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The cumulus effect

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The Cumulus Effect

By

Kate Kenney

Accepted in Partial Completion
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Kathleen L. Kitto, Dean of the Graduate School

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Kate Kenney
June 14, 2014

The Cumulus Effect

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

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Kate Kenney
June 2014

Abstract

The Cumulus Effect is the first part of a longer work of contemporary young-adult, realistic fiction regarding the formation of identity, relationships, becoming independent and leaving home. Protagonist Violet is an eighteen year-old female who has just left her middle-class suburb of Alamosa, Colorado to start her first year of college. Her four year relationship has ended leaving her emotionally shattered. Coupled with her parents' separation and slipping grades, Violet's once confident and ambitious nature begins to crumble. Over time, through her proclivity for list making and the support of her new college friends, Violet learns to accept change. *The Cumulus Effect* refers to the rising of warm air from the surface that, when mixed with cool air, causes water vapors to condense, eventually forming a cloud. This process of accumulation is similar to the pressure Violet places on herself to be the person she once was. By embracing the idea that change is constant, Violet is finally able to construct a new self.

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Critical Preface

In my thesis, *The Cumulus Effect*, Violet James is in the process of coming-of-age. We first meet the narrator in her third month of college. Life for Violet is changing rapidly as she tries to come to terms with everything all at once. After a recent break-up with her long-time boyfriend and a move hours from home, Violet's world is now unfamiliar. Once valedictorian and highly involved in high-school, after she starts college her grades begin to plummet. With the hint of separation between Violet's parents and when a new boy, Oliver, suddenly appears in her life, Violet is forced to pay attention. She struggles with an attempt to recapture her once uncomplicated life while also coming to the realization that mistakes create room for growth. Violet both desires to maintain the stability of her home life and leave the familiar for the new experiences that college allows. With family life, friendships and love in flux, Violet must figure out how to move forward and face her obstacles. The title, *The Cumulus Effect*, suggests the rising of warm air and a condensing of water vapors to form a cloud. The accumulation of pressure and expectation Violet places on herself is similar to cumulus cloud formation. According to the National Weather Service, the Latin word *Cumulo* means a "heap" or "pile." This definition mirrors Violet's own burden of classwork and family responsibilities amongst crippling self-doubt.

In "The Art of the Young Adult Novel," publisher Stephen Roxburgh describes the heart of the young adult novel as a transition from an unreliable to reliable narrator (7). Roxburgh writes, "The first person narrator in a coming-of-age – a plot of character – is almost always unreliable...Life experience is about to change that, but the protagonist is unaware" (7). The emphasis on character development is what initially drew me to the Young Adult genre. In Megan McCaffery's YA novel, *Sloppy Firsts*, the plot is in character

experience. The success of the novel – and the universal quality readers find in protagonist Jessica Darling’s story – hinges not in what happens to her, but rather how she communicates her journey and experiences. An example of this can be seen in the very first page of the novel when Jessica emails her best friend Hope after Hope has moved away, “I guess your move wasn’t a sign of the Y2K teen angst apocalypse after all. I’m still here. You’re still there. Fortunately, I’ve been way too busy basking in the golden glow of adolescent adulation to be the least but depressed about your departure...” (McCafferty 1). McCafferty’s narrative voice is so humorous and genuine that readers feel as if they know Jessica. The plot focuses on the individual and the protagonist’s change over the course of the narrative.

The Cumulus Effect is inspired by some of my favorite realistic fiction writers in Young Adult lit today. In particular, I’m inspired by Deb Caletti’s poetic imagery in her novel, *The Secret Life of Prince Charming*, Morgan Matson’s creative structure in her novel *Amy & Roger’s Epic Detour*, Megan McCafferty’s frank voice in her novel *Sloppy Firsts* and John Green’s complex characters in his novel *The Fault in Our Stars*. These authors motivated me to create an authentic adolescent experience. In *The Cumulus Effect* Violet’s journey is about her struggle with loss and change, becoming newly independent, and falling in love.

Roxburgh writes: “The elements that most often dominate in the narratives we include in the young adult category are... 1) they are plots of character; 2) the characters tend to be adolescent; and 3) the point of view is often first person” (Roxburgh 7). It’s these same three elements that I’ve included in my thesis. I’m drawn to these features of YA literature because they allow me to experience the world again. I’ve been a sixteen-year old brunette from New Jersey (*Sloppy Firsts*), a boy in love with a girl named Alaska (*Looking for*

Alaska). I've married a vampire and birthed his hybrid child (*Breaking Dawn*). I've even jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge (*The Catastrophic History of You and Me*).

Tone and narrative voice play an integral role in developing dynamic characters. While writing I strived to create a strong narrative voice. The narrator defines the novel because her growth over the course of the story is what drives the plot. One of the greatest tasks in building Violet's voice was creating authentic dialogue. By reading aloud, and by also considering how those around me talk, I was able to differentiate Violet's own youthful and sarcastic voice from that of the supporting characters. Violet's informal speech is reflected in the characters Jake and Oliver, and this tone places her voice in an era of quick communication. For example: "There are three rules at science camp. First, wear your safety goggles. AT ALL TIMES. Second, don't let the dropper touch the petri-dish. Bacteria! Bad! And third, when carrying a microscope always use two hands... These rules have been, up until this point, my essential laws to living" (3).

This passage shows Violet's direct voice, with short, clipped sentences. Also, her stress on certain words ("AT ALL TIMES") allows her sarcastic nature to come through. Her penchant for list making also is apparent in her speech. The emphasis on what she knows, and also how it fails to help her in her current situation, further brings out her exasperation. Because of the use of first person narration, I needed to maintain a balance between internal narrative and dialogue.

In early drafts, unnecessary description was problematic and at times, Violet's introspective stance often felt lengthy and repetitive. So I considered what Violet reveals about herself through internal monologue, creating purpose and drive for her as a character to move forward and accept all the changes in her life. Focusing on character as Roxburgh

describes it, to reveal the plot itself, Violet needed something important to say. For example, in a scene where Violet meets with Jake at a coffee shop, readers see Violet's desire to move on and learn from the experience: "I'm glad this is happening. I can come to terms with this moment of separation. Of not being sad or angry but knowing I need to move on. The realization's the first step, right? Going forward finally sounds better than looking back" (30). Violet's acknowledgement of her confusion and not knowing exactly what her future holds shows her growth and search for identity. Violet's progression is not linear but rather an unstable journey toward a better understanding of self. The introduction of other characters such as Oliver, Jenn and Jake allows Violet to find what it is she really wants and furthers her drive to move forward. Therefore, Violet's fluctuating development throughout exists as the heart of the narrative, as it does for most YA protagonists.

Through studying the Young Adult genre, I wanted to write an accessible story with appeal to a common teenage experience. I brought out common young-adult transitions, such as losing love and growing away from home, with Violet's overall journey. Coming-of-age stories often include "first times." Whether these include leaving home, living on one's own, or falling in love, it is always a journey to new perspectives. Since readers might simultaneously be having these experiences, I want Violet's story to seem familiar while also capturing her singular experience. It is Violet's acceptance of her parents' separation as being similar to her own, and her quest for friendship that makes her journey unique.

One aspect I incorporated to help make Violet's story more familiar was her overwhelming confusion. Although change is often resisted, the adjustments that come with finding independence are almost always for the better, even when everything seems to be falling apart. I wanted Violet's experience away from home and meeting new people to

reflect that realization and also acknowledge the desire to move forward. By assuring readers they are not alone in their experiences— and that difficult issues such as break-ups and family disagreements can be dealt with through humor and grace—contemporary Young Adult novels help readers, themselves, “come-of-age.” More importantly, these books might allow readers to see that they’re never really done growing up.

The evolution of character was essential throughout the writing process. As Roxburgh explains, the character’s journey is found in her change throughout the novel. As Violet’s perspective broadens with experience, her reliability as a narrator increases. An example of this can be seen when Violet acknowledges her responsibilities and the importance of taking care of her brother, “If I’m going to get things together it’s going to be so I can feel reliable again. So I won’t be the one who lets Joshua down” (73). On the spectrum of topics addressed in problem novels Violet’s experience is more typical than risky – she has difficulties that many other young adults have experienced. Violet’s story focuses on her growth over time in terms of who she once wanted to be and who she is becoming. A main factor in that change is the falling apart and coming together of her relationships. By highlighting those relationships, readers can see the growth in Violet as a person based on her understanding of others. In *Literature for Today’s Young Adults*, Allen Pace Nilsen and Kenneth L. Donelson discuss what is at stake in such a novel, “The problem novel... is based on the philosophy that young people will have a better chance to be happy if they have realistic expectations and if they know both the bad and the good about the society in which they live” (Nilsen and Donelson 114).

For characterization and voice I consider writer Megan McCafferty a role model. In McCafferty’s Jessica Darling series, the protagonist is both self-deprecating and honest.

Readers understand Jessica because of the frankness of the truthful insight in the details she divulges. She's goofy and unapologetic and not afraid to speak her mind, even if it is only being written in her diary. McCafferty also creates Jessica's distinct tone through font and punctuation. An example of this can be seen when Jessica is forced to stay home instead of being with friends, "So I could've been on a bus to N.Y.C. this morning. Instead, I was downing coffee and Cap'n Crunch while my mother yapped about making table favors for *the big day*. But I was too tired for tulle talk" (McCafferty 91). The dialogue between Jessica and her peers is authentic to late nineties teens growing up in the U.S. Their focus on pop culture and self-expression is genuine and earnest in its no-holds-barred attitude. In that way, I admire how McCafferty creates a time capsule of adolescent culture. The use of pop-culture references such as Barry Manilow and The Back Street Boys, creates a specific world for the reader to inhabit while also following Jessica on her commonly shared experiences such as falling in love and creating friendships.

John Green also provided a model for how to create well-rounded, complex characters. In Green's novel *The Fault in Our Stars*, protagonist Hazel is both the gushing girl behind a teenage crush as well as an introspective and intelligent young woman. In the beginning of the novel Hazel is both intoxicated by Augustus Waters and his "*existentially fraught* free throws" (Green 31) and attuned to the realities of cancer which make her a "Victorian Lady, fainting-wise" (Green 31). In a single page, readers observe Hazel's immersion with both a romance and illness.

In a similar vein, I want Violet to be multi-dimensional in her interest in science and a sometimes overwhelming preoccupation with relationships. Showing different facets of her character, Violet can then become more reliable. Also, by meeting other characters in the

book through Violet's perspective, readers will come to know these characters through her initial reaction. It is only with her growth throughout the narrative, when Violet comes to trust others, that readers also can trust her as a narrator.

I also want my characters to have faults. Violet is moody and analytical because she feels out of control. The neglect Violet has shown for not only her classwork but also by her refusal to let herself move on, illustrates the ways in which she is not taking responsibility for the important things in her life. As Violet meets new people, she begins to shed her feelings of hopelessness and allows herself to accept that change occurs and also acknowledges the transition as a positive one. For example, "I think of my constellation book sitting at home gathering dust. It's so easy to let the important things fall away. It's only in moments like these that I really miss what I've left behind" (57).

While heartbreak is not a drastic obstacle to overcome, it *is* one that causes a dramatic change. Dealing with the ending of a serious relationship forces Violet to reexamine both who she is and what she wants in future relationships. Changes such as these are commonly experienced and often build character because they allow one to see their own strength and resiliency. Violet should be a character that readers both root for and empathize with. As Nilsen and Donelson write, "There is a refreshing honesty in stories that show readers they are not the only ones who get served that kind of ball and that the human spirit...may rise again" (114).

Violet's journey is a romantic quest, not strictly an experience of love but also of finding her place. Nilsen and Donelson discuss Newbery Award-winning author Sharon Creech's observation of the romantic quest, "These journeys echo all of our daily journeys: not knowing who we will meet today, tomorrow; who will affect our lives in small ways and

profound ways; where we will go; what we will feel; what will happen to us” (136). With Violet’s introversion because of Jake’s sudden breaking off, I wanted Violet to question what she does and does not want in a relationship. With her high school friend, Corinne, moving away and Violet herself moving to a new town for college, Violet discovers the importance of becoming her own independent person. It is essential for Violet not to lose her ability to trust because without it she cannot move forward. When Violet meets Oliver she is surprised by how easily she can trust someone. Oliver’s off-beat quiriness allows Violet to let her guard down. He is a confidante before he is ever romantically involved with Violet. Her relationship with Oliver is important to Violet’s understanding of relationships because trust not something she experienced with Jake.

During my writing process, I worked to make Violet’s journey a “romantic quest.” A romantic quest is a term that Nilsen and Donelson use not necessarily in terms of relationships but as the point of departure for a character’s story. Leaving home then becomes its own journey, even when, as in Violet’s case, it’s only to a place a few hours away. Violet’s story is a reevaluation of her relationships and larger goals.

