

THE SEWER BRIDE

by

Stephanie Adwoa Arhin

A Thesis

Submitted to the

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of

Master of Fine Arts

Creative Writing

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_____ Director

_____ Department Chairperson

_____ Dean, College of Humanities

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Fairfax, VA

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Stephanie Adwoa Arhin
Bachelor of Arts
Denison University, 2014

Director: Helon Habila Ngalabak, Professor
Department of Creative Writing

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DEDICATION

For my mother.

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ABSTRACT

THE SEWER BRIDE

Stephanie Adwoa Arhin, MFA

George Mason University, 2017

Thesis Director: Helon Habila Ngalabak

This thesis is a selection of chapters from my novel titled, *The Sewer Bride*. *The Sewer Bride* is an exploration of first-generation femininity and independence told from alternating perspectives. Alison (Al) Afreh is twenty-three years old and living in present-day Washington D.C. She lives like many other American girls her age: she goes to work, lives with a roommate, gets drunk on the weekends, and is engaged in a pseudo-platonic sexual relationship with her college friend Simon. Her American lifestyle and romantic choices are placed under a microscope when her mother Esther “temporarily” moves in with her. Novel chapters in the present-day are narrated from Al’s point of view. Every other chapter flashes back to Esther’s life, defining the woman she once was, and depicting her marriage with Kwesi. In addition to these chapters, the fictional myth of “The Sewer Bride” (a child bride who lives in sewers only to serve men) functions as a prologue to the novel and an extended metaphor of Esther’s life and Al’s number one fear.

THE SEWER BRIDE

Her name was Georgina Angelica Bishop. At the age of ten, she stood at four feet, one and a half inches. Some people say she was shorter. They're lying.

Sometimes, Georgina Bishop's mother would dress her in clothes from the Toddler Section at Rawlins Department store, though Georgina Bishop actively loathed any item of clothing with an image of a grinning teddy bear or bright a red Tonka trucks stitched onto it.

Georgina Bishop often wore her hair in two long pigtails above her shoulders and, despite being told not to, gnawed on the end of each strand with her jagged crown molars. She would chew for hours, grinding on her hair until a lock snapped. And then, because it would be disgusting to take saliva soaked hair out of her mouth, she swallowed each individual piece.

Whenever Georgina Bishop went to the park, and flipped over monkey bars, or tossed a football to her father, passersby would say things like: "what an athletic little boy!" "He's sure to go All-State one day!" "His parents must be so proud of him!" When it was revealed, via ponytail that Georgina was actually a girl lips flapped shut.

People say Georgina Bishop lived two towns over.

Maybe three.

Tommy Mackey said his cousin played against Georgina Bishop in junior soccer. She was the goalie. “A mother freakin’ dynamo!” Tommy showered his friends with spittle. Georgina Bishop was the sole reason Tommy’s older cousin, Clint Mackey, tore his meniscus and had to wear a cast for the duration of his fourth grade year. Clint Mackey said that during their soccer game, Georgina Bishop caught fifty-seven attempted-goals. With one hand. And an eye closed.

According to the soccer moms who brought apples and granola and other flavorless snacks for their children to consume after the game, Georgina Bishop left with six apples and seven granola bars stashed in the pockets of her lilac windbreaker from the Salvation Army. “She didn’t even say thank you,” one mother sneered as she packed up the trunk of her electric blue moderately expensive SUV. She took a sip of her iced soy latte before masking her face behind thick sunglasses. “Classless twit.”

Mrs. Penderton said that her sister once tried to cut Georgina Bishop’s split-end infested hair. She said her sister sat Georgina in one of those gorgeous, swively salon chairs and covered her torso with a plastic smock covered in bright red lips. It wasn’t until Mrs. Penderton’s sister brought the silver shears to Georgina’s strawberry blonde tresses that Georgina started to scream. She closed her eyes and kicked her legs out in front of her, shaking like she was being electrocuted. She whipped her hair in front of her, to the left, to the back, to the right. Her body jerked and writhed involuntarily, like a girl consumed by demonic possession. Georgina screamed, Mrs. Penderton’s sister temporarily blinded for three whole minutes as a fury of blonde invaded her pupils. Finally, Mrs. Penderton’s sister groaned. She said, “fine!,” ripped the smock from

Georgina Bishop's neck, and handed her a lollipop. "You are impossible Georgina Bishop! *Please* do not come back again soon! Have a nice day!"

"Rotten kid," Mrs. Penderton told Pastor Young after church when someone mentioned the Bishops. "A young lady musn't be so rotten."

No one knew much about the Bishops. Few knew that Paul was a physics professor at the community college, or that sweet Hilda devoted her entire life to her daughter. Few knew that Georgina Angelica Bishop – the "dynamo," the "classless twit," the "rotten kid" – was a miracle baby. That the Bishops had been trying for years, *praying* for the opportunity to be parents. Hilda gave up her dreams of becoming a professional dancer, placing her pointe shoes in a cardboard box and stowing it away in the attic. Paul his cigarettes. Each night, before the Bishops tried for their child, they would – the two of them, alone – kneel down at their bed and pray. Hilda Bishop wore a white lace nightgown, the moonlight cast an iridescent glow over her pure skin. Paul would watch her, clothed in a white t-shirt, blue boxers, and white tube socks. He would look to her as she opened her mouth. "Dear God..." And then he would close his eyes too, murmuring the words that had become so automatic to him, hoping for everything his wife wished for.

After they prayed, they would open their eyes. Paul Bishop would cradle his wife's head in his hand, his fingers caressing her neck, his palm on her chin. He would look at her, at her face only lighted by the moon, at her deep brown, worrying eyes. "I love you," he would whisper, his lips barely moving. His fingers trembling. Somehow,

the air was much colder after they prayed. “I love you so much.” He’d tighten his jaw, his eyes filling with tears. “Hilda, no matter what, I will always love you.”

No one knows that this is when Hilda told Paul that she loved him too. That no matter what, she would always love him too. And after she said that, with warm tears dripping down her cheeks, her bare knees still pressed against the cold hardwood floor, blisters forming on her exposed skin, Paul pulled her head towards his and kissed her.

No one knows when Georgina Bishop was conceived though everyone knows that in their late middle-age, Hilda and Paul Bishop finally conceived a child. Hilda carried her to term with zero complications and one solitary bout of morning sickness.

Both Hilda and Paul decided to wait until Georgina was ten to christen her. Her infancy was much more hectic than either had planned, and when she was four, Georgina profoundly declared she was an atheist! And she would never worship any God! Ever!

After years of prodding, and skillful conversion, Georgina Bishop was of adequate age and faith to be christened. So, on the day she turned ten and a half, Hilda woke up her only child, pulling the curtains open. She let the pastel yellow light wash over her daughter, Georgina’s eyes opening to the nudge of the sun.

That morning, Paul made strawberry and rhubarb pancakes, Georgina’s favorite, while Hilda sat her on the lid of the closed toilet seat and trimmed the tattered and frayed ends of her straw colored hair. Hilda also helped her daughter into her eggshell colored dress. And her stockings. And her frilly ankle socks. Georgina Bishop laced her oxford flats on her own.

She was ten and half, after all.

They drove to the church together. Paul in the driver's seat, Hilda in the passenger. They sang to the songs on the radio – older songs, *fun* songs – The Beegees and The Beatles – Stayin' Alive and Walkin' on Sunshine. Georgina swayed her body from side to side as she sang along in the backseat with her eyes closed.

No one knows what happened to Georgina Bishop after her christening.

The details are hazy; the day was just too hectic. Where were Paul and Hilda? Where was the priest? Why wasn't Georgina on the playground with the other kids? Why didn't she tie her shoes? Where was everybody?

It was a miracle that Georgina was even born, that her parents' moonlit prayers had been answered, that she was real – as real as a ten-year-old girl could be – despite her flaws. And what happened that afternoon after her christening – what I still struggle to comprehend – was a curse.

It has been said that Georgina Bishop was outside for some reason – maybe playing hopscotch, or jump rope, or practicing cartwheels, she was just so damn athletic – but no matter what she was doing, it has been agreed that her feet were on top of the sewer grates. And that the laces of her oxford flats were what he first saw, before he looked up. Before he saw her. And as quickly as he did, he knew he had to have her. So he grabbed her ankle with his aged and wrinkled hand, and he didn't let go. And I *know* that Georgina screamed, that she fought, and she cried, and pleaded for him to let go! Please let go! – *God, where were her parents?* – as he dragged her into the sewer. He gritted his teeth as he pulled her down, all four feet and one and half inches of her. All of her. He pulled her into the sewer where she she became his bride.

Forever.

PART ONE

IN BED

“What do you think of children?”

I lay in bed with a joint between my lips, my head pressed against my purple headboard. Simon sat on the edge of my bed with his arms at his sides. I traced the outline— the curve towards his neck, his sagged shoulders, the lopsided distance between his shoulder blades – I swallowed the urge to realign him. He stood up.

“What do you mean?”

He slid his arms through his sleeves and walked towards my desk, feeling around for his cigarettes. His boxers hung low at his waist. Pink. With tiny green velociraptors printed all over them. I tried not to smile. The Sunday morning sunlight rinsed his tanned skin an almost golden glow. The plastic blinds behind my bed painted striped shadows against my room, they cut across his skin, over his body, and around my walls. I pulled out the joint and exhaled up to the ceiling. Plumes of smoke expanded and magnified against the shadows. I inhaled again.

“What do you think of children?”

Simon slanted to the left, sliding a cigarette between his lips. I watched his actions on the opposite wall, a scene playing in my bedroom. He lit the cigarette and breathed in. Then out. As he smoked, he fingered through my inherited record collection, his long, thin fingers touching each album. Donny Hathaway. Curtis Mayfield. Marvin Gaye.

Prince. Purple Rain. He stopped. No one could resist Purple Rain. People were conceived to Purple Rain.

He opted for Curtis Mayfield.

But the children question.

“Don’t have any.” He answered smartly before turning around, wrinkles whisking his eyes. “Do you have any I don’t know about?”

“No.”

“Good.”

I tightened the sheet around my chest. Simon moved over to the record player. My bra hung on the needle. He whisked it away. I wrapped the sheet a little tighter. Simon placed Curtis Mayfield on the turn table. He stood with his back hunched, his profile to me, eyelid lowered, shadowed stripes masking his face. He took another drag from his cigarette.

I looked down at the burning end of my joint, at the orange and black and grey. I ruminated on my own question. “I will, though. One day.”

Simon placed the needle on the record.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?” He faced me again; his eyes level with my own. He knew I didn’t do that. Eye-contact. Instead, I focused my attention on the other parts of his face; the freckles that sprinkled his nose and scattered onto his cheeks, his slightly parted lips, the way my lipstick stained them a purplish-red. I studied him in pieces, the way you view an image

through a kaleidoscope – mouth, ear, eyes, nose – broken and disjointed, and still yet an original picture.

I answered without thinking about his question. “Because I’ll be here.” I glanced up at Simon’s green eyes. His black lashes. “And their grandparents will be here. And their uncles will be here.” I looked down at my lap. “And I think that’s important.”

He turned to face the record player. “I guess it is.” He slid the case in the space between my wall and the record player. “I mean, if you’re into children and all that.”

“Yeah.” I took another drag and closed my eyes. “I guess.” I felt Simon’s weight on the other side of my bed. His bony shoulder brushed against mine as he sat down. Arm against arm. He leaned against my headboard and exhaled, clasping my fingers between his. His thumb ran against my skin in slow, soft circles. His gravelly voice sang along to the record, his words hardly a murmur.

I wanted to ask him how he became a Curtis Mayfield fan – how a boy from a small, Alabama farm town had such an extensive vocabulary of R&B and soul music – I wanted to ask where he learned to sing, if his father could, or if he was a choir boy in church. I wanted to tell him where I was the first time I heard Curtis Mayfield, how my dad played records before I fell asleep each night, how I sang myself to sleep. But I held my breath. I filed it away with all the questions I didn’t ask – the ones that got too personal.

Another song came on. I opened my eyes. Simon ashed his cigarette. He unlaced his fingers from mine and stood up again, raising his arms up to the ceiling, his shirt creeping up his torso. He groaned while he stretched. “Fucking mornings.”

“Here.” I held out the last bit of my joint. I could never finish it by myself. Simon placed it in the crook between his lips and walked over to my bookshelf, picking up something – a thin paperback – and fanning it against his fingers.

“You read a lot.” He turned to me, as if his statement prompted a response.

“Yeah.”

“Huh.” He redirected his attention back to the bookshelf and the dozens of trinkets that occupied the space. Snow globes. Plants. Pictures. He surveyed each one, moving on to the next. “Wait.” He paused. He focused on something I couldn’t see, a smile brimming across his lips. “Oh my God. What’s this?” He pulled out the Barbie doll that lived in the back of the bookshelf, still boxed in her plastic packaging.

“Akua.”

“What?”

Akua. That’s what my mom named her. Akua Barbie Afreh. She stared back at me, unblinking, her deep brown eyes framed by ink black lashes. She smiled wide, as if she knew the typo on her box – *Ghanian Barbie* – was a well-crafted joke. I knew better. Simon held her between his hands, appraising her and her dark brown skin, her bright lipstick, and her red, yellow, and green zig-zag patterned dress. It looked just like the Kente dresses my mom used to clothe me in when we went to family events and parties. They were beautiful but heavy, fitted like robes, too fancy to wear for extended periods of time.

“Nothing.” I reached in my nightstand for another joint. “Just put her back.”

“Why?” Simon grinned again.

I lit up, shaking my head. No one asked me about Akua. No one asked me why, as a child, I only had dolls with blonde hair and blue eyes. No one asked me how my mom felt when I walked up to her one day after school – Gymnastics Barbie’s pale legs between my fist – and inquired why I didn’t have blonde hair and blue eyes like Barbie. Why my skin was so dark and my hair so curly. I don’t know where my mom found my Ghanaian Barbie who wore gold earrings and a folded headscarf just like me. And only my mother questioned why I never took her out of the box, why Akua never played amongst my other toys, why I kept her twenty years later.

“Don’t feminists hate Barbies?” Simon bit his lower lip, venturing into tepid waters.

“Shut up!” I extended my middle finger and pushed it towards him for emphasis.

“Okay! Alright!” Simon tossed the box back on the bookshelf. He placed the unfinished joint between his lips.

I rolled my eyes.

He sat down on my bed, picking up my hand and pressing it against his lips.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” I exhaled. “Whatever.” I held the joint out in front of me. “This is some good shit,” I murmured, nudging his shoulder.

“I thought you were quitting.”

“Ssh.” I placed my finger on his lips. “Don’t ruin this.”

Simon chuckled and placed his joint in the ashtray. I handed him mine. “If you want my opinion, which you never ask for,” he held the joint out in front of him,

laughing. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with quitting. It’s actually quite admirable to stop something because you want to.”

“Maybe,” I nodded, “but my dad says quitting’s for losers.”

Simon frowned. “You know what I mean.”

I sat in silence for bit. “Yeah.” I patted his knee. “Thank you.”

I meant it.

THE NORTH STAR (JUNE 1983)

She met Kwesi once before he proposed, after her first year of college.

