

Girls in Delicate Daydreams

by Keeley Young

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Sweet smell of lavender, of blossoming roses, of laundry detergent and perfume, pungent and yet aromatic – a welcome smell, so I would feel welcome as I awoke. What is it, today? Tuesday, there it is on the calendar. Tuesday, 8th of May. The picture is all nature, a landscape, of the hills and a dense forest, green and green and green. No little humans hiding there. *Time to get ready for the day*, I mumble inside my head, knowing my legs won't move themselves. Knowing I have to will myself from this bed, this queen-sized bed with fitted sheets and a mattress unlike any other. The bedroom is quaint, too, but old-fashioned, or at least in my taste. Reminds me of my grandmother's guest bedroom, but with a wider window. The curtains are drawn, to hide the sunlight – some things are more accommodating.

Downstairs, the bell dings. Somewhere downstairs, someone is stepping towards the desk, luggage in hand, and there she would be – the shorter woman, lighter hair, softer features. She said her name was Jen, short for Jennifer. She said she grew up south of here, in a rural town, but she said her parents were long dead. One from an accident, one from disease. She is open, about all that – she thinks I best know her if I'm going to be working for her. I dress myself, too little time to shower, and tie the blonde mop of hair upon my head into a high pony, hurried and messy. A smile in the mirror. A smile to tell myself *just another day* and then I close the dresser, hiding the mirror; hiding the smile. Downstairs, footsteps approach the staircase – a thud, the sound of luggage lifted then dropped, and then the footsteps rise from step to step. Another guest then.

“Down the hall, second to your...second to your left, yeah.” Her voice, Jen's sound, talking to this mystery guest, some nobody, no somebody I know.

“And...and the WI-FI, it's free?” His voice is soft, yet he speaks without fear, or uncertainty. He has such a welcoming voice, and I find myself hovering nearby the doorway, to hear him. “It's free, yep,” she replies, guiding him down the hall, “and we have the pool outside, and we're not far a drive from everything else.”

He keys the lock. I imagine he's got flowing locks of dark hair – raven-like – but then I imagine he's blonde, or he has short hair the colour of tangerines. I imagine he is attractive, with that voice. He looks like something – someone. I can't peer into the hallway, they say I should try to avoid the guests, at least when they first arrive. I'd thought, when they said that, that I should be there to offer something to them, like clean towels, or an extra pillow, but Jen said all that would be in the guest room, so I needn't worry. He closes the door behind him, after his final words: “Thank you again, for the room.”

Fitted sheets. Make the beds, neatly, but they never care if a corner is loose. These aren't their beds, not their bedrooms either, so who are they to judge, they say. As long as the beds look tidy enough so that the guests open doors, enter bedrooms, and see fitted sheets tucked underneath mattresses – it'll remind them of home, some home, some kind of it.

At midday, I'm called downstairs, to the lobby. Jen needs to rush somewhere – the supermarket, or the hardware store, somewhere – so I have to be concierge for now, until she

comes back. I will be the face they see as they open that very front door. I will be who greets them, if there are guests coming – we’re rarely busy during the week, especially on Tuesdays. Maybe I will see him, the voice in the hallway. Maybe I won’t, I don’t know. Most of our guests here are the elderly, or married couples, or small families. Rarely lone travellers, they draw attention, they’re wandering the streets without hands to hold onto. What if he isn’t young? Maybe he’s some older man, in a crisis, who has come to a small family-operated bed-and-breakfast to relax. Maybe not – his voice sounded young; youthful. Older than me, probably. If he’s all alone.

There isn’t much to do while Jen is gone. Somewhere beyond the doors to the lunch hall, Kristen would be scrubbing the dishes, or she has finished by now and is outside, reading her novel in the autumnal sunlight. They told me they weren’t married, but they lived together; they loved each other. My mother used to warn me of *homosexuals* – she said they were *choosing* a life for themselves that would land them under scrutiny from others, especially the extreme right-wing conservatives. She said she wasn’t one, but I saw the glances she made towards them. I could see, even if it was deep in her heart, she disapproved just like those conservatives she spoke of. I always argued she was wrong – it isn’t a choice, it isn’t *lustful*. She would disapprove of the bed-and-breakfast. It’s been a while since I’ve seen her.

In the later afternoon, the dying sunlight their backdrop, Jen and Kristen often sit down together to eat dinner, before it gets too dark. Sometimes I eat with them, sometimes I eat alone. Sometimes, when they eat, I’m still upstairs, cleaning or sprucing. Something like that, they’d say to each other, nibbling at sliced chicken, or vegetables, or tomatoes. Something like that. They don’t treat me like a kidnapped child. I am, though. They gave me a proper bedroom upstairs, with a proper bed. They kidnapped me for the fun of it, I suppose. I’m not dehydrated, or starving, or whatever else. I think they knew exactly what they were doing when they kidnapped me from the parking lot of the church. I have a source of income now. They’d said something, I think, or they didn’t. They hadn’t hurt me. I live here, at a bed-and-breakfast now, as their maid; as their whatever. Mother had always warned me of the *homosexuals*. Yeah, whatever.

Today I am eating dinner with them. A little later than usual – Jen had come back from the store later. Meals drifted from piping hot, staggering in their wait, but then Jen was back, and she had been busy. If I eat with them, it is mostly only the three of us. Sometimes, Jared joins us. He’s an old friend, they say, between chuckles of laughter, and stories of them together. I remember once they said he slept with Jen’s brother, Michael, and he laughed, and he said it was one of the greatest *sexual experiences* – Kristen’s words – he’s ever had. Sometimes, the words, or phrases, or expressions – whatever they are – that Kristen uses are absolutely hilarious. It’s the moment exactly after that I remember what I’m doing here, and how I came to be here. One dinner, they mumbled about upkeep for this place; whispered of what would happen if they sold it. Jared whined. He stays here, sometimes, but I know he lives nearby. Sometimes it’s because he drinks too much, and of course he can’t drive home, so he sleeps in the bedroom next to mine. It’s usually empty. Or they keep it empty, for him. Their conversations are casual, or they’re serious, and almost always every little word is spoken – it’s almost as if I’m not there. Or they don’t mind the kidnapped help hearing about their sex lives.

Tonight, conversation drifts from how delicious the meal is to something more unexpected. Jen and Kristen begin talking about me. As if I'm their child, almost. Once they'd talked, very briefly, about whether I should learn how to drive. I could learn in Jen's car, and then when I had my license, I could drive out for supplies, or for whatever else they asked for. I knew then, at least, Jen simply wants to stay here to work. She hates driving, she hates the chore of it, and she hates the supermarket, because her stepsister could be working. She moans everytime her stepsister calls her, maybe once or twice a fortnight. Reminders, often, or requests. But tonight, it didn't seem like the car conversation would be revisited.

Jen smiled – a motherly smile. Parenting 101 time – talk to your child as if you are talking down to them, but avoid talking down to them, for they will notice.

“You're still all good for this weekend, yeah? You were so excited when we first talked about it,” she says, her voice soft, sweet, the taste of honey – if voice had a taste. She thinks posing the thing, this thing, as a question nulls any possibility of *talking down*, but she forgets the small things – I'm younger, I'm still some teenager they kidnapped from the parking lot of a church.

