any more free periods, and I have to get on the bus after school, since I don't live here. It really won't take that long. Please. You're the only person I can talk to." Harry pulled up the metal chair that was sitting on the wall across from her cubical, plopping down across from her and clasping his hands together as he leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. His expression became murky and searching, as if he were trying to find words to fit the torrential chaos in his mind.

“My dad died a few days ago,” he said, but his dark eyes remained cold. Gwen remembered how Harry mentioned how he wasn’t close to his parents, but he never mentioned anything about abuse, so she didn’t question him much about his family life.

“Oh, Harry. I’m sorry. How?”

“He had too much to drink one night, got into a fight outside of the bar, and one of the guys had a pocket knife and stabbed him to death.”

“How are you and your mom doing?”

“I think my mom’s pretty happy about it actually. She’s out drinking more than she normally did when he was alive, sleeping around with so many guys now that she doesn’t have to sneak around.”

“Did you talk to her about it?”

“No,” he snapped, “this is some dumb white people shit. We don’t kiss and make up. My dad’s dead. My mom feels like she has her life back again. And I couldn’t care less. This is why I’m here to talk to you.” Harry gritted his teeth, “Mrs. Long, I don’t feel anything. My family is in complete shambles, and I couldn’t care less. Is there something wrong with me?”

“Everyone grieves differently.”

Harry’s leg started bouncing rapidly at her answer, and he rubbed his face in his hands, “No, but you don’t get it. I’m not grieving. I’m not happy. I just can’t feel anything anymore.”

Gwen looked at the clock, ten more minutes before lunch and she still had two more papers to grade. “Look, Harry. This isn’t really something I can talk you through.

Maybe you could go see one of our guidance counselors? Mrs. Halloway is great, and she's an expert when it comes to loss."

Harry looked up, tears lining his eyes. "What does she know about loss?" He said through gritted teeth.

"What?"

"What do you know about loss? Do you know what it's like to fall asleep to the sound of gunfire? Do you know what it's like to find out that one of your childhood friends was killed in an alleyway because he missed the earlier bus home? What do you know?"

Gwen's mouth opened as she scrambled to find an answer, but no words came.

Harry stood up stiffly, swinging his backpack over his shoulder, and said, "You white people with your degrees and expertise don't know anything about shit." He stormed out of the cubicle, knocking the metal chair over with his backpack as he turned. Gwen caught it before it hit the ground, and she released a long sigh. She made a mental note to email Susan Halloway, to see if she could reach out to Harry, and then Gwen picked up her red pen and crossed out a misspelled word on Jack Peters' essay. When would that kid learn that "disappoint" only had one "s" and two "p's?"

Gwen looked down at the plate she had been washing for ten minutes, not a speck of mac and cheese left on its surface. Her hands were pruny and red. She looked up at the window, seeing her own broken reflection in the polished glass. She never sent that email to Susan.

After she washed the rest of the plates, she went upstairs to their bedroom where Arthur was snoring and deeply asleep. She opened the closet, reaching for the topmost

shelf in search of a new pair of pajamas, but her hands landed on something hard, cold, metal. She wrapped her arms around what she thought to be the handle and pulled out a pistol. Surprised by the weight, she nearly dropped it. What jumped to her mind was the memory of when she found Arthur's ring hidden in the bedroom of their first apartment together. Nestled in a velvet navy box was a round-cut diamond with a gold band. After calling her mother in excitement, Gwen placed the box back underneath the winter parka it was under and pretended that everything was fine. But Arthur had brought a weapon into their house, in their bedroom nonetheless. It would've been as bad as discovering that Arthur was bringing a mistress into their bedroom. Gwen turned around, shielding the gun with her body, and watched Arthur's form rise and fall, relieved that he was still asleep. She tucked the gun under the flannel pajamas that she was about to wear, and crept back down to the kitchen.

She sat at her kitchen table, her entire body trembling. Why did he need a gun in their house? Was this his own weapon or did he take it from the armory? How many other guns did he have stashed around the house? Feeling haunted, Gwen peered around the room, fearing that at any second a gun would come clattering down from one of the cabinets.

She grabbed her laptop, which was sitting on the counter, hoping to distract herself from the haunting after-image of Arthur's pistol, and went on Facebook. She clicked on the red notification, hoping that Kevin hadn't invited her to play "Sugar Crush" again, but she saw that Susan had tagged her in a post. Clicking the notification, she saw an article titled "Survivor of Clarkston Shooting Speaks Out Against Police Brutality." Susan had written: Do you know who it is?

The article came from a blog named “Written in Black,” and from what Gwen gathered, it had exploded on social media and accumulated thousand of likes and shares. She read through the article, mostly searching for her own name, but also for the student who had come forward. However, he or she had remained anonymous. In the middle of the page was a quote from this survivor: “The cops shot Harry, after he had already put his gun down. But it wasn’t just law enforcement that failed him. His teachers failed him. I failed him.”

Gwen’s breath caught in her throat. Could it have been Elaine? She was the only one who was visibly angry with her for not being there that day, and Gwen didn’t blame her. Gwen thought about Arthur’s hidden gun in the closet, the gun that Harry had used to kill his classmates, the gun that Officer Watt used to kill Harry. How could she have let a weapon into the house? Passive people, she realized, have a real affinity for disaster. Those who pretend that everything is fine are often the reason everything goes wrong.

### The Tale of the Holy Grail: The Departure

Erin kept stirring her coffee long after the sugar cubes had melted into the dark liquid, like islands dissolving into a dark ocean. She stared at the drops of rain racing down the long glass window. Sitting in the booth at the back of the Trembling Cup Café, she hoped that no one would recognize her. A couple sat at a table about three feet away from her booth. They appeared to be in their thirties, a man whose leg bounced nervously underneath the table and a woman compulsively tucking her hair behind her ear. A first date, Erin assumed, from the way they responded to one another without hesitation, like they were afraid the silence would linger for too long. Erin looked away as she took a sip of her coffee when she thought the woman had caught her staring at them, but she was only reaching for the phone in her purse to show him photos. From his cooing, Erin assumed that they were photos of her dog.

She looked down at her mug and noticed that more than half of the liquid had disappeared. This activism planning was starting to scare her. What started as a blog for her to talk to countless anonymous faces had turned into her convening an all-female Justice League. She wasn't sure if she liked the power or not, but it was different from what she was used to, which was letting other people make decisions for her. When Viv first reached out to her about using her blog for activism, Erin wasn't sure if Viv was just trying to manipulate her into playing out a story for her to write for *Emporium Weekly*. But at their first meeting, Viv told her that she would just was there to bounce ideas off her and write about what ends up happening. The thought of making anything happen made Erin shudder, made her wonder aloud if she was in any position to say or do anything.

Erin watched the couple—the woman accidentally bumping the man’s leg underneath the table, the chuckling to cover up intention—a first point of contact.

She felt a cold, skinny finger brush against her skin, which jolted her out of her trance. “Are you OK?” Viv asked, shifting her head into Erin’s view, blocking the couple.

Erin shook herself, remembering that she had been sitting across from Viv the entire time.

“Yeah,” Erin said. “Maybe? I’m not sure?”

“Are you nervous about all of us coming together?”

“Slightly.”

“It’s just one more person. Elaine got on with the program just fine, and she’s just sixteen. This teacher, Gwen, shouldn’t be a problem. She said she’s on our side.”

“I don’t know, Viv. I feel like this could get out of hand really quickly.”

For so long, Erin’s father had told her to blend in, to not draw attention to herself. Being black meant that her constitutional rights were limited by default. When he decided to break his own rules, to claim ownership of his rights, he was killed. Erin groaned inwardly—for all they knew, this Gwen woman might’ve already told her husband everything.

“You remember when Elaine first met us right?” Viv asked.

Erin thought about when Elaine came to this café to meet them for the first time. Elaine had come dressed up—black tights and a dark green sweater dress as if she were going into a college interview. She was tall, wispy, one might call her, and Erin could not believe that she was only sixteen. There was a serious look on her face, which matched

the sharp cut of her cheekbones. When she introduced herself, she fumbled over the words and her cheeks grew red because everything that she had probably rehearsed beforehand, her practiced composure, crumbled as the feeling of intimidation crept up on her.

“Yes.”

“Remember when she told us that her dad was part of the force? How he’s the chief’s right-hand man?”

“Mhmm.”

“Remember how you took a chance on her anyways? Her statement made such a big splash on the blog.”

“I guess you’re right. We need more people to speak up. I mean that’s the point of this blog.”

Viv and Erin glanced at the window next to them as a figure rushed past. It was Elaine, walking briskly towards the café door, while she clutched her hood so it wouldn’t be blown away by the wind.

“One more,” said Viv, taking a sip of her hot chocolate as she glanced down at her leather watch. Erin started stirring what remained of coffee, like she was turning the hands of a clock. The couple stood up together, commenting on the rain before putting on their coats. The man gestured at his umbrella, offering to walk the woman to her car. They fumbled at the door of the café, inadvertently playing a quick game of chicken with Elaine, before she stepped aside and let them pass. Underneath the umbrella, the woman huddled against the man’s shoulder, shrinking away from the rain.

“Hey guys,” said Elaine, brushing her stringy hair away from her forehead as she slid into the booth next to Viv. Erin noticed how this week, Elaine seemed a lot more comfortable with her and Viv, as if she was actually looking forward to meeting with them. Elaine was also a force of calm that balanced out Viv’s inexhaustible energy, the way Elaine seemed to mull her thoughts over before speaking and how Viv always came close to knocking something over with her hand gestures. By the time Gwen arrived, they didn’t even notice until she cleared her throat and said, “Elaine?”

In the midst of asking about Viv’s job as a fact-checker at *Emporium*, Elaine’s smile crumpled into a look of confusion. She raised an eyebrow. “Hi? Mrs. Long, what are you doing here?”

Erin and Viv wondered if it had been wrong to invite Gwen to this meeting without Elaine’s knowledge. She had always complained harshly about her teacher who was treating the shooting like it had never happened, and they worried that getting Gwen involved would make Elaine not show up to this meeting. But Erin needed all of them at this meeting, to get people to work together instead against each other.

“Erin,” she said, looking confusedly between the two other women, “invited me.”

“Yes, take a seat, Gwen. We’re happy to have you,” said Erin, shifting to make room for her.

Elaine’s mouth dropped slightly, “You know her husband’s the chief of police, right?”

“For the record, I’m on your side,” said Gwen, cutting in. Elaine folded her arms into her chest, waiting for someone to explain the situation to her.

“Look, Elaine. I’m sorry. I know you see me at school pretending like everything is OK and that nothing’s changed, and you’re right. I have been doing that. But I’m not stupid. School is a terrifying place to be right now. I’m not totally sure where I’m safe anymore, even at home.”

“What do you mean, at home?” Viv asked.

Gwen shifted in her seat and rubbed her arm uncomfortably. She said, “I found a gun in my bedroom closet yesterday. My husband’s. He’s been hiding it from me.”

“He’s a cop, though? Don’t they normally have off-duty guns?” Viv raised her eyebrows.

“Just because they can doesn’t mean they should. Look at this town. Who are they gonna shoot? A sixteen-year-old shoplifter? I told him a long time ago, ‘no guns in the house.’”

Erin thought about Garrett, who was also in the Clarkston police force, how he would come home every day from work and go straight into the shower, without saying a word to her. The sound of clinking silverware filled the silence at dinnertime, that is, if they were even having dinner together. She thought about the places in her house that she didn’t venture too often—the shed, the garage, the guest bedroom, Garrett’s drawer of clothes in their bedroom, underneath the mattress.

“Gwen’s right. Enough is enough. No more guns. No more bloodshed. And no more violence. That’s why we’re here,” said Erin.

“So, what do you think we should do?” Elaine asked. She had been sitting with her back slouched against the booth, her arms folded into her chest, a pout threatening to emerge on her lips, her whininess making her seem more like a teenager now.

“I think we need to start documenting things that are happening at the high school. Photos, videos, students’ statements, anything you hear or see happening,” said Erin, “then we can compile it onto the blog. It will be live updates on everything that’s going on. The searches. Police in the hallway. Testaments of fear.”

“So, you’re saying that we’re pulling a *Gossip Girl*?” Elaine sat forward, leaning on her elbows and grinning in amusement.

“Excuse me?” Gwen asked.

“You know, *Gossip Girl*?” Elaine looked around at the other three women. Viv seemed to be the only one who knew what she was talking about. “It’s this show about rich kids going to prep school in New York City. And there’s this anonymous blogger who gets confidential tips from students or even random people in New York about scandals centered on these kids. Like these rich kids aren’t only rich, but they’re kind of like celebrities. Everyone seems to care about what they’re doing.”

“Well, we’re not a tabloid platform,” said Erin, slightly disgruntled.

“Well, going with the comparison here,” said Gwen, “We’re making high school, these kids the center of attention. High school is supposed to be a safe place for its students, but that simply isn’t today’s reality. We have to show what students are going through every day since that shooting. Hell, what too many kids have been going through in this country.”

Elaine looked at her teacher with a sense of renewed confidence, and turned again to Erin. “You’ve got the two of us, your first insiders. I bet we could get you a lot more.”

## Galahad

The smell of pancakes woke Gabby, making her stretch and blink the sleep from her eyes. She sat up in bed, remembering that she wasn't in her police academy dormitory getting rashes from her itchy sheets anymore. She was at home, swaddled in a purple star-patterned comforter in her childhood bed. Instead of bare walls, she saw posters of her teenage idols—One Direction and Justin Bieber—staring at her with half-moon, whitened smiles.

Gabby jumped as Elaine slammed a drawer on the other side of the wall. Gabby rolled her eyes, knowing that she'd probably have to cut her morning routine by a couple of minutes since Elaine liked to take her time in the bathroom. For a split second, she began to miss the communal showers at college; despite their moldy curtains and consistently wet tile floors, at least she never had to wait for a shower stall to be open. She walked over to the chair by her desk where she had laid out her uniform the previous night, and touched the Clarkston Police badge stitched on the upper left breast. After putting on her uniform, she looked at her reflection in the mirror that hung on the back of her door. The uniform fit her perfectly.

“Dad? Are you cooking again?” Gabby called as she walked downstairs and tried to tie her hair in a ponytail at the same time. In the kitchen, she saw her dad, dressed in his uniform, sliding two golden pancakes from the skillet onto two of the three plates on the table. “When was the last time we sat down for breakfast like this?”

“What? It's your first day at work. Can't a father make sure his daughter is well nourished?” Lance dropped a couple more dollops of batter onto the skillet, turning around to ask, “You like blueberries on your pancakes, right?”

“Chocolate chips, actually. But I’m fine either way.” Gabby slid into one of the seats. As she began to nibble on one of the pancakes, Elaine came downstairs, towing her backpack, which bumped along the steps as she descended.

“How did you sleep Laney?” Gabby asked with a piece of fluffy pancake in her mouth.

“Ehhh...would’ve slept better without someone snoring next door to me.”

“Oh you’re talking about Dad?” But when Elaine continued staring pointedly at her, Gabby said, “Oh, c’mon Laney. You know you missed me.”

Gabby’s smile fell as Elaine scoffed and went over to the coffee maker. She’d never failed to coax a laugh out of her sister, even when she was in a mood.

“You know, now that Elaine mentions it, I think I do recall loud snoring coming from the other end of the hallway,” said Lance as he brought the last two pancakes over to the table, sliding one on Elaine’s plate and one on his own.

“Thanks, but Maya’s gonna pick me in like a minute,” said Elaine, chugging her coffee.

“Oh, um...here, why don’t you take a muffin and banana to go,” said Lance, as he reached towards for the plastic container of store-bought muffins and bananas sitting on the countertop. “Don’t want you to go hungry.”

“No, I’m good. Thanks.” Elaine swung her backpack on her back and hurried out the door, without looking at her father or sister. Lance breathed a long sigh and made for the roll of plastic wrap sitting on the counter.

“Dad, this can’t keep going on. I’ve been home for a week, and not once have we sat down for a meal together. She’s barely looked us in the eyes.”

“She’ll come around. She’s living under the same roof with two cops and she’s just going to need some time to adjust to this.”

“Can you talk to her?”

“You think she’s gonna listen?”

Gabby stabbed a fork in her pancake with a little too much force. Elaine had always been quiet, even more so after their mother died, but she had never seen her like this, a shadow of a person, a whisper.

“Is she eating?”

“What? I mean, I think so...I can’t keep an eye on her like I did when she was a kid. She doesn’t want that anyways.”

Maybe it was just in her head, but Gabby thought that Elaine was looking a lot thinner than last time she saw her.

Lance stuffed one last pancake in his mouth and mumbled, “Let’s go Gab, we’re gonna be late on your first day.”

As they drove toward the police station, Gabby looked out the window at the streets, making swirling patterns in the condensation on the glass, remembering the times that Mom had driven her and Elaine to visit Dad at the station and the times that her dad had given them rides in his police car. Even though she loved growing up in Clarkston, it was hard to accept being back in her hometown, but she was willing to take anything over unemployment, even the job of the cop who had killed a young black shooter. According to what Elaine had told her over the phone, the shooter was surrendering when the cop shot him. Gabby wasn’t sure what to believe. In the classroom, she had learned about plenty of scenarios where cops had been too trusting of perpetrators whom they

thought were surrendering. After Officer Watt quit his job, her dad called her while she was in her final week of academy, asking if she would come back to Clarkston to fill his role. It would be mostly desk work for the first few months or so, but if she worked hard, Arthur would give her more responsibilities. He also told her that Clarkston's police department was undergoing a redesign process, to tighten security so that no more mass shootings would happen, but she didn't have to worry about it too much since she would be on desk duty anyways. Plus, he said, Elaine needed her, and he needed his family back together.