The main challenge in creating the romantic quest was characterizing the ex-boyfriend, Jake. Early in the narrative Violet’s relationship of four years abruptly falls apart. Although Jake has broken up with Violet, he too is a character looking to change direction. While no character is at fault, the heartbreak unravels Violet. Jake must be characterized as both compelling but also distant. This became problematic for Violet as a character as well. Opening the story, Violet is the girl who fell in love with Jake. However, through interaction with other characters, she comes to understand that Jake isn’t the relationship she wants to have. For example, when Oliver insists Violet should be impulsive she remembers the risks

she used to allow herself to take, “Explore. Dream. Discover. It’s like life, along with a very attractive boy, is asking me: *Well, why the hell not?*” (38). By reflecting on the past and questioning what she wants for her future, Violet shows she is capable of growth.

While writing I wanted to create authentic, rounded characters. Because of the first-person narration, the story is told from a very limited perspective. To juggle between what Violet believes and what actually occurs in the narrative (the “unreliable narrator” voice) was particularly challenging with the characterization of her parents. Violet is eighteen and has only recently moved away from home. She is only now gaining the perspective that time and distance allow. Being away from home helps Violet put her relationship with her parents into perspective. She’s able to distance herself and observe the changes that are occurring between her parents. This can be seen in her desire to return to her independent life at school after a camping trip. She is also reluctant to leave the familiar as well as the consistency that her little brother, Joshua, represents in her life. Her bond with Joshua shows her concern for her parents’ separation and her desire for things to stay the same for his sake. She knows there is a disagreement between her parents but is too overwhelmed with her problems with Jake to acknowledge them. Her initial reluctance to change is also a major factor of her naïveté. She still sees her parents as full, solid people who will never let her down. A similar situation is also apparent in her relationship with Jake. It is the dismantling of trust that Violet’s relationship with Jake has caused that she must then gain back in her relationships with others.

As noted earlier, I am most influenced by YA writers of realistic fiction. Stories centered on an authentic plot leave me with ideas to consider after I’m done reading. In terms of writing style I look to Deb Caletti. Caletti brilliantly weaves introspective moments with

scene and setting. For example, in her novel *The Secret Life of Prince Charming* she paints a scene like this: “I hoped Mom would never know we’d been here, in this neighborhood of fat elms and lilacs, suddenly familiar. Tidy brick Tudors with leaded windows and arched doorways. Cars parked along the street and lampposts – actual lampposts, with curved iron arms and round bulbs” (Caletti 279). Caletti’s strong imagery creates such vibrant settings that they read like poetry. Yet, by balancing her narrative with an authentic character, the setting never overtakes the story. Caletti’s descriptions of the natural world offer insight into the characters in the way they allow readers to understand what is important to note for the character.

Starting my thesis I knew I wanted to experiment with form because innovative structure allows for character comprehension and breaks up the narrative. This allows for a more visual experience while reading because of the way objects from the character’s world are brought onto the page. While reading Morgan Matson’s novel, *Amy & Roger’s Epic Detour*, I was drawn to her ability to include visuals and artifacts, such as photo-copied receipts and pictures, to take the reader on a journey across the country. Matson breaks up the narrative with travel pages and playlists as characters move from one city to another. In that sense her readers move around in the character’s world with her. For example, when protagonist Amy travels through Kansas, Matson writes: “*Where I’ve Been...* State #5: KANSAS – The Sunflower State... Facts: Tornado season is April to June. Oh, good. Notes: But according to the rest stop info, if you see a tornado coming, you are supposed to pull over...” (Matson 182). Not only is Amy’s humor revealed in this list, but also the setting is exposed.

I included various locations in *The Cumulus Effect* to give the reader not only a sense of place, but also a sense of belonging to Violet's world. I want the reader to be aware of the physical distance between the world Violet has known and the one she's only just learning. Violet uses lists to illustrate her methodical thinking, as well as her desire for structure. Creating lists allows Violet to hold some control over her otherwise crumbling life. By cataloguing trivial thoughts, (such as the possible reasons a kettle is superior to all other kitchen appliances), and objects (like dental floss), Violet initially focuses on the things that don't matter from what really needs her attention, such as her relationships and future. Her focus on small things shows her confusion between what she really wants and what she can fix right now. Lists also show that Violet is an organized person who enjoys planning. It is one aspect of her past that has remained consistent.

As the narrative progresses Violet will begin to understand that she is not alone in her insecurities. I hope readers see faults in the characters but also understand why these characteristics are being emphasized. Overall, with the inclusion of more chapters, Violet's story is a journey of loss and change but also allows readers to experience the excitement of new independence and the freedom of being alone. Readers should go away having met complicated characters who are intriguing. I want Violet's story to emphasize how we learn from our past, how we grow, and most importantly, the significance of trying again.

The Cumulus Effect

The air is abnormally warm, even for the end of August. It's that sticky heat where you can hear your skin peel up from leather seats. I guess that's what I get for living in, "The Gateway to the Great Sand Dunes." I pick the paint off the porch swing as I wait for Jake. With college starting in a week we want to get in one last night on the town. Not that we'll be gone long. There's always holidays and trips back home. I know I'll miss this place once I'm away at school, but right now I can't wait to get out. I need change. The urge to leave kicks in for the millionth time as I watch heat waves bounce off the brick driveway. An eerie shimmer of high pressure air sinks toward the ground. The absence of cumulus clouds means the heat will continue to build, trapping the air at the surface. The waves seem audible, like the cold-hearted rattle of a Western Diamondback. I take a gulp of my water which is now room temperature. Jake is late, as usual. Peeling up the paint on the armrest, a section comes off in my hand.

"Oops." Dad will definitely notice that. I hide the piece in the dry soil of Mom's mosquito-repelling Potagerie.

I hear the shifting of loose bricks as Jake pulls into the driveway, sandy blond hair still damp from his post-work shower. He looks up at me and averts his eyes. Great. He's probably in a bad mood. It's always like this after he leaves work. After he's been yelled at all day by his dad for filing the incoming paperwork wrong. Honestly, if I had to be under my dad's watchful eye all day I'd probably be in a bad mood too. Jake usually shakes it off. Hopefully he'll still be up for late lunch at Bill's. I'm craving a BBQ burger and a mango iced tea. He cuts the ignition just as I'm about to hop into the passenger seat.

“Hey, I’m all ready. I just have to be back by eight because Mom wants me to get a head start on packing.” The heat of the brick travels through my rubber flip-flops like burning coals.

Jake shuts the driver’s side door, stuffing his hands in his pockets. His shoulders look tense. This is more than just a work problem.

“Can we talk for a sec? Maybe in the shade.” I sigh and follow Jake to the edge of the lawn where the giant sycamore offers relief with its looming shadow. This tree has been here since before I was born. Its real name is *Plains Cottonwood*. I remember paging through Dad’s old *Farmer’s Almanac* on long summer days like this when I was younger. Once I could identify all the trees in our neighborhood I moved on to flowers and shrubs. This tree is a childhood staple of sprained ankles and lost kites. In the fall the rustle of its golden leaves makes it sound almost alive. I know I’ll miss this.

“Are you okay? Your Dad got the whole Steiner transaction figured out, right?”

“Yeah, that’s all worked out. I think...I think we should talk.”

Suddenly I have that feeling. The one where all the heat rushes out of my body. It’s like a trickling cold, a shot through the center of me. Jake stands an arm’s length away.

“I’ve been thinking. And with both of us moving away...I think we should...It would be better...I think we should break up.” Jake says it just like that, looking directly at me. For some reason his eyebrows are furrowed. He’s squinting at the sun but we are safe under the shade. My mouth feels dry. The air feels brittle. I can’t speak. My legs feel like they’ve given up on supporting the rest of me.

“Violet?” Jake puts his hand out to touch my arm. Why? I’m not sure but I *feel* like I might fall over. Maybe I look like I might too. I suck in a breath of air. His hand falls short.

What do I say? That I wasn't expecting this? That I didn't know it would happen like this? That after four years, it's ending like this? I'm not sure I even remember how to swallow. Everything feels shaky.

"I'm sorry, Violet. Are you...okay?" Jake looks at me, eyebrows knitted. I want to laugh. I want to laugh! Jake breaks up with me and then he apologizes for it. I hate it. I hate this moment. I hate him. His eyes shift from the sycamore to the curb. Jake studies the spot where he helped Dad spray-paint our street address. *415*, it reads, the corner of the five eroding along the gutter's waterline. I look at it too until I feel his eyes on me. I can't stand to look back. It's like the person I thought I knew has been someone else this entire time. I bite my bottom lip and stare on the fading loop of the 5. It will gradually disappear until there is nothing left.

"I have to go." I don't remember walking back inside but somehow I find myself running through the front hall. I hear a door upstairs slam and see Dad pacing the landing, muttering under his breath. I hurry through the hallway. Everything looks bright.

"Violet? Violet, what's happening upstairs?" Joshua calls from his room as I pass. I can't breathe. Finally, I pull my door shut. Everything is quiet. I sink down onto the floor, my skin cold against the wood. I don't move. I can't move. The tears only come when I hear the scrape of tire and loose brick as Jake pulls out of the driveway.

He's not allowed to text me. Why is he texting me? It's been months since we broke up. After that day I was sure I'd never hear from him again. He would go to school in New York and I'd go to school at Boulder, three hours away from home. But then Facebook comes along to complicate everything. Two weeks after that day I posted a status. It was a

link about 120 million year-old fossil eggs that were found in China. He “liked” it. It was only then that I realized I never defriended him. Then, the more I thought about actually defriending him, the more I couldn’t do it. We never had our relationship status online so I thankfully never had to change my profile to say “Single.” But unfriending was so official. It’s like saying, “*I never want to speak to you ever again.*” It’s too final. So I kept him as a “friend.” I figured it would be fine seeing as neither of us is online too often. But then he started to like photos I posted and even commented on my status about loving Bill Murray’s new movie. Part of me was like, *what gives you the right?* And another part of me remembers watching *Groundhog Day* every Fourth of July with his family. I ignored all of it. I ignored him. So when I hear the *ping! ping!* of a text I just assume it’s Mom asking me if I’m *absolutely sure* I don’t want to come camping this weekend. But it’s Jake. I don’t know what to do.

[[Frm: Jake]]

Hey... How have you been?

Jake was in a ska band called *City Creatures*. As high school goes, everything felt fast. We talked for the first time at a party even though we’d had two classes together. It was loud and I was desperate to leave but Corrine wanted to see the band playing later. The patio light buzzed overhead as I watched ants trail their way toward a pool of spilled barbeque sauce. Next to me I heard the scrape of a plastic lawn chair. A deep voice said, “You look like you’re having a lot of fun.” Swoon, isn’t *that* an original line. All so typical. Middle-school me wouldn’t have given four years of my life to some guy I barely knew who used unoriginal lines, but I did. I used to be sure the only boy who would ever talk to me would have cystic acne and wear Poindexter glasses. On possible boy options, Jake was not even on

my radar. He offered to get me another Sunkist instead of a beer and I thought that was sweet. I mean, we're almost sixteen and I wasn't about breaking laws even though this party was boozing at Gatsby levels. He got himself a Dr. Pepper then said he had to go play but we should talk later. My brain processed: 1) Oh. He's in a band. 2) Ohhhh, he's in a band. 3) OH. HE'S IN A BAND.

After his band played he found me in the back of the crowd. What can I say? The music captivated me. He was cute even when his eyes rolled to the back of his head in guitar-playing ecstasy. A smidge taller than me with a Modest Mouse T-shirt and short brown hair, he was the perfect casual-cool. He looked athletic too, with those lacrosse arms that I just started noticing in boys. After playing he had to pack his gear but told me he'd always wanted to talk to me but never sees me outside of school. And I thought, *Yeah because I'm a recluse and I like it that way.* But he had those arms and the guitar-pick fingers so I gave him my number. He texted me the next day. He was straight-forward about liking me and I liked that. It felt easy and uncomplicated.

Now everything feels so uprooted. I have to remind myself that I still have Mom, Dad and Joshua in Alamosa. School is a mess but home I can count on. Breaking up and now starting college, I've just given up on trying to figure anything out. A text message can't be so easily ignored. I don't know what he wants. I don't know what I want. I wish I just had somebody to talk to. Like I used to talk to my best friend Corrine before her parents divorced and she moved to her grandmother's house across the country. Like I used to talk to Jake...

[[Frm: Violet]]

I'm good. How are you?

And now I'm going home this weekend to meet Jake for coffee and go camping. It's almost like these past few months never happened. Almost.

There are three rules at science camp. First, wear your safety goggles. AT ALL TIMES. Second, don't let the dropper touch the petri-dish. Bacteria! Bad! And third, when carrying a microscope always use two hands. One on the arm and one underneath the base. These rules have been, up until this point, my essential laws to living. So, what do I do when absolutely none of that is relevant to my current situation? Panic.

