LOVE WILL TEAR US APART:
A MEDITATION ON RELATIONSHIPS IN TWO MOVEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

As a child, stories were always important to me—I inhaled them from the time I learned to read, and I still breathe them in daily. However, it wasn’t until I came to Kentucky that I realized just how important stories were. Matriculating through Morehead State introduced me to a whole slew of people (some even unusual enough to be called “characters”) and through them, I heard more stories. People talked of grandparents, hollers, summers with cousins, and it was all fascinating—and disheartening. Growing up in Ohio, my upbringing trained me to be more reserved, and to always long to be in a better place, a place where a story could flourish. Thus, I was challenged to construct a narrative without the benefit of fondness for the place I was raised. But when writing of love, even if it manifests itself in unorthodox fashions, some things are simply universal, no matter where they occur.

My influences are legion, though the most prominent are Junot Diaz, with his attempts to find beauty in wastelands and no stranger to dysfunctional relationships (see “Aurora” in his stellar collection Drown); Raymond Carver, whose sparse dialogue belies the emotional weight carried by what his characters decide to tell each other; Bret Easton Ellis, to whom I owe the largest debt, as his study of casual nihilism of Californian youths was ultimately perfected in his debut novel, Less Than Zero, which informs my own work. His careful attention to the profound disconnection between individuals is something I hope my own work achieves. My characters are essentially the generation reared by those of his generation. Of course, Ernest Hemingway also has his place among my influences, his dialogue in particular.
The degree of attention he gives to the construction of a conversation is something I aim for, speech that is clearly modern, but loaded with significance. Though, in all honesty, I hope significance can be found in more places than just what people choose to tell each other.

As for my own personal style, I have admittedly borrowed from the aforementioned writers—what writer doesn't borrow from other writers? Yet through only taking what I feel can help me, my goal is to form my own voice; a voice that indicts and forgives, blames yet accepts, and ultimately tries to make sense of why events turn out the way they do, always hoping that everything will end up being okay—because it must.

The genesis of these stories began in all-night diners and in classrooms just before sunset, the titular song by Joy Division on repeat, while I tried to figure out how one can go years without establishing a meaningful romantic connection. The reasons were multitude, and lend themselves towards themes that I examine in these stories. I’ve adopted the (post-)modernist idea that people are completely cut off from one another, and no amount of emotional attachment can truly connect two individuals. While this may seem bleak, I like to think it still manages to keep people together in their isolation. Frustrated with the campy, portrayal of homosexuals on-screen (who mostly seem to exist simply as “pets” of heterosexual women), one of my primary goals for this work is to present homosexuals who are as complicated as any person, for good or ill.
The stories presented here, "Hit Us Where We Live", "Accident", "The Storm" and "Dinner Plans" are all parts of a much larger work simply about a pair of brothers, Paxton and Adam. Whereas the stories involving Paxton and his cohorts display a contemporary flavor of dysfunctional love, the stories involving Adam and Lilith are an admittedly glib retelling of the biblical Fall of Man with a modern sensibility—all in efforts to both reconcile and redeem us all. However, the following stories presented are the kernel of what the encompassing story cycle aims to show. Though love can bring people together in a superficial way, the random violence, tempestuous relationships, and wonton chaos of the world has saturated our culture. Sustaining oneself simply through love has grown difficult if not impossible for some. These stories cry for help, and beg for benediction.
Triptych: Hit Us Where We Live

I. Blaine – “All About My Sister”

“You’re in my light.”

These are Annie’s first words to me since Monday, because we can’t stand each other.

“It’s not your light,” I sneer at her. I step aside anyway so she can get the melanoma that’s coming to her. All she does is tan and drink and bawl her eyes out at therapy and tan some more, blissed out of her mind on pills. I wish she’d move out, and only make brief cameos around holidays.

“Grow up,” she scoffs.

“Get a job.”

“You first,” she sings at me.

“Already have one,” I sing back.

“Dealing drugs doesn’t count.”

“It does if you’re good at it, but I’m not dealing drugs.”

“What is it then? Blowjobs for money?” she snickers. She thinks she’s clever, but that’s only because I’ve caught her in a narrow window of once-daily lucidity. It’ll pass.

“The only thing you need to know is that I am taking care of things around here.” I say this with “mystique.”

“Oh, gawd, you are not. Dad and I are helping, too. And Mom’s only been missing for, like, three days.”
Don’t get me wrong. I love Annie. I mean, we’ve known each other since the prenatal days, but I hate every single decision she’s ever made. She’s just shallow, and dumb, or maybe just incredibly selfish.

“I’ll shut up and leave you alone if you do a favor for me.”

“Honestly, what are you, twelve?” She hasn’t looked up at me from her magazine yet. It’s hard to tell sometimes when she’s genuinely apathetic or just faking it, but I can this time—the one corner of her mouth upturns when something interests her and I can’t help but smirk at her. I know so many things she doesn’t, like why Paxton’s really coming home—it’s not her. There’s no harm in keeping this from her.

“Paxton will be at LAX today at four, but he has to crash somewhere because he doesn’t want his parents knowing he’s home early.”

She sits up, finally looks at me.

“What do you want me to do about that?” She’s playing it cool, but I know better. I said his name and her jaw tightened.

“Pick him up from the airport.”

“And take him where?”

“Take him to a motel, your bed, my bed, wherever the fuck he wants to go, just don’t take him to his parents’ place. Please, Annie,” I stress the last bit because it always works. Harpy or not, Annie can be nice like that.

“Fine, I’ll do it,” she says after pretending to deliberate. “Where will you be?”

“Working,” I say.
“Right, blowjobs for money, I heard you earlier,” she mumbles, returning to last week’s Variety. I turn to walk back inside, but since I don’t want her having the last word, I whirl around and shout her name. She looks up slowly.

I point at me, then her, and mouth, *I complete you.*

II. *Annie – “The One That Got Away”*

I’m nervous. It’s been nine months since I’ve seen him. What if he doesn’t remember me? I let my hair grow out since I finished filming, he remembers me with short hair, what if he doesn’t even recognize me?

