

WRITING SAMPLES

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The Fairy Tale of Female

i – fey

If submission was your only goal, why were we created with this spark? *A face so pretty cannot hold the power of the world, you say, burdensome and arcane and new.* We see ourselves reflected in the aquamarine of Paradise: we see the cheekbones of mirrored delicacy and the wide, dewy eyes, the flowing hair and the gentle curves of our bodies. We see what you see, something like an angel, something like a dormouse. But you cannot see what the waters show us. We see the magick, a power that builds from our womb and traverses our veins, a power that permeates the very beings that we are, a control that infiltrates our very minds and hearts. There is a wisdom, yet unreachable and forgotten, that floats somewhere between body and soul. Creation resides there, allowing us to bear the unbearable and come back stronger, smarter, more loving and more fearsome than before. You see the angel, and you think there is no more. We find the demon, and we know there is an infinity. We are more than light, more than dark. If you wished us to submit, why did you raise us with such power?

And why, if you are so powerful yourself, do you feel the need to quash it?

ii – siren

Loreley is the name bequeathed us; Eve, her land-loving sister. A portrait of divinity, her wrath and cruelty ebbing and flowing underneath as the waves in which she lay. A musical body, tune so wild that even the noblest of souls comply to her bidding. You see only demon now. You see not your own trespasses, own guilts. You find comfort in scapegoating Loreley and Eve. But you see, we do not sing for you. We find the melody within our souls dissonant with closed minds; it is not our fault you find this mystery so alluring, a dangerous carnality. We are an ocean within ourselves: our depths may elude you, but there is no need to drown. We sing not for you, but for ourselves, embracing our divine. You are invited to see our epic orchestra, drawn in by airy tendrils; it is only stealing the harmony that causes your throats to burn. Water stings those who abuse it, caresses those who love it.

Then again, blind omniscience, how can your hypocrisy truly love any living thing?

iii – witch

Harnessing one's own power is difficult. Using it in the presence of another is something else entirely. We learned the former with grace and control; we are inhibited in the latter. Our own love, our own strength is a threat, it seems, to one so very scared and meek and bestial. You would not let us show you our flames: they would have been blue to you, an embrace that would not burn. You would not let us show you our waves: they would have been foam to you, a blanket that would not crush. You would not let us show you our terrain: it would have been rolling hills to you, travel made no toil. But your fear turned to defense, your defense to anger, your anger to numb acceptance of a liar's tongue. You burned us with our fire, drowned us with our water, buried us within our earth. An attempted murder of your equal. An attempt to silence fierce benevolence, godlike protection, fearsome love, revolutionary independence. Our own fear blocking our power, we gave in.

Did you know when you burn flame with fire, it only creates an inferno?

iv – werewolf

Down, bitch! The leash is only seconds behind, lassoing a voice that mere moments ago was howling music. The guidebook says: *Tie it around the neck. Make it a pretty bow. Distract from the sound of a choking human being.* No words are spoken: the pain and resentment and struggle roils our stomach like a dog's bowl. Intellect imprisoned in a doghouse for fear of *Well, actually.* Justice impaled with a dog tag for fear of *What were you wearing.* Creativity marred by a spray bottle for fear of *Sorry, sweetheart, not like that.* Debate caged by a muzzle for fear of *God, she's such a bitch.* Words come easy to us; their escape does not. We are waiting for our full moon, for the moment when the cage is demolished and all our words are howled under a spotlight of ivory and cream. Philanthropic and lycanthropic become one, and we are no longer dog, no longer bitch. We are the wolf you so fear and admire.

Do you have any idea what a wolf's vengeance sounds like?

v – vampire

We rather like the word seductress. It rolls off the tongue in such a pleasing way, as if the consonants were temptation itself. There's something about it that personifies pure power, something carnal and irrepressible. We'll gladly take that. We'll gladly be your Morticia Addams, Black Widow, Catwoman. Each a ruler of their kingdom, dangerously smart, fiercely loyal, a precise entanglement of darkness and diamond. Their idolatry is one we can subscribe to. Whore, however. Slut. Loose. Pleasing, perhaps, in their stop-plosives, but incorrect. Our sexuality is not something you can weaponize, for we did it ourselves. We became what you wanted us to be: the Eve, the Loreley, the Queen of the Fairies, the downright dog. We did it on our own terms. Our limbs are our munitions; our tongue is our knife. We have learned to annihilate without movement. It's what happens when you manacle truth.

How did you manage to weaponize something so full of love?

vi – shapeshifter

What would you like us to be today? Please, do tell us, as it appears only one dish can be digested at a time. Here's a menu, if you wish. Would you like the blessedly unaware canine, born only for your bidding? The fetishized vampirical statue, here for your temptations and nothing more? The oddly childlike fey, poised to your pupil's liking? The lovely soloist, dragged down with you into the drowning depths? Or perhaps the silent sorceress, allowed to speak only when she agrees with you? We have learned to be each. We have learned how each inhabits our bodies. Sometimes, it kills our gentleness. Sometimes, it only stokes our ire. Sometimes, a drop escapes our numb pupil, landing on the sandpaper of our entrapment. Don't blame us for what you have done. We must now remedy the unfixable. We must relearn how to combine demon and angel. We must remember who we are.

We must re-member ourselves.

The Romanticism of the Prosaic

We took the 5 at Winthrop, walking up Nostrand past the 24/7 fried chicken place, several liquor stores, and a boutique coffee shop that stood out like a sore thumb. He departed at Atlantic Avenue with a fond kiss to her lips; I was never sure where she got off: it was farther up the island than me. I fancied that she did, indeed, work in the historic outpost on East 79th, within walking distance of the Met and the art her being so embodied.

That's what her bag said, at least. Every day, she carried a black canvas tote, emblazoned in white with the New York Society Library logo. She was forever shouldering the bag to a more comfortable position--routinely, flippantly--as she held his hand on their walk to the station. She wore a dress without fail, regardless of the temperature. Summer brought florals. Autumn brought academia. Winter was accompanied by woolen tights and a trench coat.

She embodied the hip professor. He became hipster musician.

Thick black headphones were perennially looped around his neck, poised to be thrust into defensive music position as soon as he stepped off the train. A bomber jacket, one in every color of Newton's rainbow, was paired with stained jeans and antique wire-rimmed glasses. His beard was finely kept, shaved angular and close to his face. I was surprised that I never saw a guitar case thrown across his back.

They were the Eleanor and Park couple, I remember thinking one of the first times I saw them. He, a tall, lanky artist; she, a short, compact bookworm. Their hands fit like puzzle pieces, fingers tightly twined. They leaned towards each other to talk and laugh, their figures creating a sculpture of Cupid. It was loud and intimate. Even when I couldn't overhear their words through my earbuds, I felt their comfort with each other, love emanating from their very essence.

I knew them, but I didn't. We only took the same subway every day, at precisely the same time.

It wasn't long into the fall semester that I first noticed our overlapping commute. Through the instrumentation of indie and show tunes, interrupting the daydreams of stories and the worrying of classwork, I noticed her first. Her combat boots were similar to mine: shiny, black, prepared to kick the ass of catcallers and misogynists alike. Her arms swung with a determined brightness, welcoming and intimidating. Her bag (admittedly, the "Library" of it caught my eye with some immediacy) clunked against her side; I imagined it filled with hardcover anthropology and beat-up paperbacks. In many ways, she was the epitome of "The New Yorker."

I kept seeing that bag out of the corner of my eye, winking, jewels to a magpie. So, I watched.

He joined her shortly after I realized we shared the same route. They walked only a few paces ahead of me: he slowed his long stride to match her quick, smaller one. His left hand was in her right; his right in his jacket pocket. When the station was reached and we joined the rest of Flatbush in the car, he rested an arm on the bar above while she curled under him, chin resting at chest level as she tilted towards his voice.

Rarely could I discern full sentences. It was snippets here and there, of "Jason's rad party on Parkside" or "that bitch of a landlord" or "social Darwinism at its finest." Her soft smiles accompanied his brash laughter, her murmurs interrupting his philosophical diatribes with perfect punctuality. On occasion, a book would be pulled from her bag, flipped through to produce a page pocked with pencil marks: notations on Shelley, Atwood, or Tartt. That's what

my mind scribbled in the blanks, at least; only once could I read *Frankenstein* on the cover of an antique novel.

The three of us continued this way, in perfect, synchronous harmony, for months. The tromp down Nostrand, joined by warm coffee cups as the weather chilled. Their linked hands; my fingers wrapped around whatever novel or libretto I had that day. The descent into the station, stopping just right of the turnstiles to wait for the car. Curled into one another. Their giggly intelligentsia chats whilst Tom Grennan and 88 Cups sang in my ears. Brief, sweet kiss at Atlantic. My own departure at Bowling Green. Repeat the next day.

Until, one day, the woman was walking by herself.

I would've thought nothing of it. Shifts change; people get the flu; it's far more common to commute alone. I would've thought nothing of it, except her walk had changed.

Her normal stride had morphed into an abrasive stomp. Her hands fisted by her side, first grasping the bag, then her skirt, then thrust into the air as if a limb detriment. Her face flushed a frustrated crimson, jaw tight. The buoyant wave of her hair chased after her. It didn't take a psychoanalyst to tell that she was angry. It was the type of anger that poisoned one's entire day, suffocative hot iron engulfing a body; Brooklyn could feel it, and people avoided her with wide, circuitous loops.

