

"Connective Tissue" by Sarah Lohmann
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Connective Tissue

A Novella in Flash

by Sarah Lohmann

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Something For Starts *Before, Elias*

Martin finally let me drive on the last leg. We'd been almost there anyway, with hardly an hour and a half remaining, so the gesture sat somewhere between nice and moot, but it did not go unacknowledged. I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel and ignored the others as he played music that he knew I didn't like.

Things were like this: good and in high spirits, a little buzz of frustration humming beneath our surfaces. Martin was happy enough, which was unusual, and I anticipated that Isla and Kathleen would be, too. We'd been planning this weekend since finding out that our spring breaks all miraculously lined up, so about two months ago, and Isla had only gotten the go-ahead from her parents the previous week.

I found out this morning, though, that Jerome was planning to drive up here on his own a day later than the rest of us, and I knew that would be an issue, especially for Isla. Plans were plans, after all, and last-minute changes tended to be a bigger deal to her than they would be to any of us. One might think that after all of these years, we would know not to infringe upon this boundary, but some things never change. Kathleen will always be inexplicably covered in paint stains, I will always fall for it when Martin asks me what's on my shirt, we will all always change plans in spite of the coming wrath, and Isla will always get over it within the hour. It's a functional loop that has existed, perhaps, for all of time.

When Martin and I arrived at the house, all of the lights were off and the driveway—or, what we thought might have been the driveway but could easily have been more gravel road—was empty. So, naturally, we believed we had been the first to arrive.

"Should I call Isla?" I asked, leaning over to watch Martin as he got out of the car.

"Nah. She told me where to find the spare key in case this happened. We can go in and get settled while we wait for them."

Martin moseyed up to the front door, reaching up into the doorframe and feeling around for the key. I got out of the car but stayed at the end of the walk; I felt kind of weird about going into the house without Isla. He unlocked the door and took a few steps inside so that he was visible through the picture window that took up most of the exterior wall that faced the street. He waved to me from inside.

I think if I hadn't been so excited for Martin to scream, I would have given it away when Isla stood from behind the couch. I'd covered my mouth with my hand to hide my smile. She shrieked and Kathleen did the same a second or two later. Martin jumped and let out a little wail. He almost fell down when he turned around to face them, yelling something that I couldn't hear. They laughed at him, and I did too.

Being the youngest of all of us by what felt like a significant margin now that they'd all graduated, I was going to be sleeping on the couch rather than in one of the bedrooms with the others—which I didn't mind because it meant that I didn't have to share a bed, and it meant, too, that I could stare out the window and watch whatever happened in the woods outside. I hoped I would see a deer or something. For the others, though, me sleeping on the couch was not unlike a baby in a crib. Kathleen especially did not let me forget this. She put a walkie-talkie on one of the

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end tables and would go on to talk to me with it later while she made herself a bowl of cereal in the kitchen.

“Like a baby monitor,” I remarked, holding it by its antenna.

I was standing on the carpet beside the dividing archway that connected the living room and the kitchen, digging my toes in between the shaggy strands.

“Precisely,” she said and smacked her hands playfully onto the wall beside me. “A baby monitor for our baby Elias.”

“Thanks, mom,” I mocked, letting my nose wrinkle. I felt nothing but fondness for the gesture.

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Where We Came From *Before*

The first of them had come together on the cusp of junior high school. They had met in the lunchroom during one of the school’s dreaded “Mix-It-Up” Wednesdays wherein every student drew a table number and had to eat lunch with a group of people who drew the same number they did. Martin and Jerome both happened to select the number twelve during the first mix-it-up in seventh grade, and, after meeting, hated each other on principle of hating any and all experiences happening to come out of the almost insulting lack of decision. This hatred, however, did not stop them from spending school nights at Jerome’s house, where Elias would visit when the after school activities didn’t meet.

Elias and Jerome, though, had known each other for much longer by this point, and Martin, doing what any reasonable thirteen-year-old would do, decided that he would now always sit in between Jerome and Elias on the couch. Usually, this wasn’t as big of a deal as he thought it was, but it was not uncommon for him to force himself between them or across their laps in a plea for their attention. Jerome and Elias pretended not to notice but exchanged the same knowing look each time.

The dynamic was well-established by the time the boys met Isla during their first year in high school. She was beautiful, and if she were a painting, she would have been made of those thick delicious impasto strokes. She’d come from the other middle school in the district without any patience for anyone who wanted to be less than tolerable within ten feet of her. The boys met her walking home from the bus stop at the beginning of the school year and decided they wanted to keep her after the first time she shoved Martin into the grass for asking why she wore such ugly shoes. She decided that she would keep them in return about three months later at Jerome’s fifteenth birthday party when a thirteen-year-old Elias had been allowed to punch him in the arm as payback for wiping frosting from his cake with his finger.

After that, they lived in the pavilion at the back of the park by Elias’s house during the summer and when it was warm enough after school. Elias’s mother was shocked often to find three times the amount of kids she had in her living room, not necessarily because she didn’t know they were coming but, rather, because they did their homework in almost complete silence with the exception of someone, usually Jerome, helping Elias with his history homework or Martin leading a one-man discussion about whatever topic was being covered in whatever science class he was taking that year.

