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Creating characterization through the use of setting and counterpoint characterization

Caroline Taylor Hood

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, ksf134@mocs.utc.edu

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Creating Characterization Through the Use of Setting and Counterpoint Characterization

Caroline Taylor Hood

Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
English

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Sybil Baker
UC Foundation Professor of English
Thesis Director

Sarah Einstein
Assistant Professor of English
Department Examiner

Heather Palmer
Associate Professor of English
Department Examiner

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Creating Characterization Through the use of Setting and Counterpoint Characterization

Introduction

In Janet Burroway's craft book *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, she discusses the important role characters play in fiction. She says, "Your fiction can only be as successful as the characters who move it and move within it. Whether they are drawn from life or pure fantasy-and all fictional characters lie somewhere between the two-we must find them interesting, we must find them believable, and we must care what happens to them" (Burroway 44). Burroway is stating that characters are the bedrock of fiction. If a reader is not interested in the characters then the reader will not be invested in the story. Most importantly, Burroway states that the reader must care what happens to the characters. Authors can create this concern for their characters by doing a good job of building the characters and making them seem alive. The authors must give them flaws because as Burroway states "they must be believable" (44). If the authors are successful at creating believable characters then the reader will be interested in their fate. Because I value the role characters play in stories, I chose to study the way that characterization can be done successfully to add depth to the story. In the short story collections *Homesick for Another World* by Ottessa Moshfegh, *Her Body and Other Parties* by Carmen Maria Machado, and *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri, I will be looking at how counterpoint characterization in realist and fantastical settings allow the author to create more robust characters.

Counterpoint Characterization

In his craft book *Burning Down the House*, Charles Baxter discusses how counterpoint characterization can benefit stories. He states, "With counterpointed characterization, certain

kinds of people are pushed together, people who bring out a crucial response to each other” (Baxter 88). It is this crucial response that Baxter thinks drives the story. He believes that when this counterpointed characterization occurs something extraordinary is revealed about the characters. He writes, “It seems to be in the nature of plots to bring a truth or a desire up to the light, and it has often been the task of those who write fiction to expose elements that are kept secret in a personality, so that the mask over that personality (or any system) falls either temporarily or permanently” (Baxter 88). He thinks that it is this secret locked inside the character, hidden, that is revealed through the counterpointed characterization. Thus, by using counterpointed characterization, a fuller picture of a character can be presented to the reader.

For example, in the short story “A Temporary Matter,” Lahiri illustrates how counterpointed characterization can benefit the characterization in a story. In the short story, a man, Shukumar, and his wife, Shoba, learn that the city is going to have to turn off their electricity every night for one hour beginning at 8 p.m. The city is going to fix an electrical line that has been damaged in a snow storm. They decide to have dinner by candlelight and to play a game to pass the time. In this game, they tell each other secrets. Throughout the story, flashbacks occur, and the reader learns more about the characters and what has caused the tension between them. The reader learns that Shoba had a still-birth and that neither Shoba or Shukumar have been able to move past the death of their child. The end of the short story concludes with Shoba telling Shukumar she is going to move out.

There is no antagonist or protagonist in this short story, rather it is driven by the interactions between the couple who no longer know how to be in each other’s presence. A perfect example of this tension is when Shukumar decides to place his desk in the room that would have been their child’s. He says, “In January, when he stopped working at his carrel in the

library, he set up his desk there deliberately, partly because the room sooth him, and partly because it was a room Shoba avoided” (Lahiri 8). Shukumar is attempting to avoid Shoba by any means possible. When the characters finally begin talking, the plot is driven by the tension between the two characters attempting to interact. Also, the two characters have changed so much they no longer know each other and that is an additional source of tension. Shukumar’s thoughts at the beginning of the game show how difficult it is for this couple to interact. The narrator states, “He couldn’t think of anything, but Shoba was waiting for him to speak. She hadn’t appeared so determined in months. What was there left to say?” (Lahiri 13). Shukumar and Shoba have been avoiding each other for so long that now Shukumar doesn’t know what to say to Shoba. However, he does want to speak to her and start the game. The counterpointed characterization in the story reveals important traits of both characters. At the ending of the story, Shukumar tells Shoba the gender of her baby which she did not know before. Shoba weeps with Shukumar and there is a type of solidarity and togetherness which they had not experienced since the death of their child. This interaction between the two characters illustrates that Shoba still feels some kind of connection with Shukumar, but she is in too much pain to stay with him. As for Shukumar, this moment demonstrates that he too is just as wounded as Shoba. This revelation contradicts Shukumar’s earlier attempts to deny his pain. Even more, Shukumar kept the secret of the baby’s gender to himself which must have caused him extreme pain. However, he must have thought it would have hurt his wife to know the gender, so he suffered alone. Therefore, this friction between Shoba and Shukumar drives the plot and gives the reader additional insight into the characters and how they deal with pain.

Another story which demonstrates this counterpointed characterization is “An Honest Woman” by Moshfegh. This story is centered on an older man named Jeb and a young woman

who is never given a name. In the story, Jeb and the girl are neighbors. He attempts to get to know her and spies on her often. She is alone because her boyfriend has just left her. Jeb sets her up with his nephew for a date, but the nephew gets stuck at his apartment due to a storm, and it is just Jeb and the girl in Jeb's house. Jeb is cruel to the girl, but it appears to the reader that she might be going to engage in sexual relations with Jeb. However, she only teases him and returns home. Jeb later tells his son that she would be more trouble than joy to date. In the end of the story, they are both still neighbors, but her boyfriend comes back. (include more)

Though it appears that the girl in the story is not important because she is not given a name, it is her relationship with Jeb that drives the story. In the story, Jeb is either spying on her, thinking about her, talking about her, or interacting with her. At the beginning of the story, the first time that Jeb is talking to the girl, the narrator states, "Over the last few weeks, Jeb had watched the boy and the girl through the scrim of brown paper covering their den windows" (Moshfegh 134). This statement demonstrates that even before the boy was gone Jeb was interested in her. Once the boyfriend is gone, Jeb begins to manipulate her and that drives the plot. He sends his nephew over to give her mail that Jeb has been holding on to. Jeb says to his nephew, "She is pretty. Something special about her. A gal who might be worth suffering for, if you ask me" (Moshfegh 140). Jeb talks the girl up to his nephew, piquing his nephew's interest, so that his nephew will go over to her house and ask her out. However, the final interaction between the girl and Jeb gives the reader the most insight about Jeb. He and the girl are alone without the nephew, and he says awful things to her. But, at the same time, he also seems to be trying to seduce her. Finally, the girl jumps on top of him and says, "Is this what you were hoping for?" (Moshfegh 154). She quickly jumps off of him and goes back to her house. This interaction shows that the girl has a lot more agency than was previously suggested by the story.

