

How to Begin Whaling

by Steven Dunn

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Thesis Title

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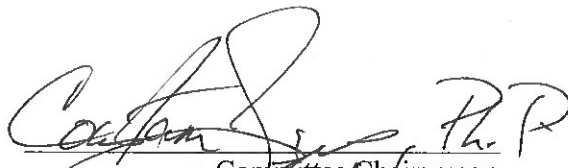
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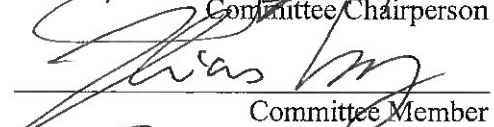
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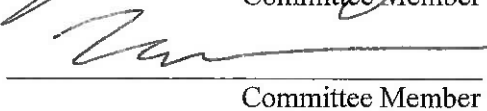
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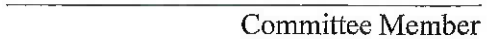
Master of Arts in Creative Writing

By


Committee Chairperson


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Abstract for Steven Dunn's Creative Writing MA Thesis How to Begin Whaling

Whaling is a long form work of fiction. It is a shorter novel length piece, but over 65,000 words. A brief synopsis of the work would identify it as a "rites of passage" story with hints of "superhero" and a little "buddy love" archetypes. This work is akin to elements of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *It's Kind of a Funny Story*, and *Girl, Interrupted*; however, it departs from these works in an aim to move the tension from the goings on of the text to the feelings the reader has. This is more a work of healing, thus stands in contrasts to the typical dependence on tension between the characters. This work is the result of overcome the understanding and patience needed to write long form, which was a new process. The goal of removing or reducing expected tension isn't easy, but the work stays true to the aim with a protagonist that finds herself in a setting that is supportive, leaving the only place for tension to be in her. This is also, where the work might provide implications to the field by being a readable and enjoyable work that avoids the typical or easy tension. Perhaps, building that tension in the reader so that they question why they are looking so hard for tension, question what that reveals about them.

Preface

People, with their anthropocentrism, are too quick to dismiss the setting of stories. Einstein's desk is a story in and of itself, how it collected both the materials on it and the person who sat at it. Too many people seem to forget what walls, furniture, leaves, rocks, and water hold, what they remember as well as what they build. They have seen so much. How many stories are contained in the walls of the Colosseum or coursing through the veins of Methuselah behind its protective bark? Too few people, outside writers, ever stop to consider the possibility that settings, at the very least, clutch stories, as if the ongoings of life can prevent staining where they occur. But, they do. When settings aren't outright conjuring the events of a story, they hold onto what happens in them, often longer than people can remember what occurred. Grasses still hold onto histories that people are trying their best to erase, because of their shame. Settings know how improper some monuments are. How many stories begin in Earth shaking quakes, whether under lightening streaked skies or the foreboding collision of tectonic plates crashing to together. Settings are always there building or recording.

The Bradbury is such a setting. A place where stories come to end and begin, struggling in the middle. These grounds are sanctified. They were sacred before humans built anything here, as grounds can be, but what was built here and continues to be built through interactions of the people who walk these halls stays in tune with the origin of the grounds. It is hard to express how rare such sanctification is among people, when someone can find alignment with the voice of the place, which is why this place is so important. Possibility is captured and lived here, and everyone is playing into that reality. It isn't always perfect, a linear line of upward progress. No, stories go as

rollercoasters, as life should, through valleys into peaks and then rushing down in a thrill that pulls people apart only to unify them in a shared experience. The Bradbury is a safety net, unlike the rest of the world, to do that metaphysical death or pulling apart and phoenix like resurgence of living through the dance of acceptance and life building. It is all intentional here. One story I remember is Rebekah's; I remember Rebekah. Her story will be stamped in these halls, probably, forever. The Bradbury will hold onto her for a long time. She earned such.

Week 1

Going inpatient starts with “impatience.”

“Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me.” – Captain Ahab, *Moby Dick*

May 17, 2018

Rebekah sat in a dark grey plastic chair under the pulsing fluorescent lights seething, trying to prevent another outburst. That was all she needed, another one. Another intake for another disappointment. She was questioning, in her mind, why people always had to press her, certainly not everyone had to go through this. An intake room was never a great place to meet anyone. At least half of the people in them were usually not at their best. Rather than truly engaging or considering the potentials, they often fell into defensive attacks, but, to be fair, far too often the help provided is hollow. Given the circumstances of such situations much of the interaction was understandable, especially with Rebekah.

“Rebekah, you need to answer my questions. We’re here to help you. What you did was wrong, and we need to decide the best way to help you. These questions...”

“Fucking suck.”

“Really? Why do you think they suck?”

“You serious?”

“Honestly, Rebekah, I’d like to know what you’re thinking.”

Rebekah’s eyes tried to roll away from the question as her head went the other direction. “Look, my ass was dropped into a holding cell for what I did, and then you brought me here and started asking stupid fucking questions when you already have your understanding about everything, from the police report, right? Your minds are made up. It’s a waste of fucking time. This is a waste of my time. Your questions only want one thing, to show that I’m a fucking menace.”

“Rebekah...”

“What? Are you dumb enough to believe this is new to me? That I haven’t been in this shit before?”

“Okay, but, what if I told you this place wasn’t like others. That we want to help, sincerely help.”

“Oh, okay, but what if I told you other places say shit like that too. You new? Just graduate from somewhere, throw on a tweed blazer, and think you were going to save the world? Seriously? You don’t think I haven’t heard all this shit before?”

Patricia noticed the tension in the room, realized Rebekah was not moving much and was entrenching into her defensiveness rigidly. Luckily, Patricia was not new to this. She was very practiced. The Bradbury would not be represented by an inexperienced person in such a crucial position. People here were intentional. The simple loading dock white/grey of the room with its three pieces of darker grey furniture started to take on the tension Rebekah was radiating. Patricia lowered her shoulders, relaxed. Opened up. Softened her voice, but did not smile.

“Fair point. Maybe a tweed blazer would be a good touch, but I was thinking it might be a bit on the nose, you see. Rebekah, I was just hoping, that you’d conclude, that since you’re here and all, why not try. You’re going to be here for a bit what’s the worst that could happen? I, honestly, would love to learn what questions would be better to ask someone on that side of the table. Maybe through working with you I’ll be able to help another person, if not you. Here, we consider the work mutually beneficial. I want to know how to serve you better.”

“What? You mean what I would like, outside of more comfortable chairs? Will I be compensated for training you?”

“This animosity isn’t moving a direction that’s valuable is it? I mean, is this hostility towards some freshly graduated worker, which I wish was the truth in some ways, helping you? How’s keeping distant helpful? Do you feel it’s safer or are you just avoiding dealing with things?”

The exasperation finally washed over Rebekah. She lifted her eyes and head back as if she were trying to fall back and away. Then, violently, she slammed her hand down on the table and began spilling words out. Rebekah broke, a little. The sort of break that might nurture hope. “Fine. Okay. You want truth? Okay. Look, people like you ask all the wrong questions. How’s surface level bullshit, that allows people to take everything out of context and write their own reasons for events, useful for deciding what that person, me, needs? Shit didn’t happen in a vacuum. Nothing does. The question should be why, why I got here. Not how. How about someone care, like really fucking care, just once.” Rebekah’s cadence and tone slowed to almost introspective. She took a breath. Shaking her head, she said, “It’s fucking hilarious, in a culture overrun with elected crooks, badged murderers, and advertising executives with MBAs, mental illness could be used to describe those that might not enjoy this circus of hollow façades complete with Botox removal of experiences.”

“Rebekah, I want...”

Patricia’s interruption sparked a return of anger, but Rebekah did not speak with the same intensity she had earlier. “No, I’m talking. I’m not done. Shit, maybe I am the problem. I’ve felt like a problem my whole life. It should be mentally unfit, not mentally ill, because we should protect the innocent and remove them from forced inclusion into the truly ill.” Her voice was beginning to betray her, but she resurged anger. “What the fuck.

Sure, okay, you know what. To satisfy things and play my part of your intake let me say what happened. My version'll be slightly different from the police report, which, I'm sure, states young black female, animal, was out of control. I mean, you hit one future trophy wife, socially sanctioned prostitute, cheerleading for the melting pot of whitewashed lives, in the head with a desk and cops need to be called. She was teaching bullshit. Why do the "powers" need to label me "troubled"? What about her. What about what she's teaching? Anyone challenging that?"

Rebekah paused to catch her breath and Patricia saw an opening as Rebekah shifted in her chair. "Is it okay for me to talk? I don't want to interrupt you again."

"Yeah. Whatever man." Rebekah said with a deep dismissing inhale.

"First, thank you Rebekah. That was the first real thing you shared with me, and it helped more than you know. I hope you come to learn that we try to listen and understand here, we don't want to be the next on the list of places that didn't help or work out. I'd like to ask, since you mentioned it, if I can get you a more comfortable chair?"

Rebekah paused. She hadn't expected that. "Oh, um, no, this is fine."

"Are you sure? I know they aren't the most comfortable, but we have to make the appearance of what is expected. It's intentional." Rebekah shook her head no. Patricia continued with her hands up in a non-threatening way, "I want to ask you a question that might challenge you somewhat, but I don't want it to be too combative. Is that okay?"

"Um, sure. I guess."

"Are you justifying your actions? Do you not think you did anything wrong?"

"First, the dramatic slut is okay, a minor cut, maybe a bruise."

Patricia dropped her voice to smooth any hint of threat and replied, “Really? And please let’s avoid name calling. I’m really just curious as to how you feel about what happened? What it meant for her, you, and all the students in class, consider that.”

Her voice exploded across the room. “Fuck! I didn’t mean to hit her! I threw the desk towards where the problem was coming from, front of the room. She could’ve moved, should’ve moved! Throwing a desk isn’t exactly a fast action. I don’t regret throwing it. I regret it hitting her, her being hurt, but dissention can be an ugly thing with tragic consequences. Striking other people happens and sometimes for good reasons. Sometimes necessary ones.”

“And was this one of those necessary ones?”

“I mean no, maybe not, but in that moment, throwing my desk seemed the only option I had to be heard over the onslaught of bullshit!”

“If I can ask, what was the bullshit?” Patricia, with hands raised in non-threatening position, while resting against the table said.

“You know, standardized misogynistic and colonial preparation packets. I had to do something. Right? I’m sure I’ll be here a long time, because the “powers” will fail to see my rationale. Here until I finish my “cognitive enrichment.” But that seems like the death of my story as I conform to theirs and maybe yours. I didn’t mean for Ms. Basic to get hit; sometimes bad things can happen when we are doing what needs to be done.”

“Honestly, I think I understand where you’re coming from, but I don’t like your justifications or dismissives for hurting someone. Really don’t like how you continue to reduce her. I believe that’s something that will be worked on. I know you don’t want to be here. That’s understandable. You’re not hiding that well if you’re trying to, but, I hope

you come to see the value of being here. This isn't a punishment. How about you try a declarative statement about being here and what you hope to gain."

"What?"

Don't look stumped and put out. I already know how smart you really are. You've shown me that. Please? Just start with identifying yourself and what you believe will happen."

"This is stupid."

"Rebekah, please?"

"Okay." Rebekah inhaled exasperation deeply. "Fuck. Here I sit, 16-year-old Rebekah Claudette Bello. I was named after an obscure 90s thoughtful singer my parents liked and the civil rights activist who inspired Rosa Parks. I'm a survivor of an absent "woke" white mother and ever supportive proud black father. That troubled mixed kid with abandonment and trust issues. So, staff of The Bradbury Center, I'm eagerly awaiting your treatment or intervention plan, complete with capsules of compliance, I'm sure. All which will help me to enjoy wearing scarves, boots, trendy jeans, wool wide brim floppy hats, and perhaps a t-shirt depicting a heritage of indigenous people that some of my ancestors murdered. Please, heal me with suburbia. I'm ready this time, really, like totes - see how ready I am, I said "totes." Hell, I might even be excited for something pumpkin spice flavored this fall. Really."

"Ooh, you're a tough one, aren't you? Those are my favorites to come through, all tough. It's good to watch you break, and meet the person hiding underneath all that armor."

"What?"

“You’ll see dear. You’re all done here, with me. If you come with me I will show you to your room. Everything you will need will be provided for you. You have our own bathroom which is stocked with everything you might need. If there is something you need not provided just ask.”

May 18, 2018

Rebekah was not ready to wake up as rested as she felt. Good could be quite disorienting. She was surprised that the façade of The Bradbury seemed to be the opposite of most facilities she had experienced. This place might be different before she fell asleep, right after she let out an audible sigh of blissful satisfaction. She wanted things to be better. She had always wanted to be in a safe place. Beds here often inspired a reaction of, “Fuck!” as eyes rolled back, joyous. 400 thread count linens only added to the comfort. The beds were more disarming than people realize, intentionally. A great night of sleep could do amazing things for the weary soul. Rebekah was no different. She tried to convince herself that the cops had killed her and her bed was a cloud in heaven, which she would have been fine with, in that moment. Funny how common it was for people to move from experiencing the now to jumping into other types of thinking rather than simply appreciating their reality.

Her wonderfully disorienting good experience continued as she got up, got dressed, and made her way to breakfast. She meandered down long warmly lit hallways which display original artwork throughout. She walked down hallways the map showed her would not lead to the cafeteria area because she was caught in the paintings. So many themes and colors displayed, a stark departure from the sterile grey or white hallways she had come across previously. The walls were a deep mustard yellow with

walnut wood wainscoting two and a half feet up. Unlike the intake room, the rest of The Bradbury was lit with soft white bulbs and natural lighting from big windows. Each hanging portrait had a motion detecting mural light above it. The level of care put into The Bradbury was one of sincerity. She was not the first to feel uneasy here. She was so caught up in the art and her thoughts when she arrived at the cafeteria, her being greeted took her by surprise.

“Morning. I haven’t seen you come through before. Are you new or has my memory finally turned for the worse?”

“Oh. Hey. Um. Good morning. Ha. Yes, I just got here last night.”

“Well then, nice to meet you. My name is Robert and I am the head of the kitchen services, and on behalf of us welcome. Anything you need, food wise, you come see me or one of the people wearing one of our aprons. We’ll take care of you. What’s your name?” Robert was an older, mid-forties, man. He was very neat in his chinos and navy light-weight sweater over a plaid button down under his grey apron. He was very orderly.

“I’m Rebekah.”

“Nice to meet you Rebekah.”

“You too. Okay. So, what’s the plan? How does this work?”

“Great question. So, you pick up food here on the line. Whatever you want. We have allergy information and everything listed.” He pointed a little further down. “Breads at the far end are gluten free and over here are more traditional. The coffee bar is just over there and our baristas are better than any coffee shop you have been to. Promise.

You can get whatever you like and come back through as much as you need to. You only check out at the register so we can keep track of inventory.”

“Wait, what? You aren’t serious? Who pays for all of this?”

“It’s included in the price of whatever circumstances that helped you come to us. Maybe you’ve paid enough “out there,” yeah?”

“Seriously?”

“Completely. See, The Bradbury Center operates on a very generous endowment along with a number of wonderful supporters.”

“So, I can get like 16 lattes or whatever.”

“Yes. But I wouldn’t. At least not in one day. No one should.”

“I mean of course. I was just saying.”

“I know. I was just trying to play along. I’m a bit of a weird one.” He smiled.

Rebekah smiled and scoffed. “Good to know.”

“Rebekah, I’m glad you’re here with us. It’s going to be fun having you here. You have good energy. I’m never wrong about these things.” Robert chuckled and smiled wide.

Rebekah noticed his large mouth with two rows of big teeth slightly stained had a large gap between the front two teeth on the top. She was impressed with his lack of insecurity with the gap he had between his front two teeth on the top. She doubted that she could be so comfortable smiling if that was her mouth. “Thank you.”

“No problem.”

Rebekah was thoroughly enjoying one of the best breakfast experiences she had ever had, based solely on the quality of food. Of course, company can add to meals as

much as it can take away. She was thinking of her dad, and how much she wished he could be here with her. Like all father and daughter relationships theirs had problems, but she loved him so much. She felt horrible for letting him down again. He worked so hard for her. Maybe she should not be enjoying such great food. She did not deserve it, but it was so good. Lost in her thoughts of buttery self-loathing, just following sinking her teeth into a warm cinnamon roll that compressed with her teeth until it pushed butter and icing over her lips, with her eyes closed, she found herself at another interruption.

“Excuse me. I believe you’re Rebekah Bello, correct?”

“Oh. Um. Yes.” She replied looking up with concern as she tried to clear her mouth. She didn’t know how anyone would know her by name.

“Wonderful. I was hoping you would be. Sorry to interrupt. Mind if I join you?”

Rebekah did not think she could say no as the lady was clearing an area for herself at the table. “Why? Sure. Who’re you?” Her eyebrows were furrowed.

“Of course. Apologies. Hello dear. My name is Laura. Everyone calls me Ms. Laura. I’m your advocate here. Your voice. While I’m paid by The Bradbury Center, I’m paid to fight them for you. If you have a problem you come to me and it’ll be addressed. I wanted to introduce myself and give you the lay of the land, so to speak. I also want let you know how you can reach me if you need anything, even though most never do. You can, always. The people here want to provide the best services for those they care for and want to be held accountable. That’s where I come in.”

“Really?”

“100%.”

“That’s so weird. This place is weird.”

“What do you mean?”

Rebekah wiped glaze from her mouth, “Just, like, most facilities aren’t like this seems to be. They’re really just less scary cages to keep the noncompliant away until they are old enough to do really bad things and be caged for real. This place is...”

“Oh, sweetie. I understand where you’re coming from. It’s important you understand that, many times, those facilities are up against evaporating budgets which plays out in all sorts of negative ways, for them and who they are meant to serve. We’re very aware of how fortunate we are here and we try to help a few centers around, where we can. Many of our counselors here volunteer at the other places because state elected officials really don’t care too much about folks in facilities. We’re different.”

“That’s putting it lightly. Everything about this place is different.”

“That’s good though, right?”

“I’m not sure yet. I think so, but I’m afraid to feel so. Wait. How did you know I who I was?” Rebekah took a big gulp of latte, which proved Robert’s claim. The food was amazing.

Laura smiled warmly. “Great right?” Rebekah nodded in confirmation and Laura continued, “I didn’t. I hoped. I find a lot of first day folks here. Early. Sitting alone. You were the only new admit for yesterday. I took a shot. What do you mean about feeling about this place?”

“That makes sense. It’s just that this place is hard to accept given what I’ve been through. Everything here is different from what I know. There’s a warmth here that’s alien. It’s always low budget furnishings and here that’s been replaced with, what feels like, a continual living room, or at least what living rooms look like on tv. All the warm

colors and tones not only in the furniture and walls but in the works of art. Well, the art moves from just being warm. Seems like some kind of gallery. There's artwork hung on the walls all over, and not like motivational poster shit, but artwork, original artwork. And some of them wouldn't be considered okay by school standards. People would find some downright problematic themes for us "crazy" folks."

"I'm aware, you know. But, I always love hearing about it through someone else's eyes. I probably take it all for granted too much. I don't stop and look at the surroundings enough. Have you seen anything that stuck out to you?"

"I saw a piece this morning that was of a woman's profile, at least I think it was a female, kind of androgynous with short hair. She was sitting with her head tilted back in a thoughtful way. The amazing part, was that it looked like the red blue overlay of old timey 3D images making what seems like an x-ray, and that skeleton overlay version was holding a real gun where the person had their two fingers miming a gun under their chin. I don't know how long I looked at that painting."

"I know the painting you are talking about. You know many of the paintings were painted by people who stayed with us before. Some of the artists are still with us. In fact, that particular work was done by one of the therapists here."

"For real? I'd like to meet them."

"Honest. I'm not a therapist, by any stretch. But I'm curious why that one stuck out to you."

"I don't know. I mean, I can't say that ending it doesn't haunt me or that I haven't thought about it. I can't imagine a decent person who hasn't or wouldn't think about it. Maybe, it's frustrating wanting to live when I'm surrounded by reminders that I don't

belong or can't partake, unwanted; that probably doesn't make sense. Just, sometimes this feels like a dream someone else thought up. It's not easy."

"You're not alone in that, feeling out of place but yet, somehow, desired. Objectified in many ways for so many reasons, hard. You're very aware. You sure you aren't a much older person trapped in that younger body?"

"Knowing the suffering all around and not being able to do anything about it aged me, I guess. I like to believe that awareness breeds maturity, and so many of us have awareness painted over us from birth on. Have to learn to deal." Ms. Laura's eyebrows shot up at the same rate her head pushed back. Rebekah had surprised Ms. Laura.

"Yes, Rebekah. But also no. Or, at least, it shouldn't be so. No one should feel they have to do all of this on their own. This place is supposed to help you with that. This place was truly created with the idea of helping, which shouldn't assume as a first step that the person in front of us is the problem. You're really sharp. I think you'll like it here, give it a chance. What do you think so far? Are we making a good first impression?"

"Honestly, that's what scares me. Like, I've never thought of food as being welcoming, but I really don't know another way to describe waking up to warm eggs, toast, and fresh fruit, with options to drink. This dining area is so warm and comfortable, hugged in leathered browns with yellows, oranges, and reds all playing together. This is a real ceramic tile floor. The tables aren't the generic bulk bought laminate top drab things from the Formica World. They're real solid thick wood squares big enough to allow people to crowd around them. The beds. My god the beds. I feel like this is an

intentionally comfortable place, not a left over. Before you sat down I was just starting to think, maybe, this place isn't a punishment."

"Rebekah, this is the farthest thing from a punishment. Or should be. It's my job to make sure of that. You're here to get what hasn't been given out there, for whatever reason, so that you can return and build your success."

"You mean play along and fit in better?"

"Not exactly. But, that has its place too. Our goal is to arm you with the tools and or insight to learn how to sidestep instances of systemic holdbacks so that your future isn't jeopardized by a system that sought to use you. Hopefully, that will make sense soon enough."

Here, Rebekah began to drift, one consequence of having an active mind. She began to see Ms. Laura symbolically, refreshing like a glass of sweet tea or lemonade on a hot day. Rebekah saw her juggling rebel vibes along with the nurturing she felt mothers should have. Ms. Laura reminded her of Ms. DeBerry, her second-grade teacher who Rebekah hadn't thought of for years. Still the best teacher she ever had. Rebekah closed her eyes and saw flashes of floral button downs, short salt and pepper hair, all dusted with chalk, and glasses hanging across a chest from a jeweled rope. Ms. DeBerry always had a conspiratorial smile under her lightly freckled cheeks. She was always in Rebekah's corner, warning her to be ready to get it from "all sides" but also building her up telling eight-year-old Rebekah not to worry because she was tough enough to put anyone on their butt. Rebekah smiled at a teacher saying butt. She remembered Ms. DeBerry leaning down to her eye level to say this sincerely with a wink. Thinking about the wink gave her the same smile of comradery.

“Rebekah, you still with me?”

“Shit, sorry I was just thinking about someone you reminded me of. Oh, sorry for saying shit.”

“No worries on either count, but I hope it was one of the good ones.”

“One of the best ones.”

“Well then, I’ll treasure that. Thank you. Is there anything I can help you with right away?”

“My dad. What’ll happen with him. I know he is going to be pissed. I know I let him down. I know he’ll be worried.”

“Your dad will be just fine. We had someone reach out and talk with him last night and they’ll talk again. Here at Bradbury there is a policy where parents aren’t allowed to see their kids for a time.”

“What?”

“How many people do you think are staying with us result from generational traumas? We want to assess the situation and have requests for therapy for the parents to go to as well, which must be agreed on before parents or caretakers can visit our guests. Does that make sense?”

“I guess so. I mean...”

“This method works. Like I said, we want your success out there. Which is the same justification we have for not allowing cell phones.”

“Okay. So, what am I supposed to do while I’m here?”

“Well, there’s wonderful outdoor area with a big pond just down the hall there.”

Rebekah followed her pointing finger. “There is a game area and crafts area. Oh, do you like to read?”

“I love books, like big love. I spend summers in the free library camps.”

“I love that. And, I bet you’d love our library. Our head official prides himself on it. It was his baby. He didn’t want funding restrictions, so he bought a lot of the books out of his own money. But, to answer your question, you are supposed explore, both yourself and the grounds as well as what we have to offer. Explore as much as you want as long as you attend your group and individual therapy sessions, which they will reach out to you soon for scheduling those. They don’t do it right away as they want you to adjust and be ready. But, come see me if someone hasn’t reached out to you by the end of the day. Don’t be afraid to introduce yourself to some of the other people staying with us.”

“Okay.” Rebekah had already decided to avoid meeting others as she looked across the cafeteria seeing other patients sitting alone and eating or grouped together talking. The safest thing would be just avoiding them.

“Come see me any time you need or want to during the day. My office is just down the hall there.” Again, Rebekah followed her pointing back across her body, the opposite end of where the outdoor area would be. “If my door is open, you can come in. If my light is on you can knock. You can also leave me a message with any of the nurses or staff. Everyone answers to me.”

“Wow. You’re the person to know it seems.”

“No sweetie, you are. Now, I have to run, but like I said, I’m here.”

“Thank you.”

“It was a pleasure to meet you Rebekah.”

Ms. Laura hurried off with purpose the way a driven person moves. Rebekah could not help but feel that the legitimacy of this place was validated. Ms. Laura was amazing and seemed to be evidence that The Bradbury had necessary checks and balances in place to best optimize growth and change of their guests. She was failing to remember being a part of a conversation where she had felt so seen and heard. Even her dad struggled with listening to her in a way she felt really heard. Rebekah then started to consider the perfection of The Bradbury from the floors to the lighting everything felt as if it was intentionally chosen, to build trust. Rebekah found the intentionality as scary as she did reassuring, in a way. What if this was kidnapper’s candy? Once a library was mentioned she had to see it, and she didn’t have much else to accomplish that day. As she walked down the quiet hallway, she considered whether lighting in other places was wrong, maybe just there. She was sure though, that lights had never been this right, which made her think maybe heaven, again. Luckily, she came to the entrance of the library before spinning down another spiral.

“What the fuck? Look at all these books. Everything is organized and clean. These titles. Authors. This is fucking legit.” She had not realized she was talking to herself but did not care too much she was. Just then she saw a chair in the corner and said, “My god, that brown leather chair looks soft, like naps. I’ve never seen something screaming for my ass like that. Don’t you worry, we’re fixing to be friends. Accent pillows that look like big navy cushions. What the fuck? Am I thirsty for a chair? Could be worse.” Running her hands lightly over the leather, “You will know me precious.” She

knew this was where she would spend her time, and again thought of being dead and in heaven. The wood the shelves were made of was so deep it might remember being a tree, then thought maybe she belonged inpatient for such “crazy” thoughts. “*Doors of Perception?* They don’t just have his fiction! Fromm. Giovanni. hooks. Krishnamurti. Kimmerer, get the fuck out of here. This is a fucking library.”

At the close of her first full day at The Bradbury, Rebekah found herself uneasy with how content she felt. She only left the library to eat and have an afternoon coffee but didn’t interact with anyone else really all day. Odd she never saw a librarian.

May 19, 2018

Rebekah awoke cozy in the softest bed she had ever known, covered in guilt. She found it nearly impossible to hide her excitement about the possibility this place could be, but she missed her father. She questioned whether or not it was okay for her to be in such an experience when she had let him down, again. Inpatient again. He would tell her that this is for the best, and maybe this time things will work out better. She knew he would always have her back, but she knew she had to frustrate him beyond measure.

A painful smile snuck over her face at thinking about how they better treat him well. Rebekah said out loud, maybe for herself, “They don’t know who they’re messing with. Dude will crunch a motherfucker. He might not be big, but he’s hard. He’d do anything for me. All I’d have to do is ask. Wish asking was easier. Wish it was easier for him to understand. I should give him more of a chance. Every time I’m away it’s always easier to see what he does for me. Wish he was here. Why do I only see what I have

when it's gone?" Tears threatened to take her morning, as tears can. She fought them backing thinking of him.

She could hear him say, "Angel, you can always come to me with anything." However, it was not fair for her to ask more of him when he has given so much. She would not want him to think his sacrifices and efforts were for nothing as bullying seems to sprout in any school, even if it is shaded differently. Intolerance is intolerance. It was the least she could do to protect him from how she suffered in the school neighborhood and school. She was also really needing to eat and return to the haven of the library, and the last thing she wanted to do was cry over her biscuits and gravy. She knew her sessions were still a day away from the itinerary she was given last night. She stood up and shook her head, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath, steadying herself to be visible to others. She didn't want to put a target on herself for being weak, especially when she didn't really know any one.

With the blessing of a perfectly satisfied stomach, Rebekah was sitting in what she referred to as her new mistress. She never realized chairs, if made correctly, not only provide rest but can also offer what could only be described as a hug. It was a chair that conjured an "Aahhh" from whomever sat it in. This chair completed her acceptance of everything in The Bradbury being very intentional. Mr. or Mrs. Bradbury or whoever were wonderfully eclectic people who built a sanctuary for weathered and worn guests. They were here in the walls, art, and furniture. She scoffed, from behind her stack of books to look through, "If that doesn't make them ghosts I don't know what would." She failed to notice someone was approaching her. Her vision had blurred the

stack of books in front of her with the light from the large picture window on the other side of the four shelves of books. Light, wood, and paper melded into a haze.

“Excuse me. That’s quite a stack you have going there.”

“What? Um. I’m sorry. The lady, Ms. Laura told me to check the library out. If I...”

“Whoa, easy. You’re good. I was just making conversation. Saying hello.” His smile was sweet.

“Oh, sorry, I...”

He shook his head and said, “Stop that Dear, now and forever.”

“Stop what?”

“Apologizing. Did you do something wrong? Did you bad mouth my mom? Not that she wouldn’t have earned it, surely. Did you hurt my books?”

“No, I was just, wait, your books?”

“Yes. Well, kind of. I’m Jaime. The Bradbury’s librarian.” He said with a smile and a wink. His pride in his position was easy to see. “So, I’m responsible for the care of the books.”

“Really? Then, you’re the person I need to know. Who’s responsible for building this athenaeum?” Rebekah said with a look of success, sliding in strong vocabulary.

“First, nerds flexing their smarts should be worthy of an awards show. I see you, athenaeum. What are you like, 15? I love that so much.”

“16, actually.” The banter was easy, which is a statement about how similar two people could be.

“Still just as impressive. Pretty much the entire library was curated by the Bradbury’s current leader, Dr. Murphy. He really is this place. His ghost will haunt it long

after he is dead. He was my individual counselor here back in the 80's. He doesn't do therapy anymore, which is a shame."

"Wait, you were inpatient here, too."

"Yes, a long time ago. I was a guest here. Those were different times. Not easy. Especially for me. Dr. Murphy helped. I know I'd be dead had I not ended up here. Which means, I'd have never had the opportunity to hear an amazing 16-year-old, who likes to keep her name to herself, full flex her vocabulary at a lowly librarian, but how was she to know. It's not like I was wearing my cape today."

"Sorry. I'm Rebekah."

"Well Rebekah, you did it again."

"What I do?"

"You said you were sorry. You don't need to apologize for existing. I'm happy you do, even if it complicates things now and again." The lower voice he said this with made her feel safer than she might have ever felt. "Now, let me judge you horribly by the books you have stacked around yourself. It's one of the perks of my position."

"Hey!"

"I believe in shaming for the right reasons, and whether people read is the best reason. Following that, what they read, I know some may see me as petty, but something needs to matter. Doesn't it?" His laugh sounded more liked of muffled or choked giggle. Maybe he had been a librarian too long, or maybe he liked to keep his humor a secret, Rebekah could not tell, but she knew it was precious.

"Well, I'll await your judgment, good sir."

"Oh, dear, you do not disappoint. Do you really enjoy these books?"

“Immensely, why?”

“Well, we have doctors and serious academics here that don’t read some of these. It took me a doctorate and two masters degrees to be introduced to some of these. Some of these are more than challenging. I mean de Chardin, Lorde, Barthes, Morrison, hooks, Fromm, May... You’re all over the place, in the best way possible. Gives me the most hope.”

“Once, I had a librarian tell me the best way to read nonfiction is to read as many of the books referenced or discussed as possible while always leaving room for poetry and good fiction. My rule has always been to pay special attention to those who write two or more types.”

“Wonderful rules! Librarians should always be listened to more. We’re better. Sincerely.”

“Can, I ask you a question?”

“You mean besides that one? Only always.”

“With all your education, why are you a librarian here?”

“That’s easy. They pay me really well, like tens of thousands of dollars.”

His whisper of a laugh washed joy over her again. She took him in a bit, noticing his crazy hair standing up all over in waves of grey with some black, a buttoned-down shirt that seemed to be a Hawaiian shirt that wished to be tie-dye. There was so much going on.

Jaime noticed her assessing him and continued, “Actually, the pay’s good, and they cover my continued education. Think about it, I get to sit in stacks of some of the most important words ever written, have wonderful conversations with amazing people

usually, eat amazing food which is free for us too, all for the place that saved my life. Are you kidding? Yes please. Can you imagine a better place to work? Now, let me ask you a question. What does music mean to you?"

"Music is life, second necessity. That's really my only complaint about this place. When they took my phone, I lost access to music. I haven't gone this long without music in forever. Why?"

"I have a feel for my own. It's just that, we have one of the greatest record collections of all time here, and you can use it." Rebekah's face lit up. "I know, right. Don't challenge it's greatness, because it is my baby and I will defend it."

"That's amazing, but records, why?"

"Because they're better."

"What? How?"

"Is the youth challenging me, an elder? You can't even begin to understand what stages I have sweated, cried, screamed, and bled next to. I have lived "music being life", and nothing is better than a record."

"But, like, you can't make a playlist or anything. You..."

"Exactly. You're building my case. Think about it. If you were an artist would you want people skipping so much of your work because it wasn't on the radio or whatever? Records are pure listening. They are the ride the musicians wanted you to take. You need an introduction. You got time?"

"That's just what I need. I've got plenty of time today. Yes, to music."

Following her day of reading and listening to music while talking with Jaime Rebekah found herself in her room, on her bed thinking about her day. Jaime was

nothing short of absolutely wonderful. He was the neatest and most put together hippy she had ever met. Older. Curly gentleman's mustache and perfect down triangle soul patch. Clean smooth skin. Soft. Pale skin that reddened easy in the cheeks when laughing or when caught up in a rant, which she had witnessed. His pants were pressed. Rolled at the ankle. Boat shoes and no socks. She did not even know what to make of that shirt though. It definitely made use of the whole color wheel. She felt more secure knowing where supplies were. Knowing how to solve things for yourself is the first step to independence. He had shown her a quiet study room that had a beautifully wood bordered chalkboard, which Rebekah was already conspiring some way to use. She was thinking about how much she loved chalkboards and how they reminded her of grade school, Ms. DeBerry. Things were easier then, until they weren't. She remembered coming home that one time. A house that was noticeably emptier, hollowed. Her absence was instantly burrowing, before Rebekah knew she felt it. The panic in her dad's face laid on top of his fear. He ran through the house looking for her. Her note. Her ghost. She loved us. Just not enough to be tied down. Rebekah still felt how weird that emptying can be crowding. She closed her eyes and sighed, "Fuck!"

