

**A FICTIONAL EXPLORATION ON THE STRESS OF THE
RIGIDNESS OF COLLEGE IN A SCI-FI SETTING**

Honors Thesis

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**STARRY-EYED, GROUNDED-FEET: A SCI-FI
COLLECTION**

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THE WINDOW BETWEEN ME AND THE WORLD

Margot from Physics picks up a chair and flings it at one of the cafeteria bots. If anyone missed the seat flying through the air, they definitely didn't miss the cacophonous impact and subsequent clattering. All eyes turn to Margot. It's like the gunshot to start a race except instead of an explosion of sound we all wait silently for the second shot. Expectation hangs heavy.

Margot stands—arms still flung out from her toss. She looks disappointed, like she expected the alloy of the bot to shatter. She did succeed in knocking the head out of the neck joint. Some of the wires spill out like cotton from a toy. The head swings back and forth, the only moving part, as the rest of the bot is abased to a mannequin - halting all functions as malfunction protocol dictates.

Margot rips the life-like head right off and holds it out like Judith showing off the head of Holofernes. Here, she makes her mistake. She reaches into the head to pull out wires, an extraneous, unnecessary and gruesome gesture—although, to be honest, all of her performance thus far was extraneous and unnecessary. Margot screams and falls to the ground, her hand smoking.

Hey. So was the head. Smoking that is.

Next to me Marie Ann holds in laughter while Mikeal grimaces. He is staring into his peas, mashing them with the curve of his spoon.

He mutters something I don't catch. Marie Ann does and she laughs from the belly up - an ugly, brash noise.

The seal of silence breaks and noise rushes in to fill the void. Everyone in the cafeteria bursts into raucous guffaws, cheers, applause, and jeers.

Extraneous and unnecessary. I pick up my tray and leave, Mikeal follows quickly, looking green, and Marie Ann chases after us both.

A month later Marie Ann and I sit together at a table of our own. Mikeal pointedly avoids looking at Marie Ann from across the lunchroom. He did shoot me a wave and a sad look while I had waited for her to come from her midmorning Thursday class.

"Is he still avoiding me?" Marie Ann spits out, stabbing her slice of pork with her fork.

I shrug, "Looks like it."

She rolls her eyes, "I don't know why he doesn't just suck it up. I'm willing to."

I frown, "I don't know. It really hurt him; you know."

Marie Ann's face clouds up. "You know... I don't really --"

She stops, eyes something over my shoulder. I crane my neck and—lo and behold! —Margot is hovering over me.

"Hey Anna Marie," Margot drawls out, "Hey... You."

Marie Ann frowns, “It’s Marie Ann.”

Margot blinks, stares between the two of us, then finally, “Really? Anna Marie and... Marie Ann?”

“Yes,” Marie Ann and I say with opposite tones. Marie Ann’s biting and my own placating.

Marie Ann and Anna Marie. Two opposites with almost matching names like two sides of the same coin. Loud and quiet. Pushy and pushed over. Free-spirited and prudent.

Margot busts out laughing, her hand accentuating her amusement by heartily slapping me on the back. Three times.

“Ow, ow, ow.”

Marie Ann bristles; her eyes zeroed in on the point of contact, “What do you want, Margot?”

Margot’s easy smile is belied by the grip she has on my shoulder, “Relax Marie, I just—”

“It’s Marie Ann.”

Margot rolls her eyes, “Ann-ee-way, I just needed to talk to sweet Anna Marie about something.”

“What about?” I ask.

Margot looks back at me and I wilt under her gaze, “That’s between you and me, sweet cheeks. Not your evil twin.”

Marie Ann stands up. She’s tall, six feet of sharp angles. It wasn’t something that worked on me but rising to her full height was an intimidation tactic kept neatly in her arsenal.

“Whatever hot mess you’re planning, don’t drag Anna Marie into it.” Her body language is as aggressive as her words.

I groan internally at the friction between the two. What a mess. These two got on like fire and oil.

Margot’s mouth curls, and I sense she’s about to unleash a biting remark that might just goad Marie Ann into violence.

“Hey, hey!” I cut in, “It’s fine Marie Ann. I actually asked her for help. For class. We’re in Physics together. You know the biology one.”

Only a partial lie. I don’t know what Margot wants, but we are in Biological Physics together, and with the way things are going it would be best to separate these two.

Marie Ann looks at me and searches my face. Whatever she finds has her backing down, settling back into her seat, pouting in that way that makes her look silly.

“... Alright,” she acquiesces, “If you’re sure.”

“Yeah. It’s fine, don’t worry.”

Margot practically pulls me up and away in the direction of the library. I don’t know if that’s where Margot intended to take me or if she was just doing it to keep up the appearance of my lie.

Margot, after all, is hands down the smartest student in this university. I wouldn’t doubt if she was already leagues ahead of some of the professors. That would be impressive even if this was a normal university.

While Marie Ann and I rode in on the waves of nepotism, Margot clawed her way to the top with her own intellect – coming from a below average public high school and a

family with a below median income. Our program was elite, and here among the elite Margot reigned supreme with top grades and accolades from research papers, including ones that she had written in high school. In an academic setting this accrued her respect among the faculty, much to the chagrin of other students. These are, after all, people who were born special and here's Margot having made herself special. Which made her dumb stunts especially bewildering.

Margot opens the door to the library and I can't help but look up at the glass roof, currently translucent to allow sunlight to pour in. At night it would turn opaque and light up with a soft light, bright enough for those on the third floor to read comfortably. This worked by way of a ring of lights inside the glass which is diffused by the glass. I wasn't sure how they made the glass opaque, but it reminded me of the eyeglasses that turned into sunglasses in the sun. The second and first floor light sources were hidden by a clever angling of panels, giving the floors a soft ambient light along with the light that spills through from the ceiling which comes all the way down.

The first floor had a large layout, but in the center the ceiling opened up in a circle to display the skylight. The other floors were partially visible, but rather than railing to fence off the circular opening to the ground floor the opening is walled off by panes of glass, the same shatterproof glass used in skyscrapers. A couple dumb boys had launched themselves at the glass our first year. They had been reprimanded but only mildly. It was only a minor disturbance after all.

Margot leads me to the third floor. She chooses a table with four seats in a far corner. There is only one other person on the third floor and they have headphones in. A cleaning bot passes, quietly vacuuming during the inactive lunch hours.

I watch it go and look over at Margot to gauge her reaction. She's nonplussed, not even acknowledging its existence. Instead she's focused on me.

I purse my lips and look back.

Time passes, measured out by me lightly drumming my fingers.

Finally, I can't take it, "How, uh, is your hand?"

She grins and lifts her bandaged hand up. She unwinds it, and my stomach flips. The skin is bubbled and warped. At the epicenter, the skin is charred gray, almost black.

"Oh, come on, don't make that face. You're in the medical program with me. Can't be feeling queasy over a couple electrical burns."

I look away out of politeness, "Does it hurt?"

