

An Investigation of Vague Narration and Reader Interpretation

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Abstract

This thesis project explores how narrators impact a reader's interpretation of a story. Specifically, it investigates how a homodiegetic, externally-focalized, first-person narrator—a “vague” narrator, one that provides little internal detail or thought, leaving personal details unknown to the reader—causes individual readers to interpret a story differently. By researching this type of narration, this project provides new insight into how that narration influences the way a story is told. Further, it sheds light on the way readers perceive a story through narration, and how that perception can be skewed in order to encourage reader inference. These findings contribute to the larger discussion of the relationship between readers and narration, and will benefit those who study how reader experience influences the way a story is read, as well as those employing narrative techniques to write fiction.

Background and Analysis

Narration has a tremendous impact on the way a story is told. It controls how a story is interpreted, how much information is given to a reader, and the manner in which that information is conveyed, all in order to form the larger story, comprised of “the narrated events and participants” of the text (Rimmon-Kenan 8). This thesis investigates the impact narration has on the way a story is told and interpreted. In particular, it explores how a homodiegetic narrator, one who is “present as a character in the story,” and who is both externally-focalized—which “restricts the information the reader gets [about the narrator] to the outer perception of the character”—and narrated in the first person impacts how a story is interpreted (Genette 245, Jumpertz and Tary 114). I argue that a narrator as previously described—a “vague” narrator—

forces the reader to interpret a text by drawing on their own personal beliefs in order to fill in the gaps of information which the text does not present. Kotovych finds that “the more is left textually implicit about a narrator’s mental life, the more readers are likely to draw inferences based on their own experiences” (van Lissa et al. 46). Kutsch further states that readers bring their own “experiential backgrounds” to a story and allow their personal “experiences” to influence both how they read and the conclusions they draw about a story (Kutsch 50).

Bal argues that “storytelling is inevitably slanted or subjective in nature”—that there can be no true impartiality in a story, because it is always told from a particular “angle” (Bal 132). My thesis supports this idea: even if a story does not present certain narrative information, the reader themselves will “slant” the way the story is told by supplying their own beliefs in order to affect how they interpret a story. Thus, by producing works of fiction which are told by vague narrators, I have created stories which force the reader to draw inferences based on their own opinions, and, as a result, interpret a story differently than how another reader may interpret it, as each reader’s own experiences and beliefs are unique.

Story 1: “Proposal”

The first piece, “Proposal,” follows a protagonist who is conflicted over whether or not to propose to their spouse. This piece features both a vague narrator, as above defined, and a vague secondary character with the same characteristics as a vague narrator (externally-focalized and providing little internal detail), but who is not the narrating voice. This story demonstrates that vague narration results in forced reader assumption by showcasing the issue of a proposal as its central conflict. Neither the unnamed narrator nor the secondary character, Alex, are gendered or

described with detail which could provide insight into their gender identities. By creating a story in which the primary conflict is whether the main character should propose, and then obscuring the gender of the two central characters, the story refuses to provide a guiding framework for the reading experience, which in turn forces the reader to make assumptions. If the narrator and Alex were gendered—for the sake of argument, if the narrator was a man and Alex was a woman—the reader would be able to rely on preexisting societal stereotypes in order to rationalize which character should propose—namely, the stereotype that men should propose to women. If the narrator was a man, the reader—if they subscribe to these stereotypes—would expect the narrator to propose, thus removing the central conflict. Because the story does not gender the two main characters, the reader is forced to draw their own conclusions about whether the narrator or Alex should propose. In doing so, the reader is forced to confront their own assumptions about which member of a relationship they think should propose, and whether it really matters. This evokes Rimmon-Kenan's concept of "[i]ntelligibility" or "how the reader makes sense of the text" (Rimmon-Kenan 124). A reader's understanding of a text involves "an integration of its elements" to pre-existing "models" that the reader is familiar with (Rimmon-Kenan 124). This is represented by the aforementioned phenomenon of a hypothetical reader holding their own stereotypes about who should propose to whom. Again, because the story provides no identifying information, the reader is unable to successfully integrate the story's ideas with their own models of understanding, and must therefore draw unique conclusions. This demonstrates that a vague narrator (and, by extension, a vague supporting character) forces reader interpretation of a given story. Moreover, it furthers the idea that a reader's own predispositions and beliefs fuel this interpretation. If the reader does not subscribe to the stereotype that a man should propose to a

woman, then they will not have the same reading experience and process of intelligibility—and subsequent struggle of wondering which of the two characters should propose—as a reader who does. The process of this struggle follows a typical path outlined by Rimmon; when information is withheld from readers, readers identify a “gap” and expect “that further information will clarify”—in this case, provide identifying information about the narrator and their partner (Rimmon 128). However, because readers never get that information, they are, again, forced to close the gap with information from their own beliefs and experiences.

