

2023-05-01

## She Poses on a Wailing Stage

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SHE POSES ON A WAILING STAGE

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## **Dedication**

For Soyoung Ro, because of her hushed but ever-present support.

SHE POSES ON A WAILING STAGE

by

KARA M. HOLLOWELL, B.S

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2023

## **Acknowledgements**

Special thanks and regards to the department of Creative Writing at the University of Texas at El Paso. To my director, Professor Aguilar who always challenged and guided me. My committee members Professor Eraldo E Chiechi and Jessica Powers for their wonderful and detailed advice. And to my thesis chair Tim Z Hernandez for putting up with my never-ending questions and concerns and going above and beyond to assist me in structure and formatting.

I would like to also thank Roxanne Gay whose words gave me more strength than I knew I ever possessed.

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## PREFACE

### Resilience and the Structure of Trauma Narratives

#### The Scope and Me

*She Poses on a Wailing Stage* is a work of autofiction that is part epistolary and part bildungsroman. The main protagonist Charlotte is for me a vessel to channel my thoughts on the aftermath of an abusive relationship I found myself trapped. *She Poses on a Wailing Stage* is a story that, at its core, is about a woman overcoming the negative effects of loneliness and becoming an active agent in her escape with the help of a support system to obtain a more fulfilling and truthful life. My goal of this novel is to challenge the perception of abused women and women who wind up as muses as passive in their abuse. I want to put on paper the reality of silent, feminine resilience that is too often mistaken for passivity. I am creating a work that highlights the severity of loneliness and what it means to live with Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

I was diagnosed with PTSD, in February 2021. It came as a shock as I thought, only veterans and those who suffered immense suffering in some awful war or attack could live with this disorder. However, Complex PTSD results from years of on-going trauma that over time changes the function of the brain. For me, I experienced years of abuse by the hands of my mother and later the man who half inspired this novel. Charlotte, similarly, suffers deeply and silently over the abandonment of her father and the incarceration of her mother, leaving her as a teenager a practically an orphan. Then, when she is later controlled and abused by Marcus, her mental health further deteriorates.

As I was receiving feedback on the first drafts of the novel, many people asked questions along the line of “well, why would she stay with him if he’s so awful?” But because he is awful



is sadly what attracts Charlotte to him. Her brain is so used to abuse and abandonment that his behavior is a comfort, it's just like home so to speak. Abuse is a cycle that can be repeated if left without treatment "If the people whom you naturally turn to for care terrify you or reject you, you learn to shut down and to ignore what you feel...Managing terror all by yourself gives rise to another set of problems: disassociation, despair, addictions, a chronic sense of pain, and relationships that are marked by alienation, disconnection, and explosions." (Van Der Kolk 213) This was important for me to show. Charlotte already had years of trauma before her relationship with Marcus. People who experience mental illness before entering an abusive relationship are not going to be able to detect the red flags as easily, because they were never shown the green ones in childhood.

Being mindful that this is partly my own story, one that includes a great deal of past suffering, I took advice from writer Roxane Gay, who has written several works of non-fiction dealing with her personal experiences and traumas. In her short story *Writing into the Wound*, she puts forth a guide on how one can make the most out of their writing, without being weighed down by the act of confession:

Not all writing about trauma is created equal. As with most subjects, writers can be careless with trauma. They can be solipsistic. They can write concerned only with what they need to say and not with what an audience might need to hear. They assume that their trauma, in and of itself, is the only story they need to tell, or that having experienced trauma is inherently interesting. Or trauma serves as pornography—way of titillating the reader, a lazy way of creating narrative tension, as if it is only through suffering that we have a story to tell. We see trauma as it unfolds but are rarely given a broader understanding of that trauma or its aftermath. (Gay 18)

I am creating a novel about Charlotte who has similar experiences to me, and while I have created her, I have kept in mind Gay's words; to keep her a whole person, with both trauma and healing as an equal player in the work. Sympathy and pity are not the goals, but awareness is at the front line.

Charlotte in the first half of the novel is desperate for connection, especially with other women. She is stuck in an emotionally and verbally abusive relationship with her husband Marcus, a man who believes a woman's sole purpose in life should be motherhood. Charlotte makes it clear through her other relationships mainly with Ruby and Soyoung, side characters who support and receive support from Charlotte, and her letters that this has never been an ambition of hers. Her interest and work as an Art History professor and all personal desires have taken a back seat priority to this outside pressure to conform to Marcus's ideals of proper femininity. It is not until she forms true friendships and allyships that she begins to remember who she was before Marcus's control. Systems of support are, after all, a key role in healing.

The literary themes of isolation and connection, and imprisonment and freedom play a huge role in each of the characters' lives. Charlotte is escaping from abuse and isolation, her mother is incarcerated in the prison system for possession of drugs, Ruby, is escaping from her addiction to alcohol, and Soyoung felt imprisoned by grief when she lost her daughter. All the female characters in the novel demonstrate strength and resilience in distinctly different ways. This is because each woman faces her own challenge, and found her own way, along with support, to find hope.

## Literary Devices and Negative Representation

With *She Poses on a Wailing Stage* I'm pushing back against the "unhinged woman" trope that seems to be on the rise in contemporary literary novels. There is even a list of books featuring this trope on the app *Goodreads*. Some of these novels include titles such as *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by Ottessa Moshfeg, *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang, and *Tender is the Night* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. These novels feature women who are mentally ill, but this fact takes a back seat as we watch the women commit atrocious acts of violence on others and themselves. The women themselves are less characters and more literary devices in their novels. In *Tender is the Night*, for example, Nicole Driver's mental illness is used as a plot twist to highlight her husband's tragic life, rather than focusing on Nicole's traumas that have led to her becoming so depressed. Nicole's illness is framed as merely an inconvenience to everyone else, which is to me a fatal flaw in its representation of trauma survivors. These fictional novels are thrilling reads but they do not garner much realism towards what is it like for the large majority of people like myself, who live with repeated trauma and mental illness. It can also walk the line of being quite offensive when characters who have mental illnesses are continuously described as being dangerous or 'unhinged'. I imagined a more realistic and sympathetic view of trauma and pain. One that does not involve forcing my main character into an overly dramatized psychotic break simply to move the plot along or to create tension.

One of the most important literary elements in the novel is Charlotte's letters. She shows strength and defiance against Marcus and lets us know that she is aware of what is going on, despite her past traumas and current abuse prohibiting her from always taking immediate action. Here is a selection from chapter 13, she writes this letter after finally admitting to Marcus that she would like to terminate their pregnancy.

Marcus hasn't loved me in a long time. But weirdly, I love him very much. He's as hard and prickly as a cactus. Inside he is a cold slush of desert milk. I've never seen a man compulsively shake before. I don't know why, but it made me love him more. I wanted to hold him close, press him inside of me. He said nothing about what I told him, in the same way, I'm sure you will say nothing. I fear he is pretending not to have heard. He's done that before.

Charlotte is completely aware of the severity of her situation. She is understanding of Marcus and his heavy feelings. She is not passive at this moment, she is accepting. Actively taking responsibility for the hurt feelings in the room, yet still planning to move forward with her own life.

I wanted to highlight this reality of verbal and emotional domestic abuse: it takes several brave attempts to build up the courage to leave for good: "Most abused women leave multiple times before permanently leaving their abusive relationships. Furthermore, studies suggest that women face both internal (e.g., profound attachment to abusers) and external (e.g., lack of social support) barriers to leaving. Despite these barriers, most abused women do leave, and they actively engage in help-seeking and protective strategies to keep themselves and their children safe." (Bermea 988) Charlotte loves Marcus and before meeting Ruby and Soyoung, she did not have anyone to turn to when things went sour. However, by the end of the novel her support systems are her strength, and she finally is able to leave. Charlotte actively pursues friendships and her role as the muse of the artist Eva O'Donnell's life. And once she feels security with these external support systems, she makes attempts to leave right before the readers' eyes.

When I was twenty, my abuser assaulted me in an attempt to impregnate me to keep me stuck in the relationship, to keep me fully attached to him. He moved me to a new city and I had

nowhere to turn. He insisted what he wanted was a family and that I should be so lucky to have such a family-oriented man like him. He inspired the characterization of Marcus. On the surface, Marcus has many appealing qualities. He loves children, he takes on the homemaker role that is typically handled by women, and he believes he is doing right by Charlotte's mental health. Here is an example from chapter 4, when Marcus acts like an anchor for Charlotte to latch onto when she is feeling anxious.

“Are you alright, darling?” Marcus taps his knuckles on the bathroom door. All the men in the house have gone outside to play basketball or at least stand around the front driveway, talking about basketball. Something more masculine than standing in the kitchen watching children fuss and spittle. He continues in a whisper, in fear that his sisters might be leaning their ears around the corner. “Luka’s a little prick, isn’t he?” They laugh and Charlotte finally allows tears of relief to stroll down her cheek. that displays this false affection, and how it can be hard for the abused partner to be tricked and sucked in by moments of blissful attention.

These moments of pure happiness and affection are brief yet powerfully contrast his typical outwardly abusive behavior. Charlotte, like me, like many abused women, often overlooks the bad, the abusive behavior, because these moments of bliss feel so good in the moment. The emotional rollercoaster is a thrilling ride that feels impossible to get off of,, until you have someone on the side holding out their hand, helping you step out of the cart.

Narratives about abusive relationships are often told in disjointed vignettes or prose that help to highlight the chaotic nature of the relationship. Novels such as *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado and *When the World Breaks Open* by Seema Reza, both utilize this to lay out the memoirs of their time in an abusive relationship. Memory loss or warped memories

are also a side effect of trauma, the brain's response to keep the body safe. “Traumatic memories are fundamentally different from the stories we tell about the past. They are dissociated: The different sensations that entered the brain at the time of the trauma are not properly assembled into a story, a piece of autobiography” (Van Der Kolk 196). It makes a lot of sense then, a broken-down narrative style would lend itself to highlighting the gravity of the intense, often disgusting abuses. However, this is not the route I’ve taken. I’ve always wanted to float above myself, to watch it unfold and get a chance to marvel at the resilience I, and other survivors had. I wanted to watch Charlotte, step by excruciating step, get the help she deserves. This is why I decided to write *She Poses on a Wailing Stage* in a more traditionally linear narrative, utilizing the genre of autofiction to fill in fictional gaps of my personal account.

I first came across the term autofiction when I was studying Herta Muller’s work in a feminist poetry course. “autofiction – a term first introduced by Serge Doubrovsky with reference to his novel *Fils* (1977)—and consider it to be a mode of writing that allows biographical elements to be woven within the coherent fabric of the fictional world and to serve as starting points for the author’s creative work.” (Shopin 199) Charlotte lives with C-PTSD, it is a disorder that is not yet recognized in the current DSM, but petitions to include it in official diagnostics manual are underway. I have C-PTSD, and I am diagnosed with PTSD. This means the care that is available to us is not fully represented and may be limited depending on who the care provider is, because of the proper diagnostic reference. Doctor Bessel Van Der Kolk discusses this exclusion of C-PTSD in *The Body Keeps the Score*: “The DSM and the entire system based on it fail victims of child abuse and neglect- just as they ignored the plight of veterans before PTSD was introduced in 1980.” (Van Der Kolk 145) Diagnosis is a powerful tool to help patients receive proper care. When people like me and Charlotte, who have both childhood and adult trauma cannot receive

representation in the medical world, what can happen is a mess of improper medication and self-hatred. I have this thought that if I cannot find representation there, I might as well write something that can serve as a piece of art that draws awareness to the very real disorder.

Charlotte developed C-PTSD from her mother's drug abuse and ultimate incarceration. Charlotte was an abandoned child who was hungry for love and belonging, a family. That is how Marcus is so easily able to convince her to leave her life behind and move with him to a new city. His intentions were to isolate her from her mother, who Charlotte remains in contact with through letters. Marcus ultimately eliminates this small connection as well, by hiding the letters once he fears Charlotte might be sharing too much about his abusive behavior.

In *She Poses on a Wailing Stage* I have used two kinds of images to guide Charlotte's characterization. There are specific visuals that represent trauma survivors and their suffering, and concrete images that the characters interact with that show hints of Charlotte's inner world outside of her letters. According to *Method and Madness* specific visuals are "Limiting or limited. Peculiar to, or characteristic of something." (LaPlante 62) whereas concrete images are "Characterized by things or events that can be perceived by the senses." (62). They are similar in function but create different responses in the reader. Charlotte counting the tiles of the floor after being scolded by her husband is a form of specific visual that helps the reader understand she is self-soothing, and the other characters are not able to see this.

The first important, concrete image is the literal image of the painting: *The Taming of the Witch*, which is named and inspired by Shakespeare's play *Taming of the Shrew*. This play shows a sexist portrayal of a shrewish, unmarried woman, who the whole town decides must be married, in order to fix her perceived bad behavior. Bad behavior is simply characterized by being outspoken and being disinterested in men. If Katherine in that play had run away from the

judgmental town and her intended husband, Petruchio who bullied, criticized, and ridiculed her, we would get the painting created in *She Poses on a Waling Stage*. It is a specific image of how Charlotte wants to run away from her situation, how she no longer wishes to be judged by those around her but feels she is not in the position of power to actually leave.

### **Literary Devices and Positive Representation**

Charlotte's story begins about two or three years into her marriage. The abuse has already cemented itself into the couple's routines. Charlotte has been coerced into leaving her job and her home state of New York and has become isolated in Chicago, where Marcus's entire family lives. Isolation of course is another tactic for abusers to maintain control. Loneliness is a major theme of the novel. Charlotte has lost herself while trying to blend into Marcus's idealization of her. Loneliness has major psychological effects that can lead to more severe mental health problems.

The short story collections *The Lonely City* by Olivia Laing and *No One Belongs Here More Than You* by Miranda July highlight the many ways in which isolated people suffer and struggle for connection. In the story *Walls of Glass* in *The Lonely City*, Laing discusses Edward Hopper's paintings and his volatile relationship with his wife. "They had frequent rows, particularly over his attitude to her paintings and her desire to drive their car, both potent symbols of autonomy and power...The silence of Hopper's paintings becomes more toxic after the revelation of how violently he worked to suppress and check his wife." (Laing 38) I was inspired after reading this story and as I developed Charlotte's character and made her into an art history professor, I wrote a short scene in chapter 14 she briefly discusses with one of her



students Hopper's work and influence. "Yes, it is. But it's also quite sad, actually." Charlotte replies with a kind smile still plastered across her face... The isolation of it all. Not to mention the suffering of his wife. We'll take a look closely at Hopper's personal life in week five." It is bitterly ironic for the reader because they will have already witnessed Charlotte's isolation and abuse. Art from the beginning was another safety net, and when she was convinced to leave behind her interest, she lost herself in Marcus's whims.

*No One Belongs Here More than You* is a short story collection by Miranda July that showcases a series of people, mostly women, who battle with anxieties induced by isolation and loneliness. The collection gave me a lot of inspiration on how to portray Charlotte's quirks and desperations. In one of the stories, *Making Love in 2003*, I was drawn to how July crafted a story of a lonely girl, desperate yet scared to experience romantic or sexual desire. When she finally obtains human contact, even though it is slight and meaningless to the other person in the room, the character is overwhelmed with joy: "I said I had broken up with my boyfriend over a year ago and still regretted it. She bludgeoned me with a look of such limitless compassion that I immediately began to cry. I wondered briefly if she would adopt me or hire me as her assistant or become my lesbian lover." (July 118) These moments of connection, which finally free her from isolation inspired me to craft strong side characters that would become important life-savers for Charlotte. Ruby and Soyoung are the most important side characters of the novel. They become genuine friends to Charlotte and act as her support as she manages to finally leave Marcus for good. Ruby is a recovering alcoholic who encourages Charlotte to seek help, and Soyoung is an expressive tattoo artist who teaches Charlotte the importance of bodily autonomy.

After the climax of the Novel, when Charlotte finally admits to Marcus that she does not want to have children with him, she chooses to receive an abortion. This is the start of their

ending, but there are still several challenges she must overcome. Including finding out that all this time, the letters she has been writing to her incarcerated mother, the very letters the reader has been reading, were hidden by Marcus and never sent. Her mother has never been able to read her words. Charlotte believing for so long that her mother had simply gone radio silent, now has the added challenge of dealing with this betrayal of trust. The first time we ever see Charlotte driving a car is to the health care clinic for her abortion.

I got this idea from the short story collection *Woman Hollering Creek* by Sandra Cisneros. In the title story of this collection, Cleofilas enters, unwillingly into an abusive relationship with a man named Juan Pedro. Felice and the doctor who notices the warning signs in Cleofilas work together to get her away from her abuser. Cleofilas is a product of systematic female oppression. When she meets Felice, she is in awe of how traditionally unfeminine she is. “Everything about this woman, this Felice, amazed Cleofilas. The fact that she drove a pickup. A pickup, mind you, but when Cleofilas asked if it was her husband’s, she said she didn’t have a husband. The pickup was hers. She herself had chosen it. She herself was paying for it.” (Cisneros 55) There is such immense power to Felice’s independence. Cleofilas gets a wonderful ally and representation of how liberating a freedom such as owning your own source of transportation can be. Throughout *She Poses on a Wailing Stage*, Charlotte is driven to all her appointments. And it isn’t until she is finally doing something purely for herself that she puts herself literally behind the wheel of her life. In chapter 15 Charlotte takes Marcus’s car when he is in the shower and escapes to meet with her OBGYN to discuss how to go about seeking an abortion. This is the beginning of her finally leaving Marcus for the final time.

Throughout the novel, Charlotte finds false hope through an artist named Eva O'Donnell. She is not an ally or friend, though she appears to Charlotte as a very important person. Someone

she can attach herself to in an attempt to escape from her life with Marcus. Charlotte's passion for art is reawakened through this relationship. However, despite the good that this awakening ultimately has on Charlotte, she cannot stay in this toxic relationship either. Though Charlotte is not a weak character, she is certainly repressed and unable to express herself in healthy ways. This is where the element of a Bildungsroman takes place. Charlotte goes on a journey to learn the value of healthy boundaries and how to break away from relationships that do not serve her. Charlotte is not the typical Bildungsroman character, who typically are young adults learning about the adult world. But she has been stuck in time, she has also been trapped in unhealthy relationships that have left her drained of self and joy. Charlotte by the end of the novel, with the help of Ruby and Soyoung, becomes a more confident character who begins her new journey of remembering who she was.

Charlotte's true education in her friendship comes in the shape of mutual care. Charlotte helps her friends along their emotional journeys as they assist her. Ruby invites Charlotte to her A.A. meeting and Charlotte shows the outmost support in her recovery. Soyoung shares the loss of her young daughter, and Charlotte lends an ear for support. This growth from victimhood to accountable friendship is a vital part of the novel. And juxtaposes her false friendship and hyper admiration of Eva O'Donnell.

In Rachel Cusk's novel *Second Place*, there are similar themes of loneliness and co-dependency. I read this novel to grasp the delicate nature between admiration and obsession. In *Second Place*, the narrator becomes enchanted with a painter and his works. She goes as far as to invite him to stay with her and her family in their spare home on their property. Soon she learns of his belligerent and selfish personality, yet she can't help but continue to be drawn to him, simply because she connects so deeply, so personally with his painting. Art is a huge source of

personal gratification for Charlotte. In my novel, she is isolated and forced away from her connection to the art world. She feels like Eva O'Donnell has come to bring her back to life, her old life in a sense. But this is far from the truth. The painting 'The Witch' that Eva O'Donnell creates holds an image that Charlotte relates to. She sees herself in distress, in a situation she wishes to escape from. She even mentions that she would like to reach up and save the witch from the painting itself when Eva O'Donnell asks her to explain what draws her to the painting. The image of the knife from under the witch's feminine, flowy skirt is an important image of resilience. This object shows just how the witch will earn her independence. I took notice of how Cusk describes this feeling of finding yourself so bluntly within a work of art. Her narrator left unnamed, speaks to the reader in first person so we can see her truest thoughts. "A lot of paintings were of women, and of one woman in particular, and my feelings about those were more recognizable, though even then somehow painless and disembodied...I admit a kind of silent bitter weeping did come from my heart at this record of passion, which seemed to define everything I hadn't known in my life, and I wondered if I ever would." (Cusk 15) It's not hard to imagine Charlotte looking up at the witch and feeling a similar way as if a new world is starting to form in front of her very eyes.

There were two reasons why I ultimately went through my first draft and changed the narration style from first to third person limited point of view. Firstly, I wanted to avoid the potential misreading of Charlotte being an unreliable narrator. Since she is suffering from C-PTSD (Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), a mental illness that is characterized by having multiple traumas over a long period of time, there is a chance her intense emotional reactions may be misinterpreted as manipulative or over-reactional by readers unfamiliar with this mental illness. There was also the risk of Charlotte coming off as being self-pitying as she is a victim of

abuse and a reflection of the author who created her. In the writing textbook *Method and Madness: The Making of a Story*, the author teaches an important lesson on why first person may be a hindrance to readers getting too close to the character. "When writing a very emotionally charged situation, putting it in first person can work against you: you can risk losing your reader. Victim stories fall into this category...The narrator can be seen as self-serving or self-pitying." (LaPlante 204) Especially for readers who are lucky enough to not live with a mental disorder or illness, I did not want to create a potentially harmful misunderstanding of the text that could further stigmatize mental illness.

Secondly, by using third-person narration I wanted to create natural psychic distance without alienating the readers who may be far removed from trauma. Third-person limited is a bit of dance in how close we come to the characters. I decided to use the juxtaposition between third person limited, which keeps us at more of a distance from Charlotte, and epistolary storytelling, where we receive direct correspondence from her through her letters. The letters that float in and out from the openings and endings of each chapter provide the reader with just enough to keep them in touch with Charlotte's current emotional state, without being bogged down by pages of her intense feelings or feedback about the abuse. Charlotte's physical and verbal reactions to her suffering are a form of image that I use to highlight realistic depictions of those who are locked in a state of fight, flight, freeze, or fawn, otherwise known as stress responses. Third-person limited allows me to show glimpses of Charlotte self-soothing or clamming up when she is on high alert, without slowing down the pace of the action surrounding her circumstances.

Two novels that deal with mentally ill women that I find to be a more respectful and accurate representation of ongoing trauma and isolation are *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker

and *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* by Gail Honeyman. *The Color Purple* is like my novel, both an epistolary and a Bildungsroman. Walker unravels the secrets of a young black woman named Celie in her confessional and often heartbreaking letters to God and her sister. These letters reveal a portrait of a violently abused girl who has grown into a desperate, and lonely woman. She withstands the abuse in order to save her younger sister Nettie from the same fate. Celie is one of the strongest protagonists I have ever read. Her strength and how it grows after she finds friendship and romantic love in Shug, was a huge inspiration to how I wanted to represent Charlotte and how powerful the epistolary elements in my novel could be to reveal just how far Charlotte has grown from a woman frightened by her pain to a woman empowered by her resilience.

Honeyman's novel paints a similar portrait of an incredibly resilient woman who, self-isolates and develops alcoholism as a result of her immense childhood trauma. It isn't until Eleanor receives the friendship of Raymond and his mother that she can come to terms with her past and start her healing journey forward toward a healthier future. This is an important lesson that I am instilling in *She Poses on a Wailing Stage*. Healing, like almost all things in this life, takes a village. Charlotte, Eleanor, and Celie all needed the love of support of others to move on to happier more authentic lives for themselves within their respective environments. By the end of Celie's journey in *The Color Purple*, she writes to her sister and says "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you alive and be home soon. With our children." (Walker 194) This letter shows how that resilience when paired with healthy support systems can create a powerful, life-changing impact on victims of abuse. Healing is possible and I believe showing this in fiction can help people like me find immense hope in Fiction.

Ultimately, I believe people are at their strongest when they are being themselves, regardless of societal expectations. Charlotte has to come into her actualized self, as she already has the strength to leave within her. And she becomes someone who does not just study and marvels at art but someone who makes it for herself. Her agency is at its highest by the end of the novel to illustrate how far she has come in her healing journey. However, her agency and strength were never gone. Women live in a constant state of systematic oppression that makes coming forward with abuse even more challenging. One specific aspect of this oppression that will be highlighted in my novel is reproductive rights. As this novel is set in the Early 2010's The supreme court ruling of Roe v Wade, which legalized abortion is still in effect. However, in 2003, under President George W. Bush, two new conservative justices were added to the Supreme Court which allowed the Gonzales v. Carhart ruling of the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act, which put a federal ban on certain abortion procedures:

“USA is the extreme example of a society in which an antiabortion movement arose in response to legalization and ultimately managed to become a leading force in domestic politics...Adding to the dismay of abortion rights supporters, the majority in this case for the first time found constitutional an abortion restriction that did not have an exception for women’s health. The federal ban adds to the massive number of restrictions that already exist at the state level to curtail women’s access to abortion, especially for the most vulnerable.” (Paul 5)

Charlotte is an economically privileged white woman of a time when abortion was still somewhat legal in the U.S. But abortion has never been easy, even for those who hold power. In the scenes in which Charlotte goes to have the procedure, she is shocked to discover that it is not as simple as she thought. She must watch awful videos and sign documents stating that she is

'sane' enough to make this decision. The doctors are sympathetic but must ultimately follow the dehumanizing and often unnecessarily complicated laws of their state. While Charlotte is inside the clinic there are religious protestors outside depicting horrible images of bloodied infants on their signs. Even Marcus, who is a central antagonist, shows disgust in their radical displays. These scenes of her procedure will show how unjust this system was and how the U.S. has truly only gotten worse when it comes to reproductive rights.

For me, showing characters who proudly receive both reproductive health and mental health care is important representation that can help inspire readers to take steps to leave abusive relationships and gain back their self-worth. Abusers may attempt to lower the self-esteem and agency of their victims, but as Autumn Bermea teaches us: “Our results support the feminist view that women in abusive relationships are empowered survivors (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988) and demonstrate that their agency in the process of leaving includes a great deal of invisible mental work, which is not often recognized as a tangible effort to leave.” (Bermae 1001) I take great pride in representing a victim of trauma through a feminist and honest lens. I hope in sharing what is partly my story, others may learn they are not alone and hopefully find the courage to free themselves from isolation.

What I have left is the final question of how to possibly end this story. It’s an ongoing one, as C-PTSD is an ongoing disorder, we see Charlotte leave Marcus, and we hope it is for good as she sets up the start of her new life. As I was writing, I found myself not wanting to stop. I wanted so badly to give her a new life. The ending right now is a narrative shift into the first-person point of view. Charlotte is sharing openly with the reader without restraint or fear of being heard. I am not sure at this time if this flip is jarring or if it creates a sense of joy. This perspective shift into the first person, is intended to draw the reader in closer to the women they



just spent the narrative with. I believe it also creates a larger feeling of agency. As the reader is given a firsthand account of how Charlotte is healing directly from her rather than her therapist or her friends.

I would like to pose this question: when reading a story about healing, there is no end, it's an ever-going process of therapy and self-love, so how does one possibly wrap it up to a sweet release into 'the end'?

Loneliness is a sickness, but it has a cure. There are disorders and conditions often left out of serious scientific discussion. Literature is a vessel much like medicine. We can bring awareness and a sense of belonging in characters who reflect our experiences. When I found myself in a bookstore, hiding behind a thin row of shelves, trying not to cry because the man I was with told me not to come home if I wasn't going to 'satisfy him' properly. I found *Hunger* by Roxanne Gay. The fork on the cover pierced my eyes and drew me close. I learned the words coercion and rape and thought. Yes, here I am. Not how do I get out of here? My hope is this, *She Poses on a Wailing Stage* can help someone spot themselves and start their process of actively demanding more from life.