Speaking to him over the phone, hearing the desperation drawing out his voice, Gabby remembered how after her mom's funeral, the three of them came home with their black clothes wet and muddied from tramping through the cemetery in the rain. Her dad walked into the living with his shoes on, trailing mud on their cream-colored carpet, and collapsed on the couch. He sat there for a moment, fixating on a photograph on the cabinet, one of him and Mom, hugging her and Elaine as they stood in towels and bathing suits on the beach. Then he crumpled into himself, weeping uncontrollably before she and Elaine walked over and sat on either side of him. They snaked their arms around him and each other, listening to him whisper, "I need you" in between sobs. They spent an hour the next day on their knees, scrubbing away at the three sets of dried footprints stamped on the carpet.

When they pulled into the parking lot, they saw Arthur just getting out his car, which was parked a few spots over to them. Though he looked tired and haggard, he still managed to flash a wide smile.

“Well, if it isn’t Gabby Shen? Look at how much you’ve changed since I last saw you.” Arthur greeted them as they approached him. Her hair was much longer than when she was in high school, and she might have had a surprise growth spurt in her second year at college.

“Good to see you again, Chief Long. Thank you for giving me this opportunity,” said Gabby.

“Don’t sweat it, kid. It should be me thanking you.” Arthur looked at Lance and said with a voice empty of feeling, “Such a shame that Bailey had to leave, right?”

Inside the station, Arthur shuttled her and her dad to her desk, or rather, Bailey’s old desk. He pointed out that the bottom-most drawer in the desk didn’t open, but she wouldn’t need to worry about it since there was plenty of room in the two drawers over it. Bailey had tried to pry it open when he first started working at the police department but soon gave up after his neighbors, Tristan and Percy, complained about the incessant squeaking noises.

“That Bailey,” said Arthur, shaking his head, “always cared too much about other peoples’ opinions. I knew it was only gonna be a matter of time before he quit.” Gabby saw her dad purse his lips, as if he were preventing himself from saying something he would regret. She couldn’t blame Bailey. If she were him, she would’ve quit also.

“Now, Tristan is going to teach you how to use our data management system. Very simple. You’re going to pick it up very quickly. We’re gonna have you doing mostly paperwork, so entering data into the computer. This will mainly consist of minor complaints like someone reporting a missing wallet, you know, stuff like that.” Gabby nodded but couldn’t help wondering if going through all sleepless nights at police

academy because her muscles were throbbing from the drills were worth doing menial desk work in her hometown police department.

Arthur checked his watch. “I have some time before I have to go on patrol. Why don’t I give you a tour of the place?”

“Uhh...Art. That’s all right. We don’t want to keep you from going about your day. I know this place well enough, why don’t I just give Gabby a tour?”

“It’s all right. As chief, it’s my duty to show our newest recruit around. But when I’m not here, she is one hundred percent your responsibility,” said Arthur with warning in his eyes, “Got it?”

Lance nodded quickly before saying, “I’m going to my desk for a bit, have fun Gab. I’ll be right over there if you need me.”

After her dad disappeared into his office, Arthur led her down a hallway, pointing out various rooms as they passed them. The station was impeccably clean—the floors recently waxed and the faint smell of lemon-scented disinfectant that reminded her of hospitals. Sometimes, when they passed by an open door and saw someone working at a desk inside, Arthur’s jolly demeanor bubbled up as he greeted whoever was behind the door. But from what Gabby could tell, the other officers always looked as if they thought that even smiling at Arthur would cost them their jobs.

At the end of the hallway, they passed by a metal door, the only door that had a scanner next to it. All the other rooms in this station could be opened with traditional keys.

“Now, this is what I’ve been most excited to show you. If you work hard, you’ll be spending more time in here.” He took the plastic badge clipped on his belt and held it

up to the scanner, until they heard the scanner beep and the door click open. As they walked into the dark room, they triggered the motion sensor lights. Gabby squinted as her eyes adjusted to the light but as soon as she could see the shelves stacked to full capacity with weapons, she felt fear running through her veins.

Arthur walked over to the first door of a long row of lockers on the left side of the wall and put in the combination code for the padlock. Then he swung open the door, looking at Gabby with an expression of pride. She swallowed at the sight of the numerous rifles squeezed into a single compartment and worried that they would come spilling out at any moment.

“That’s an impressive amount of artillery,” she said, trying to keep her voice from wavering. She rubbed her palms on her pants.

“This is just one compartment. We still got all those down the wall,” Arthur said, gesturing to the fifteen or so doors down the length of the locker. “And I believe that we have another shipment coming in soon.”

“Where would you store those?”

“We’re doing some renovations to the station, so we’re gonna add few square feet to this armory so we can build another locker and probably put another shelf over there,” said Arthur, gesturing to the places that he planned organize his weaponry.

“Aren’t there way more weapons than there are officers to use them?”

Arthur looked at her with gravity in his eyes, all of the pretended jolliness sucked out of his expression. “My officers are going to need more than one weapon on the job, just in case. We need to be prepared. Look, kid. You haven’t been in this field for as long as I have. But as law enforcement it is your job to protect civilians and sometimes,” he

stroked the barrel of one of the rifles, “it doesn’t matter how you do it as long as you do it. Another mass shooting or anything else like it will not happen again to this town under my watch.”

Gabby felt that the room was closing in on her, as if the lockers and shelves were going to crush her. She didn’t want to be insubordinate on her first day, but all that Elaine had been telling her about the police stalking up and down the hallways of the high school while toting rifles became much more vivid in her imagination. Would she want to work hard enough so that Arthur would promote her to terrorizing high school students?

“Oh, and one other thing,” said Arthur, interrupting her thoughts, “Don’t talk to the press. And if you can’t avoid doing so, you’re responsible for keeping our story straight. Bailey killed that kid, Webster, in self-defense. End of story. Got it?”

The motion sensor lights flicked off after he finished his sentence, and all Gabby could see was dark.

## Elaine

Tracks of footprints cut a diagonal across a fresh layer of snow, which blanketed the school's lawn. The line of students waiting to be searched by the police stretched to the edge of the lawn and then spilled over onto the sidewalk. The students, dwarfed by their winter coats, their hands stuffed in pockets, their chins buried in their scarves, dragged their feet as the line shifted forward. This was the first picture that Elaine took this morning.

Because she was texting, Maya barely spoke to her as they stood in line. Elaine watched as Maya's thumbs poked furiously on the screen while her face contorted in pain from exposing her thumbs to the cold for too long.

"You OK, Maya?"

"No, look at this shit that Monica just sent me." She flashed her phone at Elaine, showing her a video that Monica Fredrickson sent her from the front of the line. Elaine squinted her eyes, making out the slightly pixelated video of what looked like Miguel Gutierrez walking up to an officer to be searched.

"Take your hands out of your pockets," said the officer. Miguel paused before throwing his hands out of his pocket.

From what Elaine could make out, the cop said, "Who do you think you are kid?" No answer. The cop grabbed Miguel's hands, twisting him around so that his back now faced him, and began to slap Miguel down the sides of his body.

"You think you're all that, kid? What, are you hiding something?" He turned Miguel around to face him, but when Miguel refused to answer him, the cop became even angrier.

“Bet you’re stupid enough to bring weed onto school property. Gimme that backpack.” The officer grabbed the backpack from Miguel’s hands, unzipped it, and began throwing its contents on the floor. Elaine could hear voices in the line saying, “Hey man, that’s not cool” and “What the fuck?” Miguel continued to stare at the officer, trying to hide his anger behind a placid expression. When the cop was done ravaging Miguel’s backpack, he thrust it back into his hands and said, “Pick up your shit.”

“Pendejo,” said Miguel under his breath, as he began to kneel, but the cop was faster. He grabbed Miguel by the back of his neck and shoved him towards the ground, causing him to fall forward onto his hands.

“We speak English here. Got it?”

Without another word, Miguel picked up his pencils and notebooks from the ground, shoving them into his backpack. Then, he swung his backpack onto his shoulder, and stalked off down the hallway.

When the video ended, Elaine realized that her palms were shaking with anger inside her gloves. She thought about her father, the fact that she’d rarely heard him raise his voice at her or Gabby, and wondered if he would ever be capable of pushing a kid down like that.

“Could you send me that video by the way?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Just want to see it again.” After Maya sent her the video, Elaine sent it off to Erin: Look what just happened at security! Please get this up ASAP. Keeping secrets was not one of Maya’s strengths, and Elaine couldn’t risk word getting out that she was working against her own father.

After she and Maya went through security, thankfully with no complications, they parted ways to get to their first class. Maya asked Elaine if she wanted to walk together, but Elaine wanted to go by herself so that she could walk by Harry's locker, the way she did most mornings. His was in the middle of a large row of lockers that were across from the library. The words "burn in hell," "murderer," and "n\*\*\*\*\*" were etched into the metal door. As she walked by the locker, she slowed down and held the phone at an angle from her open pocket to take a picture. This was the second picture that Elaine took. An exasperated senior shoved by her because she was walking too slowly.

She stowed her phone away in her pocket and began to make her way to Gwen's English class. Along the way, she saw officers, who wore bulletproof vests and cradled rifles in their arms, pressed against the hallway as they watched students shuffle past them. A boy, most likely a sophomore, began to walk towards a cop who was the blocking the water fountain. As the student approached the officer, the cop began to move one hand towards the baton in the back pocket and the other towards the kid, as if to stop him. The kid pointed to behind the officer, signaling that he needed to drink from the fountain. The officer moved aside, but one of his hands was still on his baton. This was the third picture Elaine took.

When she walked into the classroom, Gwen was at the front of the whiteboard with her back facing the students as she wrote the agenda for the day: one—attendance, two—discussion, three—writing exercise. When Gwen was done, she turned around to face her students, and Elaine detected a sense of purpose in her expression. After giving Elaine a subtle nod, a sign of promise, she walked towards the door, shutting it so that the officer standing outside the classroom would not be able to hear her.

Pulling a tall wooden stool from the corner of the classroom, Gwen placed it close to the first line of desks, and pulled herself up onto it.

“OK, class. We’re going to do something different, today. I’m sure you guys are torn about the fact that we aren’t going to be reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* today.” A couple of chuckles sounded from Elaine’s right.

She lowered her voice, leaning forward on her elbows. “I need you guys to keep everything that we talk about right now private. For now, at least. I also want to apologize for the last few months, like truly apologize. I wasn’t there for you guys during the shooting and I wasn’t there after it, and I’m truly sorry. We haven’t talked about any of it during class and it’s not OK to pretend that it never happened because unfortunately, this sort of violence isn’t just unique to our school. It seems like we can never get through a year without students being massacred in a place where they should be safe. It’s insane to me that policymakers and law enforcement think that to solve the issue, they need to introduce more guns and more violence into schools.”

Elaine raised her hand, the first time in a while, and as she looked at all her classmates, she said, “I agree. And what if it’s not just going to be police officers carrying guns in the future. What if they make our teachers have firearms in the classroom and force them to learn how to use them? Is this OK to the rest of you?”

Her classmates mumbled and shook their heads. Some of them looked at her with widened eyes because they were surprised that one of their quieter classmates had spoken up.

“Would you be OK carrying one?” Elaine turned to look at Gwen. She tried to imagine a gun stowed away among paper clips, notepads, and pencils in Gwen’s desk.

What if someone aside from Gwen got access to it? Gwen's eyes clouded over, murky and grey instead of their normal blue, as if she were visualizing the same image that Elaine had inside her mind.

"This isn't an option," said Gwen. "Of course not. Letting teachers have guns is a terrible solution."

Jasmin, who hadn't touched her phone to go online shopping since the beginning of class, raised her hand: "I think that the 'security measures,'" she quoted with her fingers, "ignore the actual problems at this school."

"For example?" said Gwen.

"Well, the fact that racism at this school contributed to Harry shooting up this class. That he was probably killed, when he was surrendering, because he was black. And now with more power, cops are taking out their racist energies on black and brown kids."

"Yeah, do you know how many times people have called Harry the n-word behind his back or even to his face?" Joy cut in.

"Yeah, you know one time, Harry called out our calc teacher for getting an answer wrong, and teacher said, 'What do you know? People like you don't know anything.' The teacher made him stay after class. We checked the textbook answers. Harry was right."

Apparently, other people had noticed the abuse that Harry was receiving at school, but like Elaine, no one had stood up for him.

"I had no idea," said Gwen, her mouth stretching into a grimace as she wondered which of the calculus teachers could have been so narrow-minded.

“Yeah, and Mrs. Long, I don’t know if you’re paying attention to the line for security in the mornings. Kids get beaten down by the cops. Today, Miguel Gutierrez was man-handled by an officer. He emptied Miguel’s backpack all over the ground today,” said Amanda.

“Has anyone reported this to the principal?” Gwen asked.

“That’s not going to do anything!” Elaine cut in. “Don’t you get it? The police own Principal Weinberg. They own the students. They own this school.” You, of all people, should understand this. Don’t you know what it’s like to feel powerless, living with the chief of police?

“OK, so let’s take back the school,” said Gwen. She looked around the room, “How many of you are familiar with a blog called ‘Written in Black’?” Most of the students raised their hands. “Well as you probably know, this blog is interested in Clarkston right now and in particular, student activism. This is our school, and it’s our responsibility to make it place a place where we want to be. This blogger has reached out to me, asking for letters from this class. You can address them to anyone—the school administration, the police, teachers, including myself—anyone that you feel can do something to make the school climate welcoming and safe. This blogger is going to publish these letters, with your permission of course. What do you think?”

As Gwen scanned what was now a meager number of students, Elaine felt the corners of her mouth rising—the first time she had felt hope in this classroom for a long time.

## Slander and Strife

Arthur leaned forward on his elbows and rubbed his face with his dry cracking hands, groaning at the paused video on his computer—Gavin emptying a kid’s backpack on the ground, a frozen picture of fury. The video had been live for twenty-four hours, and had metastasized to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and god knows what other goddamn social media sites. His inbox overflowed with enraged emails, many from people from Clarkson and even some from out of state, and the phones were constantly ringing. At first, he had tried blocking the sound of ringing from his ears, but after about ten minutes it began to feel like a hammering in his head.

How could Gavin be so careless? Who knows, maybe he had probable cause, but he should’ve known better than to assault the kid in front of so many peers. Worst of all, Arthur was taking the heat for his misstep. Along with the video on this blog, “Written in Black,” there were letters and photographs, most likely submitted by a student or a number of students, of his officers at Clarkston High. Arthur believed that everything that he was doing was right, and that people would come around eventually, but this blog prevented him from releasing information on his own terms. His palms shook and he felt himself heat up at the thought of protesters storming the station or the school.

He stood up from the desk, sick of seeing Gavin’s video, and dragged his feet as he walked over to his bookcase. Two photographs in wooden frames watched him from the dust-covered shelf. One was of him and the Long family and other of him and Melvin. In the photograph of him and the Longs, taken after he had left Judy’s to live with them, they were having their first New Years dinner together at the Longs’ house. He and Evan sat sandwiched at the dinner table between Mr. and Mrs. Long, all of them

beaming at the camera, which Mr. and Mrs. Long had been saving up for months because of its self-timer function. Several times this month, Arthur had thought about going back to the Longs' house in Maben, but he had been so focused on his work that he had neglected to visit and had even ignored most of Evan's calls. He hadn't seen Evan since last New Years, when they were at the Longs' house in Maben. Evan was now a successful pediatric surgeon at Mount Sinai in New York and Arthur was the chief of police at Clarkston; Arthur loved how Mr. and Mrs. Long beamed with pride whenever their sons talked about their work achievements. After the shooting happened, he couldn't imagine the shame that would be on their parents' faces if he were to walk through their door. He had to fix things in Clarkston before seeing them again.

In the photograph of him and Melvin, Arthur had just given Melvin a tour of the police station after he was promoted to chief. While Arthur wore his ironed uniform, Melvin wore his favorite yellow Hawaiian shirt with green palm trees, plaid shorts, and flip-flops. Melvin had one arm wrapped around Arthur's shoulders and with the other arm, he pointed at Arthur's chest in pride. The last he heard from Melvin was a cryptic text message: **Going to California for a while. Don't know when I'll be back. In the meantime, be careful.** For a while, it felt freeing that Melvin was gone—no one to criticize his choices—but now, in the back of his head, Arthur felt that Melvin would know what to do about this blog situation. But he couldn't call Melvin. It would only admit to his ineptitude for leading the police department. After all, he was the one who graduated from police academy, not Melvin. As he turned the photographs face down on the bookcase, the dust on the back of the frames flew up.

Arthur stormed out of his office, barking into other offices as he passed them, “EVERYONE, CONFERENCE ROOM. NOW!” Officers meekly peered behind their doors and began to scramble towards the conference room. A sense of purpose energized his step as he stormed into the main office space and stopped in front of Lance’s open door. He could see Lance zipping up his coat, and called out to the entire office.

“FULL STAFF MEETING IN THE CONFERENCE ROOM. NO ONE GOES HOME UNTIL AFTER WE’RE DONE.” He glared meaningfully at Lance, and stormed off towards the conference room. After walking a couple steps away from Lance’s door, Arthur stopped and turned to see if his second was behind him, but Lance was walking in the opposite direction. Where the hell was he going? Arthur sighed, and continued his way toward the conference room.

