Smaller crimes

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**NANYANG
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SMALLER CRIMES

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SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES

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***TRAUMA FICTION AND THE BAD FEMINIST: Fiction as
a tool for understanding and dealing with unspoken trauma
in non-traditional sexual assault survivors
(an exegesis)***

***SMALLER CRIMES
(a novel excerpt)***

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An exegesis submitted in conjunction with a novel excerpt to Nanyang Technological University in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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What a journey.

At the end of two years it seems as though time has flown by in an almost unreasonable manner, though I imagine this is very much like the rose tinted glasses you invariably don at the end of a twenty kilometer marathon – it seems lovely and romantic and you emerge with a sheen of sweat and triumph at the end of the whole affair, determined to embark on the next one as soon as you cool down. This is a lie, of course, an endorphin-fuelled lie we tell ourselves, because the process was long and arduous and hard, and many times you felt like giving in and up. Which I think is the point – when it comes to art, creative work, or anything vaguely passion driven, suffering is always the point. Someone famous once said that the journey matters, not the destination, and although I don't exactly agree in full (for I do think it silly to dismiss the destination that one has worked so hard to get to), I see where the cliché is coming from. The suffering and I collided, chipped away at unnecessary things, and from working through it I find myself one step closer to being the person I want to someday be, in my head. I remind myself: I am thankful for the journey. But realistically, yes, it was hard.

Part of the difficulty for me through these two years stemmed from the subject matter I dealt with – and let me tell you, stowing away in an office for two years researching and writing about female trauma, rape, blame, survivor testimony, the oft unsympathetic arm of the law – it's depressing stuff. Thanksgivings, then, are in order: thankfulness to the people who have suffered my pessimistic presence for the past two years and who have helped me get through it. Stress makes me a shadow of the person I am, I know, and my friends and family have gotten a discounted version of myself

the past couple of years, yet never issued a bleep of complaint. The empathy and understanding that has been extended to me is something that I am everlastingly grateful for. My family, who I don't talk to about my work because it is not a subject I know how to objectively broach, and their offering of support by means of home brewed soup and prayer. Thank you. My friends, Georgina, Xiao Qi, Lils, Fred, Manda, Martin, and Roz, amongst others, who endured a compromised version of their friend for two years and yet always knew how to remind me through word and deed that the world is not as depressing as my research statistically shows. Thank you. My writing club of two people – one of which is myself, the other, my friend Marcus, who pushes me along and talks writing with me at 4am on Thursday nights and more. Thank you. My readers – Xiao Qi and Shane, who read draft after draft despite not actually being obliged to, who gave me feedback, who loved me enough to criticize and not coddle me. Thank you. My poor boyfriend, my better half, my rock, Shane, who has had to deal with my ups and downs and gender-fuelled debates with myself, who has been the most supportive human being in the world, past the boundaries of romantic obligation, past the expectations anyone could ever hold. Thank you. My supervisor, Barrie, who has seen me through not only these two years as a Masters student, but also through four years of undergraduate writing. Thank you. Divya, an unexpected angel who gifted me with understanding, guidance, and empathy through the last stretch of my term. Thank you. Tash, my mentor turned friend, who gave solid advice, who generously shared his experience with me, who believed in me, and who was plain great company. Thank you. There are people I have missed out, I'm sure, because the number of people I am thankful for is insane, and after two years my memory stutters and fails me, a sure sign that I need sleep. There are not enough thank

yous in the world for the people I have been blessed with in my life. I don't deserve them, but I try to.

I do want to thank the University too, although it feels strange to thank an organization or institution I can't put a face to. But the University to me consists not just the administrative and financial support they have offered me over the past two years, but also the people within, who have been to be a continual source of inspiration and support. The writing master class I took with Tash helped me figure out so much regarding what I wanted to do and achieve as a writer that my thesis would not be in the shape that it is now without the class as a catalyst. I was fortunate enough to have caught the class when it ran – and I can only hope that the school brings the class back again, for I have utmost confidence that it will help others as it has helped me. The writers that NTU had on staff offered me guidance that was invaluable to my experience as well – Tash, Divya, Barrie, Kim Cheng – and I have no doubt they'll continue to be the cornerstones of creative academia no matter where they go on to teach in. And special thanks too, to Samara, graduate coordinator, who is a blessing to the University in her passion and sunny disposition. God knows we could use more people like her in the world.

Here we are at the end of the line. It's about time to wrap things up, or I will never end – anyone who has read my work will tell you that brevity is not my strong suit. Staring at the 30,000 words that is my pared down thesis and the 100,000 words that was the original work, I find myself lost. What now? I suppose I should be feeling a sense of nostalgia, a romantic notion, the sense of an ending. Satisfaction and triumph? Maybe that comes later – for now, I just feel disbelief. Perhaps I'm being melodramatic as usual, but the point of acknowledgements is to acknowledge, and it is

how I feel. What now indeed? I suppose that question is what I will spend my life
henceforth answering. But for now, thank you. It is finished.

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SUMMARY

My work consists of two parts – a 23,000 word abstract from a novel I’ve written, and an exegesis detailing the focus of my writing and research. Through both fiction and exegesis, I aim to illustrate how the normalization of crimes that fall outside the traditional understanding of sexual harassment can reinforce the trauma victims undergo, with a special focus on the female experience. Specifically, in this exegesis, I will explore the different ways in which this trauma is not only normalized, but also often exploited in fiction. I also argue that scholarship based fiction can play a crucial part in guiding the way we approach certain topics without being exploitative, and also function in and of itself as therapy for survivors of sexual trauma via the genre of literary neuroscience and the health humanities.

Ultimately, this exegesis hopes to highlight the ways in which fiction can play a role in the grander framework of understanding and working through traumatic experiences, both in the individual experience and in society. As a result, my novel, *Smaller Crimes*, attempts to both bring awareness to the small, dismissed, everyday crimes committed against women, as well as the ways our reaction to these crimes are crimes in themselves.

I. INTRODUCTION

In December 2014, I began writing the short story that would come to form the basis of my novel, *Smaller Crimes*. In the writing process one thing became clear: although I didn't recognize it from the get go, it was motivated both by a reaction to the local culture of victim blaming, as well as a personal interest in the interior lives of strong but difficult women. This manifested in the narrative in implicit ways, and as short story developed into novel, I realized that for me, fiction could go beyond merely being entertaining. It could function as a tool in helping us understand and process the nuances of certain issues, and moving past the page, guide the way we approach these topics in real life.

The specific topic and pressure point I focused on in *Smaller Crimes* (an excerpt of which accompanies this exegesis) was that of trauma arising from non-traditional sexual assault. By non-traditional sexual assault, I refer to a case of public molestation in my narrative, and the term non-traditional is used to highlight the tension between what official terminology defines as sexual assault and what ground-level society accepts as serious enough, or legitimate sexual assault, and subsequently, how both fall short. In the novel, my interest and study in traumatic experiences within the female experience and my conviction that fiction is necessary as a socially transformative tool intersect. I propose, both implicitly in my creative project and explicitly in this exegesis, that fiction can function not only as a tool for understanding and dealing with unspoken trauma in non-traditional sexual assault survivors, it is also crucial in doing so, thus bridging a gap in psychology, academic theory, and legal jurisdiction.

EXPLANATION OF INTEREST: WHAT CAN LITERATURE ARTICULATE THAT THEORY CANNOT?

A large problem, which has in recent years been hotly debated in the media both locally and internationally, is that of sexual assault, rape, and what constitutes abuse. I propose that non-traditional forms of sexual assault can and will result in trauma, a phenomenon which I believe needs to be highlighted and addressed more clearly in today's society. That is, a society which sensationalizes and perpetuates increasingly graphic forms of sexual assault. There exists a cache of writing on these topics, but it is not nearly enough. This is where fiction comes in. What can literature articulate that academic theory cannot? It is with this question that I embark on the critical exposition of the topic. The purpose of my exegesis is twofold: to establish the traumatic effects of non-traditional sexual assault in relation to a feminist worldview, and to demonstrate the ways in which fiction can complement theory in effectively commenting on social issues such as these and by doing so, improve empathetic response to personal trauma. This includes exploring the works of Laura S. Brown, Anne Whitehead, Cathy Caruth, and other renowned scholars in the field of trauma studies, as well as critical scholarship on how this relates to sexual abuse. I will also draw on the extensive studies done in the field of literary neuroscience, narrative therapy, and health humanities to illustrate the potential of fiction to effect change in the way help is offered to survivors, while demonstrating the existing trends and movements towards accepting the legitimacy of literature as empirically valuable in the field of therapy.

Simultaneously, I will draw links to and talk about the existing fictions that successfully merge narrative and commentary. In unpacking these concepts, I hope to also show how my creative work fits in by exploring the topic of sexual crime and trauma without being exploitative or gratuitous. It is necessary to note at this point that the sexual crime and trauma in this paper focuses on non-penetrative sexual assault committed by men against women, and my novel specifically explores the interior experience of a cis heterosexual female trauma victim. I acknowledge at the outset of the paper that this is not representative of the experience of all sexual assault victims – it does not cover the experience of transgendered survivors or male survivors, both of which struggle with being historically unrecognized despite being legitimate and traumatic experiences in and of themselves. There *are* bodies of study dedicated to exploring the lack of social recognition with regards to sexual traumas in these areas. However, the particular needs of transgendered / male survivors necessitates a different study, and to do this subject matter justice to the best of my ability, I have chosen to write about the body feminine as it is an area I have experience in, being a woman myself. I demonstrate this creatively through the narrative arc of my female protagonist struggling to synthesize her attack in relation to the reactions of the people around her, both strangers and loved ones. I am hopeful that my work will highlight the need for deeper conversation regarding this topic, on both an objective and emotional level.

II. GUIDING PRINCIPLES: THAT F WORD

In developing a character grounded in a narrative world that hopes to highlight the daily trauma women face in everyday life, I have found the fiction and non-fiction works of Roxane Gay invaluable. I have drawn inspiration from both her fiction and

critical essays, as well as in the ways she continually pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable in society and why we define the boundaries in the way that we do. A survey of her fiction is especially helpful in illustrating how her scholarship on the subject has had a direct influence on the way she develops her characters and narratives, and so we will look at her novel *An Untamed State*, which is thematically and structurally similar to my own work. We will read it specifically against two of the essays within her 2014 bestseller collection of essays, *Bad Feminist* - her opening essay “Introduction - Feminism (n.): Plural” (Gay x-xiv) and “The Careless Language of Sexual Violence” (128-136).

I believe that there is a certain responsibility that is demanded of fiction that explores social topics. Part of this responsibility for me entailed representing a feminist perspective on issues like trauma and sexual assault, and one of the greatest struggles I had was grappling with the label of ‘feminist’, which carries so much weight with it that it is impossible for modern society to settle on one agreed definition of what it means. I found that my definition of feminism was aligned with Gay’s – instead of delving into the philosophical nuances of what the term means, Gay opts for a pragmatic definition that functions more as a behavioral guide. For her, and me, feminism is “advocating for gender equality in all realms, while also making the effort to be intersectional, to consider all the other factors that influence who we are and how we move through the world.” (Gay xxii). Gay argues that there is no *one* solution, that feminism “can be pluralistic”, and that one has to learn to separate “feminism from Feminism or Feminists or the idea of an Essential Feminism – one true feminism to dominate all of womankind” (Gay xxii) in order not to waste unnecessary time getting caught up in obsessing over the failings of an imperfect yet hopeful movement. She argues that it is crucial to reconcile the imperfections of the movement with all the

good it can do – that “in truth, feminism is flawed because it is a movement powered by people and people are inherently flawed” (Gay x). In her ethos, *embracing the fallibility of the movement is crucial to having it be effective* as a guiding principle in one’s life, writing, et al. Reading Gay’s “Introduction – Feminism (n.): Plural” to *Bad Feminist* is particularly useful in helping us frame the way we read her essays throughout the rest of the book as well as her standalone fiction work. It helps us focus on the issue, not the person vocalizing it. And reading Gay’s work *both* as author and academic stands as a real life illustration of how one can adopt a responsible approach to fiction that comments on social issues.

For the sake of brevity, we will focus specifically on how adopting a feminist lens affects responses to issues related to sexual harassment or assault. In her essay “The Careless Language of Sexual Violence”, Gay states in no indefinite terms that writing *has* to be a political act because we live in a world where it will be read as such, where it cannot exist in a vacuum and be separated from the political context in which the reader is situated. This is regardless of the author’s intentions because of the existing “intellectual distance between violence and the representation of violence” (Gay 132), and so, authors have to recognize their responsibility and decide how it impacts their work. In response to the growing cultural trend of sensationalizing and stylizing issues of sexual violence, she says, “We talk about rape, but we don’t *carefully* talk about rape” (Gay 132, italics my own). It is important, I think, to note that Gay’s own creative work often revolves around issues of rape, graphic sexual violence, and abuse. For example, *Difficult Women*, her short story collection released earlier this year, is dedicated specifically to exploring the recurrent theme of women in relation to abusive men. However, her novel, *An Untamed State*, is what I often cite as having the most thematic and structural creative parallel to my own. Published in

2014, it is a reinvention of the fairytale narrative convention, and it follows the kidnapping and gang rape of a married Haitian woman over a period of thirteen days, with the narrative often willing to venture into graphic territory.

The novel is divided into two sections: I. Happily Ever After and II. Once Upon a Time, and the opening lines of the novel establish Gay's literary intent clearly: "Once upon a time, in a far off land, I was kidnapped by a gang of fearless yet terrified young men with so much impossible hope beating inside their bodies it burned their very skin..." (Gay 3). The rest of the book quickly turns to an unflinching and painful recount of the experience, made all the more poignant by flashbacks to the 'before'. We see that the web of the story is constructed from fairytales layered in between scenes of rape and torture – the American Dream that Mireille pursues in college, the courtship between Michael (her first love, then husband) and Mireille which she describes as "how fairytales began" (Gay 66), the recounted romance between Mireille's parents, the romantic description of Port-au-prince, Haiti, where she grew up, and the orally recounted fairytales Mireille's mother read her as a child. These fairytales of Mireille's past are quickly unraveled as the story chronologically progresses, with the people and city systematically betraying her. Her beloved, adored city betrays her first – midway into her captivity, Mireille manages to escape, but when her rapist locates her and bodily drags her back, the Haitian passerbys staring at the scene do nothing to help for fear of being implicated and worse. The moral of the fairytale Mireille's mother tells her as a child of a little girl and a magic orange tree – "a mother will do anything to protect and provide for her child" (Gay 175) – quickly loses its legitimacy as her father, a self made millionaire, refuses to pay the ransom for Mireille's kidnapping lest it endanger the fairytale of his own life and her mother acquiesces to his decision. The complete inability of Mireille's husband to

comprehend or deal with her shattered state post-kidnapping dissolves the fairytale love of their relationship, and the disappointment is best summarized by Michael's father: "You're still thinking this is about you [...] thank God we didn't have to depend on you. Everything would have fallen apart" (Gay 325).

With each dissolution of Mireille's fairytales comes a realization that the reality of a sexual assault survivor is a brutally lonely one. Sexual assault is a crime unique in its ability to isolate the victim and re-traumatize the victim with intrusive and unwelcome recall, something the narrative demonstrates over the course of five years post-kidnapping, and in a session with a therapist, Mireille encounters the truth that will bring her not peace, but freedom: "You will get better but you will never be okay, not in the way you once were" (Gay 343). There is no romanticism or narrative beauty to the statement. Gay presents it to us as truthfully as possible, and the honesty of the narrative coupled with Gay's compelling voice forces the reader to be a witness to the full reality of sexual assault: the graphic nature of rape, the politics of control over lust when it comes to invading a woman's body, and the unflinching brutality of the recovery process which is a continual movement that is required of survivors despite no promise of a return to normality. This is how Gay talks about rape carefully in her creative work: by exploring the truth of the assault as a whole, and by representing both the disturbingly graphic details of assault as well as fleshing out the interior landscape of a survivor's journey.

And yet she is wholly aware of the delicate balance of scholarship and fiction, theory and representation, and how a combination of the two can powerfully enact change. Back to her essay, she admits freely that she is "concerned about rape culture and how we perpetuate it, but [that she] also writes about sexual violence in [her] fiction" (Gay 134). She is concerned with how one can "write violence authentically

without making it exploitative” (Gay 135) and she perpetually wrestles with the two: “I consider my responsibility as a writer and what writers can do to critique rape culture intelligently and illuminate the realities of sexual violence without exploiting the subject [but] I worry I am contributing to the cultural numbness [...] that allows rape to be such rich fodder for popular culture and entertainment” (Gay 134-135). Her concern visibly manifests in the way she writes about sexual assault in *An Untamed State*, and the result is a powerful experience that implicates the reader in this dialogue. She never offers up a definitive solution, because there is perhaps none, but she doubles down on her conviction to tell the truth and speak as honestly as she can about “the material realities of rape, the impact of rape, the meaning of rape” (Gay 135). And given that *Difficult Women: stories of resilience* was published four years after *Bad Feminist* (as opposed to *An Untamed State*, published in the same year), it seems she is still actively engaging in this dialogue, and her engagement continues to reflect and champion her personal definition of feminism to great effect.

Her awareness of how sexual violence can be exploitative is not limited to her self-reflexive commentary on her own fictions. As a celebrated essayist, Gay has spoken out in many of her articles about examples in popular fiction and television that do the *very* thing she aims to avoid. One of the most prominent examples of fiction that exploits rape and abuse is *the Game of Thrones* series by George R. R. Martin, which has since been serialized into an equally problematic television series. In an opinion piece for *Salon*¹, Gay calls out the book and television series for its problematic treatment of rape as “a narrative device. Rape is used to punish. Rape is used to make a woman more sympathetic or to explicate their anger or other

¹ Gay, Roxane, et al. “‘Game of Thrones’ Glamorizes Rape: That Was Not Consent, and Rape Is Not a Narrative Device.” *Saloncom RSS*, Salon.com, 22 Apr. 2014, www.salon.com/2014/04/21/game_of_thrones_and_the_glamorization_of_rape/

unlikeable qualities. Rape is used to put women in their place” (Gay, *Salon*). *New York Times* essayist Sady Doyle agrees – “The sexualized punishments are [...] in the text and it’s vital to the text [...] you can’t walk through a chapter without expecting something horrible – almost always to a female character – just to prove that this is indeed a very scary and dark piece of literature”². It is worrying that the count of rape in the first book alone – *A Song of Ice and Fire (abbreviated ASOIAF)* – stands conservatively³ at 214 acts of rape with 117 rape victims, most of which the reader experiences through the perpetrator’s point of view. The rape victims are almost never POV characters in the narrative structure of the book, with no opportunity to demonstrate agency, serving only as plot devices to further the character development of other characters or to function as elements of sensationalism. The only two rape victims who are given a voice in the book are both explicitly painted as villains – Queen Cersei, victim of marital rape, and Mirri Maz Durr, victim of wartime rape. Both characters are clearly painted as villains within the series – when Mirri Maz Durr seeks justice via revenge on Khal Drogo whom she blames for her plight, she is burned alive by Khal Drogo’s wife. Cersei reacts to being raped and beaten in her marriage by systematically plotting the death of her husband, and is quickly established in the narrative to be one of the book’s main villains. All other stories of rape in the book are recounted by men.

² Itzkoff, Dave. “For ‘Game of Thrones,’ Rising Unease Over Rape’s Recurring Role.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 2 May 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/05/03/arts/television/for-game-of-thrones-rising-unease-over-rapes-recurring-role.html.

³ *Conservatively* because of the difficulty in quantifying the gang rape that happens in the series

In “Rape in *ASOIAF* vs *Game of Thrones*: A Statistical Analysis”⁴, a *Game of Thrones* fan systematically broke down the number of times rape occurs in the TV series versus the books, and also lists all the instances of rapes and attempted rapes broken down into sections – group rape, rape that only appears in the books, rape that only appears in the shows, rape that appears in both, rape that ends in killing, etcetera. The sheer volume of rape in the entire *Game of Thrones* franchise is mindboggling. And much of it is unnecessary. In “Rape of Thrones”⁵, Sonia Saraiya’s essay for *AV Club*, she details the transition from book to television, and while she admits that the source material is problematic to begin with, argues that the television show runners did worse. She lists two instances of consensual sex in the book that the television show rewrote as outright rape – Jamie Lannister’s rape of his sister on the grave of their son, and Daenerys Targaryen’s marital rape on her wedding night. Both are iconic scenes within the television series. And both cannot be justified in terms of narrative storytelling – the essay argues that changing a scene from consensual sex to rape is “not just a pedantic issue of accuracy – it’s a problem with the story” (Saraiya, *AV Club*). In the books, Daenerys falls in love with her husband who grants her respect when no one else would – in the television series, she falls in love with her rapist. The entire relationship, Saraiya argues, is changed. And for no reason other than to “reel in the all-important male demographic” – ie. for the ratings.

In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* concerning the accusations of the excessive amount of sexual violence in the *Game of Thrones* franchise, George R. R. Martin defended his decision by saying that he wanted to “portray struggle” and has

⁴ Tafkar. “Rape in ASOIAF vs. Game of Thrones: a Statistical Analysis.” *TAFKAR*, TUMBLR, 24 May 2015, tafkarfanfic.tumblr.com/post/119770640640/rape-in-asoiaf-vs-game-of-thrones-a-statistical.

⁵ Saraiya@soniasaraiya, Sonia. “Rape of Thrones.” *The A.V. Club*, The AV Club, 20 Apr. 2014, www.avclub.com/article/rape-thrones-203499.

“millions of women readers who love the books”⁶. In a separate interview with the *New York Times*⁷, responding to claims that the books trivialize rape through an overreliance on sexual violence, he called it “fundamentally dishonest” if one didn’t portray sexual violence in a representation of the Middle Ages. Most recently, he also defended the *Game of Thrones* show runners for yet another graphic portrayal of rape that departed from the original storyline in the books – the brutal rape of Sansa Stark – justifying it under the label of creative licensing⁸. On all fronts, the creative decision to portray rape in its frequency and totality has been defended or deflected by both author and show runners. For example - the show runners have famously defended the Jamie-Cersei rape scene where he forces himself on her over the freshly buried grave of their son by insisting in an interview with *Vulture*⁹, amongst others, that it is not rape – despite the fact that it clearly was. In the interview, the episode’s director Alex Graves explained that Cersei was “sort of cajoled into it, and it is consensual”. On the same day, *Vulture* published a separate article titled “Yes, Of Course That Was Rape on Last Night’s *Game of Thrones*”¹⁰. It argues that the claims by the episode’s directors that Cersei’s repeated verbal protests of “no” and “don’t” eventually evolved into

⁶ Hibberd, James. “George R.R. Martin Explains Why There's Violence against Women on 'Game of Thrones'.” *EW.com*, Time Inc, 3 June 2015, ew.com/article/2015/06/03/george-rr-martin-thrones-violence-women/?hootPostID=fd755821de73a6dbf75a0649e2b7bb1b.