Some weekends, Jared would take over for them, and he'd invite some other guy too. Some boyfriend, or some straight guy he befriended, and hopes will get a little too drunk one night. Kristen told me all about him one night. He's a year younger than them – he graduated high school only barely, because, as Kristen told me, he'd been too busy sucking dick all year. For a couple years after school, he changed his tune completely – stopped *whoring* himself around, stopped wasting his time, and started dating his boyfriend of four years, Leon. Then they broke it off, after some steaming October night, and a few months later, Jared was caught with his lips wrapped around Jen's brother's penis. *Second time I'd done that*, he'd said. That's what Kristen said, and her word is true, almost always.

When Jared oversees the bed-and-breakfast, it's a strange sight, but more specifically, Jen and Kristen head down the coast for a holiday. Before tonight's conversation, they only ever vacationed together, the two of them. Now they have mentioned me. I had always assumed, naturally, they go somewhere else for more of their *alone time* – so to be invited seems ill-boding. Maybe they want me to feel more like their daughter. Maybe they want the family holidays, and the bonding, and the taste of freedom, for me. I can picture the shoreline, and the ocean. Cool water calling my name, almost. Of course, I have no option but to nod my head, smile, and utter the politest *yeah, sounds great* I can, or else why bother? *Take the free vacation, Violet*. We leave on Friday.

I wake up, the alarm ringing in my ear. I remembered to set it last night, the alarm. It's 5:50am. Sometimes I wake up earlier, but most mornings it's around six o'clock, a little earlier so I can lie there in bed, staring at the ceiling, not wanting to move at all. But I move. Today, the bedroom is cool – it's colder now, in the mornings, and the sun is more hesitant to rise, as if something is looming above it, ready to bait it. The uniform I wear – not much of a uniform, really – is loose-fitting and picked for year-round use, so it doesn't keep me warm much. Perfect for the summery months, though.

He's in the hallway. He's on the phone. He's wearing jeans, and a navy-blue striped t-shirt, and a jacket over that. The jacket's dark, maybe black, or a shade of blue. No, black. He's talking to someone, but when I open the door, he's silent, listening. But I stop moving, I'm loitering in

the hallway, clinging to the bedroom door. I know he hasn't stopped talking because I'm there, but I know he knows I'm there. But I'm the maid – not anyone important. He mumbles something, something that sounds like *I can't farm this land today*, to me, but wouldn't be. He looks like he's from the busier inner cities, the stage of the state, like he should be wandering the paved streets with his mobile phone in hand and the satchel strung over his shoulder. He looks like he might be studying law, or business, or marketing and advertising. He looks like he has a girlfriend, but she doesn't live with him, because he lives with someone else, or still with his parents. He's come here to escape them, maybe. He budes a little, hiding himself more from me, so now all I see is his back. I have to hide the obviousness of my nosiness, so I open the door across the hall, as if I was going to make the beds, or clean it. Of course, it's his room. I know from the way his clothes are tossed in a heap in the corner, because he probably was trying to find something to wear together. He's also our only guest now, so it wasn't hard to guess.

His room is like mine, but less personalised. It smells of outside, but it's indoors, and the window is closed. Maybe he was cold last night, I was. This isn't his apartment, or his house, so there aren't photographs in wooden frames. I'm not even sure he would like that. I haven't even talked to him, not once. I can hear him in the hallway, on the phone. He's talking now, he's saying he hopes the restaurant *something something* is good, he's eating there tonight. Or, he might be. He might ask the lady at the front desk – *what was her name?* he mumbles into the phone, loud enough for me to hear. He might ask her Jen if she's eaten there. What restaurant did he say it was? No clue, it was too soft. The bed is unmade, of course. He probably just woke up, it's early, maybe the phone call woke him. Maybe.

I rush from his bedroom, because I think I hear him saying goodbye. It's the back-and-forth *you hang up*, so maybe he's dating someone. Maybe he's married, the fool. No, he's not a fool to be in love, if he is. I'm back in my own room, and I don't think he saw me leave his. He doesn't come knocking on the door, he doesn't call out for the nosy, petite maid – he says nothing, but I hear his door slam shut. It didn't slam. It closed, with normal force, because he didn't seem aggressive, or frustrated. He seemed fine; normal.

I'd finished lunch, I wasn't very hungry. I had talked to Jen in reception before I ate, and she told me she was excited for me to see the ocean, as if I hadn't ever seen it before. I've only ever been a few times, with my father, before he *disappeared*. I can use that word, to describe him, because he isn't in my life anymore. He vanished, the same time I vanished from the parking lot. I remember the sand, how it weaved between my toes, and how the sea water kissed me and then retreated, sulking further into the ocean. I think now of my parents as the sea water, rising and falling, except now the tide never comes in. The moon isn't working – *out of order*. My mother rarely came to the beach. She said she couldn't imagine herself in the scope of it – the bikinis, the wind-blown hair, the men prancing around like Superman. My father would say, on the car ride to the beach, that she wasn't always so unenthused with the thought, but *she gave birth to a child so something something*. His voice would always trail off when he thought about talking about 'how the babies are made'. Being a parent, he thought there would be the perfect moment to talk about how storks only carry their own offspring, and that mama and papa love each other so much that papa shoves his *thingy* in mama, and so on...

When I did learn, another kid assured me mama enjoyed herself. As if the pleasure was leisure, that when papa did penetrate her, she was screaming with joy. It was awkward to think that my own mother could enjoy *the act* with my father, and they had to have me, or at least I'd thought that. Now I'm not so sure. I doubt something as severe as an arranged marriage happened between my parents, but I wouldn't be surprised if they married for the sake of marriage. My mother would have known her uterus wouldn't last forever. I wonder if Jen and Kristen know that too, and if they do, do they care? I doubt it. They never thought of having children themselves, they told me once, but they considered adoption, or fostering some teenager. They said the paperwork would be difficult, if they were to adopt, so they hadn't bothered, for a while at least. Then they found their daughter, I guess.

I finished lunch, what little of it I ate, and I head upstairs until I almost stumble into him. He isn't on the phone this time, and he sees me this time, because he freezes and stands there, silenced. I mutter a soft *sorry* and expect he'll leave me be, let me continue upstairs to my bedroom. Jen and Kristen said I have the afternoon relatively free today, so I thought I'd head upstairs and see what little corner of my room I haven't explored a million times. I could read a book, too. But he's stopped me, and he's talking to me now. I'm not invisible to him. "Hi," he mutters, and there his voice is, same as yesterday. Cute, handsome, like him. "Hello," slips from my mouth, just like that. I bet to him I look frayed and desperate, or otherwise too young and innocent. Maybe I look miserable, in this uniform. My hair is unwashed, but thankfully I showered this morning. But I didn't shave this morning, or yesterday morning.

"Sorry for startling you," he says, and now we're standing more comfortably, face to face. "I'm assuming you're Jen and Kristen's daughter, they talked about you yesterday morning." He's smiling, and he's folding his arms against his chest, comfortably, not in a mood. But what to respond to that? I could say, *oh I think so*, or *no, but they like to think so*. I could say, *they are my parents now*, or *I have no parents, now*.

"I'm going away with them, on a holiday," I mumble, unsure of myself, but certain of that, at least. He seems confused, but he drops the subject. He's smiling again now, as he answers a little question in my head: *what is your name, cute boy?*

"Sorry, I'm Kian. I, uh, didn't mean to crash into you like that," and now he's making sure he didn't startle me too much, as if he could have scared me away from walking, away from my chores; away from him. Staring in his eyes, I don't want to walk away. I don't want to return to my chores, or return to my room, or even go downstairs for dinner. Not even close my eyes – I want to stare, and stare, and keep staring until my eyes beg to blink. I blink.

