

Clark Kent's Summer In San Francisco

I.

The sound of cable cars and church bells poking through the chirping morning aviary chorus shook Peter awake and allowed him to peel his face off the bus window. He wasn't in Kansas anymore. The bright, cool June morning seemed to welcome him to San Francisco with a beaming smile. He had tried to stay awake for as long as possible on the Greyhound, but the droning landscape from Winnemucca to Reno had sent his eyelids crashing down. The timing couldn't have been more perfect. The morning fog had burnt off, and a sunny blue sky seemed to illuminate every pastel-laden Victorian he passed by. His Uncle Thomas lived in one, but he hadn't any clue what color or kind of moulding adorned the front. As he stewed in a pleasant awe at the vivacity of the urban landscape, Peter internally kicked himself for not coming to see his Uncle sooner.

For most of his life, Thomas had been called "The Professor" by Peter's father. He was a PhD Anthropologist who had left a brief stint teaching at the University in favor of life in the Museum. Nevertheless, his credentials had stuck and cemented Uncle Thomas as "The Professor" in the mind of his young nephew. And for the past twenty-something years, that was about all he knew about his only paternal Uncle. In his youth, he'd been a fun, but distant adult figure, whose patience for little children extended no more than fifteen minutes at a time. He was a warm, bookish type whose bushy mustache and rimmed spectacles gave an air of "boringness" to any and all children he came around. He was friendly and always came with gifts, but spent little time interacting with children. It was only a few Christmases prior that Peter had actually engaged him in his first meaningful conversation: a discussion of the purpose and foundation of a modern, balanced education. At the time, Peter had felt a bit despondent about his first year at college, but by the end of their whisky-tipped chat, he had felt assured that he was doing the right thing. And that was the last time he had seen The Professor. Uncle Thomas retreated, as he always had, back to the hilly, colorful city on the California coast, the activities of his daily life left shrouded in mystery.

The buildings around him grew taller and taller. The driver made an announcement they were arriving at the terminal shortly. Peter stood up and anxiously scanned his luggage to assure nothing had been taken in his sleep. The bus came to a halt in a dark, covered terminal and the crowd of passengers shuffled off, one by one, lobbing every shape and size of luggage parcel out of the bus and onto the sidewalk. To Peter, it felt quite big. The DeBorr family had never traveled much and when they did, it tended to be places of a more naturalistic extraction. New York City, Miami, Seattle, Los Angeles - these were places where movies took place. Denver and (of course) Kansas City were the biggest places he'd visited to date and even they felt small when put to scale with the world he was in now. It made him uneasy. It made him feel like this really was the punishment it was meant to be.

Exiting the terminal onto the boisterous city streets, Peter didn't have to look long before he saw the grinning academic waving him down with a large swing of his hand. They kept their introductions more formal and less familial. A handshake, no hug. The two then took a relatively quiet ride some short distance away into a colorful, quiet neighborhood. The house was small, but had an astoundingly detailed blue facade. The lion statues at the base of the staircase was particularly eye-catching for Peter.

Thomas had nearly the entire building to himself, save for an in-law unit that had been carved out of the first floor some thirty years prior. He explained to Peter that, though it may seem small for Kansas, it certainly would prove roomy compared to any other nearby accommodations. By the time they finally brought everything upstairs and Thomas had shown the boy to his room, Peter had felt the compounding weariness of travel begin to catch up with him. He let his eyes slip again for a fleeting moment, before he heard the sound of dishes clinking outside. Willing himself up, he walked down the hall into the living room where The Professor was preparing some kind of whiskey drink on a credenza that backed up to a massive bookshelf. The clinking of his spoon against the glass had acted as siren, summoning the boy out of his chamber.

"Ah, you're here", Thomas chirped back at the boy. "Please, please, take a seat!"

Peter nervously slunk into the dark leather armchair which faced the bookshelf.

The Professor was sifting through records lining the back wall with one hand while balancing some dark drink in the other hand. For some reason, Peter felt nervous. This may be family, but it felt all too formal at the same time. The ornate accoutrements that comprised his Uncle's very astute design scheme were so distant from anything he would have associated as "normal". If anything, he felt he was back in the Dean's office in Lawrence, where he went to college.

Thomas placed the drink carefully in the young man's hand.

"It's a Vieux Carre. You're not going to tell your father now, are you?"

Peter cracked a smile. "I'm nearly 22. I don't think there's much he could do about it now."

Thomas settled in the dark armchair across from him after putting on a record. He paused for a moment to examine the young man. Fresh-faced, bright-eyes, not a hint of grey to be found anywhere on his body. Thomas remembered when he was a young man. He wasn't as muscular, but he certainly had that face. It was the iconic DeBorr jawline that made up for their narrow noses and thin legs, which he'd always felt self-conscious about. When he looked at Peter, he was looking for these things, these hints of himself. They shared blood, after all, and despite his distance from the family, that meant a lot to Thomas. Having no children of his own, any legacy he hoped to preserve would be carried on through his work and these delicate connections to the generation below. Privately, he worried it would be hard to make these connections. But the gumption this young man had in making the journey alone reminded Thomas of the best parts of himself. The kinship was already presenting itself.

"Vieux Car?"

"Vieux Carrè. French for 'Old Square'. But the cocktail naturally came our way through New Orleans from my understanding."

Peter took an eager sip and immediately recoiled in disgust.

"Strong!"

The Professor broke out into a little chuckle and stirred his glass in amusement.

"It certainly takes some getting used to!" He paused to light a small pipe before continuing. "In fact, I'd guess a lot of this will take some getting used to."

"It's different. I'm excited, I really am. But, uh, Uncle Thomas, I just wanted to assure you that I'm here to work hard and be respectful."

"Please", he raised a loving hand, "Call me Tom."

Peter tried to shake a momentary grimace before he saw his Uncle crack yet another grin.

"As if I care what you call me! But I will say, calling me Uncle Tom might get you a few unwanted glances in these streets, you'd better be careful."

Peter collected himself as he reluctantly sipped on the drink.

"All I'm saying is that, I'm going to be a good guest. I'm here to show that I am indeed a young man of good moral character."

One of the Professor's eye's squinted a bit. He felt the boy's candor, but couldn't place the source. Something about it felt inauthentic.

"Peter, you needn't feel like you have to prove anything to me." He took a few puffs from his pipe before an idea seemed to strike him. Turning to the bookcase behind him, he fingered through a collection of albums, his pipe dangling miraculously out of his lip, bobbing as he spoke.

"When I left Kansas, I felt like I had the world at my disposal. I was only a little older than you and not nearly as smart. What I had was a head brimming with ideas... Ideas of how big the world was and what I could make of it. I saw about a thousand paths in front of me and I could choose to be terrified at the prospect of losing out on nine hundred and ninety nine of them or embrace the journey that one might take me on - and you can bet I leaned heavily into the latter. I'm not saying that the world I knew

was bad. Some people here should be so lucky to glean an opportunity to see the sunflower state in its majestic, bucolic glory. But what I am saying is that I had a chance to change in setting out this adventure. Anytime you go somewhere new, you have an opportunity to make it apart of you."

Thomas stopped and took a deep breath as if to pause his thoughts before he puffed again from his pipe. "And I think in the transactional nature of the world, we are forced to give something up, to let something die inside in order to make room for this new part of ourselves."

He pulled out the vinyl he had finally chosen and presented it to Peter searching for some reaction. It was a Jazz album with some woman on the front.

"Nat King Cole?", he asked the boy with an inquisitive twist of the head. Peter smiled and nodded. The album may not have looked familiar, but the name sure was. Nat King Cole had been a favorite of Peter's late Grandmother - Thomas' mother. The second his crooning baritone started to fill the room, a flood of nostalgia rocked the boy's thoughts. The Professor watched as his nephew's eyes wistfully danced around the room, finding wonder in his ordinary life. It made the old man happy. He settled into his armchair and set the smoking pipe on the small side table next to him, drawing the boy back into the discussion.

"Listen, I know that your coming here is not just a friendly visit to your dear hermetic Uncle. And I'm well aware I have a reputation in our family, one which unfairly brandishes me as an out-of-touch bookworm without any sense of the real world. But know that I believe that, despite the circumstances, this will be a good thing. This Summer will fly by and before you know it, San Francisco will be nothing but an echo in your reveries, there to warm you when you find yourself cold and alone."

Peter felt the intensity of the conversation increase as his Uncle leaned in.

"I'm not here to condemn you for your wrongdoing. The sins of your past may be what brought you here, but they will not define you. We are not perfect. I was your age once. And I remember the bliss of leaving behind a world in shambles for the seemingly endless opportunities ahead."

He paused.

"I hope we can both agree to close whatever"

He paused and lifted his drink to the young man.

"I hope we can both agree to close whatever dark chapters that have been written. It's the Summer now, the sun is shining, and the air is fresh. No one is here to condemn you, certainly not me!" He paused to adjust his glasses. "Find joy. Find love. Find yourself Peter.... and lose all those other things."

Peter felt a little flutter of relief in his heart. His tensed fingers loosened around his Vieux Carre as he flashed a complimentary smile back at his Uncle. His fear of feeling completely adrift in this strange, noisy environment had retreated for the time being. It was slowly being replaced with a sense of adventure.

II

The next morning Peter awoke in a panic, fearing he would sleep in much after his Uncle's 8 o'clock request. This turned out to be perfectly legitimate as he stumbled out the front door pulling his shirt sleeves down his arms at 8:44.

Out in the small front garden, Thomas was sitting, cross-legged with a newspaper in hand at a table with the final remains of what smelled like an Irish breakfast tea. Without averting his attention, he tersely flipped the next page.

"Burned the midnight oil last night?"

"I'm sorry Uncle Thomas, I tried to get to sleep. I think I was just... anxious. Being in a new place and all does strange things to my body."

The Professor cracked an accepting grin, but his tone stayed stiff.

"You know the morning offers many joys that the evening could never know itself? It's a different kind of peace."

"Yeah, well I'm in college, so I'm not too familiar with the joys of the morning, unless you're talking about the breakfast burrito day at the dining hall."

The Professor chuckled. "Humor will always elevate you. Never let it leave you Pete."

After Peter went back inside to gather himself for the day, he and his Uncle set off down the steep street where their house was. He was supposed to meet the man whom he would be working for throughout the remainder of the summer, a younger gentleman named Antonio, who ran a small Cafe walking distance from the home.

But "walking distance" turned out to be a bit of a dubious claim for the Kansan lad. Hill led to hill, neighborhood led to neighborhood as the urban hustle of the city made each block feel like a small town in its own right. Still, the distance didn't bother Peter. Now that he was accompanied by a veteran of city life, he felt a surge of confidence in his steps, taking each stride with his shoulders back and his vision ahead of him, unbothered by whatever commotion was going on in his periphery. He did his best to temper his awe at the liveliness of the neighborhood, trying not to out himself as some kind of country bumpkin, but loosened a bit once he watched his Uncle publicly remark at various everyday things he found charming. The Professor swooned over flowers, views, and kitsch little bodegas and, before Peter had time to think on all of it, their twenty minute jaunt had come to an end.

"Ah, you're the infamous troublemaker!", Antonio shook his head looking Peter up and down, grinning ear to ear.

"I swear, I've told him nothing!", the Professor said in defense.

Antonio was much younger than even Peter expected. A man no older than twenty-eight, he had a lofty gait and carried himself with the lightness of a cloud wherever he went. He looked Central American, or at least some kind of Native North American-Spaniard mix. The thing that impressed Peter the most was that he was sole proprietor of the Cafe du Rue, a position the young student never expected a millennial to hold in a big city such as this. Everyone he knew back in Kansas was working for the owners of such places. This guy had to do something right to get where he was today.

Thomas left the two of them to attend some museum meeting, forcing the two young strangers to revel at one another. Peter figured this was his big chance to make right with his new boss.

"Well, sir, I've worked in a few cafes and-

Antonio interrupted him with a giggle..

"Sir? Please. I could be your older brother... In fact, if I shave, I could pass as your younger brother. Tell me, what do you know about coffee?"

"Like I said, I've worked at the Morning Roost in Lawrence and-

"Yeah, yeah, how do you do with people?"

Peter quickly adjusted to the stern, clipped, business-first approach of his new boss and did his best to adapt.

"I'll be the best employee you ever had."

"Not yet!", Antonio said taking off his apron. "I know your Uncle probably didn't tell you, but I can't officially bring you onboard until tomorrow. Paperwork and what not."

Peter couldn't hide his disturbed reaction. After all, why was he rushed out the door with such haste?

"Don't worry Peter. I've got a more important task at hand. Consider it an introductory challenge, boss to employee."

Peter's posture stiffened in anticipation of the challenge.

"You and I have to get tossed and shoot the shit at the park."

"I'm sorry."

"What, you're legal! Don't get so caught up in the technical. I was told you would come in a little stiff. Well, let me be the one to tell you that while you're working here, you need to chill the hell out. This isn't your Anna Wintour journalism externship, it's a coffeehouse in Bernal Heights. No one here is going anywhere quickly and we're all perfectly satisfied in that."

Peter looked around as if for permission and let out a relieving laugh.

"Yeah, well you don't have to tell me twice. It's the most I've felt at home in a while."

"Perfect! Help me grab the vino and or IPAs and lets start to learn about where you come from."

Peter smiled as he hoisted the booze onto a sack on his back.

"I'm from Manhattan."

"Big Apple, eh?"

He winced. "Manhattan, Kansas, actually. Happens all the time."

Antonio just snickered and shook his head as he led them out the door.

He'd lived in the neighborhood for some time. He was born in the city and his parents just jumped around from apartment to apartment depending on where the good work was, making him an excellent tour guide. Peter tried to make internal reminders as he was shown the "best liquor store", the "best place to get a Philly cheesesteak", and "the best place to get your haircut on short notice". Antonio had a street knowledge that Peter found curious. He had all of his own favorite spots back home, but none which he could categorize so finitely, especially with as many modifiers as was presented. But perhaps even more interesting was just how delightfully relatable this young man was. He was only a few years Peter's senior, yet he had an entirely different storyline, an entirely urban upbringing. These chaotic, cramped, colorful avenues were just an everyday reality to Antonio.

After a stop at the liquor store, the boys went to a nearby park with an impressive vista of the surrounding bay, picked a lively spot on one of the hills, and laid back into the soft earth.

They were both young men, carefree and void of any physical pain, opening up a bounty of easy conversation. They kept it lite - contemporary music, favorite Saturday Night Live bits, best spots to eat around the city - but they occasionally strayed into the mild territory of 'work'. It became clear that, while Antonio was certainly his boss in a technical capacity, he had no intention of being his acting probation officer. The staunch, iron-fisted punishment Peter was told he was being relegated to was nothing more than a sharp-toned threat from his fuming parents. For his part, Antonio knew that the young upstart was here against his will, but did everything in his power to try to frame the situation as a blessing rather than a punishment. His young boss proved to be quite fond of dear old Thomas DeBorr and he did his best to impress those feelings on the boy.

"Your Uncle's a pretty cool guy, considering he fits the profile of serial killer."

"A serial killer?"

"Yeah, you know, he lives alone, no kids, no wife... his house is spotless from what I've seen, he doesn't have any ordinary hobbies. Kind of a lovable weirdo type. He just seems like the guy who's got a few skeletons hanging about in his closet, perhaps even in a literal sense."

Peter was left to think over everything that he just heard, which did momentarily make him consider why his Uncle was such a peculiar person.

"Like I said though, he's a pretty cool guy considering all that."

"Well I never really knew him too well growing up. He's my Dad's only brother and they were never super close growing up... I think it was just a general difference of interests. But nevertheless, it meant we didn't see him too much growing up. I mean, my entire life he's basically been out here and he'd come back to Kansas for holidays and the occasional visit. He spent a semester there teaching out at KSU when I was in middle school."

"Teaching? So he did do real Professor work..."

"Yeah, he taught Anthropology, not certain on the specialty though."

"Funny, he never talks about that stuff much anymore. I guess I'd heard he did that, but it all seems so distant now that he's been at the museum."

Snapping out of a daze where he was admiring the park scene, Peter took the opportunity to tickle his curiosity.

"What is the story with the museum work? What's he doing over there?"

"From what I gather, he works on the exhibits. There's some huge research project that's supposed to come to fruition this summer."

Antonio went onto explain that over the past two years of knowing Thomas, he'd always been working on this one project. It was called the 'Birth of Civilization' and it was being heavily funded by some wealthy donor whose family had been involved in museum projects since its inception.

"You should ask him about it", Antonio said, smacking his gum, "I think he'd be more than happy to tell you ALL about it."

The evening sun brought an end to their afternoon at the park and, after agreeing to report to work tomorrow at nine, the boys went their separate ways.

Peter was impressed with how well he remembered the return trip to his Uncle's house. On the inclined street, looking through the fence up into the den, he could see Thomas hard at work, scribbling on some papers. Since there was still a little light in the day and he wasn't expected at any particular time, Peter decided there'd be no harm in a stroll by the pink-hued light of the fading June sun. He decided to trek uphill this time - a direction he'd yet to go.

After a few blocks, and an endless assortment of ornate home facades, he'd reached the top of a hill. Hands in his pockets, breeze in the air, Peter took a deep breath and

smiled, reflecting on his new boss, which he hoped would evolve into a new friendship. He continued strolling along the colorful avenues, listening to sidewalk chatter and soaking in the dense, urban experience which was so far from his own experiences. He turned a corner and found a pink staircase, with a soft orange streetlight marking its place. The shrubbery grew as the stairs went up, so it was impossible to see where it went, but feeling adventurous and a bit buzzed, Peter decided to see where it led.

As soon as he disappeared into the foliage, he came across a charming cobblestone pathway that acted as a sort of road, with stairs every thirty feet or so. Jutting out along the path were little strips of concrete that led to quiet, individual homes. Down through a little brick pathway, over a small grove, a large old, white home stood out to him. There was a pretty, young girl throwing a ball to her dog, her auburn waves swaying as she chased him. Set against the backdrop of the sunset, the whole scene swelled with charm. When she saw him looking at her she gave a little smile and wave. He smiled back and, not wanting to be rude, briskly moved along on his way back home.

Once Peter got acquainted with his routine, the first few weeks of summer seemed to fly right on by. Every day began the same. He would wake up to the sounds of birds squabbling through the cold, dense morning fog sometime around 7:10, roll onto his side and spend about twenty minutes "waking himself up" by reading one of the National Geographic magazines stacked at the guest room bedside. He'd then put two slices of toast in the toaster and a pot of coffee on before he showered, only to come out and have them both lukewarm. Breakfast took all of five minutes and was enjoyed all over the house. Peter had a nasty habit of carrying his toast around as he wandered through various rooms and out onto the balcony, leaving a trail of crumbs for his Uncle to roll his eyes at later. On his way out the door, he would often stop to have a short chat with the Professor in the garden, then it was off to Cafe du Rue.

Back in Manhattan, Peter had worked in loads of Coffee shops (Kay's, Starbucks, the University-affiliated one) and he was pleased to see that the environment here wasn't much different despite the differing campus. He was worried the expectations in a "big city" coffee environment would be too much for him to handle. The orders too

complex, the taste too refined, the bustle too chaotic. The reality was much milder. The crowd that came through the shop did expect speed during the morning rush, but where fairly non-discriminatory most of the rest of the day. The drip coffee was pleasant enough for most folks who came by to enjoy casual conversation on the small park tables lining the slanted sidewalk. The work at the University coffeeshop was far more taxing.

Besides Antonio, who was there every day except Sunday, there were only three other employees there. First, woman named Tessa, who was studying at the City University at night working towards her degree in architecture. She was in her 30's and a mother of one young son. For years she had an unfinished degree in photography that was cut short when she met her first husband. As soon as he left her for another woman, she was forced to take whatever odd jobs she could to support her and her son while she figured out how to go back to school and study something she was willing to put time and effort towards. She liked working at the coffee shop because of their flexibility with her hours, a perk of her three years of tenure there.

Then, there was Devin. He was the only one younger than Peter that he'd met in San Francisco. Peppy, playful, and seventeen. Devin was a student at one of the preparatory high schools nearby and came from a wealthy Korean family. He took the job just a month before Peter arrived as a summer gig to keep his parents appeased.

Finally there was Silvio. He was the official roaster at the Cafe, though he seemed to have his hands in everything. He was old. Somewhere in his early seventies. And he didn't chat much. When he did speak, he did so with a thick Italian-sounding accent. Peter had racked his mind trying to connect the dots as to how a man like Silvio ended up working a coffee gig like this to get by. None of his co-baristas had ever had a meaningful conversation with him, though both acknowledged he'd been there long before either of them. Peter thought about asking Antonio, but it always seemed like the wrong time.

His days at the coffeeshop operated more or less the same as well. He'd get in at 7:50 (occasionally at 6:50 when he covered a shift), deal with the first hour morning rush. They'd have a lull around 11 where they'd clean utensils and catch up for a bit. Then they'd have another bump in the afternoon from about 2 until 3. After which it died down for the rest of the evening. He would leave sometime around 3 and go for a long

walk or a run around the neighborhood. Peter loved to use any opportunity to exercise outdoors as a way to see a new place. When he'd gone to Denver with his family a few years back, he took advantage of his restlessness in new places to get up early, put on sneakers and explore the new city.

This neighborhood he was now in was so bright, lively, colorful, and exciting. It seemed to change in an almost chameleonic manner with every sharp turn. He could run five or six blocks and feel like he was in a new city. San Francisco felt like it was less like one big city and more like a conglomerate of several, big city-like neighborhoods. You could be in a tightly packed pastel-laden residential neighborhood lined with bodegas and flowers shops one minute and find yourself in an industrial, monochromatic bay-side manufacturing district the next. It was an excellent way to familiarize himself with the new city. Soon, streets that seemed so foreign and dangerous began to rebrand themselves into various running routes.

He finished up around 5:30 or 6 and stopped back at the house for a shower. The evenings with the Professor were fairly quiet. For the first hours of the evening, Thomas DeBorr was holed away in his study, puffing furiously at his pipe and flipping through stacks of research papers and books he had open out on the table. He took the occasional phone call and sometimes entertained a guest, often someone from the museum, but they never left the study while Peter was there. Dinner for the two of them was the Professor's delightful task, though it didn't get started until around 8 and wasn't likely to be eaten until shortly after 9. They usually spent a long time dissecting world affairs - talking history, politics, geography - and as the weeks went by, Peter felt more and more comfortable sharing his true thoughts about the world with his Uncle. The conversation always continued after dinner with drinks on the patio or in the smoky study accompanied by an album and an occasional cigar.

Everything tended to simmer somewhere just after midnight, where the Professor would go back to his room and enjoy a nightcap by his box window facing the street. Peter took that time to indulge in the parts of his life he felt his Uncle would never appreciate. He'd watch sports, action movies, and scroll the web for whatever poked his fancy. His night ended around 1 am. And it would begin again about six hours later.

For weeks, this routine continued seamlessly and the more his days became familiar, the more Peter started to shed the darkness that he felt followed him from Kansas. No one at work and no one on the street cared about his past or what he had done prior to coming here and his Uncle seemed resigned to put all that in the past. This felt like a new chapter for Peter. His sleeps were now restful.

One morning in late June, on his way out the door, the Professor stopped him.

"We have a guest who will be joining us for dinner tonight. I'd love for you to meet them."

Peter spent the entire rest of that breezy June day feeling a bit nervous for the dinner ahead. Who was this mysterious guest that would be joining them? Why was it worth mentioning it ahead of time to the boy? Couldn't he have just proceeded as normal and find out later?

He carried his frenetic energy to Cafe du Rue. Antonio and Devin were on shift with him and both could sense his loss of ease. Devin, who had a penchant for getting involved in everyone's business, did his best to poke and prod the gossip out of his coworker.

"Did you just get dumped?", the kid asked.

"No. Have you ever heard me talk about anyone?"

Devin playfully shoved Peter by the shoulder. "Like you'd tell me anyways!"

"I just have an important dinner coming up tonight."

"It's a dinner!", Devin yelled towards the backroom where the roaster was kept. Antonio came out moments later.

"A dinner? So I was right, a dinner date?", Antonio asked with a smirk.

"No, no. He made it clear it's not a date".

Peter recognized he'd been opaque about the whole thing and simply explained that his Uncle was having a guest over for dinner, which is something he had yet to experience.

"So what?", Antonio barked. "It's probably just one of his friends from the University or someone from the museum."

"You're probably right. But I don't like being in the dark about these things"

"It's probably that donor guy.", his boss said so flippantly.

"Donor guy?"

"The 'fine, upstanding' Canadian gentleman who's helping him work on the big exhibition. He hasn't talked to you about him?"

"Is that the French guy?", Devin quipped.

"He's the wealthy benefactor who's responsible for the two biggest wings of the DeYoung museum, and he's the one who's supposedly overseeing the production of your Uncle's big project."

"You've met him?", all this talk of a man of such importance had Peter's curiosity stirring.

"He's been by the shop a few times. I mean, he was coming before any of that business with Thomas." Peter twisted his head in disbelief. "He lives in the neighborhood somewhere."

Peter left work earlier that day, claiming he needed to "prepare" for dinner. In reality, he wanted to escape the annoying badgering of his coworkers. Walking through the neighborhoods on his way home, he did wonder how many ritzy one percenters were coved away in modest-looking San Francisco homes. It was all about when they moved in. If they were in the City for more than two decades, they had a chance of being a relatively normal, middle-class American. But anyone that owned a home they

purchased in the city limits in the last fifteen years was filthy rich. They were new money and this was a new money town. Whatever old money still existed here was hidden deep within mega mansions, tucked away in gated neighborhoods. Now the richest echelons of society could be street side in a Victorian, propped up by tech money from start-ups they didn't have to devote a fraction of their attention to. The cost disparity was still mind-boggling to the collegiate from the Sunflower State. One could live in a bona fide castle for the cost of a two-bedroom apartment in California.

That evening, Peter decided to take the long way home, which involved the walk through the hidden stairway he loved to take. He had grown quite fond of the route, not only for it's perceived solitude from the cacophony of the nearby city streets, but also because he would, on the luckiest of occasions, catch a glimpse of that auburn-haired girl. Mostly it was just before dusk. He figured she had either a summer job or school because she always seemed to be just getting home. His attraction, in so much as it could be called that, was strictly cordial and friendly. She was far beyond the gates connecting to the brick pathway he walked along and it was impossible to glean a legitimate physical attraction to someone who was no more visible than a charming blob. Only her hair and the distant remnants of facial features were easily discernible at her distance.

Again, it was a lucky day. As the crepuscular light gleaned through the row of bright green maple trees, Peter let his head swivel towards the familiar yard. They caught eyes and, as she sometimes did, she smiled and waved at him. He kept his steady pace, so as to not frighten her as he flashed his teeth and walked along.

'At least she doesn't think I'm some creepy stalker', he thought to himself.

He'd been careful to gauge their interactions over the five or six times she'd seen him in the yard. The conclusive evidence suggested, she found him a friendly new member of the neighborhood. He enjoyed that.

"Have a great day!", he heard ring in a soft chirp behind him.

He swung around at the top of the stairs and saw the girl exiting the gate to walk her husky in the opposite direction. They were now on speaking terms. At least, that was the way Peter saw it.

"Ah, you must be the Kansas kid."

The stout man had just unbuttoned his suit jacket and carefully draped it over the chair, pausing his conversation with the Professor to welcome the young man home. They were just about to sit down for dinner when Peter came into the dining room. He was astonished at how this man had timed his arrival in the only ten minute absence Peter took to shower and change clothes. The man stood with an outstretched hand, a silver Tag Heuer watch clung tightly to his wrist. He didn't smile, but had one lip upturned in good faith and the full force of his two stout shoulders pointed at the boy.

'He could've been a wrestler', the boy thought as he shook the man's hairy hand. He was average height and a bit shorter than Peter, but his mere dimensionality of the man made him feel three times as large.

"Marc Roy"

"It's nice to meet you Marc. And yes, I am the Kansas kid."

The Professor had prepared a delicious hen meal for the evening with a split pea soup and sweet potato puree on the side. They were served a digestif, a paired cocktail, and an aperitif along with a specially curated wine for the meal, all of which Mr. Roy seemed to delight in more than the food which was served.

He was a businessman and he looked the part. Suit, slicked graying hair, perfect table manners. Every part of his appearance made this now familiar dining room feel more like a board room to Peter. But his conversation and curiosities made it evident he was a man steeped in culture. Money was certainly what made him, but not what made him tick. They talked about contemporary artists, about Jeff Coons and Christo, and filmmakers like Whit Stillman and Denis Villeneuve, and broad cultural changes in race relations, political tensions, and approaches to the climate. Peter would jump in now and then. He felt more obligated to chime in than usual so he didn't look weak or uninterested in front of his Uncle. He had a soft spot for musical theatre, so he found himself marveling at the stories of Marc's trip to New York and asked several questions about what he should do if he ever gets a weekend there.

The conversation was always friendly, but intense. Every time the Professor left the room to get another drink or use the bathroom, Peter felt the pressure fall on him to make a good impression. Marc was kind, but seemed to be examining him at all times, figuring out the story behind this new person in the house.

"Clark Kent, right?", he quipped.

Peter knew what he was getting at. "Yeah, you mean from Kansas? Superman is our claim to fame."

"Superman", Roy repeated. When he spoke, he always had this faint hushed sound when saying his 's' sounds and tended to slur a bit with 'sh' and 'ch' sounds as well, which Peter assumed had to be some kind of accent.

"Have you been to Kansas before Mr. Roy?"

"I've driven through Topeka once. But I'm ashamed to say, I haven't."

"You aren't missing much. Unless you're deeply interested in Wizard of Oz lore."

Marc just smiled.

"And you're a University student?"

"Yes. A third year, a junior at the University of Kansas."

"Excellent. It's the most difficult year to get through. And you chose to study?"

"Economics.", Peter paused to take a sip and collect his thoughts as the alcohol started to hit him. "With a minor in International Affairs. I'd love to do something with trade one day... possibly go to law school."

"Ah. An aspiring mensch? Hoping to make some big decisions on the world stage. Trade is a buzzword these days after all."

"I'm just interested in the macro of economics, I guess. I like the idea of the interconnectivity of it all."

"You've got the right spirit Superman.", he raised his glass to the boy, "I'm sure your parents are very proud."

Fearing his follow-up interrogation about why he was in San Francisco and emboldened by his buzz, Peter quickly took the reigns of the conversation.

"So what's your story Mr. Roy?"

Pausing to reflect for a moment, he gave the boy a brief, but detailed explanation which felt a bit like a company press release. He was born Jean-Marc Roy and raised in Quebec (which explained the hint of an accent), but his family moved around a bit, mostly between Quebec and Ontario. He went to engineering school at CalPoly and it was there he met the people whom he would one day invest in and strike gold. He worked as a civil engineer in a small firm in DC before he finally got involved with the first commercial internet delivery service. His work on that and the dot com boom sent him to San Francisco where a series of key investments with old colleagues from college made it so he never had to work another day in his life. His primary focus nowadays was in "robust cultural infusions", as he put it.

Marc Roy was now a benefactor to artisans everywhere. At least, for those who weren't in direct business with him, it was the only lens through which he wished to be viewed. Peter sensed this feeling growing throughout their conversation as any detailed explanation of his rise to great wealth was omitted as was anything about his personal life. He wanted to talk about culture, ideas, and society. The end of their dinner wrapped up with the Thomas and Marc bouncing back and forth about how the idea of Romanitas in the Roman Republic was a principle that would have a profound effect on society today.

It became abundantly clear to Peter why Marc enjoyed working with his Uncle so much: Thomas lived and breathed the culture that Mr. Roy cherished. If he didn't know the context, Peter would have assumed this was a dinner between old friends. But underlying the socratic banter was an air of strictness and an absence of levity.

The dinner ended around 11 and the men went to the study for a nightcap to talk business. At the behest of Mr. Roy himself, Peter was invited to "stay for a drink".

A drink was long enough to be drawn into their work-related negotiations. Thomas was the lead involved in curation for the new exhibit on the Bronze Age civilizations of the Mediterranean. They agreed on most things, but were at odds with how to distribute the weight of various elements of the exhibit. The stuff that didn't go over Peter's head he found a bit boring, but played interested nonetheless.

As the hour neared midnight, the alcohol fueled a sense of camaraderie and Marc seemed to let his guard down a bit. He would grab Peter after getting riled up discussing Athenian royal succession and the architecture on Crete. The enthusiasm was palpable and it was easy to get excited about these ideas, people, and sculptures even if you'd never heard of any of them.

Just before midnight, when Peter sensed his Uncle had started to wane for the night, he began mentally preparing himself for the next day covering an early morning shift. But Marc was on a high. He leaned into the two of them, tossed back a glass of Amaro and asked, "Tell me young Peter DeBorr, do you like Jazz?"

The club was called "Mr. Dizzy's Record Room" and it was filled to the brim with music-lovers of all ages gathering late into the night on a Tuesday. It was nearly one in the morning when they arrived and a heavy rain had started to warm them to the sound of aggressive percussion as it pounded on cable cars and awnings just outside. But inside, there was only music. They elbowed their way through the crowd to the bar, where a man who recognized Mr. Roy immediately brought them to a table close to the stage. Peter had never felt so important. He'd also never even seen a saxophone played live, much less been to a jazz club. For him, it felt like he was transported into an old film of some kind.

Marc held up three fingers with his hand and waved them around in a lazy fashion towards the back bar. Moments later, they were all presented with some kind of dark drink served chilled in martini glasses. The band blasted away in their faces and Peter was completely enveloped by it. He didn't even particularly like jazz, but the

environment, the mood, and passion that was coursing throughout the space was contagious. A giggle of pure pleasure escaped him.

"Not bad, right Superman?"

He could hardly hear Marc over the trumpet player's riff but he nodded enthusiastically anyway.

The group was called "Andre Hawkins and the Sunday Steppers". It was a five piece ensemble with a pianist, a bass player, a trumpet player, a saxophonist, and a drummer. They were playing a lot of jazz standards that night, but Peter wouldn't have known the difference either way. He didn't know whether it was the alcohol or the experience at Mr. Dizzy's Record Room, but his perception of time started to disappear entirely.

One round of drinks came. Another and then another. He started to learn a bit about the structure of the music and improvisational style. Solos were particularly a fun element to watch. In between sets, Marc would lean in to the two DeBorr men and try and talk to them about the story behind the song or who he thought one of the members played like. The Professor certainly had a lot of ideas of his own, impressing their host by introducing him to jazz musicians even he hadn't heard of. But the hour of the night had certainly slowed Thomas' usual vigor in conversations like this. It seemed like he had mentally started to tire as soon as they got to the club, but he sported on drink after drink nonetheless. Peter for his part, found himself becoming way more involved than usual. He knew extraordinarily little about jazz. Working at Starbucks and the University, he'd been exposed to some of the largest figures in its history. And so he continued to chime in referencing that which he knew: Miles Davis, Glenn Miller, Thelonious Monk (which he kept calling "Felonious", though no one noticed). Marc seemed to enjoy the participation from the boy in whatever form it came. Peter felt happy. He felt involved. And he felt important.

They were so lost in the music, slurred, red-faced conversation, and swirling garnish-less glasses that they hardly noticed when the lights for last call came on. The room was a haze and Peter could hardly keep his vision straight. Marc politely covered the tab and walked with them outside.

"Thank you sir... So much! That was a crazy experience. I just- I've never seen anything like it."

"Yes Marc, thank you", Thomas added.

"Please, gentleman. It was my pleasure. And Peter the younger, just know there's a lot more opportunity where that came from." He hailed a nearby cab. "Take care of your ears, take care of your eyes, take care of your soul." With that, the door slammed shut and drove away, creating a soft mist in its wake.

The DeBorr men decided to walk home in the hopes of burning off some of the alcohol. The streets were bright. The soft light from the streetlamp reflected off the pools of rain and the fresh reflective coat the asphalt was wearing.

"That was just wild. I'm sorry Uncle Tom, I know you're exhausted, but I just loved that."

He quietly smiled at the boy. "I'm glad you enjoyed yourself. You know you should go back sometime. The city is meant to be explored."

Peter nodded.

"You've been here for almost three weeks and you go to work and you go on your walks, but you still seem.... cautious."

Peter felt called out and he knew his Uncle was right.

"I guess I am a bit. I'm just trying to be a good guest."

"Dammit man", Thomas said playfully. "Explore! You're a young man. Forget all this guest noise. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm more than happy to bore you with my sample lectures every evening, but I'd think a man of your age would want to engage with his peers, go out, eat good cuisine, listen to good music."

"I'm only here for another month or so..."

His dismissive attitude started to irk Thomas.

"All the more reason to go! I'm not forcing you to do anything. But to invoke the cliché of older men feeling they have something pertinent to bestow on younger generations, permit me the opportunity to give you one piece of advice."

He paused under the streetlamp at the bottom of the steep street they lived on.

"Time is precious Peter. It doesn't do you any good to dwell in the past. You're not going to fix what you did to that family. And that doesn't mean you should forget what happened. But it means you have to move on."

Peter took a deep sigh and nodded, hoping it would end the prolonged silence. But the Professor let it hang in the air for a few moments. Then he smiled,

"I'd venture to say that Mr. Roy might be your first friend here."

He smiled back, "What about Antonio?"

"Oh he hates you.", Thomas said playfully. "He told me."

Peter took his Uncle's advice to heart. He reached out a bit to his coworkers, mostly Antonio, forming a somewhat casual relationship. They were the closest in age and had enough in common to enjoy each others company. Every Tuesday and Friday after work they would head to the Crow's Nest down the street for a drink. Antonio didn't seem to care how much or how often his employee imbibed and often was on the sidelines egging him on.

Fridays, Antonio brought a few of his friends along to liven up the crowd. Most of them were high school friends and cousins who'd known each other for sometime. As the weeks went by, Peter became more accustomed to their inside jokes and group dynamics. Ernesto was the joker of the group, Crystal was the hot mess, and Naomi was one who seemed to disappear every time she got to a certain level of drunkenness. For his part, Peter was known as the "happy drunk", who'd giggle endlessly after a few cocktails. The crew would bounce around from bar to bar, often ending at the park

after last call, drinking whatever they had picked up along the way. Peter loved the feeling like he was apart of the group and despite his stark "small town" vibe, they accepted him as one of their own. Still, he only ever really got to know them when they were drunk and prevented any kind of genuine connection from forming.

Except Antonio. Peter and his boss did take time, especially on those Tuesdays to talk and open up a bit. They'd head over to Antonio's small, chaotic apartment he shared with four other roommates and watch sports on the TV. He'd tell Peter all about the struggles of growing up a place you could never afford to live, the plight of his immigrant family, and the rapidly receding options he so desperately hoped for in the future. All of this made Peter sad. He always thought growing up in Manhattan was a drag. It felt like such a "barren one-horse town" so much of the time, but he never stopped to think about how lucky he really was, how those empty fields of sprawling wheat were vacant lots of opportunity. There wasn't ever a fear, even for the most meager of earners, that you wouldn't be able to own a home, much less be able to retire comfortably.

The cost of living was a heavy burden that weighed heavily on Peter's mind as he saw the squalor manifest in the tent encampments that absorbed entire street corners, riddled with desperate, ghoulish faces stained with the rainbow array of personal tragedies. Each face held a story. His rural upbringing made him wary of situations like this. Everyone had control of their own destiny, he was told. And sure, some of these people had fallen into the terrible disease of addiction and chosen to follow the path into the event horizon of unfiltered hedonism and rot. But many others, as he learned, were victims of misfortune. They had been priced out, let go, or abused and their pride had been robbed from them in what felt like an instant. Antonio explained he had at least five relatives who were in exactly this situation and even told Peter the street corners he was likely to see them on. Some he had even walked by before.

Peter wanted to share his own vulnerabilities. But the ones he felt he could share might seem like petty complaints when pressed up against the ones his boss had. And the one secret - the big one he carried with him every day - he didn't have the heart to share. He was thankful Antonio had never pried about 'why' he was in San Francisco or whether he 'chose' to come out here for the Summer. Anytime anyone had asked up to this point, he gave the dismissive response: "I'd never been here before this summer, so I thought I'd take the opportunity."

When he had a few drinks in him, he did talk about his loneliness. He told Antonio about his lack of friends in the new city and how he wasn't truly that close to his Uncle who kept a distance when it came to personal matters.

"He can be that way", Antonio chimed in. It seemed so often that he knew more about Thomas than Peter did.

"He tells you stuff?", Peter said with a hint of disappointment.

"Well, you know. He used to come in here a lot and he had a lot on his mind, I guess. So, yeah. He'd tell me things sometime. There was a period about a year ago where I started to feel like a confession booth."

Peter just shook his head.

He wasn't the type to try and get close to anyone, but he was disappointed that, aside from the night with Mr. Roy, he never got any insight into his Uncle's daily life or thoughts.

On a gray morning, the chimes at the door of the Cafe du Rue rang and a familiar face popped through the door.

"It's her... That's her", Peter swiveled around to get Antonio's attention. They both shared their loves and objects of desire with one another and Antonio was completely dialed in about the girl from the walks with the dog. She had walked in the shop today.

She had no dog, but her hair gave her away nonetheless. She stood about five foot seven with slightly heeled shoes on. Her dress was summery, but it nicely complimented her slight figure, even under the loose rain jacket. She had an athletic look to her, not particularly curvy, but her facial features were soft and feminine. Her hazel eyes sparkling from the mist that had gathered from outside. As she approached the counter she smiled. Antonio popped his head around the corner, but seeing her approaching, immediately retreated to the back room. Peter felt a sense of dread fall over him.

"Don't I know you from somewhere?", she said with a friendly, but reserved smile.

Peter tried to be creative. "Are you from Kansas?"

She scoffed. "No! Are you? You're the dog guy aren't you?"

"I don't have a dog."

"No, I mean, you like dogs."

"I guess. I mean who doesn't?"

There was an awkward silence before Peter chimed back in.

"If you mean your dog, I think so. You've got the Husky?"

"Esty", she said with a nod.

"Right, Esty..."

"Yeah, you're the guy who walks in my neighborhood sometime."

"It's the coolest street that you live on. Really, it's nice, it's isolated. And you've got a beautiful home."

She laughed. "Oh it's not my home. I actually live in a small guesthouse in the back."

"By yourself?", he asked.

She shot back a suspicious look.

"I just, I don't know many people our age who do live by themselves in the city."

A smile cracked across her face. "How do you know I'm your age?"

Peter had enough pressure for such menial conversation that he folded.

"Alright, are ya gonna give me a hard time all morning or order a coffee?"

Her grin expanded cheek to cheek and a soft chuckle escaped her lips.

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry. I'm a very ornery person sometimes. You live here long enough, you get kinda grouchy. You really must be from Kansas then. I'm so sorry for the rude welcome"

"That's okay. There's plenty worse than you that come in here day to day."

"Glad to hear that I'm not the worst!"

She laughed and he chuckled along. The ice had thawed a bit. She ordered a Cappuccino and payed before introducing herself.

"I'm Elish"

"Peter"

They shook hands.

"Thank you Peter. So you really are from Kansas?"

"He's new and still has no friends", Antonio said as swung out of the backroom on his way to the kitchen.

They both blushed.

"He basically pesters me nonstop after work. I'm like, 'bro, let me have some me time', you know? Meet some people."

He winked at her as he slipped into the kitchen.

"We could get a drink sometime", she said.

Peter's heart soared.

"I know a great coffeeshop", she said as she leaned in with a wink.

He'd known her all of four minutes and was smitten. They exchanged phone numbers and planned to meet in the coming days. From the outside, everything seemed on the up and up for Peter. But internally, he couldn't bat away the feeling of dread.

Thomas was delighted to hear about his nephew's upcoming date.

"It's the best news I've heard all week."

He played it off subtly, but the Professor had hinted at a difficult work week. Relations between him and Mr. Roy had soured a bit since their boozy night at the jazz club. Thomas had taken a "demeaning tone" towards Marc in their recent discussions, stemming from his benefactors lack of understanding on the subject matter. The museum board had felt it was important to bring in an array of pieces to give a broader, more varied perspective. Thomas was in full agreement and started to contact his associates down at Stanford about temporarily acquiring some of their exhibit pieces from their series on Nuragic civilization. Before long, he had people willing to donate pieces from Turkey to Tunis with everything in between. This was nothing new for Thomas. Ever since leaving academia, he committed all of his professional energy to the museum work. The way he saw it, museums were places to educate the masses, which stood in contrast to academia, where education was primarily for the educated. Working with exhibits gave the chances to tell stories, where entire university courses could come with a hint of didactic bureaucracy.

But the work was scarce. And it became even more difficult to find jobs the older one was and the less involved socially. In his early transition years, Thomas came to learn that, alongside knowledge of a culture and a people, one was expected to gift a bit. You may be able to get work at smaller end, lower-budget projects on your laurels alone. But if he wanted to truly get into the business of writing his own destiny and creating the kinds of displays he wanted to, then he would have to find someone willing to push him to the big leagues. After years of putting himself out there and

pushing and prodding every board member and gold star donor, he'd finally met someone willing to push his dream projects for him. It didn't hurt that Marc was already heavily integrated into the gallery and museum scene, not only in the San Francisco Bay Area, but also Chicago, New York, Montreal, and Toronto.

And so once they agreed to work together, Thomas understood what his role would be: to contribute value wherever possible. For him, this was in curation, planning and producing. But as time went on, he bagged to feel that his desired role from the perspective for Marc was to be a validator.

Marc had his own distinct ideas about the way these projects should come together. None of his suggestions were informed by anything other than desire and profound interest. In short, he was no expert, though he certainly fancied himself one. And so he pushed his own agenda forward in terms of how each project should come together and what should be highlighted. He was putting up a lot of money, after all. Many others who had worked with him in the past didn't mind either because he was funding them so handsomely. They often wouldn't even condor the perks: lavish dinners, expensive gifts, invitations to his winter ski lodge. And those that challenged him again and again, were placed in a situation which they slowly regretted overtime.

Thomas DeBorr was not known to shy away from the finer things in life, but he wasn't willing to give up anything to contradict his, as he called it, "stoic Dutch work ethic". In his soul, he was a farm boy from Kansas, just like Peter, who felt that the corrupting influence of money was something to avoid at all costs.

Unfortunately, this put him at increasing odds with Marc, who had his own distinct ideas about the exhibit execution. His forcefulness on this subject made Thomas wonder why he even cared to involve him. But he had one thing that Marc didn't, but wanted so desperately. Credibility.

In the days prior, their relationship had started to fray as they were of completely different minds as to which pieces deserved highlighting and which ones did not. Thomas had never met someone so unduly confident and Marc had never met someone so stubborn. Externally, it looked as though there may be an easy compromise. But internally, Thomas knew he didn't have much of a choice. He needed

the job. It was a lot of money for him personally, as well as for the museum and their foundation. And unfortunately, a lot of the funds he'd received, he had already spent.

He was in a unique bind. But externally, he wanted to keep a semblance of normalcy. From his perspective, there was no point in alarming his sensitive nephew, and the matters were really none of his business anyway.

The evening was unseasonably warm in the city. For the first time since Peter had arrived, the DeBorr men were enjoying dinner al fresco in his small, street-facing garden patio. Peter had prepared the meal for the evening: a special beef ragu pasta dish with a fresh garden salad on the side. Thomas was impressed and pleased to see his nephew in such an element of joy, which he attributed to this new romantic interest.

"So.... Tell me about her. I'm curious."

Thomas leaned back in his chair, an eager audience member.

"She's got a dog."

"Conscientious girl"

"And kind of this dark sense of humor. Like, I feel like she likes to make you feel uncomfortable."

"A heathy dose of discomfort for humor's sake never hurt anyone."

"But that's really it. She's got auburn hair and green eyes. I'll learn more tomorrow."

Thomas took a swig of his wine and smiled down at the boy.

"I hope this blossoms in a wonderful way for you. You need this."

A soft breeze passed through the branches of the large trees that covered outdoor space in front of his home. Once it passed, the sound of some late evening birds

chirping away hummed in the distance. Feeling the closeness of the moment with his Uncle, Peter decided to take a leap of faith and inquire where he hadn't before.

"Hey, whatever happened to that woman. Marjorie, I think her name was. We called her Aunt Marge for a bit. She was there one Christmas when you came out to town and I remember she brought that big red coat which us kids, of course, thought made her look like Cruella DeVille."

The Professor paused in a moment of reflection and let his chin fall to his chest as he pondered how to respond. He took a deep breath and hummed to give the impression of articulation of thought before rising to respond.

"You remember her. I'm surprised, you were just a young kid, a veritable sprout when she first came along." His nose bristled as he recollected. "She was... a good friend. We were University fellows together, both in PhD programs at the same time, and so naturally we'd run into one another late nights at the library. As you may know, there's a lot of independent study in these programs and it means you actually have more time than you could imagine to spend time with others. She and I kept each other company."

