

## *chapter one*

I kept urgently checking my phone, locking and unlocking the device as though I were stuck in a perpetual loop. The small screen glowed faintly in the dark hallway while 2000s indie rock played in the adjacent room; the twinkling guitars and messy drums thumping against the skewed picture frames hanging on the walls.

*where are youuuu*

I stared at my last text sent to Leena, eyes burning into the chat bubble as though if I scoured hard enough she would see and respond to my message. Or better yet just be here. Leena was the socialite, the one who frequented parties, and somehow always knew everyone. That was the only reason I was here, to be her plus one, and stick to her side like a dog she could parade around. Talking loudly during conversations, holding an entire room's attention, while I would laugh quietly and smile at quick remarks she made. Yet I had been here for nearly an hour, and she still wasn't here. In hindsight I knew I should have arrived *with* her, but she insisted she was busy with something and sent me the address directly, under the impression we would meet instead.

*i'm going to kill youuuu*

*this is ur thing, i don't know anyone here!!*

*ugh, u better be in like a horrific car crash at the hospital right now*

*jk*

*but please call me or something*

My phone dove back into my bag, as silent and messageless as ever. I adjusted my hair in the reflection of one of the frames and exited the hallway. I counted maybe twenty people in various clusters, talking loudly over the speakers, most of them swaying absentmindedly to the beat. On the coffee table not a single square inch of wood was visible under the sea of red solo cups scattered on its surface, like a horrific plastic slaughter. I maneuvered my way into the kitchen, refilling my drink with the haphazard cocktail of vodka and some indistinguishable red juice; not that I was complaining, I liked indistinguishable red juice. I took another swig and leaned against the stove, taking a deep breath as my eyes closed and I attempted to settle into this minefield of a social situation.

"Hey, are- uh, you good?" a low, curious voice stammered out. My eyes jolted open, while my body jumped from the reaction to another person being so close without my knowledge, the red drink sloshing, and spilling, unattractively on my skirt. "Jesus- fuck, ughh fuck, my skirt. You scared me, I didn't hear you come in." I blurted out, fixing my hair as I tried to calm down. "Yeah, it's loud you know?" I caught every other word the soft voiced man said, the party was quite loud after all. "Yeah! Um, I'm Anne, by the way?" His eyes registered my

introduction as he smiled and held out his hand, "I'm Sav, nice to meet you Anne." I looked at my red stained hand, wiping the spilled liquid on my skirt, and delicately held a few of his fingers, an incredibly meek and pitiful handshake that lasted only a few seconds as I became increasingly aware of the stickiness on my skin.

"So, who do you know here?"

"Do I go here? Oh no I'm not from here"

"Who do you *know* here?"

Sav repeated, each word formulated precisely and with great intensity as if to make sure he was heard and understood perfectly this time. His eyes looked strongly into mine, I noticed how dark and striking his gaze was, cushioned by a set of picturesque lashes. I blinked in acknowledgment and stared at one of the cracked floor tiles, "sorry- god does the music have to be this fucking loud? I don't know anyone here, well I've met Chris a few times, I think he's here? I'm friends with Leena. If you know her, she wanted me to tag along, though she's not even here herself. Which is lame, I might add." I always got long winded when I was frustrated. Sav chuckled to himself, "I've met Leena before, at a similar kind of get-together. She has an unrelenting intensity to her that is fun to watch. Very head strong, ya know?" I felt self conscious of this assessment of my friend, mainly because I shared a similar feeling, yet hearing a stranger say such things made it feel cruel, and mean spirited. "Don't you think that evaluation is a bit condescending?" I retorted. Sav's face scrunched together, his lips curving into a philosophical frown. "It's a compliment to me, what about that description would make you infer I was being negative? That feels more like personal bias than anything else." I rolled my eyes, unwilling to continue this line of dialogue longer than it needed, it still felt weird hearing someone speak about Leena like that, someone who barely knew her. "Do you typically come to parties just to over analyze the behavioral judgments of women?" That did make him laugh; a throaty, heavy laughter that shook his chest. "No, I don't just come to parties to debate societal norms on assumed negative descriptors. Do you always come to parties just to neg guys who are coming into the kitchen for a drink?" A mischievous smile stayed plastered across his face. It made his eyes squint in an endearing way as subtle crows feet appeared on either side of his face. I huffed, "Oh definitely, does that mean you will be more receptive to my sexual advances now? This negging business is tiring stuff." He laughed again, and this time I joined him. "Hmm, maybe, I think I need more alcohol before that though, so this is around the time when you offer me more alcohol, to seduce me you know?" I groaned audibly, and grabbed an empty solo cup, filling it with the mixed drink before extending it out to him, "can I get you anything else?" I asked dryly. Sav smiled and took the cup gently from me, his hand overlapping mine as he held the flimsy plastic, and my hand quickly withdrawing from the warmth of his wide palm. "Thank you miss, I think that's all." He replied courteously. I took another sip of my drink when I felt his hand on my elbow. He was much closer now as he stood over me, the faint smell of cologne and warmth surrounding me as my stomach flipped. Before I could stammer anything out I felt gentle