Several specific aspects in the story reinforce the removal of a framework for the reader to interpret the story, and thus force the reader to make assumptions. First, the narrator is never given a name. This further obscures the narrator’s gender. Alex, too, is given a gender-neutral name in order to remove any factors, like a traditionally male or female name, which could suggest Alex’s gender to the reader. The narrator, in keeping with the characteristics of an externally-focalized narrator, does not provide any internal detail or thought throughout the story. Instead, the first-person narration is objective and limited solely to the events observed or perceived by the narrator, rather than the narrator’s considerations of these events. The narrator, too, is characterized with stereotypically (and not necessarily true) male and female traits. The narrator has a very feminine best friend, whom readers may expect a woman to be friends with; the narrator cooks for Alex, which readers may expect a woman to do; the narrator played with matchbox cars and action figures as a child, which readers may expect a man to do; the narrator also played with Polly Pocket figures and Barbie dolls as a child, which readers may expect a woman to do. Each of these traits are ascribed to the narrator in order to further remove any sort of expectation the reader may have of the narrator’s gender, and thus fuel the overall uncertainty

of the central conflict for the reader. Additionally, the narrator's uncertainty as to whether or not to propose to Alex serves to fuel similar uncertainties in the reader. Contrarily, Linda, the narrator's foil character, is very certain in personality. Linda describes exactly how she decided to propose to her now-husband, and Linda encourages the narrator to be more certain. Linda is given a gender: she is a woman. Linda, a woman who is very certain, contrasts from the narrator, a character who is not gendered and is very uncertain. This character divide furthers the reader's conflict of who should propose to whom, and supports the argument that vague narration leads to reader interpretation.

"Proposal" ends without a definitive answer as to who should have proposed to whom; rather, both the narrator and Alex propose at the same time, revealing to the reader that the story has no answer to give about the narrator and Alex; they remain vague characters, and the reader is subsequently forced to draw their own conclusions about their identities.

Story 2: "Raise"

The second piece, "Raise," explores a debate between an employee and their boss over whether or not the employee deserves a raise. This piece, too, features both a vague narrator and a vague secondary character. This piece argues that vague narration forces reader interpretation through the central argument of whether a character deserves a raise while giving no real identifying information about the character. Because the reader knows nothing about the narrator, nor the narrator's boss—not their age, race, gender, or any other personally identifying information—the reader cannot rely on anything other than the information given to them within the text itself to determine whether or not the narrator deserves a raise. There are many pre-

existing ideas which a reader can bring to this piece: an understanding of, or disbelief in, the wage gap; opinions about corporations and how they treat their workers; etc. Because the story presents only the central conflict of the narrator wanting to be paid more money, the reader must draw conclusions in conjunction with their own beliefs about whether the narrator deserves more money. Based on the information presented to them in the text, the reader must determine whether they are on the employee's side, or the boss's; they must determine whether the employee is truly doing enough work to deserve more money, whether the boss is being fair or unfair, and whether the employee should quit their job or ask for a raise. Because the story only gives empirical information about the narrator—their job title, the number of people in their department, etc.—the story also avoids pitfalls of unreliability, as described by Rimmon-Kenan. Because the narrator themselves does not give any internal opinion shaped by their own opinions or experiences, there is no “colouring of the narrator's account”; the narrator's personal “moral values” are never outright stated, which thus removes the possibility of the central argument being unreliably presented (Rimmon-Kenan 102). It also removes any possibility of a “gap between” information given by “the implied author and... the narrator,” as what the reader is told can be considered factual (Rimmon-Kenan 102). Further, as Genette states, it is often the “hero's point of view” that governs the narrative” (Genette 199). By removing the narrator's own internal point of view through external focalization, the story resists swaying the reader one way or the other and avoids character-driven “restrictions of field” and “momentary ignorances” (Genette 199). Thus, the reader is able to rely strictly on the information given within the story in order to make assumptions.

The story encourages the reader to make those assumptions by giving little personal information about either character. The boss is not given a name, a gender, or even a job title. Furthermore, the narrator addresses the boss as “you,” putting the reader metaphorically within the boss’s shoes. The reader, in their own reading experience, must make the determination of whether or not the boss is being fair. In doing so, the reader draws on their own assumptions. Because of the situation presented in the story—of a boss refusing to pay their employee more money—the reader may assume that the boss is an older white man, as is often the case in real-world instances like the one presented in this piece. By that same token, the reader may also assume the employee to be a woman and/or a person of color, because women and people of color are victims of the wage gap in the real world. Depending on the assumptions the reader makes, they will subsequently side with either the boss or the employee. Again, these assumptions are based purely on the reader’s own experiences and the beliefs they hold; because no two people have identical experiences, they will subsequently bring different beliefs and ideas to this piece, and will side with different characters, respectively. This phenomenon demonstrates that vague narration and vague supporting characters force readers to make assumptions, which subsequently results in varying interpretations of a piece.

This piece also employs several other narrative tactics in order to reinforce the central idea of reader assumption. Similarly to the first piece, the narrator never reveals their own internal thoughts; rather, they narrate based only on observations they make on the things that are happening around them. The color gray also appears as a dominant symbol throughout the piece. The recurrence of this symbol reinforces the idea of an absence of information; the color is neither white nor black, but gray, a midpoint between two opposites. The boss’s office and the

boss themselves are described as overwhelmingly gray in order to reinforce the lack of detail that the reader receives about the piece, and subsequently force them to draw their own conclusions. Each of these narrative tactics supports the phenomenon of reader assumption and varying narrative interpretation of the piece.

