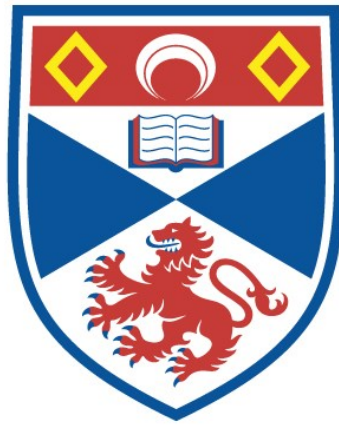


# **Girls are pretty, too**

Sofia Blankman

A thesis submitted for the degree of MFA  
at the  
University of St Andrews



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## Abstract

“Girls Are Pretty, Too” is the writer’s journey of figuring out who she is and part of a larger project that focuses mostly on the personal memoir instead of essay topics that will be added in future parts. From her rough childhood to the growing pains of university, the author learns to accept who she is by first accepting her sexuality. This piece discusses topics of verbal and emotional abuse from a parent, the sometimes toxic and contradictory teachings of the Catholic church, and how the connections between friends and families can shape, repress, and nurture someone’s identity. Written in mostly first person—with a few difficult moments written in third—this work is incredibly honest and unflinching in delving deep into difficult subjects while also elevating some tension with a few comedic moments.

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I, Sofia Blankman, do hereby certify that this thesis, submitted for the degree of MFA, which is approximately 38,764 words in length, has been written by me, and that it is the record of work carried out by me, or principally by myself in collaboration with others as acknowledged, and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree. I confirm that any appendices included in my thesis contain only material permitted by the 'Assessment of Postgraduate Research Students' policy.

I was admitted as a research student at the University of St Andrews in September 2020.

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Part 1:

Repression and Acceptance

When people ask about my first memory, I lie. My go to lie is a story Mom told me once about a two-year-old me and my baby sister, Ava. After talking to my maternal grandmother on the phone, she asked me to hand the phone over to Ava. Being jealous of the newborn, I met Mom's gaze and hit the bulky cord phone on top of Ava's head. I can clearly imagine Mom's mouth dropping open and hurriedly picking Ava up to calm her crying. I usually get a few laughs from this tale.

Or I'll make up this story from one of Mom's photo albums. There's this picture of Dad helping me keep afloat in a pool. I like the photograph, and it gives me this feeling that it was a good moment, that I was happy.

Here's the truth:

All I want to do is go to sleep and have the house be quiet. I do *not* want to sit on the bench in the dining room watching my parents yell at each other from the other side of the table. Their voices are thundering louder and their faces more furious with every shout. My father's face colors and reddens until his round face—the face I share with him—almost becomes purple. His hands wave around the room, and though they never hit my mother, they do slam on the table and the walls and create a force field of violence around him.

My mother's eyes are a cloudy morning sky, and they are blazing with righteous fury. (Though I have inherited my eyes from my mother, whenever I'm angry, all I see is my father's face reflected back at me.) My mother's hands fly around her, too, but they emphasize her points and hit nothing.

I am about three and too young to remember what they are arguing about, but I'm old enough to know the fighting is a normal occurrence. This is not the first time nor perhaps the last, but it *is* the first memory that sticks with me. Their fighting is thunderous and never fails to make me cry. I keep blinking away tears and letting them slide down my cheeks because my hands are full of my baby sister. I cannot wipe them away or else Ava will fall out of my arms and cry louder than she already is.

I know the rhythm of my sister's cries. Her wail starts soft before building to a crescendo before she runs out of breath, then she snuffles a few times, takes two quick breaths, and starts again. Despite how loud my sister is, her howls do nothing to break the roar of our parents' voices. And the fight keeps raging on. The cycle of angry faces, loud voices, and tears continue.

I don't remember when my parents tire themselves out or when my mother puts us to bed, but I know that's what happened. I'm sure of that much. But I am not sure if I was sobbing, too. I learn how to cry silently at one point. I know that sometimes being unnoticed and left alone is better than having the angry attention. And even if the attention shifts to me, crying won't stop the yelling, so why add to the noise?

"Why are you crying? Don't cry. There's nothing to be upset about," my father tells me repeatedly throughout my life.

And even if I don't cry often, I know my rhythm, too: chest aching, throat closing with a noise that I won't let out—*be silent*. Tears slip down my round cheeks with baby fat I just can't shake, and finally I let out a watery gasp, trying to suck in more air and sniff so loudly in the silence because my nose is closing up too, and I feel disgusting, too dramatic, and I hate myself for being so emotional. *There's nothing to be upset about*. Then I'll do it over again. Try to be so quiet while letting the tears run and eventually need to breathe and inhale more deep, gasping breaths like I'm drowning.

And still when I recall my first memory—which is also the first time I remember crying—I wonder if that's when I first learned to cry silently because even then, I knew the only thing worse than my father yelling at my mother, was my father yelling at me.

When my parents split up, Dad moved into a small house that his brother owned right next to their larger house. Dad's house had two bedrooms, a tiny kitchen, a living/ dining room, and

a small bathroom with a shower. I loved living so close to my cousin Paige and getting to hang out with her every other weekend. I also liked how my parents seemed happier apart. They still fought but now the fights were over the phone. Since I was so young, I couldn't remember when Dad introduced us to Michella before we moved into her house. Michella was this short, African American woman whom Dad introduced as his girlfriend. At first, Ava and I really liked her and the new house.

Michella's place was a nice, newly built model in a suburb with identical houses. Ava and I still shared a room, but now there was an actual dining room, a sitting room, and a finished basement. Despite the extra space, I missed walking down the stone stairs in-between my house and Paige's house and running around, imagining different stories as we twisted around the trees in her front yard. Dad moved us forty minutes from each other, and now we'd be lucky to see each other once a month. Sometimes I wondered how close we could have been if Dad continued to live there.

A few months after moving in, Ava and I sat on the floor of our pink room, channel surfing on our Hello Kitty TV. I paused as two women kissed each other in a pool. My finger hovered over the button, transfixed at what I was seeing. A woman with blonde hair gently held another woman's waist, before sliding her hands up her partner's neck while the other woman cupped her face. They kissed each other gently, passionately, and as soon as the blonde woman started to untie the brunette's bikini top, I changed the channel.

At six years old, I knew that kissing and taking off clothes were adult things and not something I should see. I was afraid Dad would barge in and catch us in the act of watching something we shouldn't. But I was so curious. I knew that men and women kissed each other, I'd seen Mom and Dad kiss plenty of people they were dating—though I could not remember Mom and Dad kissing each other—but I never knew that two women could kiss each other.

Without looking at Ava behind me, I jumped back to the channel with the two women, but the scene had already ended.



“Hey, we’ve seen this one. Keep going.” Ava pouted.

“Yeah, sorry,” I said. I continued channel surfing, but all I could think about were the women kissing each other and how soft they looked. And—*women can do that? How come no one ever talked about that?*

As curious as I was, I never asked my parents about it, because somehow, I just knew that if this were a common thing or an *okay* thing, they would have said something about it by now. No one said boys and girls were only allowed to marry each other, but the concept of marriage and what that meant was already laid down in my understanding of relationships.

This wasn’t my first time seeing two people kiss on TV or the suggestion that something more adult was going to happen. Dad watched *That 70s Show* in front of us while we lived in the small house, Mom would watch *Dirty Dancing* late at night, and my cousins and I would watch *Titanic* at my paternal grandparent’s place. Everyone must have assumed none of us would remember the more adult stuff, but alas no. And all of those had been heterosexual relationships.

This was new. This was intriguing.

I tried not to think about it.

My college dorms were completely different than the rooms I shared with Ava. For twenty years of my life, I never had my own room. Ava would always veto any posters I wanted to put up, and we always fought for space. We never had enough room for both our closets and constantly argued where to place furniture in the room. Our room never felt like a reflection of myself or her. Technically, I had my own room at two of the four houses Dad kept moving in and out of, but those rooms felt more like hotel rooms I kept checking in and out of rather than an actual home. I still didn’t put any posters up—not that I had any or knew what I would want posters of—and I kept most of my stuff at Mom’s place. Every week, I’d pack a

bag, move into the room for a few nights, and once the weekend business finished, I would go back home.

When I left for college, I barely took any clothes or things from Dad's house. "Anything that's left," I told him and Michella, my step-mother, "you can donate it."

For the first two years of undergrad, I shared a dorm and learned to live with people who weren't my family. I learned a lot about my living habits. I was a bit messy, and I liked to display my books and hang up art. I enjoyed having the little area around my desk be completely mine. Anytime I felt overwhelmed or needed to concentrate, I could sit at my desk and feel comforted. Since I grew up with little to no privacy or a space to call wholly mine, I created a wonderful space in my mind to fall into and comfort, compose, or wander if I needed alone time. Now I had this physical space to relax and call *mine*.

Then came junior year, and I finally had my own room. When my friends came to visit, they would remark how much the room reflected who I was. Though the space was small, I kept the room as organized as possible. Next to the door, you were greeted with a large bookshelf filled with books, a futon facing my desk where a large TV rested and blocked the huge window. My lofted bed sat against the wall where I placed another full bookshelf, a dresser, and trunk beneath it. I hung our university's flag behind my futon and added sticky-notes of my favorite quotes or my own words on the walls. No space was wasted. My room had very little space to move around, but I could not part with the bookshelves. As soon as I stepped in the room, I felt comforted by seeing all of them stacked in one place, like a welcoming hug.

The room was such a complete reflection of me that I felt like I was looking into an inescapable mirror.

Every night, I would come home and be greeted by "myself". And every time I woke up, it was to myself, and every time I hang out in the room, I *was* the company. Everywhere I

turned, I could only see me—*all* of me—and there were parts I did not want to look at. Every day was the same.

*Hello, hello. It's me, it's you, it's me. Hello. Can we talk? Let's think. Do you see?  
It's you, it's all you. Do you see? It's you, it's you, it's always me.*

I did not realize how much I needed another person.

I loved my alone time; I needed my alone time.

But every night when I went back to my single dorm, I felt a strong sense of loneliness.

I was afraid of overstaying my welcome at my friends' dorms and would leave early or not even see them the entire day, terrified I would irritate them.

Some nights I would just crash on my uncomfortable futon because the climb up to my lofted bed seemed like too much effort. The more I tried to deny my sadness, the more I felt like I was running on quicksand, sinking into a hole. I really didn't want to ask for help. I wanted to be fine. I wanted to get over this myself.

I wanted to build a ladder in the dark and save myself.

I had to confront myself every day, and finally admit/ realize I wasn't straight.

It wouldn't leave my brain. Given any moment alone, my brain would say, *You're not straight. You might be bisexual. You're not straight.*

And I'd argue saying, "You've got too much on your plate already. It's too late. This kind of thing happens in high school. Sorry. Not happening."

But I couldn't stop thinking about it.

Every time I walked into my advisor's office, my eyes drew to his large bookshelves. All English professors had loads of books in their offices, but instead of the classics and other old literature on the shelves, my advisor had comic books, an old video game console, video

games, and sure some old literature, too. Out of all the English professors, I knew him the best and his office was a great reflection of himself.

He gestured to the extra chair for me to sit down.

“So,” my advisor said, “how have you been?”

God, I wanted to lie so badly. And usually I would say “Fine,” or “Pretty good. You?” But I’d known my advisor for two years now, he’d read some of my personal essays, and lying just seemed exhausting.

“It’s been a bit rough recently,” I replied, tightening my lips into a line.

He straightened in his seat, becoming more serious.

“Would you like to talk about it?” he asks after a moment of silence.

I shook my head, avoided eye contact. “Nah. It’s okay.”

I could feel his stare, but I refused to meet his gaze and focused on my fingers twisting together, tighter and tighter.

“Have you thought about counselling?”

“Not really, no.”

“Well, I’d suggest the services here. Every person I’ve talked to who’s gone has always had a good experience and said the experience really helped them.”

I met his gaze.

“I’d highly suggest this to you and if you find yourself struggling in class let me know.”

I nodded. “I’ll consider it,” I lied.

Though I thought he made a good point, the idea of researching for the email, contacting—probably by phone call—to set up an appointment, and then actually attending the appointment to discuss my issues exhausted me just thinking about it. But his suggestion wouldn’t stop nagging me or the latest story I kept going back to.

During the end of freshmen year of college, I came up with a brilliant idea of a five-book series all following a main character named Alex. The story started as a concept of jumping through different worlds and about a main character who fell in love with both men and women. I imagined my main character kissing another woman and felt this longing. I imagined them kissing each other a little more deeply, clothing coming off, and—*I'll never experience that*. Disappointment boiled in my stomach and then a flash of fear. *It's fine. You don't need to*.

So, over the next year, I kept imagining Alex in these increasingly sexual situations with women—and a few men—all the while pretending this wasn't something I wanted for myself.

*I think I like women.*

I stuttered to a stop in the middle of campus. The sun was bright, everything was blooming, and I had so many things I needed to do before sophomore year ended, but I gave this a serious moment of consideration.

If I accepted this, what will happen? I would need to tell people, they might treat me differently, and plans for my life will be altered. Fragmented ideas and thoughts and change, so much change all pass through my mind. Too much, *way* too much.

A weight fell on my shoulders with the realization of how *messy* accepting this part of myself would be.

*If this is true, can I live without this? Pretend it's not there?*

I thought of the thousands of women in the past who had to be complaisant in their lives, who couldn't be who they really were due to the times they lived in. *If they can do it, so can I. So, yes, I can live without this part.*

After taking a deep breath and forcing myself to be content, I continued walking across campus, slamming a door on the conversation. But the door bounced back open just a crack.

And sitting in my junior year dorm, the door decided to swing back open. *This is who you are. Can't you see it?* I sat in my single room, surrounded by my books, the dark, myself, and I just broke down and decided to make an appointment.

After a week of waiting, I found myself a third of the way through the semester, sitting in the Student Counselling lobby at 8am, filling out a questionnaire about my feelings, my history, why I was there, and what my sexuality was.

I hesitated, my finger hovering over straight.

I wanted to check it so badly, to continue to deny, deny, deny.

*Lie, lie, lie.*

*Do what feels right.*

Questioning. Check.

My counsellor had a nice corner office with windows right next to the two chairs we sat on. As my sessions continued, I liked to look out at the trees as they lost their leaves and snow covered their branches, or I'd strain to watch the cars drive by on the street below. He also had a desk next to the door on the opposite wall with a few picture frames I always forgot to look at when I left. The space was quiet and felt softly private.

We exchanged pleasantries and nice-to-meet-you's. I restrained myself from reciprocating all the questions he asked to learn who I was and why I came in today. His questions were like darts; he didn't know which ones would hit the mark, but as soon as he asked about my dad, bullseye.

Tears sprung from my eyes. I gasped both to catch my breath and in shock I couldn't believe I was crying. I was astounded to realize that I still wasn't over it, *him*. I didn't even come here for Dad; I only came for my sexuality and my feeling of loneliness.

*Shit.* I grabbed a tissue on the small, circle table between us. "Sorry, sorry," I choked out. *Shit, shit, shit. Get yourself together, Sof.*

“It’s okay,” he said. “I can see that this is a sensitive topic.”

I choked out a laugh. “You could say that.” I wiped my eyes, but more spilled out.

“Sorry, sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“I just—” I take a deep breath. “I’m crying, and I don’t do that very often.”

He nodded. “Why not?”

“It makes me uncomfortable.”

“Does it have anything to do with your father?”

I squeezed my eyes shut. *Make it stop. You should be over this now.* “Kind of yeah.

He wasn’t...” *No, say it. Don’t downplay it. “My father* was kind of emotionally and verbally abusive to me growing up.” I pushed the words out through gritted teeth.

“Is that why you came in today?”

I blinked the tears away to see his expression: sad and compassionate. “I guess partly,” I gestured to my face, “but not really. I mean, he doesn’t really do it anymore. At least not to me.” I crumbled the tissue in my hand.

“How has it changed?”

“Well, he’s not here, in this state, so we can only talk on the phone and sometimes I don’t answer.” I calmed my breathing. “I think he’s afraid that I won’t talk to him again if he talks to me like that over the phone. He knows that I could just cut him off now. So...” I shrugged.

“So, why have you come in today?”

“I have been feeling lonely and tired a lot, like everything takes a lot of effort.” I checked the digital clock next to the tissues and realized that time was running out and we still haven’t talk about sexuality yet. Part of me was glad, *please don’t bring it up*, but wasn’t that also why I was here? Shouldn’t I say something? What was a good way to even start that conversation?

“And I saw that you answered ‘questioning’ on the sexuality part. Did you want to talk about that?”

*That’s how.*

“Ahhhh...” Fresh tears pricked my eyes. *Damnit.* “Yeah,” my voice broke. I swallowed. “Yeah, I just...I think I might be...not straight. I’m kind of confused.”

“Okay. What makes you think you’re not straight?”

Loaded question.

I broke eye contact and glanced out the window. “Ha, well, ah...Well, I’m a writer, right?” As I met his gaze again, he nodded in confirmation, remembering my major in creative writing. “Right, and I make up stories, and as I do that, I will imagine what my characters will do and see the story as a movie in my head. I keep imagining one of my characters, who’s bisexual, kissing women, and I get this devastated longing for that experience, too. I’m *sad* to imagine that I won’t ever experience kissing a woman, so that doesn’t seem so straight, you know? But I kept telling myself ‘oh, you’re just imagining the character and you’re a writer,’ but I’m starting to think it’s more than that.”

He stayed silent, thinking. “I agree, these seem like sexual thoughts about women. Do you think about these things with men?”

“Oh, yeah.” I waved my hand. “No problem there.”

“Well, we are out of time for now, but I want you to really think and reflect on this session, Sofia, and I look forward to our session next week.”

This wasn’t the first time I’d been in counselling. When I was fifteen and after a tense car ride to my high school, Mom asked me if I thought I needed to talk to a counsellor.

“Well,” I huffed angrily, “maybe I do. I’m so angry all the time, and I don’t know why.” I slammed the car door and huffed inside.



When she came home from work that night, she already set up a time for me to go in a few weeks. I was worried about the cost, but Mom kept telling me that I shouldn't worry about it, that counselling was something that helps people feel better.

"I just want you to be happy, Sofia," she said, tucking my hair behind my ear.

My first counsellor and I were having a wonderful get-to-know-you conversation until she asked about Dad. I looked away from her as I started crying. Unlike the second time, I had no idea anything was wrong or that Dad was a sensitive topic to me until she asked. "I think we found the root of the problem and why you're here today," she said.

As I met with her every three weeks, I continued to discuss Dad, but we never called it abuse. I wasn't ready to hear that yet. I wasn't ready to admit that this was a form of abuse. If he didn't hit us, then everything was fine, right? Not that bad?

Mom usually drove me to counselling, but once I got dropped off by Mom and picked up by Dad. I couldn't remember why this happened, but I made sure it never happened again. This was my time to be open and cry with someone about how I was feeling. I didn't want him to see my afterward.

"Hey, Fifi. I was about ready to walk in and getcha."

I tried so hard to smile at him and shove down everything I just unleashed in my session.

We climbed back into his work truck and got on our way.

"Hey, uh, Fifi, can I ask you something?" Dad hesitantly asked.

*You just did*, I wanted to say, but lord knows this wasn't the moment, especially when I had a feeling what he would ask. "Yeah?" I glanced at him from the corner of my eye.

"Are you going to these counselling sessions because of me?"

*You fucking know it is, if you're asking*. "What? No, no." I met his gaze, shaking my head. I turned back to look out the windshield. "No, I'm just stressed and feeling sad and stuff, and Mom was worried so I started counselling." I could feel his relief.

Was I supposed to tell the truth? How would that have played out?

“Yes, I’m going because of you,” I’d say.

“What? Why? What do you mean?” He’d ask as if I were crazy and also worried about my answer.

And was I supposed to just *talk to him* about it? Scream and yell at him? *Cry* in front of *him*? I would have rather thrown myself out of the fast-moving truck than tell the truth. Lying was easier to hear and less explosive than the truth. Dad always loved hearing my sweet lies and would punish me for telling the truth.

The pain came in waves. When the tide was out, it was easy to believe the pain was over, that the grief was over, not realizing the pain was only receding because another wave was coming.

I was raised by an abusive parent.

It’s hard to think about.

It’s hard to write about.

It’s hard to admit.

It’s like being born in the ocean.

You had to learn to swim or else you’d drown. You learned to read the waves, to feel the wind and know when a storm was coming, and how to look out for sharks. And sometimes you got bit, or a storm came so quickly you failed to notice the signs. But you got better at reading the waves and the feel of the wind and being hyper vigilant of the sharks until it all became second nature. Because failing at any of these skills meant drowning.

When you turned eight, you saw a shore ahead called college and if you kept up your survival skills and kept swimming, you’d make it there in ten years.

And the funniest thing about being born in the ocean, was that you didn’t know you were until you reach that shore. You just assumed everyone lived in the ocean, and you

realized once you're standing on your own two feet starting to finally dry off that all those years in the ocean wasn't normal. And the longer you were on land, the more you started to notice you're flinching at small breezes, constantly feeling the phantom waves from childhood, and still vigilantly searching for those cunning sharks.

Those instincts are ingrained in you. It's how you survived the ocean for all those years; they cannot be so easily forgotten.

And sometimes you still brace yourself for a storm that won't come, and people notice and don't understand, or they try to explain that the storm isn't coming. And when *you* try to explain why you can't turn it off or what it feels like, you realize it's hard to put the whole ocean into a few words. That explaining to someone what it's like to grow up in the ocean is as foreign to them as it is for you to imagine what it must have been like growing up on land.