Finally, in Isla’s final year of high school, she sparked a new friendship with Kathleen, her near-perfect foil. They were similar in many behaviors and interests, but Kathleen was fundamentally softer in nature than her friend. The boys, obviously, commented on this endlessly until graduation. Well, Elias learned a lot about girls and asked a lot of silly questions while Martin commented and Jerome ignored them both.

It was during next year that they—all five—had to decide whether these friends were forever or for home. Elias, being home even after the others had gone, didn’t mind being physically lonesome if all of them could keep the Tuesday evening Skype call, but that didn’t happen every week. Getting older means getting busy, but it wasn’t until Jerome came back to visit for a weekend that the mutual forever became clearer.

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“Don’t look so sad,” Jerome had said. “It’ll take a lot more than a few months apart here and there to ruin what we have, bud.”

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Good Intentions

Before, Elias

Kathleen and Isla had been in the house for a few hours already, so it didn't seem so un-lived in as it might have if Martin and I had gotten here first. The two of them had watched from the second-level balcony as we scrambled in the living room, and I remember thinking about rude young people who hover, empty mug in hand, beside service workers while they refill the coffee machine. Same sort of feeling.

I supposed that I couldn't be too upset, especially since, even though Martin and I unloaded the stuff together, he'd told me to help and proceeded to move everything by himself while I watched. He grumbled sometimes about things being heavy, but I noticed that he tended to grumble more when I happened to exist someplace he didn't expect, so I mostly just stood by the doorway until he was finished.

"Hey, Martin," Isla said, grabbing onto the handrail that separated her from the empty upper half of the living room.

I watched as Martin stopped what he was doing, hands still very much clamped on the edge of the rug. He glanced back at me over his shoulder. Earlier in the car, he had been picking at his knees just below the lip of his cargo shorts.

"How much do you wanna bet she's gonna ask where Jerome is? I mean, for fuck's sake, he always puts me in the middle of their shit. He knows that, too. This fight makes *literally* no sense. I don't know what kind of shit she's on, but I am tired of him making me take the brunt of it."

I'd told him that I wouldn't take his bet.

"What's up?" Martin replied, finally pulling his hands back to rest on his hips. He stood up and fixed his glasses.

"Did Jerome ride with you guys?"

"No," I answered for Martin. "He said he was driving on his own." Kathleen watched Isla. I looked up, too. There was a moment. "I figured you knew," I continued.

"No, I didn't," she said, looking over at Kathleen. Her eyebrows were raised and the expression was exactly the same as the one she made when she found out Sophie Jin had told the whole school she liked whoever she liked at that time. I don't remember who it was.

"Anyway, I left my lighter in the car, so." With that, Martin went outside, and I followed him.

It was normal for us to snip at each other—especially Martin and Isla, or, actually, Martin and anyone, really—but that time was different, and all of us knew it. Martin, even as he is, usually gave Isla a little more space to argue, and Isla usually giggled more and pretended to be joking, but neither of them did either of those things. I remember thinking at the time that it was probably just stress—they were around the time in school when declaring your major was expected—but I never asked. I never wanted to pry.

"She just wants to know where he is. You know how things have been with them these days," I said.

"It shouldn't affect me. It shouldn't affect any of us, actually," he replied.

He was right.

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Martin scratched at his palms briefly before flattening them against his pants. He wanted a cigarette, so, I did what I always do when I think Martin might break his streak: I held his hand.

"I'm just saying that you don't have to worry about it so much. What's theirs is theirs."

Martin looked at me over the top of his glasses. He pressed his lips together in a poor excuse for a smile and patted my arm the way guys do when they want to express solidarity in a masculine way. This made me laugh, especially because we were already holding hands.

"I'll apologize later," he said finally, looking out at the depth of the forest in front of the house.

I nodded and made a mental note to check in on that the next morning.

"We should get back in there," I said, yanking on Martin's hand as I stepped towards the front door.

"Let me have a cigarette first," he groaned. "I'll die."

"Yes, you will definitely die if you smoke a cigarette, you're so smart!" I cooed, reaching up to ruffle his hair. "Now, come on, let's get this weekend started properly."

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Our First Cabin *Before, Kathleen*

When we went on our senior camping trip, Isla and I shared a bunk. There were too many girls, and quite a few pairs of us ended up having to share some of the slightly bigger beds at the end of the hall, but I hadn't minded. Isla and I had been fast friends after I transferred to our school, and we had frustrated the other girls in our class by staying up under the blankets, giggling and divulging our deepest secrets to one another. It was a home for that burning energy that can only come when you're seventeen and with everyone from your school in the middle of the forest. We fantasized about how fun it would be if our window matched with whichever one Jerome and Martin were nearest to, or what would have happened if Elias had stowed along somehow on the bus, and I think that we had actually been fantasizing about what it would have been like to star in a teen movie on the Disney Channel, which is fine, I suppose.

I remember when, after finally turning off our flashlights and turning to stare up at the ceiling with our shoulders pressed flush against one another, Isla told me our first secret. This was a big deal at the time, for me especially. Being the new kid made me automatically tangential to everyone and every situation, regardless of how often we saw one another.

"I kissed Jerome," she said, her breath floating up and breaking against the cabin's wooden roof.

"When?" I asked. I flicked through the day in my mind, trying to remember a moment when we were apart, and then, I knew it must have been—

"During the bonfire. He took me back behind the big house and started talking, but you know how things have been with us lately and...I don't know. I was just tired of waiting, so I kissed him."

"Oh...So how was it?"

