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INSPIRATIONS FOR *AWAKE*:
EXPRESSIONS OF TRAUMA THROUGH FICTION AND
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC LITERATURE

by

SOPHIA ALMA RODRIGUEZ

A master's capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,
The City University of New York

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Autoethnographic Literature

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal
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ABSTRACT

Inspirations for *Awake*: Expressions of Trauma Through Fiction and
Autoethnographic Literature

by

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Advisor: Jean Halley

Awake is a novella based on true events in my own life. This capstone project addresses my own experiences with intimate partner violence. While it is inspired by my life, I chose to write a fictional narrative rather than a strictly biographical piece of nonfiction. Instead, this novella illustrates a few of the traumas that I went through from within the lens of a fictional narrative. This enabled me to tell about my experiences by crafting my memories into a story, without the pressure of submitting an accounting of them. Writing *Awake* has been helpful to me in that it led me to confront several of the issues that I have come up against while struggling to process these experiences and the way that they have affected me. I created this novella to share my story, both as part of the healing process for myself, and as part of my desire to connect with my community.

This project has been inspired by many texts that I have read during my classes in the CUNY MALS program, both in and out of the classroom. By reading these works, I was able to see how one can share their voice, receive validation, and contribute to our cultural conversations by telling their story. A few of these works include *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *Bag of Bones* by

Stephen King, and *The Parallel Lives of Women and Cows: Meat Markets* by Jean Halley. I noticed connections between fiction, autoethnography, and the ways in which we tell about trauma. Fiction provides the unique opportunity to explore trauma with creativity, whereas autoethnography welcomes experimental writing but stays true to realistic description and often engages with the theoretical frameworks that inform their context. Each of these methods of writing were inspiring to me and contributed to the vision for this novella.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

White Paper.....1
Works Cited.....22
Capstone Project.....24

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Inspirations for *Awake*: Expressions of Trauma Through Fiction and Autoethnographic Literature

Awake is a novella based on true events in my own life. This capstone project addresses my own experiences with intimate partner violence. While it is inspired by my life, I chose to write a fictional narrative rather than a strictly biographical piece of nonfiction. Instead, this novella illustrates a few of the traumas that I went through from within the lens of a fictional narrative. There are two main reasons for this. One is that I have always been drawn to fiction and wanted to write my own novels. The second reason is because this allows me to create a distance from these events, which are sensitive for me. This enabled me to tell about my experiences by crafting my memories into a story, without the pressure of submitting an accounting of them. In order to preserve my privacy, names, dates, and places have also been altered from their real-life counterparts.

Writing *Awake* has led me to confront several of the issues that I have come up against while struggling to process experiences that I have been through. It has been difficult to open up to people because of the fear of ridicule, or rejection. Focusing on this topic has also shown me how trauma's effects can last a very long time, as I notice how this still affects me today. The process of writing has been very helpful in confronting these experiences and the way that they have affected me. I wanted to write *Awake* to share my story, both as part of the healing process

for myself, and as part of my desire to connect with my community.

This project has been inspired by many texts that I have read during my classes in the CUNY MALS program, particularly from my first women's studies course. By reading these works, I was able to see how one can share their voice, receive validation, and contribute to our cultural conversations by telling their story. I noticed connections between fiction, autoethnography, and the ways in which we tell about trauma. Fiction provides the unique opportunity to explore trauma with creativity, such as in the haunting novels *Beloved* and *Bag of Bones*. Autoethnography welcomes experimental writing, but it stays more true to the realm of realistic description, and often actively engages with the theoretical frameworks that inform their context. Each of these methods of writing were inspiring to me and I incorporated both by writing a novella that is based on my experiences.

While there are differences between the novella and the way things played out in my own life, it bears a striking resemblance to the true story. The characters have been injected with aspects of my own personality and those of others who played a role in my life at the time. For this reason, it is a realistic work of fiction and the examples that it presents are an authentic contribution to trauma literature and analysis. The narrative of *Awake* follows a relationship that is similar to the one that I was involved in, and it depicts some of the experiences that I had through Emily and Victor's relationship in the novella. I explore the events themselves, as well as how they had an impact on my perspectives and my emotions.

Awake also describes the dynamic of an abusive, romantic relationship. It illuminates contributing factors that lead to the negative state of existence that I was trapped in – and that many others face. Intimate partner violence is a complex social issue and it is sometimes mistakenly portrayed as a victim's fault. Could they have done something differently to avoid the

situation? Could they have exited the relationship earlier on, to protect themselves from this behavior? Why didn't they reach out for help? The demands that others place on a victim can be very stressful, as I have learned.

As Dr. Laurence Kirmayer, social and transcultural psychiatrist, writes: "...cultural models influence what is viewed as salient...and, most important for long-term memories that serve autobiographical functions, what is socially possible to speak of and what must remain hidden and unacknowledged" (27). This describes the pressure that is sometimes placed on the victim of a traumatic experience by the social and cultural environment that they are in. If one feels that it is not considered socially acceptable to share their concerns, this can be damaging to how they process these events, or memories. Without approval from one's community, it is hard to feel validated, and it can deepen feelings of low self-esteem and rejection that someone may already be going through after suffering from abuse.

This is an effect that I felt when trying to engage with my feelings and my wishes to communicate about my traumatic experiences. There were times that I attempted to share about what I had gone through but was met with resistance from my audience. Some people wanted to reject my assertions, to find an alternate explanation, or a reasonable excuse. This can often be the case, or it may even be possible that someone will not want to discuss the topic altogether and they will not allow for the conversation at all. I have known people who were unable to bring up issues of domestic abuse within their family because those kinds of things were not discussed as a matter of practice. Sometimes people may use particular effort to try to rationalize a person's behavior because they know the assaulter and don't want that relationship to be affected. They may hold the individual in high esteem and be unwilling to take them down from the pedestal they occupy in their mind. The tragedy of facing the truth may be too repulsive to

them to accept.

Unfortunately, victims can become trapped in this cultural attempt to hide trauma as well. The devotion that Emily feels for Victor in *Awake* in spite of his repeated, aggressive behavior is not uncommon in this kind of a relationship. Her insecurity, too, is a trait that can often keep people from asking for help. Perhaps she does not want to cause a fuss. Perhaps she is embarrassed. Perhaps she is worried that she will lose him if the facts are out in the open air because the external judgment will be so harsh that they must be separated. Believe it or not, this is a fear that may cross someone's mind. It is clear from Emily's inner voice that she is trying to find a way to handle the situation and keep Victor in her life, despite his abuse. Eventually she finds this untenable, but this is her goal for much of the relationship when it is ongoing. At great cost to her own self-esteem, she strives to keep it together for the sake of their relationship, which she believes to be of value.

Trauma is not just an event itself but rather it is comprised of its aftershock, the ongoing and far-reaching waves of its impact. In the introduction to *The Parallel Lives of Women and Cows: Meat Markets*, Jean Halley describes trauma as that which "ripples off of violent experience like the tiny cracks in glass that surround the small hole made by a bullet" (5). This analogy is apt in describing the deep and lasting effects of a traumatic incident on a person's life. This concept resonates with me as someone who continues to have reminders that bring me back to the fear with which I associate this trauma, years after it occurred.

I recall seeing someone riding a bicycle on the street yesterday who slightly resembled the person who is represented by Victor in my novella. They were pulling up to a stoplight adjacent to my cab as it drove by. In the moments that he was within view of my passenger-side window, I quickly perceived the similarities in appearance that he held with this person. I took an

almost unconscious, automatic survey of his face and body, their positioning. When I noticed these similarities I felt a fear rise up inside of me, was it him? The reflex is so fast that there isn't even time to identify it as it occurs, only to feel it. This happens to me every so often, for the last several years.

Within seconds, I could then tell that it was not him there, several yards away from where I sat in the car. The cyclist was only an anonymous stranger, who moved on quickly. One may wonder, why did I feel this fear? It is unlikely that it would have been him. That I would cross paths with him, so unexpectedly, so serendipitously. Yet, it is within the realm of possibility. We live in the same city, as far as I know. And in the past I had run into him a few times, although I frequented areas where I thought this might happen less often, as a result. But even if it was him, what danger would that pose to me? The person could not see me. We did not make eye contact, he was not aware of my existence. I was in a moving car, going down a different street just passing by the intersection. And nonetheless, to think that I was looking at him made me scared. This anecdote is an example of the ways in which we remain haunted by the trauma of events that happened, such as in this relationship that I share in *Awake*. They exist outside of the moment in which they occurred. They exist in feelings, in memories, in dreams, and in the faces of strangers.

This project serves a dual purpose as a contribution to literature regarding traumatic experience and as a method of processing and healing for myself, the author. Research has shown that disclosing traumatic experiences through writing can have a positive effect on one's health, both physically and mentally. The stress of carrying these unresolved conflicts in our subconscious has a detrimental effect on our lives if left unaddressed (Pennebaker). Writing about trauma provides the opportunity to tell your story. The ability to speak about a traumatic

event is key to addressing this conflict. It can help bring about justice in some cases, and it can help the individual heal so that they can move on in a healthy way.

Dori Laub posits, “There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life” (77). During the period of time that I experienced this intimate partner violence, I found myself unable to share what was happening to me with anyone. Afterward, I tried to talk to a few close people about what I went through, which was immeasurably helpful but also very difficult. Now, years later, I still feel as though I have not sufficiently told my story, or moved on from it.

Writing *Awake* has been an opportunity for me to grow and move forward by disclosing some of these experiences through writing a story based on these real events. My studies in the Master of Liberal Studies program at the Graduate Center inspired this project in many ways. In several of my classes, I found the opportunity to explore the ways in which I connect with the world. I examined my experiences and those of others, and thought about how we catalog and share them with one another. This is how we grow to learn, deepen our comprehension and widen our perspectives. I valued connecting with classmates and learning from each other’s experiences and opinions.

In particular, “Contemporary Feminist Theories” with Professor Jean Halley introduced me to several topics that influenced my thought process overall, and in turn led to this project as well. Texts and discussions in the class showed me, for the first time, a community that upheld the validation of a strong female voice who had gone through extensive trauma and was able to speak on it- so that we could learn from it, offer compassion to others, and offer it to ourselves, for our own experiences with violence or discrimination. Throughout my studies at the Graduate

Center I read novels within, and inspired by, my classes which relate to this topic, but this class was the first.

Several readings from our syllabus inspired me because they strongly elevated the voices of women who had suffered through a great deal of trauma in their lives. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is the autobiographical narrative of Harriet Jacobs as Linda Brent. It charts her path as a woman in the American South who is enslaved and struggles to get away from the sadistic family keeping her captive, and from the whole side of the country that enabled her suffering. Her persistence to escape and stay hidden for years to make her way North and share her story is incredibly inspiring.

I Am Not a Slut: Slut Shaming in the Age of the Internet by Leora Tannenbaum is an assessment of modern struggles that women face in America. Moving anecdotes expose the all too common issues of misogyny, microaggression, and assault. A great part of why these issues are both pervasive and persistent is because the society where these crimes are perpetrated often ignores women's voices. For this reason, each of these texts are an important part of working against these issues. They share women's stories and voices to us, to raise awareness and confront these issues head-on and in the public sphere. This powerful text drove me to consider the impact that sharing my own story might have, and it made me believe in the value of my own voice, too, which was essential.

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison is a novel that focuses on the struggles of an 11-year-old girl growing up in a home and a town that is abusive of her, in post-depression era Ohio. The tracing of this girl's psyche from experience to experience in her life where she deals with trauma is a painful story that forces us to see what it can be like for a young, black woman in America. After reading this novel, I was eager to read another written by Toni Morrison,

Beloved. In this tale, Morrison expresses trauma in a markedly different way, and it is extremely powerful. Being within the grounds of literature, she made use of her license for creativity.

Beloved is a departure from *The Bluest Eye* in its very explicit supernatural events in the protagonists' house and among its inhabitants. The trauma that the story is centered around takes the form of a ghostly entity who portrays a character who was murdered in the protagonist's past.