I still don't know how to encompass the ocean into words, so here's my handful.

One time in the car, Michella was talking about something from the front seat as Dad drove. Ava was next to me, probably engaged in the conversation because Michella called my name and pulled me from my thoughts as I stared out the window.

"What?" I asked.

"Were you listening to me?"

"Ah, no, I wasn't," I said honestly.

The moment drew out like you were pulling a rubber band back, knowing the farther you pulled it, the harder it was going to hurt when you let go.

"What—what," I stammered, trying to backtrack, erase what I said, "what were you talking about?"

The rubber band drew back farther.

I glanced at Ava, but she looked too scared to say anything, not wanting to get caught in the snap, too.

“Well,” Michella huffed.

“‘Well’ what?” I asked. How did this go so wrong?

“Well, that just really shows what you think of me.”

“What?” I shook my head. “No, it doesn’t. I was just—” I didn’t know how to handle this situation. Why wasn’t I more careful? She seemed like she was in a good mood! And weren’t you supposed to tell the truth? I wasn’t paying attention, but I would now that I was asked to be in the conversation. I wanted to explain that! “I was staring—”

“No, it’s whatever, Sofia,” she said, shutting down the conversation. “You don’t care enough to listen to me.”

The conversation was spiraling out of control. I mis-stepped, and no guardrail was there to save me.

The rest of the drive home was spent in silence. Once we got home, we all vacated the car and somberly entered the house. Ava and I dashed downstairs to the basement where my room was. We quickly turned on the TV and pretended we didn’t hear the two of them arguing upstairs.

Then, finally, the snap.

“Sofia, get your ass up here and come have a talk with your father!” Dad called from the top of the stairs.

I glanced at Ava sitting next to me on the couch. Feeling like I was going to battle, I walked upstairs, heart pounding in my chest. I was already trying not to cry.

I stood at the top of the stairs right behind the doorframe of the garage door.

Dad looked up from his tools. His face already a familiar purple red, scrunched up in anger, looking mean.

“Get. In. Here.” He pointed to the ground in front of him.

I hugged myself and walked down the three wooden stairs into the garage.

This felt eerily similar to a different lecture from a few Thanksgivings ago when I echoed something Michella said about her father's turkey, but she got upset and I found myself in this same situation. The lectures always seemed to be for me. I couldn't really remember Ava being pulled into the garage to be yelled at. Not that I wanted him to yell at her, but why was I always the target?

"Now why would you say you weren't paying attention to Michella?" He picked up a wrench.

"I—I didn't mean..." Tears flooded my eyes.

"Huh? What? Do you have a problem with her or something?" He waved the wrench around.

"No, of course not I—" This was a lie. I did have a problem with her. One, she would sometimes say stuff that made me feel bad about myself. She once said, "Sofia, you're starting to become a *big* girl," with a nod to my stomach. There were other things too, but that was always the comment that came back to me. I knew she was only saying it because she was insecure about her body, but still, I was twelve.

And two, I've known for about a year that Dad cheated on Mom with Michella which resulted in their divorce and that he cheated on Michella with someone else the previous year and that was the reason they split for a little bit. But neither of them knew I knew; I point blank asked Mom about it because I just figured it out. Despite what he said about me "knowing nothing about the world," I could put two and two together and realized they equaled infidelity.

"Then why the *fuck* did you say that?" he interrupted me.

"I wasn't paying attention. I was—"

"Look at me!"

I didn't even realize I looked away. I can't really focus on anything, like my eyes were closed. Now, I was. I saw his lips pressing together, hand white knuckling the wrench.

"I was looking out the window," I whispered.

He slammed the wrench down on the other tools, the sound of metal crashing between us. I flinched.

"You need to get your head out of your ass, Sofia."

I hated the way he said my full name. Finally, the tears slipped down my cheeks.

"I mean, what were you thinking?"

The words came out gurgled from crying. "I don't know."

"I'll tell you what, you weren't fucking thinking that's what."

I sniffed and subtly tried to wipe my tears.

"Are you crying? Why the hell are you crying? Why are you getting upset?"

"I'm sorry."

"Well, why don't you try telling Michella that, huh? She's really upset. Yelled at me about it." He sighed. "Why are you like this?"

I sniffed again, trying to contain all the emotion inside of me. "I don't know."

"Oh, I guess you're gonna tell your mom all about this and then I have to hear her bitching at me about it, huh?"

Of course, I was going to tell her. I couldn't wait for him to drop us off tomorrow. I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know."

He sighed again, disgusted.

"I'm sorry," I said, because those were the magic words, even if I didn't understand what I needed to be sorry for.

He pointed at me. "Don't say that to me, say that to Michella."

I stepped backwards, almost falling on steps, before turning around and walking to their master bedroom where I found Michella sitting on their bed with the TV on, acting like she didn't just hear Dad yelling at me.

"Sorry," I choked out, still crying and hating myself for it. I couldn't make out her face through the tears, but I would say anything to get back downstairs.

Ava straightened at my arrival, staring at me as I tried to collect myself. Again, I recalled that time at Thanksgiving, but I couldn't run to my room like I did then because Dad started pounding down the stairs behind me. I couldn't run to my room, because if I put a door between us, his bad mood would only continue. Instead, I hurried over to Ava on the couch, to get some bubble of safety.

He stared at both of us, before digging in again, but his words all sounded like the ones before. All regurgitated things from the garage, from other lectures before, and I was sure, things I'd hear again in the future. Dry, rinse, repeat.

Then, Michella came down and put herself between us and Dad and said, "Okay, that's enough, Tom. I think you need to calm down now," or something.

And Dad huffed and spread his hands around him like he was the reasonable one, like he was getting blamed for doing something wrong.

Michella put her arm around me, as if we were in solidarity, and I wanted to shake her off because what the hell was this? But if I did, Dad would start all over again, so I tensely stayed under her arm feeling trapped.

When I met Dad's gaze again after hearing Michella talk like nothing happened, his face scrunched up again, readying up for another round, but Michella shuts it down once more. Then I did feel a little relief that he was stopped, but I also hated that I was grateful towards her after she started this.

When Dad dropped us off the next day at Mom's—*sanctuary*—I tell her everything.

“What?” she shrieked, but I didn’t flinch. “Why would he yell at you about that? You’re always looking out the window! It’s what you do. I always have to call your name to get your attention, to make sure you hear me.”

“I know.”

“I can’t—” she huffed in frustration. “I can’t believe him. Yelling at you for being yourself. It has nothing to do with *her*. God.”

I nodded and realized how right she was. He really didn’t get who I was. And I was starting to understand that a lot of his yelling at me wasn’t so much about me but more the reaction to his fight with Michella. I was someone easy to yell at because he knows I wouldn’t retaliate. What did you do when you realize you’re your parent’s emotional punching bag?

This moment feels small, like barely anything. Or maybe it’s not and I’m just so used to it that this *feels* like a small moment. And maybe all these toxic moments would have been insignificant if they had been one offs, not every weekend. These toxic moments are all just countless drips of poison my father forced me to swallow and adapt to. Not enough to kill me, but enough to hurt, to leave lasting damage, to make my body shake in worry from withdrawal before it relaxes when it gets the next dose because finally the worry is warranted.

I never craved the abuse, but there was relief when he went off because I knew who I was supposed to be in those moments. Finally, all the anxiety about triggering anything is gone, and we are doing the familiar dance, the dance of him showing his true self and not the nice act. And yeah, both are him—I know that on some level—but it’s so much easier hating this version of him than it is loving the other.

How are you supposed to love someone who abuses you all the time?

How can you hate someone who loves you?



Because between all the drips of poison, there was honey too, and that was sometimes harder to swallow than the poison.

Sometimes I wished he would hit me, just so I could have the excuse to leave. Not because I thought I deserved it, but the words never felt like enough of a reason. A hit would be the thing to push everything over the edge. And spankings don't count. He needed to hit my face, or anywhere else besides my ass, right? Wouldn't that have been enough? Would that finally make him 'seem that bad'? Was forcing to take on his anger and emotional baggage, the "I love you's" that tried to be Band-Aids and win us back, enough to justify feeling like this? Or did he need to bruise me too for people to *see*? For *me* to see?

"Listen," I tell my counsellor during another session, "I know it wasn't normal, but I also know so many other people have it worse than I do. I mean, it wasn't that bad compared to others, you know?"

"Sure, people have gone through traumatic events, and your childhood perhaps was less traumatic than others," he replied.

I took a deep breath, finally feeling like I communicated my thoughts correctly. "Exactly," I said. "Traumatic events." I relaxed in my chair.

He shifted forward. "Okay," he started, raising one hand up, "so, there are capital T, Traumas that people have gone through, right?" He waited for me to nod. "Okay? And then there are lowercase t, traumas," he put his other hand below the other, "like your father's abuse."

I just stared at him.

He lowered his hands. "While your trauma is a lowercase trauma, it doesn't make it any less traumatic, okay, Sofia? Those can still hurt. What you experienced can still hurt because it wasn't right, was it?"

I forced myself to breathe through my constricting throat. “No, it wasn’t,” I whispered.

“Your pain doesn’t mean any less, alright?”

I nodded, still trying to fight the tears. Naturally, they come anyways.

As I grab a tissue, my counsellor asked, “Do you ever let yourself cry about this?”

I lifted an eyebrow at him.

“I mean,” he gestured to me, “do you ever just let yourself *feel* it and have a cry about it when you’re by yourself?”

I snorted. “No, I only do that here.”

“Maybe next time you start to feel like this, let yourself react naturally and really sit with it.”

When I return to my dorm room after our session, I stand next to my lofted bed and hold on to one of the rails. After every counselling session, I always felt raw and exposed. I usually gave myself about two hours before doing anything afterwards to recover. But instead of fortifying my walls, I let myself feel the anger, the sadness, and the loneliness. I reminded myself how unfair Dad was and how upset he made me. I worried about my sexuality and how I wasn’t sure who I was anymore. I tried to release my control and let myself cry. Only a few tears came out, and the whole thing felt foreign to me, almost like I was putting on a performance.

I glanced around my room, looked at my books, sticky notes quotes, university flag, and wondered who my audience was besides myself.

Growing up, I would get so anxious at school, terrified if I said or did the wrong thing, all my classmates would hate me. I analyzed every interaction, both their words and their body language and then my own. At the time, I didn’t realize I was searching for trigger signs that

my father would show before he got angry or irritated. I got enough yelling and insults in my home life; I didn't need it in school as well.

I had to make sure everyone liked me. I wouldn't be the problem child for the teachers or rude to my peers. I'd be polite, quiet, and giving. No way could someone hate me if I didn't make a fuss or kept quiet. I was good, very good.

And my teachers praised my behavior. They loved how quiet I was, well behaved, and good enough in all my classes but also nothing spectacular either. I didn't get straight A's like my sister, but I couldn't get C's either or my mother would be disappointment.

"But what if C's were the best I could do?" I asked.

"Then I would push you to keep the C's, but you're not a C student. You are better than that," she told me.

Because of my "model" behavior, I flew under the teachers' radar. Rarely was I in trouble, but I was also barely acknowledged either.

My peers called me a teacher's pet and liked to tease me to invoke a reaction. Only when they called me names or made fun of my looks or interests did I break out of my quiet persona. Usually, I snapped back with denials or insults and crossed my arms. I was my most unfiltered self during those moments or when I hung out with friends. After being in school with the same group of twenty-eight kids, I started letting my guard down and relaxing around people I believed to be friends.

After school one day when I was eight, I went over to my friend Dina's house so she could show me her new room. Her house was only two blocks away from mine, so Mom allowed me to hang out for a little bit and walk home before dark. Dina's room wasn't so much as 'new' as 'new' to her. She convinced one of her four sisters to switch rooms once again. Instead of sharing a room upstairs with her younger sister, she now had one of the rooms downstairs all to herself. There were boxes full of stuff, stuff on top of the boxes, and

stuff scattered all over the room. In other houses, it would look like she was still moving stuff and trying to organize the room, but the state of her room was the state of the house.

There was stuff everywhere. Boxes of stuff, tables full of paper, half eaten food, used food containers, dishes, etc. If it had surface area, things were piled on it. Usually, the couches and beds had fewer things crowding them, but overall, her house was stuffed full of things ready to spill out into the front yard.

She was talking excitedly about where she placed the desk, the bed, and the dresser and how it was so much better than sharing with her sister, and basically the same thing she always said when the five sisters switched rooms. This happened a lot, so I kept zoning in and out—nodding at the appropriate times—and fighting with myself about confiding in her.

My heart was beating in my throat, and it felt like a metal band was slowly tightening around my ribs, squeezing the air from my lungs. *Tighter, tighter, squeezing the words out—*

“Hey, Dina?” I already spoke, so I needed to say something. I almost changed my mind, but something brave rose through the pressure and gave me room to say, “I think I like girls.”

I waited, barely breathing, terrified that the smallest things I did now would alter her initial reaction.

Her laugh broke the choking silence. “What?”

The metal band twisted tighter around my ribs. I shakenly laughed with trying to make her think it was all a joke. Some weird, strange joke. Anything to make the moment pass, make it disappear. I desired nothing more than to take the words back, go back in time and tell myself to hold it in, shove the words down. *Be quiet.*

I used all my self-restraint to stay in the chair. I knew if I left right then—leaving what I said between us—she would know I was serious and possibly tell everyone at school. What if they laughed, too, and abandoned me? I wouldn’t survive. So, I stayed for fifteen

dragging minutes and tried to sooth the awkwardness. I left her with an excuse about my mom and curfew and how I hoped she liked her room, and that I'd see her tomorrow, and eventually I got out of her crowed room and felt a little freer as I waved to her at the halfway point between our homes.

My heart pounded out of my chest and down my arms until it felt like I held my heart with my fingertips. Noticing my loud breathing, I tried to sip in more air and released them slower and quieter. *She won't tell anyone.* Deep, slow, quiet, breathe in. *She thought it was a joke.* Exhale, slow, quiet, turn down the block. *Just forget about it. She must have. Or will. I bet in a week, she'll forget it even happened.*

I arrived home and greeted Mom, before heading straight up to the bedroom I shared with Ava. I changed into my pjs, crawled onto the top bunk, and kept reseeing her frozen expression right before she laughed. Her eyebrows furrowed in confusion and lips pressing together, wondering what to do. Then all her expressive wrinkles wiped away to allow realized amusement to swept into her eyes and a widened her mouth, like she finally understood the joke.

I pressed my hands against my face and pushed against my eyes, trying hard not to cry. I couldn't or else Mom or Ava would ask why. I didn't want to explain or even know *what* to explain. I just wanted to deal with it in my own way. *Forget about it. She must have by now.* I stared up at the ceiling and pictured how tomorrow might go if she told everyone, how I might play the situation off. The thought of owning up to it never even crossed my mind. *I must have been mistaken. What I said must not be true if she reacted like that. Just shove the conversation down and pretend it never happened.*

So, I did. I shoved the words, the thoughts, the truth living inside of me, and shoved, shoved, *shoved* it all down in the depths of me where it didn't get any room to breathe and grow. I told that part it would never be granted validation or acknowledgement. It would sit

down here in the things-I-don't-think-about and eventually I would forget the whole thing with Dina. *You do not exist.*

Then I shut it in the dark.

In high school, my cousin Austin announced he was gay on a Facebook. I was a little late to the party, but I sent him a message supporting him. Though I wasn't surprised, I also never guessed he was gay. Then I pictured his perfectly styled brown, curly hair and wondered how much product he used to make it look so nice. Was that a sign? I wasn't nearly putting as much effort as he was. The next time I saw Dad, I brought up Austin's post and asked, "Do you know how the rest of the family are reacting?"

"Everyone's supporting him," Dad replied.

"Even his father?" Austin's dad—my uncle—has this intimidating face and demeanor that gives off the macho man, homophobic vibe.

"You know I asked him the same thing. What he thought about this whole Austin being gay thing. And you know what he told me?"

"What?" I asked, wanting him to get to the point.

"He said that him and Austin have never been closer. You know how they used to fight all the time." The two of them could have fought over the proper way to breathe if given the chance. "And now they don't. I mean they still have disagreements, but they get along better now. He said that he'd never seen Austin so happy."

I smiled thinking how much better Austin must feel now. I was happy for him, and I definitely didn't think about that conversation with Dina.

A few weeks later, most of my aunts and uncles and their kids were all hanging out at Grandma Meta's house when I overheard her discussing Austin's coming out with her oldest granddaughter, Tori.

“Well, of course I support Austin, but if it was one of you girls, now I don’t think I could accept that.”

I wanted to say, “Well, that’s sexist. And how is that any different if one of us girls were gay?” But I wasn’t brave enough to disagree with her. I didn’t want one of the adults to overhear and yell at me for disagreeing with someone I should respect. At least, that was Dad’s argument every time I tried to push back on him with something, that I was disrespecting his authority.

“Now, Grandma,” Tori started, “say I was gay and was with a woman, would you really stop talking to me?”

I didn’t remember how Grandma Meta responded, but I thought the question was unfair. Of course, she wouldn’t stop speaking to Tori if she was gay. Tori has always been the exception, the favorite. A few months before he came out, Tori and Austin got into this huge fight and he called her a cunt—I wasn’t there, so this was all second hand—but instead of staying out of it, Grandma Meta said to him, “If you have a problem with Tori, you have a problem with me. Don’t come back here until you to make up.”

“That’s so unfair and why is Grandma Meta getting in the middle of their fight anyways?! Cousins fight,” I vented after Dad told me this.

“I know, but you know my mom, she likes to get involved.” He shrugged his shoulders. He said something similar when I told him about her saying she wouldn’t accept us girls if we came out. “Well, she’s from a different generation, Sofia. What do you expect from her?”

I couldn’t explain how important acceptance was in the family for me, or why the whole situation mattered. I peeked in the dark at that part of myself and finally thought about Dina, again. She never talked to me about what I said to her that night when we were eight. When I repressed the memory, I repressed the acknowledgement of liking girls. Anytime I had romantic thoughts or interests in girls after that night, I wrote it off with excuses—I’m an

*artist, of course I think she's pretty, I can see the aesthetic beauty in things*—and never admitted, or even let myself realize, these thoughts were romantic or sexual.

During lunch one day in high school, she excitedly told our whole lunch table that one of her older sisters has come out as a lesbian and how she met her sister's really cool girlfriend.

My throat clamped up as that night flashed before my eyes. Her face, her laughter. *Please don't remember. Please don't remember.* For a second, I worried she would announce to the whole table I sort of came out to her. “Hey, Sofia. Remember that night you said you like girls, and I laughed? Were you serious, or what?”

*You gotta say something, Sof, before she does.*

“Wow. I had no idea,” I said avoiding her eyes, so I wouldn't see the searching stare that may or may not be there. “That's great for her though. Coming out.”

“Thanks. My parents are cool with it of course. And honestly, we should have all realized.”

I took a bite of food and shallowed wondering how you pick up on someone else's sexuality. What were the signs Dina thought were clues adding up to a lesbian? Dina's sister babysat my sister and I several times growing up, and I hadn't gotten a ‘vibe’ about her sexuality. Sure, she had a lip piercing and maybe an eyebrow one. And she had dyed some of her hair pink. But her twin sister—who Dina claims was straight and had a boyfriend—did the same things. Instead of thinking she was a lesbian, I thought the piercings and the hair dying were cool and defiant because Mom forbade me from doing those things. I didn't really see those as being signs of who she wants to kiss or sleep with, but I didn't know her like her family did.

A sudden rush of irritation broke through the panic. *So, you support your sister now, but couldn't when we were eight?* Then, I hurriedly shoved those thoughts away. What did it matter when that wasn't who I was anyway? *Let it go. It doesn't matter. Everything is fine.*



I finished my lunch, and I tried to never think about Dina's sister and I in the same context again.

Counselling helped a lot. I always felt better after going, but I still dreaded getting up early for an eight o'clock meeting. I'd get nervous, want to call and cancel. Eventually I forced myself out of bed and into his office. We talked about a lot of stuff: my family, my friends, and, of course, my sexuality.

He kept asking me why I was afraid to come out. "Minnesota's pretty liberal. Are you afraid of prejudice?"

"I didn't grow up here," I said, and wasn't sure how to explain Omaha.

The best way to describe the people of Omaha was small town people living in a big city. Everyone somehow knew everyone. If I was stuck in a room with someone from Omaha, eventually we'd realize how we connected to each other, either a place in the city or by being so-and-so's friend or relative.

While Minnesota may be 'pretty liberal' for the Midwest, Nebraska was very conservative. Churches were everywhere and the Catholic/private schools were probably more numerous than public. I attended Catholic school from preschool through the four years of college and was baptized as a baby. Catholicism was in my blood, bones, mind, and of course, my soul.

There was something hypnotic about religion when you grew up going to church and learned *all about* the teachings in school. When I was a kid, I wasn't really taking any of it in. God was this BIG idea. I prayed to God about all the things I wanted, like God was a genie and if I prayed hard enough, He'll give me what I asked for. I was the most devout Catholic during grade school. I would pray every night to not have nightmares. That was the most outlandish thing I asked for when I was young once I realized I wouldn't get anything physical. I also prayed for my sister, Ava and Mom to be happy and healthy and for nothing

bad to happen to them. But every time I prayed for no nightmares, a small part of me doubted God would deliver.