⁷ Itzkoff, Dave. “For 'Game of Thrones,' Rising Unease Over Rape's Recurring Role.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 2 May 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/05/03/arts/television/for-game-of-thrones-rising-unease-over-rapes-recurring-role.html.

⁸ Denham, Jess. “Game of Thrones Season 5: George RR Martin Defends HBO as Fans React to Rape Scene.” *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 19 May 2015, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/game-of-thrones-season-5-george-rr-martin-defends-show-as-fans-react-to-shock-rape-scene-10260038.html.

⁹ Denise Martin Follow @denisemartin. “Breaking Down Jaime and Cersei's Controversial Scene With Last Night's Game of Thrones Director.” *Vulture*, Vulture, 21 Apr. 2014, www.vulture.com/2014/04/game-of-thrones-director-on-the-rape-sex-scene.html.

¹⁰ Lyons Follow @margeincharge, Margaret. “Yes, Of Course That Was Rape on Last Night's Game of Thrones.” *Vulture*, VultureMag, 21 Apr. 2014, www.vulture.com/2014/04/rape-game-of-thrones-cersei-jaime.html.

something that was “consensual at the end” is not only wrong, it is enduringly damaging in how it plays into the *no-means-yes* narrative that rape culture perpetuates. Shortly after this, Martin weighed in on his personal blog, saying that due to the nature of television, “you don’t know what anyone is thinking or feeling [...] the scene was always intended to be disturbing, but I do regret if it disturbed people for the wrong reasons”¹¹ – implying that the viewer interpretation of the scene as rape was wrong. The backlash from countless pop culture writers internationally (Writer Danielle Henderson for *The Guardian* announced that she had stopped watching the show because she was “exhausted by the triumph of men at the expense of women as a narrative device”¹², and pop culture website *The Mary Sue* announced that they would stop media coverage on both the book and HBO franchise completely¹³) was immediate.

The problematic and exploitative nature of the entire *Game of Thrones* franchise (both book and television series) stand in clear contrast to the way Gay attempts to critique rape culture intelligently. While Gay “worr[ies] that [she] is contributing to the cultural numbness [...] that allows rape to be such rich fodder for popular culture and entertainment” (Gay 134-135), Martin’s defense of his creative choices seems to display all too clearly a dismissive response to sexual assault. In his apparent devotion to an ‘honest portrayal’ of reality to justify the excessive sexual assault in the books, it has been repeatedly noted that the franchise has an essentially non-existent track record of “acknowledging or exploring the lingering effects of

¹¹ Martin, George RR. “Author, Author!” *Not A Blog*, Tumblr, 21 Aug. 2014, grm.livejournal.com/367116.html?thread=19030284#t19030284.

¹² Henderson, Danielle. “Game of Thrones: Too Much Racism and Sexism – so I Stopped Watching.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 29 Apr. 2014, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/apr/29/game-of-thrones-racism-sexism-rape.

¹³ Pantozzi, Jill. “We Will No Longer Be Promoting HBO’s Game of Thrones.” *The Mary Sue*, The Mary Sue, 23 May 2015, www.themarysue.com/we-will-no-longer-be-promoting-hbos-game-of-thrones/.

surviving sexual assault”, further cementing the “rape-as-prop” trope that runs throughout the entire franchise (*Vulture*, Lyons). And beyond that, consider this: it’s been eleven years since the *Game of Thrones* books were released and we’re in six seasons deep for the show. The continued dismissal of the multiple protests and appeals from women writers around the world throughout this period of time for fairer treatment of female characters – in this case, fair being defined as having female characters who are *not* raped/threatened with rape every few chapters – seems all too reflective of a real life refusal to acknowledge this as a problem. It contributes to an overall cultural numbing that Gay talks about, and normalizes a dismissive attitude towards sexual assault. In Gay’s article for *Salon*, she admits that in some ways, “it’s useful for television shows to acknowledge the extent of sexual violence in our culture. These narratives allow for necessary stories to be told”. But the problem lies in the execution, and too often this narrative is “used to create drama and ratchet up ratings”,¹⁴ as the *Game of Thrones* franchise has proved. And this is something that she calls writers of fiction and television alike to actively resist and criticize.

I try to understand how to navigate the exposition without exploitation, and I try to actively engage in the dialogue in my own way. I appropriate Gay’s ethos that we need to “carefully” (Gay 132) talk about sexual assault, and I understand that this carefulness has to come from a place of diligent scholarship, to ground my fiction in nuance that is responsible and authentic without being exploitative or without resorting to sexual assault as a storytelling crutch for shock or sensationalism. But where Gay explores the shockingly graphic aspects of the topic, I focus on sexual crimes that are culturally constructed to be less severe, and through this, resist the

¹⁴ Gay, Roxane, et al. “‘Game of Thrones’ Glamorizes Rape: That Was Not Consent, and Rape Is Not a Narrative Device.” *Saloncom RSS*, Salon.com, 22 Apr. 2014, www.salon.com/2014/04/21/game_of_thrones_and_the_glamorization_of Rape/

perceived hierarchy of assault within the continuum of rape culture. In my narrative world, there is no abduction, no violation of familial trust, no rape or abuse. As hinted in my novel's title, *Smaller Crimes*, the story follows my female protagonist, a Singaporean who leaves home to work in Christchurch New Zealand, and some six months into her new life, a total stranger molests her in broad daylight on the street. The assailant is a teenaged boy on a bicycle, possibly but not definitely drunk, and the attack is random and rapid. There are no graphic scenes of abuse and assault, only some grubby fingers skimming skin through cotton, and at one point in my novel, the protagonist muses over her own disproportionately severe reaction to the attack: "He thinks I shouldn't feel this way because it's just a kid, its just a boob [...] No penetration." And it's true, that in absolute technicalities, the assault has no physical lasting damage, no marks that traumatize her skin or body. Taking account of the reactions of the people around her -- her colleagues, her family, her boyfriend -- is enough to show that the extent of how badly the assault affects her mentally and emotionally perplexes them. But I argue, in my fiction and scholarship, that they are legitimate crimes¹⁵ -- despite the ways both pop culture and legal jurisdiction dismiss sexual assault, claiming that it cannot cause trauma although medical research proves that it can¹⁶.

In my attempt to honestly and accurately represent the reactions of the people around my protagonist post-attack as well as her own internalized thought process regarding the situation, I looked at the law relating to sexual assault in both Singapore, where she is from, and New Zealand, where the attack takes place. Within Singapore, the hierarchy of sexual assault severity is clear, and this unavoidably trickles down to

¹⁵ Yeoh, Brenda S.A., and Pei Lin Yeow. "Where Women Fear to Tread: Images of Danger and the Effects of Fear of Crime in Singapore." *GeoJournal* 43.3 (1997): 273-86. Print.

¹⁶ Laura S. Brown "Not outside the range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma" *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995): 100-112. Print.

the way citizens subconsciously perceive it. Rape is defined in section 375(1a) of the Penal Code as “any man who penetrates the vagina of a woman with his penis”, and follows up shortly after in section 375(4) by saying that this does not apply in marital relationships. Effectively, this means that within Singaporean law, rape of males are not recognized, and prior consent is assumed to represent future consent – as seen in the law regarding forced penetration within a marriage. The law regarding non-penetrative sexual assault is much murkier. Referred to in section 376F as “touching”, charges of molestation are valid only if the victim suffers from “a mental disability” which “impairs the ability to make a proper judgment”, and again, disturbingly, this law does not stand if the victim is married to abuser.¹⁷ For victims who are *not* mentally disabled, charges of molestation fall under section 354 of the Penal Code, and is defined as an “outrage of modesty” without expressly defining the term “modesty”¹⁸, leaving the validity of the charge open to argument on a case-by-case basis. This definition is further weakened when considered in conjunction with section 355, which clarifies that these charges also can fall under the crime of “intending thereby to dishonor [the victim]”.¹⁹ The use of the terms “modesty”, “intending”, and “dishonor” are vague and open to interpretation, and this allows many cases of molestation or non-penetrative sexual assault to be argued as invalid. Subsequently, victims internalize this hierarchy of severity, and in many cases, force themselves to live with the experience instead of reporting cases of non-penetrative sexual assault.

¹⁷ “Singapore Penal Code.” *Singapore Statutes Online*, Singapore Government, statutes.agc.gov.sg/aol/search/display/view.w3p;ident=9f804d76-c39f-4e35-8cfe-1be8dd20bfe9;page=0;query=DocId%3A%22025e7646-947b-462c-b557-60aa55dc7b42%22%20Status%3Ainforce%20Depth%3A0;rec=0.

¹⁸ “Outrage of Modesty in Singapore.” *SingaporeLegalAdvice.com*, singaporelegaladvice.com/law-articles/what-is-the-offence-of-outrage-of-modesty-in-singapore/.

¹⁹ “Molest.” *Singapore Criminal Lawyer*, Gloria James-Civetta and Co Advocates and Solicitors, www.singaporecriminallawyer.com/molest/.

The criminal justice system in New Zealand has also failed victims of sexual assault. “New Zealand’s Rape Shield and the Need for Law Reform to Address Substantial Harm: When Politics and The Law must Address Social Injury”²⁰ by Bridget Foster Sinclair for the Victoria University of Wellington details depressing statistics: one in three girls will be subjected to an unwanted sexual experience by the age of 16, repeat sexual violence is a serious issue, reporting is extremely low at an estimated 9 percent, with only 13% of cases resulting in a conviction, and finally, that “in the United Nations Report on the Status of Women published in 2011, New Zealand was ranked as one of the worst OCED countries in regards to sexual violence” with “UK medical journal The Lancet [finding] in 2014 that New Zealand had the *third highest rate* of sexual assault in the world” (Sinclair 9-10, emphasis my own). This is largely attributed to the legal system in New Zealand. According to the report, the maximum penalty of sexual violation in New Zealand is 20 years imprisonment, which means that the defendants can “choose to elect trial by jury”, and “counsel for the defendant is likely to recommend this course of action: because rape myths are prevalent in society, jurors are likely to hold them, and they work in the defendant’s favor” (Sinclair 11). This systematically disadvantages victims and discourages them from coming forward to report cases of sexual violation, and when they do, “the focus is on the issue of consent, which involves challenging the complainant’s credibility and reliability as a witness” (Sinclair 14).

To make things worse, studies have shown that “there is a standard of “real” rape in New Zealand”, and this cultural perception of sexual assault results in society

²⁰ Sinclair, Bridget Alice Foster. “New Zealand’s Rape Shield and the Need for Law Reform to Address Substantial Harm: When Politics and the Law Must Address Social Injury.” *Victoria University of Wellington*, Victoria University of Wellington, 2016, researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10063/6312/paper_access.pdf?sequence=2.

only seeing sexual violence as valid if “the perpetrator was a stranger, if they had protected themselves” by dressing modestly, and as such, most victims interviewed “believe that their trauma will not be appreciated as valid” (Sinclair 35), especially in a legislature that allows sexual crime to be trialed by jury.

Elisabeth McDonald, senior lecturer in Law, Victoria University, published a study called ““Real Rape” in New Zealand: Women Complainants’ Experience of the Court Process”²¹, in which she conducts and documents multiple interviews with victims of sexual assault, and consequently calls for reform based on the fact that “despite similar findings with respect to the trauma caused by cross examination in the 1983 Rape Study, virtually no reforms to the process of cross examinations have been implemented. This is the aspect of the court process reported by survivors to be the most humiliating and degrading [...], and women almost always still find cross-examination traumatic (McDonald 77-78). Sinclair agrees, calling the cross-examination experience “described as being akin to a “second rape”” (Sinclair 15). Both papers conclude by agreeing that the law in New Zealand needs to be reformed in order to not only give victims a fair trial, but also to impact social views on victim blaming. Sinclair goes further to state that the “Law Commission’s investigation [...] found that the current criminal justice process is unsuitable for most instances of sexual violence [and] does not always offer justice that suits the circumstance of sexual violence” as trauma effected to each individual victim depends on their circumstances and personhood, making it “impossible to generalize what justice means to survivors” (Sinclair 13-14). She argues that in addition to law reform, there is a “necessity of education” as well as “regulation in the media” (Sinclair 47-48) of

²¹ McDonald, Elisabeth, 'Real Rape' in New Zealand: Women Complainants' Experience of the Court Process (1997). Yearbook of New Zealand Jurisprudence 1(1): 59-80.. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2568917>

which, I propose fiction plays a part. In a world where the most graphic of sexual crimes is splashed across headlines in news and fiction, I believe that literature offers us a space to account for trauma arising from smaller crimes that have been historically dismissed by legislation and society. It can demonstrate that just because there is worse doesn't justify or excuse the smaller crimes, and offer victims of these crimes the recognition and acknowledgement that is crucial to the recovery process. And scholarship-based literature is one way of doing these stories justice, both in fiction and reality.

III. TALKING ABOUT TRAUMA: A WOUND OF THE MIND

“A TRAUMA IS NOT A TRAUMA IS NOT A TRAUMA.” – GERTRUDE STEIN²²

In my focus on a very specific and frequently overlooked type of sexual assault, I propose implicitly in my creative project that trauma is not exclusive to the sensationalized forms of sexual assault that we are used to seeing in the media. I argue that it is not only medically possible to suffer from trauma in molest cases, but that it is highly likely, and the dismissive reactions to these non-traditional forms of sexual assault only serve to deepen the trauma further. The trauma that my protagonist undergoes following her assault, consisting of both the impact of the assault itself and the double-impact of society's dismissal of her experience as legitimate, mirrors the real life conversation on what constitutes 'real' sexual assault and trauma both within academia and in the courtroom. The urgency that surrounds this topic seems especially prescient, in a time where sexual assault is increasingly normalized in its representations within pop culture. Coupled with today's culture of victim blaming internationally and in Singaporean culture, I hope that my study and fiction will help illustrate the importance of this topic.

HOW TO TALK ABOUT TRAUMA

The study of trauma goes beyond an academic or medical concern. It is, as trauma theorist Cathy Caruth explains in the preface to her book *Trauma: Explorations In Memory*, concerned with “the problem of how to help relieve

²² Laura S. Brown “Not outside the range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma” *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995): 100-112. Print

suffering, and how to understand the nature of the suffering, without eliminating the force and truth of the reality that trauma survivors face and quite often try to transmit to us” (Caruth vii). The study of trauma is, in other words, empathy that directly effects help to survivors. She medically defines trauma in her introduction to another book of hers, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, and claims that trauma is “the wound of the mind” (Caruth 4). The source material she draws this from is Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which he interprets trauma as “the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world, not like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event” (Caruth 4). Early trauma theorists were mainly concerned with trauma in relation to the landmark event of the 20th century – the Second World War – and so, much of the discourse around trauma centered around post-war traumatic stress disorder and the consequent infliction of long term, chronic trauma on survivors. Despite the immense differences in nature, I believe that the study of war-related trauma criticism could be exported to modern day trauma arising from sexual assault. It was incredibly helpful to structure my study around forming a framework of questions by which I could further understand trauma and apply my lessons to contextually different scenarios. The questions I formed while reading trauma scholarship were: what were the criterion or conditions of trauma? How could we categorize a crisis as traumatic? And how could we meaningfully define the individual boundaries of trauma and what each individual could bear?

According to Laura S. Brown’s essay “Not outside the range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma”, a traumatic experience is defined clinically in the *Psychiatric Association’s 1987 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* as an experience of an “event that is outside the range of human experience” (DSM 250). This definition, while clinically accurate, is complicated in reality because how does one define the

standard acceptable ‘range of human experience’? As a feminist therapist, Brown explains that the idea that there can be one “normal” traumatic event is often problematic because it refers to “the range of human experience [that has become] the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of the men of the dominant class; white, young, able bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men” (Brown 101). This means that vis-à-vis our discourse on trauma, versions of trauma that are agreed upon by society include war, geographical catastrophe, medical trauma, but frequently and infuriatingly, *not* sexual assault. She draws upon her own courtroom experience to illustrate this – having to defend a young woman, who had been sexually abused by her stepfather over many years, against an attorney who argued that it was impossible for her to be suffering from her diagnosed PTSD because “as many as a third of all girls are sexually abused prior to the age of sixteen, incest wasn’t unusual, wasn’t “outside the range of human experience”” (Brown 101) and so, could not possibly be called a trauma. Putting aside the complete absurdity that is the line of legal defense, Brown draws on the ludicrousness of the situation to illustrate how problematic it is that our “images of trauma have been narrow and constructed within the experiences and realities of dominant groups in cultures” (Brown 102). She calls on us to challenge our rigid definitions of trauma in favor of a feminist analysis of traumatic events. We are often encouraged to accept and normalize oppressive and abusive culture as the status quo, instead of *challenging* the actual status quo – which adopting a feminist analysis would force us to do. She lists reports and personal experiences of being in court cases where women, survivors of sexual assault, are often accused of overreacting *because their assault falls short of legal rape*. Brown argues that “to deny that [...] many other women’s experiences of trauma, are in fact traumatic, sends a message that [...] psychic pain in response to oppression is pathological, and not a

normal response to abnormal events” (Brown 105). This creates and consistently excuses a culture where the very social structures that exist perpetuate a type of female victimization.

We shouldn’t have to back up a clinically certified psychiatrist in her medical diagnosis of PTSD in sexual assault survivors, but we somehow do. Stepping away from Brown for a moment, there *have* been multiple clinical studies that show how molestation *can* be traumatic. In their book, *Principles of Trauma Theory*, Doctors John Briere and Catherine Scott detail the ways in which molestation can affect adult survivors – from engaging in avoidant coping styles to internalizing and carrying around these negative messages about personal and interpersonal worth throughout adulthood, crippling their social skills and rendering them vulnerable to “intense and unwanted physiological sensations” that appear at random, triggering traumatic replay.²³ Somatic psychologist Susanne Babbel emphasizes that physical or emotional sexual exploitation is sexual abuse “in the fullest meaning of the term”, even if “no sexual contact is ever made”. She argues in *Psychology Today* that it is “vital to recognize that abuse comes in many shapes [...] and that all abuse is bad”.²⁴ And yet in spite of all this, when it comes to passing legal dispensation on sexual assault, regardless of “their felt and lived impacts,” sexual assault, whether penetrative or not, is seen as not being “real” trauma (Brown 105). The gap between clinical study and legal jurisdiction is jarring.

²³ "6 Ways Molestation Affects Adult Survivors." *Keep Kids Safe*. N.p., 30 June 2016. Web. 14 Apr. 2017.

²⁴ Babbel, Susanne. "Trauma: Childhood Sexual Abuse." *Psychology Today*. Sussex Publishers, 12 Mar. 2013. Web. 14 Apr. 2017.

IV. TRAUMA 2.0

My persistence in recognizing sexual assault in all forms as traumatic goes beyond simply being an issue of recognition and representation, and it goes beyond the troubling issue of cultural toxicity. We need to adapt the way we frame and validate causes of trauma because our very denial of it medically creates a second wave of trauma that can worsen the victim's condition as well as have a damaging impact on the community as a whole. In the above, via Brown's work, I have illustrated how we still deny recognizing sexual assault as traumatic even though it has been clinically proven to be so. Any form of trauma is by nature incomprehensible – to be processed and worked through, it requires the act of witnessing, either internally (failing which the victim suffers from traumatic recall) or externally (with a therapist acting as double witness). This is established and repeated throughout the scholarship on trauma theory – in "Recapturing the Past", Cathy Caruth describes trauma as an "occurrence [that] defies simple comprehension", which leaves behind only the "truth of its incomprehensibility" (Caruth 153). When she interviews war and holocaust psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton in a separate essay, she defines the recovery process as "an encounter and a dialogue", between victim and therapist. The therapist is in this case "a survivor by proxy, and the proxy's important" because the therapist can on some level "be in a position of constantly witnessing for him or herself" without having to be exposed to quite the same traumatic experiences, a method that has created some of "the best therapy with survivors" (Caruth 143 – 145). Of course, that is not to say that the process of double witnessing is problem-free: Caruth and Lifton do discuss the potential of false witnessing via the therapist's witnessing process, but by refusing to acknowledge the trauma at all, society resists the dialogue necessary to

recovery, and create two separate effects that perpetuate the loop of trauma, worsening the situation.

The first is the creation of socially produced trauma, a phenomenon documented in the round table discussion between AIDS activist Gregg Bordowitz, Columbia University Health Science psychotherapist Laura Pinsky, and author/editor of *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* Douglas Crimp. In the transcript of their conversation, documented by Cathy Caruth and Thomas Keenan in “The Aids Crisis is Not Over”, they both establish how the AIDS experience can be called traumatic despite not fulfilling the traditional hetero-normative criteria for trauma, and further establishes how denied testimony creates double trauma. Admittedly, the nature of the AIDS crisis and sexual assault differ, but it is not a far stretch to visualize how the effects of denying validity and acknowledgement of any one traumatic event can be similar across case studies. Crimp starts by establishing the trauma-producing context of AIDS: “the incommensurability of experiences [...] that certain people are experiencing the AIDS crisis while the society as a whole doesn’t seem to be experiencing it at all” (Caruth 256). Apart from the experience of the condition itself being catastrophically traumatic, there is a “socially produced trauma” which arises from the “double trauma” when “there’s a cataclysmic event [...] and then when the value of the witness in the testimony is denied” (Caruth 257 – 258). The board agreed that the complete denial of the crisis created another level of trauma, where the victim’s “identity is just reduced to the status of” their experience, and that this lack of thoughtful empathy for the victims created a simulacra of empathetic structure “in ways designated to marginalize the people who are actually undergoing it” (Caruth 263 – 264). The similarities between the trauma produced by the general public

denying the validity of the AIDS experience and the courtroom rejecting the legitimacy of sexual abuse as a trauma-producing event cannot be ignored.

