

“Who’re you supposed to be?” Reagan’s friend says. I think his name’s Owen. He looks up from his phone and flips a cigarette into the darkness as we cross the parking lot. His red, yellow and gray scarf and floppy hat conceal most of his face, leaving only a pair of dark eyes. Reagan, my off-campus roommate, is instantly recognizable as the dragon woman from that HBO show with her long blue dress and her pale hair braided, so he must mean me. I look down at my loose-fitting black Lenora blouse and tan Gibson Girl skirt and graze my fingers across the red coccade around my corduroy hat. All of this seemed artsy and radical when I conceived the costume, but I realize I probably just look frumpy. The wind sends a wave of leaves and garbage skittering across the pavement as, for the tenth time in the last hour, I consider making an excuse and bailing.

“Emma Goldman,” I say. His face scrunches and I start to explain that she was one of the most famous anarchists who ever lived, that she was a champion of gay rights and sexual freedom fifty years before the rest of America caught on, that she fought harder for women’s rights than almost anyone else in history. Instead I shrug and say, “She’s from a musical called *Ragtime*,” as we climb into his Lincoln with two more people I don’t really know aside from their occasional appearances in our apartment: there’s a girl dressed like Harley Quinn shivering despite the large men’s coat wrapped around her like a blanket and a guy so tall he has to

hunch in the back seat dressed in a blue and yellow jumpsuit like the mascot from that post-apocalyptic video game.

We all say, “hi,” but the conversation quickly moves past my ability to participate without coming off as desperate. I should be writing or studying, but I grit my teeth and remind myself that I didn’t come as far as I have so I could sit at home every night hunched over a book. Still, I can’t help but wonder if going to a party where the only person I know is my roommate might be...rushing it, kind of. The passenger window chills my cheek as I watch little bundles of trick-or-treaters fly by, mostly toddlers dressed like pumpkins and fairies this early in the evening. Despite my apprehensions it’s hard not to smile at the piles of leaves dotting every yard and the nearly bare oak branches reaching up almost plaintively to the newly risen half moon.

Thoughts of Halloween take me back to the story I’m working on. I’m so caught up dreaming of ways to punch up the climax I don’t realize we’ve arrived until everyone else climbs out, and I scramble to follow. A three story white neoclassical looms over a riot of dancing students, with dozens jack o’lanterns perched on every flat surface and orange and black streamers winding around its columns. Music blares from the open windows so loud I’m sure the cops will be called at some point and for a moment that seems like a good enough excuse to

bow out, but then Reagan hops out and I follow her without thinking, staying a few steps behind and surveying the party in progress: here a girl dressed as a sexy pirate grinds on a guy dressed as Deadpool, there a girl dressed as a sexy Pikachu giggles while a guy dressed as the Joker wraps an arm around her and whispers something in her ear.

As we approach the porch a voice booms, “Reagan! You fuckin’ made it!” She squeals and I look up to see her running into the arms of a lumpy, square-jawed guy dressed in a white corset, curly brown wig, and sash that says “Call Me Caitlyn.” Reagan grins and gestures for me to join them and, despite the cocktail of anger and hurt already bubbling in my stomach, I do.

“Quincy,” Reagan says. She squeezes my shoulder and pulls me closer. It’s hard to hear over the music and the buzzing in my ears. “This is my roommate Connie, the one I was telling you about.” He waves. I blink. “Connie, this is Quincy. He works with me in financial aid, and he’s *single*.” She says the last word in a singsong and, looking back and forth between her mouth, open like a woman presenting a prize on a gameshow, and this schlub in his “costume”, I realize this is probably why she invited me. I clench my teeth.

“I see,” I say.

“Who’s thirsty?” Reagan says. Her eyebrows lower as she notices what must be a pretty dark expression solidifying on my face, though to her credit her smile never breaks. “I’m gonna go get drinks. Anybody want a drink?” I start to protest but she’s gone before I can get a word out, disappearing backward through the front door as she mouths the word, “Sorry”.

“So Reagan says you’re a writer?” he says. He leans against a column and looks supremely interested in a way that reads as absolutely fake to me. Maybe I’m just primed to think he’s an asshole no matter what.

“It’s a hobby,” I say. I scan the yard and realize it’s easier to be civil when I can’t actually see the costume. “My major’s computer science.”

