

It's a Prehistoric Ritual

by Keeley Young

Eddie
Maggie
Pete

The Wedding

The flower girl tossed oval-shaped white-and-pink petals in a dysfunctional array, letting petals fall onto laps and under chairs and wherever the gusts of wind would take them. She wasn't any child they knew, or else maybe they would've been watching on with awe. Instead, as she passed them by and tossed a handful of petals right into Maggie's lap, the three siblings were looking back at emptiness. Everything to them seemed slower than usual. As if the bride was still asleep in bed, or still washing her hair in the shower. It was an outdoor wedding in a garden, it was a cool autumn day, and the little flower girl had reached the end of the aisle. The groom bent down, awkward in the suit, and gave her a hug much shorter than her anarchic trot carrying the little knotted basket. Eddie, Maggie, and Pete were sitting towards the back of the Bride's Side, each with a date slotted beside them, like an unoriginal coded pattern.

Maggie, and then Logan. Eddie, and then Calum. Pete, and then Jada.

They barely knew the groom. He was a dark-haired Christian who worked in marketing and had moved up from Melbourne, ironically right after the bride had spent two weeks in the Victorian city visiting her cousins. The bride – Alicia – is the daughter of family friends, old-time next-door neighbours of the Garveys, until they moved away after Alicia's parents split up. The wedding invitation came to no surprise – it seemed like it was practically love at first sight, and their Instagram posts of each other rung through like wedding bells long before the envelope. Maggie sat at her little dining table, pen in hand, ready to tick the boxes off the menu – half the choices weren't to her taste, it made it very easy – when she suddenly had that light-bulb moment. The wedding would be the first time she actually met the groom in person.

Another little girl had started to walk down the aisle, this time floating the petals more delicately, watching in awe as each petal cascaded in front of her eyes. The little girl locked eyes with Maggie and tossed a furling-up petal to her, and it nestled in her palm, and Maggie froze up, staring at the flower girl without words. She knew, of course, there was no need for any – and yet she'd felt a silence overtake her anyway. Then another tight squeeze, and the groom's little sisters squatted in the front row, and there were taller, slender figures stepping up onto the wooden deck. Bridesmaids.

Pete's knee bumped into Calum's, and they glanced at each other, nodding their apologies, uttering them softly as a goddess with red hair sniffed at her bouquet of flowers. Perhaps the wind had swilled a potent perfume, and it caught her off-guard – but she was in the front, the shortest of the bridesmaids, and she straightened her back and pretended she had never had allergies in her life. Maggie scanned their faces like she worked the security detail – she didn't know a single one of them. University friends, maybe, or work friends. Or girls who were getting married too, she thought, tasting something in her mouth. Logan, by then, was holding her hand, the one not clasping tight to a crumpled flower petal. She knew how it'd look if she brushed off his hand, as if all the attention might just shift to her - but it didn't change how, regrettably, she'd only invited him after her brothers told her they were bringing along plus ones. She'd woken up that morning beside him, in their little rented Airbnb, telling him she'd made that little shriek from a nightmare. It was barely anything, she'd said. But in her dreams, all she'd seen was herself standing in a Hollywood Glam wedding dress, half-coated in a green liquid. The image repeating in a carousel, green dripping from her hair.

In her silly dream, she'd been slimed.

The last bridesmaid was standing in line, balancing unconvincingly on one foot as she adjusted the strap of her heel. She looked in one moment as if she were about to topple over, and then the next she was straightening herself out, reminding the other bridesmaids she was the tallest, a whole two inches taller than the woman beside her. She and Eddie made eye-contact, briefly, an awkward exchange that was forgotten as soon as he turned his head, grinning at Calum. Weddings have their own secret language, almost. One simple stare, and the two understood one another – nothing had happened yet, but everything would happen soon, or later. Calum winked at him. The bridesmaids in their perfectly-rehearsed row suddenly loosened, awash with that boastful pride and rosy-red sentiment.

The bride was walking down the aisle. She clung to her father's arm, with every speck of attention drawn on them. It was like doves were flying overhead – but someone pressed the speed-through button, and she made it to the love of her life standing there in front of the crowd, and they didn't have even a split second to stare into each other's eyes before the something-new officiant was beginning in on a spiel, her voice sweet and breathy. The bride and groom laughed and smiled and cried and wiped their eyes and kissed. Maggie and Eddie looked at each other, as if agreeing with an unspoken thought shared between their brains.

The wedding was boring, and short. The married couple kissed again as they disappeared down the hill for more photographs, and the guests stood like they were dangling on the edge of a cliff, waiting to be told they could step back, pass each other up a flight of stairs, and start to get drunk at the reception. At the base of the steps, Pete gripped tight to the phone in his hand, pressed against his ear. It's radio silence from him as he listens to a voice on the other end, a voice running like rapids. His eyes, similarly caught in one place, hadn't broken their stare from looking up at Eddie, who was leaning against the railing of the balcony, waiting on him.

Inside, already, Maggie kept her eyes closed, her underwear around her ankles.

There was a knock on the bathroom door – she deflated with her sigh.

“Surely you literally watched me come in here,” she said, grabbing at toilet paper.

Photo Booth

There was a photo booth in the corner, a crowd pleaser, swarmed over and over by the little kids and still popular enough with the adults, although they never seemed to sneak their little heads into the bottom of any of the snapped little squares. You could glue one of the copies into the wedding guestbook, if you wanted, and they nudged you in the direction of the little book – Eddie, Maggie and Pete were standing in the opposite corner to the guestbook, sipping at their first drinks of the reception.

“Where's Logan?” Eddie said, glancing at the empty spot beside his sister.

Maggie was watching two little girls leap out of the photobooth, almost falling over as they halted to make sure they didn't leave their strips of funny faces and peace signs in the tray. She shook herself out of it, answering Eddie. “He's exploring, I think.” Maggie took a sip. “He wanted to go check out around the corner over there, probably thinks they're hiding the good food that way.”

Jada was straightening out the skirt of her dress as she sidled up beside Pete, giving him a grin that was flushed with uncertainty. “I just said hello to a hundred different people I don't know,” she said, staring out at the crowd of people moving around catching up with one another. An elderly woman walked by and complimented Jada and Maggie on how beautiful they looked, almost lurching out to pat the two men beside them, as if to say, you chose well, boys. As if the twins didn't look similar at all, although ever since Eddie hit puberty and Maggie started wearing bras it wasn't like they did anymore. The one physicality they seemed to share most noticeably was seemingly never knowing

what to do with their hands. Weddings weren't an exception – as Maggie polished off her first drink, she dangled the glass in her hand, awkwardly looking around for a table to abandon it on. Everyone else seemed to be guarding the compact circle tables, and she figured facing off against a dragon had no logic to it. She started staring at the ice, four petite cubes she suddenly wished were crystals instead, and that the glass was the vial to protect them. She let the ice somersault and crash into itself – and without noticing, she'd completely tuned out the soft twine of the music and her brothers and Jada and the little girls that made her fallopian tubes whine. Maggie wanted to stab her fallopian tubes, and she thought of the glass she was holding in her hand, surely sharp enough to cause some damage. She'd just have to do it while she was dreaming tonight, shelving that wedding-dress-dream for as long as she could.

Pete and Jada were telling Eddie about how the bathroom door in their motel room doesn't open completely, and the way Pete was describing it when Jada was unzipping her suitcase made her think she would have to become a contortionist just to be able to take a shower or sit on the toilet. Maggie excused herself to go look for Logan around the corner. The date. Logan said she was more stunning than any other girl he's ever been to a wedding with – and he laughed it off, like don't stress too much on that Maggie, *I've only been to a wedding with two other girls*. Of course, she didn't care, she almost thought about pretending to be jealous just to stroke him without needing to touch him, yet. Around the corner, she immediately saw him, standing next to a complete stranger, in the middle of some fully-formed conversation. She met Logan after they matched on a dating app, and after two dates she flung him the plus-one invitation and told him maybe he'd get lucky.

The weirdo said it didn't matter to him, she remembered, taking another step forward towards her date. Suddenly the glass she was holding felt heavier, and she set it down on a table without a single hesitation. Now her arms hung limply at her sides, but she'd passed off the crystals to a server, hopefully, and maybe the weight in her body could slowly find its way down to her feet again. Logan and the stranger hadn't noticed her yet, and wouldn't, until she stood beside them both and the only words she could think of saying were, "I thought this man had pulled a runaway bride on me."

Calum was pulling Eddie and Pete into the photobooth, with a cheeky little grin on his face. They squished against the felted back wall as Calum fiddled with the screen and selected 'Black and White' and they waited for the countdown. 3, 2, 1. Snap. Pete squinted against the flashing lights, caught off-guard as Calum gave his hand a squeeze.

Looking back at the wedding, it was as if a little voice spoke like a cricket all around their heads, whispering out,

"The electricity between them was always noticeable from the moment they met."

Another flash of the camera. Eddie left the booth first, suddenly blasted back by the shrill scream of someone's daughter, a little girl in a cream dress with shoes that sounded like she was tap dancing around the other party guests. "Can I get you a drink?" Pete said, smirking. Calum didn't take his eyes off him after that. It was an answer, in some sense, before he could spit out a yes, and before they both walked out of the photo booth and saw Eddie bent over the guestbook table, glue stick in hand. He'd harshly torn off one of the three greyed-out photos, one little square in the corner of a fresh page. Pete poked him in the ribs on each side, and whispered into his ear, "I'm stealing your date for a drink". Eddie chuckled as he tried thinking of something poignant and original to write beside the photo. He turned to ask his brother if he thought 'call me if there's ever a divorce party!' was too over-the-top, and he realised everyone was gone, and there was just an elderly man staring at him from the corner. The blank page stared back at him.