When I was in grade school, we were told a story about Jesus getting angry at the people selling stuff in his Father's temple and overturning tables and yelling at people. I hated this version of Jesus and denied this side of him because I saw anger as a sin. Wrath was one of the deadly sins after all. And when I thought of anger, I thought of Dad, and I didn't want Jesus to be like him at all.

Freshmen year, my theology teacher told us God was neither man nor woman. He, She, *They* have neither genitalia. God was above gender. This blew my mind. The idea that God wasn't limited to gender helped with the whole angry Jesus thing. I didn't know why I needed to hear that to accept an emotional God, but I needed to.

Instead of explaining any of that, I tell my counsellor about the look on a man's face when he saw two girls from my high school holding hands. During my senior year of high school, President Obama came to Omaha as a goodbye that year, he would no longer be the president. Not wanting to miss the opportunity to see Obama in person, a lot of my peers went to see him with our history teacher. Since this was *pretty major*, a lot of people held up random signs—mostly in protest about various political things that Obama was for—and several had things about homosexuality being wrong.

The man had a sign that said, "God will banish all the homosexuals to Hell." Or something like that. All those signs blurred together. As he noticed two girls in my class holding hands and animatedly talking about seeing the president, he pointed at them and yelled, "Homosexuality is a sin! You're both going to Hell!"

We all paused for a moment and stared at him. The two girls burst into laughter and shook their heads, brushing him off. I could see how much he hated them and truly believed they were damned for being themselves. The next day, while sitting in class, I brought up the man to the two of them.

One huffed and dismissively waved her hand. “He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

“Besides,” said the other, “we aren’t a couple. We’re friends who like to hold hands. But imagine if we had been.”

“I can’t stand those types of people.”

Though I believed them in the moment, I wondered now as I sat with my counsellor if there was something more going on, and I just missed the possibility, or they dismissed it because we were at our Catholic all-girl school. They were both strong feminists, questioning everything in our theology classes while I was taking in the sexist teachings without a second thought.

Would such an outspoken girl be dishonest about her sexuality?

No, she would have been honest! Right?

Though we didn’t go to grade school together, we all went to other Catholic schools. Schools that sent our parents letters informing them that they would not educate us on sex, that sex education fell to our parents. Where they separated us between boys and girls in seventh grade and told us what periods were two years too late. At Catholic school, they tried so hard to repress the topic of sex and would only discuss it as a sin. For years I believed sex to be this terrible sin and even thinking about it was shameful. Any discussion about queerness was repressed so much, it was never discussed.

Or that time in high school, when a long ago high school graduate came to present us her sci-fi book, and said, “And for all those queer girls out there—and I know you’re there—this book is for you!”

*I can’t believe she just said that.*

I glanced around the room and saw the teachers exchange uneasy and shocked glances but did not interrupt her.

*I feel like she’s talking to me.*

I shook my head a little, almost like a tick.

*No, she's defiantly not talking to you.*

*Idiot, I thought now, of course she was talking to you.*

Or how during one of my junior year classes, my classmate Viv unrelentingly argued with our teacher about how women dress. Our theology teacher—who was actually a parent of a girl in our grade—explained how women have to watch what we wear because we could lead men to sin, that dressing provocatively can spark unclean thoughts. We had a *responsibility* as women to dress modestly so we didn't inspire those thoughts.

During that class, I thought this all sounded very reasonable, until Viv opened her mouth.

“Why is it my responsibility? Why can't men just not look?”

My whole thinking process just stopped. While I thought she had a good point, I also wished she didn't say anything. *Please don't make trouble. Don't make the teacher angry.*

The teacher tried to explain that our bodies were our responsibility, blah, blah, blah, sounded like the same thing she said before, not really answer the question. Still putting it all on us.

Viv pressed harder throughout the rest of class, questioning the teacher's statements, and one girl gets really upset and claims this was an attack on men. This fired up Viv more. I stayed silent, just trying to figure out what *I* thought about it. For the three years I'd known her, I'd always admired Viv and that admiration grew after this class even if I had wanted her to calm down a little because I was terrified she'd get in trouble. She was so confident and sure of herself. I wished I could bottle some of her fierceness for myself.

After pushing enough, Viv got the teacher to admit that if a man goes after a woman because she was dressed a certain way, part of the blame was on the woman. Sure, the man shouldn't have done that—say things to her, touch her, rape her—but she tempted him to do

that sin. If she hadn't been wearing those clothes, he wouldn't have those thoughts and desires to do those things to the woman.

When I go to college, I finally realized how much victim blaming and slut shaming there was in that conversation and this righteous anger surged through me. Why *was* all the responsibility on us? What did they think happened to young girls when they told us this?

The teacher pulled Viv aside after class and thanked her for being open about her thoughts and speaking up during class. "I'm glad that I had you to bounce off of," was the last thing I heard before heading off to my next class.

A few lessons later, in the same theology class, we discussed marriage and sex and how they were intertwined. I was pretty sure I wasn't going to wait before marriage—both of my parents didn't—so while I thought sex was something special, I didn't think you only had to sleep with one person *ever*.

Sex, according to the Catholic Church, was only supposed to happen between a man and woman for two reasons: to be one with the person you're married to *and* to create life. Every time someone has sex, a potential for life should occur. Now I finally got why the Church hated birth control and contraceptives. This also explained why they opposed oral sex, masturbation, and sex between people who could not conceive a child together. These acts were all seen as sinful and selfish because life could not be created or only one person got pleasure out of the act. And while I *didn't* agree with the Catholic Church on these points, I finally understood *why* they wouldn't change their minds.

At first, I thought, *That's okay. I can disagree about this, but I'd still consider myself Catholic.*

Then, my teacher continued talking about infertile women.

I didn't know where I got the courage, but I raised my hand. "Wait, are you saying that the Church wouldn't let a woman get married if she knew she was infertile?"

The teacher's mouth opened, but no words came out. She closed it, thought for a moment, before replying with, "In the past, that would have been what the Church said. Now, however, they wouldn't." She looked around the classroom.

All of us girls were dead silent.

"Infertile women can get married. The Church would allow it." She waved her hands in a placating manner.

I didn't know it then, but this would be the final straw for me. The Catholic Church didn't seem to care much about women and our struggles. We never discussed infertile men—I was in too much shock to ask, but I wished I did. I wondered what she would have said.

In college, I started to realize how messed up some of the things our teachers taught us were. They would teach us about the Ten Commandments and talk about morality, what's good and what's sinful. And *oh*, how parents love to whip out the Fourth Commandment: "Thou shall honor your mother and father." Or at Dad's, "I'm your father and you need to respect me." Or just "I'm your father," and that got the point across.

Him *way up here*

and me

*all*

*the*

*way*

down

*here.*

The Fourth Commandment should really be something along the lines of "thou shall honor your family," so kids could be on that too. Or "honor your mother and father until they start being toxic and you're no longer safe or being protected by them." But how was I supposed to fight against a Commandment that was right above "thou shall not kill"? I

couldn't, and I didn't even realize I should because everyone was telling me this was how things were. God created the world in His image and the Church told me how to act or else I'd go to Hell.

Parents love using the Fourth Commandment as a trump card almost as much as the Church loves using the eternal damnation card. Everything was a sin, we were all selfish creatures, and nothing we did was 100% innocent. Or...that was how the teachings sounded to me. I was a terrible person because I sinned and every nice thing I'd done, had an ulterior motive. I could only be saved by God's grace and love but only if I believed in Him and admitted to my heinous crimes.

Afterall, I'd forgotten how many times Dad called me selfish, that I was a smart-ass, or that I didn't respect him enough, or how no matter how smart I thought I was, I still knew nothing about the world. That no matter how highly I may think of myself, he was better than me, more human. I was less. Could only ever be less.

And that *must* be true, because not only was something wrong and sinful about me on the inside, but Catholic school told me that something was wrong and sinful about my body, too. My shoulders *had* be covered and my skirt a certain length because those parts of my body were a distraction and a way to lead other people—usually boys—to sin. Girls should dress modestly because our bodies are personal temples to God and if we defile it by showing too much or pierce the wrong part or get a tattoo anywhere, someone may decide to sin because we weren't good enough. And that was on us girls. How dare we be happy in our sinful bodies and worship this personal temple God gave us. How dare we love this thing He gave us that leads others to sin. How could something be both sacred and sinful? Shameful and beautiful? Loveable and hateful?

How could I love myself both inside and out if everyone told me I should be ashamed of the thoughts in my head and hate my body because one day it may betray me?

"I think," my counsellor said, "I'm starting to understand what you mean."

I couldn't say the word abuse during my first round of counselling in high school, but finally could at the end of my junior year after I stopped going. Every year, my school required the students to go on at least one spiritual retreat. That year, I decided to go on an extra one that lasted four days called Kairos. This retreat changed my life.

Kairos was like counselling or fight club, you didn't talk about what happens on it. So, while I cried a lot and really contemplated how I lived my life, I realized two major things: I was angry because of my father, and I didn't know who I was anymore. As I got up to share with the large group, I talked about how Dad didn't treat me right and with all the different masks I wore to keep everyone at a distance, I no longer knew the girl underneath.

I never got that far in counselling, but maybe I needed both the retreat and those sessions to come to this conclusion. I felt freer and happier after the retreat. I stopped holding my emotions back.

The retreat was also supposed to help me connected with God more, too, but I didn't. I wanted to connect more to *Them*, but even when I lead the retreat the next year, I couldn't get to everyone else's level. Instead, leading let me express what happened in my life. For the first time, I wrote about my feelings about Dad and Michella and what happened to me. The experience was cathartic, even if a part of me still feels like a bad Catholic for getting so much out of a retreat that was meant to do something a little different.

There was truly nothing more alluring and harder to kick than Catholic guilt.

Growing up, I found mass boring and long and always forced on me. I had no choice in the matter. In college, I went to a few masses, trying to see if going felt different now that I went alone, now that I put in the effort. I still couldn't pay attention. The whole time I was there, I thought about the homework I could be doing or socializing with friends.



I tried really hard to stay an active and devoted Catholic during freshman year of college. I never really had to do that in high school. Mercy 'all-girl' High School had weekly mass, required retreats, and theology classes every semester. Theology classes never really bothered me until someone in high school told me that she practiced Buddhism and was sick of having to take Christian theology classes.

Her comment shattered a barrier in my mind that I didn't even know existed.

Not that I wasn't aware of other theologies, but after being in Catholic school for thirteen years and never learning anything about other religions, I sort of just assumed everyone at my high school was Catholic or some denomination of Christianity. Truly, a terrible assumption, but she widened my perspective. I started viewing our theology classes in a new light, like an outsider looking in. Did I really believe everything they were saying?

So, during freshman year, I experimented with my faith. I wanted to make sure being Catholic was right for me. So, I met a few different people in leadership positions of different denominations of Christianity. This was how I met Margaret. We would read the bible and discuss every line we read. What did the verse mean, what did it mean to me, how did the verse connect back to our faith? All of these. I even went to a worship service with her one Sunday.

I liked Margaret. Not 'liked her' in the way I was physically or sexually attracted to her, but I enjoyed her company even if sometimes I felt guilty around her. Really spiritual people had that effect on me. I was so sure they could somehow tell I wasn't as spiritual as they were and judged me for it. The assumption was mostly in my head, but was it though? Sometimes people like that seemed to see others' lack of enthusiasm in their faith as something to fix.

During one of our meetings, we discussed this woman she knew who found herself continuously in toxic relationships with men and decided to only pursue relationships with women from then on.

This confused me because sexuality wasn't a choice.

I was also not saying that this random woman who was in terrible relationships with men wasn't bisexual, or pan, or poly, or whatever. But the *way* Margaret told the story gave me the impression that this woman 'switched' sexualities to only women moving forward.

Margaret ended the story saying, "Everyone has something they have to give up in their life, some struggle to be tested by God. And for people like her, it's setting aside her attraction to women. She must give this up. And it's our responsibility to bring people like her into our lives, love them, teach them about God, and explain that everyone must give something up to reach heaven."

I wasn't sure how to respond to this other than saying, "Oh." I wondered what she wanted me to say. "Oh, you're so right. They need to give up love because God put them on this earth to be unloved in this way. Because that's fair. That makes sense."

What sacrifice could possibly equal giving up how you love someone?

I had a completely different conversation with Quin. I met Quin during Orientation week. She was a senior and one of the campus ministry officers in the dorm. We became fast friends and hung out a lot during freshmen year. I admired her quirky personality and how happy her faith made her. Unlike Margaret, Quin didn't give me the vibe that she was trying to fix my relationship with God. She made me feel comfortable to be who I was around her. I loved going to her dorm room, drinking tea, and having pleasant conversations.

On October 11<sup>th</sup>, I met up with Quin, and she brought up how it was National Coming Out Day and asked, "Do you have anything to say to me, Sofia?"

"What?" I panicked. "No!"

She paused long enough that I realized she was joking, but in a way where I knew if there had been something I wanted to say—which there definitely *wasn't*—she would have been okay with it. I relaxed a little and she gave me this look, like she was wondering.

"Do you have anything to say to me?" I asked, to get her to stop thinking too much.

She laughed. “No, but you know if you did have something to say, it would be all right, right?” She raised her eyebrows.

“Right,” I agreed.

I never said anything to her and she never brought it up again, but I remember that moment from months ago as I sat there with Margaret hearing something completely different. I could not explain to her how her view on homosexuality didn’t make sense and wasn’t fair for so many reasons. I also knew that anything I said would not be heard by her.

After freshmen year and spending time with Margaret and Quin, I realized that what I cared about, thought was important, and right, wasn’t always aligning with the Church. While I believed God was some perfect, sexless being, people were flawed, and since the Church was run by people, the Church itself was flawed. I was done with people telling me what to believe.

I told my counsellor about my conversation with Margaret.

“What would you say to someone if they said this to a friend of yours that wasn’t straight?”

“I’d say that’s bullshit!” I immediately said. “No way would God put them on this earth only to say that you could *never* be in a loving relationship with someone because you are attracted to people of the same sex! But heterosexual couples can get married and fall in love? It’s—that wouldn’t be fair! People shouldn’t have to ‘*sacrifice*’ love to get to heaven.”

I didn’t realize how pissed I was about this conversation until I now.

“Did you say that when you were with her?”

I deflated. “No, I...I didn’t know what to say, and I’m not much of a confrontational person.”

“Did you noticed that you were ready to defend an imaginary friend, but you weren’t willing to defend yourself?” He went on to explain how he noticed that I constantly apologize

for things that weren't my fault and mentally beat myself up about decisions or actions I've done but would be quick to defend others of the same actions. He asked me why I thought that may be.

"I don't know."

"Here are people, human beings," he leaned forward, putting a hand up high, "like your friends, sister, your mom, your *dad*," and then put his other hand up but at a lower level, "and you think you're here, right below everyone else, sub-human almost."

I wanted to deny so badly that this wasn't true. I didn't think of myself as sub-human, but...didn't I a little bit? *Fuck*. "That...might be true," I conceded.

"What I think we should work on is raising your opinion of yourself up here with the rest of us, okay? You're human, too, no less than anyone else, okay, Sofia?"

I nodded, choking up a little.

"Now, you were talking about growing up Catholic and after everything you said about it, do you think you have internalized homophobia?" my counsellor asked.

That question haunted me, and he gave me time to really think about my answer.

"No, I mean, I think I did when I was a kid, teased each other about it. But that's messed up, you know? That's not okay."

He nodded.

"And I have this cousin, Austin, who's gay and my dad and I had a whole conversation So, I know he's cool about it. After that conversation, queerness never bothered me. I mean, I don't really know how my mom feels about it, but I know his. And I still love my cousin. I don't treat him or see him differently, but..." I took a deep breath. *Please don't cry. Please have one session where you don't cry*. "It's just, it's different when it's you, you know?" *Am I making sense?*

"How so?"

I glanced up at the ceiling trying to figure out how to explain. “I feel like I have to relearn who I am. Everything I picture my life being now has to be rewritten. When I pictured getting married, I always saw a man on the other side.” I re-met his gaze.

“And now, who do you picture at the end of the aisle? A man or a woman?”

Tears welled in my eyes. “I don’t know,” I whispered.

I laid down on my futon and stared at the ceiling, reflecting on my session. Liking girls didn’t disgust me. That wasn’t the problem. I enjoyed queer stories and movies. Those stories enthralled me, and now I got why.

No, I was afraid who this new—*real?*—me was. I did not know her. How did being bisexual fit with who I believed I was? Would my friends like this new/real me? Would my family?

Something about letting go of the denial seemed freeing, welcoming, like falling into a warm hug.

But I was so afraid to take the leap. I needed—*needed*—someone to tell me, it would be okay if I was bi. I wanted someone to be there to catch me. Someone who would be on my side if people made fun of or used my sexuality against me.

*You’re bisexual. You like girls. You can be this. It’s okay.*

Ding, ding.

Ding, ding.

*Bisexual. Bisexual. You’re bisexual.*

*Girls are pretty, too.*

I took a breath and whispered, “I’m bisexual,” to my crowded room and let it catch me.

Part 2:

Introducing Me

“Have you thought about telling one of your friends?” my counsellor asks.

This is my fourth meeting with him, and I finally tell him that I accept my sexuality, but it’s still all I can think about. Randomly throughout the day, my brain will say, “Oh, by the way, you’re bi! Don’t forget about that!” There’s also this new feeling of restraint around my ribs, like a metal band has wrapped around my ribs and will only let me breathe normally again once I come out to people.

“I’ve thought about it, yes.” I take a deep breath and try on a smile. “I’m just a little nervous about my friends’ reactions.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

“They...could tell me they never wanted to be my friend again.”

He nods. “Do you think any of your friends would do this?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then,” he says, shrugging, “what’s the worst that could happen?”

I bite my lip, wanting to find the truest answer. I stare slightly to the right of his head.

“I’m afraid my friends will treat me differently.” Before gym class when my classmates and I changed or when my friends were getting ready, I always averted my eyes to give them modesty. As if on some level, I knew I shouldn’t look. Since I’m bi, I shouldn’t look right? Because it’s different? Or is that just my anxiety talking? I don’t want them to feel less comfortable with changing in front of me like they wouldn’t in front of the rest of our friend group. And I’m a little worried they’ll ask if I ever had a crush on any of them, but none of them seem the type. It’s all...just a lot to think and worry about.

But the truth is eating me up.

I must tell someone, so I can breathe again.

“I’ll text my friend today,” I tell him.

“Okay, but don’t push yourself. Take your time.”

“I’m not.” I wave my hand. “I’m not pushing myself.”

I totally am.

I try to be causal.

**Hey! Do you have time to come over to my place later today? I just wanted to chat and maybe after we can watch more *Attack on Titian*?** After analyzing the text for several minutes, I sent it hoping Caroline wouldn't read too much into it.

Caroline and I met freshmen year of college around Thanksgiving. I'd seen her around my floor—her red hair was hard to miss—but we didn't talk until I hosted an arts and craft event for our RA. Our RA was sick and asked me to take over the Christmas envelope decorating in our lounge. I said yes because I couldn't say no and nobody showed up for the first half hour.

**How's the event?** One of my friends messaged.

**Terrible. Several people have walked by, and as soon as we make eye contact, they bolt down the hallway.**

I heard more footsteps and glanced up from my phone. Caroline—though I didn't know her name yet—and I made eye contact. She froze in the doorway, turned around, and headed back down the hallway.

I groaned, wanting to go back to my room and never host an event again.

I started typing out my newest awkward encounter when Caroline rushed back to the lounge. I got ready to greet her when she said, "Hey, sorry about that. It's just I was coming for the event, but I saw you were here by yourself, and I made awkward eye contact with you and left and then felt bad, so I decided to come back, so yeah."

I didn't know what to say. She spoke so fast, and though the moment was kind of awkward, her explanation charmed me enough that I laughed.



“You’re good.” A huge smile rested on my face. “Want to decorate?” I waved my hand at the table in front of me with a bunch of art supplies. “I’m Sofia.” I waved at her. “Nice to meet you.”

She laughed and sat down across from me. “I’m Caroline. I live on the first room next to the stairs. It’s nice to meet you, too.”

We chatted and worked on our envelopes. After we came back from Christmas break and Caroline asked me, “Hey, have you read this book called *All Our Yesterdays*?”

We were chatting about random books we read in high school, the less popular the better, and I honestly never thought I’d meet someone who’d read that book.

“Oh, my, *god*. YES, I have!”

Caroline’s eyes glowed. “I can’t believe you have! It’s so good, right?”

“Right?!” I still wasn’t over her knowing the book.

“Did you know that the cover...?” And so, Caroline went on one of her rants and I was enraptured the entire time. That was the moment I knew Caroline and I were going to be *good* friends. She was this bold, nerdy person, and I wanted to be just as proud of my nerdiness as she was.

But why did I pick Caroline as the first person to come out to?

If I were writing this as a fictional story, I would make clear parallels to the protagonist’s relationships between her and Dina and her and Caroline. Draw the parallels of Caroline being the opposite of Dina, and so thematically the protagonist has come full circle. Or something like that.

In the end, I’m just the least scared to tell her. Something about her openness, her unapologetically stating her opinions or facts about random things that fascinate her, and just being someone that makes me like who I am around her feels safe.

She quickly agrees to come over after her last class, and I walk with a little extra bounce in my step until I reach my class, then the excitement fades. As dread seeps into my

chest, the day rushes by. Part of me hopes she'll cancel, and another part just wants to get it over with, because if she cancels, I might chicken out.

*Why are you afraid?* I want to shake myself. Did I think she'd laugh at me? Be disgusted by me? Not be my friend anymore?