That rewarded the woman on the subway. She plopped into the nearest vacancy, forcing the man next to her to stand as if repellant magnets; she clutched her bag tightly in front of her. I could feel rather than hear her sigh. She remained like that—tight, tense—until I got off in Manhattan. I could spare only one concerned glance backward, brows furrowed, before I wrenched my backpack further up and turned to school.

For three days, there was no male partner. For three days, the woman walked by herself, becoming more dejected with each step. For three days, I halfway kept an eye on her, intrigued by her story, concerned for this stranger.

The fourth day, all of Flatbush heard quite clearly.

“B! Hey, c'mon, babe, can we just talk about this?”

The woman steeled against the reverberation, teeth clenching as the man's voice bounced inside the corner bodega and back onto the street. She pushed to move faster, left hand white-knuckling the Society bag, right hand a shaky fist. It was no use. I watched with my own internal trepidation as the man caught up with her in three near-languid steps.

“Babe, please. I didn't mean to make you this mad.”

“Then what did you mean to do?” the woman snapped, refusing to look anywhere but forward. “You came out with this revelation like, like, like a fucking nymphomaniac, and you expect me to—”

“No, no, no, that's all wrong,” the man interjected.

“What, then? *What?* You made it pretty clear that I'm not good enough for you, that you need to go find satisfaction else—”

“No. Babe, no. You're perfect. I just...wanted to try...”

“Try? There is no *trying* here.”

Winthrop had been reached. I stood behind them with several other miffed commuters as the woman turned to the man, blocking our path with ice and rage. The businessman behind me sighed. The man shifted uncomfortably in front of the crowd.

“Baby, I love you,” he told her, voice low. “I just...I have this need. It's part of my identity, y'know, and—”

“I've gotta get to work,” she interrupted. Her voice was a knife of arsenic. “Bye.”

Mouth set, she turned and stormed down the steps. The businessman shoved past the man. The latter stood for a moment, appearing utterly defeated, before turning on his heel and shoving his hands in his pockets. My eyes narrowed as I descended.

Cheater? Addict? Fetishist?

The next morning, neither of the two were out. My wintry walk was peaceful, almost disappointingly so. My podcast received undivided attention.

The next morning, I side-stepped a divebombing pigeon.

The next, a Great Dane flew by me as his owner sprinted to catch him.

A week passed with only mundane Brooklynite drama. I became used to being engrossed in my book, in my music, in my audio. It was quite nice; still, I couldn't get the couple out of my mind. My imagination detailed a multitude of scenarios, each one bolder and more improbable than the last. Clearly, Hipster Man had done something to betray Professorial Woman. All I had to go on was her last accusation: nymphomaniac. She had stammered it out, irate and unsure if the insult would fit; technically speaking, I didn't know if the definition did or not. But clearly, this argument had something to do with sex. Possibly gender. Possibly both.

After seven days had passed, they were back.

I almost didn't notice them at first, having become accustomed to their absence. No argumentation accompanied them this time; they strode as amicably as they had in the first days I had noticed them. Only the Society bag, thumping in my periphery, announced their return.

Her hand was back in his. Their conversation had returned to cordial, a laughing query on evolutionary theory and human sexuality. She leaned her head against his shoulder for a brief moment as they walked; he pressed a kiss to her hair. It was as if nothing had passed between them. I couldn't decide if that was odd or relieving. Normalcy had returned, at any rate.

At the intersection of Parkside and Nostrand, they were joined by another man. Of medium height, stocky build, and foisting a skateboard under one arm, he completed their height portraiture. Both waved with enthusiasm; I smiled at the friendly image, turning to adjust the water bottle in my bag. When I looked forward again, the skateboard man had reached the couple. He pressed a kiss to each of their lips.

Oh, my mind stuttered.

"Hey, beautiful," the stocky man murmured to the woman, wrapping an arm comfortably around her shoulder as he shot a wink to the man. "Hey, handsome."

The trio continued down the final block and into the station. They looked like an urban Lemaire painting, I thought, a watercolor of muted Neo-Romanticism in the midst of sharp city lines. The thing that had nearly torn the couple apart had resulted in something so effortlessly normal, prosaically beautiful. My mouth pulled. I turned to my book, a McQuiston.

A chaste two kisses. The man was off at Atlantic. A forehead kiss. Skateboard took off at Borough Hall. And I'm sure that the woman rode all the way to the Upper East Side, within walking distance of the artwork they had become.

You, Me

Wonder of humanity,

There's a 70something-year-old woman who walks by my cobblestone café every day. Without fail, she is wearing impeccable red lipstick and has painstakingly separated her eyelashes, Audrey Hepburn-style. Without fail, she is wearing these gaudy lime-green rainboots. She smiles at everyone she sees, prancing through puddles on misty days like a child on a rainy Sunday morning. She is a combination of sophistication and circus, something that I never imagined would work. Even in my wildest character fancies, I have never combined Audrey with Pippi Longstocking, yet here she is.

She's the grandmother of this part of town. There's a particular group on the corner, in this pub that tends to get rowdy at night. Every time they see her coming, this big, burly man and this thin, tattooed woman come running out, abandoning their posts. They are thrilled to see her. They smile, and yell, and wrap their muscled and tiny arms around her bent frame. Bodycon dress meets docile sweater. Meaty fist meets aged hand. They are quite the trio. The raucous duo and the smilingly soft-spoken grandma fit perfectly together, somehow. It's as if a rainbow appearing in the night sky. Truly beautiful, fully unexpected. Perhaps that makes it all the more spectacular.

As the woman continues down the street, she is greeted by friends galore. Oftentimes, the barista on duty runs her a free drink—it's always a white chocolate hot cocoa, topped with whipped cream and snowflake sprinkles. The bakery across the way will give her something, maybe a croissant, maybe a kolache, I don't know. The bookstore owners, the teenagers running in the rain, the biker chicks revving their engines, the paperie artists down the way...they all greet her as if she is more than a friend, more than family. She seems to hold this corner of town together, an icon in her own right.

I've found myself wondering at her the past few days. Not rudely, of course, not gawking or anything like that. Just wondering what it would be like to live with no fear of being alone. To have friends greet you everywhere you go. It's not the free stuff that's enticing, not at all (although, honestly, a free hot cocoa and croissant every once in a while would not go unappreciated). It's this feeling of being freely, wholly loved, of loving everyone else in return. It's this idea of unity and humanity coming together in a colorful fray that somehow just makes sense. It's being free of superficial worries, because someone will always be there, to talk, to soothe, to laugh, to hug, to value. This little grandmother embodies all of that, and, god, I can't help but wonder how that feels. Does she get lonely ever? Is that why she walks here? Or is she free from all that?

Today, I waved at her, gave her a grin. For once, she entered the coffeeshop. She came over to me as I popped my earbuds out and stilled my pencil. "I love your hair," she told me, "and I hope you become a famous author." She pointed to my writing and raised her eyebrows. I laughed, told her thank you. She finished with, "My hair used to be the same gorgeous shade of red yours is. Enjoy it. Wear red lipstick every once in a while." With that, the barista was over with her drink, she smiled and bid me goodbye, and left.

She makes those gaudy boots look beautiful.

Here's to that, huh?

Buying a pair of rainbow galoshes now,

*Me**You,*

I'm sorry.
 I miss you.
 I miss you so much.
 Five things. Four things. Three things. Two things. One thing.

*Me**My brilliant partner in crime,*

Oh my god, I just did the weirdest thing. I just did the weirdest thing I have ever done in my life. If you could, please insert a generalized shriek of "why am I like this" here.

I am very ashamed.

I need to tell you about it.

A small correction: "just did" is a bit of an understatement. And when I say "a bit," I mean "a lot." The only "just" about it is that I just got caught today.

Over the past few weeks, I've developed a kind of fascination with Greek Row. A lush, tree-lined street, inundated with looming manors in neoclassical and Italianate stylings, remnants of family wealth and the nouveau riche of a century ago. The streets have no crack, no pothole; my boots make a forever-satisfying clack on the pavement as I walk. The fogged sun hits the leaves just so, creating rainbow fractals that dance across the white stone of the Houses. (Capitalization very necessary.) There's perpetual music emanating from them, too, muffled and mysterious: some days, it's the wub-wubbing of Dubstep; other days, it's remixed jazz. There's something so irresistibly foreign about the entire street, the whole of the enterprise.

It's this that magnetizes my mind, of course. Nothing else. I simply can't imagine living that kind of life, full of exclusive camaraderie, the promise of wealth, and the constant shrieking of "Sorority Squat!" or the grease of "Hey, bay-bee!" I will never be the girl driving the adorable red Volkswagen down the street; I will never be the type to own six different types of white dresses and cover myself in a gallon of glitter. There's no chance of me being the person cozied up in the window of a House, thousand-dollar lamps glowing homey and bright, textbook in hand as I laugh and study with my Sister.

That was always you. I'm sure you've made it there already. ~~You have, right?~~

It's a foreign country behind those white walls, attached to reality by perfectly symmetrical walkways. That foreignness is the only reason I've developed a fascination with them, duh. It's not like I've scoped out exactly where the AKA House is and attempt to walk past there at least three or four or five times a week and sit at the nearby park to read every once in a while in the hopes of spotting a certain human being. Not that at all.

Okay, yeah, I know. My poetics have kicked up to Edgar Allan Poe level instead of staying at a nice, melodramatic Lord Byron. It's bad. I'm bad.