"There were rumors you were getting engaged.", Peter pressed.

"Yes. I know people were under the impression."

"Like your brother? Or sister in-law? Or grandma or grandpa?"

"Or her, even."

Thomas stopped the questioning right there in his tracks and Peter almost felt like he had crossed a line.

"I'm sorry Uncle Tom, I just was curious. I had to ask. Sometimes, you just seem so... you can seem so lonely is all."

The Professor forced a defensive smile. "I assure you I am not."

"I just wanted you to have somebody. Someone to keep you company."

"I'm no spring chicken anymore, but I certainly had opportunities in the past. Marjorie was a big turning point for me in so many ways, but I've never been close to anything like that since."

The night was young, but Peter felt the conversational oil slowly burning off. Even with his wine buzz setting in with force, he could sense his Uncle's discomfort at the subject matter and didn't want to complicate his stay by inconveniencing his host. But he had to know.

"What happened? Between you two?"

"Unfortunately, as great of companions as we were, there was something always missing. It was never going to work. I think one of the greatest tragedies of love is that it's often most powerful when it's fleeting. When we know the story has to end, things become saccharine and sticky. I never was conscious of that until I was a lot older, but it made me appreciate the little things. It made me appreciate romantic moments, little capsules of love. In the end, Marjorie and I were of different minds. And so we had to break up. And, I take no pleasure in reporting that it was entirely my fault."

He started to tear up a bit.

"I couldn't be the person that she wanted me to be."

Peter felt like he'd crossed a line. He started to gather the dishes and thought about heading to the bar down the hill to sit and ponder the conversation that was still settling in his mind.

"If there's anything to glean from what I've told you tonight it's the value in being as authentic as possible. The second that you stop doing that, you end up losing yourself Peter. And there's no person and no group of people that should make you do that. I've spent so much of my life manufacturing myself in a way that would appeal to those I love without much thought or regard to myself that, after all these years, I've lost a bit of that authenticity myself. I know you have your own demons from the situation in Manhattan that you're dealing with, and personally, I don't think

authenticity mean broadcasting any of that to the world. I've made it perfectly clear my stance on that. But when it comes to who you are inside, where your moral compass points, don't let anyone or anything alter that for you. "

They left the table on an emotional, cheery note and the Professor immediately retreated to his study for a few more hours of work. As Peter walked to the bar, he could think of nothing but the sins of his past in Kansas and how he'd tried to hard to extinguish those from memory. The nightmares felt like they were slowly creeping back.

The next 39 hours flew by in a haze as Peter felt like he had something genuine to look forward to in his date with Elish. His coworkers, especially Tessa, were keen to help him get off early so he had time to prepare. So many of the days they'd worked together, she had to leave early to go to class or pick up her kid and he was always kind and accommodating.

"You make a mother proud.", she'd always tell him. She had no idea just how not proud of him his mother actually was. Even though they were hardly a decade apart in age, Tessa took on a maternal approach to their relationship, feeling the need to give advice and quiz him on his approach to his new life in the city and the girls in his life. Peter didn't take too much offense to it, but he certainly did find her nosy.

"You should arrive five minutes late to get her and have some easy excuse", she suggested. "That way she'll have a moment of doubt over whether you're coming or not and she'll be even more relieved when you do end up there. "

"But we're meeting at a cafe. "

"A cafe? Bad start. Never do a date at a cafe. Why can't you do dinner? Ugh, well then show up late to the cafe!"

Peter did not heed her advice and instead got on a streetcar early enough that he gave himself time in case he had trouble locating the place.

The San Francisco streetcars were noisy and less glamorous than he imagined. It was a far cry from a ride on a cable car with its melodic bells and open air views. The streetcars were a brutalist, grey metal shuttle which operated like a glorified bus with its worn metal poles stabbing through the seventies-inspired laminate flooring, smatterings of lewd graffiti scratched into the hard plastic. Not the most inspiring scene for a romantic meeting.

Peter anxiously tugged at the cuffs of the leather jacket his mother had bought him two years ago. His palms were sweaty already. Stop after stop, Peter anxiously let go of the pole out of fear that this was his stop and he needed to get off. Clinging the pole tightly, he leaned towards the open doors to peek outside. They were getting closer to the park stop and he could get the feeling of claustrophobia creeping back in. The buildings were getting taller and the noises getting louder. It was like his first day all over again. He hadn't been to this part of the city since.

He felt someone else hand directly underneath his, a bony, tiny knuckle was pressing up against the side of his hand on the pole. This irked him, but out of respect, he tried to not pay them any mind. Then, almost in a retaliatory manner, they had the gall to slide their hand up and put pressure on his. His head whipped around. There, dressed in a knee-length black skirt and a white shirt with a smart, red jacket of her own was Elish.

She looked stunning, but in a quiet sort of way. Her actual outfit didn't seem out of the ordinary for what he had seen her wear previously, but she was wearing a bit of eyeliner and blush, both of which he hadn't seen her try before. The subtle change stirred him. She grinned at him with tinted lips and he turned to face her.

He thought about saying something, but he wanted to hear if she had some sardonic comment of her own to add first. Instead, she stood silent, smiling and glancing up at him and then back down towards her shoes. He did the same, catching eyes with her for a short instant between moments. They giggled at the strange situation they'd found themselves in. After all, neither of them planned this. It was a sincere moment, where two strangers felt like they got to have a moment with one another that transcended expectation.

When they arrived at their stop, she finally broke the ice.

"I think this might be your stop"

It was a good thing too, because Peter was too distracted to remember that it was his stop. He laughed. "Oh yeah, what are you going to just get off at the next stop and walk over?"

"Uh, yeah. I was thinking along those lines. How else am I going to make a dramatic entrance? I mean, you kind of spoiled it."

The two of them were supposed to meet at a small pub around the corner, called Den of Thieves, which featured a comprehensive spread of black, metal lawn furniture sprawling out from the awning towards the park, itself a sunny, picturesque staple of a city-view green, complete with picnicking families, beagles kicking up mounds of dirt, and street magicians playing along the sidewalk - all against the backdrop of a row of tall, spiny skyscrapers. It certainly felt more Manhattan, New York than Manhattan, Kansas, but it provided a demure enough environment to have an actual conversation. They sat Parkside, just outside the cover of umbrellas, where they had the best angle to people watch and also because Elish said she liked to be further away from the restaurant because when it was time to leave, she felt like she could exit without having to send her server off with a proper goodbye.

He cautiously ordered a burger with a lurking fear that she may be a vegetarian or otherwise adverse to meat consumption. To his relief, she followed up with an order of Fish and Chips, but with a side salad. Both of them ordered light beers.

Their conversation flowed surprisingly smoothly to begin, ranging from topics on favorite types of restaurants, the joys of eating outdoors, and the temperamental weather patterns in the city. She also took an interest in his Kansas life, pointing out his upbringing was in stark contrast to hers. She had grown up in the city.

"A true city kid, huh? That must be where that acerbic humor sets in."

"That and domineering parents", she quipped.

When he asked about them, she turned inwards a bit. Her mother had passed three years ago from a spinal carcinoma which was found about five months too late. Feeling a bit awkward for having thrust such a vulnerable topic at her, and not wanting to have to describe his own complex relationship with his own parents, Peter tried to change topics to something more relevant: her life at the moment.

"So you're a student."

"A senior in fact, though I'm probably going to end up taking five years if everything goes well in the end."

"Well you got one year on me then", he said, raising his glass in appreciation.

Her body ricocheted from the statement. "You're a junior? Wow. I would have never guessed. You look five or six years older than me. But maybe that's just a guy thing. I feel like men sort of polarize around fifty years old. Like even through their twenties and thirties and forties, there's this pull to look fifty years old - it sort of ages you. But when you get past fifty, it has the inverse effect and somehow when you're sixty and seventy, you look younger because of that polarity. It's kind of a lucky thing in the end because women, well, I feel like women have kind of two polarizing points. One is seventeen and the other is seventy. Unfortunately that seventy starts to pull on you a lot sooner than you'd expect."

"That explains the old lady jowl you've been working on there", he teased.

She shook her head in astonishment. "I can't believe you're younger than me. That's wild. I don't know how I feel about that."

Peter panicked briefly. He didn't want to be discounted for something so trivial, but he also didn't want to acknowledge it as a legitimate fear, especially since she was known to steer conversation through sarcasm.

"You know, neither do I", he said holding a soft smile. As soon as she softened her posture, he tried to pivot.

"So, what do you study?"

"Art History", she said, pausing to think. "And Theology."

Peter was impressed. Both felt like such lofty, airy degrees, of which only people in cities really spent their time studying. At no point in his time at KU did he ever meet a Theology student and he only knew one Art History major, who was the girlfriend of his freshman year roommate Sam.

"Wow. Those are some excellent... uh, fields of study for lengthy dinner conversations or museum tours!"

She was laughing lightheartedly throughout the exchange, but Peter got a sense she had some kind of reservation about the subjects that she wasn't fully comfortable sharing.

"Why Art History AND Theology?", he prodded.

"Well I think my father would have loved me to join a convent. He's not an outspoken religious type, but as the protective father type, he's certainly keen on keeping me away from anything he deems dangerous - or fun really. So Theology was mostly due to pressure from him at the time. He said if I had church on the mind, there was less room for boys. It doesn't help that I go to a Jesuit school, where all that is kind of dangling in the periphery anyway, but that was where I chose to go and was offered a scholarship. But of course I couldn't live, breathe and eat that stuff all day. I think that would have been the nun pathway I more or less rejected, so I petitioned to study art history so I might find work in.... and you guessed it, museums. Or research. Or teaching. I don't know yet."

"My Uncle was a Professor for a while. Anthropology. Berkeley was the only local school he taught at around here, but maybe I'm wrong."

She raised her eyebrows and nodded.

"I'm sure your Uncle and I would have some scintillating conversations."

"So do you want to teach at a school locally or do you want to work at the MoMa or something like that."

She grimaced and Peter at first couldn't tell if she had a bad sip of beer or something, but her rotating head indicated that it was not the case.

"Oh, no no no. I want to get out. Way the hell out of this place.", she leaned back in her chair and caught his face sink a little, causing her to spring back forward and correct the record.

"Not anytime soon, of course! But, yeah. I mean I grew up here. I know it's a kind of fun, new experience for you, but for me, it's - I grew up waking up Folsom Street to get Ice Cream, sneaking away from school up to Holly Park to ditch the last period of the day and change out of those awful, restrictive uniforms, taking the Muni down to the ball park to get some older guys to buy us drinks after a baseball game so we could drink them down by the water park. It's all so... boring to me. And I get that sounds different to you. I mean, I had to cross the Golden Gate Bridge every day for my first summer job and you haven't even gotten to go yet! But to me, and a lot of people I grew up with, it's just the way it was. I mean, I actually envied the kids whose - and there were a lot of them - whose parents took them out of the city once they were done with elementary school to live in the suburbs or who moved out of state. And I've gotten to travel a lot. And I've seen a lot of the world and a lot of America now, I've been through Kansas myself - to that town you went to college in, and I still will never know what it's like to actually live there. To have a real cul-de-sac, to have to drive to a supermarket, the sensation of wide open spaces being apart of daily life, it's all distant to me. And now I'm an adult and, even though I've gotten to travel a lot, I've never gotten to live anywhere else. And I want to. Even if it is another city, I don't care at this point, I want to have the experience."

Pete smiled. He felt like he'd finally peeled back a layer of this woman, creating a greater understanding of who she is. She took a deep breath and a gulp of the beer before continuing.

"And so I envy you a bit. You are getting to do it. You are getting to live somewhere else."

Peter paused, "Well, whatever the case, consider yourself lucky that you have so many things you can do here. It's definitely a different experience, both good and bad."

He sensed the conversation had started to become internalized as Elish's eyes would fall to the table in between his sentences as if her mind were somewhere else. That and the greying of the sky and a moderate breeze made the comforting scene less so. Peter had an idea on how he might boost the mood.

"Hey, wanna go somewhere cool?"

She lifted her head and nodded.

A twenty minute ride and they were back in familiar territory: Mr. Dizzy's Record Room. On a Tuesday evening they were as swinging as ever and Peter made special note of how much more "exciting" and "fast paced" the music was this evening as opposed to when he was there last.

Though he played it off cool, he felt so much more special bringing a date there. When he walked in, the validation only mounted as hordes of strangers - both men and women - took to stealing a glance of the dark-haired beauty as she walked by with her bouncing locks. Peter did good to keep his physical distance from her for the time being. He didn't want to press his luck, but he did place a hand on her jacket shoulder to pull her in closely as he spoke loudly into her ear, explaining how he'd been here before loads of times (he hadn't) and how he knew their entire menu of drinks (he didn't). Elish, for her part, had certainly heard of the club before. She'd had friends and family who'd mentioned it to her in passing, but according to her, they were the type of people who, she felt like she didn't "enjoy the same kind of hobbies" as and so she never really thought of going there until Peter insisted.

Once inside and seated, just two rows back, with Negronis in hand, she admitted that the place was, in fact, very cool and she had passed the wrong kind of judgement about it preemptively.

The band was loud and exciting. "Rory Fizzle" was what they were called. There was just a bassist, a drummer, and a pianist, but the three of them managed to bring the volume up in the place to unavoidable levels. The drummer, a more slender Questlove-looking man, really pushed the decimal ceiling, pounding his snare drum with such furor, the sweat from his brow would fall onto the drum and, after a subsequent wallop from his worn drumstick, fly like projectile fire into the audience. Peter thought of it like some kind of strange musical christening.

They sipped drinks and tapped their feet furiously alongside the heavy rhythm. Peter felt like this night was heading in the direction of his last visit to the establishment where the awareness of the world localized on the music so much so that when you finally broke out of it's spell the room was in a spinning haze. But things took a shift when Elish politely declined her third drink and opted to have a glass of water. Peter wasn't ready to quit drinking himself, but he wrestled with how well he could keep his composure. He also couldn't escape her earlier remark about how he was a year younger than her. Some part of him felt like continuing to imbibe would be a telltale sign he was still prescribed to the vices of youth and couldn't limit himself so, drunkenly, he tucked his wallet in the inner compartment of his jacket, convincing himself this would be enough of a safeguard against his own carnal desires.

The music went on and on and the two of them seemed to have a grand time. Every other song, Peter would let his eyes wander to the right side of the table to catch a glimpse of her cheerful grin, usually prompted by an appreciative "Wooh!" and clap-session that she would partake in. But during a break in the music after about two hours there, he saw Elish let out a yawn and begin to slump in posture, so he decided it was probably time to go.

He offered to walk her home and she initially declined, since the night was still very young, just past nine or so. But after a few silly excuses, she let him walk with her. On the walk they talked about music, specifically live music. One thing they had in common was an appreciation for hearing a musician in person. Both of them had been lucky enough to see their favorite bands perform in front of them, some of which they both had in common. They then discussed their own musical ability, which resulted in a few short, but humorous anecdotes about how neither had any before arriving at the gate which he walked by and saw her so many times before. Looking out at the massive house at the end of the brick path, he remarked.

"Wow, that's an impressive place. A one bedroom, you say?"

"I live in the guest unit out back", she said, blushing. "The, uh, owner of that house rents it out to me. But an extra perk is that people like you think I live there."

"People like me?" he said with a grin.

She just smiled back at him for a moment before her face seemed to grow heavy under the harsh light of the streetlamp.

"You know. I don't...I don't know if I should be seeing anyone right now."

Peter pulled his jacket tightly around his shoulders and ran his fingers nervously through his hair. What was the point of the night they had just had together? The music, the drinks, the soft breezy stroll all had an air of something personal - something intimate, yet she seemed to show trepidation. Peter kept his cool.

"Yeah, me neither", he said with a grin. He kept his hands in his pockets and, under the soft orange light of the streetlamp, just admired the gleam in her eyes. She stared at him with a cautious look of gratitude and then said she was retiring for the evening, but she couldn't seem to look away from his face.

The moment was still. A boy, A girl, A streetlamp on a brick stairway in a misty city on a summer evening just after dusk. The trees nearby rustled a bit before he slowly nodded and started to back away. Something about the ornate scenery, the abject beauty of the whole scenario caused her chest to swell and her face to flush with emotion. Neither knew that each other had an elevated heart rate, dilated pupils, and sweat collecting at the tips of their palms.

With no physical indicators and the confidence swell produced by the alcohol wearing off, Peter decided to cut his losses, swivel his boots in the other direction and start marching away.

"Hey!" Her yell felt like it was almost instinctual as she herself couldn't even tell where it came from.

He paused to look over his shoulder, halfway down the stairs.

Breathing more rapidly than usual, she blurted out.

"Call me, okay?"

He nodded with a grin. "Goodnight Elish", and disappeared down the stairs.

The staff at Cafe du Rue were more than eager to hear the recap from the date until its anticlimactic ending. Tessa felt validated in her advice, and continued to perpetuate the idea that, had he listened to her, things would have turned out different. The fact that their short lunch turned into a seven hour adventure meant nothing to her, it was still lunch and, as she put it, the wrong place to start.

Devon took joy in pestering him about bombing during a date, only to then turn it into an afternoon of complaining about how girls never give guys a real chance and the two of them needed to stop putting themselves out there for the wrong women.

"She said to call her", he reminded them. But it wasn't enough for everyone, including Peter. She said she wasn't really able to see anyone.

Normally Peter wouldn't have shared the details of his date with anyone, especially his coworkers, but the dangling participle that was the future of their relationship left him unsatisfied. He needed to run the scenario by as many people as possible to see if they caught anything he might have missed. When he caught up with Antonio over their postponed beer outing, he found his boss was sympathetic towards his emotional confusion, but provided no solid suggestions on amending the situation. "I dunno, just call her."

His afternoon run intentionally avoided her neighborhood that day. He couldn't bear to imagine the awkwardness of the conversation if they had to see one another.

Thankfully, the exercise did seem to ease his mind. Huffing up hills and through parks, he found himself exploring a new area of the city he'd never been. After heading up and down this hill that felt central to his flawed geography, he was let out in a tightly packed-neighborhood with a large rectangular green cutting right through it. It didn't have the vistas of some of the parks he had been to, but it had a neat little neighborhood charm all its own. Couples eating ice cream and chatty dog-walkers lined the edges, all dressed in sweaters to combat the summer cold. Slowing to walk through the largest side street which spilled into the park, he found a charming residential neighborhood. The street was lined with bright, colorful homes, some model, others Victorian, but each with some kind of a small front yard of porch features. Peter felt like the neighborhood must be wealthy to have such elaborate spacing right up to the street. On the corner, there was several small tables set out, sprawling amongst a sidewalk garden, which itself seemed to jettison directly from an corner store. He assumed it was some kind of a flower shop, but upon closer inspection, he found out it was really a charming little French restaurant. L'Ardoise, it was called. He made note of it's tucked away location if he ever got the opportunity for another date.

When he got back, his Uncle seemed hard at work and didn't come out of his study for dinner. He had Peter order some Thai food for takeout since he would be holed away for most of the evening. Eating alone normally would have been a special delight, but if there was anyone who would help him decide his next move, it was his Uncle. Around 10:50, without a bite eaten or a bathroom break taken, Peter knocked on the door to the study and shuffled in, bearing a plate full of microwaved Panang Curry.

Thomas looked up from his desk and, with his head tilted down so as to look above his glasses, he eyed the boy with defeated face.

"Ah, you're earning your keep now", he said, trying to preserve some levity.

Peter dropped off the food and sort of lingered in the corner looking at the books. He wanted desperately to vent about his problems, but had a lingering suspicion that it wasn't the right time. Thomas could tell he wanted something, but thought that if he simply minded his business the boy would get the message.

"Man, works really killing you today, huh", Peter quipped.

Thomas let out a noticeable sigh before lifting his glasses and jamming the lower part of his palm into his eye to rub it, hoping for some tiny dew-drop of satisfaction to be wrung out of the duct, where he would feel complete for the day.

As it was explained to him, Thomas was struggling to come up with a cohesive theme for the big exhibition he was in charge of. Initially, the themes seemed simple: Geometry of the Mediterranean, Evidence of Early Philosophy Through Art, and many such others. But the consortium of random goods that Mr. Roy had insisted be present in the show stymied Thomas DeBorr's academic approach to the exhibit. More troubling was simply the idea that the two had begun to fall out. What Peter witnessed that night they went out, his Uncle deigned to him, was the end of the plateau and the beginning of the denouement of their relationship. He had played witty accomplice and adoring professor for too long, but his patience had run thin. It's true, he enjoyed jazz music. And he certainly wasn't one to turn down a discussion on Mycenaean pottery or what natural features Virgil took inspiration from in his writings, he was more in sync conversationally with Marc than he cared to admit.

"We would make great friends, I think", he sputtered out in the midst of a spouting rant.

The only thing was that they couldn't just be friends. Marc was the guy who put up the money for the project, so he was the one making decisions.

"He's not my boss", he kept having to correct his nephew. They weren't in any direct line of command, and yet their relationship sure felt like it. He finally capitulated and explained to Peter that he couldn't simply abandon the project. That Marc had poured enough money into the museum that he would forever carry a dark stain around should he decide to abandon the project which was bringing the community so much money.

"The problem is that he's a hobbyist", he explained. "His interest in the subjects only goes so far, which makes him a great sparring partner when it comes to conversation, but when it comes to execution of ideas, I'm afraid its a bit more complicated."

The opening was supposed to happen in six weeks and he hoped they would fly by as fast as possible. Marc was going through some stuff himself that he hoped would draw his attention away from the project. One of his long-time partners, a firm called Veritas, was in the process of securing a massive deal between the two of them which would make Marc ten times as rich as he was.

"Multi-billionaire was a possible figure", Thomas mentioned, seething with disdain.

The lead at Veritas had been good friend of Marc's for the past five years and their families had grown close.

"It's all very personal business, that I'm sure he'd rather not share, but he's had to be transparent when it comes to these kinds of things lately. People start to ask where he is when he's not in the gallery space."

Thomas had little interest in the details of the deal, other than to know that it may provide some comfortable buffer room between him and his irksome benefactor. The way he saw it, the more he was busy making deals and getting richer, the less he was breathing down Thomas' shoulder. What Peter couldn't wrap his head around is how everyone else was so complicit in the whole debacle.

"If it's so bad, then why doesn't someone else step in? The museum director, someone?"

"Money", he said simply. "If they want a new gallery space, a fancy new, in-house, Michelin-starred restaurant, they're going to want money. It's horrid and gruesome, but it's the way the world works. I guess the museum has been in a bit of decline for the past few years and they see him as a kind of financial advisor."

The answer didn't make Peter feel any better. If anything, it validated his disappointment for the expectation that anything, anything at all would be different. The conversation sputtered out after that, with Thomas making a few excuses before pulling the cord on his antique lamps and shuffling his way out of the room with his arm around his nephew's shoulder, slowly pulling him out of the room.

That night, Peter spent the waning evening hours staring up at the ceiling, watching the wooden ceiling fan slowly pass in circles. The rotations, for him, were a source of calming repetition. He felt like it was almost like a buddhist dharma or something like that in it's circular nature. As he watched the fans move back and forth, he slowly drifted away for the night.

And the day ended.

For the next few days, Peter decided to work on the advice of his boss and tuck away his feelings for a bit. He certainly could tell this wasn't a time to bother Thomas, who incidentally, actually felt quite bad for the way he acting during a rare moment of vulnerability from his nephew. The two of them had sort of burrowed into their own worlds for a bit, which meant coming up with excuses for missing dinner, and finding reasons to leave for work earlier.

It wasn't Peter's fault. If anything, he felt like what he was doing was protecting Peter from the indelible wrought that had been brought on the beloved institution of Anthropology. Not that Peter cared for Anthropology in particular, but he did seem to hold his Uncle in certain regard and respected him immensely, especially for his contributions to academia. But now Thomas felt reduced. This became evident in his performance and attitude when arriving at the gallery. Much to his chagrin, instead of Marc LeRoy busing himself elsewhere with his wealthy associate, he brought the associate with him to the museum. The partner in question was a Mr. Leon Hewitt. He was a dapper older gentleman with what remained of his hair neatly combed to the side, who was scarcely seen without an ascot around his neck and a pocket square stuffed into his jacket pocket. He seemed to have a sunny, cheerful disposition when he was in the museum, doing his best to politely, but silently nod in acknowledgement of the staff there. The Museum Director, a woman named Eileen McAnnan, took great pride in watching Marc tour Mr. Hewitt around the place, confidently pointing to various wings and laying out his plans for future exhibitions. When Thomas would step in and say, "Eileen, we're not actually going to do that, right?" She would casually shrug through her arms up with a helpless chuckle and relent that, 'They didn't know what exhibits they would have out next year, much less the next few years.' It was a non-answer that drove him nuts.

Thomas had always had a decent relationship with Eileen. She'd come to several of his public lectures back when he was teaching at Berkeley and appreciated his dedication to nuance. "People and peoples have never just had one way of being looked at, otherwise they wouldn't be worth studying.", he would say. She was rabid about Ancient Greek culture, especially the early history of Crete, and felt that Thomas DeBorr had a distinct way of talking about the culture with such reverence and familiarity, it was as if he was speaking about his own family. She loved that. During their first substantive conversation, they bonded over their wistful saudade over not having seen Phidas' Statue of Zeus in all its glory. It was the beginning of a fruitful friendship that stemmed from mutual appreciation. He'd, of course, known of and felt a great deal of respect for her work at the DeYoung Museum. From his perspective, she provided the museum with the much needed new coat of paint he had complained about ad infinitum. She had been in charge for nearly two decades and brought a layer of sophistication to the place, which was often misconstrued as "elitism" by the generations of young, bleeding-heart liberals attempting to burrow their nests in the city. Thomas and Eileen would have lunch once a month for several years before he told her he was thinking of leaving Academia and she had a perfect career shift for him.

"We could use a savant Tommy. I work with too many children who are focused on making the exhibitions political. I need someone who just loves the work for the core content it provides."

He didn't want to make it obvious, but was ecstatic at the offer. He left his Professorship and spent a summer in St. Ives in a small seaside cottage, taking time to read some of the classic novels he'd always lied about reading, while really getting absorbed in several research papers colleagues had lent him regarding the culture of the Bronze Age Maltese. The papers were fairly archeological in context, focusing on Hagar Qim type megalithic temples and the economic activity that revolved around them, but that was enough to light a fire deep inside Thomas. He would finish a paper, and let the notebook fold into his chest, sitting on The Towans, and let out a deep sigh of regret, wishing he had taken the extra two years and gone down the archaeology path. Fifteen years prior, he would have thought it a perfect existence and done everything in his power to make it go on forever. But now, he had a calling. There was a museum back in San Francisco that needed his expertise.

And so he started with one exhibit. Consulting work, mostly. But slowly and over time, he took commanding direction over the execution of many of the museums projects and was revered within the museum as "the torch-bearer for Western Civilization", which always made him recoil a bit, as it reminded him of some strange alt-right icon's tinder bio.

But as the Museum slowly fell out of fashion and the reality of their finances set in, they were taking in more financial help than normal. Marx wasn't the only benefactor to support the museum, far from it. But he was the most important one. The one who was saving the museum, or at least propelling it into the modern era.

And so, like it or not, Thomas found himself slowly falling out of company with the rest of the museum executives. Because, though Eileen recognized that Thomas had a wealth of intellectual prowess unrivaled to any of his contemporaries, it was Marc Roy who was able to bring the necessary funds to make the museum profitable.

On a seemingly quiet Thursday afternoon, where the grey, somber weather outside filled those working inside the museum with a certain coziness as they glanced through the massive glass walls to watch the rustling foliage rip across the lawn, Thomas found himself in the pleasant position of being alone with Eileen for the afternoon. The two of them hadn't had a chance to catch up in a while and he figured he was long overdue.

He avoided talking too much about the project itself, but instead talked about Eileens children and shared a bit about his nephew as well as some books he'd come across about Tunisian ports of the early 4th Century. While he liked the conversation, what he really appreciated was the freedom to do whatever he wanted in Mr. Roy's absence. They had been at odds for some time over what to feature in this particular exhibition and Thomas had been forced to make any number of concessions to appease him. But while that battle was lost, the battle over the placement and display of these particular pieces was one Thomas wanted to finish before it even got started. Mr. Roy felt like he strongly cared about where things were placed, but as Thomas gleaned, this seemed to be out of a need to maintain a sense of dominance.

Eileen was generally hands-off when it came to Thomas' work and so she thought nothing could be awry as he carefully dispersed some fantastic clayware pieces he felt were important along a large front entrance hall. He felt a certain giddiness in heaving some 1st Century Roman mosaics back towards a section where he was gathering "treasures of the Adriatic" and away from various framed 4th Century BC Cypriot frescoes which had nothing in common with one another other than that they both represented "art of a region". Then the sound of slick shoes on marble floor came squeaking into his ear. Thomas acted like he heard nothing and continued on with his work. Soon the black suede shoes had invaded his periphery and he could feel his heart quicken.

"Thomas, Eileen", Marc began, "I have Mr. Hewitt with me today. We just had lunch and I thought I'd give him a little sneak preview."

"Well have a look around!", Eileen invited.

Thomas carried on slowly adjusting coins in a display case, hoping he wouldn't be called on. Then a voice behind his ear.

"Thomas", Marc said, "What's happening here?"

"I'm just arranging the coins in the display."

"Where's the dishes I had at the end of the entry tunnel?"

"I moved it."

"Why?"

"So it could be with some more appropriate pieces."

Flustered, Marc turned back to Mr. Hewitt and pointed him in the direction of the dishes.

"Listen, Tom, Mr. Hewitt - Leon and I are very closely connected and well, we're going to be even more closely connected soon and for the next few years, at least. I promised

him that this project would be - well - close to completion by now. We were supposed to be putting up plaques, printing out information guides, gathering citations by now. And we're still arranging? It looks bad. Now, he's no museum heavyweight by any stretch of the imagination, but he expects things."

"Well", Thomas said without turning his head, his hands trembling from a brewing anger, "I wouldn't have to keep rearranging things if we could come up with cohesive roles for one another. We didn't have a clear expectation about placement and I happen to have some opinions about it."

"As do I. And I'm getting the sense that you don't respect those."

He paused. "You know where I wanted everything, it's right here on this diagram. Now you had freedom within each zone to choose your own placement, but from the look of things, it seems you have your own damn plans. So.... Thomas. I won't ask you again. Eileen and I have spoken about this. We need you and we need your expertise."

"I'M SORRY BUT THIS IS WRONG. If you need my expertise, then why make me work with an idea I can't endorse. You've used your financial leverage to steamroll anything I might put out there. And you've done it to Eileen. Museums are houses of culture and learning. A museum is a sanctuary."

"A museum is a business Thomas. And the sooner you understand that, the better we're going to get along."

As he headed back to Eileen and Mr. Hewitt, he turned over his shoulder he pointed a condescending finger at Thomas. "Hey! We need you. Don't forget it. And say hi to Superman for me!"

By Friday morning, Peter had caved to the pressure of his peers and gave Elish a call. Their conversation was short and uneventful, any awkwardness they left dangling at the end of their last encounter was promptly swept under the rug and they were back to lobbing clever quips back and forth. In some ways, Peter felt relief that it never got

brought up. 'Maybe she felt like she shouldn't have said anything', he thought to himself. But when he brought up the prospect of them getting together again, it was she who suggested they get together, 'with that group' he had mentioned before. She was referring to Antonio's friends who Peter saw on Fridays, who, stirring his own anxiety, were fairly invested in his current romantic campaign, if only from a distance. He hadn't seen all of them since the date itself, but they had certainly heard of him mention the charming young woman with the sparkling eyes, whose puppy dog kept her at bay from over the fence. The idea of bringing her into that fold, one which he was still relatively fresh with, made his stomach churn. But after a pep talk with Antonio, he relented that it was this opportunity or not seeing her at all.

They met for drinks in the Mission district, where hordes of young, hormonal, twenty-somethings with eyes filled with hope and bodies burgeoning with desire. Peter had ran by the bar they were visiting quite a few times. It was a small, tucked away joint called, 'The Catalyst'. In principle, it was set up fairly similarly to their other favorite bar, The Crow's Nest, but the shiny marble booths and comfy leather chairs slathered it with sophistication that their sixteen dollar cocktails aimed to validate. Elish met them all around eight and she came looking very done up compared to the last time they met. She had straitened her slightly wavy hair and added a wings via some brand-name mascara underneath her eyes. The jacket had become tighter, darker, and smaller - almost impractically small for the weather outside. She wore a much bolder lipstick, though the staple feature was the sparkling gold necklace she had delicately dangling above her subtle attempt at cleavage.

Erntesto was quick with the jokes, mocking the fact that Peter must have some kind of secret skill to bag such a cutie, and propositioning that she see him ride a bike and eat fast food if she really wanted to see skill. Everyone else was fairly shy at first, though to everyone's relief, Crystal, who was known to be eager to command the attention of the crowd and had a history of jealousy overreactions when new women entered the group, was actually complimentary of Elish's style and was even familiar with where she got her necklace.

The group slowly migrated down the street to some dance clubs, landing for a few hours at an African dancehall where they really let loose, before migrating to "The Makeout Room", a bar that offered dancing, but where there was room to have a

conversation as well. Between bars, Elish and Peter would playfully poke one another and joke around with the group. Sometimes, they would switch things up and he would look back in relief seeing her walk so comfortably with Naomi, Antonio, and one of Antonio's cousin's Tiago, who made him slightly jealous with his slick black hair. Still, her seamless transition into the group dynamic put Peter at ease. Inside the bar, Naomi praised her, saying she was welcome to join them anytime. After a while, the constant validation of his date started to wear on Peter. She was being incorporated like another one of Antonio's cousins, while he still felt primarily like an outsider.

After ordering a dark and stormy to end his streak of increasingly bad Negronis, Peter caught eyes with Elish who was leaning against the wall sipping on a Paloma, playing with the straw, by flicking it around with her lips. She let it roll around the glass as she strutted over to him.

"Whats up with you having cool friends?" , she asked.

"Well, you're just lucky they like you."

"What makes you think they like me?"

"Oh, well, Ernesto over there", they averted their gaze to Ernesto, bouncing around on the dance floor like some kind of Russian folk dancer, bobbing his head and thrashing his curly black mop of hair around, "He's never had a significant conversation with me until tonight. Never just he and I."

"I thought they were your friends?"

"They are. I just.... I think they like you a lot."

She thought about making a joke, commenting on how easy it is to like a cool chick like her, but she felt the beads of sweat collecting on her forehead and felt like she might only invite scrutiny with such a comment.

"Well you're lucky to have friends like them anyway, even if they're not good friends. I've lived in this city for over twenty years and you have twice as many friends as me in twenty days."

The liquor hit him with a second wave of drunkenness. His inhibitions began to take over and her figure, which was spinning on some rotational axis, began to entrance him. The spinning became metronomic, luring him in like some kind of hypnotic siren. The sparkle of her dress and the shine of the stage lights reflecting off her chest had his eyes dancing all over her.

"And you? Am I to count you amongst those friends?"

Through her intoxicated eyes, he also appeared more appealing than usual. His button-down shirt, showed a crease in his chest, hinting at his peak physical form. His hair gracefully draped the right side of his forehead, softening his look. And his shoulders appeared more broad than normal, stretching across two seats at the bar.

"Come on", she said as she led him to the dance floor, pulling him by the hand. They had three songs to themselves, where they took advantage of the moment and pressed their bodies up against one another, feeling the full weight of their hips. They held each other softly in between songs, not wanting the moment to disappear, only to transition into a new mood with the song. After a few songs, the others came and joined them in a circle, where they continued to dance the night away.

When last call came, the group said their fond goodbyes. Peter could tell his stock had risen within their circle as Naomi and Crystal took time to give him personal goodbyes. The girls took a ride together and Elish took them up on their invitation, so they could split the fare. She sent Peter a warm message afterwards: "I had fun tonight. I can't wait to see you again". He was disappointed his opportunity to walk her home had passed, but it provided him with a chance to get to walk with Antonio, who was committed to walking until his intoxication would fade into a buzz.

On the walk, Antonio congratulated Peter on finding Elish, explaining that organic situations like that seldom came by. Then, perhaps due to his haziness, he launched into his own story about a lost love. The only woman he ever loved. Her name was Meredith and they had run in the same circles as far back as high school. She went to a rival school, but they both had friends in common through extracurricular sports and so they hung out quite often. They both loved the Strokes, Yorgos Lanthimos films, and calling themselves amateur archers, though both had only been once before

in their lives. The summer before she left to college at San Diego State on a full-ride softball scholarship, they spent every day together doing different things. It was 77 straight days of waking up, walking, hiking, reading, going to the cinema, and watching old anime shows together. Peter couldn't hold back his smile thinking of it.

They promised to stay in touch and wrote each other letters throughout the year. But when they saw each other for the first time again, that Christmas, things weren't the same. Antonio took a long drag on a spliff as he looked over to Peter, realizing how much he'd said.

"I couldn't love her anymore", he confessed.

Peter's look of intrigue turned into one of horror. "What happened?"

"I'd met someone else."

Peter averted his gaze to his shoes as he trotted back towards the long street where his Uncle lived. Antonio had felt ashamed of what he admitted at first, but took another hit and shook his head.

"I don't understand. How could you... You seemed so well-suited?", Peter added.

Antonio just smirked and shook his head at the ground again. He nodded up the hill indicating he would take Peter all the way.

"It was a guy.", he confessed during their short hike. "I... I fell for a man. I never thought I would."

They stopped outside Thomas' house under the streetlamp around 3 am. Peter tried to hold back his feelings of betrayal and emphasize how he was glad he found himself. He wasn't upset at Antonio's sexuality or the fact that he left Meredith hanging, but more that he hadn't felt comfortable enough to mention anything to Peter.

"It was a young man named Troy. We had a day at the beach and it turned into a few nights making pastries and talking about music and dancing. I felt a kind of happiness

I've yet to feel again, man. It was real unique. A kind of love people write about, you know?"

"What happened to him?"

"I blew it.", Antonio said flicking his spliff to the ground and pulling out a cigarette.

"I pushed him away because I didn't want to accept that I could physically love a man. And... I lost him."

"I wish you would have told me", Peter finally mentioned.

"I'm telling you now." Antonio said, patting him on the shoulder. "Consider that a big gesture in our friendship."

Peter invited Antonio to sneak inside and they could have some whiskey and talk it over on the garden if they were quiet, but the idea was waved off. Then he offered to call Antonio a ride, but again, he declined. Instead, he insisted on sitting out front and sharing his thoughts with the moon and with that, the two said their goodnights.

As Peter was walking inside, Antonio called out to him in a loud whisper.

"Hey man, I can tell you really like this girl. And you're a good kid. If anything out there in the universe can make this right, I will it to do so."

"Shoot your shot Peter", he added, "You won't ever regret it."

The next morning was Peter's rare day off. He slipped out the door without seeing a single blip of his Uncle, though he did see traces of several cigarette butts on the driveway, remnants of Antonio's prolonged time out front. For a guy who always claimed that he, "only smoke when he drank", he sure did power through a lot of cigarettes, Peter thought. Having the time, he picked up all the remnants, which led all

the way up into the garden, so that Thomas wouldn't have another thing to worry about when he got home.

It was the first day of July and it lived up to every expectation Peter had come to hear about San Francisco. The sky was a dreary grey, breaking only to let in some pale light and a gust of wind. Rain, or more accurately, a drizzle, would dribble on various parts of the city in small spurts like some cruel whack-a-mole game from the heavens. It was cold outside. Very, very cold. Likely the coldest summer day Peter could remember experiencing and he'd had his fair share of June showers in Kansas. On his run, he went on his normal route, taking extra notice of the homeless he saw along the way. How painful and difficult it must be, he thought, on a day like today. He thought about how often the city was romanticized in literature and on film. Movies like "Blue Jasmine", "Big Eyes" and others that played at the small art-house theater on the KU campus fostered an image of a picturesque, seaside, California paradise, basking in the warmth of the sun, the colors of all the victorian homes in full, beaming display. This was not that. It was foggy. Ironic, he thought, since the city was so commonly associated with fog, how seldom it was depicted.

The streak of good weather he endured in his first month there was chalked up to good luck and global warming, though Tessa made it clear that she felt like her experience of the California dream was better represented in the Bay Area than Southern California - at least in terms of weather. "LA is too hot", she would complain. "And our fog is their smog."

For the first time in a while, he confidently ran up the brick path where Elish lived and took a peek over the fence to see if she was there. While he didn't see her, the lights from a small detached building did seem to suggest that she was indeed awake in that small building hidden behind the other house. He stopped his run to take a real notice of the building. Every time he'd come by the house he'd been walking in the other direction, where the view of this tiny hut-like abode was hidden. There was a small stone path that seemed to disappear around the main house and lead to the back. It was a peculiar set-up. Peter poked around, but only found the one mailbox. "What if I want to write her a letter, he thought?"

After waiting a few minutes to see if she would come out, he decided to continue onwards. The longer he was out, the more the atmosphere started to feel like

something out of a chilling horror film. The fog thickened, the day disappeared and soon all he could see was the path in front of him. "Now this is crazy", he thought. Without a real plan, he just continued heading up. Up hills, staircases, wherever his feet would angle, he moved. In his mind, the fog was like the ocean and he just needed to rise above, but after coming to the convergence of hills, some ritzy-looking residential corner, he realized the whole city was submerged too deep. He kicked the sidewalk in frustration as he had left his phone back at the house (as he always did to avoid distraction). He tried running in one direction, but after feeling he was only going further away, he made an abrupt turn around and re-climbed the hill. This is where he decided to end the "running" portion of the exercise and resign himself to the important matter at hand: finding his way home.

The chill of a slight breeze crept over his sweaty chest, which was only covered by a tiny black tank top. His frustration began to really drill in as he power walked down the stairs where he came from back to the small brick road where Elish's house was. He bent over the fence to rest his head, still internally fuming about his absent-minded mistake.

Then, like an angel drifting through the clouds, a fluffy dog came galloping over to the gate. This didn't relieve his frustration in the way that he thought it would. Dogs were cute, but Peter was a practical guy, unswayed by the charms of the canine race. The dog jumped up and put its paws in the fence, panting its warm smile in Peter's face. He surveyed the misty, opaque property, knowing that the dog had to be attached to somebody and hoping that the somebody was Elish.

"Well, well, well", the smoky voice said emerging like an apparition from the clouds. "I thought I didn't have anything to worry about and then I see this."

Peter's frustration vanished.

"I never suspected you two."

The dog barked in a kind of cute, warm, loving way.

"Esty! Don't be so brash. Peter's far too intelligent for you."

It marked the first occasion that she was complimenting him out loud, though it wasn't directly. Still, he took the intelligence compliment well, though his vanity would have preferred some validation of his looks.

"So, are ya stalking me?"

"You know I run by here."

"Yeah, but usually you don't stop here... when you're all sweaty."

"I got lost", he said with a grin. Elish let out a brief outburst of laughter, thinking he was just being clever, before he explained that he did indeed, get turned around in the fog. She explained that she was going for a long walk with Esty right before he came over.

"Would you like to join us?", she said with a beckoning smile. "I think she likes you."

Peter really would have loved to go home, shower, comb his hair, put on the special cologne his mother had put into his Christmas stocking last year all before spending the day with her, but he didn't want to miss the opportunity. At least he was in athletic pants, he thought. Shorts would have been so gauche.

They strolled through windy, suburban-like neighborhoods, by droves of quiet parks and little coffeeshops. The fog that day had diminished any views of surrounding buildings, downtown, or the famous green hills, making each neighborhood feel like its own isolated little community in the sky. With the bustle of the city obscured from view, Peter marbled at how much the suburban-feeling neighborhoods could almost pass for certain ones he'd known in Kansas, especially in places like Overland Park near the Missouri border. As they walked, she told him various stories of different old classmates or colleagues or piano teachers who lived in such places and where they were now. Peter felt like this was mostly filler conversation, but he was happy to entertain it. Most of his insecurities were happily docked since she had invited him out for the day in such an impromptu manner. After a while, they spilled out onto busy Market St, the massive avenue which ripped through the city like a broken zipper, tearing San Francisco in half diagonally. He'd known it as a geographic locus for

orienting himself around the city, but he hadn't set foot on it for more than just a second. In a city that was, at a maximum, seven miles in any direction, he had to realize how small his particular world was. Cafe du Rue, Thomas DeBorr's home on Hibson St, and even his run around the neighborhood over to Elish's secret stairs were all within a short radius of one another.

Market street was rather active, despite the poor weather, though Peter found little of interest for the first half-hour of their walk. The large, streetlight-lined avenue was lined with malls, chain restaurants, tax advisory firms, laundromats, cookie cutter bodegas, and just about anything else you could find in a small town. When they hit the, as Elish put it, "big building part" of downtown, things started to feel a bit more interesting at least. Suddenly Peter felt thrust into the adult world of big business where men in suits traveled in packs and women in pencil skirts and buttoned blazers made business calls while picking up takeout. It only lasted a couple of blocks, but it really took Peter out of his element. He wondered if one day he would be working in such a place having the kinds of conversations they were having.

"Why Esty?"

"It's short for Esther"

"That's quite an old lady name"

"Well she's practically an old lady now. I've had her for a while now."

Peter just smiled and the lack of reply made Elish feel guilty for acting coy about the whole thing.

"I named her Esther from the biblical slash famous Jewish character."

Peter took his hand and passed it right above his hair making an accompanying "whoosh" sound.

"Really? Well. She's totally badass. She's like this Jewish woman who - well there was this king in Iran and he was a Zoroastrian and, well, he basically was thinking of killing all the Jews because of his counselors or whatever. Anyway, he was looking for a

wife and she was like hot as shit and lived near him and so boom, they got together. Still, because of pressure from his court, he was like low-key thinking of killing all the Jews still, but she was like: I'm a Jew and he was like, well that's not going to work then because you're a total badass. Anyway, she stood up to him and he didn't kill her or any Jews and instead killed all the people who told him to kill the Jews."

He felt like he'd heard a similar story somewhere, maybe in a religious video from his youth or something. Still, he didn't quite get the significance.

"So... Wait, are you Jewish?"

"No", she said blankly, "But my dog is."

They laughed. She went on to explain that it was more a name to pay homage to one of her favorite Theology professors in school who taught a comparative religious studies course. She loved the idea of a dog with a cool ancient name of a famous woman.

Out of the fog towards the end of the walk, the ferry building seemed to rip through the clouds. It was almost like the mast of a ship, piercing the fog, announcing its presence. Peter remembered seeing it on TV whenever the Chiefs played the 49ers. The whole waterfront slowly appeared out of nowhere as well, each pier like a finger, reaching into the bay. Peter had never been so close to the ocean. It made him slightly emotional. Elish was amazed he'd never been to a proper waterfront before and took him down a small, walkers-only Pier to gaze out of the fog towards what would be Oakland on a sunny day.

Peter took in a deep breath, partly expecting the salinity of the ocean to fill his lungs when, to his disappointment, it felt like a breath of cold, slightly damp air. At the end of the pier were a couple of benches, where they could sit and try and follow the seagulls white bodies as they flickered in and out of the pale white sky. After a few minutes of conversations about the quaintness of the pier and how Peter found the ocean to be a lot "calmer" than he imagined, he finally decided to get down to brass tax. They walked over to the railing overlooking the fog and he took a moment before making himself vulnerable.

"I- I'm really glad I met you", he said.

"Because you need a guide for when you're lost."

"Don't", he cautioned. "I'm being serious."

He stared into her eyes for a long time, trying to read any twitch or movement for the surefire signal it would be, but she gave him nothing but slightly squinted eyelids beaming back at him, almost as if she were trying to stare right through him. The railing was cold, but somehow in the moment, none of that mattered. He slowly turned his posture towards her and saw her shoulder mirror his ever so slightly.

"I'm glad I met you too", she finally said. "And not just because of last night."

"I wanted to ask you about that."

"About last night?"

"No, about last week."

Her face quickly soured and her body seemed to almost shudder away from him. What she felt was shame, though that wasn't initially evident to Peter, who felt like he had said something offensive.

"I'm... I'm curious about you."

"Curious?", Peter said, almost offended.

"Yeah, yes! Curious. You're kind of this weird, different guy who's got this whole life in another place and you're here now and.... I guess I just like being around you and I'm curious because you bring out this side of me I don't understand."

Her rant had almost sounded like one of those TV dating show cliffhangers where they prevent you from knowing the full context of the situation. She sounded nervous,

flustered, frustrated, and annoyed and Peter was savoring every minute of it. For all his clumsiness, he had yet to see her flounder around a bit.