"He was kind of stiff," Isla said. When I looked over at her, I could see the wrinkle between her eyebrows as she thought. "I mean, he just seemed nervous. I thought his lips would be softer, to be honest."

I, not having had my first kiss with anyone yet, didn't know the significance of most of this, but I assumed that a kiss was meant to be loose and soft based on what Isla said, and I learned that Jerome, probably, was not a good kisser. Maybe she thought too highly of him, built him up in her head; they were the same amount of inexperienced as far as I knew, so I think she was probably as stiff as he had been.

"So, it was bad?" I asked, rolling onto my side, my cheek pressed into my forearm as I stared at Isla.

She shrugged. "No, not really. But I guess I figured it would be crazy good or something. You know, like, I've liked him since like, I don't know—tenth grade? So, kissing him is something I thought about a lot, so...I just thought it would be different after all this time."

I hummed for a second in understanding before responding. "But, by that logic, wouldn't it be your fault that you didn't like the kiss, then?"

"I didn't say I didn't like it," Isla corrected me, defensive. "It's just...well, we kissed on accident like three years ago, and I didn't exactly fantasize that it would be an exact replica of that."

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“But you did insult his kissing skills,” I replied, laughing a little at her. “Especially just now by saying they were the same as when he was fifteen. Which is fine, it’s not like I’m gonna go tell him.”

Even though it was dark, I saw Isla roll her eyes. She shook her head and let out a little huff, clearly not liking how I seemed to miss the point. I didn’t know what I was missing, but it seemed so obvious to her, whatever it was. I think that she wanted me to sensationalize Jerome’s supposed badness at kissing, to squeal and be amazed at her knowledge about such mature things and desire for something more, but that didn’t seem fair. So, I didn’t do that. I didn’t do anything else, actually.

“I think maybe I should teach him how to kiss. Maybe he just needs a teacher,” she suggested.

“Yeah,” I said, returning to lying on my back. “Maybe he does.”

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It Adds Up *After, Isla*

I sleep on top of the covers the first night. Kathleen is fast asleep beside me, swelling and deflating and seeming to come close to the surface before plunging deep again. I don't look at Kathleen more than once, though, as my eyes fix to a spot in the paint on the wall opposite the bed. I remember that spot vividly; it's among the top five things I can recall clearly about that whole weekend.

The droplets just barely sprayed against the windows now, but I am still dripping from the heavier rainfall from only a few minutes before. I'm shivering, one of mom's embroidered hand towels laying limply on my head. Mud is caked under my nails. I pick at it, flicking it onto the comforter by my feet.

Jerome has been my boyfriend for a long time—in the beginning, we didn't tell anyone, so even our friends aren't completely sure of how long “a long time” actually is. He was the first guy I ever liked. The point is, it isn't like he and I had never fought before that weekend. We'd fought plenty, and over stupid stuff, too. Stuff just as stupid as this.

I know he must be hurting right now. Things have been harder than usual, so I had to cut him some slack. Having hurt feelings isn't a punishable offense. Expressing how hurt you are isn't one, either.

Our first fight had been in front of my parents, which is very unlucky. I remember my sister telling me that our parents were “worried about the state of my relationship,” and I had asked her what exactly they had said. She wouldn't tell me, and I think she's probably forgotten by now, but I wished that I knew, still—it mightn't have been so difficult for them to let us stay the weekend in their cabin.

“Isla...”

My mother's voice had been as heavy and condescending as ever, and I had resisted the urge to release my frustration in a series of pointed blows into the wall. I covered my face with my hands and groaned.

“Mom, I don't get why this has to be a big deal. You've known all of these guys for actual *years*. I've been taking care of my own...school and my apartment and *everything*, you know that nothing will go wrong, just objectively.” I had said with a pretty whiny tone, admittedly.

“Honey, it's not that I don't trust that you guys will take care of the house, I just don't know—”

I had felt powerless against her word, letting my shoulders slump. I remember thinking through all the possible ways I could make it up to the others—they'd known it wasn't certain that my parents would say yes, but I had promised to make this weekend work out nonetheless.

My mother made me promise that I would share a room with Kathleen as I had on the senior trip and ended up giving us the go-ahead.

I get up off of the bed and creep over to the bathroom. Staring at myself in the mirror, I press the towel down onto my hair. My hair twisted around itself in long, curled strands and looks like mud. I turn on the faucet and run hot water over my hands, making my raw palms sting red. I hold the white soap bar and let it slip back and forth between my palms, allowing the suds to collect in creamy swaths over my fingers. My breathing heaves.

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I feel so trapped; like my emotions were stones fastened to my chest and my back and sliding down my throat. I cry and wonder why things had to be like that.

Our first fight had been only words. We snipped at each other and let things become too venomous; I remember the way they had looked at us across the table. I couldn't tell then who my mother's disgusted glare was intended for.

I look at myself in the mirror. There is dirt on my hairline from when I'd fallen. I wonder if Jerome had dirt on him. If he was hurting. I grit my teeth and tell myself to quit wondering and just ask if I'm so concerned. I know I won't ask. I don't want to be concerned anyway. I don't want to have to be.

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What is Ruined?

After, Elias

There are many deplorable things we do while waiting. We peel the flaking paint off of the wall or undo the furniture stitches. We scrape the gunk out from under our fingernails and flick it onto the carpet. We pick apart the faces and conversations of whoever happens to be near enough. We pretend to check our email. While I waited for the sun to rise that morning, I wish I had done any one of those things. I wish I had done anything, really, and I think I might if I were just eyes and nothing else.

