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(RE)CREATION

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
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## ABSTRACT

## (RE)CREATION

BY JESSICA WONG

In this autofiction novella, a young Chinese and Korean-American girl goes to college with a strong protestant Christian background. Hoping to take more ownership of her faith, she joins Genesis Church, a hip Asian-American church in Los Angeles during her freshman year. She quickly makes friends, finding the community and sense of belonging that she's always searched for and enters her first relationship with a Chinese-American student involved in the college ministry's leadership. As this seemingly perfect Christian relationship progresses, her religious boyfriend pressures her sexually, while also blaming her for not preventing this "sin." After painful experiences a therapist later defines as rapes, she finally leaves her boyfriend. The novella opens after she's left the relationship; she goes to the church's pastor and his wife, but their support is flimsy and non-committal. She seeks comfort from her family as well, but her parents are judgmental about her lapsed virginity. Her roommate, a non-believer, becomes her main source of support. The novella follows her recovery and her attempts to integrate the ideas she inherited from her upbringing about virginity, femininity, and Christianity, with the person she's now becoming.

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## BREAKING UP WITH A MOG

Mom said that God had warned her about my relationship with Noah.

It confirmed my deepest fear. God wanted me to end it. So I asked if he could meet me at my apartment the next day. We sat across from each other on my couch, as far apart as possible.

“How was your trip to San Diego?” I asked.

“Okay.” The corners of Noah’s mouth turned up a fraction of an inch. “At one point, I was driving over 100 miles per hour. Good thing I didn’t get a ticket,” he said.

My stomach turned. “So, you know, the last time we had this conversation...”

“I know. I figured this was coming after you told me not to talk to you yesterday. You missed out on some good tacos,” he said.

“Are you ... okay?”

He shrugged. “You’ve made up your mind. I’ll be fine.”

“Noah, I want you to know ... this is very hard for me,” I choked out.

“Is there anything else you want to say to me? Just get it out of your system.”

*How do I begin?* “Why’d you have to always shave it all off?” I asked, pointing to his bald head.

“If I’m gonna be a firefighter, I have to shave. You never understood.”

“See, that. It never made sense.” Any sadness I’d felt flipped into a familiar annoyance. “Why are you graduating with a biology degree then randomly deciding to be a firefighter?”

“I told you. I want to help people with my body.”

I didn’t bother telling him there were other ways he could do that. “You’re also so cheap. You didn’t even pay for our first date. Or anything, actually.”

“I worked on that, though,” he argued. “You said I was getting better.”

“You paying for In-N-Out in exchange for me covering our \$7 lattes is not the same as expressing that you care about me by buying dinner on a LEGIT date.”

He crossed his arms. “What else.”

“Church,” I whispered. “You acted like I didn’t exist. You told me to stay away from you because church is for God. How do you think that made me feel?”

“I go out of my way to say hi to you. But I guess it wasn’t enough like usual. What else.”

Then I remembered something he couldn’t argue with. “Always telling me to workout. Saying my body wasn’t good enough. It...hurt so much...to hear that I wasn’t enough for you.”

He let out an exasperated sigh. “Jess, I said that stuff because fitness is important to me. But yeah, maybe I was too focused on who you could be instead of who you are.”

“YOU NEVER WANTED TO DO ANYTHING,” I screamed. “WE NEVER WENT ON DATES OUTSIDE.”

“What do you mean? I took you to see those overpriced lights during the holidays. I even went to Disneyland with you.”

“I just wanted to go on a date outside. You didn’t even pay for me,” I said.

“It’s not like I have unlimited money.”

I pointed to his \$500 Bottega Venetta pants. “Then explain those.”

“They’re an *investment*. I can resell them and get the money back. It’s different.”

“So basically, I was worth less than your pants.”

“Now you’re just putting words in my mouth,” he said. “So what else.”

“Your family didn’t bother to get to know me at all.”

“Okay, that I understand.” He plucked some lint off his quilted pants, flicking it onto the floor. “Your parents always treated me like part of the family. I’m sorry mine didn’t do the same for you.”

“Remember the first time I met your mom. All she talked to me about was *The Bachelor*. I don’t even watch *The Bachelor*.”

“I know.” He began to tear up. “I know.”

“I’d come over to your house. Then we’d go to your room, you’d lock the door, and then we’d do sexual stuff. To be honest, it felt like I was like a ...” *There’s a reason why his parents never tried to get to know me for a whole year. But saying I felt like a sex object will make it real. Besides, it’s equally my fault since I never said no.* “...burden. And remember on Christmas when I went to your aunt’s house? Your aunt asked who I was and your mom said, ‘Haven’t seen her before in my life.’”

A tear fell from Noah’s eyes. *Strange that it’s his first sign of emotion so far.* “I think that she was trying to make a joke...”

“I think it’s because she didn’t think I was worth knowing.”

“Sorry. Is there anything else?” he asked.

“Not really. Is there anything you wanted to say to me?”

“It’s clear you’ve made up your mind.” He furrowed his brow. “You know, there is one thing. The main reason why this didn’t work out ...”

I stared at his pants’ lint on the floor.

“... you never said no. I was the only one keeping us accountable with sexual sin,” he continued. “You *never* wanted to have the hard talk after about what we’d done. Honestly, this is probably why God made sex a sin. It’s what tore us apart.”

It was my last chance to stand up for myself. Tell him that he was the one who wanted sex, that he was the one who pushed me to do things every time we hung out. But when I opened my mouth, nothing came out.

Instead, I heard Noah's voice in my head. *Why don't you want to take the responsibility for this sin? Nobody forced you to do this. It's also your fault.* "I'm sorry," I said.

"Well, I guess I'll text PYoung and his wife." Pastor Young, who we called PYoung, was the college pastor at Genesis, the church where we met.

"Huh?"

"I think they need to know that we broke up, especially because of how much they've done for us." Noah didn't wait for my response, which would have been that all they did was congratulate us for being the perfect MOG (man of god) and WOG (woman of god) couple. He took out his phone and began typing.

*Hi guys. Just wanted to tell you both that we decided to split. We got to grow deeper in our relationship and with God through your guidance and could not be more blessed. We are ending things on good terms and will continue to serve and be brothers and sisters in Christ. Love, Noah and Jess.*

"This okay?" He asked, showing me his phone.

I took a look at his paragraph. Shame flushed in my cheeks as I imagined them reading such a stupid, performative text. I didn't want to think about it anymore. "Yeah, sure."

"Cool." He sent it. "I hope you don't stop going to church because of this."

It hurt that he thought I only went for him. "Noah," I hesitated. "I have one more thing to ask."

"What?"

"You aren't...going to say anything bad about me, right." *If people find out what happened, everyone's gonna think I'm not a real Christian. But is what happened even sex?*



“No, we’re ending on good terms. I’ll do my best to make it seem normal at church and obviously I’ll still say hi to you. We just weren’t able to overcome sexual sin. Otherwise, who knows, we probably would’ve worked out.” He paused. “Are you going to say anything?”

I quickly shook my head. “No.”

We got up and walked to our cars. “I guess this is it,” Noah said. He stretched his arms out. “You’ll always have a special place in my heart.”

I buried my face into his sweater, melting into him for the last time. I’d never felt so empty before. He was really, truly gone.

When Noah’s warm body let go of mine, I waited until he disappeared so that I could drive to my parents’ house in the Valley. “WHY GOD,” I screamed. “WHY DID YOU HAVE TO TAKE HIM AWAY.” I started the engine. “I HAVE NOBODY.” Tears obliterated my vision. I wove through cars recklessly, speeding at over 100 miles per hour.

Miraculously, I got home in one piece. Mom met me at the garage door. “Oh, Jess…”

“He’s gone,” I sobbed. “I did it. It’s over.”

“I’m so proud of you. You did the right thing,” she murmured, pulling me close.

“Mom, what do I do about church? It’s my entire life. But he’s there too.”

“It’ll be okay,” she told me. And I believed her.

## GENESIS

I stared at the layer of pitch-black espresso swirling in a cup of oat milk.

“How is it?” PYoung asked. “Our own coffee shop here at church made it. They use beans from Houseroots, yooo the Valley,” he winked. PYoung was also from the Valley. When I came to Genesis the first time as a freshman, he taught me a special handshake reserved for “Valley locals.” He was wearing his Korean Supreme hoodie, where the “Su” was spelled as “수.” Looking down at his feet, I saw that he was wearing his dunks. One of the Genesis couples had just gotten married and given out customized Nike dunks to all the groomsmen.

It was fitting that Genesis would have its own cafe. The aesthetic warehouse barely looked like a church. There was a neon white cursive sign that said “In Los Angeles as it is in Heaven” at the front, fairy lights hanging from the ceiling, thick embroidered rugs spread out as accents on the stone floor, and high-tech cameras for live-streaming services from every angle. It didn’t stop there. Everything also had an abbreviation. “Gen” for Genesis, “felly” for fellowship, when we all ate together after church, and “P” before the first name of all the pastors.

I loved Houseroots. “You really didn’t have to,” I said, taking a sip. “But thanks.”

“Of course. And I’m sorry, I know this meeting is going to be difficult. I just wanted to get you a little something to cheer you up.” He started leading me to the staff offices.

“I think this will be really helpful for what you’re going through. And since you already know my wife Eunice” PYoung smiled at the word “wife.” They’d gotten married a year ago during the pandemic on Zoom. “... it shouldn’t be scary. She’s the director of this program.”

PYoung knocked on the door and Eunice’s voice rang out. “Come in.”

“You go first,” he said.

I opened the door and saw two chairs behind a desk with a glass placard that read: Eunice Kim, Gospel Care Director.

“Jess! Great seeing you.” Eunice gestured to the two seats. “Please, sit down. I’m a certified MFT and I’ve been working with Gospel Care since it began. We provide mental health services and Christ-centered counseling. I think I’ve got the rundown, but I’d like to hear some more about what happened from you.”

“So you know how I dated Noah?” *Stupid way to start.*

“Yes.”

“Yeah, so um.” *God, I sound straight up illiterate.* I was praying she’d take me seriously. “I dated him for almost a year. I broke up with him four months ago.”

“Yes, I remember the text you guys sent us.”

“He was ... abusive.” They blankly stared at me. *What if I’m exaggerating?*

“I’m sorry. I’m glad you were able to end it.” She paused. “PYoung said you experience panic attacks, could you explain what they’re like?”

I was at a loss for words. I didn’t want to over exaggerate. “So at retreat this past weekend, I just couldn’t be there anymore. Seeing him still be a leader is crazy.”

I felt like I was word vomiting. Eunice’s unfazed expression made me wonder if she was even listening. *Maybe I have to start crying or something.* “I told my small group that I was thinking of leaving Genesis and they told me to get more involved since it’s a big church. But I already know everyone. Then I couldn’t breathe, so my mom had to drive all the way from the Valley to San Diego to pick me up.”

I’d told PYoung that Noah pressured me to do sexual stuff during Gen’s taco felly three months ago. Back then, he’d said that he hated Noah. That was good enough for me. But when

he heard about what happened at retreat, he took me to a conference room and apologized, tearfully confessing that he'd failed to protect me. That's why he set up a meeting with Gospel Care.

"I see," his wife said. "How debilitating are your panic attacks?"

*That was all she got from my rant?* "I don't know, I just can't really breathe."

"How often do they happen?"

"It's happened maybe three times total." The first time was on Easter a few weeks ago – when Noah brought his friend that was a model to church. He had always talked about how skinny and pretty she was when we were dating. She was six inches taller than me. He said if I wanted to look taller, I should slim down. When I saw them after service, I ditched my Halal Guys bowl and ran to the restroom, where I locked myself in a stall and cried for thirty minutes.

"Okay, so here's what I think we can do," she began. I leaned in close, ready to hear the answer to all my problems. "We need to reframe your mind to overcome these triggers. What would you say are your biggest triggers?"

My eyes narrowed. *What is this MFT certified woman even saying?* "Well, Noah."

She took out a napkin. "Sorry, I don't have paper here, but I'm going to write down some action steps we can take. One solution is asking Noah to go to first service so you don't have to see him." She wrote *Noah - first service* on it in pen.

I couldn't believe what she was saying. *Banishing Noah to first service would make me look like a crazy ex.*

"Who are your closest friends at Genesis?" Eunice asked.

"Jess is friends with basically everyone in college ministry," PYoung beamed.

If friends were defined as spilling hardships coated with God's goodness over dinner once a year when our calendars miraculously aligned, then okay, sure. But it didn't mean my Gen friends *knew* me. Otherwise they'd know I'd been thinking about leaving. Even when my roommate Kirsten and I threw an "I hate Noah" party, having everyone dress up as him with fire hats, pretentious clothes, and bald caps, all the attendees were Kirsten's friends along with a sprinkle of my non-Christian friends.

"Okay, great!" Eunice smiled. So how about you sit next to all your friends every Sunday? If you feel triggered by anything, you can tell them."

Something about the plan sounded absurdly elementary, but nothing was technically wrong with it. "That could work."

Eunice looked down at her gold Apple watch. "I have to go out in a couple minutes since I'm in charge of communion, but is there anything else you need?"

"Is anyone going to actually talk to Noah?"

PYoung looked at his wife. "Yes, we've discussed this," he said slowly. "I'll meet with him soon to let him know that he shouldn't be treating sisters like this."

"Okay, but is he still going to be a leader?" I asked. "I don't think he should be serving."

Eunice flipped a caramel strand of hair away from her face. "Our hope for Noah is for him to be redeemed and renewed through Christ. So we want him to resume a leadership position in the future."

I blinked. That wasn't what I was asking.

"But yes, I believe PYoung said that he'd be asking Noah to take a break from leading for a bit to focus on his own relationship with God," she added.

"Okay," I said.

“Before we wrap this up, I’d like to pray for you,” Eunice said.

I nodded and closed my eyes.

“God, thank you for Jess. We trust you in this process of healing and look forward to the ways in which you’ll reveal yourself.” She took a deep breath. “Jess, I see an image of you surrounded by exploding geysers. You’re trying to walk around them, but with each step, a new one erupts. I feel like God’s telling you to trust him, and that he’ll lead you through it safely.”

“How do you feel?” PYoung asked, as we left Eunice’s office. I still wasn’t really sure what the plan was since I already sat with my friends at church.

“The plan sounds okay, I’m gonna talk to my mom some more about it.” I chucked the empty coffee cup in the trash. “Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.”

“Yes, of course. Also, I’m sorry if it’s triggering when we pass by the sanctuary.”

I peeked inside and saw Noah with his shiny bald head on stage, his hands clasped together giving the closing prayer.

PYoung noticed me staring. “Staff asked him to pray for first service today,” he explained. “They want all the bible study leaders to pray at least once. I’m so sorry.”

I smiled, trying my best to be understanding. What did I expect, for Noah to be excommunicated? “I’m gonna head out now, thanks for the coffee!”

As I left church, I saw the youth pastor patting Noah on the back, saying how wonderful his prayer was. I could feel Noah’s eyes on me as I passed by.

The tears were coming. I willed my legs to speed up, nearly sprinting to the parking lot. I wasn’t really in the mood for Christian songs, so I shuffled Baby Keem and drove away. I felt zero shame listening to him rap about getting high before sex as I wove through cars, away from church back to the safety of my apartment.

When I arrived, I Facetimed Mom. My lifeline. I'd been talking to her about the breakup almost every day after it happened. She was furious when I told her for the first time about what Noah did. What she hated most was his pharisee-like mindset. Pharisees were religious hypocrites in the Bible, obsessed with maintaining a Godly appearance.

I explained the plan Eunice and PYoung suggested, and when I finished Mom shook her head. "No, that's not going to work. Your friends can't just be your bodyguards. It's unfair and an unrealistic expectation for them."

Her first words being that it was unfair towards my *friends* pissed me off. *You have to look at things from other people's shoes*, she always said. "I know. It didn't feel right."

"I think you need to take a break from Genesis. Then find a new church or come to ours back at home." My uncle was our home church's pastor.

"That's so awkward. You want me to text them and say, 'Just kidding, I'm leaving?'"

"Yes, it's my fault for telling you to stay after the breakup. I didn't know it'd be like this. Every week when you call me after church, you're crying. It's been getting worse."

She was right. But how could I turn my back on my whole world because of one person?

"So are you coming to our church this Sunday?" she asked.

"I don't think I want to go to church anymore."

Mom's mouth on the computer thinned into a line. "We'll talk about it more later."

I hung up. Then I texted PYoung and Eunice that I'd decided to leave.

## THURSDAYS

“I know you stopped going to church last week, but this is so unlike you ...” Kirsten said.  
“Aren’t you Christian, what about your values?”

It was Thursday night. As my roommate and best friend, Kirsten had assumed the role of my last living brain cell. I’d just told her about the dating app guy who wanted to come over.

“It’s late...” she warned. “You do know he wants to like hookup right?”

“I’m so bored with my life. I need to feel something,” I said.

Mom had had strong reservations about me rooming with Kirsten, a non-Christian, when we moved in together three years ago, so it was ironic that Kirsten was the one person trying to keep me from completely losing my shit. After some silence, she said she’d go to her boyfriend’s. “Call me if you need anything. Love you.”

“Thanks, love you too,” I called out as she shut the front door behind her.

Fingers shaking, I managed to tell my match he could come over. Justin Park. I remembered that I needed to make sure he was a real person, so I asked for his social media.

Instead, he sent me his number and said to Facetime him.

When Justin picked up, he was throwing frozen bananas into a blender, completely unphased that a total stranger was calling. The call’s purpose as a short identity check turned into an hour-long conversation about how he had three brothers, was from Japan, graduated a year ago, and that he volunteered as a kids’ basketball coach. I shared that I also had brothers and was a third-year English major. After a bit, he said he’d clean up and head over.

Once he arrived, I jogged down my apartment complex’s flight of stairs to the street as the night’s cool breeze slapped my face, a faint reminder that what was happening was real.



*HONK.* I stood in the middle of the street, craning my neck around to find his car.

“*GET IN LOSER,*” the honker screamed a couple feet behind my head from a van.

Embarrassed, I yanked the door open and threw myself inside. “Nice to meet you ... sorry, wasn’t expecting such a big car.”

I took a look at his face. Even though it was pitch black outside, he was really attractive with smiley eyes and wavy hair. Because his last name was Park, I was pretty sure he was half-Korean and half-Japanese. Another thing we had in common. Being half-Korean. I showed Justin a street behind my apartment complex where he could parallel park.

