

Excerpt from None of This is an Invitation

written by Guest Contributor | March 17, 2021



Porterhouse, Texas

No one living had known the dead. The cemetery was so old, it was empty. When we were fifteen-years-old, we'd skip school on Fridays and smoke weed under the giant oak tree. Alex and me.

Alex liked the cracked headstones and the warped bars on the wrought iron fence. She liked the stretch of green and giant trees between the access road and the feeder road. There wasn't much else. Just a Dollar General on the corner. Mostly, Alex and I lay in the grass, passed a spliff back and forth, and made up stories about the dead.

Angela Bryan was our favorite. An orphan girl found in 1872, her headstone said, on Bidwell Ridge. Found was fucking chilling. She was fifteen-years-old. Same as us. Her headstone seemed cheap, compared to the others, but there was an etching of a dog on it. Sometimes we'd leave weird shit propped against it: cigarettes, snacks, wildflowers. Once Alex left her yellow raincoat by accident. When we returned, the items invariably vanished.

Edwin Grey's plot was on the ridge, under an oak: prime real estate. His marker was monumental. It had wings, and a really irate creature, perched on a square of stone. He and Linnea, a sister maybe, lived around the time Angela died.

"Not a sister," Alex said. "A creature."

Linnea's stone said *Taken By The Beast*. It sat in the shadow of Edwin's. She had no birthdate. Edwin's inscription said: "And the Earth shall give birth to the dead."

"Who was the beast?" Alex asked.

This was our game, and it was my turn to play. Alex sat next to the winged

creature headstone and caressed it while I told my story.

"Edwin built the beast out of dead people," I said. Like in *Frankenstein* because Alex thought that quote came from *Frankenstein*. She was wrong, but I played along. "Edwin tried to make a woman," I said. "He made Linnea. She was his creature, not his sister. She was the beast. Linnea killed herself, in a way."

Linnea's stone, like Angela's, was crude and cheap. She died before Edwin. He must've spent all their money only on his own.

Alex nodded, "Edwin was a dick." She leaned down and kissed the tip of the wing.

I told her about his shack, a charnel house, on Bidwell Ridge. Of course, he had a house house, too, where he lived like a good Christian, but he also had this shack, and that's where he was one night in December of 1872, the night of a terrible snowstorm.

"In Southeast Texas?" Alex asked.

"It was otherworldly," I said.

Angela and her dog were looking for a place to sleep, while Edwin was finishing his first creature. Everything was violently white. Then there was a flickering in the distance. Deep in the woods, outside his shack, Edwin hurled human scraps into a bonfire. A log sparked and cracked. A girl stood on the far side of the fire. He liked her eyes. He stepped closer and said, "Child, you'll die out here. Come inside."

Alex sat with her back to the headstone. She hit the spliff. She looked worried. "Child," she repeated. "What a creep," she said. She kept looking across the access road. I ignored her and started picking at my scalp. I got so nervous, I didn't know what to do with my hands.

"Edwin had a knife," I said. "He kept it in his waistband. He took two long strides and suddenly he's standing at Angela's side. He places his hand on her shoulder. She pulls back. He grabs her wrist. The dog barks. He had not noticed the dog. The dog paws at the air. It's black lip curled up, teeth showing. Leaping, the dog's teeth rips through his stockings and—"

Sometimes I threw shit like that in. Stockings. To see if Alex was listening. She wasn't. She was lost across the street now on the feeder road. She didn't even see the blood on my fingertips from picking my scalp.

"The dog basically tore the stockings off his legs," I took a drag off the spliff. "And Edwin drove his knife into the dog's neck and Angela ran off," I said. I said it to fuck with Alex. She hated it when dogs died. She hated it even more when their owners let them die. "Are you even listening, Alex?" She nodded, yes, but I knew she was lying. Her face was pale, and her mouth hadn't closed yet from her exhale.

"Alex," I said, "are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she said, "keep going."