He asks me if I'm allowed to talk to him. I say, yes, so it's not entirely a lie – I can talk to him, but I'm not quite another guest, so I can't spend all my time in his room. He says if we hang out in his room, they won't know where I am, and they'd get confused – as if Jen and Kristen were lost children searching amidst hide-and-seek, or a child without their mother in a department store. Less miserable, though. He says he's grateful for the room, as if it was offered to him for free, but I know he paid for it. I almost act as if I'm surprised by the state of it, but he knows I work here, so I hide any reaction and merely smile as he guides me from the door to a corner of the room, where he sits down and leans against the wallpapered wall, brushing aside a pair of

unworn jeans. I sit down beside him, feeling the carpet with my fingers. Running each finger through the strands, like hair, but it still feels like bristle, or an unshaven face. Not that extreme, it's softer, but the carpet is old in the rooms – they haven't redone the guest bedrooms yet, but they've done mine. I sit on the floor in my room often, because I'm too bored, or it's comfortable there, a clumping mess on the carpet, kinda like a stain.

I talk to him about the little things first. He wants to know what I like, what I don't like, if I like my job here. I tell him it's okay. I don't want to tell him about my parents, but I will, just not today. I like to think we'll talk again, after today, but I can't be so sure, I suppose. He's only visiting – stopping by – so one day he'll be gone, and my mobile phone is cheap and only for emergencies, really. But he says he likes chatting with me. He likes getting to know me.

I check the clock in his room; late afternoon, 2:52pm. We've been talking for a while, *hanging out*, as he said. He asked me why I stay here, in the bed-and-breakfast, and I told him my parents had kicked me out, because they...and my voice trailed off then, because I couldn't think of a lie. Now, he's telling me about his sister. He says she's beautiful, and that he's obliged to think so because he loves her, and he says he misses her every time he has to say goodbye, but she never comes with him to his visits. He says he's stayed here before, but very briefly, and he had horribly-dyed hair back then that flopped in front of his eyes, like a curtain. I can't remember him; I can't even picture him differently. He looks like he does when I open my eyes and stare at him. I run my fingers through his hair – he says I'm flirting with him – but I shake my head, and I say I don't know how to flirt with someone, I just like his hair. I like his hair *now*.

I don't know what had happened to me. I sat down in this room some time ago, and now I'm different, with him at least. I feel changed. I laugh with him, I smile with him, and I almost told him everything. I was so close, I could see every detail plotted in my head, but then I remembered something else from that day. I remember, again, what I was doing in the carpark. My mother was in church – it was Sunday morning, but what season was it? Was it chilly outside, was I wearing some sort of sweater or coat, or was I burning up? What season it was wasn't important – I was skipping church, my mother thought I was somewhere doing something else. She thought I was still inside, of course. For a while in my childhood, we'd gone to church every Sunday, to keep my mother happy. When I was about nine, we stopped. My father told me he was "all Godded out" but I didn't understand, so I told him I was too. He knew I didn't understand, because I couldn't have suffered as much as he had. His parents were religious, same as my mother, same level of extremity. They compromised, he'd said – the concept to me, at age nine, seemed a little frustrating, *why not both?* – but it meant that my mother attended church alone, until I was thirteen, and it all changed again.

I was sixteen when Jen and Kristen offered me a seat in their pearl-white Kia. I think it was a Kia – they bought a different car a few months later, because cars are interchangeable just like that. I was outside, someone had thrust a cigarette in my hand, but I didn't want to smoke it. *Devil choking you with smoke*, my grandmother always whined. Surrounded by other teenagers though, I had no choice. One of them had bought it, he was older, he was uglier. It was a mistake. When they'd stomped it out, I walked off alone, swatting the shame away from my face like it was a mosquito. I thought about the church, and about the Church, and what my

mother would think if I waltzed inside with the puff of a cigarette on my breath. So, I didn't go back inside, and I didn't follow, like a sheep, behind the *cooler* kids who thought they'd ruined another little church goer. I started walking towards the street, staring at the clouds, and the cracks in the pavement beneath my feet. A caterpillar crawled down there, a furry brown thing, and then I passed him. I had thought about waving to him, but he wouldn't have understood. He was just a silly little caterpillar, after all.

They weren't parked, or they hadn't parked then. I didn't notice them drive into the carpark until they were slowing down beside me, winding down the window, pressing their little black button. *Need a lift at all, love*, one of them said, I think it was Kristen, and then I said, *no, I'm alright thank you*. I suppose I was just there, in the carpark of a church, and they thought I was all alone, abandoned, neglected. It wasn't like my mother tried hard enough, really. She cared, to a degree, but she was so focused, so centred, on upholding who she was – not is, who is she anymore? She would tell me to eat my greens because God offered the food he might not have been offered himself, and so we must be grateful for every offering. She would ask my father to fetch his belt if I misbehaved, but she wouldn't hit me herself. She thought that would shun her from up there, upstairs. Alright if father did it. I would never see my mother again, after that day, because I opened the backseat door and climbed on in.

Kian tells me he thinks I have beautiful eyes. I say, *you're flirting now*, but he laughs it off, grinning widely. He says we're allowed to *flirt*, but by flirt he means compliment each other, because that's just called being nice. The older guy, the one with the cigarette, he would've liked to hear that – he was flirting, not just with me, but with the other girl, too. She had a tattoo on her forearm, she wasn't wearing sleeves, the Church probably hated her. Kian brushes the hair from my forehead, and he whispers, *this isn't flirting either*, but I'm not sure if I can believe him – it's the sort of thing that happens in movies and on TV, where the cute boy says she is the most beautiful thing he's ever seen, and he picks up his books and soon enough they fall in love. This could be that moment.

"I have to go," I mutter, staring at the clock in his room, staring at the time. I wonder why they haven't called for me yet, or why they aren't searching for me upstairs? Maybe they think I'm in my room, doing god knows what, because we have nothing else better to do here. But soon will be dinner time, so I want to get changed in case they ask me to eat with them. I don't think they will tonight, if they aren't calling for me already. Oh well. I'll have to eat in the kitchen then, with the chef asking me if I'm okay over and over, feeding me some new recipe she's whipping up. She said, once, that I remind her of her daughter, just a little younger. I didn't know what she meant, so I asked, and she said I was sweeter, happier to be around. I always eat more in the kitchen, without Jen and Kristen mindlessly chatting to each other and to me, so I'm worried if I eat in there too often that I'll end up looking bloated, like a pregnant woman. I suppose it isn't their fault for looking like that, they're carrying the weight of two, they can eat what they want. I suppose I shouldn't be allowed to. So I don't gain so much weight.

Kian didn't tell me when he was leaving, but he said it was soon, because he didn't have enough money to stay forever. *That was a joke*, he said, but he wasn't lying about the money part. He told me he likes talking with me because I'm not his sister, and I'm not his friends back home, who wall themselves inside a fortress to protect their emotions; who he can't talk to so openly.