"Damn it!" Locked out, again. How many times can I forget my keys? Many. Many times. There's only one more day of classes before the three-day weekend. All I wanted was some cereal before the dining hall closed for breakfast. There's already an English essay I forgot to turn in. Worth 20%, of course. I've been here a semester. I should have a rhythm: keys, homework, basic survival things. But I don't. Last year I was yearbook editor, Chem club president and valedictorian. Now I'm practically failing my classes. And locked out. That's the important one.

"Did I miss the flood? Should I gather any remaining animals?" A voice calls out from behind me.

I choke on the last bits of stale cereal, wheeling around with an aggravated twist of my rubber boot. Because along with my fluffy cloud pajama pants, I'm also wearing rain boots. A boy is sitting in front of the door across the hall, *crisscross apple sauce*. He's shuffling (poorly, I might add), a deck of cards. It's November and I've never seen him before. I've actually never seen the person who lives across the hall from me either.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

“It’s just the boots.” The boy’s eyes widen, a toothy grin spreading across his face. He fully takes in my boots, pajamas and beard of Cheerio dust. I’m mortified but squash the feeling. Who does this chump think he is? I’m already having a bad enough week. My sanity is compromised. Everyone has a limit. Mine is so far gone it’s out the window and down the street.

“Late for breakfast,” I manage, my voice clipped. I remind myself of our neighbor from across the street. Mrs. Parsnip. That’s her real name. She also has nine cats and a parrot.

I fish through my pajama pocket for my cellphone. Maybe, just maybe, Gretchen will pick up and let me borrow her room key. That is, if she isn’t in a sorority meeting or auditioning for the winter musical. It’s *As You Like It*. Does it need to be a musical? No. But it’s happening. Gretchen *wouldn’t* answer. She’s too busy being Gretchen. My mouth tastes chalky thinking about it. It’s that or the expired cereal I just inhaled. Her flaky predictableness is confirmed by a peppy voicemail greeting.

Hi! This is Gretchen! I’m not here right now but I’ll get back to you ASAP! Hope you’re having a fabulous day! CLICK. Gretchen sings out the last few words, “A *fabbulouuus daaayy!*” I can’t handle it. These past few weeks I’ve come to appreciate only the cynical and dark-hearted.

“Locked out? Roommate not answering?” The boy oh-so helpfully points out. I jump, almost forgetting he was there. My fists are clenched as I turn around. He’s actually kind of attractive in that swooped hair, slim jeans kind of way. Actually, in a really, incredibly good-looking kind of way. It’s like he’s ready to break hearts and take names and without a worry in the world.

“And *why* are you on the floor? That carpet is probably laced with frat boy semen and raver vomit right?” It’s true. I’d read it in an article for Biology. It had a sad title. Something like, “The Microscopic Life of a Public Education.”

“My favorite! Just means I’m coming in contact with a whole lot of school history. That’s important for school spirit, you know.” The boy skims the carpet in front of him.

He attempts to shuffle the cards the way they do at Blackjack tables. The deck blows up in his face, scattering all over the carpet.

“Waffle iron,” he says looking up at me from his card explosion.

“Waffle iron. Right...” Impatience trickles out of my voice. He jumps up quickly. He’s *tall* tall, looming over me tall. Gangly arms so long they almost look like they’re trying to escape his sleeves.

“I lent my friend my beloved waffle iron, Wanda?” He says this like a question. Like everyone names their kitchen appliances, “And I’m waiting for Jenn to get back from class so I can get her back. I’m useless without Wanda.”

“Right,” I say turning back to my door. “Well, good luck with that.” My eyes feel scratchy. I realize I’m still hungry. Maybe I can scrounge up some peanut butter crackers from somewhere inside my room. If I can ever find a way back in.

“Do you wanna see a magic trick?” the boy asks, spreading out the deck like a fan.

He looks at me still grinning, wiggling his eyebrows up and down. I’m sure reluctance is written all over my face.

“Pick a card! Any card!”

I pick the card on the very top, right under the boy's thumb. He chuckles, not really emitting a sound but sort of moving his shoulders up and down. Then he gathers the deck together.

"Now show it to me."

I hand him the card wondering how this will be any sort of magic trick.

"Ah! The seven of diamonds! That is a very lucky card. You will have an abundance of good fortune in your future." He swirls his hand as if a mystical crystal ball hangs between us.

"Wow. You are a modern miracle. A true oracle. That wasn't even a trick." I can't help but be amused by his enthusiasm for something so lame. With his smile I see a crooked front tooth.

"You haven't seen the grand finale!" His carny voice somehow transforms into middle-aged Boston mobster. Or smoker. The difference isn't clear.

The boy spins around me. He discreetly, or maybe not very discreet at all because I see him do it, pulls something small from his pocket. He fiddles with my door handle, giving it a shake. It pops open and a gush of cold air bursts through the hallway. I'm stunned. The boy spins around, his wild brown hair tangling with the hallway draft.

"Magic! Even in darkest of times, it continues to amaze." Again with the carny accent. "Seems as if your future is taking a turn for the better."

"That – "

"Oliver!" A voice calls out from down the hall. "Wanda is ready and willing! I've been craving waffles all morning."

A girl is stomping down the hallway in red Doc Martens, large portfolio under her arm. Reality welcomes me back as I remember how *uncool* I probably look standing in the hallway in cumulus pajama pants. The fact I even know the classification of cloud signals a sort of nerdiness I know is deeply tragic. The desire to slip through my door and hide under my *totally cool* Pottery Barn comforter overwhelms me. I'm about to do just that when the boy turns to me, grin sprawling. There's light dusting of freckles along the bridge of his nose. Was he always standing this close to me? My cheeks are warm.

"Duty calls," the boy whispers, leaning in as if we're co-conspirators in whatever just happened. "By the way, cumulus is my favorite cloud classification. It's obviously the star of the cloud family." His eyes are a light green. Silence hangs in the air between us. The boy lifts his hand and runs it through his hair. It sticks up even more, giving him a petrified, manic look.

He walks across the hall and disappears behind the door with the girl, another neighbor I've never met with jet-black cropped hair and killer style. The boy says something and her laughter comes out muffled through the door. I watch the door for another minute before walking into my room.

Oliver, I repeat, closing the door behind me.

I've assured Mom and Dad that I'm having a great time in school and that I'm invested in my studies. They make sure to ask how things are going after Mom saw the C- on my Anthropology test. That's what I get for accidentally leaving it on the living room table shoved inside a textbook. Last weekend I stayed at school hoping to actually get things done. Didn't happen. But this weekend I had a plan. Plans are what I live for. They are ideas for

being an efficient person. I like schedules and knowing what I'm doing and when. I was going to wake up with the sun, grab an everything bagel and mingle on the north campus lawn. Pro-duc-tivity. I'd feel refreshed and renewed and maybe make friends with the weird kids who always hang out in the common room. Now my plans have changed and campus feels empty and lonely. When I told Mom I wouldn't be able to make it home for our annual camping trip she sounded disappointed. Moms are good at that. I also knew she wanted me to enjoy college, even if that meant getting E. coli from the cafeteria chicken. At least I can count on Joshua to be excited about my unannounced arrival. And I've convinced myself that coffee with Jake could be a good thing if only to get our inevitable meeting out of the way.

It's practically pitch black as I drive through the densest fog I've ever seen. I feel like Julianne Moore in a dark, psychological thriller. Blind and helpless, creeping along the highway. This sensation is another example of how I currently feel about everything in my life. *Great, I'm trapped in a weather metaphor.* I finally see the splintered wooden sign announcing my arrival in Alamosa. Finallyfinallyfinally. The movie theater marquee lights up the fog with a dull yellow. I can taste the Sunday matinee showings and the bite of Sourpatch Kids and cherry Icees. Joshie and I watching repeated showings of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, laughing at the dramatic overacting and weird accents. He's only eight and really shouldn't be watching these kinds of movies but our parents never knew. They always stayed home. It's the only time we ever felt truly on our own.

I cut around the corner of Peach and drive down the familiar leafy street that is childhood. The house is dark as the bottom of my car scrapes along the brick driveway. As always, Dad left on the porch light. A soft fuzzy glow pokes through the haze. I grab my duffle bag and slug up the front steps. The front door's stained glass is murky from the fog.

It's the original glass from sometime in the late 1800's. Dad cares for this house like it's his third child. He's always trying to fix the creak in the porch's second step or tighten the loose post in the banister. I guess people buy old things because they're beautiful but they always want to make them look new. The front door opens with its usual squeak. In my mind I see the grimace on Dad's face at the sound.

I kick off my boots and hang my jacket on the coat rack. It is Mom's pet peeve, Dad, Joshua and I not hanging up our coats when we come in. *"Why else would I get a coat rack and put it near the front door?"* She would say. *Well why would you also get such a convenient bench that also holds coats?* I wonder every time. But coming home now I feel more like a guest so, being guest-like, I decide to do it the proper way. As I set down my duffle I hear Dad's muffled voice from the living room.

"Intruder? I don't know who you are but I have a very sharp knife in my hand. It is, however, covered in peanut butter but the pain will still be enormous when I stab you in the gut."

"Dad, it's just me. Put down the knife and stop terrorizing the peanut butter jar with your midnight snack habit."

"Violet? I didn't know you were coming home. You haven't graced us with your presence in a while."

The living room is dark. Dad sits on the lumpy beige couch, his giant slippered feet resting on the mahogany coffee table. This happens only when mom is out of the room. The Outdoor channel flickers something about state parks. Dad brushes crumbs off of the front of his UC Berkeley sweatshirt. I notice a pillow at the end of the couch. Is he sleeping out here?

“Yeah, it wasn’t planned.” I sigh and flop onto the green armchair. It’s covered in Lars’ thick golden retriever hair.

“You didn’t want to miss the trip?!” His exuberance shakes the table.

I couldn’t admit to him that there was nothing on campus for me. No friends to road trip to Denver with, no big school project I was invested in. All I had was the annual family bonding excursion that always ends in anger and swollen bug bites. Sometimes a bad poison oak rash.

“Yeah, thought being tossed out of a canoe again would really spice up my life.”

“We miss you. Josh’s asking us for a fee for walking Lars once a week. He even printed out a certificate online that says he’s a professional dog walker to back his credentials. Kid’s got nerve. You never would’ve pulled something like that at eight. Hell, you’d ask if you could mow the front lawn every Saturday. Now that I mention it, it’s looking a little shaggy out there...”

I’m home for five seconds and already have chores. I pick Lars’ hair off the arm rest and suppress a sigh.

“No teen angst noises. Your mother’s going crazy trying to sell the Cleary property. She needs some time to relax. How about you, me and Josh take the old paddle boards out for a spin around the lake? It’ll be a good time.” Dad sighs. He looks at me and I notice how tired he seems. I think about asking him why he’s sleeping in the living room, but decide not to. I’m sure it’s nothing major.

Dad adjusts his glasses. “Look, we’ve all been dealing with things. This is our weekend to be outside and enjoy what nature has given us. It’s November. Think of the foliage! You used to love the trees this time of year. You’re coming and there is no

discussion. Unless you want to talk about what kind of bait you'll be bringing. Because I was thinking of going with the silver rod –"

"Okay, I get the picture. Now I'm going to lock myself in my room while I still have some privacy because I guess I'll be getting none of it this weekend."

"That's the spirit, my favorite daughter. Start making your list of essentials." Dad scoots his glasses up his nose and toasts me with a half-eaten Saltine before dunking back into the peanut butter jar. I've missed him. Even though I wouldn't ever divulge all my problems to Dad, he's always around to listen.

I bullet down the hall. I'd forgotten what normal carpet felt like. The carpet in the dorms is so thin it might as well be cement covered in a layer of cement. Here it's like memory foam. Familiar but also strange. I wouldn't have appreciated it, or even noticed it, before moving away. I shuffle toward Joshua's room and crack the door open. On the bed is a large sheet pulled across a small chair and a shelf, a makeshift fort. A flashlight glows underneath.

"Psst. Whatcha reading?" I whisper to the sheet.

"Violet?! What're you doing? I thought you weren't coming."

I duck under a fleece blanket corner and find Joshua in the middle of the bed with a Goosebumps book, *Welcome to Dead House*. It's the first one of the series, a classic.

"Bored at school. Now I'm coming. Are you happy?"

"I guessss. 'Cause then I can tip the canoe on you. And maybe Mom and Dad will finally be nice to each other." Joshua rubs his nose, turning the page.

"What do you mean? Are they not getting along?" So Dad really was sleeping on the couch.

Joshua shrugs his small pajama shoulders up and down. “I don’t know. They just seem mad a lot.”

“It’s okay, Joshie. They probably just need a vacation. They both work too much.” I don’t know what I would do if they fell apart too. Where would that leave Joshua? He needs someone he can depend on. I grab a book titled, *Say Cheese and Die!* from a small pile collecting at the foot of the bed. “Have you read this one? It looks good.” A camera lies on the lawn of a suburban home, a skull reflected in the lens.

“It’s okay. Kinda lame.” Joshua scratches his nose.

