

Amber was a disgusting excuse for a human being, and a worse excuse for a woman

Amber had mutilated her body beyond recognition with drugs and scalpels and needles. Amber had scars on her thighs that she put there directly and scars by her pussy she'd paid to be put there. She had burn scars on her cheeks because of accidents and she had metal bars shoved through her soft tissue and cartilage on purpose. Her drugs were nicotine and estrogen. One had stained her teeth and the other had ballooned her tits.

Amber had been a monster long before she had looked like it. She ate her twin brother Austin when they were both fetal. She smoked twice as much and ate twice as much as she was supposed to cuz he needed tobacco and he needed food. And she didn't drink as much water as she needed, cuz she wanted to punish him somehow for leaving her so alone.

He was her "shitty parasite brother" or "her tapeworm" or "her fetus" and she loved him.

It was winter, and snow drifted into the window she blew smoke out of. She had kicked weed, but needed tobacco. She knew it would kill her. But something had to. She waited with apathy for her thrombosis.

Her roommate, who she was half in love with yelled about some video game into his headset in the other room, his anger and adrenaline muffled through her closed door. Amber was hoping, as she breathed her preferred poison, that tonight would be one of those weird nights that the two of them would hook up.

It happened every few weeks, probably. Ze would usually initiate, showing up in Amber's room, drunk, say something like "wanna do it again?" Forceful but embarrassed. And the rules of their relationship changed dramatically for a few hours. The fucking was violent. His dick was too big for Amber's neovagina, so they'd only fuck like that for a couple minutes, long enough for the novelty to wear off (and long enough to count as a dilation session), and then they'd switch to her anus. They didn't do it safely. Amber never did anything safely. Her roommate would cum and then they'd half-heartedly hold each other as Amber touched herself to get off. Then ze would leave and they would forget about it the next morning.

Their fucking was suffused with a feeling like they were getting away with something, which was the only thing that turned Amber on. She couldn't imagine any sex condoned by society being satisfying. Not that sex with Fox was satisfying. It was food for her hunger, but not filling.

She dreamed often of her brother Austin. She dreamed about fucking him. She had dreamed about it her whole life. The fantasy had followed her since she first figured out about onanism. The fictional relationship grew as she did. She could tell the story of her incestuous secret relationship as clearly (actually more clearly) than her real development.

Right now, her brother would hold and kiss her while she cried. She would snarl at him that she was crying because of him, because of how bad he fucked up her sex life, her body, her understanding of herself. He would sit and listen while she yelled at him until she was spent. Then they would sit on opposite sides of the room, reflecting on the truth of their mutual trauma. And they would think, "well, this is the best and only thing that we deserve." And they would end up in bed, gently kissing and touching each other until sleep. And in the morning, she would wake up to him, naked, sucking on her nipples, her shirt pulled up to her neck.

For a while, she was lost in the sensation, wondering if she was dreaming (dreams nestled in dreams), and when she wakes up for real she's pissed, pushes him away. He looks hurt. "You used to like that, we used to do it all the time. It was your favorite way to wake up." There are tears in his eyes, and his hard-on is wilting. Amber stares at the ceiling. "That was before." "Before what? What's changed?" There had been a moment, something that had changed them, that she couldn't quite remember through the haze of sleep, something that meant she shouldn't be reaching over to him, putting her hand on his dick, rubbing it back to stiffness. He touched hers (her fantasy body hadn't caught up to her flesh one), and it didn't quite respond the same way. He crawled away from her, spread her legs, and kissed her scrotum. He explored her junk with his tongue until she got hard, and then he blew her as though she were a boy. He was the only one allowed to do that. He went very slowly and used a lot of tongue. She stared at the sun as she slid in and out of her brother's mouth. Still getting away with this shit.

He ordered her to go into the bathroom and clean herself. She ran a shower and filled an enema bulb. She expelled the shit from her body. The water in her rectum made her even harder, as hard as she could get since she had flushed the testosterone from her system years ago. He interrupted her three bulbs in,

mostly clean, got in the shower, kissed her, turned her around. He lubed his fingers and stuck two into her, searching for her G-spot. She spread her legs as wide as she good as he fingered her. She felt a cold burning in the tip of her cock as he found her prostate. She gasped. It felt like cumming, but it went on longer than she could possibly stand. Then his cock was inside her. She hadn't noticed him lubing up, but he must have. He fucked her slowly, savoring every small feeling. He stroked her dick in the same rhythm until she came, ejaculating one small spray onto his fingers, which was instantly washed away. Then he stopped worrying about her pleasure, and fucked her harder, working quickly towards his own purpose. He came expressively, and she could feel the semen colonizing her rectum, dribbling out as he pulled out of her.

Then he sat on the edge of the shower and she shaved his legs. She did it carefully and thoroughly. She paused every once in a while to blow him. She could just barely taste a hint of her shit. But she had cleaned beforehand, so it was a subtlety. He stayed hard. He always came twice. He said that he only came from one ball at a time, so he needed two rounds of sex to get it all out. When he was smooth and hairless, she blew him in earnest. She was proud of how well she knew what he needed, alternating between her near-gagging as she tried to fit him entirely in her mouth (the noise of her almost-retching was hotter for him than the sensation), and sucking hard on the tip of his dick. He came quickly. He always came so much. She held it all in her mouth and then smiled, letting it seep out of her mouth, down her chin, onto his twitching cock.

So that was the current fantasy. It stopped there. She usually woke up cumming at that point. She had moved a while ago past the anxiety of their parents finding out, past the desperate secrecy and quietness. What she wanted now was the maturity of an adult, stable, deeply immoral coupling. It seemed likely that this fantasy wouldn't last for too much longer. She was kind of excited about the idea of her surgery finally happening in the fantasy world. She had never dreamed about him interacting with her pussy, although she'd had it for a year now. She didn't think he'd take it well. She thought he might tear out her sutures fucking her too early. That seemed like a fun one. Maybe she'd dream that tonight.

There was a hole in the screen behind the window, and snow was sneaking in to die on the warmth of her skin. Snowflakes cuddled up against her flesh and their forms unconstituted. She was wearing Not Enough. Her oldest friend, Isabel, would have taken one look at her and told her to get away from the window, that she was going to get cold, and would have brought her a sweater and tea. Isabel would not do this out of kindness, because she knew how much Amber hated it. She would do it out of moral necessity. It was Wrong for someone to be cold and dehydrated. So she fixed the world when she could. She would rip cigarettes out of Amber's hand, and when Amber objected that those cost money, man, she would say, "the money's already lost, what does it matter now?"

Isabelle and Amber had never fucked, as much as Amber had tried. She had never asked overtly, or even given any conscious signals of interest, but had thought about it as hard as she could, very often, trying to change Isabel's mind by the magic of her will. It hadn't worked. The closest they had gotten was sleeping in the same sleeping bag one night camping in a large tent with 5 other people. Isabel moved into her bag late in the freezing night, after everyone but them had fallen asleep. They had just been talking, probably about Isabel's latest world-destroying crush. They talked often about Isabel's many loves, which Amber enjoyed because she fed off Isabel's passion, liked imagining that she could one day feel that much. Isabel enjoyed it for obvious reasons. Isabel had not brought a sleeping bag, but instead her favorite blanket, severely underestimating the cold. And once she'd had enough of shivering, she asked if they could share. So they did, and got very warm, and though Isabel could undoubtedly feel Amber's hard-on, she never said a thing. Not that night, nor any other. Amber vaguely remembered, perhaps through a haze of years of fantasy, Isabel moving her hips a few times to be closer to Amber's crotch, to her boner. Perhaps enjoying the power it implied. Perhaps just also turned on, also feeling unremarkable lust, unable to act on it because of the sleeping presence of their friends. And also because it would have destroyed the friendship. So everything that happened that night was firmly under the banner of plausible deniability. Perhaps that movement of hips. Perhaps when Amber put her arm around her, rested her hand on her stomach, she had lifted her tank top just a little bit, so the contact was skin on skin. Maybe, later in the night, Isabel had taken her hand and moved it to just above her chest, on the hemline of her camisole.

Sometimes it went farther and farther. In that corner of her mind, Amber had been the one being held. And Isabel had been the one with her hand on her hemline. And her hand had found its way onto Amber's junk, one move at a time, alternating who was making the next movement. Amber resettling her body and moving slightly upwards. Isabel letting one finger slip under the waistband by Amber's hip. Amber resettling again, turning her body slightly to Isabel, slightly more vulnerable. Isabel, over 15 minutes, creeping her hand to Amber's pubic hair. Amber taking Isabel's hand and moving it lower. That much took an hour of tense breathing, and listening to the snoring of Oliver, who slept in front of them. The handjob was slower still, each stroke a minute long, the touch tentative and

then meditative. Just the heel of her thumb, stroking down the shaft like the hand of a clock.

And then a great turning, Isabel held now, a single movement that they could disguise as for comfort. Her hands quickly into her pants, only taking ten minutes. Isabel creeping her legs apart so Amber could find her clit. Faster movements. Isabel more prone to gasping, which always made them pause to listen. A real moan when they realized that she could more easily finger her by reaching from the back, but no one woke up. Her fingers, one and then two, sliding slowly inside the warmest place in this entire fucking world, it seemed (Amber was still a virgin save for Austin). And they of course tried to stick her dick in Isabel's cunt, but she couldn't spread her legs far enough apart in the confines of the sleeping bag, so Isabel came by touching her clit while Amber fingered her, biting Amber's other hand with frightening force to keep from screaming. And Amber came by rubbing her dick soft and slow between Isabel's buttcheeks. Staining her black camisole, but they wouldn't realize that until hours after breakfast.

They had also gone skinny-dipping together, back in high school, against Isabel's boyfriend's wishes. She didn't ask Amber to come because she wanted them to be naked together, she asked her because they were friends and she wanted to swim. If her boyfriend found out and had a problem, he could fight her physically. They swam and didn't touch and talked about school and ghosts and animals. One time they got caught by a young couple walking their dog. And to Amber's endless surprise, they didn't turn away and run, screaming, from the monstrosity of her form. Because she just looked like a young boy. Which wasn't really that scary to most people. Isabel petted the dog and made small talk with the couple, intentionally unashamed, and they had left.

