

**A MONSTER THAT NEVER TRULY LEAVES:  
REPRESENTING DEPRESSION IN YOUNG ADULT FANTASY LITERATURE**

by

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the portrayal of depression in young adult (ages 12-18) fantasy fiction, with a focus on monsters as metaphors for depression. Depressive symptoms often exist as background in young adult fantasy, or as temporary afflictions until the conflict of the story is resolved. In reality, depression is far from a quirky character trait, and has no magical “cure.” My introductory essay examines fantasy as a vehicle for exploring difficult topics such as mental health issues. I investigate the benefits and drawbacks of portraying depression as a metaphorical monster, consider the concept of bibliotherapy, and explain the reasoning behind my own plot devices. In *Limbo*, my novella, I portray two teenage characters: one is experiencing depression before the story begins, and the second only experiences depressive symptoms as a direct result of the story’s monster. *Limbo* was written with the intent of both informing readers who have never experienced depression before of its potential effects on a person, and giving readers currently experiencing depressive symptoms a name for what haunts them.

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this project to my partner, Colby Pinette. Without your support, your shoulder to cry on, your unwavering faith in my abilities no matter how many times I despaired, I would not have this degree. I love you, I love you.

## Introduction

Until someone told me directly, “I think you have depression,” I believed my constant feelings of sadness and dread were just a fact of my personality. My opinions about myself had sunk so low, I did not trust my own judgment. I had to get help from outside of myself; I needed someone other than myself to tell me there was something wrong that was outside of my control, in order to believe it. Thus, my thesis project focuses on the representation of depression in young adult fantasy literature and the use of monstrous metaphor to portray something that is invisible, by shaping it into something tangible and observable.

From *The Faerie Queene*’s character Despaire, of the Renaissance period, to the Dementors in the more recent *Harry Potter* novel series (1997-2007), monsters have traditionally functioned as metaphors for more socially taboo subjects such as melancholy, or depression. While these metaphors are useful for sparking conversation, however, they have a major flaw: they externalize depression as a detached monstrosity, a villain with an established kryptonite. The effects of Dementors on their victims, for instance, are clearly separated from the characters themselves; when a Dementor is chased off, the symptoms also go away. These monsters’ effects on other characters might mirror depressive symptoms, but they are limited in their ability to properly address the lingering effects, and damaging internalization, of depression. Unlike a traditional monster that is vanquished by the hero of a story, depression is a monster that, for many, never truly leaves.

The monster I designed for my novella, *Limbo*, is a being that is intended to linger. It infiltrates the psyche of the story’s characters, affecting their moods even when it is not occupying the same space as them. There is a slow buildup of mysterious sounds and sightings leading up to the final encounter with *Limbo*’s monster, adding to the dread

imposed on the characters as well as representing a growing inability to trust oneself. When the monster is “defeated,” its minions remain and there is an understanding that it may, one day, return.

I specifically chose to avoid portraying depression *solely* through a monster. There are two main characters: Wynter, who is experiencing depression before the monster of the story ever makes an appearance, and Andee, who only experiences depressive symptoms as the monster closes in. When the monster is defeated, Andee’s symptoms dissipate; Wynter’s, however, do not. Through these characters, my intent is to highlight just how debilitating depression can be as well as emphasize the fact that it has no magical cure. Depression cannot be overcome by being strong-armed into submission by a hero. In fact, untreated depression can erode your confidence, breaking you down until you feel as though you are the furthest thing from being a hero.

I was fifteen or sixteen years old when I first began to experience the symptoms of depression, and I would be in my mid-twenties when I knew to seek help for it. For a long time, I did not talk to anyone about my problems, because I felt that I *could not*. Reading, meanwhile, became my comfort food; not understanding what “depression” was, I sought out dark, fantastical stories because they mirrored the way I was feeling, and I drew encouragement from fictional heroes who were going through their own hardships. I gravitated towards stories with characters who had similar feelings to my own, and that did help me, to a point.

Still, for all of the stories I consumed, I lacked a name for what was hurting me. While I could see myself in aspects of the characters I read about, the characters in the books I loved the most were predominantly happy, or somehow content, by the end of their story arcs. With the monster or villain vanquished, the torments it had imposed upon the

protagonists would leave with it. Whenever I closed my latest book of choice, I was left behind, still trapped within my own and seemingly irreparable and abstract problems. I was reading about characters who persevered even when the odds seemed impossible and, while that is beneficial in its own right, I was never being informed about a very real condition I did not know I had.

The word “depression” is rarely, if ever, seen in young adult fantasy novels. This carries with it an implication that the term itself is somehow taboo, as if mentioning it would taint the magic of these worlds. Even in the *Harry Potter* series, where the monstrous Dementors are verifiably based on the author’s experiences with the condition (Rowling, “The Rowling Express”), the word “depression” is not mentioned. *The Replacement* (Brenna Yovanoff), published in 2010, comes incredibly close to having a direct discussion about mental health when the teenage Mackie’s friend directly asks him “do you think you might be depressed?” (55). However, Mackie simply says he is not, and the conversation ends. Depression is not brought up again. Leo, a central character of the 2008-2015 *The Last Descendants* Trilogy (Catherine Banner), begins the series as a fifteen-year-old boy who loses his brother; devastated, is irrevocably changed. His misery becomes a part of him, and he even loses his magical abilities because of it. Yet, Leo’s deteriorating mental health is not treated as something diagnosable or manageable but rather a sort of unsolvable curse caused by his grief.

Although nearly every young adult fantasy novel includes a scene wherein a hero must rest and recover from all manner of physical wounds, psychotherapy does not seem to have a place in the fantasy realm. Harry Potter visits the hospital wing of Hogwarts at minimum once per school year, but he never goes to counselling. Mackie bandages his wounds after facing off with the main villain of his story, but now that he knows his friends



do love him despite his origins, he simply moves on from his trauma. A larger, overarching plot overshadows Leo's own pain, which is accepted as just a part of who he now is.

Diagnosable depression seems to be off-limits for a character beyond the temporary, beyond the magically intertwined.

Characters in fantasy novels and series such as those I note above unquestionably experience strong emotions that directly mirror those of depression – grief, dread, anxiety, anger, fear, hopelessness – but the causes of them are, as I have mentioned, nearly always externalized; they are often directly, and inarguably, shown to be the fault of the villain. There is a major flaw that comes with externalizing the portrayal of these emotions and their causes: the idea that bad feelings must, and can, be fought off. Further, if you are unable to do so, you are irrevocably changed. For example, it is possible to combat Dementors, to fend them off and vanquish those terrible feelings. The catch: to defeat a Dementor, you must not only be an extremely skilled magic-wielder, but you must also have an incredibly resolute strength of character. This suggests that willpower itself will overcome depression, which in turn feeds into stigmas of weakness of character. Not to mention that, if you cannot fight off a Dementor, you lose your soul, your entire *self*, permanently.

Unable to understand *why* I was always so sad, I ultimately convinced myself that a “fix” would solve everything. If I could just find the right university or the right career or the right purpose, I reasoned, then then I would stop feeling this way. That, of course, was not the case. No matter how many hobbies I tried, or extracurriculars I took part in, or work I took on, things really only began to turn around for me when I knew what I was up against – not because I found and fought off some terrifying monster and came home bloodied and victorious, but because I shifted my view of my depression. While it didn't immediately disappear, the self-blame I was imposing, lessened. I was communicating with people, and

learning that I was not irrevocably unlikeable; my bad feelings about everything did not always *mean* something. I found my best support slowly, and carefully, in friends, professional consultation, and counselling.

Discussing potentially painful topics through fantasy can make certain conversations easier, and even enjoyable. To extract the greatest benefits from this as possible, more representation of mental health in characters within the genre is necessary in order to allow more readers to truly *see* themselves in a fantasy story's pages. My creative project makes use of monsters as metaphor because I recognize that such metaphors are useful for readers who have not experienced depression before. However, to truly represent depression, this metaphor cannot act alone. In my case, a name to my problem gave me something to really grasp onto – it became a problem with a potential solution, instead of an abstract mess of dark feelings and dread with no probable cause.

I am not an expert on mental health in young adults; I am only an expert on my own experiences. That being said, if I had read a story that described my symptoms and directly labelled it as “depression,” there is a chance that it would have led to me seeking help many years earlier. That chance was reason enough for me to be inspired to write *Limbo*.

### **Young Adults and Depression**

For the purposes of my project, in full acknowledgement that I am not an expert in psychology, I refer to “depression” not as a strict diagnosis but in basic terms. Depression, at its core, is a “sad, despairing mood” that lingers, and as it worsens it affects a person's functionality, relationships, and quality of life; it can include a long list of symptoms beyond sadness, including but not limited to withdrawing from others, feeling hopeless, useless, or fatigued (“Depression”), as well as “irritability, and a loss of interest or pleasure in activities”

(Maslow et al. 165). It can even affect a person physically, through chronic “headaches, digestive disorders and pain for which no other cause can be diagnosed” (“Symptoms”). According to the Global Health Data Exchange, presented via the World Health Organization (WHO) in their article “Mental health of adolescents,” depression is believed to be experienced by “3.5% of 15–19-year-olds” globally, although these numbers could be affected by a lack of reporting and diagnoses, which I discuss later in this section.

These numbers seem to be higher when focused on countries such as Canada, where mental health difficulties in general are on the rise among young adults. In 2023, 21% of Canadian youth who had labelled their overall mental health as “good” or better in a 2019 survey stated a decline to “fair” or “poor;” of youth aged 15 to 17 specifically, this percentage of decline was at 23%, or almost one in four (Statistics Canada, “2023 Canadian Health Survey”). In November 2024, Statistics Canada reported that 13% of Canadian youth aged 15 to 24 had “met criteria for a major depressive episode” within the past 12 months (Kingsbury and Findlay 15).

The climbing statistics of mental health difficulties among young adults is in part linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was an extreme source of stress, divisiveness, isolation, and in many cases, grief. A decline in mental health was more prevalent in the thick of the pandemic among “older teens who were making the transition to young adulthood” (Statistics Canada, “2023 Canadian Health Survey”), because not only were they trying to figure out who they were/are as individuals, but they were having to do so without normal social interaction, all while immersed in virtual rather than in-person education that was sometimes piecemeal as instructors tried to navigate the pandemic limitations.

Connected to the effects of COVID-19 is the prevalence of social media use. For a pivotal amount of time, it was impossible to meet with friends and family in person, so we

resorted to virtual connections. The internet certainly has numerous benefits in terms of education, sharing ideas, connecting with people around the world, and diversified entertainment. However, it can be a double-edged sword, as in the case of social media.

While some researchers have argued that social media use *can* lead to positive outcomes, and even “has potential as a source of social support for young adults experiencing social anxiety or low self-esteem,” these positive experiences depend on numerous factors including but not limited to how often the social media is used, a user’s intent, and how they are treated by others on a platform (Bettmann et al. 369). Other human users of a given platform aside, the algorithms of social media apps want you to stick around, and they do not care *what* content you are consuming, or how harmful or misleading it is, as long as you continue to consume it. It is too easy to fall into the rabbit-hole that is colloquially known as “doom-scrolling,” or to become trapped in a slough of content that reinforces the worst ideas you have about yourself, and amplifies negative experiences. As a result, a high level of social media use typically goes hand-in-hand with elevated symptoms of depression, regardless of whether a youth is already experiencing mental health issues, and it is “not simply that more depressed youth seek out more social media and are prone to more symptoms” (Gentzler et al. 1740).

Following the traumas of a global pandemic, in an era where there is a trend of publicizing many of our private moments, an open, honest dialogue about depression and its effects is especially crucial. In connection to this is the glaring issue of social stigma surrounding poor or worsening mental health which, as Kristen Marcussen writes, “is conceptualized as a weakness of character, one that is based on societal reaction and results in a ‘spoiled identity’” (211). Such social stigma is easily attributable to a lack of understanding and lack of experience, making education a crucial tool in combating mental health stigma – not by simply informing students depression and other mental health issues

exist, but by building empathy through thoughtful discussions and by ensuring there is meaningful context included (Davis 17-18).

When you have depression, it is easy to fall into the feeling that you do not belong; that you are different, or broken. The burden of having any mental illness can be a heavy one. Through the CAMH (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health), on their webpage “Mental Illness and Addiction: Facts and Statistics,” a 2019 Toronto-based Ipsos survey states that “75% of respondents said they would be reluctant – or would refuse – to disclose a mental illness to an employer or co-worker,” with respondents citing reasons including “not wanting to be treated differently or judged,” and “being afraid of negative consequences.” Conversely, the same survey maintains that “76% of respondents stated that they themselves would be completely comfortable with and supportive of a colleague with a mental illness.” Although this survey was conducted with working adults, it still highlights a notable dichotomy, and resulting self-stigma, that I myself experienced: that everyone deserves a chance, except for you – you, alone, are unworthy.

Part of self-stigma could be rooted in the fact that suffering from a mental health issue is often “framed as a choice,” where an inability to manage one’s disorder and/or function as normal is equated with being a failure, thus implying that person is “irresponsible and burdensome” (Gaudet 167). Disappointment associated with being unable to remedy depressive symptoms effectively or quickly can turn inward, leading an affected person to believe that they are not “worthy” of help or feeling better, even if other people are. Depression does not mean you are unable to care about other people but in my experience, it often does make it difficult to truly care about your own self, and therefore even believe you should or can seek help. Troublingly, depression in adolescents tends to go undiagnosed in many cases, with upwards of 75% not receiving any treatment for their symptoms (Maslow et

al. 164).

Some of the difficulty in seeking and receiving a diagnosis can also be attributed, in part, to a young adult's inability to fully describe their abstract feelings. For instance, when I was younger and feeling especially *sad*, I would be so confused by my feelings, which had no discernable cause, that I would go so far as to imagine that those emotions did not – could not – belong to me. At the time, I could not possibly begin to explain that sensation to certain people in my life. Adding to difficulties diagnosing teens, “[d]evelopmental nuances can also blur the distinction between normative adolescent behaviors and mood changes and clinical depression” (Maslow et al. 165). Not only is a young adult potentially dealing with both social and self-stigma, but their parents, teachers, or other guardians may not immediately recognize depressive symptoms. One depressed adolescent “may pretend to be sick, refuse to go to school, cling to a parent, or worry that the parent may die,” while another might “sulk, get into trouble at school, be negative or grouchy and feel misunderstood” (“Depression”). A teen might trivialize their own problems, thinking they are just being sensitive, lazy, or childish; adults in a teenager's life can accidentally reinforce these feelings by attributing even out-of-character moodiness to being a normal teenager.

“Normalcy” should never be linked to misery or unhappiness. Depression can be incredibly debilitating, manifesting as feelings of guilt or worthlessness, a decreased ability to concentrate, anhedonia, pessimism, insomnia, and even leading to considering death or suicide (“Symptoms”). While depression is absolutely not a through road to suicide, nor the only contributor, it is still important to note that according to the WHO, suicide “was the third leading cause of death among 15–29-year-olds globally in 2021” (“Suicide”); a Canadian infographic published in 2023 claims it is the second leading cause of death among those aged 15-34 (Statistics Canada, “Suicide in Canada: Key Statistics”). During the year

preceding a 2022 Mental Health and Access to Care Survey, among Canadian youth aged 15 to 24, “9% had experienced suicidal ideation;” among 2SLGBTQ+ youth specifically, this number was one in four (Kingsbury and Findlay 15; 17).

### **Bibliotherapy: Stories as Support**

While researching background information for my thesis, I came across the concept of bibliotherapy: “the process of reading, reflecting, and discussing literature to further a cognitive shift” (Monroy-Fraustro et al. 1). In regard to treating symptoms of mental health disorders, bibliotherapy is intended to guide a reader through their difficult feelings and situations. Some have described bibliotherapy as part of “Psychological First Aid” (Heath, “Using Children’s Literature” 545-546); in keeping with my theme of metaphors and monsters, bibliotherapy seems to be a sort of reinforcement of one’s armour.

Although certainly not a cure-all, it is reported to have “resulted in both statistically and clinically significant changes in depressive symptoms” (Moldovan et al. 489). Bibliotherapy can mitigate some overwhelming emotions caused by depression, particularly through simply showing participants that there are other people out there who feel the same way. That being said, one drawback to bibliotherapy is that it is not used, at least at the time of writing this essay, consistently:

Although widely used, it is not well defined: the texts used in different bibliotherapy contexts vary and include self-help materials, fiction and poetry. Approaches to selecting the texts are also diverse: often self-help materials are selected by clinically trained professionals with a background in psychiatry, and lists of suitable fiction and poetry are available from scholars of English literature, librarians and readers themselves.

Bibliotherapy is delivered in groups or with individuals on a one-to-one basis, and approaches to working with texts are also wide-ranging. (Brewster and McNicol e12)

Consequently, it seems, the results of using bibliotherapy can be somewhat mixed in terms of effectiveness, as success depends on such a wide range of factors.

This is not to say that bibliotherapy is too new or untested to be used in therapeutic settings; in fact, the term “bibliotherapy” was first used in 1916 (Heath, “Using Children’s Literature” 550). Rather, studies emphasize that bibliotherapy not be the *sole* source of support for someone experiencing mental health issues, or viewed as “a magical fix” (Heath, “Bibliotherapy” 565-566), and that it must be “conducted by a trained person, such as a psychologist, a teacher, or librarian” (Lucas and Soares 139). A 2021 study additionally suggests that bibliotherapy is most beneficial in a group setting, where reading is paired with discussion; patients who were part of a reading group program showed better results and more greatly “improved their clinical symptomatology and cognitive and psychosocial functioning” than those who did not participate in structured activities (Monroy-Fraustro et al. 13). A 2005 article makes similar observations, emphasizing that the utilization of bibliotherapy by school counsellors will help improve students’ management of their symptoms, as “stories provide an opportunity for students to learn coping skills in a safe and familiar setting” (Heath, “Bibliotherapy” 571).

Bibliotherapy in a group setting does not, to my interpretation, suggest that a book-club style of therapy is the *only* way it can work, but rather that it is difficult to gauge what books will be beneficial for which individuals. My understanding of existing research is that one cannot simply view text on a page for bibliotherapy to have full effect. A written work that is meant to be beneficial but is not immediately or easily understood is only useful if



discussion is implemented afterwards. Although a story is a valuable tool, and “gives the opportunity to exercise the choice of thinking and behaving due to the multiple possible interpretations that can be made from a situation, creating new meanings” (Lucas and Soares 138), it is clear that those meanings, as with any effective metaphor, must be understood or relatable in order to truly inspire healing.

To relate to young adults, fictional and fantastical stories may be the key. Reading a story with an interesting plot, relatable characters, and climactic moments is more beneficial than merely reviewing an infographic or pamphlet:

By telling a story, the listener shifts into a state of curiosity in their mind, and that important element of curiosity tempers judgment by promoting narrative transportation – the extended transportation imagery model: a meta-analysis of the antecedents and consequences of consumers’ narrative transportation allowing for a mindset conducive to maximizing the absorption of information. (Fanson 706)

Additionally, because “fictional literature abstracts, summarizes, and compresses complex human relations by selecting only the most relevant elements,” it functions to guide the reader to a story’s core meaning or other important information through having the reader experience it “first-hand” (Mar and Oatley 177). Adding to this, storytelling fills a gap in the more clinical aspects of therapy: agency. Unlike other aspects of treatment, stories draw you in; they happen *with* you, and make you feel like an active participant in an experience.

Everyone’s life experiences are different, as are their preferences – it is of course impossible to think that the perfect character or story can be crafted to relate to every young adult, let alone every person of any age, seeking support through a story. I discuss bibliotherapy because my main goal with this project has been to create a story that might be helpful to a reader with depression, not only by showing them that their symptoms are not

their fault, but by assuring them that they are not alone, and that they have a diagnosable condition with options for management or treatment. I certainly do not expect *Limbo* to resonate with everyone who reads it, but if I at very least spark some modicum of discussion about depression in young adults, that will be enough.

Stories featuring depression can be useful not only for young adults affected by depression, but also to educate family members, friends, and teachers – another goal of mine with *Limbo*. Barriers to seeking help with mental health disorders include an overall lack of education or awareness, and/or denial due to stigma not just on the part of the person afflicted, but on the part of their potential support system and guardians, too (Heath, “Using Children’s Literature” 544). Concerningly, the Mental Health Commission of Canada estimates that “[a]bout 40% of parents say they wouldn’t tell anyone (including the family doctor) if their child was experiencing a mental health problem” as a result of stigma (“Anti-Stigma”). Understandably, such mindsets can lead an adolescent to not only believe they are critically different from their peers and therefore “other,” but also to feel incredibly alone – yet another hurdle to seeking help. A recognition of a diagnosable problem coupled with the assurance that it is experienced by so many, and that experiencing it does not mean you are somehow “broken,” can lead to more open discussion with trusted friends, family, and counsellors. An assurance that depressive symptoms are not shameful or a sign of weakness will in turn lead to increased empathy on the part of those who have not experienced depression, and increased self-worth and self-acceptance on the part of those who have, and thereby reduce instances of both social and self-stigma.

### **“Through Magic to Truth”: the Fantasy Genre**

As said by Susan Cooper, author of the young adult series *The Dark is Rising*,

“Fantasy is metaphor: it takes you through the subconscious to the conscious, through magic to truth.” The genre provides an ideal, moldable landscape of the imaginary which an author can utilize to potentially change a reader’s viewpoint and highlight key issues by examining important topics in multilayered facets. Fantasy has the ability show things in a new perspective, especially for youth, as “[t]he strangeness and unfamiliarity of fantasy worlds allows children to take a step back from their everyday lives and exposes them to new ways of considering problems” (Dewan 13). Furthermore, a fantasy writer has a great deal more tools to work with when framing difficult or distressing subjects such as depression, especially to the benefit of those who are unfamiliar with these topics. Although it must be done with intent and care, a creative genre allows an author to use magic, monsters, and other symbolism in order to translate an abstract concept into something corporeal, and “[t]he spiritual growth of the protagonist can be presented more tangibly when depicted in terms of struggle with external magic forces than in terms of inner tension (Nikolajeva 61). In regard to mental health, a tangible “thing” designed to portray intangible, complex feelings could be incredibly beneficial to readers who do not know how depression *feels*, or its true gravity.

I am not suggesting that fantasy is the only genre capable of deep discussion or presentation of subjects such as depression. Rather, especially as a reader, it is my preferred genre for processing more difficult themes. As “a construction of meaning” (Le Guin 85), it allows a writer to not only build a narrative around a specific message but, as something built from an author’s imagination, the story also remains a safe space. There is a separation between the events of the story and the reader’s reality, which I argue is beneficial for processing potentially upsetting conversations or themes. Just as “the battle of good and evil may be less disturbing, yet more persuasive, when described within an imaginary world than in the reader’s immediate surrounding” (Nikolajeva 60-61), it can be challenging to look at a

severe problem head-on, because we naturally tend to recoil from difficult or painful situations. A fantasy setting acts as a shield, or buffer, by presenting an issue to be examined while giving the reader the safety of detachment. Events of a fantasy story may reflect or represent real-life experiences, but they are clearly, securely separated from what we know to be “real,” taking place either in a world that is not our own, or the same world but with different rules that clearly differentiate it from our own (for instance, dragons openly existing in that world).

One might be tempted to lean away from fantasy as a learning tool because of the implications that a fantasy reader is avoiding “real life,” and running away from problems by immersing themselves in make-believe. However, “Fantasy is a natural human activity,” J.R.R. Tolkien argues; “It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make” (51). Fantasy is, therefore, not simply make-believe, or pretending that reality does not exist:

It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe* [sic], of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium* [sic], giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. (Tolkien 62)

Young adults are not naïve to the fact that the world can be cruel, that reality can be a harsh place. In a post-pandemic era, where global news stories of war and democratic upheaval and starvation and climate change – not to mention shocking reels on multiple social media sites showing images and videos a viewer might not have been prepared to see – are carried with us at all times and instantly ready at our fingertips, I would argue that the possibility of a

“happily ever after” feels ever more elusive.

Fantasy can help restore optimism, I argue, because the genre’s imaginative element does not erode reality, or hide cruelty – it does not *lie* but rather builds something new from what we already know to be true and shows us *options*. Without imagination, without the ability to fantasize, there would be no hope, no ability to dream of better or even simply “different” possibilities. As Northrop Frye maintained, “The imaginative or creative force in the mind is what has produced everything that we call culture and civilization” (421). Further, Ursula Le Guin wrote, “The literature of imagination, even when tragic, is reassuring, not necessarily in the sense of offering nostalgic comfort, but because it offers a world large enough to contain alternatives, and therefore offers hope” (87). Youth thus rely on fairy tales and fantastical stories “not as escape but as enhancement of their own lives and skills,” and “are not searching for a way out of the reality in which they find themselves but rather for a field manual to help them understand their surroundings” (Abbruscato and Jones 2).

Additionally, and crucially, fantasy is an optimal genre with which to examine topics such as mental health simply because young adults gravitate towards it as a genre of choice. In a 2017 survey carried out by Scholastic Canada, youth aged 15 to 17 chose *The Hobbit* and the *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Percy Jackson* series as their favorites, right along books such as *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, *Goosebumps*, and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. The results were very similar in the age 12-14 category (“What Canadian Kids and Parents Want in Books”). This popularity is plausibly attributable to the fact that “fantasy can empower a child protagonist in a way that realistic prose is incapable of doing” (Nikolajeva 61), inspiring agency in younger readers – a crucial ability for mental health topics, especially when depression’s hold threatens one’s sense of self-worth and control.

Depression slowly erodes at your self-confidence, at your motivations, at your belief that the choices you make matter, and when depression feels as though it is a part of you, it seems inescapable. Showing young adults that they can still make decisions, that they are still smart and capable despite depression, is imperative.

Depression, at least in my experience, makes you feel as though the “magical” is beyond your reach, and beyond what you deserve. While young adult general fiction is currently delving deeper into issues of mental health, especially anxiety and depression (Wickham 11), a gap remains in young adult fantasy. When browsing in the “mental health” category on the Scholastic Books website in February and again in May 2025, there were a plethora of general fiction options for young adults to choose from. However, when the “fantasy” genre filter was added: “There are no results for your search. Please try again.”

### ***In Limbo***

My experience with depression often felt like being trapped in a sort of limbo: I felt as though I could not keep up with my peers, and that I was never going to do anything meaningful with my life. I could not see a tunnel out, let alone a light at the end of one. This is the reason I had my two main characters, Wynter and Andee, enter a space which Andee bitterly refer to as “limbo” (110), and why I named my creative project as such. I wanted to pull readers fully into this liminal space – a space of emptiness, sorrow, and loss, but a space in which the characters come to know they do not belong. There is hope that they will make it back to a reality which, despite its flaws, holds some potential for joy unlike the grey, lifeless realm the monster draws its victims into.

*Limbo*’s monster is a metaphor designed for the benefit of a reader who has not experienced depression before. As I mention earlier, it can be difficult to define a mental

health issue before first reframing it, and “many have struggled to communicate their pain in a manner comprehensible to those who have not experienced it” (Callahan and Berrios 5). It is easy to understand when a person is sad or melancholy as the result of a specific event, i.e. a cause-and-effect scenario, but less so when there is no discernable cause for the same feelings, or when those feelings become so overwhelming, you can no longer function.

My portrayal of depression was not intended to be abstract and whether through dreams, shadows, or crows, any symbolism I utilize in *Limbo* is not intended to be complex, either. I chose late January and early February as a setting because those are the darkest, most lonely days of the year. I tried to make it somewhat unclear if the shadows and ghosts were of similar make, because depression can make you doubt your own instincts. Crows traditionally have very mixed symbolism – depending on the story, they are good or bad; they can be friends, or harbingers of death. Birds in general are associated with fairy folk, with some in Ireland believing that fairies take the form of crows, or use crows to do their bidding; meanwhile, it was believed that goddesses of war also took the form of certain birds (Evans-Wentz 267; 303-304). The “sluagh,” known as “the most formidable” of the fairies, were known for “taking crescent form, like a flight of grey birds” (MacKillop 389).

The sluagh of Celtic mythology are in fact what most heavily influenced my design of *Limbo*’s monster. Some believe these malevolent fairy folk to be the “spirits of mortals who have died,” that “fly about in great clouds, up and down the face of the world like the starlings, and come back to the scenes of their earthly transgressions;” some accounts from a work published in 1900 even claimed they would force men to join them and do their bidding, “and men obeyed, having no alternative” (Carmichael 330). The sluagh who, unlike other fairies, only appear “after the fall of night, and more particularly about midnight” (Evans-Wentz 108), are believed to be “the Host[s] of the Unforgiven Dead” or, influenced

by Christianity, fallen angels (Briggs 373), representing those of poor character or low worth. Parts of these elements – the feeling of being trapped, of being damaged – immediately struck me as being relatable to the symptoms of depression. The stigma of having a poor or lacking character, especially, stuck out for me because with my own fantasy story, I wanted to emphasize the opposite.