Bag of Bones, by Stephen King, is another powerful novel which I read around the same time, in connection with classwork for a different topic. I connected it to *Beloved* in my mind due to their shared premise of a trauma which was depicted in a fictional setting with supernatural aspects. These two novels exemplify how fiction writing can provide a unique opportunity for the expression of traumatic experience. The ability to use creative devices allows the author to release a traumatic incident in an ingenious way, in this case through the manifestation of ghosts who seek retribution for their suffering. This drew me to ponder the method of using fictional literature to relay a traumatic narrative, which would be useful for my own story.

I came across *Bag of Bones* while taking a course titled "Biography: Forms of Life Writing" with Professor Brenda Wineapple. Having always been interesting in writing and reading on a broad scale, I was drawn to taking a class on the varieties within biographical writing. I was exposed to both traditional and experimental variations, such as biographical works in the style of a narrative, almost akin to historical fiction. An example of this is *Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations* by Simon Schama. Through two separate stories, Schama retells the deaths of two historical figures in a unique narrative style, and he received praise for this work of "historical imagination" (Penguin Random House). I was intrigued by this kind of storytelling, and how I might incorporate it into the idea of writing about my own life

someday.

The final assignment in the course was to write a biographical piece on a subject of our choice. For me, this was author Stephen King. I am an avid Stephen King fan, and this was an opportunity to learn about the author as an individual, to see how that added to the context of his stories and their common themes. I asked the professor if we could try an experimental writing style in the final paper to which she agreed, and this was a way to test out and grow my own skills as an author as well.

During this assignment I learned exactly how prolific this renowned American horror fiction writer is. King has been writing for nearly five decades and counting. In that time he has published over 60 novels, 200 short stories, fueled 62 movie adaptations, as well as 26 TV series and TV movies. *On Writing*, a mixture of autobiography and writing instruction for the fellow aspiring author written by King, was perhaps the most useful source in this assignment. It revealed much about the man who created all of this mystery, and how this legacy came to be.

I was a bit surprised to find that he was a rather relatable, and humble person. King struggled to make ends meet throughout his early life and now at the height of success, he maintains a relatively simple lifestyle. There are also no serial killers in his family tree, no myths of vampires in his lineage, or haunted stories in his past. I discovered that Stephen King is a person, a husband, a dad, a son, a brother, and a community member. His magic comes from his imagination, his passion for writing, and for sharing his stories. He looks at what he finds in the depths of his mind and lets his ideas come up to the surface from the dark. He doesn't have a secret darkness, he merely possesses a nature and talent to observe and craft a story from the secrets and the fears that surround all of us.

Like a moth to light, a human wants to hear a story about the dark. King's appeal is in

how he draws the reader in, to listen to what he has found. We are intrigued. And he staunchly opposes the idea that the horror genre is inferior. It uniquely appeals to him, triggering his imagination, his curiosity, and it leads to the production of exhilarating stories. In the introduction to a collection of short stories, King describes his writing process:

What catches in my filter may run right through yours. What catches in yours may pass through mine, no sweat. All of seem to have a built-in obligation to sift through the sludge that gets caught in our respective mind-filters and what we find there usually develops into some sort of sideline. I have always felt impelled to write. So each day I sift the sludge anew, going through the cast-off bits and pieces of observation, of memory, or speculation, trying to make something out of the stuff that didn't go through the filter and down the drain into the subconscious (*Night Shift* xii - xiv).

For King, horror was that thing that did not slip through the filter in his mind. Massive amounts of information, experience, and stimulation went through the sieve of his brain. His senses felt it, passing it through and moving it onwards like a great digestive system. And what got caught stuck there in the nets were the seeds of his stories.

This is not unlike the way that trauma sticks to the edges of our brains. While other, more benign memories may fade away easily, lost in the ether of our minds, a traumatic incident gets stuck. It gets lodged in there, plugging up the pipes sometimes, sticking to certain things, creating an obstruction to future functioning. Memories of a traumatic experience are ones that merit longer study, evaluation, and consideration, before we can let them pass. We have to try to reduce their power to keep from causing a blockage in our psyches. Left untreated, these incidents can damage our internal structures. It will keep trying to come back up to the surface, in events that trigger us, in nightmares, in daydreams.

Many of King's protagonists suffer a great trauma which drives their character throughout their story. His very first novel, *Carrie*, is an example of this as she is bullied by her peers mercilessly when she has her first menstruation in public and is unaware of what is happening to her. She concurrently develops powers of telekinesis as she reaches this developmental stage of menarche, and she finds a way to use this to her advantage. Carrie's character had a root within reality, and within real trauma. She was inspired in part by people who had suffered from bullying whom King had known in his own life. In high school, he had known two women who had both been repeatedly bullied. They were harassed by their peers every day, receiving taunts on their appearance and their lack of money. Both of these girls had died by the time he was writing *Carrie*, at least one of apparent suicide (*On Writing* 78 - 82). At the time, King was only 26 years old. He empathized with Carrie's plight, despite the fact that he had not experienced this himself.

King was inspired with the idea for *Carrie* while working as a janitor at his former high school one summer, earning money for his tuition at the University of Maine. One day as he was cleaning out locker rooms, the fateful memory was made that would become his first successful horror novel. As he scrubbed rust off the walls of the girls' showers, he noticed that it was quite different than the boys' locker rooms. There were metal dispensers nailed to the walls, not nearly big enough to be paper towel machines. He asked his buddy who was working with him, an army veteran named Harry, what these dispensers were for. "Pussy plugs," Harry replied. "For them certain days of the month" (*On Writing* 75).

As King looked around, he noticed that the showers were different, too. Instead of open-faced stalls like the boys' locker room, these each had a metal bar with a pink shower curtain to draw shut for privacy. They were spared the embarrassment of showering in view of your

adolescent peers. But in the boys' locker rooms, this was simply a common area. This memory stayed with him, dormant for several years, resting quietly in the back of his mind until the time was right. He was ruminating on this a few years later, working at a laundromat to make ends meet while teaching now, when the full picture came together.

He started seeing it. A girl getting her period for the very first time, but she didn't know what it was. She was freaking out, she didn't know what to do. She was scared. She was in the showers, but there were no curtains and all her classmates could see her. And the cruelty of adolescent girls kicked in. Instead of helping her along, they chose to torture the poor girl mercilessly. They teased and taunted, the girls threw tampons and pads at her, chanting words she did not understand. "Plug it up! Plug it up!" (*On Writing* 76). Carrie cried and panicked, thinking she was gravely injured and being left to die by her peers. But she wasn't going to just take it, she was going to fight back. Carrie would find a way to get her vengeance and respond to their cruelty.

King had read an article about the possibility of telekinesis in young adolescents, particularly in women upon reaching their menarche. The story came rapidly into frame. He thought that it would at least make a good short story, and maybe he would make enough to fix up their car. He was married to his college sweetheart now, Tabitha, and they lived in a trailer with their two children. He nearly threw the story away, but Tabitha convinced him to continue until he was done and it was his first major success.

Carrie's trauma and the equipment of a supernatural power to work her wrath foreshadow the mechanisms that are later employed in King's novel *Bag of Bones*. Published 24 years later in his career, it features a ghost who haunts the town that caused her death in a relentless pursuit for revenge. This novel utilizes the same strategy of employing supernatural forces to express the

pain from a traumatic incident. These characters both exert their inhuman power to punish people for the violence and suffering that they inflicted on them. It is a twisted attempt at justice, where the balance has been tipped in their favor, at last.

In *Bag of Bones*, blues singer Sara Tidwell was part of a travelling circus that routinely passes through town. She was black, and the majority of the townspeople were white, and some of them did not make effort to hide their racism. She was disdained by several of the townspeople both due to her race, and her transitional status in their community. She also had a loud, boisterous attitude that sometimes rubbed people the wrong way. Her singing amplified the spectrum of her emotions and thrust them up onto the audience, who felt agitated by her confidence in the face of their scrutiny. On a day that Sara walked down a familiar path, deserted at that particular hour, she was horribly assaulted by a group of such men whom she knew, and openly despised her. Her son came across them and tried to call for help, but in the men's efforts to subdue the child they murdered him. Sara is murdered in the course of her assault, as well.

Unlike Carrie who wrought destruction in a short window of time after the climactic humiliation at her school prom, Sara's ghost fought for her revenge over the course of decades, from beyond the grave. She haunted and possessed their progeny for generations, and despite her efforts and the deaths that she brings to their families, she never feels satisfied. This literary device is an incredible depiction of the power that lies within such a horrible trauma as the one that Sara suffered. Her grief surpasses time as her ghost chases her assailants and their offspring over and over again, in an attempt to hold them accountable for what was done to her and her family.

This reflects the ability of fiction to release a traumatic incident in a novel way. As Kirmayer explains, "The traumatized protagonist in fiction brings into awareness the specificity

of individual trauma that is often connected to larger social factors and cultural values or ideologies” (155). While telling the story of Sara, King is able to bring a uniquely personal and dramatic account of a violent assault and the long-lasting effects of its aftermath on the victim and the town to the reader. This trauma is personalized through her story in a way that resonates more heavily than a statistic or a news bulletin might.

Beloved tells the story of Sethe, a woman who fled a life of slavery in the South, but is haunted in her new home by the violence from her past. She is plagued by the ghost of her murdered child. Its spirit lingers, accusingly, and lets the home's inhabitants know no rest. “*Beloved* is the eternal return of history, of what we thought we left behind for dead” (Kleine). Like Sara, *Beloved* seeks to bring her own murderer to justice. Although Sethe tried to repress what she had done, the spirit of her child knocked loudly at the door of her conscious mind – beating on it to be let back in. The ghosts of *Beloved* and *Bag of Bones* show a particularly appropriate analogy for the representation of trauma. The trauma has become an entity, capable of its own power even though the human is no longer there in the land of the living.

Trauma often holds on tight to people, resisting being let go the way that a ghost refuses to let go of Earth. Mythologically, a ghost is stuck on the corporeal plane when it has unresolved issues that anchor it there. This may be a murder, an unresolved dispute, an unattained goal. The impact of these past events lasts much longer than the brief moments in which they took place. In a way, trauma is the psychic imprint from an unresolved conflict similar to these ghosts. It haunts the victim, who struggles to overcome it. In ghost lore, it is necessary to determine what upset the ghost during their lives to try to help them obtain a sense of peace and resolution to this conflict so that they can move on, and pass through the veil to where they are meant to go. Similarly, we seek to release ourselves from the tight hold of our own traumatic memories by

attempting to go down to their roots, dig them out of the dirt and look at them in the cold, hard light of day so that we may face them head on, and hopefully lose their malevolent power.

Cathy Caruth states, “Psychic trauma involves intense personal suffering, but it also involves the recognition of realities that most of us have not begun to face” (vii). The ghosts of *Beloved* and Sara Tidwell manifested in order to try to bring their unresolved traumas to light. In *Bag of Bones* the town had not faced or acknowledged what happened to Sara, and in *Beloved* her mother had been unable to face what she had done. This repression sought its way out back up to the surface in the form of their ghosts. These two novels provided a clear vision to me of the ways that we can use literature as a tool to lay bare, for all to see and to analyze, the trauma of a tragic incident, in the way which we wish for it to be told.

I have been drawn to consider the effects of literature, and of my own contribution, in our cultural conversations about trauma. Fictional and nonfictional representations of traumatic experience can enable our society to analyze and learn from these stories by opening up awareness and discussion. Each of the texts that inspired me have value in this aspect which were part of the inspiration to writing *Awake*. The ability of fiction to be as descriptive, expressive, and creative as you wish when describing an experience is extremely beneficial to exploring and engaging with trauma.

Awake was also inspired by the autoethnographic style of storytelling, especially as it relates to trauma studies. During “Contemporary Feminist Theories,” I learned about autoethnography and it resonated with me. To share one’s own experiences and at the same time contribute to a wider subject awareness and cultural discussions is a very valuable endeavor. As scholar Norman Denzin describes it, “The subject matter of interpretive autoethnography is the life experiences and performances of a person” (1). Autoethnography drew me in to the sharing

and processing of trauma by reading or writing a personal account. This discipline within writing and qualitative research lends credibility and purpose to an exploration of the worst moments in our lives- and the ones we may need to develop an understanding of the most, as well. I was intrigued by autoethnography and the way it can be utilized to analyze personal trauma.

