

## Pascale Potvin

### An Involuntary Consequence

The first skin-scraping call came in 2015, when I was twenty-three and cooking chicken in my Springfield apartment. It'd already been a dark and pungent afternoon; the November air had clawed at me as if my body contained a sultry secret. Still, I wasn't prepared for the grating sounds of my father's sobs.

"I just fought with Tommy," he said, once he'd regained some control of the noises coming from his mouth. "I don't know what to do. I've lost him."

"What do you mean? What happened?" I sat at the table and dangled my fingers into the Mason jar centerpiece, seeking the warmth of the candle inside. Natty always complained when she saw me doing that; she claimed I'd burn myself. I knew that she just didn't like me playing with her DIY projects.

"I don't even know how to..." Dad said. "Not over the phone. Jesus. I've failed as a father."

"Thanks," I joked, trying to lighten the mood, but it was like taping feathers to a decaying bird. It fell flat.

I had only once before heard this tone of voice from my father. So, despite the fact that I had an important event at work the next day, and that I'd told Natty we'd see her friend in *The Bald Soprano*, I asked:

“Do you want me to come home?”

“That’s why I called,” he told me. “He really needs a woman to talk to him. I... hate to ask, Sophie...”

For a few strange, dissociative moments, I thought I could smell my own insides start to putrefy. *He needs a woman to talk to him?*, I wondered. What could that mean?

I’d reached my second stoplight before I thought to text my boss about the emergency, to ask Natty to turn off the oven when she got home.

I made it to Dad’s after about five hours. His eyes had gone a paler blue; his skin hung from his gaunt cheeks with the weight of tonight’s insomnia. It was only as I was sitting on the couch that I noticed the papers in his hand. He used them to point at the teapot on the coffee table, which I ignored.

“I told him to stay in my room until we’re done,” he muttered when he sat across from me. “When you’re ready, he’ll come down.”

“What is this?” I asked. My voice was still hoarse from the crying I’d done in the car. I’d been reminiscing; Tommy used to fall asleep so much, as a kid, that our parents had had him tested for narcolepsy (verdict: he was just sleepy). He’d wake me up, some mornings, by jumping on my bed. He’d once gotten in trouble for accidentally downloading three gigabytes of Mother’s Day e-cards to a school computer. “Look-- is this a Brock Turner situation?” I asked.

Dad paused, exhaled loudly. “Not that I know about,” he told me. “Honestly, he leaves the house so rarely. And he hasn’t written about hurting anyone, so...”

I was so tangled up in my relief that the last bit took a moment to process.

“Written?” I asked.

Dad pursed his lips as he placed the papers on the table, pushed them toward me.

“I came into his room, today, when he was showering,” he explained. “I was sick of how messy it was--and, god fuck--I saw... he’d left his monitor on.”

“Dad?” I pressed. It was like I had plaster building in my chest.

“You ever hear of incels?”

I hadn’t. I became well enough acquainted with the kinds of people that incels were, however, as I read through the posts that Tommy had made in their community forums.

Mainly, he’d been criticizing the girls at his college. He seemed angry that they’d ever have lives outside of him, for some reason--even when they didn’t know him. Apparently, refusing free weed from him--a stranger at a party--but smoking with other people could make a girl a ‘slut’. So could walking into Starbucks with one’s ‘testosterone-fuelled’ boyfriend (‘testosterone-fuelled’ being code for... more muscular than him?). Tommy wrote, too, like it was some sort of ethical failure to not want a second date with him. He was convinced that all women were too shallow to ever want less attractive, ‘involuntary celibates’ like himself.

*They honestly don’t know what’s best for them, he’d written, only a few months ago--When you think about it, they’re kind of more like pets, that way. And you wouldn’t let a select number of people hoard all the pets in the world. They have to be handed out more equally for things to work, both for them and for everyone else.*

I felt like I was reading The Communist Manifesto for Virgins.

Unfortunately, the writings only escalated from there. And, finally, after reading a post about wanting a *full-bodied organic sex doll*, I pressed my hands against my face.

My pulse was hot against my palms as I kept trying to process. I was confused, before anything else. Weren't sex dolls meant to simulate the experience of being with a woman? I knew that I was out of touch with men's wants, nowadays, but I never thought they'd start seeking the opposite effect.

"I called the internet provider," Dad spoke again. His voice was bumpy and tingling, as if covered with a rash. "And all sites like this are now blocked from the house. But I don't know what else to do. I had no clue. I mean, he was kind of antisocial, but I mean, he's nineteen years old, I thought he would... What should I do? Should I put him in therapy?"

"Uh."

Before that night, I hadn't known that anyone believed in the kinds of things Tommy had written--let alone an entire online herd. My brain was too busy, in the moment, trying to escape from the dimension in which such thinking existed.

Most of all, it was escaping my body.

It was probably selfish of me, but I was becoming much more concerned for myself than I was for Tommy. I thought about every man I'd ever rejected; I wondered if any of them had written, or even thought, about me in such a bent and knotted way. Soon, I was hyper-conscious of every hole in my body: of every pore, of every microscopic pocket in my skin. I wanted to shut everything off, to become impenetrable, even by air. I rejected my body like a one might a kidney transplant.

As the walking upstairs started, though, my soul flooded back down. It went into my legs, especially--charging, above all, my instinct to run. The footsteps were a threatening cloud above my head, rumbling low and primal.

Never before had I felt afraid of my baby brother.

Within seconds, though, the noise was at the top of the stairs, by the kitchen. Then, it stopped, was replaced.

“You know I heard everything you’ve been saying,” Tommy called. His words were cool and smooth, at first. The cutting edge came at the end of his sentence, like the sharpest icicle. “You said you wouldn’t show her.”

“I don’t owe you anything,” Dad yelled, furrowing his bushy brows. But it was about as threatening as throwing a ball at a dog. The Tommy I knew would only bite into it, bring it back around for more.

“Wait,” I interjected. “I’m not mad.”

All I wanted to do, really, was to run up the stairs and to scream at him: *haven’t I taught you better?!* At the same time, though, I was still riding the high of learning that Tommy hadn’t really assaulted anyone. I also knew he’d only argue with me if I yelled.

My gentler choice of words, though, successfully lured my brother down to the kitchen. I hadn’t seen him in about eight months; I’d almost forgotten what he looked like. Of course I have a mental image of the person I grew up with, but I’ve found I don’t truly see a person until I make eye contact with them. And, in that moment, I saw something in Tommy’s eyes that I hadn’t expected. I’d thought he’d be looking down on me, now, like one would a humanoid they didn’t respect. Instead, I saw something that I could never have conceptualized. A very specific kind of sadness.