She shrugs and winds the bandages back on, "It's whatever. The worst part was the earful from the program director. I'm lucky that I'm not kicked out," She rolls her eyes and continues, "Apparently it would take a much bigger incident to get me kicked out. Imagine? Bigger?"

Marie Ann had actually wondered about that a few weeks ago when I told her Margot was back in class.

"R-really?"

Margot shrugs, "If their 'genius scholarship kid' gets kicked out for a 'mental breakdown' then it would be all over the news. Think of all the questions that would raise. This program is controversial, however successful it may be."

I furrow my brow. I want to ask her what that little outburst had been about, but it wasn't my place.

"Look," she says, "When I ripped that robot's head off everyone pointed and laughed and watched. I mean, it was quite the spectacle."

"Uh, yes. Quite."

Margot gives a hearty laugh. It's harsh. Her expression then shifts to exasperation.

"Look. That's my point," and she does point, leaning over the table to tap a finger at my shoulder, "everybody pointed,"—tap— "and laughed"— tap—"and watched."— tap—"Except you. Why?"

I blink.

What? What am I supposed to say? I worry my lip and look up towards that dome of a skylight.

"Ah. That's all? It was just gruesome."

Margot squints, her eyes searching in the same way Marie Ann's had. I try not to look away or shift.

"Two lies in the span of ten minutes? I didn't peg you for a liar," she looks amused. Her tone mocking.

I suppress a scowl.

There is no point in telling her that her spectacle disgusted me for a different reason. Here among the sons and daughters of the rich and powerful, Margot is elite.

Yet –

Margot grins widely.

--she still manages to be a grotesque waste of space and time.

To put it plainly, I'm just not interested in wasting my time with her. There is no merit in getting involved with a troublemaker – genius or not. Marie Ann is here because of money. Margot is here because of her genius. I am here because of luck and good behaviour. That's why Margot, someone with a similar socioeconomic background as me, acting a complete fool and working her hardest to destroy her social standing with little care to getting thrown out appalls me. It was an act of condemnation to turn away from her antics.

"Yeah. Okay," she says, disturbing my train of thought.

She dusts off my blouse and gives me a hearty pat on the back.

"What are you—?"

"Anyway. I'm like, super busy. Catch ya later."

I'm alone in the library.

Marie Ann is waiting for me back in our shared room. She fusses at me for a while, gently lacing her hands with mine. She begrudgingly goes back to studying when I insist on lying down, plagued by sudden exhaustion. But first she orders me a cup of tea and sits with me, dragging her heavy law textbook over.

Margot Bernochi. Extraneous, useless and now exhausting.

The next day Marie Ann and I work on splitting a little dessert cake. Suddenly Margot unceremoniously sits beside us, dropping her tray so aggressively that her fork bounces on to the table.

Marie Ann and I stare as she rolls up her sleeves and takes a big bite of roasted chicken.

"Hey sho," she slurs around her chicken, "I need more help with physics."

She wipes her mouth with her bare arm.

Marie Ann frowns, "I thought you were helping her."

Margot hums in thought, "That's what I said, right?"

"No," Marie Ann insists, "No it wasn't."

Margot shrugs, "Oops. Slip of the tongue."

Marie Ann takes a deep breath and turns to me, pleading, "Anna Marie?"

I sigh, "I thought we went over everything yesterday."

Margot narrows her eyes and searches my face. She takes another bite, rending through flesh in a big showy movement.

Gulp.

"I don't know. You seemed a little confused about thermodynamic forces. I thought we could go over it."

I grit my teeth. How did she know that?

Marie Ann frowns. I can practically see her running through her limited Physics terms while at the same time trying to decide if that was some sort of innuendo.

I sigh, yielding. Again.

"Alright," I stare at Margot. It's hard, grease and herbs are smeared around her mouth, "Maybe we could meet after our last classes. When is yours?"

Margot wipes her mouth with a napkin and gives me a big smile, "Great! See ya in the library at three!"

She gets up, taking her tray with her. I frown as I watch her dump it right into the trash.

Wasteful.

Marie Ann makes a noise of disgust.

"She didn't even-!" She groans, "I hate her so much."

She continues, "Also, how does she know your schedule? You guys share that class?"

"No."

I had noticed that, too. Does this mean she knew my schedule? Lucky guess? My frown deepens and I try not to think about it. Mind games were pointless.

"Why does she even care about tutoring you so much?" Marie Ann whines, leaning into me with all of her six feet.

"Oof, I don't know. Maybe it's like a pet project? She'll get tired of it eventually."

Marie Ann pouts again.

Leaning back into her I say, "Don't worry. A little tutoring won't hurt."

Marie Ann brushes a strand of hair from my face.

Margot is waiting in the library at a table in the back of the first floor. We're not isolated like last time.

"Your guard dog not with you?"

"Marie Ann is still in class."

Margot doesn't look surprised.

To my surprise, her physics book is open to the chapter we're currently on. Margot tells me that she might as well tutor me. My last test grade wasn't up to snuff apparently. When I ask her how she knows, she gives me a wink.

"That's not reassuring, you know." I tell her.

“Who said I was reassuring you.”

Half an hour into this tutoring session Margot closes her book. It’s sudden—she had just finished teaching me a formula on centrifugal forces.

“Do you know,” she begins, “Why I did it?”

“Threw away your food at lunch?”

“What?... What? No. Why... Why do you care about that?”

I shrug, “I don’t know, it was just super weird. Like you took like two bites of chicken and then tossed it.”

Margot steeple her fingers, “Listen, I—it was gross okay? Way too greasy. I couldn’t take one more bite.”

“Have you never had the chicken before? It’s always like that.”

Margot groans, “No, listen, we’re getting off track. But also, no, I’ve never had the chicken. Except on the salad.”

“Oh, yeah, the balsamic salad? That’s good. Pretty sure they use leftover chicken though. When they reheat it, it’s not as greasy, I think.”

“Wait stop... Stop talking about chicken. That’s not what we’re talking about.”

“It’s not?” I said innocently.

“I mean,” she sighs, “No, I was talking about the robot thing.”

“Oh that.”

Margot groans, “Oh my god. Yes, that. Listen, listen—”

“I don’t know why you did it. To make a scene?”

Margot blinks, mouth still open on interrupted words.

“To make a—” Margot makes a wounded noise, “No, no. It was a statement.”

“So, a scene.”

“No, I mean I didn’t even really do it for attention.”

“What else did you get out of it?”

She pulls her hand towards herself.

“Look I—no wait,” she’s shaking her head, “Man, you’re harsh. No, I did it because I want out.”

“Out?”

Margot groans, “Yes! Out!”

I snort, “Just leave then.”

Margot moans, “Nooooo. You don’t understand. Listen.”

“You keep saying that.”

“Because you’re not listening!” she whines like a ???

“I am. You’re just not saying anything.”

Margot pulls her mouth into a tight line and takes a deep breath through her nose.

“Look—”

“Oh, I’m looking now?”

“Look,” she says louder, “Don’t you find this all... stifling?”

She waves her hands around.