I shrugged. I went on. Edwin made a mistake. His creature needed eyes. The corpses didn't have eyes anymore. When you die, you know, the eyes are the first thing to go. Edwin took the dog inside. Here's what matters: he gave Linnea the dog's eyes. So, when Linnea came to life, she didn't want to see Edwin, at all, she only wanted to see Angela.

"What does Edwin look like?" Alex asked.

"Dangerous," I said, "in the most unoriginal way. Like Jason." I waited for Alex's response, but instead she got out her phone and put it up to her face like she was taking a selfie, but she was actually taking a picture of the access road. She didn't respond. Jason was not funny, and Alex laughed at his dumbass anyway. He wears cargo pants and Hawaiian print button-ups because he thinks the style is quirky. He writes the worst poetry because he read *The Count of Monte Cristo* one time and claims it "changed his language forever." Don't forget, I constantly remind Alex, his nickname from high school is Butt because his face looks like a pinched asshole when he smiles.

"There's a man standing under the oak trees," Alex said. "He's grinning. He's watching us and grinning." She lowers her phone. Starts frantically scrolling through her pictures, examining the screen with intent.

Now she was fucking with me.

But I wasn't going to play. I was annoyed. It was my turn, and she was trying to hijack my story. She hadn't even listened, really. So, I stayed on my back. I watched the murmuration in the sky change direction. I re-lit the spliff and then changed my mind, squashing it out into the dirt, flicking it away from us. I said, "Oh, right. There he is," and draped my arm dramatically over my eyes, letting out an even more dramatic cloud of smoke. I loved the drama of it all. It was getting a little dark and overcast. I propped myself up on an elbow.

She said, "You're looking the wrong way entirely!" She cupped my face in her hands and turned my head. "Look," she said. "It's Edwin."

Her bit was strange, not funny. She and my brother deserve each other. Her delivery was poor, her vision unclear. This was unlike her. Still I tried to play along. To set her up for the punchline. "He's probably making another creature. He's probably taking another dog's eyes," I said.

"Do you even see him?" she asked.

She was fidgeting with the grass, pulling out tufts. I kept waiting for her face to break its solemnity.

"Maybe he's burying the one he already made. Another mistake. Like Linnea. He messed up. She won't fuck him," I said, "Another lesbian." The way Alex was distracted was pissing me off.

I stood. I brushed the grass off of my jeans. I touched her shoulder, and she

jumped. "Let's go," I said, sort of lazily. "It's raining." Neither of us had noticed the turn. I helped Alex stand. She followed me down the cobbled walk, but she kept looking back. When we reached the gate, she paused. I could have sworn she waved.

After Alex went missing, I started making lists: *strange things Alex did, strange things Alex said, strange things that happened with Alex, strange things that happened to Alex*. I thought we had an unspoken understanding. When she went missing, I started wondering what, if anything, I'd understood about Alex. Her disappearance, like our friendship, felt telepathic—unspoken, unspeakable—maybe supernatural. What I mean is, was any of it real?

For instance, once Alex asked to hold the base of my skull, where my head met my neck. Back then, I got headaches. I saw bright shapes, a sudden flash. I'd hear things. When it happened, if she was near, she'd touch the base of my skull, like she knew exactly what I was feeling.

That day on Crescent Hill, when we rounded the corner, a small animal yelped quietly as if to itself and then soundly at us. When I looked back, the animal was not there, and Alex touched the base of my skull. I removed her hand. I smiled. I said, "Alex, I'm fine." Leaves skidded, whipped and swept underneath our shoes, the crunch vibrated behind me, something following. The sky heavy with clouds and getting darker in the west felt like it would crack open like an ornament, felt like someone watching us from above.

We passed a neighbor's house we had never seen before, which felt both unexpected and thrilling. Plastic pelicans lined the lawn in front of the small porch, so many it was dizzying. A small, old woman sat crouched behind her Lincoln Towncar parked outside the carport. The car was running. The woman had her mouth near the exhaust. I didn't know if I should help her, I was scared about her overextended, dribbling mouth. We ran up to her anyway. Alex kicked her over onto the dead grass and crouched down.