Another night, clothed and walking back to her car, Amber had told her about her embarrassing habit of thinking about all of her friends while she masturbated. Isabel had pushed her for more details than she wanted to share. Which friends, what were the different fantasies, if they were written down anywhere and could she read them? And obviously, "Including me?" And when Amber shrugged, Isabel said "well, I give you my permission to use my visage to pleasure yourself, good sir," because she talked like that when she was drunk and feeling funny.

And she pressed for more details, and Amber said she thought about having sex sharing that sleeping bag, and Isabel said, "I wouldn't exactly call that sex," and Amber said "It's embellished. Like, now I know that you have that mole on your right tit, so that's part of the memory now," and anyway later that night in Amber's room, drunk on stolen Mezcal, Isabel had said that if Amber was using her to jerk off, it was only right that she get to at least know what that looked like. She took off her shirt and bra without ceremony, and waited until the waves of awkwardness had passed off Amber, and she was ready to be directed.

Amber started by touching her cock through her pants, and that was okay for a while until Isabel got bored because it felt too safe and told her to strip. So she took off her clothes and her pants and was directed to continue, which she did, wetting her fingers and rubbing the head of her dick in circles like a clit. She closed her eyes to stave off her embarrassment. Isabel had her hand in her underwear, staring at her, unrealistically shameless. She got up and straddled Amber's midsection, still masturbating, leaning over Amber, her tits in her face,

not quite touching. Amber understood she was not allowed to touch or kiss. When she brought her fingers back to her mouth to re-wet them, Isabel let out a string of drool which fell over her fingers and her lips. When Amber was about to come, Isabel grabbed her cock and held on hard, stifling her orgasm, making it painful and strong and long. Isabel brought her fingers to her lips and tasted her semen experimentally, then made a face. She sat down on Amber's hips and looked at her for a while. She bent over and kissed her once, softly, and sat up and said "no, I don't like that."

They never had sex, though, not really. They went to separate colleges and didn't reconnect for years, and when they found each other again, Amber had started experimenting on her body with chemicals, first procured through illicit and unregulated means. Isabel had actually been the one to insist that she get a real prescription and get blood tests, once they had found each other again. Amber still waited until she moved into the city, because there were doctors there who wouldn't ask too many questions, and wouldn't make her see a shrink. Which she was never going to do again, not since the one her dad brought her to. And the inpatient shrinks that the first shrinks had sectioned her to. Then there was that one outpatient therapist that they had referred her to, when they finally released her. Who was named was Ezekiel, who was the only man in the world Amber had ever loved except Austin, and the only person in the world, she thought, who knew about her relationship with Austin.

The tips of Amber's fingers had become warm. She noticed the cigarette was almost gone, and snuffed the ember in the bottom of a glass tumbler that she had abandoned on the window sill days ago. She thought about closing the window. She didn't. She knelt down on the ground, her head level with the screen. She opened the screen. Snow blew in and wetted her skin. She grew cold and colder.

Something in her brain, some echo of a memory or a fantasy, some voice that she knew intimately but could not place, telling her, "if you're too bored to live, you might as well die." So she turned down the thermostat, opened all the windows as wide as they could go, lay down on the couch, and shivered until she felt alive again.

She did this every once in a while. It was still definitely still self-harm, she didn't even deny that. But she pretended it gave her access to a spiritual peace with the world and its elements. And she also got to punish her body for being whatever it was. Two birds. And it was better than the bloody shit she used to pull.

She hadn't cut in a couple of years, which was part of the deal she had struck with the therapist named Ezekiel. She had told him a lot of secrets in their 10 months together, between Amber's second suicide attempt and her leaving home at the end of high school. Secrets about how she drew blood out of her body to use in shitty undisciplined magic based on books she found in the school library. About how she drew blood out of her body because she was tired of feeling nothing. About how often and vividly she imagined murdering her father. About the pussy she imagined belonged between her skinny legs. About her brother, who she murdered in her pre-infancy, and who she had been keeping alive in her memory ever since then.

Ezekiel had a wonderful rare ability to be totally unfazed by the worst things Amber could think of to tell him. He simply nodded when she first told him about her brother-fucking fantasies. He laughed when she made a joke about killing Austin that included the word "fetality." He actually said "Me too," when she said she hated her father. He said "Me too" when she said she'd been born into the wrong sex. He said "Me too" when she said that she cut herself. She said "prove it" and he raised up the long sleeves that he too was wearing. The scars were old and healed.

He said to her she never had to forgive her father. He said to her that she didn't have to live as a boy. He said to her that she could have whatever relationship to her brother that she wanted. One day she spent an hour looking straight into his eyes and telling him about how much she wanted to fuck him, how she had spent the last few nights masturbating and thinking about him, how she would seduce him by coming into his office, somehow miraculously transformed, with huge tits and no bra in a crop top that just barely covered them. And she's sprawl on the couch and talk as usual, but the way that she was lying, he could see the bottom of her boobs, and maybe, when she had changed positions a couple of times, lost in a story about her father, he would see a hint of her nipples. And she'd sit up on the couch, one of the pillows between her legs, and would rock back and forth on it. Subtly. She'd still talk about her family. She could explain away the movements of her hips as emotional agitation, as stimming, like how she would shake her hands and snap when she was stressed. And he would be hard or wet or whatever as he looked at her, and neither of them would acknowledge their

arousal until she, accidentally, came from riding on the pillow. And as she did, she would watch a flicker of something cross his face. Something stifled, but bubbling inside of him. He looked at her as she said this, and he just asked her what part of that scene appealed to her most. And it turned out to be the tits. That thought made her cry, and they talked about that instead.

Ezekiel taught her all sorts of ways to hurt herself. They sat in his office and brainstormed different ways she could cause pain. Blades, fire, pinching, ice, fingernails, needles, riding crops, paddles. She wrote down the list in her chemistry-class notebook, and it went on for pages. He went through with colored pens and circled the ones that were safe and crossed out the ones that were dangerous. He said “you’ll be happier if you only hurt yourself in the ways that I’ve circled.” He gave the notebook back to her and said to keep it with her. Currently it was in a cardboard box in her room with a bunch of other bullshit that she was too sentimental to throw away.

She wondered how disappointed in her he would be if he could see her now, scrawny and shut-in, shivering in front of an open window at midnight. Almost a decade later, and still unhealed, unhealable. Still this.

In her memory her brother lay on the large couch beside her, holding her, his supernatural metabolism churning out heat like a furnace. He protected her from the snow, from the Bad Ones, from the recurring constant memories of the sex she (wished she?) had never had. She nestled into his phantom, and she wasn't even terribly cold. But she did close the windows before falling into bed in the silence of a snowed-in city after staying up till four in the morning for no fucking good reason at all.

Isabel came over to check on her, because she was good at checking up on people, and knew what kind of silence meant that Amber needed help (it was the kind of silence where Amber would answer one message with a word or two, and then fall silent and not respond for a day and a half). She brought over a giant bottle of Gatorade, because she knew Amber hated drinking water. She brought a computer because she had some emails to write and wanted to work on some video editing she needed to do. She couldn't just drop everything to go check on her friend, but she could bring her everything with her, bring Amber into her hectic, creative, productive life, bring some life and change into the world that Amber tried her hardest not to leave.

Isabel had a key to her apartment. Amber was asleep, obviously. In her tiny room, half the size of Fox's, if not a third. Matching the amount of rent they both contributed to their shared shelter. Enough room for a bed and a mountain of clothes on the floor and a dog bed for the tiny terrier that had died a year and a half ago. Isabel sat on the foot of her bed and touched her foot. She didn't respond. She touched her flank, and Amber stirred, clearly still asleep, just a reflex. Most people would shift away from a strange hand in sleep, but Amber shifted towards it, moving her hips to be nearer. It was what Isabel loved about her, what kept her coming back with Gatorade and patience; that underneath her pain, vague anger, and sloth, Amber loved and trusted reflexively, fundamentally moving in the direction of closeness and contact, even as she consciously isolated herself. Isabel had brought this up to her, and Amber had tried to call it sluttiness or nymphomania (and had believed it), but Amber didn't know what Amber looked like when she slept.

Isabel sat at Amber's feet and looked at her, her hand on her hip, until she wasn't sitting at her feet anymore, and she was placing the huge gatorade on her nightstand and sitting at Amber's tiny desk and opening her computer to respond to some emails. She hit the mute button as a video started autoplaying, filling the room briefly with the sound of porn. She paused that video (she had been watching it as a reward for finishing a project before coming over here) and looked back to make sure that Amber hadn't woken. Which she hadn't.

When Amber woke, she woke up cumming. She had been dreaming about her brother. The same dream she'd been having for the last few weeks. It was a good dream to be having, not because it was happy (it was in fact the most painful dream she had ever had) but because it was intense and she felt something while it happened, and she had unfinished business in the dream, which meant she had something to do, some direction towards which she could point her life.. Which is why she slept so much, and when she had to be awake, she chugged NyQuil and melatonin to try to get back to the dream.

Austin had died and was haunting her. His death had been somehow her fault. Either through negligence or murder, but because those emotions felt the same, it didn't matter which was true. Maybe she had strangled him while doing breath-play and losing her control. That seemed like her. And in the dream, every night, he would appear at her bedside and rape her. She would see him, face expressionless, eyes unblinking, materializing out of the cold air. And she would believe for a second that he had returned, and then apologize to him, over and over and over again, and he would not seem to hear her, and would say nothing and not move his face, but he would take off his pants and pull her painfully by the hair, shoving his cock into her mouth. He fucked her face as she cried in grief and guilt and tried to touch him tenderly so he would look at her with anything like recognition. She would try to push away from him, her hands on his thighs, but he was strong and unmoving, and humped her, moving her head with his hands, until she gave up and did the things with her tongue that she knew he liked, trying to make him come so she could talk to him. But when he did come, voluminously, the warm semen filling her mouth and throat, his cock almost to her esophagus, making her gag and cough, and a strand of spittle and cum stretched between her lips and his dick as he finally pulled away. She coughed and coughed and tried not to vomit, and ran into the bathroom to puke. He followed her in, and as she leaned over the toilet, he pulled down her pajama pants and started to finger her ass with fingers wet from his own ejaculate. She pushed him away but he was immovable, unnaturally strong, a force of revenge and pure lust. And she gave up, slumped over the toilet filled with her vomit, as he stuck it in and fucked her, rhythmic and without passion, her asshole a flashlight for this creature. When he came again, pushing his dick as far into her as it could go, she screamed with the overwhelming sensation and pain. She

threw up again as he pulled out. There was shit everywhere; on the floor, on her asscheeks, on his cock. He left the room and she stumbled into the shower.