“What if I just –” he said, making the van jerk back, almost bumping the car behind.

“STOP,” I yelled.

“Just teasing.”

When he got out of the car, I was surprised by his height. His profile had said 5’5 but still, I wasn’t used to talking to a guy at almost eye level.

“I like this,” he said, touching my hoodie. “Fear of God, right? Can I have it?”

“Um, no,” I blushed.

I watched as he took his shoes off at the front door. After he wrote “Justin” on my whiteboard calendar, he headed towards my room, laid down on my bed, and stretched out his arm. So I joined him. It all felt eerily familiar.

“What’s your biggest secret?” he asked.

I told him to go first, and he said that he had a gambling addiction but that he was one month clean. “I kind of have an addictive personality. Is that a red flag to you?” he grinned.

I didn't know what to say, I had my own fair share of red flags. "I mean if you're actively trying to stop then I see it as a yellow one," I said. Then I blurted out the only thing I could think of. "I ended an abusive relationship four months ago."

"Oh shit," he said. "I'm so sorry."

"Thanks, that means a lot." It was my most used phrase of the year.

I shifted the depressing conversation by mentioning I could've gone to USC like him but for piano. He asked me to share my music, so I started playing my piano recordings. We spent another two hours talking and I wondered if I was wrong. Maybe it wasn't a hookup.

But the whole point of the night was to make what happened with Noah not matter. So after Justin shared his basketball Tiktoks with me, I looked into his eyes, hoping he'd take it as a sign to kiss. I hadn't kissed anyone in four months.

*Once he gets what he wants, he's done with you. Do you seriously not care about being used?* I ignored my mind. A moment of understanding passed through Justin's eyes like telepathy. His hands started exploring every inch of my body. Then he stopped for a couple minutes, having trouble unhooking my bra.

"Once you tell your friends that I couldn't take this off, they're gonna make so much fun of me," he laughed, fumbling with the clasp.

My consciousness floated to the ceiling. I watched as my body replayed the year of sexual things Noah had forced me to do. Everything but "actual sex." Justin finished all three bases, pausing after I gave him oral. "Wanna use a condom?"

*If you do this, you have no respect for yourself.* "Sure."

Then we had sex. He experimented with different positions as I blankly stared at my peeling apartment ceiling. *Well, there goes your virginity,* I heard from above.

After he finished, he left my room to grab towels. I realized that if Justin had a paper bag over his head, I would've thought he was Noah. Except that he didn't guilt me for tempting him into sin after. After Justin patted everything dry, he said he needed to ask a very important question. *Oh my god, was he able to tell I was a virgin?*

"If you could be any color crayon, what would it be?" he grinned.

We talked for a couple more hours, most of it being mindless flirty banter, with details from his real life occasionally peppered in. Then he said that he had work early and needed to sleep. It was 5 a.m..

"Text me when you get home." I silently scolded myself. He wasn't my boyfriend.

"Nice meeting you," he replied, giving me a pat on the head. I watched as he walked back to his van, wondering if it was the last time I'd ever see him again.

Three hours later, my alarm blared, reminding me to go to my tele-therapy session that morning. After my breakup, Mom had listened to a talk about the impact of Christian counselors on spiritual and mental wellbeing. So she signed me up four months ago.

"How're you doing today?" my counselor asked.

A year ago, I would've never imagined having any of these kinds of problems. I was an innocent, Christian, straight-A student. "I ended up hanging out with a guy from a dating app. Sorry, I know you told me I shouldn't be on dating apps right now."

"Nothing I say is to tell you what to do or judge you," she reminded me.

"Oh yeah, thanks. So ... we had sex."

"How do you feel?"

"Nothing. I just feel even more numb than before."

She wrote something down. “It sounds like you’re dissociating. What was the main reason you decided to engage in sex?”

I thought about it for a few seconds. “I wanted to feel something. But I also wanted to make everything that happened with Noah as meaningless as possible.”

“It seems as if you’re punishing yourself.”

“Oh.” *It’s not like what happened with Justin was worse than Noah.* “But you know the worst part?” I continued. “It’s the same thing Noah did. Just a different hole. And the fact that he’s walking around thinking he’s a good person because he’s a virgin when he did that to me...” Tears started falling. “How is that fair?”

She nodded sympathetically.

“I *left* my church even though it was my entire life. I told anyone who would listen about the abuse. But nobody cares, nothing’s being done. Noah’s *still* a leader. They just keep saying to forgive. My pastor hasn’t even talked to him.”

She paused. “This is hard for me to say, especially because I know you’re going through a lot of difficult changes. But I think you may benefit more from an expert in sexual abuse.”

My heart stopped. “As your therapist, I want what’s best for you and your healing,” she explained. “I have a colleague that’s a sexual abuse specialist and I think she’d be able to help you a lot more than I can. Would you like her contact information?”

I felt nauseated at losing another person in my life. But maybe she was right. I nodded.

“Let me know how it goes. I think it’ll really help.”

Even though we were separated by a screen, I could tell she meant it. Her face showed real concern and for the first time, I realized someone believed that my situation was serious.

I called Naomi, the referral, a couple hours later for a consultation. She was different from my Asian American Christian counselor, being a middle-aged white woman with vibrant gemstones circling her neck. When I asked if she was religious, she chuckled and said that she was spiritual. I was a bit skeptical about setting up an appointment just because she wasn't Christian. But I decided to push that worry aside.

On the consultation call, she told me that she had been kidnapped and raped. At court, her perpetrator was found not guilty. As terrifying as the rape was, she said the dismissive aftermath was even harder. She explained that her experiences were the reason why she decided to become a therapist and specialize in sexual abuse. Plus, she was EMDR and Havening certified, which were ways in which I could heal that talk-therapy wasn't addressing. They were both methods in processing traumatic memories without being retriggering. It sounded hopeful and fancy, so I scheduled a first session with her the next day.

After the call, I couldn't stop thinking about Justin. It was 3 p.m. and since he had work, he was definitely awake. He never texted me that he got home. *Did he die?* I used Google to find an answer, typing in the search bar: *Why a guy hooked up with me and never texted after.*

Thirty minutes of Quora and Reddit told me that it was a one night stand. *Well damn, then why did he tell me stuff about his life?* After another thirty minutes of research, I concluded that it's because a man doesn't want to fuck a rock. Otherwise he'd get off by himself at home. I told myself to stop thinking about it, and tried to resume my normal life.

The next day, I had my first session with Naomi. As I told her what happened with Noah, I felt breathless. Like I had a limited amount of time to convince her that my abuse was traumatic enough to be worthy of her time. And weirdly, as I told the story, I realized it was just that to me. *A story.* Any emotions I'd had about what happened had vanished.

“I met Noah at church while I was going through a rough time with my family. I told him about how lonely I was and that I didn’t know if I believed in God anymore. He told me to come with him to church and that’s how I became more involved. So when he suddenly asked me out, it was a no-brainer. I needed him. How could I lose my best friend?” I took a deep breath. “The second time I hung out with him as his girlfriend, he stuck his fingers in me.”

“Did you know what that felt like before?”

“No,” I said.

“I can’t imagine how much that must’ve hurt.”

I was surprised by her acknowledgement of my physical pain. Nobody had ever said anything about it before. My heart beat a bit slower. “It did.”

As I described the next eleven months of my relationship to her, I told her about his cheapness. The constant body shaming. And that he avoided me at church because it was for God, not temptations like me.

“What do you mean by temptations?” she asked.

So I told her. How he pressured me every day for hours to give him head, until I did. And how that was the beginning of the repentance talks. *Why am I the only one who wants to keep us accountable? Do you care about this sin? If not, we should just break up.* It didn’t stop there.

“We did everything you can think of,” I told her. “Besides real sex.”

She continued listening, interrupting every once in a while with a “What the fuck,” and, “Honey, this is the definition of grooming. Where a predator makes you do a little step you’re not comfortable with over and over again.” That’s when I decided I could trust Naomi.

“So, the thing that gives me constant nightmares,” I whispered, “is he forced me to ...”

“It’s okay honey, take your time,” she said.

“ ... do anal.”

Naomi’s eyes rounded into saucers. “Wait. He did *what?*”

“He turned me around,” I said, choking back tears, “and forced himself inside of me.”

“That’s date rape.”

*Rape.* I’d never considered what happened to fall under the category of rape. Not even remotely. I thought it was because of my inability to speak up for myself.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Date rape is more of a grey area because it’s like hey, if we’re dating, it’s consensual, right? But that’s wrong. If you never consented, then it’s rape. Did you ever say you wanted to?”

“No.” I shuddered, remembering the agonizing pain of being ripped apart by the person I trusted most. “I told him it hurt. But he said it was better than real sex.”

“Oh honey, I’m so sorry. I want to commend you for leaving. That’s extremely hard.”

But the initial shock of her words quickly faded. She continued on about how I was strong while my eyes kept darting to the time on my screen. I tapped my fingers on my keyboard impatiently, waiting for her to finish so I could talk about Justin before time ran out. I grew tired of waiting, so I interrupted and asked if I could share something else.

“Please go ahead, it’s your time,” she said.

I updated her on how I lost my “virginity” and the apathy I felt after.

Instead of telling me it was unhealthy, the first thing she asked was if he used a condom. Instantly, red flags went up. *Shouldn’t she tell me it’s bad?* Then I remembered Naomi wasn’t a Christian and wondered if it was wrong that she was giving me sexual advice. *You’ll become influenced by the people you surround yourself with,* I heard Mom say.

“What you’re doing with Justin is called reenactment. It’s when you’re recreating the same abusive situation in an attempt to regain control,” Naomi said. “You’re also acting out, which makes sense. You lost trust in your family, in church, in your Christian ex-boyfriend. It’s like a ‘fuck you’ to everything. But you have to remember about consequences like STDs and unwanted pregnancies.”

The next week, I couldn’t help myself from relentlessly stalking Justin. I watched his entire graduation ceremony on YouTube to find out what his last name was. Then after securing the information, I searched him up on every social media platform available. My camera roll soon transformed into an FBI-like assortment of Justin’s life in screenshots.

After the hookup, Kirsten was the first person I told. My roommate since freshman year, she was like my sister. When I told her over Facetime that I’d had sex with Justin, she cried and came straight to the apartment from her boyfriend's to talk. But after I explained my reasons, she said she understood and would support me as long as I was comfortable. Every day following that, I complained to her about my all-consuming urge to text him.

“We are *not* texting him,” she’d firmly say. “He doesn’t deserve that at all.”

But still, I couldn’t stop thinking about texting or stalking him. I wondered how it was possible to develop a crush on someone *after* doing everything possible with them. Justin had miraculously gone from internet rando to crush in 24 hours.

Then exactly a week later on Thursday, I received a text. *9:32 pm?*

*Nah, 9:33,* I replied.

Similar to the week before, he picked me up in his van and we circled around my apartment complex looking for parking. I suggested parking in my tandem spot. As he backed



into it, I got out to make sure he wouldn't hit anything. But before I could give him instructions, the van hit my neighbor's red truck like a bumping car.

"Um," I stammered. "You hit my neighbor's car."

"No, I definitely didn't." He got out of the car and joined me in staring at the truck's new scratch. Then he slung his arm around my shoulder. "That was there before," he added.

The first thing he did was draw a checkmark under "Thursday" on my whiteboard calendar. Then he followed me into my room.

"Why'd you text me a week later? That's so rude," I said.

"You were waiting for my text?" Unfortunately, I was.

Even though it was only our second time meeting, a routine had been established that neither of us had ever vocalized, but both of us knew by heart:

First, we talk for an hour about nothing. Then we interlock our faces. Making out transitions to a blow job. He grabs my hair, pushing my head up and down. Then he taps my shoulder, signaling he wants to have sex. I angle my legs in a way to make the pain more bearable. I stare at the ceiling until he finishes. After cleaning up, we awkwardly lie next to each other as the fog blurring the line between lovers and strangers harshly unveils itself. We talk about nothing again. A simulation of normalcy. Because nobody wants to be the first to leave. The first reminder of reality. The cold hard truth that we're two broken humans using each other.

After using a handful of Kleenex to clean up, Justin noticed the music I was playing.

"You listen to Joji?" he asked.

"Yeah, actually I know his dad. He's a pastor." Uncle Pastor was friends with Joji's dad, but I didn't include that.

"You're Christian?"

*Shit.* “I mean, I grew up going to church. I don’t anymore though.”

“So you are,” he laughed. “I thought Christians weren’t supposed to have sex before marriage. Why don’t you go anymore?”

“My ex goes there. It’s where I met him.”

“Man. Fuck that guy,” he said, pulling me closer.

A comforting warmth spread through my body. “Well, are you Christian?”

“I also went, but only as a kid. I believe in God though.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, that he’ll control when I finish during sex.”

His joke was horrifying. *I don’t think his joke is funny*, I silently promised God.

“By the way, have you ever done anal?”

Out of all the things Justin could’ve possibly said, it was incredible that he chose the worst thing. It almost felt like God was warning me to run away.

He noticed my silence. “You said your ex was religious so, I’m just curious.”

“I mean ...” I began. “Yeah. Have you?”

“No...but can we?” he asked.

*Hell fucking no, we are not going to do anal.* I laughed. “No.”

“Pleasee,” he begged, playing with my hair.

“No.”

Justin asked at least another ten times that night. When he realized “backdoor” was a basketball move, he started giggling, switching his request to, “Can we do backdoor?” But I held my ground. It was a no every time. Then he asked if we could have sex again but that he didn’t have another condom. I mindlessly agreed.

When he collected his items to leave — a vape, car keys, phone, and wallet — he felt me up one more time, whispering in my ear, “backdoor?”

It was as if I’d split into two different people. A sexual weirdo that was best friends with Justin, and the levelheaded Christian girl I’d always been. He left at 5 a.m..

The next morning, I realized how dangerous what happened was. Nobody had ever told me what to do if I had sex, let alone without a condom. After Kirsten’s advice, I drove to Target to buy Plan B. When I asked Justin if he could fund my Plan B, he grudgingly sent me a Venmo for \$55, titling the payment “Backdoor passes only now” with a basketball emoji.

After sharing with Naomi, she told me to never have sex without a condom again. “No matter what he says, use a condom. The consequences are much worse for the girl. And with abortion being illegal in some states now,” she said, shaking her head. “Absolutely ridiculous.”

I remembered how Justin had whispered “get an abortion,” when I brought up how my parents were anti-birth control. But the psychotic part of myself wondered what would happen if he did become a father. Afterall, he did say that he was a kid’s basketball coach.

Then I hesitantly mentioned Justin’s backdoor comments. She told me to stop seeing him. I nodded, but deep down I knew I would continue if he reached out. And he did. On Thursday.

“HUNT? JUSTIN TEXTED ME,” I screamed. Kirsten and I started calling each other “hunty” about two years ago, a version of “honey” as a joke, since we’d basically turned into a married couple. The name morphed into “hunster,” then its current form of “hunt.” We said that being a “hunt” was the highest form of connection possible in the world. There were only two hunts. Me and Kirsten.

“Hunt, literally what do you gain from Justin,” Kirsten asked from the kitchen. She was cooking a pot of Kraft mac and cheese.

“I know he’s a dick, but I’m addicted. I won’t develop feelings though.”

“Okay,” she said, pouring neon orange powder into a pot of boiling water. “But I think you should ask if he’s seeing other people for your health’s sake.”

When I asked Justin later, he smirked. “You’re trying to pop the *what are we* question, huh?” You’re obsessed with me.”

“Um, no. But sure, what are we?” The amount I fed to his ego felt illegal.

“What do you want it to be?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t do hookups.”

“You’ve been through a lot, so I’m guessing you don’t want a relationship. Just stability.”

I was shocked at how right he was. “Well, what do you want it to be?” I asked.

“Honestly, I’ve dated a lot of people, so now I know what I want and how much effort goes into a relationship. I just don’t have that kind of time right now. And you also just got out of a relationship. So ... I’d say friends with benefits. That okay with you?”

I was surprised. Partially because I’d always thought of “friends with benefits” being a term for people who hung out with sex on the side. Not randos who met up in the middle of the night once a week. But I didn’t care. “Yeah, sure. I have another question.”

“What am I, Google?” Justin smirked.

“Are you hooking up with anyone else right now?”

He looked shaken. “Damn. Well since we started, no.”

“So are we exclusive?”

“Well, exclusive is basically a relationship, no? I think we should both be open to other stuff that comes up.”

I was surprised at how much his words hurt, even knowing our relationship was meaningless.

“I like hanging out with you,” he continued. “Why do you think I stay so late and come back? If I didn’t like spending time, we’d have sex then I’d make up an excuse to leave.”

His words spiraled in my mind for the next couple of days. I couldn’t make sense of why it seemed like there was more to our relationship than sex, when all we did was have sex. I was left with more questions than I had before the talk.

When I told Naomi, she asked if sex wasn’t in our relationship, would we still hang out? Definitely not. So she said it was just a booty call for him. Cheap sex. I realized the same thing had applied to Noah. Except with the label of a boyfriend.

After my session with Naomi, my laptop chimed with a text from PYoung. He’d been sending *how are you?* texts every few weeks, but they’d become less frequent. They were occasionally accompanied by *thinking about you* <3 texts from his wife. But this one said, *Are you free to talk on campus later today?*

PYoung was making his annual UCLA visit to hang out with Genesis students. It was weird he was reaching out to me personally though. It could only mean one thing. Something had happened.

*Also, I know you guys are close, so could you ask your roommate to come too? We have a staff rule that there can’t be one-on-ones between opposite genders at church,* he added.

I asked Kirsten to come and we met PYoung in UCLA’s sculpture garden in front of an androgynous metallic figure. He had two cups of coffee in his hands.

“Oat milk vanilla latte, right?” he smiled. “The barista said that this is their best drink.”

“Thanks PYoung,” we said, sitting down on the damp grass with our drinks.

“So I was finally able to grab coffee with Noah yesterday. I told him two main things. He needs to know what consent is and he shouldn’t speak badly about girl’s bodies,” PYoung said.

That barely scratched the surface. *Four months and this is the outcome? Well, I guess they tried their best.* “Thanks PYoung, that means a lot.”

“Of course, I’m sorry it took so long for this to happen,” he apologized.

“Did Noah cry?” I asked.

