

Beautiful People

I remember the day Huey Merchant left to go fight in the war. I'd just gotten out of class, and, as I was pulling my coat on, I saw him standing beneath the awning of the administrative offices, pinching a cigarette between his lips. He was looking around sort of frantically, but no one else seemed to notice. They just passed right on by and didn't favor him with a second glance.

I had nothing better to do with my time, so I decided to join him. I strolled across the lawn, edging my way between the passing throngs, and sidled up alongside him.

Huey nodded to me, his gaze darting.

"Jesus, it's cold," I said, staring up into the trees. The sun had set far enough that it hid behind the low brick buildings laden with ivy, and the leaves and boughs of the old oaks turned to ink before me. They seemed to me like the tendrils of some great sea creature, something that I could catch only a fraction of, awesome and unknowable in a terrible way.

Huey nodded again. "Want one?" he asked, offering me a cigarette.

"Thanks." I held it out for him and he lit it with a sharp little *click* that knifed through the darkness and I pressed it to my tongue. I began to shuffle about from foot to foot, keenly aware of his awkward tension and my own intrusion.

It was silent for a time.

"It's awful cold out," I repeated. The green had cleared out by now, and the lamps were just flickering to life.

"Yep," he replied.

"Don't you wanna go inside?"

"Probably should."

"Then why don't you?"

He shrugged. "You ever get the sense that all of this is just some kind of play?"

"I can't say I do. What do you mean?"

"This isn't real, Billy. We're not real people. Not yet."

I laughed a little to myself, a puff of vapor drifting from my lips. "I'm pretty sure we are, Huey."

He shook his head. "Princeton? All of this? No." He got really forceful with it, whipping his head back and forth so hard that I thought it was about ready to spin right off. "Not even close. We're play-acting. That's why I gotta leave, man."

"Leave for where?"

"The jungle."

"You wanna go to Vietnam?"

"Where else?"

"Hell, man. Anywhere else. Christ."

"That's where I've gotta go. I've got my mind set and everything. No backing down."

"Huey, you have to think about this. Seriously. You can't give this up."

"Give what up, Frick?" His voice shook across the frosted old cobblestones. He turned away. "No. Nothing to give up."

"You should really talk to someone. Talk to Langley. He'll set you straight."

Huey snorted. "Langley's just an old fraud. He's been cooped up in that dungeon of an office for so long that he wouldn't know the real world if it burned his house down."

"Then find someone else, okay? At least talk to someone."

"I'm talking to you, Billy. And you've helped me make up my mind." With that, he tossed his cigarette to the ground and crushed the little flame out beneath the heel of his polished black shoe. He turned and reached for the door behind him.

I stood watching.

All of a sudden, Huey whipped around and grabbed my shoulders. I tried to shrink back, but his grip froze me in place. His bright blue eyes shone with a mad light in that cold, lonely dusk. "I wanna wake up, man. I wanna wake up." Then he shoved me away and dove into the office and slammed the door shut behind him.

I stood there for a while, staring at the door. I must've sat there for at least half an hour, but he didn't come out. Eventually, I just gathered my coat close around my shoulders and drifted off into the night.

I never saw Huey Merchant again.

I wasn't great friends with Huey. I knew he was a good guy, virtuous and all, that he was smart, decently talented, good with numbers. I knew that, whenever he got called on in Economics, he'd always have the right answer ready. And what I knew, much later, was that he

got his leg blown off by a landmine and a bayonet jammed through his eye socket. That's how he died. Out in the jungle. In the real world.

I wasn't great friends with Huey, but he was my only friend. That's what mattered. There's lots of things I never knew about Huey Merchant. But what I did know was that Princeton felt a whole lot darker without him.

Christmas came and went, and I didn't return home. I had no reason to see my parents, and they had no reason to see me. A letter was enough. I told them that my studies were going well—the truth—that I was making some good friends—a lie—and that I'd found housing with one of them in Princeton for the break—another lie, but based in truth. An old woman named Charlie August was renting out a room above her little shop in town, the home of some crocheted nick-nacks and other assorted garbage, for a very cheap price, and, with my allowance, I was willing to pay for it. It wasn't the height of luxury by any means, but it had a working heater and a comfortable chair next to the window facing the street that I could sit in and use to read and watch people pass by. While I'm pretty sure I felt a mouse crawling around beneath the aged leather once or twice, it wasn't an awful place. I even enjoyed it a little sometimes. It felt like a bit of an adventure.

My writing didn't improve during my stay. I thought that, given all the time I had to read literature over break, my inspiration would finally spark, but no dice. I scribbled a few lines every now and then in my notebook, making sure to flip the page every time I started something new so that I could try and convince myself that I was being productive, but it never resulted in anything. There was a span of a few days where I felt the words flowing, the details forming, but, after a while, I looked down at the paper before me and realized that I was just chronicling my stay in Mrs. August's room. It was boring. It was dull. It was uninspired.

The next day, I turned the page and started a new nothing.

I showed a piece of mine to an English teacher once. Back in my junior year of high school. I was full of that giddiness you feel when you know you've got something good. I bet that's how future fathers feel when they learn their wives are pregnant. I'd helped conceive this

tiny, tiny thing, and now it was time to feed it and support it until it was strong enough to push itself out and become its own independent life.

A couple days later, I got the story back from my teacher, along with a note. She began with praise, and I think I'll always hate her for that. My prose was strong, my characters clear, my themes budding. And then, she wrote this:

Despite all of that, this story will never succeed. It is so deeply, thoroughly dishonest that it cannot. Readers will notice, even if they do not realize it. Those with the most trained eyes will pick it out right away and discard your piece without a second thought. Those who do not, however, will struggle with it for a time, trying to place their fingers on what, exactly, feels so wrong about your story. Perhaps they will succeed, perhaps they will fail. Either way, the result will be the same. They will give up. They will feel that you have wasted their time, that you have cheated them. They will know that you are lying, even if you do not know it yourself. Art is honest, Mr. Frick. If you cannot even be honest with yourself, how are your readers meant to gather anything from your story but disdain?

Needless to say, I never spoke to her again.

I started going to the bar across the street. One night, I sat nursing that old quote in the back of my head. I ordered a beer and sipped it and played my fingers across its rim and stared for a long time into that murky amber darkness as if at the bottom lay the secret I was keeping from even myself, that if I held it to the light and turned it just so I would be able to see it and snatch it and finally, finally, finally be honest with myself.

I searched through a lot of bottles that night, and I didn't find a single thing.

As I lay slumped on my stool, leaning against the table, a young man passed me and made for the door. Something made me watch him. He had a presence about him; it made my pulse throb in the corners of my eyes, and the little tingling particles zipping through my brain began to fly faster. He was pretty tall, with curly blonde hair coiling down to his earlobes and a sure, easy manner to his walk. He filled out his jacket well, like a sports player. Maybe football, or even boxing, but his face was a bit too pretty for something like that. His black eyes brushed over me for a second, and in that time they seemed deep and endless and unknowable. Then he opened the door and left, and the feeling went with him. I retreated back to my room and slept

and paid him no more thought, but I'm pretty sure I dreamt about him that night. It's been a long time, though, and I can't remember.

I thought about Huey a lot over break. I considered writing him a letter, but I tore up the words about as quickly as they came from my pen, and, after a few failed drafts, I'd had enough. I wondered what he was doing. Had he killed a man? Had a man killed him? Had he made any new friends? I was sure he had, given his disposition. Ultimately, though, I kept coming back to those last words. "*I wanna wake up, man.*" Had he? Had he found what he was looking for? I hoped so. I was the reason he decided to go, after all. He said so himself.

I hope you're safe, Huey. I really hope you're safe. I wrote it down on a little piece of paper and folded it up and put it in my pocket and carried it with me all through Christmas break. When I got especially anxious I'd shove my hand deep into my jacket and thumb across it. One night, somehow, I lost it. It must've just slipped out or something. Left on the snow. Gone.