He started to write. *Congratulations!* Generic, he thought, trying to figure out how to end the message without eventually saying '*Love from Eddie, Pete, and Calum (I guess you don't know him)*'. He flipped back through other responses – the shorter they were, the more ordinary they seemed, with

some people writing out ALL THE BEST in big, blocky letters. And then, a little more subtle, ‘You’ll remember this day for the rest of your life’, which warranted, he thought to himself, that it could be the happiest day of your life or the day you made the greatest mistake possible in committing so strongly to this one person. Eddie was stumped. He figured that maybe if he used his full name, Edmund, maybe if his message felt empty alongside the other million messages, the bride wouldn’t remember that next-door Eddie is really an Edmund, that maybe Edmund is an old-fashioned gentleman who stumbled into the wedding party looking for a whiskey and a chance to shed a few tears over how beautiful the union between two people seemingly always is. Well, within reason, he thought to himself, committing pen to paper. He jotted down something that felt right, that felt true – he wanted the best for the couple, he didn’t want to be on the invitation list for a divorce party, because he’d be pretending to be overemotional about another relationship falling apart, when his did all the time.

Eddie thought about ducking back into the photo booth by himself, even just to avoid the attention of standing alone out in the open. He couldn’t help himself watch Pete laugh off something Calum said, and wait for the drinks, and strangely, Eddie didn’t think he was losing a date at all.

He’d texted Calum about a week before the wedding.

Hey, I need a date for my old neighbour’s wedding. You in?

They’d met back in university, kept in touch in the sort of way two old coworkers keep in touch – they would message each other here and there, bump into each other in random places, occasionally invite each other over for dinner and wind up making out on the sofa. But they never wanted to date each other, because there were creative differences, is how Calum always liked to put it. They’d tried for a week or two, back in their second year of university. It was like they were piecing together a production of an original play, but the actors couldn’t figure out how to pretend, and the costume director was fired too soon. So, they would stay friends.

Let me drive at least.

On the trip up, because the wedding was two hours away by car, they took a detour at just over halfway there to lick their lips of grease. Calum came back from the toilet suddenly deciding they make another detour still, but the destination would stay a surprise, just to add some spice into your life, he said. They drove away from the small towns and the train stations and Calum pulled up at a lookout point halfway up a mountain, and they gazed out at the trees and the fields and the ant-houses and he glanced over at Eddie and said, “I need to get laid at this wedding, Eddie.”

Pete watched the baby bubbles rise in the glass, forgetting for a minute that he’d just handed a drink to an attractive gay guy that had been flirting with him for most of the wedding and its reception so far. He only seemed to want to drink champagne at events like this – weddings; birthdays for his sister or her friends, if he was invited; after Maggie had graduated from university. He liked the taste enough for the celebration, but he never found himself sitting around one Friday afternoon after the worst week – before another worse week rolled around – thinking to himself, gee I could really go for some champers right now. Calum took a sip, glancing round as if he were back atop that mountain view, admiring the scenery. He felt strange in silence.

“So, you’d know all of Eddie’s secrets then?” He said, clutching to the cool glass.

Pete stopped imagining himself floating around in a pool of champagne to answer. “I guess so,” he whispered, mostly to himself. Then, speaking to Calum clearly, “But shouldn’t you care more about mine.” His line came out smoother than he thought, but he wasn’t straight out of a rom-com or a comedy sketch about how to fail at picking up the person you want to fool around with.

Calum paused to consider it, hiding a chuckle that kept slipping out from the corners of his mouth. He took another sip from his champagne glass. “I guess so,” he said, laughing it off.

Pete thought that maybe he could’ve said something else, but he didn’t.

Swing

Eddie patted his stomach like he'd swallowed the entire carcass of a dead horse, but he'd filled up largely on the *hors d'oeuvres* before even the entrée had come around. One of the kids at the neighbouring table was watching him, laughing their head off, and Eddie slid upright, unsure whether to be embarrassed or make a bigger fool of himself if he played it up to entertain a kid he didn't even know. Unsurprisingly, though, he'd enjoyed the entrée, the main and the dessert, and he didn't even want to glance at the cake. Once he'd finished dessert, Pete had excused himself to the bathroom, and Maggie sat on the other side of Calum gliding her spoon around the plate, scraping up the little crumbs of cheesecake base. She hadn't really spoken much to Logan the entire time they were sitting down next to each other – it was hard to not notice it.

When chatter picked up once again, and no one seemed to be left swallowing down their food, everyone seemed to start floating around like clouds, or make their way to the dance floor. Calum and Pete had headed back to the bar for another drink, pretending they were both on accident thirsty for a refill at the same time. Maggie laughed off having to hike up her dress again in the bathroom, and Eddie looked down at his bladder, grateful he went before they came and probably wouldn't touch porcelain until he crashed back at the rental. Jada said it didn't even matter she didn't know anyone else at this wedding, she could get up there and swing her hips and sing the lyrics alongside the wedding party and the families. Eddie was watching everyone else figure out how to have fun at this wedding without him, and it was strange, but not in a self-deprecating way. He could figure out the rhythm if he wanted, or disappear into the night, or...and he supposed Maggie was peeing, not exactly having the time of her life. He looked up, catching Logan's eye.

"Then there were two," he said awkwardly, starting maybe the fourth conversation he'd had with Logan all day. It was friendly between them, but they were mostly distracted by other people, or sitting silent as someone delivered a speech about how they'd waited for this day since little Alicia was crawling around trying to destroy the furniture with her little kitten claws. Logan let one of his walls down. He needed to remind himself he came here to let loose, even just a little.

He set down his glass and scooted his chair closer to Eddie. "Let's not be two strangers then," he said, glancing around the room for a second. He didn't know anyone, not even the married couple. "You know my name, right?" He chuckled after that, scooting his chair a little bit closer again. There were two chairs in between them, tucked in, but Logan didn't make the move to sit right beside Eddie, at least not yet.

"I know enough," Eddie replied. His smile curved up into a smirk, like he was gripping onto a piece of information in his head he could use against Logan – but really, truly, his mind was blank, and he wanted to egg Logan on out of boredom more than anything. He'd brought a date that was more single than he was – what did he expect?

Logan set his arms down resting on the back of the chairs in between the two of them. He smirked too, and he said, "I know Maggie only wanted me here so she'd have a date. Apparently, her last couple boyfriends didn't work out, and maybe you didn't think they were good enough for her too," and he paused, tapping the chair with two of his fingers. "I didn't mean that to be rude, though. I don't mean to be annoyed that I'm a puppet."

"It's like she should be swearing off men lately," Eddie said.

"I don't want to pry."

"You're not. Maggie's open about everything."

“I like being around her, but I’ve been talking to you for about a minute and there’s about 90% less of a haze, of a confusion about where things stand.” Logan stops himself, drawing his arms backward away from Eddie.

“10% because I’m still a stranger you’ve barely met?”

Logan paused again, trying to lighten himself up. He felt his shoulders relax and he eased his arms onto the backs of the chairs, remembering he was at a wedding, and the first notes of *Summer Lovin’* started ringing in his ears. “Something like that.” He listened to Olivia Newton-John sing like she was the ocean herself. “Tell me more about yourself though, I guess I’m curious.”

tell me more, tell me more.

Eddie started rambling on not about his job, or his siblings – trying not to involve Maggie in any of the forks he led Logan down, to spare the reminder that she’d disappeared into the night like a bat. Out of nowhere, really, he started first by telling Logan that his family hadn’t always lived in this country, as if he were telling a dramatic immigrant tale that would go on to be nominated for Best Picture at the Oscars. But he let the grandiosity of it all fall away when he said that he didn’t feel like he belonged outside of Australia, because he’d been born here, and his parents had too. It was his dad’s parents that had immigrated, migrated here when staying in Latvia could have meant they wouldn’t gain much of anything, or worse – would have lost so much more. Eddie didn’t know much of his grandparents, except that they had his father only five months after arriving in Australia, and that they died before Eddie was two years old. His grandmother was first – she died before he was born, the year after Brandon was born. She’d been sick for some time, Eddie’s father would always say in recounting their lives. Eddie’s grandfather died when Eddie and Maggie were one – he rolled over in the middle of the night and did not roll back.

Eddie suddenly snapped out of it, realizing he’d been telling a depressingly long story that ended in death to Maggie’s date, who was intrigued, more than anything. Logan asked a question that threw him even more off balance: “You have another brother?”

He’d forgotten, even for a second, that Brandon would be amongst those clouds in some sort of perverted loop trying to explain to those grandparents that he’d blown his brains out on purpose. From stories, Eddie supposed they wouldn’t seem to understand how complex Brandon seemed to be – even Eddie himself didn’t fully know how to remember his brother, because he had been so young, and Brandon had been so man-behind-the-curtain.

Eddie thought about shoving a guard in front of the drawbridge to his heart, but then stopped, realising fancy wordplay or navigating around his brother’s death just made him more uncomfortable.

“He was older than me, yeah. He died when I was little.”

And that covered it well, and he noticed it was one of the few times he’d mentioned his older brother, because most times he skirted the topic, pretending he was the oldest, even though it felt clunky and off, because even Pete seemed to feel older to him. He remembered how one of his aunts, Cynthia, kept making those remarks one Christmas when she was drunk on brandy and non-alcoholic eggnog – *you’ve got triplets, not twins, triplets!* In other ways, though, Pete was always one year younger. Maybe he liked being separate.