In addition, she handles Jeb hitting on her and saying bad things about her by standing up to him and making him feel small. The after effects of their interaction tell the reader more about Jeb. He tells his nephew that she is, “sort of a dud if you ask me. A fish in the bucket, as they say. No fun for hunt” (Moshfegh 155). This shows the reader that Jeb has not learned any lessons from his last interaction with the girl. Rather, since he did not get his way, he has turned on the girl. Jeb’s thoughts at the end of the story expound on Jeb’s new attitude toward the girl. The narrator says, “She was a tramp, a tease, nobody worth his time, he told himself” (Moshfegh 156). His opinion of her has changed drastically since the beginning of the story and that shows the reader his poor character. He didn’t get his way. She didn’t fall all over him, and thus, she is everything bad under the sun. Therefore, though the girl is not given a name and thus could be considered unimportant, the relationship between the two characters still very much drives the plot while revealing the girl’s inner strength while showcasing Jeb’s ill-nature.

Fantastical Setting

In Michael Kardos’ craft book *Working with the Elements of Fiction*, the importance of setting is discussed, “The fundamental purpose of setting is to present a believable and vivid world for the reader to imagine. But settings can and should, do more than simply convey when and where a story takes place” (55). Kardos believes that it is the author’s job to create a world in which the reader can immerse themselves. He also believes that a story’s settings should, “contribute to the story’s mood, contribute to the story’s themes, contribute to characterization, present plot possibilities” (Kardos 55-56). In this statement, Kardos is arguing that a good author picks a setting that not only tells a reader where a story takes place but also adds to the story.

One important type of setting takes place in stories labeled magical realism. These stories take place in the current world but do not follow its rules . Magical creatures can exist in these

stories such as the werewolves in Karen Russell's "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves" or there can be other elements that are outside the norm. However, these fantastical settings allow for additional tools that the author can use to develop characters.

One story which illustrates this is a short story "Glam" by Machado. In this story, women are fading. When a woman fades, she becomes more and more translucent until she is finally a ghost-like creature. The main character works at a boutique store. She begins a relationship with Petra whose mother sews the dresses for the store, Glam. Petra shows the main character her mother's shop and tells Petra that her mother sews the faded women into the dresses. After this encounter, the main character begins to see the faded women everywhere. In the middle of the story, Petra begins to fade, and the main character begins to fade. The final scene of the story has the main character tearing into the dresses trying to free the women.

The fact that this short story is so fantastical allows Machado to do many interesting things to build the characters. For example, Machado showcases how the protagonist deals with the knowledge that the fading women are being sewn into the dress. When the protagonist is at work after she begins to see the woman, she is helping girls try on the dresses. However, all she can see are the women. She tries to leave and has a confrontation with Chris and Casey who are other workers. The narrator says, " 'Fuck you!' I run toward the entrance, a stapler's comforting weight deep in my palm. My arm is ready to sling it, if I have to. 'Get out. Go the fuck away'" (Machado 137). The main character's words and thoughts show the reader what she is feeling and deepen their understanding of the character. The main character is horrified about the girls. She cannot stand that the girls who are not faded are just trying on the dresses without a care in the world as if they didn't have women sewn into them. At the end of the short story, when the main character has begun to fade, she goes to the store when it is closed and loses it. The narrator

states, “ ‘Why aren’t you going? I scream. ‘Say something!’ They do not. I pull away the panel of a bodice” (Machado 147). The main character is desperate to save these woman. She is so desperate that she is committing a crime by destroying merchandise in the store. But, it could also be said that her actions express her desire to save herself from the fading.

This characterization of the main character could have been done without the setting, but it would not have had as great of an impact. By having the main character deal with physically seeing the girls who are faded sewn into dresses, the author drives home the insignificance the main character feels and the main character’s own mortality as she herself begins to fade. The main character’s desire for life and for women to mean something are clearly seen when she freaks out about the dresses and attempts to free the women. Overall, the setting does a great job in adding greatly to the characterization of the main character.

Through the course of my thesis my writing style changed dramatically as I learned how to achieve characterization through setting and counterpoint characterization. Before I began my thesis, I was writing stories with bland settings that did not add any additional depth to my stories. The settings in my previous stories gave the characters a place to exist but did not add any additional information about the characters. In addition, in my previous stories, I did not understand how to use the relationships between the characters to further develop their identity. In my short stories “Salvation,” “Scrub,” and “The Presence,” I employed both of the techniques mentioned above. I used different, specific settings to place the characters in situations which could provide vital insight about the characters to the reader. One example of a character from my short stories is Araya who is the protagonist of “Salvation.” In the dystopian society of “Salvation,” alcohol is illegal, and this particular setting highlights Araya’s daring and anxiety. It showcases her anxiety because she is so desperate to numb it with the salvation that she is

willing to risk going to jail. In another one of my short stories, "Scrub," I used the relationship between two college roommates Mia and Ava to demonstrate to the reader the level of depression and frustration that the main character Ava is feeling.

In the future, I would like to work more on using setting and counterpoint characterization to develop characters. I feel that I am just scratching the surface on the ways I could manipulate these two techniques. For example, I could have a character see a repeating image which the character could then internalize. This image could then suggest something about the inner state of mind of the character. In addition, when I am able to write more realistic dialogue, I can have conversations between characters where aspects of their identity are revealed in what they say and what they don't say. This technique would allow me to use the verbal component of the different characters' relationships to further develop their identity.

Conclusion

As Burroway discusses, characters are vital to stories and this characterization can occur through the use of setting or counterpointed characterization. Writers should keep in mind that no matter what technique they use, they should try to create characters that the reader is invested in. Writers can use counterpoint characterization and settings to create fuller characters. However, writers who enrich their stories using techniques such as image patterning or manipulating tension can also indirectly affect how developed a character is. Therefore, if a writer uses some of the techniques mentioned above it is most likely that their story will be a success.

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Original Fiction

Salvation

I swirled the salvation poured in my glass, the red sticky liquid flowing from side to side, the glaring fluorescent lights catching on the clear plastic cup. It was 3 am. My iPhone 30 in a blue white polka dotted case sat on my lap, the last text on the screen.

“Your uncle has been arrested.”

I sipped on the salvation, and told myself it was the bite of it that was causing my eyes to water. I grasped the drink. Salvation was really such an insignificant thing to cause all this trouble. What was it really? A drink, a liquid. I fisted the drink and flung it at the wall. It hit the wall and bounced off, the red liquid seeping into the white carpet, violent red against white.

A knock sounded on the door. I shuffled around the red part of the carpet and cracked the door open. Tiffany stood in front of me. Her eyes darted in rhythm with her shuffles. Shuffle right look right. Shuffle left look left.

“It’s 3?” I said.

She bit her lip, her shuffles increasing. “Do you have any?”

In my dorm room, sat an empty bottle of salvation, the hard hitting kind, so empty that the inside of the bottle had dried.

“No,” I said.

She gnawed on her lip. “You sure.”

I nodded.

She collapsed in on herself, her shoulders slumping. “Thanks.” She continued gnawing on her lip, walking away.

I sank into my bed, the text and the alarm giving me a headache.

My uncle and I had always been close. When I was younger, he would watch me while my mother worked as a nurse. We would go on an adventure to the park, and he would chase me around the bright red playhouse in the center of the playground, wood chips flying all around me, as my five year old feet attempted to outpace him. But, that was not the case anymore.

The next morning I pulled my hand through my hair, coming away with a slight grease imprint on my hand. I sidestepped the oozing red mess on the floor where a crust had begun to form. If I picked it would more red ooze out?

