

PART I

*“So we beat on, boats against the current,
borne back ceaselessly into the past.”*
- F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

Zola



Zola runs her hand across the row of seven light switches, watching as each Tungsten filament fuses and comes alive, illuminating the length of leather-cushioned bar stools. The reflection in the windows tells her that all the can lights are on, including those in the adjacent room. She adjusts the three round track knobs to “the mood” Jules, or J.P. Verne, prefers—just short of bearskin rug and the tasteful touch of a stone fireplace with crackling logs.

She hefts a case of light beer onto the back counter below the stuffed head of a large elk, its antlers coated with golden enamel, its eyes blank and staring off toward the almost vacant parking lot of the hotel. The one reserved spot is taken by Mr. Verne, because he thinks that parking all the way out there will keep his car safe from dings and dents.

As she tears open the cardboard flaps of the box, the distributor’s glue gives, and Zola grabs three glass necks in one hand and two in the other.

“It’s a small buy-in, I promise.” She hears her boss coming around the corner from the lobby, talking on his phone. Buy-ins mean he’ll be staying this evening and won’t be going home to his new wife.

“Okay. We can get it over the weekend. Just because they’re on sale doesn’t mean they’re going anywhere.” Putting an elbow on the bar, he pinches

the bridge of his nose and closes his eyes. Zola gives his crown the once-over—he shouldn't wear so much gel. It makes his hair look like it's thinning.

“I didn't expect to see you,” says Jules, when he's off the call.

“Covering for Martha. I need the hours.”

“I've got some marketing materials going out with the sales team in a couple days. I could use your help editing before I drop them at the printers. That'll give you some extra time.”

“Sure, I can do that,” says Zola. “By the way, Mr. Bronkowski's back.”

Jules studies a spot of oil on his tie, which is sapphire blue with pink polka dots. He shuffles behind the bar. “I need soda water,” he says.

“He's brought company. Eastern European. Pretty.”

Zola doesn't want it to sound as if this bothers her. Men like Mr. Bronkowski always tip well on their business trips, and she's learned how to appeal to them with talk about what they collect, their hobbies, or by asking if they have been anywhere interesting lately. Most importantly, she's learned to be polite to the women escorting them (even if they are half their age or she's sure they're not a spouse).

“Did they pay the full rate?” asks Jules, helping himself to the beverage gun.

“I think so,” says Zola, returning to the chore of stocking the sliding door coolers.

“That’s what I like to hear.” Jules is a few inches shorter than she is, even in his lifted designer loafers. She watches as he squirts water into a wad of cocktail napkins.

“Shit!” he says, stamping his foot. He has managed to get his entire sleeve wet.

He removes the cuff link—if they weren’t real he probably wouldn’t worry about them rusting, but she knows this pair was a gift engraved with his initials. His acquisition of fine watches and other accessories often makes her wonder, especially since discovering a whole drawer of them in his office accidentally while looking for a box of staples.

Finally getting to the stain on his tie, he walks away. He’s off to somewhere quickly. With his short-cut legs and stocky frame, his claims of having been an All-State wrestling champ in the early-90’s are believable, though he reminds her more of one of those circus boys—no more than 10 years old, with highly defined biceps, sometimes smoking cigars or holding oversized dumbbells impressively overhead. But then again, there is also something about his Filipino put-togetherness that makes it hard to imagine him sweating over anything, especially when it comes to rolling around on those funky school mats.

“We’re in the business of pinks elephants,” he calls over his shoulder. Everything comes with a price tag and can be bought. There is always someone willing to pay.

The Hunt Club du Monde is the name of the restaurant attached to the French-inspired hotel, **REST & POUTINE**, where Zola has been working for the past year. The place basically tries to duplicate what Old Montreal brags, on a cheaper budget. Jules almost didn't hire her, because she interviewed so poorly and spent more time looking at his shiny black dress shoes and his shiny rectangular belt buckle than at his open face. It wasn't that she'd been worried about landing the position; part-time jobs were easy to come by in a seasonal town like Portland. But what made her nervous, more than anything, was that she'd never had someone before point out her lack of confidence, right to her face.

"Do you follow sports?" he'd asked her right off the bat, and she instantly began to sweat beneath her chiffon blouse.

"Not really. The competitive thing—"

"I'll ask again. Do you follow sports?"

Zola looked at Jules, confused. "Yes?"

"Did you catch the Redskins game last night?"

Zola shook her head.

"WHOO-WEE!" With a smack on the edge of the table with the palm of his hand, he startled her. The two water glasses rattled with ice and the silverware jumped to a crooked angle on the linen napkins. Taking on a Southern drawl, he

rocked in his chair. “Man those boys played h-aaaard! I don’t care much for those black boys, but that running back. He can run like he’d been raised to.”

Had he purposefully tried to offend her? Judging from the slight Philadelphia accent that came out during all his raving—she would recognize that faint whine and overexcitement anywhere—and the obvious fact that his skin was as dark as any African-American or well-tanned Spaniard, she realized what he was really doing was testing her patience and threshold for vulgarity.

“I am more interested in the ones who call the shots.”

“Oh, you’re a smart girl? A quarterback queen. You must enjoy the strategy.”

Zola laughed. “I don’t know about that.”

“Yes, you are! You’re not agreeing, you’re making a statement. ‘Yes, sir!’ Our clientele will dictate if you let them. They’ll eat you up. Understand?”

Zola nodded, disappointed that she had gotten it wrong, and a bit embarrassed that he could read her so easily—though it wasn’t in an invasive way, almost as if he could relate to her level, her sex, and with a sensitivity she didn’t typically associate with guys in expensive Italian suits. Fidgeting, as she does whenever she’s put on the spot, she rubbed the area of skin just above the knee of her crossed leg.

Jules saw her doing this. “The job is yours if you want it. But take my advice: subscribe to daily stats. You can make some good money here, if you want to.”

He took a set of keys from his pocket as he shook her hand. The key chain was as polished as his larger-than-life appearance, and most likely his car too. She knew she was so far beyond her element, and that this conversation had been nothing short of an adult education for her. It was something different, which she craved. After all, it wasn’t her first time adapting to a foreign place. She’d found that losing her bearings or not being solely committed to what’s at stake, if only temporarily, helped to redirect her. Reinvention was her case for using borrowed time.

“*Jitterbug Perfume*,” says Opera John, as he daintily sips his dirty martini. “I was with a troupe in France, we were doing a rendition.”

She watches as his two chubby fingers swim around in the thin-stemmed glass, like a fat kid’s legs kicking in a murky lake at summer camp. Fishing out this one olive is this 300-pound man’s idea of exercise.

“I was paired with this tenor. Piro was his name. Oh, what a lovely union that was. I was an alto, sweet on him like you wouldn’t believe. I ate at his family’s corner café every day of that run. The kind with white and red umbrellas, and pinwheels in the front. And sometimes before we’d leave to break, I would

sneak in the back where he kept his costumes, because they smelled of butter cream just like his skin.”

John pined for many young men, lamenting to Zola regularly that he was too big for anyone to love anymore. He came in a couple times a week, but it had taken him awhile to trust Zola with his explicit poison. He would direct her through every step of the mixology process, from chilling to shaking to straining. And though it was one of the simplest cocktails to make in the alcoholics’ hierarchy, Opera John had his own definition of a perfect balance and absolutely didn’t tolerate a rushed drink.

“Soooo?” Zola is amused by his overplay of the gay card, especially when he bats his eyelashes at her like a giant Kewpie doll.

“Nada.”

“Really?” He acts surprised and she laughs.

“Yeah, you’ve got much more going on in that department,” admits Zola.

“You got to get out there! You ain’t no Gertrude Stein—I bet you wear rehab slippers around your house, Ms. Stein. I’m gonna call you that from now on.”

“My mother gave them to me. Worried that my feet would get cold.”

“Let’s be real. Gertrude probably had more gentlemen callers in one day, begging for her attention, than you’ve had all year. Well, there’s nothing like a good romp to get the circulation going again.”

“Is this seat taken?” Another man has joined them. John barely acknowledges him, but Zola asks what she can get him.

“A scotch with two rocks will do, thanks.”

She reaches for the label he’s pointed to, standing on her toes with her longer fingers inching up on the ledge of the shelf. She hears the phone ringing behind the kitchen doors and has to stop to answer.

“Excuse me,” she says, with a glance back at the waiting man. Now engrossed in the evening news, he gives her a dismissive nod, apparently unconcerned by the delay.

“What should I eat?” asks Jules, on the other end of the line.

“Where are you?” she asks, knowing very well he could tell her it isn’t any of her business, but this has become a regular aspect of her role.

“Still playing. Up a few hundred in hold ’em.”

“How about steak frites?”

“Is it tender?”

“You can have it raw as you want.”

“What goes well with steak?”

“It comes with fries, but substitute asparagus. They’re as thick as ever.”

“What would you get?”

“Probably that.”

“I didn’t know you ate meat.”

“Sometimes. I like it every now and then.”

“Always took you for one of these vegetables-have-feelings types.”

“Not sure I know what that means.”

“Thought writers were all the ‘farmers market, don’t-shave-their-pits’ kind.”

“I just write,” she says. “Medium? Asparagus?”

“I’ll be back within the hour, hopefully a rich bastard. Have Tanya let you into my room. Just leave the tray on the dresser.”

Zola returns to decant the scotch for the man at the bar, who doesn’t seem to notice she’s been absent.

“Thanks,” he says. “Did you happen to catch the score on the Cardinals’ game? I was in the air and missed the whole thing,”

“7-5 Missouri.”

A win will put this man in good humor, hopefully translating to generosity for Zola. He is focused on the Dow ticker. Above it, the headline reads: *Dogs Living in High Rises*. With a skinny black straw he swirls the short pour in his glass, as the cubes melt to the size of two icy pills. He takes a swig and hisses through his teeth from the bite.



Zola steps into the street after her shift. A fog is rolling in off the harbor, blurring the lights of the town with a smoky screen that covers a backdrop of brick and copper brownstones. She smells fish and salt, carbon and gasoline. This is Zola's favorite part of day—the eerie quietness that begins with the new. Her patrons have gone home and Jules has turned in, and while most others are sleeping, she will use this time to write. She can only store so much in her head before she must upload her thoughts elsewhere; somewhere past the extension of her. Putting her ideas down on paper and making room for new thoughts is for her the closest thing to a natural release. If she didn't have writing to turn to, then there would have to be something else. Though she has found in her experience, the alternative substitutes are often not as fulfilling, and are usually shallow attempts passed off for the real thing.

A blonde girl, around Zola's age, wanders aimlessly in the middle of Ferry Street, barefoot and abandoned after refusing to get in the car with her drunken boyfriend. Fortunately, it is the time of night where cars are tucked away safely in driveways and garages, and the street is empty.

“You have a smoke?” the girl asks.

Zola stops and digs in her purse for a pack, then helps the directionless wanderer with a light. “Got a way home?”

“I’m in no rush,” the girl says, leaning over to put on a pair of sandals sitting on the sidewalk that Zola hadn’t noticed. As the girl does this, her low-cut tank top sags down, showing no traces of a bra.

“I’m walking this way, if you want to join me.” Zola doesn’t want to leave the girl unattended in such a condition, but she also knows that there may be more drama in store if she acquires company.

“Nah, I’m gonna finish this and catch a cab. Mark’s probably worried.”

Relieved, Zola bids her goodnight and heads home.

At her apartment building, she notices that her mailbox has become overstuffed from a couple days of neglect. Its nameplate lists her as one in a series of others who have come before her, the only one who has yet to be crossed or blackened out. She removes the contents and lets the metallic lid slam with an empty sound.

Bills and coupons, mostly. Over the last month, she’s sent very few submissions out, knowing that even a completed piece is still just a pitch. It is frustrating to put all that time and energy into an idea, only to hear back from an editor at a journal it doesn’t fit in with the theme for next month’s issue. How could she have known that a Flirtini was no longer en vogue in trendy clubs, having been replaced by Medusa’s Orgasm over night? After all, when she does

get out she doesn't have the patience or poise for anything fancy, particularly of the popular neon variety.

Leafing through a color-copied coupon flyer for a local department store, she climbs the stairs to the second floor. Nothing she really needs—though a real Kitchen Aid mixer would be nice. Right in the middle of the thought, a small white envelope slips from the paper and lands at her feet.

In the top, right-hand corner is a foreign postmark dated within the last week and covering the rest of the surface are forwarding stamps, at least five, with the fingers pointing every which way. Zola crouches down to the worn tiles of the hallway landing, focusing on the smeared and distorted handwriting. The original address is old; it's going on four years since she lived there, and she's impressed by the postal service for tracking her down through the various relocations. Zola is not necessarily hiding; she just doesn't care too much to be found. And knowing only a few people who use the postal service anymore, she has a sneaking suspicion as to who this letter is from. The sender's address is unidentifiable, with no name included, but the legible portions look familiar. She almost wants to deny the possibility, as she slips the envelope into the stack between her thumb and forefinger, and continues her ascent upstairs.

Once inside, she hangs on to the letter and drops the rest of the mail on her kitchen table. Lingered for a moment, she wonders if she could toss it away unopened, as though she had never seen it. But it would take a will she knows she

doesn't have. Questions are forming quickly, like air bubbles underwater—as one rises to the surface, others follow, only to be stopped if she ceased breathing.

Beneath the sharp folds of the paper sachet is a letter. She considers the contents may not necessarily be the kind of guidance she's been waiting for. It could be a potential discourse from the certain existence she has fought desperately to create. But as her need to know prevails, she opens the envelope with care, and the letter flutters like wings unfolded from a cocoon.

My Dear Zola,

I hope this letter finds you. If it does not, you will never know the loss of my words. After all these years and silence, I do not expect you to read on, let alone open this letter. Even if it is tucked away in a box, at least it is in your hands. And one day you will know that I tried to reach out to you, and that you are rarely far from my mind.

I hope you are well. I hope you are loved. I hope that you are creating beautiful art. And I hope you have not abandoned your pursuit for something more.

I see my life passing before my eyes. I have traveled, loved and painted. But my life is far from whole and sometimes I wonder if you have found that piece I left behind, when I thought I misplaced it somewhere else...

Nicholay

Patches of red and yellow light bounce and flicker off the kitchen cabinets, and the refrigerator hums against the laminate floor. Watching the steam from the kettle dissipate, Zola sits at the table that serves as both a desk and dining area, with the one-page letter in front of her. She studies it as though analyzing a significant archival document.

The pot whistles.

She gets up to steep a bag of tea, and reads his letter once more: *I wonder if you have found that piece I left behind—when I thought I misplaced it somewhere else...* His words resonate. She knows how they would have exited his mouth, and curled out from his thin, wide lips—like an armadillo reciting an elegy.

But how could he?

After all this time?

He was always the selfish one.

What did he expect? Closure in his newfound life? To make her crazy as he knew he could? Four years with no word, hearing nothing, and here he was showing up in a letter, without apology?

When all that is left in her cup is the smell of mint and a hint of delicate herbs speckled on a ceramic bottom, she heads for bed, choosing sleep over the recollection of him.



Zola dreams that she is in a small paper boat in the middle of a great body of water. The sail is stamped with a compass rose pointing the way. The sky hangs heavy, but does not reflect off the water's surface or meet at the horizon. She cannot anticipate its depth, because light does not exist below her. There is no beginning or end, only where she floats in between. She becomes afraid, straining her eyes for any sign of familiarity, but there is nothing. Curling up on the bottom of the boat, she weeps. She does not cry for fear of death, but out of fear she will never be found, that she will disappear off the face of the earth and no one will notice her missing.

Determined this will not be her demise, she sits up and scans her surroundings once more, this time noticing a mainstay at one end of the boat. Grabbing hold of the line, she plants her feet for balance and with both hands begins to pull herself and the weight of the boat towards its anchor. For hours she pulls, but the rope continues to uncoil and extend. Uncertainty about what lies at the other end of its length, and whether it will be better to wait for someone to discover her, makes her heave harder and faster, feeling the stretch through her

arms and all down her side. She was once told by her mother that if she ever got lost to remain in one place, but now she wonders if there will be anyone who will come looking.

With all her might she pulls, hands blistering and body drenched in sweat. Time passes, but she has no gauge of the hours or the days. Her muscles are sore, her body weak.

Ready to give up and collapse in exhaustion, she sees it, a vague silhouette of a dock—this must be a trick someone is playing on her. But as the boat drifts closer, she can make out the rough outline of a shadowed figure leaning on a wooden railing, arms crossed and head bent. She knows the height of this man, the width of his torso, and the way of his stance. She knows this man, but she doesn't know if she should cry out in thankfulness, or let her boat drift past him into the abyss.

Zola wakes with her nightgown clinging to her body and the sheets at her ankles. Half awake, she slinks her way to the bathroom and wearily splashes her face at its porcelain basin. The dampness of her nightgown against her bare breasts gives her a chill. She pulls off the cotton gown and grabs the robe from a hook on the back of the door. She is strangely aroused from the dream, not solely in a sexual way, but the way someone would feel when anticipating a meeting with an old lover. She feels it in her abdomen, as though strings are being played

between that connected place of navel and femininity. Some describe this sensation as butterflies, but Zola knows she is not a 13-year-old girl, but a 28-year-old woman, and butterflies are too pure a description for what she feels. The thought of him is embedded inside of her now, pulling ever so gently, on all the right chords.

Nicholay



He can hear Geraldine prancing around upstairs, trying to locate her fallen garments. He can picture her long legs in various yoga-like stretches as she attempts to dislodge her panties from his tangled bedding.

“You didn’t wake me,” she says, finally coming downstairs in the same clothing as the night before. She leans over him and grabs his chest affectionately, her strawberry-blonde hair tickling his cheek and neck. “Now I’m going to be late!” she singsongs with ironic flair, then takes a few, quick gulps of the coffee he has poured and left for her. “Nothing like cold, black coffee to start the day,” she says, holding one of her lengthy legs at an angle like a flamingo.

Turning down the newspaper slightly, he gives her his attention. “You were like a peaceful undine, all laid out in morning bliss. Couldn’t bear to disrupt such a beautiful creature sleeping. It’s unjust.”

“What’s unjust is that you’ve managed to get me to stay again and you’ve barely touched that canvas.”

Nicholay sees a nice contrast between the tassels of Geraldine’s hair, and the aqua marine glaze of the cup she is holding in her hands. He makes a mental note of this palette, before his focus shifts to his unfinished cabinets behind her, without cabinet doors—just another one of his projects he’s saving for a rainy

day. “Trust me, we’re getting close. I can feel it. Pretty soon you won’t be able to pull me away.”

“I was warned about you.”

“Indeed you were.”

“I gotta to go,” she says, looking at her watch and pulling a bag over her freckled shoulder. “*Besitos. Ciao.*” Then her long limbs are out the door and down the steps, off to a class he doesn’t teach—ceramics was for the birds, full of pot-smoking youths who backpack through South East Asia in search of their *chi*.

Nicholay sets the kitchen timer on the table beside him and goes back to reading the news. Recent heirs, a brother and sister who have been off the radar until recently, when, in a bizarre turn of events, they received a large trust after the passing of their tycoon father. According to sources, they despised this man and everything he stood for; he was a self-promoting capitalist, bureaucrat and social philanderer. The siblings denounced their father’s name, and donated all their funds to local arts programs. They were currently seeking the like to sponsor.

No better than their father, Nicholay thinks. Philanthropic karma is the latest currency. Disgusted, he turns to another section, then to the soccer scores.

When the timer goes off at 11:11, he gets up and removes the button-down sweater he's wearing, leaving him in nothing but his unlaced boots. The cable knit cardigan belonged to his grandfather, a good ol' boy from New England, and it is the only thing Nicholay has left of him. He doesn't want to ruin the sweater with oil paints, since there isn't an effective way of getting the stains out. Despite the many methods and neutralizers he's tried over the years, every stitch of clothing he owns is covered with evidence of whatever project he is currently working on. Painting naked just began to make sense after a while.

This particular project is not the one he and Geraldine have been collaborating on. Right now, as it sits on the easel in the corner of his kitchen all that is identifiable is a pair of female hands kneading bread in empty space: an idea that came to him in a memory.

He hadn't thought about Zola for quite some time, until an early morning last week when he couldn't sleep any longer. He'd slipped away from the purr of his lover and went to make a sandwich downstairs. He wasn't sure if it was the piece of artisan bread he'd been chewing between thoughts, or the way the light caught the side of the hammered metal mug he was drinking from, but whatever it was, a vision came back to him, a familiar energy he became determined to capture.

The recollection is four years old, but feels like yesterday's clothes. His hand searched the bed for her, but was met with the coolness of deserted sheets. It was dawn and a chill ran along the crooked floorboards. Nicholay got up, following the smell of sweet yeast downstairs to the kitchen. As he approached the entryway, he saw Zola, nude, kneading bread. He stopped in their unlit hallway and looked on as the faintest pieces of first light barely touched her moist skin, her silhouette glistening like a mare in summer's heat. Her hands moved rhythmically over the dough as strands of hair fell to her face and her tiny breasts gently swayed in motion. She was beautifully posed and he couldn't help but make love to her and her flour-covered body, in their flour-covered kitchen.

Last week, when this came back to him, Nicholay painted feverishly for hours, into the late afternoon. The poet Rilke once described the artistic experience as "lying so incredibly close to that of sex, to its pain and its ecstasy, that the two manifestations were one in the same." And when Nicholay becomes enraptured in his work, even the temptation of a half-clothed woman happy to indulge him again and again can't take him away from his canvas.

He made the decision to write Zola out of selfishness, mostly, but also curiosity. There is part of him that wonders where the wind has taken her. She always had a little gypsy blood in her, an innate inability to settle. It was one of the many things that drew him to her in the first place. Her need for travel, to seek

new adventures, and all those unspoken personal conquests, inspired them once to dream of a love and life built on something higher. They had relished the idea that no one but the two of them alone understood what they shared, and that was all that mattered. This had been so clear in the way they made love and worked side by side, and how in time her beauty blossomed into a finely stated independence. However, there had been an element of something spontaneous and erratic too, deficiencies they did not want to admit to. Being together required them to make compromises, promises Nicholay suspected he might never be able to make to anyone, not even to her.



Among his nobler pastimes, Nicholay teaches a small group of five-year-old kids how to paint. Two days a week, he works for a community center that offers instruction on everything from aerobics to interior design for all different levels and ages. This is where he met Geraldine. She was leaving at the end of one of the studio classes she was taking, and he was walking in to teach the next slot.

“What do you think of this pot?” she had asked him, as she cleaned a potter’s wheel in the back of the room.

Nicholay went over to examine the clay heap. “Honestly?”

“Lay it on me,” she said, scrubbing the slick grey goo from her hands over the industrial sink.

“I think it’s shit, and you can do better.”

“Is that so?” she said, removing the black apron tied around her neck and waist, to reveal a curvaceous body in a floral dress. She’s taller than most women he’s known, almost his height. But what stands out to him the most, is that she is of those mixed breeds of Spanish women, with light hair and brown skin.

“In fact...” He put his hand over the lopsided, muddy vessel and pressed down hard, flattening it into a pile.

Geraldine stared at him. “Who the hell do you think you are!”

“I thought you wanted me to be honest?”

“I did, but—”

“Listen, I’m sorry. Were you really attached to that pot?”

“I spent hours...” She trailed off, shaking her head.

He may as well have been the man who hit the family pet with his car and left it for dead on the side of the road, because the expression on Geraldine’s face was one and the same. Looking as though she didn’t know what to make of the situation or him, she bagged up what was left of her project.

“How about this: Why don’t you think about it for awhile, and when I take you out tonight for dinner—as my apology to you—you can explain why it mattered that I squashed that terrible thing you called art.”

“And why would I go out with you?”

“I just so happen to be an expert on these things.”

“And this actually works?”

“You tell me.”

That was three months ago, and since then Geraldine has been the closest thing to a companion Nicholay has had for awhile.

Nicholay enjoys teaching kids, because they haven’t been polluted by reality, and their perceptions of the world are still pure. Ask children why they chose blue for the color of skin, and they’ll say, “The boy is sad because he lost his dog.”

And if Nicholay asks, “What dog? I don’t see a dog pictured here.”

They’ll say, “Because he’s lost.”

“Okay, then what about the rainbow?”

“I just like rainbows.”

“Fair enough.” This was reasoning he could follow. He would accept a child’s reasoning over an adult’s any day.

Sometimes, Nicholay brings in his paintings and lets the kids ask him questions about his own work.

“Why does that man look so angry?”

“I don’t know,” he replies. “His lover left him for his father.”

“What’s a lover?”

“It’s a woman or man who cares for another deeply, but is incapable of committing in the most intimate and complete way. Usually, someone ends up getting hurt.”

“My mommy loves my daddy.”

“You’re probably right.” It does exist, though Nicholay hasn’t personally seen such a case.

“Sometimes my mommy says she hates daddy when he doesn’t pay attention to her and watches soccer all night, and then goes to bed without her.”

If only he could see like a child again, he could paint uninhibited without a care or worry about whether what he was doing was any good. His kids were gauges for how honest his paintings were. If they told him they liked it without

any explanation other than “just because,” he knew he was on to something half decent.

Zola



September's vibrant decay is creeping inland, as it does in New England with its fiery touch and rustic soul. The treetops appear as gentle red and ginger-headed giants standing loyally on guard, waiting to shed their coats and bare their rickety bones, aged and vulnerable to another winter. Zola looks out her window at the oak in the yard below. It has become a dial for the seasons, and the scent of musty leaves has already made its way into her apartment. The family of birds that nested there for most of the year has abandoned its home without so much as a goodbye note, but she knows they will return and she will awake once more to the cheery diligence of their songs.

It's only a matter of time now until the hours in the day become fleeting, like flocks of evening geese, and the nights will get colder—particularly when one is alone. Yet the lure of procrastination tap-tap-taps on her windowpanes, with the same tenacity as drumming fingertips on a glass tabletop, making a racket she can no longer ignore. Exhaling heavily, she scribbles out another phrase, hoping for that beginning sentence to appear and give way to prose.

Ah, if only she was a true morning writer, waking when light breaks into brilliant white pieces on her bedroom floor, a jumble of words all ready and built up for a day's work. Now, distracted and trying to fend off agitation, she rolls the

pen she's been playing with across her desk and away from her. The coffee in her mug has gone stale.

She hasn't been up this early since God knows when; she doesn't normally have a routine before 11, and is feeling a bit out of sorts. With the late hours she keeps at the Hunt Club, her nocturnal habits and eating and sleeping patterns are constantly under speculation from Jules, her closest friends, and the occasional admirer. So, when she gets up to throw together a breakfast and at once discovers there is nothing in her fridge that could entice even Kafka's fasting artist, she decides a trip to the farmer's market is in order.

It is an unusually warm fall day, and Zola takes her regular route from India Street, where she lives, down the hill toward the shipyard, then along the boulevard to the park where the market is held. Her mind escapes with the moving and orchestrated sounds that echo off the wharf and under the easements of storefronts, basking in what she is a part of, but aware of being separate too. With her hands tucked inside the satiny cool pockets of her wool jacket, she turns her face to the warmth in the sky and lets her boots guide her down the boardwalk, making that familiar scuff and hollow sound as she goes.