I look around the library, “Should we go somewhere else? I guess the library isn’t the best place for a conversation.”

“What? No, no. Not the library, this whole place!” Her voice dips into a harsh whisper.

I blink, “No. Not really.”

Margot gapes at me, “What?”

“You mean, like, the school?”

“Yeah?”

My face smooths to neutrality, “No, not at all.”

“Are you...lying?”

I smile, “Not at all.”

Margot sputters, “We are trapped here! I stuck my hand in a live wire and here I am. Still!”

I shrug, “I don’t know. But if you’re unhappy, why don’t you just leave?”

She sweeps her arms out. “Just leave?” Margot raises a brow, “And then what?”

She frowns and then pulls a hand over her mouth to cover it, “You don’t get it, do you?”

My look must speak volumes because she continues, “Listen. I don’t exactly want to leave. I mean I do, but then what? I’m in a prestigious program—almost done with a prestigious program. After this the world’s my oyster, right? Or something. Also, I can’t just leave. Signed that dumb contract thing.”

She sighs, drooping over the table. My gut drops. My skin feels cold. Pins prickle at the base of my neck.

She must pick up on it. Some flicker in my demeanor, a ghost of defensiveness in my posture.

“God, you don’t want to leave, do you?” her eyes turn sharp, “What? The world too big? Sky too open?”

Another stare-down. Blinking slowly, I glance at my still open physics textbook.

I lick my lips, “I think this tutoring session is over.”

She hums, “That so? See you same time next week?”

I make a face, and she laughs.

The following week crawls by both too slow and too fast. The comfort of a schedule—Marie Ann’s steady presence; classes; the same meals rotating out with the days of the week; mandated daily walks in the school’s lush garden for sunlight; mandated biweekly physical activity in the gym; mandated weekly counseling for both school and well-being.

I can only imagine what those counseling sessions must look like for Margot. My own counseling sessions were brief. I followed the regime almost perfectly. My counselor usually looks over his tablet at my check ins, takes my weight and pulse and asks me a couple questions, not unlike what my pediatrician would ask me. Gently probing ones looking for signs of depression, drugs, and sexual activity. Drugs are practically a moot point with the school as closed off as it is, and sexual activity questions always ended in a perfunctory reminder of a counselor set up specifically for that.

Depression is the big ticket they look for. The counseling basically acted as therapy sessions anyway. My Wednesday afternoon session was scheduled for an hour, but my counselor would let me leave after half an hour if everything was going well.

Thursday after my last class I make my way to the library, passing by the cleaning bots stored in their charging cases. They come out at night to put books away and organize those left out. I wonder what Margot feels when she sees them.

“Not much,” she tells me, when I ask her directly. Margot is across from me, half-lying on the library table, flipping through a textbook I don’t recognize.

“Hm, that so?”

She snorts, “I mean what am I supposed to feel? They don’t mean anything.”

“Then why...?”

“The robot had nothing to do with it,” she tells me plainly, “It was just there.”
Should I be worried?

On one hand the bots are made in the likeness of the human form in the same vein religions claim humans are made in the likeness of deities. On the other hand they are intentionally made to be preternatural. A soft blue glow emits from the lenses acting as eyes. There’s a quiet whirl from the fans some of the lower budget models have in place of a liquid cooling system. Not to mention on the inside their heads are empty, or rather, they only have wires and joints to imitate the muscles in human faces. The motherboard operates from the chest cavity acting as a brain. The one Margot ‘destroyed’ will be repaired if it hasn’t been already.

They are human-like, but with obvious tells. They aren’t real people, even if Marie Ann insists on thanking the delivery bots when she orders beverages and snacks to the room, and even if they respond with an adorable welcome chirp. It’s all preprogrammed.

A child breaking a toy? If I am just there would I have to deal with the brunt of her rampage? Change it to ‘They were just there,’ and it sounds like something a dispassionate killer would say.

Margot waves her hand, “Anyway, after thinking about our conversation all week—”

All week?

“—I realized that I never told you why I did it.”

“No I think you did. It was stifling or something? Right?”

Margot’s mouth twists, “If I had to sum it up in one word.”

I make an unpleasant face, “One word is fine.”

If she wants to monologue then she should have done it in the cafeteria when she was holding the bot’s head. I would have stayed for that, To be or not to be.

Margot sighs and continues, “Listen, it was just spur of the moment kind of thing, okay?”

“For someone so smart you don’t think things through much.”

Margot considers me, humming, “No not really. Life should be lived or something like that. Maybe only smart people think that way, though.”

That last part was a bit haughty. I think she’s being facetious, but it is hard to tell with her, “... I guess it’s hard to argue that you’re smart.”

Margot peers up at me, “You’re a scholarship kid, too, though. Right?”

I manage to bite back my surprise but my shoulders hunch defensively. The motion draws her gaze. There’s no use denying it then.

“Yes. I am,” I tell her, trying to be as blasé as possible.

“Okay. I mean you’re pretty quick to pick up on stuff and I’m sure you’d have no trouble getting a scholarship at any normal schools. Even a good number of prestigious schools,” Margot points a finger at me, “But this isn’t a normal school. And your family isn’t particularly rich or powerful.”

“I suppose not,” my lack of reaction visibly irritates Margot, “I am curious how you would know that.”

“I just looked you up.”

“Computers are only for research or preapproved recreation,” I counter.

Margot preens, “I am pretty good with computers.”

“And if I reported you?”

Margot shrugs, “I’d be both reprimanded and praised. I don’t particularly care about either.”

I sigh, “I see. But why does it matter to you?”

“It doesn’t,” she says simply, “It’s just interesting. Like a puzzle. I figured it out already, too.”

I slump in my chair and stare at the ceiling, “Did you now?”

“Yep! You and Marie Ann have been close since the beginning of the program. I guessed one of your parents must work a low position in his office. You two became friends and Marie Ann insisted her friend go to college with her. Your grades must have been high enough for this to have been a relatively smooth process.”

I grip my hands so hard my nails press into my palms. ‘Guessed’ as in past tense. If she has already looked into me, then she probably already knows.

“Well?” She insists.

“My father is a landscaper on her estate. But you already knew that.”

Margot nods, “That explains why you’re not close with anyone else. If other people put it together then it would completely discredit you. And here among the elite you don’t want to be discredited.”

Then what about Margot? Her reputation was already in the trash no matter how smart she is.

Margot continues, “You and Marie Ann don’t even sit with other people. Which is weird. Marie Ann is really friendly.”

“I’m surprised you think that,” I retort, “Marie Ann and you get on like cats and dogs.”

“She’s the dog,” Margot insists, “Wait. Stop that. You’re doing that on purpose.”

“Doing what?”

“Getting me off track. Listen, I’m not going to spread it around or anything. This is just for fun, like a mystery novel. Part one solved.”

Wait.

“Part one?” I question.

“You are sharp. Like I said. You and Marie Ann don’t sit with other people.”

Except—

“Except Mikael.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. When I open them, I smile genially.

“I think this session is over. Thank you for studying with me.”

