

4.

MY NEW HOME was a small yellow room in a dark green house that I shared with an illustrator and an oil painter; the dancer who had rented out her bed would be gone for the summer. It was located in the West End of Providence, four hundred dollars a month for a large backyard and a cat named Elvis. The dancer had left me a pillow, clean sheets, a soft yarn blanket, drawers with little silverfish. The morning after I arrived, I forgot for a moment where I was. I panicked until I noticed the butter-colored walls, the leaves pressed against my window. Nobody was home. I looked around. The kitchen had black-and-white tiled floors, large oil paintings of jungles. There were freshly picked tomatoes and carrots, their threaded roots clumped with dirt. A wooden shelf full of spices, a crusty container of honey, a green kettle, an alligator figurine. I followed strings of lights across a denim-blue couch, a mustard corduroy chair. A newspaper was flipped open to a half-finished crossword, beside tiny paintings of mountains and peach-colored yarn. I liked my absent housemates already.

The walk to school was two miles long. The heat in Rhode Island was thick, unlike the West Coast sunshine that kissed you on the forehead. My route took me along iron fences, weeds lining the sidewalk like black flames. Old furniture lay on the street like sea lions beached on the sand. People in lawn chairs sat outside liquor stores and laundromats, white cigarettes littered the curb. A cart stood on a corner; I'd exchange one crumpled dollar for a Styrofoam cup of coconut sherbet.

Closer to campus, the streets began sloping upward, the pavement smoothed, the trees spread their arms wide, providing gray continents of shade. The grass was lush, not the scrappy, dry California kind with blades yellow tipped and bent. There were girls and guys with flamingo pink hair, quilted dresses, pumps, feathered earrings. *I must look so boring*, I thought, glancing down at my old exercise clothes, fingering the cheap pearl earrings I'd added for flare.

Class was held in a small brick building, up two flights of stairs. Large single-pane windows. Corkboard walls with constellations of small holes where art had been pinned up for critiques. I saw the drying racks where our prints would soon be laid out. A room built to do nothing but create.

My teacher had a thick mustache, round glasses, and a long apron nearly down to his ankles. He had us go around and introduce ourselves, what brought us there. The ten students reminded me of elves, specializing in elegant crafts; glassblowers and weavers and pedal-less bicycle-builders. Everyone except me was an undergraduate, many of them using the summer to fulfill missing credits. And you? he said. *I just moved here, for this class, from California, I quit my job. I like printmaking, I took a class in college, mainly relief printing.* The teacher said, *Okay! That's exciting.* He had us write our names on pieces of masking tape, choose a drawer, and label it. I wrote my name in all caps, *CHANEL MILLER!!*, prepared to fill the drawer with new prints.

He passed around a supply list of everything we would need to buy and what would already be provided: *Single-sided frosted Mylar, acetate, Rubylith, X-Acto knives, dot screens or frosted glass, Hydro-Coat plate, rosin, acid, Rives BFK, starched cheesecloth, monofilament polyester, degreaser, direct emulsion, scoop coater, Caran d'Ache water-soluble crayons, blotters, etc.* After class I walked the aisles of the art supply store, picking things up and looking at the price stickers. I hadn't factored supplies into my budget.

The next class he had us follow him back into the darkroom. He showed us how to use the enlarger, to load the negative carrier, to rotate the disk to the

right lens, expose test strips emulsion-side up, develop film, stop bath, fixer, water. How to place the transparency emulsion in the center of a positive photo litho plate and expose it inside a vacuumed bed, degrease the plate, rosin-dust the plate, aquatint the plate, soak it in nitric acid; to bevel the edges, lay the plate in the press, mix the ink, soak our papers, pat them dry, adjust the pressure. And finally to turn the wheel and pull the fresh print off the block, gingerly placing it in the drying rack. After hours of demonstration, a single print was born.

I watched attentively, standing on elevated toes behind my classmates, furiously taking notes. In the end, I had no idea what had happened. I had been lost forty-five steps prior. Students began sketching out ideas. I sat on my stool, staring at my scribbles of tiny letters like trails of dead ants all over my page. When we were finally released, I hurried down the stairs out of the building.

By the third class, I was even further behind and too ashamed to ask questions like, *What is a cheesecloth?* I ate lunch alone. Ate dinner alone. I'd already ruined a photo litho plate by bringing it into a room where there was sunlight. Everyone else was well versed, purposefully walking from station to station preparing their materials. I stayed at their heels trying to glance at what they were doing. When class ended, I went to the administration office. I think I made a mistake, I need a different class. It was too late to switch. I nodded.