“Raise” ends with the narrator’s defeat: they receive a paycheck and find that they are not being paid more money. This ending, while definitive, further forces the reader to interpret the story’s end as either just or unjust based on whose side the reader was on, as a result of the assumptions they made in response to the vague narration.

Story 3: “Heaven”

The third piece, “Heaven,” follows a protagonist who believes they should not have gotten into heaven based on the actions they took while they were alive on earth. This piece features a vague narrator and argues that vague narration forces readers to make assumptions by bringing into question whether the narrating protagonist really did deserve to get into heaven. Like the two previous pieces, this story does not give any personally identifying information about the narrator. The narrator is never gendered, given a name, or described in extensive detail. The only personal information which the reader learns about the narrator is through the form of analepsis, or flashback, which gives the reader insight into what the narrator was like during their life on earth. The reader learns two things about the narrator: that they had a six-year-old daughter, and that they killed eleven people as part of their job. The reader learns nothing else about the narrator; as a result of this, the reader is forced to confront their own ideas about who deserves to get into heaven, and which actions would result in someone being unworthy. This

lack of additional information works contrary to Bal's conception of character construction—particularly in that the reader is not given “relevant [character] characteristics... repeated[ly]” and is subsequently unable to use this “piling up of data” about the character in order to understand who they were as a person and determine whether they deserve to be in heaven (Bal 113-114). The reader is refused the typical building blocks of character construction, and this complicates their determination of the narrator's overall moral virtue.

The story deliberately withholds information from the reader in order to make this determination more difficult. If the narrator was described in detail—for instance, if the reader was told that the narrator was a man who worked in the FBI and killed those eleven people as part of his job—then the reader would find it easier to decide whether or not the narrator deserves to be in heaven. If readers trust the FBI and believe that it protects the interests of the United States, then they would believe that an FBI agent was right to kill those eleven people, and would thus deserve to get into heaven. Similarly, readers who do not support the work of the FBI would believe that killing eleven people was unjustified, and that the narrator would not deserve to get into heaven. However, because the reader is not given any of this contextualizing information about who the narrator was and who they worked for—they are only told that the narrator “apprehend[ed] individuals who presented a significant danger and [brought] them to justice”—the reader must decide for themselves whether the narrator deserved to get into heaven based purely on whether the reader thinks killing eleven people was the right or wrong thing to do. This elicits Rimmon's concept of gaps in storytelling; particularly, that gaps may be “filled in” in several ways—“automatically” or “with varying degrees of intellectual effort” (Rimmon 49). By not only presenting an informational gap, but by also refusing to fill that gap, the story is

demonstrating Rimmon's concept; the reader will either (consciously or unconsciously) make an assumption based on their beliefs and stereotypes, or work to fill the gap through their own reasoning and understanding. This informational gap—evoked particularly by the lack of information about the narrator's profession—forces the reader to not only confront their own moral beliefs, but to make their own assumptions about the narrator in order to enact those moral beliefs. The particular phrasing of bringing those eleven people “to justice” might suggest to a reader that the narrator worked in law enforcement or another protective capacity. The text never directly states this, however; if the reader chooses to believe that the narrator was in law enforcement, it is because that particular phrasing—and the detail of the scene of the narrator's death, in which they were on the job—forces them to make an assumption about who the narrator was. Never is the reader given any specific information. Any conclusions that the reader draws is based on assumption as a result of vague narration. This demonstrates the greater point that vague narration forces readers to make assumptions and interpret a piece uniquely.

Another narrative tactic which forces the reader to make assumptions is the appearance of other characters in the piece. The narrator speaks the most to the woman who welcomes them to heaven. This woman has direct control over the narrator; she gives the narrator back select memories, and is the one who ultimately helps the narrator leave heaven. This character is a direct foil of the narrator, as the two have opposing interests. This may suggest to the reader that, because the woman is benevolent, then the narrator is not. Conversely, the narrator's daughter—an inoffensive symbol of “goodness”—may suggest to the reader that the narrator is benevolent, because they cared for their daughter. Finally, the bald man who appears in the narrator's death scene may suggest to the reader that the narrator is not benevolent, as the narrator was

threatening to kill the bald man. However, because the bald man subsequently kills the narrator, the reader may perceive the narrator's actions as self-defense, which suggests that the narrator was not necessarily morally wrong. The other characters in this piece work to either contrast or support the narrator and complicate, from the reader's perspective, whether or not the narrator deserves to be in heaven. This tactic supports the overall phenomenon that readers are forced to make assumptions and interpret things differently when vague narration is present.

"Heaven" concludes with the narrator's ultimate decision to leave heaven. This decision will seem either just or unjust to the reader, depending on whether the reader—based on the assumptions, informed by their own morality, that the vague narration forced them to make—felt the narrator should have remained in heaven.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the three pieces presented in this thesis all demonstrate the phenomenon that vague narration forces readers to make assumptions, and therefore interpret a story differently. "Proposal" draws on competing conceptions of gender for both the narrator and Alex, fueling the central uncertainty of which of the two of them should propose to the other. "Raise" withholds identifying information about the narrator, forcing the reader to judge whether or not the narrator should be paid more money based strictly on the presented textual information. Finally, "Heaven" forces the reader to decide whether or not the narrator should remain in heaven based strictly on the out-of-context actions the narrator took while on earth. Each of these three pieces presents a homodiegetic, externally-focalized, first-person narrator in order to make the narration "vague" and force the reader to draw upon their own opinions and beliefs to

interpret the story, thus resulting in a different interpretation of each story by each respective reader.