"What do you mean?"

"Well I've lived here all my life. But when I'm with you it's like... It's like everything feels new, ya know? Like you see my world in such a way, and granted it's probably through rose-colored glasses, but it's so refreshing. You just feel like you're so full of spirit.... and in a place where spirit is a hot commodity to come by."

Though it came out of her mouth a bit awkwardly, Peter knew that her intentions were ultimately sweet. He couldn't understand why she seemed so troubled, but chalked it up to her own lack of vulnerability. In the moment, he wasn't sure what to say, so he simply reacted with the first thing that came to his mind.

"You're welcome", he said with a grin.

She stared at him, trying to hold back a smile. Then the magnetic forces between them that day drew them into a passionate embrace. In full view of an audience of seagulls and a very tired dog, Peter and Elish shared a prolonged kiss on the pier. Neither of them were conscious of any thoughts during the process, the here and now ceased to matter. They simple were. And they were one, connected by flesh but also by spirit. The culmination of their short existence knowing one another had built slowly up to this short, ten-second moment.

When they finally unhooked from one another, the reality of the world seemed to set in again. It was as if the birds and the pier and the fog and the breeze and the dog all slowly materialized out of a gooey, saccharine haze. They looked at each other's reddish mouths and giggled a bit. She was just as satisfied as him. In that moment, the warm, ticklish seed of a beautiful romance was planted in their hearts and they would carry it with them in their thoughts whenever the thought of one another would cross their minds.

On the walk back, Elish seemed almost entirely at ease and the two of them held hands. She walked him back to his house and, as he was passing through the gate, he turned to look at her, this time with a confident longing.

"So we're going to do this again, right?", he asked.

"This exact thing? Probably not?"

He just smiled, knowing that was her own sarcastic way of saying yes.

"Call me!", she said as she was leaving.

"No you call me this time!"

Esty barked, almost in celebration of their budding love.

In his youth, Thomas DeBorr was a known anxious smoker. It wasn't something he was particularly proud of, nor something he ever publicly broadcast, yet everyone who knew him, even remotely, knew this about him. Unfortunately, he also happened to be a very anxious person for many years of his life. The man that Peter had slowly come to know over the past several weeks was a genteel-type of man, inspired by an old-world archetype of a soft-boiled intellectual or a cultural savant. He was quiet, tender, soft-spoken, and sophisticated. Like some kind of academic crocodile, he remained dormant for most confrontations, until of course, he saw something delectable floating downriver, at which he would almost certainly snap. He was certainly more like a crocodile than a fox or other creature whose ferocity required some initial attack, no he was eager, often looking for a takedown of some kind, a real predatory approach to conversation. Luckily for Peter, he was considered immune from any attacks. In fact the only way he came to know this intensity of his Uncle's was through listening to his phone conversations or, better yet, watching videos of him in lectures and debates posted on the internet. But this old, renaissance-like sophisticate had taken years to ferment into the complex man he had become. If they traveled back in time twenty-five years, Thomas was nervous, anxious, and depressed. And everyone who knew him, knew it because of his smoking. A lot of mental work went into kicking the cigarette habit, but the most prominent move that helped him wean off was staking out his future. His initial plan after going to University was to become a lawyer, but a horrible result on the entrance exams nipped that dream in the bud. The axing of that future

path created all sorts of internal and existential problems. Who was he? What did Thomas DeBorr really mean? What did he want to represent? He was the middle of two surly brothers, one of whom (the older brother - Peter's other Uncle) had already punched his ticket to Brown University and was on their way to becoming a top genome sequencer. The other brother, Peter's father, was about to go to the University of Chicago on an academic scholarship to study public policy. All this continued to foster doubt about the idea of identity and meaning in Thomas' life until he had a conversation with his Classic's Professor about academia. For him, it offered a chance to validate his curiosities as successes. It provided him a way to funnel his interests into real career ambitions. And privately, it was the path which would bring his parents the most pride, though he would go to the grave without ever admitting what a large factor that was in his decision. And as he progressed through graduate school and onto his PhD program, he gained confidence and awareness in who he was and what he was supposed to do. Throughout those years, his dependence on cigarettes and other nicotine products slowly dissipated into nothing at all. By the time he had matured into the man he had "more or less chosen to become", he had all but eradicated the habit, save for a few occasions. He'd found that classic pipes were far less harmful and far more enjoyable an experience overall.

But on the July morning, about ten days away from the opening of the exhibit, Thomas had decided to revert back to this safety blanket and light up a cigarette he'd pulled out of a hidden stash he'd been storing in the small box underneath his nightstand. The night before he'd had to begrudgingly accept a load of demands that Mr. Roy had imposed on him regarding the use of "digital displays" - something Thomas wholeheartedly hated. He was the closest thing to a modern luddite and it never ceased to fascinate everyone he interacted with. He limited himself to a maximum of one hour of screen time a day, most of which was spent reading and responding to emails, though he would occasionally peruse fascinating new research papers from his old University's database. Peter was always enamored by his Uncle's fierce determination to avoid contemporary technology at all costs. No televisions, no "smart home" devices, and certainly no fancy gadgets were to be found anywhere in his house. It was like stepping back in time in some ways. Now he wasn't judgmental towards anyone who did choose to live in the modern era. Peter was able to watch sports on his laptop, play games on his phone, and show his Thomas some of his favorite bands on YouTube without stirring up any controversy. Thomas wasn't going

to impose his lifestyle on anybody else. But when it came to the way he operated himself, he was strict: the less digital, the more real, the better, so his logic went.

For years, Thomas had negotiated for the designation of specific kiosks, where a breadth of information about the whole exhibit could be kept on one device as a way to ward off the idea of placing fence screens in front of every piece. Sadly for him, Marc was the opposite. He actually admired the Professor's gumption when it came to his anachronistic lifestyle, but felt it was the worst possible move for anyone looking to turn a profit.

"It's exciting for people. It's interactive. And it's good for business", he told Thomas on the phone.

Business. The world of a museum was the world of business in Marc's eyes and Thomas was struggling to adjust his vision.

As if a professional blow weren't enough, Thomas was suffering from something much more spiritual as well. He was sad with himself. In his personal life, he was feeling this strange mix of loneliness and disappointment that seemed to mix together so easily. To him, it felt a bit ironic since his nephew was actually living with him, giving him some semi-permanent company, something he hadn't had in over a decade. But it didn't seem to make a difference. If anything, it felt worse because he had the company there.

This had been a perfect opportunity for him to bond with a person of the next generation. Up until now, his relationships with the younger generations had been either strictly hierarchical - through his instruction - or awkward and uncomfortable, such as when he was supposed to relate to strangers serving him at the coffee kiosks he would frequent. Mostly this was because he looked down on them. He saw them as an intrinsic affront impossibly linked to the aggressive progression of technology and the regression of "classic" and "better" society. It was horribly unfair to generalize an entire generation whom would one day shortly be at the helm of civilization and one would think that Thomas, as an Anthropology professor, would have a better grasp on what a far-reaching accusation that would be. Yet, his own innate narcissism created a silent "gatekeeping" mentality which prevented anyone younger than him from having

the knowledge that he was in possession of. It was a shrewd, condescending part of Thomas' thinking, which resulted from years of conditioning and the reinforced belief that a PhD gave you access to an elevated level of society, one which was lathered with the gilded privilege afforded to few and desired by many. Children were meant to be taught and seldom had anything materially valuable to offer. They were aware of cultural nuances and distinct trends in social norms, something which fascinated the Professor deeply. And they had the potential to become and even surpass the most intelligent people in the world, but for now they had one distinct enemy working against them: time.

This always created an oscillating relationship between him and his nieces and nephews. For the first few years of their lives, they seemed like strange little aliens to him. Sort of wide-eyed and curious, but ultimately uninteresting and sans esprit. Then when they started to form personalities and begin to achieve what he considered "personhood", they became really interesting. He found their awe at the simplest of things (a juicer, for example) absolutely endearing. There was so much joy in showing them rare coins from around the world or narrating their journey through an Aztec temple as they swung across monkey bars. But after that, there was a lull. In the preteen years, children became belligerent in that temporal squeeze between becoming an adult and losing the innocence of childhood. That "shedding of innocence", as he observed, was the turning point in them being fun to be around. Then came a spiraling several years where they felt they had to do everything to prove they were an adult, all while trying to enjoy all the best parts about being a kid. But at the end of high school, right around the early college years, they seemed to become conversational again. It was this magnificent second budding where they had become cognizant of their position in life and resigned to their lack of awareness about a number of issues, all while embracing these newfound field of interests where they had indeed started to become "little experts".

His brothers, both of whom had children, would constantly say that, while his observational powers were second to none, his views on "kids these days" were outdated and ill-informed.

"You'd know if you had them", his older brother would say. "You just can't really get it otherwise. Not all kids are little naive neanderthals. In fact, you'd be surprised at how many of them are smarter than you when it comes to a lot of things."

It was a difficult thought for Thomas to grasp, but his few weeks with Peter had been revealing in that sense. He did acknowledge that his nephew did know a few things and understand a few things better than him. World affairs, for instance, was something that Peter impressed him with. Thomas, without outwardly acknowledging it, had fallen behind due to his lack of interest in "the internet" or "television". These were things that did indeed seem to benefit Peter in a material way, which garnered great respect from the professor.

He didn't know how to articulate it, but he'd grown quite fond of the boy. Having someone around his house who could hold an intelligent conversation and was duly respectful was a breath of fresh air. They kept their conversations lofty though and strayed from family affairs, which prevented anything from getting too personal. As time went on, he sensed this wearing on his nephew, who himself seemed lonely at times. He was worried if his strict commitment to distance was part of the reason he felt so lonely. Perhaps he had done it to himself?

When Peter got up that morning, he waved to his Uncle, who frantically tossed the cigarette into some rocks and awkwardly smiled his way inside.

"Peter!"

"Hey Uncle Tom"

"What are your plans for the day?"

"I was going to meet Devin a little later for a pick up game, but if you need me, I can totally cancel."

"No... Best not. Wouldn't want you to disappoint a friend."

Peter felt like there was something his Uncle wasn't getting at, so he tried again.

"Honestly, I don't care that much. I was doing it more out of boredom than anything. So if you have something.... anything--"

"Well, I was thinking we might go for a journey."

Peter's face seemed to swing right up. He'd never felt so included by his Uncle.

"Us? Yeah. Great!"

With that he went bouncing back towards his room to change into street clothes.

The two of them hopped in his Uncle's very brown Oldsmobile and slowly slithered their way through the city. Along the way, Thomas would stop to point out different places of significance, reveling in his position as tour guide. They made their way through the green park and then up across the Golden Gate Bridge. For Peter, it was a real life "movie moment", getting to cross the fabled monument for the first time in his life.

They continued across the bridge into the green rolling hills of Marin County, a stark bucolic contrast to the urban atmosphere that seemed to permeate every inch of the peninsula. Peter gawked at the green rolling hills, which had little wispy, broccoli-trees tufting the top like some kind of decorative flair finale. To him, the environment reminded him of pictures he'd seen of hills in the Greek Islands - verdurous, sweeping, and fairly uniform. Thomas quite like the comparison, pointing out that the climate classifications of these two regions weren't too far off from one another. He said part of the reason he fell in love with this region was because of areas like this.

"A bit different than back home, eh?"

It was different, Peter thought. Not better, but different. Kansas could be green and was a sight to behold when it was. But this felt different. The flora, the shrubbery, and even the color of the grass seemed foreign in some way and ancient in another. The further along they went, the green started to fade and were blended with patches of gold. Thomas explained that the summers here had become dry over time, causing a lot of these evergreen slopes to lose their luster in the summer months.

"Consider yourself lucky", he said. "Most of the summer, it's nothing but a brittle yellow color up here. We're quite fortunate that you've had the amount of moisture you've gotten."

After about an hour of travel, where Peter was invited to share some of his new favorite music, much of which Thomas actually enjoyed, they finally came to a long, winding country road, sandwiched between two emerald hills lined with small dirt rows perfectly parallel to one another.

"Are these vineyards?"

Thomas nodded.

"All right Uncle Tom!", Peter said with leaping gusto. He had hoped to be invited to the legendary wine country with his Uncle who took such pride in his own sense of viticulture.

They rolled up the hill, up to some beautiful, old, iron gates, which were opened manually by a young man who seemed to give a personal hello to the Professor. Behind them was a glorious, old-world looking stone estate which sat perched on the top of a green hill, a veritable Mount Olympus-like setting, with a grand, circular entryway and mossy vines running up the dark stone walls. Lush hedges and fountains lined the entrance and along the sides and back, fields and fields of vineyards expanded outward until they sloped down the hill and disappeared out of view. It was magical. The prominence of the property allowed for it to look down onto the many other wineries below and into the valleys where the green and gold seemed to blend into one another. Behind the vineyard was a small hill, that seemed to represent the "peak" of the estate where a small, worn church chapel looked out over all the land, dotted by a grey stone cross. A modern sign adorned the entry with the words "St. Vincent Estates" was written in an effervescent Lucida Grande typeface.

They parked the car and a tall, dark man came out of the castle in white kakis, a linen shirt, and some ray bans.

"Professor!", the man said with a heavy Indian accent, his arms swinging open for an embrace.

"Vivek! How lovely. I hope it's a good time."

"Always, always for you my friend."

"This is my nephew, Peter."

"How do you do?"

Vivek looked a man fairly older than his Uncle, possibly in his mid-sixties, but his spritely walk and breezy composure seemed to take years off him overall. Peter was shocked at how firm his handshake was. To him, that was a Kansas handshake.

The three of them wandered inside and the interior certainly lived up to the expectations of the exterior. Everything was orderly and regal. It felt much more like a manor out of an old English novel from the inside, with old wooden furniture, wall-sized portraits of unknown old white people, and dusty old bookshelves stuffed to the brim with leather-bound books. Peter thought it resembled the manor home he always imagined from *Wuthering Heights*. The modern touches were subtle, but present. Fancy light panels, chandeliers with dimmers, and tablet equipped with wireless pay docks were just some of the things Peter spotted that brought this "estate" into the present. Perhaps the most grounding element of the place was Vivek himself.

He gleefully toured them around the place, telling Peter about its history while updating Thomas on what little changes he'd made in the last few months. The estate itself had been around for at least two hundred years, where it began as a Spanish farmhouse. Sometime in the mid-nineteenth century, the small chapel was built for local parishioners who would come to work the nearby fields. By the early twentieth century, the land was bought by some eager Anglo-Irish settler who intended on donating the land to the Church with the intention of it becoming a monastery. Over the next twenty years, the first vines were planted and the first wines were produced just after the Great Depression. With the economic recovery, the small, modest home was rebuilt and transformed into a grand, sort of estate, named after the family's patron saint, who happened to also be the patron saint of wines. After some mostly undocumented family tragedies (various sources pointed to gambling, but the 'official' report cited medical woes), the ownership was forfeited to an upstart businessman in

the beverage business around the early sixties. He kept the winery in his own family for two generations, where they were able to really flesh out the design of the estate and import newer viticulture technology.

The eighties came and the California wine boom started to bring regular, excited swarms of customers from all over the country as well as internationally. People were clamoring to get their hands on a California Pinot or a Napa Valley Chardonnay. The influx of demand allowed them to really spruce the place up, give the building a bit of an overhaul and boost production in whatever way possible. The family increased their used acreage at that time by over sixty percent. This was the period, as Vivek put it, when the place started to get its own "flavor". The family took the manor and castle image and ran with it. They leant into the old world vibe and started to fill it with all kinds of charms. The hard work ended up paying off too as the business seemed to really take off in the late eighties with no end in sight.

But as the owners got older and more of the family moved away in retirement, the structure of the business started to show cracks. The nineties put the property through a really dry spell, causing their wine to become too sweet and inviting unwanted insect pests onto the property. In 1994, their best business manager had quit to go join a brokerage firm in Jersey City. The final straw was a wildfire that hit the place right after 9/11. It was so destructive, they thought, it tore up three acres of their hillside and almost burnt the old chapel to the ground. The yield that fall was down almost forty percent from previous years. Between that and a lack of interest on behalf of the children to keep it in the family, they felt like they had forced their hand. One by one, family members got out while they were young enough to spend their handsomely earned money elsewhere.

There were pictures on the wall of some of the properties where the family members retired.

"That's Dingle, Ireland", Vivek said crossing his arms and shaking his head with a smile. There was a large, edited photo hanging on the wall of some pastoral country home, tucked away in green hills. Animals, mostly brown cows, littered the

background. "Beautiful, isn't it?", he asked without need for a response. "It's just far too cold for me. I don't like jackets... Too restricting."

Sometime in the late Bush presidency, Vivek had come across the winery during a trip with friends from Santa Barbara. He was so enamored by the beauty of the scenery and the perfect weather, he never wanted to leave. At the time he'd already found great success with a patent on some medical technology. He sort of jumbled through the explanation, but Peter could gather it was somewhat instrumental in the procedure for hip replacements. Thomas called him "an inventor", noting that he revived a career that had been long dead. He seemed to especially revel in the fact that his friend had nothing to do with the tech world - at least professionally.

"A lot of the guys around here are dot com billionaires who want the wine thing to work as a hobby. I feel like that just invites dueling loyalties."

The money Vivek was sitting on at the time was more than enough to buy the place right then and there, every last barrel and every last vine. Still, he'd been a strategic man his whole life and he didn't want to just jump into anything he'd regret. Over the next year or so, he came back every other weekend from Santa Barbara and galavanted through the region, visiting other wineries and learning as much as he could from the locals. Finally, with the blessing of the family, he began the slow process of taking over the business. For the first two years, he worked in lockstep with the stragglers from the old business as they helped him navigate the ins and outs of the business (guided heavily by the family). During that time, he went back to school - to Sonoma State - and embarked on a Bachelor's Degree in Viticulture. By the time he finished his program, he was living on the property full time, hard at work guiding the first harvest without a single employee from the previous administration.

"That's when it really became mine", he said with a satisfied sigh.

He'd go onto get his Masters and even do some Post-Graduate work in Viticulture as it became his new love and the source of his work and happiness. He'd left his old life, his old girlfriend, and even a good chunk of his money behind in Santa Barbara. This was who he was and who he would be.

Under his leadership, the Estate flourished and Thomas DeBorr was so lucky to stumble into him during a visiting lecture at Sonoma State some nine years ago.

Peter loved seeing his Uncle seem so connected to this man. For a guy who had been going on and on about the importance of connection, it was high time he have a friend for himself, he thought.

The three of them slowly shuffled out of the building to a back balcony, which on the left side looked out onto one of the descending vineyards and on the right side, it looked up to the small chapel. They sat at a large wooden table and popped open a bottle of the vineyard's special cabernet. Peter was a fair-weather wine fan. Growing up in a half-assed Catholic household, wine was served at Sunday dinners and children communion age and above were welcome to partake without many restrictions. His parents also both were wimpy when it came to beer. Neither could drink dark beers and so none was ever kept in the house. In fact, Peter hadn't sipped the stuff until his last year of High School. When it came to wine though, he was far ahead of most of his fellow incoming college freshmen, having actual preferences when it came to which wine was served at dinner and never stooping to the consumption of boxed wine. Even so, he'd never consider himself an eager patron of the stuff. Despite the early exposure, he never ceased to be prone to early and frequent headaches, something he chalked up to the sugar content.

"Tell me young Peter, what do you think? Up to your standards", Vivek goaded.

"It's nice... Well bodied"

Peter paused to see if he was going to be mocked for a simplistic answer, but much to his surprise, the vintner himself nodded in agreement, raising an eyebrow in appreciation.

"I've been waiting for someone to touch on the body of this one. It's got such an aroma... such a distinct nose on it, it kind overshadows everything with that almost clove-like spice."

"It's quite good.", Thomas said as he swirled and sipped. "I was worried about you my friend. I thought you were going to have an exceptionally dry year here again and then..."

He waved his hands lightly as if something just "appeared".

"Maybe it's your nephew bringing the good weather."

The day was nearly perfect. Aside from a slightly aggressive sun, the breeze cooled the comfortable heat, and the clouds dotted the sky enough to break up the endless bright blue, but not enough to take it over.

"How are you enjoying San Francisco?"

"Well, sir-"

"Please", he stopped the boy, "You're not my subordinate. You're like family."

"It's been lovely so far. I've never really gotten the chance to live in a city, or a place nearly as big as SF yet, so it's all very... enlightening."

"You know, I think it's great you're doing it at your age too. You're not worn of the world and stuck in your ways. You're impressionable. I mean that in a good way of course. You've got an open mind."

"When did your mind close?", Thomas said with a chuckle.

"Oh, it's been some time now. I'm curious of course. I love learning new things and letting my mind wander", he leaned over and patted Peter on the thigh, "And don't ever let yourself get so mired in your own selfishness that you stop letting yours do the same."

Peter would have normally cringed at the physical touch from a strange older man, but for some reason, it just felt part of Vivek's persona

"But what I mean", he continued. "Is that I'm satisfied. I don't have as open mind when it comes to living in the world. I have my vineyard, I have my estate, I have my books, I have my music. I like it here - the cool, foggy winter mornings, the blazing hot summer days, and the warm, warm evenings when the birds come out and grace me with their lovely little evening vespers. As much as I love to experience and be in the world, I wouldn't really want to change a thing. At least not on a daily basis. I mean, can you say anything different Tommy?"

Peter watched as Thomas' chin sunk to his chest as he stewed in thought.

"I suppose not. I'm certainly not going to sing the praises of my everyday as loudly as you, but would I change anything drastic? I should like to have a bit more autonomy at work..."

Vivek laughed and nodded his head. "Oh Professor, you should only be fully satisfied when you're left to sip and read and think and get paid for it. I think you'd be perfectly satisfied curating a museum entirely your own, even if you would be it's only appreciative patron."

Thomas grinned in a way that indicated he should be ashamed that it was true, but amongst this company he wasn't.

"You see your Uncle likes to project this image of a loner, but deep down he loves company... Or maybe it's just adoration"

Peter's eyebrows rose. No one had whipped back at the Professor like that before.

"Come now. I don't know if I'll ever really earn your adoration Vivek. You're my ultimate critic and I still love you."

Vivek laughed. "You've earned my adoration Tom. It'll just never be equal, because you'll always frankly adore me much more than I adore you", he said with his hand pressed to his chest. "But that's simply because I make wine and you are an aspiring bon vivant."

As the conversation went on, Peter saw a more vulnerable side of Thomas, one that wasn't afraid to admit his faults and own up to mistakes he'd made. In fact, he started wondering if there was something in Vivek's seemingly endless outpouring of wine that disarmed his Uncle in this particular way.

To his credit, Vivek was unapologetically open. He talked about the woman he left back in Santa Barbara and their heartbreaking relationship, his parents persistent and growing disappointment in their only son abandoning the world of business to - as they put it - "play around in the booze fields all day", the frustration with finding good help in the valley that was willing to stick around, and his own reluctance to do something about the six percent drop in sales from the previous year.

"They want me to do something new, but I just get lazy", he admitted. "I always think of great ideas. What if we try this blend? What if we order these barrels? But by the time we get around to it, I'm tired. My eyes get wearier early and I just feel like taking a nap."

That kind of candor was refreshing for Peter. It reminded him of how grounded some folks back in Kansas were, unashamed of their lives no matter their accomplishments. He thought of a girl back in High School named Celia Strong. She had mentioned to him that she wanted to be a stay-at-home-mom and he didn't think much of it at the time. But by the time he was in Lawrence at college, he quickly got the feeling that people like her were 'selling themselves short' or just generally underachievers. He didn't think his Uncle would like her very much, but Vivek sure might find her charming.

The hours seemed to fly by as they all slowly downed three bottles of wine in the hot California sun. One bottle each, Peter thought to himself (though over the course of about three and a half hours). The three of them discussed life, with a particular focus on politics, travel, and history. Vivek loved history and said if he wasn't pressured by his very traditional Indian parents, he would have gone on to study archaeology. He even teased to Thomas that archaeology was, "Anthropology for those that aren't afraid to get their hands dirty, those that have an actual sense of adventure." Peter wasn't as much of a student of history as the other two, but he had taken a few elective classes at University because he enjoyed the subject so much. Vivek took a particular interest in this and pressed him intently on everything he could remember about the Tokugawa

Shogunate from his Japanese history class. A lot had left his mind in the two years since the class, but Peter still found himself elucidating on the subject as if he were the one teaching it and finding his two elder statesmen eager captives.

When the conversation naturally started to wind down (which was when the alcohol had started setting in an unsettling sleepiness on the trio), Vivek had one of his associates bring out espresso and offered to take them on a tour of the grounds. The whole day thus far had been magical and, though he would never protest vocally, Peter was desperately hoping his Uncle wouldn't come up with an excuse to leave. Ironically it was Thomas who was worried about him.

"We don't have to stay long if you're tired", he whispered to his nephew as they walked out into the rows of vines.

"No. Please. Are you kidding me? I like it here.", he shot back.

Vivek took the two of them on a private tour through the hills meticulously lined with vines and vines of grapes. He went through and explained how old each section was and how far down the roots went. There was a lot of intricacies involved in making wine just right, but the point that Peter really zeroed in on was the importance of the place.

"I believe that there is a place everything is meant to be." Vivek said looking out poignantly at the orange evening landscape. "This hill is meant to be here and so it is. The grapes are meant to be in this soil and the juice is meant to live in those grapes. Those trees are meant to be on those hills and so they are. And I know now that I am meant to be in this place too. It feels balanced in the Universe. And so I am."

The beauty of the rest of the vineyards and the experience of trying a particularly juicy wine grape wasn't lost on Peter, but Vivek's words did leave an impression on him. It made him wonder if he would have an experience like that. One which explained where he might belong.

When they came back to the estate, Vivek coerced them to join him for a meal. Peter was shocked at how quickly the Professor was to oblige considering it was three hours earlier than their usual nine at night eating time, but he certainly wasn't going to fuss.

The three of them were accompanied by Esperanza, Vivek's assistant who seemed to do just about everything for him except lift his feet, all without speaking hardly fifteen words of English. Peter found it quite entertaining to watch Vivek awkwardly squeak his way through conversations with her blending moderate Spanish, light Spanglish, and sprinkled with some Telugu. Whatever was said, Thomas seemed quite relieved that she would be in charge of the meal and not their kindly host.

Dinner was lovely. He didn't want to say it, but it was certainly the best meal Peter had thus far in California. It was a simple, Mexican style Enmoldada. He'd always had a real soft spot for Mexican food, even back in Kansas where most of it was bland and felt mass-produced. But it wasn't until he started frequenting a burrito shop down the street from Cafe du Rue that Peter really saw what he was missing. Esperanza's very formal meal blew him out of the water.

Throughout the meal, Vivek did his best to make sure everyone felt involved, awkwardly prompting Esperanza from time to time and then giving his own "attempted" translations as to what she actually meant. The DeBorr men both couldn't help but chuckle a bit at the one-man show Vivek would end up performing by asking her a question he didn't really know the answer to, listening to her sort of guess at what he was saying and then proceed to spit a rapid-fire Spanish monologue back at him, full of flamboyant hand-gestures and oscillating tone, and then for him to nod calmly before chiming in with a, "I think she's saying..." and filling in some story which inevitably validated his very warm and open worldview. He also tried to make Peter feel apart of the conversation, something Peter very much appreciated. He'd ask him his thoughts on California and pester him about why he was only a "lukewarm" movie fan. They spoke very abstractly about a lot of things, but Peter was able to keep up. The thing he appreciated most about Vivek, which had become increasingly apparent throughout the day, was that he recognized Peter as an adult. He didn't think of him simply as Thomas' nephew or another out-of-state college kid. To him, Peter was a full blown autonomous being, just as capable of thought or opinion as those two. He was younger, sure, but didn't mean he didn't have his own set of knowledge to share. Even when he was asked the prototypical questions all young people get asked, he didn't seem to deliver them in a deigning tone, wanting of him to acknowledge his superiority, but rather to gather insight on another, a new perspective.

"Are you going to get married do you think?", he asked Peter, clinking his fork onto an empty plate.

"One day, I think. It's certainly on the books."

"Children?"

"I've never thought enough about that part to give a proper answer. I feel like that depends on the partner."

Vivek took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He lifted his finger and pointed in approval at the boy.

"Smart. Good answer. I mean, if you asked me ten years ago what my plans would be, I would tell you I'd have a wife and five kids by now. Well, it doesn't take long to figure out there's no wife. And much to my future sadness, you don't see any little feet scurrying around the place either."

"You never had kids with your ex?"

"We were never married, so we never got too far. No kids."

"That you know of!", Thomas chimed in with a grin.

"I always thought you would get married as well, my friend.", Vivek shot back, unsettling the Professor. "I knew you to be a secret man, but not one without lovers."

The exchange that followed was peculiar. Peter couldn't say anything because he wasn't quite sure how to describe it, but he saw his Uncle squirm a bit in his seat. In fact, he started to feel as if Thomas was almost gesturing through the subtle movements in his mouth and eyes that his dear friend, master of the vines, had started to cross a line. And as he slowly crawled his eyes over to Vivek, whose gaze at Thomas seemed to intensify with each silent second, he felt the palpable awkwardness building. Before Peter had time to interject, Thomas swung his arm onto the boy's shoulder

"Speaking of Peter, how are things with your mysteriously charming dog owner?"

With that question, Peter felt the pressure of the room fall towards him, but in a way he sort of welcomed. After all, he'd been dying to debrief his new love with his only nearby family, but had always felt it was the wrong time. So he proceeded to tell them the story of how he met Elish, their initially awkward courtship, all leading up to their foggy kiss. When he got to the end, Thomas was moved.

"You didn't tell me that!"

"You were busy. I didn't want to disturb you."

"That's wonderful Peter", he said, ignoring the initial criticism. "This would clear up the uncertainty and anxiety you've been feeling recently."

"I just think its so lovely that you met organically. It's so rare in this day and age.", Vivek proclaimed.

"He's no foe of technology either. He's been showing me some fun new musical groups on his device.", Thomas added.

"Impressive. I never would have pegged you as the type Peter, but then again, that shows my own inherent prejudice I suppose."

As the meal went on, Vivek had a few jugs of water brought out and invited them in the lounge to sober up a bit before they left. Peter was feeling especially chatty after the meal and continued to insist on his gratefulness for welcoming them into this "sanctuary". Vivek made a point to tell him he was welcome to come back anytime 'with or without his Uncle'.

Then, just as they were preparing to leave, and as Vivek started puffing on a large cigar, he sort of dropped a hammer on Peter out of the blue.

"You know Peter", he started with a large, impressive puff, "You seem like such a solid person. Your parents - your Uncle, everyone should be proud."

Thomas threw his arm around Peter in support, but he knew Peter felt awkward. The sins of his past in Kansas were welling up and he felt almost cornered. It was a cornering entirely within his own mind, but present nonetheless. He'd felt Vivek had been so accommodating and candid, that were he not so passionately blunt, he'd be doing him a disservice.

"I'm... I've made plenty of mistakes.", he said, hoping that would be vague enough to satisfy Vivek.

"Oh yeah, your Uncle told me a bit about that. Something about you being in trouble with your parents, right?"

"Yeah I-", Peter could tell Vivek was hungry for a more in-depth explanation and wasn't going to be satisfied without any context. He also didn't sense any urgency on behalf of his Uncle to step in. He looked over nervously at Esperanza, who was quietly smiling and sipping some kind of aperitif while doing her best to listen in. With great trepidation, but aided by copious amounts of delicious wine, Peter gave him an abridged explanation.

"I got drunk and I hurt a family... a very important family. I was... I could have done things so many other ways, but I just couldn't plan it out properly. I was thick-headed. Determined to get out of there. Basically when I was backing up out of this driveway, I ran into this man and... well I didn't really feel him behind me, so I kept going and I ended up hurting him badly. He's okay now. He's not dead or anything, but it doesn't change the fact that I would give anything to go back and reset my frame of mind. If I wasn't drunk, if I wasn't late, if I wasn't at that house, things might have been different. Unfortunately, that's not at all how fate works"

While speaking, Peter's eyes drifted downwards as he slipped back into the darkest caverns of his mind. It was as if he could feel himself carrying the wine glass in one hand and a lantern in another as he drifted back into the archives of his thoughts. When he arrived, he relived the horror in all its detailed glory. There wasn't a single part of that incident he didn't suddenly recall every single pixel of. But that certainly wasn't going to match what he broadcast to the rest of the group. As he poured out his

soul, Thomas' imposing slant forward made him wonder how much detail his Uncle actually knew about the situation.

After he stopped speaking, Peter felt a prolonged silence. In actuality, it was only about fifteen seconds, but every passing second was a justification of his anxiety of his horror. Esperanza awkwardly looked back and forth before flashing a supportive smile towards Peter. After noticing him squirming a bit, Vivek nodded his head with a disaffected expression.

"If you go down, then we're all lost", he said to a relieving round of chuckles.

"Peter, if it makes you feel any better, I am also not in the graces of my parents. After I broke off my engagement, I don't think there's anything I can do to fix things between us. And you - what you did isn't commendable or reflective of the brief glimpse of character I've been able to glean thus far, but the guy you hurt is okay. I mean, If I were your parents, I'd say done deal! You're fine. Don't sweat it."

The remainder of the meal, Peter couldn't help thinking the same thought over and over again: "I've said too much". But he couldn't help it. There was something about Vivek that made him comfortable. They ended the night talking about women (again), with Peter going into great detail about what type of women he thought he liked and what kind of woman Elish was, and how the two would never cross paths under normal circumstances. Though little detail about her was shared, the three of them did agree that the excitement of a budding romance was short lived and it certainly wasn't worth it spending these precious early moments analyzing every detailed interaction they'd ever had.

"It's the most organic, nourishing thing to not come from the soil", Vivek said pointedly. "Early love"

The DeBorr men didn't finally set sail from the St. Vincent Estates until sometime after ten, meaning they still had well over an hour on their return journey. Thomas had done the responsible thing and abstained from drinking enough to where he was quite confident it would be legal for him to drive. The downside of this was that the now-absent alcohol made Thomas extraordinarily tired. Peter, on the other hand, had really started down a path he knew it was difficult to stop and when he was cut off by

the inconvenient circumstance of having to return home, the world started to shake around him and he found himself nervously clenching his numb hands. Vivek sent the two off with warm hugs and complimentary bottles of wine and encouraged them to visit soon, which Peter was more than eager to do.

In the car ride, the velocity of their movement found a worthy opponent in Peter's jello-like stomach which seemed to wobble and bend at just about any slight movement of the car. The DeBorr men were bad company for one another at this point because Thomas was racing to his bed so he could sleep and Peter was fighting to stay awake so he wouldn't vomit and really ruin a perfectly good night. He was spared when Thomas, seemingly out of nowhere, felt a jolt of tenderness.

"You didn't have to share, you know", he said to his nephew. "I hope you didn't feel like you needed to share. He's curious but he respects privacy."

"Yeah, I know"

Peter was dismissive, but internally frustrated in that he actually didn't need to say anything.

"I'm glad... I'm glad to hear he's okay", Thomas commented.

"Peter simply nodded, doing his best to keep his attention forward."

"You know Peter, I haven't been the best lately. I mean in terms of my presence... I'm working on that. It's a flaw"

Peter forced a smile in recognition of some vulnerability on the part of his Uncle.

"One of many according to Vivek", Peter slyly let slip out. Thomas let his face slip over to his Uncle, flashing him a mean look before letting it fade into a grin with a giggle. It had been a while since he'd seen his Uncle act silly. And he welcomed it. That night, despite the drinking, he slept better than he had yet.

Mid-July was a symbolic turning point in Peter's "urban experience". He started to feel less like a prolonged tourist and more like a true local. If there was one event that started to solidify this transition for him, it was the fourth of July barbecue Antonio held at his cousin Ric's garage in Fremont. For one thing, it was the first time he'd really felt "invited" to an event that actually felt like they wanted him there as apart of the group. For his own personal gain, he'd tried to make an effort to expand his friend-base a bit, checking out a brewery with Tiago one afternoon and making a cinema outing with Tessa. They'd been having more and more shifts together at Cafe du Rue and Antonio had been out for a bit with what he was calling "car trouble". It ended up being a blessing as he never thought he would enjoy her company so much. She felt like a veritable cinephile and instructed him on all the "essentials" he needed to watch in his free time. A lot of it elicited internal eye rolls as he wasn't as out of the loop as she suspected. He'd at least heard of Hitchcock and had seen plenty of Scorsese films, but she was - as she tended to - treating him like he were fresh of the mind. Still, the experiences they had actually going to the theater were quite enjoyable. She took him to a film by some director called Olivier Assayas, whom he'd not heard of, but it was a supernatural thriller and gave the two of them large pools of conversation to draw from afterwards. When they're little "movie club" was over, they'd get more personal. She would tell him the unfortunate updates in her divorce proceedings, and the uncomfortable bodily changes that accompany being a mother. She often prefaced their conversations with some wordy preamble about how he likely wouldn't understand, but found his accessibility and insight valuable.

"You're no country bumpkin", she would slip in, which only made him think she didn't really have any context whatsoever of what made a 'country bumpkin'.

Since he didn't have a car, she offered to drive him to the barbecue down in Fremont. It was quite a different experience leaving San Francisco for Fremont, a rather industrial, blue-collar city, lined with strip malls and auto shops. Ric's garage was hidden in a row alongside several other "auto-shops", most of which operated as under-the-table car modification businesses. It was the kind of place where you could pay someone to get a smog test and they'd help you pass even if you weren't meant to.

On the car ride over, Tessa had been pestering Peter as to why she hadn't seen Elish in a while and why she wasn't coming to the barbecue.

"She just said she had other plans! It doesn't mean anything more than that", he said exasperated. But she was sure her rejection of such a direct invite had to have some kind of unknown subtext. Normally, he wouldn't have minded sharing with her, but her nosy and didactic approach was a bit ham-fisted for the kind of insight he was looking for.

He was a little saddened Elish was too busy, but he tried not to let his mind run rampant with the possibilities that he knew he was capable inventing about their relationship, and let it simply be. They'd seen each other only once since their pier kiss and it had been painfully brief. She'd been working on ramping up her thesis for a meeting with her advisor on July tenth and she'd made it clear she was painfully behind. When they did get together, it wasn't for dinner or drinks or dancing, as Peter had fantasized about, but rather, for a short trip to a bookstore and a coffee on the go. She had needed to pick up a specific new update to Gardner's *Art Through The Ages* and gather some accompanying texts. It was her way of offering a consolation since they wouldn't be able to get together again until afterwards. He was fine and understanding, but couldn't help but feel slightly paranoid that she was a bit distanced with him when the two were in public. When she kissed him goodbye, he tried to bury all his angst in the back of his brain.

By the time he and Tessa arrived at the party, it was certainly in full swing. From the three portable speakers mounted haphazardly from the roofs of cars, to the variety of Coleman grills dotting the parking lot, to the insane amount of Tecate and PBR being sloshed around in excited fists, the two of them knew they were in for a good time. And for the most part they were right.

Most of the day disappeared in an enjoyable haze, working against the trend of the sky itself. Being away from the lofty hills of San Francisco, a familiar summer heat, unbridled by a sea of clouds, was blisteringly present as it sizzled off the tarry asphalt. The combination of the heat and the alcohol proved to be a perfect recipe for a zombie-like state come mid-afternoon. Tiago had orchestrated several tables of games, each of which was often a silly gatekeeping procedure before one could drink. The

thinking behind this was so that people would pace themselves, but it turned out quite the opposite.

When the sky started to dim and the music had circled through its playlist, everyone started to make their way to a park where there would be a great fireworks spectacle. One by one, groups situated in three or four would migrate to a car and slowly evacuate from the parking lot. Peter found Tessa, who'd been in a lawn chair circle with Crystal and others, sleeping and according to Crystal "had been for some good time now". A feeling of panic overtook him as she was his agreed upon mode of transportation as of that point and he had started to wonder whether she would have been a safe choice to drive him.

The issue didn't plague him much further. As one by one, various people who'd overheard his problem began to come up and offer to take him. First it was Luis, then Tiago himself, then Crystal, and even Eduardo's friend Matt. He politely turned each one down as he made it clear he felt obligated to travel with Tessa, but they persisted, making note that they wanted him included. Finally, he relented once Crystal stuffed an intoxicated Tessa into the back of her Subaru hatchback and the three of them drove forty minutes to a large grassy knoll. Everyone had rolled out blankets to watch the show, but Crystal had hers a short distance away. Tessa continued to snooze off the booze with a straw hat over her head while for the first time in a while Crystal and Peter got to talking. The conversation was light, mostly about past fourths with family, and life at Cafe du Rue. Surveying the crowd Peter noticed one strangely absent face.

"Where's Antonio?"

"He had plans with someone else", she said casting a disappointed smile to the ground.

"With a man?"

She turned her face up with a look of stark confusion at the question, almost as if it disturbed her. Peter instantly worried that as close as they were, she wasn't in the know of his sexuality and quickly tried to wriggle his way out of it.

"Someone I know?", he quickly added.

"I don't know. I just know he had somewhere to be", she said getting quieter. "I'm not jealous, if that's what you think."

"I don't."

"He's a good friend. I just know he's not always right in the head. He's had these depressive spells. I get worried is all. He kinda shuts down."

"I can feel that way sometimes", Peter said in an attempt to be reassuring.

"You? You're in a good place! What are you talking about?"

"It's not always been this way."

She smiled and slowly nodded at him.

"You got a good girl, you know that. I hope you guys find a way to make it good while it lasts."

Peter felt his face flush with fear. "What do you mean while it lasts? Are you saying its not gonna last?"

"Nothing lasts forever. We just don't know."

She paused to take a sip of the shandy she'd mixed herself earlier. He'd never really cared to learn much about Crystal and she about him. They were both extensions of one another through Antonio. But in this moment, they seemed to be superseding that barrier. For once it wasn't a brief aside as a part of a group, but rather a real talk. After a long pause, she gave him a big grin before continuing.

"Warm summer nights. Crickets outside your window. Love. It's a powerful mixture. Summer love. They write songs about that shit, man. Its a rare, like, thing. It comes, it goes, it disappears. But its always there. And it's always been there. You're lucky to have it. You're a Kansas kid in California. Shit, you might not be working for some big tech

company, but you've got yourself a strong case of Summer Love. You'll always have that."

The way she spoke was so quiet and almost poignant as if she was herself remembering something she'd lost. He thought about asking, but for some reason, her words felt like the terminus. If she had wanted to share something, she could have. Instead, she stared out into the fading sky, leaving Peter with his thoughts. He wondered if there was a part of him that was certain this particular love was fleeting. Before he could dwell too deep in his own thoughts, he was embraced by Ric and Luis singing "Born in the USA" as a magical host of fireworks painted the night sky. As he looked over at the rest of the group, there was something warming and reassuring about the gallery of smiles and lifted cans that made him feel a part of something. They were never going to be close friends, he knew that, but his era of feeling like an outsider had begun to close.

On the ride home, Tessa had been struggling to remember much of the circumstances of the day, though she said she'd "slept it all out" of her system. When she dropped him off out in front of his Uncle's house, she thanked him for accompanying her and commented that, "This was pretty good for a Bay Area fourth, right?". Peter had nothing to compare it to as this was his first in California. His previous celebrations in Kansas typically involved backyard games, his family traveling to the University stadium where they did a show, and then coming back for a classic grilled dinner. He wondered what they were doing this year. And then, before he wondered too long, he quickly shut his mind off, so as to not think about what would happen if he were there.

It was a quiet, rather dreary morning at Cafe du Rue and the weather was starting to hamper the mood. It was the coldest day in memory of that entire summer and Peter felt like it could almost pass for an early winter day in Kansas with the frigid draft slipping through the windows. The cafe was dead. In fact, it was deader than dead. The entire morning, they hadn't had more than a few take-away orders and Peter was starting to run out of tasks for himself. It was only him, Devin, and Silvio in the place that morning and Peter's "seniority" made him the go-to over Devin. On a morning

this slow typically Devin would just be sent home, but Peter didn't want to lose out on the company no matter what form the company may come in.

If only Antonio were there. He didn't mind Devin or Tessa or the charming new girl they hired Sable, but Antonio really seemed to have been the mast of their metaphorical ship. He was the leader of the troops. For Peter, he was a friend and confidant and his absence had been problematic for just about everyone. The last time Peter had seen him was the morning after the fourth. He'd risen around ten, intending to go on a late morning run to burn off his wild night, only to find his Uncle and Antonio enjoying a cappuccino around the dining room table. They were both startled by Peter's presence at first.

"I thought you were in Fremont", Thomas asked.

"I was"

"Well you aren't now"

"I wasn't sleeping there! Tessa drove me back late last night." He shot Antonio a friendly wave. "Hey Antonio!"

As confused as Thomas was, Antonio in contrast was very calm, even pleased to see Peter and toasted to him with his coffee.

"I was in the neighborhood and I'd had some new records I wanted to show your Uncle. He's one of those few guys out there who always appreciates vinyl."

"Not just any vinyl", Peter threw in, intending to get some kind of cheeky reaction out of Thomas.

"No, but he's!... He's at least willing to listen to what I bring"

"It's not always my style", Thomas jumped in. "But I'm trying to be open. I'm trying to expand beyond and prove that I'm not turning into the kind of the sticks in the mud that I always loathed."

He seemed genuine in his words and had an airiness around him that made Peter glad the two of them were friends. Antonio did have an intangible warmth around him that really seemed to emanate to all those around. As he was on his way out the door Antonio seemed to shout at him that he may, "be away" for a few days and that he wouldn't be able to be at the cafe for a bit. He wouldn't elaborate where, but based on the casualness of the comment, Peter couldn't have assumed it was going to be for long. He thought about pressing him on the issue further after the run, but when he returned, he was left with Thomas, cleaning the dishes and coming up with theories, but no answers as to what Antonio really meant when he said that.

"He's a free spirit. They do things like that", Thomas said plainly.

But those days had piled on one after the other and soon it had been a week since Antonio had stepped foot in the cafe. Slowly the doldrums of daily operations started to seep back in with an absence in substantive conversation. It wasn't just that Antonio was gone, it was what Crystal had said. Did he leave because he was depressed? The last time he was seen (that morning in the DeBorr kitchen), he seemed chipper as ever. In some ways Antonio himself was becoming this enigma, much in the same way Elish had been one. 'What is it with all these people and their guarded thoughts and feelings?', Peter thought. Everyone was so private and it used to be just Peter that was private. Except Devin. He wasn't quiet or private.

"This sucks.", he moaned.

"Yeah well, not a lot of people want to go out when its raining this badly"

"I thought people liked coffee when it rains, it helps you fight the sadness"

"Apparently they don't like it enough. Also rain doesn't make people sad."

"Yes it does", Devin started scrolling through his phone to find something specific. "We actually had to do a study on this in Social Studies class... ah! Well this isn't it fully, but it basically shows a correlation between happiness and location based around US cities and annual sunshine hours. You see, places like Seattle have really low happiness ratings. There is some science to it after all."

"How do you measure something like that, happiness?", for some reason Peter almost took his litany of data like a personal attack.

"Well... it's mostly self-reported. People describe their mood from one to ten based on-"

"--Okay point made.", Peter was done. It was only dragging him down further. Shortly after, he got a text message and his heart started to soar. He knew Elish was supposedly going to be really free in the coming weeks and she said she'd let him know when things free up. It turned out to be Antonio, who suggested they close up early if things got slow. So he dismissed Devin and started to slowly get things in order.

Taking a break at one of the empty tables, he started to dwell on the idea that his summer was now about halfway through. He was due back in September and the days were numbered. What would things look like a year on? Would he look back on quiet days like this and feel some sense of longing? Would this end up being a "happy place" for him to retreat to when things in the future were difficult?

Coming out of his periphery was Silvio, broom in hand and gait pointed in his general direction. Thus far, Peter hadn't said more than fifteen words in total to Silvio. They'd had a few conversations early on, but it was clear to him that the old man preferred to stick to his work. He was the "master roaster" at Café du Rue. Peter always found the Master modifier a bit superfluous as he was also the only roaster who actually knew how to treat the beans. What little he knew about the leathery old man came from Antonio. Silvio was born and raised in a small village outside Palermo in Sicily. His family owned several restaurants there and his way of contributing was through coffee. He did a couple of apprenticeships and somehow ended up stateside some thirty odd years back. San Francisco was the technical landing spot.

"It's Peetehr, correct?", he said in a thick staccato-like accent.

"Call me whatever you like. By the way, Antonio called. He said we could go home."

Silvio waved him off dismissively. "I still have to do beans."

Even though he made it apparent he still had work to do, he curiously continued to approach Peter and even pulled up the chair across from him.