"The wharf rats in the tulips. Please!" the small, old woman said as she reached out to Alex's braids and pulled one so her ear was up against the woman's gummy teeth and gasoline drool. I shook Alex's arm, tried to get her away, but the woman kept hold of her braid.

"Quit! You are going to rip my hair out!" Alex said and fell into me, leaving a tuft floating down onto the wet grass. The woman ripped the air at our ankles as we backed away, her hands tiny, her fingernails unkempt and too long. Alex kicked at her again, and the top of her steel-toe boot landed on her head, knocking her face to the side.

The woman stopped clawing. "Let's go let's go let's go," I said. We linked arms and bypassed the various garbage cans, past the end of the houses, past the corn fields, the soy beans, to Alex's house.

Once inside, Alex made two cups of lavender tea. She added a little gin to each of our teacups from her father's liquor cabinet. We watched the steer

gathering in lumps in the far distance. Alex's father was tall on a horse, guiding them along, the faint bark of their herding dog farther still. The soy beans didn't grow, worst crops in seasons, each row rotting its way back to seed, too many pesticides, too many rodents. They are trying to kill us, her father said one night after too much gin, those wharf rats, all the poison, the government. I knocked the last of my tea back in a warm swallow, and when I looked at the bottom of the cup there was a ring of blood. I said nothing.

When we were in bed later, after kissing and touching in the shredded moonlight from high in the window, I couldn't stop thinking about the small, old woman. The look on her face. The way her mouth distended into blackness, an unending tunnel we could fall into. The way the sun spiraled her skin. We never spoke about what happened again. Even when we played our games.

I watched the shadows twist around Alex's bedroom, the pile of clothes on the chair looked like a person. "Get up," I said aloud, a dare. I threw a red book from the bedside table, the thud's echo too late, a glitch, as it hit the pile, not a person. I expected the book to be flung back at me, but it rested in the headlights of a passing car. I heard the shake of the doorknob. I swore I saw something across the room move. I felt the bed beside me: empty.

"Alex?"

Her back was to me. I could see her silvery body in the mirror next to the bed. My mouth tasted like wet copper. She'd taken off her shirt, her shorts, and flung them in the chair. Her movements were trance-like, detached, automatic. She turned to face me. "There's something in my skin. The itch," she said, "is inside. I can't get it out." A toolbox had been turned over on the floor. She held pliers. She pinched the skin from her stomach between the jaws.

I pressed my eyes tight, buried my head into my knees. I thought, that isn't Alex. She yanked and screamed. Zip up your eyes, I thought, don't breathe. I heard a squelching sound, followed by the soft metallic tink, like a coin when it falls through someone's fingers onto a counter. I told myself, just go back to sleep, just go back to sleep.

We called the game Murder House. We cruised the new development and rolled a spliff. It was spring again. The air was hot and moist. The streets looked like celluloid on fire. Every block had a murder house. It went like this: I said murder house and pointed one out and Alex had to guess who lived in it. Annie Wilkes. Norman Bates. Leatherface.

Mostly it was Patrick Bateman all day. The houses all looked the same. Earthy tones. Brick facades. Prickly ferns. Then, out of nowhere, there was this large pink flamingo in a flowerbed. The house had a cement stoop with AstroTurf, plastic chairs, an iron rail in peeling white paint. It was eerily familiar. Murder House, I shouted.

And Alex answered, "Cindy Wilson."

"Cindy Wilson?"

Alex was already pulling into the driveway. She cut the engine. We faced a mint green carport. They didn't make them like this anymore.

Alex said, "I'm glad you picked it. I have a surprise."

There was a big square window with mint green curtains.

"Mrs. Wilson's making dinner," Alex said. "It's like an interview. We eat together, and if she likes me, I'll watch her kids permanently. They're really bad," Alex said and rolled up her sleeve. "Last time, her son scratched me and pulled my hair."

"Last time?" I said.