But it's been harmless up until now, truly. I've been enjoying a beautiful street, entertaining a small-yet-stupid crush, scribbling outside in the fog (a real aesthete, I am), wearing lots of cozy sweaters, and nothing bad has come of it. Until tonight.

Shit.

I got too into my own head, assuming The Position, as you call it. Leading with my head. Right hand clenching and unclenching. Eyes slightly glazed. A determinedly lopsided walk. I was crafting, in my head, the character of the Love Interest. She had invaded my thoughts, unbidden and only semi-welcomed, and I had been gawking at the House too long. That, I will own. I kept envisioning who each of the silhouettes were, trying to catch the rhythm of the music playing, feeling the contagion of laughter. My mind was in quite the blissed-out state.

Then, a record scratch: "Are you okay?"

It was Elf-Girl. Her eyes burned a hole into my skull; as I turned, she threw a few strands of auburn over her shoulder, blasé and practiced. I swear to you, I turned tomato. I tried to stammer out an answer, but nothing eloquent came. ~~To be fair, it hasn't in a long time.~~

"Can I help you find something?" came the next question. Her eyes narrowed; her fingernails tapped a judgmental Morse code against her perpetually-perfect purse. I stuttered some version of a "no" and a smile. I ducked my head, dug my nails into my palm. My skin burned.

"Oh, okay," accompanied by the most ironclad, confused smirk I've ever seen. She shifted again. Adjusted something in her bag. "Well, I guess I'll see you in class, then."

I took the invitation to leave with the rapidity of a frat party's drunkenness. Just shot her a smile, averted my eyes, and took off. Thankfully, she was going in the other direction; I was spared the painful awkwardness of continuing down the path of someone you just bid farewell to. I kept my head down, my heels turning into a clunk instead of a clack: it matched the tone of my head, throbbing with shame. My ears pounded with my own pulse. I've been trying to calm it with tea and scribbling and pacing ever since I got back.

I cannot believe I got caught stalking a crush like the token nerd-boy in a John Hughes movie. Never have I thought I would transform into an '80s rom-com. My god. Who am I turning into?

Yeah, laugh your head off. You probably would. Correction: you definitely would, you jerk.

Okay, it's kind of funny. I'll give you that.

I miss your laugh. Come see me soon (and help me), please.

A constant WhatHaveIDoneWhyAmILikeThis running through my head,

Me

My sweetest of hearts,

I am enamored by artists. By that, I don't mean those with fame and fortune, the Picassos and the Dantes and the Wildes (fortune arguable on all of those). By that, I don't mean those that devote their careers to crafting. I mean those who create. I am enamored by creatives.

The things that people create are a window, into their minds and into their souls. Even a simple margin-doodle during math class tells a story. A creative—an artist—expresses

themselves outwardly, even if they're quiet in voice. They have tales to be told; they have important things to share; they want to make the world a better place. And, oftentimes, creatives have a dark side that makes it all just so damn interesting. Not dark in a threatening way. Dark in the sense of comedians having depression, musicians struggling with their home lives, or animators fighting through loneliness. They take all that hurt, all that love, all that experience, and they make it into something beautiful and empathetic and evocative. Artists are unbelievable.

I want to hear all the stories. I want to learn from them, I want to cry from them, I want to steal from them and try to have one inkling of brilliance that the amateur does. For that's what they are: brilliant. Creatives are brilliant, in one way or another. The way they communicate is the most effective and the most heart-touching of them all. If politicians were artists, or the other way around, we could live in a very different world.

(Granted, which one of us creative people wants to be President? Gross.)

I think that's why I'm so fascinated with people's stories. There is brilliance in each of them. There is beauty in the mundane. Every person on this earth has something that's worth being told, something about them that catches our ear, our eye, our wonder. Many hold that back, protected behind their white picket fence. With creatives, it slips out every once in a while: in the characters they create, in the worlds they build, in the sounds they elicit. There is a piece of a person in everything created, no matter how far away it may seem. I mean, I'm sure Stephen King is in *Pet Sematary* somewhere, right?

But even outside of that. People are just so interesting. I don't know, maybe that makes me sound creepy. Maybe that makes me seem like a stalker, or an Internet creeper, or something of that kind. Maybe. But I don't mean to be. I just want to know their stories, what they're scratching on their blank piece of paper.

And maybe, then, someone will want to know mine, too.

The oddest of heads,

Me

Septem

Prologue: The Day the Earth Crumbled

The waters of Hraunsvatn were placid. A gentle breeze coaxed the waves to and from shore, the crests licking at the base of their mountain. The birds cawed a melodic decree from their perch in the jagged rocks high above. In several hours' time, the Lights would waltz above the valley's encampment, a marvel for even the most dubious.

Pointed boots planted themselves on the muddy bank. One owner inhaled deeply, a smile crossing sharp, delicate features; the other shivered in their layers of woolen coat and hat. "Why must it be here?" the latter asked, bunching shoulders closer about their face. "Why couldn't it have been the Marianas Trench or something like that?"

"You Mediterranean kind," the other replied. "So very weak. And whiny."

The cold one glared, eyebrows furrowing in disgust. "I could turn away right now and leave you here to do this on your own, you know."

"But you won't. You want to be here." The pale smile grew as it turned to its companion. Icy blue met resonant brown.

"My god, will you ever wipe that smarmy-ass smile off your face? It's wholly unnecessary."

"Of course it's necessary." Said smarmy-ass turned to Hraunsvatn, extending their arms in a welcome and grasping at the air. "Feels like home here."

The shivering one grimaced. "Didn't peg you for the nostalgic type."

The arms dropped. The gaze did not. "What would you give to be home again?"

The other looked out across the lake, tugging their hat further down their head. Their face rose to the sky, watching the sun, for a moment, in its languid descent. Their jaw tightened. "Anything. Everything."

"As would I."

The two compatriots looked at each other, one long ascertaining. A pale hand extended, an offering of sorts; an olive palm met the branch, and their fingers curled around one another, eyes unwavering. A nod from each.

"Let's do this, brother," said the cold one.

"Not always 'brother,' but I'll let this one slide."

"Stop being a pain in my ass and help me change the world back."

The duo turned to face the lake, and, with one final breath on the part of both, ventured forth. The cold one stirred their hand under the surface, generating a gentle, breathable heat and a sigh of relief from their mouth. The icy one strode forth with comfort and purpose. Neither jolted as the water surged up their body, feet steady and sure as the depths overcame them. The waves grew angrier. The water churned with an infernal gleam. The two paused as the water hit their chins, lapping greedily into their mouths.

"The Marianas Trench isn't that warm," the icy one said.

"What?"

"The Marianas Trench isn't that warm. It's close to freezing at the bottom."

"Oh, shut up, you wintry heathen."

"My pleasure, you heat-stroked weakling."

A cordial laugh passed between the two, and they disappeared beneath the surface. The water closed above them with barely a gasp.

Only moments later, Hraunsvatn crumbled with a scream of delight, chasing the birds away with suffocation and heat.

One: Fire and Ice

“I swear to god, if that idiot looks at you again, I *will* kill him.”

Ky’s hands fisted around the plastic tray in front of him, his eyes glaring daggers across the cafeteria so hard that the right twitched in a way that made him look semi-possessed. Sofia snorted, lanky limbs crossing in front of her. “Dude, I don’t think you could kill a fly if you tried. Your aim isn’t good enough.”

“Or strong enough,” Silas retorted, mouth half full of globbed mac ‘n’ cheese. “I don’t need you hurting yourself to save my honor or whatever.”

Ky’s hand hit the table, then pointed between the two insulters. “See, this? *This* is why chivalry is dead. You won’t let the men in your life punch the face of whatever halfassed caveman is harassing you with sexy googoo eyes, and—”

“Okay, I’m gonna stop you right there,” I chimed in. My fork made a circle in the air, stabbed limp lettuce fluttering to punctuate the point. “Chivalry is dead because this weird ‘save me, Big Strong Man’ thing needed to die. Good friend does not equal chivalry.”

Ky pouted. “Is that not what I said?”

“Not in so many words.” I smiled, chomping on my salad. Ky’s eyes redirected their glare, giving Sofia and I no choice but to turn with him. Silas flushed at our indiscretion.

Grant Walton sat five tables down from us, surrounded by his posse of loud, brutish friends. One blew a paper straw at another; it landed in the other’s open magazine, which was promptly rolled and wielded as a weapon. A third shouted incoherently, making subtly obscene gestures with his hands: not enough to get caught by a teacher, but clear enough that his friends noticed and laughed. In the midst of the chaos sat Grant, staring with weird intensity at the back of Silas’s head. I was amazed that there weren’t two eye-socket-sized holes blasted through Silas’s neat black hair, boring into his brain to see if there was any chance of requited love. Grant hadn’t even noticed us looking yet. I bit my lip, holding back a laugh.

“I mean, he is kind of cute,” Sofia said, head tilting to one side, considering. “Like, definitely not as cute as *you*, Si, but he could measure up with a little bit of work.”

“Eh,” I disagreed. “He’s alright.”

“And you don’t wanna have to do any work on him, y’know?” Ky quickly put in.

“You deserve perfection, Silas,” I said.

“But what if *I* put in the work?” Sofia offered. The manicured nails of one hand tapped against her chin. “A hairbrush, a trip to the thrift store, maybe a little mascara, some propriety classes...”