I was surprised, too, by the way that he looked, because he’d written about himself as if he were some repulsive monster. The words had actually managed to reshape my memory of his appearance (though it hadn’t helped that he’d written monstrous things). Tommy, though, was pretty normal looking; I could say that objectively, being his sister and also a lesbian. Most obviously, he needed a haircut--his blond cowlick

was flopping onto his forehead--and like me, he was still a bit too slim. His skin was dry, but he had noticeably sharp features (we'd been told we shared our mother's cheekbones) and some beauty marks here and there.

"Let's go for a drive," I told him.

The idea of getting back into my car was dreadful, of course. But I knew that as Tommy's chauffeur, I'd have control over our conversation--and I was the type of person who always needed the upper hand. (I'd even been bitter, for a while, after he'd passed me in height--though he was now convinced, apparently, that his 5'10 was dwarfish).

Tired as I was, I started my spiel as we attached our seatbelts.

"You know women aren't gonna like you if you think about them like that," I told him with an angry click. "It really just seems like a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Tommy only scooted down his seat, crossed his arms.

"But you don't get it," I continued, "Cause these... *people*... have infected you with all their bullshit."

Still no response.

"Fine," I said, my annoyance turning more fertile. I turned the key in the ignition. "Dad's not here, so let's get to what this is really about."

He looked at me.

"Mom left us for another man." I grabbed at the wheel, turned on the headlights. "So, now, you think every single woman is a whore. Right? But, buddy, mommy issues also aren't the most--"

"It's not about that," Tommy spat. "At all."

“Right.” I pressed on the gas and brought us out to the dark street. My plan was to take us in circles, around the neighborhood, until he apologized. “What, then?”

He leaned his head back in his seat. “I can’t believe you’re still defending her,” he grumbled.

“That is not-” I started again, with heat rising to my chest. “You know it messed me up, too.”

“Uh, huh.”

“It even messed with my dating confidence,” I hammered down. “But you also may have noticed I didn’t lose respect for every woman in the world.”

There was a slight pause, and then he looked down at me with flat eyes.

“Maybe not,” he mumbled, “But...”

“But what?”

“You did lose respect for yourself.”

“...Excuse me?” I dug my nails into the wheel. My heart started to pound. “Just admit you’re the one who doesn’t respect me, dude. Come on. Tell a girl, to her face, that you think she’s below you.”

But he only exhaled from his nose. “I don’t think that, Sophie,” he said, now with more stone in his voice. It was a victory on my part--but it still, for some reason, felt like a loss. “You were always good to me. *You* became my mom.”

*Oh, I get it*, I thought. So, now, I’m His Decent Jew. Since Tommy and I had grown up together, he didn’t view me like he did other women--as if I were, at all, objectively different.

“But that doesn’t mean,” he continued--and it was the vocal equivalent of turning up the stove by a single notch--“That I can’t disagree with your values.”

“Values?” I squeezed.

“Sophie,” he repeated, sighing. “My room was right next to yours. You think I didn’t hear you sneaking out your window three nights a week, back in high school? You think I didn’t see you out of mine when you came home, your makeup as fucked as you?”

He was exaggerating with the ‘three nights a week’ claim. Still, a meaty disgust took form, inside of me, at the idea that my brother had been listening in on me... watching me... when he was only about twelve or thirteen. The hair on my arms started to rise, as if fondled.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I grimaced, though too embarrassed to look back at him. “Spying on me?”

“I couldn’t help but hear,” he said.

I scoffed.

“I’m not lying,” he told me. “Sorry that I was sensitive to hearing someone leave at night.” His voice had tipped, now: partially raised at me and partially defeated.

The words bounced painfully, back and forth, down my inner walls. I stopped the car in the street, turned toward him.

“You were awake?” I asked. “You heard her?”

He only crumpled up his lips, as if trying to tackle the truth before it escaped out to the world.

I tried again. “Why didn’t you ever tell-”

“Why do you think?” he grunted, low and buried.

We sat in silence until something else became obvious to me.

“Were you watching for me to come home...” I asked, “To make sure that I did?”

He paused, gave a hunched shrug.

“Okay. Look,” I said. I took off my seatbelt and got on my knees, on the seat, so that I could speak down to him. “You’re right because I did lack self-respect, back then. But it wasn’t ‘cause of her. And it isn’t like that for every girl who does those things. I was repressed. And I was numbing the pain by throwing myself at guys. I need you to understand that.”

I still really couldn’t believe Tommy’s talk of *values*. A lot of the things he’d written, strangely, had been like a twisted form of Christianity--something he’d always rejected, growing up. I had been the one to turn to Jesus, for a while (...but Jesus didn’t do anything for me, so I switched to alcohol and sex. As I’d once joked to Natty, *my tits were out because I wasn’t*).

“I do understand,” Tommy said. I held my breath, knowing not to get too hopeful. “I understand that that’s what you truly believe. But I also think you might be afraid men won’t want you, now, ‘cause of how much you’ve already given away.”

Oh, fuck no, I thought. I was all the way back to fuck you, Tommy.

I shouldn’t have been surprised; I’d felt homophobic energy from my brother ever since I’d come out, first introduced him to Natty. He’d always gone quieter around her, talked about her like she was just my friend. She’d joked that he was jealous I was with a beautiful Peruvian woman, and that was honestly probably a big part of it; it was less available pussy for him and his ‘brothers’, after all.

“So it’s not okay for women to have sex,” I argued, “Unless it’s with you?”

“Obviously, when it comes to you,” he rolled his eyes, “I wasn’t mad it wasn’t with me. I just want you to be able to have a good relationship.”

“I *am* in a good relationship,” I said, a flame between my lips, “And I wouldn’t be, I can tell you, if I were handed out like some *pet* to a random man.”

“You don’t know that,” he said, after another pause. It was hard to know if he truly believed all that he was saying, though; he’d always loved to rile me up. Not knowing his true intentions riled me up more.

“Dude. I know what this is about. Okay?” I retorted. “A woman having free will is the reason we don’t have a mom. But I’m still here, right? Doesn’t that count?”

He let out another sigh. “Yes. You were always there, and I appreciate it,” he told me, his voice going soft. “But I won’t say *I told you so* if, halfway into building a family with her, you realize you’re meant for a man.” He spoke so gently, still--soft enough to sink into--and, soon enough, I felt like I had sand in my throat. My heart thrashed, fighting to get me out of his trap, his *concerned brother* charade.

“Fine, then,” I grumbled. “Let’s do it. Hand me over to one of your Internet friends. Tonight. You’d trust me in one of their hands, right?”

