

I would like to dedicate this to my parents who let me talk at them about my plots so I could work them out, to Sarah who encouraged me to keep writing, and to Jan who answered the phone whenever I called her no matter the time.

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## The Sunset at Midnight

It happened when I was seven. It was almost Christmas morning and we were actually going to be together this year. We'd be a family. Daddy was a pilot and usually ended up being in some other city over the holidays. But that didn't matter. It didn't matter, because it was almost Christmas and we were going to celebrate it together for the first time.

Daddy was rewinding "A Charlie Brown Christmas" while Mommy was next to the tree adding nutcrackers and candy canes to the already weighted down branches. She was too short to put the star on top of the tree and Daddy brought in one of my kiddie stepstools for her to use. My sides ached from laughter. I gasped shallow breaths and tears prickled my eyes. My cheeks were growing sore, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop the laughter from bubbling out of my throat. It was like all the movies and TV shows I had seen. This was what Christmas was supposed to be like.

It was five minutes 'til midnight when the floor shook. The old boxy TV threatened to fall off the stand. Water from my glass splashed onto the table. Even sitting on the floor, I felt jostled. My fingernails scraped against the hardwood floor as I attempted to keep myself upright. My ears ached and only then did I register the loud unforgiving sound coming from outside. It was like standing next to a large speaker when the low pounding drum reverberates in your chest and bounces off your bones.

Daddy was up and out the front door before I could fully stand. I turned and looked out the window. The clock struck. It was Christmas morning and I didn't even notice, because there was a sunset at midnight.

The sky shone in oranges and reds. The flames scraped and clawed at the clouds. Even through the open front door, I could feel the whisper of heat against my skin. With each breath I took, my tongue tasted chalky ash as my nose filled with gasoline and burning rubber. A few doors down was Mr. Anderson's house. But to say the house was on fire would be a lie. There was no house left. Instead, a small plane sat on the lot with the wing broken and discarded in the front lawn. The body of the plane, once white, was scorched grayish black from the flames and threatening to collapse in on itself.

We lived next to the airport. It was easier on Daddy for us to be really close. I stared, captivated by the disaster in front of me. The mailbox was still standing next to the curb. I could see the little flag was raised. I remember wondering if the mailman would still come even if the house was gone.

My mother quickly closed the door and ushered me upstairs. She told me not to worry, and if I fell asleep then it'd be morning and we could open presents. Didn't that sound nice? Her voice cracked and her eyes were wide. She forgot to read me a bedtime story.

I snuck out of bed and pulled the curtains aside to peer out my window. I could see firefighters talking to groups of people huddled together. A woman leaned heavily on her husband who was pulling at his hair. A few people were kneeling on the ground while others tried to creep closer. Daddy pushed his way to the front until a fireman grabbed him. Daddy's hands gestured wildly at the flames, but his shouts were muffled by the window pane.

The fireman shook his head and there was nothing anyone could do, but watch as the plane folded and collapsed adding a new puff of ash and smoke. The flames crackled and consumed the groaning metal, until I could no longer see the plane. Some of the on-looking neighbors screamed with their hands clutched tight over their hearts or around loved ones. Daddy

sunk out of the fireman's grip and fell to the ground. His shoulders shook and he rubbed his hands furiously over his eyes. I think that frightened me the most. I had never seen my father cry.

Daddy once told me that when someone died, they became a star. I looked up to see if there was a new cluster somewhere, but all I saw was endless black. I let the curtains fall back in front of the window, but the light from the fire still shone through. We were supposed to be celebrating and opening presents early as Daddy sang off key to the songs on the radio. We were supposed to be together as a family for the first time on Christmas. I was supposed to fall asleep with the taste of snow and candy canes fresh on my tongue, but instead as I crawled into bed, all I could taste was ash.

## The Dragon

The war had been going on ever since Gregory's father's father was a child. Gregory had never seen it, he was only eight and much too young to join, but he would sit under the windowsill of the tavern and listen to tales of those who returned. When they'd come back, they'd bring carts filled with soft fabrics and fragile pottery. The spoils of war. The ladies of the village always oohed and awed over them, displaying the vases prominently in their homes. But sometimes the men who came back wouldn't want to talk about it. Gregory's father was like that. He had injured his leg during the fighting and been sent back home a few years before Gregory was born.

Normally, when a warrior came back injured they were given gold, a job in the town, and the title of knight for their troubles. Gregory looked down at his tattered jacket and newly mended stockings. His father didn't have a job. He didn't talk about that either. But what his family did have was an ugly lemon orange vase, unlike anything sold in the kingdom. It was a war treasure from far over the hills, and proof of his father's glory.

Sometimes Gregory would sit and stare at the vase for hours. He liked to imagine the far off place a vase like that was made or the battle fought in order to win it. Sometimes he could almost hear the clanging of swords or feel the breath of an arrow as it whizzed past his face. He loved the thought of riding into battle; but even more than that, he loved the thought of riding into battle on his very own dragon.

His father had had a dragon. Only the top warriors were eligible to get one. You had to be smart, agile, and fierce. Those lucky enough to be a part of the Dragon Brigade would ride in before the rest of the soldiers and break the enemy front lines. They dined in the King's hall and their names were talked about from tavern to tavern and village to village.

Even though his father was reluctant to talk of his dragon, Gregory still begged him for stories of glory, heroism, and victory, but his father never told. Instead, he sat in his chair in the corner and looked out the window at the rolling hills. So Gregory was forced to make up his own stories.

“Put down that apple,” his mother called, storming into the room. The dining room table was a mess from the last battle scene he had been acting out, where the fruits and the spices fought for dominance of lunch. The fruits were winning. “Is this basil? You know you’re not supposed to climb onto the counter. You could get hurt. Go outside if you want to play war.”

“But Mrs. Gramm told me to come back inside cause I was bothering her cat by playing in the garden,” Gregory whined. He hadn’t even been doing anything, but playing in the dirt with rocks and sticks.

“Perhaps you should find something else to do then,” his mother said, clearing the table and placing the bananas back in the basket. Gregory stood looking lost in the middle of the room.

“But I don’t want to do anything else,” he said.

He and other kids didn’t get along very well. They teased him for having so many patched holes on his trousers, because he couldn’t afford new ones. When he tore the patches off in frustration, they teased him because, through the holes, they could see that his knees looked knobby. His mother said his knees were normal, but mothers were supposed to say those things. He didn’t let the other kids bother him too much though, because once he became a big time war hero like his father, then everyone would love to be around him. He didn’t mind the wait.

His mother turned and gave him a look. Her eyes flicked over to the door and she jiggled her arms, full with the bottles of salt, pepper, and basil. He lowered his head and walked out.

His feet shuffled along the cobblestone as he passed through the market. Women, leaning out of windows, had conversations with men down on the streets. Carts creaked as wooden wheels bounced along the road. Venders shouted over his head, vying for the attention of customers who actually had money.

“Did you hear that they’ve sent Charles another one?” a lady asked her companion. Gregory stopped immediately and turned to listen to the women. “It’s being held at the Parkson’s farm. We should visit it later.”

“And to think it’s only been a month since the last one,” the lady’s friend said. The two were hiding their faces behind their hands and giggling with glee. This was a great honor for their town.

“Move it, boy. No loitering,” an apple cart vendor yelled. He waved his arms around to shoo Gregory away. Gregory smiled and took off down the road. He wove around the dresses of the ladies and the worn trousers of the old men until he got through the crowd and to the edge of town. His feet carried him almost mindlessly further and further away from the shouting voices and clacking shoes of the market.

Down the road, just after the crest of the first hill, a walkway shot off from the road. The grass looked stepped on and patted down just enough to have worn a faint path. Gregory followed it all the way until it ended at a wooden fence. The fence enclosed the whole field in front of him and inside was the new pride of the town: a newly hatched dragon.

Light blue like midmorning sky, the dragon’s body came up to Gregory’s head. Gold swirled around in patterns on the wings and on the back of its neck, the spikes were changing from dull to sharp. A thick collar was fastened around its throat, connecting it by a long chain to a pole in the middle of the field so that it couldn’t fly away.



Being able to see a dragon was rare unless you were on the front lines. Anyone who made it into the Dragon Brigade was able to give their hometown a dragon to raise. It was said you were more connected if both you and the dragon grew up in the same place. At the time, there was one man from Gregory's town who was in the Dragon Brigade: Charles Ruthers.

Between the songs from the bards, the stories told in the taverns, and fact that they were raising a future Dragon Brigade dragon, Gregory felt that he was already best friends with Charles. And the stories were amazing. How he'd flown straight into the enemy and broken their front line, using only his sword and the fire from his dragon. How he intercepted the boulders flung from enemy catapults and destroyed them before they could harm any warriors. How he flew so fast that he didn't even need armor, because nothing could catch him.

Gregory loved Charles, and he loved this dragon, because he believed someday it would be his.

"Come here," Gregory called out to the dragon. Its head looked up and, for a second, the two stared at one another. But the dragon didn't come any closer. The last dragon hadn't come any closer either.

Normally, this would be where Gregory would turn around and walk back to town. It wasn't good to linger, even if it was chained up. Normally, he'd be content with just dreaming of a future with a dragon and leaving this one alone. Normally, he wouldn't do any more than look at it, feet firmly on the ground, but he had nothing else to do and nowhere else to be. The quick look wasn't enough to satisfy him this time. He took a risk and hoisted himself up so he balanced on top of the fence. He wanted to be closer. Just a little bit.

The dragon spooked. It reared up on its hind legs, front feet kicking in the air. It turned and ran away, only taking a few steps before its wings flapped wildly and it rose from the

ground. Gregory watched frozen as it soared into the air. His head tipped back as the dragon arched climbing higher and higher until it was almost thirty feet off the ground. Then, all at once, it flew to the end of its chain. The sudden tautness snapped at the dragon's neck, and with a cry it was pulled off course. It rolled through the air, trying to get away, but only succeeded in tangling its wing up in the chain. As fast as the dragon took off, it tumbled back down to the ground.