I pulled up Google Maps on my phone and identified a light blue stripe as a river. I walked and walked and found it, then walked and walked along it, and finally plopped down on a patch of grass and cried. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't even know the name of the river I was sitting in front of. I had moved to a state the size of a puzzle piece, far from everyone I knew, to learn outdated printing techniques. What kind of idea was this, why did I think I could do it? Emily had followed me, reminding me I was a go-nowhere, do-nothing, *VICTIM*. This life was too sweet. This kind of pleasure, creation, reserved for people who were not me.

But only one month ago my boss had offered me a raise, and something

shook my head. My boyfriend offered me a room, but something shook my head. Coming all the way here seemed illogical and expensive and inexplicable. Yet here I was, sitting inside that idea, sweating inside that idea. It was the only thing in my life I'd ever truly chosen. No one told me I could do it, except me, which meant that no one could tell me I couldn't do it, except me. This would require trusting myself, fully for once. When I was little, I never asked anyone if I was an artist. I just cleared enough space on the table to make room for my paper. I picked up my things and walked slowly home, preparing myself for the next day.

I started coming in on off days. I told myself I wasn't stupid, and started asking questions. My teacher always took the time to help me, encouraged me to work on an even larger scale, and soon my prints were the size of tabletops. I was teaching myself to ask for help, and in return beautiful things were happening.

One evening, I heard my roommates and their friends in the living room discussing plans to go bowling. I sat still, afraid of going out to the bathroom and having to introduce myself to so many people. I was waiting for them to leave, so that I could take a long shower and chop a zucchini into disks to fry in the silence of the house. Then I heard a knock.

I waited a beat as if I'd been busy with something before opening my door. My roommate asked, *Would you like to go bowling?* I had no plans, of course I had no plans. My instinct was to reject her invite, worried it was born of pity or necessity, like a cashier asking if you'd like help taking your bags to the car. But before I could politely shake my head, the people around the table chimed in and said, *We're getting McDonald's ice cream after! What bowling nickname are you gonna choose for the screen? Don't forget socks.* So I nodded, put a wad of socks in my bag, and followed them out the door.

I was not homesick, as I was not ready to return home, but I felt the unease of being adrift, of having no footholds in the world. This and other small invitations saved me: Driving to the pond, to lay out on frayed towels amidst

thunder warnings. Riding with Angie in the cranberry-colored van with missing seats, sitting on flattened cabbage boxes. *Purple Rain* projected on a hanging sheet. Eating cherry pie, listening to dubstep remixes of the *Seinfeld* intro. I was cast a minor role in their summer, and my presence may have barely registered in their memory reels. But I can't imagine those days without them, would never forget how it felt to be included.

I bought a desk on Craigslist. A nice couple arrived to deliver it. The woman called me, said they were outside. *We can help you carry it in, but I understand if you don't want us in your home, because you know, Craigslist people. I just don't want to—* The man said, *Well how else is she going to carry the desk?* I understood what the woman meant, that a transaction as simple as receiving a piece of furniture from a stranger possessed an inherent threat, that any time we met someone online, we must scan for signs of assault, rape, death, etc. We knew this. But the guy did not speak this language; he just saw a desk.

I walked an average of six miles a day, taking myself to parks, movie theaters, bookstores, intent on discovering my new land. No matter where I went, the same thing kept happening. At first it was an older man, who nodded and said, *Good morning, beautiful*, and I turned to see who he was addressing until I realized it was me. Confused, I said, *Good morning*, before even deciding if I should've said anything at all. Be kind to the elderly. A bald man said, *Hey, pretty girl, you sure are pretty*. His smile spread slowly as if his face was unzipping, and I replied, *Thank you!*

These remarks peppered my walks, as common as birds in the trees, strange men asking me, *How are you*, and me responding, *Fine, how are you*. The comments felt too subtle to be consequential, like a tiny thumbtack inserted into a thick tire. I sometimes berated myself for being too friendly, for the way I smiled back too quickly. When a man honked at me, I instinctively waved. My default was to mirror every greeting. But I realized I didn't know the honking man, that I hardly knew anyone in all of Providence, and wouldn't need to wave next time. No waving, no thanking, no good morning, I told myself.

I passed three men sitting on a car who fastened their eyes on my legs, clicked their tongues, and smacked their lips, performing the sounds and hand gestures one might use if attempting to summon a cat. I felt all six eyes stroking the backs of my calves as I walked away. I couldn't tell if the nonverbal bothered me more than the verbal, did I prefer clicking or comments. I really just wanted silence. Once a few men clustered around a narrow sidewalk, not moving aside an inch as I walked through the narrow passageway between their stomachs.