“I’ll pick another one for the drive tomorrow. Don’t stay up too late, okay?” Joshua nods and I duck out from under the tent’s low ceiling. I’m almost out the door when I hear his voice and the small click of the flashlight shutting off.

“Violet?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“I missed you.”

“Missed you too,” I say before softly closing the door behind me.

Now in my own room, I flick on the light. Suddenly I feel like I’m exactly where I need to be. The walls are lined with old black and white pictures. All cities where twelve-year-old me hoped to live one day. There are star charts and Dad’s old globe with the different constellations. I used to love the certainty of being able to physically find stars and record their locations. Sometime in eighth grade I gave it all up. I’m not sure why, I just lost interest. Classes got harder and boys started looking good in basketball shorts. I haven’t really looked at the stars in years.

The curtains ripple in the night breeze. Mom must be ventilating the house again. She's not crazy about "stale air" in any of the rooms, never mind that the open windows leave an icicle-like cold throughout the house. But right now I like the smell of the foggy night. I think of Perseus rising above the clouds and mist creeping in, taking the last few months away. Things that time doesn't take back. Like everything that has happened with Jake. Why I agreed to meet at such an ungodly hour as eight a.m., I still don't know. Maybe it's the small hope that the reality of our shamble of a relationship will register less if I'm not *as* awake? Standing in my room I'm overwhelmed at the thought of doing anything at all. I slip on some old plaid pajama pants and my science camp T-shirt and brush my teeth in the sink across the hall. Along with her new career in real estate Mom is on a remodel kick. That means there is almost always one unavailable bathroom in our house. The tile is cold and the vanity looks staged with its fake, waxy spider plant. I shiver and run back to my room.

I've hardly touched a thing in this room since I left for school. My bookcase overflows with my old high school biology books and some classics I've collected over the years. I've never found exactly the right time to read *Great Expectations* but I like knowing it's there in case. Off the top shelf I grab one of my old favorites. It's an oversized book detailing the myths behind the constellations. *The Book of Constellations*. I always loved the cover with its star-strewn sky and Old English style lettering. I flip through the pages, landing on the myth of The Pleiades. In Greek mythology the constellation represents the Seven Sisters. Born on Mount Cyllene, they were the daughters of sea-nymph Pleione and titan Atlas. When Atlas had to carry the heavens on his shoulders, Zeus turned the sisters into doves and then into stars to keep their father company. One sister, Merope, often disappears from the night sky for unexplained reasons. One myth suggests that she came back to Earth

to marry a human so her star was extinguished. The Pleiades constellation itself is young. Just a few several hundred million years old. *Too young to have been extinguished*, the book notes. I close the cover softly and place the book on the floor.

Eight hours.

Eight hours.

Eight hours doesn't seem nearly long enough.

In the morning the chill has successfully seeped through two fleece blankets and my comforter. I barely slept. My mind kept imagining what will happen when I finally see Jake again. What are we supposed to talk about? Is it going to be awkward? How could it not? The more I think about it, the crazier it drives me. I'm not sure what he is going to say. Maybe he just needed time to think about it all. Maybe he wants me to be okay as much as I want to be okay. I feel like he's probably happier being on his own and that makes me mad again. The cycle of why he asked to see me and why I said yes circulated again and again until I finally fell asleep somewhere around three in the morning.

Mom's dressed in her "festive" falling leaves sweater. It's brown and has glittery red and orange leaves on the front – and the back. It is all I see when I walk into the kitchen, my sneakers dragging like the bags under my eyes.

"I see you didn't sleep very well last night. I didn't know you'd be home this weekend. There's waffles for you."

"Why do you insist on wearing such an offensive sweater?" I sit down in front of a lukewarm stack of waffles. Whipped cream is melted across the plate. A lone strawberry sits on top.

“Your father insisted on me wearing it. He’s gone crazy with tradition. You wear a sweater once and suddenly it’s THE camping sweater. I swear. He doesn’t stop. He woke up early to rotate the car’s tires for the big trip.” She says “big trip” like we’re going to Europe or some exotic island off the coast of South America. She looks distracted as she busies herself at the counter. “It’ll be a nice getaway.” Her voice sounds off, falsely cheerful.

I fail to join in Mom’s seemingly positive attitude. I’m meeting Jake in less than an hour. In response I drag my fork through the waffle’s overflowing syrup.

“And where are you off to so early in the morning?” She glances at me over her shoulder.

“Just running an errand.” Mom knows about the breakup but I was careful not to divulge details. She and Jake’s mom are both members of the same gym and they swim laps together every once in a while at the community-center. If Mom knows too much, Jake’s mom will know too much. I don’t want him to hear anything I might’ve said from a second-hand source. Moms are not really known for giving out accurate information to other moms. Last thing I want is Jake to know I’m a college loner who only comes out of her cave to eat home-made meals.

Joshua zooms into the kitchen, still in his batman pajamas with a detachable cape.

“What’s for breakfast? I need Count Chocula!” Joshua jumps up on a chair.

“Hey, crime-fighter. I hear you’re stealing Dad’s money making him pay you to walk Lars. That’s not something Bruce Wayne would do.”

“I’m an expert. I’m gonna be paid like one or not do it.” Joshua fumbles onto the seat across from me, cape ripping off under his feet. He doesn’t notice. Mom smiles and turns back to packing snacks.

Mom has always been the one who gets things done. Dad would spend every day riding his bike and fishing if he could make money at it. They work well together in the ways they're different. She sells real estate and he has a corporate job at a cycling company that he has to wear a tie for. We usually get along as a family but ever since middle-school Mom's micromanaging has driven me insane. Can I go to the movies unchaperoned and not get kidnapped? Yes. But for Mom she needs a phone call before, after, and the movie's rating. Joshua acts as the family's buffer, which comes in handy when Dad thinks Mom is being controlling and when Mom is angry at Dad for forgetting to pick up her tile samples yet again.

"Speaking of Lars, be sure to give him some attention when he comes back from the kennel. He's been lonely these past few weeks with you at school and your brother starting up soccer." Mom busies herself with Ziplock bags.

"Okay, will do." More chores. Great. I scrape back my chair and decide I should leave before I lose my nerve. I know I'm in a bad mood and I don't want to start off on the wrong foot if I'm spending the whole weekend with Mom and Dad in a car.

Jake is wearing his windbreaker and a green sweater as he pulls up to Starbucks. We'd agreed to meet here because it's neutral territory. I haven't seen this sweater before. Who gave it to him? He never buys clothes for himself. I push away the thought of a possible sweater-gifting girlfriend out of my head. He pulls into the spot in front of the double glass doors and I notice he looks sort of tired. His headlights shine and hit me before shutting off. *Just like a deer in headlights.* I think. No more lame references to the breakup. The wind ruffles his slept-in blonde hair. I notice he's changed that too. The sides cropped short. New

sweater, new hair. What's with all these changes? I'm still wearing the same sweaters and sporting the same shoulder-length brown hair. I shift in the plush velvet armchair looking down at the book I brought. The one I'd been pretend reading since I sat down. I even got here early in hopes of claiming my territory. If I arrived first why should I be the one who's nervous? I stare at one jumble of words after another as the blur of green comes closer.

The coffee mug scorches the palms of my hands. It's a deep sizzling burn that feels good against my nervous hands. Jake is walking towards me and I don't know where to look. The corner of the book's page is bent so I smooth it out. There are so many words on the page but my brain isn't registering what they're saying. A Jake-like blur sits in the armchair across from mine, a small maple table in between us. Good. Barriers. I shift in my chair, my back pressing hard into the plush velvet cushion.

"Hey, thanks for coming to meet me Violet," Jake looks at me directly but his voice is an octave higher than normal. Nervous, good. I want to use his uneasy state to my advantage, to claim my ground, my rightful place as the "sensible and level-headed one," but my carefully crafted, prim-and-proper, no-nonsense, I Have An Interview With Scientific American and I'm A Very Busy Woman Face quickly melts.

The thing that gets me is the way he uses my name. I hate it. When we were together he only addressed me by name when trying to be serious or when telling me he loved me. Hearing it in this coffee shop, in this way, is strange.

"Yeahsurehowhaveyoubeen?" It comes out like lost Scrabble pieces found under the couch. I say it like I don't want to be here but agreed anyway.

Why did I agree anyway? And there in the back of my mind I see it. The small glimmer of hope that he's changed his mind. I don't want to feel this way.

Jake's black windbreaker makes the swoosh-swoosh sound as he moves his arms along the chair's worn armrests. I fixate on the bald arm-length patches. How many times has this moment happened, nervous arms running along the purple velvet? Eggplant velvet. Eggplant seems like the right color term. Like if they were to order more of these chairs from the coffee-shop chair catalogue it would most likely be called Eggplant Velvet Armchair. It probably comes in a variety of other colors, why Eggplant then? Eggplant. Eggplant. Eggplant. My eyes burn a hole in the armrest. I feel Jake look right at me. Like maybe he just asked a question and I was too busy thinking about fabric samples to pay attention. I feel sick.

"I'm sorry, I didn't really sleep well. What did you say?"

"I just wondered how you were doing. Are you liking Boulder?"

He has on his formal voice. Talking to my parents voice. Strangers at a party voice. Talking with the teacher after class about the molecular structure of ribosome voice.

It is anything but sweet. It's thick. Like molasses and tough bread dough. Before adding the water and after adding the finality of a four year relationship. I breathe in deeply, sucking in a huge coffee-aired breath. The air tastes like recyclable cardboard sleeves and stale sugar cookies.

I sit up and look directly at Jake. His blue eyes blink, glancing at my shoes for a fraction of a second. If he wants to talk reservedly, then by all means, let's.

"It's okay. It's been hard to get used to living away from home but it's a nice change. How about you? New York? It must be different." My voice comes out clipped. Seeing him here now I realize how things have changed. Why am I hoping he changed his mind about us? He wanted it over and it is. I've been keeping the possibility of us getting back together

as an option ever since he contacted me again. As much as I miss the comfort and stability that Jake once gave me, it shouldn't be something I'm dependent on. It's time for me to pick myself back up.

Jake pats his blonde hair down at the back and shifts in his chair.

As much as I would rather be somewhere else right now at least now I can come to terms with this moment of separation. Of not being sad or angry but knowing I need to move on. The realization's the first step, right? Going forward finally sounds better than looking back.

I listen as Jake tells me how much he really likes New York City and how much faster everything is compared to life in Alamosa. Even though it's only a three-day weekend with Veterans Day, Jake's mom thinks it's important for him to be home for his granddad's birthday. They do a big party every year that oddly enough ends in a trip to the graveyard to visit the graves of old war friends. It's important enough for Jake's mom to use her credit card airline points. His favorite part of being back home again is Friday night lasagna. I smile because I remember how much I loved it too. He tells me his brother has just been cast as Mercutio in our old high school's adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*.

"Brian's really good. He's even enrolled in fencing classes at the Rec Center after school so he can do justice to the sword-fighting scene. You know, to die honorably and all." Jake's eyes light up talking about his little brother. He always worries about Brian, thinking he will be picked on again like when he was in 6th grade. There is no place in school for short, outspoken, enthusiastic people. Brian is always left out of everything but he never lets it get to him.

I smile thinking of Jake's little brother wearing frilly Shakespearian clothing, traipsing across the stage with a fake metal sword. He was always really good at drama; it's nice to know he's still doing something he loves. Thinking of Brian is upsetting in an unfamiliar way. There are so many forgotten details that I should've made a point to remember. Like an archeologist uncovering what she thinks to be the discovery of a lifetime, only to go back to the dig site the next morning to find a cavernous hole full of dust.

"You know you should come, if you want to."

"Come where?"

"To the play. It's going to happen sometime in December if you'll be down for Christmas."

"Oh, yeah. That probably wouldn't be a good idea."

"Well I know Brian would want you to see his big debut." Jake grins at me and I give him a sort of half-hearted smile. It really would be fun to see Brian in Mr. Cadanoso's first Shakespearian production of the year.

"I'll think about it."

"Good. I hope you come... Listen, I wanted to talk to you about August. I know it's been a while but I just needed to think about what I want. It was really hard for me to break things off like that. I just want you to know that. I'm guessing it was hard for you too. I mean, we know – well, we *knew* – each other really well. But I want you to know, I really think with school and all... it was for the better?"

I think I manage a "Mmmhmm."

Jake fiddles with his watch, still looking at me. "I just wanted to see you, not for *closure* or anything, because I still want to be your friend. We were together for four years

and I want things to feel okay. I get it if you don't want us to be friends. I just would really like to know how you are doing every so often. Because you were – you are – really important to me.”

I try to focus myself before answering. That's what I *need* to do. Think about myself. That's what the comments on Facebook were about. I get it. Jake isn't sure what he wants but knows he wants to be my friend. I never even thought of that as an option. It's the grey area I didn't know existed. I'm not sure it's even something I want. But is it something I *don't* want?