The stone buildings and open-air markets of Old Port are reminiscent of the seaside villages of Spain, as is the close energy of the bustling crowds. Tourists come for the quaintness, while the city's residents live out their lives.

Weather-beaten men in galoshes populate the pubs beside day traders in dock shoes and pastel sweaters. And fresh-faced kids maneuver narrow cobbled roads on motorbikes beside lovely white-haired ladies walking dogs. It could be anywhere, but it is in this harbor town that she wants to learn to belong.

“You brought another lovely morning with you,” says the man behind the bread cart as Zola enters through the west end of the park. Both shield their eyes from the early morning glare.

“It was lovely before I got here,” she says, leaning to pick up a basket from the stack piled before his stand. “There was an amazing blue heron out at lower pier. He looked so noble with his broad chest and stern face. Actually, he reminded me a bit of you.”

Bernard laughs heartily from his belly. “Ah, maybe when I was a young man, perhaps. Today?” He shakes his head ‘no.’

“Where do you suppose they all go when it gets cold? The herons, I mean.”

“Depends on how cold it gets. Every now and then when we have a mild winter, you’ll see a couple of them sticking around here. They like the marsh a lot over near the bay. But I suppose they go with all the other birds, though generally you see them flying solo.”

“How’s business been? I bet the other vendors are jealous; you get to greet all the women who come by here first.” Zola points to one of the freshly baked mounds with a cross-shaped texture in the top.

“Women don’t eat bread anymore. Always worried about their figures. They don’t know it’s good for them, because it tempts them like sweets.” He holds the loaf with the same care as a newborn, and Zola nods her approval. “And now we have these gluten-free followers. Depriving their bodies like that, it can’t be good for their hearts.” Bernard carefully wraps her selection in brown paper, tying it up with a bow of twine. “We’ll be packing up the market here in a couple weeks, but I’ll still be distributing to a few shops around town.”

“Well, I don’t mind a little honey and salt in my diet,” she says, then thanks and pays him when he hands her the bundle.

It is noticeably busy in the park today and she has to side step to get where she wants to go. By lunch the crowd will disperse, and couples and families will go off to find places nearby to sit and enjoy their goodies. Zola has her favorite stops, and has made a point to learn the vendors’ names and listen to their stories. Now they greet her with their warm northern accents and smiling eyes.

Tilia has the nicest cart of greens: kale, fennel bulbs, mesclun, and watercress. Her vegetable kiosk is often the second stop after Bernard’s bread

cart, unless the temperature is real warm; then it is Zola's last stop, so nothing wilts or spoils. Zola has to speak up when talking to the older Portuguese woman, who hobbles out on bad hips from behind her usual roosting spot, just so she can hear correctly. With a handful of stalks close to her face, Zola breathes in the verdant scents that remind her of the gardens and stables of her youth, and Tilia smiles knowingly at the gesture without complaining that she's touching the merchandise.

Tilia's grand-daughter, Eva, sits near the back of their nylon tent, reading tabloid magazines with images of blond and busty women on their glossy covers, or thumbing the keypad of her cell phone with zombie-like concentration. She has the pretty ethnic features that Tilia probably once had, though there's a constant look of boredom on her face. Zola tries not to see her pregnant and married by twenty, especially when Tilia says proudly, "She will be first in our family to go to college." But the young girl diverts her uninterested eyes, and Zola can't help but think a future in produce could save her.

Then there is Matisse, the beautiful man who sells olives. He happily speaks of his marriage and children, but Zola can't help but wonder if his mouth melts like a pan of olive oil in the heat of passion. The way he says her name aloud when he spies her coming is enough to make her return to his table each week.

“Hi, Zola,” he purrs, the *l* lulling and the long, sensual *ah*. In a similar way she savors the salty thought of him with an olive pit rolling around on her tongue. Leaning forward to ladle out his green and black specialties with their briny juice, he spoons them into the blue Tupperware containers she makes sure to bring. As his shoulder blades move beneath his long-underwear shirt, he is all eyes and teeth, like some sleek mountain cat contemplating her.

Others beckon her over, wanting to show off their finest selections—sometimes jewelry and scarves, sometimes simply the seasonal prides of their gardens. It feels good to be acknowledged and recognized, even if they are just strangers trying to take money from her pockets and put their goods in her basket. Even she is barely eking out a living these days.

She has chosen to reside here, and shape a life she can support on her own, but has she been overzealous to think that coming here would rid her of distraction too? Distraction is a bloodhound that seems to follow her everywhere she goes. She never intentionally set out to be a writer, after all. It happened on its own, no less organically grown than the trays of herbs with labeled wooden slats sticking out from their well-watered soil. Still, calling herself a “writer” makes her uncomfortable; it’s a term too pretentious for her.

Even as she sets her mind on the newspaper stand and the fish market up the street, she knows she is biding her time until she must return to the page again.

How long has it been since she wrote anything but a string of nonsensical words? She's stopped registering the time that has passed. Why has it become so hard for her? It is as though she woke up and there was nothing inside of her worth putting down.

Then again, maybe there hadn't been anything worthwhile in the first place.

"You want one, don't you?"

Zola turns to see her best friend Natalia giving her the I-caught-you-look, with an armload of her own groceries—too many hemp bags can really weigh a person down.

"You were staring at that sweet-looking little boy over there, dancing with the green balloon."

"I do love balloons."

"I was talking about the kid. You were staring with that far-away glimmer in your eye. Either that or you're the same day-dreamer I used to kick awake in class. What are you up to this evening?"

Zola has known Natalia ever since they were in high school, back home in New Hampshire. She and her husband Adam came to Portland, when he took the

executive chef position at The Hunt Club, five years ago. They had a hand in getting Zola to come live this city too, and it is nice to be nearby one another again.

“It’s my night off,” says Zola. “But I promised myself I’d chain my leg to the desk if that means actually getting some words on paper.”

“Well, if you work up an appetite with that writing-bondage thing, I just picked up ingredients so Adam can make bouillabaisse tonight. I know I’m not supposed to have shellfish while I’m pregnant, but I just can’t bring myself to listen to a bunch of wives’ tales. Kids have too many allergies these days if you ask me and it’s because some woman said ‘no fucking peanuts’ when she was knocked up.”

“If I come to a breaking point, I’ll stop by.”

“Great! I’ll see you at eight!” Natalia pulls her sunglasses down from out of her hair and gives Zola a squeeze, before she heads off in the direction of her home in the West End.

Walking back along the pier, Zola snacks on a bag of sticky apricots. Her skin feels dewy, with a balmy flush. All the vacations her family took to the Maine coast when she was a child come back to her now—running with the

sandpipers, her apple cheeks and sniffling nose defying that brisk sea air, feeling that sensation between laughter and an ordinary day.

Looking out to the faint white triangles tracing the bay, she sees that the heron is no longer there. There's only some gulls perched along a drooping dock rope, like necklace beads glistening against a black resin hull.



Portland's west side attracts art students, musicians, singles and immigrants, a so-called "arts district" that seems to be labeled more often by rental agents trying to lure 30-somethings from the bigger cities than by the actual colonizers and transient dwellers who reside in the neighborhood. There is nothing cool about living in the West End. The fact is that those who do can't afford to live anywhere else. The hallways of unsecured apartment buildings smell like piss, mildew and cigarettes. Elevators are routinely out of service, forcing tenants and visitors to soiled back stairwells with sticky railings and evidence of lewd acts. The lack of parking makes for low rents, but for most a car is not a necessity, since everything you really need is within walking distance. However, in the winters, when the temperature drops below freezing, you really have to brave it to go just around the corner for a box of noodles or a roll of toilet paper. At least then the hookers and the drug addicts won't bother you. Very few can manage such a thrifty lifestyle, and those who expect something better out of

living in the area eventually trade in their undergraduate fine arts degrees for comfortable desk jobs.

Zola lives on the East Side, largely because she found an inexpensive place on a quiet street. But what really sold her was the view, a slice of the ocean no west-ender can compete with. Also, she has found that in communities concentrated with other creative-types, she is less likely to get much done—too many get-togethers for solidarity.

To get to Natalia and Adam's Zola must walk through the shadier section of town. They live on the western promenade overlooking the South Bay, and technically share the same zip code as other West Enders. When her friends tell locals they live in these parts, someone is always surprised to hear they own real estate there. However, the lane they live on has some well-kept Capes and other turn-of-the-century-style homes, built by merchants and shipbuilders who prospered in commercial trade as the Old Port grew. Natalia and Adam's home is as classic as they come, with painted cedar shingles and white trim, a stone foundation, and even a wrought iron gate decorated with casted pineapples.

“My dear, I'm so glad you made it.” Zola is greeted by a very round Natalia, who is absolutely radiant with her first pregnancy.

“Well, I have very convincing friends,” says Zola, taking off her jacket in the front hallway and receiving a kiss on her cheek.

“What can I say? Law school was good for something.”

Every now and then, Zola forgets what domestic life consists of: matching linens, a full refrigerator, coffee table books, a well-behaved dog and children. Like the family of birds in the old oak tree outside her apartment, there’s a dutiful bliss to it all. She concludes that domestic life is for the well trained. The free spirit that encompasses all that Zola is and all that she aspires to be has little understanding of this way in which so many others live. But she loves her friends, regardless of what they have chosen for themselves, and knows they feel the same. They welcome her presence, and there is always a social gathering she can be coerced into attending.

The scene, however, is often predictable. The same faces, the same backdrop, the same disconnected conversations, while their offspring play at her feet. *“I thought the work to be too pretentious and assumptive... Lynn, what do you have in your mouth? NO! Spit it out ... C’mon, spit it out please, honey... God, what is that? Where was I?”*

“Consumptive?”

“Yes, yes, of course. Consumerism will soon destroy the arts as we know them...”

Unlike an accessory, however, children never seem to go with a cocktail dress the way her peers would like. Zola imagines a small child pinned to a velvet strap like a gaudy brooch, the little being kept quiet with olives and tabouleh. Different from many of the women she knows who like to be on display, Zola takes pride in her simplified appearance, sometimes wondering if her lifestyle appears novel to her friends. They always seem intrigued, but would never consider wearing her shoes, which are worn from late night walks alone on the beach, where the salt water seeps in, and from early-morning visits to the fern beds, to catch the deer awake. And from the bar and street filth she brings home.

“How do you like The Club so far?” asks Adam, standing over a sizeable skillet of spice and onions. Natalia pours glasses of wine for her husband and Zola.

“I never got a chance to thank you for getting me in over there. You’ve got some good guys in the kitchen. I’m learning a lot about Cuba from Ramon. And Jules, Jesus! He’s got the energy of a six-year-old.”

Adam laughs agreeably. “Ramon. I have to watch him every minute of baseball season to be sure he’s getting the dishes done. He keeps sneaking out to

the bar to watch his teams and then suddenly we're nailed on the line, and I've got no back up sauté pans coming. And what can I say about Jules? A good heart, but he's all over the place."

"Do you have enough time to write?" asks Natalia.

"I have plenty, and actually working there has really helped with material."

"That place is good for that," says Adam.

"Like a couple weeks ago, I had this woman in, who told me the wildest story."

"I'm sure you hear it all," says Natalia.

"I really do. So much, that by the end of the day, my filter is shot." Zola takes the glass Natalia hands her. "So, this woman came in. She has three *piña* coladas in a row and I couldn't tell if she was medicated too, but her buzz went right to her head. I didn't want to cut her off and embarrass her in front of the other customers—she was clearly one to keep up appearances. You know, the type who hires a tennis coach and plays mixed doubles every weekend, but deep down really despises it and her husband for making her take up the sport."

Natalia nods.

“So I offer her a cheese plate, but she says she doesn’t want the carbs and fat, so I give her a veggie plate instead, and before I know it, she’s crying, mascara all down the face, saying, ‘I know you are just trying to sober me up, but I need this drink. Fanny is at the vet and I just can’t cope right now.’ I feel bad, of course, so I hand her some tissues and serve her another drink, and she tells me this horror tale about her cat.”

“What happened?” Natalia has never owned pets, but Zola knows she donates to the humane society when they call and ask for money.

“She owned this Khao Manee breed. Know anything about them?”

Both Natalia and Adam shake their heads. Natalia sets the table, as Adam portions out the serving dishes.

“I didn’t either,” says Zola, taking a sip of her wine. “They are really rare. Apparently, she was on this trip with her husband in Thailand and had taken a lover while her husband was busy in meetings. The lover gave her the pet as a symbol of luck and sort of parting gift. One eye is known to be gold and the other silver, and the cats have all white fur.”

“Sounds beautiful,” says Natalia, who has taken over dinner preparation, so Adam can hang up his apron and wash his hands.

“Right? So, they’re back in the States with the cat and the cat is pretty much catatonic for whatever reason. And the woman starts believing it is a curse or something. Feeling really guilty and thinking she should never have had the affair in the first place. Then in the middle of night, she hears this loud crash and the sound of breaking glass, and gets up to see what’s happened. And she walks into the living room to find that her coffee table has been flipped onto its side, and the cat is jumping back and forth through the frame of broken chairs like a circus hoop. There is blood and fur everywhere, and the cat is really torn up.”

“That’s awful!” says Natalia, as she hands Zola a bowl filled with scallops, shrimp and fish swimming in an herby tomato-rice stew. It smells delicious, like the sea and garden have been slow-cooked together all day.

“Yeah, I can’t imagine,” says Zola. “It was probably chasing its reflection. A vain woman acquiring a vain cat seems too perfect, don’t you think?”

“Those Thai do believe in karma,” says Natalia.

“But they aren’t sorcerers. I still feel bad for that woman and her Franken-cat.”

“Well, that’s definitely something,” says Adam.

“I think, Zola, you give people too much credit. A spouse who cheats, there’s bound to be repercussions, in whatever form they come out,” says Natalia.

“Perhaps, but what about forgiveness?”

“No way! If I found out Adam ever—“

“Whoa!” Adam protests, a shrimp in his mouth. He pulls at the fanned, scaly tail to remove it.

“Honey, I know you wouldn’t,” she says, then adds to Zola, “But if he did, trust me, his two sacks would be the next day’s special.”

They laugh and toast to Kahunas Du Jour.

Later, as they talk about relationships and heartbreaks, Nicholay’s words run over and over again in Zola’s head like a damaged film reel. She wants to tell Natalia about the letter, but watching her friend’s jubilation with her husband as they discuss baby names and plans for the future, there never seems to be an appropriate time. Besides, the light, easy chatter carries Zola far away from the contemplative place where she often finds herself when alone.

Opera John was right; she needs to get out more often.



On her way home, Zola stops at Café La Mer for a nightcap. This is her neighborhood hideaway when she can’t find inspiration or stillness, where she sometimes bellies up to the bar to read or write or sort through her dreams. Dimly

lit with worn velvet couches, the café mostly draws drunken professors and a salon of young, beautiful people who find it excusable to act bourgeois. For Zola, it is shelter from the outside chaos. Strange liquors fill elixir jars with the remnants of cherry skins and lemon peels, and the smell of mussels or fresh-shucked oysters make her romanticize the life of the fisherman and his wife, listening intently to the words they exchange when they think no one else can hear them.

“I swear by it or I’ll die trying to convince you. I sing your name under my breath and the fish bite,” says Thomas.

“Come’n now, you’re beginning to sound as crazy as the rest of ‘em.” Lorelei dries her hands on her apron and leans over the bar to place her palms tenderly on either side of her husband’s face, bringing him closer to her. “Just make it home for breakfast, whether there is fish in your boat or not. This means six, not drinks with the boys.”

Thomas pulls the stretched-out neck of his sweater to his ears and the hood of his windbreaker over his head. “My beacon,” he says, and then leaves through the kitchen’s service door, forever Lorelei’s mysterious sailor sneaking out the back.

Zola orders a Beaujolais and glances down the bar at Louis, a Tuesday regular. He's twirling his handlebar mustache and staring into his glass. He's Greek, and the only person she knows who puts fruit in his merlot. His cabbie hat sits deflated beside him, and everyone knows he should be at work. Catching her looking at him, he smiles, straightens his bad posture, and raises his glass.

"Lo, what do you think about second chances?" Zola asks Lorelei.

"Are we talking about men here, or you?" Lorelei sticks a bobby pin in her mouth and adjusts the hair on top of her head.

"Maybe both?"

Zola admires the fine-looking gray streak just above Lorelei's right ear. There is something about these Northern women who wear their age so well, an ingrained wholesomeness passed down through each generation of matriarch.

"Men think they're misunderstood and we owe them a chance to explain. We women on the other hand, we never feel like we deserve 'em. If we fuck up once, we typically don't go back or admit we're wrong. Too much pride. Men just don't know any better. They'll keep banging against the same wall until we give in. Trust me, I've patched my fair share."

"But how do we know when to give in?"

“I have run this place for years. It’s a playground for many. Temptation, destruction, you name it. But you’re talking about compromising one’s beliefs... that is something different. Someone burn you bad, Sweetie?”

“It’s been so long, I can’t remember who’s to blame.”

“Well, whatever you do, don’t admit that, no matter who he is.”

Zola sits for awhile thinking how estranged it feels between her and Nicholay. Just when she thinks she’s swept away all the pieces that would remind her of him, an artifact appears without fair warning, or the tools to decipher it. Zola thinks about the letter, opened and hanging on her refrigerator, surrounded by the scraps and evidence of her new life. If their parting had been simple, perhaps she could’ve just as easily thrown out his words with the day’s garbage, or stashed them in a box out of sight and out of mind, to look at many years down the road when she is stronger or wiser. But the truth is, she hasn’t been able to forget him. And she knew that he would one day reveal himself, like the illusionist he was, forcing her to remember the way things were back then.

Zola pays her tab, leaving the din of introspection behind with the other patrons, who, like her, have told themselves lies.

Exhausted and tipsy from the cheap wine, she stumbles around her apartment, trying to locate a photograph she came across not long ago while

unpacking the couple of boxes she'd been living out of. This time around, it only took her nine months to be sure she was going to stay put for awhile, a real record for her. She was proud of how quickly she settled in.

She finds the picture under a stack of loose papers containing observations she's saving for something she plans to write, someday. In the image she's eating a pear, looking up with surprise, a droplet of juice rolling down her chin.

She studies her own expression. Pure joy stares back at her, as though wondering when they will meet again.

Bringing the photo over to her desk, she tears a piece of paper from a raggedy notebook and begins to write. Neither a poem nor a short story, it is a sequence of words that somehow effortlessly fills a page. Her hand is frantic to keep up, but her heart is as calm as a stationery deer.

Nicholay,

You can't imagine the surprise I felt when I received your letter. It's been a long time... I always believed that with time and distance we could make things right, but your letter shook me to my core, and once again I feel something missing, something that has never really allowed me to feel complete. You say you left something behind—with me or for me, I'm not sure. When you left, you took more than you owned.

With the innocence of a child, wide-eyed and hopeful, I held my heart in my hands and offered it up to you. It was not a gift, but a peace offering. You

hung it with your other medals and accolades. It became dusty, stale and forgotten. Now I ask for its return, but maybe you have misplaced it among your other possessions. You have taken a piece of me and my only regret is that I wish I had not been so wide-eyed and hopeful.

Why have you come back into my life, Nicholay? What did you leave behind?

~Zola

She doesn't bother reading the letter over. It is what needs to be said. On the back of the photograph she writes: *Please Return*. In her mind it is clever, it is rhetoric, and she does not question whether or not he will understand her plea. In a way, it doesn't matter.

Carefully tucking the letter and photograph into its own envelope, she prints the mailing address. She considers not using a return address, but decides she does not want to turn this into a game. Nicholay will write again, if he's the same man she once knew him to be.

Trying to picture his life now, she wonders if he's married or lives with someone. He seems so distant to her, as if she knew him in a time far-removed from the present. She imagines how he looks, knowing how the bends of life can change a man's appearance or spirit.

She was only twenty-two when they met. The world had offered itself to her, and with both fear and hope she did what she needed to. She hardly recognizes herself now from that girl she once was, and he probably wouldn't either. With her hair shorter, her skin lighter, she has outgrown the awkwardness of late-adolescence. Now a woman mature in both instinct and her own set of beliefs, it is hard for her to conceive of the infatuation she felt for a man she barely knew.

Nicholay



The house was originally owned by a professor of botany—Dr. Nightingale, who specialized in rare healing plants. The doctor never returned from collecting specimens in South America and was last seen in a remote border-village trying to organize a camp of men. With no news of his whereabouts, the bank declared the house abandoned and put it up for sale.

When Nicholay moved into the place it had been vacant for years, but still contained the scientist's belongings. The deterioration of the structure resonated with Nicholay; the windows were like burdened eyes, and the flaking clapboards reminded him of aged skin. He decided not to throw anything away; if Dr. Nightingale ever returned, or if a family member contacted him seeking the former owner's possessions, it would be only right to keep these things on hand to be reclaimed.

Many of the professor's personal things were boxed up and kept in a pantry off the kitchen. However, Nicholay found use for the minimal and utilitarian furniture: the petrified oak cabinet with ivory knobs; the painted mismatched chairs; the scuffed and scratched peasant table; the threadbare Oriental rug. The richest object is an African Blackwood writing desk that sits in

the corner of his bedroom. The house has been lived in and he can feel its ghosts. He's become their caretaker.

A small but impressive library also remains intact, and often Nicholay enjoys the books and journals throughout the house. He brought very little of his own when he moved in, only his art tools and a bag of clothing. He'd been seeking a simpler way of life; it was how he rationalized leaving everything behind. But from what he can tell of Dr. Nightingale and his collections, they are similar souls in many ways.

Nicholay likes the doctor's sketches best. Simply done in black ink, or occasionally colored pencil, the foreign shapes of petals and leaves with Latin labels tell him of another man's obsession with uncommon beauty. He can see it in the careful etchings—no smudges, no mistaken lines, complete certainty and precision. Admiring the steady hand and finely detailed flora, Nicholay wonders if the doctor could have ever loved anything more.

The greenhouse stands behind the main house. It was once a sanctuary and laboratory, and at one time, passion probably grew from every pistil and pod, filling the air with sweet loamy aromas and a tepid green haze only found in southern hemispheres. When Nicholay first came upon the space, there was nothing left but rows of dried compost and brown shriveled stems, broken and cracked windows covered in dirty film that kept the sun from shining too brightly,

and bird droppings splattered like white paint on benches and growing boxes. Restoring the greenhouse brought its spirit back to life. Nicholay salvaged windows from retired train cars and buildings ready for demolition. He removed all the old equipment and containers, leaving only the discolored stencils on the concrete floor where hoses had once lain coiled and watering cans had dripped. He brought in his own equipment and containers—horsehair brushes and rolls of canvas, acrylics and oils, sprays and solvents, and the easel he was given at seventeen. He worked with determination to get the place in order, anticipating the paintings he would produce in this new space. But on the first day he stood before his canvas, he could not make a brushstroke and the greenhouse filled with a suffocating heat. He felt like an insect beneath an overturned glass, aware and frightened of his own decline.

Now, his oil paints remain wet and workable. Zola's half-painted portrait has become such a presence in his life that finishing it would mean he could put the memory of her finally to rest. Like the painter Modigliani, who left the eyes of his models black until he knew their souls, Nicholay does not attempt to paint what he does not know. Looking at her photograph and letter, which arrived this morning, he wonders whether he could bring a sense of peace to her life that their past was never able to resolve. Her words were accusing, even though she was the one who left first. Ever since she walked out, Nicholay has learned to live with the choices he's made, and has taken responsibility for his part in their demise. He

can't fault her for being suspicious. But with nothing more to lose, why not at least attempt to reconcile their differences? Then maybe he will be able to find peace of his own.

In the mornings, as he works on the painting of Zola, he tells her his troubles with women. This is usually after Geraldine has stormed out, angry with him again for beginning another day without her.

“See, it wasn't just you,” he says, adding more rose pink to Zola's lips and areoles. “Can you blame me for trying?” he asks, as he uses a spatula of paint around the contours of her hipbones. “And here we are now. Would you like some more light? Of course you would. Remember that room we once rented in the hotel with narrow hallways? How you would throw the curtains and windows open wide, to rouse me—and how you roused me, you did.”

In the evenings, when he finds he's unaccompanied, Nicholay sits in his kitchen studio with a glass of homemade cognac and his half-painted Zola, speaking to her as if she has been with him all along.

Nicholay's father was crazy, and he worries sometimes if this trait was passed down to him. But it is madness that he truly fears. He has seen the faces of the mad, in the asylums and the churches, in the bars and under park bridges. He

has painted them in fascination. These are the faces that haunt him in the latest hours of solitude and why he is afraid of aging alone.



Setting out one evening to visit his friend Lucien, Nicholay drives north along the winding dirt roads of the Cape. The sun is just dipping on the horizon, creating wispy hues of lavender and salmon, and the trees are twisted in the only direction the wind here blows. He thinks of the image of Zola eating a pear; he had taken it the day they met with that troublesome camera of hers, her eyes eager and ready to capture the world with every blinking, passing moment. He was only seven years her senior, but already cynical, oblivious to the joys of living. It was Zola who helped remind him to appreciate rarity and purity in the slightest things, and that day happiness had sat beside him, eating ripe fruit with both pleasure and satisfaction—like a child. Like a woman he could love.

Nicholay parks his truck beside Lucien's Land Rover, a vehicle that hasn't moved in over a decade, its bed looking more and more rusted out every time Nicholay sees it. The wet season at this elevation isn't too kind to old scraps of metal and rubber, especially the forgotten kind.

"Damn shame," he says, putting his boot to one of the rear tires, which has sunk a good three inches into the hard and cracking dirt driveway.

Lucien came to the island ten years ago and quit driving when he realized he hated leaving home. When he does wander away from the farm, he stays within a certain distance and mostly gets around on moped or bicycle despite his age. He has become a sight in town, with his white linen clothing, wide straw hat, fisheye glasses, and ponytail flapping behind him in the wind like a pilot. The Jeep is neglected, as are most of Lucien's material things. Even when he no longer has the need for them, he has a difficult time parting with them. Nicholay has known him long enough now to know this.

Lucien was Nicholay's painting instructor during Nicholay's formal training years. Nicholay had won a scholarship through his college back home in Pennsylvania, and was given the opportunity to gain experience abroad by studying with a master craftsman. His father's drinking was becoming progressively worse, and even though Nicholay had never been out of the state before, he didn't want to stick around watching his father drink himself to death. When Nicholay boarded the plane to Spain that day he knew he wouldn't be returning, and his father stopped speaking to him.

Lucien took Nicholay under his wing, probably because he pitied him. It was a push-pull relationship from the start, beginning with Lucien asking if Nicholay had ever painted a day in his life before he came to Spain. This comment made Nicholay even more determined to prove himself as a painter.

Failure to succeed meant having to go home and face his father, the washed-up sports columnist who had smothered out his own wife's artistic light years before Nicholay was born.

As he enters the gate to Lucien's modest villa, Nicholay is still deep in thought.

"Lovely isn't it?"

Startled, Nicholay looks up to see Lucien sitting in a cushioned wicker chair, just barely in sight from the walkway, lighting a cherry-tobacco pipe. His signature hat cuts across his charcoal eyes, and Nicholay can see a smirk of welcome. "What?"

"You're telling me you drove all this way and didn't give one glance to the sky? Something must be really eating at you."

"*Buenas noches, Señor,*" Nicholay says in his pigeon Spanish, stepping onto the porch with an offering of wine and a tin of sardines.