Since depression can feel abstract and intangible, I gave my story’s monster a seemingly unlimited ability to shapeshift. According to legend, the men ensnared by the sluagh “slew and maimed at the bidding of their spirit-masters, who in return ill-treated them in a most pitiless manner (Carmichael 330) – this matched my idea of the shadow people, who are condemned to follow and obey *Limbo*’s monster, and additionally mirrors the moment Wynter is faced with a double of herself, a trick perpetrated by the monster to make Wynter further doubt herself. I also gave the monster the ability to creep into characters’ dreams and create nightmares, to give readers a better idea of the terrible sensation of when depressive symptoms infiltrate your psyche in an uncontrollable way. There is an emphasis on the lack of control characters have as they try to navigate through school and interact with friends and family, all with this terrible dread looming over them, and this lack of control only intensifies once they enter the “limbo” space.

The monster spends a great deal of the story in a bodiless form – the characters do not immediately realize there *is* a monster – and this adds to Wynter and Andee’s fears of facing it, because they do not know *what* it is or how to fight it, let alone avoid it. Even the previous victims of the monster do not know exactly what it is, and simply call it “the Thing” (106). I decided the monster would be weak to iron, colloquially known to be effective against fairies, as silver is to werewolves or wooden stakes, to vampires. Katherine Briggs in her *Encyclopedia of Fairies* confirms that “[c]old iron repels fairies;” for example, “[a] pair of



open scissors hung above a child's cradle is said to protect it from being carried off by the fairies" (Briggs 234). The crowbar, the keychain, and Wynter's pocketknife all contain steel, which contains iron – in her final battle with the Thing, Wynter has an effective tool to fight the monster in her pocket the whole time, without realizing it.

Because depression can be chronic for some, when the Thing is ultimately vanquished by the end of the novella, it leaves behind a threat of its return: "*It never goes away,*" Dewey despairs, "*It always comes back*" (150). For Dewey, it is true – the monster has returned, over and over, and takes someone new every time. To him, there seem to be only two choices: refuse the Thing and become a wandering ghost, or agree to become a faceless minion to it. The ghosts and shadow people, victims of the monster, are not meant to be representative of being unworthy and thus unable to enter heaven or a similar afterlife, as with the lore of the sluagh. Instead, I intended for them to represent those who feel trapped in limbo, such as a younger me did. They do not see other options, nor do they know a way to get home, and have thus resigned themselves to their current state at no fault of their own.

Andee feels nearly immediate relief with the defeat of the story's monster, but as with Dewey, nothing has changed for Wynter. Although Wynter is arguably the hero of the story, having defeated the Thing and helped rescue Lydia, Wynter's problems are not miraculously fixed. She even blames herself for the monster's appearance, and her terror and guilt that she might bring it back accidentally, for not feeling "better," overshadows any sense of accomplishment or pride she might have felt for defeating the Thing. Andee is the one person who gives Wynter a name for her actual problem: "depression." Only when she has a name for what haunts her, and is able to separate it from herself, is Wynter finally able to begin to shift her self-blame, and she is prompted to seek help to begin to treat and manage her symptoms. This actually parallels the external monster in an interesting way, in the

separation of depression from who Wynter believes herself to be; not necessarily plucking it from within herself, and holding it up in her hand to look at it, but recognizing that it is not her *self*.

Although I was purposefully rather heavy-handed with depressive symptoms as interpreted through the Thing, I knew the portrayal of depression as a real-world issue must also be depicted clearly in *Limbo*. I never saw my feelings in *Harry Potter*'s Dementors, for example, likely because my own feelings were so internalized; the monster, I thought, was a part of me. Therefore, while the monster is intended to be a teaching tool for potential readers who have not experienced depression before, Wynter is meant to directly represent readers with undiagnosed depression. According to Statistics Canada, girls have typically been more heavily affected by depression than boys: in 2019, "16% of girls aged 12 to 17 rated their mental health as "fair" or "poor," more than twice that of boys (7%)" and in 2023, now aged 16 to 21 years old, the percentages increased to 33% for the same group of girls and 19% for the boys ("2023 Canadian Health Survey"). Therefore Wynter, Andee, and Lydia are all female-identifying not simply because, in my opinion, female protagonists are still under-represented in the fantasy genre.

A problem I faced with my choice to write this story in the fantasy genre involves my protagonists, and the fact that fantasies often heavily rely on the concept of the chosen hero – effectively, a character who was predestined to be important by virtue of some special, unique, quality. To steer away from this concept, the characters of my novella were not directly "chosen" to be heroes, especially not for being somehow different from their peers. Mental illness should not be romanticized in the sense that it is marked as a special trait that celebrates the characters as "worthy" by virtue of their ability to withstand great suffering. Instead, Andee and Wynter take action by virtue of their own choices: for seeing a problem,

realizing that no one else is trying to solve it, and choosing to do something about it *despite*, not *because* of, their dread, their despair, and their uncertainty. Both characters have an opportunity to walk away, and the monster even promises they will be free of the terrible feelings if they do (101); meanwhile, they know that there is no guarantee they will be able to rescue Lydia and, even if they do, it is likely the monster will retaliate. By having my characters choose their own way, rather than having a path forced upon them, I further hoped to represent the fact that depression does not destroy individual desires – rather, it shrouds them. Those dealing with depression are no less capable than the average hero; the tasks are just made a great deal more difficult, because depression creates so many additional obstacles.

After they return home, it is revealed that Andee and Wynter were not the only characters having the nightmares that initially inspired them to seek out the missing Lydia. A lack of communication was the reason that they ended up facing the monster as a pair, rather than a larger group, representing the fact that community and support systems are important keys to managing depression. However, I also knew that Wynter could not be directly saved by a friend at the end of the story, because suggesting that a reader should wait for The friend or The relationship that will help them or repair their self-worth is, in my opinion, intensely harmful. Young adult fantasy stories generally feature quite heavily in the theme of found family, and of “love” being the answer – a missing puzzle piece falls into place, and leads the characters to a resolution. The “found family” trope is one of my favourites as a reader, and a support system is important when effectively managing depression, but I recognize that one cannot expect to be “seen” by others, especially when experiencing something invisible. If you stay rooted to one spot, hidden behind forced smiles and “I’m fine”s, and never ask for help, there is no guarantee of someone finding you, taking your hand, and leading you out. It

can happen, certainly – but it is never a guarantee. To rely on the belief that you need only wait, and love will find you, erodes even further on one’s self-worth, waiting for the found family, the support, when nobody knows you need it, and leads to a sense of abandonment and loneliness. Therefore, while Wynter and Andee of course work together and come to provide support to one another, there are key moments wherein the characters must act on their own. Wynter is only able to escape “limbo” because she calls out for help, and someone hears her. In fact, she calls out for help many times and, although she has a friend actively trying to save her, she does not know it for a long while. Most importantly, she still has to face the Thing alone.

It is important to present depression in a story so as not to exclude those who have it from thinking they, too, could be a hero in a story, a participant in the magic. Depression should never be used to mark a character as “chosen,” nor as a mere quirky character trait – it is an obstacle. Depression keeps Wynter from enjoying anything, from having confidence or peace when she is alone; it hounds her even as she has her heroic moment. Andee, too, begins to sink deeper and deeper into misery, and stops finding joy in the sports and games she once adored. Again, I did not want to glorify depression as a mark of being “special.” In fact, when discussing stories that are potential contenders for use in bibliotherapy, scholars insist on avoiding “extreme characters portrayed as victims or superheroes” as well as “simplistic, ‘band-aid’ solutions with ‘happily ever after’ endings” (Heath, “Bibliotherapy” 569). This cemented my resolution to have Wynter and Andee succeed not by virtue of a superpower, or birthright ability, but rather by chance. They are not chosen heroes – they simply do not give up. Likewise, I do not end the story with Wynter receiving a clean “happily ever after,” and instead tried to make it ambiguous but hopeful: “It *can* be okay,” not “It *will* be okay.”

Stories are a source of comfort; a way to interact with other people even when every fibre of your being is begging you to stay home, to withdraw. We go to the theatre and feel a little more powerful, a little more hero-adjacent, after watching an exciting movie. We take a breath, close a book and shudder after a particularly harrowing scene in a favourite novel. Stories have affected us long before *Harry Potter*, or *The Faerie Queene* – long before we even had agriculture, let alone high school. They are key to building empathy and understanding, which in turn makes stories an ideal place to house a deeper discussion of mental health topics. Because not every story will ever appeal to everyone, more voices are needed in order to reach more people – to give depression a name, and thereby prevent those affected from believing they are not worthy, or that they somehow deserve how they feel. Ultimately, *Limbo* is simply a story – but it is a story based in truth. If you, reading this, are dealing with depression, I hope you know that you are not alone.

## Limbo

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As soon as she opened her eyes, Wynter knew something terrible was going to happen.

Her phone buzzed loudly on her bedside table. Blindly fumbling in the dark, Wynter silenced the alarm. She lay in bed, staring into the blackness of her bedroom, willing herself to feel more awake.

Willing the bad feeling to go away.

Her chest was tight. She had a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. An ache as if someone had died. This wasn't new. It had been haunting her for a long, long time now. Some days had been worse than others.

Wynter finally pushed herself upright. She was so tired, she felt dizzy. She had dreamed a lot; the memories of what she had seen in those dreams were already slipping away, but they left a lingering, uncomfortable feeling.

Sitting on her bed, Wynter listened to the sound of her family going through their morning routines: someone clomping through the kitchen; muffled voices saying goodbyes as her dad left for work; footsteps scuffing past Wynter's room as her younger brother, Miles, made his way downstairs.

The gentle scent of coffee floated from the hallway into her room as Hilda, the family's cat, pushed through Wynter's bedroom door. Wynter always left it slightly cracked open, just for her. Hilda rubbed her face against Wynter's legs, purring. Wynter picked her up onto her lap, stroking Hilda's sleek black fur until she felt slightly better.

Wynter tried to focus on things that were *real*: the worn carpet beneath her feet; the sound of the furnace pushing hot air into her room; the pale, hospital-room-blue colour of her bedroom walls, peeking out from behind numerous posters of bands Wynter had liked last year.

Wynter pushed down the sudden thought that her dread was associated with Hilda. But she was an indoor cat. She would be safe at home.

*But what if she's not?*

Her mom was just heading out the door when Wynter appeared in the kitchen. “Are you taking the car?” she asked as Wynter placed her key ring on the kitchen table with a loud jingle before turning to pull her lunch bag out of the fridge.

“Not today.”

Her mom scoffed impatiently. “Why are you avoiding practicing? What was the point of your grandma leaving the car to you if you refuse to drive it?”

Miles looked up briefly from his phone at the table, then evidently decided not to get involved and looked back at the screen. Wynter’s face felt warm. “I’m not refusing to drive it,” she said, keeping her tone even, and unemotional. “I was going to ask dad to help me change the oil first, when he has time.”

“Again?! Have you not been putting oil in it?”

“It was low yesterday and it was just topped off. It probably has a leak. And the mileage says it’s time for an oil change anyway.” Wynter’s voice was wooden; she felt what little energy she had, draining.

“You could just top it off again for today. It’d be fine.”

*Jesus.* “Probably, but this way I can be sure. And I save gas money.”

“You wouldn’t have to worry about that if you had a job.”

They’d had this argument before. Wynter just stayed silent. There was no point in saying anything.

After a pause, her mom threw up her hands and asked instead, “Does the cat have water?”

“Yes.” Wynter confirmed, trying very hard not to sound frustrated.

“Do you both have lunches?”

“Yes,” Wynter and Miles replied simultaneously.

Their mom looked at her watch. “Anyway, I have to go. Love you both. Have a good day.” Wynter and Miles murmured their own goodbyes as the door snapped shut.

*You should have just taken the car.*

But there was no point wrecking it if there was a leak. And Wynter just didn’t want to drive today.

*Why is this such a big deal?*

Miles whispered, “I don’t actually have a lunch packed.”

A few minutes later, after Miles stashed some random items from the fridge in his backpack, and after checking the back door was locked and that all the lights were out, the siblings pulled on their winter coats and headed out into the frigid, late January air to wait for the bus.

Miles played on his phone as they waited, tapping the screen intently, occasionally blowing on his fingers to warm them. Next to him, Wynter looked at the dark grey sky and breathed, slow and deep. As she watched her breath float up and away in wispy billows, she willed the heavy feeling in her chest to go away.

Wynter surveyed the houses across the street from the bus stop, most with lights on; some with dark woodsmoke clinging to the roofs, floating like grey ghosts across the shingles.

She wondered if something bad *was* going to happen.

She hoped her parents drove safe.

She hoped the bus drove safe.

She hoped Miles stayed safe.

She hoped Hilda stayed safe.

She hoped everybody stayed safe.

...

Andee yawned hugely on the drive to school. When she’d last checked the time before finally shutting down the PlayStation and crawling into bed, it was two in the morning.

As she sipped her lukewarm mocha sludge from her travel mug in the coveted front passenger seat and listened to her four siblings banter overtop of the beats of the latest choice of pop album (it was *not* Andee’s turn to pick the music today), Andee reflected on how much quieter a bus ride would have been. That said, she was pretty grateful she didn’t have to take the bus as often now that her mom was working in town. Because it very inconveniently had to stop for every student along the way, the bus took *forever*.

Andee yawned a second time. *Lewellyn’s Final Stand* was too exciting for sleep. Andee dreamily thought about the parts of the world’s map she hadn’t explored yet, the easter eggs



waiting to be found. Then she yawned again, this time so violently that she teared up.

“Rough night?” Andee’s mom asked, looking over at her from the driver’s seat as Andee used the sleeve of her hoodie to wipe the tears leaking from her eyes while trying not to smudge her glasses.

“Umm no... just tired.”

There was a heartbeat of silence (silence from her mom, anyway. Somewhere behind Andee, there was a kerfuffle as one of her brothers dropped the muffin he’d been snacking on and dove for it, shrieking. She heard her youngest sister cackle at him).

“Andriana...”

Andee braced herself. Anything but her nickname meant trouble was probably brewing.

“I *would* suggest moving the PlayStation from your room to the living room, for obvious reasons, but I’m thinking you’re old enough to know sleep is a priority.” Her mom gave her A Look, before returning her attention to the road. “*Right?*”

Andee chuckled nervously as she swirled the mess in her coffee mug. “Uh huh.” Her mom sighed, frowning, but dropped it.

Andee started to speak again, but hesitated. She had been hoping to broach the subject of hanging out with her friends after school, but decided, at this point, that it would probably be best to just...not. Instead, she took another sip of her drink and stared silently out the window.

As the telephone poles along the highway sped by, Andee gazed sullenly at the frosted green pines and icy ditch lining the cold strip of asphalt in the dreary grey light of the just-rising sun. One day, Andee would have her own truck. She didn’t want anything fancy, just functional. Then she would be unstoppable.

She would be able to stay out as late as she wanted, at least.

...

Finally, the bus pulled up to the drop-off lane. When Wynter stepped down onto the cracked concrete sidewalk, Miles was already well ahead of her. His lanky figure quickly disappeared into the double doors of the main building, which decades ago had been painted in what’s universally acknowledged to be the most welcoming colour of all: salmon pink.

Miles had so many friends, and was always busy after school, and never seemed down about anything.

*I wish I belonged somewhere.*

Wynter shifted her backpack to sit more comfortably on her shoulder, and headed inside to her locker.

On autopilot, Wynter stashed her winter coat and backpack, and began to slowly walk to her first class. She thought back to September, when she had actually been excited to begin her final year of high school. But the shine of her Grade 12 year had long since worn off. She wasn't sure she was even excited about graduating.

*What is wrong with you?*

Wynter was one of the first people in the classroom. She settled herself in one of the hard, blue plastic chairs. She breathed in the musty, papery smell of the room as her thoughts struggled to move through the wet cotton in her head. The fluorescent bars illuminating the room hurt her eyes. Wanting a distraction, Wynter pulled her phone from her bag to scroll reels aimlessly while she waited for class to start. As students trickled into the room, the same video of an orange tabby cat wearing a lovingly crocheted little top hat played over and over on her cracked phone screen without her really seeing it.

She wanted to go back to bed.

Right as the second bell rang, the last handful of students rushed into the room. Two of them, Rhea and Eden, half-jogged to their seats beside Wynter, receiving a stern look from their teacher before she told everyone to crack open their textbooks so they could go over the answers to the homework.

"Hey!" Rhea whispered after she had settled in her chair, smiling at Wynter. Eden smiled broadly, too. Wynter made herself smile back.

Later, when the bell rang again, she couldn't remember what the class had been about.

...

Andee's mom worked closer to the high school than the kids' elementary school, so Andee was always the last one kicked out of the SUV on the morning drop-offs. They were cutting it close this morning: Andee had to almost dive out of the car in the high school drop-

off zone in order for her mom to zoom off and make it to work on time.

Andee sprinted up the steps and through the double doors, only slowing down when she was inside – she didn’t want anyone to see her running, how *embarrassing* – and went straight to class without stopping by her locker.

Uncomfortably hot and sweaty in her stupid puffy winter jacket, Andee slipped into the room just ahead of two other girls and internally applauded herself for not being the *very* last student to arrive as she was taking her seat. Trying to make as little noise as possible, she struggled out of her suffocating jacket and impatiently slung it behind her on her chair. Cillian, sitting to her left, made a mock disappointed face at her. She made an ugly face back before stooping to dig her biology homework out of her bag.

At lunch break, after an agonizingly boring couple of classes, Andee and her friends decided today sucked enough to justify finding something to eat that wasn’t an uninspired sandwich or cold leftovers.

The walk to Karmia’s Donairs was chilly. Andee had abandoned her coat in her locker, and was instead braving the walk in just her zip-up hoodie.

That had been a mistake.

As she pulled her hood further forward and blew on her hands to warm them, Andee thought longingly ahead to holding a warm aluminum foil wrapping stuffed with delicious pita bread, shaved beef and tomatoes soaked in sweet, tangy sauce. She had felt a pang of guilt about using her 4-H savings to fund her lunch habits, instead of keeping it for university, or her dream truck. But that guilt was quickly quashed, as it always was, by the somewhat angry thought that a fifteen buck treat once in a while was not going to put much of a dent into the cost of those dreams.

Anyway, Karmia’s offered a student discount.

Delaney, their dark, curly hair stuffed under a knitted green toque, had wandered slightly ahead of Andee and Cillian and was currently balancing on a meridian along the sidewalk.

“Kinda icy for that, eh?” Cillian called out.

Without looking back, Delaney yelled back, “You’re not my real dad!” They wobbled,

whirling their arms like a gymnast for stability.

Cillian scoffed. He bumped Andee's cold shoulder with his own. "Have you applied to any universities, yet?"

"No, dad," she joked.

"Ew, don't call me that," Cillian shuddered and scrunched up his nose in disgust.

"Anyway, lots of deadlines are soon. I think March?"

"For most places, yeah."

The roads should have still been covered in snow, but this was a strange winter and the temperature had been all over the place, bouncing from crazily warm to bitterly cold. A recent spell of warm weather had washed away what little snow had fallen with unwelcome bouts of rain; the asphalt was bare, and spots of brown grass overwhelmed the patches of greyish, crusted snow in peoples' yards.

Delaney slipped off the meridian but managed to make it look purposeful. They waited for Cillian and Andee to catch up, hopping up and down.

"What're you doing?" Andee laughed at them.

"Trying to stay warm."

"Fair." Andee moved over to give Delaney room to walk next to her and Cillian.

"I just wanna leave here," Cillian said suddenly. Delaney nodded emphatically in agreement.

Andee, meanwhile, became intensely focused on readjusting the hood of her sweater. She didn't want to talk about leaving. She thought of her family, her younger sisters and brothers – what would it be like leaving them for months at a time? *Years* at a time. She had been secretly thinking of taking a gap year, with the excuse of earning some money for school while she bought another year to think about her future. But then she'd be a year behind everyone else...

As she abandoned her hood and pulled her cold hands deep into her hoodie sleeves, Andee wished she had at least thought to wear a scarf. Her cheeks were going numb.

"I'm not sure where to go... dunno if I want to try to go somewhere in another country?" Cillian carried on.

Delaney sighed. “Imagine the crushing debt.”

Debt. That was something else that made Andee wonder if she should wait a year. But could she save enough money in just a year of work? “We’re all doomed, I fear,” Andee muttered. Delaney made a choking giggly noise.

“Hard to decide what you want to do for the rest of your life in the space of a few months,” Cillian added dejectedly.

Delaney reassured him, “My dad said you don’t have to even decide during your first year at uni, usually. You can take whatever courses you want, then just have to decide by like, year two, or something.”

Cillian sighed. “I can’t afford that.”

Delaney irritably kicked a stray pebble off the sidewalk. “It’s so dumb that even *applying* costs money.”

“Yeah,” Cillian agreed.

“And if you wanna apply to dorms,” Delaney continued, “you have to do that like, at the same time, and that costs even *more*.”

“You’re staying in dorms?” Andee asked, surprised. She hadn’t even thought of dorms. Did she want to stay in dorms? How much did dorms cost?

“We’ll see, I guess.”

The group was silent for a few more steps. Their shoes scuffed softly on the frozen sidewalk. A crow landed on the sidewalk in front of them, and ruffled her feathers huffily as they approached. She hopped aside, cawing indignantly, and gave them major side-eye as they walked past. *Rude*, Andee thought.

“BUT!” Delaney shouted unexpectedly —

Cillian jumped. “*Jesus*,” Andee swore quietly —

“Who cares?!” Delaney exclaimed. “In just a few months, we can make all those choices ourselves! We’re free! We can do whatever we want and” — they twirled around dramatically, arms in the air — “the world is our oyster!”

Cillian snorted. “*Oyster*? Are you fuckin’ eighty-five?”

“I’m not fuckin’ anybody!” Delaney cackled.

Andee listened to the two of them continue to banter, only half paying attention. Maybe she didn't need to be as worried as she was. Whatever she did, she had the freedom to choose whatever she wanted. There were no rules, really. She breathed a deep, grounding sigh.

It would all be okay.

...

Wynter peeked into the art classroom, lunch bag in hand, and was relieved to see it was empty. She chose a table out of the direct line of sight of the hallway, unpacked her food and ate quickly and quietly. She was worried someone she knew might look into the room and think she was lonely, and try to hang out. It made her feel insane. But the thought of making light conversation with anyone, even her friends, was...exhausting.

*Loser.*

After she finished her mediocre sandwich, Wynter made her way outside. Her brain was buzzing; she wanted to clear her head.

Wynter wasn't sure where Eden and Rhea were, but to be fair, she hadn't sought them out. They had possibly rounded up Daisy, another friend in the group, and gone out to buy food or just to wander around the closest, if somewhat dreary and old, strip mall. Stores cycled in and out of that mall fairly frequently, so you could sometimes rely on the novelty of a new shop to check out. Anyway, the group chat was silent, so Wynter couldn't be sure.

*They don't even like hanging out with you.*

*There's literally no point to you.*

*It's your own fault you feel so shitty.*

Wynter walked the quiet streets neighbouring the school, not really concerned with picking a concrete path. A crow cawed occasionally. Dirty clumps of melting snow hugged the sidewalks.

As she walked, Wynter mused, bitterly, that if she could find something *useful* to do, she would at least have a reason to exist, and then she wouldn't always feel so out of place. Then she'd enjoy being around people again. Then she would enjoy *anything* again.

Right now, she was just...here. And she couldn't see beyond that.

Dejectedly, Wynter tried to make herself feel excited about the future, about graduating,

about moving out on her own. But she couldn't feel anything about it.

Wynter wondered if every experience would be tainted until she found ... something. Something to fill whatever void was forming inside her, and making her miserable.

One of her boots slipped a bit on a soft patch of slushy ice, pushed from someone's driveway onto the sidewalk. Slush, in January.

*What if there isn't even much of a future left, anyway?*

Even more tired, and still overwhelmed, Wynter checked her phone for the time. She needed to head back.

When the student parking lot came into view, Wynter saw Rhea, Daisy, and Eden. They were ambling lazily away from a blue Corolla, borrowed from Rhea's mom, holding a collection of what looked like slurpee cups and crumpled fast food bags.

Wynter's chest constricted, a tiny bit, with an aching, lonely feeling.

*They don't really like you.*

...

Delaney caught up to Andee just before she climbed through the bus's folding doors. "Forgot to ask – your mom not picking you up today?"

Andee stepped aside to let other kids onto the bus. "No, sadly." Andee's mom usually drove home with the other kids right after the elementary school got out, but on the days she stayed late to go grocery shopping, Andee could sometimes convince her mom to let her hang out with a friend instead of going on errands.

"Wanna skip the bus and spend the night at my house?"

Andee stared at them incredulously. "The fu– No! I'd be dead." She sighed. "I can't wait to get my own truck," she said glumly.

"It would be nice if you could chauffeur me everywhere," Delaney agreed.

Andee scoffed. "Get your own license!"

"I didn't say I *wouldn't* drive. I just think it'd be funnier for you to drive me."

Andee glanced at the bus driver. He didn't seem like he was getting ready to drive away, yet. "Anyway, I'll ask if I can stay over after hockey this week, though."

“Lit.”

“Ew.”

The bus doors began to close. Andee yelled a “Bye!” to Delaney and quickly leapt up the bus steps. She grinned apologetically at the driver, who rolled his eyes, before making her way to the back of the bus.

Later, Andee sat at the kitchen table, dutifully finishing off her homework while her mom finished cooking spaghetti. Andee was having a hard time concentrating with the sound of the ladle clunking against the pot and whatever else her mom was doing. She sincerely lamented not having her own desk. But it wouldn’t fit in her room with the console and little second-hand tv she had, anyway.

Her mom took a break from supervising the sauce to check the whiteboard calendar by the door to the mudroom. “Okay,” she said, mostly to herself, “Meila’s volleyball is Mondays, swim lessons are tomorrow – I am SO glad Remy and Darcy have their lessons back-to-back now – and Anika’s skating trip is Thursday, but that’s during school hours, then that party is Saturday ... okay, that works —” Andee’s mom turned to Andee, looking stricken, “Oh *shit* – weren’t you supposed to go to rugby practice today?!”

Andee looked up from her biology textbook. “Mom. It’s January.”

“Oh right. My bad.”

“Floor hockey’s Thursday though.”

Andee’s mom made a note on the calendar and sighed, leaning somewhat wearily on the counter by the stove.

Andee saw her moment. “Hey mom?”

“Yes?”

“D’you think...do you think it’d be okay to spend Thursday night at Laney’s?” Seeing her mom’s shoulders tense, she added quickly: “Then nobody would have to drive me home after practice!”

“Oh? And how would you get home Friday?” There was no school this Friday. It was a Pro-D Day.



“Well...” This was the tricky part. “Anika’s friend’s having a birthday party Saturday, right?”

“Yes.”

“I could just stay ‘til then? And – and I can help you with errands or something? In return?” Andee stared hopefully at her mom’s back.

Her mom was silent for a tense moment. “I’ll think about it,” she said flatly.

Andee’s dad clomped into the house, coming in from supervising chore time with Remy and Darcy – it was their turn to feed the chickens but they were, to be bluntly honest, terrible at it – and asked, “What’s so exciting in town?”

Damn. Andee had been hoping to wrangle one parent at a time with this. “I just want to see my friends more,” Andee mumbled lamely, suddenly feeling childish.

“I don’t see a huge problem with it,” her dad said, rubbing the stubble on his chin thoughtfully. He looked over to her mom, who still looked stern. Her arms were crossed.

“Who are you hanging out with?” her mom interrogated.

“Laney.”

“Yes, obviously. And Cillian?”

“I dunno – maybe?”

“Will he be there overnight?”

Andee threw her hands up in the air. “*Mom!*”

“What?”

“Jesus – do you actually think we’d do *that?!?*” She pulled at her face with her hands dramatically. “Why don’t you ever ask that when it’s just Delaney?!”

“Because you told me they’re into girls! And you’re not.” Her mom paused. “Wait, *are* you?”

“What if I was?”

“I mean that’s fine but then that opens the same problem with a lot of different people —”

“Ohmygod —”

“I know we’ve had a talk about this but I want to make sure you know —”

“Brenna. Andee,” Andee’s dad gently interjected, gently laying his hand on her mom’s arm. He looked at Andee. “Andee, are you planning to sleep with anybody this week?”

Andee blushed deeply, spluttering, “Wh-what? No?! Why —?”

“There you go,” he said to Brenna, clapping a hand on her shoulder. “If you do, be safe and use protection,” he added, pointing finger-guns at Andee, and made as if to leave.

“*Joe!*”

“I’m just kidding.” He swiveled back. “Look kiddo —” Andee cringed inwardly; she was too old to be called that — “we trust you, but you *have* been spending a lot of extra time with friends lately. Meila’s going to get jealous.”

“Yeah, well,” Andee countered, feeling a bit manipulative, “this might be my last year hanging out with any of them.”

Andee’s mom’s face fell a bit. “I hear you, honey. But to be fair, it might be your last year here at home with all of us, too.”