His gaze weakened.

“They know how to treat a girl, after all,” I continued. “They wouldn’t ever-”

“Kay,” he grunted. “I got your point.”

“Except you really haven’t,” I told him, sitting back down. “Just... come on. You’re obviously aware of how horrible your beliefs are when you picture them inflicted on me. But it’s still not all clicking.”

He shifted in his seat.

“Maybe it’s ‘cause I’m older, so you don’t feel as protective of me,” I guessed. “Maybe if Dad had managed to adopt that other girl, you’d be thinking different.”

And I thought I saw just a bit of light shining through my brother’s cloudy gray eyes, then, as he remembered Felicity. I hadn’t forgotten about the ways that seven-year-old Tommy had planned all he’d teach his new baby sister; the idea of filling that empty space had been refreshing for all of us. It’d been a

double loss when things didn't work out. The adoption process, as we'd learned, was difficult for single fathers with newly halved funds.

"Different, how?" Tommy muttered.

"I'm sure that when you do find someone, and you have a daughter, one day-" I continued.

"What?"

"Your perspective will change," I told him. "I know it will."

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I was back at my apartment at about six, the next morning. Dad had insisted that I stay in my old room, for the night, but I'd counter-insisted that I couldn't miss work. It was true that it'd be a special day for the store; a group of fancy artists were coming in to look at bird feeders for their newest installation ("The Free Market Consuming Capitalist Gentrifications of Labor'... or something like that). But, since I'd also already told my boss that I wouldn't make it, I was secretly planning on spending the day asleep.

The truth was that I knew I wouldn't have been able to sleep in my old bed, anyway. I would have had the constant feeling that Tommy might be against the other side of the wall near my head, standing over me, listening.

Natty had turned on the bedroom light by the time that I approached. After bumping into a paper lantern in the doorway, I found her standing in front of the mirror, brushing her soft hair. Seeing me, she smiled; the popping apples of her cheeks helped to tame my brain. I loved Natalie. Even though she refused to use a grocery list, and she was afraid of loose hairs, and she always sounded like she was about to sneeze when she was about to come--I loved her.

"So? Are you okay?" she asked. "What happened?"

“Nothing. My brother is the next Trump,” I mumbled, already taking off my pants.

“What?!”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow,” I said. I took off my glasses and climbed under our quirky, puppy-patterned duvet. “Sleepy.”

“Okay,” she laughed. “...Geez. He is such a prick. I guess we won’t be using his sperm, huh?”

At that, I shifted with discomfort.

Every few months for the following three years, Dad gave me an update about the state of my brother. Not only were his evil websites blocked, he was now required to go to therapy, join at least one school club, and to take a women’s studies course (ha). It all helped; from what I heard and occasionally witnessed, Tommy seemed to be rising to better spirits. He even spent the majority of one Christmas Eve teaching me how to play an online adventure game, then bickering with me about whether *Mother!* was a good film (I was anti- baby eating). Though we still had far to go, I could tell we were making our way to talking like before.

The most glistening day, though, was that of his graduation.

It was one particular moment that stuck the hardest. Like the sun above us that day, it’d later become vivid and sweltering in my mind. The three of us had been standing behind the convocation building, after the ceremony, dripping like body-odor candles among the packed, but happy, crowd; Tommy was in his robe, holding his computing diploma. He looked so healthy and fresh, he was almost gleaming (it wasn’t just the sweat on his forehead). Dad asked if he was excited for the future, and he popped what looked like his most genuine smile in a decade.

The next part, a “maybe one day he’ll even find a girlfriend,” tease from a nearby friend of his, wasn’t as important to me as the fact that he’d made friends. But it did come back to mind about four months later.

“Do you want to go to McDonald’s?” he asked me, one night over the phone as I was settling in bed.

“Uh... not really?” I responded.

“Not even for old times’ sake?”

He was referring to the fact that every day after school over a period of a few years, the two of us would go to a McDonald’s close to our house. I’d help him with his homework and we’d play games on napkins while we waited for our dad to finish work.

But while Tommy had just moved out of our hometown, he lived in an adjoining city still hours away.

“You’re far,” I reminded him. I pointed a confused look toward Natty, who put down her *Pride and Prejudice* to return it.

“But I have something to tell you,” he said. His voice had hardened a little. “I don’t want to do it over the phone, but I can meet you somewhere-”

“It’s okay,” I decided. “We can go to the one near Dad’s. Make it a visit.”

Walking into that McDonald’s, on Saturday afternoon, was like taking a whiff of the past... plus a lot of oil. I realized that I’d much preferred the excessive, artificial flavoring when I’d been young; I also understood why the shiny plastic walls and shiny, plastic smiles hanging from them had appealed to a girl who’d taken comfort in dollhouses. In that moment, though, the design only gave me a familiar awareness of the tiny cracks and craters in my skin.

A minute after taking my place in line behind three teenage boys, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Hey,” I said, and Tommy and I did the polite, one-armed hug. He had a backpack on, for some reason, which brought forth even more memories. “How are you?” I asked. Years ago, I’d probably just have greeted him by pointing at him; there was definitely still an uncomfortable barrier between us.

I was grateful, though, that it wasn’t made of glass.

“Good,” Tommy said. And he raised his eyebrows at me, expectantly.

“Same,” I told him.

“How’s the teacher?”

“Same,” I repeated, with a smile. “So, when am I gonna see your place?”

“Oh. Well, it’s not really... ready yet.”

“That’s okay,” I said. And then, I couldn’t help it: “I’m just proud of you.”

He returned my smile, but then his eyes glazed over.

Though we hadn’t touched the topic in years, the subtext of my last statement had definitely been: *I’m proud of you because you used to be an incel.* And maybe that had been purposeful. Maybe the time that I’d just spent in the car, wondering what I was about to learn about my brother... maybe it’d brought back some old and sticky feelings. Perhaps the true meaning of my words had been: *I’m proud of you unless you’re about to tell me you’re still an incel.*

“How’s the job?” I asked, next, as I was filling my cup with Coke Zero.

“Kinda depressing,” he admitted. “Working with peoples’ medical records. Feels invasive.”

“And the pay?”

“Eh.” He received his food, and we went to the table underneath the photo of a golden retriever drinking water. I had a memory of an eight-year old Tommy sitting there, flicking an elastic band at me.

“Well, I definitely wasn’t doing any better, at twenty-two,” I told him, sitting down.

But he said nothing as he sat across from me, and that’s how I knew that something was bothering him.

Regular Tommy wouldn’t have missed the chance to tease: ‘or at twenty-six’.

“So... I have two things to tell you,” he said. I could sense him tapping his foot under the table.

