

A CHEF'S NOTE

A book by Boris Konovalov

To the dreams that haunt me.

A SHORT INTRODUCTION

Despite what you have been told, or might think, this book isn't about cooking, although cooking still is a big part of it. This book is about a person who thrives in excellence and must deal with one of the biggest failures, which a human being can experience. Heartbreak. Sure, you might read about Michelin stars or culinary competitions, but at heart this is a book about the ways that professionals or talented people could deal with pain. Keep that in mind, while reading this book.

It's a cold November morning in Chicago, Illinois. Alexis, the sous chef of a world-class restaurant, is driving to her job. She left her fiancée and colleague Mark, back at home. He did not have to wake up as early as her. Despite her opulent occupation she likes to stay humble and drives to work in her small, old car that her parents gave her after her high school graduation. It's still dark and the only people not at home are partygoers and homeless men, stumbling drunkenly on the sidewalk. Still, the Chicago roads are empty, apart from a few patrolling police cars. Alexis cherishes the seldom moments when she doesn't have to drive through traffic. It's one of the few things she likes about waking up at 4:30 every day.

Things at the restaurant have been going well for the past few months. Positive reviews never stop coming in, customers are happy, and the staff's chemistry couldn't be better. Alexis couldn't be happier with her job.

With the car parked in Alexis' designated parking spot next to the garbage bins at the rear exit of the restaurant, she makes her way to the door. Usually the door is already open, because her boss arrives way before her, but that morning, Alexis had to open the door herself. After she unlocks the door, she enters with caution. It's uncanny seeing the place, where she spent most of the past two years of her life, empty. Chef Stanley is always the first to come and the last to leave. It's uncommon for him to even stay the night in the restaurant, which is why the team gave him a futon for his last birthday which he kept stored in the supply closet to not sleep on the floor. Come to think of it, his 35th birthday was a few days ago. This year, they celebrated it by making him take the night off and experiencing his beloved restaurant as a customer for the first and only time. As expected, he did have some notes, but he delivered them like all the other notes he ever had. With respect and understanding. This, and many other things, made him an extremely comfortable person to work with. He only ever lost his cool at himself and never lets it out on others, which, in some situations, is a ridiculously challenging thing to do and takes unimaginable mental strength.

If Stanley could be described in one word it would be quiet. The chef likes to stay concentrated while he's working, which is the only way some people see him. He lets out a laugh when a funny joke comes up and seems genuinely happy or sad when people tell him something that could provoke these emotions but most of the time, he keeps to himself and rarely lets his work get interrupted, which is particularly why he is the best at what he does.

After looking around for a minute, Alexis was sure she was alone. She does not think much of it and begins to change into her uniform expecting Stanley to show up at any minute. When she came up to her workstation, she saw a stack of papers with the front page saying "for Alexis" written with the neat handwriting of chef Stanley. Alexis imagined, with a sense of humor, what it could be. A promotion, a detailed set of every drafted recipe Stanley ever created or a very intimate love letter. Maybe this was the reason Stanley decided to come later. She flipped the first page and started reading, "Dear Alexis. My wonderful sous chef without whom the restaurant would not be where it is today. If you are reading this, I am dead."

Alexis' heart dropped, her chest tightened, and her knees became weak. This cannot be true. Why would Stanley do this at such a young age? She took out her cell phone and dialed Stanley's number. Voicemail. Is this really it? Is he dead? And if he is, what could he have possibly written on those pages to make up for it? Alexis didn't know if she had the heart to keep reading.

After she had gathered herself, Alexis rushed back to the car and began to drive to Stanley's apartment. On the way there she called 911 and informed them what had happened. She also texted Mark that there was an emergency.

When Alexis arrived, the first responders had already opened the door and found Stanley's body. Alexis jolted past them into the bathroom, she saw him in a bloody bathtub with a weird expression of peace and acceptance on his face. An expression Alexis had never seen a person make before.

Alexis broke down crying and fell to the ground. She couldn't fathom seeing the person that shaped her life for the past two years dead. So many thoughts should have gone through her head. Could she have prevented this? How long was Stanley sure? But the only thing she could think of was how much she would miss him. Not in the way you would miss a partner but, in the way, you would miss a friend after you thought about a joke they would like or your parents when you're sleeping over at a friend's. So many moments would be so different and empty without the chef and there is nothing she could do about it now.

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Stanley's funeral, which was planned and paid for in advance by him, was held next Saturday. Everyone from the restaurant showed up. Apart from them, there wasn't anyone else that could have come. His parents died a few years prior, and he didn't have any close friends outside the restaurant. The ones he did have, were either dead or not on speaking terms with him.

The will said to let the kitchen staff go through Stanley's belongings and sell everything they wouldn't keep. His apartment and car were to be sold immediately. Alexis kept his knives, cookbooks and notebooks. There was nothing more to keep. Stanley did not invest much in material things, which left him with a not-so small fortune that was invested back into the restaurant and the staff as per his request. The restaurant itself was left to Alexis, which left her in a state of honor and shock.

Alexis' first shift as CDC went as follows: She woke up as early as she always did, if not earlier, and made her way to work. Upon arriving, she changed into her uniform and started waiting on her orders of meat, fish, vegetables and everything she would need for today's shift. Most of the things arrived on time, except for the beef. Stanley was very picky when it came to where he was ordering his meat from. He had a beef guy, a pork guy and a chicken guy and none of those were the same. Stanley was so serious about having the best meat in his restaurant that he knew the animals which he would be cooking that night by name, because he had visited them occasionally ever since they were born. Although this guaranteed that the restaurant got the best product every single time, it complicated things by a lot. At first Alexis didn't know which of the meat guys was arriving late, because Stanley never saved numbers on the work phone, but after a brief conversation, she got it. She screamed and shouted, until she got the butcher to get himself together and arrive as fast as possible. Turns out, he was just making up an excuse, so he could take his sweet time drinking his morning coffee.

Alexis prepared her mise en place, after which the shift was mostly smooth sailing. The cooks started coming in and before she knew it, the shift started. Except for the fact that the saucier had to adjust himself to seeing the much taller Mark in place of Alexis and that Alexis was called Stanley by mistake a few times, everything went well.

Stanley made sure that the kitchen stayed quiet during service. Dirty jokes and insults were only to be said during lunch or after work entirely. This made bar outings and family meals very loud. Every time the cooks went on break, it was as if they had just woken up from a coma. Everybody starts shouting at each other about the mistakes they noticed during service. They just had to get it out of their system before returning to the calm and relaxing environment in the kitchen. In the end, it was just friendly banter, and everyone got along quite well, which was apparent after the four-letter words stopped pouring out and the cooks started talking about the game last night or some other conversation topics that good friends had.

After the shift ended and the cooks went to get a drink at the bar, Alexis was once again left alone to plan and prepare for the next day. Some reporters came to write an article on Stanley's death, which made Alexis realize that she didn't know Stanley's reasoning behind the suicide. After she sent the reporters away, she glanced over to her locker and thought about the letter which she had left there before she left for Stanley's apartment. She finally had gathered the strength to continue reading it.

Alexis opened her locker, hesitantly took out the stack of papers and began to read.

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"Dear Alexis. My wonderful sous chef without whom the restaurant would not be where it is today. If you are reading this, I am dead." Her hands started shaking and the images of Stanley came rushing back. She almost wanted to stop, but she pushed through. "I know it's terrible for me to lay it on you like that and I am sure that you could be feeling guilty right now, but I assure you, it's ok and I am going to tell you why.

To fully understand the reason behind me taking my own life, we need to start from the very beginning. Despite the importance of my childhood, it can be described briefly.

I was born into an upper-middle-class family as the first child. My parents achieved what they wanted through hard work and hard work only, which impacted how they raised their child. My father was estranged to emotions entirely, while my mother only felt them when it was too late, so I was never educated on emotions enough. Surprisingly, my emotional intelligence was never lacking. In the end, I had a good early childhood because my parents, despite their difficulties with emotions, could still express love for their child.

My father lived and worked overseas, which led to him having an affair. My parents split up shortly after. I think after they told me, I was never the same. My mother was devastated, and I had to bear the load of that alone. Her expectations for me went through the roof, which is hard for a 7-year-old. I was signed up to everything from theater classes to coding camps. The stress of the extracurricular activities did not help a young boy who was missing his father. This is why, when I met James, an IT geek, making money on the side by teaching kids how to code whom my mother hired, I trusted him completely. It started with uncomfortable questions at first and quickly snowballed into inappropriate behavior. Apart from him, I didn't have many friends. And I didn't find it that strange that a nine-year-old had an almost thirty-year-old as a friend. This made justifying James' behavior easier for me. Until I couldn't anymore.

After two years I couldn't take it anymore and just told my mother that I had lost interest in coding and asked her to stop seeing James. My mother, the smart woman that she is, saw right through my blatant lies, asking me what was wrong. I told her, which led to us taking legal action against

James and him having to serve a sentence in prison. I did feel bad for a while but that passed, although what didn't pass was the depression I fell into. The moment I told my mother what happened was the moment I stopped being truly happy and I have not been ever since."

Alexis had to take a moment to think. She couldn't imagine how bad it must have been for Stanley to experience all of that at such a young age. The amount of pain that he had to go through is just unfair and could not be wished on one's worst enemy. After a sip of water, she picked up the letter again:

"The next few years of my life were filled with unimportant distractions, which made me think less of what happened. After I got into high school, I met my first girlfriend. I thought that I loved her, but now that I think about it, I'm not sure that the feelings that we had for each other were real. We just had similar goals and needed a person by our side to fill the empty spaces in our schedules. I found it important to keep myself busy and distracted and she got off on the wrong foot with people who could have been her friends, so she had me as a substitute. We were together for almost two years and after a while I was convinced that I did not need to distract myself constantly and that she made me truly happy.

After she went to another school and met new friends who cared about her and made her feel special, she did not have any use for me anymore and we broke up. It all came so suddenly, and my perfect world came crashing down. I didn't feel what a person with a broken heart would usually feel. The feelings that had risen instead, were the same ones I hadn't dealt with all those years before because I decided to distract myself from them. I was only missing her because she made me forget. Every day I would wake up with cold sweat drenching my sheets because I dreamt of James. Every time I saw a man with remotely similar features as him my heart would stop; my vision would blur, and I had to stop and take a moment to gather myself before I could continue with my day. The pain of the emotions that I had not dealt with was unbearable and there was no consistent way of dealing with them after I was left without a partner.

My grades or friendships did not suffer much. I was still outperforming my classmates as I was before and hanging out with friends was a needed leisure to not be alone. My ambitions were high, and I had no intention of slowing down. I was never the best, but I was good, which was enough for me.

A few months have passed, and I never broke out of my routine of school and friends. Staying in my routine made me feel safe. It seems dull, because it was. In that time, you couldn't have described me as more than an empty shell of a man.

While going out for my morning coffee I met the girl who would change my life radically and lead me to where I stand as I'm writing this. Her name should sound all too familiar to you. The girl's name, who stood in front of me in that line on that specific morning, was Coraline."

The name did sound familiar. Alexis glanced down at her apron and there it was. Embroidered in a dark purple written in all bold letters was the name of the restaurant. 'Coraline.' The kitchen staff always had a hunch that the restaurant was named after a woman Stanley once knew, but nobody would have guessed that it dates back that far. Stanley always dodged the question of how the restaurant got its name, so it was satisfying to finally find out, although it could have been under better circumstances. Alexis carried on with the letter.

“Coraline was quite short but that did not take away from her appearance. She had beautiful, big, blue eyes and a wonderful smile that showed her mildly crooked teeth. Her dark hair fell on her face in a way which seemed accidental yet still put together. When I saw her standing in front of me, I couldn’t stop looking, which is why she even started talking to me in the first place. After noticing that I was staring at her, she asked politely, “need anything?”

I couldn’t let out anything more than a pathetic attempt at an apology that made her chuckle. She left her number on a piece of tissue and told me to call her. I didn’t come home until after midnight that day. My mother was quite worried that her teenage son was out so late, but she knew how responsible I was and let it go. I did not even mean to come home at such a time, my mind was just filled with the thought of those eyes that were looking at me this morning.

I called Coraline a day later, once I finally snapped out of the euphoria I was feeling from the day before. We had a brief conversation and found out we went to the same school and had just never noticed each other, which is unsurprising considering I always show up too early and do not spend much time in the halls.

We called once a day since then, and once I built up some courage, I asked her out on a dinner date. She agreed and after talking for a bit more, we decided to meet by a metro station in the city center.

Growing up with a woman has taught me a lot about treating a woman right and being a gentleman has only worked out in my favor. The night of our first date, my mother went over the basics of dinner etiquette and romantic small talk before sending me on my way. She was always proud of her gentleman son.

Coraline and I kicked it off. She is an incredibly funny person with an interesting personality and lots of stories to show for it. She told me that people described her as a ray of sunshine who is always in a good mood, which I couldn’t agree with more. We talked a lot and laughed even more and after we finished our food, I brought her back home where she gave me a tight hug that I didn’t know I needed. On the way back home, I was sure that I had fallen in love.

Coraline didn’t text much in general, which made me feel unsure about her feelings for me, but when she called me or when we met in person, she greeted me with her warm smile and could not stop talking and laughing. I never met her mother, but I still got to meet her adorable dog, who liked me very much. We kept it romantic and only kissed after the second date, which was an enchanting experience. Her kisses were so soft and tender and made my whole body feel weightless. I was addicted to them but not as much as I was addicted to her. Everything about her was perfect. Her soft cheeks, her tiny hands with her well-kept nails, the way she looked into my eyes, how she linked our hands together and put them in my pocket to keep them warm when we were walking home, how she rested her head on my chest while we were in the elevator or waiting for the bus and finally the way she made me feel. Even if we didn’t talk for the whole day the feeling that I got from last seeing her or hearing her voice persisted.

She was the first of us to say, ‘I love you’. After she did, I was left speechless. I knew that I loved her too but the fact that she said it, was so magical that it left me stumped and I couldn’t properly answer. Even if I could have, she already grabbed me by my coat and kissed me. She was such a wonderful kisser.

I remember how she always told me to pursue the hobbies that I forgot because of a lack of time or interest, and she seemed to genuinely listen and care about the things I told her. She was just such a caring person in general.

After a month of our unforgettable relationship, she called me late at night. I was still asleep, so the call went to voicemail. The next morning came, and I saw the message. I was not expecting anything but some new gossip or an accidental call, so I listened to it without hesitation. The words that she said in that message broke my heart.

“I cannot force anything that is not there” she said.

My chest tightened and I couldn't breathe.

“I don't have feelings for you, and I really hope that you will find another wonderful girl who will treat you right and give you the love you deserve” she continued.

I stopped listening. I knew that I did not want anyone other than her. I couldn't imagine loving anyone the way that I loved her.

I couldn't cry. My eyes were dry, and nothing would come out. I sat down in silence and tried to gather my thoughts. The feelings that I was feeling were new. I felt depressed and alone in this world and I started to miss Coraline. I reached out to her multiple times out of desperation, and she was understanding, but she really couldn't care less. The quick glances in the halls quickly turned from friendly to hateful and it didn't take her long to start ignoring me and shoot down my desperate attempts for her attention. Before I knew it, she was already hanging out with other guys. I was terribly envious, yet every time I saw her, she felt more like a stranger. I didn't know her anymore and I never would again.

Every time I would see another girl. I would look for Coraline in her and I did not want to hurt anyone by telling them that I still loved the girl that broke my heart. So, I never let it come to that and stopped pursuing romantic relationships in general.

I missed her incredibly and I still do as I am writing this letter. I will never forget her favorite flowers, the food she likes to eat or how she would name her kids. But what haunts me to this day are her unforgettable blue eyes and her dark hair that smelled so heavenly.

Although the heartbreak was devastating, I could not feel a drop of anger against Coraline. Every negative emotion that I felt was directed at me. The hate and anger that I felt for myself spiraled more and more until I convinced that I was not enough, and I would never be enough. So, I got to work.

I did not really have a plan. The only things I had figured out were that I had to finish school and get into a renowned university to make my mother happy. Day after day my mother saw my grades improve and noticed that I came back home later because I was busy with different clubs and sports which went on until the late hours of the day. She was proud of me and had no complaints about it. After working tirelessly for the rest of my time in high school and a daunting application process to many ivy-league universities, I got accepted to most of them. It took me some time to

choose where I wanted to go. But after pondering for a few days, I decided to go to Harvard to pursue a career as a lawyer.

It was hard for my mother to let me go from quiet Austria to the gigantic, loud and confusing United States of America, but she prioritized a good education over everything else, so she made her peace with it. After successfully moving to Boston, I started my studies. I made some friends and went to parties, just to fill my free time with superficial distractions. Despite my choice of pastime which would worsen the grades of any other student, my performance never did, and I was still on course to becoming an outstanding alumnus.

After a while, I started to work as a dishwasher in a restaurant to help pay my student loans. Boston is not really known for their food, so it was not anything too fancy but also not a hole in the wall. Even though the standards weren't high, the atmosphere in the kitchen still reeked of hard work. Even as a dishwasher I felt inspired to do my work faster, better and more consistently. That's just how a kitchen influences you.

I always showed up earlier even though I was not specifically obliged to, but I think the chef was glad. When I came in one day he was the only one there and he seemed distressed. When I asked him what was wrong, he told me that a chef had cancelled for today and they did not have any time to find a replacement. After a moment of silence, he threw an apron at me and gestured me to come to the cutting board. The first things he took out were a knife, which he put into my hands, and an onion.

"Chop the onion" he said.

I had never cooked before, but I still tried. After watching me desperately cut the onion for a while, the chef pushed me aside and threw the uneven cubes of onion into the bin and showed me how to cut them properly. I watched carefully and internalized what he showed me. After he had cut the onion into perfect and small cubes, he took out three more onions, told me to cut them and left. He probably expected me to have to take a few tries until I got it right but to his surprise, I cut all three of the onions perfectly, just like he showed me. Turns out I had a hidden talent, which I never put to use apart from some simple meals a broke student would make.

From that point on, the chef, who was a second-generation Italian immigrant named Ricardo, appointed me as student-cook. I was paid as much as I was while washing dishes, but now, I got to cook. That's when I realized that I was sure this was what I wanted to do in the future. Every day I came in earlier than the rest of the staff so Ricardo could teach me a new technique that I would perfect during the day. It's a win-win situation for both of us, considering I got to do what I started to love, and the chef got prepared ingredients that he needed for the rest of the day.

A few weeks passed, and Ricardo finally found me to be fit enough for a position as an actual cook. The feeling that I got from getting the apron with my name on it was incredible. The first day went as badly as it could have. After doing monotone work like peeling potatoes or chopping mushrooms for the past few weeks, I thought I would be ready to be an actual chef. I couldn't be further from the truth. I spilled some stocks and broke a few plates before I stopped overestimating myself. That's when things started going back on track.

The way the people worked in that kitchen amazed me. The cooks there weren't by any means qualified. They were mostly uneducated people trying to get by, but they still worked hard.

Working in that restaurant made me fall in love with cooking. I loved it because of the methodical procedures of it. You always get back exactly what you gave. If you looked away from a reducing sauce for even a second, the taste would be completely different. If you let the yeast activate for a minute more, your dough will not rise. But if you did everything right and followed the recipe, you got an amazing dish that rewarded you for the work you had put in. I got from cooking the one thing that I had yearned for so long. Equally returned love. I was convinced that this was what I wanted to become the best at. I was sure of it.

I started staying late and learned to prepare every dish on the menu by heart and perfecting it. It took time, but recipe after recipe I became better and better. After 6 months I had every recipe internalized and could replicate it at any moment of the day.

But no matter how well or quickly I prepared that recipe, the chef didn't bat an eye. He was used to efficiency and accuracy, because he expected it from me, so he wasn't impressed.

Ricardo was an excellent cook, but by some kind of series of misfortunes, he ended up being the head chef here. I saw that he was miserable. Cooking in a no-name restaurant could not be more boring, and he knew it. Sometimes, when I came in earlier, I saw him cook. The food that came out at the end was impeccable, but that wasn't because he knew every recipe by heart and knew exactly what to add, and when. The greatness of his craft had a deeper reason, which I couldn't understand.

I watched him work and at every step of any recipe I had multiple notes on things he could have done to improve or to become more efficient but that *something* that was missing from me was still there. That same thing that I saw in everyone who works alongside you and the thing you have an unimaginable amount of."

Alexis felt flattered, although she could not quite put her finger on what exactly it was, what Stanley was describing. Could it be dedication? It seems like Stanley had enough of that. Talent was also definitely something that Stanley had in his arsenal. No matter how hard she thought, she still could not figure it out, so she went on with the letter.

"No matter where I was, I was thinking about that *something* that I did not have. Whether I was drinking my morning coffee or listening to my professor's lectures it never left my mind. Neither did cooking in itself. Everywhere I was, I was thinking about the menu of the day and all the steps I could mess up and I made sure that these mistakes would only happen in my imagination. Not a moment passed without me thinking about cooking. The only time when the thought of sautéing, frying, searing, broiling, chopping, steaming, or baking left my mind, was while I was sleeping and that's where I got to see Coraline every day.