Andee suddenly felt annoyed – she was almost five years older than Meila, the second oldest. The other kids didn’t need her anymore. They didn’t exactly hang out. So Andee countered, “Well, I wouldn’t have to stay in town for entire nights at a time if I could buy my own truck.”

Brenna sighed, “Andee, we don’t have enough money —”

“I mean I could buy it,” Andee clarified quickly.

Her parents raised their eyebrows comically in sync. “You can’t afford a good *car* with what you have,” her mom pointed out.

“It doesn’t have to be good! It just has to get me through a couple years.”

“That’s not a great buying strategy,” her dad teased gently.

“Well what else am I supposed to do?” Andee waved her arms impatiently, her frustration building. “I don’t have a car to get to town, so I can’t get a job, and I can’t get a car without a job!”

“We are *not* going to let you buy a scrap heap that breaks down in the middle of the night on the highway,” her dad said, raising his voice dangerously.

“And,” her mom added, more gently, “you’ve had your ‘N’ less than two months.”

“I’m a good driver!”

“Okay, well, you can drive on our way to school tomorrow, and every day, for practice,” her mom negotiated. “Then we can talk about jobs in town.” She looked at Andee’s dad. He nodded in agreement. She looked back at Andee. “Would that be fair?”

“I guess,” Andee said grumpily.

“That’s the only option you have. Take it or leave it,” her dad said sternly.

“Okay.” Andee tried to keep a sour tone out of her voice.

“Okay.”

“So can I stay with Laney after hockey?” Andee added grudgingly, “Please?”

“Yes,” her dad said.

Then her mom turned her head to the hallway. “GUYS,” she yelled, “DINNER!” She slid open the kitchen window and repeated the call outside.

“But I’m not done my homework!” Andee protested, gesturing at her open textbook.

“Well. Sorry.”

As Andee cleared her homework from the table, Darcy and Remy appeared from outside, where she was pretty sure they had been sword fighting with sticks again, their cheeks flushed. Anika, the youngest, came from down the hall, holding her favourite Barbie; she climbed up into her chair and placed the doll carefully in her lap.

Meila was the last kid to arrive. She was moving in a less than natural way, as if she was trying to hide something, so of course Andee’s mom – and Andee – noticed and stared at her. Squinting from a distance at Meila’s face, Brenna asked, “Meila, are you wearing makeup?!”

Meila scowled. “It’s not even a lot. It’s not a big deal.” She had applied a smear of blue eyeliner and a matching shade of lipstick.

“It’s not that – I just didn’t know you were into makeup yet.”

“Well. I am.” Meila stomped over to the table.

“Andee doesn’t wear makeup,” Darcy pointed out helpfully, as he carefully served himself.

“That’s pretty obvious,” Meila muttered snobbishly while she pulled out her chair.

Andee’s mom paused in helping Remy dish up a plate to snarl a warning, “*Excuse me?*”

at the same time Andee said under her breath, “Asshole.”

“Apologize!” Andee’s mom demanded, pointing at Meila with the pasta ladle.

Meila pursed her lips and had the grace to look somewhat abashed. “Sorry,” she muttered, eyes flickering to Andee before staring down at the table.

“Thanks,” Andee replied monotonously.

Brenna conspiratorially rolled her eyes at Andee. Then she moved on to a new problem: “Where’d your dad end up?” she asked, looking around wildly, as if she might find him hiding behind a cupboard door.

“He’s pooping,” Anika piped up, giggling. Everyone except Meila laughed – half as much at five-year-old Anika’s delighted little giggle as at anything else.

Andee’s mom let out a long, theatrical sigh. “Why am I not surprised.”

With near-perfect comedic timing, the toilet flushed. Andee’s dad walked down the hallway into a cacophony of hysterical laughter. Meila hid her mouth behind her hands, to hide her own smirk. “What?” Joe asked, half smiling in confusion.

“POOPING,” Anika shrieked, doing a wriggle-type dance in her chair as she held Barbie over her head.

...

The day had dragged on and on, but finally, it was a reasonable time to go to bed.

As Wynter was brushing her hair in the small bathroom between her and Miles’ rooms, she was hit with a sudden realization:

Nothing bad had happened today.

Wynter knew she should be happy about that. But her shoulders sagged as she stared at herself in the mirror, her eyes wide and sad, knowing she couldn’t even trust her gut feelings.

*When did you get so stupid?*

Frustrated tears welled up in her eyes. “You fucking idiot,” she whispered into the mirror.

Wynter went back to her room, climbed into bed, turned out her bedside lamp and curled up in a ball.

She laid there, willing herself to go to sleep. But her room was too hot. Wynter kicked

her blankets off, and stared into the darkness of her room. Her mind felt like it was buzzing again, a thousand thoughts ricocheting around her brain like flies trying to slam their way through a closed window. The way a boy she thought was hot had looked at her last week, like she was the wall. The way she felt when she saw her friends coming back from the mall without her today. Rain in January. Her mediocre grades that used to be straight-As. Something cringey she'd said to a teacher last Tuesday.

Wynter wished she could grab her thoughts, pull them out of her head and crumple them up in her fist, then throw them into a fire.

Wynter clicked on her lamp. In its dim light, she reached awkwardly under her mattress, pulling her notebook from its hiding place. She sat up against the headboard of her bed, and began to write.

Wynter scrawled paragraphs, words, abstract lines onto the blank pages. Block letters. Full sentences. Disjointed poetry. It was mostly nonsensical ramblings, but it was a relief to get some of her restless thoughts down on paper. Like she had let a small bit of her overflowing brain escape in the form of ink on paper.

Ten minutes passed. Then thirty. Then sixty.

Finally, Wynter closed the book, drained – like she was, for the time being, out of feelings. Out of words. But she felt calmer. She actually felt sleepy.

Wynter tucked the book back under her mattress. It was private; she didn't want anyone to accidentally read it. She didn't like all of the words she had written. They were unpolished, and raw. Wynter hadn't told anyone that she wanted to be a writer, one day.

*That will probably never happen.*

Hilda pushed through the door and leapt up onto Wynter's bed, purring loudly. After kneading the comforter with her tiny paws at Wynter's feet for a few seconds, she moved to settle herself against the back of Wynter's knees, curling up into a ball. Wynter stroked her silky black fur gently, then burrowed deeper into her comforter.

She fell asleep thinking about how much she wished she had been sleepy just a couple hours earlier, so maybe she wouldn't be tired tomorrow.

...

Andee was still awake, crafting new gear in-game. She knew she'd regret it tomorrow, and she *had* laid in bed for a long time, trying to settle down to sleep without giving in to the temptation. But she was too excited to prep her character, to follow the next lead in the story; her hands had practically itched for the controller.

Andee reasoned with herself that gaming was helping her wind down – she needed a distraction from thinking about university and her future and the impossibilities and possibilities that made her feel more than a little overwhelmed. Fighting make-believe monsters was a welcome escape.

She just hoped her mom didn't notice how much coffee she was drinking lately.

A scraping sound that was loud enough for Andee to hear through her headset startled her.

Andee immediately paused the game and pulled the headset off, thinking the noise might have been one of her parents listening outside the door to make sure Andee wasn't up late again. She turned off the tv screen so its glow shining under her door wouldn't give her away and listened, holding her breath.

The noise came again. But it wasn't from the hallway – it was from outside.

Slowly, tentatively, Andee crept to her window.

There was nothing there. All she could make out past the familiar willow tree were empty fields.

Maybe it was time to go to bed.

\*

Thursday evening, in the garage, Wynter watched her dad as he changed the oil filter in her car. The front end of the little white Honda was propped up on jack stands, with Wynter's dad scooted up underneath. Wynter stood close by, wearing her most stained pair of pants and a torn hoodie and handing her dad first the oil pan, then the ratchet, then shop towels, as requested. Ready to jump in and help, even though she knew he wouldn't ask her to.

Wynter knew how to change oil, but her dad insisted on doing it for her anyway. Wynter

had seen him do it a million times, and she wished she was brave enough to just try to do the job on her own, without asking. But she knew there would be a fallout and a lecture about how dangerous that was. She might set the jack incorrectly, or forget to put the car in park. She might kill herself accidentally.

It was easier to let her dad just do it.

The car was in Wynter's name, so it legally did *belong* to her, but it had been a gift. When her grandma had died last year, it had been left to Wynter because she was the oldest grandkid. Wynter hadn't done anything to earn it. And anything that was done to the car went through her parents, anyway. They had even insisted on paying the insurance for the first year. Wynter couldn't, wouldn't, complain – she was very grateful for that. But it still sucked, for reasons she couldn't explain.

She just wanted things to not suck.

*You're never going to be able to do anything for yourself.*

*You're never going to be happy.*

For long moments, she struggled to form the right words until, finally, she forced out a tentative, "Dad?"

"Mm?" He grunted from under the car.

"I...I'm not... h-happy. Lately."

"Oh?" Her dad shuffled, with some difficulty, back out onto the driveway and looked at her in surprise. "How so?"

"I dunno...I just. I'm not...excited about anything?" Her dad stared at her. Twisting her hands together self-consciously, Wynter tried to explain, "I just...I don't know what school I want to go to, or anything. And... and I don't know what the point of any of it is? Um."

*Why is it so hard for you to just fucking say words?*

Her dad didn't say anything; just picked up a shop towel and wiped his hands thoughtfully. Then he threw the dirty towel aside, and abruptly clapped a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sure everything will work out," he said reassuringly, crawling back under the car. There was some soft clunking and clicking as her dad put in the new filter and ratcheted the drain plug back in.

An eternity later, her dad scooted back out, pulling the full oil pan with him. “Just keep pushing forward and things will fall into place,” he told her kindly. “Can you help me clean this up?”

“But...I mean I don’t know *how*,” Wynter said, grabbing soiled towels and feeling desperation creep into her voice. “I don’t know what to *do*...”

Her dad smiled at her. “These’re just nerves. When you’re older, things’ll make more sense.” He picked up the jug of fresh oil, leaned under the hood of the car and began to pour the thick, amber liquid into the reservoir. Wynter watched, numbly taking note of how he held the jug sideways, to avoid spilling. He lowered the car from the jacks and turned the key in the ignition, letting the engine run to get the clean oil to circulate. Wynter watched him recheck the oil level, and add a little more.

“Have you heard from your mom’s sister lately?” her dad asked suddenly.

Wynter drug herself up for air. “Hazel? Uh, yeah. She asked me to babysit tomorrow.”

“Oh good.”

Wynter’s heart sank.

...

The gymnasium was full of the sound of squeaking shoes, shouts, and hockey sticks clacking on the floor. It was just a friendly practice match against a neighbouring school, but you couldn’t tell from how intensely the players were fighting for the puck.

“Oh my god, Andee!” Maria, one of Andee’s teammates, wheezed as they took their turns on the bench. “How do you have so much *energy*?”

Andee giggled humbly but didn’t reply. She took a long drink of her water bottle. Their coach had pulled them off the floor with just a few minutes left in the game, cycling in some fresh players so everybody had a fair chance to play. But Andee would have gladly kept going.

She wiped sweat from her face with her t-shirt, glad she hadn’t forgotten to wear contacts today – she’d had to wear her glasses last week, and the lenses had gotten so foggy she couldn’t see. *That* had slowed her down.

Then she joined Maria and the other benched teammates in hollering encouragement and



stamping their feet until the final whistle blew, and got up with everyone else to line up for an end-of-game handshake with the other team.

“Sure you don’t need a ride?” Leanne, another teammate, asked as Andee zipped up her jacket and slung her duffel bag over her shoulder.

“Naw, it’s all good,” Andee said. Delaney’s house wasn’t *that* far.

“Also – I’m having a thing for my birthday in a couple weeks,” Leanne said shyly.

“D’you wanna come?”

“Bet!” Andee replied enthusiastically.

“I’ll text you!”

“Sounds good! Thanks!” Andee said her goodbyes and pushed open the big double doors to leave.

“See you next week!” Andee’s coach, Miss Taylor, called as the doors swung slowly shut.

Andee waved back jovially and picked her way across the slippery parking lot to the sidewalk. She looked up at the sky, trying to gauge the upcoming weather. Her dad had told her that a ring around the moon meant it would snow. She was sick of sleet and ice. She tried not to think of whether every year would be like this from now on.

The faint outline of a crescent moon was just visible through the foggy sky. There was no ring, but it was still beautiful, so Andee stopped to gaze at it for a few seconds. She stood in the light from the spattering of streetlamps, peacefully quiet but for a few cars that went by, one by one.

A flock of smudgy, dark-feathered birds flew across the moon. Andee gasped, entranced – she had never seen anything like that before. Were those crows? It was hard to tell through the fog.

She stared long after the birds were gone. Eventually, Andee readjusted her duffel bag to sit more comfortably on her shoulder, and continued her journey.

...

Wynter woke up again at 3am. She knew it was 3am because she dared check the time, afraid it was almost time to get up. She was relieved she still had so much time left to sleep.

She often had stupid stress dreams. This time, she had showed up late to school, and the details were bizarre in the way that dreams often are. It involved missing her plane in the morning, a giant spider blocking her way in a hallway as she was trying to find her classroom in a now-unfamiliar building full of labyrinth-like twists and turns. There was an underlying feeling of foreboding, a building tension. A dense fog had seeped in, under classroom doors, filling the hallways, coming closer and closer until it was impossible to move or see. It clung to her, and began dragging her down, down into the ground. Wynter couldn't see, she couldn't breathe ... and then she woke up.

*Fun.*

She put her earbuds in and listened to music from her phone, letting the familiar drumbeats slowly lull her back to sleep as Hilda purred, stretched out on the bed next to her.

...

Andee was heading to class but kept forgetting things. She forgot to brush her teeth, then couldn't find her toothbrush or toothpaste so she spent hours trying to find them so she could finish getting ready. Her backpack was then nowhere to be found. She was making her mom late for work. When she finally got to the school, she realized she had forgotten her homework, so had to figure out how to get home. She went from car to car in the parking lot, checking for one that was unlocked, and finally found one and no, it wasn't stealing; the owner wouldn't mind so she drove home to get her homework but then couldn't find it; she had left it in one of the sheep pens for some reason and the sheep had trampled it – now she had to redo it. Then she remembered she had an exam at exactly 2 pm; it was 1:30 and she still had a full essay to write. As she frantically worked to finish her homework in the hallway, a dark, thick haze began to seep under the doors of classrooms, creeping up the walls and covering the ceiling, blotting out the light. And with it came a feeling, a horrible feeling – someone was dead or *would* be dead and everything was terrible and nothing could be done —

She scared herself awake. It was pitch black in Delaney's basement.

Andee shuddered, then rolled over and went back to sleep.

\*

Wynter chose to drive to Hazel's house Friday morning, *only* because it was really windy and it was too far to walk without freezing her face off. And at least this way her mother would stay off her godamn back.

Wynter had been driving unsupervised for a matter of months, and was still nervous about winter driving. But she made it to Hazel's unscathed. As she pulled slowly into the driveway, Wynter could see one of the kids bobbing up and down in the living room window. Orla, the youngest at 6 years old, was bouncing on the couch.

"*Winnyyyyyyyyy!*" Orla screeched, flinging the front door open and beaming up at her. Wynter smiled broadly back as Orla hopped ecstatically back into the living room.

Auntie Hazel was, coincidentally, also hopping – but on just one foot, struggling to pull on one of her shoes. "Thank you again, so much," she gasped as she righted herself, and pulled Wynter into a one-armed hug.

"No problem." Wynter smiled at her as she kicked off her own boots and clicked her key fob, triple-checking she had locked the car.

Paxton and Kieran, the eldest and middle kids, shyly came around the corner to say hello. Wynter wasn't sure how genetics worked exactly, but it seemed that Hazel's extroverted genes had skipped her two boys and fully commandeered Orla.

Hazel pressed some cash into Wynter's hand and, in a flurry of goodbye kisses for the kids, left for work.

The day flew by.

The morning was taken up with Legos, building a little town until the kids were bored, then Orla insisted on playing with horses instead and the boys pretended to be annoyed when Orla begged them to join, and then they moved back to Legos again, acting out a heroic scene in which the little Lego people needed to defeat a dragon which was actually a horse – "No, it just *looks* like a horse!" Orla insisted.

After lunch the wind had dissipated enough that Wynter walked the kids over to the

neighbourhood corner store, and bought everyone a treat (“*One*,” Wynter had to gently remind Orla, who was eyeing up the row of candies by the cashier’s counter greedily). They walked to the neighbourhood park, eating their candy, and then Wynter sat on the swings, gently rocking back and forth as she watched the kids play.

A crow flew down to perch on the playground monkey bars. Wynter imagined she was curious about why the kids were screaming so much when they seemed to be enjoying themselves; Orla, for instance, was busy trying to make a tiny snowman out of very slushy snow, and was yelling her frustrations pretty energetically when its mushy head slumped off for a third time.

Kieran noticed the watcher on the monkey bars and decided to pretend he was also a crow. He ran around cawing as Wynter and the crow observed.

Paxton, wanting to be involved but also his own man, began bouncing around like a frog. He got so into it that he shoved a soggy stick into his mouth before realizing what he was doing and spitting it out in horror. “Oh my GOD Pax, why would you *eat* that?” Orla screeched with glee.

“I thought it was a *bug*!”

Wynter and the kids howled with laughter.

As the laughter faded and Wynter’s cousins began chasing each other, shrieking, around the playground, a girl walked by. Wynter recognized her, but didn’t know her name. She went to the other high school in town. The girl was walking with her head down, hands deep in her pockets. She looked cold. She didn’t look at the playground.

Wynter swung gently on her swing, wondering where she was heading, and trying to remember the girl’s name. The crow cawed harshly, and took flight. Wynter distractedly watched her soar away over the nearby houses.

Something in Wynter’s periphery suddenly caught her attention – a figure was moving towards the kids, from the opposite end of the playground.

Wynter leapt up from the swing, staring, her heart hammering. But as the empty swing swung forward to gently bump the back of her knees, she couldn’t see anyone over there anymore.

It must have just been a shadow, or the way the fading light was hitting the monkey bars. With a start, Wynter realized it was getting dark – they should head back to Hazel’s.

Wynter drove back home after having dinner with Hazel and the kids with a warm, bright feeling in her chest.

The rising moon shone overhead, slowly on its way to being full, and just visible in gaps of cloud. Wynter admired it as she waited at a red light. As she watched, a flock of what looked like birds flew across its softly glowing center. Crows? They looked kind of big to be crows...

The light turned green.

...

Delaney was an only child and had the entire basement to themselves, complete with a tv setup, a huge purple beanbag chair and an old, ratty couch that looked like it was yearning for that final trip to the dump. A small wooden desk intended for academic pursuits was in a far corner, forgotten for the time being as Andee, Cillian, and Delaney spent their day off gaming.

The three of them played a team version of *Lewellyn’s* until the sun went down, when they became hungry again and decided it was time to order more food. Delaney and Andee sent Cillian money and he begrudgingly tapped out their fresh pizza order on his phone. “We had pizza for lunch,” he grumbled.

“Yeah, but that was leftover *dinner* pizza.”

“Pizza three meals in a row is insane.”

“No it’s not.” Andee loved cold pizza almost as much as she loved hot pizza.

“We had cereal for breakfast,” Delaney retorted as Cillian just sighed heavily in response. They slid off of the beanbag chair and sprawled on the carpet. “I wish we could do this all the time,” they sighed happily.

“Yeah,” Andee said glumly. “I wish I had a truck.”

“Go get one then,” Cillian mocked.

“Can’t afford it,” Andee muttered impatiently. This had come up before. “I don’t even

live that far away. My parents just don't want to make the trip in to come get me."

"Isn't it almost an hour round trip?" Delaney reasoned.

Andee grunted, but didn't answer. She didn't want facts. She wanted to be justified.

"Are they letting you stay in town *every* Thursday, by the way?"

"I think so? I'll have to check."

"Yassssssssss!"

"You sound like a tire deflating."

Then the three of them jumped into a heated but entertaining debate about whether *Lewellyn's* would ever be adapted into a tv series and if it would even be good.

When Cillian's phone eventually dinged, he went upstairs to answer the door as Andee and Delaney half-shouted at each other about which actress should play the title character.

Andee heard his phone chime again on his way back; with the box of pizza in one hand, looking at his phone in the other, Cillian stood at the base of the stairs and asked, "Hey, anybody wanna go to a party at Rhea's?"

Delaney and Andee looked up at Cillian from the floor and the couch, respectively. "When?" Delaney asked.

"Uh..." Cillian squinted at the screen. "I think ... now?" He held his phone up as evidence. Andee could see a Snap message but couldn't make out the contents.

Andee and Delaney looked at each other, then back at Cillian. Rhea wasn't someone any of them were particularly close to, but her parents had a really big house, and parties there were always at least pretty okay. Cillian didn't look particularly committed. "I mean," Andee said, "maybe we see how we feel after we eat?"

"I'm okay with that," Cillian said.

"Who else is going to be there?" Delaney asked skeptically.

"Doesn't say." Cillian sat down on the ground, placing the pizza box on the carpet in the rough middle of the trio and flipping it open. "I assume at least most of Rhea's friends."

"Meh," Delaney shrugged, and gingerly took a slice of the very hot pizza. They took a tiny bite and then immediately gasped, flapping their hand hysterically in front of their mouth.

“Yeah,” Andee said, “‘Meh’.” Cillian looked relieved, somehow; Andee supposed he didn’t want to go but would have, if the others had insisted.

“Well, I also have to be home by midnight or my mom will kill me,” Cillian admitted.

“Haha, you pumpkin.”

“Laney, that’s....that’s not how it goes.”

By the time the pizza was a recent memory, they had picked up *Mario Kart*, and took turns knocking each other off of racetracks until Cillian had to head home. The party was completely forgotten.

...

Wynter sat at her desk, staring mindlessly at a textbook. Hilda was on her lap, preening. Occasionally she would lean over Wynter’s books as if she was also reading them, conveniently blocking Wynter’s view. Wynter appreciated the company.

Miles was out of the house doing, well, whatever he wanted. Their parents seemed a lot less protective of him. Wynter assumed it was because Miles lived life with an easy confidence whereas Wynter even struggled to interact with humans that were family members. If Miles wasn’t home by midnight, he was with his friends. If Wynter wasn’t home by midnight, she was probably missing.

Wynter rested her chin lightly on Hilda’s head. Wynter had been reading and re-reading the same paragraph of her biology textbook over and over without getting anywhere. It was as if her brain was full, and she couldn’t force it to absorb anything else. She’d come home in such a good mood that she had even been *excited* to do homework, thinking she could clear the rest of her weekend, but her optimism was slowly leaking away.

Finally, she flipped to a new page. There was an illustration of a treefrog at the bottom of this one. Wynter smiled absently as she remembered Paxton pretending he was a frog at the park.

*I don’t want to be sad.*

Wynter closed her textbook. She cleared her desk and gently put Hilda down on the worn carpet of her bedroom. She pulled out a fresh canvas from a neglected pile in her closet,

selected some acrylic paint tubes from deep within her desk, and splashed colours onto the white background, not sure what she wanted to make but enjoying the feel of her brushes on the thin, dollar-store canvas.

It wouldn't be a masterpiece, but Wynter didn't mind. She saw a rough dragonfly shape coming out, so she focused on that, adding its outline and experimenting with paint methods to design its large, gossamer wings.

The screen of her phone lit up beside the paint containers on her desk, announcing a new notification. She tapped her screen absently to open it. It was a Snapchat from her friends – two of them, actually; she had missed the notification for the first. Wynter opened them.

One snap was a photo from a few hours ago of Eden, Rhea, and Daisy, filtered to look like they were standing in starlight or reflected in very shiny glass. They were smooshed together to fit in the frame, smiling goofily in front of the main doors of their town's single movie theatre. The next snap was of Rhea, this time with Daisy as well as a couple other people in the background, clearly at a party. Wynter recognized Rhea's house. Bags of chips and other snacks littered the marble kitchen island. Wynter at first thought it was maybe a birthday celebration for someone she didn't know. But the caption read: *Random party nightt at my place! :)*

Wynter's heart began to sink.

Maybe it had been an accident Wynter had been left out? Wynter checked her other messages, just to make sure she hadn't missed an invite.

She hadn't.

Wynter's fragile, hopeful mood thoroughly melted away.

*They just didn't want you there.*

Had she done something wrong? Were they mad at her for something? But she had hung out with them at lunch yesterday... Wynter didn't know all of the other people there, so maybe she shouldn't feel this left out? Wynter pushed the canvas away and brushed sudden tears from her eyes.

*Why do you always have to overreact?*

She just .... she just only had three friends. And they were all together. And she was



alone at home, struggling to read a handful of pages of a stupid textbook. Struggling to feel normal.

*If you weren't so boring, and such a downer, and so off-putting... maybe you would have been invited, too.*

Wynter numbly got up, packed away her paints, rinsed the brushes in the bathroom sink, and put the half-painted canvas on top of her bookcase to dry. She sat down on her bed, hugging herself.

*You're stupid to think anyone would want to hang out with you.*

Either they didn't want to see her, or they had forgotten her.

*You're literally an afterthought.*

*You could disappear, and no one would notice.*

*You deserve it.*

Aggressively wiping more tears from her face, Wynter stood up and paced her room.

*What's wrong with you?*

Her feelings were a mix of too many things. Hurt, embarrassment, sorrow, shame. She was drowning in them.

*You're so sensitive.*

*You're stupid for thinking you'd be invited.*

*So stupid.*

*Stupid.*

*Stupid.*

Stupid.

Wynter forced herself to take a few deep breaths.

She knelt and pulled her notebook out from under her bed. She sat herself down at her desk again. And she wrote.

She wrote until she had worn the feelings to frayed edges, instead of sharp points. She wrote until Hilda fell asleep, purring softly on the bed. She wrote until her hand began to cramp. She wrote until a noise at her window startled her —

Hilda stood up, her back arched, tail bristling, staring at the glass. Wynter got up and

walked tentatively to the window, peering out and down into the darkness.

There was nothing there.

It was probably windy. Hilda settled back down and began grooming herself. Wynter turned away from the window, sighing heavily.

*You're so stupid.*

She sat back down and stared at a blank page of her notebook, but the spell was broken; she was out of words.

*You're the saddest excuse of a human.*

Wynter put down the pen and scrolled her phone for some music to listen to, but nothing felt appealing to her. Nothing seemed like it might help.

She felt so, so ... bad.

*Why are you so stupid?*

*There's no reason to feel like this.*

Wynter gathered her phone, house key, and an old pocketknife, and snuck downstairs. It was late – her parents had gone to bed. She pulled her coat off its hook as quietly as she could. She opened the door and slipped outside.

The cold light of the streetlamps illuminated Wynter's way as she walked without purpose and turned recklessly down different streets at a whim.

Her neighbourhood was along a greenbelt, and a line of mostly spruce trees loomed across the road from the sidewalk, looking beautiful in a wild, spectral way. Wynter's cold nose caught a whiff of pot, which mingled unpleasantly with the sulphury smell of the local pulp mill. Clumps of trash littered the tree-line here and there, discarded by assholes or dragged there by animals, thanks to someone who hadn't locked up their garbage bins properly.

*People suck.*

Wynter numbly wondered if she might cross paths with a bear, come to see what garbage bins some idiot might've left out. Black bears weren't uncommon, here. But she didn't care.

*Maybe it's best if a bear mauls you.*

Then she remembered it was too early in the season for bears.

*Moron.*

Wynter didn't know how much time had passed when her feet brought her to the graveyard, which was a good few kilometres from where she lived. She stopped, staring in through the chain-link fence.

The graveyard was not open at night, but gentle lights still illuminated the pathways between the grave markers. The moon had either set or was hidden by the ever-present clouds, but the night was still oddly bright. Nothing moved among the grey stones marking the final resting places of the dead. Wynter looked around at the perpetually clouded sky, at the grungy, abandoned strip mall surrounded by empty lots across the road. What a bleak location for an afterlife.

Wynter looked back at the headstones, standing quietly in the dark. Now, her mind felt soggy and slow.

*I wish I knew how to be ... better.*

A crow swooped down at that moment from one of the trees overhead.

Wynter flinched and gasped; the shock rattled her to her core. A sudden burst of adrenaline coursed through her chest as for a reeling, sickening moment her body struggled to choose between fight or flight.

The crow flew off, apparently unaffected by the girl standing alone by the graveyard.

Wynter's terrible mood bubbled back up to the surface, and broke through the dam she had been trying to build to hold everything in. Unwanted, hot tears warmed her cold cheeks, soaked into her collar. Wynter stood alone and shaking under the trees lining the chain-link fence.

Through her tears, she saw something move.

A spike of fear mingled with mortification – what if someone saw her sobbing alone, like a freak? – made Wynter's heart lurch sickeningly in her chest as she strained to get a better look.

A high-pitched wail pierced the night, sending an icy cold shock through her —

The train. It was just the train whistle.

