

Whe Foedisch

Wooster

Wantons and gasoline. This city always stank; I could taste it the moment I hopped off the bus and on to the pee-splattered sidewalk. She wasn't waiting for me. Not that I expected her, but it would've been nice. Not that I expect her to be nice.

April had encroached on the gray of March, driving me into a subtle stage of grief; spring meant sun and sun meant light. I prefer the voluptuous dark clouds of rain that infiltrate the blue skies in winter. Perhaps I am more vampire than human. Sometimes I like to pretend that the sun singes me, just to avoid outdoor activities. But it was spring, and the sun was shining as I rode the bus from New York to Worcester, Massachusetts.

My dad, Bruce, lived in a triple-decker down by Elm Park. A neighborhood with the facade of affluence, tempered by the peeling cream-colored paint and lopsided balconies, hanging precariously from the edges of the three-story homes-converted-to-apartments. Bruce waved from his Ford F-150, with that big square palm of his: nails crusted with super glue and calloused from thirty years of being a roofer. I flinched in the sunlight glaring off the remnant snow piles, brown and white mixed to look like a Coca-Cola slurpy. When I was young, I attempted to eat the delicious looking concoction of snow and debris; Bruce had laughed as I spit it out everywhere. He endorsed the rearing style of *learn for yourself*—thus I am what I am: Eating shit until I find out its shit.

I slid-in the passenger side and reached over to give him a half-armed hug. He plopped an awkward kiss on my cheek, “Hey hun, how was the ride?”
“It was fine...Long and stuffy...How are you?”

“I’m hangin’ in. Got a few jobs on my plate for Spring. The ice is giving way in this sun.” Sixty-one and he still climbed ladders and dangled from gutters like an acrobat; it always amazed me that this lumbering, barrel-chested man could move so agilely on rooftops. Bruce updated me on the current AA gossip and his upcoming fifth anniversary of sobriety. “I think I’m doin’ good, ya know, the craving creeps up every now and then, especially since Sandra left...But fives years that’s something,” he boasted cheerily and with a gulp of pride. I knew he had slipped up every now and then, but who I am to call him on his shit? It’s better between me and Bruce when I let the lies pass-by like trees on the highway. “Congrats.” Fortunately, he wasn’t too sharp on sarcasm.

The sun-visors in his car were overflowing with old receipts and proof of car registration from years past, and a few random photographs clasped behind the mirror’s flap. I tugged at the corner of one photo, yanking it free, Bruce didn’t seem to mind. Sandra was staring back at me with the tease of a smile on her lips, looking lovingly into the camera’s eye. It’s the only time I’ve ever seen her eyes tender, mostly she had glared at me with angry eyes whenever I came to visit. I quickly tucked the picture back into place, before Bruce could make out her image; so I wouldn’t have to feel embarrassed for him. Occasionally he would have a woman living with him, but this last one, Sandra, had left him for a younger bloke she met at NA. I despised her so it was all gucci with me. Pretty sure she hated me too. Sandra would have gladly replaced me with her own biological baby. My father could barely handle one kid though, and he didn’t even raise me—not really. Thus, he wasn’t going to donate any more sperm. I didn’t blame her for leaving, he’s like a rock, stubborn and cold.

We parked curbside in front of the decrepit three-decker: I hadn’t been here since I graduated high school, two years ago. It looked the same, perhaps more like the leaning tower of Pisa. Bruce lugged out my bags like a good dog, and unlocked the front door for me. The aroma of stale coffee and Old Spice mixed with wet-tobacco, swarmed my senses, making me feel memories all over. The apartment was built in the nineteen-fifties and was ornamented with beautiful cherry wood lush with floral designs. It was the one feature that gave the abode a semblance of elegance. Bruce had obviously attempted to cleanup his bachelor-pad before I arrived; I could see the pile of clothes pushing willfully against the closet door, and still smell the Lysol on the tile counters in the kitchen.

“You know where your room is,” he stated, tossing my bags on to the once-white carpet, “This is your home too, so...make yourself comfortable hun.” Bruce plodded into the back part of the apartment, that had more length than width. I listened as his bedroom door creaked shut, and heard his bed squeak as he fell on top of it. He reminded me of a bear. Stalking alone in the wilderness. Will attack if threatened. Hibernating in his den—I mean, dungeon.

My room was the first door on the left as you entered the apartment, adjacent to the dining room, and behind the kitchen. I hadn't been in that room for years and was afraid of the dust bunnies overrunning the dark wood floor. Tentatively, I pushed at the door that was swelling into the door frame and unbudging. Throwing my shoulder into it with the full weight of my body the door heeded and I stumbled over the threshold. The room smelled of my teenage years, a mixture of dust motes and forgotten perfumes, tinged by the must of mildew. The single-bed still wore the white and gold star-spangled sheets of my childhood, covered by a quilt of yellow stars scattered across a cobalt background. The mattress gasped as I bounced on its ledge. Shaking dust from its springs, I laid back on its familiar face, feeling a forgotten comfort.

My phone buzzed from inside my backpack, hurriedly, thinking it might be her, I jostled through the pockets. Just a voicemail from Quincy. I listened to the eager screeching of my old friend, telling me to get my ass downtown to come see her at the Main St. Dunkin' Donuts—she'd be working until ten. Quincy never left the Woo, born and bred like the cockroaches that scuttled around in the walls of this dilapidated three-decker. She wanted to get out, but the inertia was too strong, paralyzing her in its churning stagnation, cemented by the force of its gravity. This city—a mucky puddle of a place, littered with used needles and crawling with street urchins; I kinda like it though. Mostly I because the woman I love is here. I love Quincy, but not the way I love Mik.

The bed was sunken in the middle, lopping from old age and overuse, it smelt like me. Bruce saved the room, hoping that I would come back “home,” but it didn't feel like home, it never has...more like...a smoking room at the airport. Feeling yourself dying, suffocating in the cancerous air, but all you can do is wait there, and smoke cigarettes. Because the waiting is unbearable otherwise. Wait. And then keep waiting, until your plane arrives and you leave the polluted room feeling less alive than before. Perhaps it's not Worcester's fault. Because when you get to your next destination you're still in the smoking room, and still waiting and dying: waiting to die.