“Guess I’ll just have to remind him,” I say to myself, grinning. I can’t believe he’s finally coming home. I asked him not to leave, knowing he’d have to, but I still felt that I had to ask. I mean, with what we had, not asking him to not go would seem callous. But he did go, and ever since I’ve felt like... I’m not sure. I haven’t felt like myself. I like who I am best when I’m with him.

My therapist, Dr. Sharp, says this is unhealthy behavior. That I should learn to accept who I am as a person, that I shouldn’t need others to validate myself. Since the man’s only solution for any kind of problem is a milligram of Xanax every few hours, I haven’t been taking his advice to heart. Granted, I haven’t exactly skimped on the Xanax either.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a severe-looking girl with short black hair. She’s drumming her fingernails on the wall. I look back at the gate doors—they haven’t opened yet. Trying my best not to be Creeper Girl, I steal another glance at
the girl. She’s taking off her sunglasses, and now I can see her makeup’s run a bit—she’s been crying. Suddenly, I feel my chest get heavier, for her, and whatever grief she’s feeling, I hope it passes soon.

His plane must have landed by now. The door still hasn’t opened. I’ve been waiting at the terminal for half-an-hour, waiting to see him walk through, in slow-motion, smiling as he sees me, before taking my hand in his and walking out together.

I can’t help but wonder, though, why Blaine would ask me to do this. He’s got an ulterior motive for everything, what’s he so busy with that he couldn’t have picked Paxton up? And how did he know Paxton was going to be on this flight, or that he was coming home at all? The question that I inevitably come to, and wish I hadn’t, is: why didn’t Paxton call and tell me himself?

Then I’m reminded of how many times I called him the past few months (hundreds) and the times he’s answered (considerably less than a hundred). The number of texts I’ve sent, only to get nothing back, not so much as a “miss u 2.” Now I’m not even so sure I want to be here right now. I reach into my purse and get a Xanax from my bottle. I delicately place it on my tongue, like a communion wafer, and wash it down with a few swigs of Diet Coke.

“Annie?”

I swallow and turn and there he is. He looks slightly taller, or it could be my imagination. He definitely looks tired. I beam at him and throw my arms around his neck, spilling some soda on the linoleum.

“Paxton, oh my God! You’re here!”
“Yeah,” he says, breaking the embrace. “I’m here. How long have you been waiting?”

’All nine months,’ is what I’m thinking, but it sounds too maudlin. “Just a few minutes.”

“Where’s Blaine?” he asks, looking around. “Didn’t he come with you?”

“Blaine?” My shoulders slump, but I try not to make it noticeable. “No, he’s... working, I think.”

Paxton nods like he knows something, but if it has anything to do with Blaine, I really couldn’t care less. I’m just glad he’s back.

###

“I saw your movie,” he yells at me as we drive down the PCH with the top down. I drum my fingers on the steering wheel.

“Oh yeah? Kind of a train wreck, wasn’t it?” I try to be self-deprecating. Play it cool.

“Not even,” he says and I like how indignant he gets in defense of the film, in my defense. “I liked it.”

I look over at him and he’s staring at me. Or the ocean, I can’t tell.

“Oh, whatever.” I give him a playful punch to his arm. “It was bad, I can acknowledge that. Please, don’t lie to spare my feelings. It seemed a lot better while we were filming, you know? But you know how these things go. I’m kind of taking a break from the business, actually. Like a sabbatical. It’s... kind of relaxing.”
Dammit, I’m chattering too much. I try to shut up, but I am kind of fishing—I want to know everything about New York. Well, not everything. Just the Cliff Notes, omitting any sexy times with sophisticated NYU co-eds, so what I don’t need to hear right now. Christ, especially if it’s with a guy again.

He lights a cigarette and I can’t help but make a face.

“You’re still smoking?”

“Well, it was a long flight,” he says, as if that justifies it.

“You only smoke after long flights, then?”


He’s quiet until we get back to my place. Finally, sitting by the pool, he tells me how awful New York was and that there isn’t much to tell.

“Really, the whole time I was gone was pretty unbearable.” His chair is really close to the pool, his hand resting on the water, but not breaking the surface tension.

I frown in empathy, resisting the urge to tell him that being here without him has been just as intolerable. Instead, I regale him with my experience at Pepperdine, how bitchy most of the girls are, how beautiful the campus is. Superfluous stuff that doesn’t really matter. I don’t tell him that I skipped class to pick him up—I think he’d scold me. Then again, isn’t he missing exams right now? Even if he is, I don’t care—he’s here, and I’m here. After awhile, I stop talking and he stops talking and we sit by the pool in silence until the sun sets.
I stand up and stretch, raising my hands above my head, reaching upwards. Then I look back down at him. He smiles awkwardly. I take him by the hand. He looks confused.

"Come on," I say. He gets up as I lead him into the house.

"Where are we going?" he asks.

I turn back to face him, smiling devilishly.

"My room."

He winces.

"What's that look for?" I ask.

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea," he says.

"Why not?" I ask, grabbing his shirt collar, pulling him close. "We've done it before."

I kiss him, our first kiss in nine months, long enough to carry a whole baby to term. He doesn't kiss like he used to. He's holding back.

"What's wrong?" I ask him.

"Nothing's wrong," he says. "It's just..."

He gets like this sometimes—like there's a deluge of words that's too much for him, so he just says "fuck" and stays quiet. I always wonder what he tries so hard to say. I wonder what he's not telling me, and why I'm afraid to ask him.

"Everything will be okay," I tell him. "It has to be."
I take him by the hand again and walk him to my room, to my bed. It’s been even longer since we’ve been here, not since graduation night that one and only time we made love.

“Everything will be okay,” he repeats. He closes his eyes. I don’t see them again, not during anything. They stay closed the entire time. After we finish (or I do anyway), he walks into the bathroom to shower and I sit up to watch him retreat. The room gets colder without him in it. I stretch again, and reach upwards. Just reach.

