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### Minnesota Nice

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

MINNESOTA NICE

submitted by

EMMA CLAIRE STERNBERG '21

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for  
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

2021

Director: Ethan Rutherford

Reader: Lucy Ferriss

Reader: James Younger



O California, don't you know the sun is only a god  
if you learn to starve for him? I'm bored with the ocean  
I stood at the lip of it, dressed in down, praying for snow  
I know, I'm strange, too much light makes me nervous  
at least in this land where the trees always bear green.  
I know something that doesn't die can't be beautiful.  
Have you ever stood on a frozen lake, California?  
The sun above you, the snow & stalled sea—a field of mirror  
all demanding to be the sun too, everything around you  
is light & it's gorgeous & if you stay too long it will kill you  
& it's so sad, you know? You're the only warm thing for miles  
& the only thing that can't shine.

~ Danez Smith, "I'm Going Back to Minnesota Where Sadness Makes Sense"

Growing up is losing some illusions, in order to acquire others.

~ Virginia Woolf

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## Foreword

This collection of short stories is about a year in the life of a girl named Eva. Each story takes place during a different season in Minnesota and tells about a chapter of Eva's life. The stories are sequential but not continuous. They chart four instances in Eva's year that deal with arrival and departure, illusion and reality, invisibility and being seen. This is the year in which Eva's life changes. For her, this is the year that the world she once knew is no longer, and she grapples with the shedding of those old beliefs and the acclimation of new understandings.

Before I was inspired by literature, I was inspired by seasons. While winter is the predominant and never-ending season in Minnesota, fall, spring, and summer, appear just as vividly in my mind and have shaped just as strongly how I see the world. I grew up in the Minnesota seasons, and I knew I wanted this collection to be concerned with how the seasons impact lives, especially Eva's life when she is coming of age.

Each story is titled by a season. Initially, these titles were my working titles, the ones I assumed I would change by the time I completed the collection. However, after creating titles, sifting through them, and discarding all of them, I ended up right where I began. "Fall," "Winter," "Spring," and "Summer" are inherently cohesive yet distinct, which perfectly reflects the nature of this collection. The titles help indicate that these stories deal with one year in sequence, but that they are all impacted by their own internal and external forces.

The collection begins with "Fall." September is a natural place of arrival, beginning, and introduction. Eva enters this story ready for her Sophomore year of high school. However, while this is the start of our relationship with Eva, this is not the start of her life. Therefore, Eva comes to us with pre-existing anxieties that are then exacerbated when the story takes off. She enters this story with an inkling that something in her relationship with her best friend has

shifted, and she fears that her worries will come to fruition. Additionally, she is troubled by the increasing absence of her father who has been gone for work responsibilities. As a result, Eva feels an obligation to fill that missing space for her mother, while also navigating what his absence means to her. All the while, Eva is sorting through a strengthening yet cautious relationship with her mother, that she worries will disappear once school begins. As soon as Eva arrives in the story, she begins to realize that many aspects of her life are departing. Right before her eyes, she sees things are changing.

Eventually, Minnesota's most infamous season arrives. "Winter" tells of a single night in December when Eva and her mother attend their neighborhood Christmas Eve's Eve party. This is the party Eva looks forward to each year. The food and drinks, the sparkles and sounds, they have made the night magical for as long as she can remember. Yet amidst the company and carols, Eva finds the occasion to feel different. Perhaps she feels the absence of her father on a night about family, or she feels an obligation to be the presence her mother needs. Or, it is something else. The Minnesota Nice, that feels ever present in this environment, rubs differently. It itches instead of soothes. She faces wondering if she belongs, if the magic of the evening had always been an illusion.

Months, that feel like years, pass, and a whisper of warmth drifts through the air, bringing with it a hint of "Spring." In this third story of the collection, on the start of a week of unusual spring warmth, Eva embraces a sense of hope. She desires to fill an unfamiliar gaping that has lingered in her body for some time, and she thinks the emergence of spring might do just that. On this first spring day, she encounters a boy from math. He transforms from being a boy in her class to the boy who she wonders how she never noticed until now. It is in her interactions with him that Eva feels her desires being fulfilled—or at least touched at. However, just as quickly as

spring arrives does its glimmer of hope disappear, and so too does Eva's confidence, in not only herself but in her sense of the world, wane.

Finally, warmth turns to heat, and "Summer" settles in Minnesota. Eva, in good midwestern fashion, starts her first job working at a corn stand. She navigates the tribulations that come with a new job and building a relationship with the farmer, her boss, Dennis. Amidst learning different varieties of corn, how to talk about its growing patterns, and how to make conversation, count ears, and total change, Eva encounters what it feels like to be seen—perhaps too seen. She learns the sensation of discomfort and wonders if this is what life is like. And, if this is how it has always been and always will be. Yet, she also knows that by now she might be ready for these changes. Or at least know how to handle them when they come.

This collection touches on small moments in a single year of Eva's life that are made large by the underlying tensions of family relationships and senses of abandonment, embarrassment, and invisibility. While these moments are unique to Eva, they revolve around shared feelings of discomfort that emerge while growing up and discovering both the joys of getting older and the sense of loss that comes with the bursting of illusions. This year in Eva's life is completely unlike any that have come before and will impact all those that come after.

I wrote this collection as an attempt to articulate the sensations that sit in our stomachs, tingle in our limbs, and wrestle with our hearts. For me, these feelings are most present in memories I have from my past, and I had a desire to work through them now that I am at a distance from them. While this collection has helped me make sense of that which I experienced while I was growing as a teenager, this collection also functions as a reminder that I am always growing. It reminds me that I will always have the opportunity to learn from and reflect on my experiences as long as I set out the time to write about them.



## Fall

Eva tossed her soccer bag into the back of the car, slid into the passenger seat, and rested her freshly washed backpack on her lap. The still morning air hung like a light jacket on her shoulders as she waited for her mom to hurry out of the house. She had packed an extra pullover in her backpack because she knew the school did their very best to make sure the air conditioning was at its chilliest for the first day, as though there was a need to blast out remnants of summer and welcome in back-to-school jitters. But Eva wasn't nervous—she wasn't normally, at least. Except for last night when her heartbeat, pounding hard and fast, kept her up long past when she'd wanted to fall asleep. Now, in the car this morning, she heard the birds sing on branches in her front yard. She hoped they'd ease her stomach, which was twisting into a long, tight braid.

Climbing into the driver's seat, her mom contorted her body to set her purse on the floor behind her. Clementine colored light poured in the back window of the car. Eva leaned her shoulder against the door and rested her head on the window, watching the sun's rapid rise in the side mirror as they exited the cul-de-sac. *Objects in mirror are closer than they appear*, she heard her mind say as her eyes skimmed the words. The sun was reflected in the mirror, and she felt her pupils shrink. Though it stung, she couldn't look away. The window suddenly felt cold against her ear. Maybe that's what's close. The end of summer. Or of something. It was September anyways. Autumn.

Old Crystal Bay Road was lined trees and schools. Many years ago, the trees were planted evenly alongside the street. Now, their roots crossed under and over, and their arms fought with fists and held hands and waved, while shading each other with their glossy green leaves. Eva and her mom came up the south entrance onto the road, and the first building on

their right was not actually a school at all but the hockey rink. Its parking lot overflowed every day after school, no matter the season, and Eva often thought she could smell the souring equipment that hung out to dry in the locker rooms even from inside her car.

They pulled up, and the doors unlocked. Eva slid out, hoisting her soccer bag and backpack onto her shoulders. Her eyes traced the long sidewalk leading up to the entrance. The warming and rising sun was turning dandelion. Its light made the school glow. She waited for her stomach to untangle. Maybe what she was most afraid of, all her worries about Mattie, wouldn't happen after all.

Eva paused before shutting the door, letting the familiar scent of their car and her mom wrap around her for just a moment longer: a mixture of coffee in a travel mug and perfume that smelled too mature for Eva's taste. She and her mom had spent more time together this summer than they had in a long time, taking morning walks to get lattes and spending late afternoons on the deck eating cheese and crackers before dinner. Her dad had been gone for work more than usual, so Eva tried to occupy the empty space. She didn't want her mom to feel alone. During the days it wasn't so hard. But at night she thought of her mom lying small in the large bed, and she wished she were enough to fill the hole.

She was glad to spend the days with her mom, though, especially since she found she had a lot more time on her hands since Mattie had been away in China. Mattie always proposed they go on adventures around Minneapolis and swim in as many different lakes as possible during their summers together. Eva usually liked Mattie's spontaneity and ability to seek fun, but this summer without her had actually been nice. Relaxing—or freeing, somehow. And she had never felt so open with her mom. Like she was able to share her feelings more than in the past. She of course missed Mattie, but as she began to close the door to summer and her mom and

open the new one where she would finally reunite with her friend after so long, her limbs began to feel tight. She took in one last deep inhale. She wanted to carry this scent with her for as long as possible.

“I hope you enjoy seeing Mattie, finally. You’ll have to get the details about her trip.” her mom said. “It really has been a long time since you’ve seen her.”

Eva’s twisted stomach felt no release. She said goodbye and love you and closed the door with a loud exhale. She smoothed out her outfit as she walked, which was becoming increasingly bunched under the bags hanging on her body. Her white t-shirt highlighted her summer tan, and she thought her forest green, linen skirt made her look older. She was a sophomore now and was determined to distinguish herself from the incoming freshman class. She knew being so short didn’t help, but she often felt like her unique hair probably didn’t either.

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Eva had never cut her hair in all her fifteen years. It reached just past the two dimples at the base of her spine and gathered into a little pool when she sat. The collection of brown strands shone the color of dark chocolate in the winter, and the wisps around her eyes and cheeks shimmered the color of sun in summer. She was well aware of its incredible length. She knew it was there each morning when she woke and untangled its knots, and when her mom tied it up into perfect pigtails and bouncy braids when she was little. And she very much knew it was there after she showered; its dampness soaked the back of all her shirts forcing her to learn the art of the wet, messy bun. Yes, Eva knew her hair was extraordinary, yet, every time she met someone new, they projected their astonishment onto her as though she should also be surprised by the mane she grew—as though she must not know it was there because if she did, well if she did, she certainly must not want it. Because who would want hair that long? Eva did. She was

proud of her hair. It had always made her feel seen. But she started to wonder if it made her too seen now.

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In first period, Eva took Mandarin, and the group of students in her class had grown extremely close since starting the language together in eighth grade. Their teacher, Sun Laoshi, liked to prep the classroom in the morning without disruption, so they made it a tradition to hang out in the hall until the first bell rang. Last year, Eva had loved those few minutes they spent in the hallway together. Once they got deep into the school year, much of those morning minutes were spent frantically finishing homework and scribbling down poorly written characters before Sun Laoshi checked their workbooks. Eva always had hers done in time, but she liked being the one to help her classmates get theirs finished before the bell. Plus, Mattie was in the class too, which was a relief since they often had to partner up to practice conversation. Eva liked having someone to rely on. Mattie was always better at Mandarin than Eva even though she didn't put as much effort into studying. She was naturally talented in practically everything she did.

That used to make Eva upset. Like when they were in the fourth-grade book club together, Mattie would always read ahead of everyone else. Eva's mom sometimes facilitated their meetings and repeatedly asked Mattie to not read beyond what was asked. Eva didn't get that because she figured Mattie went ahead just because she was a faster reader. But her mom told Mattie it wasn't considerate of the other group members. Instead of letting Mattie make her feel slow, Eva just spent more time reading so she could also get ahead. She learned that if she just worked harder, the gap between them was practically nothing. And so she did, and it worked. They were on the same playing field. Eva made sure she never felt less than Mattie.

Mattie had been in China for almost all of the summer, and they hadn't talked since she had left at the end of June. Eva assumed Mattie hadn't responded to her texts because of the different time zones or international phone plans or something. That's what she had convinced herself of, anyways. But when she'd texted Mattie happy birthday just a few weeks ago, she got no response. Well, not at first. She really wanted to make sure Mattie received her message, and when Mattie didn't reply, she followed up again. And again. Eva knew her six consecutive birthday related texts were a lot, but she didn't want Mattie to think she had forgotten her. Eventually, Mattie responded. "Thanks." Eva knew her texts had gone through. And Mattie didn't care.