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# She Poses on a Wailing Stage

*a novel*

Part 1

The Charcoal Waif

*Hello beloved, are you there?*

*Today I'll be leaving the house. We're finally going to the exhibition. It's at my favorite museum, the little one with the coffee shop attached. As you know, Marcus doesn't let me have coffee anymore. I can barely remember the taste, but even so, I miss it. Maybe he'll make an exception if I stay calm enough. His tastes frighten me, in coffee and in art. He loves things like cold brews and surrealism. I hope there's none of that today, I don't think my stomach can handle it. Organs and clocks hanging off limbs, children wailing and women falling apart. It's all horrible and lately a lot of things frighten me. Marcus says that's just a part of getting older. I don't know about that.*

*When you get this, let me know what you think. What's been frightening you these days?*

*Love, Charlotte*

## Chapter 1 The Temptation of the Witch

“Let’s keep this between us, okay?” Marcus coos at his wife, as if talking to a stray cat.

He pulls their white car into the museum parking lot; he parks just beside his parents’ black convertible. The scrawny older couple lean close to the driver’s side window. Gummy grins and a quick polished hand waving.

“Please, Charlotte don’t make something out of nothing.” Like a ventriloquist, he’s mastered talking through a smile. He opens his door and greets his parents.

Charlotte is left in the van. She takes three slow breathes and listens to their muffled happiness before opening the passenger side door and stepping into the chilled morning sun.

“Charlotte dear.” Her mother-in-law pulls her into a hard embrace. The she pulls away, still gripping onto Charlotte’s arms and scans her stomach. “Are you experiencing morning sickness yet?”

“What about any swelling?” His father chimes in.

Charlotte puts on her kindest smile bur shakes her head no. She wiggles out of her mother-in-law’s sharp fingers.

“Have you been back to the doctor?” She continues, not ready to let the subject of breeding end.

“Mom, leave her alone, she’s had a herd week. Haven’t you darling?” Marcus grabs Charlotte’s arm tenderly and pulls his wife close. “Let’s just go inside.” He steers her around the pair of noisy in-laws.

“I just don’t see how in six months’ time they haven’t managed to get pregnant again. Is something going on with them? Maybe I’ll need to talk to the doctors myself.” The couple do not

hear or choose to ignore the worried mother's chatter. They walk far ahead toward the front steps of the museum.

Charlotte's eyes dazedly focus on a squirrel running across the parking lot. She follows the creature and watches it skip effortlessly over a rainbow spill of oil. She traces her eyes against each line of color, counting each shade in her head.

The small gallery, located in the hub of the city, was once a community center for the elderly to gather. In the seventies it was torn apart and left hollow; over time artists began to utilize the space to showcase local talents. It contains only three large rooms, which are usually packed to the brim with various kinds of mediums. Statues and installation pieces brush against hung paintings and glass cases.

They stand in line behind weaving purple dividers. Charlotte stands on tiptoes, counting the heads in front of her, twelve in the cue. Marcus's parents twitter calmly about lunch plans afterwards. Marcus and Charlotte ease into a comfortable stance, his hand resting in hers. Eventually they make their way to the front of the line. Marcus pays for everyone's tickets.

Charlotte grabs her stub out from his hands and jogs into the gallery first. She breathes in the oil and clay. She lives for a moment inside the stretch marks of the canvases. Her eyes are full and clear. There is a smell to galleries, a lofty woody smell mixed with orange cleaner. She floats within this smell, the view, and her hearts pattering.

Marcus catches up to her. He puts a hand around her shoulder and leans into her ear and whispers "Why do you always do that?" Charlotte looks around the room and notices a few people staring. She looks down at the floor and counts the tiles. Thirty-eight horizontal lines, thirty-seven vertical.

“Excited to see the art, Charlotte?” Marcus’s father chuckles. He comes and puts another hand on her. The two men guide her to the first pieces.

The first room is filled with oil and charcoal portraits and scenic studies. As the group looks up at a young, graphite-drawn boy holding a mirror, inside the mirror a depiction of a child with a scar running across its plump belly sits and wails silently. They walk down the line of the first wall, when Charlotte’s attention is grabbed by a pair of emerald eyes across the room. She is careful to walk this time, peeling away thoughtfully from her families’ hands, toward the painting.

The red-headed girl in the portrait is staring through a smudged window, scowling at herself and at Charlotte. She’s illuminated in an unnatural orange and red light behind the grey smearing of debris, as if her skin will burst into flames at any moment. A hot, rosy image. Her expression is sad or angry. Pouting lips and swollen eyes, so hard to read, so vague. Charlotte leans over the rope to view the description on the wall.

*‘The worst thing imaginable’* Oil on stretched canvas. Eva O’Donnell.

“Lovely.” Marcus’s words catch her by surprise. He comes close and takes her hand again. “Her use of color is amazing.” A moment of sacred peace passes through the couple. Charlotte squeezes his hand and smiles up at the vivid girl.

After making their way around the busy first room, the head towards the second. But this room, halts each visitor with its stark difference in energy. Dark, with no over-head lighting, it feels like a wrong exit. One wall, across from where the couple stands, holds one large painting. It stretches completely across a long wall. Charlotte and Marcus are both hesitant to enter, but Charlotte takes the first step.



In the oil, a woman catches her breath beside a pond in the forest. She is kneeling and gazing into the small stream of water. Her reflection is looking at the couple. She's wrapped in sweat-stained white silk that drapes over her body and accentuates her figure. There's a small yet faint smearing of red across her wrists. As she dips her head down to drink from the water, she cannot see the man coming behind her. That man, hidden slightly in the mist creeps, hands outstretched, ready to pounce.

*'The Temptation of the Witch'* Oil and graphite on canvas. Eva O'Donnell.

"This one's my favorite." Charlotte says. She walks toward the painting and stands under it like a follower of God looking up to the clouds.

"Whenever you're ready to move on let me know." Marcus says after a long minute of looking alongside his wife. He leaves Charlotte alone with the painting and goes back toward the first room, where his parents are bickering about composition.

"No touching the art!" a security guard flashes a light at Charlotte who has a hand up, reaching towards the painting.

"Sorry." She pulls her hand back and touches her wrists where the woman in the picture has blood oozing down to the brown dirt. Finally, after a long while of staring into the reflection in the stream, Charlotte turns to see Marcus and his parents staring down at the only other illuminated thing in the room, a glass case filled with sketches. Locked away and out of touch like preserved artifacts.

The sketches are wild scribblings of angels and demon-like creatures holding onto frowning women. Marcos points out his favorite in the collection. An image of two women splitting each other's hands apart. Charlotte barely looks at it. Their charcoal skin and fingernails scatter on the ground beneath them like shavings from a sharpened pencil.

“It’s disgusting.” Charlotte whispers and winces away from the drawings. The picture closest to her shows a young child screaming, it has drool and snot all over its face. Neglect is written across its plump belly. All the drawings have a similar theme of filth and grotesque imagery. Women and children covered in goo, blood, and mud.

‘Studies from Home’ Graphite on paper. Eva O’Donnell.

Charlotte looks in awe at the name on the plaque. She looks back towards the immaculate painting, a look of both confusion and concern spreads over her face. She faces back toward her husband who practically has his nose against the glass. Like a child looking at a puppy in the pet shop window. An imagery of women screaming and ripping out their hair holds Marcus’s fascination.

“What do you like about them?” Charlotte asks, her voice unsteady.

“They’re so passionate and unexpected. I’m tired of seeing perfect goddess-like women, sitting pretty in chairs.” He gestures backwards to *‘The Temptation of the Witch’*. “Every classically trained artist feels like they need to paint boring stuff like that to get recognition. But this is all pure expression.” He scoffs.

“But they’re so frightening.” She insists in a whisper.

“That’s what’s so intriguing. What are they so afraid of?”

Charlotte stares intently at her husband’s transfixed expression, measuring something inside of him. His parents finally catch up the couple.

“I don’t think this exhibit is suitable for an expecting mother. Some of these drawings are just awful.” His mother fusses. She takes out a comb and nervously begins ripping through the bottom of her loose curls.

“Mom, they’re just sketches.” Marcus huffs back.

“And I’m not pregnant.” Charlotte mumbles.

“Regardless, let’s wrap it up.” She says and walks to the third room first.

The final room of the exhibit is filled with extravagant pottery and clay sculptures.

Charlotte, however, has trouble focusing on the intrigant etched designs as her eyes continue to wander back towards the second room, back towards the witch.

They exit the exhibit and follow the little yellow arrows down a long passageway to the coffee shop. Small wooden tables appear in the corridor, seated, artists wait to get their photos taken and greet potential buyers. Their exhausted eyes follow the group as they wait patiently for a bit of praise or recognition. The final table is Eva O’Donnell’s, but the artist isn’t there.

Charlotte lets out a sigh.

“Do you want something?” Marcus asks, wallet already in hand. There is a small stack of prints scattered across the wood, ready to be purchased.

“Could you buy me a print of the painting I liked, the one I said was my favorite?” She asks. Her hand travels up to his arms and she squeezes it lightly, playfully.

Marcus leaves the money in a little red box beside a stack of prints. Then he digs through the pile, careful not to bend any edges. He finds the witch and the set of mutilated hands he was so attracted to.

“Mom, Dad do you want anything?” He asks. They both scoff at the price and shake their heads.

After handing her the little plastic bag with the print peering out, the group heads into the cafe. They settle in a booth and order a herbal tea for Charlotte, a triple shot, whole milk cold brew latte for Marcus, and two hot Americanos for his parents. Charlotte runs her thumb over the

face of the woman. Under the plastic smear of the bag, she looks like she's glowing. Charlotte opens the bag a little, so can breathe.

"Could you stop shaking your leg dear, it's making me sick." Marcus's mother says while reaching under the table and pressing Charlotte's leg down.

"Sorry." She whispers. Then she twists away from the hand, not too quickly though. Just fast enough to communicate annoyance without causing a fight.

"Are you disappointed, darling? She was so excited to meet that artist." Marcus pauses and looks to his parents for help. "The one with the Irish sounding name."

"Eva O'Donnell." Charlotte peeps. She had begged Marcus to take her to the exhibition. The painting she loves, just a fraction of it appeared on the museum's website. That small portion of the witch was enough to consume her. "It's alright. I wouldn't have anything interesting to say to her anyways."

Marcus settles back, lightly nudging against her still shaking leg. Reminding her, without words, to do what she is asked. The café doors open and from the darkened entrance, a girl with vibrant red hair steps in. Charlottes looks at Eva O'Donnell in the same way she looked at her portrait, dissecting each molecule. She lets out a tiny squeak and points toward the door. Marcus follows her finger and spies the artist.

"Hi everyone." Her voice is husky and deep, unmatching her supple exterior. There's even a halo of light coming from the hanging lights above. "Just wanted ya'll to know that my booth is open. Just outside the door here. My work was featured in the second room."

"Do you want to go?" Marcus's father asks his wife, slight disinterest rests in his voice.

"We've already seated." She scoffs back.

“Let’s go meet her, I want to ask about the sketches.” Marcus says. Charlotte smiles and puts her hand through the space between his waist and forearm.

They leave the café and join the short que. With each visitor, Eva greets them warmly and with surprise, as if each time she’s forgotten that this line was formed specifically for her. She nods and hugs each person with equal politeness until Charlotte reaches the front of the line.

“Hello.” Eva O’Donnell greets the couple with tenderness, a slight coo to her voice. “I see you’ve already picked out something.” She taps her finger onto the plastic bag in Charlotte’s hands. When she looks up at Charlotte, the artist’s eyes go light and airy, her smile drops for just a second.

“We left the cash in the box earlier. We loved your work.” Marcus says quickly.

“Thanks.” She shrugs, not taking her eyes off Charlotte.

“We were just talking about how we never seem to like the same style of art, but somehow you’ve managed to create a compromise between us.” He adds. The young artist raises an eyebrow at Marcus’s hand reaching around his wife.

“Oh yeah? What did you like the best?” She asks.

Charlotte hesitates before answering. “Your large oil painting.” She holds up her little bag to show off the miniature version. “I hope to see more of this from you someday.”

“I hope so, too. Oil’s my absolute favorite medium to play with, but it’s so annoying.” She rolls her eyes up “If the men in charge of this museum didn’t like those damn sketches so much, I might actually be able to produce something of damn value.”

“Why is it that men only like the creepy stuff?” Charlotte nervously nudges Marcus, who laughs, but drops his arm from Charlottes waist.

“Exactly!” Eva O’Donnell’s laugh is cutting, sharp in the exhale.

“I’ll admit that I found your sketches memorizing. Your paintings however were basic, in terms of form.” Marcus stands at attention, a defensive posture. He looks like a soldier challenging his commanding officer.

“Kay.” The artist retorts. Charlotte holds her breathe as Marcus raises his shoulders. Charlotte darts her eyes up and down scanning the wall, but nothing stands out for her to count. Something else is muttered between the two, but Charlotte lost in thought, can’t seem to make it out. He takes her arm and leads her all the way back to the booth, where his parents are waiting impatiently.

They won’t fight about it today because it goes against their rules. One big fight a day to keep the peace. One complaint or disdainful judgment, so the rest of their time can be filled with other, more pressing matters. Charlotte would have to wait until tomorrow to hear how she embarrassed and humiliated him.

“Let’s beat the traffic.” Marcus’s father suggests.

“I would like to stay a little while longer.” Charlotte pleads in response.

“Charlotte, we’ve had a big day. You need to rest.” Marcus’s voice is demanding, a tone you can’t help but listen to. But it is not loud, sometimes Charlotte even needed to lean in close, to know what he is saying fully.

“I haven’t been out of the house in days.” She tugs softly on his sleeves, and he puts a gentle hand over hers, giving in to her begging.

“Mom, Dad, why don’t you guys go on ahead, we’re going to rest here for a bit.”

“Well then, take it easy! And don’t drink any coffee. Not even coffee cake, do you understand?” His mother wags her finger as she says this, like scolding a child. As they walk away his mother continues to list all the foods Charlotte isn’t allowed to have. The couple takes a

matching deep breath of relief once the older pair is out of sight and earshot. Charlotte puts her head on the table for a while. When she returns to reality, she watches Marcus as he glares over toward the door.

“What’s wrong?” She asks.

“It just bothers me that she doesn’t like her sketches.” He pouts.

“I think she just prefers painting.”

“But the paintings were nothing. Magnificently done, sure. But I’ve seen art like that a million times. The sketches were really something unique.”

Charlotte says nothing in response. She looks down at the painting in her plastic case and strokes the corner of the paper.

“Excuse me, ma’am. Eva O’Donnell would like to have a private word with you out in the hall, if that’s alright.” A tall man in a security uniform asks while bending low toward their booth. The couple look up at the old man in confusion, waiting for further explanation. “She is interested in the thoughts you had about her paintings.”

“And me?” Marcus says while crossing his arms once more.

“Oh, I’m sorry sir, Ms. O’Donnell didn’t mention you.”

“Is it alright if I go?” Charlotte asks. She grips her dress so hard; her knuckles turn white.

“I thought you wanted to rest?” Charlotte looks down at her lap and begins counting the black stripes along her plaid skirt, until finally Marcus says defeatedly “Don’t be gone too long.”

Charlotte bolts out of the booth, over Marcus, and follows the old man to the hall. She doesn’t turn back to see Marcus fidgeting in his seat. Then she sees her again. Eva O’Donnell walks alone with an eager look on her face. Full of curiosity and cheer. She looks like a child rushing downstairs on Christmas morning. The artist’s arms swing open and press Charlotte into

an embrace, even patting her on the back as if they were old friends. When they pull away from each other, a young man comes up to congratulate Eva on her work.

“Great show, Eve. I’m so glad I caught you. I’ve got to ask you something.”

“About?” Eva O’Donnell asks, disinterest already coating her voice.

“Your painting. The large one featuring the scandalous woman and her lover. Whatever could be the inspiration behind it be?”

“I think you should take a look again.” Eva says, a hint of annoyance brushing through each syllable.

“Excuse me?” The boy laughs, attempting to sound neutral.

“The woman in the painting is not scandalous and she certainly has no lover.”

“Then who is the man watching over her?”

“He’s not over her.” Eva raises her voice, sharp and powerfully it echoes in the long hallway. It causes Charlotte to lift her shoulders tightly toward her neck and fidget with her fingers.

“I’m sorry, did I offend you?” The boy asks.

“Yes.” Eva O’Donnell has both hands on her hips, doing a sort of Wonder Woman pose at the boy. He apologizes halfheartedly and practically crawls back into the café, a dog with its tail between its legs. Charlotte has never seen anything like it. She puts a hand over her chest to calm her rising heartbeat.

“So annoying.” Eva O’Donnell’s voice still booms through the hallway. The boy tenses as he walks through the café doors.

“Who was he?” Charlotte asks.



“Fucking clueless. He was a classmate of mine in college. I’m tired of explaining myself. I spent days talking to the coordinators, but you know what. I practically had to force it on the wall. How can anyone in their right mind look at a picture of a woman cowering in a compromised position, with a man lurking like a damn ghost behind her, and think ah yes, a dumb whore. ‘a scandalous woman’ shut up, go what an asshole!” She rolls her eyes up so hard the spiraling red veins stick out. “Ugh, I’m sorry. These people got me so mad!” She shakes her head rapidly, like a dog getting water of its fur. Then she slaps her face twice, to calm herself. “I didn’t catch your name.” She says, turning her tone low and soft once more.

“I’m Charlotte. It’s nice to meet you again.” Charlottes hands were still busy coiling around in an anxious fidget. Eva O’Donnell sees this and reaches for the shaking appendages.

“Ooh, that’s so eloquent. I’ve never met someone named Charlotte before.” She says, squeezing the other’s cold hands.

Eva O’Donnell pulls her softly back toward the exhibit. A flash of sparkling light catches in Charlottes eyes, and she notices the artist’s diamond studded earrings, three per each ear, traveling like a train up her lobe. Charlotte removes her hand and touches her own plain fleshy ears and frowns.

“This is going to sound totally bonkers, but I want to observe you, observing the art. I just want to get your in-the-moment reaction.” Eva O’Donnell gesticulates each word with her hands. Charlotte catches herself watching the digits fly around, instead of focusing on Eva’s face.

“That is bonkers.”

“It was so nice to hear something nice about my painting. The critics over think everything and the old people just bitch that my sketches are gross. And unfortunately, old

people and critics are like eighty percent of all museum goers. To be honest, ever since I saw you, I've got something on my mind that I can't shake."

They go through the door labeled 'Not an Entrance' and arrive back in the second room, the witch sits behind them as they check the sketches behind the glass cage. Other museum goers slide past them, admiring the little grey pictures along the way. Eva O'Donnell asks a security guard to turn on some extra lights that illuminate the drawings. The warmth of it flows around them, a soft orange.

"This one." Eva O'Donnell points at the charcoal women down below. "Can you tell me what you think of it?"

"Are you looking for praise or honesty." Charlotte asks carefully, timidly.

"Honesty."

"Then honestly, I think they're needlessly vulgar. I can barely look at them." Charlotte says. Eva nods and smirks at these words.

"Are vulgar things really all that bad?" The artist replies.

"Well, yours are all vulgar towards women. Children too. So, I think so."

"If I had drawn men instead, would it have changed your opinion?"

Charlotte looks around at the sketches, trying to find a man in the haystack. There is one, though maybe it is simply a masculine looking woman, it's hard to tell because their skin is half melted off by the lighter in their hand.

"Why would you make something like this?" Charlotte whispers. She looks up and see the artist looking casual, one hand is tucked in her dress pocket and the other twirling a piece of red hair.

“I’m tired of that question, ask a different one.” But Charlotte doesn’t speak up, she instead looks back toward the witch and slips away. “The only reason she could get in, was because of these damn sketches. People go nuts over ‘em.”

“So, why the peeling skin?” Charlottes asks, finding her voice again.

“Fleeting ideas.” She shakes her head and looks away from the wall. “Actually, I made it because I get loose skin around my fingernails. My best friend, Ruby likes to peel the skin for me, it always hurts real bad. So yeah, these sketches. There’s really nothing to them-.”

“Can we see your paintings now?” Charlotte says, interrupting the artist. She nods and they walk back towards the witch, who has been waiting patiently all this time.

Charlotte locks eyes with the beautiful reflection in the stream. The lurking man is watching all three women now. Then, Charlotte notices something new in the painting. There’s a knife tucked under the cloth around her legs. It’s only a sliver of a metal handle and a shaking outline of blade under the skirt, it’s not highlighted but it’s unmistakably there.

“Is she waiting for him to get close enough?” Charlotte asks toward the painting.

“Huh?” Eva O’Donnell stands close beside her, but she isn’t looking up. As she promised, she is watching Charlotte.

“The knife under her skirt.” Charlotte points up to the white garment.

“Damn, you have a sharp eye. That’s just a last resort.” The witch’s tired face has a bead of shinning sweat running down her neck, it looks golden against her tanned flesh.

“What about the red on her wrists? What happened to her.” Charlotte’s voice has grown soft, wary of the crowd forming around them.

“Huh, you’re the first person to notice that. Did your husband like the paintings?”

“He thought they were a bit boring.” Chalotte says nervously. This makes Eva laugh.

“But you think they have something? Something I can expand on?” Eva O’Donnell finally turns her head as she asks this, taking in the painting.

“Yes. I think that you’re amazing. I think your work is amazing.”

“What about it is so amazing? Why this painting?”

“I want to help her.” Charlotte whispers this so delicately that Eva O’Donnell could barely register it.

The artist folds her arms and walks backwards a few steps to stare at the entire painting. Her eyes slowly rotate from Charlotte to the witch and back again. As if she might as well be another canvas on the wall.

“She does kind of look like you, doesn’t she?” Eva O’Donnell whispers.

“Does she?” Charlotte asks. A shy smile curls onto her face.

“Let’s go back to the café.”

“Okay.”

They walk back in silence, toward the café doors. Marcus is standing in front of the entrance at the end of the hallway. Charlotte halts once he is in view.

“Before you go could I get your number?” Charlotte isn’t sure how to respond. Eva O’Donnell continues with an explanation. “I’ll be needing more of your opinions in the future. I just got an idea for something big.”

Marcus looks up in time to see Eva O’Donnell taking her phone back from Charlotte’s hands. He quickly steps forward and as he reaches them, the artist disappears back behind the museum’s exit only doors.

“So, you two are good friends now?” Marcus asks. Charlotte ignores his sarcasm and smiles in response, accidently shutting down his defensive tone.

“Have I ever told you about the time I tried to get my ears pierced?” Charlotte asks.

“Yeah, I think you did. Why?” He says, not quite ready for the change of subject.

“Just thinking about it. It could look nice?”

“We should ask the doctor on Monday if you can get them pierced while pregnant. It could put too much stress on the baby.”

*Hello out there, I hope you're happier today.*

*Marcus is out in the yard, doing something. He told me to keep it just between us, but I know I can tell you anything. Don't worry too much though, he never puts his hands on me. But that voice of his is the sharpest thing I've ever felt go through me. But anyways I'm tired of talking about him.*

*Today I want to tell you about Eva O'Donnell.*

*First, I met her portrait. I hope the blush behind her freckles reside faintly on her face forever, maybe the oil allows it permanent residency. She did not look at me truly. Her eyes just a whisper through the glass, teasing me with a false promise of seeing those unreal emeralds.*

*Then, I met her painting. A naked woman wrapped in silver gazing in a pond. One hand grips the cloth tightly as if to shame the audience from trying to look at her. The woman's nervous face squints into the water, not at the hazy figure of a man lurking behind her, but at me.*

*It is gorgeous and terrifying. A painting just for me She even looks like me*

*At least that is what she said.*

*Her sketches didn't feel as wonderful. I wonder how a girl so vivid and delicate could possibly make those dark and bloody things. Eva O'Donnell was correct about men. They are only interested in the brutal images of women,*

*but images of a girl in need of help or in deep thought, they find bland. Nothing about a woman they can't help or use interests them. Is the knight in shining armor not a wanted image?*

*Finally, I met her. And she looked at me, truly she did. From the angle I sat, the whites of her eyes called out to me. I felt like a thief for a moment. I wanted to steal her time and those emeralds right out of her sockets.*

*And then, I don't think you'd believe it. But she asked to see me. Me! It was the happiest I've been in months. I wonder if she knew that. I wonder if she knew I needed her. I haven't been seen in so long.*

*He embarrassed me yesterday. But, just in case this reaches you, don't tell him I said that.*

*He has never been a fan of hyper-realism or classical paintings. But what does he know about what artists do and don't do for attention? That man can't draw anything. He fancies himself a novice in modern art. But he is nothing but a snob*

*I can't stop thinking about the painting. I can't stop thinking about Eva O'Donnell. I think I want to get my ears pierced. I've always wanted to. Ever since I was a little girl.*

*I need to go into the oil and pull that woman free. But I fear her wrists will fall off.*

*So much to think about.*

*I hope your day is filled with as much joy as mine,*

*Love, Charlotte.*

## Chapter 2 The Sinking Man

Marcus leaves without stirring his wife who pretends, as she does every morning, to be asleep on her side of the bed. She breathes deeply for the theatrics and makes sure to face the window, so he cannot see her eyes flickering with consciousness. She waits until the sound of their family car leaves the driveway before raising from under the comforter and resting her head against the wood of the bed frame.

There's not a single force in their large suburban home compelling her to rise. So, she sits and looks out the window towards her neighbor's lightless house. The for-sale sign in the front lawn is starting to gather moss around the wooden base.

When the morning sun passes up and away from their window, Charlotte gets out of bed, retouches the sheets the way Marcus taught her, and goes downstairs to dig through the refrigerator. She takes out the glass container labeled Monday and takes it to the stove. She sighs up toward the empty hole above the stove where their microwave used to be. For the baby's sake, Marcus insisted. Charlotte plops the pre-prepared meal into the oven and waits. When the first morsel of bland, pregnancy safe food enters her mouth, Marcus texts. Twelve on the dot, like every weekday.

**I'll be home before 2. How was breakfast? Be ready by 1 so that we can get to the doctor on time.**

**Okay. I am eating lunch now. Breakfast was good.**

Charlotte gets through the meal and takes out the container she was supposed to eat for breakfast too, she eats then washes the dishes in silence.



She makes her way back upstairs and stands in the doorway of her study. The smallest room in the giant house. She looks up at *'The Temptation of the Witch'* print hanging above her computer.

The witch is stuck forever looking into the stream. Even this down sized, muted version of this painting fills Charlotte and her room with a distinct thrill of weightlessness. The man in this version now just a grey mass, a half-ghost, but his menacing aura punches through even without defined human features. The colors in the miniature version of the painting match well with the gold picture frame which Charlotte took from off the wall of their living room. It used to hold the image of one of Marcus's seemingly endless current of nieces and nephews.

She sits at her desk, attempts to go through her email but she doesn't focus for long before her attention is seized by the witch. She reaches her finger up to stroke the curve of the woman's back, like petting a nervous cat. Charlotte pulls open one of the drawers of her desk and takes out her maternity journal. It's an ugly mix of clashing pink and blue hues. But it was free and her last doctor recommended it. She flips open her journal and writes.

