

Alexandra Leaving: An Exploration into Sherlock Holmes
and the Writer, Reader, Character Relationship

A Senior Honors Thesis

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by

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To my parents –

*“And even though it all went wrong, I’ll stand right here before the lord of song with
nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah.”* – Leonard Cohen

“Escribo porque el grito ya no me cabe dentro.” – Rachel Zipris

I write because the scream can no longer be contained inside.

Introduction

When I first started working on this project nearly a year ago, my thought was to write a research paper about Sherlock Holmes. I wanted to investigate the ways in which writers in various mediums have employed the detective in popular culture through books, films, and even video games. I have been an avid fan of Holmes since my high school days and was fascinated by what I perceived as a revival of the character in recent years. PBS was at the forefront of this action in my mind, having released several well-made Holmesian films in the last few years, including *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (2002-2003), the *Murder Rooms* series (1999-2002), and *Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Silk Stocking* (2006). The Adventure Company, a producer of intricate, narrative-driven video games, also brought Holmes to life in three tales of varying maturity: *The Mystery of the Mummy* (rated E), *Secret of the Silver Earring* (rated T), and *Sherlock Holmes: The Awakened* (rated M). I also noticed, around the same time, that a few writers had taken up the challenge, as well. For example, there was *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, by Mark Haddon (2003); *Arthur and George*, by Julian Barnes, with a Doyle-Holmes hybrid detective (2005); and *The Final Solution*, by Michael Chabon (2003). I realized something special was in the air as my generation was discovering Holmes again.

As my research unfolded, however, I came to understand that I was vitally wrong about something. Even if Holmes was possibly being rediscovered, he was certainly not being revived. In his study of the Sherlockian world of parody and pastiche, *The Sincerest Form of Flattery*, Paul D. Herbert writes, “There are probably more imitations of Sherlock Holmes than of any other character from literature” (qtd. in Klinger lvii).

Starting from *Punch* cartoons and Adrian Conan Doyle's continuation of his father's work all the way down to Big Idea's *Sheerluck Holmes and the Golden Ruler*, with dancing cucumbers and tomatoes, the character has been continually imitated since his first appearance in *Strand* magazine.

Since I have been an admirer of Holmes for several years, parts of my research were done before I began. In 2006, my fascination with the detective peaked as I visited the Holmes Museum in London at 221B Baker's Street. After I returned, I bought the newly released three-volume *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, edited by Leslie L. Klinger, which contains an insightful introduction. Before starting this project, I also already owned several of Granada's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* films, starring Jeremy Brett. In the 1980s, he personified the perfect representation of Holmes and is still revered by many as the greatest actor to have ever taken up the role. As my research progressed, I had the pleasure of being introduced to Ronald Howard's version of Holmes, as well as Basil Rathbone's famous characterization. Before Brett took up the part, Rathbone's performance reigned as *the* Holmes for nearly forty years.

The official research with my advisor began by us reading selections from *Sherlock Holmes: The Major Stories with Contemporary Critical Essays*, edited by John A. Hodgson. These essays introduced me to some of the critical thinking being done about Holmes and to some of the problems that arise when studying the adventures. Catherine Belsey's essay, "Deconstructing the Text: Sherlock Holmes," was particularly enlightening. She discusses how Doyle's writing of the stories left critical holes for the reader to explore and how these holes relate to feminism. Her specific argument is that when the narrator Watson writes about women's sexuality and politics, in stories like

“The Second Stain,” he leaves gaps where the reader can infer the morality behind the stories. The gaps are obvious as Watson claims he must not reveal specific details for the sake of a woman’s honor and state secrecy; however, readers can additionally surmise that the stories support repression of female sexuality and the exclusion of women from politics.

I had vaguely heard of books that take Belsey’s idea to the next level and use gaps in Doyle’s writing combined with bits of fact to create biographies and the personal life of Sherlock Holmes. A prominent example of this type of work is *Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street: A Life of the World’s First Consulting Detective*, by William S. Baring-Gould (1962). By using Doyle’s bare suggestions of Holmes’ French grandmother and the alias of Sigerson, which Holmes uses while on hiatus after dropping from Reichenbach Falls, Baring-Gould establishes a rough family tree and biography. Other works in this line attempt to answer other pressing questions that readers have, such as “How deep was Holmes into drug culture?”, “Was Watson really the genius while Holmes took all the credit?”, “Was Holmes ever married?”, “Did he have any children?”, and “What are his religious beliefs?” I only barely looked into these types of books beyond their covers because they didn’t feel right to me. The writers of these books seemed to take the canon of Doyle and mutate it into their own views, destroying the true Holmes. The practice felt lazy and unproductive. I didn’t see the point.

One of the first assignments that I received from my advisor on this project was to write a conversation between myself and Sherlock Holmes. I still had plenty of time to play with, and he thought it would be a fun way to help me identify some of the questions I might want to address in my thesis. The work has transformed through revision, but the

essence of chapter one was this first assignment. After reading it aloud, we were both excited. I felt that it was the best piece of fiction that I had ever written. We agreed that I was on to something, but we had yet to understand it. I continued researching for my larger project, but my advisor suggested that I write another chapter and see what happened. Chapter two was another stroke of inspiration and is similar to its first draft. At certain points, I hesitated. The creative writing didn't feel like academic work. I had stopped researching. I was scared to write because I didn't think I'd be any good at it, and I didn't know if the creative writing was addressing my critical questions about Holmes. Through encouragement, arguing, and, most importantly, more writing, I eventually gave myself over to writing my thesis, now titled *Alexandra Leaving*.

The first major concession that I should make about my story is that my character Leonard is not Sherlock Holmes. One of the intentions in my mind as I wrote was that my work wasn't going to be another Baring-Gould. That had been done. At times, I stubbornly resisted obvious references to Holmes. Only two months away from completing the project, I finally decided that in chapter two it was okay for Leonard's great grandfather's portrait to wear a "deerstalker" hat rather than an "odd" hat. I also resisted the greatest temptation of all: to make my character, Alexandra, a Holmes scholar. Something in me grained against being transparent. Perhaps I've seen too many advertisements for *The Jane Austen Book Club* and *Mr. Darcy's Daughters*. I didn't want to write another potboiler dressed in academia's clothing.

Another thing that I was clear about not wanting to do was writing fan fiction, even though I was using a character initially created by another. I could make snobbish distinctions between my writing and the writers of fan fiction concerning how their work

is produced cheaply, quickly, and sometimes poorly, but the main difference between fan fiction and what I have done is that I have created something new. Writers of fan fiction use another's rules to paint their worlds, but I established my own rules, taking Sherlock Holmes out of Doyle's hands and giving him a different life. I have gone beyond parody and imitation in my writing. My only imitation would be found in John Le Carré's appraisal of Watson: he "doesn't write to you, he talks to you" (Klinger xiii). Similarly, my intention was only ever to write someone telling her story. In this capacity, I have learned a lot about the mechanics of writing fiction and how to tell that story effectively.

For all the ways that Leonard is clearly different from Holmes, they also have similarities. The setting of Leonard's living room is based on my photographs of the Holmes museum. Leonard's temperament and personality are my own invention, but they draw most heavily from Jeremy Brett's portrayal of Holmes. When Leonard finds satisfaction, he crosses his legs and draws his fingers as Brett's Holmes often does when he is extracting data from clients. In the opening credits of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, the audience sees Holmes' cheekbone pulse as he flicks a curtain. Leonard does this as well when he goes to Alexandra's apartment. Like Holmes, my character runs his own consulting service and has emotional and romantic repressions, as well. Readers only see glimpses of Holmes playing out his feelings on the violin and forming an attraction to Irene Adler in "A Scandal in Bohemia." In writing my story, I took these suggestions and cracked them open to create something new: the Sherlock Holmes I connect with in my mind.

As I cracked open the character, I began engaging in an argument with Doyle about his detective. Doyle wrote that he had "sometimes been inclined to weary of

[Holmes] ... because his character admits no light and shade. He is a calculating machine” (Klinger xl). His perception was that, while Holmes remained static, his companion Watson and the public were continually astonished. However, an author is not necessarily correct about his/her creations. As an admirer of Holmes, I felt that I sometimes understood the character more than the creator. I loved Holmes *because of* the interesting lights and shades that he offers. Rather than being a Victorian age robot, Holmes is messy and unorganized, which could actually impede his work. He uses drugs, which prevent him from thinking clearly. He plays the violin to express his emotions. Doyle may have thought that he was carelessly throwing in some monkey wrenches while writing, but he inadvertently created the things that made me and the public fall for Holmes. The discerning reader often understands Holmes better than Doyle did. In my loving deconstruction, I have created my own lights and shades for a Holmesian character that Doyle may have never intended.

While I wrote, the story started to suggest to me an analogous relationship between my characters and the writer-reader-character relationships present in all literature. Doyle, the writer, attempted to murder Holmes, the character, by throwing him off Reichenbach Falls because he tired of him. The readers of the public, and later myself, came to love Holmes enough that Doyle was forced to revive him. In my story, Catherine, is married to Leonard while his relationship with the graduate student, Alexandra, is progressing. Together, the three of them form this triangular literary relationship. Catherine and Leonard are the writer and character, married to each other for time immemorial, but as Doyle tried to throw aside Holmes, they are now estranged. Alexandra comes along as the reader who loves and understands the character more than

the writer and struggles to find her place in this relationship. Through her care, Alexandra invests an otherwise inert form, the character, with life. The rights of the writer to the character are clear, but after a personal investment, what right does the reader have to the character? The wrinkle that comes into this paradigm and disrupts everything is Alexandra's "other man." He represents all of the struggles of daily life, like Alexandra's disagreement with her thesis advisor, that complicate these relationships.

In the first chapters, the paradigm is tighter and has a simpler one-to-one ratio: During the chess game, Alexandra *reads* Leonard's movements as Leonard performs for her, like a character. I also focus more clearly on Holmesian details, like the sideboard, the pipe, and the violin, and creating an authentic space for Leonard, than I do later. My characters make sly comments about the reality of Kafka as a writer and a character. Alexandra and Leonard's conversation about God suggests that not everyone who is real, like a character, is tangible. Many of the conversations that my characters have can be read on two or more levels. My entire work suggests a metaphor that transcends the paradigm, making it symbolic of love.

As the story progresses, the distinctions between reader, writer, and character blur. Alexandra is the reader, but she is also the writer of her own work and a character, performing for Leonard. Leonard is the character, who was once a poet but now reads others. The story also presents demands that the paradigm couldn't always encompass, which led me to drop the meta-meanings at points and write solely for the characters and the story. One of these problem areas was how to get Alexandra to Paris and meet Catherine. After I dealt with the emotions of her past and showed that she had matured, the idea that Alexandra would try to resolve her problem with Leonard by any means

possible made sense. Though I did not write this for paradigm, it still worked afterwards because the writing told us things about Holmes. The plot line of Alexandra leaving mirrored Irene Adler and her independence. It suggested a chase by Leonard, similar to the way Holmes tracked Irene, but we find out in the end of my story that Leonard's chase was only a fiction. Additionally, Alexandra leaving suggests an interesting narrative from the perspective of the paradigm: The reader has a problem with a character, so she goes to the writer for an explanation. The story is still completely plausible in the writer-reader-character context. Amazingly, the paradigm usually holds, even in places like this, where I had to just let it work itself out.

Upon completing the work, I came upon another surprise. For as many questions as I intended to answer about Holmes and his personal life, I only created more questions about my character. How truthful is Leonard toward Alexandra? Does he lie in his last letter? Was Catherine the shadowy figure at the door or does she even exist? After Doyle's fashion, there is always a mystery, as I intentionally leave something to consider. *As ever, the game is afoot.*

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Chapter 1: A Knot Inseparable

When I sing, I sing a waterfall.

No use in getting sentimental, he said. The book was a silly rag slopped together in youth, only sham poetics. For about six months, I'd been coming to see the old man. One day, I found his book hidden away on a dusty shelf in Clarke's and bought it. I took it home and loved it, a stray I had serendipitously met on the street. He wrote graceful lines that I couldn't help turning over and over again in my mind: *When I sing, I sing a waterfall*. When I sang, I sang a waterfall, and I wondered how he knew. How did he find the words to prick so sharply into someone he had never met? I found his address by calling information. I read some more. I walked down the street in front of his house. I read some more. I wrote my essays and tried to ignore him, but his words shuttered through my silence. He drew me strangely. I read some more, and I finally called him. Then the great disappointment of our first meeting was learning that he didn't write anymore. No use in getting sentimental.

So little of our inner lives overlapped that it seemed pointless to come again. He didn't like talking about the poems much either. When he kept inviting me after that first meeting, I came back purely out of curiosity. Over time, I softened to his demeanor. He didn't mean to offend by his jokes and deflationary insults. He merely reveled in the fun of banter. Finally I thought maybe he had something to tell me. Somewhere inside of him the man who had delighted in imagining his melody springing forth as the delicate flow of a waterfall still existed. I came without reason, inexplicably drawn to him. He was a mystery I longed to solve.

I came in through the backdoor and quietly put my coat and hat on the pegs sticking out of the back wall. It had been pouring down sheets of rain most of the night, and my coat was drenched.

“Remember to wipe your feet, and there’s soda on the sideboard,” he said as I entered the hallway leading into the room. The entire flat was narrow and old-fashioned – the hallway was even narrower – and reeked of a lost grandeur. A little feminine teapot with an ample lining of dust stood on a side table. An old-fashioned chandelier hung from the hallway ceiling, but someone had taken the crystals down long ago. The old man made his efforts, but homemaking was not his occupation. Still the smolder of the fireplace and the bookcases, with the last sticky odor of earth clinging to their shelves, gave off an inviting warmth.

“How did you know I was here?” I called to him from the living room doorway. “I mean, I’m late.” I wiped the last droplets of rain off my hands onto the thighs of my blue jeans and straightened the hairs around my face. Through the doorway, my head tilted slightly, looking for his reply.

He glared at me over the top of a coffee cup. The rings of his eyes paralleled menacingly with the hollow of the cup’s body. “I’m old, but I haven’t lost my hearing,” he said. His hand moved to his mouth to cover a grizzly cough, and his eyes only gave me the barest glance through narrow slits. “Besides, you’re supposed to come at 6:00, but it started to really pour at about 5:15. The bus was obviously delayed. The rain cleared for a bit around 6:45. The next chance at catching a lift to the stop around the corner was 7:00. Then I figured two or three minutes walking with your pace and stride, and my watch read three after eight when I heard you come in the back way.” I could have taken

the underground, – it would have been quicker – but he knew that I always took the bus. It caught me up in the romance of an era gone by.

His eyes darted up again, but this time the lines encasing his deep sockets were grinning. I drank in his mock anger and laughed. It really was all so simple. What had I been expecting? Not so amazing, just common sense. He laughed with me and drew a deep cough again. I released the hand that had come to rest on my hip.

“Aren’t you amazed?” The entire room seemed under his control and skipped a little in front of my eyes. He was a magician, and when we were together, this was his tent. I was in his hands.

“Should I be?” I bantered back. “Why do I come to see you, anyways?” He was the one with all the answers, so I might as well ask him. My back rubbed up against the doorway, and I leaned, crossing my ankles. From the corner of my eye, I could see the rain dripping off the roof onto his front sidewalk. Dark green curtains framed the scene with their ends dragging on the floor.

“I suppose you must like me or maybe you want to steal from me. Either way, there is something in it for you,” he answered and turned his head to the direction of my eye line. “Or otherwise, you wouldn’t be human.” He watched my most trivial movements and took in every angle of my posture. As I realized, a little light of pleasure sprung into my cheeks.

“Do you really think that I would steal from you now?” I turned my head and looked back at him in full openness, arms crossed over my chest. I didn’t want him to see my blush, so I covered my embarrassment in overconfidence.

“You said that you want to write. If you wrote about me, wouldn’t that be stealing?” He paused, playing with his words. “What do you think?” As he had spoken, he had picked up a paperclip from the coffee table. Now, he was playing with it: pressing the end onto the table in front of him and turning it on its head. The motion was jerky, distracting.

“I’m not sure,” I answered, trying not to stare at the object in his fingers. “My memories are mine and that’s no theft, but you are yourself and what right do I have to that?”

He seemed not to notice as the paperclip cartwheeled again in his hand. “The right that I give it to you. You can write about me if you want; I don’t care either way.” His chin challenged me in a surety; he dared me to write about him. He *knew* that I would write about him. I hated his smug precision; I already had – at least in my journals.

A drop of rain slid down my right boot and reminded me to wipe my feet as instructed before I fully entered the room. I found the soda on the sideboard and poured myself a glass and also some brandy for him, as was customary. Some thunder crackled outside, and I shivered, thinking I should have worn a sweater. He pushed the coffee cup aside and presumptuously made a space for the glass in my hand.

The old man had been anticipating the evening as he had already set up the chess board between our two chairs. I went over and sat down in the armchair and assumed my usual position, handing him his glass. Shaking a bit, he took the tumbler and sat it on the corner. His chair was straight-backed, made of some hardy old oak. He said that indulgence in the senses would cloud the mind, and he was in this game for blood. As

ever, it wasn't enough for him to possess the superior mind; he had to prove the fact to me.

“So, why did you know that I would come when it was raining?” I asked. I sat fully back in the chair to examine the chess board, and my feet dangled above the floor. Thirty-two pieces stood on sixty-four squares with equal positive space and equal negative space, equal light and dark. Outside the night drew a long whistle, and the wind banged against the siding. I shouldn't have come.

“You always do. Why shouldn't you continue?” Again, a simple answer for a simple question. He ignored the obvious fact, though – this wasn't like always outside. The storm was enough for sane people to avoid drenching themselves. Of course, the weather wasn't a person's only motivating factor. He implied that there was something else, something inside of me not bound by the exterior, that hadn't changed. Something in me needed to come; only I didn't know what it was. If he did, he wasn't telling.

He leaned back in the chair with his arms folded behind his head, and his face assumed a pensive posture as to begin a lecture. “Chess,” he said, “has a grand old history. It all began with the Arabs who invented it during the Middle Ages as a tool to practice battle strategies. The Spanish word for chess –”

“– ajedrez –” I interrupted, still looking down. I hated it when he took on that paternal attitude like he was the only person who had ever taken a language class. I had studied Spanish, German, Latin – I could never seem to get the hang of French, though. As my body leaned in to examine the board more closely, my feet met the floor and released. I impatiently rocked, individually taking up my pieces and weighing them in my hands.

“Yes,” he continued “– comes from the Arabic word and is a cognate. Another Spanish word that comes from Arabic is –” Bump. My boots stamped the floor, and he cringed.

“– ojalá –” I interrupted again.

“And Allah better be on your side or you don’t stand a chance against me.” He threw up his fist only half playfully. Mostly, he was fully irritated and sighed. I drew further back into my seat, embarrassed for my overeager intellectual vanity. He already knew that I was smart by now. He wouldn’t have wanted to talk to me if he didn’t think I was bookishly inclined in the first place.

“It is a joy talking to an intelligent female. There are so few,” he said, complimenting me to defuse his fist and light jab. He hadn’t given me much of an accolade to be proud of, though, I thought. It was almost as if he’d said, *You’re the least stupid in a class of idiots*. Yet he was serious. This was almost poignant for him. Where did he get off making comments like that, though? This was London, the twenty-first century. I’d come to learn that there was a point of letting go with him, but ... Besides, if I let him make me angry, then he won a little. I could rise above that crap.

“I know what you meant. It *was* only a joke ...” I continued, muttering under my breath, “Allah. Allah. Of course he’s on my side. You don’t even believe in God.”

“Sit up then. Slumping is bad for your posture,” he instructed. “As for God – the supreme, the divine – do you believe in Zeus or Hera, Athena or Apollo, Hermes?”

Half-heartedly, I sat up in the chair. In another gesture of paternalism, his stern lips drew a breath of satisfaction. He was a man ever ready to improve those around him, and he *always* knew better.

“No one believes in them anymore,” I said, “Those are myths.” My fingers were antsy to begin, and I declared my argument to the board rather than him. Outwardly, I let him argue with me, but inwardly, I disliked it immeasurably; yet under that, I was sort of pleased in a confused way.

“Who can say that your brand of religion is not a myth? I work with facts, strictly.” He sniffed and took a sip from his drink. The rust-colored liquor shimmered against the glass prisms. A tiny strip of lightening from outside shone against them like a mirror.

I rolled my eyes. This wasn't the first time we had gone over this subject. “And who's to say God's not a fact?” I said. “It would be conceited to presume that someone doesn't exist who really does. You can't see every person who has a life. You can't feel them all.”

“Ah. If you put it that way, let's say your god lives in your mind. But you still haven't proven that this being *God* exists. You are avoiding the question by making irrelevant comparisons to *human* beings. In fact, this isn't really a question. As the philosophers would say, this is a pseudo-question because you can't prove that God doesn't exist but ...” He rambled on. I stopped listening.

Every question was a factual one to him, and every question was worth exploring. He forgot that there were people like me to which the feeling preceded the fact. If the fact didn't come to a feeling, something real, it wasn't meaningful. At some point he finished and slid his top button into its hole where it had come loose. A stray hair dipped into his vision. He was becoming young again.

“The entire book of Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* is said to represent a game of chess,” I said, taking up my own interest now that he was done.

“And that’s where we get our cultural notion of flying pigs. Ladies first,” He motioned his hand toward the board and kept the anti-feminism coming. Finally, the pretext was over with, and he was ready to begin. He tapped his fingers on the table like imaginary piano keys with his shadow overwhelming the chess figures.

“In the poem, ‘The Walrus and the Carpenter.’” I moved my far left pawn two squares out into the battlefield and took in his countenance. Furrowed brows sat on top of muddy pupils. Irises contracted in concentration. There was more art in reading the face of a chessman than of a player at poker, yet I couldn’t figure either situation.