“Easiest first?”

“One kind of has to come before the other.”

“Okay.”

“I’m gay.”

I couldn’t speak for a moment. If spoken to again, I felt I might even have disintegrated. Many people would believe that in my position, they’d have the perfect TV-style, *I love you for who you are* response. Yet I, the gay sister, only managed a “you’re...” and a hint of a, “but...”

“But I horribly objectified women.” He said it for me.

I focused on remembering how to nod, and then I nodded.

“Because I was an inbecel,” he chuckled. “Well... here’s the truth coming out, I guess.” He folded his hands on the table, stared at them.

“...Tommy?” I tried again.

“As you know... I was pretty hateful,” he continued, and he let out a jagged breath. “I had a bunch of anger, but it was mostly at myself. I... I was obsessed with girls ‘cause I thought that being with one would... untaint me. Or something.”

“No,” I said. It was almost a plea. *No. That’s too horrible to be true.* After a few moments, though, it started to make sense. Oh, no. It made sense. I fell back down to Earth, cracked right open.

“But, as you also know, none would let me in their pants, probably because I was super insecure,” he said. “And since I wasn’t actually attracted to them, I had no fuckin’ game. But, still... I lost it. My issues were their fault, y’know? It was their job to convert me, and they were refusing to do that. So, I turned all my hate at them... and the incel forums really enabled that.”

“Oh, god,” I said. Tears were now knocking--banging--at my inner door. I took his hands in mine.

“Dad doesn’t know yet,” he said. “I wanted to tell you, first, because I really have to thank you.”

“For what?” I sniffled. “Also being gay?” Another idiotic response.

He grinned, amused. “No,” he said. “I mean... for that talk you gave me, a few years back.” He paused as his smile tucked itself back away. “When Dad found all my posts, I was really at, uh... my worst point. The things those people said had really just distorted reality, for me. I... don’t want to imagine how much worse I would have spiraled if I didn’t get that intervention from you.”

I nodded, fully crying now.

“Of course, I believed that people like Dad--fuckin... ‘normies’, I would call them--were the ones who were brainwashed,” he continued. “I didn’t hear anything he told me about how wrong I was. But, then, you... you took me in your car, and... some of the things you said actually got through.”

Thinking back to that night, I realized what kind of pain must have been behind all of his comments.

“You mean the stuff about how I used to hate myself, too?” I mumbled, the tears scintillating on my skin.

He nodded, looking away. “When you told me that you’d gone through something similar, running to guys ‘cause you were in denial... I mean, I already knew about it, yeah, but ‘cause of how I viewed myself, I was convinced you just needed the right man. Hearing it so raw from you, though... and seeing you light up

when you talked about your relationship... fuck, it made me realize you really were okay and happy. And so, seriously, I am so, so grateful for that conversation. It was like an epiphany.”

“Wow,” I whimpered. I pulled a hand back away to wipe my face.

“I did some soul-searching,” he said, rolling my other hand in his palm. “I mean, being blocked from the sites obviously really helped. Then, one night, I had a bit too much beer by myself and I was like, fuck it. What will it hurt? And I switched my gender preference on Tinder.”

“Oh my god, yes,” I whispered.

“At first, I got pissed, seeing all those guys,” he said. “I was just jealous of their confidence, though. And things changed when I started getting matches. I got way more than I was getting before.”

“Women are pickier, dude,” I said.

He coughed. “I ended up chatting with this one guy, and we talked basically all night,” he admitted. “I told him how I felt. I mean, how I was new and insecure. You know how guys will hire hookers and just end up crying in their arms? It was like the gay version of that.”

I laughed.

“And he was super nice about it. I was, like, really lucky to have matched with him. He ended up inviting me to this gay bar, over in the city, and I built up the courage to go, and everyone there was so nice. I think he told them about my issue, but, yeah. I was still way too shy to flirt back with anyone, but the guys there made me feel more attractive than seriously ever. It was exactly what I needed.”

My smile continued to grow upward, finally without the weight it'd been carrying for the past few years. It'd really been so brave of Tommy to put himself out there, to tell me all about it like this. I'd been shaking quite a bit, the first few times that I'd come out to people--but while there'd been tremors of emotion

in Tommy's eyes, I felt none under his skin. The initial *I'm gay* had even felt, almost, like the first cut in a surgical procedure: very methodical, very much like I was the one who was being opened up. For him to move from the depths of the closet to this level of confidence was incredible.

And I hadn't even heard the meat of it.

"I ended up going back to that bar. Like, pretty regularly," he told me, next. "I was keeping it a secret from my other friends, but I was meeting a lot of new people. And... eventually... Kevin."

I gasped, squeezed again at his hand.

"I started seeing him just as regularly as the bar," he admitted. "And then... even more."

My smile was in full bloom.

"He was also pretty new into coming out, actually," Tommy continued, his own smile still shy. "And so at first, things were kind of awkward. It was like we were just friends, 'cause we didn't know what else to do, but... once we finally got into it, we were really *in it*, and... it was just so intense and amazing. I'd honestly never thought I'd ever experience something like that. Which, uh, brings me to..."

With that, he picked up his bag and pulled out a piece of paper. As soon as I saw the words *CERTIFICATE OF MARRIAGE*, I almost dissolved into the chair.

*This is to certify that on the 18th day of August, 2018, Mr. Thomas S. Kiernan and Mr. Kevin R. Paddock were by me UNITED IN MARRIAGE...*

There I was, the shaky one again.

"It was just a city hall thing," Tommy explained as I kept staring at the page. "We kind of just wanted it to be something special between us. I hope you can forgive me for that and for doing this so young. I know you probably won't approve, but it's what I wanted."

There I was, sobbing in this McDonald's, under a photo of a dog bowl.

I didn't have much room to be disappointed, either; I understood what it was like to repress something for a long time, to have it then emerge fully ripe. Above everything, I was happy that Tommy had experienced the same feeling. If his marriage didn't work out, it wouldn't matter. What mattered was that I had my brother back.

And, thinking about that, I'd later realize just how radiantly lucky our family had been with the way that things had worked out. We'd been lucky that Dad had seen Tommy's computer screen at the time that he had, that I'd given Tommy just the right speech, and that he'd happened to meet that nice man on Tinder.

"So when people ask if you and Kevin met through Tinder," I asked, as Tommy started to get into his food, "Do you say yes or no? 'Cause, technically, you did."

He laughed, almost choking on a fry.

I supposed that we'd been lucky, too, that Tommy had never really been like the other incels out there. I did suggest, as we were leaving the restaurant, that perhaps all of them were sexually repressed, but Tommy said that he really doubted it. The bitter heterosexual man, he warned, was still the most dangerous predator.