"Ni Hao! Huan ling guan ling!" Sun Laoshi said, opening the door and welcoming them in. Everyone assumed their usual spots, and Mattie swooped in afterwards, her long legs taking strides practically twice the length of Eva's. Eva thought Mattie's eyes were blue like the 10,000 lakes of Minnesota, and she had golden curls that looked like the waves of that same water when the sun began to set. She made Eva feel like a middle schooler walking through the mall with her mom amongst a sea of college girls. Mattie's backpack hung on one shoulder, and she let it fall off her arm and slump onto the ground when she slid into the seat behind Eva.

"Hi!" Eva turned in her desk and whispered behind her. "So glad you're back."

Mattie returned Eva's excited hello with a quick, closed-mouth smile. She was wearing black leather boots and a hand-cropped t-shirt. It wasn't Eva's style, but part of her wished she could pull it off if she wanted to. Her summery outfit felt especially bright. Eva looked back towards the front of the room. Her limbs suddenly felt tingly. Was Mattie being cold, or was she just reading into it. Eva rubbed her hands on her thighs to regain normal feeling and shake away the anxiety that was pumping out of her heart. Things would be fine. Mattie probably

didn't want to draw attention to herself since she was late on the first day. They would catch up after class.

Once the bell rang, everyone packed up their things to hurry off to second period. Mattie shoved her things haphazardly into her backpack and glided out of the classroom. Eva, amidst more meticulously placing her books and folders into her bag, scrambled to grab all her belongings and hurry after Mattie.

"Mattie!" Eva shouted into the hall that was now swarming with fast moving bodies. Mattie's blonde head floated above everyone else's, so Eva could see her pause before flipping around when her name was called. Eva maneuvered the crowd to catch up to her.

"Where's your next class? I'm headed to the third floor, so I've got to get going, but I wanted to say hi. I'm so happy you're back! How was China?" Words rambled out of Eva's mouth as quickly as the students around her moved. She felt like a clown.

"Yeah, good to see you too. I'm headed to the second floor for history." Eva held her gaze on Mattie. Mattie towered over Eva, so it was hard for them to really make eye contact, but Mattie made no apparent effort. She eventually looked down at Eva whose eyes were still expectant. "And China was fine."

"Oh sweet, well we can walk the stairs together. I want to hear all about the trip. Briefly now, of course, but maybe at lunch later or something." Eva headed towards the staircase, and Mattie followed silently. She felt her armpits tickle with perspiration, but the hair on her arms pricked up. They arrived on the landing of the first floor.

"Actually," Mattie finally spoke up, "my history class is on this floor, so I guess I'll see you later."

“Uh, yeah, okay,” Eva responded while Mattie slipped out of the flow of the staircase, and Eva was pushed forward up the next flight of stairs. She arrived at her next class in a cold sweat. Her mind was racing. She wondered if she was being too forward, too quick with asking questions. Eva hadn’t expected frequent phone calls from abroad, but Mattie had posted photos on social media, so Eva really felt like she could at least send a text. Or now spare a friendly hello.

She sat down at her desk and pulled on her backup sweater, still feeling clammy under the cotton covering. And, Eva realized, as her math teacher passed out packets and spoke purely in math terminology, there were no history classrooms on the first floor.

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The doors of the school were flung open by the steady stream of students fleeing its confines. Eva hurried to the locker room and was thankful to get out of her damp clothes. She knew the armpits of her white t-shirt would be tinted yellow from her anxious sweat. Her clean soccer uniform smelled of organic laundry detergent. Although unscented, it still filled Eva’s nostrils with the smell of her mom’s fresh sheets on a Sunday evening when they would climb into bed and watch a movie. That had become one of their summer traditions. For a moment, she desperately wished that’s where she was now. She pulled the jersey over her head and felt the cool air rush through the pores of the shirt.

The 3:00 p.m. September sun was intense even through the thick humidity that clouded her vision. The bags on her shoulders felt increasingly heavy as she weaved through the parking lot, and the cars of newly licensed drivers pulled out and sped off. Eva promised herself she wouldn’t try to pretend to be cool when she got her license in December. She approached the stadium path when a sparkling white Jeep flew out backwards from its spot only a foot ahead of

her. Eva stopped mid-stride, the weight and motion of her backpacks almost flinging her forwards. The driver whipped their head around in the opposite direction of Eva, as if checking their surroundings now, after the fact, would be beneficial. Their window was down, and honey curls floated around in the moving air. Eva stared at the open window. They flipped their head the other direction while shifting into drive. Mattie made eye contact with Eva and sped away. Had Mattie gotten her license right after getting home from China? And when did she get a new car? It all felt unrecognizable. This was too much.

At the field, some of Eva's teammates waved to her as she descended the bleachers. She waved back, squinting into the blinding sun to see who was already there. The turf and track absorbed the afternoon humidity, and the heat's hazy wave's suspended above the ground and dissolved into the rays. Eva laid out her warmup sweatshirt on the metal seat and sat down with the other girls. The backs of her thighs burned even through the fabric barrier. She placed her hands under her legs but felt no reprieve.

"That's why I decided to stand," said Jenna, who was a row in front of her and was re-lacing one of her cleats. Jenna's bony fingers wove the laces through the holes. Her blonde ponytail with bad highlights sparkled in the sun and shifted in the slight breeze. Eva lifted herself from her seat and little black spots speckled her vision. She tried to shake away the dots, but the rushing sensation filled her head and made her legs and arms feel numb. Jenna took a step up the bleachers towards Eva as though she was going to catch her if she fell.

"I'm good," said Eva, waving Jenna off. "I just stood up way too fast."

"Happens to me all the time," Jenna said still climbing up a row and placing her soccer ball under her butt as a substitute seat, barely denting it when she sat. "I think I'm iron deficient or something. I'm dizzy literally every time I stand up."



“You’re a hypochondriac,” Eva said.

“I know,” said Jenna. “Famously, supposedly! How was your first day?”

“It was pretty good. A very usual first day.” Eva could feel the boring nature of her response. “Do you have any classes with Mark?”

“Yes! Well, no, not yet. But I will tomorrow. He’s in a first period biology class, and I’m currently in a study hall. But I think I’m going to switch to be in his bio class. 7:50 a.m. science isn’t that bad right?” Eva knew that was a bad idea. Jenna had fallen asleep practically every day in their first period English class last year, but she wasn’t going to stop her.

“And how have things been between you two?”

“He’s a terrible texter, but what boy isn’t, you know.” She pulled out a roll of blue pre-wrap and ripped off a strand to make a headband. “How are things with you? Any boy gossip? Friend drama?”

“Why would I have friend drama?” Eva blurted, surprising even herself. What did Jenna know? Had Mattie told everyone about her texts? Jenna’s thin eyebrows rose, and her mouth searched for an appropriate way to respond. Sweat was dripping down Eva’s back, now, and the inside of her head was burning. She wished for a cool breeze. “I’m sorry,” she said. “That just came out of nowhere. It was a long day.” Jenna scooted the ball under her butt closer to Eva but said nothing. “It’s not boy related so don’t get excited.” Jenna’s eyes remained wide.

“Something’s up with Mattie. She was so weird today. Like she wouldn’t talk to me. Or even look at me.”

“Did you hear she got her license and a new car right after her trip? And, she sat with Carly and Jackie at lunch today.” Eva raised an eyebrow quizzically. “I know, I know, that

sounds very fake high school tv show, but it might mean something. The popular girls aren't her usual crowd."

"Until now, I guess."

"Don't jump to conclusions. It'll be fine. I'll do some digging and see what's up. Jenna's thin, blush lips gave a reassuring smile. Eva returned one, hoping that faking assurance would make herself feel slightly more calm.

"Plus, whatever's going on, I'm sure it has nothing to do with you."

"I hope so. I just don't get it."

"No stress, Eva. It'll be fine. I'll have answers for you tomorrow. In the meantime, get your hair up because I want to do some passing before the JV girls get here."

They both stood up, this time Eva with better vision. Eva flipped her head forwards and her hair hung down in front of her face, letting its ends get just close enough to sweep the tops of her feet. She gathered the strands and slid her tight, brown hair binder off her wrist, securing the high pony with three twists of the elastic. The skin from her forehead was pulled taut, and when she ran her hands across her scalp, there were no ripples or ridges. Then, she fastened three binders down the pony, and finally tied one more around the top. It was her go-to game day hairstyle. Everything stayed in place, and she loved the way it blew in the breeze from the motion she created by her own speed. Jenna was already on the field and Eva came down in her Birkenstocks, sliding them off when she hit the hot turf. She let the plastic blades and black peas press against the bottom of her feet and sift their way between her toes. The girls passed for a few minutes. Eva felt a little lighter with each touch of the ball. Her hair bounced back and forth, hitting her shoulders on a steady beat. It will be okay. Tap, dribble, pass. Things will work out.

The junior varsity girls eventually took the field, and Eva and Jenna found their seats again, this time squished amongst the rest of their varsity teammates who had finally arrived. They would watch the first half of the JV girls' game before taking the field for their own. Eva sat in the back row of her team's section, and behind her were the parents of the JV girls. The fathers stood at the top of the bleachers with their arms crossed and brows furrowed, examining the strategy of the game as though they were coaches and their daughters were on the Olympic team. In front of them sat the mothers whose cheers were quieter than their whispers to one another. Amidst their conversations about the upcoming hockey booster club meeting and what Nick Anderson's mom said at drinks last weekend, Eva caught a more poignant part of their dialogue.

"She can't possibly like having it so long," the mom with the fake blonde hair said to the mom with the baseball hat on her left whose husband had already been asked to leave the game for his use of language towards the opposing team.

"You think her mother doesn't let her cut it?" responded the mom in the hat. "What a hassle. What kind of mother would want her child to have hair like *that*?"

Eva could feel their eyes turn to look at her and then face one another to whisper. She wondered if they really thought she couldn't hear them or if they were simply oblivious. Or perhaps they wanted Eva to hear—to embarrass her, to pressure her to cut it. She heard them but tried not to listen. All her life people had had opinions on her hair. When she was little, she often wondered why people expected her to cut it—why they thought someone shouldn't have such long hair. Her mom always reminded her that her hair was part of her body and it was her right to do what she wanted with it. And that if she wanted long hair, then that's how she'll have it. But it felt like even though they'd spent the whole summer together, they hadn't talked in

months. The whispers behind her were interrupted by the ball rippling across the back of the net; the parents pulled themselves from their seats to stand and shout. They didn't resume their chatter about Eva after that.

The sun lowered to just above the tops of the trees that lined the far side of the field. Everyone's faces were golden and wrinkled from squinting into the light. The final minutes of the JV game ticked down, and Eva and her teammates descended the bleachers and headed to the field. Their warmups ended just as the pink and orange from the setting sun turned into shadow and then darkness. The stadium lights clicked on, and the game began.

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The leather of the car felt cool against Eva's slick skin. Her body was warm, and her uniform was damp. She let herself sink deep into the seat, knowing the sweat imprint she was creating. The close scoring game had distracted Eva long enough, but sitting in the parking lot, the stillness of the dark cooling air, made her remember. The inside of the car was as quiet as it had been that morning when she waited for the day to begin, listening to the morning birds sing positive omens for what was to come. Eva heard the metal of her mom's seat belt slide into the buckle and click into place. Her mom pulled the strap tight against her chest. Eva's own chest felt tight. She felt a desperate need to tell her mom about what was happening with Mattie. Whatever it was that was happening. Her mouth began to form a word when the car started, and air conditioning blasted through the vents. She pushed them to face up and towards the window. Her sweat was starting to dry, and her skin felt prickly. She crossed her arms in front of her chest, covering her nipples that were poking through the spandex of her sports bra.

"Cold?" her mom asked. Eva nodded. Her mom turned the knob to decrease the fan's power.