But not only does the denial of testimony worsen the trauma victims undergo, it also lays the ground for the possibility of false witnessing as a political and ideological process, which perpetuates victim blaming culture. This gives rise to the concept of community-wide “insidious trauma” as documented by feminist therapist Maria Root (Root 1898, 1992) when talking about sexual assault and trauma. The insidious trauma refers to the “traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit [...] suggesting that for women living in a culture where there is a high base rate of sexual assault”, this is considered exposure to insidious trauma. Consequently, this leads to a higher level of paranoia amongst women in this situation, in some cases leading to women exhibiting symptoms of rape trauma without actually having undergone rape through secondhand psychic trauma. According to her, mainstream trauma theory has already begun to admit that “post-traumatic symptoms can be intergenerational, as in the case of children of survivors of the Nazi Holocaust”, and might possibly “be spread laterally throughout an oppressed social group as well” (Caruth 107 – 108). If it seems suspect that we live in a society that permits half its population to inhabit traumatic stressors in everyday life, then perhaps it is time to rethink the ways we frame trauma narratives.

Despite the studies mentioned being based in Europe and the Americas, the problem of victim blaming with regards to sexual assault is immediately relevant to the Singaporean context as well. While not new, a combination of a heightened cultural sensitivity and the rise of online activist commentary has brought the issue to light in the digital sphere to a mass audience. In 2003, *Buzzfeed* called out the

Singapore government for publishing what they called a “creepy sexual molester poster”, criticizing the “awful (but typical) strategy of putting all the onus on the potential victim”²⁵. A subsequent paper, ““Don’t be a Silent Victim” - Scripting the Female Citizen in Singapore’s Anti-molestation Posters”, published by Nicola Mah with the National University of Singapore linked this to the state’s track record of using national campaign posters to “regulate social behaviors”²⁶. The paper borrows from “pragmatic analytical tools, including Relevance Theory, Speech Act Theory” amongst others to analyze “the contextual mismatch between the textual and visual elements in the anti-molestation posters” that were created by the National Crime Prevention Council (Singapore). It argues that the posters “emphasize the victims’ agency, holding them responsible for the crime [...] female victims’ lack of vigilance is blamed, complemented by the toning down of the male perpetrators’ act of molestation”²⁷.

The problem extends past misguided campaign posters. In the Singapore media scene, *Teenage Magazine’s* *Dear Kelly* columnist Kelly Chopard made waves both locally and internationally for telling a teenage rape victim she should be “grateful he wore a condom” in the magazine’s November 2016 issue. Her exact words – “I don’t blame him for thinking you were not a virgin. You acted like a girl who has been around” (*Teenage*, Chopard). Beyond the problematic nature of the statement, something many online commentaries missed out was how the text was highlighted in

²⁵ Copyranter. “Creepy Sexual Molester Poster.” *BuzzFeed*, Buzzfeed, 11 Jan. 2013, www.buzzfeed.com/copyranter/creepy-sexual-molester-poster?utm_term=.nkXXvIMvE#.sjEYJAeJB.

²⁶ For example – via the Courtesy Campaign, Speak Good Mandarin campaign, and various family planning campaigns

²⁷ Mah, Nicola. “Don’t Be A Silent Victim’ Scripting the Female Citizen in Singapore’s Anti-Molestation Posters.” *“Don’t Be A Silent Victim” Scripting the Female Citizen in Singapore’s Anti-Molestation Posters*, www.english.cityu.edu.hk/en/portal/igala/abstract/MahNicola.pdf.

red to stand out (the magazine's response font is usually green), which means that it was impossible that this was an oversight on the part of the editorial team. It had been vetted, approved, and highlighted by the magazine editorial team, implicitly showing that Chopard's views were representative of the magazine's, despite claims otherwise. The online furor was immediate – it was identified as victim blaming by local commentary site *Mothership*²⁸, state newspaper *The Straits Times*,²⁹ and gender equality advocacy group *Association of Women for Action and Research* (AWARE). The magazine later published an official apology from Chopard maintaining that “throughout [Chopard's] response [she] never blamed her”³⁰, and that she was “gravely sorry that this response has garnered a negative response”. Netizens immediately called the response out for being a non-apology and justifying a victim blaming response, and the issue was picked up by international media sites like *Buzzfeed News*³¹ and *The Independent UK*³². There was no further response from the magazine.

In the legal arena, defense lawyer Cheryl Ng came under fire from Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon in August 2016 for having “insinuated that a minor suffered

²⁸ Tan, Guan Zhen. “Teenage Magazine's Dear Kelly Gives Victim-Blaming ‘Advice’ to Girl Who Was Raped.” *Mothership.sg*, Mothership, 11 Nov. 2016, mothership.sg/2016/11/teenage-magazines-aunt-kelly-gives-victim-blaming-advice-to-girl-who-was-raped/.

²⁹ Choo, Felicia. “Aware Responds to Teenage Magazine's Victim Blaming Advice Column.” *The Straits Times*, SPH, 12 Nov. 2016, www.straitstimes.com/singapore/aware-responds-to-teenage-magazines-victim-blaming-advice-column.

³⁰ Chopard, Kelly. “Dear Kelly's Official Response And Apology.” *Teenage Magazine*, Teenage, 11 Nov. 2016, teenage.com.sg/campus/dear-kellys-official-response-and-apology/.

³¹ Krishna, Rachael. “People Are Furious This Magazine Called A Rape Victim A ‘Willing Player.’” *Buzzfeed*, BuzzFeed, 15 Nov. 2016, www.buzzfeed.com/krishrach/a-teen-magazine-has-apologized-for-calling-a-rape-victim-a-w?utm_term=.rjxmlb0IL#.vag9LONLz.

³² Forster, Katie. “Agony Aunt Tells Teenage Rape Victim She Should Be ‘Grateful He Wore a Condom.’” *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 14 Nov. 2016, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/teenage-magazine-singapore-rape-victim-blaming-dear-kelly-grateful-he-wore-a-condom-teen-advice-a7416976.html.

no trauma from a sexual crime as she was in a sexual relationship with someone else at that time". The Chief Justice criticized what he called a "potshot at the victim's morality", with the district judge Charlene Tay adding that "the DJ's mischaracterization of the offense as consensual not only flies in the face of admitted facts, it also poses a grievous injustice to the young victim by painting her as a lustful teenager who was a willing party to the act of sexual penetration"³³. The victim in question was at the time, fourteen years old. And in the realm of education, media personality Patrina Kow went online earlier this year criticizing both local schools and the state police for perpetuating a victim blaming narrative. She cited the Singapore Police Force's crime prevention talk, a commonly held guest lecture in most primary and secondary schools, which claimed that "girls are 'responsible' and 'asking for it' if they wear short skirts because the boys' can not help themselves"³⁴. According to Kow, her thirteen year old daughter, along with the boys *and* girls of the class, raised concerns regarding these statements but got scolded from the teacher in charge for "being 'rude' and asking [the police officer] 'difficult' questions"³⁵. In the comment section of *The Online Citizen's* coverage of the matter, website moderator 'PikuChoo' called Kow's daughter's reaction an "over reaction" and "suggest[ed] that [Kow] talk to her and ask her if she has been violated or assaulted". Another comment thread on the same article focused instead on debating the semantics of the term "victim-

³³ Koh, Valerie. "CJ Rebukes Lawyer for Questioning Morality of Sex Crime Victim." *TODAYonline*, TODAY, 25 Aug. 2016, www.todayonline.com/singapore/cj-menon-rebukes-lawyer-targeting-victims-morality.

³⁴ Zinnia, Neyla. "Media Personality Voices Concern over Victim Blaming with Crime Prevention Programme." *The Online Citizen*, TOC, 20 Jan. 2017, www.theonlinecitizen.com/2017/01/20/media-personality-voices-concern-over-victim-blaming-with-crime-prevention-programme/.

³⁵ Zinnia, Neyla. "Media Personality Voices Concern over Victim Blaming with Crime Prevention Programme." *The Online Citizen*, TOC, 20 Jan. 2017, www.theonlinecitizen.com/2017/01/20/media-personality-voices-concern-over-victim-blaming-with-crime-prevention-programme/.

blaming”, claiming that one cannot use the term before any crime occurs, and warned readers to be “careful about such people who jump at every minute opportunity to post their personal, doubtful, non-objective, unsubstantiated views online”³⁶.

As highlighted before, the victim blaming culture, which plays into the bigger picture of the denial of testimony, causes a socially produced trauma as well as perpetuates the “insidious trauma” that Maria Root talks about. A 1997 study commissioned by the National University of Singapore titled “Where Women Fear to Tread: Images of Danger and The Effects of Crime in Singapore” argues that “even in a city ranked as one of the safest in the world, women experience greater levels of fear of crime [...] largely centered on a fear of rape”. The paper analyzed the rape-murder of a college girl in Singapore and the subsequent media coverage, which “adopted a victim-blaming attitude, reflecting the social stereotypes of a wider society” both in the attitude of the respondents to the press coverage as well as the editorial decision of the press reports to repeatedly focus on how the “pretty girl with a Hawaiian look [...] in brief shorts [...] was jogging along a ‘quiet’, ‘secluded’, and ‘deserted’ stretch of Holland Road in the evening” (Yeoh and Yeow, 279). The effects of internalized victim blaming in the media and on the individual level in society manifests not only in the fear of crime that women experience – which is “qualitatively different from men’s” (Yeoh and Yeow 276). It also perpetuates a culture of self-censorship and suppression when it comes to speaking out about sexual crimes that are viewed as more minor, resulting in victims being unable to rationalize their shock properly or seek professional help. According to the study, “where ‘minor’ offences commonly

³⁶ Zinnia, Neyla. “Media Personality Voices Concern over Victim Blaming with Crime Prevention Programme.” *The Online Citizen*, TOC, 20 Jan. 2017, www.theonlinecitizen.com/2017/01/20/media-personality-voices-concern-over-victim-blaming-with-crime-prevention-programme/.

encountered were concerned, most women coped by rationalizing away the seriousness of the offence” (Yeoh and Yeow 276), citing it as a “deviant but harmless form of sexual harassment” (277). It is “precisely the prevalence of such harassment experience” that leads victims to normalize molest as a crime, although the same women who attempt to rationalize it away all display signs of “vividly” recalling “where, when and how the incidents happened” (277). The study argues that the ways we are encouraged by society and community to absorb the responsibility for crime results in “debilitating effects on women’s well being and social cohesion”, especially because of the “effects of fear and resultant precautionary measures [which are] largely restrictive” (284). The paper concludes thus: establishing that the quality of life for women in Singapore is compromised due to the fear they are subject to and its consequences, but offering no solution.

V. SCHOLARSHIP-BASED FICTION AND WHAT IT CAN DO

I began this exegesis with the claim that fiction can go beyond its entertainment value and function as a tool for understanding and dealing with unspoken trauma in non-traditional sexual assault survivors, something which has proven to be lacking within the victim-blaming narrative perpetuated both in legal jurisdiction and in society. This idea has been debated and reinforced by scholars within the field of literary neuroscience as well as the health humanities, and I believe that fiction has the potential to target the root of the problem by shaping the way people understand social issues as well as benefitting survivors through therapy.

There is no discussing the potential of fiction as a mode of instruction and commentary without at least a cursory mention of Patricia Leavy, founding director of Gender Studies at Stonehill College, author of the *Social Fictions* book series, which

focuses on publishing scholarship “written entirely in literary forms including novels, plays, short story and poetry collections” (Leavy 31), and a critic who has written extensively about “fiction as a research practice (see Leavy 2013b, 2015b)”. Last year, she published the commentary piece “Fiction as a Transformative Tool” in which she explains that fiction’s very advantage over scholarship is that it is “jargon-free, accessible, and experienced as enjoyable by the many, not the few” (Leavy 29). The way she frames it suggests a shift in cultural positioning. Where in the past, readers looked to scholarship for social commentary, she implies that authors now move to take over the position of the critic, reframing sociopolitical issues in a way that is comprehensible to the masses. In this way, authors are immediately assigned a new position of importance in the ecosystem of commentary. She also details selected studies within the growing field of literary neuroscience, asserting that by leading a research team to “measure brain activity as research participants engaged in close versus casual reading”, scientists were able to prove that “there is heightened connectivity in our brains for days [as a] result of physiological changes in our brain stimulated by the fiction” (Leavy 30 – 31). This not only results in a more engaged audience, it creates a greater and more long lasting impact of the message communicated via fiction. Leavy concludes that a combination of a larger audience as well as a more engaged one places fiction in the perfect position to explore the potential for literature having didactic utility in the modern day and age.

Despite literary neuroscience being a relatively new interdisciplinary field, many educational institutions have already worked to integrate the findings of the field into their day-to-day practices. According to Leavy, renowned scholar Maxine Green advocated “aesthetic education” as a means of promoting student engagement and empathy, and many disciplines already adapt the creative arts in the field of arts-based

research practices (Leavy 29). The development of this new field has also given us the tools to assign empirical value and measure the effectiveness of fiction. In “Simulating Fiction: Individual Differences in Literature Comprehension Revealed with fMRI”, researchers from Radboud University were one of the first in the neuroscientific field to prove a mere two years ago, via brain maps and fMRI scans, the individual effects of creating empathetic links through literature. The study is described as providing “on-line neural evidence for the existence of qualitatively different styles of moving into literary worlds, [adding] to a growing body of literature showing the potential to study narrative comprehension with neuroimaging methods” (Nijhof and Willems 2015)³⁷ And in Patrick Colm Hogan’s “Literary Brains: Neuroscience, Criticism, and Theory”, the concept of the “neurohumanities” as a field of study is introduced for one of the first times in academic criticism. He explains that via a better understanding of the ways science and literature intersect, “neuroscience can help us do what we do better [...], contribute to the understanding of the human mind and human society” (Hogan 303).

This idea has been championed outside academia as well. In 2010, Patricia Cohen wrote an article titled “Next Big Thing in English” for the *New York Times*, exploring “fundamental questions about literature’s very existence: Why do we read fiction? [...] What underlying mental processes are activated when we read?” Quoting professor of English Willian Flesch in saying that “Fiction gives us insight into evolution”, she concludes that we use fiction as a map to navigate our reality – consciously or otherwise. In practical terms, what this means for my study of trauma is establishing that fiction *can* help us recognize the trauma *all* sexual assault survivors undergo as

³⁷“How the Brain Listens to Literature.” *Neuroscience News*. N.p., 11 Feb. 2015. Web. 14 Apr. 2017.

legitimate through the creation of increased empathy for them. This directly affects the way society we advances the professional and medical avenues of help available to trauma victims.

This is further proved by another relatively new movement in the marriage of science and humanities - the study of Health Humanities, which is the concept that an engagement with literature and the humanities can help us understand, appreciate, and thus better treat stigmatized issues like mental illness and possibly abuse-induced trauma. It is encouraging that this study doesn't just remain as a concept, but has been developed over the last few years – the first International Health Humanities Conference was held in August 2010 on Literature and Madness, and just this year, UCL and Brown have started offering subjects in health humanities as core modules, with UCL even offering an MA program in it from the academic year 2016/17. The Arts Council of England also released an academic paper, titled “Arts in Health: a review of the medical literature”³⁸ as part of developing England's first national arts and health strategy. It details studies that prove how the arts encourage the “medical practitioner to become more humane, understanding, and sympathetic, [contributing] to re-conceptualizing medicine, bringing together academic, intellectual and educational pursuits, responding to social, ethical, and scientific needs” (22), concluding that “Literature [...] contributes to an enriched medical practice” (23). But on an individual level, I believe that scholarship based fiction's biggest impact to the everyday man lies in highlighting and facilitating discussion regarding the finer nuances of these topics by putting pressure on the empathetic link readers develop with characters and narratives.

³⁸ Staricoff, Rosalia Lelchuk. “Arts in Health: a Review of the Medical Literature.” *Arts Council England*, www.creativenz.govt.nz/assets/ckeditor/attachments/1030/staricoff_r_arts_in_health.pdf?1410235845.

This can only be done effectively if the author is able to represent his or her own take on social issues responsibly. By example, I draw on Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* to demonstrate what I consider one of the most successful marriages of scholarship and literature, and a personal source of great inspiration for my writing in terms of understanding how creative form can drive home as hard a point as scholarship. Her series of four books that make up one large female-centric epic have gained a cult-like readership globally and has been dubbed the modern day *bildungsroman*. But the books go beyond being purely entertainment – they explore a variety of subjects within Italian culture, and they don't shy away from exploring the ambiguity of ethically grey issues, including rape, sexual abuse, reluctant motherhood, the competitiveness of female friendships, mental illnesses, so on and so forth. And yet they are overwhelmingly feminist novels. *The New Yorker's* feature piece on Ferrante's novels describes the style of the narrative as authentically representing “what happens in the world of women” via stylistically reflecting the mental landscape of a woman. Although a majority of Ferrante's books are devoted to exploring large problems within the state of modern womanhood (the navigation between career and motherhood, marriage and career, etcetera), the novels are feminist in style as much as in content. The books don't preach feminism, but *espouse* it in realistically human ways, through a narrative following the ferocious female friendship of the two protagonists through decades, resulting in a meaningful “exploration of the *women's mental underworld* that makes the book so singular an achievement in feminist literature; indeed, in all literature”³⁹ (Acocella, *The New Yorker*).

The traumatic quality of her writing has academic precedence: in “Notes on Trauma and Continuity”, Kai Erikson describes the quality that trauma has of

³⁹ Acocella, Joan. "Elena Ferrante's New Book: Art Wins." *The New Yorker*. The New Yorker, 01 Sept. 2015. Web. 15 Apr. 2017.

“converting one sharp stab into an enduring state of mind”, having “both centripetal and centrifugal tendencies” (Erikson 185 – 186). I believe these effects of trauma can sometimes be more effectively conveyed and understood by the public through fiction when the writing style mirrors the effects of trauma and thus reinforces the content of the story. When an author successfully mimics the insidious nature of trauma in his/her writing style, what he/she effectively does is create a mental environment where readers are drawn into the witnessing experience and thus are compelled to empathize with the victim⁴⁰.

In a recent interview with *Vanity Fair*, Ferrante herself admits to the “personal is political” brand of feminism running throughout her novels as being influenced by the study of feminist thought she has undertaken throughout her life. She calls herself “a passionate reader of feminist thought, [but not] a militant”, saying that in light of the countless contradictions surrounding many female issues, she would “rather confront that overabundance [that] managed to provoke complex thinking” because acknowledging the cultural struggle through the ages need not be exclusive to recounting the tangle of existence authentically⁴¹. This is living embodiment of what I argue for – the essentialism of scholarship based literature – and what I aim to achieve in my own writing as well. A quick return to Brown’s paper is prudent here, in approaching the effectiveness in Ferrante’s fictions. She says in her paper’s conclusion that “A feminist perspective on trauma requires us to move out of our comfortable positions [...] to a position of identification and action. [...] Such action *emerges from a feminist analysis*, from a feminist vision of right relationship, in which mutuality and

⁴⁰ Examples of authors who have done this successfully – Lidia Yuknavitch in *The Chronology of Water*, Hanya Yanagihara in *A Little Life*, and Shirley Jackson in her terrifying short story collection – *The Lottery and other stories*.

⁴¹ Schappell, Elissa. "The Mysterious, Anonymous Author Elena Ferrante on the Conclusion of Her Neapolitan Novels." *Vanity Fair*. *Vanity Fair*, 28 Aug. 2015. Web. 15 Apr. 2017.

respect are the norm rather than power and dominance” (Brown 109, italics my own) – and this is something accurately reflected in Ferrante’s writing. But because this representation of feminism never comes across as instructive in Ferrante’s novels, one feels invited, not forced, into adopting her feminist lens. This is infinitely more effective in inspiring debate and an internal review of the reader’s own worldview.

VI. CONCLUSION

In understanding the power that literature can have in shaping the perceptions of the public, a feminist perspective on issues like trauma, sexual assault, and many other issues which should not be categorized by gender but are, is crucial. It “draw[s] our attention to the secret, private, hidden experiences of everyday pain, remind[ing] us that traumatic events *do* lie within the range of normal human experience” (Brown 110). But despite my argument in favor of fiction as social commentary, agreeing with the necessity of scholarship-based fiction does not promise to provide a clean and easy resolution to the issues at hand. We should be so lucky. Instead, it raises different questions on how one can facilitate the integration of our new understanding of the injustices of current modes of accessing assault related trauma into a new ethic of compassion. And our *act* of grappling with these issues responsibly through fiction pushes the conversation into something far greater than our immediate study and work.

The impact of scholarship-based fiction is not limited only to the immediate radius of literature and its readers – pop culture has also taken cues from fiction and has begun shouldering the responsibility of throwing light on under-discussed issues, both independently and via direct influence of prevailing literature (the books mentioned in this paper have all been either adapted for screen or had their

rights picked up for a television series). There have been revolutionary choices made in recent years both in terms of content discussed and directorial choices. Last year, Roxane Gay was announced in 2016 as the first black woman to be a Marvel lead writer on graphic novel series *Black Panther: World of Wakanda*, which will no doubt be adapted for the big screen in a matter of time⁴². Most recently, television shows like *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (written by self-identified feminist⁴³ Tina Fey) and *13 Reasons Why* have highlighted and formed arguments regarding sexual consent and mental health issues. *13 Reasons Why* in particular, which was released in March 2017, has sparked currently ongoing debate and heightened awareness of what constitutes valid assault – in the second half of the season, a drunk and unconscious girl is raped at a party and remains friends with her rapist after the incident, making an important social point on debunking dangerous cultural myths about what legitimates a sexual assault and makes it “real”. The show has since won praise from mainstream lifestyle news channels and opinion sites for being one of the first mainstream television shows to accurately and meaningfully portray sexual assault without using it as a crutch for shock value and ratings. And Netflix’s original collaboration with Marvel Studio’s *Jessica Jones* engages intelligently with the issue of sexual abuse in a way that is thematically similar to that of my own work in that there is no actual, physical penetrative assault in the show, but the narrative of a girl dealing with the aftermath of a sexually and emotionally abusive relationship and trying to fight her way back to normality in a flawed, human, and angry way. It is to Netflix’s credit that

⁴² "Roxane Gay Talks Being the First Black Woman Marvel Lead Writer." *Time*. Time, n.d. Web. 15 Apr. 2017.

⁴³ Roiphe, Katie. "Tina Fey's Bossypants: The Star's Brand of Tough Girl Feminism." *Slate Magazine*. N.p., 30 Mar. 2011. Web. 15 Apr. 2017.

the show never becomes about what Jessica's abuse was *not*, that is – not rape – but about what it is, subtly placing *all* sexual abuse on the same scale of *unacceptable*.

