Close: a Collection of Short Stories

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Close: A Collection of Short Stories

by

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Artist Statement

I begin by imagining the protagonist’s hands. I know my method might sound a bit odd, but I’ve always been fascinated by hands because they’re very telling of a person’s more visceral story to those who choose to pay close enough attention. Hands let me discover what it is the character may do for work, where they’ve traveled or live, their age, possible interests, how they might smell and sound. After cultivating these threads of viable character traits I then consider if a close or wide psychic distance would best serve to strengthen the overall character development of the protagonist and secondary characters as they are presented to the reader. Once I feel as though I have a good idea of who the story’s key characters are and where their motivations lie, I follow their hands to then build the world around them. By focusing on each character’s hands I’m able to identify how each character interacts with one another and how they physically engage with their surroundings.

After I’ve established a character’s outward appearance, I then sit with them for awhile and imagine how others might engage with them if they were real. When creating Nilo, the protagonist in *It’s Time*, I pretended as though he were one of the regular bank tellers who’d be very knowledgable, upbeat and charming when working with customers, but would then go home and almost shut down after having exhausted all of his social energy in his exchanges at the bank. Next I needed to figure out why an introvert would subject themself to a career path where they are expected to be social and value customer service. This train of thought led me to his familial background, which then upped the stakes for his potential reconnection with his long-lost sisters. I chose to have Nilo independently work on a self-made boat with the dream of taking it on the Mississippi River because it’s a very ‘American’ trope that I think is more
interesting to unpack when from the perspective of an immigrant minority who may subconsciously be appropriating a Western fable. By focusing on the perspectives and voices who are often disregarded and unrecognized by both readers and publishers alike, I hope to shake up the literary establishment. As an observer I notice the frequency of people who tend to avoid or shy away from conversations or instances requiring them to step outside of their zone of comfort in order to experience life through the eyes, skin, and bones of someone else. Keeping this in mind, I don’t often provide much, if any exposition before revealing the occasion for story to the reader. Such as with Robin’s narration in *The Storm*, I prefer to introduce my stories with characters engaged in short passages of dialogue or at the onset of a rising action in order to imitate a relatable concept of time that will exist with each reader well beyond the page. Once I’ve done the work of providing the reader(s) with glimpses of the story’s underlying tensions, I then make space for each protagonist to bring the reader(s) inward. In the final story, *No Onions*, for example, Thom corrects his customer’s mispronunciation of his last name and internally calls Mr. Ruttle a “dumbass” while maintaining a respectful external tone. I often incorporate internal dialogue within the first few pages of a short story in order to establish credibility between the narrator and the reader(s). This then allows me to slow the pacing down enough for the narrator to describe the setting, and how characters are then perceived both with and within the world I’m creating.

After countless writing workshops and constructive feedback from my peers, I’m aware that my writing doesn’t always elicit the sense of trust in the reader from the author. As noted in early drafts of *It’s Time* and *The Storm*, I sometimes saturate narratives with redundant details and descriptions instead of letting the reader formulate their own views and motivations about varying characters and the world present on the page. Reflecting on past drafts and the final
versions present in this portfolio, I now understand this process to be my method of figuring out each character’s misfit details and how they will function on the page and work within the fictitious realm. Just as I’ve learned to distinguish and cut out the abundance of unnecessary adjectives in early drafts, I am now working to improve on recognizing and letting go of the hindering descriptions that only distract the reader(s) from the story.

During a productive workshop of *It’s Time*, I’d received feedback about reader’s confusion regarding Eric’s relationship to Nilo and whether they were friends, roommates, or lovers. At the time I’d decided they were roommates and chose to show Eric as the more physically masculine of the two characters. Though I was still uncertain of their relationship myself, I did know that my aim was to juxtapose Nilo’s own struggles with his internalized mental and cultural masculinity. Following my readings of Shaila Abdullah’s novel *Saffron Dreams* and essays by James Baldwin, I discerned that the scenes where Eric attempts to convince Nilo to call Yussef back and connect with his sisters after moving them to the United States from their home in Morocco manifested as intimate synergy. I changed my mind and chose to engage Nilo and Eric as lovers instead of heteronormative roommates because I was better able to justify Eric’s motives for repeatedly answering the phone and taking messages for Nilo though he is annoyed. When I began editing their dialogue to sound as though they’ve been in a committed relationship for a substantial amount of time I no longer felt like the story was resisting me. This then made it easy and enjoyable to write in the organic moments where Eric lays his arm across Nilo’s shoulders or kisses his forehead. My ambition for future drafts of *It’s Time* is to expand on Eric’s expressed insecurity when he asks Nilo if he’s avoiding his sisters as a ploy to keep them from learning of their relationship and their older brother’s homosexuality. My thought is to further complicate the stakes for Nilo when considering how his family’s faith
views homosexuality. The current draft in this portfolio maintains the focus on Nilo and his inner turmoil around being reunited with his sisters and provides no response to Eric’s question from Nilo. I think I created a missed opportunity for myself by allowing Eric’s easy acceptance of Nilo’s blatant shift from the avoidance of his sisters to Nilo then choosing to overlook what Eric is requesting of Nilo.

My original conception of *The Storm* was influenced by Haruki Murakami’s novel *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. I aspire to manifest a similar sense of eerie authenticity for the reader with my use of setting descriptions, time as shown through the paralleled Southern Florida storm, and the conspicuous tension of active betrayal unfolding between two longtime friends. I appreciate Murakami’s usual cat trope in his narratives and included the cat, Isham, as a way to show homage for Murakami’s respected craft. The early drafts of *The Storm* were riddled with excessive adverbs and rushed through the falling out of Robin and Linnet’s eighteen-year friendship. I had made the mistake of dropping the reader into the eye of the storm without providing a clear sense of the characters’ background and the significance of their friendship prior to their demise. I chose to maintain the first-person narration in Robin’s voice then applied my classmates’ suggestions of giving Linnet more room on the page in the interest of allowing the reader to judge who her character is and the stakes she has in their friendship. This story has and continues to challenge me because it’s the first prose I’ve produced with characters I honestly do not like. I plan to turn *The Storm* into a longer story, beginning earlier on in Robin and Linnet’s friendship then carrying the reader along through their destructive end.