*Today's my second appointment with Doctor L. I don't know if I like her yet or not. She was far too excited when she confirmed my pregnancy the last time. I didn't like*

She stops and leans back in the chair, taking another long moment to gaze up at the witch. She picks up and puts down her weathered pencil multiple times before finally giving up.

She takes a pink eraser and rubs out the evidence. She looks down at the swirling patterns the pink shavings made on the paper. She puts her head down into the eraser's fallen pieces, allowing them to indent their blackened bodies into her eyelashes and forehead wrinkles. She rolls her face around in them, feeling their soft yet calloused shapes. When she sits back up a few of them cling for dear life on her cheeks.

“What are you doing?”

Charlotte jerks around to face Marcus standing in the doorway. He is home early. His confused eyes are locked onto the clumps of erasure shavings still hanging from her face. He steps forward in response to her silence and uses his hand to wipe off the little pink flakes.

“Please, go get dressed.” He says with a sad, exasperated sigh.

Charlotte shuffles past him to their bedroom. Marcus takes a moment to breathe. He opens and closes his fists. Before leaving he flicks a suspicious glance to the witch.

They leave for the appointment right on time. Charlotte watches herself in the sideview mirror as they leave their lifeless cul-de-sac and enter the city. Chicago pumps with a suffocating level of life. Bodies against bodies, competing for space. Charlotte looks deeper and deeper into her own eyes until her vision completely blurs. Marcus tells her not to rub her eyes so hard.

The clinic is remarkably vibrant. There is a mural of a mother gazing down and caressing her swollen stomach, above the parking lot. Charlotte doesn't look at it, but the immensity of this woman continues to loom over her. Her loving eyes seem to say ‘look, you can be like me. Isn't it all so simple? So wonderful? So natural?’

The waiting area has two families sitting across from each other. The proud mothers share tips and struggles as the fathers nod and chime in, attempting not to overstep and upset their newly non-pregnant wives. Their babies murmur and babble in their respective carriers. Charlotte signs in and takes a seat beside Marcus who begins to strike up a conversation with the fathers.

“We've been trying for a few years ourselves.” He says while reaching a hand toward Charlotte. She smiles but does not look at him.

“When it's meant to be, it'll be.” One of the mothers say.

“Are you hoping for a boy or a girl? Either or anything in between is fine, we always say.” A father chirps. Charlotte half-listens half-daydreams about the mural mother outside.

“I wonder who impregnated her?” Charlotte’s whisper goes unnoticed by everyone except Marcus. He chooses to ignore her. Over the past year he has slowly become acquainted with her random outbursts and has decided to chalk it up to hormonal changes. “The giant woman outside.” She continues into the air.

“Mr. and Mrs. Williams.” A pretty nurse calls gently into the waiting room.

Marcus says goodbye to the others, Charlotte musters a polite wave, and they head in. The semi-new gynecologist acquaints herself with Charlotte’s cervix. The speculum gapes her open, a constant metallic pressure sliding through her.

“Almost over, mama.” Doctor Laine says in a stern but warm voice. Finally, the metal contraption is removed from her vagina, it looks like a bird’s beak closing in on a meal. Charlotte winces at the sudden hot pain when the clamps are nuzzled out of her. Charlottes legs are removed from the stirrups, and she crosses them tightly. Charlotte lays still and feels the throbbing of herself. Louise takes out the cold gel and instructs Charlotte to lift her robe once more.

Everyone is looking toward at the ultrasound, expectant and nervous. To all except the professional, it reveals nothing but an empty gray swirl of inside pieces. Charlotte takes a deep breath and tries to stop fighting against the pressure in her lower abdomen. But it is so cold in the office and the jelly on her stomach irritates her pinkish skin. She holds back frustration tears as the image shifts and shifts and shifts.

“As we discussed last time, your stiches are completely dissolved, and everything still looks normal. Have you been experiencing any discomfort during intercourse?”

Charlotte shrugs and looks at Marcus, who is still attempting to decode the ultrasound image.

“Mr. Williams, do you mind stepping out of the room for a moment.” Dr. Laine says and gestures toward the door. Charlotte’s shoulders raise.

“Of course, do you know if she’s pregnant yet, though?” Marcus asks, eyes still glued on the screen.

“We won’t know for sure until the blood tests come in. The ultrasound is just to check for irregularities, as you know.” She says calmly.

Once the door closes behind him, Doctor Louise asks Charlotte again, this time in a much softer voice.

“Sometimes it hurts, sometimes it feels like nothing, sometimes it feels nice. I don’t know.” Charlotte admits.

“That’s perfectly normal. Victims of assault often experience sexual disorders for years after the fact. Don’t be too hard on yourself. Have you been going to the therapist I recommended? Besides pelvic floor exercises, the emotional work is just as important for relieving your physical symptoms.”

“Yes.” She lies.

“It’ll help. I’d like to recommend going to couples therapy as well. Just to make sure you both are setting the same goals.” Dr. Laine leans in a bit when she says this. She scans Charlotte’s face for her reaction. But there hardly is one.

“Okay.” Charlotte mumbles.

The doctor does her best to comfort Charlotte’s fidgeting hands, but nothing she says provides any peace until the blood tests come in and Marcus is called back in the room.

Negative.

Marcus plops himself into the guest chair. He looks at his hands until Dr. Laine presents him with a question.

“Have you ever gotten your sperm count tested, Mr. Williams?”

“No? My family has a perfectly healthy pregnancy rate. All of my sisters are mothers.”

He says to his tightening hands.

“Well, family history isn’t the whole picture. And we aren’t seeing any physical abnormalities on Charlotte’s end. It’s best we figure out the cause before we risk another potentially dangerous pregnancy.” Seeing Marcus hesitate she adds “My responsibility is to the mother first, then the fetus, then the baby.”

“Alright, I’ll do it. I’ll do anything at this point.” He says totally defeated.

“Then, let’s book you another appointment.” The doctor says. She clasps her hands together and then gets up to take off her gloves and sanitize her hands.

Back out in the lobby Marcus goes and books his appointment while Charlotte flips through a pamphlet the pretty nurse handed her. *FIFTY AND PREGNANT?! A safe delivery guide for the maturing woman*. She flips through the pages until she finds the blonde-haired woman on the cover. She’s smiling and holding onto her large belly. She’s wearing a yellow wrap dress that makes her look like the Sun. Next to her picture is an illustrated pink balloon that says *Geriatric Pregnancy is no big deal!* She tosses it down on the table and uses it as a footrest. Marcus walks outside, seemingly forgetting his non-pregnant wife still sitting on the sofa.

She watches him for a while through the large window. He takes out his keys but doesn’t unlock the doors to the car. He looks like he might be nauseous, his face goes white. He looks up at the sky and puts his hands on his head. Charlotte tries to peel herself from the sofa, but she

hesitates, only making it a few inches off the cushion. She doesn't stir until he turns and catches her nervous eye through the window. He waves his hand, beckoning her to his side.

*Hi there, I know I've been writing far too much, I promise this one will be short,  
I knew I wasn't pregnant, but Marcus never seems to know anything about the things that live  
inside me. I hope he doesn't cry like last time. His weeping scares me in the way that mens'  
vulnerability scares them. If he's not strong, what the hell am I?  
I'm back at my desk, hiding under the protection of the witch. Maybe she's hiding more than a  
knife under that dress. Could there be a magic wand that can grants spells? I'd wish her to lock  
me away in the painting beside her.  
Anyways, I wish you were here,  
Love, Charlotte.*

Chapter 3  
The Sisters

*Hello my dear, have your bruises begun heal?*

*I can't stop thinking about Eva O'Donnell. She was wrapped in magic and youth. Her entire being was as light as a sunbeam and yet her words held so much weight. I'm still trying to find the words to express how impressed I was by that, the way she talked back to that boy. I could never do something like that. Have I lived my life too softly? Where can I learn such impossible balance? I want to talk to her again, but as you know, I've never been good at initiating.*

*Do you have any advice? I'm so desperate to learn.*

*Love, Charlotte*



“What can I get you?” The cashier asks.

“Double bacon cheeseburger, large fries, large cola, a loaded baked potato and two double-chocolate chip cookies, please.” She walks home, eating the fries from the bottom of the bag on the way. The quiet neighborhood has white and brown fences shielding most of the homes from outside eyes. She peeks in between the gaps of the wood, imagining the lives that live inside. By the time she arrives home she’s finished the fries and half her soda.

Across the street from her white home, the for-sale sign has a fresh, red SOLD! Sticker slapped across it. Charlotte imagines the new neighbors, beige and blonde like the rest. Smiling coffee-stained teeth with artificial mint oozing between the yellowed bones. She heads in and dumps the fast-food bag on the table. She eats the burger while staring at her phone. She watches another woman, thousands of miles away, devour twelve cheeseburgers in one sitting. As she gazes into the screen, a small ding alerts her to a new message.

Eva O’Donnell’s name slides down from the top of her phone, in her panic she forgets her greasy fingers and swipes it open, leaving a grey streak over the message.

**Hey girlie, Let’s hang out tomorrow, I wanna talk to you about a project I’m working on. I know a great spot near the Rend. Let me know if you’re free.**

**Yes! What time should I meet you?**

**3 ok? I get out of class at 1.**

**Ok!**

Charlotte holds her phone in her glistening hands. She opens and closes the message, checking her sanity. She hops up and down in her seat, beaming at the message.

She gets up and digs a hole through the trash, carefully putting her fast-food garbage in the center of the bag, so Marcus won't find any evidence of her cheating. Then she goes and takes a shower to scrub off the evidence. She brushes her teeth twice in the shower.

\*

Charlotte lays in bed with her hair still damp from the shower. She looks at pictures of Rend Park through the screen.

"Hey." Marcus says quietly into their bedroom.

Charlotte drops the phone to her chest, protecting it from his eyes. Marcus stands in the doorway; his eyes are puffy and his lips are chapped. "Hi." She manages back.

The couple stare and wait for the other to make the first move. Marcus cracks first and crawls into bed to wrap his arms and one leg around his wife. He squeezes her tenderly. Hot water falls onto Charlotte's stomach. Charlotte runs her fingers through his hair. "I'm sorry." He murmurs into her t-shirt.

"It's not your fault." She runs a hand over his hair, brushing it away from his hot face.

"I even made you sleep alone last night. And I didn't say goodbye this morning. I know you hate that but I did it anyways. I'm a horrible husband. I don't know why you're with me." She lets him cry for a while and then he falls asleep. She hangs on for as long she can before her stomach begins to hurt from her urgency to use the restroom and she has to roll him off.

When she returns, he is sprawled out like a dog who has proudly taken over the family bed. Charlotte scoots her way back under the covers, there isn't enough space for her so she lets her knees hover off the mattress.

Marcus scoots in closer and whispers his love confessions. Charlotte smiles as his warm words fill her. But then he adds “according to the calendar you’re ovulating on Sunday. Let’s try again.” He falls asleep and she stays awake.

\*

Charlotte wakes long before Marcus’ alarm. She rolls over and watches his gentle breathing. He never snores and never steals the blankets. She takes out her phone and checks the message from Eva O’Donnell again. She only has to wait a few more hours. When Marcus wakes, Charlotte pretends to sleep.

She waits until the sound of their car disappears down the road before shooting out of bed and falling into her closet to scan the large collection for something nice to wear. Maternity clothes litter most of the wardrobe. Covering her ‘pre-Marcus’ clothes with their large quantity of fabric.

She pushes the wrap dresses and silk shirts aside and shifts through the few t-shirts that still fit. She tries on outfit after outfit, throwing the clothes on the floor and bed as she goes. She finally lands on her yellow t-shirt with the café logo on it, memorabilia from her time as a barista in college.

Charlotte passes by the mirror one final time before leaving the house. She lightly pushes around the loosening skin around her eyes and mouth, watching it become smooth before dropping it again and smiling at herself. It will take her over an hour to walk to the park, so she heads out early in hopes her reddened face from the exercise won’t be too obvious once Eva O’Donnell arrives.

The new neighbor’s things are being moved in from a large U-Haul truck. Charlotte keeps her head down in fear of small talk.

\*

Eva O'Donnell sends Charlotte her location once she arrives at the park. The weather is cool and everything is bright. The lake has a little sidewalk that wraps in and around the short sandy beach. The lake's green water has the faint smell of sour aquatic-life. But the honeycomb lights twinkling off the surface, creating halos of white light around the paths stun the visitors enough to put up with the smell around the beer can-littered beaches. Charlotte walks around for a while, following the pin like a star until finally she spots her.

She's sitting on a bench with a sketchbook covering her lap. She looks down at a couple sprawled out on towels away ahead of her. She looks at them and down and back again. Grabbing a piece of their intimacy for herself.

Charlotte watches her for a while, her feet are plastered to the ground. The artist is in sweatpants and a cropped sweatshirt that she must have cut herself based on the uneven hem dripping with shredded fabric. Eva finishes sketching and turns her head, spotting Charlotte. It takes her a moment to register, but shortly her hand goes up in a confident wave.

Charlotte jogs over, being mindful not to begin a full gallop. Eva laughs and scootches over on the bench, patting the wood to welcome her companion to sit.

"Hi!" Eva O'Donnell goes in for a full embrace and Charlotte reciprocates with a large but shaking squeeze.

"Hi. What are you drawing?" Charlotte asks while looking down at the paper.

Eva O'Donnell nods to the couple in front of her and makes a motion from finger to lips to ensure Charlotte doesn't make a sound. Charlotte looks down at the sketch Eva is working on. For a few minutes in silence, she watches her fill in shading around the outline. The sketch isn't of the couple though, at least it is not a true depiction. There are two people on the paper, a man and a woman who look like they are struggling in quicksand, pulling each other in, like crabs in a

boil. Suffocating. Eva O'Donnell closes the sketch book. Leaving the charcoal couple behind in their despair.

“Come on, I want to introduce you to the sisters.” She says and stuffs the sketchbook in her bag.

Her not-so-secret spot on the lake is under two connecting willow trees. Their branches have grown in between and around each other, making the trees look more like conjoined twins than separate beings. They're two of the shortest trees in the park, but together they've formed the widest. Their branches are swaying in the light breeze, slightly stroking the ground. They arrive just as a couple crawls out from under the branches. Charlotte waits somewhat impatiently as they rearranged their clothes and hair.

A Christmassy smell of wet bark mixed with the sour scent of the lake washes over them. There are twinkling lights that splatter the grass and dirt around them. Remnants of the sun peeking through the branches. It's cool and Charlotte's face begins to calm to a pinkish tint.

“Isn't it so nice under here?” Eva O'Donnell says and stretches out in the patchy grass. The couple before has left an outline of their bodies, still etched in the dirt between them. Charlotte nods then lays beside her new friend. Rocks push against her back, and the ground is a bit damp, but she hides the discomfort well.

“Isn't there something you wanted to talk about?” Charlotte asks.

Eva rolls over and reaches into her tote bag. She pulls out different, much larger sketch book and flips through the charcoaled pages.

“Sometimes I wonder if there's something inside me that crawls out when I draw.” All her sketches are dark. In both colors and themes. Woman and girls being tossed, pulled, and grabbed, something sinister lurking in the debris of the black chalk. Charlotte fails to respond.

“You hate my shit!” She continues, laughing again but Charlotte remains cold faced. “You and my girl, Ruby. She thinks my sketches are gross, too.”

“Ruby must have good taste then.” Charlotte let’s out. Eva O’Donnell slaps Charlottes arm but then holds onto it. They look out from under the branches and see another couple standing around the tree. Charlottes sits up, but the artist doesn’t move. She is unbothered by the waiting couple, so eventually Charlotte lays back down and tries not to look out at the impatient feet. “But why do you draw like this?” She gestures to an image of a girl lighting the ends of her hair on fire. “It looks like they’re dying.”

“Art is what the people with money say it is.” Eva O’Donnell takes a breath and cups her hands to her chin. She’s watching the legs of the young couple walk away from the trees. “And I’ve only been praised for it, until now.”

“I wish you’d paint more.” Charlotte says. “I’m sure you have so many beautiful things waiting to come to you.”

“Char, what do *you* do?” She says, changing the subject.

“I was a teacher. An associate professor, actually. Art History.”

“That’s pretty cool. Why’d you quit?”

“I got married.” Charlotte says simply. Stating a fact of her life.

“Oh?” Eva O’Donnell let’s go of the topic once Charlotte grows silent. She turns to her sketchbook and flips to a back page. There are some photographs. Reference pictures. Scattered and taped across the page. Pictures of naked women mostly. Charlotte turns away and pretends to look at her phone until the book closes again. “I do want to paint more. And I’ve got an idea for my next painting.” Charlotte focuses back on Eva O’Donnell’s green eyes. “I’m going to make a small collection. About five painting of a scene. Sort of like Monet’s Water Lilies

function. I'm sure you're familiar, professor. Alone a beautiful work, but together a full story. It's going to be a homage to my mother." Charlotte shifts and nods, to show she is still listening, despite the pain growing in her chest. "She died when I was a little girl. The only thing I can really remember is her voice. She left a little talking birthday card for me. So, I can never forget that, at least. She was real and had a voice she used to talk just to me. I'm trying to make a painting that represents that voice."

Charlotte tries for a convincing smile, but it doesn't quite catch. She is rubbing her chest and attempting to steady her breathing.

"You don't like it?" Eva O'Donnell says, frowning. A hint of a scowl begins to etch itself on her round face.

"No. Sorry. I like it. I'm just feeling sick. I had a doctor's appointment yesterday that didn't go well." Charlotte covers.

"Oh, okay. Then, you do like the idea?"

"Yeah. It's very sweet. Soft. Mother." Charlotte's voice grows fainter with each word.

"That's what I'm going for. It'll be something new for me. But if I want to move beyond these stupid sketches, I've got to do something more meaningful." Eva rolls over again and lies like a corpse on her back. Charlotte watches for a moment like a mourner to a distant relative

"And anyways, I think you could be a huge help for me. Hey, Charlotte how old are you?"

"I'm turning forty this year. In December."

"Oh my god! You got to have a huge party."

"Uh, I don't think birthdays are any big deal." Charlotte says, shrugging her shoulders.

"Wait. Char, do you like to party, like at all?" Eva O'Donnell's voice becomes excited, like a child asking their parent about the world.

“I like balloons. But I don’t like small talk.”

“My friends are having a house party this weekend. Wanna come?”

Charlotte grips her arms across her body. She doesn’t reply right away, but when the artist refuses to turn away she is forced to continue.

“I don’t know. Whose birthday, is it?”

“No one’s birthday. We drink almost every weekend. It’ll be a pretty small thing. But we play games and everyone gets sexy sloppy. You should come through!” She slaps Charlotte’s arm again.

“You really want me there?” Charlotte asks, genuinely in wonderment. Eva O’Donnell’s smile invites Charlotte to move in closer, to become braver. To let the guard, she created with her arms down. “My age doesn’t bother you? Your friends might think it’s weird you brought a random old lady to their house.” Everything about Eva O’Donnell is soft, youthful, and lean. Charlotte couldn’t resist the comparison between their hands. One supple and slightly marked on the palm with dark charcoal, and the other heavier, with protruding blue veins swirling with confidence across the skin. “I don’t want to embarrass you.” She says far too softly.

“Girl, I can’t wait to get older. No one likes you when you’re young. No one takes you seriously. So just come. Ruby is always the DD, she can come pick you up.”

“Okay.” Charlotte accepts the invitation and leans back down in the grass. The sun above them slips behind a cloud and erases the speckles of light that floated around them.



## Chapter 4 Parties

Marcus sits at their kitchen table; he's burrowed deep inside his students' papers. Once a month his poor pupils are tortured with some assignment, some essay or literary criticism about some long dead poet. And in return, they torture him with their questionable grammar and accidental plagiarisms.

Charlotte sits across from him, a coffee and an herbal tea creating steam between them. Her laptop is open on a forum she never quite got around to removing from her email list: *Global Artists' retreat*. Images of smiling young people in front of some of the world's most famous museums. The Vatican, The Louvre, Museo del Prado, MOMA, all beckoning her to take a peek inside. To live inside their radiant walls.

Today it's an advertisement for the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga in Portugal. An opportunity to be an assistant teacher of English in the beautiful, beach-side country with complimentary Portuguese lessons provided twice a week by the school. For the one-month trip, travelers would be allowed to explore the museums with complimentary tours. Charlotte scrolls through the offer and fills out the entire form. Her current address, experience, reason for applying, age. She gets to the bottom where a big blue button says Apply Now! But, she instead hits the red X on the right side of the screen, closing the application and revealing her reflection in the dark screen saver of a black Labrador that isn't hers.

"How many more papers do you need to work on today?" She asks.

"At least six more for this class. Then I have to prep for a lecture." He grumbles.

"Do you want to have sex tonight?"

"You're not ovulating yet?" His eyes flicker and calculate her cycle in between lines of run-on sentences, counting his window of opportunity.

“No. Well, I don’t know.” She trails off, avoiding his shifting eyes.

“I’ll be tired after grading.” He rubs her leg with his foot.

She reloads the application and fills it out one more time. Half-way through she minimizes the tab and pulls up her personal blog. She looks through photos from her time as a student. Her skin is bright and tanned and her smiles proudly show off coffee-stained teeth. Early morning adventures before class. Arms around friends. Bicycling, kayaking, hiking, and pretending to pray at temples, imagining herself a person who could be so spiritually free and at peace. A woman a woman would be proud of. She closes the tab to black and looks at her reflection once more, the smile is different, shorter somehow. She opens her mouth and checks her teeth. The stains from cheap, campus coffee are all that remain.

Her phone chimes. Eva O’Donnell’s name scrawls across the lock screen. Charlotte picks up the phone in a hurry, hoping that Marcus does not see her name.

“Who’s that?” He asks, still fully immersed in a loosely stapled stack of paper.

“Susan.” She responds quickly. Marcus’s oldest sister. The lie comes too easily, one she knows will be believed as the oldest William sibling is one of the biggest supporters of her potential pregnancy.

**HEY!? You still down for tomorrow??**

**Yes! I’m so excited.**

**We’ll pick you up at 9, I know it’s kinda early but be ready by then, K.**

“It’s nice to see you smiling.” His voice is calm, loving. His foot rubs against hers again as they share a moment of gentle eye contact.

“Are you sure you’ll be too tired tonight?” She asks.

“Your body has been under a lot of stress. Are you sure you’re ready to start trying again?”

“I’m not sure. But I would like to have sex anyways. We could just have some fun.”

Charlottes voice gets quieter as she feels herself begging. A faint blush crosses her cheeks and ears.

Marcus laughs at this and reaches over to put a hand over hers. After a moment he nods in agreement. A fluttering warmth settles in the kitchen.

“Anyways” Marcus continues. “I’m glad you and my sister are getting along. I didn’t think you were that close.”

“Yeah.” Is all she can think to say.

“Is she messaging about the party? Do we need to bring anything?”

“Sorry?”

“Luka’s 6<sup>th</sup> Birthday. Susan invited us all over for cake on Sunday, remember.” His tone is steady, though agitated. He is no longer cruel when he reminds Charlotte of things he expects her to keep straight. Pregnancy brain, hormonal brain. It wasn’t her fault, he mused. But on the other side of the table, all Charlotte could think of was her luck. Saturday with Eva O’Donnell and Sunday with his family. What timing.

“I made plans for Saturday with my friend.” She half lies.

“That’s good, it’s good for your health to get some fresh air. Who are you meeting?”

“Her name is Ruby. I don’t think you know her. She was an old friend from college.”

“Just don’t stay out too late, darling. We don’t want to stress the baby if you become pregnant again.” His voice again, seeps back into that soothing tone.

“Yes.” She nods.

“And please remember not to drink. I won’t be there to monitor you.” He adds.

Charlotte nods and waits for Marcus to focus back down on his students’ work before picking up her phone. She deletes Eva O’Donnell’s name and replaces it with *Ruby*.

\*

It’s been a while since Charlotte has left her house past 5 p.m. She checks her phone, then back down the road, nervous that if she looks away too long Eva O’Donnell will fly right past her. Her teeth begin to chatter, though the temperature doesn’t call for it.

She pulls down her dress as far as it’ll go over her goose-bumped knees. She’s wearing a snug t-shirt dress. Something comfortable and swishy, a dress she doesn’t have many chances to wear. Despite it being technically a maternity dress, it hugs her feminine curves and compliments her rosy skin with its green hue. She twists a little and watches the skirt flick, crease, and then smooth over her hips. She laughs a little, admiring the glorious femininity. Marcus steps outside and takes in the view of his wife, a woman spiraling in their driveway.

“Why don’t you come inside? Your friend knows where we live, doesn’t she?” He asks.

“I’m alright, really.” She says. She even picks up her hand and swats the air, telling him to step back inside.

There’s a long moment between them. Charlotte’s shoulders begin to rise even before hearing his words.

“Are you sure you want to wear that? You look uncomfortable.” His words, a biting snap. A dog that knows just where to bite. The jugular.

She shrugs and keeps her tight face away from his. He closes the door between them to retreat to safety from the grenade he threw. Charlotte listens as he clicks the lock. She holds her

head up towards the darkening sky to keep any tears from smudging her fresh makeup. In a weak voice she chants “It’s just our routine. It’s just our routine.”

Her phone rings. Charlotte sniffs and opens up the green accept call button under Ruby’s name. Charlotte puts the phone to her ear but quickly removes it as a sharp blast of metallic music crashes into the side of her head.

“Hey! You ready!” Eva O’Donnell shouts into the receiver.

“Yes, I’m outside now.”

Charlotte can’t quite make out all of her music-drowned words, but she hears the pounding base down the road and knows they’re getting close. Charlotte clutches her phone and looks back towards the kitchen windows, the only view to the driveway. Marcus isn’t there.

“Is that you?” The horn chirps as Eva O’Donnell asks.

The silver car pulls into the driveway far too fast, forcing the speckled gravel to jump out of the way to avoid the screeching tires. Charlotte backs up to dodge the rocky spray. Eva O’Donnell and company have arrived.

\*

The Williams family is far too close for Charlottes liking. At the beginning of their relationship, it was hard for her to get used to their touching, prodding, and vocal joy. Their family parties are particularly hard on her. There’s always a not-so silent judgment cast down upon the couple. Charlotte being the older woman, the one who refused to settle down, the one who didn’t take their dear son/brother/cousin seriously. Every month it’s somebody’s birthday, anniversary, or graduation. Some opportunity to make her shrink under the pressure of their immense jubilations.

Marcus is loved and greeted by everyone and Charlotte is there, as well. At the first her parties, she loved to watch Marcus play with his young cousins and nephews. He'd get right on the floor, throwing them over his shoulders, playing whatever board or video game they demanded, he always listened intently as they talked nonstop about some unimportant show or school event. He's still all smiles and ears, happy to soak in the adoration. Charlotte all the while on the sideline, knowing how to play with children, knowing how to show love to children, but not these children. These William boys with all their muck covered lips and sticky fingers, being treated like they are squeaky-clean.

Like a test she hasn't studied for, one of the nephews is lifted in the air towards Charlotte, who only just manages to snap into reality and open her arms to allow the heavy child to crash land in. She immediately lets the child down, much to the huffing of the aunts around her. They seem to revel in it, enjoying having someone in the room to collectively look down upon.