The impact of literature on pop culture is crucial in any critical discussion of trauma. I propose that the element of widespread appeal is the very element that cements their place in the ecosystem of social commentary simply because they reach and educate a wide audience that may not ever pick up an academic paper on trauma. The readership of sites like lifestyle and pop culture site *Refinery29*, which published an incredibly salient opinion piece on how “Jessica’s Friendship with her Rapist on *13 Reasons Why* Doesn’t Invalidate her Assault”, *Huffington Post*, which posted a series of articles on how *Jessica Jones* commented on emotional abuse, and *The Guardian*, who’s article on how *Jessica Jones* intelligently portrays the after-effects of trauma, exploitation, and abuse got over twenty thousand shares on social media, are vastly different from the profile of readers who have access to scholarship on trauma and sexual assault. This should not be seen as competition to fiction in the same way literature should be seen as compatible with critical scholarship – in engaging different audiences and resonating with different levels of urgency and gravity, the result is a fuller and more well formed debate around topics that demand it. And given how many of these television shows directly use literature as their source material (Jay Asher’s *13 Reasons Why* was first published as a young adult novel in 2007, and *Jessica Jones* originated as a series of intelligent and adult graphic novels), I would go so far as to propose that scholarship based literature directly influences much of pop culture, and in the rapidly growing online culture, puts pressure on pop culture to be better, to be more representative, and to be more socially aware.

In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Ted Talk, “The danger of a single story”, she talks about the important role stories play in humanizing people. She argues that the

problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete, and the experience of any human is multifaceted and made up of many different stories. And today, the creation of representative stories to be consumed by the masses is something that writers and creatives alike have the opportunity to participate in. Ultimately, when fiction normalizes the act of bestowing importance on each individual story as human and not as statistic, what it does is resist the ways in which our legal and social conduct marginalizes and refuses to acknowledge certain narratives as valid. It publicly legitimizes these experiences which legal jurisdiction can and will not, and beyond that, it forces us to move towards adapting towards a more inclusive and empathetic approach to survivors of trauma. I would like to offer up Chimamanda's words by means of concluding: "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize."⁴⁴ Holding on to this thought does not just propel us towards more thoughtful, inclusive fictions; it is a hopeful call to participate in social change, and a step towards a better world.

⁴⁴ Adiche, Chimamanda Ngozi, director. *The Danger of a Single Story*. *The Danger of a Single Story*, TED , 2009, www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en/.latest_citation_text

Smaller Crimes: An Excerpt

Smaller Crimes: An Excerpt

Prior to the excerpt:

Section I: Fault Lines. Childhood, adolescence, in flashes. Gwendolyn, our protagonist, and her adoptive sister grow up together, lower middle class poor, although it often feels worse. The Yang family comes into some money just as the girls' schooling ends, which they spend on a ten-day bonding holiday to a post-quake Christchurch wherein they argue explosively. Despite this, it is a place that strikes our protagonist as kind and resilient, which she feels convinced to her soul that she has established a deep connection with. At the start of Section II: Smaller Crimes, from which this excerpt is taken, our protagonist, being young and naive enough to believe that moving abroad and pursuing her dream of independence is all she'll ever need to fix her life, has applied for and been accepted to a secretarial job in a Christchurch-based architectural firm specializing in rebuilding the city post-disaster, while her sister pursues acting in China.

3.

"I have a boyfriend," I said, with some sense of pride and deceit. The fact was, we were just casually dating, but Arin wouldn't know that, being thousands of miles away. She had called to ask why she hadn't heard from me in awhile, and neither had our parents, though, she added, that latter bit came as no surprise.

"Really?"

"Of course really."

"Since when?"

“Maybe a couple of weeks.” I propped myself up on a pillow, one hand holding on to the phone. I was desperate to tell her the whole story, to spill confidences into her, like we used to. But I was torn between that and wrestling with my anger at her for being more successful and put together than I was, which I took personally, and so I held back out of some sense of competitiveness. I wanted her to envy me, for once, or at least be taken by surprise that I could do okay too, on my own.

“You’re bluffing - you just moved to Christchurch.”

“Oh, you know how it goes.” I struggled with it a bit more, then gave up. “Fine. Two days. We just had our fifth date two days ago.”

“Then he’s not your boyfriend, is he?”

“Basically,” I was cross, and it leaked into my voice despite my best efforts to contain it. “Why’d you have to be like that?”

She laughed, a low, intimate rumble, over the phone, ever delighted at successfully getting under my skin. “Just keeping you in check.” And she rang off. I tossed the phone aside, reminded of why I’d stopped calling her ever so often, and looked around my barebones bedroom, something I’d been so proud of finally calling my own till this point. Hearing her voice again I suddenly reevaluated my studio rental with newly critical eyes, and noticed the peeling paint on the ceiling, the slight yellow of mold around the edges of the faded wallpaper, and the smell of my dollar air freshener that now seemed jarring to me. I sighed, irritated, and slightly jealous at how easily Arin seemed to be assimilating into her new crowds, all hip young things who drank cocktails from test tubes (so she said) and did hot yoga (so she said) and breathed with their diaphragms, correctly (so she said).

“Who’s that?” Scott walked out of the shower, rubbing his hair dry with my hand towel.

“My sister,” I said, falling back onto my pillows, “well, adoptive sister.” The story was too long to go into, and besides, I didn’t feel like it. Naming her or telling her story would just increase her presence in my life, and now, spitefully, I wanted to keep her out.

He plonked down on the edge of my bed, and I caught a faint whiff of talcum powder. “So that was your sister you just named me as your boyfriend to?”

Damn. “Go away,” I said, rolling onto my side to hide my smile, “I did not.” But from then, that was how he referred to himself: as my boyfriend. And I let it be, secretly pleased that he seemed eager for the commitment, as opposed to being scared off. I introduced him to my colleagues as such, when they found him waiting at the office lobby of the architectural firm where I worked, and imagined that they suddenly respected me a bit more, the idea that someone else wanted me raising my value in their eyes, hinting that I was worthy of being wanted. This was how I felt, and I confessed it to Arin later, when we had made good again as we always did. I expected her to laugh at me, but instead she’d murmured assent over the phone. *People are like that*, she said in that thoughtful murmur of hers, and again, I felt that connection and the idea again that only she would ever truly understand me.

But Scott made me easier to be with, as a person, I think, and the following two months were months of blurry, silly happiness. I wondered occasionally if I were happy as is, or if I was high off the knowledge that I was wanted, of being somebody’s object of affection. I was more cheerful at work, and people noticed, and responded accordingly. There were a couple of girls who sat near me, and who seemed attracted to the positive vibes that I apparently radiated, and they started including me in their plans, so we began to go for post-work drinks together semi-regularly, Sally,

Christine, Anna-maria, and I. Our department became more chatty, and we lobbed jokes and complaints across the floor at each other, rolling our eyes whenever our boss, Damien, tried to join in. For the first time since moving here, I was complicit in something, and so if I am honest with myself: I sometimes took advantage of his kindness and went a bit far poking fun at him for his too-tight shirts, his five o' clock shadow, his general bumbly presence in front of the girls. To his credit, he didn't seem much bothered, and just, made a couple of comments on how he should start a dating or matchmaking service for all his staff, if everyone who found partners became as productive and happy at work as I did. *You wish. Not every relationship is so dreamy*, someone (Christine or Sally, I don't remember) said, and I secretly found pleasure in hearing it despite shaking my head - *no, we're okay, he's okay, we're just normal*. I even phoned my parents to tell them a month into our relationship, and for once, my mother had nothing bad to say. *I'm glad you didn't date an angmoh*, was the only thing, and while once upon a time I would have retorted: *what's wrong with westerners?* and accused her of reverse racism, I just smiled and let it go. And most prominently, my relationship with Arin resumed a tinge of its past intimacy, and we started phoning each other again. After a couple of jibes from her about how I'd been so desperate for company that I'd dived right into the first boy that had come along, she'd realized that none of it stuck, me being as cheery as I was, and so she gave up and we began talking about stupid, day to day things again.

She was in Shanghai at that time, where the market was apparently better than in Guangzhou, and she spoke with a very mixed Mandarin accent, something she'd picked up from hanging out with a group of actors there. Before that it was an American-mandarin one, and before *that*, a short-lived soft, lilting, British accent for a week. The way she slipped in and out of accents as if trying them on for fit amused

me, and I often put her on speakerphone when Scott was around, watching him to see how he'd react.

"Why's she got that accent though?" he asked, after the first time, and I batted it away, saying that it was what the industry required, although I secretly felt pleased that he hadn't accepted her as perfect. "Seems a bit pretentious to me. Not in a bad way," he had hurriedly corrected himself, while I bristled, "just, you know, seems unnatural." And then he'd added, looking at me strangely: "I didn't realize you guys were so close."

On her end, she'd said at first: "Well at least someone loves you over there," and then corrected her stance in subsequent conversations: "I don't know much about him. But I always knew you'd do okay." And even later, dolefully: "Find a nice guy like him for me, won't you?" I tried not to rub it in her face too much, in the competitive way of sisters, I was proud to be able to take the high road. For she was still auditioning and auditioning, and despite her frequent small roles in movies and on television, they were ultimately still supporting, minor characters, and she was still waiting for her big break. And here I was, in love!

So we continued. And life went on, happily, and the dust-and-sulphur city of Christchurch assumed a more charismatic, romantic glow. What I previously saw as boredom and dilapidation I now identified as charm. We settled into a sort of routine: Scott and I drove out of the city every weekend in his year-old Ford Ranger to go hiking, which sounded a lot more adventurous than it really was, since the city was essentially surrounded by scenery. I'd never identified as much of a country girl before that, but he was very excitable as a person, he glowed and radiated a happiness that seemed to come easy to him, and so more often than not I would find myself going along with whatever he wanted to do without thinking too much. And initially I'd

reasoned to myself that I was just accommodating him, but I quickly came to look forward to our short expeditions: the untouched vastness of nature that lay right outside the crumbly city of Christchurch, the way the air turned from musky to crisp as we drove, the total randomness of the critters I saw. The city girl in me was embarrassed and embarrassing; I squealed when I first saw a duck in the wild, then tried to chase it. It was like I was play-acting a person who was more carefree and romantic, and Scott reacted accordingly, playing along, and so for a fashion I fancied that anyone who'd seen us would think us glowing with love and youth and potential.

It was easy, also, to pick out things I liked about him in those moments: his whole hearted enthusiasm for whatever I proposed, his joyful manner, and the way he was passionate about what he loved (cars) without it venturing to the point of obsession. For pragmatic reasons (he said), he drove a Ranger, but his true love lay in older, less fuel-efficient cars. As we drove past mountains and lakes, he would point out vintage car models to me, and explain their make, their history, what he liked and didn't like about them in an almost chiding manner, and although this automobile talk bored me, I amused myself by watching him work himself into a raptured state and told myself that it was good for people to have their idiosyncrasies. The same weekend I thought this, I came down with a bout of food poisoning, and involuntarily threw up all over his dashboard in between Llama Lookout and Governor's Bay. I looked up from the mess, horrified that I'd possibly ruined his darling car.

"Please don't be mad," I stuttered, wiping at my mouth. "I'll clear it up." Even as I said this, I realized how ineffectual a statement it was – the vomit was everywhere. The stench of my shame hung between us. Here was a man who had seen the insides of my digestive system splayed all over his car. I was sure I would return to Christchurch a single woman.

But he didn't even flinch. "It's just a car. How are you feeling?" And glancing at my face, he realized how mortified I was, and endeavored unsuccessfully to crack jokes to cheer me up all the way from there to the clinic. As for the car, he later made a quick call while we were in line for the doctor's, and some uniformed men came and took the car away for half a day and returned it spanking new. From this I realized two things: that if love were reliability, then I was head over heels for Scott, and that the boy I was dating had been born into the type of family that would allow for fingers to be snapped and cars to be cleaned.

This caused a rift in me, internally, especially when he started talking about us picking up surfing and making a short trip to Australia, but I had not yet sunk to point where I would allow myself to live off a man. And besides, Arin would never let me live it down. Already I was conscious of the fact that he refused to let me chip in for the car cleaning costs (I'd offered, and privately sighed with relief when he waved it away: I couldn't really afford it anyway), and more prominently, that I spent nearly nothing on these weekend expeditions of ours – the fuel was company-expensable, he claimed, and he often used various loyalty cards or points to redeem nights at lodges across the country. And so after much internal struggle, I told him that Australia was a hard no. But the fact that he had offered to pay pleased me, and seemed a sign of his commitment and love. And evaluating this new adult phase in life I had found myself in, I thought to myself, how lucky I had become, how blessed, how in love I was. Maybe love was easier than it was made out to be. Maybe love was just where you chose to love, and who you decided to dedicate your time to. And I was happier than I'd ever remembered being.

4.

It was around the same time that Arin finally got her big break, that two things happened in very quick succession that definitively changed everything for me. The first was what I referred to retrospectively as the abomination, though today, my therapist tells me that naming it gives it power, and lets it take control of me. But it is what it is, so I ignore him, still mute after a month of forced sessions with him.

In any case, everything happened within the span of a month. It was nearing the end of January, and I was on the phone with Arin again while walking back from work. Scott usually picked me up whenever he could, having realized that I enjoyed being fetched and chauffeured around in a car though I didn't explicitly say anything about it, but he was working late that day. Earlier in the day he had promised that he would come, but he had been saddled with some last minute work, and so sent his apologies. This made me slightly grumpy, although I knew I had no right to be, but anyway the end of the work day came around and there was no last minute text saying he'd come, so I shed my work jacket and stepped out into the musty evening sun, starting on the long, forty minute walk home.

I got off at approximately the same time Arin took her lunch breaks, so out of habit, I pulled out my phone and sent her a text. *How're things?* The past month, every time I spoke to her, secretly looking for comfort, she obliged with a long and hearty tale of how the acting industry in China was sexist, rude, how she was starting to think she'd never make it, how everything was a nightmare, how she was ready to give up but no, they wouldn't be rid of her so easily, she wasn't a quitter, etcetera etcetera. Her endless quiet determinism though, had taken a decidedly duller turn in the past weeks, and I made it a point to check in on her every once in awhile, out of mostly selfless reasons.

She called, instead of replying. "Let me just die," she said, without preamble.

I hopped over a crack in the pavement. "Hello, you."

"I'm so sick of this shit. You know how I can call you at 1 in the afternoon?"

Cause I have nothing to do. Nothing. Everyday my agent says, a new audition will come in, I sent in your head shot already, your showreel, it's gonna come in, blah blah. Everyday - nothing." She said this, or variations of this, frequently. It had been over two weeks since she'd been booked for an audition, and the ones she did go for before that hadn't resulted in anything. But that wasn't so bad, she had told me grimly, it was better to at least be auditioning, and failing. The kicker was not landing any auditions. It made her feel... "Useless," she said. "My agent is useless. I suspect she's given up on me because she thinks I'm not hot enough to refuse sleeping with casting directors for jobs, and yet I persist with my moral standards. You can tell she doesn't know what to make of me anymore. She's been ignoring me the past two days. Did I tell you? Of course I did. No one else listens to me except you. Jesus Christ."

"There, there," I said, as I did every day, "something will come in."

"Stop patronizing me."

Wounded, I protested. "I'm not."

"You *are*, and you could at *least* put in more effort into pretending to be sympathetic. It's really the absolute least you could do." I imagined her now, lying on her bed, in front of her laptop, obsessing over Youtube videos of other actresses her age on mute while holding the phone to her ear. She did this every time she had a free minute: she said watching them move without being distracted by the audio of the clip would help her discern (and so, learn) the craft of the actress, she called it an academic study of human beings, but I noticed that she mostly did this with actresses who had gotten roles that she had auditioned for. Often, after hours of analyzing the clips, she

would call me and declare them talentless, which pushed her further into her conviction that the entire industry was rigged.

“Hey,” I said, turning the corner and passing the temporary bus station by my workplace. There was a sign there, stuck on the makeshift timetable panel crudely, advertising the cheapest private car airport transfers in the city. EARLY BIRD DISCOUNT, it said. An idea had struck. “Why don’t you come visit me? Seriously. Since you’re not doing anything, just come. You can stay with me. And you can meet Scott.” I felt generous.

She was quick as ever: “And is this Scott going to pay for my air tickets there like he pays for your holidays?”

“Arin..”

She realized that she had gone too far, and relented. Remorse and sorrow crept into her voice immediately, and I found myself marveling at her quick turnaround even as I nursed my injured pride. “I haven’t been working, G. And when I do, what little I get goes to rent. And my agent, that money sucking mosquito.” I heard a soft beep start up on the phone, and pulled it away from my face to glance at the screen. Wasn’t me. But she ignored the beeping and continued, gaining momentum: “The worst part is, I know I can do it. I *know*. You saw the youtube link for the ad I did recently, the one where I played the maid in the skit? I sent it to you. I thought things would have picked up, after that.”

“You were very good,” I said, dutifully. She was, in fact. I had been impressed myself, when I’d seen it, and even Scott had peered over my shoulder and commented that Arin had a certain quality about her that made her not exactly attractive, but very, very watchable. *No wonder she’s in TV*, he said, and I had snapped: *yeah, well, she’s trying*.

“I *know*,” she said, “that’s why I’m so annoyed. You know — wait, there’s this other line trying to call me, and it won’t go away —” I heard a beep, and then some generic electronic ditty, and continued walking as I pressed the phone to my face. I was approaching Tower Junction Mega Center now, a megamall a couple of blocks from my apartment, and deliberated the merits of getting a pretzel for the remainder of my walk home. As I passed the mall, the phone suddenly cut off, and I found myself no longer on hold. No explanation, no apology. Fine. Typical. I had no energy to be annoyed. I removed my phone from my face, its surface now slick with remnants of foundation and sweat, wiped at it, and stuffed it in my pocket.

I made up my mind, went into the mall, got my pretzel, and made superficial conversation with the illegal teenaged girl who worked the stand. This, also, was routine for me. She claimed to be seventeen, but I was openly convinced she was no more than fourteen, with a lot of makeup to hide the fact.

“Cinnamon,” I said, and she rolled her eyes.

“I know. You never get anything else. Don’t you ever want to try anything else?”

“I like cinnamon.” I handed her two dollar sixty, in coins. She stared at them.

“Really?” But she took them anyway, and gave me my reheated pretzel. “Bye bye. See you again.”

“Bye Anne.”

“Stop.”

I walked away, licking the sugar off my pretzel, feeling light. I was fond of the girl, her blatant rudeness, her overdone eyeliner, her exclusive dedication to goth or punk clothing. I found it endearing. And her name, stamped across her chest in embroidery: Anne. “Anne from Auntie Anne’s,” I had said, the first time I’d bought a

pretzel, five or six months back when I'd moved here. Back then, money was tight, and the two-dollar pretzels were the only indulgence I could regularly justify.

"You don't start," she'd snapped back, but her rudeness was cute, and then I took to teasing her about her name whenever I saw her, which she didn't seem to mind as much as she said, and in return she offered me unsolicited life commentary over the counter: *I hate your skirt. Ugh, emo rock is so passe. Who's that cute guy I saw you with? Do you guys have like, Asian tinder or something?* And I responded in kind, and I thought perhaps we weren't exactly friends, but we weren't exactly strangers either. Anyway, I returned to the pretzel stand over and over, and regardless of her fluctuating teenaged moods, I always left smelling of warm cinnamon and feeling generally happier.

The point of noting this is not so much to expound upon the varied joys of complex sugared carbohydrates or the meaningfulness of fringe friendships, but to demonstrate how quickly my mind worked in those days, how quickly I dropped Arin from my mind once our phone call had been cut, how happy I was to turn immediately back to my own life. I left the mall and continued the long, winding walk back to my apartment, unconcerned with anything past the edges of my ribboned pretzel, quite content to be where I was. I was lucky to get off work earlier than most — my work day ended at five thirty, as opposed to seven for most desk jobs, and so the walk home was always nice, peaceful, and quiet. I rarely ran into another human soul during these dusky walks home, and when I first moved to Christchurch, these solitary walks represented to me a time of soul searching. I saw significance in the fact that these broken roads of rubble had afforded me a new life — the earthquakes had left the city in desperate need for city planners, and I couldn't imagine another circumstance in

which I would have successfully and so rapidly landed a job in Christchurch —so although I knew I should feel only sadness and pity at seeing the broken paths and torn roofs, I often felt quite thankful instead.

I reached the foot of my building, threw away the sticky wrapping paper of my pretzel, sucked the remainder of the burnt sugar off my fingers, the granular texture of the sugar bits melting against my tongue, and made for the stairs. My phone vibrated angrily against my hipbone. I stopped, wiped my fingers against my jeans, pulled my phone out, and looked at it.

OH MY GOD U R MY LUCKY STAR. THE CALL WAS FROM AGENT,
GOT AN AUDITION, ALL FINGERS N TOES CROSSED. XXXX

5.

Wednesday, four in the afternoon. February, more specifically, the ninth, the day Arin stopped being just Arin and started being Princess Pearl as well, the leading role in a Chinese period drama that would eventually catapult her to fame. The results of the audition had come in two weeks before; she had called me, and I had been deeply touched by the news.

“Congrats,” I choked, “finally.”

Arin was suspicious. “Are you happy for me?”

“How could I not be?”

When we hung up I was surprised to find my eyes wet. But her career was flourishing, I had a successful relationship, and we were happy-happy, feeling the potency of our youth and potential stretch before us. The more we said it the more we knew it to be true, and by the end of the day, the competitive edge between us had, if not dissolved, gone into hiding. We congratulated each other heartily on our individual achievements, got drunk on the phone over the weekend, and commiserated our hangovers together, cheerfully, via video calls. Scott had respectfully committed himself to work, to give us space to just “be girls”, he said, and I had given him a big, noisy kiss on the cheek Arin watching from the small computer camera, as he bowed out of the door and back to his corporate hijinks.

The following two weeks had been spent discussing contracts, costumes, script, fixing up the rest of the casting — despite me knowing nothing of the film industry, Arin had insisted on getting my opinion on every little detail before she made any decisions. I spent hours on the phone with her, and when I mentioned, once, during a video call, that I wouldn’t be offended if she went ahead without me, what with our time differences and all, she just shook her head. “You’re my lucky star,” she said, and

in that statement, our childhood echoed in my memory: her ruffling my hair, pinching my cheek, and telling me I was her lucky star every time I was witness to yet another one of her successes. I apologized to Scott for my relative absentness during this period, for even when we were together she was perpetually on speakerphone somewhere, and he just shook his head. “You should stand up for yourself sometimes,” he said. “and tell her not to put you down so much.”