The water washed away some of the grime of his rape, and she cried for her dead brother. He appeared again in the door of the bathroom. This time he was Austin. He looked at her with concern and love, asked what was wrong. She told him “nothing,” she told him to wait in the bedroom for her. He left her alone and she sat on the floor of the shower, her fear and pain turning to anger. A chest-tightening anger so expressive and deep that it was almost pleasurable. A righteousness that only comes when you know beyond a shadow that you’ve been wronged.

And when she left the bathroom and saw him sitting on the bed, in his underwear, looking innocent and worried, the rage was too much to bear. So she pushed him back onto the bed, ripped his boxers down, her arm pinning him across his chest. He asked her what was going on and she spit on him. She spread his legs and jammed her cock into him, without warning, without anything. He screamed from pain and struggled under her, and she put her hands around his neck, not teasing, not pretending. She strangled him as she raped him, the dryness chafing her, spitting on his worthless, falsely innocent face. He was dead before she came in him. And in the moment before she did, she knew that now he would come again tomorrow. Rape her again. And she would kill him again. She cried and cried as she orgasmed into his lifeless body.

The first time she had had this dream, she had woken up crying, panicking, unable to see straight or breathe correctly. She had laid in bed motionless for hours, waiting for the sun to come up, waiting for the memory to fade. She had never experienced that kind of torment with him, that level of cruelty and trauma. Had never seen his face that devoid of love. That first rape dream had been at the start of this depression. Had, in her estimation, started it. And every night it would happen again. Every night she would be unable to stop him, unable to reach him, unable to stop herself from murdering him again.

She could not lose him. She could not lose this tether, her lifeline, the only person who loved her the way she needed to be loved. She could not have this be the way their story ended. So she kept going back to the dream, intentionally, over and over again, trying different tactics every time. She tried initiating sex with the ghost before he could take control, but he took control anyway. She tried to forgive him immediately, to pull her brother into the shower with her and let him hold her, but she just ended up strangling him in the shower (or drowning him in the bath, once). She tried to run away, but he caught her. She tried to cum before him, masturbating while he face-fucked her, to see if that could wake her up and short-circuit the dream, but she could not finish. She tried to call for their father, she tried to call the police, neighbors, but no one ever answered. She tried and tried and tried to save them, and it always ended in trauma.

The day that Isabel came over, she had decided she wasn't going to wake up at the end of the dream. That she would hold herself in sleep after he had died, just to see what could happen next, if there was anything salvageable in the minutes following the murder. So she had researched a fatal dose of Ambien and took half of that. Can't wake up from the sleep of the half dead because of something as small as an orgasm.

The deeper, more dangerous sleep made every sensation more sluggish, slower. Time passed at a crawl and every goddamn thrust lasted a lifetime. It felt like she had been caught in these rhythms (thrusting, rape, waking/sleeping) for an eternal time. Which wasn't awesome. But which she could handle as long as she could believe that it could maybe someday end. She found herself slipping out of her dream-body, and she waited for the moment to come where she could stop

dissociating and start trying something new.

When she was in the shower, at the moment when Austin re-entered the bathroom to ask what's wrong, she went back inside of her body (or at least close enough to operate it) and spoke to him. She asked him to come to the shower (she had done that before), and asked him to listen to her (she had done that before). He sat on the edge of the tub, getting his boxers and t-shirt wet (such a good obedient brother, to always listen to her like that). She started to tell a story which started with the words "do you remember, when we were children..." but which wasn't a true story.

She said, "Do you remember, when we were children, like 12 or 13, and we met that girl named Kirtani? And remember how she told us that she also had a twin, and asked if we also shared thoughts and could see through each other's eyes?" Austin listened, looking puzzled, not quite remembering. "She invited us over for a playdate, and the four of us rode our bikes to that clearing in the woods, the one with the really good tree? And her twin was a tomboy with really intense eyes who almost never said anything at all. And you bragged to them that the two of us could share thoughts, even though you knew that we couldn't. So to test it, you and Kirtani's sister, what was her name?" None of this story was true. Austin tried to remember details of it anyway. He said, "was it Chris?" and I said, "Yes, it was Chris. You and Chris went into the woods, out of earshot. You walked for a long time. Me and Kirtani were sitting on the ground, concentrating very hard. After a while, she said, "I can see them, can you?" and I said no, because I was never one for boasting like you were. She told me that the two of you were talking about what you could do to surprise us. She told me that you had told Chris to take off some of her clothes, because neither of us would have expected that. She told me that both of you got naked. She whispered to me that you had started kissing. She whispered to me that Chris was touching you, touching your thing, is what she said." Austin was nodding, remembering. This was her dream, her fantasy world, and it was her memory to alter as she wished. Austin said "I think I actually touched her first." And Amber said, "I believe that. I know that you were the one who put it in. Kirtani's eyes went like dinner plates when she said that. I remember asking her 'does it feel good?' and Kirtani said 'it feels good to her but I hate it, it feels really bad,' and she went running into the woods after her sister. And when I was alone, I could actually feel it; just for a second, just the feeling of plateauing right before coming. I could feel that girl around me. I could hear Kirtani screaming for her sister to stop that, it's not right. But I could hear it on both sides of me." Austin said, "I was surprised when Kirtani showed up. Because the sex had actually been Chris's idea." "Really? She didn't say that." "She did to me." They sat in silence for a second. "That was the first time," Amber said, "that i ever fucked anyone other than you. And I didn't even do it. I didn't even choose to do it." The shower kept washing smaller and smaller particles off of Amber's body. "And I was just thinking. I think you might have raped Kirtani. I think that might have been rape." Austin didn't look at her. "I think you might have raped me." Austin didn't look at her. Water fell down her. Austin

whispered “why are you bringing up stuff that happened so long ago?” And Amber screamed “Because you just did it again! How do you not remember?” And the rage caught fire and burned out of her, and then she assaulted and murdered him again, just like she always had.

When she woke up, she woke up in Austin's room. In his shitty, gleamingly whitewashed apartment. Her real body in her real bed was still 50% Ambien, and was still half-dead. So she woke up in the body that was able to wake up; she woke up in a different layer of dream. She woke up coming. She had been sleeping naked, her leg and arm sprawled over him, holding him in place while he watched television on a laptop next to him. She came, in this second dream, all over the side of his hip and thigh. He laughed at her as he mopped up her semen with the sheet. She didn't laugh. She was caught between crying in relief for finally seeing him in a new context, and crying out of leftover anger from the dream-murder. So she ended up just crying.

He did the thing where he just looked at her, uncertain of how to touch her, whether he should say something. He attempted to hold space, but his silent awkwardness instead just made him fade into the wall. She forced the crying to stop and held him. "Bad dreams?" he said. She nodded. "Couldn't have been too bad, right?" he said, showing her the soiled sheet. She whispered "Bad," and looked away. He pet her quietly. He lasted about 8 minutes before his mind wandered and he unpaused his TV show. That was long for him. Amber smiled a little. He was here, he was real. The bad dream was a bad dream, and their lives together could continue.

"Do you remember Kirtani and Chris?" she asked him quietly. He said, "Oh yeah, of course." She said, "I was dreaming about that." He closed the laptop. "I remember that as being a good day." She shook her head. "Not for me. I didn't like it when you did that. Without even asking me." "Yeah." After silence, he said "I should have asked you. And her." Amber thought he meant Kirtani, but she couldn't be sure. She asked, "What even did you really do with Chris? I only felt bits and pieces, and I don't know if you ever told me."

He sighs and retells the story that she had invented. She forced him to admit to a sin he had never committed. He told her the story of taking that other child, the younger one by an hour and a half, the one with behavioral issues, the one who swore, over the hill to a cool wet place under a large stone. He told her about playing a quickly escalating game of chicken, pushing each other further and further and seeing who would break first, protest first, run away. Pushing their 13-

year old bodies together, partly out of young adolescent lust, partly because they were both too proud to admit they hadn't wanted it to go this far. That they were scared. That they were both saving themselves for their siblings. Who they loved more than life itself.

He told her this story, that he believed, of the overwhelming shame that covered him like a layer of sweat as he came inside the girl, and the look of panic on her face as it happened. And as Amber listened, she began to believe him too. The memory of the nightmare was fading. He told her about Kirtani barrelling through the trees, the look of shock on her face to find him inside her sister, both of them covered in dirt and rotting leaves, and Amber started to remember for herself that moment of divided consciousness, where she could feel, with Austin's dick, the inside of that angry, wayward girl. And they talked about it. And when they had finished talking about it, Amber said, "I think that was kind of traumatic for me. Like, feeling you have sex without me wanting it, I think my brain, somewhere, processed that as trauma." And he said, "You think so?" and she said, "I think so. I mean, I was just dreaming about you raping me, but you were disembodied, like a ghost. And then we were talking about that day, in the dream. I don't know why else I would have dreamed about you raping me."

And after a while of silence, he apologized and meant it, and she said, "it was a long time ago," and he said, "can I do anything now?" and she said, "I need a palate cleanser," and she grabbed his head and shoved her cock in his mouth. She pinned his head to the wall and fucked his face. He gagged and kept gagging, and she kept going, keeping a brutal and uncompromising pace, pushing deeper and deeper towards his throat. She whispered, "relax, this will be over soon." And when he gagged again, she whispered "this is your punishment," and he closed his eyes and tried to relax his mouth and untether his mind, and let his sister use his mouth like a sock. She held his hair with one hand, the other gently touching the stubble on his jaw. She came in his throat, in rough still spasms, and as she looked down at that young man beneath her, tears in his eyes, semen dribbling from his mouth like spittle, history became rewritten, the memory of the ghost-nightmare faded, and her life with her beloved brother could continue.

Nothing is dead forever.