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Creative Works

“Proposal”

“Show me the ring,” Linda says. Her face is serious against the dim light of her living room.

I pull out the small felted box, lay it in my hand, and make a show of popping it open. Linda’s grin spreads across the rest of her face when she sees it.

“Oh my *God*,” she says, tearing it out of my hands and holding it up to her face. The bottom of the box bumps against the rim of her glasses. “Oh, and you engraved both your names on it. I’m gonna die. That is *so* cute.” Then she glances at me. “Can I...?”

“Go ahead,” I say.

She pulls the ring from its indentation in the felt and brings it up to the light of the floor lamp next to her. The ring glitters. “I’m glad you decided. To propose, I mean.”

“I didn’t, actually.”

She drags her eyes back to me. “You already bought the ring.”

“The ring is in *case* I propose.” I stick my hand out and she drops the ring back in my hand, along with the box. I set it all to one side. “I mean, we’ve both talked about it. Alex would be fine with proposing. I said I’d be fine with doing it, too. So I bought a ring just in case the moment ends up being right.” I look down, put the ring back in the box, and close my hand around it. The velvet relaxes my hands. “But Alex can propose if the moment is right, too. I’m not picky.”

Linda just stares at me. “Okay,” she says, after a long second. “I say this ‘cause I love you. You’re fucking nuts.”

“Because I’m flexible about when I’m gonna propose?”

“You aren’t being flexible! You’re being stupid. Here. Look at this.” Linda gets up and crosses the living room, stopping at her TV stand. She picks up a picture frame that’s nestled on top of the boxy TV, and—after she stops to blow off the dust—she hands the frame to me.

“What’s this?”

It’s a photo of her and I at Disney in 2002. She’s wearing an obnoxiously pink sweater and two pairs of sparkly Mickey Mouse ears at the same time. She’s grinning. I have my arm around her and I’m holding one of those refillable souvenir cups with a Mickey Mouse straw.

“It’s us at Disney,” I say.

“Do you remember how that trip went?”

“I remember you begging me to stop at every single gift shop so you could buy more Mickey Mouse ears.”

“Because Mickey Mouse ears are cute! That’s not—” She sighs the way she does when she’s fed up with me. “Do you remember how you didn’t commit to going on that trip until, like, a week before we left? And how once we actually got to Disney, you didn’t wanna wait in any lines, just in case there ended up being a shorter line somewhere else? And then we just went around in circles looking at lines all week?”

“I vaguely remember that, yeah.”

Now she rolls her eyes. “I just feel like you have problems with committing to stuff. And I’m saying that *deciding* to propose to Alex—actually deciding, not just waiting for the right moment—would be a good way to stop being so damn indecisive.”

“The ring is nice, though, right?”

She sighs again. “Yeah. The ring is gorgeous.”

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Alex gets home at 6:00pm when there isn't any traffic. I make myself busy in the kitchen, filling up a pot with water and tearing open the box of spaghetti Alex bought at the store last week. I grab handfuls of the noodles and break them, dropping them into the pot until it's full and seated on a burner. Then I get out a saucepan, dump in the can of spaghetti sauce that Alex also bought at the store, and put it on low heat.

The front door opens at 5:47pm. The sauce is on the table but the spaghetti isn't, not yet. Alex comes into the kitchen and I realize the table isn't even set.

“Hey,” Alex says, kissing me lightly on the cheek. “How was your day?”

“I had a phone call with my agent.”

“Oh yeah?” Now Alex has drifted into the dining room, bent over the saucepan. “Did he say whether or not you—”

“He said no,” I interrupt. “Which I expected. So it's fine.”

“Hey, baby, no. I'm sorry.”

I feel Alex press against me, wrapping me in a hug. I let out the breath I've been holding all afternoon and then breathe in, deep. Alex smells like linoleum floors and pencil shavings.

“It's fine,” I repeat. “It's fine. I didn't expect my piece to get accepted.”

“You've been working on it for two months.”

“Yeah, and? Sometimes magazines just don't like what you write.”

“Your agent liked it, right?”

“Yeah, he did.”

“And so did I. That’s all that matters. Doesn’t mean it’s a bad piece. Just means it isn’t the right people who are deciding whether or not it gets into...” Alex stops, concentrating. “Into *West New Hampshire... Quarterly*. Right? Quarterly?”

“*West New Hampshire Bi-Weekly*, actually.”

“Really?”

“No, you doof. I’m kidding.”

Alex laughs, and so do I. The spaghetti is finished by 6:00pm.

“I mean, if you think about it,” I say—we’re at the dinner table, now, passing the pots of spaghetti and sauce between us like we’re playing ping-pong—“it’s a good thing it didn’t get accepted. ‘Cause I never actually wanted to submit it to them, anyway. My agent just made me pick one to send my piece to.”