III. Paxton – “Jiggety-jig”

It was my mother’s idea. I left home to go to New York, for college. She graduated from NYU and insisted I go there. When I asked her why I couldn’t go to school in L.A. like Adam did, she wrinkled her nose.

“Adam’s education is between him and your father,” she’d said. “You’re my baby, and it’s a good school. I think you’ll like it there.”

I didn’t. New York burgeons on the Atlantic, which is turbulent and dangerous, there are monsters in it, razor-faced and fluorescent. It’s cold.

Now that I’m back, I’m unconvinced things are any better so far. I slept with Annie tonight. The only perk of going to New York was it provided me with enough distance to achieve escape velocity, because catching me in bed with her brother wasn’t enough. Now I wonder if this brief forgetting of myself will renew in her a compulsion to resurrect our farce of a relationship. It will fuck with everything if she tells Blaine. His call is the reason I came back.
The night before I left for New York, last August, Blaine and I fucked. Not for the first time, but certainly the most recent. Then he begged me not to go, to stay in L.A., but I left the next morning anyway. On the plane, I cried in the bathroom for over twenty minutes, until a steward rapped lightly on the door and asked if everything was okay. Affronted by his concern, I shouted, “Who the fuck is okay?!”

He never called, not until a few days ago, and every time I called him he either didn’t answer or I couldn’t hear him over the sounds of partying in the background. We used to go to parties together all the time, until the end. Low lighting, lulling bass from oversized subwoofers, champagne, usually followed by sex in his room.

God, sleeping with Annie was a mistake. She begged me not to leave, just as Blaine begged me not to leave, but she was more emphatic, her hands clawing weakly at my shirt as I left the twins’ birthday party, and I hated her for it, and I was so angry at both of them and at myself, so I packed everything up and left for New York right then and locked myself in a room at The Plaza until school started, and sleeping with Annie was a mistake.

I realize this as I walk to the bathroom after the fact with every intention of splashing water on my face but end up showering, the water hot as I can stand, hotter. When I get out, Annie has already fallen asleep. I gather my effects, quiet as mist, and deposit them in Blaine’s room. He’s still out, so I sit on his bed, do nothing.

Remember.
“Hey, Pax, wake up.” Blaine’s voice. I turn over to face him for the first time since I left, and he looks different. His hair is longer, his eyes look older, like they know things I don’t, things that are wet and writhing. Secrets.

“You’re here,” is what I finally say. His hand recoils away from my shoulder, as if I burned it. He smiles solemnly, the corners of his mouth downturned.

“Yeah. I’m here. How long have you been here?”

‘I never left,’ is what I almost say. I don’t, though, because I did leave, and the entire nine months I was away I felt out of place, like I might vibrate out of my skin, my naked spirit riding the breeze back home.

Home. It still doesn’t feel like I’m back yet, even with Blaine standing over me like he has so many times before. I pull my cigarettes from my pocket and light one. I offer Blaine one like I always do, and he holds up a hand and shakes his head like he always does. I laugh quietly.

“I haven’t been here long,” I tell him, inhaling. “Annie picked me up from the airport.”

“Bet you two had loads to catch up on,” he says nonchalantly, but I can’t help but feel he’s fishing for something. I toss an equally nonchalant shrug.

“Yeah, we had our ‘hello, how are you’s already.” I blow smoke towards the open window. Was it open when I came in? Or did he open it, knowing I was going to smoke when I woke up? He knows me that well, right? Right?
“You know she’s still in love with you, right?” he laughs. I swallow, smile, then nod.

“Yeah, I know.”

“Tch, fuck her. She’s a... I dunno. A harridan. Anywho, are you ready to meet Grey?” he asks, rubbing his hands together.


An hour’s drive to the city and I find Grey to be a man somewhere in between his forties and seventies. He’s wearing a suit the color of an overcast sky and mirrored sunglasses, even though it’s nearly midnight, and his salt-and-pepper facial hair is well-groomed, glinting like knife edges.

“Blaine, my boy,” he says, smiling. He has a wolf’s smile—dangerous, but oddly playful, and still mostly dangerous. His tone is jovial, but his voice itself hums with great presence, like it’s coming from all directions. He and Blaine embrace all business-like and I look away, to Grey’s granite desk. A photo of my brother’s scowling girlfriend rests on it in a silver frame. Weird.

“This must be him,” Grey says, clasping my arm, squeezing it. “Paxton, yes?” I clear my throat, it feels dry all of a sudden. “Yeah, I’m him. Me. Paxton.”

“It means ‘peace,’ did you know that?” he asks me. I did know this, actually, but I keep quiet. “Do you embody your namesake? Are you at peace, son?” His question catches me off-guard, so I stammer out an “I dunno.”

“Well!” he laughs. “At least you’re honest. Honesty is a virtue.” His demeanor changes in a flash so quick I doubt Blaine catches it, but I do. His eyebrows
pinch together, his voice firms and flattens. “You will always be honest with me, won’t you, Paxton?”

“Um, sure,” I tell him. Whatever—this guy is a creeper.

“Excellent. Now,” he pauses to take a drink from a glass of scotch or whatever it is creepy businessmen who run a prostitution racket drink. “Strip.”

I cross my arms. “Strip? You mean, naked strip?”

He holds his arms out to his sides, looks around, then back at me like I’m an idiot. “Yes, naked strip.”

I look over at Blaine who’s not paying attention, but pouring his own drink. I don’t want to make a scene in front of him, so I shrug and comply. He stares me down with no discernible sexual interest that I can tell and nods, satisfied.

“You’re a fine specimen of creation, son.”

“Um, thanks,” I say, catching Blaine’s eyes. He winks. My ears burn.

“You can put your clothes back on.”

While I’m buckling my belt, Grey opens a drawer in his desk and pulls out a cellphone and a datebook.

“You will receive text messages every Thursday or Friday, an itinerary of places and times you’ll be expected. Don’t be late, behave yourself, and you stand to make a lot of money.”

“I don’t really need money,” I say.

Grey smiles that wolf smile, leans in close.