I looked at Alex's arm. There was no puncture wound, just a copper-colored bruise.

What happened next was this: I looked up and locked eyes with Cindy Wilson. She was standing in the window. It had to do with her hands. She was smoking. It's how she held the curtain open, how she blew the smoke. She was stunning in a stark and muted way like when Cate Blanchett plays a social outcast, and the audience mistakes her lack of integrity for their generosity. I smiled. She didn't. I turned in an obvious way to signal I'm done making eye contact with you, lady, and I could tell she was still at the window.

"Does she know I'm coming?" I asked Alex.

"I don't know," Alex smiled and shrugged. It's this thing she does or did, I guess, looked so sweetly bewildered, it completely disarmed me. "I mean, I can't remember," she said.

Mrs. Wilson left the window and the curtain fell in place behind her.

The inside of the house was a replica of Alex's house except in mint green. Alex didn't seem bothered. "Where are the children?" I asked and Mrs. Wilson dropped a plate she'd been holding. Who wears high heels around the house, anyway? Mrs. Wilson did. The table had been set for two. Nervous and fastidious, she turned to us with an extra plate poised on the balls of her fingers, her thumb hooked around the stem of an empty cocktail glass. The wallpaper behind her—rife with wildflowers and spear grass—had come unstuck in one corner and the loose flap slapped the grease stained pattern beneath it.

"This is," Mrs. Wilson said, "unexpected." Her smile was strained. "But, of course, it's fine. It's perfectly fine," she said.

But it wasn't and she wanted us to know.

Alex said "Smells delicious." I realized then the air smelled like nothing.

"Where are the children?"

Mrs. Wilson's eyes looked startled like an animal. They settled vaguely on my face, then dropped to the floor. She looked surprised at the cracked plate shards, perfectly spiderwebbed across the kitchen. She drank from the empty cocktail glass as if it was full and delicious.

"I'll get a broom," Alex said. She spoke slow, enunciating each word as though she were instructing a child. "Where do you keep the broom, Mrs. Wilson?" But Mrs. Wilson did not raise her eyes. Mrs. Wilson opened the oven door and dropped to her knees. The bits of porcelain cracking and grinding first underneath her high heels, and then between her shins and the stone floor.

"Run," I whispered.

Then Alex did something so unusual, so inexplicable, I was not sure I knew her anymore. She smiled a little, winked at me, and pressed her palm gently to the base of Mrs. Wilson's skull.

"Mrs. Wilson?" Alex said. She touched her so softly, slowly, I gasped. Mrs. Wilson hurled the cocktail glass at the cabinets. It shattered.

"Stop!" She tried to pry Alex's hand off of her head. "Get off me!" Her lower lip was glistening with spit, and the pupils in her eyes were dilated. Her chest was rising and falling, rising and falling. She was growing calm, giving in. Alex steadily held the back of her head.

I couldn't tell whether Alex was gently guiding her head to the oven or away from it. But that wasn't what scared me. I tried to push her hand away, but she shoved me, hard, and I fell back against the kitchen counters.

What scared me was their intimacy. The history in the gesture. It was not, could not, be Alex. So, I ran.

I ran out the front door and down the block. I ran until I could not run anymore. I came to the flat lake, with its clean white ducks floating near the boats. The ducks looked fake to me. My throat and mouth tasted like copper. My sides ached. I bent over, heaving, I coughed, and spat. I had to figure out how I would get home. The worst of it was, when I ran out of the house, I could've sworn I heard Alex laughing in the kitchen.

Later that night, Alex called, and my brother answered the phone. I told him to tell her I was dead. I could see him in the living room, gesticulating wildly as if she could see it. He was trying to impress her, telling her about a deer. Hit by a car, thrashing and hemorrhaging in the street. Had to pull over. Had to take his shovel from the truck bed.

"Naaah," he said in answer to something Alex asked. He fist-pumped the air.

I bet she'd asked if he was frightened. I bet she was laughing. He clearly liked her reaction. She thought he was charming, when he wasn't. Fine, I thought, let her think what she wants to. Let her laugh. Two idiots in love.

