



Ever

Since

ALENA BRUZAS

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Thank you.

A large, elegant, handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ever Since". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letter of "Ever" being a large capital 'E' and the first letter of "Since" being a large capital 'S'.

ALENA BRUZAS

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Rocky Pond Books

Ever Since

ALENA BRUZAS



Rocky Pond Books

To Anita Hill, for speaking truth to power.
To Chanel Miller, for letting us know your name.
To the people who spoke first, despite abuse and opposition,
so we could follow.
To all the girls.

ROCKY POND BOOKS

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CONTENT NOTE: Please note this book contains depictions of sexual assault, CSA, and suicidal ideation.

One

ONCE THERE WERE five princesses. No, I mean five witches. Actually, they were goddesses. Anyway, whatever they were, they were friends.

Once there were five friends.

And the story goes like this:

It's finally summer and we're road-tripping out to the coast. Poppy is driving, so of course I'm sitting shotgun. Ramona, Paz, and Thalia take photos of their faces squished together. I say we have to make a pact to keep our phones in the glove box and we're singing to the radio until it dissolves into static and then we play the license plate game and now we're playing truth or dare. I tell Ramona to flash the SUV next to us and she gets me back by daring me to hang my butt out the window.

"Ro!" I squeal.

"Virginia!" she squeals back, and throws a scrunchie at me and says I have to do it and so I do and I think I'm going to die when Poppy goes around a corner and I almost fall out the window.

We get to La Push in time for sunset. The floor of the car is covered in garbage and my foot is asleep and our limbs are overlapping and intermingled. Thalia is braiding strands of

Poppy's hair and I'm painting Paz's toenails and Ro is eating the sandwich that Thalia packed for herself.

We tumble out of the car with our arms around each other, holding hands and bumping hips, and the bond of our friendship seems enduring, like nothing can break it, ever. But as Edison spots us and bellows my name and I feel Thalia's eyes all over my skin, I'm afraid it won't be enough.

We're camping on the beach. No one questions whether or not it's allowed. We just pitch our tents and lay out our sleeping bags and start drinking. The beach is crowded with bare feet and loose waves and fraying cutoff shorts. I change into my bathing suit but I don't go swimming. Nobody swims in the ocean here. It's too cold. Even in summer you don't go swimming off the coast of Washington.

Ro gets the fire going after Thalia relents and lets us use her Trader Joe's bags as kindling and the boys wander over all casual to drink our beer and eat our hot dogs. Rumi is putting his arm around Poppy's shoulders and kissing her neck and squeezing her thigh and she keeps leaning away and shrugging, but he isn't picking up on her don't-touch-me-I'm-going-to-puke signals. I can tell she's drunk because her breath smells sweet like maybe whiskey and her eyes are wide. Poppy always gets extra innocent, like, *Who, me?*

Rumi probably thinks it's no big deal because they're going out, but I can tell Poppy is annoyed and it doesn't help that she keeps taking shots. It's funny how a night can change like

that. How it can feel so good to sit under the salty sprawling night sky with your toes in the sand that's still warm and the fire crackling and the sparks drifting and the ocean intoning nearby. Then suddenly you feel like you might puke and also people are probably possibly judging you right now because you're drunk and sloppy and getting groped.

Poppy covers her mouth and stumbles toward the rocks and Rumi follows her like he probably thinks a good boyfriend should. I follow too because I know what's coming.

"Just piss off!" Poppy says. I almost laugh because she sounds like a British gangster, but then she bends over and I hear a splatter. Rumi hovers, his hands in his pockets and looking at his feet.

"I've got it," I say to Rumi.

He looks uncertain. Poppy yells piss off again and Rumi blushes and glances at me and then he leaves and I feel sorry for him. Poppy grabs my arm and I stagger and scrape my heel on a rock. She throws up again, so I just grit my teeth and let her hold on to me and keep her hair out of her face.

When she's done I wrap my arm around her waist and she leans on me all the way back to our tent. I take off the rain flap because the sky is clear and the wind feels good. We lie down side by side, my fake blond mixed with her real black, and she takes my hand and threads her fingers through mine.

She's quiet for so long that I think she's asleep. When I start to get up she squeezes my hand tighter. "I love you," she says with her eyes still closed.

. . .

I find Rumi sitting alone, playing chicken with the tide. His feet are stretched out and wet from the waves. “She’s just drunk,” I say. “It’s not about you. She always gets pissed when she’s sick.” My scraped heel is throbbing. He doesn’t answer, so I examine my foot. It’s still bleeding and there’s sand in the cut.

“What happened?” he asks.

I shrug.

Rumi stands up. “Wait here.” When he comes back he pulls my foot into his lap. It stings when he pours cold water over the scrape. As he applies Neosporin and a Band-Aid, I realize that I am so absolutely determined not to flirt with him that I have no idea what to say. I pull my leg back and wedge my bandaged foot under my butt.

By the fire Paz starts singing and Thalia is sitting in Edison’s lap and Ro yells something at Edison about punching him in the face, which he probably deserves but I think Ro is joking. The party oozes out away from the fire, small circles of kids here and there, and Paz and Thalia and Ro run down and splash their ankles in the water, lithe and silver in the moonlight. Edison grabs a six-pack and walks off, leaning to the side like a dilapidated house.

I tell myself every time, this is the last time. Thalia is suspicious but she doesn’t actually know. If I stop now maybe she’ll never find out. But then Edison looks over his shoulder at me. I stand up, straightening my bikini bottom and brushing sand off my butt. I feel Rumi watching as I follow Edison but I don’t look back. There are enough people here now that no one will notice, I don’t think.

The moon is almost full and it shivers across the water and for a minute I feel beautiful in the bending light. So I kiss him and of course we . . .

(I can't even say it.)

I can still hear the singing, the cackling laughter, the lewd jokes of the party.

I come home to Poppy like I always come home to her. Whether it's her house or the lunch table at school or here in the tent. I watch her breathe, in and out, in and out. It seems so easy for her.

Nobody was up when I got back from Edison. The fire was almost dead. Just a few embers glowing in the ash. I watched it for a while and drank from a bottle of red wine that somebody left open and halfway buried in the sand.

Now I lie with the bottle cradled in the crook of my arm and when it's empty I fall asleep on my wine-stained pillow and bad dreams lap at my neck but I won't remember them in the morning.

Before we leave, Ramona says we have to swim. "It's the summer before senior year. It will never be like this again."

"We have next summer, Rowie." Paz crosses her arms and squints away.

"Next summer we won't be in high school anymore, Paz," Ro says. "We'll all be off doing our own things. I'm going to France

and Thalia wants to start early at school and your mom wants to visit your family in Brazil.”

