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The Cold Surrender of Midnight's Passing

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The Cold Surrender of Midnight's Passing

Dana Marie Roach

Love on Her Wrist

Kate's tiny hands clutch her stuffed-animal, Patty the Penguin. The fingers that dig into the penguin's fluff are smeared with pink nail polish. Kate has been painting her own nails ever since her mom left four years ago. Not that her mom was ever that good at painting nails either. Her hands were always trembling.

"Hey kiddo, we're here," Kate's dad spins around in the driver's seat and his crinkly, weather-beaten lips pull up at the corners. Kate notices that her dad's hands are shaky on the wheel and that his left knee is jumpy, like he's viciously pressing the pedal of a kick-drum. Kate thinks he's acting like he does before one of his big lectures at his college. Her dad's a famous marine biologist. She reminds her third grade classmates of this when they call her mom a lunatic.

Kate unbuckles her suffocating seatbelt and wiggles over the console in-between the front seats to get a better view. Her dad's lack of reprimanding alarms Kate. She leaves her new seatbelt unbuckled.

The gravel drive emerges in a blindingly white field, leaving behind the dense white pine forest. They pass a sign that reads *Pineland Hospital*. Kate squints her blue eyes against the white to make out the cluster of brick buildings ahead.

"It looks like your college, pops," Kate says. There's a smashed window up high in one of the towering buildings, and the white paint peeling off the windowpanes. "Maybe a little uglier."

Kate tries to think back to when her and pops dropped mom off, when she was four years old. Then, bright lights shone out all of the windows. White Christmas lights were

wrapped around the lampposts dotting the drive. She knew her mom would like it here. There weren't any smashed windows.

Kate's dad kills the engine in the parking lot. Kate suddenly finds herself filled with questions.

"So mom's all better now, right?"

Eric turns to face his daughter. Eyes like the bluest tropical waters and hair a coiled tangle of gold, never brushed, and an elfin face brushed with constantly blushing cheeks; she looks like her mother.

"Almost, kiddo."

"Why just almost?" Kate gnaws at a pink fingernail.

"Well, the hospital will be closing soon. Mom is going to take medicine at home. The doctors call it deinstitutionalization. Can you pronounce that?"

"Duh, pops. Deinstitutionalization." Eric grins and kisses Kate's forehead.

Walking up the icy and salty cobblestone path, Kate squeezes her dad's right hand and Patty's left wing.

The inside of the building is white, as white as the glaring field. The stone floors send echoes of footsteps to the cavernous ceiling. There are no pictures on the walls, and cracks like ravines in the plaster. A leak drips into a tin pan in a corner from an exposed pipe in the ceiling. The drip-drip-drip is the only noise. A doctor in a grey suit with matching grey eyes and beard approaches.

“Hello there. You must be Sloane’s family.” He extends a hand which Eric’s sweaty palm envelopes.

“Shall we?” The doctor intones before striding away.

Kate lags behind, mesmerized by the hollow halls and unable to keep up with the men’s strides. Snippets of their conversation drift back to her, “Zoloft... the market for over a year...yes, very safe...doesn’t want ... you...persistent.” Kate counts twenty wooden doors on the right side of the hall, the left being one peeling-white-paned window after the other, until the grey doctor pauses in front of a door and knocks.

Kate stays back in the hall. Her dad enters and she watches her mother slowly turn her torso on the bed where she is sitting. The white sheets scrunch; the only noise. She had been gazing out the window at the parking lot below. Kate takes a step back. Her mom isn’t her mom anymore. Her once elbow-length hair is cropped short to her ears and greasy strands of it stick to her shiny forehead. The softness of her body, what was left of it when she entered the hospital, melted away to nothingness.

“Sloane,” Eric murmurs before sitting down on the bed next to his wife. He wraps his arms around her jutting shoulders and Sloan manages a smile. She peers around his head, whispering, “Kate?” Kate freezes. Identical eyes meet, though one pair still animated with vigor, the other pair, dead.

Kate unconsciously drops Patty and runs to her mom. Sloan’s eyes widen as her daughter shimmies up between her body and her husband’s that refuses to let go. Kate stares at her mom with longing, longing for the rosy-faced woman in jean overalls with the lime green watering bucket in one hand and baby on her hip that she keeps in the top drawer of her nightstand table.

Sloane stares back, trying to feel anything through the dense smog of her consciousness.

The spaghetti strap on Kate's tank top chafes against the red shoulders the sun marked her with from her afternoon on the Maine coastline. As Sloane and Kate walk down the beach, the sun starting to dip below the ocean, Kate's mom presses a gentle finger to Kate's sun burnt forearm. When she releases, the ghost of a white fingerprint remains for a mere moment. It's the first time she's touched her daughter in over three months.

"Sunscreen, Kate," Sloane murmurs before looking out to sea for a final glimpse of the culprit behind her daughter's discomfort.

"I know. Just forgot after the ceremony."

"I'm sorry I didn't make it today, Kate."

Kate is glad she's wearing sunglasses. She dreads when the sun will make its final dip into the ocean.

"It's really fine, Sloane." Kate stopped calling Sloane mom three years ago. "Middle school graduation is kinda stupid, if you think about it. Still have four years of the same thing to go."