Every time I closed my eyes to go to sleep, I would wake up next to her. We would always be somewhere else. Either at the beach enjoying the sunset, in my apartment watching a movie, at a party or in the busy streets of Vienna pushing through the crowds of tourists in the busy city center. The dream that remained in my mind as the most vivid and detailed began with me being held by her with tears in my eyes. I was never a person that cried often and especially not in front of people, yet the thought of her tiny body attempting to enclose my broad shoulders as tightly as possible while lying in her bed was so beautiful and peaceful. I remember that the dream continues with her running her fingers through my hair repeatedly and giving me a kiss on the forehead before whispering into my ear, "Everything is going to be alright. Don't you worry about a thing. You're my baby and I'll always

be there for you. No matter what you do and what mistakes you make. You can always come back into my arms, and I will always be there to hold you.”

The dream ends abruptly, for no apparent reason. When I woke up from that dream, I broke down in tears, because the moment I woke up, the stress I had left behind in the previous day came rushing back. I knew that there was no one that would hold me, run her fingers through my hair and wash away my tears. I remembered that I was nobody’s baby and that it mattered what mistakes I made.

Another thing I had noticed about my dreams was that there was no food in sight. When we were on a picnic, the food was finished, and the baskets were empty. When the movie we were watching included a scene in a restaurant, I looked away or I would be interrupted by a loving kiss. The streets we were walking through, which are usually filled with small delis and ice-cream shops, were too dark to make out what was going on in any of the buildings. My subconscious was actively trying to run away from any mention or thought of cooking because it already plagued my time spent awake.

Every time I woke up, I missed Coraline even more. Back when we were still talking, she always told me to pursue what I wanted and to not let myself be controlled by anyone. When I remembered these words, I was convinced that cooking was a dream I had to follow.

Ignoring the signs my brain gave me; I continued to cook and think about cooking, and I naturally continued to become better at it. Despite my improvement, that *something* that differentiated me from Ricardo never showed up. No matter what I did and how hard I tried, the chef never saw me on the same level as himself.

Despite my ever-growing obsession with being a chef, my grades never slipped, and my mother did not have a clue that I took cooking so seriously. She never saw it as a real job. She was surprised I was even getting paid when I told her that I got a job in a kitchen. My mother always had this fantasy that I would become this rich and successful person and that I would buy her a mansion in a romantic Austrian village and get her a cherry-red Jaguar, which she dreamed of since she first saw one. My mother repeated this dream so many times to me that I made it my own, so when people told me to follow my desires, I was convinced that I was doing exactly that. But after living in a tight dorm room for the past year and discovering my obsession with cooking I thought that maybe being a rich corporate prick was not the thing I wanted from my future.”

Alexis fell asleep after barely reading through that last sentence. Her day at work was exhausting and she barely had the energy to either come home or read a long letter of a dead person.

Mark called Alexis multiple times, but she never answered. He was incredibly worried, especially since she started acting so differently after finding out about Stanley’s death. She would stay late at the restaurant, even if there was no apparent reason to do so. Talking to her was hard while she was in the kitchen. She was consumed by concentration and obsession over everything being perfect. Lashing out on anyone who made a mistake was common practice after she took over. But despite all of it she refused to get any professional help, which made her personal life with Mark increasingly difficult.

After tracking the location of Alexis' phone, only to realize that it was in the restaurant, he made his way there. When he came inside, he saw his fiancée lying on the floor and sleeping. The kitchen was clean, and the menus for the next two weeks were neatly placed on everyone's workstation alongside the recipes for the dishes. The new menu included a green goddess salad served with puffed-up parmesan crust followed by a salmon and spinach quiche for the starters. The main courses were fried scallop with a selection of sauces, pasta with truffle gnocchi and some original pastries, created by their talented pastry chef, colored by flower pigments, topped with smoked salmon and caviar as an appetizer. The dessert was a simple Panna cotta. Every one of those recipes were pulled out of Stanley's notebooks, which Alexis never let out of her sight.

Mark directed his gaze back to the sleeping woman on the floor. She always looked the most peaceful when she was sleeping, and it reminded Mark why he fell in love with her in the first place. She was always in such a solemn mood, yet he never could take her seriously and couldn't help but crack a joke or mock her expression, which he found rather cute.

Her blonde hair was tied up in a bun and her makeup started to wear off after a long day, but Mark still thought of her as the most beautiful woman in the world.

After admiring his soon-to-be wife for a moment, he got out the mattress that was kept in the closet after being given to Stanley, carefully put Alexis on it, covered her up with an old blanket which he found in that same closet and went back home. Mark knew that Alexis would be furious to find herself in her own bed the next morning and there was only enough space on the mattress for one person and Mark was never a fan of the idea of sleeping at his place of work, so going back home and sleeping in his bed was the only plausible decision.

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Alexis dreamt of her first day. She remembers being fresh out of culinary school and eager to get to work. When she arrived, she was in awe. The restaurant looked astounding and made anybody that entered it, feel a wide spectrum of emotions. A true piece of art, born from Stanley's mind. And the idea that she would be working there exhilarated Alexis even more. She was the first cook to arrive and found a distressed Stanley pacing around the kitchen and mumbling something to himself. When she asked him what was wrong, he jumped, glanced at his watch and gave Alexis a look that said, "you should not be here this early".

"I woke up far too early and could not fall asleep anymore, so I just decided to come here since I had nothing else to do" Explained Alexis after a short moment of silence.

"Sure. Way to show your dedication" Answered Stanley with a big smile on his face.

Alexis turned red. She had read about Stanley in every culinary magazine and news source possible. It was impossible not to know him and his work if you were at least somewhat interested in the world of gourmet chefs. Getting a compliment from him, especially before even doing any work, was a serious feat.

“If you didn’t notice, I was quite worried there and that is not without a reason” rambled Stanley, “The butcher who is supposed to deliver us our fresh meat everyday busted his tire and needs to wait for a tow truck, that will only arrive after hours, and we cannot afford that”.

Stanley took a deep breath as he did not breathe once during that whole sentence.

“What I need you to do is drive over there with some coolers that I will give you and get that meat as fast as possible so that we can start preparing it in time. Do not start a conversation with the butcher. He can get quite talkative. Believe me, I know. I have wasted more than enough time listening to his stories of him and his friends on generic fishing trips. So, get on with it!”

The chef gave Alexis four 20-gallon coolers that she had to somehow fit in her Mini Cooper. But, she somehow managed it. After speeding through the roads of Chicago and barely avoiding a conversation with the intimidating, but friendly butcher she came back to the restaurant. Stanley did not expect her to come back this quickly, but he didn’t complain. At that point some of the other chefs had arrived, including Alexis’ future fiancée. Without further hesitation, they got to work.

In the end, service on that day was successful and no other mishaps happened. When almost everyone went home, Stanley asked Alexis to stay with him for a bit.

“You really saved my ass back there. Not bad for a new kid. Thank you.” He said.

7

Alexis woke up in tears. Seeing as she did not get to cry after Stanley’s death, this was quite freeing. She looked at her phone for a moment. It’s 4 AM. Alexis gathers herself and thinks about her dream. The more she thinks about it, the less she can remember. The order of events gets messed up more and more and Stanley’s voice starts to sound muffled and distorted. She gives up and forgets the dream completely.

Only after a few seconds she realized that someone had come into the restaurant and given her a nicer place to sleep. She knew it was Mark. The moment she realized that she had left him back at home all alone, she felt like she did not deserve him. No matter how focused she got, he was always there, because he knew that she loved him despite everything.

After reminiscing about Mark for a while, she stashed the mattress and cover he had so carefully set up for her and started preparing for today’s service. While she was checking inventory and completing the steps she skipped last night, she thought about Stanley’s letter. What was the thing that he did not have? How can he be so sure that she was so full of it and why doesn’t she herself know?

She finished her chores half an hour after waking up. Mark usually shows up at 6, so Alexis had time for herself. She went into Stanley’s office. It belonged to her now, but she barely moved any of the stuff he had left there before his death. The only thing she did was move some files from the table, so she could have a small space on her table to do some work if she needed to.

Alexis sat down in the old and squeaky chair with Stanley’s letter and after taking a big breath, she went on with reading it.

“After coming to that realization, I called my mother. I was not really sure what exactly I wanted to say, but I knew the core idea of it: I will be a cook.

My mother picked up and started excitedly talking about her day. I quickly interrupted her with a phrase that I barely got out of my mouth: “Mom, I’m going to be a cook”. Silence. My mother broke the quietness with an angry lecture. I forgot what exactly she told me on the phone that night, but it was something along the lines of “This is way too risky of a career. It is easy to fail and hard to get up after you do”. We screamed at each other for a long time until we came to an agreement. We concluded that I had to finish university before embarking on my culinary adventure, in order to have something to fall back on if being a chef doesn't work out.

After two more semesters of hard work and dedication, I passed with flying colors and had some money saved up from the hotel kitchen. My mother could not be prouder and although she did not imagine me in the role of a professional cook and would much rather see me in a suit and tie, she supported me all the way through my journey. She flew to America for my graduation. It was nice to see her applauding in the crowd as I was going up on the stage to pick up my degree.

After the ceremony I went to dinner with my mother. The restaurant was not anything special, just something we quickly found because we were hungry. After we sat down, a waitress brought us the menu and I quickly began to analyze it to see how many of these dishes I knew the recipe for, but my mother interrupted my concentration when she started talking:

“Maybe you should stay?” she said while nervously fidgeting with her wine glass.

I wanted to scream at her or flip the table to cause a scene, but I was in too good of a mood to follow through. I sighed and answered calmly.

“I made my choice, and I am not going to change my mind so spontaneously.” My mother looked away. “Cooking is my passion. It is the only thing that successfully keeps me distracted from things I do not want to think about. When I cook, I feel complete. I get exactly what I give and such a relationship with anything in life is worth more than anything. So no, I will not stay. This is what I am going to do whether you like it or not.” The look in my mother’s eyes told me that she was sad that she could not change my mind, but she accepted that she could not do anything about it anymore.

We did not exchange a single word during the rest of the dinner. I was so angry at my mother. After all these years she still couldn’t stop trying to be in control of my life. No matter how good the results that I gave her were, it still wasn’t enough for her. She wanted to keep me as her project until her last breath. I was proud of myself that I finally took my stand and told her off, although it was not easy seeing the pain in her eyes. I knew she wanted the best for me or at least her idea thereof, but it was not what I wanted, and I was ready to take a risk to be happy for at least some period of time. After we finished our dinner, she called a cab to the airport to return home. When the taxi showed up, I helped her with her bags and said my goodbyes. She looked at me for a moment and after an awkward silence, she looked into my eyes and said: “I love you. It is going to be okay.” These were the last words I was going to hear from her in a while.

I started my journey by selling everything that I could not take with me on my journey across the globe. It was difficult to let go of the memories I associated with every item as I packed them in a carton box to drop off at a local thrift shop. After being left with only a suitcase and backpack filled with clothes, my papers, a laptop, some notebooks and a water bottle, I went to the closest train station

to buy a ticket to New York City. I figured starting my journey in a city where so many cultures meet is a safe bet, and I could think about where to go from there.

My time in New York was interesting. I walked into a restaurant that seemed nice, ordered the first thing off the menu and stayed until closing time. Once a waiter came out to tell me to leave, I asked for the chef. The waiter chuckled, thinking that I was joking, but walked back to the kitchen once he realized I was serious. A few minutes later, a tall man with a dirty apron and a cigarette in his mouth came out to see me. After he came closer, I took a deep breath and said, that I wanted to work for him.

“Sure.” The chef chuckled. “We need a new dishwasher anyway. You start tomorrow.”

This marked the start of my culinary exploration. I walked in the next day, only to be greeted by the smell of smoke and alcohol, with some metal playing in the back. The cooks there were nothing like I had seen before. They had big, callused hands and aprons that looked like they had just been dragged through the sewers. They called each other names and made jokes about their mothers non-stop, and it seemed like normal procedure. The chef showed me the kitchen sink and half an hour later, the shift began. The restaurant was busy that night and the busier it got, the rowdier the insults and jokes of my fellow chefs became. I found it amusing and honestly inspirational. After the shift, I asked some of the chefs if they had any techniques to teach me. They laughed and went home.

Over the next three months, I would rise through the ranks from dishwasher to fryer, which wasn't much of a climb, but I still felt accomplished. The frying station was closer to the other cooks than the sink, so it was easier to watch how the others were working. Instead of asking if they could teach me anything, I watched and learned myself. Throughout these three months, I learned quite a few things and was quite proud of myself.

After another shift, the chef stopped me and whispered with a cigarette in his mouth, “Look kid, you are very ambitious. I see the fire in your eyes. I bet you're destined for greatness, but despite how much I love my kitchen, I know you don't have much more to learn here. I think you need to travel around and eat. I promise that you will find out many things that even I couldn't dream of knowing.”

Following the chef's advice, I booked the next flight to Europe. I felt that the USA had nothing more to teach me and that I had to go to the place where the highest level of cooking is practiced.

My arrival at the airport was early and I had enough time to check in my bag and even get some lunch before proceeding to the gate. The flight itself was uncomfortable to say the least. I was squashed in between two people which were very unaware of the space that they were taking up and there were multiple crying children onboard. I didn't catch a wink of sleep. In the end it was all worth enduring, because the moment I caught whiff of the air in France, I was in love.

I spent the next eight months wandering across central Europe and staying in cheap hotels while I gathered experience in local restaurants. I worked until I found that there was nothing else for me to learn. My time in each restaurant went somewhat like it did in New York, yet much shorter and much more effective. The sheer number of restaurants that I visited, brought up my knowledge and experience to new heights. That experience permitted me to work at relatively successful and critically acclaimed restaurants where I met many talented chefs that taught me techniques, they either

learnt while they were in culinary school or picked up themselves. The connections I made with them and the wisdom they bestowed upon me helped me in the next restaurant I visited, and my talent got even more refined, yet I still felt incomplete.

My search ended when I came across a restaurant on the coast of Sicily in a small town called Menfi. I got there after practically walking from north to south Italy and then finally getting on a bus, which led me to ending up in that town. The city in itself was tiny and did not have many interesting landmarks, but that did not keep it from still having that charm that such townships tend to have. As I walked through the old and narrow streets, I asked every unassuming passerby or grandpa in a cafe where the best restaurant was. No matter how many people I asked, they all pointed me in the same direction of a restaurant called Tramonto. It took me some time to find it, considering there was no apparent signage pointing to the restaurant's location, forcing me to rely on my poor understanding of directions given me by locals that did not speak a word of another language other than Italian.

When I finally found the spot, it was already after sunset and the restaurant seemed packed. The building was quite old and moderately large, it had three floors, the first of which housed the venue of the restaurant itself. When I walked in, the smell of candles, old wood and the kitchen hit me so hard that I had to take a moment before taking any step further. The restaurant could not be any more local. Every time somebody walked in, they came up to the kitchen window and told the chef how many people were part of the group and where they would sit. It seemed like both the customers and the chef knew prematurely what table they were going to sit at but kept up the tradition as a formality. The sound of conversation and laughter was periodically interrupted by the sound of a bell coming from the kitchen window, after which a deep voice shouted a number. The moment the number is said, somebody walks up and takes however many plates were set onto the windowsill of the same dish before returning to their table. I noticed a complete absence of menus and the only option of a drink was a bottle of red wine that was set on every table prematurely. After observing for a few minutes more, I could work out that there was only one employee in the whole establishment, and he was working tirelessly in the kitchen. I wondered how in the hell that man was able to convince a whole town to reprogram their behavior in restaurants to match his workstyle. It amazed me. I could not trust myself to interrupt this local routine, so I decided to stand quietly in a corner until I was the only one there, which took longer than I expected, and I eventually fell asleep in a restaurant where I never was before next to my bags. Risky if you ask me.

I dreamt of Coraline. What surprised me was that unlike my usual dreams about her, this time I dreamt of the night we met. I walked into the busy coffee shop in the morning and stood in line, after which I noticed a short, brunette girl in front of me and even from the back I could not take my eyes off her. She turned around and was about to say the phrase that started it all in her sweet voice, but instead a deep voice of a man resonated in my head.

“Need anything?” It spoke.

I was ripped from my sleep and jumped on my feet only to find a burly, short and bearded man, who was cleaning a knife and eyeing me from top to bottom.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to fall asleep--” I stopped, thinking the man standing before me wouldn’t understand a word I was saying.

“Don’t sweat it. I speak English.” he said with an understanding smirk as if he had just read my thoughts. His voice was raspy, and he talked with a Brooklyn accent. I heard my fair share of them while I was in New York, mostly screaming at me when I crossed the road without looking.

“My name Is Stanley, and I am a passionate cook and have been travelling Europe to improve my skills and abilities.” I continued. “After a long journey I found myself here and after witnessing the rather unorthodox means you use to operate the restaurant, I decided that there are many things that could be learned from you.”

“I’m sure you’re hungry. Let me fix something up for you.” Mumbled the man after a moment of silence. “My name is... Geoffrey.” Geoffrey hesitated before continuing. “Not often does an outsider come to this place. I’m surprised the locals even told you where it is.”

“Maybe I’m just charming.” I chuckled.

“Sit down,” he said, “I’ll bring some food out for the both of us.”

Geoffrey made his way back to the kitchen. Rather than respecting his suggestion, I followed right behind him, which he didn’t seem to mind. The kitchen was already cleaned beforehand, and everything seemed organized when we entered. If I decide to cook for somebody, I usually ask them what they want or think of a recipe the person might like and suggest it to them, yet Geoffrey did not seem to do any of these things. He wandered around his kitchen almost aimlessly, peeking into every cabinet and sometimes taking a vegetable or some spices out of them. The order of the ingredients he picked did not seem conventional and occasionally, he would look at the things, think for a moment and continue wandering. The walk-in fridge was where he spent the most time pondering about what exactly he was going to take from there, yet it still did not seem as if he was following a recipe.

After about fifteen minutes of circling around the kitchen, he laid down his ingredients, heated up the stove with a pan on it and started chopping the carrots he picked out.

“What are you cooking?” I asked, “Is there a recipe I can look at to help?”

“Not that I know of.” Chuckled Geoffrey “Right now I just need to listen to my heart, and cook some food.” He directed his eyes back to the cutting board and his expression went blank, like he was dead or sleeping, despite this, his eyes still showed that his brain was working and doing so very thoroughly.

My jaw dropped. I took a step back and took everything I witnessed in. Geoffrey kept on cooking, and it was so beautiful that I could not look at anything else. His chopping was precise, and he used the right amount of everything. Even if I had the recipe he was following, I don’t think there would be any notes I could give him. His efficiency and precision were unmatched and worlds above mine. As Geoffrey continued to cook, I recognized the thing that started this journey all along, yet I did not see that spark that I was looking for inside him. He was rather the embodiment of it. The thing that I had been looking for the last few years of my life was in the same room as me. I watched him closely. It was not the way he worked, but the way he thought. He did not follow a recipe that he learnt, he was making one up on the go. He knew exactly how anything would taste in any situation. He could tell the difference between a steamed, boiled, grilled and baked potato with his eyes closed. Every technique he ever learned and every food he had ever tasted was burnt into his brain and he used them to know exactly how the final dish would taste before the pan was even out. He did not

follow instructions, but he used the food as paint and the cookware as his paintbrush to finally complete his masterpiece on a plate as the canvas.

I was paralyzed up until Geoffrey told me that the food was ready, and when we sat down and I tasted the dish he had just created from nothing, I shed a tear. Everything from the taste to the texture was perfect. It reminded me of my childhood in the best way possible and inspired me for the future at the same time.

“How do you do what you do?” I stuttered with a full mouth.

“I thought you were a passionate cook.” He laughed, but after noticing that I was serious he continued. “The more you’re on the job, the easier it gets. No matter how talented your mom thinks you are, creating a dish from scratch takes practice. Some people see a vision in their dreams and wake up to bring it to life. Others do something entirely different. It depends on the chef.”

“I will stay here as long as I need to, until I have perfected the craft of creating such masterpieces as the one sitting before me.” I explained while pointing at the plate I was eating from.

Geoffrey's eyes lit up. He seemed like a friendly and happy person before, but now he was even happier. He stood up, ran through the kitchen and climbed what sounded like a few flights of stairs. When he came down, he was holding a chef's hat and an apron in his arms.

“Your bedroom is upstairs. We wake up at 4:30 and I will show you the works of the restaurant. For now, you will be my server until you are ready for the kitchen. After closing I will teach you what you want to learn.” Rambled Geoffrey excitedly, without taking a breath before giving me the apron and hat.”

8

The sous chef stopped reading. She could not help but think back to her first days working with Stanley after reading about this mysterious Geoffrey. When she first came to work for Stanley, she went through the same process he described in the letter. She too came into the restaurant only being able to replicate and follow recipes and Stanley taught her exactly how to create. She remembers seeing the colors finally forming a picture after months of non-stop trial and error in the kitchen. Alexis recalls seeing Stanley even happier than her after he recognized her proud smirk. A tear rolled down Alexis' rose cheek. The tear was one of happiness and nostalgia and gave Alexis a feeling of warmth and comfort. She pressed the stack of papers in her arms against her chest as if she was hugging them and thought of Stanley. Why did he have to leave? He had everything in life and things were going incredibly well. Alexis couldn't see any reason for Stanley's suicide. Alexis sobbed. She missed the chef so much, that she started to hate him. She could never forgive him for taking the wonderful Stanley from this world.