But I responded badly to this, I told him that it was hard for an only child to understand the dynamic between siblings, and he let it go. Regardless, things built up, one thing leading to another, and so on the 9th of February, quietly and furtively, I applied for a day off from work, tried to sleep in, and slowly attempted to figure out how I felt about the fact that halfway across the world, Arin would start filming for this new drama on the same day.

The date was significant for various reasons. After years of vague competition, I found relief in the fact that finally, she would eclipse me so entirely that there would never be a question of who the more capable sister was again. So unshakable was my faith in her talent that I had known this the minute she landed the leading role, and retrospectively felt ashamed at the realization that I had been silently hoping no one else would discover her to be as brilliant as I knew she was. All that would end within the next twenty four hours – the minute they begun filming, surely it would dawn on everyone on set that she was the star this generation was waiting for, and this triggered both a proud and bittersweet feeling in me. Partly due to humiliation and partly to indulge myself, I had told no one about my free day, not my colleagues, not Scott, and *especially* not Arin, who would guess immediately the reasons behind my random day off. The only people who had known beforehand were Damien and my sort-of friend

Sally, who sat near me at work and had accidentally overheard me checking in with Damien about the possibility of getting the leave approved.

I was surprised when it was, and then surprised at my surprise: we weren't that busy at work anyway. In the week leading up to that day I had found myself thinking with increasing frequency of what I should do with my one rare free day, but had, for some reason, put off making any actual plans. And so when the day rolled around, I had woken automatically at six, groaned, and rolled back under the covers. But — and this was a relatively new discovery for me — staying in bed past a certain time was a humid, sticky business, and unable to avoid the day any longer, I'd gotten up, made the bed, and did stupid, banal things in the name of 'me-time'. Washed in between my toes. Painted my nails, badly. Busted out a jar of old body scrub, with a suspicious expiry date. Downloaded a movie to watch, without actually getting around to watching it. I resisted the urge to talk to Scott, to make human contact, and after the one morning text I shot off to Arin — *good luck, thinking of u, love u, u gonna kill it xx* — I shut off my phone and stuffed it at the bottom of my crummy handbag.

Finally, fuelled by a strange sensibility to have actually done something on this free day more than anything else, I'd gotten up, walked to Tower Junction, and found it exactly the same as every other day. I left after roaming around in it aimlessly for an hour. Honestly, I wasn't sure what I'd expected. Half the shops were closed — it was a Wednesday afternoon, after all, and from the ones that were open, the shopkeepers peered out of their stores, surprised to see me walking around like an unemployed person. I suppose they thought I must have been trying to steal something, or look for trouble, and it occurred to me that objectively I should feel offended, though I couldn't muster the energy to. I browsed useless electronic appliances, I ran my fingers over the

wood of tables and shelves without buying anything, I spent way too long in the restroom primping up for who knows what. I even tried making conversation with the old man who manned the DA Lewis furniture store, looking for something ambiguous in yet another conversation with a stranger, but he just stared at me, eyes heavy with suspicion, obviously wondering what I was up to. So I gave up and left.

I skipped my pretzel stop that day, this I remember clearly. I thought I would do something else for a change, walk to a new coffee shop in the container malls that I'd seen being promoted on Yelp, maybe sit there for a while and read, or have a cake, basically, treat myself, reflect on life, remember to be grateful for the small things, to stop and smell the flowers, etcetera etcetera. I remember also feeling slightly guilty for not stopping to say hi to Anne, so intense was my desire to avoid anyone who I knew that I went a huge round out of my way to avoid the pretzel store. I exited Tower Junction and pulled my phone out of my bag, turned it on, noting with relief the lack of messages coming in, mapped the route out, and started down walking in the general direction of the new coffee shop. It was a thirty-two minute walk, via Moorhouse Avenue and past South Hagley park, relatively straightforward. Once I was sure I'd gotten the directions more or less memorised, I hurriedly shut my phone off again and started walking, taking deliberate care to look around at everything - the roads, the rubble, the sky, the little flowers pushing out of the cracks in the pavement, the trash on the floor, so on and so forth. I told myself: I was remembering what it was like to be independent; I was reveling in my youth. As I walked, I formulated far-fetched career plans, invented beautiful scenarios in my head where I won awards for the products of my creative inspired mind, I remembered again that I was meant to be more, meant to make history, or so I'd once convinced myself. It struck me that once

upon a time I had been ambitious, I had wanted to be an inventor of things, of stories, I had even written half a collection of self-indulgent poems in college but never gotten round to finishing them. Suddenly I realized that time was slipping me by, and I wondered how I had gotten so fat and lazy and complacent with happiness and satisfaction that I'd not started working towards being the stellar person I knew I was meant to become. I walked, and as I walked, I found myself trying to invent new products in my head that people never knew they needed: double lidded jars so you could scoop the jam off the bottom *and* the top, hollow rubberised hair brushes that you could fill with shampoo and water so you might work through your tangles *and* massage your head while in the shower, so on and so forth. I walked, and let myself imagine.

The city was quiet, it generally had been ever since I moved here, but I had never felt the quiet as intensely as I did while I was taking that walk that now in retrospect feels like forever. At four in the afternoon, it was virtually a ghost town. Everyone was either at work or too fussed by the heat to be outside. I was thinking also about this, how the quiet seemed to intensify as I went along, leaving me more and more alone with my thoughts as I picked my way down the main street. I thought about many things except the topic that I had endeavored to avoid, and so I found my mind fluttering back to how life here was peaceful and quiet, and calming, and how it was also kind and friendly, and how I really had to start counting my blessings. I remember, as I pulled my hair up into a ponytail, feeling the sweat start to accumulate on the back of my neck and under my bra, thinking that I should start again this practice of writing down three things I was grateful for at the end of each day, something I used to do in my teenaged years, something which I thought had made me

happier as a person. I watched a lone crow circle the air above. I found myself distracted by the dust particles dancing in the light. I thought: I need to watch less tv, so I can start thinking about more, real life things. I thought: TV is making me stupid. I thought: the entertainment industry is a huge scam. I was halfway down the block when someone rode up to me on a bicycle and pulled over beside me.

“Hey lady,” the someone said, and I half-turned towards the voice, still deep in thought. It was a young boy on the bike, maybe fourteen or fifteen, his eyes heavy-lidded, one foot on the pedal and the other halfway to the ground. I’d been so preoccupied with my own thoughts that I hadn’t heard him approaching, and I wondered listlessly if the school holidays were upon us. I lived far from the local school zone, and realized that I hardly saw youngsters hang around the areas I frequented. I felt old. He was still talking, he was saying: “Could I have two dollars, please?”

In the days to come I would flick back to this moment and run my eyes over the boy, trying to memorize details, features, and failing. Even now I cannot be sure that he was what I think I remember of him, and not just invented and embellished by my brilliant, creative mind. The only things I remember very distinctly to be true were all there in front of me: heavy eyes, a body torn between coming and going, youth. A stench, acrid, that strongly smelt of *boy*. What color was his shirt? I don’t even remember, today, although I think that I registered, vaguely, that it was a band T shirt. What band? I don’t know. I don’t think it rung a bell. How could I remember that it was a band T shirt, and not remember the color of the shirt itself? I assume it was a black shirt, because all band shirts I know are black. But this is my conjecture, I recognize, and not fact. And this bothers me. Things like that bother me. Never mind: let us proceed on the basis of acceptance, that what my memory tells me is true.

None of these things occurred to me then. What did, however, was a faint inkling of irritation, at my reverie being interrupted, and by what? Personal greed. I hated children. I had almost no tolerance for anyone younger than I was: I saw them as irritants, reminders of what I once might have been like. I wanted him to go away and leave me to my thoughts. I was still walking this whole time, and said:

“What do you need two dollars for?”

“The bus. I’m drunk, and I need to get home.”

This was so absurd that I stopped walking altogether. He didn’t look or smell drunk, and besides, he was on a bicycle. Disgust crept up in me like mold. Was this my life now? How could I be the sort of person to look like I would buy such a stupid, stupid lie? I looked at him. “I don’t have two dollars.”

The fact of the matter was, I *did* have exactly two dollars in coins. I remembered counting my money later on, when I got home, and anyway, I would never have been caught outdoors without cash, I was that sort of person. But I didn’t want to give my money to a complete stranger. Especially not a delinquent child. Pretending to be drunk at four in the afternoon! It was frankly insulting. And debatably illegal. I thought about the nearest police post, but it was too much effort to try and recall where exactly it was, and anyway, I knew I wouldn’t bother to report him for underage drinking, it was too hot to walk all the way there, my legs were starting to ache, and anyway, I didn’t really care. I was just entertaining the thought because it made me feel powerful, or in control of the situation, I think. Or perhaps I edit this in, now that I recall that afternoon, as I have edited so many other things. I don’t know.

“Whatever,” he said, his eyelids looking heavier and heavier. “Can I have two dollars, please?”

He pronounced it funny, this I definitely recall, he had a viscous, sticky quality

to his voice, and it made his enunciation sound slightly strange. He pronounced it *what-ever*. It sounded like a question in itself, one that applied itself from asker to askee. *Whatever? Whatever*, can I have two dollars? *Little punk*, I thought, *earn your own money*.

“I don’t have two dollars,” I repeated, putting a hand over my bag. In my head: *go away, kid*. And I started walking away.

“*Whatever*,” he replied, calling after me, and I walked on. And I think I had walked for a while, before I heard, loudly: “Can you give me a blow job, please?”

I stopped this time, and turned around, staring at him hard. My mind stuttered. I was disgusted, but this I would only realize later. The predominant feeling was shock.

“No,” I said, after what felt like eternity. And I resumed my walk.

He put his foot to the pedal and rode up next to me, kicking lazily, each rotation of the wheel slow and lethargic, to keep level with my pace. “Please,” he drawled. “Please give me a blow job.”

I steadily ignored him, walking on.

“Come on baby I’ll lick your pussy too we can go all night. Please.”

The words sounded tired and rehearsed, there were no emotions behind them, they sounded like something he’d heard on the tele and that he was now parroting back to me, but something about the way he said *please* gave me chills. I don’t think I actually felt threatened, but I did remember wanting to get away from this creepy boy.

“Please,” he was still saying, now in my ear, too close, “Please come on baby we can go to any one of the empty containers across the road no one will see. Please. Please give me a blow job.”

I registered with shock that the bicycle was so close now that it was threatening to run me off the road. I walked closer and closer to the road shoulder to avoid

bumping into him, and almost stumbled on a small pile of rubble. *Jesus, child*, I wanted to say, regaining my balance, *have some dignity. Look at yourself. Stop watching porn. That stuff rots your brain*. But I didn't say any of that, I don't know why. I kept silent, veering close to the road, navigating the ruptures in the pavement, trying to put as much distance as possible between the boy and myself. I figured that if I kept walking, he would eventually just fade into the background, and go bother someone else. I became aware of the heat again, the humidity making itself obvious to me, and a breeze chose that moment to flit by, raising goose bumps down my back where the sweat had pooled and evaporated. My ears prickled.

Suddenly the bike swerved and stopped right in front of me, and the boy leaned over, reached out, and roughly grabbed my left breast. I looked down at the hand.

"Look at those titsicles," he pronounced, sounding bored. Yet another thing I am sure of: the use of the word *titsicles*. I suppose I remember more than I give myself credit for. I remember thinking: *no one says that. How ridiculous*. A split second. And then he quickly withdrew his hand.

I blinked.

"Sorry," he said, looking at me through those heavy, half opened eyes. "Sorry." The whole thing was less than a minute. And before I could react, he turned and rode away, pedaling hard.

He glanced back over his shoulder a couple of times, reached a bend in the road, and turned. I could still see him, disappearing down the adjacent road, becoming smaller and smaller, and finally I could not see him at all. At this point I must have realized that I had stopped walking, and I looked down. My sneakers were covered in dust. *That's going to be hell to clean*, I thought. I looked up, and around. There were no cars on the road, no pedestrians to share in my shock, and the closest human being

was a construction worker squatting by a fence and drinking from a bottle a street down, body angled away from me. He had not seen me, or the punk. No one had seen it, and even if they had, he was on wheels. Christchurch was a quiet city, generally, and now, specifically. I straightened up and kept walking.

Did I eventually reach the coffee shop? I think so. I walked down the main street, blinking deliberately as I passed the small road the boy had turned into, willing myself not to glance down the road, and failing. It was empty. I exhaled and kept walking. The coffee shop was a couple of blocks down, at the entrance of a container mall, and I had found myself wondering why the city needed so many malls anyway, and in such close proximity. I turned onto a street, I think it was Montreal street, in the opposite direction of the road the boy had gone down, and walked on. One more right turn, ahead.

The great thing about Christchurch, I remembered thinking, back on my three things to be grateful for per day, *is that no matter what place you pop into, odds are, the coffee is bound to be good*. Even if it was a random petrol kiosk, or some nothing pop-up store. Back home, I was perpetually ambushed by bad coffee, packaged in pretty cups, a shadow copy of what you got elsewhere, and more likely than not: overpriced. I had thought about this a lot over the past six months, and my conclusion was that it was because of the cows. There were no cows back in Singapore. There was nothing back in Singapore. You'd be lucky to find a live chicken, though not so long ago the entire country was basically a giant farm. I knew this because my grandmother, when she was still alive, had said this a lot, moaned about her kampung days in all languages she knew. Why was I thinking about her again? I hadn't thought about her in years. I walked on.

But in New Zealand, cows were aplenty. There was the land space for livestock here, and everyone knew someone who owned a farm, or at least a backyard that had a couple of chickens pecking around. Scott and I had certainly driven past enough plains of green, littered with horses and cows and sheep. The first time I had seen them, I had squealed. I had taken about a million photos, and tried to identify everything from afar. I had even sent the photo home, emailed it to my parents and Arin, as a kind of life update that my mother seemed rather satisfied by. *Cows*, she had replied, *mean fresher milk. Your stomach might not be able to take it. Remember to stock up on charcoal pills.* I don't take pictures of cows anymore; they lost their novelty after the first three months and fifteen hundred cows or so. But I still find myself amazed whenever I think of the fact that cities and cows can coexist so closely. Anyway, somehow that had led to my theory that cities near cows had better coffee. When you had cows, you had fresh milk. And when you had fresh milk, you had good coffee. Better, anyway.

I reached the turn and made it. There were other humans on this street, it was slightly busier, and I thought to myself, safer. I noted without emotion a bunch of people congregated outside the mall, smoking, drinking coffee out of colorful printed paper cups, making conversation. But as I headed towards them, something stuttered in my brain and I walked right off the pavement and onto the road.

A car honked behind me and I jumped.

"Get off the road, lady." The voice was sharp, female.

"Sorry," I said to the air. "Sorry." But I didn't move.

The honk sounded again and I started. "Sorry," I repeated, and this time I got back onto the pavement. The car rolled past me, windows wound down, the driver deliberately and slowly rolling her eyes for my benefit. My head vibrated, and I closed

my eyes, trying to slow my breathing down. When I opened them, I saw again what I didn't register the first time: a bearded man that had been walking towards me earlier, now stopped at the end of the road, talking to a group of what looked like college students. I felt something unknot in me. I forgot the coffee. I turned around, and kept on walking.

I reached my apartment, panting from the four floor walk up, and flung my bag on the kitchen counter upon entry, flipping the switch on my coffee machine while rinsing a ceramic cup. It all seemed very fluid, like one continuous movement, and in my memory: cinematic. One cappuccino. Double shot. I jabbed at the tiny electronic display and shoved the cup onto the drip tray, then leaned against the kitchen counter, arms folded, waiting for the familiar brown liquid to start trickling out. Nothing happened. I smacked the side of the machine, hoping to jolt it into action, but it just groaned in protest and sighed a little steam.

“Fucking Nespresso knock-off” I muttered, hitting it a little harder. I was so proud when I'd bought it too, at half the original price on some Chinese website Arin had introduced to me, shipping included. A knob fell off the side of the machine and as I reached for it, I accidentally knocked the mug off balance and onto the floor, where it shattered. At the same time, the coffee machine started rumbling threateningly, and I paused for a moment, half twisted towards the floor, unsure or what to do next. Finally, after an indeterminate amount of time, I straightened up, pulled the plug on the machine, and yanked the capsule tray open. It was empty. I'd forgotten to load it.

I found myself craving a cinnamon pretzel, the smell of cinnamon suddenly so real to me that my nose and eyes watered. I exhaled sharply through my teeth, shook

my head, tried not to think about the fact that I hadn't eaten since breakfast, and cleaned up the mess halfway. But it was hopeless. I abandoned the entire endeavor halfway and retreated to the living room instead, where I sat down hard and pressed my eyes shut, head pounding. I had the ridiculous urge to call my mother. I wanted to talk to Arin. I wanted to shout at someone, my dad, maybe, or Scott. I felt aggressive, and punched the couch cushion once, but stopped immediately, feeling stupid, like it was too dramatic a movement for an empty room. Instead, I decided, I'd take a shower. I was sweating, I realized, despite the eighteen-degree air conditioning, from the brisk walking and stair climbing. My shirt was clinging to me in disgusting ways. Slick against my skin, stuck between baby rolls of fat on my stomach. I stopped slouching. I retrieved my phone from my bag and turned it on: it was six thirty-four. The four minutes off from a nice, round number seemed important somehow. It was about the time when Scott would be preparing to get off work, or at least known if he'd have to stay late. I swiped at the phone and called him. It rung and rung and rung, and he didn't have voicemail, so I finally gave up and sent him a text. *Baby*, I started, but I deleted it, holding my phone in two hands, thumbs sweaty. I started again. *Scott*, I typed, *I was walking home and got molested*. I didn't know what else to say, how else to put this to words. Finally, I typed: *Help me* and signed off.

I was in the shower when the phone rang. I remember standing with my eyes closed, face tilted up towards the hot water, the heat turned up to the very edge of what I could take. It was a habit I'd had since I was a child - once, when I was seven or eight, our electricity got cut off and we had to shower in cold water for a week. And while the weather was perpetually hot enough in Singapore that this wasn't a problem, it struck me somewhere in my young mind that hot water wasn't just a choice, it was a

privilege. And since then I had always somehow enjoyed the burn of steaming hot water on my skin. When I heard the phone go off, I let out a huge breath I didn't know I'd been holding. Some water went into my nose as I did this, and I had a mild choking fit, grasped at the shower curtain and the tap, turned the water off, and gasped. I wrapped a towel around myself and stumbled towards the bed blindly, dripping hot water all over my carpet. I felt sunburnt. When I picked up I was surprised to find myself shaking, and I had to blink the misty anger away a few times before I trusted myself to speak.

“Hello? Gwen?”

“Why weren't you at your phone?” I asked, wrestling to keep my voice flat.

“I'm sorry. You know I don't always check my phone when I'm at work; it's on silent. Are you home? I'll come over now.”

“It's not seven yet.”

“They'll manage without me.”

“What's the point of having a phone if you're not going to answer it?” But he had already rung off.

I stared at the phone in my hand until the display dimmed. My hand was trembling, and the screen was wet from being pressed to my face. I could not recognize this unnatural, irrational anger lapping at me in gentle waves, and this unfamiliarity was jarring. I tossed the phone onto the bed harder than expected, and collapsed backward, lying on my back and feeling the cool sheets hug my burnt back. I could feel the towel gaffing against my skin, which was feeling increasingly raw – I'd misjudged the level of heat I could take – and so I abandoned it, and rolled on the bed from side to side, naked, letting the sheets absorb the remainder of the water. My skin started to chill from the air conditioning and I thought: *there's going to be hell to*

pay for this later, and then remembered my dusty shoes, and broken mug, and my headache came back.

Scott found me lying there, eyes open, goose bumps, naked, on the bed that was now damp and chilled. He took one look at me, turned the air-conditioning off, and sat down next to me, the bed making a gentle depress as he did.

“Sweetie,” he said, and I sat up, reached for the towel, feeling glad that he was here, but irritated that he took so long.

“Hi.”

He held my hand as I repeated the experience to him. My hand was still warm, burnt from the shower, and his palm felt like a salve, but I couldn’t stop myself from feeling annoyed at it, and comforted, and annoyed at my comfort. Out loud: “That’s what it is,” I said, firm. “An experience.” I couldn’t do anything about it now and neither could he. I found it important to emphasize this point. I could hardly remember how the boy looked like now, and I don’t think I could — no — I couldn’t, pick him out in a crowd.

“Did he do anything else to you?” I felt his hands stiffening, flinching almost. I flicked away my irritation.

“No. Nothing else.”

It was true, that was all it was. At the same time, I couldn’t help but feel like punching his horrified, careful face. I thought of the fact that I’d wanted to get coffee, come back, and Hoover the place. Order pizza. Now all those things were impossible. The inside of my shoulders started shaking.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that,” he was saying, in a low voice, deliberately steady. “Gwen baby.” I looked up at him and his face was anguished. “I

love you so much. I love you very, very much, okay? You brave, strong girl.” He held on to my hand while saying this, and looked as if he might want to pull me in for a hug.

I found myself helpless in my anger. It was not directed anywhere, and I didn’t know what to do with it. I found myself looking desperately at my own hands, intertwined in his. *Whatever*, can I have two dollars? *Whatever*.

I got up. He stared at me, and I felt compelled to say something. This was a guy, I reminded myself, who would literally clean up my vomit. He was not a threat to me. I repeated this to myself in my head a couple of times.

“Okay,” I said. “Okay.”

“What?”

“Nothing, I just - I think I’m in shock.” I suddenly regretted asking him to come over, and then I realized that I didn’t, and felt a fresh wave of irritation rush over me. I tried to remind myself of how reassuring I had found his presence before, but failed.

“How come you don’t have to work?”

“I left early to come find you. I told you.”

“It’s irresponsible.”

Scott stared at me, and I knew I was on dangerous ground. “Anyway,” I said, “I’ve got to get to work.”

“But you just got back,” he pointed out. “And besides. You sure you’re okay? You’re being funny.”

Casually, now, I told myself. I shrugged. “Emails. It’s okay, Scott. It’s no big deal.” In my head: *please just leave me alone, Scott*. But out loud: “I just thought it was the kind of thing I should tell you. No?” I thought about it, then walked over and planted a kiss on the side of his forehead to demonstrate this: no big deal. Then I left

the room.