She woke up coming. She had kicked her sheets off in her sleep, probably at the point when she shifted from one level of dream to the other, from the nightmare to the fantasy. Isabel had watched her toss and turn as her brain tried to make her drug-filled body wake like every other day, but could not. And when the tossing was done, she was lying naked and exposed, on her back. And Isabel had set her laptop aside and looked at her friend. Amber's body was a mess of bones and scar-tissue and amateur tattoos. As she lay on her back her stomach sank inches below the crest of her ribcage. Her dick, which she sometimes tried to call her clit to help with dysphoria, but almost always forgot to, lay against her abdomen, hard and large. Isabel hadn't seen her naked in a long time. And she wasn't sure she had ever seen her hard. Probably. It seems like the kind of thing that would have happened around Amber. But no moment sprang to mind. She watched it twitch, responding to some dream, and her perception of the organ kept shifting back and forth. Some seconds, she saw it as Amber did; it seemed alien, an old and ill-fitting bit of hardware jerry-rigged onto her body as though to patch over some malfunction. The shaft full of veins, a different color from her real body, her scrotum strange, uncomfortably dangling and bulbous. Some seconds, she viewed her body with lust; seeing her dick as an instrument of her own pleasure, as a functional object. Something that she thought about licking and stuffing into her cunt, something that she wanted to feel twitch and buck inside of her. The shape of it reminded her of one of her exes, a careless and unreliable man who was earnestly kind to her on the rare days she actually saw him, and whose penis filled her in exactly the right way, one of the few people who had made her orgasm by penetration. In those seconds she became wet and thought about mounting her old friend in her sleep, waking her up to the feeling of soft flesh around that strange bundle of nerve endings attached to her crotch. And she found it hard not to stick her hand between her legs (she wasn't wearing underwear under her leggings, partially because she was out of clean ones, partially because she liked the feeling of space around her privates, unlike every other cis girl she knew). Until she eventually gave up and took off her leggings and touched herself. Not masturbation, just putting a few fingers of pressure on her clit, somehow simultaneously to quiet it and to keep her desire alive, because it felt good and strange and excitingly forbidden to be wanting her old friend in this way, and to be looking at this secret part of her twitching from a dream sensation that Isabel would never be able to access.

It was during the time of Isabel's lust that Amber came copiously as she woke. In a strange jerky motion, her hand snapped to her clit and gripped it like a lifeline and semen shot out in three spasms, the first arcing all the way to her tits, the other two on her stomach, and then a dribble and an aftershock falling into her pubic hair. Isabel had been touching her clit at that moment, closed her legs and took her hand away the moment she saw the motion of Amber's arm. She held her legs closed tightly, stifling what could have become an orgasm. She became deeply aware that her bodycon dress had ridden up past her ass, feeling all the pricks of the mesh of Amber's chair indenting her bare skin. A small bit of fabric covered her pubes from Amber's view, but if she spread her legs, Amber would see her cunt, and she couldn't pull down the dress without revealing herself, and revealing that she's been masturbating to Amber while she slept, after letting herself into the house without knocking. She thanked her past self for hiding the leggings in her bag.

Amber was groggy and could barely open her eyes to see Isabel's terror and embarrassment. She felt the wetness of her chest and stomach, and touched the semen, raising her hand to look at her fingers. Confused and drugged and barely conscious, having just left her brother deepthroating her until he cried. She dropped her head back onto her pillow with a groan, then turned her head to see Isabel. "Good morning," Isabel said. The words hung in the air. Isabel said, "I brought you some Gatorade." Amber mumbled, "Thanks." Isabel said, "You've made a bit of a mess," and stood up. She knew there was no way to pretend, and she decided to play confident, to try to normalize what had happened. She prayed her bravado would gloss over her sin. She walked the two steps to Amber's bedside table, and Amber's eyes flicked to the delta of her pubic hair, short and maintained and shaved close around her labia. Isabel grabbed a few tissues from the box and sat on the bed and started to wipe the semen off of Amber's torso. It was not totally an unfamiliar feeling; she was the kind of friend who would wipe food off of Amber's mouth, pull eyelashes from Amber's cheeks, tuck the tag of her shirt back into place. She knew that Amber knew that she was a cleaner. This was just that. Nothing odd. She wiped down her stomach and chest and paused for a half a second before committing and grabbing another handful of tissues and wiping the cum from her pubic hair. Her fingers grazed the tip of her dick and she let out another weak set of drops, dripping onto Isabel's

hand. She wiped the tissues down the shaft of her cock, threw them in the trash, and cleaned her hands with another. She said, "you're clean now." Amber was looking at her with a deep confusion, groggy, barely conscious. Isabel walked back to the chair, pulling down her dress back over her crotch.

Amber said, "I need to throw up," and groaned her body over to the edge of the bed. Isabel caught her before she fell to the floor. She stood her up and held her steady, putting Amber's arm over her shoulder, and walked her slowly to the bathroom. Amber fell to her knees in front of the toilet with a painful smack, then stuck her fingers in her mouth. Isabel held her hair. Mostly she vomited up a thick acid liquid, empty of nutrients, full of Ambien. But, again, not enough Ambien for this to be a suicide attempt. Half that much. Amber felt like this distinction was worth repeating to herself, over and over.

She was shivering on the floor of the bathroom, face covered in sweat that felt like it was freezing off her skin. She said "it's over," and Isabel didn't know what she meant, but thought that it was bad instead of good. She started to ask Amber if she needed to go to the ER, but Amber said she hadn't taken enough to kill herself, just half as much as it took to kill herself, and that that meant she was ok, she was just cold, and she had needed help sleeping anyway. She put her forehead on the bowl in a simulacrum of prayer. Isabel stood beside her, rubbing her spine, looking at the scars on her ass, watching Amber transform in her head from an object of lust to a lump of flesh. She pulled her to her feet and walked her back to bed. Her erection was slowly deflating, forgotten.

Isabel lay her down and sat next to her. She put the bottle of Gatorade in Amber's hand. She drank from it while still lying down, so small streams of it ran down both her cheeks and make little wet spots on the pillow. Amber swallowed wrong and coughed, and Isabel stroked her side as Amber curled up into herself as the coughs came.

Isabel said, "you can't do that to yourself." Meaning the pills.

Amber said, "I didn't do anything, I was just trying to solve a problem."

Isabel said, "what problem?"

Amber said, "I kept having this nightmare. I needed it to go away."

Isabel said, "what was the nightmare?"

Amber said, "a bad one."

And they left it at that.

Amber was lying on her back, having recovered from the coughing. Isabel was stroking her hair, comforting, but this is not really what Isabel does. This is a thing that Isabel could have done, that other friends in this position might have done, that Isabel may have in the past considered doing. But both of them were aware that Isabel did not touch to comfort. A hug, a touch, a hand squeeze, sure. But she didn't repeat the gesture like this, over and over, stroking her hair, which meant stroking her cheek, her ear. Amber liked it. Isabel wasn't sure what her body was asking her to do.

Isabel knew, or thought she knew, that she could easily pivot this interaction into sex if she wanted to. Especially with Amber in the not-quite-there state that she was in. It would evolve through the slow escalation of comforting touch. Each progressive stroke of the hair would go a little bit further down her jawline, one eventually touching her lip. She would massage Amber's neck, slowly starting to work down her spine. Rubbing her back, because that was what friends did when their friends were sick. Her hands would just go slightly too far down, to somewhere that was near her ass but not quite there, or too far to the side, touching her sides near her tits, but again not quite, not quite yet. She would expand the sphere of her touch to include the tits at some point, and there wouldn't be a clear moment where she started touching them like that, and there would never be a clear moment where Amber could easily start objecting. No defining moment of decision, just cognitive dissonance and a feeling of inevitability. By the time they'd be fucking, a half-hour later, Amber would have been given no true time to refuse. Or choose. She could seduce Amber like a river seduces a canyon. Seduce her like a good marriage turning abusive.

If she was honest with herself, she had already started. She had started that awful seduction fifteen minutes before Amber had even woken up.

Amber was too fucked up on pills and sleep to even notice her friend's lust or sin or confusion of purpose. Isabel was too scared for her friend and too embarrassed to act on her cruel urges. But the specter of the sex they could be having hung in the air and wafted into Amber's soul. And someday later, in some stupid part of her mind, she would begin to form a memory of Isabel taking off her clothes while staring her in the face. Of Isabel fondling her balls, mounting her, spasming violently on top of her until drool drips down her face and into Amber's eyes. Burning them. Blinding her. Someday that stupid endless part of her mind would play that video in front of Amber's closed eyes in the hours between wake and sleep. And she would get horny. And probably orgasm. Then the spectre of the friendship-wrecking sex would retreat back into its harmless cage for days or weeks.

That specter entered Isabel's soul as well. And burned there as shame.

Amber shivered, still partially dead, partially in ecstatic relief. Relief that she was only partially dead. Isabel stroked her hair, thoughts like paper burning in a trash can, focusing only on the fingertips on Amber's scalp. Behind them both, Isabel's laptop screen, forgotten, timed out, blinked black, and cast the world into darkness.

Isabel sat across the fire from Amber, and stared into it and talked to no one. She had an orange plastic bucket filled with scraps of 2-by-4, lighter fluid, and newspaper. Isabel was holding a stick. She would move and flip the wood in the fire, teasing out every morsel of burnable material. She wasn't avoiding talking to people. The fire was simply more interesting than anything anyone else had to say. She was content to observe the hypnotic life of the flames, and help the cut pine reduce itself to ash and air.

Amber was talking to Taran, an old, forgotten friend. A friend from way back. She was the kind of person who aged with her body, but not her face. The kind of person whose kindergarten photos are instantly recognizable. She had a game that she liked to play, where she cut up all her old licenses and ID badges, cut out just the photos, and asked people to order them chronologically. No one ever got it right.

Taran tried to show a star to Amber. It was difficult, because she could only point from her own perspective. She told Amber to sit by her and press her cheek against her cheek, and they each closed their outside eye. Amber stared at that outstretched finger and squinted into the endless expanse, trying to imagine that she was sitting just two inches to the left of herself. But her awareness stayed stubbornly in her disgusting body, and the clarity with which Taran saw that special star eluded her. She could have been indicating any of a thousand worlds.

There were so many stars this far from the city, even through Isabel's smoke. So many fucking stars.

Taran said, "My memories are fuzzy, obviously. They try to hide themselves from your memory. It's part of their whole process. They don't want people to remember what they do to them. It's out of kindness, actually. They told me that, too. Right before they did the procedure, they said, 'We understand that this is scary, and that this would leave you with bad thoughts and trauma. And we're sorry about it, but these experiments need to be done. Thank you for your service to science and to the future. We'll now give you the gift of oblivion.'"