“Well, no. He was actually really surprised and said he had no idea you felt that way. He asked if you’d be willing to talk to him so he could apologize.”

*Felt that way? What the fuck.* “No,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m not talking to him.” The topic of Noah was starting to feel irrelevant.

“Yeah, I figured. You definitely don’t need to. Whatever’s comfortable for you. So, how have you been holding up otherwise?” he asked.

“Not good. It’s hard to have a reason to keep going sometimes,” I blurted out.

PYoung nodded. “Sometimes it’s the small things. You like Trader Joe’s, right? Even that can be a reason. Or buying coffee.”

*PYoung just said my depression can be cured by Trader Joe’s and coffee.* I laughed.

“I’m just really worried about you Jess. I can’t consistently check in with you since you don’t come to Gen anymore. Being separated from church makes it a lot easier for the devil to mess with your mind.”

“I’m okay, seriously PYoung.”

PYoung ended our talk with a prayer asking God to soften my heart, which he described as having been hardened into an avocado pit.

I was still getting used to not going to church on Sundays. Not having it fixed into my schedule after my 20 years of church-on-Sundays-routine made it hard to remember the day.

My confusion heightened that Sunday, as Justin Facetimed me while I was at the bank.

“What’re you doing?” he asked.

“Getting quarters for laundry. But I just realized the bank is closed on Sundays.”

“Typical Jess,” he laughed. “So what’d you do today?”

After a few hours, he said, “You know, I can’t talk to some of my closest friends for this long. We work well together. Also, want me to bring quarters over later? We’d be breaking our Thursday tradition though.”

“Really?” I asked.

“People say my best quality is my thoughtfulness. You just don’t know that side of me yet.”

*Yet? Implying this could turn into something more?* “Okay.”

“Cool, imma eat dinner then let you know when I’m heading over. I didn’t think we were hanging out today, I mean we’re just friends with benefits.” He groaned. “Ugh, but I don’t have time to gym. This is why I can’t have a girlfriend.”

When he picked me up in his van later, he rolled down his window and placed four quarters in my outstretched palm one-by-one.

“This is for one hand job, this is for ...”

I rolled my eyes. “Stop.”

He laughed. “Sorry, you know I’m just fucking with you.”

After I loaded my laundry, he asked if I’d eaten dinner. I said I hadn’t, so he offered to take me to the In-N-Out drive-thru across from my apartment.

My excitement at his out of character gesture easily read on my face. He knew how easy it was to make me attached. A burger. A quasi-date.

When we got to the payment window, I reached for my credit card. “No, don't worry, I got it,” he said. Noah hadn't even paid for our first date. It was shocking how much a \$6.07 burger and fries meant to me.

“Gotta keep ‘em fed, right?” he joked to the worker as we drove off with the food.

A smile formed on my lips as I clutched the oily paper bag he placed on my lap. Physical proof that Justin cared about me.

When I told Naomi about Sunday's evidence that Justin might like me, she rolled her eyes. “Okay, so what? He's buying you a free burger for unlimited sex? How sweet of him.”

Our sessions were spent mainly on Justin, which made me feel guilty since I'd started therapy to heal from Noah trauma. It was refreshing talking about something else though.

Once Kirsten realized Justin wasn't going anywhere, she reluctantly joined me in stalking him for fun. On “hunt nights,” we'd use all of our electronic devices to find dirt on him.

After a couple days, I made the mistake of going too far. Kirsten found a couple articles about Justin's family being famous. His mom was a famous Japanese singer and his dad was the founder of an expensive Korean skincare brand. We also found his house on Zillow, which was worth about 6 million. Kirsten said I should send one of the article links to him as a joke with, *Didn't know your parents were famous.*

I don't know why I sent that text. After a week passed, I realized that he definitely thought I was obsessed. It was insanely humiliating. Then Kirsten created a solution. A poem.

*you are the light when my world is dark  
i would let you bite me if you were a shark*



*do u need a dog bc i can bark*  
*i dream of walking with you in a park*  
*your face is like a work of art*  
*i just can't bear to be apart*  
*i miss you with all of my broken heart*  
*please text me back. i miss you justin park.*

It couldn't get any worse, so I sent Kirsten's poem to him. I figured that if I was never going to interact with him again, the best I could do was satirize the entire situation.

Shockingly, he replied a week later with, *Thanks for the poem*. But that was it.

I couldn't shake the question of why he disappeared. Or why he even bothered to reply. The lack of closure festered in my mind, growing into a monster of obsession. In my lectures, I looked up his name on criminal record sites. Instead of studying for finals, I stalked his friends. I was convinced that a secret girlfriend or dark backstory would explain his disappearance.

Then a week later, he texted me asking if I could show him how to edit TikToks for his basketball videos. I got the text when I was at the airport with my family.

*I can't, I'm flying to Thailand right now*, I told him.

*Have a safe flight*, he said.

## FAMILY VACATION

I scooped a spoonful of gooey coconut into my mouth.

“That any good?” Mom asked, taking the chair next to me.

“Kinda.” The coarse mixture slid down my throat. “I thought it’d be mango sticky rice.”

Rain battered the metal roof above our heads, shielding us from the incoming storm.

Appah was taking up three chairs behind us. His bulging backpack on one, his feet on the second, his butt on the third. He’d turned the row into a bed. We were waiting at the loading dock for a yacht to come and take us snorkeling at the ungodly hour of 5 a.m..

“What time do we get back?” I yelled over to Appah.

He grunted and slid his sunglasses up. “7.”

“A.M.?”

“No. P.M..”

“That’s so long,” my ninth-grade little brother Josiah complained a couple seats to the right of Mom and I. Matthew, my college freshman little brother, was sitting next to him reading a book on his phone. “And there’s no wifi,” Josiah continued.

Matthew shook his head. “This guy.”

“You want to go back to the AirBnb and play video games all day?” Appah asked threateningly. That quickly shut Josiah up.

“So I was reading up more on enneagram type 9,” Mom said. She made me take the test a couple days ago after she discovered what enneagrams were. “So you know how you say you disassociate a lot? Apparently 9’s are known for being easily influenced by their surroundings.”

I was sick of Mom constantly telling me that my non-Christian friends were the reason my mind was corrupted into thinking sex didn't matter. She assumed that all they did with their boyfriends was have sex which was ironic, considering Noah was Christian and only wanted sex.

My relationship with Mom was a swinging pendulum between best friends and enemies. I took a break from talking to her because of those kinds of arguments, but for my sanity's sake, I ranted to her right before the trip and did the unthinkable. Telling her about Justin. It was like taking a massive shit and hoping it'd flush down the toilet.

"So basically," she continued, "when a 9 is unhealthy, they start to lose their identity because of how easily they adapt to influences. And that's what causes them to disassociate."

"I know you're talking about my friends," I argued. "But that's so stupid because—"

"Just listen for a second. Something you can do is write down what you *don't* want to do. It'll keep you grounded."

She was basically telling me to write the ten commandments. And I knew that the one thing she wanted me to write down was "don't have sex." Well too bad, that wasn't going to work anymore. "You do this all the time. Talking about me like some kind of case study. Categorizing me with these different things you look up. All I need you to do is *listen*," I said.

Mom's voice rose. "I do listen. But as your mom, it's my responsibility to give advice."

"I never asked for this advice. I don't want it."

So what if my enneagram score meant I was lost in a sea of dissociation. That didn't change anything. And why would I write down "don't have sex" when I already had.

She let out an exasperated sigh and shook her head. "I'm just trying to help you."

Then the yacht saved me. "START BOARDING," the captain yelled.

Rows of seats began to empty as people stood up to board. I noted the different people passing by, wondering which ones spoke English and overheard our conversation.

“Is it fine that it’s raining?” Matthew asked Appah. Appah’s face was fixed in a scowl. Matthew took one look and stopped talking.

Once we climbed in, Matthew, Josiah, and Appah sat together since each row had three seats. Mom and I sat behind them. The yacht was filled to the brim with at least 100 people.

The captain walked to the front of the boat and tapped on the mic. It screeched in response. He tapped again. It blasted in everyone’s ears, but he didn’t seem to mind. “WE GOING TO PHI PHI FIRST,” he yelled. “WEAR THE LIFE JACKET ON YOUR SEAT.”

It was about an hour ride to Phi Phi Island. Once we got there, the light drizzle from when we boarded morphed into a pouring shower.

“GO TO UNDER THE ROOF,” the captain yelled, running to a line of huts on top of wooden planks above the roaring ocean.

“Guess the rain’s not fine,” Matthew muttered.

The five of us gathered chairs to sit on underneath the hut. A couple feet over were some guys with Singapore University hoodies, scrolling through Instagram on their phones.

Josiah glanced at them. “Must be nice to have cellular data.”

Matthew leaned his head back, closing his eyes. Mom and Appah did the same.

“So are we just waiting here until the storm ends?” I whispered to Josiah.

“I don’t know, I guess.”

He took a selfie on Snapchat and captioned it “in a monsoon #prayforme.”

“Who you sending that to?”

“Just Alex when we get wifi,” Josiah said.

“What about Kourtney?” I joked. She was his newest crush, which I found out through stalking him on Instagram. He had pinned her comment on his latest post, which was: “nice caption.” Typical high school flirting.

His cheeks flushed red. “Stop Noona.”

“Let’s play a game. What about guess who I’m thinking about? You get 20 questions.”

“Ok. Is it a boy?”

“No.”

Matthew opened an eye. “I already know who it is,” he announced.

“Are they under 15?” Josiah asked.

“Uh ... they’re 15 I think?”

Josiah used up 18 questions before he realized the answer was Kourtney. I didn’t even know who Kourtney was. I just had nothing else to work with to relate to him.

“I knew it,” Matthew said, then continued reading the book on his phone. Couldn’t expect any less from a computer science freshman at a college with a 3% acceptance rate.

“Are you staying at home after this or going back to your apartment?” Josiah asked.

“Apartment. It’s my friend’s birthday next week. Why? You want me home?”

“Nah, it’s ‘cause there’s more space when you’re not home.”

*Oh.* I didn’t know what to say to that, so I joined the rest of my family and slept. *So much for bonding with Josiah this trip.*

“BOAT’S HERE!” the captain yelled four hours later. I opened my eyes and noticed Appah’s chair was empty. I asked Mom where he was. She said the restroom then resumed her nap. When Appah came back, he went back to his seat and put his sunglasses on.

“Appah, we need to go,” Matthew said.

“No we don’t.”

“Look, everyone from our group is already boarding the boat,” Matthew argued.

Sure enough, everyone was lined up like ants on the shore.

“We don’t need to go,” Appah repeated.

Matthew’s voice rose. “You were in the restroom so you didn’t hear, but the captain said we need to *go*.”

“Appah’s right, it’s better to wait here. They’re all in the rain anyways, it’ll take them a while to board,” Mom said.

“Let’s just go,” Matthew huffed. Josiah and I followed him. I didn’t know what was worse, being stranded on Phi Phi island in a monsoon or making Appah angrier.

“He’s so stubborn,” Matthew continued. “He’s always like this.”

Matthew and Appah spent hours together on the golf course weekly, ever since Matthew decided in the 7th grade that he didn’t want to do baseball anymore. So Appah transitioned from junior league baseball coach to Matthew’s personal caddie. Matthew ended up being captain of the varsity golf team in high school and got into an ivy school with his high ranks.

Obsession’s an understatement for Appah’s infatuation with golf. Appah swears that golf saved his life. He always told the same story every September. During 9/11, his flight back home from a business trip in New York happened to be one of the planes that the terrorists hijacked. But he missed his flight because he was playing a round of golf.

Growing up, I’d always brace myself for the garage door to creak open, announcing the arrival of an angry Matthew and grumpy Appah because of a poor round of golf. When Josiah grew old enough, he joined the two of them in golfing. So I was always alone.

Appah grunted then followed us with Mom. As we waited on the shore, chunks of coral cut our feet and warm waves angrily smacked against our shins. We clung onto our sandals and phones, then were helped onto the boat by the crew. I sat down behind the Singaporean University students who were casually swiping on Tinder as the boat lurched back and forth.

After everyone boarded, the boat took off and we were catapulted into the air. Everyone screamed and the captain looked back at us from the steering wheel, flashing us a grin. Then he turned the radio on and blasted Sam Smith's *I'm Not the Only One*. He apologized for the weather, saying that they were going back to the loading dock and everyone would be refunded 50%. Someone booed. In response, the captain turned the music up. Sam Smith wailed about heartbreak as the boat continued bouncing up and down all the way back to the mainland.

Once we returned to the AirBnb, I connected to the Wi-Fi to check if Justin had sent me anything. He'd been sending an assortment of random messages while I was away. When he asked, *Did you have to quarantine when you got there?* I thought he cared about my life. My heart sank when it was followed by, *Send nudes when you get back to your room*. That was how it went. Short tidbits of normalcy, followed by his attempts to channel everything back to sex.

I texted Justin that I almost died on a deserted island. He replied that he was at work all day and went shopping. Before I could ask what he bought, Appah said we were leaving in an hour for dinner. I quickly showered and by the time I finished, Appah screamed that the taxi had arrived. My family and I threw on our ponchos and ran inside. Fifteen minutes later, we were standing in front of an outdoor marketplace, soaking wet.

“Why are we here when it's raining,” Matthew grumbled.

Our sandals splashed dirty water as we walked alongside the gutter to an unknown destination.

“What do you guys want to eat,” Appah said after we passed about 20 shops with fake Jordans and Gucci bags.

“Anything,” Mom said.

That didn’t help, so we continued walking past more fake luxury item goods stores. At that point, Appah made the executive decision that we would be eating at Hard Rock Cafe.

We were seated at a table across from a birthday celebration. There was nobody else besides them in the restaurant, so it was uncomfortably empty. The waiter handed us menus that looked like vintage collector items. After attempting to make out the faded selection of entrees, I decided on arrabiata pasta.

I’d made the crucial mistake of sitting directly in front of Appah. I was getting déjà vu from dinner a few days before when he asked what I was doing after turning 21. I wasn’t sure if it was his way of getting me to disclose my plans about partying in Vegas for my 21st. So I cautiously laughed and asked why. Then he lectured me about needing to become financially independent since I was going to be an adult and needed to start thinking about getting a practical job. He added that if I had chosen a lucrative career in business, he could’ve easily gotten me a job at the prestigious firm he had a top position in.

“I have three jobs right now,” I had told him. I explained my plan about applying for therapy graduate school.

He was not impressed. “It’ll take you years to accumulate the hours you need to start a practice. And by then you’ll be in severe debt.” *What? Appah said he was paying for grad school just a few months ago.* “What are you even trying to be, a counselor?”

Appah had basically shut down my entire career plan in two seconds, with financially cutting me off being the cherry on top. Unable to control myself, I started having a panic attack. I



screamed at him to stop, with which he responded that I needed to grow up and confront real life. Then I left dinner and ran back to the hotel room. Thankfully, dinner had only been a floor down in our hotel building. After locking the door, I checked my phone and got a text from Justin asking to hang out when I got back. I tried to forget about my life, fixating on the ludicrous possibility of Justin wanting to date me. Again.

As if I hadn't learned my lesson, I was again directly in the line of fire in front of Appah. And as I'd anticipated, the dreaded talk began.

"Are you planning on publishing your stories after you finish your honors thesis?" Appah asked. The question took me off guard. My stories were all about my sexual trauma.

"I don't know, they're really personal."

"Well, you want to know the purpose of college? To accomplish things. Otherwise, what's the point of anything you're doing?"

"There is a point," I whispered. "Writing helps me keep going."

"Well then if you don't want *that* to be published, write about something else."

"You know this year's been really hard for me," I began. Tears started welling. "I wish you would stop pressuring me about career plans when this is supposed to be *my* vacation too."

"What do you mean? We only had this conversation two other times in this entire three week vacation," he bit back.

There were so many things I wanted to say. *You do know I have depression, lost my church and friends, got raped by my ex, and lost my virginity to a stranger, right?* But how could I? And besides, my brothers were part of the audience. So I chose my next words carefully.

"All you ever want to talk about is work. Never my personal life. Never how I'm doing."

"We only talk once every six months. I'm trying to help you," Appah said.

That hurt. That he only bothered talking to me twice a year when I went to college twenty minutes away.

“I don’t want to hear about your personal life,” he continued. “Mom tells me all about the bad things you’ve been doing.”

And that’s when something in me snapped. “MOM?” I shrieked, looking at her with rage.

“What?” she retorted. I don’t know why I expected to see compassion in her face. Because all I saw in her eyes was disappointment.

As I turned back to Appah, I accidentally made eye contact with Josiah. He quickly looked away. Matthew wasn’t even paying attention. He was reading that same book again on his phone. It must’ve been really interesting for him to be able to ignore what was happening.

“Here’s your arrabiata pasta,” the waiter said. She set the dish down in front of me. Two pieces of garlic toast, penne noodles, and red sauce with random broccoli chunks scattered around the edges. Who the fuck put broccoli in pasta.

I stabbed noodle pieces with my fork but couldn’t bring them up to my mouth. I was furious. I couldn’t believe Mom had told Appah everything without my permission. And to make matters worse, how he saw me – a stain on his perfect life.

After a few minutes, Appah spoke again. “Just so you know, those were my words, not Mom’s.”

“Well great. Glad to know you think everything I’m doing is bad.”

“I’m just trying to help you make a plan so –”

“JUST STOP,” I screamed.

“Listen, you’re a good writer so don’t waste –”

“JUST STOP.” I dug my nails into my fists. *Deep breaths.*

“She doesn’t want to take advice. Just stop talking to her,” Mom said.

I didn’t know what to do since I couldn’t run away. So I opened up the notes app.

*why don't you try to sell your story otherwise there's no purpose // panic attack*

*can we pls not talk anymore about anything related to school*

*i came because i'm going through a lot and want a break*

*we talk once every six months*

“Okay, so who are you texting now?” Appah interrupted. The anger in his voice scared me. I hurriedly put my phone away in my back pocket.

“Nobody. I don’t even have service here.”

“Then what are you typing?”

How could I say that I was writing notes about our argument to use for my story that he wanted me to write, which was ironically about him?

“Just stop,” I sniffed.

He shrugged and asked Matthew to pass him ketchup for his fries. Dinner continued on. Nobody noticed that I only ate four overcooked noodles. Or maybe they noticed and didn’t care.