She couldn't see it from here, but now she could hear it rumbling distantly somewhere behind her. Nobody was in the graveyard. Wynter rubbed her damp face with her cold hands. The movement she'd seen was probably just her own breath misting into the air.

*You idiot.*

\*

"You're kind of useless as an older sister," Meila said. Except it wasn't Meila – she was too tall, her hair was the wrong colour, her face the wrong shape. But dream Andee couldn't tell the difference. Not-Meila turned and walked away to join the rest of Andee's family, leaving her behind. "She has a point," Cillian said, from somewhere. "All you care about is yourself." "*They don't need you here.*" The scene changed and Andee was standing in front of a house. It was small, and a weird shade of blue. The door was open, inviting Andee inside. "*WAIT—*" someone screamed – Andee didn't recognize the voice. She turned and saw a young boy standing there, his face twisted into a shriek, his eyes blank —

Andee opened her eyes. It was late Saturday morning, and she was on Delaney's basement couch.

She felt absolutely *wrecked*.

When she went to the kitchen for something to eat, Delaney was sitting at the table, looking at their phone and eating cereal. They looked up as Andee came in; Andee saw they had dark circles under their eyes. "Hey! Mom and dad are out on a walk," Delaney said.

"Ughh," Andee groaned, sitting down wearily. "I feel terrible."

"Me too," Delaney said. They looked momentarily concerned. "I hope we aren't getting sick."

"Dunno. I think I just didn't sleep very well," Andee said, trying to rub her eyes without taking off her glasses. "This sucks."

"Maybe it's the couch's fault," Delaney cackled with maniacal glee. "Pretty sure I was conceived on it."

"Ugh—!" Andee recoiled in horror.

“Just kidding.”

“But why would you *say* that?! And so *cheerfully*?!”

Delaney shrugged, and yawned exuberantly. “I’m *exhausted*,” they said, yawning again. “I feel like I could sleep all day.” They put their bowl in the sink. “Want coffee?”

“Ooh, yes!”

They drank too many mugs of coffee and wasted away the day together watching YouTube videos; Delaney wanted to catch up on her favourite ghost-hunting channel. When Andee’s mom came to pick her up later that afternoon, the two friends were draped in blankies and staring wide-eyed at the tv screen – they jumped in alarm when the doorbell rang.

Andee put her duffel bag into the back of the SUV. When she shut the door, a crow was standing on the lawn, looking up at her. She stared back for a split second, until he cocked his head and flew away.

...

A dense fog enveloped Wynter, held her as she floated, weightless, like a buoy in a lake. “*They don’t need you here. They don’t want you here.*” Wynter stared at a house that looked vaguely familiar – a house with dirty, powdery blue siding and a lonely tree in the front yard with barren, reaching branches. She realized she was standing in its driveway. The fog was gone. “*You’ll never be lonely again.*” The front door creaked open slowly. A warm light spilled out into the yard. Wynter had a strong urge to go inside. But something held her back...

And then she woke up.

In a rush, Wynter remembered yesterday evening, and she felt sad and ashamed all at once. She lay in bed, watching shorts on her phone for a while, trying to feel more awake, and trying to erase how she felt.

It didn’t work.

Wynter tucked her phone back under her pillow and, still feeling exhausted, closed her eyes again. She drifted in and out of sleep until, faintly, she heard her dad calling that lunch

was ready. Wynter, curled up under the blankets, moved slowly and carefully out into the daylight creeping in from under her bedroom window blinds. Hilda slid off of her back, mewing resentfully.

“Sorry,” Wynter muttered.

Everyone else was already seated at the table when Wynter entered the kitchen. “You finally join us!” her mom said with mock surprise.

Her dad chuckled. “Burning the midnight oil, eh?”

“Too much going on on your phone,” her mom said, pointing at her with her spoon.

Wynter went straight to the stove-top, where a pot of what smelled and looked like tomato soup was sitting beside a plate of grilled cheese sandwiches. “I dunno, I was just really tired,” she said as she ladled soup into a bowl for herself.

Laughing, her mom said, “I don’t miss those teenage hormones.”

Wynter sat down, and everyone ate in silence for a few moments.

“How’s school going?” Wynter’s dad asked. Wynter and Miles exchanged a glance, unsure which of them he was addressing, exactly.

“It’s good,” Miles said first, smiling demurely, then went back to his soup.

“Good,” Wynter echoed, and tried to do the same.

Evidently her answer was not good enough for her mom. “Grades keeping up? It’s your last year.”

“Yep.” *Nope.*

“Have you applied anywhere yet?”

Wynter braced herself. “I’m narrowing it down.” *Liar.*

“Oh?”

“It costs money to apply to places.”

“Seriously?” her dad asked, looking concerned. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” Wynter answered honestly.

“Well, if you had a job, you wouldn’t need to worry about it,” her mother said.

“Hazel pays me.” Wynter hoped this conversation would be over soon. She was hungry.

Her mom rolled her eyes. “That doesn’t count, she barely pays you minimum wage.”

“I don’t mind.”

“You should,” her mom said sternly. “It isn’t your problem that Hazel can’t afford proper childcare.”

Wynter fumed internally. The words she wanted to use to defend Hazel rose up in her throat but got stuck on the back of her tongue, as if her mouth was physically incapable of forming the words. Wynter stared at her soup, loathing her helplessness.

Arguing with her mom was like arguing with a brick wall. It never got her anywhere. It was just a waste of energy.

*You’re a waste of energy.*

*Fucking coward.*

“Anyway, you have a car now,” her mother continued, oblivious to Wynter’s internal struggle. “You need to be able to pay for it.”

“I know,” Wynter said.

*You don’t deserve it.*

“Well?” Her mom’s gaze dared her to have an excuse.

“I don’t have much free time right now,” Wynter said. “I’ve got loads of homework every night. I don’t have time to work, too.” It wasn’t really a lie, since her brain had apparently become incapable of basic functioning. Her heart fluttered nervously as she remembered how she hadn’t gotten much done yesterday.

“What about your weekends?”

“They assign homework over weekends, too.”

“Hmm. Enough to kill a whole weekend?”

“Yes?”

*It doesn’t take much, for you.*

“Daphne,” her dad interjected gently, looking at Wynter’s mom, “Let’s just eat. We can talk about this later.” He got up for seconds.

Finally, blessed silence. Wynter willed the frustrated tears to stop welling up, and sipped her soup quietly.

*You baby.*

One by one, everyone else finished eating and left to do whatever they wanted with their day.

“Last at the table again, eh?” her dad teased gently as he, too, got up to put his dishes in the dishwasher and left her alone.

A second later, wearily, Wynter put her own dishes away and went back to her room.

...

Anika must’ve had a blast at the party. She’d had a sleepy smile on her face when they picked her up, and dreamily ate candy from a party favours bag until she passed out. Anika had offered some to everyone else in the car but it looked suspiciously sticky, so the offer was politely declined.

Andee made sure Anika hadn’t fallen asleep with anything in her mouth, then gently pulled the bag from Anika’s little fingers, safely stashing it on the seat between them.

She leaned her head against the back passenger window – Melia had hitched a ride in with their mom that morning, and claimed shotgun – and stared off into the trees along the highway, lost in thought.

It was almost fully dark out; although the evenings were supposedly getting brighter, there was a long way to go before it wouldn’t be dark by 5pm. The car headlights bounced off of the roadside brush and trees spookily, and illuminated the snow along the ditch with their bright artificial light, making it look white instead of grey.

Something moved in the trees.

Andee tensed, staring out wide-eyed from the SUV window. For a second, it had looked like the shadows were following the car, loping alongside it.

There —! It happened again. Andee blinked, straining to see, unsure.

She would swear that a shadow was not a trick of the light – it was keeping pace with the car, moving in and out of the trees but following just behind the light of the SUV’s headlights, in the contrast between the LEDs and true dark. Andee squinted at it, sitting up straighter, her alarm growing —

*“Oh shit!”*



Andee's heart leapt into her mouth. She whipped her head around. Andee's mom, the one who had exclaimed, glanced back over her shoulder at Andee. "I'm sorry, Andee!" Andee dimly registered she was saying, "I should have let you drive so you could practice!"

Dazed, Andee looked back at the tree-line. Everything looked normal. "It's okay," she said. She settled back in her seat, her heart still racing.

Holy shit, she must be tired. Maybe she shouldn't have watched so many ghost stories at Delaney's.

The rest of the evening passed uneventfully, even pleasantly. But Andee lay awake for a long time, unable to stop thinking. Not about the shadows – she had decided that was just the lights and her tiredness playing tricks on her. A strange feeling of sadness was relentlessly seeping into her, and she didn't know where it came from. It clung to her, like smoke to fire, as she finally fell into a fitful sleep.

\*

Andee couldn't find her family. She was at home – and she knew her parents and siblings were there, too, but she couldn't find them. They were always just out of sight. She heard them laughing and talking to each other from behind her bedroom door, but when she opened it they had moved to the living room. When she went to the living room they were nowhere to be found, but it sounded like they were playing a board game in the kitchen. When Andee got to the kitchen, they were outside. "*They don't even know you're gone.*" Why didn't they notice Andee wasn't with them? Andee looked out through the kitchen window but still couldn't see anyone. "*They won't miss you.*" The window filled with dark shadows, which seeped in under the windowpane and enveloped Andee. She flinched, shutting her eyes. When she opened them again, she was standing in front of the blue house again. "*You belong here.*"

Andee's phone alarm wrenched her awake Monday morning. She fumbled in the dark to snooze the shrill beeping, and lay still in her bed. Despite going to sleep at a decent time for

once, she felt horribly tired. Again. She hadn't felt fully awake since Friday.

*Great.*

She also just felt ... bad. As if something terrible had just happened and she hadn't remembered what it was upon waking, yet. The same feeling she'd had last night. And the night before. Was it a premonition?

Andee really, really didn't want to go to school. Feeling as though she was moving through tar, and her thoughts were having a hard time keeping up, Andee slowly got ready for the day, moving through her morning routine like a zombie.

...

Wynter slung her hoodie over a kitchen chair while she made herself a coffee that morning, delaying putting it on so she wouldn't overheat before she left the house. The house thermostat seemed unable to adjust fast enough to keep up with the weird weather.

It had been a struggle to get out of bed again. Her sleep had been too short, and interrupted by hazy, uneasy dreams. Nightmares of going missing and nobody noticing. Of forgetting to do something important. Of going to a party but all her friends had already left.

Wynter was so tired that she had slept through her alarm. She would have to drive – there was no time to catch the bus, or walk.

*Why do I have to be reminded of everything wrong with me when I'm asleep, too?*

Wynter stood filling her water bottle at the kitchen sink, staring at the tap without seeing it.

*Something bad is going to happen.*

If only she had woken up earlier...

*It'll be your fault.*

Wynter capped her water bottle but didn't leave the sink.

She tried to just breathe. In and out, in and out.

*You don't have a choice.*

*Coward.*

She knew from experience that, if she just skipped school today, making herself drive anywhere would be even harder next time.

Wynter retrieved her hoodie from the chair and pulled it on, sinking into it. Then she straightened, and yelled to Miles to hurry up as she picked up her keys.

...

As the kids loaded into the car, Andee's mom asked, "Your turn to drive, Andee?"

Andee had a sudden, overwhelming sense of foreboding.

*Something bad is going to happen.*

She had an impulsive, terrifying thought, about driving the car too fast around a corner, and sending everyone careening off the ledge and into the river below —

*It'll be your fault.*

Andee shivered and said, "Uh, not today..." When her mom looked confused, she added, "I'm just really tired today."

Her mom looked instantly suspicious. "Andriana, I will move that console myself if I have to —"

"No, I didn't play it at all yesterday!" Andee insisted quickly. "I just ... had a lot of bad dreams."

"Ok..." Now her mom looked concerned. "Are you feeling okay now?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

...

A light drizzle began as Wynter drove to school. The drive was a little tense but, to Wynter's relief, was uneventful aside from Miles briefly heckling her. "You drive like a grandma," he said, exasperated, as another car sped past her.

"Fuck off. It's a grandma car." She glanced at her dash. "And I'm doing the speed limit, asshole."

"That's just a suggestion."

*"No it's not!"*

As soon as Wynter pulled into a parking spot, Miles was unbuckling his seatbelt. He practically dove out of the car and sprinted to the school, leaving Wynter staring after him from the driver seat, her arm halfway to her own buckle. "Thank youuuuuu!" he said as he bounded away.

“Why are you running?!” she yelled after him.

“It’s COLD!”

Wynter got out of the car and pulled the wipers up off the slick windshield, to keep them from freezing there. That was nice of Miles to say thank you, Wynter thought as she walked by herself to the school.

Rhea and the others walked up as Wynter was rummaging through her locker, and stopped next to her.

“Hey!” Daisy said.

“Where were you this weekend?” Rhea asked.

Wynter’s confused heart lurched uncomfortably, and she was immediately awash in shame. *Had* she misunderstood something? “What do you mean?”

“Didn’t you see my Snaps?” Rhea sighed, and tugged at the long plait hanging over her shoulder subconsciously. “Hardly anyone came, though.”

“I didn’t know I was invited?” Wynter said tentatively.

“Of course you were!” Rhea said it so matter-of-factly that Wynter felt really stupid.

“Oh, well —” Wynter blushed, stuttering, “I’m sorry! I thought – it just looked like it was a story update; I thought it wasn’t for me.”

Rhea looked shocked. “No! Anyone who saw that was invited! I thought it was obvious!”

“It was super last minute,” Eden said, smiling consolingly. “It was mostly us eating chips and doing shots by ourselves anyway.” Daisy also smiled, somewhat drowsily.

Wynter thought she would’ve really liked to be there, anyway. She bit the inside of her cheek, smiling awkwardly back at them. “It’s okay,” she promised Rhea. “I just did my own thing, not a big deal.”

“I’m hoping to do a make-up one soon,” Rhea said excitedly. “Get everyone together before we all go off to uni.”

“Oh shit,” Eden looked at her phone, “We gotta hurry up.”

“I’ll text y’all later!” Rhea assured everyone, then walked away with Eden and Daisy.

Wynter saw Daisy go into her physics class by herself while the other two carried on to

chemistry, disappearing around the corner of the hallway.

Wynter was elated for about 0.9 nanoseconds, warmed by the thought that she *hadn't* been forgotten; that it had been a misunderstanding...

*They just feel bad for you.*

Wynter's shoulders sagged. She felt so tired. And lonely. She wondered if the movie had been a last-minute thing, too.

She wanted to go home. She didn't want to see anyone. She wanted to hide.

*You're so easy to leave out.*

*So forgettable.*

Wynter stared, unseeing, into her locker for a long moment. She slammed it shut.

*Suck it up, you fucking baby.*

Wynter headed to class.

She passed a trio of kids she recognized from her year: Andriana, Cillian, and Delaney. Andriana was chastizing the other two for something – it was probably related to the fact that a handful of paper was strewn across the hallway floor.

At first, Wynter found herself jealous of their easy banter. Then she wanted to stop and help them gather the papers up. But, inexplicably, Wynter felt a stab of fear.

*They don't want to talk to you.*

*They aren't your friends.*

*They'll think you're a loser for thinking you can talk to them.*

Unsure what to do, Wynter just pretended to be intently looking at her phone until she was well past them.

*Now they know you're an awkward asshole.*

*Coward.*

Who was afraid to help someone pick up paper?

*You're garbage.*

...

"Oh my god, guys!" Andee snarled as Cillian and Delaney, play-wrestling in the hallway, knocked into her roughly and knocked the binder out of her hands. The binder rings burst

open as the spine hit the floor, and her once somewhat-organized notes flew everywhere.

While Andee scowled at them, Cillian and Delaney sniggered and knelt together to pick the paper up.

A girl Andee recognized from their year – Winter, Andee was pretty sure her name was – walked by, giving the scattered paper a wide berth. Andee raised her hand in a “hello” wave, but Winter was laser-focused on her phone screen and didn’t look around. Oh, well.

Andee took the collected pile of paper that Cillian sheepishly handed back to her. She was feeling slightly better, now that she’d made it to school, her family unscathed, and was with her friends. Even if they were being idiots.

Cillian yawned dramatically, “Behs gonrin sun.”

“What the hell?” Delaney laughed.

“Bell’s gonna ring soon,” he translated.

...

Cold sleet began to fall again as soon as the last bell of the day rang. Miles had texted her that he was hanging out with friends after school, so Wynter made her way to the parking lot alone, her hood pulled up securely over her head.

As she drove home, she squinted through the streaks made by her windshield wipers – she needed to replace those soon.

Her windshield went momentarily dark as something skittered across it.

Wynter flinched and hit the brakes without thinking – the car skidded forward a few feet before stopping.

She immediately swore at herself – she was so lucky she hadn’t spun out of control, and that no one was driving right behind her. Her heart pounded. Had a plastic bag or something hit her window? She couldn’t see anything on the road. Maybe the sleet was messing with her eyes. The wipers gently thumped back and forth, back and forth. Sleet pattered gently on the windshield between strokes. Wynter gripped the steering wheel.

*You’re such a fucking moron.*

*You shouldn’t have a car.*

She carefully pressed her shaking foot on the gas, and drove the rest of the way home

without letting her eyes stray at all from the road ahead.

...

Andee stepped off the bus and onto gravel just as dusk was fully settling in. The sleet had stopped; she was grateful she wouldn't have to walk in it down her long and winding driveway.

A gentle breeze rustled the branches of the trees lining the driveway to her left; gently rolling fields that would eventually be peppered with sheep were to her right. Sometimes Andee hated that she lived out of town, but today she was grateful for it. She was craving a break from the constant noise of students chattering in the hall, the not-so subtle whispered gossiping during classes, the humming of fluorescent lights, the sound of cars incessantly driving past the school. And it was nice to forget, for a moment, that Andee should be planning her future out, and doing homework, and talking to people.

She could see Louis and Lamour, the family's border collies, loping up the driveway to meet her, silky tails wagging happily, tongues lolling. Andee headed towards them —

Her heart gave an uncomfortable lurch as something flickered in the corner of her eye. She spun around to stare at the trees.

In the fading light, all was still. But she was so sure something had just moved there.

Instead of greeting Andee, Louis looked into the woods, too, and stiffened; he sniffed the air for a moment, but didn't seem to see anything because he quickly relaxed and came up to nose Andee's hand. Lamour turned towards the house, looking back at Andee, her tail wagging impatiently as she waited to continue the walk home.

Andee had one last look into the trees and hitched her backpack up. She decided it must have been a deer or something. Nothing to be worried about, if the dogs weren't worried. She was just glad it wasn't a moose.

A shrill mewling pierced the silence: Fergus, one of the barn cats, appeared from further down the driveway, trotting to meet them. Sometimes he liked going for walks, too.

Andee shook off the last of the sickening, sudden shock of thinking something was about to attack. She greeted the dogs properly, picked up Fergus — who instantly burrowed his cold grey nose into her shoulder — and walked home with her entourage.

\*

Andee's mom was too preoccupied with convincing Anika to wear boots ("You CAN'T go to school barefoot!") to worry about remembering to let Andee practice driving, and a weary Andee didn't remind her. As she stared out the SUV window, in the back seat again, Andee thought about the nightmares she'd had again. They'd showed themselves in flashes that night, random snippets of sights and sounds:

A person made of shadow turned to look at her from a distance, then suddenly appeared right in front of her – they had no face. Uncontrollable wailing and sobbing, from someone Andee couldn't see. Andee was driving and didn't see the deer until it was too late and crashed the SUV. She was at that blue house suddenly. The door swung open, inviting her in. "*They won't notice you're gone.*" A kid screamed. Andee was home again – she watched as her family had dinner together, laughing and chatting; in her dream, Andee knew that she had died.

Andee had woken up feeling uneasy and anxious, like a deadline was looming but she had no idea for *what*. Feeling as if the things that had happened in her dream had *actually* happened.

To her alarm, Andee's eyes welled up with frustrated tears. She pretended to yawn, turning her face towards the passenger window, and pulled off her glasses and rubbed her eyes until all traces of tears were gone.

...

Wynter spent a significant chunk of her morning wondering whether it was normal to have recurring dreams like this.

She'd seen the house again. And it had looked so inviting. "*Nobody is going to notice you're gone if you go inside.*" Wynter hadn't been able to see the rest of the street. It was as if the world ended past the faded siding and cracked asphalt driveway. All there was, was the house. And its open door, spilling the only light to be seen out into the yard; a light that stretched out towards Wynter, stopping just before touching her feet. "*Come find me, and*



*you won't be alone again.*" She yearned to go inside that door. *"Why would you stay where you are nothing to anybody?"* Yet, Wynter had a sick feeling – a feeling that something was wrong. Someone yelled from somewhere. Wynter couldn't understand what they were saying. She looked around to see where the voice was coming from, but there was nothing but the emptiness.

*Maybe it's a sign that you should disappear.*

*Maybe you should leave.*

*You're probably going insane.*

"Wynter?"

Wynter was yanked rudely back into reality. Daisy was smiling at her, hand outstretched, holding a stapled clump of papers out. The teacher had handed out homework and was getting each table to pass it down. Wynter smiled back mechanically, and took the stack of paper.

...

In class, Andee felt ready to fall asleep at her desk. But she was getting more sleep lately than she had had in weeks – she hadn't played *Lewellyn's* or anything before bed for days now. The excitement of the game had even seemed to have worn off; she hadn't really felt the urge to play it lately.

It would help if she could stop having stupid, useless stress dreams. She didn't need creepy fog and disembodied voices and the sounds of crying to ruin her nights as well as her days, thanks very godamn much.

Andee just couldn't shake this feeling of foreboding; every time she looked at her siblings, or parents, or even their animals, all she could think of was how something terrible could happen to them at any moment. And it made her *sad*. Like she was grieving for something that had never happened. Or that was about to happen, and she knew it was coming, but she couldn't do anything about it.

Later, Andee took glum bites of her donair as she walked with Cillian and Delaney back to the school. She already couldn't remember what kind she had bought this time. She didn't

care. The cold sky, dark with clouds, matched her mood. She was weirdly shaky, maybe because she was so tired. Sometimes that happened if she hadn't eaten enough, so she was hoping lunch would remedy that. But she also had the weird, desolate feeling that their group was missing someone; like there should be a fourth person here but they were gone now. She didn't know why she felt that way, but it made her feel...weird.

A trio of crows flew overhead.

"Looks like there's going to be a murder," Delaney tried to joke.

Andee started to laugh. Her laugh went from a slight giggle to a maniacal, uncontrollable cackle. She tried not to drop her donair as she doubled over, wheezing. Cillian and Delaney laughed too, at first, then looked at Andee with some concern when she laughed on. And on.

And on.

"You okay?" Cillian finally asked.

Andee wiped the tears from her eyes with one hand, finally calming down enough she could breathe, her donair clutched safely in her other hand. "Yeah, just tired," Andee muttered, embarrassed.

"Weirdo," Delaney giggled.

Stung, Andee stayed quiet the rest of the way back to school. She barely registered Delaney and Cillian talking about some game in the background.

*Why are you so sensitive?*

...

Miles was uncharacteristically silent as Wynter drove them home. He had actually tried to stay home sick that morning, but since he didn't have any other symptoms besides being "tired" Wynter's mom had told him to go to school anyway. "Just gotta push through it," she had said encouragingly before leaving for work that morning.

Wynter suspected he wasn't actually sick. She wanted to help him. She wished she knew how to talk to her own brother. She wanted to tell him how she felt the same way, all the time.

*You're probably wrong.*

*But what if you're not?*

“Have you...” Wynter faltered. “Have you ever had recurring nightmares?”

*Why would you start with that?*

Miles didn’t answer for so long that Wynter thought he had fallen asleep. “Not really,” he finally said. He kept staring out the window.

“Never?” Wynter swallowed; her mouth was dry. Why was her mouth dry? This was her brother. She had known him for fifteen years now.

*Why is this so hard?*

When Miles remained silent, she said, “I’ve been having a lot of them lately —”

“I really don’t want to talk about it,” Miles interrupted sullenly.

Stung, Wynter replied softly, “Okay.”

*He’s just sick, you idiot.*

*Nobody else is like you.*

And she was silent the rest of the way home.

...

Unable to stand the thought of being dragged into playtime or any trivial conversations about school or chores or something, Andee went straight to her room after she got home, and only came out for dinner. She shrugged off her dad’s concerned questioning with “I’m just feeling kind of sick,” and went to lie down again as soon as she had washed dishes.

Andee stared at her stained, white stucco ceiling and blasted music in her headphones to keep herself from thinking.

She didn’t want to game. She didn’t want to look at her phone. She didn’t want to do homework. She didn’t want to see anyone. Everything felt *bad*.

*What’s wrong with you?*

...

As Wynter started to creep down the stairs late that night for her now routine walk, she saw Miles laying on the living room couch, staring at his phone.

Grudgingly, she considered just going back to her room. She didn’t want to get caught. She didn’t want to hear about how dangerous it was to walk alone at night. Wynter knew. She just didn’t care.

Wynter abruptly decided she could convince Miles not to tell their parents.

She tiptoed the rest of the way downstairs and went to the couch, saying in a whisper, “Miles?” No response. Wynter moved closer to the couch, and saw that Miles was breathing slowly and softly – he was asleep. His phone continued to play the same reel: ducklings wearing little crocheted vests waddled across the screen over and over and over. He must have had his earbuds in, because Wynter couldn’t hear any audio.

Wynter crept to the front door, pulled her boots on as quietly as she could, and finally made it outside.

Under the sombre sky, surrounded by darkened houses, Wynter felt complete solitude. Which is what she wanted. Out here, even in the sulphury, frost-kissed air heavy with the threat of more rain, she could breathe. She walked the cold sidewalks of her neighbourhood, trying to run out of thoughts. Wynter’s mind was numb and foggy and, at the same time, too full. She couldn’t concentrate. Thoughts jumped around her brain like a skipping stone over a lake. A frozen lake.

*Why do I even exist?*

Maybe things would start to click when she chose her university, when she found the right program, her calling in life. Maybe she would find somewhere she belonged, and wouldn’t end up working a job she hated until she died. But Wynter couldn’t truly see it happening; couldn’t shake her worry that life was only about following a series of mundane steps until it was over.

*What is the point of living?*

A dormant streetlamp blinked on sleepily as Wynter walked underneath it. For a millisecond, she felt like a wizard, like she had some influence over something subtly magical. When she looked back, the lamp had gone out again, and the hopeful feeling faded as quickly as it had appeared. Snuffed out like a candle, or like a motion-detecting streetlamp.

The silvery waxing moon hung, shining coldly in a sky that was otherwise dark, save for a couple of stars that Wynter could just barely make out between the clouds. Wynter paused

to look up at the moon, just to breathe in its glow. Then she walked, and walked.

As Wynter came upon the sight of the graveyard the clouds shifted to fully block out the moon, and the unseasonal, gentle rain returned, drizzling lightly down her jacket. She stopped by the chain-link fence, and just...considered things.

She was so, so tired. Her mind felt fuzzy around the edges. She was feeling out.

If her parents were right, and these feelings were normal, why was it so hard for her to just...be?

*Why can everyone except you handle this?*

Wynter stared out at the quiet headstones. She wanted so, so badly to believe that something might...happen. That she might see something, anything that proved there was a deeper meaning to things, that there was a chance of a light at the end of this suffocating, dark tunnel. That someone would tell her she needed to go on a quest, that she had some purpose she just hadn't known about, yet.

But nothing in the graveyard moved. Wynter stood, slowly getting colder, in the dark, on her own.

Then,

Wynter saw someone.

A young guy in a grey oversized sweater, looking at one of the graves, with his back to Wynter. Probably paying his respects to someone he'd loved.

He began to turn around. Worried that the person might see her staring, Wynter turned away.

*You're such a loser.*

But then – Wynter remembered just how late it was right now. The visitor gates were closed.

Heart pounding, she looked again —

No one was there.

Her breath caught. She stared at the empty graveyard.

*You moron.*

He had clearly just jumped the fence or something. But Wynter continued to stare at the

graveyard for long moments before slowly backing away. She turned and sped up, realizing she was just a stupid girl alone in the middle of the godamn night and she only had a stupid little knife and a phone. “Jesus Christ, you fucking moron,” she told herself miserably, wiping sudden tears from her freezing face.

She should have just stayed home.

When she finally got home, the couch was empty.

\*

Nightmares of her car spinning out on a patch of black ice on the highway bled into Wynter’s waking hours. As she brushed her teeth Wednesday morning, she couldn’t shake the image of her car careening out of control into other vehicles or the ditch while she drove to school; being afraid that *this* time, her dreams were a premonition...

The lingering fear pushed Wynter to even avoid taking the bus. She left early on foot, texting Miles an apology for not being able to drive him. k, he replied.

*You’re so easy to manipulate – your own brain tricks you.*

She’d also had more confusing dreams about the house. Someone, with their back to her, had gone inside. The door had slammed shut. A strange mix of relief and loss had overwhelmed Wynter, as if she had missed out on something special, and now it was too late. And then the door opened again and a long shadow reached out to her, wrapped her in its embrace, cold and clammy, and had drug her down, down into something that looked like water but was thick and smothering. The dream changed, and she was suddenly driving on ice...