"A milestone, nonetheless." Sloane says this more to herself than Kate. "How was the beach with your friends after?"

Kate can hear a strain in her mother's voice, the strain of trying to be curious.

Only the topmost curve of the sun remains above the ocean. Seagulls flap through the fading light, and tiny birds Kate can't remember the name of- no matter how many times her

dad tells her- skim over the wet sand on frantic legs so skinny they look nearly invisible. Kate takes off her sunglasses.

“Sloane. What do you feel like?”

Sloane pauses. The sun dissolves into the ocean. “What do you mean, Kate?”

Kate doesn’t answer. She stops too, and starts drawing lines into the sand with her big toe. In the silence, she watches the ocean erase them.

A lighthouse on the peninsula that is their destination begins to draw a faint circle across the ocean. The seagulls and little frantic birds encircle the two paused women. This beach is flocked with the tourists in the daytime. The birds expect food.

Kate looks up startled when Sloane begins, “I feel like a bird in a wire cage, hanging from a tree where free birds swoop by at every instant. So close, but not really at all.”

Kate waits for elaboration, not understanding. None is given. The lighthouse beam swoops through them, lighting up a sun-kissed young girl reach for the hand of her shadowy mother.

The 19th century ocean-stained beach house is dark except for the kitchen window. Kate can see her dad’s silhouette at the kitchen table when she pulls her red 1970s Chevy truck into the gravel driveway. The beam from the lighthouse is the only other light- the clouds are thick. The lighthouse beam sweeps over the roof of the house and the surrounding pine trees every four minutes.

Kate steps out of her truck, her leg muscles burning with each bend. She rolls her shoulders. Her back is even sorer.

“How’d it go?” Eric has a drink in his hand, which explains his slurred words. He switched from his one Indian Pale Ale after dinner to a tall glass, or glasses, of vodka about the same time Kate started calling her mom Sloane. About the same time Sloane became the living ghost of their home.

“I got third.” Kate’s dad grunts in some sort of recognition. When Kate joined the track team two months ago as a junior, she did it to prolong the hours away from home. Turns out she has a born ability for sprinting towards a twelve-foot-something bar and launching herself over it with a pole double her height. She doesn’t care what place she gets. She just loves the moment she gets to free-fall.

“We got second as a team. Portland got us. But they’re such a damn big team.” Kate waits a few moments for a reply from her dad. When he just nods over and over again, staring down into the clear abyss of his glass, Kate grabs a jar of Jiffy out of the cupboard and an apple of the counter for dinner and makes her escape.

The wooden stairs creak as Kate climbs them. Family pictures start at the foot of the stairs and end five stairs later. Kate climbs the other twenty stairs imaging family trips and birthday parties that never happened.

Sloane sleeps in a different room than Eric now, in Eric’s old study. Skeletons of small fish in glass frames still hang on the walls. Kate pauses outside of Sloane’s door. She knows her mom isn’t sleeping. Kate stares at the oak door. She imagines her mom curled up in the child-sized window bench, looking at the little skeletons on the wall, or her usual nighttime activity- staring out the window counting the seconds under her breath in-between the passing of the lighthouse beam. That’s how Kate knows the beam sweeps over her house every four minutes. 240 restless seconds.

One time when Kate sat on the floor of her mom's room doing her political science homework, Sloane started counting in the daytime. Not until Sloane stopped counting at 154 did Kate realize she was staring at the tiny bones in a fish skeleton.

Kate's knuckles linger over the door. She wants to go in, scoot in on the window bench with her mom, and tell her how it feels to free-fall through air. She wants to show Sloane her medal, the first one she's ever gotten in her life. Instead, she drops her hand and walks down to her room. When she opens the door, she tosses the bronze medal into the wicker wastebasket next to her desk and then dives into her bed fully clothed. Her dinner of an apple and peanut butter forgotten on her desk, she pulls the sheet over her face and cries for the first time in three years. Her tears and the thin sheet obscure the glow-in-the-dark stars on her ceiling, but nonetheless she counts them over and over again, trying to find sleep.

A boy in a tux drunkenly trips over his own feet and spills the contents of his red solo cup over the front of Kate's intricately beaded silver prom dress.

"Asshole!" Kate yells at him before giggling. It's her first time drinking alcohol, and she's too drunk to care.

The after-prom party is taking place at her rich classmate's white mansion on the beach. Kate finds this convenient. She can drink as much as she wants and walk home along the ocean, even though it will be a three-mile trek down to the ancient, small homes section of the coastline.

Kate's prom date comes up behind her and slinks his arms around her silk waistline.

“Want to go for a walk?” Before Kate answers he grabs her hand and pulls her through the sweaty rainbow of taffeta. Once on the deck, the salty air clears Kate’s mind a bit. Her date pushes her against the deck rail and starts kissing her neck. The sliding door out to the deck is glass; everyone can see them.

“Stop,” Kate mutters. He puts his hand on her lower back and shoves his body closer to hers. “Stop,” she says louder. When his hand snakes its way up to her chest, she plants her knee into his groin. He falls back.

“You stupid bitch! What the fuck’s your problem?”