Its wing was still tangled and it bucked and pulled and circled, trying to get it free. The ground vibrated lightly with each stomp of its legs. Gregory's feet were running through the field before he knew what he was doing.

"Woah easy there," he said. He slowed and put his palms out. The dragon eyed him, and thrashed once, then again, less fiercely. He took that as a win. Ever so carefully he approached. One step. Then another. "That right, easy now. You're okay".

Once he got close enough to feel the heat coming from the dragon's breath, the creature finally stilled. Gregory paused. His mother would ground him until the time he became a warrior if she were to see him, but the dragon needed help. Just a little bit of help. He was hardly even messing with the dragon. He'd be fine. This close he could see the individual scales. Flecks of gold shimmered among the blue. He lifted one hand closer to the dragon's head. It pulled back with a growl. Gregory's face was hit with heat and his eyes watered from the smoke.

"Got it. No petting," he said. He eased his way to the side of the dragon, where the chain was wrapped around the wing. Its head swiveled and watched him. His hands got closer, but the dragon didn't move away. Ever so slowly he reached out and gave the wing a touch. It felt rough like worn leather. He grabbed the chain and started to work it looser so that he could get it off the wing. The dragon watched him the whole time, but never fought or thrashed again.

When he was done and the wing was free, Gregory backed out of the field and walked back down the road. Every time he looked back, the dragon's eyes were following him.

The next morning Gregory was up with the sunrise. He wanted to try again with the dragon. He'd been able to touch it once so maybe he could do that again. Gregory grabbed a bag and ran out the door. The butcher was hanging up a new dead pig and next to it the tavern had reopened for the day. It was where a lot of the returned warriors with scars, missing arms, or legs spent their days. They trickled in even in the early morning. He ran right past them. Maybe later he'd check to see if any new warriors had come back with fresh stories.

As Gregory walked up to the fence, he saw a couple of other boys a few years older than he were already there, looking into the enclosure. He could see the creature past the fence eating meat out of a barrel. One of the boys noticed him.

"Who are you?" he asked. The boy was wearing a light jacket. Not just any one, though. He had a bright red one made from the fabrics men brought home after triumphing over far away villages. Red meant it was expensive, and that he was the son of someone with power and glory.

"I'm Gregory," he said. The other boy looked Gregory up and down, eyebrows raised. Gregory's jacket had holes and patches, and was a boring dirt brown.

"I'm Richard," the boy said "What do you want?"

"To look at the dragon." He'd never met these boys before. Gregory had worn his better trousers today, so his knees weren't even showing. Maybe these boys would be his friends.

"When I become a warrior, I'm going to train really hard so I can join the Dragon Brigade like my father."

“You?” Richard scoffed. The other kids laughed. “My father has introduced me to all the best town warriors and their kids. If you were the son of a real Dragon Brigade warrior then I would have recognized you”.

“I am a child of a hero,” Gregory puffed up, stepping closer.”

“What’s your father’s name?” Richard asked.

“Jackson Etums,” Gregory said. All the boy around him paused.

“Oh yeah I’ve heard of him,” Richard said.

“I told you-”

“He doesn’t count. He’s the opposite of a hero.”

“What are you talking about? We’ve got a vase and he was injured-”

“Yeah he was injured,” Richard sneered, “That’s because he stabbed himself in the leg so he could come home.”

“What?”

“You only got that vase, because no one could prove it. But everyone, even a few villages over, knows of his disgrace.” Gregory shook his head. That wasn’t true. His father was a hero and he brought glory to his family.

“That’s a lie,” Gregory said.

“Did you call him a liar?” one of the other boys asked.

“I think that’s disrespectful,” a third boy said.

Richard and the other boys started to come closer to him. Gregory turned and ran as fast as he could. He could hear the other boys quickly gaining. He ran to a tree and jumped, grabbing onto the lowest branches. Holding on to the bark in a tight grip, Gregory climbed his way higher.

The other boys stayed on the ground. Their clothes were much too nice to risk getting torn going after someone like Gregory and they all knew it.

By the time Gregory's stomach started to growl, the boys had lost interest and moved on. Still, he waited a little longer before climbing back down. There was no one in front of the fence. He watched the dragon trot in a large circle around the pole, before lifting up and flying only a few feet off the ground. The two made eye contact and the dragon settled back down on the ground.

"Come here," Gregory called. The dragon stayed still. "You could have at least come to help you know. I helped you yesterday."

That night at dinner he ate in silence, glancing over to his father every couple of minutes.

"Father, how did you get hurt again?" There was a quick beat before his mother chimed in.

"You've heard this story. There was a battle and your father was very brave," his mother said.

"Yeah, but how?" Gregory asked again.

"Let's not talk about it," his father said. It was the first time he'd heard his father speak all week.

"I met some boys today and they said that your story isn't the truth," he said.

"Gregory, stop-" his mother started, but Gregory wasn't paying attention to her.

"They said you hurt your leg yourself."

"Gregory how dare-"

"Did you?" he asked. He stared at his father and his father stared back.

“You’ve got a lot to learn,” his father said before he got up and went back to the window. His mother banished him to his room for being so disrespectful to his father, but he didn’t feel much like eating anyway.

The next day, in order to not run into Richard, he waited until it was almost supper before he ran to his dragon. He didn’t know when it started to be his dragon in his head, but now that he began to think about it that way, it stuck. When he approached the fence his dragon looked up.

“Come here,” Gregory called. His dragon didn’t move. “Come on.”

The dragon huffed and curled up as if to take a nap. Gregory slowly raised himself up on top of the fence, then down onto the other side. His dragon raised its head before curling back to sleep.

Ever so slowly, he approached, just like the first day. His palms were out and shoulders relaxed. He tried to look as calm as possible so as not to spook his dragon. The wing looked perfectly fine from when it got tangled before. He didn’t see a scratch on it. Carefully, he reached out to touch it. He couldn’t even feel a bump as he stroked the wing.

“I think you need a name,” he said. “I think I’ll call you Thea. What do you think?”

The dragon only huffed in return. Gregory had never been happier. If he learned how to befriend a dragon now, then he was definitely going to make it to the Brigade. Everyone would see that he was a natural and he’d be the best there ever was. He sat down in the middle of the field and continued to pet Thea until the sun started to set. And by the time Gregory returned home it was dark, but the living room was bright with candles.

“Where have you been?” his mother asked as soon as he walked in the door.

“Just being with a friend,” Gregory said with a smile.

“You made a friend?” His mother smiled and kissed the top of his head as she handed him his bowl of soup.

Later that week when he got to the fence, he took an apple out of his bag and held it out. “Come on. Come to me.”

His dragon came and continued to come to him every day for the rest of the month.

“What did you do today?” his mother always asked when he got home.

And Gregory responded bright eyed and animated: “I learned Dragons love apples the best.” “Sandwiches make their stomach hurt.” “They love getting their heads scratched.” “They love naps.” With each fact he listed, his father grew more sullen.

One night, Gregory approached the fence wearing two trousers and two shirts for extra protection. Thea looked up from where she was drinking out of her water trough. She let out a small huff before trotting over to him without him even asking. She’d been doing that the past couple days and it made him so proud. He pulled a small morsel of fish out of his pocket and she ate it right up.

She hadn’t grown too much bigger, but the bottom of her snout came up to the top of a fully grown man. It had been harder and harder to find times where the two of them could be alone. In the morning, people on the way to work would stop by to watch her. In the afternoon, she was in Brigade training. At night Gregory was supposed to be home.

But he wanted to try to ride her. He could only imagine all the other kids’ faces when it turned out that he was the best dragon rider in history. All he needed was a head start practice. They were working on her letting people ride her in training, but it hadn’t been going well. Of course, no one except for her future rider, Charles Ruthers, was supposed to be an expert in how to properly handle her, but Gregory hoped that he was an exception. The two of them had

become fast friends. He spent most of his nights with her, often sleeping curled up on his side, warmed by her breath.

“Are you going to let me ride you tonight?” he asked. Gregory climbed over the fence and rubbed Thea’s neck. She leaned into him, not enough to make him stumble, but enough that he could feel the weight and power beneath his fingers. He walked to the center of the field, so they’d have the most amount of chain to work with and she obediently followed.

She was okay when he rested against her side, but she refused to let anyone onto her back. Slowly he put one hand on her, then another. Eyes trained on her reaction he gradually leaned more of his weight onto her. Thea turned her head, then shook her body quickly as if to expel flies. Gregory eased up and when she calmed, he tried again.

“Easy girl. That’s alright. I’m not going to hurt you.” This time he was able to put more weight onto her, but as soon as he threw his leg over, she reared up and dumped him back on the ground. And she continued to do so over and over again. No matter if he fell on her from a high tree branch, used the fence to help climb up, or if he got her to lie down so he could easy hop on, every time she threw him off.

He laid on his back and blinked up at the moon and stars above him. He was surprised. He thought that she would let him ride her. His vision became blocked by Thea as she stuck her face into his. She opened her mouth and slowly blew out. Gregory could smell smoke and the burnt meat she had for dinner.

“Stop it,” he said. He pushed her snout away from him and got off the ground. Gregory was annoyed. He couldn’t even get the dragon he spent every day with for the past month to let him climb on, let alone fly. He’d never be able to get into the Dragon Brigade. He brushed



passed Thea and climbed over the fence. Thea whined behind him, but Gregory was too annoyed to turn around now.

He didn't return to Thea for the next few days and his mother could tell he was sulking.

"What happened?" she asked as he sat at the kitchen and watched his mother cook.

"I'm never going to get into the Dragon Brigade." His mother stopped stirring.

"You don't need to join-"

"How am I going to make up for what Father did if I don't join and do better?" Gregory stared down his mother. Her eyes flicked onto to his father at the window, before honing in on Gregory.

"Your father didn't do anything that warrants making up for," she said in a sharp whisper. "He made a choice he thought was right."

"So he did do it. He did bring shame to the family," Gregory was leaning forward, practically standing.

"You are too young to understand," she snapped back "but he was not the one who was being shameful. Learn that. I won't have you bring it up again."

