

Intro

*

Circus

The girl may have been the end for him. The end's beginning, like the bend of a road too slight to notice where it leads. She could have happened to him a day later or a day before, but she was there on that day, in that moment, just hours after Circus Palmer turned forty, a predictable time for a certain kind of end to come, and just seconds after Maggie slid her hand from his wrist and with her lips parted just enough to slip his finger through if he'd wanted, whispered, "I have something to tell you."

Outstretched on a chaise longue beside the hotel pool, Circus watched from a distance as the girl—in her mid-twenties, he figured—did cartwheels alone on the beach, her linen skirt falling open to bare the smooth plane of her hips and the slide of her calves sloping up to her toes. She lured his eyes away from Maggie, who was lying in another chaise longue beside him. All afternoon Maggie had been acting strangely, staring at nothing and losing the thread of conversations. This wasn't Maggie. Circus figured whatever it was she had to say wasn't anything he wanted to hear, so he let his attention be taken by the girl doing flips back and forth across the sand. When she landed on her feet, her hair lashed across her back like a whip, her shoulders lifted

and hands spread beneath the melon sunset as if she carried it on her fingertips. Hips, calves, toes, shoulders, hands, she circled in the air again.

“I wasn’t going to say anything.” Maggie hummed, the sound not fully making its way to him, not quite breaking through his focus. “But I thought you should know.”

If she were any other woman, he would have told her to come to the point. But this was Maggie, so he waited, a sense of dread needling in his gut. Chewing at the inside of his cheek—always his mouth needed something to do—he concentrated on the melody the girl made inside his head as he tapped a nervous rhythm on his knee.

“Listen to what I’m telling you.” The push in Maggie’s voice, major-keyed and salty, brought Circus back to the cabana, back to the Wild Turkey warm in his glass and Maggie beside him. Her lips were pursed as she stroked her long neck and watched the night begin to fall, possibly without noticing the girl, possibly trying not to.

Six days earlier, after not seeing each other for weeks, they’d arrived in Miami and hastily made their way to the hotel in order to get into a bed together. They’d paid extra for a room with a round marble bathtub where they could spend mornings sipping champagne before heading out to the city to visit Little Havana markets and smoke cigars. On the nights Circus played in the horn section of his friend’s band—the reason they’d made the trip—Maggie went into the city on her own, dancing in salsa bars and kicking drummers off their kits so she could play. And when he wasn’t gigging, they found hole-in-the-wall clubs where they could jam onstage with the band. Other players would recognize Maggie on occasion, asking what it was like to drum behind jazz greats and rock stars, and she’d tell stories about filled stadiums and rowdy tour buses, letting them craft fantasies around her. Usually Circus liked being the storyteller in a room, but watching Maggie hold court gave him a charge. That morning she’d sung

“Happy Birthday” to him playing a ukulele while wearing her bikini bottoms and a birthday hat. He’d laughed and lusted and wished they’d never have to leave the room.

But now this.

He’d come to Miami to draw a clean line between his first forty years and his next, and he’d invited Maggie because she was the only female in his life who knew how to be easy. He didn’t love traveling with women. A woman in the room meant ending the night back at the hotel where she was waiting.

“Sorry, baby.” He stroked her knee. “I’m listening.”

The air was slick with heat, the sky in full dusk. A breeze stuck in the palm trees clung stubbornly to coconuts instead of drifting down to cool him. As Maggie sipped a Manhattan, Circus felt crowded in a way he never had with her before.

“The sun’s going down.” He finished his drink and looked around for the server to bring another. “Why isn’t it getting cooler?”

A barman came with a bottle of bourbon from the other side of the deck, and Circus listened to the soft burble of the pour. Beside him, Maggie hiked up her dress to let the breeze reach across her brown thighs. He couldn’t stop himself from looking. To him, she’d always seemed designed rather than birthed, her body lean with crisp angles and slight curves. Circus resented her then for knowing how to steal his gaze from whatever spot on the horizon it had settled on, and he squirmed, sensing the tie lodged somewhere deep inside where he didn’t have access, the tie that attached him to her over three years—loosely, but attached nonetheless.

After the barman went away, he said, “I remember when I was a little tyke, me and my buddies did the math to see how old we’d be in 1999. Thought we’d be flying around in spaceships by then. Now here we are, 2013.” He looked over at Maggie, who didn’t seem to be listening. “Time, man.”

She answered only, “Light me a cigarette.”

Circus reached into his pants on the cement, pulled two Marlboros from the pack, lit them, and handed one to Maggie. He liked watching her smoke—the moist spread of her lips and the way she always let the tip of the cigarette linger at her mouth before she took a hit.

“I was late.” Casually, she ashed the cigarette into the air. “So I took the test.”

He let out a hard breath he didn’t know had been stuck in his throat and waited for her to smile, to laugh, to do something to let him know she was joking. “I don’t believe it.”

“Believe, sugar.”

“We’re careful.”

“Only sometimes.”

“You sure it’s mine?”

The corner of her mouth lifted. “Nice try.”