“Then why did you come home?”
I don’t answer him. I just pick up the phone and book and smile thinly. I tap Blaine on the shoulder and he finishes his drink.

"Are we done here?" I ask Grey, heading for the door. He grabs my arm again, more forcefully this time.

"Just remember—they like ‘em young," he says with a coy wink. It makes me feel sick, the entire prospect, but if nothing else, I can keep an eye on Blaine. Knowing him, he will need someone watching him, keeping him in check.

Blaine drives us back to his place. It’s after three when we pull in the driveway and he tells me he’s got to crash.

"I’ve been up since, like, nine this morning. I need to go pass out. If I’m asleep when you decide to go to bed, just crawl in bed, but don’t wake me.”

"Okay,” I say, disheartened there won’t be a homecoming fuck later on. "Okay,” he repeats, letting out an exhausted sigh. “Well, good night.”

He gets out of the car and heads inside. I notice he didn’t say he loved me, like he did before I left.

###

I spend the next few hours driving around Elysium in Blaine’s car. Everything’s where I left it—the diner’s still on the outskirts, towards the desert, the movie theatre’s still in the middle of town, and the ounce of pot I left in the glove compartment of the derelict car on Bering is still there, too. The movie theatre’s closed for renovations, though. Still though, Elysium doesn’t feel like home anymore.
I try out the pot I hid. It’s stale but gets the job done, making everything feel safe and underwater. I save my favorite place for last. It’s just after dawn when I pull into the parking lot that looks out over the ocean.

I get out of Blaine’s Scion and look around. The parking lot is nearly empty, but there are still some people out this early, I can see them on the beach. A middle-aged woman runs with a golden retriever, a teenage girl is catching some early rays on the sand. She looks familiar—I think our moms are in Junior League together, or maybe she’s one of Annie’s high school friends. Maybe both.

I light a cigarette and toe an empty Bud Light bottle. It rolls away, hitting the tire of a lime-green SUV with a barely audible thump. I inhale and head for the shore, blowing smoke out through my nose. When my feet hit the sand, I realize I haven’t felt that particular softness beneath me in months, so soft that maybe the globe will fall away beneath me, leaving me afloat and islanded in a vacuum.

Strip, Grey’s voice echoes.

I begin taking my clothes off, first my shoes and shirt, never breaking my stride. I undo my belt, let my shorts fall to the ground. I peel off my socks, hopping on one foot, then the other, and I step onto the surf. The seafoam sweeps between my toes and a shiver runs through me. This is what I’ve been waiting for.

I drop my cigarette and watch the ocean grab the butt and slowly pull it back into itself. I want it to do that to me, so I keep walking until the water is waist-deep. The night’s left it so frigid I feel like blistering open, but the sun is slowly sweeping
upward on the horizon behind me—that’ll warm it up. I find that fact familiar, comforting.

I bend low, curl inward and fall into the sea, imagine I’m still a fetus—before everything that’s ever happened happens. This is it. Now, I’m home. I can hear the waves whisper back to me:

“Welcome home.”
The digital display unmistakably reads “Pregnant.” The displays of the first two tests Annie took proclaimed the same, both of them hastily thrown to corners of the bathroom. “Hell!” she’d yelled at the first test, tossing it towards the bathroom door, flecks of piss now dried on the surface. The second test was tossed in the bathtub, but this third one trembled in Annie’s shaky fingers until she dropped it in the wastebasket next to the toilet.

She’d spent the entire day drinking cranberry juice she found in the liquor cabinet in the basement to work up enough piss to take three pregnancy tests. When Annie brought the boxes to the lady at the pharmacy counter, she looked at Annie with bored eyes.

The question that wells up in her, rattles her bones and churns her guts is, “Who did this to me?”

The bathroom doesn’t answer her, the heads of the faucets keeping in stray drops, the vent in the ceiling humming so constant that Annie forgets it’s still running. But she doesn’t need an answer from the bathroom, but through the open door Annie sees her bed. The down comforter hide the sheets still stained with Paxton’s come.

“Paxton,” Annie grunts, her fists clenching. They haven’t seen each other since the day Annie picked Paxton up from the airport, took him to her bed and created the problem gestating inside her. The past month, she sent him a flurry of
texts, but he’s ignored every one—typical Paxton. While he was going to school in New York, Annie starved for him, and called nearly every week. He rarely answered.

There’s a part of Annie that wants to run through the house like a gazelle, triumphant that she finally had a way to keep Paxton tethered. But that part, Annie begins to realize, is young and naïve. Now that there’s this kidney bean inside her that’s half of him, he isn’t really so enigmatic anymore.

“The goddamn... faggot,” she sputters, stomping her feet so hard she stands up. She leaves the bathroom and starts pacing the house, finding her father in his old study. Most of his books (which were just for decoration anyway) were placed in storage after he was served with a divorce, but ever since Annie’s mom had herself committed, Will reasserted himself in the house. He only brought a few of his essentials (booze, business papers, and his laptop) and planned on staying until “your mother realizes she’s bored, not crazy.”

“Annie?” he says, looking up from his screen. “It’s late, what’re you doing awake?”

“Can’t sleep,” Annie mumbles, staring around the room, but never letting her gaze rest on her father.

“Have you taken your medicine?”

“I haven’t been lately, no,” she admits.

“Well, I don’t know how you expect to get better.”

“Better?” she echoes.
“Are you alright?” he asks, squinting through his glasses. “You look pregnant.”

Her head flicks toward him, her eyes narrowed. “Say what?”

“I said you look pale.”

“Oh,” Annie sighs, relieved. “Just feeling a bit under the weather. Have you seen Blaine?”

“Your brother just got home a few minutes ago,” Will says. “He should be in his room. Do you know where he’s been? Where he goes every night?”

Annie is tempted to spill the beans on her brother’s professional whoring around but she needs a ride to a clinic in Los Angeles, so she shakes her head.

“I couldn’t say,” she mumbles vaguely. Will’s mouth droops on one side, and from this look, Annie can tell he doesn’t believe her.