I'm lying here in bed, the room pitch black like tar, and thinking about that. All about that. There's the light still shining in the hallway, but the door is closed. He's loitering in my dreams, he's there but I can't reach out to touch him. Not like I should touch him. One of my teachers in high school talked about loitering, a lot really. He said, *if you loiter, you look desperate for something to do*. Something like that, or he would say: *loiterers waste time they don't have, so they shouldn't mind detention*. He liked disciplining us, the students, and he wasn't unwilling to stay behind after class to wallow in the silence of detention. He was probably a very lonely man. I want to climb out of bed and knock on his door, but it's too late at night, he'd be sleeping. What if he doesn't hear me? I'd be standing there, knocking, and for nothing. I won't wake him, so I stay here in bed, staring at the ceiling. There's a few holes, small holes, carved into the ceiling, but I know that from staring at it in the morning. It's too dark to see them now. It's too dark to see anything except the shade of black above me, not like the night sky I wish I could see. All I see are the shadows of this room, amplified over and over again. It's lonely, right here. It's worse, in the darkness. Then I fall asleep.

At breakfast, Jen says she had a phone call last night from someone. It was her brother – his flight was delayed, so he wouldn't be back when he'd said so. She isn't worried, almost as if she knows everything will be okay, will be fine, but just some time later. I've met him once, her brother. He didn't seem gay, not like his sister, but I suppose he likes his penis to be sucked. Is that the word, sucked, is it like a lollipop? Not for kids, though. No. I remember in high school, when I still was in high school, someone said that this girl, whatever her name was, was good at BJs, they'd called it. You weren't supposed to ask what a BJ was, because you were supposed to know what it was, and you either gave them or received them. Some of the guys did both, apparently, but they weren't supposed to. Some of the guys liked it better when another guy gave them one, because apparently it felt nicer. They would say the girls would whine or something like that, or their technique was wrong. That's what the boys in the closet would say. They'd say, *I'm not fucking gay, but that boy can really suck*.

I found out what a BJ is in that church carpark. One of the boys, not the older one with the cigarette, was teasing the other girl, saying she'd have to blow him if something happened, I can't remember what. He made a gesture with his hands, and then I remembered the irony of it – we were outside a church, and he was asking a girl to give him a blow-job. I didn't understand why they'd call it that, because it wasn't like he exploded. Not like dynamite.

We're having cereal for breakfast, because nobody can be bothered to cook anything, and Kristen said she felt like Weet-Bix. She pours sugar on top, and it begins to dissolve, fading away. Jen is eating rice bubbles, but they float in the milk lake so depressingly that each spoonful is a joyride for them. A joyride into her opened mouth, her swallowing mouth. I have a bowl of rice bubbles too, but mine look less depressed. There's less milk to suffocate them. For mine, each spoonful is as it should be – the trap of death, poor little rice bubbles. I shove a spoonful in my mouth, half-listening to what Jen and Kristen are chatting about. They've moved on from Michael to something else, something Jen heard on the radio, or saw on the news. She tells me all about some of the criminal cases sometimes, if there's any fascinating ones. Fascinating to her, at least. Almost always, though, I find them interesting, in some way. It's intriguing to think about a life you could be living if you were bruised and battered with no

hope or love in your heart – that’s something my mother would have thought, very briefly, and she wouldn’t have repeated it for anyone to hear. I rarely watch the news, because it bores me too easily. I don’t like hearing the depressing stories, like the fatalities or the crimes, where the person must live on having been a victim to something horrible. I don’t like those stories, and the news is filled with them nowadays. So, I watch the other channels, when I watch TV. I watch the cartoons, and the cheesy reality shows, and the teenage fantasy-romance flicks; stuff like that.

I hear what she says now, my spoon lowered in the pool of milk and cereal. She says, “The world’s hit a level of shit, and they say it’s not changing, but it is, for the worse only.” I don’t know whether to question her or believe her, so I sit in silence, as I usually do when they talk about things I don’t know about. My mother pops back into my head again, and then my father, *dad, why’d that happen?* He’d talk a bit about it, but his words were too long or too weird, because he’d lived longer, and he’d heard too many older people talk. He’d say, only sometimes, *the world is horrible sometimes, Violet, now let’s not talk about this with your mother.* Then I’d be quiet and stare around, like someone began watching me, spying on me. He’d make me feel awkward, uncomfortable. Then he was gone, not even there for that day at church. Where was he then, that day? In bed, at home, probably.

Cereal doesn’t taste the nicest. Cereal tastes soggy, bathing in milk like that, and it tastes boring, sometimes. It can be good, too. It can taste like sugar, like candy, but soggy candy. I wasn’t allowed the sugary cereal, because it wasn’t good for me; because it would make me hypo and maybe if I ate too much, I’d be fat. I climb the staircase – sometimes it feels like a mountain if I’m tired or really lazy – and head towards my bedroom, just another guest room. Sometimes I like to think about what will happen if we’re booked out, where will I sleep? I know Jen and Kristen would find somewhere else for me if one last customer asked for a room; it’s not like my room is mine, it’s just where I sleep. Maybe they’d let me sleep at their house. It’s awfully lonely here at night, with the guests and no one else. It’s just him right now – hopefully he can stay here longer, so that we can still talk to each other. He says he doesn’t have any plans after this, that he was just planning on heading home. He has his own car, it’s parked out the front. He said, yesterday, that he’s his own person now, because he’s got his own car and he’s not young and innocent anymore. I asked him what he meant, not innocent anymore. He said he’s done some things, *of course*, but he hasn’t committed crimes. He’s not gonna be on the news soon, he might say if I talk about Jen and the world, and how it’s *hit a level of shit*. I’m not going to, it’ll annoy him, talking about something he probably already knows. He knows more than me, because he has a car.

I knock on his door, because I just peeked outside at his car in the little carpark Jen said came with the place when they bought it. They just painted it, a little, so it didn’t look so out-dated. She’d used that word, after a little pause, trying to think of the word. Kian is standing there when he opens the door, and he’s leaning against the door, smiling. He’s grinning, like he would if I gave him a present he liked, so I think maybe seeing me is that present. He invites me inside, asking me how I am, so I tell him I’m good, which is what I tell anyone when they ask me. I should have said I’m wonderful, because I’m seeing him, and I’m not bored. I should be getting something from my room and going downstairs to help Kristen in the kitchen, but she

has to do something in town, so I can come in his room, even for a little bit. He starts talking about his family again, and about his first stay here, again. He was with them, his parents and his sister, but now he knows it was before I started working here. So, I was still with my parents. “Why did your parents kick you out?” He asks, almost too softly for me to hear, but he wants to know, because he wants me to be comfortable with me. Because he wants to be here with me, but also back then with them too.

I’m trying to think of a lie again, it’s harder today, because he isn’t just some stranger now. “I, uh...” The words are stumbling, like tumbles down the stairs. He’s not a stranger, his name is Kian, he says I pronounce it right. He’s smiling, waiting for an answer. “I...I ran away,” I mumble, words falling out that taste like what my mother would call *filth* – she must’ve thought I did run away, or that some ugly man strapped me down in his white van and shoved his penis in me. No, she’d never use that word – she’d say he *violated* me and tossed my body in his basement or cut me up into little pieces. They would have wasted a day or so searching for me, until she called to my father and told him the news: *tragic, isn’t it, that this world is willing to ruin a girl her age, and for what?* I heard her say that, once. She was talking about a girl down the street, who’d been found drugged up behind a strip club. They’d propped her up against a dumpster, whoever did it. Mother said to me the next morning: *you promise you’ll listen to the Holy Father and all he speaks of?* I nodded. I was eleven, I didn’t know what she meant.