Gavin was the first in the room, and Arthur was already sitting at the head of the long, rectangular table with a stone-faced expression. He gestured to the seat on his right, the seat where Lance normally sat, and Gavin sat down tentatively, as if the seat would break underneath his weight. By the time all the seats at the table were filled and some officers had to lean against the wall, Arthur glanced around the room for his lieutenant, who was nowhere to be found.

“We’ll just wait two more minutes for everyone to get here,” he said. As soon as the words left his mouth, Lance came rushing through the door.

“Sorry, Chief. Just went to the bathroom.”

“Well, Shen. Next time, I expect you set a better example for this department. I don’t need any excuses for sloppiness. When I ask you to be punctual, I mean it.”

“Sorry, Chief,” said Lance as he made way for his usual seat.

“Oh, Gavin will be taking your seat today. Why don’t you stand for today,” said Arthur.

“Sure,” said Lance, attempting to hide the edge in his voice as he inserted himself between Garrett and Tristan on the wall. They gave him sympathetic looks as they shuffled aside to make room for him.

“All right,” said Arthur, folding his fingers together, “we’re gathered today to talk about the issue of social media. I’m sure you’ve seen the video of Fowell conducting a security check just yesterday. Now, Fowell told me he had probable cause to search the student for marijuana. Is that correct?”

Gavin nodded his head vigorously and said, “Whenever I was patrolling the hallways, I’ve heard kids talking about some student named Miguel dealing pot on school property.”

“Right. And this is the kind of meticulous policing I want to see.” Several of the other officers raised their eyebrows at Arthur praising Gavin. “But if we want to be meticulous, we need to be even more careful in today’s digital age. All those videos don’t show the full story. They just slander our reputation. We need people to take us seriously.”

“What do we do about it, Chief?” Lance asked.

“We’re going to be taking any electronic recording devices that are not authorized by the school away from students. So we’re talking phones, video cameras, iPads, and tablets. I need officers to search, confiscate, and tag devices as students are lining up for security.”

“What’s the procedure for returning the devices back to them?” Lance asked.

“At the end of the day, we’ll have tables set up in the main lobby with the devices and their tags in chronological order, and students can go to retrieve their devices,” said Arthur.

“Don’t you think this is going to be pretty tedious and hard to implement?” Kyle asked.

“Not if I hire more people. We have the budget for it, and HR has already run the background check on at least thirty people. As of now, I need all my full time officers,” Arthur paused, looking around the room, “to be on board with this plan. It’s only tedious and hard to implement if your head’s not with it.” He tapped his fingers to his temple, while glaring at Lance.

“When does this go into effect?” Gavin asked.

“Tomorrow.”

“I’ll need some volunteers,” Arthur said, pointing to officers in the room, “Childs, Green, Grossman, Wender, Davies, Garcia, and Martin—you guys are on cell phone duty. There will more joining you soon.”

“Chief Long, if you’re convinced that what you’re doing is right for this high school, why are you afraid of this information being publicized?” Gabby Shen had stepped away from the wall, and looked Arthur squarely in the face with her arms folded against her chest.

“Excuse me?”

“Gabby!” Lance whisper-shouted from his spot on the adjacent wall, gesturing with his eyes for her to lean back against the wall.

“No. Explain, Officer Shen...Junior,” said Arthur drily.

She looked at him with a hard expression, “You said it yourself. We’re doing our job as law enforcement. Busting sixteen-year-old drug lords and beating down suspicious students before they enter school grounds. What’s wrong with students documenting your policies so that other police departments can learn from us?”

“Well, we need to release this information on our own terms. We can’t let the public take advantage of our representation. We need to show them our methods are effective before broadcasting them.”

“But—”

“This isn’t something that concerns you, seeing as you’re on desk duty. And you shouldn’t be getting caught up in things that you don’t fully understand.” He growled at the last four words.

“Gabby!” Lance whisper-shouted again, causing Gabby to back up against the wall. Arthur scanned the room for any more dissenters, but since no one stepped forward to challenge him, he clapped his hands together and said, “All right. I want you all to be on the lookout. You’re all free to go.” People glanced around at one another, waiting for someone to stand up. When they began to walk out of the room, no one spoke a word as they left. Arthur remained in his seat, checking his phone, as all the other officers filed out. There was a text message from Gwen: Dinner’s in the fridge. Going out today for dinner with Frida.

Gwen had been going out several times a week the last month, though she’d never been one to go out for dinner very often, even when they started dating. She never brought leftovers home. She always had this distant expression on her face whenever she came back into the house after she got back. He stood up from the chair and stowed his

phone away in his pocket, resolving to stay up again tonight in order to see her when she would return home.

## Vivien

“How was teaching today?” Viv asked as she took a drink of diet Coke from her glass.

“Oh, it was fine. You know how college kids are. So hard to get people to participate,” said Erin. “Thanks for meeting me here for dinner. I’m so hungry after all the lecturing today.”

“Nah, I wasn’t too busy today.”

The Clover Kitchen, only five minutes away from her house, was Erin’s favorite take-out place after a long day of teaching at Brandeis. Erin told Viv that when she had just moved to Clarkston, she used to come here often with Garrett. Erin was grateful to escape the hotel-like feel of her house and settle for something simpler—flowerless wooden tables garnished with just salt and pepper shakers and mauve walls bearing watercolor paintings. People didn’t come here for first dates; they came here with long-time lovers. They came here with the intention of talking to someone instead of meeting them for the first time. Sometime in the past few weeks, Viv felt like Erin had become a friend as well as a partner.

“How’s the article coming along?” Erin asked, covering her mouth as she chewed her turkey club sandwich. After she finished chewing, she wiped her mouth with a napkin, leaving a faint streak of pink on the white surface.

“Pretty well, I think...” Viv said, staring at her garden salad. She stabbed a piece of lettuce, lifting it to her mouth before setting it back down again. “What we’re doing right now, I know that it’s a story worth telling. I just hope I’m portraying everyone correctly.”

“You’re not putting our names in there, right? Me, Gwen, Elaine.”

Viv shoveled the tomatoes one by one to the left side of her plate as she said, “Well, I was hoping you guys would reconsider.”

Erin put down her sandwich, scattering crumbs on her plate. “You can’t be serious. The three of us are all connected to the police personally. Making our identities known would damage our relationships.”

“Well, you saw it yourself. Every student in Gwen’s class sent letters to the blog, and more are coming, not just from other students and teachers in this school, but all over the country. It’s not like we’re fighting a losing battle here. We have the numbers to back us up. If Gwen’s husband learns that his wife is working against him, don’t you think that he’ll start to rethink his actions? Same thing with Elaine’s father. We shouldn’t be scared of being identified.”

“But Elaine’s just a kid.”

“Of course, we’ll let her decide if she wants to be named. You all get the choice. But if she names herself, she’s gonna join the ranks of kids like Emma Gonzalez and Cameron Kasky. She’s a smart and driven kid. Give her some media coverage, and she’s set to go do more serious advocacy work.”

“Well, seeing that the police have started taking recording devices away, we’re going to have to rethink our strategy,” said Erin.

Viv stabbed a tomato with her fork and ate it. The acid of the tomato burned her tongue. Erin grew quiet and picked at the crusts on her barely-eaten sandwich, causing crumbs to pitter-patter onto her plate. Viv looked at her barely-touched salad. The romaine drooped in its pool of dressing.

“I’m gonna go to the restroom,” Viv said, rising from her chair and placing her napkin onto the table. Erin raised an eyebrow at her in concern, but Viv ignored her and walked towards the restrooms, feeling her hands shake with frustration as she pushed open the bathroom door.

When she walked into the dimly lit bathroom, she heard “Here Comes the Sun” tinkling softly from some hidden speaker. Viv stood in front of the mirror, fluffing her short, wavy brown hair while resisting the urge to tear at it. She hit dead end after dead end.

A toilet flushed, and the door of the stall closest to the bathroom door swung open, and a cop walked out. Initially, Viv jumped when she thought that Elaine, wearing the Clarkston police uniform, had walked out of the stall, but she knew it couldn’t be possible. The cop now washing her hands was a young, Asian woman who had her hair tied back in a low ponytail. She was tall and had sharp features like Elaine’s, but she had a spray of freckles on her face that Elaine didn’t have.

As the cop grabbed towels from the dispenser, Viv thought about all the times she wanted to but failed ask her own boss for a story to report on, all the times she didn’t fight back when he told her that she was good enough as a fact checker.

“Um, hi. Can I just say that you remind me of someone I know?”

The cop turned around, a damp towel clasped between her hands, and looked at her with a confused expression, arching one of her eyebrows.

“Sorry?”

“No, I’m sorry. That’s really weird of me. It’s just that you look like this girl I know. Her name’s Elaine. I got confused there because I thought you were her, when I saw you in the mirror.”

“My sister’s name is Elaine. Elaine Shen. She’s in high school though, so you might be thinking of someone else?”

How are you going to play this Viv?

“Wow, this is a coincidence. I’m Vivien Hyde, Viv for short, Elaine’s guidance counselor. I’ve just been getting to know Elaine and how she’s healing after the shooting.”

“My sister never told me that she was talking to a guidance counselor.” The cop put her hands on her hips. “Huh? So, she’ll talk to a guidance counselor, but not to anyone in her own family.” Her expression darkened and she rubbed her wrist uncomfortably. “Do you know what’s going on with my sister? This whole thing with Webster and Watt has seriously messed her up, this whole shooting in general. She won’t really talk about it with anyone. Last I had a serious talk with her, she was really torn up about Watt shooting that kid. Do you think...I don’t know...”

Viv put her hands on her hips. “Well, I think you should start by believing your own sister. Maybe that’s why she’s so distant lately, because her own family members are cops and she’s working to try to trust you guys again.”

“You’re right,” said the cop said, rubbing her forehead and groaning. She eyed the floor underneath the stalls, even though no one had walked into the bathroom in the last few minutes. “My name’s Gabby, by the way. I just started working at the Clarkston police department, just doing desk duty, but I’m not sure how long I can last here. On my

first day, the chief brought me into the armory. There were more weapons, military-grade ones especially, than there were personnel to use them. The chief seems so intent on hiding the truth of everything that he's doing from the public and press. He gave us a tirade about this blog, "Written in Black," just this week. No one dares to defy him, even my own dad. And, I'm stuck on desk duty doing paperwork, filing reports, stuff like that. On one hand, I'm glad I don't have to terrorize high school students like the rest of them do, but on the other hand, I wish I could do something about all of this."

Would she join us?

"But anyways, I gotta pick up dinner before heading back to the station. It was nice meeting you. Could you please tell Elaine that I'm worried about her?"

Gabby began to make way for the door, when Viv said, "Hold on." Gabby swiveled around with a confused expression on her face. "I lied. I'm not Gabby's counselor. I'm a soon-to-be reporter for *Emporium*, and I'm working with the blogger who runs 'Written in Black' and so is Elaine." Viv half-expected Gabby to walk out of the bathroom and straight to the station to tell the chief who had been responsible for all of the blog posts, but also half-hoped that she would stay in the room to hear her out. Gabby folded her hands over her chest, shooting Viv an explain-yourself look.

"The videos, the pictures, the letters—Elaine and her teacher, Gwen, did that. We're trying to make some change in this town." Before Gabby could interrupt, Viv said, "I know you're worried about Elaine, but she's old enough to make her own decisions. She came to ask us if she could work with us. If not for us, please do your sister a favor and don't repeat anything I've told you to anyone."

Gabby stared at the floor, considering Viv's words. After about minute, she looked up at Viv, "How can I help?"

"What?"

"Didn't you hear me? I want to help. I can help you."

### The Poisoned Apple

After leaving The Clover Kitchen, Viv went back to her car and almost slipped on some ice in her excitement. In her car, she barely felt the chill, though she could see her breath form clouds. As she drove back to her apartment in the city, lost in her excitement, she almost didn't notice that the gas tank was almost empty. Taking the next exit on the highway, she brought her car to a gentle cruise down a dark road with snow-covered, leafless oaks looming over it. After about three minutes, the yellow glow of a Shell station materialized and she pulled her car up to one of the gas pumps. The gas station was empty except for a forty-year-old man chuckling as he watched videos on his phone behind the cash register inside the convenience store. As she was about to get out of the car, she saw a police car, followed by a white Corolla pull into the station. They parked in front of the pumps directly opposite hers.

Through her car window, Viv heard a familiar chuckle as Gwen, dressed in a long pea coat and black heels, suddenly appeared on the other side of the row of pumps. Her hair was in a bun, but many stray strands fell like broken spider webs at the nape of her neck. An officer got out of the police car, an Asian man who seemed to be in his late-forties. He couldn't seem to stop smiling as he looked at Gwen. Viv squinted so that she could read the last name embroidered in white on his sleeve: "Shen."

After they started pumping gas in their cars, Gwen walked over to Lance, her heels clicking on the concrete, and wrapped her pinky around his, sneaking mischievous glances in his direction. When their tanks were filled, Lance unhooked his pinky from hers, mouthing, "I'll be back" as he walked into the gas station to pay. When he made it

to the door, Viv clambered out of her car, running over to the other side of the machine where Gwen was leaning on the hood of her car.

“What are you doing?” Viv asked as she snuck a glance at the convenience store to make sure the officer hadn’t turned around. He was looking for drinks in the back of the store.

“What you mean? What are you doing here? Are you following me?” Gwen’s eyes darted around the darkness surrounding the gas station.

“Don’t avoid my question! Is that or is that not Elaine’s father?”

Gwen pursed her lips, and looked down at her shoes, shiny black heels in the middle of winter. “What do you want me to say, Viv?”

“Unbelievable.”

“What?”

“Don’t act stupid,” Viv said. Lance was now walking to the register. “You know that Elaine’s missing her father. He’s almost never in the house, and now we know why!”

Gwen continued looking at the ground and said, “I have my reasons for doing things, Viv. This doesn’t concern you. Please don’t tell Elaine.”

“Oh, I won’t tell her, for now at least. You’re going to have to do it. Oh and in the meantime, fix your hair. Wouldn’t want your husband to find out now, would you?”

Gwen’s fingers flew to her bun. Viv stormed back into her car, and drove away, watching Lance reemerge from the station with two bags of chips and some bottles of soda in his hands. He gave Gwen a wink before returning to his car, but Gwen continued to stand stock-still outside her car.

Once Viv was a good three minutes away and had calmed down, she realized that she had forgotten to put gas in her car. Huffing a sigh of frustration, she made a sharp U-turn on the empty road, returning to the gas station. On the way, she tried to shove the knowledge of Gwen's affair into the back of her mind. Right now, what mattered most was that Gabby had to execute the plan that she, Erin, and Viv had formulated back at restaurant. The plan had almost not even been set because Erin was worried about Gabby ratting them out to the officers. But, if they wanted to take down the Clarkston police, they had to take a chance on Gabby.

### The Miracle of Galahad

The thick, metal hands of the clock crawled towards 1:00, ticking off the seconds. To Gabby, the ticking sounded like pebbles hitting the walls, but no one else seemed to be bothered by it. Her feet bounced rapidly on the ground, as the minute hand finally reached the twelve. Her dad was putting on his jacket, getting ready to go home for the night. After turning off the light in his office, he strode over to Gabby's desk. He smiled and reached out a hand to tuck a strand of hair that had fallen from her ponytail behind her ear. "Hey, Gab. I'm gonna head home. You gonna be all right here tonight?" The light from her desk lamp made the shadows under his red-rimmed eyes even more prominent; he was probably drinking at least four cups of coffee a day.

She flashed a confident grin at him, "Of course. There are others here. I don't think we'll get into a lot of trouble. No patrol tonight?"

"Nah. I've been working overtime, anyways. Also, Arthur's been keeping more guys than usual on night patrol."

There were usually five people on the graveyard shift at the office, usually standing by to answer 911 calls, filing paperwork, or just playing games on their phones. On Friday nights, there was always a particularly incompetent crew at the office. Because Arthur's attention was fixed on strengthening artillery and security measures, he fell behind with good hiring. Somehow, Brian Shea, the intern who had let a reporter in the office, had managed to talk Arthur out of firing him; he manned the front desk on Friday nights. Jonathan Keeble and Wesley Pinkman, both relatively new hires, worked part-time as dispatchers. Kyle Garcia was the only full-time officer, and he was usually assigned most of the graveyard shifts and never patrol, which he would rather have done

than sit around and “babysit the children” at the station. He was Head of Security and had admin access to the surveillance cameras with a password that she believed would be carelessly hidden in his desk somewhere. She had overheard Arthur pestering him to keep his passwords protected, but Kyle insisted that his system, whatever that meant, was foolproof. On Friday nights, he would spend much of the time playing solitaire on his computer and ordering large pizzas, boxes of burgers and fries, and milkshakes. Whenever he went to the kitchen to watch TV and gorge on his food, he’d leave his security card on his desk, a card that only full-time officers got in order to enter the armory.

“Go home, Dad. Don’t worry about me.” She smiled warmly at him, as she rubbed his arm reassuringly.

“OK. Call me if you need anything.” Lance turned and began to walk down the hallway towards the entrance of the station. She watched him wave to Kyle through the open door to his office before he turned left at the end of the hallway. Her dad seemed burdened by something all the time, the way he walked like a prisoner with shackles on his ankles. It reminded her of the way he used to sit by their mother whenever she was getting chemotherapy treatments. One time, he couldn’t find a babysitter to watch her and Elaine, so they had to come with him to the hospital and watch as their mother had chemicals pumped into her body. Gabby had been bouncing her legs as she sat, impatient that she had to babysit Elaine, and resolved to ask her dad for two dollars to buy a snack from the vending machine. But she noticed the way he held her mom’s hand—her pale, thin fingers clasped in his callused thick ones. He wasn’t watching her mom but the tube feeding into her arms. Gabby let her legs dangle as she continued to sit.