A couple of boys down on the beach start laughing at her doubled-over date. She walks by them, heading for the lighthouse beam in the distance. When one of them, her track teammate, realizes who she is, he asks her if she’s all right.

“Yeah, thanks Jake. Just want to go home.”

“Text me when you make it, okay?”

Kate nods her head and smiles before turning and starting home. By the time she reaches the back door of her house, she is sober enough to care about the drink spill covering the front of her dress. She spent so much time searching vintage boutiques to find it. No girl at the dance had a dress anything like hers. Kate climbs the stairs to the bathroom. The door is locked. Kate knocks loudly. No one answers.

She shoves her whole body against the door. It doesn’t give.

“Dad!” She screams into the house. He isn’t home. Kate sprints downstairs and out the front door. She grabs the spade resting against the house by the garden.

When she reaches the bathroom again, she shoves the blade into the door again and again. Finally it flies open.

Sloane's naked body is lying in the porcelain, claw-footed bathtub. The water is red. Kate moves slowly to the edge of the tub. Her mom's wrists are slit vertically, trails of blood still sliding into the bathwater. Her hair floats around her half-sunk head. Her blue eyes are open, peering over the red water. Kate is perfectly still, a Grecian statue. All she can think is that her dad hides all the knives. How. No. It's not possible.

Kate doesn't cry or scream as she slowly descends the stairs, picks up the phone and numbly dials 911. She doesn't call her dad until the ambulance and police have arrived. In the meantime, she sits next to the bathtub with her mom.

A month later, a drunk teenage girl will get arrested for taking a crow bar and smashing open all of the bird cages at York's Wild Kingdom Zoo. The police that arrest her will find a swollen, black-ink tattoo of a birdcage with its door off the hinges and a small sparrow flying out on the girl's wrist. When they take her to the hospital to get an IV, the doctor will put antibiotic ointment on the new tattoo, of which the sparrow looks infected.

After graduating high school, Kate will board a red-eye flight to her new life in Oregon. She will pull the hood of her University of Oregon sweatshirt over her head and wait for the long night. She will be the only passenger on the plane awake.

Tracing the tattoo on her wrist, she will watch the sun set at 35,000 feet; at an altitude too high for any bird to fly.

All the Pretty Facades

Paul Foster stares at the spidery red threads that his irritated blood vessels have sprouted over the flaky skin of his face and neck. His droopy, bloodshot green eyes are caught between the gilded frame of his younger brother's bathroom mirror. *Excuse me*, he thinks, *powder room mirror*. Paul thinks back to how strange those words sounded on his brother's wife's rouge lips. When she first met his brother, Dr. Foster, two years ago, she would still lay bare the tiny black tattoo of the birdcage and free flying sparrow on her wrist and the vertical inked words *the cold surrender of midnight's passing* on her slim tricep. This Christmas Eve, every inch of her arms is covered in a cream-colored cashmere turtleneck sweater. As his mother always says, his brother has an effect on people. Paul turns on the cold faucet. He splashes water over his face and then his slightly swollen fingertips find the edge of the cool granite countertop and cling to it. To get through the rest of dinner, he's going to need another couple whiskeys on the rocks.

Paul swerves a bit walking down the sconce-lit hallway back to the dining room. The sound of clinking crystal and piano music from the distance causes him to linger on the Oriental rug in the foyer. He examines the picture of the family hanging there- his brother in a grey suit, his jaw line creating a jarring angle between his face and Kate's tanned one, which makes the crisp white of her button-up shirt pop. A bundle of pink and lace rests in Kate's lap, a little dribble of drool visible on Kate's otherwise pristine shirt. From the dining room, Paul hears the bundle of pink and lace start to cry.

When Paul reaches the dining room, his brother cuts off midsentence describing a new hospital wing and begins, “Paul! We thought you had gotten lost. Another drink?” Paul doesn’t miss the piercing glance his mom shoots his brother at the offer. He really wishes he could say no. “Sure.”

He slides into his seat in between Kate and some family friend of his brother’s that he’d already forgotten the name of.

“Samuel,” Paul’s mom calls to his brother as he heads to the kitchen, “Not too much, eh?”

Paul feels like his face got shoved into a bucket of hot water. He looks down at his plate and shoves the food around. The fork never meets his lips; his frustration creates a soft, nearly inaudible, clatter against the plate as it dances with potatoes and ham. His other trembling hand clenches his blue jeans under the table.

The wife of the family friend sitting next to Paul puts her French-manicured hand over Kate’s, the motion exposing a diamond bracelet as it slides down her wrist, and gushes, “Paul easily could’ve gotten lost! What a big place. You must be so excited about the move.”

Kate’s blue eyes are far off; to reach the words directed at her, it looks as though she has to swim against a choppy current. She surfaces: “Yes. Yes, so excited. I especially love the patio facing the lake. It’ll be so nice in the summertime.”

Kate picks up the still crying baby Maya and bounces her up and down on her white- napkin draped knee. The baby’s cries turn into shrieks. Paul turns to Maya and crosses his bloodshot eyes and makes an abababababa blubbering noise. The family friend coughs on the red wine halfway down his throat. Paul’s mom slumps back in her mahogany chair.