"Fuck," Amber said.

Taran said, "I'm not the forgetting type, though. It didn't stick with me. When I was going under, when they were going to wipe my brain, I was trying to fight it. Even if it's painful, it was the most important thing that ever happened to me. I didn't want to just go back to a pedestrian existence, die in mediocrity, and forget that, for a week in 2009, I was important."

"Shit," Amber said.

Taran said, "So I retained some of it. Images and sensations. A cold instrument that they put up my ass. Some machine that they put into my ear. It felt like a worm inching into my brain, you know, the way worms move? Expanding and contracting. I remember when the short ones, they grays, when they touched my skin, their fingers didn't feel like flesh. They

felt like... god, it's hard to describe. Static-y. Like their touch felt like static sounds. It gave me goosebumps wherever they touched me. Which includes, oh right, this is a funny thing. They were clearly trying to get, like, a semen sample. So they were, you know, like jerking me off. And one of them touched my forehead, and I started hallucinating, and I saw, actually, I saw you. That first day on the soccer field, that was the memory they stole to get me to come. So I do, right? And it was, like, such a surreal sensation, this static-orgasm thing. But the funny part was that I've been on hormones for long enough that I'm totally shooting blanks, so nothing comes out. And the fucking aliens, like, go silent and have this conference in their language about what they're supposed to do now. Because I'd totally fucked up the whole thing by being a tranny."

"Damn," Amber said.

Taran finished her beer and set the can on the tree trunk with the others. "Sorry, I don't talk about this much. People usually don't know how to react. Whether or not they believe me to begin with. So I don't mean to put you in an awkward spot, it's ok if you don't believe in this stuff."

Amber said, "Try to show me that star again."

So they sat cheek to cheek again, as Taran took Amber's hand and taught her to draw a line through Orion's belt, up and up to a small cluster of bright stars. Amber saw it this time. They looked at the same star. Amber suddenly felt her connection to the ground become unsure, gravity tenuous, as though she was clinging to the ceiling, overlooking a yawning hole. For a moment she experienced the cruel geometric strangeness of the cosmos, and she was shaking with awe.

Taran felt Amber's skin on her face, and could feel the shaking gasp as Amber became unstuck. She felt Amber's wonder as a scratching of stubble and a tightening of muscles. She started to turn her head to look at her strange old friend, and as she did, the corners of their lips touched. Not a kiss; not intentional, not held. But a hint of one. A potentiality.

Taran had found Isabel first. Amber had made herself impossible to find. She burned her past as she left it. She salted the fields of her social media presence, changed her phone number, left no forwarding addresses. Partly to protect herself from her father, but more so she would never hear the word "Jacob" again. But Isabel did not put up a heavy stone wall between herself and her past. So when Taran was trying to get in contact with old high school friends, she had called Isabel's mother, who still had that same phone number, and simply asked where Isabel was living now. Isabel had been the one to put her in contact with Amber.

Amber came back to the Earth with lips on her lips, which she hadn't felt in almost a year. Sorry, a month. Longer? Taran's lips were dehydrated and flaking. Though they only overlapped a couple of millimeters, Amber could feel, through the cracked flesh, the care that Taran took of her body. Could feel the days that would go by with no water and no food. Not because of privation or poverty, but through simply forgetting. Taran's breath was odorous. Not rank, but it smelled lived-in. It smelled the way Amber's car looked. Not coated in filth, but you wouldn't eat any food that fell into the cup holders. For example. Her other skin was supernaturally soft, through no effort on her part. Her mouth was the only hint of the cruelty she treated herself with.

In the instant of that not-kiss, a memory blossomed in Amber's mind. Playing, at 14, a two-person game of blind-man's-bluff. At 6 in the morning, on the soccer field of the local college. Taran woke up earlier than anyone Amber had ever known. And Amber didn't sleep most nights. There was always mist hanging over the wet grass, that early in the morning. It was always chilly, jacket weather, but never truly cold. If they stayed lying on the grass for long enough, their hands always fell asleep. But their breath never appeared in front of their faces.

They blindfolded themselves and then tried to find each other. Taran invented the game. She said that they needed to become mentally strong, and to be mentally strong, they had to learn to rely on senses other than sight. She would take Amber for walks in the woods at midnight, to see if they could stay on a trail in endless darkness. Barefoot, one time. Taran was built out of projects and challenges and attempts at self-improvement. As long as the work of self-improvement was romantic enough. You wouldn't find her dead at a gym. But she would spend afternoons trying to hold her breath underwater, longer and longer and longer.

When they found each other, it was often a crash. One second they'd be running through a flat and empty void, feeling like the horizon was endlessly far, that they were each alone, the only living things in their plane. The sound of the other's footsteps and breathing felt like recordings, false noises without a cause. The next second they were attached and bruised in a tangle and pile of bones and fat. They would lie in the wet grass, unmoving, hard breathing synchronizing, their hands resting wherever they ended up. At first it was random, but as time went on, as the game was played over and over, their hands somehow kept finding themselves in dangerous and liminal spaces.

This one fall in particular, Amber's hand ended up on Taran's crotch, Taran's on Amber's breast. They lay on the ground and panted like animals as Amber felt her dick grow turgid. Taran was in loose sweatpants with the name of a college down the leg, the old soft insides long grown burred and scratchy. There passed an unspoken moment where Amber neglected to let go of Taran's penis. And a moment when Taran's hand moved a little higher on Amber's chest. They both felt these moments retreat into memory, swollen with truth. Even if they never

mentioned it again, they would forever hold the echo of this mutual lust. Futures opened and closed in front of them in a frenzy of decisions as they committed to one and sank into each other's mouths.

Which was how Amber ended up giving her a handie on the soccer field.

Long story short, they dated in secret and broke up under the weight of rumor and repression. It was a long time ago.

This time they broke apart and Amber said “oh, I see it!” And Taran said “yeah, those are the Pleiades.” A few moments later, Isabel watched Taran put a hand on her lip, and smirked.

Amber's ass bones were hurting because she'd been sitting on a log. She slid off, onto the ground, casually ending up leaning against Taran's calf.

"My baby brother Austin," Amber was saying, "who I killed in the womb. I think it was him. He showed up late on night, like 3 in the morning. It was during that blizzard last year, did that hit you here? Yeah. Wow, that much? We didn't get that much in the city. It was only like 8 inches. But it was a blizzard anyway. So, I saw this person out the window."

"Paint me a picture."

"I'm standing by the window, the window is open, I'm wearing, well, I don't remember. I wasn't wearing a shirt I don't think. I was wearing sweatpants, I think. I'm very very cold. I had the window open because, I guess, it's like, sometimes you just wanna feel really cold, right? Like, being a little bit cold is always just a pain in the ass, and you want to go put on a sweatshirt. But truly cold? That's worth feeling. Sometimes."

"Makes you stronger."

"Exactly. The window was open, there was a little snowdrift on the sill. I see a man in the street under my window. It's late, not a super busy street, no one's driving, no one's plowing, no one's walking. But there's this man, lying in the middle of the street. No footprints around him. Just untouched snow. Anyway, I recognized him. I hadn't ever met him, but I recognized him.

So I ran down the stairs. I put on a hoodie and boots and ran down the fire escape. Not the stairs. I went down the fire escape. Wait, no, the fire escape doesn't reach to the ground. It must have been the stairs. But I remember walking up the fire escape with him, so it... I don't remember.

I went outside, anyway. It was silent. Have you ever been in a city in a snowstorm? The quiet is unbearable. It sounds like hiding under all of your comforters with your fingers shoved into your ears. Except, you know, cold. It eliminates all the things I hate about the city. The smell and the noise and the

people. The weight of all of their history, all our petty lives piled on top of each other like a landfill of abandoned dreams. When it's snowing, the city resets. It mimics what it will become, after humans are dead, or raptured. When the only thing crawling on the asphalt is the monsters of hell. And monsters are quiet, and keep to themselves, and meet late at night, when they wake up, to lie together and commiserate and cuddle in groups for warmth. A couple thousand monsters willing away their time in a world that has moved past itself. You know what I mean?"

"No."

"The man in the snow was an angel. He lay dead and confused. His wings were shadows, like heat shimmers. Not there, then rippling the world behind them when they moved. I knelt next to him and put his arm over my shoulder, and brought him up the fire escape. He didn't say anything, just looked around like he was blinded but trying to see anyway. When he looked at me, his eyes passed over mine. He couldn't see my eyes as any different than any other part of me. You don't notice that people do that until they don't. I sat him down on my bed and gave him Gatorade, because the tap water was bad. He put it in his mouth but didn't swallow, just let it dribble out of his mouth when he opened it.

He looked so familiar. He was filthy and shaking and smelled like garbage, so I drew him a bath. I got the water as hot as it could go. A few months before, I had had a promising date with a cute cis girl. I had cleaned my room and did my dishes and did my roommate's dishes. I pulled myself out of my squalor and threw out everything that touched my floor. I would have burned it in an oil drum in the back yard, but we didn't have a back yard. I went to Lush and bought a bath bomb. And fancy soaps. I had not gone on a date in a year. Or at least a couple of months. I used the power of this woman's judgment to wrench my life back into order and self-kindness. The date went fine. We didn't have all that much in common. We didn't go on a second. Which was fine. We didn't hook up either, which was also fine. I returned to my room afterwards and it was still clean, spotless, and free of the litter of my past. I quickly, over the course of a week, set about destroying it again. But I kept the bath bomb and the fancy soaps. They were in a drawer of keepsakes and medical equipment in my

bedside table, so that drawer always smelled like vanilla and oatmeal. I dropped the bomb in the hot water, and undressed the angel.

When he was naked, I realized how I knew him. This was my brother. I couldn't picture his face. For as long as I've dreamed about him, his face was always slippery. Not that there was anything off about it. It wasn't blank or scary. In my memories and dreams he always has a face, but it's not one that I can picture or describe after the fact. It just retreats into the background of the story I remember. But his dick, that I could picture perfectly. Probably because I experienced it by touch. So it branded itself on a different part of my brain. A part which has better access. Which knows the shapes of the lips of every person I've kissed. And I never forget a dick. I can't. It becomes a part of me in my most transcendent moments. The only moments of my life where only one thing exists, where the clutter of my brain finally stops and I can feel like I understand the world. And in those moments, the only thing I can feel is the dick. The weight of it, the way it fills me, the taste of it in my mouth, the excitement mixed with fear mixed with revulsion as it is about to come in me, become a part of me, be broken down and expelled from my body. It becomes the world. And I knew my brother's dick better than anyone. Or anyone's.