Ky and I snorted in tandem; Silas dropped his fork with an embarrassed clatter. “Y’all, *stop*,” he protested. His eyes didn’t leave his tray, flush deepening to a crimson visible even on his skin. “I’m not doing anything with Grant fucking Walton. No interest. Never gonna happen.” At our skeptical pause, his eyes shot up, sharp and insistent. “Seriously. Never.”

“But it feels good to be lusted after.” Sofia waggled her eyebrows.

“Just drop it.”

Sof and I stifled a round of laughter, bitten lips hiding loving grins. Ky leaned back in his chair, satiated. “Alright. But if you need me to kick some ass, let me know. His friends suck. He probably does, too.”

“Yeah, I *bet* he does,” Sofia interjected. At Ky’s grimace and Silas’s glare, she held up her hands. “Sorry. Done. Promise.”

I shook my head, smiling. Placing my fork on my tray, I stood. “Alright, guys, I gotta go. I promised Ms. Dawson I’d help her organize Sociology, and the only time I have is lunch hour.”

“You nerd.” Ky.

“Of course you did.” Sofia.

“Can you grab me the new McCraney she just got in?” Silas.

Rolling my eyes, I only acknowledged Silas. “You got it. See you all later. My place, 6 sharp. Mom and Dad are making their world-famous lasagna.”

I made my way out of the cafeteria followed by whoops of culinary excitement. Dad would be thrilled to hear of their shouts; it’d stroke his ego for months to come.

I made my way through the halls of West High, boots resonating in the emptiness with a rather satisfying, powerful thump. The library was on our second floor. I had plenty of time to simply breathe in the place.

In a mere three months, I’d be gone. In three months, I’d walk out of these doors for good. The knowledge gave the tastefully neutral halls an added nostalgia. I wouldn’t have any reason to return to the place where I’d met my best friends, where I’d crafted a family, where I’d figured out what I loved and hated. Locker B23—mine for all four years—would be inhabited by a different human being, the locker bank flooded not with my flock of four but with people I would likely never know. I wouldn’t hear Sofia’s voice bouncing off the walls, soft in song and loud in opinion. I wouldn’t see Silas nervously cleaning his glasses, stooped over a *Rolling Stone* in a corner. I wouldn’t see Ky with his endless amounts of scrap paper and pencil nubs, yanking one out to haphazardly write an idea against the wall. So many people had told me they didn’t stay in touch with their high school friends. My throat closed at the thought: Sofia, Silas, and Ky had been everything to me since we first met freshman year. I wouldn’t let that happen. I couldn’t let that happen.

My fingers brushed against B23 for a moment. For the time being, my gaze was rose-tinted, and I simply couldn’t bring myself to care. *We should scratch our names into the locker*, I found myself thinking. The next person would see it—*Ophelia, Sofia, Silas, Ky*—and wonder about the cool kids who had had it before her, rebels in their vandalism. I smiled, and turned from the locker.

Yeah, we so wouldn’t be doing that.

Entering the library brought a different wave of emotion. I had to fight the urge to close my eyes and breathe in, as enamored as I was in my current state. As it was, I felt myself releasing my shoulders. The library had been my home at West since the moment I first entered it. Floor-to-ceiling windows ensconced one wall, sending beams of light careening across endless rows of oak and paper. Sometimes, the prismatic light would create a rainbow across the binding of a specific book. I always thought that meant the book was calling to me, the next one I should check out: someone Out There was telling me through the bending of light, a mysticism all its own. I would grab it, settle into a worn couch close to the windows, and spend after-school hours wrapped up in a story world, one both more exciting and far cleaner than reality. Humans are complicated.

“Lia! There you are!”

I whipped my head to the left, a smile already tugging at my face. “Hey, Ms. Dawson. How can I help?”

Ms. Dawson was climbing down from a laddered shelf, slowly and precisely. A middle-aged woman with hair starting to silver and the warmest eyes you could ever see, she was the mother of the school. Intelligent and fiercely kind, everyone came to her with her problems. She would always joke that she had “a couple hundred kiddos.” I felt more like her daughter than anyone else here: we may not look alike at all, but god knows she treated me like her favorite child.

“Well, first,” she said with a grunt, landing on the ground, “you can tell me something interesting. What’ve you learned lately, Miss Ophelia?”

This was a game of ours. Every time I came into the library, I’d have to provide Ms. Dawson with something new and fascinating; in return, I got a book recommendation. “In 19th century England, there was a thing called ‘Spinsters United,’ in which voluntarily unmarried women lived together and wrote. Kind of like Boston marriages. Beatrix Potter was one of them,” I dutifully recited.

“Ah, I didn’t know that about Beatrix! A nice one, Lia, thank you.” As Ms. Dawson spoke, she moved toward a stack of books sitting on her counter. “Are you feeling fiction or non-fiction today?”

“Non?”

She immediately flipped out a book. “*The Lady and Her Monsters*. About the writing of *Frankenstein* and everything going on around Mary Shelley. You’ll love it. Now, let’s get to work!”

She tossed the book at me with a flippancy that would've been off-putting if I hadn't known her. I caught it with an ease that lacked grace and slid it into my backpack, placing the bag itself onto the floor and following Ms. Dawson to the Sociology section.

"Oh my god, you weren't kidding when you said it was a mess."

"I rarely kid, Miss Ophelia."

For the next thirty minutes, we worked in comfortable silence, the only noise film scores playing from Ms. Dawson's computer. I played a game with myself as I sorted, trying to guess the film from its music; I got *Lord of the Rings* and *The Theory of Everything* and sucked at everything else, though I still compulsively hummed to the ones I didn't know. It was bliss. The urgent noise of the cafeteria felt miles away.

The door clicked open and shut, and Ms. Dawson turned to see who it was. "Hey, Leslie, what can I help you with?"

"Just swinging by to pick up that cart of books I preordered," the geography teacher answered. Ms. Dawson brushed the dust from her hands, shot me a wink, and went to help. Their chatter became a gentle buzz in the back of my head. Foregoing eavesdropping, I inventoried all the books I would like to read, the fledgling anthropologist speaking up. *The Ambition Decisions...Outliers...ooh, The Second Sex, god, I still haven't read that...*

"Have you seen the news lately? Crazy, right?" the teacher said, foot tapping against the floor. My hands stilled on the shelf, intrigued.

"Totally insane. I hope they get it figured out soon; it's like something straight out of a dystopia."

"Right? Talk about Orwell. Crazy. Just crazy." A pause; my ears prickled. "Anyway, thanks for this. I'll be returning them in two weeks. And I *will* be on time this time, I promise."

"I'm holding you to that. Have a lovely day, Leslie!"

With that, the door clicked once more and Ms. Dawson returned. She sang under her breath, matching her playlist. I couldn't shake the uneasy interest pulling at my brain. "What news, Ms. Dawson?"

"Hm?"

"What news? About the dystopia world?"

"Oh! You haven't heard?" Ms. Dawson reached into her back pocket and pulled out her phone. "Here, I'll just let you look. It's a lot to explain, easier to read."

My brows knitted together as she turned the phone to me. I grabbed it, pulling the headlines closer, accusatory text jumping out with a lurch. INEXPLICABLE DISAPPEARANCES IN REYKJAVIK, one read. DIVORCE RATE REACHES 70% IN RURAL ICELAND, said another. THERMAL BATHS SUDDENLY BOILING IN GEYSIR, announced a third. They kept going like that, announcing one tragedy, one mystery, one horror after another; Iceland was a wreck. "Holy shit," I murmured to myself, still scrolling. Some experts thought it was intense global warming; others thought it was a poisoning in the water; a couple theorists offered up aliens. "What the hell."

I tapped on a link at the bottom of the page, the one that seemed the weirdest. HRAUNSVATN IMPLOSION? it read. TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN FICTION. My eyes skimmed, unfolding a story of a cratered lake suddenly shooting up burning water, rocks flying and mountains creaking, until nothing was left. There was truly nothing, no water, no animals, no plants, nothing except an ancient Viking ring on the bottom.

"This is, like, Orwell meets Sherlock Holmes kind of weird," I said aloud.

"You found the volcano, I take it? So weird. Nothing around there has been active for years."

I nodded, still looking down. Sweat built on my palm, the phone case sticking to the beads; normally, my anxiety would go straight to my head, but it must have been sympathetic pain, feeling the geothermal baths becoming too hot to touch. I shimmied my shoulders, attempting to shake it off, and turned to hand the phone back to Ms. Dawson. A work distraction was needed from the pit of intrigue forming in my stomach.

"Shit!"

I dropped the phone, grabbing my palm. Fire licked up the run of my arm. It felt like tiny shards of glass had erupted in my veins, slicing and burning in their path. Tears welled in my eyes; I blinked them away as I clutched my arm to my chest. *Shit, shit, shit, shit.* I didn't even see Ms. Dawson rise in a flash of panic; I barely felt her hands on my shoulders, kind and assured. For what felt like hours, it was only the fire, the pain, the screaming injury. I bit my lip, trying hard not to cry.

"Lia, what happened? Lia. Lia, answer me. Ophelia, what happened?"

My vision began to unblur. I let go of my lip, the taste of iron surging onto my tongue as I did so. *Great.* I inhaled, exhaled, tried to focus on Ms. Dawson. Her face floated in front of my mine, concerned. I realized she had been trying to move my arm from my chest so she could look at it, but I had had it vice-gripped for so long that she couldn't. As the pain died, I slowly removed the pressure. "Sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to—"

"What, curse?" Ms. Dawson tutted. "I really don't care right now. What happened? How badly are you hurt?"