The waitress sets my plate down on the table. The people in the booth behind me are talking about having driven a long way. I don't know why anyone would come a long way to end up here. I thank the waitress for the food.

The green olive, pierced by a toothpick, leaks pimento and soaks, red, into the bread.

"Earth to Elias...Hello?"

I look at Isla. Her face looks like honey.

"What? Sorry," I say, and I shift in my seat because I don't know what to do with myself. "I don't know where I went just now."

I make myself chuckle, the sound kind of wispy and thin like when your teacher makes a joke about how no one in class wants to be there and you have to pretend that he's wrong even though he is the only one being honest. I clear my throat.

Back in high school, we used to come to this diner: Isla, Martin, Jerome and me. That was way back before we'd even met Kathleen. I don't think she's ever been here. We didn't go much in her senior year; they don't have any good vegan options, and it wasn't really worth it for the Real Cherry Coke alone. She doesn't know our joke about the grandma who runs the cash register, but it's not that funny, so I don't think she's missing out on anything even though Martin seems to like bringing it up around her anyway.

"Well, you're the one who wanted to talk about something, so..."

"I know, I know," I reply and rub my hands over my face.

It occurs to me that what I am going to say will ruin this diner for Isla, if not for everyone else, too. It will ruin it for me. It might already be ruined.

"When we stayed at your parent's cabin last weekend," I start. "That first night, when it was raining a lot, I had a hard time staying asleep. I don't know why for sure, maybe it was the wind. It was pretty noisy--but, anyway, that night...I have to tell you that I saw what happened outside that night."

I watch as Isla's jaw slackens a little, her eyes falling down to her untouched plate. I swallow my spit and feel guilty for making her remember what she must have been trying to forget.

"I really am sorry for bringing this up, Isla. I know it must be hard for you to—"

"How much did you see?"

I think for a moment about whether or not I should say "everything".

"I saw enough to know what happened," I say, trying to phrase things gently.

I met Isla when I was thirteen. She was a freshman in high school and the coolest person I knew. She told Martin to shut up when he talked too much about my braces and once punched Kenneth Willebrand in the face for calling me a name I won't repeat. She helped me study for my

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calculus exams after she'd already finished high school. She'll come to my graduation in June and sit with my mom like she used to at my baseball games.

"So, what now?" She asks, doing her best not to look at me.

"I, well...whatever you want, I guess," I reply.

She picks at the edge of the table with her fingernails.

"I'm surprised you wanted to invite me here after seeing me like that," she says.

She doesn't sound meek like I expect her to, but Isla has never been meek.

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Kitchen Fluorescent *Before, Kathleen*

My mom never bought us sugary cereal when I was a kid. This is significant for two reasons: 1) I now, as an adult, am obsessed with Cap’n Crunch Berries, ergo, I hate myself and 2) she started buying it when my little brother was old enough to eat it. I think knowing that informs a lot of my choices involving my mother, specifically allowing me to not feel so bad when I don’t have much time to call her in the evenings.

I like to eat it in lieu of dessert now, and it was very important that I brought a box along with me to the cabin this weekend. I ate some before we made dinner, actually, while testing out my walkie-talkies with Elias after everyone was finally together.

“Hello, this is Cap’n Crunch to Junior. Over,” I said. I released the button, taking a bite of cereal.

“Kathleen, I thought we weren’t using Junior! Over,” Elias replied.

“How about Little, then?” I asked with a snort, my words garbled by the Berries.

“We just—oh, what? I thought you were arriving tomorrow morning,” Elias said. His voice stopped coming through the walkie-talkie about halfway through, and I popped my head up to see what was happening.

Jerome dropped his backpack by the door and chuckled when Elias hurried over to hug him. He saw me next as I approached the living room. He smiled weakly before returning his attention completely to Elias. Those two behave like brothers—their relationship spans back to elementary school when Elias’s parents thought that a 12-year-old would be the perfect babysitter to their 10-year-old son. Flawless logic, in my opinion. So, that in mind, the two of them have a strong relationship with lots of hugging and hair-touselling that Martin pretends not to be jealous of but definitely is. I think Isla might be a little jealous of it, too, actually.

“Oh, you’re here.”

I heard Isla speak from the balcony above us, and Jerome’s facial expression seemed to change in a way that I couldn’t quite pin.

“Hey, angel,” Jerome said, looking up at her. “Yeah, I thought I would have to work tomorrow morning, so I was gonna come afterward, but Erica offered to pick up my shift so that I could come.”

I knew Isla really well. She and I had sleepovers every single weekend for the entire duration of our senior year of high school. She and I take hour-long walks in the mornings before class, and she tells me to stand up for myself when my professors or classmates or guys I meet at parties don’t treat me the way I should be—because of this, I knew exactly what face she must have been making at Jerome just now.

“I wish you’d called first...We don’t have a lot of food left. You’ll be sharing my parents’ room with Martin,” she said. She sounded flustered.

“It’s okay. I ate on the drive, but,” he paused, looking at the floor. “I can sleep on the couch. I came late, I don’t mind.”

“I’m already sleeping on the couch,” Elias interrupted. “We were gonna watch a movie soon.”

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“Oh,” Jerome said, rubbing the back of his neck. “Cool. I want to take a shower, so if you guys want to wait up, I’d like to join you all.”