“I’ll be damned.” Circus opened his legs wider across the chaise. “We’re like a couple teenagers.”

A chuckle tapered out of Maggie’s mouth with a velvety line of smoke. “I didn’t think it could happen. Not with the number of years I got on me.”

“Baby, you’re not of this world. Who knows the miracles that body can do.” He took her hand, kissed the inside of her wrist, and linked his fingers through hers. “I got you, darlin’. We’ll take care of things when we get back to Boston.”

She ashed the cigarette again, winced.

“Right?”

The cigarette smoking between Maggie’s fingers and the liquor in her glass reassured him momentarily, but then he noticed the edge in her gaze.

“Maggie, come on,” he said.

“I’m thinking.”

“What’s there to think about?”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m a fool.”

“You know nothing good could come of this. Shit, I already got a kid barely talks to me.”

“Koko would talk to you plenty if you saw her once in a while.”

“Jesus, Maggie, don’t ask me to do something I’m no good at.”

“I didn’t ask you for a damn thing.”

Circus’s body seized as if everything keeping him alive had shut down at once. He tried to stay calm but felt like a cage was rising around him. He imagined climbing back through the moments of the day and settling into the space where he didn’t know so it wasn’t yet true, where she hadn’t yet told him so he was still free.

“Don’t do this to me,” he said. “Everything’s about to happen, you know this. I got Peacock Evans trying to set me up with that producer in New York so I gotta be ready, gotta focus. Man, just talking about it’s giving me the jitters.”

On the other side of the pool, a woman glanced up, letting her opened book fall to her chest to watch them. He was used to being watched with Maggie. They were loud and beautiful together.

Circus lowered his voice. “You got everything you could want in your world. You want some kid messing that up? You gonna let some kid get in the way of me finally having what I want? Don’t mess with what we got. You’re brilliant and kinky and don’t need jack from anybody. You’re my wildcat, Mags. Don’t get soft on me.”

When Maggie turned her eyes, Circus knew he had the choice to take back what he’d said or let it widen between them. Maggie rose from the chair, her body blocking his sun. He braced himself, his hand sweating around his glass. Maggie’s tall frame towered over him, holding him down. Even his clothes seemed to pull at their seams.

“Say something else,” she said.

He took a defiant sip of his bourbon. “You’re no mother.”

Maggie collected her bag and stormed across the deck, back inside the hotel. He was surprised to feel a twinge of regret at her walking away, but a swig of bourbon took care of that. It was the dread that stayed in his gut and grew solid, so that the only relief came from down the beach where the girl was pinwheeling through the air.

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It was the going he liked, liked the unclasping of links, liked getting to whatever was waiting at the other end of his leaving. It was this that pulled him toward the girl, dangled in front of him by either a generous or a mischievous fate. She seemed a promise of good things, good things welcoming and soft, as she stood on the beach and lined her lips with shimmery gloss. Circus loved those first moments when a woman didn't know he was watching and he could linger inside the strain of his body trying to resist. But he didn't linger long this time. The dread pushed him away from the terrace, away from the hotel and away from Maggie until he was slipping on his pants, grabbing his trumpet case from the ground and sprinting down the beach.

The lamps lining the boardwalk lit up as the sky started to deepen on its way to black. Circus made his way through the families lugging floats and coolers back from the beach, the couples strolling arm in arm. Once he hit the sand, he plucked a seashell from the ground, easing up beside the girl. He held the shell up to the waning sun, studying it in hopes of making her curious. She finished another cartwheel and sat hunched over her knees, peering up at him through the part of her hair.

"Wanna make a wish?" He held out the shell for her to see.

She shook her head, a skittish glint in her eye.

"Why's that?"

"I only make wishes on birthday candles. They're the only wishes that come true."

"Suit yourself." He kissed the shell and gently lobbed it into the waves.

"What'd you wish for?"

"You know I can't tell you that." Circus kicked a rock from beneath his shoe. "Where'd you learn to toss yourself around like that?"

Her gaze flickered up the beach toward the cabana where he'd just been sitting beside Maggie. The corner of her mouth quaked

into a half-smile, and he wondered whether she understood what had brought him to her.

“I got two left feet,” he said. “Even onstage, I can’t move with that kind of grace.”

“Onstage?” The girl slid her wrap from the beach and tied it around her waist, rising to her feet. “You don’t look like an actor.”

“What’s an actor look like?”

“Handsome.” She fondled the wrap’s tassels in the knot at her hip. “Young.”

Circus took a step closer to her, enjoying the tease.

“Do you tell jokes?” she asked.

“Music, doll.” He tapped the trumpet case in his hand. “Why? You like jokes?”

She nodded.

“Tell me a joke then.”

The girl reached into her beach bag and pulled out a brush, picking loose strands from the bristles before running it through her hair. Circus took the time that her eyes weren’t on him to study the angles of her face—the hewn nose and cheekbones, the pretty point of her chin. He could tell by the coy way she carried herself that she had already begun to understand what those angles could do to a man and was trying to figure out how to handle it.