"Hell hath no fury," he joked, "Like a virgin scorned."

"Lest he be trying to untaint himself..." I continued, "With taint."

Of course, I very much hated that my brother had gone through what he had. Still, I felt a massive relief as he elbowed me, in that moment, that he hadn't been the former--that he'd managed to pull out of the horribleness. From what I'd heard on the news, the epidemic of entitlement had only been getting more nauseating; back in April, an incel up in Toronto had even killed ten people with a van.

#

I watched Dad regain several years of his life while Tommy gave him the news, that night at the dinner table. Later, he even pulled out our old Monopoly game from the basement; we gave up playing after a couple of hours, but it was fun banter.

I met my brother-in-law a week later. Tommy brought him over on Friday evening, for a weekend visit, which was a nice break for my mileage. Kevin was a cute little thing: pale, with freckles and long teeth. He didn't talk much, but he helped me cut the bell peppers.

They left for their motel late in the night, and Natty and I cleaned up the kitchen the next morning. I wanted to take the chance, before the two came back from exploring the city, to clear away the night's tipsy debris.

It was as I opened the utensil drawer that I noticed our pizza cutter, or lack thereof. It'd been replaced by a soup can lid attached to an old door handle.

"Don't you think... the do-it-yourself stuff is getting a little much?" I expressed to Natty. "I mean, that poor sheep almost slipped four times on that... chiffon carpet last night. Was there something wrong with our old carpet? Our old pizza cutter?"

"I guess not," she said, still wiping the counter. "I just don't know how else to keep occupied when you leave for the weekend."

"You could... y'know... come with me."

"But last week was another serious visit, though." She raised her voice, now, like an aggravated puppy raises its tail. "It didn't seem appropriate."

"Yes. It was serious," I said, looking up at her. "Which was why I had to go."

“And I understand that.”

“Then what’s the problem?” I asked. I clutched at the drawer. “If you get bored, just read one of your chick books.”

At that, she crumpled her nose. “I swear, my seven-year olds are more mature than you, sometimes,” she told me.

“You can’t be serious,” I retorted. “You’re the one *making crafts*.”

She threw the rag to the floor and turned, hurried back to our room. I started after her, but decided to give her the space to air her feelings out.

From that point forward, unfortunately, all Natalie seemed to want from me was space.

She used it to craft.

After what became a semi-awkward weekend visit, she started again--and, over the next year and a half, her projects continued to take over the apartment. Most visibly, they spread on the walls. They were like a cutesy mold: first homemade wreaths, then framed napkin art, then watercolor plates, until there was almost no more visible wallpaper. I also started to find small changes in every nook of every room. At one point, as I tried to open the bathroom cabinet, I noticed that the handle had been replaced by a piece of quartz. At another, when I wanted to charge my phone, I found the switch plate decorated with seashells.

It didn’t take long for me to feel like a stranger in my living space. As the home I’d built for myself was replaced, piece-by-piece, by foreign material, everything began to feel slightly *wrong*. It was like I was in a *Coraline*-esque, alternate version of my apartment. It was pretty, sure--but it was skewed.

I could hardly focus. I could never relax. I tried for a long time to tolerate the anxiety, prickly as it was--but it peaked one May afternoon when I hid under the bed covers. I just needed to escape the crafts. Their gaze was all encompassing.

Breathing alone in the darkness, though, I had to confront another uncomfortable truth.

The comment that Natalie had made about keeping occupied had made me suspect, initially, that she was hinting at wanting more attention. That didn't seem fair, though, since she was the one now withdrawing from me; she never touched me, anymore, or even made eye contact. She barely responded when I asked about work. She claimed to be tired of *Stranger Things* and instead spent every evening alone, in our room.

She was crafting, of course. I didn't know how she was making so many things in such little time, but I also didn't want to see it. Too often, I fell asleep on the couch.

Later, I considered that she was spiting me for ever asking her to tone it down. But that seemed like too much of a swelling overreaction to be possible. The digs that I'd made, hung-over in our kitchen, hadn't been the fairest; still, in my mind, I'd been making room for our relationship to grow. Why was she responding by digging us a grave?

It really seemed as if my rebuilding of my relationship with my family had, in turn, doomed my romantic one--as if I weren't allowed to have both. I started to wonder if I should call our Internet provider and have them block Pinterest.

But crying silently in the dark belly of the bed, I knew that that wouldn't help, either. It'd been clear to me, deep down, what Natalie had been doing. She didn't want me anymore, and so she was trying to repossess the apartment--the one my father had bought *me*, after I'd passed all of my courses--by building it

out from under me. This was an artistic masturbation: a statement that she wanted to do not only these crafts by herself, but everything else in life, too.

My eyes stung harder when my phone lit up, by my head. I grabbed it, squinted at the new message. Tommy had asked me: *how do u poach an egg?*

I hit call.

“Dude, I’m losing my mind,” I told him.

“What’s up?”

“Guess where I am.”

“Are you...” He paused. “Under the covers?”

For a moment, I wondered if he could see me, too. I experienced a buzz of fear before remembering that things were different, now.

“Yup,” I told him.

I heard him shift around. Something metallic hit a counter.

“Geez. So, Natty’s still being weird?” he asked.

“Well, she always was *weird*, but, like... am I an idiot? What did I do?”

“When did it start?”

I struggled to swallow. My throat felt crammed, rusty with over a year of unspoken words.

“Actually, around when you and Kevin first came over,” I admitted. “We had our first fight where we never really made up.”

“...Fuck,” Tommy said. He let out a drooping sigh. “Well, now, I just feel bad.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think Kevin and I made her jealous.”

“Huh?” I said. And then I realized, with pain in my chest, what he was talking about.

He started again. “Have you guys ever even talked about-”

“No.”

“And how long-”

“Seven years.” I coughed. “We also live together, and we love each other. Why isn’t that enough?”

“Well, there are benefits to marriage.”

“For gays? Yeah, let me know when you find some.”

Tommy laughed. “Well... I’d offer you a place to stay, for a bit,” he told me, “But it’s a huge mess, right now.”

“Why?”

“We’re moving.”

“Oh, shit. Where?”

“Norway.”

It’d already been stuffy under the covers, but my shock made the air ten times denser as he admitted, “We’ll be there in about a month.”

“Goddamnit, Thomas,” I scolded him. “Why don’t you ever tell us anything?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and I heard him flicking his finger against the edge of a table: a nervous tic of his.

“It’s just that... we didn’t want to tell anyone until... we got confirmation.”

“It’s a house,” I said. “Not a baby.”