My eyes felt crusty. I rubbed the nap from their corners and hugged my bare-chest, wondering where I put my cellphone. The windows had darkened with dusk, and through the dusty panes I could see two tiny stars twinkling serenely. Worcester has the clearest skies. Pinks cut across pale blues and lavenders as if the atmosphere were an untainted canvas. It surprised me, since everything at eye-level lay shrouded in gray dirt and sooty grime. But if I remembered to look up when I walked down the streets—past the ghouls nodding off in soul-sucking corners, past the starving prostitutes, and hungry pimps—I felt almost spiritual. Like there is perfection beyond me, and all is well. This was always a fleeting sensation that I fumbled to keep; the more I tried to retain it the faster it fled from me. Most of the time I didn't look up, since the loss was worse than not knowing the feeling at all.

Bruce rustled around in the living room shifting through drawers and clanging dishes in the sink; *maybe I'll just stay here...* The fumes of Chinese food wafted under the narrow crack in my door and my tummy grumbled in response. Groping along the side of the mattress, my fingers found the cellular device; another message from Quincy, but nothing from *her*. I don't know why after two years of not speaking I hoped, even expected, she would know I was here and would call me: would want to see me. I hadn't told her I was coming. Basically, I was clutching to some asinine hope that she was telepathically inclined. I wonder if she will let me call her Mik the way I used to. Her full name is Mikena, but when we got close that first summer she told me to address her as Mik. She liked the gender neutrality that accompanied the nickname, and I liked that she wanted me to call her something special—like it was my name for her—that no one else could call her—only me.

A soft tap on the door shook me from me dreams, "Hold on!" I called, searching for a T-shirt amongst the pile of bags and clothes on the floor. "Just want to let ya' know dinner is ready hun," Bruce responded. I clambered out of bed and pulled on my chunky sweats and a black hoody, sliding my phone into the pocket. Bruce had set up the take-out boxes in a neat row, with a big spoon in each mouth, and two ceramic plates waiting to be filled. The dining table was too big for a bachelor, constantly assuming he would have company, but I knew he rarely did; never more than him and one other, that's for sure. It made me sad to think that most nights he sat at this oversized table by himself, probably wondering why he couldn't fill the

seats. It was an old table made from Redwoods with delicate engravings of floral vines and sprouts, a rarity in Worcester. Bruce had inherited it from his father an ancient Californian man, and even though it reminded him of his loneliness he couldn't part with it.

I waited for Bruce to dig into the stinky food. The grease glistened under the luminescent ceiling light, and made my nostrils flare. "Go ahead hun," he urged with genteel politeness. Over the years, especially since I had stopped staying with him, Bruce had begun to soften, making a concentrated effort to appease his only daughter. I think he felt guilty for being such an ass those early years. I tried to stay angry and cold, but his remorse hurt my heart, in spite of my resentment. My plate steamed with chowmein, white rice, and mongolian beef. I poured packaged soy sauce all over the heaping mess and took my place at one end of the grand table. Bruce piled on twice as much food, doused his plate in soy and sweet and sour sauce then sat across from me. The perfunctory pray was mumbled by Bruce as I dangled my head in pretend reverence. "Bless us our lord and these thy gifts, from thy bounty, through Christ our Lord. Amen," he rumbled with gracelessness, then shoveled a fork-full of noodles into his mouth. I followed his lead, not lifting my eyes from the plate, just in case he was looking at me expectantly. The humid silence grew denser with anticipation; he wanted me to converse, but I had nothing to say.

"So Jen, what's been going on with you? How was the last semester of school?" it was known that I had dropped out of college...but Bruce had an uncharacteristic diplomacy when it came to my life choices; whereas, my mother had had an unbecoming dominance over my decisions. She would have screamed and scolded me if I had come home and told her I wouldn't be going back to college: the paperwork had been filed and I was officially a "dropout." Maybe if she hadn't died I would've stayed in and been the normal little girl she'd always dreamed I'd be. But she died. I hated myself for blaming her, but *what the fuck*.

It was only a year ago that she left. I went back to school for my junior year because everyone said it would be good for me...but it wasn't. Coke became my most loyal ally and pot my dearest lover. I failed most of my classes, but wrote some crazy fucking short stories for my creative writing classes; which no one seemed to enjoy, but their disgruntled expressions intensified my pleasure. My favorite one was about this teenage girl who loses both of her parents in a horrific traffic accident—both decapitated. Unfortunately for her, she has to identify their remains at the police station. The girl inherits a shit-load of money and spirals into an insatiable heroin addiction, which culminates in her death. I only remember writing the

beginning of the story. By the time I had written her death scene my brain was beyond recognition, warped by amphetamines and benzos toying with me in harmony.

I wandered into every lesbian bar in the West Village seeking out inspiration for my characters, but usually just got sex, that was usually severely uninspiring. Most nights I couldn't recall what exactly occurred between me and the woman I woke up next to. In a daze, I would stumble out of her apartment and run back to my dorm room, no matter how far. I hated taking the subway those early mornings, under the fluorescent white lights, the homeless men looking at me with their red eyes and *knowing*. Knowing—I have something they want, or perhaps they have something I want. Knowing that I was just as homeless; that someday I too would be huddled under the Brooklyn Bridge or on a subway-seat trying find shelter from the cold outside. Walking the streets I was just another shadow, like the ones cowering in doorways, or slumped against stoops. Excommunicated from society, and being slowly and painfully eradicated from life.

I hadn't talked to anyone about my mom's death, except Quincy over the phone. Bruce could barely talk about it himself: I assumed he'd just stone-cold the whole affair and never think about my mother again. The only time we spoke about it was when he came to see me the first week she was gone.

I lifted a fork-full to my mouth. "Ummmm... It was fine I guess. I mean obviously not that great since I dropped out, but it was fine." Bruce waited for something more, but I ignored him and chowed down on more beef and rice. He helped himself to seconds and I chugged my water then excused myself, "I'm gonna head downtown to see Quince...Thanks for picking me up earlier." I sauntered to my bedroom, leaving him still eating at the oversized table; a dour still-frame of an old man eating alone at a family table. *Why did I come here?* It is so depressing.