Charlotte settles down on the sofa, farthest away from Clara, Marcus's oldest sister. Out from under the coffee table, Luka, his six-year-old nephew pops up and hands Charlotte a sticky rubber band. Charlotte looks to Clara for help, but her attention is suddenly dragged toward the kitchen where Marcus has another handful of small children.

"What is this?" Charlotte asks, attempting to be polite. The child stares up at her in response. "Please don't give me your trash, here, throw it away, please."

"No. Your Christmas gift." He sticks two fingers into his slimy mouth.

"Oh, thanks."

"It's a joke." He mumbles through his wet fingers.

"Ah."

"You're stupid!" He shouts.

The aunts hear, they always overhear, but say nothing about the exchange. Charlotte, knowing this, tries to calculate what her expected response should be. How can she play along with a game she doesn't know the rules to?

“What did you get me for Christmas?” He asks, voice still raised in toddler-sized aggression.

“Well, Christmas is a long time from-” She begins.

“I said what!” His voice pitches up and rings through the party. The sharp squeak rings Charlotte's hungover ears.

“Marcus' and I bought you-”

“You're not supposed to say!” He spit and screams into her face. He even lifts his little fists and starts hitting Charlottes legs. She covers her face with her hands and lifts up her leg to protect herself from the surprisingly powerful blows.

His shrill cry alerts his grandmother who shuffles slowly into the living room to shush the noise. Her sharp tongue is directed at her daughter-in-law rather than the screaming child. The boy runs off to his mother to whine and blame Charlotte for his crocodile tears. Clara finally leans over from her place on the sofa and puts her well-manicured hand on Charlotte's shoulder.

“Boys will be boys, you shouldn't play into his little games dear.” Charlotte is then beckoned by Marcus to get up and put on a good show of forgiveness for the boy and his high-nosed mother, Susan. She taps her foot impatiently while holding tightly onto the boy, who is slobbering onto her blouse.

“Please he's just a boy, Char.” Marcus whispers in her ear. Charlottes lip quivers as her mother-in-law raises her chin, waiting for the show.

“Sorry.” Is all Charlotte could bring herself to say. Susan smiles at her brother, a quick, dismissive look.

“See all better!” Marcus cheers and takes the boy from his sister’s arms and throws him into the air. The boy laughs, immediately forgetting his sad expression. Charlotte steps aside to avoid being sprayed by Luka’s spittle and fallen tears.

\*

Charlotte rushes into the backseat, hoping if she’s quick enough Marcus won’t be able to spy Eva O’Donnell in the front passenger seat.

“Everyone, this is Charlotte.” A chorus of dull hellos and curious eyes surround her in the darkness of the backseat. She nods and tries to introduce herself, but her anxiety chokes her words. Henry, the boy sitting next to her holds out a hand for her to shake.

“I’m Henry.”

“Charlotte.” She replies gratefully.

“Eve, who else is coming?” Ruby asks as she turns to check the road before pulling out, Charlotte takes in her face. Soft, just like the artist’s, but with more extreme bags under her eyes, puffy under dark brown eyes.

“Just Simon. I think you guys met him before. He’s the really tall one.” Eva O’Donnell says. She hasn’t yet looked back at Charlotte.

They pull out of the driveway. Charlotte looks out the window but there is still no sight of her husband. She clutches her purse and compares the size of it to Eva O’Donnell’s. Hers is bulky and she is only now noticing how it doesn’t match her dress. A blue and black tote bag with a logo from some gift shop visited long ago. Charlotte flips over the bag to hide the splashing waves and lighthouse image. Eva O’Donnell’s bag is strapped around her like a



miniature golden seat belt. It's very thin and the bag itself couldn't hold much more than the red lip gloss she's wearing and perhaps a tampon.

They drive out of the Cul-de-sac towards Simon's house. and Charlotte is asked to hop into the middle seat to make room for his large body. On the little hump of the backseat, she can see the tops of her new acquaintances' shining heads. Ruby has a row of red pins holding back her black, coiled fringe.

"I like your pins." Charlotte leans forward once the car pulls into the new driveway.

"Oh, me? Thanks! I just got them." Ruby reaches up and pats one of the plastic pins.

"I used to wear bobby pins like that when I was in high school. Seeing them on you makes me pretty nostalgic."

Ruby smiles softly and a dimple appears on her left cheek. She takes one of the pins from her bangs, leaving a few strands of hair spiraling up toward the car's ceiling, and then she reaches back around the seat to put it in Charlottes hair.

"Now we can match." Ruby says.

Charlotte shyly touches the hard plastic and looks over to Eva O'Donnell. She's on her phone but laughs loudly when she looks up and sees the pin. She reaches back and adjusts Charlottes hair back behind her ears.

"Gorg" Eva O'Donnell continues to laugh. Charlotte's face is still pink by the time Simon finally gets in the car.

He throws an arm around Charlotte after their introduction, and she returns with a soft squeeze.

"Wow that's a rock!" Simon grabs hold of Charlotte's hand and examines her engagement ring and wedding band. Her diamond ring shines dully but is quite large. Charlotte

couldn't help but imagine a crystal ball when he proposed to her. But these days, she's come to the understanding that the heavy rock has no real magic attached in its gleam.

“Char, let's switch.” It took Charlotte a lingering second to realize Eva O'Donnell was addressing her.

She allows the artist to crawl over her. Then she makes her way awkwardly to the front beside Ruby, who seems now much more relaxed, now that her pickup duties are over. She pulls the car back on the road. Charlotte looks in the rear-view mirror to see Eva O'Donnell wrapping her arms around Simon and whispering something in his ears. For a moment they both disappear, despite being inches away.

“You missed the turn.” Henry pipes up from the dark.

“Fuck, Henry, you have the GPS on, right?”

Simon flicks Eva O'Donnell's nose. She rolls her head back on the leather seat and scowls with softness to Henry, who is arguing with Ruby about the whereabouts of the party. Charlotte leans back in her seat, a little more comfortably.

Every once in a while, Charlotte turns backs to watch the three friends. Most of her attention rests on Simon. In Charlotte's perception, nothing about him matched Eva O'Donnell. Simon has loose, mismatched clothes, that swallow his skinny frame. Eva O'Donnell on the other hand, even when slumped down in the leather with her hands busy with her phone and Simon's leg, she looks perfectly at peace, belonging wholly in this atmosphere.

Soon, music from outside oozes into the car as they round a corner. The base makes a private earthquake along the block. Luckily, most of the houses are dark and appear deserted. At the end of the street, they finally park the car and walk until they reach an old apartment building.

On all three levels, the balconies are full of young people. Some kissing, other's smoking, some dangling their feet off the tilted balcony into space and talking about the secrets of their universe. One girl on the third-floor shouts down in excitement at the group's arrival. Then the girl flashes her breasts and the whole world shakes and uproars in her fleshy glory.

Charlotte stands in the yard, halted and reveling at the ecstatic, happy noise. Like floating in a dark pool of water, Charlotte is lost in this new space. She wants to drift forever but is also nervous that there'll be nothing to cling onto once she goes too far out to sea. She snaps back to reality but not a single member from her car stands before her, not a single person to cling to. She stands and waits for a lifesaver.

And waits some more. Until finally, before the tears of panic drown her, she catches eyes with Ruby and Henry on the third floor. They are waving down and calling her name.

“What are you doing, Char?” Ruby yells.

“Come up! We got shots ready!” Henry shouts and holds up miniature cups.

\*

Charlotte mutters “A spoiled, rotten little boy.” over and over to her reflection. Shut into her mother-in-law's butterfly themed bathroom, she attempts to pull herself together. She can't help but imagine herself as younger than the boy, a little girl in a frilled dress, Luka pushing her down and pulling her pigtails as his mother winks and says, “That means he likes you.” Just a boy but being encouraged to act like the worst kind of man. Entitled to his anger in a way she's never been allowed to be.

She surprises herself by not crying, instead she takes the dirty rubber band and snaps it in half. The quick pain from the rubber slapping against her fingers feels like a bizarre relief. She tries it again. The tingling sensation of the sharp snap vibrates her body, a sort of resuscitation.

Once her skin is red and patched, she throws it in the toilet and flushes the cursed thing away. She watches the water in the bowl slip away and become empty, then she leans against the wall to watch the water rise again.

“Are you alright, darling?” Marcus taps his knuckles on the bathroom door. All the men in the house have gone outside to play basketball or at least stand around the front driveway, talking about basketball. Something more masculine than standing in the kitchen watching children fuss and spittle. He continues in a whisper, in fear that his sisters might be leaning their ears around the corner. “Luka’s a little prick, isn’t he?” They laugh and Charlotte finally allows tears of relief to stroll down her cheek. She puts her palms on her chest and rubs, calming her heart. Happy moments like this, cement Charlotte’s place in his world. Marcus finds a way to keep her afloat, on a steady raft of his making.

Then, a sharp spike of pain in her stomach, a churning of knives twisting in her lower abdomen. She rushes to the toilet, making it just in time to allow hot vile to project from her throat.

“Are you alright? Did you just throw up?” His voice echoes through the house and reaches the lingering ears around the corner. His mother and sisters shuffle their way to the bathroom and he desperately turns the locked handle.

Charlotte throws up purple and red as her mother-in-law cheerfully announces “It’s morning sickness! Finally, our praying has paid off. Thank you, Jesus.” Charlotte stares at the colors swirling together as her pounding mind drifts away from the commotion of their misplaced delight.

\*

Charlotte makes her way to the third floor. Much to her surprise the inside is just a large, creaking stairway with doors attached to insecure pivots. Henry waits for her at the third doorway, which is void of a door, only hinges and chipped paint left in its place. He holds her hand and guides her across the crowded apartment. They dodge through the crowd of jumping bodies.

“Charlotte what’s your shot of choice?” He shouts back over the music.

“It’s been years since I’ve taken any shot.” On her wedding night she was allowed a half shot of plain but expensive vodka from one of Marcus’ relatives.

“Oh shit! Then you’re about to get white girl wasted tonight.” Henry beams.

A small paper cup replaces his hand. Inside is a red liquid that smells like a Christmas fireplace. They cheer to the ceiling and shoot down every last drop. The liquor burns her throat and makes her eyes water. She coughs once as the cinnamon flavor hits the back of her throat.

“God, that’s the worst thing I’ve ever put inside my mouth.” Henry winces.

“I’ve had worse.” Ruby says gathering the cups to pour another round.

“I know you’re never supposed to ask a lady this, but Char, how old are you?” Henry pulls Charlotte in for an awkward slow dance to the absurdly fast beat. Charlotte looks around before answering, she sees everyone’s faces flushed and twinkling.

“I’m in my thirties.” She yells over the pounding hip-hop track.

“Nice! Damn I can’t wait till I’m old enough to be done with school. You’re so lucky.” He twirls Charlotte twice, in tight circles, making her laugh and blush.

“I am?” She asks.

He laughs and kisses her cheek, then he flings both their arms in the air to dance at a more appropriate pace. In her shining moment with the young man, a thought comes to her like a sharp beam through a fog. *Where is Eva O'Donnell?*

Ruby returns with the next round, this time with a clear liquid that by the intense smell is undoubtedly vodka. Charlotte shivers. Even in her wilder years, she never drank in an apartment like this. With fresh, wet stains on the floor, and young boys hollering from a suspiciously teetering balcony. Not wanting to miss out on any of their joy, she shoots back the vodka, causing the group to scream in wild approval.

She gives her cup back to Ruby and excuses herself to the bathroom, only to find a group of girls asking for another minute while they hold a blonde girl's hair back as she kneels over a yellowed bowl. She tries going downstairs to another bathroom on the second floor. But that too has a long que. She looks around for any sign of Eva O'Donnell.

The thought cannot seem to leave its vacancy in her mind. *Where is Eva O'Donnell?*

The first floor's bathroom is miraculously free and she swoops in for refuge. No lock. Charlotte leans on the door to keep it shut. The muffled rumble of shouts and chants cover the thumping music, laying a ringing in her ears like faint mosquitoes. She sits, spinning and alone.

There's a knock on the door and she knocks back. The two shots are starting to drip their way into her brain. She rubs her eyes and the wedding band lightly scraps across her closed lids. She sends a message to Marcus.

**Just got to the get together. Might leave early though.**

She keeps the message open until he replies.

**Glad you're having fun. Don't stay out too late. Miss you.**

The knocking behind her becomes more urgent. She gets up and allows the large, sweat stained boy to charge into the bathroom. He pulls down his pants and desperately shoots pee into the bowl before Charlotte has the chance to step out. She lingers around the first floor looking for any sign of her. But, after searching with no luck, she makes her escape back to the third floor.

Ruby rushes over to Charlotte through the crowd. The shaking has become so violent the floor seems to cave in under their feet.

“Have you seen Eva O'Donnell?” Charlotte asks as she approaches.

“No, but don't worry. She always does this.” Ruby yells and shrugs her shoulders.

“Has she been kidnapped?” This captures the attention of the groups around them.

“Huh?” Ruby leans in closer, hoping she hasn't heard her correctly.

“I think that guy Simon took her.”

Ruby smiles kindly and pats her shoulder. Everyone laughs or rolls their eyes and goes right back to their methodical hops.

“Don't worry Char, Eve never stays in one place for very long.”

“What do you mean.” Charlotte asks. Uninvited anxiety creeps in through the floorboards.

“If Simon's not here either, they probably just went back to his place.” Ruby says reassuringly and takes hold of Charlottes hands. “You want another drink?”

Charlotte shakes her head yes and tilts back a mysterious shot, then suddenly her throat feels choked up and she blurts out. “I want to go home.”

\*

Behind the bathroom door Marcus and his family celebrate Charlotte's potential. Her place in the land of mothers. Charlotte tries and fails to flush down the spiraling thoughts.

\*

"Okay. Let me drive you." Ruby offers.

Charlotte accesses the smoothness of Ruby's walk and decides it's her best option. Once they make their way back to the parked car, Charlotte slides into the front seat and curls her legs up, hugging them closely, as if attempting to squeeze out the sour juice of a lemon.

"How did you and Eve meet, anyways?" Ruby asks casually.

"I went to her exhibit and she gave me a private tour. It was really wonderful. She asked me a lot of questions about my feelings."

"Wow. Doesn't even sound like her." Ruby laughs.

"What doesn't?" Charlotte asks. She begins to roughly twist her fingers in her hands.

"She actually asked you about your feelings?"

Charlotte hesitates. "Well, my feelings about her art, I guess." Charlotte's voice grows softer, more unsure.

"That's cool." Ruby doesn't mean to sound so cold, but the resting jealousy behind her response slips through. She bites her lips as if attempting to bar the words from Charlotte's ears.

The rest of the ride is mostly silent. Charlotte tries to calm her shaking leg, as to not upset the driver. Charlotte, who has long mastered the art of silent crying, slowly allows her eye makeup to fade away under the weight of the salty tears.



Out from the darkness of the car, Ruby clutches the wheel tighter before saying “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. We’re her friends, I shouldn’t be such a bitch to her. Or you. Sorry” It came out clumsy but from deep within her heart. It’s been a while since Charlotte has been so thoroughly apologized to. She nods and hopes Ruby can see her gratitude in the dark.

This music in her car is much different from the party’s music. It’s somber and reflective. Ruby mutters a soft lyric to herself. “And this is the way we always were. Me and you. Me and you.” She has a lovely voice even though she is only speaking the words under her breath. Charlotte marks the difference between the two younger women. Eva O’Donnell’s voice, deep and commanding. But Ruby’s voice is soothing, the vibrations of her breath their own ambiance.

Ruby glances over and notices Charlotte’s tears. “Did I give you too much? Sorry, For a drunk I’m a pretty lousy bartender.”

“No, I’m sorry. I’m being too sensitive.” Charlotte sniffs.

They pull into her driveway and as Charlotte steps out, she suddenly remembers the accessory still holding onto her hair.

“Sorry, your pin.” Charlotte reaches up and unclips the pin, but Ruby puts both hands up and over Charlottes’, clipping the pin back into place.

“You keep it. It matches your pretty dress.”

“Thank you.” Charlotte whispers. “For the ride, too” She adds, smiling with tears running down her cheeks. Charlotte gets out of the car and Ruby drives off. Charlotte can’t see her in the window but waves anyway until the little car is out of sight. She debates going for a walk, before the light of their bedroom turns on, commanding her to return.

She rushes in to take a shower before Marcus can see her in this sloppy state. She brushes her teeth until the gums pucker and bleed. When she enters the bedroom, Marcus is lying still in

bed. Charlotte can tell the difference in his soft breath and knows he is conscious and contemplative.

They lie in the dark listening to each other pretend to sleep. Charlotte's head spins, as Marcus's mind races.

Chapter 5  
The Trying

*Hello again, I wanted to speak with you so badly.*

*I don't like this tearing of my selves. One of me trapped in limbo and the other is painfully alive and breathing too deeply. My ribcage is all puffed and torn. Do you know this feeling? Is there a name for this that isn't too clinical to comprehend? I was thinking of asking for help. My new doctor keeps talking about therapy. But, I'm not sure. I wouldn't want to bring another person into all this. Into me.*

*Marcus is angry with me again. It was my fault. I should have listened.*

*I hope your days are getting better.*

*Love, Charlotte*

With the advice of Dr. Laine, the couple experiment with a healthy number of varying positions in order to help Marcus's limited sperm reach Charlotte's egg. The couple's arguments of fault subside once the answer is clearly laid out in the paperwork.

Marcus was angry when he first read the doctor's pregnancy plan, the one indicating his low sperm count and the new steps he must take to conceive his dream. His prior blaming techniques, her 'drinking problem' and 'lack of healthy habits' no longer serve him. His parents have four children, all healthy, now most with children of their own. Charlotte on the other hand is the only child of old parents. One long dead, the other locked away. So, blame came easy. He knows is all now. His responsibility in the matter of conceiving.

They are in bed, he is about to finish. Marcus looks down at Charlotte squinting her eyes in either pain or pleasure or a mix of the two. A red flush, a twisting pressure slowly builds until he has successfully done his part.

"Keep your legs up, for at least a half-hour." He says and rolls off Charlotte. He heads straight to the bathroom, closing the bedroom door behind him, leaving Charlotte behind in the dark, trapped in that unusual position. He sets a timer before getting in the shower, in twenty minutes he'll go back and make sure she is still where she needs to be.

Charlotte stares up at a small hole in their ceiling. There's a little crack that was once spackled over, but somehow a little puncture managed to escape the sealing mixture. Charlotte wonders how much she would have to contort her body in order to slither through that hole. If she could ball herself up and shrink to a mouse's size, it could be enough. She could slip away somewhere into the attic and start a new life in the damp rafters. Charlotte speculates her husband's reaction. Would he come out of the bathroom and jump for joy when he noticed her gone from his side of the mattress. He could snuggle up in great comfort at all the extra space he

deserves and drift off to sleep. He might save his energy and find a new wife, one more willing to conception. All without his knowledge Charlotte would be up in the rafters sliding around with great flexibility and building her strength, becoming a creature of her own making. Once strong enough, she would shatter the tiny, round, attic window, jump to the lawn, and run until her legs break.

The piece of folded skin between her pelvis and thigh begins to burn. But she keeps her legs hovering above her, allowing Marcus's will to overcome her muscle spasms.

\*

Marcus drives off to work as Charlotte listens from the bed. They hadn't the energy to clean up, so she could still smell the lingering sour of the night before. She laid in bed, pretending the smell is welcomed until Marcus texts about her lunch.

She slinks naked into the kitchen and takes a picture of the chicken-breast salad he prepared. Then she puts it on the refrigerator shelf and goes back to bed, setting the alarm for an hour before he usually arrives home.

\*

She is woken not by her alarm but by the sound of a loud metallic crash outside her window. A woman below begins to scold a man. Charlotte sits up and listens to the woman's powerful voice. She imagines a burley, middle eastern woman wearing a scarf and pointing her finger at the little man who dropped whatever it was he dropped. When she gets to the window however, she sees a heavily tattooed Asian woman putting her long hair up into a ponytail while the large moving man begs for forgiveness over the fallen ceramic pot. Charlotte closes the curtain. She still has time to sleep but decides to make her way back to the kitchen to have her first meal.

She watches the woman as the moving truck men rush in and out of the house across the street. The woman has a cheery disposition now that the work is almost over. When she walks towards the moving truck one last time, Charlotte gets a good look at her. She has a row of earrings gliding up her lobes. At the bottom there's a large black one that stretches her ear and gives it a wider appearance. Charlotte puts her hand up to her own ear, almost dropping the salad as she does so.

Then the woman turns and stares through the window where Charlotte stands. Charlotte ducks and prays the woman to disappear. But soon after, there's a knock on the front door. Charlotte leaves her salad on the windowsill and crawls away from the window, she stands only once she reaches the front door.

"Hello, neighbor." Her voice is buttery, but still holds that same commanding confidence she had when talking with the men. Charlotte takes in her colorful presence. She is covered with various patterns and colors that do not match in theory, but come together perfectly anyway on her body, a seamless collage.

"Hello." Charlotte reaches out her hand a bit too quickly, causing her new neighbor to flinch. "I'm Charlotte."

"Soyoung. I just saw you through the window. I was surprised I thought no one would be home at this time in the suburbs."

"Oh, yeah. Usually it's just me."

"Well, it's nice to know I'll have company. I don't work until three, so you'll see me around."

"What do you do?" Charlotte asks, genuinely curious.

“Tattoo and Piercings.” She holds out her arms in a joking manor, as if to say: couldn’t you tell? I work over on Main Street. I just got a job at the new shop there.”

“Wow.” Charlottes lingers over the piercings scaling Soyoung’s ears.

“Ever considered getting a piercing? I could give you a neighborly discount.” She says, noticing Charlotte’s lingering glance.

“I..I’m not sure if I can.”

“No pressure or anything! Let me give you this.” She reaches into the back pocket of her purple overalls and pulls out a black and neon orange card. On the front lists her name: Choi Soyoung, and her business’s name: *The Night Owl Tattoo and Piercing*. The orange owl’s wing sparkles in the sun as Charlotte tilts it from side to side. “In case you change your mind.”

“Thank you.” Charlotte holds the card to her chest.

“I gotta’ run, but I’ll see you around. Do you like dogs? If you’re around in the mornings, you could come for a walk with me and Benny sometime.”

“You have a dog?” Marcus told Charlotte long ago that a dog would be dangerous to have around a newborn. “What kind?”

“A mix. Honestly, he’s a mutt. I adopted him five years ago from a shelter. Can you believe they still euthanize older dogs! Drives me crazy hearing that.”

“Me too. That drives me crazy all the time.” Charlotte agrees. Soyoung smiles and points over to her own window where a brown dog hops up and down, waiting impatiently for its owner to return. The two women exchange phone numbers and Charlotte is alone again, but the kitchen seems a bit brighter.

\*

Charlotte spends the afternoon in her study. Alternating between scrolling through blogs dedicated to art and writing notes in her journal. Charlotte's phone lights up and she looks momentarily confused by the name *Ruby* spread across the screen. She slides the green answer button and allows Eva O'Donnell's voice to rush through her ear drums.

"Hey, are you free today?"

"Um not today." Marcus would be home soon. "But tomorrow. Tomorrow morning! Why?"

"Ugh okay, tomorrow's fine. I'll let you know then! Bye girlie. Love ya." The call ends before Charlotte can respond. She listens to the long, hazy tone from the quiet line. She continues to listen until the sound of the front door opening jolts her back to reality.



## Chapter 6 The Muse

Charlotte arrives precisely on time to the old warehouse. On the walk downtown she saw men on porches eyeing her down and women bouncing crying babies in one arm as they smoked cigarettes with the other. She holds down the stiff buzzer and waits for the click that unlocks the weathered front gate. Eva O'Donnell's voice sounds robotic and clipped through the speaker. "Second floor. Stairs."

She walks up the unlit steps until she reaches the studio door and knocks. Eva O'Donnell unlocks the door and beams at her new muse.

The studio is a packed with thrown about art supplies, half completed canvases, and generous piles of Eva O'Donnell's personal belonging. Despite the havoc on the ground, the high, bowled ceiling creates the illusion of space and peace. The long ceilings allow natural, golden light to vacation onto the top half of the walls, cutting them half yellow, half beige, leaving the artist and her makings draped in a soft shadow down below. The enchanted room holds onto its guest's imagination. Charlotte stands stunned and twinkling by the mysterious auras.

"This is what I wanted you to see." Eva O'Donnell pulls back a dust and paint-crusted smock to reveal a giant canvas, tall enough to grasp at the sun beams above. A half-formed background of white and pink squares resembling child-drawn houses encircles a white clear spot on the canvas.

"What is it?" Charlotte Asks. The background, though incomplete, holds a strong weight with its soft pink tones and white smears from the glossy undercoat. Charlotte inches towards the canvas, inspecting each fiber.

“That’s where you’re going to go.” Eva O’Donnell points to the empty abyss between the pink.

“Me?”

“Here’s my idea. I’m going to sketch you for a while, get a good feel of your body, your expressions.” Eva O’Donnell circles Charlotte like a shark, debating its next move. “Then, I’m going to put you up here.” She says, gesturing to the middle of the canvas.

“But, why me? Why not Ruby or one of your friends from the party. I’m not-”

“Char, it has to be you! I told you I’m working on a piece inspired by my mother, and you give off that mom energy that I haven’t found with any of my other models. It wouldn’t make sense with anyone else. Seriously, I need you.”

A shy smile creeps across Charlottes face, but she attempts to bury it in her sleeve. She keeps her eyes locked on the canvas, attempting to imagine her body standing in between the endless rows of pink. But no artistic image of her, glorious or otherwise brings itself to mind.

“So, can we start today?” Eva O’Donnell asks while moving in closer.

“Yes. Okay. But I have to be home before 4, so I will need to leave at 3.”

“Why so early?”

“Marcus comes home around five so I need to eat the packed lunch he made before he gets home.” Charlotte explains.

“That’s so sweet! He makes you lunch every day?”

“Um, yeah.” Charlotte looks back to the pink canvas.

Eva rushes over to a work bench that holds rows of loose drawing tools. Pencils of every thickness between B and H, charcoal in every color of the rainbow, and white acrylic paint with their tips half unscrewed. The mess is covered in everything but dust. Loose pieces of clothes

and hair-ties half cover the wooden bench and tools. Eva O'Donnell ties her hair back with one then picks up a scarf from the pile of clothes and shakes it off. Tiny artist debris fly off and scatter the golden air. Then she grabs a tin filled with mini pieces of black charcoal. "Here, put this on." She orders and flings the peach-colored scarf up in the air for Charlotte to catch.

Charlotte puts the scarf on her head as a nineteen-fifties movie star might do. Eva O'Donnell laughs in approval of the unexpected fashion as she sets her scene. She gives Charlotte a step stool to sit on and a plastic, blue flower to hold.

Eva O'Donnell lightly tilts different parts of Charlottes body until a perfect form reveals itself. The peach fuzz covering Charlotte's skin rise in attention. Charlotte rests with one hand on her lap holding the flower, and the other to her cheek, brushing against it as if she was her own lover. Her gaze focuses on a particularly strong group of sunbeams that sparkle with the dust left over from the scarf. Eva O'Donnell gets to work.

Hours of this. Soft touches to the skin, a pose, and the sound of the rough charcoal scratching against the large sketchbook paper. Little talking, but there is nothing to be said. The pair work on until the afternoon.

"You want a coffee? Ruby can bring some over if you want." Eva O'Donnell offers.