On the taxi ride back to the Airbnb, I stared out the window at the pouring rain. We drove over cliffs towering above the dark ocean below. I fantasized jumping off a ledge and ending it all. My apartment wasn’t too far from a lot of lookout points. I could just *accidentally* not hit the brakes when parking my car. Or maybe taking up smoking would shorten my lifespan. Being gone would solve everything. There would be no need for a career plan. If I were gone, nothing about me to judge. Maybe I’d get some compassion. But I wouldn’t be there to see it.

When we got out of the car, Mom tapped my shoulder.

“Appah and I are on your team. We love you. Stop treating us so poorly,” she said. “You know it hurts us too when you say things like that.”

“Like what?”

“That you don’t want advice.”

*Why is she victimizing herself?* “You’ll never understand what I’m going through,” I said.

“You’re right, because I’m not you.”

“Why’d you tell Appah?”

“Everything you tell me I tell Appah.”

“Well, he’s obviously judging me.”

“Try to look at it from his perspective. Sometimes the things he says come out wrong –”

“Just stop. I don’t need to look at it from his perspective because obviously nobody cares about mine. I’m tired of being understanding.”

She sighed and shook her head. “Just know we’re on your team,” she quietly repeated.

I retreated to my room and pulled out my laptop. If Appah wanted me to write stories, then that’s what I’d do.

## HOSPITAL HORRORS

The morning after our flight from Phuket landed, Appah walked into my room and silently handed me a piece of paper.

“You paying for this?” he asked.

It was a bill for \$800.

Three months before, as I was driving home from work, I suddenly couldn't see the road. It looked like a simulation. I still had creative writing class, so I tried not to think about my dizziness. But as I was walking with my friend, I was horrified when I began to lose control of my speech. And I started hearing things like, *This isn't real. She isn't your friend.* I stopped walking and turned towards her.

“Do I look weird?”

She stared at me. “Your face looks really pale...are you okay?”

Some of my creative writing friends knew about everything that'd been happening in my life from my stories in class. I'd been sharing short stories every week about things that happened. It kind of served as a form of anonymous therapy. Nobody but a few of my classmates knew my stories were real, so when people said things like “Noah deserves to die,” or “I feel so bad for the narrator,” I felt heard for the first time.

“I don't know ... I feel really dizzy.”

“Have you eaten anything?”

It was 7 p.m.. I realized I'd only had an iced americano and avocado toast.

“Not since breakfast. But I've been feeling dizzy for like a couple weeks.”

“You sure you're okay? I can tell the professor you're not feeling well.”

I hadn't missed school since I got the flu in 11th grade. But nothing felt real anyways.

"Yeah, actually, I think I might go home. Thanks, I really appreciate you."

"Of course, it's no problem at all. Maybe you should go to the UCLA hospital," she said.

Kirsten helped me set up an appointment with UCLA urgent care the next day. I hadn't been to the UCLA hospital since 2020, when the doctor asked if I went to Wuhan after I said I was severely sick. I told him I'd never been to Wuhan and he diagnosed me with a "super cold."

When I showed up to the hospital, the nurse led me into a room and asked if I could take off my clothes. She explained that she was doing an electrocardiogram, but I could barely understand the rest. I laid flat on the hospital bed's paper sheets, numbed to life as she placed cold metal circles all over my naked body. I didn't know what she was doing. The same dissociative feeling as being with Justin and Noah. "Your heart rate is just a little fast," she said.

Then the doctor came. His name was Ryan. "Have you ever been diagnosed with depression?"

I stared at Doctor Ryan, a tall skinny white man with a crop of blonde hair. "No."

"I'm going to ask you a few questions. You just have to respond with 'not at all,' 'several days,' 'more than half the days,' or 'nearly every day.'"

I nodded.

"Little interest or pleasure in doing things."

Even writing had become emotionally taxing. Someone in class had said all my stories were too depressing and antiromantic a few days before. "Sorry, what were the options again?"

"'Not at all,' 'several days,' 'more than half the days,' or 'nearly every day.'"

"Um. Nearly every day."

"Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless."

I could barely understand what he was saying. “Sorry, could you say the options again.”

“‘Not at all,’ ‘several days,’ ‘more than half the days,’ or ‘nearly every day.’”

“Thanks.” I cleared my throat. “Nearly every day.”

Any cognitive memory skills I possessed had entirely abandoned me. I asked Doctor Ryan to remind me what the four options were after every question.

“Thoughts that you would be better off dead or hurting yourself.”

“I um ... don’t know.”

“Just ‘not at all,’ ‘several days,’ ‘more than half the days,’ or ‘nearly every day.’”

“I guess ... several?”

He wrote something down. "Are you in possession of a gun or weapon or have easy access to a gun or weapon?"

I remembered reading a Reddit post that said you could get put in a mental asylum if they thought you were severely suicidal. “No,” I quickly said.

After he finished the rest of his suicidal assessment questions, all of which I rapidly responded with “no” to, he asked how long I’d been experiencing depressive thoughts for.

“At least a year.”

“It sounds like you have recurrent major depressive disorder.”

He gave me the number of a psychiatrist and psychologist then said my electrocardiogram came back fine. It was as unhelpful as my “super cold” diagnosis in 2020.

“This is covered by insurance, right?” I asked the front desk.

The curly haired woman sitting there threw me an annoyed glare. “Yes.”

“Okay.”

Then Doctor Ryan asked if I could step aside to talk to him. “If you ever feel really bad, just come here,” he said.

I blankly stared into Doctor Ryan’s smiley blue eyes. Who in their right mind would walk a mile to the UCLA hospital at 2 a.m. if they were suicidal. But as usual, I said my go-to response. After all, they were trying their best. “Thanks, that means a lot.”

So, the whole dizzy urgent care fiasco was definitely a waste of time, but I never would’ve imagined such a meaningless 30-minute appointment to have cost \$800.

“Um...” I stuttered, unable to meet Appah’s angry eyes. “So...they...” *I can’t even speak to him without bawling my eyes out. How can I expect him to take me seriously?* “They said it would be paid under insurance.”

“That’s not how it works, they’re out of network. Don’t you know there’s teleconferencing appointments available? That would’ve probably been \$30 max.”

The sniffles disrupting my every other word were making my argument incomprehensible. “Don’t...you want to know...why I even went.”

He crossed his arms. “Okay. Why.”

“I...” I couldn’t say depressed. It wouldn’t convey the severity of the situation enough to him. “Couldn’t see. I almost passed out going to class.”

“There are many free mental health resources out there for students that you should take advantage of. Did you even tell your therapist about this? That’s why you have her.” He sighed.

“Well, this is a good learning experience for you.”

“Appah, that’s my entire paycheck.”

“Then maybe you’ll think about that next time. Life isn’t cheap.”



I was in absolute shock. Appah was a millionaire. Appah didn't bat an eye when he paid for our Michelin star dinners on our worldwide vacations and the weekly golf tournaments Matthew and Josiah went on. Then I remembered his words in Thailand. *I don't want to know about your personal life.* Because I'd had sex, he wanted nothing to do with me. And that was fine, he'd never be hearing about my life again. "Okay. I'll pay it."

"Cool, pretty sure you can do it online," he said cheerily, shutting the door behind him.

I silently submitted my credit card details on the UCLA website, then started packing clothes up in my suitcase. I couldn't be at home anymore. I needed to go back to my apartment.

Mom cracked my door open. "What happened?"

I stared at the black tank top I was folding. "Appah doesn't care about me. He's literally twisting my depression into a monetary lesson, which is just so messed up."

"Don't say that. Obviously Appah loves you, it's just his way of expressing he cares."

"How is lecturing me about wasting money on the hospital a form of care?"

"Appah thinks practically. He wants to prepare you for the real world."

"Mom. He literally told me he doesn't want to hear about my life."

"He's trying the best he can..."

*Not this stupid excuse again.* "I don't care, what matters is how it made me feel."

"You look like you need a hug."

I let the ice in my heart thaw for a brief moment as I sobbed into her chest. Then I remembered what Naomi had said in one of our sessions. *Sometimes parents care the most, but don't know how to. My mother never asked a single question about my rape and she was a therapist. Any pain a child feels, the parents feel ten times harder. Sometimes it's just too much for them. They're doing the best they can.*

## HIGHS AND GOODBYES

“So I read a bit of your stories,” Eunice said.

Maybe agreeing to get dinner had been a mistake. When Eunice had told me she liked to read, I’d impulsively asked if I could share my writing so that she’d understand more. I didn’t expect her to actually look at it.

An ajumma set down two bowls of steaming seolleongtang in front of us. Eunice plopped two large scoops of green onions into her broth.

“The part where you talk about church not doing anything,” she continued. “I don’t understand because we had created a plan. You left before anything could happen. It’s not fair that you keep saying we didn’t do anything.”

“Oh. Well anyways, did you like it?”

“I know it’s your life, so I can’t really say that I liked it.” She paused in thought. “So what about Justin? Are you still talking to him?”

I poured some pepper flakes in my bowl, watching as the broth’s color changed from a soft brown to dark red. After Thailand, Justin had asked to come, but was still deciding what Thursday worked. “Not really.”

“You need to block him.”

Eunice was right. I just hadn’t expected our weird relationship to continue for this long and morph into a friends with benefits penpal situation while I was in Thailand.

After dinner, we headed over to Sul and Beans for dessert. Eunice said she’d order the yogurt berries flavor for us as I looked for a seat.

While I waited for her to meet me at the table I found, a guy with a permed middle part walked up to me. “Jess?”

“Anthony? Oh my god,” I said, getting up out of my chair.

A giant smile enveloped his face. “I haven’t seen you since retreat.”

Anthony was an incoming sophomore I met at retreat. The retreat where I broke down and made Mom drive to San Diego to pick me up. All the upperclassmen girls loved Anthony because he looked like a K-pop star and called all of us “noona,” meaning big sister.

“You gonna be at Gen when school starts?” he asked. “Everyone really misses you.”

Eunice joined us. “Anthony?” she said. “What a coincidence.”

It really wasn’t a coincidence since 75% of the Korean American population in Los Angeles was in K-Town on Friday nights and the chances of them being at Sul and Beans was an additional 50%. She noticed my silence. “Jess won’t be coming back.”

After Anthony left, I mindlessly shoveled spoonfuls of milky snow in my mouth. Eunice told me about her journey with bad relationships, which led to a dating fast and then she met PYoung. Because of God, of course. It was hard to pay attention.

When we walked back to the parking lot, I started having a panic attack.

Eunice reached for my hand. “It’s okay, breathe.”

“Seeing Anthony reminded me of what...I...lost. Noah...took...everything.”

“It’ll get better. I can send you prayers or worship songs. That helped me.”

*Why does everyone keep pressing church. I just want her to shut up and acknowledge that my life is shit.* But I knew that she was trying her best. “That would mean a lot.”

“Oh, and remember to block Justin today.”

I cried all the way back to my apartment. The same hopeless emotions as during the drive back home when I broke up with Noah six months ago. *I have nobody.*

When I opened the door, I went straight to my shared bedroom with Kirsten. “What’s wrong?” she asked concernedly, taking in my bloodshot eyes and red nose.

“I saw someone from Gen. I don’t know what to do when school starts. I have nobody.”

She hugged me. “Fuck that. I’ll always be here for you.”

“Thanks Hunt. Oh, also, the pastor’s wife said I should block Justin. I think it’s time.”

“YES, I’ve been *telling* you that for months,” she said. “We gotta celebrate.”

Our celebration was consuming the last of Kirsten’s edibles and blocking him on every social platform available once we were both high. I’d never gotten high before, but losing my marijuana virginity felt like the least of my worries.

Thirty minutes later, my body started sinking. “It’s time,” she said, taking my phone.

“Why are there five Justin Parks on Facebook,” she grumbled. “I’m just gonna block all of them.” Then she opened Snapchat. “Bye Justin,” she grinned. Then Tiktok. “These basketball videos make him look so short.” Venmo was next. “Fuck Justin,” she said, looking at the “Backdoor passes only now” Plan B payment. And finally his number.

I continued sinking into the couch. “Here you go,” she said, tossing me back my phone. “You should try typing in notes. Sometimes I do that when I’m high, it’s really fun.”

My fingers began to translate my jumbled thoughts into words and suddenly I couldn’t stop. I opened up my “what I would have said” tab on my notes app, which I started the day of my breakup. It was supposed to be for things I would say to Noah if I could.

*u debilitated me as bad as being high but in real life. i had a panic attack then realized i need to block Justin. and like i can’t breatheeeee wow i think that’s how you could die.*

I gasped for air as I tried typing my last thoughts out.

*fuck u for stealing my entire life. i cut off Justin. Did he hurt me more? or you... would this not have been traumatic if it didn't deal with religion? anyways maybe i'll have a new guy*

“You good?” Kirsten asked. “You’ve been typing for an hour.”

“Um, I’m scared.” I looked into her eyes and saw beady black orbs. “Oh my god, you look like a muppet.”

“Jess, breathe in. You’re having paranoia, you’ll be okay.”

“I started thinking about ... Noah ... can’t ... breathe ...”

“Shit, I’m so sorry, we shouldn’t have gotten high today,” she said. “Don’t worry, this is normal. Try thinking about something unrelated. What about that cafe you really like, Houseroots? Think about what you’ll order if you go tomorrow. Or maybe close your eyes.”

My brain completely lost functionality. I stumbled over to my bed and shut my eyes. Kirsten continued attempting to console me as I fought the battle raging in my mind.

*I’m coming for you, I silently told the invisible presence controlling me. Who am I talking to? Maybe it’s the devil, who knows.*

Thoughts of beady-eyed Noah leering at me from the top of a bottomless pit where I lay frozen kept me tossing for hours until God graced me with sleep at the lonely hour of 5 a.m..

## A NEW NORMAL

I wondered if it was normal. Picking up a guy for a date. But \$5 of gas in exchange for a normal date sounded like a fair enough trade to me.

Andy's dating profile started off with a picture of him posing with two peace signs. The rest were mostly gym pictures, images reminiscent of a hunched over gorilla. I'd never seen someone with such a defined six pack. I also saw that he followed a lot of my Christian friends on Instagram. Instantly, red flags went up. But he seemed nice, albeit a little fobby.

So when Andy asked if I wanted to grab dinner, I said sure. Then he asked what time I could pick him up. That's when I realized he didn't have a car because he was from China. I had to match with the one carless guy in Westwood.

Deciding on the right music to play in the car was hard since I didn't want to make him think I was weird for listening to rap when I had stuffed animals on my dashboard. But I figured what he'd see is what he'd get. I turned Baby Keem on.

*I need a girlfriend, I need a girlfriend  
Two hoes and I think I did too much  
I got two phones and I don't know who to trust  
I need a girlfriend, I need a girlfriend*

I saw Andy standing next to a stop sign. He was wearing quintessential high school junior year attire. I stopped my judgmental thoughts, remembering what Naomi had told me the day before in therapy: it was good to experience normal dates and not care so much about appearances. "Sometimes the best guys aren't the prettiest," she had said.

So I mustered up an enthusiastic smile and pulled up to the curb. His stride was a bit strange. Too much weight on the right foot, a slight bounce on the left. His shoulders were really broad and his torso was narrow. Like a dorito. *Jess, stop it. Give him a chance.*

“Hey,” I said. “Nice to meet you!”

“Hi, thanks for picking me up,” he said.

I wished I didn’t know Andy was from China. Maybe it was my internalized childhood racism towards my Chinese half, but Andy had a potent garlicky smell, a loud laugh that made his spit fly, and a slight accent.

“Where you wanna go?” he asked.

“I can take us anywhere.”

“K-Town?”

“Um, maybe somewhere a bit closer.”

“Sure, sure. It’s just cuz I haven’t gone out much. I’d love to eat anything.”

“We could just do Sawtelle then and maybe get ramen.”

He agreed then asked how my day was. I told him about my job tutoring at a community college. “Yeah, the weirdest thing happened at work,” I said. “A student asked if I do pageants.”

“I mean, that’s no surprise. Like you’re cuuute,” Andy said. The “U” in cute was drawn out to the point of maximum cringe level. It was getting worse by the minute.

We settled on Marugame, an udon restaurant. I politely engaged in the typical family, major, career aspirations, and hobbies small talk.

“So, why you on the app?” Andy asked after we sat down with our bowls of udon.

I looked up mid-chew. “Um, just wanted to see what normal dates are like. You?”

“Mm I see. Yeah, I don’t know. I’ve been on lots of dates.”

I went back to my noodles and nodded to show I was listening.

“Probably like 6?” he continued. “One was such a catfish. She looked nothing like her pics. This other one, this Vietnamese chick...she was so obsessed with me.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, she kept asking me to send pictures and if I wanted to fuck. She asked for months and I told her no.” He laughed. “She partied all the time and had fake lashes and all that. Not my type. On Valentine’s Day, she got me a bouquet of roses and put petals all around my bed.”

I got a wave of nausea remembering how Justin wouldn’t stop asking for nudes when I was in Thailand. He’d said it was a joke. “I’m so sorry... she was sexually harassing you.”

“Nah, nah, it’s chill. She was just crazy, y’know?”

“Oh.”

“You dated anyone before?”

“Yeah, for a year,” I said.

“How’d you meet?”

“Church.” I hated where the conversation was going.

“You go to church?” he asked.

“Used to.”

“I saw we have mutuals from Genesis.” *God, kill me now.* “Why don’t you go anymore?”

I told him that my ex was abusive and that Gen didn’t do much to support me.

“That’s so fucked,” he said. “You don’t deserve that at all. And fuck that guy.”

The annoyance I’d felt towards Andy began to soften. After he paid for our dinner, I suggested going to the lookout at Mulholland. The drive popped my eardrums, but I barely noticed as we started sharing more. He dated someone in Shanghai from senior year til his second year of college. He said he regretted it because he wasn’t able to make many friends at UCLA since all his time was spent calling her in their long distance relationship.



Once we arrived, we walked to a wooden beam separating us from the pitch-black darkness below. Nobody else was there besides a Mexican couple dancing to some Salsa.

“How’ve you been since leaving church?” he asked.

I figured there wasn’t a point in lying. “Really bad. I have a lot of mental health issues, but they’ve just been getting worse. I don’t speak to my parents anymore, my church is gone, I’ve kinda just...” My voice trailed off. “...lost hope.”