He left my place briefly to get take out, but then he came back and insisted on staying over. *Unless you'd rather have some time alone?* he asked, but I understood that there was a right and wrong answer, and I laughed out loud. *Of course not*, I had said, *stay. Stop making a fuss*. But when he returned with stir-fry, I watched him let himself in through my door and regretted not bolting it when he was out. But what could I have said to him? *Sorry, Scott, must have changed the locks and forgotten to tell you*. Or *Sorry, looks like the door's jammed*. But then he might call a locksmith or kick the door in, and I really couldn't afford to get another thing fixed that month. Besides, he wasn't stupid.

We sat cross-legged on the living room couch across each other, boxes of Chinese takeout balanced between us. That was another thing that had amazed me when I had moved here: takeout really came in those little white boxes, like on television. Not in the lame Styrofoam boxes they did back home.

"What're you thinking of?" he asked, and I realized I'd been staring at him while chewing at my noodles.

"Nothing."

"Okay." We chewed in silence awhile longer. "How was work today?"

I realized that I hadn't told him about taking a day off. It seemed like too much effort to explain it now, and I just shook my head at him. "The same."

"You called Arin to ask about her first day yet?"

I looked at him, feeling affronted and not knowing why. "No?"

"You sure you don't want to go out? For a walk? Some fresh air?"

"No," I repeated. "I said, I'm fine."

“Okay. Sorry.”

I knew I had hurt him, but the hurt felt dull and far away from me. I turned my face to my food and focused very hard on it until it was all gone. Then I stood up, cleared the boxes away, and announced: “I’m going to bed.”

I could tell that he was deliberating on how to respond, whether to a) offer to come in with me or b) come over and kiss me goodnight, and I knew that he knew (and he knew that I knew this as well) that both options would irritate me beyond reason. I felt prickly. This was not what I’d signed up for, I thought. I was being unreasonable and I let myself.

“Okay. Gwen?”

My face was hot. “Yeah?” It came out more sharply than I’d expected, and we’d both winced.

“I love you, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.” I left.

Back in my room and under the covers I found myself breathing, hard and angry. The sheets were still damp, but now the hot water had cooled to a disgusting, clammy chill, and I had found myself so incredibly angry for being so insanely stupid: why the hell would I have thought it’d been a remotely good idea to roll onto the bed, *wet*? The wet had probably seeped into the mattress itself, and given my luck it’d get moldy, and I’d have to throw it out, and buy a new one, and I didn’t have money for a new one. Scott did, but I was angry with him and myself, and I didn’t know why, and anyway, I didn’t want to take his money, I wanted to be independent, I had made a resolution, hadn’t I? My arms erupted into chills; I got even angrier, and I pressed myself into the cold bed, breathing hard. I was so angry. I remember thinking that it seemed like such

a straightforward emotion, such a stupid thing to say, but I was so, so angry, and I didn't know why exactly, and I was angry with everything and everyone: myself, the bed, the punk, Scott, Arin, myself, myself, myself. Stupid.

I lay there, shivering, cold, a bundle of angry emotion, but when Scott slipped into bed beside me I found myself turning towards him and burrowing my head into the space between his neck and left shoulder blade. I could feel him stiffening from surprise at the damp bed, but wisely choosing not to say anything about it, instead leaning into the embrace and wiggling an arm under and around me. *Sorry*, I mouthed into his skin, blinking back relief. He couldn't hear me, but he wrapped his other arm around me anyway, and squeezed. *Sorry*. I started slipping into sleep almost immediately, my body unfurling and loosening up, and I gave up trying to stay awake. But despite not remembering the sleep itself I remember waking up some time in the night with a jolt, to hear his measured breathing. He was pretending to be asleep. I could tell. I shifted my head and looked up at him, and he was staring wide-eyed and the ceiling, inhaling, exhaling, inhaling. He didn't acknowledge or look at me. I stared at him for awhile longer, and then closed my eyes, feeling my head start to pound again, and went back to sleep.

6.

No dreams. I woke up, sweaty, as I frequently did when sharing the bed with Scott, and for a brief moment closed my eyes again and let the revulsion wash over me, waiting for it to pass. He produced a ridiculous amount of body heat for a human being, and sleeping with him was always a humid affair, even if we didn't do anything except lie there. When we slept over at his it was alright, because he always turned his air conditioning down to the coldest it could go, and I had affectionately joked about him being my heat pack, on occasion. But over at mine, the bed was smaller, the air-conditioning unit dinkier, and the overall effect, warmer. I found myself damp.

I wriggled a little under the weight of his arm, and then sat up, disentangling myself from his sticky grip. He woke up while I was doing this, and closed his arms tighter around me, smiling into my back, obviously in a good mood. I struggled with his body for a little while longer, then snapped: "Oh my god, stop it, Scott."

He let go immediately. "Sorry," he said, mouth slumping downwards. I immediately felt the rubber band smack of guilt, and moved to hug him, but then changed my mind and rested a hand lightly on his torso.

"No, I'm sorry. I'm just -" I stopped, not really knowing how to continue. But he was staring at me, and still half-smiling, so I reminded myself that I loved him and pushed on. "I think I'm just a bit on edge. You know. Weirder out."

He sat up immediately. "Obviously. Sorry."

"Dont--"

"What do you want? What do you need? I'm at your disposal to use and abuse. You want a chauffeur today? A lunch delivery man?" He pulled one of my hands in his, closed it into a fist, and laid it down on his chest. "A punching bag?"

I laughed and pulled away. "You're so stupid," I said, and stood up. "I'm going

to get ready for work.”

“You smiled,” he called after me, and I found myself laughing again, feeling a lightness in my chest. My good mood lasted all the way through my morning cleansing routine, three-step face washing, toning, moisturizing, the small luxuries I allowed myself to splurge on every couple of months, and I felt my heart settle down while repeating the same motions I did everyday. I put a hand on the edge of the sink, leaning forward, staring at myself in the mirror while I brushed my teeth. I looked the same, clean skin, soft hair, nonexistent brows. As I filled them in, taking my time with my make up, I saw myself emerge from the sleepy mess I was before, I was comforted, and I believed, again, that I was beautiful. My face was slightly pudgy from sleep, and I kneaded my cheeks with my palms, staring at myself in the mirror the whole time, not breaking eye contact, turning my face from side to side, pushing my shoulders back, arching my back, tilting my chin up and down. Satisfied, I slipped out of my sweatshirt and into my normal work wear, fluffed up my hair, and walked out of the bathroom ready to face the day. A cup of coffee was waiting on the kitchen counter, and Scott was sitting on the couch in his underwear and T-shirt, laptop balanced on his lap.

“Gorgeous,” he said, when I walked out, and I rolled my eyes.

“Thanks for the coffee.”

“If you’ll wait for me to finish sending this email out, I’ll drop you off at work.”

“It’s not on the way.”

“You’re my girlfriend.” He clicked send, shut the laptop down, and stood up, glorious gray underpants poking out from under his t shirt. I could smell the faint trace of talcum powder in the air, mixed with his perspiration, and felt slightly ill. “And anyway, I called ahead and said I’d work from home today.”

“Tempting,” I said, “but no thanks. I’d rather walk.” And before he could protest, I added quickly: “To be honest, I think I could use the time.” I transferred the steaming coffee from the mug into a tumbler, then walked over and kissed his waiting face. “Gotta go. Bye. And seriously, put on some pants.”

As I slipped out of the door, I heard him say: “Dinner?” and for a moment, irrationality struck me and I was tempted to pretend I didn’t hear him despite my good mood.

But I only paused a moment, then stuck my head back in through the door and smiled. “See you at seven.”

The vibrations of the previous day seemed almost unreal to me, as though they had happened to someone else, and I could feel myself working to keep the memories at bay even as I focused on my currently pleasant mood. The walk to work was seven bus stops or forty minutes, and when the weather was kind and if I wasn’t wearing heels, I made the effort to occasionally walk to and fro work. Something about the rhythmic motion calmed me, and presented itself to me as a justification for the snacking I did through the workday. I pushed my earphones in as I walked, turning the volume higher up than usual, flipping through my phone at the same time, catching up on emails and messages. There was one from Arin, which I ignored without opening, and a couple more from work, work friends, and then the usual promotional mailers. I stuffed the phone in my pocket and walked on.

I found myself making the effort to push Arin’s message out of my mind: I didn’t feel like she had the right to bring her success into my life at the moment, not when I didn’t want to hear it right now. I felt my chin tremble and pulled my focus to the work I had waiting for me once I reached the office, the work that surely must

have doubled in the day I was gone. But it was no use. I could feel the sticky knowledge of what had happened creep up inside me, and I found myself trapped by the irrational nature of the incident. I couldn't breathe. When I had crossed two blocks away from my apartment, I turned the music off - leaving the earphones in - and moved my right hand to my stomach and pressed down. I had to know, I thought, what it was. Flesh, a bit more than I'd like, sure, but it was still just soft, like putty. I traced my belly button with a finger through the cotton material of my shirt, turned a button over in my fingers, then looked around quickly to make sure no one was watching me. I jerked my hand up and grabbed my own breast. The consistency of the meat was no different from fat. I was reminded of the chicken I'd made for dinner the week before, the movement of my hand when marinating the thigh meat. The meat felt like tension. I kept my hand there, moving my thumb over the curve of my breast through my shirt, feeling the outline of my bra, and all I could think of was that raw slab of chicken I made for dinner.

Stop it, I told myself, *what are you doing?* But I couldn't help myself. I could not understand it. *It's just meat*, I thought. I imagined this being what the boy had felt yesterday, and I could not comprehend it. You couldn't even feel nipple through the thickness of the padded bra. *Stop it right now*, I told myself. But it was like being in a trance. I couldn't stop rubbing the material of the bra, kneading the meat of the breast, and trying to feel what he had felt. I told myself that if I could understand it I could deal with it, process it, and put it behind me. And besides, better to face it head on. I stood there for an unknowable period of time, and then came to myself again without knowing why, dropped my hand, and started walking. There was someone else turning the block just as I did this, walking towards me in the opposite direction, and he gave

me a queer look as he approached me. For a moment I wondered simultaneously if he had caught me with my hand on my breast, and if he did, so what, but then he opened his mouth and asked:

“You okay?”

I hadn’t even realized that I’d walked clean off the pavement again. I was standing on the tarmac of the road, looking down at my black slip-on shoes which had started to gray around the edges from accumulated dust, and thinking: *the black of the road isn’t that different from the black of my shoes, not really. But there’s something about it..*

“Miss, hello? You missed a step or something?”

So this was the kind of person I had become. I could hear him, vaguely, but it seemed crucial that I think about my shoes at that point. *It was the texture*, I realized. The slip-ons were patent fake leather, and the road was made from tiny rocks. I thought about all the different rocks that must have gone through a rock grinder to be crushed into tiny rock bits, then poured all over the road to make car paths. *What sort of machine could crush rocks to teeny tiny bits?* My stomach churned.

“Yo,” he said, and there was a hand in my face, and I jumped. The man from the pavement had come too close to me, and he was standing on the edge of the pavement, waving a hand in front of me. The hand formed itself into two fingers and snapped. “Anyone home?” I heard a laugh emerge from his mouth and I realized that he was half-joking. I took a step back.

“Daydreaming,” I said, pointing to my earphones. “Not a morning person.” But I may or may not have said it aloud, because when I took another step back, turned, and walked around him, I heard him say loudly: “Rude china bitch.”

I kept my head down, walking quicker. *He’s going hurt me*, I thought. *He thinks*

I'm a rude china bitch. So this was the kind of person I had become.

I got to work without further incident. But as I settled into my workstation, Sally, who sat one desk over, spun her swivel chair around and said: "So, how was your off day yesterday?"

I was surprised for the second time in two days as I found myself heaving big fat tears down both cheeks, hyperventilating and gasping. It was as if I had floated straight out of my own body and was hovering in the air, looking down on this mess of a woman, rubbing mascara all over her cheek, struggling to breathe normally. There was a bit of snot on my upper lip, which I tried and failed to wipe away. I was aware that I was blubbering, and that my face was wet and sticky, and simultaneously realized that this was the first time I was crying since it happened, and so why did I have to go do it in a public place? *What a fool I am making of myself*, I thought, watching as Sally came at me with tissue and a horrified face, *but I could not find it in myself to make it stop.*

An hour later I looked up to see Alicia from Finance standing above my desk with an awed look on her face.

"Gwendolyn," she said in hushed tones, "I heard about what happened. Are you alright?"

I cast a quick look to my left, but Sally was studying her computer with religious conviction, her auburn hair falling over the sides of her face to obscure it like a curtain. I turned to Alicia. "It's eleven," I said, gesturing to my desk clock. "Do you mind?"

She pulled a chair over in one rapid motion and sat by me. "Wanna go for lunch later then?"

“No,” I said, thankful that I’d mopped my face up in the bathroom beforehand, and cursing Sally in my head. Alicia and I hadn’t exchanged more than five sentences in my half-year here, and I was offended that she would even ask. My brains felt cold and heavy, like they’d been dulled into wet tissue, and my left nostril was blocked from the earlier cryfest. It was causing the air I breathed in to smell like mucus, which was disgusting, but I couldn’t seem to get rid of the smell no matter how many times I blew my nose. “I don’t want to talk about it. Do you mind?”

But to my horror, she started rubbing my arm slowly instead. “I think you really need to,” Alicia said, her hand up and down my shoulder and arm, in a way that reminded me of an old person who thought she was being comforting. I stiffened. *Don’t fucking touch me*, I thought, but didn’t say. I was trapped. I wanted to get up or shove her arm away, but I was arrested by some strange sense of social nicety, and a wave of nausea pawed at me. Alicia didn’t notice my discomfort, or didn’t care. “I just knew, when I heard. I knew I had to come over and talk to you about it. I really feel for you. I had an aunt who got raped once. I was there in the after. It was an absolute nightmare.”

I looked around. “Shh,” I said, but she wouldn’t stop.

“It took her three years, babe. Three years to start trusting men enough to get into a relationship again. These things, you know you need to talk them out. You can’t keep it inside you. It’s unhealthy. You really need to start talking about it to move on.”

Please get your fucking hands off me, I thought, but Alicia didn’t respond because I didn’t – couldn’t say it out loud. Why? I don’t know. I stared at her shiny blonde hair so intently that I imagined them being actually bits of hay that would float up to me and choke me, and my chest became heavy, as if something had started pressing down on it. I choked out a raspy cough. Alicia quickly withdrew her hand. “I

don't want to," I said again.

Alicia looked disappointed. "But -"

"Sally," I said, raising my voice. "Can you get your friend the *fuck* away from me please?" There, it was like mucus, it dislodged in my throat and finally I found my voice again. People nearby looked. Sally herself turned, slowly, looking pained.

Alicia got up. "Okay," she said, "sorry. Obviously you're still on edge. Anyway." She pushed her chair back to where it came from, "You know you can talk to me if you need someone to talk to. You know where I sit." But she said this loudly, and people were still staring. The nausea came back. There was a hunger to Alicia's tone that made me look at her again, more closely. Her eyes were excited; they reminded me of a cat that had smelt something. I felt hunted.

"Get the fuck away from me," I said. "I said I don't want to talk about it."

I got up and left, walking quickly to the restroom. My nose had started running again just as I stood up, and I needed to get more paper towels anyway. I could sense eyes burn into me as I walked, and I was overwhelmingly grateful that I hadn't worn heels that day. I turned the corner past the lift and pushed the toilet door open, went straight for the last cubicle, pulled the toilet cover down, and sat on it. The back of the cubicle door was covered in stickers, hundreds of them, the free kind you get from shops along with a purchase of a CD or something, and over the years the staff must have just gotten rid of their extra stickers by plastering them on the toilet cubicle walls. It had fascinated me when I'd first joined - I'd never seen office toilets like these. It was a longstanding internal debate I'd had with herself: were the stickers just stuck there by random people, or were they deliberately applied by the office administration to add character to the company? These were the banal things that occupied my brain space. I could have easily resolved it if I had just asked someone,

but I didn't. I closed my eyes and leaned my head gently against the side of the wall. *I might fall asleep here*, I thought, *just me and the stickers. I don't have to ever leave.*

The door opened.

"Where did she go?"

"Probably left the building for some air. I'd take the rest of the day off if I were her. Could I borrow some of your lipstick?"

It was Alicia and Sally. I was struck by the ridiculous urge to laugh, which turned into a bubble of air in my chest, and I wanted to sigh, but could not. I felt trapped, half-reluctant to announce my presence. Anyway, if I stayed in here long enough, they'd leave. I had a sudden and painful desire to call Scott, but I hadn't brought my phone into the toilet with me, and spitefully I recalled - *he doesn't check his phone when he's at work anyway*. I focused my attention on listening to the two of them outside, trying to predict when they'd leave. There was a moment of quiet activity, then I heard Sally: "Thanks."

And then: "Poor thing."

"Mm."

"Shitty thing to happen."

There was a pause.

"Alright, Sal, spit it out. You look ridiculous."

I heard Sally inhale quickly, and then say: "That was really unnecessary."

Alicia, defiant: "What was?"

"You know what."

The taps started running, and they fell into silence for a moment as they washed their hands. I couldn't breathe.

The water went off, and Sally continued. "That was really uncool. You basically

outed me. Now she's going to think that I went around gossiping about her the minute she told me what happened." She sounded upset, and I thought: *good*.

"So? You *did*."

"Still, it was really uncool."

"Okay, well. Sorry." But Alicia sounded like she didn't mean it. Sally muttered something that I couldn't hear, and then Alicia snapped, again. "And *what* happened exactly? Don't you think she's overreacting? And for the record, so are you. It's not like she actually got raped. Some guy just grabbed her boob, for fuck's sake. She looks like she could use the action anyway."

Sally made a strangled noise. "Don't talk like that."

"Well, it's true. And I really don't appreciate you getting on my case about it. Fine, I could have chosen a better time to ask her about it. But whatever. It sounds like a bit of an attention thing to me anyway. Coming into work and crying about it publicly like that. Why can't she cry at home? She's practically begging to be asked about it."

My mind snagged on the word: *Whatever*. And for a brief moment I felt my head go light. I heard paper towels being dispensed, and I imagined them blotting their freshly applied lipstick in sync. "And on that note, why did *you* go ask her about it anyway? Because she cried in front of you? I didn't give you a hard time about that, did I? You know why? Because it's normal to ask when someone cries, okay?"

"Calm down."

"You calm down."

"I was just saying. I don't appreciate being made to look like a gossip in front of everyone."

Their heels clicked off, and I heard Alicia laugh, once. It was a mean sound.

“Get over it, Sal.”

The door swung shut and I was plunged into silence again, save for my own breathing. Against the new quiet it rasped noisily, and I grabbed some toilet paper and blew my nose, hard. Holding the piece of paper, I found myself surprised again. I had no idea Alicia had such a mean streak. I had no idea you could not be violated enough. I wanted to be angry, but all I felt was a strange numbness. I shut my eyes again.

Sally turned to smile at me as I returned to my desk. I stared at her a moment before smiling back, feeling strangely kind.

“You’re back,” she pointed out, and I nodded at the obvious statement.

“Where’d you go? For a smoke?”

The feeling of kindness drained out of me. We’d had post-work drinks together at least thrice in the last month, and each time I’d said no to her offer of a light. “I don’t smoke,” I said.

“Right. Anyway. Hope you’re feeling better.” She begun to swivel her chair back again, but then said, awkwardly: “Gwen? Sorry - about Alicia. She doesn’t mean to be nosy or brash. It’s just the way she is.”

I shrugged. “It’s okay,” I said reflexively, and then realized: it really was. I genuinely didn’t care. Sally and Alicia seemed far away to me again, as if they were just caricatures of themselves, or just calefare in some television series. They didn’t feel like real people to me. I briefly considered confronting her about the toilet, just out of principle, but felt exhausted by the idea of confrontation. I let it go.

I relayed this to Scott later in the day, when he insisted on coming to pick me from work. I wasn’t going to, but when I saw him I remembered the intense feeling of

wanting to speak to him when I was in the toilet, and I got into the car, hugged him tightly, and breathed: “I missed you today” into his ear. I felt him react, surprised, and then collapse into the hug. We stayed like this for a while before I started to feel uncomfortable stretched across the front seat, and pulled away.

As we drove, I regurgitated the whole story - what Alicia had said, what Sally said, how I felt, the public crying, the toilet. He got the right amount of angry, and I leaned back in the seat, slightly mollified.

“Bitches,” he said, hitting the side of the steering wheel. “Other people’s lives are just gossip to them. I hate people like that.”

I smiled at him and told him that I loved him. I did, too, in that moment, until I looked up and realized that he was pulling into the street parking outside my building. “Hey. I thought we were going to go for dinner.”

“Yeah,” he said, and as he turned to me, I saw the excitement in his eyes. “I’m cooking. Surprise!” We parked, and he practically hopped out of the car and flipped the boot open. It was full of groceries. Beef, he pointed out, and red wine. Chocolates. And some fresh lilies.

Oh, Scott. I stared at them blankly and had no idea how to tell him that my heart dropped, scanning the boot’s contents. “Didn’t you have to work today at all?”

He had already started unloading the boot, and turned to grin at me. “I did. Worked from home, remember? Then I went grocery shopping before coming to pick you. Didn’t take long.”

“Scott,” I said, thinking of how to best say this. I had been looking forward to going out - the idea of going back to the apartment seemed claustrophobic, and stuffy. But his enthusiasm had backed me up against a wall and cornered me. “I told you I was okay. I said so this morning.”

“I know, babe.”

“I don’t identify as a victim. You’re making me feel.. handicapped.” I was getting a bit agitated, and I heard it creep into my voice, but it was too late to retract the words. He put down the bags and stared at me in surprise.

“Hey,” he said, reaching out for me. I shrunk away unconsciously and registered the shock on his face. “Hey, Gwen. I know. I just wanted to do something nice for you. I can do that, right? I don’t need a special reason to show you that I love you?”

And then I felt guilty again. “Of course,” I said, and I forced myself to relax. My back muscles ached - they had stayed tense the entire ride, I realized. “Sorry. I was overreacting.”

“Never apologize,” he said, and leaned over to plant a kiss on my cheek. It left a wet stain on my face and I resisted the urge to wipe at it.

“You might have to deal with a lot of overreaction these few days,” I warned, as he picked the bags up. The spot on my cheek was really wet. I couldn’t stop thinking about it.

“Then I’ll deal. Come on,” he said, “I’m getting hungry.” He started walking towards the entrance of the building, and the minute his back was turned I rubbed at the wet spot furiously. I thought I could smell saliva and it made me mad. I stormed past him and up the stairs.

“Slow down,” I heard him say, but I ignored him. I could hear him panting, and felt a sick kind of pleasure in not offering to take a bag from him to lighten his load.

