

THE FOREIGN HALLWAY

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The Foreign Hallway

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Abstract

The novella's central concept is the relationship between a tight-knit circle of students attending a Canadian liberal arts college, set in the fictional town of Trinity, British Columbia. Hector Ford, the protagonist, transfers from the university located just outside of his Texas hometown to the small South Island College in Canada and finds himself in what the local students call "the foreign hallway." Also inhabiting this particular dormitory are a variety of other students from different parts of the world. Of these foreigners, a select few take classes with an enigmatic and charismatic philosophy professor by the name of Moriel Whittaker. As the story unfolds, the manipulative nature of the relationship between the close-knit students and their professor reveals itself. The narrative culminates in the death of the professor, leaving the students both shattered and stuck in a hellish Sartre-inspired situation: their inescapable connection to one another.

The work deals with themes of philosophy, social manipulation, and a young adult's desperate need for self-identification and belonging. This novella, while simultaneously balancing the expectations of the genre (i.e. the ability to be read in a single sitting, an ending with circular ties to the beginning, etc.), attempts to display a state of vulnerability even among the most ostensibly intellectual individuals at the collegiate level, and what price such a status may exact.

I

He was all squares, from the shape of his jawline to the set of his shoulders. Straight lines and unyielding corners dominated his build and bearing, right down to the square of his open palm, gleaming with a sheen of sweat. An unfamiliar hand clasped it tightly, and a disembodied mouth murmured encouraging words in hushed tones, words that melted before they reached Hector's ears.

Death was a sedative, muddling everything it touched. Time before the funeral had cantered along at a brisk clip, unconcerned. But in the past week alone Hector felt like he'd been swimming through soup just trying to perform tasks as simple as opening doors and drinking coffee. Even the air that morning had something of a split pea quality: salty and thick and gray-green.

Hector turned his gaze from the window and absorbed the dark clothed forms moving like shades through the tastefully decorated front room. He hated the fact that the service would be held here at a funeral home, a place that was decorated to look like some corporeal inhabitant could turn the corner at any moment and offer libations to the visitors. As if the dead were meant to live here, preserved. The whole idea was very Greek and, much as Hector hated it, somewhat fitting.

Across the room, one mop of unkempt hair turned, and with a start Hector recognized Ned Harada. He hadn't seen him since after their last study session with Dr. Whittaker, and it took him a moment to register how much his classmate had changed. Ned's hair flopped over his skull with the sullenness of a deflated soufflé. He and his hair both looked greasy, unwashed, and rancid. When Ned saw Hector, he jerked his chin in a silent beckon. He didn't break eye contact until Hector was directly before him.

“Hey.” He wasn’t sure what else to say. That it was good to see him? Not likely; he remembered with chagrin the last time he’d spoken to Ned. Besides, who would be happy to see someone at a funeral? No use hiding that they both wished they were somewhere else.

“Hector,” said Ned. “You came. I didn’t think you would.”

Hector shrugged, shoving his sweaty hands into the pockets of his dress pants. Much as he’d wanted to stay home, there was never a question of him not coming.

“I didn’t think *I* would,” Ned admitted. “It’s been a while. But it’s not easy to let go.”

Elsewhere, someone spilled a platter of drinks, and a strange woman Hector didn’t know shrieked as her dress drank up the copper-colored whiskey and the invisible gin. Idly, Hector wondered if there was any scotch to be had, and had to resist a maniacal smile. He coughed instead.

For a minute or two, Ned began a halfhearted commentary on the people who’d shown up, what scandals were already brewing in the kitchen. But when his breath ran out, so did his gossip. He looked at Hector, and then just past him, pretending to catch the eye of someone over his shoulder. Just before he moved away, he paused. “I never wanted to be cut loose, even if it was the best thing for me. You, though. They really got their hooks in you, didn’t they?”

Ned didn’t bother to wait for Hector’s reply, and he had none to give. Someone else approached him, drew his hand from his pocket and pressed a drink into it, which he drank numbly, sedately, until the person drifted away. He didn’t have to ask whose hooks Ned had meant.

He'd been adrift before arriving at Victoria International Airport, though he wouldn't have said so at the time. It wasn't as if the cab driver had asked about his mental state, and if he had, Hector wouldn't have told him. However, Hector Ford thought himself particularly grounded as he made the long drive up to South Island University. Fresh air meant a fresh start, without pretension or expectation, and Vancouver Island seemed like the ideal place to figure himself out.

From the very moment he set foot on campus, surveying the ivy-covered buildings and lush lawns with his Stetson-shaded gaze, he'd been out of place. Beneath the reproachful presence of the ancient pines, Hector followed his peppy tour guide. Her name was Sakura, and she was leading him right towards a crumbling mansion. The building's bitterly sloped roof bared gaps in its shingles, and long fingers of once-white paint curled off the exterior walls, weeping towards a sagging wraparound porch.

"They told me where to take you," Sakura jabbered at him in a nonstop current of words, "but I knew straight away where to take you, since they'd already told me you were a transfer student, so I knew you'd go to the foreign hallway, which is where I would've gone if my sister hadn't gone here first and told me absolutely what I should and shouldn't do, and helped me make a request through the system, not that you shouldn't stay there, because Bryan Hall is the dorm with the most character on campus, everyone says so, and you have plenty of character, don't you?" She paused to inhale and direct a meaningful glance at his boots. "You'll like it, probably."

She'd lingered to tell him which teachers were "totally lame" and which ones were "so easy you can fall asleep every class and still get an A, no problem," and by the

time he'd finished getting his stuff up to his second-floor room with the squeaky floorboards and sloped ceiling, he'd learned the entire illustrious history of a certain Accounting professor's former diving career.

"Thanks, ma'am," Hector had interrupted, already forgetting her name, "but I want to just hang out for a bit and unpack. I can take it from here."

Effusing exclamations of how much she understood and how rude it had been of her to yammer on at him like that when he must be so exhausted from his trip all the way from Alabama, the girl finally backed out of the room, a one-sided conversation trailing behind her. Hector kicked off his boots and tossed his hat onto the bare bed before she was even out the door.

He was from Texas, not Alabama.

He glanced outside. The light was soft and cool through his window, the sun hanging low over the pines. It was unlike the light he was used to, the kind that spread molasses-slow over unbroken horizons. He picked up his new student folder from his desk and thumbed through it. It detailed the class requirements he'd need to fulfill in order to graduate. Hector realized with irritation that a few of his core requirements weren't marked off.

When he checked in to the registrar's office the next day, she passed him on to his academic advisor who, in turn, informed him that some of his credits hadn't transferred.

"You see, Mr. Ford, we have a very high set of standards here at Southern Island, and we want to ensure that our students benefit from a liberal arts education of the highest caliber," she smiled. Her name was Dr. Gagnon. Hector thought that with a name containing the word "gag" maybe she shouldn't be so smiley.

“But I took classes that count for the social values credits. And my geography class last spring should count for something.”

“I’m terribly sorry.” Dr. Gagnon continued to smile. “But there is nothing I can do. I can recommend a social values course: Societal Problems & Analysis. It’s a 100-level women and gender studies course.” She put one hand beside her mouth and continued to speak at the same volume. With the same smile. “I actually teach it myself.”

Hector walked out of the office with a half-completed schedule. He had not enrolled in Dr. Gagnon’s class. The last time he’d enrolled in a women and gender studies course, it had been to spite his now ex-girlfriend, a decision that caused him to wince but not regret. After all, he’d shared that class with a Canadian student who went dreamy-eyed as she spoke of salmon fishing and seas and a land that undulated. That word stuck with Hector in a way that poetry should have but never quite did: it evoked ambition, something self-assuredly wild, a restless hunger. Things he recognized or wanted for himself that made him, on a whim, leave his loved ones in the lurch as he hopped a plane north. There were mountains here, and ocean on every side beyond the expanse of trees, but the creak of the old wooden stairs was the same as the Texas he’d left behind.

When Hector trooped up the steps to Bryan Hall, still clutching his half-empty paper, he was almost mown down by an Indian student with messy hair.

“Sorry! Late for a meeting!” The man kept running, and Hector caught the door to the hall before it could swing shut.

“I was hardly finished talking to him,” someone with a very British accent was complaining. “I’d always thought politicians were supposed to be polite.”

That was Hector's first real glimpse of *them*. Months later, in the aftermath of the funeral, he would think back to this first impression of them when their self-assurance made them captivating and scrubbed them of flaws. Pouring out of the stairway in formation, they had a presence that seemed to draw the air from everywhere else in the room. First came the speaker with the British voice, a red-haired man of average height. He reminded Hector of an illustration of Peter Pan, if only the picture had decided to grow up and then retroactively change its mind: a conniving smile with youthful cheeks. He walked backwards as if leading a tour group, never taking his eyes off the others.

After him there was the girl. She was dressed in tennis whites, though her brown hair was down, wild around her shoulders. "It's probably because you scared him off again, Charles," she said, in a low voice that carried. An oversized scrunchie hugged her small wrist, and the man immediately behind her made a slow grab for it, hooking it with his finger.

He was tall, possibly taller than Hector, and he wore the most unusual clothes. His linen suit, pale against his deep skin, looked tailored, and one hand casually held the collar of his jacket tossed over his shoulder. With his free hand he tugged on the scrunchie, pulling the girl back until she slowed her gait to match his. Though his stride was long, he walked like he resented every bit of energy he was expending. He leaned down to whisper something, and the girl laughed. When he smiled, his teeth were brilliantly white.

Behind them, a shorter Asian man shouldered his way forward. His hair stood at an impossible angle, swirling sideways as if buffeted by a perpetual wind. This one Hector recognized; he'd been in one of the orientation videos. Introduced himself as

Ned... something. Though his mouth was a firm line, the rest of him seemed to exude movement and energy. None of them were more than a couple feet apart from one another. Their physical proximity seemed to charge the air, their laughter excluding the rest of the world.

“Charles,” the girl interrupted, stopping everyone short. Her gaze locked on Hector. “Do we know him?”

“Call me Chuck, Sage, for the love of Christ. And...” he gave Hector a cursory once over. “And I don’t think so.”

Nonplussed by this third-person exchange, Hector nevertheless stuck out his hand. “Hey, I’m Hector Ford, nice to--”

The girl and her entourage breezed by him without slowing.

“You’ve got to forgive them,” Charles shrugged apologetically. His eyes were an elsewhere green. “Off to the lounge. Study group, you know. A little tight-knit over here; not used to other people wandering around this part of campus uninvited. What brings you to Bryan?”

“I actually live here. Just moved in.”

The ginger’s eyes widened. “So sorry. I’m Chuck Knightley. Where did you say you were from?”

“I didn’t.”