“Ah, a predictable move,” he said. His lower lip twitched in a note of excitement, having foreseen my action. I snickered as his fingers mechanically drummed on.

“Then you take the other predictable one,” I suggested. He did and moved one of his knights out from the ranks in a backwards ‘L.’ “You can’t trick me that easily. I won’t move the second pawn up for you to eat.” Our conversation fell into an easy mode and went on like this for several minutes. The thunder continued its dance above our heads.

“Some people think that Lewis Carroll was a pedophile,” I said, hoping to throw him off his game with an unpredictable comment. My eyebrows rose with the corners of my lips. I was almost shocked by my own audacity. His fingers skipped a beat before resuming their steady pulse.

“What difference does it make? His books are masterpieces, just like *Lolita*. Nabokov said that he couldn’t include any Carroll allusions because it would be too

disrespectful to cause the man's memory anymore pain ... and too obvious. It would have been an overstatement, redundant." His last few words were chopped. I could feel the vaguest impression of uneasiness tightening in his narrow cheekbones.

"It's not that it makes a difference, but it's interesting." I sounded like a silly girl now, trying to half-apologize for herself while still thinking she was quite clever. My fingers latched onto a wisp of hair, and I examined the dead ends. Now, I was trying to distract myself.

"Then if it makes no difference, the fact should be excluded. Superfluous facts will only cloud a man's judgment on an issue." One of his rooks captured a bishop that I had left carelessly unguarded at the right corner of the board. He smiled.

"Do you think that you shouldn't come to see me?" he asked, suddenly.

I stared blankly, surprised. "Of course not. Why?" I dropped the bit of hair and pretended to be interested in the fire. Stripes of red and orange devoured the remaining two logs, singed to coal black. A passion that would be dead within the hour.

"Perhaps some people think that it is odd for a young lady – like yourself – to enjoy the company of an old man alone." The whole time he spoke, his eyes remained focused on my left-most pawn.

This time I turned the fiercest shade of crimson. "Well, your housekeeper is right down the hall, and there are plenty of neighbors in the other apartments. I can see a policeman pacing the streets from your window. And it looks like it's finally stopped raining for good tonight." My words came out flustered and rushed. Another thought popped into my head, but I immediately forgot it.

“You are avoiding the question. Do you think that it is odd?” His words seemed to turn like the force of a gear as he fixed some unknown problem into place in his mind. He was almost a blanker shade of blank. My mind desperately scrambled to fill in the details.

“It’s not normal, but you’re really asking if I think anything is wrong with it.” I breathed deep. “And the answer to that would be ‘no.’ I’m not a child, even though you only give me soda, but you also know better.” I raggedly bit at the end of a fingernail. A droplet of blood wedged itself into the corner between the nail and skin. My mind couldn’t even go there. It was obscene – not so much in its nature but in its sheer unexpectedness. He had never commented on the feminine in me until that moment. I thought he was far too old for thinking of women.

“I *am* old enough to be your grandfather,” he replied. We met eyes again for a moment. It was a hard truth, one of his dull facts. There was nowhere to go with it.

“I think you’re harmless,” I said. “If not, I wouldn’t be here.” My shoulders hunched. I glanced at the clock, trying to be sly. A long, thin hand swirled across four diamonds. I couldn’t read that sort of thing especially with the cobwebs encasing the sides. It seemed he didn’t care to read it either, or he surely would have dusted it.

“You have judged correctly.”

“But you have not –” I said and slid my queen sidelong into his opposing knight. Every time I won a piece, I filled with the glory of winning the game – since I never actually did win. I shamelessly jumped up with my arms in the air, turned around, and sat back down. “Sorry. Just had to do that.” I laughed at myself, but his concentration was still fixed to the board.

“Uh. That was too easy,” he groaned, not having seen his flaw – or maybe only bluffing. You never could tell with him. He shook the air out of his shirt collar and led me into another topic, attempting to distract me and move the conversation back to its carefree pace. “What have you been writing lately?”

“I haven’t been able to write anything for pleasure. It’s mostly been literary criticisms for grad school, you know. Currently, I’m working on my thesis over Kafka’s ‘The Hunger Artist.’” I had started writing it before I had even met him, and I wasn’t quite half done. Something held me back. In my mind, the old man was shifting into a replica of Kafka with hooded eyes and slick black hair. Somehow, he was a part of my work.

“You did have a lean and hungry look when you came through the door.” We laughed, and he moved his next piece. At some point, he must have brushed the strays back; his hair was neatly in place again. I felt hollow.

“I’ve been thinking,” I said. “Perhaps that’s why you do what you do.”

“Hmmm. I do not follow you,” he said, surveying my hand poised over my last rook. He was keeping his eye on the prize. The conversation was a formality, a pleasantry, an embellishment. I relaxed my fingers and held the piece gently. I held him in the palm of my hand.

“I mean you’re probably the greatest thinker I’ve ever come across – certainly the greatest writer I know. But you’re retired. You just have people who come and consult for free legal advice about insurance claims and real estate transactions and stuff like that. I know you’ve done your university, law professor thing, but you could do a lot more. You don’t get any credit for your great thoughts, for the words you could write. You want

people to see you suffer and think highly of you. You're the suffering non-artist." I delivered my speech calmly with the security of truth. Nothing I had said was unfair.

He scanned the board, surveying his tiny army. His every gesture suggested an air of absentmindedness. I knew him better than this, though. His mind was straining overtime to come up with a neutral, non-committed answer. "That's quite a claim," he said calmly. The corners of his mouth dropped, and his hands withdrew to his lap. I'd hit some chord of truth.

"I just think that you could do so much more. You could write books of poetry and give readings and –" He was barely listening. My argument was losing its footing.

I could hear the hints of anger in his tone. "And be just the thing you want me to be: some washed out idealist, trying to nail down leftovers from his youth? I'm not whoever you want me to be. I have a good life, using my mind on my own terms."

"Leonard." For the first time that evening I addressed him, even if it was almost as a scolding mother. The line of logic had been moving us towards the pivotal question. "Why don't you write poems anymore?"

Leonard stared, steely-eyed. "That is none of your bloody business." His words were forcefully controlled, but I could feel the tension of anger rattling against the sides of its cage. I locked his pupils tight in space, mate for mate. The tension swelled, reaching its apex and imploding as our eyes floated downward, back to the chessboard. "Checkmate," he said. His queen had neatly fit into place, and his bishop and rook restricted my king's further movement.

"You're just too good," I mumbled to myself. He crossed his legs in satisfaction and lazily scratched his head, still studying the chessboard. I probed his eyes – this time

invading – rapidly searching for the anger of seconds before. Emotions just weren't him. It was gone. In the triumph of his victory, he seemed to disregard my question. He certainly wasn't answering it.

“Another brandy, if you please,” he said, handing me his tumbler. “And the slipper with the tobacco in the toe.” His manner changed the subject. Avoided and done.

I yawned and stretched to move from the cozy chair and walked to the sideboard to freshen his drink. He always pressed me into service after I lost. At first I resisted, now it was futile. This room was his dominion.

“I don't know if I will give you the tobacco, though. You know, they say smoking causes cancer.” I called to him over my shoulder. In the glass of the decanter, I could see myself reflected. A flattened head and long neck met an engorged body. Our game had drained all the blood from my brain.

Why did he never write? It made no sense. He had talent. Some life was gone. *Rush, lush, run / and if necessary touch*, he wrote. I could never imagine him touching anyone. My first thought was a woman, but that was too simple. His entire disposition verged on the asexual. He had never inched towards the man-woman aspect of our relationship before that night. Critical reception? Critics always hacked apart literary geniuses, but what critic did his talent have to fear? We are our own worse critics; the axiom was true. Somehow, he had destroyed himself. Maybe his father had never been into that touchy-feely stuff and thought he should get a real job. Law professor was a pretty stern counterbalance. He had been too deep in the hotbed of emotion to turn a hundred and eighty degrees to reason. Something had made him repulse his emotional self.

“I can take care of myself,” he called back to me, a bit annoyed. None of his problems, great or small, were my business. He was used to his old habits, and nothing could stop his will. I picked up the slipper from the hearth and flung it across the tabletop. “And you don’t have to be my enabler if you are going to throw things,” he said, raising his voice.

I was an irritant to him, and now he was returning the compliment. I simply ignored him and strode back to my chair. He was a monument of walls, stories and stories high; he would never let me in. As I moved closer, I glanced again at the clock over the mantle and concentrated. It was nearly ten o’clock.

“I didn’t realize it was this late. Did you have supper yet?” I wanted so much to come into that world inside, to know the workings of his mind. Asking was definitely not the appropriate strategy.

“I ate at the pub on the next street,” he answered. “Not that it matters.” Another repulsion.

“I should probably get going soon. Do you need anything else?” I gave my final try for the night. Pointless again. Steadily, I could feel myself slipping back into my world. My mind was drifting to Kafka and a pile of student work that needed grading. My mother might call tonight.

“I think I’m fine. What are your plans for tomorrow?” He took the pipe from the table beside his elbow, filled it, and lit it. The smoke drifted in front of his face like gangrene for the air, deadly thick and spreading. I coughed a little.

“Probably a few more hours with Kafka in the library,” I said dully. I tapped my boot, shuffling it across the floor. Reality.

“So, literary characters talk to you now? Imagine that.” He was beaming at his cleverness. I was just happy to end the night on a good note. I searched through his eyes, hoping to find some clue or even a red-herring. He never talked about his father. Was that because he didn’t have any problems with him or because he had a whole lot of problems with him? I found nothing.

“No. Kafka is an author, not a character,” I corrected him.

He slicked back his gray hair that had been black in earlier years. Likely, he’d been a handsome man once. So pale, though. “Kafka appears in many of his works, like the character K. in *The Trial*,” he argued.

“You’re too good with everything. Go to sleep soon and get some rest.” I smiled at him. We locked eyes for a three second eternity and broke together. I closed and opened my lids widely. I could almost see his eyes etched on the back of my corneas. He had a furious intensity.

I moved across the room, thinking to give him a light hug. My nerve couldn’t manage it though, so I compromised, offering him a limp handshake. He didn’t seem to be a man accustomed to touch, and I didn’t think I could handle it if he rejected the gesture. I had no intentions; I just wanted things to remain. I liked him. I admired and respected him – despite all the verbal jousting. The thought of him not asking me to come again – I couldn’t consider it.

“Next time, do you want to be black or white?” he asked. His manner seemed to say he would prolong the moment. Into what, though? We couldn’t sit here talking all night. I hoped it didn’t begin to pour again. I walked to the hallway and began collecting my things.

“How do you know there’s going to be a next time?” I called, not wanting to appear too relieved. I slid my coat over my shoulders and did the three buttons bottom to top. Both of us were proud. He didn’t need to know how much I depended on our interludes between reality.

“I know you. There’ll be a next time.” His voice softened, and he was distant again. The last “m” floated on the air, unfinished. A stilted awkwardness filled the silence. “Oh, and try to wear something besides blue jeans. Be respectful to an old man.”

“Maybe. It depends on whether it rains, but maybe I won’t come. Some people think it’s strange that a young woman should spend so much time alone with an old man,” I said teasingly as I grabbed my hat and put it over my head. I pressed him, pushing the issue to wherever it could go.

“But, do you think it’s strange?” During the game, he had seemed unconcerned – merely making conversation, maybe even trying to trip my movements. Now his face took on the same paleness it had when I asked him about his writing. He sat with a tensed back, awaiting my reply, as if he could hear it through his shoulder blades and then sigh with them. Holes stabbed through his back by assassins unknown.

“No. Since it doesn’t matter, I’ll forget the fact that you’re old.” I wrapped the woolen scarf around my neck and moved my hand to the doorknob. I slipped the doorframe a shy smile. He really did want me to come back.

“Be careful out there. I’m sure the sidewalk is slick.”

“Yessssss,” I called, exasperated. He was just trying to care for me as I did for him. He was rough at times, but we were developing reciprocal trust. “See you next Tuesday.” My fingers stuck firmly to the doorknob but did not turn.

“See you then ...” he said.

I held on tightly, peering back down the hallway. Let go. I opened the door. In the last reaches of my vision, I could make out his tiny frame huddled in the sturdy chair, clutching his drink and pipe. He did look so old. A few remaining drops fell off the gutter onto my hat, and he put down his items to move to the bookcase and take down a dusty violin. The strings purred as he poured his last remaining energy of the day into them. He was young again.

His dramatic gestures invited ghosts into the room, and they flew past the doorway, giving birth to some unknown emotion within me. It was vaguely like love and mostly like hate. In my mind’s eye, I saw someone like him, like Leonard. I hadn’t thought of that man for a long time. I had never wanted to think of him again, but when I did, it was vaguely like love and mostly like hate. The similarity between the man and Leonard was only superficial. Leonard’s face was misting over to a relaxed, almost stupid state. He had finally stopped thinking. A ghost held him by the heart, as well. I could feel the spindle fibers forming between us in a silken web. Perhaps the ghosts were the spindle fibers threading us together, tying us into a knot inseparable. I tried not to – I tried so hard – but maybe I loved him. He was the most unbelievable person I’d ever talked with, and soon he’d be dead. Perhaps I kept coming back to know that he was real.

Chapter 2: Goodbye is So Long

My usual entrance through the back door was fumbled by my left foot as I crashed into a stray watering can and yelped in pain, falling to the floor. I lay flat on my back for several moments, dazzled by the swirls of the ceiling tiles, before calling out. “What are you doing with a watering can in front of the door, you crazy old man?!” We had spent another month of Tuesdays together since the stormy night when we had played chess and I had first seen him take down the violin.

In the living room, I heard the creak of Leonard’s chair as he rose to examine the situation that had landed in his hallway. He rounded the corner, holding a newspaper limply in his hand and took off his spectacles, gaping and sighing. He was tired. I was exhausted.

“What am *I* doing?!” he yelled. “What kind of a way is that to greet someone in their own home?” His eyes flitted over my misshapen scarf and body sprawled on the floor with the watering can gently punctuating my clumsy boot. He couldn’t help himself. The corners of his mouth turned up in a smile and blossomed into a laugh. “You are a sight,” he said. I grumbled as he extended his hand to help me to my feet.

His fingers blotted out the cold that had nibbled at my hands. The warmth spread through me with an extra lurch of my pulse. I didn’t want him to release me, and I didn’t want to admit, even to myself, why that was true. I almost wished he had meant something by touching me, but he hadn’t meant anything. Helping a lady to her feet was the gentlemanly thing to do. I let his hand slip as suddenly as it had been extended. His eyes had drifted to our intersection, hand in hand, and now stared at the void where I had released him.

“Sorry,” I said, hiding my hand behind my back and secretly rubbing the memory from my palm. “I’m not having a very good day.”

“Come in and we’ll talk about it.” His tone softened as he saw the little quiver starting at my shoulders and descending down my arms and legs. Often it angered me to see him like this. He seemed to have nothing to do, no financial worries, not a care in the world. I wished every once in a while he’d get stressed or ferocious like me just to prove that he was human.

I stuck my coat on the peg and dropped my bag on the floor beneath it as we passed through the hall to enter the living room. Today it had been raining again. I was reluctant to come see him, but the afternoon saw the sun peaking through the clouds, and only a slight drizzle marked the hours before I stepped onto the bus. I said I would come. There was no real reason not to.

The room was the same as ever, but lilting rings of smoke drifted up from a kettle on the sideboard. Two thin strands danced together forming a double helix of embrace. I mechanically sat down in my usual chair and glanced at him over the back of it as he attended to the sideboard. It didn’t even matter to me what he was doing. I leaned back, coaxing the aroma into my nostrils. Comfort. It was lovely. I closed my eyes.

“To answer your question,” he said, calling over his back. “The watering can is for gardening.”

“Huhhh.” Through slatted eyelids, I let out a deep sigh. Yes, all watering cans are for gardening! I gathered my grace, only infusing a drop of cynicism into my words. “But I didn’t think you had a garden.”

“Not quite. I’ve bought a hibiscus plant. It was sitting on the back step. I’m surprised that you didn’t see it,” he said. “Well, you must have seen it. You were just not observing.” Leonard picked up the kettle and began to pour the mysterious liquid into two mugs.

“Sure. I don’t feel like arguing. I didn’t observe it. Shame on me.” Whatever.

“No shame on you. Shame on *me*. I thought I might have taught you something by now.” I rolled my eyes. He was always placing us at levels. His intellect was superior, but his *failings* were also equally superior to mine. He could even fail better.

“Of course, you do. You teach me everything, oh great one.” I called loudly, thinking he was still across the room. My head fell a little, and I rubbed my cheek against the velvet of the chair. Scratchy smooth, sort of like Leonard. I concentrated, straining to hear the tick of my watch. I had tried to leave my work at the door, but it never seemed to happen that way. For a few moments, I laid my head back and forgot myself.

“Here you are,” said Leonard, dropping the rest of the subject. My shoulders jumped as thin fingers attached to a mug surprised me from behind my chair. The scent reentered my nose. Just coffee. Nothing so magical, but somehow perfect for today. I felt so out of sorts. My thesis was lagging. The critical fire in me was being trampled. Where was the value in any of it? It didn’t determine the rising or falling of nations or the life or death of starving children. Just me. It was all so selfish. What was the value if you couldn’t share your work, your life, with someone? Without a reader, my criticism was all self-stroking, all ego.

“I thought coffee would better suit a difficult day than soda,” Leonard said. His eyes flitted first over each of my shoulders, to my midsection, and then down my legs.

Finally, his gaze came to my face. My mood was obvious, without the need for deep reasoning. He held his mug firmly but turned it gently in his hands. He sipped with lips that retreated solemnly. Each gesture was contained anticipation for me to speak.

“It doesn’t matter. Both have caffeine and calories. I’m screwed either way.” I laughed. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be like this. Thank you for seeing me.” I sat my mug on the table and picked apart the last remaining whiteness of my thumbnail, an empty movement with no blood. I flicked the nail onto the carpet.

“I like to think of it as blessed either way ... with energy ... and sustenance.” His chin turned slightly up, and his eyes seemed far away, musing. “Perhaps not so lively for the stomach as brandy ...” He drew a long pause like a deep sip. “Besides, you never would have fallen if you would just come in the front way instead of insisting on using the back like a little Judge Brack ...”

“Ouch. You better not mean what I think you mean. That devious, lascivious, criminal judge from *Hedda Gabler*. Always coming in the back door with no morality. That was really low, Leonard!” Anger sprung from deep inside of me to rest on my cheeks. I fought the sting of hot tears in the corners of my eyes, but I always made the mistake. Once I engaged him, bantered back and forth, then he would say anything. He wasn’t easy to love. I rose to leave.

He remained unmoved, leaning on the bookcase across from me. He just stood there absurdly, examining the window. Outside, two robins dived from branch to branch, plummeting lower and lower to find a resting spot, before ascending again. I stood, frozen in confusion. I tried to will him to me. Come apologize. My eyes beat into the

back of his head. Come to me. Stop me. I swear I'll leave if you don't ... He turned, unfazed.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. My mind was only wandering. Besides, not everything that I say will please you. That's not how human relationships work, is it?" His impassive posture remained without a hint of regret for his comment.

"Always. Do you even consider me before you speak?!" Immediately, I fell back into the chair and covered my face like a child. Not today. Not today. Today didn't exist. I would skip over it and go straight to tomorrow. This was the second time today that I had had to put up with someone pushing around my feelings; my thesis advisor hadn't felt the discretion to criticize gently that morning. It didn't matter. I didn't matter anymore. I tucked my knees closer into my chest and tried to forget.

Softly, I heard him swallow the lump in his throat as he moved to the chair and gingerly put his arms around me. Each of the smooth pads of his fingers pricked my shoulders with equal intensity. They pressed down on me, bearing down on my heart. The movement would seem so simple, but no, no it wasn't. Nothing was simple anymore. I shifted my body, turning around and standing to face him, never unclasping him as I moved. Now we were hugging, chest to chest. My tears pounded even harder, raining down the sleeves of his shirt. His arms were stiff, unsure, but my fingers dug deep into his back. I could stay suspended like this for hours, frozen in a posture of care. My hands unclenched the folds of fabric between them, and my spine lengthened; my head rested on his shoulder. I was disgusting. I'd done it before. I couldn't play this role again. I wouldn't do that. I brushed him off me and walked around the room to look more closely at the window. We said nothing.

One of the birds lingered outside on the windowsill. She swiveled her head side to side in a questioning manner, peering into my eyes. The other bird had flown away nowhere in sight. The sky was turning darker.

“I am sorry, really.” Leonard said. “You’re in a mood, and I forgot. Maybe I am only making it worse. You are very young, and your emotions mean a lot to you. Besides, you *are* a poet, and we both know what their tempers are like.”

The tension in my neck loosened, and I rubbed my eyes. “I told you not to say that. You know I’m not a poet. I just play at it.”

“Listen. I know more than you. You are a fine poet.” He waved his hand as he spoke, trying to draw me into his compliment and persuade me. “I like the poems you have let me read. I don’t understand them all, but I like them. Maybe criticism is not for you. I see you as an artist.”

I let out a little half-laugh of embarrassment. “Only an artist in emotions,” I responded weakly. “I can paint pity pretty well.”

One day, I had shown him a scrap paper mixed in with my literary work. The pencil marks consisted of seven simple lines:

*I was not the first to dip my hand
into the bowl resting beside you,
but yet I was the last to fold my hand,
delicately reaching deep inside you,
and let seal your hallow abyss
with a knot, drawn across the heart,
loosened from my wrist.*

He hadn't let me forget, though. When the opportunity presented itself, he tried to force his former career onto me. For a man who never wrote, he invested such an interest in my words. Sometimes it was embarrassing, but I generally let him. I hoped the more he pressed me that maybe he would want to write again. I still didn't understand. My words couldn't compare.