Logically, I *knew* Caroline and all those scenarios would be very out of character. So, of course she wouldn't.

But...what if she did?

Trying to distract myself, I tidy up my room ashamed of the mess and turn my earphones up high to drown my thoughts. I want to trash the room and remake it. I want to peel my skin off and remove the anxiety before putting it back on.

Caroline comes smiling and apologizing into my room. She explains how she had knocked but didn't get a response and would just try the door thinking I didn't hear and well, here she is.

I wave her off with a smile, it's no problem really, all the while acting like my heart wasn't trying to jump out of my chest or that my lungs were no longer breathing in enough air.

As she sets down her bag next to my futon, I stand in the middle of my dorm, wringing my hands.

"So..." she starts.

"So, how was your day?" I ask, delaying.

We both reclined on the futon, facing each other as she recounts her day and classes. I nod along, trying to breathe around the metal band squeezing my ribs.

*Tell her.*

*Tell her.*

*I have a secret.*

"So..." she tries again, "what'd you want to talk about?"

“Well, uh...” Suddenly I’m looking at the blank screen of my huge TV, seeing my wide eye reflection. I quickly duck my head and notice how my hands are squeezing the life out of each other.

*You can do this.*

“I’ve been seeing a counselor for the last couple weeks. It’s been hard recently.” I glance at her.

She inclines her head, her eyes serious, face open.

I take a deep breath and exhale shakily. I blink hard and wipe away my first few tears. I may have apologized for them. Her hand rests on my arm, and the warm, steady pressure helps get the words out.

“I’m bisexual.”

I finally meet her gaze.

She has a smile on her face like she’s trying to suppress how wide it is because of my tears. I let out a watery chuckle.

“Is it alright if I hug you?” She raises her eyebrows in question.

I nod and smile a bit.

She tightly—though a bit awkwardly since we are still sitting—wraps her arms around me and holds me for a beat, before patting my back and pulling away slowly.

“First, thank you for telling me. That was huge.”

I wipe more tears away. “You’re the first person I told,” I admit.

She grabs my arm again and squeezes, like a mini hug. “Again, thank you for telling me. I’m so glad you did.”

I laugh a little again wishing the tears would stop.

“It’s weird. I’m not that surprised.”

“So, you knew?” Was I giving off some sort of vibe? Is there a vibe?

“No,” she slowly shakes her head, “no, it’s you. This is just another part of you and now I know you better.”

A new wave of tears came in. I laugh trying to hold them off and fail. “Thanks,” I choke out. “Do, do you want to watch the show now?” And soon we are just two friends watching *Attack on Titan*. I keep analyzing how I’m sitting, how she’s sitting, the distance between us, and trying to remember if anything is different from past times we’ve done this. But I keep coming up blank. Everything feels the same.

“So, how was your week?” my counsellor asks, beginning our session.

“Good, really good.” I nod, breath in, and genuinely smile. “I came out to my friend Caroline.”

My counselor’s eyes widen. “And how’d that go?”

I take a deep breath. “Really well.” The smile grows. “She accepted me. Didn’t laugh or anything. She said all the right stuff. I cried a little.”

He patiently waits to see if I’ll continue before asking, “And after? I remember one of the concerns you had were her treating you differently.”

I shrug and shake my head. “She doesn’t treat me any differently than before. In fact,” I shrug, “we might be closer now.” My chest warms like the sun is rising beneath my skin.

“How about the rest of your friends? Are you thinking about telling them?”

“I want to, but I also don’t want to do it at a bad time, or, like, randomly.”

He raises his hand over his notepad in a placating gesture. “Now there’s no rush. Take your time, but also do what’s right for you. You said you feel closer to her now that you’ve told her, right?” He waits for me to agree. “Just keep that in mind when thinking about telling your other friends. You can be selfish about this, Sofia. It’s about you, so only worry if it’s the right time for you.”

I huff a laugh, but I really needed to hear that—almost like I needed permission—to be selfish about this.

On Thursday nights, my university's restaurant Scooter's has live music and free food. Being the broke juniors we were, my friends and I went there to study, listen to students sing, and catch up on each other's days. The place feels intimate with dark lighting, purple walls, loud music, and the dull roar of students' voices. Every table feels disconnected from each other, and each conversation is drowned out by others. I get more work done here than I ever do at the library.

A couple of weeks after coming out to Caroline, Cassie and I found ourselves in the second-best booth in Scooter's several hours early for free food.

Cassie and I met during an overnight at St. Thomas during our senior year of high school. The whole night gives students a feel for the college life at the university. The night was great! I already loved St. Thomas, but that night showed me what my life would be like in half a year. I'd be away from my parents and our whole situation, and I'd finally focus on the classes I cared about. I didn't want to go back to high school after tasting one night of college.

Cassie and I met in a basement of one of the male dorms. We discussed writing stories, and this was the first time I met someone who got *writing*. She was serious about it, like I was. We didn't stay in contact, but when we found each other again in our college dorm, we quickly bonded over writing again and that was it. We were close friends. When I'm with Caroline, we'd discuss our many similar interests that no one else in our friend group shared, like anime. With Cassie, we could discuss really deep topics or our stories for hours. In fact, to get any writing done, we'd set timers of how long we needed to be quiet before we could talk and only break the rule if it was *super* important. We never made it until the timer went off.

This semester, we were taking Writing Fiction together, and since she was avoiding her apartment and I my dorm room, we decided to edit our short stories at Scooter's.

My mood has been bad all day and now getting increasingly worst.

Part of it was my inability to write good, short, literary fiction, and the constant internal chant of *I'm bisexual. I like girls. I'm bisexual. I like—*

Earlier that day, I found out my classmate hadn't emailed our professor proof we exchanged our work, and I'd almost got an F, and now we're paired up again which is the only reason I found out he hadn't sent the email and—

I left the classroom before I could scream at him or cry. Cassie found me in the front of the building staring out at the lines of parked cars and trees, breathing deeply, brushing away a few tears, and mentally cursing everything.

"You okay?"

I met her gaze, nodded. "Yeah. I will be. I'm just...*irritated*."

She looked at me like she was bracing for me to explode or something. But I wouldn't. I couldn't.

"Sal told me that he'll change your grade since it wasn't your fault."

I exhaled deeply. "Thanks. I'm sorry I ran out—"

"Don't worry about it."

"I just couldn't stay in there for another second."

"I don't blame you. Honestly," she rested her hand on my shoulder, grinning ruefully, "you reacted better than I would have."

I snorted and shook my head, looking away.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No, definitely not. Let's just go."

Now, I stare at my newest short story, unable to stop thinking about all those things on repeat and wanting so badly to *break something*.

“How are you doing? Any progress?”

I look up from my laptop. Cassie’s face is lined with fatigue and little inspiration.

I groan and wipe my face like I could remove my bad mood with single swipe. “I don’t think I’ve done a thing. You?”

“Nope. Same.”

I close my laptop and lean back against the purple booth with my arms crossed. I can feel her stare.

“Are you alright?”

My whole chest tightens.

*Just tell her.*

*She’s religious, what if—?*

*But she’s Cassie. Cassie who I can tell anything to and she’ll just get it.*

And that’s the truth. Because I can say the randomest thing or jump to some strange conclusion, and Cassie just knows what I mean, and I’ve never had that kind of understanding with anyone. Not any friends from high school or grade school. Especially not anyone in my family. Sometimes Ava and I will have our moments of clicking, but those are rare. And Cassie rarely *doesn’t* get what I mean. And I want so desperately for her to get *this*.

I sit up and fold my hands on top of my computer before finally meeting her gaze.

“I’m bisexual.” My voice sounds helpless and so tired.

A slow but huge grin splits her face. “Wait, really?”

“Yeah,” I grit out, so tense from trying to keep from crying. Pulling my sleeves over my thumbs, I wipe away the few tears slipping through.

She gasps. “That’s awesome! This is great.”

I let out a breathless laugh, finally relaxing back into the booth, and wiping a few more tears.

“Oh, Sof, are you okay?”

“Yes,” I huff, exasperated that I’m crying in a public place.

Cassie can’t stop smiling, and I start to mirror her.

“What?”

“Nothing.” She shrugs. “This is just great! Wait!” She leans over the table, sobering up. “Does this mean I can use bi puns?”

I laugh a real, good laugh this time, and the tears are finally gone. “Cassie, I’d be disappointed if you didn’t.”

“Yes!” She does a little fist bump.

I laugh some more, and my mood feels a bit lighter.

“Oh!” Her whole face stills in realization, her hazel eyes staring off in some unknown distance.

“What?” I love when she makes this face because it usually means she’s come up with something clever that we’ll both love.

“I can ask you so many questions to make sure I’m representing Bea’s sexuality correctly!” Bea is one of her characters in her Book Baby—that’s what we call our unpublished book series.

I laugh loudly, and then quickly duck down because I’m afraid people might be looking at us. “Yeah, for sure. Ask anything you like.”

We set our work aside, knowing nothing will get done now and delve deeper into how we’re doing this semester. Soon, Caroline and Becca join us at the table, and Cassie leaves early before the music even starts, and my mood falls. The iron band appears again in the presence of Becca because she doesn’t know, and the secret, not-secret feels like a lie.

I can’t remember when I first met Becca, but I know I met her through Caroline. They’re both business majors and spend loads of time in McNeely which is where most of the business classes are. The only time I’d been in their building was when I gave university tours. So, without Caroline connecting us, we may never have been friends. At first, I thought



Becca was way too cool to want to hang out with someone like me. I was the type of person who read a lot, wore very little make-up, and watched anime for goodness sakes. I'm quirky, like Caroline. But as I got to know Becca, I realized she was just as dorky and nerdy as the rest of us.

With her curly blonde hair and impeccable make-up, I thought she would be a bit more like my sister than me. Which is fine, nothing wrong with that, but I wondered what we'd talk about, how we'd even connect. Turns out, we both loved the Hallmark channel, she watched Barbie movies with Caroline and me, much to the rest of our friends' confusion—they didn't grow up with it—and overall had a lot to say about romance stories. I found her even cooler than before, and now she was my kind of person.

The music starts to wind down and the free food is picked over and suddenly all I can think is *fuck it*.

"Hey...hey, Becca?"

Turning from watching the singers, she focuses on me. "Yeah?"

"I'm...I'm bisexual." My voice wobbles.

Her expression goes from relaxed to focused. I don't know when she did it, but Caroline—who's been sitting next to me ever since she arrived—has grabbed my hand resting between us and squeezes it with support. I glance at her. Her eyes are down cast with a small smile.

"Wait, so bisexual is when you like boys and girls, right?" Becca confirms.

I shrug and nod. "Yeah."

"No way! You've just doubled your dating pool."

"Ahhh...I don't think that's how it works." I tilt my head at her and fight off a laugh, breathing in fully.

She waves me off. "It totally is!"

Caroline squeezes my hand once more and I squeeze back before she lets go laughing.

I feel lighter. The iron band around my ribs loosens a few notches as does my dark mood.

During junior year, I was on my third university job. I used to give tours of the university and know a bunch of useless facts about it. Since freshman year, I had this night job where I sat at a desk watching out for drunk students and nonstudents from 10:00pm to 2:00am. At first, I did this once a week. This semester, they had me doing it three times a week, every week and sometimes more. Even though I was getting paid to just sit there and do whatever I liked for four hours, the inconsistent sleeping hours and the arguments I'd get into with the drunk students were chipping away at me. Then there was my day job at the Tommie Shop.

Out of all my jobs, this one's the best. The shop rests on the first floor of the Student Center a few doors down from Scooter's. If there were no customers, my co-workers and I would stand behind the check-out counter and watch the students and families through the glass walls while chatting about our classes.

During one of my shifts, I start telling my co-worker a funny story of how I got my flu shot upstairs in one of the conference rooms when I slip up. I hadn't planned on getting one and if I had, I would have worn a short sleeve shirt under my sweatshirt. But I just got out of the food court, saw the advertisement, and thought I may as well do it now because lord knows I won't get one later. I go in, they sit me down mostly behind a sheet when I realize I can't roll the sleeves up to my shoulder nor can I stretch the neckline.

"I'm really sorry," I told the nurse, "but I don't have a shirt under here and I didn't plan on getting a flu shot today."

"It's okay. Nothing I haven't seen before."

Blushing and wanting to die right there, I awkwardly pulled my sweatshirt off half my body, so my left arm is uncovered and part of my sports bra is visible.

My co-worker starts laughing.

“You should have gotten the nurse’s number.” She nudges my arm.

And absolute reflex, I say, “She was a woman.”

*Oh my god, you just closeted yourself!*

*What were you thinking? You’re not straight!*

*Oh god! I can’t believe I just did that.*

*Back track! Back track! Take it back now!*

“Whoa, uh, I mean...”

*How do I explain this?*

“She was an older woman, so no, but I am bi so I would date a woman, but not her because she was older than me. Like she could be my mom.”

After a pause, my co-worker says, “Oh, cool.”

*Nailed it! Totally nailed being a bi disaster and a disgrace to the queer community.*

I want to slam my head on the granite counter until I can’t think.

I don’t talk about this embarrassing moment with my counselor, but I do confide in my friends.

“I just can’t believe I closeted myself like that! I was so quick to deny! Ugh! I can’t with myself.” I flop onto their love seat, rubbing my face in shame.

“Oh, don’t be too hard on yourself,” Laura, another one of my friends, says. “It’s still something new that you’re telling people.”

“Yeah,” Caroline agrees. “You haven’t been out for very long. It was just a reflex.”

“I guess.” I pout, uncovering my face and staring up at the ceiling. “I guess I’m just still uncomfortable talking about it.”

“Well, just practice with us. If you see a cute girl, just tell us.”

“Yeah, it’ll take time to get comfortable with it.”

“Practice,” I whisper to myself. I push onto my elbows and watch them both prepare food in their small kitchen. “Like...I think I have a crush on Keira Knightley.”

Laura points her spatula at me. “Exactly!”

Caroline thoughtfully chews on a crisp. “Honestly, I totally get that. She’s very pretty.”

I relax back on the love seat deep in thought.

Practice.

I don’t remember coming out to Laura, nor do I remember when we started hanging out.

My first clearest memory of her, was when I went down to Quin’s dorm on the first floor to meet with her before I getting ready for my first date. My roommate’s friend set up my blind, very first, and double date. Why not cross a lot of firsts off? The date had gone terribly. Both my roommate and her friend did my make-up so well, Cassie had to do a double take because she didn’t recognize me. I had a *lot* of make-up on. And the guy—who was a football player—introduced himself to me by lightly grabbing my hand in an awkward handshake like we were in a Victorian movie and I was about to kiss his hand. My immediate thought was, *Oh, he is definitely not getting a kiss from me tonight*. Strike one. Then we went to the pizza joint right off campus where my date and my roommate’s friend’s date started laughing at this picture of a larger girl on my date’s phone. Strike two. And lastly, as the date was winding down, we stood in Koch Commons, the area that connected the two dorms, talking to some people, when my date almost left without saying good-bye and only didn’t when the other girl with me called him out on it.

Obviously, there was no second date.

But before all that happened, I spotted Laura in Quin’s room as she announced, “Sofia has a date tonight.”

“Oh, wow!” Laura said. “Good luck. I hope you have fun.”

Feeling very embarrassed, I said, “Thanks,” and rubbed the back of my neck. I wasn’t overly excited, but I was glad to rip the first date Band-Aid off.

When my friends and I discuss meeting each other, Laura also brings up this moment and how cool she thought I was for going on a date. I always laugh and then groan as I remember how the date went. Which of course everyone starts telling random details about it and gets us all laughing even more. But Laura thinking I was cool really makes me laugh.

When I want to say, “different than us,” or “not interested in the same things as us,” I use the word “cool.” I don’t think Becca is less “cool” once I got to know her and realized we were similar. I think Laura meant I was cool in the same way I meant it with Becca.

What I like about our friend group is that we are all drawn to each other for different reasons, but we’re all connected by our love of stories. Laura and I connected with our love for queer literature, way before I ever came out, and once I did, we became even closer. With that connection, it’s almost weird that I didn’t come out to her first.

We also get each other’s anxiety. We both experience it differently, but when she talks about her intrusive thoughts or quirky habits, I get it. However, while hers manifest more in creating order and keeping things neat, I’m more chaotic and messy. But that’s what I really like about Laura. She’s so steadfast and reliable. I know if I need someone to talk me out of something or help think clearer on a problem, Laura’s my girl.

Cassie and I are sitting on her bed both taking a break from writing our short stories and start writing our book babies instead. Basically, they’re our fantasy pieces we can’t submit for class but greatly enjoy writing and discussing together. Cassie shares a room in house a block from campus. The room is small with two beds, two desks, and one shared closet next to the door. I lean against the window, careful not to bend the blinds while Cassie reclines against her pillows. We’re both trying to play the quiet game so we can focus, but our longest stretch is maybe three songs before one of us has to ask the other a question.

During a distracted moment, Cassie says, “If you don’t mind me asking and you totally don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, but...how did you know you were bisexual?”

I look up from my screen. “Oh! Uhhh...”

“Sorry, you don’t have to—” Her nose scrunches up.

“Oh, no, no.” I wave my hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about it. You can ask me about it anytime. It honestly doesn’t bother me. I’m just trying to think about my answer.”

The answer is both easy and hard. Easy because hey, I notice girls and want to kiss them, but explaining sexual attraction still feels awkward and because I’ve been taught that thoughts like that are unpure and should be locked up. *Don’t talk about it.*

*No, practice. Talking about it will never feel comfortable unless you practice.*

I close my laptop and shift on her bed so I’m facing her. “I think I kind of always knew,” I start, still collecting my thoughts. “There was always this, like, bell ringing inside me anytime something happened that made me realize maybe I wasn’t totally straight.” She nodded. “Like, when we were watching that movie this past summer? You know, *Thoroughbreds?*”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Right, like I noticed that the actress wasn’t wearing a bra, and I pointed it out and you hadn’t noticed.”

She laughs a little. I shrug.

“Well, I don’t know. Maybe if I was straight, I wouldn’t have noticed. I don’t know. But it’s stuff like that. Just these little moments that added up to me being bisexual I guess.”

“Huh. Interesting.”

“I really don’t think I’m explaining this right.”

“No, no. You’re good. I think I get what you mean.”

I remember Dina suddenly and glance out the window trying to push the memory away. But the memory stabs into my brain like a thorn. “Actually,” I turn back to face Cassie, “when I was about eight, I tried to come out to this girl one time, and she laughed at me. So, I just,” I raise my hands in front of my ribs and shove them down like I’m trying to close an overflowing suitcase, “pushed it down and repressed it for years until I couldn’t anymore.”

“Wow. Really?” She looks upset.

“Yep.” I give her a what-can-you-do look.

“I’m really sorry she laughed at you, Sofia.” She squeezes my arm.

A joke to break the tension is lying on the tip of tongue, but seeing her serious face and genuine openness, I choose to swallow it back. “Thanks. I’m really glad that I have a friend like you.” We both smile a little. “And,” I quickly add, trying to push down a rush of warm emotion, “if you ever have any other questions you know about bisexually or whatever, you can always ask. I’m an open book, you know?”

“Great! Because I have a few more questions and...”

We dive into a discussion about our character sexualities and representation and barely type any more words.

When I came home for Christmas freshman year, I had grown my nails out pretty long. I don’t paint them and if they get too long they break. But unconsciously, I had grown them to a decent length and were all pretty even. They survived forty-eight hours in Omaha before I bit them back to stubs. It wasn’t until I was biting off the second nail that I realized this was a stressful habit I had.

*Really, Sof? Final exams are all fine for you, but seeing your family for the holidays is where you draw the line?*

I laughed quietly to myself and finished the rest and got through the next two weeks of splitting time between my parents.

Two years later, by the time I flew home, my nails were already all bitten off, so I kept picking at hang nails and ignoring the blood and dull pain.

“What’s the rush?” my counselor asks.

I shrug. “I don’t know. Isn’t coming out to my parents the next step in all of this?” I wave my hand.

“Perhaps. But do you want to? Do you feel *ready* to?” he stresses.

I stare through him and imagine my mother staring at me in shock and then denying it until she accepts this isn’t something she’s going to tolerate from me and she’ll say something like, “I’m done buying stuff for you,” or “we’re not talking about this ever again,” and—

I couldn’t really see this going any other way.

I literally couldn’t picture a positive response. And it’s not like we don’t have a good relationship with open commutation. We do, we had to. I mean, Dad was taking a back seat—which was fine because it’s him but also not fine because it’s the definition of being a dad—and so Mom really stepped up to give even more support. Which is great, but all my emotional and financial support came from the same parent, and if something happened to her, I’d be...adrift, lost. For years, I’ve been slowly relying less and less on my father for anything, and now here I was with something I knew he wouldn’t mind but was unsure what Mom’s reaction would be. I couldn’t lose her over something as silly as my sexual orientation.

My throat clogs up and feel the iron band wrap tight around my chest, squeezing everything out. I want to tear everything out of me and reshape myself into *someone else*, so I don’t have to deal with this.

“When you think about coming out to them, how do you feel?”

The short version? “Overwhelmed,” I say, breathlessly.

“You’re afraid of rejection?” he confirms.



“Definitely.”

“Why?” I tilt my head. “I mean the time we’re in, there’s a lot of support from campus and your peers. Does your mom strike you as not supportive or closed-minded?”