Gabby peered over her computer, glancing at Jonathan and Wesley sitting two desks away from each other in the corner of the room opposite from hers. There hadn't been calls in the last couple of hours, so the two of them seemed to be in some sort of heated debate about politics. She stood up from her desk, and walked down the hallway towards the bathroom. On her way, she passed Kyle's office, and through the open door, she saw him scanning through a Domino's menu that was open on top of his keyboard. He would usually get a large pizza around 12:45 and go on his break in kitchen for about an hour, which would be more than enough time to sneak into the armory and wipe the tapes off the surveillance camera.

When she returned to her desk from the bathroom it was 12:10. Gabby reached for the pile of neon green sticky notes off her desk and began ripping the paper, vainly hoping that it would help soothe her nerves.

After staring at Kyle's office from her seat, she finally saw him leave the room and walk down the hallway, talking to the delivery person on his phone. Kyle normally didn't return to his office after retrieving the pizza and would go straight for the kitchen so he could watch *The Simpsons*, and probably because there usually wasn't any room on his messy desk for his food. Since she didn't want to risk getting caught, Gabby waited eight minutes until she was sure that Kyle wasn't coming back. She looked over at Jonathan and Wesley who were both on the phone now, and made her way down the dim hallway to Kyle's office. Glancing over once to make sure that Jonathan and Wesley weren't looking in her direction, Gabby slipped in through the open door.

Kyle's desk light was still on, and the glow reflected off the glossy menus strewn across his desk. Gabby ran her fingers through her hair, exahling as she assessed the mess

on Kyle's desk. There were no pictures of family or friends, only papers and menus, which flooded the surface of the desk. She walked behind the desk and opened the drawers, flipping through the notebooks and binders, hoping to find a password scrawled in a margin, but no luck. Gabby sat in his swivel chair, looking at a large white bookcase and wondering if the password was stuck in one of those books. As she glanced down at the desk again, a pink sticky note fell from the bottom on the desk. He couldn't possibly be that stupid.

Gabby bent her head under the desk, wrinkling her nose at the faded gum stuck along with at least ten sticky notes. She knelt and lifted her phone flashlight to the notes. On one of the notes, she saw written in Kyle's heavy-set lettering, "CCTV admin: 4gknIZC5h7S2U1jf." After taking a picture of the sticky note, Gabby went to the coat hooks where Kyle's security card was hanging, and stuffed it into her pocket. She peered out from Kyle's office, making sure that neither Jonathan nor Wesley were looking in her direction and that Kyle or Brian weren't coming from the opposite end of the hall. Seeing that no one was coming or watching from either direction, Gabby tiptoed out of the office, walking briskly down the office towards the armory. As she passed the kitchen, she saw Kyle, eyes glued to the TV, working on his third slice of pepperoni pizza. The cheese was dangerously close to sliding off his pizza, so he held the pizza above his face, catching the cheese with his mouth. He turned at the sound of her footsteps.

"Hey! Gabby, you want some?" He asked with his cheeks stuffed with cheese.

She smiled apologetically, "Looks good, but maybe next time?"

He shrugged and continued chewing. A slice of pepperoni fell on his uniform, splattering grease on his right breast pocket.

“Shit,” he muttered, reaching down with his cheese and sauce covered tongue in an attempt to lick the grease off.

## Slander and Strife

Arthur popped another Advil in his mouth, praying that the ringing of the phones at the station would stop. He had lost count of how many pills he was taking, but he didn't care as long as the headache would stop, even for a couple of hours. His own phone was turned off, probably against protocol, but he couldn't give a damn. The press, concerned Clarkston citizens, and other police departments in the state and across the country had been on his ass nonstop since the photos of the armory had gone viral. A lot of law enforcement departments were on his side and, some along with many civilians, were vehemently against the actions he was taking.

After taking a swig of water from the cup on his desk and wishing that it were a much stronger liquid, Arthur tried to breathe and calm himself down, but he couldn't stop thinking about that blog, "Written in Black," which was blowing all of his actions out of proportion. For God's sake, let a man do his job. Closing his eyes and rubbing them as if he thought he could knead the tension from his eyelids, Arthur imagined who could be working against him. Was it one person? A group of people? Whomever it was had managed to convince one of his officers to betray him.

He looked across the desk, glaring at the photo of him and Melvin and nearly jumped, when he thought he saw Melvin's expression transform into that I-told-you-so face. Arthur instinctively picked up the castle paperweight on his desk, preparing to launch it at the photo frame. But he stopped himself before he could chuck it, realizing that self-destruction was not the way to solve this problem. He relaxed his arm, staring at the metal miniature castle in his hand. He felt the spires poke into his fingers and ran his

thumb over the moat, the portcullis, and the tall towers. He gripped it hard, knowing that no matter how hard he squeezed it would never shatter.

After he made his rounds, all personnel came promptly to the conference room. Arthur sat at the head of the table, feeling much better now that the Advil had kicked in. The pounding headache had turned in a slight throbbing. Looking around the room, he watched the flickers of fear in his men's eyes, as he if were some rabid, unpredictable animal. Good. He could work with that.

He slapped his palms down on the wooden table, making the officers sitting closest to him flinch. The ones who had been resting their elbows on the table jumped from the reverberations.

“As all of you probably know, one of you leaked private information to the public, and I'm not stupid enough to believe that whoever did this will admit to it.” He paused, looking around the room, “But in all my years as a police officer, this is the greatest offense I have EVER seen committed among officers.” Memories of the police officers pinning down Thomas's friends to the ground, even though they hadn't attacked the cops, ran through Arthur's mind, but he shook them from his mind.

“Where's the honor here?” He looked around the room, shaking with anger and feeling the tips of his ears grow hot. “Is there no sense of responsibility?”

He looked straight at Kyle Garcia who for once was rapt with attention instead of surreptitiously picking his nose like he usually did during these meetings. “And you, Garcia! I told you to be careful with those passwords. Now, thanks to you, the surveillance footage is useless because everything was wiped out.” Officer Garcia's face

had turned white and he was nodding rapidly at everything that Arthur was barking at him.

“Sir, I apologize. This is my fault. I accept whatever punishment you want to give me.”

“Well, it goes without saying that you are no longer the head of security. You can also hand in your card to the armory. For now, I want Fowell to be in charge of all security measures. Fowell. Change all of the passwords. Give them to no one but me.”

Gavin nodded at Arthur, lapping up the new responsibility like a German shepherd. Then, he turned to look at Lance, who was leaning against one of the glass walls, and flashed him a smug grin.

“The rest of you who have cards that can access the armory or any room with private files need to be careful. Keep those cards on you at all times. If I see any of these cards unattended, you will lose the rights to them.”

“One last thing before I dismiss you all. I added five more people to the night shift, three of which have to be head officers.” He looked at Lance with raised eyebrows, “Shen, I trust that I can have you lead tonight’s shift, even though it’s not your usual night. Just had to move some things around to divide the work evenly.”

“Of course, Chief,” said Lance, but despite his deference, Arthur sensed a quiet resistance simmering underneath the surface. Arthur saw a flare of defiance, that this assignment was somehow unjust for Shen. It seemed like anything that he asked Shen to do these days made his lieutenant grit his teeth or clench his jaw.

“Good,” said Arthur, clapping his hands together as he tried to overlook Shen’s insubordination.

After he dismissed his officers, he went straight back to his office and shut the door behind him. He collapsed into his swivel chair, feeling dizziness spin through his head and reached for his Advil. When he picked up the bottle, he frowned at the sound of two or three pills rattling around in there. He was going to be working late tonight, maybe he could have Gwen go to CVS for him and pick up a new bottle.

Hey, I need some Advil. Could you pick up some for me please?  
He placed his phone back on the desk and began to going through his emails, when his phone vibrated.

Sorry. Busy today too. Be back late tonight. Promised the girls I'd go out with them tonight :(

Why was she so busy lately? Fine. He could probably go grab some on his way back home after work. There was a knock at his door.

"Come in," said Arthur. Gavin peeked his head through the door and looked at Arthur with a concerned expression.

"Is this a bad time, Chief? I can always come back," said Gavin, backing out of the room with pretended courtesy.

"No. Come in. This is something about the security, right?"

"Actually...no. It's about Shen," said Gavin as he walked into the room and sat himself down in front of Arthur. He rubbed his hands on the armrests, glancing around at the plaques mounted on the white walls.

"Well, what is it?" Arthur said, snapping Gavin from his fixation with Arthur's accolades.

“Umm...It’s not really my place to tell you what is happening, but I think you should go see for yourself. It was a shock when I found out, but I think you might want to consider him as a culprit for the photo leaks.”

“What do you mean?” Arthur narrowed his eyes.

“I mean, you should go to the Greenwich motel in Stathford at around seven and see for yourself. It’s not really my place to tell you what you’ll find exactly, but what you said about honor and responsibility at the meeting really spoke to me.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Arthur wanted to throttle Gavin for not being direct.

“Sir, I respect you too much to tell you myself. You really need to go and find out for yourself.”

“I’m not gonna go to some random motel, unless there’s a good reason.”

“OK. Fine. Well, I was with some of my buddies out in Stathford getting dinner. This restaurant was across the road from the Greenwich motel, and I thought I saw Shen in the motel parking lot when I was walking to my car.” Arthur saw Gavin’s not-so-subtle delight at being able to relay this information. “It was Shen, and he was with a woman.”

“You’re asking me to check on Shen because he’s out getting laid?”

“No, Sir. This, um, I really think you should check out for yourself.”

“OK...I’ll see what I can do about that,” said Arthur. “Do you have any questions about security, though?”

“No, Sir. Crystal-clear.”

“Good. If anything comes up, please come see me and no one else.”

“Yes, Sir,” said Gavin as he stood up. He took one last glance around the room before leaving, nearly bouncing as he walked. After Gavin left the room, Arthur’s phone buzzed.

Can make you some dinner before I go...what do you want?

C’mon, Art. Don’t be irrational. She couldn’t be...He began to massage the space between his eyes, hoping that he could squeeze the thought from his mind, but the more he thought about it, the more plausible it became in his imagination. He could taste the bile in his throat, but he swallowed it before he could puke. He grabbed the castle paperweight in his hands, grasping it tightly enough in his palm that it would leave dents but not cut. Before he could stop himself, the paperweight struck the photo of him and Melvin in his bookcase, and it fell from the bookcase to the floor in a spray of glass shards. The castle paperweight clattered to the ground in one piece, splintering one of the bigger pieces of broken glass as it landed on top of it. Arthur rubbed his head, realizing that he’d had have to clean the mess up later. He picked up the phone, gripping it so tightly that it might have also shattered in his hands.

Lasagna please.

## Enid

Garrett scraped his fork back and forth on his plate as he plowed bits of spaghetti and marinara sauce towards him. His eyes were fixed on the remnants of his food, just like they had been for most of the dinner. His left hand was glued to his lap, as if he were afraid of Erin reaching for his hand at any point during the meal. They had talked without really actually talking about anything.

“Babe, what are you thinking about right now?” Erin asked. Garrett snapped from his fixation on his food, looking at his wife with a dazed expression, as if he had forgotten that she had been sitting across from him the entire time.

“How much longer I’ll be on the night shift,” he chuckled sadly.

“You’re being overworked. Maybe you should take some days off next week.”

“I don’t know. Chief’s been on edge for the last few months. Hard to do anything nowadays without pissing him off.”

“I’m just worried about you,” Erin said with a pleading expression, reaching her hand for Garrett’s. He extended his reluctantly, resting it lightly on top of hers, as if he believed she could not support its weight. His forked clinked as he rested it on the plate, and he cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“Erin, I don’t think you should be worrying about things you don’t understand. I’m seriously fine. I feel like you’ve been coddling me the last few months, and I’m suffocating because of it. You need to let me, let all of us do our jobs, OK?”

Every word in his response was like a car in a rogue freight train, smashing her with its crushing weight and fury. Erin slid her hand out from under Garrett’s.

“How could you say that? I’m your wife! I should be worried about you! You’ve changed since the shooting. You barely look me in the eyes. We don’t talk about anything important. For God’s sake, the only times we even touch each other are during sex and that doesn’t even happen very often. You don’t think that’s affecting our relationship? Me? There are things that maybe you don’t understand, because you’ve been too busy worrying about your goddamn job.”

“Fine. Care to enlighten me about what I don’t understand? Go ahead. Lay it on me,” Garrett said, folding his arms into his chest as he sat back in the chair.

The memories of her dad lying in his blood on the dirty floor of the gas station convenience store welled up in her mind. She could imagine these memories forming a lump in the back of her throat, forcing their way up to her mouth, and ending up as a vomit of everything that she had been hiding from her husband for so long. But the longer she looked at her Garrett, the thicker the aura of ignorance seemed to be around him. So she swallowed the memories, feeling them scratch her throat on the way down like fish bones.

“Never mind.”

Garrett sighed, standing up with his plate, which was streaked with the remnants of marinara sauce, and walked over to sink. Erin watched the muscles in his back contract as he rigidly washed the plate, as if he actually had to think about how to move his body. Erin walked over to him, resting her hand on his back and felt the muscles stop shifting. He let go of the plate, letting it submerge in the soapy water that had accumulated in the sink.

“The things we do to those kids at school—they’re wrong. I don’t know how I can come home to you, after all of that.” Garrett pressed his soap-covered palms against the counter, gritting his teeth together. “I’m sorry, Erin. I didn’t mean what I said before.”

She ran her fingers gently down his back, leaning her forehead on his arm and said, “I know. It’s OK.” She felt Garrett relax just with those three words, as if he believed all was forgotten, forgiven.

“I gotta head to work, babe. I’ll see you in the morning.” He kissed her forehead and proceeded up the stairs to put on his uniform. Erin eyed the soapy water, thinking about the dish that he had forgotten about. She picked it up—only one faint streak of sauce left on it—and she ran a sponge over it.

Thirty minutes after Garrett left the house, Erin sat on the couch in her living room, cradling a cup of tea, when the doorbell rang. She welcomed Gabby and Elaine who both seemed to be glad that there was a third person there to diffuse the awkwardness between them. Elaine did not take it well when Erin called her to let her know that Gabby was the one who took the photographs of the armory. It seemed like Elaine was mustering whatever strength she had in her to keep from yelling at Erin through the phone. No one had told her that her sister had joined the task force, that her sister was a part of something previously only she had access to.

Gabby walked into the house, plopping down on the couch and helping herself to one of the cookies on the coffee table. Elaine joined her sister, walking carefully as if there were trip wires all over the house.

“Nice place,” said Gabby between munches, as she swiveled her head around to check out Erin’s living room. “Sweet succulents,” she said picking a terrarium off the

table and holding it up to eye-level. She handed it to Elaine who bit her fingernails as she studied the plants poking out of pebbles, sand, and soil.

“Thanks,” said Erin, chuckling as she observed the differences between the Shen sisters and how they tried to put them aside for the sake of their mission. A few minutes later, Viv and Gwen appeared the door, and like Gabby and Elaine, seemed to be grateful for Erin’s presence to diffuse the awkwardness between them. Soon, all five of them were gathered in her living room, making Erin feel slightly overwhelmed as she watched the four women in front of her. She hadn’t hosted many things at her house before this. She and Garrett were always too busy to ever plan anything, and they weren’t too fond of partying either. But this wasn’t a party—they had to chart their next move to stay ahead of Arthur. She almost felt bad for interrupting the light-hearted chatter that had replaced the awkwardness.

During a lull in their chatter, Erin said, “OK, team. We’ve done a great job so far. I think it’s time, as Viv has said before, to take this operation to the next level. We’ve got to be recognized as part of the national movement against gun violence and police brutality.”

Viv smiled proudly, “Yes, we’ve created a platform for ourselves and have to take it to the next level.”

“Whoa—are you saying that we should name ourselves?” Gabby’s eyes widened as she spoke.

Gwen nodded in agreement, “Yeah, we have jobs and loved ones in the force. This could ruin everything.”

“What if it was just me?” Elaine’s voice was laced with an unfamiliar confidence that made everyone look at her with surprised expressions. “I’ve got an idea.”

“Are you sure about this?” Gwen asked. “Just because other students have risen up before, doesn’t mean that you have to do so as well. No one expects that of you.”

“C’mon, Laney. You don’t have to do this,” said Gabby. She looked at her sister’s unwavering expression, frustrated at not being to change her mind.

Elaine looked around the room and said, “A face for this movement is exactly what we need to take our mission to the next step. A couple of pictures and testimonies can shock people, but only just for a little while. People need a leader, someone who’s really fucking done with all this bullshit happening in her school, in places all over this country. If we want people to take us seriously, someone has to step up and own this mission.”

“So what are you proposing?” Erin asked.

“A walkout.”

“I like it, but how are we going to organize that?” Viv asked.

“Well, I’ll need Erin to create a Facebook event, anonymously of course, using your blogger account. Invite me to it, and I’ll invite as many students from Clarkston that I can.”

Elaine looked at Gwen. “Our class has to be the one that leads the walkout. We’ll march out in front. It’ll make the biggest statement. You don’t need to walk with us, if you’re afraid of what your husband is going to think.” Gwen nodded, looking down at the carpet.

“You think people are actually going to do this?” Gabby asked.