“A guy with amnesia goes into a bar.” She eyed him as she ran the brush through her hair. “He sees a beautiful lady and asks, ‘Do I come here often?’”

“‘Do I come here often?’” He grinned. “That’s a good one.”

Something shimmered on the ground, so he poked through the sand and pulled out a piece of sea glass. He handed it to her. “Matches your eyes.”

The girl fingered the glass, a smile quivering on her lips. He could smell her now. The oily sweat of her skin beneath brine from an earlier swim, mint chewing gum, and the faint scent of vanilla. “They call me Circus,” he said.

“I’m Luz.”

He heard the accent. Cuban, he guessed. “Well, Luz, what is it you’re doing out here all by your lonesome?”

“I cook in this hotel,” she answered, her voice like the pluck of a guitar string out of tune. He couldn’t decide whether he liked it. “I always come to the beach after my shift ends.”

“Silly, them hiding you in the kitchen.” Circus glanced toward the hotel to make sure Maggie hadn’t come back. When he turned to the girl, she had her phone in hand, scrolling.

“Am I boring you?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Promise nothing’s more interesting in that phone than what’s standing in front of you.”

“I don’t believe you really wished for anything,” she said. “I think you were only pretending.”

“What’s it matter? You don’t believe in wishes anyway.” He took another step toward her. “Listen, an hour from now, I got a gig down the beach at Tres Gatos. I wished you’d take me somewhere to eat and come with me to the show after.”

“Why would I?”

“Oh, you should, doll. I’m good company.”

Luz slid her phone into the band of her skirt, turned, and started walking. “What kind of music do you play?”

Circus followed. “Jazz. You ever listen to jazz?”

She shook her head.

“Something else you should do. Sweetens the soul.” He stopped walking and lit a cigarette, letting his silence signal his impatience, letting it turn her back around.

She asked, “How do I know you’re a nice person?”

“I reckon you don’t.”

“What do I get if I go?”

“Come by and I’ll show you, doll. Take a risk.”

She yanked at the knot. “Where do you want me to take you to eat?”

“Anywhere. Doesn’t matter. Bring me someplace you like to

go.” He took another glance at the hotel and a shiver passed through him. “Just get me away from here.”

* * *

That night there was no Maggie and nothing growing in her belly. There was nothing except Circus’s body and breath. He played and forgot. Horn at his lips, buzzing. Sugary sound rising in the air, the notes skipped from the trumpet’s bell as he led the brass section through “Oye Como Va.” And in every direction were women, always. At the edge of every stage on every night he played, they were like flowers in the dim rooms where Circus—manly and thick, with a mess of black hair and playful shadows in his eyes—blew his horn. He tipped his cap to a redhead at the bar, then ran his gaze down the row of bodies at the edge of the stage, landing on Luz perched on a stool. They’d shared two plates of pasta at the hotel restaurant, Luz going on about young women things—an argument with a girlfriend and a television show she liked about ballerinas—in a way that usually would have irritated him but today offered a welcome distraction. Circus was grateful then that Maggie had always known to leave him alone on the nights he played. If ever there was a night to leave him be, he figured, it was this one. When the girl smiled up at him, he brought the trumpet back to his lips and let out a blare. She hopped off the stool, laced her hands behind her back, swung her hips.

“It sounds sweet when you play,” she said when he joined her at the bar after the set.

“Maybe because I was imagining you sitting here.” He ran his thumb across her chin. “That’s how you sound to me. Or maybe that’s what I sound like when you’re around.”

The half-smile returned as she pulled away. “I want something to drink.”

“I was thinking we could head elsewhere.”

Luz slapped her fists against the bar to get the barkeep’s atten-

tion, then ordered a tequila sunrise. She shimmied her shoulders to the Bootsy Collins tune that was playing.

“Did you know there are clouds in the sky with alcohol in them?” she asked.

“That doesn’t sound right.”

“It’s true,” she said. “I read all about it. Big clouds drifting through the sky. They’re far from Earth, we can’t go up and drink from them. Maybe the stars are having a party.”

“I’m sure it ain’t the kind of alcohol you’re thinking of.”

The barkeep placed the cocktail in front of the girl, and she stirred instead of sipped it.

“Drink up quick now,” Circus said.

“Why rush?” She slurped, cringing as a flicker of embarrassment blinked in her eyes.

His nerves gnawed at him like the moment before a fight went down in a club or a noise sounded off behind him late in the night on a street he’d never walked.

“Where are you from?” she asked.

He glanced at the grenadine bleeding through the orange in her glass and gently pushed it closer to her. “Kentucky.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

He knew what she was wondering. Everyone always asked. He had African and Shawnee blood from his father, English and Native Hawaiian from his mother. Italian somewhere along the line. Circus didn’t know what else. When he toured Europe in college, women thought he was from the Islands, though they never said which ones. No one ever knew what to make of him, and he came to like the lack of definition, the trick of it. It meant he could be anything.

“Or nothing,” Maggie had once teased.