After a thorough cry, Alexis looked at her watch only to see that the first members of staff would be arriving at any moment now. She washed her face in the bathroom sink, tightened her apron and put a big smile on her face to greet Mark just a few minutes later. She thanked him for setting up a place for her to sleep and gave him a big kiss. Mark made them both a coffee and started talking about the strange dream he had, about some kind of magical monster in the woods. Alexis laughed and

couldn't stop looking at him with a loving gaze. These moments reminded her exactly why she fell in love with Mark in the first place. No matter how serious a situation may be, he always found the right way to cheer someone up and loosen up a room. He was her ray of sunshine in a cloudy world.

Only a few minutes had passed when the other cooks started entering the kitchen and preparing for the day. Alexis jumped when she remembered what was planned for today.

"Today we are going to be on our best behavior and at the peak of our performance, since a critic will be coming at some point of service." She exclaimed. "I have already talked with front of house, and they will be on the lookout for anyone that appears to be a critic and will notify us immediately. Ideally, the quality will not change a bit after the critic arrives, because you will be giving your best for the whole day."

Alexis excused the chefs and started preparing herself. This was not the first time the restaurant had dealt with a critic. Quite the contrary, the kitchen was almost breaking records on how many people visited just to review the restaurant. Everyone from bloggers to Michelin inspectors came and left more than satisfied. Alexis glanced at the red plaque with three Michelin stars and sighed. This was the first time a critic comes to the restaurant after Stanley's death, and she hoped that she could handle the pressure.

"Doors!" Shouted the chef after glancing at her watch.

The first order came in not long after. The kitchen did not disappoint, and Alexis was proud of herself and her cooks for not slacking off. The cooks worked their asses off until lunch. The break was much needed for everyone and led to them working even harder in the evening service.

When a servant came in to inform Alexis about the possible critic, the demeanor of the kitchen did not change a bit. They were working as hard as they could the whole day long and had no intention of stopping now.

Service was over, yet Alexis did not feel exhausted at all. She was filled with adrenalin and satisfaction. She was proud of herself for being able to lead such a kitchen to greatness and was proud of the cooks for being able to follow her commands.

9

"You, ok?" asked Mark after everyone had left.

Alexis was startled. She was deep in her thoughts and forgot he was here.

"I could be better." she answered, after which she looked at the office door behind which there was the letter Stanley left for her to read. Should she tell Mark about it? It was too difficult to keep reading by herself.

"What's in there?" said Mark as if he had just read his fiancée's thoughts. "If you are not going to tell me, I'm going to go look myself."

"No!" she exclaimed. After a few moments of an awkward silence, Alexis broke down in tears. "Stanley left a letter before he died. I'm so sorry I didn't tell you. It's so painful to read and I don't think I can do it by myself anymore. I don't know what to do"

Mark took Alexis into his arms and started stroking the back of her head. He learned how to calm her down a long time ago and has only gotten better at it. No matter the situation he knew exactly what to say to keep his wonderful girl from spiraling any further into her negative emotions.

“It’s okay. I’m not mad at you at all and I understand.” He said with a soft voice. “Do you want me to read it with you?”

Alexis nodded. Still in each other's arms, they slowly approached the office and Mark opened the door. The office was still messy, and Stanley’s letter sat in the middle of the desk. Mark found a second chair for him to sit on and carefully took the letter into his hands.

“Can I catch up with you on the letter?” he asked.

After getting Alexis’ approval, he remembered the part where his fiancée stopped and turned over the pages to start from the top. This gave Alexis enough time to gather herself and calm down. After wiping away her tears with her dirty apron, which she had not taken off for at least the last twenty-four hours, she watched Mark closely as he read the letter. Mark was a person that was not afraid to feel his emotions, which would help Alexis to understand what passage he was reading and approximate when he was going to be done, but after not even a minute of reading, Mark’s expression went blank. There was no way to understand what exactly he was feeling at what point in time. Alexis never saw her fiancée in such a grave condition. After a few more minutes, a tear started rolling down his cheek, yet he did not react in any way. He did not wipe it away or start sobbing, he just continued reading the letter with a numb expression and the tears did not stop.

When Mark finally looked up to indicate that he was ready to continue reading out loud, Alexis was happy to see the love of her life again. She could not recognize him while he was so deeply disturbed, and she could not help but kiss him right away. She did not care about the letter. She just wanted to show her fiancée that he was not alone and that she went through the same pain, which she shouldn’t have done alone. They hugged, laughed and cried for a while until Alexis fell asleep. Instead of setting up the mattress like he did last night, he picked Alexis up and took her back home where he dressed her in her pajamas and laid her in their bed. Alexis did not sleep that well in a while.

10

The couple slept in the next morning. Alexis knew that it was unnecessary for her to wake up so early since the rest of the kitchen staff were more than happy to help with preparation for the day and Mark usually came a bit later than he needed to. Mark woke Alexis with the smell of pancakes and coffee. Alexis was happy to have a non-rushed breakfast for the first time in almost three years and it made her even happier when she saw her beautiful fiancée making it for her in the kitchen. After breakfast they got ready and went to work in the same car. Even though Alexis arrived more than an hour later than she usually does, they were still the first to enter the restaurant.

The chef was so happy with her morning that she did not even think about Stanley or the letter for even a moment, so she was surprised when Mark brought it up.

“We can’t just leave the letter and forget about it.” he said with a suddenly serious expression. “We can read a bit now.”

“Fine,” Alexis answered, “But you will be the one reading it. I cannot bring myself to look at it anymore.”

Mark nodded and made his way to the office. Alexis followed closely behind. After settling in like children do for story time, Mark began reading.

“The uniform seemed brand new, as if Geoffrey knew that there would be another person coming someday.

My room was on the second floor next to what seemed like the living room of the house. The furniture included an antique table with some storage space, a large dresser that fitted more than I had and a bed that was more comfortable than it looked like, yet my favorite part about my room was a large window overlooking the coast. The sound of seagulls would wake me up every morning and I found it amazing. I looked out the window every evening to reminisce and calm down from the day before. Despite the charm of my humble abode, it still had its downsides. Geoffrey slept right above me, and I could hear him walking around his chambers or snoring, which kept me from falling asleep, but I got used to it quickly.

A day with Geoffrey started with a delicious breakfast, which was croque-monsieur with a glass of fresh orange juice squeezed from the Sicilian oranges growing in the garden. He called it the most balanced breakfast there is, and I could not agree more. After the food, we go into the kitchen and do not leave it for any reason until the end of the day.

Geoffrey was not impressed by any of the skills that I had learned in the past years.

“I thought I hired a chef and not a soulless robot! You’re just repeating what you see.” He told me.

The chef was nice every time of the day, except when he was working. He shouted and cursed at every mistake either he or I made. No matter how small. I was not used to such a work environment which led me to constantly make mistakes and force Geoffrey to scream even more. No matter the stress I kept pushing on until I saw the chef’s shouting as a normal tone of conversation. Before the restaurant opened, he would show me all kinds of food. Every time I walked into the kitchen, he would order me to fry a steak or boil some cabbage and taste it afterwards. I internalized the textures and tastes I would encounter during the day, yet no matter how many different tastes I had in my head, they did not seem to lead to me getting the spark I so desperately needed, so we continued trying.

At first Geoffrey would only let me watch while he was cooking for the customers and tell me to try to remember the steps he took to get to the final dish. It was hard seeing as he was improvising a new dish every day, but once he cooked it for a full restaurant, I had seen it enough times to remember what went into the making of the finished product. After service he would tell me to replicate the dish, and I would do so, but still make mistakes. He only gave me one chance every day, which I had to take full advantage of.

After many weeks of the same routine over and over again and replicating countless dishes, I finally managed to cook exactly what Geoffrey was serving to customers the entire day. The pride and happiness in his eyes were something I did not even see in the eyes of my own mother. He allowed me to cook alongside him the very next day to speed up the process of serving customers. I could not sleep, because I was so excited to finally be able to cook for others in this restaurant. I did the exact

same in many other places, yet I never was as riled up as I was this time. I knew that Geoffrey and his restaurant were something special.

Cooking with the chef was not easy seeing as I had to watch him make the dish on the fly before the restaurant opened and then replicate it perfectly, but it was what I was training for the past week. Today's dish included some duck and spinach. The duck was seared on a stainless-steel pan until it was a nice medium rare. The fond of said duck was then deglazed with wine and fresh orange juice which reduced to a thick consistency after a while. The spinach was seasoned and steamed in a Japanese bamboo steamer and then laid on the plate. The dish does not seem complicated at first, but considering the chef's standards, I was terrified. While I watched Geoffrey cook the duck, I would count the seconds in between steps to replicate it perfectly. The surprising thing is that Geoffrey kept those intervals exactly the same throughout the day.

Thankfully, after watching Geoffrey make the dish three times, I thought I was ready, and I got to work. The moment I grabbed a pan and the ingredients for the recipe, I felt Geoffrey's concentrated stare watching me along every step of the process. He did not stop working for a second, yet he still managed to monitor me the whole time. After the most nerve-wracking fifteen minutes it took to cook the duck with spinach and orange sauce, I felt a firm pat on my back.

"Bring it out." Said Geoffrey with a smile. "It's for table number fourteen."

From that point on the chef found me worthy of meeting the customers which I was cooking for and made me bring out every plate I prepared. Table number fourteen was occupied by a thin old lady with a pair of golden glasses and a cane.

"You're new here, aren't you?" She asked me in Italian after she saw me approach her table with the food. "If Geoffrey decided you are good enough to stay with him, you must really be something."

I smiled awkwardly and thanked her before walking away. Was I not the first cook to come through the door of this restaurant in search of greatness? I kept the question to myself until we were finished. During the day I got to prepare quite a few orders and bring them out to the customers, which led to me meeting some of the locals. Table number three was reserved for three fishermen who went fishing together and supplied Geoffrey with the freshest fish in exchange for free dining in his restaurant. A winemaker and his wife were situated at the seventh table next to the window. The person that stuck with me the most was the woman on table seventeen. She was a few years older than me and had wavy black hair and dreamy eyes. Every day I would make sure to serve her to strike up a thirty-second conversation or even to just look into her eyes for a moment. She reminded way of the only place I could call home. She reminded me of Coraline.

After the day was finished, Geoffrey ordered some food from a Pizzeria which we then had for dinner. This continued to be a daily tradition.

"Am I the first cook to come here?" I asked with a mouth full of pizza.

"No," he grunted "but you are the first to stay more than ten minutes after revealing him- or herself to be a chef."

I couldn't help but smile.

“From the moment I saw you, I knew that you were the right person to mentor. You just have something special inside you.” finished Geoffrey with a big smile on his face.

We finished dinner and started getting ready for bed.

“Thank you for being here Stanley.” Said Geoffrey suddenly. “It does get lonely as a chef down here. The people here are friendly, but they are not friends. They live for the sole purpose of living and most of them only want to do it alone or with someone they knew their entire life. I came here more than a decade ago and it may seem like enough time to meet actual friends to sit down and talk with soul to soul, like we just did, but I guess it just did not work out.”

I was stumped and at a loss for words. People don’t usually open up to me like that. Geoffrey gave me an understanding look, wished me a good night and went to sleep. I came into my room exhausted, yet I couldn’t sleep. The sea was calm, and the seagulls were quiet. I opened my beloved window and stared into the distance. The stars were shining so bright, like I had never seen before, and I was in awe. Despite the beautiful scenery I was experiencing, Geoffrey’s words did not leave me alone. He seemed so genuine and vulnerable when he told me his thoughts and I stood there like an idiot and didn’t have anything to say. I decided to run into Geoffrey’s room and say the first thing that would come to mind.

“It’s okay to feel lonely for a while if you find someone to help with your loneliness in the end.” I blurted out after going up the stairs and slamming Geoffrey’s door open. “You are going to feel alone from time to time but it’s all worth it in the end if you find the right person to fight the loneliness with.”

“I didn’t know you could be so touching.” He laughed. “I picked up many wisdoms along the rocky way that I call my life, and this was one of the first ones I figured out, but it’s nice of you to point it out. Now go to sleep. We have many long days ahead of us.”

The next few weeks went unchanged without anything special happening. I got to know the customers better and better every time I served them and every day, I understood more and more what Geoffrey meant that one night. Everyone fitted the chef’s description except that woman on table seventeen. My bias could have come from the fact that she reminded me of Coraline so much, but I still felt like she was different from the rest. She was just passing by and did not mean to stay. Every time she left the restaurant, I was convinced that it was the last time I would see her, but I would be proven wrong every day when she came through the doors once again.

One day I decided to not take the risk of seeing that woman for the last time and stopped her before she could leave. She was always one of the last people to leave so there was nothing holding me back from exiting the kitchen and approaching her. My Italian had gotten pretty good after listening to locals talk every day, so I was confident to finally approach someone myself.

“You look good today.” I said awkwardly with an unconvincing smile. My Italian somehow became worse when I tried to talk to her. She made me nervous.

“Thank you.” She chuckled. “You look good too.”

“I’m sorry that came off weird. I just wanted to somehow start a conversation that included more than me describing the dish I was serving to you, and this was the first thing that came to mind.” I remarked.

“It’s okay. I’m Nita.” She said with a big grin. “I have been waiting for you to finally approach me. I even have my number written down if you want it.”

I smiled and gladly accepted the wrinkled piece of paper with her number on it. I wished her farewell, and she went out the door. I was so excited that I couldn’t wait to finish dinner and call her. Even Geoffrey noticed how ecstatic I was.

“Did you finally ask that girl on table seventeen out?” He grumbled with a full mouth.

“How did you know it was her?” I answered after a short while.

“I knew by your face that your good mood had something to do with a woman and deducting which woman exactly that was, isn’t trivial seeing as there is only one who is about your age and doesn’t have a partner.” Geoffrey said and laid back into his chair. He had just finished his food.

Instead of waiting for my answer, Geoffrey took his plate and utensils and went into the kitchen to clean them before wishing me a good night and going to sleep. I did the same after I rushed my dinner and went into my room with the piece of paper in hand. I changed into my night attire and picked up my phone to call her.

As I dialed her number I thought of Coraline. Her eyes did not leave my mind, and I realized that the only reason I approached Nita in the first place was her resemblance to the girl that still has a firm grip on my heart after all those years. I couldn’t lie to Nita and tell her that I was interested in her. I couldn’t use a stranger’s friendly heart just to fill a hole that was left inside me so long ago.

I decided not to call her and instead explain to her how I felt in person. I waited for her to come in the next evening for her dinner. No matter how long I waited, she never came. When I tried calling her later that evening, the number was already disconnected.

By now I regret not calling her or not telling her how I felt, but I still feel like it was the right decision to not pursue a romance with her solely based on her reminding me of the love of my life. If anybody did the same to me, I would be devastated and I knew myself that somewhere deep down I wouldn’t be satisfied with the mere illusion of Coraline. If anyone it should be her and not a replacement.

That night I dreamt of Coraline like usual. The dream started with me coming into her apartment, which I visited only twice, but knew like the back of my hand. Coraline greeted me with a kiss on the cheek and for the first time she mentioned food.

“I’m starving.” She groaned. “Did you bring the groceries?”

I looked down and saw the bags of groceries I didn’t notice before. Coraline led me into her small but charming kitchen with a vintage red fridge that was in her family since her grandma bought it when she moved into her first apartment. After a romantic exchange I got the groceries out of the bag and laid them out on the kitchen table. The ingredients didn’t seem to have anything to do with each other and were just some groceries. I looked at them and did not see anything. There were a few

recipes that came to mind, but Coraline shot down every suggestion I laid on the table. I stood there in silence, because I didn't know what to cook when Coraline kissed and hugged me. It must have been a long day, and she was exhausted. She just wanted to be held, and I was happy to help. Suddenly something clicked and I knew exactly which ingredients to pick out and what to do with them. I took what I needed and started my process. The rest of the dream was blurry but the feeling stuck with me. After I served the finished food to Coraline, the dream ended, and I woke up.

It was still in the middle of the night, but I couldn't let the thing I was looking for go that easily. By the time I was in the kitchen, I knew exactly what to do. My mind was empty, and I didn't even understand what was going on until I was done and had a full original dish standing in front of me. I don't remember what it was exactly, but I know that it was so beautiful that I was afraid to touch it. Geoffrey came out of the shadows with an excited look on his face.

"This is the moment that I have been waiting for." He exclaimed with a contagious smile across his face. "You finally found your spark and you learnt how to embrace it."

"But I'm not sure how I did it." I mumbled. "I just came down here and—"

"Do you think I know what happens when I cook a new dish every morning?" Geoffrey interrupted. "What you experienced just now is called 'the zone' and it's something every musician, artist or athlete experiences and nourishes to become better. It's true that some chefs can understand what they are doing when they come up with a new dish, but I would consider their process unnatural. Letting your subconscious take over does not take away from the finished product."

Geoffrey came up to the plate I had set down on the counter, took a clean fork and tasted the food.

"It's amazing." He whispered after a prolonged silence. "I never doubted you even for a moment. I was sure that whatever came from your first experience of creating a dish yourself would be amazing and you proved me right. We are going to start talking about plating from tomorrow on. The food itself couldn't be better but the most important part of being the best of the best is the presentation. I understand if you don't believe me judging by the plates I serve now, but I do know quite a bit about plating a dish at a Michelin level."

I was intrigued. Geoffrey was right about his plating in the restaurant. His food tasted heavenly every time, but he just plopped the ingredients next to each other without any kind of regard to aesthetics called it a day. I went back to sleep and for the first time in many years I had a dreamless night."

Alexis zoned out while listening to her fiancée's voice read the letter, so she was quite startled when he suddenly tipped her on the shoulder.

"The other chefs are arriving." Mark said with a gentle voice. "We'll finish the letter later."

"You don't have anything to say about what you just read?" Alexis asked.

"No." Mark answered. "I don't want to talk about it."

Alexis knew that the letter hurts Mark just as much as it does her, so she decided not to continue the conversation. Despite not being afraid to show his emotions, Mark still knew when it was necessary to hide them. When they went into the kitchen, he put a big smile on his face and greeted the other chefs to keep the morale for the day at a high level. Mark's fiancée did not have such a talent, but the staff was used to seeing her in a serious mood. That's just the way she was, they thought.

Service went by quickly and Alexis found herself back in the office with the letter in hand. She thought about Geoffrey. Stanley told her about his travels through Europe, but never mentioned visiting Sicily, let alone meeting such a wise chef while on his travels. Mark was talking with the cooks outside. They were celebrating another successful day of cooking. Alexis couldn't join them. She felt incomplete without Stanley. She looked around the room. Piles of letters were spilling over the edges of the table. Stacks of cookbooks were spread across the floor. Stanley wanted to buy some shelves and boxes to keep the office tidy, but he never went through with his idea. The letter was almost unreadable for Alexis, because of the pain it reminded her of, yet it was the only thing that made her feel as if Stanley was right next to her, which was exactly what she needed right now, so she continued to read.

"When I came into the kitchen the next day, some books were waiting for me on the counter along a very energized Geoffrey.

"These books have very pretty pictures and some useful notes on how to plate correctly." He exclaimed. "I think my notes are so thorough that you shouldn't have any questions, but if some do arise, I live one floor above you."

I thanked him and after we ate our breakfast, we got to work. Geoffrey told me to find that feeling again and cook something but this time I had to look at the pictures first to get an idea how I wanted the dish to look like on the plate.

After flipping through the pages of one of the books and reading the very thorough notes that were written on many sticky notes on every page, I closed my eyes and got to work. Unlike yesterday, I didn't pass out and knew exactly what I was doing. Every step of the way, I knew exactly what I was doing and executed the idea perfectly. I finished the dish easily, yet the pressure was highest when the finished ingredients were sitting in front of me waiting to be plated. After about a minute of standing still, I finally gathered the courage to carefully spread the sauce across the cooked asparagus, after which I finished the dish off with the meat I had prepared and a few microgreens Geoffrey had prepared for me in advance.

I put up my hands indicating to Geoffrey that I was done. The feeling of pride filled me from top to bottom and I was expecting the most positive feedback I had ever gotten. Geoffrey approached the plate and started inspecting it way closer than any dish should be inspected.

"It's nice," he began. "but it's not art."

He took the plate and threw its contents into a trashcan. This was the moment when Geoffrey became ruthless and from that moment he never stopped. He started to be way stricter and stopped joking entirely. Maybe this was his idea of pushing me to greatness, but I'm sure it could have been in a gentler way. He did shout while cooking before, but never to this extent and he never got so personal with his insults.

“Your nothing.” He would say. “If this is the work you give me after I gave you food and shelter, you must be a phony and not a cook at all.”