pressure on my arm, as he scooted me out of the way, leaning down into my ear and exclaiming directly, slowly and precisely, “the burner, it's on” as he clicked the gas off and smiled jovially down at me. My face blushed from embarrassment, realizing I had flipped it on while resting against it. “Oh, I didn't realize. My bad.” His hand fell from my arm and he took a small step back, we were much closer than before. “Do you want to step outside? Quieter.” I nodded in agreement, and grabbed my bag as he opened the door to the kitchen and led me to the back patio. The air was cool in the early summer night, and when I squinted into the sky I could make out one, maybe two, stars through the city's light pollution. Something that I was still trying to get used to. This feeling of isolation that an empty sky contained, even when I was surrounded by millions of people. It made me miss the way the sky seemingly cracked open at night back home. But that was on the other side of the country, and being mournful of my time there wouldn't make my summer in los angeles any better or worse, so I pushed that feeling down.

“Do you smoke?”

The question pulled me out of my trance, as Sav extended an open pack of cigarettes towards me. I'd taken up smoking since starting college, somewhat. I had a half empty carton of cigarettes in my purse collecting dust that I purchased my first year of college. Living pseudo-independently away from my family made me feel empowered to do unsavory things, but after smoking my first cigarette on the balcony of my cramped dormitory, I realized I hated the taste and the burn from nicotine. However it was an easy excuse to leave a room if I needed, and a simple way to socialize and not feel out of place. Giving someone a light on a crowded, dimly lit patio was the perfect way of extending an olive branch to an age group of people where the worst thing that they'd ever experienced was failing an english mid term. The only difference now, however, were the hormones I'd been prescribed for my *gender dysphoria*. Which by my doctor's file on me is a mental illness I'm suffering from, and prescribing medication to me in the form of estradiol was the way of curing me of that. I know I wasn't supposed to see the medical forms with my proper diagnosis, but morbid curiosity got the best of me, and I had called the office faking a need for medical documentation to be sent my way. It didn't take much convincing, and I read the form over and over again; looking up terminology I was not familiar with and coming to understand the way the health world spoke and categorized patients. It felt isolating and lacking compassion, which I suppose was mandatory in a field where human beings were patients, were numbers, on a spreadsheet to be assigned and dealt with. Of course this information did not bother me all that much, I knew from friends, and the internet, how situations like this typically went and I was determined by any way necessary to get what I needed. So when my doctor looked at my chart, it was followed by him very sternly telling me I needed to stop smoking because of the increased risk I was susceptible to. Apparently my meds raised my chance for heart disease, and cigarettes were somehow the worst possible thing for that equation. It was a frustrating exchange, when you're filling out those forms, the

smoking section is a yes or no box; just two answers. Well obviously it's more complicated than that. I smoked sometimes, but checking the yes box makes it seem like I'm inhaling a pack a day, slowly developing tar in my lungs while I theatrically take drags from cigarettes as though I'm a femme fatale. But saying no is technically lying, even though on the scale of, does smoke to does not smoke, I'm much closer to the does not smoke side. I checked the yes box, and understood afterwards that had been the wrong choice. Even though I know now it was in my best interest to stop the act altogether, and I hadn't smoked in quite some time because of it.