An interesting example is *The Parallel Lives of Women and Cows: Meat Markets* by Jean Halley. This work discusses the oppression of women and animals in America and includes personal stories from the author threaded in with these concurrent themes. The result is a strong and complex text that analyzes trauma and elevates the stories of these voiceless populations to the reader. It shares the values and interests of the other texts that inspired me, and of my own story. It embodies what I seek to explore and contribute to as an author and a scholar with this thesis capstone project.

In the realm of autoethnography, scholarship has been undertaken to consider what this method of writing achieves for the author. Playwright Sophie Tamas wonders if it is possible to delve deep enough into one's emotions to describe the experience of a traumatic personal event, and at the same time write about it in a scholarly, precise way. She raises the concern that sometimes when academics chart their own experiences in a contribution to qualitative research it is presented in a way that is cleaned up, compartmentalized, and ultimately, removed from the emotional aspect. Yet, the emotional aspect is integral to understanding and moving forward from these experiences, to which I agree.

The biographical interpretation of autoethnography has elements of experimental writing, but remains grounded in a realistic version of events. It has the power to be taken as an authentic addition to the discourse of trauma studies. These experiences were real, they happened, this is how they made me feel, here is the context. By treading my own path which lies in a middle

ground between autoethnography and fiction, I am able to avoid such concerns as Tamas raises. *Awake* provides a vehicle to share my own story and be involved with the emotional aspect of these experiences that I share. The novella is an homage to both genres, as it explores my own trauma in a hybrid combination of autoethnography and fiction. While it is inspired by my own life and remains realistic fiction, it is also a narrative, and can be put on the shelf with fiction in more sense than an autoethnography. This was ideal to me to preserve some distance from the writing and at the same time be able to engage with these experiences in an authentic way.

While writing *Awake*, I engaged with the emotional parts of my memory to portray my experiences. Perhaps this is enabled by the fact that this is in the form of a fictional narrative, as my intention was to be able to engage fully with these somewhat repressed memories, without feeling as though I am completely revealing myself to the reader, a daunting project. A traumatic memory is not the same as any other. It requires a different way to be processed, to be understood and to be retold. Having moved through these memories in my mind, reframing them in a new setting, and writing out their dialogues, I did feel my own knowledge deepen and perspective shift, about these old events. My theories on the real-life counterparts to these fictional characters, evolved and became more nuanced, grew larger.

Helene Cixous states "...the only book that is worth writing is the one we don't have the courage or strength to write. The book that hurts us...Writing is writing what you cannot know before you have written it...It's the book stronger than the author" (qtd. in Tamas). Tamas uses this quote to describe the ability to learn about one's life through writing, as she experiences with one of her own plays. Developing our understanding of events is empowering and necessary. Stephen King is no stranger to this phenomenon, having said of his own writing: "I was, after all, the guy who had written *The Shining* without even realizing (at least until that night) that I was

writing about myself' (*On Writing* 88). In this sense, this project has given me a greater sense of control over my own experience and has made me believe that I am headed in the right direction. Prior to writing *Awake*, I felt as though my suffering was not yet fully explored. It seemed like an untapped reservoir, kept in a subterranean chamber, where light could not reach it and show its contents fully to the viewer. While there is more to chip away, *Awake* started the gears of a machine within my own mind to conduct this work.

When I first ended this painful relationship, I immediately read a psychological thriller, entitled *You* by Caroline Kepnes. The novel was about a predatory man who staked out his hunt after a chance encounter with a woman who inspired him with a desire to possess her. His obsession clearly crossed well over the line into a concern for several issues with his mental health, that were wholly untreated. Combined with a propensity for violence and a lack of empathy, he was an image to me of the partner I had just left behind. To my few close friends at the time, I had a hard time verbalizing why I was drawn to such a novel. After such an experience, why on earth would I want to relive it?

I couldn't explain it then, but when I enrolled in the CUNY MALS program I had unknowingly put myself further on the path towards understanding this impulse. Nowhere near having these feelings sorted through yet as I started my classes, I took a lot from what I learned to help me better understand my own life. I was drawn to everything about female rights, female empowerment, the female voice, as well as to understanding the difficulties faced by black Americans. I was eager to learn, and to better understand myself and others who have suffered from trauma. Having been a graduate student in this program now for three years, I have learned enough to be able to explain such things far better.

It is similar to the way that we are drawn to a horror novel, like Stephen King's. We need

to know, and to understand, that which frightens us. It is a strong, human drive. Reading this novel that focused on a relationship with events and characters that I found similar to my own was an experience of learning, and catharsis. I could empathize with Becky, who was stalked. Who was taken unawares by a charming, handsome, intelligent man that wanted to possess her without regard for her needs. He either did not register or did not care about her independent consciousness, pain and pleasure. It didn't stand a chance against his own drives and needs.

As she was pursued, and attacked, I felt along with her character, and I could see the moves which came next. It hurt me the way that I had felt hurt during my life. And I wanted to see what would happen. How would her story turn out? There was a camaraderie for me with her character. We had similar problems. I didn't know who I could talk to about this and she was a fellow victim of intimate partner violence, albeit fictional. *You* provided an external validation that I needed to relate the experiences that I had just been through to something else in the world.

You helped me heal initially, by allowing me to process what I had just gone through a little bit. These were not topics of daily life. It is not easy to begin a conversation with someone about the time your boyfriend hit his head violently against the wall to extort you into doing something, or when he threw out your food before arriving at a friend's house to punish you for some small slight. It was hard to bring up these issues with close friends or family. Embarrassing to talk about, to admit to what was done to you. Would they think there was something wrong with you? Had you brought about this chaotic storm with your own flaws? I know now that this is not the case, but it has taken much time and convincing by myself, and others, to reach this understanding.

I often resisted sharing what had happened to me with friends and family. It was too terrible, too painful, too humiliating. For them to know what I had gone through would also be

incredibly painful to them, and I did not want to subject them to it. As Kirman describes of the trauma survivor, “They found themselves in what Langer calls a position of ‘moral quarantine’, their stories too corrosive to the moral order” (25). I often could not bring myself to share my pain, it seemed an unbearable burden to place on others by speaking about it. I attempted to tell parts of my story, instinctually knowing it was need for me to move on, to heal, but as time went on and I saw how it was hard for people to hear, I felt myself resist bringing it up again. There were so many stories to tell, to get rid of, and yet, it felt like dredging up something that is painful and embarrassing to have these conversations.

By reading about someone else’s, fictional trauma, my brain could unpack a little bit about the dramatic experiences that I had undergone. From the year and a half that I was in this abusive relationship. It could do this work secretly, behind the stage curtain that separates our consciousness from the unconscious thoughts. I needed this work to be done but had no idea how to go about starting to do it. My instincts brought me to something that would help me without even understanding why.

Could I possibly explain my story to a reader? *You* made me believe it was possible, my courses made me believe it was worthwhile, helpful, essential even. Art Markman presents a theory: “Psychologically traumatic events are ones that have no good explanation. You have painful facts with no story to bind them together.” He points to the struggle to reconcile the traumatic events that happened to us and claims that making a coherent story out of these insensible memories can help us to heal.

As Kirman theorizes, “Traumatic experience is not a story but a cascade of experiences, eruptions, crevasses, a sliding of tectonic plates that undergird the self” (14). It is a large project to unravel the way that these events have affected your perspectives and your self-image. As I

wrote *Awake*, I was forced to interrogate my memories. I realized that I indeed had fragments, much messier than I thought my recollection would be, despite the passage of time. There were nightmares with shifting shapes, moments and visions that stood out in stark contrast. Words that I would never forget, but others that were difficult to recall.

Reading and writing about events similar to the ones that I went through was helpful to begin processing the memories and the feelings from these experiences that disrupted my consciousness. Without knowing how or why at the time, reading *You* started the road for me and this project has taken me much farther along the path. This project has helped me, and will hopefully help others as well, to understand and to heal from such events in their lives and perhaps to empathize with others who have been through difficult experiences.

These narratives provide a powerful methodology in unearthing some of the most difficult secrets and finding the keys that we need to break free from the prison that can be constructed by our own memories. There is a cleansing power to telling, sharing, understanding, and exposing the facts and feelings from traumatic incidents. These events are ones which we often need to develop an understanding of the most.

This project has exceeded my goals to create a fictional piece that illustrates some of the traumatic experiences that I went through. It forced me to interrogate my memories to bring them to the surface and attempt to make sense of them, so that I could share my story. I hope to continue this project after this degree by creating a longer, full-length novel that represents some of these experiences. I also plan to write other novels, fueled by the completion of this project, to continue sharing the passion of human emotion and tell stories to the curious reader.

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Awake

By Sophia Alma Rodriguez

Emily laughed. Victor had always been funny, and lately she felt herself charmed in his presence. His grin was catching, and his enthusiasm was invigorating in a crowd where the common social exchange consisted of sharing complaints, and details of the endless mediocre.

Victor had a spark in his eyes, and there was most certainly a fire brimming underneath the surface of his smooth, mocha-colored skin. The tension in his body made it seem like he was ready to leap up and go on an adventure at any moment.

He did not seem bound to the earth in the same way that the trailing lines of people reporting to work, school, home, and running errands, were. Streaming through the halls, the streets, the subway platforms, like lines streaming from an anthill with singular purpose and blinders protecting them from any risk of spontaneity.

Right now they were sitting outside where the café burgeoned out into the street, brimming over its structural constraints for their outdoor seating area in the spring sunshine. A few of their friends were gathered, catching up on each other's office gossip, romance updates, and familial squabbles.

Emily and Victor's friendship went back to college, as did some of the others. But new friendships were among them too, collected from various outings, relationships, and mutual interests that cropped up in the past couple of years. Emily found herself wishing she were sitting a bit closer to Victor, she wanted his attention focused on her again, and wanted him to see the mirth he brought forth in her eyes.

She always felt a slight connection there, but for some reason or another she was unavailable the last couple of years, always dating someone who wasn't quite right, who didn't hold her attention strongly enough. She wanted to feel protected by her lover, not worried about her lover. And she needed their ambition to exceed the basic pit stops through life. They had to be pushing for an escape velocity like her, what are the boundaries of my existence here, how far can I go, how deeply can I stretch, how big can I create?

Friends began to drift away from the table, leaving their cash behind, and promising to send a text later and keep each other updated on their plans, their gossip, or their clothes. Soon it

was just Emily, Victor, and Jacob left at the table, with coffee-stained saucers littered across its surface, crumpled bills, and torn sugar packets balanced precariously on their little dessert plates.

“Let’s go to the park,” Jacob said. “We can hang out by the river.”

Emily nodded, “Sure. I like the water.”

“I’ll go roll a joint,” Victor directed. “Hold down the fort.” Jacob and Emily remained settled in their seats across from one another at the table, signing their receipts and pushing aside their mugs that only held remnants of coffee grinds now.

“So, you and Victor?” Jacob ventured. A shy smile danced across Emily’s face.

“I don’t know,” she flustered. “Uh, maybe....” she laughed lightly.

“We shall see...” he joined her laughter, teasing his friend.

Victor sauntered back to the table, “Let’s dip,” he instructed. Grabbing bags and cellphones, the trio extricated themselves from the table and set out of the restaurant, along the sidewalk towards the water.

They talked gaily as they walked, Victor pointing out graffiti tags he’d taken note of in other areas, sharing his findings with the other two. Emily took the occasional photo: a squirrel paused mid-air as it sniffed and whisked its tail atop the pillar of a stoop, a vine

that she spotted creeping its way through black wrought-iron gates in front of crumbly brownstones along their walk.

Jacob was describing some current office drama at his department in the finance company he was working at, and Emily listened cursorily, letting her attention flow in and out, while her thoughts wandered.

She liked that Victor was game for long walks, for uncertain destinations, and for general wandering. It resonated with her sense of adventure, her spirit for exploration, her continued interest in the world that surrounded her. It was one of the things she saw as missing the most in others. It seemed like so many people were boxed in by their screens, their houses, their cars. No one wanted to go past the café, their apartment, the familiar restaurant. That was one of her main issues with the boys she’d dated recently.

She knew there must be more out there than men who wanted to stay home and play their video games, hanging out with their same best friends every night and reminiscing about college. Their inner ambition choked away, like a childhood dream. Listening to themselves became as irrelevant to them as a child's wish to be an astronaut, or the president. They tucked that inner voice away like a blanket that was only taken out on the coldest winter nights, forgotten to the active memory on most days.