“I thought it’s always been your dream to get published in *West New Hampshire Bi-Weekly*—wait, no, shit. *Quarterly*.” Alex takes an aggressive bite of spaghetti and then speaks again, mouth full. “I thought that was your favorite magazine.”

“It is. And you’re right that I’ve always wanted to be published in it.” I drag my fork through my own spaghetti but don’t take a bite. “But when I get published in it, I want it to be with *the* piece, you know? The best piece I’ve ever written.”

“Every piece you write is the best piece you’ve ever written, ‘cause you’re always getting better.”

“But that’s exactly it! If *West New Hampshire Quarterly* had actually accepted my piece, then by the time I wrote my next thing and sent it off to somebody, the piece in the *Quarterly* wouldn’t be my best work anymore. It’s like—” I stop, taking a breath. “I always have to be my

best possible author self. If, say, an editor from the *New York Times* picks up the *Quarterly* and reads my piece in it, they're gonna form an opinion of me based on that piece. And what if it isn't the best thing I've ever written?"

Alex's expression says I'm approaching a rabbit hole that could last all evening. "Alright, yeah. You're right. Never mind."

"Sorry."

"Don't be. You're right. It's just..." There's a long pause. Alex's eyes stay on the spaghetti. "I just want you to feel good about something you did, for once. How many drafts did that piece go through? Eight?"

"Seventeen," I say. "I only asked you to read eight."

"See, it must have been so hard for you to actually commit to sending it out. I just want you to feel proud of doing that, even if it didn't get accepted."

My face relaxes into a smile. "You're right. I appreciate that."

"Good. That's why you're dating me, right? For the killer emotional support and compliments." Alex twirls a bundle of spaghetti and then eats it. "Honestly, it's shocking that I haven't asked you to marry me yet."

The ring has been in my back pocket since I left Linda's. "Yeah. When are you getting around to that?"

"Don't worry. I've got a plan. Unless you propose first, obviously."

"Do you want me to?"

"What?"

"Do you want me to propose first, or did you have some big thing planned?"

Alex shrugs. "If I told you, then you wouldn't be surprised when it happened."

"Right. You're right." I let my fork drop onto my plate and drift my eyes among the spaghetti, its twists and turns. "Just have to wait, then."

#

"If you give me a list of ten magazines, I can send it out as a simultaneous submission. We don't have to go through this every time." There's irritation in my editor's voice. It's restrained, but not invisible. *"So why don't you send me that list, and—"*

"It isn't that simple," I tell him. My phone is pinched between my cheek and my shoulder. Both my hands are busy dragging boxes of clothes out of my bedroom closet. "Wherever we send my piece next has to be the ideal magazine. It can't be... I don't know, some yearly review for New Hampshire deadbeats. It has to be good."

"You can't keep holding yourself to such a high standard. We've been over this before."

"Then why don't you find ten places to submit to on your own?"

"Do you want me to do that? I'll do that."

"No, no, I don't want you to. Forget I said that." I pause to switch the phone to my other ear. "Just... I don't know what to do. Can we talk about this tomorrow?"

"Fine. But I'll call you first thing tomorrow morning."

"Fine. Bye." I hang up before I can hear him say goodbye back. The boxes of clothes are in a pile around me. Alex asked me to take out the spring clothes and put the winter ones away, to make sure the hats and gloves get boxed up and shoved in the closet. Except the ring box is sitting on the dresser behind me and I haven't yet turned my back on it.

I shut my eyes and stand in silence for a moment, two. Then the phone rings again.

“Hello?” I say, picking it up without looking at who’s calling.

“*Did you propose?*” It’s Linda. “*Listen, I pulled out the scrapbook I made for when I got married two years ago. There’s all these ideas I forgot about. Would you want to do something in Paris? This is Linda, by the way.*”

“I figured that,” I say. “I haven’t proposed yet.”

“*Why not? I told you to get a jump on it. You could’ve done it at dinner last night and had it over and done with.*”

“We were eating spaghetti. You think I should’ve proposed over spaghetti?”

“*Fair point. Did you at least start planning for how you’re gonna do it?*”

“Should it even be me who proposes?” I’d blurted the question out, but Linda is silent, so I keep talking. “I mean, Alex is smart and pretty and more than capable of proposing to me. So why don’t I just sit back and wait?”

“*Because you already bought the ring.*”

“How do I know Alex hasn’t already bought a ring, too?”

“*Then you’ll have to hurry and propose first.*”

I put my head in my hand and groan audibly into the phone. Linda pretends not to hear it. “I don’t want my proposal to be a race. It’ll happen when it happens. We’ll wind up where we’re supposed to be in the end.”

“*That’s what you said when we kept switching between the lines for Space Mountain and Tower of Terror.*”

I don’t respond. Instead, I cross the room and grab the ring box, keep it tight in my hand so I don’t have to turn my back on it. Then I go back to the boxes, stacking the spring clothes on

one side of the room so I have space to stuff the winter clothes back into the closet. Linda doesn't say anything, and neither do I.

Then I glance back up at the closet and see the edge of a matchbox car.