I began avoiding certain streets. If I was spoken to going one way, I'd come back a different way, and found myself winding around many blocks. I trained myself to tuck my head down, avoiding eye contact, feigning invisibility. Instead of strolling looking up at the trees, I walked with unwavering conviction, or stared down at my feet. Once a man started walking next to me and said, *Can I walk with you?* I began walking faster. *Let me walk with you.* As his feet kept pace with mine, I just shook my head, my hands gripping the handles of my backpack, waiting for him to fall back. Some men would be offended when I didn't respond, one man saying, *I'm just trying to start your day right.* But the compliments didn't feel like compliments when my body language communicated I didn't want to be looked at, didn't want to be spoken to. They didn't feel like gifts when they were thrown at me or whispered so only I could hear. Every comment translated into, *I like what I see and I want it. But I don't want it, I don't want it,* I thought.

Imagine you're walking down the street eating a sandwich and someone says, *Damn, that looks like a delicious sandwich, can I have a bite?* You'd think, why would I ever let you eat this sandwich? This is my sandwich. So you'd walk on and continue eating, and they'd say, *What? You're not going to say anything? No need to get mad, I was just trying to compliment your sandwich.* Let's say this happened three times a day, strangers stopping you on the street, letting you know how good your food looks, asking if they can have some of it. What if people started yelling out of their cars about how much they wanted your

sandwich. *Let me have some!* they'd exclaim, driving by with a honk. Were you supposed to say, *I'm sorry, no thank you*, every time? Would you feel obligated to explain over and over again that you don't wish to share because it's your lunch and you don't know them? That you don't owe them any of it? That it's a little unreasonable that they're asking in the first place? All you would want is to walk down the street eating your sandwich in peace. Maybe I am making this worse by comparing a woman's body to a sandwich, but do you see what I mean?

I started using my phone to discreetly record videos as I passed clusters of men. I sent one to Lucas. *How often does that happen?* he asked. *Every day*, I said. He asked if I needed a car, said he would pay for me to rent one. I said I enjoyed walking; it was the only way to notice everything. Plus I had so much time and was never in a hurry; walking was really one of the only things I had to do.

One afternoon as I came home from school, a van drove by and honked; I didn't bother turning my head, familiar now with this game. But the sound of the engine didn't die out. I heard the wheels slowly turning on the asphalt as he U-turned and pulled up next to me. He rolled down the window. *Talk to me*, he said. I immediately crossed the street and began filming as I walked. He must've been around fifty, unkempt hair beneath a cap, with a thick, soft neck. *Come talk to me*, he said, *I'm lonely*.

No, I said.

Why not? he said.

I don't know you, I said, half laughing at his question.

Just for a little, I'm lonely.

No, I said, shaking my head and looking down at my feet. I didn't say anything more, too irritated; why is it my job to care if you're lonely? *Please*, he said. I quickened my pace as he continued to call after me. I pretended to turn into a house until he slowly pulled away, then ran to my real house, closing all my blinds. I sent the video to Lucas. He immediately called me.

I need you to rent a car, he said, *I'll pay for it. Don't put it off, go today if they're*

open. Okay?

Okay, I said, I'll go.

Thank you, he said, and don't send any more videos. I can't watch them, these guys make me too angry.

I said okay and he went back to work and I sat on the bed. I felt like I'd done something wrong, upsetting him by sending them. It also seemed like he'd said, if they're bothering you while walking, why are you still walking? It didn't feel like a solution at all; they'd forced me to seal myself off in a car. I didn't want to give up my sidewalks.

I called Lucas back. *That's not fair, I said. I just want to walk home from school, I'm not doing anything wrong. I should be able to. You can walk anywhere you want. It's not fair you get to unsubscribe from the videos. You get to turn off the feed, you get to see it selectively, I don't have that option, to decide not to live it. I'm trying to show you what it's like for me. It doesn't matter what I do, it doesn't matter what I wear, how I act, it's constant, the harassment is constant. I have no money for a car, and even if I did, I enjoy walking, I want to keep walking.* I was crying.

There was resignation in his voice. *I feel powerless over here. I don't want anything to happen.* I knew what *happen* meant. He sounded pained, stuck across the country. One night, when I told him I was working late in the studio, some money was Venmoed to my account. *For Lyft, he said. Get home safe.* He was looking out for me and I understood. I agreed I wouldn't walk alone in the dark. But even in a Lyft, I never put in my real address, so the driver would never know where I lived. Safety was always an illusion.