Tiffany trudged down the hallway ahead of me. Her uncombed dyed blonde hair stuck up slightly in the back. I touched the end of my own locks. I climbed into my red jeep behind the steering wheel, mud glinting in the sun. Tiffany crawled into the other front seat.

“You ready for class?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Are we ever ready?”

No, we are never ready. Never ready for things to change.

“Where’s Cara?” I asked.

She shrugged. Sometimes I wanted to take her shoulders and rip them off to keep her from shrugging. Force her to communicate.

“Probably, throwing up,” she said.

Silence engulfed the car as Tiffany seemed to shrug over and over as if caught on a loop.

“She finished the last of the bottles we had last night?” she said.

“Didn’t you have two bottles?” I asked.

“Yep.” She stared ahead

I pinched my nose, catching some of my hair on my finger.

“They didn’t make it any better, did they?” I asked.

Tiffany locked eyes with me. Her gaze was clearer than normal. “No, they didn’t.”

I started the car, welcoming the rough grunt of the car. I ran my hands over the steering wheel, the smooth plush fabric soft underneath my fingers. The air smelled like pumpkin spice and my own rank breath. I inhaled my own exhales over and over. Bile bit at the back of my throat, tight and hot.

“My uncle got arrested?” I said.

Tiffany cocked her head, her face softening. “Araya.”

My hands tightened on the steering wheel, the soft material cutting into my tanned hands. “I know that he’s guilty.”

She nodded and reached for the radio, turning on the latest pop song. Taylor Swift streamed through the radio. My mom had told me about when Taylor Swift was the queen bee of the pop world. Now, that was no longer true, but she did still sing on several popular artists songs every once and a while as a special guest. She couldn’t seem to let herself fade into anonymity. I parked in the English Building parking lot, sliding in between two pick-up trucks. I bit my tongue as I saw that one of the trucks had the Peace Party flag flying.

Tiffany caught my eye looking at it. “It’s ironic isn’t it.” She gave a cold laugh that seemed to be wrenched from her stomach. “Peace, but peace for who?”

I tugged on a lock of my hair on the right side of my head and smiled, blinking back tears.

The world used to be very different than it was today. Salvation, or alcohol as it used to be called, was used at all kinds of celebrations. Tanned bodies chugging beers as they chanted USA or for their own football team, Georgia or Alabama, their hands raised in the air was

common. In fact, encouraged. It helped people relax and forget about their worries. Men slumped back in their recliners, sipping away on grey tinged cans. But, then the Peace Party came to power. They ran on a platform of bringing prosperity to the United States and pulling us out of wars. They flew flags spotted with a decapitated snake, blood pouring out of its neck. But, as soon as they were elected things started to change. They claimed that salvation led to bad decisions and violence. That it was the cause for wars within our borders and made it illegal. Hard card stock bulletins were released, so many that they littered the streets, my feet stepping on them. TV stations broadcasted them, the flag waving in the background accompanied by the national anthem and the cawing of an eagle. Since then life had not been the same.

In the hallway on the first floor, Andrea trudged toward us. She had her hoodie pulled tight across her face, her light brown hair sticking out of the cap of the hoodie slightly.

“You on?” she asked.

I nodded. “Yep.”

At my right side, Tiffany shuffled from left to right. “Are you sure we should be doing this?”

I bit my lip to keep from laughing or snorting. She had been the one who had been by my apartment last night looking for salvation.

“Don’t you want it?” Andre asked, taking the words out of my mouth.

Tiffany sighed. “Of course, but.”

“And aren’t you the one who is always complaining when we run out?” I asked.

“Of course, but..” Tiffany said.

“We’ll be fine,” I said.

Tiffany locked gazes with me. I felt something in the pit of my stomach squirm. She couldn't see could she? She couldn't see it all? The need. The desperation. The sadness.

"Is your uncle, fine?" Her gaze continued to be locked on me, clear and strong.

Andre pushed Tiffany's shoulder. "You worry too much. We'll be fine. Think of the party we can have afterwards."

Tiffany shuffled side to side rapidly for several minutes. The clock in the hallway ticked away with her shuffles. Tick, shuffle, tick, shuffle. But, she must have made up her mind because her shuffles slowed, and she gave us a smile. "Yeah, we'll be fine."

I left the group to grab my notebook from my locker. I smoothed my hands over my knees as I grabbed my three ring binder with flowers flowing up and down the side and across the bottom of the front.

"Hide." I jumped as a voice called out from my right side.

Andre stood in front of me. Her eyes darted behind me and to my left side. "We've got to hide."

Bile rose up in my throat. I swallowed repeatedly. "You mean?"

She nodded. "They are checking everyone first period."

"You should be safe though," I said.

Her eyes continued to swing wildly. "No, half a bottle before school."

I bit back stream after stream of bile. What were we going to do? Andre stood in front of me, her eyes getting larger and larger, and her breathes getting shorter and shorter.

"The bathroom," I said.

Andre looked at me, her eyes not really seeing me.

"The bathroom," I said.

Her eyes continued to look at me but not see. I grasped her by the side of her hoodie and tugged, pulling her along beside me.

I pushed her into the stall on the far right side. "Get on the toilet."

I grimaced as I stepped onto the toilet, locking the door. The heavy smell of urine engulfed me.

"Are you on the toilet?" I asked.

Silence wrapped around the room. I breathed in small bursts to keep from tasting the urine too strongly on my tongue. How long could I stand the smell. My legs shook slightly as I bent so that my head was not visible over the stall.

A creaking sound announced that the door to the bathroom was opening. I stopped breathing, digging my nails into my side to try to keep my breathes from increasing.

The footsteps started at the far right end then a clip clip sound could be heard as they neared my stall. The brisk clip sounded as if it was a woman wearing heels, but the slight thud after each step suggested that the person could not walk that well in them. I took a slight breath, the taste of urine coating my tongue. I dug my nails deeper into my thigh. I could do this. I could do this.

The clip clip receded, and the door creaked again. I took a slightly deeper breath almost welcoming the smell of urine. I took breath after breath attempting to calm my heart. I stepped lightly off of the toilet and opened the door. I knocked on Andre's door, but she did not reply.

"Andre," I whispered.

The woman could still be nearby.

"Andre." I pushed on the door slightly, and it swung open.

“Come on.” I pulled Andre off of the toilet by her hoodie, the material soft but worn underneath my fingers. I pushed her to the wall which she slid down, her bottom resting on the tile, stained from dirt, makeup, and urine. Tears dotted Andre’s face.

“We’re okay?” I said.

Her chest heaved, and I found my own eyes watering.

“We’re okay.”

“Are we?” she asked, her voice heavy with mucus.

I walked over to her and grasped her small hand, the slight chill from it washing over my hand. “Yes, we are.”

Andre’s chest continued to heave and her breathes came out fast. Her hot breath touched my face, covering its entirety, and I could smell the salvation that she had mentioned earlier.

“Why do we do this?” she asked.

I squeezed her tiny hand as her breath’s began to slow. “Do what?”

“Drink? Risk everything,” she said.