I lean inside and tug on the edge of a bigger box. Out comes the RubberMaid container that holds my childhood toys, or at least the ones I held on to—a set of Hot Wheels and their bright orange loop-de-loop track, a bundle of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle action figures (two of which are missing their heads), more than a few Polly Pocket figures and their trove of cheap rubber clothing, a Barbie and Ken set—

“Before you got married,” I say, “how did you propose?”

“It was at Disney.”

“Of course it was.”

“I love Disney. You know that. You’ve always known that about me.” She stops, like she’s reminiscing. *“Mike and I went to Disney for, like, two weeks. It was for my birthday. I mean, technically the trip was my birthday present, so it wasn’t like I planned this out way ahead of time, but as soon as I found out we were going, I decided I was gonna propose there.”*

I’ve gotten out one of the matchbox cars and now I’m running it over the carpeted floor, back and forth. “No, you should’ve planned it months in advance. Then you could’ve asked the employees to make the proposal part of the evening fireworks show, or something.”

“I wasn’t thinking that far ahead.” Then she pauses. *“Also, I wasn’t actually positive I wanted to marry him at first. But when he told me about the Disney trip, it just felt right.”*

“Disney magic, isn’t that what they call it?”

“That’s just a marketing ploy,” she teases. “No, but we went out to dinner and then took the monorail back to our hotel. After we got off, it was dusk, and I got down on one knee outside the monorail station and proposed.”

“That’s sweet,” I say. “Alex would never let me do that.”

“That’s ‘cause Alex hates Disney.”

I laugh. Then I bring the ring box back up to my face. My fingers slide over the velvet and I pop open the top. The ring doesn’t sparkle in the dim light of the bedroom. I’m surrounded by boxes and old toys and it really isn’t a picturesque scene, but I keep staring at the ring, at our names etched on the inside.

“I don’t want to do it wrong,” I say. “I don’t want to disappoint Alex.”

“How can you disappoint somebody by proposing to them?”

“What if it isn’t the right time for us to get married?”

“If it wasn’t the right time, you wouldn’t have bought the ring. Just get out of your own head for a second.” There’s a sliver of patience in her voice. She’s trying. *“How about tomorrow morning? Before Alex leaves for work? Just find a good moment, get down on one knee, and do it. Then you’ll never have to worry about it again.”*

“My editor is supposed to call me tomorrow morning.”

“Screw your editor. There’s gonna be a thousand more magazines to try to publish your stuff in. There’s only one Alex to propose to. Just go for it. Stop waiting for the right moment, ‘cause it’s never gonna come unless you make it the right moment.”

“Alright. Alright, fine,” I say. “I’ll think about it.”

The next morning I make eggs and french toast and waffles and pancakes and hash browns and blueberries and everything else I can find in the freezer and the pantry. I make enough servings to feed five or six people, but cooking is keeping my hands busy while Alex gets ready for work. I listen to the sound of water drizzling onto the shower floor, of the blow dryer running, and of Alex fumbling the bathroom doorknob. I listen to the *plink* of floss in Alex's teeth and the buzz of an electric toothbrush. Then I listen for footsteps, and when Alex is behind me I—

“What's all this?” Alex says.

“Breakfast.” I turn around and tug the apron off of my head. “I figured... I mean, busy day, right? Thursday?”

“Thursdays are never that busy,” Alex says, “but this was sweet of you. Um. I mean, I don't think I'll be able to eat all this, but...” There's a blueberry that's rolled out of its bowl and onto the dining room table. Alex leans over, picks it up, and eats it.

I do my best to smile. There's early morning sunlight bleeding in through the kitchen window and Alex is standing centered in its wake. The ring box is in my left sweatpants pocket and all I have to do is take it out and go down on one knee. My hand starts to move.

And then Alex pulls out a ring and goes down on one knee.

I kneel before Alex is all the way to the ground. For a second we sit there, knelt on the ground, staring at each other. Then I realize I forgot to get out my ring so I fish around in my pocket until I find it. I hold it up to Alex. Alex holds a ring box up to me. We open them both at the same time and the rings glitter in the sunlight.

Then we both start laughing.

“Raise”

“Am I getting paid enough?” I say to you.

Your expression is blank. In fact, your face is about as featureless as your office. You have gray walls and gray carpet and a chunky computer with a gray keyboard and gray wireless mouse. Your suit is gray with a matching gray tie, the definition of monochromatic, and your thinning, unstyled hair is also gray.

“I don’t mean that in, like, a ‘gimme a raise’ kind of way,” I say. You still aren’t giving me much to work with, expression-wise. “I just mean... In terms of how much people in my position usually make, am I getting paid the normal amount?”

You blink at me. “Do you think you aren’t?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking.”

“I don’t think you would’ve asked if you didn’t know.”

You’re still holding almost perfectly still, waiting for me to answer the question *you’ve* put on the table and sidestepping everything I’ve already said to you.

“Okay,” I say. “No, I don’t think I am. I talked to Rachael in HR and she told me a product relations rep usually makes around thirty-five thousand a year.”

“And how much do you make?”

There’s a filing cabinet behind you. It stretches from the gray carpeted floor up the gray wall and stops around chest-height. There are four drawers, each one with labels: A-F, G-M, N-S, T-Z. When you gave me my performance review three months ago, you opened that filing cabinet and pulled out my file and laid it on the table and looked at a one-sheet of everything

about me and my employment here. I know it included salary information because you told me how much I could expect from my Christmas bonus this year.