Maya stops crying, and smiles a toothless grin.

When Sam returns with a glass of red wine for himself and a whiskey for Paul, Paul realizes everyone else's plates are clean. He turns to Kate and mumbles in her pearl studded ear, "The food looked great Kate, really just not hungry." Kate smiles, "It's really okay." She quickly sweeps his plate and two others off the table and heads to the kitchen across the hall before Samuel's mother can make a scene about the uneaten mash of food.

Samuel leads the family friends into the living room, and Paul lags behind to see if anyone is going to grab Maya. His mother, in her purple silk pantsuit, looks like a shiny grape. She even wore pink lipstick verging on purple. She mutters, "you always had a way with the youngsters. Too bad you'll never have one of your own," before trailing after her other son.

As Paul shakily scoops up Maya, he thinks about the one girlfriend he's ever had, how he only could afford to take her on dates to Denny's and IHOP. She stopped returning his calls one day. Whiskey in one hand, baby in the other, he walks towards the twinkling Christmas tree in the living room- ten feet tall, wrapped in white lights and strings of cranberries and adorned in only Christopher Radko ornaments, it sits in front of a large bay window that looks out over the patio, and its blurry reflection in the window makes Paul dizzy. He immediately sits down, fearful of dropping drooling Maya.

Everyone folds himself or herself onto the Ethan Allen furniture. Paul thinks back to when he was a little boy and he and Sam would get dragged to Ethan Allen by their parents. They would make forts out of the chintz sofas and poufy throw pillows until their parents would make them go and wait in the Cadillac. They promised each other they'd never waste money on all that crap when they grew up.

“Oh how I love presents!” Paul’s mom chirps as she gathers a pile from under the tree to distribute. They are wrapped in striped purple wrapping paper with white silk bows. Kate helps Maya open her present from grandma: a humongous stuff animal giraffe from FAO Schwarz. Maya attempts to rip its head from its neck.

As Kate and Sam are about to open their purple present together, the phone rings. The ring sounds shrill over the piano music playing through the surround sound speakers. Kate jumps up to get it, the giraffe falling to the floor. Maya’s ensuing cries add to the shrillness.

“Babe, it’s fine, let me get it,” Sam says while standing and putting his hand firmly on Kate’s shoulder.

“No really, I’ve got it,” Kate says, pulling away from his vice-like grip.

Her heels make clicking sounds against the hardwood floors. Maya is still shrieking. Paul realizes he hasn’t had any of his whiskey yet.

“Hello,” Paul hears Kate say from the other room.

“No, he isn’t home right now. Can I take a message. Of course.” Her voice sounds tight.

Kate marches back into the living room. Maya is still yanking on the giraffe’s neck. Kate has eyes only for Sam as she calmly informs the room, “could you pick a woman who at least has the decency not to call the house on Christmas Eve?” before turning and disappearing.

Paul takes a large swallow of his drink. Top shelf has never tasted so pathetic.

Sam nervously glances at the family friends. The guy almost choked on his red wine again. “Just a misunderstanding,” he mutters to them, not worrying about Paul and his mother’s thoughts, “she’s just been acting so strange since Maya was born.”

“No need to stop opening presents!” More purple presents are passed around.

Paul meticulously opens his. He gives Maya the wrapping paper. She giggles and makes a tepee into which she crawls. Paul stares down at the Christmas present in his hand. Nicotine patches. He downs the rest of his whiskey as Sam pipes up, “Ah yes! Those are from mom and Kate and I, Paul. Really work. Got Kate to quit smoking after we got married.”

Paul forces a smile. When no one is looking, he gives Maya his present to play with too. He notices movement out on the patio; a shifting of shadows. He tries to discern a figure, but can’t with the reflection of the living room in the window.

No one asks Paul where he’s going when he leaves.

Kate is shivering slightly, leaning her elbows on the patio railing and looking out over the dark, frozen lake. She turns around at Paul’s approach. Neither of them speak- they just stare at the triangle of blurred, white lights trying to make their way towards them through the large bay window. Paul offers Kate a cigarette. She takes it. Paul finds his lighter, and they add two blurred lights to the cold surrender of midnight’s passing.

Broken

Kate stares at the degrees on her psychologist's office walls. The loopy cursive writing and thick frames make her doctor's certification seem very legitimate. His angled jaw and charcoal grey suit and acute gaze that Kate only meets through her upper eyelashes also help his legitimacy. Kate pokes at the stiff leather of her armchair and gazes at the jagged Seattle skyline, avoiding her doctor's question. She's never been as good as other people at putting on a show.

"Maybe I should rephrase my question," Dr. Foster begins. "I understand you're new at this."

Kate can't help but find double meaning in this statement. The doctor's eyes rest on her bare shoulder, on the small cleavage her black maxi dress reveals, on the curve of her neck.

"How do you spend your nights? Are you trying to fall asleep? Do you find yourself going out partying too much because you can't sleep? Your file indicates some arrests due to drinking."

"That's three questions," Kate responds, turning back to the skyline. She takes in the thousands of tiny glass windows, and thinks about all the people that must occupy those tiny windows. She feels smaller, and she likes it.