“Ah, well, I’ll just figure it out on my own,” he says with a roguish grin that reminds Annie of Blaine. “Have you gone to visit your mother yet?”

“Yeah.”

“How is she?”

“I dunno. Fine, I guess.”

“Did she say anything about... anything?”

“She made fun of my hair.” Annie rakes her fingers over her scalp, tucking strands behind her ears.

“Well, you know your mother. That’s just her way. You know she loves you.”
She crosses her arms and returns a wan smile before leaving her father in the study and trudging upstairs. She beats on his door with a fist, ignoring Blaine’s yells from the other side, until he swings the door open. Annie’s fist lingers in the air and she resists the temptation to swing it against Blaine’s head, hard enough to send a jet of blood flying out of his ear.

“What do you want?” he asks. “Is there a reason you’re assaulting my door or are you just exhibiting your retard strength?”

“I need a favor.”

“Hell no,” Blaine grunts, swinging the door shut. Annie stops it with her foot.

“Please?”

Blaine’s grip on the door loosens and he lets out a low growl in defeat.

“Fine, what do you want?”

“Drive me to a clinic in the city.”

“Why?” Blaine snorts. “Need to get your STD checked out?”

Annie rolls her eyes. “Something like that.”

“Ick,” Blaine says, making a face. “You’re so... gross.”

Looking down the hall towards her room, at nothing in particular, Annie concedes with, “I guess.”

“Yeah, sure, I’ll take you to get your herpes under wraps.”

“Thanks,” Annie says, but Blaine had already slammed the door.

###
Annie plays with the radio on Blaine's car until he smacks her hand away from the controls. He grabs an Arcade Fire CD and slides it into the player while keeping an eye on the highway.

"Dad asked me about you the other night," Annie mentions.

"Oh yeah? What about?"

"He wanted to know your whereabouts every night."

"What did you tell him?" Blaine asks, and Annie notices him chewing on his lower lip.

"Not the truth," Annie says simply.

"Oh. Thanks."

Annie nods a response and looks out the window. Neither of them says anything to the other until Blaine asks where the clinic is.

"Wilshire," she tells him. Blaine hits a pothole and Annie asks, "Why do you do the hustler thing?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"Why answer my question with another question? Just be straight with me."

"Impossible," Blaine says, turning onto the Santa Monica Freeway. Annie ignores the lame joke and asks, "What are you afraid of?"

"Merging on this goddamn freeway, now shut up and let me drive!"

"Jesus, why are you the way you are?! I hate everything you do—especially stealing my boyfriend and making him gay."
“Look, Paxton’s always been gay, always will be. And I didn’t ‘steal’ him, he came to me every time. The only reason he’s even back home is because I asked him to work with me.”

“What? Fucking old men in motels?”

“Yeah, sometimes we have to! And you’re an idiot if you think that you change him, even if he does fuck you out of curiosity or pity or whatever.”

“God, do you hear yourself? You’re a manipulative, frigid, vain asshole!”

Annie’s blood settles in her ears. “I hope you get AIDS.”

Blaine’s eyes snap to the right, his jaw clenched. He looks back to the road and speeds down the freeway before crossing two lanes of traffic to take the Wilshire exit. The twins are quiet again until Annie steps out of the car at the clinic and Blaine yells after her, “Well, I hope you get fat!”

###

In the waiting room. Girls go deeper inside, some shaky and nervous, while others come out, looking as though they’d had information tortured out of them. Annie’s arms fold over her stomach, and she looks around, trying not to make eye contact with any of the other girls. In order to not be recognized, she wore a fedora, sunglasses, and black lipstick, though realizes too late she gave her real name so it was all probably for nothing.

While reading a brochure on the tourist town, Zerzura, about the family accommodations, Annie finds herself thinking of Paxton, going to the “city of birds” with their family.
"No family with Paxton," she scoffs. "Nothing with Paxton."

*That doesn't mean you have to do this.*

I don’t have a choice.

*There's always a choice.*

I can’t raise this baby with Paxton.

*That doesn't mean you can't raise me, Annie.*

"Annie?"

Startled, Annie lets the brochure fall. She looks towards the receptionist who calls her name again. Annie doesn’t say anything, though. She swings her purse over her shoulder and stands up, heading for the door.

"Are you Annie?" the receptionist asks.

"I don’t think so," Annie calls back.

Since Blaine had abandoned her, Annie texts Helena, who agrees to drive her back to Elysium. Waiting for Helena, Annie wonders if she shouldn’t have just gone through with it. Annie meets her at a restaurant down the street, and when she pulls up, her window slides down letting out one of Helena’s trademarked squeals.

"Hey, lady! God, it’s been forever! How have you been?"

"Oh, you know me," Annie says, opening the car door. Five minutes on the road and Annie is reminded of how much Helena chatters.

"I should probably go see my mom, I haven’t been home since Christmas."

"Oh yeah?" Annie asks, unwilling to fully participate in the conversation.

"Yeah. I’ve been staying in the new apartment that Daddy got me."
“And how’s that?”

“Oh your God, Annie, you’ve got to come see it soon.”

“Totally,” Annie replies, still only paying half attention. Her eyes lock onto the grill of an SUV, silver with a darkened windshield, which seems to be barreling towards Helena’s Land Rover.

“Rod comes over all the time, but all he does is play on the fucking Xbox. Shit, this is the longest stop light ever.”

“Hm,” Annie hums, curiously watching the SUV swerve to avoid a convertible then correct its collision course towards the two of them.

No, the three of us.

Her eyes widen and she opens her mouth to yell for Helena to drive but before any sound comes out of her mouth metal smashes into metal, and Annie is showered with shards of glass.

###

“I’m afraid you lost the baby,” the doctor would tell her hours later, in the emergency room. “It’s still early in your first trimester, so we’ll be performing an MVA.”