"You've brought dinner. You shouldn't have," says Lucien, giving a nod towards the gift.

"I know," says Nicholay. "Are you going to do anything with the Rover, or am I'm going to have to come and take her off your hands?"

“Let me look at your hands,” says Lucien, leaning forward.

Nicholay holds them out without questioning. Grabbing one, Lucien presses his thumb into the palm and turns it over for examination, blowing smoke through his mouth in shallow puffs. “Just as I suspected. Delayed progress. Who is she?”

“Why must it always be a woman? Can’t it be something else, perhaps a stagnant period?”

“A man paints only for himself. The one thing that makes him question his existence is women.”

“Nothing else?”

“Nothing else.”

“Then I’m screwed,” says Nicholay. He rubs the scruff on his chin, then pulls up a chair. Placing his arms behind his head, he kicks out his legs to stretch.

“Indeed you are,” says Lucien, turning back to the sky.

Nicholay confides in Lucien with the ease of a young man speaking to an older and wiser sage. But their relationship is different than that of a father and son, because Nicholay respects Lucien and takes his advice, and because Lucien has never married, nor does he have any children of his own. Living a life of

disconnectedness, and yet purpose too, Lucien knows nothing else but to create, despite any circumstances he's encountered in his years of experience, and sometimes at the cost of loving another. From what Nicholay can tell, women only stick around long enough to figure out that Lucien's one true passion is his art, and they will only ever be mistresses to his work.

“Did you get a chance to go over and see those paintings?” Lucien asks.

“I did.” Nicholay had gone to see an artist named Guillermo last week, hoping the trip would cheer him up and bring him out of his funk.

“And your thoughts?”

“He's trying too hard to be something he's not. It seems forced and contrived. He would make a great impersonator of Goya.”

“So, should he stop altogether? Poof. Give it up?”

“I think if you aren't possessed by your own thoughts and feelings when you approach the canvas, then yes, you should retire your brushes. It should get your rocks off, exploit your psyche, bring you to tears. I just didn't see any of that in his work.”

Lucien looks proud to hear this response, but Nicholay isn't looking to impress his teacher. Instead, he wants to be more like him.

“Shhh! Did you hear that?” asks Lucien, hushing Nicholay.

They listen as the night crawls in, dragging up to the porch with a faded landscape in its teeth. Lucien lights the lantern sitting on the box table between them, the word FRAGILE stamped across it for the cargo it once carried.

“You hearing voices, old man?” asks Nicholay, jokingly. “Being out here all alone?”

“I got spirits.”

“So, have you seen these...?” Nicholay motions around his chair, “Spirits?”

“Of course not, but I have invited them to drink.” Lucien uncorks the bottle of Vinho Verde that Nicholay has brought. “And wouldn’t you know they can hold their own.”

Nicholay graciously accepts a mug.

“Chin chin,” they say, drinking to health and the heart.

It is their anthem to talk loosely of things they could never change, and never would. They argue over who they think are the true masters, and who has lost his or her way. But mostly, they try to understand why they desire the things hardest to pin down, and agree it must be the nature of man.

When they shake hands goodbye, Lucien holds on firmly. “Whatever is unresolved inside you is what made you leave in the first place. You need to live without fear, before you can call yourself an artist.”

Nicholay says nothing.

He drives home with the night sea air in his pores and Lucien’s words wrapped up tight in his head. What is it about Zola that he can’t let go? Why is he still drawn to her in a way like no other? Or is it even Zola that plagues him? His need for resolution is clear, but his desire is not.

Nicholay returns to his kitchen. Sighing as he runs his hand through the wave of his hair, he picks up the photo and squints at it, hoping something will emerge from its smooth finish and become tangible for him. He looks over his shoulder at the naked Zola upon his easel, half-lit by moonlight with her flawless face and breasts, but missing her limbs and any surroundings to ground her. “You would have made a lovely amputee, my dear.”

Nicholay feels he may have also fallen victim to a similar fate. Maybe Zola had been an appendage to him, attached in a way he’d taken for granted. Now that she is gone, he feels incomplete.

Staring for a long while at her painted eyes, he becomes electrified with a fervor he hasn’t felt in years. There have been other women, yes—fair young

sprites, exotic beauties, mature wives. But Zola did something to him that he can't forgive her for. She made him love her.

He takes her upstairs, placing the cut canvas upon a chair and positioning her at the foot of his bed. He wants to fall asleep with her as a guardian upon him, watching him sleep through the night, and wake with her focused eyes and intent mouth, the way he used to find her in the morning. What makes women so beautiful to him are the ways a woman loves her children, the way she can nurture a deep wound, but also her ability to love a man despite himself. Nicholay is as flawed as any man can be, lost and trying to find his way, trying to fulfill his purpose. Tomorrow this flawed man will paint again and not just because of the love of a woman, but because he may as well be dead if he doesn't.

Zola



My Dearest Zola,

Your heart was neither a medal nor a prize. It was a noble conquest. A mystery to unlock. A secret I protected as my own. If you could not see my love, then I was the fool, not you. I made mistakes, and for that I am eternally sorry. Will you accept this old friend's apology? You can push me away if you feel it is best, but this is my peace offering to you; the truth you have always deserved.

Remember when we were allies, chasing common goals? Ever since our separation, I have had bouts where I can't paint. I don't blame you; I was damaged long before you ever came along. However, I wonder sometimes if we were at our best back then. There was something unified and frenzied in the way we worked side-by-side. I would give anything to have that again, though I know it could never really be the same.

Inspire me Zola. Tell me your story.

Nicholay

Truth is a raspberry seed, stuck in a back molar until one day it becomes a toothache that she can no longer ignore. Zola is reading through Nicholay's recent letter when she hears an unexpected knock on her door. She sets down the letter and goes to find out who it is.

"Have you been sleeping in your clothes?" asks Natalia, not waiting for an invitation to come inside.

“I haven’t been sleeping,” Zola mutters, looking down at her wrinkled sundress and moccasin slippers.

Natalia follows her into the kitchen, a basket swinging from her arm, looking sideways at the clutter that has become Zola’s apartment. Stacks of papers and books have taken over every square inch of surface like tables at a rummage sale, but she’s so worried about throwing away notes for a potential idea, that the piles keep accruing. There was an order to things, though someone on the outside looking in might think otherwise.

“No elevator I can handle, but how about some water for a fat lady?”

Zola fills a glass from the faucet, hiding Nicholay’s letter under some books in the process.

“So, this has become your den of excuses, I see,” says Natalia, as Zola curls on her futon with a cup of coffee and forces a smile. “Here, I brought treats. I noticed how thin you were at dinner last week.” Natalia produces two wax paper bags from her basket. “Chocolate croissant or scone?”

Zola takes the scone with a sigh.

“Okay dear, I haven’t come to see this glum side of you,” says Natalia. “Either we can talk about what’s going on or we can go about our days like nothing is wrong, but we both know something is wrong. Then we’ll just be like

those fake people you despise, who act as though nothing is the matter and the whole world is perfect. You and I both know we're not like that. We hate people with sunshine blown up their asses. So why don't you save us the energy of pretending, dear, and tell me what's up?"

Natalia has many endearing qualities, particularly being persuasive. Her law classes had their benefits, and her logic always seems to find its way into the conversation in such a natural way that people just have to trust her. In her second year of school, she met and married Adam, who loved food, wine and entertaining as much as she. Disappointing her family, who had placed such high hopes in her, Natalia never returned to her studies; in their mind, she wasted her life on love. Zola knows this isn't true, that Natalia is a genuinely happy and opinionated woman who doesn't care much of what others think of her, and Zola both cherishes and envies this in her friend.

"Have you at least been able to get some writing done?" Natalia continues. "I know you've been putting in the hours at work, and Adam's come home with such praise, but I'm well aware it's not what you want to be doing—I know it's a paycheck and all, but you've got talent and should be using it."

"I wish I knew what's wrong with me," says Zola. "It's never been this hard to get into a routine. Just when I was feeling settled—finally comfortable—everything went flaccid on me."

“Flaccid, eh? What are you, a fifty-year-old man in disguise? That would explain the slippers. Maybe this writer’s block you’re experiencing—”

“I don’t believe in writer’s block,” Zola corrects.

“Okay,” says Natalia. “Maybe the reason you’re having difficulty is because you have nothing to connect to. What’s it been, Zola? Almost four years since your last relationship?”

“Hemingway believed the best way to write about a subject was to have distance from it.”

“Oh, come on! Hemingway was drunk and self-indulgent.”

“Drunkenness and self-indulgence don’t make you any less wise. Plus, he produced some very provocative work.”

“Zola, you’re a passionate woman. You need to keep that fire burning, or one day it may just burn out. Then you’re stuck rubbing two sticks together trying to get a spark.” They both laugh at this caricature.

Zola stops eating. “He sent me a letter.” She has been waiting to say something since last week, and so she spits out the news and then braces herself for her friend’s reaction.

Natalia stops eating. “When?”

“I have moved so much, I don’t exactly know. I almost wish it had gotten lost in the mail, or that some tenant kept it.”

“What’d he say?”

“Something about hoping I’ve found what I was looking for,” Zola pauses. “You know, Nat, there has always been something about him. And ever since we started communicating—”

“Wait! Communicating? There have been more?”

“Yeah,” she admits. “I mean, I thought it would be harmless. Him living there, me here. No way of us reconnecting. I think enough time has gone by—”

“When you called me, where were you? Somewhere out West? I sent you a ticket to come and get your life back.”

“I’m grateful for everything you and Adam have done. I was lost for a while. But that time was good for me.”

“No one knew where you were, Zola! Last anyone knew, you were with him in Spain. Your parents were so worried. You’d up and left, and for a couple of *years* we got nothing but random postcards and short messages. We all thought you went off the deep end.”

“I needed to figure things out.”

“I’m just saying, I don’t know if now’s the time to be starting up again with him. I don’t think it’s smart. From the little you have told me, I feel there is still some healing that needs to take place.”

Zola felt relieved, though she hadn’t anticipated where the conversation would end up. She knew Natalia was only trying to protect her. She trusted Natalia for the same reason her parents had trusted Natalia the year before to convince Zola to return to the East Coast; if she would listen to anyone, it would be her best friend.

“I’ve got to run. My prenatal yoga class starts soon,” says Natalia. “Just tell me you’ll be careful, okay?”

“I will,” says Zola, walking with Natalia to the door.

Retrieving a straw hat from the bedpost in her bedroom, Zola traces the leather strap with her finger, remembering where it was bought. She’d been traveling through a mining town in Colorado—the kind of place she didn’t know about until she ended up there—when she came across the country store smelling of sawdust and tobacco, just like her grandfather’s woodshop. When she saw the cowboy hat upon one of the untouched shelves, she wanted it as a memento.

It wasn’t the first time she had gone out on her own to look for something else, but that time she was more attuned than ever, loving how the landscape

changed from the Kansas wheat fields to vibrant waving sunflower fields to looming cathedral mountains. Kerouac had described the Rockies as being of “*papier-mâché*,” but she found their cliffs more industrial, dark and intimidating. Though she’d had her share of brushes with faith, Zola was never certain there was a God. But it was in those mountains she came to understand there was something bigger than herself, and she was invigorated with the newfound awareness.

Now, covering her face with the hat, she takes a deep breath, just as she did countless times before while lying in fields and upon red-dusted rock beds. There is still a faint hint of adventure left between the woven straw, ground in with the sweat and dirt of wear. She places the hat on her head and picks up the phone to call her mother.

“It’s so funny to hear from you,” says her mother. “I’m buying groceries, and I just put a bag of salted almonds in the cart. The ones you used to spoil your appetite with before dinner.”

“You can bring them up next time you visit.”

“I could do that,” she says. “You will never believe what’s happened. That theater teacher over at the high school is having an affair with his son’s foreign-

exchange student. I said to Karen just the other day how I think his wife drinks before the PTA meetings.”

“She’s been drinking for years,” says Zola . “How’s Dad?”

“Who?”

There is a consistent beeping on her mother’s end. Zola pictures her standing in line, looking at the magazine racks. She can hear her mother’s attention waning.

“Dad.” Zola repeats louder.

“Oh, your father has in his head that he’s going to buy a sailboat. I said to him, ‘Harry, we don’t even know how to sail!’ ‘But Mary, we can learn,’ he says. So if we end up as Cuban hostages, just remember, it was your father’s idea.”

“I will keep that in mind if the embassy calls me,” says Zola, knowing perfectly well that they will most likely buy the boat, but will never sail.

Her mother asks, “Have you gotten a job yet?”

“I’m working at that place I told you about.”

“It doesn’t have benefits, Zola.”

“No, but I’m still looking. They feed me, though. And if you and Dad ever want to get away—”

Zola can hear the checkout girl in the background. “Well, keep taking those vitamins,” her mother says. “And make sure you are getting enough rest.”

“I will. I love you.”

“Talk to you soon, Sweetie. Remember, fish oil. It does wonders for digestion.”

How did her parents actually create a child so completely unlike them? Did they settle for the life they lived, or had they ever wanted something different from what they ended up with? Were they even happy? Has her father always dreamed of owning a sailboat? Or was it not a sailboat he wanted, but another life, another woman and maybe no children at all? She realizes she knows almost nothing about these odd, middle-aged people she supposedly shares genes with. Yet sharing a life with another individual and then having children with them is a forged bond her parents will forever share. Zola imagines this connection to be something like the human vascular: delicate and corruptible, intricate and regenerative, both in its ability and need to keep the sap of desire pumping through.

Her thoughts return to Nicholay. He has changed, she thinks. There are no hints of defense or resentment in his tone. He seems different and engaging. But how does he suppose she can go about inspiring him? She is not even sure she is capable of delivering a story to anyone on such a tall order. She decides she can only give him the truth, but maybe that's what they have both been looking for all along.

Nicholay,

For all your weaknesses, they no longer affect me the way they once did. I am not one to judge your nature, for my own imperfections still remain. Perfection—I have never been one to believe in such an aim. Flaws exist in even the most beautiful of things.

As a kid, my mother used to drop me off at my grandparents house, the kind of place where my boots were immediately abandoned to the front lawn, forgotten for the day and left to the bees and beetles and bugs looking for a new home.

There was one particular afternoon when my Papap was out behind the house scrubbing blood off his hands, purpled like turnips from the hard brush washing he was giving them. Over his Army-Navy jacket, he had draped an apron splattered with shades of red and maroon, and at his feet was a plastic bucket with knife handles protruding from a soapy bath. No matter what I was told and no matter what I knew to be real, my imagination was capable of turning my always gentle, caring grandfather into a monster.

I was told not to go down to the barn, but I did. Peering through the cracks between the rotted wall planks, I caught sight of the buck's length strung up by its hind legs, its underbelly no longer that soft downy white, but matted and dark and split open. The deer's antlers barely scraped the ground. I tried to translate the hieroglyphics I saw in the dirt below them. But a fly was feeding upon one of its hairy lids, and I couldn't recognize tragedy or struggle, just peaceful placidness and all black. I waited and waited for that deer to flick its ears and be reborn again, but it never did.

It wasn't just my fascination with the carcass, or with what happened after a life was over. I loved the gap of heavenly blue where the roof still needed to be patched; the air, filled with the scent of birth mixed with the decomposition of dank wood and death; the mud squishing between my seven-year-old toes and the wet silt forming around them with a warm, viscous suction. The soil in front of the doorframe was soft from the way the rain fell and collected, and I could easily leap across the puddle by holding up the hem of my dress. But the mud is why I never wore shoes to the stables. Even after stepping on a nail one summer, I still went around barefoot.

I wasn't alone that day. An owl had been watching all along, calling out to me in its high condescending tone: WHOO, WHOO? WHOO, WHOO? It shrieked, loudly and shrilly, until I fled from the barn into the quiet open field. I can hear the owl even today. Its sound brings to mind my worst possible fears—all the things I'm unable to admit to, and that I've done wrong.

So, here we are, two people far from perfect. Our lives diverged and now they intersect again. But who are we now? Time cannot pass without change. I know I am no longer the woman of girlish fantasies and wild dreams. I find myself more grounded in a reality I have fashioned for myself, and I continue to mold my

life, sculpting it into something I have always wanted. You used to ask me what it was I wanted. The naïve, young girl told you 'happiness,' and you said you could never give that to me. I resented you, because I didn't believe you. Now, I know you were right.

~Zola



“Am I glad to see you,” says Jules, who has poured himself a drink and is already at the bar when Zola arrives at work. He startles her, sitting alone in the dark, his petite legs dangling where a full-grown man would have his feet comfortably positioned on the lowest rung of the stool. It’s only four o’clock, so she holds her tongue to keep from saying what she’s really thinking.

“Hannah told me to not bother coming home tonight. Tell me, would you have been offended if I said I didn’t care for a roast?”

“Depends if I already made it.”

“True. I think I screwed that one up.”

“You should eat something. I’ll go find Adam.”

“No, it’s okay,” says Jules, as the lights come on. “But man, did you miss an episode yesterday.”

“What’s that?” says Zola, unpacking her beer opener and corkscrew from her purse. She begins to organize the bar for dinner service. The rest of the staff will be in within the hour.

“You know that local woman who comes by here every now and then, the one who we think is a pro—”

“You’re the only one who thinks that.”

“Songbird! That’s what it says on her license plate. You know who I mean?”

“She’s always picking up the car salesmen who come in at happy hour, trying to get a better APR.”

“That’s her! So, she picked up another one. I watched her do it. I was sitting over there—” Jules points to the other end of the bar. “It didn’t take her twenty minutes to get this guy out to the back parking lot. The whole place could see her in his truck and she didn’t seem to care who was watching. Who picks someone up at a *hotel*, then goes out to their car? We have perfectly good rooms! I would’ve cut them a deal for a couple hours.”

“Who was the guy? Do we know him?”

“No, he worked for a courier service, just in for the night. That’s the best part!” Jules finishes his drink. “Can you pour me a beer? I can’t seem to do it without messing up my shirts.”

“Sure.” Zola grabs a frosted pint from the cooler, then pulls the tap handle toward her and expertly fills the glass with lager. “So what happened?” she asks, placing a coaster and the beer in front of him.

“The truck is rockin’ and rolling. So much that the back latch comes undone, and out jumps a couple dozen bunnies!”

“What?” Zola laughs. She can’t possibly take Jules seriously, particularly now, but he is deadpan and his crescent-shaped eyes aren’t blinking.

“They were hopping around everywhere. I ran out there to alert the guy, but they had been going at it like rabbits themselves and hadn’t even noticed the escapees,” he says. “Apparently, some dealer in the area was trying to save this Australian hare that is being wiped out by some virus over there.” He stops. “What? Why are you laughing? It was a real mess out there. Turds on my car.”

“Jules.”

“What?”

“You just made my night. Thank you.”

“Maybe you can use it in a story someday?”

“Maybe.”

“I’m going to my room. Phyllis unlocked the movie channels for me.”

Jules leaves a five under the empty glass for Zola, and retreats to his usual room at the end of the hallway of the first floor. Zola looks at the elk on the wall, with a head full of stuffing. Nicholay will probably think she’s nuts and will never write again—but he asked for a story, and so that’s what she delivered.

The night progresses like musical chairs, with the customers coming and going in a revolving-door procession of pin stripes, toupees and aftershave. Unfortunately, the *Endless Classics Collection*, which Jules bought from the Home Shopping Network, is responsible for the ambient soundtrack this particular evening, and the swingers’ lounges of the 1970’s, quickly come to Zola’s mind. Room keys discreetly left in check presenters are also as frequent as the fluctuating tips she receives—pilots are the biggest offenders. Though some of the girls she works with collect these keys competitively (and occasionally take men up on their propositions), the thought of doing such a thing repulses Zola.

Around nine, like clockwork, Jules calls down to the restaurant.

“Zola, it’s for you,” says Martha, teasingly.

She takes the phone. “What do you want, Jules?”

“I’m craving pie.”

“But you haven’t had dinner yet. Don’t you—”

“What kind of pie do we have in house tonight?”

“Cherry, apple, rhubarb...we have French silk—” Jules is drunk and Zola has a feeling she knows where this is going.

“Aren’t you French?”

“Well, my father is...”

“I’ll take that, then.”

“Sure. I’m busy right now, but I’ll send Martha down—” She feels a bit resentful toward Jules for putting her in this situation.

“I was hoping it would be you.”

“Are we still talking about dessert, Mr. Verne?”

“I expect it here in ten minutes.”

Zola hasn’t been with a man in a long time—a couple of years. There had been a fling with a guy she met while camping out West, but before that, it had been Nicholay. Jules isn’t an unattractive man; his efforts to remain appealing to

the opposite sex are evident in the way he presents himself. He is married, though more to his job than his wife, and Zola has heard through rumors that he is enjoying the strip clubs a little more than usual lately.

She cuts a perfect triangle out of the silken chocolate pie, adding a dollop of whipped cream to the crust for decoration, and hands it over to Martha, who doesn't have much going on other than waiting for text messages to come in.

“Jules is expecting this,” says Zola.

“Great!” says Martha, taking the plate in her hands eagerly. Zola watches as she nearly skips down the hall in her black miniskirt. Martha is known to be proficient in the trade of collecting keys. She also doesn't need to be told where Jules spends his nights away from home.

Nicholay



Sitting at his peasant table, Nicholay sips a coffee and picks at some pungent leftover Manchengo and chorizo. It is overcast, the kind of day where Zeus could impregnate the sky. Nicholay has brought his painting of Zola down with him for breakfast, but instead of sharing his meal with her, decides he wants to be left alone to his thoughts. So he places her outside on the porch, looking down on the rocky beach below, where the fishermen have just come in for lunch and to bring the day's first deliveries to the markets.

A wind chime tinkles outside, bringing in a breeze, and his palms form around the quickly cooling ceramic of his mug. His hands are hard worn, but with the elegant, slim fingers of a piano player or flamenco guitarist. As much as he tries to keep them clean, bits of paint still remain under his nails, and his beard is getting unruly along his neck. With swollen eyelids from too much wine and tobacco the night before, he is still wearing the same torn jeans and grey jersey.

He tunes out the calls of the old men hauling their skiffs onto shore, the birds swooping in for a free meal, and the sound of the wind through the chimes. But his meditation is interrupted by a soft accent and the sound of light, padding feet outside.

“Hello?”

Nicholay follows the female voice to the front door. He studies the woman through the screen for a moment. He can discern her features as dark, with even brown skin and ink-colored hair tied up with a silver clip. Most likely from the mainland, she is too composed to be vacationing, yet too relaxed to be a tourist. He opens the door and joins her on the porch, still making his assessments.

“Yes?”

“I am looking for Mr. Salazar. Is this the right address?”

“Lucien Salazar?”

She wears a simple sleeveless dress. A pair of heels hangs loosely in her right hand, exposing her bare feet to the weathered wood. Around her swan neck is a red silk scarf with purple flowers, tied with a close knot. She was probably a dancer at one time, but gave it up to pursue a more practical occupation—in sales perhaps.

Nicholay laughs to himself a bit. “I suppose Lucien gave you this address?”

“He did. He said I’d find him here.” She points to the canvas facing the cove. Zola’s eyes and bust are perky on a chipped, blue chair. “Is she yours?”

“It’s a work-in-progress,” he says. “Lucien lives thirty minutes north of the Cape. But he doesn’t take to unannounced—”

“Your work is captivating,” she interrupts. “I see longing in her movements.” She remains focused on Zola, ignoring Nicholay’s warning about uninvited guests.

“I am taking a bit of a break on it—can I help you with something?”

The woman finally meets Nicholay’s gaze. “Oh, I’m sorry. I met Mr. Salazar in the market yesterday. I’m a collector.”

Nicholay nods, but doesn’t respond. He tries to place her face; he’s sure he’s seen it before. Then the newspaper article from a couple weeks ago comes back to him; the rich siblings who inherited a bunch of unwanted money. She is one of the rebels with a cause.

“I’ve been shopping the village galleries for weeks with little success, when I heard an argument over pricing and commissions. I was considering a Miró knockoff, when out storms Mr. Salazar, clearly upset over a settlement between him and the shop owner. I chased him down to give him a better offer. It was probably an absurd thing to do, knowing nothing of his work. But have you ever just had one of those feelings? He seemed so... so impassioned. He gave me this address, but I’m starting to think I didn’t come to the right place.”

Nicholay laughs. “Miró? Really?”

She shrugs. “I was getting desperate.”

“We’ve all made impulsive mistakes out of hopelessness.” Nicholay takes up a protective stance against the side of the house, his hands in his pockets. “Lucien’s a very private man. He keeps to himself. He doesn’t sell his work much anymore, so I’m actually surprised to hear he was in a gallery. I haven’t even seen his latest work myself. But maybe it was an older piece he was getting bent over on?”

“So you know each other? You’re pretty close, I gather?” The woman eyes Nicholay. “I will take your word on his privacy, but why would he send me here?”

“Maybe he thought I would want something with you,” says Nicholay, instantly regretting his tactless suggestion.

Instead of being offended, however, she blushes. “I see. And you’re a painter, too?”

“I’ve been studying with Lucien for the last eight years.”

“That’s a long time. You must be good.”

“I get by.”

“Do you have other work I could see? Anything finished? Or did I catch you at a bad time?” The woman casually peeks past his shoulder, smiling.

“You just cut to the chase, don’t you?”

“I’m sorry,” she says. “My name is Ariana. I guess I get by, too.” She holds out her hand.

“I don’t have much time, but if you want to take a look around my studio, it’s out back. It looks like a greenhouse. Should be unlocked.” Nicholay turns to disappear into the house.

“Thanks!” she calls after him.

From the kitchen window, Nicholay watches her walk down the stairs and around the side of the house, wondering what Lucien is up to.



Nicholay decides to move back into his studio, leaving the painting of Zola unfinished in the kitchen. It waits for him at the end of every evening.

Stagnation comes and goes. Nicholay never knew it when he and Zola were together, or even before that, when he first aspired to be a painter. In recent years, he’s bided his time with still life paintings and commissions just to keep his hands working. Yet they are hardly as stimulating as a painting sprung from his own imagination. It wasn’t long ago the dormant period settled upon him, but it has been the image of her—the memory of the way they made love on the table of

their kitchen, the taste and smell of yeast and honey on her skin—that has made him take up the brush again. Now he wants nothing else but to paint.

He sizes up two rolls of canvas that have been wedged between his drafting table and the corner of the oblong studio. The roll closest to the wall is cinched at the top from being squished, and feels slightly damp, but Nicholay pulls it out anyway and lets it fall to the floor with a dusty thud. Worried about mildew and mold spreading to his other materials, he unrolls the uncut canvas to examine it. No signs yet, but just to be on the safe side, he flaps the fabric into a loose cone shape and drags it outside to bake in the beating sun. He returns to the canvas in better condition and proceeds to cut a piece six arm's lengths long and as high as his chest. This he divides into three equally proportionate sections. His plan is to tell a story in sequence.

Sweating profusely, he walks to the back of the studio, where an industrial fan has been installed for ventilation. The mechanism clicks a few times but does not start.

“Come on!” he growls, hoping this doesn't keep him from working. But the blades charge into action and pretty soon they are making a deep oscillating sound, similar to the propeller of a plane. Satisfied, he returns to the task of fastening one of the three blank sheets to his easel, one to his drafting table with

clamps, and the third one across the old gardening bench, so he can see all three points as they evolve.