"Come and sit. Let's talk." A kindness came back into his manner. He held out his arm, gesturing toward the chairs, and we walked to the coffee table together. He took the chair across from me and stared into the portrait hanging on the wall. A man stared back indifferently from the canvas at him. A few months ago, he had told me that the man was his great grandfather who had lived during Queen Victoria's reign. The man wore a deerstalker hat made of sturdy cotton and held a short pipe in his hand. Leonard had said that he liked to look at him and think when he had a problem to puzzle over. His witness to our activities gave me comfort.

"I got all worked up over nothing," I said, breaking the silence. "It was juvenile." I took up my mug and leered at him over the top. He smiled.

"It's alright. I am glad that you seem more composed. Tell me what is really bothering you," he said. Leonard leaned slightly back into his chair and started to examine me top to bottom to face again.

"You haven't worked it out?" I giggled. My cheek met the cool fabric of the chair again. It was like a touch without a touch, no commitment, an orphan born nowhere. I pressed my knuckles into the arm of the chair and watched the fabric bounce back into place with startling sensitivity.

Leonard turned from the portrait onto me, and his eyes danced. “Of course I have. I simply wanted to give you the opportunity to express yourself.”

“Then tell me what my problem is.” I sat up and folded my arms in a challenge. My eyes danced back into his, invading his frame.

With equal resolution, he sat his empty coffee mug on the table between us. No chess pieces. How odd. I hadn’t noticed before. Several books were scattered across the table, though. Lots of paperbacks. I didn’t know he owned any. All of the books that lined the shelves of his house were expensive, covered in leather.

He launched into his explanation. “When you called me on the telephone yesterday – and forced me to talk to you, I must add – you indicated that you were having trouble concentrating on your research. When you came in today, you brought your school bag with you, and you were struggling to carry it, merely dropping it onto the floor without care. I can only assume it is housing many tomes. In the past, you have only brought your school bag twice. On both of those occasions, you presented me with a paper to look over. I assume that you will again today. Your mood is out of sorts. From all this, I can only surmise that you are upset about the paper you are currently writing, which is not going as well as you had hoped. Am I correct?” His spine leaned forward, the most engaged I had seen him that evening. He was more interested in the shades I let him read than the things I actually told him.

“Yes,” I said, sheepishly. “Sort of.”

““Sort of?” I do not believe I forgot anything. You are open and your motivations are very plain. I doubt that you aim to keep anything from me at all. The minds of pure persons are much easier to decipher than the minds of criminals. See, I do not think that

you are a criminal. Devious and lascivious are other matters all together.” His left eye grazed me with a half wink, and he crossed his legs.

“Clearly not. You’re right,” I said. “You are the epitome of reason.” I didn’t want to tell him. I could never tell him how torn I was about the way I felt towards him, that – I was embarrassed to whisper it in my head – I loved him. The thought that I could even possibly love him never entered his mind. It wasn’t even a discarded hypothesis. The closest he probably got to thinking of it was, *She could never love me because I’m old, undesirable. The best has past.* I could barely imagine him thinking that, though. The lump in my throat was so heavy; everything was a secret.

“Can I tell you a secret?” he said. The lump jumped inside me like the sounding of an alarm. Please, no more. He was still bright-eyed and grinning, though. I couldn’t imagine it was more than a harmless joke. I breathed deep.

“Of course, I love secrets.” The broadest smile of my lips almost kissed the air hanging in front of his chair. Act natural.

“I like it when you cry.” His eyes probed, circling every inch of me. He was testing, waiting for my next move.

“Excuse me?” My eyes narrowed, not comprehending.

“I like it when you cry because then I can help you feel better and ...” He stopped. “You know what I mean.”

But I didn’t. I wanted him to say *and I like to touch you* or *and I like to comfort you*. He didn’t utter another syllable, though. Blunt emotional talk was really too much to hope for from him. The conversation was growing strained again. Silence was becoming our third companion.

We sat still until he initiated another turn in the subject. Every word was like a cut into a spiral, leading closer and closer to some unknown endpoint. “Are you going to show me your paper?” he asked.

I got up from the chair and went to grab my bag from the hall. My shoulder sagged a little from its weight as I returned my body to the chair and began to riffle through it. My fingers met fat spiral notebooks and over bloated books of criticism. In the very bottom of the bag, I found my battered loose-leaf notes.

“Here.” I handed them to him. “My advisor didn’t like the draft so much.” I bit my lip a little. He wasn’t going to like it either. I just knew it. The whole thing didn’t feel right, but I couldn’t articulate what that meant. It all felt hopeless. I was stupid for showing him. I glanced at the bookcase on my left.

His eyes scanned the first few paragraphs, and he rolled his lips. He turned the pages, thinking over each one carefully. “What did she say about it?”

“That ...” I bit down harder on my lip. “That ... She just doesn’t get my writing style. She thinks that it’s boring and outdated.” I got to my feet and paced around the room, finding myself at the fireplace. I didn’t even know what I was doing. I moved not to think.

“Be honest with yourself. Does she not *get* your writing style or *is* it boring and outdated?” He rubbed his fingers over the cracks in his lips. I took to destroying my fingernails again. We both knew the answer to that question.

“I’m just trying to write like those books on your shelf.” My hand motioned to the slick-covered volumes piled high in the bookcases. “People say that’s good writing. Don’t blame me if the convention is boring.”

He glanced back at the second page. “It’s yours, but don’t get defensive. I am just trying to reason out the situation.” He continued to pages three and four before looking at me again. “These are pretty good,” he said. “The beginning *is* a bit boring, though. By the middle of page three, you have hit your stride.”

“So? I’m just starting broad and then getting specific and down to the point.” I played with the edge of the mantle and shoved the poker into the pile of ash. Tonight the hearth was quiet.

“You do not need to be the dawn-of-man broad, though.” I understood his words, but I didn’t want to give in. Writers were supposed to defend the things that were their own. My work was starting to become a bastard creation, but it was still my child. My child was right even if I wasn’t.

“Hey. A little reverence for my words, please.” I rested the poker back on its stand. I was nearly done with that section, I told myself. Only twenty more pages to go, maybe thirty. Now was not the time to let the bottom fall out over stray comments from an insensitive advisor and an unsupportive friend. I still had so much to do.

“Besides it’s easy for you to criticize. You stopped writing.” My comment fell out of my mouth more sharply than I had intended. He turned and rubbed his hands over his chin and jaw like a frustrated cat cleaning his face. A response was stuck, dry in his throat, and his lips pierced and relaxed. He wanted to speak, but he repressed it. He hesitated, fearing the impact of his words. There was something he longed to say, but I could already see that it might offend me. I began to fear his words as well, backing away.

“Alexandra – back off. We have been over this before. I am not talking about it.”

All of his energy was building up to punch something, but he hit me with his words instead. He turned over some imaginary object in his hand. I considered crying again. Why wouldn't he let me in? Why had I asked him about the paper in the first place? All I wanted was some validation, but he wouldn't give it me, and I had always known he wouldn't. He straightened the papers meticulously, knocking them against the side of the table, before resting them between us.

For a few minutes, the room fell to silence again. “Leonard,” I asked. “Read me one of the poems from your book.” I didn't know what to expect. I wanted to give him some small gift, a note of appreciation.

He moved mechanically to the bookcase and drew a battered volume down from the top shelf. The whole time he didn't utter a sound; he was still thinking. It seemed that his limbs only did as I pleased out of a lack of other occupation. He neither accepted my gift nor rejected it. He simply moved. His poems had been hidden behind a row of books, and the shelf was so high that it looked as though it generally went unnoticed. He opened the book at random and began reading:

*I want to write a poem
which will transplant us to a place
where I am the only man
and you are the only woman
on the face of my green earth
or this celestial body of yours:
a place where we are not even people,*

*but can exist only as pores,
opening to the scent of experience.*

*I want to write a poem
in which I overcome myself
and hand you every thought
before I handle the truth out of myself
because I want to be more than naked
standing before you, painting all my soul:
I want to create a place where
I fold into you and cease to exist
alone.*

I had read the lines many times before, but it still struck me as an odd poem. At this point in his life and also in mine, the poem described me better than it described him. It seemed odder now, read in the middle of our conversation. Who did he want to let inside? No one. What had changed? The question was frustrating, maddening.

“Can I ask you something?” he said, after contemplation. “What moves you? What stirs you? What do you love?”

This was certainly not an invitation to declare myself, though the thought scampered across my mind. My love for him made no sense. Half the time, I was bothered with him and didn’t even want to see him. When I wasn’t with him, he was all I could think about. I wanted to create a place where I could fold into him and cease to exist alone.

I hesitated for a few moments. “I love books. I love writing. I love writing about books.”

“Show me that. Prove it to me in this essay. Start fresh with something interesting. Don’t be afraid of some passion. If you’re not comfortable, mark it out later. And don’t start any broader than Kafka’s time period. Do you understand what I’m saying?” He waved his arms widely. The only times I ever saw him like this was when he was un-cracking my behavior. Otherwise, he was pale, unmoved. This advice seemed so strange coming from him. I blushed and sat back down.

“Yeah,” I answered. I nodded my head, finally accepting him.

“Yes,” he corrected me. Again I gave him a tiny admission, and he took all authority. It was a silly rift.

“Yes, sir.” My coffee mug was finally empty, and I set it down to join his on the table, brushing aside some of the paperbacks to meet the hardwood. “You’re right. It’s hard to be passionate when I’m under the grind of so much work.”

“It will be better. One day, you can write about whatever you want and in any way you please.” He tilted his head, dragging me into his smile.

“One day,” I said, softly. It was a promise our bodies held in the space between us neither belonging to him nor me. A promise that simply was.

He gathered the mugs and abandoned spoons and sat them next to the other various artifacts on the sideboard. His feet meandered back to the bookcase, and he surveyed the shelves indifferently as he put the book away. “I had a friend once who took quite a fancy to this bull pup and carried it around everywhere with him like a helpless infant.”

“Where did that come from?” I said, laughing.

“I pulled it off the shelf inside my mind,” he answered. His whole body had grown languid as he moved to the window and drew the curtains aside.

“Your work is slow, isn’t it?” I asked.

He turned with smiling eyes. “Ah, you are learning. I see you have opened your eyes before closing them again tonight. Yes, work has left me a bit bored. No one has been in with an interesting tragedy lately.”

“Everyone is bored sometimes.” I returned the smile. Moments like this were what kept me coming back. With these comments, he made me feel that the bond between us was real and not just some passing game. I knew my feelings, but I had no idea how much our conversation meant or did not mean to him.

“Of course, but you are a great diversion,” he said. “Though you have still left two critical questions unasked. One was forgotten when we got into our quarrel and the other crossed your mind as you sat your coffee mug on the table. Well, the table should have reminded you of both.” He sat back in his chair.

I rapped my fingers, working over the problem. “Oh, the first one. I did forget. Why did you buy a hibiscus plant?”

“Very good. I bought the plant because it was suggested to me in a self-help book. One of those that you glanced at on the table.” My eyes went back to the stack of cheap pages. They seemed such a startling contrast to the fine wood. I was always finding some hidden part of him that I never could have predicted.

“You read self-help books?” I asked. The fact was shocking.

“I like to be aware of the literature of the masses,” he answered. “Ordinary people that I meet in my line of work know all about them –”

“In *my* line of work,” I interrupted, “They don’t call that literature.” We grinned at one another. He picked one up and absently ran his fingers through the leaves. There were volumes about what do if your marriage falls apart, ways to settle arguments with your grown children, how to summon spirits of the dead, and when is the right time to start dating again, among others. It was laughable. He needed none of these.

“Back to me, please. Apparently, caring for a plant relaxes you, especially if you are having trouble at work. Next to my hibiscus, there is another for you to help relax you with your work. I did not know you were stressed when I bought it, but now it is fitting, Alexandra.”

I loved it every time he said my name. That alone was a beautiful gift. Most people called me Alex, but that wouldn’t have been right coming from his mouth. He called me the name I was meant to have.

“You make me want to cry again because of your kindness,” I said, mockingly. Underneath there was a sincere note of appreciation, though. I looked down through my eyelashes, already feeling silly for my stupid comment before he even reacted.

“Please don’t.” He became cold again, and his words fell from his tongue like a dull knife, carelessly thrown. We were getting in too deep, and now he had to repulse me again. He sat the book back on the table.

“I thought you said you liked it when I cry.” Now, I was pushing it. There was no reason to let him always get away with his words, though. He held me responsible, so I held him just as closely.

“Please don’t,” he repeated. “The other question, what is it?” He continued his cat and mouse mind play and got up to pace around the room.

I rocked my boot lightly on the floor, going over the question. What else had been out of character? That was his technique, really; look for the extraordinary. Only, we seemed to define “extraordinary” differently. “You’ll have to help me with that. I have no idea.”

“The chess pieces.” He gestured with his hand, giving me the answer on a serving platter. It was all so simple to him. It should have been to me.

“Yes! The chess pieces. Why aren’t they out here, set up?” I asked.

He turned his body dramatically, enjoying acting his part. “Because I didn’t feel like it,” he said, full of glee. “I just wanted to talk to you today.”

“And we certainly did. We haven’t accomplished much.” We never *accomplished* anything, though. What was there to accomplish? Ours was an odd friendship with blurred motives. I wanted to talk about his writing, but he vehemently denied me the pleasure. He seemed to want nothing to do with me but to bother me. “Why?” I sat up.

“You feel better and that’s an accomplishment – because I do care about your feelings,” he answered back. His fingers fussed with the edge of his sleeve, a buttonhole. Stupidly, I had not noticed. The shoes had a recent shine of grease across their tongues. The hair had obviously been blown dry to suppress its natural curl. His entire appearance suggested an air of extra care.

“I better get going. I have a lot of work to do and a lot of things to think about after your comments,” I said. “It was good to see you. Really.” My hands straightened the

scarf around my neck and smoothed its ends over my chest. I was waiting, uncertain. To hug him or not to?

“Why don’t you stay a little longer? I just purchased a new piece of music for my violin. You could listen while I play. I find that a little music can help to stimulate the mind.” His words almost begged as a drift came in through the back door and bumped it to the rhythm of the wind.

“I want to, but I really shouldn’t.” Overhearing his violin as I left last time was almost too much sentiment to endure. Besides, what would happen if I stayed? If that music filled me with tears, I didn’t know what would happen. It would be against my better judgment. I wanted so much to stay, to let him know that I loved him. “I have to go.”

“Next time, then,” he said indifferently, snapping out of the moment. He was back to his grumpy, reproachful self. “I would prefer that you use the front door. It gives a better semblance.”

“The back door is closer to the bus stop,” I said and glanced at the clock over his mantle. “And if I don’t hurry, I’m going to miss the next lift and have to wait another half hour.” I stood up, firm in my decision.

“Another reason to stay ...” His eyes digressed.

“Goodbye.” I collected my bag and papers from the floor in front of the chair and also my coat from the hook in the hall. The melody pulled me as I watched him from the archway. It was what moved me and stirred me. I never wanted to leave, but he had closed himself from me so simply. It was time to return to the world of reality and to stop playing with my own heart strings.

He grabbed his bow from the chair in the far corner of the room and turned away from me as he struck the first note. Sweetly, he danced in a circle as he played, lost in his own thought. Not having gotten his own way, he was determined to pretend that I wasn't in the room. The chords of disappointment sparkled, hot beneath his fingertips. My mind incorrectly remembered much loved forgotten words, *Hello is so short; saying goodbye is so long.*

Chapter 3: What a Lovely Thing a Rose Is

I stepped onto the bus and kicked myself. What was I doing? I sat down on the cracking leather and folded my hands, staring distantly into the back of the driver's balding head. I disregarded the plant sitting on my lap, which I had barely remembered on my way to the bus stop. Leonard had to know I was crazy about him. Surely, the fact was written all over my face. I came to see him with no discernable motive. Still for months, I had tricked myself into thinking – I don't know what I was thinking, but I hadn't loved him before. The first night that I had heard him play had moved me with its beauty. Somehow things were different now. Why didn't I stay? My eyes were misting over. I straightened the strap of the bag on my shoulder. Shadows were creeping onto the pavement. It was a lonely ride with no one to see me cry.

When the bus came to my stop, I waved at the driver and gathered the bulk of all my things. My apartment was about a block over, and I groaned as I carried everything up the steps. I sat the plant on the ground by my door and turned the pot slightly. This would be her home now. I sighed as I looked back at sky. The stars shone like little miracles in a far off kingdom. The three diamonds of Orion's belt rose in the firmament. They were his strength, holding his middle together. I turned back to the plant. Her hair was wild and unkempt; she needed a pruning. I pulled my keys from my pocket and unlocked the apartment door.

I begrudgingly lifted the plant again and carried her inside. The familiar kitchen table and desk greeted me. Everything was as it should be, but the moment was still incomplete. Perhaps tomorrow I could go back and try to undo the mistakes of tonight. For now, tonight was over.

No messages on the answering machine. I had forgotten to check the mail. I went to school, came home, went to Leonard, came home. He was the only light in my routine. I knew people, of course. I had some friends, but it wasn't in me to stray too far from study and home. I wanted to find someone just exactly like Leonard, except thirty, forty years younger and take him home to keep. That's all.

I walked past the beat-up sofa and the desk to put the plant on the table and opened the refrigerator. One happy little magnet with a smiley face beamed from the middle of the door. My colleague, Josh, had sarcastically given it to me, and I left it stuck there. I was a pessimist, and everyone knew it, but underneath, I wanted to believe in something or someone. I just didn't have the courage. I'd given up. I took an open carton of orange juice from inside the fridge and drank straight from its mouth, licking the excess from my lip.

My hands absentmindedly picked up yesterday's newspaper and wandered through the pages. It was an automatic action; I wasn't in the mood for reading about others' misfortunes. Life was becoming something to get through. To get to what, though? The thought was wrong. Life was becoming something to get away from – to get away from the ghosts, the past. Half of life was even trying to get away from Leonard. I threw the paper on the table.

To the side of where the paper had landed, the plant waited patiently. Her leaves turned up in a smile, quietly reminding me of the promise of a pruning. I pulled a pair of scissors out of a jar on the counter. My eyes circled the plant for some time. I breathed deep, tapping the scissors on my thigh. Gosh, I'd never done this before. You had to be so cruel to be kind. Was it really better to snip the arm that hindered you than to leave the

problem unchecked? I laid the scissors down. She was as beautiful as the night. She was nearly perfect. A few small nips would make her complete. I would do it. However, there was no need to make a mess. I took up the newspaper and unfolded it, spreading it on the table.

Then, there it was. Even when I tried to escape him, I couldn't. I saw his face in every line of font. The advertisement was tiny and unpretentious, occupying the bottommost corner. "Legal Advice. Confidential. Selective. Free. Accredited by the Law Society of England and Wales. Contact Leonard Collins, London." An address for a P.O. Box followed. Likely, the ad didn't need a flashy promotion because the word "free" spoke for itself. I hadn't known Leonard was so proactive and engaged in his business. Honestly, I didn't know much about what he did in the first place.

A few times, I had seen clients slip out the front door as I came in the back. He had said work had been slow lately. Likewise, I hadn't seen anyone for a while. Leonard only vaguely mentioned his clients' problems. He had alluded to issues of custody and identity theft, but there were also undertones of important people and the recovery of delicate items. I had the impression that the government had consulted with him on state matters and also perhaps some public characters who had fallen into less than savory but still photographic situations. Leonard was so evasive that I couldn't put my thumb on what had made me feel that way. I just believed it, and I wanted him to believe in me. I understood that he had matters of confidentiality to deal with, but I wished he would give me a bit more insight into his work. I shouldn't have been surprised about his tendency toward privacy or his not telling me of the ad, though. Leonard just didn't talk about himself. From the very beginning when I found his book at Clarke's, the fullness of my

knowledge concerning him was a bunch of clues patchworked together. I folded the paper and left it sitting on the table, open to the ad.

From the desk, I saw Leonard's book propped up in the corner against the wall. The back was facing outward with his youthful face avoiding the camera's lens. He had been so beautiful in his own distinct darkness: dark hair, dark eyes, dark demeanor. When I looked at him, I saw a sliver of myself, but I was encouraged. The pessimist in me was only a fraction of the pessimist in him. Even if life was ineffably boring here, standing beside him I was a glimmer of hope. I crossed the room and turned his face to the wall. I should have stayed with him.

* * *

When I got up the next morning, I was renewed. Sleep had been a river into peace. The tips of my fingers and toes seemed to dance. A new energy pulsed through me, reminding me of the way I felt when I wrote something I knew was brilliant. Maybe I was ready to be myself and admit my secrets to him. I would start the day fresh by simply showing up on Leonard's doorstep – the front doorstep – and making everything better. He wasn't expecting me, but this was the day to simply hop in a cab and surprise him. If I couldn't settle the strangeness, I wouldn't be able to get through the day.

I slid out of the backseat and paid the cabdriver, barely noticing him. The cab sped down the street, but the only thing that could capture my attention was the red front door. It stood like an "X" against the peeling white paint of the apartment building. Two swift breaths saw me up the steps, and I beat the brass knocker in place.

After about a minute, I could hear worn hands scuffling beyond the door, and one large eye shown thru the peep hole. For a second, the door was a silly Cyclopes. Leonard unlatched the deadbolt and opened the door. “Alexandra, what are doing here?”

“I’m not sure. I thought you could tell me that,” I said. We both burst into laughter – an embarrassed chuckle like the tinkling of a bell – and in the reddening of that moment, I stuck out my hand to shake his. The center of my palm dripped sweat, but his hand was perfect composure. The last time he touched me, I had brushed him back, and I thought maybe he would resent it, but his grip held mine firm and warm.