“I don't really know what to say. You shouldn't have broken up with me like that. You made me feel like I did something wrong. I second guessed myself for weeks after that.”

“I'm trying to say I'm sorry. If I could take some of it back then I would. I would. I just don't want things to be like this,” he gestures between us.

“Right now, in this moment, I feel like one of the Seven Sisters. Freaking Merope, traveling off into unknown space.”

“What're you –”

“That's the thing. It happened and you can't take it back. I've honestly been replaying over and over what I would say to you if we ever talked again. I'm not sure there is anything I *want* to say. And friends? Why? ”

“I don't know. I guess so we can still exist to each other in some small way, right?”

I look at Jake and he's so familiar. His cheeks still flush in little bursts of pink. It's such an eager face and I can see a pretty girl falling in love with it all. It's only been three months but the distance between us feels so big. Almost unreparable.

“I’m just kind of overwhelmed. Would it be okay if I just talk to you later? I want to think about things and sort out my own stuff first.” I shift awkwardly in my chair.

“Yes. That’s completely fine. I just want you to be okay. Being so far away at school makes things different, you know? These past few months have sucked for me. I’m glad you’re going to think about it.” Jake looks relieved. He pulls at his sleeves and smiles apprehensively.

“Me too.” I smile but I feel like crying. I feel like this is something I’ve been waiting for and I should be happy but I don’t know what I think. I was just getting used to the idea of moving on. Even stupidly hoping for reconciliation. How can you move on from someone and still be their friend?

Jake takes in a breath. “Okay... Well, I’ll be waiting for your text. Don’t forget. I’m supposed to help my Mom with some errands but thanks for talking to me. It’s been really good seeing you.”

“Yeah, it’s nice.” I stand up. I feel like I’m leaving with more to think about than I came with. We both head to the parking lot.

“We’ll talk soon, okay?” He seems both relieved and still nervous. The lump in my throat is gone. Jake jingles his keys in his front pocket, and I know he’s wondering if he should give me a hug or just leave. He opts for the latter.

“Okay, I’ll talk to you soon.” I make my way to my car across the lot.

“Violet,” Jake calls out. “Have a good weekend! Family camping trip, right? Tell everyone I said ‘Hi.’”

I unlock my door. The engine sputters to life. I turn the heater up to the farthest wedge of red.

I decide Rite Aid can cure all my problems. Hopefully I will also find something to help me survive this weekend. Talking to Jake has left me emotionally drained but has also flickered alive an urge to organize things. What do I want out of life? What are the things I needed to focus on? I make a list:

Important Weekend Essentials for a Trip to the Colorado Outback

that I Didn't Prepare Myself For:

- *three new toothbrushes (you are supposed to change it every few weeks, I'm only being practical)*
- *detangling spray for crazy, uncombed hair*
- *Mentos*
- *a plastic pocket spyglass from the kid's bargain bin*
- *chocolate chip and cashews mix (heavy on the chocolate)*
- *three birthday cards featuring golden retrievers (because I'm bound to know someone with a birthday coming up sooner or later, right?)*
- *sunblock because November clouds don't always keep the pesky sun away*
- *a paperback copy of Amir Alexander's Infinitesimal: How a Dangerous Mathematical Theory Shaped the Modern World because it's Rite Aid's only book not by Nora Roberts.*
- *minty floss*
- *Fruit Stripes for the 5 juicy flavors*
- *four new colors of nail polish for my new and improved lifestyle of The Girl Who Is Freshly Single and Always Fabulous.*

Twenty minutes and \$43.28 later I'm halfway through my pack of Mentos with an entire hour left. I don't want to go home.

The road curves through the hillside, the trees thin, revealing a grey valley. The lake wraps around the east side of town. It's the place for high school summer nights. There's always some guy with a boat or float, hosting a huge rager that the whole school shows up. People park along the bridge, pickup trucks blasting Tupac and Toby Keith. I'd only been to a party one time freshman year to see what all the hype was about. The night ended with a

blazing headache from too loud music and a broken flip-flop from when Chad Barrington stepped on my foot as he made his way to the keg. Safe to say that would be the first and *last* time I would go to a party on the lake. Being here now is nice. Take away the packs of yelling teenagers and empty Four Loco cans and this place is beautiful. The quiet helps put the morning into perspective. I watch through the windshield as hand-shaped maple leaves flutter down from the sky onto the lake's surface. My phone buzzes.

[[Frm: Mom]]

Everything packed. Be home soon.

How did I become so tired by everything? Just a few months ago I'd loved so many things. Walking with Dad downtown where Highway 160 ran through Main Street. The same place we watched the parade every Fourth of July in tacky American flag fold-up chairs. We'd buy illegal fireworks from the crazy guy who owned the apple farm down the road. Reading Dad's battered copy of *Fahrenheit 451* in Mom's library nook when it snowed. In the spring Corrine and I would go to Luke's Pancake World and get grilled cheese to-go. We'd lie in the grass on the hill behind her house giggling at the stars. I remember thinking that grass held our secrets like a church. Four years later and all of it's gone. I want to feel excited again about being me. Once Corrine moved away in 9th grade I was left with half of myself. I can't help but think of her parents' divorce. For her it must've felt like her whole life was unraveling. It's surprising how quickly things change. Solid things falling apart, leaving only the unfamiliar. Soon enough Mom got too busy to do the parade and Dad decided we should stay home. I found Jake and things almost seemed whole again.

[[Frm: Mom]]

Where are you? We're leaving soon.

I text back *okay*, frustrated that she thinks she has to remind me. I guess she thinks I've become less responsible. I used to set big goals. Ever since a fourth-grade field trip to the Chamberlin Observatory in Denver, I had it all planned out. I'd graduate, go to college and get a job at the observatory. I'd clean the toilets there if that's what it took. But as I get older I'm not sure if that's even what I really want. Of course my parents are all for that plan, anything that pays well sounds like a good idea to them. Starting high school meant choosing classes which meant choosing a future. It just overwhelmed me. Corrine is so sure of herself. We still talk on-and-off. She wants to be a veterinarian and she's going to make it happen. I just don't know if I want something that much. Here I am a freshman in college and still unsure. I know that's common, but not for me. I've always been sure. I pull down my visor looking for sunglasses. A piece of paper folded in a small square tumbles down onto my lap. It's my valedictorian speech. Words I memorized a thousand times over. I smooth out the creases and read:

Here we are! We've made it. Four years and a million bad decisions later and we've made it. I've spent the past four years living in a chemistry textbook so I don't know many of you but I think it's important that we're all experiencing this together. It's over and I can't believe it. We are Tigers ready to take on the world. We've seen soccer victories and Alex Kendall's butt when he got pantsed on stage at Homecoming. We've survived the 2008 drought, better known around here as The Summer of Giant Sand Dunes. We made national news with class of 2010's streak through downtown during a blizzard. We've done a lot and we've lived to tell the tale. I'm sure we all have stories within each friend circle and I wish I could've been a part of it. There's only so much you can learn about in chemistry that will actually apply to real life but there're a few things I picked up along the way. First, is that

Mr. Nardini could possibly be a real-life Walter White, meth RV and all. Second has to do with the chemical law of the Conservation of Mass. The law states that matter is neither created nor destroyed. But it can be rearranged. Mass always remains constant. It's this law that keeps me grounded whenever I become unsure of myself. We all have moments of self-doubt, even now, when we've reached such an important milestone. It's in these moments, I believe, we come to know what we're worth. We exist in limitless space. Tomorrow we can be anywhere and anyone. Take that trip to Ireland, buy a motorcycle, finally tell that girl you love her. These are the chances we have to take. Why? Because we can. There's no room for second guessing. Your life cannot be created nor can it be destroyed. It just is. It's happening right now. It's meant to only be rearranged. So today I urge you to go do that thing you've always wanted to do. There's nothing standing in the way but your own self-doubt. And as we hear every day on the morning announcements, "Today is not meant to be good, it's meant to be grrreat!" I hereby give you permission to be great.

I fold the paper back into its small square. I want that ambition again. To be working toward something important. To be myself again.

And I'm ready to find out exactly who that is.

Back home I pack my things into my big green duffel that I recently found at a thrift store in Boulder. The bag has a soft suede flap and worn leather handles. I like how it looks like it's been places. If everything is up in the air, there's at least one thing I'm sure of. I want to travel to as many different places as possible. Mysterious places. Like a train station with a big clock above Arrivals and Departures, caves with furry bats on the ceiling, places not on land, houses behind rusted wrought iron gates. What better way for its first use than to

bring it with me on a sojourn into the deep, dark woods? Granted my entire family will be there, but it'll be an adventure nonetheless. At least that's what I keep telling myself.

With the car packed we're "ready to roll" as Joshua says. I feel like, being eight, my brother should be more resistant to picking up Dad's outdated phrases but I guess he's still at that age where Dad is the coolest person alive. Whatever *floats your boat*. Before we can go anywhere though, Mom makes sure we have everything in the car.

CAR CHECKLIST! ((IMPORTANT!))

Gear: Lantern, Cooler, Camera, Tents, sleeping bags, First Aid Kit, extra socks, cooking supplies, toiletries, etc.(As in, it literally goes on forever.)

Check.

Mom Food: Apples, oranges, granola bars, bird seed (basically)

Check.

Dad Food: Meat. Meat. Meat.

Check.

Joshua Food: Cashew trail mix with peanut M&Ms. (I'm pretty sure he keeps these in his pocket all year long.)

Check.

Hidden Food in my bag: Reece's (king pack), Cheese-Its, Jelly Bellys, water bottle (to stay healthy.)

Check.

"It's all here!" Mom exclaims as she plops in the passenger's seat. She shakes off her REI approved jacket. "Good to go. Let's hit the road."

Dad smiles at her and she turns to look out the window, not even giving him a glance. Something's going on but I know she wouldn't tell me if I asked. She likes pretending everything's fine. Dad cranks the engine. It gives a small grumble then a low purr as the car backs out of driveway and on to the morning street. I think it would be best if we all pretend everything is fine. For the weekend, at least.

It's Saturday morning. Three days, I tell myself. Enough time to me to regroup. I hope.

"Oliver? What are you doing here?" Like magic, I swear.

Me. In the woods. Me. In the middle of nowhere. Lake Chippewa campgrounds population: Me (and a few over-enthusiastic campers, i.e. my family). I only just got here this morning. So what is Oliver doing here? Mental List:

Questions I Have About Why Oliver of All People Is Standing Right In Front of Me at Lake Chippewa in the Middle of November:

- 1) *Had he followed me?*
- 2) *Is he a killer?*
- 3) *Maybe wanted in three states?*
- 4) *Chriss Angel? Is that you?*

My hair is probably between what it would look like after getting struck by lightning and before it goes up in flame. I try to keep my cool. He has a lopsided grin that should be illegal with hair that's windswept, in a tousled bed-head kind of way. More startling than his actual presence (and aforementioned beauty) are his hideous green waders. They look ancient.

“Violet?” Oliver’s eyes widen in what looks like a mixture of surprise and something else, amusement? Ugh, I probably look even worse than I feel. (Or he enjoys my obvious look of repulsion at his crusty outfit.)

“What are you doing here?” I sputter.

“Fishing with the Pa. We go on a big excursion every year. What about you? Why are you in the water with all your clothes on? Not that it’s strange you have your clothes on, I mean that’s normal. I’m not telling you to take off your clothes because that would be weird I mean we’ve only just met and –”

I cut in, “I’m on a family trip too. We do it every year.” Oliver’s shoulders decompress. “I didn’t mean to walk into the middle of the lake like this. It’s really too cold for swimming anyway but the water just looked really nice... I’m definitely regretting the decision though.” I walk out from the water, my hiking shorts catching on something in the lake depths. Under my foot I feel the slickness of something thick and slimy, algae? It wiggles. Nope. Not algae. I jump, screeching, desperate to find any sort of land. Land! Land Ho! Oh god what is that? I’m running.

Oliver’s laughter is thick and ringing, his thumbs hooked underneath each suspender strap like an old man. The flustered boy from a few seconds ago is clearly no longer present. Once I’m able to sit up and wipe the lake scum off my shorts, Oliver’s booming laugh has quieted into small sporadic chest heaves.

“I come here every year and I always thought Lake Chippewa had a resident lake monster. Now I know it’s just you.”

“Ha. Ha. Ha” And in the back of my head, *Every year? Me too!*

“I’m not sure I’ve ever seen anyone attack lake sludge in such a violent way before.”

“There was an eel. Or a fish. Clearly something with a hidden agenda.”

Oliver wipes his hand on his plaid sleeve before pulling me up. His grip’s firm and I’m being bolted into the air, hurtling toward his chest.

“Oof, sorry.” Oliver sets both of his hands on my shoulders, placing me an arm’s-length away, his flushed smile settling into a shadowy magician’s grin.

I stumble backward, desperate to find my shoes.

I need to act normal. Ask a question. “I’m surprised to see you here. Do you and your family usually camp in the fall?”