She sat in the aisle seat on the plane, a book clutched between her hands, her palm sticky with sweat. She hadn't been home in nearly a year – the price of airfare too high to justify frequent trips back and forth – and almost forgot what Ghana felt like. London had left her thinner, her weekly meals of banku, fufu, lamb, red meat, and stew traded in for fish, chips, peas, and Shepherd's Pie. The evidence was all on her body, the roundness and fullness of figure replaced by sharp lines and edges. Angles instead of curves. Bones instead of breasts. She could already imagine what her mother would say, witnessing her daughter's sudden change. With her thin physique and paler complexion, her mother would swear she was turning into *obruni*, a white woman.

Esther slipped on her sunglasses once she walked off the plane and down the steps. Africa's unforgiving sun smacked her skin. *Wo kwasea! Where have you been, oh?* Esther lifted her head up to the sky, soaking in the sun, the warmth, her Ghana. Before she could take a breath, the man behind her bumped her forward. He was a balding man from Edinburgh, in Accra on business. He drank five glasses of whisky and snored the whole flight, Esther remembered.

“Miss, are you awright?”

“Yes,” Esther straightened up and nodded, cutting off the man’s speech about heatstrokes rising to all-time highs in July. He’d read about it in a National Geographic someone gave him at work. A bloody-fucking shame. Esther cleared her throat. “Yes. Thank you.” She proceeded to walk, making up for the five seconds in which she held up foot traffic. She kept her book posed between wet hands, her schoolbag slung over her shoulders.

The walk from the plane to the airport was longer than Esther had remembered. In London, the plane flew straight into the terminal. From one air-conditioned box to another, she’d marveled. Her first steps in London were on blue carpeting, surrounded by white walls and glass windows. She’d felt like she was in a museum, the entire city of London on display.

Ghana was not the same.

There were no windows and carpets ushering her into the city. Instead, there were concrete walkways, mosquitos, and a red, yellow, and green sign – the same colors of the nation’s flag – with the word *Akwaaba* spelt in cut-out letters. *Welcome. You’re here.*

Esther doubled her paces, striding along the large lot that separated the airplane from the airport. She tried not to focus on the soreness in her legs, or the way her book slipped between her grip, or the dryness in her mouth – she should’ve taken another bottle of water. Instead, she watched the man who walked in front of her, his head the same shape as a basketball, a nearly perfect sphere. *A true Ghanaian, shreh.* As he walked, he carried two large duffel bags on each shoulder. The cuffs of his jeans – starched and ironed three times over – dragged across the concrete, the denim ribboning

into thin frays. Esther could imagine what her mother would say about this man with his Afro, buttoned-down shirt, and tight jeans. *Shreh! Look at the way he is spoiling them! Dressed like Michael Jackson!* In the heat, the jeans glued to his thighs. The back of his neck dripped with sweat. *Wo jeme! How stupid. Showing off like that.* Her mother would suck on her two front teeth, annoyed and unimpressed.

As Esther walked through the airport's double-doors, she looked up at the sign again. *Akwaaba Esther. Welcome home.*

She stepped into the airport, the air muggy and thick. She breathed in the syrupy scent of body odor and cologne and took a hard step backwards. She'd preferred the heat outside; at least that wasn't shared. As Esther walked, she could hear the voice of the bald Edinburgh man, loud enough to underscore his outrage, his vowels thick and heavy, coated with whisky. This was *unacceptable!* It was far too hot! Too bloody hot! Too fucking hot! Esther ignored him, picking up her pace. She strolled past the line of Ghanaians boarding a flight to Lagos, and could feel them looking at her, scrutinizing her, wondering what happened, where she was from. Women with full lips and rounded chests creased their foreheads as they watched Esther glide through the airport.

She didn't bother to take off her sunglasses.

Instead, she paused in front of the man who had her name written down in black marker on a piece of printer paper. *Esther Amanuah Osafo* penned in meticulous calligraphy. He grinned when she approached, a sizeable gap wedged between his canines. His face dark and ashen from the dry heat. "Mame Esther!" His face brightened as he enveloped her in a hard hug. "Look at'chu! Sunshades and everything!"

Esther pulled away from the hug, and looked the man over with sweeping eyes.

“Shreh, you don’t remember me?” The man frowned.

“Kafra.”

“Don’t apologize!” He pulled Esther into another hug. He told her that his name was Yaw Prempeh, he used to drive for her family. He grabbed her schoolbag and went on to explain that her parents were busy organizing her lunch – they went down to the coast to pick up fish, they were sorry, so sorry – “you always loved your fish. Enh, even when you were little, you ate like a prako, always hungry – *eh!* Remember?”

Esther smiled tightly, her grin breaking. “No.”

“Ah,” Yaw waved her away. “When I used to drive for your family, you would always ask for food. You’d see me and say: ‘Uncle Yaw, bring me fish!’ ‘Uncle Yaw, bring me coco!’ ‘Uncle Yaw bring me Malta!’ Shreh, every time I came to your house you would grab my hand and ask if I brought a snack. ‘Uncle Yaw, where’s my snack?’”

Esther chuckled despite herself, the image materializing in her mind, Yaw’s smile belonging to a face ten years younger. A short man in a black suit and tie. She saw herself in her family’s living room, arms folded across her chest. “Me'm kɔm,” she remembered. “Me'm kɔm uncle, bring my my snack!”

“Ah, so you don’t have amnesia!” Yaw grinned. “Shreh, do you remember how you used to stand up in the car and put your hands on the window? Esther you cried until your mother would lift you up. What would she say?”

Esther smiled as she and Yaw headed towards the car. “Ah! Princess Esther and her disciples, w’abo dam!”

“W’abo dam! You are mad Esther!” Yaw laughed, the creases around his eyes tightening. He opened the trunk and placed Esther’s suitcase inside before opening the door to the backseat.

“Meda wo se.” Esther climbed inside.

Yaw nodded as he closed the door behind you and walked around to the driver’s seat. She leaned her head back against the cool cloth of Yaw’s car, her eyes gravitating toward the window. Once they pulled out of the airport and onto the road, Esther couldn’t take her eyes off the street. Men walked up and down the road in each direction, centimeters from traffic. They shouted at the drivers, raising their hands in obscene gestures, wobbling off the balls of their feet.

“Drunks.” Yaw spat. They got fired weeks ago, he said. They were corrupt bankers. “They cheated so now they drink.”

Cars sped through yellow lights, horns blaring as they passed. Men in business shirts with the top three buttons undone fanned themselves while they drove, one elbow out the window. Esther watched the women who carried apples, oranges, and mangos in baskets on top of their heads, their bodies wrapped in multicolored cloths – rich purples and greens and blues – their babies tied to their backs, mouths open and eyes wide. The women walked freely in traffic, yelling, “Mango! Banana!” as horns shrieked and men waved them over.

The babies suckled on their mothers’ bare skin, sweat dribbling down their tiny foreheads and into their kinked hair. They didn’t cry. They didn’t whine. They watched everything.

“You don’t see this in London, heh?” Yaw looked at Esther from the rearview mirror, his eyebrow cocked in amusement.

Esther shook her head. In London, kids played outside in lush manicured parks in their play clothes. They didn’t walk up to stopped cars to sell water and ice-cream in 37-degree weather. They didn’t wear worn, tan sandals with sweat dripping from the bibs of their shirts. They didn’t rap on the driver’s window, hoping to make cash.

A boy, no older than seven years old, walked up to Esther’s car, a two-liter bottle of water in his hand. A too-big t-shirt draped his lanky body and the stretched collar exposed a birthing scar. He smiled at Esther, waving his dirty hands up to the glass, his lips stretched across his face.

“Uncle, mepa wo kyew.” Esther nodded at Yaw to roll down his window, reaching around in her bag for money.

Yaw quickly cranked down the window halfway. “Nsu.”

The boy balanced a bottle between his arm and hipbone before holding ten fingers in the air. He hummed what Esther imagined to be “ten.” She wasn’t sure. Yaw fumbled around the cup holder for coins. Esther redirected her attention to her bag, pulling out purple and green notes with England’s Queen printed on them. She knew she had cedis somewhere.

“Meda wo se.”

Esther looked up to see Yaw hand the boy some coins. The boy waved emphatically, opening his mouth in a wide smile, flashing white teeth and pink gums. He handed Yaw the bottle and nodded three times before running down to another car.

“How much is it? Let me pay you” Esther leaned forward, her hand still in her schoolbag.

Yaw waved her off, and passed her the water. He eased on the gas once the light turned green. Esther held the bottle between her palms, her mind going back to the little boy. “He didn’t say anything,” she thought back to his humming, his smile, his gestures.

“Mute.” Yaw answered. “The Pentecostals took a vow of silence this year.”

Esther fidgeted with her hands. She turned her head back to the window. She’d never met a mute before. She hadn’t seen one in London, either. People in London were quite standard: businessmen, professors, wives. White. Blonde. Brunette. Green-eyed. Straight hair. Slim bodies. Esther had almost forgotten how different people were. Wrapped in cloth and buttoned-up shirts. Men. Women. Children. Mutes. She’d almost forgotten about them all.

“Stupid. How can you share God’s word if you don’t speak?” Yaw shook his head. “Woh kwasea.”

Esther listened to Yaw throughout the car ride, she didn’t have much room to speak. He told her about the new hotel being constructed across from her neighborhood, the new tourist initiative the city had adopted, and a recent political scandal. Corrupt bankers and cheats. Esther placed both hands on the window as he spoke, the city passing her by, chickens clucking in the street. Children selling water.

Esther and her disciples.

Partway through the ride, Esther had fallen asleep, jet-lag absorbing her all at once. She woke to Yaw slamming on the horn. “Celebrations for the London gal!” He laughed as he pressed on the gas pedal, weaving between cars as he made his way up the driveway.

Esther looked out the window, her home somehow smaller than she remembered, the grass overgrown and the banana trees massive. Her home reminded her of the cottages she saw on television – quaint, humble – one door and three windows. A simple picture.

“Go in.” Yaw turned around. “I will bring your things.”

“I –”

“Go.”

“Ok.” Esther nodded. Her red varnished nails shook as she unbuckled the silver seatbelt. She removed the polyester strap from her shoulder and opened the door, stepping onto the driveway, her thick heels digging into the gravelly drive. She sighed, straightened her back, and took one step forward. She took another.

“Esther!” Her mother rushed out the front door, tears already in her eyes. She ran down the drive and wrapped her daughter in her arms. Esther closed her eyes, soaking in the scent of honey and vanilla. She soaked in the scent of her mom.

“Mommy.” Esther breathed, her heart and limbs still shaking. “Hi mommy.”

She kissed her mother several times. Tears dripped down her cheeks as her mother whispered how much she missed her, how she never imagined how sad she would feel and – hey! Where was the rest her? Did she not eat in London? Esther laughed and

took her mother's hand as she walked inside, the house filled with people she had never met before. Men with tribal scars shouted congratulations. Women in oversized hats twirled Esther around and clapped. Lanky lanky, shreh! Obruni from London! Esther forced laughter, ducking away from the commotion. She hugged her father when he arrived from the coast, but he disappeared again. She couldn't find her mother.

The night moved slowly.

Esther didn't know anyone at her party. At least, not the way she was supposed to. The women who she'd attended high school with all went to the same university. They knew the same people, studied at the same libraries, and attended the same church. Whenever Esther tried to insert herself in conversation, she found herself incredibly lost. She had no idea what Dr. Sharpe taught, or why Pastor Daniel was a fool, so she listened. She sat on the new Victorian couch her parents had purchased after she left, and listened to stories about Dr. Sharpe and Pastor Daniel and Ama Appiah and her Nigerian boyfriend. She gasped and laughed when she was supposed to, but she didn't know anything.

After a few hours, Esther stepped outside, closing the sliding door shut. She kicked off her heels and walked off the porch, pressing her toes into the warm earth, breathing in her Ghana for the first time all day. Her Ghana, with her heat and mosquitos, rich dirt and open sky, so open and undisturbed. Esther, no longer confined to the designated parks and sidewalks of urban life, the slightly suffocating way buildings sat together and touched. She breathed her Ghana in, long and deep. She allowed her lungs to

expand and contract, feeling the energy in her veins. After several moments, she hung her head back and began counting the endless stars that sprinkled the night.

“Do you see the same stars in London?”

“Pardon?” Esther brought her head to attention to the young man sitting down on the porch. Esther hadn’t noticed him when she’d walked out, she didn’t care to look, for she didn’t expect anyone to be out in the heat away from the party. But there he was, a tall man with a singular dimple, dressed in slacks and a loose-fitting, bell-sleeved shirt. Esther watched him as he set down his glass and approached her. He moved slowly, like the whole night was designed for his leisure. Like he hadn’t interrupted anything.

“Congratulations on your first year. Oxford is a wonderful school.” He held out his hand once he’d made his way off the porch. “I’m Kwesi Afreh. From Kumasi.” He spoke like Esther should know, before adding, “your father hired me in March.”

“Ah.” Esther crossed her arms against her chest. “Another farmer.”

Kwesi retracted his hand.

“I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.” Kwesi hung his hands at his sides. Esther watched as they swayed back and forth, like leaves against a breeze. She looked up at him yet again, his height bordering on distracting. She could see how a man like him might be useful out on her father’s farm, with his lean build and sturdy hands. She could see him tending for baby calves and hauling large amounts of produce back to her parents’ home. She could see it in his arms, the way he stood, and in the steadiness of his breath.

She lifted her head to the sky yet again, now wondering if she could really decipher the constellations. To her, each star looked the same. To her, each star twinkled with the same silver light, the same far away magic.

“The easiest one to find is the north star,” Kwesi read her mind and pointed up at the north point of the sky. “Up there.” Instinctively, Esther followed his finger, her eyes landing on that particular speck of light. It looked so small in the distance, so inconsequential. It was too small for her to focus her concentrated attention on, let alone associate with a name.

She remembered about learning about the north star in primary school. “If you find the north star, you’re never lost.” She repeated what her teacher said back when Esther wore two plaits in her hair and had never traveled farther than Kumasi. When college, London, and law weren’t even seeds planted in her mind. When the future was as far away and distant as the constellations in the sky.

Kwesi shifted. “Do you believe that?”

Esther shrugged. She never thought about it.

“It’s supposed to sound comforting.” Kwesi continued. His hands somehow found their way into the pockets of his pants. He bounced on the balls of his feet. “It’s supposed to make you feel like you can always find your way home.”

Esther could hear the sound of hi-life inside her house, of loud voices and louder laughing. In her mind, she could see her parents gloating, accepting each compliment directed towards her like they were truly meant for them. Because this was their party. Their home. And Esther wasn’t sure if it was hers anymore.

GOOD GIRL

After Simon left, I wrapped myself in the rose kimono Isaiah got me from Japan and sat down at my window seat. The combination of drums, a saxophone, and Curtis Mayfield's silky vocals crooned through the speaker. I stretched my legs out in front of me and looked out the window: Simon tossed the hood of his sweatshirt over his head and jogged through the rain. He was always ran when he left my apartment. And despite myself, I always watched, like some overprotective girlfriend or stalker. I was neither.

I started sleeping with Simon two months after I graduated from college.

I'd been going on all of these dates that my roommate had set up. She wanted to double-date. It'd be fun. Didn't I get tired of going to bars every weekend? I was really starting to bum her out. I was too funny and too pretty to be single. And her boyfriend's cousin was a really nice guy. His best friend from camp was a really nice guy. The florist who she met on the metro was a really nice guy.

