Aisha & Teresa

Nora Salem

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ABSTRACT

A novel about two young women from very different backgrounds who are united by friendship and the trauma of sexual assault.
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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

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What we did was inexcusable but inevitable. The choices were made long before we were born. Maybe his choices were made before he was born too, but that’s none of our business. We did what we had to do, like everyone else does. There is no either or. No maybe or almost. There is simply what is and what isn’t.

And as for what is, there were centuries leading up to it -- war and disease, hunger and loss. There were smaller things too, like our fathers meeting our mothers, like the decision to move somewhere nicer or to try harder in school. There was the idea that things could be different. That all you had to do was put a little effort in. So we did.
June 1991

Teresa Santa Rodriguez was born on the very day that her father met his first mistress. By the time her little brother was born, he was already onto the second.

Teresa’s mother told her later that she thought she should’ve known from the beginning. Like, from the day when he came to her in the hospital and was extra attentive. It was her first baby, yeah, sure. But even when she miscarried, he wasn’t this kind. All fluffing her pillows and shit.

Must’ve been the guilt. That should’ve been the sign, she thought, not too long after he left. Shoulda known too much love is just as bad a sign as too little.

May 1998

The only picture Teresa had of herself and her dad was of him standing in front of his beloved Ford Mustang, holding a five year-old Teresa up in the air like Simba from the Lion King. The car was the old one that he spent months restoring all by himself, in the driveway in front of their little bungalow on Rialto Avenue. It was a 1960s relic, a sort of golden-brown, and the hood was long like an alligator snout and the tail lights curved up gracefully.

Two years after that picture was taken, she was sitting in the car with her dad and the top was down. Teresa angled up out of her seat so she could stick her hand out and feel the air pass by, let it push her arm back so far it felt like it might snap.

Mariah Carey was on the radio. I still believe one day you and me, will fall in love again...

Teresa’s dad always sung along with the radio, especially the sappy songs. They both loved Mariah. When he couldn’t remember the lyrics, which was most of the time, he just made
It up, mixing English with Spanish words that sounded like the English ones he’d forgotten. Usually, she would tell him to stop, because it was embarrassing.

But it was a nice day. That, plus she had a sense that change was imminent. She wouldn’t put it that way at seven, of course. She probably didn’t even know how to name the feeling she had in her gut, but she did know it was real. She had a feeling something was going to go down. The fights between her mother and father were getting bigger and bigger and the time between them smaller and smaller. Still, her father hardly ever seemed bothered. In fact, he always seemed to be in a good mood.

__juuuu noooo i’m not the desperid type, if there’s one esparkle of hope, lef in my raspaaaaa__

Teresa giggled. He was playing it up for effect and she knows it.

By the end of the summer, he would be back in Mexico. She remembers him best standing on the porch in an unseasonable coat, two suitcases behind him on the concrete landing.

He said, I have to go because your mother is sending me back. I wish I could stay with you. I really wish I could. And then he hugged her goodbye.

* 

**Fall 1999**

Aisha and her mom headed to the airport early on a Sunday morning. They took the train to JFK, switching subway lines twice.

It was Aisha’s first time at JFK. Or the first time she could remember. The real first time was five years before, when she was two. It was about six months after her father died, and her mother, in a crisis, had decided to return to Mansoura, Egypt with her in tow. The move only
lasted a few months before her parents convinced her to move back to New York, where they, with their newfound citizenship, were more likely to prosper. Or at least, that’s how they put it.

When they got to the gate that day, Aisha could tell who he was pretty much immediately. She had probably met him when she was a toddler, so it wasn’t that she remembered him. It was something about his face, both fearful and excited. His hair was a mess and he wore an oversized navy suit and a pair of beaten up sneakers. Her mother waved. When he saw her, the relief on his face was so obvious that Aisha snickered. Her mom jammed her elbow into her ribs.

Her mother had saved up her earnings from the last paycheck from the hotel where she worked as a maid so they could take a taxi back to the apartment. He doesn’t need to know how miskeen we are until we get home at least, she had said.

In the taxi, he talked the entire way, almost without stopping. He talked about the chemistry program he had been accepted to and how excited he was to go there, once he finished the pre-reqs at the community college. He kept saying words that Aisha didn’t understand. Words for people much older than her. So to keep her entertained, he would occasionally turn around and look her right in the eye and make animal noises. I’m not a baby, she thought. Still, she couldn’t help laughing.

Having him around was very convenient, after all. Aisha’s mom could pick up more shifts at work while he babysat. There were many long nights that he would sit at their kitchen table, attempting to teach Aisha about molecules or atoms by taking her hand and outlining the drawings in his textbooks. Nothing ever stuck, really. But no one had ever paid this much attention to her, so she loved it.
They became sort of like a little family. He was her cousin, her Aunt Malika’s oldest son. To Aisha, he was also a brother. Or a father, even. The closest she ever had.

The memory really shouldn’t be that clear. In fact, nearly all of Aisha’s memories are very blurry. Except for this one.

It must have been near the end of the season. There was a slight chill in the air and the sun was already low by the time she got home from school. He walked her there, holding her hand the whole way, which had made her proud. Until he came around, she used to take a little yellow school bus with all the other kids whose parents worked late.

When they got home, he sat down on the couch next to her and pulled a blanket over both of them. He started to read to her from the book she was assigned for school. She shivered. He pulled her in closer. Habibti, he said, kissing her forehead and rubbing her back. He continued reading, but as he did, his hands moved lower and lower. Then, they slipped under the elastic of her stretchy pants. Then, into her underwear.

This had never happened before. That was a part of her that even her mother avoided touching. Was it supposed to happen? Was that just what men did? How would she know, anyway?

The memories of all the afternoons after that started to blur. Bits and pieces came back, but that’s about it. His heavy weight on top of her, the difficulty of breathing under its pressure, pain.

In June, he left for his PhD program in Minnesota. Her mother cooked a big Egyptian dinner for him -- macaroni bechamel, molokhia, kofta. He ate a startling amount of it.
Before he left for the airport, he kissed his aunt on both cheeks and thanked her effusively. Then, he knelt down in front of Aisha and looked deep into her eyes.

I will never forget you, Habibti, he said. Then, he pulled her into him and kissed both of her cheeks too, but more aggressively.

* 

TERESA

March 2003

Teresa’s mom used to pick up shifts at the grocery store, watch other people’s kids for a little money here and there. After her dad left, that wasn’t enough anymore. So her mom went to school nights and got a degree to be a nurse’s aid.

Still, they had to give up the house on Rialto Avenue. They couldn’t make the rent on just their mom’s salary so they moved to a little apartment complex not far from Tia Josie’s house on L Street. Which was convenient, because Josie or her kids could watch them when her mom worked late hours at St. Bernardine’s (the white people hospital, Josie joked, partly ‘cause it was expensive and partly because its name mangled the city’s Spanish name: San Bernardino).

Josie had a little yellow stucco house with a brown roof and a brown yard to match. The Christmas lights stayed up all year, even though she never turned them on after New Year’s. There was a gray metal gate around her yard and her two dogs were always barking when you tried to get in, no matter how long they’d known you. But once you were in, they’d just sniff you and let you pet them.

Josie was usually busy doing something, even when she did make it home in time to pick Teresa and her brother up. She was just one of those people who always had to keep her hands busy. Cooking. Sewing. Hitting someone. There were always kids in Josie’s house and they
needed to be kept in line somehow. First off, there are her own kids: Stevie, Rosie, Miguel Jr. or Mikey, and the littlest, Iliana. Then, Rosie had a kid of her own and Stevie’s baby mama sometimes brought his around too, mostly so Josie could see them. Stevie was not usually around. Plus, sometimes the kids from down the block would come around just for the hell of it. Because Josie’s house was fun and even if she’s strict about some stuff, it was where everything went down.

Iliana was the same age as Teresa but she liked to pretend the six months she had on her made a big difference. Or it was that she came from this big family where everything was always going on, like that made her more mature and knowledgeable than Teresa. Or it was that she was the pretty one and always knew how to make the right joke at the right time. Everybody was either in love with Iliana or afraid of her.

And that day, Iliana was displaying her maturity by explaining to Teresa and their friend Angie exactly what a blowjob is. Teresa was in the 7th grade, so the word wasn’t all that new. Danielle Davis, the 8th grader, was rumored to have given one to some rich kid in exchange for the gold bracelet she always wore on her wrist. So yeah, Teresa had heard about blowjobs. And she knew that it inspired giggles and shock but she just never quite knew what it entailed. Yes, she had imagined it -- of course, who hadn’t? She had imagined being a discreet and classy college girl who brought her pre-med boyfriend into her dorm room, unbuttoned his pants and blew lightly on his dick -- the way Audrey Hepburn might. The dick, by the way, she imagined as a light brown carrot-looking thing that was also ribbed.

Sooo, Iliana said, You put your mouth on it, like a popsicle, and you move it up and down. Teresa was all: What? Whyyyy? Why is that good?

Because boys like their dicks to get wet and slippery, said Iliana.
Oh, Teresa said. Angie nodded.

Then, they all went back to pouring over the Seventeen magazine that Angie had brought over. They held its pages gently -- or really, Angie did, because she was a priss and didn’t like it when they bent the corners or ripped an edge. All of them treated it like a bible, though. They were 7th grade girls and all 7th grade girls want is someone to call theirs. Seventeen actually had articles on how to make it happen.

For all of the 7th grade, they were like the three musketeers. This was mostly due to the uniting effect of failing to find a boyfriend. Even though all of them wanted one, not one of them succeeded. Despite Iliana’s bravado and Angie’s careful preening, they couldn’t get anyone to pay attention. At least not anyone worthy. As for Teresa, it was clear why she couldn’t. She was too good at school and just a little bit on the chubby side.

But together, they worked to create a system. Iliana mostly talked about sex (she always claimed credibility based on her sister Rosie’s knowledge -- doubly-proven by her sister’s six month old son), Angie gave advice about hair and makeup (red lipstick when you want to catch attention, pink when you want to seem approachable and sweet), and Teresa could wax poetic on the possibilities and intrigues romance would bring for hours. They liked how she could tell stories.

Sometimes, Teresa thought about talking about something else. Sometimes, she wanted to. Like for example, she’d start telling a story about a man proposing to his girlfriend in front of the mall Cinnabon but then somehow, she ended up telling a story about the epic battle between the girlfriend and her soon-to-be mother-in-law. Other times, the stories would get fantastical. That’s when she started to sound like the comic books that she stole from her brother. But Angie and Iliana didn’t like that. Get back to the good stuff, they’d say.
Earlier that week, Teresa’s favorite teacher Mrs. Calhoun had found the notebook she shared with Angie and Iliana. That was the trend that year. Get a notebook from the dollar store and decorate it with the names of your closest friends, write letters in it to them, pass it along and they would write letters back. Teresa was pretty sure Mrs. Calhoun didn’t actually find it. She thought it was maybe Kathy T. who hated Iliana ever since Kathy started coming to school wearing mermaid t-shirts and putting waves in her hair and Iliana started calling her Chubbs Ariel or The Big Mermaid and the whole class laughed. Teresa thought Kathy T. scooped up the notebook when she accidentally left it in English one day and showed it to Mrs. Calhoun to get Iliana in trouble. Except the only person who got in trouble was Teresa because Iliana was in Mr. Fabian’s English class.

Mrs. Calhoun asked Teresa to stay after class. She sat down at an empty desk and waited for everyone to leave. When they were gone, Mrs. Calhoun opened a drawer and pulled out the notebook. She immediately recognized the purple flowers and glittery bows Angie had stuck on it using her mom’s scrapbooking kit. She knew she was screwed.

But Mrs. Calhoun was her favorite for a reason. She was smart, soft-spoken, and never ever angry. She didn’t want to scold her or get her in trouble, she said to Teresa. She just had a few things she wanted to tell her. Things she wished she had known when she was Teresa’s age.

She said: Teresa, honey, you have this hill inside you and it’s beautiful and full of springtime flowers and that makes you want to share it. But every time you let someone come sit on your hill, they trample on some of the flowers and they die. Keep your flowers alive, Teresa.

Mrs. Calhoun had a way of talking that Teresa always loved and it was why things she said had a way of sticking.

July 2005
Teresa had always been a little obsessed with movies. She probably watched The Bad News Bears 350 times. And after that, A Christmas Story. And now, Love & Basketball. She stuck the DVD in for approximately the 231st time and about 30 minutes in, she realized she was sick of it. Summer was getting long and she didn’t know what to do with herself.

Teresa walked over to Angie’s house and Angie wasn’t even there. Damn, she thought. But Angie’s brother was on the couch and he had just started watching something she’d never seen before. Gunshots exploded through the living room and a guy in a suit with long hair pointed the barrel directly at the camera.

What you watching, she asked.

Pulp Fiction.

Teresa sat down with him and by the time she got up, she knew what she wanted to do with the rest of her life. Make movies.

But she wasn’t about to tell anyone.

AISHA

Late September 2007

On the train to school, Aisha was stuck in her own head. Which she was a lot, especially lately. She was thinking about something Mr. Crawford said in Biology the day before. Mr. Crawford was all into that environmental shit. He was always talking about it and he’s usually pretty convincing. But yesterday, he said something about how we should think about what we lose when we lose nature, about how all our worries can be erased by sitting by a stream for an hour or some shit like that. Some quote like, Earth doesn’t have any sorrows that earth (like dirt) can’t heal. Aisha thought, I don’t know about all that. She thought, I never sat next to a river that heard me out. She looked around at all the people on the train. It was morning rush hour and everybody
looked exhausted. A woman in a faded red coat slouched against a pole, a man in a windbreaker read a thick book while struggling to keep his eyes open.

Aisha felt like she could sense everybody’s stories, all their pain rising up from them like a steam. She sensed there was probably equal amounts of affection, hate, and indifference in the train. Aisha had an idealistic strain. She thought: We’re all in this together, even if we hate it.

She got off at Roosevelt, the stop nearest her high school. She was still thinking about stuff. So she didn’t really notice this tall dude trying to catch up to her. Until he tapped her shoulder. Aisha nearly shrieked.

Sorry, sorry, sorry, he said.

She looked up at him. Pretty eyes, like kinda caramel-colored. The way he stuffed his hands into his pockets and looked down, sort of bashful.

What, she said, sharply.

I think you dropped this, he said, and proffered a small black notebook.

[Aisha didn’t drop it actually. Brandon carefully opened the smallest pocket in Aisha’s backpack and extracted it. Smooth, Brandon]

Oh shit, she said. Thanks so much.

No problem.

She stopped to put the notebook back and when she looked up, he was still standing there.

You want a reward or something?

No, no, no, he said waving his hands in front of his face. I just thought maybe. I mean I live around here. I’ve seen you around...and I was wondering if I could buy you a coffee or something.
She squinted at him. He looked older than her. Had to be in his 20’s, at least.

I’m on my way to school, she said. Like high school. And I’m late.

Ok, he said. Maybe another time.

Yeah, maybe, she said.

Aisha was a little unnerved. Because he seemed to come out of nowhere, because he had to be at least five years older than her, and because he was kinda cute.

Mornings at Flushing High were chaotic. The hallways were not big enough and the kids were punks, generally speaking. Miniature New Yorkers, already good at pushing their way through a crowd. Aisha always made a point of not shoving, not clipping anyone’s shoulders, not even if she was late. It embarrassed her.

Or maybe this was just another one of those things that kept her separate from the rest of the kids. No one seemed to get her. Some of them were nice to her, and most were indifferent. But she didn’t have any friends per se.

Most days, she moved from 1st period to English to Algebra to Bio on autopilot. School was mostly easy for her. She could always get by on a minimal level of attention -- all her teachers kinda sounded like, Squak, Squak, a = bx +y, Squak, Squak, Faulkner. Whatever, you know. They repeated stuff constantly and Aisha usually got it the first time.

Basically, Aisha was bored as fuck. Sometimes, she thought what kept other kids awake in high school was mostly just wondering what other people thought of them. Today, in 3rd period English, she looked around and it felt like a revelation. There were all these people trying to piece together some sort of identity but no one who was just sitting there, being. There was the chick who tried so hard to be a bad bitch, even though she was clearly as inexperienced as Aisha was. There was the kid who dressed like an emo punk hipster -- but can anyone really be that
simple? A jock, over there, concerned with pretending that ball is life, even though he occasionally got so pumped about Toni Morrison that he went on monologues about her genius.

That’s why everyone freaks out about me sometimes, she thought. Aisha wore her hijab some days. But other days, she took it off before she got to school. Or, sometimes, even halfway through the day. No one gets that. The Puerto Rican girls would be like, Girl, why do you wear that at all if you don’t have to? White girls asked if she’s being forced to wear it by a fiercely abusive dad and Aisha was like, Uhh my dad is dead but thanks. And the Muslim girls hated her. Like, hated. Even the ones who didn’t wear hijab. One -- Miriam -- once said to her: At least I’m honest about who I am.

She just flipped her off at that moment. But long after, she thought: How can I be honest about who I am when I’m like seven people at once?

Ok, so there was maybe one exception to Aisha’s loneliness but she didn’t quite know if it counts. Ijeoma, but she went by Ijjie. Ijjie had an elegance to her, a real beauty. But she was freaked out by how tall she was and self-conscious about being dark-skinned, so she walked around hunched over and ready to snarl at anyone who looked at her wrong.

Aisha still remembered the speech Ijjie gave her when she showed up as a freshman and Ijjie was a sophomore. She said: I know you’re new here and all but you know you can’t walk like that. At passing period, the halls get crazy cuz this shitty school is too fucking full. And when you walk like that, like you’re dodging bullets or someshit, you’re begging to get your ass beat. Head up, back straight, and whatever you do, don’t move when someone is in your way. You walk right into them. Shoulder check ‘em if you have to. But do. not. fucking. move out of their way. Cuz that’s how they know they can fuck with you.
Ok, Aisha nodded. [She tried it for a couple days, but gave up when people didn’t move for her and she just felt like an asshole].

For real, though, Ijjie said. You know who fucks with me around here? No one.

Nerds don’t fuck with me, that’s for sure. They’re so scared of me if I turn around and whisper, Boo, they scream.

All the popular girls -- They don’t fuck with me either. They tell me I’m too full of myself. Show me someone who’s not full of herself and I’ll show you someone who’s hungry -- that’s a magnet on my mom’s fridge at home. In other words, are you eating tho?

All the emo kids don’t fuck with me, because they say I’m too loud. Loud? You got a problem? Bitch, try me, I’ll burst your eardrums.

Football players. Now, I wouldn’t mind if they fucked with me, tbh. Especially Reggie MacDonald, that black and Filipino boy, the tall one with the muscles. Yum. But he doesn’t fuck with me and neither do the rest of them. But that’s really because the only girls that ever get attention in high school are the dumb and slutty ones and I’m neither so oh well. I will just have to wait and they will all regret not getting to me when they had the chance.

Once in P.E., some girl told me she doesn’t fuck with smelly bitches who wear the same clothes every week. I made sure she knew that wasn’t the only reason not to fuck with me. She went home with a broken nose and two less teeth. I got suspended for weeks but it was worth it.

Honestly, the teachers don’t really fuck with me either. Most of the time if I have something to say to them, they don’t have anything to say back. And by now, they know I don’t mind detention either. Nice and quiet in detention. No one yelling at me in detention and I don’t have to go home until my mom is watching her tv shows and won’t say anything to me at all and
the babies are already almost in bed and my gross stepdad is on his way to the night shift. So I’m untouchable, basically.

Nobody fucks with me here. You wanna sit down here? You can if you want to? Nobody sits over here, but you look like you could use my protection. And some schooling, not the kind they give you in classrooms, but the real kind, you know? Some people need it cuz they don’t get it otherwise.

Aisha hadn’t spoken for like thirteen minutes. She looked up at Ijjie like, What. And that’s kinda how it always went. Ijjie had a tendency towards monologue. Aisha didn’t mind most of the time because she liked zoning out and just watching people. Plus, sometimes Ijjie really did drop knowledge on her. Most of the time, though, it was a lot of bravado and Aisha didn’t have a stomach for that. So sometimes she’d dodge Ijjie in the hallway. And since Ijjie didn’t like being unwanted, she’d ignore her too, more often than not.

By now, at the start of Aisha’s junior year, they had reached an equilibrium. They’d nod at each other sometimes. Every now and then, they might even have lunch together. But most of the time, they just kept their distance.

School was out at 3:15. Most kids roamed around the neighborhood after, smoked cigarettes under the bridge, got tacos at the Mexican place on the corner, snuck chips out of the bodega. Everybody had their rituals. Everybody had their group. Except for Aisha. Some guy might follow her out of Bio, trying to make conversation. Or a girl would ask some weird question about her hijab. But eventually, they’d drift away. Maybe she just isn’t warm enough, she thought. Sometimes, she gets lonely. Really, she didn’t think about it enough to figure it out.

But today, Brandon was there standing on the corner and suddenly Aisha had a momentary premonition that a tradition was about to develop.
What are you doing here? You stalking me?

No, said Brandon, peering around as if he expected someone would call out his lie on the spot. Just was in the area.

She squinted at him.

You got time to grab some grub?

Ok, fine, she says.

If she came home late, it wouldn’t matter. Aisha’s mom worked nights most of the time, cleaning hotel rooms in Long Island City. Most nights, dinner’s in the fridge and she just has to warm it up.

So she was cool with Brandon buying her a nice, warm meal. She was fine with listening to him talk about his dreams. DJ Rush was what he called himself and he was mostly playing at parties in Queens but he was just about to break into Manhattan and from there, the world. Aisha nodded: Yeah, yeah. But when he played one of his mixtapes for her on his little flip phone, she thought, Hey, not bad. He tells her once he starts making money, he’s gonna go all over the world. Paris, London, Bali. You should come, he said. Aisha laughed but it came out as more of a giggle than she wanted it to.

* 

TERESA

October 2007

Teresa really, really wanted to go to this Halloween party. She really, really wanted to go to it mostly because Andrew invited her and she really thought that maybe Andrew could possibly be interested in her and if he was, she’d really like to find out. The Halloween party was the perfect window, but her stupid mom wouldn’t let her go.
She asked. Then, she pleaded. No, said her mom. And the more she begged, the more insistent the no becomes.

You’re always like this, Teresa screamed. You’re so stubborn.

Her mother didn’t say anything, just kept on reading the newest issue of People - En Español. Didn’t even look up.

Teresa was furious. You’re the reason why dad left, she said. Because you don’t ever know how to back off. Because you’re so stubborn, you had to kick him out. Even if it meant we wouldn’t have a father anymore.

The temperature in the room changed. Her thirteen year-old brother even took out his headphones and looks up from a Marvel comic book. Teresa looked at him and his face was all like, Oh shit, here it comes.

But Teresa’s mom just laughed. She laughed.

You’re kidding me. You believed that chingado piece of shit? He had a whole other family in Mexico. He chose them.

Later that night as she went to bed, she was kind of grateful that at least she wasn’t thinking of Andrew anymore. Instead, she thought of her dad. Of sitting in the car with him. Of watching him pack and leave. Of the lie he told her on the doorstep.

Of course he left, she thought, stuffing her tears into her pillowcase. Of course he did. Who wants a bunch of losers like us.

*  

AISHA

November 2007
Brandon had a way about him. It was hard to pin down. But Aisha started to look forward to seeing him after school. He wasn’t pushy and she appreciated that. He just kept waiting for her, kept buying her shit.

That afternoon, Aisha walked out of the building fully expecting to see Brandon. It was just starting to get cold -- the air just beginning to pierce Aisha’s skin, the wind drying out her lips and messing up her hair. He wasn’t there. No sign of his fidgety pacing, no Yankees cap over his neat fro, no innocent caramel eyes searching for her.

She was disappointed. Which was weird. It was a feeling she wasn’t expecting. She stood still on the sidewalk, breathing into the air to see if it’s cold enough to see her breath, waiting but pretending not to wait.

After a few minutes, her pride took over and she walked to the train. But before she went underground, she decided to text him. Just in case something happened to him. ‘Where u? Dead or something?’

She waited a couple minutes. No response.

The next day, he was there in the same spot, like nothing happened. When she saw him, her heart did this little twirl. But she was pissed, so when he smiled at her, she just walked past.

Aish, he yelled at her back.

What, she said

What’s up with you?

She turned around, Did you get my text yesterday?

Is that why you’re mad?

I was just trying to check if you were dead, but you’re not, so cool, whatever.
Don’t be mad. You wanna know the truth, A? A couple days ago, I saw you walking out with that Dominican kid and I just wanted you to know you can’t take me for granted, you know?

Aisha looked up at him, The fuck you talking about?

The Dominican kid. You know, the short guy with all the chains and shit.

Aisha laughed.

Blanco? You’re kidding, right?

Brandon rolled his eyes, You don’t see the way guys look at you. The way they follow you around.

No one follows me but you.

You don’t see it. But I do. That’s why you need me around. I had to show you that so you could appreciate me.

Aisha thought that was bullshit, but she looked around. She wondered what else she didn’t notice. It wasn’t the first time someone called her oblivious.

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TERESA

February 2008

They did this fundraising thing every Valentine’s Day at Teresa’s high school. You could buy roses for someone -- anyone, a friend, a girlfriend, a crush -- and the kids from Student Government delivered them to the beloved’s classroom. It was a thing Teresa pretended not to care about, but that was mostly because she never really got one.

Teresa totally hated Valentine’s Day anyways. Perfect weather for it, she thought, looking up at the gray-blue clouds just about to burst into rain -- one of those rare cold and
dreary days in the desert. When she got to her third period Spanish class, she sat next to her BFF Roxie, as usual. Roxie was this filipino girl who always has her ponytail pulled back so tight it looks like it’s lifting her entire face up. When Teresa got there, Roxie turned to her and smiled her tight smile, her eyes lit up behind her glasses.