I watched the light reflecting off the mirror, my pale face shimmering in its surface. The dark circles under my eyes seemed to accuse me. “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

Andre took a deep breath, her crying stopped. “I mean why do we drink when it comes with such a high consequence.”

The matted greasy hair and the dark circles sat on my face and screamed.

“Because,” I said.

Andre pulled her hoodie back over her head, casting her face back in shadow. “Because why though?”

My hair and eyes kept screaming until it was as if they were inside me, echoing in my brain, taking over all the corners.

“You know why I drink?” I said.

Andre sighed. “Yes, and you know why I drink.” She picked at her jeans covered in holes where they had begun to fray. “But, I wish I didn’t.”

I hadn’t always been a drinker, just like Andre hadn’t always been a drinker. We were good kids when we were younger, bringing in A after A in geometry and English. But, then life got hard, screaming matches between parents, tv show screening after tv show screening demonstrating the herds of animals dying, lions, spotted leopards, and koalas. The tension between the political parties worsened. Republicans threw all the dirt they could against the Democrats who responded in kind and the circle continued. School got harder, A’s becoming C’s. I began sleeping, eating, crying, thinking about dangerous things. Things like blades, nooses, and pills. The drink may have been illegal, but the world had gone to shit anyways.

I reached out my left hand for Andre’s other hand and pulled her off the ground. I rubbed my left hand on my jeans to get rid of the sticky coating which had spread from her hand. I bopped her shoulder. Her eyes were fixed on the floor, and the right side of her mouth slightly lifted.

I pulled my hand through my hair. This was such a bad idea. “Let’s get out of here?”

She lifted her head, her gaze becoming a little clearer. “You sure?”

I nodded as my stomach churned. “I’m sure.”

It was easier than it should have been to get back to the car, but after one of their sweeps the surveillance always let up a little bit. Their arrogance was our greatest asset.

Andre smiled as we pulled into the parking lot. Tacos always a priority, but after today a necessity. I opened the door for Andre tapping the top of her hoodie covered head. The corner of her mouth lifted a little more.

“Araya, Andre” a voice shouted from within the restaurant.

Cara was sitting at the corner booth in the back of the restaurant to the far right. She motioned for us to join her and since you had to seat yourself, we walked over to her an extra bounce in my step.

Cara’s bloodshot eyes and pale face looked over us as she sipped on a glass of water
“How are you guys?”

Andre tapped the table with her fingers. I grasped her left hand and squeezed.

“We had a raid this morning,” I said.

Cara winced. “Then I am glad that I was sick this morning.” She pushed her bowl of chips towards us. “They make everything better.”

I let loose a small laugh. “You are always trying to feed us.”

She bit into a medium sized chip covered in salsa. “What can I say? You guys are too skinny.”

Andre’s tapping increased. “Did you hear about her uncle?”

I took a deep breath, let it out, then took another deep breath. “He’ll be fine.”

“Oh, did he finally get caught?” Cara asked.

Andre’s fingers were tapping away. They seemed to be tapping with the beating of my heart.

“Yes,” I said.

“How’d he slip up?” Cara asked.

“He shouldn’t have been drinking in the first place?” Andre interrupted.

She tugged at her hoodie with her left hand which I had released, tapping with her right.

Cara laughed and it slid over my skin, like someone had taken sandpaper and dipped it in ice. “We all know you never quit drinking, Andre.” She swept her hand across the table. “None of us will.”

Andre sat up straighter. “Yes, I will.”

Cara rolled her eyes. “Please, I give you two hours, four hours at the max before you are drinking again. What do you think, Araya?”

Andre sat with her back ramrod straight. Her eyes finally clear and determined. Cara smiled haughtily, swirling the water in her hand, staring at it every couple seconds, as if she wished it were something else.

“I don’t know. Maybe you could do it,” I said.

Cara snorted.

“Be supportive,” I raised my voice, wincing as I noticed people staring at us.

Cara continued swirling the glass, munching on a taco in her delicate fingers. “I’m just trying to be realistic.” Her face softened. “Look, this is our lot in life. Why try to run from it.”

Andre continued to fix her eyes on Cara, her hoodie still in place, the bright lights of the restaurant being absorbed by the dark material.

“Why try? Why?” Andre cut off. “Araya who is that?”

I jerked my head to the right, bile climbing higher than ever in my throat. A man in the Peace Party Police uniform was walking toward us.

“What do we do?” Cara’s voice shook.

“We run.” I made sure I had all their eyes on me. “Listen, we run the fastest we ever have. Don’t let them catch you.”

I locked eyes with the man as he watched us all rise up, he looked, and I looked. I vaulted out of the booth and chaos erupted.

“You are under arrest,” his harsh mechanical voice rang out as I increase my speed. I nearly side swept four tables in my attempt to quickly get out of the building. Cara and Andre followed behind right on my heels. I could hear their breathes mingling with my own as we tried to taste freedom.

“We got this,” I said but more to myself. Their breathes were so loud there was no way they could hear me.

I grasped the side door the man’s steps becoming louder, thudding harder against the wooden floor. I tugged, but it did not give. I tugged again. Tears bit at my eyes, and I could hear my breathes loud and fierce in my ears. We squared up in front of the man, grasping each other’s hands, Andre had little tears leaking out of her eyes.

He held up a piece of paper with print so small we couldn’t read it. “You are all under arrest for illegal consumption of salvation. Please come with me quietly.”

His clean shaven face seemed to be blank of any emotion but a bubbling of something behind his eyes.

“What if we don’t come with you smoothly?” I asked.

The bubbling in his eyes became clearer as a sickly dark emotion, something different than anger, something crueler. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a taser. “We’ll I’ll just have to use this.”

I took a deep breath, swallowed the bile in my front, looked at my girls, and darted toward him. My ribs ached as he swiftly kicked them in the side, his police boots digging into the skin. He latched onto my right arm as I struggled, digging my nails into his arm. I seized as pain radiated through my body falling on the floor. I scraped my hands on the floor going down and blood smeared across the floor. There was a deep pressure on my back as he placed his boot on my back, digging it deeper and deeper.

“You could have come quietly. This is on you,” he said.

Another wave of pain swept through my body. I tried to keep my eyes open, as I was swallowed by pain. I couldn't see the other girls. All I could see was blood, smearing everywhere, even on my cheek. All I could taste was alcohol, sweet but sour on my breath.

“All you people. Can't help but drink,” he said.

I wanted to tell him it was never a choice. I wanted to tell him about the three cuts on my wrists and the bottle of pills I still kept in my side dresser at home, but I stared. I stared at the blood and alcohol and blood.

Scrub

Scrub! Scrape! Scrub! Scrape!

Ava hadn't always been purple. Before her 13th birthday, her skin was a tan color spotted with freckles. She would run with the other children, her skin glistening in the sun, sweat pouring down her exposed legs. She would swim, the swimsuit chafing against her skin, the water, crisp with the morning summer air running against her legs. But, not anymore.

In the kitchen, Mia, her college dorm roommate, flittered around, her long brown hair whipping back and forth. Step to the left, sway. Step to the right, sway. The bright lights Ava and Mia had installed in the apartment bounced off Mia's hair highlighting her routine. Ava ran her hand through her own hair feeling the thin spots.