Walking down the street was like being tossed bombs. I fiddled with the wires, frantically defusing each one. Each time I was not sure which wire would cause it to detonate, tinkering while sweat ran down my forehead. Women are raised to work with dexterity, to keep their nimble fingers ready, their minds alert. It is her job to know how to handle the stream of bombs, how to kindly decline giving her number, how to move a hand from the button of

her jeans, to turn down a drink. When a woman is assaulted, one of the first questions people ask is, *Did you say no?* This question assumes that the answer was always yes, and that it is her job to revoke the agreement. To defuse the bomb she was given. But why are they allowed to touch us until we physically fight them off? Why is the door open until we have to slam it shut?

One day, I tried wearing headphones and reading a book as I walked, hoping to appear immersed, busy busy busy. I made it one mile. On the overpass, a man pulled over, said, *Hey, you look like a leader, I like that. I've never seen a girl walk and read at the same time.* I started laughing, up at the sky, like I see what you're doing, universe! I can't escape! What do you want, what can I do? I stopped, plucked out my headphones, walked over to his window, surrendered. The man asked me what I was reading, and I told him, he asked me what my name was and I told him, he asked me where I was going and I told him. He asked me if I was interested in attending the conference he was speaking at, and I said no, and he asked me if I was busy later, and I said yes, and then I'd worried I'd given him too much information so I lied and said I was actually moving back to California in the next three days, and he gave me his business card, and then I took it, and I thanked him. I later threw it away.

I did it, I gave someone the time of day. Can I be done wasting my energy, engaging in one-sided conversations. Once I saw a flier at a coffee shop that had a picture of a pouncing kitten, made by a group that aimed to stop catcalling. Attached were fake business cards that read 1-800-STOPTALKINGTOME, intended to be given to catcallers. Someone was feeling this too, had gone so far as to print fliers.

Lucas had a single day off that summer and flew across the country to visit me. I showed him my route to school. I showed him how incredible it was how much I sweat. I showed him the print shop and walked him through every step I'd learned. At night we unwrapped hamburgers by the river. I was proud to share my world with someone, the world I'd created myself.

As soon as he left I felt an aching hollowness inside my days, a peach with

its pit missing, its strongest part, while I became the soft mush around it. I'd forgotten how it felt to have someone looking out for me, someone to buy me fresh smoothies, to kill the centipede in my room, to fan me with a piece of paper and dab my limbs with a cold washcloth. I'd forgotten what it was like to walk relaxed in the sun, to sleep with ease, to not be on guard every hour. Most of all, nobody on the street talked to me when I was with him; he'd silenced them with his presence.

Men had lines other men didn't cross, an unspoken respected space. I imagined a thick line drawn like a perimeter around Lucas. Men would speak to me as if no line existed, every day I was forced to redraw it as quickly as I could. Why weren't my boundaries inherent?

I continued going to the studio every day. I spent more money on art supplies and no money eating out, sticking to my microwaved pizzas and raw vegetables. Sometimes I spent hours working just to have my print come out murky or faint or blotchy. I started over. I didn't keep track of time. I flipped through my notes until I didn't need them anymore.

One night I left the studio around sunset, but the sun exited more quickly than I'd planned. I was a few blocks from home, passing the neon-pink glow of the liquor store, when a man in a silver car pulled over. Not now, I thought. I don't feel like it. I heard the window roll down, *Let me give you a ride!* He was smiling as if he'd arrived in a golden chariot, instead of a small Chevy the color of a foil gum wrapper. He was so excited, like we were long-lost friends, and he was elated to see me. I couldn't believe the width of his smile, so confident. I started filming, took three long strides toward his car, bending over and putting my head into his window. In the video you can hear me asking, *What'd you say?* Inviting him to say it again for the record. He replied, *Come in, let me give you a ride!*

GET IN YOUR CAR ARE YOU FUCKING CRAZY WHY WOULD I EVER DO THAT, I said. My voice was so flighty and high-pitched I hardly recognized it. FUCK YOU, I said. I remember how quickly his smile evaporated, like a drop of

water on hot pavement, how fast he turned the wheel and accelerated away. *Good!* I thought. But my limbs started shaking, all that adrenaline, I walked unsteadily to the crosswalk. I looked at the stopped cars, trying to make eye contact with the drivers. If he comes back, are you going to help me? Do you see me? As the little glowing man of the crosswalk illuminated, I began running, panting to the tempo of my backpack slapping against my back.

I didn't send the video to Lucas. I promised myself I would be careful about coming back from the studio earlier. I was trying to save the six dollars that the ride would've cost. It's funny really, asking six dollars or safety. I knew I shouldn't have yelled at a man alone at night. Most of all I felt the eyes: this would not count as standing up for myself, this was not considered brave. If this got back to my DA I'd be reprimanded; the defense would argue she's crazy, she acts out, screams profanities, provokes men. She should've ignored him, why was she walking alone? She endangered herself, asked for trouble.