Christmas came and went—and with it a package of money from my parents—and the new semester arrived soon after. After finals, it then promptly left. When you have no one to talk to, time feels like pig-slop. You just keep shoveling it down your throat because that's what you're meant to do, and eventually you lift your head up and your stomach aches and you realize that there's nothing else left to eat, so you just sit there waiting for more to arrive.

Summer came nearer and nearer, and it was looking like I'd have to spend a couple months up in Mrs. August's ratty old room.

I first met Dylan a few days before the end of freshman year.

I was sitting in the library, twirling a pencil between my fingers, playing with the sunlight through the page of the book I'd absently discarded. It was late in the day, and the room pulsed with a blood-orange glow that weighed heavy on my eyes. Back and forth, back and forth my pencil went. It about hypnotized me.

People were dozing off or chatting in hushed tones all around the room. Everyone felt like we'd just gotten hit by a landmine. Our ears were ringing and our eyes were red with smoke and our brains sluggishly chugged towards the finish line. Finals do that to people. It was sort of

pleasant though. We'd all gone through a shared trauma, and, even though I hadn't spoken to anyone new since Huey left, I felt a bit closer to them. In spirit, at least.

The door creaked open. Footsteps rang across the old oak floorboards, purposeful and powerful. They stopped beside me, but I hardly noticed.

"Mind if I sit?"

I turned to look at the new arrival, but he was standing right in front of the windows and the sun beamed right into my eyes. He just became this bloody silhouette, light playing across the edges of his blonde hair like a halo. I raised my hand to my face and nodded.

He sat down across from me, right beyond the sunlight. The barrier cut across the center of the table, baring me but hiding him. The faint glow bounced off the polished wood of the table and lit the bottom of his jaw, and I realized that it was the boy from the bar all those months ago. I leaned back in my chair. My pulse had started to throb like before, but weaker. I rubbed my eyes and said nothing.

He smiled. It was easy and calm, and I hated him a little for it.

I started tapping my foot beneath the table.

"You recognize me?" he asked.

"I do."

"From the bar?"

I nodded.

"Thought so."

"What? Used to having that effect on people?" I don't know why I said it, but I was getting angrier by the second and I just wanted him to leave.

He laughed quietly and shrugged.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"I just noticed you sitting all alone, so I figured I'd join you. Keep you company, y'know?"

"What makes you think I want that?"

"No one wants to be alone."

I didn't reply.

"Just being friendly." He smiled.

"You were at the bar."

“I go to the bar a lot,” he said with a grin.

“At Christmas. You were here.”

He nodded. “I was. Home can be a bit stifling, y’know. Just wanted to stay in town for a while.”

“What’s your name?”

“Dylan. Cross.” He held out his hand.

I stared at it for a second and then met it with my own. “Billy Frick.”

“I know. Just wanted to hear it from you.”

I raised a brow. “Nice to meet you, Dylan.”

“Likewise.”

He leaned forward in his seat and clasped his hands together with a conspiratorial air. One side of his mouth curled up into a grin, and from the lines already starting to form on his cheeks and in the corners of his eyes I got the sense that he smiled a lot. The golden coils of his hair bounced as he drew close and his shoulders quivered a little as if some secret was welling inside him and the urge to speak it was so intense that he was about to burst from the effort of keeping it contained.

I found myself leaning in too. That old pulsing had started to numb at this point, or maybe I was just getting so used to it that my brain didn’t even register it was there. “You look like you have something to say.”

“Pretty astute.”

“What is it?”

“I’ve just got an offer to make. Think you’ll like it.”

I gestured for him to continue.

“My father’s got a house out in California. It’s just outside of San Fran, on the coast. Remote, beautiful. Really old and cultured, y’know? It’s a great place.”

“Alright.”

“I stay there every summer with my friend Sammy. In fact, my sis goes to Berkeley, so I bet she’ll join us too if she’s not too busy organizing or protesting or whatever it is she does out there.” He laughed. “It’s really a great time, trust me.”

“Sounds nice.”

“You bet. You wanna come with?”

“Me?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“You don’t know me.”

“Sure I do. Look at this. I know you great. We know each other great.”

“We really don’t. Besides, I should head home for the summer. I need to see my parents.”

“You do?” He raised a brow.

“Yes.”

He stared into my eyes and I stared back, and in that piercing darkness I felt naked. I was afraid. I wasn’t afraid of my nakedness. I was afraid of not fearing it. I tried not to swallow.

Dylan nodded. “Right. Yeah. Right.”

“I should go. I’m getting hungry, and it’s almost dark out.” I stood.

“Care if I join you?”

“I think I’d rather eat alone.”

“Alright then.”

We stared at each for a while and said nothing. Then I turned my gaze down to my hands and started shuffling my feet from side to side.

“It was nice meeting you, Billy,” he said. He sounded really, truly earnest. Everyone else had cleared out by then, and, even though he whispered the words, they rang through the empty hall.

“I’ll consider it.”

“You will?”

“I will. I’ll get back to you in a couple days.”

“Alright. Alright. Just meet me at Lockhart when you’ve made up your mind.”

I nodded and turned away. My footsteps rang out across the floorboards and, when I reached the door, I turned and stared out the window as the sun finally set beneath the gray stone towers beyond. They stood silhouetted in flame for a second before finally simmering out into bruised purple shadow. I looked back.

Dylan was still watching me. He smiled my way.

I looked down. Then I stepped out into the night.

I had a letter from my parents. When I got back to my room, I sat down at the desk facing the window and slipped it open with my finger. A small piece of folded parchment fell out, clean and cream-colored, and I unfolded it to reveal my mother's small, cramped, neat writing.

William,

We hope you've found yourself well. Your father and I would like to hear about your studies this summer, should you choose to return. He is quite eager to get you started with Mr. Shiller and has been speaking your praises to the man—in his manner, of course. It is never too early, you know. I trust we will see you soon.

Sincerely, Mother

I glanced up from the letter and through the window to the courtyard outside. Lamps were glowing atop their black iron posts and people were strolling around the cobblestone walkways. Two girls danced and hugged and yelled beneath, and then a boy pulled one of them away with a laugh and kissed her on the lips. She clasped her arms around him and continued talking to the other girl. I knew none of them.

Mr. Shiller was a businessman and my father's close friend. He ran something overseas, some nonsense with oil in the Middle East that, despite my father's best efforts, I'd never had any interest in. My father was the spearhead of Mr. Shiller's cabal of accountants, and they'd formed a powerful bond over the years. So much so that, when I came of the right age, Mr. Shiller said he'd give me a good look. "Nothing too easy," he'd said, "but a nice little boost through the ranks."

I'd managed to negotiate my major from accounting to finance, but that was as far as I'd been able to get. That's why I found myself rotting away in the boiling dungeon of Dr. Langley's two o'clock basement classroom.

I considered my plans for the summer. My old brick home in Pittsburgh. The two wheezy pines crumbling in the front yard, refusing to bloom even in the summer. The piano in the front room with keys that froze my fingers solid and notes that did the same to my heart. We'd have dinner with Mr. Shiller, and Father would laugh at all of his terrible, tired jokes, and the man would turn to me and continue on about how America had "no real work ethic" anymore, and

Mother would put her cold dead hand on my arm and say, "It's true, William, it's true." She always called me William, never Billy. I couldn't remember the last time she had hugged me.

I wondered what the California sun would feel like on my back, my chest, my pale, thin arms. The ocean lapping at my ankles, shells cracking between my toes. Reclining on the beach as the sun melts into the sea. And, high above me, Dylan's summer home.

Why me? What was so interesting to him about me?

My lips were dry. I ran my tongue across them again and again. I think I must've sat at that window for an hour. Thinking. Just thinking. My parents would be angry, but never furious. Never with that kind of passion. But what did it matter? There wasn't much they could do if I chose to go with Dylan.