 **What, asked Teresa.**

 Roxie pulled a rose out from underneath her desk.

 **I got one, she said.**

 Oh, yeah, Teresa feigned interest, Who from?

 **I don’t know -- secret admirer!**

 Roxie was enthused.

 **Like you don’t know who it is?**

 **Nope, look, said Roxie, showing her the tag tied onto the rose that just said: “Happy Valentine’s Day, beautiful. Love, your admirer from afar.”**

 **Weird, said Teresa.**

 Then, ten minutes into class in came two studious looking kids with big smiles on their faces. **We got some roses to deliver, they said, enthusiastically.**

 **The list of names was pretty typical -- the popular girls, the ride-or-die cholas, the girls with long term boyfriends whose pictures they stick behind the clear plastic on their binders.**

 **Then: Teresa Rodriguez.**

 **Huh, she said, trying not to blush, trying to act casual.**

 **You got a rose, said the kid in the green cardigan, nodding and smiling.**

 **Um, ok, she said.**
When he passes it to her, she looks at the tag -- same exact note as Roxie’s. What the fuck, Teresa mumbled.

Teresa thought about who it might be, but she mostly tried not to. After Andrew lost interest just a couple months into “hanging out” and started dating a pothead named Jessica, Teresa had maybe gotten a little cynical. So in AP Chemistry, when a couple of nerds came up to her and Roxie’s lab table and asked if they got the roses, Teresa was like, Of course it was these weirdos. Yeah, I guess so, she said. But she looked over at Roxie and she can tell Rox was pumped. When they ask if they could take them out on a “double date” on Friday, Teresa grabbed Roxie’s arm. We’ll think about it, she said.

Teresa and Roxie lived on the same block ever since Freshman year, when Teresa’s mom got enough saved up to rent out a little house. They walked home together every day. On the way home, Teresa tried desperately to convince Roxie out of it.

Roxie, those guys are losers, said Teresa.

I don’t know, I kinda like Kevin, Roxie said, smiling shyly.

Teresa rolled her eyes.

Come on, do it for me, said Roxie.

I don’t know, Rox, sounded like a really shitty way to spend a Friday night.

Oh yeah, what are you going to be doing instead?

Good point, thought Teresa.

Ok fine, she said, What’s in it for me?

My affection and friendship.

Nope, said Teresa.

Ok, fine. You can borrow my Tiffany’s necklace.
(i.e. the one Teresa had been eyeing for the past year. The one she begged her mom to buy her for Christmas. Instead, she just got a gift card to Forever 21 and her mother’s hysterical laughter: Tiffany’s! Piensas que somos los Kardashians, she had said, through giggles.)

For real?

For real.

So Teresa sucks it up and agreed to go on the date. The guys pulled up to Teresa’s house, where she and Roxie were waiting, Roxie in a tight red bandage dress and Teresa in jeans and a v-neck that highlighted the necklace. They actually opened the car doors for them and everything.

Kevin and Roxie sat in the front. Roxie giggled the whole way to the Italian restaurant while Teresa’s date, Pete, kept trying to casually touch her thigh. Which was the first time that Teresa starts to wonder if the necklace was worth it.

The second time was when Pete, who was trying to compete with the kind of flirtatious conversation going on across the table between Kevin and Roxie, leaned over and whispered in Teresa’s ear: I play guitar. You should see the kinds of things I can do with these babies. Pete wiggled his fingers in front of her face.

Teresa scooted away from him and spent the rest of the dinner only making eye contact with her ravioli.

When they pulled up to Teresa’s place to drop them off, Roxie kissed Kevin goodbye and Teresa jumped out the car before Pete could lean over and copy them. Bye, she mouthed, waving at him from behind the window.

Aw, hold on, said Pete, You can’t even give a guy a hug?
Pete got out of the car and reached for her. Teresa looked to Roxie for backup but she was up against the car and Kevin was leaning over her, staring into her eyes. *Fuck this*, thought Teresa.

Then, a saving grace. And it came in the form of a wild yelp. They all looked up. In the half-dead eucalyptus across the street was a grown man in fatigues holding a bb gun. Ay, he said, the fuck you kids up to, huh?

Um, nothing, we’re about to go home, said Kevin, pulling away from Roxie so quickly that she kind of wobbled over towards the hood of the car. Pete nudged her away from the passenger door and hopped in. Just like that, they were gone.

Teresa looked up at her neighbor. He smiled at her with all four of his teeth and Teresa recognized him even though he had big black and green streaks of paint wiped all over his face.

What you doing up there, Smiley?

Oh, just watching the neighborhood, he said, casually.

Never had Teresa been more thankful for his old acid-tripping, alcoholic ass.

* 

AISHA

_Eid al-Adha, December 2008_

Aisha had been fasting for Ramadan, but kinda like the same way she wore hijab. Off and on.

Today, she knew she wasn’t going to school and she knew her mom asked for the day off. This was the only day she ever requested every year. Her mother was asleep because she had worked the night before. But she had laid out breakfast like she always did on days like this. Just something small, something to hold them over, because after prayer there would always be the good donuts they could get on the way back home, good Eid donuts. Her mom always did things
like that -- she had a way of knowing that her absence spoke louder than her presence ever did.

In four little bowls and one plate, there was the big black olives, a pile of thinly-sliced tomatoes, a little oil, some gibneh-romy and a stack of a’ish beladi from the grocery down on 38th St.

Aisha was ready, standing in her coat in front of the round kitchen table, gulping down mouthfuls of cheese and olives and bread. Her mom walked out in a pretty abeya her sister had just sent her, all the way from Mansoura, Egypt. It was all black with beaded trim. Red, yellow, and blue beads all down the front and on the trim of the matching scarf hanging over her head.

Come on, let’s go, she said.

They had to take the train all the way to Jamaica because last time they went to the mosque in Astoria, her mom got into a fight with some Bengali lady who cut in line for iftar. Some mixture of pride and shame kept her from going back, since she called the lady a fat cow and knocked a plate of Ramadan sweets out of her hands. So instead they were going to Jamaica and with all the train-switching it took them a whole hour to get there. The train was hot and sticky with rush hour bodies crowding the car. Aisha’s dress itched. People looked at them weird. But the closer they got to Jamaica, the more people looked like them. And when they got off the train they all got off with them: Old South Asian men in big coats over white kurtas, their orange tipped beards covered in melting snow. Young Yemeni girls in bright silky scarves, massing in threes and fours. Slow-walking North African boys in hoodies with neatly trimmed beards. And Aisha and her mom. She followed behind her, reaching for the beads on the trim of the scarf trailing behind her back, touching it just lightly so she wouldn’t notice.

In the mosque, cubbies for shoes lined the walls. But there wasn’t enough room for everybody who only really came on holidays and so piles of shoes covered the floor in front of
the white shelves. She took off her shoes and then her coat and she was just looking for a place to put them when her mom grabbed arm.

Aisha, what is this? She asked, motioning to her outfit.

Aisha looked down -- she was wearing black, high-waisted jeans (maybe a little tight) and a crop top turtleneck that said, DOPE, in white italics. Only a tiny inch, maybe a centimeter, of the skin on her belly was showing.

What, ma?

Aisha, she yelled as quietly as she could manage, trying not to draw attention. She pulled her daughter in towards her and whispered in her ear: Are you stupid?

Aisha pulled her arm out of her mom’s grip.

No, she said, crossing her arms over the skin on her belly.

You can’t go in like this. You look like one of those sharmouta Spanish girls, her mother said through gritted teeth.

I won’t go in, then. Aisha put on her coat.

Where are you going, ya bint?

Home, she said, knowing she was lying as soon as she said it.

Her mother’s face curled into fury but Aisha knew she wouldn’t make another scene. She turned around and walked out.

She walked down the steps from the mosque but stopped at the bottom of the staircase, standing behind the big green metal gate. A family rushed past her, late for prayer, dragging their small children at a diagonal as they made it for the door. She stared across the street at the Bengali Grocery & Islamic Souvenirs, the Electronics Discount Center, Top Nails, Pizza Point,
Alicia’s Braids & Weaves, McDonalds, PayDay Express -- until her eyes passed the green pole standing over the train stop. The Q to Manhattan -- she almost said it out loud.

She never really left Queens on her own though, to be honest. She’d go with her mom to shop or do errands and she went once or twice on a field trip. But mostly she’d stay in the neighborhood.

She knew who she’d want to go with her. She called him.

It was one of those days that changes things. He met her in Bryant Park with a handful of bodega flowers. It was just what she needed. She let him put his arm around her.

They went everywhere. They walked the wide streets of Midtown Manhattan in the relative quiet of a late December morning. They took the 7 crosstown and landed in Times Square, staying just long enough to grow sick of it. They walked down from there all the way to St. Mark’s Place, where he bought her dumplings and bubble tea -- things she had never had before. They kept on walking. Brandon stopped to watch a pickup basketball game on West 4th and told her how he used to be a star in high school. I would’ve gone far, could’ve been in the NBA, but my coach hated me, he said. He wanted to see me fail.

They walked into Washington Square Park and there it was: the first snow of the season. Little flurries carried on the wind landing on Brandon’s cap, on the bright blue strands of Aisha’s hair. He held her hand. He wrapped his arms around her to keep her warm. She felt like she was in a romantic comedy, like she was Anne Hathaway or something. Like a more badass, poorer, Egyptian Anne Hathaway, Anne Hathaway in a pleather jacket and a turtleneck that said DOPE, she thought. As she was thinking that he put his hand behind her head and brought it up to his and kissed her, under the arch. Just like in the movies.
She walked into the apartment flushed with cold and excitement. Her cheeks were red and her lips sucked dry by a cold wind and Brandon’s enthusiasm.

Her mom was sitting on the couch. Fuck, Aisha thought, as she was brought back to reality.

She spoke quietly, calmly, and all in Arabic: bad signs. She told her she didn’t expect much from her anymore, disappointment as she was. Blue hair, hardly ever wore hijab, no, worse -- always dressing like a lunatic. But this. Leaving the mosque on Eid, running around the city all day like an American slut, you should know we’re better than that. But you don’t. You’d rather be trash. You spend all day in trash and you become trash.

Aisha didn’t say anything. She didn’t talk back. But she grew madder and madder. It was the contrast probably, between Brandon’s affection and her mom’s blatant hatred, that allowed her to feel this outraged. Yeah, she’d been shamed by her mom’s vicious tongue before, she’d been hurt. But she never felt this angry. Still, she didn’t say anything.

Ok, ma. You done?

It was the rudest thing she’d ever said to her mom. It made her feel brave.

Ya bint al-kalb, her mother said. Get your garbage face out of here.

Aisha went to her room and lay on her bed. She lay there and all she thought of was Brandon and the snow and the park and the flowers she had to throw away outside the apartment to keep her mom from being suspicious. She didn’t need to be angry, she realized. She had all this love. His love.

January 2008
From then on, she let go. She let herself go. She let him come over to the apartment after school when her mom was at work. She let him put his arms around her waist, let his hands wander down to her ass.

He told her he loved her. She said it back.

One afternoon, he put his wide calloused hands under her shirt and then under her bra, squeezed her boobs. Aisha felt herself get warm. He started to unbutton her pants. He put his hand into her underwear, moved his fingers around. Suddenly, she was startled. She thought, if I don’t stop here, where will it stop? She pulled back and grabbed hold of the arm on the couch. The couch she grew up on. No, this is too much, she said.

Baby, you know I love you.

I know that.

And I’m a lot older than you right?

I know that too, she said.

It’s just that with most of the girls I been with, it usually goes a little faster than this. I mean, I love you so much more than I loved them so I can wait a little.

She lifted her eyebrows.

But I can’t wait too long.

The thing is, Aisha thought about it. She did. She thought about it kind of a lot. She thought about taking off his shirt, about biting the smooth brown skin on his neck, about feeling his lanky, warm body on top of her. In fact, she thought about it so much, and she was spending so much time with him, that her grades were starting to suck. For the first time ever, she was getting C’s. And she didn’t care. Isn’t this a sign, she thought. Isn’t love something that makes you want to give up everything else?
And she loved him. She did.

One day at school, she tracked down Ijjie. She hadn’t talked to her in months. But she knew how to finesse her. Just enough begging and some compliments thrown in and you can get Ijjie to talk.

And maybe Ijjie wasn’t the best person to talk to. But the truth is, she didn’t have anyone else.

So they sat together at lunch that day. Aisha pretended to be interested in Ijjie’s monologues. In a quiet moment, she snuck a word in. She had to get to the point quick before it went somewhere else.

Look, Ij, so I’ve been seeing this guy. And I think he wants to take it all the way.

Ijjie pulled her head back and squinted. Who’s this fool?

I just met him here, around the way. He’s nice. Real cute.

What is he, asked Ijjie

Biracial.

An Oreo, Ijjie shook her head.

Aisha ignored her. He’s smart too. And creative. He’s a DJ.

Pff, spat Ijjie.

Aisha expected this. She knew Ijjie would act a little jealous. So she pushed on: I just don’t know what to do. He wants to have sex. He’s older, you know?

How old?

25.

What the fuck? Ijjie said. Twenty-five??

Yeah…
Aisha, what the fuck do you think a twenty-five year-old is doing fucking with a sixteen year-old?

Aisha was bewildered but armed with a steady defense: He loves me. We love each other.

Love, laughed Ijjie. No such thing.

She’s just bitter, thought Aisha.

Well, it’s how I feel, she said. I just don’t know what to do.

Don’t do nothing, said Ijjie. And definitely don’t fuck that loser.

Damn, Ijjie, you don’t have to be rude.

Yes, I do. Seems like I have to be rude if I’m gonna keep you from making a mistake.

He’s not a mistake. He’s my boyfriend.

He’s a LO-SER, Aisha. No twenty-five year-old is trying to fuck a high school junior unless he can’t get girls his own age.

Shhh, people are looking. And you don’t have to act like that.

I’m just trying to help.

No, you’re just jealous. You’ve always been jealous. Of everyone.

That was the thing that broke between them. Ijjie looked at her with an ire she’d never seen before. Aisha knew she had said something that was going to change everything, but she was so mad she didn’t care.

Fine, said Ijjie, You can go whore yourself out to some loser DJ scoping out high school girls. Just don’t ask me for help. Leave me the fuck out of it.
If anything, Ijjie’s speech made her want to do it more. She knew Brandon liked her because she was mature, better than other high school girls. But, still, every time they came close to it, she freaked out. She wasn’t sure why. Her mind was with it. Her heart was with it. But it was like her body wouldn’t let her.

Then there was that one day. It was one of those ugly mid-winter days -- icy, shitty wind, sidewalks so slick they were like an obstacle course. They got off the train and walked to her house, slipping and sliding the whole way. They walked into her mom’s apartment, laughing and grateful to be somewhere warm.

They sat on the couch and cuddled to warm each other up. He touched her all over. She let herself relax and feel it. But when he took off his pants, she freaked, again. I just can’t, she said.

Damn, Aish, how long is this going to go on for?

I’m sorry. Look, I just want it to feel right.

What do you want? 300 roses? A couple guys out here playing violin? That shit is not gonna happen, A. You’re just like all these other girls. You’ve seen too many damn romantic comedies. Stop making a big deal out of it.

Don’t make me sound like some dumb bitch. I don’t want violins. I just want it to feel right.

Well, what do you think is going to make it feel right? I think you’re waiting for some shit that is never gonna happen. It’s never gonna be perfect.

I just want it to feel right.

You sound like a fucking parrot, repeating shit. I just want it to feel right, he mimicked her.
Fuck off, Brandon.

I will. I could. I could fuck anyone I wanted. I got all kinds of girls trying to get into my pants. So if I wanna get off I can.

Well, then do it.

That’s what I’m about to do. Your virgin ass can sit here waiting to get your cherry popped all your life. I’m out.

Brandon slammed the door. Aisha didn’t stop him.

Around midnight, there was a knock at the door. She opened it with the chain still on and Brandon stuck his hand in.

Baby, please, I’m sorry. Let me in.

Aisha unchained the door and opened it for him.

What the fuck, Brandon. It’s late.

I just had to talk to you.

She looked up at him. His eyes were watery and he was wobbling a little.

You drunk, B?

I just had a little bit. I was angry after I left.

Why are you coming over drunk?

I need you.

Aisha looked down at the floor. She didn’t like to see him like this, all lit and emotional. She felt bad for making him upset. At the same time, she was pissed and more than a little embarrassed for him.

Baby, look at me.

She wouldn’t.
Come on. Look at me.

Aisha kept her eyes on the ground.

Aisha!

It was then that he grabbed her by the neck and pushed her onto the couch. You know I love you, he kept saying, over and over. He had never hurt her like that before. She was too shocked to react. He started peeling her clothes off, shirt, sweatpants, underwear. He ran his hands through her curly hair -- something she always hated. When she tried to get back up, he pushed her back down again. He stood up.

Brandon, what the fuck are you doing?

Aisha shivered, cold and naked on the couch. Brandon started to unbuckle his pants and take off his underwear.

Brandon, what the fuck?

He put his hand on her mouth and lay on top of her. She breathed into his calloused hands. Stop, she said. But he found his way in. It felt like someone had stuck a knife inside her, like her liver was bursting, all her insides coming apart. He kept pushing, harder and harder. He put one hand around her neck and tightened his grip until she could barely breathe.

Then it was over.

He didn’t say anything at first. Just pulled up his pants. Aisha sat up and grabbed a pillow, holding it in her lap like a shield.

Shit, he said.

What?

Blood.
She couldn’t look at him but she looked at where his finger was pointing. A blood spot on her mom’s couch. She shook her head.

Baby, I’m so sorry. Let me get it out.

Aisha sat there, not saying anything. He went to the bathroom and grabbed a wet towel. She watched him rub at the stain, watched the brown towel turn red, watched the stain slowly fade into the dark blue fabric. It was barely noticeable. It wasn’t even there.

He tossed the towel on the floor and then wrapped his arms around her and held her.

He left that night just before her mom came back. They had sat on the couch watching the sun rise together. It wasn’t as bad as it seemed. This was what men did -- they took what they wanted. She figured that out by now. You could either deal with it or throw yourself against a brick wall that wouldn’t budge. She was adaptable. She knew how to make it work. She could will it to be better or will herself to be alright with it. Will, will, will. It was all she had.

She let him hold her. It made her feel better to let him hold her. Made her feel better to look up into his soft caramel eyes, wet with guilt. I love him, she thought.

**February 2008**

After that night, Brandon started coming over even more often. They’d hang out for a little bit, then kiss. Then, he’d get on top of her, pump a few times, looking away. Sometimes, he’d grab her neck again or stick fingers down her throat. It wasn’t what she imagined sex would be like. But what did she know anyway? Brandon’s the one who’d been doing it since he was thirteen.

They got lazy. Weren’t as good at cleaning up the evidence. One day, he left his Yankees cap at her house, right on the coffee table. Aisha crashed out on her bed right after he left and she didn’t even notice.
That is, until her mom came home at 5am.

Aisha woke up to her mother shaking her by the arms, the black chiffon of her mother’s hijab falling into her shocked, open mouth.

What is this, she asked when Aisha sat up, stuffing the cap in her face.

Um, a friend let me borrow it, because of the rain.

A friend?

Yeah.

In Arabic, she went off: You know, that nosey old lady next door told me some boy was coming over. I told her she was confused. But she’s not huh? You’re the one who’s confused.

She pushed Aisha back onto the bed. Go back to sleep, she said. You’re not going anywhere today.

Aisha was confined to the house for a whole week. Her mom called the school to say she had a terrible, terrible flu and wouldn’t be coming in. Aisha begged. She said, Ok, I had a friend come over but just a friend. Her mother shook her head, cursed her under her breath. She took her phone, hid the remote so she couldn’t even watch TV.

Aisha spent days in bed, practically delirious with claustrophobia and boredom. She counted the bubbles of asbestos in the ceiling. Watched people yelling at each other from fire escapes like it was a soap opera. She was going crazy.

Finally, she was free. When she saw Brandon after school that first Monday she was allowed back, she yelled at him: Don’t you know I have to be fucking careful? You piece of shit, all you care about is yourself.

He apologized. Pledged.
Just leave me alone for a while, ok?

And he did. A few days passed and she wasn’t sure if she actually missed him at all. She kinda liked the quiet of the long afternoons alone she used to have. Maybe she just needed a break.

One Thursday, her mom’s day off, Aisha sat on the couch doing homework for the first time in ages and her mom was in the kitchen cooking. She heard her mom curse, loudly in Arabic and she walked into the kitchen.

That dirty bastard across the street is looking into the windows again, she said.

Aisha looked out and saw the old man on the fire escape with his binoculars out. She laughed, No shame.

Her mother went to close the curtains but first, she opened the window, flipped him off, and yelled the only good English curse she knew: Your mother’s a whore.

Her mom turned to look at her for approval, a smirk on her face. Aisha cracked a smile.

Try this, she said, sticking a spoon of eggplant and tomato in her face.

Aisha tasted it. It’s good, what’d you do to it?

Indian lady at work gave me good spices.

I like it, she said. Her mom smiled back, satisfied.

Aisha went back to sit on the couch and she was suddenly struck by a memory. She was in the fifth grade and it was a day that seemed normal at first. But then, the lady that worked the reception in the office came into their classroom and whispered something in her teacher’s ear. She remembered the distinct feeling that something bad was happening that the adults didn’t want to talk about. Her teacher went on with the lesson but she looked nervous, like at any second she might just bolt out the door. Then, about an hour later, her teacher got a call to send Aisha to the office and there was her mom, red-faced and flustered. First time Aisha ever saw her
look scared. They walked home that day. Why don’t we take the train, Aisha had asked. No train, said her mom.

When they got home, she said: The people are saying Palestinians did it. They’re the ones who flew the planes into the building. If they’re right, we’re gonna to be the ones to suffer. We have to stay inside here for a while.

Aisha thought she sounded crazy. She watched her lock the door, put the chain on, close the curtains on all the windows, dashing around the house like a terrified tornado.

TERESA

April 2009

Teresa picked up the mail that day like she did every day except today, there was a big envelope in among the pile of ads and bills. There was an envelope with the words “Wilton College” in navy blue on it and it was big. She didn’t want to open it now when no one was home, so she sat at the table and stared at it. She sat and waited for nearly an hour. She didn’t take out her phone. She didn’t pick up a book. She just looked at it. This was what had gotten her here. Patience and concentration.

Her brother came home from soccer practice. He sprouted a whole foot last summer and it still freaked her out. Anyways, she was not waiting for him.

What are you doing, loser, he asked.

Shut up, she said and stayed sitting.

He opened the fridge, drank the milk straight from the plastic gallon, all while staring at her.

She stared back.
Whatever, weirdo, he shrugged and walked out to the living room. She heard the sounds of some dumb TV show that featured clips of skateboarders repeatedly crashing into cement.

Another twenty minutes or so passed, no sounds in the house but the TV and her brother’s occasional snorting laugh. Then, finally, the metal door squeaked open and slammed shut with a bang. Then, the wooden door behind it. In came Teresa’s mom. Teresa could hear the rustle of paper and plastic and could tell by the measured labor of her footstep that she’s brought groceries.

Get your feet off my couch, Robert, she said.

Ok, ok, ma, said Robert.

Teresa stayed sitting at the yellow table. She waited for her mom to come into the kitchen with the groceries. Which she did, without even looking at her. She dropped them on the floor with a grunt, then started putting them away.

When she turned around to reach into a bag and finally saw Teresa, she shrieked and grabbed her chest: Tere! You frikin’ cucuy. You scared the shit out of me.

Mom, said Teresa in a low whisper.

What?

Mom, she said again. Look.

Teresa’s mom looked down at the table and up at Teresa. She sat down at the chair across from her and the envelope sat between them.

Open it, she said.

Teresa reached for the envelope and tore it open. Inside were many navy blue things: a brochure, a big, bold sticker with a W on it, a keychain. But she couldn’t look at any of those things yet. She had to look at the letter first. She was shaking.
She skimmed as quickly as she could. Then, she screamed.

I’m in, ma. Full ride.

Full ride?

Full ride. I just have to do work study.

Teresa’s mom jumped up and the kitchen table nearly turned over. She hugged Teresa so hard that she couldn’t breathe and Teresa didn’t care because she wasn’t sure she was breathing before.

By the time her brother walked in with the remote and half a bologna sandwich in his hand, they were both crying.

What the heck, he said.

She got in, Robbie. Full ride.

Robert looked at his sister. He had a bread crumb in the corner of his mouth and his slackjaw lay open as proof he was in the middle of chewing.

Good job, buttface, he said, and returned to the couch.

* 

**AISHA**

**May 2008**

Aisha had stopped answering Brandon’s calls. She’d leave through a different door when school ended, get off the train a stop earlier and walk the long way. She wasn’t sure what happened at first. It just felt like the magic was gone. I don’t love you anymore, she told him, via text.

It took her a while to realize it was that memory of her mother closing the curtains that shook her out of it. That image stuck in her mind for days -- her mother closing in, gathering herself and Aisha, keeping the bad things out. She did what she needed to do to protect them
when things got bad. Aisha knew she needed to do the same: close in on herself, keep the things she loved safe. No more Brandon.

At first, he got angry. Left her furious voicemails. Sent disgusting texts. But, like a miracle, eventually he gave up. Ijjie said he probably found some other teenager to harass. Maybe, thought Aisha. She was jealous for a second but it passed.

Anyways, her grades were better with him gone.

April 2009

The next April, she got a notice to pick up something from the post office. Too big for the mailbox, it said.