"Would you like me to repeat them one at a time?" Kate decides the doctor sounds frustrated. She smiles contentedly. His lip twitches at her smile.

“During the nights I read. Anything. Everything. Jane Austen. Ian McEwan. The Bible. I’m not religious. My high school AP biology textbook. If I get bored of reading I bike around the empty streets of the city. I leave anonymous birthday cards on people’s doorsteps.”

“You’ve been arrested five times in four years. You want me to believe you’re at home reading the Bible at night? How could you possibly know when people’s birthdays are? Lying to me isn’t going to help you deal with your insomnia.”

Kate imagines taking the crystal paperweight off of her doctor’s desk and smashing the glass over his certificates.

She meets his gaze. “I think we’re done here.”

The doctor scoots forward in his high-backed desk chair and leans his elbows on his mahogany desk, his face becoming so close to hers she can count the tiny pores in his nose. Her stomach drops a little.

“Why won’t you let me help you?” He doesn’t blink. Kate thinks the lack of tear ducts is indicative of one’s ability to feel emotion.

Kate feels him tracing the foundation-covered black rings under her eyes with his. She decides she’ll wear more make-up from now on.

Picking up her leather shoulder bag from the carpeted floor, Kate informs her doctor, “I’m actually not new at this.”

Sam’s doorbell rings. He glances at his four best friends with raised eyebrows. They shrug, not expecting anyone else. Sam sets his whiskey ginger down on the granite bar top and walks to the front door of his townhouse. Swinging the door open, the tipsy grin drops

from his face. Standing in the misting night is a woman with long blonde strands curling out of the black hood covering her head. In her hand is a damp card.

“Kate?”

“Happy 29th Birthday.” Kate hands him the card. Sam stares down at its homemade glitter-penned letters disbelieving.

She takes a step back and grabs a vintage Trek leaning against the wrought iron railing of his steps. As she swings a leg over, Sam stutters, “Kate, wait. Would you like to come in?”

She smiles at him, “I have more cards to deliver.” He notices them piled in the whicker basket attached to the front of her bike. Then she kicks off and pedals down the middle of the street into the sleeping and drunk city.

Sam slowly walks back into his house. His friends are dealing blackjack in the living room when he returns.

“Who was it?” Parker asks, pulling aside his cigar.

“One of my patients.” Sam holds up the glittery, wet birthday card. Parker nods gradually, looking from the card to Sam’s face. “You’re into this girl?”

Sam doesn’t respond at first. His friend Mark starts dealing him in. “That’s fucked up man, isn’t it?”

“He’s always been into girls that are a little damaged, he’s a sucker for it.” Parker cuts the end of his cigar while nodding in Sam’s direction.

Sam smiles, sitting down in the chair that Mark pulls out for him. “What can I say? I like to fix what’s broken.”

*

“I don’t want to go anymore,” Kate tells Sasha out on the fire escape. Their legs dangle over the edge, their toes pointing down at the house party guests below.

“Isn’t it therapy with the psych or AA meetings?”

“Yeah, something like that.” Kate looks out over the string of white Chinese lanterns zig zagging back and forth between the houses framing Sasha’s small backyard. She flexes her toes above the roof of glowing white orbs, letting her pinkie toe graze the top of one.

“You liked the sessions at first, right?” Sasha pours more sangria into her and Kate’s cups.

“Yeah, until they switched my doctor.” She kicks one of the white lanterns with her big toe. The swaying lantern sends sashaying light down onto the darkening party below.

“How many left?”

“One- who the hell are they?” A group of guys in dress pants and white button-down shirts walk through the throng of shorts and flannel wearing guys and flowing floor-length skirted girls.

Sasha pulls her drooping black hair behind her multi-studded ear to inspect. “God knows I didn’t invite them,” she chirps, laughing.

Kate leans back against the cool brick building and kicks a white lantern again.

“That ones my doctor,” she points with a turquoise-ringed finger. Sasha narrows her green eyes like a Siamese cat, her signature way of judging the world.

Kate pulls the fire escape ladder out with a loud clank and climbs down a couple iron rungs before propelling herself onto the grassy ground right in front of Sam.

She smiles. “Funny seeing you here?” she half asks before turning nonchalantly away, not giving Sam enough time to respond.

As the sky turns from violet to grey to black, and the glow of the Chinese lanterns becomes the only light, Kate becomes unsteady on her bare feet. Her lips are stained purplish red from sangria and her feet green from grass. The party moves in sway to the reggae music, except for the trio of men in dress pants, who lean against the brick wall sipping beer.

A man with red hair and jade eyes approaches Kate. She doesn't comprehend the first words he says to her because she sees Sam speed walking towards her and the man. Kate turns her attention back to the jade eyes, but then she hears, "she's beautiful isn't she?" and a firm hand snakes around her waist and shifts her body away from the other man. She's not facing him anymore, but she senses the man leave.

Later that night, lying on black sheets that smell all wrong, with her arms pressed down above her head, Kate doesn't feel beautiful.