Mom’s never said anything close to “homosexuality is bad” or anything. And she’s never forbade me from watching anything that showed queer representation, but it’s not like she encouraged it either. She gave me the Sex Talk when I was twelve right before my period started, and only discussed heterosexual sex. Not that I think Dad would have given me a better Talk or more inclusive one. (Thank God Mom beat him to it.)

But there’s this one moment back in freshmen year.

Mom and I are alone driving up to Minnesota. Sometimes I find it hard to talk to her about my passions, like books, movies, video games, because we’re so different and she doesn’t always get why I like or “obsess” over things. And growing up—I hate saying this—but sometimes she would say some of my interests were weird, and Ava would agree with her. My tastes in TV shows, my obsession with books, and even my music was always judged, or so it seemed.

“Why don’t you go to the football game like Ava is?” Mom would ask.

“Why would I?” I said. “I’m not interested in watching football.”

“Well, maybe you should *try* to get interested in it.”

I felt like I had to horde my interests and hide them because they didn’t align with Mom’s or Ava’s interests, it was too weird, nerdy, or perhaps queer. Dad never did this. He would let me rant about my favorite things, but I usually did this to bore him to death so he’d leave me alone. But he never made me feel like my interests were strange or not right. So, sometimes I felt like I needed to repress my interests from Mom so she wouldn’t judge me which is why I like Caroline’s family so much and how they celebrated Caroline nerdiness because they *shared* those interests.

But during the drive, Mom asked about my writing, and I engaged with the conversation. I described this new character I came up with named Alex and how she was bisexual.

“Interesting. Why is she bisexual?”

I shrugged, nervous. “She just is. When I imagine her and her story, it’s just who she is.”

She nodded. “Hmm. Do you think you are?”

My heart stopped. “What? No!” Unexplainable disappointment rushed through me, not at her but at myself. At nineteen, I couldn’t admit why.

“Okay.”

“Why do you ask?”

“I just wondered why she was. That’s all.”

But I don’t say any of this to my counsellor. I mention Catholic school, conservative Omaha, the Church, and don’t realize until much, much later that I never really answered his question about Mom.

“I see,” he says.

Since this is the last time we’ll meet for two months, he gives me a sheet talking about self-esteem. He wants me to write down the negative/ toxic thoughts I have about myself and try to identify where they are coming from. Sitting in that room, I have all the intention of doing it. But a few days later when I’m packing to leave for home, I leave the sheet behind. I’m not ready to combat my self-esteem yet.

One by one, I say good-bye to all my friends and the comfortableness I’ve felt for the last month. I’m absolutely dreading having to be home and come out to everyone. But I need to push myself, right? Everyone—Mom, Ava, Bert, and even Dad and Michella—keep telling

me to step out of my comfort zone. In fact, wouldn't coming out actually make Omaha *more* my comfort zone?

I fly down and Ava picks me up. We make idle chitchat about her first year in college and decide to stop by Raising Cane to eat lunch. It's a fast-food chain that we only ever had in Minnesota, and finally one opened in Omaha within the last year. Chicken is the only thing on the menu. You can have three, four or six chicken strips or be bold and have the chicken in a sandwich.

For a moment, I imagine working there and getting asked every day if they have a vegetarian option or if they have anything other than chicken. I just *know* they get asked that.

We order and snag a booth near the windows. The place feels a little like Scooter's: intimate, same mindless chatter you can't understand but with bright orange and yellows. And I'm here with Ava, not my friends. My initial hunger fades as the metal band around my ribs.

Of course, I want to tell her, but I'm afraid of her remembering my visit in October and redefining everything that happened there. Back when I was a freshman, Ava visited me for one weekend, wanting to experience life as a college student. We went to a Tommie football game and left as soon as we got some good pictures of her cheering. We also got a nice photo of us. We did not go to any parties, like I knew she wanted, but we did hang out with my friends, and when asked if she liked them said, "They're a lot like you."

"And...that's a good thing, right?"

"Oh, yeah. Obviously, it's a good thing, Sofis."

I rolled my eyes at the nickname.

"I mean, they don't party just like you don't." She shrugged. "Which is fine."

She was underwhelmed. And she still was the following year. No party, no football game, and barely anytime spent with me. But I was sick and couldn't really entertain her. So, with two strikes and a tradition to uphold, I visited Arizona for her freshman year during

Halloween. When I first arrived, Ava met me at the tram stop and greeted me with, “So, I have a boyfriend and we’re going to meet him in about ten minutes for dinner.”

“Oh? And how long have you two been together? When were you going to tell me?”

“I’m telling you now! Besides we like, just started officially dating three days go.”

She loaded my suitcase into the back of her car.

“So, very recent.”

“Yeah, so I thought I’d just tell you in person. Since, you know—”

“I’d be here in a few days. Okay, yeah. I get it.” I took a deep breath. “Well, what’s he like?”

Instead of getting into the car, she started leading me down the block. “Okay, so the thing is...he’s like not hot and he doesn’t have abs.”

I gave her a look. “*Ava.*”

“I know, I know.”

“No, no. That’s so—”

“Listen, I like him, and I think he’s cute.”

“Well, then don’t open with saying that. *Jesus!* Also, it doesn’t matter to me how fit he is as long as you like him. Tell me his interests.”

“He likes *Game of Thrones*—”

“OH?” I marathoned the whole show in two weeks (up until season seven episode three as that was the latest one out at the time). Yes, I lost quite a lot of sleep doing that.

She sighed deeply. “Yeah, he’s kind of a nerd.”

“Well, at least I can chat with him about something.”

He met us right outside the restaurant and hugged Ava. We had a pleasant dinner with conversation flowing well between us all. He was blonde, tall, cute, nerdy, and polite. Better than a lot of the other guys Ava would chat with in high school. Since he was her first,

official boyfriend, she kept asking me what I thought about him throughout the weekend as we continued to meet with him and the rest of her friends. I gave him my seal of approval.

During this time of year in Minnesota, I could expect snow, sharp winds, and layers, but down in desert Arizona, the only time I'd need a jacket was when the sunset. I despised heat and definitely picked the wrong Halloween costume.

While Ava was dressed as a black bunny and her roommate a sexy nurse, both showing a good amount of skin and cleavage, I dressed as Rosie the Riveter with skinny jeans and a long sleeve button shirt with the sleeves rolled up. I should have just gone with my usual *Alice in Wonderland* costume, then at least I wouldn't have been dying of heat at the party. I could have been wearing a nice breezy skirt and no sleeves.

*Why did I do this?*

I must have been the most covered person there! Not the most covered girl, *person*! Even the guys were showing more skin than me!

And while I appreciated all the different abs, pecs, and arms on the guys, I also would kept staring at the long legs, deep cleavage, and the thong bodysuits the girls wore. But I felt so ashamed of looking. At this point, I already accepted my bisexuality and told Caroline, but I didn't want to objectify the women around me. I knew how to check out guys and not feel like I was degrading them in some way, but I didn't know how to do that with women. The last thing I wanted to do was degrade women!

I'm a feminist, and I totally think women should wear whatever they feel most comfortable in—though sometimes I do get a little overprotective of my younger sister. And while I may not be comfortable wearing certain things these women were wearing, that was totally fine. Be you, girl. In fact, I wish I had half the confidence these women had. I just...didn't feel as comfortable in my body as they clearly did in theirs.

I tried to keep my eyes to myself and just notice everyone's faces instead of bodies. But that was so hard to do during Halloween on the ASU campus.

I planned to come out to her during our first dinner. Because if I didn't do it in the beginning, we'd have a weird before and after I came out on the trip. And I couldn't come out right before I left, or else it would have felt like running away. But I met her boyfriend instead and lost my chance.

But now, now I could use someone in my corner for the holidays.

"Hey, Av?"

"Yeah?" She pops a fry in her mouth.

*Just do it. It's Ava. There's nothing you can do that will make her pull away.*

"I'm bisexual." My hands grab each other under the table and squeeze.

Her chewing slows. "What's that mean?"

I throw my head back and groan. "You've been in college for a whole semester! How do you not know what bisexual means?" I could shake her. How could she not know? She's a teenager, and she's always telling *me* I need to get out more.

She gasps, offended. "I don't know. Just tell me. *Gosh!*"

My fingers start to go numb, but I felt a little steadier. Aggravating her is easier than being serious. "Well, you know how you like your boyfriend and want to kiss him and stuff?"

She nods. "Yeah."

I shrug. "Well, I feel that way about boys *and* girls."

"Oh." She takes a drink and contemplates. "People can like more than one?"

"Of course." I roll my eyes. My hands let go. "I do."

"Huh. Interesting."

I focus back on my food, hungry once more.

"Does Mom know?"

I shake my head fiercely. "No! So don't tell her. I will soon."

"Well, of course I wouldn't." She scoffs. "Are you going to tell her while you're home? Or Dad?"

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“I don’t think you should.”

“Why not?” I cross my arms.

“Because it’s the holidays and you know how Mom gets. It just doesn’t seem like a good time.”

My back thuds against the back of the booth. I know exactly what Av’s talking about. Whenever Mom’s stressed, she’ll do this thing with important conversations where she says anything—usually agreeing without actually thinking about it—to reach a quick end to the conversation so she can focus on the thing she’s stressed about. Then later, after I’ve thought the conversation is done, accomplished, proceed as planned, she’ll bring it back up again, with a new *different* perceptive—usually now disagreement. When I point this out to her, she’ll say something like, “Well, I’ve thought about it a bit more and...” but I just see this as her true thoughts she had all along but didn’t tell me.

She doesn’t do this maliciously, but I’d rather avoid that whole, infuriating dance when I come out to her.

“Maybe you’re right.”

“Well, do what you want but don’t do it while I’m there.”

I roll my eyes again. If I begged, she would be there, but yeah, I’d rather she not be there either. In fact, when I do come out to all our parents, Ava isn’t even in the same state as me.

“So, is there some girl you like?”

I blush. “No, I just wanted to tell you.”

She hums. “Well,” she avoids my eyes, “thanks for telling me I guess.”

My face flames hotter. “Yeah, well, whatever. Anyway...”

Every Christmas Eve spent in Omaha is celebrated at my paternal grandmother's house.

Almost all my cousins are in attendance (excepted for the two that live in Georgia). Grandma Meta lives next to a man-made lake that starts as a creek in her backyard. The house looks like a someone's summer cabin with apple trees growing around it that we all used to climb as kids. When I was young, I loved catching toads and putting them in buckets and watch them try to hop out of the bucket. I thought they were so cute. I remember the feeling of their rough skin and their little hearts pounding away as I held them. When I hear a toad croak, that's what I think of: summers at Grandma's and sleeping in tents outside and the sound of a train passing by every few hours right cross the creek. Most of my favorite memories when I'm with Dad are with my cousins. I don't have any cousins on Mom's side—well, I didn't until I was fourteen—so family gatherings were always special to me.

Since high school, things have shifted. Or maybe I'm just getting older and have started realizing things were much simpler when we were kids. There are three groups of cousins. The ones who see Grandma Meta and each other on a monthly if not weekly basis, Ava and I seeing them maybe six times a year, and the Georgia group who come maybe twice a year. They are all so familiar with each other in such a way that Ava and I are not. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't jealous of that closeness, but Ava and I both chose to leave Nebraska, where the rest chose to stay. That staying made them all close, and I don't regret leaving.

Since most of us are in college and beyond now, the adults and most of the grandkids just do white elephant instead of gift exchanges. We're all in the living room waiting for Paige to arrive so we can get started, and I'm waiting for Paige more so because we get along the best and are the same age, only two weeks apart, and everyone forgets I'm the older one.

I've already dismissed telling everyone I'm bi, not only because it's the holidays, but the main topic is Tori's wedding coming up in June. Not that I think anyone would say anything homophobic—Austin brought his boyfriend Austin for goodness stakes—so no



worry there, but I don't want to make the night about me. And yeah, they do share a name, and I do think it's a bit strange. I couldn't imagine dating a girl with my name.

"Why don't you have a glass?"

I tilt my head back and smile at Paige. "Of wine?" I ask.

"Yeah."

*Because my dad will freak out.*

Without a response, she shoves my shoulder and says, "Come on. We'll share a glass."

"Oh, yeah!" Ava says next to me, getting up.

I sit up and back slap her arm. "Ha, nope. You're driving, so no drinking."

I stand and follow Paige to the kitchen. I grab a glass from the cabinet while she collects the bottle and pours. I stare at the wine and imagine coming out to her and getting a hug and taking the first deep breath this whole evening. But I can hear the chatter from the living room and there's no door between the rooms so anyone can just overhear me.

"Cheers." Paige raises our glass, takes a sip, and passes it.

"Merry Christmas," I say and take a sip and drown the words with wine.

The rest of the holidays are filled with panic over my visa for India. I'll be spending the New Year on an airplane and will stay for four weeks, studying the different religions there. My visa arrives a few days before I leave, and I depart from the country still in the closet.

A weight lifts off my chest as soon as I'm in the air. I arrive in India with my peers, and as we start getting our visa ready to be stamped, new panic sets in. My six-month visa is actually a nineteen-day visa—some printing mistake that should be impossible—that expires while I'm on the trip. My friends say I'm the hot mess out of our group because I'm so chaotic, and yeah, they're totally right, but honestly, I swear the universe chooses to be chaotic for me. I can't imagine this happening to anyone else.

Reassured by my professor that we'll sort it out and they won't leave me here when we depart later this month, I calm down a little and try to enjoy India as much as possible. India is beautiful and completely different from America, but I wouldn't have been brave enough to come here by myself. While learning about many of the different theologies and eating the spicy food, I get to know my roommates and the rest of the people on the trip. The more we all hang out and become acquainted with each other, the more I realize how comfortable I feel in my own skin.

All last semester, my brain was on a constant loop of "I don't think I'm straight" to "I'm bisexual" every day. I kept reminding myself about it, obsessively, like I was somehow going to forget. But in India, the chanting has faded, and I no longer think about being bisexual every day. Being with strangers in a new place helps a lot. No one has any expectations of me, and I don't feel the need to come out to anyone. I'm being fully myself around them, even if they don't realize.

While we're on our way to see another temple, one of the girls on my trip said that she was Bahá'í. At first, I misheard her and thought she said that she was bi and almost said, "Oh cool. Me too!"

I'm not sure why I held back because I could have been showing support and solidarity with if she had said what I thought she did.

When we finally reach the Lotus Temple and I hear that it was built as a Bahá'í House of Worship, I realize she meant that she was a follower of this religion.

*Oh, thank god I didn't say anything.*

After exploring the visiting center, we head to the temple. The building is stunning and shaped just like a huge lotus flower. Once we go in, we sit on the pews in one of the petals. The whole place is empty of anything except for the pews and a raised dais in the center. I close my eyes for a few minutes and try to feel some spiritual presence. We stay for

ten minutes in silence, and by the time we leave so another group can come in, I still am left waiting.

“Have you noticed all the little boys holding hands?” one of my peers asks. She nods to some of the little school kids running around another temple we’re visiting.

This scared sight is old and huge! There are so many different groups running all over the place, both school groups and tourists. The kids are having fun chasing each other and climbing on fallen pieces of the temple. And yes, some of the little boys are holding hands. They look so sweet and cute, and I wonder why I don’t see this more often in the US.

Sanji, our tour guide for the temple, says, “Ah, yes. I had this American woman once say to me, ‘Oh, Sanji, it’s so sweet how all these little gay boys are running around holding hands.’ This is not true. They are just friends. We do not have that here.” He shakes his head and furrows his brows in displeasure.

My roommate for the trip makes this face that says, “excuse me sir,” and debates with Sanji about his “We don’t have that here.”

I, too, want to say something along the lines of, “Well, two boys handing hands *could* be gay,” but, well, Sanji is an authority figure, a *male* authority figure, and I seem to be allergic to confrontation, so I stay silent.

However, I do think there is something really beautiful about boys being able to hold hands here and have it be normal. While Sanji’s denial of queer people not being in India is problematic, in the West, we read so much into the interactions between men, especially if it’s emotional intimacy. Society discourages men from platonically holding hands, crying, talking about feelings, and other traditionally feminine things. Of course, the East has its own gender issues, but the West is so busy overanalyzing male interaction that it friend-zones all female interactions.

Once I return to Minnesota for my spring semester, I only have a few more meetings with my counselor before I end the sessions. He's not offended by it, in fact, he's very happy that I feel settled enough to switch from meeting with him to attending group counseling. While one-on-one counseling is all about working on yourself, group counseling is—yeah, still working on yourself—but also learning how to connect with people better while you and the other person are vulnerable.

I'm quiet for the first session, never having done this before and being with a group of new people. I answer a few questions but let other people really have the floor. When I leave, I'm furious with myself for not putting in more effort or pushing myself more. I agonize over it for the whole week, and when the second session comes around, I tearfully come out. I can't look at anyone in the eye when I do it, but everyone is so nice and supportive that I'm able to quickly get myself back under control. After the session is over, both counselors thank me for breaking the ice by crying.

"No one wants to be the first one to cry, so thank you for being brave and vulnerable."

"You're welcome," I say because I'm not sure what else *to* say. I didn't feel brave doing it; it just needed to be done.

Once I leave, I realize I didn't look anyone in the eye when I was crying, which is something they keep telling us to do to connect with one another. And then I beat myself up about messing that up.

Some sessions are better than others. I dislike when I do something wrong, even when they reassure me that my failing to connect with someone is okay and "this is all a learning experience." I want to get it right so badly. I keep pushing myself to be vulnerable and talk about Dad and how going home makes me feel and my fear of coming out to Mom.

I still have trouble calling Dad abusive in group therapy because I can't stop telling myself our relationship isn't that toxic. That I'm blowing it out of proportion. I'm being overdramatic like my family is always telling me.

“I just feel like he’s always watching me, waiting to yell at me,” I explain, failing to hold back tears, but I am able to keep eye contact with one of the counselors.

“I wish I could reassure you that he’s not in the room. *He’s not here.* I wish I could make that feeling go away for you,” she says, and her eyes are so open and honest, I believe her. Even though they’re just words, they calm me a little.

In another session, I tell the group I’m planning to come out to my mom this upcoming weekend when I see her. I want it to go well. I hope it goes well. I think...

By the time I get to the airport ready to go home, my heart has traveled from my chest to my throat and ready to beat out of my mouth. I keep trying to swallow it down, but I get on the plane and the more I try to focus on my book and then music, the sicker I feel. And it’s not even all just about Mom either. Dad doesn’t know I’m coming, so it’s like I’m sneaking into Omaha, and I need to make sure I’m not seen by anyone who may tell him.

And everything just feels overwhelming.

I hate going home. I just want it to be over. And I still want her to love me by the end.

Oh god, what will Bert think? And...

And it’s so hard, that I can’t–

I can’t say it like this.

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The girl gets off a plane that has brought her back home. She’s so nervous that she feels ill and a little lightheaded. The girl is only staying in her hometown for a few days, and she desperately wants to skip ahead to her leaving instead of having to face her decision to come out to her mother and step-father.

She both does and does not want to do this.

She doesn’t like keeping things from her mother, but she also doesn’t know how her mother will respond to her coming out. She doesn’t expect a good response and yet, she can’t

imagine a world where she cannot fall back on her mother. She knows that her mother won't abandon her, that her mother loves her unconditionally.

But the girl also knows that people—parents—can promise things and not actually mean them later. Not even the important things are spared. And this—*this*—is so incredibly important.

She walks to the entrance of the airport, passing people embracing, and people talking on the phone. Everyone moves around with a purpose. They look solid, *there*, while the surprising heat of Omaha and the gnawing anxiety seem to be the only things keeping her body in the present. If they weren't there, she'd clasp into herself, ceasing to exist.

She knows her mom is coming to pick her up soon. Omaha has a small airport with only two terminals and security is never longer than fifteen minutes. As soon as she texted that she landed, her mother's only ten minutes away.

The girl always hates coming home. Omaha holds a lot of good memories and people she loves—like her friend Eva, her cousins, and some of her parents—but only the bad memories come to her once she lands. Every time she comes back, the city presses around her, like a straitjacket. When she does these short trips to see her mom and step-dad, she finds herself constantly looking over her shoulder, waiting for her father to come up behind her and start yelling abuse at her. All of Omaha is a trap when her father doesn't know she's there, and she hates it. College is her safe haven, has been since she found out what it was. College is an escape from here, from him, but she can never cut out *home*.

The girl sees her mother's car and waves as she pulls up. She gets her bags in the car and greets her mother and answers that "yes, the flight was good. No issues."

The pressure of unseen eyes lessens in the presence of her mom, but car and the air between them press on her chest. Her mother sounds like she's speaking through cotton. The girl can't glean anything from the conversation and won't until she just says it.

*Just say it. Rip it off like a band aid.*

The airport isn't even out of sight when the girl blurts, "I'm bisexual."

"What?" her mother exclaims, her head whipping towards her. The girl is so happy that her mother has to break eye contact to watch the road.

"I'm bisexual," the girl croaks out, fighting back a volley of tears. She's shaking.

"And what does that mean?" her mother asks in a tone the girl cannot identify.

"It means I like boys and girls. That I would date either." Her voice wavers. She wants to steady it so badly.

"Okay...what makes you think you're bisexual?" And still that weird tone.

Immediately the girl remembers a conversation with her counselor and how he asked what she masturbated to and how that was usually a good indicator to sexual preferences. But the girl does not want to talk about masturbation with her mother, so she turns the question around like her counselor suggested. "Well, how did you know you were straight?"