"Oh. I don't want to bother her." Charlotte attempts to sound casual in her reply.

"No, she's like coming now anyways, what do you want? You look like a vanilla-latte kind of girl."

"Do I?" Charlotte asks. She used to drink whatever kind of coffee was available. Guzzling down dozens of paper cups filled with black or Hazelnut coffee in college and whatever was number one on a menu. "Um, okay. If she doesn't mind."

Ruby arrives later with the travel carrier of coffee and a small bright look on her face. Her large hair is curled around her face like a shining black halo. She holds out the vanilla-latte for Charlotte to take. The warm paper cup lets out a bit of steam that Charlotte delicately blows away before taking her first, long sip of coffee in a year.

Ruby sips on her coffee and smiles down at the sketches of Charlotte. Two full pages of studies in different angles and poses, reveal a gorgeous glowing woman.

“I love the way you draw dimples. The little shadow looks so cute.” Ruby says.

Eva O’Donnell holds up the drawing to show Charlotte, much like a child proudly showing a doodle to her mother, in hopes it will be put on the fridge. Charlotte’s focus is not drawn to the tiny dimples but rather the large eyes. Her large eyes. Somehow in the black of the charcoal they are shining with something within. Charlotte has never seen that light in the reflection of her mirror before.

“It’s really something.” Is all Charlotte can think to say. She continues to stare down at the unfamiliar eyes until the sketch paper is flipped back around and clipped back to the easel board.

“They’ll get better, the more we practice.” Eva O’Donnell explains. The three women finish their drinks and discuss the art to come until face muscles are stretched and well used. Charlotte’s alarm chimes and reminds her of reality. She must run back home with her glass slippers intact.

“You heading out? I’ll go too, Eve what time do you want me to pick you up tomorrow?” Ruby asks while standing up from her spot on the cement floor.

“Surprise me.” She puts her hands to her chin and gives a cute face to her friend.

“Just text me when you’re awake.” Ruby waves her off and walks out of the studio as if immune to its magic charm. Free to come and go when she wishes, none of the objects are able to possess her in the way they grasp onto Charlotte. Charlotte drags herself out of the room, even though deep down she is terrified it might disappear if she turns away. Once down the hazardous steps they say goodbye. Ruby goes to get in her car but notices Charlotte going to cross the street.

“Hey, do you want a ride?” She calls before the crosswalk sign can flash.

“No, please you already bought me coffee today. I’ll buy next time, if you tell me I can-”

“Charlotte, I don’t mind, it’s nice to drive with a buddy.”

Charlotte jogs to the car and slips cautiously into the passenger seat, as if at any moment Ruby will revoke the offer and she will have to tuck and roll her way out of the moving vehicle.

“Eva told me you’re a housewife. How old are your kiddos?” Ruby asks.

“Oh, I don’t have any kiddos. Yet.”

“Even better! You hit the jackpot. I haven’t even started a full-time job yet and I’m ready to retire.”

“Yes, I guess so. What do you do?” Charlotte grips onto her handbag hard as she responds.

“I work at Big Bear Coffee.” She shrugs, disinterested in sharing the details. “It pays the bills, you know. What’d you do before?”

“This and that” Charlotte smiles playfully. “I taught at a community college in New York. Not the city, the state. And it wasn’t a fancy university or anything but-.”

“That’s amazing! I’m surprised Eve never mentioned that.”

“Maybe I forgot to tell her.”

“Who’s your favorite artist?” Ruby continues, sincerely interested.

Once the seal of her anxiety cracks, Charlotte talks on and on about the things she once loved. Ruby couldn’t help but avert her attention away from the road and onto Charlotte’s unexpected glow. Somehow, they drive all the way to Charlotte’s house like this, only half aware they were sitting in a vehicle.

“Thank you for the ride.” Charlotte says, her face is still bright and stretched with a smile.

“No problem. And hey, I’ll take you up on that coffee, I like lattes, too.”

“Okay. I still have your pin by the way. Are you still sure I can keep it?”

“Of course you can.” Ruby laughs as Charlotte and her glow float out of the car.

Once Charlotte gets inside, she is surprised by her sudden hunger. Without fuss she finishes the overly-healthy, pre-made lunch. She leaves the silverware and bowl in the sink for Marcus to see. Then she remembers the coffee. She runs to the bathroom, practically slipping on the bathmat as she crashes in and brushes her teeth until blood forms around her gums and all traces of the forbidden magic beans disappear.

*Hello my dear,*

*I have grown a new fear which is impressive considering my already massive garden of dread. The weeds are overgrown and maybe I should break down and hire a gardener. Though, I don't know how to allow others into my Eden. I think I am afraid of clarity. I feel very much like a murky, shallow pool. People should be able to see the bed beneath, but there is so much clouding my being. What do people see when they look at me? What does Eva O'Donnell see in all those sketches?*

*What does this mean?*

*Love, Charlotte.*

## Chapter 8 The Cartilage

Charlotte walks around the downtown shops for over twenty long minutes. She shuffles by the tattoo-shop each time, peering into the dark windows. The building stands out amongst the quaint pastel shops. Between rows of soft yellow and faded pink two-story buildings, the little tattoo shop seems like a valley with its one-story tall stature, thick frame and fresh grey paint. The black and neon green sign illuminates the door with an oval glow that looks to Charlotte very much like a portal.

It has been several days since the doctor verified Charlotte's pregnancy. Several days since crying alone in Ruby's car. Several days since Eva O'Donnell has called. She takes what little nerve she has left to jump through the portal.

"Well hello miss, wondering when you were going to finally make it in." A young man at the bulky front desk laughs toward Charlotte and gestures for her to come in further.

"Oh, yes I made it." She says while taking in the atmosphere.

"It's normal to feel anxious, darlin'. So, what are you looking to get, we accept walk-ins."

Charlotte doesn't fully comprehend his words, but she nods and tries to explain herself.

"Um. I think my neighbor works here?"

"We've got a lot of artists here, could you be specific?"

"A Korean woman. Very pretty, but I forget her name." Charlotte looks down, her face turning red. "Maybe I'm in the wrong place?"



“Oh, do you mean Soyoung?” He calls back toward a doorway that’s covered with twinkling, hanging silver beads. Moments later Soyoung pushes the strands aside, creating rainbow droplets across their skin.

“Hey, neighbor, wasn’t expecting you!”

“Hi.” Charlotte waves shyly.

Soyoung repeats the same question asked by the boy. Charlotte doesn’t know how to communicate her desire, so instead of talking she lightly touches one of her earlobes and looks timidly toward Soyoung, in hopes the young woman has transformed into a circus tent mid-reader.

“Piercings?” The boy chimes in. Charlotte nods successfully, then pulls back her hair to reveal hole-less ear lobes. Soyoung smiles in understanding; she would be gentle on these virgin ears. Charlotte is dazzled by that smile, and utterly amazed by the secret silver piercing in front of her top gums.

Charlotte is led to a back room behind a back room. The walls on the way are littered with sketch paper covered in a smattering of charcoal dragons, birds, Chinese characters, and half-dressed women. This art style is new to Charlotte. The pin-ups eyes follow her through the hallway, beckoning her to come in further. It is unlike any art gallery she’s ever been in.

Once inside the piercing-designated room Charlotte takes in the surplus of gems and rings that surround the space. In her mind she envisions herself as Aladdin in the Cave of Wonders. She’s drawn to a wall filled with sparkling, wide set earring, but is soon gently guided towards a small table with stones, far more conservative in size.

“As much as I’d love to see you in gages, you might want to go with something a bit easier to manage, anything larger could cause tearing.” Soyoung goes on to explain the

difference between gages, industrials, and belly button rings. She also showcases the drawer of unopened needles that look very much like tampon packaging in their current state. Charlotte's eyes slowly go over each and every selection of jewelry until she finds the best option: a pair of golden smiley faces.

"Can I have these?" Charlotte asks, her confidence starting to grow.

"Perfect choice." Soyoung opens the glass case with a small key and removes the little earrings.

Charlotte is asked to sit in the large chair that reminds her of the gynecologists, she spreads her legs as an unconscious reaction once she sits down. Soyoung either doesn't notice or doesn't care.

A flash of warmth rumbles in Charlottes stomach as Soyoung goes back over to the drawer and selects one of the paper-wrapped needles. Then, taking Charlotte's chin in her hands she maneuvers her in a similar fashion Eva O'Donnell once had in her studio, this memory causes the fire to quicken, spreading a wildfire of nerves. Again, Charlotte thinks of the Cave of Wonders as magma boils and attempts to destroy everything good inside. With a thin, purple marker, Soyoung dabs little dots on each of Charlotte's soft lobes.

"Go check yourself out in the mirror." She says, smiling so Charlotte can get another glimpse of the piercing hiding inside her mouth.

Charlotte gets up and takes a long look through the grey owl-engraved mirror. She smiles and tilts her head back and forth, imagining her future, smile-filled self.

"The placement, okay?" Soyoung asks.

"I love it, already." Charlotte sits back down in the chair, she perches on the edge, too excited to lean back any farther. This Soyoung notices. She smiles at her client.

“Would you like me to count down from three or would you like to be surprised?”

“Is that what you’re going to use?” Charlotte points to the long needle in Soyoung’s gloved hands. She twirls the needle around like a wand.

“I recommend the surprise.” She teases. “Don’t worry, I’m a sharpshooter.”

Soyoung begins to count down from three, but as she reaches two, the first hole is already punctured. The pop of flesh surprises Charlotte, but she tries not to react as Soyoung slides the first smiley face into its new home inside of her. She gently puts on the back clasp, and the transformation is almost complete.

“How does that feel?” Soyoung asks while taking a step back, admiring her perfect placement.

“Hot.” Charlotte smiles back. Now there’s a real fire in her head that feels extremely more at home than the spinning heat in her gut.

Soyoung laughs softly, then goes over to the other ear. She sanitizes the needle before lining up her second target. This time no counting is needed. Being a seasoned piercer, she knows she must move fast before the client backs out. However, Charlotte tilts her head slightly, as if welcoming the sharp pain of the needle. She slips in the final golden smile.

“All done, gorgeous.” Soyoung nods toward the mirror and helps Charlotte out of the seat. Charlotte’s legs wobble slightly as she stands, a newly born deer.

Charlotte first looks from a distance, not ready to fully absorb her new self. But soon, she edges forward slowly, as if creeping up behind a wild animal, toward her reflection. She reaches up to stroke the smiles but a pain scorches through her ears and slides into the sides of her skull.

“You’ll have to be easy on them for a while. The heat dies off in a few hours. But the pain will last a month or two.” Soyoung explains as she strips off her gloves and goes into one of

the cabinets to take out some pink cleaning solution and cotton balls. “For you, on the house, neighbor.” She says while shaking the little vials.

They walk out of the backroom and toward the front counter. The boy stands once he sees Charlotte.

“Let me have a look at yuh” He cheerfully hops towards Charlotte who turns red at the joyful attention. “They really suit you! So pretty.”

“Thank you.” She beams.

“Give her the friends and family discount, Danny.” Soyoung kindly commands as she places the cleaning supplies into a little paper bag with the shop’s logo on the front.

Danny dips under the counter and pulls out a little chart holding a list of barcodes. He scans one and Charlotte’s total flashes across the screen. Charlotte pays and collects her bag from Soyoung, but she hesitates to walk away. She attempts to touch her throbbing lobes again.

“Is there anything else you want, dear?” Danny asks.

“I’m... just so thankful.” Charlotte bats her eyes, attempting to avoid the surge of tears.

Soyoung puts one hand on her chest and rubs in the sincere gratitude. She steps out from behind the counter and gently rubs Charlotte’s arms.

“You can come here anytime you want.” Soyoung says while holding strong onto Charlottes reddening gaze.

Before walking back through the portal, Charlotte turns and gives her neighbor one last smile. “Thank you. You have no idea what this means to me.”

Once Charlotte has walked off Danny turns to Soyoung as the stands gazing sadly toward their shop’s door.

“Is everything alright? She seemed a bit.” He searches in his mind for a sensitive word.  
“Off?”

“I really don’t know.” Soyoung replies, a hint of gloom gripping her words. “I’ll try to keep an eye on her.”

\*

When Charlotte arrives home, she stands in the entryway, staring into the little mirror beside the door. Her smile and the smiles on her ears don’t match but make a perfect trio. When she hears their car come down the driveway, she takes her hair down to cover the little faces.

“Oh, are you heading somewhere?”

“I actually, just got home.”

“What’s that?” He asks harsher than he means, but his words come out quickly and rattle Charlotte’s mood. He takes a breath, reassuring her that he will remain calm. She slowly holds up the bag with the tattoo shop’s neon logo. His eyebrow raises in confusion.

“You got a tattoo?”

“I. Um. I finally got my ears pierced. Remember I told you? I wanted them.”

“We never discussed that.” He quickly retorts. His voice is calm, not angry like Charlotte anticipated.

“We did. I think we did.”

“Must be your pregnancy brain, love.” His voice grows softer. He stares at his shaking wife for a moment before tucking her hair behind her ear, revealing the golden smiles. Charlotte flinches from the fresh pain. His mouth twists as he considers this new version of her. “I just wish you would have told me about it, first. But you look pretty.” He kisses her forehead.

Charlotte opens her mouth but shuts it without making a sound. She nods and raises her hand to shift her hair back in front of the jewelry. Marcus walks past her to use the bathroom. Charlotte stands in the entryway, shoes still on.

\*

Later that night as Charlotte attempts to will herself to feel comfortable sleeping on her back, her phone buzzes, waking Marcus in the process of it bouncing against their wooden headrest.

“Who’s calling so late?” He mumbles.

“My friend, Ruby. It’s just a text.” Charlotte whispers back. Charlotte opens Eva O’Donnell’s message only after Marcus’s breathing becoming heavy again.

**Hey, sorry I blew up. I just super care about this project and it felt like you didn’t. But I know that’s dumb. Come back tomorrow?**

**I’ll be there!**

Chapter 9  
The Giving

*Hello again,*

*It's been a while and I'm so sorry for my absence, but I have some important things to share. But I'm not sure if you'd want to hear it. You haven't written back. I'd hate to become one of those people who bombards their loved ones with unwanted news. But I really would love you to know. I am finally going to see Eva O'Donnell again. I hope I don't let her down. I've had that sort of feeling in my chest since I was a little girl. I don't know yet how to be enough for people. Anyways, her studio fills me with something I haven't felt in years, but I don't know yet what the matter that so floods me is called. It's something like peace, but it's not quite that, as I'm always at the edge of my seat with her. Her eyes are so intense. I'd love for you to look within her, to see what I see.*

*I wish I could hear your voice, you used to speak so plainly. In the best way.*

*Love, Charlotte.*

There is nothing behind the studio door. Charlotte knocks lightly, barely brushing her reddened knuckles across the steel, afraid the noise would disturb whatever ghost drifted inside. She's been waiting more than forty minutes now, pacing up and down the stairway, pressing her ear against the door, and counting the tiles along the floor.

She eventually settles down against the door and rubs her chest. The empty stairway echoes the sounds outside. She looks through her unviewed messages, attempting to find an answer.

**I'm here!  
Are you at the studio?  
I can meet you somewhere else if you want.  
Hello?**

She goes to type in one last message, but her phone buzzes Ruby's name. Before she can greet the artist, Eva O'Donnell shouts into the receiver.

"Char? You around the studio?" Her breath is heavy and there is a wind travelling into the phone, as if she is running.

"Yes. Are you coming?"

"No. Yes, but I need you to come get me. Can you come to The Bear Coffee?"

"I'll be there as fast as I can." Charlotte says excitedly.

She rises from her place on the floor and runs down the stairs, almost tripping on her feet.

It's a thirty-minute walk to the café, thirty minutes farther from Charlotte's house. When she arrives, Eva O'Donnell is sitting at a table in the back alone, looking out the front window but leaning back into the brick wall. A cat, watching its prey behind the grass. When she sees Charlotte, she waves her hand to beckon her over.

"Hi" Charlotte says, she isn't sure whether to sit or stand so she leans against a chair and waits for an offering.



“Hey.” She says, trying to sound nonchalant. Her eyes cross over Charlotte’s face. “You got earrings!” Charlotte bends over and sticks an ear out for Eva O’Donnell to admire. “Very cool, mama.”

Charlotte smiles down toward the wooden table. She notices Eva hasn’t touched her drink.

“Do you want something else?”

“Huh, no I wanna get out of here.” She gets up and throws her thin jacket over her shoulders. Then she takes Charlotte’s arm and together they walk out of the café. “Where’s your car?” she asks once they get outside.

“I walked. My husband uses the car, usually.”

Eva O’Donnell waits, trying to pick up on a joke that never comes.

“Char, when someone asks you to pick them up, they mean in a car.” Eva O’Donnell looks down the road and starts tapping her foot. “Come on, whatever let’s just go to my place.”

“Okay.” Charlotte agrees quietly.

As they walk Eva O’Donnell continuously looks over her shoulder, suspiciously toward the cars going by. Charlotte wants to ask, but cannot build up the strength to find her voice.

They walk a long way south, farther into the city than Charlotte has ever gone. Despite her nerves she takes in the view of the trees and the old apartment buildings that seem a different country compared to her cul-de-sac. She allows her shoulders to finally drop.

By the time Charlotte’s feet begin to ache, they arrive at a brown apartment building. They catch the elevator to the fourth floor. Eva O’Donnell shuffles through her canvas bag and eventually pulls out a long keychain to open the door.

The small apartment is practically empty. Devoid of the magic of her studio, not a single painting or sketch lurks in the living space. The only furniture in the living room is a yellow, tattered sofa that is sunken in on one side and a unmatching wooden coffee table with a fat TV plopped on top.

“Want anything to drink?” Eva O’Donnell asks while dumping her bag on the floor. She glides into the kitchen to scrummage through the small refrigerator. A tangy odor oozes from the kitchen as the door hangs open in her hand.

“Anything’s fine.” Charlotte calls back, far too quietly for Eva O’Donnell to hear. She takes cautious steps into the living room. She leaves her shoes on after noticing brown stains of footprints etched into the carpet. She moves slowly to the broken sofa, once Eva O’Donnell has come back with two beers in her hand.

“Here. It’s all I got besides tap water.”

She hands one of the silver cans to Charlotte and cracks hers open. She guzzles the alcohol down then with an exasperated sigh, grunts her approval at the taste. She then reaches forward and turns on the television. The pair watch as an older man tells a much younger man that he is not the biological father of his child as a crowd of jumping people cheer and boo. Charlotte opens hers and flinches at the sound. She takes a few sips and closes her eyes, marveling at a taste long forgotten. Then she holds the can with two hands as if worried she’d lose it.

“Like the place?” Eva O’Donnell asks and gestures with one hand like a TV show presenter. “Art don’t pay much, you know.”

“It reminds me of my mother’s home in New York.”

“Oh yeah? I heard New York is pretty grungy.”

“I suppose it is. In some ways. But-”

“Char, can you stay late tonight?” Charlotte scans the room and begins to count the raised speckles upon the miscolored ceiling. She searches for that ever-challenging word ‘no.’ Eva O’Donnell continues “I just don’t like being alone. I’m like never alone, but still. Also, you know why I asked you to come get me today?”

“No, why?”

“I had a one-night stand and the guy got super weird the morning after. Asked me to do a bunch of stuff I didn’t wanna do. He kept asking and asking and finally I slapped him. Right in his dumb face. That asshole deserved worse, but he kicked me out before I could really let him have it.” Charlotte begins to twist her hands and tighten her lips. She nods as if listening but her eyes gloss over indicating that she has left the room. “So, yeah. It’s nothing, you can just go if you want.”

Eventually Charlotte comes back from space and reenters the silence of the room. She clears her voice before speaking. “Let me. Um. I need to call Marcus and see if I can stay late.”

“You need to ask permission or something?” She scoffs.

Charlotte nods, still twisting her hands with a bit more force. Eva O’Donnell leans back in the sofa and watches as Charlotte takes her phone and her beer into the bathroom.

It takes over five long minutes of Charlotte pacing across the sticky bathroom tile before she works up the strength to call her husband.

“Aren’t you a bit old for sleep overs?” He laughs but his tone doesn’t indicate a joke.

“I don’t have to stay the night. Just late. I think Ruby needs me.”

Marcus breathes heavily into the receiver before responding with “Okay. If it’s not too late, call me and I’ll come get you.”

Charlotte nods, forgetting she is on the phone. “Thank you.”

“I love you.” His voice is smooth, enticing even.

“I love you, too.”

Charlotte watches her phone go black and she looks at her hushed reflection in the small rectangle. She smiles to herself then reenters the living room and notices Eva O’Donnell has muted the television. She sits up on the sofa, waiting for Charlotte to come back.

“Why’d you lie to your husband?” Eva O’Donnell asks toward the TV. “Ruby needs me?” Her voice is mocking. “You don’t want him to know you’re with me or something?”

“He. He might get sad. He gets sad sometimes when people don’t like him.” Charlotte replies, too nervous to move closer to her spot on the couch.

“He thinks I don’t like him?”

“At the museum you laughed at him. Do you like him?” Charlottes question trails off her lips.

Suddenly, Eva O’Donnell tilts her head backward and laughs. She tilts farther, neck craned like a horror movie ghost, to look at Charlotte, with two hands gripping her phone and beer, Charlotte looks very much like a statue. They stare at each other in their uncomfortable positions. Eva O’Donnell soon rolls her head back and turns back on the sound. A woman is sobbing on the floor of the stage as a man is jumping jubilantly around her corpse like figure. Charlotte remains for a few minutes at her spot in front of the bathroom.

“I’m not mad Char, just get over here.”

Slowly, like approaching an animal from behind, Charlotte comes back to the sofa. Tears start welling up so she snuffles and blots them away with her sleeve. She grabs at her arms and twists her sleeves and skin.

“Why are you crying?”

Charlotte shrugs and shakes her head to say she doesn't know.

Eva O'Donnell opens her arms. “Come here you big baby.” Charlotte obeys, falling into the girl's thin body. Eva O'Donnell squeezes her tightly and adds. “You really got to get a backbone, mama.”

Charlotte cries again, harder and without restraint, leaving behind a puddle on Eva O'Donnell's t-shirt.

They lay like this for the remainder of the night. Charlotte stares into the TV and wonders how anyone could watch such misery for fun. Eva O'Donnell's head is leaned back onto the arm of the sofa. She has fallen asleep.

The room grows darker but the neon noise from the television illuminates the women on the breaking sofa. The hair around Charlotte's face is matted wet from her tears. She turns her head up and looks up at the artist.

“Can I tell you something.” She whispers in the deaf room. “I don't want to be a mother, not even to you.” She savors the words, allows them to fall into existence.

She removes herself, like peeling a sticker, off of Eva O'Donnell's body. She slips to the kitchen and takes in the view of the messy apartment. She reaches deep into her purse and takes out a small stack of yellow sticky notes. On the top one she writes: *I'm going home. I love you.*

## Chapter 10 People

The sun hasn't risen yet but there is a familiar hazy blue that comforts and surrounds Charlotte as she heads home. She reaches up and around her, as if she could somehow twist the soft color around her fingers. It was a time of day she had only seen through windows, to her, this journey is a miraculous discovery, an adventure of a great explorer.

Halfway home, and with over an hour of walking left, Charlotte takes a seat on a bench to rest her feet. A car goes by and slams on its brakes, slowly it backs up to where Charlotte is sitting. Her heartbeat quickens and she tries to glue herself to the bench, hoping whatever is inside the vehicle isn't strong enough to take her from this spot.

"Charlotte?" It's Soyoung, calling out with tender confusion.

"Good morning."

"You mean happy twilight? I was just closing up shop, do you want a ride?"

Charlotte nods gratefully and gets into the black car. "Thank you."

"Of course! Why are you up? And in this part of town?"

"I had to help a friend," Charlotte says with a hint of pride in her voice. "Your shop stays open until morning?"

"Only for drunk C-Listers." Soyoung chuckles. "You don't have a driver's license or something? I always see you walking around."

"Oh, no I can drive. But Marcus uses the car."

"Your husband? Oh, well. Still, it's pretty dangerous to be walking around at night by yourself."

Charlotte nods like a child being scolded by their parents. Soyoung takes the cue and drops it.

“How are your ears, doing?” Soyoung asks, hoping to change the topic.

“Really good. They’re so pretty.” Charlotte reaches up and mildly touches the lobe. Still painful to the touch, but the heat has died down.

“They look good. How has cleaning them been?”

For the rest of the drive the women talk about piercing care, puss, and swelling. They arrive faster than expected to Soyoung’s driveway.

“You know I’m sort of an insomniac, too. So, if you ever need a ride, or a walking buddy, you can call me.” She hands over her phone. Charlotte takes it with great care and puts in her number.

\*

Once inside, Charlotte tiptoes into the darkness of the bedroom. She strips and lies in bed naked. She looks down toward her stomach, admiring the fact that it hasn’t yet risen. Marcus turns and puts a heavy arm across her shoulders. She doesn’t sleep, but listens and his heavy breathing turns into a faint snore. Through the sheer curtains on the window, she watches as Soyoung turns on and off different lights.

\*

The OBGYN’s Office is brightly lit by the mixture of morning sun and iridescent lights. Even the ugly pamphlets seem to beam happily up to the couples on the sofas. In one of the private rooms, Charlotte taps her foot, waiting impatiently for Dr. Louise. Marcus is squeezing her hand and rubbing her back.

“You aren’t due for a check-up for another two weeks. Is there any particular concern that brought you in today?” The nurse chirps, admiring the couple’s tenacity.

“We just don’t want anything bad to happen. We’ll be here every day if we have to.” Marcus exclaims.

Charlotte tries to lock eyes with Marcus. But he is intently staring down at her stomach. Dr. Louise comes into the room. She looks at Charlotte on the table and then to the nurse who is wheeling a cart toward the bed.

“Good afternoon Mrs. Williams, Mr. Williams. What brings you back so soon?”

“Charlotte seemed fatigued, like last time, we want to make sure nothing has happened.”

“Well, typically the fetus won’t be visible on the ultrasound until at least the sixth week of pregnancy.” She pauses to observe the couple’s reactions, Marcus tightens his grip on his wife’s hand as Charlotte’s eyes scan the tile of the floor. “Mr. Williams why don’t you have a seat.” The nurse wheels a small chair for him to sit on. “I am fully aware of your rocky history with pregnancy. And I am also aware that you haven’t taken our advice to see a therapist.” Charlotte’s eyes glaze up. “I am here to support and help you, Mrs. Williams with whatever care you would like to receive. However, stress seems to be playing a big role here and I would like to recommend couples-therapy, as well.”

“We aren’t having marital problems.” Marcus responds, he laughs awkwardly, as if someone had played a practical joke on him.

Charlotte nods her head but keeps her eyes on the doctor.

“I’m not insisting there is. But therapy will help reduce stress and anxiety. Which, with our history of miscarriage, seems to me essential.” The Doctor crosses her long legs and looks



with a powerful, convincing smile to Marcus, who drops his gaze to contemplate. “Mrs. Williams, is that something you think could be helpful?”

“I don’t know.” She looks down toward Marcus’s hand, still tightly wrapped around her own. “Would it really solve anything?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I. I um.” Charlotte stammers and becomes flushed. “Do I really need help? Is there something-” Her voice drifts away.