“Sometimes, but mostly spring and summer. My Dad heard about this place from a fishing buddy a few years back. Since we had the long weekend he thought it would be the time for good ol’ family bonding.”

“That’s weird. My Dad loves this fishing spot. We come here every year.” Every. Year.

“Wellll, with Saturn in retrograde, fate and joint enterprises are at play.” Oliver picks up a fallen tree branch and waves it in the air.

“Planets are never in retrograde. It’s physically impossible.” Shoes. Shoes. Shoes. I scramble to put on my shoes.

“Are you saying it’s merely an illusion?” Oliver waves the stick between his hands and it vanishes.

“Wha –” I start but Oliver cuts me off.

“I’m going to hike up the hill. You wanna come with?” He wiggles his fingers, thumbs still hooked. “That’s if you can keep up. You can probably tell I’m quite the outdoor

enthusiast.” He snaps the suspenders against his chest, the rubber making a loud cracking sound. I can tell that it hurt. Oliver fights to keep his composure.

“I’m sure I can,” I say, brushing the last of the radioactive sludge off my shorts. “But you’re going to change out of that, um, *getup*?”

“I probably should, shouldn’t I?”

“You wouldn’t want to, you know, get it dirty.”

“Oh, no. That wouldn’t be a good idea. These waders are antique. Passed down from my father’s father. Lots of fish have been caught in this green *getup*? What exactly do you mean by that? Because it’s obvious, despite their history, you think they’re just an ugly pair of green plastic pants.”

“What I meant is they look nice.”

Oliver smiles, his eyes narrowing in disbelief.

I pause before agreeing. I guess being social won’t kill me. Might even do me some good.

We agree to meet back at the same spot in thirty minutes. I change into my best hiking clothes, hoping I look the part of someone who is regularly active. When we meet again he’s wearing jeans and sneakers.

“It’s a steady climb,” Oliver explains, “It takes a while and might make you want to sit down and rest but you can’t. You have to keep going, you must endure. It’s not going to be easy.”

“Yeah, I got it.”

“Are you sure? I wouldn’t want you to collapse on the way and have to bury your body under a tree.”

“This isn’t exactly Everest.” Who does this guy think he is? Bear Grylls?

After walking for a while the trail comes to an incline. The trees rustle with yellow-orange leaves and prickly Sweet Gum pods line the path. The sky is an end-of-day purple-pink.

“Ah, twilight. You know this is my favorite time of day,” Oliver says, his voice wistful. “Everything’s just starting to get quiet and the night’s getting ready to take us under.” He dramatically hangs his arms over his head and bares his teeth like Dracula.

“Yeah, I like it too,” I wheeze. I try to force some composure. The truth is that we basically *are* climbing a mountain. With Oliver keeping the destination unknown, it’s hard to see an end game.

“Geez, are you okay? I promise I’m not trying to kill you. Here, let’s just rest for a second.”

I fall down in a huff of purple down jacket. “Well at least I’m wearing the right shoes.” I glance at Oliver’s scruffy Converse and dark jeans, muddy at the hems.

“The hike was kind of a spur of the moment decision. You know, just a way to get away from the crazy family for a few seconds.”

“Yeah, that’s also one of the main reasons I agreed to be dragged up a mountain.”

“Really? Well, here we are together in a land where the fish roam free and the hiking trails kill innocent college girls with only moderately steep inclines.”

Oliver smiles. The blazing orange glow of the setting sun dances behind enormous evergreens, peeking out past pine needles in a liquid stream of gold.

“We’re almost there. Come on. Chop, chop.”

Oliver stands, brushing trail dust off his jeans. He looks like Robert Redford in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Minus the sideburns and collared fur coat and with a head of floppy hair and busted sneakers. Maybe I should cut back on TCM's Old West marathons with my Dad. And maybe I shouldn't be doing this to myself again.

"You okay?"

Oliver extends his hand out to me.

"Yeah, I'm fine." I scramble up on my own. Oliver drops his hand, running it through his hair instead.

"It's just up ahead." He moves forward up the trail with a slight jaunt in his step. Clearly he's excited to go wherever he's taking me.

"How long have you been coming to this incredibly secret spot? Is it even listed on a map? Maybe a hidden bunker of terrorist activity?"

"All of the above actually. I've been coming here for the past few years. My brother and I found it once when we were bored. But since he doesn't come with us anymore it's kind of become my place. You should be glad I'm showing it to you. It's technically no girls allowed."

"Oh, I'm so glad."

Oliver scoots around a large bolder covered in moss and grabs a rock along the ledge to steady himself. The path narrows then ends, leaving only a small ledge on the hillside to walk across. There's only a large gaping hole where ground should be. Below is a black, pokey pit of trees.

Oliver jumps the gap and makes his way closer to the rushing sound. Most likely it's the sound of a waterfall, probably with the intention of sweeping us up and killing us. It just *sounds* violent.

"Um, Oliver?" My throat's dry, "I'm not about to follow you over that gaping chasm. I *will* fall off the cliff."

Oliver laughs. "I promise you it's safe. I've done it a bunch of times."

"This is already a horrible teenage movie. I don't know if I want to go through with it. Obviously this is when something bad happens."

"Come on, Violet. You'll regret it if you don't."

He's right. Crazy and right. In all moments of hesitation, my favorite quote rings out in my head. It's the same quote that's been stamped in my mind ever since my Dad gave me a notebook with it on the cover. It's where I'd chart the constellations. I remember running my fingers along the gold-foil font, tracing each letter. It comes like an echo, bouncing off distant trees and rock formations. Mark Twain's old-man voice:

Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.

Explore.

Dream.

Discover.

It's like life, along with a very attractive boy, is asking me: *Well, why the hell not?*

I gather all my strength and jump the rocky ledge, leaving my stomach on the trail.

Oliver stands safely on the other side enjoying the spectacle.

“Call it the leap of faith,” Oliver smirks.

“Hardy. Har. Har. I almost died. I mean what would you have done if I lost my footing and plummeted toward earth?”

“That wouldn’t have happened.”

“And how are you so sure?”

“Because, you’re too stubborn to die. And also there’s a ledge. You would’ve just fallen into a patch of prickly bushes.”

I look over the edge past the crevice and there they are. Holly bushes sit along a large ledge. Oliver skips forward behind a rocky archway. I follow behind, silently begging for a place to sit down. The trees are dense before suddenly opening up into a buzzing mossy underworld.

Everything is green.

Green trees.

Green rocks.

I’m pretty sure the animals are all green too.

Evergreens loom overhead and cast deep shadows. It smells like rainfall and Christmas. Like December morning.

Ahead of me, Oliver steps on large, overturned stones to cross over a small river.

“It’s just through these trees.”

In all the years I’ve been here I had no idea this place existed. Walking under the trees dripping with color.

“Here it is!” Oliver yells from behind a crowd of trees. I can’t see him but I’m sure he’s close by.

It's enormous, almost taller than the surrounding evergreens. A waterfall cascades in a stream of white, down a large, mossy wall of rock. The surrounding rock is bright red. Mist clings to it, giving it a deep ocher color. Small trees in small croppings, dotting the pools at the water's base. The stream settles in front of us, into a pure light blue. It looks unreal. Like Blueberry Gatorade. The red rocks and crystal water remind me of Mars, a galactic world full of space dust and calcium formations.

My shoulders relax as I let out a breath I didn't even realized I'd been holding.

"I thought you'd like it." He smiles, looking at me a beat longer than normal.

"It's a lot of water."

"Almost like a bunch of melting snow falling down a hillside, right?"

I shoot him a look and walk over to a blooming *Cordia boissieri*. Its leaves are soft like peach fuzz.

Oliver's voice trails behind me. "It kind of makes everything better, doesn't it? Nothing really seems to matter as much."

"Yeah, it makes me wish I actually spent time outside like I used to." I think of my constellation book sitting at home gathering dust. It's so easy to let the important things fall away. It's only in moments like these that I really miss what I've left behind.

Oliver laughs. "Enjoy it while you can. Soon we'll be back at school doing the same old things, wishing for just one minute to ourselves."

"Okay, I'll take four breaths now and save the other three for Tuesday's classes."

Oliver sits on a fallen log covered in moss. He unzips his jacket, placing it on the space of log next to him. Tilting his head slightly, he motions for me to sit.

"How chivalrous. Won't you be cold?"

“It’s not too bad. I think it’s all this moss. It’s kind of like a blanket.”

The once windy hillside is now gone, replaced by warm air. Dust floats in small breaks of light.

We sit there until the sky darkens.

We head back down the mountain as the moon begins to rise, lighting up a cloudy sky. It must be almost eight. It feels like it’s been a long time since I’ve seen the campsite and my family. Coincidence, (the “fates” as Oliver called it?), works in pretty serendipitous ways. Oliver’s camp is only just down the road from my own. He insists on dropping me off.

“God, I’m hungry,” Oliver grumbles, stumbling down the rocky hillside.

“I would do anything for that crumbly peanut-butter granola bar my mom insisted I pack this morning. It looked like bird food then but now it sounds as good as a donut.”

“Dooonnuutt,” Oliver groans.

“Mmm. What about pepperoni pizza, extra cheese?”

“With crispy garlic bread and cool ranch sauce?”

“And warm cinnamon sticks with vanilla icing for dess—” Oliver cuts me off.

“Okay stop. We really need to eat. Soon. And I don’t mean left over salmon with pinto beans that we both know is waiting for us.”

“Have you been to Muriel’s?”

“Does she serve food and tell me encouraging things like how this mountain will eventually lead us back to flat ground and civilization? If yes, then I want to meet her right now.”

“Well you’re in luck because it’s a diner. In Castle Rock Canyon.”

“Let’s do it.”

The closer we get to camp the slicker my hands get. Oliver insists on meeting my family. I’m too tired to object. My feet are raw slabs of meat and I’m pretty sure my stomach’s now a hole of emptiness. I picture moths inside, flying around in the vast nothingness.

We arrive at my campsite as the sky fades to a blue black. The crickets are out, chirping away in the tall grass. Mom and Dad sit in their ancient foldable nylon chairs. Dad poking at the fire and Mom lost in a book by the tent. It’s clear whatever disagreement that landed Dad on the couch last night is still happening. The back of one chair says “Ma,” the other “Pop.” They couldn’t stop laughing about it as they dragged the chairs to the The Corner Store’s register almost seven years ago. I was sure they would fall apart that same summer. But here they are, still going strong, years later. Sheesh. Dad bounds out of his chair.

“Violet where’ve you been! You missed all the good fish today. We’re going to fry up some Grayling for dinner tonight! You hungry? Who’s your friend?”

“This is Oliver. He goes to University of Boulder too. We live in the same dorm.” I’m careful to leave out the part where he practically lives directly across the hall from his sweet and innocent daughter.

“Good to meet you, Oliver.”

Dad is strangely formal as he shakes Oliver’s hand.

“I offered to take Violet on a hike. She’d never been up the hill before. It ended up being a really nice day.”

Oliver looks at me, a smile plays on his lips.

“You never mentioned meeting any boys at school this semester.” Mom stands up, striding over to Dad’s side. She is fully decked out in a down vest and god-awful shearling boots. “It’s nice to meet you. It would’ve been nice to know you were wandering in the woods without your phone, Violet. Oliver, would you like to stay for dinner?”

“Say no!” Joshua yells from inside the tent. I hear tiny video game explosions coming from his DS3.

“We’re having trout. It will taste like the glorious salt and sweat it took to reel that baby in!”

“My parents are just down a few campsites. If they haven’t eaten maybe we could all meet up for dinner. My Dad loves any sort of fishing story. He was three time champion of the fishing portion of the Castle Rock Annual Conference Kickback.”

“No kidding? My good friend Bob loves going to the Kickback every summer. That sounds great! How about we meet up in thirty minutes?”

Oliver smiles. “That should work.”

Oliver and I walk to the edge of the campsite as Mom and Dad go back to what looks like ignoring each other.

I hand Oliver back his jacket.

“Keep it. It might get cold later.”

“Thanks. So Castle Rock Annual Conference Kickback, CRACK. Is that an actual thing? Because I’m thinking it’s not.”

“Oh, it’s real. I wouldn’t joke about a thing like CRACK.” Oliver says walking backward and almost into a tree. “See you soon, Violet.”

My name. The way he said it, I can't help but feel like there's an ellipsis on the end.

Oliver's hair is damp from the shower, the edges curl around his ears, a little tuft of hair pokes out from his knit hat. He wears the same jeans and a dark wool pea coat. A large red cooler almost makes him double over with its weight. Clearly we're in for quite the fish dinner, something I have no intention of following through on. An older man, I assume his dad, trails behind, arms full of firewood. He talks animatedly to a woman. She's carrying packages of marshmallows, chocolate, and graham crackers.

"Need a hand?" By the time I reach Oliver it looks like he is ready to keel over and accept death.

"I'm okay. I just should've taken it easier on the trail out there. Trying to impress you with my knowledge of the area, I ignored blisters on the back of my foot." Oliver winces as he places the cooler at the edge of our campsite.