Ava sat down on the sofa in the adjacent living room, her body sinking into the soft plush material that they had acquired at a garage sale. Mia had announced that they were all going to get lice from it, but Ava thought that the nice baby blue color was comforting. She understood that there wasn't many things Ava took comfort in.

Mia squealed at the creak from the couch and spun around. She gave a small laugh, it spilled out of her spinning throughout the room. "I thought that you had drowned."

Ava waved her hand. "You know I just like the water."

She narrowed her eyes at Ava. It felt like Mia was rummaging through Ava's insides, squeezing them.

Mia continued to stare at Ava as Mia placed a piece of pizza in front of her. Ava inhaled saliva as it poured throughout her mouth. She breathed in and the smell of pepperoni and bread

enveloped her. She bit into the slice chewing the cheesy, greasy mess, as strings of cheese trickled down her chin.

“You looking forward to class tomorrow?” Mia asked.

The slice of pizza on Mia’s plate was half the size of the piece that Ava had just eaten. Mia picked at it as she waited for Ava’s answer.

“As much as anyone can look forward to school,” she said.

“You want to grab lunch in the dining hall together?” she asked.

Ava peeled off a piece of pepperoni and rolled it in her fingers, the grease spreading over her first three fingers. “Sure.”

Ava placed one more peeled segment of pepperoni in her mouth and swallowed around the reflux which was climbing up her throat. She grabbed another slice of pizza, her fingers piercing the cheesy bread. She forced her hand to relax and pried her fingers out of the dough. Ava lifted the corners of both of the sides of her mouth barely, like the beat of a dark spotted mouth, circling a room enclosed in darkness.

Ava sat on the edge of her bed, running her hand over her arm again and again. The dark purple which had been noticeable in the shower now stood out starkly against her white comforter. The pink spots were like a spot of dirt, resting on her skin. But, this dirt would not scrub out. The twinkling Christmas lights which Ava had installed last July when she was missing Christmas reflected off a small piece of paper perching on top of her grey side desk. Ava ran her fingers over the smooth desk, catching her fingers on wood where it had not been sanded down completely.

65....65. It stared at her from on top of the side desk, a large red circle outlining it. The 65 pulsed in her head, over and over again, like a beat that she could not get away from. It

pounded through her head accompanied by a voice which sounded like her own but crueler, a rough undertone, like someone had taken her voice and shredded it with sandpaper. The voice whispered failure, failure, failure. Ava gingerly squished her head against her soft blue pillow covers dotted with Christmas light bulbs. She closed her eyes as the pounding and the voice continued, echoing off the corners of her skull.

There was a time when Ava liked school and was good at it. When she would bring back A after A, and laugh with her friends about the B's twirling around, her short skirt catching in the Autumn wind. But, the purple appeared and the A's became C and the B's became Fs. When she no longer twirled, but sat slouched over in the bathroom, her mouth tasting tears as she stared at an F in her geometry class. 45 not even half.

The next morning Ava awoke, pressing her head deeper into the pillow, curling and uncurling her toes to distract herself from the pain which radiated throughout her body, like she had run a marathon and a half.

“What time are you leaving this morning?” Mia’s voice asked from outside the door.

Ava pressed her forehead tighter into the pillow. She held her body still so as not to make a sound.

“Did you hear me? What time are you leaving this morning?” Mia’s voice came out slightly strained, like someone was squeezing her neck.

Ava continued lying very still, not even curling her toes as the pain increased. She bit her lip to keep from crying out.

The door creaked as Mia swung the door open. The pain combined with Mia’s hot stare, a curling iron slowly moving over her limbs.

“Get up,” she said.

Ava made a small groaning sound, like a mule when it doesn't want to work.

"Get up," Mia repeated.

Ava pulled one of the other pillows off the side of the bed and squeezed it over her left ear. Ava turned her head slightly so that she could take in Mia. Her hands were squeezing themselves over and over and her face was slightly flushed.

"Are you really going to do this?" Mia's face continued to flush red, like a tomato that had been left out too long in the sun.

Ava shrugged.

"For goodness sakes, Ava." Mia turned to the door. "Fine, do whatever. It's on you. I need to go to class." She swung the door closed, but it bounced back open. Mia flounced out the door, slamming it behind her as the glass at the top of the door rattled.

Ava stared at her right hand. Flex, unflex, flex. Purple, pain. She sat up, increasing the pressure on her lip, tasting blood, so that she would not cry out from the pain. She grabbed a pair of sweatpants, thread worn, that used to be blue but were now almost grey, and a long sleeved sweatshirt which had holes in the end of the sleeves from her pulling at them.

At school, Ava walked with her head down as the hallway passed her by. She spotted smiling tanned faces and pale faces everywhere she turned, girls in shorts with nice clear legs. She settled into her seat for calculus, pulling at the corners of her sleeves.

"You going to the party on Friday?" a voice to her left said.

Ava looked over and two girls were talking. The one on the left bounced in her seat, her hair in a French braid swinging back and forth. The girl on the right chewing on her pencil as she ran her other hand through her red hair.

"Maybe," the red haired one said.

“You should,” the ones whose hair was in a French braid said.

Ava stared harder at her notebook, following the swirls in the motivational quote. “Just Keep Swimming.” She bit her lip to keep the tears at the side of her eyes from trickling out. It had been one of her favorite movies when she was younger. She would curl up with a mug of hot cocoa with three scoops of sugar and marshmallows on top. She would sip slowly on the cocoa so as to make it last until the movie was halfway through and laugh along at Dory, the soft cashmere blanket rubbing up against her skin.

The teacher strolled into the classroom, her eyes flickering across the room. Professor Kit always seemed as if she was terrified. She walked hunched over, her body tense, as if she expected someone to attack her.

“Derivatives, anyone know what those are?” she asked the class.

Ava slunk down in her seat. There had been assigned reading, but she had not done it, the pizza from last night churned in her gut.

Professor Kit’s small smile slipped into a frown, moving from one expression to the other easily.

“Ava, what about you?” she asked.

Ava slunk deeper into her seat, attempting to crawl underground to safety. The voice took up its cadence while the rest of her body ached.

“Ava?” Professor Kit asked again.

Ava stared hard at the blue Nikes that cradled her feet.

Ava imagined a world in which she knew the answer to the question. She would sit tall, the back of the chair digging into her spine, and proudly answer with a clear, calm voice. It would not shake and tears would not be attempting to pry themselves out of her eyes. A world

where she would have the energy to study and enjoy it, pouring over texts on Shakespeare and genetics. But, as the old pizza taste that rested in the back of her throat reminded her that was not the case.

“Fine,” Professor Kit turned toward the board and scratched away at it with a piece of chalk.

After class, Ava gathered her things, the ghost of the pizza still biting at the back of her throat.

“Ava,” Professor Kit’s voice said. “I would like to have a word with you.”

Ava bit her lip harder and breathed her nose, in, out, in out. She walked to the front of the room. The girl with the French braid was still sitting, scrolling through her phone.

“What do you need, professor,” Ava said.

Professor Kit was softly smiling again. “Ava, is everything all right?”

The chalkboard behind the professor was dotted with places where the cleaners had been unable to get all of the chalk off. It formed a sort of a pattern.