That pulsing throb took on a new feel in my memory. It was the pleasant sting of a new sunburn. It was evidence that you were well and truly present. That you were human. What other choice did I have?

I decided to spend the summer with Dylan.

I waited a few days to tell him. I didn't want to seem too eager or anything. The day before school got out, I went to go tell him. The door to his dorm was unlocked when I got there, so I knocked and let myself in. He was laying on his bed with his arms behind his head and a towel wrapped around his waist. He looked up as I came in, resting his chin against his bare chest, and his wet golden curls fell lank across his forehead.

Dylan grinned. "Changed your mind?"

I nodded.

"Great. Our flight's in a couple days. I'll buy you a ticket."

"No, it's alright."

"Trust me. I'll pay."

He shot up from the bed and stood in front of me, shaking the water out of his hair like a wet dog. Then he ran his fingers across his scalp and rested his hands on his hips.

"What made you change your mind?" he asked.

I swallowed and met his eye. "I just wanted a change of pace."

He nodded, lips slightly parted. “Mhm.”

We stood there in silence for a few seconds. I had no idea what to say. I tried to come up with something, but my brain chugged and shook like a faulty record.

Dylan put his hand on my shoulder. “Well, Billy, you’re about to have the time of your life.”

He had a firm grip. Definitely something to do with sports, despite his face. His skin was full and smooth, forearms thick like roots, like something natural and elemental, and I thought to myself *This is youth*. “You think so?” I cringed back from the eagerness, the yearning, in my voice.

If he heard it, he didn’t say so. “Yeah. Yeah, I think you will.”

“Thanks for the opportunity.”

“Of course.”

“I should get going.”

He pulled his hand from my shoulder and grinned again, and this time I returned it, if only slightly. I nodded to him and stepped out into the hall and closed the door behind me. I walked to the end of the hall and down the first flight of stairs, then leaned against the wall on the landing.

I gazed down at my hands. Fingers long and pale, bony, brown hairs shooting up from the digits, bulging slightly at the knuckles. I felt like something dead, wrapped in my dark coat. Or maybe something about to die. I was the feeling you get when you wake up in the middle of the day and realize that you’ve wasted it all. For a moment, I rested my head in my hands. Then I raised my fingers to my shoulder, to where he’d touched me, and felt it.

I hoped that Huey was safe. I hoped that he’d found what he was looking for.

Later, I wrote a letter to my parents.

Dear Mother and Father,

I hope you’re doing well. Things are looking up for me. I’m writing to let you know that I won’t be returning home this summer. I’ve been invited to stay at a friend’s home out in California. I will send you the address when I arrive. I’m sorry for the short notice; it was a last-minute arrangement. As for my studies—

I paused. I thought back to Langley's dungeon. Sweat running down my armpits, pinning my shirt to my chest and my hair to the sides of my head. His voice droning on, on and on, and the quick, staccato taps of his chalk on the board. The numbers and graphs and charts, vertical, horizontal, straight, zigzag; interminable. Everything reduced to points on a line, to decimals, to dollars.

I pressed my fingers against my eyes and kept going.

As for my studies, all is going well. I hope to bring all that I'm learning to Mr. Shiller's business ventures. While I know you had planned for me to enter the office this summer, and plans are now changing, I promise to bring double the effort when the time comes. I look forward to it, and to seeing you both again.

Sincerely, William

"Ever been to California, Billy?" Dylan asked. He'd taken the window seat, and he turned to study the runway, eyes going back and forth between it and me.

"No. Never."

"It's a great place. Full of excitement and... charm. That's the word I'd use."

I nodded. "It's your father's house, right?"

"Right on."

"What does he do?"

His eyes crinkled slightly as if at a silent joke. "A lot of things. He jumps around from job to job, whatever holds his interest. He's very talented, and at most things too. It makes me a little jealous, honestly. You'd think he'd be the kind of person that loses money wherever he turns, but no. He just keeps on winning. Right now, he's really involved with the Hollywood scene. That's all I know. I've learned not to ask. Eventually, I'd just run out of breath."

"What about your mother?"

"She's dead."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

“It happened when I was really young. I hardly remember her.” His smile flickered off his face.

“I’m sorry for bringing it up.”

“No, it’s alright. You couldn’t have known.” He paused. “What do your parents do?”

The plane started to rumble down the expressway.

“My father’s an accountant. He works for a man named Mr. Shiller. His business has something to do with oil in the Middle East, but that’s about all I know.”

Dylan chuckled. “Make sure not to tell my sister. She’ll fly over to...?”

“Pittsburgh.”

“She’ll fly over to Pittsburgh and rip that Shiller’s head right off herself.”

“That bad?”

He shook his head. “She’s very... involved. Got a lot of passion, y’know, and a lot of places to point it.”

I looked down at my hands.

“What about your mom?”

“She used to play the piano.”

“Used to?”

I pursed my lips. “Used to.”

“And now?”

“She just stays at home.”

“Why’d she quit?”

“I don’t know. I never thought to ask.”

The plane shook and lurched and we were off. The force pressed my back against my seat. My heart began to race and the traces of a smile curled against my lips. *This is it*, and then *Is this it?*

The flight attendant came to check on us. I was getting tired, so Dylan talked to her. They chatted for a little across me, and Dylan flashed her a smile. She laughed. I watched him and then turned away and after she finally left I said nothing.

A comfortable weight fell across my eyes. As we rose through the sky and passed between the clouds, sunlight streamed through the window and onto my face. When I closed my eyes the darkness within glowed. I felt warm.

I was having dinner with Mother and Father and Mr. Shiller. Candles flickered across the long oak tabletop. Silverware tinkled against china. Steam rose from the turkey in the center of the table, but it smelled like nothing.

Mr. Shiller smacked his thick lips. "This is just delightful, Mrs. Frick."

"Oh, you flatter me, Mr. Shiller."

I raised my fork to my lips and took a bite. It tasted like ash and didn't fill my stomach. My stomach groaned. I took another bit. Then another. Then another. I started shoveling it into my mouth. Condensation wheezed out of the turkey and onto my tongue. Peas skittered around the plate as I chased them with my fork. Mashed potatoes slipped between the tines of my fork and congealed on the edge of my plate. I was just as hungry as the moment I'd started.

Mr. Shiller laughed. "Look at him! He loves it too."

"William has always been a good eater," my father replied.

Mr. Shiller ignored him and set down his fork and knife. "They're protesting against the war, you know."

"Oh, yes. I read about that in the papers."

"Despicable, really. I've seen the footage."

"I can't believe the things these people are doing."

"I've seen the footage," Mr. Shiller repeated.

I realized that my plate had been refilled. The turkey, the peas, the potatoes. All of it back to how it'd been when I'd started.

"What was it like?" my mother asked.

Mr. Shiller sighed, relieved that someone had followed up. "Horrid. Absolutely horrid. And dirty, too. Hair down to their waists, grease all over their faces. They couldn't tell you the difference between a shower and a pigsty!"

My father shook his head, aggrieved.

"And the kids. You should see them. Especially the ones out in California, good God. All that anger, pointed at their own people. I swear, if they had their way, we'd just be one big nudist colony. It's disgraceful."

“It’s traitorous!” my father cried.

Mr. Shiller pursed his lips and him a sideways look. “Don’t be so dramatic, Frick. It isn’t the end of the world.”

“Of course, sir. Of course not. Far from it. Far, far, far.”

My plate had refilled itself again. I shook my head and muttered to myself. A pea dripped from my lip and *tinged* on the plate. I raised my fork and knife and started working at the turkey again.

“These kids, they have such passion, you know? So much. That warps you. It gets to the point where you don’t even see the real world. You create this version of events to suit yourself. You have to wake up eventually. It crushes you otherwise.”

No matter how many times I dug in, how many bites I took, how much food I shoved into my stomach, it wasn’t enough. I couldn’t even hear what they were saying. I shook my head. I kept on and on as if by blurring it in my eyes I could start to erase it.

“Yes, yes. Of course,” my mother said.