Nicholay assumes Zola is happy, or at least has found her own version of happiness. Happy—what a strange word, meaning so many different things. Are two people together ultimately satisfied? It's unlikely; he's seen it in many forms, holding his proof with conviction, knowing it is the only piece of wisdom he can ever offer another.

He'd seen it in the collapse of his parents' marriage. They gave so much of their selves for so many years, only to be met with violent disappointment and unfulfilled expectations, and eventually soothing their battered hearts in the comforting arms of paramours. (Paramour—another fascinating word, meaning “for love,” as though love is the only cause for an affair.) They were foolish believers of an idealized notion: that they could be everything and would be everything to each other. Their marriage was supposed to be a testament. Instead, it became a constant reminder of their shortcomings and powerlessness.

Nicholay had sensed a similar outcome in his relationship to Zola. When she came to him looking for reassurance and reciprocity, he tried to explain his stance and lack of faith, time and time again. He tried to make her see that what she was really seeking could never come from an outside source; it was something she would have to find on her own. For he has always believed that

love exists without form and without force. It is unconditional and can't be shaped to fit or controlled.

He wants to think Zola is happy now, but there is a part of him that suspects otherwise.

Painting puts many things in perspective for Nicholay, and when it comes to producing, he believes the senses and mind are best evoked under complete solitary freedom. All the stimuli he absorbs over the course of a couple hours, or even over years, is bottled up like fireflies caught by a child, only to have their wings torn off and their luminescent pigments spread by the trembling tips of his fingers. It sounds barbarous, but that is just what it is when he unleashes the incubus within; the white hot noise that pulls at his most vulnerable organs or lacerates him into a disciplinary focus.

“There isn't enough time to become great,” he tells himself. “We all die too soon.”

And even in the midst of such a trance, he thinks again of Zola, and with dilated pupils, begins to see the bigger picture.

My Dearest Zola,

The quest for a fulfilled heart is a solitary one. For so long, I sought fulfillment along the streets and beaches speckled with beautiful people, in the

countryside beside workers with callused hands and brandied breath and in foreign cafés, hoping it would arrive unexpectedly, like an old friend. Perhaps I was looking for it in the wrong places, or with too much assurance. I am as incomplete a man as I ever was. Could you ever forgive me for thinking I was someone I was not?

Please believe me when I say I am sincerely hopeful for your discovery, your new sense of self. I will not use the word “happy,” for you know how little the word means to me. But if you would prefer to believe that is what I am, I will not deny you your belief. Have we lost so much between us, since we’ve parted ways? Are we no longer the people we once were: passionate, celebrating and lost in ourselves? One early morning in our kitchen is a memory that has stayed with me all this time. It has inspired me to paint again.

Yes, it is true; I stepped away from the canvas. I lost my ability to create. But it was the memory of you making bread at dawn and making love at sun up that made me pick up the brush again. I wanted you to know this—that your image has never left me. I spent years trying to forget that morning together, but it haunted me with both grief and lust, and now it sits painted in my kitchen in the warm colors of your body and the cool colors of faint light. It is a symbol of what was. It is a symbol of what could’ve been.

I once followed the freckles on your skin, as one does the constellation Orion to the North Star. Somewhere along the way, I became lost. So, I ask you this: With all this time that has passed, how does one ever retrace and reclaim such careless steps? Or don’t we?

I await your thoughts,

Nicholay

Zola



Her loft reminds her of an antique aquarium. With its carved moldings framing every window and doorway, there is a certain flow to the space where she lives. Trying to unlock something meaningful and poignant, she swims about in this think tank of hers, treading water for a while, and then changes direction. When she is not swimming, she writes. When she is not writing, her mind swims, trying to come up with ways to change the personal narrative or the direction of her story. And when the sun or moon passes over the windowsills lined with jars of round stones and beach glass from her travels, she awakens to find herself floating just below the surface of distant seas—pools where she swam naked and free, like a young seal.

Just beyond her apartment is another ocean. Looking out from her desk towards its mystic expanse, she contemplates its connectedness to other oceans—one body flowing into the next, in the same way the past merges into the present.

And when she becomes tired of looking at her computer screen or the blank pages; when she lets her eyes relax to a slight blur; she can almost make out the cliffs of the island in the distance and the entrance to the mysterious Spanish gardens she once knew.

PART II

Five Years Earlier

Spain



“Apurate! Levantanse!” Mimi hollers through the door.

Zola rolls over in bed to see a giant black handprint on the edge of her pillowcase.

Pushing her sheets from the length of her body, she finds carbon smudges all across her bedding, and her fingers and palms are sooty like those of a press setter.

Knocking ensues from the hallway.

“Dame un secundo!” Zola calls back, still groggy.

“El autobus!” responds Mimi, before Zola hears her go down the stairs.

Late again, Zola grabs her jeans and blouse from the chair next to her desk and dresses. Pulling her hair into a messy ponytail, she slides her feet into a pair of espadrilles.

“Great,” she says, noticing the charcoal from last night’s studio assignment is now soiling her clothing, too. But she doesn’t have time to worry about these things, since she’s overslept.

It is an early ride from the boarding house where Zola rents a room to the school where she takes classes. She knows this because she is regularly the only passenger—the only *Americano*—who actually uses the commuter at this hour. And between the four-hour block of art courses in the morning and two hours of literary studies in the afternoon, by the time she takes the bus home at the end the day her mind will be a fog of Botticellis and Davids, and a great many writers who have written great words.

This morning, she cracks a book and attempts to read, but restlessness has come over her, and she stares out the bus window with a longing for something more. Outside, it is a ghost town, except for a couple of stray cats and clusters of pigeons, and the men who work in the scaffolding outside ancient and important-looking buildings.

She fingers her page, leaving behind a series of thumb and fingerprints in the corner. Her warm breath bounces off the window as she leans closer to the glass.

At the third stop, the hydraulics hiss and the doors open with the sound and smell of the city. Some days there is the stench of something unforgivably rotten out there coming in from the curbs, and other days it smells like the sweat-soaked pheromones of a man. Not a single sign of life can be detected, not even in

the park. The stone tables, where she likes to watch the old *compadres* playing chess, are deserted, as is the water fountain where younger men often group together to discuss *futbol*.

Zola looks up to acknowledge the man coming down the aisle, staring a little more than usual. She can't help it; she is used to being the only one in the caravan, at least until Stop 5 or 6.

Then he chooses the spot beside her, when there are plenty of empty seats.

She closes her book, but keeps it on her lap. Her attention returns to the window; the passing clotheslines and alleyways, and a cityscape that has been hung out to dry.

“Are you a pilgrim?” the man asks.

Zola turns to him, but his focus is ahead. A can of paint rests at his feet.

“Not quite,” she says, taking notice of the brimmed hat upon his crossed knee.

He leans toward her this time and whispers in her ear. “Are you running away?”

His nickel eyes meet hers, and she shies away from his closeness, looking down and hiding her dirty hands.

“I think I’m running towards something,” she says finally.

“You know, I ran away once. I was about your age. I wanted to paint and didn’t give a damn who understood me. But people just want pretty little pictures. Noninvasive stuff they can fuck beneath and not get distracted by.”

The man possesses the faint scent of burnt cherries, almost like the burn off of a pie in an oven, when the boiling fruit filling can no longer be contained by its pinched crust.

“There’s this place not many people know about,” says the man. “I spent some time there. No other place like it. It will awaken your soul.”

Zola could easily mistake what he is describing to her as spirituality, but strangely enough she trusts him without even knowing his name.

“Where would I find this place?” asks Zola.

“I can tell you, but you’ll have to go. The gardens alone are something to see.”

“It’s time for me to leave here soon, anyway,” she says.

He writes some information on a receipt that he takes from his pocket, and hands it to her.

“Don’t read into this too much, but you may someday find that you’re chasing the wrong thing. It may be mildly disappointing when you realize this. Maybe you’ll feel like you’ve wasted time. Just remember all is not lost,” he says, standing up. “It’s likely misplaced, until you’re ready.”

“Ready for what?” asks Zola.

“Ready for what happens next,” he says.

The bus begins to slow. The man holds onto to the luggage rack above his head until the motion ceases.

“This is me,” he says, putting his hat on his graying head of hair. He turns down the aisle and is gone.

For some encounters there are no possible explanations, and for Zola this was one of those experiences. For out there in the world, there are seraphs and saints, and then there are those who walk among us, who have lived a little bit more. The only difference between those who are good and those who are Godly is being mortal.

Zola looks at the piece of paper in her hands, a sales slip for art supplies bought in a store not far from where she's been living. After three months in this city, she has begun to see the allure of having specialty shops so close, because she never knows when she'll need something carved or aged, dyed or treated—these are the kind of things she writes home about. Such shops pepper the streets with their window dressings of ribbons and fabric, with bronze bells that alert shopkeepers they have company. There is something evocative about discovering these unknown nooks and crannies, especially on foreign soil. It seems as though Spain has been courting her ever since she's arrived, yet Zola still can't see herself completely committed to staying.



Zola stands at the steps of a limestone sanctuary with ornately carved doors. She doesn't know what to expect. There were no roads on this island, no village, and no structure other than this monastery built up on cliffs, practically out in the middle of the ocean.

“It's just a bunch of holy men out here,” the ferryman had said before he left. “I'll be making the rounds back this way by evening.”

There had been other passengers aboard, but no one else seemed interested in staying with her; they were mostly English, on their way to Ibiza for a quick holiday. When she hiked up the narrow path of gravel and sand toward the white

edifice above, the scorching sun was reflective and harsh, and she wondered why she decided to follow the stranger's suggestion in the first place.

This must be right, she thinks to herself, as the massive doors open to a nave so grand in size, she doesn't know if she's ever felt so humbled.

A long line of high arches cross-hatch the ceiling in a similar configuration as an elephantine ribcage, and the floors are of a rose-white swirling alabaster. This room is not one to pray in, but it is the type of room where the ravaged and the hopeless are instantly transported to a better place.

She picks up a pen and signs the visitor registry, where only one other name is listed for today, though it looks like no one else has signed in all week.

She tries to locate a map, but there doesn't seem to be one available, so she chooses the corridor to her right to continue.

The caverns of the passage, lit only by candles, lead to an elevated walkway. As she carries on, she hears the echo of crashing waves below. She follows this dark tunnel to its end, and emerges atop a lookout in the open air, surrounded by stone walls.

She assesses the island's terrain from above, trying to see if she missed anything when she arrived. Low-lying scrub and vegetation cover most of the area. She can see a few paths, like the one she took up the hill, but there are no

trees to offer protection from the elements. It is as barren as a desert and uncanny as a graveyard. She is at the highest point she can be, yet she can still see all the mica sparkling in the dirt like thousands of diamonds below her. A gust of wind brushes the bottom hem of her dress and the spontaneous scattering of her blue skirt, gives her the momentary confidence of flight actually being possible.

Backtracking, she takes another hallway, this one lined with wooden benches and portraits of foreboding men in cleric robes, some with shaved heads and others with practiced and meditative expressions.

Absorbed in these photographs, she is startled when she hears the rustling of paper and a slight cough. Assuming it is a monk, Zola peeks around the corner of the marble statue beside her, only to discover a man sitting on one of the benches, wearing jeans and a plain white tee shirt. She is caught off guard by the fact that this man had not been on the boat with her, and therefore didn't belong there anymore than she did.

His boots are pointed outward. He holds a sketchpad against his thigh, but his left hand is completely still, as though he is in the middle of an intense thought. Zola knows this feeling well—betwixt and between the no man's land, a psyche must scour before his ink can readily flow, like the spring of one's personal oasis.

Not wanting to disrupt his focus, she goes on to find a space of her own to collect her thoughts.

The hours go by. Zola uses up three rolls of film. In late afternoon, a low hum rises from the monastery and the chanting of mantras drifts along the pillars and courtyards and through libraries and scriptoriums, naturally amplified by the nautilus shape of the sanctuary's chambers. Shadows elongate and other spots are illuminated, making it seem as though the grounds have lifted up and rotated in a new direction. It is as though Zola can feel the full tilt of the world's axis, another day being born, as this day slowly slips away.

Zola looks at her watch. She still has time before the boat comes in. The man on the bus mentioned some gardens, and there is one last wing for her to see.

Two stone steps bring her down to a patch of soft grass and into the embrace of fruit trees, where the air smells of citrus and lavender and the breeze off the water. Zola begins to remove her shoes, so she can dig her toes in and make her mark—her imprint.

As she slides off the second shoe, she looks behind her to find the man she saw earlier standing at the entrance of the garden, watching her. Embarrassed and barefoot, she retreats to the trees to avoid his gaze. But he follows her, catching her by the hand and pulling her close.

“Where have you come from?” he asks, with an amused look.

His boldness is jarring, and she wraps her arm around another trunk base, barely in view and just out of his grasp. “My grandfather had trees like this,” she says, moving away from him to duck beneath the low boughs of a tree.

“These are still young,” he says, resting against a silver-papered trunk, below an umbrella of malachite green.

“When I was a kid, I’d follow him down to the orchards when it was time to prune and I’d crawl up inside them, eating pears until I was sick,” she says, leaning down to pick up a leaf.

“They’ve always been too sweet for me,” he says. She can feel him eyeing her as she twirls the leaf between her fingertips.

“I thought people found mates in a similar way—while getting blown along in the wind,” she says, letting go of the leaf, and watching it fall freely to the ground.

“I believe we choose,” he says.

“But what if no mate comes along? Then there’ll be no fruit, and we age all alone.”

“We die alone anyway,” he says. “Who are you to be worrying about these things so young?”

“Zola,” she says.

“Zola?”

She nods.

“Zola, I’m Nicholay, and I choose to kiss you,” he says, leaning toward her and putting his lips to hers. The kiss tastes of a honeyed fig and lasts only moments, lingering pleasantly in their mouths.

They wait for the boat to return, watching the evening sun change against the masonry of the walls, with something written there in the foundation, developing in the light.

The following ...

Spring



“I’ve done a lot of work for this woman over the last few years. She’s particular, but if you get in with her, you’ll have a good thing going,” Nicholay tells Zola as they walk through the flea market looking for housewares. “It’s better than sitting in a lecture hall, trust me. You’ll learn more about the industry this way. At least it’ll get your feet wet.”

“It’s just that it’s going to be a change working for a paper,” says Zola, looking over a table with an assortment of cabinet knobs, some ceramic with floral designs, others made of intricately crafted metalwork, tarnished or green from corrosion.

“It’ll be for the better. Getting to put your observations down will heighten your awareness, if you ask me. If it wasn’t for painting, I’d be a narrow-minded bastard, I think.”

“I doubt that,” says Zola. “What would you be doing if you weren’t painting?”

“I don’t know. I’ve only had one job.”

“Really?”

“The summer before I came here, I worked as a gas station attendant. I would work ten, twelve-hour shifts, and sketch between pumping gas and selling customers candy bars. I still have those sketchpads, and some of the drawings I did back then have become paintings.”

“I’d love to see them,” says Zola. “I used to write stories, but using people I actually knew, not ones I made up. Real people fascinated me. It was the storybook characters that I always found too heroic.”

“So you’re telling me I should be careful?”

Zola smiles and wraps an arm around Nicholay’s waist. “Are we really ready for this?”

“Probably not,” he says, putting his arm across her shoulders and giving her a gentle squeeze. “I’ve never lived with anyone before. You’re the first. And you’ll probably be the last. You’ll want nothing to do with me after you’ve seen my ways.”

“I’ll take that chance, Mr. Bell.”

Nicholay kisses her on the top of her head and rubs his thumb against the back of her neck beneath her hair. “We’ll be okay. After all, we’ve got this!” He holds up a stainless steel pot with a copper bottom, which he has been carrying since its purchase.

Zola takes the cooking pan from his hand. “You may want to use it like this,” she says, putting it on top of his head like a backwards ball cap.

He grabs her and pulls her into an embrace. “Are you saying I need a helmet, my dear?”

“We could both use a little armor,” she says, with a little laugh. “What are we getting ourselves into?”

He shrugs, then kisses her.

As they stroll along, Zola follows the architecture of the closely situated buildings that stand squat and imposing at the edge of the market. White tent canopies are packed tight with textiles, earthenware pottery, colored glass, and food. Market-goers pick over the displays like scavengers. A white-haired man with a long black coat sits on top of an empty chicken coop between two vendor stalls, playing an accordion. He is barefoot, and keeps time on the crumbling pavement. They stop and listen.

“I couldn’t be a street painter,” says Nicholay. “If I had to do something else, maybe I’d be an engineer, or a carpenter. I need to do something with my hands.”

“I think people do what they have to, depending on the situation,” Zola says, taking some coins from her pocket and throwing them into the black-and-

silver cubed case propped open at the musician's feet. The man gives her a slight bow in gratitude, and goes on with the tune.

"I think we choose," says Nicholay, leading her away, into the mob.

Zola has taken her first job as a paid writer for a daily newspaper. She is elated to have the opportunity to write for an audience and be paid, no matter how minimally. Nicholay helped her line up the position through a woman who commissioned him for a mural in her home. Though Zola questioned the details of the favor at first, those thoughts were quickly put aside when she received a warm reception from the editor on her first day. Apparently, Nicholay's work had pleased the woman so much that taking Zola on at the paper was the least she could do.

They rent a three-room country house just outside of Seville. Lucien arranged it; the house had been the childhood home of his close friend. Though Zola has never met Lucien or the friend, Nicholay speaks of them both fondly; he says they have been very generous to him ever since his arrival in Spain two years earlier. Carolina, the woman who lived there before she passed, was some sort of philanthropist and artist, and from what Zola can gather, she was the only woman and muse Lucien ever truly cared for.

The house sits peacefully near a riverbed in a cluster of ash and almond trees, which keeps it cool in the warm months. In the spring, pink and white flower buds appear on the almond trees, making Zola feel as though she is living in one of those dreamy Japanese ink landscapes with samurais and geishas, snow-capped mountains and cherry blossoms.

Though the cottage is quite small, there is room enough for both Zola and Nicholay to find corners of their own. Zola types away the hours in a designated area of their bedroom, while Nicholay works in another section of their living quarters just below her, putting paint to canvas in an exalted and expressive way that is both masculine and sensual. Every now and then Zola will emerge from the room above and appear behind him, watching, waiting to get swept up in his madness, and he takes her, wet paint still on his hands, with both desire and reason in his eyes.



Zola is assigned her first story after working in the newsroom for about a month, checking facts and selling subscriptions. She gets the assignment by default, as all the staff reporters are tied up working on the more pressing news of the Duchess of Alba's third marriage. Zola, being the only one free, is handed a plane ticket and a tape recorder with instructions to travel to Pamplona and interview a man claiming his father once crafted a fly-fishing rod for Hemingway.

Zola doesn't care that no one else wants to cover the story, or that the story will be overshadowed by a slew of gossip about an 80-year-old aristocrat who marries younger men for sport. This is Zola's turn to prove she's capable, without having strings pulled in her favor.

"My father had fingers like carrots, swollen and cut up from the line he tied for so many years," the son, Ernesto III, tells her during the interview. "But he was the one to go to, if you wanted to catch that prize."

"Did he ever speak about Hemingway to you?" asks Zola.

Ernesto shakes his head, and Zola notices how the shine of his hair stands out against the shoddy shop of dusty cases, rusty clamps and prehistoric-looking tools.

"Never to me. Not to anyone, really. He was not like the men who came in talking about the big fish they caught. My father never bragged."

"So how did you find all this out?"

"My father and his brother owned this shop before I took it over. My papa was a woodworker who made the rods from trees on our land, and my uncle worked with metals and was a collector of feathers. He made all the lures."

"Sounds like an operation."

“It was. They had some of the most skilled fishermen in the country come to them. They would spend months getting a pole just right,” he says. “But I didn’t find out about Hemingway until one of our family celebrations, when Papa and his brother got into a fight.”

“What was the argument over?” asks Zola.

“It was about the kind of fish Hemingway went after,” he says. “To everyone who knew my papa and his brother, this meant they were working on something.”

“But they never told you directly?”

“There was no need to. They were secretive in this way. Fishing was sacred to them, like the loyalty of their clients. It would’ve been like speaking their prayers out loud.”

“I see,” says Zola.

“Do you fish?”

Zola laughs. “I went out a couple times with my dad when I was little, but haven’t in a long time.”

“I could take you if you’d like,” says Ernesto, going to the counter near the cash register to retrieve a calling card with his telephone number. Then he

slides the back of the main showcase open, where the tackle is organized by type and size and material, and chooses a bronze spoon lure that looks like an earring.

“For good luck, and if you return to Pamplona,” he says, dropping these items into her hand. “You never know.”

“You’re right,” says Zola, accepting the gift.

“I look forward to seeing what you write,” he says, putting on his jacket to escort to her car.

“I’ll do my best, and will try to tell your story.”

“My father deserves the credit, not me,” says Ernesto. “He was the true craftsman.”

The story runs a week later, ending up in the *Lifestyles* section of the paper between a piece on this season’s trending outerwear and an article about a food poisoning outbreak that happened a couple of days prior at a local café. The story shares a page with an advertisement of a woman sporting a persimmon-colored jacket and knee-high leather boots. Her foot is up on the bumper of a safari vehicle, and she looks stoic out in the wilderness.

“Nice placement,” says Nicholay smugly, when Zola shows him the story.

“At least it’s something,” she says.



Zola hears stories of a hundred-year-old amusement park built in the mountains after the Spanish-American War. The story goes that in the late 1800's after Spain lost its territories in the Caribbean Islands, the park inspired a revival among the people of the country. A colonial powerhouse and empire for so long, Spain was so diminished by the defeat that leaders thought the only way to restore its national identity was to find ways of bringing the nation together again, whether through art or education or entertainment. Parks were commissioned, sculptures were erected, and writers and artists became unified, speaking up for a new era of progression and intellect.

For ten years, Spain maintained a neutral political presence, basking in an enlightened state. They seemed to be enjoying their carnivals of life. But when tensions in North Africa began to increase, Spain abandoned its communal gatherings for one last shot at acquiring land.

Zola convinces Nicholay to visit the old park. "It's their necropolis," Zola says, helping Nicholay to pack the rest of his equipment into the back of a small hatchback they have borrowed from a friend. "The skeletons of many of the old rides are still intact, even after they pulled off bits of metal from the roller coasters to make planes."

“So they took something joyful and made bombs?” says Nicholay, closing the lid of the trunk.

“Come on, you’re going to love it,” says Zola, opening the driver’s side door. Nicholay climbs in on the other side.

Zola has wanted to see this place ever since she found out about it. She managed to persuade Nicholay to leave the studio for the weekend, which is a real feat these days—though from the looks of it, he brought half his studio with him anyway.

It isn’t his painting that bothers her. It’s how distant he becomes when he’s preoccupied. The days come and go, passing through the rooms they share but rarely occupy together. After a while she begins to feel as though she lives with a roommate, rather than a partner.

Ever since the interview with Ernesto, her work at the newspaper has been piling up, too. Zola feels compelled to keep fresh ideas in her head, so that when she gets a chance to make her first pitch she will be ready and sharp with a proposal.

“Be my navigator?” she asks, handing Nicholay a map she picked up at a bookstore.

“Sure, but I’ll tell you now that I’m not like every guy.”

She pulls out of their driveway. “And why is that?”

Nicholay reclines in his seat, indicating that he is along for the ride. “They say men tend to get lost easily, then refuse to ask for directions.”

“And you are a descendent of Ponce de Leon?” says Zola, with her eyes on the road.

“Close, but what I was going to say is that I’ll be the first to admit when I’ve gotten us lost.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“Thought it would be.” Nicholay unfolds the map, and spreads it across the dashboard. “You can count on me,” he says.

It is a four-hour ride to the national park. Nicholay and Zola have never been in a confined space together for any extended amount of time. Chemistry can do something to a young couple; either it encourages them to be better versions of themselves, or it eats them up like wild piranhas. There is no better way of testing this than sticking a couple in a sedan in the Andalusian Mountains.

“Do you think Lucien would mind if we paint the walls in the bedroom and kitchen?” asks Zola.

“I don’t see why not. I’ll ask him when we get back. They are looking a bit banged up, aren’t they?”

Zola nods. “I thought it would be nice to personalize it a bit in there. Plus, I look at enough blank pages in the course of my day. It’s a bit much to have white walls all around me, too.”

“What colors are you thinking?”

“That’s where your expertise comes in handy.”

Nicholay laughs. “Choosing colors for anything is as overwhelming for me as choosing the right words for a poem is for you.”

“Maybe we can put a bunch of swatches in a hat and pull one out. Then we don’t have to make any decisions at all,” suggests Zola.

“How about during this trip we keep a lookout for colors that stand out to us? I’ll take photos, and we can bring the colors home with us to decide.”

“That works,” says Zola.

“But we can’t talk or think about it too much,” says Nicholay. “Or this won’t work at all. It has to really jump out, okay?”

“Okay,” says Zola, reaching for the radio.

“I got it,” says Nicholay, and Zola’s hand returns to the steering wheel.

“So what’s the deal with Lucien?” asks Zola. “Am I ever going to meet him? I’m starting to think you made him up.”

“Trust me. Lucien is as real as real can be. You’ll meet him some day. He doesn’t leave his place much, so we will have to go visit him.”

“I would like that. I feel like I know him from the way you talk about him.”

“He’s taught me a lot, and not only about painting. But I think I’m more worried about him meeting you.”

“And why is that?”

“He may steal you away.”

Zola laughs. Lucien has to be at least seventy. Anyone younger couldn’t possibly be as accomplished as Nicholay has made him sound.

“That doesn’t put much faith in me. You think I’d be swayed by some smooth-talking older man?”

“Like I said, it’s him I don’t trust. He has a way of making women fall for him.”

“That’s ridiculous,” says Zola.

“Why do you say that? I’ve witnessed it.”

“Because I’m in love with you, and you’re not Lucien.”

Nicholay looks out the window. “Lucien is like a father to me. He’s given me more advice than my own father,” he says. “Do you know what my father’s biggest piece of advice to me was?”

“What’s that?” says Zola.

“Trust women enough to behave like men.”

“And you believe that?”

“I know my mother wasn’t a trustworthy woman. She was cheating on my father from day one. My father was a fool, not seeing that she was unhappy. He loved her even after she walked out,” he says. “He loved her so much he’s still sitting in that same damn chair, waiting for her to come home. Of course, now he drinks himself to sleep in that chair. He didn’t used to do that.”

The spine of the old roller coaster rises over the tops of the dark alders as the car crawls through the winding pass.

“We should be there soon,” Nicholay says, still staring out the window toward the remnants of a past—maybe his past.

Zola flicks on the headlights.

Summer



In the summer, when the Spanish countryside feels like a sunbaked terracotta bowl, Zola loses countless hours of sleep. The house is haunted, but when she tells Nicholay this, he says it's impossible; Carolina lived a happy and full life, he says. But in her dreams, Carolina speaks to her in warnings, telling her not to love a man like this.

When it becomes unbearable for her, Zola sometimes goes out to the river behind their house and sits on its banks surrounded by iridescent fog, watching the Mayflies skip and dance on the water's surface. They remind her of fairies, aquatic nymphs, delicate and ethereal. She remembers that Ernesto, the man in Pamplona, told her that these were the best insects for bait. Their life cycle varies, from only a few short hours to the length of two days. She imagines living her life in a certain rush.