Right now, you aren't going to that filing cabinet.

"How much do I make?" I say. "Twenty-nine thousand a year."

"And you know how averages work."

"Sorry?"

"You know that if we have six product relations reps, and three of them make thirty thousand a year, and three of them make forty thousand a year, then the average salary for a product relations rep would be thirty-five thousand a year."

"Right."

"That doesn't mean all product relations reps are paid thirty-five thousand. That's just the average."

I lean back and cross my arms. "Okay, then tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"How much do the other product relations reps make?"

"I can't tell you that. That's a violation of employee privacy."

"You aren't doing a very good job of building your argument, then."

"All I'm saying is that HR might have given you a number, but that doesn't mean that's how much you should be making. You're a salaried employee and you make a set amount of money annually. If you want to talk about negotiating a raise, we can—"

I put up a hand and stop you. "I don't want a raise. I want to be paid fairly."

"Then explain what you mean by that."

“I do just as much work as the other product relations reps. Right?” I sit forward. You don’t answer my question, so I keep going. “I work the same amount of hours as the rest of them, and we all handle the same general amount of work. Sure, we take different phone calls and go to different places to handle different problems, but that’s why there are six of us. We *all* handle the work, so it all gets done. You following?”

You nod your head at me.

“I mean, I *know* I’m doing the same amount of work as everyone else, because I sit next to them all day. But I’m not making as much as Jan makes. Or Jordan.”

“Jan and Jordan have both worked here longer than you have.”

“So that’s why they’re making more money?”

“Again, I’m not really at liberty to talk about the job performance of other employees with you, but—”

“Then let’s talk about my job performance.” I point at the filing cabinet behind you. “Let’s look at my file, and we can see if there’s anything in there that would justify me making six thousand dollars less than I’m, *on average*, supposed to.”

You don’t say anything, but you do get up, open the second drawer of the filing cabinet, and fish out my file. It’s gray. You lay it on your gray imitation-wood desk and open it. The paper, at least, is white.

“You’ve never been written up,” you say. “Nobody’s filed a complaint against you. You’ve never had to be disciplined. And you did pick me up from the airport after I went to Canada last year.” You mumble that last bit. “So there’s nothing here that would immediately suggest you’re a problematic employee.”

“And my job performance?”

“Well, like I said, you’ve never caused any problems.” You flip ahead in the file. “We did your performance evaluation six months ago, and you checked out just fine. You take all your calls promptly and do your job respectfully. And it says here you’re ‘a joy to work with.’” You tip the file shut. “You do great work.”

“Then I should be paid more money.”

“No.”

You’re very firm. “No?” I say.

“No. You’re a good employee, and we pay you the appropriate amount of money for the work that you do.”

I fix my eyes on you and your untidy hairline. “I make *less money* than *everyone else* in my department.”

“You’ve only been working here for two years.”

“So everyone starts at the same salary, and then people get raises as they go? Is that it? Because Lei makes thirty-one thousand dollars a year, and she just started here six months ago. So did she start at twenty-nine thousand, like I did, and just got a raise really early on? Or is there something I’m missing?”

“I can’t talk to you about how much your coworkers make. If that’s what you want this conversation to be, then I think you should leave.”

“You know what I want this conversation to be.”

“You’re right, I do. You want me to say that you should be making more money, and I’m saying no. We pay you the amount we do based on how long you’ve been here and the work that you do. If you want to talk about getting a raise, that’s a discussion that I’m happy to get into.”

“I didn’t come in here to ask for a raise.”

“Then I think this conversation is over.”

I don’t leave. “What would I have to do for you to give me a raise without me asking for it?”

“That isn’t how raises work here. If you want more money, then you can come in here and give me your case for why you think you should make more.” You stop, like you’ve realized something. “Actually, there. Why don’t you tell me why you think you should make as much as everyone else? Because I assume you know that not everyone is paid the same amount. Someone always has to be the lowest-paid. Why shouldn’t you be that person?”

“Because I work my ass off,” I say. “Sorry for the language, but I do. You read my file yourself. I haven’t gotten a single complaint. Everyone I work with knows I’m nice, and competent, and that I care about my job. I think I should be making more than twenty-nine thousand a year for that. I think the work I do is *worth* more than that.”

You nod, listening, contemplating. “Now, I want you to tell me something. What do you think would happen if Jan came in here and asked to be paid more money? The way you’re doing it, not as a raise. What if Jan asked to be paid fairly?”

“Then I’d hope you’d pay Jan fairly.”

“But Jan, by your own admission, makes more than you do. If I paid Jan more, then the average would go up, and you’d be making even less, comparatively. If I start giving more

money to anyone who asks for it, then other people's salaries would suffer." You lean in, your tone growing more patronizing by the syllable. "Do you get what I'm saying?"

We've been talking for almost half an hour and the sun has shifted in the sky. The window behind you is no longer bright and as a result the room is grayer than before. Your office isn't soundproof and I can hear the scattered conversations happening outside the door. You sit in silence and wait for me to answer.

"I do," I say, at last.

"Good. Then are we all set?"