There were other strange events, but the timeline gets blurred. I can't remember the order. I think it was before I got mad at Alex. Before she started spending time with Jason, before Mrs. Wilson, before I wasn't sure I ever knew her.

This is how I imagine it must've happened: I held my phone up to the clock tower and waited for the sound of the tingling bells. We were at school, and Alex was playing the chimes for the 9:00AM hour. She was playing "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" which we had been heavily debating all morning. Why didn't the band just name the song In the Garden of Eden? What does Gadda even mean? I waited as the shadows grew longer, pressed the red button on the screen, watched the green dot blink in the corner awaiting the first toll of the bells.

The clock struck noon, twelve tolls measured in a row, no stopping.

The video blinking. Nothing followed the noon tolls. No song. I stopped watching the video and let the phone sag a bit, now recording the bottom of the tower's pillars and walls instead of the clock face. The bustle of the noon hour hadn't begun, which was unnerving.

Someone walked up the stairs to the landing in front of me, facing a building. When I met the eyes of the person, I saw Alex's face, her body, wearing the same outfit she was wearing, holding her phone up, recording me. I moved my phone to record Alex, but she was gone.

On the opposite side of me, behind the water fountain, was another girl. There was Alex's face, the scar on her forehead, her t-shirt, her Converse One-Stars. Alex next to the water was recording, too, moving fast towards me. Another Alex looked down from a window above me in the building. Other Alexs were popping up in every other window, and then every window, her face, her body, her phone. I thought I caught them as they popped up, but as quickly they disappeared.

When Alex found me passed out underneath the clock tower, it was 9:10. A math teacher and one of the school nurses were checking my pulse, asking me to tell them who our current president was, saying they needed to call my parents.

Someone said, "Call an ambulance."

Alex said, "But the car is in the mint carport. Where are the kids? The wharf rats in the tulips."

"What is she talking about?" the math teacher asked me, but I couldn't answer. The nurse took the phone from my hand, which had continued recording.

I watched the footage while I sat in a bed in the ER. The video was 2 hours and 12 minutes long. I didn't understand how, since it should only be 30 minutes, maximum. When I sped back through the last ten minutes, there was Alex, no, there was Alex, no, there was Alex, what was going on. When I tried to watch the beginning, the video buffered, froze, the phone's screen went

black.

I blame astrology. Alex was a Pisces. Fucking inscrutable. I'm a Leo and so was always yelling at my horoscope. For instance, Alex read "Today, dear Leo, take comfort in domestic tasks." It's not like every Leo has a house or wants to vacuum. My point is it was bullshit. Alex really was a Pisces, though, and she believed it. Once she drew a picture of us. They were stick figures. My stick figure had long hair and her stick figure had a cloud for a head. It made me unbelievably sad. "Alex," I said, "you know you're a person, not a cloud, right?" But that's just an example. It's like Alex had one foot in another world. And I was her best friend. So, I tried to follow her. There are so many examples, I was practically a Pisces, too. Take Edwin. I made him up, or so I thought, and then I wasn't sure anymore. If, for instance, the lights flickered, a book fell off a shelf, the floorboards made noise, our eyes would meet and we'd say his name: "Edwin."

I'm not Alex. I kept telling myself.

We were sitting at the BBQ place.

"Alex," I said, "I'm becoming an anxious person, just like you." I picked my head, showed her the bloody piece of skull as I peeled it from my hair. She said she hadn't noticed.

I said, "It's so like you, not to notice." Of course, I regretted saying it. Because when you care for someone and they become unknowable, it's easy to resent them for it. Alex hardly acknowledged what I'd said.

"Tell me the truth, Nina. Do you really see him?" she said. "Like really."

Where, I asked, is he.

"There," she nodded. I only saw a couple, a man in a Carhartt jacket, slumping back in a corner booth, hood up, head cocked to the left, drunk, maybe. Across from him, a woman hunched over the table, speaking quickly and quietly, her eyes darting to the right, on drugs, maybe. Then the server came with two steaming plates, and the woman stubbed her cigarette out and leaned back, satisfied and ready.