Logan took the silence to slide out of his chair and into the one right beside Eddie, so the two were face to face now, closer than they had been, and Eddie unashamedly took a more intricate stock of Logan’s eyes. They were a green-blue colour, like an untreated pool, but he tried to think of them as oceanic, turning the whites of his eyes into sand dunes and clouded skies. He caught himself red-handed in finding this new way of being attracted to Logan, but he’d spent too many years already getting used to sealing up vaults of emotions. Like the vault he had for his brother, he supposed.

It wasn’t too difficult for Brandon to cry out for him.

But he hadn’t cried at this wedding yet, no one at their reception table had, really.

Eddie cleared his throat and told Logan that he was okay, and he was, in truth, no longer on the verge of a breakdown. He'd become too adept at burying his emotions, his therapist said once, in a session that ended with him letting a few tears roll down his cheek at the mention of Charlotte's fourth birthday. Sometimes he slipped – but he picked himself back up, and now his ears were being violated by an old party-playlist song from the 00s he'd thought he'd escaped when they stopped with the school discos after Year 7. It didn't matter that he didn't remember the name of it.

Jada swerved past an elderly couple with a glass of Lemon, Lime & Bitters in her hand, making her way back to the table. She took a sip, told Eddie and Logan she'd basically just won a dance battle against someone's teenage son – *in this dress!* – and dipped out toward the photo booth and the scattering of people staring out at the darkened view. Within seconds, they could no longer see where she'd disappeared to. Logan laughed, and they both realised out of everyone that had been sitting at this table, Jada was enjoying herself the most – and they paused, thinking, why are we just sitting here talking about ourselves?

They knew why, in a sense, although neither of them needed to speak it. They'd have time for dancing, and laughing, and making fools of themselves in front of the wedding videographer. They would have time for that, give it time, but Eddie still knew next to nothing about Logan, and it made him feel self-centered. But not for tonight – he was caught on why, when Maggie said her plus-one was a guy he and Pete hadn't met before, Eddie had halted the enthusiasm right at the idea that maybe Maggie was moving on from those other insane asylum lunatics. It felt, he realised, awkward to focus so extremely on her mistakes – dating them were mistakes, but she'd be patching herself up with every step, he hoped, and still he was looking at Logan half-indulging on the past. It was wrong to, he knew that. He knew he wanted to know more about Logan, and it wasn't selfishly. He hoped.

Logan jokingly said he wouldn't start all the way back at whatever his grandparents had been doing when they were in their 20s, because it was probably just a lot of sex until they popped out another baby. His dad's parents had eight children, but his mum was an only child, so there must have been a sort of stalemate, he said, grinning, where his parents decided two children was not only enough but meant Logan wouldn't be one to grow up alone. As he started to tell Eddie about his favourite subject in high school – it was Modern History – and about how much he loved his job – he was a primary school teacher, teaching grade four at the moment – Eddie felt that weird rash of guilt again, wishing it was Maggie who was forging this connection with Logan. Guilt, too, for feeling any sort of attraction to someone that is probably just looking to at least leave the wedding with a new friend, a buddy – Eddie felt his skin become rubber. Or jelly that would puddle and pool.

Logan was telling him a story about one of his students, a girl named Aaliyah. She struggled when she was forced to read aloud in another class, so her parents had her moved into his class, hoping that maybe a different teacher could steer her in another direction that didn't involve forcing her to read aloud all the time. But that detail suddenly dropped off an edge and became irrelevant – because the story started once she was his student, and once he was making sure she wasn't struggling like she had been. His story, actually, was about the day she turned up with violet hair. She was beaming, like it wasn't a mistake, or a prank gone wrong – and she walked up to his desk and said, 'my hair's purple now like my mum's, and we're just trying to make my auntie smile, because she became a girl and got fired for it.' Or it was something like that, he said, saying he got an email later in the day too from the student's mum, with a donation link at the bottom and a note mentioning that if the hair colour is against school policy they can dye it right back, but maybe she'd just start wearing purple socks instead.

It made Eddie feel weak, made him feel sympathetic and numb. But he knew it was supposed to only make him feel proud, and he didn't want to think anymore about his past. Parts of it made him shudder, like it took stepping across a frozen lake to reach them again. Maybe he started to regret bringing Calum along to the wedding. Maybe you can accept being alone in a different way, he thought.

He didn't realise he'd just been staring at the table, silent, but he wasn't thinking about Calum anymore, or the girl from Logan's class, or his siblings, wherever they were. He was suddenly thinking about dancing now, about shaking out the cobwebs that were trying to make a mess in his head. Eddie knew he was a pretty ordinary dancer, but he shifted his gaze and caught a clearly tipsy redhead with glasses losing his mind on the dancefloor, so Eddie supposed he at least probably wouldn't poke someone's eye out or break their nose with his elbow.

Logan seemed to read his mind, although it wasn't as if he were being coy with where his mind seemed to be wandering off to. "Do you want to dance with me?" He said, and Eddie looked at him, smiling, as if it were the first time someone was asking him to dance. But he had to remind himself, he's not coming to sweep you off your feet –

Out on the dance floor, little kids were flailing their arms around, almost spinning tops in chaotic whirls, and the bride and groom were letting their hair down, figuratively, because the groom was almost bald. The bride's bare feet hit then left the wooden floor of the reception hall as she bounced off invisible springs. As Eddie moved forward, he switched his phone off, hoping he didn't need to be distracted by it at any time during the rest of the night. Logan and Eddie squeezed into a gap in the crowd, finding their groove amongst the loose and out-of-sync dancing that a song like *The Best* by Tina Turner warrants. Eddie couldn't help himself, mouthing along to the lyrics, barely a footstep away from Logan. Logan would laugh at his dance moves, but Eddie would laugh at his too, the sort of dance moves you'd probably catch the teacher doing at those school discos. Eddie would close his eyes, doing whatever he wanted to do with his body, singing out the words just quiet enough to not drown out the music or sound like he was doing karaoke hands-free, and he would open his eyes, catching Logan staring at him with that grin, a grin that – without words – said...something. He wasn't entirely sure how to read it. He thought, probably, at least Maggie's date – that she wasn't paying any attention to – was having plenty of fun without her. Logan blurted out a "YES!" when the next song started trickling out, and Eddie let the music move his arms, and his legs, and his eyes, everywhere from the ten-year-old kid doing the worm in a corner of the room that was empty to the bride getting a kiss on the cheek from the groom to Logan, moving in front of him, staying.

"The bride has requested another slower song," a bearded man spoke into a microphone, lining up the next track to be played out into the reception hall. It was an updated classic, a cover, made much slower with the singer's deep, potentially auto-tuned voice. Eddie and Logan looked at each other, and without words, they were pressed against each other, and it became virtually impossible for them to not stare into each other's eyes. Logan took the lead.

"So, the three of you brought dates you had no plans of actually dating?"

Eddie laughed, and then he felt himself tense. He thought of it all like he was locked out of the house and his house keys were sitting on a little table in the hallway, just out of reach. And yet he didn't want to go inside, because of flash flooding. *Of course*. He smiled. "Calum's an old friend, so at least I knew him long before the wedding," he said, immediately regretting it.

"Ouch."

"Oh – sorry about that, really," Eddie said, trying to smooth over the pothole.

"It's fine, to be honest. You feel like my date now."

He winked, and he laughed, and he changed the subject.

"I haven't danced like this since...the last wedding I went to, actually." He paused for a moment, before he started to tell Eddie about a wedding he went to with his ex-girlfriend two years ago. It was a cousin of his, who was getting married. Eddie zoned out a little by the time Logan was describing the wedding but caught the reason why they broke up – she wanted to move to Canada, and he didn't want to leave his family and his home. *Reasonable*, Eddie thought, getting lost in Logan's eyes

for a second there. Logan shrugged the past off, and they danced without words as the song drew to a close. They hadn't been paying attention to see if anyone noticed them, or stared or glared, and they didn't care in the slightest, and they had their reasons not to. The bearded man announced it was about to get back to the rave it ought to be, and the crowd did a sort of cheer, halfway between a rowdy exclamation and a whistle. The little kid did a vertical worm this time, thrusting his arms like he was more of a scarecrow out in the fields, forgetting to mind the crops – which meant, more or less, that he accidentally whacked into a couple people that were trying to move past him to sit back down at their tables. Eddie and Logan parted, but they seemed to agree without words that they'd had enough dancing for one night, and they tried to navigate around the little kid, who was singing the lyrics all wrong now, shutting out the world around him.

At the table, Eddie collapsed into his seat, and true to his word, Logan sat back down beside him, taking Calum's spot once again. They caught each other's attention for a moment, before Eddie turned away, watching the bride and groom disappear out the glass doors the opposite end of the reception hall. "Do you want to get breakfast tomorrow morning," Logan offered, drawing Eddie's gaze back to him, back to those emerald-city-in-winter eyes.

It was like they were making brunch dates, but they weren't dating, and what would Maggie even think of this? Eddie tried to distance his sister, because she was distancing herself, anyway.

"I guess we really are abandoning our dates," Eddie said, staring at his empty glass.

Logan cleared his throat. "I don't see them around fighting for us." He chuckled, and Eddie laughed too, waking himself from whatever had been fascinating him with that glass. It was uneventful and empty and there wasn't even a fly clinging with desperation to it, it was just some glass. He was just some stranger, then, he thought to himself – and we've had this amazing night with each other, but all I feel is guilt, guilt, guilt. Eddie tried to clear his head without giving off fresh signs to Logan, like he was trying not to alert the security guards on a prison break.