"You are not a from here?", Silvio said wiping his browned, thick hands in one another. Peter just shook his head. "Me neither. I came here long before you were even born."

Peter was bored enough to jump into just about any conversation.

"And what did bring you here Silvio?"

"Same as you. I was running away from another life."

Peter invited the challenge of Silvio's clairvoyance "What makes you think I'm running away from another life?"

"I know these things boy. I have lived a long, long life."

Peter believed him. His eyes were sunken and considerably darker than his already Olive skin. When most people came into the cafe, they assumed he was Antonio's Uncle, due to his considerably dark coloring. He was shorter, but his fairly rotund frame didn't help with that much as it only accentuated his size. Despite his compact figure, he moved like a retired basketball player. Every step a slog, every lifting of the arm, its own challenge. It was clear he was tired in the way he conducted most activities.

"I had run into many bad situations back in Europa. It was mostly because my brother in law, well, he was a gambler you see. He had a problem and then he passed that a problem onto me. It was not always gambling. Sometimes other stuff, but its not important. By the end of two years of knowing this a man, we decide - or really I decide I am now in some trouble."

Peter could tell he had shifted his attention to him because he wanted some kind of visceral response. He tried widening his eyes in the most authentic way possible.

"Now it is time for a me to leave Sicilia. At this point now, everyone in family. Brother, sister, cousins, all are not happy with me. One cousin makes wine on the other side of the island and --", he clapped his hands together as he made a raspberry sound. "Even he had nothing for me to do. So I had two choices. In one, I face my fears but choose the life everyone before me had. Itsa the one that I think is most smart. But part of me also, it just needs change. So I consider another option. I have one Aunt who is dying. I never knew she existed. My mother said she lived in America, she had to move for some terrible family crisis. Very sad, I know. But for me, I knew there was opportunity. It was a place I could escape to."

He paused and leaned in with a devilish grin. "San Francisco."

Peter could tell that at least part of this story had been rehearsed, but he didn't really let that deter him.

"You'd never been to America before?", he asked, trying to remain fairly cool.

"I'd never been to the mainland, Italia! But I knew I had a skill. Coffee was my thing I did well. And if I were going to start again, this would be the place."

"So you got to start roasting?"

"No. no roasting yet. I work my way up. But each step of the way, I was doing all I could to erase life on Sicilia. Erase those who had harmed me. This was my chance to reform life as I know it. But as soon as I got to America, I was acting like I had done something bad. I carried that darkness with me."

He paused.

"I can tell you have something you brought with you as well."

Peter kept his face blank as he wasn't quite sure how to react. He certainly didn't have an instinctive trust for the old man and wasn't exactly inclined to share his secrets

with him, but did appreciate his acute observational power. After thinking it over briefly, he decided he didn't want to lie to the man.

"I guess I did, yeah", he said with a resigned sigh, averting his eyes as he pondered into the distance.

"You certainly don't a need to tell me. Every man is entitled to his secrets."

But then Peter felt like he was missing an opportunity.

"I hit a man", he said for the first time from his own mouth. "I hit him with a car completely by accident. Whats worse I that he was kind of a local hero. A true sweetheart of the community."

Silvio listened intently. He kept a strong stare without even the slightest of blinks, maintaining perfect traction with every one of Peter's movements.

"He's alive, but he's certainly not going to be the same. He'll be hurt for the rest of his life and I'm going to be forever stuck with the communal guilt of putting him there."

Silvio seemed to chew on those words and find their taste a bit disturbing as evidenced in his grimace.

"You are a tricky one", he said through thin eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"Who cares? Who cares about man who gets hurt. No death, no horror, no drama. There is more to the story."

Once again, Peter felt cornered, but he wasn't going to yield to this coworker that he hadn't properly gotten to know yet. He stayed silent.

"Don't tell me.", he said plainly. "But if you tell no one then it lives in your heart to pain you forever."

Their chat ended rather abruptly, but Silvio made it clear that there were no tenuous feelings between the two of them. In fact, once the rain really started hammering the city, the two of them packed up the shop together and Silvio took him to the back where he taught him a bit about bean roasting. It was a pleasant surprise for Peter to learn that Silvio was far less technical with his work than others might have been. He didn't spend time talking about specific temperatures or specific times, but spoke rather abstractly about the beauty of bean roasting and the spirituality of coffee. He argued that anything that served to "encourage conversation", like coffee or wine, was amongst the most precious of all earthly goods because they fostered "real human connection" as he put it. His role was to prepare this sacred tool, much in the way a priest would prepare the eucharist. Each bean contained its own nugget of knowledge, waiting to be harvested. The roasting process was where the roaster (Silvio) would try and imagine what kind of words each one might inspire. A darker roast for those late night emotional heartaches, a roast for reflection. A lighter roast was the starter for the day, a springboard of inspiration for ideas meant to really start off a morning. To Peter, it made more sense than anything Antonio had tried to tell him about elevation and specific tasting notes. It had engaged him in a way he hadn't been in a while.

The two of them stayed until the early evening, talking about the power of human connection and reflecting on some sweet anecdotes from their upbringing. They never went back to specifics. Neither felt like they had to detail crimes, but they certainly made it clear they understood one another. They both grew up on farms. The world of "street smarts" was so foreign to them, it was like moving to a new country. The only trouble was that Peter was still in this strange land. And even though he was starting to feel less like a stranger, he was still faced with the daunting premise that his time wasn't unlimited. Whether he liked it or not, he would be returning to Kansas. And it wasn't far off now. The best advice Silvio gave him that afternoon was to "vivi il momento", and to try to be present as much as he could be. As comfortable as Peter was worrying about where he was going to be, the present needed him.

That evening on the walk home, he folded up his umbrella in the midst of the deluge. Something came over him that he couldn't wrap his head around. As the rain soaked his soft, red cardigan sweater and sent his long dark locks drooping down over his eyes, Peter felt a strange sense of relief. The whole walk home, he comfortably strolled along the street, his only thoughts consumed with his immediate sensations: cold, tight, wet, and loud. When he passed by the staircase leading to Elish's house, he had

his first break in thought. He considered stopping by just to give her a kiss in the rain, but in the end decided the idea was better left relegated to his fantasy. Instead, he simply smiled up towards her and pivoted back towards his apartment.

After what felt like months, but was in reality about ten days, Elish and Peter finally reconnected. The two of them met for dinner in a small, alley-style Ramen place in a chic corner of Japantown. Both were obviously missing one another as their greeting was pleasantly amorous and not short on physical affection. Whatever distance Peter had felt from her seemed to dissipate as soon as she pressed her lips firmly against his. The meal was lively and bright as well as they talked about her thesis. Her advisor had been particularly harsh, but had seemed to back off as soon as she'd seen the progress Elish made. She also mentioned some vague family issues that had been creating some issues, but as Peter was slurping his Udon noodles, the look of discomfort her eyes held caused him to decide to pursue the topic in a less public forum. A new point of joy between the both of them: a love of Japanese cuisine. Like a duel of wits, the two exchanged every tidbit of information they'd collected over the years about Tonkatsu and proper Wasabi cultivation. Neither had been to Japan before in their life, but through years of dates and general cultural interest in the wider world, both of them had grown a refined appreciation for the cuisine and the culture.

"We should have an anime and ramen night!", she posited with giddiness.

"Of course! Deep cuts? Or classic stuff?"

"Oh we're not going Miyazaki mainstream here"

She was smirking, thinking what she was doing was establishing her logos in regards to the complex and intricate world of anime. She was no scrub. But from Peter's perspective, she continued to charm him.

When the dinner wrapped, she took him to a tiki bar she knew nearby. A bartender she knew there named Baby had known her since middle school, but had just moved back to the Bay Area from Seattle. Peter loved being privy to what felt like some kind of strange reunion as the two of them embraced almost as passionately as Peter and her did at the beginning of the night. Baby was a gawky, slender, tattooed girl who was half Cambodian, half Jewish. Her rag-tag tales of how she ended up in Seattle and back again were dubious, but entertaining. There was no way of knowing in the end as she had a profound and outspoken distaste for social media.

Peter wouldn't have sought out conversation with Baby under normal circumstances, but he did like getting a glimpse into someone from Elish's world. He'd felt that with all the time they'd spent out and with Antonio, he'd laid his social circle bare. Elish called herself an "introvert", but by the way she'd enthusiastically embraced her bygone fellow after just a short introductory wave, he'd started to make his reservations. Of course, applying such standards was partly unfair. Most of Peter's friends were still in Kansas.

His best friend Rodney Knight was out in Wisconsin at Marquette, but was quick to return to the Sunflower State at every break in school. The two of them still had contact, but only through e-mails and the occasional text. He was one of the few who was still oblivious to the trouble Peter had gotten himself into back home. Then there was Allison, a lesbian gamer who'd gone with Peter to high school in Manhattan and followed him to college in Lawrence. They didn't talk much, except to arrange games online, which he hadn't had the energy to do since he came to San Francisco (he also felt like the Professor wouldn't much approve). Besides, she was out in Houston doing an internship for her Aerospace degree and he felt like it wouldn't be conducive to either of them.

But sadly, that was it. Everyone else back home had distanced themselves from Peter. As big as Manhattan could feel, it was like a compression chamber when it came to rumors. Word of his misdeed and bad behavior had quickly spread throughout their tight-knit community and tainted his reputation. If there was anything negative that Peter knew to be true about Kansans, it was that they weren't easy to forget anything. And frustratingly, they never knew the whole story. All they knew was Peter and the Fitzsimmons and the accident and the fire. No one knew how they all were connected, but they all drew their own dots.

He didn't want Elish to meet old friends anyway. The people he'd met over the last six weeks had proven to be as kin as Rodney or any of them.

In his head, he was already starting to do his best to forget about all those old friends. In some ways he felt treated even better by his coworkers at Cafe du Rue than anyone back in Kansas. If Elish met any of them, they might expose parts of him he never wanted known.

For the first time in a while, he thought about Daphne.

After a lovely evening dancing and letting Baby wet their lips to excess, Peter started to let his mind gravitate towards the carnal. Maybe it was the thought of "her" that he had kept suppressed, or maybe it was the young bachelorette party, frolicking about in their sequined gold dresses, skin glistening in the light from their tantric motions, but something in the place was yanking him towards physical love. When he turned his gaze to Elish, she looked an absolute vision - much like one of the Kouros sculptures that the Professor had been examining the other day. Her smile was soft, warm and inviting, her hair was large and flowing, and her body was contouring at all the right angles as it seemed to slink about to fill each corner of her mildly immodest dress. Peter hadn't even noticed that she was wearing something slightly out-of-character for what she had worn before. It was a small, blue dress - nothing formal or fancy. It ran about mid-thigh and could be worn in public without any fuss, but compared to her previous outfits (most involving pants), this one dared to reveal her figure the most. Now she was, much to her long-held chagrin, not what one would call a "curvy" girl. She had been reminded from the moment she passed through the post-pubescent threshold that she did not have a very "feminine figure". Her chest was smaller, as was her waist, hips, and legs. Boyish, she'd been told it was. She had incredible fortitude in these uncomfortable encounters and was able to simply smile and throw her hands up in surrender, but internally spent a great deal of effort to determine the small ways in which she might change or enhance her look, or at the very least mask what she felt was a deficit to her full evolutionary completion. And so what looked to Peter to be a simple last minute change of preference, was actually a much more carefully executed display, which she was simply able to pull off with a look of ease.

And the fruits of this enticing labor didn't come to full fruition until around eight that evening when all the chemicals in his brain started shooting lightning bolts to the hormones around his body. Any remnant fears wandering his mind about girls from the past, his friends in Kansas, or why he hadn't seen Elish in a while vanished in an instant. Instinct had taken over and paved the way for deep physical craving. Luckily for him, she was feeling much the same

Before long, the two of them were embraced in a passionate make-out session right there on the dance floor. There was something almost sweet about the taste of each others lips. Elish had a long-held belief that you knew you were really attracted to someone if kissing them tasted good. She tried to connect it to science and pheromones and all the other important sources, but really it was a validation of that gut feeling. They slid their hands all over one another while locked in the embrace, moving so slowly as to capture every bit of physical information about one another. It was like their palms were like spacecraft, scanning the surface of a new planet, harvesting important information. "Located: the small of the back". She stretched up to wrap her hands around the back of his shoulders, pulling him in closer. When their hands finally worked their way to each other's faces, it was as if the spacecrafts had found their landing pad. There was something so intimate and soft about a hand on a face, his slightly course and hers very soft. Time disappeared. He thought of a T.S. Eliot quote he'd remembered from his last semester class, 'The Art and Mechanics of the Word in 20th Century Britain'. "Love is most itself when here and now cease to matter." He felt that. He felt present. When they finally gathered their things to leave, he was reminded of his day in the park with Crystal and her advice about cherishing this moment. Summer love. He sighed, tucking away the notion that something like this was ephemeral.

They stopped for street hot dogs on the way back home. They passed right through the Mission district which had these great Latin-American inspired bacon-wrapped hot dogs with an Elote sauce smothered over it. That seemed so satiate only one of their appetites, so Peter drunkenly invited her over to watch a movie. The minute he said it, he wanted to smack himself in the face. That was, after all, the most cliched move since High School to get a girl to come over. The bigger problem though was that he had not checked whether this was okay with the Professor at all. And an even bigger issue with his particular invitation is that his Uncle proudly lived in a house without television. While she wavered, he desperately tried to pivot, running through the painfully

awkward scenarios were she to say yes, including such as: them having to crowd around his tiny laptop remaining as quiet as possible; sneaking around the back to try to avoid notifying his Uncle; awkwardly having to have a conversation with the Professor which would could make things more uncomfortable for Peter's remaining weeks; opening said laptop to a social media post someone had written about him after the incident in Kansas.

"Okay", she said. It was the loftiest fairest, 'okay', he'd gotten from her yet. Instead of fessing up to his fears about how everything was about to roll out, he instead decided to change the subject as the two of them walked along.

"Am I good to you?", he asked. She just laughed in response.

"Good to me? Yes. Is there a reason I shouldn't think so?"

"No, it's just. I think you're hard to read sometimes. We have these... spurts of being together and then not and it's just... I can't tell with you. Normally with women, I'm decent. I can sort of get a feel for how we are, but with you it's different."

It was definitely the alcohol talking, but it didn't make his words any less true. He'd been waiting some time to have the opportunity for candidness with her.

"I guess I'm just not as easy as those other girls", she said playfully smiling over the double entendre.

"So you acknowledge that you're difficult?"

"I think I'm complicated. But in my defense, you're not exactly an open book yourself."

Peter sat there, stewing in his thoughts for a moment, trying to remember all their interactions. He hadn't been perfectly open with her, but he hadn't ever lied to her. She knew little of his life in Kansas, beyond the banal day-to-day details any new

couple glosses over, but she knew nothing of the emotions hidden away there, the stories he'd cached in hidden alcoves.

"You're right I guess. I'm not trying to be that way", his morose posturing elicited a bit of a sympathetic response from her. She was trying to keep things playful!

"I didn't mean that in a mean way!", she said like a mother comforting a hurt child, holding back laughter at his fragility. "I just mean that we play things close to the chest."

She pulled his attention towards her. "Both you and me."

He felt a bit better after she said that. "I'm not trying to judge or anything, I just... Everything has been so great so far, I don't want anything to come and screw it up. I don't want to make things move too fast or put too much pressure on you because I know that would be unfair. I want to take it slow with you because I like you... and in a way that I just don't think I have with other girls"

She thought about parlaying his final words about 'other girls' into a sarcastic accusation about his mysterious nature and the things she didn't know about him, but could tell he wasn't in a joking mood and thought her comments were better reserved for another occasion.

"I like you too Peter", she stopped him under an old streetlamp at the bottom of the hill where the Professors house was and leaned in to kiss him underneath the soft orange glow of the old-world looking lighting fixture on that pleasantly warm summer night. Her kisses were like an amnesiac, providing a quick remedy to a worried mind. Once administered, all troubles were erased, if even just for a short instance. They started making their way up the hill and the peculiar potential social obstacles to their impromptu movie night hadn't really troubled his mind.

"We'll figure it out", he thought to himself.

Just as they were getting to the top of the block, Elish's footsteps began to slow. Peter didn't notice until she was absent at his side, at which point he swung around to see her looking at her phone and chewing on the index and middle finger nails.

Something was evidently wrong. She let out a frustrated sigh and stomped her foot a bit.

"I'm so sorry Peter, I... I have- something has come up."

His heart sank into a deep pit. What could have changed in the course of one hundred or so steps?

"Please, please don't hold this against me. It's a personal thing."

"Are you okay?", he asked instinctively.

"Yeah, yeah. I am. I just... Can we raincheck? I-- It's... I'll tell you about it later?", she leaned into kiss him before turning abruptly and starting to skip down the street.

"Is this just about the playing it close to your chest?"

He was being coy.

"I know this looks bad! I'll make it up to you!"

Then she was gone out of sight. He let out a deep sigh and with it, whatever pent up physical energy he had stored for the evening. Part of him was agonizing with newfound concern. Another part of him felt some relief that he was no longer going to have any strange encounters with his Uncle.

When he came back inside, he found his Uncle toiling away at the dining room table, already on edge. In some ways, he felt like he lucked out.

Peter couldn't sleep much that night. It could have been his unusually early bedtime (around ten) or the alcohol which lulled him into it, but there was something very disruptive about his usual REM cycle. What little sleep he had was horrifying. There wasn't so much a cohesive dream as there were faint, fleeting visions of Daphne and the McAllisters. He'd been plagued by visions of them many nights before, but so

many of those were cohesive sequences which quickly burned away with the morning fog. These were vivid, fleeting. He could see her black hair, her skinny jeans, and her soft, pursed lips. Then there were the parents. What little images remained of them were what could only be described as 'flashes of emotion'. A stark, cold, gripping anger fused with disgust from the Mr. And a depressive, disappointing, slather of languor from the Mrs. And then there was nothing but fire. Kissing and fire. It was a strange and horrific mix of images to pelt against the back of ones corneas in the early hours of the evening and Peter felt like it was just another link in the bad karma chain following Elish's pre-emptive departure. Part of him felt like this was a cruel karmic result of him not divulging what had happened to bring him to San Francisco, but he knew how his mind could run amok and decided against letting it wander too far down that path.

Ten minutes or so after midnight, he rolled out of bed, slid on his jeans and a jacket and considered making some coffee. Really he was hoping he might still find the Professor up and willing to engage him in some light conversation about anything at all. When he didn't see anyone about, he peered through the small kitchen window which had a fantastic view of the downtown skyline, but also of Thomas' chamber. The light was on, but dim. 'Reading', he said to himself, resigned to be alone.

Quietly, he made his way out the front door and opted for a nice, brisk walk instead. The warm summer air had cooled harshly overnight and it was almost bitter outside, immediately sending a shock to his senses. He started out with pace in any direction that would take him. He found that simply being outside had been a boon to his inner peace. In fact, the temperatures were so low and the wind harsh enough that he could think of absolutely nothing at all except movement.

When he finally looked up, he noticed he had been walking one of the running paths he usually took, which brought him across town near the Fillmore district. As he crossed the street away from the more residential areas of town, he found himself in good company with hordes of other young people just beginning their night out. Groups of guys with button up shirts and the scent of aqua velva ringing pungent off their curly-haired chests stomped confidently, but sloppily towards their next place of indulgence, which they usually announced to just about any passerby. Groups of girls, their jewelry shining in front of their shimmering cleavage, tall dark heels all falling in a line one after another in rapid succession creating a waterfall effect, were giggling up

a storm and adjusting their outfits, pulling their tight pants up to perfectly shape their young, perky bodies. Couples, hand in hand, walked down the street like amorous pulsars, orbiting one another without ever getting close. It was a sensory experience for Peter and one that only seemed to make him bitter. His attention finally snapped for a voluptuous blonde dressed to the nines in a body-forming black dress with gold hoop earrings bouncing in lock-step with her large breasts, her lip-gloss tinted smile pointed in the direction of her Scandinavian-looking beau. A strange, displaced sense of jealousy stirred within him. He decided to pivot and make his way to a less popular part of town. Four blocks away and through a secret alleyway, he found himself outside Mr. Dizzy's Record Room.

It was an encouraging sign that Farouk, the Egyptian bouncer, recognized him and asked where he'd been. Peter entered the space with increased confidence. It was his first time there alone and he felt a strange, foreign sense of freedom. The room was mostly full, but less than other nights and he had a pretty good scope of the place. The group that night was called "Elixir Number Six" and consisted of a four-piece group: drums, piano, bass, and saxophone. They were doing their own stuff, which was mostly riffs on Hard Bop classics. Peter loved it. By far it was his favorite set.

After standing by one of the columns for a few songs, he noticed a slender, shorter-haired brunette woman at the bar with a sort of bob cut. She was slunk over and had her chin in her palm, face beaming pleasantly towards the group. Devilishly, Peter thought she might provide him a perfect distraction for the next hour or so, so he casually made his way over to the bar. He didn't want to drink, but ordered a Blood and Sand anyway, knowing he couldn't really hurt himself anymore. He was cautious. She seemed so tuned into what was happening onstage, he didn't want to seem too pushy. Then, as the song ended, he tried a semi-audible, "Hey there", which faintly graced her ear. Just as she started to turn around and determine whether she was the intended recipient, a clearly audible call came from just over Peter's shoulder.

"Superman?"

Standing next to Peter in a fine-stitched tweed jacket was the very prominent shadow of Marc Roy. He had a strand of his salt and pepper hair hanging in front of his sweaty

visage and a whisky-breathed smile puffing cheery chuckles in Peter's direction. He chose not to dwell on the struggles the Professor had enumerated against him and instead cherish the night they had shared together so many weeks ago in this very spot. In perfect order, Mr. Roy ordered them a different Mezcal cocktail which came with some fancy-looking accouterments before engaging in conversation. The woman which had initially captured Peter's attention was now cast far into the back of his mind.

"You've come back here a lot then?" , Mr. Roy pried eagerly hoping to be affirmed in his taste.

"I love it, I really do. I guess I have you to thank for that!"

The two clinked glasses. Mr. Roy's round face was beat red and even Peter could see it in the dark bar. He had a bit of an Orson Welles aura about him as he confidently ushered Peter over to his table. They were only a few feet from the stage and it was difficult to meet Mr. Roy's haughty-looking company, which included an older, suave-looking Chinese man, a dark, wavy-haired beauty, and a quiet old woman with a firm handshake who wore sunglasses inside the bar. Peter stuffed himself in the corner in between Marc and his associate Mr. Lau.

"Everyone, this is Peter" , he yelled to his troupe in-between sets. "He's a good friend of mine."

"Pleased to meet you Peter" , a classically tall, dark and handsome gentleman next to him patted him on the shoulder.

"You like jazz?" , another named Mr. Lau asked.

"Yeah, I've been getting into it quite a bit lately"

They proceeded to analyze the performance between songs. Peter had come a long way since his last visit there with Marc. He'd made a point to play different kind of jazz records and complications when he got to be in charge of the music at Cafe du Rue. It was his way of squeezing in a study session while at work. Cool jazz, hot jazz, fusion jazz, bebop, hard bop, swing, Bossa nova, experimental jazz, and just about everything

in-between. So when it came time for him to chime in, he was ready. All of Marc's accomplices were none the wiser, but Marc himself noticed.

"I feel like he's the kind of saxophonist Ornette Coleman would have loved to see play", Peter posited to a group of curious nods.

"He's got a rhythm all his own that's kind of bitter to the ears."

"The shape of jazz to come", Marc said in a thinking kind of voice. "I agree. It's got almost its own ethereal type of nature to it."

"How old are you, young man?", the dark man asked. He was a Turkish man named Vulkan who had been one of Mr. Roy's investment advisors for some time. When Peter told him, he scoffed in disbelief. "A man ahead of his years!"

"Peter DeBorr here is a young savant. He'll make an excellent diplomat one day"

"You certainly look the part", said the beautiful wavy-haired woman, an Argentine named Maria Silva. Her praise made Peter blush. Lucky for him it was too dark and everyone was too drunk to see.

"You study international affairs, right?", Mr. Roy goaded.

"Yeah, I'd love the opportunity to work in business. I'm interested in the cultural exchange international business provides"

Peter was proud of how coherent he sounded.

"Well do you have a market you're interested in?", Mr. Lau asked. "I'm sure you've got quite a spread in front of you now."

The whole table laughed, but Peter was flush with anxiety. He didn't remotely prepare an answer.

"Please, please", Marc pleaded. "Let's talk less business. There's music now."

The group was fairly quiet through the next set, happily entranced by the wizardry, particularly of the young female drummer, who seemed to be drilling away during her fiery solo. It was another hour before things finally quieted down and most of the remaining table had made their excuses and quietly shuffled out. Rounds and rounds of different mixtures of alcohols came to the table in a colorful variety of glasses: skinny, fat, tall, short, glass, metal. Each one seemed to get fuzzier and fuzzier as libations washed their hoarse, cheer-weary throats. There were only four of them left when the band broke for the final time and Vulkan waved a pleasant goodbye: Marc, Peter, Maria, and Mr. Lau.

The last songs were renditions on jazz standards and Peter found himself singing along to a few, his drunk blanket shielding him from being aware of just how loudly he actually was. Maria, who was never that much of a jazz fan to begin with, found herself curiously peeking over at the boy. The band didn't have a singer which meant that Peter's voice seemed to perfectly imprint over their music. She thought he was simply improvising the lyrics to "My Funny Valentine" and figured it was just another skill this highly commended collegiate had hidden within his set of tools. Maria leaned over to pay him a compliment, cueing him off on how obvious he was being after all. Peter's immediate reaction was to flip his eyes towards Marc, who was staring at him, head tilted backwards, eyes zeroed in with an intense analytic look about them sucking the rest of the energy out of his cherubic, scruffy face. Peter was a bit perturbed by the intensity of the look, but was distracted by the idea that Marc's baby-face would continue to remind him of a mid-aged, drunk Orson Welles. Once they locked eyes Peter averted his gaze and quieted down. When he looked back Marc was hosting his pursed-lipped look of passionate intensity as he nodded and raised a nearly empty martini glass to the boy. 'Good job', he mouthed distinctively across the table.

It was four minutes to two, just passed last call and Elixir Number Six had announced their imminent departure after one more number. At the beginning of the last song, Marc stood up and called out to the band by name.

"Hey Henry, you have a microphone up there, don't you?"

A cold sting soberly struck Peter in his back and traveled up his spine.

"I think I 'ave a friend of mine here who might be able to help you all out with that."

The small but mighty crowd cheered as Peter stumbled his way up on stage, delirious and hazy-eyed. He didn't remember how he managed to scramble up the large wooden protrusion of a stage, but he did remember not putting up much resistance to their friendly chants. Once the music started, he felt a swell of confidence surge throughout his body. He was a veritable Sinatra up there tapping his foot. The song was familiar: "I've Never Been In Love Before". Without precedent or conversation with the bandmates, he went ahead and told people.

"This is a classic number folks, called 'I've Never Been In Love Before' ", he said to the shimmer of a cymbal. His table hollered in gleeful solidarity. As he swayed back and forth, he he found his gaze being averted away from the crowd and towards the spotlight. He didn't really care what anyone thought. This was a moment to bask in the light. As he sung the words,

"It's all too strange and strong
I'm full of foolish song
And out my song must pour
So please forgive
This helpless haze I'm in...."

images flooded his mind. It was Elish and he strolling the streets of San Francisco, kindly old Esther leading the way just slightly ahead of them -the city blanketed in a cloud, the towering skyline propping itself up as if it were trying to tether the whole peninsula to the sky itself. They slowly rocked their bodies back and forth on the pier, her head nestled in the crease between his shoulder and neck. It was like watching a reel of their relationship unfold before his very eyes. Flashes of memories interwove his thoughts: her dropping into Cafe du Rue; their night out with Antonio; Japanese food; their first date at the park; his many afternoons jogging by her house, only to be met with a distant smile. Then, a quarter of a second flash of thought about Daphne.

"I've never really
been in love before."

Peter held the note for a long time, letting a blissful tear roll down his cheek as he took a bow, letting the audience burst into a standing ovation. The last to stand was Mr. Roy.

The lights came on and everyone started making their way out afterwards.

"I'd love to see you again Mr. DeBorr", Mr. Lau said with the tip of a hat and the flick of a beautifully embroidered scarf around his neck.

"Please, call me Peter."

Within moments, it was mostly just the staff and the band left, with whom Peter was holding surprisingly coherent conversation. When they parted, he was shocked to see Marc still sitting in his near front-row seat twirling his glass of amaro and staring at an empty stage.

"Mr. Roy? Are you walking home?"

"You sang zat like a man from the heart." A little Quebecois lisp slipped from the man's damp tongue as he rocked his chair back and forth with his leg pressed against the stage. "Have you been in love before?"

"I don't think so", he responded immediately.

"Good. It's a painful experience. It always starts out sweet, but mostly ends in bitterness"

Peter pulled up a chair and Marc gave him the courtesy of his attention.

He thought about asking him a personal question, but also felt worried he may mess up their relationship. After a brief period of silence, Marc continued.

"The only woman I ever loved, Theresa, she left me, left all of us really. It's the strangest thing. We had such a good relationship but you know, going on lots of dates and traveling to far off beaches with one another. "

He looked over at Peter to make sure he wasn't just drunk rambling.

"Time changes things. It's funny. I always held out hope that if we were still together, that sourness would eventually dissipate and transform into something soft and sweet."

Tossing his glass back and flipping his hair over the back of his head, he pointed at Peter.

"You know my parents were married seventy years. Can you imagine? Seventy years? It's a fucking lifetime for some people. Probably more of a lifetime than God will afford me after all. They weren't always an idealistic couple either. You know you see all these depictions of lovers from years ago and there's something so innocent and wholesome. We have this terribly habit of coddling the past, it's insulting really. There's this idea that its simplistic and comes with a more manageable set of worries - a set that has a remedy that they just don't know yet. My parents fought like crazy. Hell, we moved around so much, my mother never knew how to identify herself. She didn't know how to say where she was from, so she just ended on 'Canadian'. And that was just the tip of the iceberg. I remember when I left for college, they were at each other's throats. I can still hear the screaming matches... The belittling my mother would imprint upon my father, telling him he was a waste of a man."

Peter solemnly nodded ever so slightly, so as to not attract attention, his eyes fixed and wide upon his bleeding-hearted subject, a statuesque man, a new-age Dying Gaul en repose. There was something painfully sad about him. It was much less about his story and more about the outpouring of raw feeling that seemed to gush out of him, as if he were punctured. It felt very in character for Orson Welles as well, Peter thought.

"But they made it in the end. As the years go on, the sources of these sores and pains, like anything that physically afflicts us, it faded. And when it's all said and done and you're old and you're in your rocking chair holding hands, thanking God every day you wake up and are conscious enough to experience this wonderful world, the unbuilt shed, the lost necklace, the broken vase, the forgotten vacation - it all fades away. It boils down and reduces to nothing but a saccharine remnant of everything you had together."

Peter briefly thought of his own parents. They were a nice couple, but there was nothing romantic about them. They seemed like good buds at times, laughing at the same comedians on TV and dancing to the same dorky nineties music, but they were utterly passionless and Peter always kind of resented that. It felt convenient for them.

"You didn't get that with Theresa?" , he blurted out.

"No. I thought we could achieve that given the time. But it was not apart of her destiny, nor mine evidently."

He let out a large groan and slowly let his empty glass descend to the table as the lights in the rest of the place started going out. The man behind the bar hollered over to him that they'd be locking the door soon. As if he had to get it out before the time was up, he finished his thought.

"I made a mistake. I never gave her the love she deserved. I was too obsessed. Obsessed with this!" , he said patting his jacket and pulling out his pocket square in a cryptic representation of what Peter could only guess meant 'wealth.'

"Look, DeBorr. Do you have a lady?"

He quite liked being referred to solely by his last name. It had a strange warmth to it, especially in comparison to 'Superman'/'

"I am kind of seeing this girl"

A large grin ripped across Marc's beat red, big, round, beach ball face as he slapped his palm and made the table and all it's accompanying dishware shake.

"JOLLY!" , he leaned in and poked the boy with a large finger. "That's what I like to hear. It'll save you from becoming the sullen dolt that your dear Uncle can be."

There was a guy seemingly hanging by the door anticipating the end of their conversation anxiously, but refusing to interrupt.

"Remember this, my friend. Tell her how you feel... You'll only ever regret what you don't say if the heavens take her from you."

"I don't even know how much she likes me...", Peter said sheepishly.

"Perfect opportunity! Genial! It's a chance for you to expose your heart first. It'll do you good."

Peter thought for a minute before he went ahead and asked the risky question.

"How vulnerable? How open should I be?"

Marc's smile faded to something more coy, almost devilish as he sank into his seat.

"Never let a woman know the whole you.", he said. "Tell her how you feel without telling her how you are."

The two of them continued their brief conversation outside, but it became apparent that Marc's surprising openness was confined to the halls of the Recording Studio.

"Frankly I find personal lives boring and not worth standard conversation," he relented as they walked up the street. "But your song prompted something in me which I couldn't hold back."

He stopped, and swung Peter by the shoulder.

"Promise me you won't say a word to Professor DeBorr."

It was a cold, stern look.

"Mr. Roy, I swear.", he paused to think. "In fact, I probably won't tell him about any of this anyway."

This diverted their conversation into the topic of the nature of Thomas DeBorr. Peter had heart snippets about their relationship from his Uncle, but it seemed to dig a bit

deeper than even he expected. They caught a shared ride and they stopped at the DeBorr household first.

"Your Uncle is a great man, but he's prideful and arrogant in a way that blinds him to opportunity. He struggles to comprehend people today and it only hinders him."

"A bit ironic", Peter added. "Since his field of study was all about people"

Marc chuckled a bit as they pulled up to the house. As Peter was leaving, he gave him his business card.

"Let's get together again Superman. I'll set something up on your calendar. We can chat about contemporary storytelling or something of that nature. I'm sure you've got plenty to share."

Peter thanked him for the drinks. Marc rolled down his window down the street. "Remember what I said about the girl! Your songs will help you."

Peter went inside, still buzzing from his moment on stage, but the second he was horizontal on his bed, the world went dark, quiet, and still.

In the weeks leading up to the gallery opening, Mr. Hewitt had made a point to stop by as often as he could. When pressed for the exact thinking behind his frequent visits, he claimed it was because he "couldn't stand crowds" and "preferred to soak it all in before others", which even made Museum Director Eileen McAnnan profoundly irascible.

"I mean really Tom, WHY now? We have six days left? What could he possibly want changed?"

Thomas was convinced that in reality, Mr. Hewitt was a very selectively chosen spy, who was elderly and nonplussed enough to seem innocent, but would have the acute palette for these sorts of things necessary enough to understand whether it was going to be successful or not.

"He probably wants to make Mr. Roy happy... Seems to be the primary initiative of everyone around here."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh come now. Be a man"

The words stung a little as he'd never felt like the most masculine person in general.

"If anything", she continued. "It's Mr. Roy whose concerned about impressing him."

"How's that? They're two men of great wealth."

"Well, I think Mr. Hewitt stands to make him a lot wealthier. I heard...", she leaned into whisper into Thomas' ear. "I heard that he's the reason behind the whole Mediterranean theme, Mr. Hewitt that is."

"How? You're saying that gentle, withering old man is responsible for the impossible breadth and incoherence behind this."

"Yes! Like I said, he's trying to impress Mr. Hewitt."

"He doesn't seem the type to care for stuff like this."

"He's trying. Or at least he wants to be the type"

"Yes, but why impress upon HIM in the first place. How do the two know each other?"

Eileen paused for a moment to search her recent memories. "I can't exactly remember what order it happened in, but they're about to be family in one way or another."

She went on to synthesize a series of gossip she'd heard (including direct anecdotes from Marc himself), which explained that Mr. Hewitt and Mr. Roy were to be in-laws soon enough through the marriage of their children - Mr. Hewitts lavish son and Mr. Roy's elegant daughter. What she couldn't remember was whether they had known each other previously or the children brought them together.

"I actually think they may have coordinated it a little."

"An arranged marriage?", Thomas raised a stiff judgmental eyebrow. "What is this, the Bombay suburbs?"

He was disgusted at the idea, not so much at the concept of parents picking out a spouse, but more that it was the wealthy conniving together.

"I mean, I do think they love each other. They've been dating for a few years now. Was it three maybe?"

He shook his head at an innocent museum staff member who was lifting a replica of Botticelli's "Venus Urbino", which sadly resulted in the man thinking he was doing positioning the piece incorrectly and wasted another twenty-five minutes going back to the break room and re-examining Thomas' carefully drawn out instructions.

"The landed gentry continue their economic dog-pile."

Eileen snickered a bit and sipped her coffee as she subtly let out, "Darling, we're hardly struggling here."

He watched on curiously as the brittle older man slowly shuffled his way around the large open space, taking great energy to lift each leg as he nodded curiously at the same thirteen pieces that had been unchanged for weeks. A stirring anger started welling inside him. He knew what she meant. They weren't struggling, especially compared to the general populous. Their home values alone made them multimillionaires. But for a moment in time, he found himself internally identifying and aligning himself with the modest Kansas he grew up in. The hot, sweat-soaked foreheads glistening red in the peak of a summer's day, their denim overalls pungent and swampy, soaked and briny after hauling crops from the earth into a shed. These people lived. They weren't greedy or tainted by the enticing, sexy allure of technology and they suffered at times, perhaps not financially, but physically. And here was this quaint old man, whose hands hadn't seen trace of a callous or blister, his lanky frame bathed in some exotic, expensive, musky scent, walking around like he could relate to anyone in the building. He was going to make life easier for his son.

Eileen saw him stewing.

"Six days Thomas. Hold it together. It'll all be over soon."

"Well six days until its up and then six months of it's presence offending the eyes of the poor people who care about this sort of thing."

She patted him on the shoulder. "I hate to be the one to tell you this, but I can almost guarantee you'll be one of the only ones upset by this display. You'll certainly be the most upset."

Even he couldn't resist a laugh there.

"True, very true."

She had a point. All of his whining and complaining would just be that in the end. Sure, some people may see his name on it and wonder what he was thinking, but they were few and far between the majority. Although his pride was a powerful thing, he also didn't like the idea of looking like someone who was just pouting.

As she glanced towards the exhibit and without passing him so much as a look, she quietly whispered, "We're all going to get a raise", she said as she pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. His neck drifted in her direction.

"I can't say much now, but there's expected to be a significant endowment named as soon as those families..." she interlaced her fingers and make a clicking sound with her hands. "... become one."

She patted him on the shoulder.

"And you'll stand to benefit."

He grinned a bit, appreciating her nuanced way of dealing with his disappointment. She leaned into his ear in a slightly erotic manner.

"Maybe we'll all move up a bit in that terrible dog-pile you referenced."

Alone with his thoughts, he made peace with the idea that things would soon be over. He couldn't dwell on the meddling of the present (or future) much longer as he still had an important role to play. The strange exchange between Mr. Hewitt and Mr. Roy gave him a sense of finiteness when it came to their involvement. If this was all one part of a big transaction, then he figured he could try and suck it up. At least for the immediate future. If their short-term survival was tied to these oligarchs, so be it. But Thomas would revel at having an idea of exactly how short their observer status might be.

The next time Peter saw Elish, it was during an unexpected drop-in at Cafe du Rue. In the days leading up to the gallery opening, Thomas told Peter he was going to visit a friend down in Carmel-by-the-Sea for the weekend. This threw a wrench in a good chunk of his original social scheduling where he accounted on at least twenty percent of his daily chatter supplied by his dear Uncle. He certainly didn't foresee the Professor heading out for a few days on the last week before the opening, but he knew, both from Marc and his Uncle, that things had become tense in the days leading up and he counted himself lucky that he didn't have to be a human tarp to catch the splattering after effect of their artistic spat. This meant he would have several days to himself for the first time during his stay in San Francisco. His immediate thought went to Elish. He wanted nothing more than to have her over for a nice dinner, followed up with a movie, and ending in some hormonally-charged, long-overdue sex (or at the very least some form of whatever she was willing to go along with). But there was the matter of Peter DeBorr's damned pride. When she left him on the street so abruptly, he was adamant that it would be her - not him, who would be making next contact. Her erratic communication tactics and mysterious disappearances were just a few of the seeds beginning to sprout in his growing garden of doubt when it came to the two of them. His conscious (and Tessa) were persistent reminders that he was a cardinal over-thinker. But whether there was something fishy or she was truly as aloof as she seemed to be, he felt he had too much dignity to let things simply be after the slight from the other evening. It didn't matter that he had a perfectly lovely time with Mr. Roy. It didn't matter that he had the house to himself. And it didn't matter that in Antonio's continued absence, his social outlets had all but been exhausted to his least

enjoyable coworkers and the possibility of a conversation with a friendly regular. He wasn't going to budge.

Which made it all the more complicated when she walked through the doors of Cafe du Rue on a cool, grey Monday afternoon. Normally, he would've interpreted this as her march to redemption, in which she would meander her way up to the counter and sheepishly own up to her lackluster nature, knowing he would be there to accept the apology. Except he wasn't *supposed* to work that day and she knew that. As far as he knew, she hadn't stepped foot in the Cafe since the day they first met, save for one quick to-go latte that she had come to pick up just before she left for her prolonged study break. During that occasion, she came in confidently recognizing she was the warming gesture he had hoped to see. But when she walked in that Monday, she looked a bit taken aback to see him standing behind the counter. He kept his cool, but was already simmering because of her dour expression when they locked eyes. She flicked her head, sending her hair whipping across her cheek, resetting her stone face into one that looked half-pleasantly surprised to see him. He tried not to show his tense nature as she approached the counter.

"I didn't think you worked on Mondays?"

"I'm covering another shift. Antonio's still gone."

She nodded and giggled, almost like she was playing a little prank on him.

"You've not been specifically coming so you can avoid me?", Peter let out with a huff and a strained, polite smile.

"Well I was. And then you found my day."

"What?" His smile became gruelingly heavy.

"Yeah. I had Mondays and now you know!"

"They would have told me. My coworkers know who you are."

She could tell he wasn't enjoying the exchange in the same playful manner she was.

"I'm kidding! Peter, relax. I was never actually avoiding you. This just happens to be my freest day in the week."

Peter crossed his arms and stared at her, putting her on the spot for once.

"You think Devon's going to remember who I am?", she said addressing his earlier point. "I'm not saying this with an ounce of shame but I'm not the most memorable girl to walk through here. I'm no Emily Ratajowski"

His eyes drifted to the counter.

"To me you are", he muttered. She let out a little burst of laughter and quickly tried to quiet herself as soon as she saw he was actually serious.

"Oh Peter, I- Listen, I really wasn't trying to avoid you. I-"

"What happened the other night?", he said cutting in. "Everything was going great and then something came up. I'm not trying to say anything in particular. I'm just wondering how things turned out since you said it was a personal issue and all."

She smiled back at him with what he perceived as a bit of a passive, fake smile. It was hard to tell whether she was actually enjoying this conversation or whether she was suffering as much as he was.

"I know I haven't been super forthright with you and I take full responsibility for that. It's not cool to ghost someone like that."

She paused and took a deep breath.

"And?", he said anticipating and excuse, while also trying to push her along as pedestrians would peek their prying eyes through the window, signaling a near-future rush he would have to attend to.

"And nothing.... I just.. I'm telling you that-", the exact wording was troubling to construct for her. "-my bad!"

He picked up her order and wrote on the cup "I'm Sorry" and slid it across the counter towards her. Elish picked it up and cocked her head to one side, spinning the cappuccino like a cylindrical globe until she came across the words.

"Wait, what are you sorry for?", she asked.

"I believe those are the words you're looking for."

"Oh, I'M SORRY. I get it. Listen, let me make it up to you"

"Maybe you can come visit me at work sometime on purpose?"

"Haha. I mean maybe something of a tangible nature."

"Ooh, I'd be careful with what you're offering there. There's plenty that falls under a tangible nature"

Her eyebrow raised and lip curled, entertained by the flirtatious effort this Kansas yeoman was making. The look was too direct for Peter, who tended to wilt when women expressed their sexuality so directly.

"I was thinking maybe we could actually have that movie night after all."

"Okay"

It came out a little uninspired, but Peter was happy with it nonetheless. "Okay" would have to do for now. They agreed to meet at a Thai take-out place she'd claimed was a High School favorite and then walk up the hill to the Professor's house after. The rest of the work day, Peter's brain was racked with guilt over having a girl over without telling his Uncle. It wasn't that there were any explicit rules set forth about guests, but Peter got the impression that the Professor would at least like to have the opportunity to meet said visitors through various anecdotes and comments he would make. The one advantage he had - the thing that would help him keep cover no matter the

circumstances was the idea that Thomas DeBorr absolutely abhorred technology and therefore wasn't going to be using any of its various observational apparatus to try and figure out what was going on. He knew he could get away with a girl-heavy weekend and nobody knowing a thing.

The other thought gnawing at his mind as he left work was that he was headed into a two-day stretch off work at the Cafe. If he played his cards right, he could have her over the entire time. His daydream gravitated towards the sweaty, hot-breathed, carnal coitus they would engage in on every forbidden surface and against every sacred bookcase in that building. But when he saw her outside Tommy Thai, barefaced and practically pajamaed, he knew the tone would be far more casual.

"I see you're ready for our tasting menu dinner I booked for us later.", he said just as they were walking up the hill.

"Wait, is your Uncle going to think I'm a total slob? I don't want him to think I'm like some dirty mess. I totally would've put some makeup on if I knew he was going to judge me."

Peter tried to shake off his silly grin.

"Oh no. Don't worry about it. My Uncle's gone right now."

"What? Where? Where did he go?"

Her look of disappointment was palpable and genuinely shocked Peter.

"He went to visit a friend down in Carmel for a few days. Didn't say much about it. I wouldn't call him the best communicator."

She let her head hang.

"Darn. I was actually looking forward to meeting him. I had a lot of questions for him."

Peter didn't quite understand what the source of the disappointment was, but tried not to dwell on it.

"You'll meet him soon enough. Don't get too excited though."

The news of Thomas' absence created a minute shift in her behavior. She was less chatty and a not as rigid with her movements. Peter couldn't tell if this was because she was no longer nervous to meet a new person or because she was now resigned to the idea that it would just be the two of them.

Once inside, Peter gave her the tour of the place, which took a whole five minutes. Elish appreciated interior design and thought that the Professor had an impressive collection of mid-century modern furniture. What Peter had always seen as "old" in the house, she seemed to see as "full of rustic charm". One particular set of Meissen plates, stacked up in some display shelf was of particular interest to her.

"Are they real? Can I look at the back?"

Peter shrugged. "I don't know. You can take a look though. I always just thought they were fancy plates."

"Well, they are", she said pointedly. "But these are also so much more. They're from a specific manufacturing facility in Germany that's been in operation for a long time. Long before Germany was unified."

Peter had no idea when that was. He was starting to feel extremely grateful that his Uncle wasn't around. Though it would have been nice to have an educated guide for the rest of the tour as Elish insisted on stopping and asking about some anthropological knick knack every few stops. When they came to the study, she got lost among the sea of old titles.

"Wow... Your Uncle has a great collection. I bet he's a fascinating man. I mean, look at this row of first editions."

Peter smiled and stood by the doorway, foolishly hoping he could coax her out of the room with his gravitational pull.

"Yeah, it's something."

"Is he married?"

"Why? Are you looking?"

She blushed. "No, it's just.... I- I'm trying to get the portrait of the man. He obviously doesn't have any kids and... Well, no offense, but I don't know that there's too many women who could stand to live like this."

Peter scanned the place, trying to spot out whatever blemish she was referring to, but the space looked perfectly fine.

"What do you mean? He's a bit of a neat freak?"

She scanned the tall tops of the bookcases.

"I don't know. There's something very impersonal about the place. Like, where are the pictures? Where's the stack of love letters? The grad notices stuck on the fridge?"

A single, loud "HA" escaped Peter's mouth.

"He's just not that kind of guy. Very... quiet. Private I should say. When you get him talking, he can certainly talk your ear off."

She started sauntering over to him like a playful little doe. "And have you talked to him about me?"

"Yes. Only the bad stuff though."

"You haven't earned the bad stuff", she said, poking his nose on the way out.

Peter had transformed the small living room space attached to the kitchen into a mini-entertainment center. If there were any saving grace from her random departure last time, it was that he didn't have to explain to her that their only visual outlet from which to view any digital media was his laptop. In the days since, he made a conscious effort to amend that with a quick trip to the electronics shop and the purchase of a small projector.