Margot watches me gather my things.

“See you next week,” she tells me as I turn away to head back to my dorm.

In Biological Physics I ace a pop quiz.
 On Thursday after my last class I march to the library like a soldier to the frontlines.

Margot opens her mouth. I raise a hand to stop whatever deluge she's prepared.
 "Study first."
 Margot raises a brow and goes to talk again.
 "Study. First."
 "Okay, okay," she says quietly.
 After half an hour she starts fidgeting, so I sigh and close my textbook.
 "Go ahead," I say, "What do you have for me today?"
 "So what were on last week?" She pretends to think about it, "Mikael, right?"
 I sigh again, "What about Mikael."
 "You and Marie Ann hung out with him. Then Marie Ann and him start dating. Not even a month goes by and she breaks up with him."
 "Yeah?"
 "But she didn't. Break up with him. That's just what the rumor mill spat out. I mean of course that's how the world would interpret it. Marie Ann seems so indifferent about it and Mikael is the one so broken up. He's also a bit of a pushover. Like Marie Ann is, and like you pretend to be."
 "Marie Ann is hardly a pushover."
 "She is, though. I've never seen her say no to you."
 I purse my lips, "I don't ask for anything unreasonable."
 Margot gets a gleam in her eyes, "Would you?"
 "Would I what?"
 Margot hums, "Oh nothing. On another note, I am curious about how those two started dating. I can take a guess. Mikael asked her out. Marie Ann consulted you. You, despite your own feelings for Mikael, told her you would be happy whatever she chose to do. Marie Ann says yes."
 "Ugh, you're right. As creepy as that is. Except I don't like Mikael."
 Margot's mouth drops, "Oh."
 "Oh." She repeats.
 "What? What is it?" The shock resonating from her is the most genuine emotion I've seen from her.
 "You don't like Mikael. You went on all their dates because Marie Ann insisted on it. Marie Ann likes you."
 I tap my nails against the table in irritation.
 "Oh my god it makes so much sense. I thought maybe she broke up with him because she picked up on it and chose friendship over a boy. That would be too pedestrian, though. Yeah, truth is stranger than fiction."
 "Is it strange for a girl to like other girls?"
 "Don't put words in my mouth," Margot says sharply, "I just meant this is more interesting than some dime-a-dozen eat love and snooze novel. Anyway, what about you?"
 "What about me?"

“Well how do you feel about it.”

I lean back.

“I’m not interested in anyone. I have more important things to worry about.”

Margot raises a brow, “Not anyone?”

“Nope.”

“So, did you know? About Marie Ann?”

“I would never assume to know anyone’s feelings. Marie Ann is my friend. If she does like me, if she does like girls, she’ll tell me when she’s ready.”

“If she tells you then everything will change one way or another.”

“Things change,” my voice is more brittle than I expected.

Margot tilts her head and states, “You don’t want anything to change. Is that why you’re scared to graduate?”

That is. Completely out of left field. Why would she say that? Why would she think that?

I wince, “Why would you... Why would you think that?”

Margot looks at me with something akin to pity, “You know I like change.”

The merciful shift from interrogation to self-reflection is welcome, if a little patronizing.

“I wouldn’t have guessed,” I say. My sarcasm is more scathing than I meant for it to be.

Margot closes her textbook.

“Same time next week?”

Saturday at midnight there’s a knock on my door. Marie Ann’s asleep, curled up next to me. The movie we were watching isn’t even halfway over.

Groaning I slip away from her and pause the tv. She probably ordered a drink before she fell asleep.

“Hey,” Margot says when I open the door.

So not a drink then.

I sigh, “It’s not Thursday.”

Margot rolls her eyes, “Come with me.”

I don’t fully open the door, using like it’s a shield between us.

“Why?” I ask.

“I have something to show you.”

“We’re not friends,” I tell her.

Is that hurt in her expression? Little bubbles of regret rise up.

“We could be,” an olive branch.

I sigh and lean against the door, “But why? Why should we be? Why are you so interested in me?”

Margot tilts her head, “Why not?”

I give a short, frustrated breath, “Margot.”

Margot sighs, “Listen. It’s not that deep. You did something different from everyone else. I noticed. I noticed other things about you – your relationship with Marie Ann is super interesting, your unique scholarship status and I don’t know, just talking to you is... nice.”

“Why should I want to be friends with you?”

“I don’t know. Why are you asking me?”

“... Fine.”

Margot beams, “Cool! Grab your swimsuit”

To my surprise the doors aren’t locked.

“Well, we’re not really supposed to be here but we’re not not supposed to be here.” She tells me in the locker room as we strip off clothes down to the swimsuits underneath. Both are athletic one pieces – the only kind allowed for women, as bikinis are deemed unnecessary and distracting. Next, I insist on rinsing off instead of heading straight for the pool. It’s part of the rules for a reason.

“Can you even get your hand wet?” I ask, shivering under the cold shower spray.

“It’s cool. I got this cool plastic bag for it,” she shows me, raising her hand so I can see it over the partition, “It’s the only thing I have to wear to go swimming.”

My stomach twists, “I’d really rather you didn’t.”

Margot is quiet. I get out and I hear her turn the water off as well.

“So you’re really not interested in anyone.”

I cross my arms, “I don’t feel things like that.”

“... Does Marie Ann know that?”

“I don’t see why I have to tell anyone.”

“I think you’ve mentioned it to me a couple of times.”

“Well, you keep bringing it up.”

Margot nods sagely, “Glass closet. I see.”

Before I can question that Margot takes a running start towards the pool and cannonballs in. I make my way over to the stairs. The water is mildly heated, so I dip in quickly instead of tiptoeing like I used to at the community pool or Marie Ann’s outdoor pool.

Margot swims over.

“Look up,” she says.

I do. Above us, another skylight, but instead of a dome it’s the whole ceiling. Starlight twinkles down.

“Cool, right?”

I nod.

“I miss going outside. Like really going outside. I can’t wait to graduate.”

Anxiety boils in my gut.

“I don’t want to,” I tell her honestly.

Margot studies me.

“Will you tell me why?”

I sink a bit in the water, “I don’t really know. To be honest.”

“I mean I’m a little anxious, too, but that’s why I can’t wait.”

“We’re just different like that,” I pause, then, “I don’t really get it, though.”

“Get what?”

“You’ve ruined your hand, tarnished your reputation, and you’ve intentionally tried to leave. We’re so close to graduating. I guess I just don’t get why.”

“I don’t know. I just did what I wanted. Maybe went a little stir crazy.”

“And how can you be so keen on getting out of here? Aren’t you worried at all?”

The anxiety bites and focusing on it makes me more frantic and nauseous. A positive feedback loop: ouroboros choking on its own tail, “I can’t stand to think about it. All

these people around me have their futures handled. Even Marie Ann. They'll have jobs, and if not that, then their parents' wealth. Even you. Even if you get kicked out, you'll be fine right? You're a genius. Why am I the only one--?"

Margot cuts me off, "Hey, hey."