His comments hurt, yet I became better after each one out of pure spite and hate of Geoffrey. The man who was once the person that turned my life around was now the person, I hated the most. I studied the books he gave me and etched the notes that came with them into the deepest crevices of my brain. I thought of new dishes and how I would plate at every point of the day. Even when I was cooking. I got myself a notebook and started sketching all the Ideas that came into my mind. These sketches went from scribbles, even I could only understand with labels pointing to the different ingredients, to small works of art that deserved an exhibit, yet I never felt like they were enough. With the constant flow of Ideas in my head, I felt like Jean-Baptiste Grenouille. I went into the kitchen to perfect a recipe whenever I could, but most of the time I would sit in my room and cook the food from scratch in my head.

Every dish I showed Geoffrey seemed to impress him less and less. I was so desperate for some kind of compliment that I started to lay out more than one dish at once for him to look at, yet it never seemed to have any effect on his opinion of my dishes. My hate for him became so immeasurable that I even started to plot how I could murder him. Thankfully I never went through with it.

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After about a week I needed some more material to improve my dishes so I went into the storage closet, where Geoffrey got the books from in the first place, hoping to find something that could help me. I barely unlocked the rusty lock that seemed to be used only once every year and opened the heavy door. A wave of dust greeted me, and I couldn't help but sneeze. The light in the cramped room didn't work properly, which led me on a longer than necessary search for a flashlight. After I finally found a small battery-powered flashlight in the first aid kit, I made my way back to the cabinet, where I began my search for anything useful. The amount of dust and spiderwebs made it hard to breathe, which forced me to take breaks occasionally. It only took me half an hour to find some other books and as I was prepared to leave the room, I noticed a large box labeled 'trash'. I set the tomes I found on the nearest counter to free up my hands and began stumbling through the narrow passage in between the large number of boxes and junk to make my way to the box in the back.

After taking the box, which was heavier than it looked, out of the closet, I closed the door and set the box next to the books. I caught my breath and drank a glass of water before opening the box. My expectations weren't high, considering Geoffrey labeled his belongings quite accurately, but it was still intriguing to find out what he considered to be trash. To my surprise the box was filled with plaques and awards. Each one of them was meant to show the immense success of a chef or a restaurant, yet every one of them had the names of the people or establishments carved or scribbled out. My suspicion of Geoffrey arose with every plaque I took out of the box until I found Michelin awards. The awards spanned many years and after counting the stars I came to twenty-four. I never doubted that Geoffrey had some serious experience, but not to such an extent. Below the Michelin plaques was a small red box which upon opening revealed a Bocuse d'Or gold medal. My heart stopped. Who was the old man that lived above me? With the medal in hand, I rushed to Geoffrey's room.

“Who are you?” I asked after opening his door and holding the medal Infront of me.

When I came in, Geoffrey was in a robe reading a newspaper and smoking a cigar. I didn't know he smoked, because he never did in the kitchen. This was only my second time on Geoffrey's floor, so I wasn't familiar with the layout at all. The floor was almost completely open, with the only wall being the one separating the bathroom. The rest of Geoffrey's amenities were spread across the rest of the room. His bed was on the left most wall and, what seemed to be the living-area, was across the room and consisted of some shelves, an office table and a rocking chair where he was currently sitting in.

"The identity of a chef is not important." Geoffrey finally answered after making me wait for quite a while. "I got these so long ago that it feels like another lifetime and at this point of my life, they don't mean anything to me, that's why they were in that labelled box."

"You can't just forget the fact that you are on par with the greatest chefs in history." I exclaimed. "This is something to be proud of and you mean to tell me that 'they mean nothing to you'?"

"Stanley." Geoffrey sighed. "You are so concentrated on my achievements that you could double in a year. I saw your notebooks and the drawings in them. Your talent is amazing, but something is holding you back from unleashing your full potential."

He stood up.

"Let's go down to the kitchen." He said while putting on some pants and an apron. "I will give you one last chance to cook something impressive and if you do, I promise you a spot in the highest circles of the culinary world."

I froze and started sweating. I went down into the kitchen with Geoffrey and my mind started to race. I had absolutely no idea what I wanted to cook for him. Despite my immeasurable stress, I began. I knew that to impress Geoffrey, I needed to step away from traditional cooking and step into the realm of edible alchemy. I experimented carefully, knowing the results had to be perfect. By the time I finished, the kitchen had been turned upside down because of the sheer amount of tools and utensils I needed to fulfill my wildest ideas, yet the dish that stood on the counter in the end, made it all worth it. The food was so beautiful that Geoffrey hesitated to eat it, which was an amazing improvement from the other dishes, which he only glanced at before throwing away.

The light that filled Geoffrey's eyes after he took his first bite is something that I will never forget. After slowly chewing and swallowing the food, Geoffrey shook my hand.

"This is your full potential at work." He spoke.

From that point on I didn't need to replicate Geoffrey's dish every day and could make my own alongside him, which led to the restaurant's first menu which included only two dishes. The first one being 'Geoffrey's special' and the other one was unsurprisingly 'Stanley's special'.

The following weeks were the most fun of my life. Geoffrey dropped the 'ruthless chef' act, and I could experiment with my dishes on a daily basis. Every time I finished the test run of yet another daily special, Geoffrey would take the time to take a picture which he would then save in a small album. This continued for a month or so and I was kept out of the loop completely regarding the purpose of these pictures and quite frankly, I didn't care for them at all. My suspicion was that

Geoffrey kept them to remind himself of the time with me after I would ultimately leave. My suspicions were proven wrong when I found a letter in the kitchen.

The only mail Geoffrey ever received was a weekly subscription of an Italian newspaper that focused on international news. Geoffrey picked them up after service every Friday and read through them at a very quick pace after which he would give them to me to keep up with the world and practice my Italian. Considering this fact, I was justly surprised to find an open letter on the countertop that was addressed to me. I picked it up to make sure that I read the recipient's name right and no matter how I looked at it, my name was written on the envelope alongside the address of the restaurant and where the letter was sent from. Upon further inspection, I deduced that the letter was sent from Denmark, a country I knew because of the awe-inducing nature and most importantly because of the amazing restaurant 'Noma' that called Denmark its proud home.

I took the envelope and began looking for Geoffrey to ask him what he knew about the letter. I looked in the kitchen, admiring the floors and shelves that I had just cleaned and neatly organized, like I did daily for the past year or so and couldn't help but feel proud of how far I have come. After my search of Geoffrey in the kitchen proved unsuccessful, I went into the garden, where we both planted most of the vegetables and herbs we used in the kitchen and indulged myself in the smell of the oranges while simultaneously looking for the chef. The last place I looked, and where I eventually found him, was in the living room next to my chambers. Geoffrey was sat on the sofa with a piece of paper in hand and when I came closer, I noticed tears rolling down his cheek. I slowed down my approach considerably and adjusted my expression to fit the mood of the room.

"Geoffrey?" I asked hesitantly. "Is everything al—"

"You're probably looking for this." He abruptly answered while holding up the piece of paper and wiping away his tears. "It's for you, but I just hoped that it would arrive a bit later than it did."

I was confused. In the past year I didn't even have the time nor the intention to reach out to my mother, let alone someone in Denmark, so there wasn't any reason for me to expect any letter.

"Do you remember the pictures I took of every one of your dishes?"

I nodded.

"Last week I picked out your best works, which was harder than it sounds, considering how beautiful each and every one of them is. I then sent these to some old colleagues, and this is one of the letters that came back." He continued. "Most of my buddies were retired, just as I am and didn't have much to say about the pictures, but they praised your talent, nonetheless. Surprisingly, one of the chefs, whom I sent your portfolio to, knew a guy, who knew a guy, who was looking for young talent for the purpose of coaching them to the Bocuse d'Or."

My eyes lit up. The Bocuse d'Or was once something that I couldn't even dream of spectating and now there was a chance for me to partake in it. I would have hugged Geoffrey if he wouldn't be so beat up because of the news. He wasn't ready to be alone again.

"Don't force yourself to stay because of such an old sack like me." He chuckled as he stood up and handed me a flight ticket to Denmark scheduled for the day after tomorrow. "It's okay to feel lonely for a while if one finds someone to help with one's loneliness in the end. Am I right?"

I laughed and tears started rolling down my eyes. This man changed my life, and it is going to be hard to leave him here, but I need to pursue my goals. We hugged tightly and went to sleep.”

The sudden noise of the office door slamming open startled Alexis. It was Mark.

“There you are!” He exclaimed with a big smile, obviously drunk. “I was starting to wonder where you are.”

Alexis didn’t know what the team accomplished today, that it was worth celebrating with a considerable amount of alcohol, nor did she care. A rookie probably chopped a carrot faster than he did yesterday or something. Mark was a people person, and he was good at making excuses to organize a full celebration, especially if there was alcohol included. Back when he first started working at the restaurant, he somehow convinced the entire staff to go out to a bar, just because he made Stanley smile for the first time. This pattern of behavior that Mark sometimes showed, was one of the few pet-peeves that Mark had, but Alexis learnt to deal with it, especially considering she had enough things that an average person would consider as weird or off putting.

After putting the letter into her purse and helping her fiancée get up, she made her way to the car with his arm around her shoulders, making sure to close up the restaurant on the way out. After getting in the car Alexis punched her address into the GPS. She knew her way home like she knew the back of her hand, but she still felt more comfortable with directions occasionally being dictated to her, so she didn’t have to think so hard.

Mark was mumbling something the whole drive home, but Alexis didn’t listen. She was too invested in her thoughts. By her age Stanley had already travelled through Europe and got an opportunity to participate in one of the most prestigious competitions of the culinary world, while she worked at his restaurant since she graduated from the culinary institute. After thinking a bit more, she realized that despite Stanley’s experiences, he still didn’t have anybody to start a family with, which was the end goal in her life, no matter how successful her career would be. She looked over at mark in the passenger seat. He had already fallen asleep.

“You have arrived at your destination.” Said the monotone voice of the car’s GPS.

“I know.” Sighed Alexis mockingly.

If Mark had been awake, he would have found this hilarious, but he wasn’t. Instead of waking him up immediately, Alexis enjoyed the brief moment of silence. She started to cry. There was no reason for her to break out in tears like she did, but she was just overwhelmed by so many things at once, that she wouldn’t even be able to say what was wrong if anybody asked.

“It’s okay baby.” Slurred Mark with half open eyes. “We all know it’s hard, but that’s why we have each other.”

Alexis smiled, wiped away her tears and gave Mark a big kiss. He won’t remember this moment tomorrow. Alexis got out of the car and Mark followed behind her while trying really hard to stay on his feet and not crash into the nearest wall. Upon entering the apartment, Mark immediately crashed onto the bed and Alexis followed, but not before she took a shower and ate a quick snack.

Alexis laid next to her fiancé in bed and tried falling asleep, but her thoughts wouldn't let her. There wasn't anything special planned for tomorrow and Alexis was ready for another day of work, yet she hoped that the moment she fell asleep tonight, she wouldn't have to wake up to the many responsibilities that she had taken over after Stanley's death. After about ten minutes of pondering, she fell asleep. She forgot what she thought about before falling asleep by the next morning.

The next morning of Alexis' life would have been so typical, that one could mistake it with any other of Alexis' mornings, yet after eating breakfast and getting ready, she decided to turn back just before leaving her apartment and continuing to another uneventful day at the restaurant, which she so loved. The reason for her to switch it up like she did, was that wretched letter, that has been bothering her from the moment she found it.

She sat down at the kitchen table and took the letter out of her purse. She stared at it in her hands for about a minute, trying to get the courage to continue reading it or to convince herself otherwise. Alexis calmed herself down and proceeded with the letter.

"My last week went by in a flash and Geoffrey surprised me with a party on my last day. He invited all of the regular customers and most of them actually showed up. My name was mentioned many times and Geoffrey insisted that this party was actually for me, yet I knew deep in my heart, that this was just an excuse to cope with me leaving and trying to readjust to living alone after almost a year of heaving an apprentice on the floor below you.

The guests were elderly or had work the next day, so they left earlier than the usual partygoers would. Geoffrey tried to make them stay longer, but he was left alone with me regardless. He went into the garden and after cleaning up a bit I followed him there. It was hard to spot him in the dark garden but eventually I found him sitting on the ground, leaned against a wall and looking up into the star-filled night sky while taking small sips from a bottle of beer. I sat myself next to him and took in my surroundings. The stars shining so brightly like they do now above me and the moist air that smelled like ocean were one of the many things that I would miss about this place. After sitting next to Geoffrey in silence for a while, I decided to finally strike up a conversation.

"Are you sure that you're ok with me leaving?" I began "I'm sure we can figure out a compromise that satisfies us both and you wouldn't have to be alone all the time."

Geoffrey stayed silent. He took another sip out of his bottle and looked into the sky as if he was counting the stars.

"I understand that ignoring me may seem like the only plausible way to make this problem go away," I said after a few seconds. "But believe me, you will think of so many things that you could have said to me and there will be no way to tell me. The regret you will have to live with is almost unbearable. I've been in your position."

I looked down at the ground and thought of Coraline. There were so many things that I could have told her to make her stay. Maybe that I missed her every time she wasn't there or that I never wanted to lose her. Despite these thoughts, it is impossible to get these things off my chest and dealing with it on my own is something almost impossible for me. When I was in college, I felt like a loser thinking about some girl who I haven't talked with in years while my roommates brought over a new

girl every week. I just couldn't understand how they could live with themselves after treating another person so poorly, just to repeat the process later on. My mother taught me that love should be something that is cherished and nurtured and if a person doesn't think the same, they are just wasting everybody's time. Because of this mentality, I could never bring myself to sleep with a woman just for the sake of it, especially because Coraline would be on my mind regardless of whom I met.

"Let me tell you something." Sighed Geoffrey, interrupting my thoughts. "I always wanted a son for myself. Somebody to play catch with. Somebody to cuddle to sleep if they feared a monster in their closet. And someone to share my wisdom with to ease the pain of this harsh world. I always wanted to be a family man, and I would be good at it. Unfortunately, I was cursed with the gift and obsession of cooking. When I was your age, I never left the kitchen and if I did, I always rushed back to it as soon as possible. One day I regained consciousness and decided to go out there and meet somebody special that would be on my side no matter the circumstances and would someday bear our child that we would raise together, yet no matter who I met, there was always another woman, and that woman was cooking. It chased me down no matter where I was, and it always brought me back to where I started. It was like an addiction. Many women tried to deal with it, but I managed to push away every single one of them."

Geoffrey stopped. He left me speechless.

"You are like the son I never had." He said before standing up and going to sleep.

I almost couldn't sleep that night. Partly because of my departure and partly because of the thing Geoffrey shared with me. I only fell asleep because I picked up the habit of taking sleeping pills while working with Geoffrey, because of his snoring. We didn't exchange a single word the next morning. Breakfast was awkward, but tasty as always. Geoffrey packed me some food, so I didn't get hungry and buy some overpriced sandwich in the airport. The taxi to the airport arrived at eight and I started packing my small number of bags into the trunk.

"So long, friend!" Exclaimed Geoffrey with a big smile and a tear rolling down his cheek after I got into the car.

"So long!" I answered.

15

"Good morning baby." Mumbled Mark on his way from the bedroom to the kitchen while rubbing his eyes. "How come you're still here?"

He looked at the stack of papers Alexis was holding in her hand and realized immediately. Mark knew how important Stanley was to her and didn't want to say anything, but he wanted the best for his future wife.

"Are you sure you're okay with reading this?" He asked with a concerned look on his face.

"Despite the statements I made in the past, I think I am." Alexis answered with a forced chuckle.

Mark didn't trust a single word coming out of Alexis' mouth, but he also wasn't a fan of having a fight in the morning, that leads to his fiancée, who is also his boss, to being mad at him for

the rest of the day, so he shrugged and continued with his morning. Mark's morning wasn't anything complicated or flamboyant. After waking up, he makes himself a very strong black coffee and drinks it alongside a simple breakfast, that takes him five minutes to eat. The rest of the morning is taken up by brushing his teeth and getting ready, before eventually heading out. This was Mark's morning ritual since he moved out from his parent's home to go to college, and it hasn't changed since. Mark liked to complete his routine uninterrupted and Alexis knew that quite well, which is why she decided to forget anything she wanted to say about the letter and make her way to work. This decision left Mark satisfied, although you couldn't say the same about Alexis.

The moment Alexis stepped foot into the restaurant that day, she went into a state that could be compared to autopilot. She didn't start any conversations, and left the ones she did have brief and concise. She focused on her job and completed every task that came her way with robot-like precision. This lasted for about three weeks, after which Alexis found herself on the couch in her living room. Everything that happened was immediately forgotten and Alexis felt like she woke up from a coma. Thankfully, the most important thing she had blocked out of her mind was the birthday of a coworker, which she found out about after Mark remembered a funny anecdote that happened during the party. Something that had to do with a ruined cake. Alexis would have forgotten it even if she was fully aware of her surroundings, yet it still concerned her that she was in such a state for multiple weeks. She decided to visit a psychologist to get to the bottom of her condition.

Alexis scheduled the next possible appointment with a psychologist, whom a friend recommended to her a while ago. Her first appointment was during noon on a Friday, which forced Mark to take over for the day. The office was on the eighth floor of a small building in downtown. Alexis was enveloped by a smell of scented candles and coffee the moment she stepped foot into the practice. The waiting room was equipped with expensive leather chairs and contemporary art hung on the walls. Alexis was called in after just a few minutes of waiting, yet she wouldn't mind sitting in one of these chairs for a while longer.

While Alexis followed the receptionist through the hallway, she admired the paintings and awards that were hung on the walls. The receptionist opened a door and showed Alexis inside, after which she left. Alexis sat down on the green sofa that stood in front of the chair where the psychologist sat. The chef examined the person she would have to share her deepest secrets with. Sat in front of her was a man with a ginger beard and a bald head, who wore a cozy fisherman's sweater and a pair of round glasses that seemed a bit too small for his face. The man looked friendly and weirdly huggable. Alexis knew she was in the right hands.

"My name is Nicholas, but you are free to call me Nick." He said, with a contagious smile that showed his big, white teeth. "What brings you here today, Alexis?"

The room filled with silence, as Alexis thought about the question. She knew that it was because of her experience with disassociation, but she also knew that it was something deeper inside of her. Stanley's death impacted her on many levels. Alexis began to cry. She had no idea what to do next, so she reverted to her basic instincts. Rather than judging her or asking her to calm down, Nick somehow made Alexis feel even safer than she felt before. As if he was crying alongside her.

"I'm so sorry." Sobbed Alexis. "It has been tough these last couple of months."

"Tell me more." Whispered Nick in a calming voice. "That's why you're here after all."

Alexis chuckled. She calmed down and told Nick everything there was to tell. Stanley's death, his letter, which she would call a memoir at this point, her career doubts that came up when she started comparing her life to Stanley's and finally the way she disappeared into nothingness. Nick handed Alexis a tissue after she was done explaining and put away his notes and pen.

"It seems like the sudden breakage of the close bond you had with Stanley changed your perspective on life." He said as he leaned forward. "People only experience such disassociation, like you did, when their brain is under severe stress and cannot take it anymore. To be honest, I'm not surprised you experienced this, considering your stressful line of work and the added pressure of the sudden passing of your boss. He made you feel like everything was under control, right?"

Alexis nodded. She didn't even think about it that way, but now that Nick mentioned it, he was absolutely right. He's good.

"I think you need to get closure." Said Nick after thinking for a short while. "I will sign you up for sessions every Thursday in the evening, so you don't have to interrupt your work. I want you to bring the letter with you."

Alexis agreed. For the rest of the hour, Nick taught the chef some ways to deal with stress. Alexis read lots of articles on that topic and every method seemed like complete and utter nonsense to her, but the things that Nick was telling her, made sense and it felt as if they were curated just for her. Alexis was satisfied after the visit. She went home and waited for her fiancée. She took the whole day off, so she had enough time to relax, which is exactly what she needed. Sometimes, lying on the couch and watching tv for hours is the best thing you can do for yourself.

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The next week went by relatively slow, but it probably only seemed that way, because Alexis was waiting for her next meeting with Nick. On Thursday, she entrusted the post-service chores to Mark and the rest of the chefs and went to her therapy session with the thick stack of paper that Stanley had written his whole life out on in her purse.

The session started with a bit of small talk until the letter came up.

"Are you ready to read it together?" Asked Nick. "You can stop anytime you want, and I am by your side no matter what."

The chef agreed, took the letter out of her purse and after finding the page she left off on, she began reading.

"My arrival in Denmark was nothing short of perfect. The plane was almost empty, and I had a whole aisle to myself, which made my flight less uncomfortable than it would have been. I was met by a Chauffeur upon my arrival at the Airport who took me straight to where I needed to be. The drive to my next place of residence was nerve wrecking. What if it was too small and I had to share a bed with a sumo wrestler for the next year of my life? I barely brushed of these thoughts. When we finally arrived, I was pleasantly surprised. We drove deep into a forest, the smell of which enchanted me instantaneously and the Chauffeur parked in front of a romantic, but still quite large cottage.

I took my bags out of the trunk and made my way to the entrance, where a tall, skinny man with hair as white as snow greeted me.

“Welcome to Denmark Stanley.” He said as he reached out with his long fingers to shake my hand. “My name is Paul. I will be overseeing you and all the other chefs over the course of the next few months and will eventually select the two most talented of you, that will go on to the European Bocuse d’Or.”