Charles laughed. “No harm meant by it. None of us are from around here. So, what’s that you’ve got?” He deftly snatched Hector’s schedule, preemptively waving off a protest with his free hand. “Don’t mean to pry, just like to stay informed on the goings-on.”

Were all Brits this arrogant? Even so, something about how unabashed Charles acted was strangely disarming.

“Found out a lot of my credits don’t transfer,” Hector explained when Charles handed the paper back. “My political philosophy class should have covered one of the core brackets.”

One half of Charles’ mouth quirked upwards. “Political philosophy?”

“Yeah. I’d just decided to change my major to PoliSci before I left the states.” It had seemed like a good idea at the time: politicians were powerful. He wouldn’t have to wait around for change if he could enact it himself, claim some agency.

Charles stuck both of his hands into his pockets and leaned back. His collar was unbuttoned, and one side jutted out while the other lay flat. “American. Ought to’ve guessed. Well,” he collected himself, suddenly buzzing with energy, “it’s been a great chat. Welcome to the hall and all that, Mr. America. Now I’ve really got to run.”

That night, there was a soft knock on Hector’s door. Before he could get up, the door creaked open. The brunette from earlier stood in the doorway, still wearing tennis clothes, hair up in a ponytail. Wisps framed her face like a halo.

“Hello. Can I come in?”

Hector wasn’t in the habit of saying no to pretty girls, so he gestured towards the entire room. The girl smiled and glided in, leaving the door cracked behind her. She perched on the edge of his bed and kicked off her shoes. “Sorry for not stopping to meet you earlier. My name is Sage.” Her voice was rich and soft.

“I’m Hector.”

“Yes, Hector Ford, right? I remember. You’re the American.” Her eyes flicked towards where his worn out cowboy boots sulked in the shadow of his desk. “We haven’t had an American here yet.”

“What’s with the big deal about international students?” Hector turned in his desk chair to look more directly at her. He would have liked to sit next to her on the bed, but the way she was perched, like a swallow ready to take flight at any moment, made him not want to startle her. He unconsciously became more still.

“Truth be told, there aren’t that many of us. Haven’t you heard the little nickname for Bryan Hall?” She had to be Scottish; her voice had more of a rasp than an Irish accent. “They call it the foreign hallway. The handful of outsiders, like you and me, get tossed here.”

Hector thought that seemed odd, that a college would group all of the foreign students in a single dormitory. Sage explained that, since most of the students were local, they knew that Bryan Hall was the oldest, most run-down building on campus. It hadn’t been torn down yet because of its supposed ‘historical significance’ but no one really wanted to live in it. The local students would request to be placed in other dorms, and what Sage referred to as the “poor hapless imports” would be left to fill this space in the only remaining dorm.

“And no one does anything about it?” Hector asked.

Sage shook her head. “But it’s alright; we’ve all adjusted. Some kind faculty make arrangements so that we are at least comfortable. So, Charles tells me you’re in need of a Social Values core credit?” She laughed at his expression. “Word travels quickly on a small campus, especially when Bryan Hall gets a newcomer. We all know

each other too well around here. Besides, international students are always the ones who get saddled with the credit transfer hoops to jump through; it's our job to help each other out."

"I appreciate it, but I'll figure it out."

Standing, Sage threw up her hands. "I'm sure you will! Never said otherwise." She took two steps towards the door and turned back. "But if you wanted to enroll in a class for your missing credit, and you've taken some kind of philosophy before, then you could always take Professor Whittaker's philosophy seminar with us."

She slipped out the door before Hector could say another word. He sat very still for another minute, dazed by the entire encounter and by the lingering scent of her perfume. Only later did he bother to ask himself how she could have possibly known which room was his.

The next day, Hector headed to his advisor's office after his morning political theory course. Dr. Gagnon's smile faltered a little when he said he would be enrolling in a philosophy seminar to fulfill his core requirement.

"The paperwork is very simple," Dr. Gagnon grimaced politely, "but you will need a permission number. Dr. Whittaker is particular about his seminar, and his lower level Intro to Philosophy is normally a prerequisite. You'll need to speak to him about it."

But Sage and Charles had already spoken to him about it. According to them, once they'd informed Professor Whittaker of Hector's previous philosophy experience he had decided to count it as a prerequisite. Hector himself received this information from Sage, who had ducked her head into his room with the good news and a charming smile.

If he hurried to the registrar's office with the form, everything could be processed and he would join her in class the very next week.

He spent the weekend in a stupor. He'd attended the various "welcome back" events on campus, and had made his way into more than one wild party. A dark-haired girl leaned into him, her head bumping his chest, and offered him the rest of her Jack and Coke. "I don't do *dark* liquor," she explained, eyes glossy, "it *affects* me. You know?" He bolted it down, and he kissed her. She giggled, kissed him back, until her friends chirped at her from across the bar. Hector then went home, wobbling and content and feeling quite welcome.

Come Monday, Hector was awakened by a sharp knock at his door. His hand slapped his nightstand repeatedly, hunting blindly. The door burst open.

"Hector, old chum, I know you don't know Moriel, but he doesn't like tardies. Most profs don't. I'd get going if I were you." Charles looked around, taking in the spilling suitcase and gaping shelves. A lone beer can lay crunched in a corner. "Got a coffee pot in here?"

"Yeah. Desk."

Charles brushed aside Hector's notebooks and a lone beer can and set about making the coffee. "Figures. No one bothers with tea anymore, except Moriel and his wards I suppose. You're going thank me for this later."

"I could thank you now," Hector said, buttoning his shirt. "For the coffee. Not for barging in. Charles, right?"

Charles snorted. “You’ll thank me for both, once you’ve had about 20 minutes of Moriel. Never want to miss a single second of lecture due to a snooze; you’ll want to be functioning at 110 percent, at least. And it’s Chuck.”

A few minutes later, the two of them were loping through the halls, Hector balancing a thermos of black coffee. They found Sage and a few other students waiting for them.

“About time,” the tallest said, eyes half closed. “We were about to leave without you.”

Sage reached forward and grabbed Charles’ collar. “We told you to get him *ahead* of time. Not the last minute. It’s your fault if we’re late.” She beamed at Hector, her face bright and fresh. “Good morning, Hector,”

“Save it, Sage, Alain is right,” Ned said. “Next time I won’t wait up.” He said this with a practiced resignation, like an empty threat he knew no one believed. His left hand fluttered over his spiked-up hair in what seemed like a nervous habit.

The group of them set off, meandering over the verdant lawn towards a crisp brick building. It looked very old and well taken care of, like an aging countess sitting back in her jewels. Inside, it exuded old-world academia. Impressive wooden doors stood closed, as if with arms crossed, as the students scurried past them. Their various shoes tapped against the wooden floors. At the end of the hall, they entered an auditorium. All of the folding seats in the first row had been torn out and replaced with thick, plush chairs. Soft golden lights illuminated a wooden stage and podium, set very close to the first row. The room appeared to be empty.

Wordlessly, the other students shuffled themselves into their chosen seats. Hector took the one closest to him, which landed him next to the tall man, Alain. Sage was one seat over.

“Well, I should hope you’ve all partaken of a good night’s sleep and are now blissfully well-rested?” A deep, melodic voice floated towards them, filling up the excess space. A man emerged from the shadows of the stage, a leather messenger bag slung over his shoulder. He set this down and peered out at the assembled students from behind black-framed glasses. He was infinitely older than everyone else in the room, but couldn’t have been more than forty. His black curls were streaked with steel. The lights glared over the lenses of his glasses. Hector couldn’t see his eyes.

Alain reclined in his chair and crossed an ankle over one knee. “Apologies, Dr. Whittaker. We were waylaid.” He glanced to his right, and the professor’s eyes followed until they alighted, for the first time, on Hector.

“Why, who is this you’ve brought me? The American, Hector Ford, I presume?” Moriel inclined his head towards Hector. He spoke the same way Alain did: with diction so perfect that his English couldn’t have possibly been natural. “Welcome to our little utopia. I do hope,” he turned to encompass the rest of the room, “that everyone has made you feel at home so far?”

As if on cue, Charles hopped up and launched into introductions of “his *highness* Alain Bourgeois” and then little “Miss Cloud” before receiving an abrupt cut off from.

“An introduction?” Alain interrupted disapprovingly. “Really, Charles.”

“It’s Chuck.”

“Anyway,” Sage whispered to Hector while the others bickered, “you shouldn’t pay any mind to Charles; he gets my name wrong on purpose. It’s McCleod.” She pronounced it *Mc-Cloud*.

With a conspiratorial smile, she offered her hand. Hector shook it and returned the smile.

Moriel set his book down on the podium, and the mild thump induced a hush over the room. “Thank you, Charles, that will do. We all extend our warmest welcome to Mr. Ford. Now, were any of you children listening when I welcomed him to the seminar?”

“You called it a utopia,” Alain said. His posture was unchanged, sprawling and languid, but his eyes were now fully open, dark black and alert.

Moriel’s glasses flashed. “Exactly. And where, pray tell, can one find a utopia? Aside, of course, from the title of Sir Thomas’s intriguing narrative?”

Sage lifted a finger. “Nowhere,” she breathed.

Moriel inclined his head. “Indeed. More has given us a play on the Greek word for both ‘good place’ and ‘no place.’ It is this utopia that we shall be discussing, but in order to reach it we must enter the ‘*eu-topos*’ of our own making. Is not the mind, the incredible analytical and imaginative properties of our own psyche, itself not a sort of good place that exists in no physical location?”

“Doesn’t the brain exist in our skull?” Charles grinned.

“Observant as ever, Charles. But the creations of the mind are not limited to its physical space- how does one contain an idea? It is impossible.”

What followed was a wide-ranging lecture that was unlike anything Hector had experienced in any classroom. Moriel talked about philosophers as if they were childhood

friends, asked seemingly straightforward questions in order to complicate their answers, and somehow anticipated every leap of thought any student could attempt to make. No one raised a hand. Though he had begun to take almost feverish notes, when the clock struck eleven-thirty Hector jolted up as if from a deep sleep.

Books and binders were swept into backpacks. The Charles and Sage stood up at the same time and left, one of them holding the door for the other. The rest began to file out.

“Alain, stay a minute. And you, Mr. Ford.”

Hector hesitated, backpack already on one shoulder. Alain, aloof, brushed off his pants as he stood. He wore the most remarkable clothes: a three-button vest over a dress shirt. His brown belt matched his shoes. “*Vous avez des nouvelles, Moriel?*”

“*Pas grande chose. En revanche, je voudrais te rappeler que...*”

While the two conversed in flawless French, Hector shifted from foot to foot. It was already too late to duck out and follow the others. But when Moriel finally turned and brought Hector under the full force of his attention, Hector realized it would have been a mistake to leave. Moriel wasn't like the complacent teachers who twiddled their thumbs after achieving tenure. This professor seemed more like a seasoned diplomat, or a dethroned king. His smile possessed an acute political power.