“Yes, please do join us,” Isla said. I could hear her drumming her fingers on the railing. “It’ll be good for us all to have some time together properly.”

The air felt strange now, but I couldn’t glean any hints from what they were saying. I guess I’m not well-versed at reading them just yet.

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Threw Some Branches

During, Elias

I am half-awake at around one in the morning. Or, it was one in the morning when I'd last looked, but I don't remember how long before this moment that had been. It started raining around the time we all went to bed. We'd been watching a movie on Jerome's laptop on the floor because we couldn't get the TV to work, and the wind had begun to rattle the huge picture windows that occupied the entire exterior wall of the living room.

But now everyone is asleep apart from me and, I learned, Isla and Jerome, who stood in the woods outside the front window. I push myself to sit up, squinting. It'd been drizzling for a while, but now it was coming down in thick soupy drops, and I can see that they were yelling at each other.

Part of me wants to move closer, but I know that I should, in all manner of politeness, turn away and try to sleep. I can't. Not when I see their stumbled movements, hear their raised voices grow shriller and more urgent. I see them clearer when the lightning flashes, and the rain makes Jerome fall when he tries to throw his body forward. I see him raise his hands.

I see his hands come down.

The darkness returns. I feel sick. I can only hear his voice now, big and frustrated, for a few moments before they fall silent. I keep watching but see nothing more.

I wonder for longer than a few moments if this had been a dream. Isla was strong and unyielding, and my memories were unmatched with what I'd seen. I know that she and Jerome had been having a rocky time, but I never would have guessed that something could push either of them into molds like these. I wonder why Jerome thought this was the only way out.

The lightning flashes again, and I see Isla on her knees in the mud between the trees, facing the road, alone. I roll onto my side and stare at the back cushions of the couch.

I can't help it at the moment, but I wish I could keep myself from sinking so deeply into the past. Of all the fights of theirs I'd seen, none of them had come close to this one—or, I suppose they did, actually, in retrospect, but I'd never noticed what I should have.

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Telling the Truth

After, Isla

"I'm surprised you didn't bring Jerome here instead of me," I say.

And I am.

"Why would I want him here instead?" Elias asks, and he seems close to scandalized that I would suggest such a thing.

We've only been in this diner for a few moments, but all I can think about is how much I wish I could leave. Seeing Elias's sweet puppy eyes across the table is too much to bare given everything I've been feeling, but that's not his fault, and I want to enjoy his company for the plush kindness that it so often is.

"Because you saw his girlfriend beat him in the woods," I say, and it feels cold coming out of me—like a ghost seeping through someone's body in a dark room—but my voice is harder than I mean for it to be. It's sharp at the edges.

"Oh."

Elias didn't know. He didn't know what he saw, or he thought he had, but didn't. I spoil myself for Elias just then, and I feel a sinking feeling similar to when you see a bunny sitting in the middle of a road. I don't know what to say.

"I didn't realize," he says. "I don't know what I saw."

His face flushes pink, the blush swallowing his neck like a burnt snake. I can hear his breathing change, and I know what I've destroyed.

I knew before; I knew from the first time I laid a hand on Jerome. I knew I shouldn't have, but I kept on and kept not telling anyone. And now, I know that I am ruined. I'm ruined in Elias's memories, in the eyes of who I was meant to care for and keep, and in the lump that's forming in my throat.

He is not looking at me when I raise my eyes again. His jaw is fixed in a tight clamp; he's thinking, and I want to ask what about, but I can't. My voice is too tightly caught in my throat, and, besides, it's not my place to ask questions.

"I didn't mean to. I've never meant to," I say, and it sounds like bullshit. It sounds like some horrible soap opera line written by a screenwriter who couldn't decide if he wanted the audience to hate or love the story's villain.

"That's not—"

"I know," I continue, my vision blurring just a little from the tears I didn't want to free. I didn't deserve to cry. "I can't justify it. I thought I could, and I did, to myself, but I just can't. It's wrong, and I keep doing it, and I don't know how to stop—" I cut myself off by taking a deep breath when my voice breaks.

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A List of My Considerations

Before, Jerome

Our guidance counselor gave all of the seniors a sheet to fill out about the most important things to think about for our lives after graduation. My mother asked to see it after I complete it; she’s curious, I guess, what I’ll tell them. I wonder if she had speculations about my responses.

As you look forward to your graduation in May, it is time to consider what elements you would like to shape your future. What are your academic goals? Who would you like to maintain relationships with? Where do you see yourself living? Fill in the blanks below with what you believe are the most important factors for your future along with a brief explanation of your reasoning. If you’re having trouble, or even if you’re not, consider coming in to speak with your guidance counselor or having a conversation with your parent/guardian.

The prompt gave some examples to guide our thinking. *Miles from home, mental health,* and *career aspirations* were, unsurprisingly, among these examples, and the exclusion of friends and relationships with people who weren’t your parents or teachers in the list was noticeable.

Before dinner one evening, I made a list in my notebook before writing it on the “official” sheet. Something about putting it on that paper first was overly permanent, at least to my mind. Besides, I had a feeling that what I would be telling the counselor and my honest (or complete) list of considerations would not necessarily be equal.

1. Miles from home

Writing the school’s first stock example as my first real answer made me scoff at myself, but I couldn’t deny that it was the most important. That distance was space from my parents, my childhood home, my cat. My sister. The only friends I’ve ever known. My whole world. Going too far from all of that makes my heart ache.