“Why not? We’ve got a ton of support through the blog and some news coverage as well,” said Viv. “I believe Elaine can do this.”

Elaine blushed, looking at her older sister, waiting for her approval—the last one she needed.

“OK, OK, fine. You better hope Dad’s not there. He’ll kill you,” said Gabby.

“Better dead than a coward,” said Elaine, shrugging her shoulders. She turned to Erin, “You ready to do this?”

## Guinevere

As she drove to the Greenwich motel, Gwen mumbled the words under her breath, fumbling over the lines at every repetition like a nervous actor. Should she say “I’m sorry, but we can’t do this anymore” or “we need to come clean”? Should she say nothing and just throw herself into his arms, silently begging for forgiveness for even thinking about never seeing him again. Initially, she thought that their relationship would be strictly physical, merely a way to forget the pain of their everyday reality, but she never anticipated that she would fall in love with him.

At first he was reluctant to talk about his personal life, but eventually he wasn’t afraid to reveal vulnerability to her, especially in the way he told stories about his family. Sometimes she felt as if she knew more about his past, his fears, and his hopes than she knew anything about Art. The love Lance had for Elaine and Gabby was palpable to her, even though she did not have her own children. At times, she even felt jealous of him but then she would remember that she knew things about his daughters that he didn’t. In particular, she had become impressed with Elaine, the way she seemed more outspoken in class, challenging her classmates whether they were discussing literature or social justice issues. The last meeting at Erin’s house made her realize how much she had come to care for Elaine because she was afraid for her. Gwen bit her lip in frustration, mulling over how Elaine told her that she didn’t expect Gwen to walk with her class. She’d feel better about Elaine and her other students’ safety if she walked with them. But, she doubted that she could muster the courage to defy Arthur and his expectations of her. For so long, she had been complacent living in the role he had curated for her, a woman he

wanted, a woman whom he thought he deserved to have. She was to be beautiful, obedient, agreeable—a character in someone else’s story.

She wondered when she had realized this undeniable truth about their relationship and how she let herself continue to live a life dictated by someone else. Was it on their first date, when she pretended to know and like his favorite band, Guns N’ Roses. Maybe it was when he told her that he liked it when she wore makeup, so she decided that she would wear it more often when she was around him. Was it when she told him that she wanted to get her PhD, and that he told her that her job at Clarkston High was perfectly fine? Or maybe it was when she asked him if he wanted to have a baby, and he chuckled and continued reading his morning newspaper, so she never brought it up again.

The pale glow from the dirty sign that brooded over the small parking lot of the Greenwich motel appeared, and Gwen turned her steering wheel to the left to enter the lot. She spied Lance’s car, a dark green Volvo, parked in the middle of the row of spaces closest to the motel. The parking lot was sparsely filled that night, but enough so that their cars blended in with the others. She parked her Corolla four spaces away from his, and walked with her hands in her pockets to Lance’s car. When she got up to the car, she leaned down to look at him through the passenger window. He smiled at her in a way that made something inside falter, like a flickering light bulb, and got out of the car.

They met at the front of the car and Lance wrapped her in a tight hug, burrowing his chin in her hair. Gwen kept her hands in her pockets. When they broke away, he reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out a Milky Way bar, crinkling its glossy wrapper as he handed it to her.

“You hungry?” He asked, winking at her. Gwen’s hands had balled into a fist in her pocket, and she began to realize how much sweat had accumulated on her palms.

“Thanks,” said Gwen, taking the candy bar out of his hand.

Lance had already paid, so they walked straight into one of the rooms on the first floor. After they entered the room, Lance began to take off his jacket as Gwen plopped down on the bed and folded her hands on her lap. Sensing that something was wrong, Lance sat down next to her and placed his hand on top of hers. Gwen rubbed her fingers in the spaces in between his knuckles, trying to memorize the contours of his skin.

“What’s up?”

C’mon, Gwen. Think about Elaine.

“Lance, I don’t think we should keep doing this anymore.” Gwen looked at her feet, refusing to meet Lance’s eyes and concentrating instead on a faded wine stain on the carpet, as if held the source of her consolation. She finally looked up when she realized that Lance hadn’t responded and when she tilted her gaze towards him, she saw his lips slightly upturned in an expression of acceptance, too thin to completely mask the sadness in his dark eyes.

“Yeah, I get it. Remember, I told you we could stop it anytime, regardless of how I feel about you.”

Gwen dug her fist into her pocket, hoping that she would be able to stop herself from trying to take back her words, but she couldn’t because all she could think about was Elaine.

“I’m sorry, Lance.” She couldn’t resist. Just one more time couldn’t hurt. She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. The smell of lemon soap and the scratching of his

stubble ignited a montage of thoughts in her mind of the nights they had spent together, the nights she imagined they would've had together if they had met in different circumstances.

“Can I ask why you want to stop?”

She shrank away. “Elaine,” she said without hesitating, “I care about her a lot. I know things are kind of tense at home, but she will open up to you. You just have to make some time for her.”

He nodded sadly, looking at his watch. “It’s not too late tonight. She and Gabby are probably still awake.”

“Thanks, Lance. Good luck to you.”

From the window of the motel room, she watched Lance’s car pull out of the parking lot. When his car dissolved into the darkness, Gwen felt regret seeping into her mind, demanding her to replay the last few minutes she had with Lance. Leaning forward, she and rubbed her eyes, feeling tears materialize as tiny beads on her fingers. When she looked down, she saw mascara streaked like tire tracks on her skin as well. Don’t be stupid, Gwen, you did the right thing. Shaking her head to collect herself, Gwen gazed across the lot and saw a black Ford Fusion, one similar to the one Arthur drove, pulling out of the lot. She gasped and cursed to herself. No, it couldn’t be Art. She was pretty careful most of the time, except for when Viv caught her at the gas station, but she didn’t think Viv would tip Art off. It had to be someone else. Running out of the room, she got into her car and pulled out of the parking lot one final time. She drove extra fast just because she hadn’t totally convinced herself about who was driving that car.

When she pulled into her driveway next to Arthur's car, Gwen felt a sense of unease preying on the calm that she had talked herself into feeling during the drive back to her house. The Milky Way bar felt like a brick in her stomach. The lights were off in the living room so hopefully Art had gone to bed early. She walked to her door and unlocked it, delicately so that she wouldn't make any noise. Cracking open the door, she slipped inside and slid off her boots onto the mat. The foyer, living room, and stairs were dark, but the faint glow of the kitchen lights emanated from the end of the hallway. She walked slowly, bracing herself to learn that Art had seen her and Lance in the parking lot.

He was sitting at the table, nursing a glass of amber-colored liquid—his favorite whiskey she presumed. Arthur was never a big drinker, but since the shooting, he had spent most days sober. When she entered the room, Arthur merely lifted his gaze to meet hers but he remained on his elbows, slumping over his glass. Like Lance, there was sadness in his eyes, but it was like that of a kid who had just had his favorite toy taken away from him.

“Are you OK, Art?” She tried to coax an answer from him just so she wouldn't accidentally confess to him.

“Why?” Arthur slurred, picking up his glass and swigging it. Gwen remained silent. “God, the amount of shit I have going on in my life—my crazy job and now my wife and my lieutenant having an affair behind my back.”

Gwen felt her eyes fly wide at the words of their affair being spoken by someone other than the two of them. She wanted to run, hide, escape. She said, “I'm sorry, Art. It's not going to happen again. I just told Lance we had to stop seeing each other.”

He slammed the empty glass down on the table, making her jump because she thought the glass would shatter in his hands. “How little you must think of me, of our marriage, to go and do something like this.”

Gwen leaned against the counter and folded her arms across her chest. “Arthur, I’ve always thought of you. This affair was the first time I ever thought about myself.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Feeling her face heat up, Gwen let words crash through unchecked, unfettered. “We almost never visit my parents because they make you uncomfortable. I never went to get a PhD because you said I was good enough as a high school teacher. I never got a chance to be a mother because you never once looked up from your goddamn newspaper every time I worked up the courage to ask you about it. I’m always the woman you want me to be, Art!” The words had shot out of her mouth like bullets, ones more formidable than any of those Art kept with his hidden gun.

Arthur reached for the bottle of whiskey and clumsily poured it into the glass. Yellow droplets splattered on the table from the sloshing liquid. “Well, I’m glad Lance let you feel like the woman you were always meant to be.” His voice, sharpened with sarcasm, reminded her of the times that she decided to go to the bar with her college friends instead of staying in with him to watch TV. “You go have fun, honey,” he’d always said pausing before the “honey,” smiling without wrinkling his eyes, which almost always made her either come home early or not go in the first place.

“It wasn’t like that!”

Arthur took another swig from his glass again, the amber liquid sliding like a waterfall down his throat.

“So, what now? Do you want to divorce me?” Gwen asked.

Arthur chuckled, staring at the bottom of the glass, as if he were willing more whiskey to materialize in there. “No. No one needs to know about my troubles at home. This was just a hiccup. Shen’s gonna get his punishment and you’re going to do your best to forget about him. After all, you’re always going to be the woman I want you to be, isn’t that right?”

Gwen felt her insides burning like she had been the one downing whiskey instead of Arthur. Her palms gripped the counter behind her so firmly that she believed that she might crack the marble surface.

“Fuck you.”

“Excuse me?” Arthur put down the glass.

“Yeah, fuck you. I just told you everything that was wrong with this relationship and you still want to keep me around like a little pet. Honestly, why are you like this?” She turned on her heels, marching for the bedroom upstairs. When she was in their bedroom, she took a duffel bag from the closet and began throwing clothes into it, stuffing it until she could barely zip it. Then, she reached for the gun and tucked it into her jacket pocket. As she stood in the middle of their bedroom, their framed wedding photo on the wall seemed to fix her feet to the ground.

Gwen had always regarded that photo with a sense of fondness. She had always liked the way she leaned against Arthur’s chest, while looking at him and thinking about their future kids running through the sprinklers on their lawn. She had stopped thinking of herself as anyone but his wife. Every time she looked at this photograph, she had always thought he had a similar vision glowing in his eyes. But now, she could clearly

see warning signs—the fact that she looked like a teenager next to him, the way he clutched her like a bird of prey. Shuddering as she took a deep breath, Gwen grabbed her bag and walked out of the bedroom. Marching down the stairs again, Gwen stormed into the kitchen and reached into her pocket to pull out the gun. Arthur paused mid-drink, his hand and glass suspended over his face.

“I’m not the only one keeping secrets here. You know how I feel about guns. How little you must think of me.” Before he could respond, Gwen smacked the weapon down on the table and stormed towards the front door.

“Where the fuck are you going?”

“None of your fucking business,” Gwen said over her shoulder. She opened the door, letting the cold night air wash over her face. A part of her wanted to strip naked and just walk, letting the cool air pour into every cell in her body.

## Lancelot

No matter how loud he turned up the rock music on the radio, Lance couldn't drown the sound her voice in his head; he'd missed several of the exits on the highway and ended up travelling twenty minutes out of his way. After trying to distract himself with the music, the wailing of the electric guitar started to make his head throb, so he turned it off and began to think of her.

Gwen was the only one that would listen to him, now that both Gabby and Elaine both secluded themselves from him. He and Gwen both understood what it was like to be caught between responsibility and desire, but now he was alone again. He rolled down the window, letting the wind whip at his cheeks, hoping that it would erase the smell of her perfume on his coat.

When he finally reached his house, a small white one with black shutters at the end of a cul-de-sac, he noticed that it was the only one with pitch-black windows. In neighboring houses, families were gathered in their living rooms, which were lit by blue TV glows, mothers were in nurseries begging their babies to sleep, and teenagers were in their bedrooms, trying not to fall asleep on top of their textbooks. He got out of his car and walked up the stone steps leading to the house. Bouquets of weeds protruded from the ground around his feet. The white paint on stairs chipped like some animal had raked its claws across the wood. He unlocked the door, delicately so that he wouldn't make any noise, and stepped inside on top of Gabby's work shoes. Of course, even as an adult Gabby never stopped being forgetful. He bent down to pick up the shoes and moved them onto an empty space on the shoe rack. After taking off his shoes and jacket, he walked towards the kitchen to soothe himself with a bowl of milk and Honey Nut Cheerios. First,

he saw the light from the kitchen and then, he heard the laughter like it was an almost forgotten memory.

“Hey, girls,” Lance said as he walked into the kitchen, “What are you doing?”

A wooden box sat in the middle of the kitchen table with its innards spilled out. Family photographs covered the table, their glossy surfaces reflecting the light dangling above them. Elaine and Gabby were in their pajamas, each with a photo in her hand.

“Hey, Dad. Elaine found some old pictures in the basement. I can’t believe our haircuts back then. Did you or mom do this to us?” Gabby held up a photograph of her and Elaine in a pink kiddie pool. Gabby was nine and Elaine was two. Gabby had Elaine in either a chokehold or a very enthusiastic hug, and they were both wearing toothy smiles and bowl cuts. Sarah had taken this picture. He remembered how the girls had climbed out of the pool and started clambering all over her legs, dampening that blue sundress she was wearing that day. She had tried to scold them, but couldn’t keep from smiling.

“Ha-ha, your mom. I tried to talk her out of it,” Lance chuckled, sitting next to Elaine.

“Clearly not hard enough, because these haircuts keep making cameos in so many of these photos,” said Elaine, lightly punching her dad in the arm. It was the first time she had joked in front of him, about him, in a long time.

“Yeah, that was only until Gabby entered her rebellious years. She decided that enough was enough and that only a professional was worthy enough to touch her hair,” Lance said.

“Look at this picture of you and Laney,” said Gabby, plucking a picture from the top of the pile that was still inside the box. Elaine, who was probably about six at the time, was sitting up in her bed, cuddling with Lance, who was reading her favorite book at the time, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Her eyes were half closed, probably because the reading light was dim and Lance had a very soothing voice. He often read two extra chapters before he realized that she was asleep.

“Wowwww what a throwback. Dad, you’re putting me to sleep!” Elaine took the picture, holding it between herself and Lance so that he could look at it as well.

“Ha-ha-ha, I’m surprised. I thought that was your favorite book,” said Lance.

“Well it’s not gonna be a very riveting read if it’s the tenth time we read it together. Plus, the lights were dim. Can’t really blame me.” Elaine smiled fondly at the picture. As Elaine studied the photograph, Lance noticed how the kitchen light illuminated strands of hair tumbling out of her bun, which reminded him of how much she looked like Sarah. Watching her, he felt tears drip onto his pants.

Elaine looked up and said, “Are you OK, Dad?” She dropped the photo on top of the massive pile on the table.

“Yeah, well, no...I-I-I’m sorry girls. I haven’t been there for you,” he said with his voice cracking.

“I missed you these last few months, Dad. Where have you been?” Elaine looked at her dad with a searching expression. He wanted to tell her the truth, but it would only push her away again.

“You know how work has been, you especially Gab. I just needed some time for myself to think. I’ve been going on walks, and sometimes I go to the gym. But, I need

you guys to understand that even though what I'm doing at work is wrong, I have to keep this job. We need the money. This doesn't mean I agree with the chief." The girls nodded, but he imagined the skepticism beneath their accepting expressions.

"We know, Dad. You're doing your best. I shouldn't have stepped out of line that one time. I'm sorry," said Gabby.

"It's OK, Gabs. At least my girls have some spine, even if I don't. From now on, I promise that I'm going to be here for you."

Elaine smiled, "Let's not talk about it too much. We still have to check out Gabby's poor fashion choices." She handed him a picture of Gabby wearing a purple feather boa on her first day of kindergarten. As she was getting on the bus, she gripped tightly onto her boa in fear that it would get caught in the doors.

"Hey! That was my favorite piece of clothing!" Gabby leaned over the table as she grabbed for the picture.

"Who let her wear that to school?" Elaine asked, snorting as she laughed.

Over steaming cups of tea, the three of them pored over the memories, most of them pleasant and some of them heartbreaking, like the photos of Sarah in the hospital. Lance resolved to take pictures of his family again, especially since they were all together again in one place. The doorbell rang, making the three of them look at each other. Lance put down the photograph that he was holding and walked towards the front door. He wondered if one of the neighbors needed something, but what could anybody possibly want this late at night?

Gwen was shivering, her teeth chattering, and the tip of her nose a bright red when he opened the door. He wondered long she must have stood at the doorstep, one finger poised above the doorbell, debating whether or not to press it.

“Arthur knows...He found out but I’m not sure how,” she said as she shook from the cold, pulling her jacket into herself.

“It doesn’t matter. Come in, come in.” She smiled gratefully and rushed in with her duffel bag in her hand.

“Thank you, Lance. It was super late and I didn’t know who else to turn to. God, I wasn’t thinking when I came over here.”

He scratched his head, as he thought of Elaine and Gabby in the kitchen. “Well, we’re about to have a very awkward situation on our hands.” He shoved his hands in his pockets, trying to figure out how to handle his daughters finding out about Gwen. “I could probably sneak you into the basement right now. There’s a couch down there, wait, no, there’s rats down there. Um...um...uh...” There were footsteps coming from behind him.

“Dad, who is that?” Gabby flicked on the lights, her face twisting into confusion when she saw Gwen. She glanced over at Elaine, attempting to ask her something with an urgent look, but Elaine shook her head imperceptibly.

“Mrs. Long, what are you doing here?” Elaine asked with a concerned expression. Gwen looked down uncomfortably, probably thinking about how little she had planned ahead when she decided to come to his house and conjuring up some logical explanation for why she was at their house.