I scrolled through the contacts in my phone, finding Mik's number. If I text her I don't know if she will respond, or if she even has my number. Plus, it was bad enough last time that I don't really know if she would want to hear from me. I typed out a message: *Hey Mik, it's Jen, I know it's been awhile, but I'm in town.* My finger dangled over the send button. I deleted the whole thing and tried again. Then three more times, changing slight things like prepositions and then the whole meaning completely, attempting to find a balance between expressing my longing and being cordial. It's hard to be cordial when you've been choking back emotion for years. *Miky, you know I miss you.*

When my mom passed, I couldn't come back here. I stayed in her house for a week rummaging through her dismissed party jewels and forsaken junk. Discovering treasures and untold secrets. I shuffled around the cold single-story abode wrapped in her green leather coat from the 80's, with her favorite pink sweater, and her sheepskin slippers on my feet. The jacket had big shoulder pads that made me look like a scrawny football player who had snorted too much coke and was attempting cross-dressing. My scrawny legs jutted out naked and furry with hair from a pair of dirty underwear, my hair a knotted ball of yarn on top of my head. I thought if I wore all her stuff, it might bring her to me, might make it so she's here. The clip-on crystals were always my favorite earrings, I attached them to my ears and slung her heavy gold and silver chains around my neck.

She used to play dress-up with me on Saturdays when we had all day to lounge around and act out my impish dramas. She would let me have my pick of her jewels and high-heels, which were always too big, and she would adorn herself in familial heirlooms. I would assign her a role, like my assistant or pupil (she always was the subordinate in my scits). And I would assume the role of the main character—a super model, or haut actress, sometimes a stodgy professor. We would strut around our simple home pretending to be the rich people we were not.

Between the tears and cocaine my eyes had swollen to vermilion red, puffed to a point of blindness, but they still looked like hers, light brown, wide, and wandering. I didn't know what else to do, except pretend to be her, or pretend to be me—at some point I lost distinction between us.

Miky called me once after I sent her a drunken text stating bluntly that my mom had died, but I didn't answer. Eventually, Bruce drove down from Worcester to find me curdled like rotten milk, my face blotched with arid skin spots, my body starved, my nose flaming and crusted, my emotions dampened and lame. We had never really been affectionate before, but he reached down and swooped me into his arms like I was an infant. Tucking me into my bed, he stroked my forehead while I cried and passed out. He's all I have now. I used to have Miky, I used to have my mom, but one is dead emotionally and the other is dead physically. And Bruce is disappointing. It's like he's dead. Or maybe I'm dead, like a tree in the forest that has been rotted out from the center, but still stands there as if it is alive: an illusion of life.

“Be careful,” Bruce called after me as I made a beeline for the front door. “Do you want to take the truck?” he offered kindly, it hurt me a little when he was kind. I hadn’t told Bruce that my license had been suspended due to a pending DUI charge, “Um, no that’s okay...thanks. I’ll uh see you tomorrow, I’ll probably be back late.”

“Okay hun. Be careful downtown, you know its not a friendly place after dark; or even before dark,” he chuckled, pleased with his own joke. I shut the door briskly and left the lonely man to himself.

I could’ve taken the bus, but public transportation in Worcester is less than reliable, plus I didn’t know what the bus schedule was anymore, walking would be refreshing anyhow. It was about a two-mile stroll from Elm Park to the downtown Dunkin’ Donuts. I put up my hood and crossed the deserted park to Highland Street; the streetlights worked on that street and businesses would still be open so I wouldn’t have to be as vigilant. Walking through darkened neighborhoods in this city could lead to an unwanted baby or just a good mugging. Fortunately, I had cut my hair short, well shorter than short: I had shaved off the dark curly knot and now had a stubbly scalp that made me look more boyish than feminine. This would deter the rampant rapists that meandered these blocks, and the Johns looking for cheap sex. Being a man is safer in a world of unchecked misogyny.

The orange glow of the tall lampposts casted everything in a strange haze, transporting me back to when Mik and I had held hands walking down this street sharing a frozen yogurt from WooBerry. The other customers had stared and whispered cutting remarks about us “lesbians.” We could feel them all—watching—some disgusted, some intrigued, others turned-on, all of them disgusting to us. A scrawny white-man with purple track marks running up his veiny forearms sat beside us and offered to watch while we fucked. After that we left. He followed us for a block until Mik wheeled on him with a ferocious red rage in her turquoise eyes and chased him halfway back to WooBerry with her nails clawing at his hideous face. “Stay the fuck away from us you piece of shit junkie!” she screamed. I had run after her yelling at her to stop, but she ignored me; I loved her for being like that. But I also hated her toughness, I could never be as close as I wanted to be to her. She would turn on me just as quickly as she she’d peel the face of that asshole. She could never melt completely, never be yielding and soft, at least not entirely...

That night we did merge. With no one watching. It was the first time either of us had been with a woman. I remember orgasming, it was an experience I had never had. She claims she came before, but I doubt it. It makes me tingle to think about it now. All summer we ate froyo and made love in her double-bed or on my squeaky single mattress, spending the days and nights together as if there would never be an end to us.

I took out my phone and looked at the unsent message I had scripted to Mik: I erased it all and tried again. *Hey Mikena, I hope you are well. I'm in town indefinitely. Would you want to grab froyo sometime?* Something panicky in my chest deterred my ambition; it all sounded wrong to me. I'd run it by Quincy first. Maybe she'd seen her recently, or could fill me in on what Mik had been up to. Or maybe she would talk me out of it altogether, which might be the healthiest choice, in all honesty.

WooBerry was still open, I peeked inside—just to see—she *could* be in there. But she wasn't, just innocence waiting to be corrupted. I scoffed and continued on, passing the Coffee Bean and new chincy Thai restaurant. Climbing the hill that separated downtown from the residential areas of Elm Park, I passed a junkie nodding out on the corner by the Shell station, he cracked an eyelid as I crossed in front of him. I dropped a nickel on the ground at his feet; I don't know if it was an act of goodwill or evil, but I didn't care, "Do what you chose," I half muttered to him and half to me. He then picked up the coin and dropped it in his paper cup, then his eyes creaked shut again.