Gregory needed to get out of the house. He was restless and had too much energy in him. His walk took him all around the town, around the horse stables and the blacksmith and without really meaning to, his walk took him down a familiar little path off the road. He saw Richard and his friends down by the fence before he even saw Thea. They were leaning over the wooden railing calling to Thea, but she wasn't coming. That made him smile. Thea only liked him and no one else. One of the other boys hit Richard on the shoulder and pointed at Gregory.

"What are you doing back?" Richard asked. "I thought we told you, you couldn't come back here?"

“Anyone can come here. The town is raising her and I’m part of the town.” Gregory walked forward with anger and confidence.

“Her?” Richard asked. He stopped, looking back over his shoulder for a second before going back to Gregory. “How does a disgrace like you know it’s a her?”

“I guessed. And don’t call me that,” Gregory said. His hands curled up in fists.

“Why not. It’s in your blood.” Richard smirked over at his friends for a split second, and Gregory used that distraction to kick him in the stomach.

Richard stumbled back, arms holding his bruised stomach in shock. Gregory let out a battle cry scream and charged forward at Richard. One of Richard’s friends rushed Gregory from behind and the two crashed into the ground in a flurry of fists and teeth. Richard and the rest of the crew joined in soon after and Gregory was horribly outnumbered.

A large roar followed by intense heat came from behind the brawling boys. Thea was right next to the fence at the end of her chain. She reared back and breathed out another burst of fire. Richard and his friends quickly jumped up and dragged each other away, scampering back up the path.

“Thank you.” Gregory said, slowly standing up. He brushed off his clothes and checked himself over. It was over so fast he was only a little bruised. Thea lowered her head so Gregory could pet the top of it. She nudged her head next to his pocket. He reached in and pulled out a banana. She bumped him in the chest.

“Yes I’ll share, but if this makes you have gas like the sandwiches, then it’s your fault.” He climbed over the fence and threw his arms around her in a hug. She didn’t let him ride her, but he didn’t want to stay mad her with any longer. He had missed his friend.

“How are you doing today?” Gregory asked. His dragon blew a puff of hot air in his face and it made him laugh. “That good huh? Alright catch me.”

Gregory took off through the field with his dragon chasing behind him. Gregory just laughed and fell to the ground when he had been caught. Thea sat next to him and laid her big head over his stomach.

“Yeah, yeah you got me,” he said, absently petting his dragon’s head. “Hey guess what I heard in town today?”

The dragon just sighed. Light gray smoke rose from its mouth. Gregory smiled.

“I heard that Charles Ruthers, your rider in the Dragon Brigade, is coming tonight to see how you’re doing.”

Thea snuggled closer into his chest.

“I can’t wait to meet him. A real member of the Dragon Brigade. I can’t wait”.

Gregory waited until both of his parents went to sleep, then snuck out of his house, but before he made it down the street, a figure stepped out and blocked his path.

“This isn’t the way you normally go,” his father said.

“I’m going to the tavern to hear Charles,” Gregory said. The two stood in silence for a second. Gregory shifted his weight restlessly. He really wanted to go, but didn’t know if he could directly disobey his father if he told him to stay. His father nodded.

“Let’s go then,” he said. He was already walking with a slight limp down the street before Gregory fully caught up.

“Really? You’ll let me?” Gregory asked.

“It’s time you understood.”

The place was already packed, but the pair found an empty chair in the back. Gregory stood on it to get a better look while his father stood next to him, face cold.

Charles Ruthers was a man of about thirty. He had a full beard and a bright yellow hat. His clothes were a mismatch of different reds and even greens and purples. Gold buttons and cufflinks glittered in the candlelight and Gregory was at once sure that they were real.

“And I pulled the sword out of the body of his horse and then drove it in his own neck” Charles Ruthers was saying. The crowd cheered.

“Charles,” a woman in the crowd said. “Is it true that you don’t need any armor? That no one can hit you”.

He laughed a deep belly laugh.

“It is true. I happen to be one of the better flyers no matter the dragon I have. I can burn them with dragon fire then use my sword to chop off the heads of the corpses. So no I don’t need any armor.”

“What about your dragon?” Gregory asked.

“The dragons have armor on their scales,” Charles said dismissively. “They don’t need anymore.”

“Charles is it true that you once single handedly-“

“But what about their bellies?” Gregory asked. “They don’t have any scales on their bellies. What if they get hurt?”

“Then I will get a new dragon. Like the one this town has here,” Charles Ruthers said. “It’ll be going with me in the morning and your efforts in raising such a wonderful animal will be represented on the battlefield by next week.” He raised his arms, an empty glass in one hand

and a mostly empty one in the other. The tavern cheered again. It was a great honor for a town to say that they helped raise a dragon.

“But this one’s just a baby. It just hatched a few months ago. You can’t take it into a battle,” Gregory said.

His father put a hand on his back to steady him. Gregory hadn’t realized that he’d been shaking. The crowd started to murmur and look at Gregory instead of Charles. Charles paused and tilted his head slightly to the left. When he spoke all loud boasting was gone from his voice and instead he was cool and serious.

“Grown or not, dragons don’t last too long in a war. They’re like a battering ram that can take the enemy fire, but they’re fast and can also breathe fire. There’s no point in raising a dragon completely when it’s going to die either way.” Murmurs of agreement went through the crowd.

“And besides,” Charles continued, smile returning again. “I’ll send my next egg here as well, so this town can say that it has raised multiple dragons.” The crowd erupted into cheers. Gregory’s father grabbed him and carried him outside, so he couldn’t challenge Charles to a fight.

“I refused to continue,” his father said when they were outside. “I didn’t want to have another beautiful creature die because of me. But you can’t just quit the war, and as long as I could continue fighting, then they’d give me another dragon to kill and send me back out.”

“She can’t go yet,” Gregory said. His mind was spinning and it was hard for him to put two thoughts together. He didn’t know what to do. “She doesn’t let anyone ride her.”

“They’ll break her,” his father grabbed his hand and slowly pulled him down the street back to their home. “What do you call her?”

“Thea.”

“I’m sorry.” Gregory shook his head. He wrenched out of his father’s grasp and tore through the town. “Gregory.”

He ran through the market, down the road, to the top of the first hill and on to the flattened path. He knew what he had to do. He didn’t want his friend to leave. He had thought that he would have had a few more years with her before they would have to part, but that hardly mattered anymore.

As soon as he got to the fence Thea got up and trotted over. She bumped her head against his chest and blew a breath of hot air in his face.

“Yeah girl. I know hold on,” Gregory said as he pulled at the collar around her neck. His fingers fiddled with the latch. His dragon bumped at his chest again and started sniffing in his pockets.

“No. I didn’t bring anything. Stay still,” Gregory corralled Thea around so that he could better see the clasp. His fingers strained to pull at the metal, but then the latch turned and the collar dropped to the ground.

“Good. Go,” Gregory said, stepping back.

But Thea didn’t move. It just looked at him.

“Go,” Gregory said again. He ran through the field and the dragon chased him. “Yeah that’s it go.” But the dragon just ran behind him around the field like it always did.

“You’re not tied up anymore,” Gregory said. He was getting frustrated, but his dragon wouldn’t leave. Gregory climbed over the fence and started to walk away. The dragon followed and looked confused when it crossed its normal barrier and realized that it wasn’t still chained.

“See you’re free,” Gregory said. “Please go.”

The sun was starting to rise. In the distance, the sound of boots marching slowly got closer. And the dragon stayed beside him, puffing hot air into Gregory's face, just like he had been training her to do every day.

### Crossing

The day Emily woke up as a ghost, she tried to get back to Anthony, but her body was in the middle of a river and ghosts could not cross water. She could feel herself start to panic, but tried to calm herself. Everything would be okay as long as she got back to him. They'd figure something out.

Emily had first met Anthony in her Intro to Econ class at UVA. She had picked a spot in the back center of the lecture hall and was scrolling through Facebook when a boy in old sweatpants and a faded T-Shirt plopped down beside her.

"I miss anything?" he asked, brushing his hair out of his eyes. Then he smiled, and Emily's whole world came to a halt. She fell in love immediately.

They had spent the rest of class telling jokes about their professor's comb over, doodling on each other's papers, and playing rousing games of Tic-Tac-Toe. They had spent the next two weeks texting constantly, learning each other's coffee orders, and how their lips felt against one another. They had spent the next four years leaving good morning kisses on each other's foreheads, applying to jobs in the same town, and talking about having children in the future. When Emily graduated, she did it with a history major, a half completed Econ minor, and a fiancé.

But then the couple had gone to a graduation party.

"Let's go," Anthony finally said at about two o'clock in the morning. "I've got work at the coffee shop tomorrow."

"Come on, let's stay for a little longer," Emily pleaded. After all the stress from finals and job applications, the only thing she wanted to do was let her hair down and show off her



engagement ring. The other girls would all ooh and ahh over her finger, jealousy written in their eyes.

“I’ve got to get home,” Anthony said. He looked around the party, shifting his weight on the balls of his feet. He never did like confrontation, which usually meant that she got whatever she wanted, so the fact that he didn’t immediately agree to stay longer told Emily just how much he wanted to head back. That was fine. She’d be nice and let him go.

“Then you leave. I’ll find someone to drive me later,”

“What? Oh are you sure? I don’t know if-”

“Yes, I’m sure. I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself,” She leaned in closer and pressed a light kiss to the furrow that formed between his eyes. “I’ll try not to wake you when I get back.”

So, Anthony had agreed and made her promise to find someone to drive her home. And she did. Only, the man she found was also drunk and he drove her into a river. She had gotten out of the car, but her movements were clumsy and slow and the current was swift. Her body was carried downstream until it stopped, smooshed half under a large bolder siting in the river’s path.

Emily’s spirit appeared on top of the bolder, hovering in the air a few feet above it. She tried to cross to the shore, but as soon as she floated directly above the water, it was like moving through quicksand with a ball and chain wrapped around her feet. She couldn’t be dead though. That didn’t make any sense. She was still young and had her whole life ahead of her. A life. She couldn’t have a life if she was dead, so obviously there was some sort of mistake here.