Kian wants to know why I ran away. I know he cares, he’s not being snoopy. He just wants to know what happened, and maybe he hopes I’ll feel better if I talk about it. It’s easier to lie now, because it’s mostly all the truth. “My mother wasn’t very caring,” I say, staring into his eyes, “and my father let her do whatever she wanted, which never helped me.” I say those words and he goes quiet, he’s just staring at me, not smiling and not frowning.

I can hear Kristen’s voice downstairs. She’ll be wondering where I am if I’m not waiting for her in the kitchen, so I have to rush out of his room and head downstairs. He understands, but he says he’ll be here if I can come back. I tell him to do something, so he doesn’t get bored – he tells me he’ll watch a movie, because he brought a few with him. Nothing I know, he likes older movies more than the newer ones. I want to stay, to watch a movie with him.

Downstairs, Kristen and Jen are talking in the kitchen, and the chef is there peeling potatoes. She asks me if I’d like to help her out by julienning the carrots – I don’t know how to do that, I tell her, and she hands me the potato-peeler. I peel some of the potatoes until Kristen comes over to talk. Her hair is tied in a loose ponytail, the blonde-colour like fading lightbulbs, like the one in the pantry at home. At the house, not home. Kristen holds one of the peeled potatoes in her hands, gazing at it, turning it over in her palm – she likes the look of it, how it’s been peeled, so I’m almost certain that I didn’t peel it myself. “Jen and I were thinking about leaving earlier on Friday,” she says, tossing the potato back into the bowl, “so we can spend more time at the beach.” I know this is code, because they always say the beach is *right there* – their words. I know they mean they want to get away from work earlier, or spend more time with me, which is a nice little thought. She’s put her hand on my shoulder now.

“I don’t have a swimsuit,” I say, and she glances at me, smiling.

“I’ve bought you one, that’s where I was,” she says. She’d been out shopping for anything we’d need, and she’d seen the swimsuit, on sale, a shade of blue or green, something like that. It was

cheap, but it would do its job, and she said it shouldn't matter if someone judges me for it because a swimsuit is just a swimsuit, and a body is just a body. She was talking about mine, my body, because I rarely exercise, but she knows I'm not overweight or pudgy. She just knows I'm not like other girls my age, because I don't care as much. Neither does she, about her own body. She says she's comfortable with how she looks, and she's married now, so the hardest part is over. That's something I learned from one of the older girls in church – a girl may care about her body to find her husband, but pregnancy will leave her with a chubby stomach, *so oh well then*. I'd always felt uncomfortable about that, and especially now being around Jen and Kristen so much – they didn't want kids, so when did they stop caring about their body? No, that's wrong to assume. They care, Jen definitely does, but they aren't church people. None of this *find a husband, make a baby* stuff they hint about. They just do what they do.

Soon enough I've finished helping in the kitchen, and Jen asks me to go upstairs to make sure everything in room four is in order. We've got a guest coming, she says. Her brother just called, saying his plane landed, so he's on his way to the bed-and-breakfast. He doesn't come to stay often, but he calls Jen whenever he can, because he's a good brother. I've always wondered what it would've been like to have a brother, one that lived. There was Oliver, but he died before I was born. My mother never talked about him, but my father said he cried a lot. He was sick – *God was testing him, and he was failing* – and my father said my mother told them not to worry, he'd pull through, but...then my father would grow quiet, tell me to be hush, and then he'd leave, if he could. If we were in the car, he wouldn't say anything until I changed the topic. I hated my mother for not talking about him, and now I hate her for not listening to the doctors. It's like she killed him herself.

The bed is made, the room is perfectly presentable for him to arrive, when he does. The curtains are drawn, because the sunlight might annoy him, or if he comes at night, the darkness will hide him, and he can be alone again. They told me to make sure the curtains were drawn. They told me to give him extra everything, like an extra towel, and an extra bar of soap. Extra pillows, too, and extra mints to place on top of them, so delicately and so perfectly, so he can feel like the prince. But it's not for him to feel respected, and grandly admired – it's so he doesn't come asking for them later. He must've done that before, asked for more towels and more pillows because he knows he can. He's Jen's brother.

He checked in late, after dinner, but Jen and Kristen had stayed here later to make sure he got to his room, and make sure he didn't disturb everyone else. It wasn't too late, so I was still awake – and now I still am. I had heard him talking to Jen, in the hallway. He said his flight was okay, bumpy a little, but he was glad to see his little sister again. He knew about this weekend, so he asked whether he'd be managing the place alone, but of course Jared would be here too. He said something, maybe *that's good* or *okay then*, and then they said goodnight and he closed the door behind him, going into his king's chamber. Burying his face in the stack of pillows or drying himself with his two towels. Or doing other stuff, the other stuff men do, that the church says is disgusting and should be spanked for. I try to close my eyes and sleep, but I can only think of him – Kian. I could get up and go to him now, but what if Michael hears me? I can't risk that, so I'll wait. I'll wait half-an-hour, or as close to it as I can. I want to see him.

I knock on his door, but maybe he's asleep. I can hear him moving in there, bumping against things, trying to get to the door but stumbling. I can hear his voice, a soft murmur, "Is that you, Violet?" I nod, and I say yes, because he can't see me yet. He fiddles with the door handle. I feel bad for waking him, but maybe he's been waiting for me too. He opens the door, invites me inside, in the darkness. I don't know if Jen and Kristen are still here, but I expect they've gone home by now, if Michael is tucked inside just next-door. We don't turn on any of the lights just in case. He asks if we can sit on his bed, and I say yes.

"Do you like working here, as the maid?" He asks, when we're both comfortable, sitting inches from each other.

"I don't mind it," I whisper, trying to stare at him in the darkness, "it's better than nothing, and the food is free."

His voice is softer, and he's leaning closer. "I'm glad you're not like them," he says. I want to ask what he means, maybe he's glad I'm not older and I'm not married, like them. Maybe he's glad I'm not a lesbian.

"I'm glad you came here, Kian," and he's leaning closer and closer, almost lips to lips. He's smiling, and then I know he wants to kiss me, here in the darkness. He runs his fingers through my hair and he kisses me, a soft touch, and it feels amazing. It feels like something I've been missing out all my life has caught up to me and tagged me. Then I can feel his hand moving down my body, from my shoulders to my back and to my waist. He touches my thighs, but he isn't harsh; he's gentle, he cares. He starts to take off my clothes, and I let him. I know what comes next. In this darkness, I know what he wants, even if I can't see his eyes. I want it too.

He's stripped off his clothes, and I wish it was lighter, so I could see his body. In school, they didn't teach us much about those places down there – the penis, the vagina – but I learnt about them after school, or at lunchbreaks. The other teenagers would whisper about them, like it was a secret, or they'd be punished if someone older, like a teacher, heard them talk about how the penis looks like a banana, but it isn't yellow, and some kids had some of the skin cut at birth. They all had their own words for those things, down there, a kind of code in their own language, so they found it weird when I said the words, the proper words. *No one says vagina, that's weird*, they said one day, when I asked why it bled sometimes. They said I was too uneducated for them, I only asked questions. They said, *how did her mother even get pregnant with her?* They thought I was like my mother, a prude. I had to ask her what that word meant.

