

*Hey*

*I'm so sorry. I will be late.*

*Stuck in traffic and my phone is almost dead. Should be there before 1.*

*I'm really sorry Minnie.*

A heart at the end of this. A withering, lying, wretched heart.

She immediately reads my message, so I turn my phone off and toss it aside. The charger wire dangles near my phone. The road ahead of me is empty. Why did I do that? What else could I have done? Once I drive further away, I notice a small quiet diner, the only place to hide in. I park my car inconspicuously behind some others and walk in. There are more people here than I expected, mostly locals, the kind that work for my dad. They wouldn't know me, right? There is a corner booth, and I slink away into it. A kindly old waitress takes my order for coffee and breakfast, which I regret as soon as she's gone.

My eyes dart around me as some cars drive by. Slow enough that I fear they might notice me, each one making me regret buying an orange car. The fear passes by, though, sometimes when it's quieter. For a moment I forget my sins and just stare at my coffee, stirring it to mix the sugar which dissolved ages ago. I cannot stomach drinking it or even touching the food. But I like the monotony of the spoon scraping against ceramic, the soft foamy bubbles gently forming and dying in this black liquid, soothing me.

I guess the only person worthy of hate more than my father is myself. After all, this is all for nothing. They'll still find me at the funeral. I can't really run away from them. And so close to Stoney with this orange car, of course, Minnie will know I am here. This is her land and her people. Every single person for miles in any direction here works for her now, now that he is dead. Minnie grieves him and I run away, like when I was a child, a truant girl hiding

amongst bushes to escape his wrath. And he always knew, didn't he? How do I love such a father then? How do you grieve him, mourn someone so incomprehensible, like God, high in the sky? His presence only scares me and makes me tremble. And now she tells me he is dead. What do I do with that?

Oh no! I can't spend another moment with this dumb shit. If don't rein it in, my mind will churn like a maelstrom of incompetence, a worthless spiral that will rend and tear everything inside of me, leaving me a worthless husk which I will not become. I need to stop and forget about all of this. I should be working right? Not wasting my time here but creating my future. I pull my laptop out from my bag, open the slides, and... Well, now what? The words stare at me in bold, taunting me.

“Construction Project Proposal, Hammond Architects,”

Behind it is my sketch of the Avertine skyline, my skyscraper rising proudly in it towards the sky. That's all I have. Everything here is perfectly aligned, with the right font, shapes, textures, every graphic is painstakingly and immaculately made to impart the desired effect. Which is reverence, I suppose. This is a symbol of my worship and my dedication to my craft. There must be something here that I can work on. Lily would call it excessive, but they don't build skyscrapers every day. And it is better sitting here being sad for myself. Why did Julius even give this to us? I mean, despite her expertise, Lily really doesn't care, and I, well, I just ran away to take a “vacation” from a billion-dollar project. As if things weren't difficult enough, I need to complete this work and be an obedient daughter, grieving like I care. All the while somehow working on what is actually important.

I try to focus. I try quite hard. I fail. The words are just shapes on the screen, flying past my eyes in a daze. It's hard when anything moving draws my eyes, terrifying me, like getting startled by the sweet waitress bringing my check. She offers to pack my untouched food, but where would I carry all

these guilt-shaped pancakes? And why am I even bothered by any of this? Is this what the Grache before me would do, those proud ancestors lining the walls of my house? Would they shrink and shrivel at every minor inconvenience like me or do something about it? My dad is dead and I'm acting like I'm twelve. Everything is fine, even if the world feels like plastic today, misshapen and weird. Nothing wrong has happened, so everything is fine.

It was nearing midday as I entered Stoney Brooke. It's beautiful, a small town in a drowsy lull, its streets empty as I slowly drive through it. Old brick houses dotted with tiny storefronts cover the streets. Amongst these are long-forgotten sweet shops and the old bookstores and cafes of my childhood. There is warmth here, maybe one stored from my childhood memories, or it's just the quiet, idyllic nature of this place. This is always my moment of respite before I inevitably reach my home. It seems to offer a little less of that today. Everything's a little worse, a little less hopeful.

And slowly the houses give way to the trees. You would never suspect they could hide a mansion here and soon I am amongst the conifers again. But these are my father's trees, who own everything for miles and miles around me. A huge pristine forest and right in the middle of it is the family jewel, the Grache estate. The funeral should have started by now. I should be fine. Around me, the trees loom over the desolate yet perfectly maintained road, their sly branches peering through the windows, stalking me as I draw closer to home. Am I just terrified of going home? But what reason do I have to be scared? He's gone.

Hadn't I thought about that, about how things would be better after him, about how Maxi would come back and we could be a family again? The jaws of the large sharp metal gate are open, drawing me in. How foolish it was to think that things could ever be better. Its poison isn't it, slowly slithering, creeping inside us that always leads to ruin. The long, winding road takes me

deeper and deeper, trapping me in these perfectly trimmed hedges and beautifully maintained flower beds, amongst the smell of freshly cut grass and flowers, which sends a shiver down my spine. I know this smell from my childhood, my father's domain. Why am I even here?

They will hate me, will they not? And they should. My father is dead, and I am late. They would know I sat in the diner for an hour and twiddled my thumbs, leaving sweet gentle Minnie grieving alone in that house. It is as if I can feel their anger at me, seeping from the house towards me. After all, I am the worst thing that a Grache can be; I am a coward. Minnie trusted me and I betrayed her. I can sense the house slowly creeping towards me, just as they had wanted it to be. My ancestors wanted it to rise from the forest, immediately visible in all its grandeur. They transformed the entire landscape to provide this effect they so desperately craved. That when someone reached the top of this gently sloped ridge...

There it was. And for a moment, I can't breathe. The large stone mansion towers over everything it surrounds, with gables rising towards the sky. It dwarfed everything; the trees shying its presence. It was a house that demanded respect, demanded that you look up in awe at its structure. It is surrounded by an enormous green clearing, dotted with statues and plaques praising the esteemed household that resides here. In the middle is the entrance, the main tower, the oldest part of the house. It is a singular structure rising above the rest of the mansion with pride, the entire building shrinking and cowering in its presence. A large wooden door stands there, looming over anyone who dares to approach it.

I have been told it is beautiful, something mentioned in college as a piece of art, built over centuries, yet forming a magnificent whole. To me, it has always seemed strange. Even when I lived there, it never felt like it was home, but like a museum, everything too tall, harsh, and overbearing. They had built it for larger people, like my father, brother, and sister. I only feel smaller here,

more afraid, stuck in its endless passages. It remembers me; it knows that I am back. And it knows I am late. It stands there judging me. Not the Grache it wanted, but the only one they had.