After those dates, I'd usually buy some beef jerky and a six-pack from the gas station and walk over to Simon's apartment in my pajamas. I'd tell him to take me out of my misery. We'd get drunk, light a joint, and play video games. We'd trash my dates. Rank them on a scale from pretentious to horny. I'd critique the dinner option while gnawing on jerked meat. And then, when the night wore on and the weed and alcohol faded together, we'd mourn the loss of our friends. The adult ones. The grown-ups. The

ones we lost to time and relationships. The ones who were ‘serious’ about their lives. They bought their furniture at Ikea. They put it together. We hardly knew them. They were assholes. Fuck them. We’d talk about how weird it was that all of our friends were settling down and planning weddings when we didn’t even know what we were eating for lunch the next day.

“Let’s make a pact Al,” Simon leaned over to me one night, swaying heavily to his left, his warm breath on my ear. “Let’s vow never to end up like that.”

We crossed pinkies.

We had sex for the first time that night.

A couple of weeks later, when my mother was visiting, she asked me why I had birth control pills in my bathroom. I’d just come home from a run, and sweat filmed the spaces between my skin and sports bra. My cheeks flushed. My mouth parched.

My mother stood at the edge of my bed, sunlight deepening her brown skin an even darker shade. Her nails were painted the rich red color of wine, and filed to sharp tips. Like claws. She spoke calmly, no tension or wrinkle on her face. She folded my laundry and placed each garment in a neat pile on top of my bed, watching the clothes while she worked. My birth control rested beside them.

“Mom...” I started.

“What’s his name?” Her fingers sickled as she balled a pair of socks together and dropped them on my bed.

In that moment, I considered lying to her. I considered, in my own bedroom in my own apartment that I paid for with my own money – at the age of twenty-three – lying to

my mom about having sex.

I rolled my shoulders back and lifted my head, eyes on her forehead. I exhaled. “His name is Simon,” I said. “We met in college.”

My mother studied me, her eyes large and wide. She opened her mouth. She closed it. Then she said, “I’m done. Your underwear is in the basket,” before icing out of my room.

She made dinner for me that night. Kelewele and waakye: fried plantain, black eyed peas, and rice. My favorite. She talked about the new self-help book she was reading, something about Christianity and weight loss. About my brothers’ birthday coming up. And how my uncle, too, was expecting twins. She never mentioned my birth control again. And whenever I talked to her on the phone, she’d ask: “how’s Simon doing?” “Anything new with Simon?” “When am I meeting Simon?” And I would answer: “fine.” “No.” “Soon.”

So I guess that’s how she believed I had a boyfriend for six months.

“Hello? Allison?” My mother’s voice came in loud and rushed over the receiver. “Good morning darling!”

“Morning mom,” I stood up and walked over to the record player.

“What is all that noise? Are you having a party?”

“No.” I lifted the tone arm off the record and watched as the spinning stopped.

“No. I was just listening to music.”

“Hey! You and your records!” She chuckled, a full-belly laugh of sorts. I could

imagine what she looked like in that moment: her lips stained a bright red from her lipstick, the gap between her two front teeth wide and inviting.

I smiled. “Me and my records.” I cleared my throat. “So uh – how’s the church retreat?”

Every year, my mother and the other women from her church - *Holy Faith and Deliverance Ministries Center of Love* – went on a ‘retreat’ to Sonoma California. My mother explained that their sister ministry was located was located in Sonoma, and that was the only reason they why went there. To fellowship together It was always coincidental that these trips fell in the middle of March – when the Maryland weather system was in the throes of confusion – and it was always the Lord’s Will that my mom returned with a semi-brand new wardrobe. Every year.

“Eh...” My mother sucked on her teeth. “It’s ok. It’s fine.”

“Just fine?” I sat down at the edge of my bed.

“I called your brother, yeah? I had one day that I was free, so I called your brother and asked if I could see my grandchildren. They are *so sweet*.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you know what he said? Wa bo dam, do you know what your *shtupid* brother said?”

I took a deep breath. “No mom. What did he say?”

“He and that *obruni* –”

“*Mom...*”

“He and his *wife* were taking the family *hiking* during the day so maybe we could

‘catch up’ for dinner. Catch up? What is that? Who am I?” My mother paused. “I am his *mother*, I think I am more important than a silly mountain. Shreh? I think I deserve more than two hours with my grandchildren.”

“You’re right mom.”

“Of course I’m right.”

I sighed and shook my head. “But you know Abe... I really don’t think he was trying to be rude, he and and Mandy probably just...”

“Your brother is not trying to be anything, is he?”

“Mom.”

“So I tried to call your father, to let him know about this, and the man didn’t even answer. So I texted him. And I left a message. No response, of course.” I could see her shaking her head. “He needs to water my roses, I’m sure he’s forgotten.”

“I can water your roses.”

“Oh no – no. Don’t worry. I’ll be home tomorrow.”

“I know but...” I stood up and walked out of my bedroom, kimono trailing behind me. “I can go hang out with dad for a little bit. Make sure y’all have something to eat. I know you’ll be home late.”

“Oooh,” my mother crooned. “You are too sweet. How did I get such a good daughter?”

“*Mom...*” I rolled my eyes.

“Seriously! Hey, other girls your age are high on drugs and alcohol. But not you, no... you are my sweet girl. My good girl.”

I chuckled. "I'm not *that good*."

"Oh, stop it. You are, okay? I have to go, I am conducting a program for the youth group, but I will see you tomorrow alright? God bless, good girl. I love you."

"I love you too mom." I lowered my head before I hung up. A joint wedged between my fingers. My mother's good girl.

A WEDDING (AUGUST 1983)

Esther was two weeks shy of her nineteenth birthday when she got married.

She had decided not to return to Oxford. Kwesi had been accepted to law school in America and once he completed his studies, she would go to school. They had devised the plan on one of the many nights they were outside on her parent's porch. Sweat clung tightly to Kwesi's skin, and though Esther was repulsed by the smell, she still rested her head against her boyfriend's chest. She breathed in the air – the way his skin smelt like earth – and exhaled slowly. The date was July 14th.

She'd only known Kwesi for a few weeks, but the depth of their conversations had suggested that they'd known each other for much longer. And maybe they had, and just hadn't realized it. Or maybe they were destined for each other. Or maybe Esther was acting like a lovesick child, but she didn't care. Whenever Kwesi spoke or looked at her, she couldn't help but feel like she was holding her breath. Like Kwesi's entire existence, their entire relationship was too powerful for this earth. She couldn't handle it. She couldn't –

“I love you.” Esther felt the vibrations of the words before she heard them.

When she did, and when she looked up at Kwesi's face to register what he'd said, tears already fell from her eyes.

Kwesi wrapped an arm around her shoulders and held her tight to him. He looked up at the sky – at the North Star maybe – and kept talking. “I’m going to America in September.” He didn’t blink. “I’m going to study law.” His voice was far away and airy, his body somewhere else. “Esther, I want you to go with me, *Me pa wo kyew*. I want you to be my wife.”

Esther sat up, planting her hands on the concrete as stared forward. “What?”

Kwesi reached for her hands, he laced his fingers through hers and brought them to his chin. “Esther Amanua Osafo, I love you, *ɔɔɔ*. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.” His face wore the pained, strained expression of a child. His mouth twisted and contorted, his brow furrowed. He resembled child who wanted something so badly. Who wanted the world. Kwesi held his world in his fingers. He held her close.

Esther felt as if her heart were about to explode. She wanted to hold her breath. She wanted to savor this moment and bottle it up forever, but she needed to speak.

“Esther, I do not have a ring right now, but I *promise* I will have one in the future. An expensive one, with as many diamonds as you would like.” Kwesi’s eyes looked like glass, shiny and wet. This was the first time Esther had ever seen him falter. A mosquito landed on his shoulder, but he did not swat it away. He didn’t look anywhere else but Esther’s face. “Love...”

Esther’s throat burned. Her heart ached. She looked up, twilight had painted the sky purple and pink, washed away all traces of the ordinary. “Kwesi...” Esther started, then lost her words. There were so many she wanted to say. She pursed her lips together, squeezed her eyes shut and nodded her head. She only needed to say a few. “I would love

to marry you, Kwesi Afreh.” She nodded again, looking up at his eyes. Her world. “Yes. I will marry you. I love you.”

Kwesi took her entire body in his arms and kissed her, pressing his lips passionately against her own, inhaling her exhale. And for several moments, Esther felt breathless. Her heart racing through her chest. Their bodies were shadows against the purple and pink sky. A picture almost too beautiful, too perfect, to be real.

She didn’t have time to plan a ceremony or a reception. There was no time to purchase a wedding dress, select bridesmaids, or request a dowry, but Esther did not mind. There were much more important things to worry about. She was moving to America. Home of Big Macs and French fries. Kwesi had been accepted to Georgetown University in Washington, DC, and once he was settled, Esther would continue her schooling as well. Kwesi had promised her parents this. Esther *would* be a lawyer. *Me bo.*

Two days after Kwesi proposed, he and Esther went to file their notice of marriage.

Esther counted down the twenty-one days until their wedding on a large calendar hung beside her bed. At the end of each day, she’d mark the passing date with a large red X, and then she’d count how many days she had to wait. Esther felt each hour of each passing day. When she went to the market with her mother – or church – when she accompanied her parents to the social gatherings of Ghana’s elite – every minute of every hour of every day felt like torture.

She awoke at five in the morning on the date of her wedding. She sat up in bed, slid on her house slippers and walked into the kitchen. Her mother was already awake, and she sat at the dining table while their house girl Mercy prepared breakfast. Esther stood still for a moment, and watched as the sunlight cast a golden glow over her mother's fair skin. For years, Esther had wished she were lighter. People had always commented on her mother's beauty. When Esther was young, she had thought that her dark skin made her undesirable. Ugly. She had thought no one would love her.

“Good morning Esther!” Mercy waved when she walked into the dining room. “Congratulations!”

“Thank you.” Esther whispered as she walked into the dining room and took a seat next to her mother.

“I will make some more tea.” Mercy set Esther's mother's food in front of her and retreated back to the kitchen.

Esther's mother picked up her spoon and skimmed it over her bowl of porridge, but she didn't bring it to her mouth. She hadn't spoken much about the engagement. When Esther initially gave her parents the news, her father was ecstatic. He had always wanted to visit the States, but he'd never had a reason, and Kwesi was such an intelligent young man. Godly and honest and he was going to make a wonderful husband. Esther's mother only said ‘congratulations’ that day.

Now, hours before her daughter's wedding, she finally spoke. “When you were born,” she set the spoon down. A soft clink of silver against ceramic. “When you were

born, almost nineteen years ago, and you opened your big, big eyes, I remember what my mother said to me.” Esther’s mother looked up, her eyes above her daughter’s. “Ah Afia, those are the eyes of a *dreamer*.” She smiled. “A dreamer. You.”

Esther always knew her mother was sad that she couldn’t have more children. She’d tried for years before Esther, and several years after, but it just wasn’t possible for her. And despite how much money Esther’s father threw at doctors, and how many home remedies Afia purchased from people who could never help her, Esther was their only child. Most families Esther knew had half a dozen children. Or more. And she knew her mother’s situation was unusual – *tragic* many women said. And knowing this about her made her love her more.

And now Esther was leaving her. In a way more permanent than going to London. This was it.

“In marriage, you will have to make some changes – compromises.” Esther’s mother reached for her hand across the table. She closed her eyes. “Don’t compromise your dreams. You understand?”

“Yes.” Esther nodded.

“You need to promise me.” Esther’s mother squeezed her hand.

“I promise.”

Their appointment was at 1PM.

The only people in attendance were Kwesi, Esther, her parents, and Mercy. Kwesi’s parents had to work, they sent their best wishes. They were sorry they could not

attend. Esther dressed plainly in a black suit she bought before she went to Oxford. Kwesi wore the same slacks and shirt from the first time they met. Esther's parents wore cloth. Kente. Loud and vibrant. Esther's mother even wrapped her hair.

They all stood in the registrar's office, the air humid and stale. To Esther, everything happened in a blur. The registrar spoke quickly. Esther answered just as fast. Kwesi held her hand. He said: *I call upon all persons here present to witness that I, Kwesi Afreh, do take thee, Esther Amanua Osafo, to be my lawful wife.* She said her line too. And then, she signed a certificate. Her name next to Kwesi's.

Her husband.

AN ENGAGEMENT PARTY

After I hung up with my mom, I got in the shower. I scrubbed over all the places that felt like sex and dirt. All the places he touched. Sometimes, long after he left, I could still feel the places his hands were – on my neck, my lips, my breasts – and sometimes, I had to scrub for minutes to erase the feeling away. I closed my eyes in the shower. I reached for my sponge, my fingers grazing over the familiar netting. I lathered the sponge in soap, gripping the bar in my other hand.

As I washed – scrubbing my arms, then my legs, then my chest – I craned my neck up to the showerhead, eyes still closed, and allowed a rainfall to wash over me.

“AL!” My roommate shouted, banging on the door. “ALISON! WE’RE GONNA BE LATE!” The door handle rattled as Stacie continued to pound on the door.

In one choreographed motion, I turned off the shower and wrapped myself in a towel. I stepped out of the tub and opened the door.

“The party starts in an hour.” Stacie brushed passed me, pulling her t-shirt over her head heading straight for the tub. She turned on the faucet. “You’ve been in here for forty minutes.”

I sat on the toilet seat and brought my knees to my chin. “I didn’t know you were home.”

“I passed Simon on his way out.” She pulled her pants down.

“Oh.”

Stacie grinned down at me, teeth and body fully exposed. She set hands on her hips, her breasts practically defying gravity. “You shouldn’t be embarrassed about having sex with him, Al. Everyone has a fuck buddy.”

“I’m not embarrassed.”

“Okay.” Stacie firmed her stance.

“Get in the shower!” I stood up. “We’re paying for this.”

Stacie rolled her eyes but did as she was told. I moved over to the sink, placing both of my palms on the counter, meeting eyes with my reflection. I glanced away, opened the medicine cabinet, and reached for my toothbrush.

“I’m just saying...” Stacie’s voice carried over the rushing shower stream, “Simon’s a nice guy. I like him.”

“I *know* he’s a nice guy.” I squeezed toothpaste onto my brush. “We’re friends.”

Water splattered against the ceramic bathtub.

“And I’m not embarrassed about sleeping with him!”

“Okay!” Stacie groaned. “I’m sorry. You’re not.”

I spit.

“I’m sorry.” Stacie repeated, softer.

I gripped my toothbrush in my fist and frowned at my reflection. I put the toothbrush back into my mouth and brushed for another ninety seconds.

“So what are we even supposed to wear to this thing?” Stacie asked, a few moments after I started patting my face for mounting pimples.

“To brunch?”

“Yeah.” Stacie poked her head out from behind the shower curtain, her red hair slicked back from the water. Practically a brunette.

“I dunno...” I shrugged. “Brandy said the dress code is ‘dressy cas.’”

“Hmm.” Stacie disappeared into the shower.

“I can’t believe she’s getting married,” I pulled a pair of tweezers out of the medicine cabinet. “...so weird.”

“How weird? We’ve known Marcus for years.”

“Marriage is weird.” I plucked a stray eyebrow hair and moved the tweezers closer to my eyes, inspecting it. “Like... potty training cats or something.”

Stacie snorted, incredulous. “What the fuck Al? *How?*”

I shook my head and worked on my other eyebrow. “Don’t listen to me.” I pulled a hair from the middle. “I’m still high.” My words probably didn’t make any sense. My mouth still felt like cotton. My eyes still bloodshot.