“Hector, I hope you weren't too overwhelmed by your first lecture. We do tend to plunge head first into our little erudite expeditions,” he chuckled, as if he were a mischievous child. “However, not all classes will be like this. Your Tuesday and Thursday classes will require a different level of course engagement: I'll send you a copy

of the syllabus with the list of required reading materials. You should also be aware that there will be weekly quizzes, three term papers, as well as student presentations...”

“Sorry Professor Whittaker, but what Tuesday and Thursday classes?” Hector had only the one class with Moriel listed on his rather sparse schedule.

Moriel looked taken aback. “Why, my advanced philosophy course. It’s 300-level, but that shouldn’t be a problem. Since you already have this class and its prerequisite or,” he winked, “equivalent, I presumed that you would want to go ahead and fulfill enough credits for your area of study.”

“I’m a political science major; I don’t really need that many philosophy classes.”

At this, Moriel laughed. “Perhaps not, but as I recall you have yet to declare a minor. A sound knowledge of philosophy and various conceptions of the good could be a useful tool for an aspiring politician, no?” He began to put his book away, a worn copy of *Utopia*, and Hector realized that the professor hadn’t been using lecture notes of any kind. Save the book, the podium had been bare.

II

Outside, the skies had opened up. Veils of rain drifted between Hector and the commons, nearly flooding the road that divided campus. Though trees clustered in nearly every corner of the university, the road was devoid of any such shelter. Hector shifted from foot to foot, steeling himself for the sprint. He hadn't packed an umbrella.

Just then, a pair of headlights turned a corner and crawled close, fixing Hector with a blinding stare. It was a nice old car, a mint green jaguar, and seemed somewhat out of place in the stormy gloom. The driver's side window rolled down, revealing Alain.

"Hector," he said in a disinterested tone, "get in."

Covering his head with his arms, Hector made a dash for the passenger's side. Door closed behind him, he shook his head to dislodge any residual rain. "Thanks. If you could just take me to the other side of the commons, where the political science classrooms are, that would be great."

"Don't be ridiculous," Alain shifted the car smoothly back into drive and continued down the road. "We're going to lunch."

Apparently Alain's idea of a lunch differed from Hector's. The two of them took Alain's car off campus down a meandering two-lane road and into the town of Trinity. There, Alain led the way to a bistro-style restaurant whose velvet chairs and sleek tables made Hector feel underdressed. The mild grey light from outside transformed into an insistent crimson as it passed through the window drapes and bounced off all the glass surfaces.

"Listen, I have class in half an hour. I could just go for a burger or something."

“Don’t be silly,” Alain waved him off with a single lazy hand motion. “It will be my treat, of course. I invited you, after all.”

The waiters evidently recognized Alain, because soon enough a steady thrum of energy pulsed through the restaurant, with their table at its epicenter. When Hector asked for a beer, both Alain and the head waiter laughed as if it was the cleverest joke they’d heard in some time.

“We’ll each take two fingers of that 21-year Oban,” Alain said, to Hector’s surprise. The different waiter materialized seconds later with a bottle of honey-colored liquid. He poured a generous dollop into one, then another, fragile-looking glass.

“Scotch? It’s noon.”

“Observing the time does not change the fact that the scotch tastes good.”

Hector knocked back his drink. He felt a velvety burn along his throat and knew that it was probably the best scotch he’d ever tasted. He was sorry to have bolted it down. Alain, meanwhile, pursed his lips in satisfaction after taking a small mouthful. When he noticed Hector’s empty glass, he shrugged and finished off his scotch too, making some remark about southern bourbon being a poor preparation for appreciating a good scotch. It might’ve been a friendly joke, even if the languid boy’s eyes retained their calm.

“Two more,” Alain commanded. “So, what brings you to South Island?”

“Never left Texas, most of my life.” He paused, considering his family’s ranch in Weatherford and how the massive blue sky felt claustrophobic, like living in a cowboy’s snow globe. The feeling of wanting to scratch the cheap blue plastic from the inside out. Years of restlessness turned over in his mind, used to going unspoken and yet nearly charmed into verbalization by the largesse of a near-stranger. “I needed a change.”

He stopped. At the next table over, a red-lipped woman burst into a cascade of laughter. Beneath this sound was the clinking of silverware as she and her lunch date, a white-haired gentleman, clashed forks over the last morsel of whatever was on the plate between them. A smudge of lipstick redder than the velvet-backed chairs smiled from the man's collar. "Whatever they're having must be good," Hector mused.

"Certainly. The scallops here are delightful." By some sorcery Alain communicated this to the waiter, who conjured up something on a shell-shaped plate that smelled like wood smoke and sea.

Hector took a bite of a bacon-wrapped scallop and chewed, swallowed. He found himself telling Alain about all the Texas clichés, and how tired he'd grown of them all. How country dancing and going to rodeos felt like playing a part he was supposed to have memorized. It was easy and exhausting. His breath tasted of salt and grease and clear water. He swished some scotch.

"Go on," Alain said. "Go on." He leaned back in his chair and crossed one leg over the other, exuding a cool disinterest that was momentarily punctured by a raised eyebrow.

"I thought college would change things, being away from my family and all..." Hector raised the crystal tumbler to his temple. A kind waiter had refilled it again. "Tried that for a year but it was all the same thing as before. So I up and left; didn't even tell my old girlfriend till after the transfer application had gone through. We had to split after that, of course. I must just have some kind of luck. That ever happen to you, with a girl?"

"No."

“Oh,” Hector’s head felt fuzzy red and scotch-muddled. How stupid. The fancy clothes, the invite to lunch...he fumbled over how to tell Alain he wasn’t really interested. But before he could say anything, Alain made some joking remark about never being able to tire of his current relationship, and Hector, relieved, let it drop.

By then their second course had arrived, heaping platters of various tiny dishes. “I really don’t think I have time for all this,” Hector protested, his eyes already devouring the food.

Alain offered him a bowl of something ruby-red and tender. “Have you ever tried carpaccio?”

Once they’d eaten, Hector leaned back into the booth. It seemed to envelop him, anchoring him between the tablecloth before him and the art deco lamp hovering over his head. “So.” He wondered aloud, draining the last of his scotch. The warmth settled in, and he collected himself. “You and Professor Whittaker seemed close. The *bonjours* and *voulez-vous*. Did you meet him in France or something?”

“If only. I was born and raised in Senegal, at least until the age of nine. My grandfather lives in Paris, and he sent for me to come stay with him. But he is a close friend of Moriel, and their friendship is what made my grandfather suggest I attend university here. And though we all admire Dr. Whittaker, I believe Charles is much closer to him than I am.”

“Gotcha,” Hector said, though he didn’t. “Speaking of university, I have class starting in...”

“Of course, of course. Once we’re finished.”

By this point the waiters no longer flurried. They droned lazily like honeybees, picking up a napkin here and a fallen fork there. Time itself slowed down as more whiskey found its way into their tumblers. A check hid politely beneath the corner of an empty plate.

“Let me,” Hector offered, wondering wildly how much this meal had cost. He reached for his wallet instead of the check. It opened with the quiet shriek of tearing Velcro.

Wincing, Alain snatched the check with his spidery fingers. “I think not.”

“C’mon. I hate to owe a guy.”

“You won’t owe me a thing,” Alain said, as the check disappeared and reappeared. He signed his name in a careless scrawl, hardly looking down. “Or you can make it up to me by letting me take you to a good haberdashery. I know just the place, two blocks from here. We’ll get you a real wallet, you can throw away that sad thing, and we’ll call it even.”

In a store that exuded leather and tobacco smoke, it took Alain only moments to procure a black leather wallet and a watch with an absurdly large face. *Breitling* gleamed in tiny silver letters above the hands. “Since you’re so worried about the time,” he smirked.

As they left, Hector stole a glance at his new watch. His class had already finished.

Alain, already long and slender, had become almost gaunt in the fallout of the past couple of weeks, looking more like a dead man himself. Even his usual impeccably

tailored suit couldn't conceal the change; the garment seemed to wear him more than the other way around. He leaned up against one wall, eyes closed, pressing his shoulder into the striped wallpaper as if his frame was too precarious to stand on its own. Hector walked over to his side, placing a hand on Alain's shoulder to let him know he was there. Alain began speaking without bothering to open his eyes.

“Did you see the woman in lilac?” He mumbled.

“No.”

“Violet I could maybe understand, but *lilac*, to a funeral? People these days; I do not understand.”

They stood in silence for a moment, and Hector wondered if Alain kept his eyes closed to avoid seeking out the faces of the dead amongst the crowd. He might've preferred that. There were too many strangers in the room, too many whispers of people trying to appear well, or unwell. And Alain did have a tendency to close his eyes to what he didn't want to see.

“When exactly did you stop wearing the watch I purchased for you?”

This time his eyes were narrowed to slits, and it took Hector a moment to realize that Alain was almost smiling as he looked out at the world like a knight through a visor. Hector smiled back, adjusting his sleeve over the face of his borrowed watch. “A good while ago. I needed a change.”

Alain sniffed at this, brushing his shoulder against Hector's in a gentle way that couldn't be mistaken for unintentional. “I suppose I understand. I don't want to stay here any longer.”

Nonplussed, Hector forgot to pull away. Alain was worldly, but somehow he didn't belong anywhere but here, keeping his bespoke clothing out of the threatening mist. "No? Where will you go?"

"Nowhere. I would like to go, back to Paris, or even Dakar, but now I cannot. There is Whittaker's library, after all. It is our *responsabilité*."

Silence fell again, dry and close between them. Alain shifted, leaning some of his weight on Hector. They stayed that way just long enough for Hector to feel uncomfortable and yet not quite long enough.

"There you are! Were you two hiding out here?" A feminine voice chimed at them. Simultaneously, Alain and Hector straightened. Alain's chin tilted up and his eyelids fluttered shut once more, while Hector forced his own gaze wide.

Sage approached the two of them and laid a delicate hand on Alain's arm. He shrugged it off in a reflexive jerk.

"Sorry," she raised an eyebrow, "am I interrupting you?" An innuendo hung in her voice, unsaid.

"No," Hector said quickly, while Alain spat back "yes."

"You can't be mad at me forever. And I'd hoped that you would have the grace to make a truce today."

Alain kept his eyes closed while responding. "I don't make exceptions just because of tragedy. Sage, *ma belle*, go fetch yourself a drink. A whole bottle, even." He extended an arm, fingers loosely pinching a hundred dollar bill.

Sage narrowed her eyes. "Look at me, Alain. *Look at me*. Don't go vilifying me for being what I am. I never resented you for thinking you could buy me, or Hector, or

anyone else for that matter. Don't stand there now and play the wounded prince." When this tack failed to elicit a reaction, she sneered. "It's not as if you didn't know about all of the other boys."