“I am glad that you came. Come inside and get warm,” he said with an easy smile.

I followed him down the hall and took my first glimpses at rooms I had never seen before: the bathroom, his bedroom, the kitchen – rooms I doubted I would see again. My apartment was miniscule but open. If he came there, he could see everything. His place was a jumbled mess with false starts and stops. It needed a guided tour to show me who he was, and I knew that I wasn’t getting one.

After the second door on the right was the entrance to the living room, and across from it was my usual hook where he hung my coat after removing it from my shoulders. His hot breath entangled itself in the wisps of hair protruding from the back of my neck. The aura around me shimmered and his fingers poked, searching for cracks in the imaginary boundary but not daring to touch me. It was the warm anticipation of wanting to feel each other again. I blushed.

Neither of us commented on the weirdness of the moment, not wanting to admit it. We simply entered the living room together. My hands smoothed over the front of my pants for lack of occupation, and I felt too nervous to sit. Happiness was bubbling in me

like a secret. It was so nice to be near him, to smell him. I had never noticed before, but his smell had a distinct identity. It was like morning breath but with an acute sweetness that didn't make you want to roll over.

“Come in. Come in,” Leonard said, ushering me further into the room. “I will go down the hall and bring – I don't know – something. Sit, please.” He turned and went back into the kitchen. I realized fully then that I had entered his home without the heavy heart I had left in my bed the night before. This time and place with him felt right to me. The nerves were not completely gone, but I was beginning to trust him as a person. I enjoyed spending time with him, and that was nothing to feel bad about. He was old, but was that so wrong? Was there anything else *wrong* with what I was doing? It seemed I just wanted something to be wrong. No matter my searching, I couldn't find a concrete problem.

My eyes surveyed the room catching the sunlight dancing on the windowpane. The thin line of mildew caught it also and turned up and curled. The usual items – chairs, coffee table, bookcases, the violin – were all in their places and any thought that they were new was some happy imagining. This place once smelt damp and dusty to me, but the odor was fading in favor of a new label: home. I walked over to Leonard's great grandfather's portrait and shyly wriggled my fingers at him in salutation.

But the center of the floor jarred the picture. All around were piles and piles upon piles of books. Books everywhere in disarray. The four cases that lined the right wall were now empty with their bowels spilled on the floor. Every kind of book conceivable was spread before my feet. Prominently, I noticed the dry, cracked books of law. Those books alone would refill two of the cases. Some of the law books were topical – criminal

law, family law, the ethics of law – but principally, they were devoted to official documents about current legal regulations. Leonard also owned many encyclopedias and glossaries of personalities. The pile of self-help books still made me smile; he had his own singular quirks. In front of the last bookshelf was my favorite section: his collection of novels. There was a nice assortment particularly heavy on the Victorians and Modernist. We both agreed that Postmodernism was something to stick your finger down your throat over. On the top of the last pile was *The Collected Stories of Edgar Allan Poe*. He had told me once that if books only consisted of works of fiction, Poe would be his favorite writer.

I turned, hearing the tea tray clink from behind as he entered. He stooped a little under the weight of the set. The tray had a lovely flowered print and matching teapot, cups, saucers, and sugar and creamer containers resting on top. It looked like something I would buy, but, as fit with several other things in the house, it was nothing he would buy. He lived simply and domestic details didn't concern him. My only thought was that it had perhaps been a gift or something he had inherited. I added the detail to my memory bank of things about him for future consideration.

“Leonard, what are you doing?” I asked.

“Sitting the tea on the table. I thought it was obvious,” he said.

I pressed my right hand on my forehead and groaned. Sometimes, he was too straightforward to really converse well. “No. What are you doing with the books all in a mess?”

“I thought that might have been obvious, too. I'm organizing them,” he answered.

He took the teapot by the handle and began pouring the liquid into two cups on the tray. His hands moved with grace not deviating from his concentration on the stream only inches from his face.

My hands clasped themselves behind my back, and I walked up and down the room as he worked. “And how exactly does a brilliant man organize his books? Alphabetically? By topic or genre? Oh, maybe there is a secret door behind the bookcase which will spring open when one arranges the books correctly by color.”

“You are a funny girl,” he said, grinning into the tea cups. “But I would assume that I do it like most people. I organize by relevance.” When he had finished, his eyes addressed me properly and handed me a dainty cup on a saucer.

“Thank you,” I said and took a shortbread cookie from the tray. “That can’t be very systematic, though.” He narrowed his eyes at me.

“And why is it not?” he asked. Leonard sat down in his chair as I continued traipsing around the room. If I didn’t move, I would explode – or say something very stupid, at the least. His eyes danced around my figure, almost as if he was walking with me.

“Relevance is subjective. Everyone would do it differently. That’s no organization at all.” I held the cookie in my hand and waved it as I talked. His statements seemed in line with his methods, but again, they felt so malleable to me. Everything had an exception or a second reading. His brilliance combined with a touch of sophism made the world seem simple – simpler than it really was.

“Of course it is relevant. This organization isn’t for everyone; it’s for me,” he countered. “This organization is like the contents of my mind, a well-honed tool.”

I rolled my eyes and bit down on the cookie. His ego was beyond seeing the errors in his work. On the other hand, had he ever made any serious errors? If the proof was in the product, possibly I was wrong. My thoughts didn't feel concrete enough to speak yet. If I did, he would smash all my wonderings to pieces, and I would be left with nothing. I glanced down at the half-eaten cookie. "This is really good. Did you bake these yourself?"

"It is within my ability." He smirked. "But I obtained these at a baker downtown. It's nice to keep a little sugar around in case I have visitors, but sweets are not a prerequisite to my existence."

I placed my tea cup on the table and sat down in my chair to continue nibbling. The table was bare of both chess pieces and board, but he hadn't been expecting me. It didn't seem to matter, anyways.

"You know, I don't feel like playing chess anymore. It sucks getting stomped all the time," I said, raking the last crumbs of cookie from my shirtfront. I was tired of feeling like we needed games to keep our relationship going. If I could, I would break them all.

"You have read my mind entirely. Winning all the time is becoming boring." His mouth let out a breathy chuckle of satisfaction. The abstract was beyond him. He took my statement for the simplicity that it was and not the deeper meaning. He was brilliant. He could tell someone where they had been walking three hours previous and why based only on their shoes, but he couldn't get into my emotions. He couldn't see what I felt or why. I had started on the false assumption that he had wanted to, though.

If he had been next to me I would have smacked him for his ungraciousness, but since he wasn't, I merely glared at him. He took a sip of his tea and stared deep into my eyes over the rim of his cup. I could feel his eyeballs investigating the line of my cheekbones and neck. Every inch of my neck seemed to tingle. I turned my head and moved a hand across my hair, brushing it back.

He took two short sips of his tea before placing the saucer and cup on the table. "I am sorry to ask you again, but I must. You see, I have no previous experience on which to base a deduction. Why are you here?" I could see his mind turning over the hypothesis that he had never dared to put into words. He was glancing at my hand lingering awkwardly on my hair. He was remembering standing at the door with me, the night before, hugging my body. He was remembering the nervous utterances of a young woman on the other end of a telephone line, wanting to meet him. The light was shining on all the corners of the canvas that had been darkness, and now he was seeing a full painting in his mind. He thought, *Maybe she loves me*. Softly, it was becoming apparent that maybe the longing wasn't only mine.

His hands rested openly on his knees with the palms turned up in a chalice, a grasping gesture that I longed to satisfy. The words of my mouth filled the emptiness as I stared straight into them, tasting every syllable. "I didn't always know why I came before, but now I do, and the reason is the same. I come only because I want to."

Leonard lowered his voice, almost singing the words reverently. "I am happy to have you here, and only on those terms, Alexandra. The terms that you feel free and come at your desiring." We stared at each other for a long time and barely breathed. The next word would turn the course of everything.

“Good,” I said, sighing. Things were finally fitting into place. Since I had come to see him, I was always on the defensive. Now I felt that he really wanted to know me, and I could *be* me without always trying to be me. Our meetings were no performance.

“You are fortunate that I was here. This morning, I took my violin to have it tuned. Now it sings even more wonderfully than before,” he said, searching for anything to say. His hands shook slightly, and he returned his cup to the table.

“My grandfather played the fiddle,” I said wistfully. My eyes had moved over to the mantle and were tracing the outline of bric-a-brac: a pair of decrepit scissors, a bell, a pipe, a metronome, the clock with its large dome, a bust of Napoleon, and a black and white framed photo of a man and a woman with a small boy. They were likely his parents. There were a million things he could tell me that I would love to know, but he didn’t. I would ask, but I didn’t have the confidence when he dismissed simple details. He couldn’t even tell me about something as impersonal as his work. The conversation hit a flat note.

“I’ve been to the southern United States where you come from, but there is one mystery I’ve never been able to figure out.” He paused for drama. “What is the difference between a violin and a fiddle?” Now, he was being facetious. I would oblige in this little game, though, and laugh. If we played only a little game, were we still in the cycle? I didn’t want to consider it. I would wind up fooling myself again.

“You’ve been a law professor most of your life. You’ve read all these important books. You could probably tell me at lunch what I ate for breakfast just by looking at me, but you can’t figure the difference between a violin and a fiddle? Amazing.” He had exaggerated his ignorance, and now I had exaggerated his powers. I began to think that if

he could only deduce the physical, but I could deduce the emotional, wasn't my reasoning greater? Only I didn't have the ego to claim the superiority.

"Well, I know there is no real difference, but why do your people insist on renaming an already properly named object?" He lifted his chin. "It really is ridiculous."

"If you call 'violin' a proper name. I think 'fiddle' rolls off the tongue better, myself." I lifted my cup from the table and drunk the last of it before sitting it down. "Did you know that Frank Sinatra wanted to play Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*? He's handsome and all, but he's certainly no Tevye." He followed my line of consciousness and slid directly into my next line of talk.

"And do you know who was offered the part of Golde but then turned it down because she didn't think the part was big enough compared to Tevye's?" he challenged. He pointed his finger at me in triumph.

"I have no idea," I said, wrinkling my forehead.

"Anne Bancroft," he replied.

"Oh, I can't imagine that. She's too glamorous. I'd like to look like her when I get old. I'm not exotic enough, though. I just look plain." He took a box of matches out of his breast pocket and fiddled with them, taking three strikes to light a flame. The smoke rolled out of his pipe like a lopsided chimney. The curls reminded me of mist and the first dew drops settling on the flowers. I hated the smell and I hated his habit, but something in me loved to watch the smoke rub up the sides of walls. A bohemian interest.

"There's nothing wrong with you. You look very pretty today," he said. I looked over at the window. Now he was giving me praises out of obligation. "Just because I'm not gaping at you, does not mean I don't know that you are beautiful." He stood up and

moved to the bookcase, continuing his light puffing. His corneas resumed their forceful beating on my neck, but I wouldn't look at him. The words were wonderful but empty. He *knew* how I looked, but he didn't *think* it or *feel* it. Most people would believe that he had given me a compliment, but it was really just another of his cold facts. For him the thought line was simple. A woman is either pretty or ugly. The outcome was a generally known fact. His aesthetics didn't involve pleasure or emotion. It meant nothing. "Come on, I'm being sincere. Don't pout. Get up and help me with these books," he said, responding to my look.

I turned to face him and exhaled. "You could at least say 'please.'"

"You don't deserve politeness when you pout," he said. "You are beautiful; that's all." He no longer belabored the point, and his words flowed seamlessly into his next statement as he walked to the center of the room and picked up a large stack of scarlet volumes. "These are individual editions of Shakespeare's plays. Arrange them on the far shelf according to the list pasted in the front cover of *Anthony and Cleopatra*. I'll work on the legal texts." He sat his pipe on an ashtray on the end table and began to work.

The volume that he noted was the first in the stack. I took it up and opened the cover. Inside was the list reading "Shakespeare's Finest Plays" with his initials, "L.C.," scribbled at the bottom. All thirty-eight of the plays were written down with dates next to them. They spun from *Anthony and Cleopatra* at the top to *Othello* at the bottom. This list was clearly Leonard's personal opinion.

"You've read all of Shakespeare's plays?" I asked with admiration. "*Othello* at the bottom is quite an unusual choice. It's highly regarded."

“Well, there are plays that are not as well written as *Othello*, but his character ruins the play for me. I don’t go in for all that jealousy business. Love has to have a sense of freedom about it. As to the plays in general, of course I’ve read them. Any educated individual should.” He had quickly thrust twenty volumes on the shelf while I had been studying his list. Again, I thought I barely knew anything about him. We had talked often but mostly about me. Seven months had not revealed anything to me. The only thing that I knew was that I didn’t want to give him up. I wanted to keep on trying to storm his walls for as long as our lives allowed.

“I haven’t, though,” I replied.

“You are young and learning. The task took me well into my forties. I would not say that I *use* the information, but it’s worth consideration.” His hands had continued their rapid pace as we spoke, but suddenly, they ceased. He moved to my shelf and put his hands on top of the pile of Shakespeare’s plays. “Don’t put those on the shelf. I don’t need them. Take them home with you,” he said.

“No. I can’t.” My lips pursed in determination. The gift was too much for everyday, unnecessary. I ignored him and began filling the shelf.

“I want you to have them. Take them. They are of no use to me, and I would prefer to forget that they exist.” His resolve was firm, and he pushed the pile slightly in my direction.

“No. You’ve put so much time into this. They are masterpieces. You should own them. Besides, I have a complete edition.” My foot nudged the pile back in his direction with *Anthony and Cleopatra* still clutched in my hands.

He shoved the pile back more forcefully. "It's all done now. My mind is made up. You might need an individual copy of a play to carry around one day. I don't want you to have to carry the weight of a complete edition on your shoulder. You might hurt your back. Plus, they are very handsome." Our eyes were locked and neither of our wills would deviate. I desired the terms of equality and didn't want a handout like I was a beggar. He was edging towards a subtler power dynamic, still unequal: one where he was a father giving all good things to his child.

"Yes, too handsome for everyday. I wouldn't know what to do with them." Growing frustrated, I shoved the pile back. The stack plummeted to the floor. *Hamlet* fell overtop of *King Lear* creating a jumbled heap of words, words, words, with *Romeo and Juliet* crowning the mess. In the commotion, the dust was stirred into little clouds, filling the air, and a sheet of paper rose to the surface and fluttered down like a feather. My fingers lifted it from its landing place on top of *Titus Andronicus*.

We were acting like children. I chuckled. Holding the paper in my hands, I noticed some writing bleeding through the folds. The letters were precise and formal, unlike Leonard's elegant script. My stomach twisted into itself in intuition like the recoil of a spring. I unfolded the paper and read aloud. "What a lovely thing a rose is! There is nothing in which deduction is so necessary as in religion. It can be built up as an exact science by the reasoner. Our highest assurance of the goodness of Providence seems to me to rest in the flowers. All other things, our powers, our desires, our food, are all really necessary for our existence in the first instance. But this rose is an extra. Its smell and its colour are an embellishment of life, not a condition of it. It is only goodness which gives extras, and so, I say again that we have much to hope from the flowers.*" The ends of my

fingertips began to shake as my wide eyes looked up to ask him the pivotal question, *What does this mean?* I looked down again to examine the script and a noted a feminine touch.

“I did not realize that was in there,” he said. “I wasn’t meaning to give that to you. It’s from a long, long time ago.” He glanced at his great grandfather’s portrait. Leonard stretched out his hand demanding me to hand the paper over. “Come on,” he said. The strain of his outstretched hand longed for the moment to end. He moved to me and tried to grab it from between my fingers. A lump rose in my throat, but I couldn’t release the page no matter the pain. My eyes glossed over the gentle curve of “t”s and sloppy loop of “g”s. The tears already began to fall as the smell of some clear, crisp perfume met my nostrils from below.

“Who wrote this?” I asked.

“I do not think that we need to –”

“Who wrote this?” I interrupted, asking again. The happiness was shattering around me, and I could feel the previous lightness of my feet meeting hard reality. The peace had been a lovely dream, but I knew something must be wrong. I never thought it would be this.

The color slid off his face and seeped into the carpet. His feet backed away from me. “Actually, my wife,” he said bluntly. He guiltily addressed the floor and only talked now to fill the most horrible of silences. “It was something that she heard me say once after I’d had a few drinks and was philosophizing.”

For an eternity of five minutes, neither of us said a word. He went back to the bookcase and meticulously lined another shelf with volumes. I moved to the window and

drew back the curtain to watch some birds playing musical chairs on the phone line. The first pigeon skipped over the second and landed beside the third. The fourth lingered away from the rest and exited my line of sight. My thoughts drifted over to the old man's great grandfather. What would he have to say about all this? I was completely right: Leonard was nothing but a gigantic question mark to me. I had been so stupid, and he had taken me in entirely. He should have told me before we sat in this room alone together ... Yet he had never expected our relationship to grow this close. He didn't understand. Inside, I carried a safe full of emotions so close to my heart – things that he couldn't dream of, things that he couldn't possibly understand. Secrets I couldn't even put into words.

“Why did – Did you ever think – It would have been more convenient if you had mentioned this fact a few months ago,” I said. “I mean it's not like you wear a wedding band or some other public announcement.” I turned from the window to face him.

“All that you wanted was to talk. I thought there would be no harm in talking.” He turned from the bookcase to address me head-on. His tone was one of controlled anger, but I was ready for it to overflow any moment. “I ask you here because I like you. That doesn't mean I have to tell you everything.” He calmed his voice. “You don't have to know everything.”

“We're friends. I wish you'd trust me.” My chest was heaving little spasms, and my face wrenched up in silent tears. He stood cold and distant. The yard between us felt like oceans. My arms folded around myself and hugged me since he would not.

“We are friends. So why are you mad? What difference does my being married make?” He was becoming exasperated, and his arms pointed and waved as he talked. It

was clear that he didn't handle emotions – his or mine – everyday. He seemed uncertain of where to step and neither knew how to advance or retreat. It was true that we had only hugged, nothing more. Our feelings were still merely feelings without the metamorphosis of words.

“It's complicated,” I said. Now the anger rushed into my face, as well. He was making excuses and taking no responsibility at all. “You know it's complicated. Everything is complicated when you're married. You live in this society, too.” My shoulders shook up and down as little tremors spread throughout my body. A welling was building in my chest. It would only be a matter of words before I would cry.

“But it's not as simple as all that.” He held out his hands toward me and moved closer. “Catherine and I are married, but we're also estranged ...” The words seemed to release his frustration in some way. He drew a deep breath and steadied himself on the nearest bookcase as his manner drifted into melancholy. He tried to conceal it, but I could see the corner of his right eye subtly turning towards his great grandfather's painting.

“Married is married. I would have liked to have known.” The tears streamed down my face. I walked to the end table where Leonard had set his pipe. I dipped my finger into the whirling smoke of the half-lit pipe's bowl. Even though this was the worst revelation imaginable, my words regained a steadiness. “Tell me about her.”

“I really don't think I –” He didn't dare to look at me, but the fact did little to ease my maddening pulse. The toes of his little burgundy dress shoes with the tassels scooted at the mound of dust in front of them.

“Tell me,” I repeated, staring absently into the smoke. I would force him to communicate. Before I had waited, not pressing him. This time his cooperation really counted. Rather than just wondering, I *needed* to know.

He stood as evenly as possible for a few moments thinking at the floor, alternating between pausing and pursing. He was straddling a line of ambivalence. I sat down in my chair again and took up the cup of tea, forgetting that I had finished it. My lips locked the taste of nothing. He came and laid his hand over the back of the chair.

“We have been married twenty-one years and lived together three of those,” he said. He was trying to justify the situation. Somehow the fact that they were separated obscured the fact that they were forever joined. It seemed the only reason to hold onto the marriage for so long was hope. How could one hold onto such an impossible hope for eighteen years, though? None of it made any sense. As he had been speaking, I foolishly held the cup but replaced it now on the table.

“Go on,” I said. This time I wasn’t going away without every detail made explicit.

“From what I understand, Catherine has been working in Paris since she departed.” Leonard’s hands fumbled, searching through his pockets in the full knowledge that whatever he was looking for didn’t exist. His feet hovered in place, unable to remain still. He was a prisoner that I was torturing for information.

“Why?” My stare beat into him more like an executioner than an examiner. I didn’t want to allow him any reason to ask the meaning of my question, so I kept my words as simple as possible. He was good at wiggling out of questions if he just made me speak. That wasn’t going to happen now.

His nostrils flared in the tenseness of some sharp pain, but he continued. “That was the problem, I suppose. She wanted to be able to leave and work on other things. Her spirit was so independent, and she never wanted anyone to tie her down. She gave my being a life and then tired of it.”

“Why did she marry you then?” I asked. My arms had subconsciously folded themselves as I sat in the chair. I was being as cruel as possible and wasn’t going to apologize.

Leonard threw his hands up in exhaustion. Though he wouldn’t say it, his body seemed to ask if all this was necessary. I couldn’t tell which was vexing him more: to think about those events or just to have to reveal himself to me. “Because she did love me and I loved her, and I am still very much in love with her, okay?” He paused. “She is the reason I don’t write anymore. The poems concern her.” He flung his arms out again and paced in a little circle behind my chair.

Finally, my mystery was solved. My first simple intuition had been right. It was all for the love of a woman. *How stupid*, I thought. So common. He wasn’t unique. He was flesh and sweat, damaged as the next person. I was really the stupid one; I had created a myth out of a man. I knew that they were love poems, but I had thought they were general, addressed to any or all women. In my imagination, I filled in the “she,” “her,” or “you” with me. It ripped my soul, knowing that I wasn’t, and couldn’t have possibly been, his poetic muse, so I played these sadistic games with myself. I drew him in to see how firmly I could repulse him; I repulsed him to see if I could draw him out further. I played a demon so that he would make me a saint. I was not “she,” “her,” “you.” I was a woman as clearly as he was a man. I wasn’t special.