“Thanks, doctor,” she will say, while Helena chatters to Rod over the phone with her neck in a brace. Paxton will come because he is listed as Annie’s emergency contact on her SAG health insurance. Back then she thought he would be the first person she would want to see in circumstances like these.
He will sit by her bed while Helena tosses him exaggerated glares and Paxton will apologize, even if he doesn’t know why he’s sorry. She will lie on the starched hospital sheets, legs drawn up, her back blankly facing him. She won’t speak or look at him, though in spite of everything, she will still want to.
The Storm

"People are afraid to wonder if you're for sale."

His eyes snap open, there’s sharp static coming from... somewhere. He wonders what he has to do, looks around, notice he’s in bed, at his parents’ place in Elysium. Groggy, his head flops to look over to the alarm clock. It says the time is “hE:11” and he mumbles “I know” to test his vocal chords. He flips the alarm clock over and he smacks the top until the static ceases. The glowing blue numbers read 11:34.

Paxton gets up and goes to his window. He looks out to the backyard. The pool light is on, making the water look like glowing radioactive waste. His brother, Adam, is swimming laps. There’s a girl he barely recognizes on a cell phone, watching him. What was her name?

“Lilith,” he whispers. As if she heard him say her name, Lilith pauses. She looks up to Paxton’s window and makes a face then gives him the finger. Paxton frowns, realizes he’s nude, backs away from the window. Throwing on a pair of jeans and a polo shirt, Paxton goes downstairs to the kitchen. He’s peeling a banana, wondering if he should apologize. The French doors open and Adam walks in, wearing swimming trunks, toweling himself dry. When he turns around to shut the door, Paxton tries not to notice the scratch marks on his back have scabbed over.

“Lilith’s pissed at you,” he says tiredly.

Paxton shrugs, takes a bite of the banana. “I didn’t realize I was naked when I was at the window.”
"Well, still. I think you’d better tell her you’re sorry."

"I don’t really have time. I’ve got work in…” He looks at his watch. “Twenty minutes.”

"Pax, please, it won’t take long. Just—"

Paxton’s cell phone starts to vibrate from inside his pocket and he fishes it out. He has one new message from Grey.

"Can you apologize to—“ Paxton holds up a hand, hushing his brother. He reads the message and looks at his watch.

"Sorry, Adam, I’ve gotta go,” Paxton says, digging in his pockets for his keys.

"Go? Go where?” Adams asks.

"Work,” Paxton yells back, shutting the door behind him.

###

While driving to the city, Paxton rounds a corner and doesn’t see the mountain lion as it chews a carcass in the middle of the PCH. Its face and eyes flashed peaceful and brilliant gold before the impact. He isn’t going very fast, so it survives even after the rear tires of Paxton’s Prius move over it. He hammers the brake and skids to a stop in a gravel patch by the side of the road. Slightly hyperventilating, gripping the steering wheel so hard his fingernails dig into his palms, he gets out of the car, leaving the door open and looks back to the mountain lion. It shrieks and yowls, its hind legs useless now, and it tries to drag itself towards Paxton. It sounds like it is both pleading for something and clamoring for revenge.
The hot wind whips around Paxton, and he brings his hands to his head to look at the maimed beast in horror. Tears sting his eyes as he wonders what he should do, or who to call, and as if to spare him, he already feels his phone vibrating against his thigh.

Fishing it out, he reads a text from Grey: *Remember to be on time.* His shoulders slump and he rubs his wet face, realizing he’s been crying, and the mountain lion makes gurgling noises as an inky black substance spills onto the road from its mouth. As he hesitantly gets inside his car, he breathes out an “I’m sorry” and cranes his neck, gapping as a silver SUV barrels around the corner, finishing the creature.

###

Paxton lights a cigarette with a shaky hand and turns his back on the brown stucco Four Seasons building in Beverly Hills. Framed by two halogen lights is a billboard that reads “ADVERTISE HERE.” A figure steps up next to him and though he doesn’t turn his head, he can tell by the cologne that it’s Blaine, and he can’t help his heart from pulsing in his head. He’s wearing the same cologne he wore that night he took Paxton to Grey’s.

“Hey,” Paxton mumbles, trying to hide a warm smile.

“Hey.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Client,” Blaine grunts.
“Room 817?” Paxton asks. Blaine doesn’t say anything, just nods. “Why are the both of us here, though?” Blaine shrugs. Paxton finishes the cigarette, tosses it to the ground, stomps on it. The wind is strong and Blaine’s eyes are narrowed at Paxton. Paxton looks at him, the wind tossing Blaine’s shoulder-length blond hair, and frowns.

“You okay?” Paxton asks.

“C’mon,” Blaine says. “We’re going to be late.”

As they walk inside the hotel, thunder drums up in the clouds, and very suddenly, Paxton doesn’t want to go through with this. He’s surprised at how much effort it takes to follow Blaine through the lobby, to the elevators. They don’t talk as they ride the elevator up to the eighth floor, and Paxton is pretty sure he can hear the thunder outside. The doors open and they continue walking to room 817.

“Hey,” Paxton starts, but he shuts up as Blaine raps on the door. It opens slightly, and a chubby hand beckons them inside. They both file into the dim room and it takes Paxton’s eyes a few seconds to adjust, and when they do, the lights flicker. Outside, he sees a palm tree bending, the fronds being ripped from the top by the strong winds.

“So, um, are you two the, uh, the boys I ordered?” the man asks. Paxton looks him over. He’s in his fifties, balding, stocky and wearing a Four Seasons bathrobe. Paxton feels his guts recoil.

“Sure am,” Blaine says. “Are you Roger?”
“Yes.” There’s a pause between them. Paxton’s eyes drift over to the minibar.

“Help yourselves to something to drink, please.”

Paxton starts to walk over to the bar, but Blaine grabs his arm and squeezes.

“We’re fine, thanks,” Blaine says, grinning at Paxton. To him, Blaine looks
like a wolf, grinning at his prey. Paxton shivers and Blaine lets him go. “We don’t
need alcohol to do this. We’re underage, anyhow.”

‘They like ’em young, ’ Paxton chanted in his head. ‘They like ’em shy.’

“Roger” tries to look nonchalant, but Paxton can tell that this excites him.

“Okay, then. So, um, how old are you boys?”