“I’ve always wanted to write,” he says. “I’ve got this idea for a novel...” He talks for what must be minutes about a young man frustrated with his parents, his sexuality, and his place in the world who stumbles across a bipolar girl while he’s on vacation in Australia and blah, blah, blah, her quirky mental illness and easy sexuality help him figure himself out before they’re parted, probably forever. At least she doesn’t die.

“Sounds cool,” I say. I try to keep my voice flat enough that my sarcasm is clear, but he doesn’t flinch. “You should write it.”

“Ah, but who has the time?” he says, shaking his head as if he just laid bare the truth of the human condition.

“I do,” I say. “Writers do, generally.”

“You probably need more of an outlet than me anyway,” he says, ignoring the barb. “What with everything you’ve been through.” He looks incredibly earnest all of a sudden. “I just wanted you to know I think you’re really brave, and honestly I never would have known if Reagan hadn’t told me.”

“She *what?*” I hiss. I take a step back and his eyes widen. That *bitch*.

“Whoa!” he says. He holds both hands up and takes a step back. “It’s cool. Bruce Jenner—” my eye twitches “—was a hero of mine even before he came out. I’m totally down with transgenders. Like, look at you!” He rubs his neck and lowers his voice. “Honestly it’s kinda hot, like... not that I’m gay, but a best of both worlds thing, you know?”

“Okay,” I say. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I have a rant ready for this. I’ve got the words. He deserves for me to scream at him. But, all the same, we’re surrounded by strangers who are probably his friends, I can’t afford to alienate my roommate, and holy shit he really does think he’s saying the right things. And, at the end of the day, I’m just... I’m just not that person, and I realize as my stomach twists that I might hate myself for it. I let the breath out and open

my eyes again. “Look. I appreciate the interest, but I’m gay. I thought Reagan knew that.”

“So?” he says. He looks suddenly confused.

“So this is pointless.”

“Why?” he says. “You like dudes, right?”

“*No.*”

“But you said you’re--”

“I’m a lesbian.” I hold my hand at eye level and snap with each word, and yet he still looks confused.

“Why be transgendered if you’re into girls?”

“Wow,” I say, throwing my arms in the air. “Wow. Okay. I’m going to go... mingle. See you around.”

“Oh,” he says. “If that’s how you wanna be, fine.” His confusion melts into a scowl and a wave of something primal rolls down my spine, something that makes me relieved I’m getting away from him while I have the chance. I think of my last trip home, of finding my old weights in the garage and setting them up on a boring afternoon, and the realization that I could only lift a fraction of what I could before. Dwelling on that loss, and on the easy, largely unearned strength of the men all around me, makes my mouth dry up. I head for the front door and make

my way through a sea of twisting bodies to the kitchen where, miracle of miracles, a keg and three coolers wait. I don't drink, not since I was in high school and alcohol was the only way to feel normal after suffering through football practice, but an atavistic screech deep inside me demands that I silence it. Three beers later and I'm feeling jittery and self-conscious, which is to say normal. I barely even dwell on what a loser I am for huddling in a corner by myself and playing on my phone. A few more drinks and I might even be able to rejoin Reagan without screaming at her for outing me.

"Let me guess," a voice calls from nearby, barely audible over the harsh rattle of Soulja Boy. I look up to find a short, olive-skinned girl in a black and yellow motorcycle jacket and a blond wig. A samurai sword belted to her waist rattles as she leans against the wall beside me, one hand dangling a plastic cup while the other hangs off the pommel of her weapon. She brings the cup to her lips with a long, languid motion and the corners of her mouth twitch into a smile.

"Emma Goldman?"

"Oh my god!" I say, leaning in so she can hear. She lowers her drink, revealing the rest of her full smile, and chunks of my anxiety and frustration break off like glacier ice. "Yes!"

She laughs softly, more of a loud sniff and a tilt of the head than anything, but my heart still stops. The lines of her face follow flowing curves like a Roman empress, and her mouth, wide with full lips, seems custom-made for the kind of laughter sad boys write resentful stories about after the fact. “You’re the first to get it. How’d you know?”