"Does Jason see him?" I said, but I didn't want to know, so I quickly added, "Jesus," and lifted my mug up, "we need more coffee." I don't want to know about Jason. I hear him when he leaves at night. I know they are together, driving to the lake. I keep thinking, she's 15-years-old. This is a problem. I should do something. But then I keep thinking, fuck it, and not doing a thing about it.

The wait staff hated us because we'd share one cup and drink refills for hours and to be honest, back then, I didn't tip well. Like once we left a drawing of a five-dollar bill and a poem we wrote. My point is our cup was

empty and no one was dying to give us more coffee. But something entirely else was happening to Alex. Meanwhile, I very theatrically threw back the last drop of coffee while locking eyes with our server, and half-expected to see a ring of blood on the bottom of the cup. No blood. When the cup rattled back into the saucer, Alex flinched like she'd been hit. Why is she acting this way?

"Do you want to go?" I asked. There's this thing I do with my voice. It's not even conscious. It drops a few octaves when it might start to shake. Like it's better for my voice not to show that I'm afraid. To be honest, what I felt was more like rage. Alex didn't even answer, and I waved my hand in front of her face. Like get a grip, Alex! Because honestly for months she'd been a shitty friend. We'd plan to meet someplace, and she'd come two hours late or not at all, and even when she was present, she wasn't really there anymore. And the stuff she said was so weird. Like: "Sorry, I got lost in a neighborhood with strange trees." When she says stuff like that, I sort of wished she hadn't said anything at all. At least the Flat Earth nonsense wasn't rubbing off yet. I'm sure my brother was filling her head with it. So ludicrous. Besides, at this point I hadn't spoken to Alex in two weeks. My brother kept answering the phone, and I got mad about it, and then I stopped caring. I realized she wasn't actually calling for me anyway.

Here we are, and she wasn't even happy about being with me. She didn't ask me how I'd been. I hadn't been well. My dreams were either weird or I couldn't sleep at all. I was always walking in this neighborhood and I could not find my way back and I had no clue why I was there. It was just a feeling. Like I was missing something that I would never find again and I could not tell if I was awake or dreaming. Then there was this other dream and I was older, and Alex was the same. Only I couldn't place her.

"Whatever," I said. "You don't care about my dreams. I don't care. How's Jason?"

She leaned forward and touched my sleeve, "Nina," she said. "What are you talking about?" Then she looked over my shoulder, and her gaze was so pointed, I expected, when I turned, to find Edwin standing there, but, of course, he wasn't.

"Let's leave," she said.

I remember it was cold, but Texas cold. 55 degrees and everyone wears winter fashions like there's actually something to wear about. My hands shook. I couldn't light my cigarette. In the parking lot, my voice cracked. I sounded so sad. If I'd known how sad I'd sound, I would've never opened my mouth. But I didn't understand how any of it had happened. It's like we were so close and then, I did not know her anymore. The sky looked like what the sky looks like in movies when it starts to snow. Alex took my hands and placed them in her unzipped puffer coat, under her arms, where they were warmest and then, she lit my cigarette.

"On the street," I said, and my voice was deep, "were there stonewalls and courtyards? Were there lights in all the pine trees?"

She nodded. "Have you been there?" she asked. "I was looking for *you*."

It got to the point where I knew I either needed to go to Bidwell Ridge or leave Texas. Eventually, I did both.

Bidwell Ridge is where they found Alex's car. Parked in an empty lot. An old motel with boarded windows a few yards off.

The county map is jagged. There's no grid and it's easy to get lost. It's based on old farms and plots of land. Even though there are no farms now. On the southside there are abandoned lots. The street lights are cracked and there's a narrow road that runs between the gnarled trees where plastic bags get trapped in the fences, the weeds. No one lives on Bidwell Ridge. It's where boys go for kicks. They spray paint their names onto the gravel, shoot bullets through the stop sign, or grope a girl for five minutes inside the body of an abandoned bus. There's a story about the bus, too. How it got there.