“Seventeen,” they both lie. The man nods.

“I got two boys about your age. Real, fine boys…” Roger trails off and grins
widely, like he just remembered a joke. Again, Paxton is reminded of a wolf. “What
are you boys’s names?”

“I’m Julian,” Blaine says. “This is Clay.” The man beams. Paxton starts to
sweat.

“So, do you want us to take our clothes off?” Blaine asks. Paxton remembers
Blaine hates small talk. Roger nods eagerly, makes a gesture with his hands. They
start to undress.

“No, wait!” They stop and look at him. Blaine’s still grinning. “Take each
other’s clothes off,” Roger urges.

Paxton looks back at Blaine who arches an eyebrow and shrugs. Blaine lifts
Paxton’s polo over his head while Paxton finishes unbuttoning Blaine’s shirt. They
undo each other’s belts and let their pants fall, and neither are wearing underwear. The man moves in closer, the lights flicker again.

“Now, kiss each other,” Roger commands. Blaine closes his eyes and moves in close to Paxton and their lips lock together. “Yeah, just like that,” the man says. They kiss for several minutes until Roger orders them to lie on the bed together. Paxton can hear the thunder from outside.

“You, Julian. I want you to fuck your friend Clay, here. And I’m going to watch. I want to see everything.” Paxton looks over to Blaine, and his mind runs a marathon through memories.

Watching movies in the Galleria, surfing together in high school, parties at Blaine and Annie’s, the night before Paxton left for college in New York, and the day before Paxton came back to L.A., barely more than a month ago, these and a hundred others, and Paxton thinks of the man’s two sons and feels sick.

“Kiss again,” Roger says breathlessly. He’s playing with his hard-on, and Paxton’s stomach turns. Blaine is straddling Paxton, and he leans close and kisses Paxton hard on the mouth. Paxton, trying to make it look as if he’s biting Blaine’s ear in the throes of passion, whispers, “I’m still in love with you.”


Paxton is standing outside of the Four Seasons, by the curb, smoking. It’s still raining, but the wind has died down. Blaine is sitting next to him, on the wet curb, knees drawn up to his chest. They haven’t spoken a word since they left the hotel room. Paxton finishes his cigarette, lets it fall from his hand, doesn’t stomp it out.

“I’m sorry I hit you,” Blaine says, finally. Paxton shrugs.

“S’fine.”

“No, it’s not. I’m calling Grey later on. We’re not doing anything like that again.”

“But... what about what I said...?”

Paxton looks down at Blaine, but Blaine is staring off at the billboard. Paxton wonders why Blaine is so focused on it, but he notices there’s no phone number or anything with it and this unnerves him.

“I know about Annie and the baby,” Blaine says numbly. Paxton’s ears perk up and his head jolts in Blaine’s direction. “You got my sister pregnant, and she went to get an abortion. I hate you both for that.”

Paxton doesn’t say anything for a long time. Finally, he sniffs loudly, says, “I didn’t know she was pregnant.” He gets down to his knees, puts his hands on Blaine’s shoulders. Blaine shoves them off and stands up. “I’m sorry, please,” Paxton says, starting to cry, “do something. Anything! Please, hit me! Hit me again!”

Blaine looks at Paxton and sighs sadly. He holds up his hand and signals a cab. It stops and Paxton is staring at Blaine, wiping tears from his eyes, his jaw
throbbing. He claws at the bottoms of Blaine’s pants, but Blaine nudges him away gently with his foot.

“No, Paxton. Never again.”

“Blaine,” Paxton sobs, “Let’s leave, just you and me, let’s get out of here! I can save us from all of this!”

Blaine opens the cab door. “I’m not going anywhere with you.” He gets in, slams the door, a sound accompanied by a thunder-crash, and the cab drives away. Paxton lies on the sidewalk, letting the rain hit him. He stares at the billboard—ADVERTISE HERE—and after a few moments a young guy walks up to him cautiously.

“Um, dude, are you okay?” he asks. Paxton sniffs loudly and stands up.

“Who in the FUCK is okay?!” he yells. The man shrugs and walks away, and Paxton stands crying in the rain. He can still hear the thunder in the distance.
Dinner Plans

In all actuality, Adam does not want to go, but he wasn’t about to confess that to Lilith. Chances are she knows already anyway. They delicately maneuver around each other in the bathroom, careful not to bump into the other, as if that act would force them both to start their routines over again. He brushes his teeth slowly while Lilith showers and he is already nude when she steps out. Adam considers gently grazing against her body with his as he moves past her into the bathtub, but he refrains at the last second—he knows it would disgust her somehow.

After showering, he pulls on a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and a button-down oxford. ‘This dinner is going to end me,’ he thinks gravely, working the snaps of his shirt. He leaves the top two undone. Lilith walks out of the bathroom, into the bedroom, wearing a black cocktail dress that makes her look older than twenty-three. He looks over to the bedroom mirror to double-check twenty years hadn’t passed in the bathroom. Putting on a pair of earrings, Lilith looks at him and frowns.

“That’s not what you’re wearing,” she remarks. Adam looks down at himself then back at her.

“What’s wrong?” he sighs.

“You look like a frat boy on vacation. We’re going to a nice place in the city, not a fucking In-N-Out Burger. Find something else.”

Adam rolls his eyes and does what he’s told, settling on a Brooks Brothers suit he wore to his grandmother’s funeral.

“Is this okay?”
Lilith looks over from the mirror slowly, a mascara brush sweeping her eye. “Sure, whatever,” she says.

The disinterest in her voice reddens Adam’s face and he considers wrapping his tie around Lilith’s neck, but he refrains at the last second—for obvious reasons.

Looking at her watch, Lilith says, “Well, we’re late now.” She whirls around to face him, crossing her arms. “Nice going.”

During the hour’s drive to Los Angeles neither of them say anything.

###

Adam takes the 405 into the city and Lilith calls her dad and tells him to just meet at the restaurant.