Emily thought to herself, this must be what the transition to adulthood means. That moment that you stop listening to your inner impulses, you stop enjoying new discoveries, you start to let the images in front of you fade away as you become desensitized to any sense of wonder in your surroundings.

Instead, you find your mind relegated to calculating budgets, trying out filters for selfies, and taking most of your pleasure from commiserating in groups, streaming TV shows, or getting intoxicated to forget the burdens of responsibility.

As the trio reached the park Emily's excitement grew at the prospect of getting close to the water. The park lay alongside the East River, breathing in the wind that swept across its waters. Benches and picnic tables lay scattered in a plaza overlooking this cityscape.

Emily walked up to the ledge closest to this body of water and leaned against the wall, pulled towards the tie to nature that this river represented. A peek at what the city really looked like, before, hidden underneath all of its concrete, glass, metal, and dirt, laid down by civilization over the centuries.

As she looked across the river she saw gulls sitting on the surface of the water, totally unperturbed as their seats were undulating with the soft movement of the tide carrying them back and forth.

She turned back to Victor and Jacob, and joined them where they were taking a seat at a nearby picnic table. There weren't too many people around, but they should still be cautious, being stopped by a cop would not be fun. Emily pulled out a lighter from her bag, these things just found their way into your stuff- but they were just as likely to disappear when you needed them.

"Nice," Jacob nodded, approvingly. No search through his pockets needed for this cyph. Victor pulled out a medium-sized joint from the side pocket of his jacket, freshly rolled in the café bathroom stalls, away from peering eyes. They smoked it together discreetly, letting the smoke escape their mouths slowly in a stream of warm air, creating a subtle haze as it combined with the atmosphere around them, that drifted away with the wind.

"I gotta run," Jacob said suddenly, gathering himself, and patting his pockets. "Have to get up early tomorrow for a project meeting." He gave Victor a quick dap, and hugged Emily quickly from the side.

Victor and Emily moved from the picnic table to one of the benches closer to where they could overlook the river. He casually placed an arm around her waist, and she leaned into him a bit. They chatted and laughed together, and fell into a kiss. They walked back to the subway together, and made plans to meet up again soon.

Once Emily was home she took a warm bubble bath, and thought about this turn of events. Did she like where this was going? Was she interested in Victor for real? To not be, and behave romantically, would complicate and potentially totally compromise their friendship for the future. And she'd liked having him as a friend the last few years.

They had a lot fun together because like her, he enjoyed exploring, both experiences and thoughtful conversation. Together they went on a walk in Central Park once, in search of a bolt that had demarcated where a city grid line would be during the mapping out of Midtown Manhattan. He wanted to look for alleyways, speak-easys, and find underground clubs.

There was a slight sense of danger also, but that comes with taking any chance by venturing off the trail to explore things yet undiscovered. Victor wanted to ask questions no one dared to consider, or thought to speculate over. He wanted to know if you would divert a train to run over one person, if you would save five in the process. Would you kill Hitler given the chance? Her responses were always hesitant and rife with ethical consideration. She wouldn't want to kill anyone, despite their crimes, couldn't they be imprisoned or rehabilitated?

She didn't sense in him a strong sense of self-preservation or careful consideration for others. He seemed more interested in acquiring experiences than in cultivating relationships, or crafting

a future for himself. But Emily was drawn to his passion for life, and wanted more of these experiences together.

~

A few dates later, and their friendship became a relationship. Their feelings for each other grew and the bond transformed like vines that crept up a tree, and wrapped its branches in its tight embrace. Emily was startled at Victor's suggestion that they become exclusive, she knew he'd often mentioned that he didn't believe in monogamy, it was one of his many philosophical oddities that made him stand out. But she agreed, thinking it meant they might see where this new relationship would take them. Maybe it was serious for him, too.

She certainly understood the controversies and hypocrisies that some saw in monogamy, but nevertheless she didn't see herself engaging with a man in any other way if it were serious to her. She knew from experience that she would be far too jealous to tolerate any less once she was in love. Her passion for life extended to that arena, and you did not want to cross her with infidelity.

~

Emily and Victor became a couple, and they went out with friends to a club in Brooklyn one night for a birthday party. They had been there before, but this time it was a large group and she

didn't quite know everyone. They fanned out a bit on the dance floor, intermingled with the rest of the large crowd filling its rooms. She loved letting go and dancing to the music, but she tried to keep track of her friends' movements too. It was smoky, dark, and crowded. The music reverberated out from the speakers in waves with a strong current, pounding against the walls, the floor, and their bodies.

Turning as she danced, Emily noticed Victor far to the left, dancing near their friend, Sasha. Sasha shimmied up close to Victor and grinded next to him. He did not blink and kept swaying, keeping a beat with her. Emily felt a sting rise up to her face. What was he doing, they just became a couple. On his suggestion, no less. They hadn't discussed this kind of thing yet, but she thought it was obvious with new couples that they tread these particular waters carefully before official lines were drawn from mutual conversations as the relationship blossomed.

Not wanting to make a scene or seem like her cool had been lost around her friends, Emily became stony rather than speak on her displeasure. When friends left one by one as the night got later, she barely wished them a good night, and eventually Victor demanded she explain.

"What's your problem?" Victor insisted. Emily blinked, doubling down on her attempt to steel herself, and shrugging off the attention he was starting to show her current mood.

"Nothing," she lied through a placid countenance, or the best she could muster at one. He wasn't convinced, and she saw his face tighten. His eyes were pulled down at their corners, his jaw tense, and his neck seemed pulled taut to his collarbone. She felt his anger and was concerned, but she had drunk too much to attempt to regain control of the situation. A few Long Islands on a long night out dancing can mean that your brakes have gone off-duty for the remainder of the night. Emily and Victor picked up their coats from the coat check and headed out into the chilly air, barely speaking to each other.

Once outside, Emily pulled out her pack and started to light a cigarette. They were a comfort out in the cold air, even psychologically seeing the warm embers light up at the end gave her a sense of satisfaction. But this was nothing compared to the relief she felt with the first drag of a cigarette after drinking cocktails all night in that hot, dry club. The craving was galloping within her, coursing in her very veins, and each drop of alcohol brought her closer to the inevitable quenching of that addicting, chemical thirst.

Victor seemed to be fuming now, pacing near her while she lit up. Her stance seemed casual but she really couldn't help but have a slack posture with the relief of the fresh air and the drinks keeping her limbs loose despite that slight sense of foreboding his

behavior was sending to her. Victor came up close, halting his pacing to confront her.

“What's wrong with you?” He demanded.

“N-nothing,” she replied, somewhat surprised at his tone.

“What do you mean?”

“You're upset,” he spat out.

“Well, I was” she admitted. May as well come clean now, she figured.

“Why? What was wrong?” His eyes flashed at her, and again she sensed danger.

Feeling mousey now, she said “I...saw you dance with Sasha.”

He locked eyes with her. “So?” It was more of a statement than a question.

“Well, you were grinding with her,” she complained, shaking her head with her annoyance. “I didn't think you would do that, you know...” Victor remained tense, pacing slightly still, almost like a predator closing in on its wary prey.

“That doesn't mean anything,” he insisted. “You don't have to be upset about that, people don't care about that.”

“I mean, ...I do,” she said tentatively.

“You really shouldn't, Emily. That's childish. People dance in a club.”

“Okay, well...” she trailed off. This didn't seem like an argument she was headed towards winning, and she was tired too. He shook his head, annoyed at her weakness. They were across the street now, meandering away from the club.

“I'm disappointed in you,” he started.

“Why?” She said, hurt welling up in her. She certainly didn't think this is how their night out would go, and she was already feeling a little betrayed by the dancing. Now she felt like she'd done something wrong, and things really weren't going her way at all.

“Sasha and I are friends. You don't know her as well as I do. You can't judge her like that.” Emily felt water cross over her eyelashes and spill out onto her right cheek, charting a very slow course to her lips. He balked at her. “You think you're the victim here?” He demanded. His anger visibly rising.

“I just- I just didn't like it,” she said defensively, but feeling defeated. He seemed to be developing a sense of disgust at her, as well.

“Give me those cigarettes,” he demanded. She passed him the pack, and he immediately smacked it out of her hands onto the floor of the sidewalk. The red box faced up at them from the street. The block letters spelling “Marlboro” and the upside down red peak coming down from the top of the box to meet them.

She was too stunned to complain and voice her protest at his actions. Emily adopted a wary look and became more aware of the perimeter of her body, watching its boundaries as she interacted with the night air and kept a slight distance from her boyfriend. She needed to be more aware than her senses were currently allowing. Drinking before was a harmless bout of fun, but now that she found herself outside late at night, approaching morning, and in an odd situation with her boyfriend she had to grapple to rein back in her mindfulness and watchfulness for her circumstances.

As they approached the subway station they went down the worn stairs into its dank interior, underground. His steps were determined but light with the ease of one with no reservation about their actions or purpose. His sense of moral high ground buoyed him forward. Her steps fell onto the stairs with a clodding sound from her heels, as she struggled to be poised despite her feelings of instability.

They waited for the subway in silence, but anger was radiating off of Victor's shoulders. Emily did not know what to do, should she leave him here and go home alone? It was nearly 3 am now and she didn't have a lot of options at this time of night. Her plan had been to leave together with him and stay over at his place, but she didn't feel comfortable with him now. But if she went home alone she would be worried about the subway or the

streets near her home being deserted, and encountering someone nasty in the night who could attack her.

A few years ago, someone had tried to rob her as she exited the train station on her way home one evening, still quite early. She had seen him lingering near the turnstiles at the edge of the platform but marched stolidly forward, eyes front, as usual. He had moved closer to the edge of the platform but as she reached the corner he darted forward, cutting her off just before the exit and yanked at her bag. Without a thought, Emily grabbed on to her purse and pulled back, yelling "HEY!" in his face. She succeeded in wresting it back from him, as he let go and she pulled away. She quickly made the rest of the distance and swooped through the exit turnstile, and soon was out in the open air of dusk, dignity intact but shaken by her experience as she strode quickly the rest of her walk home from the station.

These days she lived in an apartment in a different neighborhood of New York City, but she wasn't blind to notices in her train station as well as many others, with a grainy shot of a stranger from a security camera, claiming "**\$2,500 REWARD FOR INFORMATION LEADING TO AN ARREST REGARDING A SEXUAL ASSAULT.**" She would sometimes quickly read over the description below, noting the cross streets and estimated time of the crime. She would reason with herself, of course, nowhere is safe at 3 am, she could avoid that. And she carried pepper spray

with her now, too. Ever since her first job, in retail, where she sometimes had the closing shift and headed home at 1:30 am by herself, 18 years old and slightly terrified.

Emily took another breath of air in the subway station and tried to weigh her options, attempting to steady herself and sort through her thoughts for some kind of plan. Despite his attitude, she had strong feelings for Victor. Maybe this was a mistake. He had simply drank too much, slipped up, lashed out. Maybe it was a one-time thing, after all, she was his first real relationship she thought.

She also didn't want to push Victor any further by bringing up changing the plan to go separate ways. The offense might stir the pot further, and worsen the fight just by mentioning it. They could come back from this, if he calmed down, she thought, trying to find reason within the situation. As upset as she was feeling now, they may be able to work everything out tomorrow, and she didn't want to make things worse between them by having them go separate ways at the end of this night. Not after arguing, and the aggressive way that he acted. If they didn't meet at some kind of resolution, she would be worried about their relationship. Waking up in their separate apartments, maybe they would feel more separated from each other, less able to fix what went wrong in the communication in their bond, and repair what had been torn. Less invested in making being together work.

The subway screeched to a halt as it arrived in front of them at the platform, silver steel with a coating of muck, and dust, from traversing the city's underbelly through the tunnels. Victor boarded first, striding into the car, followed behind by Emily, and they took seats in a corner, far from the few others who were in the train with them, scattered throughout the car.

"You were such a bitch tonight," he complained. His eyes closed as he proclaimed this to her, illustrating the passion that he felt with this sentence. Emily's eyes slightly widened, but she took on a slightly defiant expression, her shoulders and neck stiffening, tensing at his verbal threat.

"I don't think so..." she rejected.

"Yeah, you were," he insisted. "You couldn't just have fun, you had to make a problem." She sighed, his emotions were too much for her, how could she reason with him?