“Oh, now I *really* want to listen to you.” Stacie turned off the shower.

I blew air out of my mouth, my lips vibrating against each other. “I just...”

Stacie wrapped a towel around her body and pulled open the shower curtain. She stepped out of the tub and sat down on the toilet seat. She brought her knees up to her chin and wrapped her arms around her shins. Pearls of water dripped from her nose.

“I just think, like, maybe marriage is kinda an outdated I idea?” I scrunched my forehead. “Like, there are *so many* people in this world, and maybe choosing the one to be with for the rest of your life is unnatural. Like. Think about cats.” I nodded to myself. “Domestic cats are supposed to pee and shit in one box, and they know that, and, like,

they've worked their minds up to that. So when you like decide to put a diaper on it or like, fucking strap it to a toilet seat, it gets upset. Because that's not what it's supposed to do. You know? And maybe we're like domestic cats and we *know* we should fall in love and everything but we shouldn't be forced to do it the way society wants us to. You know?" I pursed my lips and looked down at Stacie.

"Goddamn." Stacie breathed, her blue eyes deep and luminous. "I really need to try that weed."

El Centro D.F. was one of my favorite restaurants in the city, and of course, the spot for every important brunch the first year after college. We didn't love it just because of it's location, the Georgetown shops less than a block away. We didn't love it simply for the Mexican food, the quesadillas, flautas, and tacos. What really attracted my friends and I to El Centro was the unlimited weekend brunch. All you can drink and eat. All day.

On that Saturday morning in April, Stacie, Simon, and I sat at a huge booth/table hybrid with a bunch of our friends from college. We toasted mimosas and margaritas, spooning globs of ceviche onto tortilla chips. I sat sandwiched between Simon and Rosalie Moreau, my old French tutor. She hugged me when I sat down. Holy shit, she'd never been to a brunch spot like this before. She'd just moved to DC like, three weeks ago. We totally needed to catch up.

We wouldn't.

Brandy Harper and Marcus Williams sat at the head of the table, both of them dressed in white; Brandy in a flowered sundress and Marcus in a crisp linen suit. A silk

gray tie. The dim lighting of the restaurant cast a golden glow over their dark brown skin. Like an antique picture, they were a couple already memoried. Each motion they made was purposed and graceful. Brandy tossed her thick black hair over her shoulder as she took a delicate sip from her champagne flute, her lipstick never brushing the rim. Marcus grinned as he leaned over her shoulder to whisper something in her ear. Then the two of them laughed, mouths opened, heads tossed to the ceiling. Hair gleaming. Teeth shining.

“You’re staring,” Simon murmured. He stole a tortilla chip from my plate.

“Look at them.” I focused on the gigantic diamond on Brandy’s finger. The way it made a rainbow appear in the daylight. The way it made her fingers appear five times thinner.

Simon brushed his ear against my cheek and adopted my line of sight. Marcus fed Brandy a chip. His finger lingered on her bottom lip and she grinned, dimples cratering her cheeks, before she kissed him. The gesture met resounding aw’s across the table.

An involuntary smile tugged at the corner of my lips.

“They’re cute, huh?” Stacie raised an eyebrow in my direction.

I nodded and glanced away.

Brandy and Marcus were cute in the way that elderly people were. An unfamiliar, far away cute. A cute that didn’t pull all-nighters with me in Smith Library. A cute that didn’t pass out in the bathroom of frat parties with vomit crusted on her lips. This cute knew how to finance a mortgage and bought reasonably priced his and hers robes from a practical department store. Cute.

“Take a drink whenever they’re cute.” Simon announced to the table, his words skirting the line of irreverence. He brought a chip up to his lips, a dollop of salsa falling onto his lap. Instinctively, I dropped a napkin onto it and reached for my water glass.

“Better yet, SHOTS!” Simon announced, raising his bottle in the air.

“Yes SHOTS!” I set my glass down. “TEQUILA SHOTS!”

“*Allison!*” Brandy exclaimed, covering her hand over her mouth to keep from grinning. “It’s eleven o’clock!”

“Bitch, you’re getting fucking *married!*” Stacie squealed, shaking her head from side to side. “We need to celebrate!”

“Yeah!” I pontificated. “We’re celebrating!”

Brandy rolled her eyes and took a sip of her mimosa. “Whatever.”

Simon waved our waiter over.

“Fifteen tequila shots.” He winked as he handed over his Platinum credit card. He stood a little straighter, a little taller. He smoothed down the lapel on his cardigan.

“Thank you.”

“Fuck you Simon.” Marcus extend both of his middle fingers in the air.

“*Come on* Marcus, you’re not married yet.” I teased. “Stop whining.”

Brandy snorted. “Shut up Al!”

“Drinking is overrated.” Marcus deadpanned, sipping his beer.

“Bullshit!” Simon nearly choked. “I distinctly remember,” Simon pointed his index finger in the air. “Freshman year – I distinctly remember Marcus – this guy – doing

six keg stands in one hour!” He reached for Rosalie Moreau’s shoulder. “Can you believe that?”

“Sure?” Rosalie shrugged.

Marcus chuckled. “That was seven years ago, man.” He laced his fingers through Brandy’s. “Some things change.” He kissed her knuckles.

“They don’t have to.” Simon challenged, his voice sharp and gruff. For a moment, the table fell totally silent. For a moment, all eyes alternated from Simon to Marcus. Marcus propped both of his elbows on the table and narrowed his gaze. He was about to speak.

“*Besssssidesss*,” I slurred. “Besides,” I extended both hands in the air, waving them above my head, “Simon just blew a quarter of his rent on shots, so we better drink since he’s just gonna end up homeless anyway.”

Stacie snorted. The rest of the table smiled.

“TEQUILA SHOTS!” I sang again, and the attention focused elsewhere. To the shoes Rosalie Moreau just got from DSW. To the bullshit metro delays. To the new on-campus party policy. We were so lucky to graduate when we did. Partway through these conversations Brandy met my gaze, and raised her water glass to me.

Thank you. She mouthed.

When the tequila shots came, and the bartender brought around a separate dish of limes, and we all poured shots onto our saliva soaked hands, Marcus thanked us all for coming to brunch. This meant a lot to him. Really. Then he yelled, “SHOTS!” And we all licked our salt, downed our tequila, and bit into the limes. Acid piqued our tongues.

After we took our shots, Marcus continued to speak. He was feeling it now, overrated or not. “I am so happy that I met you,” he turned and faced Brand. She smiled tight, the way she did when she tried to hold back tears. “I am so grateful we met at Shenandoah, and that everyone here was apart of that. I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you, Brandy. I love you.”

And when they turned and kissed, and everyone clapped their hands together, I thought about how far away they were. How unfamiliar.

How cute.

“I wanted to wait for people to leave.” Brandy grinned as she handed me a gold envelope. “I didn’t want to make everyone else jealous.”

Simon, Stacie, and Marcus had gone across the street to Ben & Jerry’s. Brandy told them not to wait up. We had to settle the new tab and go to the bathroom. We’d catch up as soon as we were done. We wouldn’t be long.

I knew what it had to be. “What is this?” I fanned the envelope against my fingers, smiling. El Centro blared a playlist from 2003. True classics.

Brandy rested her elbow against the bar. She leaned her head against her chin. “Open it.”

I scrunched my nose and did as I was told. I pulled out the printed cardstock, and glanced at the word *Bridesmaid?* printed in scripted calligraphy. Then my eyes scanned the important words. The handwritten ones. *Best friend. Sister. Smith Library. Pinkie-*

promises. I fucking love you, dude. It would be an honor if you were apart of the most important day of my life.

“Al?” Brandy sat up crossed her arms across her chest.

I pursed my lips together and looked down at the card. I wasn’t going to cry.

“You really want *me* to be one of your bridesmaids?”

Brandy nodded. “Fuck your personal philosophy for once, Freud. I love Marcus. I’m getting married because *I* want to.” She sighed. “And I want you to be part of it.”

I fanned the envelope against my fingers again.

“Al.”

“Of course.” I smiled. “Of course I’ll be your bridesmaid, B.” I reached my arms out and gave her a hug and held her close, for a moment, before she drifted away.

SNOW (DEC. 1986)

Esther had lived in America for a little over three years.

And she had seen images of snow in movies and in pictures. In them, they looked like overgrown cotton balls; soft, billowy, and easy to mold. Something to play with. As a child, Esther's ideas of America had often revolved around this idea of snow – the white glitter that shimmered from the sky, the blanket that covered the roofs of churches on Christmas Eve, the magic that children played with – too beautiful to fathom being “real.” Much more than water or anything she'd ever seen before. Back home, when the sun was too hot and sweat glued her dress to her arms and chest and legs, Esther thought about lying down in the snow and burrowing her face in the coldness. She thought about lying on her back with her arms and legs spread out like an angel. She thought about flying.

Esther had been studying for the BAR exam for five hours when she craned her neck towards the window to take a good stretch. When she looked up and saw the white powdery flakes falling from the sky, she gasped. She slammed her textbook shut and ran into the kitchen, pulling one of Kwesi's wool sweaters over her head.

Kwesi had just returned home from work, his tie unknotted and his shirt unbuttoned. He stood in front of the stove in red boxers and barefoot, boiling a pot of palm nut soup. Beads of sweat dripped from his forehead.

“Kwesi, *gye soro!* It's snowing!” Esther grabbed her husband's attention.

He shook his head, not bothering to look out the window. He emptied a handful of chilies into the pot. “*Gyae*. It won’t stick.”

Esther didn’t know what that meant. What she knew was that it was snowing and that she had to go outside. She told Kwesi to hurry up. To put the stove on low. They had to go. “Shreh, grab the camera – oh!”

She didn’t wait for a response before she raced into the hall closet and pulled her boots over her socks and a jacket over her husband’s wool sweater. Kwesi stood in the hallway with his arms crossed and his head against the doorframe. A small smile settled in the corner of his mouth.

“Hurry up!” Esther turned to her husband and tossed a jacket in his direction. “I have to find my mittens.”

When Kwesi and Esther finally made it outside, Esther ran out into the empty street. She winged her arms out at her sides and lifted her head to the sky. She opened her mouth like she’d seen people do in movies, and tasted snowflakes on the tip of her tongue. They dissolved as quickly as they fell, but Esther enjoyed the moment regardless.

“Come here.” Kwesi walked towards his wife and took her in his arms. “Be still.” He held Esther’s frame, lifting her feet from the ground ever so slightly. Then, he walked in short circles in the middle of the street. Slowly, he walked faster, lengthening his circles, spinning his wife in the air. With her arms winged at her sides, her back arched, head to the sky, and snow falling onto her face, Esther felt like she was flying.

And she couldn’t stop laughing.

Now, with her tires jammed only three minutes from her apartment, Esther's excitement silenced. She pounded her fists on the steering wheel of her 1975 Volkswagen station wagon, frosted air expelling from her lips and car heater. Her chin quivered as she stomped on the gas.

The engine sputtered. The wheels turned. But the car didn't move. Esther threw the gear in park, turned off the ignition, held her keys in her fist, and counted out loud with her eyes closed. Her cracked lips rubbed raw, and her out-loud counting progressed to barely audible whispers, but she didn't waver. After twenty-five seconds, she opened her eyes, turned on the ignition again, shifted into drive, and pressed down on the gas pedal.

Nothing.

She shouldn't have picked up the extra shift at the convenience store. She shouldn't have – like Kwesi begged her not to – driven herself. *Chale, the roads will be bad tonight. Let me take you. Me pa wo kyew.* But she told him no, that she was okay, that she liked to drive. *The snow isn't a problem. Me ho ye. Don't be ridiculous.* She took her time getting dressed in the bathroom, zipping her red vest over her white shirt and pregnant belly. When she walked into the foyer – with more haste than usual – she yanked her jacket off the coatrack and pulled her keys out of the glass candy dish. She rushed her goodbye, telling Kwesi she loved him and that she'd see him in the morning, before escaping out the front door and jogging down the stairs. It was only when she reached her car that she realized she didn't wait for his *I love you too*.

Esther and her car sat in the middle of the road, headlights on, engine whirring. It was too cold to feel her fingers, so she brought them up to her lips and breathed onto them. She couldn't feel anything, but she'd seen people do it on television. It had to work. She took a deep breath and blew harder, ultimately spitting onto her hands. She felt stupid and gross and shoved her hands into the pockets of her jacket, trying to remember if she'd seen anything on television about this particular situation.

She thought about the times people in Ghana moved cars when they were stuck in the street. People honked their horns as soon as someone's sedan stalled in the middle of the road. She heard the sting of obscenities that left everyone's mouths. "*Shreh! W'a gimi pa pa!*" She remembered how her father once helped their neighbor push her car to a gas station. '*Cars are unreliable,*' he once said, '*but man is strong.*'

She knew what she needed to do.

She unbuckled her seatbelt and opened the door. She pulled her hood over her head and double-knotted the strings around her neck. She rubbed her hands together. Then, she walked out into the cold, winter air to the back of her car. She placed both hands firm against the trunk.

And she pushed.

When Esther walked into her apartment, her hair and chest were cloaked with sweat. Her car still sat in the middle of Waltham Lane, the tires packed with snow. Tears dripped from Esther's lashes. Her arms burned and vomit crept up her throat. She focused on keeping everything down. She needed to keep everything down. She took off her

jacket and threw it on the coatrack, placed her keys in the candy dish, and made her way down the hallway.

She paused before she crossed the threshold to her bedroom.

Kwesi slept on his stomach with his arms cradled around his pillow. His hand covered the space where she usually slept, perfectly aligned to her hipbone. He took deep breaths, his chest rising and falling at an even rhythm. A measured pace. He looked smaller when he was asleep.

Docile.

Tears rolled down Esther's cheeks.

"Kwesi?" She whispered, her voice caught in her throat. "Kwesi, I need your help," Her words shrunk as she sunk down to the floor. "*Me pa wo kyew*. Please. I need your help."

HOME

I woke up earlier than normal on Sunday morning. I climbed out of bed and shuffled around my desk, looking for something clean to wear. Nearly half of the contents of my closet were laid out on my floor – or desk. Normally, I wasn't this messy. Normally, I at least kicked things under my bed. It was just that getting ready for Brandy's engagement brunch had been such an involved experience. I had my closet searched for the perfect outfit, but it made more sense to put everything in my bedroom.

"Where are you going?" Simon sat up in my bed, my blanket still around his waist.

"Can you help me zip?" I'd put on a denim dress I had previously stolen from Brandy a year ago after she'd borrowed it from me for two. I walked over to Simon and turned around, lowering my neck. "I'm going to my parent's house."

"Can I come?"

I shook my head and chuckled. I walked over to my dresser, trying to decide on an appropriate necklace.

"When will you be back?"

"Late."

"Wanna get dinner or something when you get home?" Simon ran his fingers through his hair. "I got a two for one deal at Red Lobster."

“Ooh. Fancy.” I closed the clasp on the sapphire necklace my parents bought me for graduation.

“I try.” Simon shrugged.

“If we go, we gotta get at least two baskets of the cheddar biscuits.”

“Fine. Deal.” Simon rolled his eyes, a smile breaking through his pillowed lips, his teeth exposed. He had a beautiful smile.

“I’ll text you on my way home. Feel free to leave whenever.”

I waved at Simon and walked through the door.

On the drive back to my parents’, I checked my phone. My dad hadn’t called me yet, like he normally did on Sunday mornings, but he was probably sleeping in. When my mom was home, she never allowed sleeping in, not even on weekends. Every day, every hour, every minute, every *second* we were on earth, we had to give praise to the most high. We couldn’t do that if we were still asleep.