“Babe -“ he said, but then he ran out of breath, and I wanted to laugh. We reached the fourth floor and I glanced at him, past his eyes to the sweat plastering his hair down on his forehead, before unlocking the door and walking into the apartment. I could feel my face getting hot.

“Gwen?” He had put the bags down on the kitchen counter, and walked over to me, standing right behind me but not touching me. “Are you mad at me?”

“Why would I be?”

I felt him shrug, he was being honest, he said: “I don’t know.”

I was annoyed again at this gentle demeanor, his precious handling of me and the situation, as if I were fragile, or due to explode at any minute. It was fair though - I was, wasn’t I? So I was annoyed at him, in truth, for having accurately discerned the situation, which made no sense. So be it, I thought. I’m a woman. I don’t have to make sense.

“No,” I said, finally. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’m angry, but I don’t know why. Please just ignore me, okay?”

He still didn’t touch me, and I was ridiculously grateful for that. “I would never just ignore you,” he said, “when you’re in pain. That’s not what love is.”

My face got hotter, and I was afraid I might cry. “Okay. Thanks babe.”

I went into my bedroom and lay down on the bed, noting without interest that it was now completely dry. Scott had said that he’d let me know when dinner was ready, but we both felt cold relief when I had nodded and walked to the room, and in that moment, understood that we did not know how to be near each other right now. I wasn’t even sure how to be around me. I lay there, staring at the threads of my pillow, trying to slow my own breathing down, to calm down, but I couldn’t stop noticing how loud my own breathing sounded in my head. Scenes from the day kept flashing in front of me - the crying, the toilet, the embarrassment. And although I’d tried my best to occupy my mind with other things, I couldn’t help but drift back to that moment every few minutes, flashes of it, different parts. It’d hit me at the most ridiculous

moments - when I was buying take out for lunch I imagined a cyclist stopping by me and I'd suddenly experienced my whole body shuddering, when I was in the elevator at work I thought I saw a boy smiling at me in the mirror, and the worst attack was earlier in the afternoon, at about four: I'd glanced at my watch to see how much time I had before I could leave work, as one does, and I'd been hit by what seemed like a small shock wave. *It's been exactly a day since it happened*, I'd thought, feeling ridiculous. *Twenty four hours!* And I wanted to cry, all over again, but I didn't. I was finding that tears worked in funny ways, they didn't come when you expected them to, but at the strangest moments, like when the office photocopier had a paper jam, or when the lunch place you frequented ran out of the juice you always got. No one had seen me, thankfully, but it didn't change the fact that I'd been hunched over the photocopier machine, dripping tears down my nose, trying to breathe quietly, simply unable to understand why the machine wasn't working, why the paper had to jam today of all days, why it was acceptable that we lived in a world where paper could jam so frequently. It was the twenty first century, for God's sake. We shouldn't have to live like this.

I coughed, and jumped a little bit at hearing my own voice. *This is awful*, I thought. *But it will pass. It has to*. I got up and padded out of the bedroom. Scott was standing there, hunched over the kitchen counter, unaware of my presence, and I leaned against the doorframe of the bedroom, watching him for a moment. Without the pressure of interaction it was easy for me to watch him and not feel anything - my eyes ran over his ruffled hair, the adorable way he chewed on the inside of his cheek as he stared at his phone, his slight frown. He was probably double-checking a recipe online: when I first met him he could barely boil an egg properly, and here he was, attempting steak! I thought to myself: how one changes for love. Still, I couldn't help

but notice that the tip of his elbow was touching the raw beef, and there was a bit of mess surrounding it - salt, olive oil, thyme, or rosemary - I couldn't tell which - and the possibility that he would leave it without wiping the table top brought a fresh wave of irritation to me again. I stayed there awhile longer, working myself up into a state, and when he straightened up and tipped the beef into the pan the wrong way, I cleared my throat.

“How's it going?”

He looked up, surprised to see me. “Hi babe,” he said, “I thought you'd gone to take a nap.”

“I tried. But I kept thinking.”

“Mm?”

“What if I had turned around when he asked me to give him a blowjob? What if I had said, what the fuck gives you the impression you can talk to a woman like that? Do you kiss your mother with that mouth? What if I had confronted him? Maybe he would have gone away.”

He blinked, and turned down the heat on the stove. “Hey,” he said, and then stopped. He flipped the steak. I wanted to stop, but it felt too good to talk about it, like pawing at an open wound.

“I should have confronted him,” I said, irritated, and blew some air out through my teeth. “I'm so annoyed. With myself.”

He picked up the pan and turned off the fire, then paused, staring at it, body turned halfway to me. I stared at him, still feeling prickly.

“What are you doing?”

“Wait. Can't multitask.” He seemed to make a snap decision, and moved to dish the steak out onto two plates, then picked them up and walked to the dining table. I

followed him out, waiting for him to put them down, and when he did, he turned around and looked surprised again that I was standing right behind him.

“Baby,” he said, putting both hands on either of my shoulders, “I think what you did was right, walking away from him.” He gave my shoulders a firm pat, then turned and went back to the kitchen, collecting various bits of cutlery.

I stood there, unsure of what to do next, but feeling my breath quicken. Trying to find the words to express myself and failing, I resorted instead to criticizing his culinary efforts. “That’s not a steak knife,” I said, gesturing to his hands. He looked down at the cutlery in his hands and laughed.

“Baby,” he said, “you don’t own a steak knife.”

I couldn’t help it: I started crying.

“I should have said something,” I blubbered. “Why didn’t I say something?” Scott crossed the room and he had his arms around me, quickly, his mouth making words that I couldn’t understand much of beyond the fact that they were meant to be comforting. For the first time since the incident happened I thought to myself: *I’ve had enough, I want to leave him, this man does not understand me, this is too much.* But I also recognized how ridiculous I was being, how irrational, how angry I was feeling at the world and how I had placed this anger on him solely because he was conveniently nearby. So I pushed the thought away and wiped my eyes.

“Sorry,” I said, again.

“Don’t apologize.”

“I am, though. I keep thinking: if only. If only I had said something. If only I had kicked his bicycle over when he had grabbed me, he wouldn’t have been able to pedal away. I keep imagining myself kicking him in the crotch. Stamping down really hard. It even crossed my mind once today - pulling a pocketknife out of my bag, stabbing it

across his cheek, and drawing it across. Grabbing his hair and smashing it into concrete.”

I exhaled, pinching my nose bridge, and closed my eyes. I could feel myself breathing fast and hard, and I confessed in a low murmur: “In all my fantasies I have superhuman strength.”

He didn’t know what to do, and now thinking about it, I wonder if my memory has edited Scott unwittingly to justify my own feelings, coloured his tone with a tint of boorishness, cluelessness. I don’t know. But I do remember the disbelief that I felt as he said, seriously: “Baby, he was drunk. He was probably looking to be provoked. If you had done any of that, he might have dragged you off and done something worse, and no one would have been able to stop him.”

Throughout our relationship Scott had never used the term *baby* as frequently as he did during those couple of days, and the term brought to mind a helpless, wrinkly, merlot-colored infant, face screwed up with tears, skin soft and fat and vulnerable. I shrugged his arm off and twisted to face him, I said: “Weren’t you listening to me? He wasn’t drunk. He was just saying it.” And he kept silent, staring at me, so I continued: “Seriously, Scott. I told you this.”

He moved to the kitchen counter, poured out two glasses of store bought wine, and handed me one, his boyish eyes unsure. “I’m just really, really glad you’re physically unharmed.”

7.

Perhaps it was that line, *I'm just really, really glad you're physically unharmed*, or the genuine thankfulness I heard in his voice, betraying his relief, that wounded me. I thought: how could he not see that I am not the same? I was hurt, I considered breaking things off with him again, but I stopped myself because I knew realistically, I couldn't deal with any more unmooring, and I was also awash with the feeling that I was bobbing about in shallow waters, and if I held on to a pole or fixture long and hard enough, the tides would wash over me and eventually leave me alone. I would eventually be able to shrug off this feeling of horror I carried around in lumps, under my skin. I had to. My mind couldn't wrap itself around the idea that this thing not only happened, but that it had fractured me so badly — my body rejected it, my mind rejected it, and I thought to myself, how shameful, that I could be so easily felled. How ridiculous.

I somehow got it into my head, then, that as long as I rode out this period of tumultuous flux in my heart, I would be alright thereafter. So for the subsequent days I pushed my chin up, went to work, and although my body felt sluggish and dull, I tried to disguise it by throwing myself into work. Scott checked in with me frequently, but it always went the same way, him stepping around the topic, which irritated me, and me, pretending otherwise. Finally I said to him:

“If you have something to ask. Just ask.”

But he backed down. “Just wanted to see if work was going okay.”

“Why wouldn't it be.”

“No reason. Just asking about your day.”

And so it went. My body rebelled, I fell sick, but I still refused to stop going to work, even when my body dripped and leaked and my brain felt spotty with spores of mold.

When at work, I consciously avoided Alicia, and somehow maneuvered my way to my desk without getting stopped by anyone. Each day it felt as if the silence that preceded my arrival was heavy with tension, as if the office had just been speaking about me before I stepped into the room, and half of me wondered if I was overthinking things, and the other half didn't care, and saw my daily appearance at work as a sort of in-your-face defiance. Even my boss, Damein, seemed to give me less work, less responsibilities, and I wanted to scream at frustration at this, but didn't. If I showed, I thought, that I wasn't bothered, then perhaps they would all eventually move on and leave me alone. But still my body sagged once I reached my desk, exhausted from the tension of being upright, and once at the semi-privacy of my desk, gravity took over and I felt my face and shoulders pull towards the floor. I was angry, and I perpetually wanted to turn around and go home to sleep the minute I reached work, but quickly I had realized that sleep betrayed me as well, and provided me no comfort. I couldn't remember my dreams specifically, only that I woke up feeling unrested and unwell. This went on for about a week, a week of me tempering down the tides in me and feeling increasingly like I had to do something drastic or risk staying in this mode of bleakness forever, and it seemed to me a sign that at the end of the week I arrived at work to an email from a colleague I had never exchanged more than a few words with.

His name was Kenny, we all referred to him in the office privately as Daddy Kenny. This was because he was rumored to have had a child with one of the co-workers who'd left before I'd joined the company (gossip courtesy, I realize now, of Sally, which seems to predict a trend). But perhaps because of the rumor or otherwise, I never made an effort to talk to him, and so I was surprised when I fired up the computer at work to see his name at the top of my email inbox. *Kenneth Wilson*. I noted with surprise his actual name, and then opened the email, feeling apprehensive,

but relaxing quickly once I scanned the email body. He was writing to me to express sympathy, but not in a way that seemed obnoxious. He said he was sorry that something like that had happened to me, and he hoped it hadn't ruined my faith in all men. It was half jokey, and mostly self aware. I felt immediately vulnerable. I sent my thanks back and held my breath - and he replied almost immediately. *Do you want to go for lunch?*

Why'd I say yes? I don't know. I was hoping for something to happen, I guess, something that would jolt me out of my current reality. We went to a small French bistro two streets down, the kind that wrote out its daily specials in chalk. I had passed it several times before and noticed it because it was one of the more popular post-quake establishments that had been hurriedly erected out of the rubble of destruction, and this one stuck out of an old church building that had half-collapsed into itself. But I'd never had occasion to go in, it seemed too momentous for daily fare and I usually just grabbed a salad and juice with the girls at work, or brought something from home, since eating out daily tended to be too pricey for my pay grade. It seemed strange that the first time I went in was with a guy I barely knew, but Kenny had suggested the place, and I didn't have the energy to counter suggest anything. I wondered briefly if I should have checked in with Scott, but quashed the thought immediately - he wasn't the type to mind, and to the point, I didn't feel like telling him. Talking to him felt heavy and burdensome, his carefulness suffocating, and although I knew it wasn't fair to him to feel this way, it didn't change the fact that that was how I felt. I arranged to meet Kenny at the entrance of our office building, and as we walked to the bistro together, I recognized him dancing around the topic in a way that didn't feel too deliberate, and for the first time since the incident, I felt free.

He held the door open for me as I slipped in, and I remember feeling graceful, and feminine. I thought to myself that for the first time, perhaps we had all started to move on. But as I looked around the bistro for an empty table, fear crept into me again, and I realized that it was the first time in a week that I was in a crowded place. I had somehow avoided rush hour either by leaving work late or by staying at my desk for lunch, and now here I was, in a place full of noise and thronging bodies, chewing and conversing. In the background, loudly, on bad speakers: a French serenade that felt pretentious and out of place. Nausea, again. I had a flash of a vision where I was tied to a chair, other customers gathered around, staring down at me. They were lining up, and one by one came up to me and reached out, squeezing my breast while I stared back at them helplessly. *Whatever*, they said, *check out this titsicle*. They nodded at each other. *Check it out*. I thought of screaming.

“Gwen. Did you hear what I said?”

I snapped out of it. I wasn’t tied to anything; I wasn’t even sitting down. I was standing next to Kenny, we were staring up at the menu board - no, I was, and he was staring at me. His face was full of open concern, and I was embarrassed, and touched. To disguise my discomfort I looked away and nodded.

“I’m going to go for the chicken.” I turned to the counter, placing my order. I carried the little number card from the cashier and found an empty table across the door, still trying to shake off the flash from earlier that seemed so real. Please, I thought, let me not be going crazy. *That would be so.. trite*. He joined me shortly after, carrying a number card of his own.

“You okay?”

I shrugged, feeling genuinely apathetic. I could make up something, but I was tired of pretending. “I really don’t know.”

The conversation lapsed into a lull and I was reminded of how I barely knew this man. He spoke first: "Want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

He nodded, and we lapsed into silence again. The silence was no longer comfortable as it was before, and I felt the sudden urge to call Scott and tell him of my lunchtime dalliance. I wanted to know why I was having lunch with someone I didn't know, I thought Scott might be able to explain it to me. And I remembered also Arin's piled up messages to me in my inbox, all unopened, and thought perhaps it was time to open them. I missed her, and only she could make sense of what happened to me, I thought. I was a mess inside my head. I wanted to pull out my phone and look at it, but arrested by my need to be polite, I stayed still and continued participating in the silence that stretched between us. But time passed, how much I am not sure, I thought it would be rude to glance at my watch, and I thought to myself, here is a nice man who tried to ask me out to make me feel better, and what do I do? Stick him in an awkward situation. I bet he wishes he could leave now. I bet he regrets asking me out. And my previous feelings of grace drained out of me, and I felt awkward in my own body, and self-conscious again.

"Sorry," I said, apology being my first mode of defense in those days. "For making things so awkward. I don't know how I feel."

"It's not awkward."

"Look at your face, saying that."

"Okay, well, fine, it is. But I was trying to be polite." he said it nicely though, and I half-smiled at him.

"You don't have to be. Everyone is too polite around me now, it makes me feel strange. Although I guess what I should be feeling is grateful. Everyone tells me I

should be so damned grateful that nothing worse happened.”

The door of the bistro opened. Someone I didn't know walked in.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, following my eyes.

“Nothing. Anyway. So I guess that’s what I feel. Strange and grateful.”

“It’s crazy,” he said, “that people expect you to be grateful when you’ve been molested.”

I stared at him. “Thank you.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Just - thank you.” The waiter turned up by our table and laid down two set meals, chicken and vegetarian, and I murmured my thanks to him again. He nodded and left. We both broke off to look at our food and my cheeks started heating up again, like I was about to cry. I bit into my chicken, grateful for something to do. I thought perhaps I would suggest going for coffee after lunch and paying for it as a means of thanks, but before I could vocalize the thought he spoke.

“I hope you don’t mind me asking,” he said, “but are you going to file a report?”

The thought hadn’t occurred to me. “No I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t - and this is embarrassing to me - I can’t remember what he looks like. I can only remember stupid things, like bits of his voice, the fact that he was on a bike.. it really fucking bothers me that I can’t remember what he looks like.” I stopped eating, the sense of nausea suddenly overpowering. Kenny noticed, and put his cutlery down too.

“Sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable.”

I shook my head. “It’s not you. Anyway. It’s just - the whole situation is just pissing me off.” I said it a bit too loud, and winced. But I continued anyway, despite

myself. “I can’t remember what he looks like, but I still keep imagining seeing him everywhere. In my head he looks like every teenaged boy I have ever seen, on tv, on the streets, on the news, whatever. And I keep thinking that I see him. Outside the office. When I’m passing by those pop up container stalls. Just now - I just had myself half convinced I’d see him walk in here with his family, and that I’d be able to go up to his mother and tell her off for creating such a monster. Threaten her in front of her son. I want to hurt someone, you know? I wasn’t like this before, it feels like emotional manipulation or blackmail but I really don’t feel like I can care anymore. I feel like I’m the center of the world, which sounds weird, but not in a good way. Like I really can’t be fucked about how anyone else feels.” I looked up again to check his reaction. “I realize I’m not coming across very well here.”

His face didn’t change past a slight furrowing of the brow, and I was encouraged. “I want to go up to his mom and explain calmly - the calmness is important, I think - that if I went to the police, he’d have *sexual offender* on his records forever, that he’d never be able to buy a house near a school, that it’d show up on every job application. Even a university application. I don’t know, I’ll have to check. And in my head it has to be said in front of him, so I can watch his face change when he realizes that his mom is hearing about what a little shit he is. I want to see the fear on his face. I want to hit him.”

I broke off then, slightly out of breath from my tirade. It felt good to get it all out, even to a near stranger. No wonder people paid for therapy, it felt so good. And Kenny looked like the kind to understand; I congratulated myself on having the foresight to agree to lunch instead of doing the safe thing and staying in.

He nodded, stabbed a broccoli, and looked up. “His *mother*? How old is this guy?”

“I don’t know - fourteen? Fifteen?”

There was a weird sound coming from him: he was choking on a bit of a snort or something, and for a moment I wanted to reach out to him, thinking the broccoli had gone down the wrong way. But something in me held back, and as he reached out for his iced tea, I felt the earlier warmth evaporate.

He swallowed whatever was in his mouth and cleared his throat. “Sorry bout that.”

“It’s okay,” I said automatically, but something was bubbling in my chest, and before I could help myself, I continued: “No. Actually. What was that?”

“It’s nothing.”

But the back of my neck was prickling, and I felt him snap into focus. I said, again: “What was it? Tell me.”

“I told you, Gwen —“ but he broke off as he saw my face, and raised both hands in a conciliatory gesture. “It’s nothing. I just thought it was funny that you got felt up by a kid.” He backtracked - “Not *funny* funny, obviously. Just -“

I didn’t understand. “A kid.”

“Come on,” he said, his tone playful. “Look. It could have been a lot worse. You could have been in real danger if -”

I stood up. My chair scraped the floor in a way that would have normally made me wince. “A kid.” I repeated.

He recovered quickly. “You know what? Forget it. I didn’t mean it that way.”

People were starting to stare.

“Okay, look,” he said, “there’s obviously been a bit of miscommunication.

Come on. You know I didn’t mean it like that. Gwen?” *How would I know?* I thought. *I don’t even know you. It was stupid of me to think that I did.* I looked at him and he

seemed to me now big and ugly and oily, grease coming off his words, and I felt sick.

“Gwen?” he said again, his face contrite. The rest of the bistro was quiet now, save for the lovelorn wail emanating from the speakers., and even the waiters had paused what they were doing. This obviously didn’t happen everyday. “I didn’t mean it. Sorry. Please sit back down.”

Look at those titsicles. Sorry. I stared at him. I stared at him for a long time, and then when he finally looked back down at his plate in shame, I walked out.

I pushed the door of the bistro open and nearly got knocked over - there was a flash of red and I barely registered what was happening, but I was running. My chest hammered and I found it hard to breathe and I was inhaling panic, but I was running, running after the boy riding away from me on his bike, now across the road. I remember clearly, but in fragments: the whiff of sweat, from me or otherwise, the crew cut hair, the sound of the bicycle wheels. The balls of my feet hurting with every step, the stiletto of my heel threatening to break. *Young punk.* A couple of people around me stopped and gaped, and I heard someone yell: “Hey!”

And then: “Hey, stop him!”

And I heard the heavy pounding of footsteps, the stranger surpassing me in seconds. There was a pause for a hot minute, in which it felt like everyone just stared in confusion, and then other people started joining in and running after the boy on the bike.

“Stop him —“ a bald man shouted, “—he’s got her purse.”

God knows where he got the idea, but I had no breath to correct him - I was running hard and fast and my lungs felt fit to burst, my heart contracting so rapidly it was making me dizzy. My eyes stung from the sweat dripping into my eyes but I perceived everything in superhuman, sharp clarity: the dripping motion of the sweat,

each individual drop, the pain in the sole of each foot, the matted hair and shirt clinging to my skin, and I imagined myself starting to smell of heat and anger. I felt wild. It was the most real I'd felt since the attack, and I almost savored it - the emotions coursing through me, finally, in a way that I could understand. Action. Anger. It was almost comic; the whole street was either staring and shouting, or chasing the boy on the bike. The street pulsed with rage, and my mind struggled to grasp the word: *vengeance*.

The boy made the mistake of glancing back, slowing down for a moment, and someone tackled him from the side, both of them tumbling to the ground. When they surfaced, they were all elbows and knees and scrapes. The boy was hauled to his feet by the assailant just as I reached them, and for a moment I thought I could smell blood.

"Ma'am? Here's the little thief."

Our eyes met: mine, the boy's. His were wide and angry and confused, and my chest heaved.

"Get your hands off me! I didn't take her stuff." The voice was so self-assured that the man let go of him for awhile, and the boy shrugged his hand off angrily.

We all stared at him. It was true: he had nothing on him except a helmet and a rucksack. I felt curiously detached from the situation as I looked at him, wondering what he was doing there. I examined myself: hair probably sticking out, slick with sweat, my satchel swung cross body. I looked back at the boy and realized that I had never seen him before.

"You'd better have an explanation for this," the boy said, twisting his arm around to look at his elbow. There was blood on it, a fresh gash, and the man who'd apprehended him took an unconscious step back. "This is a violation of human rights.

I've got cuts all over me. This shit is unhygienic." He sounded angrier and angrier with every word, and the disbelief in his voice was incredible. He looked like he wanted to say something else, but didn't know what.

I tried to say something, but I found that words failed me. And what was there to say, really? I felt strangely peaceful, I thought: now I've fucked up. I briefly wondered what Arin would say if she were in this situation, I wondered if I might be able to bluff my way out of it as she would have. I thought I might be able to channel her confidence, I said:

"It's not him." But my voice faltered at the last moment, and it came out as a whisper. I saw people exchange looks in the crowd, and felt awfully self-aware. "It's not him." And I started crying, fat, steaming drops of tears that rolled down my cheek heavily and stayed there, mingling with the sweat and dripping off my chin slowly.