The snapping sound increased. “I mean...” he started.

I felt electric shocks all over.

“Tommy?” I demanded.

“I guess I have to tell you.”

“Are you having a kid?”

“...A Norwegian girl,” he said, and the words were like a splash of holy water.

All stuffy feelings distilled as I started to tear up, again, realizing that I was going to be an aunt.

We didn’t say anything more for a while. He knew I was still there by my deep breathing; I knew he was still there by the sound of water starting to boil.

“We just want a simple life,” he admitted. “We realized that we both had this dream of buying some property, starting a little farm somewhere. A little family.”

I nodded. He couldn’t see it, but I felt he’d know.

“Are you still working?” I asked.

“I can do my job from anywhere, pretty much, as long as I make sure I can get a signal. So I’ll support us until Kevin finds something,” he explained. “We’ve figured it all out. We’ll be going to the mountains, Sophie. I... know you might not approve, or think it’s a bad call, but we just really need to get away from society. I don’t know how to explain it beyond... well, God knows it never did me any good.”

My next breath felt like my first ever.

“I think it’s incredible, Tommy,” I told him. “I’ll have to come visit.”

“Well, if you want, Dad’s booked to come in October, right after we’re supposed to get her.”

“Oh.” I slinked over to one side. “Dad knew...?”

“Well, yeah. The agency contacted him. For my background check.”

Though shorter, the next silence felt much more stretched and strained.

“How’d that go?” I asked.

“...Great,” he admitted. His voice was warping, a little, in the hot moment. “Dad said he thinks this daughter is exactly what I deserve. He was really, really, happy.”

“Yeah,” I said. My insides turned to liquid heat, too, as I thought back to that little sister that never was. “So am I.”

“Anyway,” Tommy said, clearing his throat. “If you really need to escape your apartment, you can always come visit, earlier. I mean... maybe in a couple months?”

I agreed to bring up the idea to Natty.

Later that night, he e-mailed me the translated file on his soon-to-be-daughter.

*Name: Leila*

*Age: 14*

*My favourite movie: To All the Boys I've Loved Before*

*I like learning about: Animals and plants.*

*I am great at: Painting, crocheting, swimming.*

*Something I would love to do with my family is: Go to the beach, collect seashells.*

*When I grow up, I want to be: A conservation scientist.*

He’d also attached a photo: Leila had bright red hair and a smile like a glimpse into Eden. She was holding a small, pretty painting of water lilies.

I had a lot of questions, of course--but they were all blown out by how much I already loved this girl.

When I brought up the idea of a July trip to Natalie, though, she suggested it might be better for us to spend some time apart. This meant, of course, that I was now obligated to go that month and to go alone. I was devastated. I'd wanted to share the experience with her; I'd thought a new environment might even help our relationship. Above all, I wanted her to eventually meet Leila, because as a teacher and an adoptee, herself, I knew she'd be able to really connect with the girl. But the news of the adoption barely seemed to excite her.

I almost forgot my hurt when Tommy and Kevin picked me up from the airport and took me up to their new home. The mountains were gold-sprinkled green, the air so fresh that I felt it passed right through me, cleaned me from the inside out. My hosts were eager to show off, too: they took me hiking, canoeing, and shopping in the nearest town. Tommy got me to try the prune ice cream at a shop he liked, and I bought a cute little poncho and paintbrush set for Leila. Later on, he showed me how to feed the goats that had come with the property, and he told me about how they were planning to expand: chickens first, then a couple of cows, maybe some pigs or sheep. We had goat cheese before every meal.

Out of fear of ruining the whole lucid dream, I didn't ask any serious questions until my final night in Norway. Tommy had cooked roast beef with some of the many herbs and spices lining the kitchen shelves; we ate at the round, antique table I'd admired all week. It was as he stood and grabbed our empty plates that I decided I couldn't put it off anymore.

"So, what about your family?" I turned to Kevin, starting easy. "Are they coming, at any point?"

Kevin shook his head. "I've been cut off... since marrying Thomas," he explained.

"Oh," I said, my face going flush. "Sorry, I—"

"S'okay."

“His real family’ll be right here,” Tommy told me as he reached the sink.

I nodded. “And how do you feel...” I was determined to change the subject, “About raising someone only ten years younger than you?”

At that, my brother turned back toward me.

“It is kinda weird, right?” he admitted, scratching at the edge of the plates with his thumb. “But I figure, you pretty much raised me, and you were only four years older.”

Tenderness poured through me like warm bath water.

“But how’s her English?” I managed, only once he’d placed the plates in the sink.

“Really good,” he told me, washing. “We’ll have her take more courses. And, obviously, we’re learning-”

“Courses, where?”

Tommy cleared his throat. “Well, since we’re all the way up here,” he said, “we’re gonna have her do online school.”

I blinked. “Just for the English?” I asked. “Or everything?”

“Everything.”

“Tommy. You can’t make her do all her school from here.”

He turned off the tap, leaned his back on the counter.

“I don’t know what else we could do,” he said.

“I know things are far,” I said. “But parenting’s about sacrifices, right? It might really be worth it for her to at least try to commute. At least give her options.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. Take her to the nearest place. Let her see if she likes it. At least take her for a tour,” I said. I stood up and looked down, to Kevin, for backup; he only shifted a questioning look back to Tommy. “A fourteen year old girl needs friends,” I insisted. “She wants to start dating. She deserves that experience.”

Tommy sighed. “I know, Sophie.” His voice had shattered, a bit, at the tip. “I’m just worried.”

“About what?”

He shifted his weight. “The boys,” he admitted. “Cause, like... I was a teenage boy, not too long ago.” A ball of dust formed in my throat.

“Most boys are harmless,” I told him. “I understand your... worry, but it’s not like-”

“You sure about that?” he countered. “With how the media is, nowadays? Girls are expected to look like fucking Instagram models by the time they’re thirteen.”

The dust built further throughout my body. Knowing now that Tommy’s reservations were a result of his progress, I wasn’t sure I wanted to keep fighting them.

“I just don’t want them looking at her like that,” he continued.

“At least think about it,” I said.

That was the end of my attempt--but the awkwardness had already set around us like the mountain’s evening dew. I soon excused myself back to Leila’s future room, and, not too long after going to bed, heard more hushed arguing.

The boys were being quiet enough that I couldn’t tell what they were saying--I even worried, at first, that they knew I was listening--but I could easily guess the topic of their conflict. While I felt bad for having caused it, I was also happy to learn that Kevin had taken to my concerns. When I finally did manage to make

out a string of words, though--a tight and rough, "we're not taking her, that's final" from Tommy--I somehow sunk further into the lemon-scented mattress.