2. A Modern Languages, Language Studies, or French major field

My mother speaks French to my sister and me at home. My father barely speaks it, not as well as us, but he tries. It’s one of the purest shows of love I’ve ever seen. I hope that someone will love me so fully. Learning a language is always an act of love.

I set my pencil down along the interior edge of my notebook and stare at my crude number three. I pictured Elias and Martin passed out on my couch. I pictured Isla and Kathleen gathering their shoes and cardigans and keychains in silence before ducking out my front door. I picture giving Isla a kiss goodbye.

3. Isla

I decided that I was allowed to care. I wouldn’t change a thing, of course—I’ll go where I need to—but it matters how far apart we end up. I waved my eraser in front of my eyes, the corner of my mouth turning up a little. I could hear my mother telling me not to consider her (or Elias or Martin or Kathleen, for that matter) as she wanted my choices to be about me, which she is undoubtedly right in wanting, but none of our choices are every about ourselves in singularity, I think. Besides, if this is something important to me, wouldn’t I neglect myself in not considering it?

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I continued the list by adding in the sports I'd like to play and the amount of time I get to spend outside. After I was finished, I transferred my answers—barring such topics as athletic division, greek life, and exclusivity, which I cared nothing about, along with things like roommates and the size of the surrounding city, which I knew my school didn't want to hear about—to the counselor's list. I attached it to the fridge for my mother to find when she came home from work.

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Kenneth Willebrand

After, Elias

In eighth grade, my friend Isla punched Kenneth Willebrand in the face. At this time, I could not be more thankful, but this memory will yellow with age as will so many more pleasant ones than this. It’s strange how memories begin to taste worse and feel larger in your throat as they swell with new information; like when you hear that your friend from elementary school cheats on her boyfriend or when you learn that your mom used to sneak out onto the porch to smoke in lieu of quitting as she convinced you she had.

After learning what really happened that night—what had been happening for so long—my thoughts sounded like white noise for hours. I didn’t know how I could have seen things so wrongly, through such cracked lenses. And, too, I didn’t know how she could do it. When I’d thought it had been Jerome hurting her, I hadn’t known how he could have done it, either.

I feel strange that I can justify it when Isla hit Kenneth, though. He was a bully, someone who beat me up regularly for hanging out with high schoolers when I was still in middle school, someone who knew my route home from school and followed it just for fun and torture. Someone who made my mom so angry that she threatened to sue the school if they continued to do nothing. Someone who deserved to be punched in the face and spat on when he fell, at least back then. Isla knew that people are only owed the consequences of their own actions. I mean, I thought she knew. She knew before, at least.

Punching Kenneth taught him what it was like to be me. What did hitting Jerome teach him? Kids hitting each other is altogether less violent than adults hitting each other.

How long has she been this way? How long have I been missing the signs? How long have I been thinking of people based on a falsity that I thought I saw? What difference does it make?

Of course, I was angry at Jerome at first, too. That’s what’s worse; I thought I knew what I had to sort through—I thought I was supposed to hate Jerome because he’d somehow become the poster child for baseless cruelty. I thought I was supposed to have an emotional distancing from my best friend after he became something I couldn’t withstand.

But it was Isla. It was our shining, golden Isla, and I don’t know if she became tarnished after those good memories or if the signs were always there. I don’t know how to help her. I don’t know how far inside I need to go.

When I told my mom what Isla did in eighth grade, she didn’t know whether to be thankful or pissed.

“Violence isn’t right even when it’s on your side. You know that, don’t you?”

My mom had cupped my face in both hands and spoke quietly as Isla washed from her hands in the bathroom adjacent to the school counselor’s office.

“I know, Momma,” I replied. “I promise to teach my friends to use their words.”

She got a soft look in her eyes then and chuckled, but I didn’t know at the time what was funny about any of it. From what I understood, people only laughed at jokes, and I hadn’t told one.

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Sardines

After, Jerome

I had my first kiss under my kitchen sink. It was the first and final birthday party wherein I’d convinced my parents to let me invite everyone in my homeroom, but, in my defense, I hadn’t anticipated that the effects would be as permanent as they are. I guess that makes sense, though. Until college, a lot of kids I know thought that they’d never die unless they did it themselves.

It didn’t happen during Spin the Bottle, though, because we actively refused to play that or whatever other kissing games exist. Actually, it happened during a game of Sardines, and I didn’t even do it on purpose. Well, I guess I tell myself that I didn’t because I did a pretty bad job—as most fifteen-year-olds do, in my defense.

Anyway, Sardines. I was the first hider, since it was my birthday, and I picked the best place in the house. My kitchen cabinets are pretty deep—deeper than they look, and roomier, in general, than I think most cabinets are—so, even as I started growing into my teenage body, I found myself able to fit in there. The cabinet looked like many individual floor-level cabinets, but it was a singular cabinet that spanned the entire underside of the counter. None of my friends knew this (why would they?), ergo, perfect spot for shoving as many high school first years as could fit. I pushed my mom’s cleaning supplies to the very end of the cubby in preparation for others to fit inside.