At this, Alain's eyes flew open. He grabbed Sage's shoulder, cat-quick, and squeezed. Hector's instinct to move between the two of them was paralyzed by his sudden desire to let this play out. To see the cracks in the facades.

"Oh now ye want to touch me, do you?" Sage's thick brogue was almost sensual in its maliciousness.

"I want you to listen to yourself. I don't care who you play with outside of our circle, but never us. We were above that." He scoffed, nostrils flaring, and rose his voice for the first time all semester. "The others? You think this is about *them*?"

Hector stepped back. Heads were starting to turn nearby and Alain, noticing the attention he was drawing, released Sage. She raised a hand, to strike Alain or to grab her wounded shoulder, perhaps, but stopped. She looked from Hector to Alain and back again. "Maybe I will *fetch* that drink after all." Her fingers plucked the bill from Alain's other hand, as Hector had seen them do a thousand times before.

The moment had passed, and everyone's armor was up again.

He used to know the armor better than the people who wore it: he'd spot Sage and Charles across the commons walking with their heads close together, or Alain attended by Ned, the two of them holding court in the dorm lounge. But other than the time they shared in Moriel's lecture hall, Hector saw the other philosophy students only at a distance. There had been an opening in their motley ranks, but somehow he was sure he'd

missed it. And the more he convinced himself of this overlooked opportunity, the more Hector wished bitterly to go back and find it again. But every shared look between Sage and Ned, and every dropped pen that Charles picked up and returned, reflexively, to Alain was a reminder that he was not one of them, not yet. That's why he was surprised that when he arrived early to his Politics of Japan lecture on Wednesday morning, he was greeted by a familiar face: Ned Harada, of student council and orientation video fame, waved at him from the front row of seats. He patted the open desk next to him, as if to say *here, boy!*

Ned was the most book-smart of the group, and the nicest: warmer than aloof Alain and more eager to please than Sage or Charles. But while the others functioned alone, Ned was more willing to drop the names of other students, making study groups in a variety of classes and keeping track of everyone's names. As a result he always thrummed with a nervous energy, and his English took on a very slight Japanese accent when he spoke too quickly. He often spoke too quickly.

It was a slow class. Hector's eyes grew bleary from staring at the projector screen, and he longed for the way Moriel gave lectures. He wasn't so much a presenter as an orator. But in order to pass the time, Ned made whispered remarks about the teacher's social life (or lack thereof) and how he could be seen every Thursday without fail eating the same bologna and cheese sandwich on the steps of the administrative building. In fact, Ned made remarks about plenty of people, pulling social histories out of thin air and littering the stream of hushed words with casually revealed secrets. It took Hector leaning towards him to ask "and what about our friends in philosophy?" for him to clam up.

At the end of class, Hector was left reeling as to what had made their conversation turn sour. He tried to pick the thread back up, but to no avail. “Nice watch, buddy.” Ned snorted, and shouldered his way out.

Hector frowned, checking his Breitling. The cool metallic face offered him no clues, but did make him realize how out of place it seemed nestled against the sleeve of his hoodie. He didn’t understand why Ned would be jealous of his new watch; if Alain was as magnanimous to all his friends as he’d been the other day, Hector had no doubt that Ned had plenty of fancy junk to show off. There was no reason to begrudge him one watch.

After his next class, Hector fell in behind a group of political science students headed for the cafeteria. He hoped to see Sage there. Instead, he saw the just as familiar but much less welcome face of Ned, overeager grin back in place. His ridiculously tall hair threatened to topple as he jerked his head in a quick upward motion in lieu of a “hello.” Hector grimaced in reply. What was with the stupid head bob? It felt reminiscent of high school, the way drifting students stuck between identities would interact with anyone in the periphery of their acquaintance. It was supposed to be different here: he was in Ned’s circle, for crying out loud. He belonged. But between their truncated conversation in class and now Ned’s stupid head nod, Hector wasn’t so sure.

He remained disgruntled throughout lunch. He followed the group of students from another of his political science courses (in which the required readings consisted entirely of various volumes written by Adam Swift) and, heartened by their friendly gestures, sat down at their table. They were talking with equal admiration and derision about an elitist group of students comprised of a know-it-all, a snob, a tease, a joker, and

their ‘kooky’ professor. It took Hector a moment to figure it out, but when he did, he immediately interjected.

“Anyone done the reading for next class?”

A pale freckly girl handed him her notes. “You’re a transfer, right? I don’t mind sharing notes, but I guess American political collusion really does start early.”

“I just haven’t gotten my book yet,” Hector protested.

“Then check the library. The poli-sci section here is fairly comprehensive. Even if you’ll never be the next Trudeau, you can get everything you need to at least pass the class.”

He’d been avoiding the library. At his last college, the library had been a graveyard of useless books and useless people: the kind who were too smart to indulge in the partying lifestyle but too dumb to realize that if they wanted anything else, they were in the wrong place. Hector set foot there once, and never shook the feeling that its bookish aura had marked him indelibly.

South Island’s library seemed different- *very* different, if the noises coming from behind the Political Science section were any indicator. Hector turned the corner and saw a small brunette girl pinned against the stacks by a man with his back towards him. The girl tilted her head and with a jolt Hector recognized the wide round eyes of Sage McCleod. Unthinking, he lunged forward and grabbed the man by the collar, throwing him to the floor. Too late he realized that he might’ve misread the situation.

“Easy there,” Charles said, smirking while he stood and brushed himself off. “I get it: no snogging in the stacks. Well friends, since the fun’s over, I’ll be going. But

Hector, good toss, mate.” Unperturbed, he walked away whistling a jaunty tune that made the librarian scowl.

Hector hesitated, surprised to find Sage immediately bending over the mess of books on the floor. Reverently, she set the books on the nearest shelf before turning to address him.

“Hector. Hello.” Her face, fresh and bright, gave no sign of what had just transpired. But her shirt was slightly undone, and Hector could imagine himself for a moment sliding his hand inside of it, the way she’d shiver and lean in-

“Hi Sage. Was that something I should know about..?”

Sage shrugged and picked up the last fallen tome lying open on the floor. “Maybe so, but I doubt it. Doesn’t matter now, does it?” When she stood, she caught sight of his watch. Abruptly she let out a sharp laugh, before covering her mouth. When no stern librarian approached to chastise her, she laughed again. “What are you *wearing*?”

“A...Breitling?”

“*Ach*, honey, no.” Sage grabbed his wrist and turned it, unclipping the watch in a single flick of her fingers. “Did Alain do this? I honestly thought he’d outgrown this kind of thing by now.”

“I tried to stop him, but he acted like he’d be offended or something if I didn’t take it. Figured I’d let him have the nice gesture if he didn’t care.”

He watched as Sage shook her head and, to his surprise, stuffed the new watch into an outer pocket of her shoulder bag. “It’s a fake,” she explained. “It’s meant to be a prank. Who else has seen you in this?”

“Loads of people.” Hector shrugged, but Sage stared at him as if waiting for him to finish. “Ned. Ned commented on it.”

“Should have guessed. Alright then. Come with me, Hector, and we’ll get you fitted up with something better. I think I might have one of Charles’ old Rolexes lying around somewhere; Alain gave it to him for Christmas and he never wears the thing.”

“I was going to actually catch up on some reading-”

Sage snatched the book from his hand and pranced away. She was light on her toes, like a deer or a dancer. “The books don’t need to stay in the library, and neither do you. Besides, I feel like it’s a right shame we hardly see each other outside o’ class.”

On the way, Sage explained that neither she nor any of the other Philosophy students of Bryan Hall frequented the library. If they needed a book, Professor Whittaker would often lend it to them from his personal library, provided they promised not to maculate the margins. In fact, in her low Scottish whisper, she emphasized that sometimes she went to the university library just to avoid the others. “Nothing against the boys, but a girl needs a bit of privacy sometimes. There’s none of that to be found in Bryan.” And then she laughed, like the lack of privacy was the most charming idea in the world.

Sage’s room became one of Hector’s most frequent destinations on campus. Despite being in the same sighing hallways as his own shabby bedroom, Sage’s dorm flaunted upgraded heating, polished furniture, and a functioning tap. Even a small white air-conditioning unit hummed in the corner on blistering afternoons, knowing it was the only one of its kind in the building (apparently a gift from Alain or Moriel, though he couldn’t remember which). He’d been startled that first day, following her in while she

rummaged through a trunk, only emerging when a golden Rolex dangled from her fingers. But the room's charm mimicked Sage's own: it was full of light, dominated by the small spaces between desks and chairs and the discarded shirts trailing like stepping stones over the floor. Pieces of everyone found their way in: Charles' old notebook doodles posted on the wall, Ned's campaign pin on the desk, Alain's Burberry scarf draped over the back of a chair. It was there that Hector felt himself truly inducted into their circle, in that room where he and Charles barged in to wake Sage before she slept through lecture, and where Sage would summon them after a long day for the hot tea and shortbread cookies she seemed to always have at the ready. Hector often stopped by to visit Sage only to find Alain, sprawled catlike across the bed, drinking in the hot or cold air. He greeted Hector by refusing to open both eyes and, upon recognizing his silhouette, mumbling "*ça va, mon pote?*"

"It's a good sign," Charles insisted one lazy day when Hector brought it up. They had just finished one of Moriel's lectures and were roaming dizzy-headed across the barren commons, headed for the campus café. The mist in the air made their words hover for a few seconds between them before dissipating. "French for 'how's it going, mate' or somesuch. Means old Al has taken a liking to you. Took him months to stop pretending to be asleep every time Ned walked in the room."

Hector snorted, trying not to show how pleased he was. Alain's friendship had somehow paved the way towards a sense of camaraderie with the others. It wasn't that he didn't value their friendship individually, because they all had their quirks. But together they embodied that sparkling image of the first time he'd seen them: so well-balanced and calibrated to each other's presences so that they seemed somehow transcendent.

Invincible. It was hard to believe he could so easily talk with them now. But if anything, he knew he could trust Charles' assessment, particularly since the Brit's unshakeable good humor and refusal to let a joke go by without a good laugh meant that he got along with Alain better than anyone. But Charles, though by far the most amiable of the other foreign students, had a knack for the prodding humor of middle school boys. It might have been annoying, if not for the sheer force of his likability. "C'mon, the cinema awaits!" He'd declare, bursting in while the others studied, or "Let's all nip down to the pub for a drink," when they'd all been assigned a response paper too erudite to write while sober. Once there, papers forgotten underneath sweating steins of beer, Charles stood on chairs and launched into impressions of Ned, Sage, and Alain. "Back at my grandfather's residence in Fraaance," he said in a Parisian accent, eyelids half closed, "I pretended never to have ever *heard* of Senegal." The others would burst into laughter, even Alain offering a tight smile as he sipped a glass of wine. Charles was clever enough to realize that if he mocked everyone equally well, no one would bother to complain and spoil the fun. He was already fond of borrowing Hector's abandoned Stetson, dressing as a "Texas cowboy" for every costume party on campus.