"Sure."

I grabbed one, as did he, and leaned forward while he lit my cigarette. We sat there on the steps in silence for a few minutes, while faint music played behind us.

"You never asked me who I knew here, what if I'm just some crazy guy off the street who stumbled into a party?"

"Are you some crazy guy off the street that stumbled into a party?"

"Well I did walk here, so technically I am a guy off the street. But I'm friends with David, which is more so the answer you're looking for."

"Ah yes, David, right. We all love David." I replied back aloofly, which did get a laugh out of Sav.

"You don't know David, right?"

"I don't know anyone here, Sav."

"You know me, Anne."

"I guess so."

The way he mimicked my cadence of speech was equal parts endearing and frustrating, it made me seem more childish than I wanted to appear. He held my gaze for a moment before I looked ahead again, breathing deeply as embers glowed close by my mouth. "Well, David is kind of annoying to be honest, you're not missing out on much. He's got some good qualities though." Sav explained, talking in a way as though I was arguing about David's character and he was both defending and condemning his own friend. "David lives here, one of the couple people who rent this place. It's pretty nice right? Ya know, in that, broke twenty something recent grad way." It was a shitty apartment in Koreatown with historic, damp, brick walls begging to be covered in mold, aged cabinets, and a level of grime that I could only surmise as the result of multiple college aged men having never used disinfectant in their entire life. "It's nice, yeah." I replied. I took another large sip from my cup, the sweet taste of juice clashing against the sharpness of cheap alcohol. Sav absentmindedly tapped his foot to the low thumping of the speakers, "so uh, what's your thing? Tell me about you, never seen you around before." I looked over at him and raised an eyebrow, "what's my *thing*? Jesus, how LA of you." I replied, huffing before adjusting my position so I was facing him slightly more.

“Well, I’m a student, here for the summer on a publishing internship. Leena is an old friend and she’s letting me crash at her apartment. She insisted really, honestly I felt quite guilty about taking up so much time and space of hers. She wouldn’t even let me help pay rent for the months I’m here; sorry I’m rambling, but yeah, that’s it really. I don’t know how much more there is to tell, I live a quite mundane life I suppose.” I took a quiet deep breath, as I glanced at Sav’s features, waiting for a response. “Ahhh you’re a college student then, cool. Everyone here is a bit older then, but don’t let anyone boss you around because of that.” Sav replied, a stern but childish look on his face. “Are you and your friends the kind of people who would assume superiority purely based on age and collegiate status then?” I asked flatly. Sav, finished a sip of his drink and comedically deflated. “God you’re killing me here, do you always assume the worst of people?” I smiled, enjoying the frustration I was placing on him, “only when it’s most comically convenient for me.” He rolled his eyes, “oh well that’s good then, at least you have the awareness to weaponize it. Anyways no, I’m sure everyone would be fine. I doubt I’m even that much older than you. I graduated a couple years ago, and work in production now.” I nodded slowly, feeling the effects of alcohol in my system as I blinked a few times to adjust my vision.

“Oh ok, that’s cool? Like, television? Music? Or is the vagueness intentional?”

“Television.”

“Cool,”

“Yep.”

I glanced at the eroded stone tiles in front of my feet, “I don’t really have any follow ups for that really, do you like it I guess?” Sav laughed, “Yeah, it’s alright, long hours though.” I nodded. “It’s nice to keep busy sometimes. I don’t mind it. Sometimes if I slow down I get a little antsy, I need the stimulation so I don’t go crazy.” He continued, not letting my silence stop his dialogue: “So you’re in publishing? Like books and stuff? Man that’s cool, I used to love reading, but also I was terrible in my english classes, I could never do that shit for a living, more power to you though. Is publishing your end all? Or are you going to be a professor, or write a book? Or, well, I don’t know what else you would do. What do you want to do?” He asked, taking another sip of his cup, some of the cocktail dripped down his chin, and he wiped his sleeve on beads of red clinging to stubble. I smiled absentmindedly, “Yeah, thanks. I don’t really know. Publishing is cool, a bit of a shitty career line though. I’ve thought about teaching, but that requires me going to grad school which I am still figuring out. Most english majors aren’t really like, writing novels and stuff. You don’t go to school to become a successful writer, kinda just happens I guess, like being a famous musician or something. I write sometimes though, I do enjoy getting lost in that hyper focused place. Storytelling is incredibly interesting to me. I think reading what other people write is a fascinating way to learn more about them, even if everything they’re writing is complete gibberish. It at least makes you think, well *why* did they write complete gibberish? Maybe it makes sense to them and the meaning is being lost on other people. Language is powerful you know? Like, there’s