“Or everything,” he’d replied.

“Are you Brazilian?” Luz sipped her drink through the stirring straw. “You could be.”

She took an imperceptible sip of the cocktail and told him

about a man she'd met from São Paulo who was big and dark like he was. Circus let her believe he was Brazilian because she seemed to think it linked them somehow.

"So?" He spun his empty shot glass on the bar. "Where you taking me?"

"Why do you want to leave so bad? I like it here."

"I was thinking you might show me more of your fine town and see where we end up."

Luz settled onto a stool, filling his empty glass with olives from a ramekin on the bar and popping them into her mouth like candies. "Tell me something I don't know about you."

There was something twitchy about the girl, troubled, like she was moving against a rhythm he couldn't follow. She kept touching his elbow and shoulder, kept bumping him with her hip. He liked looking at her, the way her black hair swooped over her eyes and graced the small of her back. He decided he liked her voice, off key as it was and snapping. There was a loose tempo inside it, an undercurrent of sound struggling to find pitch. He liked hearing it the way he liked hearing an orchestra warm up. "Why don't you go first?"

She stirred her finger in the olives and thought about it. "My favorite birds are robins."

"Okay," he said. "What else?"

"I'm afraid of snakes."

"That's just bein' wise."

She stopped to watch the barman pour a margarita into a glass. "Where do you live?"

Circus pulled a pack of cigarettes from his back pocket and yanked a toothpick from inside the plastic sleeve. "Boston."

"Is it nice?"

Chewing his nerves into the pick, he answered, "Depends what you're looking for."

She draped his arm over her shoulder. "Bring me there."

Luz had a faraway look in her eye, a wistfulness he never liked

watching women disappear into. He lured her back by tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “We’re in February, doll, that’s still winter in Boston. It’s cold right now.”

She held an olive between her fingertips, stared at it, thinking. “Cold’s not so bad.”

Circus looked around to see what else was happening in the club. The bandleader was chatting up a blonde in one corner of the room. In the other, the redhead from earlier in the night stirred her martini. She noticed the girl beside him, sneered, and turned her back.

When he faced Luz again, she slid a fat olive between her lips, rolling it across her tongue, then tilted her head back to swallow. Circus watched.

“I know what you want,” she said, giving the redhead a glance.

“Do you?”

“A bad girl. You think I’m bad?”

Circus was confused suddenly and liked it. She glanced at his mouth, slipped the toothpick from it, and pressed her lips against his. Circus’s mouth filled with her—mint chewing gum, stale tequila, an unruly tongue and spit and teeth, but the lack of elegance made him wonder what her body might do. She sat on the barstool, legs swinging and gaze holding him at a tantalizing distance.

“I got a rule, sister.” Circus ran a finger over her mouth. “No woman under twenty-five. So before this goes any further, how old are you?”

“Twenty-four. Can’t you change the rule for me?”

He leaned down for another kiss but stopped when the club door opened behind her and Maggie stepped inside. In a red dress, she was a spark in the darkness, a stoplight’s flare burning a hole in the night. She lingered at the door searching the room for him.

Circus grabbed his trumpet case from the floor and the girl by the elbow and led her out the club’s back entrance. The phone

buzzed in his pocket. Maggie. He turned off the ringer and snapped on the tiny metronome he kept clipped to his keychain to let the rhythmic tick calm him.

“Circus?” Luz nibbled at her thumbnail. “What’s happening?”

He pulled a cigarette from his pocket, lit it, and took a drag.

“Are you in trouble?”

For an instant, he fell in love with the simplicity in her eyes. “Is there somewhere we can go?” He eased her away from the door. “You live around here?”

Luz took a step back, folding her arms over her chest like a child unsure how to protect herself. All at once, he regretted speaking to the girl, regretted bringing her to the club, regretted the thundering mass of his body next to hers that now seemed so small. She was so young. Reaching into his pocket, he offered her two twenty-dollar bills.

“Go inside and call a taxi,” he said.

Luz tsked at the money. “I can just call my brother.”

She pulled her phone from the band of her skirt and dialed, glancing up at him briefly as if the last few hours hadn’t happened and he was only a stranger on her path. He thought to give the girl a kiss on the cheek but realized how pointless the gesture would be. She was already forgetting him as she made her way back into the club.

And so he sprinted through the parking lot toward the water, letting the black sky cover him. Walking alone down the beach toward his hotel, Circus listened to the Atlantic’s wet murmur against the shore and the smooth press of his heels against the sand. The scent of the sea and the fresh salt air reminded him he was in a new place, disconnected from the rest of life. But then he was thinking of Maggie. He turned on his phone to see if she’d called and wondered what it was in him that hoped she had. He wondered, too, what it was that resented her as soon as he discovered two missed calls, what it was that made him feel choked.