When the post office worker passed it to her, she nearly peed her pants. Big, navy blue letters. Her top choice.

She went home and put the letter in the microwave.

Aisha barely slept that night. She heard her mom come in at 4am, heard her go through leftovers in the fridge and make a plate. Heard her open the microwave door. Heard her yell. She got up and went to the kitchen.

Ok, but how much, asked her mom.

Nothing, Aisha said. I got scholarships and everything.

*  

TERESA  

July 2009

Teresa was leaving early to do a prep program they offered to all the poor kids. She couldn’t wait to leave. She’d been wanting to leave San Bernardino all her life.
But suddenly, she felt like she was frozen here. She spent long mornings in bed, looking out the window at the concrete yard out back. When she went over to Josie’s, she got emotional over the chili con carne and hugged all her cousin’s kids too tight. She even grinned at Smiley fondly as he biked past her and waved, looking like a bedraggled Santa Claus with a long beard and a bag of recyclables slung over his back.

She couldn’t wait to leave. So why did she want to stay?

Her mom drove her to the airport and it was the first time she was ever going to be on a plane and she was going alone. Her mom fussed over her and she was all like, Ma, it’s no big deal, people get on planes everyday. But inside, she was kinda freaking out.

They were not much of an emotional family. But after they checked in and Teresa was about to lug her carry-on up the escalator to her gate, her mom said goodbye and pushed a little bit of the hair out of her face and that was when Teresa lost it.

Fucking baby.

*  

**AISHA**

**August 2009**

Aisha was on her way to catch a bus to Boston, from there she’d take a train to Wilton. In Penn Station, her mom told her she’d overpacked. Nah, ma, it’s fine, Aisha said, lifting a suitcase in each hand to prove it.

But when she got off in Boston and had to switch subway lines twice to get to the right train, she realized her mom was right. She nearly collapsed on top of the suitcases at the train station. Her exhaustion must have been obvious, because some guy came up to her and asked if
she needed help. He was a white boy -- tall, with blondish hair and a light brown beard that looked like it was just growing in. Nicely dressed. Probably rich, she thought.

I think we might be going the same way, he said, pointing to the Wilton shirt he was wearing under a cardigan.

No thanks. I think I’m good, she said.
Aisha

Aisha dragged her two suitcases up the hill to her dorm and checked in at the front desk. A bouncy blonde girl who literally had her hair in pigtails greeted her enthusiastically and gave her a room key. She felt a little self conscious in her Yankees hat and hoodie -- a compromise between wearing hijab and not wearing it, since she hadn’t totally decided what she’d do about that. She felt like she must have looked like a criminal. Or a hoodrat, at least. Second floor! said Pigtales. Elevator to your right!

Lots of exclamation points, thought Aisha.

Aisha got off at the second floor and dragged the suitcases again, the last ten feet feeling at least as long as the distance between Wilton and New York.

Room 204. Her name was there and so was another: Teresa Rodriguez. There was already a sticker pinned to the bulletin board on the door. *The Los Angeles Lakers.*

When she opened the door she saw two beds, two shelves, two desks, two dressers, and about two feet between the whole mess. The bed to her right was already taken -- dressed in pink and purple paisley sheets. There were two posters over the bed: Pulp Fiction and Mariah Carey. Aisha didn’t really recognize the first one but the second made her roll her eyes. Fucking Mariah Carey, she mumbled under her breath.

The tip of a brown ponytail peeked out behind the shelf. Aisha looked around it and saw a girl with her feet propped up on the desk, leaning back and reading.

Oh shit, I didn’t realize someone was in here.

Uh, yeah. I am. I mean, I’m Teresa, she said, standing up.
Teresa was a Spanish girl, like maybe Puerto Rican or Dominican? No, she looked more like the Ecuadorians who own the bodega a couple blocks from Aisha’s house. Ohhh, the Lakers, she’s gotta be Mexican, thinks Aisha.

What’s up, Teresa. I’m Aisha, she said nodding to her.

Aisha took her in a bit more: shiny, straight brown hair with light brown highlights, the kind she used to be mad envious of as a kid, pulled into a high ponytail, cheekbones nearly as high, eyes a little Asian looking. She’s real cute, Aisha thought. Even besides those ugly pajamas -- blue and green plaid and a t-shirt that said Sweetness in cursive.

How long have you been around here, Aisha asked, unpacking.

About a month. I came for the prep program.

Oh yeah, I almost did that. But I just wasn’t ready to leave New York.

Is that where you’re from?

Yup. Queens. You?

California.

LA?

No, San Bernardino. A couple hours South. In the desert.

Cool, cool, she said. They looked at each other a couple seconds before they realized they had nothing else to say. Teresa took a seat again.

Awkward, thought Aisha.

Teresa

Teresa was sitting at her chair, working through the reading already assigned for her Modern Poetry class. All of it felt beyond her. She loved English in high school, but it always just consisted of reading stuff and answering really basic questions. Where did Holden Caulfield go
to school? What was the old man looking for in the sea? Teachers were amazed if you got the most basic of themes. Grapes of Wrath is about how inequality is bad. To Kill a Mockingbird is all about why we shouldn’t be racist. A +

But this. This was like, different. This was hella complicated. Like all about Freud and Nietzsche and all these other guys -- names she used to just be proud to recognize. Now, she was expected to know what they were talking about.

So, in other words, it was the first time that week that she wasn’t preoccupied with who her roommate was and when she was gonna get here. School was gonna start in like two days. Almost everyone was moved in. Plus, this girl never answered the emails Teresa had sent. Was she not gonna come? That’d be cool. She could have the room to herself. Teresa wouldn’t mind. Nope, not at all.

But, then, right as she was reading about the rise of Pastoral poetry, the door swung open and the silence of the room was invaded by heavy breathing and the crash of two large suitcases hitting the wood floor. Teresa knew she should make herself known. But she was kinda shocked by it. Didn’t know what to do with herself. So she just listened.

As the girl caught her breath, she heard her say one thing: What the fuck, Mariah Carey?

Teresa blushed, then got a little angry. Best singer of the 20th century, that’s what the fuck she is.

Then, she got the courage to lean back and wave. I’m Teresa, she said as she got up.

Luckily, she said it before she even really got a chance to look at her. There she was. Tall, slim, and kind of gorgeous. Like the kind of pretty that you can tell is pretty even though she was in sweats, no makeup. She had this smooth olive skin, full pink lips, big brown almonds
for eyes and eyelashes so big and curled Teresa wondered if she could see past them. Plus, she had this thing about her. Like, maybe what you would call swagger. She seemed years older than 18, like she’d been through stuff. Maybe seen the world. Teresa crossed her arms over the corny pajama shirt her mom had bought for her.

She said she was from New York. Of course. Teresa was embarrassed to admit to being from San Bernardino, a place people only knew of if they were rich enough to go snowboarding in the mountains above it. She almost lied and said she was from LA. But she knew she was no good at lying, wouldn’t be able to keep it up for long. So she told the truth. And it seemed like Aisha was already bored of her. Ok, she thought. And sat back down.

* 

Teresa decided to make an effort. She figured if she had anything on Aisha it was that she’d been at Wilton for a while so she could show her the ropes.

She asked Aisha if she wanted to get lunch.

Yeah, I could eat...where do we go?

Oh, I’ll show you, said Teresa, casually.

On the walk over, Teresa unloaded a series of facts: Our dorm, Hasselbeck, is one of the newer ones but it was built in like the 70’s. And it’s been an all girls’ dorm since the 90’s. And there’s that frat house, Kappa Alpha Theta -- I haven’t met any of them but they say those guys are like, totally, rapists. So, why’d you pick the girls’ dorm anyway?

Oh, my mom wasn’t gonna let me go unless I did. She’s a little conservative, you know.

Oh, right.

Teresa waited for Aisha to return the question. She had a whole speech planned on why she picked the girls’ dorm since her mom and just about one out of every three Wilton students
she’d met thus far had all been bewildered by her choice. She didn’t want to be distracted, she
told her mom. She wanted a place to go that would be comfortable and separate from the rest of
campus. Or, as she told the last girl who asked, she wanted to be able to walk down the hallway
without pants on. But Aisha didn’t ask.

So here’s the dining hall, said Teresa. It’s like the biggest one. And I guess it’s supposed
to be the healthiest? I guess just cuz like there’s a salad bar or something.

(Teresa cringed at how stupid she sounds. All the “I guess”s and “like”s. Shut up, Tere,
she thought. Saying nothing is better than sounding lame.)

Aisha leaned over the cold metal and peered into the salad bar.

Cool. I love these, she said, reaching over and grabbing a bright white and red slice of
radish.

Teresa laughed. No way! They put ‘em on all the tacos back home and I always take em
off. They’re so gross.

Aisha just looked at her. Teresa looked away.

In line at the salad bar, a guy stared hard at Aisha. Par for the course, thought Teresa. He
was kinda cute though. Bright blue eyes, strong jawline, the type to show up on an Abercrombie
billboard. But, like, hipster. He wore a hoodie with a blazer over it and was clearly trying to
grow a beard. Teresa looked at him as he looked at Aisha.

Hey, I remember you, he said, finally, right before grabbing a cherry tomato and sticking
it in his mouth.

Aisha looked up.

Oh, yeah, from the train station. Hey, she said.

So I was right, you do go here.
You were right, congrats.

What dorm are you in?

Right then, some jock in a tight, blue Wilton t-shirt nudges the guy over. You can talk to your little crush later, bro, he said.

The hipster boy blushed.

Um, I guess I’ll keep an eye out for you, he said.

Yeah, I guess so, Aisha laughed and shook her head.

When he had moved down the line, Teresa asked, New friend?

That guy is not really a friend, she said.

How do you know him?

I met him at the train station. He asked to help me with my stuff, but I told him I was fine. Then he kept looking at me the whole train ride. Kind of creepy.

Oh, said Teresa, Yeah. Weird.

Teresa watched his wide, blazed back as he went off to find a seat somewhere in the corner of the dining hall, alone.

Yeah, totally weird, she thought.

**Aisha’s Journal**

*August 26th, 2009*

Made it to Wilton today, finally. Is this one of those days that’s supposed to feel like milestone? Like a marker of how far you’ve come? Like, I’m supposed to feel accomplished or some shit, just to be here? Cuz honestly today I was mostly bored.
Unpacked a little. Went to the dining hall. Ran into that white boy again, creeping on me. Ugh. Roommate’s all like oh do you know him. I can already tell this place is gonna be the kind of place where everyone is up in everyone else’s business.

I lied to my roommate. Told her I didn’t want to do the prep program because I wanted to stay in New York a little longer. Not because I spent the last couple months curled on my bathroom floor. Not because I started getting panic attacks all the way back in May and ever since then wondered if I was sane enough to even go to college. Not because I had nightmares every night, dreams of Brandon on top of me again, grabbing my neck so hard I couldn’t breathe. Or dreams of him showing up on my doorstep telling me I was his and only his and him turning out to be right. I told my roommate I showed up late because I loved New York so much and not because I was so blindsided by this thing, this ugly thing, happening out of nowhere and was as disturbed by my own mind as I was by my memories.

Why now? That’s what I’m always wondering. I mean I know what that chipper-ass counselor, Didi, would say: Change always brings back the past. I’m like, first of all, what kind of ass-backwards sense does that make. Second of all, this is just plain unfair. Here I am, about to start a real life, about to get what I’ve been working towards all these years and here I am getting punished for something that wasn’t my fault. Or that’s what I’m supposed to think. That it wasn’t my fault. What if I want it to be my fault? What if I want to know what I did to make Brandon happen to me? Who was I? What kind of sixteen year-old girl lets a twenty-five year old loser into her home, lets him into her heart? I did something too. Not just him. And both of our actions led us here, right? I wonder if Brandon is hurt too, if he has nightmares. Or if he’s found another high schooler to keep him company. I hate thinking of that. Like that makes my blood go cold.
You know what else I hate? Writing in this fucking journal. Didi and her bullshit solutions: Writing will help you make sense of things, blah blah blah. I’m trying because that’s what I do, I try. As long as I’m doing something, I feel like I can make it all better. But sometimes work doesn’t solve the problem. Sometimes work doesn’t do any good and there’s no work to be done. Sometimes I wonder if when I’m sitting here in front of this piece of shit journal, rehashing everything, I’m really just making myself suffer more. Forcing myself to remember. Did he break my heart? Did we break each others? Did he break me? Am I broken? Fuck.

**Teresa Texts Roxie**

<3 Rox-Box <3: so how’s the roomie?

*ST-money*$*: Weird, kinda. Like stuckup.

<3 Rox-Box <3: oh is she some rich girl? did her daddy drop her off in a helicopter?

*ST-money*$*: Lol, no. I don’t think she’s rich. I mean she doesn’t act like it. Maybe she’s not stuck up… like maybe I mean full of herself or something.

<3 Rox-Box <3: oh like that bitch Alicia?

*ST-money*$*: Hmm, nah, she’s not like her. Like she showed up in sweats and a ball cap,

so she’s no priss.

*ST-money*$*: Idk, I guess she just doesn’t like me.

<3 Rox-Box <3: who wouldn’t like you? so full of sunshine.

*ST-money*$*: Lol shutup Rox. How’s community college?
<3 Rox-Box <3: got my books! class starts monday. *Can’t Wait*

*$T-money*$: Lol.

*$T-money*$: Ugh I wanna go to bed but miss universe has her light on. Writing in some journal or something.

<3 Rox-Box <3: ohhhh a journaler!!

<3 Rox-Box <3: you should steal it, see what she’s writing.

*$T-money*$: OMG Rox you are always starting trouble. Leave me alone.

<3 Rox-Box <3: lol suit yourself. deuces.

Aisha

The next morning took excruciatingly long to come. Aisha didn’t sleep all night. She just lay still in her sheets, staring at the ceiling. She was terrified that if she fell asleep, she’d have those nightmares again. She worried that she’d wake Teresa up with her screams. She didn’t want to answer any questions or make any scenes. So when the sun came in through their second floor window, Aisha greeted it with relief. At least, she wouldn’t have to pretend to sleep any longer. She lay on her stomach and watched the orange light fill the quad, slowly at first, then all at once. Beautiful, she thought, for the first time since she had arrived. Wilton was known for its campus tucked away in the Massachusetts woods, just minutes from Boston but a world away, or so said the brochure. Aisha had never been in a place like this. Except maybe that one time she went on a hike with the Boys & Girls Club back in the fifth grade, before her mom pulled her out after the kids exchanged dirty Valentine’s cards one year.
She’d barely slept for the past few months and every sun rise she watched reminded her of that night with Brandon. But for the first time, it was different. It wasn’t like watching the sun rise in the city. It was a different dawn entirely. Here, the sun could really rise. Like all of it. Aisha was used to seeing the sunlight squeezed in between buildings as it rose, the prism of yellow gold ducking around bodegas and brownstones. In New York, the sun just did it’s job -- evaporated dirty puddles, encouraged weeds to grow in the cracks of concrete, reminded everyone to get the fuck up and go to work. Here, she thought, is where the sun lives.

Aisha felt momentarily energized. She got up, rummaged around for something to wear. Behind her, Teresa snored lightly. She picked out jeans and a t-shirt, something that wouldn’t draw attention. Then there was the question: to hijab or not to hijab? It was a question she had taken sort of lightly back in New York, especially once her mom started working nights for the extra cash. In the mornings when she got ready for school, there was no one around to tell her what to do. So she wore hijab when she felt like it. Modesty came and went with her moods and the seasons and she liked it that way. But now she was in college. It was a new kind of responsibility. Here, she had to become someone. She had to be an adult and adults don’t pick and choose who they are depending on their menstrual cycle, you know? So who would she be, asked her collection of hijabs from their spot in the drawer next to her underwear.

If she could pick, she would make the whole world leave her alone. Let her do her thing. Wear what she felt like. But it doesn’t work like that, does it? If she wanted to fly under the radar, which she did, she knew she’d have to leave the Islam in her closet.

* 

She stopped by the dining hall Teresa showed her to grab something to eat before she started exploring campus. It was 6 am. The only other weirdos there were overeager runners in tight
shorts and insomniacs who looked like they were the type to play video games all night and sleep all day. I gotta get some sleeping pills, thought Aisha. She took her bagel to go.

**Teresa**

A loud clatter of metal and a distinct shatter woke Teresa up at 8:15 that morning. She sat straight up.

> Shit. I’m so sorry, said Aisha.

Teresa rubbed her blurry eyes and looked down at the floor next to her. Her lamp was flat on the floor and the light bulb shattered in pieces. Aisha bent down to clean it up.

> Um, no, it’s ok. Shit happens, I guess.

Teresa got out of bed and started helping her.

> I’ll get you a new light bulb, said Aisha.

> No, it’s fine, Teresa said.

> Sorry, this room is just so fucking small. It’s like everytime I turn around I bump into something.

> Yeah, it’s fine, said Teresa. At this point, she kind of just wanted her to shut up. Too early for apologies, she thought.

> How long have you been up?

> Couldn’t sleep. I woke up around six and I’ve been checking this place out since then, said Aisha.

> Whoa, that’s early, Teresa said. Am I really gonna have to deal with this girl waking me up at
sunrise every day, she thought. She got up to toss the bits of glass she had collected when she stepped on another piece and yelled.

Are you ok?

Teresa looked up at her. Aisha looked genuinely worried.

Um, no, not really, said Teresa. I’m bleeding.

It was the meanest she’d dared to be really, but at this point she was pissed. She sat on the edge of her bed and pulled her foot as close to her face as she could manage. The glass looked like it was embedded under her skin. And it hurt like a motherfucker.

I’m so sorry. Can I get you something?

Look, I’m fine. You can go ahead and do whatever you’ve been up to since the buttcrack of dawn. I’ll take care of myself.

Aisha’s face dropped. Teresa knew she should’ve felt bad but it was the first time since they met that Aisha seemed to even notice Teresa was there. So she didn’t try to stop her when she left.

Aisha

I’ll just keep to myself, thought Aisha, after she left the dorm and headed out again. It’ll be just like high school. Which sucks. But I’ve done it before and I can do it again.

She brought her journal out with her. She was just going to go out and sketch something. She wasn’t that great of an artist, but she liked it. It calmed her. And she had nothing else to distract herself with today, since orientation wouldn’t really start until tomorrow.
She found a spot she had liked when she passed by it earlier. She sat on the dock at the lake and drew the trees on the opposite side. She tried to think of something else. If her mom had taught her anything, it was the dual powers of denial and avoidance.

*

On her way back to the dorm, Aisha saw the white boy approaching from the opposite direction. She rolled her eyes.

You stalking me or what?

Guess I just got lucky this time, he said. What are you up to right now?

Just avoiding my roommate.

Me too! Why don’t you come hang out with me instead?

White boy turned out to be named Levi. It was a name that fit him, she thought. When she told him her name, he said, Ah, the Prophet Muhammad's favorite wife.

They walked around campus for an hour, maybe two. He knew so much more than she expected him to. Knew the names of all the trees and could explain the European ancestry of Wilton’s architecture. Nerd, she thought.

By the time, he dropped her off at Hasselbeck, she felt like maybe she would have a friend here after all.

**Teresa**

She figured she should just do what she always does when she feels awkward. Shut the fuck up and keep to herself. They could get through a whole year like that. It would be fine. She made a couple friends in the prep program. She’d just hang out with them.
So when Aisha walked back in, she nodded at her. Then, she put her headphones in and kept reading about Pastoralism.

*

The next morning, Aisha was gone again. Whatever, thought Teresa. She texted a girl she met in the prep program, Felicia, and asked her to save her a seat at orientation.

When she got there, she looked around for Felicia, but she saw Aisha first, sitting next to that hipster kid she was pretending to hate. So fake, she thought. Then she saw a hand waving her over and Felicia’s lion mane -- big curls burnt out from too much bleach. Teresa took a seat next to her.

*

That was lame, said Felicia as they walked out.

Yeah, kinda pointless, Teresa said.

It’s like, I already know that frat boys are creepy and alcohol will get me drunk, but thanks.

They parted at the quad. Felicia was in the old dorms over by the lake. Teresa walked on alone. Up ahead, she saw Levi give Aisha a hug as he left her at Hasselbeck.

They had a dorm orientation after the general one. Everyone was already gathered in the first floor living room. Someone had put out a teapot, little porcelain cups, and English muffins. Aisha was sitting on an armchair in the corner. Teresa took a seat out of her line of sight.

The blonde girl that sat at the front desk the first week turned out to be dorm president. She asked everyone to introduce themselves with a “fun game” called two truths and one lie. This was the first time Teresa realized how out of her depth she was. The girls in her prep program had been mostly like her. Mostly brown or black, mostly poor. These girls were all white and all rich. Not that that was a problem. She was not going to be one of those people who
lets those things separate herself from the group. But these girls were different even from the white girls she grew up around. Their truths included: “I’ve read every book Foucault has written,” “I grew up in an expat neighborhood of Abu Dhabi,” “I speak Japanese and French fluently,” “I walked the Spanish countryside during my gap year.”

Meanwhile, Teresa could hear her mother in her head: Que chingada cosa es un ‘gap year’? La mentirosa estaba trabajando en el Gap.

Callate, Ma, she thought. She focused. What could she say that would sound that cool and cosmopolitan and smart? How could she be interesting to these people? Teresa thought about it. Don’t talk about Smiley. Or the time you wore homemade underwear for a whole year after dad left. Don’t mention dad at all. Or your favorite cousin’s repeated federal offenses. Or the accomplishment of being one of the few kids in your extended family to graduate high school without getting pregnant. Was that an accomplishment, after all, if there wasn’t really anyone interested in knocking me up? Ok, stay focused, she thought.

Your turn, said the enthusiastic dorm president. Who’s she looking at, Teresa wondered. Shit, she’s looking at me.

Oh, me, ok….umm, well, I’m a Lakers fan, I really love movies, and...umm, my Dad owns Louis Vuitton.

The room was dead silent. Then, everyone broke into laughter. Teresa blushed.

You need to make it a little tougher than that, said the Abu Dhabi girl.

You just don’t seem like the Louis Vuitton type, said Spanish Countryside. Not that that’s a bad thing. Like, you don’t seem spoiled, I guess.

Definitely not, giggled Foucault.

Aisha put her tea cup on the table. Loudly.
How the fuck would you know what that looks like? You look like you haven’t gone shopping since the Great Depression. And you, Aisha pointed at Spanish Countryside. You think you’re special? Anyone with two legs can take a fucking walk, dipshit.

Whoa, ok, no need to call people names, said the president. Maybe we should just go ahead with the orientation.

Teresa looked at Aisha. Aisha looked back with a smirk.

Aisha

Neither of them mentioned it when they’re back in the room. Still, it changed everything. Even the air in their room seemed to have a different quality to it -- freer, fresher. When they talked, the words fell out easily.

Saw you with that hipster boy again. You like him? He’s kinda cute, said Teresa.

Aisha thought of the boys she knew back home, the black and Latino boys, the variety of brown boys at the mosque. Thought of ball caps and clean Jordans, of neatly trimmed beards and that smokey smell of Black & Milds. Of that way they have of approaching girls so nonchalantly -- like they liked you a lot but didn’t care if you liked ‘em back.

Not really my type, she said.

Seems like your his.

Aisha snorted. I hope not, she said. I need friends, not a boyfriend. I’m not planning to date while I’m here.

Seriously? Isn’t that what college is for?

Aisha looked over at Teresa. She sat on her bed, under her two posters, with her knees pulled up and her chin resting on top of them. She felt a sudden affection for her.
Maybe for some people. Not me. I’m kind of sick of boys. Plus, I feel like I gotta figure myself out, ya know? I’ve spent the last few years just drifting. Not really knowing what I want or who I am.

Not me. I know myself too well by now. And I wouldn’t mind some action.

Aisha laughed.

You know what you’re going to major in?

Not sure. English, maybe. I’ve always wanted to do film, but they don’t have that major here. How about you?

Aisha sighed.

I have no freaking idea. I like art. But I think I’ll try something a little more serious. Like sociology or something? Something my mom won’t be pissed about.

Teresa smiled with recognition.

Oh your mom is like that too, huh? I told my mom I wanted to make movies when I was 15 and she laughed so hard I thought she’d stop breathing.

Pfff, my mom is the same but with less of a sense of humor. If I told her I wanted to be an artist, she’d probably kick me out of the house. ‘You wanna to be an artist? You sink you can eat za art, huh?’

Teresa giggled.

Where’s your mom from?

She’s Egyptian.

Your dad too?

Yeah. From the same little village north of Cairo. My dad died though.

Shit, I’m sorry.
No worries. I was a baby. I never met him.

Teresa was silent for a few beats.

Well, my dad left us when me and my brother were kids. I don’t know which would be worse, really.

Hah. They both suck.

Yup.

They spent the rest of the night talking, even as they turned out the lights and lay in bed. Teresa told her about the first time she saw a movie she loved. Aisha talked about the feeling of being on the N-Q train going over the bridge into Manhattan. Teresa told Aisha stories about home -- her brother, Tia Josie, Smiley. Aisha liked how it sounded, having those many people around you all the time.

Must have been nice, she said.

Mostly it was annoying. I’m looking forward to some peace and quiet.

Yeah, right.

Teresa laughed.

Ok, ok. I’m looking forward to drinking without supervision and cuter boys.

Aisha tried to figure out what she was looking forward to. By the time she had it in mind, she could hear Teresa’s light snore.

*

It was the first time in nearly six months that Aisha didn’t watch the sun rise. She woke up with a start around 8am, when her phone buzzed. She looked around at the light filling the room and at
Teresa, lying on her stomach with her face turned towards her, her light pink lips laying open to expose a cute little gap between her two front teeth.