Always she, always she. I never heard the voice asking why he pulled over, why he believed I'd get in, what he might do if I did. How much was I expected to take, to absorb and ignore, while they yelled and clicked their tongues so freely, with no fear of being confronted. Was I stubborn for wanting to walk, was I asking too much? The thick tire was now pockmarked with thumbtacks and nails. I felt the tire becoming misshapen, lopsided, deflating. It would not function like this.

One balmy night, I was far from my home, at a coffee shop on Thayer Street. When I was ready to go, I sat on a bench outside, waiting for my Lyft. An old man sat down beside me. He turned and said, *Would you like a slice of bell pepper?* He had glasses, a soft cotton shirt with a little notepad in his pocket, looked content and restful. He had a small knife in one hand, a sliver of green bell pepper in the other, a handkerchief in his lap where he had set the rest of the vegetable. I stared at the slice. What if he's poisoned the seeds? What if he's a pervert and rubbed his penis on the bell pepper and wants to watch me eat it? What if he slits me with his pocketknife? The little old man patiently held the

bell pepper out to me. And that's when I thought, *I'm losing it*. There is a kind man wearing a fedora on a warm evening eating a bell pepper on a bench. You are allowed to be cautious but you don't always have to be afraid. Give yourself permission to enjoy this small vegetable. I took it, eating it in one piece, thanking him.

Every night, when the light disappeared in the sky, when the bells of the sherbet man's cart rolled away, and Elvis curled into a perfect circle, I could not fall asleep. I would lie starfish-limbed atop the blankets. *It's too hot to sleep*, I told Lucas in a tiny green text bubble. The next day a package appeared at my door; he had ordered me a nice fan, not the cheap propeller kind in a wire cage, but the kind with timed settings and glowing buttons, with a note that said, *From your number one fan*. But heat was not responsible for my peeled open eyes. What kept me awake was the knowing that soon Brock would be studying my face for the first time. In court, I'd be forced to forfeit my anonymity and all the protection that came with it. I wanted to remain unrecognizable to him. I wanted to sit behind a screen, to wear sunglasses, wondered if I should cut my hair, place a bag on my head. The day I'd show up in court would be the day I surrendered my safety.

On a Friday night in college, graduation a few weeks away, I was walking to a friend's house when two police cars tore past me. I thought nothing of it. It was common to hear sirens in Isla Vista: it was a town on the ocean bluffs inhabited solely by eighteen to twenty-two-year-olds, every street lined with shabby wooden houses, bikes abandoned on lawns, overcrowded balconies, orchids growing out of recycled Franzia boxes. On sunny days you'd see beautiful girls in swimsuits holding large rafts over their heads, like ants beneath a crumb, walking down the street to the water. Guys biked with surfboards tucked under one arm, their wetsuits peeled halfway off like a banana. Isla Vista was a network of couches to sleep on, a friend a block away in any direction. A wild,

sunny village we called home.

But by the time I reached her apartment, the sirens had stacked, blossomed, erupted. When I walked in the door, all five of my friends were quiet, listening. We received an email from UCSB Emergency:

Shots fired in IV 2 detained, investigation ongoing,

That was it. A single line that dropped off with a comma. Texts began circulating; maybe it was gang related, a robbery, a drug deal gone wrong, a drive-by, no a shootout, a bomb, firecrackers, drunk driver. He was Persian, no Asian? It was two guys, one guy, in a car, a black one. Someone may have died, one person, possibly three, maybe none and this was all a sick prank.

There was a video going around, someone said it was a guy, the guy, so we huddled around the phone, and there he was, sitting in the driver's seat, face saturated in orange from the setting sun. *Hi, Elliot Rodger here . . . I don't know why you girls aren't attracted to me but I will punish you all for it. I'll take to the streets of Isla Vista and slay every single person I see there. . . . I take great pleasure in slaughtering all of you. . . .* Panic erupted, one of us screamed to turn it off, one was convulsively crying on the floor, jerking as if her stomach were being yanked by a string. He was still speaking, contaminating our air. I shook my head, refusing to hear it. He is coming to Isla Vista to kill girls, we are girls in Isla Vista, but we can't be who he is talking about. *You denied me a happy life and in turn I will deny all of you life, it's only fair. I hate all of you.* We denied you a happy life? Hate fucking who? I was livid. I grabbed the phone, walked out of the room, set it on the bathroom counter, and walked out, firmly closing the bathroom door behind me. I felt I had trapped him in there, the video still playing, him speaking into the darkness to no one.