Her mom continued to ask about Eva's day as they drove down Old Crystal Bay Road. Eva felt her mouth formulate responses, but her thoughts were on the trees that were interspersed with lampposts she hadn't noticed that morning. For split seconds, as they passed each post, her white jersey glowed against the darkness that filled the cavity of the car. Flickers of light and shadow followed them down the road until they turned right. The lampposts disappeared. Eva stared out her window which was cold again. She looked out at the area where she knew there were spacious fields and dense woods in the daytime. Now, they were gaping spaces of nighttime descended on the world. The only thing guiding them home were the dim headlights of the car. Eva wished her mom would turn on the brights. She needed to see what was coming up ahead.

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Eva lay in bed that night, her body exhausted but her mind awake. She knew she wouldn't be able to fall asleep until she had sorted everything out. She recognized Mattie was distancing herself from her. That's what the summer had been about. She wanted to attribute their lack of communication to the time difference, but she couldn't fool herself any longer. But maybe if she just tried harder to show Mattie how good a friend she was, things would return to the way they were. Where it came naturally to Mattie, Eva had to work hard. And so she would.

When she woke the next morning, she felt optimistic about her plan to win Mattie over. She would be even nicer, ask her more questions about her summer, and be the friend Mattie wanted her to be—in whatever way that was. She picked out her favorite coral tank top and tied her hair back into a long, loose braid that she thought gave her one of those 'just whisked together an outfit' look.

“I never had a chance to ask you yesterday—how was Mattie’s trip?” asked Eva’s mom, as they pulled up to the school drop of curb.

Eva felt glad she hadn’t told her mom about Mattie the night before when she thought she wanted to. Things between her and Mattie would be fixed by the end of the day, so there would be no need to sort things out with her mom. But her mom’s question suddenly made her feel exposed. Did she know something was up?

“I think she had a good time,” said Eva. She pulled her bag up off the floor and out from in between her feet.

“You think?”

“What?”

“You think Mattie had a good time?”

“You know what I meant,” Eva said, feeling defensive. “Yes, she said the trip was fine.” Eva opened the car door and slid out. “I’ll see you after practice,” she said ready to slam the door shut.

“Eva, everything okay?” Her mom’s eyes latched onto Eva’s. Eva knew she couldn’t break away from it. “You don’t have to let people walk all over you, you know.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You shouldn’t put up with people not treating you the way you know you should be treated. The way I know you know you should be treated.”

Eva felt her weight leaning into door as she gripped the handle. She hated that her mom was right. And that she knew what was going on. But she couldn’t admit that her and Mattie’s friendship was failing. But it wouldn’t fail. She wouldn’t let it.

“I’m fine. Really.” She attempted a convincing smile, hoping her lips didn’t quiver. She closed the door and headed towards the school, ignoring the knots tightening in her stomach. It was time to execute her plan.

Eva got to Mandarin class early so she could have time to chat with Mattie, but Mattie arrived late again and rushed out of the room right as the bell rang. She wouldn’t run into her the rest of the day.

On her way out of lunch, Eva spotted Jenna heading into the lunchroom amidst the stream of students. “Have you seen Mattie today?” Eva asked, pulling Jenna aside against the wall of lockers.

“Not yet, but we have lunch and math together. I’ll do some digging. Don’t worry.”

Eva paused. She was worried. “I’m not acting crazy, right?” she asked. Jenna didn’t respond. Bodies rushed past them as they stood still. White noise was growing louder in Eva’s ears. Jenna squeezed Eva’s hand.

“I’ll text you tonight. I promise.”

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That evening, Eva sat outside the front of her house on the wooden bench that was covered in moss and potential splinters. Her house sat on top of a hill, so she watched pink and purple accumulate over the its peak and begin to descend behind it. Green leaves that had fallen too early scattered the grass in front of her feet. The air was still warm, but nighttime’s impending presence blew in a cool breeze. Eva’s skin felt prickly. She would sit inside, but she didn’t want her mom to hear her conversation with Jenna. She couldn’t know she was losing her best friend. It was too embarrassing.

She stared at her phone waiting for a text to light up her screen. Eva felt her heart pounding in her stomach. She could hear the windchime at her neighbor's house at the end of the cul-de-sac. Its song sounded sad. Her phone screen glowed.

“Hey, so I talked with Mattie after lunch,” wrote Jenna.

“And? How did she seem?” Eva asked.

“Like—totally normal. Like her jokey, funny, Mattie self”

“What did you talk about? What did you ask her?”

“We were both headed to the third floor for math, and I asked her about China and summer, and she told me all about her trip and her new obsession with some noodle dish she's been making at home. And just how pumped she is to have her license and a car and that her dad gave it to her so she would rejoin the basketball team or something.”

“She didn't mention almost hitting me with that car, did she?” Eva hoped her sad sarcasm would come through.

“No, she didn't. She didn't actually mention you at all. So, I brought you up.” Jenna stopped typing. Eva's hands covered the back of her phone in sweat. Why had she stopped typing? She would wait only a minute longer before following up. A long block of text appeared on the screen.

“When I mentioned you, she got kind of weird. I just asked if you two had gotten to hang out since she got back from her trip, since I knew you were looking forward to catching up and everything. And she just kind of stared straight ahead and kept walking. She finally responded that no, you guys hadn't hung out in a while. And probably wouldn't anymore.”

With every word she read, her stomach twisted tighter and tighter. She almost felt like she wanted to vomit. Like that would help release all that was building up inside of her.



“What does that even mean?” Eva asked. Her fingers shook as she typed.

“She said, ‘Eva and I can’t be friends any more. She won’t understand why. I know that. I just can’t be her friend any longer.’” Eva’s throat felt thick and her neck tight.

“I’m so sorry, Eva. It makes no sense.” Her eyes swelled. She could feel her bottom lashes holding up heavy droplets.

“Is it my hair?” Eva asked. Jenna didn’t respond.

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Eva stripped off her dirty practice uniform and stepped into the steam behind the curtain. Goosebumps formed all over her body. The water was scalding. Her skin tried to protect her from burning, but she let the droplets turn her patches of red. Her mind was so focused on the heat, fired by its power, that she no longer needed to cry. Instead, she needed to do something powerful. Something to really show Mattie she was determined to be what Mattie wanted. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back, letting the water pour directly on her face. What if she cut it? Got rid of it all. She could go into her dad’s vacant office, take the scissors off his bare desk, and snip it all away. That’s what Mattie wanted, wasn’t it? That’s why she didn’t want to be friends with her anymore? Because of her hair. Because it was too childish, and Mattie wasn’t a child. She folded her hair in half, feeling its pretend new ends just brush the tops of her shoulders, feeling it glide against her clavicle bone. If she just cut it, she could be what Mattie needed her to be.

Eva heard her mom’s footsteps ascend the stairs outside the bathroom door. She thought of the hours they spent together in this bathroom, her mom combing and braiding because Eva wanted her hair long. Eva loved her hair. And her mom was the only person who never asked her when she was going to cut it. She was the only person who supported her. Eva imagined her

mom's tired eyes, and the sadness that would fill them if she cut it. Not because her mom only wanted Eva's hair to be long, but because she'd know that Eva cut it for someone else. And she had always taught her that her hair was hers. For only her. Eva pictured her mom brushing through her hair, but the brush stopping short.

Water pooled in the fold of the dark nest, growing heavy in her hands. She let it drop down her numb back, the gathered water burst across the tub floor. From her scalp to the tops of her feet, she was burning. The ceiling light glowing behind the cloudy steam like the scorching fall sun breaking through the humidity. She stared up at the light. At the sun that was stinging her pupils. She stared because it stung, and she didn't want to look away.

## Winter

The Pierson's Christmas Eve's Eve party had been a tradition for longer than Eva knew. Generations of their family had lived in that same white house on top of the hill since it was built when her own home was still farmland. As the Pierson family grew, so did the size of the party and the ease of running it. When Eva first started attending, shoes were left in a scatter all across the icy front porch. Eventually, temporary shelves were made out of colorful cardboard building blocks Christopher and Maggie Pierson played with in their basement. Then, the shoes-on rule was instituted since too many people had gone home with someone else's black winter boots. The coat mountain that accumulated on Mr. and Mrs. Pierson's bed became an organized system in their garage with hangers and numbers.

Eva's mom opened the front door, and a burst of warm air cloaked their chilled limbs. Christmas songs swam through the gaps between people. Eva and her mom weaved through the foyer and kitchen, bypassing the garage door, dropping a hostess gift on the kitchen island, and heading to the screened in porch for drinks. Christopher and his friends, who were sophomores in college, had run the drink bar for the past few years. They wore Santa hats and green and red aprons. They were loud and full of laughter. Her mom got a glass of red wine in a short, clear, plastic cup. Eva asked for the punch as she did every year. It was some sort of magical red and bubbly concoction for kids that only existed on the night of the Christmas Eve's Eve party. Christopher's friend ladled the juice and handed it to her. Muscles in his forearm peaked out from under his rolled-up sleeves. Eva wasn't sure why getting the punch suddenly felt embarrassing. She watched the boys behind the table brush and bump each other while reaching and pouring. Eva thanked him, grabbed her cup, and turned away. The drink cooled her clammy hands. Her cheeks burned.

Together Eva and her mom made a direct route towards the dining room. The deep red wood of the mahogany walls bled across the dark floor. A gold chandelier hung over the carved and polished table that consumed most of the room. The chandelier's own light made its curved arms glisten and glow. Platters were spread across the table and placed on tiered stands. Eva took a green paper plate and handed a red one to her mom. She took little steps around the edge of the feast, piling her plate with the delicacies unique to only the Christmas Eve's Eve party. She grabbed a pepperoni and cheese pull-apart, pickle roll-ups, spicy tortilla wraps, a strand of green grapes, and a handful of caramelized popcorn that she spent the whole night pulling off of her back teeth with her tongue. They found space for three to stand against the wall, near the window, so the two of them slid into the opening. Since the summer, her dad had been travelling more frequently for work, so he couldn't make it home for the party. He reminded her over the phone that Christmas Eve's Eve wasn't a holiday, so he didn't get time off. But he wouldn't be home for Christmas either, and even though they didn't celebrate, she wondered when he would ever be back. Her mom never said anything about his absence, even when Eva wished she would. She was determined to enjoy the party even without him and help her mom have fun too. She always seemed eager to leave.

The window behind them looked out to the backyard, and through the reflections of the partygoers, she could see the thick and hardened blanket of snow. The icy sheet covered the ground where the trampoline used to sit, and all the neighborhood kids would come to play on sticky summer afternoons. Eva's ears were filled with the sounds of fingers flying across the keys of the piano and voices trying to talk over its music. At the same time, she could hear the quiet of the neighborhood as she looked out the window. All her neighbors were here, at the party, and Eva could feel the emptiness of their homes, the quiet hum of heaters warming their

empty rooms, and the nipping wind squeezing its way through gaps beneath old doors. The cul-de-sac looked darker than usual. Lonelier. Even though the houses shimmered in Christmas lights, the colors didn't look as bright. They didn't look as joyful as they usually seemed. She wondered what about them had changed? Why did things suddenly feel different?

"The Zimmermans!" boomed the party host's voice from across the room. Chris and Becky made their way towards Eva and her mom, their arms open wide. "So glad you both could make it." Her mom quickly put down her plate and cup on the decorative dresser next to her. Eva didn't have a chance before she was wrapped in a hug while balancing drink and plate in her hands.

"We wouldn't miss it," said Eva, switching exchanging hugs with Mrs. to Mr. Pierson. Becky was of medium height and wore a velvet green dress with a holiday lights necklace. Chris was tall and broad and wore red suspenders. Eva wished she owned something more festive than her navy, winter, synagogue dress.

"We always look forward to seeing the invitation sticker on your holiday card," said Eva's mom.

"Well remember the year we didn't put them on?" said Becky. "We assumed after holding the party for twenty-three straight years people would just know to come."

"But we got so many calls that night asking if something had happened, if the party was still on," continued Chris, finishing Becky's story.

"That was the first and last time we made that mistake," said Becky.

In the moment of pause, Eva thought to ask how college was going for Christopher. She was cut off before the words could come out.

“So good to see you both,” said Chris. “Off to keep making the rounds! The Reniers are here somewhere, too.”