so much you can say in the nuance of sentences to bring new meaning to words. All we do is string words together and the way we say them, in what order? What tone? What familiarity of subjects? There are so many factors that will change each person's perception of something being said. It's really special; can tell you a lot about a person I think." I wrapped both my hands around the glossy plastic of my cup, realizing how much I was gesturing and the way I had become unaware of how loudly I was talking, I looked to Sav again, "sorry, I was rambling, yeah, I don't have anything figured out really. It was a bit of a last minute decision to even come here for the summer." Sav leaned back and rested on one of his elbows, "Well what's your read on me? Based on how I *string sentences together*, of course." I felt warmth travel up my neck and dig into my face, it felt like he was teasing me, and I could feel myself shutting down to avoid the embarrassment. "Oh, well, I don't even know you, do I?" I replied coldly, taking another drag of my cigarette, "You seem confident, and perhaps a bit confrontational; but in a way that objectively attractive men in their twenties are good at posturing." Sav winced, but chuckled, "so I'm attractive then, objectively speaking of course." I stared over at him,

"Sure, is that what you want to hear?"

"Only if it's what you're thinking. Do you want to hear my read on you?"

I reached into my purse, fishing for my phone, "I think I'm okay with not knowing." I clicked on the screen and was greeted with a barrage of messages.

*I'M ALIVE!!!*

*sooo sorry i'm the worst*

*almost there I promise*

*long story i'll tell u about it later*

*ok i'm walking up i'll come find u*

The last message was sent twenty minutes ago, a wave of relief, and also annoyance, washed over me as I realized Leena was somewhere inside right now while I had been out here having a conversation with this stranger who was nice and also mean to me. I'd definitely need to interrogate Leena for her lateness, which in this case was egregious even by her standards. It must be something to do with her girlfriend, at least I think they were together again? I couldn't keep track truthfully. I had only met Bri a few times and while nice she was also a complete mess, in a way Leena in her chaotic put together nature found endearing occasionally (when they were together) and absolutely the worst most awful thing in the world (when they were apart). Voicing my opinions on Bri was always a bit of a minefield depending on which mood Leena was in. I sent a reply back as Sav touched my shoulder, "I didn't mean that maliciously, I was going to compliment you. I think I did a lousy job though. You're cool, and really smart and- I just mean I'm having a nice time getting to know you." Sav was becoming visibly drunk at this point. And in my visibly drunk state, I

found that unappealing. I noticed when inebriated I grew quite judgmental of others, which is one of the reasons I didn't enjoy drinking all that much, but I, much like everyone else in this world, was known to make mistakes. I stood up quickly, swaying roughly as I did with Sav following suit and grabbing my arm to keep me from falling. His figure stood over me as he chuckled and chimed "woah" at my lack of balance, "careful there, Anne, I'm sure Leena would kill me if you got hurt on my watch." A big smile sliding over his features. I took a step away, towards the kitchen door, feeling my face burn: "I'm starting to get cold, thanks for the cig." I said, turning quickly as I started to walk back inside, his hand, his warmth, and his presence, slowly drifting off of my form. "Oh- ok yeah, no problem, maybe I'll see you in there-" The sound of Sav's voice cut off roughly as I closed the door, leaving him outside as the loud buzz of interactions and shuffled playlists bombarded my senses again. I filled my drink cup again and now, steady on my feet, walked through the kitchen to try and find Leena; the lingering feeling of Sav's hand burning a hole in the fabric of my coat.