Rebekah did not want to go down the that path she needed to focus on something else, Ms. DeBerry. It was weird how some people take on such importance in the lives of others, though all people do that. She was the first woman to tell her not to worry about her mother leaving. She squatted to eye level with an eight-year-old crying girl looking very worn and said, "She didn't leave because of you. She'll hate herself for what she misses out on, because you are going to do great things. It's really her loss, as hard as that might be to see." As she spoke to her she smoothed out her

clothes, and promised her she would be with her. It was strange how people forget to pay attention to helpful voices regularly, walk away from them so easily. This feeling conjured words from Fromm's *To Have or to Be*, first book started in The Bradbury. She said to herself, "Of course, a place that shares a name with the author of *The Halloween Tree* would have a great library, should be that way. More people need to read Fromm. They won't because it's an argument against the American Way. But the American Way shouldn't be an effort of thinging people, reducing individual living human beings to things. Being is existing. Thinging only offers existence to a few, with power." She sat with those thoughts weighing her down until she fell asleep.

May 20, 2018

A roaring cackle filled the lunch area and started Rebekah. Such a huge voice. She said out loud to no one, "Wait, who the fuck is that?" Somehow not everyone was startled or looking around.

He was easy to locate with the volume he carried, such a loud person. "Ha, ha, ha. We'll see tomorrow, won't we Bobby? Ha, ha, ha."

"Shit my dude, you don't have to be that loud. Damn, loud as fuck." She looked at him and immediately thought, "How can someone that small be so damn loud." He was the oldest person she had seen here. Him or Robert, but probably him. It was as if he did not care about the attention he drew. Since being here Rebekah had made a conscious effort not to acknowledge the other people, unless she had to. She had seen many other patients, a few that piqued her interests, but she remained focused on avoiding eye contact, just catching smiles and nods in her periphery. She was not ready. Mr. Loud looked kind of grimy, bit gamey. Shifty, maybe a janitor. He looked

weathered, with tough skin. He was very small, like her in fourth or fifth grade. When he walked down the hall next to her, she noticed his hair was thin, and the brown in it working overtime trying to hang on. Made him seem younger, but she still thought he was old. His beard was dusted with the white hair of experience maybe wisdom. She found it funny how his hair fell into mangy loose curls around his shoulders, but his hat really surprised her. It was woman's hat with a sequin cross. His whole outfit was questionable, "Someone needs to take that dude shopping. His fit is tragic, damn. Like if someone made every decision they shouldn't make. It's a violence." She noticed his walk was a little hunched over but his step definitely had a spring in it. His smile was warm though, sincere. It held the reality of tragedy in the corners of his mouth. She was amazed that she found herself wanting to talk to him. He had an aura of coffee and cigarettes. But his smile, when he walked by, real sweet, a sparkle in his eyes.

Week 2

The Rubicon that was a meeting.

“Ahab is for Ahab, man. This whole act’s
immutability decreed. ‘Twas rehearsed by thee
and me a billion years before this ocean rolled.
Fool! I am the Fates’ lieutenant; I act under
orders.” – Captain Ahab, *Moby Dick*

May 21, 2018

This morning was pregnant with urgency, as well as other threatening emotions. This was the day for work to start. Rebekah equal feelings of excitement and utter terror, so amped up. She wished The Bradbury was not so tech no, because she thought some music would be helpful. If only she had her phone, her playlists. Then she remembered, a quick breakfast would give her some time to hit some records. Jaime would be a good distraction.

“Good Morning Rebekah. How are you today?”

She noticed his previous confused shirt was not a one off, they seemed to be his way. “Fine. Honestly. I’m freaking out a little.”

“You look a little, umm, wired. Touch cracky. What’s up? Can I help?”

“Um, cracky?”

“Yes. Like you took a ride on a crack pipe and it isn’t going so well.”

She laughed. “I’m not sure that’s okay for you to say.”

“Says the lady laughing. If laughing is medicine, then I’m helping you heal. So, what’s up”

“Today’s my first therapy session. It’s group. I need music.”

“Ahhh. Well, that, I can. Come on.”

Rebekah was impressed, “Damn. This collection really is great, Jaime. My man. You’ve really put together an amazing collection, so many records. I’m impressed.” She said as she lightly ran her hands over the covers resting in their shelving.

“The only things I’m prouder of than this collection and set up are my dogs.”

“You have dogs?”

“Five of them, all foster fails, well one stray I could never find the home of. Is it failing if I placed all four though? I think not. I got one big lady, Lily, the queen, matriarch, who is a grey three-legged pit-bull mix. One big black Pyrenees Lab mix, Owen. The sisters, Pearl and Ruby, border mixes dumped, discarded. And then John full blood border boy found in the middle of a busy street about to be hit. They are all living their best lives now. They are my pride.”

“You seem to have quite a collection, five! I always wanted a dog. You also might have some attachment issues, just sayin.” Rebekah lips pursed in mock judgement.

“Don’t we all have attachment issues, especially in these walls? Hello. They are the best. Everyone should have one if it is possible to. Okay, you need music?”

“Yes. You have current music?”

“Should I be proud of this collection if I didn’t? We have so much. But, you shouldn’t listen to what you know.”

“Why?”

“How many times have you been stressed and done that?”

“Always.”

“How often does it work? Aren’t you really just building a soundtrack for you to get obsessive about whatever is on your mind. Familiarity with music can give space to fall into what you want to block. Pick things that you are less familiar with.”

She had not expected such introspection from Jaime. “Okay. How about you DJ? Can you?”

“Every day I wait for that question. How much time am I needing to cover?”

“Couple of hours, maybe three.”

“Well that isn’t too much time, but it’ll have to do. So, let’s make the most of it.”

Jaime quickly grabbed an album showing Rebekah how to handle them as well as how to use the stereo. The 60-year-old Zenith quickly clicked to life and pushed sound into the room, filling the room like water fills a cup, through the wonderfully clear Advent loud speakers as it shook off a little dust, not much due to Jaime’s care. Jaime ran through several artists most of who Rebekah had never heard of like, Tears for Fears (especially “Mad World”, which almost made Rebekah cry), Cyndi Lauper, Simple Minds, Lee Michaels, Bad Brains, Fishbone, KRS One, Twisted Sister, Living Colour, Rage Against the Machine, Idles, and Pleasure Venom. The only two that were familiar to Rebekah were Rage and Living Colour after she heard them. He also played, “For What It’s Worth”, which had an impact on Rebekah. The church of Jaime was in full force.

It was nice to feel connected to truths that have been preached and fought for a long time, from different angles. For different reasons. It was easy to agree that people should be equal and no one should be marginalized for the benefit of someone else, but it was just as common to ask why people were so bad at living in such a way. Music is medicine for so many. It heals. But it is also a means of teaching or preaching, which makes it odd that so many listeners, maybe most, hear the words, dance to the rhythms, and remain as narrow minded and unaware as they could be. Rebekah, like many people, found this so frustrating. This conflict reminded Rebekah how the Klan held meetings and recruitments in churches, some pastors led the way.

She asked Jaime, “Why do, or how do, followers or fans screw up so many of the lyrics and meanings? Like, how can someone like some of these artists and understand them so poorly?”

Jaime laughed, “People often seem more interested in validating a position they hold rather than giving themselves to the possibility of experience. Consider the number of Christians who support the gospel of greed yet claim the fellowship who preached against greed, “What you do to the least of me you do unto me.” Some internal voices are just too loud, or people are just too insecure.”

“Thank you, Jaime. I was literally just thinking about churches being meeting places for Klan activity.”

“Oh, absolutely right. It’s truly mind blowing how hypocritical so many people are. It’s also time you might want to make your way to group. I know you wouldn’t want to walk in late.”

“Oh shit. Right. Thank you so much. For you and spending time with me. It’s meant more than you know.”

“You’re welcome, always. The library doesn’t get as many newbies as you’d hope.”

As Rebekah made her way to the group room, which Jaime mapped out for her, she said, “Maybe everyone suffers from something similar, insecurity. The struggle just makes pain. Maybe that is what people do, wave some trope over their head so that they feel protected. Those tropes become barriers and fence lines to keep people out, which really weakens us.” Rebekah recalled a TED talk she watched where the researcher “roughly” said that strength is built in the vulnerability to be open. She came

to the room more quickly than she anticipated. It would be good to be early. But. 15 minutes, was that too much. Damnit. Something was crawling through her, over her.

The room was not empty and now she felt stupid kind of standing halfway in the door frame frozen, looking in at a woman writing on a pad of paper with her head down. She had not noticed Rebekah. Rebekah could have backed away and came back, but that window of possibility was closing. The woman was just writing on her pad of paper unaware of the drama just feet away. Rebekah was entranced at the sight of her. She loved her dark undercut hair, pulled back over her left ear. Something was tattooed on the side of her head under her hair. Rebekah could see lines but had no idea what they moved to make. Rebekah found her striking, caramel complexion, really sharp dark jeans, red button down under a camel form fitted blazer, and those shoes, serious heels barely missing the brilliance of Dorothy's slippers. "Kinda, wish I was home." It was then that Rebekah noticed the woman was looking right at her with her dark brown eyes. Rebekah screamed, "Shit!" as loudly as she could internally.

"Hey. Hello, my name's Amy Martinez. What's yours? Umm... Hello... Are you Rebekah? Are you okay?"

Rebekah felt like an idiot just sitting there waiting for her brain to catch up and let her mouth speak. "What... I mean sorry. Hello, yes, I'm Rebekah."

"Well, hello. I'm happy to meet you." Rebekah was devastated as Amy raised her hand with the perfect deep red painted fingernails up to meet her own, with a pity laugh, which she had earned. Amy continued, "I'm happy to have you joining us? I hope you will like this group. We've done a lot of work together, and I'm lucky to have them to work with. All I'll ask is that you attempt to see this genuinely. It can be a lot at first, but

this is a safe place. I'll always make sure that it will be. I'm so happy you're a little early, let's us pre-game. Feel free to sit anywhere you like. This is first come first choice."

"Okay, I'll just sit here." She sat two chairs away from Amy. Two chairs away was close enough she was safe but far enough away she seemed independent still. As she sat down, she continued to appraise Amy, noticing that, while strikingly beautiful, she had the premature weathering of a survivor. Creases around her eyes and lips revealed strength and grit. Rebekah knew she had to be genuine. Then she noticed Amy looking at her and moving her mouth, "Fuck she's talking again or still. I've got to look like a complete idiot!"

"....refreshments are along the wall. Help yourself to what you'd like. I'm sure everyone will be coming in soon. So, what do you think of The Bradbury so far?"

"Honesty, sometimes, I feel like I'm dreaming, but I'm not totally sure if this is a nightmare building or a fantasy. It feels alien to me to have adults act, I don't know, appreciative or respectful to me."

"Alien huh, that's an interesting word to use, why alien?"

"I mean, I don't know. I feel out of place and waiting for the reality to pop out from behind a fern or something."

Amy laughed. "I can't say that I don't understand. I remember how I felt about this place when I started. I appreciate you reminding me what a gift the walls hold. I can promise you, with the zero significance my words hold for you now, that this place is what is supposed to be. It's always shown to be what we believe or fear it to be, at least from my experiences."

Before Rebekah could reply people started coming in, interrupting the conversation with laughs of familiarity. Amy looked up and smiled to greet everyone coming in and say hello. Rebekah became aware of how the room must have felt because it started to cool to a warmer temperature, better matching the mustard walls standing guard to protect this circle of comfortable 70's chairs, solid wood frames and vinyl burnt orange cushions on the seat and back. Big simple dark wood circular coffee table in the center of the circle on top of an off-white rug with blue circles and streaks of greens and oranges for Rebekah to focus on. She did not want to look up. She did not want to look like the neglected puppy in the store that needed to be noticed, needed to be loved.

She just listened to the cacophony of those in need thinking she would look up when she was ready, casually. She wanted the others to think that she was "whatever about them and being here." Her anxiety was threatening to hit the eject button flipping her chair backwards and shooting her through the wall behind her. Leaving all these people left with their mouths open, including the boy with red dyed hair and the girl with dyed blue hair who truly knew each other, perhaps siblings. She had seen them in the hallways. Without looking up, seeing the shuffle of some feet, it was clear that some of the people in the room had issues, they were not masking well. She heard one person talking about her mom's boyfriend hitting her mother and brother before she hit him with a pan hard enough it cracked his skull, which was hard for Rebekah to avoid looking up for. Suddenly, she noticed two shadows holding hands. The bodies the shadows went with had to be across the table and circle from her. She wondered why they were holding hands, why she was so tense. She laughed to herself considering the gift of

awareness and the anxiety that sprouted from its side like a thorn, side effects. Her breath had shallowed, and she was like a coiled tension spring ready to launch. She looked up and saw them. She had seen them in the cafeteria. They held her attention more than the other patients. She couldn't deny she wanted to talk to them. For some reason, she had known them forever or, maybe, was waiting for them. Like this place maybe. Clearly, they were already friends, good friends, chatting and whispering to each other. Very comfortable. She doubted they needed another friend.

"Yo, hey, you okay?"

She had not even noticed someone standing right next to her talking to her. Rebekah jerked her head up at the face somewhat hidden under dark shoulder length dreads. The face was visible enough to see that it wore a shitty scraggly beard. Rebekah noticed that he looked like the black Shaggy. "What?" She knew she came off a little harsh in that.

"Oh, no. Sorry, I was, uh, just asking if anyone was sittin here. You didn't say nothing so I was, uh, just seein if you was okay."

She wished he would have just sat down and shut his mouth instead of making a scene. "Um, I'm fine. Sit." Her eyes rolled and she shook her head. The last thing she needed was for some beta bro to ruin her chance at meeting them.

"Cool... My name is J... Uhhh... You're new huh? Uh, what'd you do to, get in?"

J would be just the distraction she needed to stop gawking at the two across from her. He seemed quiet by nature and a little older. He was probably actually concerned for her, which was sweet. "Well J, short answer is, I broke in the middle of history and

hit a teacher with a desk.” His eyes bulged. She knew the reaction was that of a “good boy.” His scoff was airy and heavy and truly one of shock.

In a hushed voice he replied, “No shit, you threw a fucking desk at a teacher? That’s crazy. Wish I’d seen that.” He was genuine. His smile was proof. Not confident. But not weak. Sturdy. There was a noticeable strength and resiliency to him void of pretense.

Rebekah leaned back, relaxing, turned to look at him, “How about you J, what brought you in?”

He looked down, “Uhhh, unhappiness... I guess. I mean, like a teacher was worried. I said some stuff in a story I wrote, and then I was in a room with a counselor and my folks. Everyone looked worried. I was just writin what I thought and stuff. It bothered them. I, uhh, guess. Anyway, here I am.”

Rebekah wondered how much truth J was telling, perhaps he was guarding himself. Something felt omitted. However, he might just be aloof, because he seemed more introspective than sad. She quickly saw how others would be concerned for him and his well-being. She had only just met him and was already feeling that she was going to have to take him in, a lost ass puppy. He would be worth the effort.

Amy’s started the meeting. She stood up, introduced herself and mentioned the group had a couple of new faces. Rebekah was relieved not be the only one. Not being the only one took some of the pressure off. She did not have to be amazing, just better than the other new face or faces. She was only hoping that she would not be asked to introduce herself first. She did not want to have to set a tone of interesting or fall short of one that was already held. With a group of 16 people, Rebekah was going to have to

come up with something real interesting, quick. She wanted to be interesting.

Performance anxiety started to collect over her upper lip, threatening to pour out of her hair and down her face, probably soaking her armpits too. Oddly, her mouth went dry. Amy pointed to a young woman sitting at her left, which was wonderful as it made her nearly last. Rebekah was relieved, more time.

Group members started sounding off one by one around the room. Inching closer and closer to them, the two that Rebekah knew were destined to be her future homies, who knew maybe they would even become her besties. Anticipation was building in her like steam in a boiling kettle. The first of the two was up next. Rebekah was fidgeting. Though, she felt bad for the young woman who was currently sharing, a lot, of her story as her introduction. It seemed that the gods personally had it in for her. She was so young to be that strung out. No one's interesting thing should be surviving all that. It was hard not to feel trauma bombed, so much trauma. She had seen all the dangers and nightmares and survived. This teenager knew the horrors people pretend not to see or refuse happening all together. Rebekah looked down. It was hard for anyone to make eye contact, and noticed her hands balled into tight fists? She wondered if it was at what she was hearing or anticipation for the next two to speak.

There was a pause. Amy stepped in and said, "Liz, thank you for sharing so much and being so vulnerable in front of everyone. Your resiliency in so much trauma is something I admire so much about you. Your strength is so remarkable. I know it's easy for you not to feel strength in all of that, but here I believe we we'd all agree that it is only strength that you're here and able to share your story with us. Thank you. If it's okay we'll continue through?" Liz nodded yes with a smile.

Without hesitation, boldly, she skipped her friend, “Liz, you always amaze me. I can’t find the strength you always show.” She looked from Liz to the group, “Hello, my name is Mel and I used to play soccer, competitively. I was really good.”

Her skipped friend rolled her eyes and laughed. These two were thick as thieves, maybe actually thieves. She stood, still smiling, and playfully punched Mel, “My name’s Sara and an interesting thing about me is that I’m a really good singer and have rude friends.” She smiled wide and looked at Mel. Rebekah knew their names. Mel was taller. She had straight dark blonde hair dyed green here and there. She looked thin and soft and had squinty eyes, probably too much time staring into the sun for soccer. She had freckles dancing constellations across her smooth frosty white cheeks. Her mannerisms matched a female athlete, complete with deeper voice and loud ass piercing laugh. Sara was different, more fem. She was really short, like maybe a couple of inches above receiving government assistance short. She had rich brown shoulder length hair and olive tinted skin with a mousey face, which truly seemed to align with her size, compact. Rebekah knew she was meant to know them both. It was odd how she felt that way, but she did.

Their giggles grew in a shared laughter of the group, even Amy head tilted down shaking back and forth. Everyone was laughing. These two were the close friends people hope to find. They were perfect to Rebekah and she wanted to impress them. Hoped they would want to talk to her. Rebekah realized that it would soon be her turn as the person next to J had stood and began talking. When Troy finished and sat down Amy nodded in encouragement of J. Rebekah noticed she was not the only one seeing

the puppy needing help, maybe. But then she realized, in absolute horror, this meant she was after J. She doubted whether she was ready.

J stood quickly, perhaps quicker than he really wanted to. Awkward. He was tall, over 6 feet. Rebekah noticed his complexion was a little darker than hers.

“Umm, I’m J. And, uhhh, I like video games, art, and anime.”

Rebekah thought, “Not real original J, maybe it’s J as in “J”eneric.” Rebekah was flushed with needed to follow someone who had not taken the time she needed to take in order to craft something witty and interesting. She felt bad for being critical of J because of her anxiety.

Then he sat down it was Rebekah’s turn, “Hello, I’m Rebekah and I guess I’m a hell of a desk pitcher.” She had hoped to turn a flaw into street cred, but it seemed to miss as she looked into blank faces. Her face flushed with red. Everyone in the room could hear her heart pounding. She put her hands against her legs hope the building sweat would be absorbed. She stood there mentally screaming, Holy Fucking Shit!. Sweat was about to be popping through her face like popcorn. She screamed at herself, Sit the fuck down! She knew she had blown her chance. Everyone looked confused, even Amy was holding a look of pure befuddlement and the furrowed brow that accompanies it. This was the end for her. She did not understand why she always did things like this. The task was simple. She wondered why what she thought was funny never materialized. Then wondered if she actually thought it was funny. She sat down quickly and planned to keep her head down the rest of the session. She only heard white noise around her. Then J was nudging her? Everyone was looking at her expectantly. She said, “Um what?”

"I asked what you meant by desk pitcher." Said Mel.

Rebekah's brain slowed, almost arrested. Her heart pounded and it became hard to hear. Her frantic anxiety caught her and she did not know how to read the situation. Slowly, almost quietly, she said, "Um, well, I was referring to what got me here. I threw a desk at a teacher." Her statement drew gaping mouths and a few giggles. Rebekah still was not sure she was safe, sure it seemed her statement gained, somewhat, of positive creditability among her peers, but it seemed Amy was looking at her intensely.

"Rebekah, do you not feel remorse for hitting someone with a desk? Do you think it's okay to make light of potentially causing a great deal of injury to someone else?" Asked Amy.

Terror was crawling up Rebekah's legs as they began to threaten giving out with shakiness. "Well no, not necessarily; it's not like that."

"Then how is it?"

Rebekah's face felt red as any stop sign, but it was not helping. She wanted to run. All of the attention she never wanted was directly on her and not for good reasons. She said, "Well... It's just that, I didn't know what to do. I felt an energy in me welling up from depths I didn't know I had. I felt required to do something. I was looking at the top of my desk and thought, "Fuck this." Sorry, I mean, a, forget this, stood up and threw the only thing I had. The same weapon that was used against me."

"Swearing in this room doesn't need apology, ever. I think the words you chose are interesting, what do you mean the weapon used against you?"

Rebekah did not know how to take Amy's tilted head. Was it judgement or curiosity? In either event the rest of the people in the room seemed to fade away, like

an ice cream left on a park bench on a hot day, gone. The intensity was tearing at her sides trying to pull her apart and she feared losing control and crying. She tried to deflect with a look away, “I mean come on, you have to know. I know you do.” All alarms were sounding.

“Tell me what you know I know.”

Rebekah stared at her with more fluid in her eyes than she needed but not enough to cry and she was not about to admit it by wiping her eyes.

“Please Rebekah, tell me.”

She was furious. Why was Amy coming for her like she was? This was her first appointment. Speaking was the only way to avoid crying now, too much pressure.

“Come on man. Shit. Nothing’s like me.” She shook her head fighting. Rebekah continued, “I’m tired. Real fucking tired. I’m tired of living for the expectations of people who won’t ever offer the time to see me or hear my story. I’m tired of reading and learning about a history that exemplifies exactly what I’m tired of; constantly the story of success. Whose fucking success? Whose erasure? I’m tired of how fucking alone I feel. Why do I have to throw a desk to be noticed?” Her anger was with her. She was much louder than she wanted to be, tears were coming. She was reaching an exhaustion. “I mean are my grades not enough. No, they aren’t! Not getting in trouble isn’t important. I finally gave them what they wanted? Now I fit nicely in the box of dangerous black animal.” She felt feral, but didn’t mind. She stopped and pulled down the façade and just was. She sat there with tear-soaked cheeks surrounding a nose adding to the mess she had become, but she was still holding on to some composure. That is until J’s arm reached around her and squeeze her shoulder as he leaned in

towards her. The big sobs and crying came in flurry. She turned in to him and he stretched his other arm around her in a hug.

“Hey, it’s, um, okay. You’re not alone. We’ve got you.” J said softly.

Rebekah dropped her resistance and cried. No one else moved or made a sound. After a few minutes that felt like days Rebekah thought, “How long are these assholes going to sit silently and watch me cry? Damn.” She finally raised her head and saw all faces looking at her with caring. Some of them were even crying some. Amy was nodding with a wet face and pained smile. Rebekah had no idea what to make of this experience. It didn’t feel quite real.

“We got you. We all got you.” J said with his left arm still around her.

Amy broke the silence, “Wow. My goodness. How about we thank Rebekah for sharing and end there for today, I know it’s a little earlier than normal, but I think Rebekah has given us something really important to consider.”

Following the end of the session several members of the group approached Rebekah and echoed J, who had slinked off through shadows. They were representing evidence for his claim. They did have her. The young lady who had overshared, Liz, went to Rebekah and placed her hand on Rebekah’s shoulder, looking deeply in her eyes, and said, “It’s gonna get better.”

Rebekah thanked her and watched her walk away. It was weird watching someone walk away longingly and then noticed J had disappeared. It was then that Rebekah noticed something or someone right behind her. She turned and it was them.

“You’re a fucking Queen.” Mel said.

“Thank you.”

“Yeah.” Sara said and threw her arms around Rebekah. Rebekah loved that hug. It was a type of medicine, which was not too common for Rebekah. Outside of her father there was no one to offer this type of medicine.

Amy broke up Rebekah basking in the dream come to reality of bonding with Mel and Sara, “Hey Rebekah, could you hang back a bit? I’d really like to talk to you a little bit, if you are okay with that. Sorry Mel. Sara. Maybe you all could catch up later?”

Rebekah, even though she really did not want to said, “Sure.” She would equally want to spend time with Amy.

“Okay, we’ll be looking for you later.” Mel said for the both of them.

The sincerity of the statement and offered, “Cool.”

As Mel and Sara exited Amy turned to Rebekah, “Thank you. Please, come sit back down.”

“Okay.” Rebekah sat down, and Amy pulled a chair around to face the one Rebekah had taken, sat and leaned towards her. She wanted to transform the space into a real, honest, and intentional space.

Amy looked deep into Rebekah’s eyes and said, “The first thing I want to do is apologize for putting you out there like that on your first session. While confrontation is our goal here, at The Bradbury. It usually happens a little later with more trust and understanding. You gave me an opening and I ran with it. It was right to do, and I think it worked really well. But I wanted to see if you were okay.”

“I’m good.” And, oddly Rebekah was good, which should have unsettled her but did not. Perhaps, it was due to her having such an openly emotional exchange.

“Really? That was a lot of emotion, which isn’t always easy for people to express, especially publicly on their first group session.” Amy’s eyes were big and bright with curiosity.

“I mean, that was pure hell. I don’t do that, ever. But after, I saw how everyone acted. I guess, I forgot I had those feelings. Forgot how I was feeling.”

“That’s wonderful. I want you to know everyone in that circle has had a similar experience. It’s another focus at The Bradbury, intentional and unyielding support that borders right up to real love, especially when someone’s brave enough to be that vulnerable, that honest and sincere.”

“I’m not sure I’d call that brave.”

“You should. You overcame how many negative statements and desires to run. Set there and tore back the bandages and laid your wounds for all to see. Only the strongest and bravest show potential threats where they’re weakest. How is doing what you did anything other than brave?”

“I mean when you put it like that. Maybe. I just felt weak doing it. Also, how are you in my head?”

“That’s my point. You felt that way and still did it. People have more in common than they don’t. I’ve felt that. A part of the reason we feel that way is that polite society doesn’t want to slow down and potentially be burdened with the problems of others. So, we teach Walk it off or Never let them see you cry.”

“Makes sense. I can see a power component.”

“Well, sorry to add to your frustration.”

“No, you’re good. I’m happy to connect more dots. It’s important to me to see the interconnectedness of things no matter how frustrating.”

“You’re quite a savvy thinker for your age, smart and intuitive. I don’t think I had friends in college thinking like you. I wasn’t like that at your age.”

“Perhaps my mom bailing on my dad and me, made me question a lot. Certainly a few great and loving teachers helped empower and encourage me, and my dad sacrificed a great deal to make that education happen the best he could. I was always aware of what was going on.”

“Maybe, but you have to appreciate that a lot of people go through what you have gone through without connecting the dots that you have. You shouldn’t sell yourself short on the understanding you’re bringing to this problem. I think being here’ll be great for you, but it’ll also be great for us. The Coyote was wise to snag you up.”

“Thanks, but what? Coyote?”

“Sometimes, some discoveries, are best made in the patience of time.” She winked. “Lastly, I want you to know that I’ll be scheduling your first individual counseling meeting, which won’t be with me. It’ll be with one of our individual counselors Dr. Calloway, who’ll probably ask you to call him Peter. Your first appointment will be at the end of this week, following your group meeting. Any questions?”

Even though Rebekah’s head was buzzing like a hive of questions, she said, “No.” She did not know what to do with the mention of “the Coyote.” She was starting to question if that had happened really.

“Okay, see you soon. It was great to meet you and I look forward to getting to know you better. You can stay here if you want, but I have to run. Just shut the door on your way out.”

“Yeah. You too. Okay.” Rebekah watched Amy get up and gather her things to walk out. She was alien in that moment. She was a stranger in this place. Nothing was like this place, at least nothing she knew. Everything at The Bradbury was so weird, but hoped it was real. She decided to take the afternoon away from people and go to the library before dinner and then go to bed early. She was drained. It was not easy being so exposed.

May 22, 2018

Rebekah got ready and headed to breakfast thinking that people cannot help who they are drawn to. She was connected to Mel and Sara. She knew she was supposed to know them. She was amazed that she could feel so connected to two people she had not known prior but somehow felt like she was waiting to meet.

While looking down at her gravy saturated biscuits and what was left of her ketchup covered hash browns, Rebekah was taking an inventory of interesting people she had come across at The Bradbury who she wanted to know better. The residents were easy to spot in their light brown scrubs, which Rebekah was happy to wear. Scrubs were so comfortable. At home, her pajama pants were scrubs, stolen from an x-ray appointment, were her favorite pajamas. This made her think about home. Sometimes little memories bloom bigger memories or anchoring contexts that mutate the simple into the devastating, the hopelessness she felt about thinking about home and her dad hurt. She forced herself away from her pain, which she was typically

successful at with her classic, "Anyway." She returned to her love of scrubs and the possibility of being at The Bradbury. She was curious to meet these new people and learn why they ended up here. Discovery meant everything to her. It might be smarter to seem less eager and take her mind off of things, which meant heading to the library. Words read or sung would be a soothing medicine for her.

Arriving at the library disappointed Rebekah, Jaime was nowhere to be found. She resigned to be her own company, which was not an uncommon reality. This did rule out music though, since Jaime had to be there to open the door, but books would do. Books has always been there for Rebekah. Books were the most dependable voice in her life. Rebekah definitely held a love hate relationship with people, which she credited to the very small number of people who would actually stop focusing on themselves long enough to be of any real value to other people. She saw the majority of people on this continuum of selfishness, where normal people included people who would steal from you because you had something they wanted to people who griped about paying taxes because someone was a welfare queen even though more than three quarters of recipients of welfare work steady jobs that pay so poorly the staff can't afford to live on. She felt CEOs, bankers, politicians, rapists, and murderers were a collection of the worst of people and not too different.

It was not easy for her to muster the courage and energy to be around others. Others are not always good to be around. Many would describe her as defensive or closed off, maybe shy, but, truthfully, she was afraid. She did not know how much more she could stand to lose. It is not easy to find a way to live in the narratives of others, especially if you struggle with interacting with others. Yesterday had unraveled Rebekah

a little. It had been a long time since she had wanted to know anyone. Today she is wanting to know more than a few. No one would be more surprised than her about her recent wanting to meet others. The really terrifying part was that she wanted more than meeting them. She wanted to know them, which requires a certain level of vulnerability.

She was horrified at the prospect of putting herself in the position that time and experience had consistently taught her was a mistake. She had always wished, in fountains and birthday cakes, for some type of measuring device that would identify whether or not people were genuine, if they were how they attempt to seem. It was laughable how many people claim to be good solely based on the evidence that they do not do bad things. Good should be the result of real intentional effort, much more than allowing yourself to be a monster. The very minimal requirement of good should be allowing space for others to exist and the teaching of true history, a history of the winners and the victims. She was troubled by so many educational boards wanted to undo through ignorant anti DEI platforms, the progress that so much sacrifice had built. It was wrong to write off so many people, but, again, her fear held her arrested in her ability to grow. One of the outcomes she hated the most of the sacrifices her father forced them into for better schools was that the suburbs mask things in a particularly nefarious way. The saccharine façades deliver the violence in a much more palatable way but the cancer developed traps all the same.

Suburban people seemed managed, scheduled, occupied, and meeting them too frequently left Rebekah feeling wanting, like they were or could only be marginally valuable. She knew and would argue that many in the suburbs, enough they did not always feel like minority, were real and considerate people, but they often had the same

walls and hesitations she had. These were individuals who were not excited about being extensions of their parents' dreams or glory days. These dissenting peers were the only people she was safe around, and some of them were more than a little sketchy. Being oblivious is an excuse that only stretches so far. She saw them as drones, droning. She typically only followed older academics and authors, real folk. Real folks were different. They have major problems, maybe life or death or dying problems.

Rebekah often argued, "I have yet to see a social media star or influencer who isn't completely mediocre and unoriginal, honestly. Maybe they were exceptional in mommy and daddy's bank account, but not much more." Common jokes seem more interesting with big houses and expensive cars in the background, which fuels the thought of familiarity with the wealthy and entrenches the idea that the American Dream is possible. This existence is incorrect and fragile, of course people get upset and frightened at anything that even comes close to challenging the pristine vision of what their lives are like or could be like. How ill fitted so many must be to see that life, with the privileges that help some through it more than others, is equal for all. She remembered Timmy. The one boy she tried to date. He was interested in her for fetishizing her race and to make his parents angry. In one argument on inadequacy, he offered the solution of moving for people with problems, fucking moving, which is exactly what her and her dad had done, so easy. Then when challenged, he attempted to prove how hard his life was at times and how many adversities his family had to overcome, which amounted to missing a vacation. She was remembering the end of their turbulent relationship. Timmy was sitting next to her on his porch swing looking at her over his right shoulder. While she started the conversation looking at him, she

remembered it ending without her seeing anything other than the tree in his neighbor's yard.

She said, "Shit. I'm happy for you Timmy. I won't even make a shitty comment about how "hard" you've had it. I just wish you hadn't made me prove that my family wasn't just a bunch of "freeloaders" without drive."

"Is that why you wish your mother had stayed around?" Replied Timmy.

"My dad has a PhD and most of his family have degrees. My mom's family is the uneducated and lazy trash who thought they had enough money that they never had to really try. None of them have degrees. My grandfather is an unthinking salesman who looked at me like a mistake all of the handful of times I have seen him." Rebekah was losing patience with his inability to grasp truth or willful ignorance.

"Which of your parents were white?"

"You know what Timmy, fuck you! Maybe, I'm not happy for you Timmy. You fucking piece of shit." She walked out then and there, without waiting for his, "Wait, I'm sorry. What'd I say? I didn't know..."

Without realizing it, Rebekah had spent the entire day reading and thinking about how wrong getting to know others can go, which is why she was her own company so often. It was almost dinner time. She had missed lunch and was hungry. Skipping an early meal was not a rarity for her once she got around books and was free to think time tended to race by without her noticing, like when movies show time travel. She decided clean up the table next to her chair, put the books back and go eat dinner. She took two books with her, as Jaime told her she could do, to keep her company while eating and

going to bed. She had decided that while she wanted to see and talk to others, mostly Sara and Mel, she should just call it a day and be alone.

May 23, 2018

“Hey nerd!” This bold greeting from Mel resulted in Rebekah spilling her milk to Mel’s laughter and Sara rushing to help and grabbing more napkins, breakfast officially paused.

“Shit! Umm, hey Mel. Uh good morning. Hold on, let me wipe this up. Don’t want the book to get wet.”

While Rebekah and Sara were finishing cleaning up, Mel said “Ha. Fuck dude. You need to chill a bit friend. You’re a little high strung. We just wanted to see when you are going to eat lunch; we’d love to eat with you if you’re up for it.”

“Oh, yes. Thanks Sara. Here, I’ll throw those away when I’m done. Uh, yes, I’d love to. I’ll probably eat around 1.” Joy was coursing through Rebekah’s body from her toes to the scalp of her head, probably her hair too.

“Great. We were looking for you yesterday but we didn’t see you.” Sara said.

“Yeah, I was in the library. The library here’s fucking amazing.”

“Okay.” came from them in unison.

Rebekah was used to most people her age not being readers. Sure, she hoped they might be, but reading was one of the reasons she connected better with older people. Shyly, she said, “I know not too many our age read and thinks it’s lame, but I love books. I love reading them and being around them.”

Mel flicked her hair back over her ear and said, “That’s great. Honestly. I have a hard time focusing. Sara reads some.”

“Yeah, here and there. Mostly, vampire stories and stuff.” Sara added.

Rebekah loved horror stories, especially vampire or zombie stories. “Really? I love some horror. You do you read, like Matheson, Rice, or King?”

“No. Like Meyer. I think that was her name.”

“Oh, cool.”

Mel felt the awkward forced acknowledgment and said, “Okay, we’ll see you at lunch.”