Her mother doesn't answer, and the girl feels the need—like she owes her mother something—to find an answer anyways. Pushing her mother during a tense discuss is nothing new—the girl has always been defensive—but she wants this to be a productive talk.

"I don't know. I just—when I picture kissing a guy or girl, I feel the same, I guess." She wishes she had a better reason, something more quantifiable to explain, to make her understand.

"Well how do you know when you've had no experience kissing boys. Or *have* you kiss anyone?"

"No!" the girl says too quickly. "I mean, no, I haven't been kissing anyone, but I mean, did you need to kiss a boy before knowing you preferred guys?"

The mother doesn't respond, and after a minute of tense silence, asks, "Have you told anyone else?"

“Ava knows and all my friends in college.” The girl feels a little more stable remembering all of them.

“You told Ava? When?”

“During Christmas.”

Her mother nods, contemplating. “How’d they all take it?”

“They took it well. They treat me the same and actually, Cassie and Becca were really excited for me.”

Her mom hums.

She continues to ramble. “Caroline was the first I came out to.”

“Came out? Is this what you would say this is? ‘Coming out?’”

“Well, no one ever comes out if they are straight. And since I’m not, yeah, I am coming out.”

“Okay. I see.”

The girl tears her eyes away from her mom. Looking out the window and tries not to spiral. Is this a good reaction? What is her mother thinking?

“Are you going to tell Bert?” her mom asks.

“I was planning on it.”

“Hmm...all right.”

Her mother drives on for a couple miles, and the girl desperately scrambles for a way to move past this conversation. In the past, after getting punished by one of her parents, she always resented how they’d just flip their tone of voice and pretended the tension was never there. She gets it in this moment and wonders why her mother isn’t doing that *right now*.

“So...” she starts, “what’s the plan for this weekend?”

Her mother takes the question and runs with it all the way home.

They grab the girl’s bags and greet her step-dad in their third floor apartment. She doesn’t come out to him. She doesn’t know how to bring the conversation to that, nor does



she want to deal with the tension again. The girl puts a smile on her face—she’s always been good at that—for the rest of the night and falls asleep with disappointment in her heart and a tiniest bit of relief. She was not kicked out of the house or turned away, but something about the whole conversation has left her unsatisfied.

Next day in the car, on the way home from errands, her coming out is brought up again, but she cannot remember who starts up the conversation and this time she’s crying more.

“I just—I just don’t understand. You’ve had crushes on boys in the past,” her mother argues.

“I did. Those were real crushes,” the girl tries to explain.

“Have you had crushes on girls?”

“I don’t know! Maybe. I probably did but I just didn’t realize it at the time. Usually I’d just think, ‘oh I’m an artist. Maybe it’s just the artist in me who thinks they’re beautiful.’”

“I do that, too,” her mother continues to defend, to make sense. “I think women are beautiful. Are you sure it’s not that?”

“I’m sure you don’t think about kissing them. I—” the girl has to shallow around a sob, “I do.”

“Why are you crying? What’s got you so upset?” Her mother asks, putting the car in park, finally getting home and facing her now.

But the girl cannot face her. “I’m afraid you’re going to stop loving me.”

“Oh, Sofia.” Her mother pulls her into an awkward hug. “Honey, there is *nothing* you can do that will make me stop loving you.”

“I know that, but...I don’t know. It’s just...some parents kick their kids out, even when they say won’t.”

What the girl really means is *I don’t trust you when you say you love me.*

“Sofia, you’re my daughter, I’ll always be there for you. There is absolutely nothing you could do that will make you stop being my daughter.”

What her mother really means is *Please believe me when I say I love you unconditionally.*

And despite the words and hug, the girl still has that doubt deep in her heart of *maybe one day I’ll be too much for her and she’ll leave me.*

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I pull away from Mom and wipe my tears away. *Get ahold of yourself, Sof. Jesus.*

“Feel better?”

I sniff and nod. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“I’m sorry I hurt your feelings, Sofia. I’m still trying to wrap my head around it.”

I huff out a laugh. “Yeah, I don’t blame you. It took me a couple of months and talking to a counselor to get me to accept it. So, you know, take your time.”

I both understood her confusion and needing time to accept this shift in perspective of me while also deeply wishing she did not need the time.

“I wouldn’t say anything to the boys or Gammie. I don’t think they’d take it well.”

The boys are Bert’s sons, my step-brothers.

“I wasn’t really planning to, but okay.”

“I’m just—” her voice cracks.

*Oh God, please don’t cry.* My throat tightens.

“I’m just fearful that people are going to use this against you.”

“Mom, I’ll be fine. I’m aware of all of that. But,” I shrug, “I’m going to be myself. And if people can’t accept that, I won’t have them in my life.”

She laughs ruefully. “I guess that’s true.” She smiles worriedly at me. “I love you so much.” Then she embraces me once more and gives a light kiss on my forehead.

When I arrive to the next group session after the weekend with Mom, everyone is proud of me for going through with it.

“How’d you feel when she reacted the way she did?” one of the counselors asks.

*Gotta be honest.* “I was glad I came out to her,” I start and notice I’m not meeting anyone gaze. I correct myself and continue. “But I was disappointment in how she reacted. I mean, it could–” I cut myself off from going on a tangent. *Stick with the emotions.* “I left disappointed but a little less so after our second conversation.”

She nods. “Anyone else disappointment with Sofia’s mom’s reaction?”

Instead of feeling like I got punched, it feels like something is trying to punch *out* of my stomach. I want to defend Mom, but group therapy is about emotions not logic or explaining oneself, only owning how you feel. I squash the instinct.

A few people nod in agreement.

The only boy in our group speaks up. “I’m actually kind of angry with her.”

“Good, yeah. It is kind of frustrating isn’t? We all care about each other, right?” We all nod. “We want what’s best for each other, and when someone we care about gets hurt, we get angry on their behalf. I agree, I’m a bit angry as well.”

I clench my hands together and take a few deep breaths to swallow the defense. I don’t want them to think bad of her. I badly want to express, explain what our relationship is like. That honestly, it’s not surprising, and I’m super grateful she didn’t cut me out. But that thinking is the bare minimum. Of course, she shouldn’t/wouldn’t kick me out. What was I thinking?

*It’s okay to be disappointment. It doesn’t mean she’s a bad mom. It means she’s human and didn’t handle it well. Nothing’s changed.*

I keep telling myself that until I feel less guilty about being upset.

In June, my oldest female cousin gets married, and Ava is the only cousin not in attendance. Since this is the first marriage, her absence is a big deal and half the questions everyone asks me is why.

**OMG. You must tell me everything that happens!** Ava texts me.

I carpool with one of my uncles and his family. As we drive up, I'm surprised how nice an Iowa vineyard is. The outside and inside try hard to imitate an old Italian building with fields of grapes around us. I glance over the open floorplan, past the tables and chairs to the open bar. April already passed and my twenty-first birthday with it. Sadly, the bar won't open until the ceremony is over.

The wedding goes wonderfully, and as soon as I spot the open bar, Paige and I are there ordering our first drinks. We clink our glasses before taking deep gulps. I take a seat at one of the tables next to the dance floor and wait patiently for the rest of the photos to be done so we can eat.

"So, Sofia," Michella says as she and Dad sit down across from me, "do you have a boyfriend yet or what?" She smiles and lifts her eyebrows.

She asks me this every time we talk since high school, and I always felt a twinge of loneliness and irritation at being asked. And now, I also feel that tightness around my lungs—*tell them, tell them*—and it's not just the too small bra I'm wearing.

*Just do it. What's the worst that could happen?*

They could accept it, and nothing will change, or they could reject me and finally I would have an excuse to cut them off—*look here! They're homophobic! I can now cut them out for my life for this reason, and no one would question it!* They're not, but either way, I don't care.

Suddenly the metal band disappears and a wave of calmness rolls through my limbs. I don't need to squeeze my fingers together to keep them from shaking. My eyes aren't watering. *I no longer care what you think of me.*

"Ah, actually," I say, straightening up in my seat, staring them dead on, "I'm bisexual. So, don't be surprised if I date a girl instead of a boy."

"Oh, okay," Michella nods and smiles more widely. "So, just to make sure, bisexual means...?"

I glance at Dad—silent, eyebrows slightly raised, surprised—before replying. "I like boys and girls."

"Well, that's great! Isn't that right, Tom?" She nudges him.

He mumbles a "yeah."

"Well, Fifi, I'm looking forward to hearing more about your dating life!" She gives me an awkward hug before leaving the table.

I take a gulp of my drink and feel the heat travel through my whole body.

"Hey, Sofia?"

I meet my father's eyes.

"Thanks for telling."

I nod. "Sure."

"You know, I kind of always suspected."

"Oh?" *That makes one of us.* "How?" The air between us is so awkward that I take another drink, so I have something to do with my hands.

I try to think of any evidence he might bring up when I remember the "Umbrella" music video. I lost count of how many times I watched Rhianna's "Umbrella" when I was young and found it on On Demand back at the first house we lived in with Michella. The song is great and Rhianna's very beautiful, but when she's covered in silver body paint and possibly naked—she's just smooth curves, dancing with a mirror double—I couldn't look

away. I played that music video *all the time* on the TV. I even showed it to my cousins, saying, “Isn’t the song so good?!” before Austin, a few years older than me, realized and told all the adults how inappropriate the video was for us to watch.

I mean he was right, but I was unbelievably upset, even if I never showed it.

“I don’t know. I mean, you never dated and never seemed to be interested in that like your sister,” he said, causing me to snort into my cup. “I can’t really explain it. I’m just not surprised I guess.”

I nod, not quite meeting his eyes. “Well, you’d be the first. Mom was really surprised.”

He laughs tightly. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.” I give a tense smile.

I leave the table and get my second drink. About ten minutes go by with the pictures still going and my hunger still growing, when Dad returns to the table with Brooklyn in his arms.

“Hey, ah, Fifi?”

“Yeah?” Reflexably, I sit up in my chair again.

“I just—I just wanted to say that I’m sorry.”

My blood freezes before rushing from my head, making me lightheaded. *Is he...? Did he just...?* His eyes water little.

“For?” I try to play it off, cut the tension I can feel rolling off of him, but also scrambling to think of the million things he could be referring to. *He’s not seriously apologizing is he? For how he treated Ava and me?*

*Of course, not. He can’t admit it.*

*God, just leave me alone.*

“It’s just—Sometimes when you girls were growing up, I don’t think I was always there for you, and you coming out made me realize I may have missed so much stuff.” His

arms tighten around Brooklyn. She looks between us, oblivious. “I mean, I always tried my best, but I’m sorry if I ever failed at that. And now,” he looks down at her, his adopted child, “I have a second chance.”

I don’t remember what I said to get away from the table, but it must have been good enough or false enough, because he doesn’t chase me down or ever bring this conversation up again.

His apology—“I’m sorry”—and the words “second chance” twist around and around in my head.

*You’re fucking sorry?! Really? Tell me what you did. Say it to my face. Admit it.*

I drown the words by finishing off my second drink. I don’t know how my hands aren’t shaking, in anxiety or rage.

*“I have a second chance.”*

*Well, good for you. You really fucked up on the first try.*

Everything in me wanted to turn around and scream at him. Curse, spit, hit—destroy—something. I wanted to make a scene and throw out all his dirty laundry. *Let them all see how great of a person you are, Dad.*

Instead, I stand in line for another drink and take a few deep breaths—and then a few more because damn this bra. Instead, I gather all my twisting, thrashing emotions and shove them deep down. *You are at your cousin’s wedding. You cannot react in anyway.*

I reach the counter and plaster on a smile and order my third drink in an hour. I make sure to only sip this one as I start to feel the warmth seeping into my head, damping the anxiety and smoothing the anger. Glancing over at the table, I see that Dad is gone, but I’d rather not sit back down again until we can finally eat or else I’ll think and think and—I’d really rather not. I spot Paige and a few more cousins standing on the dance floor and head over. God, I wish Ava was here with me.

Paige says she'll let me stay at her place for the night since there's no room at Grandma Meta's place and no way am I sleeping at Dad's. How would I escape?

We stay late, late enough that Dad has already wished me goodbye, and I'm drunk enough that I agree to Paige's suggestion to take off this tight bra. I feel immediate relief once I unclasp it and stuff it into my purse.

Hunter, Paige's younger brother who is also Ava's age, drives both Paige and me back to her place. Paige is in the back seat typing away on her phone or snoozing, I can't tell. Turning my head back in the car triggers my motion sickness, and since I'm already not feeling steady, I keep my eyes forward in the passenger seat.

"Well, I suppose that Josh will be next," I say, meaning our oldest cousin who brought his girlfriend to the wedding. Josh lives in Georgia, so I don't know how long they've been dating, but I can tell they're serious.

"To get married?" Hunter clarifies.

"Yeah, seems like he's the only one in a serious relationship." While Austin has been dating his boyfriend for a few years, I don't believe they'll get married. Part of it is the same name thing, but I also heard from someone that his boyfriend cheated on him, and I want him gone, but that's not my place.

"I guess, so," Hunter says.

I wonder for a moment that he's just humoring me because his responses are lackluster. Or maybe he doesn't know how to have a conversation with a talkative, drunk me. My cousins have never seen me drunk, in fact, when Josh's father visits Ava in a few months while he's on a business trip in Arizona, he tells her that I was "wasted." Hardly, I just...I needed a break. But then I think about taking off my bra and wonder if he was referring to that.

"So, Hunter, you datin' anyone?"



“No, not at the moment. Do *you* have a boyfriend?”

I watch us cruise down the dark highway. There are barely any lights this far in the country. I smile a little and think, *Fuck it*. “Bold of you to assume that I only like guys.”

I don’t look at him, but I can feel something in Hunter straighten, like he’s paying more attention to the conversation now. “Oh, I see. So, any boyfriends *or* girlfriends?”

This is one of the reasons why I love Hunter. He’s so quiet, but he just rolls with everything. He’s such a sweet person and looks like a giant teddy bear. I would ruffle his hair if he wasn’t driving. I sigh deeply. “No, neither right now. But I’m sure there’s someone out there for me somewhere.” I pat his arm. “And for you too. We just have to wait.”

Hunter pulls up to the house and Paige and I crawl out of the car.

“What do you think of it?” Paige asks.

Hunter calls goodnight and starts heading down the stone stairs to his parents’ place next door. I can’t imagine going down those stairs right now in my state.

I stare at the tiny house that Paige waved to. I haven’t seen the house in years, but I’ll always remember it as Dad’s first house. Even in the dark, I can tell my fish graveyard is gone, but I’m sure that been gone for years. Instead, flowers are planted right in front of the porch and the house is a new blue color. I think it used to be grey. I like the blue much better. I climb the porch stairs as Paige unlocks the door.

The whole place looks superimposed. I can see Paige’s own furniture and posters and potted plants while also seeing Dad’s old pullout couch with the scratchy fabric and the small table he had next to the tiny kitchen. A flatscreen has replaced the thick one Dad used to have. Ava and I loved using the pullout couch to watch *A Cinderella Story* and falling asleep there at night. I glance out the window next to the front door and, yes, that one streetlamp still shines through the blinds.

“It’s really nice,” I say. I follow her to her room. “It’s different.”

Her place is filled with stuff. Pink is everywhere. I never realized how sparse the place was when I lived here. Paige's room is against the wall that I once kicked a hole into because I was falling off the bed Dad, Ava, and I were sharing and thought pushing off the wall would be a good idea. In the middle of the night, we all heard this big *thump* as I broke the wall. I was terrified that Dad would yell, but he just huffed tiredly before pulling me closer into the bed. In the morning, he only checked it out and said that next time, I try not to kick so hard. He repaired it before we came back for his next weekend.

I sit on Paige's bed as she shuffles around in her dresser. I glance at her desk and how cluttered it is. Dad only ever had a dresser and the bed in here. In our bedroom, Ava and I had metal bunkbeds and one dresser for both of us. We also had cubbies to hold our toys. The last room left was the bathroom between the two bedrooms. When I go in to change into my pjs, I phantomly smell Dad's shaving cream and almost expect to see his bread hair all over the sink from his latest shave.

I get back to Paige's room and she wishes me a goodnight. I watch as she goes to her roommate's room—my old one—and try to glimpse anything in it. I can't. I lay back on the bed and wonder if Paige heard what I said to Hunter. I remember Dad sitting me down on his lap, gelling my hair into a ponytail before school.

*"I tried my best."*

I turn on my side and try not to think about how that was him trying his best. The name calling, the gaslighting, the repression of my feelings, the anger being unleashed on me—on Ava, too—and somehow that was all him trying his best.

*"Well,"* I wish I had been brave enough to tell him, *"it wasn't fucking good enough."*

For my last semester of undergrad, I have stretched myself thin. I already finished all the classes for my major last semester, so I'm just checking off my last Theology class—called

Eschatology, the study of last things, afterlife mostly—and two graphic design classes for my minor. I finish one internship that started in the summer and begin another as soon as it ends. I still work two jobs, Madewell and Pure Barre, and squeeze in applying to thirteen graduate school programs. Seeing my friends is the only way I don't go crazy, but it's close.

Then, my classes are done, and Christmas is here. I've finished half of the applications for graduate school and have given my notice at Pure Barre to relive some stress. On Christmas Eve, my cousins all congratulate me on graduating a semester early. Austin talks to me about coming up to the Twin Cities since he and Austin both live in Iowa, the state between Minnesota and Nebraska. He's told me this before and about how much he loves the cities. He always says that he'll tell me when he comes up next time and that we can hang out together. We never do.

"I know this really great queer place," he says. Then seems to realize something and places a hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry, there are plenty of straight people, too."

I fumble—*you idiot, he doesn't know*—and I want to say, "Well, actually I'm not straight, but good for them." Or "I'm bisexual so that won't be a problem." But I'm literally about to step out the door and leaving on that note feels too dramatic, even for me. Plus, if I leave on that note, what will Austin say about it, because I know he'll say something to everyone about it, and I'd rather be here for the fallout. So, I shrug it off and let the moment pass.

Before I leave to celebrate New Year's in Minnesota, I tell Mom, "I keep chickening out coming out to Bert. Do you think he'll react alright?"

"Actually, I already told him," she says as she continues to make dinner.

"You what?" I ask aghast. I put my phone down and look over at her. "When?"

She glances over at me before turning back to the stove. "That weekend you came out to me."

"Why'd you tell him?" I try to keep the frustration from my voice.

She shrugs. “You didn’t tell him while you were here, and I wasn’t sure when you’d get a chance to tell him anytime soon.”

And I’m sure she wanted to talk to him about it and discuss her confusion with someone that wasn’t me.

“Oh,” is all I say and go back to continuing to help make dinner. *I do not feel betrayed. I don’t.*

*Of course, she would tell him, why wouldn’t she?*

But the thought hadn’t crossed my mind. I just assumed she’d keep it from him until I was ready to tell him. *Guess you don’t have to worry about that anymore. Check that off the list.*

I return to Minnesota for January, and it’s my first time being in Minnesota for this month. For the past three years, I’ve run off to another country to escape for a while, first Italy, then the United Kingdom, and last year India. Now I’m just working my last month at Pure Barre and finishing my second internship.

As I finish applying to graduate schools, Becca asks me if I want to travel to London with her at the end of February. She graduated early too, and her new job has a business retreat planned in the UK and wants to stay longer to see the country. She’s never been and since I’ve only got Madewell at this point, I agree!

Before we leave, Mom tells me I must be careful. A virus is going around, and I cannot catch it and give it to Gammie or my uncle Carl because they could die if they get it. Her warning scares me a little, but I think she’s overreacting. When I board the plane, I get a whole middle row to myself. It’s the sparest plane I’ve ever been on. But I’m so happy to fully lie down that I push the worry aside.

We see the Tower of London, the Eye, Big Ben, Harrods, the bridges, and even some shows. We get tickets to see *The Prince of Egypt* and *Phantom of the Opera*. We joke about

seeing *Magic Mike Live*, but as soon as we meet up in London, we head to the ticket window and get the cheap tickets to see it anyways. The show is actually quite feminist. Highly recommend.

We go to the Making of Harry Potter, and as soon as we get in line to start the tour, I drop something and split my jeans on my left pant leg on the inner thigh. I contemplate getting Slytherin pajama pants, but Becca says she'd be too embarrassed to walk next to me if I did. I carry on and pat myself on the back for wearing a long blazer.

After leaving the British Library, Becca and I stop in at Gay's the Word. One of my goals coming to London is to get a paperback copy of *Wayward Son* by Rainbow Rowell. It's not out in paperback in the US yet, and I would really like a copy, especially because it's a different cover. Since the book is about a queer love story, if any bookstore has it, this place would. The store is filled with posters of queer people and advertisements for queer events. I wish I could attend some and meet people like me.

I scan the shelves and find the book, but it's still in hardback. Scrounging up my courage, I ask the employee behind the counter if they have any in stock.

"No," he says, looking at his computer screen, "looks like it's not out yet."

*Well, that's embarrassing.*

I don't really want to leave without buying anything, so I quickly scan his countertop and spot queer flag pins. I search for the pink, purple, and blue pin. I smile and thank the guy once he hands the bisexual flag pin back. I drop it in my bag, think better about it, and secure it in a zipped pocket in my purse instead. I don't put the pin on, but I'm comforted to know it's there.

We are vaguely aware of the virus sweeping over the world. We keep washing our hands before eating anything and using hand sanitizer after using the Tube. We pretend the numbers we hear of people getting it in the UK don't freak us out.

We're back in the country a few days into March. I only need to focus on Madewell and pick which graduate school I want to go to.