The first time he’d seen her, standing in the middle of a friend’s

garden party, she seemed mythic, like sculpture. Circus couldn't stop watching. Everything about Maggie seemed to crackle like lightning—her percussive laugh, her smile, her gait. There was nothing familiar about her, yet as soon as they spoke, everything was easy. For three years, he went to her whenever he needed that sense of recognition and whenever she called in need of whatever she got from him. He'd never thought about how long it would last or how it would end. Until tonight.

Circus planted himself on the beach, lost in the gentle passage of the wind that seemed to move through him. He wanted his horn. Nothing calmed him like its sound. Rinsing his hands in the ocean's salty waters, he opened the case, licked his lips, brought the brass to them, and blew. He played one of the salsa tunes from the night but slowed the rhythm and let the morose, tottering melody fill the air, swaying between minor notes and major. He blew, and the tightness in his body loosened as he gave the song to the sea, to Luz back at the bar, and to Maggie wherever she was.

When he finished, the air held the sound, the wail of the trumpet ringing where the waves met the shore. Circus wished the whole night had happened differently. He saw himself back at the club, dropping the trumpet from his lips, stepping off the stage, and finding himself a spot in the back of the room where he could nurse a glass of bourbon until the sun came up and he knew what to do about himself.

Circus continued to the hotel. The air was loose around him, the wind running its cool fingers through his hair. He found his rental car in the lot and took the bottle of whiskey he'd kept beneath the passenger seat. Sitting on the hood, he took a swig, gazing up at the endless sky, without walls, without corners, and beneath it, found calm. But then thoughts of Maggie came, Maggie wriggling beside him in the sheets of the bed after she'd woken up that morning and later swung her hips as she traipsed through the room humming music. He was desperate for her and knew he

should have gone back to the hotel after the gig. As he thought of her, something in him began to crack, something seeping and wet and wounded, and an old terror rose in his chest.

Circus looked up when a flicker of light caught his attention. Maggie walked out onto the terrace five floors above, the breeze lifting the hem of her nightgown. He followed her gaze out to sea where the water was dancing, the waves sighing against the sand. Maggie was near, the crack was closing. The way the moon cast its glow against the railings of the terrace made it appear as if she were contained and just out of reach. He loved her entirely then and imagined a child in her arms, his child, and there was something comforting and erotic about it. He watched her and loved her but knew with each step he took to the room where she waited, his love would fade, and by the time he got to the door, it would have drained completely.

Circus clicked open the lock of the car, laying his trumpet in the back seat and covering it carefully with a blanket. Sliding into the driver's seat, he had one last glance at Maggie and sped out of the lot. The guilt swelled against his ribcage until he drove far enough away to sense its silent pop. He lit a cigarette and found a jazz station on the radio, settling in for the next couple days. The drive north would be long.

**Ready,
the
Heart**

*

Koko

“Does it hurt?”

The drag of the sewing needle’s point across Koko’s forearm left two tiny dots of blood and a sting, so she couldn’t tell which of the girls clustered around her on the school bleachers had asked the question. Koko glanced at the other freshman who’d gone first after Natalie De Luca and Kima Brooks asked who wanted their ears pierced or skin tattooed. The girl held a napkin over the freshly engraved miniature heart on the inside of her wrist, her lips parted as if she were secretly taking breaths from the chilled winter day to keep herself from being sick.

“It should hurt,” Natalie said, the tip of her tongue curled against her top lip. She sat two planks up on the bleachers, her long legs crossed at the knees. Teeth chattering against the cold, she rubbed at her bare thighs, goose pimples under the hem of her down coat. “So does it?”

Koko barely recognized the whispery sound of Natalie’s voice because Natalie, who’d been Koko’s best friend in the neighborhood until the older girl’s legs lengthened and breasts swelled three summers before, hadn’t asked her a question in years.

“No way,” Koko answered.

Straddled on the plank beside Koko, Kima lowered the point of the needle into the flame of her pink Bic lighter. “Where do you want it?”

Koko ran her finger over the inside of her arm beneath her elbow joint. “There. I guess.”

A yowl came from the track field yards away, where a group of boys were having a snowball fight, and all the girls on the bleachers turned to look. The captain of the basketball team—the Tower, everyone called him—swept flecks of snow from his jacket with his giant bony hands, cursing whoever had thrown the snowball. Koko watched him bend to the ground to craft another ball with the same precision and care her art teacher shaped molds of clay.

“What color you want it to be?” Kima asked.

The tip of Kima’s needle blackened against the flame. Koko bristled, imagining its drag across her arm, though a part of her wanted to feel it again, to see the white scratch of the needle on her dry brown skin, to feel the cut and watch the blood. She wanted the other girls to see.

“How are you gonna color it in?” Koko asked.

“Permanent marker.” Kima snapped a wad of gum Koko didn’t know she’d been chewing. “The color stays because of the slit.”

Millicent, one of the older girls, rolled a collection of permanent markers between her palms, and Koko listened to the strange crack of plastic. She had wondered all year how anyone with an old lady name like Millicent could be as popular as this girl was. But Millicent wore blue jeans that hung low on the angles of her womanly hips, and she had an accent all the boys made fun of, though Koko could tell they liked the sound.