Save for the birds, it was quiet the next morning when I left the bed. I pulled into the bright and empty kitchen, tried to figure out how to work the European coffee machine.

Once I got it to make noise, I heard a groan in the living room. I turned and saw Kevin sleeping on the couch. *It must have been a really bad fight*, I realized. It was also a bit weird to learn that my brother wore the pants in his relationship.

"You're up first." I heard him approach, from behind me, just as I was taking the mug in my hands. "Call the media." I felt his hand on my upper back.

"Sorry if I woke you," I chuckled, turned to him. My face still felt sticky with sleep as I spoke. Similarly, Tommy's face was bright pink, like a newborn's. "Travel makes me anxious."

"S'okay," he said. "Do you want some food for the trip?"

"I'll be okay, but thanks, Elroy," I said. The old nickname made him smirk.

I felt silky inside as I sat back at the table, knowing things were back to normal between us--that the previous night had only been a speed bump. I figured that those always inevitably appeared, when one sped into things like marriage and parenthood and farming. But even if they were *not taking her, that's final*, I knew things would ultimately be okay.

After hugging me at the airport, Tommy told me to have a safe trip, and that he'd do his best.

#

I didn't want to leave. I knew what would be waiting for me, back in reality; as I boarded, part of me even hoped to crash and 'DIY'.

But I was back at the apartment at about nine that night. Pulling my suitcase through the doorway, I called to her, but the following silence was pure and whole. It was like even the kitchen appliances were holding their breath out of pity.

As expected, there was a card on the kitchen table. It was made out of printer paper; I supposed that there wasn't an *I'm leaving you* section at Hallmark.

The card's title--my name--had been harshly underlined. I was surprised that Natty hadn't just crossed it out: *'Sophie' is not the answer I was looking for, she'd be saying. Seven years have been deducted from your life.*

But the card didn't even say that much.

*You know I'm sorry,* was all that she'd written.

*All the best.*

I read the scrawny message about five times before looking back up. And when I saw the wall, I sat down in defeat.

"She left me," I said, out loud. "And she left her fucking DIYs."

I moved to a new place, just out of the city, as soon as I was able. It'd be a much longer commute to the birding store--but the remnants of Natalie, literally all over our apartment, were just too painful on my eyes. I already had the internal remnants to deal with: that constant image of her little tan face with the huge brown irises.

So, I uninstalled half of her decor, and I sold the place for twice its value to a middle-aged mom with blond kids.

I received another letter, in the mail, only a few days before leaving. I knew that it was from her, too, because of the way that she'd underlined my name. But I didn't open it. I was afraid she'd realized her first message was too brief and had now provided a list of everything wrong with me. *You're a burden. You're directionless. I want children, not a child.* I stuffed the letter under the mattress of my new twin bed, told myself that I'd open it when I was emotionally ready.

I spent the next four months bingeing episodes of Dr. Phil, not answering work e-mails, and getting annoyed at people with slow dogs on the sidewalk.

It was only one evening when I was wine-drunk, watching an episode about a man who'd asked for a divorce via fridge magnet alphabet, that I gathered the courage to call. As my cheap new phone rang in my ear, I rehearsed my speech: *Okay, maybe I have abandonment issues. I might be afraid to commit. But why couldn't you just work with me on that? And did I have to be the one to propose just 'cause I was the top, or something?* The words turned to salt in my mouth, though, when her mother answered.

"Hello?" came Dorothy's unmistakable voice. It was always overly bubbly--mostly because it was always full of rosé.

"Uh, is Natalie there?" I asked. "Sorry, I thought I'd dialed her cell."

"Who's this?"

"Sophie."

"Sophie. Oh, hon. You didn't get my letter?"

...*What?* Pulse thumping in my face, I wobbled over to my bedroom. I dove my hand under the mattress.

Looking the crumpled envelope back over, I realized that the handwriting did not belong to Natty. After seeing that distinctly harsh underline, I hadn't ever bothered to look closer.

Where else would she have learned passive-aggression, though, but from her mother?

*I'm writing to inform you that Natalie isn't well, Dorothy had written. If you have any information about why that might be, please be in contact. And tell me how long this has been going on. Were you aware that she quit her job a year ago? Why was she crying about cars 'constantly stopping to look' at your apartment building (isn't there a stop sign out front)?*

*I suppose it doesn't matter much, anymore. If you'd like to go see her, she's been placed at an institution. 35 Willow Dr, in Dunstville.*

The angry fizzing in my ear had given up and gone--was replaced by dial tone--by the time I reached the next paragraph. Dorothy had gone on to imply that I'd somehow ruined her daughter. That it'd be clear I'd done it on purpose, if I didn't give her the decency of a visit. I stared at the letter for another while, still holding the phone to my ear. I became so accustomed to the noise that it became my whole self. I was low, flat, painful dial tone.

I stopped going to work, after that night. I slept constantly, trying to avoid what I had done.

The signs of Natalie's mental illness had been everywhere I looked. They'd been so bright, so colorful; even her mother had caught on to them, as soon as they'd approached. Yet, for a year and a half, I could only believe that she was trying to send me a message--that her home decor was deeply meaningful, somehow. But it hadn't been about me. It hadn't been about anything, because he'd been functioning irrationally. The poor girl had been just like her art: pretty, but skewed.

And my self-centeredness had failed her. I'd let her symptoms spiral, because I'd only thought about how they affected me. This, I now realized; yet, like an ugly infection, my selfishness continued to build. In

the end, in my head, this tragedy was still all about me, because I couldn't handle the feeling of a woman leaving without logical reason.

I became trapped in the rings, trapped in this cycle of guilt for another few years. It was the loneliest time of my life. I couldn't bear to see Dad, couldn't have him know that I'd sold the apartment. I thought, several times, about going back to Norway; then, I always remembered that I should be visiting Natalie, instead, or at least first. And so, I never did either.

The second skin-scraping call came when I was thirty-one and in bed, eating Ben & Jerry's Chocolate Therapy. It was the only kind of therapy I could still afford and also one of my personal performances of depression. Lying there, with a cold spoon in my mouth and two old, empty tubs at my feet, I could have been an art student's tableau.

"Come home," sobbed my father into the phone. I'd been fearing this moment: the point at which his disappointment would come out wet.

His eyes were burnt out by the time I reached him. His cheeks were almost concave--literally depressed. He seemed malnourished, like his desperate body was now trying to eat him from the outside in. In my selfish way, the sight cushioned my fear that he'd comment on my unbrushed hair. I entered without a word and went to the couch. This time, there was no tea.