"I'll hopefully be hungry by then, we'll see," Eddie said, grinning. They took a weird moment to realise they didn't have any way to really contact each other, so they exchanged phones and typed in their phone numbers, and shrugged at each other, saying they might as well add each other on some form of social media too, because it wasn't like they planned on calling each other. They laughed at the world before it had texting and messaging, like all the world had to just hear each other's voices or wait weeks on end for a piece of paper to come in the mail.

The bride and groom were nowhere to be seen, but the celebration raged on, and an elderly man was passed out in the back of the reception hall in a chair pushed against the wall. Eddie and Logan were trying to keep themselves entertained without moving out of the chairs – they figured, were there many games you could play without a single prop, without a single item at all? Eddie laughed through a Never Have I Ever suggestion, telling Logan they could be tipsy teenagers again, getting all worked up over whether someone had their first kiss or not. It made him think about how he'd never been in a room to play Seven Minutes in Heaven, but almost every American tv show about high schoolers seemed to find a way to trap two of its characters in that tiny, cramped closet and force them to confront whatever feelings they had for each other. Sometimes it would be panting, sweaty make outs, and other times they would just aggressively glare at each other, ignoring the very obvious sexual tension between them. Eddie supposed those moments just passed him by, and that was alright – it wasn't like he'd stayed a virgin forever. Eddie couldn't think of anything else, and thought for a split second that maybe weddings needed to have more things to do this late into the night, because how many hours did the bride and groom really think people wanted to dance for?

It was Logan's serious suggestion that won it – Red Hands.

Eddie knew it would probably only entertain them for five minutes, but that little kid out on the dance floor was almost taunting him with his unwavering commitment to grooving his way into the hearts of all the other guests at the wedding. By the time the kid took a break to lie down on the floor, staring at the ceiling, Eddie wasn't paying attention – he was trying to avoid getting slapped by Logan's hands. He was flailing, compared to Logan's swiftness. For every near-miss or slap Eddie would stress through, Logan would avoid Eddie's hands without struggle, and it seemed like the game wasn't even a calculation for him. No wonder he chose it, Eddie thought, not lifting his eyes off the two sets of hands in the middle of the faux arena. And then what seemed like the impossible – Eddie's hands collided with Logan's, his lightning reflexes somehow off-guard. He felt like a child for cheering – they were playing a game for children, after all – but he celebrated his victory, breaking off the game for a split second. Their hands didn't part, and Eddie caught Logan staring back at him with those eyes.

It would have been the briefest of moments between them. But, caught in the moment, their faces inched closer together and not a single brain cell changed their minds, and they kissed.

Immediately after, Logan withdrew his hands back away and closed his eyes.

"Second time I've kissed a guy at a wedding," he said, shaking his head, laughing the decision off. He took a second to regroup himself, and then he added, "Neither time was the worst thing I've ever done, but the first time was a definite joke, at least."

Eddie sat in that chair in silence. He felt, first, a very strange embarrassment, like everyone at the wedding was watching someone dump pig's blood over his head. But then he felt a cool, calm wave rush over his body, and he felt inside the ocean, not floating atop it, but inside it. Underneath the surface, down in the depths, sinking to the bottom but he could breathe, he had gills. He was human with gills – he wasn't a mermaid; it didn't feel like a fantasy like that.

He exhaled out. "Look, I think that's just my fault," he said, glancing at Logan.

"It takes two people to kiss."

"You came to the wedding with my sister."

"I've never felt lonelier than how it felt realising she asked me here to just disappear after dinner, and to barely talk to me at all in between." Logan was staring at him like he was pleading a case, and Eddie was looking back feeling like he wanted to just pass out and fall asleep on the curb tonight, like he was warranted a bad night's rest after this night. He was projecting a nightmare, and the projection was a life-like replica.

"Can we go outside, please?" Eddie said, casting a quick glance around the reception hall. No one was looking at him, every single other person was distracted by something else, but he wanted fresh air, and he didn't want to abandon Logan to be all by himself.

Logan was happy to join him under the moonlit sky.

"This entire time, once Maggie disappeared – and there she was, outside, standing with Jada while she smoked a cigarette – this entire time, you've felt like my date, I wasn't lying about that," Logan said, as they walked side by side out the gates from the wedding venue and down the road. "I've had a really great night, and stupidly, I forgot who I was, who you were, where we were – all that."

The heartbeat of the wedding, the ear-numbing music, blared from somewhere behind them, and it slowly started to drown out with each step. There was space between them, a sort of courtesy to keep them from stumbling into each other and having to apologise for another thing.

Eddie was smiling to himself at this point, staring out at bushes and the darkened night sky. "Stupidly, the gay guy thinks he stands a chance with someone pretending to be instantly close with him." He laughed at himself, taking a second to look beside him, hoping Logan wasn't stopped dead in his tracks laughing right at him too.

"I still want to have breakfast with you tomorrow," Logan said.

“But it’s not a date.” Eddie grinned, and then without pause, his gut twisted in on itself.

Sometimes, they’ve said, you can find love at a wedding. Sometimes the best man is caught with his pants around his ankles, and he’s in there doing the nasty with one of the bridesmaids, and then he might call her the next day, or he might never see her face again. Under the moonlight, Logan was looking at Eddie with an expression that wasn’t readable. Eddie was piecing together a puzzle that left him feeling nauseous and thinking cold, hard concrete could be comfortable.

Because, of course, Pete and Calum were probably locked up in the rental, making banging noises and not worrying about muffling their moans.

It didn’t make him feel anything though, which was a relief. A strange feeling, really. He could draw on that numbness if he needed to, and it became a side-kick in the inevitable – he knew he’d spent all night betting on odds that seemed impossible. Logan would go back to his schoolteacher life, staying on dating apps looking for a girlfriend to take away the feelings lost on his ex, and Eddie would just have a new friend he could maybe make plans to hang out with again, but it would be different this time, them laughing off that kiss they shared at a wedding, or never mentioning it ever again. It was strange. But he was hungry, too.

They walked for far too long into the night, forgetting where they were. Somewhere behind them was a wedding they no longer cared about, but it meant something, at least.

Eddie thought it meant something that their kiss wasn’t a joke, even though to him it felt like it had been. A cruel prank. But it wasn’t, he knew that too, because he wasn’t in high school anymore and surely Logan hadn’t just spent his entire night bullying him like that.

But he didn’t know what else to say about it, so all that replayed in his head was how he told Logan he thought he stood a chance, and “but it’s not a date”, and the dance they shared, and Red Hands. It was a lot to shuffle through, a medley of hits. Hits and misses, no doubt.

Swing II

He was too busy being distracted by the sudden *thum* in his pocket to realise Calum was downing the rest of his drink without a hesitation, clinking the glass down on the wood of the bar. It was a notification, so there was a chance Pete was getting something completely unimportant, but he couldn’t change his mind once he started thumbing around for a tight grip on the phone in his pocket. He read the notification in his head, a message from a coworker, actually his second-in-charge.

Pete glanced up for a second, noticing the empty glass. “Did you want another drink?” He asked, trying to hold Calum’s focus while he tried to process the message. She’d caught something, but not like she was in the stands at a cricket match – he could almost hear her pause, in between upchucks into the toilet, to type out the message she’d sent through. She was supposed to be in charge tomorrow, too, but now his head spun trying to piece together *something*. He shoved his phone into his pocket, clinging onto the bitter taste in his mouth – he’d barely registered that Calum said he was fine, that he’d need another drink later, after he’d dragged Pete out onto the dance floor.

“Should we make it a private dance floor,” Pete said, as more of a suggestion than a question, as he glanced over at the other guests at the wedding, and there was his brother, Eddie, sitting at the table still, talking innocently with Maggie’s date, Logan. The four of them had driven the two hours together – Pete and Jada up front, Maggie and Logan in the backseat. Pete made jokes at the start, when they were merging onto the highway – don’t get too touchy-feely back there, you too. But he’d watched them spend most of the wedding so far as two people that just happened to be sitting beside each other, so it warmed him, a little, to see that Logan wasn’t just twiddling his thumbs or drowning the thoughts out at the bar. In the car, at least they had seemed to be chatting, and playing I Spy out the windows to

waste the time – like he and Jada had been, although sporadically, mostly just talking about work and Pete would try to haphazardly explain how the three siblings had kept enough of a friendship with Alicia to be invited to her wedding. From the backseat, Maggie had piped in, reminding him Alicia had probably invited them *because* she was inviting Maggie, but after an hour and a half, she waved that decision out the window and said something more along the lines of “maybe her other old neighbours just didn’t want to drive two hours to see her in a white dress.” The sudden pessimism came from somewhere, and Pete knew it – when they’d stopped to let her out to use the toilet, she’d come back a changed person, gripping her phone in her hand and asking they just drive off now. A six-foot-two man with dirt brown hair refueling beside them stared at them as they left the petrol station, but the only person in the car to notice him was Jada, staring out the passenger seat window. She hesitated, weirdly, thinking about waving to him – but it made no sense to her, she was just bored, having grown tired of talking about whatever came to mind while she watched other cars sit at the same speed beside theirs.

Pete and Calum found their quiet spot out in the compact parking lot that only managed to house five cars – one, of course, was the tackily-strung wedding car, although they hadn’t painted the words “Just Married” anywhere on the vehicle. Streamers, though, dangled limply and seemed like future ocean décor more than anything. In the middle of the greyed concrete, they stood with only inches between them, and they didn’t dance. Pete leant in and kissed him, keeping his tongue at bay, for now. The stars had eyes and were peering down on the two men, who might’ve stripped off their clothes in the open, in the cool air, if their hands didn’t stop them.

It would’ve been a moment with flash if this were a movie.