Teresa Texts Roxie, again

*ST-money*: Ya know, I think this roommate might work out after all.

<3 Rox-Box <3: Oh yah? How come?

*ST-money*: She’s funny. Just told off a whole roomful of dumb rich girls.

*ST-money*: And she’s into art and stuff. She might be fun.

<3 Rox-Box <3: Cooool.

<3 Rox-Box <3: Well, just don’t forget your old friends stuck in community college now that you’re at the top.

*ST-money*: Shutup, Rox. Ya know I’m a true bitch for real.

<3 Rox-Box <3: Better be.
Aisha and Teresa clung to each other. It was the aftermath of one of those monstrous Massachusetts snowstorms, which had been followed by beautiful spring-type weather so warm it melted nearly everything. Then the frost returned, reliably. So, in other words, they were both slipping around on the ice that lined the pathway to Chilton House, where they were hosting one of the biggest parties of the year at Wilton. It was one of those underground things that the administration wasn’t supposed to know about, the kind where half the attendees were naked and the other half too blasted to get undressed.

A snowball careened across the quad, seemingly from nowhere. Teresa ducked to miss it and the sudden movement threw Aisha off balance. She slipped and landed in a seated position on the concrete.

T, she yelled. What the fuck?

Teresa helped her up.

You know I didn’t even want to go to this thing. And now you have me out here sprawled on my ass.

You’re fine! And it’ll be fun I promise. Getting there is gonna be the only hard part.

Aisha rolled her eyes.

Fine. Let’s just go.

A little flashback here. Both of them struggled through the first semester. It was the first time that either of them really had to try to pull good grades. Teresa managed a 3.0 but Aisha got a D in Intro to Sociology. This was a problem, especially since Sociology was supposed to be her
major. So Aisha had gone back for the spring semester, thinking to herself: Ok, buckle down, we can do this, focus.

Meanwhile, Teresa had spent the whole first month bugging her to get out of the dorm. Go have some fun. Take some stress out. You can’t stay in here all semester, she had said. Aisha turned her down every time. But for this party, Teresa wouldn’t take no for an answer. Plus, Levi had been texting her nonstop all day, trying to get her to come out too. Fine, fine, fine, is what she ended up saying.

Truth is, she wasn’t just worried about her grades. Aisha always had this sense about herself -- like she was constantly at a tipping point. Like if she didn’t hold herself together at all times she’d literally fall apart. Like particles of her being would split off to every corner of the universe and she wouldn’t be able to gather herself again.

In other words, she was convinced that if she went to one party, she’d come out an alcoholic, coke addict, and a ho. Which, if she was being honest, was at least partially her mother’s old country rhetoric sinking in. But it was more than that. It was more than trying to be a good Muslim girl. It was the sense that she was just an all or nothing kind of person.

The snowball turned out to be Levi’s fault.

Hey, he yelled, running at them from about 30 feet away.

It was Teresa that put it together first.

You? You threw that?

Levi nodded.

You fucking clown, Aisha said, hitting him across the chest. I could’ve died.

Levi laughed and put an arm around her.

You know I didn’t mean any harm.
Teresa rolled her eyes. She was used to the flirting between these two but what she really hated was how much Aisha denied it. At the same time, she couldn’t help watching them like she was a biologist studying a chimpanzee’s mating dance. She paid close attention to what he said and how Aish responded or how they looked at or casually touched each other. Once, she even thought of taking notes. In the end, she decided it would be (1) too hard to conceal and (2) too crazy. It was just that she didn’t get it. What was it that he liked so much about her anyways?

Another flashback. So, yeah, Aisha was in their dorm room all the time freaking out about grades. But guess who always had time to visit? You got it -- Levi. Every time Teresa got back from classes, there he’d be, sitting on Aisha’s bed, “studying.” Once, she even walked in on him giving her a backrub.

   After he left, Teresa turned to Aisha and was like, What the fuck was that?

   Aisha shrugged.

   I didn’t ask him to do it, she said. He offered.

   You could have said no…

   Well, he didn’t really ask actually. He just started doing it.

   Ok but you really gotta stop pretending you two aren’t flirting. Because you are.

   We are not!

   Teresa lifted her eyebrows.

   Ok, he may be flirting with me. But that’s none of my business.

The closer they got to Chilton House, the more it seemed like there was a pilgrimage underfoot. The entire campus seemed to be walking in the same direction. To the left, frat boys passing around a gallon full of what was definitely not water, yell-singing the Wilton fight song. To the
right, a group of girls from the basketball team, shaved heads and high ponytails bobbing in time to Young Thug blasting from someone’s iPhone. Up ahead, a march of weirdos and hipsters and nerds, all going the same direction.

This looks like it’s gonna be big, said Aisha, concerned.

Hell yeah, it is, said Teresa, pumped.

Aisha turned to Levi. He looked anxious.

Let’s go back yet again. Aisha knew Levi was flirting with her. She wasn’t dumb. She also wasn’t about to admit it to Teresa because then she knew they’d have to talk about it and what it meant. Aisha wasn’t used to having a friend as close as Teresa was to her. T was always around, always asking questions, always knew everything about her. She liked that. It was a change from the lonely life she had lived up until Wilton. She loved having someone to come to when she was sad or excited or confused, someone who would actually listen, someone who got her. But at the same time, they were so close that some things just couldn’t be shared. Does that sound counterintuitive? That’s because it is. When you’re trying to avoid the reality of something, the worst thing to do is to let your best friend know about it.

There were a couple of good reasons why Aisha didn’t want to acknowledge Levi’s interest in her. First of all, she came to Wilton making lots of promises to herself. Some of which she had broken already, like get good grades or never get drunk. Others she wanted to try to hold fast to. Like, no boys. After Brandon, the mess of Brandon and the mark he left on her, she knew she needed time, if not a pledge of celibacy. Second of all, Levi was a goddamn mess. It was easy to think otherwise looking at him. He literally looked like a golden boy with that pretty blonde hair and bright blue eyes. He came from some wealthy Connecticut family, had gone to an elite boarding school, and had no problem at all sailing by in Wilton classes. He had been
writing 20 page papers on obscure topics since he was 15. He had gone to plays she had never 
heard of, had art hanging in his parents’ living room whose creators she had only just learned 
about in her art history course that fall, had friends whose parents owned banks or wrote novels 
or anchored the nightly news. Things like that amazed Aisha. What did that feel like, she 
wondered.

But, on the other hand, there was this part of Levi that was amazing in a different way 
entirely. Every now and then, dark clouds would gather over him. He’d have these days when 
nothing could make him feel okay. Days when he would come into her dorm room on the edge 
of tears but unable to explain why. Days when a song would come up on a playlist while they 
were studying and he would abruptly become indignant, ordering her to change it in a tone she 
never otherwise heard. Worst of all were the days his father called him. They didn’t happen 
often, but when they did they were bad. She never heard these conversations because if he called, 
Levi would always leave not just the room, but the entire building (which was weird, because if 
it was his mom, who called every day, he’d just sit on the bed and roll his eyes and make faces at 
Aisha). Still, she knew those conversations were bad, because when he came back, he’d have a 
look on his face that wasn’t the same as his almost-crying face or as his angry, impatient face. 
Something that was darker, more sinister, and near-impossible to define.

Why was he so sad and so angry, wondered Aisha. If I had what he had, I’d never be 
upset, she thought, I’d just go around turning in my high school papers for college credit, then go 
do drugs and bang girls. Which was, after all, basically what Levi did. Even though he clearly 
had a crush on Aisha, that didn’t keep him from using all his looks and charm and riches to 
seduce a significant portion of the female members of the class of 2014. It wasn’t enough for
him, though. Nothing ever seemed to be enough. Who was he? How had he become this way? And why?

Trying to figure that out may have been half the reason she kept him around.

From the entrance, the house looked surprising pristine. There would be no sign of the kind of chaos they’d been promised if it wasn’t for the excruciatingly loud bass line coming from the basement. It was so loud that the wood floor beneath them seemed to be shaking.

Teresa searched the first floor for a good spot to hide her coat. She was on all fours peering under a particularly large armoire when she heard a familiar voice behind her.

Nice ass, said the voice.

Teresa got up. Quickly. Anthony was standing behind her leaning on the doorframe, looking all cute and nonchalant.

Teresa first met Anthony at a Latino Student’s Union meeting in the fall. At the time, they had been polite, almost professional. Where are you from? What’s your major? etc, etc. The times they ran into each other since then involved similar small talk. Until about a month ago, when the ice was thoroughly broken after they got to second base under a stairwell at a frat party. Ever since then, he’d made her nervous, mostly because he was the first guy she kissed that she actually liked. Meanwhile, the tone of Anthony’s conversation had quickly gone from polite with a touch of sarcastic to variations on ‘let me touch your butt.’

Hey, so you’re here too?

Anthony laughed.

Everyone’s here, Tere. So did you find anything interesting under that dresser or were you just trying to show off?
She thought of Aisha and what she’d learned from her observations. What was it that she did? Stand like this with one hip out, a disinterested stare, never try too hard.

Oh, yeah, I was just looking for a place to put my coat, she said, scanning the room and avoiding his eyes.

There’s a pile of coats over there.

I know...I just didn’t want anyone to take mine.

You worry too much, he said, taking Teresa’s coat and throwing it in the pile along with his. Come on, let’s go before they run out of booze.

Teresa looked back for Aisha and saw her cuddling up to Levi, whispering something in his ear. She let Anthony grab her hand and lead her up the stairs.

Aisha had never been in Chilton House before. Oriental carpets, bronze vases, old wood floors.

She found herself staring deeply into the eyes of the 1934 Racquetball Team before she realized Teresa was gone.

Where’d she go, she asked Levi.

I don’t know, disappeared.

Levi appeared unconcerned.

She’ll be right back, probably. Hey, so remember the other night?

What night?

Aisha was back to staring at the old team pictures on the wall. Something about them was fascinating to her -- their clothes, the old version of a football, even the way they stood seemed different.

You know. When I had a little temper tantrum.
Aisha remembered. Over the serene pictures of probably dead football players, she saw the memory of Levi, flustered, throwing a coat on and making his way towards the door. That night he had asked her if she “saw this going anywhere.” Like, where? she had asked. Levi rolled his eyes in response. Do you do this to all the guys? Make them grovel? Make them bare their heart and soul to you before you stomp on it? He was joking, but also not, she could tell. She could tell, also, that the way that Levi was trying to win her over was very different from the way he tried to woo girls at frat parties. The last time she was privy to that particular mess, she overheard a very wasted Levi ridicule a tall blonde’s tight blue dress right to her face and then go on to tap her ass, saying he didn’t mind a donk, no not at all. Aisha had rolled her eyes when Levi looked at her to check for jealousy. It was hard to be jealous when girls were so easily swayed by his nonsense. No thanks, she thought.

So that night, when Levi had asked her what she wanted from him, the only thing she could think was, nothing. She liked the way things were, she had told him. She liked studying with him. Liked hearing about all the things he knew and the places he’d been to. She even liked the challenge of slowly easing him out of his bad moods -- it kind of reminded her of home, of cracking jokes until her mom’s stern face would turn into a slight smirk. Don’t be a baby, she had said, when he started to shake his head (and maybe even tear up a little? hard to tell). I like you. I really do. I’m just not down to give you what you’re looking for right now. I’m trying to focus, trying to stop letting silly romance get in my way. Know that it’s not about you.

Yeah, sure, let him down easy, right? he had said. You can really be so fake sometimes, Aisha. You spend all day talking about blowjobs and squeezing your boobs between your arms while you’re “reading” and then you act like you were never interested at all? You know what? Fuck this. Fuck you, he said, then stormed out.
It annoyed her to be reminded of the whole thing. She liked looking at the pictures better.

Uh huh, I remember, she said.

Hey, look at me. I want to apologize.

She did as he asked. His hands were in his pockets and his eyes looked bare. A pose that reminder her, briefly, of Brandon.

I don’t want to ask you for anything you can’t or don’t want to give to me. If I can’t be anything else, I’m happy to be your friend. I mean it. I shouldn’t have left like that.

Ok.

Ok?

Apology accepted. We should go find Teresa.

Which was gonna be hard. The basement of Chilton was packed. Getting around meant sliding past shirtless backs slick with sweat and pushing between people grinding on each other. Cones of purple and yellow light swung around the room, blinding them.

This is gross, Aisha yelled into Levi’s ear.

You need a drink, said Levi, passing her his flask.

Aisha took a swig -- pure whisky. It burned going down.

This shit is also gross, she said, handing it back.

We’re not gonna find her in here, he yelled.

Aisha pulled him by the hand and pushed forward.

Little by little, she realized Levi was right. She resigned herself to standing in one spot and sipping from Levi’s flask. He was right about that too -- no sense in being sober in this mess, she thought.
Turned out that Anthony knew Chilton House people. Or person. A junior he had met through the Latino frat he pledged last semester. He took Teresa up to the third floor and she came upon a whole room full of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans and Mexicans hoarding tons of booze. She could tell Anthony was doing double duty -- showing off to her that he knew upperclassmen and showing off to them that he had a girl. He kept putting his arm around her and acting like they knew each other better than they really did.

But besides all that, something about the vibe in the room made her relax. They were all bravado and baseball caps, passing around a joint. The couple of girls that were there weren’t pretending to like her like all the white girls on campus did. When Anthony introduced her, they just nodded at her and looked away. Yeah, this feels like home, she thought.

Which had turned out to be a confusing idea for Teresa, ever since she’d gone home for winter break. She had spent the whole first semester at Wilton bewildered, out of her comfort zone, and terrified. She told herself she’d never be able to get through if it wasn’t for Aisha, who was equally as freaked out by Wilton culture as she was. Seriously, weekly tea at Hasselbeck? With porcelain cups? If she didn’t have anyone else around to see what she saw, she’d probably lose her damn mind.

When winter break came around, she couldn’t wait to get home. She didn’t love San Bernardino and she didn’t want to move back. But after her first semester, she finally knew what it felt like to miss it.

She got off the plane and her mom picked her up and on the drive home she could already tell things were not the same. She couldn’t help imagining what Wilton students would say about this place. The 98 cent store and the swap meet. Junkyards growing on the town like a fungus.
Even tumbleweeds. There were actual tumbleweeds blowing around the street, which is something that had never really registered with her before.

Everybody seemed different too. Her mom sounded more Mexican than she should, for someone born and raised in California. Her cousins felt distant from her, for the first time in her life. She rolled her eyes at the shit she used to love. The movies she and her cousins used to watch over and over seemed dumb now, all fart jokes and stereotypes.

What’s the matter with you, her mom kept asking. You think you’re too good for us now? Maybe, she thought, but didn’t dare say it.

On the way back, the thought had pained her. San B wasn’t the same, but Wilton was no home either.

Whiskey loosened Aisha up. She gave up on Teresa. She started dancing. She tried to convince Levi to join her, but he clung to his flask and the wall. Until some guy from the basketball team wrapped his arm around Aisha’s waist and whispered in her ear. Levi came up and grabbed her by the arm. Aisha giggled, first at him and then at the roller coaster feeling of being swung around while drunk.

Upstairs, Anthony kept handing Teresa cranberry vodkas. She finished one, and she’d look down to see another was in her hand. They were starting to appear like magic, like she thought she maybe willed them to exist. The drunker she got, the more she wondered where Aisha and Levi had gone. Were they hooking up? Were they wondering where she was too? Teresa thought of Levi’s green blue eyes and how he looked at Aisha, she thought about the way he ran his hands through his hair when Aisha made him nervous. What would it be like to be her? To have him stammer and fawn over her the same way he did over Aisha? It wasn’t that she had a crush on
Levi. He was just around all the time and watching him and Aisha had started to feel like a hobby for her. Maybe he was a little cute, in that preppy New England boy gone bad kind of way. They did seem to have a lot in common, didn’t they? He was into film theory too and when he first saw the Pulp Fiction poster on Teresa’s wall, they had ended up talking about their favorite scenes for, like, a whole hour. She never heard him have conversations like that with Aisha. What he liked about her must be physical. Ugh, boys are so shallow, she thought.

She decided to look for a bathroom to see if she could sober up and check her face — why was she even thinking of Levi so much anyways? When she got up, she wobbled a little bit. Anthony grabbed her by the waist and made her sit back down.

Some girl made a joke about hipsters wearing Urban Outfitters crosses that looked like the kind her abuela bought at the second hand store and Teresa laughed too hard. She could feel herself getting embarrassing.

Maybe we should go down to the basement about now, said Anthony.

Levi’s flask was empty. Aisha was convinced they should go look for more, even though deep down inside she thought, here it is, my all or nothing monster coming up to get me. Levi seemed more sober. He told her they didn’t need anymore. But she dragged him along anyways. They circled the perimeter of the party and she ended up pulling him out the basement door in the back, as if, in her drunken logic, she believed that somehow there would be a wondrous fountain of booze awaiting them there. Instead, the cold February air blasted Aisha in the face. The sobering effect was nearly immediate. She shivered and grabbed her arms, realizing she wasn’t wearing a coat.

Aisha sat down on the low brick wall behind Chilton House. She felt like all the energy had been sucked out of her. She felt like shit. The past few months rolled over her back like a
freighter: the failed tests, the struggle to understand what teachers expected, her inability to stick
to her own rules, her confusion over the debates her peers held in classrooms, as if there were
entire worlds she felt like she had missed out on, as if they were speaking a language she failed
to learn, her fear that she would be exactly what her mother feared she would be -- nothing,
nobody, lost and adrift in a sea full of all the lost and adrift people on this continent, no job, no
home, no family, no one to take care of her and no one to take care of. With not one rope holding
her down to this earth, she’d float away. All of a sudden, she wanted to cry.

Levi sat down next to her.

You all right?

No. Drunk. I don’t know.

Levi put his arm around her and kissed her forehead. It calmed her. Having him around
calmed her. He had all the answers she didn’t. Whenever she felt the stress of it all taking over or
when she felt sure she wasn’t going to be able to make it, to graduate, to get a job, to exist in any
sort of way resembling successful, Levi would crack a joke or answer a question in just the right
way and things would feel ok, even if just momentarily. She was thankful for him. I’m thankful
for you, she considered saying. But she didn’t.

Let’s just go get Teresa, she said, getting up.

The music was pulsing in the basement and Teresa was dancing with Anthony, her back to his
front, his arms on her hips. The lights weren’t helping with the wooziness. All of a sudden, she
felt it coming onto her. She left Anthony and pushed her way through the crowd. If she could just
get to the stairs, she’d make it to the bathroom on time.
About three feet from the staircase, she saw Aisha and, then, Levi. He looked at her with concern, his thick eyebrows knitted and those green-blue eyes staring her down. Then, she puked all over the dance floor.

Levi picked Teresa up off the floor and Aisha led them to the first floor bathroom. Aisha held Teresa’s hair as she slumped over the toilet. She rubbed her back and told her it would be alright.

Aisha looked up at Levi, standing in the doorway. He looked handsome like that, hair ruffled, a little wrinkle of concern developing between his eyebrows. He looked back at her. She smiled. He straightened up.

Is she alright?

Yeah, I think so. Maybe we should take her back to the dorm.

Aisha put an arm around Teresa’s waist and lifted her up. Levi helped.

When they got to the dorm room, Teresa face-planted into her bed and passed out.

Thanks for the help, Aisha said.

Of course, said Levi.

He had his coat on. He’d leave and she’d be alone, unable to sleep and staring at T, crashed out on her bed. Suddenly, she couldn’t stand that thought.

Come here, she said.

He sat down on the bed next to her. She kissed him on the cheek, just to express the gratitude she had felt before and even more so now that he had taken care of T so sweetly. But then she pulled back and looked at him, looked at how he looked at her. He was so often full of shit, wasn’t he? But if you were careful enough to look in his eyes, you could find out how he really felt. For all Aisha’s fears about Levi’s ability to manipulate people, especially girls he
wanted to undress, the way he looked at her made her think she could maybe trust him anyway. That maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to have some kind of rope tying her down to the earth, some preventative measure against her fear of floating off into the ether like a hot-air balloon. Maybe she was making the wrong promises to herself. Maybe she needed to make promises to someone else in order to keep them. She held Levi’s chin in her hand and kissed him, this time not on the cheek.

Levi stayed over that night.
The scene opens with a sweeping overview of New York City around sunset. Windows glow with light and the sky is a bright sapphire blue behind the buildings.

A woman in a satin robe runs a bath. She lights a candle. A phone rings.

ROCHELLE, mid-20s, Latina, pretty in a quiet way and with the air of mystery, answers her cell phone.

ROCHELLE
Hey Ma. Si. Que te pasa?

A woman’s voice is heard through the receiver, speaking Spanish.

ROCHELLE
Yeah, I know, it’s just been a busy day.

Woman’s voice grows louder, the Spanish quicker.

ROCHELLE
Ok. I promise I will. But not tonight. Why? Cause I’m tired. Like I said, it’s been a crazy day.
CUT TO:

I/E NEW YORK - MORNING
Montage of Rochelle’s day. She walks down a busy sidewalk in professional clothes. Suddenly, she hears a scream.

Rochelle looks up. A toddler is clinging from a window eave, about to fall.

CLOSE in on Rochelle’s face.

She looks up and squints, calmly. Then, she flies. No costumes, nothing corny like that. But it becomes clear that she’s a superhero and she’s shooting into the air and grabbing the kid, just as he nearly lets go.

MOTHER, 30’s, in a bathrobe, looking disheveled. She’s standing behind the window frozen with fear until she sees Rochelle.

In a thick New York accent:

MOTHER
Superlady! Thank god you were here!

Mother grabs the baby as it cries.

ROCHELLE
Yeah, I just happened to be walking by. Glad I could help.

MOTHER
How can I repay you? I don’t have much money, but...look I just made a big breakfast. Wanna stay and grab something to eat?
ROCHELLE
No, don’t worry about it. I gotta drop off a bunch of resumes. Job hunting, you know how it goes.
(Rochelle shrugs)

MOTHER
You bet I do. Best of luck to you!

ROCHELLE
Thanks!

CUT TO:

I/E SUBWAY STATION - DAY
Rochelle taps her foot, waiting for the train and glancing at her watch. A woman tries to take a selfie but then fumbles her phone. She tries to grab it before it falls but ends up crashing into the tracks.

Rochelle swoops down and picks up the woman with her superhuman strength, taking her out of harm’s way just before the train arrives.

WOMAN, 20’s, blonde and well-dressed.

WOMAN
Superlady! You saved my life! I always wanted to meet you!

ROCHELLE
Well, here I am. Hope I’m not too disappointing.

WOMAN
No way! You totally look better in person.
ROCHELLE
Thanks! Look I gotta run -- on my way to an interview.

WOMAN
Oh good luck! I’m sure you’ll get it.

ROCHELLE
Hope so!

CUT TO:

I/E HIGH RISE BUILDING - DAY

Rochelle walks out of the building, looking disappointed.

Mumbling to herself and looking at her phone:

ROCHELLE
That went well. Maybe next time don’t talk about the ex in a job interview, huh?

A barrage of honking emanates from

THE STREET
Suddenly, a cab driver loses control of his car and it’s heading full speed into an Ann Taylor storefront.

ROCHELLE
looks up. Close in on her face, again. She looks concerned. In a flash, she’s between the car and a sales assistant, using her superhuman strength to push the car away, just as it crashes through the glass.

CABBIE, 40’s, very New York. Yankees jacket or something.

Gets out of the car and looks at the damage in awe. He yells at no one in particular:

CABBIE
Where the fuck did this store come from? Like it popped up out of nowhere.

SALES ASSISTANT, early 20’s, terrified.

SALES ASSISTANT
Seriously? I could have died!

ROCHELLE
K, I’m going to let you guys figure this one out.

Rochelle walks off.

CUT TO:

I/E - CENTRAL PARK - DAY

Rochelle walks around the park, looking disappointed. She sits by that big pretty fountain that’s always in New York movies and picks at a bagel with her chin in her hands. Next to her, a man feeds his young son a hot dog.

The kid starts to choke.
ROCHELLE
You know the heimlich maneuver?

MAN, late 30’s, wrinkled plaid shirt and jeans, looks helpless.

MAN
No! I almost took a class but, you know, it was a bunch of nights a week and it was football season --

Rochelle grabs the kid out of his stroller and wraps her arms around his chest until he coughs up the hot dog.

MAN
Oh my god. Thank you! Hey...I know you. Aren’t you SuperLady?

ROCHELLE
Yeah, I guess that’s what they’ve been calling me.

CUT TO:

I/E BACK TO ROCHELLE’S APARTMENT - NIGHT
Rochelle’s on the phone with her mom.

ROCHELLE
Yeah, I know. Ok. I’ll put in the cake order tonight. No, I promise it’ll be ready for Dad’s birthday. Yeah, they got all day. It’ll be fine. Ok. Te quiero tambien.

Rochelle hangs up the phone and goes back to the bathroom. She lights a candle and gets in the tub, with relief. Just as she closes her eyes and sinks in, her phone buzzes.

SHOT OF PHONE:
Text message from DOUCHEBAG DO NOT ANSWER:
Miss you, babe.

Rochelle groans.
Summer in New York. People blooming like trees, rats running out to feel the warm night air, the thick dirt of subway sweat, free concerts. Aisha always loved summer in the city. The city came alive in the summer, stretching out of its winter cave like a hibernating black bear. This summer, though, was even better. Because this summer, she was in love.