He'd put a lot of effort into making the space feel comfortable and somewhat professional feeling. Using Silvio's mechanical expertise, he was able to fashion a screen out of curtain cloth that could easily roll up and snap using a latch mechanism they had lying around in Cafe du Rue. She was impressed with the setup and nestled herself into the soft, dark, leathery armchair. The seating situation was the one disappointment as Thomas DeBorr's disparate chair situation meant that there was no couch from which to have intimate physical contact. Instead, the two of them were relegated to separate chairs, pushed close to one another. They bust open their Panang Curry and put on their films. Peter went first and chose Woody Allen's "Blue Jasmine". He hadn't actually seen the film, but knew from Tessa that it "took place in San Francisco" and "was good". Allen was a recent discovery of his, but had quickly become one of his favorite directors. He was painfully unaware of the continued controversy which plagued his career, but luckily for him Elish had a strict policy of separating professional and personal lives. Still, the film was a bit more depressing than Peter expected (he'd only ever seen his comedies) and he was eager to move onto her film, which he hoped would provide a better opportunity for coziness.

She didn't waste anytime in putting on her pick, Luc Besson's "Leon: The Professional". According to her she'd seen the film thirty-four times before and would continue to add to that count until she died.

"It's just such a marvelous movie", she said, clutching her chest as she jumped back into her chair, giddy as a schoolgirl.

Peter hadn't seen the film, he hadn't heard of the film, and the only actor he recognized was a young Natalie Portman (coincidentally his first celebrity crush). He found the movie charming and familiar in a strange kind of way, though most of it was difficult to watch as Elish's prying eye would drift towards him during any moment of

excitement to intervene on acting barometer of taste. She would flip her head towards his as Gary Oldman was screaming or Jean Reno was monologuing to see exactly what his face might say about his thoughts. He certainly didn't like the feeling of being watched, but decided it was ultimately a sigh that she did indeed care what he thought about the piece.

When the movie was over, Peter's immediate reaction was one of heightened suspicion. Why on earth did she adore this movie as much as she did? He thought it was good, great or amazing even, but he couldn't quite wrap his mind around why it was so important to her. The uncomfortable, borderline romantic connotation between the elderly French lead actor and the pre-pubescent girl was of particular issue for him. It was almost like there was incestuous undertones as the director had spent so much time crafting a sweet, familial, almost parental relationship between the two. He put on his psychoanalyst hat and determined that there may be some underlying problem in her relationship with males (or perhaps just her father), but he thought it unwise to approach her with such serious issues at a time when she was riding so high, so he shelved the thought for later.

As the credits rolled, she flipped her head towards him one more time, her ponytail whipping around.

"Well? Wasn't it amazing?"

"It was really good. I can't believe I've never seen it."

She clutched her hands to her chest, drawing his eyes to her small, but pert breasts.

"I-- I just. It speaks to me you know?"

"Yeah. It was a film about sacrifice. And I definitely think they did a good job of showing what real sacrifice could do for someone else."

Her expression drew inward and her head slumped down, her face wearing an almost comical expression of condescension.

"It's a love story", she goaded.

"A what?"

"I see what you mean about sacrifice, but to me it's a film about love. It's a powerful, powerful testament to a very unique love."

"You mean a very taboo love?", Peter asked with a smile, trying to keep things light.

"No. Well. I mean, I don't think they were right for each other in the end, but I don't think that makes it wrong."

Peter's eyes narrowed. "He's at least four decades older than here."

She rolled her eyes and leaned in towards him. "Oh come on Peter, you believe in more than just romantic love, right?"

He thought for a moment. Was this a trick?

"I suppose."

"Do you love your parents?"

"Sometimes."

"But you don't want to have sex with them."

"Ah", he said, moving to the kitchen to pour them a glass of wine.

"I think love is still this strange thing that we don't really have a good grasp of. Its not as simple as we make it."

As she spoke, Peter uncorked a special bottle of wine hidden in the small wine storage underneath the stairs.

"Did you know the Greeks have like four different kinds of love?"

"Oh?", he said coyly, knowing indeed the context of the answer./

"I don't remember them all, but I remember there's agape. That's the Christian kind of like brotherly love."

"Like you and me?", he said with a devilish grin.

Her face turned sour.

"What?"

The disappointment was met with great warmth from Peter who was unsure whether she would validate his worst fears.

"And then there's Eros.", he said leaning in.

"Oh so you do know?"

"Do you know what that one is for?"

She knew exactly what kind of love she was referring to and in her mind, he had entertained her well. Their senses had been stimulated greatly. They enjoyed the smells and taste of terrific Thai takeout. They feasted their eyes and ears on the spectacle of the cinema. It was only fitting that for part of their dessert course, they divulge into the pleasuring of the flesh.

"Remind me again", she said with inviting eyes.

And with that, the two of the were rolling on the large Moroccan rug Thomas had laid out in his living room, biting lips, red-faced, heart racing, and crotches throbbing.

They lost themselves in a realm of senses, forgetting that they were in someone else home. It didn't seem to matter. They made their own with each other. They created this powerful fusion of hard and delicate, boisterous and serene, feeling and void. It was

perfectly validating for a relationship that had seemed so shaky for so long that, for them to find their solid ground was a blessing. Neither Peter nor Elish planned ahead or wondered whether their teenage, hormonally-charged make out session would blossom into something more primitive. They weren't so fixated on the idea of 'consummating' a relationship like that.

After about an hour of their sweet corporeal exchange, the two finally gave each other some breathing room. In separation, they sat for a moment and admired their rosy, warm cheeks which adoring affection. Hand in hand, they felt like giving each other the full nakedness of themselves, a feast for the soul to accompany the eyes. But there was restraint. Finally, one of them broke the silence. And to the surprise of many, it was Elish who came out with the first words.

"You and I are something else, huh?", she said with a sincere smile.

He nodded.

"I just feel like you're really real. Like you're not like a lot of the guys I know. You're genuine and you try and be yourself."

She paused for a moment.

"I still feel like there's a barrier here though."

He sat and let his head droop in shame.

"There's something strange. I can't put my finger on it, but there's something there."

Suddenly Peter felt his neck tense up and his head turn white hot. He knew he'd been coy with her, but it certainly wasn't a solitary exchange.

"To be honest I feel the same way about you.", he said. Her eyes widened before they shifted away from him towards her exposed breasts. She flicked a small speck of dust off one of her exposed, saliva-coated nipples.

"I like you. And I don't exactly know why"

"What do you mean?", he asked with childlike sincerity.

"I mean I like you. I think you're interesting. You make me laugh. You make me think. You make me want to be a better person. You're not like a lot of the men in San Francisco."

Peter rolled his eyes. He'd heard her mention something of the sort a dozen times before.

"What I mean to say is, you're not constantly worried about your career trajectory or your social standing. It's refreshing."

"So I'm just a pleeb?", he asked dryly to a small round of laughter.

"No"

"A country bumpkin?"

"No!"

"So I'm a real boy then?". The way he spoke evoked the spirit of Pinocchio in the old Disney movie. She laughed and nodded.

"Are you a real girl?"

Her smile faded and she hoisted her body upwards. She sat criss-cross applesauce while tracing her thoughts across the many artworks on the wall.

"I don't know", she finally mustered. "Maybe for you. What makes a real girl?"

"Well are you honest?"

She just scoffed.

"Are you yourself?"

"Mostly.", she said. "With you, almost entirely."

This made him swell with emotion. It was such an affirming statement that his crotch began to harden solely at the words. They stayed like that on the floor and talked for hours. It started painfully personal, but shifted to issues of culture, philosophy, and society.

Eventually, the two of them got up and got somewhat dressed. He didn't want her to leave and was devising a way to assure her continued presence. Quickly thinking of a convincing reuse, he devised a plan to play a friendly game of Scrabble in his room (the only board game Thomas left in the house). She showed little sign of reluctance. Once inside, it was almost akin to the scene of a crime for her. Elish took note of every detail of every nook and cranny in his space. It wasn't the room from his childhood, but it was his temporary sanctuary - the place he rest his head every night in San Francisco. She knew that by entering the space, she was submitting to further disrobing and inappropriate behavior. But it seemed like a small price to pay, especially given the outlet it provided into Peter's mind. On his small side table desk, his journal was sitting out in full display. She flipped a page upon entering and whipped her head back to face his.

"So who's Daphne?"

His head went cold again.

He couldn't think of an appropriate response that would satisfy her while being honest with her, so he just let out a small uncomfortable laugh. She simply let the silence stew.

"Where did you see that?"

"It's right here", she dropped a heavy finger on an open notepad which rested on his small bedside table. "In your... 'dream journal'?"

Peter's cheeks flushed again. He'd been keeping a log of his first morning thoughts for the past few weeks. The inner world wasn't something Peter cared or thought a lot

about. Growing up, things like "karma" and "imagination" were the intangible fantasies of simple folk. None of it affected the real world. But in his unquenchable thirst for understanding, he was curious about these strange, unclassifiable functions. Thinking, dreaming, feeling - they all seemed abstract and yet necessary to him. Three weeks earlier, during a slow afternoon shift, Tessa and he were discussing such matters. She had been taking a 'Psychology of the Mind' class and had ample information to share, including a rather lengthy anecdote about the importance of dreams. They could be the best possible lens into our unconscious, she explained. If he were to keep a record of whatever his dreams held, it would do wonders in understanding himself and how various anxious triggers were set off in his head. What he didn't count on was it coming back to haunt him.

"She's just a girl in my dreams", he said with an apologetic grin.

"The girl of your dreams?", she made an overtly dramatic gasp. "Well I may as well not even try then."

"You know that's not what I mean"

"Oh so you mean she's a real person?"

He closed his eyes and nodded his head.

"Is she... still around?"

"Do you mean is she alive? Yes. Very much so. Or did you mean, is she still in my life? That would obviously be a negatory."

Her crossed arms unfolded at the admission. Her posture indicated openness, but her thoughts were quite restricted. She honestly was going to play the whole thing off as a casual joke, but as soon as she saw how sensitive he was about the subject, an instinct kicked in.

"Is there a story there?"

"She was a girl I had a thing with?" He quickly tried to reverse the pressure. "You're telling me you've never dreamed of an ex?"

Elish knew that she had cornered him a bit and, based on everything she knew about Peter thus far, she wasn't going to get much out of him with a too-aggressive approach. So she tilted her head and batted her eyelashes as she walked towards him. Even though this was the beginning of so many fantasies for him, he was terrified. It was as if she was going to strike him down like a tigress circling her pray.

"Peter?", she said, staring in his eyes. "It's okay. I really don't care."

She leaned in for a kiss and the two shared a soft embrace. This continued onto his bed, where they shared each others embrace once again. Just like that, all the stress of the world seemed to disappear. After about an hour of comparing the temperature of each other's tongues, they took a short break to eat some pizza rolls Peter had hidden from the Professor in the back of the freezer. With the smoldering, chemically treated mixture of pepperoni cubes and some low-grade mozzarella in his mouth, a nagging feeling started to gnaw at him. Elish's third yawn in two minutes had followed a few comments about "having to head back soon" and Peter was desperate to not let her leave. Not just because of the prospect of more kissing and possibly more than kissing and possibly sex, but also because he felt their earlier conversation hadn't ended. When she checked her watch for the third time, he jumped in.

"I didn't mean to be so weird earlier. Daphne was a girl from Kansas who I really liked."

Elish gave a polite smile and nodded her head, doing her best to collect the crumbs that seemed to tumble from the creases of her mouth.

"I honestly didn't think she'd be anybody.", she said with a mouth half full of Totinos.

"She's not. Well, she is, but she's not like really-- I was never in love with her. At least, I don't think."

"What happened? You scare her away?"

He let out a deep sigh. "I wasn't really supposed to see her."

She shifted her posture to face him.

"OOh, do tell."

He waved her off. "You don't wanna hear this. It's weird! It's about another girl."

She held her splayed hand to her chest, again in a mocking manner.

"You've been with another girl?"

Peter rolled his eyes.

"I think we have to end this right now."

He thought for a moment. "Okay, okay. But if I tell you... You need to tell me something."

Elish's eyes raced across the room, weighing the cost-benefit analysis.

"Tell you what?"

"What's going on with your family or whatever."

After a long pause, she nodded slowly. "Okay."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

With a heavy heart, Peter began to retell the story of his time with Daphne. He looked up at the clock himself. It was nearly two in the morning - the time she often haunted his thoughts anyway. It was a story ripe for the telling.

Manhattan, Kansas was a charming little town. It had a population just under 50,000 when Peter was growing up there, nulling it of any and every opportunity to have the feel of a true 'city'. It was a sleepy, soft, college town situated smack dab in the middle of the Great Plains. Kansas State University had planted its roots there in 1863, meaning that for the past several generations, it was a really defining part of the civilian identity. But as it moved into the 21st Century, Manhattan began to take on a identity of its own with chic new shops, small concert venues, and new, fresh subdivisions. This was all a byproduct of the mind-melding effect the University had on the town, but its many denizens were happy to own it as their own pleasant accident. Peter's family had zero association with the University or Universities in general (until of course the Professor), but they came to love the community they were more or less stuck in because Peter's dad Schuyler had gotten a job with a civil engineering firm in the area.

Manhattan had hot, long summers and brief, frigid winters. Its springs were short, but lovely. Its falls were even shorter, but among the best in the world. It was on one of those fall days that the Pereira's came through for the first time. Hector Pereira was a partner at Schuyler DeBorr's engineering firm and through a short investigation by Lisa DeBorr (nee Schulz), they found out that the family lived in the neighborhood. The Pereira's were a tight knit nuclear family: Hector, Elena, Daphne, and Martin. The children, Daphne and Martin, were picture perfect representations of well-behaved, well-mannered suburban children. When they first stepped foot in the DeBorr household, Martin was dressed in a dapper, striped, button-up shirt that his mother undoubtedly spent several minutes wrangling around the four-year old and Daphne, done up in a small gingham dress, fitted with stockings that clung tightly to the six-year olds tiny legs, was like a charming little sprite topped with a little black bow her mother had tried to get to balance on her head.

The whole family was very attractive in an in-your-face kind of way. They all came with chocolate brown eyes and varying shades of olive skin, owing to their paternal Iberian roots (via Portugal three generations prior) and their maternal Mediterranean roots (via the Peloponnese only one generation back). Their appearance was made all the more stark by the fact that most of their fellow townfolk were varying shades of salmon pink when exposed to the sun. Lisa DeBorr erroneously assumed they were Mexican

(much to Schuyler's chagrin) and proceeded to make several comments during their first encounter about how much she enjoyed "different cultures" and "spicy food".

But it was plainly clear to everyone, but especially Peter, that Daphne was the ultimate synthesis of every piece of charm and beauty the Pereira family had to offer. She had the thick, healthy, dark hair. She had the soft, plump, round lips. She had the smooth, hushed, soft delivery in her speech. The only thing she missed out on was some level of self-awareness, which would ultimately doom her later on.

From the moment he laid eyes on her as a boy of seven, one year her elder, Peter was completely beguiled. For the next several years, they became a perfect childhood pair, chasing each other around and diving into their imaginations for the hour their parents talked after dinner. It was natural, easy, and fun between them. In retrospect, there wasn't anything particularly special about their relationship. Most agreeable, well-socialized children of a young age were able to find ways to enjoy each others company for a few hours. But in Peter's fantastic memory of events, these were the seeds for the drama which would later come to fruition.

Things were innocent, save for one incident on a cold December night. The families had gotten together for a pre-dinner party and the (still) seven and six year old had been playing hide and seek in Daphne's parents room. In a bout of curiosity, a young Peter asked to "see her girl parts" and she acquiesced so long as he show her "his boy parts". The two dropped their pants and shared a curious exchange of bewildered looks, unsure of how anatomy could be so blatantly different. It would be the last time the two would be so exposed to one another for over a decade.

Once they got into Middle School, it was clear that the friendship between Schuyler and Hector was much stronger than that of Lisa and Elena. This meant that their regular, family-style dinners were slowly faded out. Peter and Daphne saw each other less and less and by Middle School, they were familiar strangers whose Dads got together for beers to reminisce about their time working together.

Hector Pereira remained a strong presence in the life of the DeBorr's and seemed to genuinely enjoy the company of the whole family. He took a liking to Peter from a young age. There was something about his respectful, quiet nature and his well-timed

candor that made him an impressionable young chap. He took extra notice of how well-behaved he was with his parents.

"See! Honor thy father and mother still exists! Praise the lord", Hector would say.

Once you were old enough to be involved in adult conversations, it became quickly apparent what a small town Manhattan actually was. It was clear that everybody knew everybody and everybody was always in everybody's business. The small street that Peter grew up on "Snow View Lane" was known for its big 'block parties', which were supposed to be seasonal, but seemed to happen ten times a year. There, all the neighbors came together to celebrate accomplishments, spread gossip, and critique one another on their life decisions. Most of it was cordial and in good fun, but small divisions did exist. The Manhattan "subcultures" were divided primarily on class, but with a strong undercurrent of religious affiliation. The DeBorr's were Dutch (and German) Catholics, a relative minority in the strong, episcopal and evangelical stronghold. The Pereira's were primarily affiliated with the tiny Greek Orthodox community, but through Hector, had maintained strong relations with the Catholic Church. He was often seen accompanying the DeBorr family to Sunday Mass and would certainly congregate with them, the Murphy family, the Sanchez family, and the DiVicenza family at these block parties, leaving Elena, Daphne, and Martin to congregate with others.

By the time Peter was thirteen, he was encouraged to call Hector "Uncle", which he did with gusto. It helped that his new "Uncle", had become a bit of a local hero. After leaving the Engineering firm, Hector joined a volunteer firefighter group where he helped contain a summer wildfire spread that nearly made its way to the KSU campus. Within a year after the adoring press, he'd gone onto start his own small business, a sandwich shop that specialized in hot sandwiches and gyros, and a year after that, he had founded his own nonprofit to help deal with the opioid problem in the community.

Mr. Pereira had gone from friendly neighbor to local hero. Within the next three years, he would begin a skyrocketing political career, beginning in city council and working

his way up to Mayor of Manhattan. Throughout this launch to local stardom, he never lost touch with the DeBorr's. He maintained his weekly visits with Schuyler and had even taken on a semi-paternal role with Peter. His own son Martin had been relegated out of the picture because of his strong inclination towards 'counterculture', mostly in the form of an unhealthy interest in "The Crow" and "The Cure", leading him to seek out a bright spot in the young male populous, and there he found Peter. He was the one who pushed Peter into the Boy Scouts. He was the one who taught him how to Golf. He was the one who would come by and have a beer with him in the garage while helping him with his English and History homework. Which is why he shouldn't have acted so blind-sighted when he invited the boy to ask his daughter to their sophomore year homecoming dance.

One warm fall evening, the DeBorr men and Hector were casually practicing their putts in the backyard when the question sort of just came out.

"Hey, you wouldn't think of asking Daphne to the dance, would ya Pete?"

At the time, the concept of Daphne had faded into the distance, he thought little of her as anything other than Hector's daughter. He explained to Peter that she had a few male suitors who were just bad news and "none of them Catholic". Peter was supposed to be the perfect solution.

So he did and she said yes. Homecoming became a first date which evolved into a second and third and then before they knew it, they were "a thing" at the school and quite a popular one as well. At first, Hector was perfectly fine with Peter. He felt like he knew the kid and was well aware of what kind of a boyfriend he would be. They didn't need to bother with any protective paternal "talks". This came at a key time as Hector was gearing up for his next big political leap: his first run at Kansas' 1st Congressional Seat. From his perspective, everything was in order with his work, his political life, his community, and his family. What he didn't count on was Peter and Daphne pushing the ever so old-fashioned limits their parents had imposed on them.

One evening in the summer between their Junior and Senior years, the two of them first made love underneath the beaming moon of a cloudless sky in a small community park down the street from Manhattan High School. It wasn't a particularly memorable event for either party, but it did provide much needed relief from a seemingly

untamable hormonal build-up. They thought they were in love (and said as much so), but they were also caught up in the bliss of a blossoming relationship.

Their deed would prove to be ill-timed. Within seven weeks, it became perfectly evident that Daphne was pregnant.

They tried to think of various, creative strategies to hide her condition from their families, but neither of them had any clue what they were doing. In general, they didn't know what this would mean for them, their families, and their futures. After a while, distinct change in her seventeen year old belly became too hard to hide. When the Pereira's found out, it was the end of an era. Peter had fallen from grace in the eyes of Hector.

The fallout was peripherally damaging as well. It brought a stern ending to a decade and a half long friendship between Hector and Schuyler and cut any ties between Daphne and all her old school friends (she was taken out of public school immediately). The goal of all this was twofold. One: mitigate as much damage from affecting his year-long congressional campaign. Two: keep his daughter as far the hell away as possible from her offender. One of those turned out to be easier than the other.

Despite the best effort of Schuyler and Lisa DeBorr to purge the very thought of Daphne from entering the newly tarnished halls of their household, Peter was naturally rabidly curious about her fate. It was another six months before he was privy to any information about her life whatsoever. No words from friends, no information on the internet, no sign of her from her favorite barista. There was absolutely no information given.

The next news he heard came upon his family's much maligned return to church (albeit a different, adjacent parish). An elderly parishioner who taught the Spanish classes at the community center let it slip in conversation with Peter and his mother that Daphne did not have a baby. In fact, she reacted as if Daphne had never had a baby at all, but acknowledged there were rumors she had a child, "but possibly miscarried". She dismissed it all as harmful gossip. As far as Hector Pereira was concerned, the damage control had succeeded and the community was none the wiser to the problem.

But to Peter, that was one answer which spurned a million questions. He needed to know what happened. As soon as his parents had felt like they'd done their best to purge every bit of Daphne from his life, Peter was able to get in contact with her through Martin's girlfriend, who worked at the coffee shop she frequented. They exchanged letters back and forth and eventually found a way to contact each other. Being as careful as possible, they orchestrated a meetup. Mr. and Mrs. Pereira were supposed to leave town to attend to the Elena's ailing mother. The timing couldn't have been better for Hector's campaign as they had been drained of cash from the primary and were left with little more than an overworked group of interns, tired and frostbit from knocking on doors.

On a cold August evening, just weeks before Peter's freshman year, he returned to the Pereira's for the first time in over a year. His contact with Daphne thus far had been relegated to pen and post-it as it was made clear that any digital communication was at risk of interception. This meant that there was little to no warning or insight into what their interaction might hold, instead driving a curious fire within Peter's soul. He parked in the driveway, walked in the front door, where he saw her, teary-eyed sitting on the couch. From the moment he saw her, he felt things were different. She didn't look happy or warm, she looked weathered and muted. He knew from that moment that they both realized what they had wasn't a mature informed love. They had made a young, foolish mistake and they both now knew that, but their human senses took over. They may not have had the same instant passion young lovers do, but they felt for each other in a more human way.

Crying on the Pereira's brown leather couch, she lamented to him the same story he had heard earlier. The baby was simply "not here" and that it "went away on its own". He struggled to discern exactly what she was saying between her words. Was there some kind of intervention she was covering up? Was there a mistake in the initial diagnosis? Instead of continuing the interrogation, they went up to her room to hold one another in peace. As he told her about how relatively normal his life had been in the past year, she became bitter. For her, nothing was the same. New school, new life, new rules. She felt shepherded in every single move she made as every bit of independence was quickly usurped from her. The tragedy of her life as it unfolded in

the past fourteen months was surreal and wretched. To hear his own existence remain so plain, except for her absence only brought her a burning, aching pain.

Through wipers, neither could hear the sound of Hector's car pull up on the sidewalk. Instead, it was his jingling key ring that faintly rang in the back of Daphne's ears, sending a jolt through her system and causing her to stand up in a panic. Her entire body went cold, like the systems began to refuse to work. They heard the back door open and thought they'd found their escape. Peter went down the stairs, around the hallway and out the side entrance through the back gate. He practically slid into his car, revved the engine and slammed on the gas.

If only he had looked in his rearview mirror. If only he took one second to look in his rearview mirror. His vision went entirely dark and he heard only Daphne's scream. A large thud echoed like a thunderous roar. At that point, Peter should have gotten out. He should have turned around to see what had happened. But he didn't. Instead, he pulled ahead and took a sharp left turn, only casually glancing out the driver's side window to see a contorted, mangled version of Hector Pereira, writhing in pain, reeling screams of agony to the heavens. His legs had been twisted, bone exposed, face burned from sliding on asphalt. And Peter simply fled. The last image in his mind was the tortured face of Daphne Pereira solemnly staring at him as he pulled away.

For the next three days, all Peter could do was wait. Wait for the fallout. Wait to see what exactly would happen next. He didn't know what the consequences would be, but his mind raced all over the worst possibilities: prison, expulsion, peripheral social damage to his own family. He closed his eyes and waited for the grenade to go off, but it never came. No one spoke of it. No one addressed it. The wick had gone out with a whimper. It was at the end of the three days that the only mention came in the form of a single word from his father, who pulled him aside in the hallway in a discreet sort of matter: "enough".

And so life moved on. He left town and moved to Lawrence, where he would begin his academic journey. He never mentioned the Pereira's again, but followed Hector's rise from afar. His terrible accident turned into a small blessing for his campaign, infusing a level of sympathy into his status as infallible hero. Media reports cited a mysterious "hit-and-run" as the cause of his wheelchair-bound physical malady. For a man so beloved by his community, it was just fodder to fuel his rise. In time, he would come to

walk again (though never fully the same) and all that remained from the accident would be a small, little scar on his left cheek. Peter would go on to get sucked into the collegiate culture at KU and immerse himself in a world outside of Manhattan. Schuyler and Lisa did their best to quiet down and disappear into the background.

The following summer, Peter stayed in Lawrence. Nothing explicit was said, but heavy implication made it seem like it would be easier for everyone if he kept his distance. And so he did. He took classes, ended up working in a cafe for a summer, and proceeded to have an amazing sophomore year. The summer after that, he did indeed return home, this time to help with a remote research job in accordance with the rival KSU. It was the first time he'd really been exposed to Manhattan as a college town and it felt like a foreign place to him. He spent a hot, dry, summer stuck inside air conditioned, emptied lecture halls, flipping through stat-sheets on Japanese-EU trade relations. Between that and several quiet dinners with his parents, one with Rodney Knight, and two with his friend Allison, the summer flew by fairly quickly. The thought of Congressman Pereira (now in the process of mounting a run for Senate) didn't so much as cross his mind. Daphne appeared in his thoughts now and again, of course. But no longer was the focus rumination their dewy, sweet summer kisses, the parting of her soft hair, or giggles in the middle of cornfields. Now, he only saw one face: the face of despair she left him with when he pulled away that day.

"She hates you, you know?", an old mutual friend mentioned late that summer in line at a 7/11. "Obviously you weren't on the same page about how much you meant to each other."

It was the only thing he had heard about her before returning to school again.

In early April, during the Spring Break of his Junior year, Peter returned back to Manhattan, for what he imagined would be a nice week with a few old friends. On Thursday, two days before he was supposed to drive back, the news broke. The Pereira household had been set on fire. The smoke could be seen for miles and even though they no longer lived close, the entire neighborhood banded together for fear of the family's future. Hector was in Washington, but the news was quick to spread. No one died, but Elena Pereira had to be rushed to the ER for burn damage that she never truly recovered from. The police released a report with a strong suggestion that arson was at play. No one at the DeBorr household said a word about it, but Peter was

privately worried for all their safety. When Hector and his family were interviewed about the atrocity days later, they all were in agreement. "There are certain individuals who have hurt this family and who have made it their goal to hurt this family and we intend to persecute them to the fullest extent of the law."

All eyes shifted towards Peter.

Manhattan, Kansas was a charming little town. It has a tight-knit community and, when in search of someone to vindicate, they made sure they would find answers. Pretty soon, rumors started spreading. By the time Peter was taking his first final, he was getting phone calls from local papers asking about his relationship with Daphne Pereira and whether he was the "crazy and violent ex-boyfriend" that so-and-so had been speaking of.

He didn't commit the crime. And part of him was certain that Daphne did it herself to spite her controlling parents. But that's not the way the narrative went. Whether or not the Pereira's pushed it along, everyone in the western half of Kansas began to believe that some vengeful ex-boyfriend of Hector Pereira's daughter had carried out the attack as a way to exact pain on a woman who had left him for a better life. Not one mention of a pregnancy, nor the hit-and-run, nor what a "better life" was (or really what Daphne was doing at all). The papers didn't need to say anything really. The community started to piece together the puzzle themselves. No one knew if any of it was true, but it started to get around that Peter was also responsible for Hector's initial accident as well. They all assumed his wrap sheet was even bigger. Peter was mentioned by name in three separate publications as a possible suspect (even though had proven quite cooperative with the local police investigation), but thus far had avoided dragging anyone else in his family down with him. The last thing he wanted was to hurt his family.

In three short weeks, his community had turned on him. He was on the lips of every good, church-going family in Manhattan and it was no longer a safe place for him. He had intended to go back, work at KSU, his head held high and weather the storm, prove to his fellow citizens that he wasn't the man they'd made him out to be. The night after his last final, he got a call from his father.

"Peter, pack your bags. Your mother and I have made a decision about his summer plans."

Peter closed his eyes and let out a deep sigh.

"We've bought you a bus ticket to San Francisco. It leaves tomorrow."

It was nearly four in the morning when the story finally reached its conclusion. Elish sat there, glossy eyed, but stern in composure, tepidly mustering a smile. The room was cold and their tired vision was fogged by the gleaming light, which seemed almost diffused through the ceiling as if they were in some kind of a factory or something. Normally, every moment of silence would have generated compounding sense of fear in Peter. At that moment, he felt relief. His initial thought was that it was the relief of finally expressing something to someone which he had kept inside for so long, but the more he thought about it, the more he felt relief simply to be away from all that.

He gazed at her with a fading smile. Even in the witching hour, she managed to capture some bright essence, a validation of everything that was right in the world, neatly packaged in the strands of hair that slowly swung in front of her beautiful brown eye. She could tell he was vulnerable. He had poured his heart out to her in a way he hadn't yet. For every criticism of his distance, she was now privy to his innermost sanctum, the lockbox in his mind. He feared she would look at him like a criminal, like a guilty party. After all, his account was only one account and even though they'd been with one another for a while, trust was something that had to be earned. Her face now looked analytical, perhaps critical, with her furrowed, slanted brows, narrowed eyes and lightened mouth. The look would have brought any man fear. But her thoughts were not as condemning. After all, what kind of a person would she be to cast a person like that to the side for sheer honesty.

Before she could muster up a response that she was carefully articulating, Peter stepped towards her and patted her on the shoulder. The strange, platonic-feeling move bothered her internally and she quickly clasped her hands around his neck and pulled him in for a slow, soft, middle-of-the-night kiss. Then she said,

"Lets get some sleep"

Any notion of physical intimacy that evening was shrouded in an intense plume of tiredness that had seemed to drop like a bomb on both of them following the conclusion of the story. Thinking he may have an opportunity in the morning, Peter ushered her onto his bed. Neither of them removed their clothes, but were fortunately in comfy-wear thanks to their movie watching plans. He went to get them both a glass of water in case they wanted it in the middle of the night and by the time he came back, she was already asleep. It took only a moment to appreciate how posed her body looked all curled up in the way a relaxed, strident feline might when sleeping in their own domain. She didn't snore or move more than the natural breathing which kept her body peacefully rising and falling. He almost felt like the better move would be to sneak away to his Uncle's room and just try and reconvene with her in the morning. But some force of nature, some natural instinct pulled him in. He crawled under the covers next to her, forming like the perfect spoon to the warmth of her body.

Normally, he detested the idea of going to bed without brushing his teeth or without taking off all his clothes except his boxers. But the moment was happening and he didn't want to ruin it by becoming a victim to routine. When he sat there, staring at the silhouette of her head from behind, a special kind of honey-flavored warmth seemed to drip into his chest.

His mind was a wild beast, running rampant from the energy gathered earlier. He knew it would take time to bring it back to speed. He wasn't sure what she had thought about his confession, but no matter her thoughts, she had already been more receptive than he ever respected. In his mind, he'd finally done the right thing. In being candid with her once and for all, he felt like he had truly opened the door to a real relationship. Not one based on deceit. Not one based on false identity. Not one based on mysteries yet to be solved. A relationship founded on the truth. As he snuggled her, he reconciled how much better it ever felt than it did with Daphne. That felt like a young love. A juvenile introduction to the world of feeling. Something sweet, but artificial. This felt different to him. A mature love. Something that was actually real.

July in San Francisco was a difficult thing to pin down. It had a worldwide reputation for being cool, but global warming had acted to challenge that notion, bringing in strange, uncomfortable dry spells. Most of the buildings in the city were built back when the place had predictable weather patterns and never got much over seventy five degrees, meaning that all the charming Victorian homes and late nineteenth-century apartments were fully equipped to heat against the cool, biting winters with their old, metal, clamoring radiators, but practically none of them were outfitted for the arid, central Californian warmth that had slowly migrated towards the coast. There were no air conditioners in Thomas DeBorr's house. Part of the reason for that was a resistance to adding any additional "rogue technologies" into the house and the other part was pretty much laziness. The lack of cooling in combination with the old, slightly musty, insulated walls made even the lukewarm morning light heat the house quickly.

That morning was one of those. Peter woke up earlier than he wanted to with his sheets tossed on the floor and his sweater soaked in a thick sweat, he turned to make a comment about how their body heat probably didn't help, only to find an empty embossing of Elish's body where she slept. When he rolled down the hall to contend with a heavy bladder and a beating brain, he peeked out the hallway window to see Elish sitting in the garden with sunglasses slanted off her nose and her limbs all crossed as she cupped a large cup of water to her mouth.

He made sure to give her enough courtesy to change his shirt and comb his hair before heading out to meet her. In the soft morning light, diffused through the leaves of the large oak tree, she had sprawled out one foot extended, one reclined, a book lifted over her face to protect her from the beating sun, the nub at the end of her glasses being chewed pensively in her mouth as she lay like a modern, Boticelli-esque Venus.

She put the glasses back over her temples and gazed at him over the rim of her shades, like he'd seen so many bikini-clad women do before in advertisements.

"No Bloody Mary?", she flashed him the slightest of grins.

"I'm not too much feeling hot sauce and bacon right now"

He rubbed his stomach as he took the chair next to her.

"I thought you might be gone by the time I was up. Kind of your M.O."

The slight was registered.

"I wanted to", she owned a sassy look, "it was horribly hot in your room last night."

Peter let the silence hover.

"Besides", she finally said. "I couldn't leave you without giving you some closure on our conversation."

In the near distance, church bells chimed nine times. The bells sounded like something one might hear in the hills of Piedmont, with a mellow, antiquated timbre. A crowd of young kids in their mid-twenties came shuffling across the sidewalk in front of them, carrying a portable speaker and a large blanket. The girls were dressed in shorts and bikini tops and the men in trunks and button ups with their shirts left wide open. Their energy and excitement would have been magnetic to any of their contemporaries on a typical, bright, summery morning - of course, had they not been hungover. Peter looked at them from beyond the fence and wanted to stay as far away as he possibly could from their raucous energy.

He looked at the book she was reading. King, Queen, Knave by Vladimir Nabokov.

"Is it about Chess?"

She smirked. "Not quite. Well, I can't say for sure yet. You should know, I stole it from your Uncle's collection."

He winced a bit. The thought of one of Thomas' books out of place could come back to indict him later. Still, he couldn't let his mind focus on a single other thing while he awaited her answer. And yet, she seemed to sit perfectly at peace, contented to letting him squirm around in heavy anticipation.

She sighed and put the book down.

"Let's go somewhere" she said.

"Where do you wanna go?"

"You tell me."

"Tell you where I wanna go?", he asked,

"Tell me where I want to go. We can use my car"

He was in a better mood now, allowing a chuckle to escape his mouth.

"Okay. You'll need a swimsuit", he paused "A really good one".

Once the jokes were over, the two of them gathered some supplies, walked down the street and hopped into her charming, fifteen-year-old Mini Cooper. With the windows rolled down, they set off and Peter directed them North.

He refused to tell her where they were going every time they asked.

Once they drove over the Golden Gate bridge, they lost track of space. Zooming around with the windows down, the landscape became a mass expanse of nothing but green and yellow. Hills disappeared in a blur. The sky was the only constant as clouds seemed to slowly track the movements of the ant-like cars creeping along below. It was like a scene out of a California advertisement. Perfect weather (if you like it hot), adorable compact car, and two amorous young people smiling as the road ahead of them looked endless. They continued on and on and Elish blindly went where Peter led. To him, it was an exercise in trust he hadn't been afforded yet. And what a blissful day to be together!

After a lengthy ride, Peter found the familiar winding road. He had to use the internet to get himself oriented at first, but was able to correct course as soon as he was in a familiar place. In a pleasant twist of fate, the whole area was foreign to Elish. She had been through many of the roads, but never had a reason to stop.

"I love driving through here. It's like something out of Italy"

He also thought somewhere Mediterranean, but slightly more east.

Down the winding road was a row of tall Cypress trees, blowing away from them in the wind, like a set of outstretched fingers beckoning them to come in. Out in front the "St. Vincent Estates" sign was covered by a minivan.

Once inside, Peter was disappointed to see Vivek actually fairly busy. They had come on one of his intentional "non-public" days before, but this was not one. The crowd was light - no more than twelve people, but many of them were demanding and especially of Vivek's attention. When he finally got around to greet them, he managed to keep his social inertia in lifting Peter off the ground with his big hug.

"Well, well, well!", he dropped the boy who was a little embarrassed to have been picked up as a grown human. "And you must be the girl of his dreams!"

"Is that what he told you?"

Vivek laughed as he crossed his arms. "He told me you were a bit evasive"

She rolled her eyes and Peter shook his head trying to shake away his approving smile.

"Well that accusation might be correct", she conceded.

He explained to them that he was busy, but willing to comp two tasting for the two of them. The parties who were visiting were here either on business or really wanted to take advantage of the air conditioning. This meant that the outdoor area could be entirely theirs.

So they went and laid out in the grass, Nebbiolo's in hand, under the heat of the beating summer sun and appreciated the subtle curvature of the hill where the winery was. Out at the far edge, they sat where the land split. One ascended higher to where the old chapel was, where the other sloped dramatically downward towards where some of the Pinot vineyards were. The grass there was tall and almost untamed. Peter

had overheard Vivek explaining that the extra moisture they had received in weeks prior had come as a bit of a surprise to their typically attentive groundskeeper. They didn't mind being out there. It made the experience feel a little more wild. The breeze was soft, but not soft enough to drown out the sound of summer bugs and birds chirping away in the foreground. Both of them made pillows of their palms and laid on the downward slope so they could face the sky as well as the endless landscape of rolling, green hills. They watched as the clouds tickled the perfect blue sky, pointing out the ones that resembled things. Elish's tradition was to liken clouds to certain pieces of architecture, which Peter thought was a nice twist. They found a Gherkin cloud, a Sagrada Familia cloud, a Coliseum Cloud, a Tokyo Skytree cloud, and a cluster of Angkor Wat clouds.

Elish wrapped the soft, mauve, cashmere scarf over over her eyes as she nestled her head further into the ground and let out a little, joyful giggle. In all her years living in San Francisco, she'd only been to a few wineries and all of them were really commercial. They were all crowded and the decor was almost a caricature of the actual culture they were trying to imitate. This was different. This was special. What impressed her most was how perfect it was as a true hideaway. Down that winding road, up that steep hill, no one would easily find the two of them up there. Their own little slice of heaven. A warm summer afternoon, a glass of red wine, a soft, grassy hill. Everything about it was just as Peter had hopes, minus the other strangers inside.

When they're childlike fawning over the clouds ceased, she finally cut in.

"Thank you for telling me.... that. The thing you told me last night. You must have not know how I would react."

"I never really know how you're thinking."

The bird chirping and bug buzzing filled the voids of silence they let sit between their prolonged sips. With the aroma of wine filling their noses and coating their lungs, the world took on a sun-drenched, hazy aura which felt filled with serenity.

"I like you", Elish said, finally turning to him. "Nothing's changed with that."

A few more sips as she admired the particular shade of orange the mid-afternoon sun brought them. Behind the shade of sunglasses, her eyes scattered across the landscape looking for somewhere for her heart to hide.

"I needed time to think about what to say... I know what I felt immediately. It was a strange sense of relief. I think it brings me peace knowing that you're real. You're flawed. I mean damn. You've got a big problem on your hands. I needed something troubling to relate to, but what you've got is beyond the ordinary."

Peter couldn't bring himself to look at her as she spoke. He was too afraid that her face would show him a truth he didn't want to confront. Instead, he focused on the chapel up on the top of the hill - a focal point where he could distract himself.

She continued. "You've got baggage. And not simply a crazy ex kind of baggage, but a I'm twisted up in the law kind of baggage. You know the kind of stuff that those old English writers like Austen and stuff would conjure up... But I can't fault you for being honest. There were plenty of places in your life where you've screwed up, but I don't know. I don't think you're anywhere near irredeemable."

She let out a sigh and collapsed back into the grass, letting her head fall softly into her palm, which was propped up by her elbow, her head craned towards him.

"I think a lot of us have a tough time letting go of things. Things that... aren't good for us. We let these things form and attach themselves to us until they form this toxic symbiotic bond. I don't know... it's...it's dark. I guess what I'm trying to say is: you needed to let go. You needed some - as we'd say in theology - absolution. And you took your debts to the right person, because I happen to know a lot about that. What I'm trying to say is there's a lot of worse things that you could have said that would have ruined that confession for me."

"Like accidentally killing Hector?", he posited.

"Or worse: saying you truly loved the girl."

Her words sat with him for a moment. He'd known by now that his "love" for Daphne was a byproduct of hormones, coincidence, and youth. And he certainly knew that her scornful current outlook wasn't exactly drawing him back towards her.

"I used to think I did. I think everyone who feels very strongly for someone has that inkling. But it's so hard in the moment. In the moment, everyone can feel like they're in love. What they really are is 'caught up' in love. You become so enamored by the idea itself that you cease to really pay attention to where it's going and so you start to apply it to whoever you can, however you can. It's like trying to find a puzzle for one piece... it usually doesn't work."

He paused to look at her. "I'm not the kind of guy who falls in love easily. I thought I was, but the feelings in my heart are more... wary. There's not a lot of 'longing' there. I hope she's okay, but I don't need her. I don't miss her. I miss the youthful innocence, but-

"-but you miss your own just as much as you miss hers."

He nodded at her. And then, as if to beckon one over, she slowly scooted towards him. They made intimate eye contact as their bodies slowly started to pull towards one another. His neck slowly lunged forward in anticipation of a kiss. Elish then took her nearly empty wine glass and splashed the remaining half ounce of wine on his face. Peter blinked wildly, shocked at her brazenness while she giggled.

"That's for hitting a guy with your car"

With that, he slowly pressed his bodies towards her, wrapping his arms around her waist and he softly lowered her to the ground. When he brought his face in, she softly licked the wine off his face, like a kitten lapping up milk. The warmth of her tongue on his cheek tickled him, sending a feeling of relief through his body via the vagus nerve. Eventually, he started licking her back and then, like a penny going down a tube, the tongues slowly circled towards the middle, where they plunged into the respective mouth, beginning a beautiful dance between the two.

The birds continued chirping. The bugs continued buzzing. The sun continued setting. Other than that, all was quiet.

After an hour passed and the second tasting had really kicked in, Peter convinced her to sneak up with him to the small abandoned chapel on the hill. Without hesitation, she followed him, skipping gleefully through the dirt path of the vineyards, up towards the old chapel. Once inside, Elish took all of four minutes to do her best in deciphering the significance of the place before the two of them were on the floor of the building, undressing each other for the first time. Her body was this strange fusion of boyish and feminine, fragile and agile. His was solid with a soft core, but warn all around. They let their senses take hold as they explored each other's bodies, finally relenting in taking off her delicate panties and his boxer briefs, before succumbing to a passion they had felt build for so many weeks now.

They returned to the estate just before dusk and in time for Vivek to give them a few minutes of their time. Peter hated his timing as she had just agreed to give more insight into her strange behavior as their kindly host ushered them into his lounge area.

Once again, Esperanza joined the three of them for some 'tapas' out on the back porch. Peter had hoped for a dinner and intimate conversation as they were awarded last time. But it was clear that without Thomas there, the two of them were missing a key link. Still, the hospitality was welcomed graciously as the four of them lovingly split three bottles of wine, watching the sun slowly plummet after each one.

Esperanza was in much better company this time around thanks to Elish, who unbeknownst to Peter, was extraordinarily proficient, dare he think conversational, in her Spanish. He whipped his head around in a double take when he heard her address the kindly woman.

"Mucho gusto Señora. Qué hermosa velada!"

That brief interaction was plenty more than enough to attract Vivek's approval, which he had been explaining to Peter most of the night was fairly difficult to come by.

"I doubt that", Peter said, being cheeky.

"You think I don't have high standards? Well why do you think I'm still single dear Peter? It's because I don't just invite anyone in. I really consider myself a collector of characters. I'm out there, scouring the vast emptiness of the world for original people. They don't make to many original people anymore, I actually think they're a dying breed. One in a thousand, more like one in ten thousand. It may seem strange to you, because I believe you're like me. You take a keen interest in people and you do your best to understand them. See this girl right here? You've found another original. That what people like us do."

Vivek delivered his speech as he kicked his chair away from the table, let his sunglasses fall down the bridge of his nose, and tossed back the remainder of his red blend from three harvests ago.

"I guess I just took you for a personable guy Vivek. I would be hard pressed to see someone like you actually turn someone away."

A devilish grin came across the man's stubbly, oak-covered face as he looked at Peter over his glasses and said, "And that's the trick, my boy. Only let those close to you who your trust. In our case, that tends to lie with us originals."

Peter had come to enjoy his new friend's prophetic waxing under the influence of his own potion. Though he didn't agree with much of it, he knew he was never being spoken down to. It was clear that this was not so much instruction from an elder, but the musings of a friend who probably secretly wished to be immortalized as an under appreciated philosopher.

Eventually, Peter and Vivek's conversation exploring Vivek's early migration from Bangalore to Chennai (not to mention a brief stint in Goa) and Elish and Esperanza's conversation about the tragedy of a lost mother (Peter managed to capture the words "madre" "muerte" and "tambien" in the same sentence) converged around the idea of moving around while young.

"So Elish, you've never lived anywhere outside of San Francisco?"

"Never. Always wanted to."

"Well where would you most like to go?"

"Somewhere exciting and different. There are so many ideas... Chicago, New York, DC... I'd love to live abroad too."

"Mumbai?", he said as he stretched his arms behind his head to relax.

"Bogota?", Esperanza added.

"Anywhere really. I would love to obviously go somewhere where they speak a different language so I could pick it up. I think I'd probably lean towards like Buenos Aires or something first."

Thinking he has synthesized her thoughts, Vivek jumped in. "So really, just some far-off urban area?"

"I'm not even one hundred percent married to that idea. I'm actually more than happy to go to an Alaska or Mongolia."

"I think it's important for young people to move around. That's what we do as humans. Its what we were meant to do. Ever since we left Africa, we've roamed the earth and we haven't really stopped ever since. Continue the tradition young lady!"

All this conversation made Peter slightly uncomfortable. At his core, the departure of Elish was at the bottom of his list of things that he wanted to happen. But he did his best to retain a smile throughout the dinner. The logic was sound, but his heart didn't want to listen. From his perspective, it was perfectly plain that Elish was already born in the right space. He was the one who needed to escape the uncouth, uncultured countryside fo the urbanized, modern city environment.

He didn't want her to leave. Even though he needed to leave Kansas to complete his journey, he felt like her leaving would be the prophesied end of their relationship as they knew it. Places like New York, Bogota, and Alaska seemed even more difficult to relocate to, especially considering how much of an ordeal it was to get to San Francisco in thee first place. A swelling unease made its way from his wine-soaked gut,

up through his chest and into his head. He had read about this strange sensation before, a feeling the Portuguese referred to as "saudade", these pangs of longing for something that was never there. The thing in this case was a solid, loving relationship.

Vivek wagged and approving finger in her direction after they two had decided that she was almost certainly bound for some far-off exotic land (lately it had been the Azores).

"Well Ms. Donahue, I think that we are going to have to connect one day. Be it Kathmandu, Sydney, or Montevideo, we will connect one day, mark my words!"

It was the first time he'd heard Elish greeted with such a title. Until now, he'd had seen her as a colleague in so many scenarios, the formality of his address had reminded him of her rarely-spoken of prestige. She was on her way to a graduate degree after all and Peter knew the statistics. It was rare when someone with a graduate degree actually remained in the same state, much less the same city. Feeling his resignation mount in combination with the alcohol they were consuming, Peter felt emboldened. He took advantage of an silence in the closing minutes of dinner to get some answers from his withholding lover.