When Eva was little, she played with the Pierson and Renier kids in the cul-de-sac. On summer evenings they played night games like ghost in the graveyard and capture the flag or went for night swims in the Renier’s backyard pool. Eva spotted all seven of the red headed Reniers in the piano room. The two boys, Jim and Andrew, squished onto the piano seat together. Their hands moved faster than the music itself. They never stopped playing, even when one of them would jump off the seat and switch sides, while the other slid over. The two eldest girls sat on the couch and watched their brothers play. Eva didn’t really like Katherine and Margaret. Well, Margaret was fine, and Eva wasn’t actually sure how she felt about Katherine since they hadn’t interacted for a while now—probably since Katherine was in high school and Eva was in sixth grade. Katherine had told Eva she thought it must be embarrassing having such long hair as a middle schooler one afternoon years ago. The remark wouldn’t normally have bothered Eva so much, but that same day her hair had gotten caught in someone else’s locker and a custodian had to come help her get it out. He joked he could just cut it off. Eva didn’t think it was funny.

The girls sat in their matching family Christmas sweaters that most people wore for fun on ugly sweater day, but the Reniers wore in all seriousness. They were hand knit Scandinavian style sweaters with reindeer galloping and snowflakes falling across the front. She thought they were hideous, yet when she watched them from the other room, Eva was the one who felt embarrassed.

“Should we go say hi?” Eva asked her mom, her eyes glancing towards their red sweated neighbors.

“If you’d like to,” said Eva’s mom. “But I have a feeling they’ll stop by soon.” Eva wasn’t sure how her mom knew, but as she predicted, the sound of the piano eventually came to a halt and seven red sweaters surrounded Eva and her mom.

The boys stood with their mother, Betsy, and chatted with Eva’s mom, while the three girls stood by their father, Mike. Eva made conversation with the girls and their dad. Mr. Renier was a soft-spoken obstetrician, so in some ways he was very serious. However, he also had a goofy side that only his kids seemed to find funny. Then again, maybe they were just family jokes. She just wouldn’t get it.

The Renier family had lived in Minnesota for generations. They had a cabin deep in the northern woods, cross country skied in negative thirty-degree temperatures, and ate hot dish and drank beer on Saturday nights. Although Eva had grown up playing with the Renier kids, the older she got, the more different she felt from them. Like when they said grace before meals, believed in Santa long after elementary school, and went to church seven days a week. She, of course, respected their family traditions and had even unintentionally learned to say grace herself because of how many times she heard it said. At the same time, she started to feel like an outsider. Like she didn’t belong. Then again, she wondered if she ever belonged.

“What are your plans for Christmas this year?” Eva asked the girls and their father. Mr. Renier answered.

“Oh you know, just the usual. Getting up for church, kids will open Santa’s gifts, back to church for carols, then all the family is coming over for dinner.” The girls smiled but their eyes were disengaged in the conversation. “And yourselves? Christmas plans at the Zimmerman’s?”

“Dad—” interjected Katherine, who was suddenly paying attention. Her red hair had been straightened so many times it no longer had its shine, and her eyes were hard to read

beneath her clumpy mascara. “They’re *Jewish*. They don’t celebrate Christmas.” Katherine said this as though December 25<sup>th</sup> didn’t exist for Eva’s family because they didn’t observe the holiday. Eva’s mouth hung slightly agape. Random notes banged loudly from the piano. Two little girls and a boy sprawled across the seat and hit their soft, wet hands against the keys.

“Well of course they have plans,” Mr. Renier responded to his daughter and then chuckled. He didn’t raise his voice over the piano.

“Yes, we do have plans,” said Eva, trying to be heard. “We’ll go to a noon movie, then get Chinese food at this great place near the University, and then hit another movie afterwards.” Katherine’s eyes were wide, which surprised Eva since getting Chinese and going to the movies was a well-known stereotypical Jewish way to pass the day. But maybe Katherine’s surprise wasn’t confusion at all but something different. Was she appalled?

“That’s interesting,” said Katherine, pausing for a moment. “Well, have fun with that.”

Betsy and the boys stopped their conversation with Eva’s mother and said they had to find Mr. Pierson to get group carols started in the piano room soon. The seven red sweaters smiled and made their way to the room with the oversized couch where a football game was playing on the television and people were cheering and cheers-ing. Eva let out a sigh of compressed air and looked at her mother who took a long sip to finish off her wine. They were the only ones left in the dining room for the moment.

“I’m going to get some more food,” Eva said, looking at her empty plate and realizing she needed to busy herself.

“And I’m getting something more to drink,” said her mom. “Can I get you another punch?” Eva held her empty cup and felt her dry tongue press against the roof of her mouth.

“That’s okay,” said Eva. “Nothing for me.”



Eva filled her plate with a second round of the same foods and sat down in a chair against a different wall in the dining room. Her mom came back with her second glass of wine and joined Eva in sitting. Eva watched the Renier's huddle around the Pierson's in the other room, and they all hugged and laughed.

Everyone at the party looked as happy as Christopher and his friends had from behind the drink bar. It must be the holiday spirit putting everyone in a good mood. Why, then, was it not having its same effect on her? Eva rested her green plate on her lap. Her navy dress felt especially blue. She looked at her mom who was snacking on Christmas colored m&m's. Her mom's dark brown hair and black knit dress blended into the deep wood of the chair and wall behind them. Eva felt like the two of them could disappear into the paneling and no one would notice. The sounds, the food, the colors consumed everyone with joy, but Eva felt herself being dissolved and swallowed.

"I'll be right back," Eva said.

Her own voice surprised her, but she was glad to pull herself from her slow fade into the mahogany. She stood up quickly, leaving her plate on the seat of the chair and tossing her empty punch cup in the nearest trash can. She wove her way into the family room and squeezed past bodies to pry open the door to the basement. The glow from the upstairs followed her for only a second before the door closed behind her. She descended the steep and narrow stairs, the unfinished walls on the sides of her making each of her steps cautious. On the landing at the bottom of the stairs was a cement wall covered in a giant white sheet of paper. Markers were scattered across the frayed and scratchy carpeting. Blank at the beginning of the night, the paper was now covered in children's drawings. Eva had spent many Christmas Eve's Eve parties in front of this paper, filling sections with her own doodles. She picked up her favorite purple

marker and wrote her initials in big cursive letters in a corner of the paper. She felt the cold cement only one layer beneath the tip of the marker. She thought to draw something else but found herself closing the cap and placing the marker back on the floor. The air in the basement was dry, and the lights were dim. Flickers of light flashed through the small window on the swinging wooden door that led to the room on her right.

Eva entered and tip toed to the back behind the couch, which was covered with small children's bodies curled up or spread wide. Their eyes were glued to the glowing projector. Will Ferrell ran across the screen dressed in yellow tights and a green coat. The kids laughed at his absurdities. Eva smiled, too, but only because she liked watching them laugh. The scene itself didn't seem all that amusing. She wanted to join in. To laugh with them. She wanted to think the movie was funny, but she didn't. She never had. She felt a familiar uncomfortable heat build in her ears. The kids' giggles suddenly made her angry. Or sad. She wasn't sure which, but she could feel the heat bleed into her head. She felt for the exposed cement behind her and leaned back for support. The cool wall sent a chill through her clammy skin.

At the next burst of laughter, Eva slid out of the room and back through the wooden door. Her eyes were caught by her purple letters on the wall. They looked especially visible against the green Christmas tree drawings that littered the page. Everyone would notice how different her work was from the others. And they could trace it back to her because no one else at the party had a last name starting with Z. Her eyes scanned the floor for a marker to scribble it out. Her attention was suddenly caught by a hush followed by a boom of an announcement from behind the door at the top of the stairs. She looked again at her initials. Maybe no one would think anything of them. She ascended the stairs, opened the door, and was whisked into a flow of partygoers all headed to the piano room. She tried to push the discomfort of the moment out

of her body and welcomed the warm, steady beat that was filling her chest. It was time for carols.

Almost every year, Eva sat with Theresa Renier for carols. They held the song sheets together and tried to harmonize their voices amongst the hundred other singers seated all around them. The sounds of the group were beautiful, and the Christmas Eve's Eve party had its own traditions for how songs were sung. Partygoers squished into the piano room. Those who predicted when carols would start scouted out a seat early, so they could have the couches or comfy chairs. All the others were relegated to sitting cross legged on the floor or standing in the back near the doorway. Mr. Pierson stood between the floor to ceiling Christmas tree and the glossy, grand piano while his mother put on the concert.

As Eva glided along with the group into the room, she spotted Theresa sitting in front of one of the couches on the floor, the rest of her family either next to or behind her. The spaces around them had already been taken. Eva's eyes scanned the quickly filling room. She saw space next to Christopher and his college friends who were huddled around a comfy chair a few groups of people in front of her. She couldn't stand by them. Could she? In a moment of random confidence and desperation, her legs maneuvered her towards the boys. She squeezed into the space next to the boy who handed her the punch. The kids' drink. Her ears were burning again. She could feel heat radiating off his body. His thick, veiny hands lifted from resting on the back of the chair as he emphasized something he was saying. When he brought them down, his arm brushed her shoulder. She could feel his warm skin even through the thick fabric of her blue dress. He glanced down at Eva as a silent apology for bumping her. She smiled at him, but he had already turned back towards his friends. They passed song sheets to

each other above Eva's head. She needed one of them. Eva opened her mouth to ask, but the room fell silent.

Grandma Pierson stood up from her seat at the bench and turned around to face the group. She was a small woman in red cashmere with wire reading glasses and once blonde hair now white, pulled back by a large tortoiseshell clip. Her back was slightly hunched, but Eva could still see the upturn of her red lipstick. She said something to Mr. Pierson that sounded like a whisper. Mr. Pierson repeated her order out loud for all the group to hear.

"Page two, *Joy to the World*," he said. His voice rippled off the walls. Around the room, hands flipped through pages to find the song. She looked up at the boy next to her, hoping he might share with her.

Grandma Pierson sat down at the bench and let her hands float above the keys. The group took a unison inhale. He didn't offer. A hundred voices, young and old, high and low, burst into song.

Eva followed along as well as she could. She thought her years of participation in Christmas Eve's Eve carols would help jog her memory, and for the first two verses of most of the songs she was able to follow along. The untrained lungs of the group sounded like a professional chorus. She imagined this must be what a Christmas church service is like. Hundreds of voices merging as though they were always meant to be one.

But when Mr. Pierson shouted, "let's do verses three and four!" and the rest of the group raised their glasses and hoorah-ed in agreement, Eva could only mumble or hum along until the song was over. Her voice hushed beneath the deep bellows of the guys next to her. She felt like she was being buried. In desperation for something to ground her, she scanned the room for her mom. She had left her in the dining room and hadn't stopped back in before carols began. She

didn't see her mixed in with any of the singers. The group was on number nine of the *Twelve Days of Christmas*, and without the song sheet, she had been lost since six.

Eva felt sticky underneath her dress and breathing in singing air didn't help. There were too many sweater-wearing bodies around her. Her chest started to feel tight and her vision foggy. She needed to get out of there. She wiggled her way out, no one budging to make room for her exit.

A freezing rush of air blew against her from the propped open front door. Eva peered into the dining room, but her mom was nowhere to be found. Instead, the door to the basement caught her eye again. She pictured her purple letters hanging on the wall. In her mind they felt even more ridiculous than before. How out of place they must look. She descended the stairs, this time not caring how loud her feet thumped the hollow wood underneath her. She almost wanted to disrupt the kids watching the movie and the singers upstairs. She wanted them to hear her.

More green and red drawings had been splattered across the hanging paper. Her purple initials stood vibrant against the monotony of Christmas colors. At the same time, they still seemed to disappear amongst the mass of trees and Santas. The holiday spirit was hiding her letters away. She felt like she was disappearing. Why was this happening? Why did her initials not fit? Why did everything feel so different this year? She wanted to blend in, to be a part of all this, to feel like she belonged. But she knew she didn't. She stood out. She wanted to embrace that. It just felt like no one else would.

Eva grabbed the bottom corner of the large white sheet of paper and tore it off the wall. The sound of the paper ripping down the middle as she pulled overpowered the sound of the carols from upstairs and the movie playing in the next room. She didn't care. The paper fell off

the wall and blanketed the floor like a fresh coating of snow. Eva's body still felt hot. There was still more inside of her.