“What about you, William?” Mr. Shiller asked, turning to me. “What do you think?”

I was still shaking my head.

“Ah, now that’s a good boy,” Mr. Shiller said. I could hear the smile on his voice.

“You’ve done quite a job with him. Quite. He’ll fit in just perfectly, Frick, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely, Mr. Shiller. Certainly. Without a doubt.”

I raised my head and realized what I’d agreed to. I opened my mouth to speak. Food came tumbling out. It fell in great gray piles of slop, peas and turkey and potatoes gnashed between my teeth. Little strings of turkey stuck out like hairs, the peas like tumors, the potatoes the rotten head. I kept trying to form words, kept trying to move my tongue in some way conceivable to the human ear, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t. I couldn’t speak. They’d already gone back to their conversation, my mother and father and Mr. Shiller. They laughed together. They lit cigarettes. They blew those little spirits up into the air. They didn’t care. Then they stood and Mr. Shiller took my mother by the hand and led her into the sitting room, my father following close behind. And I was still at the table. Still choking. Still trying. I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t speak.

We chased the sun across the country, and by the time we landed it was around three o'clock. I'd had a very nice nap, and I was feeling pretty alright with myself.

Despite the usual tedium of the airport trek, most of the people there looked happy. They stood around chatting, passing drinks back and forth at the bar, rushing about to catch their flights. Sunlight streamed in through the high windows. Outside, palm trees swayed in the breeze from off the Pacific. Normally, that time from noon to dusk depresses me. Maybe it's the light, or the slow decline. Either way, I hate it. I didn't hate this, though. This was different. This made me want to get outside. It made me feel as if I was glowing.

Dylan led the way. We got our bags and headed to the exit. On the way, we passed a group of girls and Dylan nodded to them and made some witty remark I can't remember. They giggled and made one back and he laughed and we continued on.

"Why didn't you talk?" he asked.

"To who?"

"Those girls." He shot a look back at me, one corner of his lips curling up.

"Oh. Wasn't interested. Besides, not the right time."

"Mhm."

A middle-aged man stood by the sliding glass exit doors. He wore a tailored brown suit and brown shoes and his sandy hair was combed back across his head. He held a white sign with the word "CROSS" written in bold black letters across its front. Dylan waved to him as we drew near. The man smiled slightly and lowered the sign.

"Charles."

"Mr. Cross." The man's voice had a silky purr to it.

"This is my new friend Billy. He'll be staying with us over the summer."

Charles nodded.

"Billy, this is Charles. Or Mr. Cambridge. Very prim and proper. He's been working with my dad for a while, to say the least."

"Since before you could walk, sir."

"And I'm sure I was as delightful back then as I am now."

"That much remains to be seen."

Dylan laughed and gestured for me to follow. They were so easy together. We walked through the doors and out to the car, a sleek black thing parked beneath the awning in front of the

airport. Charles opened the door for Dylan, and he slid into the back seat. He gestured for me to follow, and I did. Charles shut the door and slipped our bags into the trunk and got in behind the wheel.

“Straight home, sir?”

“Straight home.”

We began to drive. The California coastline drifted into view. The sun dove in-between the palms and the sea shimmered with gold. Two seagulls raced alongside us for a few moments before drifting away. We rounded a bend and the crimson towers of the Golden Gate stood tall next to the San Francisco skyline. Hills so steep I thought the buildings would slide and collapse in tsunamis of plaster and brick. Even from that great distance I could tell that the harbor was bursting with activity, and, far away, Alcatraz loomed on a foggy island.

I turned to Charles. “It’s awfully hot out.”

“Yes, it is.”

“A lot different than Pittsburgh.”

“I’m sure.”

“My mother always wears these great big coats. If she brought those here, she’d probably melt.” I laughed to myself.

“Hm,” he replied, and nothing more.

I didn’t speak for the rest of the drive.

In middle school, I had a friend named Alonso. I met him at piano practice. He was really stellar at it. Much better than I ever was.

He was also rich. I remember the first time I ever went over to his house. It was this huge brick thing, crimson cornices and high windows and a front door with a knocker on it. I was almost afraid to touch it. It was so perfectly polished, so clean and smooth that I could see my own reflection wobbling in the bronzed metal.

My parents and I always lived comfortably. We had more money than most people. Even then, our home was nothing compared to this.

Alonso handled it with so much grace, too. I was in awe, and he knew it, and I knew that he knew it. He never mentioned it, though. He just laughed off my comments with an easy smile, then turned the conversation to something else. I hated it. I knew that he was doing the right thing, but I hated him all the more for it. I wished that he'd gloat, or make fun of me, or something. At least do something.

I still remember his bedroom. Big enough to warrant its own couch, a beautiful bed with a dark wood frame and white sheets pulled crisp and tight. My toes sank so deep into the rug that it felt like it was eating me alive. Two wide french doors opened out onto a balcony overlooking the grounds. The yard sloped down to a pine forest, and in the afternoon breeze the blue grasses danced below.

"This..." I began.

"It's nothing," Alonso said. "Don't worry about it."

I looked over at him and he smiled at me. Then I turned my gaze down at my hands on the railing and said nothing.

We spent a few hours together, and they were the most painful hours of my young life. When it came time for me to leave, I don't think I'd spoken in an hour. He waved to me across the lawn from beneath his front door, and I offered him something weak in return. Then I got into my father's car and left.

I never talked to Alonso again.

Dylan's house was nothing like that. It would be impossible to speak of it in the same breath as any other. It was a palace. There's no other way to say it. Sultans lived in worse conditions.

Charles pulled the car up to the top of the semicircle driveway. A marble path led across the wide green lawn to the front door, flanked on both sides by palm trees two stories high. Ankle-high grasses swayed in the breeze, and the boughs of blooming pink crape myrtles rustled beside the roar of the sea.

The house filled the whole horizon. Pockmarked brown and beige stone, rounded Mediterranean pillars, blood-orange shingles that glowed in the sun. Tall arched windows lined the sides of the house. At one end lay a wing separated from the rest. It looked like some kind of chapel. Stained glass rippled like fish scales, but I couldn't tell from that distance what it was depicting.

I stood there for a moment in silence. The wind played through my hair, and I kept brushing it back from my face. I was afraid that I would swipe my hand across my eyes and when I looked up it would all be gone. I'd be standing in front of my parents' home, right under the dead trees, snow melting around my ankles.

"Like it?" Dylan asked.

I glanced over at him. The breeze tossed his curls around and pressed his shirt against his chest. I grinned. "It's amazing. I don't know what to say."

He shrugged. "It's no big deal." Then he started strolling up the path towards the front door.

Charles gestured for me to follow, lugging our bags along behind him.

The front door opened with a casual bellow. Black and white tiles lined the floor in the foyer. A staircase with a wrought-iron banister snaked its way around the rim of the tower. I looked up, and up above lay a fresco of a painter on the roof. I admired it for a while and wondered why it made my heart pound.

"Let's go upstairs and get you settled in, and then I'll show you around. Sound good?"

I nodded.

"Great." Dylan bounded up the stairs, and I followed behind, my fingers drifting across the railing. Charles' shoes *clicked* across the floor like a toy soldier.

The second floor was divided into two halls. The main stairs spit you out into the first and larger of the two. Domed roofs supported by pillars in both directions. Dark oak doors were set into the walls. At one end of the hall was a circular lounge with plush ivory couches and wide windows. Another staircase sat in the corner, leading back down to the first floor. Beyond that lay the second hall, much smaller than the first, which led to the master bedroom, sporting two doors that could've belonged on the face of any upper-class house back in Pittsburgh. On the opposite side of the lounge, across that great first hall, was a large black door with ebony vines weaving among the frosted glass panels and a stench of iron so strong it made my nose throb from halfway down the hall. It had a wing all to itself, the windows sending bars of sunlight across the floor that emphasized the shadows between.

I turned and pointed at the door. "What's that?"