At sunrise she clenched her fists, glared at the shore, and marched straight ahead. She felt the resistance and the weight pulling her back. But the bolder was only a few feet from the shore.

Surely, she could manage to cross a few feet. The further out she went, the harder each next step was. Exponentially harder. Darkness came, but Emily didn't need food or sleep so she hardly noticed. Time slipped past her so easily. When she got halfway she felt like she was dragging the Titanic behind her, hull and anchors grinding against the sea floor. She lost count of how many times the sun rose and set, reds and oranges splayed beautifully against the water, as she trudged on.

It only took a second for her to lose her concentration. A dog on a leash appeared on the shore, barking. Emily looked up at the sound and relaxed her grip on her spot above the water. In the blink of an eye she was back on the rock. She didn't need to blink anymore. She tried to remember to continue doing so anyway. The dog looked right at her and kept barking. A man in a hideous orange search and rescue jacket came running at the noise.

"Hey! Hey, I'm right here," Emily called to the man. He didn't say anything, didn't even look at her as his eyes scanned the water and shallow rocks. "Can you help me?"

"Frank. I think we've got something," the man said as he sloshed through the water with no difficulty at all. He approached her body. "Shame."

Emily jumped, screamed, and swatted at the men as they moved around her and took pictures of the scene, but they never once reacted. Only the dog made eye contact with her. It barked and whined while pacing up and down the bank, constantly staring. The aggression was off-putting. Animals usually loved her.

Soon it was time to move the body – not her body because *she* was still hovering around off to the side and no one could make her claim the water logged limp thing as belonging to her. She was glad when they brought out a gurney and a white tarp to cover the thing up.

In all the movement, she found something curious. She couldn't directly move over water, but when something else was between her and the water's surface, then she could move easier. It took some clever timing, the gurney, and distinctly not thinking about what was under the white tarp in order for her to get across.

Once on the mainland, Emily oriented herself so she could start moving towards her and Anthony's apartment. She followed the road. Sometimes she would start drifting higher, moving up until she could see over the tree tops. It made her stomach turn. Or she wished it made her stomach turn, but for some reason she didn't feel much of anything at all. She pushed the thought away and focused her energy onto making sure she stayed near the earth and walking like a normal person.

All the windows in the apartment were dark. She always kept a key on her, but her pockets were empty now. When she tried the doorknob, her hand floated through it. She didn't try again. She kept telling herself that it was all going to be okay. Sure, she wore the pants in the relationship, but Anthony was actually the smart one. She only pretended like she knew everything.

That's why they were so good together. She came up with a plan, then he came up with a better one, and then she tweaked it a little until it was a plan which benefitted the both of them. He'd figure something out. She was still there 'living' as a ghost, so it wasn't like she was completely dead. She could still live beside him, and go on adventures, and do things. Maybe, it wasn't in the form that she had planned, but this one still counted. She just needed Anthony's help.

He came back later that night, phone held against his shoulder and an empty box in his hands.

“I’ve put posters on almost every phone pole in the city and I’m joining the search crew tomorrow,” Anthony was saying. “Yeah, the forest first.”

“Anthony,” Emily called. “Anthony, I’m right here.” But he didn’t hear her.

“Yeah, I know but I haven’t ruled out that she just got lost. She could be wandering around just waiting for someone to find her.”

Emily tried to hug him, push the cups off the counter, flick the light on and off, but nothing worked.

“I’m here, Anthony. I’m right here. We can work this out.” She grabbed at his shoulders to shake him. She wanted so badly to believe that she could touch him. She felt resistance when she made the contact, phasing into him only slightly. She could almost touch people. He brought a hand up to brush the point of contact absently, but showed no more signs of recognizing her existence.

Later that night a policeman came to the door and asked if he would come to ID a body they’d found in the river. When Anthony came home he curled up on the couch, blankets wrapped around him and didn’t move. No amount of reassurances or hugs she gave did either of them any good.

On the day of the funeral, Emily watched as Anthony, red eyed and sleep deprived, put on his nicest suit – the same one he proposed to her in – and walk out the door. She hated the funeral. Her father talked about how she had passed much too young and how she still had so much life ahead of her. And yes, yes she did. She hated how they talked as if she didn’t still have the option of living her life. She wasn’t willing to give it up yet. She still had plenty of life left in her.

Oh, her mom though. Her mom talked about how she hoped that her daughter was happy, crossed over, and had moved on. She hoped that wherever Emily was now, she would look down on them and watch over them. Emily was currently in the front row trying to sit on the pew without sinking through it and seething. She was supposed to have moved on? What did that mean? Was she just supposed to forget about everything she was looking forward to? Sorry that you've spent your whole life in school preparing to go out in the world, but now you have to toss it aside and forget about it. Moving on? Emily was nowhere near moving on.

When the day came to move to the town of Hustly, Emily followed. Anthony's aunt and uncle lived in the town and he'd fallen in love with it a little more every time he visited. Emily had wanted to move into the city. She liked the bright lights and seeing people constantly moving down the streets, but Anthony had pouted and begged and sulked until she caved. Hustly was where they both found jobs after school.

As he moved into their, now his, new apartment Emily concentrated on her memories of Anthony. The way his hair stuck up in all directions when he woke up. The way his arms felt wrapped around her. The way his voice calmed all her nerves. The way he smelled like home. She concentrated all of her feelings, tried to trick herself into thinking that it would actually work this time. She touched his shoulder. Anthony flinched.

"What was that?" a friend asked as he helped unload the car.

"Probably just a bug or something," Anthony said. "Just put everything in the living room. I'll unpack once everything's inside."

The front door closed, but she stayed outside. It hurt. Not being able to touch or comfort her loved ones, and not being able to communicate with them. Not being able to do anything but

watch hurt. Emily looked around. All attempts at communication were ignored. Anthony was too distracted by his grief at the moment.

If she gave him a week or so, then she was sure he'd be more open to receiving a sign. All she had to do was wait and then he'd figure out how to help her continue living her life next to him. She couldn't help out with the rent by having a job, but she also wouldn't add to the grocery bill, or need to pay for seats at concerts, or covers at the bars. The two of them could make it work.

In the meantime, it wouldn't do either of them any good if she hung around him all the time, waiting for him to notice her. She had always wanted to visit New York. Anthony had never seen the point of going on vacation to look at "tall buildings and endless concrete," but if she was free for the next week anyway, then it wouldn't hurt anything.

Emily rode to New York on top of a bus and it was amazing. There were people everywhere. She wandered freely through the museums and sat in the best seats at all the musicals. Occasionally, a dog or cat or a young child would make eye contact with her, but it would only be for a moment before they'd find something else interesting to stare at.

The first time she saw the sunrise from the top of the empire state building, she decided she had to come back the next day. And the next. The sunrise from the top of Lady Liberty was also gorgeous. The Brooklyn Bridge was the best place to see the sunset. But something didn't feel right. All her emotions felt a little dimmed. The excitement and spark that she could see in other people wasn't in her anymore.

At night, she loved going to the bars. With the flashing lights, pounding bass, and bodies meshing on the dance floor, she could pretend that she was still one of them. Roaming the city was so much better than sitting in classrooms all day and the dull cubical job she'd had accepted

back in Hustly. When she got Anthony to notice her, she'd have to drag him up here one week. He'd groan about it, but he'd enjoy it. The culture, the nightlife, and the energy made her feel so much happier than she had been when she could breathe. Here in the city, she almost felt alive. Almost.

After New York, she got on a bus to take her back to Anthony, but when they went past Washington D.C. she decided that she could spare at least one more day. What kind of history major would she be if she passed up seeing everything in the Smithsonian? She'd always wanted to go, even as a little kid, but even that didn't satisfy her. Something was missing. There was something different between herself and the people who breathed, besides just having a body.

The train that went close to Hustly continued all the way down to Florida, and who didn't feel completely alive when they visit the Happiest Place on Earth?

When she finally made it back to Hustly, she had to admit that she'd been gone a little more than a week and she still hadn't managed to completely feel anything. She could experience emotions and identify that they were there, but the drive and the spirit that came from them was gone.

When Emily got back to the apartment, something didn't feel right. There were pictures in the picture frames and new art decorated the walls. The sofa wasn't the sandpaper colored one they'd picked out together at the secondhand shop, instead it was teal. Anthony, with a beard, came walking down the hall. It threw her off. She hated the scratchiness of facial hair and had previously made him shave it off after four days.

"Hey Anthony," Emily said. He started making coffee in the kitchen. He fiddled with the mug on the counter while he waited for the coffee to drip into the pot.

“Anth,” a woman’s voice called as she rounded the corner to the kitchen. She was in a too big t-shirt that went to her upper thighs. “Do you have to head off so soon?”

“Sorry, babe. It’s just until I get the promotion. Then we can start sleeping in again. I promise.” Emily reared back. No. Wait. This wasn’t right. Anthony was engaged to her. To Emily. She was still here and as long as she was here then she had a claim first. She only left to give him space and she stayed away because she wanted to try to feel alive.

She moved around the apartment looking for a calendar. Wait no that wasn’t right was it? According to the calendar four years had passed. Four years? She hadn’t realized. Okay, so maybe it’d been a little longer than she thought, but still, in only four years, Emily had been almost replaced. Sure she wanted him to move on eventually and be happy, but looking at his happy smiling face, she couldn’t help but feel like she wanted him to look a little less happy. If she was really the light of his life, then shouldn’t his life be a little less bright?

Emily didn’t know what to do. She’d now been out of his life longer than she’s been in it, but she still stayed. She hadn’t planned much past graduating, getting a job, and living with Anthony. Living. If she was going to feel alive again, then it would have to be with Anthony right? And who gave this women the right to live the life Emily had wanted?

The woman’s name was Sam, Emily learned, after Anthony got down on one knee and gave her a ring. A ring that, thanks to Anthony’s newest promotion, was bigger than hers had been. Emily’s own ring was at the bottom of the river.