From the moment I first touched it, as we were masturbating together watching softcore porn on Cinemax, it was a part of me. Just as he was about to come, I reached over to him and grabbed it, so he would finish to me, but be unable to refuse. It was an unplanned thing, but inevitable. Like my future love was reaching into my past and moving my hand. And after he was done, and his semen was cooling on my hand, the look in his eyes... I wish I could picture it again. It was a look of overwhelming fear. There was no pleasure, no joy or excitement. No guilt. Just terror. I never asked him what he was afraid of. I don't think it was getting caught, though. Because he didn't look around. Just at me. He was shaking as he put his hand out to touch my dick. He had jizz on his hand. It lubricated me. It didn't take much to make me come too. Mixed jizz made us blood brothers.

So the shape and texture of his cock imprinted itself in my head forever. I've never... it's more real to me than anything I've ever invented or remembered.

So the angel is naked. His wings blur into his body. They are huge; they fill the room with their shimmering transparency. It's like we're underwater. I can't feel them physically, but my hairs are standing on end. You know that feeling when your hand is resting less than an inch from the hand of someone you have a crush on, but have never touched? That tingling bright feeling? I had that all over my body. He's standing and he's looking around with wonder at the lights and stuff in my bathroom. Like he's never seen a bathroom before. He may not have, I don't know how heaven works. He can't speak, or he just isn't. I don't say anything either. I don't think I could have. There was something about the whole thing that compelled my silence.

I took his hand and led him into the bathtub. He sat in it, didn't flinch at how hot it was. He put his hand in the water, and took it out, and looked at his hand. It was shiny. He was fascinated by it. I remember what I was wearing now. I was wearing a robe. When he looked back at me, I opened the robe and let it fall to the ground. You know, how it happens in every HBO show, some woman drops her clothes in one move, while a man watches stoically, but he's in awe of her beauty? It was like that. He saw my tits and immediately his mouth fell open to sing the glory of God, who could make a creature as gorgeous as me.

I'm fucking with you. I was wearing dirty pajama pants and a winter coat with no shirt on under it. I took them off, but he didn't look away from his wet hand. Which was prettier than me, I guess. But I got in the tub with him, facing him. We just kind of looked at each other for a while. He didn't seem to recognize me like I recognized him. I took his hand and put it on my crotch. Which was hard, but not enough to jog his memory. His hand felt like it was breathing, like it was its own organism. After I let go, his hand slid off my clit without ceremony. It was nothing to him. I didn't know what else to do. By some compulsion, I reached underwater and found his foot, raised it up,"

Taran said, "and washed his toes one at a time, kissing each one as you finished it."

Amber, speechless, shattered.

Taran's dad, who was richer than Amber's dad, didn't suspect that his daughter-son was a faggot or a tranny. Amber's dad suspected both. So while they were together, they spent their time at Taran's place. Her family owned her home. It wasn't huge but it was substantial. A few weeks after the morning on the soccer field (Taran whimpered when she orgasmed that morning, straining her hips against Amber's unlubricated hand. Their lips were locked together, and Amber could feel Taran's mouth pull back into a snarl. Or the face of a crying child. Taran pushed against Amber so hard that Amber worried for a moment that Taran would rise into the air and float away if she didn't tether her to the earth, so she pushed down just as hard. When the first squirt of come came out, it was a relief for both of them, to have something slippery between them. Only the last few seconds of the handjob felt like actual pleasure, after that almost violent pushing), Amber found herself in Taran's living room, alone in the house except for Taran's kid sister, who was playing video games in her room, and who, Taran assured her, wouldn't come out for at least 6 more hours.

They had fucked a few times in the interim. They were brutal, flailing couplings, that ended in confused tears and long silences. They would meet in the woods or by the river. They would make out without figuring out how to use their tongues, wet and unsatisfying, frantic in their stolen moments. Near the train tracks by a secluded bend in the river, Amber vomited on both of them after gagging on Taran's cock. She cried at her failure and they took off and washed their clothes in the river water. The first time they'd seen each other fully naked. Amber with her scars, Taran with her fat, both showing their vulnerability and variable self-punishment many months earlier than they were ready to. They wrung out their dirty clothing and lay it to dry on a rock. Taran sat with her back to a stone, Amber sat in between her legs. Taran held her loosely. Taran suggested that they should look directly into the sun without squinting. They did. Amber was grateful for a moment to see nothing, and to pretend that the water leaking out of her eyes was a physiological reaction, instead of a mark of her shame.

Amber would go home to cry to her brother, to hold Austin and weep and tell him about their attempted sex. She would tell him that when Taran touched her cock, she could feel her disgust in the tentative, awkward way she moved her fingers. She could feel that Taran wanted her to have a pussy, that if she only had a

pussy it would be easy and natural and Taran would actually be attracted to her. Instead of going along with their sexual relationship because she had no other option, and because Amber had started it first. She asked him why Taran didn't want to go down on her. She'd ask him why it didn't feel like it did with him. Why this strange other form of sex, this physical and disjointed version, didn't feel like it always had with her brother. Was it because she didn't love her? Was it because *she* didn't love *her*? And Austin would calm her down and tell her to stick with it, that it was always like this. That sex outside of the family, with people who didn't understand each other, was always a clumsier and faster dance. And he would go down on her, saying that even if Taran didn't like Amber's cock, he did, and if she couldn't come with her, he would always be there to draw the sperm out of her blue balls. Then, as Amber was coming, he finished her with his hand and told her "don't you ever forget about me, though. I come first, remember that." And he brought his hand, messy with semen, to her lips, and she licked herself off of him.

So in the silence and emptiness of Taran's big house, they kissed on the couch. World of Warcraft slightly wafting through the halls from Alexa's room. Within the walls, away from the fear of nature, they were safer, and they had time. Nobody was going to stumble across them, no train would barrel past them, full of prying eyes. The only person who could possibly see them was her sister, and she was both friendless and had secrets of her own. So she would tell no one. Taran said that, if Alexa did by some miracle leave her room, the most she would do was stand in the doorway and watch her brother kissing a boy, smirk, watch for a bit too long, and continue to the kitchen to make popcorn. She would be happy for us. And she had a type, and that type was skinny white faggy boys with long hair. So even if Amber was naked and exposed, the worst she would do would be to turn Alexa on. Amber imagined Taran blowing her on the couch, which she still hadn't ever done, and pictured looking up, and seeing Alexa in the doorway. She leaned against the jam, her hand on her boob, touching her nipple without even realizing it, dumbstruck with glee and fear. They would make eye contact, Alexa would put a finger to her lips, and Amber would nod. The blowjob would continue, noisy and wet, and Alexa would lift up her shirt and show Amber her small tits, and pull down her sweatpants until Amber could see her pubic hair. She'd put her hand down her pants, not breaking eye contact, masturbating for her brother/sister's boyfriend/girlfriend. Purely as a cruel tease. She would remove her fingers from her pussy, her shirt resting above her chest, and lick her fingers. Then she would smirk, put her shirt down, and walk from the room, pulling her pants down to show Amber her ass as she went. And Amber would come in Taran's mouth for the first time, and Taran would cough and gag and then smile. Alexa was 19 years old.

A few months later, after Taran and Amber's tryst had settled, Amber did remember a moment, sleeping over at Taran's house when the parents were away (a secret luxury of the homosexual), and finding Alexa in the living room, crying and watching a movie. Taran was asleep, but Amber was full to the brim with insomnia, like she always was, and was wondering through the big house, imagining living in a place with stone tile. She was wearing one of Alexa's dresses, which she had entrusted to her. She knew about her brother's boyfriend being her brother's girlfriend, was one of the few people that secret made it to. Because, again, she was friendless and had secrets of her own. And had enough dresses that giving one away wouldn't be deprivation. Amber had cried when she put it on her. Taran had been sitting on the bed, watching her sister, arms full of clothes, undressing and redressing her boyfriend, finding a dress that fit her boyish forms. One not tailored for tits, not too tight to show her bulge, one with flow and stretch and form. And when she had found this yellow one, after an eternity of ill-fitting options, she drew cat-eye linings on Amber's eyes, concealer on her budding beard, and subtle lipstick on shaking lips. Then she allowed Amber to look into the mirror to see herself. Amber looked at herself as herself, flanked by the boy/girl she thought she loved and by the sister who was so kind without needing to be, and broke down in sobs. This other family hugged her from both sides and she disappeared into their warmth and flesh and let the years flow out of her eyes like a painful boil finally ready to be lanced. It was one of her treasured memories. One of the few sparkling gems that Amber kept in a safe in a vault buried in the labyrinth of her mind, safely hidden from the vicissitudes of her broken memory. She spent that night playing that scene in her head over and over and over and over and over, burning it into her self. Knowing how easy it was to forget. Trying desperately not to let even a detail escape her sieve.

Amber was wearing that yellow dress and no underwear when she found Alexa weeping at the television. She was watching Law and Order: SVU. Mariska Hargitay, the cop protagonist, was in a dark basement. An evil criminal was attempting to rape her. Amber sat down by Alexa and Alexa turned to her and grabbed her and held her hard. Amber didn't know what to do and acted on instinct and hugged her as hard as she could. She pressed her ear against Alexa's ear and thought good thoughts as hard as she could into the weeping girl's brain, and said nothing. As the hug went on longer and longer, and Amber found herself praying for grace. As words of devotion marched through her brain, Amber marveled at them. She had never asked God for any grace for herself. As she was thinking of divinity, Alexa pulled away and wiped her eyes. She started talking to Amber about a day from the previous year.

She had gotten a boyfriend online. A person from World of Warcraft, a member of her raiding party. She had gone to visit this boyfriend, named Anselm, to see him in the fleshworld for the first time. He was a scruffy man, 27, short and unkempt. He seemed kind and lived in squalor in a house in suburbia he shared with a man named Hamlet, another member of their party. She ate pizza with them on the floor because they had no furniture, and played Halo, and slept on her boyfriend's mattress on the floor.

She said more about the rape that followed, but Amber was kind enough to forget the details.