Freezing and shaken, Wynter had shivered in her bed, trying to convince herself it was just a dream. She had pulled her blankets back on, put her earbuds in and listened to music for a long time, until the feelings subsided enough for her to be able to fall asleep again.

At least walking might help her wake up.

*You should have just driven.*

*You're probably going to die young anyway, why fight it?*

Dying, Wynter knew, is inevitable. Slow but sure decomposition: the one trait every human shares. There was no point thinking about it – no point wondering how it was going to happen, or when. If Wynter could just stop thinking about it, block herself from imagining all of the scenarios in which she might die, or her family might die (would it be a car accident, a fall, cancer, a workplace incident—?) she knew she would be better off. No one else seemed to wonder about this. Everyone she knew seemed so much ... lighter. Unburdened by the weight of knowing everyone is going to die one day. But Wynter couldn't stop.

Her phone buzzed. It was a text from her auntie Hazel: Can you watch the kiddos for a bit after school plz?. Another notification appeared as Wynter stared at her phone screen. Totally no problem if not – totally my own fault!

Numbly, Wynter texted back, Yes I can.

Omig thankyouuuuu!! Hazel replied, the text flooded with heart emojis.

Finally – one more class, and then Wynter could go see her cousins. In a familiar place, almost at the end of the school day, where all she needed to worry about for the moment was class work, Wynter finally felt a tiny shred of peace. Waiting for class to start, Wynter absentmindedly opened the first app she saw, and tapped on a video of a cat riding a Roomba. She watched the short reel on mute; it actually made her smile so she watched another: a compilation of cats pushing things off of counters. Wynter was glad Hilda didn't do that. Wynter scrolled to the next video – a dog meeting a newborn baby this time. Next video – a group of tiny kittens toddled across a huge, sleeping Great Dane. Next video – a caption pleaded for donations as the camera panned around a crowded hospital tent and showed images of wounded children – one was missing both legs; a baby was bandaged so much you could barely tell it was a baby; a mother cried as she held her injured child –

Wynter immediately swiped out of the app. Shocked by the emotional whiplash of joy become horror, Wynter's shakily improved mood instantly plummeted again. She felt sick. Guilt washed over her. She felt guilty for sitting here, safe. She felt guilty for wishing she hadn't seen the video. She felt guilty for not being able to do anything about what she had

seen.

She took a deep, quiet breath.

How were people sharing silly, pointless clips, oblivious to the fact that people were ... having *that* happen to them?

As other students began to trickle into the room, Wynter panicked internally and reopened the app, scrolling quickly, just wanting to find another cute video to mask her misery, just so she didn't start class feeling like this, but the teacher walked in at that moment and Wynter had to put her phone away.

She wanted to sink into nothingness. She imagined ceasing to exist. Simply disappearing. *Maybe that would be for the better.*

*The world is a trash fire and you can't do anything about it.*

What was the point of trying if the world was just going to end anyway? What was the point of getting a degree on a piece of fancy paper if it let her live comfortably in her own tiny little bubble and did nothing of value for anyone else? What was the point of trying to find something that might make her happy if some asshole could just drop a bomb on it all anyway?

*It doesn't matter if you ever go anywhere, because everything is just going to shit anyway.*

Wynter tried to concentrate on the words the teacher was saying, but all she could think about was the look on that mother's face.

...

Andee had hoped that her bad mood would wear off by the time school ended, but it hadn't. She wasn't even in the mood to ask if she could stick around after school, to hang out with friends while her brothers went to their swimming lessons.

She stared out the window the entire bus ride home, hoping the drums and guitars of her favourite music would drown out the bad feelings. But they clung to her, gripping her chest and filling her with fear.

Last night, Andee had had more nightmares. She had watched someone she didn't recognize walking into *that* house, alone. The door slammed shut behind them. Suddenly,



Andee had been drowning in a pit of tar. That's what had woken her up.

Waves of abject hopelessness overwhelmed her to an almost crushing extent. She didn't know what to do about any of this. She didn't know how to keep functioning; she didn't know how to keep moving forward as if everything was normal when everything felt so wrong.

The ride took forever.

...

The sky late that afternoon matched Wynter's mood: dismal and moody and dull. Luckily, though the ambiance was still dreary, it was not actively raining or sleeting today. *Very* lucky, since taking the bus to the high school also meant making a trek on foot to Hazel's work. Wynter's cousins were waiting there for Wynter to pick them up while Hazel wrapped up some paperwork. But the walk didn't take long at all, and Hazel didn't seem to care that Wynter hadn't driven there.

As was now tradition, Wynter took the kids to the corner store before heading back to their house. As Paxton, Kieran, and Orla perused the candy selection at the store, Wynter swam in her thoughts, barely registering the contents of the snack aisle.

*You're a loser.*

*Are you ever going to be able to act like a normal human and not feel cringey and terrible and sad about it?*

Wynter pulled herself abruptly and painfully up for air when Orla asked for her opinion on whether Skittles were superior to Smarties.

Ultimately it didn't matter, because ice cream was the snack of choice. There was some serious discussion among her cousins in the line for the cashier, concerning who had chosen which flavour of drumstick cones. Her cousins were usually pretty diplomatic, but Wynter was painfully aware that an older lady behind her was staring. She didn't want an audience that might assume the kids were just being brats, so she gently asked if Orla and the boys could wait to talk about this after Wynter paid.

Serenely, the kids nodded and consented to continuing trade negotiations outside. Paxton very dramatically mimed zipping his lips shut and throwing away a key. While Wynter was

aware zippers don't generally have keys, she appreciated the effort. As she put her wallet away and herded the kids to the door, Wynter's eye was drawn to the wall of assorted, brightly-coloured "wanted" ads and community events next to the exit door.

With a horrible lurch, she saw a familiar face looking back at her under a large red "MISSING" label.

In the photo chosen for the poster, the girl, slightly younger than Wynter, was beaming, her hair in French braids, wearing a bright purple hoodie.

The paper was crisp and white – freshly printed. "Lydia Macneve," the name read.

The girl who'd been walking by the park. *That* was her name. Lydia.

Wynter shook herself, stamped her emotions down, and took the kids home.

...

Alone in her room, Andee lay on her bed and scrolled her phone, looking for something, anything, to snap her out of her mood. She swiped past post after post, jumping from app to app. Selfies, photos of people's pets, ads, scams, filters, news, trends, songs, updates, ads, videos, news, memes, a photo of a face she recognized with "MISSING" slapped across it, another ad —

Andee sat up and swiped back to the last post. Andee knew her, Lydia, from the other high school. She'd used to play rugby, but Andee didn't remember seeing her last season. The OP had the same last name as the girl in the photo – maybe it was her mom?

"DINNER!" Andee's mom yelled from the kitchen.

...

Hazel got home late. She apologized profusely as she dumped her bag and shoes in the hallway. The kids were quiet, worn out from a long day of play and full of just enough sugar that their eyes were glazed, flopped on the couch watching a movie together.

Wynter was barely holding herself together.

She just wanted to go home.

As Hazel threw her jacket haphazardly into the closet by the front door, she did a double-take at Wynter's face. "You okay?" she asked, sounding concerned.

"Yeah, I'm okay," Wynter lied, biting the inside of her cheek so it looked like she was

sort of smiling. She kept biting it until she was outside. As soon as the door shut behind her, Wynter's face fell. She went home.

Upstairs, she and laid down on her bed beside Hilda. She stared at the ceiling. For once, she felt unable to cry.

Dinner was quiet; Wynter mechanically ate her food and avoided eye contact, praying nobody brought up the car or jobs or university again. She wouldn't be able to handle dealing with that right now. Her nightmares were haunting her every thought, and making her nauseated.

Her mind spun.

*The nightmares.*

*Could it have been you?*

*It should have been you.*

Should she join a search team, Wynter began to wonder, then immediately killed that idea. What use would she be, stumbling around? She had zero training.

"Did you hear about that kid who went missing?" Wynter's brother asked, shattering the silence.

Wynter swallowed. "Yeah. I saw a poster," she replied woodenly.

"Who?" her mom asked with confusion.

"A girl from the other high school," Miles replied.

"Oh no! That's really too bad," her mother said.

There was silence for a few minutes. Wynter wondered if she should just put what was left of her cold potatoes in the fridge, and try again later.

Her mother cleared her throat. "What did you get up to today, Miles?"

Miles shook himself out of an apparent stupor and said, "Oh, yeah, I went to Carly's house for a bit. We played *Smash*."

Wynter's dad made a choking noise. "You did what?"

"Played *Smash*. It's a video game. Like, with Mario and stuff."

“OH. okay.”

Wynter was slowly becoming consumed internally with a fierce, burning anger. She couldn't eat. The idea of finishing the food on her plate made her feel sick. She got up to find a Tupperware container.

“Are you done?” Her mother asked in surprise.

*WHY DO YOU HAVE TO COMMENT ON EVERYTHING –*

“Yep.”

She must have sounded too sharp. “No need for lip, Wynter,” her dad chided.

Wynter put her plate very carefully on the counter, to control her shaking hands. “I’ll come take care of this in a minute,” she managed. She hurried upstairs. And as soon as her bedroom door was closed, she burst into angry, sad, frustrated, despairing, frightened tears, holding her fist to her mouth to stifle any noise.

...

“I don’t know what to do.”

Andee’s dad looked up in surprise from the dishes in the sink, and glanced back at Andee. “What do you mean?” he asked, drying his hands on the dishtowel.

Andee was doing homework at the kitchen table again. Or, trying to. The words in the textbook weren’t making any sense.

“What do you mean, ‘What do you mean?’” Andee clenched and unclenched her fists in front of her. “I don’t know what to do about...” she suddenly lost her words.

*Stupid.*

“Um...there’s a kid missing. I remember her from rugby,” Andee finished lamely.

“Oh?” Her dad froze in surprise, a dish held in midair. “When did that happen?”

“I don’t know.”

Andee looked past her dad and out the kitchen window, which overlooked the backyard. The other kids were doing their best to make a snowman out of crusty snow and slush. Even Meila was helping. Andee felt a pang of loneliness, that she wasn’t out there with them. Like there was a divide forming that she soon wouldn’t be able to traverse. She shook the feeling off as her dad sighed. “Sometimes...sometimes there is nothing you *can* do,” he said gently,

watching his hands intently.

Andee felt bolted in place; she was frozen not in shock, but in disbelief. “But what about search parties?” she asked, her voice growing more desperate. “Shouldn’t we all stop and look for her?”

Her dad put the dishtowel down and leaned against the counter, looking dismally at the floor. “Andee,” he began. He was silent for a long moment. He restarted, “Andee, sometimes life is just like this. We can’t help. These things happen. There’s nothing else you can do.” His tone was final.

Andee couldn’t accept this. “But —”

“That’s all there is to it,” her dad said. “Stop beating yourself up about this.” He turned back to the dishes.

Andee sat, stunned. Faint voices from the tv filled the background. In a blind, seething fury, Andee decisively, quietly, closed her textbook and packed up her pencils and graphing calculator and paper. She left the kitchen without saying anything else. She knew when a battle was lost.

But she hadn’t even meant for it to be a battle. She hadn’t thought they’d be on opposing sides.

...

Later, Wynter went back downstairs to put her plate away.

Someone had packed her leftovers into a container already.

Wynter knew she should feel grateful. And she was. That was nice of someone. But she also knew it could just be because her mom liked the house to be just “so.” So, Wynter would likely have to grovel and thank her mom later. So, instead of being relieved or grateful, Wynter’s frustration gained fresh kindling.

*Why do people care about dirty dishes, but not missing kids?*

...

“What if”s kept swirling around in Andee’s mind; scenarios whirling around, over and over, like tornado winds, tearing and scraping the edges of her brain raw.

Why was she having these dreams? What if Andee had been the missing kid? Or Meila?

Or Darcy? Or Remy? Or Anika? Why was Andee having these dreams? Why was her dad not more worried? What if Lydia had fallen into a well or down a ravine or if she was trapped, screaming to be rescued right now —?

*Why am I having these dreams?*

How were Lydia's parents doing right now?

*Why am I having these dreams?*

A cold breeze picked up outside, pushing the branches of the willow tree outside her bedroom window to scratch and rattle against the glass pane, like long, ghostly fingers rapping to come in. One of the dogs barked at something briefly, and Andee heard her mom go to the door to check on them. The door closed again, and her mom padded down the hallway and back to bed.

For the first time in a long time, Andee cried herself to sleep.

\*

That night, Wynter's nightmare was especially bad.

Lydia was in the dream, this time. Wynter could hear a terrifying howling noise, like wind ripping through trees in a storm, but it was becoming harsher and more like a shriek as Wynter stood, staring, stuck by the distance she could not cross, no matter how hard her dream-self tried. Lydia was surrounded by an inky, black haze. She was lost, and afraid. Wynter had no control over her body. She could only watch as the other girl cried and called for help, wandering alone in pitchy darkness. Everything faded to black. And Wynter watched, bodiless, in the dark silence; watched as nothing else happened but an overwhelming feeling of despair and loss grew and began to envelope her, suffocating her. She had seen churning, impenetrable grey fog, with dark shapes moving within it. Wynter still couldn't tell *what* they were – she just knew they were dangerous. “*Leave her, or I will take another.*” Somewhere within her dream, but out of sight, Wynter recognized the voice of Miles calling out for her and screaming. Her heart stopped, then plummeted. Shadowy figures materialized, grey smoke on a black backdrop, flitting in and out of sight. Then they

began to close in on Wynter as she yelled Miles' name. They stretched their smouldering, grimy limbs toward her. They enveloped her —

She began to suffocate —

Wynter woke up gasping for breath. Hilda jumped in surprise and landed on the floor with a hiss.

Wynter was safe in her room, sweating but able to breathe. Hilda climbed back up onto the bed and settled onto Wynter's chest, purring directly into her face. Hilda's whiskers tickled Wynter's nose. Wynter laid awake, her thoughts scaring her, running through terrible scenarios.

Finally, soothed by Hilda's soft rumbling, she drifted off into a fitful sleep, full of tarry tendrils and flashes of Lydia's face.

...

Andee was in a forest. Spruce trees stood guard, tall and silent. A dusting of snow lay on the ground. It was dusk. Andee could hear crying. *Lydia!* Andee could make her out, far away — the girl was sobbing, all alone. Andee tried to move towards her, but couldn't. A dark, tarry mist darkened the edges of the dream, smothering any light. Humanoid figures separated from the mist and began to advance on Andee, like predators stalking prey. A terrible voice said, "*Leave her.*" Andee watched, helpless in her nightmare, as the girl cried out and reached for her, screaming in terror as she was pulled back into a dark grey, tarry fog. Dream Andee strained to rush forward, tried so hard to run to her, but was too slow — her body wouldn't respond properly. Her legs felt like lead blocks. "*Leave her, or I will take another.*" Then, through the space between the figures, Andee saw something that made her blood run cold. Lydia had reappeared, and a little girl was there with her, holding Lydia's hand, looking terrified.

It was Anika.

Andee shocked herself awake, her heart pounding, doused in sweat.

She rushed upstairs, barely caring if she looked insane. She just needed to know —

Anika was sitting at the kitchen table with her legs, too short to reach the ground, swinging carelessly as she finished the last of her cereal. Andee breathed a sigh of relief, and

fought the extremely strong urge to check on every single member of the family as she retreated back to her room to get ready for school.

...

At school Thursday, Wynter thought she felt a strange, but comforting atmosphere of solidarity – as if everyone was united in their shared anxiety or fear or grief for Lydia. It made her think back to how she had felt when the pandemic had started.

*Maybe people don't suck as much as I thought.*

She saw a few sets of puffy eyes; a larger number of students were missing from class than usual. She thought Miss Rory's hands shook slightly as she handed out marked assignments. Rhea, Daisy, and Eden sat with Wynter at lunch that day in the art room, instead of going to the mall. They didn't talk very much.

But as the day went on, as nobody said a word about the missing girl, Wynter knew the feeling of was commonality she'd felt earlier was likely just in her head; she was probably just projecting.

Mechanically, she went from class to class, barely registering the lessons. There was room for nothing in her thoughts, except worry.

*You can't do anything about it.*

*You're useless.*

...

Andee spent every spare minute she had that morning scouring the internet on her phone. But she couldn't find anything about Lydia anywhere. Not even a social media page. The post she had seen yesterday was gone.

At lunch, she ate clumsily with one hand and typed on her phone with the other, for any news on search teams, or anything to do with finding the missing girl, changing keyword after keyword, and coming up empty again and again.

"What're you doing?" Cillian was staring at her, looking uneasy.

"Looking for news."

"Of?"

Andee tore her gaze away from her phone screen to stare at him incredulously. "The



missing kid?”

“But it literally happened yesterday.”

“So?” Andee snapped.

“So there won’t be anything new about it.”

“How do *you* know?”

Delaney stayed silent, looking back and forth between the two of them. Andee noticed that they had been chewing their nails again. They hadn’t done that in a while. Seeing Andee looking, they hid their hands in their pockets. “We can’t do anything about it, Andee,” Delaney said gently, sorrowfully.

“How do you know?!” Andee demanded again, her voice rising.

“Kids go missing all the time,” Cillian added desolately.

Andee stared back at her phone without really seeing it, seething.

An anger smouldered inside her, fueled by the lack of *news*, the fact that that search parties weren’t scouring the town, that school was just going on as normal. And that her closest friends didn’t seem to care.

“And that makes it okay?” she demanded.

Delaney’s face fell. “Of course not.”

“Then why don’t you want to do anything?”

“What *can* we do?!” Cillian demanded angrily.

Andee spluttered, “Anything! We can go out and look! We can... we can ....” Andee felt her face crumple.

Delaney opened their mouth again, but the shrill ring of the end-of-lunch bell interrupted them. Andee grabbed her bag and marched off without looking back, wiping the threat of tears from her eyes.

Andee barely made it through her next class without exploding. Unable to stand the thought of having to keep acting like everything was normal, she decided to skip the rest of the day.

She lingered in the hallway after the warning bell, unsure of where to go. Her phone

buzzed. A message from Delaney. *I want to stay over after hockey again?*

Andee did want to stay over. But she also didn't want to hang out with Delaney and pretend everything was fine, just like she had to at school; just like everyone else was doing. She shoved her phone back in her pocket, and began to walk towards the exit.

She was hyper aware of how hollowly her feet echoed in the otherwise abandoned hallway.

*Abandoned.*

*Lost.*

*It could have been me.*

Bleak hopelessness hit Andee like a semi-truck.

*What is the point of me?*

*What does it matter if it could all be gone at any moment? If it can be stolen, like people steal kids?*

Her heart ached. She felt as though she was rotting from the inside out.

There was no hope left. Lydia was gone. And there was nothing she could do about it.

*People go missing all the time, and nobody cares.*

Andee knew Cillian was right. Kids had gone missing before; if not here, then in other towns, cities, provinces. Soon, it would be as if Lydia had never existed. But Andee would know Lydia had *been*. She would always have to know, and remember, and not be able to fix it.

Andee rushed into the nearest bathroom and dove into one of the empty stalls, fumbling to latch the door. She barely stopped herself from sinking to the floor as hot tears spilled down her face. She sobbed as quietly as she could, not wanting anyone to hear.

*What's the point in trying?      Nothing matters.*

*Everyone ends up taken, or dead, or forgotten in a ditch somewhere.*

*It could have been you.      And everyone would just carry on.*

*There's no point to anything you do.      No talents except at dead-end sports.*

*No real future.      Your family will forget you.*

*Your friends will leave you behind.*

Finally, Andee ran out of tears. She listened to make sure no one else had come into the bathroom, then went to one of the sinks, taking her glasses off to splash cold water on her face. In the mirror, her skin was red and splotchy.

Meila's comment about her not wearing makeup twinged in her memory. Andee stared at herself in the mirror, and put her glasses back on.

*Loser.*

*It doesn't matter that you're ugly when everything is falling apart.*

...

Late that afternoon, Wynter went for a walk instead of going to class. She wasn't learning anything, anyway. School seemed so pointless, today.

*You're pointless.*

Wynter was trying not to think of what might have happened to Lydia; how she had no control over anything; how everything was so sad, and she still had to pretend grades mattered. Eventually, Wynter looked up, and found herself within sight of a gas station. She noticed the clouds were looking suspiciously thick and looming, and pulled out her phone to check the forecast. If it was going to rain or sleet or whatever all week, Wynter might as well use her time for something useful, and stock up on candy so the kids didn't miss out the next time she saw them.

As she tapped her card at the station's cash register, Wynter was painfully aware of the posters by the door. Unable to stop herself, Wynter stole a glance.

She couldn't see Lydia's poster anywhere. A strange mix of relief and worry filled her. Maybe she'd been found?

*You know that isn't true.*

Then, on her way out, Wynter caught sight of the corner of a piece of paper poking out from behind a notice about a yard sale and a printed ad with tear-off numbers for someone looking for a house-cleaner. Wynter pulled up the bottom corner of the ad.

Lydia's poster was there, hidden.

*Forgotten.*

Wynter stared, seething, then let the corner of the ad fall. She left the store.

She had a sudden realization. She picked a direction and, with purpose this time, set off again.

...

Cillian caught up with Andee as she was walking to the library to wait for hockey practice to start. She had considered just skipping that, too. But coming up with a lie to tell her coach felt harder than just forcing her way through drills.

“Hey!”

Andee turned to him sullenly.

“Where’ve you been?” Cillian asked, his eyebrows scrunched into a look of concern.

Andee just shrugged. “Around.”

“You know what I mean.”

When Andee was silent, Cillian asked, “D’you want to talk about it?”

“I tried to talk about it,” Andee snapped. “And nobody cared.”

“We care, we just —”

Andee spun around and walked away.

...

Even without knowing the house number, Wynter knew this was it.

The house from her nightmares.

Wynter felt an inexplicable chill, deep within herself. She had realized it had looked vaguely familiar because she had driven and walked past it so many times. But she had never really *seen* it.

There was no car in the driveway. The lights were off inside, despite the deepening dusk. There were no blinds in the windows. No curtains.

Wynter just knew: nobody lived here.

A lone crow pecked at something on the front stoop. Noticing the audience, the crow flapped abruptly away, cawing once. Suddenly feeling like an intruder, Wynter hurried away without looking at the house again.

\*

Although she had texted her mom that she'd be spending the night with them, Andee still hadn't replied to Delaney by the time floor hockey practice actually started. A few teammates had not shown up for practice, including Leanne, which made Andee even more upset with herself for not just going home.

As she mindlessly ran the drills set up by Miss Taylor, Andee felt like she was trying to run through mud. Her reaction times were slow. She missed the puck over and over again. *And* she'd forgotten her contacts today. Andee's glasses bounced around on her face uncomfortably, sliding around on her sweaty nose as she ran. She had to wipe the steam off of them every thirty seconds.

*Idiot.*

As she missed the net for the millionth time, Andee was just grateful it wasn't a game day. While she walked to the back of the line to take another shot, Miss Taylor waved her over. Andee nervously joined her at the sidelines.

*She's going to tell you to pack up.*

"You doing alright?" Miss Taylor asked, putting her hand on Andee's shoulder. Her face was furrowed in a troubled frown.

"Yeah," Andee said.

"You sure?"

"I'm fine," Andee replied, forcing a smile. Her coach didn't look like she fully believed her, but just squeezed her shoulder, said "Ok," and let it go.

Running around and flailing a stick seemed to have made a tiny difference to Andee's mood – she felt marginally more energized towards the end of practice, sweaty and heart racing.

But, once she was dressed and standing alone in the school parking lot, on frozen asphalt and surrounded by ice and dark, dark skies, she felt lonely and hopeless all over again.

Andee wondered if she should find the courage to text her mom, and ask for a ride home after all.

“Andee!” Andee turned to face Maria, who was waiting for her own mom to pick her up.

“Hey.”

“Are you coming to Leanne’s birthday next weekend?”

Andee had completely forgotten about it. “Uh, yeah! Yeah, sure.”

“Great!”

They stood in a somewhat awkward silence for long seconds. Andee felt like Maria wanted to keep chatting but Andee honestly couldn’t shape her brain around anything interesting or useful to say, so she just stood there stupidly. Andee suddenly realized that the birthday would probably involve people from Leanne’s actual ice hockey team, too. Most of the girls in floor hockey also played ice hockey. But not Andee. The party would be another reminder she couldn’t afford the gear to play. Maybe she should have focused on that instead of a truck. But without a truck, she still wouldn’t have been able to make the 6am practices.

*You don’t deserve a truck, anyway.*

*None of your dreams are going to come true.*

A loud dually truck pulled up to the school. “See you next week!” Maria said.

“See you.”

As she watched Maria gingerly make her way across a patch of ice and climb up into her mom’s truck, Andee wondered if Maria knew that Lydia was missing. She wondered if she cared.

Andee stared at her phone. She thought vaguely about having dinner. She didn’t feel very hungry. She still didn’t know if she wanted to go home or not.

*You have literally two choices and can’t even make up your mind.*

She checked the time. She could get away with a few more minutes of deciding. Andee picked a direction and started to walk.

...

“Has there been any news of the missing kid?” Miles asked at dinner that night. Wynter stared at him in surprise.

“Not that I’ve heard,” Wynter’s mom replied, shrugging. She swirled her stew around with her spoon, not looking up.

“Oh,” Miles said, looking dejected. He returned his gaze to his own bowl.

Wynter wondered, again, if he was doing okay. He didn’t know Lydia very well – or she had assumed he hadn’t. He was a year younger than Lydia. Was he affected more by this than she had thought?

She remembered, then, him brushing her off in the car the other day. She hated how scared she was, just of him doing that again.

*Coward.*

Her dad cleared his throat. “How was school today?”

...

Andee tried to let her mind go numb as she walked, picking directions at random. Long minutes passed. She was running out of time to make a choice.

Then she stopped dead.

She stood, as she had in so many dreams now, in front of a house with blue siding, with an empty driveway, a barren tree.

She froze. Her mind reeled.

*You were dreaming about a real house?*

It looked long abandoned. Litter was scattered on the front stoop. The driveway likely hadn’t been shoveled in a long time, because it was a mess of melted and refrozen snow and ice, with no tire tracks in it. There had been no snow in her nightmares.

She stood, shivering, but not from the cold.

Then she realized – this street was on the way to Delaney’s house. She breathed a sigh of relief as she surveyed the rest of the street and recognized another house, because it was painted a deep purple. And another house further down the street – she had seen that frayed hockey net before, pulled up into the yard for now, in wait for someone to practice shooting pucks again.

Andee was subconsciously heading to her friend’s house, as she had done so many times before. Andee had walked past this house over and over. That must be why she had dreamed about it.

As she continued her walk, Andee almost believed herself.

Andee's feet eventually led her to Delaney's house, where a grumpy Delaney let her in, gave her a blanket and pillow, and then went back to bed, shutting the door of their room with a firm -snap-. Andee was left wondering if she should have bothered Delaney's parents instead, and asked to sleep in the spare room. But she didn't really have the energy to try to explain.

Laying on the couch, Andee stared at the ceiling, which had faded glow-in-the dark stars stuck to it, as the hours ticked away.

She couldn't stop thinking. She couldn't stop being sad. She couldn't stop wondering about Lydia, about the house, about dreams.

She wanted to *do* something.

...

A breeze scraped cold air across Wynter's face.

*Of course you're too stupid to wear a scarf.*

She had laid in her bed for a long time staring at her phone screen, looking for...anything. Clues. Hints. More articles. But she'd found nothing new. So here she was.

That same streetlight flickered to life as she walked underneath. When she looked back, it was out again.

With her red, raw-feeling eyes, she followed every new length of sidewalk like a lifeline. She walked on. And on.

A shock of white paper caught her gaze, fluttering along the sidewalk in the sudden breeze. Wynter stopped to pick it up. It was a partially stained, printed certificate: "To Gideon, for Going Above and Beyond to Help a Classmate," surrounded by a big bold border of clip-art crayons, apples and suns. Wynter didn't know anybody with that name. And the paper didn't say the name of the school.

Wynter wondered if it had been thrown out with the trash, or if it had slipped out of someone's bag accidentally.

She looked around, and found a broken stick at the base of one of the trees. She carefully placed the paper in the crook of a branch, using the stick as a wedge to keep the wind from



pulling it along, making sure the name was clearly visible from the sidewalk. She hoped that it didn't get too wet, and that whoever lost it, found it again.

Then she carried on.

Barely registering time passing, Wynter trudged mechanically along until she made it to the now familiar chain link fence. She stared into the graveyard. She waited, watching.

And waited.

And waited.

The breeze brushed through her hair. She shivered, growing colder the longer she stood there. Moving, the chill had been very manageable. Stationary, it seeped through her clothing, penetrating her jacket and turning the skin under her jeans to ice.

She was thinking about the guy she had seen last time. Thinking about how lonely he must have been in that moment.