"So when are you going to tell me what's really been going on?"

"That's right", Vivek interjected. "I remember you talking about her uncomfortable mystery before. So... what do you have to say?"

Elish widened her eyes at Peter as if to say, "DON'T", before turning back to her hungry audience. She privately chided men and their lack of boundaries to Esperanza before finally responding.

"All I'd like to say is that my family life is very complicated. My father is... he has a very strong idea about my future and it requires a lot out of me. And it often requires me to act in ways I fundamentally disagree with."

Vivek clapped. "Excellent subterfuge. I think you may have a career in politics."

Peter knew at the moment he brought it up that he was treading into dangerous territory. Still, he felt he had been gipped out of a mutual revelatory process and was bound and determined, with the ethanol running through his veins, to force her hand. The public forum proved to be her forte and Vivek and Esperanza weren't going to put her on trial the way Peter would. As soon as the sun set and the soft pink dusk palette filled the empty sky, the young couple was sent off with a complimentary bottle of wine and a warm, inviting hug.

Their drive back chased the last bits of light and Elish did her best not to elaborate on the conversation earlier. But after listening to an entire No Doubt album stuck in heavy traffic on Golden Gate Bridge, she felt like she couldn't hide any longer. She let out a loud, exhaustive sigh.

"Listen. My Dad is all I have right now. He's... He expects a lot out of me and that includes who I choose to spend my time with."

Peter scoffed, almost offended.

"Are you trying to tell me your Dad wouldn't like me in a roundabout way? Is this because I work in a coffeeshop at the moment?"

"I think the more disturbing part would be the whole scandal you left behind in Kansas. The coffeeshop thing wouldn't be as bad. Listen, I promise... everything that's been 'strange' with me? It's because of my school or my Dad. The other night when I had to bounce early? My Dad. I felt weird about it because it's not easy to tell everyone your Dad's calling you."

Peter let his head sink.

"Hey! It's fine. Seriously." she let her palm slowly gloss across the side of his cheek. "I had a really good time today. I think all my theology professors would be incensed to know what we did in that chapel this afternoon."

Peter grinned. "It's perfectly Greek, though, isn't it?"

Before she dropped him off, Elish took him to an overlook on the top of Twin Peaks. The magical, rolling hills of San Francisco twinkled with the sparkling lights of small bodegas, neighborhood bars, and cramped apartment complexes. It looked like a sea of fireflies on top of a soft, inviting hill. They listened to some of his favorite old Jazz music (including some songs by Peggy Lee) as they laid one head on another and let one of their best days fade into obscurity.

The entire drive back, Thomas had a painful, nagging sensation that he was going to return to a home in ruin. As perfectly respectful and clean as his nephew had been throughout his stay, the elder Mr. DeBorr hid a natural distrust for the younger generation. If there was any wildness in his youth, he did his best to keep it hidden. But throughout his life, he did seek out any opportunity to make it known he understood the distractions of youth. "Everyone has a vice", he would say tritely at family gatherings. "Young people just like to try them all out before they decide." He did his best to respect young people, avoiding drenching them with platitudes and "life advice" they had been inundated with by so many of his peers, most of whom just felt like they needed to speak. But where the idea of the *jeune homme* or the University student brought him joy, the idea of the frat bro and the eager schoolgirl brought him a particularly bitter kind of disgust. It was the sophomoric balance point. On one side, you rolled into a pit of hedonistic, selfish, aimlessness. On the other, enlightenment and the lifetime of self-generated pleasures that came with it.

He'd had a lot of time to get to know this nephew of his in a way that he'd never really been interested in before. The first fifteen years of a child's life are what Thomas called 'learning to be a human'. It involved acquiring things like social skills, basic interests, and some very vague geopolitical sensibilities (i.e. Iraq isn't maybe all bad). Anytime he was forced to interact with children in this age, he kept his conversations short and distanced. Knowing it was important not to deny any and all interest to kids this age (after all, he thought, Mozart was only three when he was composing), he would take any direct approaches towards them with what many onlooking parents would call, "a probing manner". This involved dissecting the complex interplay between their interests, their world framework, and their social circles. He would ask questions like,

"Why are you friends with Tamara? Is it because her parents are lawyers and your parents are lawyers and the two of you can pass enough time together discussing horses?"

This usually was impetus enough to have a parent come swoop in and satisfy Mr. DeBorr's shrinking attention span for young, developing humans. The pubescent ones were particularly difficult because they certainly felt like they understood the world, though they were just crowning into it. Not only did they feel especially entitled in their new opinions, they also made it their mission to make you aware of those. As a Professor, he found this at odds with his ever present informational evangelizing mission. As his nieces and nephews got to that age, he took a particular joy in explaining to them how, contrary to what they'd just learned in their 'exploring their ancestry' class, humankind was all really African in origin, which up to that point in their education had been glossed over or neglected.

But around the age of sixteen something changed. They had more developed personalities, thoughts, and politics. Suddenly, they weren't trying to dictate the lessons they'd been taught, but were now curious - about the world around them, the people they'd heard of, and what media to consume. They were hatched from their insular familial spell, free from the supremacy of their existence as their parents descended from the pantheon back to earth where all their flaws became ever present. He took great interest in this demographic. The sad irony of this shift was that it also coincided with the era in which the kids wanted to be as far away from adults as possible. So most interactions were relegated to obligatory gatherings during holidays with primarily family members. This is where he felt like he first made a connection with Peter.

His nephew wasn't into sports, even though he played soccer for the junior varsity squad. He was more interested in travel magazines and cooking, overlapping two interest categories that he also cared about. He had a newfound love of history. It was World War II and not ancient cultures, but Thomas knew that it was a start. He had a girlfriend, but he was very measured about their relationship. He made it clear that she wasn't going to prevent him from going away to school. That in concert with his general increase in curiosity and inquisitiveness, especially about life in the Bay Area and San Francisco, all were signs of improvement in the Uncle's adoring eyes.

But that was about all he knew before Peter came out to California to stay with him.

Ever since his nephew stepped foot in his home, he knew things would be different. For one thing, he had never had a long term guest in his life before Peter's arrival. Every time he had a captive audience, Thomas was eager to give them a tour of his home, making sure to emphasize the quaint glory of his guest room. What he consistently left out was how vacant it really was. Before Peter, the last guest who actually stayed a full night was his colleague Eileen McAnnan, which was over four years prior, and only at the behest of their paralyzing headaches (a result of a home wine tasting which quickly spiraled into a dinner, which itself turned into a aperitif tasting, which itself turned into downing an entire bottle of green Chartreuse). Two years before that, his brother Schuyler and his brother Will (short for Willem) both stayed during overnights on their respective business trips. Other than that, the guest room remained empty.

Thomas wasn't alone in his house all those years. He had romances which created their own chaotic pulls on his bedroom. But the guest room was left neglected. And in its absence, Thomas saw an opportunity to flex his interior designer muscles. He went Antiquing several weekends in a row to find the coolest side tables and the most rustic-looking chairs. For him, everything needed a story. The chair by the window he had acquired from an antique store down near San Luis Obispo where the salesclerk had told him the harrowing tale of it's early twentieth century voyage by an impoverished family of Sicilian immigrants who were determined to keep their hundred year old, hand-crafted 'throne' in the family, at the very least as a way of keeping something of value with them in the new world. The lamp in the corner had been designed and created by a student of the Danish Bauhaus Academy just after World War II. The student had felt dejected by the excess of designers entering into the market, so he set out to do his own thing in California, only to find the market there just as saturated. It didn't matter to Thomas that the bulbs that would need replacing would cost a fortune in shipping. Or that the paint that would inevitably chip on the chair would be impossible to color match. In his eyes, it was important for the room to be full of stories.

When he had gotten the call from Schuyler that they needed a place for Peter to go that would keep him away from the media frenzy, he was reluctant to offer his help.

The idea of a troubled young collegiate boy coming to stay in his neat, meticulously-designed room brought a burning sensation that radiated throughout his chest cavity. But if there was anything Thomas had learned in his many years, it was that there was always more to an initial story. He knew his nephew. He didn't know him well, but he knew him. What little he could be certain of was that he wasn't not the type of young man who would set fire to someones home. And in his demure, meek, almost mousy-like mannerisms, he certainly didn't seem like the kind of boy who was commanding the media attention he now seemed to have in Kansas.

The late-night conversations the two of them had shared around an empty Christmas dinner table littered with bones of some large, dumb fowl and accompanied by some cheap Australian wine, shone Peter in a particularly charming, intellectual light. He felt like the young man was now ripe for the world and fully ready to embrace a bright, exciting and adventurous future. So when he heard that the future of his young upstart of a nephew was in jeopardy, it struck him that he may have an opportunity to intervene. In his own youth, he'd wanted anything he could to get him out of Kansas. He knew the path it provided him and he wanted so badly for this strange new human to have the opportunity as well.

When Thomas finally returned home, he spent a good two hours running his corneas over every single surface in the house, wincing every time he saw a shifted mug or a chair turned the wrong way. There was no leftover aluminum cans or Corona bottles filling up his trash, but a few empty wine bottles were tucked in the corner of the study room along with a makeshift home theater setup.

He pulled out the emptied (but not rinsed out) Petite Syrah and examined it along with the rest of the makeshift entertainment center. The Professorial instincts frequently were mixed up in his own mind with Detective intuition, something he garnered after reading a few too many old crime novels and fancying himself smarter than the troubled protagonists, wanting about following the wrong clues. However erroneous he proved to be about the majority of his assumptions (there was some kind of a party there; porn must have been displayed on the new TV; a few of his favorite books were carried out by some drunk hooligans), one did hold true. The smell of a particularly musky perfume led him to believe a woman spent the night in the house.

What he wanted to do was call Peter up and give him a stern, but polite lecture on respecting the space of others. He pulled out a copy of Jedidiah Purdy's 'On Property' and leafed through a few pages, trying to cite a specific, compelling passage to illustrate his point. But after that effort just seemed to waste the rest of a perfectly good afternoon, he opted to sit outside and enjoy the sun and the city folk with a glass of chilled Benedictine and a copy of a book on early Gothic tribes as he mulled over his next move.

About twenty or so odd days a year, San Francisco had some of the most stellar sunsets in the whole of the country. There was something about the transition from orange to magenta, against a backdrop of shallow clouds, the sea quietly droning on in the background, which could stir up emotion in even the most fortuitous of individuals. These could theoretically happen any time of year, but Thomas had made note that the summer months where rain was present were a slightly favorable environment. From the afternoon blood orange, the entire spectacle lasted about an hour and a half in all its majesty and was a welcome reminder to the Professor that he didn't live in such a bad place after all.

The sky was a perfect sedative for the mind. All his anxiety about the impending exhibit opening, the incessant present of Marc Roy, and the prolonged feeling of personal loneliness all seemed to dissipate into a blurry jumble in the background as his mind sucked in the nutrients of the sky, like a plant, roots outstretched, eager to partake in its photosynthetic healing. It seemed like everything he had been doing over the last week had been in order to distance himself from the museum. The event was in three days and he knew that his sharp tongue was ready to leap from its cage if he were only given the opportunity. But self control and restraint were qualities that generally shone through Thomas DeBorr and he knew himself well enough to know that getting away to indulge in mindless drinking, walking, sex, and fatty foods was just the thing he needed to keep him away from the museum. If only he was flush with more cash, he would have stayed longer, right up until the gallery opening. But an ingrained sense of duty pecked at him and he could resist no longer.

After he downed his Benedictine and follow up espresso, burning through nearly forty pages in the process, he decided that the best approach would be to speak with his nephew directly. Begrudgingly, he made his way inside to the 1960's style black telephone that sat on his desk. Pulling out an address book, he found Peter's number

and proceeded to ring him. No answer. He felt this to be an innocent, but inconvenient error on the part of his nephew and decided there may be a better way to reach him, via text. Begrudgingly, he pulled open his desk drawer and turned on the phone he tried to keep himself away from as much as possible. The main menu was flooded with messages and he was reminded again why he hated technology like this.

Slowly and after four separate edits, Thomas sent off a message to Peter that simply asked, "Where are you?". After the response wasn't immediate, he pulled out his pipe and took a few puffs out of a nervous fear that he hadn't abided by some strange new tech etiquette. Just as the crepuscular hour had begun and the sun was making its protracted journey downward, he get his reply:

"At the Opera! Be back soon."

He was so puzzled by this response, he grabbed the bottle of Benedictine around the neck and poured out several servings in a larger glass. Something wasn't right.

Lisa DeBorr was a mousy, squeamish little woman who made every effort to quiet her footsteps when she walked in a room. She came from a quiet family of artisans and day laborers in Indiana who were of a particularly conservative German stock which clung tightly to the social norms of the past and had conditioned the females in the family to not be outspoken in any manner. As time went on, she was exposed to and did indeed embrace the tenants of 2nd wave feminism, but refused to do so in a way that would have exposed her private nature to the public. That meant that, when she had a family of her own, she was comfortable enough to disappear into the background and yield the table to the slightly chattier men in her family. Growing up, this meant Peter's relationship with his mother was always a bit distant. She was caring and sweet, packing him lunches with homemade notes and bringing him hot soup when he caught a fever, but she wasn't doting or maternal in the way he'd come to learn through the media. She hated hugs, never spent much time with him without his father, and was horribly uncomfortable when he cried. Privacy was cherished above all in her life. She made many conscious efforts to spend time alone so she could listen to her music and watch her shows without anyone intruding.

This left Peter with an enigmatic, puzzling image of his mother. He'd conflated this obscurity with an overall lack of personality and purpose, but had mostly overlooked qualities of hers he'd simply found to be "boring". To him, she was just a "normal, boring mom" whom he could scantily add details about. Even when away from her, there were few things that triggered the memory of her.

But one of the very few things that he would never forget about her was her love for Opera. Every afternoon that he came home from school early and she was cleaning the kitchen, he would enter into a chamber surrounded and flooded with the sounds of Puccini and Wagner. For the average mother in Manhattan, it was distinct and different. And for Peter, it was like nothing he ever heard and nothing he would ever experience outside that small household.

Which is why when he found himself sitting in the audience at Verdi's *La Traviata*, Peter was stricken with a powerful sense of appreciation for his oft neglected mother. When Marc Roy had contacted him only three hours earlier inviting him to the Opera House, Peter wasn't sure it was up his alley. The idea of sitting in a large theater, listening to wailing crescendos in a foreign tongue, stirred up a small feeling of unease as he imagined himself in the cushiony seats, trapped between two bulbous, culture-obsessed curmudgeons, who most certainly wouldn't approve of his groans. But this was weighed against his desire to see Mr. Roy again. He knew they weren't destined to be best friends, but he felt like there was a mutual respect. It wasn't an equal respect - Mr. Roy was far beyond his years in terms of exposure to the world, adventure, and culture - but he also knew that Peter had potential. He could see that Peter was curious about the world and personable in a way that his disgruntled colleague Thomas wasn't. In the end, he concluded that it would be a much more productive way of spending his time than waiting to hear from Elish again, and so he agreed and less than an hour later the two were in a car.

Now, as the curtain rose on the second act, Peter was sold on the whole experience. He decided he loved Opera. He'd always imagined it to be a boring, confusing, display of a tradition that was slowly dying out. What he witnessed was spectacle, grandeur, and prestige. And not just on the stage. The process of entering the grand building, everyone dressed in their best garb, ladies wearing the most elegant dresses, and gentleman with ties and fitted shoulder walking around with an almost regal swagger.

The whole thing had a sort of Old World aristocratic charm to it that he'd only felt played out in scenes from books like *Anna Karenina*. And then there was the schmoozing. Mr. Roy was evidently a regular as every few groups they passed made an effort to pass a friendly glance or split away to quickly catch up with the man. He politely obliged most of them and was kindly enough to introduce Peter as his, "Young friend from Kansas". Peter didn't mind one bit.

Once the curtains rose and they had sipped down two glasses of Dom Perignon, the real spectacle unfolded.

The lead actress had an almost telekinetic relationship with her voice, waving her hands as if to cast her vibrato from one end of the opera chamber all the way to the other. She was like an enchanting sorceress, draped in robes and singing in tongues, creating music as the spectacles of the stage unfolded behind her, the salon of a Parisian home disappeared into a fog, where a small, quaint street scene took its place. What exactly the show was about was a mystery to Peter. There was a translation of the Italian on the small screens off to the side, but looking at them took away from the experience. In fact, the only times he looked away from the stage was to glance at Mr. Roy, hunched over, gleaming with intrigue, his head cocked and eyes fixed on the stage. He looked like an artist studying his subject, pensive and studious, determined to understand the essence of the piece as if he were mentally rolling all the stage around in his palm. There was a muted giddiness to his adoration of the arts, which was only hinted at by his non-concealable right cheek smirk.

Peter saw him as he wanted to be seen. From this angle, he had fully embodied the Renaissance gentleman in his place as a gentle, scholarly benefactor. His many-thousand dollar watch, clinging tightly to his wrist, reflecting the soft lights of the stage, suggested the power he held and the extent of wealth he commanded. Mr. Roy looked cool. He looked interesting. Peter wanted to be like him.

When the show was over, Marc took him over to a small area where they were doing a private reception, careful to ignore the nosy onlookers. There, he pulled him over at a small side table and cast an approving grin on Peter.

"Well?"

"It was... magical. Like nothing I could have ever imagined."

Mr. Roy threw up his arms in triumph, "Eccellente! Your Primera opera! I mean, you only get this experience once, Peter. I envy you for it. It's a sensation you'll have and cherish for the rest of your life."

"I want to come back. I... I still feel like I'm shaking."

"I know you appreciated it. Truly", he said wagging a finger at him. "Do you know how?"

Peter shook his head.

"You didn't fall asleep."

"How could I? This whole experience has been like something out of a dream."

"And who needs to sleep when the dream is real?", Marc said before taking a long sip of his whiskey. "Too many people are content to fall asleep Peter. It's one of the oldest, most cherished art forms in the Western World and people are content to pay their five hundred dollars, sip champagne they could easily enjoy at home and take a three and a half hour nap with a few dictated interruptions to get up and enjoy some cheese and more wine. I speak as a man who is filled with great frustration Peter. You see, the Italians, who were kind enough to provide us Verdi, Cappuccinos, and the Renaissance, they have this thing called 'Andamento Lento'. It's all about appreciating life at a slow pace. Take care finding your ingredients, take care eating your bread, take care writing your poetry or your songs or your epics - slow it down. This part of life? It's not meant to race through. You don't go to the Opera to say you've been there. You go to experience, to live it. And yet so many people do..."

He seemed to lose his train of thought as his eyes had been stuck, looking out into the cold, dark, rainy San Francisco streets. If he had any doubts of Peter's interest, they were immediately quelled when he glanced over at the attentive student, seemingly waiting in anticipation on the next move.

"That is why we work hard. That's I commit all my energy to bettering the world by bringing art and culture back into the daily conversation. I had to work and toil and slave away, spending sleepless nights and countless hours, building up industry brick by brick. And when people - my loved ones even - asked what it was all for, I had an answer: to better the world. And now, after living the life of fast and reckless, I too can indulge. I can enjoy the *Andamento Lento*. I can appreciate it for what it represents: an appreciation for authenticity, history, and story."

He paused to let out a deep sigh.

"And, oh Mon Dieu, I can see that you, too have the seed of something great. You're a man in search of an identity.... Now the question is: Clark Kent or Superman?"

At the end of his short sermon, Peter was stunned. He was completely bewitched by the strange fusion of capitalist rigor and artisan adoration, which stirred an osmotic passion in him that made him want to follow Mr. Roy's every move. He almost took the opportunity to ask. Ask about Mr. Roy's life. Ask about how he could get to his comfortable, effortless place in life. But as other theater patrons descended, he decided that his Opera steward's ego was perfectly satiated.

After the show, Mr. Roy invited Peter to head to the jazz club once more, where, after a few stiff drinks, he admitted to him that part of Peter's fortune had been a last minute cancellation by Mr. Hewitt's son, Malcolm. It came of as a guilty admission, but Peter couldn't care less how he received the invite, he was happy to get out and spent the day with a man of culture, class, and exuberance. They spent the rest of the night listening to the music, chatting with the band, and intellectually sparring about which alcohol was the most refined. Somewhere in the midst of their conversations, Peter realized he no longer had any trepidation spending time with Marc Roy, that he was no longer someone he had to try to impress. He had earned his favor.

They didn't mention or speak once about Thomas, though he was alluded to as Mr. Roy mentioned, "rising tension and falling soldiers" in reference to the exhibit opening in the coming days. Peter felt like it was prudent to forge his own relationship with the man anyway and could tell that further dissociating himself from Thomas could be useful in case things really soured at the exhibit.

After a perfect day of luxury and music that many men never experienced their whole lives, Peter was brought back to the house, where Marc sent him off with a wink, and with the smell of absinthe on his tongue said, "I think it's looking more like Superman every day". and drove off.

When Peter arrived at the house, he found, out in the garden, a faint glowing light with a small waft of smoke emanating from it. As he approached, he recognized the strong patchouli and wood smell he'd smelt so many times before.

It was Thomas at the garden table in the dark.

"So Peter. How's our friend Mr. Roy?"

Peter cautiously approached his apprehensive Uncle, who was basking in the dark shade of the awning, while sipping a potent Port, swigging like a alcoholic as his nephew approached.

"Well, do you have anything to say for yourself?", Thomas asked.

"We went to the Opera"

"Ah. Men of culture spending an afternoon together. I hope you learned something,"

Peter let his head fall in shame.

"It didn't.... It didn't mean anything. What are you jealous?"

Thomas scoffed. "Ha. Hardly! Two cultural nubile men doing their best to stomach some baroque opera.... sounds pathetic."

Peter remained defiantly silent in the face of the insult, but he was holding back tears. His Uncle cast his gaze elsewhere, unable to look his nephew in the eyes.

“Hmmm... And the wine bottles? What did that end up meaning?”

“What do you mean?”

“Was that an onanistic venture or were you accompanied.”

“Onanistic?”

“I was consumed with the pungent stench of perfume upon entering.”

Peter let out a deep sigh. He never meant to sneak Elish around behind his Uncle's back, and could tell it positioned her terribly in case he ever did want to bring her around. He had been meaning to introduce the two of them for some time, but it never seemed like the right occasion - on the one hand, their relationship seemed in a state of unsatisfactory flux, and on the other hand, he did hope that she would one day be a greater part of his fold. It stung him that Elish was going to be associated with, what he knew his Uncle was alluding to, the odor of a concubine. When their eventual meeting did happen, it would not be without tension.

“Okay, yes I had a girl here. It was Elish. I'm a guy in his twenties, what do you expect? Where were you even? I thought you weren't going to be back for days”

Thomas recoiled as if he weren't expecting that challenge.

“I was out. I needed to clear my mind from the utter abomination that the man you spent a casual Traviata afternoon with has created. I've needed to get away, but I needn't explain myself as to where I've chosen to spend my time or my whereabouts because, unlike you, I've chosen to live a private life.”

Perhaps feeling the courage supplied by the alcohol, Peter scoffed and glared at his Uncle.

“What's that supposed to mean? You don't think I live a private life?”

Thomas condescendingly glanced into his glass as he tossed back the rest of the port.

“Well not if you read the Kansas City Star...”

“That’s low”, Peter posited. “Especially for you”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re my Uncle. You’re a DeBorr. We’re DeBorr’s!”

Then, as if some Devine lightning struck him, Thomas shouted, “WELL THEN YOU BETTER START ACTING LIKE ONE,”

A long silence followed. It was clear Thomas was not done explaining himself.

“I know you have your thoughts about me and some of them are probably perfectly true. But, believe me when I say that I do care about you, about us, and about our family’s name more than I let on. I know what kind of meddling that Marc Roy has been involved with and I can tell you now he’s nothing but bad news. You may like him now. His power, his presence, his money are all huge draws from people everywhere he goes. But he doesn’t just care about anyone. He likes you. You.... bring out something in him.”

And then Thomas ominously leaned in and grabbed Peter by the edge of his collar.

“Listen to me. If you get on his bad side, everything will fall apart. He’s the kind of man who will work day in and day out to make sure you have no future. You see, to him, people aren’t assets, they’re sport. They’re something to be traded, like the stock of the day.”

“He’s not like that”, Peter said.

Thomas sighed. “Trust me that I’m telling you this because I care about you: Marc Roy is not your future.”

Then he paused and almost trembled a bit before continuing.

“I... I want to help you. I haven't always been good at showing it, but I care about you. I want you to learn and grow as a young man.”

It was the first gesture of emotional vulnerability he had ever received from someone on his father's side of the family. Peter did his best to temper his frustrations.

“Yeah, well I don't see you inviting me to the Opera.”

With that, Peter felt like he'd made his closing statement and stormed to bed. He made a conscious effort not to use the bathroom, so as to not have to go outside and interact with his stubborn Uncle anymore.

Thomas awoke with the most painful headache the next morning as soon as the birds started making their first chirps of the day, a good hour before any light of day. After stirring around restlessly for a few hours, he turned on his side to see the three empty bottles of Benedictine on the side of his dresser, one overturned, now visible in the morning light, all a strong sign that he'd let himself drink to excess in a way that he had come to regret. For a person who loved when people called him "Doctor", Thomas DeBorr has a strange, concealed aversity to medicine and preferred to allow any traditional ailment to work its way through his system without the help of medicine. But that morning, the pain was too great. A stabbing feeling in his neck, an uncomfortable pressure in his abdomen, a throbbing feeling in his chest, and a burning sensation in his lower back. He was a complete mess.

When he rifled through his holistic and mostly decorative medicine cabinet, he made sure to do so loudly. It was his private hope that if he cause enough of a ruckus, it might coax his embittered nephew out of his room and they could have a sober conversation about the events of the night prior. When there was a complete absence of movement or noise, Thomas went over to the room himself. The door was left cracked and, aware of the risk of breaching his privacy, he took a deep breath and opened it up. The bed was made, but empty. In fact, much of the room looked like it was before Peter ever arrived. A cold sweat came over Thomas as he considered the possibility that he ran his nephew out of town. Had he been too cruel? Had he said

something that out of turn? It was certainly unlike a DeBorr to have such a strong revulsion to criticism like that.

Again, he continued to venture further into the breach of privacy by opening the closet, which revealed the small grey suitcase Peter had arrived with, still opened. He let out a sigh of relief.

With the opening right around the corner, he considered going to the museum. He called Eileen, just to do a temperature check, but was quickly told that everything was under control and that they wouldn't be needing help just yet.

"Why don't you go see a film?", she asked him while directing workers in the background.

"By myself?"

She pulled the phone away from her face before bringing it right back.

"Is this... Thomas DeBorr? I'm just really trying to make sure I'm speaking to the right person? Is this Thomas? Because I've known Thomas for many years now and I think it would be news to me if he ever chose to go to the cinema with someone."

For Thomas, it felt like a vulnerable wound had been exposed.

"No... I. I just wanted to extend the offer... to you?"

She laughed.

"You and I know you're much more clever with words than that. I don't for one minute believe that's the case."

When that avenue of entertainment was exhausted, he decided he'd finally make his way over to Peter's presumed location, Cafe du Rue, to speak with his nephew in person. Upon arrival, however, he found Antonio and Silvio chatting behind the counter.

"Tom, what are you--"

"I'm actually looking for Peter."

Antonio scratched his head. "I'm not enough for you anymore?"

He knew Antonio was being playful, but the weight of his guilt was starting to field its own gravity, slowly pulling everything in his world down around it. Unfortunately, Antonio had no idea where Peter was.

"But you should stay. We can have breakfast."

The offer was sweet, but Thomas was clear.

"You know, you could try calling him."

And so he did. And, despite fumbling with his cell phone a bit, he got his nephew on the line after a few rings.

"Where are you?"

"I'm at a brunch in the Marina."

In the background, Thomas could hear instruments, mostly brass, clamoring away. While he had his suspicions about who he was spending time with, he didn't want to ask directly.

"Are you enjoying yourself? You didn't have to go alone."

"I'm not. I'm actually with Mr. Roy and one of his associates Mr. Lau."

The truth stung even though he suspected as much.

"Well, are you going to be home for dinner?", he asked.

After a pause, Peter jumped in. "Yeah." He waited a while as his background noise started to die out. Thomas finally figured out he was walking away from the crowd.

"And... I was wondering. Do you think I could bring Elish?"

It was a small Olive branch, but one worth talking about.

Following a darling seaside brunch, Peter accompanied Mr. Roy and his dear friend Mr. Lau to the museum where the exhibit was being put up. The three of them had been so caught up in discussions about patronage and the arts that it seemed a natural segue to see patronage at work. Marc had explained there were far too few Cosimo Medici's in the world and all the power that people such as him used to hold had been shipped away to large corporations.

"Art is now just for profit.", he mused as he wandered through a hall of Greek vases. "These treasures once told stories of people, not companies. I always felt that was at the heart of expression - pure, unfiltered emotion."

He went on a rant about critics of Homer who felt he was too verbose and meandered around the point too much, before he himself experienced the self-fulfilling prophecy and found his way back to his end point, which was why the arts needed someone who had transcended business. In his eyes, he was the middle man. He was the one who would bridge the gap between the corporate world and the world of creators, all the while remaining and impartial, but loving spectator. Mr. Lau started asking where he found this very distinct mission of his and both of them were shocked when he was so candid about something personal.

"I spent a month in a Franciscan monastery after graduating. It was a special time for me, but more than that, it was a time where I was able to appreciate not only THE beauty of THE universe, but also simply beauty in the universe."

Peter tried to hold in a scoff at the notion that this man of high culture and esteem would spend his days with a bunch of chaste men reading Scripture in the middle of a pastoral scene. Then again, there was always a few eccentricities about Marc Roy and, though it wasn't his first thought, it could certainly fit the bill.

Mr. Roy left to attend to some business with Eileen and Peter, now comfortably aware his Uncle wouldn't be there, enjoyed a stroll through the gallery, looking for signs of his work. He found a small note on a statue written in Thomas' handwriting.

"Thracian, but drawing on influence from Western artists, certainly Praxiteles. The Anatolian plain was much less organized back then."

A smile crept across Peter's face as he gazed around the room. Dozens of small notes were now noticeable all over the place: hanging from paintings, tucked under vases, rolled into the hands of statues. It was clear that, even though it wasn't mentioned once, Thomas DeBorr's invisible hand was everywhere to be seen in this place. He felt a bit of pride for his Uncle. Though they had somewhat of a bruised relationship, it still was exciting to see something he was doing find a home in public.

"Sometimes I wonder if he's just bullshitting me", a voice said over Peter's shoulder. He flung around and saw Mr. Lau.

"Yeah, I mean. He certainly talks about all of this stuff with the tenacity of a man whose studied it his whole life. But there's a part of me that thinks he just wants to be apart of something."

Peter nodded along. "I mean, I think he spends a lot of time around it. My guess is that he's as much of a virtuoso as he says with all that time."

Mr. Lau flashed his teeth as he chuckled in a warm, friendly way.

"Oh Peter. If we could all only learn by osmosis, I feel like I could be the smartest guy on earth. Unfortunately, my presence isn't always the best sponge."

The two of them stayed chatting about success and the contemporary job environment. He heard the stories of Mr. Lau's lucrative textile business in Chinatown that had been surrendered in favor of his newfound love of fine cutlery. His career

path had so many careening twists and turns that Peter was left wondering how each section would bring him back around. When Mr. Lau finally left with a tip of his hat, a business card, and an open invitation into a small tea shop he operated in Chinatown, Peter was left mystified and inspired by this mysterious old man who was evidently a keen observer of human nature.

The second he was alone, he phoned Elish, whom he was excited to hear was alone and bored. Though the dinner with his Uncle offer wasn't received with what he would call "excitement", she agreed that she would come and asked him what she should wear, a good sign that she did indeed care.

Peter made an excuse with the gentlemen and snuck out, hoping to smooth things over with his Uncle before the two of them were to arrive.

Peter caught Thomas on his way out the door. He gave his nephew a once over from head to toe, taking care to analyze his new, rather well kept look. A small fire started brewing inside him which he quickly swallowed in the interest of their relationship.

"Where'd you get brunch?"

"The Seaside Cafe? I think that's what it was called. It was under the bridge anyways, great view."

Thomas let out a deep sigh and explained that he was heading to get them ingredients for dinner, something Tuscan he was thinking. Not wanting to think he was avoiding the subject, he paused before getting into his car and addressed the boy directly.

"I do not mean to come at you with ire. I've come to rather appreciate you as a whole, real, developed young man."

Peter gave him an approving nod.

"I know that's some twisted way of saying I love you Uncle Tom."

Thomas let out an uncomfortable laugh as his face became beat red. In his car, he smoked his pipe as he considered the implications of "love" and what a strange word that was for him in the context of his family.

Back from the store, he shelved any simmering anxieties about Peter, Marc Roy, the Museum, or the exhibition that were stuck poisoning his mind and let his body become a mechanical device. Over the course of a Nat King Cole record, he had prepared a delicious al dente pasta, a fresh, Turkish-inspired salad, and the best he could muster for a dessert - a sort of half-done flan dish that just needed some toppings. The doorbell rang and, standing there with his apron on, Thomas felt he was experiencing that distantly familiar sensation every parent feels when they meet the significant other of their child, standing in the doorway of the home, greeting them with subdued, but optimistic pleasantries.

She had a face that he'd felt he'd seen before, perhaps decades ago, or embodied by another spirit. Either way, she was sweet, attentive and perfectly humble and did an excellent job of pretending it wasn't her first time in this building. He, of course, was eager to give her a proper tour, but was cut short by the cooling pasta that Peter couldn't manage to watch for more than a few minutes.

As soon as they all sat down, he could tell this wasn't just any fling. The two of them had a strange, intangible energy, one that was magnetic to others, but almost repulsive between the two of them. Kindred in his presence, but distant once his gaze left. It left him with so many questions, but he didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable meeting her for the first time.

Her experience in academia was a natural bridge for the two of them and, though her artistic palette was more ecclesiastic in nature, Thomas was more than happy to indulge her in conversation about the best frescoes to see in medieval cathedrals and why the Vatican was overcrowded for the art that they had there. She was eager to hear about his journey from Kansas and dig into the relationship between the two men, which put both DeBorr men on a bit of an edge.

He had asked her. "What is your relationship like?"

And was met with a candid answer: we're not sure yet, but it feels lovely. They danced around the future, but indulged in the pleasantries of the present.

When she turned around and asked him, "What is YOUR relationship like?"

Neither men really knew what to say. It wasn't in the nature of DeBorr men to be candid or open about their relationships, especially with other men or other men in the family. An unspoken 'Dutch stoicism', likely of their Catholic Utrecht Hapsburg lineage, had been present in the family for generations, but just as quietly as it came in, so it was never addressed.

Peter jumped in with a meager explanation about their distance. As long as he'd grown up, the two of them had lived hundreds of miles apart, which only seemed to compound upon their years. His father, Schuyler, was the oldest of three brothers and the first to establish a policy of individual glory. Unlike Peter's best friend Robert's family growing up, the older DeBorr generation were not going to have a "family" business. It was important for Patriarch Willem (II) and their mother Dorothy, to have three sons who succeeded independent of one another. But Peter always secretly wondered if this was simply because they fought a lot as kids and the parents were keen to prevent any more drama.

Either way, the three brothers set out on completely different paths and Peter, never wanting to pry in family business, did his best to not ask questions as to why.

"I always appreciated Peter", Thomas said. "He was a kid with a lot of curiosity, who liked to ask questions. He was quieter than me, sportier than me, and certainly grew up in a much wealthier neighborhood than me, but our connection seemed to transcend all that. I spent scant time around children in my day. My nephews and nieces, the occasional coworkers child - but I made a conscious effort to avoid getting close to many. I suppose the initial suspicion has to do with some traumatic event in my childhood, but the reality is much bleaker: I simply felt like children were a nuisance. Maybe its some deep-rooted sense of superiority or maybe its because it's because I feel they can't relate to me, but I always looked at them like they were another species. until Peter, of course."

Thomas crossed his fingers as he took a moment to admire the two lovers, gazing intently at him, waiting on every word. It was a scene of his from another life. In that moment, while talking about children, he imagined what it would be like if he had children this age. The concept of a child was not one that was relegated to relationship for him, but a demographic designation. It was odd to him that Peter and Elish were still someone's "children", though they were no longer children themselves.

"I remember one time when Peter was seven years old, he came up and asked me at a Christmas party whether or not glasses were simply meant to make you look smart. When I told him that they were meant to help you see, he went ahead and asked if the correlation between eyesight and intelligence was because their poor eyesight caused them to never excel at athletics and so they turned towards more studious matters in an effort to improve their position in the world."

He paused to correct himself.

"Well, he certainly didn't dole it out in that exact vernacular, but you get the gist. It was a very astute social observation from him that, raw as it may be, held some kernel of truth, especially in the era before contact lenses were as widespread as they are today."

"So you're telling me he peaked at seven?", Elish said with a chuckle and accompanying punch from Peter. The sarcasm flew right over Thomas' analytic wince, but the dinner proceeded accordingly anyways. After the flan, they made their way to the lounge where Peter was happy to see her welcomed as an esteemed guest. The conversation was short and got sidetracked on the twisted and endless political landscape surrounding global warming, something which the three of them were very much of the same mind about. When she had indicated her time was running short (made clear by the checking of the clock for the third time), Thomas felt compelled to figure out exactly why she looked so familiar.

"You never took a class at Berkeley?"

"Never. I wish. I had a few friends that made it out there, but sadly I never made it over the bridge for school."

"What about a sister? Anyone in your family?"

She laughed in a charming, schoolgirlish kind of way.

"No sister. As far as I know, most of my family went to school out east anyways."

He sat there, stumped, staring into her, perfectly soft, hazel eyes, admiring her sun-kissed, lithe arms, and her petite, sort of stunted features as he tried to place her.

"Your mother?"

Peter flashed him a quick glare, mouthing the words to stop, but it was too late. Elish bit the inside of her lower lip before lifting her chin to face him.

"She passed away some years ago."

"I'm so sorry... I shouldn't have asked - I..."

The room fell creepily silent as everyone looked for the next words. Elish finally broke the spell, "It's really okay. It's a common mistake. But I really should be going! I promise it has nothing to do with your question. It's just late is all and I know Peter works tomorrow."

Thomas thought about inviting her to the gallery, but figured Peter had warned her it was off-the-table, since no one ever asked about it. He waited around for Peter to get back from walking her home, and had an open bottle of Coffee liquor and a pint of milk sitting out.

"Boozy latte?", he asked.

In the quiet of the night, which was admittedly rare in the heart of San Francisco, one could be lucky enough to hear the soft buzzing of insects set amongst the hums of passing cars in the distance. When you combined that sensation with a ceiling view of the sparkling night sky, it was almost as if the land was endless and there weren't

buildings or cars or sirens or anything modern, but rather the serenity of a quiet summer evening somewhere pastoral. Such was the night Peter and Thomas enjoyed out in his front garden, allowing the silence to simmer as they took turns sipping on their drinks and exhaling away their grievances privately.

The art of the prolonged silence wasn't invented by the DeBorr's, but it was certainly enjoyed by them. After licking off his milk-mustachioed lip and pulling his pipe out of his jacket pocket, Thomas stood up and walked over to his black-metal fence, leaning into a sort of hunch as he lifted his arm to reference the glow of the city all the way to the waterfront.

"Imagine", he said puffing a long tobacco draw from his pipe. "What this all looked like four hundred years ago."

The cityscape teemed with bustling energy with pockets of life and excitement spilling over its many hills, leaving small mounds of darkness reserved for only the very top. The moon's sharp glint off the bay in the distance shone like a long, jagged cleaver, physically separating one landmass from another. The city truly felt like an island from this angle.

"Those stars in the sky were being considered by Galileo against a crowd of raucous critics. The Mughal Empire was approaching its zenith in the Indian Subcontinent, the Ming Dynasty was beginning to show cracks as it would march slowly towards its inevitable collapse, and bands of Europeans were reaching the American shores for the first time, unaware of what this part of the world had in store for them."

Thomas DeBorr had a gift for bringing things into context. It was a special tool he used to make any and everyone in his audience instantly feel like a tiny speck observing the majesty and wonder that the greater universe had to offer.

"And here. There was quiet.... Imagine the green rolling hills, these strange earthen behemoths erupting from the ground like golems with grassy backs. There would be no lights, except the moon, no sounds, except the trees and the wind, and no sense of time except through the crashing waves of the ocean. Wild. Pure wild. Not in a rugged, untamed sense, but in a natural, proper sense. From here you could see all the way to the ocean and still it's reflection would be seen in the bay. I like to think we could hear

the sounds of coyotes prowling about as they still try to. Or perhaps something more dangerous or exciting, like a bear."

Peter could see it. It was like one of the natural dioramas at a science museum had jumped to life and become bright and illuminated right before Peter's eyes. Building and infrastructure dissolved and was replaced with soft meadow and quiet paws.

"No people.", Peter said, almost out of instinct.

"Yes. No people.", Thomas said before raising a sturdy finger. "Actually, allow me to amend that a bit as an Anthropologist. I want to say that there was an indigenous population here... the Ohlone Yelamu people, though their habitation was fairly disorganized and what we know about their existence here is limited. Current Anthropology suggests that there could have been anywhere from 150 to 300 permanent settlement areas on this tip of the peninsula, but their penchant for nomadic behavior and promise of better hunting opportunities may have driven them regularly eastward."

He caught his nephew a bit bleary-eyed.

"Either way, I don't imagine they would have affected our little thought painting much."

The long silence returned. Peter knew his Uncle was trying to maintain the pristine image of the empty, untainted landscape, but he couldn't help but think about these mysterious settlers. For him, it didn't detract from the scene, but instead added to it.

"She's a great girl Peter.", Thomas relented. "I hope you have your head right when it comes to her."

Peter wasn't quite sure what he meant by this, but took it as an admission of appreciation. They sat and chatted about civilizations and culture for awhile, avoiding any topics too personal, though both wanted to go there. Before he called it for the night, Thomas put his arm on the boy's shoulder.

"I'm glad you came Peter. I'm.... happy to have family here."

A mysterious mass billow of fog was lurching across the ocean as it climbed up the southern hills and began to slowly seep through the streets of the city, just before dawn. Were there enough light to properly see it, one would have thought it an ominous omen from afar, especially after a week of near perfect weather. Walking to work that morning, Peter found himself more lost than ever, completely disoriented by the lack of notable landmarks he'd been so used to. What made the whole scene worse was the eerie, ever-present sensation of deafening silence. No other footsteps. No other people.

Cafe du Rue itself was empty entirely except for Silvio, who was quietly sipping a cappuccino in the corner. In some ways, it was the perfect morning for reflection and Peter took full advantage. But the thoughts that morning weren't about his Uncle's gallery opening (which would be the following evening), nor were they about his strange, budding relationship with Mr. Roy, but they were naturally situated on Elish, whom he was going to invite to the gallery opening later that evening.

Sitting behind the emptied counter, he started to get lost in a daydream about the two of them, dressed to the nines, almost in a Gilded Age gala (which the exhibit opening would not be), dancing out under the stars. In his imagination, he could see the lights of the magnificent Golden Gate Bridge light up the skyline as if it were announcing the coming of a divine duo. The waltz music slows and things changed. The Bridge was set ablaze and slowly it's iconic red beams seemed to grow splintery fibers of wood as it morphed into a massive, monstrous version of the Pereira house. Just as flaming pieces of shrapnel were falling from the sky, the bell signaled the door opening and there was a face he hadn't seen in a while.

"Antonio!", he said running to embrace his uneasy friend. In an official capacity, Antonio had been back at work for a few days, but Peter's days off happen to prolong their reunion.

He looked a bit unwell, but the diagnosis seemed to plague him prior to Peter's presence, so he didn't take any offense. "Peter. I'm happy to see you."

"Did you schedule me off your first few days back just so you wouldn't have to see me?"

Antonio grinned. "I heard you might have wanted the days off anyways. Sounds like you've been having quite some fun with our sassy little scholar friend. A wine country trip, eh?"

A thought dawned on Peter. "Wait - how'd you hear about that? I haven't talked to anyone here about it."

"You know Silvio. He blabs"

"No seriously", Peter said, almost alarmed. "I-"

"Relax. I talked to Tom. He let me in on everything. I hope you've done what you need to get in his good graces."

"Oh, you must have talked with him before then. We're great now! He had Elish over for dinner with us the other night."

The two of them continued to catch up as Peter relished in reliving the most exciting details over the past few weeks. After he had bloviated to his own satisfaction, he noticed the still troubling look on Antonio's face.

"You look really sad.", he said putting a comforting arm on his shoulder. "Something happen to you on vacation?"

"The same thing always happens... It ended"

His cryptic answer lingered the rest of the work day. It was clear that it was not just the end of vacation that was creating this looming cloud over his dear friend. At the end of Peter's short shift, he even considered extending an offer to connect with him over beers that night, but the promise of an afternoon with Elish was too alluring to pass up.

On his way to Elish's place, he strolled through the fog, planning out the rest of his future in his head. He would figure out how to come back here after a semester at KU, then make his way into the trade world using his connections through Mr. Roy, marry Elish, have lots of children, and ultimately a nice Victorian in the city, or vineyard out in wine country. As he was wandering towards those iconic pink steps, he heard a familiar chuckle.

"Superman!"

Twice in one day Peter had been surprised. He thought it a good omen. Mr. Roy prodded on over, emerging through a layer of fog and looked the boy up and down with surprise.

"What are you doing in these neck of the woods?"

Remaining coy, Peter replied. "Oh, I'm just on my afternoon walk."

"May I join you for a stretch?"

Peter nodded graciously.

The two of them strolled through the fog with the precision and appreciation of English gentlemen enjoying an afternoon constitutional. Mr. Roy's elegance was transportive; Peter wished the two were in Foggy London Town, walking through Camden Market enjoying marveling at the little gifts in the windows. Instead, they simply talked about the great city, appreciating its history and culture. Marc said he had neighbors back in Canada who had emigrated from the city and it always left him with a special spot for the city.

"That's the wonderful thing about San Francisco", he said. "Sometimes its Paris, sometimes Rome, sometimes Los Angeles, and sometimes London".

Peter had gotten so caught up in their conversation about JMW Turner's art and its Byzantine-influenced color, that he had forgotten about his engagement with Elish.

Not wanting to create a sense of unease in Mr. Roy, he quietly waited for a moment between Mr. Roy's commentary.

"... Anyhow, when is the last time you were in London Peter?"

"Well, sir, I've never been, but-

"Never? Would you like to go?"

"Of course! I hate to trouble you-

"Well I don't want to preemptively raise your spirits too much, as I can be so fond of doing, but I may perhaps have an opportunity for you that could bring you out there. Maybe you can settle some business for me"

A warm, soft sensation came over Peter's body. It was as if he was being injected with the saccharine purity of a delicious creme brûlée and it was dissipating all over his body. Any thought of Elish had been shelved.

"Mr. Roy, I would be honored."

"Yes, well. We'll have to work out the details a bit. But I'm going to a wedding at the end of the month and I'll have to head back to Quebec afterwards. Normally I'd be making a stopover in London, but alas, I can't be expected to stretch myself too thin! Between you and I, I have a special Aegean jaunt I just have to do at the end every summer, and I certainly can't sacrifice that, now can I?"

It didn't really matter what Mr. Roy said, but Peter was willing to nod at whatever the man was saying. He wasn't considering school, or work, or the personal responsibilities of his friends, but he was entertaining the thought of a different, more sophisticated life that seemed to dangle right in front of his very eyes.

"Agh", Marc's phone rang. "It's Mr. Hewitt. Say, what do you say you and I have a chat about it this evening? We meet at Dizzy's?"

"I'll be there"

His own words started to haunt him as he climbed back through the fog, down the pink brick steps, through the verdurous lane to where Elish's small guest house was. As he came up to the gate, Esty ran up to him, wagging her tale with giddiness, but he couldn't see any sign of her.

Feeling the rush of adrenaline from his new opportunities, he jumped the fence and landed in a small grass patch on the other side, where Esty licked the side of his face. Peter was feeling romantic in that moment and happened to have a small parchment paper in his pocket where he could compose a charming poem which he planned to slip under her doorstep in homage to a bygone era of letters and notes.

As he arose, the mansion which stood like a massive, opulent jewel adjacent to her much more demure cottage took on a slightly sinister vibe, its colorful exterior turned a shadowy black, its sun-kissed roof, a hidden, ominous steeple. In all their time together, Peter had neglected to ask about it and Elish had neglected to bring it up. He thought the business of her neighbors unimportant until it was a looming presence, seemingly leering at him as he approached her cottage.