"I didn't mean to," she complied. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you."

"You should have done better," he said, shaking off her peace offering. "You were an embarrassment to me." Emily rolled her eyes in exasperation, what was going to make him stop, this wasn't working.

She noticed a woman sitting on the other side of the car, her eyes staring directly at her and Victor, and Emily looked away. *How long had she been watching, could she hear them?* She warmed

with embarrassment, she hated being talked to like this, but she didn't want to make it any worse by putting up a fight. She felt like that would surely only make him step up his anger, harden his aggression, and she didn't want to see him grow any worse. She was shocked at how he had been speaking to her, and she didn't know how to mitigate the situation at all.

Emily breathed in slowly, her chest felt like it was rattling as the air came in, spreading in her lungs and bringing clarity to her eyes.

"Is she looking at us?" Victor demanded.

"No," Emily said immediately. He shifted in his seat, he had been drinking also, and she wondered if that was part of his anger. Was it welling up because of a lubrication from the alcohol, opening something darker within him, that had been lying in wait, simmering, and seething? Waiting for a soft, unsuspecting mouse to come nearby, sniffing the air innocently, then attacked from the side in a sudden dart, as the snake's long body shot forth and wrapped around it with a tight embrace.

"What are you looking at?" Victor snapped at the woman. She looked angry, her brow furrowed, and body tense.

"It's okay," Emily said to Victor. He shook off her plea for calm, like a bull with no sign of letting go of the energy that was reeling inside, preceding an inevitable charge.

"Nobody should talk to a woman like that," the woman said loudly, right in their direction. Emily took a deep breath, why would she do this? This was going to make things worse. She felt torn inside, her chest straining with the different directions she felt herself being pulled in. This stranger didn't approve, she was seeking to head him off, to shield her from his wanton anger and aggression.

"Who are you?" Victor seethed. "This ain't your business. Mind your business." Emily's eyes darted to the woman, anxious to see her response.

"You gonna let him talk to you like that?" the woman continued. Imploring at her. Emily was frozen, caught between two worlds. She didn't want to be treated like this, but she was with *him*. This woman was a stranger. Showing any allegiance to her would put her in opposition with this man she had *just* grown to love. She didn't want to let that go. Not yet. She did not want to give that all up just yet.

Victor looked at Emily accusingly, "Tell her to shut up," he demanded. Emily breathed in. She sucked in the air, hoping for some kind of way out to present itself.

"I can't do that," she said, her tone as calm as possible, but trying to maintain a sense of her own authority.

"Go," he demanded. "Go, tell her that she's a bitch." Emily's eyes widened, she could *not* do that. "If you don't, you must not

want to be with me, huh?" *Fuck*, she thought. The train halted as the doors opened at the next station, sliding away to reveal the platform waiting behind them.

Two police officers stepped on, looking both ways, assessing the train car. It must have been close to 4 am now, if not later. Emily felt vulnerable, she was facing her angry boyfriend, an indignant woman, and now two cops were looking right at them. She was self-conscious of her club attire, a dress with heels that she'd picked out eight hours ago now, when the night was full of promise and she hoped to make a great impression; her makeup that was now smeared, and recently streaked from tears.

The police officers approached her, and Victor. She stiffened herself, she had to protect him, protect herself. She didn't want to end up in any bad situation with these cops. She didn't know if she could get in trouble herself, for this situation that she found herself in.

"How's it going?" one of the officers asked. They were both white.

"We're fine." Emily offered, immediately.

Victor agreed. He looked like a caged animal. His defiance heavily masked, dialed back so that he only looked wide-eyed and reproachful. His aggression taking a second-row seat, instincts of preservation fully taking over.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, thank you. Fine." Emily said, again. As firmly as she could manage. Mustering herself with all her power to try to appear as sober as she possibly could, and as in control of herself, and calm in her situation as she could. It was quite an act, and she feared it would be nowhere near believable. They looked over at the woman on the other side of the car.

"You okay, ma'am?" They walked over, and exchanged conversation, the woman complaining. The officers looked at Emily and Victor again, then stepped off the train and walked back down the platform, the doors closing again.

She had called the cops on them, Emily realized. As this dawned on her, she was again reminded of her intoxication. She didn't notice anything, and yet, this woman must have called, or spoken with the conductor, sometime during this train ride. The cops were waiting for them on that platform. They boarded to look for them, to speak with them, check out the situation.

She was shaken. Victor was temporarily quelled, he seemed to have been distracted by what happened, and the warpath was no longer so clearly in front of his eyes, beckoning him down its tracks. They reached Victor's apartment in silence, but she was clearly not out of the doghouse. He barely looked at her, and she got the feeling she was to blame for this now, too. She curled up under the sheets on his bed when they got in, scared and sad, but too tired to think up a better solution than to just go to fucking

sleep, finally. She knocked out, disappearing into the calm, quietness of sleep where she was safe, and alone.

~

The next morning, Victor was up before she was. She walked out of his room to the kitchen, where he sat with a bowl of cereal and a glass of milk at the side. He was reading *The New York Post*, and he stopped to look up at her as she approached. “Hey, baby.” he said. His expression hard to read, but it seemed innocent, wide-eyed, open and vulnerable. She poured a glass of water, and joined him at the table, hopeful that this was all over in the light of morning, the reasonableness of day.

“How are you feeling?” she started.

He shook his head, as if shaking off bad things, and said “I feel fine. I got some sleep. Last night was kinda crazy,” he almost laughed, imploring her to play along it seemed.

“Yes,” she said. Grateful that he was acknowledging something, but skeptical of the lack of gravity in his description. She ate her breakfast feeling somewhat reserved, trading casual conversation with him, but feeling a blanket curled over her body in her mind, as if she had created a buffer between her and him, as she slept. A comforting layer of protection, to shield her from the pain of her senses.

As she started to think about heading back home she wanted to touch on it one more time. Emily looked at Victor and

said somewhat hesitantly, “You were...a bit mean last night.” Almost a question. Victor’s face crumpled, as he closed his eyes and looked down, nodding in admission.

“I know,” he said. “I know, I’m sorry.”

“I just don’t understand,” she said. “I thought we were good. We were mostly having a good time.” Power spilled from her like sand through spread fingers. Victor picked it up.

“We are, I’m sorry. I couldn’t stand that I made you upset. I’ve never acted like that before, though. I don’t know what got into me,” he sighed. The burden of his actions wearing on him.

“It’s okay,” Emily consoled him. “I just didn’t get it. But I know you care about me. I know you didn’t mean it.” Thoughts shifted around her head as she tried to frame this new reality for herself. Okay. He lost his temper. But he’s sorry. He didn’t mean it, it probably won’t even happen again. And he said he’s sorry, that’s what’s important. Emily was sufficiently comforted by these thoughts, and besides, she didn’t want to fight, didn’t want to do much besides go home, take a shower, and eat some healthy food today. See her dog, and relax in her own, big bed.

She said a heartfelt goodbye to Victor, and walked out to the street, heading back to her apartment as the day approached its afternoon.

~

As days passed, Emily adjusted her emotions to prevent his anger. She began to anticipate which things she did would bring his wrath up to the surface. It was a hard way to live. Tension injected itself into her muscles as she tried to look ahead with every comment, every opinion she expressed. She couldn't seem like she was uncomfortable, about anything really. If she was hungry, she was spoiled. If she wanted attention, she was a leech. If she was jealous of how he looked and acted with other women, she was a shrew, who hated women, and didn't understand sex and love, the need for freedom, and the beauty of open relationships.

Her jealousy meant that she had no confidence. Her desire for romance meant that she had no life. No boundary of hers was respected. But she learned to live within his. She strained against them, though she tried as hard as she could to stay within the lines. A body and a soul is not meant to fit the shape of another's mold, no matter how much they try to bind themselves to fit into the image.

~

On the 4th of July, Emily and Victor were going to a party at *Lust*, one of her absolute favorite clubs. There were always a few people wearing bright, intricate costumes. There were cages up on the walls that you could climb up to from a staircase on the dancefloor, to dance above the crowd and enjoy some

exhibitionism. And they played upbeat music, which she enjoyed. The softer melodic tunes of house music tended to bore her, and she preferred the strong drops and falls of a heavy bass techno or dubstep, with a fast tempo throughout.

They held themed parties at *Lust*, and for this American holiday they were guaranteed a free hot dog for each patron, and specials on beer and shots at the bar. It was also a foam party, and she had never been to one of these before. Emily was excited, even though it was just the two of them. On the one hand, no buffer if things got bad. But on the other, no witnesses if they did, either.

Hiding her pain was increasingly difficult, and she didn't want to imagine what the repercussions would be if she let it slip to their friends that she was struggling in their relationship. His hatred seemed to stem from her discomfort, so naturally any evidence of her suffering increased his tantrums - letting his friends see this could only be a huge risk to that. So far she had kept it to herself, she knew her own friends would not approve, and she was too embarrassed to tell her family, or worry them about her being unhappy.

Entering the club with Victor, Emily saw the floor filling up with foam. They always arrived early. Victor did not believe in missing a minute of an event they bought tickets to. And he expected impeccable timeliness from her, too. She added that to the mental list of things to be careful about. They loaded up on

drinks and hot dogs together at the bar, admiring the ambience and the crowd, and then they made their way out onto the dance floor. Emily felt pretty good tonight. They were currently exclusive - this had begun to change regularly based on Victor's mood and his generosity. A big fight meant they were not exclusive or not together anymore for a few days, while she felt like she was hanging by a thread until he inevitably changed his mind and generously told her that they would again be exclusive, or continue being a couple.

She eyed the other dancers without worry tonight, not fearing that her date would be whisked away. Of course, he could change his mind at any point but for now she didn't have reason to think so and she wanted to live in the present, and enjoy this time of happiness for herself.

As friendly people danced near them, occasionally joining their little circle, she didn't feel threatened for tonight. Emily eventually found her way to the front of the foam machine, delighting in the fluffy clouds of soap building up on the floor and dancing into the air as they spewed out from its fans. She grasped it in her hands and tossed it up above her, playfully. The ground was covered in fuzzy, white snowbanks, covering the dark, sticky floor that usually met her feet in the club. She slipped once, falling on her side, hard, but popped back up again eager to keep dancing and playing in the foam.

Victor joined her but didn't take part in her activity, just lingering nearby as he performed his own dance moves under the club lights, part of the undulating crowd that was embracing the thundering beats. He seemed to take enjoyment from Emily enjoying herself. He encouraged her at times to freely do the things that made her childish heart happy. Those bouts of creativity where you suddenly have the instinct to do something, just for fun, and you actually do it.

Although she might struggle with social anxiety, Emily was also determined to have fun, to enjoy her life, and she liked to play. One thing that made her happy was to play, despite that she was now in her mid-20s, that she had responsibilities, that she was an "adult." She had always maintained that childish part of herself that was whimsical and enjoyed the simple pleasures as they came to her.

Hours of dancing and drinking, and Emily was eventually very tired and thirsty. They had water but usually they would make you buy a bottle for \$5 instead of letting you ask for a glass of tap water, so, it was not an unlimited resource despite the hot environment, the cardio dancing, and the alcoholic drinks which eventually drained you a bit.

She stumbled over to the bathroom on the 2nd floor on her tired heels, and after waiting online with the other girls, made her way inside the single stall, darkly lit room. Closing the door behind

her, the music was muted by a fraction. She leaned on the sink with her hands and peered into her reflection in the streaked mirror, surrounded by stickers and paint stains from a hundred parties that had come before.

Her alert eyes stared back into her from the glass, but the rest of her face was lax and blurred. Black makeup that had crisply lined her eyes at the beginning of the night had drifted its way down underneath her bottom lashes, creating a natural smoky eye from the long, hot, sticky night. She peed for what felt like five beers, before washing her hands with soap and attempting to brush the hair out of her face before anyone outside got too impatient waiting for their turn.

As Emily rejoined the atmosphere of the club, she didn't see Victor on the balcony waiting for her. Wasn't he going to meet her there? Her brow furrowed, and she tried to concentrate through the haze that had firmly situated itself inside her head as it approached 3 am. Yeah, she thought tiredly, he was meeting her here. She walked to the edge of the balcony to wait, looking down at the first floor where the main stage was set and all of the dancers were congregated. Up here, she was just below the level of the lights, the disco balls, and she was directly across from the cages of eager, adventurous dancers at the far wall.