Sam attempts to dictate his last patient's notes. His fingers abruptly stop typing every minute or so to check the tiny digital time on his screen. Her appointment was for ten minutes ago. He tries to remember the dosage of Prozac he prescribed to his last patient but an image of Kate's note on the bed keeps running through his mind- *Sorry, would've stayed the night, but well, you know*. Someone knocks on his office door and he slams his fist against his keyboard in shock before regaining composure. A nurse that really is a secretary steps in and he exhales through his nose.

"What?"

"Your 2:00 patient canceled. Strangely, she asked for your personal email. Sorry, I usually wouldn't give it, but she was so sweet."

Sam immediately logs into his email. *Dear Dr. Foster, A proposition: we exchange the last appointment I need for my clearance for a date. I need your autograph. Kate.*

Sam pushes his rolling chair back from his desk and runs his hands through his hair. He stands up, but before he walks away from his desk, he turns back, and standing, types: *you have yourself a deal. Set the time.* An immediate ping follows his words. *3 am. Seattle Aquarium.* Sam laughs. *An aquarium? You want to break into an aquarium?* Kate responds immediately. *Of course not. Bring your wallet. You're buying.* The green light by the generic image of a human head disappears and Sam smiles and leans back, less worried about the issue of her disposability. He thinks about their correspondence and decides she's not that fragile. She can handle being used. At least, what's already broke can't be broken.

"How long have you known the night guard for?" Sam asks as he walks next to Kate around an enclosing of sleeping sea otters.

"Since I moved here two years ago. I grew up on the ocean. This is my favorite way to spend my nights."

"And you've never felt guilty about sneaking in?"

"I pay. The guard's underpaid. I never do any harm. Do you ever feel guilty about sleeping with your patients?"

Sam chuckles. "Patient." Kate raises her eyebrows and leads him toward her favorite aquarium. The giant Pacific octopus's large red body is lying on the rocky bottom of its aquarium.

"My favorite," Kate says, indicating towards the octopus with her head.

“It’s pretty creepy looking.” With the dark hallways lit only by the nightlights in the aquariums, Kate can’t disagree.

“It is, yes. But that’s part of its appeal. The octopus is so alien, so foreign. Reinforces that the ocean is a world apart. And I like that.”

“Why?”

“Because I love the ocean. Not so much my own world.”

They walk through a tunnel aquarium filled with fish from the coastline along Washington. When Kate gets to the middle of the wrap-around tunnel, she lies down on the cement floor and looks up at the fish darting over her head.

Sam lies down next to her and reaches his hand under her t-shirt.

“No,” Kate says flatly, pulling his hand away, “not here.” The illuminated blue waters of the aquarium create swirls of dancing light on the floor around them.

Sam pulls back and looks into eyes that match the water above them. He lies back down next to her and gently grabs her hand, realizing that the mind lying next to his is one he wants to leave alone, exactly how it is.

A Place They Called Nirvana

Ben scanned the *Wall Street Journal* lying on the granite countertop. His sullen face glanced back up at him. The photo showed him rushing past Wall Street's charging bull, and the headline broadcasted "Wall Street's Top Bull, Hendiger, Disappears From Money Game". Staring at the photo, Ben did some mental math. He figured he was on track to be a billionaire by the age of thirty-five. But he had cut himself out of the equation three years shy of a billion.

He whirled around when he heard the elevator door ring open. As Maya Foster walked out, wearing only white underwear and a white sweater, which hung off her slender shoulder, all numbers vanished from Ben's mind. Her crow black hair fell in waves around her olive skin. The elevator was in the center of the circular room, and reached all six floors of their mansion. Ben leaned back against the countertop as Maya made her way across the vast room. Ben had realized a year ago- when he hired someone to build him a mansion in the jungle of Costa Rica- that the only reason money was valuable to him was to give it to her. And perhaps the pleasant distraction of making it. Maya reached him and was wrapped in arms like steel, arms like the cables that framed the glass-paneled walls of their home. She tilted her head up to Ben and opened her mouth. A small white pill lay on her tongue. She flipped it between her crimson lips, and, kissing, Ben and Maya split their prescribed dose of lithium.

But only Maya swallowed.

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Ben hopped onto his four-wheeler. Every day he rode the fenced-in perimeter of his thousand acres of jungle land. The path ran right up alongside the ten-foot fence, and today was muddy with rainwater. The rain was turning to a sprinkle though, so Ben wore only a shirt.

The track was so narrow that at times Ben had to duck to avoid being close-lined by a branch; he felt like he was in a tunnel - on one side his towering fence, the other the thick jungle, and above the grey, dense mist of a sky. He didn't mind being in a tunnel though. Tunnels have direction. And the direction of his tunnel took him in a wide arc away from Maya.

Ben approached a shallow river he needed to cross. It usually wasn't difficult, but the usual banks were swallowed by rainwater. He stood up and started through. The tires started to tirelessly spin when he reached the opposite bank. He revved the engine but still the tires just turned, spraying water in a high arc.

Ben cut the engine and sat there in the river. The river disappeared under a grate in his fence, and Ben watched the water leave. For a moment he closed his eyes and remembered the river before the grate was there. He and Maya had just flown from New York- it was almost a year ago now. They had gone on rides together then. He remembered when they first reached this river. Maya had asked him to stop. It was a blistering hot day. She had these purple flowers tied in her hair, but they were wilting in the heat. His heart rate didn't pick up as he remembered her shimmying out of her blue dress and sliding into the clear water. He stopped living in his memories a while ago. Now he just felt the mist on his face.