Lance breathed a sign of surrender, “Well, I, um, I can tell them?”

“Your dad and I have been seeing each other,” said Gwen, barely above a whisper. Lance ran his hand through his hair in embarrassment, guilt, shame, and mortification for being caught in a lie. He wished he had told the truth when they were looking at pictures in the kitchen, so he wouldn’t have to talk himself out of another lie he had dug himself into.

“What?” Hurt marred Elaine’s face in a way that reminded him of the way Sarah’s face looked almost every day when she started chemotherapy. “So what about the gym and your ‘walks’? All this time, you guys have been sneaking around.” Tears formed in the corners of her eyes, threatening to hurtle down her cheeks and onto the carpet.

“I’m sorry,” Gwen said. She looked at Elaine with an expression clouded over with shame, as if there was so much more she was apologizing for.

“Elaine, I’m sorry. We’re not seeing each other anymore. I promise I’m here for you guys. That wasn’t a lie,” Lance said.

Elaine glared at both of them, stormed back down the hallway, and marched up the stairs to go to her bedroom. Gabby shook her head at Lance and Gwen and trailed after her sister. After hearing their doors close, Gwen sighed and rubbed her eyes, as she flopped down onto the sofa. Her dark hair was tangled and greasy, but even then Lance just wanted to burrow his chin in it and breathe in her scent.

“Oh, god. I’ve made a mess of everything by coming here,” Gwen said, “I’m really sorry Lance. I can probably go get a room in a motel or something...”

“No, no, the damage is done. It was partly my fault too. I lied to them earlier and made them think I was actually telling the truth. They were on the verge of forgiving

me.” He sank down on the sofa, crossing his hands over his chest. “But, I’m glad you came to me.” They sat in silence, while Lance pretended to be transfixed with the faded cream carpet, remembering the time that he and his daughters spent an hour on their knees scrubbing the mud out of the carpet after Sarah’s funeral. Gwen bit her lip, figuring out what she could say to him.

“So, I guess I’m without a job?” Lance winced, bracing himself for her answer, but she shook her head.

“I’m not sure. I doubt it. He’s too proud, too prideful to even get a divorce.”

Lance burrowed his face in his hands and sighed. “I sleep with the man’s wife, and he still keeps me as his slave.”

Gwen placed her hand on his arm, not daring to move it anywhere else, and said, “You don’t have to stay at this job.”

“I do. Everything I do—it’s for the girls. I will gladly take any punishment he gives me.” She nodded in understanding, though many things unsaid still lingered in her eyes.

“Well, it’s pretty late. We’ll talk about this more in the morning. Let me fetch you some blankets and a pillow,” said Lance, getting up and straightening his pants.

“Thank you.”

He walked into the hallway and up the stairs to his bedroom. He still had a queen-sized bed, but everything about it was different since Sarah died. If she were here, she’d tell him that he should wash the sheets more often and that the green mattress cover didn’t match the duvet. The little things never escaped her attention. Would she notice the way he looked at Gwen? Would she let him move on?

He stepped outside his room, readying himself to go downstairs to ask if Gwen would rather sleep in his bed so that he wouldn't have to sleep alone, but then he saw the sliver of light peeping from underneath Elaine's door. She was probably reading to distract herself from the scene she witnessed downstairs. Shaking his head, Lance couldn't give himself permission to give in to his desires, not again, so he went back to his room, pulled a blanket and pillow off the shelf in his closet, and walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

### The Last Tournament

The last thing Elaine wanted to do was go downstairs. Heaving a long sigh, she flipped over on her stomach and burrowed her head into the pillow. The alarm on her phone trumpeted again and without lifting her head, she reached over to her nightstand and snoozed it. Never mind going downstairs and seeing her dad's friend-with-benefits or whatever the hell they were. She wasn't even sure if she could make it to school and help lead this walkout. But it was too late now; so many people, including students and teachers, wanted to participate. Pushing against her mattress, Elaine sat up and began to get dressed.

It seemed like her dad and Gabby were both out of the house, which left her alone with Gwen. After going downstairs and snagging a granola bar and apple from the kitchen, Elaine crept into the living room, praying that Gwen was asleep so that they could avoid an awkward conversation, but the sofa was empty aside from a folded blanket and pillow. Gwen must've gone to school early or, Elaine bitterly thought, left in the middle of the night when her conscience had finally come to her. How dare Gwen pretend to be such a do-gooder while she was turning her dad into a home-wrecker? Shaking her head, Elaine reminded herself of what was important, and clutched the rolled-up poster that she made earlier in the week.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! Elaine opened the door and saw Maya's car. Maya rolled down the window and shouted, "C'mon, get in or you'll be late. We got things to do you badass bitch!" Elaine smiled at Maya's mysterious ability to defuse her anxieties and walked towards the car.

Maya had decided that the soundtrack for their morning drive would be Beyoncé, of course. During the drive, Elaine drummed her fingers to the pulsing beat of “Run the World” on the door, feeling like her stomach was starting to unknot itself.

“I know you told me this earlier, like right after the Facebook invites for this walkout came out, but I still can’t believe you know who ewriter18 is and you didn’t tell me you were working with her!”

“I couldn’t risk word getting out that I was working against my dad. He could get in trouble at work.”

“Yeah, I get it, but still. How do you feel about today?”

“A little nervous but excited.”

“Come on! The turnout is gonna to be so big. This is gonna make the news and television and everything!” That was the thing—Elaine wasn’t sure if she was ready for that type of recognition. She had never sought attention before; she was always the quiet one in the classroom and never wanted anything but to just blend in. However, working with Erin, Viv, Gabby, and admittedly, Gwen, she found the voice inside of her, the one that didn’t just let injustices pass her by. Looking out the window, she saw the lawn next to the parking lot and remembered the patch of grass where she had sat down, nauseated after evacuating the building post-shooting, and decided that she would never feel that helpless again.

After they parked, they walked to the security line. “This might be the end of these long-ass lines, if this walkout goes well. If it doesn’t, well then we’ll have royally fucked ourselves over,” said Maya, craning her head to estimate how long it would take them to get through security.

“I hope so,” said Elaine, clutching her poster closer to her chest, as if she were afraid that the officer doing the checks would confiscate it. After the two of them made it past security and dropped off their phones, they walked to Mr. Laghiri’s chemistry class. Along the way, other students discreetly looked at Elaine, as if to confirm that the walkout was going to happen. She had never talked to some of these people before, and it took her a few seconds to understand why they were winking at her. She wondered if the cops noticed the discreet exchanges that she made with other students, but they seemed to be unaware and even dispassionate about their jobs.

As she and Maya sat through Mr. Laghiri’s class, Elaine drummed her fingers on the desk as she fixated on the clock at the front of the class. She was simultaneously excited and nervous for the clock to reach 1:00. As Mr. Laghiri droned on about thermodynamics, she wondered if he knew about the walkout and whether he would walk in it. Apparently, he had also been hiding with Gwen in the break room during the shooting, but Elaine wanted to believe that he would try to redeem himself this time around. All the classes after his also blurred together in her mind, muddling together with her anxiety. At lunchtime instead of going to the music room, Elaine bought a ham sandwich, plopped down next to Maya at one of the cafeteria tables.

“What’s up stranger? I almost never see you here,” Maya said as she chewed her own sandwich.

“Gotta fuel up for this,” said Elaine. The slices of bread felt like old, dry sponges, but at least the ham and cheese seemed fresh. She really wasn’t in the mood to eat anything, but she needed something to calm her down before going to Gwen’s class.

“Hey, I don’t you think you met my friends here. This is Delilah and Alexis,” she said as she gestured to each of them.

The two black girls sitting across from them smiled warmly at Elaine. Delilah wore large square-framed glasses that settled underneath her thick eyebrows. Her hair, tied in a tight ponytail, spiraled into thin ringlets. Alexis’s facial features were sharply chiseled, which balanced out the gentle, keen look in her eyes. Elaine knew that they were in the METCO program, but never had the chance to talk to them, so she smiled and introduced herself.

“It’s really cool how you managed to get this walkout together,” said Delilah. “I’m done with the way the school has been for the last few months. You know it takes me twice as long as any white kid to get through the security line here.”

“Ha-ha, it’s not just me. This walkout wouldn’t be happening without most of the students and hopefully some teachers as well,” said Elaine.

“You really think this is going to work?” Alexis asked.

“C’mon, fuck the police. 800 people said that they were gonna come to the event on Facebook. We’re not just gonna make the Clarkston police but the whole country pay attention to us,” said Maya. Elaine smiled at her, thankful that she had a friend who seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of optimism and who seemed to believe fiercely in this mission.

They spent the rest of the lunch hour talking about mundane things—how much homework they had for the week and TV dramas that would be missed because of said homework—and then it was 12:45 and time for their next class. Delilah and Alexis gave

Elaine reassuring smiles before they left. Before Elaine could leave, Maya grabbed her hand, giving it a firm squeeze, and said, “See you soon.”

“See you soon too.”

On the way to Gwen’s class, Elaine passed by Henry’s locker. There was a new student using it, some sophomore girl, who had already decorated the inside with flower magnets and pictures of her poodle. When the girl closed the locker door and began to walk away, Elaine saw that the profanities on the door had been painted over with a layer of dark green paint.

All the students were there when she walked into Gwen’s classroom and some of them were in the back of the room, adding the finishing touches to their posters. After setting down her backpack, Elaine joined some of her classmates in the back of the classroom as they colored in words like “Stop the violence,” “This is a school zone, not a war zone,” “Books OVER Bullets,” “Black Lives Matter,” and “#ENOUGH.” The posters were vibrant and screaming.

“Whaddya think?” Jasmin asked Elaine when she noticed Elaine hovering over her shoulder. Written in all capitals and in thick black letters were the words, “BLACK LIVES MATTER.”

“It’s awesome.”

“Someone’s gotta stand up for all the acts of racism that have been happening here,” said Jasmin with a resolute expression. “What Harry did was so wrong, on so many levels, but he didn’t need to be shot down like that.” Elaine nodded in agreement as she thought about him, the poems he had written, the lyrical sadness that flowed from each page whenever he shared his work in front of a class that was barely listening.

Elaine turned around, searching the room for Gwen, and wondered if she had been scared away because of their confrontation the previous night.

“Hey, class! Sorry I’m late!” Rushing into the room and closing the door behind her, Gwen’s face was flushed and though she tried to hide that she was out of breath, Elaine could see her chest heaving underneath her blouse. “I was trying to do some last-minute convincing in the staff break room. I have very high hopes for this walkout. How is everyone doing?”

“We’re finishing up the posters,” said Elaine, looking at Gwen with a neutral expression. She hadn’t forgotten the previous night’s events and especially the imploring way that Gwen had looked at her for forgiveness. Meeting Elaine’s gaze, Gwen tentatively nodded but her eyes no longer reflected pleading, only readiness.

1:00 PM.

“OK, guys. It’s time. Hold your signs up, stick together, and don’t stop. We’re gonna take back our school, because it’s no place for police or violence,” said Elaine. Scanning the room, she remembered how in November they were cowering under desks and in closets and sitting in their classmates’ blood, but now they were more than ready to lead this movement. With Gwen on her right and Jasmin on her left, Elaine led the small but determined group out of the classroom and headed for the main lobby. A few paces out the door, Elaine heard the sound of unfurling signs and chants of “End the violence!” resonate throughout hallway. She unfolded her own sign—“FEAR HAS NO PLACE IN OUR SCHOOL” in bright crimson—and began to chant along with her classmates. As they made their way down the hallway, Elaine felt someone grab her wrist.

“Hey, told ya I’d see ya soon,” said Maya, her eyes glazed with excitement.

Other students and faculty members toting posters streamed out of their classrooms, and joined the clamor and chanting. The police officers guarding the halls shouted at the crowd, ordering them back into their classrooms, calling for backup, shoving students, but the mass of people only expanded like an angry, ruthless wave, swallowing the police who tried to stop them. Elaine could feel the crush of the bodies behind her, but she imagined an internal metronome demarcating her every step, propelling her toward the front doors. She could hear Gwen’s voice becoming hoarse from all the yelling but even so, she continued to shout.

“ELAINE!!! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!” Elaine’s gaze wavered when she saw her dad running from the opposite direction to meet her. At least ten other cops followed him. Pure horror and panic were legible in the whites of his widened eyes. For a second, she wanted to stop so the crowd wouldn’t mow him down, but she couldn’t now that the mass had metastasized down to the end of the corridor closest to the main lobby. So, she continued walking, forcing her dad and the other cops to backpedal towards the glass doors of the main entrance.

“Dad, get out of the way,” said Elaine with gritted teeth.

His head spun wildly between her and Gwen. “How could you guys? What do you think you’re doing?”

“Doing something right for once in my life,” said Gwen, her voice breaking from all of the screaming she had done.

“You could do the same thing, Dad,” said Elaine. Seeing the hurt and confusion on her dad’s face made her internal metronome skip a beat, but as soon as she felt the

body of another student push her from behind, she regained the momentum to surge forward.

They were at the front doors now, but the police had formed a barricade with their bodies in front of the doors. Beads of sweat formed on their foreheads and between their eyes, and their pupils darted from side to side. They were in the grip of silent panic; all their procedures and instructions buzzed like static in their minds.

“Dad, let us go. For once, do the right thing in your life. If you want me back, do this for me, Dad,” said Elaine. “I don’t want to ask you again.” Red and blue flashed outside—siren lights—and cops stormed towards the school. Elaine watched the cops who had barricaded the door relax slightly at the sight of backup, but they still looked warily at the chanting crowd.

“Elaine, this is dangerous. You need to get out of here, please,” said Lance. Elaine stared at him, challenging him to give her another futile order. The glass door swung open behind Lance, and the police chief, Arthur Long, stormed past her dad to face her. She had grown slightly since she had last seen him, but he still loomed over her so that she could see every piece of stubble poking out of his chin. His eyelids were heavily wrinkled. He scowled at her like it was closest thing he could get to screaming in her face. Following the chief was a burly man with blonde hair and a sneer etched on his face. It was Officer Fowell, otherwise known as “The Brute” to the student body that suffered his aggressive security checks. They both carried large guns with them.

“Young lady, what the hell do you think you’re doing?” Arthur glared murderously at her.

“Chief Long. My name is Elaine Shen, your lieutenant’s daughter, and you have been terrorizing our school for way too long. This is a march to protest violence at our school.”

He scoffed at her and turned to look at Gwen. “Is this your twisted idea of revenge? You’re doing a hell of a job of pissing me off right now!” She wiped the spray of spit off her face and placidly looked at him.

“Get out of the way, Art,” said Gwen.

“Over my dead body.” He held a megaphone up to his lips, “Students and faculty. Though you think your protest is a demonstration against the use of police force in your school, your actions today have failed to convince me to reduce the security measures that I have taken. In fact, it has only convinced me that there is an even greater need to control the anarchy that has overrun this institution. I strongly advise you all to return to your classrooms and resume your regular activities, before people get hurt. I warn you all—we will not let anyone go through these doors. Any attempt to do so will be forcefully resisted.”

Elaine felt her hands ball in a fist—she didn’t come this far to be stopped. Then, she heard a wave of voices surge forward, repeatedly chanting “OUR SCHOOL!”

She could see TV news vans parked outside the school—they were so close.

“Well, I’m sorry, Chief. We have to do this,” Elaine said and pressed forward, attempting to brush past Arthur. But he was quick, bearing down on her with his gun, trying to shove her back, but Gwen was on him, trying to shove the barrel away from Elaine. Arthur was raving like a mad dog, face red and eyes bulging, but he kept shoving as if he knew nothing else. Lance, jumping to his senses, tried to pry Arthur away from

his daughter and Gwen, only to have Arthur try to shake him off like a mechanical bull. As Elaine felt her lungs crushed by Arthur's gun and the bodies of the students trying to press through the door, she watched as Officer Fowell raised his gun to slam it over Lance's head in an attempt to free his chief.

"DAD! WATCH OUT!" Elaine managed to yell even though she felt like all the air had been deflated from her lungs. Lance dodged the attack, but the barrel of the gun came down with a cracking force on Arthur's head. Elaine watched as her dad, Officer Fowell, and Gwen gaped at the chief, their limbs and horrified expressions posed like a trio of Greek statues. The officers blocking the door broke from their ranks as they craned their necks to see over the bodies. Arthur instantly crumpled to the ground. The pressure on Elaine's chest ceased and oxygen flooded her lungs, but before she had time to relish being able to breathe again, the crowd shoved. She saw that Gwen was trying to turn back around, to see if Arthur was OK, but the crowd was also shoving her forward. Now that the chief was down, the officers were shaken, lost without direction. Even Lance didn't even know what to tell them, so the mass forged past them.

Elaine had forgotten to bring her jacket to protect her from the February cold. The wind seemed to slice gashes in her cheeks, but she couldn't care less. She looked down at her sign, which was crumpled and torn from the scuffle, but the crimson words were still legible. Maya and Gwen were at her sides, shaken but still marching forward. The crowd was roaring now, their voices assailing anyone who tried to stop them. The officers that were outside had lowered their weapons, probably because her dad had dispatched them to stand down. Gabby was standing a few feet to her right, looking proudly at her and Gwen as they marched past, and Elaine found her voice again. She began chanting again,

bellowing in symphony with all those who were also in pain, and it felt like release. As the crowd poured onto the sidewalk, advancing towards metal fences that separated school property from the news vans and reporters with hungry looks in their eyes, Elaine felt a dizzying sense of disorientation as she watched the video camera lenses pan over the crowd and heard the harsh snapping of cameras.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw two figures pushing past the fence—Erin and Viv. Looking to her right to make sure Gwen was there and also saw them, Elaine grabbed Gwen's hand and they rushed toward them, collapsing into their arms.