“Alright, great.” Rebekah said to them as they began walking away smiling and giggling. She wanted to be a part of that.

She was relishing how great her breakfast had turned out, especially with how it started. She was thinking it was odd for her to have been hesitant when she wanted to meet them so badly. She was just feeling happy.

“Hey there Rebekah, how’re you doing today? You sleep okay?”

She knew who it was before she turned to see him. She smiled wide at his hollow sounding voice. “Hey J, I didn’t really sleep well, but it’s okay. Probably still adjusting.”

“I, uh, kept my eye out for you, uh, yesterday, but didn’t see you.”

Rebekah couldn’t stop herself from feeling, a little, popular. People were seeking her out. Her life might become more occupied. “Yeah, I was stupid and holed up in the library all day.”

“Oh, that’s cool. Why do you say it was stupid?” He said with a frown.

“Honestly? I was scared. I’m not good around other people. Don’t trust people much.” Alarms sounded in her head as if she were a submarine, “Why did I say that? Why is he so disarming? What the fuck is happening?”

“I get that. It can be, uh, a lot. Being here. But, um, most people here, like, really want to get, mostly, to really know people. New folks are interesting. Especially, for those that are more, um, long term. We, uh, like new interesting people. And, you’re interesting. Huh.”

She was reluctantly happy to hear him talking. Her skin was crawling with joy, because joy is hard to trust. Her eyes were beginning to dart about in her anxiety, she wanted to control that. Thank you, maybe. The minute she spoke she interrogated herself on why she sucked so bad at this. She was wrestling with the fact that she threw a desk at someone for being oblivious and only interested in their own view and experience and here she was avoiding people for offense as her teacher.

“So, J, I get the feeling you’ve been here a minute. What do you do here to pass the time?”

“Well, umm, I just hang out, attend my classes, sessions, um, listen to music. Draw. Watch a little TV and play some of the old video game systems they have in the rec room.”

“Wait, they have those things? I thought this place was way low tech, or nearly no tech.”

“I mean, I’m not sure how much tech was involved in Atari and the original Nintendo, Sega, and PlayStation systems, but I mean, they’re here.”

“What, do you mean classes?”

“Well. Like. I’ve been here a while. So, like, I’m completing school here.”

“How long have you been here? How long are people usually here? Where’s the rec room? What’s this place about, like it’s different right?” His eyes were glazing over in retreat. He was overwhelmed.

He pushed his shoulder length hair out of his eyes with smile that wanted to be a laugh, “Whoa, umm that’s a lot of questions. Like, I’m not really good at talking with others, too much. I really keep to myself, mostly. One of the things I’ve been working on in my individual sessions is the benefit of, um, talking with others...”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to...”

He raised his hand to stop her. “There you go, easy. Please, let me finish. Sometimes it’s better to not have everything um upfront, isn’t it? Like, if we had everything up front, what would be left to discover and, um, learn through experience, even if it goes wrong? One of the reasons I struggle with people is that I feel I’m, um, expected to have lots of answers or my whole story ready upfront. I don’t do well with that. It takes me a minute to, uh, gather what I want to say. I’m not dumb or anything. I just need patience.”

Rebekah could see J’s value, especially since he put her in check in the most honest and sincerely disarming way. She could tell it would be easy to be around him. There was real sincerity in him, which was a welcomed and different experience.

He continued on, “I can tell you that, um, I’ve been here about two months or so. Mostly, it seems, people are here until they are ready to get back out there. Honestly, most days I would rather stay in here. Um, a couple of people have been here for a few years, but they are in pretty, um, rough shape.”

She assessed him as not one for gossip, a person who took things as they were. She admired him for that. "So, there's an amazing cafeteria, the greatest library I've ever seen, and a rec room that isn't horrible?"

"Yeah. There is also the access to the grounds outside that you...."

"Wait, J, we can go outside! What the fuck kind of mental hospital is this where they will let patients roam?"

"Ha. That's funny. Why wouldn't they? We're in the middle of nowhere. I mean. Would you leave? I mean, um, you remember what it was like out there, right?"

"Fair point."

"Here, they believe that nature is, uh, helpful. The grounds outside are really nice. There's a big pond that'll have toads around it and, um, ducks sometimes. One time, one of the other patients saw a momma deer and her babies walk up to the pond and drink. At least, that's what she said. Said the deer didn't even seem to try and want to run off when they heard noise. Outside is really nice, but I don't like being out there when it is hot. Um, I usually go outside some in the morning and, um, every once and while after dinner."

"That's amazing to me though, still. Okay, what about this place. What's the, I don't know, lore?"

He tilted his head back and smiled. He liked conversation, "I don't know much, but I do know that some hippy who grew up on a reservation or worked on one, um, something like that, started this place with a friend of his. I heard that he was a little crazy, or at least that is what I thought when Marjorie told me that he was, umm, 'touched'. Not like assault, but like, other worldly."

“Whose Marjorie?”

“She used to work in the cafeteria. Um, she retired.”

“Mr. Bradbury and his friend must have been amazing people, because this place is very different from what I’ve experienced.”

“The two of them are still around from time to time. I think. I mean, um, I have heard them mentioned. Amy told us one session that she met them. They hired her. She said they were feminists which was the primary reason she agreed to work here. Um, I don’t know. She told us that one of them inherited a bunch of money or something and started this place. I don’t think either of them are named Bradbury though.”

“I suppose I can’t let curiosity like this sit. Maybe I will need to seek out Ms. Martinez.” Rebekah realized she had been talking to J for a long time and she needed to get ready for lunch soon. “Can we meet up later or tomorrow. I’m sorry, but I have some stuff I need to do before lunch.” Namely shower and get ready, things she didn’t do the previous day.

“Sure. It was good, um, talking with you.”

“Okay, see ya J.”

As Rebekah headed to her room, she realized she should have made more concrete plans to meet him? She was confident that she would run into him again, but it would have been better to set something up so he would know she cared. But she wanted to get back to her room and finish some reading, rest, and get ready to meet her new best friends. Her new best friends had to include J. Why wouldn’t it include him? He deserved to be included after all. Maybe she’d ask Mel and Sara about him.

Rebekah was early to the cafeteria for lunch. She was hungry. She would eat some before eating with them so she could avoid looking like a pig. Eating with others was not a comfortable time for her. It was hard for her not to feel judged. Others would think if she ate too much she wanted to be fat, but not enough and she would have a death wish for appearances. It was hard for her with some many people waiting to judge her.

She was not ready for how good mashed potatoes were at The Bradbury, so fluffy and smooth like a savory cotton candy blanket for the soul. The potatoes were creamy without being salty, just warm enough to reveal the spirits rising to the heavens but not so hot they burned the top of a mouth. They were the perfect mashed potatoes, glazed with a little brown gravy. Rebekah was elated, to say the least. She found joy in the green pole beans, just the correct amount of resistance before the skin gives way to the juicy flavors held within with a snap. She also grabbed steamed carrots cut into little orange wavy discs. But what nearly was too much for her was the fruit salsa chicken. She had never imagined such a thing. It was a glorious baked chicken breast, topped with a fresh fruit salsa, so moist it surrendered juices into a little pool of flavor on the plate. This chicken was unlike anything she had ever knew. This meal was a religious moment. Sometimes people cross paths with a meal that aims to be good enough it is epochal. It had an Earthiness to it that seems natural. It was the perfect savory. The first bite was just chicken, but the second bite reached out for some of the salsa resting on top and she was changed. Rebekah had never liked cooked fruit. Warm fruit was unnatural. This salsa was not cooked. It was chilled. Her taste buds were wrestling all over her tongue for the sweet and savory happening alongside the clash of warm and

chilled. This is what orgasms must be, at the very least. She savored her food and when done, knowing she could eat some more, she looked up and saw Mel and Sara approaching. She was glad she had just put away evidence of first lunch. They were giggling. They walked right up to her and hugged. Rebekah was not ready for hugs, had not thought of how they would greet each other, but this felt natural.

Mel, head to the side with her eyes fluttering back tongue out of the side of her mouth, said, "I am so fucking hungry."

Rebekah was happy to see them filling their plates, not holding back. Maybe it would not be so weird eating with them. She remembered of Robert Heinlein's term, to grok. Maybe that is what this was.

"Hey, it's nice outside, you both want to eat outside?" Mel said.

"Yes, queen, yes." Sara answered for Rebekah and her.

"That'd be great. I haven't been outside yet." Rebekah agreed.

Mel turned to face Rebekah, looked down at Rebekah's plate then into her eyes, "What the fuck Rebekah! We don't promote or put up with twig bitch expectations of not eating, not saying peeps should be unhealthy, but some fruit isn't enough. We aren't birds."

Sara appeared next to her, "Besides, if we don't eat we will never grow those lovely lady lumps that keep all the boys a coming." She laughed hysterically at her joke.

Rebekah knew she could eat another piece of chicken, more potatoes too. Rather than explain her neuroses she went and got more chicken and potatoes, which proved to be as good as the first round. As the three walked down the hall to the door to the outside area Rebekah noted how hard it would be to leave the food. They all agreed

they had never eaten this good, which was not saying anything negative about their families.

The outside area at The Bradbury was amazing. Rebekah was betting that there were more green growing things than the vast majority of people inside had ever seen. The grass looked as smooth and soft as leather, even though up close individual blades of grass were visible. Looking out it would have just looked like green leather stretched over the ground if blooms of purple, pink, blue, and yellow had not been sprinkled all over. It stretched as far as any sane person would ever run, probably further. At the tip of its reach it surrendered to or maybe grew woods with trails built through. The trees seemed to be thick, making the trails all more noticeable. The pond was definitely big, maybe small lake. The waters spilled out over the field, as waters seem to do, little spills on the surface. They could really see the end of the water from where they were, as it pushed into the tree. It was servicing both the people and animals of the tree line. Beautiful. Other than for her dad, she was not sure she would want to leave this place?

Wooden picnic furniture was set up to allow small groups to gather at tables to eat much like the tables inside were arranged. The furniture was in good shape with only a little of its death poking through the veneered varnish of the vibrant extension of dead trees. The cushions were newer, with the red and blue stripes competing for acknowledgment with the color of the flowers in the flower beds. Everything about being at The Bradbury was meant to be disarming, which was, lowkey, triggering Rebekah.

Sara fell into a chair as if she were worn out saying, "Sweet little baby Jesus, save me from having to be indoors today. It's too fucking nice out here. I need the sun."

Mel laughed, which was harsh sounding. "Bitch, whatever, like you would be outside if you didn't have anything else to do today. You just don't want to go to individual therapy."

"What do you mean? Why not?" Rebekah asked.

Mel made a somewhat exasperated gesture towards Sara and said, "It is hard for Sara to see her therapist. Her therapist is everything she wished her mom was. It hurts. She's mad that if someone can do it, why couldn't her mom. Which I get, but she also needs to get over it, right."

"Oh." Rebekah was not ready for laundry to be so exposed.

"Goddamnit Mel, why do you have to air my bullshit out like it's the laundry! My pee stained sheets are for everyone to see. Why are you being a bitch?" Sara fumed.

Mel was ready. She was always ready, "Fuck you, like you didn't say she belongs with us. Why would we hide truths from someone that is here, with us? Who belongs."

Rebekah was not sure if this tension was typical, if it was normal it would be a lot to cope with. But maybe they were just putting up their fronts to impress, which was flattering. "So, like, are you two fighting? Do I need to get some help for an intervention? Something?"

There was a pause. Then, laughter exploded from Mel and Sara and then Rebekah. This was the moment. The ties that bind happen easily, or could at least. She realized she had not laughed that well in a while.

Mel calmed her laugh to enough to say, "See, Sara, I told you she'd be great. I knew she was us."

“What do you mean I’m you?” Rebekah asked.

Mell looked at her very seriously, “Well, we’re the same. Certainly, our experiences are different, but we’ve beat our circumstances. We’re survivors.”

Sara, was nodding her head as if they were in church and she agreed with the sermon, “We can see it in you. Typically, there are two types in here; those building to fight some more, like a boxer in between rounds, and those who are beat, trying to not drown. The people here try to help the last group become the first, otherwise they are not likely to make it. We can see you are building. The next round is gonna be hard. But I know you got it. I can tell.” Sara was animated with her facial features and expressions, almost as if she was trying to make herself know or feel her words to be true.

“Bek. I notice you say gods? Why?” Sara looked deep into Rebekah’s eyes and asked, “Not that it matters, in the least, but I’m curious. What religion are you?”

Mel’s eyes widened, “Damn Sara, trying to run her off already?”

Rebekah smiled a little and answered, “I’m not. Maybe, I’m a mix of a number of them. Religion’s interesting, but I believe they’re all holding onto something true and at the same time messing it up with a bunch of biases and falsehoods. Too much doesn’t add up.”

Sara’s eyes widened as her mouth fell open, “That is amazing. Your family doesn’t pressure you?”

Rebekah shook her head and smirked, “Not on that. Can I ask you two something? Why are you both here?”

Sara rushed to answer that question, as she had been waiting for it. “Basically, my dad’s worthless, like less value than a ghost. They’re around long enough to scare you at least. My mom has a hard time focusing on me. I think she is just lonely and needs someone, but I can’t be that person. I’ve tried. I was making dinners and making sure my brother was fed and got to school. He is with his dad now. He was lucky to have a dad that tried some. One day, a teacher made a phone call, and case workers showed up. Basically, it was here or foster care for a bit. This place saved me. It was kind of my fault, even though my therapist says it wasn’t, because I didn’t know how to do laundry and didn’t have money to go to the store. Mom hadn’t been home in like four days, and I asked a teacher for help. This was her help.”

Mel looked at Sara piercingly, “Fuck that, Sara. I’ve told you it’s your mom’s fault. I know you get mad when I say it, but it is true. Just like my mom should have protected me better and looked after me more. It sucks, but we were their responsibility. It was their mistakes not ours.” Mel look irate, indicating to Rebekah that this was an ongoing disagreement between the two.

Sara rolled her head and eyes and sighed, “I know. I know. It’s just that, if I could’ve kept it together a little longer, maybe she could have turned around.”

Rebekah could visually see the trauma bonding. Their love made so much sense. “I’ve no idea how to even reply to that Sara. I agree with Mel, not to say anything bad about your mom, but it would be her responsibility, right? I can’t imagine what you both have gone through.” She didn’t want to go into her mother issues, which essentially was reduced to just one issue.

“It is what it is. Suffering’s never in short supply, I guess. Look around.” Mel was so hard, armored.

Rebekah looked at her new tough friend, “I guess you’re right. I’m not sure that makes anything okay though.”

“You’re precious, Ms. Rebekah. I’m glad we were right about you. You have a good heart. Glad you ended up here.” Sara smiled widely.

Rebekah’s smile welled up from somewhere deep in her, a place she was not aware of, “Thank you for saying that Sara. This might be a dumb question, but do we all have the same therapist? Mel, you said Sara didn’t like going to her therapist because she was what Sara thought her mother could have been.”

Sara replied looking playfully disapproving of Mel, “Well it isn’t that exactly. Mel paints things her way. I mean, I’d love for my mother to have some of her characteristics but... Your question, no. There are different therapists here. Don’t know how many. Mel has a dude, which wasn’t the best for her in the beginning. Mine used to be here as a patient. Actually, some of her art is hanging on the walls all around the place.”

Rebekah wondered if she might be the artist of the painting that mesmerized her. Sara was still talking, “She is amazing. I have never been heard more; sometimes when I leave her office I just want her to adopt me. I hate myself for feeling like that. I love my mom, but I know what being with my mom will do to me. I hope she is getting better too.”

“Yes. Yes. You love her but guilt. Guilt. And you wonder where I get the picture I paint.” Mel rolled her eyes and looked at Rebekah, and continued, “My therapist is Mr. Rogers, and he is wonderful. I’m sure you will get a good one. But, they don’t really

want us talking about our therapists because they want each person's experience to be their own. I can say this, everyone here is amazing. It isn't too good to be true, it's kinda wonderful. Honestly, I don't want to leave. I'm safe here. I want to be safe. With so much suffering, at least I've got this place."

Following the brief discussion of therapists, the three friends continued talking through dinner, easy conversations. As conversations between friends should be. Challenge was in them too, but it was not the center of their conversation. The day was one of the best days she had ever had. For a brief moment the problems she had seemed distant and she found herself oddly free. She realized that she had not retreated into her space the whole time the three of them were together nor did she feel awkward with them at any point following their shared laughing fit. She was safe. It was not as though she didn't feel safe with her dad. She did. But here she was safe and free which was a feeling that was not as common. She typically was required to be something for others all the time, but here she was free, expectation free. That night she laid her head on her pillow with a smile holding onto one thought, "This place."

May 24, 2018

Rebekah was oddly optimistic, wondering if what she was feeling was what normal was. It was weird how so many people, like she had, convinced themselves that they really didn't need something as important as companions. She had been wrong for isolating. Putting one's self out there was not easy, especially for someone with her type of history. Yesterday showed her that. While many, she would argue most, people sucked, having people in one's life was the better way to live. It was never easy to see how much you may have taken something for granted, especially people. Just then, as

has often happened to Rebekah when performing tasks while thinking about things, a collision happened. Returning her tray and walking away hoping to interact with some new friends she bowled right over someone who was coming up behind her.

“Oh Shit! You okay?” Rebekah had leveled the mysterious old janitor, who, now, seemed broken. He was, maybe, half her size. She easily outweighed him by about 30ish pounds. She could tell the way any person can who runs over a smaller person while the other participant has very little feeling of the hit. While he sat there she looked at him, how he looked, jeans and 80s style, geometrically patterned short sleeve button down both of which had a healthy splattering of gravy and ketchup. His hat was on the floor revealing the long light brown greying curls of his thinning hair and his glasses were knocked diagonally across his nose. Then he looked down at himself then up at her and started laughing. His laugh was a roar of joy ripping through the choked silence. The crash was attention getting enough, but now everyone was looking.

She feared she had knocked him into insanity, “Sir. I’m so sorry. Are you okay? Can I get someone or something?” She reached down to him.

He looked up at her, eyes glistening with tears, but not from pain. His smile, revealed someone too busy to maintain dental care. His smile was crooked, his teeth stained with what anyone would assume to be cigarettes and coffee. With his wide Cheshire grin, he said, “For what? What are you apologizing for?”

Rebekah looked confused. “Um, excuse me? For, a, knocking you down.”

His smile stayed while he said, “I realize I’ve been knocked down, quite thoroughly too. I asked why you are apologizing. Am I to believe that you were waiting around the corner to barrel me over and smear me with my own condiments, which

have resulted in a pattern the designer might should have considered?" He started to giggle.

Rebekah flushed, "No, of course. I wasn't, I mean I didn't try to wait and knock you over. Of course. I mean, I would never."

Still smiling while making no attempt to accept Rebekah's outstretched arm and lift himself up, "Exactly. That would be a really shitty thing to do to someone. Besides, how would you know whether or not I knew karate? Surely, someone that knew karate would have avoided an ambush like that, might even have had a counter attack."

Rebekah was dumbfounded. "um, do you know karate?"

His laugh roared back through the cafeteria. "I wish. Perhaps, this could have been avoided, but I am glad it wasn't. Collisions with others are wonderful examples that we continue to exist."

Rebekah had no idea what to do or think. She had never been happier to see two hands rushing up to help this potentially concussed individual up. It was J. In a world of onlookers and recorders, helpers or doers like J were so important. He had his hands under the laughing man's armpits lifting him up, "You two okay? That looked kind of rough."

The laughing man stopped laughing but continued his beaming smile, "Hey J, thank you. I believe we're both okay. How are you?"

J's nervous shifty eye contact returned now that the crisis was not a crisis and said, "Um cool, but Charles you have, like, shit all over you." He pointed to Charles's clothes. At this, Rebekah finally pulled her hand back. She was interested in learning the mysterious janitor's name.

Charles look up at J, still smiling. "Technically J, I have condiments all over me. If I would have consumed them then, and only then, would they have had the chance of becoming shit." This joke sent him into more laughter, which J half-heartedly accompanied. "J could you get me a rag from one of the custodians' carts right behind you." J turned grabbed the rag and tossed it to Charles who caught it and thank him. "Let me catch up with you later, if that's okay. I really appreciate you helping out. You are ever the model man." He smiled at J. J nodded and softly patted Rebekah on the shoulder.

Charles turned to Rebekah with a look of sincerity, "Are you okay?"

He seemed less frantic. She looked at him sheepishly, "I'm fine. I was worried about you."

His smile beamed again, "Ah, no worries. I'm an old dog. You don't get this scarred and charred body without bloodshed. I might have to run home and change though."

"I'm so sorry."

Charles shook his head, still smiling, "So, you've said. Question, how hard do you think it is to manipulate someone so willing to apologize? I often think how the world might be different if those in power weren't so damn successful beating submission into the masses with laws, gods, and force. I wish people would see the realities. Stop calling helpers crazy."

Charles laughed, a little, but his question was genuine and serious. Rebekah didn't know what to make of it, "I, honestly, have no idea what to say, and this is so surreal, so unexpected."

He looked at her quizzically, "Why unexpected, the collision?"

She reacted before she thought, everything was off in her head, "No, because you are a janitor... Right? Like, I know there is a movie about a genius who is a janitor, just didn't think I would meet one. I guess."

His laughed reached for a volume that was surprising, even given his previous outbursts. He could barely talk as he was doubling over, "Oh shit... Janitor.... My god... I could never.... Work... That hard.... Janitor..."

Rebekah knew her face was flushed to as crimson as it could get. Charles continued, "Oh dear, thank you for that. I needed a good laugh. Perception's most of our thinking, when you boil it down. It's good that you see me that way, for a janitor is what we all are, in some capacity. Don't be embarrassed, you have just given me the perfect metaphor for my life, and I truly thank you. Teachers and people who work in mental health are custodians. I can't believe I forgot that word associates with our effort so well. Glorious. Thank you." He slapped his leg. Rebekah just looked on in awe.

He was looking at her with an unnerving intensity, smiling wide. She could see each coffee and cigarette stained tooth. He seemed to be trying to hold the moment. Then he said, "I must apologize. I need to run. I have meetings today, and I need to change still. I want you to know that I hope you have an amazing day, and I will check on you later. It was an absolute pleasure running into you." He giggled like a child. "Well, truthfully it was wonderful having you run over me today, a most splendid and exquisite journey. I'm hopeful that we all learn to see the opportunity of those rabbit holes we fall into rather than the problems they might be for the timetables we are trying to keep. Sometimes, it's important to be late, not only for us but those we keep waiting."

He turned and started walking away and called back over his shoulder, "Until next time. Maybe I'll start keeping extra clothes in the office." She heard him say janitor and start laughing again.

Rebekah had no idea what to do with what had just happened to her. She did not know what she should do. She looked over herself and managed to avoid any food or condiment getting on her scrubs. She wondered if maybe sometimes people are just supposed to take in things that happen and stay in that taking. She needed to move. She wasn't comfortable sitting in this unnerving unknowing. Then one word crossed her mind, library. She wanted to read Carroll's book. Charles said rabbit hole. She knew that had to be an Alice reference. She had made plans to hang out with Mel and Sara, which she believed would become a new normal, but she had enough time to read a bit. If Jaime was there she could talk to him about some music and get something good to listen to while she read. She was not sure why, but she wanted different music than she would typically choose.

She did not want to discuss Charles yet. Something was odd there but she could not quite put her finger on it. Charles was her unicorn for the time being. She enjoyed knowing something others did not. She saw Jaime right when she entered and called out to him, "Hey Jaime. I want to read a bit of *Alice*, what music would you suggest? I want something I wouldn't know."

He looked up from his desk, "Oh, well hello to you too Miss Rebekah."

She ran up to him, "Deepest and most sincere apologies good sir. Good day. Pease help."

“Okay, better. Wow, interesting. Wait... Maybe. No. Yes. I’ve just the thing. This is going to be weird. But, I like it. *Barrel* by Lee Michaels. Lots of people’ll say artist’s first albums are best, but Lee got better as he went. He had to find himself, which is why I think it fits. It’s also a reason his music reminds me of people who come here, like you. Maybe, like you. His fourth and fifth albums are an undoing and introduction. *Barrel* is fourth.”

Rebekah marveled at the things Jaime knows. Jaime taught her that Lee played with Hendrix, which is someone she had heard of before. Jaime really did have the perfect job for him which allows him to be an amazing asset to this place and people. Thinking of that, sitting on the floor with headphones on holding Carroll’s book, she thought about how amazing everyone at The Bradbury was. It was weird how disarming everything was. “Maybe I’m dead, and this is heaven. Seriously. Maybe, the cops responded to the call of black people doing something they deemed wrong the way they far too often respond to that call. If this were heaven a lot of things would add up. But this can’t be heaven, can it?” Rebekah looked up at the clock and knew she needed to head to meet Mel and Sara.

As Rebekah approached Mel she was unaware how distressed or off she looked, but Mel noticed right away and said, “What the fuck’s up with you? You okay? Am I gonna have to hit a bitch?” She started laughing before Rebekah answered. She liked being the bold and tough one, needed to be such maybe. Her loud laugh was music to Rebekah’s ears. Sara had stood up and was punching her fist with a pursed face, ready. Rebekah knew she already loved these two, for who they were, not who they were trying to be.

In her halfhearted laugh Rebekah said, "Oh nothing, Sorry I'm a little late."

Sara switched from her ready to fight pose to folding her hands in front of her and with a mockingly mother voice, complete with batting eyes, said, "I was worried sick dear. One more time and it's no prom for you."

Mel laughed and looked at Sara, "Perhaps we need to set up a behavior modification, token economy Sara. We need to get this oppositional defiance in her managed."

To Rebekah's surprise she found herself challenging her new friends to defend The Bradbury, "Are you both really mocking this place?"

"Easy there, tigress. We're just playing. You should know we love this place. We were having fun, not making fun of this place." Mel said.

Rebekah was mortified, "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it like that. Today has been weird, but good. I've felt oddly and wonderfully in over my head since breakfast. It's been wonderful but in the best and weirdest ways possible."

Sara looked encouragingly, "Sounds good. But Imma need them details, why you holding out on me and Mel? Spill the teas. Just know, that after this build up if you don't deliver, I reserve the right to stab you with my potato fork."

Rebekah could not have stopped the smile that sweetly stretched across her face, like a puppy stretching. "Well Stabby, even though I know you're mostly joking, it truly means a lot to have a place like this genuinely trying to exist in a carbon footprint free way with this damaged world. Another reason this place is amazing. I thought it was weird and wonderful that plastic forks and stuff could be made from potatoes. So there that." Mel and Sara's threatened to roll out of their heads. "Have either of you ever

talked to the janitor guy. The crazy feral looking one. Well, he's not a janitor. I probably shouldn't say he is, but Charles looks like one."

They both said no and then were mesmerized by Rebekah's telling of what the morning had been like. They hung on every detail. When Rebekah finished they sat there. Then Mel said, "How fucking weird. I mean, someone like that is weird, right?"

Rebekah was very excited about sharing her story and Mel was less than enthusiastic, "Yeah, but, also amazing, right? I can't imagine how I would feel in that moment, what do you say? Shit, I don't know what to say right now."

Mel started to open her mouth to reply but Sarah cut her off, "Mel, you wouldn't say shit. You'd just stand there. Well, sit there. It would be hard not to."

"Bitch please, you would just slither away and hide." Retorted Mel.

Sara rolled her eyes, "I never said I would say anything."

Rebekah pulled the attention back to her, "I wanted to run and hide. It was like being in the presence of true nature, an owl that descends from a treetop to your table with a mouse in its grasp that just looks into you. All you can do is try and not disturb the magic of the moment. That's what I was trying to do. That's all I could think about, keep this happening. Continue life in the gravy and ketchup as long as absolutely possible, because a crew is waiting to come and clean it up to restore the civilized manner of being."

Mel looked at her in awe, "Um, what? Talk about magic. Look at you, what you're doing. How many people our age talk like you. Sara and I don't."

"I don't even really understand what you are saying. Completely. If I'm honest."
Said Sara sheepishly.

“I mean, I just think, like, the genuine experience is so rare that the powers of conformity are waiting, always waiting, to pull us back to the comfort of the status quo, making us believe that the experience can’t and shouldn’t be maintained, but he was the experience.” Rebekah said.

“What, come on, fuck you. Why do you always sell yourself short.” Mel challenged.

Rebekah did not want the conversation to fall into a negative place. “I’m not trying to. It’s just that it felt so much bigger than me. Hey, let’s change the subject. What do you two think about Jaime, in the library? He knows music and people so well. I can tell him a mood I’m in or what I want to hear, and he knows the perfect thing to start me on.”

“I think he has that adorable older vibe. He’s the point where older preciousness can be kinda sweet. It seems genuine too, not like someone who’s trying to gain trust to harm.” Mel offered.

“I really don’t know who he is. I mean I know him, but not well.” Sara added.

Rebekah smiled. She liked that this would not be a contested position, “I think he’s great. He’s truly genuine and really cares.”

“He’s the type of guy I hope to be with one day.” Mel admitted.

“Yikes. He’s a little old and not really put together well, with his hair and weird shirts. That’s what I remember about him.” Sara said through laughing.

“I don’t mean just like him, obviously. I’m just saying that he’s the type of person I hope to find, one day, someone like him. Besides, he is way gay. So, obviously I would hope to find a straight person.” Mel said.

“And there she is folks, Mel the lady with a wonder gaydar.” Sara chided.

Rebekah was shocked that she had not even considered his sexuality. “How do you know he is gay?”

Mel looked at her dumbly, “Seriously? Same way I know you are.”

Rebekah was shocked and just sat there.

Sara looked at Mel, eyes wide, “Oh my god Mel, I can’t believe you just said that.”

“What did I fucking say?” Mel said as she lowered her head into her shoulder as she was preparing to lunge at Sara.

Rebekah interrupted the beginning of their bickering, “Um, what? Why do you think I’m gay?”

Mel looked at her quizzically, “What do you mean? Are you not out? Seriously? It’s okay. There’s nothing wrong with you. You’re perfect. But you’ve never considered how some people will read your awkwardness. Do you think people don’t see the way you look at the ladies and how different it is than how you look at dudes.”

Rebekah knew who she was, or at least who she found attractive, “I mean. I just never really thought about it. There’re always other things going on in my head. I think labeling something is just a means to capture things in a rigid framework. Why can’t I just be?”

Mel moved closer to the edge of her seat, “How about with women? Are those other things there then too? Are you too distracted to feel desire then too?”

Sara was afraid a fracture was beginning in the newly made group, “Mel, stop! Can’t you see this upsetting her? Rebekah...”

Sweat was starting to form, seemed like she was sitting on the sun.

Mel continued to push, “Who or what’re you thinking about right now? I’m not trying to fuck with you. I want you to see. I want to help.”

Rebekah attempted to slide through the integration, “Umm, uhhh, I am not thinking about anything or anyone.”

Mel smelled blood, “Bullshit.”

Sara decided to mama bear up, “Mel, fucking stop! You’re being an ass. What the fuck’s your problem? Why’re you coming at her like this?”

Tears were building, threatening. Rebekah knew they were going to fall. She was feeling alarmed.

“Sara. Stop trying to control me. It’s safe. I saw her look at Amy. I know what was in those thoughts.” Mel was done.

Sara, ever protective, didn’t back down, “Maybe she’s not ready to talk about that Mel. It’s her fucking story.” She looked at Rebekah, “It’s okay...”

Rebekah needed to build space between that moment, that space. “Hey, I’m sorry but, uh, I need to go. I just have...”

Sara was feeling hopeless, pleadingly said, “Rebekah, please don’t go.” As Rebekah rose and started to walk away, Sara turned to look at Mel. “Fuck, Mel, see?”

Mel was deflated but too proud to reveal it, “Sara, shut up.” She called out to Rebekah, “Bek, I didn’t mean to...” Neither Mel nor Sara ran after her. They thought it would be best to give her space. The tension was sitting between them restlessly. Sara walked off without saying anything.

Rebekah went to her room, skipping dinner, obsessed with how weird it was to try and argue with someone when you know yourself to be in checkmate. It is important to maintain autonomy and control, but people don't live in vacuums. She was angry at being forced into being out when she did not think she was ready. She knew her truth, knew who she was. Crying in front of them made her feel worse about the whole exchange. Most importantly she didn't know what to do about seeing them the next day or any time soon. If Mel knew did her dad? She could imagine how to handle that right now. Would he know or deny it, like she had.

Once she calmed down, she saw their concern. They were sweet, especially Sara battling for her. Their hearts were not in a bad place, even Mel. But she should have handled that better. It was not right for her to press like that. She was unraveled.

She had one thought as she laid her head down to go to sleep, she was going to find her therapist tomorrow and make them earn their money.

May 25, 2018

Rebekah awoke to a prison of uncertainty and mental puzzles. She assured herself that there was a good thing about puzzles. Puzzles were meant to be assembled, hindered because too often people are so close to the pieces, they miss the picture they are supposed to build, but there was a picture a solution to be found. She sat upright in her bed thinking maybe this is why people are such social creatures, damned to always be building themselves through the understanding of others. As much as the insights of others annoyed those targeted, truth should not be overlooked because people feel a way about it. Someone's desire to hide truth should not be grounds to attack others through their own insecurity. She considered her secret, which

was not really a secret. It is one thing to know something about yourself, another to be ready to discuss it with others. It was not wrong for her to be who she was. However, she was bound into what others may think or how they may feel about her truth, especially her dad. Sex and sexuality were not topics they discussed. What if he stopped loving her? Could she really lose both parents? Could she just put it out of her mind and focus on other thing, "Celibacy can't be the worst thing."

She got up, showered, and dressed. On her walk to breakfast she thought, "I bet Sara and Mel are pretty freaked out at my reaction. How do I approach them after that? They're the only people I want to talk to right now, but. I don't know what to say. I really don't understand the move I'm supposed to make. They saw me, in ways, better than I saw myself or was willing to see myself, and still wanted to seek me out and include me. Normally when things go off you just bail, retreat to books and stuff Rebekah. Is that okay this time? You gonna hide forever?"

Breakfast proved to be medicine for her spirit, as if her soul prescribed buttery warm biscuits swimming in a bowl of creamy sausage gravy, soft perfectly seasoned eggs, juice, and a latte. Sustenance was what her physical body needed. She was better and was gathering her strength. She knew that she needed to do.

She quietly finished her breakfast and returned her tray. She started walking down the hall to the library. As she walked through the thick wood doors, she saw Jaime sitting at his desk in his doorless office just to the right before the rows of shelves started. He was dressed in a light blue Hawaiian shirt, with his glasses pushed up on his forehead reading. "Good morning, Jaime. What books would you suggest to explore identity or self-awareness?"

Jaime raised his head from what he was reading, “Ooohh, sounds like someone is doing that good work out of the gate. What do you mean by self-awareness? That is a big enough thing it starts with an individual and extends to communities of people and particles, even plants to a degree.”

Rebekah sighed, “Shit, Jaime don’t make it hard. Just, like, self-awareness.”

Jaime did not register an emotional reaction, “Okay. So, someone is in a bit of a mood and that someone wants direction. I’ll stand by my question. I mean, awareness of what. You could be in search of different awarenesses, which have their own books I’d recommend. For instance, I would suggest something different for sexual awareness than I would for racial awareness. Does that make sense?”

In one reply he showed Rebekah exactly why she sought him out and respected him. He did not center himself in her mood, which was already a little taxed. Instead, he allowed her to have space to emote as she needed and stayed on task, “I’m sorry. Just, like, broad or general self-awareness for now. Maybe that will lead to more focused aims later.