On the side of the wall, he scribbled a small note which read, "Im so lucky to have met you. You're the best thing about this city". It wasn't dripping with emotion or bubbling over with raw romance, but it was good enough for a DeBorr gentleman. Feeling more unwelcome by the minute, he slipped around the corner to her front door of the cottage and was shocked to see a light on. He couldn't help but peer through the window to see Elish primping herself in front of some mirror with a small, but thick leather bound book she was leafing through set off to the side.

She was completely oblivious to his voyeurism and he took full advantage, admiring her from afar. Her look was that of a majestic woodland creature: soft, the opposite of intimidating, and unaware. There was something peaceful about her presence. Even though he didn't expect her to be home, he wasn't upset. Just the opposite. He figured this was a sign that she was taking great care to prepare for their meeting.

As soon as she caught eyes with him, her body shook like it was electrocuted with lightning. She then rushed over to the door and yanked him inside before he could peel away.

"What are you doing here?", she asked him.

Peter scanned the inside of her little cottage. It was a warm, homey environment. The walls were washed white, the wooden furniture was antique-looking, but new, and the moulding along the edges gave a sense of elegance to a place that seemed like an afterthought in the presence of it's much more regal neighbor. Despite it's fancier touches, there was something very 'Elish' about the place in some of the more peculiar decor. The banana phone along the wall (which probably was never used) gave a bit of playfulness to the space. A Felix the Cat clock which ticked on the wall was decidedly retro enough, it just had to be an Elish addition. But perhaps more than anything, the poster of Jean Reno which hung along the hallway towards what Peter assumed led to the bedroom was the biggest marking that made it clear that she made this space her own. He was eager to look at the small collection of photographs she had framed not he counter space, but recognized his arrival without warning had caused some discomfort.

"I thought I'd surprise you", he said as he handed her the note. She grimaced at first, forcing an upturn on the corners of her mouth when she looked back at him.

"You really shouldn't be here. It's not a good time Pete."

"Why? You've never invited me back here. I don't feel like its too crazy to come by your girlfriends place after being together for a bit."

She let out a long exhale. "I'll meet you back at your place okay?"

"Is everything okay?", he asked.

She nodded, but it was evident to him that everything that was happening was far from okay. Her discomfort was having an osmotic effect on him.

"Please Peter. It's not a good time."

Still he stood defiant.

"What the hell is going on? Huh?"

"I promise we can talk about it later, but I don't have time right now."

"I-- I don't understand. You're supposed to meet up with me in just a few hours?"

He was taken aback by her shock and she immediately adjusted, positioning herself in a much more welcoming posture.

"You're welcome to stay, of course! But I just think it may be better if I meet you back at your place."

Her hesitancy was palatable. Peter walked past her, pushing his ears down the hallway.

"Is there someone else here?"

She grabbed his shoulders and pulled him in.

"Peter. It's just you and I. I just... wasn't expecting you. Other than that you're completely fine."

When he peered into her mysterious brown eyes, he saw no signs of trickery and slowly retreated from her presence. They shared a short, but awkward goodbye before Peter made his way back to the fence from which he came. On his way, he looked over his shoulder at the looming building across from hers and felt the weight of strange eyes on him through the thickness of the fog.

The entire time, he didn't understand what he did wrong. What bought her so much unease? Why would she shun him like that?

As he waited patiently at his place, he pulled out an old bottle of Dubonnet and poured it over a generous helping of champagne. His Uncle was nowhere to be found,

so he helped himself. When he heard footsteps, he rushed to the door, but through the small little keyhole, he saw someone he did not expect: Antonio.

Peter figured this was an attempt to drag him out for a beer and he had other arrangements, so he hid when the knocking started. After a short silence, Antonio started calling out, "Toomm!" "Helloooooo!"

Three minutes passed and Peter observed as Antonio's distorted face retreated solemnly from the quiet doorstep. He waited another ninety minutes (and an entire bottle of Dubonnet) before Elish finally showed her face.

"What the hell?", he said in a sort of drunken stupor. She thought of nothing, but lunged onto his face, kissing him passionately to quell his rage to no avail.

Peter bottled his confusion and stowed it away in the overflowing drawer within his mind.

"When would be a good time to see your place?"

His question seemed to only annoy Elish who let out an audible groan. She stomped over to sit on one of the Professor's leather armchairs.

"Are we going to focus on this all night? I thought we were going for a walk."

He heard Esty's bark outside and agreed to shelve the actual conversation for the walk.

Outside, the fog had cleared up and the clouds had lifted, just in time to show a soft pink veneer. His head was still euphoric from the imbibing prior and the pastel-like sky with every shade of soft red only directed his thoughts in an increasingly yonic direction. For her part, Elish seemed extra affectionate, squeezing his hand tightly and pulling him close to her. Had he bothered to check her expression, he would find a woman deeply troubled: sullen, widened eyes, terse lips, and a jaw that seemed to be grinding against itself. Instead, he simply assumed this was her way of indicating she wanted them to find a quiet room where they could explore each others bodies.

Most of their conversational energy was spent on when the best season was. Elish had a soft spot for winter while Peter held steadfast that the warm months were best, second only to fall. He couldn't possibly imagine, coming from a snowy environment, why someone would actually seek out the activity of shoveling. And she felt like the heat made her feel lazy. Normally these kind of debates between the two of them were perfectly lighthearted and brought them a special kind of cordial jousting of wits. They ribbed each other like lovers and then laughed like old friends. But about an hour into the walk, the lack of usual charisma had become thick and when they pulled over at a small park in the middle of a neighborhood to let Esty pee, he finally caught sight of her somber expression.

A great sadness came over Peter. He hated seeing this woman he cared about so much in such a position of obvious discomfort. Of course he wanted to know what was wrong, but he was too afraid of the answer to ask. In his mind, the worst possible solution was also the most likely: the Daphne situation had gotten to her.

So he pivoted.

"Hey what are you doing tomorrow by the way? I know its kind of last minute, but tomorrow night I'm going to this special thing and I thought you might want to come along."

"Thing? What? No, I'm sorry Peter. I already know tomorrow's not going to work. I have a conference that I have to prepare for and an old friend is coming into town."

He didn't want to spoil the surprise, but was eager to bring her in to see his Uncle in his element as well as meet Mr. Roy and Mr. Lau.

"Well bring them! I think-"

"Peter. I'm sorry. I-"

She looked away from him for a moment before burying her head in his shoulder and squeezing tightly. He felt warm, salty tears press into his cotton shirt and was sobered

in an instant. As if instinct took over, he squeezed her back, pulling tightly on her body and smelling the sweet floral scents that wafted off her hair.

"Listen, if this is about --"

"Are you really leaving? At the end of the summer?"

They locked tear-stricken eyes as the world around them slowly faded out of focus. He was so distraught by her current state, but he felt like one of them needed to stay strong, so he forced a small smile.

"Probably, yeah. I have to finish school. I want to come back here after though. Just have to figure out the right way, you know? That's what the adventure is all about. It's everything between where you are and where your goal is."

She started shaking as she burst into this cry-laugh hybrid with a beet-red face and loud, moving wails.

"Hey! Elish! What's going on?"

She collected herself enough for a moment to steady her speech and look him straight in the eyes.

"I've been more real with you than I've been with anyone else in my entire life. I- I- I don't have to be anyone else when I'm with you."

He didn't know what she meant by this. It was simple, but seemingly layered response. In the absence of something comforting and rational to say, he opened his arms wide and wrapped them around her once again. When he looked into her eyes again, he saw a woman trapped, as if there were glass between them, restricting any true means of connection. Her bare skin felt cold and he nestled his nose onto her neck to give her the warmth of his breath.

Esty's bark to announce the end of her bathroom session broke the exchange up, prompting Elish to wipe away the tears that had formed in her eyes and make an abrupt turn back towards the street.

The rest of the walk was spent by Peter trying to get her to talk. He had told her about the art walk he'd read about in the local paper and how, though it was contemporary art, the theme of the week was "Surrealist Inspired". She'd spoken a lot about her appreciation for that esoteric kind of stuff ("Dadaism is where it gets really good", she'd often posit), but his suggestion elicited little more than a few polite head nods. He also suggested that next week they go to see "The Fifth Element", playing at the small revival theater in North Beach. He'd recently learned it was the same filmmaker as "Leon" and figured she'd be interested. Again, nothing.

He thought back to her concerns. Was it really about him leaving? Was she afraid he would go back to Daphne? Peter started to spiral himself, spending increasing mental energy focusing on his own departure date. He hadn't thought about it much before, but the summer had largely passed him by. It was August now and though he'd arrived little more than two months ago, his time was quickly dissipating. As he squeezed her hand, he reassured himself the feelings they shared for one another. Crystal's prophecy still echoed solemnly in his head. He worried that maybe what they had was simply a product of a beautiful summer which seemed to be slowly closing up.

He managed to convince them to head to a park out by the northeastern part of the city, which faced the Golden Gate Bridge in all its massive, ominous splendor. There, the sun serrated its way through the drifting clouds and, in the company of a loving canine, they watched the sunset together. No words were exchanged, no sappy glances. She leaned her head on his shoulder as they breathed in the fresh, saline-kissed air and stared off into the endless Pacific. Their breathing began to sink with the sound of the crashing waves and there was something almost heavenly about the moment that seemed to almost freeze in time as they spoke and thought of absolutely nothing.

"You know what's out there?", Elish said as she pointed across the sea. "A thousand miles of nothing pure emptiness, endless sea. It's barren. It's raw. There's probably a billion different sea creatures, but no sign of intelligent life."

"It's kind of terrifying when you think of it. The scale of it. It's scary", Peter added.

"Its the future"

She giggled.

"Literally, like it's tomorrow somewhere over there... Crazy how that works."

He playfully punched her on the shoulder as the last glimpses of the orange sky faded from view.

The second that he left her, all the anxieties he had logged away came back to haunt him and he needed an immediate remedy. Luckily for him, he already had an invite to his favorite cure. Without even bothering to change (though he threw on an informal dinner jacket of sorts), he skipped down the street, across Market, and down the alleyway until he stepped inside the smoky, tobacco-scented jazz lounge he had come to call his "home of the night".

There, sitting at his table at the front, was Mr. Roy.

"I was worried you weren't coming!", he said, pulling Peter in by his shoulder.

"Of course! It's only ten."

"They're already through their first set. They're a Hard Bop-inspired Quintet. A lot of Hank Mobley stuff so far."

He pushed a purple-looking drink towards him.

"This is our mandatory drink pairing of the evening!"

The smell of strong botanicals wafted up to his face. It was so powerful, his eyes watered a bit. After a few drinks, Peter was stuck in the trance. He and Mr. Roy eagerly exchanged their thoughts after every song. Both were in concert about the excellent improvisational ability of the group, though Mr. Roy was adamant that the bass player was too much of a ham.

"He takes unnecessarily long solos. It's a bit obscene."

Peter watched like a careful pupil as Mr. Roy's eyes carefully and metronomically ticked back and forth between the five players on stage. Each second, he would move to analyzing another instrumentalists rhythm, cocking his head curiously when he wanted to listen more closely. It was easy to tell when Marc liked what he heard. He would take a deep breath, slowly let his eyes close and enter this soft, euphoric, head-bobbing state. It reminded Peter of images he'd seen: pious Jews praying with strange boxes on their heads at the Wall in Jerusalem. His anecdote drew a strange look from Mr. Roy, who scoffed and mentioned something about being "too much of a good Quebec Catholic" for that, before a look of blissful realization seemed to take over his face.

He grabbed Peter by his shoulders and pulled him in closely with a look as if the two were about to start one of the greatest adventures mankind has ever known.

"That! That is it. The religious experience. Something transcendental... Sensual. Something that moves you in a way thoughts and experience can't easily define. That is what our relationship with art should be."

There was something so gripping about the way Marc spoke that Peter couldn't help but get swept up in it. It was gravitational in a sort of fascistic way - voice slowly building to crescendo, ideas ended with a thoughtful pause, the swinging of fists, the drooping of sweaty locks of hair, and all the emotional fervor one could hope for out of someone speaking directly from the heart.

"Jazz does that to me! And I can see it does it to you too Peter. It moves and connected with audiences, forcing them to think and process in ways that are uncomfortable and strenuous. But if not that then what for? There should be struggle and pain. None of it should be easy. It's like capital, Peter. In this great world as envisioned by our Classical fore-bearers, we must stave and suffer and til the land if we expect to taste the nectar of its fruits."

He stopped to take his glass of fine Scotch like a shot.

"Art today is nothing like that. It's commercial, sure, but its paltry. It's ringing emptiness, designed for the easy digestion of the masses. Hip hop? Rock? Adam Sandler movies? I mean come on.... None of that is going to get us anywhere."

He paused to assess his own drunkenness which had caused him to sway.

"Before I discovered Jazz, I didn't think there would be anything worth giving my attention to in the past century. I was wrong. And I feel so... envious, but proud that you seem to already have a handle on that yourself."

"Oh, Mr. Roy, I... I have to credit you for all that. I really knew practically nothing when I came in here for the first time."

"Yes. You knew nothing. And now you know so much! If I had been given the opportunity at your age, I would have been Empire of the Earth by now".

"You would have made a great Emperor, I'm sure. Certainly a fantastic patron"

The two just stared at one another with a deep sense of mutual respect. It was a strange sort of intimate look that Peter didn't even share with his father.

"I want you to be fabulously rich one day", Marc said. "We need more people like you. Curious, quiet, inspiring, and powerful. A man of the soil, but with a global reach... Superman"

He had seldom heard such praise from his own family and, perhaps in his own drunken state, he found himself wishing that Marc were his Uncle instead of Tom, his own mental slight that he would later come to regret.

"You know Mr. Hewitt? I've introduced you haven't I?"

"Oh yes! Well, only briefly"

The music slowly swelled back up and their conversation started to be drowned out by the loud sounds of a trumpet a few feet away.

"He's going to make me very rich. Our children are getting married and, I don't want to spoil anything yet, but perhaps I can arrange for you to come to the wedding. I think he could really help you spread a good network in London."

"I would not want to impose."

Mr. Roy held up a finger to his lips. The music had taken him again.

"Find a date and get yourself a good suit. We can talk about it more tomorrow at the opening."

The two of them proceeded to order round after round of drinks. As they sipped more and more liquor, the less and less clear it all became. The lights blended with the roaring saxophone and the rattle of the drums. The haze swirled like a vortex and the lights on the walls of the room gnashed against one another in a drunken fit. Just before their final 15 minutes, around 1:40 am, Peter found the guts to be a bit vulnerable with the man he had come to look up to.

"Thank you Mr. Roy... You.... You've changed my whole life and I can never thank you enough or repay you."

He chuckled.

"Immortalize be though your stories. Just like the heroes of old..."

He would, he thought. If he remembered when he got home. The rest of the night was a dark blur, but he left with a warm, paternal feeling from Mr. Roy

Thomas DeBorr hardly slept the night of August 6th. He tossed and turned, wrestling with various social nightmares his mind had conjured. By the time he finally gave in to the idea that he wasn't sleeping, there was only one that stuck with him. In it, he and Eileen were walking along the Asian side of the Bosphorus in Istanbul. It was a marvelous, warm Mediterranean summer day and both Eileen and himself were dressed like fabulous, high-class Americans, embarking on their own sort of Grand Tour. They tried to cross the water, but they were told that they would have to wait for

the tide to settle. In place of the transcontinental Bosphorus bridge was a massive, stone statue, reaching hundreds of meters into the sky. This Colossus acted as its own island, bringing tide in and out, commanding waves like its own peons. Both of them could tell from a distance that the thing was distinctly humanoid, borrowing heavy from the Renaissance tradition of sculpture with its finely carved shape and sinewy legs. The head was obscured in the clouds, but Eileen seemed to know exactly how important it was as she was content to wait. But impatient as ever he was, Thomas embarked at sunset in a small rowboat, battling against the ever-increasing tide. When he made it to the center of the straight, both sides of Istanbul seemed to retreat from the water, leaving him alone with the massive statue. The Colossus animated to life and reached down into the water with a massive stone hand, lifting Thomas up in his rowboat, to come face to face with the being. There, as the clouds parted, he came face to face with a stone-faced, extra-muscular Mr. Hewitt. It was jarring to see such an old man, with his leathery face and bushy white beard attached to the rock-solid body of a twenty-something body builder. He leaped out from the boat into the cold waters below, but as he plunged deep below the surface, a face seemed to emerge from the murky depths. Its features were completely indiscernible, but its laugh completely recognizable: it was Marc Roy. Squeezed between Sea and Sky, Thomas paddled with all his might to get back to the surface and somewhere safe. There was a small piece of driftwood he was able to cling to briefly before he felt something grab his ankles and yank him underwater. Holding his breath, he succumbed to the strength of this assailant and turned to greet them, but much to his horror, the mermaid-like creature he had been pulled by was none other than an off-brand version of Peter.

At that point, he gave in.

He rarely got to see San Francisco wake up entirely, but he was going to take full advantage of it. After all, the party that evening was the most blatant source of his anxiety and he was fully planning on getting a solid night's rest after the ceremony was done.

As he sipped his morning coffee, still under starlight, he put on a quiet record of African choral music. There was something so distinctly harmonious about the beautifully haunting chants of these young children of the mother continent and the beginning of a new day, it fulfilled something primordial within him. As he sat on his favorite outdoor chair, he reflected on how horribly his dream demonized so many

important people in his life. Mr. Roy was more than deserving of subconscious scrutiny, that was to be sure, but the rest of them weren't. Mr. Hewitt? He was just an old man who happened to share the unfortunate company of Marc Roy. He may have been just as bad, but Peter wasn't forced to interact with him in the same way. Eileen? She seemed to leave him at the river's edge, but she likely felt just as trapped as him. Then there was Peter. Why was he, of all people, the one who seemed to bear the burden of worst cause. Thomas felt a strong sense of guilt over his self-conscious.

That morning, along the first crack of daylight, the restless Thomas made his way over to the empty Cafe du Rue and waited outside, furiously smoking from his pipe until someone came over. It was Antonio, who seemed pleased, but perplexed as to his presence.

"You want to come in?", he asked

Thomas nodded.

Around 6:15, Antonio started to put the place together as he gracefully allowed the Professor to observe from the side. It was rare for him to have any company during openings, so he vastly appreciated it.

"You're visiting me on your big day?", Antonio asked with a smile.

"I'm actually here for Silvio"

The two of them gave a friendly nod to the old Italian man who was quietly shuffling to the back.

"Coffee?", he asked the Professor.

The two of them sat down for a while and enjoyed a formal breakfast of sorts. He talked Antonio through his strange dream, which elicited little, uncontrollable hiccups of laughter. Putting on his therapists cap, he felt like Thomas had spent far too much time analyzing his self-conscious and over-thinking the opening.

"I think its an issue of control with you. You have to let go"

Thomas crossed his arms defiantly. "Did you know he's taken Peter under his wing?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"They go to breakfast together, jazz clubs, the Opera, and who the hell knows where else."

"Well, your exhibit opening, for one thing."

The blunt response knocked the calm out of the Professor.

"How do you know that? Is that true?"

"Well he's certainly going tonight to the opening and I think at Marc's request."

Thomas violently pressed his palm against his forehead in frustration.

"It is not his place! What kind of a betrayal is this? I mean he's MY nephew. MY FAMILY! It doesn't concern him."

A sultry, almost daring smile flashed across Antonio's face.

"I've never seen you give two shits about your family. Before Peter came around, you hardly even mentioned that you had any. Practically prided yourself on being a hermit. And now, you've had a pretty stark about-face."

"Maybe I'm coming to terms with my own mortality", Thomas mused. "But I do care about the kid and.... even though he's not mine per-se, he certainly is cut from a similar cloth. I believe that much."

"Oh come on Tom. You know he is."

"I don't blame him for any of this. I just think he's gotten sucked into the wrong thing, that's all."

They continued to talk for the next hour, performing a sort of pro-bono charity session while Antonio waltzed around the cafe, preparing it for the customers of the day. After Thomas let out his final sigh, indicating he was about to trudge his way over to the gallery, he noticed a prolonged silence from across the room. He slowly raised his head to see the probing eyes of Antonio slowly narrowing, as if it were plunging deeper and deeper into his soul.

"Where've you been?", Antonio asked, suddenly with a heavy dose of scrutiny.

Thomas nervously looked around.

"Tony... Silvio is here, can we not?"

"You don't get to just come in here, pour your heart out to me and pretend like everything's good. I'm not your shrink Tom."

Though he'd spent all his life studying humanity from the dawn of human civilization, pouring over records of earlier Nuaragic social behaviors, and vying to understand the reasoning behind their particular building habits, there were certain personal interactions in the modern world that he never could quite reconcile with what he'd traditionally understood as "human behavior". These sort of, under-the-table confrontational situations were amongst them.

"I mean, I feel like we've had some great, special moments you and I. This summer had been awesome and, frankly, you've got a great nephew. But your self-centered, self-righteous neurosis is suffocating me man."

Thomas stood up and walked over to the counter where Antonio was waiting. His posture rigid, he slowly and cautiously extending an arm onto the mans shoulder, rubbing it lovingly, while his eyes looked all over the room. Antonio wasn't impressed.

"Look at you. Even now, you can't focus for two seconds!"

His palpable disappointment was shattered when in walked a wet-haired, chipper looking Peter. Thomas was stunned and couldn't seem to move, his arm rigid in a statuesque pose. Antonio let his head drop.

"Hey Peter."

"Uncle Tom? What are you doing here?"

He couldn't look Peter or Antonio in the eyes, so he stared off into the corner between them, still resting his arm on the man.

"I came for coffee Peter. And conversation with a good friend"

The air grew stale and thicker by the second as Peter was trying to make sense of the his Uncle's odd behavior. Antonio took the old man's hand and slowly peeled it off his shoulder.

He let out a whispered sigh. "Bye Tom"

And then Tom, with his gaze fixated on the floor, abruptly walked out of Cafe du Rue, leaving Peter to pick up the pieces of this strange scene he had seen play out before his eyes.

"What's going on Antonio?"

"Just getting everything ready."

He doubled down in a much more serious tone.

"What's going on Antonio?"

He tried to speak, but nothing came out. He simply looked with a sad wistfulness at his young employee and friend and finally lamented to hug the child as it was the only form of expression he could seem to muster at the moment. In their tight embrace he squeezed Peter in a tough, painful sort of way, almost as if he was trying to break him in two. When he finally released him, he slowly backed away, turned around and then

went about his business for the rest of the day. Peter was so dumbfounded by what had happened that he couldn't bring himself to question it any further. Instead, he let the distractions of the cafe pass the time while he buried his thoughts in the spectacle that was to be that evening.

The Fairmont hotel sat perched high atop Nob Hill, a fitting location for the privileged class to gather, where they could observe the peons do their busywork on the winding, bustling streets below. San Francisco's many hills were always curiously narrow, peaking for a moment and then precipitously cascading downwards. Whatever real estate could be squeezed on top of these "nipples of the earth" were always some sort of architectural marvel, but Nob Hill really seemed like something else. There really only seemed five or six square blocks on which to build, with the exterior blocks sloping dramatically. Still, in these small patch of land, five or six buildings of regal quality seemed to occupy its perches, like castles sitting over a fiefdom. Aside from one rather imposing Church, there were four large hotels, acting like minarets positioned at each corner of the hill. Every one had their own view, peering out over some of the most pristine and expensive real estate America had to offer, but it was the Fairmont that had the most envious view of all.

And Marc Roy wouldn't settle for any less on his big night. He had arranged for a little reception to take place there following the party at the exhibit. Even though his home was no more than a short jaunt away, he booked a room at the hotel as a treat to himself and to keep up appearances. As it turns out, he wasn't alone in the hotel.

His daughter and son-in-law, the charming but perfidious Clark Hewitt, were also guests at the hotel that evening along with the elder Mr. Hewitt himself.

Alone in his hotel room, staring out the balcony towards the twinkling Golden Gate bridge, Marc let out a deep sigh of accomplishment. He could see the horizon from here and his future looked bright. For a few hours as the evening dwindled, he called some of his brokers and bankers, making sure everything was proceeding accordingly with his wealth and that things would be in order when the impending deal with the senior Hewitt went through. He then took a courtesy phone interview about the status of one of his former companies, using the opportunity to lambast the current administration and boost his own reputation. In the end, it was all about preservation

- himself, his family, his money, and his legacy. He always felt like he was writing his story on earth. Which is why when his daughter fell in love with the son of the foremost businessman West of the Mississippi, Orville Humphrey Hewitt, a fire started inside him that burned unlike any other. It was a strange, entrepreneurial, individualistic fervor that made him feel like he needed to prove himself. There was something about Mr. Hewitt that reminded him of his own father - Thierry Roy, a second generation Quebecois with all the sophistication and class of an old world regent. But the crippling difference between the two would make all the difference in Marc's eyes: unlike his father, Orville Hewitt had been a massive success. Thierry was a shopkeep who toyed with a few patents (a gum storage container, amongst them) and eventually pursued politics aggressively. After three consecutive runs at office, each getting successively smaller, it appeared that his desire to move out of the Yeoman class so many immigrant families hoped to would never materialize. Emmanuel Roy, Thierry's father and Marc's grandfather, had always griped to his wife Antoinette that the biggest mistake they could ever make was to leave Brittany for some supposed opportunities in a land as vast and barren as Canada. Everyone came to see his point when Thierry began to struggle. He was defiant though and that spirit of a "deserved success" carried right on down to Marc, who believed he could make the Roy family royal again.

With a bit of spare time before the party, Marc snuck away to the hotel bar to grab himself a martini and meet up with Mr. Hewitt.

There, sitting in a large brown lounge chair, spectacles pushed back against his bushy, white, mustache, was Mr. Hewitt, who had a large chilled glass of some kind of lager. He wasn't chatting with strangers as Marc was known to do, instead quietly staring at pedestrians. They started talk about business. Mr. Hewitt was always curious about where the wealth was being generated, how he was increasing his portfolio, and what the latest financial advice was. Though business was now second in his life, he always had time to humor his daughter's future father-in-law.

They chatted for a while about "gentlemanly things" - trading travel stories, their own speculations about "the market", and finally, about the destiny of their now-intertwined dynasty. For both of them, the marriage was always going to be the thinly painted veneer which cemented their now-combined heritage. Mr. Hewitt respected

Marc and felt that his "un-aristocratic" origins actually helped to bolster his character. Although the outside world seemed to see Marc as some kind of a Silicon Valley bon vivant, Orville always seemed to look at him as if he were some kind of a salt-of-the-earth yeoman, a capitalist who had planted his grains and was now simply reaping what he had sewn. It was a quaint angle that Marc himself disagreed with, though he was more than happy to play the part to keep appearances.

When it came to their future family fortunes, both were in strict agreement that whatever grandchildren may come, they would be responsible chiefly responsible for their endowment. Clark, while already a high-powered real-estate attorney, wasn't seen so much as a successor to his father than as an heir. He knew well how to preserve wealth, but didn't seem to inherit the gene for actually generating it. Though they both knew that the Hewitt family was going to be the primary benefactors towards this family fortune, Marc made it perfectly clear that he was far from reaching the zenith of his career.

When they finished settling the business of the wedding, the two of them hopped in a luxury short limo. Marc had made it a point to not arrive too early to his own events and this was no exception. He always got a little thrill out of the pomp and circumstance that seemed to draw towards him when he entered the room. A little insecure voice inside him had been planting the idea that Mr. Hewitt's presence may overshadow him, but he strode into the museum, with it's glittering lights lining the entrance as if he thought himself the belle of the ball.

The whole of the museum was lit up with a sparkling spattering of lights and accoutrements which made the whole place feel less like a museum and much more like a movie premiere. Floodlights flashed back and forth out front and a large, black carpet was rolled out, lined with gold fringe, and stepped on by men in suits and women in gorgeous, flowing dresses. Small, pure white LEDs were placed throughout the gardens to make it look like the stars above had fallen onto the space below. Large fire pits marked the gilded entrance, with its flames reaching high up into the sky, a tacky "Antiquity" touch that Marc pushed for, but Thomas loathed.

Entering the museum, it felt like a palace. Every man and woman inside was dressed as if it were the last party of their lives, wearing the nicest clothes and sipping on the finest wine. Per Marc's request, all the other exhibits were closed and the generic

theme of "Ancient Greece" was haphazardly plastered all over the place with Mycenaean spirals along the walls and Santorini blue lining the edges of the tables. Scenes inspired by Greek pottery were tastefully displayed in large, grandiose pieces around tables where wines flowed like water. It wasn't perfect, but it was near enough the experience Marc expected and he was thrilled to see Mr. Hewitt clap with delight upon entering.

"Well they're here", Eileen quipped as she coyly sipped her Manhattan.

She and Thomas had stowed away in a corner. They were far away from the exhibit and equidistant from the open bar and the hors d'oeuvres table. Despite his outright disdain for the entire event, Thomas showed up and showed up well. He wore a suit with a classic vest and even a tie, which he had in a Windsor knot. Eileen wore her favorite little black dress, but upon seeing Penelope, a young woman who worked in the front office, wearing something all too similar, she spent the rest of the evening arching her back in an uncomfortable way to try and conceal what she felt was her "middle-aged woman paunch". The simpler, less obvious solution to her problem was acting as a sort of stowaway with Thomas off to the side.

"I'm glad he's decided to show up for his own party", Thomas angrily swigged his whole glass of brandy.

"That Mr. Hewitt looks like he could crack any second..."

"Yes, speaking of Eileen, how old is his son?"

"He's maybe in his early thirties. He must have had him around your age or my age. Wow... To think that nature allows men this endless fountain of youth."

Thomas laughed. "Youth? Hardly. Are we looking at the same man? And I'll have you know, whatever nice things you have to say about me or Marc in the moment, they'll be gone in ten years once we both look like him."

He caught the eye of a very pleased-looking Mr. Roy, who cordially cast a toast in his direction. Thomas refused to raise his glass, only deigning a smirk. Their days as fellow contributors had been numbered and whatever remained of their crumbling

relationship seemed to be relegated to conversational references and gestures. For a moment, Thomas reflected on the welling excitement he'd felt when he first heard Mr. Roy was interested in helping out the museum. Tales within the community spoke far and wide about this "generous philanthropist" who wanted to take back the world of the artisans from the commercial giants who were thirsty for profit. He sounded like some strange sort of Artisan Karl Marx, ready to liberate the proletariat of underpaid sophisticates to their deserved place of respect. Even their initial conversations, while conducted through a thick frame of professionalism, were full of hopeful banter about 'cultural revival' and 'driving interest for other than monetary gain'. As Thomas watched him give the opening speech, he let out a large audible sigh.

The ribbon was cut and people were now free to see the exhibit in all its glory. Curtains fell, lights rose and the music from some Spotify "Lyre" playlist echoed throughout the background. There were two wings containing all the pieces, along with a central colonnade where there were informational models and a few key statues. The collection was impressive and relied heavily on its presentation to enhance its mystique. Each statue had a rotating light above it, providing the viewer with more intimate contours the casual visitor might have not otherwise noticed. The paintings, mosaics, and vases stood behind glass, lined with gold and with small tablets protruding out front. They had gone so far as to design their own interactive app experience, allowing the viewer a "virtual" tour of how each art piece may have lived during its time. Thomas couldn't help but feel a stinging rush of heartburn every time he passed by some unwieldy spectator more interested in the digital representation than the art right in front of them.

He tried to make the best of the experience. Of course it wasn't what he imagined. The Sardinians, Cypriots, Tunisians, and Etruscans were all fields of study he would have loved to explore in any minute detail. But they would have to wait. Instead, he was forced to put his name on this haphazard smorgasbord of cultural paraphernalia without strict theme or sense of cohesion. The people that night didn't seem to care, but Thomas knew that once the crowds started to dissipate over the next few weeks, that the people who would care would show up and make their voices heard.

Across the museum, Peter strolled in with neither pomp nor circumstance. He was wearing a suit jacket and button up shirt, but decided to nix the tie he'd struggled to fashion in any reasonable way, instead opting to make use of a bright teal handkerchief

as his outfits key colorful element. The whole affair was an uncomfortable situation, straddled between a man whom he had historically loved and a man whom he had become extremely enamored with. His original plan was to greet his Uncle, showing that he owed allegiance to no one. But in the wake of their awkward morning, he had much more of a confrontational approach in mind. Before he could get anywhere in the proximity of Thomas and Eileen, a large entourage of familiar face approached him, beginning with a chipper Mr. Lau.

"Peter! You made it. We were all worried you'd had too much fun at Dizzy's."

"I couldn't miss this for the world. Special invitation after all."

"This is my wife, Suzanne"

She looked ten years younger at least, maybe early fifties. Peter figured it wasn't his first marriage.

"Where's your date? This mysterious girl?"

"She had other arrangements. But soon."

Suzanne chimed in. "You know I've always found that women like that are just trying to get you to commit further. Maybe its time for the next step?"

He politely humored her before trying to break away towards the bar. It quickly became clear that his continued friendship with Mr. Roy had garnered him more than a few friends as waves of people approached him, most of whom he didn't know, asking about their friendship.

A reporter came up to him at the bar.

"Caroline Wanamaker, SF Chronicle. Mr. DeBorr, right? How exactly would you describe your relationship with Marc Roy."

"What makes you think I know him well?"

"You were spotted having brunch and attending the Opera with him. I'd say that's something. Listen... We're no gossip column or anything. We just want to know more about the man from the people who know him best."

"He's a great guy. And not just for the arts. I think he's truly invested in bettering humanity."

"Any personal anecdotes? How he is as a father? Jokes he's told you? Favorite brand of toothpaste?"

Her questions started to irritate him and not only because they exposed his extremely impersonal relationship with Mr. Roy. Feeling terse, he walked away and made a B-line right for his Uncle. Every step felt like a build towards a confrontation as he wanted answers and his all-too private Uncle wasn't willing to share. Just before he made it over to the duo, who obviously felt his threatening presence, as evidenced by their slow migration towards the snack bar, Peter felt his shoulder thrust around and the booming of the crowd grow louder.

"Peter DeBorr!", Marc exclaimed excitedly.

"There you are! Where's your woman. I hope you're not telling me she's mysteriously disappeared again."

"I'm afraid so. But all the better. I'm not sure she'd be the ideal audience for an exhibition like this."

Marc escorted Peter into his large posse, all of whom were eager to welcome him as if he had been one of them all along.

"Peter's going to head to London at the end of the summer. Once we get everything in order that is. I think he's going to be a prime candidate for the role - inventive, charming, and always curious."

They all raised a glass to him and Peter joined in, shoving aside any residual guilt he held for his Uncle. The conversation in the circle slowly drifted towards the afterparty, which was supposedly going to be an extraordinarily lavish affair. Talk of endless Dom

Perignon, timeless Sturgeon caviar, and a full string orchestra all were dropped casually as if there were no other way to properly celebrate. Peter was coerced into coming right then and there. After the group started to disband and Marc Roy was sucked away with the others, Peter stayed to chat with a few stragglers before being approached by a rather important, distinguished-looking old fellow he'd heard so many little things about.

"And you must be Peter!", Mr. Hewitt said with a charming, toothy grin. "Orville Hewitt! Mr. Roy has spoken very highly of you."

"And of you sir. It's only too much of a shame that neither you or I have had the time to properly be introduced."

He looked Peter over, up and down, as if he were examining cattle for the quality of their stock.

"Have you by chance met my son Clark? He's a perfectly curious gentleman just like yourself and rather close to your age. I'm not ashamed to admit I had him when I figured I was past the age of being a parent, but with enough money and common sense, the specter of death looms distantly. Anyway, I think you two might enjoy each others company"

"I haven't had the pleasure yet, but I'd be delighted to meet him."

"He and his fiancée - the daughter of our friend Mr. Roy - are supposed to be here somewhere, but I haven't the foggiest as to where they could be. If we don't see them here, then surely at the reception."

"I'm afraid I'll have turned in by then Mr. Hewitt. It's already a bit late for me."

The old gentleman waved a friendly, but dismissive hand in front of the boy's face.

"Oh poppycock! If I can muster the energy, then surely you can too!"

Thomas was seething from afar, but remained put lest he miss interacting with the museum's most important patrons. Ms. Swig (Susan) and Mrs. Belvedere (Samantha)

were two socialites from old money whose families had been present in San Francisco for well over a century. They were large contributors at the museum and made a point to visit with the executive staff at every big exhibit launch. These were asses which Thomas had no problem kissing. They lacked a deeper cultural interest and were certainly big partakers in the frivolities, but the key thing that kept them in Thomas' good favor was their willingness to acknowledge his superior knowledge.

"I would never try to take an exhibit away from you", Ms. Swig said, trying to stir the gossip pot. "I know how anal you can be about this place Tom."

Eileen chimed in. "It's not even the place in particular, but more the content. I sweat to you that the element which makes Tommy most upset isn't the content, but the interior design"

The Professor threw his arms up in playful protest.

"No seriously. You would make an incredible designer."

"I'm flattered. And even more so by your kind words Susan, but I had to bite the bullet on this one. Unlike you two, someone came in here with a lot more money and even more opinions."

Just as he was planning his exit strategy, he saw a smirking Marc Roy, holding a microphone, walking slowly in his direction. His stomach churned and his legs grew weak. He started violently shaking his head. Still, Marc approached, holding the microphone up to his own mouth.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we're now about to hear some words from the curator of this exhibit, the intelligent and talented Mister Thomas DeBorr!", he looked properly exuberant as he butted the two older socialites out of the circle as he shoved a cold, metal microphone in Thomas' souring face. He let out a deep sigh as he reluctantly smacked the stick out of Marc's hand and held it up to his face. Summoning all the positive energy he could muster, he forced a smile and walked over to face the crowd.

"Good evening", he began.

"I'd like to begin by thanking everyone, friends and family-", he took a pause to stare at Peter, "-for coming out today. And of course, I'd like to give full credit to Mr. Marc Roy, whom we have to thank for this entire glamorous affair. With that, I hope everyone enjoys the exhibit! Goodnight"

Thomas almost threw the mic away before Marc beckoned him with a glass of champagne in one hand and a microphone in another.

"Why don't you give them a little explanation about the exhibit Tom?"

He squeezed the microphone so tightly his knuckles were white. Then, without skipping a beat, he pulled his fist up to his face, grit his teeth, forced a smile, and continued.

"The exhibit? The exhibit! Right. Well, I'm not sure I'm the best person to speak on the matter. A little ironic considering I'm the Head Curator and former specialist in cultures of antiquity!"

The crowd let out an uncomfortable laugh. Eileen was pacing around the back shaking her head at him, as if to warn him that he was treading thin water.

"We're talking about the Mediterranean! That magical patch of earth which straddles Europe and Asia. From Morocco to Anatolia, Egypt to Monaco, the many peoples and cultures which have inhabited the shores and islands scattered throughout that sea have been talked about, studied, and discussed since time itself."

The perturbed tone of his voice pulled at the ears of the flashy patrons, who were all starting to whisper about the now less-distinguished Professor.

"And, despite the numerous cultures and exciting new discoveries we as Anthropologists have made in the region - exciting remnants of Berberized Roman colonies along the Algerian border, the Nuragic link to Sea Peoples who invaded Egypt in Sardinia - we've decided, perhaps a bit predictably, to rehash the Aegean. Or, early

Hellenistic culture, to be precise. Now as I look around the room, we've got a particularly typical crowd for a wonderful, high-class event such as this: older and white."

The laughter resumed, as most of the crowd assumed this was a barb sent in jest, but Peter watched on with growing spite.

"And so, I'm sure you're all excited for another classical, expected exhibition of some of your favorite Greek-looking specimens. We've got your brown vases with black designs, your perfect collection of old, bronze Athenian armor, and of course, we have some colorful Mycenaean mosaic fragments that you'll find.... charming. All the pieces you're going to see tonight come from a period of about six hundred BC to around four hundred AD. Remember to take great care and respect when thinking about or discussing with the pieces we've brought out for you as they are, and Marc is fond of reminding us, foundational to our Western Civilization. With that, I do hope you enjoy,"

An awkward clap slowly built momentum and things seemed to smooth out. Marc even gave him a raised glass from afar. Even though the audience managed to miss it (likely in their exuberant drunkenness), Marc wasn't going to let him escape with a sleight like that. As Thomas pushed through the crowd towards the exit. Eileen chased after him to reprimand him for what she thought was such a "gaudy display of jejune behavior amongst a sophisticated and benevolent crowd". But Marc caught the both of them by the door. He thanked him for the speech and insisted that both of them be present at the after-party at the Fairmont. Thomas tried to decline and escape the hellhole he seemed trapped in, but Marc doubled down on the threat too Eileen.

"I think it would reflect poorly onto all of your generous benefactors if you two happen to be absent from such an event. You know what they say: when you're absent, people gossip!"

"I haven't heard that one. Is that a Canadian thing?", Thomas quipped

Despite his protests, Marc forced their hand by escorting the two of them to his personal vehicle. With every step, Thomas' blood rose a degree. He couldn't stand to spend one more minute with the haughty charlatan and he didn't even think his job

was worth it. The entire ride was dominated by a silly conversation about previous openings, which only Eileen and Marc participated in. When they arrived, they were ushered into a Gastby-esque escapade, whose superciliousness seemed almost cartoonish with the amount of lavish touches which seemed to impress like a slap in the face on every patron entering through the door. It made the party at the museum look paltry by comparison.

Peter, who'd gotten caught up with Mr. Lau, had decided to walk there himself. The chagrin for his Uncle was stirring a fire inside him that he had hoped to tame before he was with a larger audience. When he finally opened the door and entered into the grand ballroom, Thomas was the first person he saw. But something was different this time. No longer was he wearing a look of guilt and shame, but a look of fear and horror. He rushed over to his nephew in a swift panic.

"Peter, I'm sorry about earlier, but I really think its best if you leave. I have to tell you something important"

"Oh really? Is it about sleeping with my boss? Is that it? Because in the many weeks - months! - I've been here you've failed to mention ANYTHING to me like that."

Thomas turned his head in shame.

"I-- Listen we don't -- I haven't slept with Antonio. I--"

"-Well that explains his mood as of late!"

"It's more complicated than you think Peter! BUT this is not the time"

In a rare act of defiance, Peter leaned into his Uncle's face, which was always about two inches above his. For once in his life, he felt like they were on equal footing. This man who, his whole life, he had heard wax poetic about the chivalrous world of academia and the privilege of being in the intelligentsia wing of the human race, had looked now like a scared, bespectacled, mustachioed old man. He grabbed him by the collar and yelled, almost tearfully.

"I spend this whole summer trying to get to know you, connect with you, and spend time with you. Just when you think that everything makes sense, just when I think I have the whole story, you come and show me that you're just like the rest of them, full of your secrets. I thought we could be honest with each other. When I saw Antonio in the kitchen in the morning, I assumed it was innocent, but really it was whatever fucked-up front that you're attempting to maintain for my sake."

He had completely stunned the Professor, who seemed resigned to stare at the floor as the tirade had attracted the attention of a few nearby patrons.

"All I wanted was to make you proud. But for whatever reason, you didn't care. Please don't mess with the guy who actually does. Have some self-respect."

With that, Peter walked away. Thomas, now licking his wounds, ran outside and started hyperventilating, attracting the attention of a group of vagrant teens. With the flash of a five dollar bill, he acquired a pack of cigarettes and started to puff profusely as he melted against the wall. A tear ran down his cheek as he muttered to himself.

"I tried.... He's on his own now."

Peter continued though the party until he found Mark, who was seated at a round table full of several members of his entourage. They all gleefully cheered for him.

"Peter! You have to meet Mr. Hewitt's son - er, my future son-in-law Clark. A handsome young, light-haired man a bit older than Peter and nearly ten inches taller stood up from the table to greet him."

"I've heard a lot about you Superman."

"I hope only good things!"

"Well from what I hear, you'll be my right hand man in London in a few weeks. If they think you're up to the task, I'd say those are very good things."

Peter had to look back at the rest of the table to quell his excitement. 'This is really going to happen', he thought. Mark gave him a nod of approval and a loud cheers rang

out to celebrate the future endeavor. They sat and mulled over some scant details of their exact dealings over in Europe. Essentially, the task was going to involve coaxing some risk-adverse Europeans into Series C funding of a few key Silicon Valley startups. They would be expected to have complete decks to share along with vital statistics ready to drop in conversation on a moments notice. None of this seemed to faze Peter as his primary function was made clear.

"Clark, if you can get this guy into a good cocktail lounge after 11 O'Clock somewhere in Kensington, I think we'll be able to get all the money we need."

At that precise moment, two things happened. One involved Thomas making a conscious decision to head home, drink an entire bottle of old French Amaro to himself, cry until his pillow had saturated. There was a split second in his mind where he considered running back inside and having a Graduate moment where he screamed at the top of his lungs at his oblivious nephew. But he seemed resigned to the fact that life wasn't like the movies and decided to stick with his original instinct. At that exact same moment, a stunning-looking, lavishly-dressed Elish Donahue in a Gold, floor length dress and a white pearl necklace started down the large, regal staircase to the main ballroom.

Peter looked at her as if he were setting eyes on her for the first time in his life. Her hair had this lofty, swaying bounce to it, threatening to undo her delicate, dark curls. Her eyes shimmered in the light in a way they hadn't before (it seemed some glittery eyeshadow was the eventual culprit). She obviously didn't catch sight of Peter when he saw her because she radiated a warm, welcoming smile as she waved from the top of the stairs like the belle of the ball, her hands covered by a soft white glove. It was the closest thing to a princess he could imagine. Even when she reached the bottom, she seemed larger than life, perhaps because she was nearly tall enough to look Marc in the eye, much less Peter, a true feat of wizardry considering her initial, lesser than average seeming five foot five.

Without pause or hesitation, Peter took his beaming face and slowly pushed through the crowd like one treading water. When he finally had an opening, he ran up to her from the side, grabbed her arm and went in to kiss her. Perhaps in shock, her face went through a swirl of emotions. Surprise, joy, then horror, disgust, and finally a true

nothingness. She abruptly turned her cheek to his lips and even gave him a quick shove to try and create distance between them.

Peter was horrified. She refused to look him in the eyes and had continued to add strain to the confusion that weighed heavily on their relationship. His horror turned to anger and for a moment, he considered squeezing his hand as tightly as possible so as to create the tiniest bit of harm towards this woman who, despite all the agony, he truly and deeply loved. But fate interceded and no such physical pain occurred.

Marc Roy's imposing, pot-bellied presence weighed just over Peter's shoulder like an animal, but it was Clark Hewitt's swift pull that jolted him away from his beloved.

"Woah, there! I think you have the wrong woman", Clark said.

"Clark, I'm sure it's an honest mistake. Peter here has not yet met the lovely Elish yet"

The whole world was spinning in Peter's mind. As he refused to turn around and look at the men, so Elish refused to turn her gaze towards him.

Then Marc spoke.

"Elish, this is Peter, a good friend of mine. Peter, this is Elish Donahue, my lovely daughter."

As if nothing ever happened, she wiped her expression clean, looked up at Peter with a gleaming grin and held out her hand as if to greet him for the first time.

"And my future wife!", Clark added for stinging effect.

"It's alright Dad. I get mistaken for women all the time. You're friend here looks like a very SMART guy, so I'm sure it was just a mistake."

Peter wept silently. He maintained a straight face as he shook her hand and even forced a grin while he 'apologized', but then quickly excused himself across the room to the bathroom. It was in one of the most elegant stalls he had ever been in that he unceremoniously created his own lachrymose stew of vomit and tears before flushing

them to oblivion over and over again, only desperately hoping that he could carry his memories along with them. When he had thoroughly drained any trace of liquid from his body, he ran outside, though not without catching the horrifying image of Clark Hewitt with his arm around Elish's back, leaning down to plop a tender kiss amongst her silken hair.

Outside, he fell against a wall which reeked of Marlboro, which incidentally was his Uncle's somber spot of choice from earlier. He sat there, completely catatonic, too scarred to consider his next move. He still naively thought he might wake up from some dreaded nightmare, but nothing came of that hope.

After about an hour of waiting outside alone, Elish appeared, this time with a large, soft jacket covering her dress. She ran at him with tears in her eyes and distress radiating from every motion.

"Peter! PETER! I'm so sorry! Peter I- I never thought it was going to be like this. Not like this. Not in front of everyone."

There was a thick silence.

"I know I should have told you earlier, but... I couldn't. How could I? It was a complicated thing from the beginning and-- PETER, answer me! I-- I don't love him Peter, I just... My father set us up... It's I can't really describe it! Peter, it's like an arranged marriage... I know how silly that sounds, but you have to believe me. If there was any good way, I promise I would have told you, but I just... I-- PLEASE SAY SOMETHING!"

"I now see why you were too busy to join me today"

"To be fair Peter, If you had mentioned to me that this is where we might be going, I would have told you everything!"