Dylan looked at it for a second before replying. "Oh, it's just this old family hall. Full of historic things and all that. Nothing too interesting. You shouldn't go in there. Dad would get

pissed. It's fragile stuff, y'know?" He turned away from the door and started walking in the opposite direction. I followed.

My room was one of many. The walls were painted a deep blue with gold crown molding. Thin ivory drapes were wrapped around the spokes of the four-poster bed. The door to my bathroom lay at the left, the clawed-footed tub opulent and grand, and to the right sat a table and two chairs. The portrait of an old man lay affixed to the wall above my bed.

"Who's he?" I asked, pointing.

"That was Hiram Cross," Charles said.

"And why's his portrait hanging there?"

"Each of the bedrooms serves as a memorial to one of the family ancestors. This room is dedicated to him."

"I've heard that there was an old tradition where the newly-married members of our family would come up to their rooms and consummate their marriages on these beds," Dylan said, leaning close. "I also heard," he said, voice lowering, "that we never washed the sheets."

"That's absurd, Mr. Cross," Charles replied. "Absolutely absurd. Either way, Hiram was never married. He was quite a lonely man."

I stared at the bed.

"Yes, quite lonely," Charles continued. "Caught in that horrid profession. I feel sorry for him."

"What did he do?" I asked.

"He was a railroad magnate. A businessman." Charles shook his head and set my bags down.

"It doesn't sound too bad to me."

Charles pursed his lips. "Yes. I'm sure."

A long silence followed.

"Well. I'll leave you both to it." Then the man turned and left.

Dylan sighed, resting his hands on the back of his head. "Sorry about him. He gets pretty defensive about stuff like that. Big stickler for tradition, y'know?"

"It's alright."

"He used to work at some big company like that. I don't know much about it; he refuses to talk, and the couple times he has made me not wanna ask more. It sounded bad, from what

I've heard, but that's pretty par for the course." He shrugged. "Eh. Doesn't matter now, right? He's with us for the long haul."

"All's well that ends well," I muttered.

"Exactly. Just like that."

I stepped up to the window. Past the pool lay a wide stretch of rocks that sloped down into the sand of the beach. A path had been cleared between them. Easy dunes rolled across the shore, and gold and lapis waves licked at the land.

Another boy stood on the shore. He was facing the sea. Long, wavy brown hair drifted behind his head. An easel with canvas sat before him, and he reached back and forth between his pallet and his painting, his brush working with ease. I hardly noticed him at first. He seemed like a fixture of the landscape, almost like a natural formation. Even from that far away, he looked so at ease that I almost didn't think anything of him.

I pointed out the window. "Do you know him?"

Dylan came to stand beside me and followed my gaze. He smiled. "I've been looking forward to this." He turned to me. "You wanna go meet him?"

Sammy.

I'm at something of a loss for words.

Throughout my life, there have been a lot of people who've had an effect on me. Most have been people like Dylan. Dylan was a powerful person. He had a kind of charm that made it impossible to hate him, even when, deep down, you really did. His voice was raspy, almost like a smoker's, but with a pleasant catch to it. He emphasized certain words and sounds and phrases in such a nice way. He was attractive. Dylan could command himself—his words, his voice, his body—in a way that conformed to the desires of whomever he was trying to convince. He had a million different versions of that same stupid smile, one half of his lips curled more than the other, each one tailored to a different person. Men and women, it didn't matter. Even I still remember his smile. He never realized it too, so you couldn't even be mad at him. All you could do was laugh and go "That's Dylan!" and then curl up in your room later and sob. He was a

worm that dug through your eyes and ears and curled around your brain and constricted until you blacked out. Dylan was a powerful person.

Sammy was also powerful. Just not in the same way.

We stepped out onto the patio and around the pool and up to the rocks. Dylan led the way along the path between the stones. The wind had picked up and the sun had sunk lower in the sky. It was still yellow but now sported an orange halo. The clouds started to turn pink like a dream.

Dylan crouched low and bent his knees, and then he turned back to me and placed a finger on his lips. *Shhhhhhhh*. I nodded. Then he turned back to the boy and continued.

The boy with the easel stood about halfway between the rocks and the water. I crouched beside Dylan and even though I felt stupid I didn't care. My heartbeat throbbed in my tear ducts and my temples began to sing. It was intense. It hurt but I didn't hate it and I couldn't stop going either way. We kept going. Little spurts of sand shot up where our feet touched the ground. We were close now but to my pulsing eyes it looked as if the boy was the one nearing us and not the other way around, slow and steady and inevitable.

Dylan drew ahead a little. He was close now, right up on the boy. I wanted to reach out and tell him to stop and wait for me but I didn't and I couldn't and my lips wouldn't move and I stood there crouched like an idiot as Dylan raised his hand and stood poised to touch the boy's shoulder.

The boy turned to face us. The wind tossed his hair in front of his eyes, and he curled it back over his ear with a thin hand. He didn't smile, but somehow I knew he was happy.

"I heard you coming," he said. His voice was soft but not sickly.

"You did?" Dylan asked.

"Of course. You're awfully loud."

Dylan turned back to me, face incredulous in a performative way. He jammed a finger at the boy. "This guy. He gets me every time. I swear it's gotta be magic."

The boy chuckled. "Or maybe you're just an animal."

"Impossible."

I shoved my hands in my pockets. I had no idea what to do.

The boy looked at me. "You must be Dylan's friend. From Princeton."

I nodded. It was still hard to move my tongue.

“You can call me Sammy.”

“My name’s Billy.”

“Nice to meet you, Billy. I’ve heard some things about you.”

“How much?”

“Some things. And there’s others I haven’t heard.”

“Hope it’s nothing too bad,” I said.

“I’d call it interesting more than anything.”

“Christ,” Dylan said. “You’re always talking in riddles. Drives me nuts.”

“For a big Princeton man, you’re not very interested in deep thinking,” Sammy replied with a smirk.

“Oh, you shut the hell up. I don’t have time for any of that. Bunch of intellectual garbage. People say that if you don’t read, you’ll rot your brain. Now that’s a load of shit. It’s the real heavy thinking that really gets to you.” He sighed. “What are you painting, anyways?”

Sammy glanced at me before replying. “A dream I had.”

Dylan inspected the painting. “Damn. Not bad. Better than I could do, that’s for sure.”

I stepped up beside them and looked.

He’d been painting a landscape. It looked like some sort of shoreline. Black sand and shimmering blue gemstones. Wisps of it drifted through the air and sparkled. People stood on the beach. They seemed like they were made of that very same stuff, held together by prayers and nothing else. Spindly arms and corkscrewed fingers raised to the sky, gaping mouths with no teeth. I was worried that if I breathed too hard on the canvas they’d just blow away. There wasn’t a single cloud in the dark, endless sky. Just a sort of pulsing radiance from the sun. It sat just above the bloody sea, a rainbow kaleidoscope curled into a ball.

“Bad dream?” I asked.

Sammy raised an eyebrow. “What makes you think that?”

“They’re screaming, aren’t they? The people?”

He turned and looked at the painting for a moment, then glanced over at me. “I don’t think so.”

I stared at the painting and squinted my eyes. I thought I must have missed something the first time. But no. They looked like they were screaming. They looked like they were in pain. It couldn’t be anything else.

I felt Sammy's eyes on the back of my neck. When I turned to face him he looked like he was studying me. His eyes were the same dark shade as Dylan's, and staring into them gave me that same old headache. His had some small flecks of blue, though. That was the only difference. Dylan's were all black.

"Are you two related?" I asked.

Dylan laughed. "What makes you think that?"

"Your eyes are the same. Or pretty close."

"Just a coincidence."

"How'd you two meet, anyway?"

"We're old family friends," Sammy replied. "I used to live out here too, just a couple minutes away. Then we moved out to Florida a few years ago. We still keep in touch, though."

"He traded Heaven for Hell."

"Where do you go to school?" I asked.