“Played her in a community theater production of *Ragtime* last Summer,” she says. She adjusts her wig and rolls her eyes, though whether she’s exasperated with community theater, *Ragtime*, or something else I couldn’t say. “And I’m a Women’s Studies minor so, like, I’d probably collect historical feminist trading cards if they made ‘em.” She laughs at her own joke, which normally irritates me, but I must be tipsier than I thought because her laughter infects me and I nearly spill my drink.

“Anyway,” she says. She holds out a hand and I shake it, feeling like a creep for noticing how soft her skin is. “Name’s Jo.”

“Connie,” I say. I wipe my hands on my pants, suddenly afraid I was clammy or gross and I hadn’t noticed. “What, uh, what brings you here tonight?” Stupid question. Stupid.

“Token gay friend,” she says. She gestures to a group of students clustered near the front door, almost all in some kind of literary costume; there’s a drowned



Ophelia, Hester Prynne, Frodo Baggins, and Morpheus. I recognize a couple of them as editing staff for the campus literary review and feel the sudden urge to run to a different room, but then I finish processing the word “gay” and hold back a gasp.

“Oh man, same!” I say. I realize after I’ve said it that I maybe shouldn’t have sounded excited, but here we are. I point to the window looking out over the porch, where Reagan and her friends are busy trying to shotgun beers but mostly just succeeding in soaking their clothes in Miller Lite. Jo covers her mouth to hide a smile and says, “Duh.”

“Duh?”

“Straight girls don’t dress up as Emma Goldman for Halloween,” she says, then bobs her head back and forth and looks thoughtful. “In my experience, anyway.”

“I guess not,” I say. I touch my neck and feel it heating up. She tuts and tucks a stray lock of black hair back into her wig, and I can’t help smiling as an arc of courage surges from her smile into me. “So you’ve got a lot of experience?”

She barks a laugh and shakes her head. “Depends on who you ask,” she says, her eyes twinkling. “Thanks for talking to me by the way. I can only take straight people shenanigans for so long, you know?”

“They’re exhausting!” I say, throwing back my head and letting out a groan. She drains her cup and tosses it at the overflowing kitchen trash only for it to tumble to the tile. I’ve never admitted out loud how frustrating straight people can be. It always seemed rude or ungrateful or unnecessarily divisive, like their toleration was a privilege I needed to carefully husband, but she made it seem normal and just letting the words escape feels like a cable unwinding from my lungs. “I didn’t even want to come tonight, but...” But what? It seemed too pathetic to sit at home alone for your your eighth Halloween in a row since you stopped trick or treating? Your shrink said you should? “My roommate dragged me out.”

“Only to abandon you in the kitchen,” she says. I flinch and she shrugs. “Her loss is my gain.”

“I mean...” I rub my cheek and turn away. “I should be working on my story.” I glance at her group of friends and sigh. “The Redwood Review’s deadline is soon and I’m nowhere near done.” I kill my own cup and drop it in the sink.

“Not like I’ll get in, but I still have to try.”

“Why won’t you get in?” she says.

“Nepotism,” I say. She arches an eyebrow and cocks her head. I shrug. “Is it nepotism if it’s friends? And, I don’t know, I’m STEM so I’m viewing it from the

outside, but the writing scene here seems so pretentious. I want to write horror stories but all anybody cares about is ‘realism’. There’s this girl Catherine who’s gotten in two years in a row, and like, both of her stories were just mopey college students drinking coffee and talking.”

“I’ve heard of her,” Jo says slowly. She scratches her chin, a flicker of amusement crossing her face before going neutral again.

“Oh god,” I say. “You’re friends with her or something, aren’t you?”

“I mean, sort of,” Jo says with a shrug. “I don’t like her very much but I know her real well. But it’s not a big deal. What’s your story about?”

“It’s about a group of friends who realize all the older people in their town are actually centuries old, with sort of a Lovecraft vibe going on in the background. The elders made a deal with a nameless, formless thing that lives in a lake, and as long as they keep giving it their offspring it keeps extending their lives.”

“The dread of Gen Z life in boomer hell told through cosmic horror,” she says. “I like it.” She gestures to the back door and presses two fingers to her lips before taking my hand and leading me outside, where the relative quiet and cool feels like a paradise I hadn’t known I wanted a moment before. We lean against a porch railing and watch a ring of guys in superhero t-shirts arguing about how to keep the bonfire going while she pulls out a cigarette. Before she can light it

another bolt of courage strikes me and I light it for her. She rewards me with her first smile so far that isn't mischievous or coy but just nice and warm and then offers me a cigarette.