She watched as this new Sam fit right into Emily’s role. Sure, the living had grieved and moved on, but the dead hadn’t. She hadn’t accepted that her time was done. She had promised that she would love Anthony forever, and she was sure he had promised the same right back to



her. Well, forever hadn't come yet, and Emily was still here whether they could see her or not. The lack of a heartbeat didn't mean that her life was over.

After the wedding the two moved into a large white house with a screened in front porch. The place was nicely decorated with a piano in the front room and three blankets on the back of the couch. When she was alive, she used to whisper future fantasies late at night in Anthony's ear, and this house matched exactly.

"It's beautiful," Sam said.

"I've always wanted a house like this," Anthony responded. He hadn't. He had wanted to live in the middle of nowhere, but Emily had refused and made him sleep on the sofa until he conceded that when they had a family they would live in the suburbs. The wind chimes near Emily clanged around in the windless air.

It took several more years until Anthony and Sam brought a baby girl through the front door of their house. Her name was Kate. Emily always wanted a child. A little girl of her own, whose hair she could braid and who would borrow Emily's high heels way too big for little feet.

She stayed away from the kid as much as she could. This girl should not exist. Emily should be standing there with a child of her own. And this little girl – half her Anthony's and half the other women's – should never have entered this world.

As the child grew, sometimes her eyes would flick to the corner where Emily was floating.

"Shouldn't she have imaginary friends her own age?" Sam asked one night after Kate described the "Lady in Heels" who hangs around the house.

“She’s probably saw something on TV or something,” Anthony responded. He looked older now with a full beard and lines starting to show on his forehead. The muscles on his arms were replaced with weight around his belly and a few gray hairs were coming in on his head.

Emily never hurt Kate, but she never talked to her either. Although the little girl could see her, she still couldn’t hear her. No one could hear her. She started to join Kate and her stuffed animals when the little girl had tea parties. It was here, when Kate placed an empty princess tea cup in front of her and their fingers brushed, that Emily realized that she could touch the little girl. It was as if since the girl believed that Emily was real then she was. It was here that Emily realized that when it was just the two of them, Emily could pretend that Kate was her own. It was here that Emily practiced bit by bit on how to get stronger and move real objects. Under the gaze of a girl who thought she was real, Emily became a better ghost.

But one night, when the small family was eating dinner Kate ask her parents how they met.

“At work,” her mother said “Dad worked in the office down the hall.”

“I’d have to walk past her cubicle to get to the water fountain,” Anthony chimed in. “I was shy at first, so I walked past her over and over until I thought she’d noticed me. Don’t think I’ve ever been so hydrated in my life.”

“And then did you ask her to marry you?” Kate asked.

“Not quite. But, I knew I wanted to soon after,” The couple smiled at each other over their meatloaf. “I thought I knew what it meant to be happy. I thought I knew what love was, but I was wrong. Your mother was the first woman I ever truly loved and if I could go back in time I wouldn’t change a thing.”

And that was it. Emily seethed. Doors on the cabinets rattled. The picture frames on the wall fell off and onto the floor.

“Earthquake?” Sam asked. Her voice pitched higher, a crease appeared between her eyebrows.

“Outside,” Anthony said, as he moved quickly to the front door. The door that when opened, slammed shut and locked itself. The woman tried to unlock it, pulling at the handle. The chandelier rocked and clanked against itself. The books fell off of their shelves. Sam was screaming and Emily screamed with her. But Kate was silent. She stared, eyes wide, at Emily who was floating over the dining table. The front door unlocked with a soft click.

The family left the house, throwing clothes into bags and tearing out the driveway. Emily followed. They went to a small vacation home on a river. The family hesitantly entered the home, but Emily left it alone. Her flash of destructive anger was gone and in its place was cold jealousy.

Why should they be allowed to live their happy life? Why was hers taken from her so quickly? Emily hadn’t been a bad person, just a normal student. All she wanted was a decent job, a mortgage she wasn’t buried under, and a family with a child. She didn’t need to be rich beyond belief, the parent of a Mensa child, or head of the PTA. She just wanted to be happy. What was so special about Anthony and his family that he was allowed to live and move on when she would forever be dead, forced to watch other people live out her dreams and goals. He could move on from his grief, but she would forever be stuck.

Emily watched the family settle into their vacation home. Watched them snuggle on the couch watching Disney movies. Watched the little girl pray every night for a puppy. Anthony smiled when he overheard her.

“It’d be good for Kate to get a dog. Round out the family,” he told his wife. Emily had been the one to convince him that they should eventually get a dog. He said they were too much work. They’d argued for an entire semester. She’d been relentless in dragging him to shelters until he had conceded they get one once they moved into their new house.

“That sounds like a great idea,” Sam said. Emily ground her teeth and if a lightbulb shattered in the closet, no one had to know.

Emily started to feel eyes on her. The little girl would watch her just as much as she watched the family. Her eyes tracked Emily from across the room or down the hall. Emily never got too close, not after her outburst, always staying on the other side of the room. The eyes of the little girl started to unnerve her. They were too cold and too judgmental. Her parents never liked it when she talked about “The Lady in Heels”, and Kate was a fast learner. She didn’t bring up that Emily had followed. But she did watch.

She hadn’t meant to scare Kate and it wouldn’t do to have her pretend daughter be frightened of her. Emily’s own parents thought she should move on days after the accident, Anthony had all but forgotten her, and to the rest of the world she long gone. But Kate was the one person left who knew she was here. The one person who sat with her like she was still alive. The one person she could touch. She had to get Kate’s forgiveness.

Before dinner, Kate wandered out of her house and down to the dock over the water, which ran swiftly underneath. She pulled rock after rock out of her pocket and tried to skip them. One by one they sank to the bottom.

Emily floated up next to Kate if only to bridge the gap between them. Kate’s head shot up and she looked Emily right in the eyes. She reared back at the proximity, but she was already sitting close to the edge and the girl fell off into the river below and disappeared below the

surface. Wait. That wasn't what she wanted to happen. Emily raced to the side of the dock looking for the child.

"Kate," she yelled. But no one could hear her. A head popped up above the water as Kate thrashed and spluttered. She disappeared a second later, being swept downstream. Emily rushed down the side of the bank after her, and she tried to grab her out of the water, but she could still hardly move over water and the current was too fast for her to keep up. For a second she looked back at the house. Should she go get help? She didn't want to lose sight of Kate. She had to get someone's attention. She grabbed hold of a support beam on the dock and focused all her energy into breaking it. Then she ran.

Kate's hands slapped against the top of the river, trying to stay up. Emily remembered the feeling of water surrounding her body. The way it felt to have it slush down her throat and up her nose. How she could see the surface, but never get there. The way it felt when the last of the air was pushed from her lungs. How it looked when the final air bubbles left her mouth and floated away while she stayed trapped down at the bottom.

There was a tree further down the river. Emily climbed on the low overhanging branches which dipped into the water and watched Kate's bobbing head get closer. As soon as she reached the tree Emily grabbed the back of Kate's shirt and held. The girl screamed, but as long as she could scream, she had air.

"Kate," Anthony yelled from up stream. "Kate, hold on."

Later Emily watched the family huddled on the side of the bank, daughter squished between mother and father. All three were soaking wet and no one, but Kate, had seen her. Even when Anthony climbed the branch and grabbed Kate from Emily's hands, he gave no signs of recognition. He told his wife she was stopped by a branch. Told Kate he was sorry he hadn't

fixed the dock in years. It must have collapsed under her. He had heard it break. Kate just hugged her mother, her real mother, and cried.

Emily was breathing hard until she realized that she didn't have to anymore. This was all an accident. Just like what happened to her was an accident. Honestly, she didn't want to bring any harm to Kate. It just wasn't fair. Why should the world continue to turn when she wasn't in it? What did she do so wrong and Anthony do so special to allow him to have a life and not her. All she wanted was to live. Okay, so maybe she couldn't do it while actually breathing with an actual body anymore, but she'd been willing to make some compromises.

She tried seeing all the sights she didn't get a chance to see, she tried living the outgoing free life she always wanted, and she tried pretending she had a daughter of her own she was raising, but nothing gave her that same warm rush of emotion that she got when she was alive.

Was this it? One stupid mistake to get in that car was all it took. Was there really nothing she could do to fix it? Was she really – and she hated thinking this word – was she really dead? She looked at the three sopping wet people in front of her, and she knew. This would never be her family.

Her hands were becoming see-through. It was painful to admit, but it was true. There was nothing left for her here. She couldn't live through other people. She couldn't live at all. It didn't matter that her time was short. It's the time she'd been given. She was dead. She was actually dead.

A warmth started to spread through her hands and up her arms. It moved into her chest and down to her belly, as the world around her slowly got brighter. The more Emily let herself accept the truth, the more she faded. The heat in her belly grew stronger. She felt a pull to fall

into the warmth and brightness surrounding her. With one final look at the family, she closed her eyes, accepted her fate. In between one moment and the next “The Lady in Heels” faded away.

## Children Living in the Walls

We step outside for the first time in a year and my head spins at how open the empty and open street is. The moon is as bright as the sun. I stop myself from shielding my eyes. Mickie walks ahead, trying to hide the limp in his gait. He never wants to show how living in the cramped spaces in the walls affects him

“Feels good to breathe fresh air again,” Mickie says. He takes a big breath and tries to stifle a cough. The air is a little too crisp and clean on our lungs after all the years of damp musk. There’s just so much air and so much space. I don’t know what to do with it all.

“Don’t strain yourself,” I say. “Come on, let’s do a lap and get back inside.”

“Oh come on Terrence. Let’s take it slow. We turn eighteen next year. This is our last time,” he says. I roll my eyes and the two of us meander down the street. It’s empty, of course. The last time we ran into another person on this outing was two years ago, and it was just another child who ran away before either of us could say anything, but I still can’t help looking all around and listening for another set of footsteps, just in case.