She swims over and awkwardly pats me on the back with her good hand, "It'll be alright, Anna Marie."

I groan, "How do you know."

"I don't," Margot says quietly, "But what are you going to do?"

"What can I do?" I crow.

Margot is quiet; then, "What you want. Do what you want."

I shake my head. What a stupid answer. The kind someone who doesn't worry about consequences says.

After I calm down, I get out and awkwardly linger between Margot and the door to the changing room. Margot waves me off, jovial despite my outburst. She tells me to go on without her; she's going to swim a bit longer. I leave her, the pool, and the stars. It's like leaving a dream and returning to reality as the bright lights of the changing room shine in my face. I towel off, deciding to take a full shower back at the dorm. When I return, Marie Ann, groggy and half-asleep, asks where I was.

"Just went for a quick dip in the pool," I tell her, making my voice as soothing as possible.

As I expect, even with an answer that she would normally question, she's placated in her exhaustion. Sleep pulls her under.

The next day proceeds as usual. The pool and the stars sit in me like Pandora's box. As beautiful as it all was, the comfort of it closed - of proceeding as normal - is too valuable.

Margot wanders over and Marie Ann rolls her eyes. Surprisingly, it's in a friendly exasperation. Margot too was being inducted into the routine.

I think of giving her a wave but there's something stormy and dangerous in her face, despite the smile. Her smile appears predatory and her eyes are wild. She sits next to me, leans in close. I know her lack of penchant for personal space, but this was overdoing it.

"Hey," she laces our fingers together.

"What are you doing?" A spike of discomfort shoots through me. I try to pull my hand away.

"I had fun last night."

Slam.

Marie Ann is staring, storm brewing in her expression. Her fist pressing into the table where she had brought it down like a gavel.

"What the hell does that mean?"

We have everyone's attention. I sink into myself.

"What do you think it means?"

Marie Ann shakes in repressed rage.

"M-Marie Ann, calm down," I tell her quietly.

"Yeah, Marie Ann. Calm down," Margot parrots.

What a mistake. Like throwing oil on fire.

Margot isn't done yet, "Yeah, me and Anna Marie had a great night last night. Don't be jealous because I got her first," her smile gets a mean edge too it, "Don't worry. You can always have your turn."

A moment of silence. I can't believe these lies pouring out of Margot.

Then Marie Ann lunges around the table. She pulls Margot up by her collar. There's a flash of vindication on Margot's face, but it's overtaken by panic as the collar presses into her throat.

Marie Ann shakes her, "Shut up. You're full of shit."

Margot opens her mouth to retort, but Marie Ann shoves a hand in her face. Margot pulls her arms over her face to defend herself, and Marie Ann tries to pull them away.

I stare at them. Everyone's staring at them. At us. I feel like Eurydice, but there is no relief. If only I would be pulled into the earth.

Red welts appear on Margot's arm where Marie Ann has scratched her. Then, like a snake, Margot strikes. She grabs Marie Ann's wrists and uses her weight and momentum to roll them. She sits up tall and straight before delivering a punch to Marie Ann's jaw.

Margot stands triumphant – a true Nike. Marie Ann is prone. She covers her face with her hands, groans and curls in on herself.

I'm frozen.

Then there's a rush. A security guard I've never seen before rushes out. Hot on his heels is what must be a nurse. I've never seen her either.

The nurse squats near Marie Ann. She helps her up. Marie Ann stares at me as she goes.

Margot is also escorted out, but she doesn't even glance at me. She leaves with her head held high, in the direction of the dorms. Marie Ann is led in the direction of the infirmary.

I'm the only one left.

Marie Ann returns to our dorm. Her cheek is swollen and splattered with an ugly yellow that will turn purple tomorrow. She doesn't speak at first. Storming to her side of the room. She aggressively opens her dresser drawer. She grabs her sweats and slams the drawer shut.

After she changes, she takes a deep breath and turns to me.

"She was lying," is the first thing out of my mouth even though Marie Ann was gearing up to start talking, "We went swimming last night, that's all."

Marie Ann works her jaw like she's chewing on something, trying to decide if she likes it or not.

Sighing she wanders over and settles onto the bed next to me. She rests her head on my shoulder, her back curving in what must be an uncomfortable arch.

"I shouldn't have fought her," she confesses.

"I—" I don't know if I should condemn her or absolve her guilt. I decide to do both, "No. But she provoked you."

"... Yeah," then Marie Ann looks up at me so vulnerable and open. For one terrible moment I think she's going to kiss me.

I grab her shoulders, "Marie Ann. I didn't do anything with Margot because I don't want to. I don't want to ever. With anyone."

“What?” Marie Ann’s brow furrows.

“I –” I let her go and pull away.

“Wait, no,” Marie Ann grabs my shoulders, “No, it’s okay. Just stop, just. Just tell me.”

“Marie Ann,” My words are rushed, truth spilling out like pus from a wound, “I don’t want to be in a relationship. Ever.”

I don’t know why, but with Margot it just felt like truth. With Marie Ann it was like my own confession back to her.

Marie Ann looks at me earnestly, “I’ve never seen you like this.”

“What?”

Marie Ann sighs, “It’s just. You never open up. At least not to me. I worry about you, you’re so... Closed off. I care about you a lot, you know? And the whole thing with Margot was so out of character... I felt like I had to protect you.”

Marie Ann worried about me? Closed off? But I –

“But I –” I blink, “But – but...”

I bite my lip.

Marie Ann sighs, “I’m gonna take an Advil and go lay down. Just... Don’t push me away. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Marie Ann falls asleep within minutes. I stand to leave.

There’s a bot hanging outside Margot’s room. I walk to the door and place my hand on the knob but it doesn’t make a sound so I go right in.

“Hey,” Margot says.

She’s standing by her desk. On it is a pile of books and papers.

“Sorry for the mess,” she’s grinning, “I’m packing my stuff up.”

“Why—”

She cuts me off, “Oh! I did it! I got kicked out!”

“What?”

“Yeah. Turns out assaulting another student was an escalation that they couldn’t ignore.”

I blink, “Is – Did you want to fight her?”

Margot looks at me like I’m a particularly amusing child. Moving away from her desk she goes to sit on her bed.

“It wasn’t not intended,” she tells me plainly.

I try to swallow the knot in my throat. She had walked into the cafeteria with the intention. Was it thought out or did the idea come to her as soon as she saw us? If it was thought out, how far back? This morning? Before or after we went swimming? When she first walked up to me and Marie Ann?

“Did you even want to be my friend?”

Margot’s face gets this look of pity. It makes me so sick I look down at my feet instead.

“Anna Marie. I do. But I realized last night that you’re the sort of person who will always keep your head down and go with the flow. It’s in your nature – the path of least resistance.”

I grit my teeth, “And what? You’re so special?”

“No. I just do what I want. I talked to you because I noticed you. I kept talking to you because you were interesting. I picked a fight with Marie Ann because I wanted to see if she’d confess. You know, make her jealous. This was an unintended outcome.”

I look up at Margot, my lip curling to show my teeth, “So, what? You were just messing around?”