When initially sitting down to write what is now titled *No Onions*, I only knew I wanted to try to craft a suspenseful narrative. Inspired by the popularity of commuter bicycling and the widespread use of rideshare services in Portland, Oregon, I decided to create a story with a crass
bicycle repair shop owner named Thom. Aside from Thom’s declared motivation of murdering unsuspecting Uber drivers as his only foreseeable option to maintain his livelihood—however completely disregarding his poor customer service—I didn’t have much of a sense for his characterization. I don’t typically read suspense novels or thrillers, and instead relied on influences from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *a mercy*. I was most intrigued with Morrison’s use of young protagonists’ perspectives and voice to defamiliarize the reader’s own notions of children’s innate innocence albeit shaped by the grueling, unavoidable societal constructs. Thom didn’t strike me as the fatherly type, so I decided it would be interesting if Thom had a child he didn’t know about but who sought him out as a teenager.

I concentrated on Morrison’s use of syntax and diction to manifest a feeling of uneasiness throughout her storylines and did my best to emulate the same techniques. *No Onions* was one of the more difficult stories I’ve written in quite some time because it includes flashbacks alluding to rape. I struggled in identifying who would be revealed as the perpetrator of the past actions, which led to the spawning of Cora. After a few drafts of trying to force the narrative in either direction, I recognized how I could use what I don’t actually know about the characters to my authorial advantage. I decided to leave the question as to whether or not Thom had forced himself on Bera up to the reader(s). I juxtaposed details such as, “Thom thought hard but could only remember the moist heat of her breath on his palm and the saltiness of her neck,” before he becomes nauseous, and later, “Thom ran his tongue across the corner of his lower lip where Bera had bit hard enough to draw blood,” to further complicate Thom’s characterization and whether or not Cora was justified in her chosen action. In future drafts of *No Onions* I think it would be fun and interesting to refine Cora’s storyline into a series of vignettes. I would include Cora’s relationship with her mom, Bera, and how she’s perceived to those she interacts with at school.
Readers can immerse themselves in a good narrative just as they similarly would in a close relationship. In these ‘close’ relationships, people often bring varying voices, perspectives, modes of thinking and understanding into the fold. But what happens when meanings are hidden or simply lost in translation? Close: A Collection of Short Stories invites the reader to analyze how ‘close’ a relationship can be by exploring ‘close’ as: an adjective in It’s Time, as a noun in The Storm, and as a verb in No Onions.
It’s Time

Nilo faintly overheard the repetitive ringing of the house phone inside and looked over at the dusty digital clock on his work bench; 6:21, he sighed. *I hope it’s his last call for the night.* Looking back down at the faired frame of his wooden boat in front of him, Nilo ran his fingers across its smooth surface and savoured the tangibility of his efforts.

“Nilo!” Eric shouted from the side porch of the house, his irritation reducing Nilo’s name into one quick syllable. “Your sister’s translator is on the line...third time!”

Nilo dropped his meager arms to his bony sides and looked up at his boyfriend through the dingy side window of the garage. Eric’s eyes were wider than usual, and his jaw hung down as he stood behind the screen door, waving the phone in the air; palm of his hand cupped around the orange receiver. “Take a message,” Nilo called back. “I'm still busy.” Nilo turned away from the window and removed his black sports coat from the steel stool, then slid the stool underneath him.

Reaching into the front pocket, he removed his light blue pill box and dumped Wednesday's prescription drug cocktail into his left palm. *I'm tired of this.* He shot the pills and capsules into the back of his throat, then chased them down with the glass of stale water mixed with dust and wood shaving residue that he’d neglected on his workbench over the past few weeks. Nilo sat hunched over with his arms across his stomach and prayed the burning pain in his gut would soon subside.

“Three times in less than an hour.” Eric said, walking up the driveway, shaking his head as he approached the workbench and took a seat on the stool next to Nilo. “No shit, he calls in fifteen-minute increments. It's like he's watching the clock—the persistent little bastard. Here are the messages, at least what I could make out.” He placed the scraps of paper next to the open
toolbox then threw his sturdy left arm over Nilo's shoulders and squeezed. “Gonna make it babe?”

Nilo glanced down at his forearms and hardly recognized them. His sepia brown skin was now pasty, the blue of his veins palpable—I’m disgusting. Shifting his weight and wiping the sweat from his palms, Nilo straightened himself out under the weight of Eric's arm and turned towards him, struggling to suppress his abdominal pain. “Yeah,” his voice cracked. “Thanks, really.”

“Well, aren't you gonna read 'em?” Eric asked in his usual suggestive tone.

“I have a pretty good idea of what they say.”

“Then call 'em back. You didn't spend all that money to move 'em here only to not see them, right?”

Nilo stood up and languidly made his way around the boat to the cutting table for a sheet of plywood, refusing to let his metabolic condition continue to limit his momentum. “Will you go check on them for me?” he asked out of the side of his mouth.

“What?” Eric squinted. “Why do you want me to check on 'em? They're your sisters.”

Nilo closed his eyes and envisioned Fatimah and Lahley as the delicate little girls he left in Morocco twenty years ago. He took a deep breath and held it. Pursing his lips he replied, “I know, Eric,” and exhaled. “It's just not a good time, you know.” Again and again you weigh others down. Shameful. You burden your lover with heavy requests? You're no good. The girls will see. Weakness. “They can’t…” Nilo began as his voice escaped him. He fell silent then shook the thought away.

Eric walked up to Nilo’s side and leaned up against the cutting table, arms folded across his chest. “Not following— you went to all the trouble of getting 'em to the US. Now you’re
refusing to see ‘em?” Eric leaned over and kissed the side of Nilo’s damp head, “What’s up with you, babe?”

Nilo felt the tips of his ears warm. His eyebrows arched and his jaw clenched. He grabbed the hammer off the table and walked past Eric, careful not to make eye contact. Nilo placed the fitted plywood against the frame of the boat and maintained a dead gaze at the grooves of the wood. “They can't see me like this,” he said aloud, almost as if to the plywood as he drove the nail through. “This hard, swollen stomach. My concave chest. I'll be burdened with shame.” Nilo could feel Eric watch his every move as he went about constructing his boat.

*Please help me.*

“It's been long enough, Ni. You need to see them and I bet they need to see you too.”

Nilo looked up at Eric. Beads of sweat clung to the spaces between the black hair outlining Nilo’s face and above his upper lip. His face was flushed and his nostrils flared. “I need them to be proud of me, can you understand that? My sunken face will remind them of the death they had to see every day. Every fu—” Nilo slammed his hands onto the table. The sound of pencils hitting the ground and rolling away filled the silence as he recollected himself. “I just...I need them to forget, okay?”