"I, um, I don't know. I went to hand the phone back to you, and then this pain just, just happened. It was, like, a burning, like putting my whole arm on a stove. Like, it went *all* the way up my arm, and I, I don't know, it just—"

"Okay, calm down. Calm down, honey, you're babbling." Ms. Dawson placed a hand on my wrist. "May I look?"

I nodded, words failing me. Ms. Dawson smiled, close-lipped, before carefully turning over my arm. I couldn't look, could only watch her face as her mouth opened, then closed, then opened again. "Okay, hon, don't panic," she said, "but I have no idea what this is."

Only then did I look down.

Three perfectly round circles had burned themselves into the skin of my palm, vibrantly red bruises that sang when I looked at them. Testing, I closed and opened my hand. "No pain," I confirmed, "just... whatever that is."

"Did my phone do that?" Ms. Dawson asked. Her eyes widened. "Oh my god, did my *phone* do that to you? Lia, I am so sorry. It must've short-circuited or something. I wouldn't have given it to you if I had known. Oh my god, I'm—"

"It's fine, Ms. Dawson, really." I couldn't wrench my gaze from my skin, a wonderment coloring my tone. "It doesn't hurt right now. And you didn't know. It was probably just a freak thing."

"Still." Ms. Dawson blew out a breath. "I feel awful. Let's get you to the nurse. It's almost time for you to get back to class."

"Seriously, I'm fine," I said. "It doesn't hurt anymore. I'll just run some cold water on it or something. I'm fine."

"Okay. Okay. Whatever you say."

Ms. Dawson watched as I picked up my bag and left, seemingly scared I was a glass figurine that could break at any moment. When I turned around to shoot her a smile and a brief wave, she merely worried at her lip and nodded. My reassurances could do nothing for either of us.

I made my way to the bathroom and stood in front of the farthest sink, running blessedly cold water over my palm. The red circles didn't dim; in fact, they seemed to glow under the chill. I blinked again and again, unbelieving, trying to make them go away. My mind swam: fear, curiosity, panic, and wonder took turns as to who could be at the forefront. I wracked my brain for what could've happened. It couldn't be technology, right? A short circuit would cause a literal fire, or at least some smoke, if I wasn't mistaken. I would be really, really burned, like ICU standards, if I had been that close. And a phone didn't have circles...right? I'd have to ask Silas. He was better at tech than I was.

My fingers instinctively curled around my palm at the thought. *No.* No, I couldn't tell Silas. I couldn't tell anyone that hadn't seen it happen. How would I explain it? This unknown existed in the realm of, "Hey, I think I may have just been abducted by aliens." There was no reason to be burdensome about something so small and so weird. No. They wouldn't get it. My fingers uncurled, revealing the trio once more. I raised my eyes to look into the mirror. Dull green stared back at me, the gaze of shock. I'd need to tone that down.

“You’re fine,” I told myself. “You’re fine. You’re fine.”

The bathroom door swung open, revealing Sofia in her colorful finery. “Oh, hey, Lia,” she said. Breath catching, she immediately noticed the water. *Damn it.* “Oh god, what happened? Are you hurt?” She stepped forward, hand reaching out to help, eyes narrowing in perceptive worry.

“Oh,” I stalled, quickly turning off the water and hiding my palm with a paper towel, “bad paper cut. I was a klutz with this giant book I was trying to put on the top shelf.”

Sofia’s eyes narrowed even further. “I don’t see any blood, so that’s good. You sure you’re okay?”

“Oh, yeah, absolutely fine. Just...being stupid.” I laughed, breathy and unbelievable. I’d never been a good liar. And Sofia had always been the emotional detective of the group. Her hand raised again, mouth opening to contradict.

Fortunately, I was quite literally saved by the bell, its screech announcing my departure.

“Agh, gotta go. Enjoy your free period, Sof! I’ll see you later!”

The door slammed behind me as I scurried down the hall, not at all suspiciously disappearing into a crowd of upperclassmen. I swung my bag around and pulled out my battered copy of Mead’s *Blackberry Winter*. I hoped the paperback would cover better than the towel.

I hadn’t even realized I was still clutching it.

They didn't look a day older than they had the last time they were seen. Two brothers and a sister had managed to return, settling into their skin with the ease and regality of an old fur coat. The Icy One had been the first to greet them upon their return, pale hands clasped in front.

"Welcome back, old friends," said the Icy One. "My god, are you a sight for sore eyes."

"I could almost say the same for you," said the Elder Brother. "If I weren't so jealous that you managed to get out, that is."

"Just say thank you and move on," the Sister scolded. "Get over yourself. We're here now."

"But we are missing several of us," said the Younger Brother, pointedly.

"All in time," the Icy One promised. "All in good time."

"We did warn you," chimed the Mediterranean, arms crossed across the body, defensive. "We could only let three of you return first. It was the most we could do without bodily harm. Not that I'm opposed."

"That'd be quite the stupid thing to do to us, don't you think?" replied the Elder, a brow popping. Grey steam circled his hair.

"Would you like to test that theory?" snarled the Mediterranean.

"Go ahead. Try it."

"Ah, ah, ah!" The Icy One jumped between the duelers. "We're all on the same side here. We all want the same thing. I think it's time we work together, don't you? I mean, we're basically the same, all of us here."

"I have always seen a lovely comparison between us, friend," said the Younger. "I do admire the serpentine ability you have."

"And I could teach you more," offered the Icy One. "As could my friend here. We've been out for longer than you. But we must work together."

"That's rich, coming from you," muttered the Sister. "A backstabber never changes their scales."

"Do you really think I could do that to you, love?"

"No." The Sister smiled at the Icy One. "Because you'd never get the chance. You say trust is called for? You haven't earned our trust. Honestly, I'm more willing to trust Dog-Man over there. At least he made his position known."

"I don't know whether to be complimented or insulted," said the Mediterranean with a smirk, adding, "You do realize I don't wear that face anymore, right?"

"Neither do we," stated the Younger.

"Alright, I'm bored," the Elder interrupted. He examined his fingernails, archetype for his wealthy mold. "Let's get started."

"Alright," said the Icy One. His palms rose, a celestial map emanating from his fingertips with a casual flick. "Where would you like to begin?"

The Elder grinned. Silently, he pointed to a pinprick of light, touching his index finger to the map. Fire and ice hissed in perfect harmony.

Among the Living

One.

The house stood empty and cold. Its inhabitants long fled, all that remained were the remnants of ancient civilization and a Dr. Pepper addiction. Papers and notebooks were scattered amongst the rubble of a life led, long and tiresome, a reward in its exacting haphazard throwing. The tables were empty, excepting the brass and the gold and the iron and the parchment; there was no clicking of heels sounding against the parquet; there was no humming of Vivaldi and Farrenc to interrupt the quiet.

The house stood empty and cold, the same house that Jem knew as home growing up.

At least, it should have been that way.

Instead, the halls were teeming with light and life, warmth emanating from every fireplace. Jem swore that the museum had lit all fifteen of them; the only one that had been used during Jem's existence in the household had been the much-sooted office's, and the scent of burnt twigs and freshly-singed marble suffocated the halls. People bustled this way and that—Intern? Historian? Archaeologist? The director of the whole damn place?—and Jem had to sidle along the wall during most of his journey. Sweat pockmarked his neck as he ascended the central staircase. He self-consciously dabbed at it with an old handkerchief.

When he reached his destination—a bedroom in the east wing—he could finally breathe. Only two people stood in this room, barren of most furniture: the lack of conversation, paper-flipping, and envious artifacts gave Jem space to breathe. He blew a puff of unintentionally-held air out of his mouth, and the woman standing in the center of the room turned. Jem smiled.

“Hey, Andrea,” he said. “Sorry I’m late. If I had known it’d take me half an hour to get up the stairs, I would’ve started sooner.”

Andrea chuckled. “It’s insanity, right? Rebecca was so thrilled that you were leaving all of this to them that she just couldn’t wait.”

“Rebecca?”

“The director of the museum.” Andrea furrowed a brow, searching Jem’s face in a rather judgmental manner. “I’m assuming you’ve spoken to her?”

“Oh, god, yeah, Rebecca, of course.” Jem shifted his weight, a self-deprecating laugh exiting his throat. *Why the hell would I have any idea who that is?* “Right.”

“Anyway, so.” Andrea moved towards Jem, flipping a manila folder out from underneath her arm. Opening it, she brandished several papers drenched in legalese. “We’ll make this nice and quick for you so you can get on with your day. I just need a couple signatures, one on each document, and an initial on every page. Slam, bam, thank you ma’am, you’re all done.”

“Sounds great.”

“Feel free to look it over as much as you like. Dr. Stanley and I are just finishing up the medical part of all this.”

Jem nodded as Andrea turned on her heel. His eyes skimmed the pages with rapidity—*don’t care, don’t care, don’t care*—and his signature came with a casual ease he knew shouldn’t be realistic. He should’ve been reading every inch with utmost care. He should’ve been having an out-of-body experience, rationale kicking in while emotion ached. He should’ve been itemizing every single object and experience in this list of papers. He should’ve been. He wasn’t.

After he finished, Jem clipped the pen back to the folder and joined the lawyer and the doctor. “Here you are. Anything else you need from me?”

“Not on my end,” Andrea said. “Dr. Stanley?”