"Don't strain yourself now. You're the one driving to Muriel's as soon as we find our escape window." I see the anticipation of good food trumping his chauffeur status.

"Oh, I'll make sure we get there. I have my order ready."

Before I can ask what exactly that is, Oliver's dad introduces himself. He's shorter than Oliver with a round dad stomach and thick, silver grey hair. He's dressed in khaki pants and a red shirt that says, *Any fin is possible if you don't trout yourself!*

"Hello there! Name's Walt. Violet is it? Nice to meet you. This is my wife, Kathleen."

The woman with the marshmallows smiles, trying to extend a hand. She laughs as three Hershey bars tumble to the ground.

Oliver cuts in. “Too many marshmallows? I say impossible.” He gathers up the chocolate bars giving Kathleen an amused look.

“Well you sure are beautiful! Oliver mentioned he met a great girl at school.” *Great girl?* It must be art portfolio Jenn or someone else. We barely talked that one time at school. Kathleen smiles. She has short brown hair cropped almost into a pixie cut.

“Um, thank you.”

In the lantern light Oliver almost looks embarrassed. Did he just blush?

Clearly I am delirious and in need of sustenance.

After the initial greetings parent to parent: Mom. Dad. Dad. Mom. I am about ready to leave and never come back. The stress of pleasantries after an already tiring day is enough to make a girl insane. We’ve only eaten a few bites of dinner in hopes of being able to leave and go to Muriel’s. Thank God for Oliver and his quick mind.

“Soooo, I was thinking. Since Sam’s Bait Shop is still open for a few hours, and we need to fill up the truck’s tank, maybe I could go to town for a little bit? Not too late though.”

Whoa there, Oliver. Turn down the excuses a little bit or you might start a fire in all the dry grass.

Oliver’s dad looks at my parents and chuckles. He sits up from his own foldable chair he brought along. “Okay, okay. You can go to town. Just not too late. Don’t want to leave us old folk unattended. We might get rowdy out here alone.”

Oliver grins at his dad and looks over at my parents. Mom and Pop. “Would it be okay if Violet comes along for the ride? She promised me that she would pick out my next baiting lures. She told me she is quite the fishing pro.”

“That’s true,” Dad beams. “She caught an eight pound trout when she was just eight years old! Never would’ve believed it. A fish longer than her arm.”

It was true. Not that I really wanted to pick gross worms or weird-smelling plastic octopus bait out for Oliver. But I did know how to catch a fish.

“Just remember your phone this time,” Mom says with a small smile.

With that we are off.

“Excited for some real food?” Oliver’s voice jumbles up and down with the gravel road. He’s beaming.

“Pancakes!” I yelled into the night.

“Oh, man. And the butter? With a fruit topping? Peaches or strawberries? I can’t decide.”

“I do feel kind of bad leaving my brother behind. I know he would’ve liked to come with us.” Not to mention with Mom and Dad not getting along right now.

“Not more than he likes the new Donkey Kong on DS3.”

“Are you telling me you have a DS3 and you let my brother borrow your game?”

“That’s not what I’m telling you. I’m saying that I have a DS3 and I’ve already beaten the new Donkey Kong so I let your brother *have* the game.”

“How nice of you. Are you sure you don’t want to go back? I can leave you two alone to defeat the evil ape king.”

“It’s okay. I’d much rather be here,” Oliver’s grin matches his crazy hair. He looks back at the road as I wish away the heat from my cheeks. The road finally levels off onto asphalt. “Besides, King K. Kool is a Saltwater crocodile, not an ape.”

He's driving me crazy and I like it.

With the heat on full blast the truck ride is luxurious. Like a steamy shower after a snow flurry. It's perfectly thawing out all my frostbitten pieces. First the nose, then the fingers, then my sad, forgotten feet.

After a few minutes of battling static airwaves, Oliver settles on an oldies station. He turns the volume low. Dean Martin and John Lee Hooker sound less like music and more like small snippets of words in the wind.

My mind drifts as I lean my head against the window. Sam Cooke's voice traces along the road's yellow dividing lines,

If you ever change your mind

About leavin'

Leavin' me behind

Well, baby, bring it on home

Bring it on home to me

Yeah,

I know, I laughed when you left

But now I know

I only hurt myself

Of course. It's the song I listened to on repeat that day in August. I punch the radio dial with force. A sudden *twack* and we are listening to an alternative-rock station.

Oliver shifts in his seat. “Not an oldies fan?”

“Not tonight.” I know I sound angry and I instantly feel bad. I mean Jake and I are “friends” now right? “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just been a rough start to school.”

“I get it. No need to explain. How about we just let Coldplay soothe us with their melodramatic orchestral build-ups? Then we’ll have pancakes and you’ll be in such euphoria you’ll forget about whatever’s bothering you.”

“Sounds good.” I turn up the volume.

Five songs later we pull into Muriel’s. I can tell Oliver senses a shift in my mood. My throat’s tight, making it hard to breathe. All from a god damn song. I hate this in-between feeling I’ve been left with. I try to let it go. I don’t want to deal with it now.

“You ready?” Oliver looks at me apprehensively.

“Let’s go.” The edges of my mouth turn up a tiny bit. “I’m getting extra pie.”

“Extra, extra pie.” Oliver jumps out of the truck and we make our way toward the most glorious campground dinner ever. Forget the trout, we’re living the high life.

Muriel’s menu makes us weep with joy. There are lumberjack breakfasts complete with buttermilk pancakes, juicy grilled ham and fluffy eggs on buttery sourdough. There are sandwiches on potato bread and sugary maple spice spread served over crispy hash browns. Shimmering Belgian waffles, golden at the edges. Seasoned potatoes slathered in butter and garlic, available for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

We’re two hungry college kids rolling with platinum American Express. Straight from a father’s pocket.

Luxury.

“There’s nothing better than a diner just after the dinner rush.” Oliver scans the restaurant, taking in the small bear cubs and pine tree silhouettes that border everything in sight.

It all looks familiar. The same chipped mugs sit on a shelf above the old 1980’s register. The framed photos of ancient Hollywood stars like Humphrey Bogart and Gary Cooper hang faded on the walls. It’s like living inside a memory that smells like fresh coffee. I laugh out loud.

“What?” Oliver looks at me amused. He takes off his knit hat, the once small tuft of hair revealing an even bigger cowlick. He pats down his hair aggressively, cheeks pink.

“I just remembered something I thought of on our hike.”

“What’s that? Maybe how you were so certain you would die but you also knew in the back of your mind that I would most definitely save your life?”

“Uh, how do I say this...No. I was – it’s kind of embarrassing – but I was thinking you looked a lot like the star of a Wild West film.”

“Like super manly, I’m going to steal your woman and your liquor too kind of Wild-West tough?” Oliver smiles, one eyebrow inching upward.

I throw a piece of bacon at him. It misses his plate and bounces off his chest. He pops it into his mouth, giving me a smooth wink.

I’m not sure I’m ready for this friendship.

Stuffed on pancakes and thick maple syrup, Oliver and I pull out of the diner parking lot with the truck’s heater once again on full-blast. Oliver pops in a mixed CD. Old, slow

songs fill the truck with a trickling magic. We idle off the main road. The blinker ticks left, back to the campground.

“I know a place –” Oliver starts.

“Let’s go.” The right blinker flips on. The *click click* of what’s to come.

Oliver’s Mix of Oldies but Goodies (and some new stuff)

1. My Lover’s Prayer: Otis Redding

2. Four on Six: Wynton Kelly Trio

3. Lost in the Stars: Kenny Burrell

4. She Lit a Fire: Lord Huron

5. 22: Night Beds

6. What a Wonderful Man: My Morning Jacket

7. Misty: Wynton Kelly Trio

8. I Can’t Turn You Loose: Otis Redding

9. I Thought About You: Kenny Burrell

We’re at a field. Everything’s pitch black once Oliver cuts the engine. The moon a thin sliver in the sky.

Oliver unbuckles his seatbelt. “It’s kinda cold out. There might be something in the back of the truck. I’ll take a look.”

I hop out of the cab and the freezing November air hits instantly. I sit down in the middle of the field on a blanket of plush grass. It’s long and willowy like the grass in fairytales.

“I found us...something.” Oliver reluctantly hands me a wool blanket folded into a square. I open it and see it’s not a blanket. It’s a poncho. With fringe. I laugh as Oliver sits next to me. He pulls his own poncho over his head.

“Mmm. Toasty.” I double over with laughter. He’s so pleased, sitting there in a vibrant southwestern print. “Settle down, crazy cackler. It’s better than being frozen.”

“Or going back to camp,” I add.

“That too. I love Kathleen but whenever we go camping she insists on doing every family-bonding activity there is. I guess that’s what happens when you marry a guy with a fourteen-year-old son. Take them outside and let them do what men do.”

“She seems great. Your Dad likes doing all the stuff too, right?”

Oliver smiles. “Yeah, mostly. Except this one time she took us rock-climbing and my Dad was stuck in the middle of the wall for like an hour and a half. Did I mention we were inside a gym? We had to call the manager to get him down.”

“My Dad loves all the outdoor stuff too. So much that he made me into his Junior Fishing Assistant when I was nine. I was obsessed with making the best lures. I spent hours picking out different feathers and hooks.”

“That sounds frightening. Then you grew up and decided you would set your sights on locking yourself out of dorm rooms instead?” Oliver grins at me. I wrap a piece of fringe around my index finger.

“That was an accident. Another lame thing to happen to me in an already lame week.”

“Why lame?”

Oliver leans back in the grass, propping his head up with his arm. I sigh, lying down on my back. The grass feels like silk.

“I don’t know...” I hesitate telling him about Jake. That’s what everyone always tells you not to do with other guys. Talk about ex-boyfriends. I figure I might as well. It’s not like a second opinion would hurt. “I saw my ex-boyfriend for the first time in months. It just confused me. I don’t know what he wants.”

“Shouldn’t it be what *you* want?” Oliver’s voice is gentle. I can tell he doesn’t want to say the wrong thing.

I take a deep breath. “I don’t think I know what that is either. It’s hard to let people go, even when you know you need to.”

Oliver folds his hands on his stomach and lies back in the grass. “College. We’re all just a big mess.”

“Oliver, you’re hardly a mess. You’re crazy Mr. Confidence with a magic sleight of hand. Bet you’ll be doing Vegas before the semester’s up.”

Oliver looks up at the sky. “If only I was half a cool as you make me sound, I’d do just that.”

I don’t believe it. There’s no way Oliver’s insecure. He’s the dictionary definition of happy-go-lucky. I look up for the first time and see it. The sky drenched in stars.

“Orion’s belt.”

“I know. It’s beautiful.” I close my eyes. The night glitters, warm and endless, my eyes heavy with its fullness.

“We’re here.”

I jolt awake at the sound of Oliver's voice. The truck is parked in front of my campsite where both tents are dark. It must be later than I thought. I get out of the cab, the blast of cold evergreen air shaking the tired from behind my eyes.

"Sorry I fell asleep. It must've been a longer day than I realized."

"No problem."

My voice comes out in a rush. "Thanks for the momentary getaway. It's nice to have something other than rubbery fish for dinner." I realize I'm still wearing the poncho. I quickly take it off and hand it back to him.

Oliver's eyes are rimmed with an almost desperate plea for sleep. "We should make breakfast night a regular thing. You know, when we're back at school?"

The realization that I know Oliver from school, from the night I got locked out, comes flooding back. It's weird how you can feel close to someone so quickly.

"Yeah that would be fun. Maybe we –"

"Violet, is that you? Where have you two been? You should've called. Your father and I were worried." Mom crawls out of the oversized tent door in her Calvin Klein pajama set, her hair a perfect mussed bun. She did know we were camping right? As in sleeping on dirt?

"Sorry, Mom. We didn't realize how late it was."

"It was my fault, Mrs. James. I'm sorry we woke you," Oliver says. He gives me an apologetic glance.

"It's okay." Mom flashes Oliver her signature tight-lipped smile. "You both should get some sleep. We're cutting things short. Be ready to leave early in the morning. Have a good night, Oliver. Tell your parents we said goodbye."

Mom heads back in the tent and I hear my Dad's low grumble of a voice and Mom's short reply. I don't know what's going on but it can't be good. We've never left early before. My parents live for this trip. My Mom always says it's her Hawaii. Since I've been back she's seemed preoccupied. I'm having trouble writing it off to some real estate problems like Dad mentioned.

I know something's off on the car ride home. It's quiet in that pin drop way. The way silent reading is quiet. All too quiet on the Western Front quiet. It's like that when we pack up the campsite in the early hours of the morning. Joshua fills up the silent void though. He does *not* stop talking about Donkey Kong. There should be a limit to how much he can say about a pixelated mammal but no, there really isn't. There are levels and characters and *A-B-A-BB-A* moves that, for someone in the know, provide endless conversation. After about an hour and a half of Joshua talking about how cool Oliver is and how hard *Level Two: Kingdom Jungle* is when you have to jump over the building bricks shaped like a banana, Mom practically goes bananas.