“I just think things should always be in motion.”

Margot stands suddenly, looking at her door. Then she walks back over to her desk. She grabs a random piece of paper – a Physics quiz from the looks of it. She writes something on the bottom half, tears it off, and then shoves it in my hands.

“Here,” She herds me toward the door, practically pushing me out, “I have to keep packing, the security guard will be back soon.”

“Wait!”

“No time, Anna Marie. Give me a call when you graduate.”

She closes the door behind me.

A call? I look at the paper in my hand. Sure enough, a number is written on it. I crumble it up and stuff it in my left pocket.

Back at the dorm Marie Ann is still out cold. When the pain killers wear off, I’m sure she’ll be up.

I pull the paper out of my pockets. I grip it hard with both hands and tear it right down the middle. Staring at the two scraps I go to tear it up more. I should throw it away. Margot is trouble, nothing but trouble. Extraneous and unnecessary trouble. Absolutely exhausting.

Wandering over to my desk I pull open the top desk drawer. I shove the paper in and close it.

THE BOOK OF CATHLEEN ROSE

Cathleen ‘Cathy’ Rose ordered a double space burger with a side of fries, and a strawberry milkshake on her first date with Jackson McCormick. It wasn’t something she would usually order, but her mother had told her to always copy her date’s meal .

“Try their taste,” she had said, “step into their shoes.”

Jackson had good taste if a bit self-indulgent. He seemed fit enough. Cathy wondered if this was a special occasion or a new trend how this reflected his normal diet. More importantly Cathy was already thinking about how many extra gym visits she would have to fit in this week to burn off all the extra calories. Washing down two layers of greasy patty with a sip of milkshake had her considering adding some for the next week too.

Maybe Jackson would want to come with. She had a top that was somewhere between skintight tank top and sports bra and a pair of athletic leggings that she was sure he would like. Maybe he played a sport, she thought, as she snuck glances at his toned arms.

Jackson smiled at her, “What do you think of the burger? I don’t eat here a lot, but I’ve become kind of obsessed with trying out all these new space- theme foods. Do you know they have an orbit bowl at the ramen place a few blocks from here?”

Cathy tugged at a curl of blonde hair that was too short to make it into her ponytail, “It’s pretty good. It’s kind of just a normal burger, though.”

Jackson looked at her, then down at his burger. He opened the sesame bun and stared at the ingredients.

“Oh,” he said, “Yeah. I guess it’s more like a theme name aesthetic.”

Cathy nodded. Her attention wandered to a TV hanging in a corner. It was one of those big square ones that looked like it could fall at any second.

A politician was shaking hands with one of the Others. There was a stark difference in their looks. The Others had a dichotomy in fashion from what Cathy had seen. She personally thought both styles were rather ugly – either overly complicated plastickystrappy vinyl shirts looks and pants with eye-straining vivid colors or an all-natural minimalist look of muted colored linen and cotton shifts and leather moccasin shoes. The Other that was shaking hands wore a neat linen sheet that was an off-white crème. It trembled in the wind like gauze.

Jackson looked back, “Oh, have they already reached an agreement for exchange students?”

“Students?”

“Oh well, I guess adults, i It’s just easier to think of them as exchange students. Most of them are academic anyway, right?”

The Other that was shaking hands was far from typical college age, but age but thinking of it as a cultural exchange was easier mindset to slip into. Better than the thought of invasion or assimilation that had been floating in Cathy’s mind.

“I think my parents applied to be a host??,?” Cathy told him.

“Really?”

Cathy nodded, “My brother moved out to live with his fiancé and they converted his room for it.”

“They’re really into it, too?”

Too? Cathy frowned at that. felt her mouth twist unpleasantly.

“I don’t know. Mom’s an academic type, too. A psychology professor.”

Jackson nodded and took a bite of his burger. One of the patties slipped out and plopped on his plate. He rushed to catch it as a reflex; succeeded, unfortunately; dropped it and jerked his hand back, knocking over his milkshake and spilling his fries onto the floor .

Jackson froze. Cathy froze. They both stared at the disaster of a meal then up at each other. Cathy tried to repress a smile, but Jackson saw the amusement in her face and grinned. His teeth were a bit long and the bottom row a little crooked, but they were surprisingly white, and he looked handsome like this even with pink milkshake sliding down his blue t-shirt.

Jackson McCormick picked Cathleen RoseCathy up before noon for their second date. Jackson, Cathy had found out, was moderately sporty. He did indoor archery on Sundays after church and had invited her to try it out with him on a Tuesday when her only class was in the afternoon and he had off from his barista job.

On the drive over Jackson told Cathy that he was a part-time student in his last semester. Cathy herself was a Junior. Apparently, they attended the same college but had never crossed paths at the school. Jackson told her he was majoring in Music Technology. This was a double-edged sword for Cathy. ThisWhile it was interesting to Cathy, but it also triggered her stewed in embarrassment aboutat her Business major. People who followed their passions made Cathy uncomfortable. She had never found her own passion and had fallen into a practical path of study. She spent too much time vaguely exploring other ideas. Laaying on her bed, scrolling majors at colleges far, far away and toying with the idea of doing something crazy, like going to a school to make violins or horse saddles .

But it Cathy would mentally try them on only to find that they were somebody else’ dream.was random . She just didn’t have the passion for it.

Once they arrived at the indoor range, she changed the subject. It wasn’t one she particularly liked but anything was better than talking about school on a date.

“You know how I was texting you about how my parent’s’ application was accepteding?”

“Yeah,” he said as he picked up a bow. It was a lot more complicated then she had been imagining. The bows she would make by tying up a curved stick with rope string as a kid paled in comparison with this machine ofwas nothing like a compound bow. Two pullies with the string not only webtwentgoing from end to end but also were strung two more times in a criss- crosscrisscross to create a tension. in It was sothe first so tight that her attempt at pulling pulling it bacshe would have had more luck plucking it for music then trying to use it for sportk was a pathetic failure .

Jackson took the bow by it’s professional and intimidating looking grip, “Don’t worry, there are lighter bows.”

“Well, she moved in last night,” Cathy told him.

Jackson paused while in picking up another bow, “Really? What’s she like? Has she done anything weird?”

“No, not really. I mean she was wearing those plasticky clothes this bright yellow top. One of the sleeves were just a bunch of straps. And the skirt might have just been a thick sheet of green vinyl.”

Jackson handed her another bow to try, “I was reading an article about that. Apparently, there was a split between naturalism and artificialism.”

“I think both are weird.”

Jackson gave her a worried look that she pretended not to notice. Instead she finally was able to pull the string back on one of the compound bows. It was colored pink, embarrassingly enough. A girl bow.

“Well,” Cathy pushed through the tension that hung in the air, “She’s definitely an artificialist. Her hair is like this purple color, but when she moves it looks green sometimes. And she has this glove that has circuitry through it. I don’t know what it does though, and her backpack had a computer screen on it but she just threw it to the floor.”