Eric stared back at Nilo and said nothing.

“I'm sorry,” Nilo brought himself to say. “I didn't mean to yell. I just...I just need you to help me make sure they're settled, that's all.”

Eric looked away from Nilo and shook his head. “No, babe, *I'm* sorry. I gave the translator our address. He'll be here with your sisters around eight, depending on traffic.”

Nilo's heart rattled his ribcage and he began to feel a persistent, heavy throbbing in both his temples. “No, no, no,” he defiantly repeated. “You didn't.”
“You wouldn't even come to the phone, Ni, what else was I supposed to do? They've been here all week and all you've done is avoid their calls. You don't hear it in the translator's voice, but I do. He's concerned for them and for you—it's time.”

“Call him back and, and, tell him you made a mistake.” Nilo began to stutter as he paced around the garage, holding his slender fingers up to his temples.

Eric folded his thick hands over the back of his neck and turned away from Nilo, shaking his head. “If that's what you want then you can call 'em back. His number's on every one of those messages I took for you.” Eric walked over to the workbench and snatched up a piece of paper then shoved it into Nilo’s chest. “Here. You call 'em.”

Nilo looked down at the message then back up at Eric. “You know I can't,” he said in a whisper, running his hand through his curly, black hair. “I'll shame them.” Nilo threw his head back and took a deep breath. *What do I do?* His instincts were telling him to jump in his car and run, but he knew fleeing was not an option. He sat back down on the steel stool, elbows propped up on the workbench, and his face in the mild scent of glue that coated his hands.

“I get why it's a big deal, Nilo. I mean, twenty years is a hell of a long time. But why do you think you'll shame 'em if they see that you're sick? Do you just not want them to know we’re together?”

Nilo raised his head from his hands and turned around to face his lover. “The last time we saw our Papa he looked as decrepit as me. Men with guns kicked down our door after supper and grabbed my Mother by the hair, throwing her into the wall. Papa tried to save her, but a man hit him across the face with the butt of his gun and they all began to kick him. He cried out in pain. There was so much blood. I grabbed my sisters and we ran.”
Eric grabbed the stool next to Nilo and slowly lowered his body onto it. “You've never told me this before...who were they?”

“Bad men my Papa owed money to. He brought shame on our family.” Nilo grimaced at the memory of his Mother threatening to move him and his sisters to their Aunt and Uncles if his Father wouldn’t stop throwing their money away. As a child Nilo believed it was his Father’s injuries from the mining accident that kept him from providing for their family like he’d done before. Looking back, he knew his Father no longer cared for responsibilities of any sort.

Hesitance crept into Eric’s inflection. “And that's why you came here to the States?”

“Yeah,” Nilo nodded, “or they would have killed me too.”

“Did you really think you wouldn’t see your sisters once you got 'em here?”

“I hoped, but realistically? No, I didn't. Not looking like this. Anyway, I'm sorry I never told you any of this before, Eric. Some things just belong in the past.”

Nilo watched Eric try and make sense of this new information. He was wide eyed with his mouth slightly open again. He blinked a few times then reached over for Nilo's glass of water and finished it off. Eric began to cough, “There’s—” He beat his fist against his chest. “There was shit in it.” Wiping the excess water from his brown and red mustache, Eric looked back at Nilo. “They won't be ashamed, babe, just happy to see you I bet. They probably just want to thank you for getting them outta there and all, trust me.”

Tears began to well up in Nilo's eyes. He quickly looked away from Eric, refusing to let him see any tears roll down his cheeks. He rose to his feet and let out a deep groan in an effort to pull himself together. “When will they be here?” Nilo asked in a confident tone.
Eric's lips curled into a smirk, “Eight, depending on traffic. So...'bout thirty, maybe thirty-five minutes from now. I think you should show 'em the boat when they get here. Let 'em see what you've been working so hard on.”

Nilo gazed at the boat's wooden frame and over at the fitted sheets of plywood waiting to be attached. The throbbing in his temples became dull. He took a long, slow breath. “I guess. I wonder what they'll think about their older brother sailing his own boat down the Mississippi River.” Nilo chuckled to himself reflecting on the usual doubtful expressions he received from his customers at the bank when he told them his big plan.

The familiar, faint, repetitive ringing of the house phone carried over to the garage. Nilo and Eric looked at each other, then Nilo walked inside. The phone rang two more times.

“Hello?”

“Yes, hello Eric.”

“No sir, this is Nilo. Who may I ask is calling?”

“Oh good! Nilo! This is Youssef, your sisters’ English-Arabic translator. Is this a good time? Your friend, Eric, gave me your address. We planned to bring your sisters to your home this evening, did he tell you?”

Nilo’s stomach tightened. “Yes.”

“Unfortunately, Nilo, we will not be able to make it to that part of town this evening. Any chance we can reschedule for tomorrow afternoon instead?”

“Oh?” Nilo responded without any hint of relief. “Why can't you bring them tonight?”

“The poor things, they're terrified to be in an enclosed vehicle at night. They won't make the distance in the dark. The afternoon will be more kind to their nerves. Will this be okay with you?”
“Yes sir, I'll move some appointments around to be available.”

“Great! Does one o'clock work for you?”

Nilo looked over to the digital clock on the microwave and calculated about seventeen hours until then. “Yeah. I mean, yes sir, that'll work for me.”

“Thank you for being so patient with me, Nilo. They really do look forward to seeing you, I’m sure of it. Good night!”

Nilo hung up the telephone and returned to the garage. Eric was holding the last sheet of plywood needing to be attached to the left side of the boat. “Who was it?” Eric asked.

“Youssef, the translator.”

“He need better directions? I told 'em to GPS it.”

“No, no, my sisters are afraid to travel at night.”

“Oh, so they're not comin' at all?”

“They'll be here tomorrow at one.” Nilo said as he walked back to the stool and took a seat.

“You okay with that, babe?”

Nilo stared at the floor for a few minutes and mulled over Eric's question in his head. You okay with that? You? Okay with that? You okay—

“Nilo?” Eric interrupted, tapping Nilo's shoulder. “Ya hear me? I said, are you okay with that?”

Nilo snapped out of his trance and looked up at Eric, a smile filling out his sunken face.

“Lahley and Fatimah are safe now.”
The Storm

I couldn’t believe it.