Leonard paused even deeper, gathering all his courage. He presented himself in front of my chair. All of him was on display now. We could both feel the energy growing, and I held my breath, not knowing what to expect. “But perhaps I feel for you also. There,” he said. He turned his back to me as he turned his mind from thoughts he desired to discard.

My diaphragm lurched. I began to hyperventilate. A moan echoed from my throat. “No.” Every syllable bounced like a hiccup. My chest was tightening. I could barely breathe. My words fell to a whisper. “You can’t. You are married – There are things – Things you can’t possibly ...”. My body doubled, and my hands anxiously rubbed my shoes, trying to redo the fallen laces. My words, my movements, nothing was functioning.

He turned back towards me. Through blurry eyes, I just made out the engraving of terror on his face, lips parted and eyes full. He had seen me cry often enough, but never with such a scream running through my body. Every inch of my limbs shook in the fire of cruel knowledge. I was so bad; I didn’t deserve to be happy. Leonard grabbed me, pressing me into a hug. Both of his arms bound me to his chest as he forced my limbs to a silence. He gently rocked me back and forth like a dumbfounded child. I let him, allowing myself a moment of blankness.

He didn’t know. He didn’t know anything. His hubris had not allowed him to see that maybe there was a flaw in his logic. I was not as clear-cut as he had reasoned. During the last chess match, he had said, “You are open and your motivations are very plain. I doubt that you aim to keep anything from me at all.” He was so wrong. Part of my obsession with knowing him had perhaps been a ploy to keep him from truly knowing

me. If he knew all about my studies, my family, my leisure, then maybe he wouldn't guess that there was something I was still keeping, something that could crush me utterly.

I was too tired to care any longer, though. The essential fact was still true: I loved him in spite of everything. I wanted nothing more than to own him. I leaned into him and felt his comfort wash over me. He had never treated me badly. The image of Orion shining underneath last night's moon returned to my mind. Leonard was the diamonds holding my middle together. In this moment, I was folded against him in a posture of surrender as we shared one breath. If we didn't think, everything was right.

He gave in to the temptation of silence and began kissing my cheek, cautiously moving his lips down the line of my neck. I gasped, more in surprise than pleasure. He knew that I was upset, but the leaning was half an invitation. I wanted to want his kiss so badly. His lips moved across my forehead and down to my eyelids and over my nose before I pushed him off of me.

"Please, don't. Please, don't." My words were so weak, and my emotions were exhausted. Tears stuck to my face, and I tried to rub them off. The kisses had mixed with the tears and fell unceremoniously to the floor. The force of my outburst had only been a proof of the force of my love, and my refusal was so weak that I still don't blame him for what happened next.

His hands grabbed my temples and forced me to stare full into his eyes. He examined my soul, trying to determine the cause of all this torture. Leonard's hands slid down to cup the roundness of my face as he pressed his lips firmly against mine. For a split second I began to comply, tilting my head backward. One of his rough hands planted

itself into the arch of my back. Almost at the moment where I would sigh, my hands met his collarbones and shoved him off me.

“God, Leonard! What do you think you’re doing?!” I yelled. He had not misjudged so terribly. My resistance was another facet of longing. The corners of his mouth sagged with the slightest shade of hurt, but his eyes were going all over my body, trying to decide the depth of his fault. He waited for me to make the next move. I was the black queen moving across the checkered board.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. The tears welled up in my eyes again, and he held me in his silent gaze. “I have to go.” I got up from the chair and walked into the hall to fetch my coat. The tremors had begun again, and the coat only barely made it into my arms.

“I need to go. I can’t believe – I need to go.” I muttered as much to myself as to Leonard. My head was turned away, forcing myself not to look at him. The mirror on the wall captured my reflection and held it like a breath. I was an indescribable mess with wild eyes, mused hair, and blotches covering my face. I could only see a corner of Leonard’s shoulder. I kissed my fingers and pressed them to the spot on the glass where he was standing. Leonard shifted, moving out of the frame. I turned.

“Will you come back?” he asked. His forehead wrinkled, and his body leaned forward, longing and inviting me. He kept his distance, but it took all his will. His hands clenched and unclenched. Letting him think he had forced himself onto me was an even greater wrong, but I couldn’t undo it in that moment.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Do I have a choice?” I paused, staring at my feet. I had taken so much; I had to give him some hope in return. “I don’t know when. Just give me time.”

“For what it may be worth, I do care for you,” he said.

I turned. My hand pushed against the backdoor, and I descended the few tiny steps. The patter of some new-born rain dripped onto my face, but I left the coat under my arm. I wanted to lie submerged on the concrete, but still my feet carried on. From behind me, I could hear the distant strain of a violin. The melancholic notes floated through the doorway like pipe smoke. The rain fell harder. I walked to the bus stop and checked the schedule before sitting down on the cracked bench. A vendor came by, and I handed him a ten pound note. He searched his apron and dispensed the appropriate change before handing over a red umbrella. I sat alone on the bench surrounded by vendors and passengers and pedestrians and opened the umbrella over my head, becoming a red dot in the sky, in the atmosphere, a blip in the universe.

Chapter 4: A Circle Even Deeper

I wandered the streets before returning to my apartment in Earls Court. I passed Cromwell Hospital to turn down Warwick Road. The rain had ended, but I still held the new umbrella over my head. My shoes tripped across the ground, kicking up stray bits of gravel. Passersby only disinterestedly looked on. I found a secluded shadow and vomited up the contents of my stomach: his tea and the shortbread cookie. My stomach was as empty as my brain; I couldn't even commune with my own thoughts. Sometimes it was impossible to discern where the stories left off and our lives began. Were the things we said of any meaning? How much was I hanging my hopes on a figure who could never translate into reality? In that room, in his sphere, I believed Leonard could love me to the fullness of his repression, but once we stepped outside, it would all fall apart. I was falling apart in the alleyway.

If I could only stop thinking, it would work. They were married – legally, technically, only in a word. She had abandoned him. If she wanted him, she would still have him. I knew the truth of what I thought, but it only sounded like pitiless justification to my ear. I didn't want him like this.

The vomit caught itself up in the strings of my hair. I brushed them aside to feel the heat radiating from my forehead. My purpose in London was to work on my education, but I was starting to feel like I was putting my life on hold for him. School didn't inspire me anymore – at least not like Leonard did. When I worked in the library, I used to write little bits of Keats or Coleridge onto pieces of paper folded in quarters and dropped them into my pockets. Then I started to drop my own lines into my pocket, and every line sang his name. *I want him to breathe thru me in a circle, / finding solace and*

completion in a circle even deeper. I didn't even know that I wrote of him then. My heart held some mysterious longing for a man without a face. I knew that Leonard was in my consciousness, but it was beyond me to know that he had seeped under the surface of my skin. Part of me wanted to believe that he was just another man and part of me wanted a savior. The thought was so not feminist, so very against my training. I thought I might throw up again.

I inhaled and gathered myself. I couldn't go on like this all night. I rounded the corner, practically sleepwalking into a little market along the street. The attendant looked up from behind the counter with a pencil and notepad in his hand. He gave me a low smile.

"Can I help you with anything?" The attendant had the stunning quality of a thirty-year-old man who looked twenty. The completeness of his dark expression led me to think he must have Italian roots. I took in his posture: back slightly bent. I didn't want to look at him that closely.

"No," I blurted out, not even attempting politeness. I turned my head and started down the first aisle. His eyes roved around with lips slightly parted, but he went back to the company of his notepad.

The aisles were narrow, barely facilitating my trance. On the left, vegetables and fruits were piled in ornate pyramids, and my hands absently fondled the oranges. My sneakers glided down the middle aisle, only to stumble over a tumbled box of Triscuits. Behind the counter, the man was playing a radio, and some disgusting pop song flooded the speakers. I forcefully blocked the words out of my hearing. How could someone

reduce something as splendid as love into a few rhymed lines so blatantly commercial? The song so much wanted to please that it paradoxically offended.

A sticky heat settled over the room. My head swam. I felt as if I really was nearly vomiting again but without any corporeal product. I had to get out of here. I entered the last aisle and saw the thing I had been searching for: my outstretched arm met the warm glass of a bottle of wine standing on a shelf. I went to the counter to pay for it.

The man's focus was still on his notebook. I coughed to rouse his attention. A light bounced off the open sliver of his register's drawer. He slipped the pencil behind his ear and tossed the pad down before looking up at me. His every movement seemed carefully studied to give off the impression of carelessness. "That all you need?" he asked. "You sure you need this at all?"

"Just tell me how much." I crossed my arms and stood motionless.

"I don't think you should drink alone – that is, if you haven't already started," he replied. He smirked, planting one hand on the counter while struggling to make contact with my vacant eyes.

"I don't think that is any of your business," I said, peering into my reflection in a mirror behind the counter. My hair was knotted into a mess at the nape of my neck, and I thought I saw the merest speck of vomit on my chin. What was he playing at? "Besides, who says I'm drinking alone?" I challenged.

He looked me up and down, eyeballs grazing both crooks of the arms resting against my chest. "Yeah, you're drinking alone," he said.

"Fuck you!" I yelled, leaving the bottle on the counter and exiting the store. This man was looking to possess in a moment of weakness; Leonard had done it with the

knowledge of some affection. Every man – even one as unique as Leonard – was in it for the same thing. The *why* was the only thing that made any difference.

My feet led me back around the corner and a few blocks over to my apartment. I made a mental note to myself never to go inside that market again. I had meandered earlier, but now each foot rose and fell in hot intent.

Leonard's confession was a betrayal deeper than I could articulate. He betrayed secrets I hadn't even told him. I riffled through my pockets, searching for my keys. My eyes fell down to the flowerpot that I had sat back on the landing. Each bud was like the end of one of his fingertips. I began forcibly kicking the side of the pot. My fingers fumbled through the foliage, and for every tear that fell, I ripped a bud off of the plant and threw it. When I realized what I was doing, I completely fell to pieces against the side of the front door. The flowers were gifts he had given to me to care for like small children. I gathered the pieces and cupped them in my hands.

“Leonard.”

* * *

The next morning I found myself in bed, not remembering how I came to be there. The curtains that I usually drew before going to sleep were flung wide in neglect, and sunlight streamed through the windows. At first I blinked, only perceiving a pale yellowness on the ceiling. I smiled at the lights flashing in front of my eyes, and then the memories came back to me – ones from the night before, ones from years before that. I groaned and rolled over, pulling the comforter over my head.

The old-fashioned alarm clock on the night table buzzed. I stuck out one limp hand from under the covers to bang it to silence. It was 7:00, and I was expected at the

university in an hour for a meeting with my advisor. Screw that, I thought. The meeting wasn't important anyways. We would just go over the same problems again. For once, I wanted to lie in bed all morning and not feel guilty. This seemed as good a time as any to try.

The whole evening was a mistake. He couldn't have known. I must have looked like a maniac. None of it was his fault; the guilt was mine – again. I could fix this, though. I would get up and take a shower and get a cab and walk right into his house and ... and ... No, I couldn't do it. I couldn't do anything. My head fell back on the side of the pillow into a dreamless sleep. The last thing I remembered before dozing off was my eyes reflected in his eyes – pale blue consumed by muddy brown. I love you. I love you. I love you ...

“Uh. Huh?” I was jolted upright from my sleep by the ringing of the telephone. I threw my legs over the side of the bed and wobbled into the other room. It was one of those functional do-anything living room-study-kitchens with everything but the toilet and the bed. The white paint was beginning to peel against the backs of the framed black and white photos. They were art prints of cats, the creature of solitude. My apartment was really nothing to look at compared to Leonard's place. I would have liked to wake up in his apartment with the side of his chest pressed against the arch of my back ... Hanging on the wall next to the kitchen table was the phone, furiously giving its fourth ring. My hand hurried to the receiver, but I let it fall.

The clock over the oven read ten to eight. My advisor wasn't missing me yet. In the States, it was even earlier; it wasn't my mother. It could have been a telemarketer or a friend calling, but I still wasn't going to risk it. I stood wiping the sleep from my eyes as

it rang two more times. The answering machine clicked on, and I cringed, hearing my chipper salutation played back to me. In the stillness, my hand went out to the phone again and fell. I breathed, waiting. Any moment, I would know. I stared at the machine. My hand hovered over the phone. Finally, it beeped. Please don't be him, I thought. An unceremonious clunk met my ears as someone put their receiver back on the hook.

It had been him. I felt it. He hated using the phone, but this was an unforeseen circumstance. He would have never left a message if I didn't answer. I could see him now walking back into the living room and unfolding the newspaper. He didn't care that much. If he did, he would make some dramatic gesture. If he cared, he would be here, folding me into his arms. I pulled the cord out of the wall and fell back into bed.

* * *

I lay in a hospital bed. The doctor swimming in front of my consciousness was quacking away with an absurd mouth like the bill of a duck. I wondered if he had indeed finished medical school. Some faceless man was standing to my side, squeezing my hand. A nurse came in with some ice chips and all of them started to yell "Push!" at me. I tried so hard. I wanted it to be perfect for all of them. I keep trying to look down, but I couldn't see beyond the rounded abstraction. "Push!" they yelled louder. I really was trying. Where was the pushing supposed to come from? Was it in my belly or in my head? I disappeared. Where was I? Where was my body? I gasped, waking from the dream.

My hand automatically fell to my stomach, and I looked around. No one was there, and I was hungry. I glanced back at the clock on the nightstand. 7:00 – this time p.m. Geez. The day had melted into nothing. I sat on the edge of the bed, trying to decide

what to do with the loose ends of the day. Nothing came to me. I'd never had this time before when I wasn't moving or doing.

It seemed I had always moved because I didn't know what I would do if I stopped moving. If I stopped moving, then I had to think, and if I had to think, then the ghost would come. No. I wasn't going to think about it now. Last night was enough drama to deal with at present. The more I tried to force a silence on my thoughts, the more the tears forced themselves from the corners of my eyes.

I could barely see my feet, dangling off the bed through swollen eyelids. I pressed my palms into the mattress. I wanted to feel something, anything – the wood of the floor against my cheek. My nails dug deeper as I tugged at the sheets. I wanted to exorcize my soul from my body and start over. I should have never met him. I should have never come to London.

The moonlight, shining in from the window, glistened on my bare shoulder. It was the touch I longed for, the touch that would always be. Time would always be my intercessor. The sun and moon would repeat their cycle, and I would wake even then to know that I was one more day away from grief. Time was my penance and my companion. Time would tell me if I could love Leonard and how.

My feet met the ground, and I stripped the rest of my clothing to shower. After I was clean, I sat on the couch and read over my thesis again with a muffin balanced on my knee. I marked a misplaced apostrophe. One of my quotes had accidentally been un-attributed. I was still in the world of Kafka. There was no simple tunnel out or glowing "exit" sign, but comma by comma, I was closer to completion. In spite of myself, I laughed. I was sitting and reading the most boring, uninspired paper about one of the

most depressive works of literature, and I had started to smile. Did I even want to do this kind of thing for a living? This was the only moment of fun I had had working on my master's degree. So much time had been wasted on bitterness and trying to escape the past. I had to realize, the past was done now.

I jumped. My laughter had nearly drowned out a knocking on the door. I already knew, but I went and peered out the peephole. Leonard was standing with his back to me, staring down the row of doors at the other apartments. A trench coat was slung over his shoulders, and he carried a box under his arm. The back of his head seemed to drift into the night. He withheld his gaze not wanting to look too intent.

I rested my head against the back of the door. I had said I would see him. If I didn't now, he would wonder. He would call again, I would ignore, and then he would come again. I wanted to see him, but only if I didn't have to be me. I wanted to be older, wiser, more sophisticated – Catherine. He loved Catherine. *Perhaps, he felt for me*, he had said last night. His words, fresh in my memory, cut me. Only time. The more time we spent together, the better things would get. The resolution was still a mystery. I unlatched the deadbolt and opened the door.

His face shone clearly in the moonlight. Leonard's image was never more welcome to me than in that moment. The curve of his nose cut through the blackness as his every feature was embossed in nature. He was an element, a part of the night. He smiled, releasing the worried wrinkles from his forehead.

"Hello," he said. He paused. His eyes took in my sloppy pair of sweatpants and my hair, still wet from the shower. I looked down. He was neither delighted nor troubled; he was composed.

I spent a long minute considering him. We both seemed like new people, meeting for the first time. Neither of us knew how to act. My hand fell from the doorframe when I realized the awkwardness of our soundless stares. I fully opened the door, exposing the contents of my apartment. “Come in,” I said.

His eyes shone, happy not to find a repulsion. He entered and began examining the room. The first thing he noticed was the decrepit sofa and traced the back end to end with his eyes. His gaze rested on the cat prints, but he only glanced at my bookcase against the far wall. I would have thought he’d been more interested in that. He went to the curtains to examine the view. Barely a hush passed between us.

I slumped down on the sofa and watched him. The streetlamp hit the side of his jaw, illuminating it, as it pulsed. He absentmindedly flicked the curtains back into place and sat down next to me. The proximity forced on us by the one sofa was unbearable. I stood up and moved away on the pretext of hospitality.

“Can I get you anything to drink?” I asked him. “I have orange juice ... water.”

He studied me again, trying to read my question. We had spent longer silences together, but I had never seen him so removed. Yet his absence oddly seemed to hold a resolve. He fiddled with the worn paper on the corner of the box in his hands. Something was coming. “Water will do nicely. Thank you,” he answered.

I went to the cabinet and took down a glass, blowing the light coat of dust from its inside, and filled it. I couldn’t hand him one of the plastic cups that I usually drank from. He accepted it and thanked me again. I sat on the arm of the couch, watching him take delicate sips.

“Alexandra, do you have any coasters?” he asked. “I don’t want to –” He held the glass half-way to his chest, not daring to let it tarnish the coffee table.

“Of course.” I grabbed a coaster off the desk and handed it to him with the barest tips of my fingers. It was just a ratty piece of cardboard, but it separated the layers that must not touch. He placed it on the table and set his glass on top. We both looked attentively as if he were performing a ceremony. He hadn’t asked me yet how I felt or why I didn’t answer the phone or any of that. He didn’t need to, though. My lethargy wasn’t exactly covering anything.

His coat was folded neatly resting on the arm of the couch. He sat with the box lying next to him. The sides were long and thin, but the bottom was deep. The shape mirrored the black and white photos hanging neatly to his side. I hoped that the box was lined with poems or roses or remembrances from his past. He would tell me everything here tonight. In my most juvenile imagining, I thought perhaps they were divorce papers to prove that he was trying to resolve the situation. The thought was obtuse: his marital status wasn’t the situation at all.

“You are quiet tonight,” he said. The statement was true, but it was also a projection of his condition onto me. *Neither* of us had anything to say. I blushed and looked away. I had been staring at the fullness of his bottom lip, struggling to remember the precise way in which it had glided across my neck. For all the hurts it could not cover, his kiss had been a marvelous release.

“Is there anything to say?” I asked. He peered deeper into my eyes. He was turning over the pages of my mind. I could tell he knew that I was embarrassed. I had made an outburst that he had no possible way to understand. My anger probably seemed

disproportionate and unnatural to him. Maybe it was. He was trying to guess why, and he had no way to know. I gave him a reserved smile.

“I wanted to know that you were okay. I called a few times. You never answered. I hope that I’m not intruding,” he said. The barest flutter of an eyelash betrayed his survey of my neck. He looked away. “I brought the chess board. I know that you said that you don’t want to play anymore, but I thought perhaps ...” He trailed off.

I had been too simple. I should have known that we couldn’t cast off the games so easily. Our relationship was built on a house of pride and neither of us really wanted to show our cards. I had pressed his hand. Perhaps if we played one more chess game, it would break all the games. I didn’t know.

“Yes, I will,” I said, crossing my arms. I got up and scooted the coffee table closer to the couch. The carpet piece under it bunched, and I smoothed out the creases. Leonard took out the board and laid it on the table, arranging the pieces. It was his board, but now we were playing in my house. I sat down next to him.

“Do you want to be white or black?” he asked. I pointed to the line of pristine figures. I lifted the white queen in my hand and sat her on the far side of the board. Leonard arranged the rest of the pieces with his black soldiers on his left and my white ones on his right. The board was turned so that neither of us had to move our hand across the other as we played. He looked up, and my eye accidentally caught his.

“You *are* quiet tonight,” he said.

“Chess is a grand old game,” I replied. The chuckles started in the corners of our mouths and burst free as our eyes met again. He was normal; I was the weird one. I

needed to relax. I nervously glanced at the window, and he followed my vision before realizing it was nothing.

“Chess *is* a grand old game,” he said. “That was an interesting night, the last time we played chess.” He studied the board, ensuring that every piece was in its place. His mouth turned over his thoughts slowly, making every word ideal.

“Yes. Remember how hard it rained?” That night seemed like so long ago. It was before any admissions or feelings, before any of this mess had started. He held out his hand, inviting me to begin. I took my far-most pawn and moved it out two squares.

“You were soaked *and late*.” He paused. “And you spoke to me of Lewis Carroll.” His words had drifted from dreaminess to reality and a seriousness crossed his brow. For the moment he looked away. He returned his gaze to the board, and his eyes surveyed every angle before mirroring my move and sliding his opposite pawn out two places. The move was subtle but aggressive. After a time, mirroring could drive an opponent mad: he was on a warpath.