“That’s really cool,” Jackson smiled and said, “Okay, now you want to widen your legs. And be sure to hold it like this. You don’t want to snap your nose off or hit your wrist. That’s what would happen in movies.”

“Katniss loses a nose,” Cathy jokes.

Jackson smiled, breathed in, and then let loose the arrow he had been demonstrating with. It wasn’t a bullseye but close. Jackson breathed out. Cathy’s heart fluttered at his look of concentration. It suited the dark stubble on his chin and the pale grey-blue of his eyes.

Jackson puts his bow down and helped her position herself. His hands adjusted her stance and moved her eyes arms by the elbows. Polite touches but Cathy’s skin seemed to buzz where his fingers brushed.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. He didn’t sound all too sorry.

“Don’t worry about it,” her mouth was dry. She wet her lips.

She let go. The arrow flew past the target, hit the floor, and spun widely against the concrete.

He let out a husky laugh, “It takes practice.”

Cathy grinned and looked over, “You’ll keep helping me with my form, right?”

A light flush dusted his cheeks, “Of course .”

On their third date Cathy leen Rose invited Jackson McCormick to an event the gardening club that she was helping host., which she was a part of, was hosting. It took a little finagling, but he was able to meet her after his shift and before his evening class the Friday Wednesday it was occurring. Usually, he told her, he would just lounge in the cafeteria near the library until class. Cathy decided silently that even without the event that she instead of heading home after her classes morning classes she would wait . Cathy mentally took note. After her morning classes, instead of heading straight home, maybe she could lounge with him. The wishwant to spend time with him was almost like a desperation, and she would grasp take any stolen moments she could givenbetween their cluttered schedules that she could.

Being with him was more fulfilling than any of her classes. It was hard to focus on balance sheets with him aroundwhen being with Jackson was so much more pleasant.

She loved his passion for whatever he was doing – music tech, archery, and even his interest in the Other's. It made her long for her own passion; and she felt like with him maybe with him she would be able to find it.

Jackson wandered over, looking for her. His black framed glasses were perched on the bridge of his nose. It wasn't a large event but there was a sizable group. The event's focus was teaching about houseplants. T, and there was a limited supply of plants being given away that the gardening club had propagated grown over the semester.

She had saved a pothos specifically for him and had bought a blue-glazed, ceramic pot to transfer it into for it. Cathy wondered if this had been a mistake. She still had put makeup on just for him, but she was covered in potting soil.

"I got this for you," she told him.

She instructed him on how to repot it. First getting it out of the plastic container by tapping at the bottom and pulling it out; loosening the roots and then filling up the ceramic pot with a bag of potting soil that was spread on the white foldable tables set up for the event.

Her gardening gloves didn't fit him, so he got dirt all over his hands. , but hHe told her he didn't mind.

After that she talked about care and drainage holes and how she'll help him repot it when it grew bigger needs to again. After that they loitered, and the conversation drifted to her new housemate.

"Is it weird?" hHe asked.

Cathy's face twisted, "Actually. Yeah. She acts like she... Knows me."

"Knows you?"

Cathy shifted uncomfortably, "Yeah. I don't know. It's stupid. Something in the way she says my name. You know how people talk about like... I don't... never mind."

"Wait, like what, though?"

"Like... She knows me but doesn't. She only calls me Cathleen Rose, I hate it."

He reached out to brush a dirt-covered hand through her hair but thought better of it, "I guess I'd have to experience it."

Cathy shrugged and then brightened, "Oh! I did find out about her glove. Apparently, it allows her to interact with tech intuitively. She told me that there were chips you could get implanted, but it was expensive."

"Maybe she's just afraid of needles," Jackson joked.

Cathy giggled, "There's not really much she can use it for yethere now. It only works with her backpack now."

"The culture shock must be crazy."

"Oh, apparently she doesn't shower. They have like mist sprays that can cleanse you in a minute."

"What? No way."

Cathy grinned, "Yeah. She was telling me artificialism is all about efficiency. Apparently, naturalists still shower and bathe."

"Does she smell?" Jackson asked.

"No. Besides, she's told me she's taken to showering. Finds it relaxing. Hates drying her hair though."

"That's a bit of a girl thing," he told her, running a hand through his cropped hair.

Cathy snorted and pointed to his hands.

“Oh shit.”

Cathy laughed then –

An alarm sounded. Cathy’s legs shook and Cathy wasn’t outside then she wasn’t outside but in a café. She half crouched clinging to the plastic table and shaking. She smelled coffee and it made her stomach tighten.

“-athy! Cathy!”

Jackson was there, clinging to her hands. She shook and shook and shook and then it was quiet, and Cathy was back at school. Their memory of the café faded back to just an awful memory. The smell of coffee coming from Jackson was overpowered by the refreshing intensity of potting soil.

“Hey, it’s okay. It was just a fire alarm.”

Cathy looked around. Other students were just as shaken as her. One girl was sobbing, and another boy was pale as a sheet.

“I’m okay,” she said as if saying it made could make it true, “I’m okay.”

On their fourth date Jackson McCormick invited Cathleen Cathy Rose to his studio apartment. She drove her little Kia over and parked it next to his Jeep. She left her backpack filled with textbooks in the backseat. She texted her mom that she was spending the night with a friend.

Her skin buzzed with anticipation.

Inside the apartment was clean Jackson had cleaned , although she thought she saw a sock peeking out from behind a cramped desk. Next to the cramped desk was a twin bed. The frame looked cheap. The sheets were a neutral grey, but the comforter was a surprisingly refreshing green. He had a little foldable table propped open in front of the bed. The pothos sat on the kitchen counter next to one of the only windows. An electric guitar was mounted on the wall.

The room smelled nice. The bathroom was clean spotless. The food was good – salmon fillets he had bought in singles, preseasoned with lemon and pepper. He told her that he had had to google what broiling was and had been relieved at the simplicity. She complimented him. The salmon flaked onto her fork., t The lemon zested her tongue, and it wasn’t dried out like her previous experiences with salmon..

After dinner, after the table was folded and dishes were rinsed and stacked in the sink, Jackson offered to pull something up to watch on his laptop. , but Cathy put a hand on his thigh and leaned in to kiss him. He tasted like salmon and lemons and the beers he had pulled out that made her feel warm, even if they tasted was sour. The thrum of anticipation was taught like a bow string, the arrow hit its mark and afterwards she relieved herself in his clean spotless bathroom, pulled on his shirt and laid down with him snug in the twin bed.

They talked. and sSomething like a secret that had been sitting heavy in her heart slipped out. as conversation inevitably wandered. An inevitable late night confession.

“Eileen – that’s the Other’s name, told me she knew me.”

Jackson looked over, his toned arms bare and wrapped around her, pulling her close.

Cathy licked her lips and shivered as her sweat cooled, “You know how there are theories cropping up because our histories are so similar?”

“Yeah?”

“Eileen finally told me. Apparently, there’s an author named Cathleen Rose. They use the same date system and the dates years line up.”