Here’s what it felt like to be nineteen and in love in New York City in the summer of 2010: full and dripping with gritty sweetness, like when you open a pomegranate and the juice slips down and you have lick it off your wrists before it stains your jeans, like the ruby crush of the seeds between your teeth. Like sitting on a Brooklyn fire escape as the sun set, leaning back against someone else’s beating heart. Like cut-offs burning an ugly suntan onto your upper thighs and laughing about it later in tangled off-white sheets. Like self-serve yogurt and liquor flavored kisses, chocolate sprinkles on wine-stained lips at 4 AM. Like a round, white pill on your tongue in a warehouse full of strangers, a place where there is dark and light but nothing in between, and when the light hits the mole on his right arm and it’s kind of like God revealed a prophesy to you and only you.

By August, she could barely even remember anything else she had done for the past few months. Not the middle schoolers’ camp she worked at in Queens or what it felt like to be back under her mother’s roof. That was the mundane. Painful, but only because it was the exact opposite of how she felt around Levi: brightly and vividly alive. They’d lay up in the Brooklyn apartment Levi was subletting for the summer, tell each other stories, ask questions, fuck, repeat. Levi always wanted to know about what growing up was like for her. He would ask questions about Queens, about wearing hijab. What would your mom think of us lying here right now, he might ask, right before rolling over on top of her. He called her Scheherezade whenever she wore
winged eyeliner. So fucking corny but, still, she loved it. As for him, he looked like the lead in all the movies she’d watched since she was a kid -- a little bit of the prince in Sleeping Beauty and a little bit of Ryan Gosling in The Notebook. He wasn’t like any of the hoodrats she grew up with, the ones she thought she had liked. All the Hey Mami’s and Lemme Tap That’s. Levi was a different breed. He knew the ways of the world. She could take him anywhere. Or he could take her, really. He knew how to wear a suit without looking like he had borrowed it from his fat uncle. He knew what restaurants to take her to in the city and he even paid for dinner, no going dutch, nothing. He was prince charming and he picked her.

She was in love. Like for real this time. Not puppy dog high school love, not the love of an easily manipulable teenager -- real love. She was sure this was what adults called love. The kind that can only develop when you’re out on your own, becoming your own person.

Somewhere in the back of Aisha’s head she was worried. There was the fear that she had given into the gluttony that had always wanted to destroy her and that she had finally given it permission to do just that. She had never let go quite like this before, not with Brandon or with booze or drugs or even with Teresa. But wasn’t giving into it some kind of aversion therapy? Was it possible that letting in this kind of entropy would give her a chance to rebuild herself without that old fear? It never made any sense anyways. People are more than particles. Anyways, Levi was obsessive too. In that way, they complimented each other. A little jealous, sure. But that’s how these things go, anything you love comes wrapped up in the fear that you’ll lose it. Besides, going back to Wilton in the fall slowed them down. Reality visited them. They became a couple with everyday rituals and, yeah, some arguments too. Nothing crazy.
Like there was the thing over Teresa’s movie. Thanksgiving break, T was supposed to go to New York with her, partly because she had nowhere else to go but mostly because she was trying to make a movie that was set in New York. She told Aisha she wanted her to star in it and after Teresa explained the idea to her, she was like, Um, how? It was a superhero jam that required Aisha to do shit like save babies falling from three story windows or stop a car crash with her super strength. Aisha thought like, (1) do I look like a superhero to you? (2) what, exactly, is your special effects budget, Ms. I can’t afford a plane ticket home for thanksgiving?

Teresa said, Don’t worry about all that. So it’ll look a little janky? Oh well, it’ll be part of the charm. The big indie directors do shit like that all the time.

Aisha figured she’d just believe her, because why not try it. She still hadn’t figured out what she was supposed to do with the rest of her life and maybe-just-maybe she was a good actress and just had no idea. She spent the weeks leading up to Thanksgiving imagining red carpet interviews and buying her own personal jet. Little by little, she got used to the idea.

Problem was, the scheduling. Levi wanted her to spend Thanksgiving with her parents. Nah, she had said. Parents, especially the kind Levi had -- all Connecticut, cardigans, and after-dinner cocktails -- made Aisha nervous. Eventually, Levi relented. But then he said:

Let’s just take a weekend trip to New Hampshire. I got a friend who goes to school up there that can get us some Molly, we can run through the woods, butt naked, tripping balls.

Aisha looked up at him. She sighed.

Nah, she said.
What? Why?

I promised I’d help her out with her movie.

Are you serious? That movie doesn’t even make sense.

I think it’s cute. Besides, I promised her, so I’m gonna do it.

So I’m not gonna see you all Thanksgiving break?

Guess not.

Seriously, Aisha?

What the fuck is the big deal? We’re together all the time.

Levi frowned. She had pointed out something that neither of them had complained about

before: how all-consuming their relationship had been.

Guess I’m going to have to find other ways to occupy myself.

She knew what he meant.

Yeah, I guess your hands are going to be real busy.

Levi ignored her, walked over to his bookshelf, and pretended to be reorganizing his

books.

I’m pretty sure Marie would be down for that Molly trip so maybe I’ll ask her.

Aisha knew Marie as Levi’s high school girlfriend, the one that cheated on him and broke

his
heart. He said they were friends now, which was something she didn’t quite believe but didn’t think about much, since she only came up once or twice. She knew Levi was egging her on, but she couldn’t help it.

Ok lemme get this straight: You’re planning on getting high with your ex-girlfriend in the middle of nowhere New Hampshire?

Yeah, we’re friends now, so why not? Anyways, Marie is the kind of girl that’s up for anything.

And I’m not?

You’re afraid of Thanksgiving dinner with my parents, so, no, you’re not up for anything.

It just seems like a lot.

If you were a little more confident, you could probably deal with it. But you’re so awkward and shy. You should’ve seen Marie when she came over for dinner with my parents. Got drunk and told them dirty jokes all night. They loved it. You should loosen up a little.

If you wanna date your ex again, you should just go ahead and do that.

Aw, come on, don’t take it that way. It’s just that, you know, my parents stress me out. My dad, especially. He’s going to be sitting at that table insinuating that I’m a *homosexual*. And then he’s going to ask me about Wilton and when I tell him about it, he’s going to explain how much better Yale was and ask why I couldn’t have tried a little harder at that *expensive* high school he sent me to, and how he did so much more with so much less and how lucky I am...it would just be a lot easier if you were there.
Why? So they can ridicule me?

No, they only do that to me. Seriously, Aisha, just suck it up. I do so much for you. You can’t do this one thing for me?

Are you for real? Like I don’t bring you coffee when you’re studying? Or type up your notes when you can’t read your own bad handwriting? Or suck your dick when you’re too tired to fuck? Or play out all your little fantasies?

Whoa, relax, Aisha.

Don’t fucking tell me to relax! You know what, call Marie. Tell her to bring her dirty jokes and her incredible self-confidence. You can leave me out of it.

When they parted for break, his goodbye was cold. Whatever, she thought. Let him have his temper tantrum. Teresa had pulled an all-nighter writing a midterm exam, so she slept the whole bus ride to New York. But Aisha stayed awake. She realized that, for a few hours, she had some of that thing that she had in excess in high school, but these days had almost none of: loneliness. It was a good kind of loneliness, the kind that makes you panic at first when you’re not used to it, but then settles into something that feels sort of like a divine touch. A revelation.

At first, she had almost thought of waking Teresa up, making her talk about something, anything -- T was always good at that. But after about twenty minutes, she settled into it. She hadn’t really had a moment to herself probably since before she and Levi started dating. She
thought about some stuff. About Levi and how much she would miss him this week. *Try a little gratitude*, said some other voice in her head. Wasn’t Teresa nuts jealous about what she had? She would never say so, but she was. Poor Teresa. In so many ways, she seemed so lost. Aisha thought of her standing in front of the mirror in the bathroom they shared, pinching at her love handles. Or how nervous she got when Levi was around, like she couldn’t handle the presence of a guy, any guy, without worrying about how she looked or seemed to him. She had had to convince T to move out of the all-girls’ dorm for their second year. I’m just more comfortable here, she had said. But Aisha wanted to move to Wagner House, where Levi lived. Besides, the rooms were bigger. She finally convinced her by telling her she’d get more of a work out walking up the hill everyday from Wagner to the English building where most of her classes were. She knew it would work but it was her last weapon, because Aisha hated encouraging that thing that T did, obsessing over pounds and calories. Teresa was always looking into some new diet pill or researching work out regimens she never actually tried. Aisha told her, You’re not even fat. You just think you are because you got those Latina hips. You’re not supposed to look like one of those skinny Norwegian models. Easy for you to say, Teresa would respond. You can house a bacon burger and fries without gaining a pound.

They were opposites, weren’t they? Aisha could never sleep, Teresa was practically a narcoleptic. Aisha was tall and skinny, Teresa, short and thick. Aisha was forgetful and indecisive; Teresa was motivated and had a mind like a steel trap. But they were inseparable.
Girls in Hasselbeck used to joke, here comes Bert and Ernie. Not that they ever spent much time
talking to anyone else.

Levi was the only person who ever pierced the bubble. And he spent their entire freshman
year trying to do it. At first, they were kind of a trio. Levi and Teresa had some stuff in common.
They could talk about books they loved and movies they watched over and over. Aisha would
zone out to those kinds of conversations, but she liked how much T lit up over them. It was cute.
But then once Levi and Aisha started dating, that stopped. Levi asked if Teresa hated him. No,
she’s just jealous, Aisha had said to him. Of who, he asked.

Did Teresa have a crush on Levi? She did say he was hot when she first met him. But
then again, she was always pointing out the shit he did wrong, saying he was flirting with other
girls or too controlling with Aisha. Levi had liked to flirt with T a little, especially before he
started dating Aisha. He’d pinch her dimples and call her sweet. Or he’d say she was so
interesting and easy to talk to. Compliment her when he thought she looked good. He must have
done that to make Aisha jealous, mostly. They were so different, after all. He couldn’t really
have been interested in both of them.

When they got into the city, they took the train to Queens and lugged their stuff up the stairs to
her mom’s apartment. Teresa’s bag was weighed down with equipment and she stood at the
bottom of the staircase looking up at Aisha like, *Help.* So Aisha took her stuff up and walked down to help Teresa.

By the time she got back down, Teresa was deep in conversation with a woman who was most definitely on crack. She scratched her neck and looked at Teresa with pleading eyes.

Come on, T, let’s go.

But the woman held onto Teresa’s sleeve.

Please, she said.

Teresa looked so confused and scared Aisha nearly laughed. She reached into her wallet and grabbed a five to give her.

I need $20!

Well, that’s all we got. Try a little gratitude. Come on, T.

Wow that woman was messed up, she said as they climbed up to the fourth floor.

How’d she get in?

I opened the door for her.

Aisha looked at Teresa askance.

What? She asked me to.

Aisha shook her head.

When they opened the door, she could smell the food cooking. She knew what it was before she even walked in because her mom had texted her in all-caps, as usual, **WHAT DO YOU AND FRIEND WANNA TO EAT?** She had asked for baba ghanouj and macaroni
bechamel. They were her favorites and usually her mom would say they didn’t go together, but ever since she’d been away at school, her mom had gotten much nicer.

Aisha hugged her and went straight to the oven to stick her face into the bechamel.

Hey! You gonna make it cold, her mom yelled.

Ma, you won’t believe what Teresa just did, she said, closing the oven door and licking the creamy sauce off her finger.

She told her about the woman and her mom laughed. She pointed a wooden spoon at Teresa.

You be careful here. This city is a lot of crackheads. Yani, everywhere, she said motioning widely across the kitchen as though she were conjuring them up in front of her.

Teresa smiled, probably at the sight of an old Egyptian woman in an abeya talking about crackheads. Which made Aisha cringe a little.

When they sat down to eat, her mother waited until Aisha’s guard was down and her mouth full of bechamel:

Ok, so you not wearing any hijab at all now?

Ma, come on. We talked about this last summer.

But you always change your mind. I never know what you decide.

Look, it’s just harder in college.

Why? You can’t study with scarf on? Your scarf blocks ideas from the brain?

Ma, come on. Let’s just talk about this later. Teresa doesn’t want to hear us fight.
Don’t mind me, said Teresa. Me and this macaroni are having a moment. What do you call this Mrs. Abu Bakr?

Bechamel.

I can’t stop eating it. You’re going to make me fat.

Good. You need it.

Teresa turned to Aisha.

I like her, she said.

The next morning, Teresa woke Aisha up at 6am to get the lighting right for their first scene.

What the fuck, mumbled Aisha, half asleep, throwing a pillow at Teresa’s pysched face. Teresa pulled on Aisha’s arm until she finally got out of bed.

When she got out of the shower, she saw that Teresa had laid out an outfit on her bed and put a mug of hot coffee on the desk for her. Aisha put on the clothes -- a gray blazer, a matching skirt that was just a little too tight on her hips, and a pink button down.

Aisha had no idea what she was in for. She had glanced at the script and thought most of it impossible, but Teresa told her she would handle it, so she knew she would. Somehow.

First, T asked her to walk down the street in her suit, looking serious. Next, she played the sound of a baby crying on her phone.

When you hear that, she said, look up towards the building. Concerned-like. Remember, you’re a superhero.
Oookay, said Aisha.

Then, they went back up to the apartment. Aisha had to climb out to the fire escape and do her best to pretend to be flying. Teresa, dressed in a robe and curlers, set the camera tripod up behind her and dangled a plastic baby doll from the window. Right as Aisha crawled out the window, her skirt ripped.

Shit, what do I do now?

I don’t know! Hold onto it. The show must go on!

For real?

Yeah! We’re gonna make it work.

Aisha had to hand it to her. She was determined. Aisha did her best superhero impression and saved the baby from falling down four stories. End scene.

Ok, ok could’ve gone worse, said Teresa.

They broke for lunch and watched the scenes on the camera Teresa had borrowed from the multimedia center at Wilton. They giggled, nearly choking on their tuna sandwiches. It was ridiculous-looking. But Aisha kind of liked watching herself on the screen. Maybe I am cut out for this after all, she thought.

Then, she read the next scene. Saving a woman from being run over by a subway?

Teresa, WTF.

We can’t do this, she said.
Sure we can. You film me falling into the tracks and we cut to a train and then I film you reaching down for me.

Ok that’s crazy. You are not going down on the subway tracks.

We’ll time it out! Just trust me.

They went to the nearest stop on the Q, which was mostly empty since rush hour was long over.

This isn’t even going to look right, Aisha said.

Stop worrying. I’m the director.

Teresa pulled out her phone.

Ok, great, the next train isn’t coming for 13 minutes.

Then, she set up the camera on the tripod, knelt down, and began to climb to the tracks.

Whoa whoa whoa, are you serious? You cannot do that. You know I’m not an actual superhero right?

It’s fine! Come on, we gotta be quick, she said. Then, she switched to acting mode: Help, Help, she screamed.

What the fuck, Aisha mumbled.

She nearly giggled at Teresa lying out on the dirty tracks and begging for help. She was a terrible actress. Then, she heard it. The train. It was coming.

Teresa! The train is coming! Like not in thirteen minutes. Now! It’s coming now!
Shit, Teresa said jumping to her feet. She reached for the edge of the platform and struggled to pull herself up. She was too short.

Shit shit shit, echoed Aisha, kneeling down and reaching for Teresa’s hand. She pulled on her arm so hard she thought she might rip it out of her socket. They both landed flat on the platform and watched the train pull in. A handful of people exited the train, walking around them. One of them was a skinny kid who looked about thirteen, trying to be a badass in a Knicks cap and a baggy bomber. He glanced at them on the floor and then at the camera. He lunged at the camera, grabbed it, and started booking it.

Shit, Aisha said again. Before she finished the syllable, Teresa’s was up, running after him. She tackled him on the stairs and grabbed the camera. Then, she stood up and kicked him.

Get the fuck out of here, kid, she said.

Aisha was behind her by the time she caught her breath. Teresa looked back at her and caught Aisha’s eye. Teresa’s bun had fallen halfway out and she was covered in subway grime from the tracks. Her high cheekbones were bright red and she was breathing hard, holding her sides as if her organs would fall out. Aisha knelt over her knees and laughed. She couldn’t help it. T slumped against the wall and then sat on a step. Aisha was grateful to hear her giggle too.

She was also sorta grateful that the camera ended up with a cracked screen. She felt bad that Teresa was going to have to pay for it (with what money??) but, still, she was kind of relieved. Teresa rolled the film and stared at it through the busted screen.
Maybe I’ll just make this a documentary. Like, the “Making of” or something artistic like that.

Yeah, ok, she said.

This is totally not the end of our filmmaking career, Aish. Just wait.

She rolled her eyes. She looked over Teresa’s shoulder and watched herself on film, heroically pulling Teresa up from the tracks. Maybe, she thought. Maybe.

They spent the rest of the week sleeping in all day until Aisha’s mom went to work, then drinking the nips they had smuggled in their backpacks and watching late night TV.

One night, while they were watching a comedian-magician perform in the last few minutes of The Tonight Show, an idea struck Aisha. She was sprawled out on the couch with her feet propped up behind Teresa’s ears. She looked up at T, who was in her Sweetness pajamas with her pretty hair pulled into a loop at the top of her head, holding a pillow to her chest and sipping on a tiny bottle of coconut Bacardi.

Teresa, she said. You know what I just realized? Maybe you’re really bad at doing things normally just because your mind is meant to be doing something else, you know?

Rude, said Teresa.

No, I mean it in a good way! Like the way you think of things doesn’t make sense to anyone but you but that’s why you’re going to be so good at making things up. Like movies.

Awww, she said.
I’m serious! I mean, maybe the next one. Not this one. This one kinda sucked.

Teresa held the pillow over Aisha’s mouth.

I can’t hear you over all my genius, she said.

On the way back, Teresa stayed up just long enough to tell Aisha about plans for her next feature film. But Aisha was mostly zoning out, thinking about Levi. They had barely spoken that week.

She wanted to patch things up, but didn’t know how she’d say that to him.

Hi, hi, hello. What’s up? I just asked you something, said Teresa, shaking her out of it.

Huh?

I can tell you’re not listening to a word I’m saying.


Teresa rolled her eyes.

Sometimes I swear it’s like always either with him or worried about him.

It’s just that… we had a fight.

Aisha hated admitting things like that to T, mostly because she knew it played into her whole “Levi’s bad for you & you guys don’t belong together” narrative. She also knew that Teresa wasn’t going to let it go until she explained it.

He’s mad that I didn’t want to go to his family’s for Thanksgiving.

I didn’t even know he asked you. That’s kind of a big deal, huh?

What? Yeah, I guess it is. I didn’t even think of that. I just didn’t want to go, I guess.
Why?

I don’t know. Can you picture me, Egyptian girl from Queens, in whatever fucking chateau those assholes live in? I mean you saw where I came up. Is there any chance they wouldn’t automatically hate me? Nah, no thanks.

Well, what’s your plan? Cuz you can’t hide from them forever.

Forever? Who said forever?

So, you gonna meet them? Or are you planning on breaking up with him?

Didn’t realize those were the only two choices.

I just mean, like, where do you see this going? Like is Levi the one?

Teresa said it in a sarcastic tone, but Aisha knew it was a real question.

I don’t know. I mean we’re nineteen. But I do love him.

Yeah? Why?

It’s just different with him than it ever was with my ex. I just feel like he knows so much about the world, stuff I’ve never even heard about. Like he’s traveled everywhere. You know what he told me the other day? That there are pink dolphins in the Amazon river. And he saw them.

Yeah, cuz his parents are rich.

Ok, yeah. But it’s more than that, he’s curious about everything. He has this greed for life that I’ve never known anyone else to have. And it’s exciting to be around.

Then, Aisha lowered her voice.
Plus, the sex is banging.

How? Come on tell me the good stuff.

Well, it’s just so different than it was with Brandon, like I said. Brandon used to treat it like it was an errand he had to run. Like the only point was reaching the finish line. Like I wasn’t even there.

Aisha drifted off. She could still feel the way he made her feel -- like a rag doll, like an old sock. How could she have loved him? No, this was so different, she thought.

But Levi takes his time. We could spend all day in bed, probably, just messing around. And we do things I never thought I would.

Liiiiike?

He’s a little rough sometimes. But in a way that I like. Like it almost feels like I don’t have control, even though I do.

What?

I don’t know if you’ll understand it.

Come on.

It’s complicated.

Didn’t you say you hated how rough your ex used to be?

Yeah, but Brandon never knew how to turn it off. He was always like that, whether we were fucking or not. But Levi, it’s like he’s putting on a performance. It’s hot.

I don’t get it.
Yeah. Told you.

When they got back to the dorm, she texted Levi. I missed you, she said. You were right. We should’ve found a way to hang out over break. Come over, he texted back. So she did.

Aisha had a whole speech planned -- I should’ve just gone with you, it was all about me, I was stuck in my head and, you were right, too shy and ashamed, I’m sorry. She didn’t get a chance to say it though. He undressed her as soon as she walked in the door. Wait, she said, but he didn’t listen. Momentarily, she thought of her conversation with Teresa, Levi vs. Brandon and all that. But the way he kissed her had a way of silencing most thoughts.

He pushed her onto the bed and grabbed both her wrists in one of his hands, holding them over her head. Then, he fucked her. She pulled her face up to his ear, felt his hot breath on the side of her cheek, whispered I love you in his ear. He pulled back and stuck three fingers in her mouth.

When they were done, he transformed, as he always did. He kissed her fingertips one by one and lay down at her side, cuddling up next to her like a puppy. They talked about Thanksgiving -- she told him about Teresa’s failed movie, he did imitations of his stuffy dad. They laughed. Then, he went to shower.

It felt good. Like things were finally where they were supposed to be. She’d stay here tonight and in the morning it would be back to the usual. Monday classes, studying, and Levi to reward her at the end of the day.
His phone buzzed. She looked at it. Marie. Good thing she knew his passcode.

And there it was, bright and bursting like a very pale pink peach, Marie’s ass. She held up her shirt so as to feature her red lacy thong. Her face turned to look at the camera with a smirk. There was a hoop in her right eyebrow. She did look like that adventurous type of white girl, Aisha thought, just before her heart stopped. Then, she threw the phone against the wall.

He came out of the shower dripping.

What the fuck happened? Are you ok?

Then, he looked at the phone, face down on the tattered dorm carpet. He knelt to pick it up. From her vantage point on the bed, Aisha could see the multitude of cracks across the screen. Good, she thought, half-satisfied.

What the fuck, Aisha. What the fuck is this?

She looked up at him. He was handsome. Well-sculpted, you could say. His soaking wet hair was pasted to his forehead like stripes of tawny paint framing those ocean-blue eyes.

You got a message, she said, and flipped over to face the wall.
7.

November 2010 - May 2011

The first time she came back to the dorm in tears, Teresa wanted to say I told you so. But that feeling was complicated by the desire to smoke him out and assassinate him.

Then, by the second and third and fourth times, she got tired of it. The cycle repeated itself over and over. He’d cheat, she’d find out, she’d scream and cry and complain to Teresa, but then after a few days of shutting him out, she’d forgive him again and they’d turn into total gross lovebirds. Once, it turned out that he had fucked three of the girls in Wagner and Aisha only found out because all three of them got into a ‘The Boy is Mine’ type of fight, which ended in them turning on him and telling Aisha all the gritty details -- text messages, dick pics and all.

That one was particularly embarrassing. Like, everyone in the whole dorm knew at that point. Aish was practically hanging her head every time she walked in. How, Teresa thought, could she possibly deal with this? Why keep going back to him? What secret powers did he have?

Whatever it was, the effect was undeniable. Girls swooned for him and it wasn’t just the good looks. He had a way about him. An easy grin, a desperate desire to please, a self-deprecating sense of humor, a bottomless pit of horniness. All girls ever want is to be wanted. And Levi gave them that. He wanted everyone, all the time.
What complete bullshit. Can’t they all see his game, thought Teresa. She couldn’t help wondering if for Aisha part of the appeal was that she was a sort of Queen Concubine. In the end, she was the only one he ever actually admitted to love. He could have just about anyone, but he picked her.

God, Aisha’s such a dumbass, she thought.

Teresa, for her part, had taken on a vow of celibacy by her sophomore year. No, it didn’t matter that she still maintained a strong hold on her virginity and that there weren’t any good candidates interested in taking that off her hands. Even if that weren’t the case, she would still be keeping it in her pants. She had shit to do here, and she wasn’t going to let any stupid man-boys divert her from that path.

Which was kind of the opposite of what she had planned for when she showed up at Wilton. Her whole life she had felt a good three steps behind the game. Everyone else had to explain to her what a blowjob was, everybody had kissed someone before she had, now everyone had lost it long before she got the chance. She thought going to college in this new place all the way across the country was going to give her the chance to finally be more worldly than everyone else she grew up with. Here is where she would catch up. Here is where she would bloom.

Yeah fucking right. At Wilton, Teresa learned people could detect your awkwardness no matter how far you had strayed from home. The standards were lower here, sure -- back in San
Bernardino if you shuffled around looking at your feet like half the nerds did here, you’d get your ass beat. But still, college had its cliques and you had to get it right to fit in. Teresa had a habit of clinging closely to one friend but hardly ever talking to anyone else. Aisha was that for her, but she was starting to feel like she had to branch out if she wanted to get to know anyone else.

So halfway through freshman year, she had started to go to parties without her, parties that the Latino Student Union held, parties that some geek in her film classes invited her to, parties full of drugs she was never that into doing. After the chaos at Chilton house during her first year, she was reluctant to get trashed again. Teresa liked a certain amount of control and whenever she drank or smoked, it was almost like she could feel her limbs walking away from her. She couldn’t handle that.