“I remember it well.” I cupped my chin and rested my elbows on my knees, thinking. His knee was only inches from mine. If I scooted slightly, I could just graze the edge of his knee with my sweatpants. The gesture would throw him, but it would likely throw me, too. Disguises and subtle strategies were over. It was the time to win by any means. “Just the other day, I was reading about one of the games Carroll invented. It’s called –”

“– doublets,” Leonard interrupted. My hand had hovered over a second pawn, but I let it drop. I had been reading about doublets just that week, but still he had known. He

eyed the bookcase in the distance but with an intensity that said his mind was fixed on the board.

“Yes,” I said, changing tactics and moving out a knight. “The player picks two words with the same number of letters but opposite meanings. Then he or she starts with the first and uses real words with only one letter difference to get from the starting word to its opposite. Like you can turn –”

“– a boy into a man. Hate into love. Force east and west to meet.” Leonard had interrupted me again. I sighed and then thought better of it. He was trying to get under my skin by reversing the roles. Last time, I had done this to him: I had interrupted him as he had tried to lecture me about the nature of chess and its linguistic history. My motive wasn’t sheer obstinacy, though; I had done it to prove my intelligence. He grinned, delighted at my irritation.

A wrinkle crossed his forehead. “Why is it that you study Kafka instead of Carroll?” Leonard asked. “You seem to know so much about him. It’s the one thing that really doesn’t make sense.” Only one thing didn’t make sense about me? I laughed. I wasn’t surprised that he was trumped, though. It barely made sense to me.

“You won’t believe me if I tell you.” I kept a close watch on his eyes, going over the board. He looked up. “Well, someone once told me that no one would take me seriously if I studied a children’s author. He said Kafka wrote things of importance and value.” I looked down almost ashamed, lowering my voice. “Pretty silly, I know.” I had so foolishly let someone lead me away from the writing I loved. I examined my fingernails.

“At times, we make the most trivial decisions with care, and at other times, we make the gravest decisions on a whim,” he said. “Now every thread has fit together.” He illuminated his remarks no further. I was confused but too proud to ask him what he meant. *Every thread has fit together*. What had he been following or trying to figure out? Was it me? Was he conceited enough to reduce my being to one of his problems?

Leonard slid another pawn two spaces to the middle. Not to appear too concerned, I went to the desk and turned on the lamp. The darkness had nearly consumed us in its inky cloak. I sat back on the sofa and gently pushed my kneecap into his. A prickle jumped up the side of my thigh. A few breaths staggered out of my mouth. I did want him. I curved my knight again in another ‘L.’ The moment my fingers released the piece, his pawn knocked it to the board. I huffed and moved my knee away. I had been right: I had only distracted myself.

He chortled, taking my knight from the board. Leonard would not look at me, so I examined him. His shoes were neat without a hint of dirt on their tassels. The burgundy leather was fine but not too fine for everyday. His trousers were crisp and ironed with a tidy line leading up to his belt, encircling his slight waist. The belt and shoes matched perfectly and complemented the pale blue oxford above. An artillery of buttons led another line straight up to his chin with a wrinkled neck peaking out between the folds of fabric. He looked like a stereotype to me, everything that an old man should be. It was his words, his dreams, his passions that set him apart. If he had been examining his body he would have found something remarkable, but nothing about his anatomy struck me as unique. A fault of mine, I’m sure. His exterior meant nothing to me. In my heart, he was all intellect and humor and lively discourse.

My mind wandered as I spoke. “Did you know that Lewis Carroll said math games were a good way to keep tempting thoughts away at night?” Leonard’s hand hovered over a bishop. For a few seconds, his fingers remained in indecision, ready to expand or contract. He turned.

“Shall we dismiss the overture, Alexandra?” he said. His lips pursed, and he withdrew his hand from the board. In the distance, a bell tower struck 9:00.

A moment passed. I glanced at the lamp again. A moth swarmed around it, lowering itself in circles to the glowing orb that would destroy it. The scene had a vicious radiance.

“What do you mean, Leonard?” The hangnails on my fingers itched, longing to be bitten. I contended myself by picking at them with nails from the opposite hand. I glanced back at the board. The game had been progressing, and he now had half my pieces in his prison. I tapped my fingers impatiently.

Leonard folded his hands together, considering his words. “We are avoiding the issues by playing this game,” he said.

I turned and laughed. For the first time, we were sitting facing each other. My chest swelled. A note of smugness bled through my tone. “We were always avoiding issues by playing games, Leonard.” I slumped back into the sofa.

His hands remained clasped, and he still looked downward. I didn’t know what to expect. “Perhaps you’re right,” he said. “But there was something especially last time ...” He couldn’t finish the thought. One of the black and white prints over his shoulder was crooked.

My knee jerked the coffee table. His encampment of white figures fell to the floor, followed by the few black pieces I had collected. The whole board toppled as rooks and pawns went tumbling. Neither of us moved. We simply sat watching with a stoic distance. The scene played like a movie on the screen. We were the audience, sophisticated enough to know that we were not in it and could not alter the events before us. A nothingness crept across my face.

“Yes,” I said absently. Perhaps this was the time to disambiguate, making everything plain. I cleared my throat and stared down into my empty hands. They were like the wings of a dead moth balanced on a limb. My bottom lip began to twitch as my chin shook.

Leonard looked into my hands as well. He took one of the dead wings and interwound my hand with his, forming a cocoon. A vein in my neck jumped. I was even more overcome by this simple gesture of care. “Alexandra, just tell me,” he said, softly.

“You were wrong,” I managed to choke out. The last time my tears had come with brutality; this time they came with restraint – a deeper form of self-torture. He pressed his free fingers to his lips and gazed through the window, off into the endless night. Stray cats ran across the shadows of brick walls. The lights from the streetlamps only seemed to grow dimmer as they maintained their glare.

His eyes bored into me, asking me what I meant, but his mouth remained silent. I sighed. This time, he would be my examiner, my executioner. If only with his eyes, he would force the truth from my memory.

“You told me your secret. I have secrets too,” I said. “I’m not as open as you think.” None of my friends in London knew. I barely told the story to myself. I shook

again and leaned into Leonard. I didn't want to remember. I used his shoulder as a tissue, rubbing my heartache into it. I breathed, trying to ward off the jumps and gasps in speech. The steady stump of his demeanor supported me. He needed to know.

Leonard took my hand still wound about his and wiped a tear from under my eye. He balanced it on the back of his hand, a universe in a bubble. My wild imagination thought that he would kiss it or drink it, but instead, he rubbed it into his skin, making it a part of him. I feebly laughed and breathed.

“It all happened years ago. My mother and my father were friends with this couple that my father knew through work. They would invite them over sometimes for dinner or to play cards or something. I never cared that much about them.” I had begun. In my mind, I saw a fixed tunnel with no light at the end. There was only the path I had started on, and I had no idea where it would lead. I was alone. Maybe that was how Leonard had felt when he had looked out the window at the cats and fading streetlamps. I didn't know.

“Why do they matter now?” He lowered his voice, already seeming to understand. All through my walking in the streets, my vomiting in the alley, my altercation with the clerk, my morning in bed, my hand poised above the telephone, I had been conceited enough to think that he hadn't known. Only he did know, from the downward tilt of his head to his eyes' avoidance to his muffled words. How could I have doubted him?

I turned and rested my head against the arm of the couch. My fingers fell to release his hand, but he held me tightly. For a moment, I tugged. It didn't matter now. I surrendered.

“Alexandra,” he said, swallowing. “I already know.” I stared down at the forgotten chess pieces scattered on the floor. Most of them were underneath the table, but perhaps a few had rolled across the room under the window or even beneath the couch. The board clung to the table and sat before us empty. It was ready to be stored away. I lurched. A soundless quiver passed over my shoulders, but he held me together with his stare.

“The husband made me feel –” I stopped. I couldn’t do it this way. I hadn’t decided if my relationship with Leonard was guilty or innocent. I stood and crossed the room to lean on the bookshelf. From here, he looked so old, so small sitting on my couch. He was like a piece of sandpaper reused year after year with ripped edges and bald spots. I was crazy to think that maybe this would work: twenties and sixties didn’t belong together.

Leonard picked up the water glass that had thankfully endured the topple and took a sip. “You don’t have to do this.”

“He made me feel weird. Okay?” I had to continue. I picked a book at random and flipped through it. It was a charming book in coffee table style. There were no words of substance, but it didn’t matter. I merely hid myself between the covers for a moment and hastily put it back on the shelf.

“When I turned seventeen,” I continued. “My parents decided to have this big party for me. People from school came and from church and also this couple. Tables were set up out on the patio, and people were playing in the grass. After the couple came, my dad asked me to show them where the drinks were. The wife stayed with my mom, but

the husband followed me inside.” I leaned my arm against the bookcase. The tears were so thick in my eyes that Leonard’s image was only a fuzzy abstraction.

“We were alone,” I moaned. Leonard walked to the shelf to console me, but before he could touch me, I moved and crossed over his path back to the couch. He stood, watching the scene from the bookshelf as I sat down again.

“You don’t have to do this,” he repeated. “I don’t require this knowledge.” His hands were in his pockets, and he held me in his vision. He said that he didn’t, but I knew in the end that leaving this unfinished would leave him unsatisfied. There would be another conversation. There would be more tears and new games and – His eyes were lovely when they hit the moonlight.

“I have to tell you,” I said. Immediately, I fell apart again. My resolve had been wavering back and forth. I had to tell him because I loved him.

Leonard came and sat next to me again. This time, he was on my right. The lamp shone behind me, throwing me into contrast with the hint of a halo about my head.

“We were alone only for a few minutes, and he started to tell me that he loved me.” I threw my hand to my face. I didn’t want him to see the stain – to have the invisible guilt grow visible before his eyes. “And he said that he had loved me every since he had first seen me.” I gasped. The words flew free from my mouth like a prayer resting over our heads. Such ugly words composed a moment of beauty. He was resigned.

“Every part of me was disgusted. His wife was on the other side of the sliding glass door. Nothing happened the rest of the evening.” Leonard leaned into me. I stared out over the coffee table’s broad plateau. It was a clean slate, an uncharted frontier. My lips met with the rim of Leonard’s water glass and took a sip.

“This man – He was persistent, though. Every time he and his wife came by, he would manage five or ten minutes alone with me. His enthusiasm grew.” My voice cracked the still air. “And I’m so ashamed. Somehow, I grew to love him too. I don’t even know how.” I threw my hands on my knees and expelled whimpering sobs.

The night that Leonard had played for me, this man had flown into the room and perched himself upon my shoulder. The forlorn husband was the man I could not escape. The husband had left the beat of his pulse on my chest and the imprint of his kiss between the blades of my shoulders, the whiteness of my thighs. I had made the mistake in thinking that meant he wanted my soul. The husband was the ghost I ran from, locked inside the corner of my mind that I’d kept bolted even to myself. Because of him, I had denied myself to Leonard, to me. He – he was the one who thought I should study Kafka. I continued sobbing.

Leonard pressed his thumb into my shoulder in an infinite circle. I wanted him to breathe through me in a circle, finding solace and completion in a circle even deeper. I wanted him to stop. He needed to hear me and just my words. I gracefully removed his hand from my shoulder. “Listen.”

“Always,” he said with the greatest sincerity. He crossed his legs and leaned back into the couch.

My fingers played with a button sewn to the seat. “I mean, I don’t think that I really really loved him. Of course, he didn’t love me. That’s not how you love somebody. He tried to make me go against my family, my community, my beliefs. If he truly cared for me, he would have let it go.” The words had descended to a cool murmur.

Leonard sighed. His brows drew together harshly. “Be glad it wasn’t love. Love would have made it worse.” He stared at his hands again. I hadn’t noticed before, but he was passive and serene. Leonard respected me, giving me all I needed, feeling along with me in a terrible compassion.

My thoughts fell to this other man and the time that we had parked in my driveway and listened to his Allman Brothers cassette tape when my parents were out to dinner. He had no halo to slip off his hand and lay on the dashboard, but I still stared obsessively at his left ring finger. He was a father but kissed as if he were a virgin and began to weep, so I gave him a tissue, becoming his mother. Later, he still asked if I would like him to walk me inside the house, and even though my knees were trembling madly, I said, “Not here.” Never here. I couldn’t tell Leonard about that.

I hung my head. The deluge of tears was everywhere. “He couldn’t let me go. We started meeting more and more and finding other ways to see each other. Then, it happened.” I paused, considering my words. “It happened.”

Leonard looked wearier than I had ever seen him. He rubbed his hands across the hollows of his eyes and his forehead, searching for some perspective. He took my hand again. I squeezed his hand warmly.

“Thank you,” I said. Somehow it was easier this way. I held all my emotions together as I delivered the few sentences. “His wife was going out of town, and my parents would be on vacation. It was the first time I had ever been at home by myself. He asked me to meet him, and we would go somewhere and make love.” As soon as the words had left my mouth, my resolution broke, and fresh tears streamed through every pore of my body.

“And I went ... and he didn’t. And I hated him for it. I hated that maybe he didn’t love me, and I hated that he humiliated me, and I hated that he got to be righteous. He could say, ‘I knew it was wrong, so I stopped first. She’s evil; she wanted to continue.’ And I – I *was* evil.” I paused. I wiped the blotches as a glow of peace spread across my face. It was finished. “I was so young, and I thought I loved him so much.” The last tear fell from the corner of my eye, and I laughed lightly as I captured it and rubbed it into Leonard’s hand.

“That’s just the point. You were so young. It was not your fault. It’s a good thing he doesn’t live here. If I saw him, I would kill him right now. No questions asked. His behavior is inexcusable.”

He took me in his arms. Our hearts beat right up next to each other as we felt the closeness that can only come from two people bound by pain. The clock tower struck again. It was 11:00.

“Do you feel better?” he asked removing his hands to address me. He was still shaken but painted a forced smile on his face.

“As better as I can. Do you see now why it hurt me so much? I thought I could never trust you after you told me about her.” I turned my face full towards him. After all the words I had spoken, Catherine felt like nothing more than a distant nightmare. “In my mind, you became him.”

The impression of a tear flickered in his eye. “Someone hurt you. Someone exploited you, but that person was not me,” he said. I never thought you could want me. I do not ask you to give up your studies or your family or anything else. They have nothing to do with our relationship. The only people in our relationship are you and me.

I'm old. Marriage and children are behind me, even if I was single. I have always cared for you." He paused. "Do you understand?" I took his hand and held it to my cheek. He meant the world to me; I wanted him to deny me nothing. I wanted to have him honestly.

"I don't know. Where do I fit into your life then?" I answered, letting his hand fall.

"My wife and I are practically divorced. She is lovely, but she will never love me again. When she asks for a divorce, I will give it. I let her decide. She is a beautiful painting, and I hang her portrait in my heart alongside yours. Neither is lesser or greater." My heart fell. I needed to hear that I was better. He could at least say that his affection towards me was more passionate, even if equal. He could at least love me enough to lie.

Still, he continued. "Comparisons are essentially unfair. She is no part of our relationship. When you and I are together, there is only us. All that I want from you is the honor of loving you, in this moment, for however long this moment continues. If I can make a life strung together by moments, I will die a happy man." He laced his fingers through mine and searched my eyes for some hope, however distant.

His words rattled my every resolve. I considered for several moments. I heard the bump of a neighbor's late night visitor on the stairs. The black knight rolled against my foot. My voice finally returned to me. "Yes" I said, folding myself into his arms.

He kissed my cheek. He was so close but felt oceans away. My issues with Leonard remained. Could I take him and love him? I still didn't know. He hadn't said that he loved me even though he implied it. He certainly didn't want to marry me. No one wanted to – He wanted to love me but without any commitment. Was that love? We sat holding hands and watching the stars of Orion against the night sky.

“I hope I didn’t hurt you. I had to tell you. The man – he made me not want to love you. He made me never want to love anyone again.” I hummed a tune from my childhood, not knowing exactly how I had learned it. It was a mournful rambling that made no sense. He listened as he took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the excess moisture from beneath my eyes.

“What do we do now?” he whispered.

“I need time to think. I’m confused to say the very least.” Hesitantly, Leonard unwound his hands from my heart and held me at arm’s length. His eyes climbed inside mine with more honesty than I had ever felt from any human being. I saw myself reflected very small like a flower blossoming in his pupils. *There is much to hope from the flowers.*

“I love you,” he said.

Chapter 5: Alexandra Leaving

After Leonard left my apartment, I went to bed again and lay there, studying the ceiling. A watermark from the uncharacteristically wet season drifted on the wall above my eyebrows. Nothing much else had been said. Only *I love you*. He had finally said it. I rolled over on my stomach and crossed my arms under my chin. Before, I couldn't deal with my feelings because I thought I was imagining things. Now, everything was too real. For months, all we were was an innuendo. The sudden turn of fantasy into reality over the past two days had left my head spinning. I blinked.

The clock by the bed read 2:00. I rolled back over to look at the ceiling and wove my hands into an "X" across my chest. I breathed. A sliver of moon shone through the crack in the curtains. She decorated the sky like the bloom of a rose. I remembered seeing the moon last night and thinking, *Time will always be my intercessor*. This time, I had a different epiphany. The glowing orb twisted itself into a heart and then a question mark. The answer was a great and terrible birth inside of me: Leonard could never love me. He wanted things to remain as they always had with only the added admission that we were in love. Our life was already strung together by moments. Moments were all we were. Catherine had expressed my feelings best in the scrap of paper that had fallen out of the plays: I loved him as a condition of life, not even a choice. How could Leonard and I claim to love each other if we couldn't agree on the meaning of the word?

The shadow of a car passed across the bedroom wall. I released my hands to my side. Leonard had kissed my cheek. I had toppled the chessboard. I took my fingers and caressed the palm he had held. The memory was engendered in my skin. He had said, *I*

love you. I hadn't returned the words. I meant it in every sentence and every glance, but I couldn't say those exact words. There was still Catherine.

Even though things were over between them, Leonard could not leave her. He was still holding onto her inside his being. I could never love two people at once as he did. I gave him all my breath. If he couldn't leave her, he didn't love me enough. If I allowed things to remain as they were, with no further commitment, maybe I didn't love myself enough. The sheets were tangled into knots. There was no way I was going to be able to sleep. I turned to the wall. I wanted to marry him.

* * *

After more tossing and turning, I drug my sleepless body out of bed at 4:00. I took the bus to Piccadilly Circus and walked around the square. Gigantic billboards displayed images of supermodels and actors and Coca-Cola bottles, all bejeweled in glaring lights. If you were thirty feet tall, it was the place to be seen. The noise consumed my senses, and it was thrilling not to think but to experience. I was a little over five feet tall, and it was the place to become invisible. Hundreds of people surrounded me, talking on their cell phones and drinking from their coffee cups. The night was still alive, and I smiled in full anonymity. A few drunken homeless men wandered into the square, and I exited, taking a side street. I wandered down Victoria and Whitehall before finally coming to a rest on a bench on Lambeth Palace Road.

The sun was just peaking over the horizon. For a long time, I considered the London Eye reaching out over the Thames. Ticket sales had not started yet for the colossal Ferris wheel, and it remained motionless. Through the expanse in its middle, I saw Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. They stood upright and solid. The buildings

were pillars of architecture just like their members were pillars of their society. I wanted to be like them, living in ease and convention. I wanted to be loved conventionally because convention meant real love to me. It was an absence of shame that I had missed both with Leonard and the faithless husband.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a man and woman holding hands watching the boats drift on the marina. She was laughing as he rested his head on her shoulder and rubbed his hand over the bump of her stomach. My face wrenched, preparing for tears that would not come. I didn't want to love in secret. I wanted not to blush when he took my arm in the street. I wanted to lean out the doorway and give him a kiss before going to work in the morning. I wanted to display my swollen stomach to the world without fear. Convention is ease and comfort and love. No one could give me an honest offer. After all I had experienced, my tears remained dry in their ducts.

I gazed back at the stationary wheel. If only my mind could find that measure of serenity. The few boats on the marina continued to float, tied securely to their posts. The man and woman had walked away. I ran my hands through my hair and over my cheekbones. The tourists were gathering, and I was in no condition to be seen. The hollow of the Eye beat into me. I had wrapped myself in circles, only tripping on my desires. Leonard stopped, retreated, tried to listen. Even when I doubted him, I knew Leonard did not mean to hurt me the way that the other man had. The other love had been an embarrassing passion that forgot the word judgment. Often enough, the other man and I had kissed in his car in broad daylight, and I had written him sickeningly tasteless poems that I had slipped into his jacket pockets. I had given up caring who saw us laughing and smiling or whispering. Inside of me, I had felt that he was my property and

disregarded the fact that he really belonged to someone else. In the end, I hated him more than I had ever loved him. Any suggestion that Leonard was this other man was ignorance, but now Leonard was married, too – He didn't want to commit to me any more than the husband had.

Allowing myself to think about the other man was hard, but allowing myself to think about his wife was harder. She had still loved him. Maybe it wasn't with the abandon of a newlywed, but she owned him inside her heart. I hadn't stolen his love, though. By the time I met them, love had already left him. It didn't have to be me, but it would have been someone, sometime. I wasn't the transgressor but the unfortunate victim of both of them. My chest heaved a tiny spasm. The ticket box was opening.

The sun rose higher in the sky, and I put my hand to my forehead like a visor. The odds had been stacked against me, but I was a rational being, regardless. I possessed a conscience, which I had failed to use. Leonard said his marriage was over, but was he lying? I had heard the same assurances before. Catherine had not asked for a divorce, but she was a free-floating soul. That was fine. I had to know before I could act, though. Was the marriage really over *for her*? My hand fell to my side.