I gripped the letter delivered for Linnet. The stationery was the perfect thickness, the kind that indicated the museum’s ability to spend the extra bucks on acid-free and watermarked cotton paper, matched with a sleek cursive font—every other line included her name and not mine; it should’ve been mine. I brought her letter—*laced with hypocrisy*—with me to the backyard where I swayed on the hammock still dampened from the previous night’s storm, and mulled over the congratulatory sentences on her first week of work and the dates she’d need to make note of in her soon-to-be busy calendar.

*How can she do this to me?* I swung and stewed in anger the duration of the sunset over the Gulf, her deceit at the forefront of every thought. *She’ll be home around six,* I reassured myself, *and better have some good goddamn answers.*

The day’s humidity lingered into the evening and I could only make out the stars’ radiance in subtle glimpses between the steadily moving clouds and gaps between the palms hanging over my head. I could smell the rain coming and hear the tides in the semi-distant east rush onto the shore, but I didn’t want to move just yet. Moving would mean my acceptance of the looming storm and I wasn’t ready. I let her letter rest on my belly and watched it rise and fall as I welcomed the salty ocean air and the crisp scent of rain. “She knew I needed this job,” I whispered.

In the corner of my eye I caught a quick shadow move against the refulgent light in the dining room. My heart pounded so hard I could feel it in my teeth. I anticipated turning my head to see Linnet standing beyond the sliding glass door, her and I locking eyes the same way enemies instinctually do. I felt the arch of my left eyebrow raise—assuming my intimidating
position—but was surprised to see no human figure beyond the glass. I was relieved yet 
disappointed to find our cross-eyed balinese cat, Isham, pawing at the lower corner of the glass 
in an effort to attack an insect or maybe to tell me he needed food. On any other day I would 
have laughed at my own ridiculous combative behavior, but today it only warranted a smirk. 

Droplets of rain began to fall on my bare arms and feet around the same time I decided I 
had enough of the mosquitoes. I went back into the house and flung Linnet’s letter onto the small 
pile of mail on the dining room table. Isham weaved between my legs; his shedding, silky cream-
colored fur clung to the wet skin around my ankles. I picked up the little furball and nuzzled into 
the nook of his neck—the calm of his deep, accepting purr was soothing. “Hungry baby boy,” I 
said in a high-pitched voice typical of pet owners, as I cuddled him close and walked into the 
kitchen. I placed him on the smooth granite countertop and poured his dry food into his crimson 
porcelain bowl, all the while wanting Linnet to come and see I had opened her letter and now 
knew she was the asshole; my best friend was the reason I didn’t get the docent position at the 
Ringling Museum of Art.

I was startled to hear the front door slam shut and Linnet’s voice echo against the 
concrete walls from the front hallway. “Cattleman Road?” I heard her inquire. “Great, I’ll be 
there around ten-ish. Buh-bye.”

“Ten-ish,” I repeated to myself, “that’s not even a real time.” I realized I could no longer 
hear the tapping of her high-heeled shoes against the tile. Before I could turn my head she was 
barefoot and next to me, opening the refrigerator.

“Guess there’s no more tea,” Linnet said into the fridge, irritated.

The sound of annoyance in her inflection made my blood boil. She had no right to be 
upset, she stole my dream job out from underneath me—*backstabbing bitch*. I knew the tea was
behind the crockpot but I didn’t care to divulge the information. Instead, I faced her, resting my hand on my hip, and silently watched her give up. She let out a quick groan and flung the refrigerator door closed. I decided this would be her moment, the last chance she’d have to tell me about the docent position and how, rather, why she’d stolen it from me. Linn was never one to come right out and confess anything she’d done wrong and I knew she’d need a little coaxing.

“How was your day, Linn?” My mouth asked the question but I felt as though the words I don’t care were written on my forehead.

“Pretty good,” she said between her teeth. She walked past me to the fruit basket hanging above the sink and grabbed the last starfruit. “Beat the storm.”

“Mhm,” I responded, propping myself up on the counter next to Isham and stroking his back. “Weather report said it’s not gonna last long but is expected to be destructive.”

Gusts of wind had begun to pick up outside the kitchen window, the Marlberry branches scratched against the glass. My eyes followed Linnet as she maneuvered from cupboard to cabinet for a cutting board and a knife; she was cautious not to make eye contact with me. Strike one. I’ll be more frank. “Ya know, you haven’t told me anything about the new job, Linn. You started...last week?” I gazed up at the ceiling fan and pretended as if I couldn’t quite remember when she started. “I was thinking you and me could have a girls night tonight, ya know, without Griffin this time.”

Linnet rolled her eyes.

“It’d give us a chance to catch up like we used to. I don’t even really know where you’re working, what you’re doing, if ya even like it...”

“It’s all right,” she said with a shrug, still cutting the starfruit into slices for herself. “I just answer people’s questions all day.”
I smirked at her attempt to be aloof. “But what do you actually—”

“Did you get the mail?” Linnet interrupted.

“Dining room table.”

Linnet slid a slice of fruit between her thin red lips and wiped the excess juice on her black pencil skirt before striding into the dining room. I hopped down from the counter and slowly walked after her. She was holding the letter and standing over the dining table made of driftwood we had built almost six years ago now.

Linn and I used to do everything together, back when we considered ourselves unrelated sisters—that is before she started dating the hot shot curator. Before she decided I’m not cool enough to go out partying with her and his stuck up friends, leaving me at home alone with Isham for days on end. Her thin, shoulder-length, strawberry-blonde hair hid her face—I was hoping to see her jaw drop or her rosy complexion fade to white upon realizing she’d been exposed. I leaned up against the entryway, arms folded across my chest, staring at her so hard that if I had lasers for eyes she would’ve already had holes burned straight through her skull and into the walls past her.

“Wanna explain?”

“You opened my mail!” she shouted, no longer wary of direct eye contact.

“Damn right I did,” I snapped back and returned a piercing look of disdain. “I don’t know how you did it, but you stole that job right out from underneath me and didn’t say shit! A second ago I gave you countless opportunities to come clean and you kept your responses so tight I couldn’t tell your lips from your asshole. Just like you, isn’t it, Linn—waiting until all the hard work is done then claiming the effort. No wonder you’ve been so distant over the last few weeks.”
“I’m better qualified,” she stated sharply, waving her letter at me.