And then there were the boys. Truth was, she wasn’t so bad. She had good cheekbones and nice hair, even if she was a little thick. She got attention from time to time. Just never the good kind. First, there was Anthony, that creep. Turned the ‘charm’ on full blast after that time they drunkenly hooked up. Really, he was just an awkward kid trying to imitate whatever version of a Puerto Rican papi he’d been trained to believe in. Besides, he was less interested in her than he was in upping his body count. No thanks, she thought.

Then, there was Davis. A film nerd too. A little short for her liking, but oh well. Ended up having a dorm room filled with pictures of his high school girlfriend.
Greg, who was high all the time. Peter, who probably had a foot fetish. Austin, who was a civil war reenactor.

Teresa was on a break. Besides, she had had an epiphany. What if being worldly had nothing to do with getting laid or falling in love? What if she could be refined and sophisticated just by doing the things she actually enjoyed -- watching movies and trying to make them. Once the idea struck her she felt sort of foolish for never having considered it. Saw too many Katherine Heigl movies in adolescence, she thought.

Like every miracle cure, this one was a mixed bag. She was getting better at the things she had been bad at, like writing scripts and thinking more carefully of the frames she’d shoot. After watching about thirteen Samurai movies, she had learned how to count to 10 in Japanese. She knew the lyrics to at least three Bollywood songs, even if she didn’t know what they meant. Sure, there were other, more “artistic” films she could watch, but she preferred to watch what she liked. She could watch experimental film for class, but when she was back at her dorm, vegging out, avoiding alcohol and boys, and usually all alone because Aisha spent most of her time at Levi’s now, she wanted to watch the good stuff. The bright colors and the cheesy dance moves. The gory assassinations and the complex plots based on long-dead concepts like loyalty and honor. Yeah, the good stuff.

Sometimes, if Aisha was at odds with Levi, she’d watch them with her. That’s all they ever did, though. No more talking, no more late nights lying across from each other in the dark, imagining their futures. The ups and downs with Levi were starting to put a strain on their
relationship. After the first couple of times Aisha had promised to never go back to him, Teresa had started to see through her lies. The Aisha she had worshipped when she first met her -- strong, independent, self-aware -- was gone. Levi had eaten her up.

One night, after a particularly bad fight, Levi had agreed to spend the night in Aisha and Teresa’s dorm room as some sort of compromise. Annoying, thought Teresa. Their bedrooms were separated by a bathroom with paper thin walls, so she could hear them arguing all night as she was trying to watch an Almodovar movie. Giggles and the sound of lips smacking rose over women yelling at each other in Spanish. Ugghhh, get a room, she thought.

Then, she heard the bed squeaking, then Aisha’s moans. At first, they were trying to be quiet, but then it seemed like they gave up. She heard Levi smack something fleshy, heard Aisha’s sharp cry after, which then devolved back into moans. Teresa’s hands crept into her pants. She listened to them carefully. She closed her eyes and Aisha’s moans became her own. Levi’s grip was on her hips, not Aisha’s. She came just after Aisha did.

That spring, when Aisha told her she had decided to apply for a study abroad program in Brazil, Teresa was relieved. Maybe the drama with Levi would stop, and maybe she could stop pretending they had anything in common anymore.

Ever since Aish had starred in Teresa’s shitty, ill-fated first film, she had started to think about acting more seriously. Not that she ever said so. She was way too embarrassed to admit it.
But Teresa could tell. Aisha loved watching herself in those scenes. When they got back from Thanksgiving break, she was taking more selfies. Asking Teresa questions about the biz, questions Teresa had no answers for but did a good job of pretending to know. She signed up for an intro to dance class and fell in love with latin dance, especially samba and Afro-Brazilian. She decided she was going to go to Salvador da Bahia to learn more about it. Go, thought Teresa. Go chase stupid dreams that’ll always be out of your reach. As long as you’re far away from Levi.

It seemed that Aisha had started to realize the effect he was having on her. It also seemed that she had given up on being able to let go of him on her own. She needed to extract herself from the situation, go to a whole other continent. Dream different dreams.

Teresa thought it was a good idea. She also thought Aisha might not make it. She imagined her there, in a Brazilian jungle basically, hot and sweaty and desperate for McDonald’s french fries. Were there McDonald’s in Brazil? Probably. Whatever. The point was that Aisha didn’t like to make herself uncomfortable if she didn’t have to. Which is why she never studied and why she could never manage to stay away from Levi that long. Teresa wasn’t about to tell her that, though. So maybe Brazil would teach her.

Teresa was looking forward to a few months living outside of Aisha’s shadow. She was sick of feeling like she was the one who paled in comparison. If she hadn’t found herself after the first couple years of college, it was because she was just trying to be Aish. It had finally dawned on her that if she was ever going to become the person she imagined herself being, that
person still wouldn’t look, smell, or talk like Aisha AbuBakr. Which could be a good thing. That remained to be seen.

Everything had been so boring for so long. The same classes, the same schedule, the same movies in the empty dorm room, even the regularity of Levi and Aisha’s fights had started to seem mundane. Until the last couple weeks of the spring semester. Was it that they were halfway through with college? Was it because Aisha was leaving? Was it that fresh springtime air that gives everybody the energy to start shit all over again?

One night, Aisha showed up at their dorm with all the things she usually left at Levi’s -- a sweatshirt, her toothbrush, a crystal that she thought gave her intense and prophesy-filled dreams. That was a new sign. But Teresa didn’t think much of it.

Then, Levi banged on the door. Teresa knew it was him immediately, just by the shamelessness of the knock. At first, Aisha shook her head and told Teresa not to open it. But he kept knocking. Then, he pushed the door open. He grabbed the things Aish had taken with her and stuffed them under his arm. Come on, let’s go, he said without even looking at her.

No, I told you. I’m not going back with you, Aisha said.

That’s when Levi finally stared her down. Teresa had never seen him like that. Levi was almost always calm, even the times when Aisha yelled into his face. This was a different Levi. His jaw was set and his eyes were wide. He clutched the crystal so hard Teresa thought it might crumble in his hands.
Aisha. Get the fuck up.

I said no.

He walked up to where Aisha sat on the bed and hovered over her, using his height to his advantage. Teresa couldn’t see Aish’s face but she could imagine it. She’d be determined but scared. Angry but incapable of looking him in the eyes. Teresa had never seen it get this bad. It was the first time in a while she felt bad for Aish. She watched them silently stare at each other for what seemed like hours but was probably more like 30 seconds. Then, Levi grabbed her by the arm and picked her up, dragging her to the door.

Teresa!

Teresa panicked. She could hear Aisha calling her name as if she was on the shore and Aisha was underwater.

Levi, stop, she said.

She wanted it to be an order, but it sounded more like a desperate plea.

Look, Teresa, stay out of it. You don’t know the whole story. Let Aisha take care of this like a big girl. You don’t have to clean up after her.

Teresa looked at Aisha. Aisha stared back, the crook of her arm still caught in Levi’s grip. Her eyes looked like they were painted on -- huge and colored with fear. Teresa didn’t get a chance to say anything else. He pulled Aisha out the door and they were gone.

Aisha came back, finally, a whole day later. She said it was over. *Done* done, she said.
Has he ever been like that before? I mean like pushed you around like that?

No, no, he’s not abusive. It was just a bad fight. He was angry.

About you leaving?

Yeah...Plus, he found out I fucked someone else.

Who??

Some kid at a party. I came home and he wasn’t there and I was fed up. So I went out with a mission.

How’d he find out?

Aisha shrugged.

I told him, she said with a smirk.

You are bad, said Teresa.

He deserved it. Had to give him a memorable goodbye.

Sounds fucked up.

Aisha’s smile faded. She sighed.

It is. It’s over now. I’m just gonna do this thing. I’m gonna go to Brazil in a couple months, and I’ll move on, Aisha threw her hands in front of her as if to expel it all.

I’m gonna miss you, said Teresa and for a moment, really felt like she would.

Aisha pulled a joint out of her jacket pocket and lit it. Teresa noticed it was rolled the way that Levi liked to do it -- thick in the middle, with a makeshift cardboard filter at the top.
T, you know I’ll miss you too. Even if you’re lying, she said. Then, she inhaled and coughed. Teresa watched her behind the cloud of smoke, her face blurred and already distant.
8.

June 2011

Levi,

That shit I left at your place, that shit you mentioned in your email, I don’t want it anymore. You can keep the flip flops, my crystal, you can even keep my thong. If you want the memories. If that’s your thing, whatever.

I’m only replying to tell you a couple things. It’ll be quick. I just had a couple questions. Like when you told me you were at a meeting for the jai alai club, were you maybe lying and instead *crushing somebody else’s pussy* (a phrase I would never use but I’ve heard mirroring helps ease communication and I know how much you liked that particular saying)? Because the thing is, I looked up the jai alai club. It’s on the Wilton website. But nobody’s been in it since 2003. Did you think using a sport nobody plays anymore as an alibi would prove unbelievable enough to suspend my disbelief? If so, I can’t knock you for it -- it’s almost honorable to take that kind of risk based on a strongly held, if foolish, conviction.

Relatedly: Did you know when you *crushed my pussy*, it would hurt for a couple hours after, but then it would just go back to normal, like you were never even there. Kinda cool, huh?
Pussies are so durable. I know you did not like that, unlike my pussy, I was not durable. Like the time I showed up at your dorm sobbing after those three girls texted me, all at the same time, to tell me they figured out you were fucking all of them in addition to me and they “just thought I should know.” You told me I was over-reacting. Maybe you were right. You tried to tell me they lied, but you recognized that dick pic, didn’t you? You said they were nothing to you. I believe that. I think all of us were.

Remember that life you imagined for us, that night you made me lamb chops back in Brooklyn? You wanted me to picture us in New Hampshire with two bloodhounds, a new baby, and a small sustainable farm, just “as a side gig.” Something else maybe I should have told you a long time ago: even then, in tears at your doorstep, I felt guilty. Because at dinner that night, I had taken my attention off my lamb chops (hard to do, they were really fucking good lamb chops, Levi), looked you right in the eye, and said I love you back. I lied. And later, I cried because I thought my tears might make me an honest woman.

This may sound hard to believe. Especially after all the crying. Or after the time, when the third girl surfaced, that I snuck into your dorm room and poured a gallon of milk all over your mattress. And blow-dried and remade the bed so that you wouldn’t notice until your entire room stank like a fraternity fridge.
Do you remember the last time we fucked? You must because we fucked like it was the last time.

Like it was the end of the world. And it was, for us. But that world’s gone now.

It was the same night I woke up, mid-dream, calling out: my love. You must have thought I meant you. But really it was more like, Where’d I put that? I left it somewhere around here. Under a bookshelf or maybe pressed between the pages of the bible your mother sent you that you never open or possibly hidden in your dress shoes?

All I knew was that it had come out of me. It was crawling around elsewhere, apart from me, when it should’ve been in my esophagus, rolling around like a loose bead I had accidentally swallowed in infancy. I know this all may seem so silly but the thing is, Levi, it wasn’t meant for you. It wasn’t meant for me, either. It was meant to stay there in peace, turning over and over like the sea.

And yeah, I said, My Love, but I’m not entirely sure that’s what it should be called. It’s just the name I heard for it. Something I’ve been calling it ever since I saw the Valentine’s Day episode of Full House back in the 6th grade. I felt like I could see my face covered in shadow but peeking, just barely, into the light. Finally, I understood what I had been missing ever since I saw Ariel marry Prince Eric while her beloved sea folk looked on from the water. The answer had
come just at the right time -- when I was pimply and confused and starting to find the smell of post-PE boys more intriguing than nauseating.

Levi, you see? It didn’t matter that my father was long dead, that my mom worked two shifts and I hardly ever saw her, or that I didn’t have anyone to call a friend, really. I wasn’t alone if I had somebody’s name to write in cursive on my spiral notebooks.

But then drawing in my notebook became waiting for a phone call which became waiting for someone and then lying under them until they were done, hoping that each time I did would add to the pile of love they had for me. Hoping that each time I did something I didn’t want to do that I was making myself harder to leave. I learned my lesson. I thought I had learned it years ago, but I was wrong. Another thing: thanks for the refresher.

Don’t fret, Levi. I’m not looking for apologies. I liked the way you handled me roughly. The way you pacified me. It left me with nothing else to say and I loved being quieted.

This is just to say, really: I want it back. My love, lifelong bead, my ocean, whatever you’re supposed to call it. I want it back. And you know what, my thong, too. You don’t get to keep that shit.

Aisha
From the moment she left the airport, even the air felt different. More like New York than Wilton, but still, different. Thicker, brighter, and lightly bathed in ocean salt, even though she landed miles and miles from the sea. The van that picked her up was painted with the logo of the study abroad program. The driver nodded at her and helped her with her bags, but then didn’t say much. She didn’t mind that, though. She just wanted to look. The road out of the airport was a wide lane lined with bamboo as tall as oak trees. Driving through it was like going through a green tunnel, the road stippled with light. It was just as she had imagined -- a place where even the vegetation was exotic, where just driving down a road felt like entering an alternate universe.

Then, it was over. The van turned onto a highway. It was still lined in green but they could have been anywhere. Florida, maybe. Or driving upstate through the after effects of some healthy June rain. Disappointing, thought Aisha. But then she was ashamed of her disappointment. What did she want from this place, anyway? What was she asking of it? Better find out now, she thought, before it all comes rushing in. Expectations are waiting to be destroyed, she thought. She remembered how she was at 16. How much easier it was to believe that things could go the way you wanted them to or that the world was full of trees that offered all the fruits you longed for, all you had to do was climb up and pick em. Since then, it felt like each disappointment was taking her one level further down into the hellhole of adulthood.
had thought it would be so different. She was so optimistic back then. She had thought that
growing up would be a marker of accomplishments, each step getting you closer to who you
wanted to be. Going to college, getting a job, falling in love, having kids, blah blah, blah.
Instead, the past few years were marked by the before and after of catastrophes. There was the
era Before Brandon (B.B.), then there was After Brandon but Before Levi (B. L.). Now, she was
in her Anno Domini, her new start, everything would be fresh. It just didn’t feel like that. How
sad was it that her life had become marked by ex-boyfriends? Or worse, by the damage they did
to her? Things she wasn’t ready or willing to name. Can you be raped by someone you’re in love
with? Can you be abused if you’ve hurt the abuser too? No, she thought, those kinds of simple
words are too small to hold what she had seen, felt, lived. They didn’t explain what she had with
Brandon or Levi. Nor did they give her the credit for the damage she dealt upon them. What
business did she have thinking about this now anyways? This was a true new start. Not like last
time. She was going to stick to it this time. She was going to stay strong. Step #1: Stop worrying
about the bullshit you left behind.

Before she knew it, there it was. The whole city lying before her and then the ocean
beyond that. The buildings were taller than she expected, the ocean more blue. Looking at it, she
felt something she hadn’t felt since her first memory of taking the train into Manhattan. Like a
whole life lay ahead of her. Like there was a mystery to discover and it was lying somewhere in
between and inside these buildings or somewhere off on that shore. A million directions she
could run in and no obstacles in her way. Was it something you could calculate? The multitude
of ways one day could unfold depending on who you met, what you ate, where you walked? If so, how many options did she have, here, in this entirely new place full of entirely new people? For the first time since she planned this trip, she felt like she was running towards instead of away from something.

All she knew about this place was what she had learned in dance class. How the rhythms of Africa traveled out to the eastern coast of South America and then spread out from there. She learned how dance had become an art of non-verbal resistance -- resistance against the Portuguese church and its tight-lipped values or against those who argued for the possibilities of extinction via assimilation. The teacher never said much more than that. Yet, as she practiced the moves, she liked thinking of the path that they had taken towards her. There was something about dance, something about movement, that told a story better than anything on paper. Learning Afro-Brazilian dance, she felt like there were long-dead voices speaking to her: this is how we moved, this is how we lived. This is how we bent down to harvest food. This is how we fucked. This is how we held our children when they couldn’t or wouldn’t stop crying. And as Aisha learned those movements, she learned people, both dead and alive. This wasn’t an easy thing to explain. Which was why she stuck to dance in the first place.

Aisha had always been the kind of person who needed to feel something to know it was real. She got in trouble at a museum field trip as a kid for trying to poke an Ancient Greek statue. Once, when she was in the sixth grade, she saw Christina Aguilera exiting a high-rise on 72nd and Lexington and, even though she didn’t care all that much for her music, Aisha felt an
overwhelming desire to run up to her and touch her hair. She wondered if this physicality that
was so deeply embodied in her was part of the reason why things had happened the way they did.
Did she exude some kind of sick-sweet perfume that drew those who wanted to manipulate her
limbs like a barbie doll? Or was it maybe that she let Brandon fuck her like that, let Levi push
her like that, because she had somehow willed it so? As if they knew she would never feel
anything unless it was pressed up against her skin.

But she wasn’t going to think about that anymore. No, she wasn’t. She was here to do
something and be someone entirely different and if she was going to do it, really do it, she would
have to push the other things out of her mind. She made that promise to herself just as the van
pulled up to the hotel roundabout and she walked back into that humid, sea-soaked air.

In the hotel, new students were already gathering at the downstairs bar, unabashedly excited
about being able to drink legally. They were in sundresses and shorts, some already pink from
the sun, their hair texturized with sea salt.

Aisha thought she’d skip it. Part one of this project might be returning to her high school
loner state. She momentarily remembered the greedy monster that lived inside her -- the one that,
upon saying yes, would never stop saying it. Celibacy, sobriety, and dance. This was like rehab,
she thought, positively.

Once she got to her room, she realized something she wasn’t expecting. She was sharing
it. Shorts and baseball caps were strewn all over one of the beds, along with a sarong with
Brazilian flag on it. Their owner came strutting out of the bathroom wrapped in a fresh white towel.

Hi! Was wondering when you’d show up. I’m Katie.

She was tall, about Aisha’s height, but bigger. Not fat, more like wider. She had short blonde hair and a slight Southern twang. Her skin was covered in freckles and moles and had turned peachy pink where the hot water had hit her. Her greeting was a little too enthusiastic and Aisha was exhausted from the flight.

Yeah, I have a tendency to be the last to arrive. I’m Aisha.

Well, I’m going to just get dressed and go down to the bar. Wanna come? That’s where everyone is. Can you believe we get to drink here?

Yeah, I can. But I think I’ll skip it.

Katie paused rummaging through her suitcase and looked up at Aisha.

Really? Why?

I just wanna try to focus on other things here.

Oh my god, you’re one of those ‘I’m not here to make friends people.’ I already feel like I’m on Real World Brazil.

Aisha hated her immediately.

Like most people she hated, Katie was not prone to giving in. In between orientation events, she’d ask Aisha if she wanted to grab some acai or take a walk down to the beach or maybe have
just one caipirinha. No thanks, said Aisha. Then no again. The more she asked, the ruder Aisha became. Katie seemed unfazed.

Suit yourself, she’d say, every time.

Meanwhile, Aisha found other ways to occupy herself. She walked around the neighborhood and sketched anything that caught her eye -- an absurd looking flower here, a loud-mouthed fruit seller there. She was getting to know the place, as usual, by feeling the outlines of it. Men stared here, but she never looked back, not even when they called her like a cat: Psst, psst, vem gostosa. She barely understood anything anyone said anyway. She was relying on turning her high school Spanish into something like Portunhol, with the help of a little tourists’ dictionary. She stared at the fruit-seller’s cart, amazed at a large spiky green ball that he had opened up to expose about a hundred white fleshy seeds. She wanted it. But when she finally got the courage up, she asked for a mango because it was the only thing whose Portuguese name she could remember.

What a weird existence. Being in this place where the words you’ve used your entire life are useless and you have to relearn the names for everyday things. Bus. Street. Store. It must have been what being a toddler was like, watching people point to things and being amazed at the new sounds, rolling them around in your mouth like seeds. Aisha thought of how it must have felt for her mom to move to New York City knowing only how to say “Fire the Bitch!” after watching 9 to 5 too many times. Aisha’s dad was going to school in New York. He was going to be a doctor. She was this kid from a farming village outside Mansoura and now she was
going to be rich in New York City, with all the famous people. Aisha had seen pictures of her at a fancy restaurant not long after she moved to the city. Her hair was uncovered and short and she was wearing a sparkly lavender dress. When Aisha first found the picture, she was shocked. What, you didn’t think I could be beautiful, her mom had said. No, I didn’t think you could smile like that, she had thought. The woman her mother had been before disaster rained on her was a woman she’d never meet. Who would either of them be without the emptiness they’d been left with?

Here, in Salvador, with her tongue tied into a pretzel and her shock in watching women lay out tanning on the beach in thongs, she felt like she could be her mom at 20 in her lavender dress. That if time worked that way, days overlapping each other like neighbors in apartment buildings, maybe Aisha was her mom and her mom was her.

It comforted her to think about that.

Their last night in the hotel, Aisha relented. The one thing she liked about Katie was that nothing Aisha said or did seemed to affect her. At first, she thought she was just narcissistic and oblivious. It took a few days for Aisha to realize it was more than that. Katie understood when Aisha was being rude, she noticed when she said something cutting. But she never seemed to mind. This, thought Aisha, was a chick who knew herself. She liked that.
That last night, Katie told her she wanted to go to this place that she had heard of when she was researching Salvador. It’s basically the reason why I’m here, she said. Aisha was intrigued. Beco dos Artistas, Katie called it. Alley of the Artists.

The program directors didn’t want the students straying too far from the hotel. They had even organized events at local bars to entice them to stay in the area. Aisha and Katie waited until the lobby was mostly empty and grabbed a cab in the front of the hotel.

The drive was the first time Aisha really got to look at the city. On the way in, she had basically seen the highway and a couple streets leading up to the hotel. They weren’t going all that far, but she was hungry to know this place and she gulped up every detail. Meanwhile, Katie talked. A lot. Mostly about her major -- hospitality -- and how she planned to move to a place like this, somewhere tropical and exciting to work at a hotel and live there forever. Wouldn’t that be the life? Katie didn’t know why everyone wasn’t taking hospitality classes. They were so easy, she said, and they were all she needed to live in the Caribbean or something for the rest of her life. Hmmm, okay, thought Aisha, nodding and mostly not paying attention.

The Beco was a hard place to explain. Let’s start with the entrance. It didn’t look like much. It was a narrow street littered with cigarettes and the remains of brightly colored drinks. The kind of alley way you normally wouldn’t even glance into. It was a secret place, but not really. A secret in the way that your mother’s first abortion is a secret -- you know about it but you know enough to pretend you know nothing at all.
Walking in, the alley was lined with a series of bars, each more brightly colored and louder than the last. There was something different about this place, but Aisha had a hard time putting a finger on it. It was early still, for Salvador, and the party was just getting started. There were almost no women, just men. A guy in sky high heels and earrings made of condoms passed by Aisha and tugged on her ponytail. Que fofinha, he said, laughing and walking off.

Ohhh, everybody’s gay, she realized. Then, she looked at Katie again.

Is this a...gay bar?

Um, yeah, Katie pulled her lips in between her teeth and wiggled her chin. A nervous tic.

Why...would you…

Katie sighed.

Why do you think? I figured you’d be cool with it. But you can leave if you want to.

She managed to keep that peppy tone in her voice and Aisha knew she meant it. She could leave if she wanted to.

Nah, it’s cool. I can hang.

Lemme get you a drink, Katie said, enthusiastically ducking into the nearest bar and motioning for Aisha to follow.

Aisha thought to mention her oath of sobriety, but Katie was so pumped. She could have just one caipirinha. She was in Brazil. Brazil. Brazil. The men were beautiful and none of them were paying attention to her. She shivered with something that felt like a little bit of joy.
Katie came back with two drinks rimmed in sugar and topped with lime. She was beaming, grinning from cheek to cheek.

Isn’t this place great?

Yeah, it’s cool. No girls really, though. You disappointed?

No way, they’ll come. Just wait.

They did. Eventually. Not many of them, but they did. By then, Aisha and Katie were both three drinks in. Katie tried to keep Aisha from buying her a drink in return but Aisha was all like, You think I was raised by wolves? and went up to the bar.

The woman in front of her was in a cotton red dress that held her in like a hug. She was tall, but made even taller by the pile of braids on her head. When she turned around, Aisha saw that her face was as formidable as her presence. It wasn’t that she was gorgeous or anything. Not quite. It was more that she looked like no one she had ever seen before. A strong jaw, long nose, purple-painted lips that were full and shaped like a perfect circle when pressed together. Aisha was staring. She wanted to apologize, and she opened her mouth to say sorry. She realized she couldn’t remember how to say it, so she stood there with an open mouth, no words coming out. The woman laughed.

E sua primera vez aqui, cotadinha?

I...Sou Americana....falo poquinho portugues, she stammered.
Ohhh, *an American tourist*, said the woman in a confident nasal accent. Did you come here for the beautiful women?

No...I’m not... I’m straight.

Yes, me too, of course.

The woman’s purple lips spread wide to reveal a gummy smile.

What’s your name?

Aisha.

I’m Raissa. Very nice to meet you. Where are you sitting, Aisha?

Over there, Aisha pointed at Katie who was staring at the two of them and chewing on her plastic straw.

Raissa smirked. Aisha noticed the expressiveness of her face -- how her lips and nose and even her forehead told everything she thought so clearly. She felt some anthropological urge to reach up and grab her cheeks or trace her thumb between her eye and the tip of her smile.

Don’t be weird, she told herself.

My friends are always late. It’s the Brazilian way, Raissa shook her head. Maybe I’ll sit with you, she said.

It wasn’t a question. Aisha followed her to the table.