One night, Zola watches Nicholay sleep, untroubled, until she knows she won't wake him, then slips away quietly, still naked. They haven't made love in weeks, and she has found other ways of satisfying herself—sometimes even in his studio among his paintings, hoping to get caught in the act. But tonight she has another sort of yearning.

She opens the cabinets, removing one package after another: salt, flour, yeast, honey. Blending the ingredients together, she presses her palms into the soft dusted belly of the dough, her body rising and falling with each motion. Flour begins to stir up around her, settling into her exposed creases. And every now and then, she flings her head back to keep her long hair from dipping between her working arms, and closes her eyes like a woman riding away on the night. She does this with purpose. When she feels she's achieved the perfect mold, smooth and firm to the touch, she tucks the kneaded dough into a cloth to rise.

"Now that's an image," she hears Nicholay say from behind her.

She hadn't heard him come downstairs, but before she has a chance to turn around he is at her collarbone, kissing her. Her breasts instantly ache under his touch, and his workman hands go to her hips.

"You scared me," she says, submitting to his caresses, as he works his way between her thighs. He is the same man she left sleeping in bed, but she feels like a different woman; she is the bread upon the table, the heat in the stove, as new as the morning. The love they make is unrefined and wild, running over them like warm spring puddles on fertile plains, leaving her finally satisfied and him weeping.



“I can’t allow myself to believe in something that will ultimately fail,” says Nicholay, watching Zola stand on her toes to peer into the vanity mirror to apply her makeup. She does this unconsciously, just like counting on her fingers or pouting her lips. Nicholay likes to tease her by telling her that if she were a mere two inches taller, better at math, or thicker-skinned, she wouldn’t be the same woman he loved.

“It doesn’t have to fail,” she fires back, as she applies liner and mascara to her eyelids. She looks at him through the reflection in the mirror, where he is positioned behind her, sitting on the bathtub. He is already dressed for their outing, while she, as often is the case, is running behind, putting on finishing touches.

“A false foundation cannot support a house. Marriage is just a substitute for security. It guarantees nothing but the kind of pain that can destroy a man.”

“You think I want to destroy you? Is that what you think of me?”

“That’s not the point.”

“You know, Nicky, there are examples of people out there who have figured it out, who have put in time and effort, and they’re not imbeciles.”

“You’re asking for proof? Tell me about the first man you loved. The first man you ever said those three words to.”

“Fine, but then we have to go,” says Zola. “His name was Jamie, and he was good to me.”

“Was?”

“He still is. I still care for him very much.”

“So why did it end?”

Zola can see where this is going. “We wanted different things.”

“Different things?”

“Yes, we both did.”

“But isn’t that what I’ve been trying to say? One settles, the other goes. There never seems to be enough room for two people to be in the same place, at the same time. It’s like the proudest and most vibrant flowers trying to blossom side-by-side. One ends up dominating the garden; the other becomes malnourished.”

She has to admit there’s some truth to what he’s saying. That was always Zola’s problem with relationships; they were either confining or conflicting, or

too close to her own parents' reality. Then she met Nicholay, who asked nothing of her, but challenged her to believe in something more.

“Imagine something different, an understanding if you will. Having the freedom to explore different kinds of relationships, to have them inspire you. To grow from them. Not only that, but to be able to love deeper, because of such an understanding.”

“I don't want to be late,” she says. Standing between his open legs, she rubs the sides of his head with her thumbs and bows to plant a kiss on him. “You think too much about what doesn't work.” She playfully snaps one of his suspenders, and his defense softens.

“I'm proud of you. Have I told you that lately?” he asks, holding her around the waist.

Zola knows the conversation isn't over, that it may, in fact, be about something much more complex that neither of them is ready to deal with. But it is their first year together and they're having all the important conversations; and for the most part, they seem to complement one another well in their aspirations. They have all the time in the world to get to where they want to go.

The plan is that Nicholay will take Zola to dinner in honor of her recent journalistic successes. Then they're going to drop in on a gallery opening.

However, their discussion about the woes of commitment leaves a sour taste in her mouth that even the best wine or the richest sauces can't get rid of. Zola can tell Nicholay feels the same way. All evening, they seem to be moving in different circles, like the choreographed steps of bull and matador.

"You've been with that girl a lot tonight," Zola says to Nicholay at the opening. She gestures toward a tall Russian woman with long legs and a tight black dress, who is pouring a round for a group of men who are clustered around her.

"She's the bartender," he says, sipping his drink.

"Have you seen Ivan?" Zola asks, referring to the artist. "He was looking for you earlier."

Nicholay shakes his head. "He looked busy. I'll congratulate him later."

"Well, I'm ready to go when you are," says Zola. She doesn't feel well, though she does not know if it's from the conversation, the people in the room, or the way Nicholay is behaving. He looks silly in his jacket, she thinks, like a boy playing dress-up.

“I’ve been invited to the pub with some of those guys,” he says, nodding in the direction of a group of French men they met earlier.

“I’m going home, then. Do you have the keys?”

“I’ll walk you out,” says Nicholay, putting his drink on a table.

Zola waits as Nicholay pulls the car around for her. Leaving it running, he gets out so she can get in.

“Is everything okay?” he asks.

“It may be the food. My stomach is upset,” she says. “I’ll just meet you back home.”

“I won’t be too late,” he says, kissing her forehead.

He closes the door for her. She watches him walk back inside.



The sound of knocking downstairs makes her open her eyes. Even as she transitions from sleep to wakefulness, Zola senses that Nicholay has not been home.

She reaches for his wristwatch on the nightstand to check the time. She locked all the doors before she went to bed.

The knocking ceases. Zola pulls one of the blankets around her naked shoulders, and in socked feet goes down to answer. But when she opens the door there is no one there.

Grabbing her keys off the hook in the front hallway, she steps outside and walks around the house. She finds Nicholay trying to open the window to his studio. It wouldn't be the first time he came in this way. Since they have been together, Zola has witnessed Nicholay's strange behavior of sneaking in in the middle of the night, looking rough and animalistic, sometimes clawing at her until she awakes, or sleeping at her feet like a dog. Then there are the times when he sneaks into his studio in the wee hours, where Zola finds him on the floor in the morning, crusted paint in his hair and all over his clothes, smelling badly of booze and tobacco.

"It's locked," she says, startling him.

"I don't have my keys." He is weary-eyed and disheveled.

"Where have you been?" she asks.

"I told you."

"Where?"

"This is ridiculous. I'm tired. Can we talk about this in the morning?"

They stand in silence with a speckled moon stretching their shadows across the lawn. Nicholay doesn't make eye contact with her. She is chilled beneath the blankets, her socks wet and filthy.

"Come with me," she says, walking out into the dark.

"Where are we going?"

She doesn't respond, but he follows her, walking to the end of their property where the river coils quietly like a black snake.

"Zola?" he pleads.

With her back to him, she looks into the miniature gulch below. Creeping vines hang from the trees as though trying to pull the willows and poplars in for a swim. Small critters scamper among fallen debris further out on the forest floor.

"What are we doing out here?"

She turns, but doesn't quite look at him. "Take your clothes off."

"Why on earth—"

"Take your clothes off and get in!" says Zola, louder.

"I'm not—"

“Yes, you are! You’re not coming in the house smelling of another woman. Or else you’re going to sleep out here with the lynxes and coyotes, and trust me, they won’t be so kind to a pathetic man like you.”

She begins to shake and sob. Nicholay reaches out to her.

“I didn’t—”

“You did. I know you did.” Her chest is tight with her hard beating heart.

“I’m sorry,” Nicholay says finally, unbuttoning his shirt. Zola knows it is over.

He strips down as Zola sits huddled on the bank, the blanket wrapped around her in a cloth nest. His chest hair is matted and his testicles are two deflated lemons stuck to his inner thigh. She feels disgust like she has never felt before, and closes her eyes as he splashes into the water and wades out to the middle.

“Goddamit!” he yells into the woods on the other side of the river.

Zola doesn’t feel sorry for him. Not a bit.

Dunking himself a few times, he scrubs his hair and scalp with his fingers before coming back to shore. He crawls up next to where she sits and collapses,

breathing with difficulty from the cold. His skin is raised with goose pimples and his jaw is clenched to keep his teeth from chattering.

She leaves him lying there and walks back to the house with the blanket around her. She returns to bed, and Nicholay doesn't attempt to join her.



Nicholay,

The nights are too long. I need to relearn how to be alone. My writing is suffering. I have gone to stay with a friend in Pamplona. I won't be gone long, only long enough to miss our bed. Do not worry.

Zola

Zola leaves the note by Nicholay's boots in the hallway. She doesn't dare disturb him while he's in the studio working. She walks out the front door without him even noticing.

Her plan is to see a doctor near Pamplona, then find a place to stay until she figures out where to go from there. A child is growing inside of her. She can feel her body already adjusting to fit that growth. There were definitely signs; her increased sensitivity to taste and smell; the way she's been guarding her emotions with an impatient tone or quick temper. She often feels as though she wants to

pelt Nicholay with a bunch of hard marbles every time he makes an asinine comment.

Going home isn't an option. She made the mistake of telling her mother when she had lost her virginity at sixteen, and her mother insisted on reminding Zola every day, up until the day she left for college, that she had no interest in raising her children's children. Irresponsibility, even now, wouldn't be tolerated, and an unplanned pregnancy wouldn't get her an ounce of sympathy.

The night she left the party alone, she stopped by a 24-hour pharmacy and picked up a pregnancy test. She had an inkling, the way women do when they sense something different about their changing bodies. As she waited on the toilet for her bladder to relax, she anticipated the definitive release that would give her a plus or a minus, along with the tough facts she knew she would have to face sooner or later.

All the questions, all the possible solutions; it is all too much for her to comprehend. Her reality has been knocked askew, teetering on shaky ground. She knows how Nicholay feels about children— not only wasn't it in the cards; it was the surest way to end their relationship. The first time they were intimate, he said to her, "If we're going do this, I need to know something: Can you live for something other than having kids?"

She was barely twenty-two. Children were the last things on her mind, and so she told him she could go without. They agreed there would be no children. It was understood. End of story.

Ernesto knows she will be in town. She hasn't forgotten his offer to teach her to fish, and she likes the idea of spending her days in tidal pools and amongst currents. She needs time to reflect and prepare for the new life she is about to enter into, with or without Nicholay at her side. She knows keeping the child will mean a sacrifice, but it is a trade she is willing to make.

Her body tells her one thing, her heart another, while her soul tries to mediate between the two. If only she could transport herself into the future, she would know the choices to make. The fear of the unknown has never terrified her more. It is the abyss she will dream about years later, a world of never-ending plains and skies, in the land of unpredictable and uncontrolled possibilities. The painter Dalí hadn't been a madman; he'd been a prophet.

At two-and-a-half months, the arms and legs are formed, the heart has been divided into two chambers and is pumping, the brain is growing rapidly, and taste buds are beginning to emerge. Zola can't believe so much can be happening in an organism slightly smaller than her thumb. In two more weeks, the child will

be the size of a small apple, with fingernails and toenails. She is in absolute awe of all this growth, including her own.

She will write Nicholay in a day or two, or perhaps call him. It is the right thing to do, after all. But how she will tell him? How should she write it—recite it, this speech she should know by heart. What tone will she use?

As the days go by, while she sits in doctors' offices and sleeps in her cheap hotel room, she realizes she is okay with just being by herself. And somehow, all longing and truth she wanted to unfold like a picnic they would take in together, all those expected things, retreat further inside of her. It becomes harder for her to miss Nicholay, when it feels he has given her his best part.

The day she visits Ernesto, he instantly detects something different about her. "You again—so full of life," he says. Rising from behind a draftsman's table, he walks over to meet her at the entrance of his shop.

Zola does not respond. Certain things will remain unspoken.

"What brings you to Pamplona? Another story?"

"Actually, I've come to learn to fish. I feel it's a good time."

He nods, as though he understands everything she doesn't need to say.

She remembers his smooth-skinned charm. He isn't arrogant, just sure of himself. His clothes are airy, fitting loosely beneath his strong neck, and he wears a closed-toe sandal that is almost feminine. He is a little older than Nicholay, though not by much, but his composure tells her he is a man with experience far beyond his age. There is something archetypal about him, and she is keenly aware that he has the perfected proportion of a renaissance man in the flesh.

Ernesto catches her gaze and looks her straight in the eyes. "We go out at five."

"In the morning?"

"*Sí*. And bring a thermos with you. It will be cold."

Zola wants to tell him she will not be able to drink coffee in the morning, to spill everything to him like a runny yolk. But she keeps these secrets to herself. Of all the decisions she has to make in Pamplona, whether or not to have a little caffeine will not be her most difficult.



Zola bicycles into town for her first fishing lesson. The sun is barely cresting over the horizon, the air crisp enough to make her eyes water and her knuckles chap. On her ride she notices a few stores with light on and movement in the windows, but there is a hush in the streets and the wind speed through her

bicycle spokes tell her, "*It's only you. It's only you.*" For a moment, she believes what she hears.

She parks her bike in the alley next to the store and enters the stairwell leading to Ernesto's apartment. She pauses for a moment before her ascent. It's just fishing, right? Nothing more.

She shivers and she can't tell if it is from the dampness of the hallway, or her conscience.

In Ernesto's apartment, the temperature is surprisingly different. She immediately notices the dryness, and there is a familiar scent in the room, almost like clay between one's fingers. The view from his street-side windows is not as nice as she'd imagined. From where she's been staying only a few miles away, the town appears to be situated upon a hill; but from this vantage point she can't see beyond the rudimentary shapes of rooftops, chapel towers, and building facades. The realization that he will never look out his window toward where she works and sleeps is a disappointment.

She is comfortable with Ernesto. There's a feeling of simplicity as she waits for him to gather his things. She feels no need to be anywhere other than where she is. She likes watching him move about his residence, knowing that

each item he looks for will be right where he left it. Nothing in Zola's life is like this, but she thinks that maybe there will come a time when it could be.

"You like?" he asks, holding up a case to a CD. *Paco de Lucia*.

"Heard of him," she lies.

"We will listen in the car. I think you'll enjoy." He puts some extra things into a backpack, and is ready.

It is a short drive in Ernesto's truck to the spot where the river forks in two like a wishbone, creating a slight rocky island perfect for reading or eating. Ernesto says he likes to stand at the tip of this strip of land, in shallow water facing the currents, as the fish decide which way to swim. This state of confusion distracts the larger fish, and they will mistake the free bait for easy prey.

He tells her all this in the car, pausing to listen to the flamenco musician on the CD, who has been accompanying their conversation with passionate solos and weeping guitar. Ernesto strums along on the steering wheel.

"You like?" he asks again.

"Yes, I do," she says.

The mosquitoes are vicious. Swatting at them is useless. Red welts come quickly to her skin, and Ernesto chuckles to himself every time he hears the slap of her hand against an arm or a leg.

“You shouldn’t bathe at night. It’s the lemon oil that’s attracting them.”

She gives him a look as she sets her bag away from the water’s edge. How does he know what she puts in her bath water? And when had she let him close enough to her that he could distinguish this scent on her? Was it when he had leaned across her in his truck to reach into his glove compartment, or was it when he put on the radio? Or could it have been when he stood beside her earlier that morning, pouring hot coffee into her thermos?

“Watch what I am doing with my wrist,” he says. With a delicate and directed rhythm, Ernesto’s angler line dances back and forth above his head, then into the middle of the stream. “It’s a fluid motion. Not a quick action.”

Zola tries to copy this movement from the ten-foot distance where she’s balanced herself in the riverbed. But her line goes where it wants, landing too far off to the side, or too far out from the ripple she is aiming for, with one of her casts just barely missing his ear.

“No, no. You’re trying to control it, instead of guiding it. Timing is everything. Watch me again.” Ernesto repeats the cast, his forearm rolling

smoothly at his elbow joint, landing his fly exactly near the same rock of his first demonstration. “You are using the repetitive sweeps to unfurl the line. This is how you get enough momentum to land your nymph.”

Zola tries again. Her loops are better, but not nearly as graceful as his.

“Better,” he says. “It will come with practice. It took me years to find my own technique. I learned from both my grandfather and father, but they also had a style of their own.”

“How long did it take you to master this?”

“As many years as you are old, my dear.”

The insinuation about her age slightly bothers Zola. She thinks of how Nicholay frequently made such comments, too. *Too young to know what she wants. Too young to make those sorts of decisions. Too young to believe anything differently.* If she had told him she wanted to learn to fly fish, he probably would have called it a youthful whim, too.

“This is a blood knot,” says Ernesto, when he reels in his empty lead. A fish has gotten away with his fly, and he crouches to examine it further. “It connects two autonomous pieces of line, just like a family lineage.”

Ernesto holds out the knot for Zola to inspect. She follows the swoops and crosses with her fingers, but can't figure out how the fiber bud is made.

"You see," says Ernesto, taking up the line in his hands. "If the knot is strong and made with care, it will endure for a long time and you will have your success. But if it's weak and made carelessly..." Ernesto tugs at the two sides. "It comes undone and is another opportunity missed."

Zola leans over and picks up the separated pieces, now frayed and lying at his feet.

"Will you teach me to make a strong one?" says Zola, as she hands the ends back over to Ernesto. "I want mine to last."

"I can teach you what I know of fishing."

Zola smiles. "That's all I want," she says.



Through Ernesto's connections in town, he finds her a place to stay with an elderly woman named Peata, who offers her home to solo travelers for indefinite periods. Ernesto tells her that the landlady takes to artists, because they keep to themselves for the most part and live on meager diets.

The hallways are lavender and covered in photographs, the bedrooms whitewashed with clean lace curtains. The toilette and bathtub have claw feet, and Zola likes the idea of being able to soothe her body in warm water after days spent hiking over river rocks and standing in icy streams. When she shows her the house, Peata explains to Zola that she spent most of her life in London, but moved back to her homeland after her husband passed away. She has lived in this house by herself for the last fifteen years, tending to her gardens and her guests, never having the desire to return to the city life, where people tirelessly move about but don't really go anywhere. Zola knows this will be a good place for her to stay.

Her bedroom window faces west, overlooking and the dirt road and gate leading to the property. Occasionally, a car or bicycle passes by, but it is an occurrence so rare that Zola pauses to see who it is and observes them until they are out of sight, before returning to her writing. By the second week, however, she stops thinking it is Nicholay and works for hours without looking up.

She craves olives and juicy clementines. Traces of her cravings appear on the keys of her computer and across the thighs of her skirts. She takes trips with Ernesto to the *mercados*, where they try delicacies she's only read about—salted and aged meats, pickled vegetables and virgin oils, rare mushrooms and roots. They take turns cooking for one another with the new ingredients they discover in

these markets. Food becomes an adventure for them, a language they can both understand. They bake and fry the fish they catch, wild brown trout or catfish, sometimes adding the peels of lemons or oranges they gather during their walks on his family's land. Sprigs of rosemary and thyme from Peata's herb garden also make their way into these dishes. They enjoy the indulgences of things that are good, because they don't know a better way of living.

Zola hasn't rested so peacefully in years. The long days, the fresh air and the writing she creates leave nothing more for her to want. She sleeps like the child inside her womb, undisturbed and content. The things that haunted her back in Seville have all but subsided. There is a light around her, and a feeling of being optimistic and worthy.

Fall



Ernesto invites Zola to a cafe in the park, where an outdoor movie plays on a sheet strung between trees. They eat little sausages and hard cheeses. Zola tells him her secret, and he says he already knew.

“Tell me about the father,” he says.

“He probably hasn't even noticed I'm gone.”

“I don't believe that. He's hurting.”

“Let him hurt. I can’t forgive him.”

“Just because he was with another woman doesn’t mean he loves you any less.”

“Whose side are you on?”

“It’s not about sides, Zola, or about being equals.”

“Then what’s it about? Because I’m having this baby despite him.”

“I was with this girl once. It didn’t matter what we talked about: pigeons, chairs, movies, music; she needed to prove to me that she could not just have a conversation about a topic, but also that she knew as much as I did.”

“What happened?”

“I stopped talking.”

“You stopped seeing her?”

“I stopped talking in her presence. I loved her—God I loved her. She was an amazing woman. But that one thing about her drove me nuts. I quit competing.”

“And that worked?”

“For awhile, she tolerated it. We would sit for hours saying nothing to each other, like a couple of old people who have been together too long. But she would still try to engage me in conversation, because she needed to be heated about something.”

“Didn’t that lead to tension between you?”

“Sure. She took her anger out on me in the bedroom. She was wild and willing to do anything to get me to open up.”

“Did you?”

“I never shut myself off to her. My feelings never changed. She left me, because she questioned her worth. Not because I did.”

“I still don’t know,” says Zola, picking at the outer skin of one of the sausage links.

“You just need time,” says Ernesto, turning his attention back to the movie.



In the night, a moth flies into Zola’s room. It circles around her bed, then lands on her windowsill. “Come with me” it says, with a vibration in its voice.

Zola rises from bed and follows its translucent wings down the stairs and out the front door. She trails its flight through the gardens, lit by the moon and the stars, to the gardening shed where she retrieves her bicycle, and then to the country road, where they set out into the night.

It brings her to a boundary of pasture that looks like her grandfather's old farm. The moth takes up a branch nearby as its perch. Up in the trees is a pair of owl eyes she has come to know very well, staring down on her.

She hears moaning in the distance, a sound so filled with pain it brings on an unexplainable sadness that grows deeper and darker as she walks over the grassy knolls toward the faint ember of light cast off from Pamplona. She can make out the shadowy profiles of beasts roaming on the horizon, a herd restless and pacing.

She crouches in the grass, trying to disguise her presence. They can smell her, but pay her little mind, for there is something more burdensome stirring.

The moans come again, this time only a few feet away. Her eyes adjust. A shape that Zola had first mistaken as a toppled-over haystack is actually a head, straining in discomfort, rising and falling with every jerk of its thick neck. She doesn't dare get closer for fear of startling the unsettled animal, and stays squatted

in the tall weeds, waiting. The cow cries again and again. With every contraction and spasm, Zola remains in place, stiff and helpless.

She wants to look away. She wants to vomit. She wants to close her eyes and wish for it to be over, but she can't. She now knows what true pain smells and sounds like, and she can't just turn away or escape it.



Peata's eyes are hawkish and suspicious in the morning. Zola tries to eat her breakfast at the table casually, while Peata waters her blooming clivia and begonias. But even with the windows open and the garden fragrances circulating through the house, Zola feels tension in the room.

Zola speaks first. "I've been sleeping so well and I'm getting a lot of work done here. I hope I haven't been disturbing you with my typing."

Water continues to trickle from Peata's can. There is something unrushed and careful about her nature. "Lady's Slipper. I made tea from the root during my first pregnancy."

Zola sets her cup down and turns to the woman, who is now plucking yellowing and dried leaves from her flowerpots. She hasn't told the woman she is pregnant—she hasn't told anyone, only Ernesto the night before.

“I was a sleepwalker, too,” the woman continues. “However, I don’t know where you brought all the mud in from. We haven’t had rain in over a week.”

On the way to the river, Zola tells Ernesto about the Luna moth.

“That is strange,” he says, turning onto the trade road that leads to their fishing hole.

As they pass a field on their right, Zola spots the handlebars of a bicycle lying below in the ditch. Her bicycle.

“What’s that?” says Zola, holding her breath.

“Luna don’t have mouths,” says Ernesto. “I find it interesting that it spoke to you in your dream.”

“They don’t?”

Ernesto gives her a sideways glance, grinning widely and playfully. “They don’t have mouths because they live for only one week, and their sole purpose is to mate. They don’t eat, they don’t sleep. They just mate, then die, knowing a piece of them will live forever. Imagine if man were immortalized in such a way. It would be tragic. But in the case of the Luna, it’s quite beautiful.”

“I didn’t realize that,” says Zola, thinking about how uneasy she felt getting dressed earlier that morning, with the image of the stillborn calf on her mind, and how peaceful it looked lying in the field next to its exhausted mother. “It’s probably nothing.”

“Dreams are never nothing,” says Ernesto, parking the truck.

Zola’s casts are becoming more natural, as is her relationship with Ernesto. As they bait their lines in silence on their river island, he sometimes leans over to observe her fingers working with the string and fly. Other times, he lets her figure it out on her own. Then they walk into the river together, where they take their places like orchestral conductors, with Zola three paces to the right and Ernesto six feet out. Together, they wave their wands, summoning the fish to them.

However, this time Zola feels hesitant. Ernesto goes in first without her. He casts his line and looks back at Zola.

“Coming in? Or are you just going to watch me?” He turns back to the rushing water.

Zola picks up her pole and slides her feet in. “It’s really cold today,” she calls over to him.

“It only feels that way because the air is so warm. You’ll get used to it.”

Trusting him, she steps forward, placing her feet slowly and cautiously as she goes. Even her rubber waders can’t protect her bones from the temperature of the water, but she finds a calmer spot that isn’t out too deep and makes her cast.

She looks over at Ernesto, who is waiting too.

After several minutes, with only the sound of the moving river to entertain her mind, she begins to shiver.

“I’m getting out. It’s too cold,” she says. She can’t tell if he heard her. As she tries to steady herself, the rod quivers in her hand. Beneath her boots, the feeling in her feet and calves drains out, as though they belong to the river itself. Before she can catch her breath, she is submerged, water filling her waders and pulling at her clothes.

She faintly hears someone calling out, but the voice is muffled and distant. Darkness and cold cradle her. She lets it take her.

“Don’t worry. Don’t worry,” it says.

Before Zola can open her eyes, the smell of animal droppings is in her nostrils, making her woozy. She can feel hay grass poking her skin. She is wet and chilled, but she is sure the sun is still above her, even though there is something blocking it.

“Nicholay?” she asks, with eyes still closed.

“No, it’s me.” The shadow momentarily disappears, then returns. “I’m going to get these off so you can warm up. Okay?”

She feels the gentle unfastening of buckles and belts, then the damp rubber suit being pulled off her torso, hips and legs. Water runs down her inner thighs.

“I think you fainted,” he says. “I saw you, then I didn’t...”

Zola sees Ernesto kneeling next to her. She looks away, at a patch of black-eyed Susans and when looks to him again she sees that he is staring at one of his hands.

“Zola. There’s blood.”

The baby. Zola tries to see where it is coming from, but instantly becomes light-headed from the sudden movement.

“Don’t get up. I’m going to get the truck,” says Ernesto, without delay. “You’re safe here. I’ll be right back.”

As she lies there, she feels a pulling pain just below her abdomen. Through the warming air she vaguely remembers the scent of her grandfather's barn after a butchering. For the first time since she's arrived in Pamplona, she wants Nicholay at her side. But it is Ernesto who returns, and delivers her safely to the town's doctor.



The first thing Zola notices when she wakes up is the feeling that something has been taken from her. Loss carves out a space inside.

"Your body was trying to purge the pregnancy," the doctor tells her.

"I don't understand," says Zola, still groggy from morphine. "I have ultrasound photos. Only a couple weeks ago, everything was normal."

The doctor is looking at the files in his hand, and not at her. "It seems you couldn't carry."

"I don't understand. You're saying I've been carrying a dead..."

"I'm sorry we couldn't detect it sooner. Would you like to see the photos from the surgery, to see what we accomplished?"