“You? Better qualified? I chuckled. “Show me ten-ish on a clock!” I laughed a little harder. “Right after you explain to me how we can be out of tea when there’s half a pitcher behind the crockpot—better yet, when there’s two full boxes of tea bags in the cabinet. Give me a fuckin’ break, Linn! You? The girl who doesn’t know any significant differences between Dalí and Picasso? Much less their inspirations or influences. The girl who can’t budget her own finances and still depends on her parents to fix her stupid mistakes. The girl who leaves clumps of her hair in the drain and makeup all over the sink.” My observations were getting to her. “I put in the work—I made the contacts, I found the position! You wouldn’t even know Griffin if it weren’t for me.” I retorted.

“So? You don’t even like Griffin. And who cares how I met him?” Linnet replied.

“But had I not—”

“And anyway, the internet is global, Robie!” She clenched the damn letter as she motioned a sphere around her head with her pencil-like arms. “People in remote villages probably know how to search Google and send emails by now.”

“You didn’t. You were too busy socializing to put in the work like I did. You know I needed this and you—”


Her response caught me off guard. I shifted my weight to my other leg and stood up straight with my neck extended and tucked my wavy black hair behind my ear to ensure I was hearing her correctly. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Don’t play stupid, Robin. You watched me prep my responses to the President of the Art
Department for months and during the conference I invited you to, you just regurgitated all of my information. By the time it was my turn to speak I didn’t have anything to say, it was humiliating! You didn’t care about how much that meant to me, just as long as you looked good.”

The moment Linnet finished her sentence I had already forgotten every word that escaped her mouth. All I knew was I hated this new cunty stranger standing in front of me—her dainty hands at her hips, wearing the Calvin Klein bangle bracelet watch I thought I’d lost a few months back. “Way to go, dumbass, now what do you expect me to do to pay the rent?”

Linnet gazed down at the letter in her hand then released the exquisite stationery to the table. “I honestly don’t care what you do, Robie. I’m moving out at the end of the month.”

“Movin—moving out?” I struggled to say, clearing a thin layer of phlegm from my throat. “That doesn’t give me any time, I need a thirty day notice.”

Linnet smiled, exposing a red smear of lipstick on her upper-left front tooth, then looked away from me. “You’ll figure it out. Phoenix told me you’ve been looking for a one bedroom anyway, I just beat you to it.”

She caught me. I had been looking for a single bedroom behind her back for a while but needed that job in order to pay the security deposit and the first month’s rent. We’d spent the first half of the year making plans to visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York for the first time. It was supposed to be the trip to help us reestablish the bond we once had in the longest friendship of my life. A couple of months ago I got on Linn’s Macbook Pro to reserve the hotel she wanted and I discovered a folder with pictures of her and Griffin in New York on the steps of the museum and in front of the fountain. I shouldn’t have been so surprised. Linn had been so wrapped up in Griffin and never told me anything anymore, much less cared to spend
any time with me. After that I’d stopped tolerating her consistent fuck ups. I looked over at a
framed photograph taken of the two of us on our first day of fourth grade. I didn’t want to look at
her and I no longer felt as though I were still standing as tall as I was a minute ago.

“Well…” I began, “I was gonna tell you, but I wasn’t planning on moving until the end
of the year and I was going to give a thirty day notice.”

I felt her gaze and looked up, hopeful she’d believed me. “Mmm.” Linnet nodded. “Well
then, I guess I was gonna tell you about the job but you just got to my mail first—guess we’re
even.”

Outside I heard the heavy downpour and the crackling of thunder as bolts of lightning
pierced through the thick, overcast sky, illuminating the fallen patio furniture scattered across the
backyard. We quietly stood on opposite sides of the table and looked over the room we had
decorated together—the Starry Night quilt draped over the antique rocking chair we lucked into
at the Wagon Wheel Flea Market. The cedar stump end table we wrangled at the antique fair at
Coachman Park back in ‘08. We once collectively made this house a home and now we were
collectively eradicating all emotional comfort. *So this is it, this is what the end of an eighteen
year friendship feels like.* My face felt flushed and warm and my stomach felt as though tiny bats
had crawled out of the caverns of my inner intestinal walls and were aimlessly flying around.
The storm had seemed to die down, now the only constant sound was the funnelling of rushing
water through the gutters.

“This is stupid,” Linnet said, breaking the silence. “I need to go get ready.”

“Where are you going?” I asked, out of habit.

Isham strolled into the dining room and over to Linn. She bent down to pet him and was
no longer in view beyond the table. “Madfish Grill,” she replied, “I’m meeting Griffin and some
friends—reservation only.” Linnet popped back up, brushing cat hair away from her tidy docent attire. “I need to change.” Linnet removed the letter from the table and folded it back into thirds. As she made the final crease, she seemed to want to look up at me but hesitated—maybe I just wanted some indication that she still cared. In one swift motion she turned and hurried out of the room without any last glance.

My chest felt as though it had caved in on itself and my breaths became slow and deep. My upper nasal cavities began to tingle, but I wasn’t about to cry, not yet. I heard Linnet’s bedroom door slam on the other side of the wall and the familiar tapping of her high-heeled shoes as she scurried down the tiled hallway to the front door. I remained in the dining room, my right arm holding up my left with tips of my fingers over my mouth to stay quiet. “Shit!” I heard Linn say, just before her keys hit the ground. She must’ve been distracted because I didn’t hear the scrape of the metal being removed from the floor until she had already opened the front door. I expected her to say something, at least a “see ya” or a “bye”—the front door slammed shut.

I stood frozen with my back to the sliding glass door and listened as she started her little green Mini Cooper and drove away. The tinges of built up pressure released and I let out a loud cry from the depths of my belly. I wasn’t sure if I was crying for the loss of a friend or the loss of the upper hand, but I cried hard. I felt Isham head-butt my shin—I looked down at his blur of a body. I pinched the cotton material on my shoulder and used it to wipe my tears and snot. My mouth and chin quivered but I had enough restraint to stop from tearing up and whimpering. I bent over and picked Isham up and threw his plump, furry body over my tears and booger covered shoulder and stroked his back. I felt his body relax over mine and he began to purr.

As I was about to retreat to my bedroom, I looked over at the framed picture of Linn and me from fourth grade and wanted to hold it. I walked over to the small, waist-high shelf and
picked it up—we were so young. A sympathetic smile crossed my lips and my eyes began to water. I had known our friendship had been over for a while but this was the first time it sunk in. *She screwed me...and doesn’t give a flying fuck.* I became enraged. I removed Isham from my shoulder and put him on the dining table then marched to the front door, framed picture in hand. My jaw became clenched and my hands trembled because I knew what I was doing.