Thalia smiles with the sun on her face and leans back in the sand, closing her eyes. Poppy glowers into her coffee and I say, “What about me, Ro? Where will I be?”

Ro gives me a look that is wistful and uncertain. “You’ll be sweeping cobwebs from the sky, Virginia. But you’ll be with us by-and-by.”

My toes are buried in sea foam. Ro puts her brown foot on top of my pale one. Her toenails are red and mine are teal. Our feet look nice like that, side by side and overlapping. She tucks a lock of hair behind my ear and I smile at her freckles, which I love. She’s reassuring me in her own way, I know. Maybe she’s not sure where I’ll end up, but she has faith in me to figure it out, is what she’s saying.

“So are we doing this?” Poppy’s hungover and pissed about it.

“Fine,” Paz says, but then she smiles and reaches for Thalia.

We run into the water holding hands. A wave rushes up to meet us like frozen blue static. We scream and Poppy squeezes my hand so hard it hurts. And then I am submerged, immersed, surrounded by cold so shocking, I can’t breathe or think. And for a second I feel terrified and almost lost like I’ll be swept out to that infinite blue sea. But to the right and left of me I am anchored to these girls. With them, I am safe.

Two

ON THE WAY home Thalia and Paz ride with Edison. Ro sprawls out in the back and falls asleep with her feet hanging out the window. Poppy loads a bowl. She's still hungover and now she's carsick, so I'm driving even though it's her car.

"Soccer is starting this week," she says.

"Are you dreading it?" I ask. I can't imagine why anybody would actually want to spend time with a bunch of eleven-year-olds.

"I like the kids. They're hilarious."

I smile at the road. It's so Poppy. To her, it's not even a good deed.

"Me and Edison, you know, again," I say.

"Was it good?" Poppy refuses to judge me.

"Yeah, mostly."

"What were the bad parts?"

"He's a sloppy kisser. He got spit all over my face and shoved his tongue way too far down my throat. I almost gagged."

Poppy laughs, covering her eyes. We come up on a curve and, reckless, I speed up, screeching as we tilt and the woods and the ocean rush by in blurs of green and blue and my entire world seems precarious. Poppy whoops and sails her hand out the window.

“You know, it’s fine. It’s just that I don’t think you like doing it,” Poppy says after a while.

“It’s fine? You really think it’s fine what I’m doing?” I glance back at Ro. She’s still asleep.

Poppy leans back and closes her eyes. “I mean, like, in a cosmic sense. We’re seventeen. It’s not like Thalia and Edison are married with kids. I mean, like, it’s all just drama. There’s no major consequences.”

“You mean, like, you mean, like.”

She laughs. “Piss off.”

The thing is with Poppy, there’s no hiding. She looks at me and I look back at her. “But I feel bad about it,” I say.

“Then why do you do it?”

She’s hogging the weed. I grab it and take a hit. “Puff puff pass yo,” I say with my mouth full of smoke.

“Virginia,” Poppy says. “Why do you do it?”

“I convince myself I want it, in the moment.”

“And then after?”

“Like last night after Edison and I hooked up, I felt like a pot that had been scoured.” I take another hit and hand the pipe back to Poppy. “That’s a weird way to put it.”

“I get it. Empty.”

“And like scraped out.”

“You should stop.”

“Stop what though?”

“Stop doing things that make you feel bad,” Poppy says.

“But there are so many things that make me feel bad and I never know which it will be. And I have you. And you always

make me feel better.” I give her a shitty smile like I know I’m an asshole and I know she loves me anyway.

We pull into the line for the ferry. In the back seat Ro grunts and sits up, wiping drool from her mouth. “I smell pot,” she says.

Poppy drives through downtown Seattle traffic, after the ferry docks. It smells like salt and seaweed and cold wind and then it smells like exhaust and hot pavement. She grunts in frustration every time she changes gears in her hand-me-down muscle car. Ro scrolls through songs on her phone, searching for the perfect one.

I wish we had camped an extra night. Or I wish we had stopped and stayed in some tiny coastal town, some run-down bed-and-breakfast on a run-down road with clapboard houses and American flags snapping in the wind. But we didn’t. We’re here.

We park and Ro runs to her house and her mom comes out, down the stairs. We were only gone for two days, but they walk with their arms around each other’s waists, talking like it’s been months and they have so much to catch up on.

My house, across the curve from Poppy’s, is dark and the shades are drawn, but I can hear the music pounding through the door.

“I think Mom is making pizza on the grill tonight,” Poppy says, as if she assumes I’m spending the night. As if Willow, Poppy’s mom, will assume I’m spending the night.

I can smell the orange blossoms from the tree in the yard

between Poppy's house and mine as we slip past. Since that first night at Poppy's when we were almost twelve, I haven't slept in my closet or crouched behind the oak tree in the backyard. I haven't tried to get invited to some friend's house only to be told no because it's a school night. Willow always lets me.

Inside her house, everything seems so normal. It's clean and there's food in the fridge and Willow is sitting on the deck drinking iced tea. She asks us about the trip and she says I need some aloe for my sunburn and then she starts the grill and I close my eyes and listen. To the conversation, to the birds, to the wind in the treetops, to the *tap tap tap* of cutting tomatoes and onions and peppers.

I think about that first night. About the keen relief of not being home when He was there. Of not having to avoid Him or to feel the compulsion to smile at Him and then the discomfort of actually smiling. About how Poppy lent me her best pair of pajamas and gave me her best pillow to sleep on as if it were no big deal. As if it were just a normal night.

"Virginia," Willow says.

I open my eyes and look at her, smiling and normal.

"Do you want some?" she asks, holding up a pitcher of ice cubes and lemons and tea.

And I pretend to be normal too, like I always do, like I have been, ever since.

So I have this book. It's big and heavy and full of sun and sky colors. It's called *D'aulaires' Book of Greek Myths*. My fourth-grade

teacher gave it to me. She had to be kind of sneaky about it because it was a pretty obvious display of favoritism, but that was the year I showed up to school with handprint-shaped bruises on my shoulders.

I spent the year reading and rereading the book in a shady spot of the reservoir park. When it was raining or getting dark, a lot of times I would go to Thalia's house. And her door was always open, figuratively and literally. Their doors and windows are open all year, almost. The rain comes misting in, and the air and the wind and the sun.

Thalia wasn't as obsessed with the book as I was, but she liked the story of Daphne. My favorite was always Medea. We would have these really intense discussions about Hades versus Hel versus Lucifer and the evolution of mythology and religion.

Poppy is sleeping next to me and I'm staring at the ceiling. Next year I'm taking the Comparative History of Ideas class, and the teacher requires a senior project. I keep thinking about doing it on folklore. Mythology and fairy tales. Once upon a time. Once upon a time there was a little girl. Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess. And she lived happily ever after.