“I was scared about thinking you were bi,” Calum said, their hands retracting from each other. They felt awkward holding each other when they weren’t kissing, at least out where a million eyes seemed to be casting their gaze on them. Calum couldn’t retract his stare, at least. Pete didn’t even contemplate it. He was forgetting what was left dangling in his pocket, too.

Calum paused before he spoke again, his voice soft but without that fear. “Eddie told me on the drive here, but he said you were bringing a date, a woman, so I let it shift away without a thought.” He was, inside his head, trying to contend with two parts to the whole – one side wanted to be logical, wanted to make it all like he were presenting a pitch, but the other side had spent part of an unusual night getting to know a man taller than him, probably more dominant in bed than he was, and a definite top, at least, again, another assumption he made just by studying his eyes and the way he had been acting all night. He supposed that both sides of his brain were being methodical, in their own turned-on sense. He couldn’t deny their chemistry made the hair on his arms quiver.

Pete couldn’t help but grin. “Jada and I are just friends,” he said, and like he was an animated character, Calum’s eyes lit up. Pete didn’t want to linger on his love life too much – he hadn’t tried to date someone in a couple of years, and he couldn’t even exactly pinpoint what caused him to shut out the idea – there was no incredibly traumatic break up, no fiancé that abandoned him at the altar, no true string of horrible dates, although horrible dates were something the two Garvey brothers seemed to have in common. Maggie liked to pretend she never seemed to go on a ‘horrible’ date – but when one of her relationships fell apart, she’d admit with a Cherry Ripe in her hand that all the men she usually goes on first dates with have the charm of a cult leader when she meets them. They do their dirty work later on, when she’s let her guard down.

Pete didn’t want to be thinking about his sister right now, why was he? He refocused on Calum, standing right there in front of him, who just told him he wouldn’t mind kissing him again, and maybe again, maybe even again? “Oh, really?” He said, and their lips met again, and Pete thought about his tongue, and then he thought about Calum out of that suit, even though he thought he looked incredible in it. He pictured what Calum’s butt would look like without fabric covering it. He could

feel his dick getting harder in his pants, and imagining what might be running through Calum's head if he brushed against it made him hornier than he had been all day. He'd woken up in bed alone, because they'd split the cost on a room with two beds, but he laid there in just a pair of black boxers with Jada's soft breathing in the other corner of the room, and he'd thought about jumping out of bed to masturbate in the bathroom after he shimmied past the wonky door. His dick throbbed in the boxers, but he didn't move from the bed, stuck thinking she'd wake up and hear him anyway, and be plain grossed out by the *thwip-thwip* from behind the closed door, as if he were just Spider-Man in the sheets.

Pete planted one last kiss on Calum's lips before whispering, "I can't imagine the bride and groom need tucking in." It was his breath against Calum's ear that made them abandon the parking lot without question, and they stepped outside the gates searching around for where they had parked Pete's car earlier in the day. It stood out behind a Mazda that was parked awkwardly half up the curb, his four-wheel-drive the colour of the surface of a lake at midnight. He's had sex in this car twice, with the same guy, but tonight wouldn't be a third time that would break the streak. Pete felt around for the keys in his pocket to unlock the car, eyeing the other male as he sidled up beside the passenger door, quicker on his feet than Pete would've thought – but he supposed Eddie had been right, Calum had come to the wedding with intentions, whether they be cruel or not, after all.

There couldn't be anything too cruel in lust, he thought as he slipped the seatbelt over his torso and buckled himself in. Always the first thing he did when he hopped in a car, no matter what. Beside him, Calum was fiddling with his, slower and almost seductive, but Pete realised he must've just been imagining that every little move the other male made was in an effort to oil him up and strip him down. He twisted the key in the ignition, and they drifted further away from the wedding and closer to a darkened bedroom of the rental Calum and Eddie were sharing.

Pete felt around for the light switch in the main room of the rental, illuminating what stood in front of them for only a moment – when he suddenly remembered why they were here, he switched the light back off, moving around in the darkness like it were a memory game. Calum, right behind him, uttered almost-silent warnings right before Pete was about to stub his toe. It was a little messy, until they stumbled into the bedroom with each other in their arms, and their lips pressed against lips, and Pete's tongue down Calum's throat. Calum kicked the door closed with his feet. They couldn't just tear each other's clothes off – but Calum had started to strip himself down as they made a path toward the bedroom, his suit jacket thrown somewhere limply. He unbuttoned Pete's shirt, pausing to plant kisses down his hairy chest, and then the button-up was flung into a corner, and moonlight caught on Pete's naked torso. He had been skimping on going to the gym lately, but his figure was nothing to complain about. Calum started to unbuckle Pete's belt without much of a glance downwards – his eyes drifted between Pete's chest and his eyes, until he was swept up into a kiss and the belt almost tumbled out of his hands. They were both shirtless now, and Pete was slipping out of his pants, revealing a pair of mauve boxer-briefs. His cock bulged out against his leg, and without a moment's hesitation Calum had a hand wrapped around it, pulling down his underwear with his free hand. He took Pete's six-and-a-half-inch cock in his mouth, bobbing his head back and forth, his knees now scratching against the cedarwood floor. Pete ran his fingers through the kneeling male's hair, then gripped to it, thrusting him faster as he heard Calum made no sound to come out like complaining. Pete closed his eyes.

The next time he kept them open for longer than thirty seconds, they were moving from the door toward the bed, and Calum was dropping his pants at a rate he was jealous of – no struggle, no stumbling around like his knee was caught in an invisible crease. Calum stripped until he was naked, and stood in the moonlight, his dick shorter than Pete's, but thicker. Pete moved to him, and they kissed for the first time both completely nude, their skin meeting with skin. There was an intensity to their touch. Pete cupped Calum's butt with both hands, and he craved to skip the waiting, skip everything that could

be skipped and feel his cock slide inside of Calum. With a glance at the bedside table from the shorter male, Pete slipped his hand into the drawer, pulled out a wrapped-up condom that he hoped was just his size, and let himself exhale for even just thirty seconds. He listened to the silences, and somewhere behind him, he suspected Calum was standing expectantly with his hand on his own dick, stroking it softly to keep it standing to attention.

They knelt down opposite each other on the bed, the covers tossed frantically to the floor. A short kiss broke off after only a few seconds, and Calum let out a high moan, a cue for something else, something more. Pete wasn't gentle with himself, thumping down on the sheets with his throbbing cock sticking upward like it were the North Pole in a rugged tundra. Calum knew what to do. He began sliding his smooth ass against Pete's dick, playing out little sounds, eager little noises for how desperately he wanted to be pummeled by the taller male. And then he slid down, feeling the six-and-a-half-inches penetrate him, a euphoria beyond anything he'd witnessed today, or the day before. Calum rode up and down, forgetting all manners that would ask for an inside voice, his screams intense and lustful. He couldn't care if someone heard him, or shunned him, or turned up their television on him. There was always an intensity to how he felt when he was being fucked, a feeling he couldn't describe, and he wanted to bounce on a pounding cock like his for the rest of his life.

Pete had his eyes closed, letting the other male do most of the work – but it seemed natural, as he listened to Calum's heavy breathing adjacent to his moans and to the slapping sound as his butt cheeks hit against Pete's crotch. Sometimes he would thrust himself deeper inside of Calum, and the other male would let out a groan, a passionate groan, and Pete would open his eyes and see Calum turning his head. They would make eye-contact, and it would linger, and Pete would make a comment he thought was sexy – something like 'you're so hot', or 'fuck yes', or 'I'm gonna cum inside you'.

He had to slap away a sudden image of his brother burned into the back of his eyelids – Eddie coming into the rental, flicking on all the lights, exposing them bare naked in the bedroom fucking each other's brains out. He didn't want to think about his fucking brother – and he slapped Calum's thigh, and he became hornier to block out the idea of getting interrupted, and he blurted out that they should change things up and change position.

Pete tried not to squish Calum under his weight as he bore down on top of him, thrusting his cock inside of him once more. He knew he wasn't hurting him – but something gnawing at his brain made him suddenly self-conscious, far more than he thought Calum could ever be. The other male handled everything with a lustful ease, moaning brashly as Pete thrust back and forth, and roles were reversed, to a degree – he was no longer able to just relax back and close his eyes, but it made him focused, and alert, and he felt himself inch closer and closer toward finishing. The tension in his shoulders had disappeared, replaced with blood that burned like fire. He planted his wet lips on Calum's mouth, their tongues almost twisting together. Pete forgot everything about where he was. All he knew was the sweat and the panting of the man beneath him. He thrust his cock deeper and felt himself climax into the condom. Moonlight danced on his sweaty torso. He exhaled louder than he had all day, but for a few moments he didn't move, staring down at Calum, whose mouth lay half-open.

Pete rolled off of Calum and collapsed down beside him, reaching with his left hand for the other male's still erect cock. He began thrusting it back and forth, up, down, his hand gliding against Calum's foreskin. Calum let out another soft moan. Stringy squirts of cum spouted out and onto his bare stomach, and coated Pete's hand, and they both fell silent. It was a relax, lying there naked with their legs brushed up against each other's. Neither really contemplated moving, until Pete fidgeted with the condom, slipping it off and tying it up, and the moment of absolute nothing seemed to have passed. But Pete lingered in the doorway, gesturing with his sticky-white hand, "Want to join me in the shower?" He said, and Calum grinned at him, leaping out of bed.

After they showered together, they collapsed back on the messed bed in only their underwear, and Calum inched closer toward Pete until they were cuddled up. Calum traced a hand through the hair on Pete's chest. They forgot, for even just that moment, that they were strangers not so long ago, and that this wasn't forever. But the idea of them together forever scared them both, so it came circling back around, threatening their bubble. This was still a stranger – and where you could expect their minds were a million miles apart, they weren't. Both were wondering if this weekend would be the first and last time they saw each other, and the surprising relief that came from that, never having to worry over the stresses like going out on dates, and falling in love, and trying not to hate one another. In each other's arms, they were strangely excited to let this be unique, but their expressions hid this out of sight, and Pete, with his eyes locked on the ceiling, paused to whisper, "I could go for a nap."