I lifted the picture over my head and threw it to the ground—the glass shattered and scattered all around the entrance. I heard Isham’s nails scrape against the wood as he darted off the table. I felt better. *Now when she comes home she’ll have something to have to fix herself,* and if she took off her shoes right away like she typically does, she’ll find out firsthand how deep betrayal can cut.

I tiptoed around the glass and went to the living room to retrieve Isham from his usual hiding place, underneath the couch. As soon as he saw me, he came out without hesitation and I lifted him up, returning him to his original position draped over my shoulder. I turned off all the lights and retreated to my bedroom, shutting the door behind me. My parted velvet drapes exposed my large Florida windows, and in the distance I could see flashes of heat lightning against the blood-orange sky. I cranked the window open and took in deep breaths of the cool ocean breeze. I decided I was being ridiculous and extremely irrational and should sweep up the glass before Linnet came home and hurt herself. I rested my cheek on top of Isham’s soft head and listened to his deep purrs while I stared at my bedroom door for a few minutes. *She could hurt herself,* I thought. But I didn’t move.
“Hey man. Didn't mean to raise my voice earlier on the phone.”

Thom glanced up from his iPad. His bare knuckle continued knocking against the touch-screen, tallying the hefty receipt for a new bike tire tube added to time spent on the completed frame alignment and tune-up. “Nothing was insinuated, Mr. Ruttle. I’m familiar with puncture-resistant tubes.” For a moment, Thom fixated on the definitive sag of Mr. Ruttle’s own flat tire orbiting his midsection, the expanded blue latex drooping between the silver lettering of his Pearl Izumi gloves nestled against his veiled waistline. “Don’t wor–”

“Only, it almost sounded as though you were insinuating I punctured my own tube. I’m sure you often see nasty gashes like the one I had, or worse.” Mr. Ruttle removed a stiff red-leather wallet from the back pocket of his 60’s style cycling jersey. He tossed an American Express card across the smudged-glass counter.

“I’ve seen some gnarly tube tears over the years,” Thom said. He slid the credit card between the white square and swiveled the iPad’s display of a $319.05 bill in full view of Mr. Ruttle to sign, “which is how I know tree debris couldn’t have made that three-inch slash in a puncture-proof tube.”

Thom held the credit card between his fingers like a cigarette. Bent at the elbow, hunched over the glass counter, his eyes followed the hurried scratches of Mr. Ruttle’s pinky against the screen. He waited for Mr. Ruttle to notice the credit card he’d been holding out over the counter. “Your card, sir.”

Ruttle seized the card, shoving it against his wallet in his back shirt pocket. “There, see? You are saying–”

“Copy of your receipt?”
A strained, woolly crescent rose above the frame of Mr. Ruttle’s yellow-tinted glasses. Thom’s stomach let out a demanding rumble; he grinned and nodded in an awkward agreeance with the interminable guttural effort to curb the uncomfortable silence. He concentrated on the bulge tugging at Mr. Ruttle’s flabby earlobes, causing them to twitch and expose the thickened white stubble he’d neglected to shave along his jawline. Mr. Ruttle forced a closed smile, revealing cracks around his small mouth, chasing up towards his wide nostrils and pale sunken cheeks like a snake’s trail left behind in the sand. “You call this place Good ol’ BS, Mr. Caucy?”

*Kah-see. Not Kou-cy, dumbass.* “Yep, Good ol’ Bike Shop.”

Mr. Ruttle reached for the grooved, padded handlebars, relieving the weight of the carbon frame he’d leaned up against the glass bike-light display case. He walked the bike to the front of the store. “Bullshit is more like it!” Mr. Ruttle shouted up to the popcorn ceiling, ramming his front tire into the thick glass of the front door on his way out.

“Another satisfied customer, Dad?” Thom turned his back to the shop’s entrance and saw Cora walk out of the bathroom, wiping her damp hands against the raised chest of her black Glass Animals hoodie.

Startled by her shaved head and toneless voice, Thom missed the step down from the front counter on his way to the store’s entrance to bolt the door. “You had hair up there earlier today, right?” Thom shot a raised eyebrow over his shoulder, hoping he’d mollified the embarrassment of his misstep. *Dad. Dad? Goddammit.* Thom chewed on the hard D like a wad of newspaper, displeased by her offensive designation. He thought he’d been so careful—learned to pull out in his teens, perfected the method in his twenties, even kept a corner Walgreens’ supply of Plan B on hand in his thirties—yet for sixteen years, somehow, there had been Cora. The tips of his ears became warm and each beat of his heart reverberated against his ribcage. *Dad. Death.*
Daft. He flipped the plastic rectangle dangling above the weathered “Hours of Operation” sticker to display a candy red CLOSED. Succumbing to a wave of dizziness, Thom was knocked back on his heels. Before his spine felt the usual pang of the door’s protruding metal bar, Thom’s protracted, bony fingers reflexively grasped the doorframe and he managed to lean himself back against the glass, his blunt Adam’s apple pointing to the green exit sign above him.

Cora reached out for Thom, her boots squeaking against the shiny, scuffed floor. “What the hell! Are you okay?”

Thom closed his eyes, his chest filled with the mixture of Cora’s faint citrus aroma and a familiar chemical undertone he couldn’t quite identify.

No. “Fine.” I’m forty-two and a fucking diabetic. “I’m fine.”

He coughed then shook his head. He adjusted his copper brown beanie, batted his eyes open, and for the first time he saw the pools of golden honey around Cora’s pupils. He watched her lower her gaze to his gauged septum ring, or possibly his greying top lip. She has the same stupid dimple in the middle of her chin as me. He felt for his own hiding behind his beard. Thom watched Cora narrow her eyes before lowering herself to the ground beneath him. Her persistent, edgy glare gave him chills.