“Dad?” I set my keys on the counter in the foyer before taking two more steps inside. “Dad? It’s me.”

I unzipped my jacket and unraveled the scarf from my neck. I took off my rubber rain boots and lined them up beside my parents’ flip flops and my mom’s running shoes. When I was younger, my dad was really particular about these kinds of things. No shoes inside. No hands on the walls. No sliding down the stairs. No messing up his house. His money. This was his investment.

His dream.

I walked around the lower level of the house, into the formal living room with the recently upholstered sofa and the grand piano only Isaiah knew how to play. I walked through the doorway to the family room, the spacious place where my brothers used to design train tracks and railways. We would spend countless nights staying up until 1AM, laying on the beige sectional, watching cartoons until my dad came down and made us go back to our rooms. The family room opened into the dining room, the dining room into the kitchen. My mom's favorite place, only because of how much natural light came in through the window. A bowl and spoon populated the sink. But my dad wasn't there.

He must be upstairs.

I held on to the bannister as I took the stairs one at a time. Pictures of me and my brothers lined every inch of wall. There was a picture of Abraham during his "aspiring African rapper" phase. He wore baggy jeans and a Chicago Bulls jersey. Cornrows and cubic zirconia clip on earrings. My dad said he looked like a fool. Like the kind of man who would end up pumping gas for a living. Do you want to pump gas for a living? He'd laugh as he took a sip of his Heineken, my mom swatting his head with the back of her hand. She told him that this was the way American boys dressed now. He was expressing himself. She saw it on Oprah.

Isaiah's pictures showed less variety. There were pictures of Isaiah at age six, age nine, thirteen, fifteen, seventeen. Wide-rimmed glasses framed his face, and a certificate of some scholastic achievement filled the space between his hands. Chess Club. Debate Team. Brain Bowl. Science Fair. In each of those pictures, Isaiah wore his best church

clothes. My dad did too. And his hand gripped Isaiah's shoulder, tight and firm. Though he didn't appear in every picture, his hand was still there. Isaiah's smile still big. The certificate still impressive.

I had the most pictures on the wall. Because mom and dad can look at me or Isaiah and see the both of us, Abraham explained once. One of the benefits of having twins. The pictures of me spanned my entire lifetime; they catalogued the most embarrassing moments of my existence. There was a picture of me when I lost my first tooth, flashing a huge grin, the gap between my two front teeth the color and depth of a hockey puck. Another picture from when my mom entered me in "The Next Miss Ghana" pageant, my head dwarfed by the kente head wrap. I looked like a doll. At the top of the stairs was a picture of my high school graduation, nursing a bouquet and my diploma; Abe and Isiah on opposite sides of my shoulders, my mom between them, and my dad beside me. We all looked at the camera with the same wide eyes, the same toothy smile. The same features.

My mom started overpopulating the house with pictures and paintings when dad told her she couldn't paint over the wall. *'We'll have a hard time selling the house; people won't be able to imagine themselves living in a lime green room.'* He made a dig at my repeated request. My mom simply nodded and said okay, though she told me that she'd try to win him over. Though we never left the house once we moved in.

When I got upstairs, I didn't hear the usual hum of the television. And when I walked into my parent's bedroom, I didn't see my dad in his usual spot in the brown

wicker chair in front of the window. My dad didn't have his eyes closed. He wasn't reading in the mid-afternoon sun. He wasn't there.

"Dad?" I stepped into his bathroom. His toothbrush wasn't where he usually left it. Neither was his toothpaste or mouthwash.

I walked out of his bedroom, around all three bedrooms and two bathrooms. Once. Twice.

"Dad?"

I paced around my bedroom again. Abraham's. Isaiah's. Their bathroom. Mine. He wasn't there.

"What's up Al?" Abraham answered on the first ring. He sounded far away, like he was climbing a mountain while he spoke, a bandana tied around his forehead and sun goggles tightened around his ears. My nephew was probably secured in his Baby Bjorn, his back against Abe's abdomen, his sunhat protecting his face from the California sun. "Al?"

I sat down on my parent's bed, rubbing my temple with my fingers. "Have you heard from dad recently?"

Abe snorted. "Do I ever?"

In the distance, I could hear Abe's wife instructing him on how to take care of the baby. It's too hot. He's hungry. *Let me hold him.*

"I haven't heard from him in a few days and neither has mom. It's not like he goes anywhere," I continued.

"This is our dad we're talking about."

“I know.”

“He probably left his phone at Costco or something. He probably dropped it between those massage chairs and took a two-hour nap,” Abe chuckled at the thought.

“Remember when he did that?”

I did, but I shook my head. I tried not to freak out. I counted to five “Abe. I’m at the house and his toothbrush is missing. He’s not here.”

“What?” The line crackled and popped. My nephew squealed as Abe unclicked the Baby Bjorn. *‘Did you miss your mama?’* “What do you mean?”

I racked off this afternoon’s events on my fingers. I measured my breaths. “Mom called me this morning and I told her I’d check on dad. I came home. His car is in the driveway. His keys are in the holder, but he’s not here. His toothbrush isn’t here.”

“Um –” More crackling and popping. “Um –” Abe’s voice wavered. “Okay.” He breathed. “Okay. Stay where you are, alright? I’m gonna try to sort this out.”

“Alright. Thanks.”

“Love you sis.” He hung up.

Moments later, Isaiah called.

“Hey little sister.”

“Hey Isiaiah.”

“Everything’s good, yeah? You have nothing to worry about.” Isaiah spoke with the same confidence he usually had when he was defeating his opponent in a debate tournament or completing the final word in a Spelling Bee. His words were sparse and low. Purposeful and measured.

I'd never realized how much I relied on them.

“Okay.”

“Okay,” he repeated. “Al, do me a favor and pull out dad’s briefcase behind the TV stand. It’s burgundy.”

I got off my parents’ bed and walked over to the TV. Sure enough, my dad’s burgundy briefcase peaked out behind the hutch.

“You see it?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Pick it up and carry it over to their bed.”

I followed Isaiah’s instructions.

I unclasped the golden locks

Tucked in the space between my father’s checkbook and calculator was a note. Folded. White. I opened the note and read it to myself. The entire note was only three words long, only three words said everything. My father’s handwriting was small and delicate, and I had to bring the note close to my eyes to truly make out what he’d said.

I moved home.

Best, Kwesi

“Al?” Isaiah’s voice pinched through the speaker. “Al, what did you find?”

I didn’t know what to say to Isaiah. I didn’t know what I’d read.

So I hung up.

When my mother came home, I was still sitting on her bedroom floor. My father's note clutched in my hand. I tried to stand up as soon as I heard her footsteps, but I was cemented to the ground. I didn't know how to move. I don't think I wanted to. I settled into the ground.

"Alison?" My mother walked into her room, a straw sunhat covering her face. She walked into her closet. "Are you deaf? Go get my suitcase."

I nodded. I wanted to say *OK*, but my mouth felt like chalk. Dry and dusty. And much unlike chalk, I lost all ability to form words. Instead I lifted the note up to my mother, the white piece of paper between my index and middle finger.

"What are you doing in that briefcase?" My mother's voice hardened as she walked up to me. "Put it back."

OK.

"Alison." Her voice cracked. She looked down at my hand but she didn't grab the note.

I couldn't look at her. My eyes focused on the contents of my father's briefcase - on Isaiah's birth certificate that lay on top, at the small American flag my father received after he passed his citizenship exam, on my first grade school picture. I was missing my two front teeth, but my smile was confident and wide.

"Mom." I trembled when I spoke. "Read it."

She could've said no. I would've said *OK*, I would've put the note back where it came from. I would've gone downstairs to get her suitcase. I swear. I know she didn't want to read it. And I know - deep down - she already knew what it was going to say.

She picked up the note quickly, it barely grazed my skin. She unfolded it just as fast; the crinkling sound was a good indication. And for minutes she stayed silent. Her words cemented inside her mouth. Her breath caught in her throat.

“Go home, Alison.” She finally said. She crumpled the note in her fist.

“Mom...”

“Go home now.” Her gaze shifted down to me. Her eyes misted. “Please.”

I’d never heard her sound like that before. So strained and angry and sad. I didn’t know a voice could sound like all of that at once.

I didn’t hug her when I stood. Her body didn’t ask me to. She stood frozen in place. In time. So I left.

MISCARRIAGE (JANUARY 1987)

Esther woke with a fist tightening in her stomach.

Four long fingers curled into a palm, squeezed together by a thumb. The fist twisted and writhed, each time more painful than before. It was a strong, unshakeable feeling. Each time she thought about it, it hurt even more. Each time she tried to take her mind off it, it hurt even more. Esther brought her arms around her abdomen as it contracted. She exhaled a deep breath. She tasted vomit.

She got out of bed and ran to the bathroom. She clapped a hand to her mouth as she lifted the toilet seat. Landed on the tile floor with her knees. She splayed her fingers on the ceramic bowl and opened her mouth.

After she vomited, she lifted her nightgown, pulled down her underwear, and sat on the toilet seat. And then she saw it. The blood. It pooled in her underwear in heavy globs. *Hyet*. There was so much blood. Esther brought her fingers to her thighs, gasping as she felt the sticky warmth on her skin. All over her skin. She brought her fingers up to her eyes. The blood was as bright and red as the tomato paste her mother would prepare with waakye — a color so vibrant and rich it was almost unnatural.

And it coated Esther's underwear. Her thighs. Her fingers. The fist inside her stomach twisted up her throat. Tears poured down her cheeks.

“Kwesi!” She gasped, air knocked from her longs. “Kwesi!”

She couldn't stop bleeding.

Moments later, Kwesi sprinted into the bathroom. But he froze at the threshold. In his sleep-state he saw his wife, sitting at the toilet, ounces of blood coating her inner thighs. She'd miscarried.

ALONE AGAIN

When I walked into the Subway restaurant, the door chimed. Underneath the dim fluorescent lights, a couple sat huddled in a booth. Her face was shrouded by brown curls and his lips stained rouge from her lipstick. Her fingers wrapped around his arm as she leaned into him and he massaged the back of her neck, his forehead against hers.

A gust of wind snapped me out of my stare-down. A girl dressed in a fishnet body suit ran by, a wooden stick-horse between her legs. “Eat fresh bitchesszzz!!” She screeched as she galloped out the door. Her two friends chased after her, soda straws between their teeth, doubling over in laughter.

I walked up to the counter.

“Alone again?”

Ahmed grinned as he wriggled his meaty fingers through plastic gloves. His eyes – warm and brown and framed by thick black lashes – dropped down from my face and onto my chest. He reached for the Italian herb bread before making his standard request. “Come back with me.” He winked.

The lights above him flickered.

“What would your wife say?” I buttoned the neck of my coat and pulled my phone out of my pocket, deleting six missed calls from my brothers.

Ahmed chuckled as he layered turkey slices on top of the twelve-inch sandwich. “Funny girl.” He moved on the pepper jack. “You shouldn’t be single.”

“Yeah?” I sent a quick text to my roommate.

“I have a brother.”

He was a doctor. In residency. At Yale. Ahmed told me about him every Sunday morning at 3AM while he made my custom turkey sandwich. Ahmed emphasized that his brother was a smart boy, and that he was very tall with straight teeth. When I’d asked Ahmed why *he* was still single, he’d smiled up at me, his chin lifting from the plastic partition that separated us. “He works too hard,” he’d explained.

Ahmed, I gradually learned, worked too hard as well. In the daytime, he worked as a custodian at the Natural History Museum. He spent extra time in the dinosaur room, memorizing the number of bones on the Tyrannosaurus Rex and spraying Pledge on the railings that were sticky from the hands of elementary schoolchildren. On his days off he drove for Lyft, deliberately picking people up in Georgetown at peak hours. He said that he didn’t mind his jobs, and that the day he became a father his wife shoved a newspaper in his face and told him to get off his lumpy ass. He was gonna get another job if it killed him. He needed to provide for his daughter. And he was gonna give her the world. She was his princess. He was gonna give her the fucking world.

Ahmed proceeded to make my sandwich, layering cheddar on top of the pepper jack, then lettuce, tomatoes, onions, and olives. Extra olives. I focused on standing up as straightly as possible. Breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth. I hated how I lost my balance whenever I was drunk, how my weight seemed to shift to one side of my body. Like Simon.

Simon.

“Here you go.” Ahmed slid a large cup across the counter. I never paid for my drinks.

“Thank you,” I spoke carefully, deliberately.

“That’ll be \$7.75.”

Ahmed rapped his hands against the counter as I rifled in my purse for my debit card. Once I found it, I held it out to him, my wrist semi-limp. He leaned over to retrieve it, but his fingers moved past where the card wedged between my fingers. They lingered on my skin, weaving through the groves between my knuckles. I could feel his thick fingers through his plastic gloves, sweaty and warm and firm. I felt the strength of his grip as he locked his fingers in mine. My mind went blank. I couldn’t move. He squeezed my palm and dropped his voice below a whisper. “You really are too beautiful to home alone,” he said. Then he glanced up, the corners of his mouth twitching into a smile, before pulling his hand away and removing my card from my weak grasp.

I drew my hand back and laughed – full and loud and from my belly – and rung my hands out at my sides. But my chin quaked. I redirected my attention to everyone else in the restaurant. The couple sitting at the booth stood up to leave, he carried her purse over his shoulder. She wore his jacket. They held hands as they walked through the door. Once they disappeared, I tried to focus on something else. I tried to count the tiles in the ceiling and the number of posters on the walls and the different flavors of soda, but all I could feel was the plastic of Ahmed’s gloves on my hand, between my fingers, on my skin.

On me.

“Have a great night!” Ahmed held my debit card out to me, eyes glinting. They smiled, in their way. Clear, and bright, and glossy.

Wordlessly, I nodded and retrieved my card with two fingers. I left my drink cup on the counter, and walked through the exit.

“Subway!” Stacie screamed as I walked out of the restaurant. From far away, she looked like a wild fairy, something mystical and inexplicable, a permanent fixture among the colorful lights in Northwest DC. She sat on the curb with her boyfriend and hung her head on his shoulder. Her knees folded under her chin and her hot-pink fur jacket draped over her legs, dwarfing her stature. Her hair, cheeks, and lashes were coated with glitter, and she donned a silver tiara. Some girl gave it to her when we were in the bathroom at Johnny Pistolas. She said that she felt like she was Stacie’s pee-sister. Stacie said she felt it too.

Stacie patted the spot of concrete beside her. “Subway!” She clapped her palms together as she tilted her head from side to side.

I sat down on my reserved spot, avoiding placing my feet above the sewer grate. When I was younger, my brothers said that sewer men lived down there and they waited for the moment a girl’s foot got caught so they could pull her down to be their sewer bride forever. Of course, the physics of this story don’t make any sense, but it did back then.

I stretched my legs into the street, pulling the sandwich out of the bag and resting its contents on my lap.

“Are you shaking?” Zach leaned forward and narrowed his eyebrows. With both hands stuffed in his pockets and a cigarette in the crook of his mouth, his lips barely moved. “You good, Al?”

I shook my head and forced my cheeks upward. I steadied the tremors in my hands and fingers and voice. “Yeah, yeah. I’m fine.”