Five minutes later, while Calum got himself a glass of water, Pete scrolled through the newsfeed on his phone. He was ignoring the text message from Lena, mostly. He'd reread it as soon as Calum left the room, but he couldn't come up with a response that wouldn't have sounded disingenuous – he didn't want to just reply back with something half-heartedly wishing her back to good health, but he had sent that anyway, because the part he was really ignoring was how on earth the store was going to cope without either of them there. He just wanted to call every other employee scheduled for tomorrow and tell them to stay home, they wouldn't open, people can go one day at least without needing activewear or a basketball or whatever else they wanted. He was halfway through checking who was rostered on tomorrow when Calum came back into the room, carrying the glass of water. He set it down on the bedside table and climbed back into bed, slipping underneath the sheet.

He darted over to his messages and typed out a quick apology to his brother. He'd realised when they stumbled into the rental that it was only a one-bedroom, probably to save on the expenses. Eddie and Calum were close friends, so they mustn't have cared about sleeping in the same bed – but now that bed smelled like their sex. He waited for a few seconds for a reply, but got nothing yet, and so he returned his attention finally back to Calum, who was taking another sip from the glass.

They talked for some time, about the trivial sort of thing you would've expected to happen at the wedding, and not in bed after they've just had sex. But a weight of sorts had been lifted between them – the will-they, won't they of whether they would have sex after all had, well, climaxed. Pete felt more comfortable with Calum than he would have anticipated – so, then, his lips parted and his mind had already decided the words before he could have realised.

"I've been having sex with Eddie," he said, watching for Calum's reaction. Calum didn't move – he was studying Pete, too, but for a different reason. He supposed he was searching out to see if Pete had suddenly morphed into a perverted weirdo that enjoyed passing through whatever bloodline could have been a barrier – but he saw Pete no differently now, knowing this truth now, if he continued to believe it. He paused as Pete's lips parted, waiting for more, and he realised he wasn't entirely disturbed – who was he to judge, when he's gone home some nights and searched through the gay tabs for simpatico stepdad-stepson porn. Calum tottered between thoughts – and so did Pete.

Calum had to admit to himself he didn't know how to respond.

"Does it make me a fool for saying I love my brother more than I've ever loved anyone else?" Pete paused once he finished, knowing it would've come out as if he had crazed romantic feelings for Eddie. But he understood what he meant in his head, and tried to explain it more to Calum, who listened without too much judgement. What he meant – his brother would always have his back, and perhaps now they shared a bond that transcended what he had with Maggie, but they were both responsible for that and didn't regret it, at least that was what he believed. Eddie never seemed to express a regret for it either – but Pete tried to settle things before he started becoming an anxious freak – pull an Eddie – and worry Calum was trying to collect all this information on him to start a

smear campaign. He could already imagine how neighbours would react, or how friends would, or anyone at work. Alicia would start cropping out the Garvey siblings from any of the wedding photos, no doubt. It was a wonder she had invited them after all, he mused again, and suddenly his mother was sitting beside him in the row at the wedding ceremony, instead of Jada. His mother, wearing white at a wedding no doubt, scolding him still for all of his failings, brandishing the baseball bat in her left hand. His mother, and now his father too, parents risen from the grave, ogling him but he didn't feel an overwhelming anxiety. He was, oddly, letting it all wash over him, and maybe it felt like his eyes had rolled all the way back in his head, but he breathed out. He breathed out and looked calmly at Calum beside him in bed.

"Everyone's going to think you two are disgusting if they know," Calum said, as if he had read into Pete's thoughts, but he was a minute slow.

"I should go," Pete said, starting to slide out of bed. But Calum gripped to his shoulders, spinning him back around with the strength he had, although Pete became light and feathery in his hands. They were once again staring into each other's eyes, but there was no malice. There was an uncertainty, of course, but the uncertainty had been there between them all night. The uncertainty had only disappeared when they were having sex, but otherwise it clung to them like another pair of hands on their waists. Calum couldn't tell what he wanted, or needed, to say. But he thought he would regret it all if he didn't at least keep an ear for his curiosity, for him to understand why the two brothers had started having a sexual relationship. He had an otherwise dull life to contend with, and he'd spent all night at the wedding edging Pete to have sex with him, so maybe he could end the night on some note that felt not like he was just thinking of life as serving to what everyone is told to serve to.

"Don't go," he said, and it sounded without a tinge of selfishness.

Calum drew Pete into a tight hug, and it all felt out of place, but he thought he understood.

Pete was left without words. He wanted to talk to Eddie, to talk about...something. He thought about the night that they buried their mother. They hadn't spoken a word to each other, and they hadn't had a proper conversation until around 12pm the next day. They'd talked a little about the sex, of course, but they didn't want it to end, even now that another ghost would be watching down on them. People would be judging them. But neither of them wanted a big, lavish wedding yet, they didn't want kids or to settle down and they didn't give a fuck what other people thought of them. They were giving up on dating, at least for now, so they'd invited dates to this wedding that were old friends, people they could count on to not get wound up on the chance of being their soulmate – because Pete and Eddie had pretty much given up completely on ever finding someone to be with like that. They don't need the romance now, they don't need the mystery and the new things learnt and the dates to romantic places like restaurants and little cruises down the river. It struck him just like that – they wanted what they had, someone they could rely on and trust and never feel scared of, never feel the way Maggie would end up feeling constantly with her boyfriends that deserved the penalty of death, and then, truthfully, they did want the sex. They both knew it would topple one day, and one of them would find someone to start a proper life with – but they thought, was it so disgusting if it wasn't hurting anyone? They couldn't exactly accidentally give birth to a deformed baby.

It had started like it was a cyclone blowing in – and maybe it would end that way, too, but he couldn't be certain. He checked his messages – nothing new had come through, but of course it hadn't, he would have heard the vibration. He had felt so often lately that he was on some other plane entirely. All he wanted was the happiness and safety of his brother, and of his sister, too. But things were meant to go sideways when they were meant to go sideways, and Pete knew just one last thing: he would be waking up tomorrow morning and want to be driving off home far, far away from this wedding without a second thought, and he realised in that moment he likely wouldn't get that godmother wish.

Swing III

Out of the corner of her eye, Maggie noticed someone was watching her.

He was tall, muscular, with a sleeve of tattoos she wanted to trace over with her fingers, asking him what each drawing or illustration meant to him. Sometimes a guy would look at her, straight-faced, and say something she thought was so silly, like ‘this dolphin is my mother, because she is part of my pod more than anyone else could be’. But in those moments she would feel herself recoil, feel herself realise the sensitivity was what she should admire – and the muscle man would seem more human to her. Dolphins – she thought, ignoring this man perched in the corner of her eye, moving away from the bathroom door. She was stomaching the bloated feeling that had come on from the three-course meal – ignoring someone, or a multitude of someones, really, was a form of aid like a bandage more than anything.

She cut a glance at the tattooed man that had been in her periphery – but he was no longer looking her way, and she talked it up to the little booze in her system that he’d ever been staring at her anyway. The likely story, she thought, readjusting the strap of her thin peach-coloured purse, was that she was paranoid about something else. The tattooed man was standing with two other men, at least one of them was one of the best men, although she couldn’t exactly remember – all she remembered was noticing that the groom had very attractive friends, or brothers, and then she’d looked away out of fear of any one of them getting the wrong idea. It bummed her out to feel like that – that a shared glance might mean they would stumble over and hit on her, or try, and she’d tear herself in two trying to decide if she would go home with some stranger again or keep playing against her type, take herself home instead. Maggie found it simple to forget they were there – but it was difficult, then, to suddenly see Logan still sitting down at the table in the reception hall, chatting away to her brother.

On the toilet, she’d berated herself in her head.

You stupid asshole.

You’re pathetic for inviting him.

You won’t even let him fuck you.

You can just close your eyes.

She’d started to imagine the expressions on people’s faces if they discovered her passed out on the toilet like some dead drugged-up celebrity. An image of herself dressed like Elvis flashed in her head, and she almost convulsed right there on the porcelain. She saw a series of mental images flash around, circulate, a zoetrope of every single tumble. She tore off a length of toilet paper, far more than she needed, but it wasn’t the length she even cared about – it felt like a revolt, ripping at paper, and she’d spent weeks, or months, or longer, who could say, she had spent all this time wanting to destroy things, smash something and then something else. The toilet paper was a nothing action, especially out in public, and she’d imagine this place could afford all the toilet paper in the world, but it was a release, of sorts. She thought about sitting back down beside Logan and doing herself a favour, getting to know him beyond the times they texted each other, the couple dates they went on, or the conversations they’d had in the car.

But as she stood watching him, she could have been in his periphery instead. He was laughing at Eddie’s jokes, he was smiling at Eddie, he seemed infinitely happier than he had been in any of those moments they shared together – and Maggie felt her heels tighten against her toes. She saw a flash of herself fleeing barefoot, and the colour of the dress mattered little, it was the fleeing that counted for everything.