Several minutes passed as she enjoyed her vantage point before Emily sighed to herself, *was he late?* Maybe he was still

waiting for the restroom. She walked over to the men's room, and saw no line. As she walked back to her waiting spot her phone lit up, and she saw his name blowing across her screen. *Hmm...* She answered, and could barely hear his voice on the other end.

She made out his shrill tone, "Where the fuck are you?" as the sound on the call faded in and out, competing with the speakers. *Oh, shit.* Adrenaline surged up from her gut, competing with the haze to force clarity upon her.

"Do you want me to come meet you? Are you outside, honey?" Her voice was simpering. She was pleading for good graces, if there were any to be found. He hung up.

Emily began to panic. One, rush outside. Two, call again to find out where he is. Three, wait for further instructions? He hated complacency. He also hated when she called him back after he ended a call. On the other hand, there were a few times recently that she didn't call back after learning from that experience. But when he dialed her, he admonished her for making him call her back. Sometimes, you can't win. Ultimately, if he had already left the club, she had better not stay. Although if she left now and she had misunderstood, there was no coming back inside. "**No reentry,**" the *Lust* rules proclaimed near each of the exits. Emily looked down at her phone again. No calls were coming in, no texts received. She brushed her hair behind her ears, and descended the

stairs past the other drunken fools surrounding her, making her way to the main exit.

Another flight of stairs, a hallway, and a confirmation to the security guard that she knew “all exits were final,” and then she was outside in the warm night air. Her dress clung to her, soaked from the soap that had turned into water when the bubbles inevitably receded. Without the body heat that humidified the inside of *Lust*, she was starting to feel the chill of her wet dress and wishing she had pants or a sweater to cover herself up.

Victor wasn't in the crowd of people outside of the club entrance/exit, she scanned their faces, focusing on each one. They smoked cigarettes, glanced at their phones, and chatted casually with one another. Some drunk, others alert, some excited, and some looking bored. Emily tried to call Victor, *straight to voicemail*. She stomped down the block in her heeled boots, heading towards the general direction of the train. When she reached the corner, she decided to make land on a little stoop with wide stairs and a welcoming archway where she could try sitting down and making another call to Victor. She raised her phone to her face and suddenly a call was coming in - Victor.

“Hello?” she asked, her slight bewilderment evident.

“Where are you?” he demanded, right away. Tears quietly streamed down her face.

“I'm just down the block from the club. I wasn't sure where you were.”

“Are you crying. Are you crying right now.”

“No.”

“Don't lie to me. How could you lie to me right now, you disgusting bitch. I don't know why I even talk to you, why I bother trying to explain anything to you. You're not worth it.” Emily's breath caught in her throat as she tried to bite back the shock and hurt. *Just 30 minutes ago, it seemed, they were wandering through the club together, harmony for a moment, all the positive opportunity before her.*

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I will do better. I promise.”

“Fuck this shit.” Victor said. “I'm heading home with or without you on the train.”

“Okay, well how far are you?” she tentatively asked.

“I'm waiting for the train,” he said. “I'm taking it from Union Square right now. If you can make it to Grand Central we can take the next train together. But you have 15 minutes. You have to catch up to me.” Emily paused, how was she supposed to get there that fast?

“I...don't know if I can get there in time. I still have to walk to the train station here, which takes like 10 minutes.”

“You can meet me there or you can go on your own. I’m leaving now.” Victor hung up the phone, leaving Emily to decide what to do next.

Normally she would try to do what he asked, but it would take half an hour to get there, so what was the point? She leaned on the archway of the stoop to rest her head and rested for a few minutes. Finally getting up, she noticed that her side felt sore. She had fallen once in the foam, maybe a couple of times. But there was one time she remembered her chest hitting the ground a bit hard, on the side. It seemed sore there now.

Emily left by herself, dejectedly, she wouldn’t catch up to him now, but she had to go home regardless at this point. She took the trains by herself, feeling chilly in the Subway AC with her damp dress on. When she made her way on to the 7 train she rested her head on the bars as she curled up in the corner seat and drifted asleep for a bit. When she woke up, the subway announced that it was the Times Square - bound 7 train, next stop 110th St - Junction Blvd. She looked out the windows because it was above-ground now, and it was full daylight.

The train was now crowded with people going about their day, and she was definitely out of place. She must have slept through her stop, and the next ten, because it was heading back down the line now. Thankfully it hadn’t stopped at her station yet, so she got off a few stops later and walked home. Emily greeted

her roommate without explanation and headed straight to her bedroom. She tore off her old clothes and piled into her comforter and went straight to sleep for five hours. Waking up in the afternoon, she finally made coffee and breakfast, checked through her new messages on phone and email. Nothing from Victor on her phone, weird, he must be sleeping, or... angry.

Checking her email, she had a new email from Victor. She opened it up, surprised to see an email, and read through it quickly.

“Hey baby, did you get home okay? I woke up on the train and my phone was gone, and I wasn’t sure why you weren’t with me. Give me a call on the landline when you get up. Love you, baby girl.”

Emily was puzzled. She called his landline, and his cousin that he lived with answered the phone. He passed it to Victor who was in his room.

“Hey,” he answered, sweetly, softly. “Did you get home alright? What happened?” Emily explained that they left separately, and he was a bit upset at her it seemed, so they didn’t end up travelling together. He couldn’t remember why he was upset and said that it didn’t matter, and was just glad she had gotten home safely. He had woken up on the F train and noticed that his phone was gone. He had been using it and might have had

it in his hand when he nodded off, so he thought someone must have stolen it from him on the train car.

Emily agreed to come over in a couple days to just hang out and relax together. They could take it easy, watch an anime show, and make some popcorn.

She took the rest of the day as a self-care day, taking a long hot bath, eating her favorite food, avocado toast, and playing with her dog, Wexler. He was a yorkie, and he absolutely loved attention and let her shower him with kisses on his furry little forehead when she was home.

Her side was aching, and she remembered the fall that she had when she slipped in the foam last night. She touched it gingerly, and felt a bruising pain meet her in return.

~

A few days later, Emily visited Victor's apartment as planned. It was rainy outside, and a perfect afternoon to stay inside and take it easy with her boyfriend. They ordered Chinese food, and curled up on the couch together to watch an anime show they had gotten into recently, *Requiem*. She loved the Japanese voices when they turned off the English dubbing and just read the subtitles to follow along, although it made it harder to concentrate on watching the show so she often switched back and forth depending on her mood.

The artistry of the characters in the show was fascinating to her, and the fact that they were vengeful spirit warriors made it even more intriguing. Emily crouched down to sit on the rug on the floor, putting a sketch pad onto the coffee table where she sat by the TV, and started doodling one of the warriors. Victor fell asleep on the couch, so she paused the show and referred to the still to keep working on her drawing. She used colored pencils that she had brought in her bag to add the hues of the spirit to her drawing.

A while later, Victor woke up and paused to admire her drawing. She was happy, and went home with a full heart the next morning.

~

As the weather got chillier in the Fall, Emily and Victor moved their dates indoors to movie theaters, museums, and their friends' houses. He and his friends smoked marijuana copiously, although Emily wasn't as fond of it and usually tried to abstain without drawing too much attention. She had such an active imagination that its effects on her were often very overwhelming, and she preferred to keep it calm and avoid risking igniting her latent social anxiety.

While she connected with Victor's friends, they weren't really her own, and she felt a little isolated, despite being familiar with some of them from college. They were closer to

acquaintances than best friends for her, and she thought that her relationship with Victor was probably what kept them close at all. Although this didn't trouble her, it meant that she would never share with them her concerns about their relationship when he lashed out. They were his friends, not hers. And Victor made sure to remind her of that.

One evening, Emily brought Victor to a work event, their annual bash to impress the investors and recognize employee achievements. She received an invitation with a plus one, courtesy of her employer. Emily dressed up in a slinky black dress, and he wore his best business – style attire. The night was going off without a hitch, when Victor informed her that Jacob invited him over to hang with the group at his apartment in Bed–Stuy.

Emily flushed, knowing that her invitation was not implicit. Victor made it clear that she did not have any “girlfriend privileges.” There was no automatic right for her to sit beside him in a group setting, to be invited to a friends’ gathering, she had an equal status in his eyes to any of his friends and she should never assume that she was welcome somewhere just because he was.

Emily thought this strained against convention, not just in terms of etiquette but the general friendliness she was accustomed to in past relationships, and in seeing those around her. Why would she inherently be excluded? Wasn't the norm the opposite? People would always say “you can bring your girlfriend” or “you

can bring your boyfriend” or better yet, it was very often completely unspoken but understood.

One accepted your friend's significant others at social outings with the exception of perhaps a close – knit best friends only event, or perhaps a ceremony that was important to you like a graduation, a wedding, a formal event. Especially when Emily had known these people from college too, and gone on group outings with them for almost a year now. They didn't text *her*, Victor would say. If I bring you, that's me asking for a favor, he said coldly, like an instructor teaching a slow pupil, having the utmost patience for their need to repeat the same lesson again and again.

Emily had received accolades in her academic and her professional life. Frankly, she was lightyears ahead of Victor in the latter, at least for now. But there was no compromise in his eyes when he offered her his criticism. He saw himself as the arbiter of etiquette in their lives. To him, it was the law. His law. If she wanted to keep playing his game, to be with him, she had to follow the rules, and she had to look like she liked it.

Emily tensed at the table as she ran through scenarios quickly, in her mind. She didn't want their night to end early, with him going to a party separately. She was celebrating an achievement of her own tonight, having received an award for her work on a community outreach project, and she wanted to share this success with her friends. Despite what brought them close

together, they were her group now. She didn't have time for anyone else, and she grew fond of them and enjoyed their friendships even if they were first formed out of convenience and accessibility.

Emily loved to celebrate, she enjoyed the "corny" things in life, and to her, these simple pleasures were important. Otherwise, weren't you watching your life pass you by? Cynicism was too costly in her opinion, given the inevitable termination of our life span.

Emily smiled at Victor, keeping her face as simple and open as she could. "Honey, do you think you could ask if I could come?" His eyes narrowed. "I just thought-It would be nice to-" she twisted her mouth to the side as she tried to gather herself to make a better impression.

"I'll ask." Victor nodded, not looking at her, but down at his phone. Emily's wrist tensed, as she braced herself for a potential storm. Not tonight, her inner voice pleaded. Her shimmery black dress fell on her frame in a flattering silhouette, her heels made her feel poised. The downside to enjoying the little things, was the disappointment when they were spoiled.

As the ceremony wrapped up, Victor lead Emily out of the dining room and out into the street, barely giving her time to wave goodbye to her colleagues as she rushed to keep up. Outside in the cool night air she followed behind him, not really wanting to catch

up to the smoldering and dangerous fire in front of her. The fresh air enveloped her and a sense of calm reached out to her from the universe, grasping at her, trying to pick her up into its safe embrace.

"Keep up," Victor snapped. She couldn't be saved by nature. She was too tied to this man to let herself be. She imagined herself for a moment as Aphrodite, but receding into the beautiful clamshell, its lips slowly creaking shut as it retreated back into the waves of the ocean, submerging itself in the deep, calm sea.

She quickened her step for a few strides until she was walking alongside him.

"Everything okay?" she asked, lamely.

"Let's go through here," he pointed at the entrance to Central Park. It was dusk, but the park was still open, lampposts lighting up the paths and late-night couples, revelers, dogwalkers, and joggers would still meander through its expanse a while longer.

Emily lifted her dress as she navigated her heels on the cobblestones that formed the steps that lowered into the park. *Thank God the whole park isn't like this*, she silently praised. She thought about making a remark to Victor but held it back, knowing he couldn't stand when she complained. She didn't know what a tough life was, he'd say. His parents had worked hard all their lives

to achieve lower middle-class status in this country. He had to fulfill their dreams, to shoot even higher.

Emily tried to be humbled, but her thoughts would go to her mother and their own difficulties making their way in life. The difference, she thought, was that at home her individuality, her expression, her ideas, were valued, or at least accepted. But Victor's were not. His family expected him to reach an economic status, but also to be silent. He was to obey all of their cultural traditions and values, despite his vehement rejection of them internally.