“I’m sorry. It’s not the same, but I struggled with insomnia a year ago. I took every medication possible, but nothing worked. I know what it’s like to feel hopeless.”

“So why do you still go to church?” I asked.

“I went growing up then stopped. But then I met some kind people who brought me back. I’m still figuring it out. Like it’s either the goody-goody Christians or superficial frat guys. I don’t fit in with either.”

I was surprised at how honest he was. “Same for me. How’d you cope with depression?”

“Gyming. Focusing on bettering myself felt like I had a goal. That’s why I help train other people now and work as a physical therapist for UCLA athletes,” he said proudly.

“Wow. My way of coping has just been writing about all of this. I’m working on a book.”

“That’s so cool! I don’t read much, but you must be super good at writing.”

He moved a bit closer to me, his shoulder touching mine. I closed my eyes and pretended that I liked Andy. That it was a perfect date and I had butterflies in my stomach. But none of that was real. He just also knew what depression was like.

A couple minutes later, a cop yelled at us and the Salsa couple. We climbed into my car and I drove him back home. When I pulled up to the curb, he cleared his throat a couple times.

“Can ... I get your number?” he stuttered. “This is the best date I’ve ever been on.”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” I said, putting my number in his phone.

“So would you maybe wanna hang out again?”

I knew hanging out would come with the expectation of dating, and I didn’t want that. It was obvious he really liked me. But I didn’t want him. *Nice guys are rare though.* “Sure.”

After I updated Kirsten, I got a text from Andy asking if I wanted to work out and cook dinner together.

“What do I say to this?” I asked, showing Kirsten.

“Do you want to?”

“I said I’d hang out with him again. He’s...nice.”

“Does he wanna cook at his place or ours?” she asked suspiciously.

Andy said that his housemates were all at his apartment, so mine if I was okay with that.

Kirsten said she’d go to her boyfriend’s so I had space. “Just make sure you don’t do anything you’re not comfortable with.”

“Don’t worry, he’s probably the most normal guy I’ve met. He’s no Justin.”

“Well, someone not being like Justin is the absolute bare minimum.”

The next day, I waited for Andy in front of UCLA’s gym. I hadn’t gone to the gym since the last day I hung out with Noah. After we had eaten dinner that day, Noah asked me to work out for what seemed like the 100th time. Like when I went on a cruise with Kirsten and he sent 15 ab exercises so I wouldn’t “get fat.” *Don’t you wanna turn me on?* he’d said countless times.

So I gave in, following his lead as he had me squat for what felt like hours in his garage. When I tried to hug him, he pushed me away, saying that I needed to concentrate on the workout. That’s when I saw what I was to him – a body. When I started crying, Noah apologized for being too hard. *I can make you feel better,* he said. Then he took me to his room, flipped me on my

stomach mid-cry, and I experienced the searing pain of anal sex again for what I swore to myself would be the last time.

“Hi!” Andy said, waving at me from the gym’s entrance.

“Damn, you sure you don’t work out?” he said. “You look like you’re a regular.”

I instinctively tensed. “Really?”

“I’m serious. You have a nice athletic build.”

When he mentioned we’d do squats, my stomach turned. *Andy is not Noah*. I followed him to the outdoor section, which looked remarkably similar to a jail courtyard. I rapidly inhaled asphalt-scented air as I copied his movements. After we finished the circuit, he smiled. “You have a really nice body.” He touched my arm. “And some good meat.”

“Huh?” I panted.

“I think I told you,” he sighed. “My ex was anorexic and looked like a skeleton. I tried to help her, but it was just too late. But you’re super toned and fit. So you have good meat on you.”

*Who calls someone’s body “meat.”* “Is she okay now?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Her pics on Insta are still super skinny. I mean, what could I do? I tried.”

After the workout, we walked back to my apartment. He asked me to make avocado toast. He thought trying my typical diet was cute, but I wasn’t excited about eating toast for dinner.

As I sliced avocados onto sourdough, I thought about how annoying it was that our dinner was using up all my ripe avocados, which I’d been saving for breakfast that week.

“Pretty good,” he said, as he munched on the bread. “Might need another toast though.”

I only had two more slices of sourdough. Using up another piece on Andy really bothered me. He took his time eating the extra toast he requested, so I began to clean up the dishes.

“Wait stop, I wanted to do the dishes for you.”

“No, seriously it’s okay.” I was expecting him to protest again, but he nodded and resumed eating. Once I finished, I walked over to my couch and turned the TV on.

“You wanna watch something?” he asked, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“We could watch *Love on the Spectrum*.” I don’t know why, of all the things on Netflix, I selected a neurodivergent dating reality show.

I pressed play and the *duh duh* Netflix opening began. A man was describing his fear of teeth to his date when suddenly, Andy reached for my hand. Unfortunately, he’d only grabbed three of my fingers. It was as romantic as a little kid holding my hand.

“Sorry, lemme try that again,” he said, releasing my fingers then interlacing them with his. *Andy thinks I like him*. My heart sank. I wasn’t just annoyed. I was jealous.

“You know, I wasn’t able to sleep last night because of you. I even told my mom about you, she said you’re really pretty.” *HIS MOM?* “Also, you smell good.”

Then I realized his lips were on mine. The sensation of a cold, wet mouth. He started pressing his face into mine with more passion, moving his hands towards my chest. *Why did I think this would be different?*

Guilt choked me as I realized Andy and I had dramatically different perspectives of what was happening. *But this time, I asked for it. I led him on. It’s my fault.*

“You ever done it?” Andy whispered.

“Huh?”

“Have sex. I know you mentioned you hooked up with someone.”

“Yeah...have you?”

“Nah, because my ex was anorexic. Her body was so fucked that she had no sex drive.”

“Oh...sorry?”

“I’m really curious to see what it feels like,” he smiled. “But obviously I don’t want to do it with just anyone.”

I ignored him. After an hour of making out to *Love on the Spectrum*, Andy left on his electric scooter.

For the next couple of days, he texted about how he thought of me when he passed a coffee shop. Or how he wanted to take me to his mansion in Hawaii. Or how I better not forget about him. Then he asked if I was free to get ramen. He added that he’d never bought condoms before. *Which ones do I get?* he messaged. I ignored him.

After our ramen date, we headed straight to my bedroom. Once twenty minutes of making out passed, his hand started crawling down my thigh. The same curiosity in his touch as the day after Noah asked me to be his girlfriend. He lifted my underwear up. “I have such bad blue balls,” they both said.

“How do you do it?” he asked.

*I’m corrupting Andy. How am I suddenly the one with experience?*

Andy didn’t wait for an answer. He took his boxers off. “I’m kinda big, huh? Seven inches,” he said proudly. “Should I get the ... you know what?”

“Whatever you want.”

“How do I put this on?” he mumbled, scrolling through a Wikihow page titled, *How to put a condom on*. After he announced that he did it successfully, I lifted my legs up. But something felt severely wrong. Maybe it was because Andy was Christian, a virgin, and a decent person, but guilty thoughts began flooding my mind.

I pulled away. “Sorry, could you finish in the restroom? I’m really tired.”

“Oh...yeah.” He got off of me. “Sorry, am I...not good...”

I could barely register that he was in the room. All I could hear was the same voice that'd been condemning me for months. *You're giving him trauma. You should just kill yourself.*

He asked again. "You know, it scares me when you don't say anything."

I looked up. Noah stared back.

"Why don't you want to talk about what we just did?" Noah's voice raised. "Don't you care about fighting this sin? It's unfair that I'm the only one keeping us accountable."

I blinked. Noah's face disappeared. "Sorry, I don't think this is going to work."

"Wait, what? Is it because I'm not good?" Andy asked.

"No...I told you my ex was abusive, right? I'm severely messed up."

"We don't have to have sex. I told you I did *nothing* with my ex for 3 years," he said.

"I don't think we're compatible. But you're really kind, especially when we were working out..." I started crying. "My ex told me I was fat and you're so nice and you deserve someone who appreciates you..." I started gasping for air.

"You're beautiful." he said, holding my hand. "I can't believe someone like him exists."

I looked at Andy through blurry eyes. "What got you through your depression? Because to be honest...I don't know if I can keep living. I can't stop thinking about ending my life."

"Jess, your life is worth a lot." His eyes started to water. "My mom just kept pushing me to keep going. There's so much more ahead of you. You can't just throw it away."

"Thanks Andy, that means a lot to me." I cleared my throat. "Sorry, I didn't mean to trauma dump on you. I meant what I said though. You deserve someone who's mentally stable."

"I want to help you though. I really care about you."

"I don't want to lead you on." He knew me for five days. He was infatuated.

I knew it'd make Andy's attachment worse, but I didn't want to be alone. "You can still sleep over if you want," I said. Nobody had ever slept over at my apartment before. Justin used to leave at sunrise, but that didn't count. Noah sleeping over was out of the question. *It'd be unfair to my future wife if we slept together and broke up*, he'd always say.

Andy took me up on my offer immediately. After we got situated in my bed, he stared at me intently. I closed my eyes for a bit and when I opened them again, he was still staring.

"Can we be like...cuddle buddies or friends with benefits?" he whispered.

"What."

"I really want to keep seeing you."

"Friends with benefits doesn't work. Trust me. I don't want to lead you on."

"So we're just never gonna talk to each other again."

"Um. Yeah?" I rolled the other way so I wouldn't have to see his face.

"So I'm just another hookup."

The bitterness in his voice stung. I didn't do hookups. Or maybe I did. "I told you, I fucked up," I said to the wall.

When morning came, I made him breakfast as a peace offering – avocado toast – and dropped him off at his apartment while blasting Future's album *I NEVER LIKED YOU*. When Kirsten came back to the apartment for lunch, I told her what happened.

"Hunt, don't feel bad, you dodged a bullet." Kirsten resumed pouring a packet of neon yellow cheese into a pot. She was making Kraft Mac and Cheese, her staple meal. "I think most of the single men out there right now are Justins or Andys. Fuckboys or virgin simps."

## MAYBE I'M PSYCHO

Appah asked if I was ready to call. He'd been texting me weekly about different HR job openings. When I told him nothing on my resume related to business, he scolded me for being prideful. The worst was when he told me to apply for a job at his firm, mention that he was my dad, and say that it was my dream job. All his texts were reminders that I'd never be enough.

He told me to apply for a HR position at Warner Music, since the hiring manager was his friend. The pre-screening interview was in an hour, so he wanted to prep me on what to say.

"Sorry, I forgot I have to talk to my dad. I just gotta call him for like thirty minutes."

"Okay, good luck," Kirsten said.

I picked Appah's Facetime up on the third ring, bracing myself for the severe awkwardness that began with every conversation we had.

"Hey," he said. He was sitting on his swivel chair in his home office. A painting of two elephants was taped behind him. The elephants' bodies were Appah and I's handprints. I made it years ago. "How've you been?"

*He doesn't actually want to know. He's only asking so he doesn't seem like he's just calling because of the job.* "Good," I smiled. *What can I possibly share that a normal person would be doing?* "I went to a movie premier with Kirsten yesterday at the theater in Westwood."

"I remember that theater when I went to UCLA. Your first time?"

"Yeah."

"Nice." He cleared his throat. "So, did you get a chance to look at the company values and job description?"

"Yeah, honestly I still don't really understand what HR is."



“Okay. Well, remember what you really liked at Genesis?”

I dug my fingernails into my palms. “What?”

“You always said that you loved how inclusive and friendly the community was. It’s like a church. Creating a welcoming environment where everyone is a part of something bigger.” He chuckled. “Crazy how everything always ties back to Christianity.”

As Appah continued on about how church was like HR, I opened up Yelp on a separate tab on my computer and began searching for hair salons. I’d been thinking about dying it again two weeks ago. I was addicted to altering my appearance at least every other week.

“That make sense?”

“Yep,” I said, looking at Skylight Hair Studios’ reviews.

“Do you know any of the artists that they work with? Might be good to name a few musicians you like from their label.”

“Mhm.”

“You really like Frank Ocean, right? I think he’s on their website.”

He was my favorite singer in high school. Appah’s knowledge of me was so outdated.

“Appah,” I said, “One of my jobs has a lot of hours that will continue during school and I signed a contract for it. So I don’t know if I’d have time for this internship.”

“That’s fine. Contracts can be broken.”

My head throbbed. “You know I have like three jobs right? I’m a research assistant, writing tutor, and social media outreach coordinator.”

“I thought you wanted help getting a real job.”

*A real job.*

Twenty minutes later, he asked if I had any other questions.

“No,” I quickly said.

“Okay, good luck.” He paused. Before he could potentially add “love you,” I quickly said “bye” and hung up. I didn’t want to hear him say something I could never believe.

I closed my laptop and walked out from my room to Kirsten on the couch. After two steps, I couldn’t hold it in anymore.

“Jess, what’s wrong?” Kirsten asked, standing up and hugging me.

“I hate my dad. How can he care so little about what I’m going through,” I sobbed. “He thinks I’m incapable of getting a job without him. I have three jobs.”

“Hunt, you’re one of the hardest workers I know. Don’t listen to him.”

The interview ended up being only 10 minutes long. I could barely understand what the brunette interviewer was saying. I just nodded my head a couple times and said I was interested in the internship. She said they’d follow up with a formal interview in a month.

“How was the interview?” Kirsten asked after.

“Okay I think. Can we unblock Justin now?”

Kirsten’s face lit up. “So I’ve been thinking about how we should present him with an ultimatum. Either you guys hang out normally, as in outside, or you cut him off completely.”

We drew a flowchart on our whiteboard calendar with all of the possible outcomes. If the conversation went nowhere, I’d ask my interview questions. Like how many people he’d hooked up with, if this was normal to him, and what relationship trauma he had. I roleplayed the flow chart with Kirsten as Justin, and was finally ready to unblock him two hours later.

I texted him, *hi what was the reason for ur mixed signals (i.e. bringing me quarters; saying we have compatible personalities but then ghosting me) & intentions. just give it to me straight. i’m too lazy to psychoanalyze so i’d appreciate it if u were as clear as possible :-)*

He responded an hour later with, *I can deliver your news tomorrow.*

So the next day, after many warnings from Kirsten saying to not fall for his manipulative tactics, he picked me up as usual in his van to look for parking.

“Long time no see,” he grinned, as I climbed into the front seat. The radio was playing tracks from I NEVER LIKED YOU.

Before I could respond with something sarcastic, I looked at Justin and forgot everything. Because of how much I’d talked and thought about him in the last two months since I’d seen him, I couldn’t believe that he was real. “Yeah,” was all I could offer.

On the short walk to my gate, I realized that I was nervous. I cared about what he thought of me.

“This new?” he asked, touching my hair. “I like it.”

“Oh. Yeah, I kinda messed up. The bangs are a little uneven.”

“Did you do it because of me? You know, how girls change their hair when they go through something and that kinda shit.”

I laughed and punched his arm. “No, shut up.”

When he entered the apartment, the first thing he did was walk to my white board. Kirsten and I had obscured most of the flowchart before he came, so there were just random words floating on the whiteboard like “depressed” and “interview.” He drew a dick under the word depressed. Then he walked over to my room and sat on my bed.

“So, are you gonna answer my questions,” I asked in my most assertive voice.

“Why don’t you sit on my lap,” he smiled.

“Justin, seriously, you have to answer.”

“Fine. I’ll answer one then you have to come here.” He paused. “Okay, your quarters question. I feel like any decent person would do that for someone.”

Heat flushed in my cheeks. I reluctantly crawled over to him. “What about —”

“You sure you wanna talk right now?” Justin leaned in and before I could argue, he started kissing me.

The next hour was a blur. The switch in my brain controlling any sense of judgment went dark. As his mouth explored every inch of my exposed body, a familiar numbness returned. I re-entered consciousness fifteen minutes later when he whispered “Hey,” touching my lips with his index finger.

“You’re insane,” he panted after. “I’ve never finished from oral before. Maybe once in like high school, but...” He patted my head. “...you should be proud.”

Then he tugged his boxers back on and went to wash up. *Ask him why. Don’t let him get away with the bare minimum of a response.* When he returned from my restroom, he sat cross-legged a foot away from me on my bed. I reached for the giraffe plushie guarding my pillow and fixed my eyes on its brown nose. “What is this Justin? And can we talk about how I sent you that super weird article and poem. Did you think that was normal?”

“Can I get an emotional support stuffed animal too?”

I rolled my eyes and tossed him my black chubby cat.

“Why would I think that’s normal? Honestly, I think you’re pretty psycho,” he said.

*Psycho.* The reality of that word was starting to sink in.

“I mean, yeah, the article with my parents was overboard. But it was the day after In-N-Out. I kinda figured you had feelings for me because of the way you looked at me when we were

kissing. You had this...” He quietly laughed. “...this is embarrassing to say. But this sparkle in your eyes. So when you sent me the article, I was like, ‘Oh shit, she’s obsessed.’”

I was pretty sure the moment he was referring to was when I was staring at him, trying to believe that what was happening was real. Not a hallucination for a story I’d write later.

“And then the poem. I was in my bed when you sent it because I’d just woken up. I read it and was like, ‘Wow, she’s *really* obsessed.’”

I set the giraffe down. “Wait, you thought that was real? Dude, I sent that as satire.”

“I don’t know Jess, honestly you’ve done some pretty psycho things. Didn’t you like, text me from a random number?”

*OH MY GOD. HE KNEW?* “How’d you know that ...”

“Jess, there’s only one person who would ask if I was dating someone. You. Also, what person would ask a question like that if they hooked up once. The small dick thing kinda hurt. I know I’m not the biggest but...I was like nah, she’s joking. I showed the texts to my friend and he couldn’t stop laughing. He was like, ‘Dude this girl you’re talking to is actually insane.’”

I hadn’t been joking about that. Kirsten and I talked about his small dick all the time.

“I had a nightmare last night that I came over and you stabbed me with a syringe and I couldn’t move. It’s kinda why I asked you to meet me outside first today,” he continued.

Justin didn’t know half of what I’d done. Like how I’d seen his house at least 5 times, or the fact that I even knew where he lived. Or how his weightlifting brother somehow kept showing up in an Instagram fitness ad on my feed. Or how I even knew that it was his brother.

“So then why’d you come back?”

“It’s fun.”

*Remember the flowchart.* “Well anyways, this entire situation has just been really confusing for me. Maybe you don’t think it’s weird, but it’s bad for my mental health. So the way I see it is we hang out together as friends outside, or I cut you off completely.”