Zach furrowed his eyebrow again and looked back at the neon Subway sign and through the window at Ahmed, the other employees, and the group of drunk customers who we definitely looked like. He turned to me again. “Really?” he probed. “Cause –”

“Here.” I handed half of the sandwich to Stacie who took it between both hands.

She took a large bite, lettuce and tomato and mayonnaise spilling out of her mouth and dripping onto the concrete. She opened her mouth as she chewed, cupping her hand under her chin. “Fuck me!” She cried. “This is so good!”

“Jesus.” Zach chuckled.

I giggled. Between the sound effects Stacie made, and the way pieces of the sandwich hung from her red curls, I couldn’t contain myself. I almost felt warm again, like I did earlier that night, liquor numbing my thoughts and loosening my limbs.

“Are you gonna eat that?” Stacie swerved into me and pointed at my untouched half of the sandwich.

I looked down at the sandwich, realizing, that for the first time I didn’t have the drunk munchies. Really, my stomach felt leaden. Heavy. And before I could question why, I remembered the hands that made the sandwich and how comfortable they felt grabbing my own. How I never asked them to touch me. How they were so strong.

“No.” I pulled the wrapper out to Stacie. “Go for it.”

“Ohmygodthankyousomuch!” She grabbed the sandwich and ate it over my lap. Mayonnaise coated my jeans all at once then in splatters.

It could’ve been worse.

“Think we should get tattoos tonight?” Zach pointed his cigarette at the tattoo shop across the street. People leaned against the white brick building smoking cigarettes and laughing loudly. “They’re open twenty-four hours.”

“Like a pharmacy,” I observed.

Zach snorted. “Nothing says ‘trust me’ like a 24/7 tattoo shop.”

“Next to an Irish bar.”

“In Adams Morgan.”

“In Washington DC.”

“What are you guys even *talking about?*” Stacie yelled with her mouth full. “We can’t get tattoos tonight.”

“Guess we can’t fool you.” Zach took a drag from his cigarette.

I shook my head, ignoring him. “But if we could, and you were gonna get a tattoo to remember tonight – right now – what would you get?”

“Mmm....” Stacie frowned, wiping crumbs and tomato and mayonnaise off her face. She dropped the remains of her sandwich on my lap and licked her fingers. “I think I would get a little tiara.” She touched her head.

“Seriously?” Zach blinked.

“It’s symbolic.”

Zach didn't respond. Instead, he wrapped his arm around his girlfriend and held her closer to his chest. In the street, their shadows created the outline of one person. One round body with one head darkened by the light. One heart.

Before I could study my own shadow alone on the edge of the curb, a yellow taxi rolled onto the street and the two of us vanished.

Stacie turned to me, still connected to Zach. "What tattoo would you get?"

I focused on the tattoo shop across the street. In the space between the shop and the Irish pub stood a Ghanaian restaurant painted gold, green, and red. Bukom Café. I knew enough Twi to know when words looked familiar even if I didn't know what they meant. My dad insisted on not teaching the language until my brothers and I were 'ready.' I guess we never were.

A man, who looked a little bit like my dad in size and stature, stepped outside to take a phone call. He wore the same tweed blazer and chocolate colored sandals my dad owned and. The African dad uniform. He grinned while he spoke, all white teeth, even skin, and high cheekbones. He shouted something into his phone before he tilted his head back and laughed at the sky. At the moon. He howled again and shook his head, holding his hand on his forehead.

I wondered who could make him laugh so fully. Maybe it was his wife or his children. Maybe they were at home and he called to check in with them. Maybe they put him on speakerphone. Maybe he wanted them to know that he was safe, and that they loved him. Maybe they knew where he was.

Tears pricked my throat.

“Al?” Stacie whispered.

“Nothing,” I blinked and answered flatly. “I wouldn’t get anything to remember tonight.”

Thirty minutes later, Zach insisted on taking me back home even though he and Stacie planned on going to his place. I told him that that didn’t make any sense. Stacie couldn’t go on a forty-minute drive through the city, she could hardly stand up straight. I was okay. I was fine. Zach finally relented and said he saw my point. Stacie puked onto the street. Zach hailed me a cab. Despite my protests, he handed the driver a twenty and told him to get me home in one piece.

“See you tomorrow.” Stacie pulled me into a one-armed hug, her other arm wrapped around Zach’s. “I love you!” She planted a sloppy kiss on my cheek.

“I love you too.”

I got in the cab and watched as Zach shut the door for me. We pulled away from the curb, the lights, fur, and tiara diminishing in the distance. When the cab driver asked me what my address was, I took a deep breath and rolled my shoulders behind me. I lifted my chin and recited the intersection of two streets I didn’t live by. I sent a text. Then, I rested my forehead against the window and closed my eyes.

“Hey.” Simon opened his door wide, ushering me inside. The wrinkles around his eyes crinkled as he took me in. “How was your night?” He disappeared into his kitchen

and opened his refrigerator. I took off my jacket and sat down at his barstool, kicking my feet out in front of me and twisting my body around.

“It was okay.”

Simon returned with two bottles of Gatorade. He handed me one as sat down beside me.

“Just okay?” He cocked an eyebrow.

“Mmhmm.” I took a swig from the bottle.

“No details?”

I wasn't sure what I was allowed to say, or even where to start. I thought about starting at the week before – the day I found out my dad left – and how I had to break the news to my mother. I could've started with my mother, and the strange texts I got on an hourly basis, the bizarre pictures of Biblical quotes layered on mountaintops and oceans: *Trust in the LORD with all of your heart and lean not on our own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. Proverbs 3:5-6. I keep my eyes always on the LORD. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Psalm 16:8.* I could've told him how my brothers wouldn't stop checking up on me. How they called just to hear my voice. How I was a 'champ' through this whole thing. And it was because of all this – this clusterfuck of a week – that I decided to get drunk with Stacie in the first place. Only to walk into Subway and have my hand violated by some strange man I hardly knew. I wanted to talk about *all* of that. I wanted to break into hysterics, to freak out for a second, to cry into someone's arms.

But Simon wasn't that someone. We'd established what he was. Who we were. So I just pursed my lips and shook my head. "Nope."

"I don't believe you," he smirked.

"I mean – Stacie met a girl in the bathroom and they bonded over pee streams. She gave her a tiara." I offered. It was a detail, sort of.

Simon laughed. "Only Stacie." He placed his forearm on the counter and leaned into me.

"Only Stacie." I repeated.

For a few moments, Simon and I sat in silence. I looked over at the kitchen, and the immaculate way Simon and his roommate organized everything. On the counter was a blender, and a toaster. A rice cooker. Real appliances. In college, Simon literally ironed his grilled cheeses. As I surveyed the kitchen, I felt his face studying me, analyzing me.

"You look really nice tonight," he finally said. His eyes swept over my body as he got closer. "I'm glad you came over."

I took another sip. In only a week, the scruff around Simon's chin had grown and darkened. He looked older, more mature in some ways. But even when his appearance changed, the rest of his properties stayed the same. He was still, in a lot of ways, the guy he was in college.

"Is your roommate here?" I whispered, suddenly considerate.

"In her room," Simon matched my volume. "Should we go –?"

I nodded before Simon could finish his thought, sliding off the bar stool and leading the way to his bedroom. As I walked behind him, Ahmed's voice echoed in my ears.

THE HAPPIEST PLACE ON EARTH (JULY 1997)

Esther had lived in America for fifteen years before her family took their first vacation.

Kwesi came home from work one day, sweat draping a bib around his collar, the lenses of his glasses clouded with fog. The air conditioner in his car had broken years ago. *It still isn't as bad as home*, he said, every time he came home from work, heat soaking through his shirts. And slacks. He grinned wide and happily, the kind of smile that her mother said looked like an *akɔnsɔn* – a baboon. He ran into the house singing, his voice low and off key.

“Oh happy day!”

He picked up Allison and secured her bird-like arms around his neck, spinning her around so that her frilly white socks flailed out in the air.

“Oh happy day!” Allison echoed, her voice small and nasally. She giggled as she spun, her shoulders quivering and head bobbing, her thin braids roped in the air.

Abraham and Isaiah looked up from their video game console, the green and blue pixilations paused. Their eyes away from the TV for the first time all afternoon. Kwesi could do that to them, Esther marveled. It would take minutes for the boys to peel away from their games whenever she asked. She'd even taken to unplugging the television to get their attention. “Mom!” They'd whine, snot-nosed and pouty. “We haven't saved

yet!” Now, they watched their father with wide-eyed wonder. No time to save. No time to protest.

“Dad!” Isaiah exclaimed once Kwesi moved on to the eighth iteration of his song.

“Dad! What’s up?”

“When Jesus washed! When Jesus washed! When Jesus washed!” He rocked Allison back and forth.

“Kwesi! *Gyae. Dwedwe down.* Put her down. Shreh, you’ll make her sick.”

Kwesi stopped singing. Like a mimic, Allison closed her mouth too. She did it in the dramatic way she watched on television, both of her lips folded in and invisible. A line formed in the place a mouth would be. Her father set her down on the floor and she stood firmly on both feet, only two steps in front of him, because she couldn’t bare to be farther away.

Abraham and Isaiah turned to one another, communicating something that only twin boys know. They studied each other, nodded, then glanced from their recently silenced father to their mother, who stood in the doorway with her arms crossed against her chest, a scarf covering her undid hair, and her blood red nails glinting in the sunlight.

“What is it?” Esther held her palm up. “What is this singy-singy nonsense?”

Though reprimanded, Kwesi couldn’t help but smile, still unshaken. He took three giant steps towards his wife, grabbed her by the waist, and planted a large, wet kiss on her forehead.

“Ooh!” The kids sang.

Esther could not be embarrassed. “What did you do?” She spoke slowly and carefully, a smile pushing through her rigid exterior.

“What did I do?” Kwesi teased.

“Yes. You have to have done something real *shtupid* to come in here singing and kissing me in the middle of the afternoon.”

“What did *I* do?” Kwesi repeated, louder this time.

Esther nodded, arms still against her chest.

“Yes!” The kids chorused.

“Well.” Kwesi over enunciated, . “I have two weeks off this summer, so I thought it would be a good idea to take a vacation.”

“A vacation?” Esther chuckled, the concept.

“Where?” Abraham shot up.

“This man in my office has a time-share in Orlando...” Kwesi dragged out his vowels, smooth and cool, like he’d introduced himself to Esther fourteen years earlier. His words sounded like leaves against the breeze, airy and light. “He isn’t using it this summer so he offered to let us stay there for six days.”

“Six days?” Esther choked.

Abraham nodded. “And four of them will be at Disney World!”

The family was going to Disney World.

At six-thirty on the Sunday morning on their trip, Esther walked into her daughter’s bedroom. A hoard of Barbie dolls greeted her from their shelf, their bodies

mangled in various contortions. Blonde hair. Blue eyes. Allison slept in her pink plastic princess bed, her shaggy brown teddy bear under her elbow, a mesh safety rail protecting her from rolling out. Abraham and Isaiah snored on the floor, encased in their Star Wars sleeping bags. Their shoulders brushed against each other's, Abraham's forehead nestled into the crook of his brother's neck. They slept the way they did when were infants – Abraham inhaling deeply, then Isaiah exhaling at double the volume – their two bodies symbiotic in a way that Esther only understood from textbooks and documentaries.

The boys had dragged their sleeping bags into their sister's room the night before, after dinner. Kwesi had spent an hour regaling the kids with tales all of the things they were going to do when they got to Florida. They were going to go swimming! And they'd ride rollercoasters! See dolphins! They would eat all the ice cream they wanted! Kwesi's eyes grew wide as he fascinated his children, transforming vacation and Orlando into a vast and infinite space. A space where rules were nonexistent. Sunshine was constant. Mice and dogs walked together hand and hand. They posed for pictures. *We'll take pictures*, Kwesi promised. *We'll take hundreds*. In Orlando, desire equated to necessity. Indulgence abundant. Orlando was a place that Esther couldn't imagine, even in her most unreasonable fantasies.

There was one bit of information that excited Allison the most. She sat on the couch; her stubby little legs stretched across her father's lap, her mouth gaped in the symbol for wonder. She was dressed in Esther's favorite Allison outfit – a navy blue nautical ensemble with a matching sailor hat that from JC Penny. It was a steal. Esther paired the dress with frilly little ankle socks. The itchy ones. Kwesi grinned at his

daughter, still in his work clothes, a Pluto the Dog tie fashioned around his neck. “The best part is that we are all going to share a room all week,” Kwesi’s eyes sparkled. “With two beds.” He put his two fingers in the air. “And we can tell stories *all night*.” He chuckled and tickled Allison’s back.

Allison had always wanted to share a bedroom with her brothers, who at the age of ten lived a life totally independent from her. They left the house in the morning to play with their friends, and did not return until sunset. They rode two-wheeled bicycles, *without* helmets. They slept in bunk beds: Abraham on the top, Isaiah on the bottom. Even when she was on her best behavior and she was allowed in her brothers’ bedroom, Allison couldn’t climb up to the top bunk. Her brothers didn’t want her to. And her mother said it was too dangerous. She was too little. She’d trip and sprain an ankle, Esther warned. Break a leg, Isaiah offered. Snap a neck, Abraham concluded. But when she got older, her father promised her she could have her own bunk bed. She could have *three* bunks.

But it wouldn’t be the same.

Allison clasped her fingers together and tucked them under her chin. She resembled a doll in the way her wide brown eyes peered up at her father’s, her sailor hat perfectly covering her head. “Can I share with Abe and ‘saiah?”

Esther winced. What a terrible nickname – *Abe*. It made her son sound like an unintelligent brute and not a man called on by God himself. When the little white boys in kinder-care started calling her son Abe, Esther thought it was just a phase. Surely, another sane adult would encourage Abraham to go by his biblical name, the right one.

But Abe caught on too quickly, like a virus. Soon, Esther received elementary progress reports with the name ABE AFREH scribbled at the top in bold black ink. Isaiah started referring to him as such, transporting the hideous schoolyard name into the once sacred walls of her home. Once faced with Abe every day, Kwesi abandoned Abraham altogether. Allison learned the three letter name months before Abraham. So there they were.

Abe and Isaiah. The Afreh boys. Hair buzzed in matching haircuts. Heads as large as their father's. Shiny brown scalps. That summer, Abe and Isaiah alternated the same red basketball jerseys. Chicago Bulls. 33 and 23. Pippen and Jordan. On their ten year old frames, the jerseys hung past their knees and brushed against their calves, but the boys didn't mind. Kwesi had purchased the jerseys in adult mediums, so the boys could wear the jerseys well into their mid-twenties. Because Pippen and Jordan were bound to be legendary, and those jerseys would be worth thousands one day. *It's an investment*, Kwesi explained.

"Of course you can share with your brothers." Kwesi smoothed the top of Allison's hat and kissed her forehead.

"*Dad...*" Isaiah groaned. "Are you serious???" He gesticulated towards his sister, waving his hands like an airline conductor. "Allison still wets the bed."

"No I don't!" Allison protested, slamming her hands onto the couch. She turned her head from her father to her mother. "I don't!" She wrinkled her forehead.

"*Yes she does! She's gonna pee all over us!*" Abraham stood up and backed away from the couch. "That's freakin' nasty!"

“Don’t say that word.” Esther warned.

“I don’t wanna wake up with no pee all over mah body, man. Freakin’ gross.”

“Stop it!” Esther insisted.