My eyes sparkled with joy. I knew exactly who was standing opposite of me. Paul Falk was a legendary cook that exploded into the scene by opening a fine dining restaurant, after saving up money from his office job, which immediately received countless awards for his revolutionary dishes that took inspiration from classic Nordic cuisine.

“It’s an honor to meet you Sir.” I said as I shook his hand. “I have heard so much about you.”

“I can say the same for you.” He chuckled. “Geoffrey told me all about you.”

The way Paul said Geoffrey’s name was unnatural. As if he was saying the wrong thing on purpose. He knew who Geoffrey really was, or at least who he was before he became Geoffrey. I had to ask him about Geoffrey someday, but now I just wanted to take in this moment. Funnily enough, I never found out who Geoffrey really is, but the more I think about it, the more I realize that it doesn’t really matter. Anyway, back to the story.

I went back to the car to get my belongings, and Paul showed me to my room. I was the least person to arrive, so I got a quick look at the other young chefs, that were here for the same reason at me, on the way to my room. The cottage was recently renovated on the inside and looked quite modern. It may have been stripped of its soul, but I felt comfortable in the monochrome and minimalistic environment. It left me undistracted, which helped me to think about the important things in my life. The door to my room wasn’t any different from the others. I light wooden door labelled with the number twelve, made from a thin sheet of stainless steel. I opened the door and the first thing that I noticed, was the big window at the end of the room. In my opinion, the window dictates the feeling of the rest of the room. The window was a single square glass pane, the view out of which was unobstructed by any sills. It looked out deep into the forest.

“Get some rest before tomorrow.” Said Paul after I set my bags down. “We’ll meet outside at 5 a.m. tomorrow. Bring everything you would need in a kitchen.”

Paul left and closed the door behind him, which left me in a loud and lonely silence. I thought for a while. I thought about a lot of things. About Coraline. About how I haven’t called my mother in over a year. About Geoffrey and how he was dealing with being alone. I thought about how I would deal with being alone. I thought until the sun set. When I noticed the stars in the sky, I decided to tackle my life one small step at a time. I began with taking a shower. The shower was communal, so had to take my shampoo, towel and robe with me before making my way to the end of the hall, where the shower was. On my way there, I came across another chef, who seemed to have just gotten out of the shower. He was a slight bit taller than me, and had long and curly hair, that he was frantically drying with a towel, as he was walking back to his room. He noticed me and smiled in my direction. The smile was big and sincere. He smiled as if I was a childhood friend he hasn’t seen in a while. For the first time in a very long time, I smiled back, not because I wanted to be polite, but because my mood has improved, and I felt happy.

Despite me being the last of at least ten people to use the shower that night, it looked like it had just been installed just for me. A chef’s pesky habit of cleaning up after themselves everywhere

they go, is not to be underestimated and I couldn't help but try to clean the shower up even better than the person before me did.

The shower was refreshing but tidying the room after me left me exhausted. I fell asleep almost immediately after making myself comfortable in my bed.

I dreamt of Coraline again. I forgot the dream after I woke up, but I knew it was important, after I had realized that my body was covered in cold sweat. I got out of bed and started pacing around my room. My hands were shaking uncontrollably, and I could barely breathe. I fell to the ground and my vision started to blur. I was having a panic attack. As I was curled up on the floor, Coraline's voice started ringing out in my head. She was repeating the last things she ever said to me. How she didn't have feelings for me but still wished for me to find the perfect woman.

I calmed down and looked out of the window. It was still dark, and I could see the stars shining in all their glory. I picked up my watch from the nightstand. It was ten past three in the morning. It wasn't worth it to fall asleep again, so I just sat myself down on my bed and remained there until I heard the other chefs get up. I got ready and made my way to the entrance, where I sat down on a couch.

"I didn't sleep at all today." Said an energetic voice suddenly.

I looked to my left and saw the chef that I encountered on my way to the shower. He was walking towards me and smiled, as if he had known me his entire life.

"Tell me about it." I answered as I adjusted my posture to make some more room on the couch. "What kept you up?"

"The howling of the wolves mostly." He spoke. "I grew up in the city, so it is strange hearing anything other than other people walking down the street."

I didn't hear any wolves. I was probably too distracted with getting myself to calm down to pay attention to anything happening outside my window.

"I'm Mauricio by the way." He exclaimed with his hand already prepared to shake mine.

"Stanley." I answered.

It was still early, so we had time to talk, which is exactly what we did. Mostly about how we came to this place and what we expected from it. Mauricio was full of life and hope. He stayed humble, although there were enough reasons for him not to. His parents immigrated from the Caribbean to New York City, where they opened a restaurant. He grew up around tasty food and learned the procedures that went into preparing it from a very young age. By the age of fourteen, he had already mastered the art of being a cook in a family-owned deli and strived for more. He wished for a subscription to a culinary magazine for his birthday, alongside the opportunity to eat at least one meal in the best restaurant in the city. His parents denied him his second wish but gladly agreed to the magazine. Mauricio told me about how he discovered a whole other side to the culinary world as soon as he got his first journal. Funnily enough, his first job was also in a hotel. Mauricio seemed open about his life and was completely honest, which couldn't be said about me. I kept my origin story brief and undetailed. He noticed that I was hiding something, but we got interrupted by Paul, who entered the lobby exactly at 5 o'clock.

When I looked up to him, I noticed the other chefs scattered around the lobby. Most of them were conversating amongst each other, and if they weren't, they were trying to keep themselves awake. I counted sixteen chefs, including me and Mauricio. Since only two of us will get the chance to compete at the Bocuse d'Or, I knew it was going to be a fierce competition.

Paul came to a stop in the middle of the room and sounded out a loud clap, which led to all of us focusing our attention on him. He examined each and everyone of us closely, after which he got a displeased look on his face. I recognized that expression. It was the same face Geoffrey would make after looking at my dishes and insulting them. This prepared me for an encounter with a superior as such.

"Well, this is unfortunate." Paul sighed, breaking the silence. "One of you is late. Somebody find that chef and tell him or her to pack their bags and go home. The rest of you, come with me."

Paul continued out of the door and everyone followed.

"We'll find him!" Exclaimed Mauricio from behind me.

He grabbed my hand, and we went to the rooms, knocking on each one, until we found the missing chef, who was still in his pajamas. Turns out, his alarm clock ran out of batteries. Mauricio gave him the news, apologized and rushed back to the others. I followed.

"Did you see chef Paul's smirk, when he announced the disqualification of the first cook?" asked Mauricio.

I didn't.

"How can somebody crush another person's dreams like he did and still be so smug?" Mauricio shook his head in disappointment.

It was a rhetorical question, so I didn't answer and focused on getting to Paul and the others as fast as possible. When I looked over at Mauricio, I saw fear in his eyes. Mauricio expressed his emotions in such a way, that every person around him felt the same as him at any given point in time and this was no different. The fear that Mauricio transported through his eyes, was so immense, that I suddenly had a hard time catching my breath. Thankfully, Mauricio got himself together quickly, which led to my release from the prison of panic I was in, although there was no reason for it. Paul's fearmongering tactics didn't have any effect on me.

Paul was waiting for us outside when we arrived.

"The others are already in the bus." He said while looking at his watch. "Don't worry about the chef that had to leave us so soon. A driver will come to pick him up before our return."

This time I noticed the smirk on Paul's face that Mauricio was talking about. It made me angry that anyone can have such a demeanor in this situation. I wanted to scream or punch Paul in the face, yet I didn't. I got on the travel bus alongside Mauricio. We sat down at the very back. The bus started to move immediately after Paul got on it. We drove deeper into the forest for about thirty minutes until we arrived at a plot of land with a single building standing in the middle of it.

The building was nothing special. A simple but roomy single-story house with a slanted roof so the snow can be cleared from the roof easier. Next to the building, connected by a glass hallway, was a greenhouse. It was bigger than a usual garden greenhouse would be, supposedly containing many types of fruits, vegetables and herbs.

Paul stood up and ordered the rest of the chefs to make their way to the building. He called it “the kitchen”, which was misleading, because upon entering, our eyes feasted upon a hall filled with miniature workstations, that included everything a chef would use in a kitchen, rather than a single kitchen like in a normal restaurant.

“Choose any workstation you like and leave your belongings there.” Spoke Paul after letting us look around the space for about three minutes. “We will begin a brief tour shortly.”

Paul wasn’t lying when he told us that the tour would be short. There wasn’t much to show. The greenhouse included lots of different plants and the fruit thereof that we could use while working. The workstations included two ovens, a stove, pots and pans, a cutting board and other rather expensive equipment that we would need to prepare a dish. The only unusual thing about the tour, was the walk-in fridge, triple the size of the room I was sleeping in, which was solely to keep enough ingredients for many chefs.

“Get to your station, and I will give you your first task.” Shouted Paul after finishing the tour. “From this moment on, unless you have a question, the only thing coming out of your mouth will be “Yes chef”. Is that clear?”

“Yeas chef!” We all shouted in unison.

My heart started beating faster, but not because of stress or fear. I felt excited. This is my passion and the thing I have been perfecting for the last few years of my life. I knew I would come out victorious at the end. The only question was who was going to be standing along my side.

Paul gave us the first task, which would start the long and meticulous road to the last two chefs standing. The rules of these tasks were simple. Firstly, we had six hours to complete the daily task as perfectly as possible. Secondly, there was no limit of ingredients or iterations of a meal. We could try as much as we wanted to achieve what satisfied ourselves. The chef would judge the dish or dishes by some criteria he would not reveal. If he was not satisfied, you were out. The tasks were sometimes a multiple-course meal or a single dish. Chef Paul probably made them up on the spot, or without thinking about them too hard. This whole experience was quite like a cooking show of some sorts. It was unusual, but I liked it.

The first task was a simple steak and frites, yet there was a twist. He gave each one of us a small dish with sauce inside, ordering us to replicate it perfectly to serve with the finished dish. Replication was my line of specialty, so I wasn’t too worried. The thing that separated the good chefs from the excellent chefs was what we did with the sample of the sauce. I knew in an instant who was going to be disqualified after watching half of the cooks tasting the sauce before doing anything else with it. At this point, they could have just walked out the door. Me, along with Mauricio and the more talented half of the contestants, took out a plate and started testing the consistency of the sauce, which told us the almost complete recipe of it. The consistency of it was almost the same as water, yet it was just a little bit thicker and more malleable and after tasting a tiny bit of it and recognizing the strong, buttery taste, I knew that the chef just gave us some kind of variation of a *beurre blanc*.

I began preparing my dish. I took the biggest potatoes that I could find, peeled them and scored them on the vertical side, so they would turn into thin strips once I cut them, which I then seasoned and fried in about a cup of veal fat. This made them crispy and salty, which is everything one would expect from a potato side dish. Making the steak was also relatively simple and it was on the plate, along with the potatoes, in fifteen minutes. Now came the sauce. I tasted another drop of it just to make sure, and recognized a faint aftertaste hidden behind the thick curtain of the sweet butter flavor. The sauce was infused with something. I closed my eyes and emptied my thoughts just to concentrate on the taste, that was caressing my tongue and messing with my head. It was fond. Chef Paul used the burnt bits, left over by the steak to make the infusion for the sauce. I began with the process. The pan I used for the steak was still warm and full of flavorful fond on the bottom of it. I brunoised some shallots and threw them in the pan along with some oil to deglaze the pan. I followed with some red wine and stock and let it reduce until there was only about a tablespoon of thick sauce left over. I let it cool before blitzing it in a blender to make it smooth and mixing the exact amount needed for the perfect consistency into my finished *beurre blanc*. I finished plating the dish and went to chef Paul for my evaluation.

Upon placing my dish in front of him, my head emptied. Nothing was important to me other than what was going to come out of Paul's mouth. The evaluation itself only lasted about a minute, but it was the longest minute of my entire life.

"Congratulations." Said Paul after wiping his mouth with a towel. "You figured out what I used to make the sauce, which is more than impressive. I don't expect anybody to come as close as you did today."

The appropriate reaction in this situation would be a feeling of excitement, pride or happiness, yet I didn't feel any of these things. I didn't feel anything. I knew that I was good at what I do, but I didn't know what I was doing it for. What would be there at the end of the road? After the meaningless awards and the countless hours spent in the kitchen trying to figure out one tiny nuance just to perfect yet another dish. Did I want to grow old, living in some cabin in the woods after a long-lasting career? I put off these thoughts for later. As I was walking back to my workstation, I watched the other cooks. The ones who I guessed would be disqualified were panicking trying to figure out the last step of the dish, while the others were finishing up and making their way to Paul. Mauricio was the first chef after me to finish.

At the end of the day, our numbers were cut in half. All the great chefs were disqualified. Some withstood the first day by sheer luck but were disqualified the day after. The excellent chefs remained.

"This is where the fierce competition starts." Paul announced upon greeting us on the third day. "As some of you may have noticed, there are only half of you left. It happened sooner than I expected, but it was inevitable. Each chef standing here in top of the line. Even if you do not make it to the *Bocuse d'Or*, you still have a bright future in the culinary world ahead of you and you may even still compete later in your career. This may sound reassuring, but it doesn't mean that you shouldn't be giving it your all. I wish you the best of luck."

He wasn't wrong about how the competition would continue. The rate of disqualified people slowed down over the next few weeks. Assignment after assignment, nobody would slip up. Everybody gave their best and had no interest in changing that fact. There was only one chef disqualified every one to two weeks. I was slowly growing tired of the repetitiveness of the things we

had to do in the kitchen. As I went to sleep every night, my memories of the tasks were starting to intertwine, which led to strange dreams of hybrid dishes that were made of tiny aspects from different dishes I had cooked in the past weeks. This soon transcended beyond only dreams and started to plague my head during the day. Thankfully, my cooking skills did not start to deteriorate and I still showed much promise, but my mind was still overcrowded, which led to the next three months being a complete blur.

I went back to my room after another long day at the kitchen. I didn't bother changing my clothes or showering. I just jumped straight into my bed and started falling asleep, when I suddenly heard a knock on my door. It was Mauricio and he had some beers with him.

"There's only three of us left now." He said after making himself comfortable in my room.

"I didn't notice." I said honestly. "I wasn't fully there these past months."

"I know." Mauricio sighed. "What is your deal man? It's like you're a hollow shell of a man. It's hard to get through, yet I know there is something inside. A funny kid with a charming personality. He's buried deep inside you. Below some shit I can't figure out."

I looked at him with utter shock. How could he have so much insight into another person? I don't share much and try to at least seem to be in a good mood, yet he still somehow saw right through me. He was looking deep into my eyes, almost reaching my soul and trapping it in a chokehold. Mauricio knew exactly what he was saying and no matter what I would say next, whether it would be a lie or the complete sincere truth, he would know exactly what the thought behind it was, even if I didn't know myself. This control that he had over me made me feel on alert, yet safe at the same time. Having a person that knows what could be going on in your head is something that I craved and missed desperately. Coraline was the only other person besides Mauricio, who ever had such control. The only downside is that you feel lost in your own mind after they leave.

"I know what you're thinking right now." He said with a slight chuckle, breaking the long and awkward silence. "It seems impossible that somebody saw past your well-crafted facade."

"You're good." I chuckled.

"I'm good because I was once in the exact same position you are in right now." He began. "It's a dark place to be and I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy and especially on such a close friend. The facade that you're putting up is only going to hurt everybody around you if you are not careful enough. It will either slip an anger and you'll lash out on somebody, or it will swallow you hole until you can't find your way back to being the person you once were. You can tell me whatever you want. I'm here for you."

I took a big sip out of the bottle of beer in my hands, took a deep breath and told him everything. I don't know if it was the alcohol, my fatigue or my need to get so many things off my chest, but by the end of the night, Mauricio knew every single thing that kept me up at night. Everything from Coraline to James. After I finished, Mauricio gave me a very tight hug. He didn't tell me how to fix anything or to "just deal with it". He gave me what I needed most. Understanding."

"I think this is a good place to end today's session." Nick interrupted. "There isn't much left, so I think we will be done with the memoir next week."

“Memoir?” Alexis asked confusedly.

“Well, I don’t see it as a letter at this point.” Nick answered. “It may have started as a letter, but at some point, because of the dialogue and detailed descriptions, it turned into a book. A person that wants to describe their life, wouldn’t pick a letter to do so and I think Stanley knew that. Maybe he wanted to leave a letter, but there were too many things he wanted to get off his chest, which seemed like an important thing to him. Nevertheless, it still doesn’t change much. It’s not important what we call it.”

Alexis stayed quiet. She just read the thing that kept her up at night for quite a while, out loud and everything Nick had to say was an observation on what kind of text Stanley wrote before taking his life. She understood that there wasn’t any time left to discuss it any closer, but he could have just shut up about it. Alexis took a deep breath to calm down. She knew it wasn’t his fault, and he was just trying to loosen up the tension. Alexis only felt that way, because she was tired and awfully hungry. She bid farewell to him and went to get some burgers and fries next to her home.

17

Alexis drove to the diner, which was there before her building existed. She went there a lot. Mostly with Mark. They went there every time they were too lazy to cook anything for dinner, after cooking dinners for hundreds of people. The diner was nothing special. They didn’t have the best fries in town or exceptional service. The menu consisted of very few dishes, and they only served black coffee straight from the pot, which wasn’t anything to die for. Every other diner in Chicago would be of more value than this one. Despite all of this, Alexis always went back to it. The food wasn’t the best, but that doesn’t mean that it was bad and just thinking about all the jokes Mark had told Alexis in the booth next to the entrance, made the food taste even better. The convenience of a diner right next to your apartment building also couldn’t be ignored.

The diner was almost empty when Alexis went in. The only person there, other than the cashier and a few cooks in the back, was an old man reading some kind of book with his coffee. He was there most of the times Alexis visited her, so she wasn’t surprised. She went up to the register and ordered a bacon cheeseburger, soda and some fries. She watched as the cashier went to the kitchen to tell one of the cooks the order. Talking to the cashier was a young boy. Probably in high school. He wore his apron without tightening it in the back and had an earbud in his right ear, yet he didn’t seem like an obnoxious teenager that would do these things out of spite. His reasoning for the way he showed up to work was probably comfort or something else that was relatively innocent. The cashier walked away, and the boy started cooking. Alexis watched him closely as he put the ball of mince on the grill and smashed it flat with a spatula. He looked genuinely happy while preparing Alexis’s meal. He had a smile on his face and was quietly singing along to the music in his earbud. This is what Alexis fell in love with so long ago. The most important ingredient in any meal was and always will be passion. Alexis was worried that she had forgotten about that because of the recent events. She had to pick up her slack.

“What bring you here so late?” Spoke a warm, deep voice behind her.

It was the old man. He took his coffee to the counter and sat himself next to her. He smelled like cigarettes and bacon. His smell was comforting.

“I met some friends.” Alexis answered calmly. “I’ve seen you here before, haven’t I?”

“If you went to this diner in the last six years, you most definitely did.” He laughed with a raspy voice. “I have been going here ever since my wife died. I can hardly be at home. So many things there remind me of her, so I stay here until I’m too tired to notice them.”

“I don’t know if a coffee is going to help with your cause.” Alexis remarked.

“It’s decaf.” The man chuckled. “I’m Steven. Tell me why you’re here exactly. And don’t lie this time”

Steven saw right through her. I guess troubled people recognize people such as themselves. Alexis’ order was in front of her before she could answer.

“Let’s sit down.” Steven suggested.

“A close friend died some time ago.” Alexis said, after sitting down in her usual booth. “Suicide.”

“I’ve lost a fair share of friends to suicide.” The man mumbled. “What I’ve found helps most is closure. Finish the things they couldn’t finish themselves, you know?”

“I think I know.” Alexis sighed.

“Well then you know what to do.” Steven exclaimed before walking out of the door.

Alexis was stumped, but she was too hungry to think, so she ate her burger and went home. There was so little left of the letter. The last thing that Stanley left for him to be remembered by. She didn’t want it to be over, but it had to be.

She went home only to find Mark already passed out on the bed. She’s glad he doesn’t overwork himself like she does. Maybe she should start giving the other chef’s short tasks before they left, just to make her life easier. She went to the bathroom after taking off her shoes.

“Closure.” She thought to herself while making herself ready for bed. “Closure is what will bring me peace.”

Alexis went to sleep. She just had to make it to next Thursday.

Thursday. The past week went well without anything special happening. The cooks started moving on from Stanley’s death and the morale improved greatly. Alexis was glad that the team was getting closer again, yet she couldn’t move on like they did, which is particularly why she was looking forward to her session with Nicholas that night.

She told the staff what chores they had, took her stuff and made her way to the car. It was already dark. It was a warm June night. The sun was setting, and Alexis could hear the children playing in the nearby park. The drive to Nick was uneventful, just like the wait in the waiting room. Maybe it only seemed as such, because Alexis was about to have the highlight of her week.

“Good afternoon.” Smiled Nick, after his assistant let Alexis into his office. “Let’s get straight to the letter, so we still have time to discuss it at the end.”

Alexis agreed, took the stack of papers out of her purse and took a deep breath. This would be the last time she began reading without knowing what came next. She began reciting the letter.