“Why don’t you put, like, a gust of wind since your name is Bree?” Millicent stopped sorting through the markers and tilted her head. “You know, Bree like breeze.”

“That one’s Bree,” Natalie said, nodding toward the blonde freshman with the heart tattoo. “This one’s named Koko. But if

we're letting her hang around, which I haven't decided if we are yet, she needs a new name. 'Koko' sounds like a puppy."

Rolling her eyes, Millicent dropped the markers onto the plank. "I can't keep these little freshman girls straight."

Koko caught an aqua blue marker before it rolled to the ground as Millicent fluffed her hair, then bounced off the bleachers and headed toward the boys. The back-and-forth swing of her hips embarrassed Koko as if somehow the sight were too grown-up for her, like dirty movies or high heels. The boys flocked around Millicent, but only the Tower was taller than she was, and the two seemed to gravitate toward each other in a way that made Koko imagine they were dancing. She noticed that Bree, the other freshman, who now held a lump of snow over the fresh wound on her wrist, was watching, too.

"What do you want the design to be?" Kima asked.

"Maybe a butterfly?" one of the girls suggested. "Kima draws good butterflies."

"Get a bulldog," said another girl, drawing a black diamond on the back of her hand. "Then you'll never forget going to school here."

Kima spat her gum to the ground. "That's something I want to forget. Class of 2013, girl, this is the year I'm set free."

"Maybe she should get the Tower," Natalie said. "She stares at him enough."

Koko felt the soft kick of Natalie's foot against her back. When Koko turned, she hoped a look would pass between them that would tell her Natalie remembered the years they used to run through the neighborhood in their pajamas and make costumes out of their mothers' jewelry. Instead, Natalie blew a sarcastic kiss through her lips, slick with a purple lipstick she said was called Lilac Kitten.

"Circus," Koko said louder than she'd meant. "I want it to say Circus."

Kima arched an eyebrow. "You like clowns or something?"

“Circus is her dad.” Natalie slid her phone from her pocket, thumbing at the keys. “She’s obsessed with him.”

“No, I’m not,” Koko mumbled.

The other girls snickered as if cued by the roll of Natalie’s eyes. Bree looked up at Koko with a thin smile, her lips caught on the wires of her braces.

“Whatever,” Kima said, making another pass of the needle through the flame.

A giddy shriek sounded from the field, and all the girls turned just as Millicent latched her fingers through the belt loops of the Tower’s blue jeans and followed him across the snow-covered grass.

“Are they fucking?” one of the girls asked.

“Obviously,” Natalie said without looking up from her phone. “Millicent fucks everyone. Why do you think the boys love her?”

The Tower ran faster than Millicent could with her hands attached to him, so she tripped, which Koko thought mean until she realized the fall was meant to give him a reason to help her to her feet. Koko watched them cross the field, noting how the older girl had a way of putting all the prettiest parts of herself just out of reach of the Tower’s touch when she moved around him—the corners of her hips, her mouth, the flipped ends of her long black hair. Koko tried to see herself slinking around the boy the way Millicent did, but knew she didn’t have that kind of magic, not like Millicent, or Natalie.

They were both tall and raven-haired and delicately built. Even the other girls on the bleachers, including boyish Kima with her sleek frame and straightened hair, were lovely the way Koko knew girls were supposed to be. Their hair fluttered when the wind blew through it, unlike the bun of bristly curls knotted at the back of Koko’s head. Their faces were made up of squares and triangles, unlike Koko’s rounded nose and cheeks. They looked like girls in shampoo commercials, she thought, while Koko was sturdy and small, thick-thighed and busty. Sometimes Koko saw a pretty girl

when she looked at herself in the mirror, and she knew she had something because men in the streets stopped to whistle. But at school, she felt ugly—her eyebrows too bushy, her lips too plump, her brown skin too blotched.

“Would you do it with Tower, Nat?” asked the girl coloring the diamond on her hand.

Natalie looked up, the glint in her eye a tease at the younger girls. “I’d blow him.”

The girls laughed or agreed, and Natalie smiled to herself, Koko understood, because she liked imagining doing it. Koko, who’d never been kissed or touched by a boy, let her gaze fall from the Tower’s face to his shoulders to his knees, briefly gracing the lump in his blue jeans. She’d seen naked boys, but only hidden under the blankets of her bed, where she watched videos on her phone before falling asleep at night. As the Tower gripped Millicent by the wrists and pulled her to her feet, Koko quivered against the same sensations she felt under her blankets. Readiness, fear, and a light tickle between her legs.

“My boyfriend would die if I did that to another guy.” Natalie fixed her hair in the camera on her phone. “Older guys get wicked jealous.”

“The boyfriend we’ve never seen,” Kima said under her breath.

The younger girls glanced at each other as if expecting a fight, except for Bree who seemed as in the dark as Koko on the matter. Unruffled, Natalie took a quick scroll of her phone, turning it so the girls could see the photo on the screen of a white male torso, chest slim and hairless, his slanted purplish thing in his grip.