“You’re absolutely psycho,” Justin said, shaking his head. “You’d just cut me off?”

“Justin, I already did. You do know that you were blocked for a week, right?”

“Oh.”

“Whatever, can you just make a decision?”

“I think I’ve already told you. I’m really busy and I don’t have time for a relationship. Work ends late, so I’m literally only free at night. And usually I just go out with my friends after.” He grabbed the giraffe on my lap and turned it around, bouncing it up and down on top of the chubby cat. “I mean it’s like I’m attracted to you, but I like you as a friend.”

Justin watched my eyes narrow. “Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I’m not asking for a relationship. I’m asking to hang out outside. And I’m only saying this because our dynamic is literally a recreation of my abusive ex. All we ever did was sexual things he wanted and he was so cheap we never went out. It just feels like the exact same cycle.”

He stopped pretending my stuffed animals were having sex. “I get it, and I’m sorry—”

I cut him off. “Also, pressuring me to do ‘backdoor’ was messed up. You know why?”

“Because your ex...?”

“He anal raped me multiple times.”

He didn’t speak for a minute. “I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

His apology made me strangely uncomfortable. “Well anyways, that’s why I’m pushing for something that’s less sexual and transactional.”

“What I don’t get is when we talk here, it’s the same thing we’d be saying at dinner.”

I thought about how Noah always left after he made me do whatever it was that he wanted. It's what stuck out so much about Justin. He stayed after for hours. It felt like he cared.

"I don't think there's a problem unless there's feelings involved. I mean, I can just not do pillow talk after if that helps," he continued.

"No," I quickly said. "It's fine."

"I get what you're saying about recreation, but this is just what friends with benefits is."

"We're not friends though."

"What do you mean? I consider you my friend."

"Do you realize that everything we do is transactional? That's not what friends are."

"But there's foreplay, it's not just like pure sex. Here, let me explain this to you. It's all a delicate balance." He held up one hand. "See, so here's work." He put the other hand up. "And here's love life." He smiled. "I'd say you're a part of that."

Our conversation was going nowhere. I decided it was time for the interview segment.

"Since the last time we saw each other, how many people have you hooked up with?"

"One."

I was ashamed at how surprised I was by his answer. I thought it'd be more. But also at how little his answer bothered me. "How about you?" he asked.

"Same. One." I told him a brief summary of Andy.

"Holy shit, you took his virginity? Poor China man," he said, shaking his head. "That's pretty fucked up of you." *Doesn't Justin know he took mine?*

I decided to change the subject. "So why besides work do you not date?"

"I thought I told you. My last ex went to college abroad and it was really hard for her to make friends. She would tell me that I was the only one who could make her happy. I couldn't

leave her because she would threaten to kill herself. After I left, I realized I don't know why I ever dated. I could finally do things I love like basketball, focus on making money, hang out with friends, and then just fuck around. I think relationships are mostly just there for comfort and that's not something I need or want right now."

I silently listened as Justin recounted his past traumas. *I'm also depressed. I'm also obsessed with him.* I realized that our relationship was also a form of recreation for him. He liked being wanted, but without the responsibility of caring for someone.

"I'm so sorry. It's emotional abuse, and I can't imagine how hard it must've been."

He shrugged. "It happened and it's over. I just know I really don't want to date, at least for a few more years."

"Yeah, I get that. Honestly, I think friendships are way more important anyways. I don't know if I'd still be here if it weren't for the support my friends have been giving me."

"Wait, what do you mean by 'still be here?'"

*Why did I say that?* I reached for my giraffe. "Um."

He stared at me. "Wait, are you suicidal?"

I didn't know how to answer his question. *He doesn't want to deal with someone that's mentally ill.* "I'm just saying that my friends have helped me get through some really hard shit."

He seemed unsatisfied with my answer, but didn't press me further.

Justin got up to leave around 5 a.m. because he had work. "Yeah, soo...I don't know if I can answer your question. What about we meet in the middle. Better communication? We can watch movies if you want. Or I could bring over In-N-Out or something."

We stood next to my front door in silence. His proposal made sense. It's not like I could date someone either. Besides, I didn't want another person in my life to leave me.



He took my lack of words as a sign of agreement. “Just don’t block me and I’ll reach out. It’s up to you if you want to respond or not.” Justin took a step closer and placed a hand on my shoulder. “And seriously, if you need someone to talk to, you can call me. I mean it. And if you need someone to beat up your ex, just say when.”

Justin came over again the next Thursday. But he left at 12 a.m. instead of 5 a.m..

Every Thursday after, the same questions circled in my mind. *How can I transition from seeing him as a person to a body? How is he able to have the emotional capacity of a rock?*

Life felt more and more unreal, as if I was trapped in a cycle of anti-romantic stories. Then I wondered what would happen if I told Justin about my writing. *I can escape this simulation and bridge our relationship with real life.* “Did I tell you that I’m working on a book? All the stuff I write about is my actual life, so people who read it will think I’m insane.”

He smirked. “You are insane. Am I in any of the stories?”

“You think you’re worth a story?” *Not him being a main character.*

“Maybe. Can my name be Lemón?”

I sighed. “This isn’t Wattpad.”

One Thursday, I got high by myself and lay on the couch, watching my led lights transition through all the colors of the rainbow. *You’re fucked up,* a voice said. *Why would you even call yourself Christian? God doesn’t know who you are. And neither do you,* another joined in. I focused on trying to breathe as voices continued crashing, smothering me in guilt.

I tried to distract myself by swiping on dating apps. Another guy I’d been talking to who’s Instagram handle was mr.peach asked if he could come over and binge Euphoria with me. I was depressed, intoxicated, and didn't have an HBO plus subscription, so I agreed.

An hour later, he showed up to my front gate. “I brought some snackies,” he grinned, holding up a Vons bag with lime hot cheetos and Cherry Garcia ice cream.

I blinked a few times, trying to silence the intrusive voices. “Nice to meet you.”

While he was attempting to unjam my cobweb-filled windows because it was 100 degrees inside, Justin texted me, *Wanna help pay for half my computer?* He always sent out of pocket texts when he wanted to meet. I wondered if I should tell Mr. Peach something came up since I’d rather see Justin.

I texted Kirsten to discuss the Justin vs. Mr. Peach dilemma and she said to stick with Mr. Peach since Justin was always an option. Then she asked for a picture of Mr. Peach, so I sent her his Instagram.

*Um, jess ... is he straight!?* she texted.

Kirsten began pointing out things on his social media that I had somehow failed to notice before. His Instagram bio said something about loving space cowboys and had lots of hearts. I realized I hadn’t stalked him enough, but I didn’t really care. Everyone felt the same anyways.

Mr. Peach was an attractive six-foot-tall Vietnamese boy with bleached hair and was happy to give me a tour of his ten tattoos, including an ass tat that said “momma’s boy.”

Again, I felt idiotic for thinking us watching Euphoria meant we were actually going to watch Euphoria. 5 minutes into Episode 1, he stuck his fingers under my underwear, asked me to suck him 7 minutes later, then put his dick in me after another 10 minutes. But as his body bounced up and down, I saw something in his eyes that scared me. Pure lust. Sex began to hurt more and more with each passing second. I told him to stop.

But nothing happened, and he continued plunging himself into me with blind ecstasy.

*You don’t owe him anything.* “Sorry, can you stop? I’m really tired,” I repeated louder.

He stopped thrusting. “Huh?”

“I’m really tired, maybe it’s from weed or something.”

“Being high’s never done that to me,” he said, removing himself from my body. “Is it something I did?”

After I assured him that it wasn’t, he asked if he could sleep on my couch. I gave him a pillow then checked my email. One was about a Genesis beach event. I let out a long sigh.

“You good?” he yawned, putting his feet on my coffee table.

*He’s a stranger and knows nothing. Justin would get it though, he knows about my experience with church. My gut turned again, but this time fueled by a confusing mix of longing and loneliness. Yeah Justin knows, but it doesn’t mean he cares...,* a final voice trailed off.

The next morning, I woke up from hearing the front door creak open. Then I got a text. *Heading out now!* It was my first real hookup. And it was as insignificant as brushing my teeth.

I spent the rest of the day robotically fulfilling my daily routine of work, buying a \$7 cup of coffee, then sleeping. But every minute was spent in a mindless fog. My soul was possessed by a stranger, the person I’d become.

I told Naomi about my experience with Mr. Peach, explaining that I didn’t like sex. I hated it. But I still wanted to see Justin because I felt like we had a genuine connection. So my conclusion was that I’d just be having sex with Justin.

“Well, your decision is similar to when a heroin user is an addict, and they can’t just stop,” she said. “But at least they’re using a clean needle. Also, we need to focus on the positive here. You were able to say ‘stop’ when you weren’t comfortable. That’s huge progress.”

“But what’s wrong with me?” I asked. “Why am I so desensitized towards sex. Why don’t I care that Justin’s been hooking up with other people even though I’m so attached to him? It just feels as mundane as him saying he made a new friend.”

“Nothing’s wrong with you. It’s because there’s two parts to your addiction. Dissociation from numbing your pain by being with Justin, and hits of dopamine because you have a crush. So it makes sense that you ‘don’t care.’ You’re dissociating.”

Whatever numbness I felt was quickly forgotten when I woke up dripping in sweat the next week. After taking my temperature and seeing it was 100 degrees, I canceled work and self-diagnosed myself with a heat stroke. I tried to medicate myself by placing a bag of two-year-old frozen vegetables on my forehead. But nothing worked to lessen the fever. Sweat continued to stream down my face, drying my forehead and chin into a flaking sandpaper.

*Just learned how to juggle.* I never saw Justin’s unsolicited 11 p.m. juggling announcement until the next morning. As puddles of sweat continued to stain the navy sheets strung around my body, I persevered with my Euphoria marathon using Mr. Peach’s HBO plus. Then Justin texted again, saying that he could come over.

*Okay sounds good, also it’s so freaking hot here.* I paused to wipe a layer of sweat off my nose. *I almost fainted today and had to call off work.*

*Are you sick? Maybe tonight’s not the night,* he said.

I was pretty sure the fever was from my apartment’s lack of AC, so I told him I was fine.

Justin said that he changed his mind and was too tired. I realized that I didn’t want him to be the one controlling when we saw each other. I told him that it was either tonight or never. He said we’d settle it over Word Hunt, a game where you find as many words as possible on a little grid of letters in a minute. I lost. I said it was still tonight or never.

Then he Facetimed me. When I picked up, he was running on a treadmill.

“This can be our hangout,” he grinned.

“I’m not even joking, you won’t see me again if it’s not today.”

“You’re sick and I’m not feeling great, so why are you pushing so hard?”

“I’m not sick. Everything is always on your timeline,” I said.

“But I’ve never flaked before.”

“Yeah, because you’re the one who decides the day for whatever fits your schedule.”

Kirsten walked into the living room. She quietly sat next to me and texted me to mute myself. After I pressed the button and faced the camera towards the ceiling, she said, “I thought he was cute from his photos, but holy shit, I changed my mind. You can do so much better.”

“Huh?”

“Hunt, he’s *not* cute. I don’t know what you see, but he literally has a slight mustache and beard.” I took another look and noticed Justin’s facial hair for the first time. “You’re definitely his hottest hookup. Don’t take this the wrong way, but before Noah shaved all his hair off, I think he looked better. And listen to what Justin’s saying. He’s *weird*. If you heard me talking to someone like that, what would you say?”

The word *weird* was beginning to sink a bit deeper. “I’d say you can do a lot better.”

I unmuted myself. “So, are you coming or not?” I asked.

“Off we gooo....” he said, pressing a button on the machine and running faster.

*God*. “Can you please just answer, it’s a simple question with a simple response.”

“Why do you make my life so difficult ... what are you doing tomorrow?”

I had my official interview scheduled with the music company Appah made me apply for. “I have a job interview with Warner Music. But I have three other jobs and I really like them.”

“This is a real job though.”

My gut clenched. *A real job*. The exact same words Appah had said.

“I don’t mean it like that,” he continued. “But it’s a corporate job.”

Then he started juggling hacky sacks.

“What the actual fuck am I looking at,” Kirsten said, observing Justin’s performance.

“Justin, what do you want,” I said.

“Are you sure you never wanna see me again.”

“Um.” I looked at Kirsten for guidance. *If you hang out with him again Jess, you’re on your own. I’m not going out of my way to let you have the apartment anymore*, she texted.

“I need to hear you say it,” he said.

“Uh...yeah.”

He stopped juggling and picked his phone up. “Damn. Alright. Got it.”

Kirsten and I ended the night by erasing the whiteboard flowchart on our calendar together, the only evidence of his existence.

“Maybe this is the trick,” Kirsten said, wiping the words and Justin’s dick drawing off with a wet paper towel. “It needs to happen two times.”

She was referring to when I broke up with Noah. I tried once in November, after talking to Kirsten about it for hours the night before. But seeing the polaroids of us he’d hung up on his wall and the Walmart sweatpants he’d let me borrow countless times had made it impossible to let go. We went to church together. He’d met my family. He’d even said we were going to get married. He was my “first” everything. So I decided to give him a second chance.

The second time was a week before what would’ve been our one-year anniversary. That morning, Mom texted me, asking if I was sleeping over at Noah’s. It was the only time I had ever

stayed at Noah's overnight. Plus, we were sleeping in separate rooms. When I came home, she asked if Noah and I were engaging in sex. When I told her the truth, which was everything but sex, she told me I needed to end it. She said that she'd had a strange feeling that she should check my location on Find my Friends that morning, something she hadn't done in years. *It had to have been God*, she told me. But I couldn't. It was Kirsten who had driven down to the Valley and convinced me that I had the power to end it. And I did.

“Why won't this stupid dick come off,” Kirsten grumbled. “Freaking Justin. It's probably bigger than his.”

“Wait,” I asked out loud, “what day is it?”

“Holy shit,” she said.

We looked at each other wide-eyed.

“It's Thursday.”

## A SPIRITUAL WAR

When I heard that Noah was trying out for Gen's praise team as a drummer, I wasn't surprised. But I was furious.

The first thing I did was text Eunice, asking why Noah was still serving. She said she would talk to PYoung about it. I never heard back from her.

The next morning, as I was driving to Whole Foods to buy some more avocados, I got a text from one of my Gen friends. *Jess...I don't know how to tell you this. But Noah's at the leadership meeting.*

I lost it. I drove back to my apartment as fast as I could, running through two red lights.

"What's wrong?" Kirsten asked when I came in.

"They don't care," I screamed, shaking my head and wiping tears from my face. "THEY DON'T FUCKING CARE AND NOBODY FUCKING BELIEVES ME."

"So Noah's still serving," she said, her face hardening into a frown. "What's PYoung's number? I'm texting him. I don't even go to Genesis and I'm still gonna say something."

I wordlessly handed her my phone for his contact information. For the next hour, she sat on her bed frantically typing out an essay into her notes app.

"Let me know if there's anything I should change," she said, sending me the text she had drafted. It was the kind of text that's so long, you had to press the "..." to open it up onto a separate screen.

*hello young, this is Kirsten. we met a few times, as i'm jessica's roommate. i wanted to reach out and express how disgusted i am with how the situation with noah has been handled. i've watched this situation unfold by jessica's side over the past 8 months and i don't know how,*



*but it just keeps managing to get worse. i want you to read this entire message and let it sink in because i care a lot about jess and if you do too, something needs to change. at the very least you owe her an apology. this is truly my last resort, as all of jess' concerns have been ignored and i don't know how else to get this point across.*

The text continued on for another six long paragraphs explaining what Noah did and how Genesis protected the abuser at the expense of the victim. The hardest part to read was when Kirsten talked about how she was happy that she had never decided to join.

“Let me know if he responds,” I called out as she left for her boyfriend’s.

“Of course,” she yelled back. “He better.”

Then I got a text from Mom that she’d arrived. She’d come to get brunch because of what I assumed was her attempt to make up. We hadn’t talked since the UCLA hospital fiasco.

Once we were seated at the Parisian cafe I chose, She asked how I was doing mentally. I told her that it was hard but Kirsten was helping me through a lot.

A server placed a heaping plate of sweet potato pancakes and a chorizo breakfast burrito in front of us. After I took a picture of the food, Mom cleared her throat.

“I know I don’t talk about Halmoni much,” she said. “But it’s because I never really had a relationship with her.”

The burrito in my hand went limp as I stared at her. *Mom’s sharing something about her past? She’s never done that before.* “How come?”

Mom looked down at the pancake in front of her. “Halmoni...” she paused. “My mom committed suicide when I was in college.”

I always thought grandma had died of cancer. “Mom...I’m so sorry.”

Her eyes were watering. “It’s not something I like to talk about. But I feel that you’re old enough to know now. I see your pain and it makes me wonder what I could’ve done differently with my mom. I’m trying my best to be there for you, but I know it hasn’t worked that great recently.” She locked her watery gaze with mine. “Jess, please. You can tell me.”

I wiped tears from my face. “Honestly Mom, it’s been really hard. What Appah said about not wanting to know about my life really hurt.” I waited to see if she’d interrupt and defend him, but she was silent. “Ever since leaving Gen, my life has been a mess. I can’t even believe some of the things I’ve done. And Noah’s life has just been totally unchanged.”

“I know,” Mom said. “What Genesis has done ... Well, what they haven’t done, is despicable.”

I was surprised she was taking my side. “Thanks Mom. But honestly, sometimes I feel it would’ve been easier to just...”

Mom dabbed her eyes with a napkin then passed another one to me.

“...have continued dating Noah. Nobody seems to think it was a big deal anyways. Sometimes I find myself doubting if my memory is even accurate.”

“Jess,” she said. “I believe you.”

“Thanks Mom,” I sniffled. “But I think a lot about just ending it all. Maybe then people would finally realize how severely my life has changed.”

She was silent for a moment. “People don’t realize how badly someone was hurting until after they’re gone and it’s too late.”

“Honestly, the biggest thing I’m scared of is going to hell,” I said.

“I’ve been learning more about how depression is an illness. And I believe that God knows how much the person is hurting and has compassion. He’s a loving God.”

I hadn't thought about God in a long time. "But why is life so much worse now? I left Noah, shouldn't it be better?"

"This world has so much sin." Mom reached for my hand. "Satan blinded you to what Noah was doing when you were in the relationship. And he's working ten times harder to keep you from healing now that you're out of it."