“I woke up with a terrible headache the next morning, which made me panic. Being hungover would disrupt my performance and could lead to me not achieving my goals. I paced around my room, before deciding to take the day one step at a time. I put on my clothes, took my cooking utensils and continued to the usual meeting point, where the last cook, apart from me and Mauricio was waiting.

She was a woman with wavy blonde hair tied up in a tight bun. Everything about her demeanor intimidated me. She was a tad shorter than me, but it didn’t make her less intimidating.

“I don’t think I have properly introduced mys—”

“I don’t really care.” She scoffed

“Fine.” I chuckled uncomfortable.

We stood there in an awkward silence until Mauricio finally came.

“My head is killing me.” He complained. “We shouldn’t have drunk so much yesterday.”

We laughed for a bit until chef Paul came. All three of us corrected our posture almost immediately upon his arrival and went to the bus like he ordered us to. At this point the bus was replaced by a minivan with Paul as the driver seeing as it didn’t make much sense to rent a travel bus for four people.

“Something’s different.” Whispered Mauricio. “I can feel that something is going to change tonight.”

“I hope it will change for the better.” I answered.

Mauricio chuckled and stayed silent until we arrived at the kitchen. Paul opened the door and ordered us to go to our stations before giving us what would ultimately be our last task. Paul went to a free station, took out a pan and a single egg. After heating the pan until water bounced around when splashed on it, he cracked open the egg and fried it for about five minutes before putting it on a plate. The three of us watched every single one of his actions closely, trying to figure out what exactly he was doing, so we could replicate it for the task. Paul pierced the yolk of the egg and let it run all over the plate.

“This is what your dish should look like.” He finally spoke, after making us guess for another few minutes. “But I don’t want to have a savory dish before me at the end of the day. Your task for today is bringing me a dessert that looks exactly like the egg I have fried just now.”

Mauricio and the other chef looked like they had just seen a ghost. The task seemed more than impossible for them. I was calm. I had already figured out how to make the slightly browned egg white. The only thing that was left was the runny yolk.

“The time starts now.” Paul exclaimed.

We walked to our respective stations, some faster than others, and began. My Idea for replicating the egg white in dessert form was a very thin layer of sponge cake, topped with white chocolate ganache. The sponge cake would make it look like the bottom part of the egg was browned in the frying pan.

I learned the perfect sponge cake recipe from a pastry chef in Switzerland, who taught me the perfect ratio for the fluffiest sponge cake. To make my life easier, I decided to bake a whole cake and then cut off a thin slice to put on the bottom of my dish. The only hard part was getting the exact right amount of cocoa powder to make the color perfect.

I made the white chocolate ganache while the cake was baking. The trick was to use more cream than usual, to make it runnier than it would be under normal circumstances, so it would emulate an egg white that spread across the pan before solidifying.

After the sponge cake baked, I took it out of the circular mould and cut off a thin layer. It took me a couple of tries to get the piece of cake to the plate, without destroying it, but I got it eventually. I put the ganache on top, smoothed it out and made a crater for the egg yolk with a hot spoon. The only thing left to figure out was how to make the yolk. I looked over to the other chefs to reassure myself that I had enough time. Both were hard at work but didn't seem to have anything reminiscent of a finished product.

After a while of pondering, it finally hit me. I remembered my short time in the Netherlands, where the head chef offered me to stay with him before I ultimately departed. Because of this, I had to stay much longer than the other cooks, and watch the chef do his work. On one occasion, he was experimenting with molecular gastronomy. More specifically, with a process called spherification, which included dripping a liquid, mixed with alginate, into a cold solution of calcium chloride. The chemicals react with each other and make a sphere with a liquid of the chef's choice inside, that could be easily popped with a fork or knife.

I went into the greenhouse to get some mangoes and took the needed ingredients from the shared pantry. I quickly cut the mango and turned it into juice. I chose mangoes not only for the superior taste, but also for the thicker consistency of mango juice, which would perfectly mimic a runny yolk. After following the required steps for a perfect juice-filled sphere, I was almost done. Seeing as I had multiple spheres ready to plate and more than enough cake and ganache, I decided to refine my plating before bringing the finished dish to Paul.

As I was walking to Paul with my dish in hand, I heard a quiet sobbing coming from one of the chefs. I couldn't have been from Mauricio, because he had just disappeared into the greenhouse for some additional ingredients, so there was only one other chef left who could be crying right now. I approached her with caution to not scare her or make her uncomfortable.

“Is everything alright?” I asked with one of my hands gently resting on her back.

“Obviously it isn't!” She shouted, pushing me away, which made me drop my dish. “We have been working here for the past three months without any goal in sight, and quite frankly, this made me lose my passion for cooking. If this is what fine dining is about, then I'm not cut out for it!”

Mauricio heard the screaming, and I saw him slowly peeking out of the door leading to the greenhouse, trying to figure out what was happening. Paul was reading the paper in his chair, that looked quite uncomfortable, when the chef lashed out, so he was quite displeased to be interrupted because of something such as this. He slowly stood up and started walking towards the chef.

“Come with me.” He said after looking her up and down. “Do not say a word.”

Paul led the woman to a secluded part of the kitchen, which was probably just a spare room, where they stayed for about fifteen minutes. Mauricio and I were too invested to go back to work, so we just stood there, waiting for one of them to come out and say something. When Paul and the other cook finally came back, she had tears rolling down her eyes, yet she wasn’t audibly sobbing. Whatever Paul told her in that room didn’t make her sad or ashamed, it traumatized her.

“You two are the last ones left.” Paul said with a smile on his face. Obviously addressing Mauricio and I. “Pack your bags and we will leave for Vienna first thing tomorrow.”

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“My heart stopped, and I felt my pores gush out an unimaginable amount of sweat. My chest tightened, I couldn’t breathe, and my knees weakened. I haven’t been back in Vienna since I left for university. So many things that reminded me of terrible things were in that city. I wasn’t ready to go back.

“Why are we going to Vienna?” I asked, barely getting the words out of my mouth.

“The European Bocuse d’Or will be held there.” Paul answered calmly. “I have the necessary accommodations and a place to prepare ready for us.”

Before I could say anything else, Paul had already made his way outside and was waiting for us in the car. I got in and didn’t say a word for the whole ride home. The disqualified chef left that same evening and I found myself left alone in my room. My things were packed and the only thing left to do was go to sleep and wake up the next morning to leave for the airport, yet I couldn’t even bring myself to think about shutting my eyes. My thoughts were overwhelming. After all this time away from home I didn’t know how to return. I thought about my mother’s reaction to my sudden return. She would probably scream, yet I wasn’t sure if it would be out of happiness or rage. It would probably be the latter, considering I ignored her advice and went to travel the world without a single word. She probably didn’t even know if I was alive.

The other thing that was bothering me deeply was Coraline, or at least the idea of her. She loved to walk. Every time we met, we would walk to wherever we were going and walk back. She knew the city like the back of her hand and showed me corners of the city that I didn’t even know existed. Seeing the city in such a light with a beautiful girl next to me was magical, yet the moment she left, Vienna was ruined for me. I couldn’t commute on foot without passing a street that we had walked on and every time I did, my day was ruined. Every time I saw a familiar place; I found myself standing there for a few minutes remembering exactly what we were talking about or what I was thinking. Her laugh echoed in my head, and I felt sick. I felt deep hatred and regret, yet it wasn’t directed at Coraline. The hate was that of myself. I hated myself for every mistake I made and for everything I did that could have pushed Coraline away from me. One day I couldn’t take it anymore. I stopped walking entirely and only took public transport. If walking somewhere was unavoidable, I

kept my head low and tried not to look around me to avoid recognizing a place. Vienna was ruined for me and the person that did that couldn't care less.

A sudden knock at my door interrupted my thoughts. It was Mauricio. As always, he had sensed a disturbance in my mood and wanted to understand what had happened or at least make me understand myself. I let him in and sat myself back on my bed immediately.

"You have a history with that city, don't you?" He asked after a brief moment of agonizing silence.

I never told him where I was from. As far as he was concerned, I could be from anywhere. I look like the most average Caucasian male. I wasn't freakishly tall and didn't have blond hair. My eyes were brown, and I was slim. People like me existed all around the world.

"It's where I'm from." I sighed. "You know what I left behind. I'm not ready to go back to that."

What I said was completely true. The shame that I felt, for leaving everything I know like I did was immense. There was not a single day when I didn't think about how I could have broken off that part of my life more cleanly.

"Listen." Began Mauricio. "The past is a terrible thing that haunts each and every one of us no matter where we go or what we do. The past of some people may be worse than that of others, but no matter how terrible the past of a person is, it still follows them wherever they may be. You aren't the first person to be afraid of facing your mistakes. It may sound like it, but I'm not trying to downplay what you are feeling. It's good that you are afraid. This isn't a fear of facing your errors. You fear repeating them. This shows that the person that made those errors is entirely different than the person sitting in front of me right now. You changed and so did everything you left behind and there is nothing that anybody can do against that fact. I know that you can do what you fear most. You're way stronger than you think."

I was speechless. Mauricio's words filled me with warmth and confidence like nothing else ever did, yet I still felt that deep sadness that has been inside me for such a long time. I decided to let it all out. Tears started violently rolling down my cheeks and I sobbed louder than ever before. Mauricio was quick to take me in his arms and try to comfort me, but he still knew that this was exactly what I needed at that moment in time. I felt good. No matter what happened to me, I was still a friendly boy that loved making him and other people laugh. That boy was still hidden inside me, but he was buried so deep that I had almost forgotten about his existence.

I fell asleep with tears in my eyes. I dreamt of Coraline. I dreamt of the times I saw her after we had stopped talking. The emotions I felt when I had to watch her be happy without me were gut-wrenching. I found it unfair that I had to go through such terrible things, and she just seemed to go on with her life without a care in the world. I hated myself for not wanting to forget her.

As the sun rose the next morning, I slowly opened my eyes. I was tucked in my bed. I looked over to the side and saw Mauricio lying on the floor, covered with a duvet he probably took from his room and his head resting on a pillow. I felt bad for him. I shouldn't have worried him like I did. He was a good person and an amazing friend. Neither the world, nor me deserved him.

My thoughts were quickly interrupted by the sudden opening of the door. Paul, dressed in a knit sweater and some jeans, was peeking out from the entrance. This was the first time I saw him without his usual chef's attire.

"Strange." He said, obviously referring to Mauricio lying on my room's floor. "But it saves some time that you both are here. Wake him up and get ready. We leave in forty minutes."

Paul left as abruptly as he went in. As I gathered myself and went to wake up Mauricio, I noticed that he was already awake and was lying there with his eyes closed. He was avoiding any unnecessary interaction with Paul.

"Is he gone?" he whispered as I came near.

"He is." I answered.

"I still have some things to pack, so I'll be in my room." Mauricio said, with his blanket and pillow in hand. "I'll see you in forty minutes."

"More like thirty-five." I chuckled.

Unlike Mauricio, I had already packed everything and was ready to leave. I went out the door and slowly made my way to the entrance, making sure to look at every corner of the halls on my way. I wanted to properly wish farewell to another chapter in my life.

Paul was already in the lobby when I arrived. His suitcase was quite small, and he only had a single bag with him apart from it. I guess he never packed much. We waited in silence for Mauricio, who arrived exactly on time. Paul wasn't impressed, but he was still the one who set that timeframe, so he let it go. We collectively went outside and got into a cab that was already parked in front of the lodge. Paul looked at it and let out a deep sigh before telling the driver to go to the airport.

I slept through most of the journey to Vienna, so there isn't much to say. The only times I was awake were during check-in and security control, and quite frankly my mind was somewhere else, so I had forgotten all about it.

I knew I was home the moment the Austrian air hit my face upon leaving the airport. Except for Mauricio and Paul, not a single soul knew of my return. I hadn't talked with my mother in almost two years and didn't feel the need to warn her in any way, considering I wasn't even planning on visiting her.

The first stop we made was at our hotel. Paul managed to get each one of us a room in a quite prestigious hotel in the first district. I remembered the last time I passed that place. Coraline and I were making our way back home after watching a terrible movie. I won the tickets in a school contest. Despite the movie being awful, I had a great time. It always made me happy seeing her laugh. We passed this hotel, like we did many times before, because it was near the tram station that led to her house. I only glanced at it for a moment, just to look back at Coraline. She had just taken out a cigarette and was trying to light it, which turned out to be quite unsuccessful. She wasn't quite of age, but that didn't stop her from smoking a cigarette occasionally. She would always say that she was looking forward to her eighteenth birthday, because she still felt a sliver of guilt every time she smoked and thought that that would fix it. I never smoked myself, especially not at that age, but even after only a month of knowing her, I still made it a habit to carry a lighter for the rare occasion, where

Coraline's somehow didn't work. I stopped in front of her and helped her light it. She thanked me with a kiss, and we went on.

After a brief check-in, we went to our rooms, only to leave anything we didn't need behind. Paul told us that he would show us our place of work, where we would prepare for the competition, which would be held in a few months. The place itself was on the first floor of an old building. It was a single room with a whole kitchen in it. It had everything a chef would need. Not more and not less. I liked the place and was more than ready to prepare there every single day of the next six months. We grabbed a quick dinner and went back to the hotel. Being back home wasn't as terrible as I expected. Despite the many memories that came back to me during the day, I still managed to keep myself focused on the task at hand. I took a quick shower and went to bed. I was sure that I was more than ready for anything that tomorrow would bring.

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"I need to use the restroom." Said Alexis.

She left without waiting for an answer. She rushed to the toilet and shut herself in in one of the cubicles. She was hyperventilating and sweating uncontrollably. As she was reading, she felt that there were only a few pages left of the letter. She knew that the moment she would flip to the end, Stanley would really be gone. Maybe she should just bail on her therapist, lock the letter away somewhere and never finish it, so that she could still somehow feel Stanley's presence following her through every step of her life. No. That would be haunting. Alexis didn't know what to do and that stressed her even more. If she could only disappear into an endless void right about now. Every one of her worries wouldn't matter anymore and she would just be floating there for an eternity, or at least until she would draw her last breath.

After thinking about her options for a moment, she decided to run from her problems, even though that was the worst option she could choose. She gathered herself and was ready to leave but was stopped by Nick in the hallway.

"I know exactly what you are doing." He said with a disappointed look on his face. "Look. I understand how you're feeling, but—"

"No, you don't!" Alexis interrupted. "Nobody on this whole planet can understand how I'm feeling. Stanley was my everything. My beginning and my end. From the outside he may have only seemed like my boss or a good friend, but it was way more than that. I went to work for him after leaving everything behind and having to go through fierce and unforgiving competition in culinary school. My entire family refused to talk to me, because they thought I was a disappointment for not wanting to become a doctor, like they wanted me to. I had it in me, yet it just didn't make me happy, so I went the route that fulfilled me, but it didn't. Being without my family was harder than I thought, and I barely made it through school without breaking down completely. I had barely any hope left, when I stepped foot in that restaurant, but the moment I stepped out at the end of my shift, I knew that it was all worth it. And I know for a fact that I wouldn't feel that way with any other chef other than him. I loved him like a brother, a father and every other way a human could love another."

Alexis fell to the floor and put her face into her hands. This was the first time she had been this honest with herself, let alone another person. Nick helped her up and took her back to his office.

“I cannot imagine what you’re feeling.” Nick said after sitting down next to Alexis, rather than in front of her. “The loss of a loved one is something that I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy, yet it seems that the bond between you and Stanley went deeper than mere love. You were connected on a deeper level. It may sound corny, and it goes against everything that anyone had ever taught me, but I think you were soulmates. Despite your relationship being much deeper than most others, I still think that the process of dealing with the loss of it stays the same and it will not help to put off finishing the letter that he gave you. Believe me, I know. By your condition, I can guess that you would much rather want me to read the final pages.”

Alexis looked into Nick’s eyes. They were filled with genuine empathy and compassion. She knew she could trust him. She nodded and gave him the unread pages. He went back to his usual place and after taking a breath, he began reading.

“I woke up refreshed and happy to have a change of scenery. I looked out the window. It was still very early in the morning and the streets were empty. I took in the seldom moment, where Vienna is quiet. I shaved, brushed my teeth and dressed for the day. Upon looking at my watch, I realized that I still had more than enough time until the others woke up. I pondered about what I should do until then. I tried falling asleep again. Unsuccessful. Reading a book also didn’t seem to hit the spot. I hung out in the lobby for a while, but it got too eerie having the receptionist stare at me in silence and quite frankly, it wasn’t as well ventilated as my room, so I went back to it.

After walking into my room, I looked out of the window again. An hour had passed while I was killing time, and the very early workers were already starting their day with a sandwich at the bakery and a hot coffee. Mauricio set an alarm to go off in an hour, after which he would go eat breakfast and get ready. Paul set the rendezvous time to nine o’clock, which is in another two hours. I thought for a while, after which I decided to go for a long walk in the city. Either to remember it or win it back for myself and not let the memories of Coraline ruin it for me. I put on some perfume and went out. It was summer and the trees were greener than I remembered them. The birds were singing, and a warm summer breeze was hitting my face. I walked without giving any thought to the direction I was walking in, until the first rays of sunshine started peeking out. Once I noticed them, I knew that it was time for breakfast. I looked around to approximate where I was and recognized the area in which the café, where I bought my morning coffee in the past, was. I haven’t gone back there ever since Coraline, and I stopped talking. I thought it would make sense to face the unpleasant memories, where they were the worst, so I made my way to the coffee shop.

I wandered around for a bit, because I had overestimated my knowledge of the area, but eventually made it to where I wanted to go. The shop was the same as it was all those years ago, which is unsurprising, considering it was a chain of locations which usually don’t go out of business that quickly. I stood in front of the shop to gather the strength that it took to go in there. I watched a few people go out and a few others go in. After calming down a bit, I decided to go in.

The moment I opened the door; I was hit by the smell of coffee and freshly baked bread. I missed experiencing this smell every morning. A few people were sitting on the small tables and reading the morning paper or just enjoying their cup of brew. Some were ordering their morning drink at the front and the rest of the people stood in line and waited patiently. I joined them and prepared myself to wait for a good five minutes.

Suddenly, I caught a whiff of another smell. A smell that made me feel warm yet sent shivers down my spine. A smell that made me feel at home and the doctor’s office at the same time. It was

awfully familiar, but distant. It was Coraline. I couldn't mistake it for anybody else. She switched perfumes and shower gels, but beneath the synthetic fragrances, I recognized the smell that once plagued my dresser. I looked down slowly and there she was. She stood turned away from me, but even from behind I could tell it was her. Her wavy, black hair reaching just a bit over her shoulders and her legs crossed over each other. After all these years, I met her where our paths crossed for the first time.

I looked at her in utter shock and awe for what felt like an eternity before she turned around. All of a sudden, her soft cheeks, rose lips and beautiful blue eyes were staring right back at me. She hadn't changed a single bit since the last time I saw her, and she was beautiful. I felt the chokehold that she had on me become tighter and tighter until I almost couldn't breathe. Coraline looked down at my feet before staring back into my eyes. It was painful, but so beautiful that I couldn't look away. She smiled, the same way she would smile at a stranger. Polite, yet just enough to not make the person think that they were good friends. She didn't know who I was.

"Need anything?" She asked politely, as she tilted her head to the side.

I never thought that I would hear that wretched phrase come out of her mouth again. She stood there without even feeling a tiny bit of shame and looked me into my eyes when she said it. She destroyed me and dared to forget who I was. Coraline was like a parasite in my brain, while I left her memory a long time ago. What an unfair turn of events. I hated how this turned out. I wanted to scream my lungs out, so she would know what she had just done.

"You fucking asshole." I began. "What makes you think that you have the right to even look at me after what you did? You stand here before me, like nothing had ever happened, while not a day had passed where I didn't think of you. I destroyed and rebuilt myself many times in your name. I dreamt of you and hated waking up to a world where I couldn't be with you. I barely kept going, while you seem to be doing amazing. You left me alone with so many questions and I couldn't do anything about it.

What is it even supposed to mean that "It could've worked out, but it just didn't"? How am I supposed to hear that and not think that it was my fault that you decided to leave? Especially considering that you were the one that always wanted to see me. I was ready to text rarely and only see each other once a week or even less, but you were the one that always made plans and jumped into my arms when you saw me. You called me every night and didn't let me go to sleep so you could talk to me until you were too tired to keep your eyes open. I what world does a person do these things and then just decide that they don't have feelings for the person they were doing these things with?

Of course it was my fault. There isn't any other explanation for the things that happened to me. I pondered day and night, trying to figure out what I could've done to prevent it and never came to an answer. I could've either done everything differently or absolutely nothing. I bet that even you couldn't answer this question if I asked you. Your lie, that it was on you and not on me, that you never had feelings, was so convincing that you probably think that you never lied to me.

And why the fuck would you leave a voicemail message to tell me these things? You could've gathered some courage and arranged a meeting somewhere. It would have made things so much easier for me. I wouldn't have had to guess the answers to my many questions, because you decided to ignore me, and I would just know the answer instead.