He smiled warmly, “The sorry thing again. Really? You don’t need to do that with me. Life asks too much sometime. I just want you to know that you can talk to me if I can be of help. Always. I think you should start with Rollo May, more specifically *Discovery of Being*. His work isn’t the easiest, but I think you are good for it. He can be a little dense. Watts, Frankl, and Buscaglia would be high on the list, and Fromm is literally always a must. You can also never go wrong with Bell Hooks. But, for now, I think starting with Rollo would be a great start. Want me to grab it for you?”

She smiled, “No, thank you. And thank you.”

He looked at her seriously, “Anytime all the time. And like I said, I’m here. Even if you want to just talk about books.”

Rebekah collected books for his suggestion and went to her chair. Her plan was to read for a while then seek out Mel and Sara. She did not want to follow her typical pattern, but knew they were not awake yet. She had not ever seen either of them at breakfast, which concerned Rebekah. Breakfast was her favorite meal. As she started reading it did not take long for her to realize, “Jaime is #GodLibrarian.” She wondered if he was a “fucking wizard” or something like an angel. She found it amazing how he continued to put the right thing in her hands. It was hard for her not to see him as existing there only to serve her. No one else was there to utilize his skills. He seemed perfectly equipped to help her. Rollo May’s book was the perfect book for her to be reading, as dense and slow as it is. Sentences and phrases were jumping off the page for her, “we live in others and they in us.” “Mel’s awareness of me wasn’t a damning at all just because it was a little too accurate for the comfort of my insecurity. Her insights should’ve been a blessing, freedom into truth. I need more confidence to live a truth like that. Seems society thrives on its people believing they are not enough, rather than considering what they could be.”

Just as she finished that thought something crashed into her and the chair. Quickly, before she fully knew what had happened, she replied, “Oww, Fuck! What?”

She heard the giggles and laughter erupt as Mel said, “Shit. Sorry Bek. And sorry Jaime.” Mel and Sara continued laughing as Mel was getting off Rebekah.

“What the fuck are you Mel, some kind of dyed hair ninja. Shit. Invading my chair time. You could’ve creased the book.” Said Rebekah through a broad smile.

With hands raised to both sides of her face in mocked horror Me said, “Oh, No! Not a book crease!”

Jaime’s face rounded the corner, “Um, no ladies. You all are being too loud, and did someone hurt one of the books? That is the only unforgiveable act. I will skin the perpetrator alive. You don’t come up in here being loud and hurting my babies.”

Mel stood and sincerely said, “No. No. Jaime. Honestly, I was just trying to find Bek and surprise her. I’ll keep it down.”

Sara stood next to Mel chest out like a soldier, “Sir Jaime. I know I don’t know you too well, but on behalf of Rebekah, Mel, and myself, I’ll give you a guarantee that no books will be harmed in the ongoing of us three queens.”

Jaime looked at her mildly impressed, “Cute. That better be the case.”

Mel looked at Sara then Jaime and said, “Jamie this is Sara. She is short and short on things like attention span etc, probably why you don’t know her, but I promise Bek and I will keep her in line.” She nodded in assurance.

“Oh, sweet Mel, you’re the only one that concerns me.” Jaime said and smiled.

Mel stood more proudly, “Ha. I’m glad you have a good grip on reality Jaime. They keep telling me I need to work on that.”

Jaime shook his head, “Always the sparring partner. Just remember to keep it down some, and these books are my babies.”

“I promise. We promise.” Sara replied.

“I won’t let Mel or Sara hurt anything.” Added Rebekah.

“You I’d believe. You love these as much as I do.” Jaime said to Rebekah with relief.

Jaime started walking off and Rebekah looked to see if he was out of earshot.

“Hey, I’m glad you two found me. I was going to come find you and apologize for...”

Mel cut her off before she could finish with a hand up to halt further statements, “What? Are you nuts? Well, I mean you are here, so... Why are you sorry? You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m sorry if I said something you weren’t ready to talk about. I shouldn’t have assumed you were comfortable with it. There is nothing wrong with it, and I’ll fuck up anyone who says otherwise. I’m in the fucking rainbow and no one should feel less than because they’re in its lights. Sara gave me shit about coming at you like that yesterday, and she was right.”

Sara was nodding her head in agreement, “Yes, I was right. In any event, as the group’s pure het lady, in all my cisdom, I feel it’s my duty to welcome you into the realization that you were trapped in a closet and aren’t anymore. We, the two of us, can see you. You’re good and wonderful, and we’re happy to have you around.” Rebekah was thinking about how quickly something can go from adorable to played out. Sara sensed her pull back and continued, “Now bitch, enough of that. You got that yesterday, today you get love. No tears. No negative.”

They were everything she hoped they would be. “Thank you, both. It’s not easy for me to sit in this. It feels too good, and I’m not really used to that. This, you both and everything, means so much.”

Mel shrugged and was ready to move on, “Yeah. Yeah. It’s not easy to be comfortable, but that’s the point, right? All of our, probably justifiable, insecurities keep us disconnected from each other while all we want is connection. At least, my therapist says something like that. Point is, you are us we are you. It won’t always be pretty. Sara

was ugly as fuck last night, but I needed that. She knew that. I hope I was what you needed to move forward.” Mel was correct. She was what Rebekah needed.

Sara, still in cute combative mode said, “If Mel wouldn’t have been butt ugly, I wouldn’t have been ugly. But speaking of ugly. My tummy is being very ugly because it’s so empty. Shall we lunch?”

“Yas! I’m hungry.” Mel agreed. “And we have time before group.”

Rebekah put her hand up to pause the two, “Yes, food, but first let me just say thank you to both of you. You were both what I needed, oddly. Sara, seeing you fight Mel for me was, I don’t know, it meant so much. Mel, you were what I needed. I needed that push to move into my future. Thank you. I love you both. And Mel I’ve never liked nicknames, but I like that you’ve started calling be Bek. I think I’m going to use that now.”

The three hugged. Rebekah was a little teary eyed. Sara looked at her, “Let’s sop those up with some carbs sweetie.”

When the three new friends walked into group following lunch Amy looked up and smiled wide. Bek wondered how Amy always look so great, dressed up without losing her warmth. She saw J. who looked down. He was already sitting and had his head down not looking at anyone. She feared it could be her new friends and she had neglected to find him following the collision with Charles. He looked up but put his head down after seeing us. Maybe, he was hoping to sit with her.

She leaned over to them, “Hey, do you care if I sit with J?” They both understood and nodded their heads in full support.

He did not see her approach and was startled when she said, “Hey, you saving this seat for anyone in particular?”

He was noticeably excited to have been sought out though he attempted to play it off in the most unsuccessful way possible. “Oh, umm, hey, uhh no, I’m mean yea, I didn’t know if you would need, a, seat. But, you know, you don’t...”

Bek smiled at him sweetly, “I know I don’t have to. I want to.”

The group session went well and the group was truly supportive of each other. J was great, just being even keeled. She hoped that he was not entertaining some sort of romance thing. She did not know if she should address things first, in order to avoid losing a friendship she was already valuing. Then she realized how she was feeling like an alien, again. She did not, really, know if she was ready to vocalize her orientation, but thought it might be best to do. There was this little voice in her head who wanted to verbalize this truth for the first time in a way that was her decision. She decided to ask Amy following group. It was important to be herself and exist as she was. Sometimes people can be exactly where they want to be but then not be able to focus because one of the mice in the brain hops on the squeaky wheel. She knew she was distracted and probably was not the only person aware.

Bek was aware that she was in a positive mood and had a lot of energy. She was excited. She found it peculiar how much better she felt without any singularly specific moment of insight. It is wonderfully medicinal for people to truly know that they are not alone. This feeling was similar to being next in line to check out on Black Friday. Comparing the sense of gaining control to high volume shopping lines made sense, as every step of the perilous wait was so freeing. Lines offer the chance to see the power

of every step, whether moving towards or away from something. Steps having meaning. They are human power.

After group, Bek told J she would see him around, and then told Sara and Mel that she would catch up with them, but that she wanted to see if Amy had a moment.

“Ooohhh, I bet you do want to chat with Amy.” Mel was always ready to spar. She enjoyed creating tension.

Bek’s eye roll was on point because it choked that giggle right out of Mel. “Oops, too soon?” Mel did not go down easily. “Of course, we’ll catch you later.”

Sara waved. Bek turned to Amy and walked up to her.

“Ms. Martinez, you have a second?”

Amy looked up from her notes shocked she had one that hung out after. “Of course, this was the last session for me today. But can we go get a coffee from the cafeteria and talk? If you’re comfortable with that. It’s usually not really busy around this time. I need a little spark.”

Bek nodded, “Coffee sounds good. I could definitely go for that.”

Bek admired Amy thinking, “She’s poetry in action. How does someone make the simple act of putting a pad of paper in a bag look graceful?” Once Amy had her things ready she looked up and said, “Let’s go. It looks like things are going okay for you since last session. Making friends I see.”

She smiled proud, “Oh my god, there’s so much. I really don’t think I’ve taken it all in. I mean, it all started with Jaime and J. Both of them were amazing, but also, the people in the lunch room are so welcoming. This whole place is nurturing. I actually thought it might be heaven for a while, maybe a little of me still does. I don’t feel like I

can trust it. Then I met you and Mel and Sara and everything is completely too good to be true. Maybe the cops did kill me and this is the next place. But then, I met the crazy, sorry weird, weird's better, janitor. This is all so weird. I hope I'm making sense." She realized that the flood gates she opened were probably overwhelming Amy. "Um, I'm sorry. That's a lot."

Amy laughed and seemed truly happy. "Why are you apologizing? It makes me so happy to hear the wonderful overwhelming week you've had. I want you to fight the tendency to apologize. People, especially women, feel the need to apologize so much, for what? Existing?" Amy had a look of genuine concern. This issue plagued her, rightly so. Then she continued, "I want to talk about some of things you just said if you are up for it, but, first, what did you need to talk to me about?"

Bek threw her hands up and rolled her head back, "Yes. Absolutely. Whatever you want to talk about. What I wanted to ask is, ultimately, if someone might be romantically into me, should I let him know that he doesn't have a chance in order to try to prevent ruining a potential friendship?"

Amy sized up this question as they entered the coffee bar area and put up her finger to pause the question until they had ordered and found a table to sit at. She starting answering asking, "Hmmm, this wouldn't happen to be someone I know would it???" Her right eyebrow was raised in mock inquisition. "I'm just playing. I think communication is the key, but always remember and respect that, just like you don't have to like someone that is into you, you should respect their possible wish not to be your friend. It might be too much for them and that's okay. First though, I think it is always worthwhile to consider why a person does or doesn't have a chance."

Bek went and retrieved their waiting coffees and returned. "Well he doesn't have a chance because I'm gay." She was shocked that it came out so easily. Then she also wondered why she assumed it would be hard to say.

Amy made a face of recognition, "You are? That's wonderful. It looks like you're feeling some sort of way about saying that though. Unless I'm reading your expressions wrong."

Bek shrugged a little sheepishly, "Well, I guess, this is me coming out. That was the first time I've said that to anyone. Mel pointed out that she thought I was gay yesterday, and while I knew that, I wasn't really ready to own it. Last night I recognized I've been avoiding it."

Amy pulled her head back impressed, "Wow, that must have been a lot to take in. It's never easy to confront what we're not ready to confront. How are you and Mel? Was that an intense exchange?"

Bek began nodding it acknowledgement with how tense things were last night, "We're good now. It wasn't easy at first. But we've talked this morning. She doesn't always approach things with correct amount of, delicacy, but I think I needed that push. But now it's like I see it as a bigger issue that I need to deal with, maybe." If my goal is to be known for who I am, then I should be the last person trying to suppress my truths, which is what Pride is essentially about, right? Visibility?"

Amy's eyebrows were both raised in wonderful surprise at how insightful this young lady in front of her was. "Okay, that's a lot. Very fresh. First, I believe you should absolutely mention this in your individual therapy session later today. I can imagine there is quite a bit of processing that needs to happen. I love that you and Mel were

able to have that exchange and work through it. That isn't always easy. I'll say that if you are, then you are. You wonderfully are. I know a number of women, and men in truth, that have held onto that secret for decades, living fitful lives, only to realize that none of that suffering was necessary and they were better off without the people who made them feel like hiding their truth was the right thing, but getting to that can hurt. I'm not saying that being out is easy. It isn't, but it is at least giving yourself the opportunity for you to be who you are. And yes, that is the primary purpose of Pride, visibility, which is another thing that makes so many legislators who want to gut and destroy DEI programs in schools so monstrous. Have you heard of the concepts of autonomy and agency?"

Bek knew, she wanted to be similar to Amy when she was older. She was in awe. "Yes. You mean like an individual's right to be who they are without the pressure of others forcing them to be more of what others wish. Something like that."

Amy smirked and shook her head. "Not really "something like that." Exactly that. You really are, truly, bright. I hope you know that. Autonomy is your ability to live and act as you wish. You are autonomous when you are free to act in your own agency, not in accordance to forces other than you which includes parents, teachers, coaches, clergy, romantic others, whom or whatever. It's when you choose and live according to who you are. Growing up should be finding that identity through challenging all the forces that will try to get you to live for them. Too many people, maybe most, are struggling with their identity simply because the people in their lives don't want them to have the space to create who they are. People who want the visibility of some to be stripped away."

“But, why would people who love us do that? I understand not everyone elected is a god person. Some are fucking awful.”

“People try and control others, typically, because of fear, shame, maliciousness, but mostly, insecurity. Often, it’s the hard times that motivate our best work, so over protection has deep pitfalls with a sacrifice of autonomy as other people create resistance. In effect, parents are teaching children to live for conformity, which is the opposite of autonomy. Schools bent on testing drive that point home too. Shame plays a role in some situations as many parents have shame about elements of their lives and don’t want their children doing the same. Insecurity leads parents to raising their children with a dependency on them, which makes sure that the parents will never have to deal with being alone.” Amy said smiling.

She had never heard someone break it down so easily. “Shit. Amy, when you say it like that it makes sense, easy. So, why do we continue to do what we do though? Why do smart adults continue to do what isn’t working?”

Amy nodded and smiled, “Why indeed. I think it’ll be a longer journey than necessary because, for the most part, people are cognitive misers. Mostly, they will work only as hard as they must in order to accomplish the minimum requirements of not failing, even if not especially with their own growth and development. Our society is built on avoiding failing more than striving success.”

Bek was transfixed, “Fuck. I mean, I’m sorry.”

Amy waved her hand to bat away the unnecessary apology. “Stop apologizing for existing as you are. I don’t need that. I think “Fuck” is the appropriate reaction to seeing the cycle of misery that civilization has created.”

She smiled, “Yes, Amy I can’t thank you enough. Hearing an adult saying what I have felt makes me feel, I don’t know, included?”

“Less alien?”

Having her word thrown back at her only added to her feeling seen, “So much less alien.”

Amy smiled, “Good, don’t get used to it. There are billions of people out there who want to pressure us into compliance to what they are comfortable with, so they stay relevant. Us ill-fitting souls got to stick together.”

Bek scrunched her face up like she was being deployed, “Always. Absolutely agree. Love that. What questions did you have before?”

“Well, I really only had one, but I also probably should be making my way to my office. I still have notes to write and folks to contact. But, who is the janitor you mentioned?”

“Oh, his name is Charles. He’s not really a janitor. He is kind of smaller dresses more interesting than anyone here probably...”

Amy started laughing, which sounded great, though she was started that Amy was laughing, “Did you ask him or call him a janitor? Please say you did.”

“Yes.” Rebekah started to feel embarrassed.

Suppressing her laughter, Amy said, “Oh, I bet he loved that.”

“He did actually. He laughed, really loud, and a lot.”

“I imagine. Well, he’s not a janitor here, in the traditional sense, though he has dealt with more than his share of trash and cleanup. We can talk about him later. He is

very important. He's something else, too much to dive into now. But, he's a wonderful person that you can trust."

"Okay, thank you." Rebekah's mind was swimming with curiosity of who Charles was.

"Okay kiddo, I'm going to head to my office and do some work. I really want you to bring this up in your individual session. But most importantly, I want you to know that I expect great things from you. You're ahead. Ahead of most adults. This is deep water you're swimming in, and you're doing damn well." Amy winked as she said this and Bek held on to it.

As Amy stood to go, Bek said, "I'll see you next week. Oh, and please call me Bek, if that's okay."

She looked down at her, "Will do Bek. I like that, but then again I am partial to three letter names."

Bek continued sitting with a little coffee still in front of her thinking about how this place continues to provide her with amazing people and interactions, so unreal. As she took her last drink she thought she should find Mel and Sara before her individual session, which she was anxious about, but ultimately was expecting to go well.

It did not take long to find them. They were outside with their pants pulled up to just over their knees and their shirts pulled up to reveal their stomachs, probably a violation. It was a beautiful day, warm, not hot, just right.

Bek approached them, "Hey, what's up? How are you two doing? Isn't today great?" Bek was not aware how positive her mood had become.

Mel's head jerked around startled. "Whoa, look at this chipper bitch. What wonderful thing has happened to put you in such a good mood? You and Amy have, a moment?"

She did not want Mel to ruin her mood, "Jesus, no. Please don't do that Mel. Don't plant those seeds. Don't take away from what I am feeling."

Mel put up her hands defensively, "No, no I'm just giving you shit. Honest, sorry. That was stupid. I didn't mean anything."

"It's okay; I just don't want to cheapen what happened. I mean I get it. With the new realization and how beautiful she is, blah. But she isn't that for me. She's who I want to be. I have never admired as I do her, and don't do any stupid bullshit with that. I need that to be sacred."

"Deal, one hundred percent. I'm sorry. I didn't think about it."

Sara decided to add her thoughts while desperately trying to tan, "Mel always defaults to being a dumpster fire. It's her way. Try to never take offense. She's like a 12- or 13-year-old boy. So, what happened, what did you two talk about? Why are you so excited?"

"Everything. Originally, I wanted her advice on a situation. I think J might have feelings for me, and I wanted to ask her if I should say something to him about me being gay.

Sarah looked a little offended, "What, why didn't you ask us? I know me and Mel can be idiots, but I think we give good advice."

She realized that she had inadvertently wounded Sara, probably Mel too. "Sara, I'm sorry for not asking you about it. I'm not great at friending, honest. But most

importantly I wanted to identify myself to someone, I guess. I hadn't realized that I wanted to 'come out' to someone until I was in the middle of talking to her, but I've been in the safety of that closet for long enough. I want my story to be known. I want to voice my identity. She was a safe place to try being honest with myself and others. I hope that makes sense."

Mel was surprisingly understanding, "Of course, it makes sense. I know Sara understands that. Being confined in that isolation is horrible. I also think you were smart to voice your truth the first time to her. She's amazing."

While Bek considered whether Mel was being supportive because she felt that way or because she was trying to be extra cool, she decided it did not matter. The support was nice. "I really would like to hear what you two think about what she advised though."

Sara returned no longer rejected. She held immediate pride of being the friend that friends sought out. "Well tell us already so we can." She was happy that Sara returned so easily. She would never want to hurt Sara.

"Amy told me, basically, that it is my decision to voice my truths, but it is important for me to voice my truth and live my story for myself. That it's good for me to meet the pain that might be waiting, which I'm sure is important to weigh whether or not the truth could result in physical violence. I think it would be good for me to tell him."

"Why would you talk to him. It's his problem if he misreads stuff. That's his problem. Who cares? I mean I think you could create a problem by bringing up something that might not be real. I say do nothing, unless you have to do something." Mel seemed a little calloused and distant.

“I think I agree with Amy. Mel doesn’t like to discuss the things she is going through, but I think being more into the story is better. Like, it was important for you to speak your truth to Amy, which I understand. It’s probably more important for you to practice saying that to a guy that has a crush on you. Also, I don’t see how it could hurt anything, really. I think the goods would outweigh the bads, especially with J.”

Mel shifted in her chair abruptly so she could stare at Sara, “What? Are you serious? She doesn’t owe him anything?”

Rebekah tried to mediate, “Mel, Sara didn’t say I owed him anything. But don’t we owe consideration to those we care about? Isn’t that the way the world should be? Shouldn’t we focus on seeing what is coming and try to make it better for all rather than simply reacting?”

“Whatever. I don’t care. Do whatever you want. Fuck. I’m going to my room.” Mel jumped up from her seat and started off.

Rebekah watched Mel storm off, confused, “What the fuck Sara? Did I do something or say something wrong?”

Sara shook her head, “No. You know, she has problems. I mean, obviously we all do.”

“Well sure. But what the fuck was that? What made her mad? Why the fuck did she storm off?”

“She does that, when she doesn’t have control or power and she feels threatened. Problems. Some people are more ready to deal with things than others? Don’t worry. She will probably be okay next time you see her, like nothing happened.”

“But that can’t be healthy can it. I mean doesn’t she need to deal with it?”

“Sure, I think she does. But we can’t force her to can we? My therapist always tells me that if we love someone, we give them opportunities to grow and change without demanding they be who we want them to be. We can choose who is in our life and if they are worth our sacrifices. I love Mel. She hasn’t created anything unhealthy for me.”

In an instant, Bek knew how important Sara was and how wrong people were to overlook her, “Sara I hate to leave you out here alone, but I have my first individual appointment. I don’t want to be late.”

“Ooohh, that’s right. The first one. No worries. Everything will be great. Try to find me after. We can eat dinner together. You can tell me about it. Maybe Mel will be chill by then. Excited to see who you get.”

First meetings are typically seen as kind of ominous which is exacerbated by Bek just being told where to go, a destination, a room number, a time. Nothing else. She did not even know if she was still to meet Dr. Calloway. However, Bek knew everything thing else here had worked really well, she doubted this would take a turn. She stood in front of the door, maybe she was waiting for it to knock itself. “Fuck it. Let’s knock.”

“This fucking door is dense. Bet no one could hear the screaming. What if this is where shock torture and lobotomies go down.” The tendency of the mind to answer uncertainty with leaps to perilous outcomes.

Before she could turn away and make for her escape she heard a voice. “Hello. You must be Rebekah, no, apologies, Bek, right? Please, come in. Hope you’re doing well today.”

He seemed okay to her. She noted he was fiftyish and bald with a shiny thick beard which was mostly dark though streaked with grey. She liked his style, simple cardigan over a buttoned down with khakis (all of which seemed to have an allergy to steam and starch). There was no ironing here. He looked like the avatar of an old-style tobacco pipe that lived in a library, perfect, maybe.

His greying facial overgrowth parted for his lips to spread warmly across his face. "Greetings, I am Dr. Calloway, but please call me Peter. I'm so happy to finally be getting to meet you. Please have a seat. I promise this room is safe."

Bek had no idea how he knew about the Bek stuff? She decided he probably had access to charts and stuff. His office was beautiful. Interesting. It was like the storage room for the Museum of Academics. Every service seemed to be the resting place for some kind of figure, statue, book, or art, but it was not really messy. She acknowledged that while it was messy, it also appeared ordered. Books were everywhere, on every surface. Art on the walls and knickknacks everywhere on the shelves with the books. This stuff must have meaning, at least at some point, to be receiving real estate in an office that could use a little more space. But it was also an office that would, likely, look the same if it were bigger. The clutter was the space's inhabitant. "Hello, yes Bek. Can I ask you how you knew to call me Bek? Is it because you have my records? Did Amy, I mean Ms. Rodriguez, put that in my note?"

He sat behind his desk motioning to one of the chairs in front of him for her to sit in. "First, you can refer to Amy as Amy if she has said that was okay, just like I ask you to call me Peter. Second, you are correct in assuming I have access to your records, which includes your group notes, but I don't like to look at those things before meeting

someone. Earlier today, I called Amy and asked her what to expect from my new colleague and she replied, 'Call her Bek and you will love working with her'."

"That's it?"

He moved his hands a lot while he spoke. "I wouldn't want anything more. I like uncovering. For me, it is the uncovering that leads to discovery or understanding. I wouldn't want to cheat myself out of that experience. I think it is the most important part of the process."

"Okay, I like that. Can I ask some questions too?"

He nodded and smiled encouragingly. His smile was bright and sincere, "Only always."

Bek liked that response, "My questions are, did you choose this office and decorate it? Have you read these books? What are your thoughts on Fromm?"

His voice was so deep and smooth, like if shadows had honey. "I chose this space somewhat. When I was hired, they gave me the choice of a few spaces. Wow, that was fifteen years ago, anyway. Great questions pull in memories. Thank you. I've read, or read into, the majority of these books. However, I would never claim to have read them all. I have a habit of starting a book and then jumping to others. And lastly, I love him and the work of him and his wife. Their efforts spoke to me like little else has in this field. Can I also say, that I love that you started with asking me about my books. I love measuring people by what is on their bookshelves. I know, it is petty but it has proven correct too many times. I don't think someone is a bad person because they have some neurotic tale of obsession masquerading as erotic fiction or paranormal

angst, but I know the conversation with them will leave me wanting. So, I aim at avoiding it.”

Rebekah laughed. “I get that, but are they okay with you being this, um petty? Personally, I haven’t been to many other houses than my own, but I am around enough to know that way too many people are speaking from the support of empty bookshelves. It disgusts me. I avoid others too. One of the main reasons I don’t have too many friends is because so many people know little to nothing but want to run their mouths because they have likes or whatever. I’m curious, how can you start and not finish? That is a sin in my book. Like what kind of sadist pulls a cover back and doesn’t keep going until they meet its opposite?”

He leaned back in his green leather swivel chair, “Because, there are so many things that pull my interest. And sometimes I start things I’m not ready to finish, so I pause them. Some of the greatest things in life come from the time we give them to develop. Too many people are way too focused on outcomes, mere accomplishments, that they cheat or miss the journey. I’ve grown to be patient, which has changed everything. My goal in reading isn’t to get through a book but rather digest it and grow. For instance, I’m still reading a book I started four years ago. And yes, I still remember what it’s about. Marginalia in an important thing. It just needs to be chewed a little more. Maybe I need to grow a little more.”

“Four years? Shit. Patient huh? I mean that is easy for some folks because they have had it easier maybe.”

“Bek, are we going to compare street cred stories? Does winning such comparisons invalidate truth? Certainly, patience comes easier to those that have less

demands, but patience helps us all. When I learned that, my life got a lot better, and so did all of the relationships I had.”

“Okay, maybe. But it isn’t easy to be patient, and people are rarely patient with me. Everyone wants to shove a deadline at me and demand that I meet the goals they made for me. And, I’m interested, why did you call me a colleague? What’s marginalia?”

“There is absolutely a struggle of time, how we wish to spend it and how others demand us to spend it. I can say that it is never equitable, honestly, but we need to find a balance between those two plans. It involves sacrifice, and, in my opinion, the sacrifice should be on both parties, though it rarely is. But taking care of yourself should never be seen as selfish. I call you my colleague because that is how I see this process. We are two people invested in the shared goal of growth and development given the constraints of our situations. Make no mistake about it, we are in this enterprise together. The enterprise of Bek. Marginalia is underlining, highlighting, circling, and writing in books.”

“Oh, but they should be books owned then. I can see how that would be useful. Especially if you read some and return to them. Also, I always love reading those little notes and comments, makes you feel connected. One day I will have a library. Considering this enterprise, it seems odd to paint it as a mutual endeavor. I’m the only one with expectations levied on them.”

His laugh surprised Bek, deep and filling the whole room. “Amy could not have been more accurate, a teenager using levied, wow. Oh Bek, I have expectations of me in everything I do. One of the things I hope that you learn is that expectations of ourselves are so very valuable in creating realities for us to build and live. They guide.

How can we have purpose without expectation? I believe we're supposed to be something. Something, we choose to be, not others. Goals aren't accomplished through luck and waking up. We achieve because we wake up and choose. Our expectations are based on the beacons of our goals. They are steps to getting where we need to be, where we wish to be. Please, understand, you are not the only one in our enterprise with expectations of growth and development. And no one will ever walk through that door" He extend his long arm and pointed with his long finger to the door to his office. "and be more critical of me than I will be of me."

Bek could not think of him as anything other than truly genuine. "Well, where do we go from here?"

"I'm glad you asked. First, I want you to feel free to ask any question or interrupt me as you might need, but I ask you to try and interrupt with kindness. Putting your hand up is a wonderful non-verbal cue that you want to say something. I want you to know that I enter this effort willing to suffer through the difficult times and exchanges knowing full well that they are coming. I want you to know that you are free and safe to express yourself as you need to, which will remain between us unless you mention something about someone getting hurt. I must protect those in danger, including you, to the fullest of my ability. I do not expect you to give me all of this trust this second, as I am aware that trust is built through a communion of experiences. I would like you to begin by telling me what led to you throwing a desk in a class. Please provide the back story you believe to be relevant to expressing this story in the truest and most complete way possible. What do you think about that?"

"Okay, I mean, you already know it? You have read it in the file, right?"

“Certainly, I am aware of parts of it; however, I want to hear your version. I don’t think it would be wise to just read the report and start working with you. I understand what you did, but I don’t understand why you did it. Reports rarely cover that truly honestly.”

She recognized that was the first time someone had asked her the question she truly wanted to answer. The question that was most important. “Why? For a lot of reasons. I mean, the frustration builds up. Constant pressure continues to build and build and something has to give. I didn’t intend to hit her, but I don’t really care too much that she got hit, which I feel guilt for. I just couldn’t sit there and hear any more bullshit. Something had to stop the constant play that marginalized people have to just get over it, while we still teach that America is for everyone. If it is for everyone it must include the histories of all people. Goddamnit, I hate this. Why do you want me go through this shit again? You have to know what I mean.” She realized how fast she was talking and how loud she had gotten.

He began speaking in a cadence slower than his normal to offset where Bek had gone, “Okay, couple of things I want to say to you then I want us to sit in your pain, silently. I don’t want you to fight it. Let it be with us. It deserves that. I’m sorry for your pain. It’s real, and is a logical reaction to the suffering that you have endured directly and indirectly. I want you to know that I’m not asking you to go through the experience to harm you or for a malicious intent. It’s important to bring in here the things that need light, because they have been in those shadows you mentioned too long. This is a space for you, so don’t fear it. Everything you have shared has been rational, even though not everyone would agree with us. I want us now to take a moment, quietly to

think about what you were brave enough to share. In a few moments I will break our silence to continue talking, if that is okay with you?"

She was happy that all she needed to do was nod because her voice would stab her in the back the second she opened her mouth. She hated feeling weak, exposed. She was frustrated that discussing what had happened led to so many emotions. She did feel that he was hearing her though, which was different. Maybe not different for The Bradbury. She couldn't remember a time when she had been allowed to talk about what happened without interruption. This was usually the point where orderlies would be coming in with the holds, likely with injections to calm her down, but no one would have just listened to her. Again, everything about The Bradbury seemed genuine. She realized she was very relaxed, calm. It had been wrong to dump on him like she had. She was not sure how she could have avoided being defensive, how could she have expected this place to be so different. Why would she not play into what typically happens. Then she realized she was merely attempting to justify her behavior and stopped herself, "I mean there are other ways."

Peter had been watching her the whole time. She had never looked around or up, just down at her hands in her lap. He continued his slower cadence of speaking, which was as close to a crawl as speaking could go. "Bek, I would like to start talking again about what you were saying before; however, this time, I would like you to attempt to not let your emotions speak for you. It's understandable why you would let your emotions have a voice, they should, but I want you to see that you having a voice includes not letting your emotions speak for you. Do you think it is fair for me to ask this

of you? And do you think that you feel like doing this now? You don't have to; we can come back to this if you wish."

She hesitated. She wanted to continued talking but was not sure she could feel safe enough to avoid becoming emotional.

"Bek, it's completely okay to return to this another time, if it's too much or you feel too exposed. I want you to know that you don't have to protect yourself in this room. We are going to go through some hard things, but this will be together. I'm not here to take shots at you or attack you. I want your success. The only success I can find is you finding your success. Okay?"

One simple thought plagued her thinking, comically, if he was in her head talking about how she was definitely feeling, "Say 'Purple' if you can read my thoughts." He did not say purple. "I, just, think it's hard to do that. I feel, I feel, I don't know, too open. I feel too exposed. There is nothing to protect me; I wouldn't be able to... Nothing."

He nodded in understanding, "Bek, I don't want to press you. I'll assure you that you are still in control and will remain in control. Talking about something doesn't take away your ability to protect. You're the protector, and you aren't going anywhere. Trust in yourself to handle the difficult situations. You have been doing a pretty good job of it so far, recent event excluded. Maybe, just maybe, together we can uncover how to turn pretty good into great, which is all I want. And if it is ever too much, the door behind you is unlocked."

"I understand that, but you are asking me to share a truth that has kept me safe for this long." The tension was building in the room again, neither were moving much.

With his ever-measured cadence, his deliberate way of speaking, he said, "I will challenge you a little there. Has it kept you safe or isolated? I know they seem similar but they most definitely are not. Isolated is not safe, and I can prove it. What happens to the isolated gazelle? Isolated water buffalo? Isolated anything. The predators circle, don't they? Isolated people are easy to discard, especially if they are of color, even more especially if they are of color and female. If you were safe why did you feel the need to throw the desk? That act seems to come from a place of pressure and tension, which are not words of safety. The veil of safety covers the monster of isolation. Isolation is such a horrible thing it can be used to torture. When we self-isolate we are torturing ourselves for various reasons that ultimate are similar to insecurity, which puts tension and pressure on us."

She did not realize that she had set up and neared the edge of her chair. "What if people try to hurt you or use you?"

His calm resolve was permanent, "No what if about it. They will. They are waiting to, at least some of them, but let me ask you something. You have become close to a few people here correct?"

She was defensive immediately, "Oh, keeping tabs?"

In a manner of pleading, "I have eyes. Come on, don't avoid the question. Stop trying to make me an adversary."

She threw her hands up, "Okay. Yes, J, Sara, and Mel."

"Why?"

"Because I thought they might be different."

He nodded, "Exactly. Yes, they're great, but why? I mean it's likely that you will leave here and never see them again. You all come from different places."

Bek had not thought of that. Instantly pain washed over her. Everything would be forever hopeless. Hearing him say that jarred her like a blind side screen, rattling all of the air out of her. Fuck you, Counselor Asshole. Is this destined to be ruined? Come the fuck on. Life has to just keep taking shots?

Peter saw her mind working and pain moving across her face like shadows, "I don't mean that to question the bonds you're forming, certainly people have left here and remained close. We love it when that happens. I'm just pointing out that you betrayed your effort of isolating rather quickly, for relationships with people you might not be able to maintain, and that should tell you something, shouldn't it?"

She was dumb founded. "Okay, I see what you are saying, maybe, but this is different."

"How? Couldn't they hurt you too?"

"Well yeah, but they won't. They accept me."

"As you are?"

"Yes! They accept me as I am!" Her emotions were starting to grasp the controls of her thinking. She was taking everything being said as a challenge and possible threat.

"They would accept you whether you are who you are today or who you could be tomorrow, just like I do. I believe you. I also believe they are all three amazing people deserving of love. You don't have to change for me or them."

"Good."

He leaned forward in his chair closing the space between the two of them, "Is it good enough for you? Challenging you a little, if things were good then why would you feel something as threatening? As I mentioned I accept you for you, and reflect about possibilities without judgement. But you are judging always, right, which is why this interaction is more threatening than others. In talking with me you might find points that you don't like about you, and if you do you will struggle to accept that inconsistency. So, you will require a change, and that scares you. Finding yourself in the midst of cognitive dissonance is never comfortable. People do everything in their power to avoid feeling that anxiety."

"That is why I threw the fucking desk. Being tired of people forcing their will and their lies on to me."