Once she sat down, she took charge of the conversation. She introduced herself to Katie, asked how long they’d be on vacation. We’re students here, Katie said. Ohhh, here to study, said Raissa, in a falsely reverent tone. Then, Raissa told them that she used to be a student at the
university they were going to attend. She said she had studied languages and literature for a long time, but hated it. She had always loved reading books but studying them took all the pleasure out of it. This movement and that philosophy, etc. etc. So she quit. She started doing something she had always wanted to do: make music. Raissa was a singer. Sometimes even a rapper, she said with a giggle. It was mostly samba but she put her own touch on it. Something more contemporary, more African, more rhythmic. You should come see a show, she said, looking only at Aisha.

Aisha agreed. She would come see a show. For the music.

When Raissa’s friends began to arrive, Aisha got a clearer sense of what Raissa was all about.

Not that they were all the same. They weren’t at all. It was more that each was a perfect specimen of their type. An earthy hippie. A wannabe rapper. A buff capoeira who rolled up in a black tank and loose white jogging pants, as if to emphasize her athleticism.

The night dragged on much longer than she had planned. Conversations doubled in length because Raissa had to translate everything from Portuguese to English then back again when Katie or Aisha responded. They talked about everything. They talked about music, travel, politics, sex. The buff one dreamed of moving to New York and opening her own capoeira studio there so she wanted Aisha to tell her all about it. Would it work, she asked, through Raissa’s translation. Would I make money? Aisha shrugged. Sure, she said. Why not?

The possibilities seemed endless that night. Aisha could be an actress/dancer and Raissa
would win a grammy. Katie would open up a whole chain of hotels, first in the Caribbean and Latin America, then everywhere. The hippie would make her own beauty products with natural Brazilian ingredients and sell them to Americans for all their dollars.

When Aisha and Katie finally found their way out of the alley, Raissa was the one who waved down a cab. Let me, she had said. I know how to bargain. She opened the taxi door for them and gave each of them a cachaca-scented kiss on the cheek. Before the cab drove off, she stuck a flyer into Aisha’s hands.

Come. You promise?

I promise, Aisha said.

Aisha had already moved into her host family’s place by the time Raissa’s show was supposed to happen. They were a middle-aged couple whose kids had grown up and left and after which, they seemed to have discovered how little they liked talking only to each other. They were nice. Lived in a nice neighborhood. Aisha was glad to have gone to the Beco before getting there, or she would’ve thought Salvador could be just like an American suburb.

Aisha held the crumpled flyer in her hand. Sambista Raissa Morais, it said in orange on a pink background. As 20hs, 12 de Agosto. Maybe she had a little crush on Raissa. But why should that matter? She was a girl. It was different. Maybe it would help get her mind off things. She was good at not thinking about Levi during the day -- when she had Portuguese class or when she was exploring the city, eating new acai and acaraje, walking through centuries old
churches or sitting on a beach. It was night that was the problem. The moment she lay down to
sleep she thought of him. Not so much thought of him, actually, more like felt him. Felt him like
a phantom limb. She could feel the weight of his arm around her waist and she could smell his
aftershave. She had learned long ago that nighttime was when her defenses were down and when
all her demons snuck in. She was going to have to up the ante. She would go see Raissa’s show.
Anyways, she promised.

She decided not to mention it to Katie. She’d wanna go, for sure. After going to the Beco
together, Katie clung to her like a life raft. Katie sent a text to Aisha’s janky pay-as-you-go
phone at least three times a day. Once she joked that she needed her to attract all the cute girls.
No thanks, thought Aisha, deleting the text. Katie was alright. In small doses. Besides, Raissa
had asked her.

The bar was small, with brick walls and candles everywhere. Raissa stood behind the
stage waiting to be introduced. She wore a blood red dress and had her braids half up, a small
white flower tucked behind her ear. How could anybody be so carelessly elegant, Aisha thought.
Then, she realized Raissa was smiling at her.

When she got on stage, Raissa said, in English, First I’m going to do a little Fado, for my
new American friend. Bem vindo, Aisha, she said.

The tune she strummed was soft and quick at first, almost like flamenco or something.
Then it faded behind the honey of Raissa’s voice. Which started out gentle -- the vowels
extended and her voice quiet. Then, bam, there it was. Like a long wail, like something Aisha
had never heard before. It was a sort of lament, deep and ardent. Like a sharp cry made musical. The sound of a sadness that seemed almost prehistoric. Aisha closed her eyes and felt herself riding the waves of it, as Raissa’s voice climbed up then back down again.

After the show, Raissa came right up to her.

So, am I as good as Britney Spears or what?

Aisha laughed.

Way better.

Raissa smiled.

Can I buy you a drink? Since you came to watch me?

They had another one of those long conversations. Raissa spoke for most of it, teaching Aisha about the history of Brazilian music. Like Levi, Raissa seemed to have a mind for detail that amazed Aisha. Both of them seemed to have read and remembered libraries of information. Unlike Levi, Raissa didn’t condescend to her. Why was she comparing them? Was this something she was really thinking of? As though she didn’t already have enough to terrify her poor Masri mother with. She watched Raissa’s wine-stained lips move and, for a second, Aisha closed her eyes and drifted back on the waves she had rode during that Fado.

At the end of the night, Raissa called her a cab again and opened the door for her again. Aisha, wine drunk, stood for a moment too long. Raissa leaned in and kissed her. Bonita, she said, touching her chin. Boa noite.
The next morning, Raissa invited her to come to the beach with her. It was too late, Aisha realized. The yes monster had woken up. Maybe when she first told Katie she’d go with her to the Beco or when she had her first sip of a caipirinha. Whatever it was, she was done for. What time? she texted back.

The beach was dotted with bright umbrellas, people selling everything from drinks to fried shrimp, music blasting from three different speakers. The water was so warm and the waves were small and gentle. Because of the bay, Raissa explained. Aisha leaned back and floated on the water. She closed her eyes. It felt like listening to Raissa sing. All these new things coming at her so fast had blended into one feeling and it was this one. The feeling of floating in warm water with ocean salt on her tongue and words she couldn’t make sense of in her ear.
Fall 2011

Teresa got Aisha’s email just as school started. Aisha didn’t say much. I’ve never been all that good with words, or maybe just not as good as you, she wrote. But she did attach a few pictures. One, of the view of the ocean from her room in her host family’s apartment building, the turquoise water peeking out behind tall buildings. The next, a big green fruit, spiky on the outside and white and fleshy on the inside. Another of Aisha, wearing a half-head of cornrows and standing in a cobblestone street lined with bright pastel houses. The last was of a woman -- tall, black, and striking. She stood on the beach in a red bikini with a hand on her hip and her head thrown back like she was caught mid-laugh. Like it was meant to look candid. Aisha had saved the picture as “Raissa na Praia.” But she didn’t write anything about her.

Skype soon? read Aisha’s sign-off.

Yeah, right, thought Teresa. It had taken long enough for Aisha to respond to her email, she was never going to actually take time out to talk to her. OooOOoooh, Brazil must be so exciting. No time for your best friend. Busy eating fruit on the beach and getting your hair braided, whatever.

She was surprised that Aisha didn’t ask about Levi. She expected her to. She expected her to be heartbroken, still. She expected her to say something about being homesick. Like when Teresa used to go down to Ensenada with her family for a week or two over the summer and end
up craving root beer and hot dogs with a vengeance. But Aisha didn’t seem to miss Levi or Teresa or barbeques. Which pissed Teresa off a little bit, even if she wouldn’t admit it.

Levi, on the other hand, kept asking about her. He had started texting Teresa on some dumb pretense or another: Wanna study together? or Hit up this party with me?, etc. Sometimes she would go. Sometimes she wouldn’t. He was smart -- he only asked about Aisha every now and then. Still, Teresa could always tell he wanted to. He’d beat around the bush a little bit. He’d start by asking if she was lonely these days. Or he’d go through old memories. Remember that time Aisha put mayonnaise in my shoes when she was pissed at me? Or that time we convinced you to blaze and swim in the lake? He always tried to bring Teresa in, as though she was part of those memories too. She knew she wasn’t, really, though. She knew she was a means to an end.

The thing that she had forgotten was how much she and Levi really did have in common. They could talk for hours. At the library, she told him she was writing a paper about literary influences on French New Wave cinema and he told her she might like Agnes Varda, had she seen anything by her? Teresa had heard the name before but the way Levi described her movies interested her in a new way. He told her about how Varda used documentary style, long before it was cool, and how she included feminist themes in her work.

Feminist? Didn’t think you were into that.

Of course I am. Any sensible adult believes in equality.
Equality, huh, thought Teresa. She wasn’t so sure she believed him, but she liked the sound of it. Besides, she didn’t have to believe him to glean information from him. He *was* useful to her, after all. All that elite boarding school education was helping her get A’s on all her papers. Their conversations practically wrote them for her.

Did she feel bad spending all this time with Levi while Aisha was on another continent, totally unaware? Why should she? Aisha barely kept in touch. She had hated Levi when he was with Aisha but now that she was far away, Teresa realized she didn’t really know anything about their relationship at all. She only heard Aisha’s half of the story. So much goes on between two people behind closed doors.

Anyways, if nothing else, Levi was convenient to have around.

Things were going well for Teresa, with Aisha gone. Not having her around had opened things up for her. Like without Aish’s shadow hanging over her, people were actually drawn to her. Guys that would’ve swerved for Aisha were instead talking to her. Girls that were scared off by Aisha’s somewhat off-putting (read: bitchy) demeanor and couldn’t get past her constant presence were now inviting Teresa out. Plus, she had just finished up a cushy film internship in New York for the few weeks before she had to show up at Wilton. Sure, she was basically delivering coffee to people who were glorified coffee deliverers themselves but she felt *accomplished*. Popular. Even kinda cute.
It’s hard to tell if it was before or after she realized the attention she was getting -- sort of a chicken and egg thing -- but Teresa noticed that she had been hiding. It was like a revelation. All the t-shirts and jeans, the refusal to wear anything more than blush and a few coats of mascara, even for big occasions, her hair always in a long ponytail. She had thought that she was making a choice to stand up to the beauty industrial complex. You know, fighting the power and all that. Sounded honorable. It took her a while to think of it a little differently. It wasn’t so much that she was fighting the power, she was more like hiding her own. If she didn’t try to be pretty, she would have a foolproof excuse to give anyone who tried to tear her down.

What if, she thought, what if instead I did try a little? It started with a couple YouTube makeup tutorials and and some drugstore eyeshadow palettes. Next, she was highlighting her sculpted cheekbones (thank you Aztec ancestors, she said, peering up to the clouds). Coloring her lips a red that complimented the cinnamon in her skin. She even wore her hair down and curled it every now and then.

Next thing she did was go to the gym. Get on the elliptical. Take a couple yoga classes. At first, it didn’t seem to be making much of a difference. Then, one day she looked in the mirror and thought, Hey, I can work with that.

The crazy thing was, people noticed. And they didn’t just notice. They reacted. Professors (of both genders) called on her more when she raised her hand, girls she passed by on campus complimented her hair or her eyeliner, and there was the one time a middle-aged man at CVS let her cut in line for no particular reason at all. These were people that, technically at least,
were not attempting to bang her. She had no scientific proof here, but she had the distinct sense that something had changed. The universe had shifted to look at her, little Tere Rodriguez.

Finally.

So it didn’t seem totally inexplicable that Levi would start to flirt with her. Nothing gross or anything. Just a few compliments. The worst he ever did was say her ass looked good in her new jeans. Which, like, who cares? Her ass did look good. By now, she knew Levi well enough to know his tricks so he couldn’t pull any of that careless shit on her.

Maybe there was a little bit of double consciousness going on for Tere. Hard to say. On one hand, she was Aisha’s devoted best friend, the girl who generally kept to herself, did her work with perfection, and thought only of how to get better at what she loved. On the other hand, she was becoming this slim thick mami, highlighter and lip stain on, nalgona and perky in all the right places, long indio hair swinging shiny down her back. She was not keen on ignoring this new attention. How could she? Even if she didn’t want to admit it, it was what she wanted her whole life. Just wanted someone to see her.

Was it too much to ask? Now the universe was smiling down on her and she was supposed to turn away? Nah. Like Aisha used to say: If he’s flirting with me, it’s none of my business.
As you have probably guessed at this point, all of that was leading up to a decisive moment. It was a couple weeks before Thanksgiving break, just before midterms season would demolish any possibilities of campus chaos, and there was another Chilton party planned.

Levi told Teresa he was “having people over” for some pre-gaming and she should stop by, if she wanted to. Teresa had a couple pre-game invites lined up -- one from a girl who wanted her to pledge her sorority and another from a guy in her poetry class who had written her a dirty sonnet. She not pledging shit and she was not going to give it up to cochino Shakespeare, but she knew both of them had fakes and would be able to get the good liquor, instead of that weird plastic gallon of vodka she usually saw at parties. She was planning on party-hopping anyway. Plus, she was interested to see who would actually show up to his, since he didn’t really have any friends per se. So she told Levi she’d put him in her lineup.

The first place she stopped at was the sorority girl’s spot. She met her at yoga when they were the only two who couldn’t get into a headstand. They kept falling over, one after another, like dominoes, until finally they caught each other’s eyes and giggled. So hard that the teacher had to shush them. Afterwards, Teresa quickly realized their lack of balance and upper arm strength was about all they had in common. Still, she was a good friend to have around -- knew all the good parties, even the ones in Boston, and promised she would get Teresa a fake on a discount. She didn’t expect to stay long at the girl’s party. Just Hi, vodka tonic, bye, etc. Teresa’s inclination to make it a short visit was compounded when she walked into the room. It was all pink and green. Like entirely. As in, there was nothing in the room that was not pink or green,
minus a couple things that were pink or green with polka dots. Her pink toothbrush sat on her windowsill in a green ceramic mug. Freaked Teresa out a little. There were a handful of other people there -- all girls, all from her sorority. She had a drink, then told her she had promised to show at a friend’s by 9:30 and booked it.

The “poet” had a totally different vibe going on. A distinct style for sure, but his dorm was like psuedo cigar club. Actually had a second-hand leather arm-chair stuffed into a tiny corner of his room. His bros were all sitting around, a few with their arms around demure girlfriends, literally smoking cigars (Real Cubans, he said to Teresa with a smirk. He didn’t offer her one). All he had was whiskey. No mixers. What the fuck, thought Teresa. She downed a glass like a shot and left.

On her way out, it occurred to her that she was maybe rushing to get to Levi’s. She could just go straight to the party, she thought. She had already gotten a couple texts from one of her film friends and another from the secretary of the Latino Student Union. They were there, said the music was good, wanted her to get over there. She was hardly ever drunk around Levi and she didn’t know if that would change the vibe. But the curiosity killed her. She wanted to know what kind of party he was hosting.

When she got there, there was only one other person in his room. Mark. A guy that she occasionally saw studying Econ with Levi in the library. A little nerdy, but nice. Was this some kind of blind date? She sat down cautiously.

Levi looked excited to see her.
What do you want to drink? he asked.

Whatever, she said.

He seemed to sense her discomfort.

Mark was just about to leave. Didn’t you have friends to meet at the party?

Um, yeah, said Mark.

Teresa would’ve thought it was rude if she hadn’t been immediately relieved.

He passed her a vodka cranberry just as Mark made his way out the door.

Thought this was supposed to be a party, said Teresa, taking off her coat.

I shortened the invite list, he said, smiling just a little.

To who? Me and Mark?

Well, you really. Mark just kind of invited himself after we finished up at the library.

Teresa blushed and stuck her face into the cup. She should ask why he wanted to be with her alone. She should leave.

She didn’t.

They started talking, like they usually did, with an anecdote about the three of them that was actually about Aisha.

The three of us woke up all at the same time, remember that? Aisha opened the door and she realized it was just some drunk girl who crashed into the door and passed out in the hallway.

Aisha picked her up by the collar and told her to go find her dorm. Can you believe that? I had no idea she had that kind of muscle.
He laughed. Teresa laughed too, even though the story wasn’t even all that good. He was running out of new ones to retell.

As they kept drinking, Levi’s eyelids started to droop and he stared at her from underneath them. Was this what they called bedroom eyes?

He put his plastic cup on his desk and rolled his chair over to Teresa, who sat on his bed. He came up to her, too close to her face, and tucked one strand of hair behind her ear.

You really are so hot. I can’t believe I didn’t notice until you started trying to get me to notice.

Teresa shook her head. She wanted to tell him no, it wasn’t for him. But suddenly she wasn’t sure. She had never thought that before, but maybe he was right.

That was when he kissed her. When she was defenseless, stuck in her own thoughts. She let him, but only because it was a sneak attack. But he kept kissing her, so she had to kiss back. His hands traveled down her shirt and he took off her bra with one hand and grabbed a handful of her tits with another. Then he unzipped her pants and stuck his hands in her underwear. He was moving too fast. It was like watching a masterful concerto player at the piano, his hands running up and down her body like she was made of piano keys.

When he got up and started to unbutton his pants, she snapped out of it.

No, we really shouldn’t, she said.

Something in him changed at that moment. She waited for a response, but he didn’t give her one. Instead, he grabbed her face and stuck his dick into her mouth. She didn’t know what to
do. But it didn’t seem like he needed her to do anything. Then, he pulled out and lightly pushed her onto the bed. She didn’t know what was going on at first. It took a while to register. By the time she realized where the pain was coming from, it seemed too late to stop it.

When he was done, he pulled his pants on and sat at the end of his skinny dorm bed with his head in his hands. Was he crying?

Teresa sat up and put a hand on his back.

Are you ok? she asked.

He was crying. His whole ribcage was heaving.

I’m sorry, he said. It came out like a wail.

Teresa didn’t know what to say. She ran her hands through his hair and kissed his cheek.

It’s ok. It’s gonna be fine, she said, rubbing his back in small concentric circles.

After a few minutes, he pulled his face out of his hands and looked at her.

You really shouldn’t tell Aisha, he said. I mean, if you feel like you need to...you can…

It was hard to tell what he actually wanted. Maybe he wanted her to tell him what she wanted to do. Maybe he wanted her to take charge and make a choice about what they’d do about it.

I won’t tell her.

He looked crestfallen, momentarily. They were play acting and she had already agreed to be in the show. She backtracked.

I mean, I don’t want to tell her. But you know how hard it is to keep secrets from her.
He smiled.

Yeah. If anyone knows, I know.

Levi decided he didn’t want to go to the party anymore. He was too upset, he said. Teresa thought she’d go anyways, but when she left Levi’s dorm, she realized she didn’t want to either. Her hips were aching slightly in the spots where he’d gripped her and her entire pelvis seemed to be pulsing with pain. It was her first time. She asked herself how she felt. Like nothing, she responded. Not even guilty, at least not yet.

She was grateful for her single dorm that night. She climbed into bed and stared up at the ceiling, waiting for sleep to come. Would they keep doing it? she wondered. If he wanted Aisha to know, wouldn’t that mean he wanted to move on. Maybe move on with her? Was it going to be a thing now? How would Teresa explain it to Aisha if she came back and realized Levi had chosen her instead? What would Aisha’s face look like? Teresa imagined it -- Aisha’s horror and jealousy. It was pleasant to think of, actually. Made her feel kind of warm.

They wouldn’t. No she couldn’t. She wouldn’t do that to Aish. She wouldn’t do that to herself, right? Stick around and let Levi treat her like crap the way he did Aisha. No. She wasn’t in love with him or anything. But now they had this thing that they had done that would always keep them attached to each other, in some way, no matter what. He was her first. Her first.
The Next Morning

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HAPPY HOLIDAYS
November - December 2011

Teresa stayed at Wilton for Thanksgiving. If Aisha was around, she would’ve gone home with her. Instead, she planned to go to the Latino Students Union dinner for all the kids too broke to go home. On Thanksgiving morning, she lay in bed like she was chained to it. She couldn’t get up. Or wouldn’t. It was hard to tell. In the end, she never made it. She just stayed there. She got up around 6pm, when the sky was already pitch black and the whole dorm was so quiet that she started to wonder if anyone else existed, or if it was maybe just her here in this empty place and maybe the sun would never come back up. She put her electric tea kettle on and poured the hot water into a styrofoam cup of noodles. She sat eating it in her bed, her back pressed against the wall and her legs tucked underneath her.

It wasn’t the first time she’d been like this, but it’d been a while since it had gotten this bad. The last time was when her mom told her that her dad had chosen to leave, that he wasn’t kicked out. For a whole week after that, she had stuck close to the bed and barely ate. This was a little different though. Maybe it was because she was alone and it was Thanksgiving and all that. Maybe that made it worse. But there was something else to this. Like a sort of nausea. Like she was constantly sick to her stomach. Also, like her skin was trying to crawl off her body. She scratched at her arm, but then kept scratching so hard that she bled. Seeing the thick red liquid
crawl down her arm came as a shock. She didn’t feel it. She looked at her arm like it was somebody else’s, like she could tell that somebody else to get up and get some neosporin and a bandaid or something, couldn’t this stranger see that her arm was bleeding?

The past couple weeks had been a blur. She went to class, went to the dining hall, came home, read or watched TV -- in other words, did all the things she did normally, in the same order she normally did them. Except she kept having this distinct sense that she wasn’t doing them, but rather that she was watching herself do them on a screen. As if she wasn’t doing any of it but watching a movie made of herself doing all these things. A really, really boring movie.

It was her first time. Her first. She saw Levi a couple times in passing, at the dining hall or on the way to class. He’d always smile shyly and say hello but that was it. It was his reaction - that careful, polite avoidance -- that made her realize it. When she did was when the nausea first started. How could she not have known? Why did it take this long to get it? She always told herself she’d never be one of these girls.

Ok, so Aisha didn’t really think she was going to be able to schedule a skype call. She did kind of say it as one of those things you just say, when you feel bad and you want someone to think you’re a kinder, less selfish person than you actually are.

But all of a sudden, her schedule opened up.

Ever since Raissa’s girlfriend returned from touring as a backup singer with some Brazilian pop star.
Raissa invited her out for drinks that night, saying it would be a group of them and she had a friend she wanted her to meet. Aisha showed up, a little late, but not too much. Her eyes went directly to the woman Raissa had her arm around. She was small and cute, in a sort of precious way. She had a wavy pixie cut, a few caramel highlights in it. She wore a green tube top dress that complimented her light eyes. When Aisha walked in, Raissa whispered in her ear and nodded in her direction, and the girl smiled a very generous smile.

The only seat available to Aisha was at the end, next to the capoeirista and about three seats from Raissa and the pixie girl whose hair she was now gently grooming. Aisha wanted to grab the corner of the table and flip it over, but she restrained herself. Something about how everyone acted, even the friends who knew Aisha had been seeing Raissa, made her feel like she must have somehow misunderstood. Everyone was calm and in a general joking mood. Aisha put her hands in her lap and waited patiently for an explanation.

When it came, it was not the one she was expecting, nor did it provide much of an explanation at all. This, said Raissa, is my girlfriend. She just came back from tour.

Aisha’s jaw dropped.

Your girlfriend?

Yes. I told her about you, Aisha. Nao e, Luana?

*Luana*. What a bitch ass name, thought Aisha.

Luana nodded politely and smiled in Aisha’s direction. The whole thing was so fucking orderly and kind and loving she didn’t know how to react the way she truly wanted to. With
Levi’s indiscretions, she was more than comfortable trashing his room and breaking his electronics. Here, Aisha felt like the most important thing she could do was maintain a calm demeanor and, if she couldn’t do that, stare into her plate. She still felt like maybe, hopefully, it was some kind of joke. There was still something she was missing. Maybe Raissa had meant to say cousin or step-sister but had gotten the English word wrong.

When Raissa got up to go to the bathroom, Aisha gave up on being discreet and rushed after her. She grabbed her arm.

What the fuck is this, Raissa?

She shrugged innocently, as if to say, What could you possibly mean?

Your girlfriend?

Yes, my girlfriend, she said confidently pronouncing each letter in the word, as though she was repeating it for her English teacher.

You never told me you had girlfriend? said Aisha, leaving a question mark at the end so Raissa could step in and correct the confusion or end the practical joke.

Raissa looked like she suddenly understood.

Oh, Aisha, I’m sorry. I didn’t know...did you think...we’ve been having so much fun, yes?

Aisha looked at her, grinding her teeth and considering punching her right in her big grin.

My girlfriend and I. We have an agreement. We don’t think it is good for people to only be with each other. Our love is big enough for many.
For many, Aisha repeated. How many?

Right now, it’s just you. And her of course.

She was so calm. She said everything as though she was explaining a simple, obvious fact of life to a child. Aisha held her hands in fists at her side and pumped them. She couldn’t get herself to do what she had done with Levi. It didn’t work here, like this.

Fuck you, Raissa.

She went back to the table, grabbed her bag and walked out without looking at anyone, especially not the precious little fairy in green. The warm summer night air came as a shock to her, as though she had forgotten she wasn’t home anymore. She started to tear up as she walked to the bus stop and she kept tripping over the cracked tile of the sidewalk. How could she be so dumb? Again. There were only two people at the bus stop and they both looked so serene, like a painting. A man in uniform, probably a doorman at one of the fancy apartment buildings nearby, was on his way home and home was probably far away in the hills above the city. Maybe he was going back to a small, crowded, tin-roofed house full of kids under the age of 10. A middle-aged woman in a tight brown dress held a pot of warm food in her lap. Maybe she was going to visit a sick neighbor or her ex-husband who had been paralyzed in a car crash and could no longer take care of himself. All these other people had real lives, real routines, probably real problems so much worse than the foolish heartbreak of a dumb American girl who thought she was being adventurous. Aisha hung back and tried to look like she wasn’t waiting for the bus. When it came, she didn’t get on it. She decided to walk home instead.
It was Raissa’s fault. She fell for her instead of for the city, like she should have, like she was meant to do.