When we arrived back at my apartment, Mom unbuckled her seatbelt and wrapped her arms around me. "Jess," she whispered, "remember that no matter what, I'll always love you."

That night, I got a text from Eunice asking if I could Zoom her and PYoung. Ten minutes later, I was sitting in a tie-dye XXL shirt in front of the couple.

"Nice bangs Jess. Also, we got your roommate's text," Eunice said.

PYoung stared down at his desk.

"It was shocking and really attacking. We had no idea you felt that way. Do you agree with everything she wrote?" Eunice asked.

"I didn't tell her to write it. It's from her perspective, but it's all true," I said.

"I feel that a lot of this was miscommunication. We told Noah it was a mistake and removed him from leadership," Eunice continued. "And frankly Jess, it's unhealthy that you're so obsessed with these Noah updates. It's not like we talk about you every time we talk to him."

*Noah updates.* I couldn't believe the conversation was real.

"Anyways, Kirsten said you've been going through a lot. How are you Jess?" PYoung asked. It was his first time speaking.

"Terrible." *God. I'm crying again.* "And um. Yeah."

PYoung looked down again, unable to meet my eyes. “I’m glad we had this conversation so we could clear some stuff up. Can I pray for you?” he quietly asked. After he asked God to give me strength, they ended the call. I was left in shock at what had just happened.

The next day during therapy, I recounted the entire Zoom call to Naomi. “This is making my blood boil. They VICTIM BLAMED you. They GASLIT you. Noah updates? Please. You were looking for some ACCOUNTABILITY. If you’re up for it, I’m willing to have a talk with them free of charge to educate them about why this is just totally wrong.”

For the next couple of days, I texted the couple to coordinate a time that they were willing to meet with Naomi. Meanwhile, Kirsten and I planned on having a watch party for the call. “Party” meaning Kirsten and I. We brought out the sparkly paper party hats that we used for special occasions. The last time they’d been put to use was the “I Hate Noah” party.

After we entered the Zoom waiting room, Kirsten brought out the lime hot cheetos Mr. Peach had left. “Thanks for meeting today,” Naomi began. “The goal is to provide information about what happened to prevent things like this from happening again.”

Eunice rolled her eyes. PYoung’s face was contorted into a concerned frown.

“So, what do you all know about this situation? Eunice?”

“I understand that Noah asked her to do some things she wasn’t comfortable with.”

“What things?” Naomi asked.

Nobody said anything.

“What did he make her do?” she repeated.

“It’s hard to say out loud...” PYoung mumbled, his eyes lowered.

“Jessica said Noah asked her to do...” Eunice paused. “Anal sex. But she didn’t specify if he was aggressive in making her do it, or—”

“Do you know how many times this occurred?” Naomi asked.

“No.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong Jessica, but at least six times. If Jessica wanted to, she could have easily taken him to court and charged him for what he did to her.”

Nobody said anything. I took another chip from the cheeto bag.

“Why’s Eunice keep rolling her eyes like that,” Kirsten said.

“Eunice, Jessica confided in you when she was falling apart. I heard about the solution you suggested. Sitting with her friends at church. That’s like asking someone to put on a gas mask in a fire without extinguishing the fire,” Naomi said.

Eunice’s smile faltered.

“If you don't know what to do, the best thing to do is to just say that,” Naomi continued. “Noah needs serious help. Based on what Jessica’s told me, he’s on the autistic spectrum and is quite possibly reenacting a trauma of his own. People don’t just go and anally date rape someone. There’s a high likelihood something has happened to him in his past. He needs therapy. And not just regular talk therapy. A trauma specialist.”

“Yes, we’re in the process of referring Noah to Gospel Care,” Eunice said.

Naomi raised her eyebrows, but didn’t comment on that. Then she began to explain the neurobiology of why I couldn’t leave. “She was in ‘freeze mode,’ meaning that she was unable to move or say anything when these things happened. Noah took advantage of her innocence.”

The wrinkles on PYoung’s forehead grew deeper as he nodded.

“Jessica’s made it clear to me in our sessions that she means no ill will on Noah. She wants to see him not hurt anyone again. But trust me, this will repeat if nothing’s done. What’s happened to Jessica is something that has altered the course of her life forever.”

PYoung unmuted his box. “Actually, what you just said aligns with the goal of the church. We also want to see Noah restored and healed. We’d also love to walk with Jessica, but only if that’s something she’s comfortable with.”

I never thought I’d go to church in college, especially because of how suffocating, toxic, and cliquey it was growing up. But the summer before college, Uncle Pastor had prayed a verse over me. Then I heard a voice that wasn’t from me. It said, *Your dad loves you, and I love you even more.* I hadn’t even known I had problems with Appah. Or that I desperately wanted his love. There’s not a doubt in my mind that the voice was God’s. And that’s why I searched for a church on Yelp and found Genesis.

Naomi knew I didn’t want to go back. I’d told her that in our last session. “Jessica’s had a hard time trusting in this church and this kind of trauma will follow her forever. Little things like scents, colors, or even pastors can be triggering to her.”

PYoung grimly nodded and muted his box.

“Eunice, do you have anything to say?” Naomi asked.

“No. I echo everything Young has said.”

After the call ended, Naomi called me to make sure I was okay.

“Nobody’s ever stood up for me like that before,” I told her. “It meant a lot to me.”

It was the first time I’d ever said that phrase and genuinely meant it.

## MENTAL MEDICINE

It happens like this every time. I'm in the kids' classroom at Uncle Pastor's church. A guy gets on top of me. Sometimes it's Noah. Rarely though.

Then whichever guy my subconscious chooses forces me to turn around. Once again, I'm facing the floor. It's a colorful rug with images of little cartoon Biblical figures holding hands. The one on my right is a bearded Moses holding a staff. On the left are Adam and Eve dressed in leaves. The air has the sickly sweet scent of Cheerios. I hold my breath, bearing the pain in silence. Each thrust hurts more than the last.

*PLEASE. CAN WE JUST HAVE NORMAL SEX?* I cry out.

*Damn*, he says with disgust. *You've changed.*

*YOU'RE A RAPIST*, I scream. *HELP*. A mix of people from church pass by the classroom, taking in the scene with glazed expressions. Appah. PYoung. My friends at Gen. Then they leave.

And he doesn't stop. Not until a slimy liquid oozes from my butt and drips onto the floor.

"I had another nightmare," I told Kirsten when I woke up.

"Oh no..." Her eyes narrowed with concern. "Are you okay?"

"Maybe I had that dream again because I'm scared about going to the doctor today. I'm kinda nervous since the last time I went was when ... you know." It was the appointment that had caused the traumatic UCLA hospital bill.

"Today's your physical though, right?" she asked. "It'll be okay."

I hadn't been to a physical in about two years. My appointment was with a new primary care doctor in Santa Monica that Mom had found for me.

When I arrived, the nurse checked my vitals. “Your heart’s a bit fast,” she said flatly. “I’m just going to go through the PhQ-9 questionnaire and then I’ll be done.”

“Okay,” I said nervously.

“Little interest or pleasure in doing things.”

“Nearly every day.”

“Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless.”

I thought about my dream last night. “Nearly every day.”

After she finished asking the questions, she said, “Alright, thank you Jessica. Doctor Chang will be in shortly. You should get undressed and wear the paper gown on the chair.” And with that, she exited the room, trailed by the scent of floral perfume.

I wrapped my shivering body in the thin paper dress. After I successfully knotted the back’s plastic ends into a bow, someone knocked twice on the door.

“Come in,” I said.

A Chinese-American woman with a bob cut in her mid-thirties walked into the room. “Hi, nice to meet you. I’m Doctor Chang. I saw the results for your PhQ-9. How are you doing?”

I stared back at the woman, a complete stranger who knew nothing about my life. *Why would she care about me?* “I...don’t...know,” I gulped.

“It’s okay,” she said, her voice lowering. “What’s been going on?”

“To be honest...” Tears started falling down, staining my paper-covered lap. “I was scared to come. Last time I went to the doctor, I had to pay a huge bill because my dad got mad.”

“Don’t worry, this is covered by your insurance,” she assured me.



“I had a really bad dream last night.” I couldn’t stop talking. “I ended an abusive relationship in January. But I get nightmares. I had one last night. Also, I don’t know when I’ll come back to the doctor, so I wrote a list of things I want to ask you. Is that okay?”

“I’m so sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m glad you were able to end it. And yes, of course. What are your questions?”

“I’ve taken like 2 Plan B’s...does that mean I’m infertile?”

“No. But would you like a prescription for birth control?”

“My mom would get mad. She can see that on my records, right?”

“Yes, but you’re an adult. You can make decisions for your body now.”

“I’ll think about it,” I told her. I continued down my list of questions I’d written on my notes app: *Where can I get an STD test? I have difficulty concentrating and always feel dizzy.*

After I’d exhausted my list, she circled back to the depression test. “Have you ever considered taking antidepressants?”

“Isn’t it kinda like fake happiness? I have a therapist.”

“It’s good you’re getting therapy,” she told me. “But no, there’s a lot of misconceptions about antidepressants. Basically, it creates a serotonin increase by preventing the reabsorption of serotonin into neurons in the brain. I’ve seen patients have amazing results, and you should consider it. Sometimes you need a mix of both therapy and medication.”

At the end of my checkup, I had iron pills for anemia, a new prescription for birth control, and antidepressants. I Facetimed Mom to let her know about the medication.

“I don’t know...Well, it’s your choice,” she said.

“Mom, I get really bad dreams a lot. Like I had one last night again about you know... the stuff Noah did.” I started crying. “I just want it to stop.”

“I know.”

“I’m just so angry about everything. I want to cut Appah out of my life after graduation. He doesn’t care about me.”

“How could you say that? Of course he does.”

“Mom,” I stammered. “Do you realize that he’s never said anything about Noah. He doesn’t want to know about my life. How can a father not care about their daughter hurting?”

“He didn’t want to retrigger you...” she began.

“That’s a sorry excuse. Don’t pretend he’s not talking about it because of triggers. MY THERAPIST SAID HE COULD HAVE ASPERGER’S.”

Mom’s voice turned dangerously low. “You can’t go around labeling everyone with autism.”

“I’ve only said that about Noah. Appah is also unemotionally aware. Besides, my therapist is a professional.”

“I know you’re hurting Jess,” Mom said. “But you’ve been able to forgive me. Can’t you do the same with Appah?”

“It’s not that simple Mom. He doesn’t try. You do.” Then I realized how I could make Appah know how much he’d hurt me. “Tell Appah that I’m not going on family vacation this winter break.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Okay. I’m going to do some more research about medication to make sure it’s safe. I love you a lot Jess. Appah does too.”

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY

The last thing I wanted was to spend my birthday dinner with Appah.

Ever since the Thailand trip, I'd done everything in my power to be distant. I figured if he thought I'd been doing "bad things" back then, God knows how he'd feel about the recent developments.

"Happy birthday, how've you been?" Appah asked as I entered the car.

"Okay," I smiled. I remembered what Naomi had told me in my session yesterday. *Act like a reporter. It'll help depersonalize anything he says that could be hurtful.*

"Did that interview I helped you with ever happen?" Appah asked.

"Yeah, I didn't get it," I said. "But I accepted a job offer to be a high school English teacher in New York."

"Cool," Appah said.

We spent the rest of the drive in silence. When we got to Beverly Hills, we walked down a row of designer shops to the Crustacean.

A server led us to a circular oak table flanking a translucent floor with Koi fish swimming underneath. After Appah told the server we would just be drinking water since our family didn't drink, he asked again how classes were going.

"Okay," I said. My voice rose a little. "I didn't realize until recently, but I have a 3.9 for my major GPA."

"I'm not surprised," he said proudly. "You barely study and always get great grades. This major was made for you. I failed my UCLA English G.E.'s."

"Thanks Appah. So how's work been?"

“Tiring, I don’t know. Just all feels the same.”

“Do you enjoy work?” I asked.

“Well, I wouldn’t say I enjoy it. But I’m good at what I do.”

The server came back with our glasses of water and took our order. Porcelain platters laden with salmon, garlic butter pasta, and caramelized brussels sprouts emerged shortly after. But I didn’t notice as I continued asking Appah questions. I hadn’t been so deeply engrossed in a conversation in a long time.

“If you don’t like work, what makes you happy?” I asked.

Appah set his knife down. “I’m not sure. To be honest, I don’t know if I know what happiness feels like. It’s not like I have depression. My dad did. At least I think he did. But back then, mental health wasn’t a thing. So we assumed he was always exaggerating.”

“Someone told me depression is hereditary...” I began.

“Yeah, that’s why I brought it up. Mom told me a little about what’s been happening with you. I could see it being genetic,” he said. “But anyways, growing up, my dad always talked about how we didn’t have enough money. So I made it my life’s purpose to make sure that was never a problem again.” He looked down at the artistic plates of food in front of us. “And it worked. I have enough for you kids, for your kids, and maybe even your kid’s kids.”

The expression in his face crumbled, melting into a deep sadness. “But...at what cost. I know you think I’m a lot closer to the boys, but truthfully...” he said, lowering his eyes, “... I don’t have a relationship with them either. We golf, but that’s about it. I don’t really know anything about them.”

I continued quietly listening.

“I tried to make it work. I told myself things like, ‘If I buy Jessica this \$10,000 piano, then it makes up for not being there for her piano recitals.’” He chuckled softly. “It’s messed up.”

My eyes started watering as I remembered looking out at the audience as a ten-year-old. Just Mom and my piano teacher in the audience clapping. Appah was always missing.

“And it’s never enough,” he continued. “You would think that because of all this money and prestige, I can relax. But I can’t. It’s always what’s the next best deal? It’s not even the actual money anymore. It’s just the idea of it.”

“What about friends? Do you tell them about this?” I asked.

“I lead a Bible study and I guess technically I’m close to the guys there. But it’s more like they come to me with work questions. We don’t talk about emotions and that stuff.”

“Appah...” I said slowly. “Would you ever consider going to therapy? Don’t you want to experience an anxiety-free moment at least once before you die?”

He laughed. “I see now why you’d be a good therapist. I’ve never talked about this before. But sorry...I think therapy is a little too much.”

I didn’t expect a miracle. But he had just said I could be a therapist. It was drastically different from what he’d told me on our trip. He was also a human that needed a friend. I wanted to be that for him.

We wrapped up dinner with chocolate souffle for dessert then walked to the car. Appah put his arm around my shoulder. “Sorry, this dinner was supposed to be all about you. I wanted to hear about how you’ve been, but I ended up talking the whole time.”

“No Appah, thank you for sharing so much. I really appreciate it.”

“Like I said,” he grinned, “you’d be a terrific therapist. You have lots of talent.”

On the ride back to my apartment, the lack of tension between Appah and I felt unfamiliarly familiar. A memory came back to me that I hadn't thought of in years. My sixth birthday. My youngest brother Josiah was expected to be born in the next few days and Appah had a big business trip coming up. But without hesitation, he woke me up at the crack of dawn with a platter of steaming chocolate chip pancakes and drove us to Disneyland. Just me and him.

There's a picture of that day framed in the corner of my room back at home. A six-year-old me with little pigtails laughing at the Main Street Electrical parade, raising her hands up in the air while being hoisted on Appah's shoulders, both wearing smiles from ear to ear.

"You know how I said I don't know how to be happy?" Appah asked.

"Yeah."

"Well, this dinner was the first time I've felt happy in a very long time," he said.

Chills coursed through my body as a revelation came to me that I never thought I'd believe.

*Appah, I forgive you.*

## FAMILY VACATION, AGAIN

I decided to be open towards giving family vacation another shot.

On our flight to Hawaii, Mom tapped me on the shoulder. “I did some research about the antidepressants you’ve been taking. How’s it been going?”

“Really good,” I said. “When I wake up now, I’m actually excited.”

Mom squeezed my hand tightly. “I’m so glad that it exists,” she whispered. “I heard about what you’re saying on a podcast. I can tell that you’re closer to your normal self.”

When we offboarded the plane, Appah put his arm around me and told Mom to take a picture. I stood awkwardly smiling, trying to get used to Appah 2.0. He’d become extremely nice ever since our talk. And since I had the new teaching job, we didn’t talk about work anymore. He seemed happier too. Since Appah always took our family on his work trips so we could explore the world too, I was used to the little things that went wrong. The balance for a gift card at a restaurant being incorrect. A hotel not giving us a good room even though Appah was a platinum rewards member. But this trip, we went a whole three days without a single Appah tantrum.

Something felt off with Mom though. She was more quiet than usual. When we were sitting at the beach together, watching Josiah search for turtles with Appah in the ocean, she turned to me and said, “I’m glad you’re the oldest.”

“Huh?”

“Because I was able to spend the most time with you, I can understand a bit more about why you do some things.” She turned to look at Matthew, who was lying on a beach towel reading a book on his phone. “Matthew’s the most similar to me.” Then she stared out at Josiah. “Josiah too. He’s obsessed with all that fashion stuff now like you, but he’s a good kid.”

“What are you saying,” I asked.

“I still remember what you were like when you were little. You had a big imagination and were so social.” She softly laughed. “I remember you were always at the cake table during birthday parties. You didn’t care about anything but the cake.”

I wondered why Mom was bringing up the origins of my sweet tooth.

“Sometimes, I don’t understand why you do what you do.” She paused. “But still, I know who you are deep down.”

I wasn’t sure what she meant by that, so I focused on the rhythm of the waves crashing.

During dinner, I remarked under my breath about how slow our server was. Mom heard. “You used to be nicer when you talked. Like the tone and words you use. But now it’s really mean. I wonder if it’s because of the friends you surround yourself with,” she said.

And there it was again. The jab at my non-Christian friends.

So the next day, during our mom-daughter brunch at a coffee place I found on Yelp, I asked Mom if something was bothering her.

“No.” She looked down at her ube bagel, avoiding my eyes. “Well...I had a nightmare a few weeks ago where your entire face was covered with piercings.”

“Piercings?”

“Yeah. And I ...” Mom reached for a napkin to dab her eyes with. “... I knew that was my Jess. But there was just so much pain in the picture and you were unrecognizable.”

“Mom...” *Is she that scared of who I am? I’ve become a monster?*

She managed to crack a smile. “But hey, maybe it was God preparing me to see your nose piercing.”