Amber had been silent but attentive during this story, and held Alexa chastely, trying to do the things that a good listener does. Another track of thoughts played out in the background of her mind, which all had to do with the feeling of Alexa's shoulders, and the way they felt so natural under her hands. And about the sensation that she was wearing no underwear. Amber mentally attempted to burn those thoughts to cinders, but they kept growing back. In the following silence, as Alexa's tears quieted, there was nothing really more to say, so Amber suggested they watch something else on TV. Something funnier and lighter, a distraction from the fracturing cruelty of memory. They watched vulgar cartoons in silence. They were sitting close together, but no longer touching. Amber didn't remember the rules about how to interact with rape victims. After a bit, Alexa sighed and

asked Amber to go to her room and bring back a tin lunchbox that she had hidden in the top of her closet. It turned out to hold marijuana, lighters, a grinder, rolling papers, and a tiny glass pipe. Alexa ground the bud and filled the bowl with steady and sure hands. She said to Amber that it was the only way she could calm down anymore. She lit the bowl and sucked down smoke and passed it to Amber, holding her breath for as long as she could before exhaling a cloud into the air above them. Amber, in retrospect, smoked it entirely incorrectly, not pulling it into her lungs, not covering the hole in the side, and didn't get high at all.

So when Alexa forgot what she'd been crying about and started giggling at the cartoons and started cuddling with Amber, she was still stone sober. Alexa was leaning against her brother's girlfriend, resting her head on her shoulder, holding her hand which rested on Amber's bare hairy thigh. Amber had not expected to run into anyone on her thoughtful self-pitying walk through the hallways of what seemed to her a mansion, and the dress was the only thing she was wearing, and she felt herself grow hard with the feeling of a woman's pinky on her thigh. Alexa was absorbed by the TV, the pot doing its work of narrowing the scope of the world to the one thing in front of her. Amber tried her hardest to become soft again, to not notice the fact that the back of her dress had ridden up the last time she's changed positions, and she could feel the texture of the couch cushions on her taint.

Alexa moved Amber's right hand so that it was around her waist, and left her own hand resting on Amber's thigh. When she reached to scratch her nose and put her hand back down, it brushed against Amber's hard penis. Amber was too embarrassed and scared to even apologize, but Alexa seemed unperturbed. She rested her hand further up Amber's thigh, her pinky just almost touching her cock through the fabric of the dress. Amber heard her whispering to herself "She's safe, this is safe." Amber moved her hand a little further around Alexa's waist, touching her hip bones. Later, Alexa lay down and put her head in Amber's lap, pressing the back of her skull against Amber's dick. She said, "I'm just reacclimating myself." She had taken a few more big hits off the pipe at this point. She held Amber's hand over her chest, between her breasts. She lay, relaxing into the feeling of being touched again, feeling warm and safe in the cocoon of her intoxication, and Amber tried to figure out who was taking advantage of who. To her infinite shame, Amber moved her hand to rest it on Alexa's breast, and periodically shifted positions so that she could feel the sensation of something moving against her cock. She leaked precum, but was relieved that she didn't orgasm.

They fell asleep on the couch, and Amber had vivid dreams of reaching her hand up Alexa's shirt, feeling her nipples tighten. Of Alexa lying down on her lap and pressing her head into Amber's cock. Of feeling her ribs and her belly button. Of Alexa sitting up a bit, lifting Amber's dress so that it rested above her clit,

exposing her as they lay together. Of turning the TV off. Of Alexa shifting as she was falling asleep, turning her head over so that her lips were resting on the base of her cock. Of Alexa raising and lowering her hand, touching her as though by accident through her dress. Of moving her hands over her body, quiet and slow. Of Alexa, asleep or hypnotized, licking her dick, moving it towards her, putting the head in her mouth and softly jerking Amber off until she came in silence. Calmly swallowing, replacing the dress and hiding it, turning back over, and falling back asleep. Amber woke up in Taran's bed.

But months earlier, making out on that same couch with Taran, Alexa safely out of Amber's sight, the two awkward lovers were finally learning each other. They were kissing slower, more gently, less tongue and less motion. Running their hands slowly over each other's hips and chests. Taking some time to breathe and sink into each other. They weren't even hard yet. Taran invited Amber to take a bath. The tub was massive, spotless, cleaned by paid and immigrant hands. It filled up slowly. Taran poured bubble bath into it from a bright pink bottle from under the sink, the cap stuck to the bottle with the dried soap that had accumulated in years of unuse. She had to pour a lot of it in for it to foam properly. While it filled, they undressed each other. After weeks of furtive fucking in cars and on river beaches, they saw each other naked for the first time. Amber's scars on full display. The rolls of Taran's fat. But beyond the surface level vulnerability of their shame, there was beauty. Taran's birthmark that looked like the state of Oklahoma that covered most of her right ass cheek. Amber's soft line of hair reaching from her belly button to her pubic hair like an arrow. Taran's appendectomy scar. Amber's hipbones. The muscles of Taran's strong back. Clavicles, cuticles, dimples, pimples, tendons and toes, the heartbeats almost audible like a second breath. The miraculous architecture that composes and supports a human life. They saw inside of each other.

They both felt tears brimming, and in the full, lukewarm water, they sat across from each other in rapt silence. They played a game with their feet, running their toes up and down each other's legs, towards the straining clusters of nerves at their crotches. Taran's foot went higher up Amber's leg and Amber caught it, brought it to her lips, and

washed her toes one at a time, kissing each one as she finished it.

Amber said, "Holy shit."

Taran, not understanding the implication of that synchronicity, said, "I didn't know that that was your signature move, I had thought that was a special moment just for me."

Amber said nothing, waved her hands vaguely. The stars among them burned in endless fury.

Taran said, "No, I'm just teasing you, finish the story."

Amber said, "There's not much more. I reached out to touch his penis, and he looked up through the ceiling, said a couple words, and vanished from the bath with a huge splash. And I was alone. And that was the closest I ever came to seeing my brother."

After a silence, Taran said, "Come on, you have to tell me what the words were."

And Amber, lying, said, "The weird thing is, I don't remember."

Then, a few seconds later, said, "I don't know why I just lied, I do that all the time for no fucking reason. He said, 'you have forgotten you.'"

"What did he mean by that?"

When Amber said that she didn't know, she was only kind of lying, so she didn't feel guilty enough to say anything else.

Isabel was watching Amber with alarm in her eyes. Taran getting abducted and violated by aliens was one thing. She hadn't seen that girl in years, and didn't care about her too much. Her obvious disconnect from reality, her ability to believe her own lies, these were curiosities to Isabel. The kind of thing she'd mention to a guy she would date: "I met my old friend from high school. She turned out to be a trans UFO conspiracy theorist, isn't life wild? People change so much." But what Amber was describing bothered her. What Amber was talking about sounded like... the word in her mind was "madness." She didn't know how to ask whether Amber was actually describing a dream, or a fantasy, or was just telling stories for the sake of lying. Or if she was earnest. If she saw an angel who was her dead brother and tried to seduce it. She didn't know how to ask. She wouldn't, not now, in front of Amber's old squeeze. But she needed to ask on the drive back home, tomorrow.

Taran was talking about aliens again. "One of the things I learned was that aliens are just as much a psychic phenomenon as a physical one. Their existence on this earth, or this dimension, is being projected into our mind as a psychedelic experience. So all the high-strangeness events you hear about, aliens pausing time, walking through walls, appearing as uncanny simulacrum of people you know, is because they're appearing to you by hijacking your consciousness and letting you fill in the gaps..." Amber and Isabel caught each other's eyes. Amber saw what could have been pity.

She had entirely forgotten that Isabel had been there, listening, the whole time. The secrets about Austin, the encounter with the angel. She had been sharing those with a kindred spirit, a woman clearly as fucked-up as she was. Taran clearly had a memory broken by conspiracy and trauma, whether real or implanted. Someone who inhabited a world of aliens and men in black could handle the introduction of angels and ghosts and incest. But Isabel wasn't broken in the same way that Taran or Amber were. Isabel remembered her childhood. She looked at pictures of herself and saw herself. Not because her appearance never changed, like Taran's, but because she had no wall between herself and that young girl. That face was simply hers, with no qualifiers. How could she possibly understand? The unbroken cannot feel the broken, they can only see them.

Amber didn't want Isabel to think that she was crazy, even though she was. But she was crazy in a safe way, in a "my brain doesn't work today and is trying to kill me" crazy. She didn't want to be crazy in the old fashioned way, a "raving woman screaming in an asylum, being brutalized by a fire hose" crazy. She looked away from her, not able to hold the gaze. She shook her head, not knowing what she was communicating, not knowing whether Isabel would understand the gesture.

Isabel and Amber had slept in the same room a couple of times in the last month. Once, in their staid roles as caretaker and broken piece of shit, at Amber's place. Neither of them wanted the other one there, but both understood that Amber couldn't be alone or she would probably die. But the other few times, it hadn't been that dire or abuse-adjacent. Amber had come over to Isabel's place (Immaculate, small, shared between her and her platonic life partner Nija). Amber brought over weed and they played chess. Their strategy became worse and worse as the night went on and they got higher. They lay on Isabel's bed and watched Basic Instinct on Isabel's cracked laptop screen. Lost in the drugs, they watched the central sex scene three times in a row, giggling at how seriously it took itself, at the fake intensity in the actor's eyes.

Which had devolved into sharing with each other their favorite sex scenes from movies, which had devolved into sharing porn, which had devolved into the darkness of a closed laptop, which had devolved into

“Amber.”

“That's me, I'm Amber.”

“Yeah, that's you.”

“What's up?”

“What was that you said about the angel?”

“I didn't, I mean, I know it didn't like really actually happen.”

“What do you mean actually happen?”

“I don't know, I mean it wasn't real in reality.”

“Uh huh...”

“I'm not psychotic. Don't look at me like that. I know the difference between what actually happened in real life and what was just a dream or something. I'm sure there wasn't an angel in my house, and I know I don't have a brother anymore.”

“Anymore?”

“I absorbed my twin in the womb. My dad told me about it.”

“I didn't know that.”

“I don't talk about it. I sound crazy when I do.”