I turned down the hall and almost stumbled into a stocky, well dressed man; muttering a "sorry" as I started to walk past but stopping as the man called my name, a jovial smile pulling his features taut as I remembered this was Chris. He hugged me tightly, laughing into my ear as his words slurred and reached me roughly; "Anne! It's Chris! How the hell have you been? God it's been awhile right?" I fixed my hair and smiled, my eyes wandering to the passing bodies behind him, keeping an eye out for my elusive friend. "Oh yeah- I'm good yeah, glad to be here, anyways have you seen Leena?" I asked absentmindedly. Chris cocked his head to the side, like a curious dog, "No I haven't seen her all night actually, I assumed you two came here together, but I'm sure she's around! Here- c'mon let me introduce you to some friends! Come socialize a bit." Chris grabbed me gently by the arm in his inebriated state and led me to one of the connected bedrooms, which had seemingly been turned into a makeshift socializing pit. Music was softer back here and there was a small crowd of people sitting on pillows in various positions. The smell of marijuana wafting through the bodies. Chris introduced me by name, one by one, to the nine or so people occupying the space while I smiled and forgot, one by one, each of their names shortly after they were spoken. They all seemed nice and put together, in an effortless way that made me envious. Everyone knew each other and played off of each other's mannerisms and laughed at jokes I had no prior knowledge of. There was one woman there who was a graduate student studying english literature, and I made an effort to quietly converse over the matter. "I'm an undergraduate actually, studying english as well" I informed the woman, she had her hair slicked back in a chic updo, wearing a neutral palette with a plaid skirt and flattering halter top. "Oh how exciting! I'm in my third year of grad school actually, I remember those first few years of undergrad, god I was so childish I really thought I had everything figured out." She spoke nonchalantly, but attentively, her eyes smiling at me and the faint scent of perfume enveloping our conversation. "Haha, yeah- um, I definitely don't have anything figured out yet, working on that part. What is your specialization?" I asked back, trying to find my footing in the conversation. She adjusted the pieces of hair that fell delicately in

front of her face, I was desperately trying to remember her name; “I’m focusing on american historical literature and behavioral linguistics; I did a minor in linguistics in my undergrad, and found a way of working them both into my thesis.” She beamed proudly. I felt incredibly self conscious and out of my depth in this conversation. I knew some friends who had picked up minors here and there, and I was kicking myself for not having the forethought to do the same. I tried to recall what I had learned in my intro linguistics class during my freshman year, but couldn’t bring any coherent thoughts together, so instead I just took a sip of my drink and nodded enthusiastically; “Wow yeah, that’s quite resourceful! Sounds interesting.” I stammered back. She grabbed the nearby joint and exhaled smoke maturely, “It’s been a pain in the ass is what it’s been. But I suppose I only have myself to blame; you’d have to be a masochist to study english, and I’m sure I’m speaking for the both of us here.” She laughed attractively and I smiled quietly, “Right, yes. I’m here for the summer actually, I’m interning at Stone Press over in east LA.” The woman passed the joint to me and I took it absentmindedly. I had smoked weed a handful of times in the past; at best feeling slightly uncomfortable, and at worst having full existential breakdowns over my life, so I tried to use in moderation. I inhaled from the joint and coughed slightly, before handing it back to her with a short “thanks” stammered out her way. She smiled back at me, “Oh Stone Press? That’s cool! Is Samuel still one of the editors there?” A knot formed in my stomach, the way she didn’t even need to try to make me feel adolescent in a casual conversation was miserable. I was struggling to seem competent and she was flaunting aloof intelligence. I had only been working for a week, and I struggled to remember any of my coworkers faces, especially when most of my interactions involved grabbing coffee and rewriting spreadsheets that were pinged to my message folder. The name Samuel didn’t sound familiar to me, but then again he could have been one of the dozen coffee orders I had taken. So who knows. “Oh yea, he’s still there, nice guy! How do you know him?” I pathetically responded. Her eyes grew wide and she nodded deeply, “that’s so funny haha, what a small world! Oh we went to the same college, he was a few years my senior but we had mutual friends through some classes. He has an incredible mind, tell him you know me!” The woman grabbed my arm and smiled gently, her kindness nearly brought me to tears. “Oh- yes sure, I’ll make sure to mention you.” I replied, returning her smile.