He glanced at the denim of her jeans worn thin, frayed strands hanging loose between her thighs. In that moment Thom began to recall the stick and poke infinity tattoo on the inner thigh of a girl from his junior year of high school. She hung around the shop but didn’t know dick about bikes; what was her name? He remembered fragments from one of the sticky Summer nights he’d rode to the bluffs to drink, smoke, and watch the sunset with a handful of friends. She was there. She brought that caffeinated booze. Thom chuckled. Yeah, the Dragon Joose. New to the art of shotgunning and waterfalls, Thom was soon cross-faded and threw up. Fuck
me. That sucked. Unable to ride his bike home, the infinity girl offered to stay behind and walked him home. Reba, maybe? Thom thought hard but could only remember the moist heat of her breath on his palm and the saltiness of her neck.

“You don’t look ‘fine.’ You look like you’re about to puke. Should I move?” Cora asked.

Thom didn’t say anything, only lifted his grimy index finger to his lips and shook his head. Together they lingered in the window frame, speechless. They took in the last of the day’s sun winking over the bank’s brick building in the distance. Thom watched a jogger in lime green shorts across the street, the rhythmic sway of her ponytail as she dodged the rusted metal grate of the storm drain. He noticed Cora’s attention fix on two boys walking side-by-side, their phones held up to each other’s faces. He thought she might’ve caught his stare when she wrapped her slender arms around her knees, hugged them close to her chest and started to rock.

“It was too fried to do anything with.”

“Huh?”

“My hair,” Cora sighed. “It was too fried to do anything with.”

“It’s your hair. Or, was anyway. I could give a shit less.” Thom looked back to the passing cars, then discerned the bright orange vest of the Shell gas station attendant as she flicked her cigarette in the street. Thom salivated—he patted his flannel pocket for his pack of yellow American Spirits.

“You’ve been helping out here ‘bout a month now. When are you gonna tell me how you found me?” Thom asked, looking down into his half-empty cigarette pack.

Cora continued to stare out at passersby on Haywood Street. “I Googled you.”
“Of course you did.” Thom sighed, “Generation Z over here.” He thrust the butt of a fresh cigarette between his lips. The taste of the earthy tobacco relaxed him. He patted his pockets for the lighter he no longer had.

“I’ll trade you a light,” Cora offered, pointing at the cigarette hanging from the corner of Thom’s mouth.

_She’s mine all right._ Thom pushed himself up off the glass. “Now what kind of new Da—I mean, what kind of dude would I be if I let you smoke?”

Cora dropped her head back, staring straight up Thom’s nose as he looked over at the cash register. “You’re supposed to be the parent, yeah? You tell me.”

“Anyone tell you you’re kind of an asshole?” Thom extended a cigarette to Cora.

Cora smiled and lit her cigarette, then tossed the baby blue Bic up to Thom. He lit his cigarette then released the lighter into his pack and walked to the iPad at the front counter.

Cora released a thin strand of smoke through her nostrils, propping herself off the floor. “Mom said you were a real piece of shit in high school,” she said between drags.

“That right?” Thom asked. _Must be one of those groupie whores from my drumming days with Knee Deep in Nail Clippers then._

“Yep,” Cora exhaled. “She always said she would’ve had an abortion. Only, there was some girl you were dating at the time?” She hopped up on the counter, her left eye squinted to avoid the sting of the smoke. “Some girl Mom hated. She really wanted to screw her up. And, well, here I am.”

Cora shrugged, ashing her dwindling cigarette on the floor then stared off toward the helmet display she’d asked to reorganize the week before.
“She sounds like a fucking lunatic,” Thom affirmed, thumbing through a stack of bills from the cash register before cramming them into a zippered pouch. He drew from his cigarette. “What’s her name again?”

“Bera.” Thom met Cora’s arched eyebrow and dead gaze. She took another drag then tossed it to the floor. Releasing her last puff of smoke Cora said, “Reed. Bera Reed” from the back of her throat. She dropped off the counter to extinguish the cherry with the toe of her shoe.

Thom let out a groan and cracked his knuckles. The fingerprints from his opposing hands left distinct impressions in the chain oil residue that had built up over the day’s maintenance drop-offs. “Hey, are you hungry? If I don’t eat something soon my blood sugar will crash me out.”

“Bera. Reed.” Cora repeated.

“I fell behind and skipped lunch. There’s a sandwich joint next door; I trade free bike labour for sandwiches from time to time.” Thom jammed his hand in his Dickies pants pocket for his phone. “They’ve got decent Rubens. I’ll shoot ‘em a text,” he sighed down into the phone, his thumbs pressing hard against the buttonless screen.

“You really don’t remember her? Not even a little?”

“Guess you could say I got around.” Thom felt himself grimace but did his best to force a laugh. Cora remained silent. He gripped the black, glossy square in his shaking palm. Thom minded the flare of her nostrils and for the first time noticed the shimmer of two studs in her nose. “Look, kid, I don’t know what you want from me. If your mom told you how much of a shithead I am, I don’t get why you came looking for me.”

His hands were trembling; he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Thom’s hazy memory filtered through customers from earlier in the day, the week, then faces blurred as his
mind raced and derailed to the morning his bassist took a good crack at his nose after learning Thom had slept with his girlfriend—and in their band’s touring van no less. *Ash, Lilly, Tramp Stamp.* Thom tried to focus on the girls who passed through the shop back in high school, but there had been too many to really remember any *one* in particular. Another wave of nausea returned, this time with a faint headache spanning the distance between his throbbing temples.

Thom spotted the quiver of Cora’s lower lip before she’d bitten down to stop it. She pressed her head into her shoulder, meeting the few tears that managed to escape their ducts. Cora sniffled then cleared her throat. “She hates me too, so, I figured I’d see what you were all about.”

*What parent doesn’t hate their shit kid?* “I see. I just don’t have any money or any—”

“I didn’t ask you for money.” Cora said.

Thom raised his hands out in front of him, as though he were being held up at gunpoint. “Okay, okay. Sorry I assumed. She just...no one told me about you.”

“I’ll show you.” Cora gestured for Thom to follow, walking to the far back wall of the bike shop, behind the helmets. “Here,” she pointed. “Right here, just like she always said; these are your names engraved in this shitty heart, yeah?” Cora looked back at Thom. His throat was arid though beads of sweat dripped down off the tip of his nose. *Bera Reed + Thom Caucy 4 ∞.*

“You fucking remember.”