“Thanks,” I say, “but I can't.”

“Why not?” she says. Twin plumes of smoke flow down her lip, twirling away to mix with the smoke rising from the bonfire.

“Blood clots.” I look down and fiddle with my scarf. Maybe it's presumptuous, but maybe it's time to have The Talk.

“Birth control?” she says. “You know that's based on an outdated study, right?”

“Uh,” I say. My face scrunches up. “Well. I take a higher dose than most—most people.”

“Oh?” she says. My stomach bottoms out. This was a mistake.

“More than, you know... more than a cisgender girl would.” Can I trust her to know that word? I bite my thumbnail. She's a women's studies minor, right? If not her then who, really?

“Right,” she says. She nods slowly and ashes her cigarette. “Cool. Let me know if anybody gives you a hard time about bathrooms or whatever and they'll taste my Hanzo steel.” I laugh way more than the comment warrants, all my fear of

rejection bursting out in gasps. “You didn’t have to tell me though. It’s not my business.”

“I mean,” I say. I rub my neck and look at the fire, trying to find words but only managing to mutter. She taps her ear. I sigh and flare my nostrils. “It’s just I thought you should know because it seemed like you were, you know... flirting?” I flinch like she’s about to hit me or laugh in my face or both at once but she just smiles sheepishly and, as near as I can tell in the darkness, blushes.

“I need to work on my game I guess.” I smile and watch her squirm for just a moment, feeling the heat in my face bleed away, replaced by a feeling of powerful, serene control. I wonder if this is how confident people feel all the time, if this is how she felt when she first approached me. “Can you blame me though? A girl dresses up as my favorite lady radical and it’s not like I can let her slip through my fingers.”

“So you’re not throwing away your shot?”

“And she quotes musicals!” Jo says. She feigns a swoon, nearly falling over the railing, and the composure I had just a moment ago shatters as I laugh so hard I snort. “What dark Hallows Eve spirits did I please to deserve this treasure?”

We talk for a little while, about how *Fun Home* changed our lives (the comic for me and the musical for her), about how she’s minoring in women’s studies and

majoring in theater because she's allergic to money (it has the texture of a well-worn line but I still laugh), about how I don't really care about programming but I'm good at it and the tech industry seems like one of the safer places to work if you're trans, about Quincy and his shitty costume, about all the times she's had to tell a guy she's gay *over and over*. Eventually I'm just drunk enough that I take her up on the cigarette despite the risks and it reminds me of when my sister would come home from college and we would sneak out to the shed and she would let me have one beer and one cigarette, and how the palmetto bugs looked like little men in armor through the haze of the smoke, and despite how terribly the night started I feel warm deep inside, like maybe one day I'll look back on this as one of the best nights of my life.

I start to tell her how glad I am she came over, how special this feels, but maybe that's the wrong thing to say. Maybe being meta about a good conversation in the middle of the conversation only removes some of its magic, or maybe I would come on too strong, but at the same time I'm also sort of picturing our wedding and the dogs we'll adopt and name after girl comic characters and musical heroines and what we'll look like when we grow old together because I'm a creep and I'm completely hopeless, and then I'm suddenly starting to turn dark and spiral when she touches my arm.

“Sorry to interrupt the moment,” she says with a wince, “but nature calls. Wait here?” I nod and she stubs out her second cigarette, disappearing inside. I close my eyes, take a long, deep breath smelling of dry pine and smoke and spilled beer and, somewhere a ways off, probably marijuana, and pull out my phone. A few moments later I’m mindlessly scrolling through Twitter when a shadow falls over me. I don’t pay any attention to it at first, but then I notice the shadow’s owner is talking to me as a cup is shoved into my field of view.

“You there?” he says.

“Oh!” I put my phone in my purse and look up to find a guy I don’t know in a green wig and a purple suit, his face painted to look like Heath Ledger’s Joker (which makes him probably the seventh joker at this party), offering me a drink.

“Sorry.” I take it and cradle it in both hands. “Thanks.”

“You looked thirsty,” he says.

“I guess.” I do my best to stay neutral and scan the crowd for Jo, but she’s nowhere to be seen. “Thanks.” The guy leans closer, bracing his elbow on the railing and fiddling with a lapel.