### The Death of Arthur

Sally the nurse smelled of vanilla. Arthur didn't know what she looked like, but from the sound of her silvery, singsong voice, he guessed that she was about late-thirties to early-forties. She was probably a mom with kids old enough to be embarrassed if she dropped them off at the movie theater to meet their friends instead of a block away so that they could walk over to meet them. Maybe that's why she spent her energy narrating every little thing she would do for him. *Mr. Long, I'm just gonna shift you a downwards, just a bit. Mr. Long, I'm going to clean under your armpits now.* Or, maybe that's just simply her job and she knows that there is still a sentient being in that shell of a human lying on the hospital bed.

She liked to leave the classical music channel playing on the radio next to his bed. It wasn't that bad; he had definitely developed a taste for Chopin, but anytime something by Bach came on, he wanted to stick scissors in his ears. However, the headache-inducing sound of the harpsichord was never enough to jolt movement into his limbs, at least not in his physical body.

The last thing he remembered was staring down a girl named Elaine, his lieutenant's daughter, trying to keep her and a mob of protestors from leaving the school, and the next thing he knew was waking up on a rowboat in the middle of an ocean. When he first came to, he screamed until his voice was hoarse, shouting across the empty sea for someone to pluck him off the boat and put him back into his body. Realizing that no one would come, he looked down at the water, watching the waves gently lap at the sides of the ramshackle wooden boat. There were no oars, but Arthur hoped that the waves would be enough to get him to some sort of mental shore. But it had been five days of

endless drifting to the sounds of waves, people coming in and out of the hospital room, and the classical music. Yet he never felt hungry, thirsty, or the need to relieve himself. He constantly longed to see shore, land laid flat like paper. The sky was always a grayish blue, the same shade as Gwen's eyes. The air almost always smelled of vanilla.

Except for the one time that Gwen came to visit him; her citrus perfume immediately dominated Sally's vanilla one. It was day one when she came in the room. He was lying with his hands pressed behind his head, trying to figure out if the cloud in the sky looked more like a UFO or a Hershey's Kiss, but when the smell of her citrus perfume stung his nose, he sat up half-expecting that she would be sitting across from him in the boat. But, there was no one there.

"Gwen, why are you here?" Arthur asked the empty space across from him, hoping that this would translate into actual words.

*Hi, I'm Gwen. Are you Arthur's nurse?*

*Yes. Nurse Matthews. Just call me Sally. And, you're Arthur's wife, right?*

Arthur scoffed at Gwen's hesitation.

*Yes, legally. It's a complicated situation, but I'm his emergency contact. I had to know how he's doing.*

*Well, as you already know, your husband suffered from trauma to the head, and we've put him into a medically induced coma. There's a lot of swelling around the impact area and he hasn't been responsive to other treatments. This coma is going to help with the swelling.*

*How long will he be like this?*

*As long as it takes for the swelling to be controlled, but even after we take him out of the induced coma, he might not return immediately to his conscious state.*

*By this you mean...*

*Since brain injuries are often unpredictable, people who are pulled out of an induced comma may wake up after a few weeks while others may go into a vegetative or minimally conscious state.*

*Oh, god.*

*Don't worry yet, Mrs. Long. He's only been in the ICU for four hours so far. There's time. How about I give you two some alone time. I'll be back to check on him in twenty minutes.*

*Thank you.*

Arthur heard her sit down on a chair to his right. When she interlaced the fingers on her left hand with those of his right, he frowned at the feel of warm flesh instead of a silver band.

*Art, I'm so sorry that this happened to you. Gavin was being stupid and tried to attack Lance. Oh god, this is so terrible. I'm so sorry.*

The concern in her voice sparked hope within Arthur.

*Art, I hope you're in there listening.*

You're loud and clear, Gwen. She rubbed her thumb against his, and Arthur almost smiled.

*I can't help feeling like I partly contributed to this. I'm really sorry about everything that happened between us. I should've just been honest with you and told you how I felt about Lance, right from the beginning. We've both made a lot of mistakes.*

Arthur thought about the early days of his relationship and how the insecurity was always there, how he was always uncertain of why a girl as beautiful and smart as her would want to date someone like him who was way out of her league. He'd probe her about the guy friends she still kept in touch with from college. He'd never want her to travel anywhere. The desire to own her was always there, but it was unnecessary. In the early days, Gwen was devoted—she'd let him control her. She began to massage his hair, the way that she used to, as they were about to fall asleep on his couch in the apartment he had when they first started dating. He hoped that some small part of her loved him still.

Her phone went off. *Hey. I'm with Art right now. No he's still in pretty bad condition. Yeah, of course. I'll meet you guys for dinner. You sure the girls are OK for it? I'll be right there. See you.*

She held his hand to her mouth, kissing it gently. He felt a drop land on his hand, and then he heard her snuffle. She never said his name over the phone, but he knew whom she was talking to. Arthur smiled as he thought about when he first interviewed Lance, a hopeful new detective. A father with two daughters, no doubt compassionate, and a criminal justice major, no doubt intelligent, Lance was Arthur's man, the officer that he knew would become chief if he wasn't around. Lance told Arthur that he hoped to establish his roots in a small town, to make a difference in the community. At the end of the interview, he shook Arthur's hand, a firm and strong grip, a promise, and began to walk out the door before Arthur stopped him and said, "I'll see you at work on Monday?"

Arthur had lost the one man in his force he could completely trust, a man he had tried to mold in his own image, and the thought made him shrivel into a ball as he clutched his head with his arms.

A drop of water landed on the back on his neck. Craning his head, Arthur looked up at sky, which had become grayer than blue, and blinked as another raindrop fell in his eye. More drops followed—not a storm but a very light rain. The water was darker than before and swelled so that he couldn't stand up without losing his balance. Wind gusted across the ocean's surface, giving it the appearance of shattered glass.

*I hope you'll be OK.*

A film of water now covered Arthur's face and he shivered from wearing his damp shirt. Gwen was silent for a long time, but he could still feel her thumb sliding over his.

Don't leave, Gwen. Stay with me. I'm sorry.

*Goodbye, Art.*

He heard the chair screech against the tile as she got out of it and the clicking sounds of her heels. Moments later, the scent of vanilla returned.

*OK, Mr. Long, how about some classical music, while I empty your catheter bag?*

That was four days ago and the air had smelled of vanilla since. He often heard Sally come in with get-well cards and balloons from his employees and heard her place them next to his bedside, as if she expected him to jolt straight up and start reading the cards.

The boat was beginning to feel cramped, though it was still its original size and he was still the only one aboard it. Ever since Gwen left, the waters had become choppy,

not enough to capsize the boat but enough to keep him from walking around. The sky had become a perpetual wash of gray, thick like oil paint, and there was no longer any point in entertaining himself by finding shapes in the clouds. So, he took up crunches, along with any exercise that didn't require him to stand on the boat. Being able to move distracted him from thinking about his actual physical condition.

His family, the Longs, hadn't come to visit him yet, but Art felt his hope dwindling. They were probably so disappointed after reading all the media reports about Clarkston; he didn't blame them for not showing up.

He was in the middle of his hundredth crunch, when he heard Sally's smooth voice from the door.

*Mr. Long, come on in. We're still keeping him in a coma, since there's still quite a bit of swelling that's spread all over his frontal lobe.*

*Thank you, Sally.*

*Of course.*

The chair shuffled and the visitor sat down, letting out a long exhale as he did so.

*Hey, Art. It's me, Evan. Hope you're doing OK.*

Arthur felt his breath catch in his throat, as he sat erect in the boat. Evan, where's Mom and Dad?

*It's just me today. I know you were probably too busy to answer my calls or reach out in the last few months, but a lot has happened. Dad had a stroke and Mom felt that it would be best if they moved to an assisted living residence. They know about what happened to you, but they didn't have any way of coming to see you. I tried to get down*

*from New York as soon as I heard, but I had a row of major surgeries coming up. I just finished operating this morning and came down as soon as I could.*

It's OK. At least you're here now—that's all I care about. Arthur wished he could apologize to Evan about all the missed phone calls, for being so caught up in his own life that he had forgotten about his family.

*The last few months must've been so tough for you. You must've been forced to make a lot of hard decisions. You've made mistakes, Art, but you're a good person. I know that more than anyone. You can come back from them, just like you're gonna make it out of this coma.*

Arthur smiled, hoping that Evan would be right. Maybe if he got of this coma, he would do many things differently, wouldn't do things to drive people away. He had missed out on much of his family's lives since he had been so occupied by his work. For about an hour, Evan told him about his job and how Mom and Dad have settled into their assisted living home, and then he was gone. Sally came back in to check on his feeding tube and his vitals, while he attempted to do more crunches. The waves pulsed gently now, but he couldn't rid of the unsettling feeling coating his stomach like rust. About an hour later, he heard Sally at the door.

*He's right there, Mr. Coyle. I'll be back in a few to check on him.*

*Thank you, Sally.*

Wait, Arthur knew that gruff voice. Someone plopped down on the chair next to him.

*Hey, Art. It's me, the Wiz. I'm back and at your service. Oh man, I'm sorry that this happened to you.*

Arthur wanted nothing more than to see him, to jump out of the bed and embrace him.

*I wanted to come as soon as I heard, but my flights kept getting delayed or cancelled. I wish you could see me now. California has changed me. You know I haven't eaten fast food in like four months. Yeah, I'm on that green juice stuff now.*

He sounds happy.

*I'm still doing SAT tutoring and now a bit of nonprofit work on the side.*

Wow, this was different.

*I see you've been getting some get-well wishes. Cards slid across the table as Melvin picked them up. People are goddamn stupid. These probably aren't even the ones that play music. Mind if I read them to you?*

Go ahead. Not like I can stop you. The sound of ripping paper sounded like thunder cracking.

*Ahem. First one is from Kyle Garcia. Oh, that's slightly awkward. He just signed his name under the prewritten message that says "Get well." OK, onto the next. Garrett Childs. "Dear Chief, the wife and I hope you feel better soon." Boring. And last one—Gavin Fowell. Oh, I know the dick. It says "Dear Chief, don't worry I'll help keep the force in good order while you're away."*

No apology for putting him into this state?

*Where's your lieutenant?*

Probably refusing to forgive him for assaulting his daughter at the protest. If he were her father, Arthur wouldn't forgive himself either.

*Ah, not on good terms I take it from your silence.*

Fuck you.

*Sorry, bad joke. Damn, I wish you were awake right now. I just want my friend back right now, even though things between us have been rocky between us for a while. I mean, you and I, we've both made so many mistakes, but no one deserves this Art, this coma.*

Art wasn't so sure that he didn't deserve being this state. He had made so many bad decisions, choosing violence over and over again. Arthur lay back down on the boat, feeling as if he were in a coffin. The sky was dark, foreboding, threatening to rain again. Arthur felt the waves underneath the boat churn and worried that the boat would crack from the increasing pressure of the water. He lifted himself onto his elbows and watched the waves undulate viciously. The waves' curling fingers clawed at the boat. Every time the boat slid off the crest of a wave, his stomach dropped. Then, the rain hammered down on him. Arthur watched boat fill up with water, and started to bail with his hands.

*Goddamn, I wish you didn't fight so hard before, because maybe you wouldn't be in a coma. I wish you knew that some things were out of your control, no matter how you tried to control them.*

For some reason, even though water nearly reached the rim of the boat, it still hadn't sunk deeper into the ocean. The waves pummeled the boat, spraying his face with foam at every beating. Arthur looked up at the sky, wondering if this storm would ever end.

His hands were getting cold and rigid from throwing water overboard. Arthur lay back, seeming to float on the water that filled the boat, crossing his arms across his chest

like he was a mummy in a sarcophagus. I don't want to fight anymore, he thought as he closed his eyes.

I hear you, Melvin. Then, a wave of cold water slammed on top of him.

Opening his eyes, Arthur wondered how long he had been unconscious for, and he stared up at the sky, the murky gray dissolving into blue. The rain had dried from his face, but his clothes were still damp. Waves no longer bruised the sides of the boat.

Arthur sat up and peered over the side, facing a crystal-clear reflection of his face. Unruly facial hair no longer dotted his face, but instead he saw himself, for the first time in a long time, as clean. His eyes matched the cerulean that had washed over the sky. The water was completely still, flat and smooth as glass. He almost wanted to step out of the boat and walk across it. Dipping his index finger into the water, he saw ripples radiate from it, muddling his reflection. Melvin must have left hours ago, and Arthur hoped he would be back soon.

Arthur looked out across the horizon and for the first time in days, he could make out a sliver of shore.

## Erin

After taking off her three-inch black heels, Erin relished the soft brush of the living room carpet under her blistered feet. Along with Elaine, Gwen, and Viv, she'd had a long day doing endless interviews with local and national radio and TV stations and newspapers and was eager to be home and away from the public eye for a few days. The entire week, she felt as if she had been gasping for breath on a treadmill of public appearances. She longed to return to her usual routine, which mainly consisted of getting up early to make coffee, going for a run if she had time, and then driving over to Brandeis to teach.

It was strange to be recognized in public, to sign autographs and take pictures with strangers while she was standing in the checkout line at Shaw's or going for a jog. Black Students Organization back at Columbia invited her to speak at their events, though she'd been a soft-spoken member of the club during her undergraduate years. However, before she could even think about going to do any public speaking events, she needed to be home for a few days, enough so that the chatter from the outside world could quiet temporarily.

Every time an interviewer asked her why she so was so passionate about her mission, she felt the memory of her dad transforming into words on her tongue, but she would then rinse them away by chugging down the complimentary water bottle given to her at the beginning of each interview.

She walked into the bathroom, shut the door, and sat on top of the toilet lid. The light in the bathroom was fluorescent and sterile, devoid of any sense of warmth. The blisters on her feet looked a bit like raisins if she squinted her eyes. Resting her forehead

on her hands, Erin stared at the raw skin on her feet on the white tile, wincing at how torn up she was underneath the semblance of poise she had been giving to the camera all day. Though she was supposed to go out with Viv for drinks tonight, she was glad that Viv had bailed. When Viv submitted her article about the underground activism that she had been a part of to Manny, the editor-in-chief of *Emporium Weekly*, he loved it and ran it on the front page of the upcoming issue, and promoted her to full-time reporter. She told Erin that she had to stay up all night writing, if she wanted to meet her imminent deadlines. It was all right—alcohol wasn't going to solve anything.

When she heard the front door creak, Erin sat up straight as if electricity had jolted through her back. She had barely seen Garrett in days, since she was busy doing interviews, and he was always at work; by the time one of them returned home after a busy day, the other one was already asleep or pretending to be asleep. Afraid of hearing the hurt in his voice if they were to talk about her part in the protest, Erin had been feigning sleep the past few times Garrett had returned from work. She could see the blue glow of his phone behind her closed eyelids as he sat up in bed, scrolling through texts and social media before going to sleep. They also hadn't discussed the protest or any of her blog activities, since the day of the march at school, when they spotted each other in the crowd. Looking across the mob as she was hugging Elaine, Erin had seen Garrett looking helplessly at her as the students swarmed around him. Some of them jeered at him while others merely ignored him, but he didn't seem to be aware of it all. Instead, Erin saw only confusion as he stared into her eyes as if he didn't know who she was. At the same time, Erin couldn't sleep because every time she closed her eyes and began to drift off into sleep, gunfire and blood would thunder and seep into her dreams.

Pushing herself off the seat, Erin walked to the sink and splashed water onto her face. As she looked at herself in the mirror, she raised a hand to her face, touching the fading scar under her chin from the time she fell off her bike when her father had first tried teaching her how to ride it. Erin's cousin, June, who was three years older than her, had outgrown her first bike, so it went to seven-year-old Erin. On an early Saturday morning, the sight of a new, though used, hot pink bike in the garage was enough to convince Erin to go with her father to neighborhood tennis court. Since no one was playing tennis, her father guided the bike as Erin gripped the pink handlebars, squealing as they rolled over the cracks on the court. When he let her go, though she pedaled, her hands were unsure of how to balance the bike. She fell forward, her chin and arms smacking the court. As she pulled herself up off the ground, Erin saw drops of blood staining the concrete. Her dad was already by her side, checking her for injuries and saying, "It's OK, Erin. Brush yourself off, and just try it again. You have to keep trying."

The scar on her chin would probably fade over time, but the memory of her dad's blood seeping towards her, as she lay belly-down on the floor of the gas station convenience store was a poorly healed, misshapen bullet wound. She had tried, Dad, she really had, to extinguish ignorance, but what about Garrett, people like Garrett? There was always going to be someone left who wouldn't understand the truth, even if it were in front of him, someone who would rather be ignorant.

It's OK, Erin. Brush yourself off, and just try it again. You have to keep trying.

Taking a deep breath, Erin opened the door, wincing as it creaked. She had to keep going.

“Garrett?” She called as she walked into the living room, and saw him transfixed on his phone screen. He seemed to be reading intently, but as soon as he heard his name, his head whipped towards her in surprise.

“Oh, hey...Erin. I thought you were going out tonight?” He rubbed his hair uncomfortably. He was still wearing his uniform, though he had started to undo the first two plastic buttons.

“I wasn’t really feeling it tonight. I’ve got a lot on my mind.” Erin thought that would be the end of conversation, as Garrett would usually find an excuse to end any sort of serious talk with her.