Why did I always do these things to myself? Why did men think they could do these things? The two men were so different; the common denominator was me. Me. I couldn't deny it. Why was I doing this again? I told myself – and I told myself over again, but I loved Leonard. He had waited over seven months to tell me anything. If he had wanted a cheap thrill, he could have satisfied it more quickly and with more emotional economy. He invested in me because he loved me. No matter how I beat

myself inside my brain, I always came back to the fundamental reality: Leonard loved me.

The London Eye started its swivel through the air. The tourists swarmed the ticket office like an ant hill. The line steadily grew to half a mile long. As passengers moved on and off, the wheel continued spinning. The line would multiply exponentially, and constant movement was the only way to accommodate everyone. The Eye could go on. Leonard could go on, but maybe I couldn't. I needed perspective. My heart was suffocating my mind in his presence.

I took a scrap of paper and a pen out of my jacket pocket. On the top of the list, I wrote "America" and immediately crossed it out. I didn't have nearly enough money, and I was already running from there. It seemed no place in England would work. Leonard knew the geography too well. I didn't want to be found before I was ready. Where did I *want* to go? I wrote down "mountains" and "the ocean." My pencil paused, hovering over mountains again, before scratching them both out. I needed somewhere more concrete. My eyes passed over the stolid column of Big Ben, and I wrote down "tower." Yes, I needed to lock myself away behind some tower where Leonard could never reach me. Where was the key to my tower?

My mind wandered to the continent. There was Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. Spain and Portugal were perhaps a bit too southerly. Italy would be lovely, I thought, but I didn't have the money. Focus. I could speak German fluently and Spanish pretty well. The shouts and laughter of the growing crowd around me filled my ears. I wanted to go someplace where I didn't have to communicate with anyone but myself.

“Leaving,” I wrote next on the list. I tapped my foot against the concrete. Somewhere Leonard would never think that I would go. Somewhere he would think I didn’t want to go. All the countries I had named were beautiful. Each was as likely as the next. I had no place to go and no one to see in any of them. Except – I had forgotten because I didn’t want to know. I had barely heard him as he had tripped over the words during his confession. Catherine. Catherine lived in Paris, he *thought*. No, he had subtly lied. He *knew* that she lived there.

I ran my fingers across my lips and glanced back at the London Eye, revolving at full tilt. Meeting Catherine was the one way I could be certain that things were over between them. Catherine was the other woman and slightly repulsive to me. I was wrong, though: I was the other woman. Leonard felt so much like mine that I forgot the reality of the situation. Could I compare to her? He had told me next to nothing about Catherine. The sum of my knowledge was that she was strong where I was weak. Even if I didn’t know her, she had formed a mystique in my mind. She was the perfect woman with a personality that would fill a room. She was a flower blossoming into eternal youth.

Leonard had compared Catherine and me to paintings hanging side by side in a museum. How could someone not know who they loved more in their heart of hearts? Underneath all of his layers, he knew. He knew that he loved Catherine more, and he was too scared to tell me. What other facts or proof did he need? He would probably say something absurd like, “Let’s all sit down and take tea together and talk about the weather or some such nonsense. Just the three of us, cozy as can be, and then maybe I can decide.” Trying to conform to his decisions was draining me. I didn’t want to wander around his house and play second fiddle to some ghost. I was going to meet the ghost and

hear what this indecisive man was really like from her own lips. If I could compare the paintings, I would know how over it was for myself. She would tell me if I could love Leonard.

* * *

That afternoon, I went back to my apartment and called information. “Hello, operator, do you have the number for a Catherine Collins in Paris?” My every intuition said that Catherine would not have changed her last name. I let the air release itself from my mouth now that the most difficult words were spoken. The operator paused for a moment and let the line lay silent before tossing out a string of numbers that I pulled in with the tip of my ballpoint pen, laying them to rest on a pad of paper. “An address?” I continued. When I was done writing, I placed the receiver back on the hook. The easy part was over.

Before I could leave, I sat down at the kitchen table and folded my hands. The only worry left was my thesis. A stack of note cards, loose sticky notes, and hundreds of pages sat before of me. The work was just half-done. Leonard had likely only impeded my progress. Being done with my work meant that I had to leave him whether I decided to or not, so I had delayed. The decision was now fully in my reach. I hated Kafka. I only studied him because of the husband’s suggestion. Continuing my work was to continue in the grasp of both sets of repression. I wanted to know who I was outside of all that. I lifted the pages in my arms and let them fall into the garbage can. I sighed.

The University of London was a great school, but part of the appeal had been an ocean between me and my problems. Before, I had run from the husband and any solution we could have come to. I wanted to get away now, but this time I had to run to a

solution, to Catherine. Leonard would come to my place again, I knew. Last night, I had made him believe that I could be happy. It wasn't a total lie. Someday, I would be happy – it just might not be with him. I needed time to think and much more than a day or two. I needed to put the hibiscus flowers and the chessboard and all that out of my head. I loved Leonard, but what did that mean?

I went to the desk and grabbed a piece of typing paper. I sat at the table and wrote a note to my advisor. At first, I explained how I would not be continuing with my work and was going away. I marked it out. If I told her that, she would panic. Besides, it was beneath her dignity to leave her a Dear John letter for my thesis. She had put a lot of time and energy into me. I stood and walked to the trash can. I had made my act of defiance. If the decision was only up to me, I would leave the pages there on top of banana peels and potato strings. I picked them out of the trashcan. I had put a lot of effort into my work. I would finish for her, and I would finish for me. The men were out of the equation now.

A dry piece of lettuce clung to back of one of the pages, and I flicked it off, setting the pages on top of yesterday's newspaper and – it barely occurred to me – on top of Leonard's ad. I held my pen again, bringing it to my lips as I thought. I wrote that I was tired and needed a vacation. In a few weeks, I would be back to finish my work. Perhaps Leonard would give up finding me by then. If I came back to him, it had to be on my terms and with a clear conscience. I took out an envelope and tucked the letter inside.

I gathered my things. The essentials fit into an oversized suitcase. I didn't have much to pack. I put my luggage by the door and looked around the room. My billfold was tucked away in my purse. Everything seemed handled. I turned the doorknob. Somehow, I had to meet Catherine. She had lived with this man; she could explain everything to me.

Why did he never look at you when you stared at him? Why did he argue over nothing and accept the most difficult things with ease? Did he really know or did he just make you think he knew? Was he free to love me? She was the key to my understanding, and with understanding, I could start down the path to resolution. If I could think of no other way, I would ring her doorbell and tell her everything. Her words that I had read to Leonard – *our powers, our desires, our food, are all really necessary for our existence in the first instance. But this rose is an extra* – impregnated my brain. I just knew that we were alike – Catherine and I. Leonard had loved us both. Catherine would understand me where Leonard failed. I was already gone.

* * *

An hour later, I was boarding a compartment on the Eurostar train. My parents had sent me a nice amount of money for my birthday to buy a new sofa, but I cashed the check for a ticket instead. They would never know the difference hundreds of miles away. I simply did not care. Freedom, I repeated my new mantra to keep the anxiety at bay. Freedom.

The train was modern with all of the seats facing forward like an airplane. I was relieved that the cars did not fit my outdated notion of carriages with the passenger's seats turned in on one another. I didn't care to spend two hours trying not to look into the eyes of someone facing me. Instead, as soon as I boarded, I flung myself down in the tightest corner and used my bag to bar any company from joining me in the outermost seat.

I had a book, and I was determined to read or at least pretend to read. I glanced at the spine: *Chesil Beach* by Ian McEwan. My school chum, Sarah, had loaned it to me. It

was the story of a woman who was afraid to love the man who loved her conventionally, so she offered him an open marriage. He was repulsed and left her. I didn't believe it. In my experience, the men I had known had longed for open, free love, and the women had despised it. I was hungry for love and didn't fear it. The book was regressing and going back to the time they had first met. The words formed automatic syllables and hummed to the swish of the tracks. A dull groaning filled my mind. The meaning of the pages fell to nothing. Leonard was still the only thing on my mind.

What was he doing? I wondered. Was he calling my apartment right now? I could imagine how the phone, not budging from its horizontal position on the wall, would fiercely ring without the release of a hand. Again and again, pounding into the silence of the space. His clear voice would record message after message on my stationary machine, all leading to nothing. The perversity in me loved it. Maybe now he would know that feeling. I love you, baby, but I'm busy. I love you, but let me get my affairs in order. I love you, but I don't know if I love you more than her. Ridiculous. I was being ridiculous; I knew he didn't leave messages on answering machines.

I glanced at the seats across the aisle to my side. Two teenage girls sat with another girl joining their conversation from behind them. The three girls poured over a tabloid. Their smiling eyes examined Prince William's obtuse teeth jeering out from the cover as they giggled. I leaned back and the moment became a perfect tableau in my eyes. Part of me wanted to go back to that snow-white innocence when I could just love someone inside my mind and live untarnished, a time in life when nothing was more exciting than the feel of glossy pages without consequences underneath my fingertips. Did that time even exist? The innermost girl waved her hands in broad gestures while the

one next to her snorted, and the first playfully smacked her. I laughed at them. There were maybe only eight years between us, but they made me feel closer than ever to Leonard in their naiveté – not that I was the soul of experience.

One of the girls looked up and turned towards my chuckles. Her eyes lit on me, and she eagerly motioned towards the picture, stuttering some French syllables that I had no way of comprehending. Yet her body language told the whole story. She was so sweet and eager for some reply, willing to share the companion of her imagination.

“Sorry, I don’t ...” I began. Before I could even finish the words, she turned back and tightened the fold of her companions. They whispered. Now they were talking about me. Before, they had conversed about the charms of the young royal. The language of teenage girls was no mystery, but how much more mysterious were words between a man and woman who wanted to understand each other? Leonard had said, “I love you,” but it was completely different than the love I felt for him. He wanted to talk with me and to play chess with me and to feed me. I wanted to kiss him and to write poems for him and to hang my head on his shoulder. His love was pure and paternal, mixed with the romance of a teenage boy. Every gesture that emanated from his love was care. My love was passion and starry-eyed adoration. I chuckled at the girls again. Chatter away. Stay happy.

I stared blankly into the back of the seat in front of me and crossed my legs. Seconds later, I quickly uncrossed them. That was his move, his gesture. In Leonard’s moments of deepest satisfaction, I had seen one kneecap slide across the other. Did giving me pain bring him some true satisfaction? He had said that he loved to comfort my tears, but did he love to give me thirst to quench it? All of the grins and glances began to

feel artificial. Could he have only drawn me in to repulse me? Maybe this relationship could only survive with a game, a constant push and pull, like a flag teetering from one side of a rope to another in tug of war. He began to disgust me.

The dull countryside glided past. What was he doing now? I could envision Leonard rising from his chair and pulling his coat over his shoulders in the hallway. He would catch the same bus that I did around the corner and ride it all the way to my stop nearly an hour away. His eager body would sit, poised on the seat nearest the exit, and he would long for the bus to come to a halt right up against my door. This was going overboard. If Leonard did catch the bus, he would probably purchase his ticket with exact change and sit down in the most comfortable seat, while politely waiting to descend from the bus last. He was always a gentleman, if in ritual only. He probably hadn't tried to call at all. According to my wristwatch, it was about 4:00 – time for a nice cup of tea. Don't count on an old British gentleman to miss his tea.

My back slumped down in the seat. A mother with two small children was coming towards me, and I was trying to avoid her very noticing. She passed by steadily with a click of her pumps. Very elegant. Very Catherine in my imagination. Did Catherine and Leonard ever have any children? He never told me. He probably had a son, dark and introspective and exactly my age. Just the kind of man to make this whole situation more troubling. Then I would be the woman who loved the father and the son and had to choose between them. I slumped lower.

In my mind's eye, my knuckles would knock on a bright, hardwood door, and a hand of polished fingernails would wrap around the frame to open it. Catherine stood as a vision with mounds of golden curls and a long flowing linen robe. I was crazy again.

Paris wasn't Heaven. Catherine surely wasn't an angel. She was probably one of those old women with knee-length silver strands that they pull severely back into a knot at the nape of their necks. She would probably wear a mannish pantsuit and some hideous clunky shoes. I wanted so much to be prettier than her – to have some advantage – but if she wasn't beautiful, somehow things collapsed. I could say to myself, *Leonard stays with Catherine because she is better looking*, but I couldn't say to myself, *Leonard stays with Catherine because she is better*. Her body could be superior but not her being. Please, not her being.

In my parallel fantasy, Leonard would primly exit the bus and nod his cap at the driver before stepping off. He would bend over and pick some lint from his trousers while bracing a newspaper under his arm. Throwing the lint to the street, he would unfold the newspaper, sit down on the bench around the corner from my apartment, and place his cap in his lap. The Italian grocer would come out and offer him a piece of fruit, and they would talk about me. The grocer would ask Leonard if he knew the strange alcoholic girl who lived just up the way. She popped in every few days looking awfully pale and strange. Maybe a nice looking girl if she combed her hair and washed her face. Leonard would reply that he hadn't the foggiest who she was and thank him for the fruit before tossing the core and the paper in the garbage.

He would stride down the street and slick back the side of his hair with one hand. No, he would never do that. His hair was always perfect. Instead he would put his hands casually in his pockets and carefully step over each crack in the sidewalk, counting them as he went. Twenty-one. Twenty-two. As he came to my front steps, he would turn on a dime, without even a scratch on his penny loafers. Maybe he would whistle something

like “Hail, Britannia.” A very nationalistic man. He would skip up the thirteen steps – he would know as he counted them as well – and rap his knuckles to wood, first softly as a gentleman, then succumbing to pounding. He would make my poor door pay for his anger and leave his signature on its face. Then he wouldn’t be able to stop. Laying in his elbow first, then his well-aimed foot, he would knock the door to the ground. This was absurd. He wouldn’t dare. Leonard was likely still at home, curled up in his chair and enjoying the fire and something delicious. My stomach grumbled.

I leaned down to my purse and pulled out a sandwich. The bread stuck dryly to the roof of my mouth. I barely wanted to eat. The act could not remove the pain in the pit of my stomach. Leonard was using me. He wasn’t like the other man, but my mind kept drifting back to the idea. My soul was adamant – Leonard was not another version of the pervert out to replace his wife with a girl barely older than a child. Leonard just didn’t love me enough, but the husband hadn’t loved me enough either. No one could love me as I pleased. Somehow, my subconscious kept coming back to the thing I knew and hated. There was so much to love about Leonard, though. He filled my longings for conversation and intellect. He found interest in the words I said. He sparked a fire inside of me to be more and do better. He was a man with all the world and time at his fingertips. Leonard could do anything, be anything – except my husband.

Chesil Beach was still sitting next to me on the seat. I didn’t care to hear anymore about the man’s fraternity brothers or the woman’s music conservatory or bicycling through the woods. I flipped to the end of the book. Of course, how did I not see this coming? The man had left her, only to find at the end of his life that he loved her more than anyone he had ever met and would have been blessed to have her. It was so stupid.

Men never turned around and said they were mistaken. I stuck the book back in my bag. It grazed another book, and I could see Leonard looking back at me. I had forgotten that I brought *his* book with me. I wasn't going to look at it now. I laid the sandwich on the seat where *Chesil Beach* had been and tucked my knees into my stomach and closed my eyes.

The seatbelt lightly tugged me back. I didn't realize that the train had stopped. Outside the window, the station was bustling with hundreds of tourists and commuters. Paris. Paris is for lovers, I thought, for a pair of people. Now I'll step lonely into that great heart. I looked through the window trying to orient myself as to the location of the nearest metro stop. I could make out a brightly colored sign with a subway map that would tell me how to find her neighborhood. My fingers grasped for the purse next to my feet. I pulled the strap tight in my arm and rose, leaving the sandwich behind on the seat. This was Paris. Paris wasn't Paris when you were alone, but Paris was breath.

Chapter 6: The Beginning and The End

His picture, staring at me from the back cover, was luminous. Around the edges of his temples, I could already see speckled bands of gray, and he held a half burnt cigarette in his hand, lightly tapping the ash off onto his trousers. His eyes avoided the camera, but his body leaned, lanky and open. He wanted you to look at him. He wanted you to speak to him but without him approaching you. It was a picture I could imagine myself walking around in for hours. He wore a dark suit, but I would wear a light dress to balance him. He stood confidently in the foreground, but I would sit on a tree swing in the background and try to will him to me. He would win, of course, and he already had. The man was Leonard in his early thirties, and the book that so consumed me was the collection of poems that he had published in his youth.

During the final year of my studies in London, I went into *Clarke's* to shop for textbooks and came out with Leonard's book snug in the palm of my hand. The bookstore specialized in used and out-of-print books. I made a habit of scanning as many shelves as I could each time I went in the store, since the merchandise was constantly rotating. I wouldn't have noticed Leonard's book, shoved in the corner of a forgotten shelf, except that I had been looking for something. I just didn't know what. I bought the book – it was on discount – and read most of it on the way home, bobbing up and down to the rhythm of potholes underneath the bus.

Leonard wrote straightforwardly, without pride. His poems weren't minefields of allusion and learning. He wrote like a young man ready for some greatness but yet unstudied. That day and several weeks thereafter, he began to take life in my mind. In my

romantic sensibilities, he grew into a Heathcliff or a Byron, and I was stupid enough to believe maybe that was real.

It had been about a month since that afternoon, and I was making paper balls out of my rough drafts and calling that writing. His book was standing upright in its place of honor, balanced next to a picture of my parents on my desk. *What color were his eyes?* I wondered. I picked up my pencil again and scratched away at the paper for a while. It was pointless. Leonard Collins. The final stroke of the ‘L’ dipped into a curve and scooped up the ‘e’ in an embrace. I wadded the paper up and threw another ball into the trashcan across the room. Collins, Collins, Collins, and I missed. I sighed as I lifted my body from the chair to throw the ball away, and the last line of his biography struck me again: “Mr. Collins currently resides in London.” Maybe he was still here. His downcast head and open chest were calling me.

I picked up the telephone receiver and dialed information. It was so simple that it felt like a trick. Two Leonard Collinses in London? Possible but not likely. I shook my hands out and rolled up my shoulders. I could call him, and then I could meet him. What if I was just bothering him, though? At this point in his career, he was surely a busy writer with a heavy stack of published titles. The poems were too brilliant for him to have stopped. I picked up the receiver again and set it down. An apprehension caught in my throat. After thirty years, a man would not be the same person. He wouldn’t be as beautiful, and his words would not jump with the same impulse. The man of my imagining could not be, even if he ever was. I turned off the desk lamp and went to bed for the night.

When I got up the next morning, Leonard was still with me. I had dreamed of him that night. We were inside his photograph, and I flew through the air while he pushed me on the tree swing. The long bow on my dress fluttered behind us. We laughed together, but suddenly, I changed. "Let me off," I said. "I don't want to anymore." He didn't say a word but continued pushing me. "Let me off!" I started to yell. With every pulse of the swing, I became more and more insistent. "Let me off! I don't want to! I don't want to!" He looked down, impassive as his photograph. He stood straight and powerful. The tilt of his crown said, "Ask me again ... I dare you," and I did not dare but woke up.

Over breakfast I pouted some more. The oatmeal felt dry in my mouth. I limply held the spoon over the bowl and let it drip off the end. The curds grew fatter and fatter, exploding in my mind. I dropped the spoon. On the corner of my desk, I could see the scrap of paper where I had written down his address. I pushed myself away from the table and went to pick it up. The scrap was light in my hand like the flutter of an eyelash. I folded it and stuck it in my jeans' pocket. I glanced at the clock and picked up my coat and schoolbag to dart out the door and catch the bus.

I wanted to go to him first, but his apartment was an hour across town, and I only had an hour until class. I sighed. Academics first. I kept my eye on the clock all through my Feminism in Medieval Literature class. When the professor asked me a question, I was dumbfounded, offering him nothing. As soon as class was dismissed, I ran around the corner to the bus stop, not lingering with the other students as usual. I laughed. This was crazy. My thumb stroked the cover of his book.

I tried to count off the stops to his apartment, but I was too nervous. I buried myself behind the covers of his book and read. "I want to wakeup inside your kiss," he

wrote. I blushed. Besides me, there were only a few housekeepers and some stray students on the bus. I drew the book closer to me and eyed them suspiciously. Reading his book was becoming an intimate act that felt inappropriate to do in public. The nerves escalated as I put the book back in my bag and looked at the map over the windows. The bus lurched to a stop, and I scrambled for my things, realizing I was there.

The street was abandoned. An unnatural quiet settled over the afternoon. The line of apartments was typical, one-story and whitewashed, but the units seemed somehow richer than mine in the burrow. It wasn't the part of town that I imaged for an imminent author. The location was certainly centralized and useful, but not as fashionable as I had given him credit for. I took the address out of my pocket and walked up the street a block and turned the corner. My eyes flicked across the gold plates on the doors: 217, 219, 221. I looked down at the paper and back. It was his. I stood, considering it from the opposite side of the road. There was nothing remarkable in the white brick. The address plate was just as polished as the others. Each door stood like a stain, red at its core. His was no exception.

I pulled my coat closer around me, brushing my fingers against the honorary pin that the department had given me. The wind blew strands of hair into my face. It would be nice to go in and escape the cold. I looked into the sky and considered whether it would rain or not. If it poured, I could knock on the door and pretend to be only passing by but now in need of shelter. I peered into the downstairs window. The curtains were slightly parted, but I couldn't make out much, perhaps a kitchen sink. One brown eye met my gaze. I gasped. The curtain flicked back into place. I stood, dumbfounded. If it was him – I turned and ran back to the bus stop. I want to wake up inside your kiss.

* * *

About a week after, I tried to call him. The voice that met me on the other end of line was his housekeeper. “Mr. Collins does not speak into the telephone,” was her reply. Apparently, I had been “fortunate” that she was doing some light cleaning in his apartment at that time or no one would have answered at all. The next five minutes was an odd, sorted conversation where I spoke into the phone and she repeated my words to a dim, gruff voice in the background who made replies through her. At the end of our brief dialogue, it was concluded that I would come to visit him next Tuesday.