I slide my phone out from under the pillow. *Hey*, I text Thalia.

What's up? she responds. *How's Poppy?*

asleep and cranky

How can you be asleep and cranky at the same time?

shes hungover enough to manage i promise, I text.

Thalia texts me a GIF of a panda falling over, which is supposed to be Poppy, I think.

so i was thinking about doing my senior project on folklore, I
text her.

Like what about? Thalia replies.

not sure yet, maybe mythology? like daphne or something

That sounds cool.

right, do you want to partner up?

It takes Thalia so long to respond, I start to get paranoid.

Okay, she says.

I stare at the word until my eyes hurt from the glare. She said okay. Maybe now I can fix it. Fix what Edison broke.

I send her a bunch of hearts and roll over, smiling into my pillow.

Thalia always thought there was a definite difference between fairy tales and mythology. Fairy tales are different from mythology are different from religion. Fairy tales are like Disney movies. Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Cinderella. Something that the Brothers Grimm probably wrote or maybe Hans Christian Andersen. A princess gets saved from an evil witch by a handsome prince and they lived happily ever after the end forever and ever.

Mythology is like Zeus, you know? Or maybe Odin Allfather and super-hot Thor, but that's in the Marvel movies. And that's where I think she's wrong. It all bleeds together. Thor used to be somebody's god, somebody's religion. Then he became a myth and now he's a hot Australian actor who's actually an alien who

speaks Shakespearean English. None of it makes sense. All of it, mythology, religion, fairy tales, all it is, all it ever has been, is the stories we tell. The stories we tell to make sense of things.

In the dark when you're scared, the thunder is booming and the world is shaking and everything might come down around you and there's a beast, a monster, a wolf coming to get you. When things feel beyond your control. You tell yourself a story.

Once upon a time.

I wake up before Poppy. I sleep so well here, I always wake up first. I slip out of bed and downstairs to the den where we have our sleepovers when it's all of us. The couch that Thalia and Paz always claim, their feet crossing and overlapping in the corner of the sectional. The chaise where Ro sleeps, lounging like a princess in a Renaissance painting. And me and Poppy make a nest on the floor, blankets and couch cushions and these long floor pillows that we found at Target covered in peacocks and paisley prints and dahlias. I sleep better when I'm next to Poppy.

The morning light is blue and diffuse and the dew sparkles like Cinderella's dress, tiny lights on leaves and flowers. When I manage to wake up for it, this is my favorite time of day. I drink some of Willow's mint tea and wait for Poppy. She comes creeping down, tired but not grouchy, rubbing dreams out of her eyes. I hand her my tea, hot through the mug in the morning cold air, and she takes a drink.

“Let’s go for a run,” she says eventually.

“I don’t want to.”

“Come on, it will feel good. You’ll be glad when we get out there.”

We sync up our music and start out fast, racing like we always do, and we’re pushing past our seven-minute mile. I can feel the seconds falling behind me, slipping away in our slipstream, until we’re sprinting. Poppy throws her arms up and yells along with her favorite line of the song and I put my hands up in the air when the song tells me to and she does a move like a lawn mower, pretending to be a dad-dancer, and the sun is in our eyes and the air is perfect warm.

It rained last night and there are puddles in the dips and cracks of the sidewalk. I jog in place as Poppy stoops to rescue a fat earthworm stretching, reaching for dirt and flowers. She always does this. Not just for worms—for any bug, even spiders. Thalia calls her the steward of small things.

My feet are wet with puddle water and I want to shower and put on clean clothes and my house is quiet now. “I’ll come over later,” I say.

“I have that soccer coach orientation thing,” she says. “I’ll text you when I’m back.”

We never say goodbye. Somehow she knows I need to know that she’ll always be there. It’s never goodbye. There’s always later.

“Okay,” I say.

“Love you,” she says.

“You,” I say.

“No, you.”

And I wave her off into the sunlight.

We all grew up here in this cul-de-sac. Paz and Thalia share a fence at the back of the curve under a tall ponderosa that kills the grass and smells like pine sap and dust in the summer. Ro lives on the corner closest to the rest of the world. Where you can hear the noise from Fifteenth two streets over. Where the bus stops just behind Pagliacci’s that makes the pesto primavera we used to celebrate birthdays with, feeling like we were fancy.

The reservoir park is behind my fence, dark and safe and cold or lovely warm or mostly something in between. In seventh grade we climbed over my fence and smoked weed in the park for the first time. Ro got paranoid and Paz got loud and I stared at the underside of the leaves of the birch tree, silver bells in the wind. In ninth grade Ro dared me to streak and then changed it to just moon them from the sidewalk but I didn’t hear that part and ran naked through the park dodging yellow streetlights, cold and kind of thrilled. I got dressed behind them, hiding in the shadows of the fence, while Ro and Poppy and Thalia and Paz were bent over with laughter because I streaked naked even though that wasn’t actually the dare.

At first I didn't know them. I watched from my front stoop. Ro with her parents who actually paid attention to her, taking her on walks or loading her into her booster seat going who-knows-where. Thalia and Paz at the other end of the street, small faraway forms drawing giant chalk trees in front of their houses or Hula-Hooping or cartwheeling or trying to ride their bikes with no hands. Even after me and Thalia became friends in third grade, I felt like an outsider. Then Poppy moved in, an unclaimed girl, who maybe could be all mine.

Poppy gathered us. When she moved here we gathered around her. She invited us all over and we all came and then we were a group. We weren't before, but when Poppy came we formed. And then her home became my home, more than my own.

The houses in our neighborhood, Thalia's house, Paz's house, Ro's house, they're Sears Craftsman. I looked it up once because I like them so much and they're so different than my house. Mine is a big ugly split-level we bought from an old lady and it still smells like old lady even though it's been years. The toilet is stained and the cupboard doors are warped.

The debris from the party my dad must have had last night is scattered over the carpet in the living room, trailing through the kitchen and the dining room into the bathroom. There is a small splatter of puke on the linoleum next to the toilet. The kitchen counters are littered with empty bottles and scarlet rings of

wine. The garbage can is out from under the sink and stuffed with pizza boxes and crumpled bags of chips. I take the pizza boxes out and set them on the counter to put them in the compost later.

There's a beer bottle filled with cigarette butts on my nightstand. The air smells stale and rank. Somebody probably passed out in my bed last night.

I rip off the sheets and open the window and lock the door and lie down on a spare blanket from the hall closet. I cover my head with my uncased pillow and fall asleep.

Once upon a time there was this beautiful princess who was also a goddess who was also a witch. Her name was Medea. (I know you've heard of her.)

She lived in a faraway land far away from everything everything even the gods where the sands were black and hot and the water was gray and it churned with monsters and in the forest of conifers beyond her kingdom there lurked creeping creatures and crawling creatures that scared and fascinated Medea and sometimes she crept there with them learning their secrets and their spells.