The next email told us to remain indoors. We bolted the locks, closed the blinds, *get away from the window*. Our phones kept chiming. Claire's housemate had been shot. Nothing pieced together.

At three in the morning, we stared at the news on TV, heard *mass murder*. The word *seven* was displayed in tall, white letters at the bottom of the screen.

It seemed wrong to group the dead. It was not seven; it was one and one and one and one and one and one and one. Each an entire life, each with a name.

The morning light never came, the air unmoving and still. On days like these the fog slipped in from the ocean, erasing the water, the shore, engulfing our little houses. We blinked, exhausted, wondering if it was safe to leave. We kneeled on the couches and carefully parted the blinds. I received a call from an eleven-digit phone number. It was my mom, calling from Beijing, on a trip to visit family. She'd seen the news, *I just wanted to hear your voice*. Our phones shook with calls from family members waking up to the news and we retreated into corners, *I'm here, I love you too, we don't know, grandma's calling*. Rumors circulated there'd be copycat crimes, some men glorifying Elliot's actions, hailing him as their leader, the *supreme gentleman*.

When we finally stepped outside, it was eerily quiet. On the street people traveled in tight groups, divided into herds and packs. The atmosphere was hushed, no one strolling, longboarding, no thumping music leaking from houses. The press conference was scheduled for 4:00 P.M. Before it began, we separated to privately unravel in our showers, to put on clean clothes. We regrouped inside the apartment, our safe house, refusing to be alone.

Elliot had lived in a brown apartment building, a block away from Sweet Alley, where I'd frequently buy bags of sour watermelon candies for long nights at the library. On Friday evening, he killed three people in his apartment, two Chinese roommates and their visiting friend; 142 stab wounds in total, bloodstains in the hallway, bodies dragged and covered in towels. He carried his knives and handguns into his black BMW, drove to the Alpha Phi sorority house, knocking hard on the door. When no one answered, he shot three women outside, two bled to death in the grass. He sped off, fired through the glass window of Isla Vista Deli, one male slid to the floor dead inside. He crashed his car on Del Playa, the main street, the nose of his car crunching in, before pressing his gun to his temple. Police found him with his head blown out, blood painting the curb. The ambulances were backlogged, students

kneeled beside bleeding students. Bullet casings littered the street alongside sprinkled glass, large shards of window. The police found 548 rounds of unspent ammunition inside his car that he never had time to use. Six classmates had been stolen from us, Elliot the seventh. I do not include the victims' names here, for names are sacred, and I do not want them identified solely by what he did to them.

A month after my assault, I stepped out of work, unable to focus. I walked down the carpeted hallway, unlocking the supply closet to crouch behind the routers and chairs with broken wheels. I called the detective. *I was just wondering*, I said. *I know this sounds strange, but do you think Brock would ever hurt me?* I clarified. *I went to a school where a guy got really angry, there was a shooting.* I didn't know how to ask my question, he didn't know how to answer it. *There's no way of knowing*, the detective said. *But hopefully not and we are working hard to get ahold on things.*

Right, of course, I thought. I felt crazy. What was I looking to hear. You're safe forever. I didn't bring it up again. But it was a strange feeling having never met the man I was now up against. I had no idea who he was or what he was capable of.

I never forgot one of the opening lines of Elliot's 137-page manifesto: *This is a story of how I, Elliot Rodger, came to be This tragedy did not have to happen . . . but humanity forced my hand.* His cruelty had a narrative arc. He spoke like he had never wanted to do what he did, he was pushed to. And it was women who had made him suffer, who left him no choice but to execute his Day of Retribution. In his video, he'd said, *I've been forced to endure an existence of loneliness, rejection and unfulfilled desires all because girls have never been attracted to me.* His hostility was born of entitlement, self-pity.

I will punish all females for the crime of depriving me of sex. In Elliot's world, the unspoken law was that women owed him sex, we existed only to receive him. Those were the rules, that was our purpose. Sex was his right and our responsibility. The punishment in his world for breaking his laws, for rejecting

sex, was death. When headlines first broke after the assault, Brock's smiling photo accompanied every article. *Unfair that he is publicly shamed while she gets to hide*, commenters said. Why would I want to humiliate him, when I'd seen what it could lead to?