“I’m fine,” Ava said.

Professor Kit’s mouth slipped closer to a frown. “You’ve missed 3 classes in the past five.”

Ava’s gaze flickered across the room, looking for somewhere to land. “I’ve been busy.”

She didn’t want to try to explain the fact that lately all she wanted to do was hide and try to forget she was different from everyone else. She knew that was useless though. No one had ever been able to see her purple skin.

Professor Kit’s mouth morphed into a full frown. “If you miss 2 more classes, I’m going to have to drop you from the class.”

Ava breathed. In, out, in, out. “But, I’ve been busy.”

Professor Kit straightened her back. “Rules are rules.” She reached for a stack of papers on her desk. “You were gone when I handed these out.” She thrust a piece of paper at her.

Ava took the piece of paper. They weren’t cold, but something about them seemed to cause a chill to settle in her fingers.

Professor Kit gathered the rest of her papers. She hunched back over, shuffling toward the door. She stopped at the door, her face breaking out in a small smile again. “I hope in the future you are less busy.”

Ava stood, the chill in her fingers growing, flowing up her arm and into her chest. Ava took a deep breath and opened the assignment. 43..43...43 Again, not even half. Ava let one of the tears from her left eye trickle out as she took in a gasping breath after a gasping breath. She tried to take a deep breath to calm herself, but she couldn’t make her lungs expand that far. She jerked upright as the girl with the French braid jostled out of her seat, gathering her things. Ava wiped her tears with her sleeve, and her nose, getting mucus all over them. 2:00 p.m. Ava had an appointment with her advisor.

Ava had known what she wanted to be when she grew up since she was ten, a doctor. Her mother had caught the flu. Her nose had been full of snot, and she shook with aches and chills. Ava had given her mother Tylenol, Advil, and plenty of fluids. Staring at her mother, sitting curled up in blanket with a mug full of tea beside her that Ava had fixed, that was when her decision was made. Her advisor was helping with that.

Ava trudged to the water fountain outside of the classroom beside the woman’s bathroom. She splashed her face with water, scrubbing at it.

Ava's feet sank into the advisor's office soft cream colored carpet. She reached down and pulled at it, smiling as the soft texture ran through her fingers. She sank down into a chair beside the right wall a stack of magazines sitting on a light grey stand beside it.

"Would it have killed them to have some color?" a voice said from her left.

Ava turned and inhaled sharply, almost choking on saliva. The girl sitting beside her was orange, bright orange. Not the orange that one gets from a suntan gone wrong, but the orange of the fruit. The orange seemed to cover all of her skin, from her ankles which were wrapped in sandals to her head which was adorned with a green headband. Ava opened, closed, and opened her mouth.

"I'm orange," the girl said. "My name is Sophia."

"I'm...I'm," Ava said.

"You're purple," Sophia said.

Ava felt like the time when she was five and she fell off the side of a slide, she just plummeted, cracking her arm against the dirt ground. Then tears had fallen out of her eyes, creating damp spots on the ground.

Sophia stuck her hand out. Ava reached out to shake it, their two colors rubbing harshly against each other.

"Sophia," the woman at the front desk said.

Sophia gave a warm smile which curled inside me, and walked away, a bounce in her step.

The carpet where Sophia had stood didn't look any different. Ava's hands didn't look any different. But, weren't things different?

Ava was 14 when she first asked her mother where the other kids were that had colored skin. Her mother's eyes lit up as she laughed. She patted her on her purple colored hand, turning back to her coffee. Ava had looked over the years for another colored person, scanning *People Magazine*, tv shows like *Friends*, and her own classmates year after year. But, there was never another colored person.

"Ava," the woman's voice called.

Ava stood up, running her hand through her hair over and over again. Breathe, run through hair, breathe, run through hair. The woman motioned with her right hand toward a door to Ava's right never looking up from her computer.

Inside her advisor's office, he was sitting behind his desk, his coffee colored eyes pinned on her.

"I've reviewed your files." He folded his hands on his desk. His tanned hands blended in with the dark wood color of the desk. "Ava, it's time to get serious."

"What do you mean?" Ava asked.

He pulled out a piece of paper from the top one of the piles on his desk. "Your grades are terrible."

Ava's fingers rested on a copy of her transcripts. A piece of paper littered with C after C with a B- sprinkled in every once and a while.

"You can't get into med-school," he said.

Ava sat up straighter that falling feeling again, but this time her body hit concrete over and over again. "Yes, I can."

He sat up straight, moving his tie. "You need a 3.7 to even begin to qualify."

A 2.3 winked at her from the page underneath her fingers.

“I can still do this,” Ava said.

He shook his head. “Ava, you can’t.”

“Yes, I can,” Ava raised her voice.

“No, you can’t. I would advise that you pick another path.” His fingers typed away on his computer.

Everything melded together, the pain, the voices, the falling. Ava struggled for a breath but couldn’t catch on, tears sliding into her mouth. She dashed out of her advisor’s room and the lobby into the hallway outside. She attempted to breath, pulling in sip after sip of tears. Ava spotted the nearest bathroom, throwing open the door, and blasting the water on in the sink. She grabbed a paper towel and scrubbed. She scrubbed until she saw blood, red against her purple skin. She scrubbed and the red coated the bottom of her sleeves mixing with the mucus.

“Stop, stop,” Sophia stood at the bathroom door. She ran over, standing on her left side.

“You have to stop this.”

Ava stared watching her hand go up and down her arm and the bright red blood speckling her purple arm as it flowed into the clear water.

The Presence

I was sitting with my sister, sipping on coffee. My feet sank into my house's soft grey carpet. It was one of the few things that didn't cause my skin to feel as if someone was taking a grater to it. My sister's two older boys were playing with Legos in the corner. I couldn't tell what they were building. It could have been a space ship? Heck, it could be a barn. It was just a mish mash of different colored blocks. Her daughter was sitting to the side, scrunched on her stomach, reading a book. Her right hand ran through her hair over and over again. I wanted to reach out and grab that hand. Tell her to stop it. Warn her, but I wasn't sure what about.

My sister stared at me from her seat in a greyish-blue chair with flowers that were fading. I knew she was taking in the long sleeved, drabby grey sweater with blotches of color that seemed disjointed and if I looked at head on always gave me a headache. That is why I wore it though. If the itching started I would find a mirror and stare hard at the colors until a headache appeared. This method worked sometimes, but often I would just wind up with a headache as I slumped to the floor with a hand full of my skin as I raked my nails over my knee over and over again.

My sister set down her cup of coffee, a few drops spilling over the edge onto the table.

"I'm worried about you."

I fixed my eyes on the drops and avoided her eyes. When we were younger, she could always tell what I was thinking. As we got older, her guesses got less and less accurate, but she was still the only person who seemed to have even a small idea what was going on with me.

"I'm fine." I kept my hand from running across my knee. The itching wasn't present right now, but it had become almost a nervous habit. When the itching first appeared the year I

turned thirteen, I went to the doctor, who asked how I got a large wound on my knee. As she disinfected it and bandaged it up, I told I slipped and fell. I couldn't tell her the truth. I couldn't tell her that it felt as if my very skin was revolting, as if my organs were begging to be released from their cage.