Ten years ago the Duchess – Thank Heaven for Her Beauty – who rules over our land, discovered she wouldn’t be able to have any children of her own and Degree 14 was passed. All children who weren’t hers were seen as a direct insult. Anyone under the age of eighteen was to be delivered to her castle at once where she would raise them as her own. Kids were disappearing from the streets so fast it was hard to tell if they were taken or being hidden. It was too dangerous to ask the neighbors. One of them could have turned me over to The Guard. But, as the community adjusted to accommodate for Decree 14, and many children were able to slip through the cracks. Or more accurately into the walls.



In between the wooden frames and old drywalls of the houses, there is a small gap. Abandoned underground tunnels and passages in the walls, were left over from the last war or in some cases hurriedly added on as an afterthought. They were crude and damp, but they worked. It is in these gaps, these often overlooked and never talked about spaces, that the children live. All of them. There are no children outside since Decree 14 was passed. No bouncing ponytails or feet dangling off the side of a chair. At least none that anyone can see. We must grow up in secret to be protected. It is only when a child turns eighteen, that they are deemed safe enough to walk outside in the sun.

Before that, the only time we are safe enough to go outside is on the Duchess' –Thank Heaven for Her Beauty – birthday, when it's night and the townspeople and The Guard are off at the feast and parades.

Mickie waddles up to an apple tree planted along the cobblestone road. We're fed regularly, but there's something special about looking at multiple apples and being able to choose which one you want. He reaches up and grabs an apple. It takes both hands for him to pull it off the branch.

"You want some?" he asks after taking a large bite. Juice drips down his chin, and he wipes it off with the back of his hand. He licks it off his fingers saving every last drop.

"Yeah, I'll take a bite." The flavor bursts over my tongue and I'm brought back to picnics and being able to sit on the swings and play tag in the park with Mickie. At the next road we come to, I start to turn left.

"Let's go right. I want to swing by the river," Mickie says.

"We're just going to get dirty all over again. What's the point?" I ask.

"You stink," he says, knocking my shoulder.

“I do not. I just used the wash cloth yesterday.” We turn right. Mickie smiles at me and laughs. It doesn’t sound like it used to. When we were younger and didn’t have to hide, he would laugh with his whole body, head thrown back and hands clapping. Now he just has these little huffs.

The first time I went into the walls it was a little over a week after Decree 14 was passed. My mom brought me, under cover of night, to Mickie’s house on the other side of town. My feet kept tripping over the cobblestones in the dark and my mom’s hand was like a vice grip on my wrist. A light green bruise formed there the next day. I was tired and scared. My friends were disappearing and there were talks of upcoming house raids. I had lost track of Mickie a few days prior. My mom knocked once on the back door and it opened immediately. Mickie’s mother, Ms. Locker, a plump woman in a light blue nightgown, opened the door.

“O’ heavenly sky. I thought you’d gotten caught,” she whispered. She grabbed my shirtfront and yanked me inside. My mom followed closely behind as I was dragged through the house.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to risk people seeing him, but then the Edisons lost all three of theirs and I hear they set up twenty-four hour Guards in the maternity ward and I thought maybe you’d still be willing...” my mother tapered off and looked down. Ms. Locker nodded.

“It’ll be tight, but they’ll fit.” We came to a stop in front of a closet.

“Where we going?” I asked.

“At the back of the closet is a mirror,” Ms. Locker whispered harshly. Her eyes darted around the room as if she thought someone was going to pop out of nowhere and arrest her. “Move the mirror carefully. I don’t want it breaking. You’ll find a hole in the back of a wall. Climb down it.”

“But I...I don’t,” I stuttered.

“Terrence sweetie,” my mother pleaded. “This is important.”

After a short pause, I nodded without really being sure as to what I was agreeing. It seemed to satisfy them though. My mother pulled me close and kissed the top of my head. When she pulled back, she let out a big sigh and Ms. Locker opened the closet door and pushed me inside.

“May the Duchess – Thank Heaven for Her Beauty – have mercy on your soul,” Ms. Locker said before shaking her head slightly and closing the door.

The closet was small. Coats and jackets were hung up as shoes littered the floor. I grabbed the full-sized mirror in the back and slid it to the side. There, inches above the floor right in the center of the wall, was a hole just large enough for me to crawl through. On the other side was a small hallway barely large enough for me to walk straight without having to turn sideways. The ceiling seemed to extend past the second floor and it went all the way to the roof. A ladder stuck out of another hole in the ground and I swung my leg around to climb down into the hidden cellar.

The metal ladder clinked with each rung I moved down and my fingers were stiff from the cold. The damp air tickled my lungs. I could hear water dripping steadily nearby and the floorboards groaned from my mother and Ms. Locker walking around above us. Sitting on the ground holding a single candle, was Mickie.

“Terr,” he said smiling. “I thought I was going to have to live down here alone.”

Mickie counted down the days until our year walk. For the one day we could be outside, could see the stars, to be able to stretch and not touch anything. Every year he’d reach his arms

out wide in the middle of the deserted street and spin in a slow circle. I hated it. I hated the extra risk and the fear that would coil in my belly. I didn't want to find out what really happened if I was caught.

No one really knew what happened to the kids the Duchess – Thank Heaven for Her Beauty – raised. Mickie and I would debate about it all day or ask his mother when she dropped us our food for the day. I wondered if she wasn't just killing them and pretending to raise them. Mickie and his mother thought that they were alive, but since so many were taken, they were probably neglected.

When we were thirteen, during our year walk we ran into a group of three kids who were living in the butcher's old broken freezer in the back of his store. Their skin was cracked and dry and they winced slightly when they moved. They fantasized about the jewels and soft fabrics that must be handed out to all the children upon arrival. They talked about having space to run, being allowed to make noise and laugh, and being able to learn from teachers again and not from scavenged old school books. Those three were debating letting themselves get caught that night.

No child who was ever taken from our town has ever returned. Ms. Locker mentioned once that a few young adults had moved into town, saying that they had grown up in the palace.

"There was something wrong about them," Ms. Locker had said. "They smiled at everything and thanked everyone they passed, even if we were just standing there. They were too happy. It was unnerving."

"Come on Terr. Just try it," Mickie says from where he's playing in the river, still dressed in his shirt and pants. He left his jacket on the bank at least. His hair is plastered to his face and water droplets drip down his nose. His skin is so pale it almost shines in the moonlight.

“Mickie come on. Your mom is expecting us back soon. We’re going to be late,” I call from the shadows.

“We’re late every year. If we show up on time, she’ll be worried.” Mickie laughs as he shakes his head and water flies off his hair.

“We’ll get caught. Hurry up.”

“Terr., this is our last secret night out. We gotta enjoy it. Besides, this is the one time we can actually breathe. I’m dying in the cellar.”

“We’ll breathe enough when we’re eighteen and not at risk for being arrested. You’ll live until then.” Mickie rolls his eyes, climbs out of the river and back onto the road without responding.

He just smiles and twirls around in the middle of the empty street. He holds out his hand and cocks his head to the side. An offering. I slowly come out of the shadows and take it. Together we meander down the road.

“Wanna go visit the old playground real quick before we go?” He tugs lightly at my hand.

“You’re not going to give up on this are you?” I ask then sigh.

“Never,” Mickie says through a smirk.

“And you can’t just wait a few months until you’re eighteen?”

“Nope,” Mickie lips pop on the P. His face is full blown smug.

I lower my head in defeat and Mickie pulls me along behind him. It’s late. Later than we’re normally out. I shiver slightly, but Mickie still feels it.

“You all right there?”

“Just cold.” Before I can react, a jacket collides with my face. “Gee. Thanks for that Mickie.”

“It’s what I’m here for.”

I reach to chuck the jacket back at him, but Mickie whirls me around and pushes me against a storefront window. He clamps his hand over my mouth and we stand still. There, coming around the corner, is the sound of clapping boots against the cobblestone. A small jingle accompanies the footsteps slowly coming closer. A Guard. Mickie grabs my shoulders and his determined gaze pierces my eyes.

“I’ll distract him. You run straight home.”

“No. Not happening.” I say. Mickie shakes my shoulders. His eyes never leave mine. He doesn’t even blink.

“Don’t you ‘No’ me. Run straight there. I know a longer way. He can’t follow both of us.” It’s a horrible plan. He might have known this area better when we could walk around in it, but that was almost ten years ago. I want to argue, but the footsteps are so close to the edge of the street. I can see the shadow of a figure on the ground growing larger.

“Okay,” I cave. “I’ll see you back there.” I take off running with Mickie’s jacket still clutched tightly in my hand.

It feels awkward to run. We try to get our exercise in the cellar, but it usually boils down to walking in large circles and doing pushups. Sprinting back and forth could cause too much noise and it’s too easy to trip in the dark.

My legs feel tight and heavy, like they’re filled with lead. With each step, tingling pinpricks shoot up my thighs. I try to run on the grass or through gardens to muffle the noise. I don’t hear anyone behind me. I reach Mickie’s house and burst through the back door.

“You’re late again,” Ms. Locker says. She eyes the jacket in my hand and looks behind me. “Where’s Mickie?”

I don’t know what to tell her. Do I tell her he’s coming? Do I tell her I left him behind? He’s the one who told me to run. It wasn’t like I forced him to sacrifice himself or anything. My breath starts coming in fast. I don’t like this clean air. The cool dampness in the basement feels more like home and I want to go back to it.

“Where is he?” she asks again. At once, she’s out of her seat and moving to the back door to leave.

“No, stop. There’s a Guard.” When children are caught, at least, they are supposed to live. If an adult gets arrested for actively harboring a child, then that’s treason and punishable by death. “He’s taking the longer way home.”

“And you let him?” She whirls around toward me, advancing. She’s skinny now, having to split off her food with two boys without drawing too much attention. I retreat backwards.

“He’ll come back,” I say, but she doesn’t look convinced. My hands start to shake. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know what to do. I panicked.”

Ms. Locker pauses and forces herself to take a few deep breathes.

“I’m going after him,” she says. She grabs her boots and puts them on. “I can’t believe he’d risk everything like that.”

I think back over the night. Mickie’s always so happy to be free and drags his feet, coming up with a million excuses before having to return. What if he didn’t want to return? He said living in the cellar was killing him. What if he gave up and let himself be caught like those other three kids wanted to all those years ago? Would he really just leave?