I still did not know her name.

I excused myself to use the bathroom, and turned down the opposite way, searching at this point desperately for Leena. It was past midnight, and anxiety was festering in my chest like mildew, each breath felt wet and damp against the condensation in my lungs. Was Leena even here? Did she just lie and set up the entire night as some elaborate way of pushing me out into a social situation like a socially awkward child? I was past amusedly annoyed, and settling into a pit of dismay; I could feel the anger dripping into my brow and obscuring my vision as I stumbled into the living room. There were somehow even more people crammed into this tiny space than before. Sitting on a small armchair, in the lap of Bri, was Leena.



Gesturing her arms wildly and sloshing her drink in the process. Even with the music blasting around her she was competently overpowering the decibels, and everyone around her was processing each word spoken intimately. "Listen all I'm saying is that it's incredibly presumptuous of you to assume a person's voting behavior just based off their socio political background- no c'mon disagree all you want but in this day and age it's true! The bias of upbringing doesn't have the same hold as it did generations before; we have an onslaught of information and resources at our fingertips. Some of the most chaotic leftists I know grew up with law enforcement parents, and yes that's anecdotal but my point still stands!" Leena tossed her long braids over her shoulder, laughing while she casually debated esoteric topics with a group of people I didn't recognize. I didn't always fully understand the need for such conversations, they sometimes felt braggadocious; why did intellectualizing political alignment matter? When you're surrounded by middle class Americans, all with access to higher education and all incredibly supported through family while in their twenties? Did the need come from a place of inherent guilt over their own privileges, so that the self awareness, or lack thereof, for the situation could be excused? I was no different in this scenario, my parents were still, for better or for worse, married, and my mother in my late teens also started working again. I was comfortably middle class with a stream of dual income from my parents supporting my college education. I had made note of this, and decided to move on from it at a younger age. I wasn't sure what else there was to do, or say, about the matter. Nothing in my power would change the situation, and I wasn't anarchistic enough to secretly drain my parents of money to give to socialist organizations. Did that even matter? It didn't seem productive to mull over, and yet in this microcosm it was unfathomably important; because of this I could not help but feel alienated in some way, as though in my day to day I was interested or concerned with the wrong things. It wasn't a pleasant feeling.

Her eyes landed on me and she let out a small squeal, jumping up and hugging me. "Anne honey hello hello oh I've been looking for you where were you? I'm sorry I was late, I know I know classic me, we'll talk later I'll make it up to you. Anyways, have you guys met Anne yet? Oh she's just the best. I'd marry her if she wasn't straight and also basically a child!" She laughed brazenly and put her arms around my waist while a few people waved weakly my way. "I'm twenty by the way, not a child. Just to clarify." I stammered out, feeling my face redden from the looks. Leena pulled me over to Bri and they nodded in my direction. "Hey Anne, good to see you." They spoke evenly, barely even turning their head to acknowledge me. "Yeah- you too Bri." I replied. I came to the assumption Leena's lateness was the result of a fight, not that Leena would ever lead you to believe that was the case; as she always prided herself on her ability to hold composure over any situation. I sat on a nearby pillow as Leena positioned herself on the arm of the chair Bri was occupying. "I've been looking for you all night you know, I wouldn't have shown up this early if I knew you were going to be late." I said quietly and sternly to Leena. She smiled and tossed a dismissive hand my way, "Oh Anne, you worry too much. Just go with the flow more, we're all here, and everything's

good! You must've been chatting it up for it to take this long for me to grab you, you're already turning into a little social butterfly." Leena replied with a wink. I gritted my teeth, finishing the rest of my drink, visibly drunk at this point. "I'm not having a good time, and would like to leave, everything is not good. I'm tired." My voice raising slightly. Leena's eyes widened, and she put her hand on my arm, "Me and Bri *just* got here though, is everything okay? We'll stay a little longer alright?" Bri scoffed and chimed in, "I don't care if we stay or not." Leena's face scowled for an imperceptible second, before smiling again: "I care, so we're staying, alright?" Bri pretended to not hear her.