Koko turned her head before the picture could stick, but she wasn’t fast enough. She didn’t know which of the feelings in her body to allow—exhilaration, confusion, embarrassment, alarm—so she rolled her sleeve further up her arm in preparation for the tattoo as the other girls fought over the phone to have a closer look.

Natalie let out a cackle that sounded wild and sinful. “He sends me a dick pic whenever he wants me to come blow him. It’s like

the bat signal. Usually he gives me jewelry to thank me when I'm done, so it's a win-win." She stared at the screen, lying back on the plank of the bleachers as if falling onto the cushions of her sofa at home. "Just looking at this picture makes me want him in my mouth."

"Gross," Bree said, then gasped as if speaking were a mistake.

"Don't knock it till you try it," Natalie said.

"Why do you like it?" Bree asked.

Natalie unspooled her lipstick, smothering her mouth in violet. "I have all the power."

Koko turned her gaze back to the Tower, wondering what he looked like when he let his pants fall to his ankles, wondering if he ever made noises like the ones she heard the men in the videos make when women put their mouths and hands on them. The Tower was grinning at Millicent like he loved her, and Koko's heart hurt because she wanted to be looked at that way. As Millicent jumped onto the Tower's back and let him carry her across the field, Koko wondered what Natalie meant by power and if it made the older girls more exceptional than the younger ones. If it somehow made them prettier.

"Someone's thirsty," Natalie said, poking the pink tip of her tongue through her purple lips that reminded Koko of a bruise. "Do you want to have little Tower babies?"

"Hardly," she answered.

Natalie went on about the Tower and Koko's make-believe babies, speculating on whether they'd be tall or short, athletic or lazy. The other girls laughed, but Koko wasn't bothered. Even though she thought the Tower was cute, and even though she had once kissed her rolled fist imagining his mouth, she was no longer thinking about him because her truer love was making his way across the track field. Mr. O'Rourke, the English teacher, waved his hand at the girls while beside him the school guidance counselor, Mrs. Washington, stumbled through the snow in heeled boots.

"I should go," Koko said, certain she knew why the teachers were coming and not wanting the other girls around to see.

"What about your tattoo?" Kima asked.

"Can I get it tomorrow?"

"We're not doing them tomorrow," Natalie said.

Just then Mr. O'Rourke called Koko's name. All the girls turned their heads.

"My God," said the girl with the diamond on her hand. "That's who I want babies with."

Kima hid the lighter and needle in the backpack between her feet as Mr. O'Rourke waved again, his wide mouth revealing a toothy grin. He'd always reminded Koko of a tree, with his lanky limbs knotted at the knuckles and knees, the way he loomed over her desk when he asked questions. Koko also thought of caricatures she'd watched drawn at birthday parties because his jawline was an inch too big, his nose bumpy and his brown hair a shaggy mop. "Goofy," her mother had once called him after a parent-teacher conference. Still, he mesmerized Koko whenever she sat in his classroom or saw him in the halls, and she knew other girls felt the same.

"Your babies would have giant heads," Natalie said and returned to her phone.

Mr. O'Rourke clapped his gloved hands together and said something to Mrs. Washington that made her laugh.

"How's everyone doing this afternoon?" Mrs. Washington asked when the teachers arrived. All the girls mumbled an answer. "Pretty chilly to be outside, isn't it?"

"They're tough," said Mr. O'Rourke, beaming at Koko.

"Maybe we should find some clubs for you all to join," the guidance counselor went on. "There's better things to do with your after-school time than loafing on the bleachers."

"We're bonding," said one of the girls.

"Bonding's good," said Mr. O'Rourke in the bouncy way he said everything. "I hope you're bonding over the Lucille Clifton

poems we talked about this morning. I bet that's what you're doing. Am I right?"

All the girls tittered except for Natalie, which seemed to bother Mr. O'Rourke. Koko could tell how much he liked making everyone around him smile. It was one of the things she loved most about him.

"Natalie," he asked, "you didn't like the Lucille Clifton poems this morning?"

She didn't answer at first and continued scrolling through her phone.

"Only the 'Dark Moses' one with the guy's rod twisting like a serpent," she said without looking at him.

"We didn't read that one," he said to Mrs. Washington as his cheeks reddened. "That's not one of the poems I assigned."

Mrs. Washington nodded, though she didn't seem to understand.

"Koko," she said, taking a step forward. "Are you busy, dear? We'd like to get your two cents about something."

The other girls looked at Koko like she was in trouble. She grabbed her backpack and followed the teachers across the field, answering vaguely when they asked about her classes and grades, whether she had plans for spring break.

When they stepped inside the school building, Mrs. Washington stomped the snow from her boots, and the sound echoed in the empty halls.

"Koko, dear," she started, "do you have any idea why we want to talk to you?"

Koko knew but shook her head. The two teachers glanced at each other like actors playing schoolteachers on a television show. Mr. O'Rourke flicked his head in the direction of his classroom, so Koko followed them down the hall, taking her favorite seat at the side of the room near the window. Mr. O'Rourke sat behind his desk and started flipping his fountain pen between his thumb and forefinger while Mrs. Washington opened one of the accordion files she'd been carrying.