"Because that would have been a GREAT time to tell me. Unlike any number of those other times when you and I were together! I mean.... Elish... We spent days together. All those lunches... All those drives... We had a perfect evening."

Elish bit her lip in frustration. The cold air from the Bay had come in and bit it her bare arms, causing her to hug herself to keep from shivering. It disturbed her that Peter seemed entirely unfazed by it.

"You know... You failed to mention ANYTHING about my father - who obviously seems to know you well - during any of those moments together either."

"How was I supposed to know that was important?"

"It's important because... because... you were keeping things from me Peter!"

Peter laughed, though miraculously without converting his expression to a smile.

"I would point out the utter irony of that, but I don't think it needs to be stated."

He lifted his body, limbs peeling off the walls, and slowly dusted himself off as he started back on the cold, damp, foggy streets towards his Uncle's house. Elish's heart was racing like crazy, completely unsure of what to do in the situation. She stepped out of her shoes, picked them up and started racing after him, barefoot. Uncertainty and strife such as this would only weigh over her fragile soul ad infinitum if things didn't get resolved now. She trailed behind him some distance, but decided to give him the physical space she thought he needed.

"I meant to fix all this before...."

Peter kept moving ahead, focusing only on his breath and his footsteps.

"I--- I wasn't sure about everything Peter. When I met you, I was.. I mean I am - Well, Clark and I are not technically together. We were on a break! We ARE on a break! I mean... we're not together.... I know this sounds confusing, but Peter please believe me that I never meant to hurt you. I never meant for you to see me like this."

Something snapped in Peter in that moment and he turned around with a massive wave of rage as he charged at her.

"I told you EVERYTHING! I told you my darkest secret. I had lied to everyone except you because I knew that if we were going to be together, I didn't want it to be fake. With you, I was going to be real. And I knew you had some things going on and I knew you'd have some things to work out, but I really thought that if it was something this big and this problematic, you would have told me at first. **INSTEAD, YOU LIED TO ME. AFTER TELLING YOU THE DAPHNE SHIT?** Unbelievable."

She had yet to see him reprimand her so forcefully and she practically balked at the charge initially. Standing there, now halfway between her foreign, more regal look, and her familiar, friendly look with her bare feet on the cold ground and her artificial curls beginning to unfurl, Peter felt some small degree of sympathy for her. His heart wanted forgiveness. And in truth, he knew she was deserving of some, since he himself was not fully honest with her. Another more practical part of him wanted to show forgiveness just so that he could collect whatever missing pieces of the story she had cached. But the dark side of the DeBorr family was a stark, unwavering sense of justice, in which the idea of forgiveness played no part.

A slow stream of tears swelled to a burst as Elish began to heave rhythmically under the harsh white streetlight which separated the two of them. This provoked a deeply disturbing response from Peter as he saw in her tears the morose reality of so many troubled women around the world. But more than anything, it reminded him of Daphne. She continued to plead with him to hear her out, to discuss their next steps together. But Peter had chosen his fate.

Without so much as a kiss or a glance, he turned away from her and started an abrupt sprint up the hill. Like Orpheus avoiding being sucked into Hades, he wouldn't hasten to give notice to his Eurydice, no matter how much he wanted to. In that moment, he was happy to leave her adrift on the river Styx, her fate left up to another day.

There was something about the end of summer days in the hilly streets of San Francisco that stirred up feelings of profound sadness amongst its citizens. Between

the months of August and September, the soft, cool air of the early summer months, so iconic for the region had dissipated and a genuine wave of California heat tended to splash the city more frequently. The sunsets grew more blood-red and tended to last longer. The sweet aromas which were born in spring had faded and aged in a way that gave them some nostalgic kind of sophistication. Scents of roses and lavender gave way to that of tobacco and sandalwood. This transitional period was tragically short, but became a sort of marker for the city. For it had labored this long year and like any other city, it needed to shed its coat. Or, in a much more somber sense, it needed to die. For in its death, it could be reincarnated and continue to exist ad infinitum until some cosmic event would bring wanton destruction upon its million inhabitants and life would have to start again.

The mornings, which brought with them a special kind of piercing brightness, were particularly notable. Once the sun was up, and the colorful Victorian homes were shining in all their glory, it was impossible to stay indoors. The city was teeming with energy, sprawling with people, and moving at a consistent, but leisurely pace which one only could imagine when on an exotic vacation. It was a Sunday and San Francisco stayed with its pattern of sleepiness, with most street quiet until close to midday. The bells of the old churches, especially the massive ones attached to the Mission Dolores Basilica, which rang out with an old European elegance (adding to the international flavor of the city), were sometimes the first faint sounds to grace the ears of those lucky enough to live close by.

The DeBorr house wasn't particularly close by any of the churches that had beautiful bells. However, both Peter and Thomas had returned home in a state of drunken disorder and in their putrid half-conscious states, had left not only every window open, but the front door as well. Thomas, who was usually up earlier, had heard the sounds of the eight o'clock bells for Mass and was awoken to a house that looked as if it had just been hit by a tornado.

Tables upturned, menageries shattered, books all over the floor. It wasn't difficult to see that their absent-mindedness had provided a prime opportunity for some clever thieves to come and wreak havoc on an home with two drunken, morose, otherwise occupied men. After assessing the damage, Thomas was spectacularly calm. Although a number of things had been stolen, most of which were seemingly important artifacts he had filled his menagerie with, the books and maps which he treasured most of all

were still there, albeit scattered across the floor. All in all, the total amount of goods stolen was likely somewhere in the eight-thousand dollar range. But Thomas, chuckling to himself, struggled to even remember some of the things he used to fill the menagerie with.

When Peter stumbled upon the scene, he was petrified. To him, it looked as though an assault had befallen academia itself. Mouth agape, he took account of the scene and carefully weighed his Uncle's state. Despite their qualms, he could no longer think any ill thoughts towards the Professor. For now, he saw a loved one in need, a true victim of a tragedy. He carefully crept over next to him and placed a loving hand on his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry."

It was unclear who left what open. Peter certainly came back after his Uncle, but neither went to sleep straight away. Thomas himself had wandered into the garden for a late night smoke break and Peter toiled in the backyard, searching the internet like a desperate addict in search of something to make him happy. Whatever the case, both felt guilty and Thomas was certainly not going to pin the responsibility on his nephew. He took out his pipe, which he was puffing casually and showed his nephew a soft grin.

"It's all material, Peter.", he said. "It would have been the victim of time one way or another."

They both sat and observed the scene, trying to assess the next steps, when Thomas finally broke the silence with an offer to his young kin.

"Fancy a stroll?"

Leaving the house in its state, the two of them hopped into the car and set off. An hours drive and they were in the hilly countryside, where the green fields had grown golden and the sun had grown especially hot. They came to the foot of a hill, where they began their ascent in the late hours of the morning. Little was said in those first miles, but both expressed their happiness to be in nature.

The summit took about an hour to reach. The two men slowly trudged their way to the top, doing their best to mask their respective heaves under their breaths. Neither was in particularly great shape that morning and the hot sun on the dirt path, lightly shadowed by the scant foliage did little to help them. After seeing an older, dwarfish gentleman who had a strong Ashkenazi look about him, they started discussing Woody Allen. Thomas was shocked that Peter had heard of the filmmaker considering they were generations apart. But his years in Lawrence had exposed the young ingenue to a colorful world of cinema of all generations. Woody Allen was amongst the first "units" in this "self-prescribed culture course" Peter embarked upon. Vicky Cristina Barcelona and Broadway Danny Rose were his two favorites. Deconstructing Harry was Thomas'. The smalltalk between the two faded once Thomas pulled ahead. Peter didn't mind. His Uncle looked like an old colonialist ready to conquer Egypt in his beige outfit and his hard beige cap. Rhodes himself couldn't have designed a better-looking stock figure for "explorer". Cane in one hand and pipe in another, he stood triumphantly at the peak overlooking endless hills and valleys, bristling his mustache as he grinned from ear to ear.

Peter pulled up silently behind him and plopped down on the ground, still able to enjoy much of the view. The wind blew strongly on the summit. It felt an appropriate sound to accompany the absence of people to join them in that moment. Without losing his pipe or turning to face Peter, he muttered, "Wind must've deterred many others."

The two DeBorr gentlemen stood parallel to one another, staring off into the empty distance with the soundtrack of the roaring wind to accompany them. The landscape had a sort of swelling emotional effect on Peter. The rolling hills, blue sky, tiny traces of distant roads, the ocean and bay in the distance, and the concrete jungle of San Francisco with the faintest hint of the Golden Gate Bridge in the background - all managed to bring together this strange real-life mosaic of Peter's time in California. It made everything feel present in that moment and the reality of his dwindling days in the state slowly hit him like a leaf falling from a tree.

Thomas broke the silence.

"You need to forgive her"

"What?", Peter snapped.

"You heard me. You need to forgive her. It seems crazy right now, of course, but believe me, if you don't do it now, you'll leave the scar of your regrets to weigh heavy on your heart from now until the end of time."

Peter was a bit annoyed that the Professor, intellect that he was, had not chosen a more tactful way to address the situation that had unfolded last night.

"Us DeBorr's... We really love to avoid shit like this. It takes a literal climb up the mountain to get to the point anyone really wants to discuss."

Thomas just smiled. The two continued to avoid looking at each other.

"What can words do now? I mean... It's over."

"Words are the most powerful tool a man has Peter. If every last thing had been taken from my house this morning, I would still have my words."

The wind roared to fill the soundtrack of Peter's thoughts.

"You need to forgive me as well"

He looked up at the Professor, who had shed a tear of his own, but hid it behind his circular sunglasses.

"I know", Peter said.

Thomas let out a deep sigh and collapsed into his cane a bit.

"Peter, if I would have known earlier, I would have told you. I-"

"I know you didn't know. How could any of us have known?"

"There's another thing."

"Yes?"

"Antonio and I cannot be lovers, as much as it pains the two of us."

Peter listened intently as his Uncle gave more color to the strange encounter the other morning at the coffeeshop. As it turns out, there had been intense chemistry between the two of them as soon as the two met one morning during Antonio's first opening shift. A few jokes led to gestures, the gestures led to notes, and the notes precipitated a few 'meetings'.

"He would call them dates and he has every right too. But in retrospect, I cannot look at them that way.", Thomas noted.

These meetings were ice creams which became dinners which became weekends away. They had gone so far as to express their desire for one another in the most direct of terms, building a romantic intensity ripe for the popping. When the pressure hit its apex and things were set to built to their natural physical climax, a massive wall came between Thomas and anyone else.

"I thought of her", he said. "And only her"

He had been attached to a woman named Holly in his Graduate class who he spent the better part of eight years with. Peter was hardly aware of it, but the two had met a few Christmases when he brought her to Kansas to meet the family. They were engaged to be married for fourteen months when one day, completely out of the blue, she took everything and left. She had run away to some small village in Sardinia, leaving Thomas with only a note explaining she had to fulfill a life dream or die with regret. He kept hope she would return, as she indeed indicated it was possible in the letter, but after months turned into a year, he started to falter. Only after her went through the hassle of hiring a private detective did he learn that within two weeks of landing, she had fallen in love with an Italian pilot and apricot farmer who offered to take her all over the world. It was the chance of a lifetime she couldn't pass up.

Even though Holly chose someone else, Thomas would never simply relinquish his feelings for her. She would remain, forever in his heart.

"I had to tell him that there will only ever be one love of my life...", he explained. "And it will always only be Holly. He couldn't really bear that."

The wind swept over the peak, causing the large fields to bristle as Thomas' words hung heavily in the air. It was a lot for any person to take in, but for Peter it brought a great deal of peace. Though it saddened him, the thought that the two of them would never find the love that either hoped for, it was like finding the last piece of the puzzle, learning exactly what his Uncle's story was. The fact that he was attracted (and likely had relationships) with men was less jarring to him than was the idea that he was abandoned by a lovely woman, who fled from him in search of a better life - and found it. He always had thought his Uncle a lonely man, but this revelation made him seem even lonelier. Yet, he also appeared tougher. No longer simply the bespectacled academic with untarnished hands, Peter looked at his Uncle reborn. Here was an adventurer, covered in dirt and sweat, standing proudly with one foot on the summit, gazing off into the distance, caring little about what troubles had befallen him at work or how to reconcile lost loves. He was a man who would march on despite the pain. And he might become stronger for it.

They sat there in a blissful silence, listening to the roar of the wind and taking in the late summer beauty of the Californian landscape. Tears streamed down Thomas' face, but he made no sounds. Instead, he looked back at his nephew and grinned. With the firm clench of a farmhand, he grabbed Peter's shoulder and squeezed it as he brought his nephew under his literal wing. They stayed there until the light got faint. And they returned home, reconciled. There would be no more strife between the DeBorr men.

At the cafe the next morning, Peter couldn't help but look Antonio over again and again. There was no formal acknowledgement between the two of them about what had happened and Antonio assumed Peter was still too naive to understand the complexities of their relationship. It was better for the both of them that nothing was said and Peter played his part to a T. This was helped in part by the uncomfortable fact that Peter was down to his last few weeks at the shop. School would begin in less than a month and he would be somewhere in a large lecture hall in the sleepy fall streets of

Lawrence. Antonio shared his own bittersweet feelings about the departure, promising he'd make sure the two of them got time to spend with one another before he left.

He was on shift with Devin when the early afternoon wind down began. The two had never gotten close over their time together that summer, but they did the best to stay up to date on each other's lives.

"When's your London trip?", he asked Peter.

The question sent a somber shudder down the vagus nerve and radiated throughout the rest of his body.

"I don't know. I think it will overlap with the first week of school. I don't think I can do it."

"What? Don't not do it! I'm invested in a successful college experience and I've put a lot of effort into research to determine the best way TO have a successful college experience. That being said.... I heard that missing class now and again - especially at the beginning - is okay. Well, at least it's not impossible to make up. There are a lot of effective strategies to get your ass covered in case attendance is--"

"I think its more of a personal thing", Peter said, hoping to end his rant.

"I thought you said you didn't want to go back to Kansas."

"I don't.... Really. But it's only one year."

"I still think you can make the trip work - it's only a week and-"

Just as Peter was toying internally with the problems and ramifications of continuing on his journey with Mr. Roy, the bell rang above the baby blue wooden door that separated the Cafe du Rue from the outside world, and in strolled a very distressed-looking Elish. The store was nearly empty, so her dramatic movements were all the more noticeable.

Devin cocked his head in amusement. "Oh yeah, I remember you. By the way, she was looking for you yesterday."

Peter pushed him aside and manned the counter like he was guarding the walls of Constantinople.

"Peter, you haven't been answering my texts."

"I've had my phone off."

"Can we talk?"

"I'm working right now."

"Please."

He looked at Devin, who had no ability to grasp the social context which seemed to broadcast out to everyone else in the cafe.

"Devin, can you watch the front for a bit?"

Devin crossed his arms. "There needs to be two of us up here. Antonio left for the day, so I don't think its such a good idea."

From the back room, a slow, lumbering Silvio came out and put a heavy, hairy hand on Devin's shoulder.

"That's okay. You can a-do it. I'll be here for you", he said.

Peter recognized the old Italian's kindness and gave him a nod of thanks. He and Elish then went back out that baby blue door and onto the cool, burnt-orange afternoon sidewalk.

They spent a long time staring at one another, subdued to the destiny that had rocked their last few days. Peter finally put himself in a place where he was ready to hear her

out and she took care not to say something in such a way that wouldn't drive him away. The story went a little something like this.

After the untimely death of her mother, Marc had taken extra care to get close to his daughter. They had never been too close growing up as he was always a businessman and family was simply a placeholder for his legacy. He intended on having a close relationship with his adult daughter, but the passing of his wife while she was in High School, forced him to fill shoes he wasn't fully prepared for. But the scars of a distant father figure in childhood held firm in her mind. Instead of being a reconciled father and daughter, they became guardian and trustee. After what had happened to his wife, he sought to protect her from anything terrible happening. What this meant, in practical terms, was a strict limitation on her freedoms. She wasn't permitted to leave the state for more than a vacation, he had to have knowledge about all of her peers, and under no circumstances was she to date without his knowing. As his paranoia and grip on her increased, so did the chasm between the two of them. She started to seek him out less, did her best to disassociate with him in public, and began donning her mother's last name instead of his: Donahue. As prominent as the Roy name was in the public sector, Elish Donahue was determined to cast a path all her own. Because if she was forced to live under his watchful, smothering gaze, she sure was determined to do everything she could to make a name for herself - anyway she could.

So although he imposed his will when it came to what she studied and where, she made it clear that she would go on to work in what she chose and how she wanted. When she went for interviews, she didn't mention who had sent her there. When she was at University, she never brought up who was paying for classes. She may have had to live in her father's world, but she certainly wasn't going to acknowledge it.

When living with him prompted her to nearly run away from home, he agreed to a compromise. On the far end of the property, there was a caretakers cottage, small but livable. He offered it to her along with subsequent renovations on the condition that she agree to remain there until the conclusion of her studies. She reluctantly accepted.

And for a long time, they continued on increasingly divergent paths. As Marc got nosier and more invasive, so she pulled further and further away. There was never an absence of love - far from it. Without the mother, the two of them were all they really had (minus an estranged sister who lived in Ithaca, NY) and they did their best to

remain as cordially loving as they possibly could. And so, with love, they lived separate, secret lives, in a constant war of push and pull. Elish had her own separate circle of friends, her own list of alibis when she wasn't out studying, and managed to find a way to date charming boys by posing everything as a "hang-out with a peer" rather than a "date with a cute stranger". As cruel and imposing as this all seemed, she never labeled him as abusive. Perhaps it was because she felt guilty and knew he was just worried about her. Or perhaps she simply didn't have the ability to recognize it.

Either way, her double life found a major hitch when a dinner with the Hewitt's sent her trajectory on a different path. At drinks on the Hewitt's patio afterwards, she and Clark got to know each other. He was charming, intelligent, and funny - not to mention tall and handsome with a distinct, Nordic-looking flavor. They agreed to go on a single date and three months later, they were a couple of practically noble stature. But that three-month mark signified the beginning of the end for Elish. She loved Clark and found many things to appreciate about him. In the end, his goals, ambitions, and general world-view was not compatible with hers. She found him arrogant, narrow-minded, and painfully posh in a way that made everyone else feel bad. While they had seemed to enjoy a wonderful honeymoon, he wasn't anything she was looking for in terms of a long-term partner.

So she tried to leave him. And it worked at first. But as soon as the letters he sent her, begging her for another chance were intercepted by Marc, whatever she wanted was immediately cast aside. How could she have known that their relationship had become a strange kind of glue that bonded Marc and Orville more than it did Elish and Clark. Their relationship was no longer about the two of them - it was about their fathers. One was an industry legend, living on the fortunes of a vast Empire, the other was a rising giant, now comfortably situated in the upper echelons of society. They had come to work closer than ever and it was clear that they would do anything and everything to quell any internal strife between the two of them.

And so it became clear. It didn't matter what Elish wanted. Clark was a fine man, who was unlikely to cheat, not abusive, and had outstanding credit. What more could she ask for? Marc had made it clear to her that, unless she wanted to destroy the possibility of a truly great, limitless future, she would have to take one for the team. And so she did.

She and Clark remained together. She had countless problems with him that enumerated by the day and he, who was initially perfectly adoring, had come to find plenty of faults with her. Even Elish wondered if he really wanted to be with her either. They were destined for an arranged marriage and there was little either could do. But Elish's spirit never gave up. And her heart always longed for something else, a man who really cared. She wanted a guy who could actually be impressed, who remained curious about life, who wasn't drenched in the dripping luxury of a silver-spoon upbringing. She wanted a guy who wanted to travel, cared about learning, but wasn't overly didactic, a guy who was excited about dive bars, and never checked the price on a wine bottle; a guy who loved to talk about life, but loathed discussing work; a guy who found romance in the rain, but could care less for the beach; a guy who could appreciate the beauty of San Francisco, but also try and understand the complexities of its many, many flaws.

Peter simply rest his arm on the shoulder and directed his piercing gaze right into her beautiful, teary eyes. He thought that if he looked hard enough, he might be able to glimpse the answer, eclipsed for just one moment between sobs - the answer to the question that plagued him day in and day out for months: did she really love him?

"Come away with me", he said.

"What?"

"Yeah, you and I can get out for a bit. It'll be good for everyone else to understand where we stand. Your Dad, my Uncle, 'Clark'."

"What would that accomplish Peter? I don't think you get it. It's not as simple as breaking a few hearts here."

He stepped back and crossed his arms. The late sun gleamed off the top of the pyramid top of the TransAmerica Tower in the near distance. Peter walked by it every day and was reminded of how close it all was. It all seemed so close.

"Elish... You're acting like you don't have free will! What on earth is stopping us? It's not like your Dad isn't going to love you anymore. I could care less what he thinks of me."

Even Peter knew this was a lie, but he was focused on preserving their connection by any means possible and was swelling with confidence in his oratory abilities. She seemed firm in her stance though and, wiping away her tears, leaned into him and gave him a big hug. A painful, humbling sense of inevitability fell over Peter who felt the pangs of loss penetrate his skin by osmosis. He held her tightly and in doing so was hoping to hold himself back from certain eruption. In his head, he was visited by an array of memories of their past: the day she walked into the shop; all the times he'd seen her on his many runs; their first night out together; the way she got on well with Antonio and all his friends; their sushi dates downtown; the days spent walking Esty in the cool San Francisco air; the warm drive up to Napa; the late night and good wine. Did it all have to culminate in this tragic moment? Fleeting images, memories of what had gone. It too seemed like it would tragically fall victim to time like so many before it and the wistful thoughts began to haze in his head as a cloud slowly drifted over the sun and covered the Tower in the distance. Peter started crying. Not just sobbing either, but a full blown deluge of tears. He didn't shake or shudder, but he did cry and the tears fell to stain their shirts.

"Why'd you come here? If you weren't trying to fix everything. If you weren't trying to make things work. ", he asked.

"I am trying to fix everything Peter... I... I came here to say I'm sorry.... because that's the very least that you deserve."

And so, there was no knock, down drag out ending. It was a quiet, fizzling out between the two. Without exchanging an excess of words, Elish had made it clear that she was resigned to her fate and certainly not suicidal about the prospects. They embraced one last time in a long, lachrymose kiss which seemed to capture the bittersweetness of the moment between the salinity of their tears and the sweetness of her cherry-flavored lip gloss.

They agreed to walk for a bit since the sun came out again and they started to make their way all the way down to the Piers. It was a long walk to the Embarcadero, but

their natural conversational flow made the journey feel quick. It was there, feet away from where they shared their first kiss, that they sat on a bench where they would share their last. This time, the sun was out and the wind was calm. They faced the ocean as they slowly watched the pink clouds drift over the crimson bridge, creating a beautiful model for the old painter standing on the edge of the dock nearby.

They had avoided talking about Clark, Mr. Roy, the Museum, and pretty much anything polarizing. In fact, the primary subject of their walk over was Esther and her favorite streets to walk in the city, with a little time given to Peter's upcoming semester of school. When they got to the bench, they observed 20 minutes of silence before Elish, nestled in his arm, finally chimed in.

"The summer's over... and I'll remember it for the rest of my life."

"Yeah. Me too. I mean... All this? It'll go down as one of the most amazing experiences of my life."

Elish let out a small, assuring chuckle. "You see Peter? It's not me you're in love with. It's all this." She let out her hand to gesture to the majesty of that small little 49 square mile slice of heaven. "The people, the streets, the life, the experiences - this is what really made you feel the way you do, and I was just lucky enough to be along for the ride."

The sun started to finally disappear behind the sky as they looked at each other as lovers once more.

"And unlike me, Peter DeBorr, maybe this city can actually find a way to love you back one day."

The sun set on that magical moment and the soft music of the Opera played in Peter's mind as he felt the beauty of a moment simmer to its ultimate end as Crystal's prophetic words had finally been laid to rest.

Fall in San Francisco was christened with long, weatherproof jackets, streets which had slowly become void of tourists, and an almost emblematic, rolling cloud of fog, which seemed to descend from its hilly peaks and slowly crawl into the quiet city neighborhoods. It was an early day at the beginning of September and Fall was already here. There would be no snow or pitch black mornings in the near future, but the leaves would soon fall, and casual conversation would take physical form through the steam of breathy voices. And there would be the rain. The soft, cool rain. Sometimes it was described as pouring, and other times it was simply spitting. But on the cool morning where Peter walked into the Cafe du Rue for the last week before he would return to Kansas, the rain was "sprinkling".

The wave of tourists and people who spent their summers in the City by the Bay had all but completely dissipated, leaving the regular cafe-going crowd dwindling, especially on mornings with weather like that. The space was completely empty except for Peter and Silvio. Behind the front counter, Peter was sat, mired in his thoughts, still numb. It's been a few weeks since he'd seen Elish, but she still seemed to be there every time he closed his eyes. Everything conversation, laugh, glance of desire was captured and replayed to him in flashback at every given moment. For some people, it would have been a rallying cry, inspiring men to take up arms and fight to their dying breath for the woman they loved. Was she not a Helen of Troy, worthy of crossing an ocean for? Instead, he was stunned. And fought all of his battles inside his head. He told everyone, of course. Antonio, Ricardo, his Uncle, Tess, Crystal, Devin, and even Silvio. Each one was surprisingly muted in their sympathy, but united in their response, which collected around a resoundingly unsatisfying idea: there's plenty of fish in the sea.

But the sea was soon to be a far-away thought in Peter's mind. He would be on the cold, concrete streets of Lawrence, Kansas with a gas station coffee in hand, briskly walking from lecture hall to lecture hall, dreaming of the majestic California coast. Knowing this was to be his fate, Peter couldn't seem to live in the present, torn between a romantic near-past and a tortured future. That morning, he had the rain though. Behind the muffled jazz that played through the radio speakers, there was the sound of pitter-patter on the rooftop. Letting out a deep sigh and slumping into his palm, Peter sat and stewed, wishing and begging that someone, anyone would come through the door.

Silvio emerged from the back, sipping a cup of espresso in one hand and carrying a bag of beans under the other. He saw the boy slumped over and set down the sack. Peter watched as the old man shuffled past him to the machine and slowly, but meticulously ground up the beans, tamped the grounds, and made himself two small cups of espresso - one of which he placed in front of Peter's glazed-over eyes.

"You cannot let-eh your taleent slip. Even though there are-ent any a customers, you must work to keep fresh your skills."

He pushed the cup towards Peter.

"Andiamo. Taste."

Peter sipped the espresso and tasted bliss. Whether it was the care put into the craft or the taste of the actual cup, he was moved back to living in the present moment.

"This is incredible. Thank you Silvio."

"Just because you-a have your mind foocused on all dees other things, doesn't mean the world will stop moving." He slowly walked around to the front counter, pulled up a chair, and plopped down. "Life... itsa full of pain and zadness. You lose love. Perdi l'amore. It.... can also loosa you. But its important not to lose yourself."

He stared Peter square in the eyes and tried to speak directly to his soul.

"Dis girl, she's amazing. She change-a your life in ways you will always remember for da rest of your life.... But-"

A rare smile unfolded across his mouth.

"But- You have a long life. La vita è lunga e piena di mistero. Abbraccialo. Embrace the unknown. I know everything did not go as you had planned. But when you are an old man like me, you will have a wonderful story to tell."

He added in Italian, "La vita è una storia che è stata scritta prima che tu nascessi e che verrà scritta molto tempo dopo la tua morte."

Though the words were unintelligible, Peter understood the premise and the motive.

"Thank you. I'll try my best to remember that.", he said with a kind nod.

"No music.", Silvio said. "Enjoy it as it is."

"Enjoy what as it is?"

"La pioggia! The rain, Pietro!"

As soon as Silvio snuck back into the back room, Peter took his advice and turned off the radio. And then, he felt it. The soft pitter patter of the rain. The diffused white light that poured in through the windows bathed the room in a kind of warmth on that cold, cold day as the rain that had always come with a level of dreariness felt cathartic. The city was washed over and there in the empty cafe, Peter stared out into the soaked San Francisco streets, listened the percussive hum of the rain on the roof and felt something, felt happy for the first time in weeks. He couldn't help but laugh. And one laugh begot another. And another. And another. And when it all settled down, sat in the air and felt proud to have spent a summer of his life inside the cozy walls of that building. It inspired him to keep going and he spent the rest of the afternoon making espresso until he had achieved as close to perfection as he felt he could possibly get. Not a single other customer came.

When he was off, the rain had reached its apex and it started to become dark. The rain never bothered him and, feeling nostalgic, he decided to go for a stroll before drinks with Antonio.

The two had kept up their tradition of getting drinks weekly despite the tumultuous couple of weeks. Luckily, the timing coincided with the brief respite from the rain that day and even afforded the two of them some sunlight. They didn't mention Thomas once and kept any mention of Elish limited to a few disparaging words. Still, get managed to find a plethora of things to talk about - mostly wistful reflections and societal musings. Antonio had found a nuanced way to rant about tourists. Though they provided significant margins to his business, he still couldn't find peace with

their incessant and seemingly disrespectful habit of taking pictures at every street corner.

"Are they even experiencing life? Sure they've been to Coit Tower, but they experienced everything through their damn iPhone camera. That's a screen, that's not polished marble. That's no skyline, it's a JPEG. I mean, come on! People aren't content to let time pass anymore, they have to try and collect it like it's some commodity. It take the spiritual, intangible nature out of it."

A lot of what he said resonated. And that in itself was enough evidence for Peter to realize he was no longer thinking in the mindset of a sightseeing newbie and instead was at least familiar enough to know that if he wasn't he local, he certainly was no longer a tourist. The two of them went to the far north side of the city, to Baker Beach near the Golden Gate Bridge for the first time in Peter's life. It was the first time he'd been to the beach all summer and as he dipped his toes in the sand, he realized he hadn't felt the substance in over a decade. It was soft and grainy and completely enveloped his course heels. Staring into the curling ocean waves, he touched the tips of his toes with the tips of his fingers and was transported into this strange, primordial state of being. Maybe it was the three beers, he thought. Something about the sunset, the passing barge under the crimson bridge, and the frigid Pacific Ocean foam lapping against his tired skin, all made Peter DeBorr feel disconnected from himself and his ego in a way he hadn't before.

It was then and there that Antonio finally broached the subject that snapped Peter out of his spell.

"So London is a no-go, then?"

Peter shook his head. "I don't know."

"You never heard from the guy again, I'm guessing."

"No... Well, are you talking about Marc? He texted me a bunch a while back. Tried to call me even." Peter left the majestic Pacific to its rhythm as he turned towards his friend. "I think by now, he must know something. Even if she didn't tell him, he knows I'm not exactly a reliable guy."

Antonio put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Hey", he said in an almost stern voice. "You could still go, you know. Maybe she didn't say shit to him? Huh? Maybe you come in there and tell him that you've been going through some stuff? You've basically played the guy this long without him knowing it. Whose to say you can't keep that going?"

Peter just averted his gaze. For the past few weeks, the whole London opportunity had been the sore that wouldn't go away. It was the one element of the relationship he held out hope for. For him it was a future. A real future, filled with bountiful promises of success and wealth. But it now seemed to dangle by an imaginary thread. He never wanted to confront whether or not that thread held strong.

"I can't", he muttered. "I can't do that to myself."

Antonio let out a deep sigh. "Well then you need to put it behind you. If that's really true then you need to bury that shit and let the ocean take it away."

He paused to bite his lip and disappear into his own mind.

"You can't live in a world of What-If's, Peter. Take it from me. When its gone, its gone. It does no well to dwell on missed opportunities."

Peter thought about the Mirror of Erised from Harry Potter. The movie version made an impression on the young Peter, who took its stern lesson of the folly of desire quite seriously. Harry wasted his days away in front of that thing and Peter couldn't fall into that same fate.

Even though in his mind, the offer was clearly revoked, things didn't seem right. Peter still held out a faint hope that Marc Roy would drive up and swoop him into his car, dashing him off to the airport in a Brooks Brothers suit. But in the weeks since they'd seen one another, none of that happened. And what's worse was, Peter deliberately avoided him at every opportunity. Not a single message mentioned Elish, yet Peter couldn't bare to face him now. He wanted to stay on Baker Beach with his dear friend,

toes in the sand, the sky enjoying a brief break from the wet grayness, and just be still for years to come.

And so he did. And after that, they talked about other things for the next hour. Antonio was a good friend and he knew where Peter was at mentally and emotionally. Even though he would soon be far away in his mind, he could at least provide him with the smallest token of companionship that one could offer: respectful silence and space for reflection.

"Thank you", he finally told Antonio after the last light of the sun had disappeared. "For taking me here, for everything."

He started to crack and his diaphragm trembled as tears squeezed their way out of his ducts. Antonio just laughed and playfully tossed some sand in his direction. "We've been drinking this whole summer and all it takes is a sunset on the beach to make you melt. Don't get any funny ideas now."

Peter thought about making a joke about his Uncle and how he already couldn't handle one DeBorr man, but shelved it before his tipsy mind ruined the moment. He didn't want to leave Antonio with anything but bliss, just as the two had come together.

Antonio invited Peter to join him, Ricardo, his cousin, and a few other familiar faces for a round of indoor Mini-Golf at Urban Putt, a local haunt they crew loved to visit after a round of drinks. But something was so satisfying about the afternoon, that Peter left him then and there and decided to walk, just as it started to rain again. This time it was a soft misty kind of rain, one that you couldn't see, but feel.

Peter slowly meandered his way through shiny, bright streets, passing through neighborhood after neighborhood, slowly making his way through so many places that seemed familiar, even though he'd never been. He walked through the Richmond District, down towards Golden Gate Park, through the Panhandle, stopping in the Haight, weaving back up through Japantown, Pacific Heights, before briefly stopping in Chinatown to take refuge from the now heavyish rain. He sucked down a few Mai-Tai drinks at a dive bar called the Lipo room (which Antonio had recommended to him on multiple occasions) so he might have a booze jacket to brave the cold again.

From there, he went through the glistening lights of the financial district in a warm haze.

As he strolled the misty streets, looking up towards the towering buildings which seemed to be swallowed up by dark grey clouds, he felt a special kind of sadness swell over him. It wasn't that he was looking at anything particularly beautiful, but rather that he was looking at things he wouldn't be able to see in the near future. Even though these wet streets, gleaming from the bounty of streetlights and red lanterns, were nothing he hadn't seen before, he was now acutely aware that it would be some time before he would see them again. This led him down a mental rabbit hole where he became cognizant of "time" as an institution and the passage of time as a special kind of privilege. Antonio's lecture at the beach carried more weight now. As he stared down the dotted orange line of lights that led down Market Street to the Ferry Building, he felt like he was looking back into the past, seeing the very nexus of his existence encapsulated by the sea ahead, just as when he turned the other way and looked up the hill where the lights faded and the street disappeared into a blank nothingness, he felt he was looking into the uncertainty of his future. The entire fabric of time, his life and every moment captured in it, seemed to present itself in every present molecule around him, creating a dizzying effect as every cause and effect, consequence and reaction, possibility and opportunity seemed to swirl around the city in the same kind of misty haze that was now moistening its citizens. Peter let out a deep sigh.

'I just need a drink', he thought.

He decided to intentionally walk a few streets he'd never taken before while remaining committed to slowly making his way back home. Each corner he turned had its own little treasures that Peter wished he'd kept his eyes out for before. Little bodegas with Arabic script written above them, El Salvadorian-style pupuserias, cocktail lounges, smoky dive bars, barbershops specializing in "real Black hair!", Korean laundromats, Victorian apartment complexes with chipping paint, and charming little boutique cafes that made Café du Rue look like some kind of gauche, Americana-influenced

nightmare. He wanted to peek inside each and every one and capture just a glimpse of what daily life would be like in one. All these weeks and all this time and still there was so much he never got to see. Instead, he chose to spend his time with a woman who would live him haunted and full of regrets. What a waste, he thought.

As appealing as some of the bars he passed looked, he thought it not worth his time to venture anew. This was a time for reflection after all.

By the time he'd wandered down through the Haight and back along Golden Gate Park, he heard the nearby St. James' Cathedral strike eleven o'clock and he promptly skipped the rest of his wandering and made his way back to that alleyway he'd been down so many times and walked through the smoky curtains of Dizzy's. Immediately, the mystic sound of Sonny Rollins' St. Thomas filled the air and he found himself wrapped in a blanket of comfort. The room was just as loud and tobacco scented as he was hoping for and the only light that allowed him to discern anything of note was pointed at the five-piece band that jammed away onstage. The saxophonist looked like a strong-jawed Malcolm X type, though he wore thick Ray-Ban glasses. Peter listened intently for a moment to see what he thought of the group. In the end they were all well above average, except for the trumpet player who seemed to struggle with the improvisational virtuoso kicked off by the eccentric drummer.

Peter ordered a Hurricane (still in the mood for something sweet following his earlier Mai Tai) and leaned against the bar to listen to the rest of the set. One drink went down, then another, and another. Were there an available seat in the house, he may not have drunk so much and simply listened to the music before going home. But he was stuck with the tempestuous libations at the bar, which goaded him again and again. With each drink, his body got warmer, his heart raced faster, and the music got louder. He couldn't help but sway his shoulders and tap his feet as the bassist went off on a solo.

When the group finally stopped to take a break between sets and the lights came up a little bit, Peter asked for the check and decided he was sufficiently drunk and would have to come back again one other night to try and appreciate the music. But as the crowd shuffled around and slowly cleared, the old table where he spent so much time had an eager patron who watched Peter fumble around at the bar with glee.

"Marc", Peter said, finally catching the man staring at him, his seat now positioned towards the bar. "I should've known."

Mr. Roy just stared at him with a look of haughty pity as he assessed the level of drunkenness of his former protege.

"Funny you should say that", Marc continued. "I haven't seen you in this place in a while. Weeks, at least. So I don't know how you possibly COULD have known."

Even with all of the liquid courage he'd poured down his gullet in the last hour, he still struggled to conjure some level of confidence while looking at the man. Instead of being quippy, he figured he'd address the situation head on.

"Look, I know it must be confusing, what happened at the Fairmont, my absence and lack of communication - I get it. But I promise you, there's more to the story and if you're up for it, I'm willing to share what I know now."

Marc watched as Peter squirmed and averted his eyes at every opportunity and relished every second of it. He grinned and leaned towards the boy, resting his elbows on his knees.

"Oh I know what's going on.", Marc said. "I've been made very aware"

Marc took his time looking the boy over. He studied his slanted, slobbish posture and smirked at his furrowed brow. It was a disheveled state Marc had emulated a few times himself, but there, sitting on the opposite side of the spectrum of inebriation, he smugly looked the boy up and down, and decided he was far from the man that he hoped he would turn into. Peter felt the full sting of his stare and finally barked back.

"You think you're so damn great, huh? You sit on top of the world and proclaim yourself a man of culture. Well you know what? You don't have the tiniest fucking iota of culture about your...person... that you didn't manufacture or buy. The operas and the jazz and other shit that makes you feel above everyone. You don't understand it! You don't get it. You're just like any of the rest of us and don't think for a damn-"

Marc calmly let out a bellowing sigh to break up Peter's rant.

"What are you trying to say?"

"Your a wannabe. And I think you'll always be that way."

After he was sure Peter was finished with his rant, he took a survey of the room to make sure no one was paying attention to the increasingly belligerent antics being performed in front of him. Then, rising from his chair, he walked over to Peter and pushed the full gravity of his large, imposing figure on the young man.

"I trusted you. I let you eat my bread, listen to my music, read my books, and sip my wine. You became a small part of my world Peter. And for a minute, I really thought you might end up being a large part."

He paused as he leaned into Peter's ear.

"I was ready to give you London. I was ready to elevate you, because I thought you had promise, young man. But it turns out that you're callow. And when I thought I had Superman, I had some imbecile plains boy who wanted all of life's luxuries without any of the blood and toil that needed to be apart of it. You were Clark Kent in San Francisco and Superman was nowhere to be found."

He spoke with a menacing growl, the heat and moisture from his mouth threatening to break Peter's artificial composure.

"I think the worst part about you Peter is that you became the very thing you claim to hate. And you betrayed my trust, which is unforgivable."

"I loved your daughter", Peter blurted out desperately.

"You fucked my daughter and endangered her future."

"SHE DOESN'T LOVE HIM"

The rise he gave Peter brought Marc joy.

"Oh, Peter. She doesn't have to. Didn't you learn anything this summer? I think the thing you're missing is: She doesn't love YOU."

The words hit Peter like a wall collapsing straight on him. He fought back tears as he grit his teeth.

"If she did, then she wouldn't have chosen the path she did. Did you really think she would betray her future for some fantasy life? Come on Peter! She's a smart girl. And she used you. And she'll go on to have an amazing life and enjoy her marriage, grandchildren, and various, luxurious vacations from Dubai to Milan - all without even considering the thought of you."

As soon as the tears burst out, Peter was quick to bury his face in his arms. The band had started to make its way back onstage and he hoped that would be distracting enough for the patrons to not notice his meltdown.

"That's not true."

"I'm sorry son, but it is. There was no love for you this summer. No real love anyway. You fell in love with an idea. Maybe the city itself. But Elish was always too good for you."

"I'm not done. I'm not DONE." was all that Peter could muster to say in response.

The band was tuning its instruments and Marc could tell his time was limited.

"You are though. It's sad because we could have been something. You were an amazing protege. But just like your Uncle, you'll one day be a talentless hack wasting away in an office somewhere grateful that you got the tiniest sliver of taste as to what life with Marc Roy could have been like. And I will continue to never speak your name again, so that you can fade out of existence."

He leaned in one more time.

"And trust me: that's a favor considering everything that I know you did in Kansas... I have your Kryptonite. Don't forget it."

With that, he took a deep swig of his drink and raised his glass to Peter. His eyes puffy and swollen, his diaphragm trembling, Peter managed to nod politely and say, "I'm sorry. I really am." Before turning around abruptly to the sound of loud brass filling the room. Outside, he found a cigarette on the ground and quickly borrowed a light.

About halfway through the smoke, he thought, 'Maybe I am turning into my Uncle', before tossing it on the ground and walking away.

His mind wavy, as if blood were sloshing around in there even when perfectly still. It would be his last conversation with Marc and he would dwell on its contents for the next two hours, when he ultimately decided there was little he could do. In his case, saying his piece was all he could've hoped for.

When he finally returned home that night, his head hit the pillow and he passed out cold, never giving another thought to Mr. Roy for a long time. In some ways, Marc was right. It was the story he fell in love with - or perhaps, the city. And that night, his dreams were void of any grand romance or wild character dramas, but instead filled with quiet street scenes of the city he had come to love so dearly.

On the last September morning Peter was able to experience, near the end of the month, the young man was sent off with an iconic, billowy plume of fog. He watched from his window as it crept over the mountains and down the hill to the DeBorr household. He even daydreamed it would take him away somewhere far across the sea - Japan, Korea, maybe Indonesia. But he knew that within 24 hours, he would be back on the ground in the Sunflower state, en route to his last year at the University of Kansas.

He packed his bags early, put on his Jayhawks hat, and tidied his room so it looked respectable when Thomas came to see it after work. Then, he made himself toast and went out to enjoy the garden breakfast one last time and found his Uncle there with a large newspaper obscuring his face. A massive grin cracked across his face and he instantly felt lighter.

"What are you doing here?"

Thomas slowly dropped the newspaper and stroked his facial hair, coyly resisting a mirrored smile.

"Waiting for my breakfast, evidently."

"What about the museum, I thought you had to-"

"Leave of absence", he said rolling up the paper. "Yes, Eileen and I have worked out a scheme so that I can take a small sabbatical to... refresh myself. It's important to get perspective every once in a while Peter, remember that."

And so the two sat out in the garden for a lovely breakfast. Thomas explained that he had booked an Airbnb in Barumini, Sardinia for the fall months and planned to spend his time there by himself expanding his studies on the Nuragic ruins nearby, writing a book he'd always mentioned, and learning a little conversational Italian. It all sounded quaint and magical, but was typical of the kind of DeBorr fluff that would get passed around casually in conversation. This time, Peter knew he meant it. He had the proof that the plan was following through and he felt a special kind of admiration for him.

Throughout the summer Peter had come to learn so much about his Uncle. He'd cycled through waves of judgement and admiration, but ultimately came to add a layer of love and respect to the layer of appreciation he'd already had. In his eyes, Thomas didn't need to have some massive book sale or some great gallery success, he'd already been a hero in Peter's eyes and would be immortalized by future generations because of his wit, intelligence, stubbornness, and soft, emotional heart.

After lunch, the two made one last trip by car down to Crissy Fields, just underneath the Golden Gate Bridge. It was foggy and cold, but the massive red industrial metal of the bridge was bursting through the clouds as if to send Peter off with a proper goodbye. Staring out at the distance quietly, Thomas tried to pass on some words to reassure his nephew.

"You know Peter, I think you're gonna be just fine. You're a smart young man and you're going to do the DeBorr name proud one day."

"I don't know about that."

He chuckled. "You can't possibly screw it up any more than we did!" The two of them continued to laugh and share reflections and stories as they admired the city through the window of his car. Thomas made sure to mention that he would come to visit for Christmas and Peter also made him promise to bring him and the other kids things from Sardinia. The two agreed to stay in contact, but it was decided that e-mail was best. Any further technical knowledge was a completely unrealistic expectation for Thomas and Letters seemed like a stretch and were 'too romantic' for Peter.

When he was finally dropped off at the same station where he was picked up all those months ago, Peter felt a strange cathartic wave over him. Perhaps it was finally seeing an emotional Professor, whom he had forged a lifelong relationship with. It also could have been the simple continued soundscape of the city - the birds chirping, engines humming, portable speakers blasting, skateboards rolling, door chimes ringing - all which really made the place feel alive, pulsing with a vibrancy he knew would remain consistent, long after he left.

"You going to be okay?" , Thomas asked.

Peter nodded.

"Get home safe please."

Peter felt cheeky. "I'm not going home... not really."

The two shared a long hug before Thomas peeled back and pulled a small book out of his pocket.

"I want you to have this. It's the basis for my book. Kind of a historical art fiction meditation piece. Read or don't, but it's doing nothing on my shelves."

Peter leafed through the pages giddily. He was happy to have some piece of Thomas DeBorr he could take back with him. With an emotionally restrained nod and salute, the two DeBorr men departed from one another. He would never again be thought of as the Professor in Peter's eyes.

Waiting at the bus station, Peter took every possible second to absorb the city in all its sensations one more time. The slightly salty air, it's cacophonous soundscape, it's grey atmosphere, and its garden of tightly packed, pastel-colored buildings, dotting the scenic undulating hills. If he never came back, he knew he'd have to have this moment right there.

And then he heard a voice.

"Peter?"

It was an older man's voice, but he couldn't quite place it.

"Peter!"

Right where Peter turned around, he stood feet away from a fast approaching Mr. Lau, whom he hadn't seen since the Fairmont. He was looking like a dapper man for his middle age with a scarf flowing from around his neck and a tight fedora suited to his head full of thinning hair. Peter was cautious, but he didn't seem hostile.

"Mr. Lau, good to see you."

"Are you off? Is this for London?"

Immediately Peter knew Marc had been good to his word. He was simply now off-topic.

"I'm afraid not. I actually have to go back to school."

"Oh, what a shame! Well I'm glad I got to see you one last time. I did enjoy our many conversations over good music. You'd grown up a lot this summer, I could tell."

"Thank you Mr. Lau. It really was my honor to get to know you."

"Safe travels Peter!"

He set off for a moment before pivoting around and pulling a small card out of my pocket.

"If you ever find yourself in the city again or even in New York, reach out to me. We're always looking for young talent and I get the sense that you'd do well... with a little more experience. Either way, let's keep in touch."

Peter looked at the card and admired its clean text before looking up to see Mr. Lau vanish before his eyes.

The bus ride back was long, passing through Reno and Winnemucca in Nevada, Salt Lake City and Provo in Utah, Grand Junction and Denver in Colorado, and finally through Salina in Kansas. When he arrived at the Junction in Lawrence, the sweeping plains had a small, frosty edge to them. He looked up at the clouds above, dotted so delicately above middle America and wished inside that he might have one descend to him again. Then, looking out at the town, he carefully tucked Mr. Lau's card in his wallet as if it were a precious ticket of some kind, safe keeping it so that he would be able to revisit it at the end of the year. Descending the steps from the bus stop of Massachusetts Street, Peter took the freshest breath of air he'd had in a while. With a fresh soul, now speckled with the earliest yearnings of adulthood, he rolled his suitcase to Burcham Park at the banks of the Kansas River, dropped all his belongings, let out a deep sigh and closed his eyes, hoping to dream once again of his summer in San Francisco.