She was the granddaughter of Helios the god of the sun (before Apollo, that usurper). She didn't like the gods. She didn't like heroes either. She heard of Jason before he came. She heard of his bold quest, him and his Argonauts, to claim her golden fleece. But it was guarded by the never-sleeping dragon to whom Medea fed fresh apricots that dripped like honey juices and whom Medea petted and whom Medea loved.

She heard of Jason and she knew he could never take the fleece from her never-sleeping dragon. She heard of him and she knew he would fail, but then she saw him and there was just something something something about him. Medea fell in love with him. Fell hard. (It was like magic.)

In the end she helped him steal the fleece, she helped him thwart her father, she helped him kill her dragon, she helped him escape her kingdom, and she loved him so much so much that she went with him. And they lived happily ever after. (Right?)

Three

I WAKE UP to my mom yelling fuck you, presumably to my dad. The garage door opens and the floor vibrates beneath my bed. The bass from his subwoofers is so loud and low that I feel my skull waver to it, kowtowing, submitting. It's too strong and all my bones know it. It's like an assault. Everything my dad does is like an assault.

As the look-at-me noise fades I hear something so familiar, it would be comforting if it weren't so terribly sad. My mom crying.

I almost ignore it and go back to sleep.

Just like I always almost ignore it.

I've spent years trying to ignore it.

I am so sick of it. But.

She's in the bathroom with the water running (as if that covers anything up). I sit on my mom's bed and wait. She comes out, her face washed and cold-creamed and shiny and not quite new, and she tugs her sleeve down over her red and raw wrist and I avert my eyes just like we've agreed in not so many words.

"Hi honey," she says. "Want to watch *Friends*?"

I rest my head on her shoulder just the way I know she likes.

I let the bright palette of *Friends* blur into a bleeding watercolor and let her sniffles be muffled by the laughing live studio audience.

She falls asleep quickly. I guess she took something. Or several somethings. The clock on the nightstand says it's only eight. I need to get out of here.

I lean into Ro's dresser and take a picture of her doing her lips. I knock her perfume over with my butt and Thalia laughs and I spray my wrists. "Mmm, what is this?"

"J'adore." Ro affects a French accent.

"Ugh, I have the worse zit," Thalia says.

"Want me to pop it?" Paz says, sticking her face in Thalia's and looking at her skin.

"Get away, you sicko," Thalia yells.

"Seriously, ugh!" I say, shuddering.

"It's satisfying," Paz says.

"Can I use your concealer?" Thalia says.

"Doi, I only have my skin color, colonizer," Ro says, and crosses her eyes at Thalia.

Paz shrugs and I dig around in my bag until I find an almost empty tube and hand it to Thalia. I check my phone again for a text from Poppy. "I'm sick of Isaiah and his dumb friends," I say, and of course I mean Edison. I glance at Thalia but she's ignoring me now, staring at the mirror, dabbing at her chin.

"But Isaiah has the best house and he's having people over

tonight, so shut yo mouth, woman,” Paz says, and I take a picture of her sticking her tongue out at me.

“Where’s Poppy?” Thalia says.

Everybody looks at me. I hold up my empty phone and shrug. “Where indeed?” I say.

“You haven’t heard from her?” Paz says.

“I’ve texted her like twenty times. We were supposed to hang out this afternoon but, like, nothing.”

It’s a weird silence. A strange empty moment that feels airless. For so long we’ve gathered around Poppy. They all keep looking at me like I should know where she is, but she’s not texting me back. I shrug again.

Ro stands up and spins, her braids flaring out and her skirt skimming her butt. “How much of a hooch do I look like?” she says. She makes a kissy face, her lips purple and glowing against her chestnut skin.

“Just the right amount of hooch,” says Thalia. She’s wearing a sprigged romper. I like it better than my sundress. She sees me eyeing her. “What?”

I swirl my skirt a little. “This would look so good on you!”

“I’m not wearing the right bra for it,” she says.

“We can trade! Come on, we’re the exact same size and it will look better on you than it does on me.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “We’re not eleven anymore, Virginia.”

When we used to trade clothes and pretend to be twins. Back when our friendship came easier. When I didn’t have to fight for every smile.

“Fine! I was just trying to do you a favor.”

Paz rolls her eyes from the bed, but I know she’s not judging. We’re allowed to care. We’re allowed to look good and be excited that we look good and being excited doesn’t mean we’re shallow. We all have nice even features and skill with makeup and just the right clothes, which sometimes means trading when Thalia isn’t being a hooch. Paz is the real beauty, Brazilian and Indigenous Hawaiian, with flawless golden skin and long black hair and brown eyes like crushed velvet but she plays it down. If she wears makeup she looks airbrushed perfect and people stare. I pretend I don’t but I notice people looking at us when we’re all together. All together, all combined, we add up to something more than the sum of our parts and something split into equal parts.

We are part jealous, part lascivious, part in love.

In the dark and silence we slip by lit-up houses, like glowing Norman Rockwell paintings. We duck beneath my window, Poppy’s, Thalia’s, Paz’s, giggling, feeling stealthy, feeling devious, feeling excited.

But we’re ready to be loud and we run through the narrow dark reservoir park, holding hands, shrieking, ready. The music is pounding when we get to Isaiah’s and it floods through my body like it’s electric. I grab Thalia and Ro, and Paz starts screaming the lyrics, and we jump up and down to the beat like maniacs, and I feel like I am insane and I don’t even care about all the things everybody is saying about me.

But of course it doesn't last, because Edison starts slinking through the room. He touches my hip and he stands between me and Thalia and she shrieks and throws her arms around his neck. Her cheeks are flushed and her eyes are bright like she feels amazing, like this is the best moment of her life. Because Edison is her boyfriend and he's gorgeous and he smells just right and they're dancing. But she doesn't know that now he's reaching back. He's touching my arm, my thigh, my bare skin, trying to entwine me. Like he thinks we're all going to tumble into bed together and he's finally going to get that threesome he's been dreaming about.

And I'm almost lured into his fantasy, I'm ashamed to admit. But then the song changes and Langston bumps into me and smiles an apology and at the same time his hand closes around Paz's shoulder oh-so-carefully. But it's too late.

Thalia noticed. She saw the one second that I touched Edison back and that's all it takes. Her face slams shut like a door and she turns. She looks away. She leaves.

And I'm left spinning in the darkness.

Maybe it's just awkward. Maybe nobody noticed after all. Thalia disappeared and then I couldn't find Paz or Ro. I go outside looking for them and the party has spilled out into the yard anyway.