“I’m Forester,” he says.

“Connie,” I say, craning my neck to look over his shoulder.

“That’s a pretty name. You new?” I shake my head. “How come I haven’t seen you around? I feel like I’d remember you.” I frown and shrug, and he just laughs. I start to take a drink, if only to keep my mouth occupied so he won’t be offended that I’m not talking, when a yellow-clad arm shoots out of my peripheral and snatches the cup away. I look over to see Jo standing beside me, her deep, brown eyes boring into Forester.

“She’s with me,” Jo says. I notice people nearby turning to watch us, Reagan and her friends included. I hunch my shoulders and try to disappear.

“It’s a party,” Forester says, holding a hand up and looking offended. “Jesus, Jo, I’m just being friendly.”

“She doesn’t want to be friends with you,” Jo says. Her voice is low and flat, sort of superficially calm but then when you listen closer you realize it’s like when a cat is frozen and moaning, ready to flay your hand. I start to speak up, to try and defuse the situation and avoid a fight, to maybe tell Jo that I appreciate the sentiment but she’s being kind of creepily possessive, when she narrows her eyes and pours the drink on his purple-sharpie’d Chucks. He swears and takes a step toward her, but thankfully another guy grabs his arm and leads him away.



“Uh,” I say. “I think he was just trying to be nice.” She turns to me and for a moment she looks enraged but then the color drains from her face and her hands shake.

“Jesus,” she says. She closes her eyes and runs a hand down her face like she’s talking to an idiot and now my impatience is turning into anger. Who does she think she is, actually? “Look. Don’t take this the wrong way, but you haven’t been living as a girl for very long have you?” I don’t say anything, just scowl and cross my arms. She sighs. “You have to be careful, okay? You can’t take drinks from guys you don’t know.” She scans the crowd and grimaces. “Especially when you’re by yourself.”

“Oh,” I say. All my anger and indignation flushes out like dirty oil, leaving me scaping and raw. “*Oh*. You think he...?”

“I’ve heard stories.”

“Oh my god,” I say. “If you hadn’t shown up—”

“Well I did,” she says. She smiles and squeezes my arm. “What’s a feminist samurai good for if not this exact shit, right?”

“My hero.” Her smile fills me up again. I think it might be hard to feel bad for long when she’s around.

“Really though,” she says. “Stuff like this is why I write about people talking over coffee. Life as a woman’s scary enough without adding orcs and killer clown ghosts or whatever into the mix.”

“What?” I say. I feel suddenly dizzy, like when you’re half asleep and you walk in a room only to forget why you were there in the first place. “You write what?”

“Those stories you hate,” she says. She smiles, but now it looks less mischievous and more like a cat fascinated as it toys with a small animal. “That’s why I write them.”

“But you said your name—”

“*Nom de plume*, honey,” she says, arching an eyebrow. My stomach lurches. I feel like I’m about to puke. She’s been laughing at me this whole time. She probably only came to talk to me because her and her friends knew I’d submitted all those horror stories and they were making fun of me. I can’t tell whether I’m hurt or angry or ashamed, but it’s probably all three.

“I need to go,” I say, so fast it sounds like one word.

“Wait,” she says. She tries to grab my arm but I jerk away and disappear into the press of bodies before she can say anything else. I consider hooking back up with Reagan and trying to enjoy the rest of the night but I don’t think I have it in

me. Between what almost happened with Forester and the prospect of running into Quincy or Jo or her friends I just can't, so I shoulder my purse, stomp out the front door, and start the long walk back to campus on my own.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” I hiss in time with my steps. This simple mantra keeps my thoughts at bay until I pass a group of trick or treaters dressed like princesses, witches, and Captain Americas and their moms give me nasty looks. So now I'm an idiot and a public menace. Fantastic. I reach the graveyard that marks the halfway point between the party and campus when I hear voices calling out and look up. Two guys in black hoodies and sloppy skeleton face paint watch me from across the street while a third in a grim reaper outfit waves a big plastic scythe and yells.

“Happy Halloween!”

“Okay,” I say, waving back and forcing a smile. “You too.”

“You're beautiful!”

“Okay.”

“Come party with us!”

“No thanks!” I say. My skin crawls and I keep walking, remembering what Jo said about being by yourself. They keep pace with me but don't approach otherwise.