*You're selfish for thinking that might have been anything more.*

Wynter felt foolish all over again for thinking the figure in the graveyard so many days ago had been anything other than a human breaking rules, for beginning to believe something interesting, something different, might be happening.

*Your stupid fantasies aren't worth anything.*

Wynter just missed thinking that magic might exist. Evil existed, though, and it stole kids. Or dropped bombs on them. Everything seemed so hollow, and empty. A life of bleak mediocrity stretched before her. And everyone just carried on as usual. Even with someone suddenly being *gone*.

*Nobody really cares about her.*

Her parents had been too uncomfortably accepting of it. They had barely cared, either.

*What does anything matter if nobody cares about anything?*

*Nobody really cares about you.*

Wynter felt her heart sink down,

down,

down

into a black hole of despair.

*Nothing matters, you loser.*

Tears welled up in her eyes. Wynter didn't bother to try to stop them falling.

*You're a coward.*

*Crybaby.*

*Idiot.*

A train whistled and rumbled somewhere in the distance behind her.

*You can't do anything about anything.*

*Everything sucks.*

*You can't help anyone.*

*All you can do is watch as everything falls apart.*

A pickup truck drove by. Wynter smelled diesel.

*Broken.*

*Useless.*

*You'll never do anything meaningful.*

A breeze rustled the frosted, bare branches of the trees overhead.

*You scribble meaningless words in a journal no one will ever see.*

*You're so weak.*

*You can't help anyone.*

*You're a terrible daughter. You're a terrible sister.*

*You're a terrible friend. Nobody likes you.*

*You don't belong anywhere.*

*You're nothing.*

*You might as well disappear.*

*Nobody needs you.*

*Nobody would even notice.*

*You're a molecule of earth in a pile of dirt.*

*You're nothing.*

*You're a drop in the ocean.*

*You're not important.*

*If you had gone yourself, Lydia would be safe right now.*

*You can't do anything right.*

*You're nothing.*

*It should have been you who went missing. Not Lydia.*

*You're nobody.*

*Just a body.*

A body with too many feelings, so heavy and confusing that they felt like they didn't even belong to her. She was so, so tired. Tired of feeling. Tired of herself.

*I hate me.*

Wynter stared at the grey blocks of stone and carved angels and crosses, blurry through her tears, and wondered

What would it be like

To lie there

Under the cool earth

And feel...

Nothing.

*It would be better for everyone.*

*Nobody needs you here.*

Something whispered in her ear: "Hello."

Wynter recoiled and swatted at her ear, as if a fly had been buzzing there. Her heart pounded as she looked around wildly, frantically scrubbing the tears from her face with her sleeve, seeking out the person who'd spoken —

Until she remembered it was windy. The voice was a gust of wind. She was alone.

Slowly, Wynter's sadness transformed into anger, first at herself, for being so easily tricked, then, suddenly, at whomever had taken Lydia.

Drained, she wiped her face dry.

*Do something.*

Wynter's footsteps felt too loud. The occasional car drove by, headlights briefly illuminating the dimly lit street. She felt exposed — like she was doing something she shouldn't. The air was crisp, and irritated her dried eyes. Wynter was surprised she couldn't

see her breath. She pulled her toque lower and shoved her hands, fists clenched, deep in her pockets.

Finally, a few streets later, she was there.

Wynter loitered uneasily in front of the house, uncomfortably visible in a neighbouring porch light. The bare branches of the maple tree in the front yard stretched, naked and silent, into the night air. Litter from someone's fast food order, transported by the wind, was lying trapped between the bottom of the screen door and the concrete front stoop.

The interior of the house was still dark. Wynter could sense no one was inside. There was no life inside the white window panes, which gazed out into the street like empty eyes in a pale blue face.

*Now what, genius?*

Wynter's nerves were worn down, numb; she stood, staring at the house, feeling silly and indecisive.

Someone was standing by the gate to the backyard.

A kid stood staring at Wynter. Her eyes struggled to adjust to the dim lighting beside the house —

No. It was a bush.

One of those stupid juniper or whatever decorative bushes. Not a person – a fucking bush. Wynter's initial shock and adrenaline rush morphed into anger at herself.

*Such a coward.*

What was the point of coming here if she wasn't going to *do* anything?

*You doormat.*

*So scared of breaking rules.*

"Fuck it," Wynter muttered breathlessly to herself. "Fuck this. Fuck everything." Wynter boldly walked to the front door, reaching one hand from the cozy safety of her pocket and pushing down the front door handle.

It was locked. The handle jiggled, but didn't turn.

Of course it was locked. It'd be weird if it wasn't.

After an uncharacteristically violent thought of kicking down the door, and immediately

deciding that that might not be the best idea, Wynter checked again that no one was looking and walked along the front of the house, then through the carport, to a fenced backyard. She carefully, noiselessly, unlatched the gate and slipped inside.

Wynter stood on the path leading to the door and hesitated for only a second before she tried the back door.

It wasn't locked.

Shocked, despite hoping for this exact outcome, Wynter took half a step back.

*Why is it unlocked?*

Was someone inside? Wynter listened, but couldn't hear anything coming from inside the house. She thought of her nightmares, the way the house had drawn her to it. Now, Wynter felt nothing.

*It's a trap.*

Wynter looked up at the sky, trying to ground herself. She breathed a deep, shaky breath.

The now nearly-full moon peeked through the clouds. As she watched, a cluster of something dark swooped across the silvery light. Then, as soon as it had appeared, it was gone. The clouds shifted to cover the moon's light again.

Wynter's heart raced, beating fear into her numb self. She tried to stay calm as her brain struggled to decipher what exactly she had seen. It felt like time stood still.

Those weren't birds.

Wynter stood there, staring. Terrified.

*Leave*, her body screamed at her.

Then she thought of Lydia, maybe scared and alone somewhere.

*You might be the only one looking for her.*

Her hands shaking only slightly, Wynter stepped back towards the door, and twisted the doorknob. It turned smoothly, and the door opened with a faint creak.

Her heart still thumping loudly, Wynter pushed the door open and slipped inside.

Most houses smell like something. Seasonal candles. Laundry detergent. Whatever was cooked last. Socks. This house smelled like nothing. Just empty air.

Uncomfortably aware of the plot of every horror movie she had ever watched, Wynter briefly considered turning on the lights, but the neighbours would probably notice if an abandoned house suddenly lit up.

Suddenly Wynter felt very stupid again. She was standing in the dark hallway of someone else's house. Maybe nothing nefarious *was* going on. Maybe she was just trespassing.

*You're just fixating on a stupid nightmare.*

*The house isn't anything. Just filler for a recurring nightmare.*

Wynter shivered. She should move away from the door. Just in case. And maybe she should lock it. She turned up the brightness of her phone screen started to angle it so she could find the deadbolt.

A faint sound just outside stopped her.

Her entire body tensed and icy cold adrenaline flooded her hands and feet. Was that a footstep outside, on the path to the door?

Wynter shoved her phone in her pocket, dousing the light, and as quietly as she could crept further into the house, down the hallway and ducked through the nearest door, shutting it as much as she dared, not wanting the latch to click and alert whoever was coming through the now open back door.

Because, Wynter had realized as she huddled in what she assumed was a bedroom, she had *still* not locked the fucking door behind her.

A light abruptly illuminated the space outside the room Wynter was in, seeping through the gaps under the door and along the door jamb. The light moved with whomever was holding it; probably looking through the kitchen and living room areas before going down the hall towards where Wynter was.

They didn't belong here, either. They would have turned on the lights.

It was only a matter of time before they came to this room and looked inside. Wynter looked around wildly, trying to make things out in the dark. She couldn't see the outline of any furniture in the room. She would be too noisy if she tried to run. There was nowhere to hide.

The footsteps drew nearer. The only real weapon Wynter had was her pocketknife. She

didn't think it would help much unless she surprised the other intruder. But she pulled it out, so she was ready, and waited.

*What a dumb way to die.*

The person was right outside the door – Wynter gripped her knife, bracing herself —  
And they carried on past.

Wynter didn't allow herself time to relax with relief. She had changed her mind. She needed to leave. Now.

Listening for the footsteps to come back, Wynter took off her shoes and, holding them in one hand, she pushed open the door slowly with her other, which was still wrapped around her knife.

As soon as she stepped out into the hall, the other person's flashlight illuminated her. Involuntarily, Wynter screamed, dropping her boots, holding the knife out in front of her. And the other person screamed, too.

Then: "Shut up! What the fuck are you doing here?!" a voice Wynter recognized hissed at her.

Wynter forgot herself for a moment and hissed back, "What the fuck are YOU doing here, asshole?"

"Oh my fucking god I think I died for a minute —"

"Put the light down – you're blinding me godamnit —"

"Why are your shoes off? For fuck sake —"

"So I could get out —"

"Is that a *knife* —?!"

"Because I thought you were going to fucking kill me you dick —"

"I was fucking looking for Lydia —"

"So was I!"

They stood in silence for a moment, the key fob flashlight now pointed at the ground.

"We're making too much noise," Andriana said. "Let's go talk somewhere else."

Wynter burned inwardly at the fact that Andriana was assuming the lead. And humiliation that she looked so foolish. She had felt in charge for about 30 seconds, and

operating like a real human, all on her own, then someone came in and she immediately relinquished control.

*Like a fucking loser.*

But she simply replied: “’kay.”

Because at the very least, Andriana being here meant Wynter wasn’t losing it.

\*

As Winter pulled her boots back on, Andee turned away and stomped to the back door. She opened it.

And felt like her heart had stopped. Behind her, Winter gave a sharp intake of breath.

The battered white door frame outlined a rectangle of grey. Andee was looking out into the backyard – but it *wasn’t right*. It wasn’t dark outside anymore – the patchy snow and brown grass were awash in a soft, silvery glow. Like moonlight, but with no actual moon to be seen anywhere. Andee could easily make out the back fence, a lonely wooden playhouse by the tiny, barren flower garden, the trees of the greenbelt stretching out behind the property.

And there were people standing in the yard, staring at her as she stood, frozen, in the doorway.

Most of them were young – teens. There was a spattering of what looked like even younger kids, and older adults. But Andee wasn’t focused on their ages. They were standing too still; they were transparent; their staring eyes were blank.

They weren’t alive.

With a strangled cry of alarm, Andee slammed the door shut and locked it.

“What the FUCK is happening?!”

“*Ohmygodohmygodohmygod* —” Winter stammered behind her.

Andee ran to the living room window. She couldn’t see outside – it was as if the glass was tinted. She ran to one of the bedrooms – same thing. Andee wrenched the bedroom window open. She still couldn’t see anything. She shoved it back shut.



With a bewildered Winter watching her, Andee ran to the front door and opened it. Here, everything looked the same as it had when she had snuck into the house before. Quiet asphalt and pulpy air greeted her. She could see a tv playing through the living room window of the house across the street.

She shut the front door, and turned to stare helplessly at Winter. “What’s happening?”

Winter stared back at her, her mouth moving but no words coming out.

Andee sat on the floor, head in her hands, needing to process.

“Andriana —” The guttural sound from Winter made Andee snap to attention.

Winter pointed to the corner of the living room.

A young girl was standing there.

For a heart-stopping moment Andee thought it was Lydia. But it wasn’t.

This girl was not alive.

Time stopped as Andee and Winter stared at the colourless girl in her striped, knee-length skirt and wan blouse. She was smoky around the edges. She looked angry. Or afraid?

“What d’you want?” Andee breathed.

The phantom’s milky eyes snapped over to Andee, and she looked like she was about to speak. Then she pointed at the bedroom, her expression now horrified.

Through the bedroom door, Andee could see the window she’d opened was still ajar, just a crack.

The girl’s mouth opened wide. And she began  
*screaming.*

She screamed  
and screamed —

Her mouth got wider and wider, horrifyingly so, as the scream amplified. The sound tore through the room. Winter and Andee clapped their hands over their ears and cowered. Andee sank further onto the worn laminate floor.

Then —

Sudden silence.

The girl was gone.

“What the fuck was *that*?” Andee gasped, getting up off the floor, her legs shaking.

“Oh my god!” Winter shrieked, scrambling backwards —

Something was creeping in through the open window.

A black substance, thick as tar oozed through the window, and spilled onto the floor.

With dark wisps of smoke clinging to it, as if it was smoldering, it crept across the carpet and into the hallway, towards Andee and Winter. As tendrils reached out from the main mass and began to grab at their ankles, they flailed and yelled and tried desperately to kick themselves free.

But it got them anyway.

Andee struggled helplessly as the pitchy, cold tendrils crept up her legs and torso, tightening around her chest and working themselves like vines around her throat and over her face, slowly smothering her, pulling her down to the floor — she looked wildly around as she tried to free herself and saw that Winter was trapped, too —

*“I already have a chosen one,”* said a voice from the air, or maybe from within her own head. The voice was like nails on a chalkboard, raspy, like the dead forcing sound past long rotted vocal chords. The voice from the nightmares.

*“Leave, and there will be no more fear. No more sorrows.*

*Leave. Let her disappear.*

*Or I will take you next.”*

And the tendrils were gone.

Winter slumped fully on the ground, gasping for air. Shaking, Andee slowly pushed herself up off the floor.

...

There was the sound of a car driving by outside, then nothing.

Andriana scrambled to slam the window shut and paced back and forth down the hallway, her arms crossed.

Wynter lay on the floor, her brain constricting.

*You should do what it says.*

*You should just let it happen.*

Motionless, indecision held her captive. Indecision, and fear.

*You can't fight it.*

And what if walking away was the right thing to do? What if going after it made it angry, made it take more people? *Would* this terrible feeling, the shadows, the fear – would it all go away if they let whatever thing that was keep Lydia? What was one person, if nobody else got taken?

*Are you worth more than she is?*

Wynter wondered how the ghosts outside had died. She wondered how many of them there were.

*Are you going to just let it happen again?*

*Coward.*

Wynter thought of how Lydia must feel, alone, lost, trapped.

*What if this was you?*

Wynter knew, then, that she wasn't going to walk away. She sat up.

...

As Andee paced the house, she remembered her nightmare about Anika.

*If we try to do something, will it go after us?*

How many people had this thing taken over the years? There were so many ... ghosts... outside. That meant more people would be taken. It would keep happening. She thought of how her dad had reacted.

*I can't pretend to not know what's happening.*

*I can't just do nothing.*

*This could be Lydia's only chance.*

She stopped pacing, and looked over at Winter. Winter was staring back at her, her face set in a grim, determined look.

Andee had a terrible feeling that time was running out.

"I wish we knew how to kill it," Andee stated dully.

Winter pulled something from her pocket, and said tentatively, "Um. I have a knife?" She held up a standard, silver-handled pocket-knife.

“I, uh. Have a Swiss Army knockoff. On my keychain. But that’s it.” Andee pulled out the fob with her house keys, Delaney’s house key, a mini flashlight, and a metal bottle opener, among other little knickknacks. Retroactively, she wished she had thought to borrow something sharp from Delaney’s parents’ garden shed.

Winter shakily got to her feet and gestured around the abandoned living room. “Maybe we’ll find something here. Like ... forks, or something.” She took out her phone, still glowing with its flashlight turned on, took the few steps to the kitchen and began to open cupboards.

“I’d prefer more knives,” Andee said. Winter choked out a sound somewhat resembling a chuckle. “I’m Andee, by the way. Andriana’s for when people are mad at me.”

“Oh – sorry.” Winter looked embarrassed for some reason, pausing as she shut another cupboard door. “I’m...I’m Winter. Um. With a ‘y’. Because that makes sense.” She visibly winced, and opened another door, hiding her face.

“Ok, cool.”

Quickly, the two of them scoured the entire upstairs together – under sinks, in drawers, on top of the fridge, in the dark corners of closets. But they found nothing upstairs. Finally, they looked into the dark, yawning entrance of the basement together. Not caring if the neighbours saw, anymore, Andee tried to flick on the light, but nothing happened.

“Uh.”

“Yeah.”

With a heavy breath, Andee took the first step. Her foot leaned on the first, creaky step. Nothing happened. Slowly, the stairwell lit by phone and flashlight beams, they both made their way downstairs.

The basement was unfinished, and also completely gutted. A lonely water heater sat in a corner, but where most basements were stuffed full of forgotten memorabilia and boxes of dusty Christmas decorations, this one was bare. Without much hope, Wynter and Andee investigated it anyway.

Empty shelves, illuminated eerily by the yellowish light of Wynter’s phone, taunted

them. Their feet sounded alarmingly loud as they walked around on the cold, concrete floor.

A flurry of black wings abruptly burst from one of the empty shelves of a rickety wooden storage unit.

Andee and Wynter both screamed and ducked – but it was just a crow. He flew past them and up the stairs. Andee pointed her light at the shelves, in case more crows were hiding there.

“Look!” Andee hurried to the shelf, and pulled a rusty crowbar out from where it was tucked, almost invisible, along the wall. She unsteadily wiped dust from it.

“We’re saved,” Wynter said weakly.

...

They stood at the back door together, Andee holding the crowbar like a baseball bat, Wynter gripping her tiny knife.

The crow that was trapped in the house with them was perched on a cabinet behind them, staring.

Wynter swallowed. “Andee.” She took a nervous, rattling breath, and asked out loud the question that had been haunting her ever since she arrived at the house: “What if it’s a trap?”

Andee shrugged, shaking her head helplessly.

Wynter shuddered involuntarily. Her hands shook as she reached to open the door again.

*You coward.*

“Hey,” Andee said, gripping Wynter’s shoulder with her free hand firmly, her gaze fierce. “We’ve got this.”

Wynter wasn’t so sure about that and from the tone of Andee’s voice, she knew that Andee wasn’t, either. But Wynter nodded once, and slid back the deadbolt, and pulled the door open.

\*

The crow took flight, and gracefully dove past them and into the grey world.

The ghosts outside were gone. An empty backyard waited for them as the door snapped

shut on reality behind them.

Wynter and Andee took a few hesitant steps out into the yard, their mismatched, colourful jackets and toques painfully out of place in the unfamiliar ambience.

Beyond the backyard, a grey forest of smoky spruce trees stretched out before them, without end. In reality, the greenbelt was laughably narrow, an excuse for city officials to claim the space was “green,” not a place large enough for anything wild to live in it.

Wynter looked back, and saw that she couldn’t see past the house into where the front yard and street would be. The edges of this world became fuzzy there, and faded to black.

“Holy shit.” Andee whispered.

But...

Inside, despite the dread in the pit of her stomach, despite the fear, part of Wynter was strangely excited, in an anxious, tentative way.

*Something more.*

Then again, there was a chance that she was actually in a coma, and this was the result of an IV drip of some hallucinogenic medication. And even if it wasn’t, “something more” might kill her. Or Andee.

Andee relaxed her titanium grip on the bar just long enough to pull out her phone, look at the screen, and return it to her coat pocket. “No service,” she said.

Wynter gripped her knife, her knuckles white. She didn’t bother to check her own phone, in the back pocket of her jeans.

They stared at the bleak, but somehow mournfully beautiful forest stretching out ahead of them.

Tentatively, Wynter took a step.

And then another.

She looked at Andee, who nodded resolutely and readjusted her grip of the iron bar in her hands.

They headed for the trees.

...

When they got to the gate in the backyard fence, Wynter unlatched it and Andee peered

through, checking to make sure nobody – *nothing* – was waiting to catch them on the other side.

After taking a few steps, though, they realized they *weren't* alone.

The girl had come back. Andee nearly swung at her as she blinked into existence out of nowhere. Wynter jumped.

“That w-was a warning,” the ghost girl whispered, flickering in and out. “There isn’t much...time. Or she’ll...she’ll end up like me.”

“*Like us,*” a chorus of disembodied, frail voices added. Wynter and Andee looked around wildly for the other speakers, but there was nobody else around. At least not that they could see.

A young boy blinked into sight, just behind the girl. “Don’t let the Thing have her,” he pleaded, his voice low and hoarse.

“What is it?” Wynter asked. “The – the Thing?”

He just shook his head and disappeared.

“But *how* do we find her?!” Andee demanded of the ghost girl.

She flickered, and was gone. A crow cawed somewhere in the distance.

Andee groaned loudly, trying to mask her fear with frustration. “They’d better not keep doing that,” she said, but without heat.

They continued on.

The trees were as still as statues. Not a needle or stem stirred. Their trunks were long and branchless until well above Wynter and Andee’s heads. Beyond the fence, the forest floor was clean, bare except for a soft carpet of ashen snow. Unlike snow in reality, it didn’t make any noise as they walked; it felt like powdered sugar underfoot.

For long minutes, nothing else happened but Andee’s dread grew steadily within her; the tension was building to an almost unbearable strain. She kept thinking she saw dark shapes flitting between the trees, just out of her line of sight, figures made of ebony smoke. Her heart was hammering. She glanced at Wynter, and wondered how she was so stoic. Wynter was looking around, taking everything in solemnly, as if merely assessing the situation and not having anything near a panic attack.

...

Wynter felt like she had walked into a funeral. She looked up to the sky, instinctively looking for the moon but, from what she could see through the branches high above, the sky was blank, the colour of iron. There was no moon breaking through clouds, here. The sky sat low and heavy, and seemed to meld with the fog that hung over the trees, brushing their sharp tops. It gave the ground a smothering, dusk-like atmosphere.

"I feel a bit claustrophobic," Andee whispered.

But Wynter felt...enveloped. Held. She found the ambiance somehow ... familiar. Not comforting. Just, she almost felt like she had been here before.

But something kept flickering through the trees, reminding her to remain afraid and stopping her from contemplating the feelings of familiarity too deeply. The wispy, shadowy figures from her nightmares were following Wynter and Andee as they carried on through the strange forest. They stayed just out of sight, and far in the distance. Wynter could only catch them in her periphery – whenever she turned to look at one, it was gone.

And as Wynter and Andee moved further into the woods, a heavy, dreadful, familiar feeling rooted itself in Wynter's chest, steadily growing larger and larger; Wynter had to focus on breathing, as if someone had wrapped their fingers around her very soul and was slowly squeezing.

*Someone is going to die.*

But Wynter felt like this so often, already, that she didn't know if she *should* be reacting to it; she didn't know if it was a gut feeling, or her mind playing tricks on her.

Wynter stole a glance at Andee, and was surprised to see her own feelings reflected in Andee's pained expression.

*You aren't alone.*

A tiny ember of hope kindled within Wynter, somehow finding room in the vice grip holding her heart captive. Maybe, just maybe, they might come out of this okay. Wynter would have finally done something meaningful with her life. They would find Lydia, and they'd find their way out, and they'd all be safe.

And then everything would be okay.



...

Time passed.

Or maybe it didn't. Maybe the suspense was why it felt like hours were passing.

Andee kept checking the time on her phone but the digital numbers illuminated on the screen never changed. And nothing changed about the sky, about the trees. The lighting never shifted. The ghosts – or undead, or whatever they were – remained out of sight. But their constant companions, the shadows, continued to follow them.

Andee and Wynter walked in silence, apart from the sounds of their breathing, their padding footsteps, and occasionally, the distant croak of a crow. Here and there, the sound of a breeze whooshed overhead, but the tree branches high above still did not shift or sway.

Andee had had to lower the crowbar because her arm muscles began to scream with exhaustion. The rusty metal felt heavier and heavier. She shifted it around every so often, holding it first in one hand, then the other; propping it on one shoulder like a rifle; holding it in both hands like a barbell. Part of her wished she had brought her duffel bag from Delaney's, to carry it on her back.

*Delaney.* What would they do when they discovered Andee had left? When they didn't see her at school Friday?

A sudden, if brief, pain in her left sole momentarily distracted her thoughts. Andee paused for a second to shake the tension from her foot. Her winter boots weren't meant for long hikes.

*How long have we been gone?*

Wynter stumbled beside her. Andee abruptly realized that she must be exhausted, too. "We should take a break," Andee said.

She looked around for a place to settle, not wanting to get her pants damp. Ultimately, she sighed in defeat and sat down on the snow, against a tree. Wynter sank down beside her.

To Andee's surprise the snow, if that's what it actually was, wasn't cold, or wet; it felt like cool ash, and was dry beneath her fingers. Andee suddenly realized that she wasn't sweating – this whole place wasn't very cold at all, and it wasn't too warm for her winter gear, either; it wasn't anything.

...

Wynter leaned gratefully against her chosen tree. She had intended to keep walking for as long as it took, but was secretly relieved Andee had suggested a break.

“This is crazy,” Andee said, holding up a handful of snow. Wynter picked some up herself, and was shocked by its dry texture. “Is – is it just for show?” Andee wondered out loud.

Wynter had no idea. She shrugged.

They sat in the quiet for a while.

“You doing okay?” Andee eventually asked.

“Yeah.” Wynter’s voice was flat, tired. “You?”

“I mean. No.” Andee shared a worried, empathetic look with Wynter.

The ambient silence was oppressive. Wynter couldn’t see the shadows right now; they were keeping their distance. She wondered what they were waiting for.

“What do you think has her?” Andee asked suddenly, in a whisper. Her voice trembled slightly. “Like...*what* is it? ‘The Thing?’ A demon? An alien?”

Wynter wanted to console her – wanted to say she didn’t know either and that she felt lost and afraid, too, but that they’d make it out; that she was so, so relieved that she wasn’t alone; that having Andee here with her made her believe they could find Lydia and make it out. But the words that formed on Wynter’s tongue felt shallow, and died there. So she just whispered, “Something I don’t want to meet again.”

*What a stupid thing to say.*

“‘Something.’” Andee sounded defeated. “Yeah. Just...a thing.”

*Just a thing.*

*A Thing.*

“Did...” Andee hesitated. She looked at Wynter. Her eyes felt like they were piercing into Wynter’s soul. “Did you have a bunch of nightmares about this? And about...about Lydia?”

“Yeah.” Wynter felt a surprising, immense relief. “Just like, shadows and stuff. Um. Classic nightmare bullshit.” Wynter dropped the eye contact.

*How eloquent.*

*Incoherent loser.*

*She probably wishes anyone but you was stuck here with her.*

There were so many other people who would have been better off looking for Lydia with Andee, who was athletic, and pragmatic, and smart.

*You're none of those things.*

"D'you think other people were having nightmares, too?" Andee's voice was hoarse.

"D'you think other people were feeling this?"

Wynter thought of Miles. "Maybe," she replied. Andee scowled, but not at Wynter, and glared off into the forest. Long seconds passed. Another crow cawed somewhere. "What if..." Wynter hesitated, "what if we keep walking forever and don't find her?"

"Then I guess we're trapped in —" Andee gestured around her. "— fucking limbo 'til we die."

"Story of my life."

Andee looked at her searchingly. Wynter was uncomfortable with the attention. "Just...I never seem to be able to get anywhere with my life," she muttered lamely.

"Oh." Andee drew her knees up and leaned her arms on them. "I feel that," she said. "I've been feeling like shit lately." She pulled off her glasses and wearily buried her head in her arms.

The tiny hopeful flame in Wynter's chest sparked a little. "Me, too."

*Not alone.*

"But I think it's this Thing's fault," Andee continued wistfully, somewhat muffled, "'cuz I didn't feel like this before."

The flame grew. Wynter hadn't always been like this, either. If they saved Lydia, would Wynter stop feeling...bad? Instantly, with a sick feeling, Wynter remembered the warning. "If we save Lydia and get out, will it...just take someone else?" she asked in a whisper.

Andee looked up, her expression resolute. "We need to kill it."

Like a candle in a gust of wind, Wynter's hope was snuffed out.

*A crowbar and a pocketknife aren't enough.*

Wynter was so, so tired. Without meaning to, she said out loud, “I’ve felt so bad so long, I don’t know if I know how to be happy anymore.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Wynter saw Andee raise her head to look at her. Embarrassed, Wynter didn’t turn to meet her gaze. She stared straight ahead instead, into the never-ending forest, full of ghosts and shadows. They could easily get lost forever, in here.

Wynter wondered what would happen if she and Andee just...never came back. She suddenly wished she had left a note. But it was too late, now.

*You have to make it home.*

Wynter’s sudden desire to make it out alive, a sudden break from her apathy, surprised her.

Her scalp tingled. She looked up, and saw something was falling from the sky. She thought it was snow – until it sank closer.

Bits of paper were falling from the sky.

Andee put her glasses back on and stood up, snatching one of the fluttering pieces out of the air. Something was written on it. Andee read it, and her eyes got wide. She handed it to Wynter, then started to grab other pieces of paper, collecting them, reading each one.

The one Andee had given Wynter read, “I’m so sorry, I can’t do this anymore.” The sentence looked as if it had been torn from a longer note. Suggestions of words lined the edges, words torn apart in the middle, cutting off the rest of the story.

Wynter got up and plucked another scrap from the air. “I wish I could have told you what I was thinking”

Another: “Everything feels so horrible and I don’t know why”

The paper was crumbling to ash, to powder, as soon as it hit the ground.

*“I wish I could be normal”*

*“Please forget me”*

*“No one can help me”*

*“I hate this”*

*“I love you”*

Bits of thoughts on paper, falling like snow, littering the ground. Bits of feelings and

regrets.