The dive bars were rambunctious down by City Hall, teeming with drunken college kids, and inebriated alcoholics who found solace among the youngsters, whom one day would be exactly like them—or maybe not—but probably. I was just another shady figure passing-by so no one gave me a hard time; although, a few creatures of the night offered me heroin and another oxytocin: I almost took up the latter offer, but I was short on cash. City Hall might be the most aesthetically appealing structure in Worcester. Grand like the Capitol just quaint and with bird shit all over its dome. It makes you feel like there's greatness occurring behind those stone walls, but nothing ever changes here.

Dunkin' Donuts sits kiddy corner to City Hall's entrance; I crossed over to the corporate coffee shop that was packed with disheveled faces wrinkled by abuse and disappointment. Blue-collared men getting off shift from the steel plant, mangled humans seeking shelter from the crisp air, and prostitutes making eyes at potential Johns. We all were there, waiting. Waiting for something to change. But nothing did, not ever.

Everyone looked so worn, like they had been beaten in Hell then spit out by the devil to live a life of indignation. I sighed as I swung open the grimy glass door covered in greasy finger prints, and heard a shrill cry from across the room, “Indigo!” Despite my efforts, a smile crept up my lips as the old nickname echoed. Quincy once said my skin was so black that it looked dark blue, like the sky at midnight—so she started calling me Indigo. We had been best friends since high school; she was basically my only true friend. The other people I met at college were acquaintances and the ones I had made during my high school years in New York had all disappeared. Well it could be that I disappeared. I seem to be in a perpetual state of disappearing, becoming less and less at every moment. I have this fantasy of dispersing into a million particles of dust that just linger, making everyone around me choke, until eventually a gust of wind comes and blows me far-far away. Sometimes I wish I could commit suicide that way. It wouldn’t be messy and no one would have to feel fucked up about it because I would just be gone—like smoke—or the rays of daylight. Plus I hate violence, so dispersion into microscopic pieces would be easier than stealing Bruce’s revolver and leaving behind the messy violet pools.

Quincy ran around to greet me, forsaking a line of hostile customers. “Indigo you came! I’ve missed you so much.” She squeezed me, making me feel secure for the first time in a long time, and rubbing my fuzzy head. I returned the embrace holding on to her as if we could stay like that for as long we pleased. “Hey, I’m still waiting for my hazelnut coffee! Come on!” a rock-like man in a Carharrt work suit yelled at her. “Yo hold on! Cantcha’ see I’m busy!” Her coworker behind the counter stepped up to the cash register before things got unruly. “Thanks Jane! I’ll be right there,” Quincy called.

“You can go back, I’ll wait around until you get off,” I assured her.

“Okay great. Do you want a coffee or hot chocolate; you look like you could use something warm.”

I nodded, “Yeah anything is good, thanks.”

She hugged me hard, kissed my cheek, and strolled back to her position as lead cashier, while Jane slung out the coffee orders. The carbuncular man glared at me from behind his styrofoam cup of flavored coffee; I glowered back at him until he looked away.

Almost every table was occupied. Scanning the room for an empty chair I wandered over to the bar lined with stools that faced out the big front windows. Luckily, I found a seat in the corner so I didn’t have to sit between the gruff characters that fidgeted in the other seats. Scooting up on the stool, the man next to me

jostled a bit and gave me a sideways glance. People in Worcester don't mind staring at you if you bewilder them. They will stare and stare without shame. This man couldn't shuck his eyes from my head and face, making me cringe a little. "Yo, can I help you sir?" I snarled at him. Finally he turned his back to me without a word, just the unfriendly quiet of judgement. It made me want to scream at him, make him feel some sense of remorse. I radiated sour vibes his way instead, not wanting to cause a scene.

The smell of aspartame-flavored coffee brewing and rubbery sausage sandwiches being heated, mixed with the perfume of tobacco and stale human stench nauseated me, but also made me feel like I belonged. Like I could be the piece of shit I am and blend into this broken community. Quincy caught my eye and waved me over to the pick-up counter with a cup of steaming vanilla flavored coffee, "Black, just how you like it," she winked and handed me the cup. I walked back to my seat, before the strung-out newcomers could steal it. The newcomers were young, probably my age; they looked a mess. Two boys and an attractive girl. I was too busy scrutinizing the tall lanky boy with a pockmarked face and hunched shoulders to notice the fourth member of their entourage entering the cafe. But I felt Quincy's eyes gaping at me. I returned her gaze and she straightened her lips into a distraught and cautionary expression. My brows furrowed quizzically in return; she shrugged her head in the direction of the newcomers. Turning to look over the motley crew again, I noticed the fourth member. Quickly, I covered my head and face in the shadow of my hood, turning my back to the whole cafe and keeping my eyes out the window. My heart was fluttering as if it were on speed, I couldn't stop the beating and jumping; I thought I might throw-up.

"Ey Quincy, what's up?" I heard a familiar voice slur. "Let me get uh hot coco--yo make it on the house ma girl," she cackled and her posse joined in, "Yeah put it on the house!" they hollered idiotically. I would have loved to see Quincy's face, but I was too afraid to turn around and be seen. I didn't want our first meeting to be like this. I wonder if she would even recognize me; she sounded real fucked up.

"I can't do that, sorry guys," Quincy responded patiently with an edge of contempt. She never liked Mikena. Mostly because of how Mik treated me. Quince always dissuaded me from getting involved with her; they had been in school together since the sixth grade, and so Quincy *claimed* she knew every shady thing Mik had ever done to the girls and boys who adored her.

Mikena and I had a shaky beginning: morally opaque one might say. She had been seeing this scumbag, Evan, who was ten years her senior and had crystal blue eyes that narrowed into slits when he

examined you. I hated his face. And everything else about him. He made me feel like I had been dipped in black slime whenever he came around. But Mik was enamored. As if he were a win for her. She used to brag that a twenty-six year old man wanted to fuck her. I was a jealous lover, so I couldn't neutrally discourage her from engaging with him, but Quincy tried. We were all in my room at Bruce's, drinking vodka and orange juice; Bruce worked late nights at the steel factory so we had the run of the apartment. Obviously, Bruce didn't keep any liquor in the house since that would only lead to perpetual temptation, but Mik's boyfriend came in handy for that. Evan would buy us handles of Mr. Boston vodka and if he hung around to drink with us he'd try to fuck us all at once. It was gross. Mik didn't know any better, I guess.