Happy to see her making connections and talking about what happened in nodded encouragingly, "That's fair. I get the justification. I do. But what did it accomplish for you and her and those who witnessed it? What did it accomplish for those who love you?"

Rage hit her first, but then a deep sadness. "That's fucking low. I know I hurt my dad. I've done nothing but avoid thinking about what I've done to him."

He lifted his hands in a defensive posture, "Whoa, no. That is not what I meant. In fact, your dad is okay, I have spoken with him a few times."

She jumped at the bait, "What? You talked to him? What'd he say? What'd you talk about?"

He patted the air between them, "Slow down. At first, he was more than angry and ready to tear through the walls to get you out, like a loyal father would be. But he

was willing to listen. He and I discussed the situation and what might be best for you, and he now agrees that this is the best place for you. I've talked to him a couple of times and agreed to call him once a week while you are here to let him know how things are going and what is going on, but we will not discuss the specifics of any talk you and I have or that I read in your notes. He can also call me anytime he feels necessary. He is working with a couple of other members of our staff as well for his own growth."

She was so excited, "Oh my god, can I see him? Do I have visitation rights or something?"

"Our standard policy is to wait a week for visitation, if not discharge. We prefer to work with the individual here before including the family; however, for those staying with us for a longer time we begin to integrate family into the work further down the road."

"Wait, I could be out of here in a week? Why have so many been here longer than that?"

"Here, we hope that you'll be here as long as you need to be, but we understand the demands of life noting this can't be permanent placement. Those that have been here longer aren't ready yet, even though I believe a couple might be, maybe. Anyway, I was just trying to get you to see that being a part of something bigger than you whether a friendship or family holds a responsibility."

"But what if someone else doesn't hold up their part of the responsibility? Like my teacher?"

"Good. I like that you're applying the responsibility, just make sure you don't only apply it to others. When faced with someone not taking up their responsibility you must consider your own integrity not justifying what you know shouldn't be done. You have to

ask, is going at them and reducing your self-worth for a second of catharsis? In no way am I saying that what happened was okay nor am I saying that certain situations won't call for a variety of measures. But let's look at your situation. Do you think your teacher is reconsidering her life, or did you just validate a bias you didn't create? It's a catch – 22, unless we see the other ways.”

“Other ways?”

“Yes, other ways. You're smarter or more knowledgeable than this teacher, at least on some things, yes? Why aren't we discussing how smart your voice and actions were right now? What else could you've done? Eye roll if you want, I'd like you to answer that question. What else?”

“Man, I don't know.”

“I'm asking you to show your brilliance and be creative, unless you aren't creative and brilliant.”

Bek's eyes narrowed ready to go full in. “Look...”

Dr. Calloway raised his hands again in defensive posture, “Wait, I'm not trying to fire you up. Just challenging your line of thought. Remember, I'd like you not to let your emotions answer for you. My challenge isn't to you as a person, just something you've done or a way you think. Please, answer.”

She tried to compose herself but opening her mouth would result a spill of how she was feeling, “Okay. Look, I don't know what you want me to say; I could've stayed quiet.”

“And let that injustice happen in front of you? I'm not sure quiet is good. Quiet builds pressure.”

“Fucking A, what do you want? You say what I did was wrong, fine. I say do nothing, and then you throw the problem in my face.” Frustrated tears were blurring her vision. “What?”

“Are the extremes all we have? You’re far smarter than that. You came in here talking about Fromm. What else could you have done?”

Fuck my life. Counselor Mega Memory over here using everything against a teenaged client.

He saw her drifting, “Stay in this moment Bek. Don’t recede. What are some other things you could have done?”

Her whole body was tense and the top was threatening to explode off, “Damnit. I could’ve given a speech. I could’ve challenged her to a debate. I could’ve spoken with classmates and started a group to challenge the history we’re being forced to accept. I could’ve gone to the principle or started a social media out cry. I could’ve gone to the newspapers. I could’ve laughed and told her how wrong she was. But I didn’t because I choose to do stupid shit!”

“You don’t need to attack your actions so horribly. If you and I were discussing someone else setting here who had done what you did, you wouldn’t be so harsh to them. Why be worse to yourself than you’d be to a stranger? So, shaming yourself really is never helpful. I’m glad you identified that there were many different things you could have done, not just two. So, now you have to claim responsibility for the choice that you made, to throw a desk. That was yours and it had a price tag that was rather steep. We’re almost out of time, and I don’t want to pressure you further. I appreciate what you’ve shared with me. I’m impressed with how vulnerable you have been and I

hope, after you get over hating this meeting and maybe me, that you realize what you did here, and how much better you are for doing it.”

With a forehead squeezed into a relief map of shock and concern she said, “Wait, that’s it? You just tear me down and then I go?”

He tilted his head and looked at her, “Do you honestly see this as a tearing down? You were, maybe, more successful at sitting in a stressful and challenging situation and not letting your emotions take you to a place that you couldn’t be in control than you have ever been. Eventually, you won’t need me to pause you for you to collect. You will learn to do that.”

“Okay. So that’s it? No homework or anything?” She had to digest this meeting, which might take some time.

“I believe you’re doing great work here on your own. I believe we’re on a good path, but if you need something. How about, this week I want you to be aware of your emotions and feelings and the voice in there with them, your narrator” He pointer his boney finger between her eyes. “Consider what all you are choosing and what your narrator is writing. Think about that narrator, and let’s discuss who that is and what they are about next week. How about that?”

“Um, okay. It’s weird leaving like this. Feels like we are in the middle of something.”

He smiled wide through his beard, “We are, and we will be.”

“Okay... See you in a week.”

“Unless, anything happens that you need to reach out to me before then. That is true for all the staff here. We are here to serve you. Be good Bek.”

“Oh, um, sorry, before I go. I was supposed to tell you about recently coming out. I’m a lesbian. Mel kind of outed me, but I’m glad she did. I mean it’s been a good thing.”

“Oh, okay. Why? I mean, good for you. I’m happy that you are figuring yourself out. Why were you supposed to tell me this, not that it isn’t important? I’m just curious why you worded it that way.”

“I had asked Amy about whether or not I should tell J, who I believe might be attracted to me, that there is no hope, because...”

“Oh, okay, that makes sense. How do you feel about being this vulnerable about yourself?”

“Honestly, like Cinderella, a bit. It fits better and wearing it lets me be more of who I truly am. If that makes sense.”

He smiled wide again. “That makes perfect sense. Sometimes we gain awareness where we’re not looking for sense to be made. All intrusions, from commercials to friends, have the potential to send us somewhere that we can use to enrich or better our lives. If you’re comfortable, I’d like to talk about this in our sessions at some point. How did you feel about what Amy advised you to do concerning the boy, you okay with that?”

“Yeah I’m good with that. She told me it was my choice, and we talked about the pros and cons. Talking to him about it is the best thing to do, especially if I care about him, and I do.”

“That’s good. If it goes wrong or you need to talk about it, please remember you can reach out to me, and I’ll be happy to discuss it with you.”

“I will. Thanks. Good bye.” She waved and smiled.

“Take care Bek.” He smiled and picked up his pen.

She turned to leave feeling a strong sense of uneasiness but also safety, which was an unnerving combination. As she walked away from Peter’s office Bek realized how long her day had been, and she would rather grab her dinner and go to bed. She was drained. She hoped Sara would understand and was worried about Mel, but she really needed to swallow all of the experiences of her day. She was just going to head to the cafeteria and then to bed.

May 26, 2018

Bek woke up feeling hopeful, with energy. She knew she needed to see Sara and Mel, and they probably weren’t up yet. She hoped she would find Mel in a better mood. She wanted to talk to someone about her session. Something was different, as if maybe out of place. She started to wonder who she was, thinking she was feeling similar to noticing someone had moved something or placed something new in one’s room, just different. She decided to walk to the cafeteria to eat breakfast, because what does food not help. She noticed as she was thinking this her body reacted in kind as her stomach started to growl, as if reading her thought. She realized she had skipped dinner last night, leaving the cafeteria after standing in front of it for a few minutes. Skipping the meal added a grumble. Then her mood picked up. Maybe Mel and Sara will be there.

Her breath caught and heart stopped when she saw him, sitting there with a coffee reading and writing something in a notebook. She immediately began wrestling with herself. “Why would I approach him? I shouldn’t. But, there he is, and I want to. After all, isn’t luck about the practice of seeing the opportunities in front of you and

taking them? Go make luck Bek. Am I an ass for interrupting his reading? He's too focused to notice."

Sooner than she thought her legs had walked her up to him, as if they weren't a part of the internal struggle. She heard her voice, "Um hello, remember me from the, uh, other day?" She screamed at herself, "Fuck I sound like J. Is that motherfucker contagious."

He finished scribbling something not really legible and then lifted his head and his scruffy beard spread wide, eyes glistening, like a child. He cackled, loud. "Well if it isn't my fellow collision companion, we keep running into each other." He roared at his own joke then collected himself and continued through the suppression of his laughter, windedly. "Oh, I prefer today's version, if I'm honest. How are you holding up? Anything worse than a bruise? Please, sit sit, and for the sake of all that could be called sacred start with telling me your name. I apologize; the way we met seemed to have pushed, what little, social conventions I might have had" He laughed again. "out of me. My name is Charles. Charles Murphy."

She was a taken a little aback. "Thank you. My name is Bek. Actually, I was hoping I'd see you sometime. This really isn't easy for me to ask, but I was wondering if I could bother you for a minute about some thoughts I'm having about my first individual session. I don't know why. I mean, I don't even know what you do here, but for some reason I feel like talking to you is what I should do all of the sudden. If that makes sense." She was putting pieces together. Charles was Jaime's mentor, which made sense to her oddly.

His smile stayed wide, but a deeper gravity seemed to form around it. “First, I’m honored I struck you as, maybe, valuable. As for what I do here, I suppose I wear a number of hats, but none of them are ever more important than to make sure the people who are staying with us are getting everything they need. Is everything okay? With your session?”

“Completely fine, well for the most part anyway.”

“Okay. Why don’t you tell me what is going on?”

“Well my therapist is Dr. Calloway, and I like him. He didn’t do anything wrong I don’t think, but I have never had a counseling session like that. It was weird. So, I don’t know.”

“Weird, isn’t a helpful word really, as a description. I mean it isn’t as helpful as people think it is. Many people, many people, would describe me as weird. I’m not saying I would argue with a single one of them about calling me weird, but that creates a frame that might not help me understand what you are saying.”

“Oh, um, sorry...”

“Nope, no apologies. None. Together, we’re communing a happening, perhaps sanctifying it, that we will each use to grow from, in some way. We’re working together to make this. Progress will never be made without errors and missteps, certainly, but we can reduce those with clarity. I’m just trying to show you what might be going on between your listener’s ears, to help us both.”

This response pushed her shoulders back. It disarmed her. She had never had someone speak like that to her. “Oh. Okay. Well, what I found weird is that it was nurturing. Like, I never felt like he didn’t care or want to be working with me. In fact, I felt

like he really wanted to talk to me. It was weird to feel that but have him continually challenge me and what I was saying. I didn't know what to do with that. At times it was like he was leading me onto trap doors just to trip the wire and make me fall."

Charles chuckled conspiratorially, maybe a stifling of his room filling cackle. He was smiling like a child who hid something and wanted someone to find it, even if it was just behind his back. "That rascal Peter, apologies Dr. Calloway, always leading people into pitfalls to help them out of. He did help you out of that trap, right?"

Shock was easy to read across her face. "I'm not sure that he helped me out. I mean, he did, but it felt more like he was waiting patiently for me to climb out."

His smile widened, "And we'd both agree that patiently waiting for others is tremendously helpful. I would hope. I will not give a magician's secrets away Bek, but I'd ask you what's the goal of therapy?"

Shocked shifted into unsure curiosity, "Um, to help people better their lives."

"Indeed, that's a great outcome, when and if it happens, but that's not the goal. Let me ask another question, how does therapy arrive at the hopeful outcome?"

Curiosity had given away to confusion, especially with his Cheshire grin, "I mean, I don't know. I guess by making people think about what they do or who they are."

His smile widened further, nearly a hug, "Wonderful. Really wonderful. And what have you been doing since your session?"

She felt embarrassed as the dots began forming meaning, "Fuck me!"

His laugh filled the room instantly and warmly as he tried to speak between roars. "Oh yes... Fuck us indeed... Bek, I believe you are at the cusp of some great things. I

can see it, in your eyes, you are starting to meet the thing behind the curtain. I believe you are becoming the solution you have always been. Oh, that is a beautiful thing to see, like a puppy playing even if it is in a war zone.”

Now real embarrassment set in as she noticed the eyes that had searched for the noise. “Thank you. This place is so crazy. Sorry I don’t mean crazy. That’s rude. I just mean it’s hard to appreciate and adjust to how everyone is so supportive. I’ve never had anyone truly support me like this, besides a teacher once. Well, my dad, but family doesn’t count does it.”

Charles was patient but quick to address. “First, crazy isn’t really offensive, unless you mean to demean or offend, otherwise it’s just a word. Second, and more importantly, why wouldn’t family count? Just because he’s your father doesn’t make him a liar, sure maybe a little biased, but still not wrong. If one person believes in something, isn’t it true, at least to an extent? I know all the gods hope so. Maybe you should listen to him more than those voices tearing you down, including the one in your head. Having a loving supportive father will make you, somewhat, of a rarity here. Most people that stay with us have little to no support at home.”

She took him in, this weathered man who looks, more than a little bit, homeless. She knew that most people in polite society would mock him or make a joke of his tired and worn clothing or windswept and feral hair. They may avoid him for his smell of cigarettes or coffee stained teeth, shun him for his disinterest in taking care of himself. And they would be wrong, so wrong, to do so. She was meeting the genuine article for the first time. He looked inhuman or otherworldly human. She knew she would likely never meet someone else like him. She couldn’t avoid the nagging little thought of this being

heaven still. She ended her thinking and looked at him breaking the short quiet that had set in, "Thank you for listening to me and talking. I appreciate it. I don't want to take too much of your time."

His broad smile still burning like a fireplace. "Any time all the time, as long as I have the time. My time is for you and those staying with us. There is no matter use of my time than speaking with you all. However, I'm late, as always. I don't say that to make you feel guilty about talking to me. It's just to motivate and remind myself to get where I need to go. This was a better use of my time. I assure you. I hope I see you around, and I hope you interrupt me when you see me. We can talk books, if you read. I love them, and always am looking for someone to talk about them with."

She looked as if she had won a prize, "Oh my god, I love books. The library here is heaven, such a great collection."

"You think so? I'd say that I am quite proud of it. You know, you have to have the right sorts of readers to discuss with when building an appropriate library. It isn't easy business, which is why the library arts are so precise, very serious love there. Building a library is not too dissimilar to building a zoo. Books are living worlds, not too different from animals. Some can be a bear to read." He punctuated his last point by tapping the copy of *The Accursed Share* in front of him, laughing at his own voice.

The title looked interesting, and seeing him read it made it required reading for her. "I can see that. Wait, didn't you say you were late for something?"

"Shit, yes. See? I would rather stay and talk with you. Maybe we can schedule a lunch to discuss books?"

Joy washed over her and she did not try to hide it, "I would love that."

“Then we should, but I gotta run now. See you around.”

How odd it was to really want to keep talking to someone she had only talked to twice. She wanted all of his time. It was wrong to be so greedy, but she didn't know how else to be around someone like him. It would be wrong for anyone to attempt to monopolize him, but could not deny that is what she wanted to do. She looked up and saw J walking away from the tray return and compost area.

She stood up and called out to him, waving him over. “J, hey, come sit here.” It looked like she had started him.

He approached her awkwardly, head and shoulders slouched over, his typical posture. “Uhh, hey, Bek. What's up?” She had sat down but he was making no move to join her.

She looked up at him. “Not much. Are you going to sit down or hover over me like a weirdo?”

He sunk his head a little further. “Umm. Sorry, sure. Umm, how are you doing today? Good breakfast?” These are the questions that make him such a puppy.

“You don't need to apologize. I'm good. Breakfast was great, as always. Hey, I wanted to ask you about Charles. What's his story? You seem to know him.”

His face relaxed into comfort. It seemed that his anxiety might be associated to lack of knowing. “Um, yeah, he's like, a good dude. He's really smart and weird.”

She couldn't believe she hadn't thought of talking to J about Charles before now. “No, like how did you come to know him? What does he do here?”

He pushed his hair out of his face. “Oh, well one day he came up to where I was sitting, um, for lunch and said something like um, ‘I always think it is best to sit with

those brave enough to sit by their self.' He, um, started in on some big magical story like, we were already, you know, discussing that before. He's, uh, weird, but I think he's the most, um, like, sincere person here. Ever since that day he's gone out of his way to chat with me."

She could see his connection to Charles made him feel important. "I bet that feels amazing. Having someone like him seeking you out."

J shrugged. "I mean, it is, but I, ah, also think he would do it for, like, everyone. Um, if they were sincere."

"Do you know what he does here?"

He nodded in affirmation. "Oh, he, um, runs the place. He's, like, in charge. I don't know if this place has like a CEO or whatever, but he's the head. He, a, has told me how he hates reporting to the board of directors, or whatever."

Dumbfoundedness washed over her. "What the fuck? What kind of leader eats in the cafeteria and talks to the nothings? The kind that helps."

J looked up and into her eyes. "Um, I think he would, like, be offended at you calling anyone nothings. Why would you say that? We all matter. I mean, the right kind of leader would treat everyone as, like, important, right?"

She rolled her eyes. "I know that. You're so literal. I just mean that we, in the dynamic of the structure here, matter less. We are the low people on the totem pole, you know?"

His eyes were still on hers, which unnerved her. "Um, actually, without us this place wouldn't exist, you know. And besides the low position on the totem pole is the most important. Charles taught me that. He is, like, really into Native things. He even

lived on a reservation. Um, I am not trying to, like, uh, correct you or whatever. Or make you feel, like, dumb. It is just that, it was nice to share something, uh, he taught me. I am sorry if that made you mad. You look angry.” He started to get up.

Her face of curiosity probably looked a little too similar to resting bitch face. “Wait, wait, hold on. Sit back down, please. I don’t like to be corrected or challenged, but that doesn’t mean I don’t need to be. It’s cool. Actually, necessary if I am ever going to grow. That’s something I probably need to work on. You didn’t do anything wrong, actually you did what was right.”

A sheepish smile of pride worked its way across his face. “Thank you.”

“Just the truth homie. That’s weird about Charles. I want to get to know him better, so bad. Also, J I appreciate you. You really are a good person. But I want to discuss something, which is new for me to do. I just want to be clear. Um, I don’t know how you see me, but I want to discuss it now rather than have any issues, because I value you. I just want you to know that I don’t see you in a romantic way. I can’t and won’t, but I think you’re, no you absolutely are, so important to me. This is all new to me, but for the first-time things are making sense for me, and I just want to say something to you. I want to share my truth and be honest with myself. I’m gay. I hope that doesn’t change things between us, but I just needed you to know. You’re the first person I’ve ever just said that to.”

He was quiet long enough it unnerved her and started pouring doubtful thoughts in her head. She wanted to throw her tray up in the air and run. Before she could say anything, he looked at her sincerely, “Um, that’s awesome. That you are starting to see yourself, and, um, be honest. I, really, didn’t think of you like that, really. I mean, I saw

you more like a sister, I guess. I just wanted to help you feel comfortable. I don't, like, think about stuff, um, like that, really."

She did not expect that reaction. She did not really know what to expect. What the what. I'm his puppy? What the fuck is happening. I'm not a fucking puppy. Wait, don't get defensive, no snarky barb. His response was perfect. Don't fuck that up. I don't have to be a shepherd. I can be a sheep. There's a beauty of being strayed and finding a shepherd, someone who is always looking to care for lost ones. Fuck. The tears. The squawk of his chair sliding towards her, on cue, as he reached his arm around her shoulder without a word, just as tears started running over her cheeks, brought her out of her head. She knew she was being loved.

He leaned his head towards her. "Hey, um, I am sorry, if like, I said something that hurt you or something."

She turned her head into him. "No, no, stop. You didn't do anything wrong. Again, you did everything right. Too right for me, I guess. Thank you."

He smiled. "No problem. I, um, think that you're really important too. To me I mean. To other people too, I bet."

She smiled wide. "Thank you, J., I think I'm gonna go read before I hang out with Mel and Sara, later. Hopefully, I'll see you later."

"Yeah. Let me know if you need, um, anything."

J had been a constant bright spot at The Bradbury on the way to the library. He had been some of the best parts of good days, which was saying something, because so many days had been good. She wanted to get to the library to find the book that CEO Charles had. She was still amazed that he was in charge. She was struggling to

identify how someone whose wardrobe is literally completely thrifted end up a CEO? His difference and being selected as the boss evidenced how peculiar The Bradbury was. She starting thinking what she should really ask him for is to draft a reading list for her. She imagined building her own library one day, with his list as a foundation.

The library had two copies, which wasn't surprising to her. She started thinking, with Charles's comments on building a library, that maybe Charles had built this one, and if he was in charge his involvement would almost be a certainty. She could not stop herself from thinking, "What if this library was his reading list? Holy shit! Maybe this is heaven. If so, I am probably saying and thinking way too many cuss words. Maybe this is a fantasy novel, like I opened a book that sucked me into its pages." That is how reading is often, a portal to abduct people. There is plain evidence that if people would read more much of the world would improve, and Bek knew this to be true. There is so much discovery to be made. Everything, every sound, smell, fades away. Just me and words, dancing.

After reading for a while, beginning to understand and appreciate what Charles meant by the complexity of some texts, It was late enough to find Mel and Sara. She went to the cafeteria and it was almost empty, decided to get a coffee. There would be no way for her to acclimate back to the world when coffee prices were so high and she was getting used to the availability. She turned down the hallway of the cafeteria thinking to check outside before trying to find their rooms, still hoping Mel was in better spirits.

She found them outside, walking in the grass under clouds threatening a storm in cool crisp wind. The smell of ozone was strong, promising a good storm with loud walls

rumbling thunder and lightning that would race across the sky. The darkness growing would make the light earn its place. Bek knew pregnant droplets of life would definitely fall soon, and she loved it. She loved thunderstorms, felt more alive watching puddles form than any other time. They turned around in their walk and saw her coming. The three of them laughed instantly and ran towards each other. Storms always help conjure laughter and solace, laughter in the rain, solace when the rain is on the other side of a window pane. The three of them turned away from The Bradbury and continued walking, together.

As they reached each other laughing, Bek asked, "So, are you two trying to get stormed on? Is that the play for today?"

Mel side stepped the question and looked into Bek's eyes as she placed her hands on each of Bek's shoulders and replied, "Hey, lookie lookie. First, I'm sorry or whatever. I was being a nasty shit yesterday, and Sara told me that threw you. My bad. That's on me."

"It's like I always say, sometimes it's hard to deal with Aunt Flow. Bitch always comes to stay with the same tired ass stories and cringy feelings." Sara said through laughs.

Mel faked shock. "Sara, you are such a bitch." They all laughed. "If you were a man I'd crucify you for saying that."

"If I were a man, I wouldn't say it, until have I hit that." More laughter.

Bek broke the laughter, "So, do you two bitches want to hear about what I have been through since I saw you last or what?"

“Oh shit, that’s right, how did you first individual session go? Who’s your therapist?” Mel said.

Bek sensed the Mel wasn’t herself, but continued anyway. “Well my therapist is Dr. Calloway.”

“Oohh, James Earl Therapist huh. I still believe that voice belongs to Mufasa.” Mel said.

Sara tried to look somber, hanging her head remorsefully, and said, “Mufasa for life Bro.” More laughter.

Bek loved the reference. “That’s a great nickname for him, especially with that voice. Like, I felt that connection without knowing I did, because I didn’t think about that until you said it. The session was weird. Like, he would ask me things to set a trap for me to fall in and challenge me. Like he was trying to let me catch myself bullshitting the whole time. But he also wasn’t really threatening.”

Sara, always the protective one, “Bruh, what? I don’t know if I could handle my therapist coming at me like that. I appreciate how awkward my therapist is. She wouldn’t be that direct. I mean she challenges me, but not like that. I think I’d just close all the way down.”

Mel looked at Sara, “But that is the point isn’t it? I’ve been thinking about this. I mean they are always saying everything here is intentional, aren’t they? They take their intake evaluations and put us in places or situations that will get the best out of us.”

Bek absolutely believed it was intentional. “I agree Mel. This place is that intentional, has to be. Hey, speaking of, neither of you have said who your therapist is. Who do you see and how is that going?”

"I don't have one." Replied Mel.

Bek looked at Sara then at Mel, "What? I thought everyone here had to have one?"

Sara replied, "Well, most do, but Mel refused. She said that she wouldn't meet with an individual in a room alone. So, she meets with her advocate in the cafeteria and in group only, outside doctors and nurses."

Bek was amazed to hear this. "Oh. You mean we get to have a voice in our treatment? We can determine things?"

Mel looked up and at Bek. "Well, yes and no. Of course, you get a say. They've listened far more here than I have ever experienced. I didn't even have to make threats or anything. They wanted to work with me."

Bek shook her head, everything about The Bradbury was different, "That's interesting. Once again, this place is something else. I really like the challenge of Dr. Calloway. I appreciated his frank cut through the bullshit and just deal with it attitude, but it surprised me. So, do you want to hear about what else I have experienced? Do you know Charles? he's the guy that I thought was a janitor, that I ran into. He's actually the CEO here or whatever."

Sara looked at Bek, "Oh, Dr. Murphy? I haven't met him but I heard him mentioned."

"I guess so. I didn't know his last name to be honest Sara. He was just different. He dresses like a homeless person, all thrift all the time. I think he has an aura of cigarettes and coffee dust. He's small, but his voice is so loud and big. His laugh shakes the room, honestly. He seems other worldly. Very different. He says wild things. Like, I

messed up and said I was fucked. And he laughed so loud and said, 'Yes, we are fucked'. He also laughed like crazy when I asked if he was the janitor. Said, that would be an honor." Bek replied.

"Seriously, Charles sounds weird as fuck though." Said Mel skeptically.

"I don't know. I think he sounds like an alien, or just really different, which gives me a little hope. I mean, if he can make it, we all have hope." Sara said.

Bek nodding, appreciated Sara supporting her excitement, "Exactly. Maybe people have to be different to 'get it'. I'm probably not doing him justice how I saying all of this. It's just amazing to be around him."

Mel was getting bored and rolled her eyes, "I mean whatever, I just think he might be trying to be weird or something. I don't think people can truly be that out there, especially and be the head of a facility."

Bek wanted to confront Mel but not harshly, she did not understand her animosity, "But this isn't just some facility, right. We've all mentioned how different this place is. Maybe it takes the weird to get here, and that is the point. Maybe there are few places like this because too few people are given the possibility of creating a place like this. Wasn't it a bit of luck that started this place? I remember something I read once, that my dad told me to read, but I can't remember the author. I know it was a black woman. She said something to the effect that it is impossible to take out the master with his tools or something like that. Maybe that is what this place is, an effort to build something that was prevented previously, and to do so requires a different set of tools, maybe a Charles set."

Sara was beaming and Mel seemed to soften a little, "Maybe. I mean, I hope so. That'd be better wouldn't it? I'm just a realist and don't think things will change. I don't get my hopes up. Life is misery."

The floor might fall away, "I completely see where that comes from, not like you but from my own way. Let me just say, in honesty, I'm changing. I can see it already, and with that so is how I see things. I believe this started in group, with you two, Amy, and J. I'm not as bothered by things. For instance, I don't feel as heavy or weighed down. I don't wake up as mad. For the first time in my life I'm waking up thinking about what interesting things I'm going to do today, weird."

Sara looked at Bek, "How did we, me and Mel, start something for you the first day in group?"

Before Bek could answer Sara Mel added more questions, "Want more of what? And what do you mean less weighed down?"

Bek looked at both of them, "The truth is I'm still figuring it out, the whys and definitions. I just know how I feel. Sara, you and Mel gave me something I've never had. I've never had real friends, especially ones that sought me out. That might be something normal for you, but I've never had that. I've never been included, and the four of you showed me what that meant, and somehow, I knew you two were that instantly. That's why I feel lighter. Maybe, I just don't feel like I am alone having to deal with so much shit on my own. You gave me a great deal of that."

Sara and Mel both decided to tackle Bek independently but in unison. Sara looked at her, "Bek, that breaks my heart. How could someone not love you. We

thought you were great instantly, before we heard you speak. Something about you. Maybe that is why people pushed you away. You're going to be great."

Mel deadpan as ever said as she pulled her arm from under Sara, "Great might be a stretch. Sara has a flair for emotions, if you haven't noticed."

Bek looked horrified and replied, "Fuck you. At least I'm not a robot going around 'Love does not compute. Love does not compute.'"

Mel narrowed her eyes, "Eat shit. Or would that hurt your feelings too much."

Bek laid there with her back against the grass looking up into the clouds and thought it was perfect at The Bradbury, right there in that moment."

A raindrop hit Sara's forehead. "Okay, well, the three of us better get inside before the rain unleashes. Plus, it will time to eat soon. A latte sounds good, too."

Mel smiled, nodded, hair all over and out of place and said, "Yes. I could go for that."

After dinner and more talking Bek went to bed blanketed in happiness. It was amazing to be truly understood. It was more important to be heavenly than to be heaven, and this place was heavenly for her. She began thinking about the similarities between her and Neo in the Matrix as she reached her door. She realized she wanted to know how much deeper this place goes. How much deeper she could go. Then fear raised an anxiety-eliciting question, "What if you can't maintain this out in the real world? Can you afford to lose what you're seeing and doing? That pain could be completely choking. There aren't take backs of this type of decision. Knowledge is rather permanent." She, all of the sudden, was on a ledge, in the clouds, dancing, carefree but knowing full well what the pavement feels like. How hard it would rush

towards her if she fell. She thought, “Maybe, some are born on this limb, and never know the dangers that lurk beneath, over the edge, and others never look up to what could be. I’ve been thrown into what was up, what is possible.” She noted that it was scary, but she loved it. She hated how insecure she was and didn’t like feeling insecure about it.

May 27, 2018

Bek decided to start her morning with a mission to find Charles. She had an epiphany and wanted to learn what he might think about it. But finding him was proving to be difficult. It was odd struggling to find someone that saturated her world, “Fuck, finding Charles is like chasing a ghost, just barely in the periphery, enough to notice but too late to catch.” She had not expected him to be on campus on a Sunday, but the lady in cafeteria had told her he was there. Before she knew it she had spent the morning looking and was moving into lunchtime. She began to consider giving up, as Mel and Sara were probably up and looking for her, and he might have left already.

Just as she was giving up, she saw him reading and having a coffee. She ran to him, losing a little of her breath on the way, “Oh my god. Sorry. I can’t believe. I found you. I’ve been looking all over for you. I woke up really wanting to talk to you about some things that I believe I might be figuring out. Maybe I am just being weird or something. Sorry.” She knew she was speaking far too fast, but he was letting her have her moment. However, he was moving so slow.

He looked up and smiled wide. “My goodness, today’s going to be a good day. I love being met with this much drive, determination, and energy. But, I am old as shit and it’s Sunday, respite day. So, I’m going to need you to slow your burning a little for

me. Fear not though, we will manage. You're getting my brain going faster than the coffee has today. Let's begin. Hey Bek, how are you doing this beautiful day?"

She was amazed by his warm and gentle boundaries. His ability to accept was miraculous. His ability to always smile was other worldly.

"I am sorry, but I..." He looked up, raised an eyebrow and lifted his hands. Bek knew exactly what she had done. She apologized.

He smiled still and warmly said, "You know I won't allow that. Stop. No. Begin again without apologizing for existing as you are, with all that comes with you. You're not unwanted nor a problem. You are accepted. Be. Now, Hey Bek, how are you on this most glorious day?"

It took every bit of mindfulness she could muster to avoid apologizing again. She knew he was right. It is the most destructive thing that society requires so many to apologize for merely existing, as if the world was not big enough. The world is plenty big for everyone, though certain exclusory narratives would not agree.

She collected herself, "Well, hey Charles. I'm doing pretty good. I'm glad I bumped into you because I've been wanting to talk to you about some stuff I've been thinking about. How are you? Do you have some time to talk?"

He laughed. "Absolutely, wonderful. That's how to do it, a little formal for the likes of us, but in the weird world that will help you get along quite famously. I like that you can turn that on. I'm good, too damn old to be anything else. I always have time; typically, it's the people who are waiting on me that seem bothered. However, serendipitously, today I really don't have any meetings. At least I don't remember having any. So, we have time. My fee is that we talk books a little too. Agreed?"

She sat across from him as he moved his empty plate and mug to the side of the table, "Agreed. You're too energetic to be old. Question, did you say weird world or real world?"

He beamed, "You know how it seems batteries work until they die. They don't seem to have a lesser time. They're on or off. I'm a battery, until I'm just a husk of inanimate mass. And I'd like to think that I'll have earned that rest. Good hearing, I said weird world. Isn't weird? Freud said something similar to, man-built civilization to hide from his nature, something like that. Think about what it means to be civilized. It isn't natural. Most of the things we do in the name of civilization are really in conflict to the process of life and living, yet it is called progress." He was animated, moving his hands and shaking his head. Bek could tell he was in the mood to pontificate. "So many sources, from the *Bible* to *Silent Spring* to *Walden*, from great thoughtful minds, advise us to live within the biosphere, yet we continue to erect strip malls across the street from empty strip malls. Progress." He razzberried his lips and continued. "Civilization found ways to reduce the human and its spirit to something that spends the majority of its wakened life earning endless money for some greedy person in order to purchase shiny unnecessary trinkets on sale and out of season in order to fit in and feel like a good little consumer like Carlin and Fromm pointed out. Calling it merely weird is being playful."

Her brain was more than likely mimicking her mouth which had to be gaped open. This is what she knew would happen. He was who she needed to meet.

He was smiling, maybe a little too thoroughly. "Anyway, you were looking for me. I need a wonderful discussion. I hope I wasn't hijacking your thoughts or what you wanted to discuss. I only meant to provide clarification as to why I refer to 'out there' as

the weird world. I do want to know what you wanted to discuss, and we need to include books.”

She was dumbfounded at the completeness of him. “Um, no. Actually, what you’re saying resonates quite well with what I’m going through, although I’m struggling to remember exactly what I was wanting to discuss. I recognized Fromm in what you were saying. I don’t know Carlin though.”

“Ahhh shit. Of course, you would be in the know. Carlin is a comedian that everyone should know. You have time. Yes. You are a bright one. I knew you were. Your eyes are too focused and burning to not be truly bright. How do you think what I said connected to what you’ve been thinking?”

“Well, I’m still putting the pieces into places to make the picture, but I’m starting to see something emerge. So, maybe indulge me a little as it will be clunky. I think.”

“Bek, you don’t need to preface your work with pre-apology. We’re in this together. No judgement of an individual, just considerations of what individuals say and do. Jump in.”

Bek realized she had focused more on finding him than what she was going to say particularly, putting the cart in front of the horse so to speak. Nerves started plaguing her. She was rubbing her hands together mindlessly, but she knew she needed to jump. “Okay, well, let me start at where I was and then, okay... Lately, I realize that I have felt lighter, not like weight wise, but my soul or spirit, whatever. I don’t feel the pressure that has been with me since as long as I can remember. My shoulders are easier to get out of the bed in the morning, which is terrifying, and I have been waking up with energy, also terrifying. I believe this comes from finally meeting people

to share my life with. Out there all I have is my dad, who I don't want to burden. I feel like I don't have to defeat everything on my own here. I've noticed that in sharing my struggles they seem less significant, less arresting."