"Swarthmore. It's a small school."

"Pennsylvania, right?"

He nodded.

"I live in Pennsylvania too. Pittsburgh. Or my parents do."

"It's an interesting place, that's for certain."

"It's not too bad. Too cold in the winter."

"I bet this Florida boy's freezing to death up there," Dylan said.

"I never hated it. I think it's very beautiful," Sammy replied, still addressing me.

I shook my head. "It just depresses me. I can't stand it."

"Princeton's not too different, is it?"

"Well, no."

"Then why do you go there?"

"It's a great opportunity. I don't think there needs to be any other reason."

"You don't?"

"No."

He stared at me. His face didn't move, but it felt like something was different. Like he was appraising me. Like how he saw me had changed.

“Well,” Dylan said, “it’s getting late, and there’s still something I wanna show you before dinner’s ready.” There was a slight edge to his voice. He was smiling, but his eyes flickered.

“I think it might be best if we showed him some other time.”

“We should do it now.”

They stared at each other for a moment and said nothing.

“Show me what?”

“See, Sammy. He’s interested. Now we have to.”

“Yes. I guess we do.”

“Then what are we waiting for?”

I tried LSD for the first time a few months into my senior year of high school. I didn’t really like it. It made me feel loopy and sick and out of my mind and I remember waking up from my fugue and vomiting into the dirty basement toilet at the house of a classmate I didn’t know. It gave me the overwhelming sensation that I was truly alone in the universe and that no one would ever be able to dive into my skull and understand me and love me. Most of the time, we can hide inside our heads and pretend that what we show on the outside is enough. We can be self-sufficient. We can filter things through our own eyes. When you’re on LSD, it feels like your brain is expanding. Like it’s gotten so big that it’s beating against your skull and melting out between the cracks. When you’re in that kind of state, you can’t deny anything. You have to reckon with your own ineffability. I learned that word from Denise Bohlman. *Ineffability*. She taught me that word at that party in the basement of the house of the classmate I didn’t know. She was very nice. She went by “Danny” behind her parents’ backs and pierced her ears in funny places and cut her hair awful short. She was really into the night scene, really knew her way around a lot of that funky shit I didn’t dare try. Then after a party one night she disappeared and none of us ever saw her again. I hope she’s doing well. Wherever she ended up, I’ll always remember her for teaching me that word. *Ineffability*. That’s how I felt when I got high. I was shrinking like a nerve in the cold. I felt present and aware that people were watching me, that I wasn’t isolated in my little bubble of the world. It was the most terrifying experience of my life. I don’t remember running to the bathroom, but I do remember the vomiting. I remember pressing

my chest tight so that I could force myself out—whatever made “me” me—and through the drain so that no one could look and see. Meanwhile, the walls were dancing around me. I laid back with spit dripping down my lips and watched the light on the ceiling swirl slowly. Maybe I was there for an hour or a day or just a minute, who knows, but the next time I was conscious I was laying in bed late at night and the afterimage of that light was burned into my eyes.

Stepping into the gallery at Dylan’s home was like staring into that light again. So much art lined the walls that I could hardly tell what color they were painted. A large round table sat in the center of the circular room. On it were a variety of pots and sculptures and artifacts, some weathered, others so clean they looked like they’d been made yesterday. The gallery sat in one of the corners of the house, at the base of one of the towers, so only a few tall windows lined its gentle curves. Tall grasses waved outside, and the ocean and the sun shone nearby, but the silence of it all made it seem so far away.

I’d never seen any of the pieces before. They all had a sort of dreaminess to them. Both aloof and raw. It all felt very fundamental, elemental, as if everything unimportant had been cut away and all that was left was the most basic form of the scene itself. A lot of them depicted violence. Torture, war, sacrifice. Hundreds of people were dying in there.

Art doesn’t usually make me emotional. Most of the time, I just take it in and walk away and try to make myself feel like I’ve gotten something out of it so that the other people there won’t think I’m an idiot. I’d made a game out of it. See how stupid I could make myself look before everyone else started to notice. These pieces, though, felt like real tragedy. As I watched, I became one of the soldiers. My sword shuddered as it clashed with my enemy’s, and all around me my friends were dying. Whether we won or lost, I didn’t care, because they were gone all the same, and no flag or trophy would ever bring them back.

I almost started to cry.

“Hit you in the feels?” Dylan asked.

“Yeah. I don’t know,” I said.

“You’re not the only one. I never got it myself, but hey. At least someone does.”

It wasn’t just violence. There were scenes of beauty, scenes of peace, scenes of love. There were baskets of fruit that looked like stained glass. There were days and nights in the city, people enjoying glasses of wine in outdoor cafés and beneath moonlit awnings. There were men and women embracing beside dark, bottomless ponds. These felt separated from the rest. They

were contained in their own worlds. The next room, the next street, the edge of the forest. None of those things mattered.

One in particular caught my eye. It was set in a dark forest. A man with the legs and horns of a goat stood above a crowd of naked people. They were all splayed out around a bonfire. The people sat so close together that I couldn't tell whose limbs belonged to who, where one ended and the next began. They all rolled around together in various positions of ecstasy. Meanwhile, the man with the goat legs drank from a cup of wine and watched. Something red dribbled down his lips, but I couldn't tell if it was wine or blood. His penis was erect.

I turned away. It felt wrong to stare at it.

Dylan laughed. "You found it?"

I nodded.

"Damn right. It's really something, isn't it?"

"I'm not sure I like it."

"Really?"

"It makes me uncomfortable."

"What's there to be uncomfortable about?"

"I mean... there's a reason people do that sort of thing in the privacy of their own homes, if that makes sense?"

"I feel you. Still, though. It's just a part of life. Nothing to be ashamed of."

"It feels wrong."

"What does?"

"To paint something like that. And to look at it. I feel like that kind of art should be left for real things. Things that last."

I met his gaze. That same old twinkle of laughter still glistened at the corners of his eyes, but it was undercut by something greater. The bottom had fallen out of his humor and instead it was being supported by a deep bluntness. *This is it, take it or leave it*, it seemed to say. "Things that last?" He smirked. "What's more lasting than that, Billy?"

I turned to Sammy. He just stood there without speaking, arms crossed, staring.

"Did you paint any of these?" I asked.

"What makes you think that?"

I thought for a moment. The words had just spilled out. At first, I wasn't even sure why I'd said them. "Some of these look like what you were painting on the beach. They've got the same feeling to them."

"Didn't know I invited an art critic to come stay," Dylan said.

I shook my head. "Forget it. I was being stupid."

"No, you weren't," Sammy replied. "You're right. In a way."

"What do you mean?"

"None of my art is up right now, but it's hung in this room before. Dylan's father is an art collector. He rotates pieces through this room. This isn't even a fraction of what he owns."

"Remember how I told you my dad jumps around a lot? This is the one thing he's stuck with for a long time. His real passion."

"I don't recognize any of these paintings."

"That's because they're completely original," Sammy said. "All of these pieces—paintings, sculptures, pottery—were made by Mr. Cross' family and friends. Some of these go back a couple hundred years." He raised a hand to one of the sculptures on the table and ran his lithe fingers gently along its face. "Hundreds of pieces of art, and none of them will ever see a museum."

"How much do most of them cost?" I asked.

"To us, they're priceless." Sammy's voice came hard and sharp and I went silent.

Dylan laughed. "I'm glad my dad didn't hear you ask that."

"I'm sorry."

Sammy didn't reply. He stepped up to one of the more surreal paintings and traced it with his eyes. It sat on the wall beside one of the windows, and the dimming light from outside swept across his bronze face. His fingertips tentatively drifted along the edge of its frame. "Do you know who painted this one?"

Neither I nor Dylan knew who he was addressing.

"Dylan. Do you remember Mrs. Lithgow?"

"Sort of," he replied, hands on his hips. "It's been a long time."

"Yes, it has. She was such a great woman."

"I don't remember her being the nicest."