My first night back, I wake up hot and my nose stuffy. It must be allergies since spring is here, and every time I come back to Minnesota, my sinuses must readjust to the pollen again. For three nights in a row, I wake up with the familiar feeling of having a fever.

*Oh god! What if I have it?*

*Oh my god, you don't!*

*I had a fever. Only at night, but still! Could be.*

*You don't have a cough. You're fine.*

*What if you're not? What if Carl or Gammie die because of you?*

*I don't have it.*

I keep my distance from my family just in case.

My first day back to work, my manager tells me that some of the students are leaving because of the virus and more hours are opening up at work. I say I'll take them because this is my only responsibility left. Then the hours are cut, and I don't see more hours on my timesheet. In fact, I get four days off in a row and decide I haven't been home since the holidays, and I may as well drive down for a few days. The day before I leave, I'm reading in my room and my nose shuts off.

One minute I can smell the wood from the floorboards, my clean shirt, the mint from my shampoo, the pages of my book, and then—*poof*—nothing!

It's instantaneous.

I inhale deeply through my nose, trying to smell anything. I lift the collar of my shirt, nothing. I raise my arm take a whiff of my armpit, nada.

*What the hell?*

*You did just get over an allergy thing. Must be that.*

Afterall, this isn't the first time I haven't been able to smell when my allergies acted up. But usually that was when my nose was stuffed up, and I thought I was over it...

*Don't worry about it.*

I go ten minutes of trying and failing to read before I go make some tea and get spicy leftovers from the fridge. The rice tastes like nothing, but rice doesn't really have a taste anyway. But the chicken is strange. I chew it slowly, running my tongue over every bit of it to get a hint of flavor. Nothing, just the sharpness of spice. No flavor.

I tilt my head back and pour the hot tea down my throat. Usually this helps smooth any dry spots and help my nose open a bit more so I can breathe better. I take another bite. Still nothing.

I finish the meal a bit angrily and make a second cup of tea with a little brandy mixed in. I lean back in my bed with my spiked drink and tell myself, *Don't think about it. It'll come back in a couple of days. Relax.*

Still unable to comprehend my book, I set it aside and start searching for explanations on my laptop. After an hour, I'm reassured that this is a normal thing after a spike in allergies and more importantly *it will come back*. Calming down, I grab my book once more and read for a few hours, but I take a shot of rum later that night to spark something. Anything.

Nothing.

The next day, I pack up my car, hug Gammie, Carl, and my aunt, all the while holding my breath, too afraid to even breath on them, just in case, and head to Omaha for four days. I over packed the car because my aunt insisted I take some stuff down.

Two hours on the road, my manager calls me and says the store is shutting down for three weeks.

"It's not the store's decision but the mall's. Everything is up in the air right now, but you'll be receiving an email soon with more information, alright? About pay and stuff."

*Shit, this is serious.*

I thank her and call Mom right after.

“Work is canceled for three weeks.”

She sucks in a deep. “See, I told you. Bert just knew this was going to happen. What’s your plan?”

“Well, I guess I could stay down for the rest of the week, heck longer.”

“Do you have enough stuff? Clothes?”

I glance at my rearview mirror and see the boxes of my stuff. “Yeah, definitely. I got some clothes at your place still anyways. So, overall, it’s all good!”

We hang up. Three and half more hours to go.

Besides my parents, Eva is the only person I talk to in Omaha. Eighteen years, and the only person I speak to I’ve known since kindergarten. A few days after I arrive home, I celebrate St. Patrick’s Day at her place with her friends and tell everyone about my nose. I couldn’t tell them what the flavor of the alcohol was, only that it contained alcohol. Besides seeing Eva twice that first week, I have no plans all day/ all week. Mom and Bert work all day and the boys and Ava are all at school (Will is the only one still in high school but is mostly staying with his mother). And Eva—like most of my friends—is finishing up her last semester.

For the first time, I have nothing to do. No obligations, no responsibilities.

It’s like I was on cruise control and suddenly I had to slam on the brakes to miss a huge collision.

There’s *nothing* to do. I earn more money being unemployed and have already accepted a spot at the University of St. Andrews. I know where I’ll be in the fall—in Scotland once the travel restrictions are lifted, because they *must be* at that point, right? I should have been writing. I have all the time in the world and yet, nothing could get me to write. I’d been so used to juggling a million things, that having none felt strange, unfulfilling.



After a week of being home, Bert texts me an article about people who are asymptomatic with the coronavirus will sometimes lose their sense of smell. *Shit*. He, Mom, and I are all trying to do the math and guess when I must have gotten it and how long it's been. I got back from London about three weeks ago.

"You've been back longer than they say to do a quarantine, so you should be fine," Mom says.

"Thank God, I left Minnesota when I did."

"No kidding!"

"How are you and Bert feeling?"

"We're both fine. Don't worry."

"Do you need to take a test? What about work?" Mom works at a hospital in the finance department and never works from home during the pandemic. They just make her wear a mask while in the office. Bert owns his own business—he owns apartment buildings and talks a lot about people needing to hold off on rent because they can't work—and keeps going in person. So, I'm alone most of the week.

"I'll try to get a test, but materials are so low that they are really just giving them to people who have symptoms."

"Well, should I get a test?"

"I'll let you know if I can find you one."

She can't. I need more symptoms to get one.

One night during lockdown, I hear Bert's and Mom's bedroom door slam shut. The sound echoes around the apartment. A sudden shot of fear shoots through my limbs and I'm up at the door, hovering, not realizing I'm waiting to hear shouting voices coming from their room. I crack open my door and peek my head out, trying to assess the situation. Hearing nothing, I

tiptoe out of my room and glance down the wide hallway to their bedroom door. Still closed. Everything is quiet.

I pull out my phone and text Mom. **Are you okay?**

I don't get a response. I creep out to the kitchen grab a glass of water, still waiting. I walk further along the hallway and still nothing.

I text her again. **What happened?**

Still no answer. I have the desire to go knock on the door, demand to know what happened. Maybe they were being quiet so I couldn't hear.

I decide against intruding and try to sleep. I'm restless the whole night.

The next morning, I ask Mom about the slamming door.

"Oh that? It was nothing. Bert shut the door and we had a window open, so it slammed it shut." She laughs.

"Oh," I say quietly, trying to figure out why I reacted that way.

"Why do you ask?"

"I just...I guess I was worried he was upset."

"Oh, no. he wasn't upset. He jumped when the door slammed."

"So did I." I laugh, humorlessly.

Mom leaves for work, leaving me with my thoughts.

I've never liked slamming doors, but I didn't totally realize it was a trigger, or that I trusted Bert so little. On some level, I honestly thought Bert was capable of being that violent. I groan. I'm not over my childhood trauma, like I thought I was. Something about men and yelling and loud noises just immediately got me on guard.

*You need to trust him. He's never given you reason otherwise.*

Despite what my body tells me, I choose to believe the best in him.

Four days turned into three weeks. After being in my pajamas for 48 hours straight, Mom says I need to focus on *something*. We pledge to go on a cleanse together as soon as I get back from Minnesota. After it became clear that work wouldn't start until May at the earliest, I needed to get more of my stuff and clothes fit for warmer weather. I pack the car up again with clothes, books, and other miscellaneous stuff and make the round trip in three days. Once I make it back, I finally tell Dad I'm in town. I feel sort of guilty that I didn't tell him before, like I'm being a bad daughter, but during the last four weeks, I didn't feel like I was missing anything in my life.

He wants to meet up, and though I really don't want to, I feel obligated to see him, Michella, and their two adopted kids. They have this big, new house with new furniture in the kids' bedrooms and in the second living room that connects to the kitchen. They even have a guest bedroom that Dad tries to get me to sleep in.

"No way am I doing free babysitting," I say, shutting down the conversation.

They have a finished basement and an outdoor patio. Their house is nice, but I keep hearing the echoes of Dad's comment about me being "so expensive" while I note every new item in the house. I think about how I used to hide my deodorant in my room because they kept stealing it or how the tampons were always gone. Eventually I learned to pack everything I needed for their house and repacked when I return to Mom's.

Dad tries to talk me out of going to graduate school. The conversation is similar to the one we had when I left for college, about how it's a waste of money, "I never went to college, and my life is great," and blah, blah, blah. Dad asks how I'm going to pay for college in Scotland, and I admit that Mom's gonna help me. He goes quiet before saying how much debit Michella has from college. I glance at her, a little upset on her behalf that he told me the number, and didn't dare glance around the big, new house.

Ever since coming out to him and having that “I don’t care what you think of me” moment, I’ve been able to be more honest and confident in their presence. “It’ll actually be cheaper for me to go to school in Scotland than in the US.”

I give some details and Dad says he’ll help me out some but can’t do much because of the house. I don’t hold my breath.

We finally finish making dinner and sit down.

“Okay, Fifi, how’s the dating life been? Has no one really caught your attention? Boy or girl?”

I shake my head. “No, we are in the middle of pandemic. Not really a time to meet people.”

She gave me a look like I should still be able to get a date despite all of that. I’m sure Ava could.

The conversation petters out a little and changes to the kids. Jamir inevitably gets in trouble with Dad. This time I realize how tense I am as his loud voice carries through the house. I look across the table to Brooklyn to see how she’s fairing. This five year old meets my gaze, shakes her head, and rolls her eyes at the yelling.

I huff a laugh. *You’re sassy kid. I like you.* As amusing as she is, I wish I could take her away from here. *Don’t let them destroy your innocence. Don’t let them make you grow up too fast like I did.*

Once I finally say goodbye, I drive home thinking of how easy it was to talk to Michella and Dad about my sexuality. If I could discuss it so openly with them, why couldn’t I discuss them with Bert? Plus, he already knew, so why was I so nervous about it?

Feeling determined, I arrive at the apartment and seek out Bert. I catch him walking into the laundry room with his earphones in. Mom is in the living room talking loudly with some of her friends on video chat.

“Hey, Bert. Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Sure. What’s up?” He takes out one of his earphones.

“I just wanted to tell you—and I know Mom’s already told you—but I wanted to tell you myself as well.” I take a breath. “I’m bisexual and...yeah.”

Oh good. No tears.

I step back, ready to just go into my room and find something to distract myself from overthinking.

“Wow. Hey, can we talk about this?” Bert places his hand against my arm while taking out the other earbud.

“Ah...sure.”

“Okay. Come in, here.” He swings his hand to the boys’ bedroom—Will’s not here this weekend. We sit down in the two chairs, facing each other.

“Alright. This is big.”

I nod my head, sort of meeting his gaze, but also watching him rock the chair back and forth, back and forth.

“Thank you for telling me.”

“You’re welcome,” I reflexively say, not sure where this is going.

“Based on how quiet you’ve been about it, I’m guessing not many people know?”

Yes, no, kind of. “My friends know, and Ava does too, and obviously you and Mom, even my dad knows. In fact, that’s why I wanted to tell you because he knew and—I just—well, it felt weird that he knew, but you didn’t hear it from me yet, and I care what you think so...yeah.”

He nods. I can tell he’s thinking hard about what he wants to say. “I’m so glad you feel comfortable enough to tell me and that we live during a time where people are more accepting of it. Not like when I was your age. Even so, I worry about people who will use this

against you. It terrifies me that I can't protect you from all of that, but I'm so proud of you for being unafraid of being who you are."

Damnit, the tears.

"Well, I hope you know that I love you and am always here to support you."

I take a deep breath to try to push down the tightening of my throat. "Thanks, Bert. I love you, too."

He smiles and stands. I stand with him and feel like we just finished having a gentleman's conversation and are about to shake hands. Instead, he opens his arms and hugs me tight. I take a deep breath, but I still can't smell anything. His arms hold me tight, and while the hug is a little awkward, the embrace still feels comforting, so I squeeze him a little. *This is what I wanted with Mom.*

We pull apart and we both wipe our eyes a little before we leave the room.

Mom pops into my room an hour later, asking about my conversation with Bert.

"I just came out to Bert is all," I say. "I was at Dad's and we were just talking about it casually, and I just got to thinking that I should just tell him, even if he already knows."

She nods. "How'd he take it?"

I smile. "Really well." As she's heading out the door, I say, "Mom? I really wish you hadn't told Bert. It should have been me."

She sighs. "I'm sorry. I just wasn't sure when you were going to tell him, and I wanted to talk to him about it."

I nod. "That makes sense." And it did. I understand.

"I'm sorry, Sofia."

"It's alright, Mom. Thanks."

She closes the door and leaves me alone to read.

My stepbrothers and I don't have the best relationship. We are siblings, but we didn't grow up together. We don't have a bond like Ava and I do, so I don't feel the need to tell them I'm bisexual. I also don't trust them with this part of myself either. Dillon, the older of the two—who's Ava's age—will sometimes make homophobic comments. I call him out on it, of course, but like my counsellor said, I'm more willing to defend others than myself. I don't want to deal with any comments they may have about me and my interests. I guess, if I ever date a woman or get engaged to one, they'll get the message.

This is how I feel about my extended family. I still feel the metal band wrapped around my chest in their presence, but it no longer feels overwhelming. But sometimes I'll catch myself straightening my language, keeping myself in the closet. It feels a bit like lying. With friends and when meeting new people, it's so easy, because those are the people that can be easily removed from my life with barely any consequences. Sure, the separation can still hurt, maybe even a lot, but family is forever. Even if I did not have contact with those family members, there will always be a way in which we are connected. There could be events where I must see them or choose to not go to those events and miss out on important moments with other family members. I love my family and I don't want to lie to them, but sometimes I think it's easier to let some things lie just to keep some peace. That's what I keep coming back to when I think about blowing up the dynamics anyways. Usually, I review the consequences when I wonder about telling my cousins about Dad and the abuse and the truth about his marriage to Michella. But what would that do? How could that be anything but messy?

But telling Dad's side of the family about my sexuality wouldn't be a big deal. Austin's already out and everyone is proud of him (well, all but one uncle of five, so that's still a win), but when? When's a good time for that? Plus, would Grandma Meta really accept me? It's been years since she had that conversation with Tori, but I still catch myself thinking about it.

Part 3:

The Bi-Defense



“So, how’s your boyfriend doing?” Eva raises her eyebrows at me, begging me to respond correctly.

“He’s fine,” I grit out, hating the lie.

As soon as I sat down, Eva expressed that she was worried our regular waitress thinks we are dating.

“So?” I shrugged, opening the menu.

Eva and I have known each other since kindergarten and went from seeing each other five days of the week through eighth grade, to maybe once a month now that we attend different high schools. When we meet to catch up, we have a nice dinner at Field Club, our families’ country club. Field Club wasn’t all that fancy with a small exercise room downstairs and a view of the pool from the dining area. I mean, Field Club is nice—it has a golf course—and the food is great, but I didn’t feel the need to wear my Sunday Best like I would if we were going to Bert’s dad’s place, Happy Hallow.

“Even if she did, it’s not like we can just say something to her. That’d be weird,” I said, still looking to see if there was anything new on the menu. Eva didn’t even bother to open hers. She was too distracted by the conversation, and she always ordered the same thing: chicken with extra mash potatoes and extra gravy.

“When she’s in hearing distance, ask about my boyfriend.”

I lower the menu and meet her brown eyes. She leaned over the table, hands on the closed menu. She’s serious. I look away from her wide, pleading eyes, and said, “I’m not doing that.”

“Oh, come on! Please? Just ask it.”

“No! It’s stupid and not true.”

“Come on. I could ask you instead.”

“Absolutely not.” I want to slam the menu down on the table but don’t want to draw attention to us, so I set it down softly and with direct eye contact. Matter settled.

“I don’t want her think we’re dating.” She furrows her eyebrows and pouts her lips.

Asking why never crosses my mind. Closing my eyes and exhaling deeply, I say,  
“Fine.”

Sometimes, kids can do and say some really messed up shit. Like in most schools, my class had bullies. Sometimes I got bullied—usually by the boys—and by some of the girls. Others had worse bullying than I did. With the girls, I usually fell under the radar because of how quiet I was. I’d be pushed to the side. That hurt, too, in a lonely way. If no one really acknowledges that you’re there, are you even making an impact?

And sometimes, I could also be a bully.

The school held recess on the carpark which didn’t have a jungle gym or anything fun but the dumpster which we weren’t allowed to get close to anymore. Too many kids chipped their teeth running into it. During one recess, my group of friends started bullying another girl as we played a game and taunted her with, “You like her, don’t you? You like a girl, right?”

Hands on hips, plaid skirt swaying in a faint breeze as we all baited this girl we’ve known for years.

I can’t even remember why we decided to be mean to her, but I think this happened before trying to come out to Dina, so I must have been seven or eight. This actually might be part of the reason I tried to come out to her. This realization that while the girl we were bullying wasn’t actually queer, I was.

I want to defend this. *It was Catholic school, what do you expect? We were all saying homophobic stuff.*

*Or I was an insecure kid, and I didn’t want to be left out, so I followed what they were saying. I was a sheep.*

While these things are true, they’re all excuses I used to make myself feel better about hurting someone. After being the last one to turn my back to her, I remember feeling instantly

bad and don't remember doing much bullying after that moment, except with my sister. But I definitely never spoke up either when my friends did it or when they were bullied.

Standing up for others, I learned to do in high school. Learning to stand up for myself is something I started trying to do in college. I'm still working on it.

But what haunts me is that moment with the girl on the playground.

When Eva and I talked about *Modern Family*, which premiered during seventh grade, I was worried Eva would discuss the gay couple the way she usually did when homosexuality crept into our conversation: her face scrunching up in disgust, fake gaging, and saying, "ew!"

Instead, she said, "Oh and the gay couple, Mitchel and Cam, they're my favorite."

"Really?" I didn't mean to ask, but the question just slipped out.

In between bully that girl in school and now, Dad and I had a conversation about gay people.

"You know," he said, "I think that it's all right. I mean, look at it this way, why would anyone choose to be gay? People are going to judge you for it, and it makes your life harder. Why would someone choose to make their life harder? So, my thoughts on it are this, they must be telling the truth and that can't be wrong. It's not really hurtin' anybody is it?"

I shook my head.

"Exactly, so I think it's all right. People should just let others live their lives how they want to live them."

Despite the hard stuff between us, I really took what he said to heart.

"Yeah, really, Sofia. Geez. Honestly, they're great and so dramatic. I love their storylines."

"Oh, it's just, well, I kind of thought you were uncomfortable with it," I hesitantly said.

"Well, I mean it's just two guys. That's totally fine."

I hummed in agreement, but she hadn't said anything about women. And sure, enough there were still moments as we finished grade school and high school when we'd talk about queer women and she'd get that face again and say, "ew!" So when I started coming out to my friends and family, I was afraid that my oldest friend would react the same way to me. She was the first person I could talk about my family life and my family drama. She was my oldest friend; she knew me, and I knew her. And all I could see is her saying, "EW! Sofia, we've slept in the same bed together. I can't believe you!"

She could be like Dina all over again, but worse. So much worse.

In the spring of 2019, Eva got a job working at Disney World in Florida and invited Ava and I to come visit her. We'd only be there for two full days, so we jampacked the whole weekend. Since Ava and I had never been, Eva wanted to show us everything. On the first day of our trip, we went to Universal Studios and the next day, we park hopped from Magic Kingdom, to Epcot, and then to Animal Kingdom.

At this point, I was only out to Ava and Mom—Bert wouldn't be until another year and Dad and Michella, the following month at the wedding.

"Here, I got you both some Micky Ears!" Eva handed us matching pink, sparkly mouse ear headbands.

Ava and I hated wearing matching stuff, but we both thanked her and wore them the whole day we were at the park.

"Now, Sofia, I basically packed for you. I have Band-Aids and pain medicine." Eva shook her fannypack.

"Oh nice!" I was notorious for getting blisters anywhere on my feet and raging headaches from dehydration. Shamefully, I hadn't even thought to pack supplies for any of that. I thanked her several times over.

Instead of either of those things, I got badly sunburned on the back of calves and the worse chaffing of my life. Not just between my brushing thighs but up my entire butt crack. Every step was painful.

That was my first time in Florida, and it wrecked me.

As soon as we returned to the hotel room to regroup, Ava yelled, “I call the shower first,” then ran into the bathroom and hopped into the shower.

“Ava, what the hell?”

Eva started laughing uncomfortably.

“I really need the shower!” she called out.

“And I don’t? I’m overheated enough to be my own sun!”

“Sorry can’t hear you!” She turned on the shower.

I laid down on the bed, trying to calm my body down.

At every park, Eva and Ava whispered to each other about all the men they’re seeing walking around, but I was enraptured with the parks and princesses. When we walked into Magic Kingdom, I stood there for a moment gazing up at Cinderella’s castle, taking a moment to fully realize I was here. Every child has dreamed of going to Disney World/Land/whatever, at one point in their life, right? I remember being in Dad’s first house when he moved out and watching the Disney World commercial. The kids looked so happy, and everything looked so magical, I had to go. I begged and begged each of my parents and they both said, “One day.” Not now, but one day. And now, here I was, twenty-one, an official adult walking around Disney for the first time. But for a moment, I felt like a kid again, fulfilling a long-awaited dream really late, maybe even too late.

“O.M.G. Sofia!”

“What?” I tore my gaze from the castle, smiling, and turned to Ava.

“Did you see that guy over there?” she whispered, her attention not straying from him.

I groaned. “Seriously? We’re in Magic Kingdom.” I pointedly gestured to the castle.

Ava gave me this look, glanced at the castle, and back at me. “Are you serious?”