A decorated Christmas tree drawing in the corner had ornaments and presents underneath it. She grabbed it with her cold but sweaty fingers and tore it into pieces. Then she did the same with the family of snow people and then with the Santa Claus and his reindeer. One by one she shredded the entire sheet until all that remained was her own section of initials. She could feel her heart pounding under her dress, a mixture of adrenaline and anxiety pumping through her limbs. She grabbed the intact purple letters and held them in her hands. If she left it, everyone would know she did this.

Eva ripped them up, sprinkling their remnants across the floor. Her heart finally stopped racing, and she looked around at the snowstorm she had created. It was wild and loud, and that's what she had needed, but it was also sad. She swept up the flakes into a snowbank with her feet and pushed the slush to the corner of the room. Then, she ascended the stairs not wishing to ever look back at the shoveled blizzard behind her.

"Eva," her mom said, surprised, upon Eva's entrance into the room with the big couch. For a moment, Eva thought her mom's tone sounded accusatory, as though she knew what Eva had done. She worried she would have to confess. "You're not at the carols? You always stay through the end."

"I hadn't realized you never join them," Eva said. Her thoughts turned from the basement to her mom and how long she had disappeared. "And I'm sorry I left you. If I had known you didn't want to sing, I wouldn't have made you wait for me."

"Oh, don't worry about that. I don't mind."

"But you have to sit here all alone."

“I promise, I’m really okay. The carols are beautiful from out here.”

Eva looked at her mom, whose gaze stared straight ahead at the fireplace on the far wall. Her mom’s shoulders hunched forward, as though her black dress was a weight tugging at her, extracting her energy and pulling her down. Eva looked at the lines between her mom’s eyebrows. She hadn’t noticed their depth before, how much sadness they seemed to carry.

Her mom faced Eva and patted the open spot on the couch next to her. She sat, and her mom ran her fingers through Eva’s hair. Eva could feel small snags untangling in each comb-through. This was their experience. It wasn’t carols in the other room, but something different. A sense of abandonment and belonging only they could share. Eva thought of the basement and what she had done. She wanted to believe that her mom would have approved, or at least understood. That if she had told her, her mom might have nodded and put her hand over hers. That she would have said she sees her, and that she knows exactly what she’s feeling. Eva looked down at their laps, sitting side by side. Their dark dresses looked bold against the tan couch.

They sat long enough for the carols to become a white noise in the background of their thoughts. Eventually, they made their way to the front door, and Eva felt the body heat from the crowded piano room spill out into the foyer and stick to her skin. Her mom opened the front door. The winter air was still and refreshing. They descended the front stairs, holding onto the ice-covered railing with their bare hands, bits of frozen snow crunching underneath their feet. In the midst of the frozen night stood their yellow house at the end of the cul-de-sac. Eva could hear their heater hum, beckoning them to come inside.

## Spring

The forecast on the Sunday night local news predicted unusually warm weather for the upcoming week. The seven-day outlook showed a streak of sun and temperatures in the mid-to-high forties. Despite that a spontaneous warm week happened once every April, and after it, Minnesota reverted to its seven-month long winter, people still believed that this was the first real sign of spring and that it was here to stay. Of course, the slush would freeze over, snow would fall, and the skies would turn grey once again. Eva supposed though, as she watched the television in the oversized chair in the corner of her mom's bedroom, that even though the spring fling of a week would fade faster than it lasted, it was still an omen of warmth. An indication that hope would float through the world in a sudden burst of wind.

The next morning, the warm weather arrived as predicted. Eva opened her bedroom window and let the cool, wet breeze awaken the soft air that had accumulated while she slept. Her room smelled of recently washed sheets with a hint of sweat from her slumber. The outside air felt refreshing and slick inside her nostrils. The sun was still beginning to enter her eyeline, and the chirps of birds grew louder and more frequent as the sun rose. She slid off her flannel pajama pants and pulled on jeans, a long sleeve t-shirt, and sandals. She looked down at her ghostly and ghastly feet, which had been shoved in wool socks and hockey skates for months. The cork of her Birkenstocks felt like a pumice stone against the calluses on the edges of her toes.

Eva's sixteenth birthday had passed a few months prior, and since her dad had barely been home since the summer, his car was hers to drive. She thought she would like the independence a car gave her, and she mostly did. She liked rolling the windows down on mornings like today when the crisp and damp air held her tired eyes open. And she liked turning



on the pop stations she was never allowed to listen to when she was younger. No more NPR or Grateful Dead. No more Dixie Chicks or Faith Hill. She turned the radio up.

Eva felt the morning breeze in between her exposed toes as she navigated around puddles of melting snow along the sidewalk towards the school. She glided through the doorway, taking note of the boy with a forest green backwards hat and a square chin who held the door open for her. She kept her gaze on him for a just a moment longer than necessary. And he didn't look away. Instead, he smiled at her. His lips were a blush pink and the ridges around his nose and mouth were deep.

"Thank you," Eva said, turning her body towards him. He followed after her, and the door closed behind them.

"No problem," he said. He caught up next to her. Eva's face suddenly felt warm, and she could feel her ears turning red. They held the same pace for a moment. She wasn't sure whether he was intentionally walking next to her or if only by coincidence he stayed by her side. The gap between their bodies was small. Like the distance between friends. Not how strangers would walk next to one another in the hallway. Maybe that's because he wasn't a stranger, though. They had second period math class together, and his name was George. He sat a row behind her, and while he rarely raised his hand, when he did, his answers were always correct. She wondered if he knew her name. Or noticed how close together they were, now, as they walked. If he thought anything of it even.

They entered the main hallway, and a flurry of other students buzzed around them all headed in different directions. The walls were covered in posters for the casino themed prom coming up that only seniors were allowed to attend. Nonetheless, prom-posals had been a constant the past few weeks at school and dates and dating had been on Eva's mind. She had

been having an unfamiliar yearning linger in her mind lately. A sort of hollowness inside her stomach. Or perhaps her heart.

“Nice that spring’s here,” George said. Eva nodded. She spotted her locker and wondered if he’d follow her towards it. His feet diverged from hers.

“See you in calc, Eva.” His green hat floated in front of her and headed towards the stairs. She caught his scent and tried to place it.

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All of first period Mandarin, Eva thought about George’s curly brown hair and the way it poked out of all sides of his hat. And about his bony shoulders, which held up his book filled backpack. Her body felt tingly and uncomfortably warm. She wondered if George was thinking of her right now. If his body, too, felt suddenly impacted by her presence.

“Eva,” Mattie said from behind her as though she had already said her name multiple times. A stack of papers hung in the air over her left shoulder.

“Oh, thanks. Sorry,” Eva said, grabbing the papers, pulling one for herself, and passing them onto the next row over. Sun Laoshi still sat Eva and Mattie together because Eva hadn’t let on to just about anyone that they were no longer friends. And while interacting with Mattie still sent pangs into her stomach, Eva had finally started feeling less embarrassed about herself and her hair—despite that Mattie had told everyone it was too long.

The bell rang, Eva packed up her things, and she walked alone up to the third floor amidst the mass of students. She slid into her desk in the second to last row in the far-right corner of the room. As she relaxed in her seat and pulled out her blue notebook, a green backwards hat glided across her vision, obscuring her view of Mr. Porter writing out problems for the day. She watched George until he was seated. Had his limbs always been so long? His

gait so overextended? She looked away from him when he turned his attention from his bag on the ground to the front of the room. But when everyone went to copy notes down on their papers, Eva snuck another peak of George. She assumed he, too, would be writing, but he caught her glancing at him. She gave her best attempt at a soft smile, feeling awkward in the act. At the same time, she didn't mind that he had seen her looking at him. Part of her wanted him to know she was. And she really hoped the look she gave was subtly flirtatious. Eva returned to copying the equation on the board. Her pencil felt slippery in the wet grasp of her palms.

Towards the last few minutes of class, Mr. Porter pushed open a window while everyone worked quietly on an example problem. Eva felt the fresh air meet the stuffy classroom. It was refreshing inside her stomach, which was churning something new. She and George were in some sort of silent dialogue, but she wasn't sure if she was supposed to speak it into existence. In three minutes, the bell would ring. Eva pictured George packing up his things and waiting for her so that they could walk down the hall together like they did that morning. And while she had never really thought of George in any special way until this morning, she wanted him to know he was on her mind now. It was like learning a new word. Maybe he'd felt it too. Perhaps all of a sudden George thought to himself, *wow, I never really thought about Eva until now, but now that I have, I can't not think of her.*

A gust of wind blew through the window and shifted papers on Mr. Porter's desk. The breeze rustled against the hair on her arms, causing her mind to pause. She was letting herself get too far ahead. For now, she would just hope that he'd at least look at her one more time. He didn't.

Eva finished the worksheet right as the bell rang. She piled her textbook, notebook, and folder on top of one another and slid them into her backpack. She started to rise when she felt a

familiar yank on her hair. The metal bolt in the back of her chair had strangled the strands. Eva sat back down to create some slack as she tried to release her hair from its grasp. She knew she would have to yank it out. She'd done this before. Like when she stood to give an oral presentation in English class last semester and hadn't realized her hair was stuck. She had stood up fast enough that it ripped out as she rose. Throughout her whole presentation she had thought about the hair dangling from the bolts. How visible they were. And how she would have to dislodge them from the chair and throw them away without anyone looking.

Now, Eva pushed away the free strands and grabbed hold of the ones she'd lose in a second.

"Wait." Eva looked up from her hair. George was standing next to her desk, his green hat looming over her head. His cheeks were dotted with fading pimples. "Can I help?"

"There seems to be only one way out of this," Eva replied.

"Can I give it a try?" He knelt down to the floor. His knees pressed against the cold tile. "Is that alright?"

Her stomach and chest contracted in embarrassment. Her heart raced faster with each moment she looked at George. Her scalp screamed with any slight movement. And on top of all that, Eva hated when other people touched her hair. They either wanted to braid it or stroke it or pull on it, and even without her permission, they still did it.

But George did ask. And it seemed there was no other way than her original, painful plan. The tips of her ears were burning. This was not the attention she wanted. She felt too seen. Like a child. Her hands were still on her hair, ready to free herself. She looked at George's face which was now parallel to hers. His eyes were green like his hat, and his lips were chapped.

“If you think you can get it out,” she said. His hands slid in in place of hers. Eva wished they’d touched.

“Let me know if I’m hurting you, and I’ll stop.”

Eva nodded. Strand by strand he untangled them from the bolt, each one falling down her back once free. “There we go,” he said, unlooping the last piece.

“Thank you so much,” Eva said. She had been holding her breath the whole time. “I was really ready to sacrifice my hair to the chair.”

“First I hold the door open for you and now this. Next time you’ll have to write me a thank you note,” he said, rising from the floor and holding his gaze on Eva. His face held a grin that rose higher on one side.

She grabbed her backpack off the ground and stood up as well. Mr. Porter was at his desk, pretending not to witness their interaction. Eva’s cheeks warmed like an oven preheating. Other students started filing into the classroom for third period.

“Where are you headed?” he asked.

“Second floor. Mrs. Naylor’s.”

George initiated their exit from the classroom, and together they descended the staircase to the second floor. The entire way down the stairs and across the hallway Eva wanted to say something. She felt words bubbling from inside her chest up to her tongue, but her lips stayed sealed. Getting her hair caught was embarrassing enough—she didn’t want to even risk speaking, not knowing what might come out of her mouth. Whatever they had in this moment was good, and she didn’t want to mess it up. Then again, George wasn’t saying anything either as they walked. Maybe he was just as nervous.

They arrived outside her third period door just as the bell rang to start class.

“Keep an eye out for dangerous chairs,” he said, shifting his weight between his feet.

“I will,” said Eva. Her voice emerging unexpectedly high. “And really, thanks for your help. My hair and I are incredibly grateful.”

Eva’s brain told her to head into class since she was already late, but her feet stayed put, her eyes remained locked on his. They stood in front of one another next to the wall of lockers. She could smell his deodorant. A sort of spicy mint. She worried her own would fail her from the profuse sweat that was accumulating under her armpits and backpack straps.