"JOSHUA. We've heard enough. Please put your game away. It's quiet time." I'm startled by Mom's harsh tone. The tremble of Joshua's lip makes me flush with anger.

"You don't need to yell at him like that."

Dad, sensing a volcano about to erupt his euphoric show-tune state, cuts in, "Violet, it's fine, just forget it. Joshua, settle down and put your game away."

The wrath of Mom is not to be messed with, so the rest of the drive is quiet to say the least. I know it has little to do with Joshua and more to do with Dad because I hear Mom's sigh every time Dad taps his fingers on the steering wheel. I've never had a real reason to

worry about Mom and Dad having problems but now I'm not so sure. It's the little things about each other that drive the other crazy. The small ticks.

It's the tapping the fingers on the steering wheel that does it. Cracks the facade of cool. Because it's that small motion that causes Mom to sigh, annoying Dad so he does the thing that annoys Mom more and the cycle escalates until nothing is left except sighs and tapping.

Times like these I wish I could just fall into DS3 oblivion too. By the time we're home, I know there's an argument seething. For Mom it's only a matter of unpacking the car first. She's like Mary Poppins that way.

I make a point to get a majority of the camping gear out of the back seat before asking Mom if I can take Joshua to ice cream before heading back to campus. She clips me a cool, *fine but not too late and only one scoop for Joshua* as she slams the trunk and trudges toward the garage with the empty cooler. Dad walks over to me and I notice plum colored bags under his eyes, the wrinkles around his mouth line like canyons.

"Thanks for taking your brother to get ice cream. As you can tell your mother is pretty upset. We're working through some things. I don't want you to worry. It would be good that she has time to cool off. We'll just order in from Lorenzo's okay? If I don't see you before you head back to school then I love you and drive safe."

"Okay, thanks Dad." My voice is quieter than I mean it to be. He seems withdrawn in a way I haven't seen before. I decide not to read too much into it. They're adults. They'll work it out. They always do. It's my job to keep Joshua out of the line of Mom's wrath.

Dad smells like campfire and warm fleece as he gives me a hug and heads inside to the quiet house. There's something sad about returning home after a long weekend. It's

almost like the house was content being full of things but not people. Just a museum full of laundry baskets and dusty shopping lists. It's probably better I leave now before I get too sentimental and decide college isn't for me. I open the back door of the Jeep and poke my head in.

"Joshua! Guess what time it is?" His head jerks up, eyes DK glazed. It's some sort of mind control. I shouldn't have let Oliver give him that game.

"Violet, I'm not a little kid! Stop doing that."

"I refuse to believe you're getting older. I also don't think you'd say no to chocolate chip cookie dough."

"Okay, but only 'cuz I'm really hungry and I'm tired of eating Mom's birdseed bars." Joshua glares at me and tucks his DS3 inside his pocket. I can tell it's hard for him to suppress a smile that only chocolate chip cookie dough brings out.

The drive to Tony's Ice Cream Parlor is a maze through striped red rocks. It's one of those towns with a lot of bronze placards that tell you little stories about the exact spot you're currently standing on. All the buildings have painted wooden shingles and coordinating shutters. It's the place to spend a Sunday afternoon as the sun starts casting shadows. An afternoon like this is the definition of *leisurely*.

"Violet, can I get two scoops if they're small?" Joshua presses his nose on the glass and I peel him away as the employee's eyes narrow in the Don't Get Drool on My Glass I Just Windexed kind of way.

"Yeah, but don't tell Mom okay? And don't act all crazy and hyper when you get home. Mom and Dad will take away your DS3 if you get too rowdy."

“I won’t.” Joshua grabs two spoons from the cup on the counter and sits in the empty booth by the window. That’s another thing I love about Tony’s. Here you can eat ice cream in sparkly vinyl seated luxury.

After my own tough choice of mint chip or cookie dough, waffle or sugar cone, I slide in across from Joshua, once again immersed in the world of crazy alligators and evil primates.

“Joshua.”

“I knowww. Just this level. Please.”

I sigh and slide Joshua’s cup toward him. He always chooses cup over cone. Kid doesn’t know what he’s missing.

“Don’t let that game become your life. Before you know it you’ll become a zombie. You’ll fail all your classes because you didn’t do your homework and you’ll have to live at home forever.”

Joshua sticks out his tongue. The game makes small pinging noises followed by a chime that sounds like losing. He puts the game down and shovels a large scoop of ice cream into his mouth.

“Are they mad or something? They seemed mad last night.”

“Who knows with those two. I’m sure it will all be better when we get home.”

“They’ve been arguing a lot, you know. Since you’ve been gone. I think they miss you. And so do I. Now I have to walk Lars all the time.”

I know I have to reassure him but this time something feels different. The look on Dad’s face before I left seemed resigned. I knew they sometimes fought but maybe it was more often than I like to believe. I have to remember that being Joshua’s sister is my most

important responsibility. I can't help but feel that I need to be the consistent person in his life. If I'm going to get things together it's going to be so I can feel reliable again. So I won't be the one who lets Joshua down.

"It'll be okay, Joshie. Just eat your ice cream and try not to act like a sugar crazed lunatic when we get home."

"No promises." Joshua gives me a big chocolatey smile and I know for now he will be okay. At least this is what I tell myself because I can't stand to stay at home another second.

Campus seems more like home than home currently does. Apart from the occasional handful of missing Cheese-Its, here everything has its place and nothing changes unless I want it to. Everything is quality controlled to my liking. I guess that's why some people prefer to live alone. It's knowing there will always be hot water in the shower and that you can *take* a shower whenever you want. It's always having peanut butter in the jar when I want peanut butter and apples. Just the small reassurances in life, that's all I really need.

Growing up, Mom always reminded me that bad things like to happen in threes. But sometimes it seems like they happen in sixes or sevens. For once I'd just like to know everything will be okay. I settle into my Sunday night routine. I shower off the camping dirt and bundle up in a sweatshirt and leggings. I crack open *Othello*, something I was supposed to have finished last week, when I hear a knock on my door. It's actually more like a rhythmic drumming. I stand in the middle of the room, frozen. Either I ignore whoever it is or I open the door and deal with the lunatic. In all likelihood it's one of Bridget's friends

hoping to catch her before the Pi Beta Phi meeting, or wherever it is she goes to be social. Someone this persistent won't be ignored.

Lo-and-behold it's some guy in a dirty tank top and shades. Even though we're indoors, and it's nighttime.

"Hey, is Bridge in? She told me to stop by."

So now she goes by Bridge? Mental note. Wouldn't want Bridget to be insulted I didn't know her kinky new nickname.

"No *Bridge* is out for the night. Something about a Phi Delta Theta kegger on 48th?" I have no idea where Bridget is and I'm also not entirely sure if there's even a 48th street in town. I'll let the *homeboy* figure that out for himself.

"For real? I didn't even know. I guess that's what happens when you sleep through Chem." Tank Top laughs, his teeth are partially eroded from energy drinks and cigarettes. Ick.

"Yeah, real bummer. Wish Dad's money was going *somewhere* useful right?" Tank Top's smile falters and I can see he's confused.

"Tell her I stopped by." He shuffles down the hall and almost disappears around the corner but not before he gives a hand-slap-chest-bump to another tank top frat boy wearing sunglasses on the back of his head.

"Dude, you hear about the slammin' party on 48th?" I hear a *naw dude, really?* before I firmly shut my door and turn off all the lights in the room.

I'm ready to enter the realm of dreams for all eternity. Bridget will most likely be gone until tomorrow afternoon at the very least. It's basically like I'm living in a single room with the most deluxe twin sized bed ever. I have a good pile of blankets going on. They've

slowly accumulated into a large heap that I can burrow into when I have days like today. I feel overwhelmed with school and now I'm worried about the situation at home. But it's not like I have anything to genuinely complain about. For now I'll accept my mediocre crappy days as just days I have to live through to get to the Good Days. I'm embracing the fact that at least today wasn't a Bad Day. Because those are hard to bounce back from. The days where I can barely get out of bed and when I do go to class it feels pointless and redundant. Sometimes I feel so behind I feel like it's impossible to catch up. Tomorrow can't be another one of those days. I need to take action. Now. I crawl out from under the blankets and fill up the tiny ceramic kettle Mom got me from The Container Store. It's efficient, compact and perfect for college. At least that's what Mom told me when she assured me that I needed a kettle. And although I resisted at first, she's right. This kettle has been my savior.

*Reasons You Listen to Mom When She Suggests Kitchen Appliances
(Kettle Edition):*

- *You will make hot chocolate → more than once.*
- *More often than that, you will make tea → rough day? Tea, Green.*
- *Most of your meals will consist of Cup o' Noodles → Main ingredient? Hot water.*
- *Lots of noodles high in sodium means sad sad digestive system → Enter Green Tea.*
- *The steam your kettle produces rejuvenates dry Colorado skin, and makes me feel like a new woman. → Necessary after being dumped.*
- *Green Tea = best friend, warm hug.*

First, Mom is usually, almost always, typically right about things even though I'd rather die than say it to her face. Second, never go to The Container Store with your mom because you will want everything and she will want to buy you everything. There are things in that store that I'm not even sure have a function. They just look like products to make life easier. Like space bags. When will I need a space bag? Never, but I want one. The kettle whistles. I wrap my fleece blanket around my shoulders and stumble around in the small

cupboard above the sink. It's the night for glorious green tea. Just when I think I've found it I hear another knock on the door. This knocking is also rhythmic but its less abrasive than Tank Top's. The beat sounds familiar but I can't place it. I stumble for the overhead light and wince at its brightness. I open the door, expecting another intrusive stranger.

"She's not he—" I start before I realize that I know this person and the song he was rapping on the door. Hakuna Matata, and it's Oliver. He's not alone.

"Hakuna Matata, campfire friend." Oliver waves his hand in exaggerated salutation. "We've come to bond over stovetop s'mores and toasty beverages. You know, 'tis the season and all."

I recognize the girl behind Oliver as the one who lives across the hall. She has paint stains on her jeans and her hair is cut in an artsy haphazard way. I smooth down my own frizzy bangs and open the door wider.

"What are you doing here? Why aren't you still camping?" He always seems to be appearing out of thin air.

"Crappy weather. Dad wasn't having it so we left this afternoon."

Jenn clears her throat. "Hey. I live across the hall. I think I've seen you on campus. I'm Jenn." She smiles at me and Oliver suddenly throws his hands in the air, exasperated.

"You guys haven't met yet? Sorry about that. Violet, Jenn. Jenn, Violet."

"Yeah, I think we got that," I say to Oliver and Jenn smiles at me. She seems friendly enough. Maybe I could break my role as the college recluse just this once and be social. I mean Oliver did say s'mores, right?

"I probably should've asked if you were busy. But who are we kidding, no one's ever too busy for dessert. It'll be like the campfire soirée we never had." Oliver wiggles his

eyebrows up and down and gives me his lopsided grin with that slightly crooked front tooth. He jiggles a full bag of Jet Puff marshmallows, inching closer into my room with a scuffed Converse.

“Okay. But only if you brought real Hershey’s squares and not weird imitation chocolate.”

“Of course. I would never,” Jenn says. She and Oliver brush past me into my room. My eyes do a quick sweep, confirming there is nothing embarrassing out on display. I’m not used to having a roommate, let alone guests here to see me. Nevermind an attractive boy and a girl he’s most likely dating. Are they dating? Oliver didn’t mention anything. But it’s not like we talked about past, or current, relationships. We mostly bonded over the world’s best pancakes and oldies music. But he did go into her room that one morning...

“Kettle’s on!” Oliver proclaims, twisting the stove knob and pouring hot water into three ceramic mugs Jenn brought.

“Please, make yourself at home,” I say as Oliver studiously pours in a packet of hot chocolate mix, careful not to let the edges overflow.

Jenn curls up on Bridget’s plush fur rug in the middle of the room. “You should’ve seen him the first time he came into my room. His socks were wet so he threw them in with my laundry. Then he took the whole load down the hall and tossed them in the wash.”

“Hey, they were my last clean pair. Your laundry smelled funky anyway.”

“Why are you feeding Violet lies? Now that’s how she’s going to think of me, Gross Laundry Slob Girl.”

I laugh. “I promise I won’t. I’m just glad this closet has a curtain because my laundry is out of control.”

“Violet, are you telling me, in your subtle way, that you want me to do your laundry too?” Oliver walks slowly toward the closet, one hand reaches for the curtain.

“No,” Jenn and I say together. Oliver laughs and hands us each a steaming ceramic mug. Mine is light blue with hand-painted red and yellow flowers. Oliver plops a handful of small marshmallows on the top, each one making a tiny splash in the melty chocolate pool.

It’s college and I have friends and hot chocolate. I almost don’t believe it. I’m liking this new me.

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