Dr. Stanley shook his head. “No, I think we’re covered. Everything’s been disposed of, nothing you have to worry about.”

“I appreciate that,” Jem said, something genuine this time. “Thanks for dealing with all of it for me.”

“Oh, not to worry. I’m happy to do it. Anything I can do to relieve my favorite patient’s son of stress in his time of grieving.” At the faltering of Jem’s smile, Dr. Stanley continued: “God, sorry, that probably rubbed salt in the wound. I *am* sorry, James. Truly. Your mother was the most remarkable person I knew. We’ll all miss her more than we can say.”

Dr. Stanley’s gentle eyes were filled with comfort and expectation, something Jem had nearly forgotten the feeling of. A soothing smile pulled at the doctor’s mouth, his forehead furrowed in the grief of a friend. “I’ll miss what we could’ve had,” Jem said, the words scalding his tongue.

“That lost future is the kicker, ain’t it?” Dr. Stanley replied. A moment of silence for Jem’s acquiescent nod, then: “If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to let us know. We’ll be here.”

“Of course. Thank you, Dr. Stanley. Andrea.” Jem smiled at both. “I’ll see you around.”

He left the room with the initiative of a child running from trouble. He barely noticed, in his periphery, that the threadbare coverlet from Elinor’s time at university remained. Rebecca and her vampiric museum had had no interest in that one, he supposed. The life had been sucked out of it years before, in a time that felt like a different millennia.

Jem shoved his hands in his pockets as he strode, shoving past denim-clad scavengers with agitated abandon. He just wanted out of this damn house. The place brought back every prepubescent angst he had had, made him feel juvenile and small and just so very, very done. The sooner he got fresh air and an indulgent Isla smile, the better.

“Mr. Novak? Excuse me, Mr. Novak!”

Jem pressed his lips together, closed his eyes for a moment as if he could make the invasive alto go away. *Jesus Christ*. One exhalation through the nose for composure’s sake, then he turned with a tight, close-lipped grimace of a grin.

An incisive woman stood before him. Everything about her was sharp, from her cat’s eye glasses to her pointed loafers; she had a near-avian bone structure, seemingly too light for her tall stature. Her dark eyes were sharp, intelligent, edging on the side of calculating. She swiped several rogue tendrils of hair to the side and adjusted her glasses, shooting Jem a quick smirk. “Mr. Novak, hi. It’s a pleasure to meet you in person. Rebecca Carpenter.”

Jem met her handshake somewhat coolly. “Hey. James Novak. What can I do for you, Rebecca?”

“Well, first of all, I wanted to say thank you for this tremendous opportunity.” Rebecca clasped her hands in front of her, glee radiating from the gesture. “Your mother was the most brilliant historian of the past sixty years, and to be gifted everything in her home ...it’s just thrilling. We are so grateful to you, Mr. Novak.”

Jem merely grunted in reply. He’d heard the spiel one too many times.

“But,” Rebecca continued, seemingly unbothered by Jem’s lack of response, “there’s so much. Not all of it is history that she discovered; some of it’s your history. And from what I hear, Mr. Novak, you’re not so bad yourself at hunting for treasure in a pile of old things. I was hoping, frankly, that you’d be willing to assist us in going through your mother’s collections.”

“No.” The answer was so immediate it even startled Jem. Rebecca blinked, a knife composed of English dug into her abdomen. “I’m sorry. No. It’s been a long time since I’ve even done anything like that. I just advise now.”

“But that’s perfectly fine!” Rebecca took a step closer to Jem, avoiding a clumsy intern behind her. Jem felt, suddenly, that his privacy was being invaded. “You’re still in the world. You’ve still got your mother’s genius. You don’t have to curate or anything, we just want some help.”

“The answer is no, Ms. Carpenter,” Jem snapped, firm, sharp. “I don’t want anything to do with it. I’m sure you and your team have it under control.” With that, Jem turned on his heel to leave. The claustrophobia of the heat from the fires was getting under his skin. His face burned.

“Wait, please!” Rebecca stepped in front of him, producing a slim piece of cardstock. “Just take my business card. It has my personal number on it. Just...think about it. We could really use your help.”

Jem took it between two fingers, carelessly shoving it in his jacket pocket. “Okay. Fine. But I can’t make any promises.”

Rebecca, against all odds, smirked again. “No, none of us can.”

Jem shoved through the front doors into blessedly clean, clear autumnal air. He welcomed the shiver of late September wind, reveling in the crunching of the first fallen leaves of the year. It was all over. He would never have to deal with Elinor again. It was a knowledge that roiled his stomach with something like relief, something like joy. As he walked down the street to his car, he couldn't help but laugh. The drive to the café was punctuated with the most joyous of tunes: when he pulled into the place, he was singing along to Queen at full blast.

Isla was sitting in their favorite place, the corner booth, next to the window where all the birds gathered. Jem couldn't help but take a moment to simply breathe her in at the door. Her very presence calmed him, the same way it had when he had met her nine years ago. She looked nearly the same as she had as a college senior: her black curls mussed about her face, thick brows framing dark eyes; a cozy sweater—today's a rainbow thrift find—led to slender, charcoal-stained hands, perennially wrapped about a mug of lavender tea. The only difference was the deeper laugh lines that graced her lips.

Jem smiled himself, the first one not forced that day, and strode to her side.

"Hey, love," he said, leaning down to press a kiss to her lips before sliding in across from her. "Sorry that took so long."

"No worries," Isla replied. "I figured it'd take a minute. Everything go okay?"

Jem held up a finger. "Enough about Elinor until I get some coffee." Isla cocked a brow, pointedly taking a long sip of her own drink; behind her eyes twinkled a deprecating mirth. "Hey, don't give me that look. You never even met the woman."

"Maybe not," Isla replied, "but I certainly heard enough about her to feel like I have. 'Insufferable, selfish woman,' right?"

Jem shot her his own look in brief annoyance; Isla winked, playful, as the waiter approached. Soon, a cup of tar-black coffee rested in Jem's hands, and he took a grateful, loud slurp before settling back into his seat. "It was fine," he said. "Got all the paperwork done, handed everything over to the museum, nothing crazy. It's over."

"Good." Isla reached across the table, hand wrapping around Jem's. She squeezed, eyes suddenly gentle. "I'm glad that burden's been lifted from you, honey. Maybe it took a decade, but it's finally over."

More like a lifetime, Jem couldn't help but mentally correct. His subconscious babbled at him, something he carefully avoided with a nod of agreeance. "Me, too. Onto better things. Like, status update: how's the new installation going? Any progress today?"

"Oh, a little." Isla drew back to her own mug, swirling the tea inside. "I've got about three more pieces to finish, I think. Just can't pull myself away from the kids long enough to pick up the canvas, y'know?"

"The school really is killing you on that," Jem said, brows furrowed. "You've been working crazy overtime for what, like, a couple months now?"

"Yeah, but it's not them. I've got a couple of students right now—all only like twelve, thirteen years old—who are already so *good* at what they do. They have crazy promise, Jem, and I can't turn down mentoring them. I mean, if they could become the next graphic novelist or children's book illustrator or Vincent van Gogh, who am I to turn them down when they ask for help?"

Isla's passion radiated, gesticulations painting a world of color and mentorship. Jem couldn't help but grin again. When he had first met her, Isla had seen teaching more as a reliable gig while she built up her empire of charcoal and watercolor and acrylic. She balanced her days at the school with a canvas or a desk at night. In the past few years, though, she had grown more and more involved with her students and less with her own work; her middle schoolers had to be the luckiest young ones on the planet, learning from one as skilled, high-spirited, and compassionate as Isla.

But there was still something sad about it, Jem couldn't help but feel. Something sad in her canvases laying on the floor of their shared office space, untouched. Something sad in the dry paintbrushes, gathering dust in their coffee mug home. Something sad in how her young passion appeared to die a little every day. Jem's thrill at Isla's love for her kiddos was always mingled with a tense cry for what could have been.

“You’re an artist,” he finally replied. “An artist who loves what she does and has an installation coming up where she may sell her pieces again.”

“Okay, yes, Captain Obvious,” Isla said. “But I’ve still got a month and a half. It’ll be fine. Maybe not my absolute best work, but it’ll be fine.”

“Whatever you say, love,” Jem allowed. “I’m excited to see what you got this time.”

“And speaking of loving what you do,” Isla prompted. She met Jem’s eyes with unwavering challenge. “What’d you tell Boston?”

Jem’s windpipe clenched. “Nothing yet.”

“James.” Isla raised a brow. “You have to respond to them soon.”

“It’s not ‘til—”

“I know it’s not until next year, but they’ll want to know. And, frankly, hon, *I* need to know.” She leaned forward, pulling Jem’s gaze back to hers. “I’ll have to tell the district if I’m renewing my contract soon. And if we’re going, there’s a lot of logistics that we need to figure out: selling this house, buying a new one, moving, getting a job for me, making sure that—”

“I know, Isla.” Jem’s snappish tone had returned. Her face hardened. “Sorry. God, I’m sorry. It’s just been a morning, and I really can’t talk about this right now.”

A stony silence followed, one broken by Isla with a resounding, “Fine. But if I’m an artist, you’re a historian, my darling.” Room was held for Jem to respond; he couldn’t, instead taking another long drink of his coffee. Isla sighed. “Let’s get some food. What’d’ya say to some chicken and waffles this morning?”

Jem’s nose wrinkled. “Gross. I still can’t believe you eat that.”