His smile was the widest she had seen. He raised his hand to interrupt. "If I may. Yes. So wonderfully yes. Absolutely. I want you to understand that you are doing work that many, much too many, adults can't or won't do. You're being self-aware. You're looking into what you do, but then going a little further into why you do it, seeing the concerted interaction of performer and audience. You see the two are fused in a, truly, communal effort, a dance. They sanctify each other. In doing or being we sanctify a rhetoric or philosophy. I think I see where you are going to connect the dots between us, but I want to see where you are going. Just know, where you are right now, this is a place, so few people find, mostly because they don't want to seek, too much effort. They're happy selling out and settling, forgoing real meaning."

She nodded with pride. "Yes. That willingness to sell out seems to keep the status quo, which is something that scares the shit out of me. I feel like Neo in the pill scene in the movie *The Matrix*. I see things now. I'm aware. I don't necessarily know more but am connecting more. I've been rushing down the rabbit hole without thinking of the reality of what surrounds me. But I feel like I'm not safe anymore or won't be. Maybe, I will be in more danger than ever before because I know, like really know, what's at stake. I'm scared that outside of this environment I'll lose this person I want to be. This person that fits to truth. I'm afraid that I will succumb to the pressures of conformity, especially, because now I know that I can't do this alone. I'm scared of

losing the people I've come to count on. I'm scared of losing who I have started to become. I don't think I could survive that pain."

He nodded. "Very good. I remember my, existential crises."

"What, bullshit. You?" She frowned.

He was not smiling or laughing. Bek noticed that he had dropped into something else, something deeper. "Of course, I've been there. I am a person after all, at least somewhat so. That's one of the things most important to learn. More is similar in the human experience than is different. Certainly, the degrees of similarity and consequences are different, but the experience of insecurity is rather universal, and that is what gives me hope about the weird world. If we can change in here, why can't they change out there? We just need the correct social pressures and situations. I remember feeling that insecurity most as I was preparing to graduate and leave graduate school. I was safe in academia. It wasn't that I was afraid of battles, hell surviving battles was kind of my thing and I have the scars to verify the stories. I've always been out of place. Growing up functionally, but just barely functionally, poor the kids had it out for me from the start. Richer or poorer, it didn't matter. They never hesitated to let me know I wasn't one of them. Teachers joined in, always pitting me against the lazy majority in debates. They despised my existence, together, for some reason."

Bek knew how those deep wounds festered. "I know what that's like."

"I'm not surprised. I was litter in their clean roadways. I'll never understand the callousness this country has for the poor, disenfranchised, and marginalized. Ignoring them doesn't remove them, no matter how many gates are erecting around a community. They will remain just down the street." She could see his pain as if his scars

were opening and playing video. "I'll be honest with you and tell you that loneliness almost claimed me several times. At some point we can't help but agree that maybe we are the problem, and everything would be better without us. I've stood on that corner too often that pure chance could have slipped me into traffic, but wonderfully there were these different angels around saving souls like coupons to use or be used later." He smiled through the darkness that surrounded him. "Sister Mary Agnes was my angel. I went to a small Catholic school and Sister Mary Agnes was our librarian. I hid in the library to avoid my tormentors. She was warm and always challenged me to grow and not accept their definitions of me. She was the teacher I needed who was never on my class schedule. She gave me a legacy that I had to carry forward, made me promise to war the correct fight. She was the first person to cuss for me. I can still hear her saying, 'Enough Charles, you have fists too. Just make sure to knock the fucker out.' I'm sure she said some *Hail Mary's* that night." He laughed, bittersweet.

Bek noticed his eyes were glistening. "Was it always that hard? Do you mean I'm going to suffer and suffer?"

He smiled assuredly. "Graduate school was the first time in my life where I felt less like the outsider and more like the popular people. I was free, or freer. I remember the relief that grew inside me. I didn't want to leave. I had this wonderful mentor who I was amazed by. He held the command of a room with his intelligence and force that came from knowing, a real confidence. He and I were nearly opposite in every way, but we had a respect for each other. Certainly, we fought too. Differences always need to be worked out, but I knew I was valued in his mind and heart as he was in mine."

Bek's brow was furrowed. She was staring at him.

“Bek, it’s going to hurt, and that is the best pain you can ever feel. The pain verifies what you experienced was real. I have lost so many people and situations that meant everything to me, and they still do. You can’t make me relive or remember what I won’t let go of. These stories are me. Distance injected between you and something doesn’t remove it. It will be with you always. Sister Mary Agnes is still with me, she always will be even though she died before I was in graduate school, and now she’s in you. These important things leave an imprint on us not too different than the imprint we leave in shoes, clothes, and mattresses. Pain comes with real experience, but the experience heals you the rest of your life, which I would say is a good trade off. As for the insecurity you feel about being able to maintain in the weird world, it really depends on how serious you take the legacy. I have been continuing this legacy for Sister Mary Agnes and my mentor, and I am asking you to continue you it with me.”

“Of course. I want exactly that. I want to help.”

They both fell silent. The silence was pregnant with depth and meaning. Bek knew something real had happened right there over the table and empty dishes the way stories do. Even this quiet had meaning, where two kindred souls were digesting the reality of life. Then, just as stories occurring in shared spaces the silence was stabbed by an angry voice.

“Charles! There you are. The Board has been waiting for you upstairs for a fucking half hour. When you call a weekend meeting you shouldn’t be late! Move your ass.” Who in the hell is this pissed of Indian Lady? As the lady turned to her. “Oh sweetie, I’m sorry for my language. You have no idea what it’s like to try and corral him.

He will be my death.” Narrowing her eyes on him. “Charles come on! Up. Move. Please!”

Charles smiled sheepishly and looked at Bek. “I guess my schedule was less open than my memory. She gets payed the big bucks to yell at me.” He winked mischievously. “By the way Bek this is Pam. Pam this is Bek.” Charles started down the hall.

Pam looked from him to Bek. “Oh, he laughs. It’s fun to make a mockery of other people’s time is it. Which, isn’t your fault in any way Bek. This is his. Nice to meet you.”

Bek tossed a likewise to her as she had turned to follow Charles and continue her tirade against him. Bek saw that she was right to see that many people wanted his attention. She decided she really did not want to be around others and wanted to continue to think about her exchange with Charles. She grabbed food quickly and headed to the library to grab a few books and then go to her room. She hoped she would not run into any of her people, because she did not want to try and explain. She just wanted to spend time with her thoughts.

Charles was lucky to have Pam and did not envy her job. It seemed that for anyone to attempt to reign in Charles would be asking a great deal of them. Reigning him in would be a violation against nature. She did not understand what it meant that his story could be so shocking yet, at the same time, make perfect sense. Charles and her had a great number of similarities. After considering the surface points of their discussion she decided to think about the deeper issues.

Week 3

In the Weird World “Madness” is the Only Hope.

“Thou should’st go mad, blacksmith; say, why dost thou not go mad? How can’st thou endure without being mad? Do the heavens yet hate thee, that thou can’st not go mad?” – Captain Ahab, *Moby Dick*

May 28, 2018

Spending half a day thinking about what Charles had said filled Bek with hope, but as hopeful as she felt, she could not shake her hangover of doom. She was struggling to consider how anything was worth anything. Living on the surface of life was hollow and going deeper was often an act of isolation as best as she could see it. Plus, with so few people choosing to think and feel deeper the likelihood of life being fixed or even better was next to never going to happen. She wanted to talk to someone, maybe she needed to. Big questions and ideas need collaborative minds, once isolated minds have uncovered important findings. She feared she might just be weak. A sign would be nice as she left her room for breakfast. After the short walk. "Wait, is that Amy? That's Amy sitting and drinking coffee. Empty plate in front of her. She's reading something on a pad of paper. I don't think I have seen her here in the morning before. Sign?"

Signs are typically what people make and Bek made hers, walking up to the table Amy was sitting at. "Good Morning Amy. How are you today?"

Amy looked up and smiled a warm greeting. "Hey Bek. I'm good. How are you? Want to sit down and talk?"

Bek didn't hesitate at the offer but played the polite role. "I don't want to interrupt or anything."

She gave Bek a mock look of displeasure. "Please, stop. I wouldn't have offered if I didn't want you to sit. Plus, I could use a break. I've been down here working for about an hour and a half."

Bek was visibly shocked. “Damn, you’re up and at it early. Doing something big or?”

Amy moved her head side to side as if weighing whether to divulge or whether what she was doing was big. “I’m working on something kind of big, a presentation I have to give at a conference for group therapy. But I’m nearing the end, so a distraction would be good.”

Bek smiled and decided to move the conversation to what she wanted to talk about. “Oh, okay. I was thinking that I never see you here this early.”

“So, you’re the hall monitor?” Bek loved the way she bantered, deadpan but smooth, not like Mel. “Just playing. Usually, my mornings are a very personal time. I get up. Do yoga and meditate. Then I make breakfast and drink coffee while I read. Today, I decided to come here early and let someone else take the burden of some of my tasks so I could focus on this. It’s so great having that benefit.”

“Well don’t you have your shit together Ms. Wake Up Into a Routine.”

“Ha, trying to. I work better in a regiment. I’m more productive. My mom would say I’m way behind being thirty, unmarried, and without children. But my focus is elsewhere.”

“Marriage and kids aren’t everything. That’s one great thing about being the kid of a single male parent. That pressure of offspring and relationships aren’t ever there. I’m always weirded out at mothers that are caught up in the love lives of their children. My dad never wants to consider that. Maybe that’s why it was so easy for me to avoid and not think of.”

Amy narrowed her eyes into a squint. "You know, you're really insightful for your age. I said that before, but every time I talk with you, you surprise me. I mean you draw conclusions in a way that few do, even fewer in people your age range. I hope you see that."

Bek shrugged from embarrassment. "I don't know. I feel like I need a great amount of feedback to see so much."

Amy shook her head to challenge Bek's shrug. "But aren't you seeking out the feedback. Just because something comes from another person doesn't mean that you didn't make it happen. You put yourself in that position. You were receptive to the insight and did something with it."

Bek smirked. She had not considered that. "I mean, I guess... That's one way to see it I suppose."

"Yes, the correct and accurate way to see it. You need to give yourself credit."

Bek saw her opening. "Can I ask you something?"

"Always. What's up?"

"Last night and this morning something has been nagging at me. Why does any of it matter. Like, getting better or seeing problems, what's the point? The world is going to be shit no matter, right?"

"Oh. You suck. Taking me to existentialism sans coffee shop crepes, beautiful lean people, and the romance that radiates from the Eiffel Tower." Amy loved her own joke. She could see that Bek understood that she was commenting on existentialism spawning in French thought, even if Bek failed to enjoy it as much as her. "See, that is what I'm saying, you understood, that's impressive. I wouldn't have got that at your age."

I was way into parties and stupidity. You're something else. To answer your question, why do I help people?"

Bek put her hands up apologetically upset with herself for failing to see the possible offense her question held for someone like Amy, who made her living in helping. "No, I didn't mean you. I meant..."

Amy waved off Bek's fear of hurting her. "Stop, there's nothing wrong with your question and it's not offensive. I'm choosing to answer fully. I remember asking my mentor a similar question. His answer was, 'Do we do things to fix the world or to add to the narrative that we believe will fix the world?' Charles is smarter than all of us. Maybe you are on that level. I'm not."

Bek rolled her eyes but blushed at the comparison of her and Charles.

"Bek, if we're aiming to fix the world then we'll die before seeing the fruits of our labor. But if we're adding to the success of bettering on a small level that grows like a forest that we can see."

"Wow, okay. There's so much. First, I have to get this out of the way. Charles was your mentor?? Like Charles, from here Charles?"

Amy smiled see the fangirl gushing. She remembered how she had reacted to him in the beginning. "Yes. Charles, from here, is my mentor. I see that you've crossed paths with that mangey wild one. Has he told you about being the coyote?"

"Um, no. What?"

"You need ask him about it. Some of my favorite stories of him are anchored in his otherness and complete joy and celebration of that otherness. I love him. He is sacred. The world needs to see more of him to realize its potential."

Shaking her head in disbelief Bek replied, "I agree with that. I'll ask him about being the coyote. I think I see what you're saying. We need to find narratives worth replicating and then live in a way where we extend those thoughts forward, into the future, and deeper within ourselves?"

"Yes, that's the gist of it, but remember these narratives come nearly as much as they are found. Be sure to remain open to the rain falling and lightning striking. The information is all around us, even crawling over our toes, because all things matter and are connected. The more pieces we set in place the more we see and understand."

Bek tilted her head to the side. This is what she needed to hear. "I like that. I've always loved puzzles."

"I would expect nothing less from the likes of you. Unfortunately, though, I need to get back to making the doughnuts. They never make themselves."

"Okay. Um, what?"

"Sorry. Old commercial about getting to work. It's dumb, but just something I can't ever avoid thinking when I need to get to work. 'Time to make the doughnuts.'"

Bek and Amy parted ways, and Bek knew that seeing her and having that little chat was exactly what she needed. The impact someone makes is important on a macro and micro level. Focusing on either side would cause anxiety. She was about to head to the library when she looked up and saw two very unhappy souls approaching a table thinking, "Wait. Look at those two bumbling through the breakfast line early."

She walked up to where they were about to sit far too energetically. "Hey!"

Mel looked dreadful but was the only one ready to form words. "Of course, you'd be up this early. With energy. You're so fucking weird with your FOMO bullshit." Mel pushed Sara into a chair.

Bek looked from Sara to Mel. "Ooh, someone woke up peachy with her zombie pet. What's going on with you two, why are you up dragging around still sleeping beauty?"

Mel looked at Bek through squeezed eyelids, "I couldn't sleep, and it was her fault. So, she doesn't get to sleep now." Mel, more than moderately, nudged Sara awake.

"Fucking stop, bitch." Sara whined without opening her eyes.

Bek looked at Sara and put a hand on her head and said, "Aahh poor baby. Mel why are you being so mean. Let her sleep."

Mel looked at her incredulously. "What! I didn't sleep at all because she was in my room late and then knocking on the wall all night. Like, seriously all fucking night."

"Wait, your two rooms are next to each other? I never even thought about where your rooms were really. I don't even know who are in the rooms near me."

"Maybe it is because you are self-absorbed with your head up you own ass?" Mel replied.

Bek's eyes widened and her face screamed emotion. What. The. Fuck.

Mel looked bad. "I'm so fucking sorry. I'm being a complete shit. I'm so tired. I'm sorry. Sorry. Fuck, I'm lashing out. I haven't been sleeping well and last night. Shit. I'm sorry." Mel stood up and she started to cry. Mel was not the crying sort.

“Hey. Hey. Come back. Don’t walk away. Sara’s here. Mel don’t apologize. Hold up. Come here. Come here. It’s okay. I have you. I’ve suffered worse. No worries.” She noticed how frail Mel felt, like a bird, hollow bones.

“No! It’s not okay. Nothing’s fucking okay Bek. Nothing.” Mel seemed desperate.

Bek had no idea what to do, but she was not going to back away. “Hey, what’s going on? What can I do?”

Mel continued in her despair. “Nothing. I don’t think anyone can. I don’t know if I can or want to do this shit anymore. It’s not worth it, or I’m not sure that it is. I feel done. I love you and Sara, that’s all I have, nothing else.”

She did not want to walk away or disengage. She was wishing, maybe praying, for someone to overhear and help. “Mel. Mel, you do have us though, don’t you? That is a start, right? I bet you have more than that too. What about Amy?”

“No, just you two. I have nothing. I’m nothing. There isn’t anything like a home to return to for me. You’ll leave. Sara’ll leave. I’ll be lost. You both are getting better, but dumb fucking me will still be here, fucking alone. I don’t fucking exist. Don’t you get it?”

Bek started to cry at Mel’s pain. “You exist to me. You’re in my story, and without you and Sara I don’t think I would be where I am. And I mean that. You say I’m doing so well, but I have been alone until you and Sara. Of course, J too. I agree that my dad is a good dad, but he’s gone a lot. So, this is the first time I’ve connected with others.”

Mel looked at her through tears. “Okay, but that is my point. My dad isn’t good.”

She didn’t have much else to offer Mel but kept Mel’s elbows in her hands. “Mel, I don’t know what to do for you. You are up against some things that would overwhelm me it seems. I’m amazed at your strength. I don’t know what to say. I just want you to

know that I love you and you anchor me. I don't mean to flaunt my growth or whatever. I don't want to hurt you."

"No, no, it isn't that. I want you to be better. I want you to be happy. You deserve it. I love you too. I just want that also, and I don't see a future of that for me. I don't see the possibility without pulling down great people from what they could be. I don't want to be a drain. I must have something in place to help me get that, right? Something, not much, but I need something that isn't targeting me."

"I don't know the right things to say, but you are not alone in this. I will not leave you hanging. You are not a drain to me. Mel, I think you need to talk to someone about these things, and they have great people here. People you can trust. I know you are in the right place. Would you do that? I know you don't think it'll help, but fuck it. We're already here anyway. Please, will you agree to talk to someone about this, about what you are feeling. I'll go with you."

Sara finally woke up enough to realize she was alone at the table and saw Mel and Bek. She rushed over to them. "What? Did I miss something? Did I fall asleep? What the fuck's going on?"

Sara's eyes looked wild, feral, with food in her hair. She must have dropped her head in her plate. Mel laughed slightly at how ridiculous Sara looked. Sara was the person that knew how to diffuse bombs, but she did it with unawareness of a bomb or danger. Bek looked at her and said, "Sara, sweetie why don't you go get cleaned up. Mel as agreed to talk to someone, and I am going to walk her to find out how to do that."

Sara looked at Bek confused. "What? How long have we been here? Fuck you. If you two are going, I am coming." Bek instantly saw Sara's strength. Everyone needs a Sara.

Bek looked at her and said, "Okay, but can you at least get the eggs and gravy out of your hair?"

Sara lifted her hand to the side of her head and found the cooling warmth of slimy gravy. "What? Fuck, ewwww."

Bek and Mel joined the ewwww spontaneously. "Ewww." In chorus, like a holy church choir. That ewwww was evidence of their connection and hopefully would be the ewwww that saved them. Bek was glad Mel was still capable. She started thinking that she would not mind being in a room alone with her dad while she was holding a baseball bat. She did not know what he did, but she knew what he deserved. She could tell.

Bek looked up and saw Amy was still in the cafeteria. Perfect. Her and Sara help walk Mel over to her.

"Amy. Amy. Please help." Bek said.

Amy looked up and started moving towards Mel. She was ready. Amy had concern spread all over her face, which made Bek think Mel was worse than she thought. Amy looked at the three of them and said, "Hey ladies, what's going on? What happened?"

Without hesitation Bek answered Amy. "We were just talking about them being awake early and Mel kind of went off. She was saying stuff about it not being worth it, and everything. She is really upset."

Mel's eyes went wide. "Bek!"

Bek knew she betrayed her friend but had to. Amy, arm around Mel's shoulders said, "Mel, I'm so sorry. Don't be mad at Bek for looking out for you. It was the right thing to do. I'd be really happy if you would come with me and talk for a bit. Will you agree to come with me? Please, sweetie." She willed Mel's hand into Amy's.

Mel's suffering stained the day. Group had a cloud over it. Everything was hollow or just happening around Bek. She was keenly aware how grounded people are by forces outside of their control. Life is not a science experiment with controlled variables. And maybe it should not be. It is messy. Coping is necessary. Bek was wishing she could have been better at coping. She knew she would have to be there for Sara, especially with no information being made available. Amy told them that she could tell them anything about what was going on other than Mel was in the best place for this to happen.

May 29, 2018

Bek woke up feeling guilty, knowing that day would, most likely, not be a good day. She questioned whether she should have taken Mel to Amy, not that she did not trust Amy, but that perhaps Mel did not need the standard reaction and follow-up treatment.

"Hey Bek."

She looked up startled. "Oh, hey Sara. Morning. You're up early."

"Yeah, wasn't gonna sleep too good. I heard last night Mel failed her suicide assessment. She'll be in the acute treatment area for a while."

Bek was shocked. "What? Why would they take her away from us? That's fucking bullshit."

Sara put up her hands and shook her head. "No. Bek, she is in a bad place. She needs that. People there get better treatment, more interactions and observations. It's kind of a reset."

Bek lowered her head. "But we won't be able to see her?"

Sara nodded and put her hand on Bek's arm. "Not for a while. It's protocol. They just want to get her right. Make sure they can control as much as they can. Also, want to prevent her from feeling embarrassed in any way."

"Shit. Maybe we shouldn't have done that. Maybe we should have..."

Sara's resolve was adamant. She cut Bek off. "What don't you get? We did, mostly you did, the right thing. She needs to be there. We weren't enough to help her. We couldn't have been."

"You're right. We did. It's just going to be weird or hard without her around."

"I know. It was last time."

"Wait, this has happened before?"

"Yeah, once before. At least once here. She's never fully talked about everything, but she's probably had a harder life than you could possibly imagine. But she's still here. Still working. She's crazy tough."

Bek held her gaze down. "Too bad she has to be so tough. No one should have to be that tough."

Sara rubbed Bek's arm. "Agreed."

Bek looked up at her. "You know, though, you're pretty tough yourself."

Sara frowned in surprise. "What?"

"I don't think you give yourself enough credit, but you're really tough. To love and accept as you do. That's not easy."

"It's easier when you think if you don't accept people they will take their love away." She shrugged.

The laws of gravity shifted because Sara's comment dropped the bottom out of her stomach. She said, "Shit. I don't know what to say to that Sara."

"I think you understand more than you think. You're kind of like the both of us. You have a tough exterior hiding your real love. It's not as thick as Mel's but better protected than mine. There are reasons for that."

Bek was shocked, realizing she had not seen Sara's strength. "Fuck! You woke up ready. I think you're right. I mean I've never really thought about it, but, shit, you're right."

"I can't take credit for it. My therapist said that. But it made sense once I heard her say it."

"You talk about me in therapy Sara?"

"Well, yeah. Don't you talk about us? Besides, most of my work is on relationship boundary building. She was pointing out that most things exist on a continuum or spectrum. So, if open and guarded are two ends of the spectrum you would be closer to middle."

Bek couldn't resist the opportunity. "So, you and your therapist are calling me mid behind my back?"

Sara laughed her giggle. “Ha, that’s funny. Being mid might not be so bad though, which is the point. There are goods and bads for every point along the way. So, it’s okay to be where you are, but if you aren’t happy, you can see where to go. Her approach is very practical, and it makes sense.”

“That makes perfect sense. I can see why you connect with her. So, what are your plans going to be now?”

“Well, first I’m fine on my own. I hope you know that. It’s not like I am dependent on others or anything. But, I thought I would just hang out with you. Even if we’re just quiet.”

Sara might be the most pleasant person she would ever meet. She smiled. “I’d love that Sara. You’re always great to be around.”

“Good.”

They didn’t notice someone coming up behind them. “Hey, um, Bek and a Sara.”

They both turned and said, “Hey J. What’s up?”

He looked at both of them. “Um, nothing. I just, like, wanted to say something yesterday, but, you know, didn’t know what, exactly, to, a, say. But I’m real sorry about Mel. That had to be, uh, hard.”

Sara smiled so sincerely at him. “Thank you, J., That means a lot. Bek and I were just talking about how hard it will be with her gone.”

He continued avoiding eye contact, as normal. “I bet. I don’t want to be in the way, or, a, anything. I just wanted to, a, say sorry. See you around.”

Bek looked at Sara and then J. “Thank you, J. That’s really sweet. I’m not trying to speak for Sara, but I hope you know you are never in the way.”

Sara nodded and agreed. "Absolutely not."

"Alright, cool. See ya."

When he was out of ear shot Bek looked at Sara and said, "He's so awkward but he's also so sweet. Don't know why some hetero lady doesn't snatch him up."

"He needs confidence. It wouldn't be easy to date someone who's speaking in a, a, like, like, um, um. Think about what making out with him would be like. Do you like that or are you trying to saying something?" Sara was proud of that joke.

"Why would you say that? That's horrible."

"Sorry, but not wrong though. I mean I think he's great, just putting myself in the position of dating him. It'd be hard, but he is kinda hot."

"Oh, kinda hot huh?"

"Like I said, the confidence would be hard to get past."

"I think people have a fucked-up view of confidence. Think about how hard it was for him to come up to us to say that. Twice as hard as some arrogant privileged 'alpha'."

Sara looked sincerely at Bek. "I'm sorry. I know he's your dude. I shouldn't have made that joke. And you're probably right. He's probably stronger than people, than I, give him credit for. I just needed a laugh."

"I see that. I want a distraction too, a good distraction. I don't want someone else to pay for it though."

Sara nodded. "I like that."

"Pretty proud of that thought too. It was off the dome."

"I see that. I was right here the whole time Bek. You really are a different type of person."

“Hey, you are too. Didn’t you just call me on my shit about Mel?”

“I suppose.” Sara smiled.

Some days only need to check the boxes, so to speak. It is important that the day not fall into the abyss that was built under it, and this day accomplished just that. Her bond with Sara grew. She learned that she had probably not been giving Sara all that she deserved. Sometimes a person’s ability is best seen in the absence of others. Nothing really happened that day, but, maybe, everything happened in nothingness. It was important to have days like they had, the type of days that built resiliency.

May 30, 2018

Bek was awake sitting at a table in the cafeteria area taking it all in. The cafeteria was empty. She was up earlier than normal. In front of her was an empty plate pushed to the other side of the table, a mug of coffee still emitting steam even though the heat had been stamped back with cream, and a book from the library. The cafeteria resembled more of a very large bistro than a cafeteria with its warm tones. She was happy in this quiet moment. She was hearing a secret that only those who roll with the rise get to know. She should just sit there continue having coffee and reading until Sara got up. She loved coffee in a way that few 16-year olds do, though that number is shrinking. She could not stop herself from questioning why she would ever want to leave this place. If she could just have access to her dad she would stay forever. A deep voice vibrated through her quiet serenity.

“Excuse me, Bek.”

She looked up to see a serious and not so excited to be up at this time of day Dr. Calloway standing next to her. "Oh, Dr. Calloway. Hello." His presence was sending off alarms in her head.

He put his hand out, palm open, reassuringly. "I don't want to alarm you or anything. Everything is okay. I just wanted to reach out to you and see how you were dealing with everything that happened. I've been updated on the events that happened the day before yesterday, and wanted to see how you were. I was hoping to find you here. Your paperwork indicates that you're an early riser. I know that must have been hard. But, you did the correct thing looking out for someone. Sometimes getting people the help they need feels like a betrayal, but had you not done that she could have hurt herself or someone else or tried to. You supported her, looked out for her future." His cadence of word delivery was the definition of smooth and steady. It was hypnotically steady, which she found fascinating.

She nodded approvingly. "Wow, I mean I'm impressed. Thank you for finding me. I'm more concerned with Mel. What can you tell me about her? How's she doing?"

"I wouldn't tell you anything about her if I could. I'm sure you appreciate that. I'm here to check on you. How are you holding up?" He smiled.

She looked down and avoided eye contact. "Well, I mean, it's not easy. I understand what I did was right, but I still feel like I betrayed my friend a little. That's been weighing on me."

"I understand that. Sometimes, loving someone means doing something they don't want you to. Like taking the keys from someone who is about to drink and drive. You're motivated by what is best for them. You did that."

"I can see that."

"Good. So, you're good with everything?"

"Sara said she's in the best place for her, and I agree."

"Exactly. Good. Well, I won't take up too much of your time. I look forward to seeing you Friday. If you need anything in between don't hesitate to reach out. I am here for you. Okay?"

"Okay. I promise to."

He smiled and waved. "See you Friday."

"I'll be there."

Bek was less surprised that the people at The Bradbury were amazing as she was acclimating. She knew they were as the place is. It was just feeling more normal. With lunch not too far off, Bek realized she had been sitting in the cafeteria for more than three hours. Bek stood up and decided to go and look for Sara, when she noticed her emerging from the hall. Bek ran up to her deciding she could have another coffee and a pastry. Sara looked like she had just gotten out of bed.

Bek quickly walk up to her and nudge her hip with her own. "Hey sunshine, how are you today?"

Sara smiled through her sleepy haze. "Hey, Bek. I'm okay. Tired but I'll be good after I eat. I bet you already ate. Will you still sit with me while I eat?"

"Of course. I've been waiting for you."

She raised her head quickly. "Oh sorry, I can eat fast or..."

"Stop. Don't be silly you are good. I'm glad you got some decent rest. Hopefully, that gives you a better day. Besides another coffee and a pastry sound kinda nice. You

just missed something kind of wonderful. Dr. Calloway came and found me and asked how I was doing with everything. He wouldn't tell me anything about Mel, but he said we did the right thing."

"I told you. I wonder if my therapist will come looking for me."

"Probably. It feels amazing having someone go out of their way to check on you, you know." Bek noticed the twenty something Tinkerbell grown into a damn near six-foot pixie giant standing in front of them and looking at them.

She called out as the two got closer. "Hey Sara, how are you?" She seemed so practiced and poised to Bek. There was an awkwardness she seemed to be trying to avoid. She turned to look at Bek and said, "And I bet you must be Bek. I'm Jean. Good to finally meet you. You're becoming quite famous around these parts."

Bek's face moved into confusion. "Um... Hey. Famous?"

Jean smiled. "Oh completely. More than a few of the staff have talked about you. You've been a wonderful surprise and addition around here it seems. We have high hopes for you, not that we don't have high hopes for everyone around here, but there is something different at work in you. Meeting you, I can see it instantly. It's nice to see what others have been talking about." Bek was in awe of the amount of conscious effort Jean seemed to be putting into interacting. She found it wonderfully unnerving.

Sara looked between them and then looked to Bek and said, "Jean's my therapist here. She's also the artist of a lot of the paintings on the walls around here."

Lightbulbs flicked on in Bek's mind as shock descended her face. "Wait... Hold on you're the artist that I've been talking about. That's where I've seen the name. Holy shit. I love your work. Like, the first day I just stood in front of some of them fixated. The

one with the gun literally was so powerful. I was also shocked for it to be on the wall of a facility like this.”

Jean, uncomfortable, flushed red over her pale cheeks and neck. “Um, thank you. Charles appreciates some of my work. When he saw that he said he thought it was at the core of what we do here, or something like that. Essentially, the aim of our work should help people see their choices and the mirror between them physically and metaphorically, something to that effect.”

Bek nodded. “That sounds so Charles. Can I ask where the images come from?”

“Really, they come from something I’m feeling. I’ve always felt deep reactions to situations that resulted in a need of expression. For a lot of my feelings expressing them visually is the best way, especially as I started when I was younger and didn’t have an adequate vocabulary to express the feelings.”

Sara looked to her therapist, feeling left out. “Ummm, hello. Why are you out here? You’re never out here?”

Jean looked at her. “I came to find you because I’d like to talk to you, if you are up for it. I know you were probably enjoying your time with Bek, but do you think we could chat for a bit? Come with me?”

Sara rolled her eyes. “Okay let’s go.”

Jean’s eyes were so piercingly blue like a crystal or glass. Jean looked at Bek and extended her hand for a hand shake, very awkwardly and said, “Bek, it was wonderful meeting you. Finally talking to you made my day better. I really appreciate your complements. They mean a lot. Hopefully, we’ll run into each other and continue talking at some point.”

Bek shook her hand, nodding. "You too. It's great seeing the creator of some the art around here. I'd like that conversation very much."

Bek looked at Sara and said, "Sara, if you want to find me after I'll be in the library."

Bek didn't know what to make of Jean. She thought about her as she walked to the library, opting how of her coffee and pastry. She was not easy to read. Bek believed she was sincere about talking to her again, but could also see that Jean wouldn't have been bothered or pained if that talk never happened. It was like she lived more in the present which was captured more than continued. Charles seemed to be different, living in the past, present, and future, or maybe a void. So much peculiarity in the people here. They all fit or belong together somehow. She noticed how everyone at The Bradbury had a true identity. They were all survivors. Survivors of what, though?

As Bek turned into the library she saw someone she hadn't seen there before. "Hey, J. What are you doing in the library?"

He looked at her wryly with his hands up. "What? I'm too slow to, a, read? Just kidding. Jaime orders me in, some, a, manga, to read"

Bek loved that J was showing more of his range, joking well. "Really? That is awesome. I haven't read much manga. Should I?"

His eyes widened. Bek knew she was about to get a lecture. "I love them. I mean, they're not just, like, comics or whatever. Not that those aren't important, but, like, manga just has more story to them."

"Story is the most important thing. Maybe I'll try one. What's the one you are currently reading about?"

“Um, it’s about a zombie outbreak, in a high school. I really like, um, zombie stories.”

“Really. That’s interesting. Why?”

“Well, I mean, like, people are zombies, right? Mindless consumers.”

Bek was not ready for J to be so deep, especially as nonchalant as he just was about it. “Oh, shit. I wasn’t ready to jump all in the philosophical, but yes. I love that. Sorry I assumed that your interest was going to be superficial. That was wrong of me.”

J shrugged. “It’s cool. I like that stuff too, just, like, they” He opened his hands in front of him physically gesturing that, obviously, Bek knew the “they” meant zombies, but continued to say it anyway. “...zombies, are pretty decent, ah, symbols for the problems of, ah, society.”

She smiled at him. “J you’re such an onion.”

He frowned. “Huh? Like, I smell bad?”

“No. Not at all. You have layers. Deep complete and complex layers. The world would be a little better if more people had those layers.”

He shrugged again. “I don’t know. I mean, people might be too, ah, in their heads. And, like, be awkward around other people.”

Bek nodded. “Maybe, but the world would be better for others. And, maybe our world should be more accommodating to people like you, more patient. You’re worth it.”

He buried his embarrassed chin in his chest. “Wow, huh, I don’t, ah, know about all that. But, thank you. Means a lot.”

She shrugged downplaying how important it was for someone to say this, hoping that would help him learn to expect it and settle for nothing less. "It's just the truth homie. Just the truth."

"Well, um, I'm gonna go so I can, ah, start these." He nodded towards the door.

She lifted her head. "Okay, I'll see you around. Let me know if I should read the series. You've definitely put me in the mood for a zombie story."

"Alright. Later."

J was great. He was deeper than people wait to learn he was. Zombies were a great symbol for the typical mindless consumer, and he had confidence. She looked up and saw Jaime return to his desk and look up at Bek with a smile.

She nodded and bowed slightly. "Good afternoon amazing Jaime."

"Well if it isn't the third or fourth most avid reader in the joint."

She was horrified to learn she wasn't winning a competition she was unaware she was in. "What, who the fuck out reads me?"

"Well Charles, Me, and maybe Amy. You too are close."

She instantly was humbled and built up. "Then I'm placing myself in great company aren't I. I have a request, I want a really good, full, and complete zombie novel. What cha got?"

His eyes lit up. "Ooh, great topic. I bet you were inspired by J. He loves them. You know that young man is brighter than people credit him for being."

She raised her left hand in the classic I know gesture. "I literally think that every time I hang around him. He's really smart."

Jaime nodded in solidarity. "Honestly, that's true for so many people here. Trauma changes people, namely it robs them of their childhoods or childishness. Makes them grow prematurely, oddly. But, seeing the results of the brightness that sprouts forth gives me hope. I hate that it 'has' to be like that."

"I completely agree. I was just wondering why the world can't be more patient and adaptive to appreciate how and what angular thinkers can offer."

He tilted his head to the left and smirked. "That, right there, is what separates you from the others. That's what the people who work here would say. That's the insight they would have. That's why so many are talking about you."

After finishing her talk with Jaime Bek decided to reacquaint herself with her favorite chair and start her new book. She was deep reading, almost instantly pulled into Whitehead's book until Sara came running around the corner a little quickly for a library. She had not realized how long she had been reading.