Allison hadn’t wet the bed for two whole months, an impressive accomplishment for a three year old, which was more than Esther could say for either of her sons. She washed their sheets well into their first grade year. In the living room, she leaned against the doorframe, folding her arms across her chest, and focused on her husband and his goofy tie. *Do something*, she urged.

“Come on dad.” Isaiah lectured to an undergraduate history class now, all pomp and authority. His words stretched and exaggerated with the wave of his hand. “Be reasonable here.”

“I don’t wet the bed!” Allison repeated to everyone in the room and no one in particular, her voice whiny and annoying. Her sailor hat flew off and her multicolored plastic barrettes clinked against each other with each shake of her head. She was at the precipice of a tantrum, her body bubbling with all of the lava inside a mounting volcano. Her chin quivered, her body shook, and the tears already rolled down her cheeks. She would erupt in ten seconds. Nine. But the boys were still going at it, still insisting that Allison couldn’t share a bed with them, it was a freakin’ unreasonable decision dad. There was no freakin’ way it was going to end well dad. No freakin’ way dad.

Seven.

And Kwesi sat where he had three minutes earlier, back when he enamored his children with fictions of the happiest place on earth. His living room now the complete

opposite. Five. He was speechless; it was so easy to reel his children in, to make them believe in magic. They had clung to his every word. He'd sustained them for one whole hour. This was supposed to be his glorious moment. Three. And now, now all of that magic was dust. Crushed under the feet of two ten-year-old boys. Two. Now, the lava was about to spew all over the living room and Kwesi didn't know what he could do about it. So he watched as Allison opened her mouth wide... and he held his breath...

One.

“CUT IT OUT RIGHT NOW OR ELSE NO ONE IS GOING TO DISNEY WORLD TOMORROW!” Esther dashed towards the couch, scooped Allison in her arms, and cradled her head under her chin. She swiveled towards her sons, knelt down, and pointed directly at them, their oversized Chicago Bulls jerseys suddenly resembling dresses. They lifted them up to their waists in embarrassment. “You think you can lecture your parents? In our house? That we paid for? Shreh...” Esther sucked her teeth. “You must be out of your natural senses.” She spoke slowly and methodically, her finger still in the air. “You *will* share a bed with your sister every night we are on vacation, you *will* enjoy it, and I swear to *Jehovah* if you two say another word about it –”

Allison whimpered.

“I will *make sure* it is the last word you say.” Kwesi finished, standing up behind Esther and folding his arms across his chest, suddenly awakened by his wife's outburst. He channeled the energy of his own father, who roared with rage whenever a young Kwesi made a misstep or spoke out of line. He channeled the energy of the man with a palm that felt like hot fire whenever it struck Kwesi's butt cheek. Or face.

Kwesi had only struck his kids a couple of times. No – that was purely Esther’s territory. She was the one who knew how to react to bad behavior, who cut in when teasing went too far. She was there when the boys sprinkled cayenne pepper on Allison’s pacifier, when Abraham pushed Isaiah into the YMCA pool before he knew how to swim, when the twins locked Allison in the attic for forty-five minutes. She was there whenever Allison retaliated – in her way – biting her brothers’ arms and flopping down on her stomach, battering the ground with her fists and legs while she screeched at the top of her lungs. Esther would whip her children, or tell them to calm down, or ignore them altogether, but she always knew how to react. Every time. Kwesi loved that about his wife, he loved the way she wasn’t afraid to insert herself in conflict and tear it apart with her bare hands.

He envied that about her.

“Now go up to your rooms, get your sleeping bags, and put them on the floor of your sister’s bedroom.” Esther adjusted Allison on her hip. “You three are having a sleep over.”

Abraham lolled his head up to the ceiling and Isaiah exhaled an exasperated groan, but neither said anything else. Instead, they slinked their shoulders forward, carried the tails of their jerseys by their sides, and trudged out of the living room, past the painting of The Last Supper, and the silver rosary hung above the television set that glinted in the sunlight. They walked slowly, defeat in each step, as if they lost a championship basketball game.

Pippen and Jordan.

Esther put the sailor hat back on Allison's head and cupped her daughter's face in her hand. "Stop crying, okay?" She kissed Allison's forehead, though strings of tears still washed down her cheeks. Esther frowned. "Why are you still crying?" Edge coated her voice.

"I don't know!!!" Allison's admission only made her sob harder. She contorted her face in a way that resembled a raisin, all wrinkles and soft lines. When she hiccupped, tears caught in her lungs, so she hiccupped again. And again. "I." She gasped. "Don't." She breathed. "Know."

"God." Kwesi muttered after a few minutes of Allison's silent crying.

"Check on the boys." Esther instructed, her eyes on Allison. "Make sure they packed."

She didn't turn around and face her husband, and she didn't need to. She knew that as soon as she uttered her instructions, Kwesi would walk out of the living room and follow the boys upstairs to their bedroom. He would stand in the doorway with his arms crossed while the boys stuffed clothes into their matching duffel bags. Isaiah would wipe his eyes and say he wasn't crying. The pollen count was too high. And Abraham would sulk in a corner, embarrassed that his own *mother* lashed out at him. Esther knew that Kwesi would be silent, observant in a way. He'd tell the boys to hurry up and not to forget to pack clean underwear. For that, Esther was grateful. With her children, Kwesi was dependable, and she couldn't ask for anything else.

Esther sat down on the couch with her daughter and held her while she cried until she exhausted herself to sleep. Then, Esther carried her back to her bedroom, changing

her out of her sailor dress and into pink princess pajamas. She bundled her under her blanket and kissed her forehead. When she walked out of Allison's bedroom, and shut the door behind her, she ran into her sons who wrapped their arms around their sleeping bags.

"Hmm." Esther looked down at them.

"We're sorry." Abraham looked down at his sleeping bag.

"You're sorry for what?" Esther leaned against the closed door.

"We're sorry," Isaiah looked up, "for being disrespectful in the house you paid for. And making Allison upset."

Esther smiled. "Okay. I accept your apology." She kissed Isaiah's head, then Abraham's. She turned the knob of Allison's door. "Don't be loud, okay? She's already asleep."

The boys nodded and walked into the bedroom.

Minutes later, Kwesi and Esther got ready for sleep.

"You baby her." Kwesi unbuttoned his pants and took them off. "Sometimes," he added.

Esther emerged from the bathroom and pulled her toothbrush out of her mouth. "Don't be stupid. She's three." Esther held her toothbrush and pointed at Kwesi. "And you spoil her."

"I know." Kwesi chuckled and shook his head. "I spoil all three of them."

"Huh." Esther raised her eyebrows and walked back into the bathroom.

“Huh what?” Kwesi called into the bathroom.

Moments passed. Esther finished brushing her teeth, she gargled mouthwash, flossed. All the while, Kwesi sat on the edge of the bed in his boxers, eyes towards the bathroom, awaiting his wife’s response. When she walked back into the bedroom with her face washed, silk scarf tied over her head, and robe wrapped around her body, Kwesi asked his question again. He spoke slowly. “Huh what?”

Esther smiled and bit her bottom lip. “You are funny.” She nodded. “Really funny.” She rolled her tongue around her mouth. She paced around the bedroom for a few seconds, running her fingers against the bedpost. “Do you think – is this vacation a good idea?” Her face hardened, instantly wiping all amusement from her features. She couldn’t smile about this.

“What?”

Esther sighed and shrugged. “Love, we can’t even afford this trip.” Esther pursed her lips, she knew she wasn’t supposed to mention this. Financial realities were in no way magical. And as much as she wanted to join in Kwesi’s excitement, and imagine herself walking hand-in-hand with a gigantic, hideous *rat* creature, she just couldn’t. “What are doing?”

“We need this.” Was all Kwesi said before he stood up and walked out of their room. “We need our children to believe in something special.”

GONE

He was gone before I woke up.

I awoke in the middle of Simon's bed, rolled up in his white duvet, my knees folded to my chest. My hair was uncovered, my curls dry and matted, and my head cradled by his lipstick-stained pillow. Sometimes I slept with my mouth open, my mouth hungry for the air that my nose couldn't consume. Sometimes I snored and a string of cold drool ribboned out of the corner of my mouth. I wondered if Simon thought that was unsexy.

I wondered why he'd left.

My dad had left.

I rolled over to my side and reached around for my phone on Simon's nightstand. I pressed the On button, but the screen didn't glow to life. The sound didn't chime. It was dead. Usually, Simon reminded me to plug in my phone before I fell asleep because my dad always called at 9AM on Sundays. His voice would boom over the receiver – full and bright and loud – and he'd stretch my name into a song, '*Alleeson! It's your daddy!*' He had to remind me who he was every time. Even after I explained to him how Caller ID works. Anyway, I'd say hi and then he'd tell me about the weather and what he ate for breakfast. (Nice. And scrambled eggs). Then he'd ask, '*did you eat?*' And I'd answer,

'not yet.' He'd tell me to get off the phone and make something to eat. I'd say, *'okay dad, thanks for reminding me.'* He'd end the call by telling me that he loved me.

And I'd tell him I loved him too.

Simon probably forgot to tell me to plug in my phone. That had happened before. Or maybe I didn't listen. Maybe I knew that my dad wouldn't be calling so there was no reason to keep my phone charged for him. Maybe I'd never have to.

The fact curdled into my stomach like expired milk. The whiskey sours, vodka, and jägerbombs from the night before mixed together, sloshing and cramping my digestive muscles. I sat up, feeling the familiar sting of vomit rising in my throat. I tried to settle myself. I closed my eyes. I counted to ten. Twenty. Thirty.

The nausea passed, and I swung my legs onto the floor. I curled my toes into Simon's shag carpet and glanced around his room. My skirt and top were neatly folded on his desk. My shoes were by the door, and my jacket hung on the knob of his closet. I got dressed without looking at my reflection. I raked my fingers through my hair. I rubbed crusts of sleep out of my eyelids and around my mouth.

I shut the door behind me as I stepped out into the hallway. Simon's roommate rattled around in the kitchen, probably making breakfast. She was normally awake when I left in the morning. Normally working out or cooking or finishing business reports. She was the walking representation of productivity. I hardly knew it existed.

"Good morning!" She grinned as she glanced over her shoulder, blonde hair lighted by the sun.

I zipped my jacket up to my chin. "Morning."

“Want some?” She gestured to the cup of coffee in her hand.

On regular mornings, I would've said no. I would've tip-toed out of Simon's apartment, offering as much as a distant nod to Eliza if our paths crossed. I would've hidden my face inside the hood of my sweatshirt and speed-walked to the bus stop. I would've put in my headphones. Turned up the music. Ignored the glances from men and women who noticed I was still dressed in the same outfit from the night before. The same stilettos. The same dirty underwear. I would've pretended not to care about their judgment. I would've pretended not to care that Simon had vanished that the morning. And I would've believed myself.

Instead, I nodded at Eliza and approached the bar, sliding onto the wooden stool.

“Yes please.”

Eliza opened the cabinet and rose to her toes, leaning her stomach into the counter as she reached for another mug. She picked up one by the crook of her pinky and gingerly held it in both hands before she set it down. She walked over to the coffee pot and paused, her eyes meeting my own.

“Cream and sugar?”

I nodded twice. Once for cream. Once for sugar.

Eliza proceeded to make my drink. She moved slowly, careful not to make any sudden noise. She opened the pantry with caution and still kept her focus on me. “How was your night?”

I shrugged my shoulders up to my ears. “It was okay.” The standard non-answer. “How was yours?”

Eliza stirred a spoon into my drink. “Bullshit.” She scrunched her nose. “Gay girls suck.”

I wanted to say, ‘*straight boys too,*’ but my lips clamped shut. I lifted them into a smile and hoped that I didn’t seem too dismissive.

“Here.” Eliza handed me my mug. “Coffee always helps my hangovers.” She retreated back to her original spot on the opposite side of the kitchen and grabbed her cup. She held the brim of her mug to her lips and gently blew before taking a sip. The kitchen settled into itself, groaning to life with the sounds of the coffee maker and the dishwasher. Still, the ambient silence was deafening. I tried not to focus on it. I tried to direct my full, undivided attention on my coffee. Eliza alerted herself to the bay window in the living room. “I don’t know how he does it,” she finally spoke.

“Who?”

Eliza redirected her focus to me. “Simon.”

Hearing his name aloud sounded like the admission of a secret, a taboo. His name sounded like it belonged to someone who only appeared at night when the lights were off. It sounded like if she said his name too loud, he might disappear.

“He runs like twelve miles every morning,” she continued.

“Right.” Twelve miles. Of course. Simon cared about staying in shape. I knew that. That’s why he was always gone when I woke up. He tried to get three miles in every morning. He told me he ran cross country in high school to lose weight. He told me once, when I dropped acid for the first time, and we were laying in the woods across the street from school.

It was a random night in October, cool enough for a sweater, jeans, and nothing else. The moon was bright and full, and the shadows cast from the tree branches looked like long, spindly fingers. I felt like I was being baptized by the earth – dirt and mud coated most visible regions of my body. Simon placed the palm of his hand on top of mine. *'Al, your fingers are so tiny. And so are your hands. Your hands are so small. I never had small hands.'* He frowned, removing his hand from my own. *'I used to have really big hands in middle school because I was fat.'* He sat up and glared down at me. *'I was a fat kid, Al.'* He stared off in the distance, like he could see his former self in the darkness.

I couldn't help myself. I cracked with laughter.

The coffee Eliza made was vaguely spicy, I realized, halfway through my cup, a strange mix of cinnamon and cayenne. I could've asked where she learned to make coffee like that, or if she'd ever thought about including ginger. But I didn't. We sat in silence, and each time our eyes met, we smiled at each other before looking away. I couldn't ask her intrusive questions. That wasn't appropriate. We were just two strangers in an apartment drinking coffee.

Most of the things I knew about Eliza were the small things Simon mentioned in passing. They were otherwise inconsequential unless they had an effect on his life. *'Eliza is a great cook. She made steamed salmon for dinner.'* *'Eliza took me to her company's happy hour - best mozzarella sticks I've ever had.'* *'Eliza and I went to West Virginia to check out to a strip club...'* The things Eliza knew about me were probably more

miniscule. Her primary interpretations of me were probably reduced to sounds. My giggle. My feet as they skittered from Simon's room to the bathroom. My moans.

Heat circled my cheeks and I lowered my head. I couldn't stop imagining what she thought of me. She didn't even know me. "Thank you." I cleared my throat and set down my drink. "For the coffee."

"No problem!"

"I should probably go home now." I shifted in my seat to stand up.

"You sure?" Eliza took a step towards me. "Are you okay?"

She didn't think I was. The universal face of concern shrouded all of her features. The creased forehead, the lowered eyebrows, the open-mouthed pout. She took a tentative step forward, her hand outstretched, a sentence hanging on her fingertips.

"I'm okay." I nodded, fully standing. "Really." I smiled — one of my best, cheeks raised, teeth revealed — and pointed to my coffee mug. "That was *so good*, Eliza. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Eliza pulled her hand back and ran her fingers through her hair. "Get home safely, alright?"

"I will." I walked into the foyer and opened the front door. "Thanks."

I decided to walk home.

The weather wasn't too unbearable, and I forgot to put my SmartTrip in my pocket. I ambled onto the sidewalk with my hands stuffed in my pockets. Above, white cotton-candy clouds shifted through the deep blue sky. No shapes — no elephants, or

telephones, or ice-cream cones formed above me — I pulled my head out of the sky and kept walking.