That night in my room Quincy laid it out, "Mikena, you are a beautiful *girl* and he is a piece of shit man that can't get any pussy from women his own age so he's preying on high schoolers. Like come on girl, you don't really think he'd turn down a woman his own age for a teenager?" Mik flushed with anger at the threat of another woman taking her man, "You're just jealous."

Quincy rolled her eyes and recoiled, giving me a look of utter disbelief and annoyance, then addressed me as if Mikena weren't in the room, "Yo this girl is wack I don't understand why you bring her around." They always put me in the middle, it was the worst position; between my best friend and the love of my life. Mick rose to her feet, chugging the half-glass she had left of her cocktail and immediately dialed Evan, speaking deliberately, "Hey babe can you come get me, these girls are boring, I want to kick it with you." Quincy couldn't care less what Mik did with her emotions and body, but I did; I always got caught in the crossfire. Mick stormed out of the apartment and waited outside on the sidewalk for her "babe" to come get her. I went out on the balcony and looked down at her frail figure all wrapped up in an oversized green canvas jacket, her tiny porcelain legs sticking out from a knee-length dress like two toothpicks. If I had called to her she would've ignored me. So I just watched to make sure Evan came, and grew hot with envy and the protectiveness of a cuckold husband when she climbed in his truck and kissed him.

When I went back inside Quincy was *tsking* and giving me her look of compassionate disapproval, "Indigo, she's not into you like that. Plus, she's no good, trust me. She has like the worst reputation 'round school. I bet you'll meet someone when your back in New York and forget about her anyways—aw come on don't look so torn up." Tears were already careening down my cheeks—the alcohol was having its effect. Despite her dislike for Mik she always consoled me when I felt fucked up about her. She hugged me to her

chest and stroked my hair as I lamented the unrequited love. But later that summer, when Evan wasn't around, Mik and I did consummate our love. She saw us both for awhile, until he became a gadfly to her, and I became her *one*, her dragonfly. Eventually, I too became a gadfly to her and she replaced me with a new one. But I know she loved me, maybe even still does. *I hope.*

The crew of kids Mik came in with turned the relatively halcyon cafe into a tense atmosphere. They were speaking with the inconsideration of people who are out of touch with reality, and the disrespect of the purely selfish. My curiosity was surmounting which gave way to false courage, but I needed to see her; to really look at her. Terror gripped hard around my throat, its claws keeping my head towards the big windows, but my mind wouldn't let me slink away from this opportunity for observation. I looked up from the table and realized I could see the four of them reflected in the glass, *yes*. I watched hoping they wouldn't feel my peering eyes. They were huddled around a tall table that only allowed standing: Mik had lost weight, she was always petite, but now her hipbones protruded from the waistline of her saggy jeans. Her boney arm the width of a telephone-line dangled over the shorter boy, whose hair hung over his eyes and ears like a mop-head and he looked as though he hadn't showered or eaten in months. Mik's face was familiar, but only slightly. It looked like she had been wrung out in the laundry and aged well beyond twenty-one. Her hair had been dyed a brick red hue, and cascaded past her shoulders midway down her back in stringy strands. I couldn't get over how skinny she was: her cheeks were sunken and the taught skin displayed her bone-structure almost elegantly. To see her was ecstasy for me. Even though she looked half-human, half-skeleton.

The other boy was tall and lanky, his skin the sallow color of bone, his clothes hanging loose from his body like he were just a hanger; his gangly arm was draped around the other girl, who I instantly envied. Her skin resembled the bronze-gold of a Tahitian goddesses, with long brown hair streaked with blonde and a zaftig figure more womanly than I could ever hope to be. Silently, I prayed that the strange girl was straight. My scrutiny returned to Mik, truly a formidable sight, but still those old butterflies took flight in my tummy as my eyes grazed her face, looking for an expression I might recognize. She looked up for an instant as I was staring, finding my eyes in the glass but not seeing me, and immediately returning to her obnoxious conversation. For a moment my heart stuttered, *what would I even say to her*. I didn't want our first meeting to

be like this; I didn't want to have to be around her while she was strung out. At least not for the first time, and not if I'm sober.

"Miky lets get outta here. Drew is meeting us in ten minutes in Main South, and my veins are beginning to itch," I heard the tall boy say. The use of her nickname made me shutter; that's what I call her. *She's mine*, dammit. I hated this possession I felt over her; I can't help it though, I love her so much. They all shuffled out of the cafe, dragging their infested blood with them. As the four of them passed by the window, Mik looked up, but I quickly averted my face to the now cold cup of joe. *Did she recognize me?* Part of me hoped she did. When I raised my eyes again they were gone.

Quincy walked me home after her shift. The air was biting cold by that time with a whipping wind that forced us to link arms for warmth and protection. We slept in my single bed, our backs curled away from one another with our spines barely touching. Sometimes we would cuddle, but neither of us was very good at being tender or soft.

I watched the fingers of sunlight creep through the grubby panes, while listening to the steady pace of Quincy's respiration. My heart trembled as I thought back to Mikena's appearance last night. Part of me wished I had said something to her; let her know I was here—home. She made Worcester feel like home. Only her. Quincy groaned and turned her face towards my back, dancing her fingers up my spine as if she were playing a keyboard. "Are you awake?" she whispered. I rolled over and faced my chubby-cheeked friend. Her face glowed in the pale light, with the freshness of a good rest. My fingers twitched with a sudden urge to brush the wisps of auburn hair from her temples and cup my palm around her rosy cheek. The blue of her eyes taunted me, seeming to intuit my desire. "How are you feeling Indi?" she asked cooingly. "I'm okay...should I have said something to her? She seemed so...different." Quincy grimaced, "She *is* different. Worse than she ever was." A tight knot was forming in my throat, which would lead to a deluge of tears if I didn't keep myself together. "I'm sorry Jen, but she got hooked on heroin. She comes into Dunkin' like that a lot, with the same people, and they're always high as hell."