Outside, where the wind would tickle the back of her neck, there were two other guests huddled beside each other already, both with a cigarette in between their lips. She considered the girl

she'd become if she let herself solve her problems with a puff, or one hundred puffs, and with the worst mental image she turned around away from them before the shorter of the two, a woman in her late 40s with charcoal-black hair down past her shoulders, blew out what might've been a rhinoceros in the smoke. Out of everyone's way, standing in a square patch of grass, Maggie slipped off her heels and left them to imprint beside her feet. She didn't writhe her toes around, pretending it was the first time she'd stepped barefoot in such a softness, but she sighed, the sort of sound she used to make when she'd collapsed into a window seat on the train after any day in the city for university. Sometimes, back then, she imagined the future as her head toppling off her body, a public decapitation. There was some ancient folklore she would conjure up like it were a spell of protection, a tale about a woman with a ribbon around her neck, but she couldn't properly remember anything else about it, and she didn't mind that. It was the insignia that Maggie clung to, the idea that she had no ribbon to fear of, to keep tied around her pale throat. Sometimes she would scratch at the bare skin where she thought a ribbon could have been – she wore turtlenecks and scarves for a month or two in her third year at university, and she'd sighed, because it was winter, and no one would notice.

Going through her purse, Maggie pulled out her phone and shuffled through some of the pictures – there were selfies, sure, but photographs of nature too, from little trips she would take with ex-boyfriends where she was lost and distracted in green, and blue, and not the colour of their skin or their hair, or the bright or the dull of their clothes. Haphazardly placed among a sea of green was a snapshot that pulled her right back into the past – it was him, Jett, kissing her on the cheek. Maybe subconsciously she knew she was being drawn back in to stare at that picture, after she'd rescued it from the Deleted folder about a week and a half after they broke up. His eyes were closed and she still wanted to stick knives in them. She shoved her phone into her purse, covering her mouth with her hand.

You can let it out, a voice in her head whispered to her.

As long as what you're letting out is your vomit, girl.

Come on, puke.

Be disgusting, you should know how to be disgusting.

The smokers weren't on the lurk, watching out for her, when she'd made her way back to the balcony porch that wrapped around the reception hall. In a small crowd near the doors, a blonde woman wearing an olive-green dress was rocking her child back and forth, lulling him to sleep. Maggie hadn't noticed how many children were at the wedding until that moment – suddenly she thought she must have been imagining a few to fill in gaps in the empty space, and tried settling herself back down from the cliff that was her thinking she had been looking over all their little baby heads during the ceremony. She didn't want to think that one was sitting behind her then, kicking at her back, making her jolt forward instead of cry, instead of beam and smile.

Splinters can come easy. Maggie used to believe something her uncle told her, with a look of fear he concocted in his eyes. He said, splinters can come easy, when you rest your arms on the wood and start snooping on what your neighbours are getting up to. When she started understanding things – things like sex, and what neighbours could be getting up to – she thought her uncle was a perv that bore his arm down on the wood while he masturbated to the neighbours fucking in their bedroom. Her uncle had made some joke, some seemingly unrelated joke another night, that the neighbours didn't like curtains. When she got her period, Maggie steered clear of her uncle, and she stopped being terrified of splinters, mostly.

She was leaning on the wood when Jada tapped her on the shoulder with her free hand.

“Your brother might have a thing for your date,” she said, with a high little laugh. She set her Lemon, Lime & Bitters down on the railing and leant against it beside Maggie, the two of them staring out at the world together. The small piece of the world that belonged to the wedding venue.

“Eddie?” Maggie said, pausing. It hinged inside her stomach that she never asked Logan whether he was only interested in women, or if he was bisexual, but she expelled it all out – it never mattered to her, anyway, and here she was avoiding him for most of the night. She felt cruel for convincing herself it didn’t matter. Her brain had the twist locked in – he was nobody, not while Jett loomed over her shoulder like puppet master with his strings.

Jada smiled off Maggie’s blank stare. “I think we’re all everywhere tonight though,” she said, turning back to the darkness. “You’ve been a vanishing act.”

She could feel the silences in her voice, the accusations other people have cast off on her when she’d disappear into the bathroom for what they considered too long. Jada watched to see if Maggie noticed too, to see if she suddenly acted completely different, compelled by what it means to be called the vanishing woman – but then she felt another sentence tired of waiting its turn.

“Tell me you want to be alone, and I’ll leave.”

Maggie found herself becoming part of the wood, like it was her roots, and she sought out the comfort in it more than she would have growing up. There was something she wanted to call spite that tied them together, woman and wood. Woman and dead tree. She shook herself from it just long enough to respond to Jada, to not appear completely taken away through a hollow.

“Really weird question,” she said, her gaze lingering on Jada’s dark face. “Can I have some of that, your drink?” In her voice was only pure curiosity – Maggie supposed she was thirsty, and the effort to dance through the crowd inside for something, she couldn’t even figure out what, made her feel lethargic. But here was a drink.

Jada glanced at her, at first in understated shock, and then the corners of her lips rose up, and her smile became familiar as she pressed her hand to the cool glass. “Don’t down it,” she said, miming as if to slide the glass across the railing. Maggie wet her lips with citrus. There was a strong aftertaste of alcohol, more than she expected, and she winked, the sort of wink that said, *that was just what I needed*. Bitter is the taste in your mouth that has never left. She thought of the winding scribble that encapsulated her list of subjects and objects that would pair well with lemon and lime. Yellow, green and distaste the colour of her first period, and every subsequent period, every single full stop.

The abortion.

She sets the glass down. Her fingerprints are left at every scene of the crime. A blink and the colour swilled in the glass was nothing she didn’t expect, and she wondered if the sharper taste she swallowed was a figment of the con. Heart protecting heart. Maybe I’m losing my mind, she thought, and she felt like she was losing her mind for thinking she was losing her mind. Jada had been telling her about a production of a play from the 80s that was being put on in a few months, and Maggie had drifted out of focus for a moment, thinking about big hair and shoulder pads and Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go, which she assumed was from the 80s and thought about digging around for her phone in her purse to check, to be sure.

She eased herself back into the conversation, but the subject was changing. “Do you think it’s foolish to be in love?” All I do is ask questions, she thought, but she didn’t retract it. Jada was mulling the question over as if swishing wine in a glass, careful, considerate, delicate. Here was a woman asking her whether it would be a more logical choice to free out some storage space in her heart. Make room for emotions like nonchalance and indifference. She thought of something, it noticeable on her face, and then she pressed a hand to the cool of the glass again before she spoke.

“I think it’s foolish to not try,” she said, breathing out an invisible thread. It dangled in space. It wanted to latch onto another, someone like Maggie, but it kept dangling in space and time. Jada was noticing it silently, patiently.

Maggie bit the thread with her teeth.

“I’ve been foolish,” she said, as if she were confessing in church. She didn’t know that feeling, how it existed or didn’t exist, the sorts of things other sinners would confess. She felt herself a sinner, although she couldn’t be certain what her most egregious sin was.

Thinking about sin made her glance to Jada’s lips. It would be cruel, she thought, if it was all the pure straight Garvey kids that had died, and the sinners were left to fend off the world with all their baggage. But she couldn’t say why she was doubting her sexuality at this wedding – something about the touting of true love and sacrifice and forever and ever that made her think she could pretend to be lusting after a woman if it meant she could find a workable *forever and ever*. Love is about sacrifice, she read in a thought bubble like she was reading giant block letters on a billboard above her head.

Love is being invited to a wedding you could’ve skipped.

That felt wrong in her head, though, what with how every interaction she’d had with Alicia since she moved away being completely an out-of-body experience that she can barely remember.

Love is getting married when that could’ve been skipped.

Jada smirked, stifling a small laugh. “I would have turned away from you if you tried to tell me you’re some brain scientist with every decision you make.”

“I barely passed through university, and I barely know why I did it,” Maggie said.

“The pressure, right?”

“To pass, or to do it?” Maggie asked, thumbing the wooden railing.

“Both, I guess.”

Jada let out an elongated breath, something of a sigh without the collapse of the shoulders, or any sort of movement that would have made her seem overly animated, complete the opposite of who she is. She shifted slightly on the spot.

“For hours, it’s been a joke that I’m here,” she said, without glancing back for Maggie’s attention. “Maybe I would care more if I could tell Pete cared to be here, at this wedding, but he was so unfocused through it all I started to think he invited me to dry work training from when I worked with him.” She paused, as if to pick back up again, but in the next moment she shook it off and rested her arms down on the wood.

“It was a pretty ordinary ceremony.”

“It’s not only that.”

“I know what you mean. I could be at home in bed with leftovers and an amount of alcohol I can’t be judged for when I’m alone, but I guess I came here instead.”

“Pete told me he was surprised you got in the car,” Jada said, pausing.

Maggie exhaled. “He’s protective.”

“You know none of us belong here.”

“It’s always so funny to me when people are like, I belong here, like you always just think of that joke stupid shows make with the whole *oh, I don’t see your name written on this floor!* Well, I always think of that. I’m glad you feel like your name is written in the corner of the room in mouse font, or under a floorboard, or something.”

Jada takes a sip from the glass, the ice melting into condensation. “Let’s tear up the floor,” she said, her voice without a hint of sarcasm.

“But you know what I mean,” Maggie seemed to ask, although it came out less a question than her committing to herself, to what she’d just said to her audience of one.

“Do you feel like you belong within yourself?”

The question shocked Maggie, only in that she rarely heard someone ask her something like that. It always felt on the exterior – where are you in the world, do you see where you might belong in our company? But she always thought about herself. Remember the ribbon.

“Shouldn’t I, because I can’t see myself jumping out of my skin,” she said, unconvinced.

Jada was stuck staring out into the nothingness. “I used to work with my father,” she began, as if she were delivering her story to some floating, invisible specter. “He worked in a different department, though, so it felt more like I was on the same train as he was, but he would depart at a different station before mine.” She straightened out her back, as if he were there, reminding her to. “The work was boring, and I lasted maybe six months. But while I was there, my grandfather’s brother died. I suppose our relationship was distant, but in his last, maybe, three years, he spent a lot of time with my grandfather.” She paused, clearing her throat.