This, she thought, was why he struggled to allow for discomfort. If he couldn't voice his, why should she be allowed to? Emily kept these thoughts to herself, knowing that this was not one of those rare times where they could attempt to make progress on their relationship by openly talking about their perspectives, and what insights she thought she could share to help him understand and move forward past his anger, or his pain.

Ahead of them, a mouse scampered across the path, from one side of the grass to the other. Victor observed it coldly, and Emily let out a light shiver. Could be worse, she thought. There were rats in Brooklyn, in Lower Manhattan, and she figured that late enough at night they would be here, too. Scurrying beneath the park benches, locating scraps of discarded food and wrappers,

sniffing, licking, and eating the morsels that remained hours after they were abandoned by the people who had purchased them.

Emily clutched her purse, and was holding the award in her arm, a pretty, glass rhombus her colleagues had presented her at the party. There was a card, too, from Victor.

"Let's sit," Victor suggested. Emily gathered her dress and sat next to him on the bench, warily. "I'm waiting for Jacob to text me back," he said. "Don't know if you can come, though."

"Okay," Emily said.

"Are you upset?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I just hope I can come, it would be nice."

"Well, you know, you weren't invited. So you are really putting pressure on me by asking me to invite you. I have to ask for you, so this is me asking for a favor for you."

"I don't know," Emily said. Her spirit straining against playing along with this subjugation.

"What do you mean? What don't you know, Emily?"

"I just think, that, you know, he might not see it as a big deal, you know, inviting me to come. We're already together out tonight, like, it kind of makes sense, right?" Victor rolled his eyes.

"You don't get it," he said. "You are so ungrateful." Emily screwed her face up as she tried hard not to disagree. "Give me that card, he pronounced." Emily handed over the card he gave her earlier in the evening, embellished with glitter and calligraphy by

whatever card company crafted this note of congratulations before Victor bought it from a drug store.

Was he going to throw it away? A few weeks ago, he presented her with a plastic bag full of shredded paper after a fight. He had asked her to come over to get something she had left at his apartment without saying what it was. When she opened the bag she saw that it was the drawing she had made of the anime they watched together. She had left it as a present for him that day.

Victor took the card and turned it over in his hands. With a loud rip, he tore the card in two, and then four pieces. He tossed it from his lap, and let it fall to the ground beside them. Tears welled up in Emily's eyes. She liked that he had gotten her a card, he so rarely did those nice little things. She loved having a token of his appreciation and pride for her. Her light sobs made her breathe in more deeply, as her body's involuntary pathways tried to calm her down, not knowing what was upsetting her, only that she needed to breathe deep, she needed to feel safe, and loved.

Victor stared at her, daring her to protest. "Look at what you've forced me to do," he said. "You ruin everything. Let's walk," he said. They got up from the bench and started down a path together in the dimly lit park. Emily squeezed her fingers into the palms of her hands, willing herself to get through these moments. Even though she felt like the worst was to come tonight she also knew that eventually he would give up, he would calm down. He

would apologize, and then, they would be happy again. Until the next time.

A group of young men were gathered around a bench under a streetlamp along the path in front of them.

"I want you to go talk to them," Victor said. Go tell them what an idiot you are."

"What, no, I can't..." Emily panicked, realizing he was serious.

"You're not going to make this up to me?! I will leave you right here. That's it. Forever."

"No" she softly sobbed.

"DON'T CRY." he said. Emily wiped her face as neatly as she could and took in a deep shuddering breath to calm her rhythm inside.

"Okay, okay, I'll do it."

"No, that's not good enough now." They were getting closer to the guys, now. They were just a few yards ahead on the path. "Go offer one of them a blowjob." Emily blanched. She glanced at Victor and saw there was no mercy there. "Now!" Emily veered off from Victor, angling her path towards the group of men. Her nails dug into her palms and her legs were stiff with each step she made across the pavement. I literally cannot do this she thought. How can I do this? She walked close by them, one of them making eye contact, and she looked away quickly.

She veered away again, like it was just an awkward detour to have come so close to their group. She looked to the side at Victor, where he forged straight ahead, and was looking back at her with disdain.

“I’m sorry,” she said. Victor shook his head, and motioned to her to hand over her award. She did so, not even worried what he might do with it, just desperate that he could be placated.

She normally gave into his demands, but she couldn’t when it involved other people. He could ask her to show up at his house at 3 in the morning just to send her back home with scraps of a drawing that she had made for him. But ask her to curse out a stranger, to stop them in the street and offer them a sex act, or to steal something – she could not do those things. She couldn’t impose into someone else’s world because of his craziness.

It wasn’t their fault that he was like this, that she couldn’t control him. And even if she didn’t know how to fix him so that he wouldn’t try to subjugate her when he got mad, she could at least not involve anyone else. No one else deserved that.

“Let’s go to the subway,” Victor said. “Jacob said that you can come through.” Hope sparked in Emily’s head as she wondered if this might help him calm down, maybe they might even have a good time for an hour or two again. They exited the park and walked towards the subway, Victor still looked like he was fuming so Emily mostly tried to keep quiet.

As they reached the station and went down into the platform it was mostly empty. One or two people were on the other side, waiting for the train that would come down the opposite track. Emily glanced at her award, a pretty glass thing, she wanted to put it somewhere in her apartment. Victor was clutching it haphazardly, it almost looked like he was carrying it for her, to an outside perspective.

They took seats in the dirty wooden subway benches, next to one another. Victor directed her gaze to her and she could see the cold detachment in his eyes that preceded his meanest statements and requests.

“Hit yourself,” he said. Emily looked at him uncomprehendingly. “Don’t play dumb.”

“What do you mean, Victor, I – you don’t want me to do that.”

“Yes, yes, I do. You don’t know what I want. Listen to me. You need to make it up to me for what you failed to do in the park. Now, bang your head down on this divider on the bench. Hard.” Emily looked at him, thoughts swirling through her mind. How could he want that.

She didn’t move a muscle. Victor stared at her, she could see the vulnerability creep up into his face, from feeling the tenuousness in his sense of control over her. She was not obeying. He shook his head.

“Alright, we’re over. This is done.” Emily looked at him, her eyes pleading but not wanting to say anything that would bring another negative reaction out of him. She sat there quietly, hands in her lap.

The train approached the platform and she got on alongside him, not too close, not wanting to trigger more reactions from him. They moved through the car, and she sat down next to him.

“Okay,” he started off, “you have one more chance. You have to hit yourself in the side, now.” Emily’s side was still painful, her fall at the club had turned out to be a bone bruise on her rib. It was sore and ached if she leaned on it, or twisted her torso too much. Victor knew this.

“Punch your rib,” he said. Emily’s brow furrowed and she reached out to her right side, instinctively, holding herself there. The train was pulling into the next station, and as the doors opened, the man who had been in their car got off and walked away down the platform. They were alone.

“You better do it,” he said, “before the next stop or your opportunity will be gone. And you know you’re not coming with me if you don’t do this.” Emily felt agonized, but she held her right arm out from her body, bent at the elbow, and lightly connected with her side, immediately wincing slightly.

“That’s it?” he said. “No, do it again. You have to really do it, none of this pansy, half-assed shit.” Emily swallowed bitterness as

her spirit sank even lower. They were getting closer to the next stop, their train car following those before it through the subterranean darkness of rails and turn signals.

Emily searched Victor’s eyes and not an ounce of negotiation was there.

“Are you going to do it or are you wasting my time?”

“No,” she said, “No, I’m doing it. I’m sorry.” Emily closed her eyes briefly and pulled her arm back again, this time she swung into her side and tapped the ridge of her rib through her clothes at her side, putting enough force behind it to cause a sharp inhale and pain to radiate in her body.

“Good” Victor said.

Emily relaxed her muscles and her posture sunk lower into her seat. Their train reached the next station and the doors opened, a couple climbing on and sitting down together in the middle of the car.

They sat in silence, Emily wondering if Victor was quelled. And if he felt any remorse for what he’d done. She wondered if there was a part of him that knew what he did was wrong. Emily reached down and tried to smooth her dress along her knees, feeling the hem with her fingers. She stole a glance at him, and his eyes were straight ahead, occasionally he’d glance over at the couple further down in the car. He put his headphones in his ears

and was absorbed by his music, bouncing his head to the beat seemingly unperturbed by anything.

Emily studied her hands and blinked away tears from the edges of her lashline before they could spill over and chart down her cheeks, exposing her insides. She tried to pull herself together, sucking it all in like a deep breath to fit her into a corset that would paint a pretty, undisturbed picture. She rubbed the skin under her eyes, ridding her skin of any smudges of makeup that may have fallen down there when she had cried earlier.

They finally arrived at the stop they were to get off at, and Victor made brief eye contact with her as they got up and left the train. Emily kept quiet and tried to breathe in and out to calm herself, she wanted to reach a baseline of calm, even if it was a layer of polish rather than the real thing. Her cheerful temperament was a veneer that she needed to apply to pass the judging Victor would certainly be quietly assessing when they entered Jacob's house.

"Why don't you fix your makeup," Victor said, gesturing at the bench against the wall before the exit turnstiles. Emily sat down and pulled her makeup out of her purse. She probably did need to touch it up, her eyes must be red despite her trying to blindly dab at them on the train. She applied dry foundation in fast, broad strokes, hiding the ruddiness that had taken over her whole face. She added a fresh layer of her red lipstick, then redid her

mascara, and eyeliner, to make a strong eye that wouldn't evoke inspection of any bloodshotness. Emily snapped her compact mirror shut and threw everything back in her purse, and zipped it close. She looked up at Victor, who was still nodding to his music, standing nearby. Again he made brief eye contact and appeared to give her a stiff nod, before leading her out of the train station as they walked to Jacob's house.

"Yo, we're outside," Victor spoke into his phone. His usual silky voice conveying a sense of ease, and an upbeat energy. Jacob let them in at the door, and Emily offered her most natural bright smile and relaxed demeanor as she hung up her coat and greeted their friends before sitting down with them on the couches surrounding the TV.

"How was your night?" Jacob's girlfriend Samantha asked. "It was good," Victor offered. "The drinks were kinda wack, but the food was pretty good."

"Yeah," Emily agreed. "I even liked the salad."

Victor started to roll a joint, and continued, "The waitresses were like models, man." Emily warmed, holding back her anger and forcing a genial smile.

"Yeah," she said, an edge of sarcasm creeping into her forced enthusiasm.

"Nice asses," Victor said. Emily blinked hard to keep from rolling her eyes back into her head. She had limits.

“Can I use your bathroom?” she asked Jacob.

“Yeah” he said, as she got up, already heading towards the door down the hall. She passed his cat, Max, and whispered, *Hi*, as they crossed paths in the hallway.

After freshening up, Emily stared into the mirror making uncomfortable eye contact as she tried to connect with herself, both to steel herself for the world, and to acknowledge the storm that was on the inside. No one really saw her but herself, she thought. With a final exhale, she left the bathroom and returned to the living room.

Emily's eyes were downcast as she reentered the room and climbed back into her spot on the couch, alongside Victor. He was describing a story and she didn't care to follow the details. Emily found herself looking away from his eye contact and her responses and contributions to the conversation were coming out terse. Victor's grin stayed plastered on his face as if he had been born with it etched there, but when the others went into the kitchen to fetch more drinks he glanced at her sideways with a warning glance and she saw the tightness in his jaw.

Emily's eyes widened and she forced a smile out. She tried to perk up, and give out more smiles as the conversation continued for the rest of the night. As they finally said their goodbyes, Emily and Victor headed to the bus stop with Samantha.

After seeing Samantha off, Emily and Victor waited for her bus next.

Emily looked over at Victor, hoping for a calm send-off, he was still holding on to her award.

“So, you wanna talk about that attitude?” Victor said.

“I'm sorry,” she shrugged. “I was just tired.”

“You're tired?” he said.

“Yeah, it was just a long night,” she mumbled.

“And what? Do you think that's my fault?”

“No,” she said. “No, no.”

“You do,” he said. “You do, don't you?”

Emily was desperate to go home. She was tired. Even at the expense of his anger and disappointment with her, she wanted to go home and sleep.

“I just want to go home,” she said. “Can we talk about this later? Maybe tomorrow?”