I take a long drink from the bottle of gin that I brought from home. It's gross, but it was full. Thalia and Edison are across

from me. He's waving around a whole bottle of champagne he probably stole from Isaiah's parents like he's so fucking cool. Thalia snatches it and takes a massive drink, wiping her chin and laughing into Edison's face, being charming and beautiful and fun and free. Is she faking? Does he really make her happy? I wonder if this confirmed it for her, about him and me.

I drink some more disgusting gin wishing it were delicious champagne and I don't care that I probably look like a creeper over here with my bottle and my scowl and maybe I should just go home. But it doesn't take him long. It never does. I don't, I don't, I don't understand his thing with me. I'm not even, like, better looking than Thalia. I mean, we're practically twins. Maybe that's it. Maybe he's into twins. Sicko. Pervert. He digs his fingers into my arm and pulls me along while I try to find the gin bottle with my mouth. I giggle into the bubbly echoes and then choke down a mouthful.

"What are you laughing about?" Edison asks. He leans against the side of Isaiah's house. The party noise is not so distant, but distant enough, I guess.

"Just I'm a slut and it's funny, you know," I say.

"I do know," he says, and lights his blunt. He reaches for me.

"Edison."

"What?"

"I just." I can't think of what to say. I can't think of how to leave without offending him or hurting his feelings or making things awkward. I lean my head back against the wall and close my eyes to the stars that are low and lush tonight. He's touching

me. His hands are underneath my dress, pushing it to the side. Beneath my bra. I take a hit from the blunt and I am floating up and up and up like I am a balloon, a red balloon, all my color and all my red dwindling in the dark, fading, fading.

“Hey,” somebody says through my eyelids.

It’s Rumi.

“What’s up?” Edison says. After a pause he removes his hands from under my dress.

Rumi smiles at me, but there’s a crease between his eyebrows. I drink him in. His long body leaning back like the air supports his weight. His dark brown hair with a slight wave, long enough to tuck behind his ear. There’s a hole in his earlobe, a vacant piercing. His skin, warmer and deeper russet because of the summer sun. Each detail stands out and also how he looks at me like maybe he cares about what happens next. Like it matters to him if Edison leaves me alone or not. Even if I’m trying to pretend it doesn’t matter to me.

I offer the blunt to Rumi. “Thanks,” he says with his mouth full of smoke. “So, like, have you heard from Poppy?”

Edison looks away, at the dark nothing behind the trees.

“No, not all day. Have you? I don’t know where she is.” I put space between me and Edison and I feel it when he notices and steps closer to me again. He isn’t ready to give up yet, and I don’t think he cares what Rumi thinks.

And then Rumi closes in as well. They study each other. For a second all pretenses are gone. Then Edison shakes his head and sucks on his blunt and blows smoke up into the dark air. And I feel it, the exact second he’s done caring. He laughs like

he's incredulous, like I'm acting crazy, like he's above my stupid drama. And so I slink around the side of the house and Rumi follows me.

We sit against the fence. I pull my legs close and wrap my arms around my knees and hold myself so tight, I stop shaking. I can't think of what to say.

I take a drink of gin but I don't offer any to Rumi. It's mine anyway.

I think it's possible people are talking about me right now.

Maybe about me and Rumi.

About what a slut I am.

About how I'll fuck anyone.

About how even as soon as Poppy's not around I start fucking with Rumi.

I stand up and I feel like I have eyes all over my skin like my skin is too tight for my body like I want to peel it off and step out of myself and be somebody else. Rumi touches my wrist and I feel like the stares intensify and I turn and leave. I find the sidewalk, stumble down down down the hill, watch my feet, twist my ankle. Then Rumi's hand is on my arm just above my elbow, guiding my faltering feet.

"Virginia," Rumi says, and his hand is warm. "Let's sit down for a minute."

Ravenna Park is halfway here and halfway there. Up from the ravine and the creek there is a little playground. I find the swings. I find my feet and I watch them, dragging through the gravel that's all dim and gray in the night.

Rumi says, "Maybe you should go home."

I sway on the swings. "I don't want to go home."

"Okay," Rumi says, and he kicks his feet back and starts to swing. "Let's race."

The wind is cold and it rushes by my face and flings my hair back and the skirt of my dress against my thighs and we laugh so hard as we race to be the highest swing, to kick a hole in the sky, we laugh so hard that I feel like I can't breathe.

"Childhood is not over yet," Rumi says, slowing down.

My heart is pounding and my head is clear. I hear a frog gurgle somewhere nearby and I am just enough drunk and just enough not to have a visceral memory of soft wet frog skin in my hand, struggling against my palm, tickling, making me giggle. Even here, in this very park, I used to catch them. I perk like I am a cat and I smell a mouse.

"What?" Rumi says.

"A frog," I say. There it is again, down the hill. I follow it with Rumi laughing behind me. "Can you hear it? It's close," I say. I take my shoes off, set them on a rock. My feet are in the mud and my ankles are wet, splashed with creek water.

Rumi crouches next to me. "There," he says, pointing.

I creep closer, closer. I see it. A little hunched shadow. Rumi grins at me. His eyes gleam. I lunge forward and I do, I touch it, but as soon as I feel the slick wet muscles straining against my hand I scream and fall back, ass in the water. My dress is wet and I can't stop laughing. The frog belches in protest and hops to another rock. Then it freezes again like of course we can't see it now that it's moved a little.

Rumi is bent over, breathless with laughter.

“I used to be so good at catching frogs,” I say.

Rumi sits in the mud next to me and puts his arm around my shoulders, still laughing. He pulls me in tight and then releases me. “I can still see it,” he says. He scoots forward and pulls his sleeve up around his forearm, white cotton glowing against his skin. For a moment everything is still, frozen, even the trees stop rustling in the wind. Rumi’s hand strikes out like a snake and the frog disappears beneath his knuckles. I shriek and put my hands over my mouth.

“Here,” he says, and drops the frog in my lap.

Quick before it hops away I grab it. The frog pokes its head between my fingers and I hold it up, peering into its eyes. “Hello,” I say.

It hops away and we catch it again. And again and again. Poor little frog. But I love it. All of it. The cool night. The creek. The trees above us. The stars that are dim behind all the streetlights and houselights and headlights. I love Rumi warm beside me. I love the hum of nighttime insects singing to the moon. But most of all I love my wet skin, my muddy dress, my messy face, my tangled hair. I love this version of myself.

I point with the frog in my hand. “Under those rocks over there in the summer there are like a million garter snakes. I used to catch them and tuck them into my shirt and keep them there and they would wiggle around and then get sleepy against my body heat.”

“Oh my god.” Rumi laughs. “Give me the frog,” he says.

I give the frog a kiss and hand it over.

“I think it’s time to release the little guy,” Rumi says. He holds the frog up to the water. “Goodbye, little friend,” he says. “Be free.”