“In those three years, he was there a lot of the time when I visited my grandparents. He told me about the time he worked for a white man that could not see past his race. Maybe his name was John, maybe he thought he owned the whole company. My grandfather’s brother, he told me, when they start to lace their compliments with slurs, you find your way the hell out of there.”

Jada turned to Maggie with a muted smile. “The day I said I quit, I thought of him. I was hoping my dad was happier where he was, but I’d been spending six months taking a job that was chewing me up and spitting me out.” She sighed, taking another sip from the glass, before she continued. “I was out of work for three months before I started working with your brother. You take the opportunities you get, sure, but you find your reasons for believing in your mind and your body, always.”

Out on the grass beyond the porch, the evening wind tugged at an unmoving mowed lawn. Maggie would’ve loved to have seen something move, thrust about under starlight, but not even a twin pair of moths found the cool. It was empty, and it was dull, with her back turned away from the glow of the wedding party, but she had listened to every word Jada had spoken and was assessing her own damage. Beside her, Jada was finishing off her drink, the glass wetting her palm.

“Some days I’m so afraid of being a woman,” Maggie let out, like popping a balloon. She felt herself deflate for a moment, and then expand back again, her ends tying up once more.

Jada was caught off-guard. “I don’t see either of us lasting as a man, though,” she said, setting the glass back down, wiping her icy hand across the edge of the wooden railing.

“I want my body, and my mind, but not my heart, sometimes.” Maggie felt it thrash in her chest in response, a child unloved.

It makes her think of children. “I don’t know how to see myself as a mother, even more now that mine is covered up with dirt and can’t do anything about how she tormented me but called it tough love,” Maggie said, clutching to the edge of the railing. Her voice had shaken when she said the t-word, both of them, as if they were uneven scales fluctuating between tipping down or tipping up. They sagged down. She caught a glimpse of her mother in hospital, in one of the photographs in her baby album. Day One of Maggie, there she is, being cradled in her mother’s arms swaddled in a sickly-pale green that had long since ceased pretending it were pastel. She was born hairless. Now she had spent the weeks since that doctor’s visit regrowing everything. She had shaved her legs and under her armpits for the wedding, but that had been a deception, a trick played on her to be more presentable and the ideal standard of beauty. It is a scary thought to be hairless again, to be blank and baby-smooth and have either had someone tear away at every part of you, undoing your age, or have woken up some morning having been cursed by a witch and thinking, I stand too tall to be mocked like this.

“Don’t be a mother then,” Jada said, without regret.

“I don’t want to hear their cries for every word I say.”

“Are we talking babies, or men?”

“Both,” she said, pausing. “But not always men. I can’t be alone.” She studies Jada’s face for a moment, considering her response, what it might be. She didn’t think of love lost when she spoke again, keeping her eyes on the other woman. “Sometimes I – I belong with myself because of my brothers, and without them I think I would be a mother without a choice.”

Maggie feels the first tear of the night well and droop down her cheek.

Jada hesitates to wrap her arms around the other woman. They feel like strangers to each other still, as much as the old, dead skin has been shed. Deciding against it, she attempts to hide her arms, to no luck, but Maggie’s attention is elsewhere as she sifts through her purse in the hopes for an unused tissue. A loose, empty packet is scrunched up in her hand, and she wipes the tear away with her finger, a sharp and sloppy move.

“Can you promise me something,” Jada said suddenly, her voice an opening in the silence.

Maggie paused, watching her with the anticipation of a deer hunter. “I can try,” she replied, nudging her purse from side to side with the tap of her index finger.

“Promise is the wrong word,” Jada corrected herself, taking Maggie’s other hand in hers. “I don’t need you doing anything that’s feeding out of the wrong hand, be it becoming a mother or falling in love with a white man or going to the wedding of a girl you barely know anymore,” she said, with a sympathetic smile to the other woman beside her. Their grip on one another was soft but strong, far from the grip of one woman dangling off the edge of a cliff and the other rescuing her with the scrape of her fingernails. Jada loosened her grip on Maggie’s hand. “You can call me if you want to.”

Back to rifling through her purse, Maggie fished out her phone and handed it Jada without being prompted – they hadn’t exchanged numbers, they’d never even considered the possibility of being friends. It felt silly, again, to Maggie, to be talking about the prospect of friends and a shoulder to lean on, it felt much too young or too old for her. As if it were only children or ageing, dying women who needed the constant care and the constant support – which, she considered, she knew was incorrect, but she was swilling around her mother in liquid form in her brain and it was laborious. It felt like homework, to describe the differences between herself and the young/the old.

What age did she feel then? Mid-twenties and she was waiting with a sick repulsion for the bride to call everyone inside to make some grand announcement, and suddenly she would stir and she would wake up in a gender reveal party, and she would want to gag herself with fistfuls of pink/blue cake. Around her, it was still wedding season. Thankfully, she could not see Alicia on a podium.

Jada handed back her phone and Maggie’s eyes trailed down the contact info, very sparsely filled in. She’d left her phone number and an email address, although Maggie doubted she would email a friend ever. Jada had set her contact name as “Jada Pete’s Date” and it made her chuckle – she didn’t know another Jada, really, but it was like making fun of the whole night. The three siblings had all brought along a date at the pleasure of being offered up plus-ones on a silver platter, as Alicia and her new husband seemed to be tossing their money around like at exotic dancers. Maggie felt herself tense – she was twirling round the pole, stripping off her Old Hollywood gloves, and letting them forget her too, as she stood outside on the porch forgoing the celebrations. She felt like a reject from the past invited out of sympathy, but it felt subtle, and largely ignored. It wasn’t a joke they played for their cruelty. It was simply like adding an extra set of names to the guest list to fill out the crowd.

So it never mattered that they weren’t pretending to be everywhere all at once.

She imagined Pete was off fucking Calum, because they had been flirting all dinner and it was plain obvious in their faces. She thought it would have been miserable if Jada had been pining for Pete.

Jada rested her arms on the wooden railing once more, staring out into darkness. “It wasn’t a lie. If I wasn’t here tonight, I’d be at home in sweats drinking something anyway,” she said, gliding a finger through the air, an uncoordinated conduction of an orchestra invisible.

Maggie swallowed some of her silence. “I would be asleep,” she began, caught imagining her head on the pillow, her humidifier plugged in with the scent of falling under, drifting off to the charted and the known, rather than anything that would rock her and thrust her. There would be a half-filled water bottle by the bed, upright on the carpet, and her phone flipped over for only the dimmest glow to sneak out with each notification, like a crack of sunlight in a cave. Her bedroom would be impenetrable, if she could come by some occult magic to seal out outside forces, like old boyfriends. And the baby she killed.

Maggie thought her throat was dry, that she needed something to drink to wash out the taste of the thick air and wedding season and what must have been an old blue-and-orange carriage drawn by horses, bottled. She didn’t taste regret.

Sometime later, Jada mumbles something to herself, digging around in her own purse for something else. She draws out a pack of cigarettes, arm extending as she offers one to Maggie.

“I’d rather get hit by a car,” she said, shaking her head.

As they stepped down the stairs and found an empty patch, the same spot those two women had been standing and smoking in, Maggie wondered again if she would become exactly their spitting image if she took up their smoking and never found herself settling down, having the children and the perfect life and the house firmly cemented into the ground. She knew nothing of those women, and yet she assumed from their stout posture, their hunching shoulders and their yellowed or blackening teeth – she didn’t get close enough to truly tell – that those women wouldn’t be boasting about having the *right* life. It was like whipping herself, reminding herself that she didn’t need to aspire to checkmark every seemingly ordinary woman urge – the husband, the house, the baby, the other baby. She shared a rental with a friend from university. Her baby, she thought, well it was her job.

Jada puffed out a cloud of smoke. Maggie stood there watching Logan and Eddie wander off on the blackened driveway, wondering if she had spent the night ignoring a genuine guy just to shove him straight into the arms of her handsome, put-together-enough twin brother. He who knew how to be a man, even when the world told him he ought to be a girl, or he ought to forget about it. She felt herself shake, and she didn’t think it was from the cool breeze. She was inhaling the smoke, too, and turning away to gag or make the silliest of faces to her audience, the bushes.

Charlotte poked her tongue out, her face protruding from dark green.

“You should be glad you don’t want to be a Margaret,” she said, her cheeks a flushed scarlet-red. Her nose was pale, her eyebrows unshaped and a little bushy.

“Maggie,” she said, or Maggie had thought she said, but it was Jada this time, stomping out the cigarette with her heel. The act was so unfeminine it made Maggie suddenly perk up, although she couldn’t entirely explain why. She had seen her sister, and she felt beautiful now. She felt unhinged, too, but it was freeing to not feel so much like a closed door sealing in such uncomfortable torment.

No more lingering out on that porch, she thought, as they passed a couple hovering behind two chairs at one of the tables. Many of the older guests had retreated to their tables too, sitting down, some hunched beside one another talking about how tired they were, or worried that tonight would be enough to finally send them on their way to the nursing home. They laughed. Maggie was dragging Jada forward by her hand, weaving their way through the tables to the dancefloor. Music echoed out into the night, and Maggie started to match her body to the rhythm the moment all space opened out for them. Her hips swayed and she closed her eyes, paying no attention to where her arms jolted or whether her feet inched her closer, or further from Jada. Maggie thought she was even starting to forget who Alicia was. It was a surreal feeling, that nothing truly phased her. That nothing mattered now.