We ate cornflakes with milk and wandered down Highland Street to the Bean Counter for coffee. "Do you think I should text her?" I asked. Quincy shook her head vehemently, but seeing the pain in the tight pout of my lips clarified, "It wouldn't be healthy for you trust me, but if you can't resist than just do it. I

doubt her phone even works anymore.” Quincy and I parted ways after we sipped the last tepid drops of coffee, and licked the crumbs of croissant from our fingers. I sauntered back to Bruce’s while she made her way to Main South to get ready for work. Now that I was alone, my hands gripped around my cellphone. I tried to resist texting Mik, but every twenty-minutes I would start creating a message to her, changing it slightly: a comma here or an adverb there. Finally, I generated one that felt complete and simple: *Hey Mikena, it’s Jen. I’m in town indefinitely and was wondering if you would want to meet for coffee or something?*

With a racing heart and sweaty palms, I pressed send and the deed was done. *Her phone is probably inactive anyways*, I reassured myself; although, I desperately wanted to hear back from her. Throwing the phone on the bed I paced back and forth across the molting carpet. A *ting* sounded and I jumped on the mattress eagerly seeking the message. But it was just an email. Distressed, I left the bedroom and tried to distract myself with Bruce’s sparse photographs. He had hung up a few photos of me from when I was a toddler, and my high school graduation picture, where I am smiling as if I am happy, and have one arm around him and the other around my mother. An unwelcome tear drizzled down my cheek. And then that ache I knew so well clutched in my omphalos, constricting my lungs and clenching my heart. A pang that I knew how to subdue and escape (for a moment); yet, it always returned, ever since she died. My chest wrenched and I could feel my breathe catching in my throat, like a millions flies were stuck, gasping for air. A whimper escaped and then the downpour. I missed her. So much. The carpet felt good, comforting, as I crumpled into a sobbing ball, falling like a wet napkins to the floor. If I could disintegrate, or turn into a puddle and evaporate, that would be fine with me.

Bruce still wasn’t home when I came to, with the golden light of afternoon streaming through the bay windows in the living room. My face felt puffy and a deep tiredness tugged at my every limb. Laying out flat on the floor, I stretched my arms and pushed myself up. I felt better. At least somewhat, or just benumbed.

I went to check my phone, finding that I had missed a call from Mik three hours earlier and had also missed a text from her, preceding her call. Everything felt bright as my heart smiled with complete joy and hope. It was perfect timing; *she must have felt my pain, she knew I needed her*, I shamelessly fantasized. Her message read: *Jen! You’ve gotta come out tonight. You’re gonna vibe tight with my crew. And I have a surprise for you.*

My eyes could not peel away, *a surprise? What kind of surprise?* I guess she does miss me. I was trying to run through what the surprise could be, when Bruce rumbled through the front door. Tucking the phone in my pocket, I greeted him in the living room. He was looking at me quizzically.

“What?” I demanded.

“You were just smiling hun.” A huge grin broke across his face like rays of a sunrise ascending the side of hill and casting light over the surrounding land. I shuffled uncomfortably and let the scowl return to my cheeks, replacing the joyous wide-eyes with glowering squinted ones. Bruce still grinned at me.

“It’s nice to see you smile Jen.”

I wanted to cry again. To crumple into a sobbing ball in his arms, rather than the putrid stained carpet. But I couldn’t step towards him, everything in my body tensed and froze as my heart reached for him. The moment passed and the unhappy contortion remained, the smile lost like a flame to ash.

He flung his work bag onto the couch and switched to small talk...I wonder if he wanted to cradle me the way I needed him to, but just couldn’t take the step, just like I can’t. Maybe our stone-cold hearts are genetic. Perhaps our emotional decrepitude is a heritable trait; something we just *are*. He probably gave me is goddamn addictions too. The anger resurfaced, replacing my ache for affection with the stoic resentment I preferred. Then I didn’t feel any longing, I just felt...nothing.

“What do ya want for dinner tonight hun?”

“I’m probably gonna be out.”

He looked at me gloomily, but conceded with a nod. The loneliness seemed to hang on his shoulders as if two hooks were pierced through the muscles and dragged down by giant weights. I winced as an ember of guilt shimmered in my core, but expertly, I extinguished the emotion and crept back to my now-dark bedroom, closing the door behind me. In the dusky dark of my room, I took out my phone and began composing a text to Mikena. After a few drafts, I settled on one that seemed to be both detached and wanting: *Sorry I missed your call. I was sleeping. Yeah I’m down to meet your crew, and for a surprise. Where should I meet you?*

Before the minute had changed she responded: *Were about to cop. Meet us on the corner of Main and Richards in an hour.*

An icky feeling rose in my gut, as I considered what exactly they were “copping.” I had attended enough AA and NA meetings with Bruce to know what that meant, and usually what that referred to in the Woo. I think I knew this time too. The haggard look of her face in the coffee shop screamed heroin, plus Quince had suggested that. Pills didn’t do that to your cheeks the way intravenous extracurriculars did. It could be OC, which I had snorted before, and enjoyed the subsequent subduing, but I doubted it. *She wouldn’t harm me.* I trusted her. My intuition reeled with trepidation, but I *needed* to be close to her again.

Digging through my unpacked bags I yanked out a pair of fresh black jeans, faded with just the right amount of wear, and a slight tear in the outer-thigh, revealing a peek of brown skin. My tone only a few shades lighter than the pants, barely noticeable, but it was my way of being sexy, that, and a dark grey T-shirt that hung from my shoulder and pulled-up at the belly a smidge. I dumped out the entire bag to find my forest-green wool socks, and my mother’s delicate gold chain. I couldn’t bring myself to look in the mirror, but I felt comfortable enough, so I laced up my high-tops and threw on my warmest coat. The pipes began groaning, followed by the gurgle and creak of Bruce’s shower. *Perfect.* I slipped out the front door without notice and leapt off the front steps into the cool night air.

Tonight I was not afraid. I seemed to float upon the pavement, confidently striding through the shady streets and dank neighborhoods that had offended me the evening before. The ache did not even come. My heart floated within me, it was lifting me from my head and into some sultry heaven. I even smiled to myself. Lost in fabricated scenarios, where Mik draws me into her arms; the arms I remember: soft as clay, the color of blanched-canvas, where I used to scrawl love letters as we lay wrapped in my blankets, while her eyes waltzed in rhythm with my pen. She whispered, “I feel so warm with you Jen. Read it to me.” Then she would close her eyes and listen with the faint glint of a smile resting on her lips. My voice would start slow and quiet, not wanting Bruce to hear, but soon the passion would overcome me and my voice intoned in synchrony with my heart. When I finished, she would open her aqua-algae colored eyes and stare, until I had to kiss her. Or, I would look straight back at her, so that she knew I meant every word. So she could never doubt any word. She would blush when I looked too deep and too keenly, so that I knew she heard—and felt every syllable.