*Ber—ah shit.* “I need to sit down.” Thom grabbed a step stool and buried his face in his hands. He felt Cora loom over him. *Reba? Really? You fucking idiot.* Thom ran his tongue across the corner of his lower lip where Bera had bit hard enough to draw blood. He’d pushed her away. *Don’t be such a pussy,* she’d said, sliding her panties down from under her floral dress. *She had the biggest nipples I’d ever seen.* Thom lowered his hands to his lap, itching his palm. He
remembered thinking her hair felt like Spanish moss between his fingers. “It was just a one-night-stand kinda deal, ya know? Nothing memorable. And that’s just some stupid carving from back when she had a crush. Means nothing.”

“Nothing memorable,” Cora repeated.

“What is your deal, Bera?”

“I’m Cora.”

“Goddamnit. Yeah, I know.” Thom pressed his thumb and middle finger against his temples to nullify the incessant hammering inside his head. “I think it’s time you head out, okay, Cora? I’m not feeling right.”

Cora rolled her eyes, then turned the corner back towards the bathroom. Thom aired out his collar and adjusted his beanie. The cool air trickled down into the pockets of his armpits. He released his forehead to the chilled, refreshing metal of the helmet display shelf next to him. Thom felt the vibration of the shop’s air conditioning unit kick on beneath his feet. After a few minutes he began to smell the baked bread and cured meats funneling over from the sandwich shop.

“Here,” Cora appeared in front of him extending a black velcro pouch. “You’re diabetic, right?”

“Thanks…” Thom hesitated, then took his insulin pouch from Cora’s hand. “How did you know I’m diabetic?”

“My grandma’s diabetic. I noticed your pouch in the bathroom earlier when I was looking for the Drano.”

Thom held the pouch in his lap, still resting his forehead against the soothing metal. “Hey kid, you cool to go check on those sandwiches next door for us? Just tell Niq you’re with me.”
“You know,” Cora began as she ran her fingers across the helmets, adjusting their spacing on the shelf, “most of Mom’s stories were about working here during high school. She’d brag about skipping classes to come down here to ‘make easy money doing the shit people could do for free.’ And, of course, to see you.”

Thom glanced down at the once white T-shirt underneath his flannel; now soaked with sweat and so transparent he was sure she could make out his small, pointed nipples and grizzly chest hair. What? Bera never worked here.

“I’m having a hard time believing you don’t remember raping my Mom, Dad.”

Panic coursed through Thom’s veins as he haphazardly propped himself up. He tried to ignore his migraine enough to focus on Cora. “No, no, no. I have never raped anyone in my life. You need to get the fuck out of here, Cora. Seriously.”

“Oh no?” Cora asked, bending down in front of Thom. “You’re not the Thom Caucy that loved Queen and Joy Division in high school? The Thom Caucy that had the psychedelic toad? You know, the one you’d agitate until it’d ooze DMT for you both to lick off it’s back? Mom said you had it through most of your senior year, until your dad found it.”

Thom recollected his high-school-self; blaring Queen loud enough to drown out the ringer of the shop’s telephone and customers who liked to hear themselves talk. The friends he had over to indulge in the toad. But Bera was not included in these memories. “What do you want to hear, huh, Cora? I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry your bat-shit Mom never told me about you. I’m sorry you’re fucked up. I dunno, I’m just...sorry.”

Cora’s face contorted to a pout. “Aw, Dad, you don’t look too good. Do you want some help taking your insulin? I’ve done it before.”
“Listen to me,” Thom’s breathing was laboured and his vision blurry—he couldn’t tell if Cora knew he was seeing double—“if you’re not gonna help me, then just leave, all right?” Thom managed to hold his eyelids halfway open. He tried to sit himself up without the help of the step stool’s handlebar behind him, but his body swayed uncontrollably. He swallowed slow and deliberate to keep his stomach acid down.

Cora smirked, “But Dad, I’m not hungry.”

Thom slumped back against the shelf, grinding his teeth. *What the fuck’s happening!?*

“C’mon, let me help you,” Cora laughed as she reached for the velcro pouch in Thom’s lap. “You’re being ridiculous.”

In one swift motion Thom mustered a jolt of strength. He swung out his arm, shoving Cora to the ground. “Go.”

“Go, Cora,” she teased back at him in a snotty, mocking tone as she rose to her feet. “Where do you want me to go, Dad?” Cora cocked her head to the side. She hitched up her hoodie to rest her palms against her stomach.

Thom shook his head and let out a sob. “Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what, D—”

“Stop calling me your fucking Dad! I was wasted. We were just having a good time, that’s all it was. We were kids just having a good time!” Tears fell from Thom’s reddening face. His mouth parted, strands of saliva and mucous clung to the corners of his lips. A bubble of snot swallowed his septum ring, hanging low enough for him to taste the slimy salt.

“Shh-shh,” Cora cooed as she leaned into Thom’s hot breath, rubbing his upper arms. “See? That wasn’t so bad.”
Thom snorted up a large glob of mucous and almost choked as he tried to fashion it into a wad he could get a reasonable spitting distance out of. “Wh—” Thom cleared his throat, “Why do you want to give me my insulin so bad? Thom let his puffy eyes close. The fluorescent shop lights reflecting back at him from the tile floor amplified his debilitating migraine.

“Sure, Dad. Something like that.”

Thom heard the pop of Cora’s knee as she bent down beside him, the clank of her cheap silver rings hitting against the metal handle of the step stool that she used to steady herself. He felt the weight of her arms, hand over hand, resting on top of his forearm. Cora crouched motionless next to her father for a few minutes, then began to roll up his sleeves. Thom made a meager attempt to lift his wrist, but his hands were too shaky—he stopped fighting Cora. He heard her unzip the pouch, then undo both thin velcro straps for his unsealed syringe and labelless vile.

“Relax,” she said, her breath warm and dank against his skin. Cora pinched Thom’s loose flesh between her fingers and began counting, “One...two...” She thrust the needle into her father’s arm. He felt the syringe shake in her hand as she muttered demands for the solution to come out faster.

“Dad?”

“Mmm,” Thom groaned.

“What kind of sandwich did you order for me?”

Thom took a slow breath, expelling spit between his mumbling lips. “Turkey, avo—,” he slurred, “cheese.”

“No onions?”

Thom was barely able to shake his head, “I -ate onions.”
Cora laughed, “I hate onions too.”

*Knock-knock.*

“Yo, Thom!”

*Knock-knock.*

“Open up, man, it’s Niq! I’ve got your sammies and a busted chain, man!”

Thom’s face and body began to burn from the inside. He struggled to breath and grasped at his bulging throat. He violently thrashed his arms and legs, launching shoe into the grip tape display. Cora took a step back.