The first week of December. Aisha was almost done with her program, Teresa was studying for finals. Aisha set up the computer on the desk in her room, close to the window, so Teresa could see how close she was to the ocean and how warm it was outside. How good she was doing.

Teresa sat on the bed in her dorm room with a towel wrapped over her head. She felt tired all of a sudden. She started to think of backing out, right as the call came through.

Aisha: Hi! You look cute. You just take a shower?

Teresa thought she sounded too peppy. She sounded like someone else.

Teresa: Yeah. Put it off all day, but I thought I should be clean for you.

Aisha: You didn’t have to do all that. I can’t smell you from here.

Teresa cracked a pained smile.

Aisha: What’s wrong?

Teresa: No, nothing. I’m fine. How’s Brazil?


Teresa: Oh no way.

Teresa picked at her nails instead of looking at the show Aisha was putting on.

Teresa: Your pictures looked cool. Who was the girl in them?
Aisha’s shoulders dropped and she looked out the window. She thought of changing the subject, of just swinging the computer around and making Teresa look at the sea. But she’d see through it.

Aisha: Her name is Raissa...we were...kinda like, dating, I guess?

Teresa stopped cleaning her nails and lifted her eyebrows.

Teresa: No way.

Aisha: Yeah. I wasn’t expecting it. It just happened.

Teresa: Whoa, so what was it...like?

Aisha: Good. Weird at first. But good. It was different. Like every time I had sex with a dude it felt like a fight or something. With her, it was something else. We took our time.

Teresa: I mean, it’s kind of surprising, but not really. It’s like I expect you to do some crazy shit. So whatever.

Teresa shrugged and made an effort to look unimpressed. She was maybe jealous. There were always things inside Aisha that could be discovered, things that would be new. Teresa felt too obvious in comparison. At least now she had one secret she was keeping from her.

Teresa: So what’s going on? Is it a thing?

Aisha: It’s over now. Turns out girls can be just as scummy as boys.

Aisha glanced up and to the right. She was quiet for a second.

Aisha: I’ll tell you more when I get back. How are you?

Teresa: I’m good! Well, fine.
Teresa took off the towel and shook out her hair.

Aisha: What are those?

Teresa: What?

Aisha: On your arm. The scratches.

Teresa looked down. She had forgotten about them. No one saw them now that she kept herself in winter coats and sweaters. They were growing like ivy on her inner arms.

Teresa: It’s...nothing. I had a rash or something.

Aisha squinted.

Teresa suddenly felt like she had to say something. Anything.

Teresa: I need to tell you something.

Aisha fell back into her chair. She looked tired.

Aisha: What? Just tell me.

Teresa: It’s about Levi.

Aisha: You’re fucking kidding me. I don’t wanna hear about him.

Teresa: It’s about me too.

Aisha: ...about you? Like how?

Teresa: We hooked up, Aisha.

Teresa took the throne from her. She had unseated the queen, right? She thought this might prove something. That when she said it, she would finally feel bigger and more important than Aish.

But she didn’t. She just felt nauseous again.
Aisha: What are you talking about?

Teresa: We were drunk. I was at his dorm. He kissed me.

Aisha: He kissed you? Is that how it went? Are you sure?

Teresa nodded yes.

Aisha: Don’t pretend like you haven’t been wanting him. I know you always had a crush on him.

Aisha’s heart was pounding. She could feel her blood pumping through her veins. She could almost hear it.

Teresa: It’s. It’s not like that. I told him to stop.

Aisha froze.

Aisha: What do you mean? What happened?

Teresa: He kissed me. And, you know, at first I let it happen. But then I said, no, we shouldn’t.

Aisha: And then?

Teresa: And then…

Teresa’s eyes clouded up.

Teresa: And then, he made me. He pushed me down. I should have said something. I should have stopped it.

She was crying now.

Aisha didn’t know what to say.

Teresa: I should have screamed. Or pushed him off or something. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.

Aisha: No. Don’t be.
Teresa looked up from her lap.

Teresa: What do you mean? I did it too, didn’t I? It was my fault too.

Aisha: No it wasn’t.

Teresa: Hey, I was there. I kissed him back.

Aisha stared Teresa down. Everything was coming together -- Levi’s hands down her throat, the names he called her, the way he betrayed her constantly, like she didn’t even matter. And now, Teresa’s arms, her tears, all of it -- it was all connected. She wasn’t going to let him do anymore damage.

Aisha: I know those scars, T. I’ve seen them before. I’ve had them before.

It was the first time Aisha told anyone. It was the first time she had said the words out loud. The words were still not enough. It was more complicated than how she said it, but the way Teresa cried when she told the story, she knew that something came through.

Aisha comforted her. She told her it was going to be alright. She told her that they would fix it. Teresa didn’t ask how.
For her last week in Brazil, Aisha decided to do it up. With what little money she had left from her work-study savings, she planned a trip to Morro de Sao Paulo, the island just off the coast of Salvador.

The only way to get there was to take a catamaran that sped over the rocky waves. Somebody should’ve warned me, she thought as she puked over the railing. Once she got her bearings, she realized she wasn’t the only one. The passengers were divided almost evenly between those who were vomiting everything but their internal organs and those who were stretched out on the seats, peacefully sleeping off a dose of anti-nausea meds.

When she got off, she lugged her suitcase down to the nearest hostel. She showed up at the desk, pale-faced, sweaty, and smelling of vomit. No beds left, they said.

And so on and so on. Until finally she made it deeper into the island to a small, raggedy hostel owned by two sisters. Or lovers. Or friends. Who knows. They laughed when she entered.

You get medicine next time, they said. Aisha nodded. I know.

She was one of about three other guests in the place and they were all in one big room full of beds, most of which were empty. Aisha fell asleep immediately and woke up at dusk, annoyed. She had left Salvador at 6 that morning, hoping that she’d be able to get in an extra beach day. Instead, she stumbled out to the kitchen in sweatpants. They were serving dinner for a small fee.
It was just her there, all the other guests were gone. Just her and the two sisters or friends or lovers. They smiled and encouraged her to sit. They gave her a plate of salad, beans and rice, and a small bowl of papaya and mango. Aisha devoured it, starving.

The women watched her, encouraging her every step of the way.

Come, menina, said one.

You need strength, said the other, flexing her muscles in explanation.

Their ridicule had dissolved into maternal affection. When she was done, she finally looked at them closely. One wore an apron and had short bleached blonde hair that had turned a sort of orange. She stood in front of the sink, washing dishes. The other sat across from her smoking. This one was more stern somehow. She had dark hair and dark eyes. If it wasn’t for the prominent scar running from her ear to the corner of her mouth, she would’ve reminded Aisha of her mother.

You see the scar, huh? she said.

I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to stare, Aisha got up and went to put her dish in the sink.

No, no, sit, said the woman. Would you like to hear how I got it?

Ok, said Aisha, trying to look as though she’d expected she would be told, trying not to look too eager.

You scare off the guests with that story, said the blonde, in Portuguese, shaking her head.

Only my favorites, replied the brunette, in English.
She took two bottles of Skol out of the fridge and gave one to Aisha, keeping the other.

On the house, she said. See, I know all the American sayings.

Then, she got comfortable. Put her feet up on the chair next to her and began. It started when she was young and in love. Like most stories do, she said. He was a beautiful man, moreno, tall, strong. He could swim for miles. He loved her too. They lived together because they couldn’t keep away from each other for long. It was a small shack near the beach, but it was all they needed. He fished. She cooked and sometimes picked up washing or catering jobs for the hotels nearby. Everything was perfect. They’d lie in bed all morning, he’d take the boat out while she got her work done, come home, and they’d have fresh fish to fry. Perfect, she repeated. Until one bad season came. No fish. Barely enough for them to eat, let alone for him to sell.

Even though they never needed much, they couldn’t afford anything anymore. So she took a job at the hotel. Maid. Good work, bad boss. Little did she know it was only the beginning of her bad luck. After one really stormy night, her love did not come back. He was lost, she told herself. But he’d find his way back. She didn’t give up hope until his boat washed up on the shore a week later, in pieces. What could she do? She had to go on, keep working. But the bad boss took her bad luck as encouragement. He started to tap her on the ass, put his hand in her blouse. He didn’t have to tell her she’d be fired if she said anything. She knew. It got worse. He started to push her into the broom closets, tell her to go down on him. Then, fuck her on the bed in the hotel room and leave it for her to clean up after. She dealt with it. And dealt with it. Until she saw him start to tap somebody else’s ass (Here, she nodded to the blonde). She was the only one that had been
kind to her after everything. She could deal with him doing it to her, if she was his only target.

But not if he would do it to everyone else. So one night, she offered to work late, knowing she’d be alone and he’d be the manager that night. When he took her to an empty room, she took out the knife and stabbed him right in the liver. He took it out of her hand and swiped it at her face. But he was already too weak, bleeding out on the carpet. He dropped the knife and she finished him off.

That story is not real, said Aisha.

She laughed and took a drag of her cigarette.

The blonde nodded. Aisha took another look at the brunette.

Didn’t you go to jail?

Claro. Thirteen years, she said putting all her fingers up as though they would be enough to count on. She took another drag. Worth it, she said, leaning back and blowing out the smoke.

Maybe if it had been another time in her life, Aisha would have been horrified at the woman. Maybe if she had had a different life entirely, she would have packed her bags and left. But as it was, it gave her an idea.

The next morning, she felt better. She walked out to the beach and laid her sarong out on the sand, then ran directly into the blue green surf. Her nose filled with salty water and the mosquito bites she had scratched all night started to sting. She looked directly into the sun, even though
she had always been told not to, and when she closed her eyes, she saw it still -- a light orange-yellow circle stamped onto the black of her eyelids.

She spent the entire day like that. Alternating between ocean and warming herself on the beach. A man came by selling fried fish wrapped in newspaper. When she handed him her money, he looked her up and down before taking it. She winked, then shooed him off so she could eat.

At night, she went back to the hostel and shared a couple beers and a couple joints with the maid-murderers. It was the most perfect day.

On the way back, she took dramamine and slept like a baby, pleased to have finally learned at least one lesson.
January 2012

Aisha was testing the waters. She had an idea, that’s for sure. She just wasn’t ready to come right out and say it.

Teresa sat down on her bed with her hair wrapped up in a towel, just like it had been the last time Aisha saw her, on the video chat. Teresa had become a little obsessed with showering. She did it sometimes two, three, four times a day, more if she was just in her room alone all day with nothing to do. It became a pastime, and a particularly rewarding one at that. She’d put the water on so hot that it scalded her maroon. She came out feeling like she’d sloughed off a layer of her skin, as though she was fresh -- an entirely new person.

Aisha didn’t ask about it though. She talked instead. She talked about how she was really getting into SVU. And how there was an episode where a woman killed her rapist and got away with it.

Crazy, huh? she said. But it would be kind of satisfying, I guess...

Teresa scratched her scalp under her humid towel.

Yeah. I guess.

Pretending she didn’t know what she meant. If Aisha was angling for something, she better at least be able to say it out loud.
Instead, she just changed the topic. She didn’t ask about Levi, didn’t ask about the thing that neither of them would name. She was rifling through the bottles on top of Teresa’s dresser.

How come you have all this makeup all of a sudden?

Aisha turned to look at her. She held a bottle of drugstore foundation in her hand.

I got into it for a bit. But then I stopped. After…last semester some time.

Aisha looked down at the foundation and nodded, as though the conversation she was having was with it, and not Teresa.

Next time it came up, Aisha brought popcorn and candy over to Teresa’s dorm and pretended to be interested in the movies she was into. Teresa put on a Swedish vampire movie and Aish did a really good job of faking interest until about thirty minutes in. Suddenly, she pressed the spacebar to pause it and looked at Teresa.

It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have brought him into our life.

Our life. Our life. As though they were a married couple with a shared bank account and two kids.

You didn’t do anything, Aisha, she said. Before she could press play, Aisha pushed her hand away.

No, look at me. Part of it is my fault, at least. If it wasn’t for me you never would’ve met him. I did it, I want to undo it.

You didn’t. And you can’t.
Yes, I can, Aisha insisted.

Teresa shook her head and looked up to try to keep from crying.

You know what I’m talking about, T.

Aisha grabbed her arm.

No.

You do.

Say it.

Aisha pulled at a curl that stuck out of her big bun.

Say it, said Teresa, again.

Instead, Aisha told Teresa the story of the Brazilian maids and their dead boss.

Then she said: Ok, look, I don’t think we need to kill him or nothing like that. I just think he should suffer. Like, just a little of suffering. Not die or anything, but like maybe we make him sick enough that he has to lay up in bed and think about his actions.

You’re nuts. There’s no way we’d get away with something like that.

I have some ideas. Besides, If we don’t, if we don’t do anything, he’ll know he can do it to anyone.

No.

Then report it.
You know I can’t report it. A guy like Levi -- his parents probably have lawyers who make more in an hour than my mom makes in a year. It would be long and drawn out and no one would believe me. And it’s too late now. I have no proof. Besides, I don’t want to.

So what? We’re just going to act like it didn’t happen?

We?

T, guys like this… they keep doing it. It keeps happening. Who’s supposed to stop it?

Nobody else will.

Teresa bit her lip and pressed play on the movie.

After Aisha left, Teresa lay in her bed. She couldn’t sleep. What was it that Aisha told her? He lived in my dreams. It kept happening in my head, every night, over and over.

She remembered Aisha her first year. How she never ever slept through a whole night. How a couple of times, she even heard her wail and yell in her sleep. The scars on her thighs that Teresa only ever saw when Aisha had just came out of the shower.

Then, she thought of that day that Levi came to their dorm to get Aisha. She thought of his hand gripping her arm and the look on his face. The look on her face -- like she had turned into a statue, frozen in fear. She thought of the Aisha she first met. Thought of her now with the knowledge she had about what it felt like now, after all of this, thought about how she was diluted with pain but still, even then, Aisha was the person she had wanted to be. Didn’t Levi take that from her? Didn’t he take it from both of them?
Maybe they could do something. Just a little thing.

Aisha came over again. Teresa wondered if Aisha had deduced that she was becoming a mole woman. Was it the sweatpants? Or was it how long I’ve been wearing them? she wondered.

Anyways, she didn’t let her say much. Instead, right as she walked in, she just asked her:

What are you thinking?

Huh?

The Levi thing. What’s the plan?

Aisha lit up, a little.

Ok, so it’s kind of a three prong plan.

Three-prongs?

Not that complex. But good, I think.

Ok, tell me.

Well, first, I tell him I’m taking him back. So I can get his trust back, you know? Get close to him. Then...well, I was thinking we could give him a little estrogen. Cuz, you know, he won’t be able to get hard?

Does that really work?

Yeah, I can get it online. But, see, the estrogen is going to fuck with him. Hard. I looked it up. It’ll make him depressed. He’ll lose that sex drive that is basically his entire personality. He might even grow breasts. And then, I dump him.
Teresa looked disappointed.

There are other things we could do, though. What about mushrooms? He’ll take anything I give him, probably.

Teresa shook her head. Too easy to trace, she said. We need to be sure no one will know.

Aisha’s brows were knitted. She was thinking.

Hey. I just remembered this thing my mom was talking about last year, after Yasser Arafat died. She said he’d been poisoned. I was like, Yeah, right, ma. But she said the poison was untraceable, you know? Like it was colorless and tasteless and it took forever to work...so they’d never find out who did it. Actually, a lot of people just thought he got sick or something.

Aisha took the computer off Teresa’s lap and googled it. *Thallium poisoning. If left untreated, will cause nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea within the first 48 hours. After a few days, nervous system damage develops, which could cause headaches, numbness, loss of control of reflexes, dementia or even a coma. Heart rhythm disturbances occur after a period of approximately three weeks, often leading to death.*

Yeah, ok, but where the fuck are we going to get that? We need a scientist or something.

I think I might know someone, said Aisha.
When he picked up the phone, she shivered. His voice sounded so particularly him. A sound she’d never forget, really. She could still hear him whispering in her ear.

She hadn’t wanted to call him. But this was worth it, she told herself. It would be worth it. Plus, this way, if they went down, he would go down too. Two birds, one stone.

Hey, Ahmed, she said, trying to sound casual. Long time no talk.

Yeah, how’s your mom?

He wasn’t trying to sound casual. He just was. She could hear him scolding his son in the background. How old was that kid? Probably around the age Aisha had been.

You might want to go somewhere quiet. I have a serious question for you.

He paused. Here was the tension she had been waiting for.

Ok, sure.

So Ahmed, you got a wife now, right? And a couple kids?

I thought you had a serious question.

I do. First of all, you have a good life? Do you feel blessed?

Yeah, sure. I’ve been lucky.
See, I don’t feel like I’ve been all that lucky, Ahmed. I mean, things have been alright. But there are just a couple things I can’t seem to get out of my head. Like, when you lived with me and my mom in New York, remember that?

He swallowed, audibly.

Yes, of course, he said.

Well, I remember you putting your hands in my pants one afternoon. And then kissing me the next. And what was it that happened the day after that? I think, nowadays, they might call that rape.

You misunderstood.

I misunderstood? I misunderstood. You know who I don’t think would misunderstand? The NYPD. I think they might understand pretty clearly.

He didn’t need to know that Olivia Benson wasn’t real and that nobody would care about a rape that happened a decade ago.

I was a kid, then, from the middle of nowhere. Some village. I was confused. I wasn’t the only one who was, though.

Are you trying to say it was my fault too? That me, an eight year-old kid had somehow willed your fingers into my vagina?

He sucked in his breath. This was too much for him, she could tell. Good. Good.

What’s done is done. What do you want from me? An apology? Now that I have kids, I understand a little better. I really am sorry if I hurt you in anyway.
Aisha laughed.

Yeah, send me an apology letter so I can wipe my ass with it. I need a favor from you. A big one.

What?

You work in a lab, still, right?

Yeah.

I need to get something from you. Thallium.

*Thallium*? Are you kidding me? That stuff is deadly.

I know. Get it for me, or I tell everyone. And it’ll blow up your entire life.

You are crazy. I am truly sorry if I did anything to affect you. Because now you have clearly lost your mind.

I guess so, huh?

Aisha smiled.

The shipment came the following Friday. An official looking box. The contents were less official looking. A plastic back with the letters $\text{TI}_2\text{SO}_4$ written on it in permanent marker. Inside the bag was a grainy white powder, tinged a subtle gray.

Aisha had done the research. She and Teresa both wore thick gloves as they mixed the salt into flour in Aisha’s dorm room. Then, they took the flour, eggs, milk, and some cocoa powder into the shared kitchen and baked a cake. Carefully.
Aisha had already won her way back into Levi’s heart. She thought it was going to be hard or confusing or weird, but it turned out, she excelled at it. She had never been more in love with Levi than when she pretended to be in order to poison him. She would look up at him and smile, as they sat across from each other studying. He must have thought she was finally learning to appreciate him. But really, she was felt like she was finally doing something productive and worthwhile.

The cake was for Valentine’s Day. Aisha cooked him his favorite things: lamb chops and risotto.

Even prisoners get last meals, right?

They ate sitting on pillows laid on a sheet in Aisha’s dorm room. She put the food on a coffee table that usually sat next to her impromptu couch -- an air bed with a Brazilian sarong and a couple pillows on it. She even put candles on either end of the coffee table.

Levi sat across from her and smiled. He loved her. She could see that now. He was grateful to have her. If he had the chance, he might even try to mend his ways -- try to be faithful, keep it in his pants, maybe not call her a whore or stupid bitch on a regular basis. But after a few months, he’d get comfortable, go back to his old ways, break her down all over again. Then, after a little agony, she’d break up with him. After which, he’d find someone else to pin his hopes on and slowly destroy her. And all the other women he’d contort and manipulate and rape and pretend to be in love with along the way.
She made the cake especially for him, she told him. She was cutting out sweets. So he could have as much of it as he wanted.

She watched him eat it, watched the brown crumbs circle his mouth and the way his jaw lay half open as he chewed mouthfuls too large to eat elegantly. She smiled.

So glad you like it, she said.

They weren’t having sex, so she didn’t think he would ask to spend the night. But he did. He didn’t want to leave just yet and couldn’t they just cuddle? She didn’t want to seem suspicious so she said yes.

Turned out to be the wrong choice though. She knew the symptoms would start a few hours after the meal, she just didn’t expect them to be all that severe. First, Levi started writhing in the bed.

Are you ok? she asked.

My stomach, he said. It hurts all of a sudden.

Oh no, was it the dinner?

Do you feel sick too?

No.

Then, must not be, he said, through gritted teeth.

He spent the rest of the night alternating between vomiting violently and curling into a fetal position on her bed. Whenever he went to the bathroom, she’d wrap her pillow around her
head so she wouldn’t have to hear it. Still, the sounds of his dry-heaving made it through the
cotton.

She was going to have to suck it up. This was just the beginning.

Next was the headaches. They’d be studying in the library together when he grabbed his temples
and winced. She feigned sympathy to cloak her fear and anxiety. Would he go to the doctor?
Would they test his blood and figure out what they’d done? No way, she told herself. It was the
last thing they’d expect.

Nonetheless, it became impossible to quiet her nerves. She started spending more and
more time away from him, making excuses so as to avoid watching it progress.

Teresa scolded her. You have to act natural, she said.

Aisha shook her head.

I can’t do it.

Too late, said Teresa. You gotta.

Of course, it was the hair loss that really freaked him out. He’d always been vain.

Did...you notice...does my hair look different to you? he asked.

What? No, said Aisha.

You seem like you’re lying. Are you lying?

No!
It’s just that I notice clumps of it coming out in the shower and that’s never happened before. No one in my family is balding. What’s going on?

Those things skip a generation, I think.

No, something’s going on. I know it. I’ve been feeling awful. I should go to the doctor.

Are you sure it’s not just stress?

Stress? No way. What if I have some crazy virus?


She could swear she saw him narrow his eyes at her. Didn’t she?

Then, it became impossible to ignore. He was weak and in pain all the time. He went to the campus clinic and they sent him straight to the emergency room. He was all hooked up to machines and delirious when Aisha and Teresa visited him.

Aisha hadn’t wanted to go. But Teresa pushed her. We have to make everything look normal, she said. But they won’t ever suspect us anyway, said Aisha. You never know, Teresa said, rubbing her hands together to warm them as they stood at the bus station.

The moment she entered the room, Aisha wished she had put up more of a fight. All of the long weeks leading up to this were bad enough, but him lying there -- Levi, who had always seemed like a force of nature to her, tall, strong and never out of energy -- lying prone on the hospital bed, his eyes continually rolling backwards. That was too much. Aisha looked at Teresa nervously. She hadn’t seen Levi at all for the past few weeks. Aisha had kept them apart,
partially to shield her and partially because she felt certain she’d lose her cool. Seeing Teresa’s calm face made her think she had underestimated her. She swore a subtle smile.

They sat on either sides of his hospital bed, staring at each other, saying nothing. Then, all of a sudden, Teresa grabbed his hand. She knelt down to his ear and whispered something.

Aisha looked at her questioningly.

What was that?

Nothing, she shrugged.

The doctors thought it was some autoimmune disease with a complicated name. They figured he might deal with some side effects, might need physical therapy. Since he was young and in relatively good health before it all, they figured he’d pull through.

It was an arrhythmia that ended it. March 13th, 2011.

Of course, it wasn’t over then, really. The campus mourned for him. His picture showed up everywhere. His parents were on the news, in tears.

How could this have happened, said his mom. He was fine just a month ago. And now he’s gone.

His father sat next to her, squeezing his wife’s hand, but otherwise appearing unmoved.

Aisha’s stomach curdled.
Aisha and Teresa didn’t talk about it much. Just once or twice. The only thing Aisha remembered clearly about those conversations was this one thing Teresa said: We killed the man who changed us both for the worse. Maybe he took our new selves with him. Maybe we can go back to who we were now.

Teresa surprised her. She assumed she’d waver and that Aisha would have to reassure her: We did the right thing. Instead, it was the opposite. Well, not quite, since Aisha was never one to directly admit to making a mistake. Every now and then, she’d say something about how much pain he’d been in or how surprised she was at how difficult it was to be with him for it, despite all the determination she had in planning his demise. Teresa’s responses were always quick and certain. We did what we had to do.

It’s hard to say when or how it happened, but little by little, they stopped hanging out. Maybe seeing each other reminded them of what they had done. Or maybe their disagreements on the outcome of it became the underlying context of every conversation. Anyways, they lost touch.
Epilogue

Aisha didn’t hear from Teresa for nearly 20 years. Teresa had been successful, if mildly so. Made a few indie films that played in theaters near where Aisha had settled down in a Jersey suburb. When they came out, sometimes she’d go see them and other times she’d avoid them. But if she did see them, she always saw a glimmer of something else -- a life that could’ve been, a memory from the past, a bit of Teresa at 18, or a bit of herself at 20.

But no word from her, until they were both nearly 40. That was when Teresa started to send her letters. Real physical letters. She liked the romance of it, Aisha supposed. The letters were succinct and gutting. Teresa had always been poetic, but in middle age, she was also fierce and enigmatic.

The last letter arrived a few days after she overdosed, purposefully. She was 42. It went like this:

Aisha/Aish/Amor,

You said that the Qur’an says if you kill one person, you kill all mankind. That seems true to me. It certainly felt that way, at times.

Yet, nowadays, the more I see and know of the world, the more news I watch, the more I’m not so sure that’s a bad thing. Maybe we were all a big mistake to begin with.
In the end, even though we really only knew each other for a few years, you were my only true love, my only double, my *partner-in-crime*. Even though I haven’t seen your face in years, you’re the only one I’ll regret leaving.

With respect and love,

Teresa