"I know you're upset," I tried, the words drying up as they reached my mouth. I realized I didn't know when I'd last said so many words out loud. "It's had nothing to do--"

"This isn't about you," Dad said as he sat across from me. He ran his hands up and down his face. A leafy stem of confusion formed in my chest.

"What, then?" I asked.

“I’m sure you’re very tired from your drive, and so I’m not going to make you wait any more,” he said. The shaking in his voice had become more condensed. “I called you over to say Leila is dead.”

For a while, there was no couch beneath me. There was no coffee table, no person on the other side. I was sitting on, surrounded only by white pain.

“What do you mean?” I croaked. She was seventeen. How could she be dead?

“The authorities were here today,” he said. “The Norwegian police were in contact because... about a month ago, a group of hikers found her body.”

I couldn’t really place what happened, next, or for how long I was sobbing. Dad ceased to exist again until I managed to get a weak hook on myself.

“What happened?” I murmured.

“They think...” he started again, “It was an accident. Head injury. She probably fell against a table or something.”

“No.”

“But, Sophie...” His voice started to rattle again--a painful sound, like his brain was a broken engine--  
“It wasn’t just an innocent accident.”

My whole self began to curl.

“It took them this long to figure out who she was,” he said, “Because she’d already been decomposing for months.”

Something in me broke.

“Thomas and Kevin didn’t ever report her as missing,” he told me, and then he started to cry again, too. “No one... in the world was looking for her. Oh, god...”

I stood up, walked to the far wall of the living room. I pushed myself against it, staring out the window.

“What did he do to her?” I whispered. A moment later, “What was he doing to her?”

“They found him,” was all that Dad said.

I sunk to the floor.

“I never visited,” I said. I started to fall back off my mental cliff. I held myself, overwhelmed. “I never even met her.”

“...She was a gift.”

“I should have been there,” I continued. “He gave back in to his old thinking... he gave back in... I didn’t...”

“Sophie,” Dad interrupted, his words throaty and whole. “It wasn’t old thinking.”

An uglier reality took my face in its claws. It forced my neck, slowly, back toward my father.

“What do you mean?” I shivered.

He walked over to me. He knelt down, placed his hands on my shoulders.

“Remember when I had those sites blocked?” he asked, his eyes gleaming white. “I thought I’d gotten it to stop. I thought it was over.” It was like I was the parent, and he the child, begging me for forgiveness.

“But he was good with computers, Sophie.”

I was off of the cliff again. I was flooding.

“All those years, he was just encrypting everything, looking at things privately,” Dad said. “Still talking to those people. Talking to Kevin.”

I whimpered, digging my fingers into my sides. Dad stood, started toward the kitchen. “Kevin... had been sucked into that whole culture because he lacked confidence,” he said. “That’s why Tommy zeroed in on him. Made him his... sidekick.”

Soon back at my side, he handed me a piece of paper. I recognized my brother’s writing style immediately-- and, just as immediately, I recognized that this single page was supremely worse than the stack I’d read eight years prior.

*It’ll be easier if we’re legally married, Tommy had written. Fuck it. I want to do it. I’m willing to let my family think I’m gay and won’t have to totally cut them off. We’ll just take her to some secluded property and she’ll literally be ours. I know you’re also not into girls of the younger breed... but it’ll be way easier to get one that’s passed puberty, anyway.*

*It’s obviously still super risky, but it’s not like we have much to lose. To me, the pros outweigh the cons. I’m already ready to kill myself. Might as well delay it until I’m in jail, lol. Plus, if we do get away with it, that’ll just make it so much better. It’ll have so much fucking meaning.*

I was stupid, I realized, my brain going slippery. I was stupid. I was stupid. I’d fallen for everything. Fallen for it. He pretended. He didn’t care. About her. Me. Girls. This time. All of it. I should have thought. I could have thought harder. He’d been so good. He said he’d keep her safe. Oh god. He said. He’d spent all this time. Listened. Held my hand. He said he was gay. I’d cried. He was grateful for what I’d said. His epiphany. He lied. He wasn’t gay. He didn’t love me. I thought it was true. In the car. I’d thought I’d gotten through. I didn’t do good enough. I thought. That moment...

I fell over. I couldn’t breathe. My throat was its own choking grip.

“Sophie, please. Don’t make yourself sick,” my father begged, from somewhere above me. He tried to touch me. “You’re scaring me,” he said, his voice loud and clanging, when I scattered away.

But it was too late. Chocolate brown chunks--hot, now--came up my throat and down onto the carpet as that conversation in my car further unfolded in my mind.

I realized that up until just now, I’d still been wrong. I’d still been making things convenient for myself. Because worse than the realization that Tommy had been lying was the one that he hadn’t lied about everything. It hadn’t all been fake. Something that I’d told him that night had, in fact, helped him and inspired him.

He’d only lied about what that thing was.

I collapsed further as I thought about what I’d said to him, near the end of that long talk. I had done this. I’d given him the idea.

“Sophie,” my father tried again, a few moments later, as I was forcing myself to a shaky stand. “I’m going to call an ambulance if you don’t calm down.”

But I ran. I hurried across the living room, to the kitchen, and around to the back hallway. I ignored the voice behind me; by now, I only had two phrases in my mind. *He wasn’t fully lying. This is my fault. He wasn’t fully lying. This is my fault.* By the time that I reached our bedrooms, I understood the words for their deepest meaning. They were written all over my body; the ink had reached my blood. And so I ran past my room. I went into Tommy’s.

I locked the door and turned on the light. The room had been emptied, but Tommy still lingered. There was his old desk lamp, a textbook, a crumpled water bottle. I took a breath, slipped off my cardigan,

and walked over to his closet. There were still some old clothes of his hanging there. I pushed them aside, making room.

In the slow, sluggish minutes that followed, a distant piece of me could still hear the noises at the door. For the most part, though, I was nothing but the new mantra in my head.

*Oh, Tommy, it whimpered. Why did you have to love me? Why, still?*

*Why couldn't you have agreed with Kevin and just taken me, instead?*

End

## Appendix

This story was inspired by the following Internet post:

Take the adoption pill. Dunno why so many incels seem opposed to this idea. First find a fellow incel and "marry" him legally. Then, go to an adoption center and adopt a baby or a child female. Slowly raise her over time. When she becomes pubescent, both of you should try approaching her sexually. If she resists, then force yourself onto her, telling her that if she reports the incident or screams, you'd dispose of her. Congratulations, you've just created your own sex slave for many years to come. It's important to go to a remote area by the way once you begin your actual "intentions." Over time she probably will be attracted to both of you. If necessary, adopt 2 girls for each incel. Thank me later.