I rolled my eyes, crossing my arms as Leena jumped back into conversation with people I did not know. I counted the leaves on a nearby pothos, watching the way its tendrils cascaded off the side of a bookshelf as I tried to will the clock on the wall to accelerate. The plant itself appeared sad, and lifeless. As though it was both getting too much sun and not enough sun at the same time; being over and under watered. I had never possessed what some might describe as a green thumb, typically I was really good at killing plants, I didn't know how to speak their language and because of that it felt impossible to tend to their needs. My mother gifted me a plant at the end of each summer before I started my next year of schooling, and each time I had neglected, or smothered, it to death. The first year was a philodendron that survived for my first semester. When the winter crept into the corners of my apartment, its hearty slotted leaves grew emaciated and weak. They withered and fell, one by one, the week of my finals. Several nights of that week, the ones where I watched the sun rise instead of sleeping, I stared at the plant instead of familiarizing myself with lessons from my intro classes. It was as if the organism was attempting to stay awake with me, aware that if I was left alone I would spiral, and in its final hours decided providing me company was more valuable than staying alive. When my exams ended and I slept two days in a row for an accumulative twenty one hours, I saw my philodendron, rotten and jaundiced, and cried. This was at a time in my life where crying was always a shocking and unwelcomed event, one that so rarely happened that when it did, my life revolved around the experience for several days after. I ended up throwing the entire plant, decorative pot and all, into the dumpster the next day. When I visited my parents for Christmas the following week, I confessed to my mother how I had failed to keep her gift alive. After laughing at me she responded, "You must not have a green thumb like I do," Which felt like a lead weight settling into my stomach, realizing I had failed to rise to the occasion of caring for this plant, in which doing so would have given my mother and I something to bond over; instead I felt even more isolated, and childish. My sophomore year my mother gifted me a snake plant, ensuring they were hearty and "unkillable" so I wouldn't have to worry. The snake plant did not make it past syllabus week, which somehow felt impressive even by my standards.

I got up, and headed messily to the kitchen to refill my drink. Leaving the living room and moving down the hallway as a tall man turned the corner and collided with me, spilling his

drink down my front. I gasped as I stared down at my stained top. "Oh my god- Anne I'm so sorry, that was totally my fault." I looked up and realized it was Sav standing there, wide eyed like a deer in headlights and holding a crushed solo cup. I instantly bursted into tears and folded into myself, my hand covering my face as my body shook from crying. Sav placed his hand on my shoulder, red cocktail trickling from his warm palm onto my skin, and started scrambling for words. I recoiled and shouted, "Don't fucking touch me." I stumbled past him into the kitchen, and out the back patio door, closing it behind me as I tripped down the three stair landing and skinned my knee. Thankfully no one else was out here to notice my pathetic state as I cried, and after a few moments I stood and wiped my eyes, my hands smudged black from running mascara. I sank against the back fence till I was sitting on the rough concrete floor, breathing deeply to recollect myself. "You're fine, you're ok, everything's fine." I whispered to myself. My head was starting to throb at this point, like it usually did when I'd had too much to drink.; the cold air of the night sticking heavy to my damp clothes. I knew I couldn't go back inside after that, the idea of seeing Sav again after that, the desperate apologetic expression that would be smeared across his face wasn't something I wanted to experience; as well as Leena seeing me in this state, which she would overreact and make it a big thing. I looked around the patio and noticed a gate leading out into the nearby street. I stood shakily, exited through the gate, and walked. I paid for a rideshare on my phone while I kept moving, selecting a random closed cafe nearby as my location. I needed to calm myself down a bit. I'd just go back to Leena's and sleep, I had a spare key anyway, and I could yell at her in the morning. Then she'll apologize and everything will be fine again. My phone buzzed and the screen informed me my ride was five minutes away. I rounded the block to my destination and sat on the curb, scrolling through the notifications on my phone. I tried to numb my brain with the onslaught of stimulation through the internet but nothing unwound the knot inside me recently. I threw my phone back into my bag, feeling defeated, and rested my head on my knees. I would probably be able to get the stains out of my clothes, what I was more embarrassed about was the fact that I cried from something so miniscule; as though ruining a piece of fabric was something to freak out and scream at someone about. Of all people it had to be Sav too, of course. Now instead of just being weird and drunk and a bit flirtatious, I'm sure he's filled with regret and pity towards me, the girl he spilled a drink on which put her in hysterics. I didn't need his pity, or anyone's. Nothing infuriated me more than being looked down upon like that. In a world where I was expected to be victimized, I didn't want to play that part.