Cathy curled into his chest so that she didn’t have to face her own confession, “She has one of the books, too. Told me it was such an inspiration to her historical literature grad thesis. She couldn’t stand to leave it.”

“Did you read it?” Hands soil-free, he played with her hair, winding the curls around his fingers and, and then letting them bounce free.

“No. She just showed me the author’s photo on the dust cover.”

“Did it look like you?”

Cathy didn’t answer but her grip on the sheets tightened.

The silence lingered before she confessed again, “I need to read the book. I can’t stop thinking about it, but...”

“It’s scary,” he whispered.

Jackson looked at her dirty blonde curls splayed out like a halo. Cathy looked up at him. He looked shaken. She understood, to some degree. She coped with the shift in reality the Other’s arrival had brought by doing her best to ignore them. Jackson had immersed himself in it like an obsession. To him the Other’s had been fascinating. An undiscovered culture. It helped to think of them like this, but this evidence of similarity shook him to his core.

“If you get your hands on it,” he told her, “We can read it together.”

Cathy nodded.

Cathy stayed the night and she dreamed. The smell of coffee from his barista job haunted Jackson’s room and his skin. It then permeated her dream subconscious. The scene sets

. The dreamed the same scene she did every night like a play in a theatre with no exit. It was bright sunny day. Her coffee order. She ordered coffee – a medium latte with a shot of vanilla flavoring and skim milk that she could no longer stand the taste of. Her eyes skimmed the man’s barista’s name tag but didn’t read it. She grabbed her coffee and was ready to walk out. Siren’s. Confusion. The barista grabbing her wrist as she stood there dumbly. She dropped her coffee drink and they squatted together in fear and confusion and sickly sweet, low-fat coffee.

The TV played the emergency broadcast and they watched a missile – no a ship that looked like a part of the Mormon church on the outskirts of town had taken flight, interrupting the over-saturated blue of the sky. She and the barista gripped each other as they prepared to die. She read his name tag.

‘Jackson.’

On their fifth date Cathy leen Rose and Jackson McCormick met at his apartment. He ordered take out, which sat in white plastic bags and Styrofoam boxes waiting for her. Cathy pulled the book out of her messenger bag as soon as he opened the door. She clutched it tightly in her hand as if someone would walk past and snatch it right out of her hands.

There was a nervous energy. Jackson had read an article about how the Others' planet was likely a mirror of their own but in over a hundred years in the future. The exchange program was being reexamined. Ethics were being discussed. Uncertainty hung in the air.

Jackson had forwarded it the article to Cathy, and it had made her twitchy. Finally, unable to take it, she had snatched swiped the book from Eileen's backpack.

"Let's read it before we eat," Cathy said.

Jackson agreed.

Cathy turned the book in her hands, letting Jackson get a better look at the cover. It was black with gold embellishments.

The Tilting of Planets The title was simple if dreary.

"Do you write?" He asked her.

Cathy shrugged, "A little. Not enough to consider it a hobby or anything."

Jackson nodded.

Cathy opened the book. Her eyes scanned the first paragraph.

"Well?" He asked. His leg bounced in anticipation.

Cathy bit her lip, "It's... Normal?"

It wasn't until she said it that Cathy realized her imagination had been running wild. A thousand possibilities, but none had seemed real. Reality felt was anticlimactic in comparison.

"Did you read the author's notes?" Like the afterword or the segment about the author."

Cathy flipped open to the back. The picture that stared back was of her but with laugh lines and crow's feet and hair streaked grey stared back. She wasn't smiling.

Beneath older Cathy, Cathy read that she had lived in Florida with her partner Troy. Who was Troy? Why Florida? Cathy remembered visiting Florida. She remembered hating it. The humidity frizzed her hair and making made sweat drip down her back, and. The how the intensity of the sun had left her red and peeling for days.

Jackson was quiet beside her, although his eyes were surely reading the same thing.

Cathy licked her lips, "You know. We wouldn't have started dating if... If the Others hadn't arrived."

"You think so?" He asked but his tone of voice gave away the fact that he agreed.

Flipping forward she reads the afterword She flipped back a few pages to the afterword.

A life spanned before her. The life of Cathleen Rose. Her life.

Cathy doesn't didn't like what she read. Advances in technology undercutting her industry. Being She had been lost and entering entered the military. The horror and emptiness as she had tried to find herself in high tech war fields. The alcoholism. The PTSD. The miscarriages.

It was awful. All awful. Cathy wondered if she killed herself – a certified Sylvia Plath.

Cathy's hands shook. She shook. She thought about huddling under café tables as coffee dripped down onto her.

"Jackson," she said.

“Cathy?” He whispered. His hands hovering over her shoulders like she might break if he touched her.

Cathy shook.

Jackson took the book from her and tossed it away, “It’s okay Cathy. Breathe.”

Cathy took a big gulp of air she didn’t know she was missing. Her fingertips were tingling.

“I’m okay,” she said, but it was a lie.

Cathy knocked on his door a month later. This wasn’t a date. Her Kia was parked next to Jackson’s Jeep. It was filled with things. A whole life packed into a hatchback.

Jackson opened the door. Cathy stood in better shape than he had seen her all month over accidental passings and dates. She looked good. She stood confidently and her eyes were bright. She. For the last few weeks, she had been participating in life like a specterghost. Caught in the motions but not really there.

“Jackson,” she told him, “I’m leaving.”

Jackson’s heart panicked, “Leaving? Now?”

Cathy nodded, “I’m going to stay with my brother, and then, I don’t know.”

Jackson worried his lip.

“Is this good-bye?”

Cathy’s face scrunched up. Jackson reached a hand up and caressed her face.

“Hey,” he said, “I’m graduating soon. We could look for somewhere to get lost together.”

Cathy shook, “I can’t wait. I already dropped out.”

Jackson pressed a kiss to her forehead, “You don’t have to wait. I’ll catch up.”

She looked up at him. The thought of leaving him behind had torn her heart in two. She had almost decided to stay but she had been gripped by a fervor. The need to leave. The need to break herself from this path she had so placidly entered. Older Cathleen Rose was not her; she had decided. She didn’t want to be someone who let things happen to her. She needed to make something happen.

“I think,” Jackson started, “It’ll be an adventure.”

He smiled down at her and Cathy smiled up at him. Soon, she would drive out west toward the desert. Maybe, just maybe, in all the sand’s dry heat she would find something for herself. Maybe take a writing class. She hadn’t decided. For now, she walked into Jackson’s apartment for a proper farewell.

Jackson didn’t do passions by half after all. Jackson took her into his apartment and into his bed. Afterward, lying in his arms as he traced shapes on her skin, Cathy felt more relaxed than she had the past month. It would be so easy to take it back and stay. He was good. Had been good to her. Even as she had shut him out over the past month he had been there; when she crumbled and cried, he held her; and when she had told him she wanted to get away after college he encouraged her.

Being without him would be hard and she knew the strain distance would have on such a freshly budding relationship but she needed this. Needed to live her life, not Eileen’s Cathleen Rose, not some violin maker in Austria, and not Jackson’s.