"Say," Charles remarked as they ordered their coffees, "you've been hanging around with Al too much." It was true; over the past weeks Hector had fallen into the habit of studying with Alain, taking advantage of the comfortable silence that settled around him whenever he was still. It made him a great study partner. "You'll get dull if you keep that up. You'd better come to the little get-together out in the woods tomorrow."

Hector barely took a moment to consider. This invitation, uttered as if his inclusion was a matter of course, validated his snap decision to take up philosophy. The mental image of their elite cohort flashed through his mind as he said “Sure.”

“Good. God knows, someone needs to look after our Ned when he goes to drink at these things, and I’m tired of doing it alone.”

When night fell the next night, Charles knocked on Hector’s door and held up a less-than-untouched bottle of whiskey in his free hand. Hector grabbed his coat and the bottle, soon feeling the warmth of both. They stopped by Ned’s room before leaving, waiting the five minutes it took for him to finish coiling his hair into some new shape. Then the three of them set off across the ghostly commons, stealing swigs of whiskey between patches of moonlight. Other shadowy figures converged with them at campus’s borders and soon an exodus of swaying students was winding its way towards the woods.

Though South Island University was bordered to the southeast by the town of Trinity, the north side of campus backed up against a vast expanse of pine forest. Once the trees shielded his view of the university, Hector felt the quiet eagerness that hunters feel, the wild foreboding of man and nature colliding. The forest was the kind that is never silent, bursting with rustling underbrush and the shivering of small paws, but tonight discordant howls rang between the firs and the clumps of wild blackberry. When the group of them, led by Charles, finally reached the source of the uproar, they saw savage light and leaping shadows dominating a crowded clearing. And before it all, Sage, barefoot and beaming at them, two bursts of red sitting high on her cheeks.

“Glad you boys made it. There’s nothing quite like a bonfire!”

“Well if it isn’t *Miss Cloud*, and without our pal Al in tow,” Charles raised the bottle of whiskey, now only two-thirds full, in salute before taking a deep pull. “Here’s to it and from it and to it again, and if you don’t get to it and don’t do it, you’ll never get to it to do it again!” This he said in a single hasty breath, before taking another drink and belching happily. Then he passed the bottle.

“Here’s to our children, and to hoping they have obscenely wealthy parents,” Sage crowed, tilting the bottle up for longer than Hector would have expected.

Ned’s turn was next. “Here’s to chemistry, for proving that alcohol is a solution!”

“Here’s to chemistry, all right,” Charles swiped the bottle back, “may Ned one day have it with a lady!” He attempted a wink, managed a blink, and then crumpled into guffaws at his cleverness.

Ned rolled his eyes with such force that he nearly toppled over. “Steady, old chap,” Charles laughed. “Hector I bestow you with this,” he passed Hector the bottle, “and this.” He gave Sage a gentle shove. “Don’t lose ‘em, will you? I’m going to get Ned some water. I bet he’ll drink it if I tell him it’s gin.” With that he maneuvered Ned towards a water cooler several yards away. The sounds of their mirthful hiccups soon faded into the din of the crowd.

Hector tipped the bottle back and felt some of the rust-colored liquor slosh down his chin. He was pleased to realize that he was well and truly drunk, and paused a minute to savor the sweet velvetiness of his tongue in his mouth. Though he still tasted whiskey, if he inhaled deeply he could smell the loamy scents of the forest, mild against the acrid smoke of the bonfire. He reeled through the midnight crowd, losing faces in the flickering shadows. Sage followed so closely that she bumped into him, jostling the whiskey, and

apologized by kissing his shoulder and taking the lead, daring him to follow. Hector swayed after her, reeling her back in with the sheer honey of his drawn-out “daaaaarlin’.” She laughed at him with a full-throated laugh that left her panting.

He was holding her hand a few minutes later, trailing after her as she led him to a fallen tree just outside the clearing. She unzipped his jacket and slipped her cold hands inside, clawing deliciously icy fingers up his back. When they kissed, it tasted like whiskey. The two of them broke apart and the night slammed in between them, rushing in with the sounds of disjointed laughter and the fire’s uneven glow. “I might go find some water too,” she sighed. “Will you stay here?” Without waiting for a reply, she squeezed his hand for a moment before whirling back into the fray. Hector sat very still for a few minutes, wondering if the night was real. He felt content, deeply pleased with how the night’s events had transpired, and wondered what would happen next. Anything, probably.

“Hector, hullo!” Like a drunken jack-in-the-box, Charles sprang up from behind another tree. His hair stood up on one side and his shirt buttons were half undone.

“Hi Charles. I swear I was going to find you.” Hector leaned back against the log and tilted his head at Charles, who made a joke about the being distracted and led astray by a will-o’-the-wisp. Soon they both clutched their sides, laughing about the dangers of woodland nymphs and partaking of fairy drinks. Charles stood and affected a clear, low soliloquy about nature’s seductive perils and the falseness of Arcadian utopias. Hector wiped a tear from the corner of his eye, unable to breathe; it was a spot-on impression of Professor Whittaker.

“We as scholars must rise above such base instincts, that fear of our own power that drives us to return to what we feel we once had. We must rise above it!” Charles pretended to polish a set of invisible spectacles. Hector leapt to his feet and hooked a hand onto a low-hanging tree branch of a nearby tree.

“I’m trying to *rise* above it, Moriel, I’m trying!” He called down as he sought purchase with his feet. Soon he sat comfortably on the branch and grinned down at Charles. In response, Charles leapt for the closest handhold. He would have missed if Hector hadn’t caught him and hoisted him up, arms straining from the effort of supporting the dead weight. Not to be outdone, Charles immediately clambered onto a branch slightly higher than Hector’s, giving him a disapproving stare.

“No climbing in class, Mr. Ford.”

“No losing shoes in class, professor.”

They both looked down, spotting where a single brown shoe lay abandoned at the base of the tree. Charles’ left foot wore only a sock. “Well that won’t do,” he sniffed, and unlaced his right shoe, tossing it to the forest floor. “There.”

Hector tossed down his own shoes and remarked that without the extra weight they should be able to climb higher. He swung onto the next branch and took off his shirt. From across the tree, Charles tossed his pants and belt down. Soon they wore nothing but boxers, and perched precariously high above the clearing below.

“Thanks for the leg up, mate. I knew having a big Texas chap around would pay off sooner or later.” While they both looked over the rest of the party, Charles began to fill Hector in about the last time he’d been to a party like this. Hector listened with amusement as Charles spun a story full of angry lacrosse players and a case of mistaken

identity, culminating in a hickey here and a black eye there. “Turns out it was the *other* fellow’s girl,” he finished. “How was I to know? Ned always gets me into the worst scrapes at these things. I go out and have a good time and he goes out and just...” he waved a hand, “Collects. Files it all away. Suppose someone has to.”

By this time most of the party-goers had tightened into a close, whispering circle around the flickering fire, or else drifted off into the privacy of the nearby woods. The muffled voices, at this distance, were the same volume as the creatures rustling in the night. But from directly beneath them rose the sound of an insistent hiss.

“Tree snake?” Charles asked, shrugging.

“One of those wood nymphs sent it after us, probably. Nature’s curse or something...”

“More like nature’s call, eh?” Charles whooped. “Oi Ned! Quit pissing and get up here!”

They both heard a yelp as Ned, glasses askew and T-shirt inexplicably soaked, looked up and recognized them in the tree. “What in the- What are you doing up there? Where’s Sage?”

“Good question, chap,” Charles scrambled back down the Douglas fir, losing some skin from his knees along the way. “I’ll take a look. Chat amongst yourselves.” He tossed a grin over his shoulder as he bounded between the trees.

Hector remained perched on his lofty branch, craning his neck to see the stars that had suddenly crowded in close. It could have been several minutes before he realized that Ned was talking to him.

“And Alain is going to find out sooner rather than later.”

“What?” Hector slid down the tree, landing awkwardly on his right foot. “Shit. Sorry. Couldn’t hear you up there.”

Ned raised an eyebrow but carried on, not bothering to stem his tide of words. “I was saying that Charles shouldn’t always jump to go find Sage. Alain knows how Sage is, but for Charles of all people to chase her like this would be a betrayal. He is Alain’s best friend, I think.”

“Sage is dating...Alain?”

It was silent for a few moments while the most shocking information sunk in. His mouth burned. All the times he’d sat on Sage’s bed while she’d perched in the window, her feet resting on his lap. All the times he saw her walking with Charles, arm in arm, and she paused to smile at Hector, her silhouette eclipsing the sun. All the times she’d borrow knickknacks, trinkets, a few dollars here and there, from Alain with only an indifferent kiss on the cheek as thanks.

“You didn’t know?” Ned giggled, taking obvious delight in Hector’s ignorance. “Not as good friends as you thought you were, maybe.”

The whiskey fog lifted enough for Hector to realize with piercing clarity that in this moment, he did not like Ned. In fact, he wanted badly to punch him in the jaw. Or maybe the gut. And why not? With a resounding crack, Hector smashed his fist into Ned’s jaw, shaking his fingers as Ned reeled backwards. Maybe he was still drunk after all, but through the smoke and the pines and the fading night, damn it felt good.

Hector smiled at the memory, running his left hand over his knuckles. Here and now, he was surrounded by tasteful orchids rather than trees and wildflowers, and

mourners instead of partygoers. He'd written off the punch as his typical drunken antics, but now he could see that maybe Ned had just been right. Ned was right about a lot of things, and Hector never seemed to like it. Being wrong, lacking knowledge, always a step behind, stuck, these were the things he'd tried to escape by coming to South Island. Some escape it had turned out to be. Looking around, Hector became painfully aware of how truly oppressive his current surroundings felt. Old photos stared at him with bespectacled eyes, taunting him with erudite smiles. People he didn't know sobbed over unfinished work, whispered tail endings of embellished stories and somewhere across the room, Charles was laughing, the kind of gasping laugh that sounded like a sob. Hector needed air. He looked to the window, catching sight of a delicate silhouette moving towards the back door. The familiar figure was, as ever, gilded in a corona of daylight even on this cloudy day.

Hector maneuvered his way through the crowd of black suits and dresses, searching for the ray of light. Searching for Sage.