Dr. Louise comes to her side. “There is absolutely nothing wrong with you. But, there are always people here, who want to be on your side. There’s no pressure here, but I think therapy could be a useful tool in your belt to reduce stress.”

“Okay, can we try it?” Charlotte’s voice returns to her, and with it her shoulders straight she turns to Marcus for a final answer.

“Fine.” He says and drops his hand from hers.

\*

Marcus sleeps in. He wakes and snuggles close to Charlotte whose soft warm body feels like a pleasant welcome home with each embrace. He brushes her matted hair away from her face and whispers a loving “Good morning.” She smiles at him but keeps her eyes closed. He settles down not wanting to wake his newly pregnant wife. A vision he has dreamed of for most of his life, lies before him like an offering.

He waits until the fear of tardiness settles in. He gets up and gets ready for work. He rushes through the house collecting his coffee and his loose papers. In the kitchen he checks the fridge, making sure Charlotte’s meals were prepared and properly labeled. He draws a small heart on the Tupperware containing the spinach lasagna.

Charlotte waits until Marcus is long down the street before shooting out of bed and getting ready to see Eva O'Donnell.

\*

At the studio, Charlotte is placed in an unusual position. Her neck is craned toward the window as the rest of her body twists toward the artist. Eva O'Donnell uses a long piece of fresh charcoal to scratch at the thick paper. Over an hour of silent studies go by until she is satisfied. She repositions Charlotte into her regular position with the scarf wrapped around her neck. Then she goes to a blind spot in the studio and takes out the canvas she has been working on for the past few weeks. The painting in its incubation period is a mess of layers. Charlotte's face upon the canvas had been painted and repainted over so that the paint has raised substantially above the canvas's flat surface. Nowhere close to being done, but a solid base is meticulously placed across the fabric.

"Alright, Charlotte can you look directly at me for this?"

Charlotte locks eyes with Eva O'Donnell and watches contently as the artist floats back and forth from easel to empty space and back again. It takes her a long time to mix the oil paints into the perfect shade. Eva O'Donnell takes in each shape and trace of color. She occasionally comes forward and repositions Charlottes head. A long time of peaceful silence goes by.

Charlotte basks in the attention, in the warm light of the studio.

Like clockwork, Ruby arrives to the studio to drop off coffee and drive Charlotte home.

"Oh, wow. Eve." Ruby looks dazedly into the canvas.

"Can I see?" Charlotte asks and steps off of the podium.

Eva O'Donnell picks up the canvas and holds it away. Charlotte stops in her tracks and begins to fidget with the scarf.

“You’re the muse. If you look at it before it’s finished, it’ll taint the image.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” Charlotte steps backward, back to her spot. Eva O’Donnell places the canvas back on the easel.

Ruby looks over to Charlotte. She sighs in defiance but remains otherwise silent.

\*

Charlotte sits at her desk, looking up at the witch. Her oil eyes seem softer than before. Her body, bulkier, more pronounced as if made from wood. The man has almost disappeared into the fog.

*Hello there, it's been far too long,*

*I haven't been my usual self, but somehow this new self feels more familiar. Have you ever felt this way? Like there is a peeling of your flesh but it doesn't hurt. In fact, there's no feeling at all.*

*There is a peaceful emptiness that I'm slipping into.*

*Marcus is being himself, again. He is always filled with a secret sort of light that my eyes just can't adjust to. His happiness is so painfully pleasant. His hands on my skin are also familiar.*

*We are going to the therapist together soon. I hope he likes me.*

*And I hope you know I still care for you,*

*Love, Charlotte.*

## Chapter 11 The Crack

There's a cool breeze coming through the studio window. Charlotte closes her eyes and enjoys the soft push of invisible winds. The scarf is around her neck and a warm paper cup of coffee is just to her right. She has made a home out of her place on the stool.

"You can take a break." Eva O'Donnell says while taking the canvas off the easel and returning it to its hiding spot in the dark corner. Charlotte steps off the platform and stretches her arms over her head. "I think I'm almost done with the first set of paintings. A few more days of touch ups? I'm not happy with the face of one of them. And then we'll let them dry."

"And then I can see them?" Charlotte asks eagerly.

"Sure."

Charlotte looks around the studio at the other, non-hidden paintings. There are only a few, and they seem to Charlotte unfinished. On one, there is an image of two creatures flying over a pink and purple night sky, a smear of village is hinted beneath their gangly grey feathers. In another painting there is a blue rope looping around and around what looks to be a human limb, but which part of the body Charlotte cannot decipher. The limb is off center, letter Charlotte know the rope is the star feature.

"You busy this weekend? We're all going out on Saturday."

"I really would like to."

"Cool, so come."

"I can't. I have um, plans on Saturday."

"Wifey duties, huh?"

"I guess so." Charlotte replies, quieter than she intended.

Eva O'Donnell doesn't press further. She begins to put away the paints. She haphazardly sweeps them into a pile of tubes near one of the legs of the easel. The action reminds Charlotte of a children's movie, where the princess lifts up the carpet to brush in a large pile of dust, only to leave a humorous mound behind as evidence to her carelessness.

Ruby peeks her head into the studio but doesn't enter. She gives Charlotte a quick nod, and pays Eva O'Donnell no mind at all. Charlotte picks up her purse and heads out, giving the young princess one last glance on the way out.

"Eve told me she's almost finished with some of the paintings."

"It's going well, I think. I haven't seen them yet, but I can tell in her eyes. The paintings are going to be." She pauses, hunting her brain for the correct feeling and settles on:

"Everything."

Ruby frowns and unlocks the car. Their drive for Charlotte is a peaceful silence. Her mouth has the pleasant bitterness of coffee still swimming within her gums and tongue and Ruby's car seat is warm, as if someone had been saving it just for her. Just a foot away Ruby's mind wanders like a wild cat, newly caged. She accidentally accelerates too quickly while going around a corner.

"Hey, Charlotte?"

"Yes?"

"This is sort of a big ask, but I just don't really have anyone else to ask. Well, I asked but they said no, so." She glances quickly over to Charlotte who has a welcome smile plastered on her face. With this non-verbal welcome she finds the courage to continue. "Next week. On Monday, I'm getting my first chip. For A.A. Could you come and be my plus one? It's kind of a big deal. To me."

“Yes. I’ll go. Of course, I’ll go!”

Relief and love flush through the car, the weight of holding back needs, finally dissipated.

“Thank you.”

When they reach Charlotte’s driveway, Ruby digs through her glove compartment and pulls out a small card. On it reads

A.A C.H County Member  
312 Ember Street. 1<sup>st</sup> floor Coffee Shop.  
A Community here for you, always.

“This is the address. I’m assuming you’ll need a ride though, right.”

“That’s right.” Charlotte chuckles, unoffended.

“Then, I’ll see you Monday. I’m sorry you might have to skip your session with Eve.”

Charlotte tightens her lips, it is apparent to Ruby that this hasn’t yet crossed Charlotte’s mind. There is another silence until finally Charlotte’s smile returns.

“This must be really hard for you, right.”

“That’s right.” Ruby answers, her words thick.

“I’ll see you on Monday. Thank you for inviting me.”

Once Charlotte is safely tucked away inside her home, Ruby let’s her tears flow down her face. The warmth of it all fills her chest.

\*

“Hey neighbor!” Soyoung pulls at her dog’s leash. The mixed-breed jumps and barks toward his new friend.

“Hello, baby.” Charlotte coos to the large dog. “What’s his name again?”

“Benji.”

Charlotte rubs the dog with both hands as he twists and pants around her. Once he’s calmed down enough the two set off for their walk.

The neighbors keep their lawns trimmed and green, but barely visible through the fences. They walk along the sidewalk in a long arching curve until they reach the end of the cul-de-sac that leads to a small intersection.

“Which way should we go? Since you’re the walking expert in these parts.” Soyoung jokes. Benji however makes their decision for them, pulling his owner to the left, up a small hill.

The walk along the road and eventually find themselves in the next town, a quaint village that dips inward like a bowl. They walk around checking out the shops and stalls. Benji barks at a local cat, lazily stretching itself in the sunlight.

“I Haven’t been here in a while.” Charlotte shares.

“Really? But don’t you go for a walk every day?”

“Yeah, but I always go South into the city. I’ve been helping out an artist these days.”

Charlotte says, pride littering her voice. Then, shyly she adds. She’s been painting me.”

“That’s pretty cool. I’ve been meaning to check out the local art scene. Maybe you could introduce me sometime.” Soyoung pulls on Benji’s leash again as he attempts to cross the street to meet a cute Pomeranian.

“That would be so fun. I’ll ask her.”

\*

Marcus comes home with a certain glow about him. He practically skips around the kitchen, preparing dinner for three. Charlotte sets the table, keeping him in the corner of her eye.



“Could you please remember to set out the knives this time.” Marcus asks as he chops the garnish.

“Yes.”

“Good girl. I’m making your favorite, Olive oil pasta.”

They sit and eat. Marcus makes a joke about an older student in his class, who insisted all professors were members of the communist party but then went on to explain socialist values. Charlotte laughs. She shares a story about a boy she saw on one of her walks. He had almost tripped but when he caught Charlotte watching he blushed and pretended that falling was his intention. He continued to fall on purpose, like a game, until Charlotte rounded a corner, sparing his little knees. The couple holds hands on top the table. Charlottes favorite food really is Olive Oil pasta. And his hand is so strong and inviting.

“Could you bring me your purse, darling? I’ll put in a little extra pocket money for you this week.”

Charlotte swallows her last bite and heads to the closet to get her purse. She sets it in front of him. He takes out his wallet and flips a few extra bills in his hand, counting them twice before digging into her purse. The A.A card rests in one of the open side pockets inside the purse’s interior lining.

“What’s this?”

Marcus removes the card as if it were crime scene evidence. He inspects the words carefully and looks up at Charlotte with an aggressively confused eye. Charlotte’s shoulder’s raise as she debates her potential excuses.

“It’s my friend’s.”

“Uh-huh. Going to need more than that, my love.”

“My friend Ruby’s...card.” Her fingers travel up to her neck and she begins to pick at her skin. Marcus doesn’t interject, so she is forced to go on. “She is getting a reward for. Um. Because she isn’t drinking. Which is a really good thing to do. To not drink. Drinking. Um. She asked me to go. I can go and help her get the award, I mean.” Marcus continues to stare her down, unflinching. He holds the card with a confident grip. “What do you think?” She asks toward the floor, her eyes glaze across the tile until she see the small crack in the floor.

“You said your friend Ruby was only passing through town. So, what she lives here now?” Marcus keeps his voice low, forcing Charlotte to focus on his words.

“Yes...she lives here now. Not that close by though.”

Marcus sighs. He leans back in his chair and observes his far away wife. Her eyes look longingly, desperately away from him and this is what drives him to delicately put the card back in her purse. Charlotte, surprised by this, raises her gaze to meet his.

“I’d rather you not hang around alcoholics while we’re pregnant. I know you, Charlotte. I know how you get. So easily swept off your feet. Forgetful.”

Charlottes eyes become teary but refuse to drop from his deep brown and indignant eyes.

“I’m supposed to go. She needs me.” She pleads. When his stare does not soften, her tears can’t resist their plummet. She follows where they fall. She rests her wet and motionless eyes on their target: that sustaining crack on the floor.

“What am I the bad guy now? For wanting my child and my wife to stay safe and healthy? Huh?” Charlotte doesn’t reply. He takes her limp hand in his and squeezes life into until she reluctantly pumps back. “I love you, Charlotte. Don’t get yourself lost in the wrong people, you’re worth more than that.”

Charlotte is shocked to life and begins to choke on her tears. Something rattles in her chest, and she needs a moment to catch her breath. A voice hiding inside of her seems trapped under the lump in her throat but with persistence she lets it free.

“But I like her! I like her so much and I said that I’m going!” She cries loudly like a child being caught in a lie. Her body vibrates Marcus’s solid seat.

He allows her to calm down before he continues. “Do you really need to run around with an alcoholic of all people? Be rational for once. Can’t you wait until after our child is born? You’ll have plenty of time for friends. Better friends. I promise!”

“I’m so lonely, Marcus.” Charlotte’s voice pierces through the house. A quiet but sharp dart. The foundation beneath them begins to quiver. The crack on the floor rumbles and peels farther back into the tile. Charlotte watches it grow.

“But I’m here. We are here, and we always will be.” He gets up and comes to her. He puts a hand on her stomach. Her ribs and organs that have softened with years of slow, painful marinating. She crumples not like a hardened bone, but rather like a cut of the finest steak, softly between fangs.

Charlotte sobs and hiccups. She slips out from under his heavy hands and curls up onto the floor beside the kitchen table. Marcus attempts to reach out and hold her shaking shoulders, but her intensity causes him to hesitate, so he settles with just standing over her, helpless in his own world.

He clears the table. He washes the dishes, drowning the sounds of sadness away. He finishes and dries his hands upon a small towel. He folds it and before he leaves the kitchen, he gives his wife one last look of exhaustion.

“I love you, Charlotte. When you are finished here, come to the bathroom, I’ll have a bath running for you.” He loves her. And that love of his holds stronger than any other truth in the room.

Charlotte is left on the tile. Her body slowly warms the floor. She inches herself towards the crack on the floor. She feels herself slipping through it, like muck sinking, dripping into the sewer. She digs a finger inside and feels the sharp edge of the chipped marble tile. The physical, steady mass of hers comes as a surprise. She tries and fails to push herself in. She’s left, a stain in the kitchen.

*Hello again, I don't have anything to say.*

*But your silence is worse than mine, I think. At least there is someone holding a hand to my*

*throat. But what's your excuse?*

*Write soon, I'm begging.*

*Love, Charlotte.*

## Chapter 12 The Family

The couple sit, facing the same direction, one cushion apart. Doctor Howard's office is a swirl of calming colors, mostly creams and blues. Several species of potted and hanging plants give the room a faint smell of wet soil. The Doctor sits across from them on a plush brown couch, he leans back comfortably yet his face his alert and present as the couple settle in. He watches the husband lean back, finding a comfortable position, as his wife sits perched on the edge.

"I'm so glad you made time to come see me today. I know it can be hard to schedule in time for self-care, self-improvement."

The couple nod their heads and try to smile at the large man. The doctor has a large, yet calming presence. Like Walt Whitman, bearded and stately, he seems in his element, comforted in the nature of his office.

"I would like to start by letting you know that this will go at your pace. You two are completely in charge here." He makes intent eye contact with Charlotte "I've been made aware of your situation from Doctor Laine. I understand you are here because you're newly pregnant, Mrs. Williams."

Charlotte nods her head once more. But her attention is fixed on a vase beside the doctor's sofa. The blue swirls illustrating a Chinese garden, have hidden pockets of yellow speckles. Charlotte tries to make out the little dots.

"Would you like to start by sharing your feelings on this?" Doctor Howard continues after a hesitation in her response. "We don't have to go into in now. Whenever you feel

uncomfortable or unsure of your answer, you can tell me. There is absolutely no pressure to share.”

“I feel. I feel, nervous.” Her words are soft. Marcus reaches across the sofa and takes her limp hand in his.

“I can imagine so. Can you pinpoint what exactly makes you nervous?”

Charlotte shakes her head, the task of finding reason seemingly too out of reach.

“We’ve had a few miscarriages, so it’s been hard on her, right darling?” Marcus offers.

Again, Charlotte doesn’t respond. She traces the lines of the vase and stays perfectly still. Dr. Howard watches her manic pupils dart like a typewriter, jaggedly in their sockets.

“That must have been very difficult. Mrs. Williams would you like to go into this?”

“Not right now.” She whispers.

Doctor Howard nods with firm gentleness. He jots something quickly in his notepad. He glances down at the couple’s hands, interlocked but not gripping. He notes this, as well.

“Then let’s change the subject. I’d like to hear from you both. Is there anything you could do for your partner at this time? Something that might help ease the anxieties of pregnancy?”

“I’ve been preparing her meals and making sure she exercises every day.” Marcus offers.

Charlotte’s eyebrows furrow and she removes her hand from his. Marcus creates a tight fist on the sofa’s leather cushion. Doctor Howard writes this down.

“Let’s discuss this, then. May I call you Charlotte?” He receives permission with her soft ‘yes’. “How do you feel, letting him control your meals? Your exercise routine?”

“I’m not controlling her-”

Doctor Howard interrupts Marcus’s retort. “Mr. Williams, you will have your turn once we listen. Go on, Charlotte.”

“I. sometimes want to eat what I want to eat.” Each of her syllables carries a heavy weight. “I know he just wants me to be healthy.” She quickly adds. “He wants the baby to be healthy. But. I don’t think. Um. I think I can cook for myself?”

“Do you enjoy cooking?”

“I did. I remember I did.”

Doctor Howard quickly underlines something he had previously written. Then he raises his hand to Marcus, indicating he may speak. But Marcus hesitates, debating how to respond.

“I’m just trying to make her relaxed. If she gets stressed, she could hurt our child. I can’t handle losing another one, especially if it’s something I could have prevented.” He admits.

“I can see you feel very passionately about becoming a father. How long have you wanted children?”

“My whole life. My mother said I used to play with babydolls instead of trucks.”

“Could we find a way to better communicate our needs then? Sometimes when we think we are helping, what we are doing is diminishing the other persons voice, feelings. Have you asked Charlotte what she would like from you?”

“What do you want then? I’ll do whatever.” Marcus says this with great force. He moves in closer to his wife, great desperation crosses his face. Charlotte shifts slightly farther away from him.

“Let’s try asking with compassionate language, Mr. Williams. When we ask questions genuinely to our-”

“You told me to ask her what she wants and now I’m not supposed to ask her what she wants?”



Dr. Howard shifts confidently toward Marcus and puts on a calming voice, a tune like a mother singing her son a lullaby.

“Let me finish. Charlotte is the one carrying this pregnancy, this specific burden. We- both me and you, are here for her.” Marcus glances over at Charlotte. Her entire body is clenched and compacted on the cushion. Dr. Howard continues. “So, in order for us to be there for her, we must truly be there. Listening, asking, learning with great empathy.”

“And what about me? I’m the one who does everything, I pay the bills, I take care of everything in the house. You know she doesn’t even do housework? I do it all. So why is it that I’m always the bad guy!?” Tears appear in his sharp eyes.

Doctor Howard smiles kindly. “My apologies. I see there is more than pregnancy anxiety that needs to be discussed here.”

Charlotte laughs. A mean, and quick release of air that rattles through Marcus’s skin. She covers her mouth, a look of regretful dread flashes and disappears on her face. Doctor Howard writes another note.

\*

Marcus retrieves the mail every day after work. He shuffles through it, taking what’s his, then he takes the rest to Charlotte’s study. She’s writing on a piece of loose, decorated paper. She finishes her last line, folds it, and meticulously slides it into an envelope. Marcus places the stack of magazines onto her desk.

“Another letter, darling? I can put it in the mailbox for you.”

“Thank you.” She says. He kisses the top of her head and leaves with the letter in hand.

She picks up the stack once he leaves and manically flips through it. She takes up the magazines and shakes them out, expecting something hidden to fall like a leaf, out from between

the pages. Once she knows there is nothing more, she throws the stack into the bin beside her desk. She rests her head against the table.

Above her, the Witch's eyes watch as Charlotte breathes shallowly against the wood.

*Good morning, I've never left bed so early.*

*It's odd, but my legs feel much stronger. Must be all the walking I do. But this time, you know I am always awake, but I never seem to move. But something exciting happened last night and I just need to tell you right away.*

*I dreamt last night for the first time in months. Not just any dream. She came for me. The Witch. She looked so beautiful with her damp hair and dreamy skin. I don't remember what her eyes looked like and that's bothering me. But I'm sure they were lovely. She didn't touch me, but she walked across the pond and knelt before me. Her knees all scratched like old porcelain bowls. She opened her mouth to speak but her lips were fused together and peeling like drying glue. Yet, those lips were pink and plump. Inviting. Like coming home to a warm dinner. Someone across the table happy to hold your hand. I miss her now that she is back in the painting. The man behind her is getting harder to spot. But if I squint and turn my head I can see him, still lurking in wait of his chance at-well, I don't know what he waits for. Something he lacks, I guess. I don't remember if I said anything to her. I simply watched her come and once she was right in front of me, some warmth overtook my body and I awoke and had to removes the covers from my sticky skin.*

*Marcus is happy again, I guess the therapy is working. But that's not very interesting to hear about, right? He wants to go back, I think. I think I do, too.*

*When are you going to write back? Have I done something wrong? Please tell me, if so.*

*I love you, still with all my heart You don't even need to be jealous of the witch.*

*Love, Charlotte.*

## Chapter 13 The Friends

It's Monday morning and Charlotte is holding her breath. He is walking slower than usual around the house. Putting on one sock, then scrolling through his phone, looking at very little, then the other.

"Darling, what are you going to do today?" It's been years since he last asked that question. The last day he did was Charlotte's last day of work.

"The usual." She claims.

"You're not thinking about that alcoholic still, are you?" He sits on her side of the bed, watching her reaction. Charlotte pulls the covers up to her chin and says nothing for a long time. But Marcus, refuses to move away.

"I was thinking that-" She starts.

"Darling, please think about our child."

"We don't have a child-"

"Our baby, the one that is growing inside of you." His voice is low by the pressure of the early morning. He continues, holding back on his words "I am trying to do what Doctor Howard said. I am telling you what I need, so please listen and respect me."

Charlotte nods toward the window, the blanket now covering most of her face. He leans in and kisses her forehead with forced tenderness.

"Thank you. I love you." He whispers.

She says nothing and cannot bring herself to watch as he leaves.

"What about me?" She says to the air. The words fly upwards and into the crack on the ceiling. Disappearing entirely.

An hour drifts by in silence. Then, the sound of Ruby's car rumbles into the driveway. She beeps her horn a few times. The doorbell rings twice. Charlotte weeps quietly into her pillow as the car backs up and out of the driveway, even the engine sounding mournful with its soft purr.

"It's for the best." Marcus is not here; he has long gone to work. But she can feel him leaning over her, petting her head, very much as a master soothing his anxious dog. "I'm here." The voice around her continues to call.

"No. No! Wait!" She runs down the stairs, still in her pajamas. She runs out the door and down the road, but the car is far away. She rushes back in the house and digs out her purse from the closet. She finds the card, still tucked away in the side pocket. She holds it close to her pounding chest and runs back out the door.

She runs out and across the street and bangs on Soyoung's door. Her neighbor opens up and has a delighted but confused look on her face.

"I need your help." Charlotte breathes heavily between each word. Soyoung nods and gestures for her to come in, but Charlotte shakes her head. "Can you please drive me here?" She hands the card over for Soyoung to inspect.

"Looking to change your life?" Soyoung laughs. But when Charlotte doesn't join in she grabs her keys from the counter beside the door. "Come on, then."

\*

Charlotte slams the unexpectedly light door open, the doorhandle crashes into the wall and makes the door bounce back. The small group of people turn startled toward the entrance. Soyoung stands a foot behind Charlotte who ran on ahead to find the right meeting room. This being the third group they've scared.

“You made it!” Ruby stands from her plastic chair and jogs to them. “And you brought a friend?”

“I did. Um. Did we miss your turn?” Charlotte twists her hands together and tries not to look at the confused eyes resting on her.

“We just started. Come on in.” Ruby calls to Soyoung who nods and joins the group.

Once everyone has shifted to expand the circle, the organizer stands and makes his introduction. He reveals a small wooden box filled with tiny golden tokens. They watch as person after person stands and takes their respective token, some crying, others stoic, some in disbelief.

Then it’s Ruby’s turn.

“A reminder of how far you’ve come. The precious baby of our group. We are all so proud of you. You’ve made me the proudest sponsor.”

Ruby accepts the token and turns to her friends. Charlottes hands turn red from how hard she claps and Soyoung cheers theatrically, making everyone laugh.

The guests leave first as the A.A group finish their meeting in private. Everyone stands in the yard, proudly waiting for their loved ones to return.

“I have to get ready to open the shop soon, can you get back home, okay?” Soyoung asks.

“Yes. Thank you. Thank you again. I know that I’ve been nothing but a pain for you, but-

“What do you mean?” Soyoung asks.

“I’m just so lucky to have a neighbor like you.” Charlotte says. “Even though I’ve given you nothing in return. The earrings, your nice words, this.”

“Charlotte. The kind of person who is willing to run out of their house in their silk pajamas, just to be there for a friend. That’s someone I want in my corner.”

“Really?” Charlotte looks down at her clothes. She quickly covers her chest, just not realizing her breasts are visible through the thin material.

“Let Ruby know I say congrats. I’ll see you around.”

“Okay. I’ll see you too.” Charlotte’s words are muddled but sincere. Soyoung gives her one last smile before getting back in her car.

Soyoung watches Charlotte for a moment behind her car window. Charlotte moves back and forth, a bit anxiously as other’s shift judgmental glances onto her. Soyoung beeps her horn. Everyone, including Charlotte turns to look at her. Soyoung waves to Charlotte and makes a little heart with her thumb and pointer finger. Charlotte unsure of how to form that shape, takes both hands and makes a large heart, using her thumbs as the tip and all other fingers as the rounded tops. Soyoung drives off, smiling down the road.

Eventually Ruby comes out through the doors and runs up to Charlotte, the women hug for a long moment as both huff a sigh of relief. Not a word needs to be spoken between them, they hold onto each other tightly as they head towards Ruby’s car.

\*

Ruby pulls into Charlotte’s driveway. The two women spent the trip gushing over the token, debating on the best place to put it. The best place to show it off to the world.

“Hey, could you give me your neighbor’s number? I want to thank her for coming.”

“Sure.” She takes out her phone to find Soyoung’s information. “It was so nice of her to drive me. I’m sorry that we were late.”

“You came. Don’t be sorry.”

Charlotte tightens her grip around her phone. She fights back the tears that seem to want to come more and more frequently these days. Once the information is exchanged Charlotte steps

out of the car. She waves until she is out of sight, then she turns to see she left the front door wide open.

She steps through quietly, listening for any hits of an intruder. She sits at the kitchen table for a long while, listening and waiting, but no one pops out from behind a curtain.

She takes the containers of premade food and sets them all out across the table. Monday to Friday's premade meals. All mostly the same with only a slight variant of meat. She pops open the lid and one after the other she devours the tiny portions. Even the artichokes, that she despises most, yet week after week appear in her dishes. She masticates the browned leaves and feels them brittlely fall apart in her mouth.

Marcus comes home to a pile of cleaned Tupperware left dripping in the drying rack. He leaves his shoes on, their loud tapping against the kitchen tile alerts Charlotte of his presence. She is hiding on the sofa. She looks like a lost child, praying that the cushions are tall enough to conceal her.

He opens the empty fridge and slams the door closed.

"What the absolute fuck is wrong with her?" He says, loud enough for her to hear. He knows of her not-so-hiding spot. "Charlotte!"

She stays put, sinking deeper into the green couch. He takes off his shoes and tosses them toward the front door. Then he removes his belt.

"Charlotte!" He calls again.

She shakes like a newborn. But eventually peels her body up. She stands behind the sofa and looks toward her husband, belt in one hand, the other gripping a tuft of his own hair.

Brushing and twisting the strands violently.

"Just, come here. Now. Please." He squeezes the plead out.



“I was hungry.”

He shushes her and looks at the cleaned plastic near the sink. He grinds his teeth.

“Is this about Dr. Howard? That I don’t listen to you, huh? You think I don’t listen?”