“I’d better head into class,” Eva said, breaking their silence. She wasn’t sure how long their quiet had lingered. He wiped his palms on the sides of his pants, turned the handle, and opened the door to her classroom. Mrs. Naylor’s voice slid through the open space.

“Well, see you later, Eva.”

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Eva didn’t see George for the rest of the day. Her eyes scanned the lunchroom, the hallways, and all her classrooms, but he had somehow disappeared from her life just as quickly as he had come into it. But she didn’t need to see him in order to think about him. Each class he entered her thoughts, unbidden. In English, she thought of his voice which was low and mumbly. In biology she thought of his thin and flared nostrils—of what the spring air felt like passing through his nose to his lungs as he inhaled, and what it might feel like against her skin as he exhaled. And it was in last period study hall that she started to doodle, drawing embarrassing hearts in the margins of her notes and their names side by side so she could see what they might look like together.

Watching the seniors prepare for prom made Eva notice couples everywhere. And it further emphasized the aching sensation that made her body feel hollow when she fell asleep at

night. But Eva knew her thinking was irrational. How crazy it was that yesterday George was just another boy in her math class, and today he was constantly on her mind. Her drastic change in feelings felt absurd. But it also felt nice. It was nice because she had never really felt so fixated on someone before or felt her stomach fill with warmth like it had all day. And it was especially nice thinking he might feel the same way. Maybe this was spring. Something new was emerging.

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Her car was parked under the shade of a tree, so the seats felt cool even through her clothes. Eva drove home with the windows down and the music loud enough to hear over the whipping of the wind. It was then that she was thankful for the car—for the independence she had in this moment. Along the tree lined roads, the buds on thin branches were growing a forest green. At a stop sign, she watched two birds land on a branch and pick at the bud with their beaks. Eva pressed on the gas and the birds flew away.

At dinner that night, Eva's mind was still on George. The kitchen window was cracked open, and the cool spring air whisked in an optimism that she felt flowing into her veins. She wanted to tell her mom about George and found herself pausing before bites. But the more she attempted to formulate the story in her head, the sillier it began to sound. Telling her mom he untangled her hair from a chair no longer felt like a heroic act. If anything, the entire situation was just embarrassing. Then again, she knew that her mom would be supportive. She would tell Eva how wonderful it was to have a crush, how it was about time someone recognized how special of a girl she was. And she would be curious and ask questions. What was George like? What are his interests? What does she like about him? At the same time, she also knew that if she said something, her mom would encourage her to take action, to call him, to make things

happen. So Eva decided things weren't yet real enough to share. For a moment she considered that things might not work out between them—that maybe he wouldn't like her as much as she thought she might like him. And if she told her mom now and then things failed, she'd be even more mortified having to admit that. Instead, she decided that keeping George to herself was safest. She would preserve their quiet flirtation until it actually became audible.

Later that evening, after Eva showered and her mom got in bed to watch the news, Eva sat down at the table in their shared office space. She hadn't quite known if George had been joking when he asked her to write him a thank-you, but she felt just daring enough to assume he would appreciate the act. She really did think he seemed interested. Why would he have come over to her desk in the first place during math and then have walked with her to her next class. She knew these were all such little things, but something about them seemed genuine. She also noticed how his green eyes held her gaze just long enough for her to know it was intentional. And how his forearms were flexed from nerves when he rubbed his sweaty palms on his pants as they stood in the hall. And that when she turned to walk into class and he headed to his, he snuck one more glance before she disappeared into the room.

Eva pulled her box of stationary off the bookshelf next to the table. The paper was ivory, and her name was printed in peach cursive letters at the top. *Dear George*, she wrote. She thanked him for opening the door for her that morning, for helping her with her caught hair, and for walking with her to her next class. She said she enjoyed his company and kind gestures and that she would return the favor in the future. But that perhaps, in the meantime, he might want to do something with her. Even just work on math homework together. She stopped before signing her name at the bottom. Love, Eva? That was too bold. How would Mattie do this? *Sincerely, Eva*. Then, in peach colored ink, she drew a little heart next to her name. She slid the notecard



into its envelope and licked it shut. She liked knowing that his fingers would peel open where her lips had been.

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Later that night before going to sleep, she picked out the perfect spring outfit. She laid out jeans, a yellow lace tank top, and her tan sandals. But when she slid out of bed the next morning and pushed open her curtains, the sky was grey, the clouds looked heavy, and the wind whipped the thin branches on the bare trees. She cracked open her window and stuck her hand out. Yesterday's warmth felt like it had never existed. There was no way she could wear her planned outfit. She would settle for a sweatshirt since her favorite sweaters were in the wash. But she would still wear her sandals—she was a Minnesotan after all.

“I saw you got your stationary out,” Eva's mom said upon Eva's entrance into the kitchen. Eva looked at her watch and wanted to get to school at the same time as yesterday in hopes of seeing George at the door.

“Yeah, I needed to write a thank-you,” Eva said. She was an awful liar, but thankfully that was the truth.

“Good for you. No one writes thank you notes these days. I'm sure they'll appreciate the gesture. To a teacher?”

“Just someone at school, yeah.” Eva grabbed the keys off the hook, jingling them loudly as to indicate her exit. “To a boy in my class, actually.” The ridges of the keys dug into her palms from her tight grip. Her face was suddenly warm. She wasn't sure what had come over her.

“Oh, Eva, how wonderful! And so nice you're writing him a note. You're father used to write me love letters like that.”

“It’s not a love letter. It’s just a thank you note. It’s really nothing.” Eva’s mom waved away her dismissive comment.

“He’s going to love it. I can’t wait to hear how it goes. What’s his name?”

“George.” Eva felt her ears turning red. “I’ve got to go, Mama.”

“Yes, yes, okay. Good luck, sweet girl. And good for you. Drive safely.”

Eva drove safely to school, still watching her speed even though she felt rushed. The long walk from her parking spot to the school was blustery, and for a moment she reconsidered her open-toed footwear. She’d upped her hair in a braided high pony, so it stayed tamed even in the cold wind. Her cheeks were pink, and her numb fingers wrapped around the handle of the door, swinging it open for herself. No George in sight.

All Eva could think about in Mandarin was George and the letter. She felt for it safely tucked in the padded laptop pocket of her backpack each time she reached in to grab out a book or folder. When she touched it, she thought about how it might feel like moving from her hand to his. What the textured envelope might feel like under his fingertips. But she’d pull her hand away from it before she could smudge his name written on the outside or wrinkle its crisp edges. The impossibly slow class finally ended, and she flew up to the third floor, feeling the card pressed against her back as she climbed the stairs. She watched the door from her desk, and just as the bell sounded, he walked in and found his seat.

Math was somehow moving even more slowly than the previous period. Eva only let herself look over her shoulder at George once while she was passing papers behind her. He didn’t see her when she did, though. His square chin was pressed against his neck, his gaze intently set on his work. His hair fell forward over his face, and he tucked it gently behind his

ear. Eva's underarms tickled with sweat. She slid her hand into her bag, feeling for the note in its pocket. It was still there, unharmed.

Mr. Porter handed out a five question quiz a few minutes before class was over and told everyone they could leave when they finished. Her stomach dropped. They needed to finish at the same time so she could give him the thank-you. She hurried through the questions, not caring how she did on the quiz as long as she was able to meet George in the hall. Eva listened for movement behind her, and when she heard his long footsteps head to the front of the room, she scribbled her name at the top, gathered her things into a bundle in her arms, and turned in the quiz.

George was already a few strides down the hall, so Eva had to call after him. He turned and she hurried across the speckled tile floor towards him. Her backpack jostled her from side to side while she speed-walked. She hoped she didn't look as awkward as she felt.

"Hi," Eva said in an exhale. She tried to hide her panting. Her heart was pounding in her ears.

"Oh hey," he replied. He looked at her for only a moment before turning his attention and feet forwards down the hall. Eva suddenly realized she'd need to say something more.

"What'd you think of that quiz?"

"Not too bad, I guess. Didn't think much about it."

She paused again, not knowing why their conversation was so strained nor how she could smoothly transition to giving him the note.

"I wrote you the thank you note," Eva blurted out, surprising herself. "Like you mentioned yesterday. The one you said you wanted." She put her backpack in front of her body and pulled out the note. His brow furrowed then raised.

“Oh yeah, I forgot about that.” Eva’s hand shook handing him the card. She watched his fingers peel open where her lips had once been. She wanted to know if he thought anything of that. He mouthed the words as he read them. Eva’s face was burning. She imagined what she would do if she received such a letter, what it would be like to see the cautious handwriting, the carefully phrased questions, the words printed just for her. His eyes reached the bottom of the ivory page. They paused there for what felt like a long time. He bit his chapped bottom lip, and the color of his cheeks turned the color of his pimples. Still looking at the note, he slid it back into its casing.

“You really didn’t have to write me a thank-you.”

“No I know, I wanted—”

“Like, I meant it as a joke.”

An “oh” emerged from Eva’s mouth. All the heat that had been building in her body suddenly escaped, and a chill ran from the back of her neck down through her limbs. She felt pressure building in her cheeks and forehead. She thought it felt like the entire school had collapsed around them, but that wasn’t the feeling. This felt like nothing she’d ever experienced. Like nothing she’d ever felt before.

“Right yeah, well, I meant it as a joke too.” She looked up at his face. He looked embarrassed for her. She noticed his thin hand holding the card. There was no indentation from his sweaty palm on the paper. He wasn’t even nervous. He didn’t even care.

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Eva wanted to cry all day long, but by the time she got to her car and had the space to do so, she was too numb to conjure up tears. She plugged in her phone and turned the music as loud as it would go, then backed it off. She took a left off of Old Crystal Bay Road, so she could go

the long route home. She couldn't go home yet and face her mom. She knew she shouldn't have told her about George in the first place. Now she'd have to tell her everything that happened. How wrong she had been. How foolish.

She sped down winding Willow Drive, hitting the curves with more speed than she was used to and feeling her body lean in its force. The music was loud, and the grey wind whizzed against the sides of the car. The turn coming up was sharp, but she wanted to see how fast she could come at it. She had never felt this way before. She wanted to be in charge of this very moment. She thought about the car flying around the turn, losing control, and plummeting deep into the surrounding woods. What it would feel like if the front bumper drove straight into the thick trunk of a tree, halting all motion. Stopping all sense of movement. The windshield shattering down on top of her.

Eva turned the steering wheel and pressed on the gas. The car whipped on the turn but not quite enough to keep her in her own lane. She veered into the opposite side, the car still leaning left. Eva felt the momentum through her limbs. She couldn't feel her heart beating—the adrenaline was rushing too quickly. Eva slammed on the breaks.

Paused in the middle of the tree lined road, Eva broke out in a cold sweat. She composed herself enough to direct the car back into its lane before coming to the stop sign at the end of the road. She could feel her heart again, and it was pounding so heavily her chest ached.

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Once home, Eva looped the keys around the hook. Her dad's keys. The car he didn't drive because he wasn't home. She never wanted to hear their jingle again. They had given her independence, the freedom she thought she desired. And then they betrayed her. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to want anymore, or what she was supposed to believe in.

She reopened the back door to shut the garage door. The sun had just barely started to set since it was April, but she could still feel a chill still slide through the closing door. This was Minnesota. The grass wouldn't green, the flowers wouldn't bloom, and the birds wouldn't sing for a least a few more weeks.

## Summer

Eva arrived fifteen minutes early to the first day of her summer job at the corn stand. She hoped to make a good impression, but when no one was at the stand for her to impress, her confidence waned, and nervous energy settled in her stomach. She got out of her car and stood in front of the green and white tarped wagon. The wagon consisted of painted green pieces of plywood on top of a metal structure with wheels so it could be hooked up to the back of a truck. The sun already felt hot on top of her head, and it had yet to reach its zenith. She wanted to sit down on the curb of the parking lot where the wagon lived for a month and a half out of the year, but she didn't want to look lazy when Dennis, her boss, arrived. Instead, she leaned her butt up against the side of the wagon that was exposed. She waited. The flower shop that stood parallel to the wagon looked quiet inside. Only employees wandered aimlessly, watering plants in the green house.