Sara looked at Bek's blank face with worry. "Hey, there you are."

Bek looked at her somewhat confused. "Hey. Sara. How are you? How did everything go? What's wrong?"

"Where have you been? I've been worried. I was waiting for you for lunch but I didn't see you."

"What? What time is it? I read through lunch? Fuck. But, I'm not sad really, because this book is really great. Like really. So fun. So smart." Bek waved *Zone One* by Whitehead in the air lightly. Jaime was right again.

Sara was relieved, then curious. "Should I read it?"

"Would you read it?"

“Probably not, but that isn’t what I asked.”

“Everyone should read it. It’s saying a lot, but is also just entertaining.”

“Hm, then maybe I will.”

Bek and Sara hung out together until dinner and after, mostly in the library, until they went to bed. Oddly, their time together was mostly quiet. Sara drew while Bek read. Sara liked to draw. There was a period where the two of them listened to some music after Jaime found the headphone splitter. Bek picked up reading again when she was in her room. The book was great and truly showed how great of a symbol zombies are for what people reduced themselves to be.

May 31, 2018

Bek woke up feeling so grateful for J, wonderful broken J. She looked up at the ceiling, “You are so great. I needed to read about zombies more than I needed to read what I would have ended up reading. All you good man. All you. Also, whatever gods are up and listening, bless Jaime.” It was crazy how two people without knowing, really, could collaborate in placing someone right where they need to be. Maybe that is a part of people taking the responsibility to play the role of being in a community. Bek left her room for a quiet breakfast. And continued reading up to lunch. She was nearly finished with Whitehead’s novel and loved it dearly. She loved that she could be so entertained while being challenged. When lunch started, she got up to get food and returned to her table. She looked up and saw Sara walking towards her. She smiled at Sara and waved.

“Sara. Hey, I missed you at breakfast, but glad I’m catching you at lunch. I wanted to talk to you about something. About Mel.”

Sara's eyes widened past awake. "Did you hear something?"

Bek shook her head. "No. I just wanted to see if you felt like it was okay for you to tell me what you know about her past. I've been thinking about it a bit."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you said the other day, after she said her dad wasn't good, that she had it horribly, worse than I could imagine. What did you mean?"

Sara looked uneasy sharing someone else's trauma. "Bek, I don't feel comfortable, really, talking about her story. It's hers. I mean, also, I don't know a whole lot. She really doesn't like talking about it. I just know enough to know that she's survived shit no person should have to. I think it's safe to assume that any evil you can imagine she has suffered."

Bek's eyes welled up. It hurt to hear her fears for her friend realized. "Thank you. That helps. I'd never want you to betray her, or me. You didn't. I'm just curious as to what my role should or shouldn't be in protecting her. I've been thinking a lot about us doing the right thing for her by getting her help, but what if we should do more. I mean, what if she was released back to her dad from here? Shouldn't we stop that if we can."

Sara drew close to Bek and lowered her voice. "Like what? Take the fucker out?"

Bek instantly imagined what that would look like. It was hilarious. "Ha, I love that, would love to. But I was thinking more of saying whatever we know to someone that could help. You said that she doesn't like talking about things. She doesn't have a therapist. What if she hasn't told anyone about all of that?"

Sara looked unenthusiastically at Bek. "Bek, I'm sure the people here are very aware. I mean, even you are always talking about how great everything is here."

“True. But what if she is just better at deflecting and hiding? I don’t know if I feel great about assuming all is well.”

“Bek, I don’t know. I mean, it’s her story. It’s her thing to work on. I don’t think we should be over involved in it. Unless she wants us to be. She has always been, ‘Leave me alone, I don’t want to talk about.’ I think we should respect that.”

“I’m not so sure. Sometimes people aren’t in the best place or mindset to defend themselves or look out for themselves. Why wouldn’t we fully involve ourselves for someone we love. Isn’t that the biggest part of love? Prioritizing another. Besides, like Calloway said, sometimes loving someone means taking their keys even though they claim to not be drunk and be fine.”

“I understand that, but it doesn’t feel right to me. I mean not everyone sees love the same way.”

Bek was getting frustrated. This is where she always struggled with other people. It was horrible that more people weren’t intentional with their life and wanted to live in excuses not to want and be more. This was a moment symbolic of why she was always alone. She remained calm, as much as she wanted to hit those who actively choose ignorance. “More people need to read what hooks writes about love. I read her book right before I landed here. She, basically, wrote that often people want to claim they were loved when they really were just abused less severely than many. Which, honestly makes sense why we would disagree. I’m not judging you. I hope you see that. I’m just saying that your way might not work for me. Not that it’s wrong, just maybe wrong for me. Likewise, I hope you appreciate me for that difference.”

Sara looked at Bek sincerely. "I don't think you are awful. I think it'd always be good to be loved by you. It's just a lot sometimes. But, probably more for you."

Bek furrowed her brow. "What do you mean, more for me?"

Sara, eyes wide with hands going up in a physical expression of curiosity in how this was hard for Bek, said, "Effort. I'm exhausted just listening to the things that you're thinking. I can't imagine. Like, I truly, am focused on trying to get through this day, as it is."

"I'm doing the same. Just adding more to what it is." Bek nodded.

"Maybe. It's just overwhelming when you are always trying to finish the puzzle. Like, sometimes it's okay to just be a piece, right?"

If felt like Sara punched her square in the stomach. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be overwhelming."

Sara realized Bek was wounded and didn't want that. "No. Bek. You're good. The world needs you, but the rest of us might not be able to keep up. And you have to be a super woman with a super power of patience."

Bek was overwhelmed now. Sara was so much more. She understood and Bek was definitely not alone. "First, the world needs both of us. I appreciate you saying that, but we are all in this together. I don't expect anyone to keep up with me, really. Not sure what that even means fully. It would just be better if there was more effort, you know. All I want is for people to try and not sabotage me or tether me to their situations or insecurities or whatever. Just like it would be wrong for me to require people to think like me, it's wrong for others to try to force me to not be who I am because it makes them feel small. Everything is debate, and people should put in enough effort to substantiate

their position for the betterment of all or stay out of the way. That sounds a little harsh. Maybe I shouldn't think that way, so assertively."

Sara smiled. "I don't even think you need me in this discussion. And honestly, I'm exhausted. I love you. You will do what you think is right, and that might stir up some shit. I respect that about you. But, I'm gonna go take a nap."

Bek stood up and hugged Sara tightly and, into her hair above her ear, said "Okay. Love you too."

June 1, 2018

As Bek was getting food thinking about how she wanted to talk to Dr. Calloway, she became aware of eyes on her, watching her. She turned to see Charles, who started smiling wide when he saw the recognition in the face of his target.

She walked straight to him. "Shit! Okay, that's creepy for you to be just behind me like that, even for you. Been killing yourself this morning, already with the cigarettes?" Charles already smelled like a burnt pack of cigarettes.

The smile beamed like the Sun. "Only every day. We all need vices here, as Earthlings, maybe." He laughed.

She rolled her eyes. "Come on. You know those things are bad for you."

He nodded in agreement. "Living is already a terminal disease dear Bek. None of us will make it out alive."

"Maybe not, but shouldn't we do everything to extend that time and make sure ours exists aren't too horrible."

He nodded. "I might advise you in such a way. However, my hypocrisy knows no limits. It is my biggest part. Anyway, I went to the doctor to get checked out. He said I

have the lungs of a teenager. All that conditioning and running I've done as a long-distance runner my whole life paid off, my lungs are great."

Bek was shaking her head. "I call bullshit. You go to the doctor? nope. Sorry you don't seem the type."

"I have been to all sorts of doctors, mostly out of curiosity, but I have been."

"When was the last time you went to the doctor for a checkup?"

"Oh, at least... Let's see... Surely not more than 15 to 20 years ago."

Bek's eyes were wide. "See. You need to go ahead and wipe that smile off your face. You haven't been to the doctor in my lifetime probably. You need to go. And, what do you mean about running?"

"Perhaps I need to. Maybe, we'll see. I am a busy person. I mean running. My size limits the amount of sports I can play. Soccer wasn't a big thing in the US when I was young and running made me feel alive. Plus, it helped me avoid bullies. My body sang as I pushed it forward, with every pounding footfall, each one trying to be farther away from the last. I ran cross country as well as some sprints and relays through undergraduate."

Bek was impressed. "Look at the little athlete. I can see you running. It fits. Do you still run?"

"Not really. At my age, I would have to wonder how many pieces I would be leaving in the wake. I don't think my body could hack it, and, honestly, I don't really want to learn how much I have lost."

"I bet you could still outperform most people your age. And like people your age, you still need to go in for checkups, especially if you fear your body holding up." Bek

became acutely aware that she had this want to nurture and protect him. She couldn't understand why that was. She was confident that this world was better for him being a part of it, but wondered if there might be more to it than that. Perhaps, he had just enough downtrodden wet dog to inspire people to look after him. It seemed everyone who talked about him wanted to protect him.

His voice interrupted her thinking. "Masterfully done, young Bek. Thank you for caring. I can't say that it will change much, old dogs and tricks and such being what they will, but I feel your appreciation and care, and I see it for the gift it is."

She remembered. "Oh, hey. I'm supposed to ask you about coyotes or something. Amy told me to ask."

His cackle roared through the cafeteria. "Amy would do something like that. She can be such an asshole. Do, you have a minute?"

Bek agreed by finding a table for them to sit at, with a "Sure."

Once they were seated, she looked at him. "Okay, coyotes?"

His eyes glistened in a way that introduced the significance of the story that was to come. "Okay, coyotes. Well Native Americans often believe that animals and humans are a part of or share a kindred spirit, animal totem. People learn our totems through their behavior and interactions with animals. The coyote is one of the primary Tricksters. Tricksters have a great capacity for knowledge, especially the secret knowledges, which they use to orchestrate narratives for others. Essentially, they are teachers even though sometimes their methods are questionable. Once, a long time ago, I was at my lowest. I didn't want to live anymore. I was teaching on a reservation at the time and had driven to a canyon covered in rocks and dirt. I was ready. I was ready to cast myself over the

edge, when all a sudden I froze. I saw a coyote with a fresh kill, a raccoon, in its mouth trotting towards me. She was beautiful even though her coat had seen better days, she was a survivor, battle tested. The blood around her muzzle was a sign of the life she was able to make more than it was the threat of the life she could take. She looked up at me and dropped the lifeless animal in front of me and stepped back. She was nurturing me, no malice. I also have never been so close to throwing uncooked meat in my mouth and eating it. Everything in me screamed to bite into this offering, but I didn't. I knelt, tears making mudpies on my cheeks, and held out my hand to her. She touched her nose to my fingertips. That feeling was the only thing that existed in the world right then. I was completely lost. Satisfied she had healed, she pulled her nose away, picked up her kill and trotted off. That was medicine. She was my first real healer. That's really the point of life, being aware of what's around us. She was my first totem."

Bek's mouth was open and she was aware of only his story. "Holy shit. Are you serious? That really happened?"

He smiled, mournfully. "It did. Right after that, the same day, I met my second totem. Not everyone has more than one, but some have more than two. I pulled up a sitting place over the canyon noticing all the little life living. Resilient trees and shrubs pockmarked the brown dirt as it stretched out. I was deepening. Just as I was beginning to feel swept away my second totem landed on my knee and danced and hopped around, teaching. This wren, who was so brilliant in his browns, looked more orange and yellow in the light. He looked right at me flapping his wings with the excitement of children opening presents as he hopped from leg to leg to ground. He taught me the magic of dancing through the seriousness and depth of living, of being present."

Bek was shaking her head, still holding her fork without ever taking a bite. "Shit. I don't even what to think. I don't think I would understand what to do with that."

"In that moment you only need to exist and be open to receive the lesson. Commune with the larger whole, maybe see your place in it. Understand your incompleteness and how we errantly attempt to cope with those holes in us and force our will, our security."

Bek was doubting very seriously that she would ever meet someone like Charles again. Being around him was as close as she would ever come to petting a unicorn. "I don't know what else to say other than, that was beautiful. I mean, I have nothing to compare it to, no way to help me digest it. I have to consider it at its own value, and that's jarring."

"Interesting... Jarring?"

Before thinking she said, "In both meanings I suppose, shocking and captivating."

He smiled wide. Her brilliance was so common to her she didn't see it, at least not all the time. "You, in particularly you, will find more of these moments than you could believe you will, as long as you are open to them."

She smiled. "Can I ask you something, I mean you being the head person here."

He shook his head in disagreement. "I am not the head of anything. I facilitate something greater than I could ever be."

"What?"

"The truth."

"J told me you were in charge, like the CEO."

“I’m not being flippant with saying the truth, you shouldn’t dismiss the point. I don’t see it as a power position any more than a good parent would see that they are the boss of their children. It is a collective where all are working together, pretty much equally. Certainly, I have more signatory authority than others, but I see that as meaning very little.”

She hoped she hadn’t offended. and decided to continue on. “Um, okay, well that still works. I’m curious as to whether or maybe how necessary it would be, for a someone here, like me, to inform someone of abuse.”

The air around him charged at once with a violence, all kindness gone. “Bek, tell me what happened and what you know.”

“Um, it’s just that, I don’t want to betray people, but I heard something about abuse that someone is going through.”

“Here. Something is happening here? You must tell me! I must protect them!” He had moved to the edge of his seat as if preparing for an attack.

“No. No. I’m sorry. It was before they got here, but I’m worried for her. Like if they get out and return to where they’re from...”

“Who was being hurt? Who are we talking about? It’s important for us to know so that we can help the best way possible. This is not a betrayal. It’s a protection.”

She realized how feral compassion could be when under threat. “I am just worried about Mel. I learned that there are problems in her past, with her dad. She told me that, but then I heard that my worst fears were her reality.”

He began relaxing and the charge that had filled the room eased. “Okay, thank you for saying something to me. You know I won’t talk about particulars of anyone

else's situation. But, I can tell you Mel is getting all the help she needs. It'll be okay. You and her have nothing to worry about. There are unfortunate realities for so many people, as you're aware of. I wish I could remove all the suffering in the world, and this is the best I can do to try and accomplish that." He said as he motioned around to the facility from inside, from its cafeteria. "It pains me when horrors happen, and I feel helpless about them. I'm sorry if I got a little intense. Are you okay?"

She knew she would not want to witness the wrath of Charles. She did not think she would feel bad for who he directed it at. They would deserve it, but it would still be horrifying. "It kind of breaks my heart a little, makes me feel kind of guilty."

"Why guilty?"

"For complaining about or struggling with my life. I mean I haven't had to deal with anything like that."

"I would think that you need to stop thinking about things in a competitive context. It isn't about measuring whose suffering is worse. Your suffering doesn't disappear because someone has suffered worse or differently any more than your joy and happiness would disappear because someone is happier or more joyous. We must consider where we are and where we need to be understanding that we are better off determining that for ourselves rather than by letting someone else dictate what our experience will be. You have suffered Bek. I admit that I would give anything to remove that pain. However, I must acknowledge that those experiences went into making the wonderful human being that I see so much potential in. We're here to work on your story. We're also here to work on the individual stories of those around you."

“So, in effect, working on the individual story of humanity one strand at a time, like DNA sequencing.”

“Wonderfully put. You assimilate information in a grand way, which allows you to use it as you will. Your ability to process and use information as you do is what is most impressive about you. It will always be what earns you invitation and acceptance to any conversation you wish to be a part of. Now, I can feel Nandini hunting for me. She has a stalking quality that’s eerie. I better get to my office before she finds me. She’s reaching the point of putting a shock collar and GPS on me. She used to be so sweet.” He laughed at his own comment and stood up.

“Okay, I’ll see you around. Maybe you should buy her something nice.”

He was shocked. “What, why?”

“For having to put up with you. You might buy yourself, literally buy yourself, some time before being collared.”

He laughed and then hushed it as his eyes darted around looking for her. “Fair point, but I think I am in too deep. I don’t think I can afford a house and car, which is what it would take.” He smiled and set off.

Bek realized she had not eaten as she looked down, then heard, “Charles!” Shit! She’s close he better move. She laughed, then laughed harder as she caught sight of Charles running down the hall more inauspicious than Mr. Rooney in *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* but only barely. She had better eat the cold food quickly because she did not want to waste and she needed to head to group. Bek was in a good mood heading to group. Talking with Charles might have proven better than talking to Dr. Calloway.

When she got to the room she saw everyone milling around and walked up and hugged Sara and then J, which embarrassed him as he was not ready for public affection.

As everyone was seated, Amy started the session announcing, "Before we start, I know we will all notice Mel's absence again. I want you to know that she is okay and will be returning to us shortly. Everything'll be okay."

Bek was not alone in appreciating Amy's statement about Mel. Everyone was thinking about it, especially with the empty chair, left empty to show them all they have permanence. Bek did not find the meeting really moving, though she appreciated having the opportunity to discuss Mel, as Sara had. Neither divulged too much of Mel's story, but both discussed how hard it was not having her there. It was nice to see that they did not have to carry all their pain alone. Group taught a lot about the importance of sharing life and not being afraid to be sincere and honest with people. While some will judge, those that do not will be the best gift a person could receive.

Bek was also eager for group to be over, which made her feel a little rude for being distracted, so she could tell Amy she knew what the coyote meant. As people were leaving she walked up and said, "Hey, Amy, I now know about our resident Coyote-therapist."

Amy showed no sign of understanding. She looked confused. Swing and a miss. She replied, "What?"

"Charles. Charles told me about the coyote and wren being his totems."

She chuckled. "Oh, that's hilarious. Isn't it wonderful? I remember being so amazed by that story. No one could tell it like he does."

Bek nodded. "Talking to him is like stepping into another dimension where nearly anything's normal and almost expected. I could talk to him forever."

"Yes, he is great."

Bek noticed Amy was off. She seemed distracted during group too now that Bek thought about it. "Amy, is everything okay? I'm not trying to pry, but you seem a little different."

Amy lowered her head a little. "You would be the observant one, remarkable, really. Yes. I'll be okay. Just a not great day for me. It means a lot that you noticed and said something."

It was alien for Bek to get validated so often at The Bradbury. "Thank you for telling me you're off and not saying that it was nothing or I was seeing things. I appreciate that. Wish I could help."

"You wanting to help is more help than you could imagine. I appreciate it. I try to never lie to people, especially intuitive younger people who need and deserve confidence in their abilities and efforts. You deserve honest responses."

Bek beamed with pride. "I appreciate that. It means a lot. Of course, I hate that you are upset, but I respect your story."

"It's less that than it's a professional boundary I would have for you and all of those I work with. If you were just someone I interacted with, like a neighbor, I would have no problem talking with you."

"Really? Wow. That means a lot. That you would think high enough of me to think my thoughts would be worth considering."

Amy narrowed her eyes seriously and focused on Bek. “Bek, understand and never question that you have an amazing voice and mind. People would be better off listening to you in most situations, probably. In fact, the reason you’re here seems to have been created from people not listening and considering you because they were too busy dismissing you more than it was about you being an unruly kid. You will help people. You will be more of an answer than they will be.”

The moment might be too much for her. “Um, Amy, I don’t know what to say. Thank you? That’s a whole lot to hear. Uncomfortable, but it’s nice.”

Amy maintained the sincere intensity. “Bek, I want you to know that you’re different, in the best ways possible. I don’t say that to scare you or put unnecessary responsibility on your shoulders. I just want you to see possibilities that you might not have been aware of, nothing more. I see your potential. I believe everyone here sees your potential. You don’t have to take on any call to action you don’t want to, but I believe you are here because that’s what you want. You hit someone with a desk inadvertently. You took action, an important stand. Now, I believe we both know that action wasn’t what it should have been and that you acted out of base emotions rather than careful consideration, which damages your reason. Imagine what you could be and do if you were more intentional with your efforts of living, which isn’t easy, but I think you need to see that. We are the products of the efforts we feed, if we take the time to feed efforts.”

“I get what you’re saying. I believe I’m starting to see that for myself. Sounds like an updated version of the story about the boy asking the medicine man about the two

dogs inside him. I'm not sure I know what to do with that. Does that mean I need to take certain classes building towards some degree and job?"

"It can, but it doesn't have to. I believe that's where you need to see the best way for you in your life. You need to consider how you want your life to be and how you want to interact with your ability, purpose, people, work, so on and so forth. That's what I mean by more intentional or deliberate with your efforts. Understand the relationships of possibility and demand that each action has for and of you."

Like Sara said earlier. "That seems a little overwhelming, at least the responsibility of that."

"I know. It can be. But that's the responsibility difference makers take. It isn't an easy life, and I'm not saying you need to start today. But ultimately that's what is in front of you. Cavalier leadership is shit. I believe we all have experienced the horrors of what bloated privilege as the result of financial wealth and what it's offered the world of how things should be done."

"Intentional and deliberate living for the greater good wouldn't be likely to come from someone with stakes in the ongoing game."

Amy slapped her leg. "Exactly, Bek! You seeing that at 16 is amazing and gives me hope. Now what will you do with that knowledge? Will you make a difference? Will it be on a large scale or small scale?"

Bek was happy but shrugged from doubt. "Wouldn't you agree that a lot of 16-year-olds understand that though? It seems like from being here, that quite a few young people understand this suffering and the bullshit of privilege."

“And yet here we still are, secluded away from society rather than in it. See that’s how you’re different. You aren’t as apathetic. You believe changes are possible, and you are ready to make changes. You want to mobilize or motivate people to change. You’re moving from knowing into doing.”

“How do you know I am not apathetic or would be able to motivate anyone?”

“Apathetic people don’t hit the library like you, and as far as motivating others, well, you seem to forget that I have known Mel, Sara, and J long enough to see differences in them and their behavior. Those differences have been so much more visible since you arrived. And, very, and I mean very, few of the guests here seek out the staff as you have. And, in case you need more, I’ve seen you motivate the staff here. Charles was on his way of washing out into a shadow of his former self before too long. He’s different now, since you.”

“What?”

“Seriously, he’s been rekindled since he met you. He and I have talked about you a few times. Again, not to put pressure on you, but you have given him hope. Nudged his rowdiness awake.”

“What do you mean nudged his rowdiness awake?”

“Well, he’s been dormant for a while. You need to understand, when he says he is part coyote, you need to believe it. He has a, troubled, history with how bad his... bite used to be. He has seen his front lines and has the wounds to tell the story of fighting against oppression. For the last five to ten years he hasn’t been that. He hasn’t been willing to war. He is now. He talks fast like he used to, like his mouth is barely keeping up with the pace of his thoughts. You have rekindled him.”

Confusion wrinkled her brow. "But how did I do that? I haven't done anything."

"You seem to have made an impact on a lot of people for a do-nothing person. I asked Charles about it. Asked him if he was aware of it. He said, 'Of course, I'm not stupid. You know the saying that when a student is ready a teacher will be found? We always think about the student in that but consider the responsibility and excitement in being chosen to teach. I have to help pave the way.' He is trying to soften your opening. He is working on launching an outreach program to schools to teach against oppression. You don't see you in that?"

"I didn't know. I didn't ask."

"That's why he didn't say. You made him realize that he had let up. Your fire is contagious, the best sort of virus to spread. See we are unaware of our impacts, until they are shown to us. And then many of us refuse credit. I'm just showing you. Every year students talk about teachers that have impacted them, but they rarely acknowledge the impact that they have had on their teachers. Of course, this isn't always true, but when it's true very little else matters."

"You mean like how time is different when I'm with Charles, Mel and Sara, J, You, Jaime, or Dr. Calloway. Charles is the greatest example, but hours feel like minutes."

"Yes. That's a part of it. You need to see that when it's real it is the same feeling for him, which explains why he is late so often, maybe."

"I can see how some of that excitement might be me, but he also strikes me as the type that dives into everything around him."

“Do you have evidence of that? You seem him talking to a lot of other patients and people here?”

“I know he has talked to J a lot in the past.”

“Is that a coincidence? I think he’s been waiting for you. I think he’s been making a place for you, subconsciously.”

“Wow. I mean...”

Amy nodded. “It’s a lot, but you need to know it. You need to be shown the opportunities that will sit all around you. Gives you something to discuss with Calloway at the very least. Just remember, I was where you are once too. Someone with my history rarely finds herself in the chairs I sit in. You have more potential than I did. He was and is my mentor. But, I need to get out of here. Thank you for saying something. I can see this conversation needed to happen, and I’m glad it did. Hope you’re good with it.”

“Yeah I am and me too. It’s a lot to think about, but I appreciate knowing what options I have to think about and what you see in me. It is crazy to consider how little of these interactions I’ve been conscious of, when considering the other parts. Thank you for being honest and sincere with me.”

“Anytime. See you next week.”

Bek completely understood Sara’s situation. Amy was who she wished I she could have had for a mother. If she could have built a mother, as she used to wish to be able to do, Amy would have been it, even though she had not known Amy until very recently. She was the all mother, sincere, endlessly loving, fierce, and nurturing. She loved and hated her for that. She started walking to Dr. Calloway’s office thinking,

"Today is fucking awesome. Great day. But is it?" The emotional weather was becoming as unpredictable as the weather outside. Fear started to rise in her. The Bradbury built people up so well, but then turned them loose, back in the world. Even if people in Mel's situation received protection, she was worrying for people in hers. She knew she was not going to get this validation out there. She was safe in The Bradbury. She had a suspicion that they were about to send her back. She was not ready. No Charles. No Amy. No Calloway. She was wondering how this was not setting people up to fail as she turned Dr. Calloway's doorknob.

He looked up at her and smiled warmly. "Hey Bek. How are you today? You look a little upset. What happened?"

"I don't think you people here are doing good things, and it's not okay."

He was confused, noticeably. "Um, Bek, I have to say that I'm a little shocked at you saying that. I thought things were going better for you. Would you please give me some context so that I can understand where you are coming from?"

Maybe she had opened a little too hard, but there was no turning back. She was about to open her mouth to say something when Calloway said, "Bek, I want you to know that I am sincere in what I asked. I am genuinely baffled here, and I want to understand. Will you please help me understand?"

He deflated her anger. She hated that. "I don't understand why the people that work here make us feel like they really care."

He sat forward in his chair. "Bek, has something happened? I will not speak for others, but I do care, genuinely, about you."

Her rage reinflated as tears began jumping over her lower eyelids. Her emotions were exhausted at the roller coaster. "Bullshit! How can you claim to care about someone, 'genuinely' when you are fattening them up for the goddamn slaughter that awaits them out there? You know damn well what waits for us and how few people will give a shit about us, but you'll send us out there anyway. How's that caring? You're bailing on us after showing us what fucking could be. You have no right. It's not okay to teach us what it is like to be cared for and loved only to turn us back out into that. How is that caring, huh, Dr. Calloway. How's that caring?" Bek was shaking with anger she thought, but it was fear.

He put his hands up defensively. "Bek, I want you to know that I'm not trying to talk down to you. I'm only trying to react to you as best I can. Seeing my patients walk out of here is the best and worst part of my day. I'm so proud of them and where they have worked to get, but I fear for them and I will miss them. It hurts, and not always the same. I value the relationships that are formed; they are real relationships. But taking this job requires me to take on the responsibility of being temporary. It's bittersweet. It hurts to realize that I will not know the faces I am working with too long. Faces I have come to truly care about. They will go off and begin living their lives, creating families, getting jobs, living so many wonderful memories. It's sweet to know that they are out there doing great things, hopefully. Of course, in this line of work we're always working our way out of being needed, which opens the availability to help others. It isn't easy to always be temporary. There are many former patients that I would love to see and talk with, but that isn't the way it is. That never takes away from what we knew while we worked together. It was real."

“So, I’m not the only one that will be hurting, Dr. Calloway?”

Calloway was rattled. “Oh, shit. Um, I’m sorry. Fuck. I’m really sorry for losing my composure there. Sometimes it isn’t easy for us on this side either. I owe you a little explanation, I suppose. I was informed last week that a former patient of mine killed himself. He was 14 last I saw him. It’s been three years since I’ve worked with him. We had spent time working on him coping with his sexuality in a town with a mind as narrow as they come. He was almost out of there. Almost free. I can’t help but feel like I failed him. I didn’t do enough. He was a brilliant young man. So full of life. He was surrounded by the fucking darkness of his family and classmates. Bullied for breathing into a body different from their bodies. He was too good for... I’m sorry.” He had tears in his eyes and paused to collect himself. “The point is Bek, there are no guarantees. I wish I could take in every person that walks in my door and make sure they would always be safe. But that wouldn’t be safe. It would be imprisoned. So, the only thing I can do is everything I can while they are here and send as many of them out there as I can. So, maybe they can find each other, build something better.”

She wanted to hug him. “No. Dr. Calloway, I’m sorry. I never considered what this could be like for you.”

“That is the dilemma isn’t it. People knocking into each other incapable of feeling what the impact means to anyone but their self. Bek, I completely get where you are coming from. I have similar fears and similar pains. Loving people isn’t easy. It requires sacrifice.”

Bek was feeling tension, started to fidget in the absence of her resolve, and wanted to lighten the mood. "Loving? Ease up Doc I said caring." Calloway laughed, which made Bek more comfortable.

"One day Bek, I would give anything, for the world to see that there really shouldn't be any difference between loving and caring. One day. So, with that shared experience behind us, can I suggest you step out and go to the restroom down the hall and splash some water on your face and get a drink out of the fountain to let me freshen up, then let's try this appointment again."

She nodded. "Sounds like a great plan. Tears and snot are not a good look."

He looked at her nodding slowly. "For either of us."

Bek was relieved at the respite and appreciated the water break. She was amazed at how genuine people were here, even Calloway who seemed to be quite professional. He might not be a person capable of being on the level of comradery as Charles and Amy, but he still could reach and connect emotionally and honestly.

As Bek walked back into his office he looked up at her refreshed and vulnerable and said, "Greetings Bek. How are you? Have you ever considered the importance of second chances, or maybe second starts?"

She looked at him and said, "Well, hello Dr. Calloway." She laughed. "I'm good. I hope you are too. Second starts might be the most beautiful thing in the world."

He smiled warmly. "What if everyone doesn't agree on the second start? What if some are standoffish or oppositional to it?"

The seriousness of the question revealed Calloway was back on his game, and, perhaps, she was not ready. "Um, I suppose that's okay. People should be entitled to

their feelings and positions regarding getting back together or starting to work again. So, I guess, the ready people need to be patient.”

He nodded. “Good. Do you think you can be patient with people in your old school?”

He was not pulling punches. “Wait. What? Where are these questions coming from?”

His hands were up defensively to calm. “I didn’t mean to shift, I was just curious what started the feelings you were feeling earlier. I was wondering if your fear was that they would be holding grudges against you, and ultimately you not having the patience for them to work through what will likely not be smooth transition back. I wanted you to know that there are options for school. Options we could seek out together, with your dad, to help you be successful. You don’t have to return to that school if you don’t want to.”

“Honestly, that concerns me a little, but it wasn’t what set me off Dr. Calloway. Knowing Amy hurts me, but it’s a pain that I want, if that makes sense. She’s what I would want for a mother. It wasn’t so hard losing a mother I can’t remember. Maybe I was too young to know to hurt when I lost Ms. DeBerry. But I’m aware now. I know and the need is too much to bear. I don’t know what to do with that pain.”

“Bek, that is a wonderful connection you have with her, and I would bet is reciprocated, even if on a different level. But no less powerful. I can completely understand your feeling, and honestly probably should have seen it myself. This is the hard reality of being open and letting people in. I can offer you this as, maybe, a kind of explanation. I shared a tragic story about a former patient, one that hurt to voice. So,

you see the truth about how this relationship. I haven't told you about the stories of former patients that I have regular communication and check-ins with one of which I haven't seen in over 11 years. I'm not saying this to give you false hopes, but just to say that relationships, as all relationships, are what the people are willing to work to make them. I believe it is typical that therapists won't reach out so much due to fear of creating dependencies or preventing the autonomous choices and coping that need to come for the regular living of their patients, and there are laws in certain situations. But I believe many of us are open to receiving communication. In time, those interactions can become any number of realities."

This was the lowest level of professionalism she could imagine from him. He was so poised. "I appreciate you sharing your story with me. I know it was painful. But it helped."

"That is all I want to do for you, whether today, yesterday, or ten years from now. Of course, ten years from now my memory might be shaky. I might need a great deal of context to place you, maybe."

She was pleased to hear him make a joke, wondered how comfortable it was for him to engage her as he was. "Dr. Calloway, I think the real thing that is scaring me is that I'm seeing that I might not be here long, but I love it here. I'm scared of all of the bad possibilities out there, now that I'm aware of the real possibilities everywhere."

"I won't lie to you. You won't be a patient here long. You are as acute as ever seeing that. I don't think you needed to be here anymore than we needed you to be here. As a matter of fact, next week you will have your first visit with your dad, who has been so ready to see you again. Don't tell him I said so, but his excitement at seeing

you is hilarious. He has called me every day this week, sometimes just saying thank you. He has put in the work to improve his parenting, and understands that the parenting you need is going to need to be more than providing a better neighborhood for you to live in. He knows we are here to support you both with educational material as well as support groups of families of children that have come through here. He already has himself singed up. I know that doesn't fix everything, but you will have a team."

Joy rushed to her eyes and threatened to catch in her throat. "That means a lot, because I'll probably need one."

"You? Bek, everyone needs a team. I can't imagine a single person that could navigate a successful life alone. What matters is who we put on our team. I will have to admit there is some wisdom in the old saying 'birds of a feather', although I believe the focus is wrong. That should be a statement solely about the bird in question and less about the flock. Children always read that..."

"As judgements of our friends."

"Exactly. When it should be judgement of the person. We are supported or held back by our flocks. We need to learn that we need to make an effort of building our flocks, intentionally. This doesn't mean you can't have sketchy friends. I have to see one of my best friends through the free side of a glass separation. He made horrible decisions, and he got in trouble, but I didn't let his choices make realities for me, and he wouldn't let me fall into them either. I know he is a good friend for protecting me. I just wish we could have found another way for him."

"Wait though. If our flocks are so important why have a sketchy person? Shouldn't you tell us not to do that?"

He chuckled. "You think I should expect a fantasy? Many, if not most, sketchy people are products of a situation they didn't build. That doesn't mean they shouldn't be held accountable for wrongs, but maybe not vilified as deeply. There are good people in prison. People who were born into situations that created the stronger potential or probability of punishable behavior. Knowing them isn't bad. Only knowing them might be more problematic. Definitely, not being strong enough to be yourself around them is problematic. I think we need to get away from good or bad thinking and see things more on a continuum of possibilities and likelihoods. Realizing also, that there was a system incorporated hundreds of years ago to skew the results in specific directions which led to harsher punishment for certain laws, certain drugs to be worse than other less damaging drugs, and the more focused policing of certain neighborhoods and people more than others."

"I like that. We shouldn't compare things as much and should look at individual situations as honestly as we can."

"This is why I chose psychology. I want to make sure I see the tree and the forest, not just the forest. I believe our time was up a little while back, and I want to respect your time. I am sorry I kept you longer."

"Honestly Doc, there is no where I would rather be."

"Wonderful. I will see you next week, and I will let you know what day your dad will be coming as soon as we work out schedules."

As Bek left and headed to her room to go to sleep she was so very aware of how good things and goodness can be terrifyingly lonely. She realized that she had a lot of thoughts running laps in her head, competing for dominance or attention of focus. She

was somewhat overwhelmed at the prospect of being who she knew she should be and how isolating that choice could be.

June 2, 2018

Bek opened her eyes knowing that the day would be difficult. She was not aware of any other type of day that could follow the previous one, which was so amazing and challenging, scary and thrilling, anxiety provoking. She just wanted to sit in it. She should head to the library and let solace shroud not to hide, but to dig and explore.