Now he understood that Maya would never balance him. He understood that bringing her here had made her worse. Him worse. She was wrapped in a fog of lithium, impenetrable

even if he was kissing her. He used to be in a haze too, until he decided that he'd rather be sick than live in an illusion. Than be an illusion.

He revved the engine again. The four-wheeler crawled up and over the bank. He glanced back at the river as he entered his tunnel once more. He really did love it when she wore purple flowers in her hair.

Maya walked out onto the balcony with a squirrel monkey perched on her shoulder. The balcony protruded off of the sixth floor of her cylindrical sanctuary, and the sanctuary stood on top of a green Costa Rican mountain. Her lithium had kicked in a couple of hours ago, and hope still skirted around the corners of her thoughts. Maya's tower looked down on haphazard green- a jungle teeming with the murmurs and sighs of life- and the azure of the Pacific in distance. She could faintly make out the fence, a thin line of black running through the green. It was a big fence, and guarded by Costa Rican men. They didn't really need a fence. The nearest town, La Florida de Barú, was a two hours drive away on a dirt road. And they had natural fencing. The mountains stood like the serrated ends of broken glass.

Maya looked below and saw a guard walking up to the house. To enter the house, one has to be buzzed in and let up by the elevator. Right before the guard pushed the buzzer, Ben intercepted him. Small bits of their conversation in rapid Spanish drifted up to Maya's perch. She fed her pet monkey slices of banana as she tried to keep up; her Spanish was not nearly as good as Ben's. She understood that Ben wanted to increase the number of men in the guard to six. Maya let out a sigh as her monkey played with her long tresses. Ben had no one to fear- no one was trying to reach him and her. He was in one of his stages of hyperactive paranoia.

Maya hated Ben's twenty hour-long episodes of planning and building up walls- who in hell was he trying to keep out? He had fled to Costa Rica to escape himself. And he had enticed Maya to go with him with the promise of a nirvana in the sky.

Maya never told him that he was her paradise- he didn't need to build her one. She now acknowledged to herself that he had chosen the worst person to cage himself in with.

She was the down to his up.

The sun started to set. Maya liked sunsets- she liked the ends of days. The sun turned the sky bright orange, and the mountains and jungle slowly turned black.

As the jungle got darker, the animals got louder.

Ben sat at his desk in the corner of the room. The glass wall behind the desk was a sheet of inky black dotted with nature's crystals. Night had fallen- this was the time of day he hated most. He never wanted to sleep, and Maya, now curled up in the center of their large four-poster bed, always wanted to sleep. Ben also hated darkness. That's why, while Ben sat at his desk watching the money game from the sidelines -the stocks rising and falling and he silently buying and selling to occupy the restless recesses of his mind- nearly fifty candles lit their bedroom, lit the entire top floor of the glass mansion. Some large, some small, but all set in Swarovski crystal candlestick holders- a gift to Maya. The room was illuminated. From below, the room looked like a giant firefly hovering above the trees.

Maya turned in her sleep, and as she did, a pillow perched on a corner of the bed fell, knocking a candle in its crystal holder to the stone floor; the flame from the candle died as soon as it hit the stone, but still a shriek rose from Maya's throat- a debilitating shriek Ben

couldn't, always couldn't, believe came from her small frame- but it did, and increased in intensity as Maya rolled off of the bed onto the crushed crystal strewn floor and started sweeping the shatters together where her tears made a pool - where her arms swept like she was trying to make a snow angel, a crystal angel, until her right hand got sliced and the crystal chunks turned into rubies.

Ben got up from his desk to scoop her up. He had dealt with this before.

Ben screwed the lid back on the bottle of lithium pills. He slid one into his mouth and pressed one into Maya's hand that wasn't wrapped in a gauze bandage. They were sitting at their breakfast table. A glass vase shaped like an orb sat in the center filled with violet bamboo orchards. An old woman, the mother of one of the guards, had brought them that morning with a hopeful look on her face. She was wondering if they wanted a housemaid.

They didn't. They didn't want anyone in their home. Ben turned the woman away with some money pressed firmly into her shriveled hand.

Ben rolled his lithium around in his mouth. "We should go for a hike."

Maya kept her gaze on the bamboo orchard's inner, dark violet void- she was trying to put her finger on the exact color of the interior petal. She didn't want to go for a hike, and she thought Ben knew that; didn't he know it caused her anxiety and more energy than she could afford?

"Byzantium."

"Sorry?"

"The color, Ben. The interior of bamboo orchards is Byzantium."

Maya used to be an artist. She wasn't that good, but good enough for galleries in New York to pretend her abstract swirls were worth big money. That's how she met Ben. He was the big money buying her abstract swirls.

Maya still painted, but only during those rare stretches of time when her world was filled in with the color it once was always- when the world turned vivid again.

"Fresh air would be good for us." Both of Ben's feet tapped on the stone floor.

Maya raised her jade eyes from the flower to Ben. Her eyes still looked artificial to him, even though he knew she didn't wear colored contacts.