The rumble of wheels on a loose axle grew loud as it approached. A man in a straw hat slowly slid out of the driver's seat and opened the back of the rusty blue truck.

"Come grab these beans," Dennis said. His voice was low and slow and midwestern. He pointed towards a large white pail of green beans. Eva grabbed the wire handle that was hanging on its side and slid them off the truck.

"Where should I—"

"Just put them on the wagon. We need to get the sides up." Dennis walked to the far side of the wagon, unlatched something underneath, and raised the tarped side up and over his head. It stayed put like an awning above him, the tip of his hat just brushing the metal beam that supported the side. He did the same to the other side, so that the wagon turned into its own stand. A little green shop on wheels.

“Hop on up,” Dennis said, looking at Eva and then at the back of the truck. She hoisted herself up, so she was standing in the back, her feet surrounded by gunny sacks of ears of corn.

“Slide them out to me, and I’ll carry them over. They’re heavy.” They were, indeed, heavy. Each sack probably had at least fifty ears of corn piled inside. She felt her biceps flex and her fingers grip tightly as she latched onto each sack and pushed them towards Dennis. Without pause, he flung each one off the truck and tucked it underneath the wagon onto the pavement of the parking lot. Seventeen sacks later, the truck was empty. Eva could feel the unfamiliar and unused muscles in her arms and back that were suddenly awake and pulsing.

“Alright let’s see you get one up on the wagon,” he said. Eva nodded, since she wanted to prove she was strong enough, and she also couldn’t say no to her boss on the first day.

She squatted down, grabbed the flaps of the sack, and sprung herself up, heaving the corn on top of the wagon. Then she raised the bottom of the sack up over her head, hoping the corn would tumble out. It didn’t. She shook the wet and dirty sack thinking that might loosen the ears inside. Instead, mud unlatched itself from the fabric and attached to Eva’s skin. Dennis reached over and took the sack himself, moving Eva to the side.

“You’d do better with a few more inches on you. Getting it up higher helps the corn to come out better.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Eva said, her face warm from the heat and embarrassment. “Height has never really been my thing.” She hated herself for trying to make a joke. Dennis grinned underneath the shade of his hat.

“Apparently not. But you’ll figure it out. Not the height thing. The sacks are what I meant. Those will get easier.”



His fingers still gripped the fabric of the sack. He raised it up with only one hand, and the corn tumbled out, making thudding sounds as they hit the wagon's surface. Dennis threw the sack behind him onto the patch of grass next to the curb and walked back to his truck. Eva grabbed the ears of corn that rolled across the wagon. She began to line them up, stacking them neatly in rows and on top of one another. She wanted to look busy—or at least look like she knew what she was doing.

Eva had applied to work at Dennis's corn stand in the beginning of June, right after school ended. She had seen a handwritten note hanging in the flower shop next door when she and her mom stopped by to buy new gardening gloves. Her mom encouraged her to apply since she thought Eva didn't have any summer plans yet and was looking for a way to occupy her time. Eva actually had planned to fill her time working on writing a collection of poetry, but she hadn't told her mom that. Admitting to her mom she liked writing felt embarrassing for some reason. And it wasn't that her mom wouldn't support her if she did tell her, it was that this very personal part of her life would become exposed—and she wasn't sure she was ready for that to happen quite yet. As an attempt at an excuse to get out of the corn stand job, she reminded her mom she didn't have any farming experience. Her mom said she didn't need any to just sell corn. Eva hadn't seen a way out and didn't want to put up a fight, so she called Dennis's number that same day. He offered her the job right then.

Now, suddenly, when Dennis was moving his truck and parking it in a spot, another vehicle pulled up next to the stand. Out of a tiny maroon two door car emerged a large man in overalls and a railroad cap.

“You selling corn here?” he asked. His voice sounded as though it started deep in his stomach. It carried all the way to Eva's ear as he trudged forward in his big black boots.

“Yes, we sell corn,” Eva replied as though she’d been working here all along.

“What kind and for how much?” The man was now standing next to her. She could see the wearing metal on his overall buckles. His thick arms were freckled and hairy.

“What kind?” Eva repeated back, wondering to herself how there were different kinds of corn. In response, the man grabbed an ear of corn from the middle of her neatly stacked pile, causing the other ears to tumble down. She reached to capture the rollaways before they fell off the wagon.

“Mhmm. Just what I thought,” he said after peeling down the husk. Eva felt the veins in her neck puff from the heat inside her body. “It’s bicolor—yellow and white. I’ll take a dozen in two bags and a basket of your beans if you got them. Your watermelons ready yet? I want a big seedy one—none of that seedless crap. Nothing better than spitting the seeds out as far as you can.”

Eva felt her heart pounding in her ears, and she was sure every inch of her body was sweating. She glanced over at Dennis who had parked but was still sitting in his truck looking down at his lap. She wanted to run over and ask him for help. Instead, she decided to attempt self-sufficiency. So, she grabbed a plastic THANK YOU bag from a small wicker basket sitting on her left. Her damp fingers were able to separate the plastic sides from one another and let air fill the cavity.

“A dozen, you said?”

“Baker’s dozen, please. In two bags.”

“Okay, yes, sure, of course.” Eva began placing ears of corn into the bag, counting in her head as she went.

“This the first day you’re open? I didn’t miss the start, did I? I look out for your sign every day starting in June.” His attempt at conversation made her lose count.

“Yes, today’s our first day for the season.” *Two, three, four*, she counted to herself.

“Ah, good. A real shame to miss even one day of this beautiful sweet corn.” Eva tried to tune him out. *Five, six*—she wasn’t sure if Dennis sold bakers dozens, but she wasn’t sure she should refuse the customer—*seven*. Next bag.

Eva estimated a large handful of beans and put them in their own bag. They hadn’t unloaded any watermelons, so she told him they weren’t ready to be picked yet. She had no idea if that was true or not, but it sounded feasible enough. His black boots tapped the pavement impatiently.

“Here you go,” she said. She picked up all the bags by their handles. She could feel their thin plastic weighed down by the heavy ears. She swung them off the wagon and tried to slide them onto the man’s open hands, but his palms were thick and sweaty, and the loops were getting twisted around one another. He tried to push his hand through an opening but missed the hole. Instead, the force of his hand against the bag caused them all to crash into one another. The corn inside the bags shifted and punctured the bottom of the plastic. The corn ripped through and tumbled out onto the dusty parking lot. And in her attempt to catch them as they fell, the bean bag, too, dropped out of her slippery hands and emptied all over the ground.

“Oh my gosh, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Eva dropped to the pavement, frantically picking up the ears that were rolling underneath the wagon and the beans that were now covered in dust. Her shirt clung to her sweat covered back as she leaned over, and dirt and gravel from the ground stuck to and pressed into her damp knees. Eva was too embarrassed to look up while she gathered the scattered produce, but she could feel the shadow of his large body loom over her.

“What’s going on here?” asked a new yet familiar voice. Dennis had silently returned to the stand. She turned her head and looked up at him. His work boots were covered in dry mud, and the knees of his jeans were stained brown

“Your worker girl dropped all my corn and beans,” said the man. Eva stood up and plopped all the vegetables onto the stand. She dusted them off with her hands. Dennis took the broken bags from the man and eyed them. She wondered if Dennis was going to defend her. She wanted him to protect her from the customer’s accusations. He wasn’t wrong that she had dropped everything, but she didn’t want to be blamed.

“Did you put the corn in with the soft side towards the bottom?” Dennis motioned what he meant as he asked. Eva shook her head. She had faced them the other way around.

“Makes sense. The stalk ends are pointer and rip holes in the plastic.” He looked squarely at Eva as he spoke before turning to the customer. “We’ll get you some new corn, sir.”

Dennis put together two new bags of corn and beans, gave the man his change, and the customer clunked his way in his big heavy boots back to his tiny car.

“That man’s name is also Dennis,” said Dennis. He walked to the other side of the wagon and faced Eva directly. “Good man. He drives school buses and limousines.”

Eva wasn’t sure if she was supposed to respond, and she couldn’t tell if Dennis was upset about what had just happened. But she did know that her entire face was pulsing with heat and her body was covered in sweat.

“I’ll have to check to make sure the corn you dropped is still alright to sell. I only sell the highest quality corn—none that’s been bruised or bumped.”

Eva wanted to crawl under the wagon and never face him again. She had been at the stand all of thirty minutes and had already managed to ruin the corn and embarrass herself. If

only she had said she'd rather stay home and write all summer. Maybe admitting that to her mom would have been less humiliating than this.

Dennis went through the prices of the produce. Corn was four dollars for a half dozen and seven dollars for a dozen. Big baskets of green beans were three dollars, and the little ones were two. He said something about a deal on the cucumbers and zucchinis, but Eva had a hard time following. He told her he'll stay until around noon each day, and after that she'd be on her own until close at five.

Eva's mouth hung agape, and her eyes held open wide. She hadn't realized she'd run the stand all alone. How would she ever remember the prices of everything? She'd need a calculator to add it all up. Or at least a pencil to write everything down. Dennis made her nervous—he was unconventionally intimidating. But she didn't want him to leave.

“But I'll stay the whole day today. You're still in training and need to learn the lay of the land.” Eva's shoulders dropped from being held by her ears. “Now, let's talk corn.”

Dennis spent the rest of the day explaining how to run the stand, where and when to put the street signs out, how to price special orders, the different varieties of corn and their unique tastes, and what to do with the money at the end of the day. Eva did a lot of listening and nodding, trying to absorb every detail of information he relayed to her. He had run this stand for twenty-seven years and was the renowned farmer for the Long Lake area. Dennis had created a legacy, and Eva was now a part of it. Even if she hadn't wanted this job in the first place, it was hers now and she had to do things right.

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The next day, was just as hot as the last, and the spike in humidity made the air look foggy and bodies feel heavy. Dennis arrived in his truck at exactly 10:53, and Eva now knew

their routine. She got the pail of beans and zucchinis and cucumbers off the truck, then slid all the sacks down to Dennis. She put out the closest street sign and bagged up a few dozens and half dozens—soft side down in the bag—for when an influx of customers arrived. They prepared the stand together mostly in silence, which Eva was glad for since she was still embarrassed after her mistake the day before. Plus, in these long stretches of quiet, she was able to think about her writing—the poems she would be crafting if she were at home. Then again, part of her knew she wouldn't be since she refused to write when anyone was around and might know what she was doing. She didn't want anyone to know. So maybe it was best she was here, at the corn stand, writing poems in her head, her mind both pen and paper.

When the lunch lull hit, Eva felt the humidity rest on her limbs and weigh down her shoulders. Dennis must have too since he eased his way onto the surface of the wagon.

“Go ahead and sit if you'd like,” he said, breaking the silence Eva desperately wanted to preserve. Dennis was tall and didn't have to jump like Eva did to get up on top of the wagon. They sat on opposite sides, their backs facing one another but their heads turned. Quiet settled all around them again. Maybe they would just stay like this. Just sitting—no talking. The only sound came from the leaky hose faucet next to the garden store and the squirrels that ran up the tree next to the stand.

“I'll have some really excellent corn to pick next week. It's my favorite variety. Called ambrosia. It's sweet but not too sweet. Still got that corn flavor.”

“I look forward to trying it,” Eva replied.

“You're going to be in eleventh grade this fall?” asked Dennis. “Got a favorite subject by now?”

“I’m pretty decent at math,” Eva said. That was the truth, she was good at math. It just wasn’t her favorite. But she couldn’t admit she loved English class best. She didn’t want him to ask further questions. Talking about her passions to anyone felt invasive. “Did you have a favorite?”

“Reading. Well, maybe not as much when I was in high school, but definitely now. Can’t read all that much during the corn season, though. Too busy and tired.”

“Do you have a favorite book?”

Dennis let out a long, throaty *hmm*. “I’ve always been a fan of Mark Twain, but I think my favorite book is *My Ántonia*. Willa Cather is the author. It’s about Midwest farm life—Nebraska farming. You might like it—considering you are a corn seller now.” He looked away from Eva and up towards the tarped ceiling of the wagon as if he was making a mental note of something to himself.