He caught up to her by the glass doors. Christ, even when she cried she was beautiful. Her eyes were dark rimmed, both from fatigue and streaked makeup, and they shimmered when they caught Hector's. "Alain doesn't know what he's talking about," she murmured, wilting into Hector's arms. "He doesn't mean it. He can't go and treat me this way, after everything, after Moriel..." Her voice broke, and she clutched him tighter. Despite himself Hector felt a sick triumph that he, not Charles, nor Alain, nor anyone else, could hold her right now. He was taller than Charles and stronger than Alain, and though he was duller than both of them, he knew Sage didn't mind.

"I know," he said.

“You don’t,” she sobbed, “no one does. He went and changed all the rules on me. If this is how he reacts about Charles, then I can only imagine...” She tilted her head suddenly, a fierce smirk taking her lips. “Anyway, he used to *like* knowing I had other men. It made him feel like I was valuable. I was an equal to him, since I could play with all the commoners without getting attached. He didn’t mind if his friends borrowed me for a bit, as long as I belonged to him. But when I cross some line he drew, when I fraternize with someone else he actually considers worthy, that’s what rankles him.”

Unbidden, that first moment of Sage kissing Charles in the library flashed through Hector’s mind. He imagined Sage being returned there a week later, in the hands of some new suitor intent on rifling her pages. Then that last time, in Moriel’s library, when he’d seen her drop her books thoughtlessly, carelessly. He said nothing about it now.

“He acts the prince, oh sure, but only so we all have to scrape and bow. You know that too, don’t you? You still carry that coinpurse he gave you.”

“Why does he have to pretend?” Hector interrupted. “What if that’s who he is?”

“No one is just who they *are*. At any given moment, we are all a combination of who we used to be, who we want to be, and what we are afraid to become.”

“And what does that make you?” The question shot out of him before he could think about it.

Sage smiled sadly and picked up her drink. “The only time I’ve been truly afraid was when I found out about Moriel and the hemlock. Even though I knew it had nothing to do with me, I couldn’t help but think of that tea we’d been drinking earlier, and how my being questioned for it would make everyone think I was guilty of more than one unforgivable thing.” She looked at him meaningfully. “So you tell me, Hector.”

Hector stiffened as she sighed, leaning away. He wanted her so badly, but not for the first time he noticed that she was perfectly aware of her effect on him. This wasn't grief she was displaying, with her wide eyes and bitten lip. When Sage twined her fingers through his, Hector felt his stomach sink. It was a bribe. Ned was right: Sage always knew exactly what she was doing.

Sage was the one with the least influence over the entire group, so she worked individually. She who stole kisses with Charles, who whispered and giggled with Ned, who enticed Alain out of his lethargy with sparkling promises of objects, experiences, or both. On the piece of paper taped to Hector's door, it was Sage's fanciful looping handwriting that had first invited him to come to Moriel's office hours with her. Hector had arrived, note in hand, wobbly from Molson beer on a mild Monday afternoon. When he saw her, he greeted Sage with a spontaneous kiss on the cheek. She laughed and accepted it with grace.

"Thanks for coming. Dr. Whittaker on his own can be a bit...*intense*. I find it easier to study in groups anyway, don't you?" With that she opened the door, revealing Moriel's private office and library. The room was oak-paneled, tastefully decorated, and packed with bookcases from floor to ceiling. While a formal desk brooded near the left wall, the room itself was dominated by a round wooden table, which bore all the silver and porcelain required for an old-fashioned tea. It was surrounded by plush chairs, and almost all of these were filled by other philosophy students. Though he was surprised to see them all there, Hector realized it made the most sense: of course they would study together. It was only natural for the group to behave towards everyone's advantage, which meant preserving their unity. Happy to be included, Hector took a seat between

Sage and Charles, breathing in the subtle smell of old paper and leather. Alain nodded at their arrival, and poured them each a cup of dark tea.

Once they were settled, Moriel himself appeared. He sat in a large leather armchair and accepted a cup of tea from Alain, maintaining silence until he'd taken an initial sip. "Well, my pupils, ask away."

Alain launched in first, eagerly posing a question about the Epicurean school of thought. "Why would a pleasurable existence be a controversial philosophy?"

"Pleasure as defined by an absence of pain only, Mr. Bourgeois. I hoped you'd remember that we discussed a multitude of definitions for pleasure in our lecture."

"Some folks don't need fancy things to live happily, Al old chum. Easy to see the mix-up though," Charles chipped in. "A bunch of rich Greeks, ladies and gents both, living it up in their own little castle sounds pretty pleasurable."

Moriel said nothing, but gave Charles a benevolent smile.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you Charles?" Sage winked.

"You're all confusing Epicureanism with *Hedonism*," Ned whined as Moriel inclined his head and frowned. "Those two are opposites!"

"What would you know of either?" Alain sniffed. "You have never struck me as one familiar with pleasure, Ned."

"Aw c'mon," Charles grinned, "Ned knows *everything*, doesn't he?"

"In fact," Moriel said, instantly hushing the room, "Epicureanism can be considered a kind of hedonism, albeit removed from the colloquial sense of the word. As such, Epicureanism's enemy was not Hedonism, its parent, but Platonic Realism, its opponent."

Charles stopped slouching and ran his hands through his hair to make it stand up in a poor imitation of Ned's gravity-defying locks "Platonic Realism: the followings of Plato!" Ned affirmed, leaning forward. He pushed some imaginary glasses up the bridge of his nose for effect. Hector and Alain laughed; Ned sulked.

"Not quite." Moriel turned away, apparently not seeing the momentary flash of disappointment shadow Charles' features. "Who can take a guess? Alain?"

Alain opened his eyes and explained the differences between Platonism and Platonic Realism, basking in Moriel's full attention. His slow erudite response only faltered when he came to his conclusion. "The Platonic Realists do not believe in appreciating the beauty of things, correct?" The idea seemed to disgust him.

"That's not true," Sage shot back, giving him a gentle slap on the wrist. "They just think that beauty doesn't come from what things look like. Beauty is what it is. The Platonists just wanted you to know things for what they are." She looked to Moriel, beaming when he nodded his approval.

Hector took this opportunity to jump in for the first time. "I actually got a question about-"

"Of course you do," Charles interrupted. "So, are we not going to talk about the elephant in the room? Platonic Realists think knowledge is virtue. By that token, Ned is practically a saint."

"What kinds of knowledge though?" Sage smiled serenely. "Not the kind Ned has, surely. The highest Platonic good can't mean knowing which teachers aren't sleeping with their spouses."

Conversation shot back and forth quickly, and Hector wasn't sure whether he ought to be taking notes. He looked to Professor Whittaker, hoping to take a cue from him.

Moriel's expression was one of mild amusement, and his delicate spectacles flashed in the firelight. "More tea, anyone?" he inquired.

The study hours were almost ceremonial in nature. Lecture was for absorbing, leaving them spellbound by Moriel's teaching, but in the private library the students could seek out their own answers and engage in actual conversation with their enigmatic professor. Cup of tea in hand, they would pose their questions, prompted each time by Moriel's gentle invitation to "ask away." Though Hector only found a note on his door every other week, he understood that the others gathered at office hours regularly, like they had a standing invitation. For the longest time, it didn't occur to him to ask to show up every week, at least not until after the party in the woods. With midterms just around the corner, a visit with Moriel didn't seem so far-fetched.

"Office hours? Why of course Mr. Ford, you needn't have asked. In fact I'm pleased that you are taking this initiative; overcoming a resistance, even a perceived one, is after all Nietzsche's idea of supreme happiness. And for you," his voice dropped to a low oracle-like cadence as he peered almost *through* Hector, seeming to see his entire history of unextraordinary girlfriends, friends, and life choices laid bare, "the decision to take action is of the utmost importance. You want the power of self-determination, no?" Dr. Whittaker smiled. "You must be taking my lessons to heart."

III

That same week as his conversation with Moriel, Hector ran into Charles on the steps of Bryan Hall. “Just the chap I was out to see,” Charles exclaimed. “Saw Ned yesterday with a bruise covering half his face. Wonder how that got there?” He mimed punching at Hector, hopping around on his toes like a boxer. “Our Ned has always been chatty, but no harm givin him what for when he crosses the line, eh? The bloke tried to talk to me about it, thinking I’d take his bloody side. Not likely.” As he talked, he kept step with Hector until they reached Moriel’s library. They took their seats side by side while Alain poured the tea, and Sage arrived moments later, balancing a stack of well-loved books tenderly in her arms.

Then Moriel entered and entreated the students to “ask away,” seeming to overlook the empty space where Ned’s chair normally stood.

Hector stared at that empty space, pondering what it might mean. For the first time, he couldn’t focus on Moriel’s conversation, and was surprised when he heard his name. “What was that?”

“The tendency of the universe, according to Aristotle, Mr. Ford?”

“Oh, uh, order.”

Moriel inclined his head towards Charles, as if that answered whatever question he’d asked. “And while we’re here, just for our own amusement, what do our post-classical thinkers believe to be the tendency of our universe?”

“Entropy,” Sage replied quickly, eyes fixed on her fingers that twirled a strand of hair, “or things falling apart. Chaos.”

“Entropy indeed. So then what is our role?”

“If nature is entropy, then civilization is order,” Alain reasoned. “So it is our job to create order.”

“And define order. Create our *own* order, rather, and by whatever means necessary,” Charles added, causing Alain to smirk.

“Or at the very least, whatever means you have at your disposal,” Moriel chuckled. “The will to power is, according to our companion Nietzsche, a virtue and imperative. But if weakness is therefore a vice, perhaps the entropic nature of our existence is itself immoral, and it is our duty to impose our own will upon it.” He checked the clock on the wall. “I believe that is all we have time for today. I wish you all patience and diligence in your studies, and I implore all of you who don’t want to borrow from my collection to purchase your own copy of *Huis Clos*, or Closed Doors, before we begin our study of Sartre.”

Whether it was due to the idea of entropy or the empty chair, that session haunted Hector. *There is order; things fall apart*. He found himself picturing kaleidoscopes and their infinite colors that shattered and regrouped only to fracture again.

Things had certainly fallen apart, but even now at the funeral Hector was struggling to find the order amidst the chaos. He found himself mesmerized by Sage’s wide grey eyes, which seemed to draw all the light from the room and snare it in their depths. Her lips were slightly parted, and Hector took a moment to realize that she must have just asked him a question. He was conscious of being nothing but an animal, a dog whose fur stood up at seemingly nothing, just sensing something was amiss.

The next thing he knew, he’d blurted out his knowledge about the library. The words fell over themselves of their own volition, leaves tumbling from a winter tree. Sage

stood, small and unshakeable, as he described everything he'd seen, how he hadn't meant to see any of it, how he now felt he had no choice but was obligated to tell the others. None of it seemed to faze her. "I know, Hector." She put her hand on his chest as he drew back, startled. "I know you want to, but what good will it do, other than hurt me? You think it will endear you to Alain? You think it will help Charles? Haven't we lost enough already, without..." A sharp, childish giggle cut her off.