Soon enough my ride pulled up to the curb I was occupying. I stood, checked the license plate to confirm, opened his car door, confirmed I was his passenger, and entered the backseat. My head rested against the window as he quickly pulled off and we drove north about twenty minutes out of the city to Leena's one bedroom apartment. Muffled jazz music played off an AM radio station as my eyes started to unfocus out the window. We merged onto the interstate, accelerating in speed as buildings blurred across my window. Flashing as though they were images in a zoetrope, and I was spinning aimlessly inside their looping

chamber. It had a dizzying effect that twisted my stomach. Drinking always made me a bit nauseous and the hypnotic effect the landscape across my vision created was adding to that unease. I unbuckled my seatbelt and the driver pretended not to notice. I started daydreaming about the possibilities we would get in an accident, what that might look like on the interstate, at one in the morning, a drunk trans woman too stupid to use her seatbelt in the backseat. In many of these hypothetical scenarios, I surmised it was likely I would not survive; driving as fast as we were, it was the only logical assumption. There was also the possibility that in a horrible crash I could still survive; one where I became immensely injured, broken, concussed, bones splintered, my very essence damaged, but alive. In the fantasy where I survived, my entire junior year of college was not about college. My entire year was not about anything. It wasn't about my apathy, my failing love life, my strained relationship with my parents, it wasn't about the way my mother cried when I first told her I was trans, or about my cruel relationship with my appearance; the year would be spent surviving, and mending myself back to being a human being again, and I think having that year off from being a member of society sounded gluttonously rewarding. That did not happen though, and suddenly my driver was repeating words again and again at me, before I processed their meaning: "Miss, we're here." I thanked him, and left his vehicle, tipping him twenty percent and leaving a positive, vague, review. I fumbled with the spare Leena gave me as I dragged my heavy limbs up two flights of stairs, inserting the chipped bronze key and turning the mechanism. The door groaned in anguish as I pushed its heavy frame open, locking it behind me. I removed my shoes, tripping and bumping messily into the wall. My coat returned to the wall hook, next to an overflowing amount of jackets. The small apartment was cluttered, but in an endearing way. Eclectic enough to show a level of taste. The hardwood floors clicked with each footstep, as I retrieved a glass of water from the filtered pitcher in the fridge. The indicator light on the device blinked red angrily, communicating an expired filter. I tried to imagine what Leena would look like addressing and changing the filter on this device, which seemed so uncharacteristically a task she would do, so I came to the assumption it had never been done. I remembered then how I read an article detailing how most commercial filtration devices were nefariously inefficient and in turn a waste of money, so I took solace in the acceptance that one way or another, the condition of this container did not matter.

I was too tired to do anything besides strip to my underwear and sleep, accepting my inability to wash the makeup off my face. I fell onto the dingy pullout, its metal hinges yelping from the added weight, as my eyes drooped and my vision blurred. I thought when I settled down, in the quiet of this apartment, my emotions would unravel even more. I'd start crying from an overwhelming night, or scream in frustration over Leena, or Sav, or Chris, or the woman who's name I still could not fucking remember. I would scroll aimlessly on my phone, thinking about all the mistakes I had made that day, and intellectualizing why I had committed them; fantasizing about a life where I possessed the hindsight knowledge to cease making foolish decisions, to disrupt self destructive behaviors. But I didn't do any of

that. My eyes closed for longer and longer intervals, as my breathing slowed and grew steady; and when I drifted off all I felt was hollow and fragile.