“Come on,” Reaper says. “It’s still early.”

I don’t say anything, just keep walking. I do grab a loose brick off the graveyard wall as surreptitiously as possible and hold it where they can’t see. The skeletons yell something incoherent and Reaper walks into the street.

“I know you can hear me,” he says. “What, you think you’re too good for us? You’re a five at *best*. I’m talking to you. I said *I’m talking to--*”

“Go away!” Something moves in the corner of my eye, something up the hill in the darkness of the cemetery, but it’s gone with a glance and my attention returns to the three men, all of them now standing in the middle of the road.

“Don’t be a bitch,” one of the skeletons says.

“Yeah!” the other one says. “Show us your—” He yelps and jumps out of the way when I throw the brick. I’m reminded again of how much muscle I’ve lost, and it’s not like I was a quarterback, but years of athletics don’t go away overnight. The brick sails over his shoulder, just missing his head, and a moment of silence falls as all four of us realize I could have hit him if I’d really wanted to. I grab another loose brick, whispering a silent prayer of thanks to lazy groundskeepers, and hold it at shoulder height like a shotput.

“Come closer,” I say. “*Please.*” They back up. I focus on Quincy and his tasteless fucking costume and Forester and Jo and how much I hate these three and

how Jo was right, she was absolutely right about life as a woman being scary and unpleasant enough, and I'm squeezing the brick so hard it feels like I might crush it into dust. We stare at each other for what feels like all night before a car pulls to a stop in front of them, washing them out with its headlights and honking angrily. They mutter something it's probably best I don't understand and slink off into the night. I let out a long, long breath and turn to put the brick back where it belongs, only to screech and jump when I find a pair of black-striped yellow boots atop the wall.

"You scream like a little girl," Jo says. Her hands are on her hips and most of her body is out of sight above me, still in the deep shadows cast by the oaks dominating the cemetery. "It's cute."

"How long were you watching?" I pretend to dust myself off to conceal how badly I'm shaking. She hops down from the wall and adjusts her wig.

"I've been following from a block over since you stormed off."

"Why?" I cross my arms and scowl. She actually wilts a little, which feels good.

"It's Halloween," she says. "Hard to think of a *less* safe night for a girl to walk home alone."

“I was fine,” I say. I resume walking and she follows after, struggling to keep pace with her shorter legs.

“Clearly,” she says. “That was actually... wow. Remind me not to get on your bad side.” I shoot her a look that states in no uncertain terms that she’s already *on* my bad side and she rolls her eyes. “Okay. Whatever. But you know what? I didn’t even know you were *that* Connie until you talked shit about my stories.” I rub the bridge of my nose and close my eyes, the night’s stress blooming into a pink, orange, and green smear of a headache.

“Fuck.” I hiss.

“How close do you live?” I tell her and she grimaces. She takes me by the shoulder and pulls me into a walk. “You’ll stay with me tonight then.”

“In the dorms?” I say. She nods. “I’m not allowed in the women’s dorm...” It’s dawning on me more and more that I’m the asshole here, that she was probably completely earnest about everything and the only reason she didn’t tell me who she was after I bad mouthed her stories was because it would have been awkward, and I want nothing more than to be left alone.

“I dare somebody to say something,” she says. She hooks her elbow in mine. We walk in silence for a few blocks, jumping at each figure that materializes in the edges of a street light, at every honking SUV full of loud men hurtling toward

some calamity or other. We pass a bar near campus, the bass of otherwise indiscernible music sending my headache into overdrive. Men lean over the patio and yell something it's hard to make out, and it's hard to tell if they're yelling at us or at the women in the parking lot or just yelling, yelling, yelling like men do, like I remember even I used to do sometimes when I was pretending to be one (and Christ, I used to be quiet for my social circle but looking back I was so loud and I took up so much *space* and it was so *easy*), but all the same we tighten our arms and quicken our pace until they're safely behind us.

"I'm sorry," I say as we approach the hill leading up to the dorms.

"Don't be stupid," she says. She extracts her arm from mine and even through the haze of my headache I feel suddenly naked, but then her fingers are in mine and they're like an old, thick sweater. Together the two of us, in the clothes of fearsome women, climb toward quiet, safety, and the half-hidden moon.