In those moments we were *in* love. Not just acting out love. Love wasn’t a verb in these moments. It was a Thing. We were in that Thing; nestled in Its belly like twins in a womb. We were together, sharing a

place in *Love*. But I could also see, by the way her creamy cheeks flushed as if a white rose had suddenly become a crimson one, that she was frightened by that place. It always made me smile to make her feel vulnerable, but when her eyes would turn to beady dots and dart away from me, I'd back off. I'd recline on the pillows and wait for her to come back to me. Sometimes she would. Other times she would leave; and I'd flog myself for loving her too much, and diving too deeply.

I was only two blocks from the corner of Main and Richards, but ten minutes early. I searched for her amongst the orange glow of the street-lamps, scouting the scene from the sidewalk half-a-block north, while biliousness gurgled like toxic waste in my gut. The fantasies had ceased for the moment, allowing my nagging intuition to shoot a warning up my spine. There was no way I wasn't going to see her tonight. *But maybe I'll skip out on whatever party-favors they partake in... Then I should be fine. I just won't do whatever drugs they're getting.* Feeling safe and more confident in my decision I proceeded towards the corner, where three figures were lingering by a stop sign on the opposite side of the street.

I appeared like all the others. Hood up, hunched shoulders, lurking in the shades of gray and black. When I reached the adjacent corner I tried to decipher Mik's voice in the conversation across the street. They all sounded like men. When the small one turned around to face me, I realized they all were men. Suddenly, two hands gripped the backs of my shoulders, making me jump and whirl on the perpetrator. But it was only her. Every fear I had dripped away like rain drops on the car window, rolling into an abyss I could not see. I only saw her. Gaping like a dumbstruck owl. I could feel myself staring, but her eyes drew me in like the Sirens, towing me under like a whirlpool. Still a warmth was pluming into my chest. She smiled back at me, but the Duchene lines around her eyes didn't wrinkle. I didn't care, because it was her, my Mik.

Her arms reached up and grasped the heads of my shoulders, resting there lightly. Overcome, I embraced her around the tummy, and pulled her to my chest. Every rib poked back at me. I thought I might crack one, so I loosened my hold and regained some composure. Her silence forced me to speak, "It's so good to see you." *Fuck.* Tears were stinging my eyeballs, *I am not about to let myself cry, what the fuck.* Mik drew away and seemed to search my face for a moment, until a squeaky male voice called her name from the opposite corner. The other two men were now gone. Mikena dropped her hands from me and waved to the gangly guy. Quickly, I wiped my eyes and lifted up the hood that had fallen during our embrace, stuffing my hands into my pockets.

“Jen, this is Jeremy; Jeremy, Jen,” Mikena curtly introduced us, anxiously looking at Jeremy and his fisted hand. “Hi,” I said as friendly as possible, even though I hated him and recognized him from the night before. He gave a nod in my direction and moved in close beside Mik, separating his fingers enough so she could look inside, but not me. “You think it’ll be enough? Did she bring cash?” Jeremy asked Mik with a sideways glare at me. “Yeah it’s enough. I’m covering her tonight, so shut up.” At this point I felt obliged to chime in, “What are we doing tonight?”

“It’s a surprise,” she said and smiled, so I couldn’t press her anymore.

If only we could be alone for a bit, I wanted to whisper to her. But she had fallen into a hushed conversation with the ugly boy, leaving me to stare up the street and pretend like I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop.

“Brian’s over on Cambridge Street, let’s head that way,” Jeremy commanded, dragging his elongated self in that direction.

“No—I want us three to do it at our place,” she retorted.

Our place? No. No. No. My hopes were quickly evaporating into the piercing night air.

“Why?” he whined petulantly.

“Because, I think it’s her first time...Just give it to me then if you don’t want to come,” she demanded. I recognized this Mik, by the way her voice deepened and resounded with obstinance. The stubborn Taurus, who would scream and tear at your eyes if you dared to oppose her, or shun you without any remorse no matter how much you apologized and begged. He obviously knew this Mik too, because he readily conceded, and defeated, walked with her north of Richards Street. Past front yards decorated with plastic bottles, empty beer cans, and plastic bags dancing like dandelions in snow-covered gardens of trash; past forsaken homes with broken front windows and raped of their copper wires. I stalked at their heels with my chin tucked to my chest. Mick swiveled her head every hundred-feet to make sure I was still trailing them, and I’d smile to reassure her that I was there. She would smile back, but it wasn’t reassuring.

We reached the summit of Richards, crossing the street to a dilapidated white building, the paint peeling like the skin of a matured sunburn. It stretched three stories high and was the width of three trucks side-by-side; a torn screen-door hung ajar, banging against the wooden one behind it. Jeremy swung the screen-door aside and unlocked the front door, jiggling the knob to get it loose. Mikena followed him inside, beckoning me with a wave of her hand. I obeyed, cautiously stepping into the building that reeked of spoiled

dreams and fermented vegetables. My nostrils flared in the shock, while my eyes adjusted to the dimly lit staircase, where my guides were mounting. Again I followed. The wood creaked as we bombarded up the steps, disturbing the piles of dirt and debris communing in the corners of each stair.

On the third floor they turned into a hallway lined with five doors, two on each side and one at the end of the hall. The indiscernible buzz of a television emanated from the first door, while an infant cried from behind the neighboring one. Jeremy unlocked the door of the last apartment, *corner apartment*, I thought sarcastically, smiling maliciously to myself. The outside wore a battered cream-colored door, stained with brown fingerprints and a dried brown liquid that I hoped was coffee. A loud boom from upstairs, brought me to attention as I tried to figure out where the fuck we were. Mikena turned to face me while Jeremy manhandled the door knob; the key didn't seem to fit.