“No,” Victor said. He scoffed at her. He paced at the bus stop. Emily prayed silently for her bus to get here quickly. For better or worse the torment would be over for the night, at least. A bus was in the offing, starting to come into view. Although the headlights were bright enough to be seen she couldn't read the banner yet.

She looked back at Victor, just in time to see his right arm raise as he threw the award down at the sidewalk a few squares

ahead of them with enough force for it to smash and shatter into several pieces, skittering along the pavement. Emily cringed as he stalked back towards her, his face as calm as if he had just stepped away for a moment to discard litter into a bin.

“There,” he said. “You didn’t deserve an award for today, right?” He laughed at his own joke. Victor grabbed her arm tightly, pulling her closer but the bus was coming into view and it was *hers!* He reluctantly let go, and she wiped fresh tears away from her eyes as she got ready to board the bus while it creaked up to them at the stop.

“Don’t call me tonight,” he said. “I’ll call you when I feel like it.”

“Bye,” she mumbled, not wanting to be sweet nor aggressive as she made her exit, her escape. She quickly boarded the bus, hoping that she didn’t look like too much of a mess to the driver as she scanned her card and the passengers as she quietly made her way to an isolated seat and looked out the window. She could see Victor watching her bus as it idled, the doors closed, and it began to pull away. Then he stalked off in the opposite direction towards his train station. She felt free of him, free of this night. At last. She couldn’t wait to get home. She didn’t want to call.

~

At home, Emily did not want to call Victor. She slept quietly, but not peacefully. She felt defeated, and alone. She felt sorry for

herself, and at the same time, angry with herself for letting this happen. Why did she let him treat her this way? Why was she around someone who tried so hard to push her down. To make her fall, and to hurt. In the morning she fed Wexler and drank a cup of coffee while sitting with him on the couch, watching the news with the volume down low, as she barely paid attention to it. The TV made her feel less alone, and in touch with the rest of the normal world, that she should be a part of.

After eating a small breakfast she thought about calling her family, her sister, or her Mom, but thought better of it. What could she say to them, really? She wasn’t going to tell them the things that he said to her. What he asked her to do. Finally, she decided to call Lola, a friend from college that she had reconnected with recently. Their friendship went way back and every conversation seemed to pick up with ease no matter how long it had been since the last one. They had a “low – maintenance” friendship, they liked to say.

Lola answered the phone after a couple of rings, and assured her that she had to stand up for herself. Emily left out, edited, and toned down much of the story, but the overall impression was still a compelling one for some distance and some much-needed self-care and healing away from the relationship.

She decided to go for a walk with Wexler and head to the park for some fresh air and a good dose of tree-supplied oxygen.

Wexler jumped around the alcove at the entry way as she tried to put on his harness, and happily let her take him up into her arms as she unlocked the door and stepped out into the building. Once outside, she placed him gently on the sidewalk after carrying him down the steps of their stoop – his legs were a little short to do the stairs on his own.

As they walked to the park her phone started ringing in the back pocket of her jeans but Emily ignored it. As they crossed the street, it rang again and she silenced the ringer. Walking into the park, it rang a third and fourth time and she checked to see who it was before silencing it again and returning it to her pocket. Victor. She took Wexler into the dog run and chose a bench to watch him from as she unhooked the leash from his harness and let him shoot out for a circle around the expanse of the run like a furry bullet.

Another call came in and Emily changed the phone to vibrate, and then to silent, when the calls kept coming. After watching the small dogs playing in the run for a few minutes she absorbed the safe energy that she felt coming from the sun, the trees, and the sky. She felt as if the universe was looking out for her, and trying to embrace her. With a deep breath, she fished her phone out of her pocket and switched it on to see what the damage had gotten to now.

36 missed calls and 12 new text messages, it notified her. As another call started coming in, Emily picked up the phone.

“Hello,” she said, giving away nothing.

“Why aren’t you answering?” Victor said. “I need to talk to you.”

“I’m walking Wexler,” Emily replied.

“I’m sorry about last night,” Victor said. His tone remorseful, and almost frantic. There was a pause as silence filled the space where Emily was supposed to tell him that it was alright.

“Why aren’t you answering me?” he demanded, sounding like a child who requested ice cream from his Mom, instead of a man who had been hurting her deep inside, scratching and digging at the surface of her soul with his ragged nails, trying to soil as much of the pureness of her heart as he could possibly tarnish.

There were two sides to him, she thought. This helpless, apologetic, childish side, that wanted to love her and be happy with her, and couldn’t stand when she was upset. And then, his other side. The one that calculated the best way to strike her mind, through behavior, through action, through demands. The one that had absolutely no mercy or remorse but presented a calm, cool demeanor to anyone nearby.

Emily watched Wexler stop running to bark at a bird. He seemed assured that the bird needed to be addressed. She lifted her legs off the floor and curled them underneath her on the bench.

“I don’t think I want to be with you, anymore.” Emily said. Hurling the words out into the distance between them, words that would change her life, but spoken calmly, stoically. Now it was Victor’s turn to be silent.

After a pause, “No you have to. You have to be with me. I need you. I’m sorry, okay. I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t behave like that. I don’t know what came over me. I love you.”

This might have worked in the past but he had given these speeches so many times, and her heart and psyche couldn’t take the beating anymore. It was too much, it was too often, it was too immoral. His evilness, no matter what good might exist in there too, was just too strong for her to continue being with him. She had given up that he would change, because instead, it was getting worse.

The previous fight they had, Victor had slapped her across the face, hard. She didn’t think he even enjoyed doing it. He did it because he knew that it would hurt her psychologically. One of her parents had been hurt this way in the past, and it was something that Emily was still very troubled over. He knew that if he did this to her, it would cut deep. Much deeper than the brief sting that she felt on her face. It would give her a sense of utter defeat and hopelessness.

“I can’t,” Emily said. “I don’t want to do this anymore, I’m sorry.” She felt disembodied, her voice a new one. A new Emily that was taking over, taking care of her.

“I’ll kill myself if you leave me,” Victor lashed out at her. Emily paused, she wasn’t prepared for this. She wiped sweat from her forehead. Why hadn’t she picked a bench with more shade? She found that she didn’t care much about his distress. But she couldn’t have something like this on her conscience, no matter who it was.

“No,” she said. “No, you won’t do that. Please.”

“No, it is fine,” Victor said. “Maybe this is for the best. You know, this is just what I have to do. But if you won’t stay with me, then I will kill myself. I will tell everyone that it wasn’t your fault. No one will blame you. This is just the way that it has to be.”

Emily bit her lip with frustration. Why wasn’t he letting her go? She had decided. This was her decision.

“No, okay fine.” she gave in. Her tone dull. She felt momentarily defeated.

“Fine, what?” he said.

“I will stay with you,” Emily said. She looked out at the park, seeing the playground on the other side where kids were running around and playing while their parents and babysitters were helping them along, or watching them from the side, making sure they were safe.

“I will stay with you, then.” she repeated. Trying to sound confident in the words that she spoke, that he needed.

“Okay,” he said. His voice brightening.

“Um, can I talk to you tomorrow?” She tried, hoping to get off the phone.

“Sure,” he said, his voice becoming congenial and silky once again, his ego soothed by getting what he needed. Emily hung up the phone and sat there, contemplating her decision. She didn’t really have a choice. She couldn’t have someone’s suicide on her hands. As much as she felt she really needed to free herself now, that this was too much, suicide was far worse. She couldn’t have that on her conscience, she just couldn’t.

And she couldn’t stop it, either, if his threat wasn’t a bluff. He had shown his willingness to be impulsively violent. And the recent escalation backed up his claims. She felt defeated. She would have to do this now. At least temporarily. Maybe, maybe he would break up with her again and she could fade away into the distance, escape his grasp and let him think that it was his idea....

~

The next few days were slow and seemingly uneventful. Her haze of resignation made everything seem a bit boring, and like she was waiting for the hammer to drop to see what would possibly come next. And then, it happened. On Wednesday he got upset with her. He hemmed, he hawed, he disavowed himself of

her. He hung up, and she smiled. A simple smile as if she had a secret, spread across her face. Gentle, peaceful, and she felt the stirrings of encouragement. There were no calls or texts for a day or so, and then he blew up her phone once again. She ignored him. She was free now. This was it.

Leaving work on Friday, she made her way into the first floor lobby and was heading to the exit when she heard her name.

“Emily!” She turned and saw Victor waiting for her on the side, a bouquet in his hands. She made a beeline for him and walked him out as quickly as she could into the park across the street from her office.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I love you. I didn’t mean it.” Emily was reserved and she did not mean to budge.

“No,” she said. “It is over. I am really done.” She willed strength into her face, adopting the confident demeanor that showed this was her choice. She was independent of this now. Victor’s face became desperate, he begged her, he followed her to the train. He threatened to stalk her at her home. When that didn’t work he said he would never give up on her. That he would always be waiting for her. She left him at the train platform as she firmly boarded her subway alone, with the other commuters. His pleading face was visible through the train car doors, but she didn’t budge.

Arriving home, she felt free. She asked Lola if she was free and they made plans right away to meet at a restaurant around the corner from Emily's apartment. At the restaurant Emily gave her the news, and after a couple of margaritas with her dinner, she dished a little bit more detail about the nature of their relationship. Lola balked, and was extremely indignant.

She wanted to hunt him down, she wanted to hold Emily close. She settled for walking Emily to her apartment where they sat for hours, talking and crying, as she finally released some of the burden that she had been holding onto alone.

Wexler was not sure what all the commotion was about, but he was happy to snuggle in next to his mom on the couch and receive her frequent pats and kisses, although they were sometimes a bit wet from her tears.

~

A few weeks later, Emily went to a yoga class with Lola, who invited her friend David, too. They walked through Central Park afterwards, and sat around at a picnic table drinking their water bottles and having healthy conversations. Emily felt so full. Full of health. Full of options for a life that went in a positive direction.

She looked back in her mind on herself a few weeks ago and saw a different person there. A different version of Emily that was

sad, dark, alone. Haunted, injured, hopeless. She apologized to her. For the pain. She gave her compassion.

And then she thanked her current self. She was so grateful. You did it, she thought. You saved her. One Emily had saved the other. She had replaced herself in a way. There was a fresh Emily now, almost like she had been reborn.

Like a snake that has gone through a season in its time and has to shed his skin. Casting off the scales that no longer served him, slithering out in a fresh body of newly constructed healthy cells that pulsed under the sun. Vibrant, vital, continuing.

Emily was revived.

She glanced at Lola and David, grateful to have her own friends. None of her friends with Victor were speaking to her now. She hadn't said anything to them, really, about what happened, but she heard from Lola that he was telling lies to explain away their break up. He seemed to claim that he dumped her for cheating on him, or something of the sort.

Lola had tried to back her up, but Emily wasn't strong enough or invested enough to tell the truth to people who were already turned against her. Starting fresh, she thought.

David was a more recent friend. Lola's boyfriend Chad knew him from college and he was a new fixture in their group, along with Chad. David was interested in yoga, and he loved

nature. He seemed to have a gentle way about him which Emily couldn't help but admire. He looked to be quite strong, and yet, he had more grace to him than many people she had met.

As they left the park, Emily said she wished that Wexler were here to bark at all of the birds chirping in the trees.

"You have a dog?" David said, visibly intrigued.

"Yes," she said, laughing slightly. "He is an adorable little Yorkie with a big personality," she summed up. "Here, let me show you," she said, taking out her phone. She zipped through her camera roll to find a recent pic she snapped of Wexler playing with a stuffed animal squirrel that rivaled him in size.

"Ohhh," David said, "Cute," he confirmed. "I love dogs." Emily smiled, pleased.

"You have to meet him!" Lola said. "He is very friendly."

"Cool," David said, looking to Emily.

"Yeah," she agreed, "Come over sometime and you guys can hang out," she winked.

Emily was wary these days, much more wary of people. Even the ones that she had known for years. But the way that David looked at her, the way he seemed to be both gentle and appreciative of nature, warmed her heart a bit. She could feel herself tilting a little bit towards him, like the tendrils of a fern

unfurling tentatively, feeling the light from the sun and pushing up towards it.

She had left Victor and no matter how much damage that relationship had done to her psyche, her hope was intact. Her appreciation for love, and the serenity that she found in nature were still in her possession. And she knew she could move forward.

~