I always wondered why Mom didn't react more when she saw my nose piercing for the first time. She just said it looked nice and that was it, which was very unlike her.

"Mom," I said softly. "I'm sorry. I know how difficult what's happened to me is for you. To be honest, all these changes I've been going through..." I motioned to my hair, new tattoo, and piercings. "... are kinda because I've become addicted to changing as much as I can about myself. I tell myself the more intimidating I look, the less likely it is for me to be hurt by someone like Noah again."

She looked up, locking her watery red gaze with mine. "You're a kind, optimistic, loving person. Noah took advantage of that. Don't beat yourself up for that sick predator's actions."

We demolished the rest of our bagel then took turns sipping each other's drinks. Mom's coconut latte and my macadamia mocha. Then I told Mom about the conversation I had with Appah and how I'd decided to forgive him.

When I finished, her eyes were red again. "This is huge. A lot of your pain with men stemmed from your anger towards Appah not being there in the past." She wiped another tear away. "And maybe even impacted how you've felt towards God."

## TRAUMAVERSARY

Every time I went to the club, I looked for Justin. I knew he went out in Santa Monica since he used to talk about it all the time. I couldn't go back then since I'd been underage.

One Saturday, I went with Kirsten, her boyfriend, and a frat guy to The Victorian. A three-story house that felt like an elevated frat party.

“WHAT DO YOU GUYS WANT,” the frat guy yelled, making his way to the patio bar.

“MOSCOW MULE,” I shouted back.

The patio's breeze felt heavenly as air dried the sweat on my forehead. Some couples were making out next to bushes strung with fairy lights. A few sitting down on couches smoking. None of them were Justin. I hated that he still had a hold over me, even though it'd been months.

“Jess, here's your drink,” the frat boy said, passing it over to me.

I nodded my head to the beat, downing my drink as fast as I could. Then Kirsten's boyfriend accidentally knocked my drink out of my hand. We stared at the liquid running down.

“SHIT, SORRY. I'LL BUY YOU ANOTHER ONE. BE RIGHT BACK,” he apologized.

Then behind him, I saw the unthinkable. Justin.

“Kirsten,” I whispered. “Justin is literally right there.”

Before she could stop me, I was already in front of him. He wasn't alone. He was with a girl. But I was too drunk to register anything I was seeing.

“OH MY GOD JUSTIN,” I screamed.

He looked at me, and for a few seconds, I saw his face frown in confusion. But then recognition registered. “Wow,” he said.

“FUCK YOU.” I flipped him off. “LITERALLY, FUCK YOU.”

I took a quick look at the girl. Maybe Chinese or Japanese. She flipped her hair, rolling her eyes in annoyance. I turned back to Justin, and he stepped closer to me, away from her.

“It’s been a while,” he smiled.

The alcohol betrayed me. “You know, you’re not blocked,” I whispered in his ear.

He gave his trademark grin. “I’ll hit you up later, yeah?” he said. Then he turned and walked inside the house, his arm slung over the girl.

I retreated over to Kirsten and the guys. “I can’t believe I saw Justin in real life.”

Kirsten’s boyfriend walked up to me. “You want me to fuck this guy up?” he asked. He was also a Justin hater since Kirsten had told him all about it.

Without thinking, I started chanting. “BEAT HIM UP. BEAT HIM UP.”

Kirsten held her boyfriend’s arm in restraint. “NO OH MY GOD. DON’T. WE’RE GONNA GET KICKED OUT. HE’S NOT WORTH IT.”

“Who’s that? Your ex?” the frat guy asked.

I didn’t know what Justin was. “Someone I used to talk to,” I answered.

“I always thought Justin was ugly, but he’s even worse in real life. No way that guy thinks he has you wrapped around his finger. You’re so much hotter than him,” Kirsten said.

“Dude, that guy looked like a middle schooler with a pedo-stache. Why the fuck does he have that mustache,” her boyfriend chimed in.

“AFTERS AT MY PLACE?” the frat guy interrupted.

When we got back to his frat house, we all danced and drank a bit more. Since the frat guy was a DJ for clubs, he played a couple of his mixes. After Kirsten left with her boyfriend, I cuddled with the frat guy on the couch. *Did Justin recognize me? Will he text me?*

“I can’t believe Justin was at the club,” I told him after we had sex.

“Oh. that guy?” he yawned, taking a hit from his dab pen. “He’s hella fucking short.”

I told Naomi about the miraculous revival of Justin, and she was far from amused.

“If you don’t ever have a healthy relationship, I will refund every single session. You’re going to have a new start in New York, teaching kids your passion for English,” she said.

“Thanks Naomi. But I don’t know, this addiction towards Justin is insane.”

“You’re still living in the fantasy of what he could be, not who he is,” she said. “This addiction you’ve developed...I think for you it’s not really sex, but a love addiction.”

Three days later, I got a call from Justin at night. When I picked up, he updated me about his new cubicle at work. Then he asked if Kirsten was home. She wasn’t.

He came in his van 20 minutes later, a few minutes shy of midnight.

“Can’t believe I’m back,” he mumbled. “When’s the last time we even talked?”

“Remember the juggling call?”

“Damn, that was a long time ago. I can still do it though.” Justin reached for the pill bottles on my bedside table. My antidepressants, birth control, and iron pills. He got up and started juggling them. Then he noticed the birth control. “You upgraded,” he said.

“Things have changed.”

He took a tin from his back pocket. “Want one? Edibles. The kind for sleep though.”

For some reason, I didn’t hesitate. I wanted to show him that I’d changed. “Sure.”

“Damn Jess, you get high now?”

“Stop doing that patronizing shit.”

He popped a small purple square in my mouth with his fingers. “Sorry.”

The edible quickly took effect, and my nerves calmed down. *Maybe I need to be high to enjoy sex.* But after he asked me to lie on my stomach, something slid near my butt.

I twisted away from him. “What the fuck Justin.”

“What?” he said.

Maybe I’d imagined it. I turned back onto my stomach. But then I felt it again.

“Justin, seriously, if you do that again, you’re leaving.”

“What?” he asked again.

“You know, the backdoor shit,” I whispered.

“I’m not,” he argued.

I reluctantly turned and for the third time, I felt it. Despite all the guys I’d been with, I would never let anybody do what Noah had done again.

I pushed him off and started crying.

“I know the fucked up shit your ex did to you. You think I would do that to you?”

The tears turned into a panic attack. Justin was the only one I’d had sex with who knew about my past. Justin was someone I trusted.

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

Shudders convulsed through my body. Someone I *had* trusted.

“Sorry,” I stuttered, tears streaming down my cheeks. “I didn’t mean to cry.”

He reached for my hand and held it. I flinched at his touch.

“Sorry,” I said again. “What happened was a long time ago.”

“So,” he said after I’d calmed down, “Where do you want your kids to grow up?”

The weed made his confusing signals even more indecipherable. “A suburb?” Then I decided to ask him a question. “Do you think you’ve met who you’re going to marry?”

“Would you marry me?”

I wanted to believe he could change. He could play basketball with my brothers and be the good boyfriend he'd said he was before getting into hook ups. But that wasn't reality. "No."

"Oh. Ouch. Maybe you just haven't seen the good side of me yet." He paused. "By the way, you're the only one I do this consistently with. I think that says something."

The high began to kick in again. "Are you saying you like me?"

He brushed a piece of hair away from my ear, then whispered, "I love you."

*I love you*, Noah had said. The day he had forced me do anal after the traumatic workout.

"I can make you feel better," Noah and Justin murmured. I groggily watched as they climbed on top of me. They didn't come off until they finished.

By the time Justin was done, it was 5 a.m.. "I feel like I believe in God now. We were never going to see each other again." he marveled.

The next morning, I woke up in shock. I reached for my phone to tell Kirsten everything that had happened then noticed the date.

Justin's visit was on the same day that Noah had anal raped me for the last time.

*It's what's called a traumaversary*, Naomi told me later.

The undeniable feeling in my gut as when I broke up with Noah returned. I texted Justin that I never wanted to see him again, finally allowing myself to close that chapter in my life.

## AFTERS

I'd waited one whole year to finally write the last entry in my "what I would've said" note. It took a while for me to think of my first words.

*What I would've said (one year):*

*I have nothing to say. It feels like you're a fictitious villain that completely wrecked my life. Not a person I once called my best friend. You can't give back what you took, and you can't fully ever know what you did either. Besides, I highly doubt that you will ever apologize.*

"Hunt, how do you want to celebrate your freedom anniversary?" Kirsten asked after I finished typing.

"What about that ice cream place you've talked about?"

"Afters." Kirsten always raved about Afters, her favorite dessert spot. Similar to Kirsten's affection for Kraft Mac and Cheese, ice cream was something that she deeply loved. But the ice cream had to be special enough. Afters' flavor selections including cornflake and salty chocolate chip met her high expectations.

On the twenty minute drive there, we talked about the year, laughing about the weird men that had entered our apartment, the "Hunt Household," and marveling at how my parents were no longer my enemies.

"It's insane what a year it's been for you," Kirsten said. "Your life is so crazy, it feels like I'm the side character watching you go through your main character journey."

When we arrived at the ice cream shop, I began making my way through sampling all the flavors. At my fifth flavor, the employee helping me rolled their eyes. Kirsten motioned at me to come closer. "Why is she being such a bitch to you?"

I laughed and continued sampling, trying my best to not make eye contact with the employee. Then the employee gave me a double scoop. “Sorry, I asked for a split single,” I said.

They stared at me in disbelief, then took a big spoon, dug half of the ice cream out of my cup, and threw it back in the ice cream tub with a satisfactory *BANG*. “There,” they said.

I blinked twice, confused about the employee’s definite hatred towards me. Kirsten told me to write a Yelp review, so I did.

*my experience was tarnished by the customer service given to me by the caucasian girl with dark hair in a side part bob with rectangular glasses. truly one of the rudest servers i've ever met. ice cream is good tho (cookie monster was yummy).*

The store manager reached out to me the next day with a long paragraph saying that she checked the security cameras and that the worker (whom I accidentally misgendered because they were non-binary) apologized. She added that they would refund both Kirsten and I’s orders and take care of us if we came again. So of course, we went again that night.

“Which do I choose,” I consulted Kirsten, staring at the three flavors I’d been eyeing.

“Have all three,” the Korean worker from behind the counter smiled. Before I could say anything, he had already scooped them out.

“Wow, thanks so much,” I said.

Then he scooped another three flavors for Kirsten. By the end, we had six free ginormous scoops of ice cream with Kirsten’s favorite cornflake topping sprinkled on top. He brought out a freezer bag and began packaging them up. “For your late night snack later,” he explained.

We continued thanking him as he piled the ice cream in the bag.

“Thanks again!” I said, taking the bag from him.



“Wait.” He dug into his pocket, searching for something. “My manager told me to give this to you.” He passed a thin sheet of carefully folded paper to me.

When Kirsten and I got back, I unfolded the note.

Dear Jessica,

Hi! My name is Noah – I’m the server that helped you on the night you left your review. I wanted to sincerely apologize for my behavior towards you. I had received some unfortunate news, hence the reason I was so stressed. Regardless of my personal struggles, though, I never should’ve taken it out on you, and I truly apologize for my behavior. You do not have to forgive me – all I ask is that this doesn’t stain your perception of Afters as a whole. Thank you and I hope you have a good rest of your day.

Sincerely,

Noah

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*So Noah, maybe I do have one thing to say to you if I could.*

*I’m not the same person I was when I left you,*

*despite all the recreation I went through.*

*For a year, I tried to take control of a life that no longer made sense.*

*Since all I could ever hear was you telling me to repent.*

*But now I’m stronger than I’ve ever been,*

*and I guess in a way I was re-created at the end.*

## A ROBOT MADE ME CRY

“What updates do we have today?” Naomi smiled. “Any new characters I need to know about?”

Ever since I’d cut off Justin a few months ago, my life had become significantly more stable. “Nothing, actually.”

“Nothing is good,” she said. “Would you like to do some trauma work? We’ve only dabbled with it so far.”

The reason I’d started seeing Naomi was because of her expertise in trauma work. But even though it’d been over a year, we’d barely done any. She said what was most important for me was to feel heard before I was ready to let go since a large part of the trauma had been from people dismissing my pain. *Letting go isn’t the same as saying it’s okay*, she always said.

Naomi shared an EMDR website with me. Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. Once I clicked the link, there was a dark gray screen with a little green soccer ball.

“The way this works is you can choose what music to have in the background, what the icon is, how large it is, and what the color is,” she explained.

I decided on replacing the soccer ball with a robot. I liked how the robot icon’s mouth was set in a comedic straight line. After Naomi switched the robot’s color to blue, I chose sad classical piano for the background bilateral music. The bilateral music alternated between my ears, and synced with the robot as it moved back and forth across the two sides of the screen.

“I want you to follow the robot with your eyes and remember why you stayed in your past relationship. The right side of the screen are the fairy-dust things about dating Noah. The left side is what reality was.

*Right.* We're going to church.

*Left.* He tells me to take off my top.

*Right.* We take cute pictures in front of the Disneyland castle.

*Left.* He sticks his fingers in me.

*Right.* He meets my family. My perfect Christian boyfriend.

*Left.* He tells me I'm a sin.

*This isn't who you are, it's something that happened to you,* Naomi's voice said from above. "Keep following the robot with your eyes now. You can free associate."

As my eyes shifted from right to left, I saw Noah being patted on the back by the youth pastor after his prayer. The last time I'd ever been to Genesis. *Right, left.* People told me to get over it. He messed up, so what? Everyone sins. Forgive. *Right, left.* "Why are you so obsessed with these Noah updates," PYoung's wife accused. *Right, left.*

"Do you want me to stop it?" Naomi gently asked.

"Okay," I said, brushing tears away.

"On a scale of 1-10, how triggering is the memory you're feeling right now?"

During the few times we'd done EDMR, I'd never said something was higher than a 6.

"Ten."

"What's the main thing you're feeling?"

"I feel...alone," I choked out.

"If you could rewrite this story, what would you have needed in that moment?" she resumed the robot's movement.

I followed the robot with my eyes. “I want everyone to know what PYoung’s wife said to me. I want people to talk about her so badly, that she leaves Genesis and sees how lonely it is.”

“That’s great,” Naomi said. “Goodbye Eunice, have fun being alone.”

An e minor chord started playing. The image in my brain shifted. Suddenly I was at retreat waiting for Mom to pick me up. “I’m so sorry,” Eunice said. She was sitting next to PYoung, in front of me in a conference room. “Jess, I’m truly sorry.”

I looked into her eyes. And I saw tears. Real, genuine, compassion.

I asked Naomi to stop the robot. “Actually, Eunice doesn’t have to leave Gen.”

It wasn’t I needed at the time, but maybe Eunice and Genesis had been trying their best. I believed that now.

After the session, the burden of triggers weighing me down felt significantly lighter.

Then I joined Kirsten in the bedroom to finish packing up all our things to move out. Our lease was ending in a few days since I was moving to New York right after graduation. Even though I knew nobody there, I was excited to be teaching kids about stories and writing. *You’ll be that cool high school English teacher with the Jordans*, my friends told me.

“It’s like we’re a divorced couple,” Kirsten sadly said, watching me fold up my stained bed sheets. I planned on burning them once I moved.

“Don’t say that Hunt. You can come visit me in New York anytime.”

“I don’t know what life will be like without a hunt,” she said. “But when you come back to L.A., we’ll definitely be neighbors.”

She helped me stuff the rest of my clothes up into three giant cardboard boxes. Then I drove us to the Valley since Mom said Kirsten could come over for dinner.

I usually made the drive home alone, which always reminded me of the drive home after my breakup. So Kirsten sitting in the passenger seat made me felt safe. I was excited to be in New York soon, where public transport was the only option.

Mom met us at the garage door. “Kirsten!” she said, giving her a hug. “Welcome, it’s so nice to have you guys over.”

We hadn’t had any guests come over since Noah during the family dinner where my parents and brothers met him for the first time. That was one of the only memories I had to hold onto when I was trying to rationalize staying with him. Being with him, having a special guest, made me feel like my family had cared about my presence more. But I saw that was a lie now.

“Kirsten, do you like Korean barbeque? How are you with spice?” Mom asked.

“That sounds yummy! I like everything,” Kirsten smiled. “Where’s the restroom?”

After Mom showed Kirsten where the restroom was, I asked if I could talk to her.

“Mom, I did some more trauma work with Naomi today. And it’s crazy. I remembered that Eunice cried when you came to pick me up. And it wasn’t performative. She actually cared.”

“Wow,” Mom said.

“And I remembered what it was like dating Noah. That sick cycle of hope followed by apathy. I’m so thankful I’m out of it. I feel more alive now than I have in a year.”

“This is so encouraging to hear. You’re healing Jess.” She shook her head in awe, tears running down her face. “You’re healing.”

Then Kirsten joined us. Mom led us to our long wooden dining table. She’d set up a grill on it piled with meats, veggies, and corn cheese. Mom drove all the way to Koreatown before dinner to buy sides like ssamjang and fresh banchan for us since she knew Kirsten was coming over for dinner. Appah, Josiah, and Matthew came out of their rooms to join us.

“So, Josiah,” Kirsten said, “I saw you have a girlfriend now?”

Kirsten followed both my brothers on Instagram. Josiah had been on a roll with posting about his new relationship. The last update was yesterday, when he posted a mirror selfie of them at an art museum. He’d complained to me later that it had too much “European art.” Not enough aesthetic stuff.

“Yeah,” he blushed. “Do you guys have any good places I could take her to on a date?”

“You should take her to the ice cream place Afters,” I laughed.

Mom passed a plate of pickled radishes around.

“Are you guys excited to graduate?” Appah asked.

“Yeah, but Jess is leaving me,” Kirsten sighed.

“You guys will be a long-distance couple!” Mom laughed.

Matthew plucked a few pieces of kalbi off the grill with his chopsticks and placed them on my plate. “What are you doing after graduation?” Matthew asked Kirsten.

She told him that she was working for an entertainment industry. I quietly looked over at Appah to see if he’d say anything. Afterall, Kirsten’s job was a corporate one.

But he surprised me. “Jess is going to be a teacher. One of the best ones out there,” he smiled proudly.

Kirsten squeezed my hand tightly underneath the table.

I looked at everyone laughing and eating.

A warm, pure joy spread throughout my entire body.

This was my family. This was my home. This is where I belonged.