He's on top of me. His hand is cold on my skin, but I can't tell him that, because he'd think I'm complaining, and maybe he'd stop. I don't want him to stop. He's touching me, he's touching my boobs, he says they feel nice – I don't know what to do with my arms, they dangle by my side, awkward, but I feel comfortable. He shifts, moving there on top of me, so he can put his dick inside of me. One of them called it that, no, a few did. They laughed whenever someone said it. It hurts, at first, but I know it's meant to feel good, so I keep waiting for it, staring at his face as he moves with it, enjoying himself, I think.

I don't know what I expected. I wanted it, I always wanted it, and here it is, lying here with him helping me through it. It is exactly what I hoped. He cares enough to be here, with me, and he knows this is my first time, and it doesn't change his mind. Because he likes me.

He slips, but he doesn't fall, it's just his hand against my thigh that moves, an inch too far. He thrusts himself against me again, and now it doesn't hurt. It's pleasure. They'd say, *what do you know about pleasure, little girl*, but I don't listen to them, I never did, because their voices were whispers when what they had to say wasn't important. It was when they talked about the things I knew nothing about that I listened, because I knew they couldn't be talking about me, not when they whispered about orgasms and cum, as the idiot boys called it. That was what swam towards the shining light – no one had called it that, I thought it sounded right, since pregnancy with the religious creeps sounds like heaven. My father told me that it isn't, because *things happen to the woman that aren't comfortable for her*. Because heaven is supposed to be comfortable, like sex once the beginning hurt ends. That's what I've heard on television, when I watch it sometimes. That's what I hear.

He is lying beside me now, his sprawled naked body beside me, his breath soft as he sleeps. I stare up at the ceiling, the blank ceiling, looking like nothing in this darkness. I have him now. He loves me, he showed his love to me today, just now. It wasn't something the other kids talked about, but in the church, *sex and love-making* were what happened once you got married, because it was the ultimate show of love. You wait until the knot is tied, they'd say, and then he'd carry you to bed and he'd hope for the blessing of a child. They would treat this as the ritual, the sacred act, because if you fucked someone before you were bounded together, you could say hello to Satan in Hell. But it wasn't like that for Kian and me, it wasn't, because I know he loves me now, if he was willing to snap the thread. I know he more than likes me, because he isn't like the teenager in the carpark, with the tattoos and the cigarette. He isn't like that, smoking and sticking his penis in places where it shouldn't be. Kian isn't like that. I'm staring at the ceiling; I can't sleep. Not right now. I'm thinking about something else, not him beside me, not my past, but my future, mixed with my present. If I saved enough money, I could buy a place for myself, so I wouldn't be living here. I could learn how to drive, or he could teach me. I could try to go to college, learn how to be a successful businesswoman or follow a dream I didn't realise I wanted. I could be with him, yes, and one day we could get married by the sea and live by the sea and raise our children there. I could see Jen and Kristen for the holidays, because they'd be considered my real parents, and the only grandparents my children would know. They'd meet his parents too, I suppose, so maybe not. So, we'd split the holidays up, one here with them, the next wherever his parents are, handing me albums of his baby pictures, waiting for me to *ooh* and *aww*. Maybe I'd watch the news, if I'm to be a grown woman, and maybe I'd make up little stories about growing up with Jen and Kristen as parents, because I wouldn't want to tell my children about my mother. Maybe I would remove my mother from the stories and leave my father, because he only beat me to please her, and he cared enough to tell me truths, little ones and big ones. It's nice to think about my future, about what it could look like, and now I know something too. I love him. He loves me, I know it.

I wrote his number on a piece of paper when he slept, because he told me we'd call each other but he forgot to write it for me. I wrote it in neat handwriting, I always had it. He's waking up now, and it's weird to look over as his eyes open, his cute smile forming as soon as he sees me. "Good morning," I whisper into his ear.

“Morning, cutie.” He doesn’t know I barely slept. I was too excited to sleep last night, too excited from what happened, but I tried to, and I did for a little while. I’ve never remembered my dreams, so I don’t know if I did or not, but I hope so. I hope I dreamt of him, or of the beach, because I miss it so much, and I never realised.

“I don’t want to move from this bed today,” I say, kissing his cheek ever so softly, he might not have felt it. He would’ve. He says he definitely has to thank Jen and Kristen – I remind him that those are their names, the two women who own this place – and he has to tell them that they have the greatest maid, or whatever I am here. He makes me blush. Cheeks ripened and red, like strawberries, bursting, almost. I ask him, “What’s the day today?” and he stares at me, unsure, looking for his phone. I had put it back where I found it in the night – there it is, down on the phone, almost tucked underneath the bed. He’d thrown it, probably. Nobody tucks their phone underneath their bed, not anyone I know.

“It’s Friday, my love,” he says, cocking his head up, as if he’s teasing me. Friday is when we planned to leave early for the beach, so I’ll have to say goodbye. Maybe he’ll be waiting when I come back, but I don’t know when he said he was leaving. He hasn’t said, I would’ve remembered. I don’t want it to be Friday, I don’t want to go. I know the beach can wait.

Now he’s left me here. I’m standing outside, for once, with a backpack over my shoulders and a frown on my face. I look miserable, that’s what Jen and Kristen are saying. They didn’t see him leave, they checked him out, but that was it. They went upstairs to talk to Michael and I raced outside, because I wanted to say goodbye. I wanted to ask him when I could see him again.

“I don’t know, I have to go home,” he said, and I still don’t believe him. I was standing in this exact spot when he drove off. I was standing here when he brushed me off when I tried to kiss him, but I was – I am – confused why. Last night was perfect but he’s sped off without me, without a promise to call me, without saying *I love you*.

He didn’t say much else. He didn’t even mention last night. He packed up his things and then he left, like he changed in a split second, like nothing mattered. My body hurts. It hurts where he touched me, and where he pushed into me. It hurts where each little nerve flinches; it hurts in my organs, and in my heart, the organ he crushed with his hand. He never wrote his number down so I couldn’t call him. He didn’t care. It’s why he smiled at me over and over, and why he laughed at every joke I tried to tell. It’s why he asked me so much, so he could know who I was, and he could make me feel comfortable. Comfortable enough to sleep with and then just drive off into the sunset, like the happy couple should in those movies, but this time it’s just him. I did more for him than I knew I could. I let him in, I let him hurt me, I did what the other kids say I would do. I hurt.

Jen and Kristen tell me to hop into the car, in the backseat with the backpack and the food, and with the empty space beside me filled up. Packed up. We say goodbye to Michael and Jared – he’s here now, got here a few minutes ago, he was late – and then the car doors are slammed shut, trapping me inside. When they first drove me around, they were listening to music, they said it was someone called Alanis Morissette, *she’s iconic*, they said. Her music sounded nice, but it was obviously music my parents didn’t like, and the church wouldn’t have liked it either. She sung about cigarettes, break-ups, taxis, and she had this whole song about *irony*, which Jen and Kristen were talking about when the song played, and it was one they both didn’t like very

much. They talked about something, but I'd blocked it out to hear the song, because her voice was something I'd never heard before. It's strange, to think about what changed when I listened to her music. They aren't listening to Alanis today, no, they've got a different CD in the stereo. Usually they listen to the radio, but when they go on their little holidays, they listen to one of the CDs they've bought, or Michael's bought for them. Today is ABBA, and I know I heard their music when I was younger. My mother liked them, and my father did too. Sometimes she'd pretend she didn't care, but I know *Fernando* was her favourite song. She'd hum the songs, in the car, or she'd sing sometimes. Sometimes she changed the lyrics.