“ ... ”

“You ever have really bad nightmares? Not the kind where you're in danger. The ones where you're the danger. Where you don't have full control over your actions and you watch yourself, like, kill people or let your family die or rape your friend? The kind of nightmare that really sticks with you? And you wake up

feeling guilty and it ruins the hell out of your mood for the day?”

“I guess.”

“The dream didn’t happen. You’re not a school shooter or a serial rapist or whatever you were in your brain. But you still remember doing those things, and your body still feels guilt because of it. It’s not real, but it changed you. And if someone asks you why you’re in such a foul mood, there’s no way of answering because nobody takes your dreams as seriously as you do. Which makes sense but still doesn’t feel right. I think about my brother every day and I dream about him most nights. I see him more than anyone else in my life, and he’s been through all this shit with me. And dreaming of him changes my mood and my body and allows me to see the world in a kinder way. So he’s real. Real enough to impact the world. I know he’s not literally an angel who I fucked. I just don’t particularly care about the difference.”

“...One night last month you took a lot of sleeping pills and you told me you’d been having a nightmare-”

“Yeah, that was about him.”

“You could have hurt yourself really badly.”

“See what I mean? He’s real.”

“I’m worried about you. And I don’t really know how to say this, but you need to see someone. I know you don’t trust therapists, and I know that doctors have hurt you in the past. But it’s worth looking again.”

“I’m handling it myself.”

“You’re not, though. You’re really not.”

“I made it this far alive.”

“Alive, yeah, but you’re not living. Hon, I love you, and you know that I love you, and you know that I’ve seen the best and the worst of you. Your life, right now, it’s bad. You’re miserable. You’re unstable, and when you start to unravel, it’s always a disaster. Yes, you’ve never killed yourself, but every time you fall apart, you get close. Normal people, Amber, living normal lives, don’t ever get very close to suicide. Your depressive episodes can’t always have those kinds of stakes.”

“I’m not going to kill myself.”

“You say that now, but earlier in the month, when you were suicidal, you said otherwise.”

“No I didn’t.”

“You said that if you’d spent the night alone, you’d give yourself a 20% chance of not making it through till morning. That’s not normal, Amber. That’s not handling it. If that’s true, if that 20% is true, then you’re just counting down the depressive episodes until you hit one where I’m not available, or Fox, or I guess Taran, aren’t available. And that night, maybe you roll badly on those 20% odds. It’s just a matter of time until you do something drastic again, unless you get real help. And I know that that’s harsh, but I think that you’re stable enough today to hear it. You took a handful of sleeping pills to try to talk to your dead brother in a dream, Amber. It’s not healthy to risk your life over something like that.”

“I get it, I’m not normal, drop it.”

“Amber, you’re incredibly sick. You know it, and I know it. You, as a person, maybe you are normal and maybe you’re not, I don’t care. But your mental state, no, it’s not normal. It’s diseased, it’s pathological. You need care.”

“It’s never worked.”

“Try again. If not for yourself, then for me. I can’t sit here and watch you wait for death. And if you died, I’d never forgive myself for not being there on that one

night. But if every night could be that one unlucky night, then..."

She trailed off and the two of them stared into flames. Amber was crying. Isabel did not reach over to touch her. They drifted in parallel as the Earth spun.

"If not for me, do it for your brother. He would have wanted to see you happy."

Amber started to bawl. Taran came up behind her and crushed her in a hug.

"Oh baby," Taran said. "Poor sweet baby."

As Amber spurted sadness onto Taran's clothing, failing to control her tears, Taran's eyes were hostile. Isabel looked away. Resentment burned in her. Yes I made my friend cry. She needed it. She needed to hear it. Who was Taran to glare at her like that? She didn't have the context. She hadn't watched Amber degenerate over the last few years, disappearing into the mist of her depression. All Taran had seen was her intense and melancholic lover transform into an intense and macabre adult. She remembered her as a closeted headcase, and then found her again, still a headcase, but now living authentically, and saw only improvement, an upward trajectory. But three years ago, Amber had been happy.

The summer of Amber's joy was a low point in Isabel's life. She was living in a punk house, sharing the top floor with a man named Dominic. He was a confrontational man who raised pigeons on their roof, who burned incense despite Isabel's allergies, who masturbated with the door open, who would knock on her door to berate her if she left a dish in the sink. Her other crunchy punk housemates would hold rituals and seances in the living room. These events drifted between stoned kids giggling at each other while they loudly mispronounced Latin, and religious transcendence of frightening physical intensity. Isabel decided to move when she came home one night after a night of hard drinking to find three housemates, shirtless and painted with blood, holding each other's heads and crying. They were surrounded by small piles of sand, leaves, and bones. One of them was speaking in tongues. It was, in Isabel's words, a bad scene.

A lot of stuff was going wrong in Isabel's life that summer. Her life partner out of the country, her employment unstable, plus she had started drinking again at the same levels she had maintained in college. But whenever she went over to Amber's place, just a few blocks away, what she complained about was the toxicity of her house. Amber was housesitting for a professor, living in a brightly-lit white rowhouse with impeccable floors and art deco furniture. There was an herb garden in the back yard that Amber was being overpaid to maintain. Much to her own surprise, she was succeeding and the plants were thriving.

The night of the blood ritual, Isabel called Amber three times in a row while walking over to her house. On the third call, Amber picked up and said,

"Hey, is this an emergency?"

"I guess, kind of. Can I come over?"

"Uhhh, yeah, I guess."

"Do you have someone over?"

"I mean, yeah."

“I don’t feel super safe at home.”

“Yeah, for sure. You can come over. Door’s unlocked.”

Isabel heard her apologizing to someone as she hung up the phone. Amber greeted her at the door in a small robe, disturbed mid-coital. Isabel was crying but didn’t know why. Some slurry of shock and frustration and booze and shame at being so fragile and guilt at disturbing her friend over something so mundane and unimportant. Just some witches cutting themselves and invoking Satan. But she was crying and Amber held her. Isabel opened her eyes from inside the embrace, and saw a boy on the stairs, with heavy scars over his nipples, wearing only low-hanging jeans. He had his fingers in the belt-loops, pulling them low so that Isabel could see the top of his pubic hair. Probably on purpose. Isabel could feel Amber’s fading erection through the robe. She burned with embarrassment.

Isabel pulled away from Amber, wiped her eyes, and introduced herself to the half-naked man. He shook her hand and introduced himself as Cade.

“Hi Cade, I’m so sorry this is your first impression of me, I’m usually not this...” She waved at herself in a vague way. And I don’t mean to intrude on your...” She waved at the two of them in a vague way.

“Don’t stress, girlfriend,” Cade said with an unplaceable accent. “I’ve been there. It’s ok to need to leave a scary housing sitch. I used to live in a house with a couple of buddies from high school. We’d been friends for a while, making trouble together. Stoner emo kids. Honestly, it turned out the biggest thing we had in common was just hatred of basically everyone around me. But we all graduated and some of us got jobs and we moved out of our parents houses into the cheapest apartment we could possibly find.”

They were sitting on the couch now. Amber had put on sweatpants and a shirt, Cade hadn’t put on a stitch more. Amber had provided Isabel with a glass of horrible wine.

“So I wake up the next day,” Cade was saying, “and Noah was in the living room, clearly still tripping, naked and watching Rugrats and crying. And it was funny for a moment. I even like knocked on Dave’s door and said he should come out and see this, but then when I tried to turn off the TV, Noah flipped the fuck out. Grabbed me by the collar and started yelling about how he was gonna break my face. And Noah wasn’t a small guy, he was 6 foot, easily 250 pounds, had hair like a lion. And I was presenting female at that point, and I’m not a tall dude. So I was just hoping that he calmed down, that he could get control over whatever he’d mixed the acid with. And Dave, what a hero, he was like, “Dude, she’s trying to help you out, the government is watching you whenever the TV’s on. It’s how they get thoughts into your head. And Noah starts freaking out about it, totally forgetting about me. Ends up destroying the TV and told me that I shouldn’t get mad at him for assaulting me, because The Man made him do it. So we lost the TV, but Patrick had stolen it anyway.”

It was a few hours later. Still on the couch, Cade flipping through the professor’s records, playing Bruce Springsteen on the expensive sound system.

“Of course, I want it to be true,” Amber was saying, “I want it all to be true. Every single weird little story that people tell. All the bullshit about faeries and elementals and crystals and shit. Can you imagine how amazing it would be? All that magic. Like, the plants in the backyard. I have a witch friend who’s convinced they all have souls. And that they directly affect your emotions with ghost powers. Just reaching into your head and rooting around in it. And I’m listening, and I’m like, that’s stupid. But what if it weren’t? Like, imagine how cool it would be to find out that that’s real.”

“Then every time I let a plant die,” Isabel said, “I’d have to feel even more guilty. Not only did I fail as a responsible person with discipline and stuff, but I’m also a murderer.”

“Negligent manslaughter at worst,” said Amber.

That night, sleeping on the couch, Isabel was woken by the sound of footsteps. Amber was back in her robe, smelling like sex, padding into the kitchen to get

water. Isabel watched her through half-closed eyes. Amber had a clay pot full of flowers. She put her face into it and breathed. She whispered, "Oh, I wish you could smell this." And Isabel had wondered who she was talking to, what memory of a person Amber was sharing this quiet moment with. In a quiet, huge, and safe house in summer, a kind and understanding lover resting naked upstairs, the air heavy with the smell of flower and sage, the sound of cars filtering through the open window. Cold water in her throat. A tiny paradise island for this girl and whatever phantom she was evoking. And unbroken woman.

Isabel felt envy burning in her throat. She wanted to be like this. Sober and safe, squatting in an upper-class life. It was an unusual emotion for her, and it was followed immediately by shame. What kind of person was she to feel anything uncharitable over the happiness of her saddest friend? So she sat up and said, "Hey," and Amber said, "Hey," and Isabel said, "I like that one," and Amber grinned. She sat on the couch with Isabel and said, "Me too." Isabel lay back down, her legs over Amber's, and Amber said, "I love this time of night. The peace of it. I wish I never had to sleep at all, and I could just live at 3am forever." And Isabel fell asleep again, pinning her friend to the couch with her unconscious feet until, once Isabel's breathing had changed, Amber tenderly extricated herself and returned to her lover. They had talked that evening about Cade's fantasy of waking up with someone already inside him, and Amber was burning to fulfill it for him. She left her robe on the stairs, finished her approach with the night air clinging to every inch of skin.