As the months passed, I grew wary. He was out of school, I was out of work; we had both been untethered from society, aimlessly drifting. All those empty days. You change, you forget to eat, you don't know how to sleep, you drift far from yourself. What if in the time I was growing depressed, he was growing resentful? I asked if he was seeing a therapist and nobody could tell me. *College is the time when everyone experiences those things such as sex and fun and pleasure*, Elliot said. *In those years I've had to rot in loneliness, it's not fair. . . . You forced me to suffer all my life, now I will make you all suffer*. Everyone needed someone to blame. He and I were both in some kind of pain, but what type of violence could his pain ignite? I could not live with myself if he hurt anybody. I contemplated it obsessively. What if he was angry at Stanford and wreaked havoc on campus. What if he really did believe his life was over and committed suicide. *You deserve to be annihilated and I will give that to you. You never showed me any mercy so I will show you none*. Whatever he did, I would feel responsible, although I knew it was out of my control.

I wanted accountability and punishment, but I also hoped he was getting better. I didn't fight to end him, I fought to convert him to my side. I wanted him to understand, to acknowledge the harm his actions had caused and reform himself. If he truly believed his future was ruined and he had nothing to lose, the possibilities were terrifying.

The scenarios multiplied in my head. I'd lodged wooden planks in my windows to seal them tight. I checked the backyard, looked for feet beneath shrubs. I hated how close I was to Ohio, he could come find me, could take the train. I turned off location tracking, deleted social media. I looked up gun laws. Elliot had legally purchased three semiautomatic handguns, fully loaded magazines, as easily as one buys grapefruit. I was losing my mind. What if the hearing was

a trap. I imagined shootouts outside the courthouse, chaos erupting, ducking behind car doors, splintered windows, bailiffs sprinting, blood pouring out of bodies. I did not know whether this was reasonable or insane, just knew that insane things were possible. In my yellow room, I'd lie still so I could hear everything, my bulb always burning. I soaked myself in light. Sleep was no longer rest, but vulnerability. At six in the morning the solid black masses of trees finally split into individual leaves, and I'd feel relief. The light washed my thoughts away and I could be unconscious for a while.

I could barely wake up for class, after sleeping only one to two hours. I never made time to pack lunch, and unwilling to spend money on campus I starved myself for eight hours until I got home in the evening. At art galleries I filled napkins with free grapes and hummus-smeared chips. I was always exhausted, increasingly unhealthy. I wanted my mom's cooking. Wanted Lucas to hold me sleeping.

I taped the note from the fan above my bed, like a flimsy dream catcher. I taped a picture of my parents, young and holding hands in front of a blue wall of fish at an aquarium. A picture of my naked baby sister and me, side by side on a bedsheet patterned with tiny geese. They were my little protectors hovering above me at night.

It was on one of these nights, after hours of lying still, that I tossed off my blankets and picked up a pencil. I drew the two bicycles that had found me, bringing them to life, spoke by spoke. I had learned their names in the police report:

Carl-Fredrik Arndt

Peter Lars Jonsson

I drew smooth handlebars, tiny pedals, lumpy asymmetrical wheels. I stuck it to the wall above my pillow, pressing it flat. An omen of protection. Send help. I rolled back into the sheets and took a breath. If they were out there I could rest. I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.

The night before my final critique, I stacked my prints; a pile representing

hours of trying and retrying and finally succeeding. I made thank-you cards for my professor and my TA. I set three alarms. I laid out my favorite red dress. I got into bed and wished to sleep this one night. Six hours passed. Sleep never came, so I decided to simply stay awake until I'd have to leave at eight o'clock. Instead my mind slipped away at seven in the morning, and I was so heavy in my stupor I didn't even hear the alarms. When I woke up, it was one o'clock in the afternoon.

There was no buzz of panic, only a deep welling of sadness. The critique was almost over. I had missed my classmates' presentations, the finale of the entire summer. Still I called a Lyft, pulling on my red dress. In the car I picked the crust out of my eyes and thought about everything in the world that was worse than missing an art critique. This was so small. But I was sad because it was so small, and I couldn't even do it. I would apologize to my professor, make sure he knew my absence was not born of disrespect.

When I walked in, the last person was presenting. Everyone looked at me. I didn't have an explanation and I didn't pretend to. I took a seat in the back, wanting to be invisible. I did not feel it was worth presenting. Yet my professor gestured that I should, welcomingly. I began one by one pinning them up, my back to the room, as people sat in silence. *It is no matter*, I told myself, *Soon none of this will matter*. I turned around to face them and introduced each piece.

I was met with quiet. Then the professor spoke, a warm smile beneath his large mustache, and said they were wonderful. Classmates pointed out my drawing of a two-headed rooster. They complimented my imagination, the sinister, the whimsical. They asked me about where I got my ideas, what kind of techniques I'd used, admired the coloring. I sat and marveled too, as they were commenting, and I must have looked tired, but I was beaming. Seeing all of my pieces up, side by side, the beautiful and bizarre things I'd created despite all of the struggling in the hours in between.