"Hullo. Sorry, thought I heard my name." Charles looked between the two of them, spying Sage's hand on Hector's lapel. He burst into another fit of laughter, tears trailing down his cheeks. "Must've been wrong. Ta."

Hector looked after him, worried. Charles was far from stable, but the sooner he learned the truth about what had happened, the better.

"I'm sorry Sage, I've got to-"

"What? What's so important?" She trembled, with rage or sadness he wasn't sure, but it made him reel. *More important than me?* Her words implied. She didn't care that he knew, she cared that he might tell. He felt a sick thrill realizing that for once he was the one with a card to play.

"I have to find Charles. I promised him..."

"Don't lie," Sage smirked, the expression twisting her face into something lovely and cruel. "It never suits you, Hector."

As he turned to search for the familiar mop of red hair, Hector pondered the truth of her words. He lied in the unavoidable ways, and did so very well when it came with an instinct for self-preservation, but in any way that mattered he stuck to the truth. He hardly

ever lied to himself, even, and most of his life was guided by an honest impulse to do what made sense. He used to think that most people behaved that way.

Finally, he spotted Charles standing in a circle of people, knee-deep in an outlandish story complete with character voices. Hector laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Bloody *-hic-* hell, mate. You gave me the jump. Wot’s up?”

“Charles, are you drunk?”

He laughed at that, a manic laugh. “No, don’t think so. I oughtta be. And wot’s it gonna take for your to call me Chuck?”

Out of all of them, Charles had fared the worst. While Alain had become delicate and brittle, Sage’s dramatic grief had honed her gentle shine into something as hard as the edge of a diamond, but Charles had gone neither way. He was, as ever, the life of the party. He shook everyone’s hand, handed out quips like party favors, and his smile never faltered. He’d been that way since he first heard the news, dissolving into a fit of laughter as if it was all a big prank played for his benefit.

Talking to him now, Hector felt sick. Charles went on in a ramble about how “Chuck” was an everyman’s name, a ground-beef name, a throwaway name, infinitely more likeable than a stuffy “Charles” and therefore superior.

“After all,” he said, pushing up imaginary spectacles, “Aristotle’s definition of happiness lists not only good friends, but plenty of friends. Quantity *and* quality play a role, and why not? A supremely happy man is he who has it all and, as we shall see with Nietzsche, the ideal man or *Übermensch* is in possession of good traits in both quality and quantity.” It was funny in an eerie way just how academic, just how *alike* he could sound when he wanted.

“Why do you do that?” Hector asked.

“Wot mate?” Charles put a knuckle to his eye, wiping away a tear of mirth. He seemed barely able to talk around his laughter.

“Impressions. You do them all the time. Why?” And not just any impressions: though when it came to instantly picking up on the personality and mannerisms of any individual, Charles possessed true talent, he rarely used it on anyone other than his closest friends. And Moriel was by far his favorite subject to impersonate. He wondered why he hadn’t noticed it before.

“It’s all to make a point, isn’t it? Whoever said that imitation was flattery was full o’ shite. And imitating some high and mighty folks can take them down a notch, too. Everyone loves to laugh at someone else.” It was true: Charles trailed smiles, ever followed by a mild-tempered retinue, and this made him the best-loved. It was impossible to be cross with him, or take anything he said too seriously. In fact, Charles was incapable of taking himself seriously. Imitation *was* in fact Charles’ highest form of flattery and esteem.

“Not today, Chuck.”

At this, the grin faltered. “Today most of all. If you live your entire life taking everything seriously, you need to die on a lark. And the bastard was so clever, it’s not as if he hadn’t known this is how I am. He still wrote me into the bloody paperwork like the rest.”

For an instant Hector thought about telling Charles everything, but maybe Sage was right. What good would it serve to tell him; who would it help? He hesitated, mouth open. Charles was eyeing him now, clearly anticipating whatever big thing he had to say.

At the last second, Hector changed course, and thought back to something Sage had said. “You want to be like him,” he guessed wildly. “You want to be like Moriel but you’re afraid you can’t be?”

“Been listening to Sage’s theories, have you? All of that ‘who we are is who we are afraid to become’ nonsense? Bollocks. I’m being a better version of him- no one wants me dead, right?”

“No one ever said...”

Charles rolled right on, his laughter returning. “I mean, any of us could have wanted him dead: Alain values his stuff, his collections and his money, of course. Or admired him for it, or resented him. Ned was bitter and might have wanted revenge. Even I can say that he took something from me, that I was jealous maybe. And Sage, well, you know how women are.” He tipped his head. “You’ve got no motive though. If this were a movie, you would have done it, you know.”

It chilled him to think so. “Yeah, I know.”

“And out of us you’re probably the only one who could! All muscle, no motive, I’m afraid. But none of that matters, since none of us ever could have done it. It would have killed us to.” And maybe it already was. Charles was burning brighter than a sparkler about to go out. It occurred to Hector that maybe Charles had been more attached to Moriel than any of them realized. It would explain why he seemed so affected now. “He brought us together, made us ourselves.”

No one is ever himself. “Or at least who we thought we were.”

“Or who we wanted to be,” Charles hiccupped. “That’s what you did, wasn’t it? Why he liked you? You saw things the way they should have been.”

Hector wasn't sure, so he said nothing. His near-empty glass beseeched him, but he wanted to figure this out before he took the final swallow. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to see or to become, but suddenly something that Ned had said not too long ago came back to haunt him.

It had been right after those last office hours. They'd all meandered into the foreign hallway's lounge, spreading out notes and snacks in equal measure. Sage disappeared, murmuring something about meeting a friend, and kissed the top of Alain's head before she left.

Just as Charles' crass (though remarkably intricate) notebook doodles began to draw a laugh out of Alain, the door swung open.

"Ned." Hector said. The pause hung in the air for a moment and, not knowing what else to do, he gestured towards the seat next to him. *Come here.*

Ned Harada shook his head, something between longing and disgust shadowing his features. But he took the seat anyway. No sooner had he found his perch than Charles sprang to his feet. "I'll run and get some more chips. Hector, Alain, want anything?" And he was gone. Alain, meanwhile, sprawled sideways across the couch and closed his eyes, his head angled towards the radio playing in the corner.

Ned visibly crumpled. "Office hours were today," he said to no one in particular.

"They were," Hector replied. "You didn't come."

At this, Ned whipped around to sneer at Hector. "Thanks for pointing that out. Observant, aren't you?" He laughed quickly, bitterly. "I know I am. I see what Moriel is doing. You know we used to have another few folks in our class? Twins named Logan and Lucas Black."

Hector had never met these twins, let alone shared a class with them.

“No, you wouldn’t know. That’s because they stopped coming to office hours. I gave Sage’s name to a guy on Student Government, and somehow the next semester I’m taking class with Dr. Whittaker. We liked knowing people, Sage and I, and Charles liked the stories. Even Alain finally gave me some gifts, including a watch that no one bothered to tell me was fake. But the twins never liked me. Lucas was gay, so Sage couldn’t play with him, they never laughed at anyone’s jokes, and neither one liked rich people. They stopped coming to office hours, and the next semester, they weren’t invited into Moriel’s class.”

“Maybe they failed the exam without office hours.”

“Maybe. I don’t know or care. What I do know is that Moriel knew what would happen. I’ve heard what they say about him in the faculty lounge...”

Of course Ned listened to conversations in the faculty lounge.

“...they all love him when he’s there. But you, us? They think it’s funny, how close he is with his students, when he is so distant. ‘That’s just Moriel tending his garden,’ they say, ‘let him have his experiment.’ And that’s what it is.”

Rationally, Hector recognized the Voltaire quotation in regards to tending one’s garden. But he couldn’t help but picture a classical Dr. Whittaker in a utopian garden, pruning away the excess branches so that only the finest of fruits could ripen. “Taking an interest in his students isn’t a crime. He probably had his reasons.”

“Maybe not. And I am sure he did have his reasons, not that I know them. But you definitely don’t. Do you know what you are in this experiment? You’re the control. You exist to make everyone else stand out. And I’m just another unnecessary variable.”

“Oh, Ned?” Charles had returned with the chips and two sodas, one of which he passed to Hector. “Sorry old chap, but do you mind? We’re trying to study.”

Ned left in a huff. Only when he was gone did Alain crack open his eyes and reach out a languid hand for some cheese puffs.

“So, what’s next? Nihilism?”

“God is dead: long live God.”

Hector laughed, hunting through his bag for his textbook. With a start, he realized it wasn’t there. “Guys, hold up a minute, I think I need to run back and grab my book.”

He took long brisk strides down the hallway, picking up to a jog when he made it outside, as he hadn’t bothered with a jacket. He was shivering by the time he reached the Humanities offices, and paused at the door to Dr. Whittaker’s office to collect himself.

No one was allowed in this section except by special invitation. It was an inconvenient but fair barrier: Moriel possessed an incredible personal library, including multiple rare and valuable books, and didn’t trust his fellow professors not to breach the sanctity of his privacy. His students were subject to the same limitations but only because, according to him, he had to uphold the code as universal. Much as he adored his philosophy students, they were not above his own system of justice.

The door beckoned, slightly ajar and leaking the lively glow of firelight. Hector paused at the threshold. He could’ve knocked; Moriel would have understood and likely applauded his initiative for coming all the way back in the name of his education. When Alain had stopped by just for a reference book, he’d ended up with three different volumes from Moriel’s personal collection, along with a hefty dose of erudite

philosophical witticisms about scholarly trials. Hector remembered the tone better than the content: aloof, endearing, vaguely amused.

But something kept him from seeking out such an interaction this time. Some instinct kept him rooted just outside the oak doors, eyes fixed not at the light from the doorway, but at the shadows it threw on the carpet just ahead. They flickered crazily, and for a moment Hector was suspended by the odd sensation that the shadows themselves were whispering, but it was only the voices inside the study. Moriel's own rich drone swam through the air, accompanied by a softer voice. Who had Moriel invited in at this hour? Had one of the other professors stopped by to borrow a book or have tea?

"You really ought to try harder to befriend the French language. Its lyric quality suits your voice quite well. I find it low and lovely, with all the old world elegance of Latin and more beautiful nuances than English could comprehend."

"Respectfully, sir, couldn't you say the same of Gaelic? The same things, just a little wilder."

The second voice was feminine, and all at once he knew Sage was there with Moriel. He would have knocked then, if only he hadn't seen how closely the shadows danced.

"Of course you would have a preference for the language of your ancestors. There's a marvelous pride in one's heritage."

"I have always loved plaid. And I've never had a problem with my self-esteem."

The whisper of rubbing fabric. A soft chuckle. "No, I don't believe you have." The shadows moved out of the light. Hector leaned back in order to see them through the

gap between the door and its frame, eschewing comfort for just an instant. But the instant stretched on, an eternity captured in a single image.