New Hampshire Avenue was alive with tourists, shuffling down the sidewalk. Middle-aged Midwestern couples walked down the streets in their neon colored baseball hats, cutoff shorts. They wore their digital cameras around their necks. They held out their paper printed maps, flustered when they rustled in the wind. Turning their backs and facing the opposite direction, just to figure out how to get to the White House.

I put my disconnected headphones in my ears and bobbed my head along to invisible sound. Inaudible music.

She was asleep in the lobby of my apartment.

She was the first thing I saw when I walked through the glass double doors. She sat on the red couch in front of the elevator, to the left of the fitness room. Front and center. She was dressed in a vintage Adidas tracksuit my brothers got her as a joke one Christmas. My mother hardly wore pants. She sucked her teeth when she opened the present, unamused by my brothers' snickers. She called it a '*garbage outfit*' and stashed it at the top of her closet.

I could tell that she'd tried to keep herself awake. Her arms were folded over her chest and both of her feet were planted firmly on the floor. If you glanced at her, you wouldn't have guessed she was sleeping. She didn't have that weird, involuntary face twitch other people had when they slept. She didn't snore. She didn't drool. Her breaths

were even and measured. It was the upper half of her body that gave her away: her chin folded into her chest and her shoulders hunched forward.

And her eyes were closed.

“This your mutha?” The doorman gesticulated, DC accent in full-effect. He sat at his desk with his phone in hand, playing some puzzle with an annoying soundtrack. He was too engrossed in his game to give much energy to the middle-aged woman asleep on his couch.

I nodded, noticing the two large suitcases at her feet for this first time. “Yeah, um. I didn’t know she was surprising me...”

“She got here at four o’clock.”

“In the morning?”

“Yeah.”

I wanted to puke. I couldn’t believe I’d made her wait so long.

I tried to piece everything together. I tried to understand how my mom got to the city in the first place. She hated public transportation. She hated driving even more. Did someone give her a ride? She’d probably called to ask me to pick her up. And I didn’t answer, because I let my phone die. I’d spent so much time thinking about how my dad wouldn’t call that my mother never crossed my mind.

I should’ve thought about her.

I shouldn’t have forgotten about her.

“Mom.” I knelt down and shook her knee. “Mommy, wake up.”

Her eyes fluttered open and she jerked her knee up, startled. “Allison?” She glanced down at me, her eyes raw and bloodshot. “Hi love,” she whispered, registering where she was. Crimson blood vessels zagged around the whites of her eyes — more than I thought possible — the bags below her eyelids thick and puffy. She squeezed her eyes and tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Oh my God.” I stood up, my gut stuck in my throat. “Oh my God mom.” I reached for her with shaking fingers. I cradled her head in my arms. “I’m so sorry.” For not being home. For not answering my phone. For having her sit in this lobby since four a.m. “I’m so, so sorry.” For my dad. For everything.

My mother cried silently. Her chin quivered against my chest. Her tears soaked through my jacket. She folded into me easily, as if she couldn’t hold herself together any longer, as if the weight of her was too heavy to bear, as if I was the only person on this planet who could keep her together. So I stood with my mom in the lobby of my apartment building for a while, cradling her, trying to hold her together, while she wept.

BROKEN (JULY 1999)

A week after Esther's mother died, she found a pair of women's underwear in her husband's briefcase. It was a Saturday afternoon and Kwesi was out, playing oware and drinking beers with the Ghanaians in Woodbridge. Esther had been mining through Kwesi's important documents – the social security cards, his application for citizenship, the one photograph from their wedding day – for the children's birth certificates. The night before – six days after her mother's passing – Esther had decided that her children needed passports for when they went to visit her father. The trip would be soon, Esther decided, sooner than later. It needed to be.

As Esther's fingers shuffled around the manila folders and legal envelopes, a slight of red caught her eye. Wedged in the pocket behind Kwesi's checkbook and calculator were a pair women's underwear. Red. Lace. Worn. And when Esther brought the material up to her nose, rubbing the fabric between her fingertips, she caught the lingering scent of sweet. Sweat. And suddenly, Esther saw her husband in a dimly lit room with his shirt off. She saw his dark, muscular chest. His protruding pelvic muscles. She saw fog. A woman in red lace underwear. A woman with round breasts and full lips. She took Kwesi in her hands, soft and smooth. She took all of him.

Esther braced her palm on her nightstand. She steadied herself, brought herself back into her bedroom, into Saturday's late afternoon, lace underwear clutched beneath her fingers. She sighed, then extended the waistband of her jeans. She looked down at her

own plain white underwear. The pair she purchased from Sam's Club in a pack of twelve whilst shopping for rice, tomato sauce, and oranges. She had never owned a pair of red underwear before. Never held one up close. And now all she could imagine – all she could see – was what this woman looked like. What she did. Who she was.

And despite herself, Esther thought about her husband. She thought about his large, round head, about how when they first shared their bed, he always slept against her shoulder. In the beginning, Esther tried to shrug his weight away, she tried push him off her, shake him away. But eventually – naturally – she got used to him. His weight. His body.

His heartbeat.

Esther thought about his hands, the ones she'd first noticed when he worked as a farmer back home. In Ghana. Where they met, outside on the porch away from her mother and father. Her mother. Her mother was dead now, buried in a grave Esther had not yet seen, a grave she was not sure she'd ever see. "*Dammit.*" The word fell from Esther's lips and staggered into the air. She gripped onto the edge of the nightstand with both hands, underwear still holding the underwear. She squeezed her eyes shut. She tried to breathe.

"Mommy?" Allison strolled into her parent's bedroom on her tip-toes. This was a new habit, a way she practiced her ballet around the house. In the doorway, she stood half an inch taller. Oh, this was dangerous. Allison was putting strain on her distal muscles. She was hurting herself. Sickling her feet. Esther expressed this concern constantly, telling her daughter to flatten. *Shreh, Allison. Flatten! Flatten-oh!* Kwesi chided Esther

for spoiling their daughter's fun and Esther stopped saying anything altogether. Allison would outgrow this. She would be fine.

"Mommy, are you okay?" Allison stood in front of her mother on her tip-toes with a poise she'd borrowed from her dance class. She stood with her back straight. One leg in front of the other. Arms by her sides. Good.

Esther balled the lace underwear in her fist. She focused on her youngest, her eyes misting. Late afternoon sunshine brought warmth into her bedroom. It covered her arms, blanketed her numbness. "Oh, God." Esther shoved the underwear into her back pocket. "God. Look at you." Allison turned around with her arms spread out, her pink tulle tutu extending from her waist. She reminded Esther of the fairy from Peter Pan: small, delicate, and shimmery. "You look so beautiful, *ada*."

"Thanks." Allison whispered. She looked down, pouting her large bottom lip and interlocking her fingers, bouncing on the balls of her feet. Even at five, Esther's daughter was shy in the way most adults were, unable to accept a compliment, bashful when illuminated by attention. Allison was much unlike Kwesi in this way, who thrived on positive energy. Allison was Esther's most accurate and complete reflection; a living embodiment of the things Esther had planned to change, the things she now couldn't.

Esther reached for her daughter's chin, gently rubbing her skin with her thumb. "You are beautiful, *mama*." She swallowed, the word *mama* caught somewhere between Esther's throat and her heart. "Believe that."

Allison looked up at her mother with her wide brown eyes. She didn't blink.

"Okay?" Esther pressed. She clenched her jaw. "Say it."

Esther needed her to say it because it was true. And if Allison said it, she would believe it. She would carry herself like she did. She would know she was worth something. Tears dripped from Esther's eyes. Allison watched as they fell, as they rolled down her cheeks in thin rivulets and disappeared into the carpet.

"Allison." Esther reached for her daughter's hand. "You are beautiful."

Allison had never seen her mother cry before. Even after grandma died, and her mom hung up the phone in the kitchen, and rubbed the cord against her lips, she just sat with Allison and her brothers on the couch and read them *Anansi* stories before it was time to go to sleep. But she never cried. Not that night. Allison didn't know her mother was capable of crying.

"O.K." Allison said after several moments had passed, and her mother still held her hand. "O.K." She nodded. And then she wrapped her arms around her mother's waist. "Please don't be sad, mommy," she murmured, pressing her head against her mother's stomach and squeezing her eyes shut.

"I'm not." Esther sniffled and cleared her throat. She pulled her daughter away from her and held her by her shoulders. "I'm not sad." She lifted her cheeks into a smile. She laughed, craning her neck up to the ceiling. "I just love you so much." She kissed Allison's forehead, "I love you and your brothers so much."

"I love you too mommy." Allison looked into her mother's eyes. Another reflection.

Esther rubbed her hand against the back of Esther's neck, stopping at the nappy kinks and tugging on them. "So let's do your hair, hmm? Tell your brothers to bring me the chair from the kitchen. The thread is in the downstairs bathroom."

After Allison raced back upstairs with the spool of black thread in hand and the twins carried the large wooden dining chair up the stairs and into Esther's bedroom, Esther sat her daughter down, placed a jar of Ampro Pro Styl protein styling gel, a hot comb and a soft brush on her nightstand, and pursed the thread between her lips. She focused on taming her daughter's hair, the thick curls, the truest representation of Ghana, into a slick bun. *Required*, Allison's dance teacher instructed. So Esther plugged in the hot comb, shushed her daughter's continual *ow's!* and concentrated on recreating the perfect ballerina bun. For a moment, her mind was only focused on hair, just hair. And for a moment, a brief moment, she almost forgot about the red lace underwear stuffed in her back pocket.

When Esther came home after watching five-year-olds attempt multiple pirouettes across a wooden stage with a construction papered backdrop, she set her purse on the floor. She took off her jacket and shook out the few lingering snowflakes that clung to the shoulder. She walked into her closet to hang her jacket, and passed him.

He sat down on the bed, his fingers wrapped around his chin as he glared at his briefcase. It was where Esther had left it, still open, birth certificates laid on top. Esther walked back into the room and stood in front of her husband. His tie was partially

unraveled, the top button of his Oxford shirt undone. Something about him was frozen in place, like a hand left mid-air after a glass shattered. “Esther,” he said, his voice soft.

Esther blinked. In front of him, and dressed in a pair of blue jeans and a multi-colored knit sweater, she looked so unlike the woman he’d met sixteen years ago. Her face was softer, her movements slower. The Esther Kwesi had met sixteen years ago was brash, bold, never dressed for comfort.

Was that what America had done to them?

Esther pulled her long braids into a ponytail on top of her head. She hooked a finger through a belt loop, then reached in her back pocket. She held the red lace underwear out in front of her, held it between her thumb and index finger, waved it in front of Kwesi, who, for a second, caught a glimpse at the Esther from sixteen years ago. Pursing her lips together, Esther put the underwear back where she found it, in the pocket behind Kwesi’s checkbook and calculator. She then closed his briefcase and secured the clasps.

Kwesi sucked air through his front teeth. “Esther...”

“You missed your daughter’s recital tonight. At the school.” Esther picked up Kwesi’s briefcase and tucked it in the space between the television hutch and the wall. “She had a solo.”

Kwesi’s jaw stiffened. He tried to capture his wife’s thought process – he tried to read her mind. She didn’t look angry in the way anger colored someone’s skin, her nostrils didn’t flare, her face wasn’t stiff, she didn’t frown. But still, there was a

measured irregularity, a rehearsed calmness in the way she addressed him. Her presence was solid, cold. And she knew.

“I’m sorry.” Were the only words Kwesi felt able to say. In that moment, sorry covered so much, but meant so little. And he knew this. He could fix this.

“She has a surprise for you in the living room.” Esther sat down in the spot the briefcase once was. Her side of the bed. She folded her hands together and bowed her head. She thought about praying.

Kwesi wanted to touch her. He wanted to run his fingers against the comfortable fabric. He wanted to tell her that he’d made a mistake. He’d made a lot of mistakes. And, honestly, he’d probably make more. But still, he loved her. She had to know that.

Instead of saying anything, or holding her, or attempting a well-intentioned lie, Kwesi simply nodded, said “okay” and stood up.

He left Esther in their bedroom. Where, for the first time since that morning, she had a moment for clear thought. And everything Esther thought of brought her back to the same resolution, the same trap.

She couldn’t leave.

That night, Kwesi tried to cuddle against his wife’s body, but it was cold, so unusually cold. He opened his eyes and looked out the window at the moon, full and rich. He thought about the nights when she was warm. Hours later, when he finally found comfort, his head against her shoulder, Esther shook him off. Violently. “*Twe kɔe.*” She hissed, bite in her voice. “I can’t sleep. *Remove your head.*”

So he moved. Kwesi sat up and moved all the way over to the right side of the bed. His side. An equal distance away from hers.

And away from her.

THE SEWER BRIDE

When Georgina Bishop was pulled into the sewer – still clothed in her eggshell colored dress, her ankle still clasped in Flem’s aged and wrinkled fist – the pungent scent of urine wafted the sewer air. It was unbearably hot. It was the type of warmth did not strike all at once, but instead took its time to boil. Within minutes, the heat seeped into Georgina Bishop’s skin. Into her pores. Georgina swore it reached her lungs. Her strawberry blonde locks clung to the back of her neck with the same intensity and attraction as two oppositely charged magnets.

“Let go of me!” Georgina gasped, breathless, as Flem carried her high above his head, her body a plank. Flem gripped both of Georgina’s ankles in one hand, and her neck in another.

Flem didn’t answer. He took long, purposeful strides through the sewer and the various connecting tunnels. Now, it is important to note – as many others will not – that only a select few have seen Flem before – though he is real – unlike Bigfoot and The Loch Ness Monster. He is – like all inhabitants of the sewer – an enigma. However, I have it on good authority and I have *definitive* proof that Flem exists.

Georgina Bishop’s betrothed was (and is) a colossus with a height of eight feet five inches. His toes are webbed, which makes it easier for a being of his stature to walk without toppling over, his skin gray a result of the lack of sunlight in the sewer. He has

scales – much like fish and other amphibians – due to the unhealthy sewer water, but I’m getting ahead of myself –

Flem carried Georgina Bishop through the connecting tunnels of the sewer. For a few moments, Georgina Bishop objected with all of the might and gusto in her ten-year-old soul. She screamed as loud as her voice could carry, the shrill from her vocal cords reverberating off the cool, metal pipes.

Help! Let go of me! Help! Help! Please!

She lost her voice quite quickly. The lack of water and the intensity of the heat made it difficult for her to speak – let alone scream – and she was just too damn tired. By the time Flem stopped walking and brought Georgina to his dwelling, a ramshackle collection of Styrofoam crates and a deflated air mattress, Georgina Bishop had fallen asleep.

He lay her down on the hard, dusty mattress. With her golden strawberry locks and her eggshell colored dress, Georgina Bishop resembled an angel. The significance of this was not lost on Flem who whispered, “bride,” his voice hoarse and scratchy. He took a scaled finger and ran it across Georgina’s cheek, then he kissed it. “Welcome home.” He curled up next to her, clutching his hands to his chest, closed his eyes, and went to sleep.

BIOGRAPHY

Stephanie “Steph” Adwoa Arhin received her Bachelor Arts in Communication and English (Writing) from Denison University in 2014. There, she was published in *Exile* and *Juicebox* student presses. She will graduate with her MFA in Fiction from George Mason in 2017. There, she worked as a Teaching Assistant and volunteered with *Fall for the Book*. Her writing has been nominated for the AWP Intro Journals Prize and won the 2017 Dan Rudy and Alan Cheuse Awards in Fiction.