“You’re better off without me”

“Please don’t forget me”

“Nobody needs me”

“Goodbye”

“Hello.”

A boy had materialized behind Wynter, reading over her shoulder.

Wynter spun around to face the speaker. She and Andee were surrounded. These weren’t the faceless shades, but the ghosts again – so many of them, staring at the two living girls.

*How many times has this happened and we didn’t notice?*

“Hi,” Wynter breathed. He smiled. Was he their age? He wore a baggy, oversized grey sweater. Maybe it had been a different colour, once.

“I’m Dewey,” he said, with a voice that sounded like falling leaves.

Wynter said shakily, “I’m Wynter. This is Andee.”

Andee asked, “Where’s Lydia?”

His mouth moved, but no sound came out. Dewey’s grey expression became terribly, terribly sad. “I can’t ... say,” he finally managed, sounding helpless.

Andee groaned. She leaned close to Wynter’s ear. “Do we know he’s trying to help, or is he...” Andee murmured forebodingly, “*bad?*”

“We are not...like them,” Dewey breathed. Andee blanched. “The faceless ones, that...follow you.”

“Who are they?” Wynter asked.

“Bad.” He shimmered, like an old tv losing its connection. He didn’t say anything else.

Wynter looked at Andee and shrugged weakly. She turned back to Dewey. “How do we find her?” Wynter asked desperately.

“Don’t stop...don’t stop m-moving.” He began to fade. “I...gave up.” There were some more garbled words Wynter couldn’t make out. Like he was going through a tunnel.

“But we don’t know where to find her!” Andee was nearly shouting in her frustration.

“How do we *find* her?”

“It never...never goes away,” he whispered. “It a-always comes back.”

“So we can’t kill it?!” Andee cried out.

“It will trick you. Don’t...” Dewey flickered.

“It isn’t real.” Another little voice said, from somewhere.

And another: “Dreams.” Another: “It isn’t real.” Another: “Keep going.”

“Don’t give up,” Dewey said, or maybe it was just the sound of paper falling.

He was gone.

And so were the others.

The last pieces of paper fell to the ground and disintegrated.

...

Andee yelled incoherently in frustration, and threw the crowbar. Wynter just stared out into the now abandoned forest, quiet, thinking.

Andee stalked away to retrieve the crowbar, and returned saying angrily, “Well, I guess we just keep walking?”

“Yeah, Wynter said weakly. “And...‘it isn’t real’?”

“*What* isn’t real? The Thing?” Andee couldn’t hide her frustration. “The way it grabbed us, the way we feel because of it – it all feels pretty fucking real to me!”

“Yeah.”

They looked at each other.

Andee grabbed Wynter’s hand. Wynter looked surprised, but squeezed her hand back reassuringly. “So we don’t get separated,” Andee said. But she just wanted to feel less afraid.

They continued on.

Andee’s burning frustration gradually dissipated, and was slowly but surely replaced again with cold trepidation and dread.

*“It never goes away.”*

But she tried to ignore it. And they kept going.

And going.

And going.

Andee tried to stamp down her ever-growing fear that they would just walk forever, and ever. Her hand was sweaty in Wynter's. But she didn't want to let go.

Then —

There she was.

Walking alone, head down, arms crossed. A crow alighted from a tree branch high above, and Lydia looked up at the sound. Then she saw Andee and Wynter and stared at them, eyes glazed. Her hoodie was royal blue, and she was solid.

She was alive.

\*

Andee gasped and started to rush forward.

"Wait!" Wynter whispered harshly, gripping her hand tighter and pulling back to stop her. "What if that's not really her?"

Andee hesitated. "We have no way to know," she said dejectedly.

The terrifying, oozing Thing could pop out of somewhere, unseen for now. "And what should we do after we get her?" But Wynter already knew there was only one option, just like she knew that facing the Thing was inevitable.

"Run," Andee confirmed. She checked behind them, probably looking for shadows. "Run back the way we came and hope the house is still there."

It didn't matter if this was the real Lydia or not. They had to take that risk.

Andee locked eyes with Wynter. Wynter nodded.

...

Andee let go of Wynter's hand, to walk a few steps forward. "Hey," Andee said softly, cautiously to the girl in the blue hoodie. She held the crowbar loosely at her side. Lydia looked back at her mutely, her sad, weary expression unchanging. "We're here to take you home."

"Home?" Lydia finally spoke, her voice raspy.

"Yeah," Andee beckoned to Wynter, feeling a little helpless. Wynter moved forward to

join them.

Lydia looked at them blankly. “Who’re you?”

“Andee and Wynter,” Andee replied. “We’re friends.”

Lydia seemed confused, then. She blinked slowly. “I don’t...know...you?”

Andee had thought that finding Lydia and telling her they had come to save her would be a joyful, relieved moment, but Lydia seemed too out of it to understand what was going on. Andee exchanged a worried glance with Wynter.

*What if we can’t convince her to come with us?*

“I...don’t have friends,” Lydia said then. A tear fell from her left eye, and slid down her face.

“We can be your friends,” Wynter said softly.

“And your family,” Andee added, “they need you back.”

Lydia shook her head. “No,” she replied hoarsely. “No, they don’t.”

“Why do you say that?” Andee asked gently.

“They didn’t come find me.” Lydia blinked again; the glazed look shifted a bit.

“Why...why wouldn’t they come find me?”

Andee thought of the single “missing” post she had seen. Someone had put that up. Someone had cared. And then Andee thought of how her own dad hadn’t wanted to talk about it.

Mournfully, Lydia said, “Nobody wants to find me.” Her voice was thick with tears that hadn’t fallen, yet.

Andee thought, then, of the nightmares. How unclear they’d been. How threatening they’d become. “I think...” Andee gazed intently at Lydia. “I think they wanted to find you, they just didn’t know where to look for you. They didn’t know *how* to find you.”

Something hopeful flitted across Lydia’s expression, but her face quickly fell again.

“No,” she turned away. “Nobody wants me around.”

“Wait —”

“It’s okay,” Lydia whispered, her back to them. “I’m nothing.” Her shoulders drooped.

“I’ll never be anything.”



“Lydia,” Wynter said, her voice heavy, “You’re not alone. I know how you feel.”

The other girl didn’t turn around, but didn’t move further away.

“The Thing – the monster here – it’s making us feel like this. It isn’t your fault.” Wynter reached out a hand to Lydia.

“Please come with us,” Andee pleaded.

For a long moment, Lydia just looked at the offered hand. And then she reached to take it

—

Something erupted from the ground.

Four transparent walls trapped Lydia before she could take the offered hand, forcing Andee and Wynter to stumble back. Lydia screamed and shrank back as the glass, or whatever it was, around her began to turn grey and opaque, like stone. A terrible screeching noise pierced the air, a sound like a howling wind ripping through the still trees, coming closer and closer.

“Run!” Lydia screamed, as she disappeared from sight.

Instead, Andee hoisted the crowbar.

She swung it at the wall as hard as she could, trying to crack the barrier. Her first hit rebounded painfully, the bar bouncing off of the material. She couldn’t move her arms properly in her stupid jacket – she ripped it off. She bellowed incoherently as she put even more force into her next swing. And then the next.

The material refused to break.

It refused to break

Then

A tiny crack appeared.

The crack began to spiderweb.

It splintered —

The wall shattered, the pieces chiming like glass as they fell to the ground, where they dissipated.

Wynter grabbed Lydia’s hand and pulled her away.

As soon as the wall shattered, as soon as Lydia was next to Wynter, a flock of dark

shapes swarmed, gathering from above, from behind the trees.

“This is so fucking cliché!” Andee yelled, trying to camouflage her fear as she hoisted the crowbar again. Wynter pushed Lydia behind her and held her knife out in front of her.

Shadows grouped and merged together, shifting and billowing until they reached the ground, where they formed the terrible, viscous

Thing.

It slithered towards them, over the ashy snow, creeping closer and closer.

*“I did warn you.”*

...

Its tendrils started to reach for Andee, who was closest. She scrambled towards Wynter and grabbed Lydia’s other hand. “Go go GO!” Andee screamed.

They ran as fast as they could, feet pounding.

But the landscape began to change.

The ground bucked and rolled; the strange powdery snow morphed beneath their feet, becoming black, hardening under their boots and expanding out into the forest. The trees melted and shrank, melding into the ground, now as flat and smooth as asphalt. The reeking stench of sulphur filled the air.

To Wynter’s horror, her boots began to stick to something tacky. Then her feet started sinking. Her hand jerked out of Lydia’s.

Shadows flitted around her head, swooping down and diving like birds protecting their nests. Wynter cowered, her arms over her head, twisting around awkwardly, her feet rooted to the spot as the tar began dragging her down, down

down

*“It’s not real!”* Andee screamed suddenly.

She was knee deep, and must’ve shoved Lydia ahead of her before the muck caught her – Lydia was standing on solid ground, gripping Andee’s hand, slipping a little as she slowly pulled Andee out.

Wynter was almost knee-deep in grime. Her legs were already screaming with fatigue. With horror, she realized the ground was beginning to harden around her.

*What's the point of trying?*

*You're too weak.*

But she tried anyway.

She picked up one foot – agonizingly slowly, she forced it free of the tar with a terrible sucking sound.

One foot. Now the other. She braced herself on a solid patch of ground with one hand, trying to pull herself out.

Shadows were swooping closer and closer. Wynter knew instinctively that the only reason the shadows hadn't actually harmed them yet was because they were screwing with them; they never quite made contact, wary of the metal weapon but circling, like vultures...

Meanwhile, the ooze followed, slowly but surely advancing on them. Toying with them.

*It's not real it's not real it's not real*

Wynter pulled her second foot free as Andee, too, toppled onto solid ground.

They kept running.

The ground changed again, as if the moisture was being sucked out of it, turning to a dark grey layer of dust, lightening, becoming snow again...

But this time, the snow billowed up from under their feet as they ran, plumed up into the air, choking them, filling their mouths and noses. Wynter tasted soot; she tasted —

Ashes.

Wynter tried to cover her face by pulling the collar of her sweater up from beneath her now sweltering jacket, all while swinging her pocketknife around her head in a feeble attempt to keep the shades away.

Andee doubled over with wracking, wrenching coughs. She dropped the crowbar. Lydia stood helplessly by, stricken, unsure how to help. Wynter rushed over, snatched up the crowbar and helped Andee hobble away with Lydia just as a tendril reached them, gripping onto Andee's ankle.

Wynter stopped only to stab at it with the sharp end of the crowbar as hard as she

possibly could. It recoiled, letting Andee go.

...

Andee struggled to clear her airway as shadow people continued to herd them away. She pulled her toque off and held it to her face like a mask. Her glasses fogged up, dust sticking to them, blinding her, and she threw the toque aside. She immediately regretted it as she inhaled another mouthful of dust.

Doubled over, she could see shapes beneath the dust, terrible shapes that looked like sleeping animals. They lay, so still, under the blanket of grey, like the people in Pompeii. She held onto that single phrase uttered by one of the ghosts like a lifeline: *It's not real*.

*It's not real it's not real it's not real —*

Shadows dove at them again. Wynter threw her jacket to Andee, to use to cover her face. Andee, coughing, held the jacket to her mouth and nose and wrenched her keychain from her pocket, having no other weapon. Instead of fumbling with her Swiss Army knife, she swung the bits of metal at oncoming shadows like a flail, keeping them back.

The three kept running.

Lydia was fast, but not fast enough. As she began to fall behind, Andee reached back and grabbed her hand, dragging her along. Andee could barely see Wynter next to her. The soot in the air was too thick, her glasses too filthy.

The oozing mass followed them, steadily, ominously, easing itself through the ashes like a horrific, festering oil spill, glistening and smouldering.

With a lurch, Andee realized that it wasn't hurrying.

...

Something began to crunch underfoot.

Wynter looked and clapped a hand over her mouth, eyes wide and staring. Andee glanced down and screamed.

Bones littered the ground. Broken and whole, big and small, ribs and legs and links of spines, yellowing and stark white. It was impossible to tell if they were animal or human.

One of the shades chose its moment and dove at Wynter, picking her up by the back of her hoodie and throwing her multiple feet away. She slammed into the ground, bones

scattering everywhere. Wynter gasped, wheezing, convulsing in pain with the wind knocked out of her. Andee was there suddenly, pulling her up, all while still gripping Lydia's hand tightly.

Wynter struggled to her feet, shaken and bruised and one knee stinging from where something had sliced through her jeans but otherwise unharmed. Somehow, she had managed to keep one hand on the crowbar. Andee gripped her free hand and pulled her forward, slipping and sliding over the bones. Wynter recovered her senses just in time to swing the crowbar at another shadow, sending it reeling back.

Meanwhile, the oily monster loomed behind.

"We have to be almost there!" Andee shouted as they continued to run. She let go of Wynter's hand to swing her keychain at a shadow.

A sick feeling threatened to take over Wynter – what if that had changed, too? What if the way out wasn't there anymore?

*It's not real it's not real it's not real*

*What if you're trapped here?*

*It's not real it's not real it's not real*

*Someone is going to die.*

Again, an immense, immeasurable, weighted sorrow. She felt like she was running through tar again.

Wynter fought it down. She had to keep moving.

...

Another smoky figure burst into sight just feet away from Andee's face; the shock almost sent Andee tumbling to the ground. She whipped her lanyard at it.

The shadow disappeared again. Andee knew the shadows, this Thing, were just playing with them. Fucking with them. How else would they have not caught them yet?

Wynter was still swinging the crowbar with all her might at shadows that came too close but her energy was waning – it looked like she was fading fast. One dove at her as Andee watched and snatched Wynter's toque from her head.

*Are we going to die in here?*

Andee didn't know how much further she could run before her legs just gave in. Lydia was barely keeping up. Andee didn't know how much further they could all go, when she finally spotted something —

“THERE!” Andee shouted to Wynter, who spun to look.

The fence.

It stood like a beacon in the distance, this part of the landscape blessedly unchanged. Closer to the fence, the trees still stood, and the floor of bones became snow again.

*Please please*

*let us get out*

Andee summoned the very last of her strength, clung to Lydia's hand with a vice grip, and sprinted harder than she ever had. Her legs felt like lead blocks, slamming into the ground, that might crumble at any moment; her lungs screamed for more air. But she did not slow down.

She reached the fence, fumbled one-handed with the clasp and flung the gate open, Lydia beside her and Wynter close behind.

...

Wynter's strength was dwindling – the bar was so heavy.

*Why are you so weak?*

When Andee shouted, she didn't think, just sprinted.

As Wynter reached for the open gate, something grabbed her from behind and slammed her to the ground, multiple feet back from the fence. The crowbar went flying out of her hands.

*NO not again — !*

She gasped desperately for air, writhing on the medley of bones, which poked and prodded her and dug into her chest as she lay there, helpless. She tried to cry for help, but all that escaped her mouth was a dry, powerless wheeze.

Unable to move, she watched as Andee ran through the backyard with Lydia, running back towards reality.

Wynter saw them vanish into the house, saw the door slam shut.

They didn't look back.

\*

Wynter curled into a ball as the featureless shadows surrounded her, bracing for impact. Preparing for them to grab her, to tear her apart.

Nothing happened.

Finally, shaking, she raised her head.

They were gone.

She was alone.

*All alone.*

Wynter stood up, stumbling on legs that felt like jelly. Her knee still stung. Her whole body hurt. But the ground was solid again.

There was nothing around her; she was stranded in the middle of a flat surface stretching far beyond Wynter's sight, like a silent ocean of granite. No – the fence and house. They were still there, in the far distance.

A glow from above illuminated everything, but she couldn't see a light source. All she could see above her was a sort of smoggy sky.

She started to walk, limping towards the fence. She didn't dare cry out. Wynter couldn't hear anything – she was surrounded by silence, but for the soft padding of her boots on the ground.

Abruptly,

the lights began to go out in front of her.

The house plunged into darkness. Then the fence. Then the remaining trees. Then a chunk of ground and ashen sky. All without a sound.

Wynter began to run in the opposite direction, knowing subconsciously that it might be a trap but every fibre of her being knew she didn't want to end up in that darkness, in that pit of unknown.

As the darkness caught up to her, thoughts found room in her head anyway.

*You coward.*

*They left you behind.*

...

They continued to run and run and suddenly they burst through the door with an explosion of energy and flailing limbs. Andee kicked the door shut behind them, slammed the deadbolt in place. The house was still pitch black, illuminated only by what little light fought its way through the livingroom window from the street – Andee could just make out Lydia’s shoulders shaking as she cried noiselessly.

Andee awkwardly pulled out her phone and shone it into the dark room, but saw nothing nefarious. The house was quiet, the corners full of shadows, but benign ones. She and Lydia were both covered in ash; their feet wet and freezing, their breath and bodies steaming in the frigid February night in the unheated house.

The old linoleum creaked under her feet, just like it did at her own house, the familiar sound grounding her in reality. That, and the sound of their breathing, Lydia’s sniffing, and the distant roar of logging trucks on a far-off highway were the only noises.

They were back. Lydia was safe. They were all safe. They could figure out what to do about the Thing later.

But nothing *felt* any different. And why had no shades come after them?

Something was wrong —

Andee suddenly felt as though her soul had been plunged into a bucket of ice water. Her stomach plummeted sickeningly.

“Wynter?!” she called out desperately.

There was no answer.

...

Silence enveloped her, wrapping around her like a thick, suffocating blanket.

*Alone.*

Wynter couldn’t see. It was like waking up in the middle of the night from a deep sleep,



disoriented, unable to see your own hand in front of your face. She pulled her phone – miraculously still there, and unbroken – from her back pocket and tapped the flashlight on. It lit only a small circle around her, as if the darkness itself was impenetrable. The circle shuddered, Wynter’s arms still trembling with fatigue.

Wynter exhaled a tiny, lonely, scared whimper. The small sound echoed, as if she was surrounded by walls. But she couldn’t see any walls. Maybe they were just out of sight.

She had a terrible thought about walls appearing, like they had around Lydia, and closing in on her.

Her chest constricted and breathing became harder as she began to imagine the feeling of being crushed, trapped – her heart raced and her hands shook – the phone almost fell from her hand, her fingers unable to hold on – her breathing quickened into hiccupping gasps – the empty space wobbled and heaved and her brain burned – she was going to die – she was going to die —

*No.*

*No. That’s enough.*

*It isn’t real.*

Unsteadily, Wynter planted her feet, feeling the ground – or whatever it was – solidly beneath them.

*Breathe.*

She breathed slowly. In through her nose. Held it a few moments. Out through her mouth. In through her nose. Out through her mouth. In. Hold. Out. Hold. In. Hold. Out. Hold. In.

Hold.

Her heart slowed again. Still beating too quickly, but now she could think. There were no noises, no sounds of scraping walls or anything that might suggest the walls were literally closing in.

*Forgotten again.*

A sharp pain stabbed deep within her.

Whether it was a hangout, a party; life, or death; Wynter would be left behind. A small, heartbroken part of her wondered if Andee had seen her fall; had left her as bait, so the Thing

would get her instead of Lydia.

*A way to get rid of the problem, with only one casualty.*

*You should have known you were only brought together by chance, by shared misery, by happenstance.*

*It didn't mean anything.*

Drained, Wynter sat back down.

*Who cares if you die here?*

*Better you than her.*

She remembered sensing that someone was going to die tonight.

*You should have known you were the expendable one.*

She had felt like she was part of something.

*You were.*

*"Poor little baby, left alone."*

The voice permeated the darkness, the voice as terrible as a scream, as oppressive as tar. Wynter shuddered, and looked around for the speaker.

*"You are all alone. You knew you would end up alone.*

*I knew, too."*

Something brushed against Wynter's face in the darkness – something cold and clammy – and she recoiled, gasping reflexively.

*"I know everything."*

The voice reverberated; it sounded as though the speaker was circling her, like a predator circling prey. Wynter still couldn't see the Thing.

*"I saw your friends run," it taunted. "They*

*saw*

*you*

*fall."*

The last word felt as though it had been breathed directly into her ear. Wynter cowered.

*It isn't real.*

*It isn't real.*

*It's lying.*

But it was finding the cracks, prying them open.

A bright, piercing scarlet light momentarily blinded her. Wynter shielded her face with her hands, blinking furiously as her eyes struggled to adjust to the sudden luminescence.

The light faded to a dull, pulsing, burnt ebony against the grey. A floor materialized again beneath Wynter's feet, one that looked like flint. Wynter stumbled a step back in surprise.

The shape pulsated through the air, writhing like a sort of bloated snake or dragon, but clearly not a *body*; it was still merely a shifting, smouldering, tar-like mass. A writhing, shapeless figure.

Wynter felt the blood drain from her face. This was somehow worse than when the monster was an oozing Thing. How do you fight something that doesn't have a body, doesn't have weak points?

*This is the end.*

Then, the shape exploded – countless shadows separating from the core mass like spooked birds erupting from a collective perch, flying up and out of sight. A young woman stood there now, laughing at her. She was surrounded by grey vapour. Wynter couldn't make out any defining features. But she looked like a normal, human woman.

"Got you," the figure mocked, her voice uncannily familiar.

The last of the mist dissipated. Wynter could only stare.

Standing in front of her... It wasn't just some person.

It was Wynter.

\*

*"Wynter?!"*

Andee tried to flick on the lights, but the power must still be out – nothing happened. She swung her flashlight around, but only saw a petrified Lydia.

Terrified she had locked Wynter out of the house, Andee ran to open the back door.

It was too dark outside to see.

“No —”

Andee shut the door and opened it again.

Nothing changed.

And again.

It was still the real backyard.

“No no no no no —”

Andee slammed the door over and over before giving up and then stood, motionless with panic, staring at the door.

Wynter was trapped, and Andee had no idea how to get back in and save her.

Shakily, she fumbled with her phone. She pressed it against her ear as it rang, finding a shred of comfort in the familiar, shrill sound.

No one picked up.

She despaired for a moment, then tried another number.

Ringin g again. It rang for what felt like forever. The shrill sound pierced deep into her ear in the quiet.

“Hello?” Cillian’s groggy voice on the other end said.

“Can you come help me?”

There was no hesitation. “Where are you?”

...

Wynter’s world was collapsing; her mind reeled as she tried to make sense of what she was seeing.

She, Wynter – was the monster?

Was *this* why she had felt so bad for so long? Because a piece of her had been wreaking havoc on people this whole time?

*It isn’t real.*

Wynter stared at the other Wynter, and *hated* her – hated everything about her. Her blotchy face, her chubbiness, her poor posture; long hair that on anyone else would be notable, but on Wynter was underwhelming and lank. The other Wynter even wore the same

outdated skinny jeans and shapeless black hoodie that Wynter was currently wearing, minus the ash and dirt that Wynter was sure covered her own clothes.

*It isn't real.*

"You thought you had friends," the double said. Wynter shuddered at the sound of her own voice. "What a joke." Her nose wrinkled as she circled Wynter, surveying her. Wynter nearly tripped in her haste to move, to make sure her back was never to this version of herself. But countless shades surrounded both of them, anyway.

*It isn't real.*

The other Wynter smirked. "Nothing special." She stopped circling. "Nothing even remotely special. And everyone knows. So everyone leaves you behind."

*Is it real?*

"What do you want?" Wynter asked, near tears, breathless. She already knew the answer.

"Well," the double grinned toothily. She leaned forward, as if telling her an exciting secret. Smelling rotting meat and burning charcoal, Wynter shrank back. "I want to eat." She gestured to the shadows behind her. "And then the rest of you can join me. You'll make a wonderful soldier."

Wynter's chest constricted.

The double straightened up again. "Struggling...simply to exist. Afraid of death, yet craving it – deliciously incompetent and wallowing in self-pity..." she made a grotesque "chef's kiss" gesture.

*real?*

The double circled Wynter languorously. "I watched you a long time, hoping you would be the one to answer my call."

"What?" Wynter whispered hoarsely.

*"What do you think drew me here in the first place?"*

So...then...

It was all her own fault. Her inability to find meaning, to feel happy...that had brought the Thing here in the first place.

Wynter wanted to sink into the ground, and keep sinking, and

die.

*I hate me I hate me I hate me*

So many failures. This was just one more.

How could she have believed she might make it out of here alive? She didn't *deserve* to.

Andee was the hero for a reason. And Wynter would become a ghost. No – she wouldn't even be a ghost. A mere shadow.

Wynter couldn't stop tears welling up.

*Always*

*fucking*

*crying.*

She had believed, for a moment, that she had belonged to something, that she was doing something important. But it was destined to end – even if she had made it out, it was destined to end once everyone found out Wynter had nothing to offer; once they found out Wynter was the problem, that *she* had attracted the monster here.

She was

...nothing.

...

When headlights illuminated the bare living room window, Andee was combing the house, trying to look for a doorway back to Wynter. Lydia sat huddled on the floor, watching mutely with fearful eyes.

Andee's mind felt like it was skipping over coherent thoughts; tumbling around like a rock polishing machine, or like when you were skipping a stone over water and it just kept skipping, skipping, skipping. She couldn't focus. She opened cupboard doors again. She tried the front door. The basement door. She looked out every single window – she even left one open.

Nothing happened.

She didn't know what to do.

Andee ran to the front door when she heard soft knocking, and ushered a very bewildered Delaney and Cillian inside.

“Sorry Andee, I was sleeping, Cillian came and got me —” Delaney said, looking stricken.

“It’s okay,” Andee said. She felt slightly calmer, with them both there.

Cillian gasped when he saw the girl sitting on the floor. “Is – That’s —”

“Yeah.” Andee gently pulled Lydia to her feet. Lydia stood, unresisting, shivering.

Cillian immediately shrugged his coat off and wrapped it around her. “Take her somewhere safe,” Andee said. “I have to look for Wynter.”

“Where’s Wynter?” Delaney questioned, looking frightened.

“She’s trapped.” Andee felt herself growing more tense, closer to snapping. “I don’t have time to explain, but I need to go get her.”

“On your own? Fuck that,” Cillian said, looking incredulously at Andee.

“Cillian, there’re – Things – after her, I don’t know if they’re coming back right now, and I don’t know how much time Wynter has and Lydia should go to a hospital or something —”

“I’m not leaving.”

“*FOR FUCKSAKE*,” Andee shrieked at him, “*TAKE HER TO THE CAR AT LEAST.*”

Delaney and Cillian gaped at her, alarmed.

“Okay,” Cillian said, with the air of someone clearly trying to calm an insane person. He looked pointedly at Delaney, and went to wait in his car with Lydia.

...

“Don’t look like that,” Wynter’s reflection mocked her. “Because of me, you will never have to *feel* again, you’ll never have to be...alone.” She smiled maliciously at Wynter.

“You’re only losing your body. Your soul will stay with me. It won’t have to wander, lost, like the ones who refused to join my cause, who preferred to suffer even after I had no more use for them...”

Wynter had been disintegrating, day by day, as something followed her like a storm cloud.

And now she was home.

There was no light at the end of the tunnel. There was only grey.

She would be swallowed, and forgotten.

*You don't deserve a happy ending.*

Wynter was tired of feeling, tired of existing. She imagined being a shadow, feeling nothing, needing nothing. Blissfully mindless.

It was ...

almost a relief.

“How...” Wynter couldn't finish the sentence. *How do I become one of you?*

“You don't have to do anything,” the voice whispered, “except surrender to me.”

All Wynter had wanted was to be happy. To be important, somehow. To be a version of herself she could be *proud* of. She didn't know how to be. She didn't know how to help anyone, not even herself. She wanted to. But she never would. She would never have close friends. She would never reconnect with her family. She would never feel...like she belonged.

It was over.

Wynter walked, haltingly, numbly, a couple steps forward.

But

*Don't give up.*

Wait

*Don't give up.*

“Come here.” The other Wynter beckoned her forwards. “Don't fight it.”

*Don't give up.*

Wynter looked at the extended hand – really looked at it. This other version of her – something was different. Something about her – something besides being Wynter's mirror reflection – wasn't human. Her hand, beckoning – she had too many fingers. The other Wynter grinned malevolently, with teeth that seemed too many; Wynter felt a dazed surprise that they weren't pointed.

Wynter's eyes, this close to the Thing, couldn't focus properly. The double looked as though she had some sort of photo filter on – she shimmered as if, when she moved, the filter wasn't quite keeping up. And when she moved, when she grinned, Wynter thought she could see something much more terrifying hidden behind the mask of the other Wynter's face,



lurking, waiting to burst free.

*This isn't me*, Wynter thought.

*It's not real.*

*It's not real.*

The ghosts had said it. Andee had screamed it as they ran through the tar.

*It's not real.*

*This.*

*Isn't.*

*Real.*

It was a trick. It wasn't normal. Her brain had been playing tricks on her – the Thing had been playing tricks on her.

This was not normal. This should not *be* normal.

*It will trick you.*

Wynter closed her eyes.

All she had wanted was to be happy. To be important, somehow. To be a version of herself she could be *proud* of. To be someone who could do things; who could *help* people. She didn't know how to be. She didn't know how to help.