My sister's face pinched in an expression I know she didn't use a lot. She was the happy sister, the smiling sister. "Abby, you're not fine." Her gaze flickered over my hair, and I had the oddest feeling she could tell it had been a week since I had washed it. "Please tell me what is wrong."

"I just have had a cold." I started to lightly scratch the inner part of my elbow, up and down. It was oddly soothing.

"That too." She leaned forward. "You are always itching. Are you sick? Is that what is wrong?"

"Here is the address for a therapist." She handed me a card. "I've made you an appointment for two."

I took the card from her, my fingers sliding over the thin card stock. It felt rough, and my already sensitive fingers felt raw after they had touched it. I quickly deposited it into my purse and smoothed my fingers over the table cloth, trying to sooth them.

I knew that if I didn't go she would never shut up, and that sad look on her face would continue. I did not like that sad look. She should always be smiling.

I looked back over at her daughter who had now curled a piece of hair around her finger and was pulling quit viciously.

"How is Bailey doing?" I asked.

She blinked, her eyes darting to her daughter. Bailey had just managed to pull out a strand of hair. “She’s fine.” She smiled. “In fact, the teachers are talking about maybe moving her up a grade level.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. It was not my place to question my sister. My happy, satisfied sister who never felt the itching.

She got up to leave and gathered her kids. She leaned in to kiss me on the cheek, and I braced myself. Skin to skin contact never felt good, but with her it was almost tolerable. She laid her fiery hot lips against my skin, and I bit my cheek harder to keep from speaking. I gave her a smile. I used to have to blink back tears when I bit my cheek but not anymore.

She paused at the door. “Remember the therapist.”

I nodded and waved.

She continued out the door with Bailey following behind. I went to turn around but paused when I saw Bailey was still standing at the door.

“Bailey?” I asked.

She stared, unblinking at me.

“Bailey,” her mother shouted.

Bailey ran back to me and shoved something soft in my hand. She darted out the door.

After the door was closed, I opened my hand. Bailey had given me a lock of her hair, blonde and shiny. I padded into my room and placed it in my top drawer. I wasn’t sure what to do with it, but it felt wrong to get rid of it.

I pulled my silk pajamas on, the softest I could find. They had all kinds of positive affirmations on them. Keep believing and Dream on. I found them incredibly annoying, but they

were the only pair of pajamas that didn't constantly make me feel like my skin was ripping open, so I allowed it.

I pulled the covers over my head and waited. I knew I would hear it soon. I breathed in and out, felt my stomach expand and scrape against my night shirt. I listened to the soft exhales of my breath as they were released into the room to I don't know where. The itching was not a sudden thing. First, it feels like a soft caress over ones skin, then pins and needles as if one has sat too long on a leg, then bees under my flesh before finally settling on the overwhelming itching at last. I turned my head everywhere to see if I could spot the presence, but as it was every night, I didn't see anything. I would have thought that I was crazy except for the fact that I could always hear the breathes accompanying it. Maybe I was still crazy. But no, I didn't think so. The presence felt too real.

I got up out of my bed and settled against the chair, staring in the mirror. I took in the dark circles underneath my eyes. I think my sister thinks that I have taken to coloring underneath my eyes to give them more depth since I have not seen her without shadows in a year. She would never imagine that it had been that long since I had slept well. Truthfully though it had been years since I had slept really well if ever. I could remember staring at my sister as she slept in her twin sized bed in our small room painted blue because it was supposed to be a comforting color. It was one of my parents ideas to help me relax. The blue didn't help, and I spent my nights staring, cataloging the features of my sister. If I could have drawn I would have been able to draw a perfect replica.

The breathing wheezed harder than normal then stopped. I waited for it to start again. I looked from side to side as if to find the presence and help it.

"You...." I said as the wheezing started again.

I would never admit to anyone, but part of me found the presence comforting. Yes, it caused a horrible response in me, but I didn't feel like it was the presence's fault. I don't know. Maybe I really was crazy. I knew I should hate it. But, it felt like a puppy that had been abused or something.

"I'm going to bed now." I curled back into my bed and stared at the clock on the wall. The ticking reverberated with the wheezing, and I counted down the hours until I had to get up. Tonight, had not been the first time I had talked to the presence. I had first had the idea a couple of months ago. I had been so frustrated and distraught I had yelled at it. Called it a demon, a monster, and any kind of name I could think of. All that had happened was a pause in the wheezing before it continued.

I woke up when the sun filtered through my window, burning my skin which had become uncovered during the night. I pulled my shirt back down and hurried to get dressed. I grabbed the same outfit I had worn to go out for the last three months, a black turtle neck and sweat pants. The high collar of the turtle neck and the long baggy pants which sagged against the floor looked terribly mismatched. I must have looked like I was either trying to rob a bank or crazy. Maybe I was crazy?

I called an uber and sat in silence with the driver after I had given them the address for the therapist. I didn't like to talk to strangers. I usually worried for hours after my conversations were over about whether I had said the right thing. It wasn't worth it to waste that kind of energy on someone I was never going to see again. The uber stopped, and I got out of the car after tipping the driver.

I did not like this building. It was 15 or maybe 16 stories. I didn't have the energy to count. It was two different kinds of stone, which I would have enjoyed if I wanted a headache. It

had automatic doors which I always secretly feared would one day not recognize me as human and open for me.

I ran my thumbnail lightly over my inner elbow and stepped through the doors. I walked right in the direction of the waiting room for the therapist. It seemed the same person who had designed the outside of the building had designed the inside for it was a bright green which I only saw on the backs of soccer jerseys after a game, utterly unappealing.

I stepped into the waiting room and inched toward the front desk. There were colorful decorations hanging all over the room, banners, wind chimes. I had never seen those inside before. I decided I didn't like it. I told the woman I was there for my appointment, and she handed me a stack of papers. I filled them out. There were no questions about the itching and the presence, but I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. I knew I wasn't exactly normal. But, maybe not crazy. I sat running my finger over and over the pen. It was cool and one of the few things that had felt good against my skin in a while.

"Abby," a voice called. It was the woman at the desk. She motioned for me to go through the door. I could tell it took a lot of her effort to do that. Maybe she too didn't like spending energy on things she didn't deem important.

I walked through another garnish green hallway and found myself in an explosion. There were pinks and blues all across the room, almost as if they were chasing each other to see which one would win out. There were pillows with bold patterns of triangles and circles all around the room. I felt a headache coming on and pinched my forehead.

"Abby," a voice said.

I looked down at the floor and a woman was sitting cross legged on one of the pillows. She gestured for me to join her.

I ran my finger over my knee in my sweatpants, the headache beginning to radiate down my neck. I crouched and made it to the floor. I sat my sweatpants bunching up as I sat cross legged on the floor.

She stared at me for a couple of seconds. I felt each one of her slow blinks against my skin, surprisingly soft as a butterfly.

“My name is Cami. I want to know what has been going on with you?” she leaned her weight on her right elbow.

“Why is your space so colorful?” I asked.

Cami’s smile increased. “I find colors very therapeutic. Pink and blue are known to be healing. Plus, I think it helps my patients to relax to see what a causal and fun environment this is.”