The car ride is okay, so far. I'm trying not to cry, because they'll look in their mirrors and see tears if they stream down my cheeks. He said something else to me, right before he left. He said, *you didn't expect me to stay with you, did you?* He was angry, by then. He didn't scream at me, but I thought he might have. Maybe if I tried to get in his car. He told me I shouldn't have expected so much from him, because I told him everything with him had meant so much. He knew he took my virginity, but it didn't bruise him – he just jumped into his car and sped off, after he said his little *I'm sorry*. I'm staring down for a lot of this car ride. Staring down and singing along to any of the songs I remember, so I don't curl into a ball; so I don't think about him too much. We'll be at the beach soon. Think about the beach, Violet.

“Do you want anything from the servo, Vi?” They ask, well Jen does, as they open their doors. They step outside now, soaking in the clouded sunlight of a Friday in the May, in autumn. I tell them I want something to eat, and maybe something to drink, but I don't need to pee. *Chips? Or something sweet?* They ask, and I ask if they think there'll be any donuts inside. I know how they feel sometimes about things like donuts, but they say, *why not, let's treat ourselves*, and Jen heads inside while Kristen begins to fill the petrol tank. I watch her move inside, tiptoeing almost down the short aisles, grasping up a packet of potato chips, or something similar. I watch her change her mind and switch packets, and then head to the rear wall, looking for something to drink. I watch her open the fridges, and I feel like I'm her the day they found me. Watching someone go about their life with calmness, but sitting beyond just waiting to change that, unless Jen and Kristen never planned on kidnapping me. Maybe it's what I said. Maybe I changed their mind.

“Donuts!” I squeal, as she passes me the caramel-coloured container with the three donuts inside. Jen and Kristen are smiling, back in their seats in the front of the car, and then they ask for one each, and I open the box for them to pick which one. She only got the glazed ones, but one of them looks deformed, and the glaze is too runny. Kristen takes that one, because I almost beg her to. I wrap my fingers around my donut, staring at it, and then biting it. It tastes almost like heaven, but not quite, and the people in the church wouldn't think heaven is this yummy, glaze-coated dough circle. I eat every single bite, and they do too, and then we're driving again. On the road again.

As a kid, I'd ask my father if we were there yet, but only when it was just he and I in the car. I knew my mother would snap at me, thinking I was serious and stupid. My father would just laugh and tell me no, of course not, we're still moving, *aren't we?* But I'd keep asking him, because I was bored, and the road outside looked lonely and never ending. I don't ask Jen and Kristen, not because I'm bored, because I'm not, but because I'm older now, and I should

know better than to ask stupid questions that I know the answer too. We're almost there, because Kristen points out the turn-off. She's driving, so she's pointing it out for me, because she can hear that question even without me saying it. We're almost there.

I see the ocean, in front of me, the waves crashing, and I'm wondering if they could topple me. When the car pulled up at the beach, I launched myself out to vomit. It wasn't much, but I felt it rise in my throat, and I felt sick. The taste of it lingers in my mouth. Jen and Kristen think it was the donut, or the drink – I'd drunk a bottle of soft drink they thought I'd like. The donut tasted delicious, and the drink was fine, but I think it was him, that caused this. He didn't have a condom last night, we didn't think of it, but I knew it was something you did, because they taught it in school. They'd say, *wear a condom*, and that'd be all of it. They gave out free ones to the boys, and at lunch, some of the boys pretended like they were about to pull down their pants and slide it on. I said they were disgusting, and another girl laughed and said, *as if someone would let you fuck them*, and then he acted like he was going to fight her, but he didn't. Then he was laughing with her. She teased one morning that they hooked up – her words – and that his thingy *down there* was more impressive than imagined. I didn't listen to her anymore.

The vomit came too soon after the car ride. I had no time to notice the beauty of the outside world; no time to open my eyes and stare at the sun, and the almost-cloudless sky, and the sprinkled sand soon to be beneath my soon-to-be bare feet. Jen had handed me a bottle of water, to wash my mouth out, and I downed half of it, thirsty, I guess. The taste of the vomit disgusts me, even if it was only a tiny puddle I puked.

I'm standing here by the ocean now, with all that behind me. Everything behind me, except the sea water lapping at my feet, trying to kiss me. I've missed the beach. I don't get to come here often, I don't get to bury myself in sand, or build sandcastles, or lie down in the salty sea water. There's the pool out back at the bed-and-breakfast, but we only use it in the summer, and now that reminds me of something. Jen and Kristen come down here a lot, not dependent on the weather, or the season. They must like it down here, even when the ocean is cool, and the sun dies more swiftly on the horizon. They don't care that it's not the dead of summer, so maybe it's not the time of year for them, but the place, and the people. They always have each other.

Inside the house they've rented, Jen and Kristen are unpacking, and bickering about something. They're talking about something that I shouldn't be hearing, because they're talking about me. Kristen is saying, *maybe it wasn't such a great idea to bring her along*, but Jen is disagreeing, telling her that I need a chance to relax and to be by the seaside. Telling her that this will be good for me, because I'm always locked up in that room, and that building, a bit like a prisoner, but they have a chance to make it less so. Jen says, *this is time for her to feel like we're finally the family she needs, the family she wants*, and then Kristen falls silent, because she knows Jen is right. They didn't hear me come in, they haven't noticed me lingering in the hallway, because now I'm leaning against the wall, staring at the creases on my hand. I never knew anyone who thought the lines, thin and delicate, could mean anything. I never knew anyone like that.

When I think I hear them walking towards the doorway, I bolt forward to try and busy myself far from them, so it doesn't seem like I heard them at all. They see me, reading on the sofa, I'd quickly snatched up a book from the shelf – something by a female author, I think, I'm not

paying much attention. As soon as they start chatting to me, I close the book and tuck it away, forgetting about it all over again.

“Jen and I were just talking about tonight,” Kristen says, resting her hands on the back of the sofa, smiling at me, “and we’re gonna open a bottle of wine if you want to join us.” They weren’t just talking about that, but I nod my head, and I smile, and I say I wouldn’t mind that, because I wouldn’t mind tasting alcohol. I haven’t yet, not with my parents once breathing down my neck, which is a funny little saying. There’s not ever really any alcohol in the bed-and-breakfast, unless a guest sneaks it in, and I don’t usually go out at night, not especially to somewhere I wouldn’t be allowed in. I’m too young, too innocent, and I didn’t have someone around to pour alcohol down my throat. One last time to think about him, right now, and then when they hand me a glass of wine I’ll forget all about him and how he lied to me.

What was I thinking?

I wasn’t thinking. It’s afternoon, late afternoon, with the sun beginning to fade, like it does every single day. I’m sitting on the deck, staring at the ocean, wanting to know what’s out there, hiding beyond the waves. What’s out there, is it different from here, of course it is, isn’t it? If I still lived with my parents, I would never be here, and not ever somewhere close. Nothing would have changed. I don’t know where Jen and Kristen are, they could be in their room. They said they were picking up dinner, but was that later? They said they’d pick it up at six – what time is it now? I fumble for my phone, staring at the screen. It’s not yet six. I begin to look at my phone, bored, scrolling through the stuff I have left there. Stuff I’ve written down, nothingness really. There’s some pictures I’ve taken of myself, but they don’t look like me anymore. They still do, but the smile is different, that’s what it is. I want to be smiling again, like in these pictures. The sun makes me smile, and the beach, and the ocean, but he stands in my mind, sticking himself inside of me and then running away, laughing, probably. I didn’t know better, and I still don’t know much better. I keep staring at the pictures of myself. I look so ugly.