“I wouldn’t call her nice. She was great. She was a powerful woman.” He turned to me. His face was still and unreadable, but the hints of something more tossed beneath. “She taught me how to paint. My mother and father are both writers, but they always supported whatever I wanted to pursue. When I told them I wanted to paint, they found the best person they could. And she was the best.”

“You both have lots of connections,” I said.

Dylan shrugged. “Networking runs in the family. We’ve got influence.”

Sammy continued as if he hadn’t heard us. “She was cold and tall, like an empress. She tried to teach Dylan and me for a while, but only I stayed on.”

“She wasn’t very receptive to my thoughts,” Dylan said.

Sammy laughed, light and low. “No. No, she wasn’t. But she didn’t restrain us. She showed us the woods and warned us about them, but, if we wanted to go explore, she wouldn’t stop us. Every time we met, it felt like I found something new.”

“And she sure wasn’t afraid to tell you when it was shit.”

Sammy laughed again, louder. “She was merciless. You had to earn everything with her. That just made it sweeter, though. Her praise meant so much more than anyone else’s, and, when she hugged you, it felt like real, honest love. She didn’t hold anything back.”

“What happened to her?” I asked.

“She died last year,” Sammy replied.

“I’m so sorry.”

“That’s why this is priceless,” he said, laying a hand on the painting. “That’s why you could offer us any amount of money in the world, and we’d refuse to take it. Because this means so much more than that. When I look at this, I feel her. There’s a human being behind it, and, when you stare hard enough, you see them. That money, what does it mean? What does it feel like?”

I didn’t reply.

“Nothing. It feels like nothing.”

The sky outside was red and blistering and it made Sammy’s tan skin look like blood. His face was hard and motionless. I stood there with my hands in my pockets. I played with the seam of my pants between my fingers and tried not to look away from his gaze. Dylan said nothing

either. Sammy turned to look at the painting one last time and sighed, and lowered his trembling hand.

“It’s getting dark. I need to get ready for dinner,” he said. He crossed the room to the heavy wooden doors and stepped out. His footsteps retreated across the stone floor outside.

“He’s right,” Dylan said. “Dinner’s gonna be ready soon. You should get cleaned up.”

I didn’t think I needed to change much, but I nodded regardless.

Dylan walked away. When he reached the door, he turned back. “Don’t worry about Sammy. He gets worked up over stuff like this, but he doesn’t stay mad for long. If it was such a big deal, he and I would’ve stopped talking a long time ago.” He laughed to himself.

“Are you sure?”

“Trust me, it’s no big deal. At the end of the day,” he shrugged, “it’s just a stupid painting.”

He turned around and left, and then I was alone. I stared at the painting. It looked so much like the one Sammy had been making earlier. There was so much of him there. I turned my eyes down to my feet and left and closed the door behind me. I headed back to my room. I had to get ready for dinner.

It took so long for me to find my way back that by the time I returned to my room it was dark outside. I went to the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror for a while. My hands were resting on the rim of the sink and under the pale glow of the lamp they looked like skeleton fingers. They looked like they’d crack if you bent them hard enough. Chicken bones. They shook slightly. Water dripped from the faucet into the bronze bowl.

I ran a hand through my hair. It was long and stiff and came down to my ears. When I looked up I saw that my hair was frazzled on the side where I’d rubbed it, tangled and wild. I tried combing it back with my fingers, but all that achieved was pressing it too close to my head. I liked it when it stood out more. It gave me a sense of uncertainty. I was fun. Anything could happen.

Now that side was pinched and plastered to my head and everything looked uneven. I stuck my fingers in the back and raked them up towards the front of my head to try and get it

back to normal, but that just made it gnarled at the edges. One side was smooth, the other like I'd been standing in the middle of a hurricane. So, I did the natural thing. I tried to make the other side look messier. Better to be even, after all.

It didn't end up how I wanted it. Hairs were sticking up every which way, and I was getting really overwhelmed, so I rested my elbows on the edge of the sink and placed my forehead into my open palms. I breathed deeply a few times. Then I looked up and smiled at myself in the mirror. A big, toothy grin. I had nice teeth. I sure did.

I wondered how Dylan felt when he stood where I stood, looked where I looked. What did that presence feel like? How did his grin rest across his mouth? How did every action, every movement, work beneath his muscle? He couldn't exist in the same way that I did. We were so fundamentally different that we might as well have been different species. I wasn't watching him. I was observing him.

I left the bathroom and went to my suitcase. I searched through it for a while until I found a long-sleeved button-up and pants that fit my taste. The shirt was a nice, deep navy, and I tucked it into my pale khaki pants. Then I went back to the bathroom. There was a wrinkle in my shirt from where I'd folded it. I rubbed it and straightened it with my palms, but it kept sprouting back up whenever I let go.

What did Sammy see? In me, in Dylan, in himself?

There was a knock at the door.

"Yes?" I called.

"Dinner is almost ready." It was Charles.

"Alright. I'll be there soon."

I'd started to sweat beneath my shirt. I tugged at the chest and turned back to the mirror. I didn't want to be late, but I wasn't presentable yet. I looked at my hair again and hoped that it looked better, as if by ignoring it for a while it would fix itself perfectly. It was exactly the same as before. I tugged at my bony wrist until it popped. My skin was raw and tender from where I'd been messing with it. I inspected it in the mirror and splayed my hand so that it would look bigger, fuller.

A slight stubble stood out on my cheeks and chin, but I didn't have enough time to shave it. It just sat there, dark against my pale skin, dark like my frazzled and ruined hair, dark like the

navy shirt with the wrinkle that looked like a knife wound. Dark like their eyes. Dylan's. Sammy's.

There was nothing else to be done. I straightened my shirt one last time, tugged at my hair, and turned away quickly. I didn't want to see if I looked better or worse or the same. I would just imagine that I looked exactly how I wanted to look. I stepped out of the bathroom and into the hall. I heard voices below, calling for me.

Down the stairs and through the central hall. Then a right through some wooden double doors, arched with a sandstone trim. A rectangular room opened before me, the walls painted a light shimmering gold with ivory crown molding. A crimson and silver carpet muffled my footsteps, dull, hollow ghost-thuds. A crystal chandelier dangled and twinkled in the center of the room. We were set so far into the center of the house that not a single window lined the walls. There were paintings here as well. Landscapes, for the most part. Beautiful things with brushstrokes that looked like feathers and fish scales. Set on those walls was a collection that mirrored and warped the entire earth.

In the center of the room sat a great rectangular table. It looked like it'd been ripped right out of the hands of the English aristocracy. Only three chairs had been set with silverware, gathered at one end of the table. Dylan and Sammy had already taken their seats. I walked over to them.

"There's the man of the hour," Dylan said. He was sitting at the head.

I took a seat beside him, across from Sammy. "This is a little extravagant for just the three of us, don't you think?"

Dylan shrugged. "You're our guest. We're gonna treat you to the real experience. Although, that does remind me." His voice drifted off, and he glanced around at the other seats. His eyes passed quickly over them, and I could tell he'd already inspected them a few times over.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Is it your father?"

"Yeah. There's nothing set out for him." He turned in his seat and called Charles' name.

The little man stepped from a thin, swinging door set into the corner of the room. “Yes, sir?”

“Is Dad gonna join us?”

Charles approached the table and paused a few feet away. He clasped his hands just above his stomach. “Sir, I wanted to tell you sooner. You were showing our guest around, and jumping from place to place, and the time just never presented itself...”

“It’s fine, Charles. Just tell me what’s going on.”

“You see, sir, your father is going off to war.”

“What?”

I glanced over at Sammy, but his gaze was locked onto Charles as well.

“He’s been drafted, sir. It’s unavoidable, you know. There was nothing he could do.”

“Where’s he at now?”

“He left two days ago. He gave me a letter and asked me to relay it to you whenever I got the chance.” Charles pulled a white envelope from the inside pocket of his jacket and placed it gently between his fingers as if it was something to be worshipped.