The frog sits in Rumi’s open hand and then hops into the creek and disappears under the sheen of moonlight on the black water.

Rumi is looking at me. He is looking at me like I am something beautiful and he is drinking me in. I close my eyes and let the night wash over me.

The thing is, before Poppy and Rumi, before Edison and me, there was a minute when I thought it would be Rumi and me. It was the first two weeks of last summer. Poppy was at an arts camp and then she was training to be a lifeguard at the public pool and Ro was on that big trip with her mom and Paz was in Brazil and Thalia was just starting to date Edison. So nobody was ever around and I was bored and I ran the track at the community center training for who-knows-what but also just because it felt so good to push and push and push my body. And Rumi was there playing basketball.

I’m good at basketball. I don’t even like watching it, but it’s like when I’m running. I stop thinking. I sink into the burn and stretch and sweat and suddenly I’m doing it and I’m good at it. I’d play with Rumi and he was right there, next to me, close to me, touching me, and I could smell him and feel his heat and

it was there. That shallow breathing, that quick heartbeat, that smile we're both trying to repress. It was there, I felt it.

And then once we almost kissed. He walked me home and it was dark and we stopped at the reservoir park and he spun me around so fast on the merry-go-round that when I got off I was dizzy and stumbled accidentally-on-purpose and he caught me and I played like I was fainting and he crashed onto the grass still holding me and I ended up in his lap and he wrapped his arms around me and I stayed there. And we stared at each other. And I was smiling and so was he and then he stopped smiling and he was just looking at my eyes and then at my lips and I knew it was going to happen but then it just didn't.

But I kept thinking it would.

But then somehow it didn't.

And then Poppy texted me, *omg guesswhatguesswhat*.

And I had no idea.

Four

I STAY UP way too late reading *The Ramayana*. I'm trying to distract myself. But I throw the book on the floor and it crackles like an old gum wrapper. I shouldn't treat it that way, I know. It's Poppy's and her grandpa's before that and I'm pretty sure he brought it from India when he immigrated here. But it's almost one in the morning and I can't get stupid Rumi out of my stupid head.

I creep down the hall. Even though I know it's a bad idea, I fall asleep on the couch watching Netflix.

The sound of a phone ringing wakes me up. It rings and rings and rings until it feels like an electric drill boring into my brain.

My dad was still out when I fell asleep but now he's sprawled on his ripped corduroy recliner in his underwear nursing a tall glass of something iced and black and probably full of Sailor Jerry. A horror movie is glowing green on his pallid face. The TV phone is ringing loud and there is a pale girl staring at it, her eyes like black holes. I close my eyes because I know something bad is going to happen and I don't want to see it.

The TV starts screaming and I burrow deeper into my blankets.

"Will you turn that down?" I hear my mom whisper. I guess

her multitude of pills wore off. I guess their fight wore off. I keep my eyes closed and I wonder what time it is.

“Stop,” she says. “No, just turn it down.”

My dad doesn’t say anything.

“Virginia is right there.”

“She’s asleep.” He’s drunk. He doesn’t slur but his voice always lilts up. Like he’s so good-natured, like everything is amusing, like he’s so easygoing, like everybody is his best friend. Until he doesn’t get what he wants.

“Stop,” she says again, quieter this time like she’s already giving in.

I imagine my dad trying to pull her into the chair with him, touching her, grabbing her, wrapping his arms and hands around her wrists, her thighs, her waist, like tentacles. I imagine my mom resisting, pulling away, trying to smile, trying to laugh, it’s no big deal, she’s just tired, just let her go.

“She’s fucking asleep.” He’s loud now, as if I’ll sleep through anything.

“Let’s go to bed.” She has to appease him now because he’s getting pissed.

“Fuck,” he says.

I keep my breathing even.

“Come on baby, just come to bed.”

“Just fuck off.”

I don’t squeeze my eyes shut because that is too obvious. I keep my face slack, relaxed, still.

“No, come on.” She’s pleading with him now.

Just go to bed. Just go to bed. Just go to bed.

“Just shut the fuck up and fuck off, Sharon. I don’t even know why you’re still fucking standing there. Just go the fuck to bed.”

I try to just listen to the movie, the screaming and the ripping and the shallow frightened breathing because I know what’s going to happen now, I know what my mom is going to do, what my dad manipulated her into doing, what she didn’t want to do because I’m right here, but she could only resist for so long, and now I can’t move because then they would know I’ve been awake the whole time, and so I just lie there and try to listen only to the movie, and not to my dad lying back in his chair, and not to my mom trying to make it quick and quiet, but there’s a little bit of slurping and sliding and sighing, and eventually there’s my dad grunting and my mom coughing, and then quiet footsteps, and then unobtrusive snoring, and then just the screaming and the ripping and the frightened shallow breathing.

The doors slam separately, one, then the other. Front door, garage door. My dad’s bass makes its standard goodbye. My mom screeches away in her Jeep she thinks makes her look cool.

My arm hangs off the edge of the couch, long and pale, and my blue veins drip toward my wrist like wet watercolor. The light coming in from the north-facing windows is thin and washed out and in it I am less visible.

I feel like a ghost. Like maybe I don’t actually exist. Every-

thing is quiet and white. I sit up and look out the window. There are shadows moving around in the windows of Poppy's house behind the dogwood trees.

But when I text her there's no response.

Edison texts me and I delete it.

I text Thalia: *did poppy show up?*

In summer we always did the same thing. Poppy lifeguarded at the pool and the rest of us sat around and got tan (me and Thalia) and freckled (Ro) and more golden and lovely (Paz) and waited for Poppy to be done. Ever since she was old enough, two years ago. Before that we'd just hang around the pool and swim.

But Poppy always took the first steps, the first one to do the grown-up thing. She was the first to sign up for driver's ed and then get her license while the rest of us just took buses around or walked. She was the first one to get a job, babysitting the summer she was fourteen, all summer, five days a week, for two bratty kids who lived down the road from us. Then she lifeguarded when we were fifteen.

One by one the rest of us followed—reluctantly, but we did. Learning to drive, getting a job. We didn't until she led the way. When she led, we walked behind her.

But this year she signed up to coach soccer, a team of middle schoolers, leaving us to our own devices at the pool.

Thalia texts back: *Dad says no, she didn't. He's stuck coaching her team until he can find a replacement. And apparently Rumi's sister is there even. I guess she was really excited to be on Poppy's team. But she's not there.*

Edison texts me again.

My phone is hot in my hand.

She's not there.

But I don't have time to think about it anymore because I'm meeting Thalia to work on our senior project. So I just shower and dry off and put on lotion and makeup and blow-dry the ends of my hair and get dressed and try really really hard not to think about anything but stories and fairy tales and folklore and myth.