It was not reading time. She needed to sit with her thoughts before leveling them against the thoughts of others. She needed music. She wanted the music her dad loved, grunge. As an immigrant he fell in love with many genres like hip-hop, falling deeply in love with artists like KRS-1 and Public Enemy. However, the first time he heard grunge he heard music that played his emotions, angst. He always said bands like Pearl Jam, Living Colour, and Faith No More were screaming against a power. He felt Rage against the Machine was the perfect birth of something between the two. Music was threaded into her origin. Her parents met at a Faith No More concert.

Her greatest times were with her dad and his music. Memories of her sitting and listening to music as her dad taught her about the meaning of lyrics and lore of the band flooded over her. He was with her at the moment, which was bittersweet. Her dad kind of became what those songs were arguing against, somewhat. He conformed, maybe for her. Maybe that is what becoming a parent is about. The songs were, still are, against everything that is suburban, where he sacrificed so much to move her. The songs validated counterculture beliefs and called into question the quiet voices of the suburbs challenging whether that vanilla experience is, maybe whether it should be,

real. She loved his music. The way it spoke to her threaded her to her father, as it spoke to him similarly. She was confused as to why he forfeited so much to raise her in the place his music fought against.

She was struggling with the thought of opening up to her dad. She knew he would listen, but she did not want to question everything he worked hard to build. She understood that he wanted her to be safe and have the opportunities of better schools rather than take the time to fight the injustice of supporting public schools through local property tax collection, which guaranteed inequality. She did not think he was betraying the truth, but believed he was forgetting, which left them at an impasse. She did not know how to say those things to him without chastising every sacrifice he had made. She feared he would take her thoughts as calling him a failure for trying to give her more or better.

Her thinking was starting to become circular, bouncing between her love for and frustration of him. As she was thinking she should seek out Charles or Amy, she saw Sara. Then she saw Charles. She chose Sara. She wanted to talk with Sara. She questioned why she would pass up the opportunity to work out some things she had been thinking about to hang out with Sara? Maybe she was purposely trying to avoid dealing with things. Why would she do that.

Sara greeted her with a big hug, excited. "Bek! Did you hear yet?"

"Hear what?"

"Mel might be returning soon, like real soon. I heard that she was doing better."

"You know, there are laws about sharing certain information..."

"Shut up. Don't try and poison my ways of learning."

“Oh, no. I’m just amazed that so much is available.”

“It really isn’t. I have a source, but she was vague. I had to read between the lines.”

“She? Wait. Is it Jean?”

“Jean? Are you crazy? Jean would never. She is all by the book. Just be happy it looks like we’ll see Mel before too long.”

“I am. I want to see her so bad.” Then she feared that she might be released before she saw Mel again. She decided to go ahead and give voice to her reality. “Sara. I don’t think I’m going to be here much longer.”

Sara looked down, sad. “I don’t think you should have ever been here. Not that I’m not so happy you were. Meeting you was one of the luckiest things that has happened to me.”

She looked at Sara even though her eyes stung. “Shit, don’t make me cry. We’re going to have to find out how to stay in contact after I’m released.”

“I bet there’s a contact list that we can place you on or something. There has to be. I don’t know how much longer I’ll be here either, but I’m trying to stay with Mel. I can’t leave her.”

“That’s beyond precious. But you might need to get out there to make a place for the two of you.”

Sara looked up into Bek’s eyes. “I thought you were going out to make a place for the three of us.”

“Seems simple enough.” Bek laughed.

The rest of the day continued to answer Bek's dilemma. She started seeing solutions in being. Sara was a wonderful unknowing lighthouse, and Bek would do what was necessary to maintain a relationship with Sara for the rest of her life. Sara was worth it.

June 3, 2018

Bek opened her eyes to a morning that was a perfect complement to her mood. Bek realized that would hurt to not be here, but moving on was right. She saw her improvements and realized in some ways she might have outgrown the purpose of The Bradbury, though it would still be a resource. She wanted to know what her options would be for continued work, if any. It made her angry to feel ready, but she could not dwell in that. She could ignore what she had realized. There was no turning back. She just wanted to soak it into her. She wanted to take in the space, furnishings, library, art, cafeteria, all of it. She wanted it to imprint into her, and a rainy day was the perfect setting for rich reminiscing. Watching the rain fall over the grounds outside would be magical.

She decided the best way to start the absorption was to just lay in the greatest bed she had ever slept in, listening to the rain collide with the roof and window, see it bounce off the ground. She decided to have a late breakfast and read in the cafeteria until Sara came out of her room.

In the cafeteria she breathed in everything being alive while she laid her head back leaning into the back rest of the chair, eyes closed, and the *Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* resting on her chest. She had a funny thought that the book was keeping her from floating away, anchoring her, and, in a way, the book was. It was perfect, and

in a perfect place, a quiet screaming peace. She saw what Charles meant it would be hard to find this out there, in the weird world. She heard the footsteps of a thief, trying to sneak up and steal this bliss. It would be Sara and waited.

She heard the missing voice. "What the fuck are you doing, psycho?"

Bek looked up and saw Mel, "Fucking Mel." She shifted into something like an out of body experience. "Holy shit! You're back, like really back?" Bek jumped up and hugged her so hard she lifted her off the ground.

Trying to escape Mel said, "Easy nutjob. I wasn't sent off to war, damn."

Not letting go, Bek said, "Don't! Don't you try and minimize how happy I am to see your stupid face." She felt healthier, looked healthier. "We have missed the shit out of you."

Mel smiled. "I missed you too."

"I have so many questions, but I don't want to overwhelm you?"

Mel smiled and rolled her eyes. "I didn't miss your hyper mind, well maybe I missed that too, just least."

Her coy smile bordered on perfect. "We should wait for Sara though. I know we have similar questions, but can I ask you one thing?"

"Sure."

"Are you mad at me? Did I let you down or betray you?"

Mel scrunched up her face. "Huh? Did you turn dumb while I was gone? You took care of me, better than I was taking care of myself. I can't be mad at that, which isn't to say I'm comfortable with it."

"What do you mean not comfortable?"

“You said one question, but I know your one is everyone else’s five. I’m not good at being loved. I don’t know what to do with it. I know you were loving me, but that is very weird for me, like it doesn’t fit.”

It hurt Bek to hear her friend admit to her struggle. Tears threatened. “I don’t know what to say to that. I do love you, and I hate that love feels so weird to you. Have you eaten yet? Hungry?”

“Jesus. Settle down mom. Damn.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I love it. I want to get better at feeling it. Also, I’d love to eat. The food in the other side isn’t near as good, because they were afraid to give me access to too many utensils.”

As they started for the food area Bek turn and grasped Mel’s arms. “Promising something.”

“What? Why? What?”

“No suicide jokes. I know how you deal with things, but I can’t, not with you. I’ve had to think about not having too long. I don’t ever want to know a day or world without you in it. I can’t laugh about it, and if that makes me an asshole, I can take that. But I can’t laugh with you about that. I’m sorry.”

Mel dropped her chin. “No. You’re right. I shouldn’t joke about it. I’ll try. But old habits and shit. I’m sorry. I really don’t know how to handle discussing where I was too well. I don’t want to ignore it, but I know it isn’t great to joke about.”

“It’s okay. I just want you to know that you can say whatever, and I’ll love you no matter what. I can’t promise that I won’t cry, but that’s okay. I don’t mind crying.”

“Deal. Now, can we go eat?”

“It’s so good have you back Mel. I do have to tell you, though. I’m not sure how much longer I will be here. I hate to say this on your first day back, but it is true. I just want everything out there.”

“I know. Amy told me. She came to see me a couple of times while I was on the other side.”

“Oh. Oh, that’s great. It’s weird that she knew and said something to you before me.”

“Don’t me mad or anything. She wanted me prepared. I agree with her now. You don’t belong here. Never did. Even though you assaulted a teacher. I’m glad you ended up here though. I also know Sara will leave before me. It’s okay. I’ll leave too. When I’m ready. The tricky part will be finding out how to stay in touch.”

Bek nodded adamantly. “That’s what scares me the most. I’m terrified of losing you and Sara. I’m terrified of losing this place, this safety.”

“Yeah. But it’ll be great to seek this versus having it forced on you.”

“I can see that.”

Mel looked up and then returned her eyes to Bek, conspiratorially said, “Hey, I see Sara coming. Should I hide and pop out or let her see me?”

“She’s probably already seen you.”

“With her shitty, squinty gopher eyes? She barely sees me when she is across the table from me.”

Sara's voice filled the cafeteria and everyone looked. "Holy shit, Mel! Yes!" Sara was as loud as she could be and fully tackled Mel in her chair. The hit probably hurt in the best ways.

Sara punched Mel in the arm as she got up from the tackle awkwardly. "Damn! Oww. Fuck. Sara stop. What was that for?"

Sara leaned into her face and pointed her index finger in Mel's face. "Don't you ever scare me like that again. You don't get to quit without me. Besides we adopted a Bek together."

They all laughed. Bek sat in the perfection of having her best friends with her. It was bliss. Mel looked at her. "Get down here on the floor with us bitch or you're out of the group. Didn't you hear Sara? All for one."

There would be blood, definitely bruises if she added her body to the pile. Bek caught Charles watching them out of the corner of her eye and his smile seemed to be approving, happy. As Bek pounced on her best friends, it was interesting how someone who is always needed everywhere seems to be everywhere, or at least gets there. On his terms.

As the three friends seated themselves in chairs a voice was attracted to the commotion.

"Um, hey Mel. Um glad you're, a, back. Look good."

She looked up at him. "Hey J. Wanna to sit with us?"

His head tilted down. "Oh. Um, sorry, I can't. I just wanted to stop and say, um, hi. And, I'm happy to see you, um, Mel, back on this side. Glad you are, a, doing better

and stuff.” He patted her shoulder as he walked away. She understood why he was not going to hang around, but she wanted him to always feel included.

Sara looked at Bek. “Okay, your puppy is sweet. You might have been right about him.”

“He really is a great person.” Bek smiled.

Mel interrupted the discussion of J. “Okay, before I answer your questions, I want you both to know my dad’s a bad person. He hurt me in ways that I don’t want to discuss exactly, but it’s as bad as your imaginations can go. He allowed me to be hurt too. I’ve moved forward with the legal folks here to have him arrested and prosecuted. I’m not sure what that means exactly, and what will happen with me. Living with my mom won’t be a great option, and I’m not hundred percent she won’t be prosecuted too. I’m not certain she would want me anyway. She has resented me since birth. She started resenting me more once my dad started being interested. Her resentment led to her doing different kinds of things parents shouldn’t do. Everyone here promises me that it’ll be okay, and that the entirety of this place will be behind me, in my corner. I also have my own individual therapist now, Kaylan. We’ve put in a lot of hours on getting me to a better place and I have a ways to go, but I’m working, not hiding, and I’m proud of that.”

Sara’s shock held her mouth. Maybe it was too much for Sara to cope with. It was hard to consider. “I can’t fathom how brave and strong you are. That’s awesome that you have all of that support from this place and a therapist. I have nothing to say about your parents, except that I’m sorry they were your parents. I’m sorry they hurt you. I love you. I know Sara loves you. We’ve talked about you so much, and we’re here

for you.” Bek paused for Sara to reply but saw nothing would be coming so continued to encourage Mel talking. “What is Kaylan like?”

“She’s amazing. Hyper. She has short hair parted on the side. Younger. She has tattoos and her septum is pierced. Her hair’s purple. She was one of Charles’s mentees. He probably isn’t near as weird as I said he was, except for maybe in the best ways possible. What meant the most to me was that as I told her what I have experienced she looked like Sara looks right now, like she would like to be alone with my dad and mom for a good minute, with a baseball bat. Something about her makes her feel familiar.”

Bek nodded. “Like she’s what has been missing.”

The rest of the day was spent with them building a new familiarity with each other from the old one and this new one. Every thought and experience created a new observer and experiencer. They were learning to appreciate growth.

Week 4

Endings are Beginnings and Beginnings are Endings

“Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief.” – Captain Ahab, *Moby Dick*

June 4, 2018

Entering the cafeteria feeling rested and optimistic, Bek saw Dr. Calloway sitting by himself with a cup of coffee in front of him. She had not ever seen him in the morning and thought that weird. She walked up to him. "Hey, I love coffee too, but liquid diets were like 15, 20, years ago."

He smiled before he looked up. "If it is the Notorious B.E.K."

She feigned shock. "Ohhh, what? Doth my ears deceiveth me? Dr. Calloway has jokes?"

"Come on, don't be hard on an old man. It's early. I'm trying." He pleaded with her.

She shook her head. "Nope, sorry partner. You don't get to play the old card standing in the same building as Charles bro."

"Fair. Maybe older adult hampered by being incredibly normal, unaided by anything abnormal or spectacular. Just being around him ages me. I'll retire and he will still be outperforming 20 somethings. It's just not right. I think I hate him, deep under, all of the love I have for him."

She smirked. "Envy is ugly doctor."

"Fair point."

"What brings you here? I usually don't see you around breakfast, and you obviously didn't eat."

"How do you know what I did or didn't do? I could have already put my tray up."

"False. I have seen your cluttered space. You wouldn't make for the tidy type."

He put his hands up in surrender. "Always observant. I'm actually here to catch you. I learned that you are an earlier riser. You got me out of bed, because I wanted to be the first person to tell you that your father is coming for a visit in three days. I got everything worked out yesterday. I thought you might be excited about hearing that."

Bek stood up quickly, on the verge of tears, and the chair she had been sitting in fell with a clang. "Oh my god, thank you Dr. Calloway. I can't believe it! I want to see him so bad. I have noticed how much of a void someone can create even if you don't spend a ton of time around them. You always spend more time with them than you think. I can't believe you got out of bed early just to give me this news. I appreciate it so much." She wanted to hug him, then thought that he would not want to hug. She decided to hug him. "I'm so sorry if this is wrong, but I can't help it. My body is telling me to hug."

He laughed. "That is okay Bek. I am happy you are happy. You deserve to be happy. I want you to always remember that. You deserve happiness."

She was so excited to see her dad and show him all the changes she had made. She was proud of where she had worked herself into. She hoped Mel and Sara would not feel that she was bragging or showing off. She wanted to share her excitement so bad and feared she would not be able to control it very well. Her nervousness proved to be unwarranted. Sara and Mel were happy for her and excited about the prospect of meeting Bek's dad. They wanted to meet the man who helped bring their precious friend into the world.

Group therapy proved to be a double celebration. The group was happy Bek was going to get to see her dad and that she had a dad worth seeing. Bek saw evidence of

how rare that is in the eyes of the group. It wounded her that more fathers did not live the responsibility the gift of parenthood required. The celebration of her good fortune only happened following the eruption of the group's joy at learning that Mel had returned and would be joining back in. Amy used the positive news as a way to guide the group to recenter the intentional aims of the work they are undertaking and recommit to striving for self-improvement and resiliency.

June 5, 2018

Bek was in the cafeteria having breakfast, feeling amazing, reading Audre Lorde's 'Change' out of her collected poetry and was hit, "Fuck. When a student's ready lessons are everywhere. If I'm interpreting this poem correctly, it seems to be speaking to not making your problems worse by creating your own internal wars about things. This is me. Lesson collected. Problems exist all around, there's zero question about that. Some problems are larger than others, but all problems harm. There's no use in creating hierarchies of suffering because those that would argue only want to dismiss the pain of others. There is nothing sustaining in the effort of people othering people in pain for false feeling of strength for their insecurities. Fighting up against that closed off wall, like I've done forever, only offers wars inside me, which moves me further from purpose. I need to let those useless battles go and develop success and improvement where I can. I want to be on Lorde's shore of calm waters, teaching." She heard a voice spoken to her closed eyes. It brought her back.

"Hey, I don't mean to interrupt, you look like you are immersed a bit, but can I sit and talk to you for a second?"

"Amy, please, definitely." Bek closed the book in front of her.

“Thank you. You look like you were in a good place. What were you thinking about if you don’t mind sharing?”

“I have sabotaged myself. Everything here...” She said as she opened her arms wide and looked around. ..”and a poem from here...” She placed her hand on the book as if it were a holy book. “...really kind of brought it all together. Certainly, there are forces that undermine me, but, in a way, I’m undermining myself too. I drain too much of my energy fighting an unwinnable fight, because I worry about fitting into this ill made story. However, if I change from my frustration and work towards a purpose, I make winning the war much more likely and I live a purpose.”

Amy laughed in shock. “Shit. By this point in the day I’ve only decided what to wear.”

Bek smirked at her. “We both know that’s not true, but I appreciate you trying to build me up. You’re one of the reasons I’ve learned what I have.”

“I’m not sure about that, necessarily, but it’s nice to hear you say that. So, I’ll take it. I don’t want to take up too much of your time, but I wanted to let you know that I’m planning to have a group meeting in two days, special meeting at 3pm. I want to welcome Mel back and keep her on a good track officially.”

“I think that’s a great idea. I was wondering why she wasn’t in group yesterday, but figured it was just how it goes. I know she would like to be back in group. She told me about how much time you have spent with her and how much it has meant to her. I didn’t know her mom was doing bad things too. I know you can’t talk about it, but I’m worried for her. What’ll happen if her parents are locked away? She won’t have anyone.”

"I think it'll be okay. Mel is nearing an age she could make it on her own. As a worst-case scenario."

"But I wouldn't want her placed in foster care or anything. I wouldn't know where she would end up or bad things could happen to her."

"Bek, I believe everything is going to be okay. Foster care is not always so horrible. There are a lot of great foster parents. She could even be adopted. She might even end up staying here."

"No offense. You know I love this place, but I don't think that would be great for her. Do you?"

"No, her being here that long would not be good for her. When she's ready, she needs more freedom and needs to interact with people out there. I only mean to say that she'll have the full backing of us here. We'll make sure she has the start to life that she needs, that she deserves. We have the resources to help in several ways. We would not consider it helpful to set people up to fail or become dependent on anything other than themselves. That's our goal here."

"I know. I didn't mean anything bad by it. I'm just scared for her."

"I completely understand Bek. I am too." There was a steeliness to her tone. "The first thing we must do is hold those that hurt her accountable. They need to be punished."

Bek was amazed at how much Amy cared. "I can't believe that you are not a mother."

"What?"

“Shit. I’m sorry I didn’t mean to just blurt that out. It’s just that you would be the perfect mother. When you have kids, if you do, they’ll be so lucky.”

Amy’s mood shifted to warmer. “Bek, damn. Thank you. Just remember that it’s often a lot easier to help people and go home rather than help people you live with.”

“I think I can understand that, but I still believe I’m right. You’ll be amazing. Oh, hey, this is perfect. In two days, I get my first visit with my dad. You can meet him.”

Amy smiled. “Bek. I’ve met and talked to your dad, several times.”

Bek’s eye shot to wide amazement. “What?”

“I organize all of the parental groups and interactions. I don’t facilitate them, but I’m the outreach program director. The program is my baby. I started it three years ago. So, I have several interactions with the people that are using the services and working to improve. Your father is a wonderful person who I’ve enjoyed getting to know, and he is ready to have his Bek back, and I can’t blame him for that. I’ll miss you being here a great deal.”

“I will miss you. I can’t believe you have talked to my dad so much.”

“Is that weird for you? I haven’t disclosed anything from sessions about you to him, and I have his written permission to discuss his efforts with you. I’ve given him general updates about you, but no details. I didn’t tell you earlier as a matter of practice, because not all parents are willing to do the work.”

“It means a lot to know he’s working so hard for me, and you could give him details. I signed a form that said you can discuss things with my dad on the first day. I have nothing to hide from him.”

"I agree. You have nothing to hide from him, but you have come to know parts of yourself that he might not know about, and I believe those are your reveals to make."

Bek smiled. "I appreciate that. I wasn't even thinking about him not knowing that I'm gay. I'd like to be the person that tells him that."

"That's understandable. I don't want to take too much of your time. I just wanted you to know that we have a group session."

"I have no conflicts. It'll be good to see everyone."

"Perfect. Now I'll let you get back to Lorde, such an important poet and voice. I remember the first time I read her. I never could understand why her work wasn't more mainstream, except for racism."

"You know Lorde, of course you do. I just finished it, going back and rereading some favorites, and she is amazing. Her work is so relevant, still. Which might be sad. Would you do me a favor?"

"Oh. Yes, sure. What can I do?"

"Will you make me a list of books you consider must reads? I know I'm going to be leaving before too long and I decided I would like the people that have impacted me here to give me a reading list, so it'll be a way to continue some type of communication with them."

"I love that idea. I'd be happy to make you a list. I'll complete my homework by the next time I see you."

"I don't mean you need to drop everything and get it done."

"If I don't it could slip my mind, besides me saying that allows me to ask you for a reading list for the same reason the next time I see you. I'm stealing your idea. It's a

beautiful way to treasure people and what they mean to us through the books they love. I'm excited to read your list."

Bek was beaming. "Deal, and I don't think the idea is that original."

"It might not be that original of an idea, but that doesn't make it any less wonderful. It also is nowhere near common enough, especially in your age range. Never minimize your brilliance, there are too many people wanting to do that for you. I'll see you later."

"Have a good day."

"Same."

The recent good seemed to be a root system for more as another great day for Bek was logged. She ate with J, Mel and Sara. The threesome seemed to acquire a fourth, for the sake of expansion or maintaining the golden results of three. They were close and it was plain to see they would care for each other. It was peculiar how the introduction of a new person can meld people who previously knew each other. One of the mainstays of *The Bradbury* is that self-development is essentially the most important undertaking someone can pursue, and good friends are paramount to the efforts, friends who will hold others accountable and be complete enough they wouldn't be insecure enough to use others. Friends like that help people pursue their own goals through hard truths and accountability.

June 6, 2018

Bek got up early, ate, and headed to the library. She had not been in the library much since Mel got back. She wanted to soak up the library and early was the best time. She stacked an unreadable tower next to her and knew peace. Sometimes, the

world could be corrected with walls made of books. Bek wanted to make a fortress to protect her, a place she could build for her happiness. Nothing put her at peace like her chair and the musky smell of dust, ink, and glue. The colors of spines lined up whether by color, content, or contrast always seemed like art to her, just beautiful possibilities nested against each other dancing in walnut shelves.

“Hey, there you are. I thought I might find you here. Excited about tomorrow?”

She looked up in shock to see Charles, the quiet version smiling down at her.

“Oh, hey! Yes, I am. Were you looking for me?”

“Yes. Is it not okay for me to?”

“No. Sorry. I am just shocked.”

“Well. I’m excited about your visit with your dad. I wish more of our parents were like him. I know he’s not perfect, and I know you have your issues with him, which are justified. He has been working so hard for you though. He even got the teacher to drop the charges, which really has helped your position.”

“Shit. I can’t believe she did that. I know he’s a good person, and I know he cares about me.”

“He does. I wanted to find you and ask you an important question, at least it is for me. I wanted to make sure you and I had the opportunity to discuss.”

“Sure, anything.”

He looked serious. “I want you to tell me what you think about this place and what it’s meant to you by describing your life before and after. I want you to know that I ask you this because I value your input. This, also, isn’t an attempt for you to complement this place and what we do. I just want an honest answer.”

She sat up from her slouch, feeling a deeper importance. “Well, I can’t think of anything I could say that isn’t a compliment. This place has been a major catalyst of growth for me. When I came here, I was rash and angry. I wanted to inflict punishment on those that transgress, but I don’t want that anymore.”

He smiled. “What do you want now?”

“I want to focus on improving myself and helping others to improve themselves. I want to start whaling.”

He furrowed his brow. “Whaling?”

“Yeah, you know like Ahab.”

“Interesting. *Moby Dick*, really? He dies though, no?”

“Yes *Moby Dick*. I’ve been thinking about it a lot, even in round about ways. We all die, but he died with a purpose, living in his passion, his purpose. Dying in passion is better than waiting to die all greyed and safe on the sidelines. I want to be lost in the living a purpose worth dying for. Our whales will be what they will be, and they might be big enough they overpower us and pull us down to our deaths, but that’s okay because it writes the story. Not living like that is dying each day. I think that is what the wren and coyote taught you. I imagine Ahab never regretted his decision, even when he realized that saving breath would never come. I think he felt calm not panic. It was his purpose. Too many people are afraid of living a life of purpose, especially at the stakes of, no matter the costs. Certainly, we shouldn’t get so lost we become our own undoing, but Ahab found his match, was in the throws with it, and lost. I think he was exactly where he was supposed to be doing what he was meant to do.”

“Why would you want to follow someone who died, a person often characterized as, at least, a little bit crazy, monomaniacal?”

“Because those are the stories we tell. Those are the stories that are important, the stories that abduct us and extend into the future. No one has published a story that never challenges the norms or fights the tyranny of safety, which I mean all ways. Without Ahab we would never meet Ishmael. His story probably wouldn’t have extended beyond his family and friends. And that might be enough for some. It’s not for me. Besides, it’s like Seal said, ‘We’re never gonna survive, unless we get a little crazy’.”

He laughed loud enough Jaime would have come over the counter if his name were not Charles. “So, you are more focused towards your goals and outcomes, rather than the words and behaviors of people around you?”

Bek nodded. “I think, I don’t need to conform to others to be what I feel is success. In fact, conforming to them might hold me back. I admit this isn’t easy but setting out into a sea searching for purpose is never an easy choice. It’s not supposed to be. If it were easy everyone would be doing it. So much can go wrong. The pursuit is the justification. I think it’s weird that society praises the atypical people through history and biography, through stories, while trying to force everyone to conform through dress codes, rules, social expectations, and testing. I can’t imagine any serious people that would agree with conformity being good, unless they had the power. Yet, here we are with so many powerless people believing that they align with the power.”

“I love that you are thinking about the powers that control, writing our histories and rules, but I am curious. You said we did something for you to be the catalyst for this? How? It seems you got here all on your own. None of us gave you Melville, and I

don't think I've ever heard that defense of Ahab. Why aren't you giving yourself the credit you deserve for the work you've done?"

"What do you mean?"

"How was this place the catalyst for where you've arrived? I've read the notes of your sessions. I don't see a justification for that statement."

"Well, I mean. Okay, it's all of the interactions, sessions, people, library, everything working together. This is what I have been longing for, dreaming about."

"How's that our doing?"

"Why are you asking this? Why are you challenging me on this?"

"Oh, no Bek, no. I just want you to see that you created this. We do our best to set up intentional interactions and probabilities, but you did the work. You sought out books and conversations. While this is a very supportive place and making these types of personal improvements is more likely, you did this. If it were us, everyone here would be where you are, right? And, you can do this anywhere, here or home. You have the skills to seek out and use what is available, and help is always available for those that are looking. Remember, my angel was a librarian. You know how to generate these interactions. You know how to find and experience what you need. You are living intentionally with a purpose, and I don't think you need to be under our care anymore. I think you should go home tomorrow with your dad when he comes."

A bomb exploded too close to her. "Did I do something wrong? This feels too sudden. Why are you making this so sudden? No. I'm not ready to go I need to be here longer. You send me back, and I'll fuck up to get back in."

He lifted his hands in surrender. "Bek, Bek. Slow down. Slow down. Come, walk with me. I want to talk to you. You don't have to go back with your dad now, but if not now, when? You'll be the same ready now as you would be in a month. Ready is ready."

"I know.. But..."

"No, no buts. I said you could stay. You know you shouldn't though, otherwise you would have stopped there. Right? You know none of us here want you gone. We've all grown fond of you. If you stay, you'll be stunted or stalled at best. You need to go whaling in the sea. All you will find in this little maintained and nurtured pond is fish. This was my whale, and we are still battling. My staff and I share a pursuit of this passion, and I love each one of them for it. You're out of place where you are in it. Maybe, one day, you'll see this as your whale and come back to move it into the future. I could see a version of you coming back. Hell, I can see a version of you taking over for me. But I can't force that pursuit on you. If it's in your future, you need to find it. I don't plan on going anywhere soon."

"You just think I should go so soon."

"Yes. And, so do you. It's not like you can't come back and hit the library or have lunch. I'm sure there is some form and waiver you would need to sign, but we are here."

The concern the bomb set off was lifting. "How would I get here? I don't even know how far my house is from here."

"Your house is about 35 to 40 minutes from here."

"You think my dad is going to drive me here?"

“Honestly, yes. From the conversations I’ve had with him, I believe he would. And if not, there is a bus stop really close, which is one of the reasons I built this here outside of the city, but not disconnected. We will give you a bus pass.”

“Really?”

“Really. You will never be disconnected from us, unless you want to be. It works out well. Your group session will be a welcome back and a going away. I know J, Sara, and Mel are going struggle and we’ll help them through it. We’ll gladly make sure that they have all contact information to reach out when they are ready to leave. How does that sound to you?”

“I’m not sure. I guess you’re right. I don’t want you to be, but, honestly, I would be staying more to hang out with my friends. That isn’t what this place is for.”

“I appreciate you saying that. I’ll come to your group session, as will Dr. Calloway and Jaime to say goodbye. I have reached out to the staff to tell them this plan ahead of time all of them feel the bittersweet reality of saying goodbye to you. I think you should spend today with your friends. Don’t avoid their or your pain. It’s the pain that tells us what was real. I have told their therapists to be expecting them, and we have already been working with Mel. She knows.”

“She does? She didn’t say anything.”

“We asked her not to. The news hurt her, but she’s handling it okay. It is all going to be okay.”

“Hippies are always saying that.”

He smiled and laughed a little. “And, we’ve always been right. We’re just waiting on the rest of you to understand and live in a way that would prove it.”

“Maybe. Charles, I’m scared. I love this place.”

He put his arm around her shoulders. “I know, but that isn’t the reason to bind yourself to us. You need to complete your growth, and that’s out there. You know we love you too. And you can always reach out, but it’s best.

She would never see his smile enough. “I understand, and I know. But, I’ll see you tomorrow, you won’t forget or get caught up?”

“Bek, I only forget people who think they are or want to be important. I never forget people who are important. I’ll be there, maybe even early.”

She turned abruptly and hugged Charles deeply, help him. It was the hug she had needed. Only her dad’s would be better. “I don’t care if this violates something.”

Charles hugged her back as deeply and said, “Let em come try and make me stop. You are family. You are a part of us.”

Bek figured out soon that she would have the headache so frequently tied to crying. The rest of the day was filled with tears spilt out of love and connection. She cried all day. Seeing J cry wounded her. He was so sweet about it, gentle. He agreed it was right for her to go, but asked if he could put her on his contact list and asked if she would stay in touch. She was his list. After J, Bek face reality and talked to Sara and Mel. The fact the Mel already knew didn’t stop her from crying, but both Mel and Bek soothed Sara into understanding. Initially Sara wanted no part of the change, after only just getting Mel back. Sara eventually saw reason and held Bek and cried as Mel reached her arms around both of them. The day ran out with the foursome of Bek, J, Sara, and Mel laughing outside after dinner over everything that had happened, the sweet surrender to what would have to be.

June 7, 2018

The entire campus was alive with the bittersweet graduation of someone who had, in a short time, left an indelible stamp, a mark that will survive through history, epochal. Things would be different surrounding the presence of Bek, the whaler. The party generated enough expression of love Bek was overwhelmed. It can be easier to notice a person's impact on their departure. She looked at the doors as they opened for a tall lean but sturdy man, with rich dark skin, and a smile that stretched out like a sunrise. He was dressed in grey slacks and a purple button down with a tie.

"Dad!"

He ran to her and lifted her off the ground not noticing the eyes pouring over them as bodies cleared a space. They were both crying. "Rebekkah, my Angel. I'm so proud of you."

Mel reached her hand out for Sara's and they clasped each other's hands, bittersweet.

Their solidarity was broken by Bek dragging her dad to them introducing them.

Her dad reached out to both of them holding their hands smiling, "Ladies, thank you. It's wonderful to finally get to meet you. I heard that Rebekkah had made friends, and I can see why. Please call me Joseph."

Mel and Sara greeted him but were not expecting him to be as attractive as he was. He was a striking man, a rugged handsomeness. A face that was fierce and hard but prided itself on gentle warmth. Once settled everyone started to get food. The Bradbury provided for the farewell and welcome back party. People began sitting in the cafeteria and Joseph started making the rounds speaking with people like Charles, Dr.

Calloway, and Amy. Bek was excited to take him on the tour, especially taking him to the library. Bek set and watched her two positive worlds come together in more of an embrace than a collision, as it should be she thought. She smiled watching everyone interact, watched her dad in a conversation with J. He was there and everyone was loving him. After J, Joseph spoke with Charles for some time and Bek swooned, her two favorite men speaking candidly to each other, enjoying the company. It was different than the more formal she watched between her dad and Dr. Calloway, which made her laugh. She was shocked to witness the ease and familiarity her dad had with Amy, but she guessed they had worked together on a number of things. Charles interrupted her watching her dad, the way children of single parents do, knowing having one is a natural insecurity, and asked if he could speak with her.

She looked at him. "Sure, but can I just say something first?"

"Only always." He smiled.

"I'm glad this place isn't heaven."

He looked at her curiously. "What do you mean? Did someone say it was?"

She dropped her chin a little. "Well, kind of. I had a nagging feeling that maybe this was heaven, like maybe the police showed up and shot me, and this was heaven, which is why my dad wasn't here and everything was too good to be true."

She was surprised he did not laugh. She had thought her whit would have conjured a smile at least, but he looked somber. "I hate the pain associated with that truth. Racism ends the lives of beautiful people. I've never had someone say we were heavenly. I like that. I'm glad it isn't too. However, if you think about it, what else is heaven besides something people are willing to put in the effort to make. Maybe it could

be, at least, a heaven. But that takes our effort as well as yours. I'm going to have to think about this. Again, you and I are sanctifying each other's thoughts."

She smiled. "I like that. Heaven is what people are willing to make. Why can't we work together to better build it in this life?"

"Exactly! Now, here." He handed her a manila envelope. "This envelope and everything in it is yours. In here there are a couple of things. A bus pass, and some tax forms. Last night, I realized that as much as you don't want to leave I don't want you to leave either, but you shouldn't be a patient here. So, I thought I would offer you a job. We could use some help in the library and I would like to talk to you about working with a new high school initiative that I want to start. Now, I do..."

Bek couldn't let him finish. She hugged him hard enough he did not have enough air in his lungs to keep talking. She even stopped his laugh from being audible. "Yes! Yes! A million times yes!"

She released her squeeze on him. "Okay, okay, now wait. I don't want you to answer today. The job is yours if you want it, whatever hours you can manage, and obviously you can do homework in the library, but I want you to go home and think about what is best for you. The bus pass never expires and will always be yours, like the job. There is also something in there regarding college, because we have to get you on track. You're the first recipient of The Bradbury Scholarship, which is a part of the initiative. That's yours no matter if you take the job. We are going to invest in yo..."

"Charles. I don't know what to say. I don't know where to begin. I just.. I just.."

He smiled. "Right now, don't say anything. Your words will come, and when they do large swaths of people will listen, and we're going to support you through the whole

effort. Also, in there is all of my contact information, which you could use to contact your friends if you choose not to come work here. I can't wait to see what all you will do. It will be worth the price of admission when so few things are."

After, Charles and Bek talked she said goodbye to Jaime, who urged her to take the job, and Dr. Calloway. She respected Dr. Calloway more than she could honestly understand. She respected him enough that it made everything vaguely awkward. She saved Amy for last, her matriarch, her all mother. Amy gave Bek her number and Bek knew that they had become a part of each other's lives. Bek did not feel much sadness, because Amy, like others, were going to be a part of her life. Bek also knew she was going to take the job.

The End