There's an oversized cross—they say—somewhere between two giant trees, where a girl appeared in the street and the driver swerved into a bald cypress tree and died. Teens drive past, fast, with their music loud and windows down, and throw their empty bottles at it. I'm nothing like that.

The first rule is, if you're driving, you don't stop for anything. You don't open the doors or the windows. If someone leaps from the trees into the hood of your car, if someone flags you down from the shoulder, you keep going. There is no shoulder, just a ditch. Maybe you'll see two headlights approaching, fast, and if your car's got a good radius, then maybe you turn your car around, and if not, maybe you swerve quickly and wind up in a ditch, your trunk pointing at the moon like a tombstone. That's when their shadows peel off the tree trunks and come for you. Honestly, I can't say I blame them, whoever they are. I didn't go out there on a dare, to disrespect, or test, or master what I did not understand. I was listening to a song. A song so sexy, I was somewhere else entirely. I was following my GPS. I was going to the address Ana gave me. I met her outside the Dollar General. This was just after Alex disappeared. Ana wore a yellow raincoat. The sleeve was torn. It looked just like the one Alex had worn. I said, "You remind me of someone." I smoked a spliff and turned on the radio. I was feeling pretty good about my choices. When I turned on Bidwell Ridge, the sound cut out. They say the street is so dark and filled with smog you can't see anything until it leaps into the arc of your headlights, and even then you aren't sure whether what you saw was real or not. Then it's gone. It happened like that.

I looked down at my phone. It said 9:10. The signal was out. When I looked up, I saw her, a yellow raincoat, hands on the hood of my car, eyes wide, and then a bump. That didn't happen. I told myself. It didn't. I checked my rearview mirror and couldn't see a thing. I know it's fucked, but I kept going. I was seeing things. I was stoned out of my mind, and I was late to

meet Ana. That's what I told myself, as I rolled up into the gravel lot outside the old motel. I didn't even know what we'd do there: maybe smoke and listen to some songs. She'd say close your eyes and listen to this one, and I would close my eyes and listen and maybe she would tell me something maybe a story and the smoke and the song and the sound of her voice—which was rough and deep and pleasing—and the way the air felt crisp and like a glove at once would all become a part of it, this mystical feeling she was giving me—like what a miracle to be somebody!—and when she was gone I could turn the song on and feel the whole thing over and over again. I could feel this way for the rest of my life if I wanted to. I would wonder where Alex went, try to intuit when she would be coming back. Everything would feel possible, again, inevitable, even, like, of course, she would come back and see me, of course, Alex would return. She was standing at the far end of the lot in a yellow raincoat, and when I looked down at my phone it said 9:10 and it was just like time had finally ended.

Before I leave Texas, my brother finds a shoebox full of old photographs. A photograph of bare breasts like shallow grave plots. Alex's. Not mine. I'm behind the camera. We are in love, Alex and I, in this photograph. Last night, I cracked my night mouthguard in half, and cut my gum. I was following Alex around the Wilson's house. We were looking for the wharf rats. The living room filled with mint green tulips. I suck in my cheeks. Tongue against flapping skin in my mouth, a temptation to yank until it is an expose: an unraveling of my entire jaw, my throat, my heart. Black dots like infestation, blink and its animals in suit coats with pocket watches by the hundreds, blink and they're gone. Blood on uvula, the room smells copper or crisp-iron that green-rusts faucets. Blink, and hours go by, years go by. Now, a nipple on my tongue. Something sharp strikes my gums. But then. I choke. And in the choking, a scratch in my throat. A hollow rip inside my sternum, as if the cut expands to my whole mouth. Something crawls up my throat. I flip my phone's flashlight and watch in the mirror the hand, then the arm, clutch the sides of my molars, digging fingernails into my metal fillings, pulling itself up. I gag. I spit. Pennies. One, and then, so many, and all at once.



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