I know I sound furious, and I absolutely am, but all the rage that you caused will never be let out on another person, especially not you. Every bit of pain, hate and rage that I have ever felt and will feel, will be turned against myself either to make me stronger or to humble myself. I love you, Coraline. I love you more than every other human being has loved in their entire lifetime. I love you like God loves his children and that is the one thing that will never change. I love you, and despite all the pain that you caused, I miss you. At the end of the day, I just want to be back in your arms, where nothing bothered me, and my head was empty and the only thing I knew was that you were there for me. I'm sorry."

These words never left my thoughts. By the time I finished the second sentence in my head, I had already stormed out of the café and was running as far away as I could. I wanted to go home. I wanted to see my mom again.

I ran through the streets of Vienna, which seemed to become narrower and fuller with people with each step that I took. I tripped and fell multiple times and probably lost some useless trinket that I kept in my pockets. Usually, I would set out to find it, but at that point in time, it didn't matter. I ran until I reached a metro station. I knew the metro system like the back of my hand, so it wasn't hard for me to find the right way to the platform. Once I got onto the next train, the way home was like muscle memory. I knew when to get out and what lines to switch to, but the morning rush hour still made me uneasy. I felt like a crazy person, trying to squeeze past old grandmas to get on the train first. After a while, I reached the station that was closest to my house. I got out onto the street and could finally take a deep breath of fresh air.

I haven't visited home in over seven years, yet nothing much has changed. I walked slowly until I reached my apartment building. A sense of safety enveloped me as I walked in. I called the elevator and pushed the needed button, after it arrived. I looked in the mirror. I didn't recognize the person that was looking back at me. I have learned so much since I was last in this elevator. Was I ready to see my mother again? Was she ready?

After a quiet ding, the elevator doors opened and I stepped into the hallway. There were only a few steps between and the front door of the apartment I grew up in. I froze, yet I was still determined to go through with my decision. I put one foot in front of the other and before I knew it, I had already pressed the doorbell. I heard footsteps rushing to the door, before my mother opened it.

"Oh Stanley." She said before hugging me tightly. "I have missed you so much."

After she let me in, I saw a small dog run up to me and start smelling my feet. It was a golden retriever puppy. I always wanted one.

"His name is Felix." My mom chuckled. "At one point it got lonely without you, and he helps with that. He's a charming dog."

My mom made some coffee and a proper breakfast. I calmed down and we started catching up. We talked as if nothing had happened. My mom seemed proud of my achievements and had already forgiven me for not following her advice. I felt bad for not reaching out to her for so long. We talked until I got to this morning.

“I remember Coraline.” She said with a look of nostalgia on her face. “She was a pleasant young woman. But never mind that. You just told me that you’re here because of a competition. If that’s true, what are you doing here with me? Not that I’m complaining.”

“I bailed.” I sighed. “I went straight to you after seeing Coraline again.”

“I think you need to go back there.” My mom said. “I’m sure I didn’t raise a quitter.”

She was right. I needed to suck it up and get back to work. Just to prove to myself that I’m not nothing without Coraline. I got up and promised my mother to come visit her again. I made my way to the arranged meeting spot, determined to perform at a level I have never performed at before.

“Look who the cat dragged in.” Said Paul after I had arrived.

I ignored him and made my way straight to the workstation.

“Let’s get to work chef!” I said after putting on my apron and hat. “I already came late and I’m not looking to waste any more time.”

Paul was offended yet impressed by my determination.

“What the hell happened?” Whispered Mauricio.

“I visited my mother.” I chuckled.

Paul gave us some orders and the rigorous training began. Paul was unforgiving and never satisfied, which wasn’t a problem because I was the same. I worked my ass off every single day and went to talk with my mother every evening. I told Paul to refund the room so I could stay back home. I took some convincing, but eventually he agreed. Mauricio noticed by how much the level of performance has increased, but he wasn’t looking to give up just yet. He performed better every day and never repeated any mistake that he made twice and at times, he was even on par with me.

Paul, Mauricio and I got closer with each training. After the final month of training, we went out for drinks after finishing our work in the kitchen.

“We are going to crush our opponents.” Paul said drunkenly one night. “I had many talented cooks under my wing, yet not even one of those could ever dream of working at such a level as you two. Everything from your raw talent to the chemistry you have, makes you an incredible team that is nothing like I have ever seen.”

All of us laughed and raised our glasses. Life was good. At this point I had almost forgotten about my meeting with Coraline.

“You still never told me what happened that one time.” Mauricio asked after Paul had fallen asleep on the table.

“I did actually see my mom again.” I spoke. “But before that, I coincidentally met Coraline again.”

“Coraline, as in that girl that you told me about. That must have been terrible for you.” He said with a concerned look on his face as he took another sip of his beer.

“It was.” I sighed, lowering my eyes to the ground. “It takes something big to make me want to see my mother again.”

“I understand.” Mauricio nodded, after which he looked over at Paul, who was slurring drunkenly with his head on the table. “We need to get him home. I didn’t know he likes drinking this much.”

I agreed. We helped Paul up and called a cab.

“Let’s take a break before the final week of training.” Paul suddenly spoke while we were in the taxi. “You both need to clear your heads and I’m not sure I can shout as loudly when I’m hungover.”

He fell asleep again with a smile on his face. I told the driver to drop Paul and Mauricio off at the hotel, before taking me home. I finally had some time to reflect on everything that was happening.

I thought about the incident in the café. I should have told Coraline what was on my mind. At least a dumbed down version of it over a cup of coffee. Even if she didn’t remember me, I still doubt she would say no to a quick drink, especially if I claim to be an old friend. But despite the much better options that were available to me, I chose to run. I ran away from my problems like a little child.

An old man bumped into me, interrupting my train of thoughts, which helped me more than it did cause harm.

“Oh, I’m sorry young man.” The man said with a smile, raising his palm in an apologetic manner.

“No worries, sir.” I said politely.

“You look distressed son.” He observed after looking into my eyes for a moment. “Whatever it is that is bothering you, remember, it will pass, just like everything else in this world does.”

That phrase gave me a small sliver of hope. I went back home to my mother and went to sleep. I woke up the next morning and was ready for another day of hard work, before realizing that Paul had given us a break. At first, I didn’t know what to do with my free time, but I got the hang of it pretty quickly. I started by raiding the pantry and watching whatever was playing on the tv. I wish I could say that I did anything else that day, but that was really it. I fell asleep on the couch with the tv still on and slept like a baby until the next day.

The final week of training went by in a flash. On Monday, Paul gave us the finalized menu that we will prepare for the competition, and we started mastering it. It seemed like every step of the way had very small room for error, which made us mess up countless times, yet we got up every time and never repeated the same mistake again.

The menu was internalized and perfected by Wednesday, which left us with almost four days of pure repetition, which was my specialty. By Sunday, I was going through every step of the process

in my head while brushing my teeth or eating breakfast. I was confident in the abilities of Mauricio and myself.

“Tomorrow is the big day. You ready?” Mauricio asked as we were finishing up on the last day.

“Like never before.” I chuckled.

We said our goodbyes, knowing that in twenty-four hours we would either be extremely disappointed or the best chefs in Europe.

I won’t bore you with the details of the contest, which you probably know all about. Everybody in the culinary world remembers those headlines by heart. “No-name chefs clear out the competition.” Or “Team of young protégée chef’s takes Bocuse d’Or by storm.”

Although there is one observation I had that day, which led to you reading this today.

From all the articles and headlines you can guess that I was way younger than the other contestants that were there that day. All of them were established names in their respective countries or even the world and had multiple restaurants under their belts, most of which were awarded Michelin stars. The position they were in was my end goal and after I won that night, I knew that it was nearer than I thought, yet I knew that the moment I would reach that goal, I would be at the peak of my career. With the Bocuse d’Or there was nothing else left for me to do other than open endless restaurants until I die, which wasn’t my idea of a meaningful career.

Basically, I set a goal for myself, that I would be the CDC of the best restaurant in the world by the time I was thirty-five years old. I knew that after reaching that goal, the only way further was either to stay at the peak, which is nearly impossible, or start going downhill, which I had no interest in. And if I didn’t reach that goal, my life would be meaningless anyway.

I know it sounds selfish, and I realize that you are very angry with me, which is more than understandable, but I would rather have my death send a wave of shock around the world than die in obscurity. That’s the reason I’m not with you anymore. I’m sorry.”

“There’s only one page left. Do you want to read it yourself?” Nick said, handing the sheet of paper over to Alexis.

Alexis wiped away her tears, that had rolled down her cheeks silently, while she was listening to her therapist read the letter and continued reading after taking a deep breath.

“You know, as I am reading this, I find it funny how much more some parts of my life matter to me than others. Coraline and everything that has to do with her, takes up more than half of what I’ve written, while my college years are merely glossed over, despite them supposedly being the best years of my life.

After the competition, I got to work at the best restaurant of that time. The famous Noma in Denmark. Once I got there, the first thing that surprised me was the silence. All of the establishments that I worked at before, were filled with music, laughter and insults, but now it was just pure

concentration. This is when I knew that I was at a completely different level than I was at before, which only motivated me further to become the best, which I eventually did.

I worked without lifting my head up, not letting anything distract me, which in the end led me to my success, but it still had its setbacks. Because of my dedication to the restaurant, I fell out with Mauricio and only found out about his death much later than I should have. The same thing happened with my mother.

Just so you know, I don't regret a single thing I have ever did and I will not regret what I am about to do next. In my opinion, my life was fulfilled and living any further would just be a waste.

Dear Alexis, promise to continue doing what you love and loving what you do. Don't let this loss drag you down for too long. Give your all in every part of your life and if you ever need to prioritize a single thing, don't make it your career. Instead of spending way too much time in the kitchen, you should rather go out with Mark or even call your parents. They have probably forgiven you long ago.

Thank you for being the best partner I have ever had. Thank you for everything.

Yours truly,

Stanley.”

21

“How do you feel.” Nick asked, folding his glasses.

“Incomplete.” Answered Alexis, while looking to the floor. “You told me that I would feel better after finishing the letter, yet it still feels like something is missing.”

“I understand.” Nick sighed. “I can't tell you what exactly that may be, because only you can decide what exactly was missing, but I can help you find what it may be.”

“How do we even know where to start?” Alexis asked, massaging her forehead with the tips of her fingers.

“Maybe you feel like Stanley didn't finish something and left it behind instead.” Nick spoke after thinking for a moment.

Alexis stayed silent. She went through the entire letter in her head, looking for anything that may seem unfinished. It seemed like Stanley thought of everything, to avoid taking up any more of Alexis' time. She wished he hadn't done that. If he had just been a little bit more careless or not as smart, she would still have something to hold on to the memory of him.

“I think you should go home and think about it.” Nick said, looking down at his watch. “Our session ended five minutes ago anyways.”

Alexis got up and went home without a word. She didn't want to seem impolite; nor was she that distraught because of what she had just read. She was just so deep in her thoughts, trying to find

anything that Stanley might have missed. Even an unpaid phone bill would leave her satisfied. She thought back to the words of the old man in the diner.

“Closure will bring you peace.” His voice echoed in her head.

Closure will bring her peace. She thought that finally finishing that vile letter would bring her exactly that, but she just found out that that was not the case. Alexis didn’t know what to do.

Mark had just made dinner, when Alexis came back. A simple risotto and red wine were on the menu. They had some small talk over dinner and went to sleep immediately after. Both had long days and were not so fond of staying up late to dissect them.

The next week at the restaurant went by smoothly. Although the thought of finding what she was looking for still plagued Alexis, she still performed like she always did. Alexis was desperate to find the thing that kept her from her well-deserved peace. She felt like she had forgotten something constantly, which is everything except a pleasant feeling. It tickled her from the inside out and made her feel empty and lightheaded.

Friday. The shift had just ended, and Alexis was preparing to stay way later than she should, when she thought back to what Stanley wrote at the end of his letter.

“Prioritize anything except for your career.” Was the gist of it.

“Do you want to go to the movies?” Alexis asked her fiancée as he was about to leave.

“Sure.” He said, after hesitating for a moment. He was just so used to having to go home alone, because his soon-to-be wife worked way longer than him.

Alexis got ready and they got into her car. They decided to leave Mark’s car in the parking lot until tomorrow. The cinema was quite full, and they barely got tickets to some corny love-story set in Paris. They haven’t been to the movies in a very long time, so they were down to watch whatever. After squeezing past the already seated guests and making themselves comfortable in their designated seats, Mark and Alexis looked over at each other. Both of them felt such immeasurable love for each other and sometimes took it for granted. They were thankful to have each other.

The movie was terrible, yet upon finishing it Alexis felt something click in her head.

“It’s Coraline!” She exclaimed, squeezing Mark’s arm. “Telling her how he felt after all those years, was the thing that he never did.”

“What do you mean?” Mark asked.

“Look.” Alexis began. “I just finished the letter with my therapist, thinking it would bring me closure to the loss of Stanley, yet it only left me emptier than before. I felt that something was missing. Nick suggested that it could be something that Stanley never finished that was bothering me to that extent and now I realized that he never got to talk to Coraline after she broke things off with him. Throughout these years, he got so much more experienced and the amount things he wanted to tell her changed and grew by the day.”

“So, you want to track down someone, about whom you know nothing about except their name, approximate age and appearance, as described by Stanley, who was obviously obsessed with her?” Mark asked skeptically, while trying to get out of the crowded cinema safely.

“You read his letter. You know how much Coraline meant to him. It would be the least I could do. No matter how hard it may be.” Alexis said, pulling herself even closer to Mark as to not get separated.

“I know I can’t convince you otherwise, so I’ll let you do what you need to do but promise me to figure out the logistics of the restaurant before you leave for Europe or wherever else that woman may be. You know how much I hate organizing things.” Said Mark upon getting out onto the street and gave Alexis a kiss on the forehead.

“I love you.” Alexis said, looking deeply into her fiancée’s eyes.

“I love you too.” Mark answered, with a big smile on his face.

22

A few days have passed since they were at the movies. Alexis knew she needed to find out where Coraline was, no matter how hard it was, yet she didn’t know where to start. She thought about going through Viennese telephone registries, yet there was no guarantee that she was still living there. Looking for her on the internet was also useless, considering the amount of Coraline’s that were registered to various pages. Alexis thought she would never find her and decided to give up.

The feeling of emptiness persisted, yet Alexis found ways to ignore it. She felt terrible for not finishing what she started, yet there was really nothing she could do. She continued working hard yet also kept in mind what Stanley told her in the letter, which honestly improved the restaurant more than if Alexis continued staying late, like she did before. If she couldn’t find the most important woman in Stanley’s life, she at least wanted to keep the restaurant, that was opened in her honor, thriving.

Alexis stopped seeing Nick, after deciding that there was nothing more to talk about with him. Because the only thing that was bothering her was that feeling of dissatisfaction that she had because she couldn’t find Coraline, yet she also knew that there was nothing she could do about it.

Mark and Alexis started going on more and more dates, which improved their relationship and mood considerably, not that any of those things were suffering. One night, they decided to get Chinese takeout and watch a movie at home. Once they made themselves comfortable on their couch, they started talking. Remembering some of the funniest moments of their relationship and some of the scariest ones. They talked and laughed for about an hour until they started talking about their wedding. Both Alexis and Mark weren’t in a big rush to finalize the marriage and hadn’t thought about it much, yet now that things were going so great, they finally decided that it was time. After talking about it for less than five minutes, they set a date for next spring.

All in all, Alexis was happy. For the first time in almost eight months, she felt like she was healing. She stopped thinking about Stanley constantly and only remembered him fondly once or twice every week. At one point, Alexis finally decided to clear out Stanley’s old office, instead of

sulking about him and letting it weigh her down. She knew that she wasn't going to let herself forget him, so there wasn't anything stopping her from seeing it through.

Alexis told her fiancée what she wanted to do and asked him to help her. They stayed after the shift ended and began their task. Clearing out the dusty boxes took longer than it should have, because Alexis spent too much time looking through every one of them. She had a story for every item that she found, yet it didn't make her sad remembering them. Quite the opposite. She was glad that she got to make those memories with Stanley when he was still here.

They were down to the last few boxes and Mark was ready to wrap up as quickly as possible. He took one of the boxes and was already making his way to the garbage to throw it away with the other boxes, when Alexis interrupted him.

"Wait!" She exclaimed. "Let me look through that one. I promise it will be the last."

"Fine." Mark groaned. He couldn't say no to her.

He gave Alexis the box and took the other few boxes that were left instead. Alexis opened the carton, only to find a few old notebooks from the time when Stanley was still travelling Europe. She flipped through them. Most of them were filled with random thoughts that Stanley wrote down as soon as he had them. There was no way anybody would understand what he meant with them, without knowing exactly what he meant when he wrote down 'bone marrow is better.' Or 'Milk!'. Alexis went through each of the diaries, without finding anything interesting until she got to the last one, which was dated right before the Bocuse d'Or competition, where Stanley won.

She opened it, expecting the usual bullet points that she found in the other notebooks, yet she was surprised to find a collection of texts that anybody could understand. Each one started with 'Dear Coraline.' Stanley was writing down what he would say to Coraline. Every text ended abruptly, as if Stanley didn't like what he had just written, and the next one would begin exactly as the one before it did. Every page was a polished iteration of the one before. Alexis flipped to the last filled out page. The letter didn't end like the others. Instead, it was complete. This was exactly what Stanley would say to Coraline if he had ever seen her again. Alexis started reading it and recognized it from the letter that Stanley had written to her. He wasn't going through iterations of what he would say. Stanley was trying to remember what he didn't say to Coraline when he saw her in that café. Before throwing the notebook away entirely, Alexis decided to look through the few empty pages, just in case there was anything else he had written. As she was flipping through the pages, a small piece of paper fell to the floor. Alexis picked it up and inspected it closer.

'Coraline' It said, followed by a number. Alexis had just found a way to reach the woman she was so desperately looking for.

"Mark!" Alexis exclaimed, getting up from her knees. "You won't believe what I just found."

Mark came running into the office, eager to find out what piqued his fiancée's interest so much. Upon reading what was written on the tiny piece of paper, his eyes widened, and a big smile formed on his face.

"This is amazing!" He shouted. "Now you can finally find out more about Coraline. I'm so happy that you found this."

Mark wasn't lying, yet he also hoped that this phone number wouldn't lead Alexis much further. If the person that this number belonged to was really the same Coraline as the one Stanley was talking about in his letter, it could send Alexis down a rabbit hole that would never end. If finishing the letter didn't satisfy her, then why would meeting Coraline do?

"I'll call this number first thing next morning," Alexis said. "I'm sure it won't be too early over in Europe. And the good news are that this looks like an Austrian number, so it could really be the same person that I am looking for."

"I'm sure," Mark grunted. "Let's get our things and go home, now that there isn't anything left to clear out."

Alexis talked through the whole car ride home, describing what she would do if Coraline answered her call tomorrow morning. Mark listened and stayed supportive, yet he didn't say a word. Alexis noticed and guessed what he could be thinking about, yet she decided to let it go. Nothing could talk her out of going through with this.

The couple got home and went to bed. Both turned their backs to each other and a tense silence filled the room. Neither of them could gather the courage to talk about the elephant in the room.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Mark finally said, turning around to face the back Alexis' head. "I'm just scared that—"

"I know what you're going to say," Alexis interrupted, turning around to Mark. "You're scared that I'm never going to let it go and that I will someday drag you down a rabbit hole with me. I understand your worries, but I'm confident that this is the last thing that is keeping me from letting Stanley go completely. And even if that isn't the case, I promise that I will go through everything myself, without hurting you or anybody around me."

"That sounds convincing," Mark said, with a big yawn. "You sound genuine, so I'll let you do what you need, without interfering in any way. Anyways, I'm exhausted after carrying all those boxes around. Good night."

23

The next morning came as fast as Alexis fell asleep last night. After waking up, Alexis managed to get to breakfast before remembering what she wanted to do in the first place. Only after seeing the tiny sliver of paper on the kitchen counter, did she remember to call the number that was written on it. She quickly grabbed her phone and started dialing the number.

One ring. Alexis' heart was beating. What would she say if anybody picked up? Second ring. At least she knew that the number still worked. Third ring. It would truly be humiliating if nobody picked up. Fourth ring. This is it. Nobody got to the phone in time and Alexis didn't want to bother anybody any further.

"Hello?" A female voice suddenly sounded from the other line.

"Yes, hello?" Alexis stuttered. "Am I speaking to Coraline?"

“Yes, this is her.” The voice answered calmly. “Who am I speaking to?”

“My name is Alexis.” She rambled. “I’m a friend of a person, who held you very close to their heart, and I only recently found out how to contact you. I really want to speak with you. I know you live somewhere in Europe, and I would be glad to go there, I’m just not sure where exactly it is you are.”

“Sure. I’m always ready to meet new people, even if the circumstances are quite weird, but since you claim to be a friend of a friend, it would be impolite not to trust you.” Coraline said with a slight chuckle. “May I ask, who this friend of yours is?”

Alexis hesitated. She only knew how Stanley felt about Coraline, not the other way around. What if she didn’t want anything to do with him? It didn’t matter. She had to go through with it as far as she could.

“It’s Stanley.” Alexis whispered, not out of secrecy, but out of shame and nervousness.

Silence.

“I haven’t heard that name in a while.” Coraline spoke, after what felt like an eternity. “I will send you my details. Just give me a heads up when you plan on coming, so I can clean up a bit.”