I don't want to live in a cellar any more than he does. I'd rather be home with my parents and be able lean my head out a window or grow a garden or climb a tree. I don't want to live in hiding, but if I had to I'd want to be with Mickie. We've been best friends since we were born and we've lived on top of one another for the last ten years. I feel like I'm going to be sick. I don't want to continue to go through this if it means I'd have to be alone.

"I'll go with you," I say. Ms. Locker looks up.

"No. You'll stay here. No sense in losing both of you." She walks out the back door. I rush outside after her, when something down the street catches my eye. Mickie limps heavily on his way down the road towards us. Ms. Locker shoots forward to her son. She gives him a quick hug before dragging him inside. I lock the door behind us.

"What happened?" I ask. My eyes rake over him for any cuts and bruises.

"I squeezed through a couple fences to get away, but I took a turn too sharp and twisted my ankle," Mickie says.

"I'll get some ice, but then I want both of you to go straight to the cellar." Ms. Locker says. She hugs Mickie tight, then holds his face in her hands. After a second, she turns to me. "You'll have to help him down the ladder."

I nod.

"Hey, Terr. You okay?" Mickie asks. He's stretched out on the sofa with his leg propped up on one end. His hair is still slightly damp from the river. "I didn't mean to put us in danger like that."

I sit down on the floor next to him and he leans his arm on my shoulder. I really can't imagine would it would have been like to live without him. The pipes drip constantly and any



movement on the ground floor immediately wakes us up, but at least I have someone to talk to. Mickie's a few months older than I am.

"Hey Mickie?" I ask. "I know you can't wait to be free, but will you come visit me down there before I turn eighteen right?"

Mickie sits up, and I help steady him so he doesn't bother his ankle.

"Of course. You didn't think that I would just leave you outright?" He flashes me a smile. "We're in this together."

Yeah. We'll survive through this. I don't know what we're doing once we're able to walk around under the sun again, but whatever it is we'll get do it together. And for the first time tonight, I feel like I can breathe.

### The Question

Mia's palms were clammy as she ran her thumb over the small felt ring box in her pocket. Her mom had repeatedly warned her that Ethan would get scared off if she asked first, and her dad was even more helpful in suggesting that if she waited a little longer Ethan would surely propose himself. But her parents were old and wrong. The generational gap between them and her was like a canyon – deep, wide, and insurmountable. Women could do anything nowadays. Especially recently graduated, beautiful, professional women, like herself.

Mia studied her reflection in the hallway mirror of her apartment, and ran her fingers through her hair. It was smooth, long, blonde, and styled perfectly to bring out the best aspects of her face. The length emphasized her high cheekbones, and the color was carefully chosen, out of seemingly hundreds of color swatches, to compliment her light tan. If anyone on this Earth was to be considered beautiful, it was going to be her.

So, who cared if her mom thought that a woman proposing went against status quo? Not her, that's for sure. Besides, Ethan wouldn't do it himself. He was a follower through and through, only making a move once he saw someone else already had. When she broached the topic of marriage to give him a hint and spur him on, he said "Well, I've always thought I'd get married one day." He used those exact words. She's written it down as soon as she got home, so she wouldn't forget.

She had been so excited for the next couple of days after, bouncing on her toes and always checking behind her in case he was going to pop out and surprise her. Her excitement faded, however, as time passed and nothing happened. Obviously, her hint hadn't been received. If she was perfectly honest, that hurt. She had a schedule with a perfectly laid out life plan, and the only way that she could stay on track was if she married Ethan right now.

There was a knock at the door. She looked at the clock and smiled. It was so Ethan to show up right on the border of being late. Mia glided down the hall, hips swinging with practiced ease, to answer it. Ethan stood in the doorway. He had on a pale blue shirt that brought out his eyes and his hair was curled into endless ringlets. He looked so handsome and she already knew she was beautiful. Together, they would have the most gorgeous children.

“Are you ready to go?” Ethan asked. His voice flowed like a dark chocolate river over her.

“I’m all set,” she said and the two of them walked down the steps to the quiet street. It was eight o’clock on a Sunday evening. A little too late for most people in their town to be walking around outside, but the privacy was perfect for her plan.

“Then your chariot awaits, my lady.” Ethan laughed and Mia swooned. He called her ‘my lady.’ That’s only a few steps removed from saying ‘my darling’, ‘my queen’, and ‘my wife.’ She climbed into the passenger seat.

“Thank you,” she said. Her voice still sounded calm. Thank God.

“So, where exactly is this surprise date of yours located?” he asked.

“The park. River side entrance.” Ethan nodded and drove, head bouncing slightly to the radio. Mia watched him and smiled. Everything was going according to her plan. It would all work out. This was the man she would settle down with, have children with, and grow old with.

For a while, she thought she wouldn’t settle down with anyone. The thought had kept her up at night, twisting and turning restlessly in bed. But her fears were all for nothing and Ethan was worth the wait. She couldn’t have picked a better person with whom to share her life. So she was ready. She was so, so ready. She and Ethan had been dating for three whole weeks and she was sure that was long enough.

Mia had planned the night out to a “T”. She’d spent hours picking out the best ring, silver with a gold wave running through the middle. She’d scouted out the park at all different times and days until she found the time where she knew they’d be alone. She even mapped out the perfect walking route, and knew she’d ask the question on the crest of the red bridge.

Of course he would marry her. She’d plotted out a detailed life plan to make sure she lived the best life possible. Her list said that she needed to get married at twenty-four, which was right after finishing college at twenty-two, and right before buying her first house at twenty-five. Her twenty-fifth birthday was next month. It was a close one. She felt a little behind.

As soon as Ethan parked, Mia guided him to the correct path - the left one that went by the gentle flowing river. The moon was full and bright against the night sky, and with only a few wispy clouds in the distance, the stars shone down on them as they walked. The air was cool and fresh. Beneath them, the ground crunched slightly with each step. She made sure to pick up her feet so she didn’t scuff the top of her shoes against the pebbles. She would not start off her engagement with dirty shoes.

The lights along the path bathed everything in a slightly yellow tint. Mia rubbed her left thumb in circles over the velvety box in her jacket pocket. The box felt heavy against her fingertips, but was second only to the weight of lead in her stomach. Even though she had everything planned, she was still allowed to be nervous. She was about to change her whole life forever. Ethan looked up at the sky, smiling.

“I’m glad you suggested a walk. It’s beautiful out tonight,” he said. He turned to her, his bangs flowing into his eyes. He pushed the brown mop back from his face, but it flopped back a second later, like it was magnetized to his forehead. At least her hair was straight for their future children’s sake. Ethan’s curls were impossible to control.

She pictured the bridge in her mind. This would be their spot. They could go to the top of the bridge every year on their anniversary. She'd been looking for the best place to propose, ever since she graduated college, as part of her plan for a perfect proposal. Planning was good.

When she was in elementary school, Mrs. Hallzer said that everyone only had one life and that they needed to live it to its greatest potential. Her homework assignment was to write down her goals in life and to aim to complete them. It was all theoretical and up in the air of course. Mia wasn't stupid. She knew that she wasn't supposed to map out her whole life right then. She was still only a foolish child who thought she would grow up to be a princess ballerina.

She learned quickly that dreams meant nothing if they were impossible to begin with. But lists showed an obvious progression - a way to see how to work your way up the ladder rung by rung. So while she didn't make her final list right then, the idea was there. The seed was planted in her mind. She started making lists of everything she wanted to do in elementary, then middle school. The list she made in high school was more complicated, involving clubs and after school activities that would look the most appealing to a college. She found she liked lists and plans. They made life meaningful.

Ethan squeezed her hand and pulled her on a trail that went closer to the creek. The water rippled across the rocks. It wasn't very deep. Probably only went up to her knees at the deepest, but the night reflected off the top, making it look bottomless. Her heart started to beat a little faster.

"You know, right now it feels like we are the only two people on earth," Mia said. In the distance, the bridge was coming into view. The worn red of the railings stood out in the glow of

the lights placed along it. Her hand over the box felt sweaty and she wiped it off on her pants, before squeezing the box again.

“Hey look at that,” Ethan said. A small bench sat a few feet off the path facing the water. “Come on. Why don’t we sit there and talk. I could look at this place for hours.”

The park wasn’t too large. Mia could see the top of the old courthouse and the new Marriott Hotel peek out above the trees, but the park always did seem to block out the rest of the world. The river muffled the sound of passing cars and the flowers covered the smell of the paper mill a few miles up the road.

Ethan started to walk over to the bench. He tugged slightly at her hand for her to follow, but she didn’t go with him.

“What about the bridge?” Mia asked. The proposal would be the most romantic right on top of the bridge, with the water running below, the open sky above them, and the sounds of crickets drowning out the rest of the world.

“But that’ll loop back to the parking lot. We can walk over it on the way out. Don’t you want to relax a little before we leave? Draw out this date a little longer?” Ethan cocked his head to the side. “Is something wrong?”

“No. Of course not”.

Stopping like this was a good thing. Ethan was spontaneous where she was meticulous. This was why they’d fit together. Opposites attracted, and his not completely following her plan only reminded her of it. They’d help each other grow, and it only proved he was the right choice. But even as she told herself that everything would be fine, her knees slightly shook and she felt flush despite the cool air. She didn’t want to wait. With each second that passed, the bridge seemed to be taunting her. It loomed before her, refusing to get closer on its own.

“Hey, breathe. We can go the bridge and come back if you want,” Ethan said. He was studying her. His eyes flicked back and forth across her face, before he squeezed her right hand gently. Her left one clutched the box in response. “Ok?”

“Yeah, ok.” She took a big breath to steady herself as they continued their walk.

She wanted to wipe off her sweaty palms again, but Ethan was staring at her. He’d know something was up if she started acting nervous. The wood of the bridge was rustic, but sturdy. There were a few gaps between the planks, but Mia had worn her flats in case her heels got stuck. With each step, the clunk of wood echoed around them. Slowly, they made their way up until they were standing on the highest point.