I reached my hand inside my pocket and felt something soft. I wasn’t sure what it was, but I held onto it tightly hoping it would help keep me grounded as the headache continued to pound.

“Again, I ask what is going on with you?” she asked.

“I’m itchy,” I said.

I still doubted if she would be able to be helpful. No one had before. I smoothed my finger against my forehead. I had promised my sister.

“Why are you itchy?” she asked.

I ran my finger up and down inside my coat. “I’m not sure. I just am.”

I didn’t think it was a good idea to tell her about the presence.

Cami stopped leaning on her elbow and sat up straighter, the emerald necklace she had on swung wildly. “I think that there is a reason.” She tapped the necklace. “Tell me Abby. Do you consider yourself a nervous person?”

I stopped stroking the object inside my pocket and started lightly scratching my knee. “Not anyone more than another person.” I felt myself slowly increasing the speed of the scratches.

Cami’s gaze flicked to my hand on my knee. “Well, let’s say you are for hypothetical reasons. What could be making you nervous?”

I stared at the necklace as it reflected the pink and green on the walls. It seemed to be glittering in time with my headache. Pound. Glitter. Pound. Glitter.

“Life,” I said.

“What about life?” she asked.

I ran my hand through my hair and then felt a slight itching in my chest as I realized my hand was not on my knee. “My life is fine. Sure, I’m not as great as my sister at everything, and I don’t sleep well. I don’t like to go out or do things that take a lot of energy. Most things scare me, but that doesn’t mean there is anything wrong with me. It’s just the way I am.”

Cami stared at me, blinking again. “I think that you have been extremely stressed out for a while. So long that it might have even started manifesting in weird ways, am I right?”

I caught myself mid-nod. Was she right? Was the presence related to anxiety. No, it felt too real to be that.

“I don’t think so,” I said.

Cami's brows pinched as she gave me a look of sadness. "I'm still going to suggest that you take the medicine I prescribe. It's a very low dose, but it could give us an idea about whether you have anxiety or not."

I felt wetness against my leg. I must have scratched through the skin again. I nodded and took the script from her hands. I rushed out of the office as I felt the blood dripping down my leg and into my sock. I cursed myself for not bringing any band aids with me. Normally, I kept them in my bookbag, but I had not remembered today. I placed my leg on the seat as the uber drove me home. A man in his early twenties tried to make conversation with me, but I glared at him. I kept my hand pressed against the wound, the moisture seeping through the pants and making my hand damp and sticky.

At my house, I shuffled into my bathroom and pulled my pants down. I pulled the sock off that was now coated with blood. Some blood had already started to dry and was forming a crusty layer. I put three band aids on the wound and limped to the kitchen for pain meds. I had gotten very good at dealing with these kinds of wounds. I probably needed to go to the hospital to get stitches, but after the first three times this happened that became too troublesome. I learned as long as I kept it heavily bandaged and didn't do anything too strenuous I was fine. I gulped down the medicine as the cold water hit my throat. One pill didn't go down easily with the first swallow of water, and I took another sip. My gaze flitted to the samples that Cami had given me of the meds she had prescribed. Was the presence caused by anxiety? Would the itchiness go away if I took the meds? Was I crazy?

I imagined a world with no itching. Where I could go out in cute dresses and get drinks with friends. Where I could go to the library and get a book or go out for a movie without wearing a long sleeved shirt. But, that world would be without that presence, the hulking,

monster of a presence that had kept me company for so long. My mind flickered between both options. An image came to mind of me and my sister sitting in a tea house, sipping tea, smiles on both of our faces. She leans over and compliments on how clear my eyes look and how happy it makes her to see me well rested. I blush and my hand doesn't find my knee to scratch.

I opened the bottle of meds and swallowed the horse pills. I settled onto the sofa in the middle of the room, my arm across the back. It was a gentle blue with a smattering of white splotches. My parents tried my whole childhood to use blue as a calming force, and I guess I grew to like it. Though it never calmed me, the sight of any shade of blue caused a smile to break out across my face. I listened to the clock tick in the living room and waited to feel something. I kicked my shoes off and scratched the back of my foot with my toe. I could tell it was an itch not caused by the presence but the soft carpet tickling my ankle.

I locked my gaze on the doorway to my bedroom. I let my eyes widen to take in the whole frame and settled deeper in the sofa. Then I saw her as a part of me knew I would.

She was about as tall as my knee with braids in her hair, standing in the doorway. She had wide eyes and was holding a book in her hand, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. I motioned with my hand, and she moved toward me. I noticed that she wasn't entirely solid. As she moved, I could see glimpses of the other side of the room. She settled near my feet clutching my wounded leg. It felt as if something was just barely grazing it, like the wind, or a soft breath, warm. I relished it. I often didn't feel warm anymore.

"Why are you here?" I wasn't sure if the figure could talk.

She locked her eyes on me, and the terror and joy swimming in her eyes made me want to cry.

She held up her book to me, and I tried to take it from her, but just like her I couldn't quite get a grasp of it.

"What do you want?" I tried again.

She locked those eyes on me again, brimming with tears that would not fall, and I felt mine fill with tears like they hadn't in such a long time.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Her grip on my leg almost became solid.

"How can I fix you?" I stared at the eyes the exact same shade as mine when I looked in a mirror. I took in the nervous way she averted her eyes the same way I was known to do.

I stood up, and her hand fell away. "You have to speak!" My chest heaved, and I could feel the tears running down my cheeks. "I don't know how to fix this." I tore a hand through my hair, ripping some of it out with my nails. "I've never known how to fix this."

The girl continued to stare at me, two mirror images, one slightly older, reflecting back and forth.

She frowned and padded toward my bedroom. I followed her. My right hand scratching earnestly. In her actual presence, the itching was almost unbearable.

In my bedroom, she walked toward me. She reached her hand toward my cheek, stopping just before she touched it, but I felt the kiss of heat. I closed my eyes to enjoy it. I opened them, and she was no longer in front of me.

I darted to the door of the bedroom, glancing right and left. I placed my hand in my pocket, and felt for that soft thing again. I ran my finger over and over it again to try to soothe myself, but it didn't seem to be working.

I checked underneath the bed, but that too was empty. I settled on the bed as the tears ran down my face. She was gone. She was gone. I...She was gone. She was gone. I pulled my hand out of my pocket, finally glimpsing what I had been running my hands over all day. It was the lock of hair from Bailey, earlier. I tucked it around my wrist and sobbed.

Schizophrenia, drugs, Bipolar. The words would be whispered in her sister's ear as she got older. She would never smile again, only slight lifts of her mouth when she caught sight of her sister. She would often be caught looking over her shoulder as if for some invisible presence. She didn't stop wearing long sleeve clothes and sweatpants, but she did stop itching. She seemed sad about it. Her sister would often see her glance at her knee and tears in the corner of her eye as she flexed her hands. Only Abby knew the real reason, she had lost herself completely. She had flowed out of herself so slowly that she hadn't noticed it and then with a pat on the cheek she was gone. But, on the days when she would watch her niece Bailey tug her hair harder and harder, she would think that perhaps she wasn't the only one.

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