Charlotte nods her head. She tries desperately not to look, and the shining piece of metal attached to the leather rope.

“I want to make my own food.” She whispers.

“You should be either resting, eating, or exercising and that is it! Think of our child!”

“Dr. Howard said you need to listen to me, too.” Charlotte’s voice trembles but her posture remains firmly erect, as if refusing to fold. Her eyes are so wet that Marcus appears to her a fish in a fogged lake.

“What could you possibly need? What?”

“An abortion.”

*It's me again,*

*Marcus hasn't loved me in a long time. But weirdly, I love him very much. He's as hard and prickly as a cactus. Inside he is a cold slush of desert milk. I've never seen a man compulsively shake before. I don't know why, but it made me love him more. I wanted to hold him close, press him inside of me. He said nothing about what I told him, in the same way I'm sure you will say nothing. I fear he is pretending not to have heard. He's done that before.*

*When I turned thirteen you went away and never came back. Why'd you have to go and drink yourself nearly to death. Maybe it would have been better for me if you'd have just gone on with it. Allowed yourself to be swept away in the current of that gin you loved so much. You loved it more than me, didn't you? That's what that lawyer said.*

*I don't think you know how many times I've called out to your corpse-like body. I guess this doesn't matter if you'll never write back. You used to send me letters every month. I hungered for them. I thought things between us were becoming clearer. I thought the word family might start to mean something.*

*I miss New York. I wish I never moved here. .*

*I'm afraid I don't have much love left to give,*

*And like you, I wouldn't make for a very good mother.*

*Yours despite all this,*

*Charlotte.*

Part 2  
Charcoal Like Nectar

## Chapter 14 The History

Charlotte stands in front of her classroom, eagerly anticipating the arrival of her new students. Plucky university freshman with sleepy, anxious eyes shuffle by one by one, greeting their professor once they realize who she is. Charlotte smiles at each, taking them in and giving them immediate ease of mind.

Once all sixteen are in and accounted for she steps to her podium and instructs them to pull out their textbooks: *Art History through The Nineteenth Century*.

She's like a conductor. She introduced the syllabus, perfectly laid out with clear mid and final term assignments. She flips through the introductory slides and shows off some of the more spectacular works of Monet, Matisse, Cezanne, and Van Gogh. Each there own swirling impression of a scene.

Charlotte peaks around the class, one student is practically floating from her seat as Diego Rivera's epic city scenes flash across her eyes.

"Just wait until I introduce you to Mary Cassatt." Charlotte beams.

The class finishes and the students quickly put their noses into their phones, scanning desperately at the campus map in hopes of finding their next class without difficulty. The young girl lags behind, her eyes are transfixed on the final slide: Edward Hopper's *Morning Sun*.

"It's so peaceful." The young girl says, approaching the screen tentatively.

"Yes, it is. But it's also quite sad, actually." Charlotte replies with a kind smile still plastered across her face.

"Why so?"

“The isolation of it all. Not to mention the suffering of his wife. We’ll take a look closely at Hopper’s personal life in week five.”

“What about separating the art from the artist.”

“I wonder if that’s truly possible?” Charlotte muses.

The girl beams at her professor before leaving the room. Charlotte is left with the mid-morning sun as company.

\*

Her phone buzzes on her desk. A message from the man she’s seeing.

**I’ll be there to pick you up soon!**

**Sounds great!**

“He’s very eager to please, isn’t he?” She jokes with her colleague. Another young woman fairly new to the university.

“It’s a green flag! He’s putting in so much effort.”

Charlotte agrees and looks down at their messages brightly. Then, she puts it away and goes back to her work.

\*

Marcus picks Charlotte up in his car. Leaving hers behind in the parking lot. They drive, Marcus takes Charlotte’s hand in his, using the other to stir. Charlotte blushes and enjoys the view of their bodies innocently interlocked this way.

They sit at a small, secluded table in a lowly lit restaurant. There are streaks of twinkling lights around the edges of the dark brick on the wall. The flowering plants, that appear maroon in the light help to keep the couple hidden.

“Best seat in the house, for you.” He kisses her fingers delicately. Charlotte takes her thumb and runs it along his plump top lip.

They eat their food slowly, letting everything cool as they talk and review their days. Charlotte fills him on her new students and her plan for the post-impressionist lesson. He leans in close, holding onto each word.

“I have some exciting news. But I’m not sure how to tell you.” He says.

“What is it?”

“I got a job back home in Chicago.”

Charlotte’s soft gaze turns shallow as she listens to his explanation.

“It’s an amazing opportunity for me but.” He teeters off, examining her sunken expression. “I know it’s only been a few months, but I want to take our relationship to the next level. I can’t lose you.” He pines.

She hesitates before speaking. “Marcus, I don’t know what to say.”

“Come with me.”

“But I can’t leave my work. And you know I can’t leave New York. We just started the semester, anyways and.” She explains but Marcus is already moving forward and attempting to sweep her up and away with his vision.

“Imagine it. You and me and a little place of our own. We’d be a family. You told me once that’s what you’ve always wanted. That’s what I want, too.”

“A family.” Charlotte whispers. Her eyes move across the restaurant, as if looking for someone.

“I know it’s a big ask. But I think we’re worth taking a chance on, don’t you?”

Charlotte hesitates before answering “I’ve just never had someone take so much care of me. It’s a bit. Overwhelming.” She admits.

“Now that you have me, you’ll never have to worry about a thing. All that pain and burden you’ve told me about. I’ll take care of it all, darling.”

Charlotte blushes a faint orange, a perfect peachy color that would make William Turner swoon.

\*

“Charlotte’s pregnant!” Marcus is calling his relatives from out of state. The celebration rings on from his laptop. His cousins cheer and ask probing questions about Charlotte’s diet, sleep schedule, and nursing plans. Charlotte remains in her study. Face buried into her journal, she flaps the papers with her thumb and forefinger, focusing on the soft noise.

“Let me go get her!” Charlotte hears him call. She sits up and looks around the room, scoping for a cranny to crawl into. He jogs up the stairs, not giving her much time to find a hiding place. “Darling, Ruth and the kids want to congratulate us.”

She nods along and smiles on cue. But her eyes glaze past the screen and pass the kitchen table. Outside she spots Soyoung’s dog, Benji. He jumps around a small hole he’s dug, excitedly scooping up patches of grass and dirt with his large paws.

“Charlotte?” Marcus’s cousin calls through the computer.

“Yes?”

“I said, have you thought about names yet?”

“Not yet.” She mutters. Her eyes move back up to the dog.

“I’d love to name my son after me and grandpa. Another Marcus on the Williams family tree. Remember, darling? I told you before.” Marcus asks. He places a hand on Charlottes arms, squeezing it gently.

“Oh, yes. I remember.”

“I think that would be just wonderful, what if it’s a girl?” Ruth cuts in.

“Perhaps something timeless, Abigail or Miranda? Something that will always be in fashion.” Marcus muses.

“Oh yes, I just can’t stand these new-age crazy names. Let me tell you, being a teacher during role call is an absolute nightmare.”

Charlotte excuses herself to the bathroom during Ruth’s rant about a girl named Kate, spelled Kaighte.

In the downstairs bathroom, Charlotte sits on the toilet until she hears the conversation drift back to pregnancy. Ruth makes a joke at how long Charlotte has been in the bathroom and recants her own pregnancy-bladder problems.

“Darling, are you alright in there?” Marcus calls.

“I’m fine! Just give me a minute.”

“Ruth before I let you go, want to see the nursery?” He asks.

She listens as their happy voices trail away from the kitchen. She stands and is about to flush the toilet, when she notices the small window that leads into the backyard. She pulls back the curtain and scans the empty lawn. She locks the door behind her before stepping on the toilet and shimmying her way outside. The ground is much farther away than she expects, and she lands with a thud.

She pulls herself up and runs out to the front of the house and towards Soyoung’s place. Benji barks excitedly as she approaches. Soyoung comes out, looking alarmed at Benji’s yelping.

“Hey, neighbor!” She says cheerfully once she spots Charlotte.

“Hi.” Charlotte gasps.

“On a jog? In jeans?”

“Oh, um. No. I was just. Escaping.”

“Ha, what’d you mean?” Soyoung asks. She attempts to calm Benji down by snuggling him close to her. Benji continuous to wag his tail and hop up on his front paws toward Charlotte.



“Would you want to go for a walk. Together, I mean.” Charlotte asks.

“That’d be great! Let me grab Benji’s leash.”

They walk down the street together. Charlotte, looking forward the entire way.

\*

“You’ve been outside this whole time? Jesus Charlotte, I thought you fainted or something!” Marcus yells as she comes in behind him, standing silently in the doorway. She notices the white scratch marks over the golden doorknob where he attempted to pick the lock.

“Sorry, I think I must have locked it by accident. I just went for a walk.”

“Why wouldn’t you let me that? I almost called an ambulance!”

“Sorry.”

“For fucks-sake.” He slams down the screwdriver in his hand, leaving behind another tiny scratch on their kitchen table. He aggressively runs his fingers through his hair and tugs at the strands. When he cannot bring himself to look at his wife, he turns away and goes upstairs, slamming their bedroom door shut.

Charlotte walks tentatively towards the scrape and rubs her finger along the raised wood. Above something crashes on the ground. The metallic clang of something hard and electric.

At night, when Charlotte believes Marcus is asleep, she creeps into bed, stepping over the broken shards of a desk lamp on the way.

\*

Marcus drives her back to her university. Her car is waiting patiently and alone in its spot.

“Think it over, my love. Think of the life we can have together.” He whispers and then leans close to kiss her passionately.

Charlotte shrinks under his weight and allows herself to pass through him. Through her mind a single word flutters like a hummingbird’s wings: family.

## Chapter 15 Plan B

She waits until he steps into the shower, just long enough to know his hair must be wet and his clothes are in a muddled pile. She stalks into the kitchen, quietly but with great precision, this hasn't been the first escape. She takes his keys off the hook and runs out the door. She slams the driver's side door and shoves the keys in the ignition. There is a moment of panic as she fumbles to adjust her seat and put on her seatbelt.

“What are you doing?!” Marcus yells down from their bedroom window upstairs; he is naked and dripping water onto the lawn below.

Charlotte pretends not to hear him. She pulls out of the driveway. Unfamiliar with the acceleration from many months of being a passenger, she nearly hits their mailbox. She slams on the breaks, then accelerates properly down the street. Marcus is left behind, yelling into the air. When their car is out of view Marcus runs to his phone and dial's his mother's number. Her hands shake against the steering wheel as she drives, far too quickly out of the cul-de-sac. She drives furiously, half in a daze until she reaches the clinic.

She lets out a choke of tears once she parks the car. She puts her head on the steering wheel to avoid the gaze of the woman on the mural and her swollen belly. She hiccups, wipes her eyes, and opens the door.

Inside the clinic, women sit reading magazines and patting their sore backs.

“Hello, Mrs. Williams. We weren't expecting you today?” The receptionist greets her warmly but leans over the counter to check her calendar in confusion.

“I need to talk to someone. I need something.” Charlotte says. Her hands are still shaking as she takes the plastic board.

“Okay, just fill those out and have a seat, we’ll get to you as soon as we can.” The receptionist smiles happily until Charlotte turns away. Then, she turns to another nurse, and they share a worried expression and hushed whispers.

Charlotte obeys and sits rigidly on the sofa, waiting with her legs held close to her body, in an attempt to control her shivering skin. The other women and their partners glance over to her, curious but afraid to make eye contact.

“The doctor can see you now, Mrs. Williams.” A nurse calls.

Charlotte waits a bit longer in one of the private rooms. She sits, erect and barely touching the medical cot. When Dr. Laine knocks on the door Charlotte jumps and almost falls off.

“Oh, just you today Charlotte? What brings you in?” She asks.

“I need...help.” Her voice, despite her shaking body is steady and clear.

Dr. Laine closes the door behind her quickly and sits close beside Charlotte.

“How can I help?”

\*

Eva O’Donnell adds more white paint to the grungy palette. Months of caked on, dried paint plasters its corners. She mixes the red in until the perfect hue of pink appears. She takes a small, rounded brush and dabs the color. She touches up the edges of the face plastered on the canvas.

She steps back and smiles at the finished piece.

Behind her, the other paintings lean against the wall, waiting their turn to be touched up and judged. Charlottes plump, smiling face is echoed in different variations across the room.

\*

“I had no idea so much went into this.” Charlotte says.

They’ve been discussing for a long while, going over all the option, all the different procedures, all the freedoms still allowed to a woman and her choice to conceive.

“It’s unfortunate. Miscarriages and abortions, despite often needing the same procedures, are considered very different in the eyes of law makers. But I’m afraid we do have to follow the rules, regardless. Dr. Jones has been performing abortions for about six years now. She takes great care of her patients, you’ll be in good hands.” Dr. Laine states this like a script, something she has had to inform many people in this situation before.

“But why can’t I get it today? Why do I have to-isn’t it worse the longer I wait?” Charlotte tries to keep her voice steady.

“I know this is quite frustrating. There’s, quite a few steps in terminating a pregnancy legally.” Dr. Laine shrugs. “We can get you into surgery in a few days at the earliest.”

“I just have to fill this out right?” Charlotte asks and holds up the hefty stack of papers. A mental health questionnaire.

“Yes. Dr. Jones will evaluate it and get you in as soon as possible.”

Charlotte nods and begins flipping through the pages. One phrase catches her eyes. In a long list of questions, near the very top of the list, it asks *History of sexual abuse or physical violence?* Underneath that, another question reads *History of mental health disorders?* Charlotte’s shoulders tense. Beside each question is a line to fill in your answers and then a box listing numbers from one to ten.

“What if I write down the wrong answer?” She whispers, but Dr. Laine is busy on her computer, writing an email to the specialist. Charlotte watches her click away at her computer, looking in awe at the rapid pace of the doctor’s fingers.

“If you don’t mind me asking, does Marcus know this is what you plan to do? It’s fully your decision mind you, we’re lucky our state doesn’t force spouse approval. But...you’ll need to prepare for that conversation.” Dr. Laine’s question is gentle, cautious.

“No. I don’t know how to tell him.”

“We can work with you on that, too. I heard from Dr. Howard that you and Marcus have been going to Therapy regularly. How has that been?”

“I’m not sure yet. Honestly, when I’m there I feel like I’m just floating outside the room, waiting for the hour to be over.” Charlotte says. She looks to Dr. Laine who continues to smile kindly.

“I see. Charlotte, I just want to say. Not just as your doctor, but as a woman. I am very proud of you. Even though it’s hard, you’ve been trying. Once you’ve finished with this.” She taps the mound of paperwork on Charlotte’s lap. “You can rest. We will take care of everything else from then on.”

Large tears fall from Charlotte’s eyes. Dr. Laine places a box of tissues beside her and waits patiently for the tear to dry. A nurse comes in and takes away the drenched pages, to replace them with a fresh set.

\*

Eva O’Donnell takes pictures of her finished paintings. All five, large canvases spread across the metal floor. Each one its own universe, different shade and compositions, but together they form a completed scene.

From left to right an image of almost Charlotte emerges. Her hair and body slightly twisted to look more like Eva O’Donnell’s features. Her with a spiraling pink universe in her womb. Then her spewing that pink onto the world around her. The middle painting holds pink incubators, inside Eva O’Donnell’s face is reflected in the glass. The last two painting show

Charlotte and the artist embracing like two halves of a snake. Intertwined strongly but with serene expressions gazing toward each other.

She halts her photoshoot when she spots an imperfect smattering of oil. She bends down and tinkers away with a smooth knife until satisfied. She finally steps away and examines them all.

“I think this is it.” She beams like someone radiating after a marathon, exhausted yet triumphant. “Time to let them dry.”

\*

Charlotte finally leaves the clinic, her face is red and puffed. She sits in her car and rests her swollen eyes for a moment. She takes out her phone and calls Eva O’Donnell.

\*

She answers the buzzing phone. “Hey, girlie.”

“Can I come over?” Charlotte asks. Her voice lacks the usual airiness that Eva O’Donnell is used to.

“Sure, I’m at the studio, come through. I have something to show you.”

## Chapter 16 The News

Charlotte arrives to the studio and parks sideways in one of the available spots. Both parties see each other, and a look of shock passes over their faces. Charlotte stares at the cigarette being pressed between the artist's black boots and the pavement. There's still hints of smoke trailing up toward the sky.

"You got the car today?" She asks.

"Yes." Charlotte makes a gesture, showing off the vehicle as if it were a sweepstakes prize on a game show.

"Come on up! You're going to be so excited when I show you." Eva O'Donnell waves her over toward the stairs.

"I have to tell you something first." Charlotte says, more confident in both voice and body. Eva O'Donnell grabs onto her hand and starts leading her up the staircase.

"Can it wait? I wanna-"

"I'm having an abortion." Charlotte blurts out.

"What?" Eva O'Donnell stops and takes her hand away. She looks down at Charlotte, something like discomfort plastering her face. As if something tacky was caught between her fingers.

"Maybe tomorrow or sometime soon. My doctor said I'd likely be approved so-"

"Why would you kill your baby?" Eva O'Donnell's words are both accusatory and curious.



“I’m not- it’s.” Charlotte starts but freezes, her eyes gloss over. They stare at each other, miles apart on the stairway. Eva O’Donnell hangs on the top steps her arms dangling down and fists clenched.

“That’s what it is. So, how? What gives you the right to kill you baby?”

Charlotte shivers and her teeth begin to chatter in her mouth. She clenches her jaw, attempting to halt the clacking noise.

“You were my muse. For my mother, my mother, and you just. You’re.” The artist hunts for a word but comes up short. Her paintings flick through her mind and escape from her lips.

“What the hell am I going to do you now?”

“Please, I-”

“They’re all wrong now. I had you all wrong. You’re not my fucking mother, you’re a lying bitch like everyone else.” She whispers sharply and her eyes too begin to glaze over the other woman. The pair stand shaking and pouring their tears down the steps. Eva O’Donnell finally breaks their silence. “I guess I don’t have anything to show you today. Jesus, I’m going to have to rework everything.”

“I’m sorry, I-”

“I’m over it.” Eva O’Donnell shrugs and wipes a tear from her face with a quick flick. “You want to go and kill your baby, then just do it, fuck. I’ll text you when they’re done, I guess.” She turns and stomps up the stairs alone. Charlotte stands for several minutes alone on the steps. Listening to the clanging and banging and swears from the artist above her.

\*

Soyoung puts the small urn back on the mock-fireplace mantle. Around it, she places the wooden picture frames and souvenirs. She continues to dust the rest of the living room while half dancing to the rock music blasting from her laptop.

She opens the large, green curtains to let in the sunlight. Across the street she spies one of her neighbors walking around his yard. She observes his agitated stride. He takes out his phone and barks into the receiver. His arms flail madly with each word. Soyoung can hear some of his conversation.

“Well? How can I know? What do you mean by that? Well, if she isn’t there where would she be? Mom, just go check again.”

“Looks like our girl wandered off again.” Soyoung says to Benji, who’s lying peacefully stretched out on the sofa. “Hope she’s alright.”

Soyoung leaves the window and checks her phone. She scrolls to find Charlotte’s name amongst the loved-ones and cliental. She hesitates, types but then deletes a message. She puts the phone back down on the coffee table. She goes back to her cleaning, but her head remains slightly shifted toward the window.

\*

“It’s so unfair, It’s so unfair. Why does everyone I love leave me.” She chants into the glittering air.

\*

Charlotte drives far under the speed limit down her street. She notices the lights are on in Soyoung’s house as she pulls into the driveway. She does not see Marcus, pacing across the over-grown lawn.

“Where the hell have you been?” He spits before she even turns off the engine.

Charlotte steps out of the car but she rests her hand on the door handle. She keeps her head down toward the pavement.

“Are you listening to me? Where the fuck have you been? You know we’ve been worried sick. Even mom went out looking for you. Do you have any fucking sense what time it is, huh!?”

Marcus marches to the driver’s side to stand above his wife.

“I. I just needed some space.” Charlotte whispers into his chest.

“What are talking about?”

“Um. Marcus. We need to talk about something.” Charlotte mumbles. He says nothing in response. His brow narrows and his foot taps against the gravel. “I need. I need to um.”

“For fucks sake. What? What’s wrong with you?”

“Hey, everything alright?” The couple hear their neighbor’s voice calling nervously behind them. Soyoung appears across the street. She stands in her driveway, arms folded across her chest.

“Charlotte, darling. Come inside.” His voice drops. Sickly sweet and centered.

Charlotte looks back at Soyoung. Soyoung nods toward her house and Charlotte takes a step toward her.

“Get inside now!” Marcus commands.

Charlotte flinches but does not turn back, her feet know where they must go. Soyoung puts an arm around her friend, and together they walk inside. Marcus is left alone once more. He stands, stunned and gapping at the empty space where his wife once yielded.

## Chapter 17 The Relics

Soyoung locks the door quickly, despite knowing her neighbor hadn't followed them in. Charlotte takes off her shoes and steps into a pair of slippers Soyoung eagerly offers.

"Thank you." Charlotte whispers toward the pink, fuzzy house shoes. Benji begins to jump excitedly when he spots her. She goes to pet him, but her shaking hand warns him away. He lightly tucks his tail near his hindlegs but accepts the rigid pet.

"Let's go take a load off, huh." Soyoung gestures toward the living room. She walks ahead to check the windows. Marcus and his commanding voice are nowhere in sight, but she pulls the curtains closed anyways. She turns back and sees Charlotte standing in front of the sofa, her eyes are still wet and glued onto the slippers.

Soyoung sits on the sofa first. "It looks new, but it's been lived on." She runs her hand across the upholstery "It's pretty soft if you want to sit."

Charlotte remains standing in front of the arm of the couch. She's like stone, unmoved but inside a world of complexities, like shinning minerals yet to be identified, live on inside.

"I think I made a big mistake." Charlotte whispers. A shiver runs down her spine and she impulsively begins to shake. She holds herself, attempting to crush her weathered stone into debris.

"Do you wanna talk about it?" Soyoung stays still, her voice wary.

Charlotte breathes heavily, attempting to catch the air that seems to be thinning in her lungs. She shakes her head but then changes her mind. She tries to talk, to allow anything but panic out of her mouth, but with each attempt she loses oxygen and the words fall like fog onto the ground.

“Let’s take it slow, then. Could you sit, maybe that would help.” Soyoung suggests. She pats the cushion beside her until Charlotte eases herself down.

“I feel so cold.” She whispers. Soyoung pulls the blanket from the back of the sofa and drapes it around her companion’s vibrating shoulders. She rubs Charlotte’s arms for a while, attempting to heat her up. “I’m sorry. I’m okay.”

“I’d hate to see you upset, then.” Soyoung smiles. But Charlotte’s eyes remain drooped down toward the hardwood floor. “I have an appointment at 8. But before then I’m all ears. If you want to talk.”

Charlotte opens her mouth, but her words become frozen again. She chokes down a fit of tears and manages to blurt out “I don’t want you to hate me, too.” Tears fall like a down-pour.

“I don’t really have a lot of context about what’s going on, neighbor. But I don’t think there’s much you could do that would make me hate you.”

“I’m have...I...I’m getting an abortion.”

“So?”

“So?” Charlotte repeats, finally looks at Soyoung’s calm face.

“Is that why you two were fighting? He wanted to keep it?”

“Yeah. No.” Charlotte takes a minute to breathe once more. “He doesn’t know yet.”

“Then why was he so mad?”

“I stole the car...again.”

Soyoung smirks and takes her arm from around Charlotte’s shoulders. She goes into the bathroom and takes the toilet paper roll off its holder. She lets Charlotte blow her nose and wipe her red face.

“No offense but your man seems like a real bitch.”

Charlotte lets out a quick, exhausted laugh, but her eyes narrow as if she wishes she could take the teasing back.

“You’re not mad at me?” Charlotte eventually asks. Her face is red and dry from the tissues.

“Is there something to be mad about? It’s not really any of my business. In case you’re forgetting I permanently scar people’s bodies for a living. Consensually of course.”

Charlotte looks once more at her neighbor’s face. They smile lightly at each other and allow the boulder of emotions to roll through and past them. Charlotte allows her shoulders to release and drift back down.

\*

“I don’t see what your problem is.” Ruby says. She glances disinterested around the canvases laying on the floor.

“What don’t you get about a baby killer posing as a mother. It’s the most brilliantly horrid thing. It’s like cruel irony or something. I didn’t capture it. I didn’t even suspect it. She’s so weird and quiet, yuh’ know.” Eva O’Donnell’s voice is aggravated but her eyes are sparkling with delight.

“I think you’re blowing this out of proportion.” Ruby restates. “These look great, just submit them as is.”

“No. If I do that then I’d be a total fraud. I’m going to capture her essence. Her real essence.”

Ruby rolls her eyes. She walks around the last canvas and takes a second glance at Charlotte’s happy expression in the paint. Something turns inside of her stomach, she puts a hand to her gut, to suppress the sharp jab.

“I just worry, Eve” Ruby starts but the artist ignores her and begins mixing a batch of paint. A dark purple appears on the palette as the paintbrush sloshes the color around it grows darker and darker. “that you don’t really see her at all.”

Eva O’Donnell steps towards the first canvas. An image of Charlotte masquerading as her mother. Reimagined hair teacher and bone structure hide the muse’s true form. The artist takes a large flat brush and smears it across the face, a mask of black contorts her expression.

\*

“My daughter.” Soyoung holds up the urn for Charlotte to see. She had been eyeing the gleaming case for a while. Soyoung walks to the mantel and picks it up. She holds it with great care and love. She walks back over to Charlotte and hands it to her. Charlotte feels the unexpected mass of the object, the cold smoothness. A tiny engraving of Korean scrawls across the urn: *여기 있는 것들은 시들지가 않아*

“What does this say?”

“They’re lyrics, from a song Sooah loved listening to: Things here won’t wither. My parents wanted to add a prayer, but I thought this was more fitting. Besides I never took Sooah to church, so.” She shrugs.

Charlotte gives the tiny urn a solemn smile before handing it back. Soyoung places it on the mantle.

“She was six when she passed. You would have loved her. Such a people person.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Charlotte asks. She mimics Soyoung’s hands and pats the sofa beside her.

“I’m going to need some wine, first.” She says with a chuckle.

“I love wine.”

Soyoung laughs and heads into the kitchen. Charlotte listens to the satisfying pop of the cork and the swishing glug of the alcohol being poured into glasses. She returns with two purple filled cups.

“It’s a Korean brand. Black Raspberry. Might be a little bitter than what you’re used to.”

“I’ve gotten pretty unused to most alcohols these days.” Charlotte says. She puts the glass to her lips and tastes the fruity spirit. “It’s delicious.” They sip for a moment and enjoy the aroma. “Do you want to talk about your daughter?”

“You don’t mind?”

“I’d love to know.” Charlotte reassures her. Soyoung thinks for a moment and takes a sip.

“Abortion wasn’t an option for me. I had her in Korea. Totally illegal there. Even rape victims. They say of course if you’re raped you can have the procedure, but let’s be real, when are victims actually believed?” Soyoung says this last part with great disdain.

“She wasn’t planned?”

“A happy surprise. I loved her deeply. My parents adored her more than anything. But I was so scared, and too young. I was still in high school, and my parents were already in the process of moving us abroad. Away from her father. I don’t know. It worked out I guess, but it just would have been nice knowing I had any say in what was happening to me.”