“Well, we’re late anyway… Adam had to change his clothes…” Lilith looks over at him now and Adam tightens his grip on the steering wheel. “Where is the restaurant?” Lilith covers the mouthpiece with her hand. “Get on La Cienega. Okay, we’ll see you there… Uh-huh, bye.” Lilith hangs up, looks back over at Adam.

“Your knuckles are white,” she tells him. He clears his throat.

“Yep,” he says.

It’s late enough, so traffic isn’t terrible, and they arrive at the restaurant and are led to a table where Lilith’s father sits, alone. As the couple approach him he stands, like an old tribal elder, and the act comes off as archaic. Adam rolls the word over in his mind’s tongue: archaic. Lilith leans over the table so her father can kiss her cheek. He then extends his hand to Adam and smiles showing his teeth.
“Gaius Grey,” he introduces himself as Adam takes the man’s hand and shakes it. “You would be Adam, I take it?”

“Yes, sir,” Adam says, his spine stiffening on its own volition. Gaius’ handshake is strong, and when it ends, he steals a glance at his wrist to double-check that his hand was still attached, that Gaius hadn’t taken it and left him with a bloody stump. Gaius.

’What an odd name,’ Adam thinks, and again that word echoes in his head: archaic.

“Call me Guy,” says Lilith’s father jovially, smiling again. The smile bothers Adam, and he can’t think of any legitimate reasons why, but the teeth glinting in the dinner light, like needles, put him off. They all sit and a waitress takes their drink order before leaving Adam alone with the Greys.

“So, Lilly tells me you recently graduated from film school, congratulations!” Guy beams.

“Oh, thanks,” Adam says. “Yeah, it was a lot of work, but I’m finished now.”

“Not at all,” Guy counters, “I should think you have a lot ahead of you.”

“I guess you’re right,” Adam murmurs. Whenever he thinks of what his first film may be, or anything regarding the future, he breaks out in a sweat. “So what do you do?”

The question is innocent enough, but he obviously broke some secret rule because Lilith plants a fork in his thigh.
The motion was remarkably discreet: under the table and so quick that Adam didn’t even see her remove her fork from the table—because she hadn’t. Hers was still on the table, cocooned in cloth with a knife (‘Why didn’t she use a knife?’), and that’s when Adam realized she must have prepared for this, and taken one from an empty table while the matire d’ led them to the table. It was a clever move.

Adam makes no noise as the tines penetrate his flesh, halfway between knee and groin, save for sharply inhaling through his nose. He sucks his lower lip in his mouth to bite down on for a few seconds and grabs Lilith’s hand, squeezes it so hard he feels something break in his grasp. Lilith moans quietly, and disguises it as a throat-clearing. Through all of this, Guy either doesn’t notice, or pretends he doesn’t notice.

“What do I do?” he repeats, carefully preparing his answer. “I nudge people—get them to where they need to be.”

“Mmm,” Adam hums, more to help deal with the throbbing in his leg than provide a response. He doesn’t dare look down, but he can feel a warmth ooze and pool around the wound before tickling its way down his leg. He wants to yell, but that would make him lose the game.

“So are you a life coach or a travel agent, something like that?” Adam asks, panting slightly. He feels the weight of Lilith’s hand back on the fork, as a warning:

*drop it.*
“Something closer to a talent agency, I’d say.” Adam nods and the subject dissipates. As a reward, Lilith pulls out the fork quickly and tosses it beneath the table. Adam lets out a heavy sigh.

“Here,” Lilith says, ridding a napkin of its silverware with a flourish. Adam notices she uses her good hand, placing the napkin on his lap. “So you don’t soil your only suit.”

“Thank you,” he says, looking over at her for the first time since they sat down. He drops a hand beneath the table and applies pressure.

###

Drinks and dinner plates come and go. During the course of the meal, Adam learns more about Lilith, things they never talked about because they both agreed they were boring.

Like that Lilith has three siblings: Sam, Michael, and Evelyn, the boys being from Guy’s first marriage. They both work for Grey in his “talent agency”. He also learns that in her youth, Lilith had nearly been killed in a car collision—an SUV had hit the driver’s side of the car in the middle of an intersection and killed Lilith’s mother.

“Tara was...” Guy loses his receptive warmth for a second and looks down at his glass, running a thumb along the rim. “She was something else.”

Lilith stays mostly quiet during the entire dinner, except when Guy announces that her sister, Evie, is coming to town. Lilith drops her fork on her plate and Adam recoils, but barely.
"Is she now?" Lilith growls.

"Yes, if you could pick her up from the airport when she gets in, that would certainly be a boon to me."

"A boon?" Lilith’s voice drips with venom. "Who fucking talks like that?"

"Will you do it, please?"

"I guess," she says after a beat, sinking into her chair a bit. Adam looks over at Lilith, curious: he’s never seen her submit like this.

"Excellent," booms Guy, clapping his hands together. "You know, when raising your brothers, I was much harsher."

"I’ve heard," Lilith says pointedly. "I know all about your halcyon days."

"Well I don’t know about all that," Guy laughs. Adam’s eyes flick back and forth between the two, and he feels like he’s missing something, though it’s getting harder to focus on things that aren’t holes in his flesh at the moment. "Anyway, we’ll have to do this again sometime after Evie gets here—the whole family."

Lilith motions for another drink.

"How grand," she murmurs.

###

Later, during the drive back to Elysium, Lilith and Adam pull over to have sex. It’s like a game to them: do something terrible in public to get ahead, then fuck to determine the winner, a process unto itself. Pulled over on Bering, they couple, constantly wrestling over who gets pressed against their door and who’s pressing, who’s pushing their swollen and curled fingers (‘Like a dead spider’) into the other’s
pulsing leg, and she’s in control and while bucking on top of him her throbbing hand
moves from his leg to make a fist solid enough to punch him in the eye but these
attacks make her cocky and a sentence fumbles its way out “Normal people don’t do
this” but it’s then when he finally presses back, hard, grabbing the wrist of the hand
and sending it into the glass, and the day is his. A tally is being kept. A fork in the
thigh, a broken knuckle, these are nothing.

There is still so much more they can do to each other.