It took about twenty minutes for anyone to join me, which made me feel pretty good, and it didn’t surprise me at the time that Isla was first. She prides herself even now for being particularly clever, and I can’t say that she’s not. I’ve always thought that cleverness was attractive if not a little intimidating. She’d gotten on her knees and shuffled in beside me. In a motion to face herself back towards the cabinet’s doors, she fumbled, and, ducking so as to not hit her head on the plumbing above, she came very close to my face. I did not move out of her line of motion, inviting her mouth against mine, and we kissed, horribly, for a brief moment.

“If you tell anyone about that,” Isla had whispered, the docile tone of her voice rendered ugly by her words. “I swear to God I’ll—”

“Wow, this is a really good hiding spot!”

I had never been more thankful for Martin than at that moment. I am, actually, consistently thankful for him. He is always my buffer when I need him to be even if he doesn’t know it. Maybe someday I’ll be able to repay him for my fifteenth birthday party, but I think I’d rather not. I don’t think it would make sense unless I told him everything about everything.

Of course, I’d told Elias and Martin about my forgery of a first kiss during our boys-only sleep over the next weekend, and, of course, they had a lot to say. Martin laughed for approximately ten minutes straight about cock-blocking me, and Elias consoled me.

“Dude, you’ll kiss her again,” Elias had said. “You’re, like, in love with her.”

I can still hear him saying that. I can still hear myself whining defiantly that I wasn’t. I was, but things are complicated, and I wonder what world I would have lived in if he had been wrong.

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The Part of You That Dies

During, Isla

The first time I’d become like this was the night of our graduation. There were maybe fifty people in Jerome’s house and spilling out into the backyard. All of our friends and their parents and teachers were milling about. Jerome had told me before the ceremony that we could leave together halfway through; we had quite a few things to sort out.

Among these was that I hadn’t told him yet where I’d decided on going to college. This was because when my classmate Adelaide Sinclair told her boyfriend Dennis that she was going to UCLA—a sheer opposition to his Penn State decision—they’d broken up that day. She’d explained to me that it was because neither of them thought very seriously of each other and that I shouldn’t worry, but a nagging thought kept telling me that Jerome was closer to their mindset than mine, so I could hardly help it. Another was that I hadn’t told him that I loved him in about a week.

But it was eight thirty, and he didn’t seem ready to leave. I watched him through the crowd of heads for a moment as he chatted with our French teacher, Madame Roman. My frustration alleviated itself at the way his expression animated while he spoke his mother tongue with her, and I carefully made my way through the living room so that I could stand at his side, hold his hand.

I’d returned home at around one in the morning that night, and I could barely make myself recall what I’d done. I’d thrown up and screamed, sobbing, into the toilet, snot and tears flowing out of me like piss from a dead animal. Slow and rotten.

“Isla,” he’d said when I’d asked him to leave. *“Give me a second, will you?”*

My brain, irrational and lusting for self-preservation, told me back then that this meant he had already stopped loving me.

“You knew all this time? Why would you keep that from me? That doesn’t make any sense.”

My vision had hazed and fear raised my hand to lower it against him. He didn’t understand; how could he say something like that to me if he knew what was at stake? If we valued each other the same, then wouldn’t he be as afraid as I am?

The last fight I had with Jerome is in the woods outside my parents’ cabin. It’s raining, and the ground was cushiony—puffs of mud swelling around my shoes with each step as the Earth attempted to swallow us both.

He is walking away, and I am yelling.

I had been tempted to yell in the house moments before, but the idea of one of our friends hearing me made my blood curdle. Our argument was stupid—it started that way, anyway. He was trying to go to bed, but I was frustrated that he’d disregarded my arrival plan for this weekend, and he was not understanding. He was tired from driving all the way up here straight after his shift, but he’d been avoiding me for weeks, and I wanted to know why.

“Look at me,” I said, maneuvering my head into his line of sight. He stared blankly through the crack in the door to his shared room with Martin, who I could see lying on the bed.

“Isla, can’t we just talk about this tomorrow? I know you’re frustrated, but I’m so—”

“I’ve been trying to talk to you for two weeks,” I interrupted him. “Why didn’t you tell me that you’d have to come late today? And, how did you get Erica to take your shift? I thought you guys didn’t get scheduled together, so when did you even talk to her?”

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I watched him droop at the mention of his coworker. I knew he wanted for me not to have noticed his mention of her, but I couldn't help it. I don't know when I had become so possessive that something like this mattered.

"I asked the group chat if someone could cover me," he'd replied. "I asked Martin to tell you."

That had been the moment when I remember wanting to yell for the first time. His short answers made me feel feverish. I could feel him avoiding the conversation in spite of having it. He was avoiding me even as we spoke.

"Yes, but why didn't *you* want to tell me?"

I knew why, in my mind, but I wanted him to say it. To respect me enough even just for that.

"You know why."

I felt it rising in me, and I stormed off down the hall. He had never been so bold before, and, though I should have seen it coming—despite everything, Jerome is no pushover, not even for me—but my frustration began to blind me like it always does. My skin buzzed as I swatted the kitchen's side door open in my flurry.

Now, in the woods as the heavens break open and soak us through, I go back to that place inside of me. That burned hole in my skull that lives between my eyes—a version of me that cages whatever promise lovers make to keep each other safe in a box of fuse-bound and lonesome self-doubt.

I hit him. I hit him more than once, on the shoulder, on the chest, on his face. The first two or three are superficial, only barely as heavy as the rain. The next is resounding—harsh and loud enough on his cheek that I know there's a mark without looking. His arms fly up to protect against me, quivering. I stop. I hear him breath under the cover of the storm.