Charlotte nods, letting her know she’s present, listening.

“Her father was what we call a Beksu, a loser without a job basically, and he was the worst because he started messing around with a teenager.” She points to herself. “Someone my parents told me not to get involved with. But he. Well, he didn’t really give me much of a choice.” Soyoung pulls back the hem of her long skirt, revealing the tattoo of Medusa. “He was nice until he wasn’t. But anyways.” She drops the hem again, leaving the mythical woman in a



shroud. “She came and I learned to love her, and then she was taken away from me, anyways.” Soyoung leans back and drinks every last drop of her wine. “The universe takes no prisoners, I guess.”

Charlotte tries to hold back her tears, but they fall anyways. Soyoung reaches over to the toilet paper roll and hands her more paper. Charlotts covers her face and takes large, desperate inhales.

“I’ve been doing really good for myself, though. I got this great house and a job I love. I even got myself a new man. A respectable one, this time.” Soyoung looks down at Benji, curled up on his dog-bed. “Every day I think of her. It’s like she’s here forever blooming inside my heart. She’s still growing, somehow.”

They sit together, hand in hand. Charlotte crying without restraint and Soyoung holding back tears. Through the pulled curtains, their neighborhood grows faintly grey. Then darkness. Soyoung takes a moment in the black to enjoy the peace of the living room. She gets up and goes near the urn again, beside it the light switch. She illuminates the room.

Chapter 18  
Peak

By the time Ruby arrives, Charlotte has fallen asleep on the sofa. The red and cream crocheted blanket pushes her down delicately into the cushions. Her glass of wine looks stained with drops of purple paint. The rapping at the door stirs her for a moment before she closes her eyes again and flickers back to her deep slumber.

“Come on in.” Soyoung greets the young woman stepping through her doorway. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Yeah, It’s nice to actually meet you.” They stand for a moment, a bit awkwardly, before Soyoung gestures a quiet finger to her lips as she walks through the kitchen to peer into the living room. Ruby sighs with relief over Charlotte’s snuggled body. “Thank you for taking care of her.”

“She’s had a long day. Sorry for making you drive all this way, but I thought she might need some more support and I’m already late for my appointment. Want something to drink?” Soyoung heads into the kitchen to get another glass before remembering the trip to the A.A. center. She pours ice water, instead. “Here.” She hands Ruby the glass and watches her sip it tentatively. “How long have you known Charlotte?”

“Not long. A couple of months, I guess.”

“Huh, same here.”

Charlotte begins to snore quietly. The pair stands, leaning in the kitchen cabinets and watches the thick blanket rise and fall.

“There’s something I need to warn her about. But now probably isn’t the best time.” Ruby says.

“I’m thinking the next few weeks will be pretty rocky for her.”

“Do you know if she has anyone else? Old friends, family? Charlotte never mentioned anyone.”

Soyoung shakes her head, frowning but trying her best to appear optimistic. The two fall silent as Charlotte stirs once more.

“So, what’s this warning you’ve got for her?” Soyoung asks.

“Do you know Eva O’Donnell? She’s a local artist.”

“Never heard of her.”

“Charlotte’s been sitting for her. She’s been painting her as some kind of motherly saint. But now the paintings are all fucked. They’re going to be bad. I just don’t want her to see them.”

Soyoung furrows her brow and thinks over what’s been said.

“Hi?” Charlotte’s voice startles the women. She stands with her hands balled up into fists in the kitchen doorway.

“Hey, I just got here. You were sleeping pretty hard.” Ruby says.

She tapes her chin and nods. Charlotte wipes away the line of drool that spread towards her chin. Soyoung goes back to the kitchen then hands another glass of water to Charlotte, who takes it with both hands, respectfully.

“Why are you here?” Charlotte asks.

“Just, checking in on you. I heard you’re going to have a pretty big operation soon.”

“I am. I think I’m finally ready to get help.”

Ruby walks over and wraps her arms around her. They hold on tightly, almost spilling the waters in their hands. Soyoung tells them she’ll be back before around midnight and the house falls silent once more and Ruby and Charlotte curl up together on the sofa beside Benji.

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Ruby rises first. She looks over at Charlotte spread out on the floor, her body loose and wild. Vastly different to the tight ball she rested in the night before. She mauls over waking her up, giving her the warning now. But instead, she sits still, watching her friend's chest fall and rise. She heads to the bathroom to freshen up before leaving to open the coffee shop.

Charlotte stirs at the sound of Ruby's old car starting up. She lifts herself and stretches. Her back pops. She rocks out of the blankets and crawls toward the window. Peering outside into the blue haze of dawn, she could barely see her house. The lights were off, but the car was still parked in the driveway where she left it. She crawls back and under the bedding and drifts back into a fitful sleep.

Soyoung makes coffee and pulls out a few containers of leftovers and side dishes. She sets the table with a large spread of reds and greens. The smell lifts Charlotte from her shallow dreams.

"Morning, sleeping beauty." Soyoung says through a bite of steamed meat.

"It smells amazing." Charlotte says shyly.

"Have a seat!"

Charlotte sits beside her, in front of her own bowl of rice. She picks up the chopsticks but fumbles with them.

"Fork?" Soyoung asks while holding up the extra utensil.

Charlotte blushes and nods.

"This is delicious. What is it?"

"Pretty basic Korean food, Cucumber salad, Bulgogi, Japchae, and Gakduggi." She points rapidly at each colorful dish. "My mom makes way too much and brings it to me."

Each spoonful is an experiment of flavors for Charlotte. Soyoung teaches her how to stack her spoon with the best side dishes to create new tastes.

When they finish eating, Charlotte offers to wash the dishes and clear the table. Soyoung accepts and heads upstairs to shower. Halfway through the dishes, Charlotte's phone begins to ring. She looks around desperately for a kitchen towel but falls on using her clothes. It's an unknown number.

The woman's commanding voice startles Charlotte awake. "Good afternoon, is this Charlotte Williams?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"This is Nurse Kirsten, I'm calling on behalf of Doctor Jones, from H and J Women's Clinic. How are we feeling about your procedure request?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

"We know this is short notice, but we can get you in tomorrow, after three, if you're available. You see there are always cancellations, and we try to be flexible for our patients. We prefer to do the procedure as quickly as possible as to prevent any further complications."

"Oh. I see." Charlotte pulls back the curtain and peers out the window towards her home. She tries to spot Marcus somewhere in the windows, but they remain dark. The nurse asks her another question, but she does not hear. "I'll be there." And the choice is made.

Chapter 19  
The End of it

She moves quickly, before Marcus returns from work, but her legs move slowly around their bedroom, her feet barely manage to shuffle inside. She starts with the closet. She pulls her clothes down large batches at a time, they slide and pop off of their hangers. Then she glides to her side of the bed to open the large cupboard in her bedside table. She pulls out old phone chargers, pictures, and other forgotten relics. She plops them on the floor beside the large suitcase.

As she organizes her belongings, her eyes catch something on Marcus's side. His own cupboard was left slightly ajar. Charlotte slinks toward it. She stands, weary to disturb his hidden artifacts. Eventually, she slowly tugs at the doors and a large pile of crumpled up envelopes come sliding out before her.

The letters from the correction center spill out like a bouquet of dead peonies. Wrinkled and darkened by time and dust. Charlotte stares at each crease and tear. She methodically collects them, becoming the world's most pathetic florist. She puts them in a spiraling pile, corners and loosely opened envelopes stick out like thorns. Then, she stares intently at each piece of paper. Each one is lovingly addressed to her in shaky cursive writing: *My Daughter*.

She takes one out from its place in the bouquet. It's wrinkled from being shoved in the drawer. She holds it like a fragile bird, and she reads her mother's words.

*Charlotte,*

*It's been so long since you've written. I know that sending me letters can get expensive. Have the price of stamps gone up again? I wish you'd try a little harder to reach out, but I understand life gets in the way.*

*I have wonderful news. They reduced my sentence again. The hearings have been going great since the state changed my lawyer. Guess, that other guy didn't cut it. I've been very good, they say. Sobriety has really done wonders, now that I no longer have the itch for it. I've also got a new job in the kitchen. It's much better than the laundry. I don't want to burden you, but I saw some horrible things in those sheets. Which reminds me, could you send more sanitary pads, they only give us 1 a day, some baby powder too if you can manage it.  
One more year. One more year and then we can be together again.*

*I love you so much,  
Mom*

Charlotte picks up letter after letter soaking in her mother's words, her pleads, her requests for necessities. Charlotte opens another and this one is short. But she holds it in her hands the longest.

*Charlotte,  
My dear I think I owe you an apology.  
I'm sorry you had to come into this world the way you did. You must've been so embarrassed, so ashamed. That's why I was so glad when Marcus came along and took you away. He's a good, good man. And that's all a girl needs in this world, really.  
I love you, and I hope you're not too mad at me.  
Love,  
Mom*

Charlotte looks closely at the date scratched on the top of the page. March. Five months ago. 5 cycles ago. The envelope had been ripped long before, read by eyes not hers, then stuffed into a drawer to be forgotten.

Charlotte shuffles through her spiraling stack until she finds the oldest unread letter. It's crumpled on the sides as if someone had gripped it too tightly, then attempted to smooth it back out.

*Charlotte,*

*I loved your last letter, you've always been such an observant person. The way you describe your in-laws made me feel like I was there in the meeting beside you. Remember when we went hiking, you nearly saved our lives by seeing that avalanche warning sign that had been buried under the weeds and dirt. You always seem to see the things I miss.*

*That being said my dear, don't forget that being too disagreeable isn't pretty. I know you wouldn't want to be a burden on anybody.*

*I hope you and Marcus can work things out. He comes from a good family, and family is really the most important thing. Besides, he can give you more than me and your father ever could.*

*God rest his soul.*

*When he gets you down, you can always tell me. I may not be beside you right now, but you know I'm always here. You let me know if he ever roughs you up. Your father did that from time to time, I'm sure you remember that. I'd always find you in the closet, shaking like a little lost puppy-dog.*

*Remember, it's okay to feel lonely sometimes dear. Just don't sit in it too long if you can help it.*

*Gotta put a smile on your face somehow. Get out there and find the good ones.*

*Love,*

*Mom*

She searches one last time through the swirling spread of letters. She finds the one dated the closest to the one in her hands.

*Charlotte,*

*He didn't put his hands on you too, did he?*



*Please tell me, you haven't written back yet and I worry. A mother's job is to worry.*

*Love,*

*Mom*

Charlotte puts the letter to her face and cries deeply onto the ink. Smudging and letting it run black over her cheeks and fingers until its practically dissolved.

\*

She sits and waits for his return, looking very much as she did when she posed for the artist. Still, barely moving, but spine straight and jaw relaxed, her eyes no longer red but clear and sharply locked on the bedroom door.

He unlocks the front door and puts his things away. She listens as he climbs the steps slowly, similarly to how she had entered the house, as if it had never belonged to them. He stops short at the top of the stairs, looking in at his wife glaring through him. She appears very much like a witch over her brew as she leans toward the crop circle of letters before her.

“How could you?” She starts. She waits for him to enter the room and take in the full scene of splattered letters. “You hate me this much?”

They linger on each other, lips quivering in anger and fear. Their eyes are red and exhausted. The distance between them thickens and leaves the room molten. Charlotte begins to vibrate, shivering and shaking the bedframe against the wall. He paces across the bedroom and out again into the hallway. His thumb nail is in his mouth and he's twisting it between his canines. A squeaking noise between each chomp. She watches him like a cat watching a stranger in their home, trying to mask her fear by making herself bigger.

“Please. Answer me. How. Why did you hide her letters from me?” She pleads.

He continues to pace. Charlotte counts the number of times he enters the room. Twenty-four.

“Can we talk about this some other time, darling? I want to-“

“Marcus.” She pleads.

He straightens his back and talks smoothly. “I knew the letters would distress you. My love, please I was just thinking of our baby, his health.”

“What about me? Have you ever. Did you ever once think about me?” Her voice cracks.

“I do nothing but think of you.” The smoothness in his voice dissipates. “Your health, your anxieties, your psychotic-addict mother, all of it. I think of our future! You’re the one who wants to throw everything away!” He shouts through her as she remains still on the bed.

When she does not respond he marches through the mess of papers, making a point to slide his feet and crumple them, and leans over her. She withdraws backwards. His breath blows and moves the thin hair around her face.

“You’re the fucking crazy one. You. And your drugged up family. I’ve been taking care of you for years, without any thanks. I wanted a better future for you. And now you’re throwing away everything that I’ve invested in away.” His words come whispered and hot on her skin, his teeth are bared like a wild animal.

Marcus stares unblinking at her quivering body. With his fist he pounds three times wildly against the wall. All while hoarsely whispering “bitch, fucking bitch. Respond for once! Say something!”

Charlotte waits. Curling slowly into herself as he unleashes his anger. Years of frustration onto the wall beside her. Eventually a small, cracked hole forms and he stops.

“I don’t want to love you anymore.” A whisper from the room, then nothing.

\*

Charlotte kneels on the floor. Clothes, books and old photographs are scattered around her office. Her suitcases are almost full but she attempts to stuff more items into the expanding fabric. The last one, the witch from above her desk. She takes down the frame and holds it delicately in her hands. She removes the paper from the glass and examines the witch closely, holding it near her nose. The knife is still there under her skirt. The man has disappeared. Charlotte folds the print into a small square and puts it in her pocket.

“Can I at least drive you?” He asks from the doorway, not attempting to enter her space.

“Why would you want to? Will you try to kidnap or something?” Charlotte asks suspiciously, not looking up from her task of zipping up the over-stuffed baggage.

“I just. This feels like our ending. And I guess, I just want to have a fair hand in that.”

She nods in agreement. But then shakes her head as he watches from the doorway, supervising her for the last time as she finishes packing her bags. The letters are beside her, carefully unwrapped and stacked in a neat pile. She takes them and tucks them carefully into the front pocket of her backpack.

“I’ll think about it.” She shrugs.

Mom,

*Forgive me, please. I know now that you've been here all along. In your own way.*

*I 'm sorry you've had to read through months of back-letters. I'm so sorry if that silence, that distance, hurt you. I've been pretty silent lately out here. I don't remember when that started. Was I ever bright or cheerful? There were moments, moments beside you especially that filled me with great love and happiness.*

*One time you were late coming home. I hated when you were late because dad was always home. I don't remember much. I don't remember anything but how purple my skinned turned, and how shocked I felt by the contrast between pinky flesh and the dark swelling.*

*Please disregard everything I've written. I'm escaping for good this time. The word betrayal might be too small. There aren't many words that haven't been over used, I think. I don't know what to do with myself, but I know I have two legs that work, what a great privilege that is, maybe that's enough for now and I won't have to sit here at this desk any longer, waiting for the right words to come and go.*

*I'll come to you as soon as I can. I don't have any excuse for not visiting sooner. Mom, in one of your letters you mentioned that I must be ashamed to come from a family like ours. But that couldn't be farther than the truth. I am so thankful to come from a woman like you. Even if you weren't always that woman 100 percent of the time. I thought I could never forgive you for turning yourself in, for leaving me with dad. I thought it was the greatest abandonment of my life. And in a way, it was. But also, I think I've abandoned myself, too.*

*Anyways, I think I'm starting to understand a word called accountability. I'll teach it to you later if you want. Or maybe you can look it up yourself.*

*You hurt me so badly, and sometimes I can't see farther then that hurt. But I'm not a teenager peeking through bars to you anymore. I'm not a child holding my knees close together so no one hears them cracking against each other. We are different, aren't we? In your letters, you've become so clear. I can't wait to see your eyes without glass or bars between them. You must look so beautiful in natural light.*

*I am so proud of you for getting the help you deserve. You would love my new friends, they're a lot like you. Sacrifice is such a big word.*

*Love always,*

*Charlotte*

## Chapter 20 The Choice

“With your permission we’d like to have a doctor in training come and watch the procedure.” The doctor asks. He’s taken her vitals, done his ultrasound, and asked his mandatory questions. All that’s left for Charlotte is the wait.

“Um. Sure, okay.” Charlotte’s voice rattles in her throat. The long night of crying and packing has left her body swaying numbly on the examination bed.

The doctor hands her another form of consent to sign. Then the nurse comes in and presents a tray, an assortment of white and blue pills placed neatly into a little white cup.

“Pain and numbing medications. Since you’re only around 11 weeks pregnant, anesthesia isn’t an option for us. Any allergies? Have you taken valium before?”

Charlotte shakes her head then takes the pills and gulps them down. The cup sticks to her dry lips as she polishes off the water.

They explain the procedure to her once again, a simple suction of the uterine wall. Pressure. light to moderate bleeding. A cold, gloved hand and the doctor’s heavy instruments. Crying from the next room. The shouting of protesters outside. Thumping behind the ears, blood or guilt. The blood. And something else alien. Charlotte is forced to watch the videos they require, horrific scenes far different from the procedure the doctor described. Mutilation.

“It’s state law. I’m sorry you had to watch a late term pregnancy termination. I promise, this will be quick and easy. Try to push the video out of your head.” The doctor says sympathetically. A nurse, who left the room for the video, comes back and around to Charlotte to gently pat her back.

“The suction only takes a minute.” The doctor continues. “From patient testimony the pain is minimal, it’s the pre-procedure anxiety and the cramping afterward that’s difficult. If you want to wait in the reception area you may. Sometimes it helps to be around people.”

Charlotte removes herself from the paper sheeted bed and moves slowly out the door. In the waiting room, far from the front windows, a small group of women fidget and pretend to read magazines. Most have come with an older woman by their side, squeezing their partners hands and cooing. One girl sits alone, her leg shaking rapidly as she stares at the clock.

“Hi.” Charlotte attempts. The girl takes a moment to respond.

“Miss. Holan?”

They look for a moment, both glossy eyed and tipsy with disbelief. Neither can bring themselves to smile.

“Hello, Michelle. It’s been so long.”

“What are you doing here?” The girl asks.

“Same as you, I suppose.” Charlotte says gently. The girl rubs her stomach, acknowledging the truth.

“I should have been more careful.” Michelle whispers in a sad, solemn way that entices Charlotte to place a reassuring hand on the girl’s shaking leg. She doesn’t push down, but rather allows the girl to bounce her palm up and down. “I can’t take care of it, so.”

“It’s alright. You were so bright in class. Always curious. I’d hate to see anything get in the way of that.”

The girl nods but remains frowning. Eventually her name is called, and she slowly moves toward the nurse.

“Good luck Miss. Holan.”

Charlotte smiles toward the light behind the nurse and waves her student away.

\*

Marcus sits in his car, shaking and furious. His face is irritated and dampened from the downpour of salty tears. He finally brings himself to pull out of the clinic's driveway. He sat there, watching Charlotte through the thick window as she sways slightly in a waiting room chair. He begins to drive away when a protester shoves a grotesque picture of a torn apart infant in front of his window. He slams on his breaks and glares at the woman holding the sign until she backs away, still shouting something about her religious text.

"What the hell is the matter with these people?" He whispers to himself. He drives around them and down the street toward home.

\*

Eva O'Donnell instructs the museum curators and assistants on how to hang her paintings. They aren't fully dried from her night of manic painting, so the assistant try their best not to smudge the images. They bicker and complain as other paintings are moved to the side or smooshed close together in order to accommodate for the over-sized canvases.

"This one has to be on the left, so people can read it like a book." She orders. Once the paintings are hung, they examine the positions, then rehang one slightly to the right. "It's crooked." She starts to complain then whispers angrily under her breath "fucking idiot."

She continues to bark orders until satisfied. The paintings take up half of the room. Two corners and a long back wall. The images twist a sinister pink and purple, an open wound.

She goes to the painting at the center. An image of a bloodied infant crawling back up into its mother's womb. Under it, Eva O'Donnell places a yellow sticky note reading *I'm going home. I love you.*

\*

Soyoung is waiting for Ruby in her driveway.

“Hey!” Ruby calls from her “Hop in!”

Soyoung slides into the car, Ruby watches her and a faint blush crosses her nose and cheeks. Soyoung’s long black dress shifts and her leg tattoos appear. Medusa peeks through the shift. Together they drive to the clinic.

“How long do you think the procedure will take?” Soyoung asks.

“Not sure, but we should be there before she gets out, maybe she’ll feel loopy from the anesthesia or something?” Ruby wonders aloud.

“I wonder how things went yesterday with Marcus. She spent the night last night over there.”

“Did she?” Ruby asks. Soyoung nods her head. Both look ahead, worried expressions running across their faces. “Maybe. Well, I don’t know.” She fails to come up with a reason.

\*

“How did she do?” Charlotte asks, her words faint and husky as the medication pulses through her blood.

“I’m sorry dear?” The nurse asks, leaning in as she finishes places Charlotte’s limp legs into the straps.

“Michelle Brooks. Is she okay? You took her back...here.” Charlotte winces as her cervix is opened.

“Who?”

The doctor enters her with the long, thin tube. Charlotte gasps and cries, thick streaking tears.



*It's finally morning,*

*I'm less sore than before. I'm happy for that, I had to wear one of those extra thick pads for a few days, I looked like I was wearing a diaper. My friend, Soyoung said I looked cute, like a baby.*

*She has been nice enough to let me stay and rest. I've tried very hard to be a good guest, grocery shopping, doing dishes, and keeping quiet. It's been hard to look out the window and see the lights of my home flicker on and off.*

*I'll be leaving her living room soon though. I'm not sure where I'll go first. But I know eventually I'll come to you. I'm sorry if what I did made you sad. Maybe you wanted a grandchild.*

*I'm not feeling sad though. I think it's important that you know that. I feel something like tired. Not quite exhaustion, but I feel like I want to lay my head down for a very long time. Preferably in a bed that I own alone. And then, when I'm ready to wake up, I'm hopeful that I'll be well rested.*

*Love, Charlotte*

Part 3  
A Muse of One's Own

Chapter 21

## The Return

After work I drive west. My students wave as I exit the parking lot. I remember me, this time last year. Begging and following like a dog hooked to a chain. Marcus was something like a cold doghouse. And I loved him and sought shelter in him. But now I'm starting to see, he is nothing compared to the home I've made here.

I pull into Ruby's driveway. She runs out the door, waving and beautiful. Her afro bounces as she jogs toward my car. We hug, sideways and bit awkwardly with the seatbelt constraining my upper half.

We head East. It's a long trip, past the city and through the woods. Soyoung will meet us at my apartment when she's done with work. Driving to her place is still too hard. Maybe someday I'll be able to go down that street without sweat forming at the base of my neck.

Ruby pulls out her fourth chip. One Year Sober! Is printed with care across the golden coin. I hold her hand and squeeze it as hard as I can muster. We turn up the radio and blast an over-played song. We sing as loud as we want.

Hours drift by until signs for the rehabilitation center appear along the highway. Ruby notices when my breath grows shallow and puts and hand on my shoulder.

*If you're not ready we can head back.*

*No, I'm ready.*

I've been preparing for months. I think I got myself pretty pieced back together from the shattering. There are still parts missing and the glue is wet. I know there is still a tiny version of myself crawling through the floorboard of his house. But I want mom to see me how I am now. The entire mass of me. I hope I appear to be a complete woman, despite the fragments still floating around Marcus.

The giant white building stretched into view. Long but not tall. A pair of looming steel fences with spiraling wire for a hat greets us first.

*Book an appointment, miss?* The guard asks, peering suspiciously into the car.

*Yes.*

He asks questions robotically and inspects the basket of things mom had asked for.

*You're all set. Have a nice visit.*

As if this were a resort? I wonder how he can bare it. Being the three-headed dog of this prison. I can't imagine that sort of responsibility.

We are escorted to a free parking spot and patted down before we can enter the building. The basket is inspected once more by a woman who is taking her job far more seriously than the guard outside. She takes out each item. Tampons, pads, fresh underwear, shampoo, conditioner, flowery soaps, perfume.

*Sorry miss, but this item isn't allowed.* She takes out the nail clippers and puts them aside in a small box.

*Thank you.* I say as she hands me back the basket. I am thankful for the delicate care in which she placed back each item. Can someone really harm themselves with nail clippers?

We are guided to what looks like a dystopian high school cafeteria. We sit and wait. My bottom feels cold against the metal bench.

*How you feeling?*

*Nervous. Happy.*

Ruby smiles softly and I feel just a little less anxious. Having her here is such a blessing.

There's a loud buzz and a click of the steel doors unlocking. A flush of orange pours into the room. Woman in handcuffs hugging their wrists shuffle and land into their loved ones.

Then she appears.

Mom's soft eyes, a bit crossed and drooping from a history of harsh substances. She lifts both hands and waves. I go to her and scoop her frail body into my arms. The handcuffs stab into my stomach as she tries to reciprocate the embrace. I guide her to our table where Ruby is standing ready to greet mom. There's something like pride hiding in my chest as they embrace.

I decided not to bring the unsent letters. I'm trying not to beat myself up over it. Dr. Howard said there's no sense in blaming myself over his irrational decisions. Abuse. I can't stand to say the word yet. An awkward opening of the mouth, wide and then a kiss into a snake's hiss. Aha-byu-ss.

*I've missed you so much.*

*I've missed you more, mom. I should have come sooner.*

*It's alright. You're here. Life gets in the way, I know that.*

Her words tighten the feeling in my chest. Cold and uncomfortable. How can she be so forgiving? I don't even forgive myself, yet.

\*

*She won't move in with me, She said she can't.*

*Why not?* Soyoung asks. She's tying back her hair into a tight bun, careful not to let any strand fall during the session.

*I don't know. I think she's afraid of being a burden. But she wouldn't be. I told her so.*

*Where will she go?*

*Back to New York. She said there's a friend who's been writing.* I say sadly. I'm sitting on the soft, black recliner, holding out my hand to her as she shaves around my wrist.

*Well. You can always go visit, it'd be a fun girls' trip if you want to third-wheel me and Ruby.* She throws away the cheap razor and wheels her cart close. I watch closely as she unwraps a fresh needle from its package. *You got to let people do what they need to do, ya know.*

I nod and tell her I'm ready. The tattoo machine turns on and the buzzing rings through my ears. She draws one line and waits, checking the skin carefully for any negative reactions. When the skin stays a normal amount of pink, she begins.

One line at a time dragging towards her with great care. Ten lines diagonal. Six across. The shading is the worst. Tight circles of jabbing pain over the already sore skin. She is careful to tell me each step as she changes needle size or examines the ink. The wiping of the dry tissue paper across my skin somehow outdoes the pain of the needles. Eventually I look away and focus on a small picture frame on the metal cabinet. Sooh looking toward her mom as she works. A huge grin stretches across her tiny face. I can't help but smile at her. I would have loved to know her. Maybe I could even have a daughter like her one day. I close my eyes, allowing the artist I trust to take care of me as I drift into the dark.

*Alright, have a look.*

I look down at the tiny dagger, pointed towards my protruding wrist bone. Black against reddening skin. It's blade is short, but intimidating. I go and look in the mirror. I could float in this moment. Stay here with my back straight and my friend by my side. Soyoung tilts blade in the light. I cannot believe how beautiful I look.

*Out in the open just like you wanted. Everyone will be able to see it.*

## Vita

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She has been accepted and published in various anthologies including *Boundless 2021* (2021), *At Central Park, New York* (2023), *Our Bodies. Period* (To be published Fall 2023), *42 Questions* (To be published in Spring 2024), and *Becoming Real* (to be published in Spring 2024)

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