Instead of answering, I turned my back to her, took a picture, and said, “Let’s just have fun.” And *now* I felt my age again.

Even if we weren’t at an amusement park, Ava would still be pointing out different guys asking if I saw them and “aren’t they so hot?” With Eva, they tag teamed pointing out the guys while I remain oblivious to their sightseeing. When I walked, I genuinely didn’t notice people around me. Usually, I would listen to music and be lost in my head or lost in the *actual* sights around us. When I stood still, then I’d notice their attractiveness. But Eva and Ava spent a lot of time constantly pointing out different guys here and there and nudge me before realizing I’m super uninterested.

During a moment when Eva was distracted, I elbowed Ava’s arm and say, “Hey, check that girl out over there.”

Ava followed my lead and saw the cute girl with long brown hair laughing with one of the characters.

“I think she’s really pretty.” I smirked when she frowned back at me.

“Of course, you do, because you’re a lesbian.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not a lesbian.”

“You’re not noticing the guys.”

“I notice,” I crossed my arms, “sometimes.”

She gave me an unconvinced look.

“I just don’t feel the need to point out every hot guy I see, or girl for that matter.” I shoved her. “Stop it.”

I celebrate Christmas in Omaha in 2019. The pandemic is right around the corner, and Eva is sitting across from me in our living room. She’s in the middle of talking about one of her

friends from her time in Florida and how the friend is bi, and “Yeah, she’s like really cool. She’s been with both guys and girls.”

She keeps going, but I’m stuck on the fact that she knows someone who is bi and has just breezed over it like the fact didn’t matter. Her friend is bi and she’s so cool with it, and I’m not really listening to anything else she’s saying. I blurt, “Well, just so you know, Eva, I’m bisexual, too.”

“Oh, cool,” she says, still distracted by her story, “anyways...” She says a few other words, but I’m barely paying attention over my relief. “Wait...you’re bisexual?”

“Yeah.”

“Really? Since when?”

“Forever, I guess.”

“Huh.” She looks lost in thought for a moment. “Does your family know?”

“Ava does and Mom, but not Bert, yet.”

“Oh. How’d they take it?”

“Good! Well, my mom was confused, but she seems fine with it now.”

She laughs. “Yeah, I can see her being confused. Well, this is *so* interesting!”

“Yeah?” I’m just glad her face hasn’t scrunched up in disgust yet.

“Yeah. You know.” She leans towards me. “Bisexuality seems to be really popular these days. *Everyone* seems to be coming out as bi, right now.”

“Oh?” I ask, confused. I’m not sure how to take what she said. While I’m glad that more people feel comfortable to come out, I’m not sure I like the sound of “being popular right now” part. She made coming out as bi sound like some new clothing trend people were trying and would eventually fade.

“Yeah,” she nods sagely. “Anyways, my story.” She continues telling me about her friend, and I force myself to focus on her words. *Popular right now.*

She finishes her tale and stares at me for a second before saying, “You know. I just can’t believe you’re bi! When did you tell Ava?”

“Last Christmas.”

“That long? Why didn’t you tell me?” She pouts.

“I know, I was just nervous to tell you, you know?” I want to stop talking about this with her.

“Well, I wish you would have told me before, and I could have gotten you the Pride Ears.”

A rush of longing flows through my chest when I remember the rainbow Micky ears.

One of our first stops at Disney World was the ear shop. They had one for every occasion: graduation, birthday, wedding. Then a rainbow one caught my eye. The Pride Ears. I quickly searched for the bi one and was disappointed when I realize they only had the rainbow one. *It’s okay. That isn’t the right one anyways.*

*But still, those are the one I would have gotten if I had a choice.*

*False advertisement. Guys won’t look twice at you, plus you’re not out to Eva.*

I tore my eyes away and tried to guess which character other ears were representing. Ava slid up to me, nudged my shoulder, and said, “Psst. Sofia.”

I huffed in annoyance. “Yeah?”

“Look, they have gay ears.” She nodded to them.

For some reason, that small gesture made me happy. “Yeah, I saw. Pretty cool. Kind of want them.”

And for the rest of the trip, every time I saw someone wearing them, I felt both pride and envy. I wanted to wear them proudly, too.

“Yeah,” I softly say, “I really wanted a pair.”

“Well, if you had told me, you could have had them.” She reclines in the chair like the matter was settled.



I laugh a little. “Right. Thanks.”

She laughs, too, and everything feels a bit weird. With the rest of my friends, I felt this instant relief at telling them, the band around my chest falls away so I could finally breathe around them again. And I still feel that relief too after telling Eva. I’m no longer dreading telling her, agonizing over her reaction. But the band doesn’t feel gone, only loosened, like I’m still worried she’s going to turn around and say something biphobic. This feeling is how I sometimes feel when I talk about my romantic life—or lack of—with Mom, like I need to keep my guard up or else they’ll catch me in a lie or cut me down. *Practice. Just practice.*

As okay as her reaction was, something about it feels held back. But I’m afraid what I might find beneath the surface if I poke at her enough to reveal the truth.

I don’t want to feel like this around her. I want to believe or trust her enough that she won’t say something that will hurt me, that I disgust her. She’s my oldest friend, that means something right? I can’t lose this friendship, and I hate thinking of how much I wish she reacted a bit differently or felt comfortable enough to have a deep conversation about how we were both homophobic in our childhood and “Wasn’t that messed up? What are your thoughts on that?”

How do I bring that up? Would she even engage in that conversation? Is she in a place in her life that she can?

A few months later during lockdown, I’m over at Eva’s place, and we’ve been drinking with her roommates. She’s drunker than I am, I’m headed out soon so I’m basically sober, and she needs help finding her keys in her bedroom. She’s not looking for them to drive or anything, but she left something in her car she wants to get. After a few minutes of hearing her rummage in her room, I walk in and find them in her unlit room in a few seconds.

Laughing, I hand them over. “Here you go.”

She takes them and huffs in amusement at her shortsightedness.

She's standing in front of her open door, and I wait patiently for her to walk out first so I can leave. Instead of turning and heading out, her hands land on my shoulders. "*Thank you, Sofia,*" she drunkenly says.

I'm uncomfortable with her hands on my shoulders and try not to show it. "It was no problem."

She shakes me a little. "No seriously."

We stare into each other's eyes, and then she's leaning closer to me and her eyes seem to start closing and her lips look a little more pouty than usual and—

*Am I reading this wrong, or is she trying to kiss me?*

I back up enough, so her hands drop. I panickily laugh. "I think I should probably head home. Let's go outside." I scratch the back of my head, walk around her, and quickly get my shoes on.

The entire drive home and every time I think back on this moment, I wonder if I had been reading her right or not. Was she going to kiss me? Was that not her intention? Does she even remember that awkward moment? Was she too drunk? We have never talked about it. That conversation is on the same level as discussing our homophobic language in grade school, something we either can't right now or may never discuss.

And what if she does remember? Did I just do what Dina did to me? Reject who she was? Was she trying to show me who she was?

"I could never be with a man who's been with another man."

My brow furrows. Please tell me I did not just hear that.

"*What?*" I turn from the kitchen counter to meet Mom's gaze.

"What?"

"You can't be serious."

"Well, it's true." She shrugs.

So many thoughts swirl in my brain. Where to start? “Mom, you do realize saying that is kind of homophobic right?”

“How is it?” Ava speaks up.

“Because!” Words crowd my mouth, all fighting to get out at once, but this moment feels important. I need to be careful and be understood. They need to realize saying this is not okay. “Because why should his history matter? I mean, you wouldn’t care if it were a woman, right?”

“No, of course not.”

“So, why should it matter if he’d been with a man in the past?”

“It just makes me uncomfortable.”

*Well thank goodness you’re married to Bert and never have to worry about it then.* I want to snap back with this so badly, but I know saying it wouldn’t do any good. “Listen, I really wouldn’t advertise saying that, okay? People will really take that the wrong way.”

“So, are you saying,” Mom gestures to me, “that it wouldn’t bother you?”

“No!” I say, exasperated. “That would be hypocritical of me.”

“Not if that’s how you really feel.” Mom gives me this look, lifting her eyebrow with an open face, saying ‘this is a safe place to be truthful.’

“It’s not!” My voice rises the more passionate I get. “See, this here is the reason why so many people don’t want to date bi people,” I start. “Everyone is so worried about their past partners and being cheated on. I mean, I’m pretty sure no guy I date will be upset to learn that I dated a woman—in fact, it seems like guys really like that—but I am worried that a woman might be upset that I’ve been with a man. I wouldn’t want to be judged for my dating history nor would I judge someone else’s.”

Mom hums and nods. “And that’s how you really feel?”

“Yes!”

“Okay, well just calm down. You’re getting really heated.”

I growl in frustration. Ava and Mom always say that when I get passionate about something, usually about something political. They never want to have healthy debates about hard conversations and end up shooting down the conversation because I'm getting loud or "too heated." They make me want to pull my hair out, peel off my skin. I don't bother to even ask Ava for her input, more afraid she'll be on Mom's side instead of mine. I would rather just not know. I wonder what Eva would have said and decide if I think about it too long, I'll just get more upset because I'm sure she'd agree with Mom.

"You know what, I'm going to walk away from this conversation," I say, putting my hands up in surrender.

"Well, I'm sorry, Sofia, if I hurt your feelings." Mom presses her hand to her heart.

I wave her off. "Just please don't say that to anyone, because it is kind of homophobic, okay?" Then I walk out of the kitchen.

Belle and I lean forward on the counter and check out our co-worker's ass. I've never really got what's so appealing about guy's asses, but his was plump and well defined even in his worn-out pants, so I'm starting to kind of get it.

The ice cream shack is a great people watching spot. I love watching the dogs and the waves crashing on the shore. I've never lived next to the ocean before, so I never tire of the view. If I were alone, I'd be reading my book and waiting for customers. I love Scottish customer service. I don't have to entice people to come up like I would if I were in the US; I need to wait for them to come to me. But since I'm with Belle, my co-worker and flat mate, we usually just chat about random things. Like the shows we watch together, the latest guy on her radar—right now it's Rob and he's a keeper—and the differences between Scottish and US cultures. We are both American, so it's nice to talk to someone who gets how it's hard sometimes to be an American in a foreign country. You never want to be *that* American, but inevitably you end up saying or doing something that makes you that anyways.

I rest my chin on the palm of my hand and sigh. “You know, sometimes I wonder if I’m even attracted to guys,” I joke, smiling a little.

“Oh my gosh,” Belle stands up and turns to me, “honestly, I’ve been wondering that, too.”

I tilt my head towards her, not quite sure I know what she means. “Huh?”

“Honestly, you never seem very interested in guys. What if you’re just a lesbian?”

*Oh.* I match her stance.

Her eyes look big, attentive, and I can tell this is something she’s thought a lot about and has used my joke to start the conversation.

*Shit.* I really wish I hadn’t said that now. “No, I’m pretty sure I’m bi.” I huff a laugh.

“Really?” Her head tilts to the side. “Because you’ve friend zoned three guys, and you seem more interested in girls.”

I feel caught in a riptide. “Three guys?”

“Yeah, Dan, the guy in Dundee, and now Stewart.”

Oh, right. I guess there has been three guys.

Dan was in my cohort, and when we were chatting online before meeting in person, I thought maybe something could happen between us. He was interested in writing like I was and sounded nice on our group chat, but during our first class on Teams, his thin blonde hair, glasses, and thin shoulders reminded me a lot of Bert. Then I met him in person, saw how he was basically my height—Bert is much taller than me—and any feeling of *maybe* was gone. Friend zoned number one.

The guy in Dundee was something along the same lines. We chatted on Bumble, and we had good conversation, nothing overly deep, but some of our interests aligned—he liked *Pirates of the Caribbean*, too! Then we had a brief in-person encounter and something about his beard and the awkward feeling between us turned me off from the whole thing. Number two.

And lastly, Steward. We also met on Bumble, had good conversation, and when we met for the first time, we walked around St. Andrews for two hours. We talked about our families, and I was honest and dove into deep topics with him. He felt safe. We didn't kiss, much to Belle's disappointment, but we did kiss on the second date after having a nice dinner. He was my first, real kiss, and I didn't really get what the deal was about kissing.

When we broke apart, he looked elated; I wasn't. I hid my face in his chest, so I didn't have to fake some expression. When he asked what was wrong, I explained how that was my first kiss, and then, feeling some general social pressure, I invited him up to my flat. Nothing happened, except for some more kisses. We just hung out on the couch and watched *Brooklyn 99*. On our third date, he made mac and cheese at my place, and we watched *Batman Begins*—I'd never seen it—while we ate. I was so aware of our hands holding each other, how my fingers laid on his and how uncomfortable it was and how my fingers slowly lost feeling because I wouldn't even twitch them. After six sessions of boring kissing, I realized this wasn't going to work for me.

And that's three.

"I just, well...I just didn't like any of them like that," I say, not sure how to explain.

"Okay, but you really didn't seem interested in them." She lifts her eyebrows.

Before the third date with Stewart, Belle and I had a conversation on how we both expected the date to go. Since we were having our third date, Belle questions if we were gonna sleep together.

"No way! Noooo way!" I said. "He's not even stepping foot in my room." I didn't even like Belle and our other flat mate going into my room, let alone someone I knew for only a week and a half. I'm very private about my space.

"Well, that seems a bit extreme."

I exhaled. "Well, if he needs to use the restroom, obviously he can use mine. But I don't want him touching my stuff." I pictured him and I sitting on the couch like Belle and I

were now. I imagined how the movie watching may go, how closely we'd be sitting together. How our bodies might touch. How we would probably kiss again. Was that excitement or anxiety in the pit of my stomach? "I also really don't want him pausing the movie and talking about it either."

We set the conversation aside to start a show, but when I paused it for the second time to discuss a scene, Belle pointed out how I'm doing the same thing I don't want Stewart to do. *Damnit*. I groaned. *What was my deal?* I didn't know why I was being so negative and trying to downplay the date.

Staring at Belle now, I'm starting to see her perspective. My strange defensiveness towards my space and privacy. "I still like guys. I'm not a lesbian."

She flashes her palms. "Okay, I'm just letting you know about the pattern I'm seeing."

We both direct our attention back out to the beach, waiting for someone to ask for ice cream, and discuss safer topics.

A few days later, I'm hanging out with some people in my cohort, telling them what Belle said and, now that I had time to overthink the whole conversation a hundred times over, I realize just how upset I am with her. What does she know? She doesn't know how much I agonized over these same questions, my endless soul searching, and finally accepting myself. And now she's making me question it all over again. When I come to the same conclusion, I get upset with her all over again for questioning me, as if she knows who I am better than I do.

I don't voice all of this, just my frustration when Matt asks, "Well, what if you *were* a lesbian?"

*Really?* I want to ask. Also, *is it okay that Matt asked because he's gay, or is it still offensive? Do I still have a right to be upset about this?*

I also really don't want to screw up my only queer social circle by offending Matt or making him upset. I settle on asking, "What?"

"I mean," Matt starts, "when I first came out, I said I was bi before realizing I was gay and coming out as that. So, do you think you're really bi or just a lesbian?"

I'm stunned to hear that Matt originally came out as bi. I've only ever known him as gay and not when he was figuring himself out. And while I empathize with his narrative, I keep reading posts online about biphobia, and how this is one of the harmful ways in erasing bisexuality. Everyone is entitled to exploring their sexuality but sometimes people make me feel like my bisexuality is just a steppingstone before I admit I'm 'fully' a lesbian. As if it's easier to still have my foot on the 'straight' side to give hope to my family that I'll still marry a man. That I'll still upkeep the heteronormative standard.

And funny enough, no one questions my liking girls—not since Mom did when I came out—only my attraction to men. Of course, if people need to come out as bi because they feel safer to say that, before coming out as gay or lesbian or whatever, then fine. All I'm asking is to respect the other labels. If someone says they are something, then respect it, no matter what your perception of them is. *No one knows what you find attractive or what you fantasize about better than you do.* I keep telling myself this, trying to revamp my confidence.

"I'm pretty sure I'm bi."

"And it's totally okay if you change your mind."

"No, totally." I wave my hand. "I know it'd be okay."

Then he laughs. "I mean, you did say that you questioned your sexuality after kissing Stewart. How bad does the guy have to be to make you question your sexuality?"

I snort but also feel bad for saying that, even if was true.



When I finally get home, I lay in bed mulling over both conversations and try to grasp my problem with guys. Every time I question my sexuality, I make a list of guys—because at this point it’s super obvious I like girls for *sure*—I would like to kiss and touch and sleep with: Jensen Ackles, but as Dean Winchester. Check. Henry Golding, Richard Madden, Justice Smith. Check, check, check. Totally all untenable men, but still, the attraction is *definitely* there.

So, if I do like men, what’s the problem?

A few days later, while talking to Mom on the phone, I get my answer.

“Well,” she says, “I think you’re afraid to be loved by a man.”

And damn if that doesn’t fuck me up a little bit.

“Wow, that’s...brutally honest.”

“I just think you feel safe with the love of a woman and not with a man. I hope one day you can get over that.”

And that hurts. Like my sexuality is the sum of my trauma. I’m so afraid to be loved by a man, that I convinced myself to like woman, too, to give myself options. Or that I won’t heal from the scars of my childhood until I fall for and marry a man. I know she’s not saying that, but also isn’t she sort of insinuating that if I marry a woman one day, she’ll just think I couldn’t get over my issues with Dad to love a man?

When I explain this conversation to my sister a year later, Ava asks, “Do you even realize what you just said?”

“What?”

“You just said you feel like you have to date a man before marrying a woman? I mean, are you sure you even like guys?”

I take another sip of my drink and try to figure out when I lost her. I want to explain how I figured out I’m terrified to be in a relationship with a man because I don’t trust them.

That our dad—the man who’s supposed to be the model for all men—treated me—both of us—like shit when we were growing up and kept saying things like, “you got to marry a man like your father,” and how that really messed me up, too.

I want to explain that I’m so afraid that I’m not a good judge of character, especially with men, and I don’t want to be in a toxic relationship or in a good one where the guy ends up cheating on me like Dad did to Mom. That I’m so sure a guy is going to hurt me emotionally, physically, or both, that I trick myself in swiping on the guys that don’t seem like that. I swipe on the guys so safe, that I’m not even attracted to them. Because if I am, there must be something wrong with them, and the relationship will only end in pain.

But girls are different. Girls *get* it. What it’s like to live in a man’s world and how to be vulnerable. We are so sweet and pretty, that being with one is easy in such a different way, because safe for girls doesn’t mean sexless. That the first time I sleep with anyone, it’s a girl I met the day before on Bumble. And when we kissed, I finally got what people meant when they said that kissing was good. That it wasn’t just two pairs of lips moving against each other, but how when her lips were on mine, this feeling of wanting swelled inside my chest and as soon as we broke part the feeling started to fade, so of course we must kiss more to prolong the feeling. And suddenly clothes are coming off and we keep asking, “Are you sure? Are you sure?”

“Yes, yes. Keep going.”

And we take everything off but our socks. And the lights are off, and we get to know each other through our hands and mouths.

I finally get it.

And I promptly freak out as soon as the lights come back on and see the bruises on my chest. I didn’t think I was the kind of person to sleep with someone just after meeting them. Or that I was the kind of person to break it off with someone after sleeping them. I kept thinking, *God you’re acting like such a guy*, and beating myself up over it.

And I know if she had been a guy, that never would have happened, because a guy would have to work three times as hard to make me feel safe enough to get me in his bed.

And when I call up Caroline freaking out over losing my virginity, she keeps telling me, “You’re just learning more about yourself. You’re living your best life. There’s nothing wrong with what you did.”

Or how Ava herself tells me a few days later when I decide to tell the girl I can’t see her anymore that I, “don’t owe her anything. Not another meeting. It’s just like when Dad would guilt us into seeing him. You don’t owe her or him shit.”

I glance around the gay bar and notice how close the people next to us are. I want to laugh at how ridiculous it is that we went from straight *Magic Mike Live* to gay bar on my twenty-fourth birthday.

I want to explain to Ava that I feel like I’m not gaining enough experience in my romantic life. That I’ve just turned twenty-four and never been in a relationship—two weeks and three dates don’t count right? And every time one of my friends text how so and so is engaged now, I feel this strong *lack* in this area of my life. From the outside, everyone seems to be jumping into marriage. Are we really ready for that? Shouldn’t we just wait until we’re all thirty and *sure* about the person? Am I still missing something and falling behind in this regard? How can I feel so young and have so much time for romance and also feel like time is catching up to me? Like we are all in a race to find The One and time is closing in on us. I still don’t feel mature enough to deal with my lingering childhood trauma, or how I’ll carry that in a relationship. But I also get the feeling I won’t know until I try.

I can still hear my counselor’s question: “*Who do you picture getting married to?*”

I still don’t know. Not their gender, not their race, or height, or hair color—if they even have hair—or if they’ll have a beard that will scratch up my face or long hair for me to tug on when I kiss them. I can only picture how happy I’ll be to walk down the aisle and

promise to spend the rest of my life with them. How we'll balance each other out and how we will parent our five adopted kids. I want that so much, that I want it here with me now. I'm so afraid that my life is going to be cut short. That I'll die before I get to accomplish the things I want to do. That I'll die before I get to have that blissfully happy, solid future. I want their hand in mine and not this glass of whiskey.

I take another sip.

I'm not nearly drunk enough to discuss my issues in a public place but also too intoxicated to string all my thoughts together for it to make sense to Ava anyway. So, I just tell her to forget about it and change the subject.