Coraline hung up. Alexis was shaken. Obviously, the call ended on a much more negative note than it started, yet Alexis still counted it as a win. After not even ten minutes, a text message, containing an address in Vienna lit up Alexis’ phone. This was it. This was the last step that Alexis needed to take, before letting Stanley rest in peace. She could have screamed, yet she kept her composure and waited for Mark to wake up, so she could tell him what had just happened.

Mark came down yawning in his usual sleeping attire. A pair of sweatpants and an oversized t-shirt with some dorky print on it. He said he slept like this for as long as he could remember. Coraline told him to hurry up and come to her as soon as she noticed him.

“Did you call?” Mark asked, still tired.

“I did.” Alexis answered with an excited look on her face. “And it was actually the Coraline we were looking for.”

“Isn’t that swell.” Mark said calmly and started making coffee for himself.

“don’t you have just a bit more to say?” Alexis asked. “It sounds like you don’t care at all.”

“Because I don’t.” Mark answered calmly. “You said you won’t drag me any further into this and I promised that I would let you do whatever you want. We’re just keeping our promises.”

Alexis could’ve started yet another fight, but she knew that Mark was right. Just because the thought of Stanley was one of the biggest parts of the last year or so, doesn’t mean that everybody else cared just as much as her. Mark had already found his peace with Stanley’s death by the time they were making their way back from his funeral. He was only interested in helping Alexis let go of Stanley, because he knew that it was best for her, not because he needed help with it himself.

Alexis bought tickets to Vienna that same morning. She found the cheapest tickets available, which were for a flight that was scheduled in two weeks. She figured that would be enough time to get the logistics at the restaurants in order. She would only be gone for a few days, yet she knew that that was still enough time for Mark or anybody else to mess up at the restaurant, if she didn't give them a clear set of tasks that would keep everybody too occupied to make mistakes.

The kitchen staff took the news that Alexis would be gone quite well. Maybe because they didn't think that a few days would make a big difference or maybe because they knew that Alexis had to take a break at some point. All in all, Alexis was quite sure that the restaurant was still in good hands.

After the shift, Alexis decided to call Coraline, to make sure that there would be no future confusion about her arrival. Mark was already in the car when Alexis told him that she needed a minute. He waited patiently, just like he promised.

Alexis took out her phone and dialed Coraline's number. She picked up immediately.

"Hi, I'm sorry to bother you this late," Alexis said. "I just wanted to give you some news."

"No worries. It's five o'clock over here. I just woke up," Coraline answered with a calm voice. She sounded surprisingly awake for somebody who had just woken up. Must be a morning person.

"Oh okay. Sorry, I'm just not used to talking with somebody in a different time zone," Alexis chuckled. "I'm calling to tell you that I got tickets to Vienna in about two weeks. I don't remember the exact dates from the top of my head, but I can text them to you if you'd like."

"It's fine. I'll just remember to clean up in the next two weeks," Coraline said. "I have to go now. Good night."

"Good –" Alexis couldn't finish her sentence before Coraline hung up.

24

The two weeks passed in a flash. They passed so quickly that Alexis wouldn't have noticed that her flight was tomorrow if Mark hadn't reminded her.

"Are you all packed up?" Mark asked while eating his scrambled eggs.

"You've got to be kidding me," Alexis groaned. "I'll start now, but you have to remind me again when we come back home."

"Will do," Mark chuckled.

Alexis grabbed a few pairs of socks and underwear, some pants and shirts. She didn't care about how she looked, so she just grabbed whatever she saw first. She laid out the things that she picked out on the bed and set a suitcase down next to the pile of clothes. She ran to the bathroom to get her travel pack, that she had gotten as a gift from a line cook in the kitchen a few years ago. The small bag included a small tube of toothpaste, a toothbrush and tiny bottles of shampoo, shower gel and conditioner. Alexis had hair that didn't require much maintenance, and it helped that she kept it

relatively short, so she wasn't afraid that her hair would suffer too much from these cheap products. She looked at the pile of things, trying to remember if she had forgotten anything that would go in her check-in luggage, before making her way back to Mark to finish her breakfast and leave for work.

Alexis and Mark grabbed a bite at the diner after closing down the restaurant. The diner was quiet, which was to be expected at that time of day. The couple sat down in their usual seats and waited for the waitress to arrive. Upon looking around for a moment, Alexis noticed the old man that talked to her the last time she was here. He saw her before she laid eyes on him and was already looking in her direction. They exchanged a polite smile, before looking away.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?" Mark asked suddenly.

"Come on." Alexis sighed, taking Mark's hands into hers. "We have had this conversation already and you of all people should know how hard it is to change my mind."

"You're right." Mark chuckled. "But that doesn't mean that I'm not bothered by your decision."

"I know." Alexis laughed before giving Mark a kiss on his cheeks.

Mark and Alexis came back home and started getting ready for bed. Alexis folded her clothes and packed them neatly in her suitcase. Everything that was left was to pack everything she would take in her purse. She didn't think that she would need anything other than the things she already carried in her day-to-day life. She thought about it for a second, before remembering the letter. She knew that she probably wouldn't show it to Coraline, but she still wanted to have it on her person, just in case. She packed it in her purse, after which she was officially ready for departure.

Alexis almost couldn't sleep that night. She was afraid and excited at the same time. So many things could go wrong and there was nothing that she could do about it. After twitching and turning for a long while, Alexis decided that stressing about it would only make it worse, so she went to sleep. She had a strange dream that night. The reason behind the strangeness of the dream was that Alexis couldn't understand the meaning of it at all. She dreamt of the restaurant kitchen. The kitchen was empty and mostly dark, except for one light illuminating a workstation. Standing by that workstation was Stanley. He was working on a new dish. He was figuring out the plating of it. It seemed like he tried a thousand different positions of every part of the dish, yet he was never satisfied. He threw away plate after plate and began the process from the beginning each time. For the duration of the dream, Alexis didn't leave her spot. She just watched Stanley from a dark corner in the room, hoping that he would show her the finished dish once it was ready, yet that moment never came. Alexis woke up in a cold sweat the next morning, without ever getting a conclusion to her dream, yet it didn't matter, because she had forgotten it by the time she got out of bed. Alexis didn't like to linger on things she didn't understand.

Alexis' flight was at noon, so she still had some time after Mark left. She looked around, preparing herself mentally to leave her life behind for a few days. After locking her apartment door, she went downstairs and called a cab to the airport. Her time in the airport, leading up to her flight, was painless. It wasn't as busy, seeing that it was in the middle of the workweek and things moved swiftly. Alexis got into her seat and prepared for takeoff. She fell asleep the moment the plane reached its desired altitude. The flight was nine hours long and Alexis slept through most of it, only waking up

to eat the food that was provided to her halfway through. All the stress and excitement made her really tired. She needed that rest.

She was looking out of the window, when a pleasant chime came from the intercom and the pilot's voice announced, "we're going to be arriving at Vienna airport on time, in about ten minutes. Please stay seated and keep your seatbelts fastened. The table trays should be closed and the seat straight up for the landing. Welcome to Austria, people."

Some people clapped and some people groaned, because they had to wake up from their deep slumber, yet Alexis didn't move and stayed completely silent. The responsibility she would have to face after stepping out of the airport was immense, and she wasn't sure if she was up for it.

Alexis' seat was near the front exit of the plane, so she was one of the first ones out, which made standing in line for the passport control and security check much more pleasant. Waiting for her bag to show up was a whole different story. The luggage was somehow late, which meant that Alexis had to wait thirty minutes before the first bags started showing up. While she was waiting, Alexis called Mark. He picked up after two rings.

"Hi darling! How was your flight?" He exclaimed.

"It was good, but now I'm stuck here waiting for my bags." Alexis groaned, rolling her eyes.

"Well, it happens." Mark chuckled. "By the way, the first shift without you went well. We were still efficient and managed to get through the day without any major accidents."

"Try to get through tomorrow without any accidents." Alexis sighed.

"Will do." Mark answered. "Anyway, I'm going to take a shower and go to sleep. I'll call you tomorrow. Good night."

"Good night." Alexis said, while looking down at her feet. It's the first time that she's so far away from Mark and he seems to be taking it quite well, while it stressed her out extremely.

After trying to wait for five minutes more, Alexis got bored again and decided to call Coraline. She picked up almost immediately and said, "Look, I'm at work right now, so I'll have to go soon. What's up?"

"I just landed in Vienna." Alexis began. "When can we meet?"

"Tomorrow's fine." Coraline said, after a moment of silence. She was looking through her calendar. "I'll take a sick leave. Come by for lunch. I think I sent you the address."

Before Alexis could say anything, Coraline hung up. She was a busy woman.

After finally collecting her bags, Coraline went to the exit of the airport. After navigating confusing signs for a while, she finally made it to the taxis, waiting for customers. She got into the first one and was greeted by a bearded man with a beanie stretched over his head.

“Where to?” He asked, like he did hundreds of times before. It was routine. He was probably so used to greeting customers like that, that it sometimes slipped out when he met his friends or family.

“The Ritz-Carlton hotel please.” Alexis spoke. She didn’t want to deny herself anything on this trip, which is particularly why she chose to stay at a well-known hotel around the world, instead of a two-star, family-owned hole in the wall.

It was noon in Vienna, which took Alexis some time to wrap her head around. She wasn’t used to such time zone differences. The farthest she has ever been from the United States, was in Vancouver, because she visited her cousin. The streets were getting fuller by the minute, because of all the people going out to eat some lunch. This made getting to Alexis’s hotel, which was in the most crowded place of the most crowded district, harder than it would have been in the morning or late at night. Thankfully, her driver stayed calm, which was unusual, since a cab driver in Chicago would have lost his mind at this stage of traffic.

A few minutes later, Alexis arrived at her destination. The driver helped get her bags out of the trunk, said his goodbyes and went on with his day. After checking in, Alexis went up into her room. It was on the second floor with a view of the Ringstrasse and had a single queen-sized bed. All in all, it was a usual hotel room with expensive furniture. Nothing extravagant.

Despite the luxury surrounding her, Alexis didn’t pay attention to it. She did have a whole itinerary planned to discover Vienna and its treasures, yet she couldn’t bring herself to move. She decided to stay in that day, only going out of her room to eat a light dinner. Tomorrow was an important day. It stressed her so much that even if she was hungry, she couldn’t bring herself to eat any more than she did, fearing that she might barf her guts out that night. It shouldn’t be that big of a deal. Coraline seemed like a nice person and apart from Stanley, they had absolutely nothing in common. Alexis still had the chance to make a good impression, yet she still felt like she was about to face an eternal enemy.

Alexis slept poorly that night. She still had lots of energy left, which made her fall asleep slower. She twisted and turned in her bed, until finally, at about two in the morning, she fell asleep. That night was dreamless. It’s as if her consciousness was leaving Alexis’ mind as empty as possible to prepare for tomorrow.

Alexis was woken up by the morning commuters driving to work. It was about seven o’clock. She went down to eat some breakfast. She was greatly satisfied by a full English with a big cup of coffee, after which she went back to her room to change. She figured that it wouldn’t be wise to rot in her room like she did last night. She decided to go out.

Vienna was a beautiful city. The architecture was unlike anything Alexis had ever seen before, and the well-kept greenery made her experience as a pedestrian quite pleasant. It was a normal business day, which left the streets mostly empty. The only people that crossed paths with Alexis were other tourists or grandmas walking their dog. Alexis visited the big cathedral in the city center and briefly stopped in a gallery, after which she grabbed a coffee in a café.

She sat there, people-watching and sipping on her coffee, when she decided to look down on her watch. It was half past eleven. She paid for her coffee and made her way to the address that Coraline sent her. To arrive on time, Alexis decided to use the public transit system, instead of walking like she did the whole morning. The tram and subway lines could not be more straightforward and efficient. She would miss that about Vienna, once she came back to Chicago, where the subway line wasn't nearly as good.

Alexis arrived at Coraline's doorstep just before twelve. She lived in an old apartment building, with high windows and decorated walls. Alexis called Coraline.

"I get it that you're here?" Coraline said, after picking up the phone.

"I hope so." Alexis chuckled, expecting a polite laugh in reply. Coraline stayed silent.

"I'll be right down." Coraline said after an awkward pause.

Alexis' heart pounded. She was about to meet the woman that had a chokehold on Stanley up until his death. After about a minute of waiting, the big wooden door opened. Behind it was a short woman with wavy black hair. But what caught Alexis' attention the most, was her eyes. Once she saw them looking up at her, she knew exactly why Stanley was so in love with Coraline. Even Alexis, who was soon to be married, couldn't help but fall in love with the big, round and light blue eyes staring up at her.

"it's so nice to meet you." Coraline exclaimed with a contagious smile. "Come in."

Both had some small talk while walking up the stairs. Coraline lived on the first floor, so it didn't take long at all. Coraline opened her front door and let Alexis in. The apartment was quite small, with high ceilings. Coraline showed Alexis where to wash her hands and they both sat down at a small kitchen table next to the window.

"Is it okay if I smoke?" Coraline asked.

"I don't mind." Alexis answered.

Coraline opened the window and lit a cigarette. She made sure to blow the smoke out the window. It was apparent, that she didn't like the smell of smoke in her home, but she couldn't resist her urge to smoke. After watching Coraline smoke for a bit, Alexis said, "You know, I was quite surprised that you were so open to meeting a stranger you have never met."

"I like to take risks. It makes life more fun." Coraline replied. "And once you said that you were a friend of Stanley's, I knew you weren't some swindler. How is he by the way? Why didn't he come out here himself?"

A tense silence filled the room. After hesitating, Alexis sighed, "He's dead. Suicide."

Coraline's eyes teared up. It looked like she was about to burst out in tears, yet she didn't let a single tear fall down her cheek.

"Is that why you're here?" Coraline asked, after calming down a bit.

“Yes, it is.” Alexis spoke, looking down on the table. “He left a long letter, describing his life and you were a big part of it. He wrote about everything from the day you met to the day he last saw you. He only spoke fondly of you.

“I see.” Coraline sighed. “I think about him a lot. We met at a very turbulent time in my life. There were a lot of negative things and people around me, which made me severely depressed. Stanley was nice and funny and did anything I asked him to. He was perfect. He looked good and, despite never meeting him, my mother liked what she heard about him. He would have spent his entire savings on flowers for me, if I didn’t stop him. I had absolutely no complaints, which is particularly why I broke things off with him. I was distant and sometimes hurtful, and I felt like an asshole every time I hurt him. I hoped that he would someday leave himself, because he couldn’t take it anymore, yet he stayed. I didn’t want to hurt his pretty soul any further, so I lied and told him that I don’t have feelings. It was one of the hardest things I have ever done.

He tried talking to me many times after and believe me, I liked it. I wanted to talk to him. I wanted him to forgive me, so it would all go back like it used to be, but at the same time I knew that I wasn’t ready, so I started ignoring him, no matter how much it hurt me.

I was in love with him, despite what I said. His green eyes looked at me, filled with love and hope. They made me happy, and I loved seeing them light up every time I gave him a kiss on the cheek. We never fought. He grew up mostly without a father, so he knew not to treat women properly, which he did. Before him, not a single man had treated me with even a sliver of respect, so it was refreshing to see that chivalry wasn’t dead. And I mean chivalry when I say it. His actions and words were straight out of a fairytale. He was like a knight in shining armor, and he knew it, yet he stayed humble. He apologized often, before I taught him that every time he did, it sounded less believable, so he stopped. It was another feature that I liked about him. If you pointed out a mistake, he never repeated it again, if you explained his mishaps correctly.”

Coraline paused. She looked into the air, as if she was reminiscing about something. A warm smile appeared on her face. She took another hit of her cigarette, before putting it out in an ashtray and continuing, “At one point, I realized that I was wasting my time, reminiscing about him so much. Don’t get me wrong, I neither stopped caring about him, nor did I forget him. I just decided to live on with my life and concentrate on my future.

A few years had passed since I graduated from high school, and I did precisely what I set out to do. I enrolled in a university to become an architect and concentrated on getting better than I was before, keeping Stanley in the back of my mind.

We met again in the same coffee shop, where we first saw each other. I remember seeing him walk inside. He looked nervous. Since the last time I saw him, he had gotten much taller and tanned. His hands also looked much more calloused. As he stood behind me in line, I was trying to remember what exactly I said to him when we first met. I think it was something along the lines of ‘What’s up?’ or ‘Can I help you?’ I turned around and said whatever I thought was correct, yet instead of answering me, he rushed out of the café as fast as he could.

I didn’t want to chase after him. Quite frankly, I found it funny. That was the last time I saw him. I think I read about him in the paper that week. He won some kind of culinary contest. I guess he became a big-time chef.”

Coraline chuckled, shaking her head. Her legs were crossed over each other and her hands were resting on the table. Suddenly, small barefoot steps sounded from the next room and a high-pitched voice called, “Mama?”

A toddler walked into the kitchen. He had longish blonde hair and green eyes. He looked nothing like Coraline. After admiring him for a second, Alexis asked, “You have a kid? Who’s the lucky one?”

“He’s adopted.” Coraline whispered, closing the boy’s ears with the palms of her hand. “I always wanted a kid, but my dating life was more than complicated, and I never found I guy which I though was cut out to be the father of my children. Now that I think about it, I think Stanley would have been great.”

Coraline picked the boy up and stroked the back of his head.

“What’s his name?” Alexis asked.

“Henry-Matisse.” Coraline smiled, giving the boy a kiss on the forehead. “I’m going to put him to sleep again. I’ll be right back.”

Ten minutes later, Henry was calm. After Coraline came back to the kitchen, Alexis, scared to wake up the kid, whispered, “I have something for you.”

She took out the stack of papers from her purse, where Stanley had transcribed his life and started looking for the pages where he wrote what he would have said to Coraline if he had the chance. Alexis thought she had to see it. After she found the pages, she handed them to Coraline, explaining to her what exactly it was she was holding in her hand. Coraline started reading though the monologue and Alexis knew exactly what part she was reading, by the expression on her face. Once Coraline was finished, she laid the pages back on the table and broke out in tears. Alexis helped her calm down, which she did after about five minutes.

“I miss him.” Coraline said suddenly. “I miss him so much and I am so sorry for what I did.”

“We all miss him.” Alexis spoke with a reassuring voice. “And you shouldn’t be sorry. I’m sure he forgave you, and now that you have read what he had to say to you, he can rest easy.”

“Did he achieve his dreams?” Coraline asked with a tear-filled face. “I knew him as an ambitious guy, so I need to know that he stayed that way.”

“He is a legend in the culinary world and opened one of the most renowned restaurants in the world.” Alexis said with a smile on her face. “I would describe that as achieving his dreams.”

Coraline laughed. She was proud of him and quite relieved. She almost thought that he would give up on himself once she left. Thankfully, that wasn’t the case. She looked up to Alexis and asked, with a genuine curiosity, “What’s the restaurant called? I’m sure I’ll visit sometime.”

“Coraline.” Alexis answered after hesitating for a bit.

Coraline laughed, while more tears started rolling down her cheeks. She hugged Alexis tightly and whispered, “He was always such a romantic. One of the many things I loved about him.”

After calming down, Coraline and Alexis spoke for a while. Alexis even cooked dinner for them and Henry. They talked about many things. From the contents of Stanley's letter to what school Coraline wanted to send her son to, once the time came. The longer Alexis talked with Coraline, the more she understood what an amazing person she was. She was intelligent, emotionally ripe, funny, understanding and many more things. Coraline was a ray of sunshine that infected everyone around her with hope and happiness. Alexis now knew exactly what Stanley had meant by that.

It was getting late and Alexis decided to go home. Coraline didn't refute. She had to get up early in the morning to get to work on time. While Alexis was putting on her shoes and gathering her things, Coraline decided to say a few words of wisdom before she left.

"I don't want to undermine Stanley's decision, yet I still think that the reasoning for his suicide was poorly thought-through." Coraline began. "Even if it was the peak of his life, it wouldn't go straight downhill. Life is many things, but it isn't linear. There would have been many challenges to come in his life. Ups and downs that he could have never predicted.

I know that it's cliché, but I still think that everybody should remember that they are going to die someday and seize the day because of it. 'Memento mori' and 'Carpe diem' basically say the same thing. Live your life to the fullest. Every step you take leads you to a series of events. Whether they're fortunate or not so much, doesn't matter. You should still live through them and experience every emotion that they bring with them fully. That is what life is about. Remember this and let it ring out in your head constantly. It will save your life someday."

Alexis thanked Coraline for the conversation, advice and for being able to cook for her, and left. She didn't have to think about Coraline's words, because she knew that they were truthful. Alexis went back to her hotel, admiring Vienna at night on the way, and started packing her bags for tomorrow.

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A few days have passed since Alexis came back to Chicago. It was raining at the graveyard. Alexis stood in front of Stanley's grave. 'Beloved chef' it said below Stanley's name. Alexis looked at it with a smile. She was happy.

"It's okay, my friend. You can rest easy now." Alexis said as a happy tear rolled down her face. The words were meant for Stanley, but Alexis needed to hear them herself.

She walked to her car thinking, "It's okay. I can rest easy now."