Dylan turned away and waved his hand at the man. “No, it’s fine. Just leave it in my room, and I’ll look at it later.”

“Yes, sir.” He slipped the envelope back into his pocket. “I’m very sorry about your father, sir.”

Dylan laughed. “Sorry? What’s there to be sorry about? He’ll be there and back in no time. Real American man, y’know? Nothing to be sorry about.”

Charles nodded. “Certainly, sir.” He turned and went out the way he’d come.

“Dylan...” Sammy began.

“What?” he replied, too harshly. He seemed to realize what he’d done, because then he narrowed his eyes and let loose a slow, open-lipped sigh. His hand extended towards Sammy’s. “Sorry. Sorry about that. It’s just a lot.”

“Are you alright?” Sammy asked.

“Yeah. I meant what I said back there. He’ll be back in no time.”

“Yes, I’m sure he will be.”

“I knew a guy who went off to the war,” I said.

Dylan turned to me. “From Princeton? Who?”

“Yeah, from Princeton. Huey Merchant.”

“Oh yeah, Merchant. Huh. I never knew that’s where he disappeared off to. I just thought he up and left one day.”

“What happened to him?” Sammy asked.

I met his eye, and we stared into each other for a moment. I felt him searching inside me. I felt him watching as Huey told me he needed to go fight, needed to go see the real world. I felt his breath on the back of my neck when I learned that Huey’d died in combat, that he’d gotten a bayonet jammed through his brain. I tried to search back. I tried to become the bayonet. I tried to pierce myself through the socket of his eye and pull back the mystery, the epiphany, that lay behind that darkness. “He came back safe and sound. I think he even liked it so much that he went back for a second trip.”

Dylan hit the table with his palm. “Hell yeah! See, that’s what I’m talking about. A good American man, or whatever you wanna call it.”

Sammy scoffed but said nothing.

Dylan didn’t hear him. “Knowing him, he’ll probably come back with fifty new buddies hanging off his arms. Oh man, you’ll wish you were here. The party he’ll throw.”

Charles came with the plates then. The kind of china that sang sweetly when you hit it with your fork. We’d been treated that night to a seafood linguini, piled high with scallops and long tufts of crab and lobster meat still in the shape of a claw, the pasta fine and golden like coiled harp strings, the sour kiss of lemon on my tongue like the LSD on my mind all those years ago. Charles returned a minute later with the wine. He set three empty glasses before us and poured us each a drink, solid and scarlet, and then placed the bottle on the table and left us again. Dylan drank his down in a couple gulps and immediately set about pouring himself another glass. Sammy took the time to swirl it and savor it. His cheeks flushed slightly as it passed down his throat like a bronzed apple left out in the sun. I placed the glass to my lips and tried to follow what Sammy had done. I sniffed the wine but I had no idea what I was even supposed to be searching for. Eventually I drank it down. It was bitter and awful and my cheeks shuddered as it passed through my throat. My fingers searched for water but there was none. Dylan laughed and took another swig. His lips were a bright supple pink. He pulled a packet of cigarettes from his pocket and placed one on his tongue and flicked the lighter open and closed and when it snapped shut it was the loudest sound in the world, it was impossible to ignore. I watched as he puffed the

diamond smoke from his curled lips and maybe the wine was already getting to my head but beneath the chandelier it looked as if stars twinkled in the smoke, little galaxies bursting to life as they had so many billions of years ago when the universe first came to be and hydrogen and helium met and made love for the first time, and behind it all was Dylan: Dylan the specter, the immutable, the animal, the awfully human. I giggled. "One glass?" Dylan asked. "Fucking lightweight." He laughed and I went on laughing, because why wouldn't I? It was the funniest thing in the world. I took another sip of the awful wine and then another and then it was gone. Dylan refilled my glass before I even got the chance to ask. By now Sammy had also finished his first glass and was getting a refill, and Dylan had worked his way through half of his second. "Want a smoke?" he asked us, and we both agreed. Soon we were all puffing on our cigarettes around the table. Dylan started blowing smoke rings above our heads and we clapped and cheered for him between sips of wine, and he bowed to us like an old magician. At some point Charles had come back in and brought us another full bottle but I couldn't tell you when that was for the life of me. We all talked about something but it was really just empty babble, nothing of substance. We just wanted to fill the air with a sound beyond the flickering of our little flames. At a certain point we lost even that faculty. We all started staring off into space. Sammy tried to get up at one point but slipped and fell back into his seat. Dylan was so out of it that he couldn't even bring himself to laugh. I started thinking about Huey. Frankly, it's a miracle I was able to think about anything at all. But maybe thinking is the wrong way to put it. It was more like he materialized. Like he'd yanked himself out of my head and imposed himself upon me without my will or intervention. What had it been like, out there in the jungle? Had he really found what he was looking for? Maybe it was the wine, or maybe it was Dylan, but suddenly I was sure he had. There was no other option. Even if he died, so what? Everyone had to at some point. That didn't mean he was still lost. "Do you really think your dad's gonna make it out?" I asked. Dylan turned to me. "What?" I repeated the question. He snorted. "Are you kidding? Of course he'll make it out. Why wouldn't he?" I smiled at him. "Of course he will." Then Sammy raised his glass. "To Mr. Cross." Dylan raised his too. "To Dad. Gonna miss you. Give 'em hell." I joined them and mumbled something appropriate, and we all drank. I was really sure that he'd make it out, too. I didn't know the man, but I got the sense that he was strong, that he could look after himself. I had hope. I had so much hope. I smiled. I took another sip from my glass and tumbled deeper. Beauty on the cusp of the horizon. For the first time in a long time, I was happy.

I stumbled back to my room hours later. The world revolved behind my eyes and I was swept up in it. It was the first time I'd ever really been drunk. Not the throwing-up-in-someone's-basement kind. This was a warm, springtime buzz. It was the pleasant sting of a too-near bonfire on a cold night. In the bathroom mirror, my reflection was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

The air in the room was stifling. It couldn't contain me. I was bursting at its seams. I pushed open the doors to the balcony and stepped out. I almost fell, but caught myself at the last second on the sandstone banister and started giggling softly. The warm cider light from the lamp beside my bed spilled out onto the semicircular fish-scale tiles beneath my bare feet. I wiggled my toes and laughed at how warm they were.

My balcony looked out onto the backyard. Reclined chairs sat around the pool below, lit by an ovular light gleaming a bright blue. Its rays rippled as the wind kissed the water.

The breeze tossed through my hair. It blew it all out of shape and every which way. I didn't mind. When I closed my eyes, it was easy to imagine that the wind was a hand, the hand of someone I cared about, sailing along my scalp. The hand was soft and thin and gentle, but passion lingered beneath it. There was always the danger that it'd go tight, grip my hair, bring me down to my hands and knees. I didn't know whether or not I was supposed to be afraid. The thought scared me, but I didn't shrink back.

I lost myself out there. It really was easy. I closed my eyes and let the sound of the waves toss past me. In the darkness I pictured the reeds that stood between the yard and the beach. I pictured them swaying. The wind carried them this way and that. I wanted to kiss them. I wanted them to kiss me. I wanted to be them. I wanted to have always been them. I wanted to watch as sand and trash and death washed up on the beach, and still just sway there, say *that's alright, baby, that's all right*.

I started to feel sick. The wine was kicking its way back up my throat, and standing there with my eyes closed drifting in the dark wasn't helping. I turned and kept one hand on the banister as I went back inside. The air inside the room weighed me down, kept me on the ground, kept my mind from floating away. It'd wiggle its way out of the cracks in my skull and then get shoved back in again by the gravity of the place. I moved to shut the door.

“Have you opened it yet?”

It came as a whisper and I had to stand there for a moment wondering if I’d really heard it.

“No, not yet.”

It was Dylan’s voice this time. It came from outside. I shuffled back to the balcony and stood just inside the lip of the door, listening.