"Surgery?"

“When we removed the fetus, we found that your fallopian tubes were damaged, and an ovary had ruptured beyond repair. We had to remove it.”

“Can I still have children?” Zola tries to get the doctor to look at her, even though her face is wet with tears. She wants to be sure she isn’t completely broken, that there is some small chance.

“It will be difficult, but possible. We’ll know more after we see the how the scar tissue heals.”

She doesn’t want to hear anymore. She is being punished. She wasn’t supposed to do this on her own in the first place. She was incapable of protecting their child.

Nicholay was right not to want children with her. She couldn’t handle the responsibility.

There is a reason hospitals feel so sterile. The lack of life in their décor and ambiance prepares patients and loved ones for the inevitability of death. In a place so morbid and demoralizing, it is hard to grasp onto hope.

Zola looks at the painting across from her metal barricaded bed. It is of a bowl of fruit, grapes and peaches and a couple of pears past their prime. In the foreground is a dead pheasant, its long neck stretched out where it once dangled from the mouth of a dog.

A sweet nurse snuck a pair of pale blue booties on to her feet in the middle of the night. Zola asks to keep them; this simple act of kindness from a stranger makes her realize that she isn't alone in the world.

“You'll have beautiful children when the time is right,” says Ernesto when he brings her lilies.

“It was your body's way of saying the pregnancy wasn't healthy,” says the nurse, helping Zola to use the toilet.

“It's more common than you think,” says the doctor, adjusting her morphine dose.

“You're all lying!” Zola wants to scream, but she doesn't have the energy.

She lost a lot of blood. Internally she feels like a bruised cantaloupe, scraped of all its seeds. She asks Ernesto to call Nicholay for her, then changes her mind immediately when she considers how the situation may appear if he does come.

By the third day, Zola feels herself regaining strength and the doctor agrees to release her into Ernesto's care, as long as she promises to stay off her feet. The stitches are still vulnerable, and with too much strain or activity, she is at risk of losing more blood.

With fishing out of the question, she doesn't have reason to stay in Pamplona much longer.

Peata is at the gate when they drive up. Without letting her feet touch the ground, Ernesto carries her to her room. Peata is close behind, with afghans and tea.

Zola misses her mother. She misses her family. Why hasn't she talked to them in so long?

"I will come tomorrow if you like. Right now, you need rest," says Ernesto, standing at the foot of her bed. "Try not to grieve. You need to heal first. You'll have plenty of time to feel sorrow, when your heart and head are strong again."

She never sees Ernesto again.

Winter



"Have you been to Colorado before?"

Zola turns from the window of the plane. She's been waiting for the first sight of land to come into view, after hours of looking at only water.

The girl sitting next to her is British, smartly dressed in a tuxedo jacket over a tee shirt, and she wears a nice watch on her wrist—probably a graduation gift from her parents, along with the plane ticket to the States.

“No,” says Zola, adjusting the scratchy blanket the flight attendant gave her and the undersized pillow propped behind her neck. She pulls the plastic shade down, hoping that when she opens it again, they’ll be flying over something that’s worth looking at.

“I only have a layover in Colorado,” says the girl. “I’m on my way to LA, but being in the Denver airport for twelve hours still counts, right?”

“Buy a magnet, and it will,” says Zola.

“Of course. My mother would love that. Good idea.”

The girl picks up the *Sky Miles* magazine from the blue velour pouch in front of her, where they keep the in-flight manuals and barf bag. “Do people really buy this stuff?” she asks Zola, flipping through pages of designer luggage and perfume.

“People buy a lot of useless things, when they have nothing better to do,” says Zola.

“Do you have family in Colorado?”

“No. Honestly, I don’t know why I chose this flight. It’s far from the place I call home.”

“So you don’t know anyone? No one is waiting for you, and you don’t know why you are going?”

“Yes.”

“Who you trying to get away from?” The girl laughs.

Zola doesn’t find it as funny. Why should she have to explain anything to anyone? This girl doesn’t know her—her story—she just assumes that Zola has poorly planned or is trying to escape someone. Normal people, rational people, people who buy magnets in the shape of states, don’t travel to places without knowing a single soul, without an itinerary in hand.

What this girl doesn’t know is that this is exactly what Zola wants—solitude. A new beginning. To be carefree. To have no plan at all. All she needs to know about Colorado is that the state bird is a lark. She’ll be singing at the top of her lungs, when she doesn’t have to worry about anyone hearing her.

Spain is behind her. The last two weeks provided enough time for her body to recuperate, and Peata had nursed her back with her holistic ways. *Take this and take that* was her daily prescription. The old woman told her stories about

London and Paris in all their glory, so that Zola's dreams could be filled with the glittering lights, satin evening gowns and the piano music of Claude Bolling.

A few times Zola picked up the phone to call Nicholay, but she never did. She finally wrote him a letter confessing everything. It was simple and to the point, and she avoided making any mention of how she really felt, because she still wasn't exactly sure how that was.

She thinks she has forgiven him. But she can't forgive herself for having deceived him. She doesn't deserve to be forgiven.

As the plane makes its way down the tarmac, Zola drinks in her new landscape and the mountain range that awaits her, bent and creased like a monk in prayer. The sky is the color of amethyst and frostbite and acai berries. Zola thinks, *All is not lost. I'm okay not being found for awhile.*

The girl wishes Zola luck as she pulls her bags down from the overhead compartment.

And Zola says, "Good luck," back—not knowing who needs it more.

PART III

Nicholay



Lucien is on all fours, digging in the soil where he's planted a handful of vegetables and flower bulbs. With his head stuck in leafy greenery, it looks as though the bushes are giving birth to a full-grown man. The position reminds Nicholay of a heavy-bottomed polar bear, clumsily fishing for his dinner.

"Isn't it a little late in the season to be gardening?" asks Nicholay, surveying the pockmarked ground around Lucien's knees.

"I'm collecting," he says, scooping and tossing dirt aside. His elbows rub against his ribcage as his hands search beneath the earth bed. Leaning close to a patch of bluebells, he shifts his weight to his left side.

"Do you need any help?" asks Nicholay.

"There's a good one. Well formed," says Lucien, dropping something small and hard into the tin bucket beside him. It lets out a soft ping. "That's the last of them."

Lucien moves to one knee, and Nicholay reaches forward to help him.

"I got it young man, I got it."

Nicholay steps back.

Slightly hunched over, brushing dirt from his pants, Lucien turns around.
“I can’t be so old that I need someone to keep me balanced.”

“When did you start believing in age?”

“When you attempted to make me feel old, damn it!”

He walks toward the backdoor and slides off his dirt-caked slippers.
Handing the bucket to Nicholay, he plucks the pipe from his shirt pocket.

Age is catching up to Lucien. The fading out process has already begun.

With this somber reality in mind, Nicholay looks down into the muddy
base of the pail. “Snails?”

“Escargot,” says Lucien.

With lips drawn tight, he lights a match, the first smoke through his
nostrils, making his eyes water. Sticking his hand into the container, he pulls out a
black-shelled grub. “They are hermaphrodites. Male *and* female. Companionless
creatures, because they’ve got complete souls.”

The slimy slugs don’t look like much to Nicholay and hardly appetizing,
but Lucien has a way of relating to the rest of the world, as if he holds the secret
which men will spend their entire lives trying to find. Being trusted with this
knowledge makes it all the more significant to his pupil.

Nicholay follows Lucien into the house, carrying the pail with him. “That woman you sent over to my place a week ago,” he begins.

Lucien’s head rocks back in a rough laugh. “Dark complexion, with imposing eyes. Seeking something, that one. It certainly wasn’t me.” He takes the container from Nicholay’s hands, bringing it over to the kitchen sink.

“I don’t think she was looking for me either,” says Nicholay, getting comfortable in a chair.

The grunt in response indicates he will have to wait until Lucien finishes.

Over the stainless basin, Lucien rinses the snails of grit and the gelatinous substance that coats their bodies, continuing to smoke like the artful codger he is. In the drying rack, paintbrushes are mixed with silverware, and Mason jars with colorful and permanent tints are arranged amid drinking glasses and colonial-patterned china.

Nicholay fiddles with a butter knife left over from breakfast, forming small piles of crumbs upon the tabletop. As he lets out a deep sigh, the crumbs blow away.

“Did you hear about Madrid’s loss yesterday?” asks Nicholay.

The sound of water stops. Nicholay looks up. He watches as Lucien shakes excess water from a colander and transfers the hard little bodies to a ceramic bowl. Nicholay didn't know what would become of the terrestrial critters until now. But of course Lucien would attach theory to something he would later devour, because that is his power of influence—just when you think you understand the depth of something he sees, he makes it appear simple and small again.

Lucien takes a cloth and dries his hands. Pulling the pipe from his mouth, he finally speaks. “You're not satisfied?”

“She is a beautiful woman—”

“I didn't mean with her,” Lucien interrupts firmly. “Satisfied with what you are doing. Or, shall I say, what you're not doing.”

Nicholay thinks about this for a moment. “You're right. I had this grand moment of inspiration. Then what? It vanished! I got caught up in thinking I could carry a feeling over to something else. It doesn't work that way, does it?”

“Let me ask you this,” says Lucien, leaning on an edge of counter. “Why are you waiting for it to come to you? A settled mind is not required to create. Inspiration is temperamental and needs to run wild. If you can get a grasp on anything, even if it's just a handful, you need to ride it out.”

“I thought I needed to find resolution first.”

“Through your work, young man, through your work,” says Lucien. “Inner peace and all that jazz is bullshit. If love inspires you, use it, but there is more than just that out there. The way in which women excite you will change. You must be aware of this, or you will become more and more unsatisfied. It took me a long time to understand this on my own. You never want to become dependent on such a muse.”

“So what about the girl?”

“No one can work under the demands of another. It’s a good lesson to learn. Show me anyone who has and I will show you an unsatisfied man.”

“Should I not do the show then?”

“Oh, so she did want something.”

“Am I a fool to have committed to an exhibition?”

“Not necessarily.” Lucien sits with Nicholay, emptying the contents of his pipe into a tobacco tin. Tapping out the last dried shreds, he says, “Why don’t you go home and clear your head, and then stand before your canvas? See it as if it were already painted. Not as space that needs to be filled, but as something that

needs to be revealed. Then it will be done, and others will be able to see what you've seen all along."

"I wish it were that easy," says Nicholay, looking away, frustrated.

"Easy. Hard. Don't think about it. It will happen the way it should."

Nicholay wants to trust his guide.

"Would you like to bring some snails home with you?" asks Lucien, getting up. "They are delectable with a little lemon and garlic butter."

"I think I'll pass, but thank you."

"Just means more for me."

Lucien walks with Nicholay to the door. "Let go of the idea that you *need* to produce or *should* produce. Get these notions out of your head. Something will appear. It will come out of hibernation and roar." Lucien puts his fist gently to Nicholay's chest, just above his heart. "It's in you, and it's scratching to come out."



Nicholay,

Before we met, I was always looking for something else, with curiosity lying beneath the changing showcase that I'd become accustomed to—a lifestyle

in a constant state of energy and fete and restlessness. I never had to apologize for who I was or the things I was doing, because I never let anyone come close enough to care.

I realize now, as we talk about the way things were, that I was afraid. When I walked out and left you, I was afraid for the first time in my life that I would have to think about someone other than myself and that I would have to be responsible for a life other than my own. I was scared of my incompetency, my lack of experience, my inability to keep you satisfied in all aspects and need. I even recognized the possibility that I would never completely fulfill you. Knowing this each day, to be reminded of it—I couldn't live with it.

Since then, I can admit that my thinking was all wrong. It never was about pleasing only you or me, but finding pleasures of our own and then bringing them to the table, to share in their completeness. I find it funny that we are now seeing this; these letters are filled with all of the conversations we should have been having back then. We can spend years dissecting what we should have done differently, but I think it is best to become acquainted with who we are now.

There is much I would like to know about you, and I hope you feel comfortable enough to confide in me. A friendship would mean a lot to me, since I have always considered you and our time together a significant part of my life. I hold you and your talent at such a high regard. I think I have always somewhat

envied your confidence, hoping it would rub off on me and perhaps cure me of my own flat-lining imagination. I want to believe that I can still become inspired, just as I was when I was with you. At least, I have hope in such a possibility.

Tell me Nicholay: Where are you these days?

Zola

Nicholay reads as he walks back from the mailbox to his studio. He has been working on the new triptych consistently, and the three connected paintings are beginning to feel exhibition worthy. In less than a month, he will be one of five no-name painters, sculptors and photographers who have potential for success. Would he define himself this way? Probably not. But with future sales in mind and a mortgage due, and the promise of all of his materials taken care of by sponsors, it was an offer he found difficult to dismiss. Lucien may think less of him for submitting to such pressures, but Nicholay is nowhere close in his evolution as an artist to position himself above buyers, critics, and an audience. He will attempt to play the game, if it means some bread is coming in. Call him a sellout, but he has no desire to starve.

Sitting on a stool by the central canvas, he is letting it all sink in when there is the sound of a car in his driveway. He expects it to be Geraldine, since he

hasn't seen her in a few weeks and there is still work to be done together. But it is Ariana he sees.

"You haven't returned my calls," she says, standing under the steel doorframe with her arms across her chest.

Nicholay chooses a softer brush, dips it in water and assesses his palette. He glances toward the easel, then looks back to the plywood board covered in a variety of wet and hardened globs of pigment. Rolled up tubes, some uncapped for too long, give him the last bits of paint.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" she says, moving uncertainly toward him, her face angry but naturally pretty.

"I don't know what to tell you. I'm working. I didn't know I had to give you an update every hour." This woman wasn't going to dictate to him; he would make the deadline for the show. What else did she want?

"No, you don't have to check in every hour, but I am putting large sums of money into promoting your name and your work, and I need to be assured that you are going to deliver when it comes time."

"You needn't worry," he says, working out an angle with a spatula and then blending its edges with a brush.

“Really? Show me.”

Nicholay roughly puts down his tools. The sound they make on his workbench is one of irritation; she needs to get off him, or he won't paint at all. With open hands, he gestures around him. “What proof do you need?”

Nicholay watches Ariana move into the space, which he's clearly been using. She moves cautiously, almost as though she doesn't want to disrupt his subject matter. Her fingertips hover above one spackled and flush surface, tracing imaginary lines and routes like someone who has just regained eyesight.

The figures are amorphous in nature, a mix of features that are human and animal, male and female. There are feathers and fingers, eyes and hooves, mouths and tusks. If someone stares long enough, deep enough, they could delineate the outlines of a woman, man and child in each composition.

“They are complete souls,” whispers Nicholay from behind her. He is standing so close he can smell laundry detergent on her clothing.

“I can see them,” she says, as though entranced by how the creatures look at once alive, and ready to leap out and devour her whole. She stares at his work, and he stares at her, neither one of them speaking.

Finally, she turns to leave, walking past him and brushing his side as she goes. The motion makes Nicholay's skin tingle, and it takes everything inside him to resist grabbing her hand and pulling her back to explain.

He remains in the studio as he watches her walk across the yard. A bee buzzes around him, circling his head, then exiting through a chip in one of the glass walls. Ariana disappears from sight, leaving a powdered auburn dust swirling in the road.

Could she even begin to understand what he sees? Could anyone? As soon as these paintings are finished, he will be able to send them off with her to the mainland. However, his original plan of not attending the show has changed. He has found a new interest.

Zola



Crawling from beneath the covers of her bed in the azure of first light, Zola pulls a wool sweater over her head, warm leggings around her thighs and thick socks onto her feet. The world is still in shadows, except for the slight blue tinge of pre-dawn that, by the time she makes it into her kitchen, will become the golden cast of the sun shining through the marbled panes of every New Englander's eastern-facing home. Through the windows she's cracked, to let out some of the dry radiator heat in the middle of the night, she hears forks scraping

on plates, and from the house next door comes the aromas of coffee and wood smoke and the clambering noise of young children getting ready for school. Zola gathers her waders and tackling box and puts on a knit hat and rain jacket. She hasn't picked up a fishing pole since Pamplona, but what better way of facing her past than to try again at something she once loved?

Zola can almost be mistaken for an adolescent young man among men, standing in line in her oversized gear, waiting to get a coffee from the breakfast cart. They let her go ahead of them, not knowing what else to do. Sometime in their lives, their fathers had taught them that chivalry wasn't dead; women and children always go first.

Below the wharf, crates are hauled on to trawlers, nets are detangled and picked clean of debris, and ropes are stacked up around strong arms to tie-off or tie-down. Zola knows some of the guys from the pubs and restaurants around town, the places where they sell their catches in exchange for hot meals and strong drinks. They are men of lore, the weather and the sea, spending their isolating days among rotting fish bodies, the lead of petrol, and the unpredictability of swells and gales. There is a brutality to them, a hard coolness that makes her wonder if the affection of a woman could ever warm them, or if they will forever be wedded to the spirit of the Atlantic Ocean. Even when she

turns around to thank them, they are looking past her—far, far beyond the mouth of Casco Bay.

“If I knew to behave better, but I say the attire suits you,” says Chris, walking up to her as she’s about to hand over a couple bucks for her coffee. “I got this. Put it on my tab,” he says, smiling down with his big Nordic face. “It’s a real treat to buy my favorite bartender a drink.”

“What tab?” says the man in a bowler hat and fingerless gloves, pouring a steaming cup of joe for the next person in line.

“I’ll get you later, Griff, I promise,” says Chris.

“Thanks,” says Zola, putting the money back in her pocket.

“Don’t mention it. You know you’re something for braving the port at this hour. Don’t tell me you stayed with one of the Duckies last night.” Duckies are what the locals refer to as the “young blood sailors,” usually obnoxious trust funders joy-riding around in Daddy’s boat, or the stoic merchant marines that frequent as many coastlines as they do hookah bars and pool halls, looking for easy girls.

Chris isn’t one to talk either, since most of the year he lives on his boat, but as soon as winter blows in, he usually shacks up with some crazy woman or another. He has a reputation in town for his foul mouth and disgusting jokes, and

it isn't a surprise that Jules befriended him over a night of drunken debauchery. The two men are often seen together comparing notes, or taking turns trying to impress a female, stumbling around in heels too tall.

Chris looks surprised when she asks where to find the best spot to fish alone is. "The water will be calmer down a ways, on the other side of the bridge," he says. "It's off-limits to motor boats, and the sandbar stretches further than any other part of the peninsula, so you can wade."

Casting from land where a snag on a rock or in some tall weeds is much more likely is the surest way of losing a fly. Not to mention, she is rusty.

Chris is on his way to check his traps, but offers to take her down to the cove.

"I think I can find it. I don't mind exploring."

"You know where to find me the *Laila* at slip three," he says. "And send that kooky Polynesian my way when you see him, I got some purple sea urchin that will really get his dick hard."

The beach gnats make the seaweed pulse with a sound like the electric pen of a tattoo artist. Zola sticks the handle of her pole into the sand, pointing straight up towards the faint strata of translucent clouds scattering in the new sky. She sets her fishing kit on a nearby rock, and opens the yellow lid to inspect its contents: a wrapped clipping of line, artificial nymphs of green duck feathers, two spools of black thread, a packet of hooks, skipping stones, an origami sailboat Ernesto had once sent downstream to her, and a pair of reading glasses left behind by a stranger.

The knot comes back to her quickly, as though they aren't her fingers tying the fly on, but his. She recognizes her own knuckles, but not how they expertly roll while threading the string. Her mind seems to expand like a sponge, when she finds herself this close to the water's edge. She lets it lap at the toes of her rubber boots, but no farther will she go. The fly dangles from the cork and graphite pole in her hand, slightly slack in the direction of the light wind. Timing is everything.

She recites a stanza from Tennyson while directing her line in a motion slower than a whip, leaving the last word to propel her lure a good fifteen feet across the crescent-shaped inlet, barely rippling the surface as it lands.

The streams through many a lilled row

Down-carol-ling to the crisped sea,

Low-tink-led with a bell-like flow

A-tween the blossoms we-are-freeeeee.

She waits.

Zola understands her place in the scheme of things. She can send out anything she wants with good intention, but if she doesn't have the patience or the wherewithal to accept universal disappointment or discouragement, then she wasn't cut out for such endeavors in the first place.

As she thinks about growing pains, she feels a slight tug that barely bends the rod, but she releases the bail on instinct. As soon as she does, the line goes limp and the movement at the end stops. False alarm.

Suddenly, though, the line jerks fast, running out quickly a good five feet at an angle, making the reel handle spin quickly under her right palm, smacking against her thumb as it turns. Wanting to give the barbed hook enough time to lodge itself in the mouth or throat, she continues to wait, watching the line zigzag through the water.

Finally, she flips the bail back over to lock and begins winding the spool, slowly at first. There is tension on the line, but she still isn't fighting much. Not

until the last few yards does it really give her trouble. But she stands her ground, reading the pace and energy of the fish, and acting upon what it tells her to do.

When her catch is brought in and breaks the surface, she lets it flop down into the sand.

“Looks like you got an alewife!”

Zola turns to see Chris sitting on the breakwater wall.

“What do I do now?” she calls over to him. Chris jumps down into the sand, and comes over to her.

“Figured you would need help with this part.” He pulls a screwdriver out from under his jacket, and hands it to her. She looks at him, unsure. “See how it’s sharpened on the end?”

Zola nods.

“Okay,” he says, squatting on the beach. He puts his fist around the alewife’s pearl and slate-colored body, instantly calming the wild flapping of its golden finned tail.

“Should I take the hook out?” she asks.

“You don’t need to.” Zola kneels down next to him with the tool in her hand. “Okay, see this spot above the eye? The temple,” he says, pointing to where

he means. Its soft yellow eyes seem to be begging for mercy. “Now just shove it in right there.”

“This is the only way?” she asks, nervously.

“It’s the best way. He won’t suffer anymore.” Zola can see the asthmatic breathing begin. The fish is becoming sluggish, and the tail is barely twitching. Zola’s jaw tightens as she jams the spike into its head of cartilage and flesh, without hitting a shard of bone.

“It’s like the spot was meant for just that, huh?” says Chris, as she withdraws the screwdriver.

“I’ve never killed anything before,” she says.

“It’s not the best eating, but the more you do this, the luckier you get.”

Chris bleeds the fish for her, then gives her a few pointers on how to prepare it.

“You keep it,” says Zola.

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” she says. “Now that I know I can do this, I’ll give it another go another time.”



“Say you’ll come,” says Natalia. “I don’t give a shit about architecture or conservation reform, but you need to meet this guy.”

Adam has a gig catering a private party, coordinated through a mutual acquaintance, and Natalia is trying her best to hype up the host to Zola with a mixed bag of ulterior motives. Zola is curious; Natalia is pulling out all the stops on this one. But she’s always hated the idea of being set up and just the thought of walking blind into a date sounds so awkward to her, so she has never once followed up on any of her friends’ attempts to play matchmaker.

“He’s a transplant, too, and a writer,” says Natalia, while waiting for Adam to finish his prep list at the restaurant. This afternoon is their third trimester doctor’s exam, and Zola can tell they are both anxious to get going to see on camera how perfect their baby is.

“You do realize we may have nothing in common?” says Zola, tapping her pencil on her ordering sheet. She came in early to help Jules with the end-of-the-month inventory, yet Jules is nowhere to be found.

“In common with who?” asks Adam, unbuttoning his chef’s coat.

“Honey, please tell me you have another shirt to wear,” says Natalia. Adam looks down at his *Violent Femmes* tee shirt, threadbare where the cotton has begun to pull away from the iron-on decals.

“What’s wrong with it? Summer of ’98. You were just a giii-rl,” he teases. Natalia relents as he kisses her cheek. “Got to keep it for the kid, anyway,” he says. “He’s gonna be cool just like his papa.”

“Right. On second thought...” Natalia rolls her eyes, flashing Zola an I’m-over-the-moon-for-this-one smile.

“I’ll think about it,” says Zola.

“That’s what I like to hear,” says Natalia, slowly climbing off the bar stool, her body adjusting to the weight of her belly. She groans. “I better get my ass back.”

“It looks okay from here.”

“Thanks, girl! I have a feeling you’re going to like Max. And if you don’t, I promise never to subject you to another one of my awful plans again.”

“Deal.”

The happy couple leaves, and Zola puts down her clipboard to see if Jules has come in.

She knocks on his door. “Jules?” she says, her head resting on the frame. There is some movement in the room, but it may just be the cooling unit in the window; they can get loud when they need to be serviced, and even when Jules isn’t occupying a room, he keeps the A/C as cranked as a meat cooler. “Jules?” She raps the knuckle of her index finger against the door.

“Do you need me?” His reply is muffled.

“It’s almost time to open for lunch service.”

The door opens abruptly, the chain still in place. Half of his face is visible: rich brown eyes, caramel skin, the wider side of his nose, and his hair as she’s never seen it before, dry and ruffled like a teenage boy’s. His breath smells of peanuts and scotch. “I’m not feeling it today, Zola. Ever just want to walk away for good?”

She looks at her feet, boring black flats on an ugly geometric carpet. “I have.”

He opens the door wider, and she can see he’s not his usual self. He’s wearing his old college wrestling sweatshirt and a pair of sweatpants. He isn’t

wearing shoes, not even socks—nothing shiny to look at. “Do you want to come in?” he asks.

She hesitates, then decides she is comfortable enough and steps into his room. He shuts the door, and she tries to figure out the most appropriate place to sit. The TV is airing sports highlights. The alarm clock is a blank gray screen, having been unplugged from the wall. Three cell phones sit on his desk, along with a pair of cuff links, a bottle of cologne, and a pack of unopened gum. Other than these items, there are no other signs of an occupant. She is surprised that the room doesn't feel more lived-in.

She sits on the matching footstool of the overstuffed chair in the corner. Jules goes to the end of the bed, close by. “My wife doesn't love me.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know,” he says, flatly. “She married me because I was her best option.”

“What does she do exactly? If you don't mind me asking.”

“She sells novelty products at home parties. Completely futile.” He flicks the TV off, and Zola realizes she's been staring at it. “I can't make her happy and she knows it, but as long as there is money in the account, she won't leave.”

“Do you want her to leave?”

“I want to leave and do her a favor.”

“Where would you go? Would you stay here?” Jules has become a regular part of her routine; she can’t imagine him going away, not now, not when she is just starting to get her feet under her.

“I want to go back to the Philippines and work in my aunt’s orphanage. My parents are getting older and as their only son, I will one day inherit rice fields and land that has been in my family for well over a hundred years. I’m trying to keep them holding onto their shares. The developers want to build more malls.”

Jules is distraught; it’s all over his face. Zola wants to touch his hand in comfort, but she stays where she is, listening to his stories about living on the island as a kid. About the little white owls that nested in their sugarcane fields, fields that were burned by revolutionaries, and how horrified he was to witness this event and the other crimes that followed.

How he lost his virginity too young in a brothel, like the other boys who hung around the military camps and sex shows, hoping to make quick money playing poker with the soldiers.

How his father had another son, a brother unknown to him until he was ten, when he moved into their house. His mother’s quiet acceptance. His father’s

domineering eccentricity. They were rich in their homeland, with chauffeurs, maids and nannies, even a pet monkey. When they came to the United States in '82 with all their money strapped to their chests, they could barely afford to live in section-8 housing of a Philadelphia ghetto. Jules was thirteen at the time, growing up in a neighborhood where getting involved in sports was the only alternative to joining a street gang. Too small to play basketball, Jules became a wrestler, a good one. He went college. Landed a decent job; became successful. When his parents went back to Manila, he bought them a house. He married a white girl, because that is what it meant to be an American.