I lose myself as I lose him. He's crying and telling me he'll be back before morning, that he has to go somewhere else and think. I'm begging him not to leave me here and sinking my fingers into the mud like I could grow roots there. I'm wishing that I was a tree.

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Saturday *After, Martin*

On Saturday morning, I woke up before everyone else. I made a pot of coffee that I knew I would drink alone—everyone else likes tea and juice, the amateurs. Elias wasn't on the couch, but he left a nest of blankets in his wake. I turned around, facing the sliding glass doors that separated the kitchen from the depths of wet leaves and grasses in the mouths of deer, waiting for the drip to finish and beep.

"You have coffee before food?"

I leapt, clutching my chest as I squealed. I was really starting to feel like the sissy everyone pegged me for in middle school.

"Jesus Christ, Kath," I said, collapsing forward to rest my palms on the counter. "Announcing yourself is encouraged. Even saying *good morning* might have done the job."

She chuckled, sinking her spoon back into her cereal. "Good morning," she said. "Sleep okay? The storm was crazy."

I shrugged, jumping a little again when the coffee maker beeped near the fridge. I went over and got a mug from the cabinet and poured myself a cup.

"Yeah," I said. "Jerome didn't come back until late, I think, though." I furrowed my eyebrows. "He woke me up when he came back. I didn't even hear the rain, to be honest."

I looked over at her, and she'd paused chewing, a blank look cast over her face.

"What?" I asked, crossing the kitchen again to take a seat across from her at the table.

"Nothing," she said. "I just have a weird feeling is all. He was acting funky when he got here yesterday, and Isla kind of was, too, but I can't say for sure that any of it means anything."

Kathleen looked over to the living room. Her eyes darted across the furniture as if reading lines from a book, trying to see something she'd missed in there the night before.

"I was gonna make some eggs," I said, changing the subject. "I know you had cereal—"

"I don't eat eggs," she said. "But I'll probably have some toast and jam if you'd like some, too." She turned back to look at me, that emptiness filled with a kind smile. It, feeling familiar, made me worry less about what she was worrying about, too.

The first time I'd talked to Kathleen alone had been on our senior camping trip, so, we had been in the woods then, too. We'd both been around the bonfire at the same time, seemingly abandoned by whoever we were supposed to be with, and we had sat on the same wooden bench together in silence for some time before speaking. Something I find curious, though, is that the silence hadn't even been awkward or uncomfortable. I'd enjoyed it.

That silence returned on Saturday morning as I made my eggs, and she steeped her tea beside me, spreading preserves over blackened toast.

"I'm surprised you like your eggs scrambled," Kathleen said, her voice gliding effortlessly into the air.

"Oh, and why is that?"

"I don't know. You strike me as an almost-over-hard type of guy. You know, because that kind of egg is perfect but impossible to get right without about an eon of practice," she said.

Something about that flattered me, and I chuckled. "Thanks, I think."

"You're welcome."

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Elias’s voice came from somewhere behind me. “Martin,” he said, and it sounded foreign in his mouth, like when you say something so many times that it just sounds like noise. “Can you make me some eggs, too?”

I looked over my shoulder at him, and he looked, frankly, really bad. He rubbed his eye with his fist, chapped lips pouting unintentionally as his very essence yawned.

“Dude, is the couch that bad?”

“Huh?” He asked, blinking and shuffling closer. Kathleen laughed beside me, slipping two more slices of bread into the toaster.

“You just look tired,” I said. “Is scrambled okay?”

Elias waited a moment before replying, appearing to let his body settle back into itself—the wind seemed to blow through him straight from outside. He focused on the tile floor.

“Long night,” he said. “Scrambled would be great.”

“Here,” Kathleen added, moving closer to Elias. She set a plate of toast down on the island for him. “Pre-breakfast toast.”

I huffed an airy laugh out of my nose and picked out two eggs. I set the finished ones aside for Elias, cracking the ones that would be mine into the pan and watching as their barriers broke: shell then yolk. I looked up from the stove and saw a deer between the trees outside.

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Where We Have Gone

After

We are often asked in school or on personality quizzes who we look up to the most, and most of us want to say someone huge. A bigwig in your hobby, a historical inspiration, your mom. And we would say those people, too, but it's more difficult to know who you would like to be *like* if you can't pin down how you already are.

We pack up the cars together as the sun bows away beneath Sunday's horizon, and though it is not silent, it feels like it could be. None of us are saying anything important, passing bags and playing tetris in trunks.

The weekend had been like this, too: ghosts of words humming through the hallways that something's different now. And we know what it is—but some of us don't, and the partial knowledge is heavier. Those half glances between moments, unaware of what eyes and ears have seen and heard, what secrets pass along in that space, is rifting.

We say our *goodbyes* and *call me when you get homes*, and we know full well that we will. The separation will be comforting like the togetherness used to be. We'll return to not talking with our voices every day or every week, but the messages will be ongoing, still. Some of us will worry, others will wander blindly on and see the difference when we meet again in the summer. Not unlike a puzzle, the missing pieces will reveal themselves when we stop looking for them. They'll swim to the surface of the carpet or untuck from between the cushions.

They'll glow green in the dark like stars pasted to a ceiling, waiting to be found as we rustle, close, between the sheets. And we'll see them again, less, when we wake up.