I rode the 6:00 bus to his apartment and gathered my courage before tapping on the back door. Since I hadn’t had to search for the number, I’d gone straight to the back of the apartment. It was the door closest to the bus stop. Someone shuffled about a bit before answering. He greeted me with a furrowed questioning. My fantasy had been wrong, and my second guessing had been right. Leonard was no longer handsome, but his face spoke to the past pictured on the back of his book. His eyes were dark and searching as I had imagined, and he wore a moody frown, not of ugliness, but whimsical appeal. The anger I saw was only a show; he was challenging me.

“Hi,” I said, airily. “I’m Alexandra Hargraves. I called.” I clasped my hands together and waited. He remained silent. I prepared myself to squeak out more syllables when he spoke.

“I am aware of the fact,” he said, “though you are perhaps taller than I thought. Come in.” He motioned with his hand, welcoming me into the house. “You can put your coat on one of the pegs and then enter.”

I entered as he said with a solid formality. The apartment was perhaps smaller than I thought. The rooms were a bit messy for his having a housekeeper, but everything seemed to have a place and a reason. The mirror hanging on the wall next to the pegs felt like an intention as much as the untidy corner full of umbrellas. Part of me felt foolish for coming here. People didn't do things like this – I never had before – but I already felt like I knew part of him. He played in my mind ceaselessly like the open and close of an umbrella.

After I hung my coat, I followed him through the doorway into the living room. “I won't introduce myself as you already know who I am. It is enough to say that you may call me Leonard.” He moved towards a pair of chairs, and we sat down, facing one another.

“I'm Alex. You can call me whatever.” I wanted so badly to act cool and impress him. He just stared blankly. My ankles crossed and uncrossed themselves. I balanced my hands on my knees.

“Alexandra,” he said, correcting me.

For a long time, those were his only words. We sat together in silence. The fingertips of his two hands matched each to each with its partner and rested under his chin. As he studied me, I studied him. There was something wild and Byronic about him, but I had imagined that quality coupled with good will. Leonard had a passionate life about him but not the openness I had read in his poems. I had anticipated everything but this coldness. The fact that he had agreed to see me made no sense in this light.

“There is only one thing that I cannot discern,” he said. “You said that you had read my book, but you are not a law student.” His fingers tapped their mates lightly.

I almost laughed from the tension, and a smile slid into the corners of my mouth. “You’re right. I’m not a law student. What do you mean by saying that I’m not, though?”

“My text covers the basic principles of the study of the legal system in Britain.” He coughed. “You are not a law student. How did you come to read it?”

He sat on his throne like a king, looking down on me from his superior height. We had met in his home, his domain. From his arrogant introduction to his calculating glances, it was clear that he thought he knew everything. I took a moment to soak in the pleasure of knowing that I was superior in one piece of knowledge. I smiled. I had some advantage, and I would use it to crack him.

“If I am not a law student, what *do* I study?” I crossed my legs like his but did not raise my hands; that would have been too much. His eyes slightly narrowed, and he was quiet for a few moments longer.

“You,” he said, “study literature.” We were back on his terms again. His comment was so unexpected that I slightly jumped back. He finally released a smile. We were matched in our first game together.

Over the next hour, I drew it out of him that he thought I must study literature because of my bag full of books, the right arm which was thinned by rubbing against the desk to write, and a certain romantic tilt of the nose. The whole thing was ridiculous, a bunch of muddled presumptions.

“No, that could apply to a law student. Well, except for that silly business about my nose. What does my nose have to do with it?” I challenged, grinding the toe of my shoe into the carpet.

“A person’s character is all in the nose,” he replied. He was glowing now with the smile I became so familiar with. “Take my nose for example. What do you see?”

I looked up at him and examined his face full on. His hair was unusually full for a man of his age, but little gray flakes were sprinkled in the strands. Slight sideburns ran down his temples, but the rest of his hair was neatly cut, and he didn’t have a trace of stubble on his face. He had some wrinkles around the eyes, but his cheeks seemed soft and inviting as pillows leading to his lips, locked in a pensive twist. It was hard to tell whether his lips were laced with brightness or playful sadism, whether his words were laced with exuberance or sarcasm. My eyes fell on him for only a moment before they dashed away. His eyes were so penetrating, and I didn’t know him well enough to be looking at him this way. He would think – but then his eyes darted away, as well. I looked back again at his nose. It was sort of longish, descending to a sharp end. What could I say?

“I see a ball of skin coming to a point.” I drew my lips in a little and continued avoiding his eyes. It wasn’t much of an answer. No matter his nose, the question was pointed.

He summoned his power into his eyes and looked at me fully. “You can do better than that. There’s poetry in you. What does my nose look like? Make a metaphor.”

My cheeks flushed crimson. Not only was I examining, I was now the subject of an examination. “Oh, wow ... I don’t ...” This was the last position I wanted to be in at that moment. I smoothed some stray hairs out of my face. He watched me all the time, taking in my countenance and tapping the end of his fingers together, still locked in

space. "I wasn't expecting ..." I stopped and looked at him full again, evening my voice. "Your nose is a hawk."

He let his fingers rest and crossed his arms in front of him. "Wonderful. Obvious, but accurate. Now, what does that tell you?"

I had been so relieved. Only more questions, now. "That you are intelligent, marvelous, a thing of majesty with wings that can take you anywhere," I replied sarcastically and slouched a little.

"There's no need for all of that," he said as he coughed and straightened himself in his chair. "When I asked you what that told you, I did not mean about my nose or even necessarily about me. What is this conversation telling you?"

I sighed. "Do you think of these things often?"

"All the time," he answered. The mood relaxed again, and he offered me a drink. I moved around to the sideboard to help myself. I was still confused. Was this the man that I had really hoped to see? He looked the same in a way, but how could he have written those words of beauty? He was cold and bent, but granted, he had good humor. In his presence, I was becoming timid, reserved and then a bit ferocious. Was that what he meant? Were these the telling things? Maybe he hadn't asked me about his nose to know about his nose. He wanted to see how I would reply to some stranger asking about himself or asking for a metaphor out of air. It had really never been about him. I was a laboratory subject as he threw in variables.

"How did you know I was studying literature?" I asked him, returning to my chair. "I mean, it couldn't have been my nose or my arm or any of that other ridiculous stuff." I handed him a glass of lemonade before taking a sip of out of my own glass.

He laughed, throwing his head back a bit. “You’re still puzzling over that?” I eyed him sternly. “I was just putting you on about the nose stuff. The pin on your coat. It says ‘University of London Literary Scholars.’ You really should give people more credit.”

“Oh. Yeah, that was ... wow. Bravo.” Two ice cubes stared back at me from the bottom of my glass.

“I like you. You’re a funny girl.” He took a sip and sat his glass on the table between us. As he leaned in, he lowered his voice a little. “There is something I have to know, though. Why did you read my book?”

My eyes brightened. I considered teasing him longer, but he had shown his cards. Fair was fair. I started to recite:

*To meet you on the page
and to feel your pauses
between my lines,
little gasps
of light,
glimpses
of beauty
greater than truth
and truth greater than ...*

Leonard threw his hand to his forehead, recognizing his flaw. He interrupted, taking over the recitation of his words:

*... reality. I think I know
whose hand I feel tonight*

*gliding across my
separate sheets
to the speed
of laughter,
to the speed
of lovely,
to the speed
of love me
because we only
have syllables to prove
that metaphor
stains deeper
than your fingers
dripping black in ink
on your skin
whiter than ...*

All his cleverness was spoiled. These were his words that I had read, his book of poetry. He couldn't even remember the last, so I finished for him. "... *the center of my spine*," I said. The words fell off the end of my tongue in a sweet triumph. I folded my arms and thought I'd feel proud, but he wasn't beaming anymore. "It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

"Too long. I couldn't even rememb –" He was stuck in the words inside him. Distant again. Another rock and tip in our see-saw conversation. "A friend supervised the publication of the damn rag. I had no part in it." He told his story to the carpet as I

watched. “You see, I felt that only he ever appreciated what I wrote. After a time, I didn’t even appreciate it anymore ...” His story fell to the wainscot, and he examined various paintings around the room. I folded my elbows onto my knees and cupped my face. He seemed so sad.

“What do you mean?” I held my silence, ready to listen.

He ignored my question and posed a counter one. “Do you like the poems?” His look was searching, almost needy. Some wall was coming down inside him.

“I think they are very fine. I like them a lot. They express the clarity of your feelings so well that they make me think you’re really talking about what I’m feeling. That must seem crazy ...”

“Good to know what the public thinks.” With those few words, he locked himself up again. Leonard had now made his way to the window and was looking out over the street in front of the apartment. He seemed a man disappointed with his lot. Writing was salvation for some people, but judging by his reactions, it had been his damnation. I had to offer him something. He wasn’t who I had expected, but I was still compelled.

As silently as possible, I got up from my chair and left him at his window. I darted into the hallway and pulled my copy of his book from my bag. How could he not appreciate the loveliness? What had made him turn from hope of emotion to mechanical despair? He was still whimsical and theatrical at touches, but he was so stern. The man who wrote these poems was a completely different creature. I turned back into the room and met him at the window where he had remained.

“Excuse me, sir,” I said. “Would you mind – I mean, may I ask you to sign my book?”

He took the book from my outstretched hand and moved to his desk to recover a fountain pen. The only sound was the scratch of his pen on the page. After he was done, he half-heartedly handed it over. "Do not close the cover yet. That would smear the ink," he said and sat back down.

I stood at the window and tilted it in the light to read the inscription. "*To Alexandra – That these vain scribblings may come alive for you more than they have for me.*" I was relieved that he had remembered my name, but none of the other words made sense. How could the words live in a way that they hadn't already?

"Thank you, sir," I said from across the room. "But what does it mean?"

He put down his glass and took a deep sigh. His lips hadn't even met the glass. "Why do you insist on called me 'sir'?" he said. "Your thanks are unnecessary." He lifted the glass again.

"And?" I pressed him.

Another deep sigh. "Anything can be understood if you search long enough. Not everything is to be told." He finally took a sip and sat the glass down on the coffee table.

With that the subject was done. I blew lightly on the ink in the front cover and closed it. Now, I had to search. The first fact was that he was infallible ... His original logic about my studies had been wrong. A bag of books, a worn arm, and a nose were no kind of evidence. The pin had really told him everything. But he was right. Was he? Now, he was definitely playing with my head. I knew that I studied literature. Maybe it wasn't him that was wrong. Could I be wrong? What had I misunderstood? He stared into the mantle distantly.

"Who was the poem about?" I asked.

Leonard reached out his fingers and grabbed his pipe from the coffee table. “Why do you assume it’s about someone? It could be some thing.” He paused and tapped the end of the pipe against his chin. “I’ll tell you, it was about the way reading and writing excited me when I was young.” Tap, tap. “... and a good friend I knew a long time ago.” He stared straight at me with an unwavering fierceness. He was soaking every particle of my soul out through my eyes. “Thank you for coming. If you pass by next Tuesday around this time, I’ll be here.” With those few words, the meeting was over.

* * *

That had been the beginning of my journey, and now I was reaching the end: Catherine’s doorstep. The house was charming. It embodied every apprehension from my fantasies on the train, complete with red brick, white fence, and a garden out back. Roses streamed down their trellises and morning glories withdrew their slightly parted petals. The sun was high in the sky, just barely noon.

I stared long at her door before putting my hand up. My fingers hung, suspended in the air. What *did* Catherine know that I didn’t know? Leonard was obnoxious, challenging, intelligent, lovable. Why had she left him? Why did *I* leave him? He loved me but not nearly enough. *Did* he love her more? He couldn’t even articulate who he loved. Maybe, he just *couldn’t* love. Love requires giving of yourself, unfolding every mystery. How could Leonard do that when he didn’t even know himself?

I backed away from the door. The pain was not necessary. I didn’t need to see the face of someone else who had once been wrapped in my misery. Leonard had outsmarted himself. He thought that his loving was freedom, that not knowing was freedom. No, it

was only repression. He lived in the moment with me because he couldn't face the anxiety of knowing, of choosing. No more facts were needed.

I put my hand to my mouth and glanced at the peep hole. He couldn't write poems anymore because he couldn't face his soul objectively. He didn't have the courage to examine himself and find – everything: the disappointment, the wrong decisions, the heartache, the right, the power, the dignity, the hope – everything, but freedom. He was tied to himself and couldn't choose to be different. I pursed my lips.

“I love you,” I said to myself and cried into my hands. I planted myself on Catherine's step next to my suitcase. This all had to end. I couldn't go on this way, constantly tearing myself apart. He just wasn't worth this. I didn't even feel in love anymore. I no longer desired to love him. “I love you,” I repeated in a whimper.

From behind, I heard the door crack open and a woman addressed me. She stood in shadow from the high tilt of the sun, and I could only vaguely make out her outline. “Parlez vous français?” The pronunciation was precise, and even with little French, I could hear a note of empathy bleeding through.

Something in my look must have given me away. She had to know; she was Leonard's wife. I shook my head “no” and kept it down trying not to look at her.

She tried again in English. “Do you speak English? Are you alright? Can I do anything for you? Is there someone I could call?” I took in her shoes: satin slippers. Charming, again. I didn't want to see her face. She was becoming disgustingly perfect.

“No, I'm fine.” I brushed my hair into my face. I didn't want her to see me either. I didn't want her to somehow see the truth in my face. “I'm sorry. I'll leave.” I got up from the step and haphazardly stumbled down the road with my suitcase wheeling

behind. Flakes of brown and green beer bottle glass crunched under my feet. From the slightest shard, I could see an eye boring itself into the back of my skull. One pale blue eye floated in a sea of glass. I turned to her.

“Ca –” I stopped myself. She wouldn’t know me, and moreover, her image knocked the breath out of me. She was old. No older than Leonard, but still old. I had given her all the credit of youth in my mind despite the obvious facts. The lines around her eyes were perhaps more drawn than his, though. She had led a life fuller in anxiety and deeper in compassion. The blush in her cheeks implied kindness and life, but upon the first glance, it was hard to find her beautiful. If someone really searched her mind thoroughly and found that he loved everything inside of her, then she could perhaps be beautiful in his eyes. I would at least give her that. I had no advantage of knowing a picture from her prime like I did with Leonard. Maybe I was prettier or something, but maybe it was only youth. Youth would pass away. Then I wouldn’t be able to rely on such a low advantage.

“I’m so sorry.” My words floated out of my mouth inescapably on the breeze, and I turned away. She was still his wife. He loved her still. I wasn’t the only thing wrong with this picture, but I still didn’t belong. My feet mechanically trudged the way to the Metro station.

Catherine was the morning glory. In the light of day she kept her best secret, but she was good inside. I knew it. Only the good could contend with Leonard’s attitude. Before when Leonard had held me, I had thought that I was bad, but I wasn’t really: I was good. I had been patient, loving, sometimes a mother to my love. I had not asked for anything unreasonable, only my rights, my dignity. When I was seventeen, when he, the

other man, would run his hand over my thigh, then I didn't know. I thought I was evil; I thought I had asked for it. *On some level, I wanted it*, I reasoned. Only letting the other man's fingers come inside to keep my virginity; I wanted to be disgusting. I couldn't take off my blinders to see. It was him. *He*, he was disgusting.

But – Leonard wasn't him. Leonard was the sigh of relief. Leonard was light and life that fueled me. There was nothing dark to our love. The core of our love was this: he had come to care for me. He never wanted to tell me because he never wanted to hurt me. Sometimes, he couldn't control his sarcasm or ill humor, but it was never about me. He wanted to give me nothing but hope for my writing and my future. He gave me the greatest gift. He let me leave him.

Epilogue

When I got back to my apartment, everything was as I had left it. The plant had grown fresh buds, though, and it looked as if someone had watered it. The red light on the answering machine was blinking, but it was just my advisor calling about my note. Nothing but bills in the mail.

I stood before the committee and defended my research, and afterwards sat down and decided to leave it all behind. I had my degree, but it wasn't my path. I had been running so long. It was time to go home – really home. I hadn't heard a word from Leonard, but he gave me the strength to leave. My mother was delighted and perplexed to find me on her doorstep, the returning scholar with a master's degree and no money. "Come in, I love you, honey." "I love you, too, Mom." That was all, even though she knew something was different in the dim of my eyes.

Over the next few months, I moved out and found a nice boring job as the personal assistant to a consultant for an accounting firm. After the work day was over, I became myself. I wrote slowly, deliberately. I did everything the hard way. Rejection letters poured in. No one liked my poetry. Eventually, I went back to school to find more fulfillment in debt.

He was always on my mind. I thought so often of picking up the phone. I'd still cry when I thought of everything. He let me leave, but was it because he cared or because he just didn't care? When the tears became too much, I transfigured them into ink and wrote. Leonard. I learned to control myself. One day, I would make him proud of me. Better yet, one day I would be proud for myself.

Five years passed slowly into success. I found a better job writing book reviews and cultural arts features for a mainstream newspaper in Memphis. After a creative writing class one day, I stopped to check the mail and received the most unexpected news. Months ago, I had entered a poem sequence in a contest – and won. There was some prize money, but mostly, I was thrilled about being published. I was still little Alexandra but with her little book now.

I was exploding to tell him. I picked up the phone. I put it down. I laughed at myself and picked up my pen. I would tell him the best way possible, with multiple revisions. The story of the last five years spread over three pages that I carefully tucked into an envelope and addressed. I asked him to come to my home. I wanted to invite him in and give him a copy of my book and sign it and ask about his life. If there was anything left, maybe I could give action to my love again. I had never stopped; I had merely held it inside my heart where only I could touch it.

I was overcome with my accomplishment. It was the pentacle of my life – nothing more important could happen. I would never receive a more important letter than the one telling me that I had won the contest. Then two weeks later, it came: another envelope with formal type-set. “We regret to inform you that Mr. Leonard Collins passed away ...” My tears passed away, and after all this time I had none left – I couldn’t cry because it wasn’t real. I paced around the room, drawing my hand to my mouth and then releasing it. He had to be alive. He was immortal; he couldn’t die – not before he knew. His attorneys begged to differ. Leonard had died of heart failure at home alone in his bed two months previous. Nothing more.

The attorneys thanked me for my letter. They had had difficulty locating an address for me. In his will, Leonard had left a packet. Please find enclosed. From inside the envelope, I pulled another one. It was slightly smaller and addressed in Leonard's handwriting, "To Alexandra –" simply. The contents were obvious, weighed in my hands: several pages of typing paper. I went back in the house and sat down at the table with the letter opener taken from the drawer. I held my hand to my mouth and sighed. I had written to him, asking him to my home, so I was ready to see him. I was ready to see him, so I was ready to read. I sliced open the flap. On top was a thin, loose sheet. My eyes met the smooth loops of Leonard's handwriting and read:

Dear Alexandra,

I hope that you never have to read this, mostly because I hope to give you these pages myself someday. It may seem strange to you that I am doing this, but my years are growing shorter, even when I first met you. Death comes to everyone. Everybody knows. I sincerely hope to see you again before that day, though, that I may burn the very words I am writing. There are so many things that you do not understand about what happened, but I do not understand them either. I have stopped trying now. The only thing there was ever to understand was that I loved you, no matter how you may have doubted. Believe me now. Every day makes that clearer.

The first time that I met you, you had such an impact on me. You are the only person who has ever really admired my work. It's good, but not even good writers always have success. You helped me to appreciate that part in me again, even if I only started to act on that change after you left. I was – and am – sorry

for how things ended, but it was the best for you. I thought about calling you so many times. When I decided to act, you were already gone. I could have searched, but you hadn't indicated that you desired it. Your decision was made. I sincerely hope that one day you will be a great professor. More importantly, however your life leads, I hope you will learn to believe in yourself and love yourself in a greater way than I could ever love you. Find a good man your age; have children; be happy. The problem was never you. It was me – I was too old, too set. You were perfect.

The contents of this package are poems. After you left, I started writing again. A great many of them are about you and the way I felt and the way things were to me. Maybe they could help explain how things really were. I have thought of you a great deal. If I had known how one tragedy had wrecked you, I would not have advanced. I did not mean to cause another. Someday I hope you forgive me if I have done any wrong by you. I am sorry for everything. I should have listened to you. I was scared to say it but now it seems obvious. I did love you more than Catherine, but I loved myself more than you. If I could take it all back, I would give you anything you wanted. I am sorry. I love you.

Yours,

Leonard

I couldn't help but cry then as all my confictions bubbled over into tears. There was nothing to forgive; I loved him. From underneath, I picked up the first letter. I had to

know – if there was anything to know. In his beautiful, sympathetic imagination, Leonard wrote:

“Alexandra’s Pain”

Broken buds are my hands
cradling my final
memories
of days spent
in sunlight
before being plucked,
being cut down
by your fingers that pruned me
tenderly, taking my body
jealously, as an embellishment.

The rain dissolves,
and I devolve into woman
less than woman, a stillborn
fairy, a fallen
messenger from the earth.

My long stem
transforms in the shade
into an untapped wand
with only shards

of pixie dust
dabbed like purple rogue
across my cheeks –
the last lingering youth to fade –
because you cannot
remember simple beauty
like my name
and threaten to throw me now
to a barren grave.

I wish to tell you. I long to tell you
my hidden hovel
of truth fine as sand
buried deep
in my roots, the wiry tiptoes
of my feet,
but I can barely breathe
through parched lips,
so I give you this: my final forgiving
kiss and hum a lilting
lullaby to my seeds, spells
of subtle magic, so the words
of the whispering wind

may not be lost, even to them.