After class I bought a fresh roll of tape. I stood on a chair, hanging them all up in my room, even though I'd be moving out soon. I made a gallery, just for

myself. I had gone from a clueless river weeper to a prolific printmaker. This was my evidence that while my mind had been shriveling in anxiety, my heart had been busy, thankful to have been given a chance. I saw the part of me that insisted on surviving.

To celebrate, a friend I'd made in class invited me to a block party where there'd be snow cones and dancing. I arrived early. Eventually my friend appeared with another girl, a sculptor, and they both blinked a little slowly, having had some whiskey. I treated myself to a vodka pineapple, watching kids catch lightning bugs and drink cream sodas out of red vine straws. We hopped around the makeshift mosh pit; I tied the sleeves of my jacket around my head like floppy bunny ears. A few guys came over in a musty cologne cloud of oak-moss and burnt logs. They asked if we were art students. I wondered if he knew because of the clothing tied to my head. *Just for the summer*, I said. *Are you from here?* he asked. *No, California*, I said, *how about you?* But his friends were already moving on, calling his name and wildly gesturing they wanted to go. He looked at them and turned back to me, leaned in with a serious look, *If I stay here, will you have sex with me later?* There was no segue. We'd gone from small talk smaller than a peanut to this blunt question. *No*, I said, unblinking. Without a word he trotted away to his friends as I stood there, my sleeves dangling from my head. The three of us were left bristling. His friends had asked them the same question. Was that real? Why would he say that? His friend asked you that too? The one with the gelled hair?

We called it a night, heading back to my friend's apartment, craving buttered toast and cold water. As we walked we exchanged stories of ludicrous encounters with guys, the things they would say and do. *One time this guy at a coffee shop, one time my friend's brother, one time my philosophy professor, one time . . .*

Where are you ladies going? A black Mustang was rumbling at the stoplight with three heavysset guys inside, snug in their seats. *Do you want to come to the club?* The club! I felt dehydrated, vodka and tiny pineapples streaming through

me, my mind filled with stories of *one times*, and suddenly I was delusional over how much I was expected to tolerate. The street was mostly empty, we were blocks away from the bars, nothing but houses with black windows and dormant Greyhound buses. I walked into the middle of the empty street, clenched my fists, threw back my head, and started screaming.

I screamed with my chest open, ruthlessly. My friends were stunned, began laughing, and the men grew testy, looking around uncomfortably, stuck at the red light. They began peppering my scream with *Crazy bitch! Crazy bitch!* But I didn't care. Their polished Mustang, their specks of hair, their dumb logistics; even if we did want to come to the club, we couldn't all fit in the tiny car. I don't want to have sex with you, I don't want to go to the club, I don't want you walking next to me, asking me where I'm going, how I'm doing, in a tone that wraps around me and pulls my shoulders up into my ears, making me want to go deaf and disappear. The tire full of nails had burst, tinkling like rain down onto their car. I felt powerful, intimidating, insane. I didn't care if the entire world woke up. The light turned green. *Chase them*, my friend said, and we began running.

We were three girls sprinting after a single black car. She caught up with them at the next light and slapped the taillight. *Get the fuck away from my car. Don't you dare fuck up my car.* They were angry at us, these women turned menaces, stepping out of line. I was still yelling, the adrenaline flooding, *you stupid-ass pigs*. But when I looked in the window, I saw the way one of the men glared at me.

Suddenly it didn't feel like a game, and I snapped into defensive mode. Stop, stop. We stepped back and they sped away. Witness, if they come back we need a witness. My head swiveled around. There was a young guy with glasses about thirty feet behind us. He seemed taken aback, hands in his pockets, as if we were going to turn on him too. I was secretly thankful he was there. I held my forehead, out of breath, our chests still rising and falling.

That night, though I had planned to stay through August, I decided it was time to go. Home was not an option, anywhere but home, the hotbed of assault,

festering memories. I needed to continue my route of avoidance.

The day Lucas's internship ended, he boarded a plane and arrived in a rental car. He helped me pack up, gently rolling my prints, my whole life in this blue vehicle. We would drive down to Philadelphia, where I could stay with him until the hearing. He waited in the car, giving me time to say good-bye. I stood in my yellow room, my refuge, my chamber, remembering all the nights of suffocating heat, the terror that coated the walls, then melted away every morning. I left the fan, standing alone in the middle of the room, hoping it would bring coolness and quiet to whoever came next.