“And I can’t believe you drink literal oil, but *c’est la vie*.”

“It’s just, like, on their own they’re both good, but combining the two makes for a weird dichotomy of—”

“It’s entrée and dessert, you heathen! Why can’t you—”

“Oh, *I’m* the heathen? At least I don’t combine KFC with friggin iHop—”

“What can I get started for you today, folks?”

Jem and Isla looked over at the waiter, standing so stoic and calm, and immediately burst into laughter. Jem’s throat opened back up, his stomach calmed its calamity, his mind seized with humor instead of hurt. He was seated in his favorite café, across from his best friend, with a so-bad-it’s-good cup of coffee in hand. They both had good jobs, they had a home, they had friends they loved. *And no family left to bother us*, he reminded himself, even as the business card burned against his chest.

They were absolutely fine.

The Measure of a Woman: Producing Classical Theatre in a Post-#MeToo World

On October 5, 2017, Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey's *New York Times* exposé on Harvey Weinstein caused an international implosion: inspired by the 2006 phrase coined by Tarana Burke¹, the article launched the #MeToo movement in places as diverse as Ireland, Poland, and South Africa; the ensuing discussion on sexual abuse and power dynamic left no community untouched, including that of the American theatre. The continual fight towards betterment begs a myriad of questions for the community, not the least of which being: in an artistic world that has thrived on hegemonic patriarchal works of the past, how can we address rape culture, abuse of power, and misogynistic trauma onstage? How can we produce classical works in a post-#MeToo era?

Representations of trauma inherent to misogynistic society are pervasive in classical theatre. It is in the strangulation of Shakespeare's Desdemona, the coercion of Williams's Blanche, the assault of Moliere's Elmire. Female trauma is found less obviously, as well, in the weaponization of Lady Macbeth's miscarriage, the deadly objectification of Chekhov's Yelena, and the vilifying of fellow females in *The Maids*. This repetition of the female villain-victim narrative is harmful to both actor and audience. "Beloved female characters have, through my body, been verbally, mentally, and sexually abused; mutilated, murdered, and exiled," writes classical actor Melisa Pereyra. "I am doubly traumatized by both embodying and seeing violence inflicted...for the sake of storytelling."² A 2020 study done for *Performance Science* found that many actors, especially female-identifying actors, reported PTSD-like symptoms connected to their work, as simulated violence "is so connected to reality that it cannot be easily assigned as 'not real.'"³

For the audience, viewing this misogyny can have equally negative impact. Studies going back to the 1980s⁴ prove as much: there are problems of desensitization to sexism and domestic violence, the triggering and normalizing of latent aggressive behavior, and an increase in women internalizing and accepting a victim status. In addition, for those who have past trauma, seeing violence of any variety onstage may trigger the intrusive memories of PTSD, lending itself to self-harm in ways physical and physiological.⁵

However, we cannot and should not entirely rid ourselves of classical theatre. It is our ancestry, rife with artistic brilliance and historical significance. There are two approaches with which to begin the bettering of their production: the expansion of representative canon and the introduction of trauma-informed practice.

Historically, classical theatre has been defined through the male gaze. Excluded from the stage, but not necessarily the audience, classical women were seen through "the exotic—often fetishistic—gaze of the male," begging the question: how can we "disrupt the male subject's phantasy of a phallogocentric power?"⁶ In other words, how does one disrupt the pervasive idea of male as powerful, female as powerless?

One way to do this is through script selection. Though many female artists have been lost to history, there remain numerous female-identifying contemporaries of classical playwrights whose work has survived. Instead of Euripides, consider producing *Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim*. Instead of Shakespeare, consider Susanna Centlivre or Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Instead of Chekhov, consider Amelia P. Rosselli or George Sand. Instead of Williams, consider Angelina Grimké or Zora Neale Hurston. Accessibility is no longer an excuse: these plays have become far easier to license. With the introduction of programs such as Hedgepig Ensemble Theatre's "Expand the Canon"⁷ or UCLA's "Diversifying the Classics,"⁸ hunting down translations and production scripts of these women's plays has become less of a hunt, more of an adventure. A brief click of a URL leads one to a goldmine of artistic genius. Producing these playwrights for a 21st century audience provides women of all backgrounds with representation and empowerment traditionally hidden in classical theatre; on the flip side, it provides male-identifying audience members with portraits of complex women, undeniable heroes of their own story, certainly not victims.

Representative expansion is only the first step, however. Theatres must begin utilizing trauma-informed practices, largely with the assistance of intimacy education and direction. These directors are individuals who specialize in consent work, boundary setting, and establishing a common vocabulary, trained in trauma-informed pedagogy, cultural competence, abuse prevention, and more.⁹ By acting as a bridge between actor and creatives, intimacy directors grant empowerment to a historically disempowered situation, assisting in interpretation to bring forth a sense of safety in the midst of realism. To do this, these specialists utilize “deloaded language,” a way of blocking sexual and/or violent scenes that makes them “repeatable, manageable, and documentable.”¹⁰ Sexualized language becomes a written series of movements. Suddenly, the death of Desdemona feels closer to choreography than reality, deactivating the actor’s trauma sensors and allowing for vulnerability and recovery.

The industry has seen the effects of antiquated intimacy practices. Until the advent of intimacy education in 2006, actors were simply told to “go for it” in scenes of a sexual or sexually violent nature. At its worst, this led to physical assault: Professor Adam Noble recalls a student in the early 2000s assaulting another as the two attempted to block Blanche’s rape scene on their own¹¹; all it takes is a simple Google search to encounter the horror stories of Old Hollywood and Broadway. To a less intense degree, this lack of guidance can lead to dangerous mental gymnastics. Tonia Sina, now an intimacy director herself, recalls an adulterous showmance as a result of staging a sexual scene on her own.¹² Continues Pereyra in her essay: “Our minds may know violence onstage is part of play, but our bodies don’t.” These enduring dangers to the actor can be almost entirely negated by the use of trauma-informed pedagogy.

The same style of approach can apply to the audience, utilized by way of contemporary interpretation of classical works. After all, as director Nathan Singh observes, “If we were completely healed from the roots of those traumas [of the past], we wouldn’t be doing these plays anymore.”¹³ The messages of classical theatre still apply; they must simply be reimagined and restaged.

The first improvement comes in centering the female protagonist, treating her as a full human. Two phenomenal examples of this in the past decade or so are Dr. Nora Williams’s *Measure (Still) for Measure* and Julie Proudfoot’s *Medea*. The former is a highly collaborative restaging of Shakespeare’s infamous problem play, shifting slightly in each iteration. Williams brings Isabella to the forefront, asking the devising teams she works with what lines matter most and how to center Isabella’s story; this has led to some lovely queries on gender, queer identity, and sexual harassment. As Dr. Williams herself has said, “we can treat...Shakespeare’s words as inspiration...as something we can draw on as opposed to the thing that’s defining our process.”¹⁴ A similar situation occurred with Proudfoot’s 2021 audio play of *Medea*. Crafting an aural world out of Medea’s monologues allowed for an unapologetic antihero, highlighting female complexity and sexist strife in a way both horrifying and empathetic. Allowing these classical women to be main characters in all their complication—villainous, heroic, strong, scared—is yet another way to address the inherent misogyny within classical lines.

Additionally, a further query to ask oneself: what is necessary to show within these plays? What suddenly becomes gratuitous upon adaptation? This is not as applicable to the oldest plays mentioned, of course, as most brutality occurs offstage, but when one comes to the violence of a Williams or O’Neill play, for instance, what needs to be shown onstage? Oftentimes, violence against women holds the function of pornography as opposed to necessity, prompting the glamorization of abusive relationships as opposed to realistic illustration. This has a high possibility of causing the aforementioned trauma response. It is of utmost importance to ask these questions, wonderfully aided by an intimacy director.

Utilizing trauma-informed practices leads to actor safety and interpretations better-suited for a 21st century audience. That collaboration, in turn, leads the theatre to realistic yet sensitive illustrations of the all-too-real traumas of sexism and sexual violence. Along with the introduction of classical female-identifying playwrights, it allows the audience to actively process trauma in a healthy way, and to see their female characters as the women of autonomy and intellect they were and are. This is how the theatre begins to produce classical works in a post-#MeToo era. By listening, by learning, and by teaching their artists and audiences how to find the beauty without ignoring the pain. That, as playwright Cecilia

Copeland writes, “will change ‘rape culture’ from simply being on our stages to being the much needed subject of our work.”¹⁵ The artistry of the classics doesn’t have to die; it simply needs to adapt.

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The Politics of Power, Gender, and Story
in Paula Vogel's *Indecent* and Deborah Davis and Tony McNamara's *The Favourite*

The English royal court in 1711. A Jewish theatre troupe in the years preceding the Holocaust. Three power-hungry noblewomen. An oppressed minority struggling to tell their uncensored story. These two worlds, at first glance, appear to be as far apart as two can be, a duo of unrelated tales based on true events. However, when one delves into their construct and ambitions, Paula Vogel's *Indecent* and Deborah Davis and Tony McNamara's *The Favourite* have far more similarities than differences. They come in the exploration of gender and sexuality, the illustration of unending power struggle, and the affect deep grief and loss has on one's mind. While *Indecent* may have been far more successful in its undertaking (a point that shall be discussed), the two stories are twins in their ultimate goal.