"We found something of yours," the counselor said.

From one of the sleeves of the file, she pulled out Koko's journal, on which she'd plastered Day of the Dead stickers and drawn roses and slinky cats. For two days, Koko had been waiting for Mr. O'Rourke to come to her with the journal, which she'd planted on a bookshelf in his room two days before, knowing Mr. O'Rourke cleaned the room himself because he was too kindhearted to leave it to the janitors.

"Did I do something wrong?" Koko asked.

Mr. O'Rourke scooted to the edge of his chair. "Of course not."

"We just have some . . . concerns about some of the things we read in your notebook," Mrs. Washington said. "We weren't trying to invade your privacy reading it. We just needed to see who the book belonged to."

"What are you concerned about?" Koko asked.

Mrs. Washington sat on a corner of Mr. O'Rourke's desk. "A couple of the poems you've written. They're lovely, Koko. You're a talented girl. We're just concerned about the content. Whether what you're describing in them is real or imagined. You understand?"

Koko had never liked the way Mrs. Washington spoke to everyone like they were little kids. It wasn't Mrs. Washington she'd wanted to talk to anyway.

"I'm not comfortable," Koko said.

The teachers glanced at each other again.

"Maybe I should leave you two alone," said Mr. O'Rourke.

"No," Koko said, her hands clenched beneath the desk, "I'm not comfortable talking to Mrs. Washington."

The counselor recoiled. "Why not, honey?"

Koko ran her hands over the surface of the journal, picking at the edge of one of the stickers as she tried to come up with an answer that would make sense. "Mrs. Washington isn't a poet. She won't be able to understand my poems."

"It's not the craft we want to talk to you about, Koko," she answered.

Koko pressed the edge of the sticker firmly against the cardboard cover. "I prefer talking to Mr. O'Rourke."

Mrs. Washington nodded, collected her accordion files, and left the room. After a prickly silence, Mr. O'Rourke stirred a bowl of paper clips on his desk with his fingers, took one, and bent it around his thumb.

"Are you having a good year?" he asked.

"I guess."

"What's your favorite class?"

She shrugged, embarrassed to say "English" now that they were alone. "Not math."

"Yeah." He chuckled. "I was never very good at math either. Tell you a secret?"

She nodded.

"I didn't even make it to algebra in high school. Too much of a knucklehead, I guess."

Koko fidgeted inside the strange sensation that came over her body, as if her leg had fallen asleep but the tickle were moving all over. She had never been alone with him, had never been alone with any boy she loved.

"How many books do you have in there?" she asked, nodding toward the tiny alcove attached to the classroom that Mr. O'Rourke had turned into a library.

He glanced over his shoulder. "You know, I haven't counted. A hundred? Two hundred? Like I said, I'm bad with numbers."

"Can I go in?" she asked, her stomach fluttering like it did when she daydreamed during class about Mr. O'Rourke leading her into the library, shutting the door, and kissing her.

"Koko, I think we should talk about your poems." He came around the desk and sat in the seat beside her. "May I?"

She shrugged, taking in the soapy scent of his aftershave. He took the journal and opened it to the first page, sliding his hand across the words she'd written purposely days before in hopes that he would read them and worry, that this very moment between them would come.

"It's a beautiful poem," he said, scanning the lines. "But when I read it, I feared . . ."

His voice trailed off, and he bit at his bottom lip, nervous, it seemed, about how to handle things. When he looked toward the door, Koko imagined he was wishing Mrs. Washington would return. She would know what to do.

"What's wrong with the poem?" Koko asked.

Mr. O'Rourke kept his eyes on the page. He swallowed, and his Adam's apple bounced. "Koko, are you . . . is this person . . ."

He struggled, and for a moment Koko was sorry for lying.

"Is what you wrote in the poem true?" he asked. "Your stepfather . . . he uses . . . are there substances in your house?"

For days, Koko had imagined this moment but hadn't expected Mr. O'Rourke to bumble so awkwardly through it. The point of writing the poem had only been to stand out from the sea of faces he looked at every day. How easy it would be to tell him now that the poem was made up or was about a girl she could pretend to know, then seize their moment together and move it in a sweeter direction. But for some reason, Koko didn't want to do that. He was struggling. He was struggling over her, and she'd made it happen. She wanted more.

"Yeah," she answered.

Mr. O'Rourke fell against the back of the chair, letting out a long breath he seemed to have been holding in. He paged through the journal absently, not reading or even looking at the poems. "Mrs. Washington should handle this, Koko. She knows the proper channels, okay, the protocol. There's a protocol. Why don't you want to talk to her?"

Because I love you, she imagined saying. Instead she asked, "What's to talk about?"

Mr. O'Rourke got up and paced the room, his hands in his pockets. He stood in front of a Walt Whitman poster as if he were getting some kind of guidance.

"I think I'm supposed to report this," he said.