“I know how it is to try to convince yourself that you got everything you wanted, but still feel that gap of uncertainty,” says Zola.

“She is the kind of woman that most men dream of possessing,” says Jules. “And that’s exactly how I’ve seen her since the day we married, as a possession I worked hard to have. But she gives me a headache with her demands, and the more I give, the less she respects me.”

“Then maybe you should stop handing over the keys so easily. Maybe find other ways of showing her who you are that doesn’t involve buying her things,” says Zola. “Why not take her to the Philippines? If you two can survive an environment outside your comfort zone, then the two of you can survive anything.”

“You’re right. I would be a coward if I just up and left her high and dry,” says Jules. “I could totally take her with me. She’s never met my parents and the beaches are amazing. That’s what I’ll do.” Jules begins pacing, unable to sit still with his enthusiasm. “I have to make a call.”

“Don’t let me keep you,” says Zola, standing to go.

One of his three phones is already to his ear. Zola lets herself out, thinking she had written off Jules too quickly. You don’t really know a person until you know what they are afraid of.

She is a coward for walking away from Nicholay, she realizes. She never looked at it that way before, but now she sees that Jules is a lot better than she is at calling things as they are. She knows she has rationalized many of her choices as she’s moved from place to place, but did she really emit the guilt of cowardice? She is no anomaly after all, just another undecided girl looking for her best option.

And if such an implication didn’t hit home for her, the letter sitting in her mailbox did.

My Dear,

When we first arrived at the steps of the sanctuary, what were the unanswered questions we brought with us? You told me once our love filled in all

those open crevasses that revealed your soul to the world. I never understood this kind of comfort, and continued to seek it in other forms. I hurt you with these pursuits, I know this; but I never meant to cause you any deliberate pain. In the end my selfish needs were never met, and to this day I question the choices I made with you, with others, and for myself.

These days I'm closer to understanding the unattainable. I struggled for years trying to achieve what has never been done before. But it wasn't just a pigment or a brushstroke I was trying to create; it was always something more that I couldn't put my finger on.

Do you know how we associate certain hues with feelings, thoughts, or memories? Red is the color of the heart. Blue is a mood close to sorrow. Green means life. White is something anew.

I find that many of my paintings are incomplete, because I'm always looking for something else between colors. Can you really name the color of mist at the horizon? The color of sweat and tears, the color of pear juice on your chin, the color of wanting and needing, the color of remembering? How about the things never seen, but always felt? The color of no name.

It seems to me it is the people that eventually leave you, rarely the places. So, why try to capture impermanence, when we know very well that we can't?

Nicholay



Tonight's party is on the other side of town and Zola takes her time getting there, walking uphill towards the historic Eastland hotel. The address Natalia gave her is only two streets over from this landmark. Zola tries not to have preconceived notions about where the guy lives, but there is definitely a type of person who lives here and the last thing she wants to listen to is some West End hipster going on about what he deserves from others, when all he does is sound like an asshole.

"Max is from Boston," Natalia tells Zola when she gets there. "He's spent some time in Europe too. Lovely dress, by the way, much better than that wrinkled number I saw you wearing the other day. I was beginning to worry that you thought ragamuffin chic was in."

"So what's so great about him?" asks Zola, taking in the other people in the room. She recognizes a handful from past gatherings, but can't put a single name to a face, other than Lucy. Everyone knows Lucy as the muse to one too many men. Zola has seen semblances of her on local gallery walls, with vacant eyes and never the slightest hint of a smile. In the flesh, she is crane-like as she moves through the crowd, her slinky dress about to fall off her anorexic body, her blank angelic face telling of a life of being used.

The space itself is open concept and seems to serve multiple purposes, though it does not extend to the bathroom and bedroom, which are visible through glass-blocked dividers. Three of the four mustard-colored walls are covered in art of all shapes and sizes, with only a few inches separating each mat or frame. The fourth wall is covered with shelves of books and albums, so many that Zola could spend days feeding her head.

“He writes criticism. You’ve probably read some of his commentary,” says Natalia.

“Oh God,” says Zola, having a flash of recognition. “You’re not talking about Maxwell Laurie? The last thing I read of his, I responded to with a not-so-nice letter to the editor.”

“You have crossed paths already, then. Let’s formally introduce you. It’s long overdue.” Natalia grabs her arm and drags Zola across the room toward a man with a confident build surrounded by complimentary-looking people. Natalia pulls her right up to him like a parent encouraging a shy child. “Max, I want you to meet a friend of mine.”

Maxwell Laurie is a lot younger than Zola expected. His views on the artistic experience are archaic for their time, and Zola said so in her letter to *The Port*. She expected an older man with silver hair, an outdated suit, and maybe

even an obvious hair piece; someone who appeared as detestable as he sounded. But no, Maxwell Laurie is attractive by anyone's standards, and Zola is embarrassed by her own assumptions.

“Max, this is Zola.”

Max slips a hand from the pocket of his jeans, and switches his drink from his right hand to his left and reaches out to her. He has charm, with chestnut hair beneath a newsboy hat and a wide, jockey smile. His forearms are tanned and defined beneath the rolled-up sleeves of a white button-down shirt, and his shoes are two pointed signals of poise—definitely not boots, but the kind of footwear a modest or practical man never wears. He takes pride in his appearance and it shows. He is not what Zola normally finds appealing in the opposite sex; he's too pretty for her taste, but there must be something else that Natalia knows will make her consider him.

“‘The artist is nothing without the gift, but the gift is nothing without the work,’” he says, taking Zola's hand.

“Excuse me?”

“It is one of my favorite quotes of Emile Zola's.” He switches his glass again. “But I think a recent personal favorite of mine is, ‘His perception of the creative experience has all the insight of a man masquerading as an artist.’”

“Who said that?” asks Natalia.

Zola’s cheeks are burning. He is quoting her, and is clearly enjoying her discomfort.

“Apparently someone posing as the patron saint of the arts,” says Zola finally. “I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“Don’t worry about it. I actually found it an interesting perception. Aren’t we all masquerading as someone else?” He sounds sincere in his response, and Zola is relieved. In a way, she feels singled out, as if they are the only two in the room and they have no other choice but to interact. “Natalia mentioned you were coming,” he says. “I was looking forward to meeting you. It’s always nice to meet people in the flesh, especially when they seem to have—” He stops as Natalia disappears to the table with food, unabashedly abandoning them. He chuckles. Zola wonders what he was going to finish saying.

“So when you’re not attacking critics, are you working on anything else?” he asks.

“At the moment, a piece on oyster farming.”

“Interesting.”

“Not really. It’s boring as hell. Actually the bits on mating are—” Zola stops. “In a perfect world, I would be able to write about something other than shellfish that breed, but unfortunately, that is the height of their existence and mine right now.”

“I would love to read it.”

“Thanks. That’s nice of you, especially after I said such horrid things about you.”

“I’m a critic. I’m not supposed to be liked or agreed with. That’s the profession. I tell people what I think and hopefully it gets them thinking for themselves. It’s different than telling people what to think. I would never do that.”

“I could never do it.”

“Do what?” Max asks, his expression kind.

“Not care what others think of me. But maybe that’s my problem. I’m always so worried about getting to the bottom of things and having people see me so low and exposed, sometimes I feel like I’m not telling the truth, that I’m being dishonest.”

“Readers may be relentlessly judgmental, but many of them also want to relate. They are more looking to connect with your story than put you on trial.”

“You’re probably right,” says Zola. At least, it sounded right to her.

“Look at it this way. Another set of eyes belongs to another heart, mind and soul. No one sees things exactly the same. My green may be your blue—”

“Sorry, what did you say?”

“My green may be your blue.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

“It has to do with subjectivity.”

“No, it’s a sign.”

“Sorry?”

“Someone said that to me once. At the time, I thought it was an excuse for something else...” Zola distinctly remembers a long, drawn out conversation on a car ride with Nicholay after he asked her if she loved him. He didn’t like the word “love,” and believed that people who used the word too much had turned it into something without value. “It’s like saying, ‘I cheese sandwich you’ over and over again,” he’d said. He made Zola feel stupid for loving him.

“That sounds like a story to me,” says Max. “We want to be understood, yet no two people see things the same way. So, instead what do we do? We learn

to accept. It's about making different deductions over the same shared experience, don't you think?"

"I think I should go find Natalia before she eats all your dip," says Zola, choosing a lousy way out of a real conversation, but the way Max looks at her—she refuses to be so transparent.

Max laughs. "It was nice meeting you, Zola. Your words complement you well, and I truly mean that in the most genuine sense."

Zola shakes his hand again. "Maybe we can talk some more another time."

"I would like that," he says, handing her a business card. "Call me. And keep me in mind if you ever need someone to bounce ideas off of. I would be much obliged."

"I will, and thank you," she says. And with that she goes to find her friend, who is indeed devouring the last of the dip.

Natalia sees Zola, and all she has to say is, "I told you so."

But Zola is distracted by the memory of Nicholay, wondering if the two of them would still see things that differently.

Nicholay



The last art event Nicholay attended was with Zola, and he can imagine what she would say if she saw the clothes he has laid out for tonight. If she were here she would probably sneak off to iron his shirt, add a tie when he turned around, or maybe even replace the belt. But the boots she would leave alone, knowing it is all a matter of compromise.

From his closet, Nicholay pulls out a garment bag containing a jacket made of black velvet with a black silk lining. Sexy even for a man, it was Zola's attempt at making him look gallant, though he could never really pass as an authentic European man, having the stature of a mason and the face of an honest woodsman. A week ago, though, he finally brought the unworn gift to a tailor in town to adjust a couple of seams in the shoulders and the hem of the sleeves. Now, examining himself in the mirror, he thinks he looks like a cross between a lounge singer and a spy. The only thing amiss is not having Zola on his arm in her poppy-colored dress.

The painting of her leans against the wall, resting atop an old traveler's trunk.

"I feel overdressed," he says, getting rid of the tie and undoing a couple buttons of his shirt. This looks and feels much better to him.

He glances at the painting again. Her left hipbone and the dimple of her buttocks need more shadowing, but other than that the painting is truly the image of her frozen in time, the flour and dough in her hands as lifelike as a picture show. “I would feel more myself if you came with me,” he says, straightening out the alignment of his shirt to match the fly of his pants.

Zola was always much better at working the crowd, attuned to others and knowing how to behave. These things are lost on Nicholay, but he never bothered to try; why would he change if he had someone like her to get him through a night like this? He hadn’t foreseen that one day he would be going to such events alone.

He rubs his chin where stubble has grown in. “I know. I probably should’ve shaved,” he tells her. This is the most dressed up he’s been in ages.

“I will tell you all about it when I get home,” he says, putting his wallet into the inside coat pocket, and grabbing the keys off the dresser.

Leaving his bedroom, he keeps the light on.



Walking into the gallery space is like crossing the border into an alternate universe. Beneath an atrium, cross sections of ceiling beams are exposed to a dark crystalline sky, and contrast fittingly with the hi-gloss cherry wood floors and potted plants throughout its corridors. The bare and glittering arms and legs of

women balance the sharp contours of men, and the rise and fall of their interchanging languages remind him of how long it has been since he's attended a party in the city. It is a euphoric sea of perfume, sex, and champagne, and he is hesitant to ride the wave.

Ariana spots him before he can escape, motioning him over enthusiastically. Negotiating his way through the dazzling specimens filling the room, he catches bits and pieces of conversation, but mostly he goes unnoticed. He sees his paintings hanging on the far wall beside a turntable setup. Sets of eyes look at him from each canvas, wondering why they are there too.

The deejay switches to a French version of some pop music, but Nicholay can't let his inhibitions fade away.

Ariana receives him on the other side of the crowd, kissing him upon each cheek before she introduces him to the guests.

"I'm glad you came," she whispers. "I didn't know if you would."

"I couldn't miss my own show, now could I?" he says, his lips close to her ear.

"But you thought about it. I saw you at the door."

“Just seeing what I was getting myself into.” He eyes the deep neckline of her dress; it dips almost to her ribcage.

“We shall make it worthwhile, then,” she says, with confidence.

“It already has been.”

“Ariana has such an eye for new talent.” Nicholay overhears a flamboyant black man say to a woman, and they both look him up and down as though he is on an auction block. He is put off by this, but doesn’t let it show.

“So what do you think?” he asks Ariana.

“I think you are good at what you do. And if you let me, I can give you a name. I think you’re a beautiful man.”

“That’s it?”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought you would have some thoughts of your own on the paintings.”

“I told you, I think they’re good. You are the whole package, Nicholay. This is what the people want, not some crazy old man’s work that I have to dig out of an attic, or pry out of fingers. They want art that is mod to their lifestyle, that they can hang in the corner penthouse overlooking the Seine. In the ski chalet in the Alps. They can live vicariously through your work, because it is alive just

like the streets of Rio, and rich with meaning like the Zen-like religions they follow.”

As Nicholay listens to Ariana, he realizes she is not solely in the business of collecting; she also enjoys the company of the painters. Ariana had piqued his interest, yet he can see now there isn't much beyond her façade. He has known women like her—self-serving in their nature, and successful. She wouldn't want him for any reason but to satisfy her own needs and desires. He would very much enjoy her body, but he knows she would never come close to fulfilling him. This isn't enough for Nicholay and it certainly would never be enough for her. She is attracted to those who have imaginations because she doesn't have one of her own.

As Nicholay steps outside to smoke, he sees Lucien walking up to the entrance. Stopping to light his own pipe, he says, “Hard to breathe in a room full of air, isn't it?”

“Something like that,” says Nicholay, touched by the fact that Lucien showed up. “Have you come to see your hack student squirm in a room full of critics?”

“Screw 'em. They know nothing,” says Lucien. “Are you headed back in?”

“I was actually thinking about leaving.”

“Good. Let’s get out of here. I’m already short on air.”

The two men walk down the stairs and down the long drive. The city is a prop and the night surreal, and Nicholay has glimpsed what he could become, and left it behind. That wasn’t him in that room. It was an impostor. An artist posing as an artist—the worst of the kind. All the approval he needs is from the white-haired man beside him, smelling too much of brandy but still walking tall. He must have been a sight in his day, thinks Nicholay, not knowing who is really doing the following or the leading, or where they are actually going. It doesn’t matter. He now knows what he doesn’t want and a little more about what he does. It really wouldn’t be so bad to end up like his teacher; there are far worse things to be.

Lucien hasn’t said much since they left. He just stares ahead, humming under his breath—probably painting something in his head. They round the block to the park and continue on, with the river and the trees as their guideposts.



Nicholay,

Sometimes I can’t help but think that I’m not particularly good at anything. I seem to be mediocre at a variety of useless things, but not particularly good at the things I want to become better at. I want more time in the day and

often get worried when I don't get a chance to sit down and write at least a few lines. Occasionally, I get angry toward anything or anyone who interrupts or takes away from this time. This is why I am glad to be alone; because I don't want to give up the short hours of my day to anyone. No one should have to, if they must feel so torn away from what they really want.

There's a street preacher that stands in the square by my house, spouting his interpretations of the Lord's word. I'm certain he doesn't get paid for this, but he is there every day, despite people yelling from their windows for him to be quiet. He has a following, too. His apostles stand behind him, three or four men, offering an 'Amen' every now and then when they feel inspired by his verses. The preacher feels chosen to do this, and his followers believe in him simply because he speaks so passionately. He believes what he says is the only truth and so the others do, too.

I think we all want to feel this sort of devotion to something. Because aren't we all just looking for confirmation of our existence?

The nearest I've gotten to this, so far, is finding meaning through the written word. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about, because there is no other feeling close to creating something from nothing. The closest comparison I can think of is having a child. And as we have learned, it is difficult to devote your life

to both. One must eventually choose; either you live your life for yourself or for others. It seems to me that we have gotten everything we have asked for.

Zola

Has he gotten everything he has asked for? Nicholay thinks there could be some accuracy to this. He has accepted the fact that his benchmarks for success will always be spread out in such lengthy intervals that he will only see true progression when he has a full life's work under his belt. Nicholay plans to paint until he dies without retiring. No plan, other than to keep doing what he's been doing. Some may question where the reward is in being this committed to something until death, which makes Nicholay laugh, because no one promised a reward, at least not to him. There are definitely similarities between him and Zola; they are both opportunists maneuvering through an incongruent world.

There is not much Nicholay looks forward to, because he can't be certain where he will end up. But he has come to look forward to Zola's letters as the weeks go on. He is reminded of her idiosyncrasies, the ones that made him fall for her in the first place. With a maturing insight, it is hard for him not to feel some sort of renewed attraction for her. He hasn't met anyone like her since.

The phone has been ringing for over an hour. Nicholay knows it's Ariana and hopes that if he continues to ignore her, she will put the check in the mail and call it a day. Some women are just more persistent than others, and then there is the possibility that Ariana will get in her car and come over, like she's done before. Maybe if he goes away for a little while and can't be found at home, she will give up all together. A change of environment may even do him some good. Maybe Lucien has some suggestions; after all, he seems to have the whole avoiding-women thing down.

Nicholay waits for the ringing to stop, then picks up the phone.

Zola



Zola doesn't have to scrounge up the courage to call Max. He calls her instead, asking if she would like to come along for a private purchase he is considering for his collection. He wants her opinion on a few pieces, he'd said, and he can't be sure that anyone else will be as straightforward as she is.

They choose to meet in the square downtown, in front of the bookstore. When Zola arrives she sees that a few late season vendors are still open. Max is running behind, so Zola talks with Bernard until he arrives.

Walking hurriedly toward her, Max waves and smiles. "I'm so sorry to keep you. I got stuck on a call on my way here."

"No worries. I was learning the secret to Bernard's brioche."

"Lots of butter, I presume?" Max greets Bernard with nod. "An acquaintance of mine brought some souvenirs back from his latest trip and wants me to look at a painting. Our tastes differ, but he has a sense of mine. He only lives a few blocks from here."

They leave Bernard's cart with bread samples and walk out of the park.

"How long have you been collecting?" Zola asks, as they head south.

“Since the first piece my father gave me. He bought it in Cuba in the seventies and gave it to me for my eighteenth birthday. Because of the lack of materials available to Cuban artists, it’s painted on a scrap from a canvas sail. The paint is of an unknown blend, but the colors haven’t faded and are just as vibrant as the day he gave it to me. It’s truly amazing how some artists improvise when they have little to work with.”

“Your admiration must fuel your passion for writing,” says Zola.

“It does, but I have moments of questioning like everyone else. Sometimes I wonder if my representations are just another way of labeling, rather than truly understanding.” He adjusts the portfolio case on his shoulder. “How about you? Where do your stories come from?”

“Mostly from experience. Which is hard at times, because I’m not always sure that what I am remembering is accurate, or if it’s me wanting things to be different.”

“I think we often forget how mysterious and flawed the brain is.”

“So you don’t believe in perfection?” says Zola, surprised. “I would think someone who studies art would consider the possibility of it.”

“Ask an artist to find the perfect stone in a quarry and they will pick up any at their feet. Ask a writer to do the same and they will have to ask you to

define the characteristics of a perfect stone, so that they can match it. I'm a writer. I dissect and analyze."

"I've known a painter who thinks everything is beautiful. It used to frustrate me how he saw the world."

"So you don't believe in perfection either?" asks Max.

"Pain, envy, greed, violence—they wouldn't exist in a perfect world."

"Or maybe they are part of a larger symmetry?"

Zola is enjoying the conversation and the walk so much that when they arrive at their destination, part of her doesn't want to go in.

"Here we are," says Max. "I'm going to warn you, Tobias is a bit eccentric, but harmless. He would have made Napoleon jealous with his conquests—actually he may have inherited the leotard pants too, now that I think about it."

Zola laughs.

"Get it out of your system now. If Tobias sees the slightest hint of amusement at his cost, he makes it uncomfortable for everyone, trust me. He's a really sensitive guy." Max turns to use the gaudy doorknocker, a phoenix with a ring through its beak. Zola assumes a neutral smile, and they wait.

“Maxwell!”

A middle-aged woman with fiery hair and powdered face answers the door. She wears a gauzy dress wrapped like an altered toga, tightened around her thighs and skirt hem, and showcasing the sides of her hanging breasts, which are much too large. She is almost a full head taller than Max, with a pendant front at eye-level to anyone of average size, accentuated by a golden charm of a cat with ruby eyes. Green henna decorates her left arm from clavicle to wrist in intertwining vines and flower buds, and Zola can't help but stare at the jewels upon her fingers. Enveloping Max, she rocks his body from side to side with the strength of a gorilla. “Where have you been, sweet man? I overheard Camille, that vulgar loner, say just last week that you wouldn't be around anytime soon. She could only hope that, poor dear—she couldn't do better than you if she tried and everyone knows it. That girl needs to stop feeling sorry for herself. Her father bought her an original Rothko and she turned her nose up at it, telling everyone she didn't care for anything existentialist. Can you believe the audacity?”

“We all have our preferences, Lou,” says Max. He seems pretty accustomed to this tiger of a woman meddling in his personal affairs.

“Who's this?” the woman asks with a wry smile, only now acknowledging Zola, standing beside Max.

“This is Zola. She’s a fellow art lover,” says Max. “Zola, this is Lou, Queen of Art Deco.”

“Christ, another one?” asks Lou, reaching out to Zola.

As Zola suspected, the weight of her hand is heavy in hers.

“Zola’s a writer,” says Max.

“Even worse! I can only take you writers in small doses. My husband collects and I decorate. You writers overanalyze way too much in my opinion. You need to *enjoy* more.”

Lou leads them into a rotund marble entrance with colorful tin sculptures and artificial plants, and for a moment Zola is back at the sanctuary, looking down the stretch of corridor toward the gardens.

They are ushered down a hallway to a room that looks like a bank, with disjointed grey architecture built in layers upon layers of rectangles. Stained glass is in every window, but the display of art is most impressive—more impressive than any collection Zola has seen in New England. Even the galleries of Isabella Gardner are meager in comparison.

“Darling, we have company. Maxwell’s here,” Lou calls toward a leather wing-backed chair.

A small, dwarfish arm emerges from its right side and beckons the group over. Max and Lou don't hesitate, while Zola trails behind, gaping at the walls.

As she catches her hipbone on an oddly placed table, a porcelain swan rocks on the stand, and she catches her breath. "Shit," she says, rubbing the spot above her right thigh.

Max looks over at her. There is an expression of amusement on his face, as if to say, *it happens all the time*.

She joins them and immediately smiles at her first sight of Tobias.

With the airs of a show pony, Tobias can't stand more than five feet tall. His feathery, thinning hair lies so close to his scalp it looks as if it is sewn on. Behind round glasses, his mole eyes shrink back from the rest of his face, as though they would disappear if he breathed in too deep. He is indeed wearing leotard pants in a shimmering green, and his crossed legs look like entangled garden snakes. On his lap sits a Siamese cat, purring with every touch.

In a lisping whisper, he says, "We humans are just like felines. We protect our independence and flaunt our efforts by sticking up our noses, but in the end we have the same dependencies." Tobias rubs his thumb and forefinger behind the cat's ears and the cat squints with pleasure. "We simply need to be touched."

Zola notices the grey cat hair that has collected on Tobias' pants and wonders how long or how often he sits like this. She also thinks about how long it has been since she has been touched by anyone other than the occasional brush of a stranger on the street, or a hug in greeting from a friend. It isn't the same as a direct caress, a caring rub, or the intimate stroke of arousal. Something has definitely been missing. Zola's eyes move from Tobias' lap to Max's hands. They appear both gentle and strong, with the veins of a person who knows how to use his hands.

"Toby my friend. I want to hear about your recent escapades. I'm curious to see what you picked up this time," says Max.

"I can't say it's anything of your taste, but I did think of you." Tobias moves the cat to the floor and gets out of his chair. It is the first time Zola sees his feet touch the ground; it as though he has to climb down from a perch. "The seller was adamant about the story behind the painting, but honestly I could've cared less. She kept telling me I had to appreciate the courage of the artist. His insight. But all I could think of was the price tag she was trying to push for some unknown painter. I talked her down, but it wasn't easy."

They follow Tobias to a door in the corner of the room. He presses some buttons on a keypad and it beeps in response. He tries the handle. It doesn't budge.

“Dear, I think you changed the code before you left, remember?” says Lou from behind Zola and Max.

“Oh yes. Right.” Tobias tries a different order of buttons. This time the door unlocks and they enter.

Full of frames and paper tubes, the chamber feels like a tomb of treasures. Tobias rummages through the clutter. “Here it is,” his voice sings. He produces a smaller canvas from behind a larger framed print. He hands it to Max and they exit the crowded vault.

Max holds the painting at arm’s length; together, he and Toby admire it. “I guess this is one of the paintings from a series of three. I’m curious to know what the others were like. They were bought before I got to the show. What do you think?” asks Tobias.

“What do you think?” says Max, turning to show Zola.

The emerald eyes of a winged child stares back at her from beneath a masked face of fish scales. It bears an external heart on its chest, like an ancient wound that has healed and hardened to a scar. The child is not of this world, too delicate and beautiful to ever survive. There is something so familiar to her, so—

“What is the name of this artist?” Zola asks Tobias.

“Like I said, the artist is unknown to me. American, but trained in Europe. I think his signature is...” Tobias looks over the painting. “Oh, yes, it is there in the bottom right, dear.”

She recognizes the pointed peak of an N and the long loop of a Y, painted lightly in white. They are the same letters she once traced with her own finger. She once knew them so well that she could have forged them.

“Are you okay?” asks Max.

“Look at her. She looks like she’s seen a ghost,” says Lou.

Max mouths the words. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, a ghost,” says Zola. “Would you excuse me? I need some air.”

“I’ll come with you,” says Max.

“Not necessary. I’ll just be a moment,” says Zola, and begins to find her way out.

Max calls after her as she reaches the door. “What do you think of the painting?”

Zola pauses. “I think there is more to know about the artist,” she says, and walks out.

Zola is sitting on the steps outside of Tobias' brick home when Max comes out with a wrapped package.

“You bought it?”

“I figured if it could illicit such a reaction in you, there must be something to it. Are you feeling better?”

“I like to think of myself as someone with an open mind, but there are some things I just don't understand,” she says. Max sits down next to her on the stoop, and rests the paper-wrapped painting against the black iron railing. “That painting,” she says, nodding in its direction. “It brought to mind the fragility of life, and how there is so much outside of one's control.”

“Wow. And here I was thinking, ‘Would this look a little gay hanging in my apartment?’”

Zola laughs.

“Seriously, the colors are all wrong. Studio 54 comes to mind—“

“Stop it!” says Zola, but she can't help but laugh.

“What?” says Max, also laughing. “Here I ask you on a day date, and I take you to see pictures of androgynous children. I would understand if you didn’t want to go out with me again after this.”

Zola shakes her head, smiling. If anything, she has to give Max credit; here she is, going through all the possible scenarios in her head and the likelihood of her and Nicholay intersecting once again, and Max is still good-humored and kind, even though he’s well aware she has been affected. He doesn’t seem to need to ask her questions, which she appreciates, since she doesn’t have many answers.