“You’ve been doing a lot, Erin, the past week, months. It’s OK to give yourself a break.” Seeing that he didn’t want to leave the room, she sat down next to him on the couch.

“Are you mad at me? We haven’t talked about any of it,” Erin’s voice trailed off, trying not to sound accusatory.

“No, um...I’ve read a lot of your blog actually, since I found out that you wrote it.” He smiled at her, “It’s really good. You’re a talented writer.” He placed his hand on her lap, and rubbed his thumb back and forth on her skin. This was the in-between she had missed in their relationship. He rarely touched her like this without it ending in furious but silent sex. When they weren’t having sex, Garrett acted like he couldn’t even stand being in the same room together. Of course, these two things would only happen on the infrequent occasions that they were both awake and together at the same time.

“Why didn’t you tell me how much you cared about this cause?”

“Since the shooting happened, you didn’t seem like yourself for so long. You didn’t want to talk about anything other than weather or what groceries you wanted me to buy for dinner. You didn’t look at me like you used to. I don’t know, Garrett, I just didn’t know how to tell you.” She looked down at her lap, rubbing small circles on the black dress. “I felt like you needed to deal with whatever you were going through in your own way.”

“I was really messed up, Erin, so messed up by what I saw that day, and all the days after that. I didn’t want to put that on you.”

“You can tell me anything.” She leaned forward, kissing him on his lips.

“So can you.”

. It’s OK, Erin. Brush yourself off, and just try it again. You have to keep trying.

She took his hand in hers, rubbing her fingers against his dry knuckles. Looking into his eyes, the color of moss mixed with dark wet soil, Erin wouldn’t allow herself to see yet another ignorant white man. She looked at the man she fell in love over a steaming margherita pizza and a mutual love of cheesy Christmas movies, the man who was smart and capable of understanding.

Taking a deep breath, she looked at him and said, “Let me tell you about my dad.”

## Elaine

“Wow, Dad, first time we’re not going to school together in a long time,” said Elaine as she leaned against the back seat. Through the metal bars that divided the front of the patrol car from the back, Elaine watched her dad gripping the steering wheel with one hand and with the other propped on the window, while Gabby crunched on an apple. Looking out the window as the car cruised through the neighborhood, Elaine knew how all the streets fed into one another, knew the cars that belonged in many of the driveways, and knew most of the sleepy-eyed people emerging from their houses to go to work; everything was the same, and yet she felt different.

“It’s the first time in a week you’ve gone to school,” said her dad, trying to meet her eyes from the rearview mirror. After the protest, Viv, Erin, Gwen, Gabby, and Elaine had been invited to a flurry of news, radio, and TV interviews. Elaine thought it was strange seeing the group on TV, dressed up and their faces caked with makeup. It was like them having a secret meeting, only infiltrated by countless bright-eyed, pearly-toothed, over-caffeinated interviewers along with viewers all over the country. Elaine liked hearing the older women talk, newly understanding their perspectives as they explained their experiences in trying to raise awareness at Clarkston, but her own fears chipped away at her hopes. She struggled to keep from biting her lip or blinking too fast for fear of ruining the lipstick and mascara. Of course, Elaine would answer that she’d continue fighting against gun violence, while smiling at the interviewer, rigidly nodding because the weight of her hair from the hairspray always made her head seem like it was locked in a forward tilt. But in the back of her mind, the thought that perhaps things

would never change no matter what she or anyone else did gnawed at any semblance of hope.

“I’m ready to be back and see everyone,” said Elaine, as they pulled next to the curb at the front of the school. In about a week, she along with several other students, including Maya and kids from Gwen’s class, were set to do speeches at City Hall, but before she could make any more public appearances, Elaine was ready to be a high school student again. Come to think of it, she had a test in chemistry in a few days that she hadn’t started studying for.

“See ya, Laney! Have a good day,” said Gabby through the open passenger seat window. Gabby grinned at Elaine with a wide, toothy smile that had rarely made an appearance on Gabby’s face since she started working at Clarkston.

“Love you!” Lance said as he stuck his head out from behind Gabby’s. Elaine felt the blush creep up her cheek, fighting the instinct to turn around and make sure that no one was behind her to eavesdrop.

“I love you guys too,” said Elaine. As she stepped away from the curb, the patrol car pulled away from the sidewalk, heading towards the police station. Elaine kicked a couple of pebbles off the concrete as she tried to steel herself to walk towards the entrance. When the last pebble had gone over the edge, Elaine took a deep breath, holding it in her lungs for a second before expelling it slowly like she was gradually letting the air out of an overly carbonated soda bottle.

When Elaine arrived at the entrance, the line for security was sparse—a few kids bundled in jackets moving steadily up the stairs. The kids moved quickly because none of the police officers were confiscating phones or spilling the contents of backpacks on the

ground. After the cop scanned her body with a metal detector, he nodded and allowed her to collect her backpack and continue down the corridor. As she walked to class, Elaine noticed that there were fewer officers on patrol and none of them carried rifles. People appeared to be more at ease now, chattering freely, filling up the hallways instead of shrinking away from the few officers leaning against the walls. It felt normal without actually being normal.

As she passed by the decorated lockers of the shooting victims, Elaine noticed that the photographs and notes that had remained on the lockers were either curling at the edges or crumpled. They'd eventually all be stripped off the lockers at the end of the year to make room for other students. She made her regular pilgrimage to Harry's locker, and accidentally made eye contact with the girl whose belongings now occupied it. She thought about how many lockers in the country in the past year alone had been cleared out prematurely and replaced with somebody else's stuff because of gun violence. Elaine wanted to go over and tear down the photos of poodles that were taped on the inside of the door, but she just buried her hands in her pockets, curling her fingers into tight fists, and kept trudging to Gwen's class.

As she walked in the room, some of her classmates came up and hugged her, giving her high-fives or fist-bumps, saying how cool it was to see her on TV. She smiled and said that the march's success, the publicity, wouldn't be possible without them, but at the same time, she wondered how many TV appearances it would take laws to change, for violence to end.

"Hi, Elaine," said Gwen as she walked into the classroom. Elaine noticed her new crimson lipstick. Her dark hair was down and straightened, the freshly cut locks just

grazing the top of her shoulders. Over the course of the week of interviews, Elaine had watched youth return to Gwen's complexion, in the way she glowed in front of the cameras. She could've been an actress, handling all the questions without fumbling over the answers.

"Hi, Ms. Long," said Elaine, not wanting to cross the boundaries of teacher-student relationships that had already been crossed, a million times over, in her own home.

Though Gwen no longer lived at their home since she'd found an apartment a couple of miles away, she still regularly came over for dinner often which, to Lance's surprise was Elaine's idea. Maybe it was seeing Lance and Gwen fumbling for each other's hands when they were separated at the protest, her wanting her father to find love again, or watching Gwen redeem herself that made Elaine want Gwen to be a part of her life.

Yet, every time Gwen came over for dinner, she seemed to be on guard, afraid to cross boundaries, like a candidate at a job interview. When Lance would open the door for her, it would be a quick smile followed by a "Hi, how are you?" No hasty hugs or swift kisses to the cheeks. No formal, skin-tight Ann Taylor skirts and dresses like the ones she wore to school, but fuzzy knit sweaters and dark-wash jeans. At the dinner table, she would slice meats like a neurosurgeon, making careful and controlled incisions. She would cover her mouth to speak if someone asked her something while she was in mid-chew, a soft blush creeping up her cheek the longer she spent simultaneously chewing and talking. After dinner, she always offered to do the washing up, standing up to collect their plates and silverware, before one of them urged her to sit down. Though she tried

not to ask Gabby too much about her work and Elaine too much about school, Gwen seemed genuinely interested when asking them about their favorite books, movies, weekend activities, places they wanted to travel. Lance never forced himself into the conversation, letting Gwen and the girls' stories and laughter fill the kitchen, which had been long devoid of chatter, stepping in only when anyone directed a question at him. He had long been going on dates with Gwen, but that wasn't as important as spending time with her and his daughters. Because while their feelings for each other were certain, how Gwen would fit into his family was not.

Elaine wondered how many times you had to meet another person, until you could fully understand them. So far, she'd met Gwen, the teacher, and Gwen, the activist...so who was this version of her? Gwen, the woman who was trying to date her father without making things extremely weird and awkward? Gwen, the person? Elaine liked the latter better.

Since Gwen had altered their curriculum, they had been doing an impromptu month of Toni Morrison books. Not all, but many of the English teachers, had been changing their curriculum, adding more writings by authors of diverse races and backgrounds. After Elaine sat down at her desk, she pulled out a copy of *Beloved* from her backpack. When she first bought the book, it had a glossy cover and unmarked pages, with the feel and smell of new books that always sparked excitement in her, but this time she was even more eager to engross herself in the works from an author she had never read before. Touching the plum-colored cover, Elaine traced the jagged branches that speared the jet-black word "Beloved," feeling the book's creased, broken spine, and thumbing through the pages filled with illegible notes. The book bulged with confetti-like

pink and green sticky notes. Every time she opened it, some of them would fall out. The story had kept her up for nights, as she read until 3:00 in the morning and woke up with the book facedown on her chest. Nothing from the beginning of the year—Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, the Brontë sisters—had caused her such sleepless nights of impassioned reading.

When class ended, Elaine stayed behind, slowly packing up her bags until everyone had left the classroom. Gwen was at the front of the class, back turned, wiping the notes off the whiteboard, leaving a blue smudge every time her arm went back and forth. Gathering up her backpack, Elaine walked up to Gwen.

“Hey, Gwen,” said Elaine shyly, trying to fight the urge to look out the door to make sure that no one had caught her calling her teacher by her first name.

“What’s up, Elaine?” Gwen dropped her eraser on the metal tray that lined the bottom of the whiteboard. She looked concernedly at Elaine as she absentmindedly rubbed the blue residue off her fingers.

“Um, just seeing if you’re still coming to dinner,” said Elaine, running her fingers through the hair at the nape of her neck.

“Of course, I wouldn’t miss it for anything.”

Elaine smiled, “Cool, I’ll see you at seven then?”

As Elaine began to leave the classroom, Gwen said, “Is there something else you want to talk to me about, Elaine?”

Slinking back towards Gwen, Elaine looked at her teacher as she bit her lip, trying to find the words to explain the thoughts that had been pinballing through her head the

entire day. Gwen had a warm smile, encouraging but not probing, like the smile she had seen her mother with in many old photographs.

“Do you think people are gonna forget about everything that we’ve done, everything that’s happened at Clarkston?” Elaine thought about the lockers of the victims—stripped of notes and cards, disinfected, refilled with the books of another student. “Everything feels too normal here.”

“I think we did that most that we could’ve,” said Gwen. “Look, I know it’s been a really busy week of interviewing and making appearances for you. Coming back, going through all of your classes, feels too normal—I get it. But, I promise you things are different here now.”

“How?”

Gwen looked at the door and said, “I haven’t seen any cops pass by or stand outside our classroom this entire class. Your dad being the interim chief is a good thing, Elaine.”

Elaine nodded, glancing at the stream of students pouring into the hallway, and realized that the months of stoic looks and murmured voices had given way to laughing and chattering as students bustled towards their next classrooms. Sneakers squeaked against waxed tile as people dodged through the crowd, kids with phones stealthily snapped pictures of their friends, and students leaned against walls without fear of cops shooing them away.

“Normal is good, but it’s not enough of an illusion to make people forget,” said Gwen as she reached forward to touch Elaine’s arm, a boundary crossed. Elaine’s mind

struggled for a second, trying to reconcile the different versions of Gwen she had met throughout the year with the one standing in front of her now.

After Elaine left the classroom, she pulled her phone from out of her back pocket. A dozen text messages exploded on her screen, the first from Maya.

Hey, room 205 today after school.

Right, Elaine remembered, frustrated with herself for almost forgetting. Maya and a bunch of students had been leading discussion groups after school. After the shooting, guidance counselors and some faculty members held grief workshops, but they mostly just provided ineffectual and generic exercises for healing—journaling, physical exercise, and meditation. But no one wanted spiral into further grief by having to explore their feelings in a journal, no one had the stamina to run the grief out of their systems, and no number of deep breaths could effectively expel the past from people's memories. However, from what Maya had told her, many people had been coming to the discussion groups to talk about what it was like to be a black student and to feel isolated from their white peers, what it was like to feel like guns were pointed at their backs while walking down the halls, what it was like to feel crippling anxiety and depression every day, what was it like to have to grow up so quickly.

I'm coming, Elaine texted. Tucking the phone back in the snug back pocket of her jeans, she continued down the hall.

After a long day of anticipation, the bell finally rang, freeing the students from the monotony of class. Walking against the flow of students enthusiastically forging for the buses or their cars, Elaine elbowed her way past the crowd until she reached the stairwell to the second floor. In room 205, Maya and several other students were setting up chairs

into tight circles, making the room look slightly like a teacup ride at the amusement park. Spotting Elaine at the door, Maya put down the black metal chair that she was carrying and hustled over to her, tightly wrapping her arms around Elaine.

“Elaine! I missed you!”

“I missed you too!” Elaine said. Gazing around the numerous chairs set up like chess pieces around the room, Elaine said, “Seems like it’s gonna be a big turnout.”

“Oh, it’s been big. We actually had to expand to the two rooms next door. But I need you in this room helping to guide discussions.”

“What? Me? Ha-ha, all I’ve been doing this week is talk,” Elaine chuckled.

“Which means you’ll be prepared for this,” said Maya. She and other student leaders, mostly seniors, welcomed students as they entered the room, and by the time every seat and most of the floor space was filled, the student leaders began to direct the incoming students to the neighboring rooms. In her circle of chairs, Elaine looked at the students sitting in her group, all of whom she had never spoken to before or had never even met before. Jenny, a sophomore, had been following “Written in Black” since its inception. There was Jackson, a tall black boy, a junior and one of the few black kids who had lived in Clarkston his entire life. Until the shooting, he had never been so brutalized by police officers. There was a mousy girl, Allison, whose deep voice surprised Elaine when she introduced herself. She was a freshman and Jack Peters’s sister. The more Elaine looked at her, the more she could see more of her brother in her face, and she felt a wave of sadness when she thought about him being shot, and then him being lowered into the ground at the funeral.

All it had taken was four months. Four months since the shooting for suburban dreams of safety and security to turn into nightmares. Four months for people to experience violence at the hands those who were supposed to protect them. Four months for people to adjust to living without a classmate, a friend, a brother. At the same time, those four months didn't destroy them, no, thought Elaine as she broke her gaze from the faces of those in her circle. There were boys from the football team, who had never seemed to care about getting hit in the head until Harry's bullets went through their teammates' heads, kids from debate club who were interested in social advocacy, students from the METCO program, who routinely missed their buses to stay for these discussion groups, white students, black students, Asian students, Latino students, and they were all there because they had lost people, and they wanted to understand why students were being forced to adjust to living in a nightmare until it's no longer surprising but normal.

Feeling the emotion trembling in her throat and threatening to burst out, Elaine looked down at her hands, the dry, white patterns of cracked skin, the thin strips of cuticle shielding smooth nail, the blue veins snaking through pink flesh on the back of her hands, and in the simplest way possible, Elaine remarked on how alive she was. Though she could easily have been massacred along with most of her classmates, Harry had shown her mercy. She was alive. They were all alive. For the past four months, they all learned what it meant to be alive, to be frighteningly vulnerable, that the cost of surviving the shooting was to worry about death lurking in unknown places. But now, coming together, they were learning the unmitigated power of being alive, realizing that their voices could drown out the fear of vulnerability and replace it with hope.

Elaine thought about the Boston City Hall appearance that she'd been scheduled to make along with their classmates. They'd probably get to ride in a sleek black limo, complete with bulletproof windows and a couple of bodyguards. Nearing Government Center, they'd gulp at the sight of the gray inverted concrete pyramid that was City Hall, the shadow it seemed to cast over the endless crowd that had gathered and completely covered the broad brick steps. Elaine would remember that on a seventh grade field trip to Boston, Mrs. Abrams, the trip leader and her history teacher, led the group of weary teenagers who had trudged for what seemed like forever across the sprawling square to stand in front of City Hall. She said that the building's architecture style was something called "brutalist," and mentioned something about function over form. But Elaine had drowned out her voice with her thoughts, as she stared up at the imposing fortress of City Hall, feeling the same sort of discomfort she'd feel if someone were leaning too closely to her face.

Pulling up to the curb, they'd see a crowd of people toting signs like sails in the wind and photographers holding cameras like rocket launchers. Mustering smiles, they'd trail behind a bodyguard or two as they led them through the fenced-off path cutting through the crowd, but at the same time Elaine wondered if any of her friends would look across the square and see a row of cameras and wonder if one of them was a gun. They'd make it to the podium and shake hands with the legislators who needed to hear what they had to say. The bodyguards would step to the side, and they'd all think about scrambling off the podium for a fraction of a second. There would be too many unknown variables in the crowd and too many enemies who wanted to silence them. But then they'd remember

their responsibility to speak up, and the churning in their stomachs and the trembling in their hands would calm.

Looking at her classmates for reassurance, Elaine would step up first to the podium, reaching into the pocket of her pants for her typed speech. She would feel the edges, soft and worn from the hundreds of times she'd folded and unfolded it, as her fingers grazed across them without the fear of getting a paper cut. But the words would already be in her head, along with thousands of others she had forgotten to type out, so she would slip the paper back into her pocket. Grasping the sides of the podium, Elaine would lean into the microphone and open her mouth.

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