But she *wanted* to.

If she survived, there was a fraction of a chance she might get to do those things. If she gave up now, there was absolutely no chance she ever would.

She would be consumed, become a literal shadow of herself, and years later someone else would go missing. And it would continue forever.

She couldn't become like the ghosts, forever young, forever frozen in time and place, their memories stagnant, stuck while everyone around them moved on, and away. Wynter couldn't become like the shadows, spreading more pain.

She needed to move.

Wynter opened her eyes. She looked the Thing in the face.

Wynter didn't feel strong, or smart, or capable. She might still die.

But she wasn't going to lie down for it. She wasn't going to let herself become just a

memory, a scrap of paper with a scribbled line. Not like this.

“You’re nothing, on your own,” the double jeered. “It’s best you disappear now, stop holding back everyone you’ve attached yourself to. They won’t miss you.”

Wynter responded, hoarsely, “That won’t work.”

The Thing looked at her, confused. Then its face cracked into a huge grin. “What do you mean by *that*?” it cackled.

Wynter said, “I’ve already been telling myself all those things, long before I ever met you.”

She pulled her pocketknife out, and slashed wildly at the Thing. The double screamed, clutching at its face, staggering back and clawing at its eyes.

Wynter turned and began to run into the darkness, in the direction she hoped the house had been.

...

Delaney peered out the window. “Cillian’s in the car with her. Doors locked. They’re safe,” they assured Andee.

Andee spun around to Delaney. “How the fuck are we going to get her out?!” Andee pulled at her hair, trying to think.

“What — ‘out’?!” Delaney spluttered. “What’s going *on*?”

There was a long pause where Andee couldn’t think of a way to answer, where both of them stood, frozen, in the middle of the empty living room, one trying to find a solution to a completely impossible situation and the other not really sure what was going on at all.

“Uh, did she have her phone on her?” Delaney asked helplessly.

“Our phones didn’t work in there.” Andee ignored Delaney’s bewildered look. With a jolt, Andee remembered that they had lost cell service when they got to — to the limbo place. But she’d been able to call Cillian. “Look for patches of no service,” she told Delaney, and turned away to begin scanning the house, holding her phone above her head.

“I really wish you’d tell me what was going on.” But Delaney, too, held their own phone out like a dousing rod, and started walking slowly around the house.

Andee’s heart pounded. She didn’t think it’d ever *stop* pounding. She was afraid to blink,

in case she missed the bars disappearing. “Help me! Please!” Andee whispered hoarsely, hoping one of the ghost kids heard her. Delaney glanced at her, confused again, but didn’t ask.

Andee just needed a hint, a suggestion.

...

Wynter was running and getting nowhere.

She’d had a fleeting thought that maybe this entire ordeal had been one extended, fever-induced nightmare, and that she was about to wake up and she would be back in her bed, gasping for air, terrified, but safe.

But she didn’t wake up this time.

She ran.

Her breath became more laboured. She was on the verge of collapsing. She felt dizzy. Wynter ran blindly into the grey nothingness, not knowing if she was headed in the right direction, not knowing if the ground would suddenly give way beneath her, not knowing if she had even covered any ground, because nothing changed.

Wynter had nothing but a phone with no cell service, and a small knife that she knew wouldn’t be enough. Her only chance was to outrun it.

But suddenly, she couldn’t breathe anymore – her lungs couldn’t handle this. She had to breathe. Gasping, Wynter stopped, and then she looked up. She thought the darkness, the fog, had retreated, and for a moment her heart leapt, thinking this meant she was almost out —

But the mist had parted to reveal she was surrounded again. Dark shades circled round her, staring motionless, faceless, no personality; no spark, but somehow reigniting a panicked urgency within Wynter to stay alive.

But, lungs heaving, Wynter knew it was over. She had tried, and it hadn’t worked.

She wasn’t going to outrun it.

She abruptly thought of all the things she would miss: the look of moonlight on sparkling snow, the smell of outside after rain, the feel of paper under a pen. Hilda, small and warm and comforting. Orla giggling conspiratorially. Andee smiling at her. The last time Miles had hugged her.

The crowd of shades parted, and the Thing walked up to her again. It was smiling, thinly, like its patience was running out. Its face bore no sign of a cut. But something flickered again. The filter, the fey-like glamour, waned.

Wynter clenched the open knife in her hoodie pocket.

As they stared each other down, the Thing's filter, all resemblance to Wynter, melted away completely. What remained was a colourless, grotesque face, with a mouth and nose that were slightly elongated, like a beak. Bristling, spiny teeth erupted from a wide, gaping mouth. The Thing's body was a terrible, clammy, sickly slate colour and it had too many arms – arms that ended in too many clawed fingers – long fingers that reached out to grasp Wynter —

As it lunged at her, Wynter planted her feet and thrust the knife up in front of her. Her final defense. It was literally all she could do, all she had left. She closed her eyes as the Thing connected with its target.

Then —

Wynter breathed out.

She wasn't dead.

Wynter stared into a blank, white, pupilless eye. The handle of her pocket-knife stuck out from it grotesquely. Thick and glossy, gunmetal-grey sludge oozed from the wound.

The Thing's entire being began to gurgle and bubble like the contents of a witch's cauldron.

Wynter held on to the knife.

The monster shrieked – a terrible sound that pierced Wynter's ears like an icepick.

Wynter held on.

Pieces of its body began to crumble, falling to the ground around the hilt of the knife, becoming hot ash that floated up to melt tiny holes into Wynter's sweater and singed the exposed skin of her hands.

Wynter gasped in pain, but held on.

A rushing wind whipped Wynter's hair, the howling winds drowning out the Thing's wailing as what was left of it swirled into a mass of grainy soot and flew away, away,

until Wynter was alone again.

No, not alone.

Not yet.

A part of the monster remained – the most broken part, the part that was all darkness and loss.

The shadows floated around Wynter, sinking to the ground like deflated balloons until they were at eye level. Even without faces they looked...so *unhappy*. Wynter reached out a hand for the one closest to her, suddenly disturbed *for* them.

The one she almost touched turned its featureless head towards her abruptly.

Then the flock of them took to the air – in a flurry of wind and the sound of feathers, they were gone.

\*

Andee and Delaney had moved the search to the backyard, and then had slowly ventured out into the greenbelt behind the fence. They picked their way around evergreens, sleeping deciduous trees, and bare branches of bushes poking up through the crusty snow and ice, scanning frantically for loss of service.

Then, Andee froze – did she hear shouting? “Shh!” she hissed. Delaney stopped moving immediately. Andee, motionless, strained to listen...but there was nothing but a dog barking, far away. Her shoulders sagged.

She turned to see one of the ghosts was standing, somewhat ominously, at the edge of the tree-line, staring at Andee, wringing her hands.

Delaney had seen her, too. They made a choking noise somewhere in Andee’s periphery.

“Can you help us? *Please?*” Andee begged.

The little girl stuttered, “I don’t k-know!” She sniffed. “I don’t know if it’s against...against the r-rules.” She flickered.

“*What rules?*” Andee asked in frustration. Andee saw, now, that the area had more than

one ghost lingering. Andee counted five of them here, that she could see. All of varying heights, slightly different ages. All staring with sad, sad eyes.

“How many of you are there?” Delaney whispered, stricken; so quiet Andee almost didn’t hear. Andee swallowed, her throat tight. Would Wynter be among them, next time?

“Can – can you try?” Andee asked the kids, desperately.

“Ok,” one of the boys said softly.

As one, they blipped out of sight.

“But we cannot promise,” his bodiless voice whispered in Andee’s ear.

“Thank you,” Andee said to the open air.

After a second of quiet, Andee went back to wandering around recklessly, haphazardly, mindless of tripping on a stone or sticks and wounding herself. Andee fought off a rising panic, one that made her mouth dry, and filled the back of her throat with bile. Wynter might be trapped forever. She might slowly starve to death. She might be injured. She might already be dead. The weight of Andee’s guilt, her inability to notice her friend falling behind, did its best to overpower her. Andee tried not to heed it.

*We’ll find a way in.*

They had to.

Delaney suddenly shouted: “Over here!”

...

*Alone.*

She was alone.

For real, this time.

As though the Thing hadn’t paid the electrical bill for this world, the light faded quickly, until it was again too dark to see her own hand in front of her face. Wynter wondered if the world was just going to...blip out, with her inside it. Wynter might not be cursed to be a shadow person, but she would still cease to exist.

Wynter let the knife fall. She sank to her knees, then curled up in a ball, her head in her hands, trying not to panic.

Maybe out there, Andee would be able to tell that the Thing was gone. Wynter closed her eyes, resigning herself to nothingness forever.

But ...

*I want to go back.*

*I want to try again.*

She uncurled herself from the ground, picked up the knife, and pushed herself, wearily, to her feet.

She needed help. She couldn't escape alone. Was anybody still out there? *Was* there a chance they were trying to get back to her?

"Hello?" She called uncertainly. Silence answered her.

Wynter whispered to herself, "I'm not fucking dying this way." Not after all this. Not after she finally had wanted to *live* again. "*I AM NOT DYING THIS WAY!*" she screamed into the void around her.

Wynter turned the light of her phone on, inspected the knife for gore – there was none – and flicked it closed again. She shone the light out around her – there was still nothing to see.

*What if nobody is looking for you?*

Wynter pushed that thought away. "Help," Wynter tried to shout, but it came out as a panicked murmur. The reedy sound was instantly swallowed by the nothingness.

*Even here, you're afraid to make noise.*

If she wanted to get out, she needed to be loud.

"HELP," she yelled; "*HELLO?*"

She began to wander, calling out into the emptiness every dozen steps. Occasionally turning her phone flashlight on, shining it all around like a beacon; the battery getting lower, and lower.

She still had no cell service, so it didn't matter, anyway. Wynter thought of when she would visit her grandmother, who lived hours out of town with no nearby cell towers, but occasionally you would walk through a pocket of service in the hay fields; just because of the way the mountains were arranged, or something, a signal could get through.

Wynter missed her grandmother, suddenly and fiercely. The last time she had visited, her

grandma had seen the look on her face, and asked her if she was okay. Wynter wished she had told her the truth.

And now she was gone.

Would she see her grandma when she died?

...

Andee's heart leapt and she crashed over to where Delaney stood, the phone held aloft in their hand.

"No bars," Delaney said, sounding tentatively optimistic. They were standing at the knee-high stump of a large tree, long since chopped down. It was so decomposed, Andee saw when she shone a light on it, that mushrooms and moss covered it. Strange, to see that in the wintertime.

It did not look beautiful and picturesque – it was rotted, abandoned; a tree slowly being broken down to become part of this tiny sliver of forest again. The forest reclaiming something a human had damaged. The ghost kid materialized beside it, and nodded frantically at Andee. She disappeared again.

So this was it.

But this wasn't a door.

Andee became overwhelmed with despair and crouched down, her head in her hands, phone fallen to the ground. "I don't know what to do," Andee gasped through unexpected tears.

"We can keep trying," Delaney said, holding out their hand to Andee. Andee took the offered hand and stood up, wiping her eyes with her sleeve.

Suddenly

Andee heard *something* —

"Hello...?"

"Help..."

"Where's that coming from?!" she whirled towards Delaney who, wild eyed, made it clear they had heard it, too.

"Wynter?" They both shouted, not caring if anyone in the neighbourhood heard them.



“WYNTER?!”

There! From a spot at the foot of the tree’s rotting trunk, Andee saw a light. A very, very faint glow, but it was there.

Without thinking, because thinking was not helping so far anyway, she threw herself to the ground and plunged her hand into the cold, rotting bark —

into nothingness —

And after a split second, someone grabbed on.

...

When you got lost in the woods, you were supposed to make yourself as visible as possible. You were also supposed to wait in one place. But Wynter decided the rules were likely different in supernatural cases where the landscape was magically constructed by an evil oily monster.

If she kept moving, she was *doing* something. If she sat still, there was no way to avoid a panic attack and spiral.

Numbly, Wynter had realized that the floor/ground/whatever it was, was collapsing as she walked away from it. In pixels, like crumbs, like sand in an hourglass, the ground was falling away.

She was running out of time. The world was disintegrating. But at least it was slow. And at least she knew she wouldn’t be stuck here forever.

But she didn’t know where *not here* would take her.

So she kept walking.

Wynter was filthy, she was chilled; she was exhausted, her mind rubbed raw. She had seen things she didn’t dare believe were real, had faced a monster she could only imagine mere minutes ago. Or had it been hours? Her feet hurt. Her chest was tight. She struggled to breathe, as much because of the mental strain as the physical toll tonight had taken on her.

But she didn’t stop walking.

On a loop, she thought of Hilda, of Miles, of Andee, her cousins, her parents, Hazel, her grandma – everyone she would miss, or who she already missed.

“HELLO?” she cried out. “HELP!”

Over and over.

Her voice began to go hoarse. “HELP!” She half yelled, half croaked.

“...*Wynter?*...”

Wynter stopped dead.

Had that been in her head?

Her heart pounded.

“Hello?” She called again, shakily.

“*WYNTER?*”

It

was

*real.*

Wynter half ran towards the voice – she wanted to sprint but she willed herself to be careful, in case the floor was falling apart somewhere ahead of her, too. The voice was coming from above her. She shone her light at the ceiling/sky.

As she stared, a hand appeared; a human hand protruding out of grey nothing.

Wynter hesitated for a millisecond, wondering if this was some final trick. But she *felt* like it was real.

She decided to believe in it.

Wynter took the offered hand, and held on as tight as she could. The hand clasped hers, and pulled Wynter up towards the grey sky.

She felt herself move through something; she was overcome by the smell of dirt, and rotting bark, and the tinny, sharp scent of ice as someone held her hand and another person grabbed the back of her jacket and pulled her out. She felt debris stuck in her hair, felt the sudden cold of the outdoors.

A tree stump behind her crumbled, flattening, smoothing out as if it had never existed.

The three of them scrambled away from the trunk, for a moment terrified it might suck them in with it.

Then, Andee and Delaney threw their arms around Wynter.

Despite the shock, Wynter felt a warm feeling bubbling up inside of her; a comforting sense of security she last remembered feeling when she and Miles had been small, laying on the floor together, her parents on the couch, not watching tv or anything but listening to music. Just existing.

Delaney extracted themselves from the hug and ran to the house, excitedly saying something about telling Cillian that Wynter was safe.

Reluctantly, Wynter pulled away from Andee, guilt twisting her insides and souring the enormous relief she felt. She was glad it was dark. A terrible feeling had returned, slamming into her like a truck. The things Dewey had said, fighting with the fact that she had *seen* it disintegrate...

*What if it comes back?*

*It'll be your fault if it comes back.*

But as Andee pulled Wynter to her feet, then a hug, Wynter stamped the feeling down. She didn't want to ruin this moment.

"Is it gone?" Andee asked.

"Yeah." *Maybe.*

Andee held her in a hug a moment longer before stepping back, then grabbed Wynter's hand to lead her back to the house, to where Delaney and Cillian waited anxiously, Cillian with his arm around Lydia.

Snow began to fall.

...

Cillian pulled into Delaney's driveway, and killed the engine.

They'd just returned from sitting with Lydia at the ER. They didn't know where else to take her. Delaney had finally coaxed a phone number from her as they sat on the hard plastic chairs, and had called Lydia's parents to meet them in the waiting room.

Now, sitting in the backseat of Cillian's car, Wynter thought about the look of panicked relief on the faces of Lydia's parents as they burst into the ER waiting room; how they sprinted to Lydia as soon as they saw her; how Lydia had waved goodbye to Wynter and the others through a gap in their embrace, smiling and sobbing at the same time.

*Would your own family do that for you?*

"I'm not gonna to piss around," Cillian said grimly. "How did you know to go to that house?"

"Nightmares," Andee said bluntly.

Delaney, looking sullen, unbuckled their seatbelt and turned around to look at her from the front passenger seat. "Did they have Lydia in them, too?" Wynter could see Cillian's knuckles turning white as he gripped the steering wheel.

Andee looked back and forth between Cillian and Delaney. Delaney looked at Cillian. Cillian looked at Delaney. Delaney looked at Andee. Cillian looked at Andee. Andee looked back at them. Wynter felt like she was missing something.

"I was having nightmares, too," Delaney admitted.

"Me too," Cillian breathed, sounding relieved.

"Were – were you feeling terrible, too? Like, sad? And like nothing would ever be okay again?" Andee stared at them accusingly.

"Yeah," Cillian replied morosely. Delaney nodded.

"But every time I wanted to talk about what's been bothering me, neither of you wanted to listen," Andee started, her voice beginning to rise.

"I went after you and you refused to talk to me!" Cillian argued, twisting around to look at her.

"You told me we couldn't do anything about Lydia!"

"I didn't think we *could*!"

"It doesn't matter!" Delaney interjected loudly. Andee sat back in her seat, arms crossed. "Just, we need to talk about these things next time, okay?" They looked around at everyone, as if daring them to argue.

*"Next time?!"*

"Jesus, Andee, you know what I mean!" Delaney's voice was sharp. "Okay?"

"Okay," Andee said.

"Okay," Cillian echoed.

Then Delaney leaned over the back of their seat, looking right at Wynter. "That goes for

you, too.”

A warmth bloomed in Wynter’s chest, and she managed a faint smile. “Okay,” she agreed.

“I feel...” Andee began, in a much softer tone. She breathed in deeply. “Lighter.” She sighed. “I feel...ok.”

“Me too,” Delaney exhaled, as Cillian laughed shakily in agreement.

“What a night,” he said.

\*

Andee woke up late the next morning on Delaney’s couch. Cillian and Delaney were on the floor, still asleep. Delaney, who had insisted Wynter take their bed, was curled up so deep in their sleeping bag that Andee couldn’t see them at all.

Andee felt so ... *relieved*.

Despite everything that had happened last night, despite waiting in the ER for hours, despite getting much less than eight hours of sleep, Andee felt, for the first time in weeks, like she had slept properly. She’d woken woke up naturally – there was no need to drag herself, kicking and screaming, into wakefulness. Andee had had zero nightmares. She felt like she had just kicked the flu, or a bad fever.

Warm and safe on the couch, Andee felt like the weight of the world had lifted from her. Like she had told the others last night, she already felt *lighter*, freer; the dread was lifting, sloughing off of her like ice from a melting rooftop.

A tiny spark had reignited in her chest, and was blooming, warming her.

*Everything is okay.*

She breathed deeply.

*Everything*

*is*

*ok.*

She actually teared up with relief as she laid in bed, listening to the peaceful, familiar

sounds of Delaney's house.

Andee missed her own family, fiercely – she couldn't wait to go home.

...

As soon as she opened her eyes, Wynter knew something terrible was going to happen.

She sighed dejectedly, softly.

Wynter had no idea what time it was. She lay awake, still tired but not sure she'd be able to fall back asleep, mulling over everything that had happened. Wynter had not told anyone about the double, about anything the Thing had said to her.

She felt ... lonely. But Wynter knew that she *wasn't* alone, here. Andee, Cillian, and Delaney were mere feet away. They had all talked for a long while before passing out, with Andee taking the lead and telling the bulk of what had happened with the Thing. No one had pressured Wynter to explain what had happened while she was trapped, and Wynter was relieved for it. Then Delaney lent Wynter and Andee some pajamas, and everyone had helped Wynter clean up her knee and put ointment on her hands. By the time Delaney insisted she take their own bed Wynter felt so horribly embarrassed and intensely grateful, she thought she might explode.

Delaney and Cillian had been having the nightmares, too, Wynter abruptly remembered. That meant even more people might've been. Miles, for instance.

*We could have had more people helping.*

She pulled the blanket over her head.

The Thing was gone. It had disintegrated. Wynter had seen it. Lydia was safe. They had all survived. Wynter hadn't even had any nightmares while she slept.

But why didn't she feel any better?

Part of her hoped that she would feel okay tomorrow.

Part of her was pretty sure she wouldn't.

*You're still you.*

Her chest ached. It wasn't a physical wound – it was something deep inside.

A tear slid across the bridge of her nose and onto the borrowed pillow.

She wanted to go home.

\*

Days passed.

Everything seemed back to ... normal.

Andee had made a new group chat for the five of them, so they could check in with each other – namely, so they could make sure Lydia continued to be okay – and Lydia had soon morphed into someone bright, cheerful, and bubbly. She was a far cry from the dull-eyed girl they had rescued, in the best way. Miles was back to his usual chipper self. The corridors at school were buzzing with chatter. Laughter broke out randomly in the hallways. Teachers cracked light-hearted jokes during class.

Before class on a random Wednesday, Wynter stood outside Eden's locker, listening quietly as Rhea, Eden, and Daisy chatted merrily about any number of things.

Wynter couldn't connect, couldn't compute with what they were talking about. Far away, but right next to her, Eden animatedly described something funny that had happened in class.

Now that she knew the mood had lifted for everyone *but* her, Wynter felt...

Devastated.

She had literally helped save a kid. Granted, her part was accidental. She wasn't powerful, or particularly smart. But she had *saved* someone.

If that didn't fix her, what would?

What *could*?

Sitting with Andee, Delaney, and Cillian in the caf at lunch, Wynter ate her tasteless leftovers inside her bubble of radio static, watching other students as if through a dreamlike haze. Everyone else was so happy – she didn't want to bring anyone down.

*It's not their fault you're like this.*

She was biting the inside of her cheek so much, her teeth had left permanent marks.

*If you keep feeling like this, it'll come back.*

*The Thing will come back, and it will be your fault.*

The bell rang.

Delaney and Cillian left for class. Andee hung back, catching Wynter alone as she was heading back to her locker.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“How’re things?”

Wynter composed her reply, bit her cheek. “All good.”

Andee looked Wynter in the eyes. “Are you okay?”

Shocked and feeling responsible for the look of concern on Andee's face, Wynter's eyes filled with tears. Mortified, Wynter fought them down, but they welled up anyway.

Reluctantly, she shook her head sadly, and stared at her feet.

The bell rang again – class had started. But Andee didn't leave.

“Can I help?” Andee asked gently.

A warm feeling of gratitude swelled in Wynter's chest. “I...I don't know. I don't think so,” she choked out. “But...I really appreciate you asking.” Wynter wiped aggressively at her eyes.

“D’you want to go somewhere and talk?”

Wynter struggled to answer. Finally, she forced out, “Um, okay,” in a whisper.

They snuck out and walked away from the school grounds together.

The snow had stuck around, this time. It was nice to see front yards covered in a fresh blanket of clean snow.

Wynter felt awkward, but tried to just focus on breathing. The terrible, sick feeling was growing, and growing, and growing.

*It never goes away. It always comes back.*

*You're going to make it come back.*

“Where d’you wanna go?” Andee asked after they were out of sight of the school.

“I think this was all my fault,” Wynter blurted out, in a near whisper. She was afraid, so afraid, that Andee would hate her for this, that she was sharing too much, but she knew she



had to say it. She couldn't go her whole life without saying it. She couldn't pretend; couldn't hold it inside.

Andee looked at her. "What d'you mean?" Andee asked, but not in a way that was judgmental or accusatory.

"I'm so miserable all the time – I think I attracted the Thing here. I think I drew it here in the first place. This never would have happened if I wasn't such a loser, and if I still feel bad – and I do – I – I might bring it back..." Mortified, Wynter wiped at the tears pouring from her eyes.

*Always crying.*

To her surprise, her relief, Andee was shaking her head. "No," she said, "there's no way this was your fault. It was lying to you."

"But —" Wynter didn't know how to believe that. "But I'm always so sad, even before Lydia went missing, and no matter how many good things happen I can't stop it, I can't control it —"

"Exactly," Andee said firmly. "You can't control it. We've all felt so miserable for the last while – and we couldn't control it. All of this was a fucking game for that monster; *it* made us feel terrible things. We couldn't just turn them off and on."

Wynter gazed back at her, unconvinced.

"Also," Andee continued, "I don't think you've been around *nearly* long enough to be responsible for all of the ghosts we saw there."

Oh. She hadn't really thought of that. Wynter said softly, "Okay."

"And you *beat it*. You *saved* all of us."

"I didn't know what I was doing —"

"That doesn't matter," Andee interrupted. "Dewey said something about how it comes back – that means you couldn't stop it. None of us could. But you saved a kid. And if Dewey's right, and it comes back, you beat it once – you can beat it again."

Wynter struggled to process Andee's words. She wanted to say, "thank you," but instead she stared off into the distance, unable to shape her thoughts, her relief, her worry, her timid hope, her fear, her gratitude, into words.

Andee smiled reassuringly, and motioned for Wynter to keep walking with her. “So...” Andee said after a few steps, “you still feel...um, bad?”

Again, the words Wynter needed felt stuck on her tongue, like they didn’t want to come out. “Everyone has been saying they feel better...” Wynter finally managed. She inhaled shakily. “But I don’t.”

Andee said reassuringly, “Maybe it just needs more time to wear off? You faced it way more directly than any of us did —”

Wynter had been afraid she would say that. “No,” she said, with a dejected, wan sort of smile. “No, I think this is just how I am.”

“How you are?”

“Yeah like...like I’m just a sad person,” Wynter said stupidly. “I’ve been like this forever.”

Their feet crunched in the snow on the sidewalk, which hadn’t been cleared yet after a fresh dusting of snow overnight.

“Something you said, when we were looking for Lydia...” Andee sounded hesitant. “Have you...have you ever thought you might have ... depression?”

Wynter’s breath caught. Seeing her expression, Andee followed up quickly, “I mean that maybe your brain doesn’t make as much serotonin or something as it should. Like, like how people with diabetes, their bodies don’t make enough insulin? I am not describing it very well – I don’t even know if that’s how it works, I’m not a doctor ...” She bit her lip anxiously. She looked concerned, like maybe she thought that Wynter might be offended.

Wynter was not offended. She just didn’t know what to say. “I don’t ... I honestly don’t know.”

What did it mean if her problem wasn’t that she was an imperfect person, and she just needed help? What did it mean if how she was feeling wasn’t normal, and there was actually a chance she *could* feel better?

*What if feeling this way isn’t your fault?*

“I think...” Wynter hesitated. Glancing nervously at Andee, she said “I think I need counselling.” She choked out a laugh. “To start.”

“To be honest,” Andee replied, “we all need fuckin’ therapy after this week.” They giggled together, somewhat nervously. “But I know what you mean.” Andee looked at Wynter, saying earnestly, “I think that’s a great start.”

Wynter had not been to the graveyard since Lydia had come back.

She and Andee waited until dark, but went early enough that the gates wouldn’t be closed yet.

They walked up and down the neat, flagstone aisles, Wynter trying to remember where she’d seen the boy in the grey sweater.

He wasn’t there, and then suddenly, he was.

As Wynter and Andee approached, he was looking at a headstone, his head bowed, arms at his sides.

*Gideon “Dewey” Scott*

*1993 - 2009*

*Beloved son and brother.*

*Too young.*

The tiny dash between dates encompassed a life that was cut much too short. Wynter would never ask Dewey how he died. But she had an idea of what had happened.

“Hi,” Wynter said.

“Hi.”

“Thank you, Dewey,” Andee said. “And ... everyone else. For helping as much as you could.”

“I couldn’t do much,” Dewey said mournfully.

“It was enough,” Wynter assured him. “Thank you.”

“It never goes away,” he murmured. “It always comes back.”

“How do you know?” Andee asked him gently.

“It’s gone, Dewey,” Wynter said softly. “It ... I think it died.” But she remembered the

shadows; they hadn't disintegrated with it.

Dewey shook his head sadly, or Wynter thought he did – he flickered at that moment, so much that she couldn't be sure. "It mi...might come back anyway," he said mournfully.

"It's...happened before."

"Then we'll fight it again," Andee said stoically. Wynter felt a rush of gratitude for her.

"I wish...I wish I could go home." Dewey whispered mournfully, his voice like rustling leaves.

"I know," Wynter whispered back. "I'm so sorry, Dewey." Wynter's "sorry" carried more weight than she could possibly explain. "I'm sorry," Andee echoed quietly.

Wynter mourned for this boy who would be forever sixteen. Who had been in so much pain, and felt so lost, that he couldn't see anywhere else to go. Whose story was now finished, compiled into a couple of small paragraphs on a website of obituaries.

"I have to go." His voice was soft, so soft Wynter almost mistook it for a couple of crows swooping low overhead.

And then, he was gone.

They stood there a long time, but Dewey never re-materialized.

Wynter knew they would never know more about him.

Snow began to fall again.

As they left the graveyard together, Andee suddenly stopped walking. Wynter looked back at her.

"I don't think it's a bad thing to be sad," Andee said, suddenly and fiercely. "Things are fucked up." She stared out into the distance, thinking. Then she looked back at Wynter, saying, "It's stupid to promise everything will be okay. But maybe ... maybe it can? One day." Andee looked at her intently. "And you can talk to me about it. Anytime."

Wynter smiled, her eyes filling with tears again. Grateful tears, this time; hesitantly hopeful.

*It can be okay.*

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