“Let’s say goodbye, and then we can go,” says Max, standing and helping her up.

“I hope I didn’t come off as rude,” says Zola.

“Don’t worry about it. I just told them that you like art so much that sometimes it brings you to tears,” says Max, opening the door for her. They both smile. “They didn’t seem to think much of it.”



Zola,

My first show was a success, not because of the response I received or because the paintings that sold, but because when I left the opening I was absolutely pleased to move on. There was a moment when I wished you could’ve

been there with me, though now that I think about it, you probably would've found the people in attendance as distasteful as I did.

Lucien did come, though, and that meant more than words. Of course if I had told him that, he would've said something like, "Don't let it go to your head; I am just here to scout for some fresh-faced thing that will show me her wonders."

The other thing I wanted to tell you is that I will be away for a few weeks, and won't receive any of my mail until I return home. I have yet to decide on a destination and have been tossing around a couple of ideas, but perhaps I will have more time for rumination, and maybe we can continue our correspondence, as I have been enjoying the familiar voice in your letters. Do you suppose we should speak on the phone sometime? I would suggest e-mail, but it is a trek into town for me to connect at an Internet café.

Thinking of you and hoping some worthy ideas have been knocking on your door. Don't be afraid of the pen. It can do you no harm.

Nicholay

Max asked to see her again. He invited her to visit his friends, who own a bed & breakfast on Chebeague Island. At first, she thought it was strange that he would consider taking her on such an intimate excursion, since they haven't known each other very long. But he was careful to add that they would have

separate rooms, and that he hopes the company will give them both quiet hours to write, as well as some enjoyment exploring the island together.

She agrees, and as she writes the date in her calendar, she notices a circle around a day later this week. Zola racks her brain trying to remember the occasion. It has to be important, or she wouldn't have bothered making the effort marking it down. She has a bad habit of storing her datebook in her head.

“Natalia!” Zola grabs her phone off the table and pulls her friend's number up on speed dial. “If I missed it—Come on, pick up!”

The ring turns into a voicemail. Zola hangs up and calls Adam's cell phone.

“Hello?” Adam shouts into the phone. There's a racket coming through on his end. “That's with a béarnaise, guys!” A banging, metal chorus resounds.

“Adam, it's Zola. I'm glad you're not at the hospital yet. I thought I—“

“Not yet! I'm working so I stay out of her hair. She's gone bonkers with the wait. If that boy doesn't come out by the weekend, they're inducing her.”

“Keep me posted. I'll try her again on her cell, but will you let her know I'm checking in and thinking of her?”

“Will do, Love! See you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I’m in around six. Hang in there!”

“Thanks!” he says. “I’ll see you soon.”

Natalia’s call comes in at eleven o’clock the following evening, when Adam and Zola are at work. Jules allows for the restaurant to close for the rest of the night, and the two of them hightail it across town to retrieve Natalia, getting her to the hospital with plenty of time to spare. But Adam and Zola are most thankful when Natalia finally gives up trying to be Superwoman and demands an epidermal.

“Sugar plums,” says Natalia, glassy-eyed from the drugs that have been put into her spine.

Zola pats her hand, which is covered with needles and tubes. “You’re doing great. He’ll be along soon.”

Natalia screams bloody murder; the candy-coated halo has evaporated. Zola winces.

Indigo Meyer Reece is born at six in the morning, weighing nine pounds, seven ounces, with all his fingers and toes. He is unflawed, not even a freckle upon his skin or newborn wrinkle out of place. This isn’t the name chosen for him originally, but when their clean and healthy baby boy makes his first appearance

in the birthing bed, under the breast of his mother, Adam is crying tears of joy and Natalia is crying tears of happy exhaustion, Zola is the one to point out the unique purplish-blue of their son's eyes. It is then that they decide to move the family's namesake to his middle name and call him Indigo instead, and Zola is honored to play a part in this.

The placenta is put into a freezer bag to be stored until spring, when they will plant it under a pear tree sapling for good luck and good health.

Zola falls in love instantly as she cradles Indigo in her arms.

"You can tell me forever you don't want one, but I know you do," says Natalia, beaming as bright as a star ready to sleep for a million years.

Zola hands over the pink-skinned bundle to his mother, who begins humming a ditty. Before they know it, Zola and Adam are singing along.

Nicholay



Nicholay packs only a rucksack of clothing, a handful of his finest brushes, and a tightly rolled scroll of canvas. He also includes Zola's letters, so he can continue his dialogue with her, and refer to them if needed.

He locks the doors and boards the windows of the house, leaving all of his and Dr. Nightingale's belongings inside, and secures his studio with a heavy-duty chain and padlock—though if some hard-up artist actually decided to break in, the windows could easily be shattered.

Nicholay straps a seatbelt across the width of an unfinished frame. He decided to keep the wood raw, but the painting of Zola is finally complete.

Her eyes look quizzically at him, as if to say, "Where are we going?"

"You will be in good, trusting hands. I promise," he assures her.

He has never promised anything before, to anyone, but this he does mean.

He can't keep her with him, and he knows she isn't supposed to stay.

She was never supposed to stay. He understands this now.

Nicholay makes a stop on his way to the airport. When he pulls into the driveway, Lucien is sitting in his chair, smoking his pipe and watching the road unwind and fall off at the horizon. He is a man who possesses grace doing absolutely nothing but being present.

A week ago, Lucien came to see Nicholay in his studio, worried that the gallery opening had done a number on his student. The painting of Zola was still in the works; still inanimate and without spirit—a body without life, a mimic of the real thing.

“You’re so close to releasing her, my boy. So close.”

But Nicholay had to stop on his own, knowing that his teacher’s expectations would never be met. He knew when no more could be done. Despite the myth that a painter’s work is always evolving and is rarely finished, Nicholay believes that he can take things too far, running the risk of ruining the whole thing and having to begin again.

“Don’t you have work to do?” Lucien calls now from the porch as Nicholay climbs out of the cab of his truck.

“Nice to see you, too,” says Nicholay, walking around to the passenger side to fetch the painting.

“What do you have there? It better not be for me, because I have all I need,” says Lucien, getting up from his chair to meet Nicholay at the top of the stairs.

“In that case, think of it as something to hold on to for me. I will pay you for storage, if you’d like.” Nicholay unbuckles the belt and removes the painting from the vinyl seat on which it safely traveled.

“That’s unnecessary. Let me have a look there. Maybe it will grow on me and I will just decide to keep it.”

“That is my hope,” says Nicholay, presenting the finished piece to his mentor.

On the porch, Nicholay places Zola in the chair next to Lucien’s. Side by side, they look at her, tilting their heads slightly. Lucien smokes, and Nicholay rubs the back of his neck.

“How about a drink? You must be thirsty?” says Lucien, finally breaking their study.

“I should be on my way. I’ve a plane to catch.”

“That’s right, running off to find that *thing*.” Lucien shakes his head, but smiles for the first time since Nicholay’s known him. “I give you a couple weeks,

and you'll be back here realizing that what you were looking for was right where you dropped it." Lucien points to the ground, and Nicholay looks down. "At your feet."

"Perhaps, but it isn't just the painting. There are other things..."

"So be it. Don't forget I—"

"I know. 'You told me so.'"

"Well, I did. But what I was going to say is, don't forget that I like salt water taffy." Lucien pulls a set of keys from the pocket of his yellow pants. Taking two of the keys from the ring, he hands them over to Nicholay. "One is for the front door and the other is for the back. Sorry, I never got a chance to match them."

"I'll figure it out," says Nicholay, clutching the keys in his hand as a gesture of thanks. "Do you mind if I use the head, before I go?"

Lucien gives him the go-right-ahead gesture. Nicholay steps inside, and Lucien follows behind. But as Nicholay walks by the living room he recognizes something and stops abruptly. Lucien keeps moving down the hallway to the back of the house.

On the wall hangs two of Nicholay's paintings from the show, the woman and man—his Adam and Eve. The child is missing, and there is an irony to this that Nicholay picks up on instantly. Hanging next to each other, both figures are turned, as if in conversation with one another. One has horns, while the other has tusks. Between these two paintings should be the third, though without it the series is as poignant as ever.

Nicholay goes to find Lucien, who is rinsing brushes in his kitchen sink.

“Now I know who my secret benefactor is,” says Nicholay. “You didn't have to do that.”

“Of course I didn't,” says Lucien. “But it was either that, or let an awful little man purchase all three. He was a leper.”

“Thank you.”

“Just do me a favor when you get to the States...”

“What's that?” asks Nicholay.

“If you find her, don't let her go. It will be your biggest regret to get so close, only to have her slip out of your hands again,” he says. “I know how you feel about this one. What sits out there on the porch says it all.”

When Nicholay drives away, he sees Lucien and Zola together, waving.
On the rear view mirror he reads: OBJECTS MAY APPEAR CLOSER THAN
THEY SEEM.

He laughs out loud.

Zola



It is the kind of autumn day that doesn't strike a New Englander, because they are so spoiled. The skin still blushes in the mid-September sun, while a saline breeze sweeps up the coastline, reminding the people of Maine how much the sea is a part of them. Zola and Max sit at the stern of the *Casablanca*, on their way out from Yarmouth, knee touching knee, shoe touching shoe.

"You're going to love this place," says Max. "I know I feel more myself when I get away from the mainland, where I don't have to be on a schedule or interact with a bunch of different people."

"Must have been a real treat to leave Boston and come north."

"Don't get me wrong, I miss it from time to time. There's a different mentality there, a real appreciation for education, and working hard to play hard. It isn't just another blue-collar city. Boston's got real soul, you know? You just have to know where to find the pulse." Max props his right ankle on his left knee, and puts an arm across the bench behind Zola. He isn't wearing socks, confirming that it's time to kick back and relax.

"So," she begins. "You know those paintings—"

“Don’t worry about it,” he says, patting her leg. “I took your advice and checked with some contacts of mine. Apparently this guy is the up-and-coming IT guy overseas.”

“That’s not what I—”

“The Casco Bay islands are in sight. Please remain seated until the ferry has safely docked.” The voice on the speaker crackles out, and Zola catches sight of their destination ahead. “We’ll be exiting on the starboard side today and we want to thank you for choosing our chartered lines.”

The islands are still only grey mounds, and from a distance they look like whales in migration. Zola keeps her eyes glued there, imagining one dipping below to feed and disappearing forever.

At some point, she will have to tell Max, but in the meantime—

“Shall we?” says Max. The boat has stopped moving. He puts his laptop case over his shoulder as he stands up.

Zola collects her leather duffle and follows him and a line of travelers down the gangplank to the pier. Walking past the ticket booths, they head toward a cluster of buildings that she assumes to be the center of town. There is only one

general store, a post office, a bank, a school, a café, and a gallery. Who needs all that other stuff anyway?

They buy two coffees for their walk, and continue up the street to the end of town.

“So how’d you end up in these parts?” Max asks.

“It’s kind of a long story,” says Zola, taking in the sight and scent of wildflowers and freshly cut fields. Barbed wire and posts mark the boundaries of properties, but Zola does not see one house along the way.

“Try me.”

“Well, I bounced around for awhile.”

“Nothing wrong with doing the pinball thing for a bit. My father was in the Air Force.”

They take a right down a private dirt drive. “Do you know what I like best about the nomadic life?” he says, as they walk beneath a tunnel of trees toward the ocean. Shadows of leaves and light move over them like a school of glimmering sardines.

“What’s that?”

“The feeling of discovery.” He stops in the middle of the road. “How simply a change in locale can make you feel like a completely different person.”

“Then I’ve been a million people,” says Zola.

“Me too,” he says. “That’s probably why I like you so much. You have multiple personalities like me. That’s why, despite all odds and changes that may come our way, we must continue to write. So we appear sane.”

Zola laughs at how serious Max looks when he says this.

“What?” she asks, searching his eyes.

“You laugh beautifully,” he says.

She sees a protruding veranda in the distance. As they get closer, the curtain of green draws back, revealing a sprawling house on the edge of meadow, and a strip of desolate rocky beach. A carved wood sign swings slightly in the wind, just steps from a stone walkway. The weathervane on the main steeple and dormer swivels in its iron joint.

“Now this is lovely,” says Zola.

“Come on,” says Max, sounding pleased. “Anyone home?” he calls, taking the stairs up two at a time to reach the screen door.

“No!” A man’s raspy voice answers from inside. “Go home. We don’t like no stinkin’ beatniks here.”

A silver-haired man wearing a Cheshire-cat smile and thin-rimmed glasses appears in the doorway.

“What?” says Max. “You’re discriminatory against your own kind now?”

“A smart man would be,” says the man, then opens the door.



Henry Foster ran *The Fern Bed Inn* alone for fifteen years, before Mirabel came into his life.

“She was a gift from the sea,” he says, sitting in a rocking chair positioned between Zola and his young wife.

The four of them have just finished a welcome dinner of raw oysters on the half shell, baby field greens from the Foster’s garden, and quail with plum sauce, and are now taking in the last glimpses of day on the water with aperitifs.

Zola admires the simple charm of the couple and their home. She loves the way neat bouquets of ferns are arranged on tables and shelves, and how the whole place smells as though one has slept in a bed made of the fan-like plants. She is also pleased by Max’s thoughtful invitation, and glad she came.

“If it wasn’t for this woman...” says Henry. “She turned my life on again and has been a godsend to this place.” He motions with his hand to indicate the whole existence he and Mirabel share.

Mirabel smiles and sips hot tea.

“And can you believe I am going to be a father?” says Henry. “At fifty-five. Another marvelous blessing.”

“Henry, you promised,” says Mirabel, giving him a chastising look. She leans over to Zola. “We were going to wait to tell anyone, but clearly Henry doesn’t know how to keep secrets.” She shoots him another look, and returns to her tea.

“Tell us, Zola,” says Henry. “What do you do? Max has been a friend of ours for years and we’ve always wondered when he would bring someone around. When we heard you were also a writer, our immediate thought was, now how could that possibly work?”

“I write, but I’m still working on what I’m trying to say. I’m just enjoying the process right now. Max is really helping me to understand the process more.”

“See, that’s so nice,” says Mirabel. “If I were a writer, Henry here would be dividing our home into territories.”

“It’s a good thing you’re my flutist,” says Henry with a nod of agreement.

“We hope to work on some ideas while we’re here,” says Max. “And maybe if Zola gets comfortable enough and we don’t scare her away, she’ll share something of hers with us.”

Zola can smell the jasmine candle burning on the windowsill. She feels at ease with her new friends. Henry and Mirabel seem to have it figured out, despite their age difference, which Zola guesses to be more than twenty-five years—but maybe that’s why they fit so well together. From what Zola can tell, they admire each other’s uniqueness. Tension is probably as foreign a concept to them as being apart. Zola doesn’t know if she has ever felt that way about anyone. Being alone is what she does best.

She looks at Max, in his chair across from her. His back is against the dark night. A pair of moths is caught in the light of the lantern above his head. Zola can’t get over how attracted she is to him, and not because of how handsome he is, but because she doesn’t have to read into every word he says.

“So what do you kids have planned for tomorrow?” asks Henry.

“Probably lunch at the sandwich shop in town, and maybe we’ll stop in at the gallery,” says Max. “I haven’t been over there in a while.”

“There’s this painter... Mari, do you remember his name? We met him the night you played that opening,” says Henry. “He had remarked to me how much he enjoyed watching you play the flute. Said he wanted to paint you. Of course I agreed with him, as any man would. What was his name?”

“That’s right,” says Mirabel. “He has a house here, up on Shepherd’s Road.”

Henry is rolling a sheet of thin white paper between his fingers. “My substitute for drink,” he says, gesturing toward the joint. “Keeps my head on right.”

“Yeah, not much to worry about out here,” he says, taking a toke, and then passes it to Max.

“Sounds like a man of mystique,” says Zola.

“I’ve heard stories,” says Maribel.

“Have you? And you kept them from me?” Henry teases.

“I just thought they were rumors,” says Mari. “You always tell me to believe only half of what I hear, especially when it comes from the salty broads who run the general store. You know how they like to stir up all sorts of things, particularly about the ones who live here part time. That’s how I became curious

about you, after all. You were that crazy drunk poet who ran a ramshackle inn. I just knew I had to meet you.”

They laugh.

Zola wants to hear more about the man on Shepherd’s Road who is spotted infrequently, like some mythical creature.

“We’ll plan on having you for dinner tomorrow night. A boat comes in in the afternoon and we will have some more guests here. Sometimes they join us for meals, and sometimes they don’t,” says Henry. “Mari, you should go to the market and get whatever’s fresh off the block. And we’ll break out a bottle of Chianti.”

“Sounds great, man,” says Max, gathering his empty cup. “I’m turning in early.”

Zola stands, picking up the blankets she’s been sitting under, and Max takes them in his arms to carry up for her.

“Sleep well, Zola,” says Maribel, “If you need anything, just let me know. We’re happy to have you with us.”

Henry stubs out his nightcap.

“Thanks for having me,” says Zola, before she and Max turn to leave.



The next morning, while laying out a breakfast selection, Mari tells Zola she likes to take rides to various spots on the island to play flute for the hermit thrushes.

“Solitary, the thrush/Sings by herself a song, Song of the bleeding throat,” quotes Henry, his head down as he scratches out something barely legible on a scrap of paper.

“Walt Whitman,” says Zola.

“Very good,” says Henry, looking up and putting the piece of paper into his flannel pocket. “I could easily mistake my wife for a bird. Sometimes I think it’s her on the porch in the morning, but it’s really one of those miniature hermits. I think they follow her back home, thinking she is one of them.”

“Ready?” asks Max, finishing his coffee in a hurry.

Zola grabs an apple and a corn muffin for the road, and they bid the couple a good day.

Zola borrows a bicycle from Mari, a Schwinn in robin’s egg blue with a wicker basket and brass bell. It was a refurbished wedding gift from Henry. Max uses Henry’s rusted jalopy of a bike, but it still peddles all right.

As they bicycle down the road, Max and Zola talk of things they have dreamt of since they were young, and how life has a funny way of detouring itself when something is wanted too much—if you are patient enough to let life happen, it makes the wait all the more worthwhile.

“I was quick to leave home,” says Zola, coasting next to Max. “I couldn’t wait to be on my own.”

“How old were you?” asks Max, swerving his bike in a pattern of backwards and forwards S’s

“Seventeen.”

“I wanted out badly too,” says Max. “I think we all want that at that age, because we think we know everything already. It sure is a wakeup call when we realize we don’t.”

“I spent more time at my grandparents’ than at my own house,” remembers Zola. “I had more freedom there. There was a logging mill up the road from their farm, and as a kid I used to crawl all over the wood piles out behind the property, pretending that I had my own cabin in the woods. I learned how important being alone is—my need for solitude has always been with me.”

Some of the roads are not well groomed, particularly in areas where they have been washed out from rainstorms, with rather large potholes and gravel

deposits they have to walk their bikes around. They have no map, but it is nearly impossible to get lost on the island—if they make enough circles, they will end up right back where they started. They make several stops on the way to town to check out different geological formations or clusters of trees, wishing there were more places like this on earth, but also liking the idea of keeping these places to themselves.

“You must have a unique relationship with you parents,” says Max, as they push their bikes along a stretch with wild briars of raspberry bushes crowding the road.

“I like them enough, but we’re not very close.”

“My parents can’t stand one another,” says Max, shaking his head. “I can’t believe they’ve been married as long as they have.”

“I just know I don’t want what my parents have.” Zola stops on the shoulder of the road, and empties her shoe of a rock that has been rolling around inside and bothering her. Max waits as Zola gets herself situated. “There used to be an elderly couple that lived next door to us—the Tallys. They were in their nineties, and were by far more affectionate with one another. My bedroom window looked down into their kitchen, and I would watch how tenderly they shared that space together.”

Zola and Max keep walking. “I remember looking into their kitchen the night Mr. Tally died. Somehow, his wife managed to get him on their table, and had laid him out so that she could bathe him. They came for his body the next morning. It was probably one of the most beautiful displays of love I have ever seen.”

Zola and Max lay in the bedded October grasses of a field ready and waiting for the sharp cuts of the tractor’s blade.

Chewing on a piece of straw, Max rolls onto his side. “Are you always this hard to read?” he asks. “I’d pay to know what you’re thinking.”

“Only when I’m in a moment. I don’t want to mess it all up by talking about things that don’t really matter.”

“I should probably try that out then. I seem to talk to figure out the next thing to say. It’s the Bostonian in me.”

Zola takes a deep breath. “I’ve been meaning to tell you something about that painting back home.”

“You didn’t like it, did you?”

“No, it wasn’t that,” says Zola. “This going to sound crazy... but I think I was meant to see that painting.”

Max moves to a kneeling position and sits back on his heels. He looks down at Zola and picks a piece of loose hay from her hair. “You were meant to see it? Like the way two people are meant to meet. You can’t explain why, but you feel it deep down inside.” Max gives her his hand, and she accepts it, getting to her feet.

“There is so much that is unexplained out there,” she says, as they walk out of the field toward the road.

Max picks up his bicycle, and she does the same. “If there wasn’t, then there wouldn’t be hope,” he says, mounting the patched seat.

They continue to the bluffs on the other side of the island, which jut from the earth in dirt drifts.

“It looks like rain,” says Max, pointing to boats on the water, where sails are blown out like kites lost at sea.

“It looks like the ink of an octopus,” says Zola, watching the sky darken before their eyes. She feels she needs to tell Max now, or else she never will.

“I knew the painter. From when I lived in Spain,” she says. *I knew him as a man too*, she thinks, but she keeps this thought to herself.

“Weird,” says Max.

“I know.” She nods in agreement. It was weird, strange, surreal, and unusual. She is still trying to understand why and how. Nicholay writing to her was one thing, this was something else entirely.

“Let’s get to lower ground, quick, before we get struck by lightning,” says Max, grabbing her hand.

They slide down the sandy dunes, grass whipping at the legs of their pants, running out the momentum of their bodies on the hard-packed beach below. It is low tide, and the water’s edge is decorated with a shell-and-stone appliqué in white and silver and opalescent.

Zola takes off her shoes, rolls up her pants and sticks her feet in. “Some days this is the only thing that tells me I’m alive.”

Max joins her, wading up to his calves.

“But how do you celebrate?” he asks, taking her hand again in his.

Zola throws her arms around his neck and kisses him. The waves, encroaching on their thighs, soak them from the waist down. They shiver and huddle closer.

“I’m relearning,” she says.

“Then there is hope.” He holds her tightly around the waist so she doesn’t get washed away.

They postpone their return to the inn as long as they can, peddling back slowly, and carrying their findings with them—their pockets full of sand and their hearts full of something they can’t explain.

Nicholay



Nicholay asks the man in official nautical dress on the dock if he has missed the boat. He's out of breath from running down the hill; his bus broke down in the last couple miles, so Nicholay decided to keep going on foot.

"By three minutes," the man says, fastening a holding rope across the entrance of the boarding ramp. "You can take the cargo ferry if you don't want to wait. They're loading now."

Nicholay looks below to the open platform watercraft, loaded with palettes and boxes and a few cars. "What time is the next one?"

"Comes in at five from the island. Leaves around 5:30. You can get tickets over there." The man points to a booth, where a female teller sits behind a plate of glass.

"Thanks," says Nicholay, taking his pack off and sitting down on a bench, on the port side of the cement transit building. He opens his bag and takes out a pen and notebook.

Zola,

You can find me at this address for the next month. Feel free to write. Or, we could meet up. Seeing as we will be so close, it would be silly not to. But no pressure; I understand if you say we should just keep things as they have been.

It is by sheer coincidence that Lucien owns property so near to you. I haven't been in the States for some time, and for a while I didn't think I had a reason to come back. It did cross my mind many times during the plane and bus ride that maybe you are my reason. The physical distance between us hasn't been this near, in years. I have no expectations, only hope...

“See the boat?” Nicholay hears a man say. He looks up to see a small boy atop the man's shoulders. He is pointing toward the bay; the child squirms from his lookout to see.

Planning to finish the letter later, Nicholay puts the notebook away.

The ferry is chugging in, and the men who work on the dock move quickly to their posts to prepare for disembarkation, communicating with one another in Portuguese—a language so close to Spanish, but not quite close enough for Nicholay to understand.

The black and white vessel, like a giant floating block, is negotiated into the slip and calmed like an animal being put into a pen. Nicholay goes over to the

woman at the window to buy his ticket. They make small talk as she processes his card and prints his voucher.

The passengers unload in pairs and singles, and Nicholay waits near the railing, looking out across the water with his back to the dispersing crowd.

“We will begin boarding deck one and all assisted passengers,” the docking agent calls, ushering a waiting group aboard.

Nicholay leans down to pick up his backpack from the ground, and works his way through all the people who are migrating one way or another, upstream or down. With eyes focused on where he needs to go, he pushes through the mass of sweaters and windbreakers and sunglasses. Clumsy bags bump against him as he passes through.

Zola



Amid the throng, trying not to lose her grasp on the clasp of Max's fingers, is Zola, returning to the mainland.

"You with me?" Max calls over his shoulder.

"Wait, do you have my purse?" asks Zola, noticing that it is not hanging across her.

Max stops in the middle of the rush. "Did you leave it on the seat?"

"I must have," she says. "I'm going to run back. Hopefully it's still there!"

Zola heads back on board. She waits patiently in the aisle as an elderly couple puts their luggage away and takes their seats. Ahead she can see a man, his back to her, sitting at the end of the row where she and Max had been seated earlier.

"Excuse me, I think I left something between the seats," she says, approaching.

The man stops writing and looks up.

They stare not knowing what to think. "I did," says Zola, forcing air from her lungs and words to her lips.

Nicholay closes the notebook, and puts it to the side. Zola's heart is pounding. "What am I looking for?" he asks. He leans across the seats, slipping his hand between their pilled cushions to feel for any items wedged between. "I don't feel anything."

"I don't know where else it could be," says Zola. "How—"

"Did you find it?" asks a voice from behind her. Max.

"No," she says, turning back to Nicholay, wishing they had a little more time.

"It's probably in your bag," says Max.

The captain begins his departure speech over the speakers, telling them it's time to go.

"Thanks for looking," she says to Nicholay, feeling torn whether she should leave or stay.

"If it turns up," says Max, handing Nicholay a card with his contact information.

"Sure," says Nicholay, taking the card. He looks to Zola, searching her face.

“Come on, Zola, before we get stuck on this boat,” says Max, making his way to the exit.

“Thanks again for looking,” she says, touching Nicholay’s shoulder tenderly.

“It was worth a try,” he says softly, and he lets her walk away.



Dear Zola,

When we saw each other on that ferry, I had been writing to tell you that I have come to stay for a while. But as fate had it, there was another plan for us. When I initially wrote you a couple months ago, all I wanted to know was if you were okay. And the reason it took me so long to find you – I can’t really say.

Everyone finds closure in his own way, and sometimes we hang on to certain memories, afraid to let go—afraid to be alone out in the big, vast world. The vanity of youth, the belief we are sure of our abilities and what we want can tarnish the fuller picture. And not until we have truly lost something or someone of value are we capable of seeing our faults—that is, if we are lucky.

I am writing to say goodbye, Zola, and that I hope you are well, that you are loved, and that you are creating beautiful art. And that I hope you have not

abandoned your pursuit for something more, because there is so much more out there in the world to love.

Take care my darling, and enjoy the ride,

Nicholay