“I used to get a lot of reading done here at the stand when I would stay all day,” he continued, “before I hired young people like you to help out. When it gets really quiet in the late afternoon, I’d sit up here on the wagon like we are now, stretch out my legs and read for as long as I could until a customer came. I’d even do a little writing now and then. Little stories and such. Maybe if I hadn’t been such a famous farmer, I would’ve become a writer.” Dennis chuckled to himself, his strong shoulders lightly bouncing.

Eva’s gaze remained on Dennis as he stared up at the striped awning above them. She wondered how he was so open about himself. About his writing. He seemed like someone who could never be embarrassed. Like he could drop an entire sack of corn and not turn red. His confidence was intriguing and uncomfortable.

Dennis closed his eyes and grinned, head still tilted up. Eva felt the humidity sitting inside her. She was damp with hot and nervous sweat. They sat in silence again, but this time, Eva had trouble finding the headspace to mentally write. She wondered if that's what Dennis was doing right now, without any restriction or hesitation.

"I can feel the lunch rush coming," he said, finally. His eyes were still closed, his body still relaxed on the wagon. "Let's bag up some corn."

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Later that afternoon, after the lunch rush lulled, Dennis got in his truck and pulled up to the side of the stand.

"I'm taking off for the day," he said, rolling down his window halfway. He handed her a thin stack of five- and ten-dollar bills. "Put these in the wallet. You're low on change."

Eva took the money. She wanted to ask him how much the remaining tomatoes were. And if he might stay longer.

"You'll be fine," he said. "Bring the wallet home with you tonight and hide it somewhere in your house until tomorrow. Throw the old sacks in the center then put down the sides of the wagon when you're done." His truck pressed forward out of the parking lot.

Eva looked at the wagon and tried to remind herself of the reality of her job. She really was just selling vegetables. There was nothing to be nervous about.

After a half an hour with no new customers, a light blue minivan parked next to the stand. A mom who looked around her own mom's age got out of the car with her oversized purse hanging on her shoulder.

"Hi dear, I'm so happy to see you're open," she said. She had a calming voice. Eva thought of her mom at home. She wondered what she was doing. "Can I just get four ears of



corn, please. I would get a half-dozen, since I know that's how you usually sell them, but it's just me and my son at home tonight, and neither of us should eat more than two."

She motioned her head towards the car upon mentioning her son. A boy, probably her age, sat in the passenger seat, looking down at his phone. He had messy blonde hair that hung over his eyes.

"Four is no problem at all," Eva replied, turning her attention away from the boy and back towards his mother. She lined up four ears of corn and grabbed a plastic bag out of the basket.

"Oh wait," she said. She put her hand on Eva's arm for just a moment as a way of stopping her. Her touch was light, and her palms were smooth. "I have reusable bags in the car—hang on."

She hurried back to the car, saying something about always forgetting to bring them into the store with her. She opened the door, and the boy looked up. She asked him to grab the bags from his side. He handed them to his mom, and she came back towards Eva. His gaze didn't return to his phone but stayed on Eva. His face was covered in freckles. He smiled at her and she did the same. She bagged up the corn, paying attention to the exchange with the boy's mom, but she liked that she could feel his eyes still on her. She was glad she wore her summer skirt and tank top. She wondered if he noticed the way she looked. If he thought she was pretty.

His mom took the bags, loaded them in the backseat, and started the car. They pulled away slowly. He gave her a little wave as he passed by. Eva returned the wave, then quickly looked away. She still made sure he saw her smile. She figured they'd probably never see each other again, but that was okay. She liked that for even just a moment, she was noticed.

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The previous day's humidity swelled into a thunderstorm that night, and after the release came a wet and cool morning the next day. The sixty-degree weather wasn't actually that cold, but the drastic drop from the past warm days made Eva feel a certain chill run through her bones. The sacks, corn, and even the money inside the leather wallet they used as a cash register were damp from the overnight rain. After getting the stand ready for the day, Eva's hands were frozen and pruned. She rubbed them together to produce heat, but that created little reprieve. Dennis suggested they take turns walking through the garden store green house to warm up. He told Eva she could go first.

She walked across the parking lot to the store entrance, taking an immediate right turn into the steamy plastic enclosed room. She wandered between the rows of plants and the misters that kept them hydrated. Their light spray tickled her skin and left summer snowflakes on the hair on her arms. She looked out the condensation covered window at Dennis who was pacing around the stand, peaking at the tips of ears, snipping the ends of green beans, and reorganizing the zucchini and cucumber box. He seemed like he should be a very simple man to decipher, but even from only two days together, he had grown to be a complex character in Eva's mind. He was so attentive to detail and took such pride in what he did, all the while sitting back and letting a random sixteen-year-old help run the stand that brings in his livelihood. And this thing with writing, she just couldn't figure out. She was sure that if she had asked, he would have told her all about what he writes about, who his characters are. She wanted to know why he could be so open, and yet she could tell no one.

A mister to her right switched on and the sudden stream of light water brought her back to the present moment. She figured she had spent enough time warming up and headed back

outside to switch places with Dennis. And it was right as Dennis disappeared into the store that a dark grey SUV pulled up quickly next to the stand.

A man wearing worn black loafers slid out of the driver's seat. The hems of his pants were frayed, and he wore a too-large, tweed jacket.

"Hiya there, kid," the man said, pushing the door closed but not with enough force for it to shut completely. He looked and sounded older than the way he spoke. He shuffled forward towards the stand.

"Hi, how are you?" Eva asked. She didn't know the man, but she had gotten used to greeting people with a kind of warmth as though she'd known them for years.

"Not too bad. Better now, in fact, since I get to see a lovely young lady working the stand."

"How much corn can I get you?"

"No more pleasantries, I see. Rushing me right along."

"Sorry." She had grabbed an ear of corn to start bagging. Her hands were shaking.

"What's your name?"

"Eva."

"Aren't you going to ask me mine?" Eva didn't respond.

"It's Ted," he said, too impatient to wait while she paused.

"How old are you, Eva? Just starting high school?"

"I'll be a junior this fall."

"A junior, huh? Never seen a girl your age with that kind of hair still." Eva had worn it down because it was cool enough to not stick to the back of her neck. She immediately regretted

that decision. She wanted to respond with a snarky “thanks,” but her hands were still shaking, and she was worried her voice might come out that way too.

“Then again,” he continued, “you’ve definitely got the legs of a sixteen-year-old. You must be a sporty girl.”

Eva felt like she was going to vomit, but instead her throat grew tight.

“You know what you remind me of,” he said. “Ever been to one of those drive-in diners where they come up to your car window to take your order. Sort of an old-fashioned type of place.”

Eva knew what he was talking about but didn’t acknowledge it. He continued talking, nonetheless.

“I’m just thinking about how great those places were. You’d get to sit in your car and a nice young girl like yourself might glide up in rollerblades and her tiny little skirt with a big fat burger and fries on a tray. We didn’t even need drive-in movies because those diners came with dinner and a show.”

Why was he telling her this story? What was she supposed to respond? Heat was building in her face.

“If you grew up in my time, you’d definitely be perfect for the job.” He put his hand on her shoulder and held it there. She could feel his fingers pressed against her bra strap. His eyes traced her body until they stayed put on her face. She didn’t know where to look, or how to get his hand off of her. She wanted him to stop looking at her.

“Did you say a half dozen?” she asked, conjuring up just enough of a steady voice to change the subject and moving so his hand would release from her shoulder.

“I just want three of them. And they better be your best ones.” Eva began to slide the corn into a bag when Ted grabbed an ear out of her hand.

“This one is too big. I’ll pick out the good ones. You young ones are cute these days, but you just don’t know how things are done.”

Eva knew she needed to fight back. Even if she ruined Dennis’s reputation, she couldn’t let someone speak to her like that. But when she opened her mouth to speak, no fighting words emerged.

“Two dollars, right?”

Eva nodded. He handed her a five. She opened the wallet, but the bills were still damp and stuck together. She was having trouble pulling them apart.

“And you give me three dollars back. Geez, girls still can’t do math?” Eva could feel goosebumps all over her body, but her cheeks were burning. The inside of her head was spinning.

“They’re just stuck—”

“—Just give it to me, I’ll get them out.” Ted’s splotchy and wrinkled hands reached towards hers to snatch the wallet. Eva pulled it out of his reach. His fingers still grazed the backs of her hands. She took a step backwards away from Ted, almost falling into the wagon.

“Hey there, Dennis!” Ted said, turning himself around when he heard Dennis approaching.

“Hi Ted,” Dennis replied, nodding his head as an extra hello gesture.

“First time coming to the stand this year. I see you got a new girl working for you. Nice looking but—” Ted hushed his voice as though Eva couldn’t hear what he said next, “—doesn’t seem to have a lot going on up there other than that hair of hers.”

Dennis straightened his back and took his hands out of his pockets.

“She’s been working for only a week,” Dennis said and then paused. “And yet she’s better than all the workers I’ve had in all the year’s I’ve sold corn here.”

“Is that so?” said Ted. He turned his gaze from Dennis back towards Eva. “You’ll have to cut that hair of yours if you ever want to get a real job in the future. Completely unprofessional. I can’t believe your mother let you grow it that long.”

“Ahh because her job working for me isn’t real,” said Dennis.

“You know what I mean,” said Ted to Dennis, side-eyeing Eva.

“Well, I can’t believe your mother would let her son speak so rudely to their local farmer,” said Eva. Her sharp response surprised her. And surprised Dennis, too, since his unkempt eyebrows raised in shock. His mouth curled into a smile.

“You’ve got a real sassy one on your hands, Dennis. I wouldn’t suggest keeping her around much longer.”

“I’ve got a feeling she won’t be going anywhere for a while now,” said Dennis. “But I think it might be best if you leave.”

Ted rolled his eyes, snatched the change out of Eva’s hands along with his corn and left the stand.

The two of them moved around, adjusting things in silence just to keep their hands busy. Every now and then one of them would look up at the other, almost wanting to say something but deciding to preserve the quiet of the moment. Eva’s hands had stopped shaking, and her body returned to a normal temperature. He stepped out from under the awning and looked up at the sky. Eva poked her head out too. The sun was peeking through the clouds. Something

popped into Dennis's mind because he suddenly started walking towards his truck. Eva watched him reach into the passenger side through the open window and grab something off the seat.

"If you've got the time, let me know what you think," Dennis said. He handed her a small book with a cover that was both the color the sky and kernels of corn.

"But it's your favorite book," Eva said.

"I'm not giving it to you to keep. Just loaning it because I think you'll like it."

"Thank you, Dennis. Really, that's so nice of you." Warm energy was pulsing through her body. As disturbing as Ted's comments were, Eva no longer found them all that shocking; it was as though she'd had a dream of the experience, and the dream had now passed, and what remained only was a knowledge, perhaps, of what the world might have in store for her. And now she would be better at seeing it coming. She could protect herself. Or at least she could try, and she would not be surprised.

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At the end of the week, the sun overhead was scorching, but Eva didn't mind that her light grey shirt was now a shade darker. She liked that she was outside in the warmth working a job she was slowly getting good at. After the Saturday lunch rush, when no more customers were in sight, Eva ran to her car.

"You already got through it?" Dennis asked as Eva handed him back the book.

"Yes, of course. Some slow parts, but I really liked it. Thanks for sharing it with me. And in return, I have something for you to read." She slid a thin, stapled pile of papers towards him. He picked it up, and his eyes scanned the cover page, letting out an audible laugh.

"The Girl with the Really Long Hair. Can't imagine who that's about."

“I know the title isn’t all that creative. It’s just a draft. And you’re the first person to ever read my collection of poems.”

Dennis flipped through the pages. Eva nervously wiped her sweaty hands on her shirt.

“I’ll keep an eye out for the slow parts,” Dennis joked, sitting down on the wagon’s surface, taking off his straw hat, and placing it next to the corn.

And that was that. And the summer would hang around for at least another month and a half. Her tan would grow darker, her hair would grow longer, and the corn would grow until the warm nights blew in a cool breeze and the bugs no longer swarmed outdoor lights. It was still a Minnesota summer, July, and that was something she knew wouldn’t change for a while.



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