I knew it was a bad idea.

We're meeting at The Pearl, on The Ave. I'm late, so I take the bus even though it's close enough to walk. I dodge a group of kids sitting on the sidewalk outside the door. One of them, with blue hair and a plaid scarf even though it's hot out, goes to Elderberry, our school. Thalia waves to me through the painted window.

There is something in the emptiness that comes after sex. I can feel my walls that are scraped out and thin and close to breaking. And the aching nothingness within. That is the most of what I feel. The walls and the nothing.

Thalia is reading the weekly free newspaper, fingers on the page, totally engrossed.

"Have you heard of being turned on by sucking on somebody's nose? Apparently it's a thing. It's called nasolingus."

"Urgh," I say. Thalia closes the newspaper.

I knew it wasn't going to help anything.

"So what do you think?" I say. "I mean, we know we like Daphne. Should it be about her story?"

"That might not be enough material for, like, a whole year-long project."

I knew it was going to make everything worse but I wanted to feel skin on my skin and bones on my bones and heat in my cold cold body. Edison kept texting. And I kept texting Poppy and she kept not texting back. So I told Edison to come over. And he did. And we . . . And then he left. And now I'm here.

I resist rubbing my hands all over my face and smearing my eyeliner. Before Poppy moved here, for a little while Thalia was my best friend. Around when we were eleven. It was always her house I would go to. And her dad was always glad to see me. But then in middle school I started drinking. I started smoking pot and sometimes I did other stuff too. Ecstasy or shrooms or acid. I started making out and giving hand jobs and then giving blow jobs and then having sex. And that scared Thalia, I think—not that she didn't do all the same things eventually, but not until high school.

Me and Thalia never stopped being friends either, but our dynamic changed. She spent more time with Paz and Ro and I spent more time with whatever guy I was hooking up with at the moment. But then everybody started having sex and it wasn't a big deal anymore but the distance remained between us. And it still does. And I still miss her.

And then Edison and her started dating at the end of

sophomore year. It was like they were really in love. I hated it. It drove me crazy. It disgusted me. Thalia was stupid and romantic and naive. And Edison would definitely cheat on her.

She looks at me now. “Has there ever been a story that really resonated with you? Since the first time you heard it?”

I think of Edison, his face above me, not even seeing me.

“Medea,” I say. “The story of Medea has always haunted me.”

“Why do you think these stories have so much power? They’ve been around for thousands of years and people keep telling them,” she says.

“Should that be where we start from? The power of stories?” I say.

“Why do they have so much power?” Thalia says.

“And the power of how they’re told,” I say. “How they’re told, the telling of them, who’s telling them, that also has power.” I take the last drink of my coffee and when I look up, Thalia is looking past me, a friendly smile on her face. I turn and look over my shoulder. It’s Rumi.

“Hey!” Thalia says. “You work here? How did we not know that?”

Rumi pours more coffee into my mug. It splashes a little and I cover it with my napkin. “It pays the bills,” he says. “What are you all up to?”

“Senior project,” Thalia says.

“You guys are already working on it?” Rumi says. He looks at me and I don’t say anything and then back to Thalia.

She looks at me too. Then she says to Rumi, “Yeah, the teacher is really tough. But she has connections to the UW

and if we do a good job on the project, it can help, so me and Virginia are being proactive.” She laughs and shrugs a little, like she’s embarrassed by our ambition.

“What’s it going to be about?” he says.

“We’re not sure exactly. We’re thinking the power of mythology? How come it stays around so long? I like the story of Daphne and Virginia likes Medea, so maybe Greek mythology?”

“That sounds interesting,” he says.

They both look at me but again I don’t say anything.

“Well, I’m almost off. I’ll be back,” Rumi says.

Thalia gives me a look. “Why are you being weird?”

“I, uh,” I say, and then stop.

Thalia stares at me for a minute, her eyebrows low over her eyes. (How does she get her eyebrows so perfect? They’re like straight out of the eighties.) “Okay, so, the power of mythology? Or the power of storytelling? It’s mythology that has lasted so long. Nothing else has the same kind of staying power. Maybe because mythology is religion to the culture it came from. What’s the difference between mythology and religion? Mythology is somebody else’s religion?”

“Right,” I say. My eyes flick to Rumi and then back to Thalia. I imagine the bright colors of my big book of Greek mythology. The weight of it on my lap. “It’s also that the stories, they make me feel safe. You know?”

“Me too,” Thalia says. We’re both quiet and then she notices me noticing Rumi and her face settles into disapproval, a deep crease between her straight-across brows.

I feel my cheeks tingle and press my cold fingers to my hot

skin. I'm trying really hard to not look at Rumi, to not let Thalia see me looking, but also I stretch my legs out, long and tan, and I notice when his gaze graces my bare legs, my shoulders, my face. He smiles at me, behind the counter. I feel like he's touching me. And when he takes off his apron and comes and sits down at our table, I try to pretend the space between us doesn't tingle.

He touches my coffee mug. "Can I?" he says.

I nod and again I can feel Thalia's attention and I look down, away from Rumi drinking out of my cup. I imagine what his lips might feel like.

Thalia closes her computer with a snap. "I need to go to the store."

"Already?" I say.

"We were supposed to do it this morning but Dad had to do soccer stuff. The program director got into a car accident last week and he has to take over for her and he says it's been a nightmare. We're making braised short ribs and Dad needs pickling spices."

We used to cook together at Thalia's house. Things that would take all day. Things long and beautiful that filled the house with smells. Back when we were in third grade, fourth grade, something like that. Back when things were okay.

Her dad is outside, here to pick Thalia up. He's talking to the kids sitting on the sidewalk. He laughs about something and hands the girl with blue hair some money and she's smiling up at him, watching him as he opens the door. He comes over to

say hi and ask us generic friend's-parent questions until they leave, his hand on Thalia's shoulder, steering her out the door.

Rumi is watching me watch them leave like he can see the inside of my brain. "Want to go somewhere?" he says.

My hands are under the table. I rub my middle finger with my thumb.

I should say no.

The sun is on my face, shining hot through the windows, and it lights up my eyes, making them glow, I think. It smells like coffee beans and there is a low chatter and the whir of espresso machines and nobody is looking at us. I think about leaning in and I see him glance at my lips, and I want him to come close enough to smell my perfume.

"Escape?" he says. Like he's rescuing me from a tower.

I'm just pretending anyway. This is all pretend.

We pick raspberries. His aunt runs a community garden behind the Dick's Drive-In in Wallingford. We walk even though it's too far and we have to cross over the freeway. It's on their property like a massive backyard with aisles of vines and pumpkin plants oozing like lava over tires painted bright colors and filled with summer blooms. An old man with a straw hat digs his bare fingers into a patch of lettuce and nods at us as we go by. There are families and sweethearts picking berries with stained red fingers and sunshine in their hair.