I was trying to keep my face a sculpture of peace and equanimity, but my eyes were noticing the cobwebby corners in the ceiling and lingering on the browning baseboards, causing a grimace to spree across my lips. When I realized she was studying me I quickly returned the gaze, unable to ask her everything I wanted to: *Like what the fuck are you doing in here?* I tried to convey this with my eyes, but Jeremy finally got the door open and tugged at Mik's arm drawing her away from me and into the dark room.

The air felt sticky inside, like there were parasites nesting in every molecule of oxygen, latching on to your skin and breeding in your lungs. The smell of unwashed clothes and forgotten food containers, mixed with the stagnant essence of cigarette smoke hurt my eyes, making me long for a window. I spotted one at the far end of the small boxy room, with a tattered khaki corduroy recliner pushed up against its sill. Mik and the scum that attached himself to her were plopped on the double-bed, looking at a powdery substance in a dime-bag. She pinched it between her thumb and forefinger, rubbing the tiny grains, while he pulled open a drawer in the short wooden bureau next to their bed, taking out a Nike® shoe box.

The recliner looked as though it might transmit herpes simplex to me if I sat on it, so I loitered by it instead, trying not to stare at them. Instead, I began examining the dismal room, with no decorations and only the nasty chair, the bed, the short bureau, a taller bureau, and a small card table with a fold-out chair. A heaping pile of clothes rested at the foot of the bed, surrounded by empty Mountain Dew® bottles and some stray food packaging. I didn't notice a trashcan. *That must be why they just leave their trash scattered*, I thought sardonically and slightly disgusted, but no less infatuated with her. I wanted to say something like,

“Why don’t you recycle?” or “Do you have a trash bin?” But my attitude was subdued by my uncomfortableness and a gnawing sense of being out of place. Mik finally noticed me shifting over by the chair, “Make yourself comfortable Jen—why don’t you sit down?”

“Uhhh...that’s okay. But can I open the window?”

Jeremy scowled at me, “No.”

“It’s really hard to get up,” Mik explained.

I sat on the arm of the chair, trying to ease myself into the situation. My olfactory system was becoming desensitized to the smell, and the single-bulb ceiling light had slowly lightened into a brighter halogenic glow. Mik got up off the bed as Jeremy tinkered with his tools and the pale-yellow powder that he had emptied on to an open notebook. Placing her hand on my shoulder, she asked, “Have you ever flown before?”

My quizzical look was enough to tell her *no*.

“It’s really amazing Jen; the best thing I’ve ever had. Not like anything else in this world. It is the best thing in this world—I’m sure.”

She smiled at me, her lips curling up her teeth, showing me the yellow stains and mossy decay that were quickly eating away at the once pearly enamel; her oxidized copper eyes placid as a waiting room with not the slightest twinkle. *Where did the light go?* Her eyes once reminded me of the warm Ocean waters of the Pacific, changing in color, like shadows and depths change the hues of blue from cobalt to turquoise of the great sea.

I forcibly suppressed my cringe as Jeremy, called her Miky and lifted the spoon to flame, deliquescing the powdery substance with baking soda, creating a liquid form. She trotted over to him and wrapped a rubber-band around the upper part of his arm, causing the veins at the inner-surface of his elbow to bulge with lust. Pulling a syringe out of the shoe box, Mik sucked the liquid out of the spoon, filling the syringe with the urine-like substance, that reflected prettily in the lamp light. Jeremy flicked his vein twice, with a *tap-tap*, the only sound in the dingy apartment. The process fascinated me, I couldn’t tear my eyes from the ritual, wanting to know how to proceed for when it was my turn. Because now I knew how to reach her. This was the key.

I swear I could see him salivating, growing impatient with Mik as she fiddled with the needle. “I’m ready, come on,” he growled. Mik poked the needle through his skin and effortlessly pushed down the syringe releasing the drug into his bloodstream. Instantaneously, his eyes rolled back into his head and a sigh of delight escaped from his mouth, “Ahhh...That’s good.” As if it were the best orgasm he had ever had. Jeremy fell back on the bed with another “Ahh.”

Mikena grinned and ran her fingers through his greasy hair, then directed her attention to me, “Ready Jen?” she asked smiling that stale smile. I didn’t know if I was ready...Something about the way she was looking at me made me want to run-out and not ever see her again. But I love her. I love her so much and I just want her back, like how we were before—in Love—and floating as if we were particles of light, refracting in the likeness of rainbows. No death, no ugly boyfriends, no syringes, no putrescent smiles—just her and me.

She was heating up another dose, “Come over here Jen.” Hesitantly, I padded over to the bed, just five steps away, and sat on the far corner from Jeremy, being careful not to disturb Mik’s process. Jeremy was moaning quietly, it was the happiest I’d seen him. Personally, I liked him better this way: sedated. I was about to ask Mik if we could leave him here and go wander the city, just catch up and whatnot. But before I gained the courage, she handed me a rubber-band and instructed me to tie it around my upper arm, above the elbow joint. I did as I was told, feeling as helpless as driftwood in the riptide, using my teeth to pull it tight. My heart wasn’t even racing; I just sat there watching it unfold, as she filled the syringe and flicked my vein with her thumb and forefinger. As Mik placed the point of the needle to my arm I almost yelled, “Stop!” but she looked up at me with those Caribbean eyes sending a serenity through every bone; until she smiled that wicked smile, making me regret ever texting her, but simultaneously she flushed the fluid into my veins and with a yelp and a subsequent convulsion the world went black and I felt myself vaporize into the atmosphere. Floating above my body, I could see Mik smiling at me, pleased that I looked so tranquil and idyllic. She called to me, but I couldn’t respond. I tried to move my tongue to speak, but I did not know where my mouth was, it felt separate from me, like it was down there on the bed, and I was up here in the corner of the moldy ceiling. “Jen,” she called. It sounded like an echo in a distant canyon. “Jen,” her voice cooing like she knew how good I must be feeling. “Jen,” she called again, more anxious, putting her hand on my shoulder and shaking it. My eyes were staring into nothingness, not even a blink disturbed their repose,

and my body laid there limp next to Jeremy, like the plucked bud of a flower left out to dry on the kitchen table: wilted before its time and lifeless before its bloom.