Sage perched on the arm of Moriel's favorite leather chair, the same chair in which the professor himself was sitting. An open book balanced on her knee. Moriel's delicate, scholarly hand reached up as if to give her the kind of condescending pat on the head a parent would give to a small child, or to a pet. Instead his fingers dug into her waterfall of hair, tugging her head back until, with a soft sigh, Sage toppled backwards into his lap. The book fell to the floor. Her hands gripped the starched collar of his shirt, his free hand tugged at the lapels of her coat. It slid from her slender girlish shoulders, puddled on the floor alongside the Burberry scarf she'd gotten from Alain. In the firelight, Hector could have almost sworn that he saw himself reflected in the gleam of Dr. Whittaker's glasses.

He wanted to look away then. Every moment he continued to stand there and do nothing felt like another tide of bile roiling his insides. But it made too much sense. Of course Sage would set her sights on Moriel; it was just like her. He was more connected than Ned, wealthier and more elegant than Alain, cleverer and more charismatic than Charles. Even Sage, she of the entrancing smiles and intimate power, seemed less distant and ethereal, and there was something vulnerable about the entire scene. But in the meantime it was beautiful to watch. She was pale and fine, and he was a more rugged incarnation of the rulers the Greeks envisioned. A warrior poet. A philosopher king. And what was Sage? A muse? A whim? Hector saw the looks that passed between them, the hunger there. Then, when Sage's ink-stained fingers touched Moriel's pristine buttons, the spell was broken. Something had changed, and Hector didn't want to know whether

order or entropy would win out. Hardly daring to breathe, he retraced his steps through the building and across campus, Nietzsche regrettably forgotten.

Hector wouldn't remember the excuse he gave to Alain and Charles to avoid studying with them, or the night of troubled sleep, haunted by dreams of Sage's wandering fingers and the pages of abandoned books. He would, however, remember the tentative tap at his door, the frail sound belying the finality of its message. The early morning image of Alain still in slippers, supporting a wilted Sage in his arms, would forever lurk behind his eyes. "*C'est Moriel*," Alain whispered. He didn't bother to translate when his tone spoke volumes. "*Il est mort*."

They all progressed towards Charles' room, knowing it would take all of them to break the news to him. In hushed tones, Alain told Hector some story about Dr. Whittaker sponsoring Charles at South Island, or else paying his tuition, and generally taking him under his scholarly wing, eliciting the student's unshakeable admiration. He would be broken when he heard the news.

Charles' bed was unmade, but his room was otherwise clean and neat: the sign of a place little used. He perched on his desk chair while they relayed all they knew to him, barreling through his confused smiles and repeated protestations of "I don't believe it." Sage cried intermittently, and Alain kept the heels of his palms pressed firmly to his eyes. Hector found himself agreeing with Charles: it was unbelievable. How could a man die when he had never seemed quite real in the first place?

"How did you find out?" Charles finally asked.

Hector looked to Alain, who looked to Sage. Her face flushed deeply. “He was supposed to meet with the dean for coffee this morning...she couldn’t get ahold of him. She called the police, and they called me in first.”

“Why you?” Charles asked, wounded. “Why not...” he swallowed, laughed until his voice cracked, “why not Alain, for instance?”

“Because Sage saw him last,” Hector said, voice neutral.

Sage murmured something about having left her scarf there.

“Sage,” Hector said, looking at her, trying to make her understand. She locked eyes with him, and he saw her eyebrows raise, registering what he meant. Recognizing that he knew she’d been there. She was afraid. Almost imperceptibly she shook her head.

But for once no one questioned anything. Alain buried his face in his hands once more, shutting out the world more forcefully than he’d ever done. Charles took Sage’s hand, so quickly that she looked startled. Then he used his free hand to move her hair up from her neck, revealing a mottled purple mark peeking out from behind her collar. “Al, old chum, you didn’t maculate our Miss Cloud, did you?”

“What? Certainly not, Sage doesn’t like anything like that...” Alain lowered his hands from his eyes.

“How would you know?” Charles laughed. It was an uncaring, off-kilter, nothing matters anymore laugh. “Have you ever tried?” With that, he leaned in and kissed Sage right on the mark.

Hector saw her stiffen, and realized with dread whose lips must have been there last. But she collected herself quickly and placed a gentle hand on Charles’s shoulder.

“Now’s not the time, Charles.” She whispered. She blinked rapidly, looking from Hector to Alain, a doe caught in headlights.

“*Mon Dieu.*” It took Hector a few moments to realize that the flared nostrils and wide eyes dominating Alain’s face was an expression he’d never seen before: utter horror. He stood up and left the room, closing the door softly behind him. None of them saw him for a while after that, not until the will was read.

The rest of the university, even within the Humanities Department, went on as usual by the week’s end. But in Bryan Hall the rumors flew. Dr. Whittaker had been well known and admired among all the foreign students, not just the philosophy scholars whom he loved best. And the sudden absence of the close-knit clique that had treated the foreign hallway like their castle only stoked the gossip.

“I heard he was murdered.”

“It was one of his students, wasn’t it?”

“No, it was some hit from the Austrian mob. He was running from them, you know.”

“I don’t think he was Austrian. Does Austria even have a mob?”

“Everyplace has a mob.”

Alain, Charles, Sage, and Hector were called in for questioning one after the other, though they didn’t talk about it. Hector was startled to belatedly realize that they, all of the philosophy students, had to be persons of interest because they’d been the last to see Moriel. It was therefore no wonder that the once instinctive communication of glances and gestures between their cohort had turned to mistrustful silences. Individually,

however, they heard the truth of it: the signs pointed to hemlock poisoning. Residue had been found in Moriel's teacup, seemingly imbibed mere hours after office hours.

Out of a morbid curiosity, Hector looked it up: it was a historical death, and very Greek. But it was brutal. Hemlock poisoning meant loss of mobility, numbness, and a painful suffocation as the lungs stopped functioning. It took hours, but the victim supposedly didn't lose lucidity or speech until the end. After this news was delivered, Hector couldn't even walk by Charles' room without overhearing his mad fits of laughter.

Finally, the four of them reunited, seated on an unfamiliar couch in a room that smelled of stale coffee and toothpaste. It was morning, and they would have been at lecture hosted by a bumbling replacement for Moriel if it hadn't been for this brusque man in a crisp suit. According to him, though most of Dr. Whittaker's property and possessions had gone towards various causes for education and public work, a piece of his considerable fortune was bequeathed to them, to cover their remaining collegiate expenses.

"Preposterous," Alain protested, "Moriel would have known that I don't need..."

"And one more thing," the man said. "In addition to a few small tokens set aside for each of you individually, Doctor Moriel James Whittaker wished for the four of you collectively to take possession of the entirety of his considerable literary collection."

"The bastard gave us his library." Charles laughed. "Quick, let's all scribble in the margins and dog-ear the corners!"

The man paused at this, and said that they clearly needed a moment to process this development. As soon as he left the room, the four philosophy students exchanged bewildered looks.

“I’m sure I have no idea what Moriel was thinking,” Alain whispered. “Why would he give us his library together? Why not just give us each some of our preferred volumes...”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Sage breathed. Since it had become clear that no one was aware of any wrongdoing in those late hours at Moriel’s office, her entire demeanor had changed. Though at first she’d been on edge, repeating nervously that they’d had tea in his office the last time she was there. But the questioning had ceased, and there was no sign that anyone could ever find out that she’d been there after hours. Moriel had left no clues. It was as if the knowledge that the professor had purposefully left her blameless had manifested to Sage as a sign of something far deeper. She sighed his name, blinked often whenever she was reminded of him. “Isn’t it obvious? Moriel was creating order and entropy, both at once. He figured it all out, didn’t he?”

Hector wasn’t so sure. Surrounded as he was by subdued mourners, listening to Alain’s grandfather soliloquize about Moriel’s glory days in the Paris literary scene, it was impossible not to understand the impulse. Of course he wanted to believe the words Moriel had left for them: that the students he had tutored were the only ones to be trusted with his greatest treasures, the morsels of knowledge he’d left behind.

“But why wouldn’t you stay to finish what you’d started,” he whispered. He stood over the casket, looking not at the wood but at the painted portrait of Moriel. Even in oils, delicate silver spectacles obscured his eyes. “You saw me in the library, didn’t you? Was that why you did it? You thought I would have told everyone and ruined your reputation?” It didn’t seem right, not for Moriel. He could have handled the situation,

even if Hector had revealed what he'd seen. Sage was right; Hector wasn't a liar. But Moriel, he could have been.

“You didn't have to die. You chose to. It was *your* choice.”

Saying it aloud made Hector think he might be on to something. The choice was definite; hemlock was so unusual, so deliberate. It would have taken some planning to procure it. Moriel was, among many things, masterful at preparation. What was the word? *Sprezzatura*. The art of carefully planning so as to seem effortless. Moriel had talked about it at length after their discussion of Machiavelli during office hours.

But how could he have planned this, leaving Hector with an impossible choice because of the information he possessed, the secret he carried? Hector could choose to tell the others what he knew about Sage, or else keep that information for himself.

“Were we all just part of your experiment?” *And what was I?* “I was only there because you needed an outsider.” He tried not to think about the possibility that Ned might have been right. After all, what did Ned know? Evidently not enough to give him joint custody of a library. Not enough to tear apart Sage, Alain, Charles, and their collective memory of Moriel with one bombshell. A thrill shot through him at that thought, both from the power he possessed and the feeling that he was one step closer to understanding something just out of reach.

Hector reached out and touched the casket itself, the wood reminding him of the politely closed doors to Moriel's office. What were they supposed to learn there next, after their exams? “Something about Sartre,” he murmured aloud, “Or something about each other, according to Charles. Or maybe this was just the test for all of your foreign students.” He lingered on the word “your”, feeling rankled.

Maybe it was both order and entropy, the way the four of them knew each other, loved and resented each other, and yet were now bound by this shared duty. Duty was, after all, a philosopher's role. Was he even supposed to be part of this group? Given the way they'd treated each other all afternoon, what was to stop him from revealing everything he knew? The polished oak revealed nothing, and Hector withdrew his hand and turned away. His gaze caught and lingered on the scene across the room.

By the door, Charles' steady laughter quieted as Sage whispered something in his ear. Alain looked on from a few paces away, car keys in hand, benevolent smile in place. Tension seemed to ripple between them, but it charged the air in the most magnetic way. Hector glanced around for a sign of Ned, and saw that he, too, cast longing looks towards the trio ready to depart, oblivious to him. But they hesitated, waiting on some catalyst to send them on their way.

Hector finished his drink. The soft burn soothed him, the familiar muddle making the grey day bearable. Then he set his glass down on the casket and went to join them.