Mostly I just pick and eat. The berries are bursting and warm

and I am hungry. I realize it's been a while since I consumed anything other than coffee or alcohol.

So far we haven't talked much. He hasn't mentioned Poppy and neither have I even though I feel a strange ache, wondering where she is. He just hosts me here in this bright garden. Rumi smiles a lot, not at me. Like he's trying not to look at me too often. But at the creeping green sweet-smelling raspberry vines. At the other people, whose voices seem muffled. He looks at my hands lingering on the berries and when I push my hair out of my face, wishing I had a hair tie.

"Here," he says. He gathers my hair. His fingers are calloused and rough. They brush the back of my neck. He twists my hair into a knot. I can't see what he pulls out of his pocket, and he slides it in, securing the knot.

"What was that? That you put in?"

He rests his hand on the nape of my neck, then moves around so I can see his face. "A pencil, from The Pearl. I'm a frequent accidental pencil thief."

I think of Thalia for some reason and the way it felt to look at her and remember me and Edison.

"Lyra!" Rumi yells, looking over my shoulder. An adolescent girl with warm ocher skin like Rumi's and dark straight hair comes out of the house, yanking a puppy on a way-too-long leash. Rumi waves her over.

"He shit on the carpet again!" she says. She's wearing black high-tops with the laces untied.

"She's going to make you get rid of him," Rumi says.

The dog is small and brown with floppy ears and a docked

tail. His whole body is wiggly and excited as he sniffs my feet. She sits on the ground and pulls him into her lap and tries to hug him while he struggles to paint her face with his tongue. “I don’t care. I’m never getting rid of him. I love him.”

Rumi sighs and laughs and says to me, “This is my sister, Lyra, and her dumb dog, Trunks.”

Lyra coos into the dog’s neck, “Oh, are you a dumb dog? You beautiful dumb dog.”

“Trunks, as in *Dragon Ball*?” I say to Rumi.

“Right, she’s in a phase.”

“An anime phase, I presume.”

He nods and laughs and I’m sort of ready for Lyra to go away but she vibrates along next to us as we pick berries. “I’m using this app on my phone,” she says, and I’m wondering why she’s talking to me. “On my iPhone. I have an iPhone.” She looks at me and I nod and smile, pretending to be impressed. Rumi is up ahead and I think he’s listening. “And I used this app to make a stop-motion movie with my Legos. I have this Lego movie kit, but also I’m using my Star Wars Legos, but I changed it to Dark Sky instead of Darth Vader because of copyright and I don’t want to get, like, sued.”

“Right,” I say.

“Do you want to see it?”

Rumi lifts his chin up a little and I think he’s waiting to hear my answer. I think he’s hoping that I’ll say yes. And I feel a pang thinking of the pang *he* might feel for his sister who wants to show me her stupid video. So I smile. “Yes, definitely.”

She runs off to get her phone. We walk behind her and Rumi

takes my hand. I know we shouldn't because how would I, how could I explain this to Poppy? I couldn't. But his hand is warm and rough and I don't want to let go.

The video is stunningly bad. I can see the corner of her finger for most of it, blocking the hiccupping action of the little Lego men who just do not emote particularly well. It's kind of like one of those old silent movies with the scene and then the words coming next, in this case in lopsided and scrunched-up handwriting that I can't really read. But Rumi has this big smile on his face watching me watch the video. So does Lyra.

It's over now and I look at her and her face is so wide-open. "That was great! Really great. Is it like a series? Because I'm not sure that little Lego guy is out of trouble. That other little Lego guy looks like he might be coming back for revenge."

"Yeah, I mean my friend really likes them too. He told me to keep sending them, so I think I'll be doing more episodes, like maybe three a day," Lyra says.

I get into Rumi's brick-like Volvo with my flat of raspberries. The world is somehow both orange and blue, dusky and dusty in the twilight, and it's getting cold. He turns on the heat and drives me home. The lights are on when we pull into the driveway. But it's quiet and I think going inside is an acceptable risk.

My fingers are on the cardboard flat and it's cool on my legs. "They smell good," I say. "The raspberries."

"Yeah?" Rumi says. I can't read his smile. Is it something or is it nothing? It's nothing, of course. Because he's with Poppy.

So, “Thank you,” I say. “Really.” But I leave the raspberries in his car. I don’t like to think about their luscious ripe red sitting on my sticky kitchen counter.

Inside, I stand at my bedroom window. I think of being with Rumi in the garden. In the sun and the warm and the wind.

It doesn’t matter anyway. I don’t expect to see Rumi like this again. I just don’t. I can’t.

I left my pipe at Poppy’s. I really want it and it’s not even nine yet. I text her again, and again she doesn’t respond.

I scroll up and up and it’s all just me, acting casual, telling jokes, memes, GIFs, then: *where are you? seriously where are you? Poppy? are you mad at me? wtf is going on?*

I text her again: *i left my pipe there want to get high? ill give you greens.*

But nothing.

There are lights on in her house. Glowing warm squares. Like a lantern in the vast night, guiding me, calling me home.

Is she there and just ignoring me?

It’s just an excuse. I mean, I really do want my pipe. But I also want to know what’s going on. To see Poppy.

Willow answers the door, and rests one bare foot on top of the other, toes painted mint green.

“I forgot something,” I say.

She stands back from the door. “Sure, come on in, Virginia.” She leans against the counter. I remember when they renovated. Me and Poppy took sledgehammers to the wall between

the kitchen and the dining room, wearing safety glasses and ponchos, Willow laughing and taking photos of us. Now it's open and bright and white. Willow says, "Want some tea? I just put the kettle on."

"I mean," I say, thumbing over my shoulder, "is Poppy here? I'll just go up."

Willow opens her mouth and then closes it again.

The kettle starts hissing steam.

"She didn't tell you?" Willow says.

"Tell me what?"

The kettle screams and she yanks it off the stove. "Poppy went to stay with my dad," Willow says, turning back to me.

"For how long?"

"Virginia," Willow says.

Her eyes are so light brown, they're almost gold. The worst part is watching her watch me, knowing that she sees the realization on my face. That all is not right here.

"The whole summer," Willow says. "She'll be back in September."

I take a step back. The rug is thick and soft under my feet.

"It was really last minute. He's been asking her to come stay for a while but she just decided to go."

I turn to leave.

"Don't you need your thing?" Willow calls after me.

What thing? I can't remember.

My cheeks are hot. I wave over my shoulder, vague, embarrassed.

Poppy is gone.

Poppy is gone and she's not coming back for the whole summer and I don't . . .

I don't

know

how

to

exist

without her.