We eat dinner, fish and chips from the place a few streets away, and then Jen pops the bottle of wine, and pours three glasses. Kristen smiles to her, and they kiss, very briefly. I don’t see them kiss often, but I know they must, and they certainly love each other. Proper love, not stupid love. I take a sip of the wine, they say it’s white wine, they say they don’t care if tonight isn’t the biggest of occasions. They bought the bottle to celebrate us, together, and how this is almost their perfect family, if only I was their legitimate child. Not some kid stolen from a church parking lot and never sent home, like some odd form of a boarding school. Would I have liked boarding school, if they ever sent me? I think they would have thought something *terrible* would have happened to me, like a girl would offer to tattoo me, or some guy would press himself up against me, or I’d be converted to paganism. Even if they sent me to a Christian one, they would still have worried. My mother would have worried.

It tastes good, but not the greatest. I keep drinking it to please them, and because I want to be drunk, because I’ve heard it can be fun, to be drunk. I want to be drunk. Some of the other teenagers were already getting drunk, at their age, because they had older siblings who had an arm around their shoulder and a plastic cup in their other hand. Or they had older friends, who whispered in their ears and told them just how *freaking fantastic* it is to let loose and give up all

you've got. I had no one like that, but it never mattered much to me. The older kids were shadows in the hallway, some attractive, some damaged, but they didn't bother me much. I down the rest of the glass, and Jen and Kristen smile as if they're impressed, but it's not like I've done much. Not like the older kids. No more thinking about them, *can I have another glass?* I think they want me to drink more, to get drunk. They have more than the wine – they have rum, and some vodka, and Jen says she can make cocktails for us. She does. They say they've brought plenty for us, for the weekend, because it's time to relax. *Time to enjoy*, Kristen says as she pours herself a drink, kicking up her feet onto a footstool.

"Come on, Vi, drink up!" Jen hollers from the kitchen, making cocktails. I keep drinking, further and further into the night, and I think I might forget him altogether tonight. Maybe. Once I start drinking more, I don't stop, and maybe I'll puke again today. They're watching me, and they tell me to make sure I don't push myself. They tell me to stay calm and try to find my limit, but I keep staring at it, staring at the alcohol, and I want it inside of me, down my throat. It tastes better, the alcohol. It tastes like excitement and fear in one, so I keep drinking until what I feel changes, and I'm in my temporary bedroom, wanting to hurl something at someone, wanting to vent my frustration; wanting to end this play of pretend.

Kristen comes into the room as soon as I knock over the chair. I want to blame the alcohol, and whatever it does to my body, but I can only blame myself for what is happening, because I'm the fuming one, I'm the one who knocked the chair down. I want to pick it up and act normal when she asks me what's up, but I can't. She's standing in front of me, trying to calm me down. "Vi, what are you doing in here?" She says, stepping forward, not afraid of me.

I open my mouth, expecting the downpour. "I'm stupid, I'm so stupid, Kristen, I fucked up." I hear that word come out so naturally, but I've only heard myself say it maybe once, in front of the *cool kids*. I never rebelled to my parents by swearing because I didn't want the belt. I knew she'd remember it, up in that head of hers. But I knew I could say it here, comfortably, even with the alcohol. Especially with the alcohol now.

"What are you talking about, Violet?" She says, stepping forward, "you're fine, the alcohol won't kill you." Of course, she thinks it's the alcohol. Of course, she doesn't know what I've done with him.

"I did something stupid with that guest, the one who left this morning," and now the irony of it all sinks in, the irony, like in that song they listen to. "I know I shouldn't have..."

"Hey, what did you do?" I can hear something in her voice, but it's not discomfort, and it's not anger. It's a nurturing voice, because she cares, of course she cares.

I can't look at her anymore. "I let him hurt me, Kristen," I whisper, and I know she heard me because she steps forward, as if she's about to hug me, to comfort me. "I thought he'd be like the guys I've seen in movies...I thought he liked me, you know, actually liked me..."

I should have seen that everything he did was a broken thought. He only said *this* because he meant to do *this* to me, he only did *that* with me because I was *that* for him. I don't think I can change *this* and *that*.

I sink into her warmth, burying my head on her shoulder, wishing I could just collapse right here, in her arms. "But...but you let him...you let him do what he did to you?"

I gulp. I let him. I thought I loved him. I try to speak, but it doesn't sound like words, it's just muffled tears, because I don't want to move from her shoulder. I want her to hold me up, so I can let the weight of him fall from my body.

If I had longer arms, I could touch the ocean. Much longer arms, the size of giraffes themselves, or even longer. I want longer arms to touch the ocean, so I don't have to move. The night breeze touches my skin; I'm standing outside, in the moonlight, all alone.

Jen opens the door, I know it's her. She walks up behind me, squeezing my shoulder with her right hand. "Hey, Kristen said I should give you some space, but I want to be here for you," and I know she means every word. She always has. I don't know if I can tell her all about him, about what happened, about why I don't know what I'm doing. I want to tell her every single thing, knowing she'll wrap her arms around me like a mother should. "We all make the wrong decisions, hell I know I've made plenty of them" She's beside me, staring into my eyes. I don't know what to say. I don't know who to talk about. I'm staring at the ocean again, between the trees, beyond the sand.

"Do you want me to go inside?" She asks, retreating her hand.

"No," I lower my head, not looking at her or the ocean, "stay with me, please."

Every now and then, I tell them things about before. I've told them plenty about my mother, because they've wanted to know why I was skipping church. I've told them very little about my father, because he wanders in my head as one of the only cheerful memories, but I've told them about the welts that would appear like magic with the strike of the belt. Only when I was younger. I've told them about some of my other family, like the grandparents who died when I was five, and the uncle on my father's side who bought his own farm and drowned himself in the river there. I tell Jen now about Kian, the boy who walked right into my life only to walk right back out, after having messed up almost everything, sort of like a racoon ransacking the garbage can for leftovers and scurrying off with the core of an apple. I'm telling her about the kiss, how it felt so sweet, and how he seemed like a decent person until his layers unravelled. I tell her it was more than a kiss, I tell her I don't know what is left of my virginity – thinking about that man upstairs, gliding among the clouds – and I tell her I don't know what to do, not anymore.

"I don't know what else to say but that all will sort its self out eventually, because you're young, and you have all of your life ahead of you," she whispers, smiling at me, "know life won't be perfect and you'll struggle less through all of the bumpy roads."

I've unfolded the slip of paper. There is his number, scribbled in black ink. I type in every number, into the keypad on the phone, and now I'm listening to it ring. Waiting for him to answer, not expecting to hear my voice again. I think I've scripted what I want to say in my head, but I don't know if he'll answer, and I can't stop him for hanging up.

He answers. "Hello?"

"I want you to know that you didn't break me, Kian," I mutter out, listening to his breath in the microphone on the other end. "I want you to know that you didn't steal everything."

"How the fuck did you get my number?"

I think about hanging up now, but his voice changes my mind, his anger. “I don’t know an awful lot, but I know you haven’t broken me,” and I want to wait for his response, but I don’t. I hang up. I put the phone down on the floor of this bedroom. I shut my eyes. *Okay.*

The End...