When she went to college, everyone started asking her what she was going to do after she graduated with her degree in management. Stay in the area or move away? Would she get a job or go to grad school? Find something in her major or settle for any job that paid her money and included health and dental insurance. There were too many options. How would she know which one was the best? So she figured she was now old enough to make her final list, which would last her the rest of her life. She sat down wrote everything she eventually wanted to do. Get a dog, tour Europe, and learn sign language. On Facebook she could see that some high school friends were already touring kindergartens with their kids and her college roommate got engaged the winter before graduation.

She expanded her list to her personal life and put it all on an Excel spreadsheet. She figured out how old she wanted to be when her kids turned eighteen, and worked backwards from there. If she was fifty when her last of three kids graduated then she should be twenty-six when she has her first one. Which means twenty-five when she gets pregnant, and twenty-four

when she gets married. Lots of people had guidelines written like that, and what was the point of writing it all down if you didn't follow it?

"Wow," Ethan said as he turned to face the slow oncoming water. He walked to the railing and peered over.

Mia stood a few steps behind him and slowly got down on one knee. The moon was full, and the sky was clear and bright. She was sure she would hear the crickets chirping if the blood rushing through her ears would quiet down. No matter. Everything else was exactly according to plan. She pulled out the box, but her palms were still sweaty. Before she could react, the box slipped through her fingers and landed with a plunk on the wood, before it tilted and slipped through the gaps in the planks. There was a distinct splash when it hit the water.

"What was that?" Ethan asked, turning back around. "Why are you on the ground?"

"I...uh...I mean I," Mia stumbled. "I just dropped...hold on. I'll be right back. Stay there." Mia jumped up and ran off the bridge to the bank of the creek.

"Mia? What are you doing?"

"I said stay there." This was fine. Perfectly fine. It was just a little side step in her perfect plan, but that didn't mean that her plan had gone off the rails. The outcome would still be the same. Besides, hadn't she just been telling herself that she needed to be more spontaneous like Ethan was? Now this proposal had a little bit of both of them in it. She could see them laughing about it later as they sat in front of the fireplace, drank champagne, retold the story to their friends. Her teeth ground together. It was fine.

Mia took her shoes off and stepped in the creek. The water was cold against her feet. The rocks a little sharp, but most of them had been smoothed out over time. She could do this. She



looked around. Would the box have floated down with the current or sunk right there? Probably sunk.

“Mia, what the hell? Cut that out,” Ethan called from the bridge. “That water’s got to be cold.”

The night was making the water dark and impossible to see through, and the little light that did shine on the water was blocked out by the bridge. She waded carefully to the deepest point. It was only up to her thighs. Not bad. It was ok. Everything was ok.

“I just dropped something. Don’t worry.” She called back. She kicked her feet carefully, feeling if she could hit anything that felt like a box. Nothing.

“Have you lost your mind? Is it really that important?” Ethan asked. He looked unsure from on top of the bridge. He head scanned the water below him, before he looked back to her.

“Yes,” Mia said. She went completely under the bridge, her arms outstretched to keep her balance. Her foot nudged something small and hard. She reached down and pulled up a good sized rock. She groaned and tossed the rock over her shoulder.

“Careful,” Ethan called out behind her. Mia whipped her head around. Ethan was standing a few feet back by the bank. His pants were rolled up as far as they could go, but the bottoms were still wet. His shoes and socks were resting next to hers on the shore. “Almost hit me.”

“I told you to stay up there. What are you doing?”

“I figured you were either nuts or dropped something incredibly important,” Ethan said. He looked around as if making sure that no one could see them. “So what are we looking for?”

“A box.”

“A box?” Ethan waited, but Mia didn’t say anything more. It could still be a surprise. This could still work. Ethan sighed. “Alright if we go slowly we should be able to find it.”

“Yeah. Ok. Thanks.” Mia reached down and tried to feel the bottom with her hands as well.

“Hey Mia. Deep breaths. It’s going to be fine.” He tilted his head slightly to the side and gave her a small smile.

Slowly they made their way back and forth across the creek, canvassing below the bridge. Would the ring have fallen out? No. The box was closed. She could still ask him right? Her foot slid over a rock covered in moss and she shuttered at the sliminess before regaining her balance. Maybe she should just put the box back in her pocket and try again some other time. She could already hear her mom tell her that this is why she should have left it up to Ethan.

“Hey Mia. Is this it?” Ethan asked. In his hands was the little black box. It was soaking wet, but her box all the same.

“Yeah. That’s it.” Ethan nodded and then handed it back to her with a smile.

“Why were you carrying this around? It’s funny cause it kinda looks like-” He looked up at the bridge then froze. His eyes went back and forth from the top of the bridge to Mia’s face to the box in her hands. “What’s in the box?”

“Nothing. It’s nothing.” She’d ask later when it could be a better happier memory – when she’d get it right. She had a whole speech planned. It took her four days to write it, but now she couldn’t remember a single word. Ethan took a step back, feet sloshing in the water. She took a deep breath and remembered her plan. She was already running short on time as it was, and as long as they got married what did it matter if the proposal went a little askew? She turned the box to him and opened it. “Will you marry me?”

“No.” He shuffled as if he wanted to get as far away as possible. Away from her.

“What?”

“I’m not going to marry you,” Ethan said. He looked around, eyed darting everywhere but her face. Mia didn’t understand.

“What do you mean you’re not going to marry me?” Mia asked. She walked closer to him, ring still held in front of her as she pushed it against his chest. Maybe if he saw how much effort that had gone into picking the perfect wedding band, he’d change his mind. He’d realize how much he needed to be with her. Just like she needed to be with him, because they were a team, a couple, together until death do them part.

“We’ve only been dating three weeks. Why are you acting like this?” Ethan looked at her pleadingly. “I hardly know you. Don’t do this.”

“What about love at first sight? I already love you, so why do I have to wait? It’s you. I know it’s you,” Mia said. Of course they knew each other. She knew his coffee order – a tall flat white with whole milk. He liked hardcover books over electronic, rom-coms over horror films, and that he could sing along to every Disney song that came on Spotify. Her mind was whirling. They were supposed to be kissing right now. He would smile and she’d chase his lips as he pulled back. He’d chuckle softly and she’d be wrapped in his embrace as the birds chirped around her and the water rushed under them, or around them at this point.

Ethan’s hands hesitated above the black felt box, before he grabbed it and shut it with a snap. Mia jumped back at the sound.

“Don’t cause a scene,” he said in a hushed whisper. He looked around again, but the park was empty. She chose it for that reason exactly. A month ago, with her twenty-fifth birthday creeping closer, and the pit in her stomach growing larger, she started to doubt her carefully

constructed life plan. But without her life plan who was she? How would she know if she was living life correctly and to its fullest potential? So when Ethan came along at the perfect time and had asked her out one day when she was at her favorite coffee shop, she knew he was the one. Her plan didn't fail her. Here was her guy, right on time. And now he was trying to leave.

"I have a plan. I knew you would come when I was twenty-four and you did. I predicted you and I was right. We can have a perfect life together. I've already planned it all out." Mia reached into her pocket.

"What are you talking about? What plan? Oh don't tell me you wrote it all down." Ethan was slowly scooting away from the bridge and to the riverbank. Mia pulled out her phone.

"Not on paper. It's on my notebook app." She didn't say it was because it was harder to lose a phone than a piece of paper. She knew him well enough to know that he wouldn't like it. She could tell. They were connected like that.

"Listen Mia. I knew you were really organized and everything, and I figured it was probably OCD, and I was willing to work with that, but this is too much." His hands were in front of him as he slowly backed away. It looked as if he was trying to talk down a wild animal. Mia shook her head. She wasn't going to pounce or attack. She was being perfectly reasonable given his resistance.

"I'd be willing to get married early next year, if you wanted to wait a little. And I'm even willing to get pregnant before we finish buying the house, as long as we can move in before the baby comes."

But Ethan was walking away, sloshing out of the river, before she'd even finished her sentence.

“Ethan? Where are you going?” She called after him. She scrambled after him, grabbing her shoes in her hand as she passed them.

“I just wanted a nice relaxing date. A walk then maybe a movie afterward,” Ethan said. He refused to look at her even as she ran up beside him and swiveled in front to confront him. “And then you come out of nowhere talking about a proposal”.

“You said you wanted to get married,” she reminded him. “I know it. You said, and I quote ‘Well, I’ve always thought I’d get married one day.’ I wrote it down.” It had been on their fourth date and they were talking about where they wanted to go in life. Their hopes and dreams. He said that he had always wanted to swim in the Dead Sea. He said he wanted to go hiking with his dog. And when Mia brought up marriage he said –

“I said one day. One day I wanted to get married,” He finally met her eyes. His were blue. She had always preferred brown eyes, but Ethan couldn’t help his eye color so Mia wasn’t going to hold it against him. “I meant like bigger picture, sometime in my life I would want to instead of just dating forever. I didn’t mean right now.”

“I-I thought,” But Ethan was already walking away. Again. “Ethan.”

He reached the parking lot where his Hyundai Sonata was the only car there, sitting under a lone street light. Ethan sighed.

“You’re not getting it. I’m not going to marry you. We’re not on the same page. I doubt we’re even in the same book.” Ethan let out a small laugh. It didn’t sound like any of the other laughs he ever made. She immediately hated it. “We’re done. It’s a no.”

The cold wind blew, but she didn’t feel it. She’d already grown numb. He said No. Like completely no. Like not even ‘later in time give me a little bit to think about it. To consider.’ It was just a no. But she had a plan. She had a plan and it failed. She was twenty-four and turning

twenty-five next month, and now she wasn't even dating anybody. She'd fall behind. Maybe not have that last kid. But that was a whole child. A person she was giving up. What was the point of having a plan, of writing it down, if it was just going to get thrown aside like it meant nothing? Did her plans really mean nothing?

She looked up as Ethan got in the car and drove away. Mia stood in the middle of the parking lot alone and soaked and, for the first time since she was a child, she didn't have a plan.