There was an uncomfortable pause.

Then, the boy spoke and any hopes I might have held out for kindness were dashed. He sounded furious, and I remember noting it as a difference in cultures - how a young Chinese boy would never have the nerve to raise his voice at an older woman. And then the shame, at resorting to labeling myself an older woman as an excuse for my behavior. "You've got to be kidding me." He looked offended at my tears. "What do you mean it's not me? It's not *anyone*. Your handbag is right *there*. Is anyone buying this bullshit?"

There was a hand on my shoulder. I flinched, and looked up into the warm eyes of a stranger.

"Lady," the stranger said firmly, and I was struck again by what a bad judge of character I was, "what exactly did you think he did?"

"I got molested. I thought it was him." My voice caught on the word 'molested',

the taste of the word on my lips disgusting me. It even *sounded* disgusting. The ‘Mo’ in particular reminded me of a leering old man.

People now looked confused, unsure of how to react, except the boy, who made an explosive sound. “Are you fucking kidding me?” he said, and I flinched, embarrassed, crying even harder. I couldn’t breathe, my nose was getting choked up, and some snot ran out of my nose and stuck to my face. Someone handed me a tissue, and I grasped at it gratefully, mopping my face, but it soaked up almost immediately and was useless henceforth.

“What the fuck,” the boy said, looking at the sky. “What the actual fuck.” He sounded really angry now, and I couldn’t stop staring at the blood on his elbow.

“Sorry,” I tried to say, nodding and shaking my head, trembling with something that wasn’t quite fear - and then I realized: I was shivering. Everyone stayed quiet, and the silence was oppressive. I found myself sweating again: or perhaps I had been sweating continuously this whole time and hadn’t realized. Illogically, I found myself thinking of how my chin would look like to the people around me, and it seemed like they were all staring at me, waiting for something to happen, but I was obviously incoherent, so they remained clueless.

“Are you going to pay for this?” the boy asked, shaking his bleeding arm at the man who’d tackled him. The man just stared at him. “I don’t fucking have fucking insurance,” the boy said, almost to himself. “Of all fucking days.”

He picked up his bike and dusted down the seat. “Give me a card,” he said to me, “a name card or something. If anything’s wrong with my bike I’m fucking coming for you.” But I shrank into the crowd instinctively, shaking even more, and he actually hissed in frustration. “Insurance. For the insurance. God. I’m not going to touch you. You’re fucking crazy, okay?” He turned back to the man next to him. “Name card.”

The man acted like he didn't hear: he didn't even give any indication that he'd registered the boy's voice. He just stared straight ahead. The boy slung a leg over the bike, and jabbed a finger at the man. "Maybe she's crazy," he said, his voice thick with disbelief, "but what the fuck. Be a man. Shame on you. Can you even fucking hear me?" He waved his hand in front of the man's face, and the man, incredibly, didn't even blink. "Fuck." The boy said. "Seriously. There's something wrong with all of you. Get the fuck out of my way."

The crowd cleared, and he rode off, flipping his middle finger back at them. And he was gone.

There was a collective sense that the crowd had relaxed a little, but the rest of them didn't seem to know what to do now that the immediate crisis was over. And what was the crisis? I found myself thinking. Again, I saw myself as if from a distance, disgusted. A crying lady in office wear, her face a mess, her office wear conservative, even by my standards. I had chosen this day to wear a long sleeved cardigan, one of my favorite knits, over a collared blouse, pressed and tucked into a printed midi skirt. Low kitten heels. I saw myself and thought, this lady with her blouse buttoned all the way up is claiming to be molested by a teenager on a bike. In broad daylight. I looked at the crowd: the crowd that was coming to the slow realization that they had assaulted an innocent boy. I wanted to laugh: how quickly the mob like sense of justice had dissipated. It wasn't sitting well with anyone, really, this new self consciousness, and they all looked to me incredible figures that I could not make sense of, that I found nonsensical. Rapidly the crowd lost shape, blinking, squirming, and they seemed not to know what to do with me too. They radiated discomfort, and I realized that nobody really had the heart to ask me if I had been telling the truth. Eventually, someone hailed a cab and put me in it. *You should go*

home, the crowd seemed to say. They didn't offer to pay.

It seemed that the city had ostracized me: it had chewed me up and spat me out. Not that I had ever felt like I had truly felt that sense of belonging or intense love for Christchurch past the holiday I had here that had started it all, but I certainly hadn't felt this hostility radiating from every street, surface, corner. I couldn't remember the purpose of my stay here any longer. Why on earth did I think it was a good idea to uproot my entire life and move? My life now seemed to me to be a series of bad and inexplicable decisions: the job, the damp bed, the competitiveness with Arin that I understood I had to bear responsibility for, and the boy, oh god, the bleeding boy. I tried to close my eyes in the cab and push my face against the pleather of the seat, but I could still see the city passing by, the awful mix of grime and dust that I was employed to fix, and I thought, with a jolt: my eyes are not closed. I cannot even close my damned eyes when I want to. The cab driver continued down the road, silent, and I felt the air in the cab was heavy, and wanted to get out, but I couldn't bring myself to stop the cab. We pulled up outside my building and I gave him some money, I don't remember how much except being left with the vague sense that I'd been ripped off, and stumbled out of the cab.

I stayed home all of that day, lying in bed, staring at the ceiling. Now that I had the luxury of privacy I could not seem to cry. Let it out, I told myself, trying to will forth my tears Get it all out. Stop embarrassing yourself in public. Enough is enough. But the tears would not come. My phone, on the other hand, would not give me peace - it was buzzing nonstop, and I finally reached for it to read my messages.

Kenny here. Got your number from Sally, hope you don't mind. I'm really sorry about just now.

Damien: *Where are you? You've been at lunch for over three hours*

Scott: *Hi baby. How's work? Thinking of you.*

Damien, again: *Never mind. I heard. Feel better soon. See you tomorrow.*

I deleted everything and buried my phone under my pillows. I wished, briefly, that I could be the sort of person to hurl my phone across the room, but I was handcuffed by pragmatism: I couldn't afford a new phone, I needed the phone, and anyway, did people really do that in real life? Throw phones around? Those things were expensive. I wished I could be as melodramatic as I thought I was, but I was learning an awful lot of things about myself over the past week, not all of which I necessarily liked. The day's events were prodding their way back into my mind, the fresh humiliation stinging my cheeks again, and I wanted to scream Why couldn't I? I wanted to, I was alone at home, but I couldn't. Somehow the sound wouldn't come forth. *Just scream*, I told myself. But I didn't. And I was rendered so helpless at this mental turn of events that I felt myself sinking further into my bed, giving myself up to the frustration that I could feel but not name.

Later that evening I heard the locks click, and my mind dimly registered that it had to be evening if Scott was coming back. I didn't move. I heard him letting himself into the apartment and calling out: "Gwen?" I closed my eyes.

There was some movement and I smelt the mixture of talcum and sweat that announced his presence in my room. I kept my eyes closed, and forced myself to breathe normally. *Go away*, I thought, but then I felt a warm hand on my forehead (*Clammy*, I thought, *the hand is clammy*) and felt my face jerk involuntarily.

"Sorry," he said, as I opened my eyes. "I thought you might be having a fever. I didn't mean to wake you." But his words sounded hollow, and I realized that we both

knew I hadn't been sleeping. Trapped, and embarrassed, I looked away. "You weren't answering your phone," he continued, and I noticed the flowers in his arms - *not more fucking flowers*, I thought, *I still have the flowers from the last few nights, and I don't even like flowers, you should know this after dating me for half a year, they're fucking useless and they die so fast anyway*. I had a wild vision again, a flash, an image of myself sitting cross legged in the apartment, surrounded by vases and vases of flowers of every kind, blooming apologies for what he didn't know how to say. My nose felt itchy.

"Are those more flowers."

I saw his face change just a fraction, and he looked down at his arms, as if he were also surprised at the appearance of a random bouquet of flowers in his arms. And it was a mighty bouquet too, one of those newly trendy styles that had hydrangeas and baby's breath and wild roses all wrapped up in a gigantic swath of brown paper. It would have cost at least a hundred dollars, and because Scott didn't know what saving money was, he wouldn't have known which stall to go to, to get a good deal, he'd just have bought the first, most impressive thing that he'd seen, and this, more than anything else, caused me to feel irritated again. "They look like flowers to me," he admitted.

"Why'd you waste your money like that. I still have flowers from the last time you came over."

"I thought it was a nice thing to do for my girlfriend."

I couldn't help myself, I said: "I don't like flowers."

"Yeah, I'm starting to remember."

He walked away to put them down, and I looked at his back and regretted having ruined the night so early on, and so quickly. I wanted to apologize, halfheartedly, but

didn't, and let my mind drift away. He returned, I ignored him, he left to tinker around in the kitchen himself, in this way an inordinate amount of time passed. I wondered how long more my life would wither away in this manner, and when my life would return to its regular programming. I didn't like myself, nor did I like the way I was behaving, I was ashamed, and yet felt no impulse towards changing: I felt the world had done me wrong and so the onus was on the world to change, not I. But of course the world had no interest in my personal opinion, and so it did not. So we were at an impasse, me and no one who cared. I wonder if it were the same day or another day that the following events happened: in my head it all joins up continuously, it makes no difference. But anyway it finally came to pass that at some point I thought it was about time for me to do something, and so when I met again with Scott, in my apartment that had become too small for the two of us and my rage, things clashed.

8.

To be fair, he started it.

“Don’t get mad,” he said. It was pointless before we even began, those days, I was always angry.

“Nothing good ever comes out of a conversation that starts with that.”

He continued, unfazed. “I did something.”

“What.”

“I —“ and everything else came out in a rush, “ —
called and talked to your sister Arin sorry.”

I did get mad. I wanted to walk away from him, but there was nowhere to go, my apartment stayed the same size no matter how much space I felt I needed, there was only the bedroom and the living room and besides, we were already sitting on the bed, so the only place I could run to hide in would have been the toilet and the lock didn’t work anyway. So I sat on my anger and glared at him. “You had no right.”

He looked sorry. “I know. But I didn’t know what else to do.”

I was furious, furious that he had taken the liberty to reach out to her, they had never met, he had no right. I was myself working up into a fit, I relished it, I looked past his head and at the snow globe he’d given me months before that was now sitting on my dresser, I imagined picking it up and throwing it at his stupid skull. I dug my nails into my arm to keep myself in the moment and forced myself to focus on him again. He was saying: *I thought you girls told each other everything*. “She’s saying that you haven’t been replying her messages — that you haven’t opened them —“

“It’s none of your business —“

“— actually, yes, it is, as your boyfriend, and one that’s concerned, I think it *is* my business.”

I dug my nails into my skin so hard, my skin tore. “Get out.”

“Gwen —“

“No, seriously. Return me my keys. And get out.”

I looked away, he got up, he came over to my side, I refused to look at him, it was an endless and useless dance. I was burning up inside with the secret shame I carried that now had become more public without my consent, I was remembering not the specific incidences with my colleagues and strangers but the cumulative humiliation of the experiences. I thought of Arin and what she would think, I felt both her kind and her cruel sides meet in me, and my heart pounded in terror of hearing from her — or worse, of not hearing at all. This whole time Scott was still pawing at me like a puppy, and irritated, I pushed him away.

This hurt him, evidently, and triggered his impassioned speech which burst forth so freely that he had had to have prepared it, or at least dwelt upon it, for a period of time. I’ve tried to help, can’t you see how I’ve tried to understand, I don’t know what to do anymore, I feel so useless as a boyfriend, nothing I do seems to work, you’re so angry and prickly all the time, don’t you see that it hurts me to see you like this, etcetera. It went on and on. Some of it must have worked, because I felt guilty and glanced at him, and he, catching my look, immediately rearranged his face into a kind of expression that elicited even more guilt from me. And seeing that look, I thought to myself that I had better put myself aside and do something, or risk ruining everything good that I still had going for me, of which I felt I had very little left, in my life.

I reached out and caressed his face, “Sorry.”

“What for?”

“You know what.”

“No, Gwendolyn. I don’t. Spell it out.” But he had never been any good at being

firm or harsh in the face of vulnerability, one glance at my face, and he crumbled.

“Please?”

“Stay,” I said. I found that I couldn’t go on, and took a moment to collect myself before continuing. “I’m no good at this. I- I’m trying to be normal and I’m failing miserably, Scott. I thought I could just get over it but I cant, and that makes me so angry that I literally, I literally –“

He saw that I was struggling and cut me off. “Why didn’t you share this with me?” he asked. “The point of boyfriends is to have them listen to you, all the time. Didn’t you know?”

I shook my head, I said: “Don’t patronize me.”

He said: “Tell me.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Take your time.”

“I’ve taken time. I still don’t know how. I don’t think I ever will. This is really fucking hard. I cannot do this.” I wanted to get up and leave, but I couldn’t. He reached for me, I think to hug me or comfort me, and involuntarily, cruelly, I flinched.

His shoulders dropped. “Sorry,” he said, and in that word I heard the burden of all the hurt I had caused him, that I would continue to cause.

“No –“ but I didn’t know how to follow up, and so I stopped short, and we both sat opposite each other in silence. I said, quietly: “Thank you for trying.” And then, after more silence, I volunteered, tentatively: “I do love you.”

His mouth opened and closed several times but no sound came out. Fear started mounting in me, I sensed abandonment on my horizon, I felt my breathing quicken, I

—

“I don’t know how to do this either,” he said, finally.

Everything in me deflated. I stared at him flatly. “This isn’t about you.”

“It involves me.”

“Okay.” I raised both hands, palms facing outwards. “O-fucking-kay, Scott.”

“No, Gwen, don’t do that. Don’t — go off on a tangent and get all defensive again. Talk to me. That’s the only way I — anyone — can help you.”

I opened my mouth to say: *I don’t fucking need your help*. But instead the sounds that came out of my mouth were different. I heard myself say: “I keep dreaming of confrontation.”

After a week of intractability, this new information volunteered must have seemed very impressive to him, he nodded with too much force and reached out to take my hands. I forced myself not to react; I pulled up the memory of his hurt-stricken face from earlier, and willed my hands to relax into his. “Go on.”

I didn’t want to, but I was propelled forward by something like guilt. “I keep seeing him everywhere I go. I still can’t remember what he actually looks like. But in my head. I see him.” I stopped to check his reaction, he was listening intently, “And I have killed him. I dreamt the other day that I ran him over with your car.”

“That’s normal.”

I stared at him as if he were stupid. “No, it’s not fucking normal, Scott. You don’t understand: I *wanted* to hurt him. It brought me joy.” I wanted to stop talking, I was suddenly exhausted, but he gestured for me to continue: “I can’t believe I just stood there and let it happen. I cannot. I think about it all the time. It’s really driving me fucking crazy, Scott, I feel so violent all the time.”

I stopped because I noticed his face doing something funny, and I suddenly was overcome with the violent urge to tear his hands away from me, I remembered the snort of laughter that Kenny had produced at the bistro, and my mind went white for a

second. But no - he was not laughing, he was crying. I looked at him again, more properly. His eyes had gotten shiny, and his face was screwed to the side in a funny way, trying to stop the tears from leaking out of his eyes. I was both momentarily moved, and at the same time, disgusted. Again I felt like I was hopelessly trapped in this relationship, but now held at gunpoint by the emotions of another. I saw before me a stretch of time, indeterminate, where we would continue like this, and despair wrapped itself around me.

“Gwen,” he was saying, his hands reaching out towards me again, and I had to force myself not to flinch. “I love you so much.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You know that I do.”

I stared at him impatiently. “So?”

“And I only mean the best for you when I say this, don’t take it the wrong way but I really think we need to work on this, maybe together, but I – I think you need to learn to let go.”

I went very still.

He’s one of them, I thought, awash with regret. I knew it.

“Letting go. Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

But I was shaking. I held myself very still, in order not to betray myself, as everything else already had. He continued, minding my tone: “It’s not like that. I just think maybe we should talk to someone. Someone who can help you.”

“Yeah, okay.”

He must have somehow felt encouraged by this, because he moved a thumb to caress my cheek gently, in an attempt to be comforting, or affectionate, I couldn’t tell which. I was so angry. I stared at his beautiful, calm face, with those tear-stained

cheeks, and I wanted to burn it. “Gwen, baby.”

Stop calling me baby, I thought, furiously, but did not say.

“These things are hard to get over, I can imagine, and it’s easy to feel like no one is here for you but it’s not true, you know I love you, so, so much. And there’s no point going back to the boy for closure or some kind of justice, because you won’t be able to find this boy again, you don’t remember what he looks like -“ I knew it was true but I felt hysterical, and to prevent myself from going absolutely batshit crazy I forced myself to stay very, very still, because the minute I broke rank I knew I would implode, “- and you need to find resolution some other way, Gwen, you really do. This cannot haunt you forever. It will drive you crazy.”

I am crazy, I thought, but I refused to speak. *What the fuck is he saying anyway?* I felt the urge to laugh, but I forced myself to stop. Despite this, I felt my face moving, trying to smile, but I made that stop as well. I thought I should get up and go, but I found that I could not move, and I thought: *now I’m figuratively and literally trapped*. I felt my mouth move against my will and curve into the ghost of a smile, and I turned my focus inwards, towards stopping myself from breaking out into laughter. *If I start laughing*, I thought, *I will truly turn mad*.

The following happened in such a way that I questioned it for a long time: the ghost of a smile, that had escaped from my lips, that I had no control over, followed by a brush of his thumb, against the corner of my lips, encouraged by the smile, emboldened. It occurred to me at some point that we were still very close, I had been focusing so hard on keeping still that I hadn’t realized how very near our bodies were to each other. His breathing shifted ever so subtly. The thumb was still moving on my face. I registered all this as though far away, and felt something claw inside me. I thought to myself:

This is it. This is the day that I die.

I felt like I was crying, but my face must have not moved an inch, or knowing Scott, gentle, kind, oblivious as he was, he would have stopped. Or not. Who's to say, now? Again, the feeling of unmooring presented itself to me, the desperation of the idea that I was in shallow waters, and that this was yet another tide I would have to ride through before eventually life decided it was through with throwing me waves. I thought of calmer waters and times, I did not remember the feeling of safety but I remembered the fact that once, I had felt safe in my own body, an assurance that now seems stupid, and immature. I also remember wondering, even then, about how unfair I was being, how it was illogical and unreasonable to apportion blame indiscriminately, shifting it from one male to another, until they were all criminals in my mind. Surely I could not be called to reason in situations like these, but as he lowered me gently onto the bed, I felt angry at myself, anger at the need even at this point to attempt making excuses for him, and the thought gurgled up in my mind: *He's doing what he can to make amends for another of his kind.*

I left my body then. It is a phrase that came up a lot, in my subsequent research into the topic, when some time had passed, when I started being interested in things again, cause and effect, ideas, etcetera: *I left my body*. A cliché, and it did occur to me more than once that that was what I had become, a cliché, and the self-awareness hurt me. But it was true, I felt it, I actually felt the precise point in which I left the situation and physicality of the circumstance I was in, and wondered, listlessly, what it was about me that allowed men to happen to me. *That's not fair*, I thought, my mind drifting, *but I don't care. I really cannot care anymore.*

I stared blankly at him as he toiled over my body, reclaiming land that he felt he had lost in some way. *Love is an action word*, I thought, *it can be committed, like a crime*. And I could barely feel his fingers skimming my body, only knew that it was

happening, but I suddenly heard a voice in my ear, the voice of a boy, self indulgent and thick: *Come on, baby, I can lick your pussy too. We can go all night. Please.* And I was hit with a wave of revulsion, and disgust and I started shaking uncontrollably and I thought: *this is it, oh my god, I have gone crazy*, and I could not stop shaking, and I started screaming and trying to buck him off, but even as I did I knew that he would — and he did — take it as a sign of passion, success, and closure. I thought to myself then, and now: *here. You have finally gotten through to me. Here is what you wanted.* And I wanted to cry, but didn't.

He wiped himself down as I lay there, twisted around the sheets. *It is finished*, I thought. *I fixed it.* He smiled at me and stroked my hair and said nice things to me again, but I couldn't understand the words even though I understood that they were good. I reacted, I probably smiled back. But either way, I must have done something right, because he smiled again, and I felt like he was happy, and I thought, briefly, again: *it is finished.*

We lay together at night, his snores rumbling against my body again and again. I felt sticky and warm against him, and I tried to recall whether I had ever found his weight against mine comforting. Probably. But I couldn't bring the memory up again, or recall the feeling of assurance, or safety, or anything like it. Instead I felt blank. I lay there, events of the past week flickering through my mind passively, and I grew newly heavy with the knowledge that my grief was inconveniencing everyone. It was a disproportionately huge inconvenience for something that shouldn't be that big a deal. It had made me mean spirited, and nasty, and I had tried to hurt people, to make them feel the same pain I did. I had tried to hurt Scott, I realized now, and all he did was try to be there for me. I shuddered again, and in his sleep he pulled me closer to him. For

the first time that night I felt my eyes start to leak hot water, not just in my head, but physically, too. I wondered if people would care more if I'd actually been raped: I thought of Sally, Alicia, Scott, Kenny, faces in the crowd that had stared at me, straight, unblinking, unsure of what to do with me. I felt myself move, sluggishly, throughout the crowd, their eyes following me. *Stop it*, I told myself, and felt regret. I pulled the blanket up over myself, despite the heat, up to my breasts, and paused. Scott stirred next to me, and in his half slumber, I felt, rather than heard, him mouth into my shoulder: *Love you*. I cannot remember if I reciprocated. It didn't matter. What was done was done. I turned over and went to sleep.

After this excerpt:

Section III: After the fire. It takes awhile, but Scott and Gwen fall apart, predictably.

Arin appears in Christchurch, citing a lull in her work, and lives in with Gwen for three months, during which she also starts dating someone. Gwen struggles with reconciling her competitiveness with her gratefulness that Arin has taken time out to be with her, but they eventually come to head when Gwen realizes that Arin has pulled out of a couple of movie opportunities to watch over Gwen, and is unable to cope with the responsibility of being the burdensome sister. After Gwen spirals into a destructive relationship with an undeniable creep, Arin confronts her over her series of destructive actions and finally decides to leave. With nothing left to hold her in Christchurch, Gwen then returns to Singapore in Section IV: Handclasp.

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