Both Vogel's play and Davis and McNamara's film are, first and foremost, intimate explorations of gender, sexuality, and how the two intertwine. As Ryan McPhee observes in "Paula Vogel Put Her Story as a Gay Jewish Woman Onstage in *Indecent*," the play was "born primarily out of [Vogel's] own personal sense of marginalization: marginalization as a gay woman with a Jewish legacy" (McPhee). While the play follows the inception and subsequent indecency trial of Shalom Asch's revolutionary *God of Vengeance*, tracking the play and its contemporaries from 1906 to 1952, the main draw is of Jewish female lesbian identity. Asch's play was the first to put a kiss between two women on the main theatrical circuit, and to do so in a way that empathizes with and humanizes queer women in a space that never did. It is a "compassionate understanding of the powerlessness of women in that time and place — Asch is a young married man, in a very early work, writing the most astonishing love story between two women," as Vogel herself has said (Weiner). As one can easily imagine, lesbianism was not an accepted identity in the early 20th century, especially not in America. Women already had so little power outside of the domestic sphere; add to that the love of another woman—accepted in the privacy of European homes; vilified in American, well, everything—and they could bid any form of normalcy, self-sovereignty, or socioeconomic improvement good-bye. Asch not only accepted the identity of a queer woman, but put it on the stage as a viable character, illustrating the pain the queer identity was put through. As the actress Reina tells stage manager Lemml before she is fired for being unable to speak English, "This will be the only role in my lifetime where I could tell someone I love that I love her onstage" (Vogel 34). *Indecent* takes precisely the same stance, exploring feminine power and queer identity in an environment that normally would hold the opposite.

The Favourite aims to do much the same. Women, in the time of the 18th century, held no power unless they also held the favoritism of the monarch. Once that was accomplished, they wielded remarkable political and governmental sway. Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, was Queen Anne's favorite for several decades. Her representation in Davis and McNamara's film illustrates her power hold in a rather avant garde way: costumer Sandy Powell turned the idea of historical femininity on its head, dressing the real-life noblewoman in traditional male attire of the Stuart era: "I wanted her to be strong and in command, if not 'masculine' in the sense we usually see...The idea had been that as any emancipated woman might, she could incorporate menswear into her outfits and look great in it..." (Brooke). In contrast, Abigail, Baroness Masham (Sarah's cousin and newfound competition), explores female duality in her delicate dresses and brute force hunger for power. As Tomris Laffly observes in his review of the film, while it would be "unwarranted to define 'The Favourite' [sic] as a timely feminist film," there is

“a certain timelessness in its old-fashioned frankness about a woman’s fight to get what she wants and demand what she deserves by any means necessary; brains, sexual appeal or usually, a combination of both” (Laffly). For Sarah and Abigail, their power struggle does, indeed, combine both mental and sexual prowess as the two become warring mistresses for Anne’s heart. Their queer identities are kept a secret from the remainder of the court: bisexuality is still contested in 2021, much less 1711. It is only in darkened corridors and behind closed doors that Anne’s sexuality is revealed and satiated; even if Sarah and Abigail are only engaging in sexual acts to gain an upper hand, there is still some exploratory part of them that is revealed.

Two related questions that are posed by both works of art are, “Do you dare to say this in public? Do you dare to show this in public?” (Vogel, via Weiner). It is answered in two vastly different ways. *Indecent* embraces what is considered taboo, providing its audience with an uncensored, empathetic look at the power struggle provided by the combination of gender, sexuality, religion, and circumstance. The reason *God of Vengeance* was delivered an indecency verdict of “guilty” is made painfully clear in Vogel’s play: anti-Semitism, homophobia, and misogyny. Nothing sexual happens onstage; it is merely the power of this Jewish troupe’s words, the humanizing effect of their unrepentantly Jewish female story, that frightens nationalistic America. Vogel’s Reina and Deine (and their characters, Rifkele and Manke) are unapologetically proud of their identity. They do not back down onstage, in court, or in real life; even in the Łódź ghetto, awaiting imminent death, they are still performing this piece. It is only Asch’s cowardice, caused by a brain ravaged by witnessing pogroms and the coming Holocaust, that causes the play to be destroyed. In *The Favourite*, on the other hand, the necessity of covert exploration is made apparent. Every grasp for power is underhanded; every facet of love happens behind locked doors. Queen Anne is “a ruler who treats her ladies-in-waiting like playthings out of a deep, insatiable desire for attention and affection” (Sims); she is desperate for an affection that never came for her, something that never would, as a queer woman of position in an unaccepting time. All three women are aware of the fragile position they hold. It is made clear to the audience that this secrecy is imperative for their survival, a humanizing effect in its own way.

There is one more thing that conjoins *Indecent* and *The Favourite*: mental strife caused by loss. It is most apparent in the latter. Queen Anne is a woman plagued by poor health, a mercurial temper, and unending suffering. Most of this comes from intense grief: she has lost 17 children, no heir surviving. As she herself says, in a rare moment of tender vulnerability, “Each one of them that dies, a bit of you goes with them” (Davis and McNamara 43). Anne has lost a piece of her soul, a piece of her identity, every time a child has died. As noted by Travis Bean for *Film Colossus*, the 17 rabbits Anne owns “didn’t just represent her 17 children—they also symbolized the life Anne had left in her” (Bean). And what *is* left? As one can easily imagine, not much. It’s no wonder she went somewhat mad. A similar situation occurs to Shalom Asch in Vogel’s play, though his response is less outwardly pervasive than Anne’s. He is a man who has borne witness to pogroms, who, after transferring his play to New York, went back to see the beginnings of the horrors of the Holocaust. The guilt, the anger, the fear have so ravaged his brain that his entire personality has shifted. The psychoanalyst Dr. Hornig asks, “Is he often this...angry? Does he exhibit signs of paranoia?” to which Asch retorts, “Ask her if there’s anything in her charts that can map the disintegration of the Jewish psyche due to centuries of persecution?” (Vogel 46). He feels the loss weighing heavily upon his soul, and his guilt at feeling powerless drags him down so far that he won’t even defend his beloved play. When Madje, his wife, and Lemml, his best friend and manager, plead with him about the importance of such a play, he shouts back, “There are massacres right now all over Europe! And I’m

supposed to care about a play I wrote when I was in short pants?...I can't. I just can't" (Vogel 57). The loss of his people and of his culture have blinded him to the importance of his story, leading to its annihilation and further anti-Semitism. *God of Vengeance* remained that way until its resurrection in the late 20th century, as the play later reveals.

Clearly, these two vastly different worlds have more similarities than can be seen at surface level. However, this writer would argue that Vogel's *Indecent* far surpasses *The Favourite* in its success. Though both utilize unconventional means (Vogel uses time jumps and multi-character actors; director Yorgos Lanthimos takes stylistic chances with avant garde lenses) and aim to accomplish the same thing, Vogel's audience is left far more satisfied and touched than Davis and McNamara's. This is largely due to staging, I would venture. Lanthimos's unnecessary fish-eye lenses (horribly distracting), nondescript sound barks (why the odd, startling organ?), and incorporation of modernity with antiquity (break-dancing at a ball?) obstructed the powerful message the script was trying to convey; on the other hand, *Indecent* director Rachel Taichman's use of klezmer, costume, and scattered ashes (symbolizing the resurrection of a revolutionary phoenix) are both far more viable and far more enveloping. In short, they made sense. One could be fully swept into the world of *Indecent*, allowing the heart, the mind, and the soul to go with. *The Favourite*, with its jolting preference for style over substance, fails in that regard.

Vogel's play succeeds, too, in its ending. As the playwright herself has observed, "There's nothing more deadly to our ability to fight back and resist than being deadly serious and solemn" (McPhee). Though *Indecent* tackles intense, topical issues, it never loses its sense of wit, cleverness, family, and, most importantly, hope. Through all the horror, all the struggle, all the loss and grief and strife, Vogel's characters remain connected to the importance of the story they tell and their importance to each other. They smile, they laugh, they pray and hope. The play does not end with the cattle cars to Auschwitz. Instead, it ends with two girls kissing in the rain, proclaiming, "Er vet dikh keynmol mer nisht vey tin (He won't hurt you anymore)" (Vogel 77). It ends with love, and with hope. It is far more powerful than *The Favourite*'s somewhat confusing ending: Abigail nearly kills one of Anne's rabbits, and Anne retaliates by forcing Abigail down to massage her legs while a filter of hopping bunnies overcomes them both. Supposedly, "...now that she's lost both Sarah and Abigail during her final years (in real life she would die just a few years later), her reaction is to go to a dark place and demean someone she once bonded with" (Bean), but it simply doesn't read as well as it should. Most would take Vogel's "love story in terrible times" (Weiner) any day. I would agree with them. Bittersweetness, hope, and a possible solution for future generations will always trump unnecessary, muddled sadness.

In short, though both Paula Vogel's *Indecent* and Deborah Davis and Tony McNamara's *The Favourite* strive to explore gender, sexuality, power, and mental health, the former is far more successful. One is left both with the feeling of having learned something very important and of the heart being torn to shreds and rebuilt again. It's no wonder audiences often left the Tony-nominated play with tears welling in their eyes. *The Favourite*, on the other hand, though powerful at times, often leaves audiences bewildered, ruining whatever touch the script may originally have had. Both works of performative art have promising plotlines, significant stories, and intense, necessary statements to make. It is both unfortunate that only the theatrical one delivered and fortunate that at least one of them did. Paula Vogel emerges triumphant in the exploration of gender, sexuality, illness, and their entwinement with power.

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