Maya acquiesced, "okay, then".

When Maya got up from the table to change, Ben spat out the little pill he'd been swirling around between his gums. He knew he needed the pill.

He had known the last thirty times he spit it out too.

"Is the gun really necessary Ben?" Maya asked when she noticed the flash of silver from inside Ben's vest.

"Yes, completely," he responded.

Maya didn't respond. She usually didn't. She questioned, and when shut down by Ben's plan, she once more withdrew into a fog of feigned apathy.

Ben noticed Maya's silence. He always did. He wanted so badly to say the right thing that he usually scared himself into saying nothing at all.

They steadily climbed up a narrow dirt path bordered thick with trees and vines. Maya's monkey perched on her shoulder and plucked a banana off of a tree they went past.

The deafening sound of rushing water reached them before they saw their destination. The waterfall looked like nature's enlarged replica of a sink, with its single stream of water pouring out of the side of a cliff into a perfectly circular pool below. The pool water looked black, the waterfall white.

Ben and Maya stood at the top of the cliff. Ben pulled out his gun, set it on a rock, and then yanked off his vest and shirt. Without a moment's hesitation, he flung himself over the spilling water. Maya hated him in that moment. She listened for his splash but the falling water obscured everything. Suddenly nervous, she scrambled down through the rocky, tangled jungle towards the pool.

A vine caught her foot and she tripped, scraping her knee on a rock. She left some droplets of blood behind. Holding her monkey's tail to steady her fear, she made it to the pebbly bank of the pool.

Ben was swimming circles in the water.

"What the hell Ben!"

Ben looked over. Maya's complexion was ashen. She had blood on her white pants.

Ben called, "What?"

Maya screamed over the waterfall's din, "You act like an idiot! God, Ben when you pull shit like that I just- I just don't know what your intentions are- if you are trying to - "

Ben was out of the water now. He had his arms around her waist, but he didn't feel like he was holding on to anything.

"Maya, I feel so- so... *lifted*, Maya- can I tell you-" He hesitated. "I haven't taken my prescription in nearly four weeks."

Maya pulled out of his hold. It was like she was seeing him for the first time in a very long time. The half moons under his eyes were so dark and swollen it looked like he'd been sucker punched in each eye by insomnia. Even so, there was a strange gleam in his eyes- too awake for the circles below.

“Ben- Ben...”

“What?” Ben asked. He paused, the only noise pounding water, but Maya didn't fill the silence.

For once Ben wasn't scared about having the right thing to say. To scream.

“Why are you always down when I'm up? When I'm down and you're painting for four goddamn days straight you don't see me-”

“Ben! Fine! I want to go home.”

As Maya hiked through the jungle- a quarter of a mile in front of Ben- she cradled her monkey like a baby and counted her steps. Bed. She just wanted to go to bed.

Ben walked slowly back through the darkening jungle. His temples throbbed. He felt exhausted and awake at the same time. Maya's worried voice- *Ben... Ben-* kept echoing in his mind. He thought he could hear the animals whispering it to one another. He thought he could hear the leaves rustling it back and forth.

Did she care?

No, Ben knew she didn't. A year ago, he realized money was an illusion. People exchange it back and forth, but they never actually see it. It's not tangible. A month ago, he realized he had exchanged one illusion for another.

Maya was an illusion. A beautiful, horrible illusion. She was always there- he had made sure of that. He had stuck her in a tower on top of a mountain one hundred and twenty miles from the nearest neighbor; she was all his. But she was as abstract to him as the swirls of hers he had spent so much money on. She wasn't tangible to him. She had slipped through his ten-foot fence.

She was a beautiful, horrible illusion, and the only thing that held his world in place. His world was all an illusion. So a month ago he decided to quit it.

An animal swung over Ben's head. He lurched and pulled out his handgun, and sent a ringing shot into the purpling sky. He heard the breaking of branches as something fell to the ground. It was the first time he had ever pulled a trigger. He realized it wasn't that hard.

He put the silver handgun back inside his vest and calmly walked on through the jungle. Lightening flashed over the mountaintops in the distance. He could see the golden scars against the darkening bruise of a sky, but there was no sound of thunder.

When Ben stepped out of the elevator into their bedroom he found Maya already asleep on the bed. All of the candles were lit and the night had sent the world into shadows. Maya was curled up in a ball on the bed, that goddamn monkey of hers curled up with her. She looked so far away. He almost woke her up. His hand levitated above her slim shoulder, about to shake it.

Then he stepped back.

He sat on the edge of the balcony. When he pulled the trigger, his limp body fell just like it had fallen into the black pool of water only three hours earlier.

Maya jolted awake to the sound of a gunshot. Her monkey menacingly cackled. The balcony door was open. She ran out onto it and looked below where the guards were screaming; they saw her and started screaming up to her. She didn't understand what they were saying. Even if she were fluent she wouldn't have understood them- her whole self was focused on the image six stories below. She vomited. Then she screamed.

Still screaming, she started smashing all of the crystal. One by one she smashed the candleholders against the stone floor. She walked over the smashed bits. The bottom of her feet turned crimson.

Her nirvana in the sky went dark. The animals outside got too loud for her to bear any longer.