You pick up my file like you're going to put it away. Instead, I say, "No."

You stop. "No?"

"I want you to pay me less."

You don't say anything, not immediately. You settle back into your chair and drop my file on the gray desktop. For a long moment you stare at me. Then: "You want to be paid *less*. Less than twenty-nine thousand a year."

"Right."

"Why?"

"Because I think I'm being paid too much."

Your eyes are a pale enough blue that they look gray in the harsh light of your office. You keep staring at me. "What are you doing?"

"I'm listening to what you said. I don't want other people's salaries to suffer because you pay me more." I sit up. "So pay me less."

"That isn't how this works."

“I think it is. If you pay me less, then I’m still the person making the least in the product relations department. Nobody else has to become the new lowest-paid representative. And it would actually lower the average pay of a product relations rep, which would mean you don’t have to pay new employees as much.”

You’re quiet. You look from me to my file to the floor and then back up to me again. Your face isn’t as expressionless as it was before. “I’m not going to pay you less.”

“So you won’t pay me less, and you won’t pay me more.”

“Not unless you want to ask for a raise.”

“So by that logic, I *am* being paid the appropriate amount.”

You continue staring. “If you say so.”

“So if I’m being paid the right amount,” I continue, “then I don’t need a raise. I don’t ever need to ask for one. Because I trust that you know how much my work is worth. So you,” I say, leaning back, “don’t have to worry about me. Just keep paying me how much I’m already making.”

“You can always ask for a raise if you want one.”

“Why should I? I’m being paid the correct amount of money, right?”

You shrug your shoulders. “If you don’t want a raise—”

“I didn’t say I didn’t want one. You told me I’m making the right amount of money. If that’s the case, then you wouldn’t give me a raise even if I asked for one. Because you wouldn’t pay me more money than I deserve.”

“You can ask for a raise if you want one.”

“But you’d never say yes to that.”

“You don’t think I would?”

“Well...” This time I shrug. “If you *did* say yes, you’d be admitting that I deserve more money than I’m already making. Which means that you aren’t actually paying me what I deserve. Do you get what I’m saying?”

For the first time since we’ve started talking, your face has noticeable emotion. I watch you clench your jaw. “You can quit any time you want, you know.”

“Why would I quit? I’m making the perfect amount of money.”

“Stop with the charade for a second. If you don’t like how much we’re paying you, and if you don’t want to ask for a raise, then it’s well within your power to walk out the door and never come back. You don’t have to work somewhere that doesn’t pay you what you think you deserve.”

I tilt my head. “Why are you so insistent that I *ask* for a raise?”

You say nothing.

“There’s nothing wrong with giving somebody what they deserve,” I continue.

“Especially if they’ve already called you out on it. I don’t see the point in being a stickler about this. Just pay me more. You know I deserve it. You know I’m not making as much as someone who does exactly the same work that I do. Just pay me more.”

You shake your head. “We don’t have to.”

“I think you do.”

“No, we don’t. There’s nothing that says we as a company have to pay two people the same amount, as long as we can prove that they’re doing different work at different skill levels. I

already told you that you've been here less time than everyone else in your department. That's a good enough defense for how much we're giving you in your paycheck."

"What about what I deserve?"

"You don't deserve anything. We *agreed* to hire you, didn't we? That was on us. *We're* offering *you* a certain amount of money, not the other way around. You agreed to your contract when we hired you. If you want to change that contract, it needs to be you who opens that discussion by asking for a raise. Because we," you say, tilting your head, "have no real obligation to offer you more money just because you 'deserve' it."

"I do deserve it."

"By your definition. We've already been over this." Now you do get up, grab my file, and return it to the filing cabinet behind you. The drawer shuts abruptly. "I have more than enough reasons for why we shouldn't just give you more money—how long you've been working here, your overall skill level, how much work you do on a weekly basis. And other things, like the number of times you've shown up late—"

"I've barely ever been late."

"But what if there's someone else in your department who's *never* been late?" You sit back down, gray in gray, and look at me. "It's nothing personal. Just data."

"Oh, I think it's very personal."

"But you can't prove that."

"No," I mutter. "I can't."

#

At the end of that week I open my mailbox and flip through what's inside: the city newspaper, an advertisement for a gutter-cleaning service, an urgent notice that some small part of my car has been recalled, and an envelope containing my paycheck.

Inside at my kitchen table I fold the envelope on its tear-away perforation and slide out the paycheck. There's the check number and routing number, the address of our office building, and my name. Then there's a dollar sign and several numbers.

It's the same amount of money.

“Heaven”

I’m not, and then I am.

I can’t see anything but white. I blink, and I still see white. I bring my hands up to rub my eyes except I don’t have any hands. When I look down at myself I don’t see a body, don’t see legs or feet or the clothes I must have been wearing before I got here. When I try to reach for the memories of where I was, of what I was doing, I can’t seem to find them. My brain is a blank up until about two seconds ago.

That’s okay. Don’t stress too much about it.

I look up and see a woman standing in front of me.

Hi, she says. Her voice is inside me and around me all at once. How are you feeling?

“I don’t know.” My voice isn’t much different than hers.

It’s okay not to know anything at first. Her smile is sincere. Do you know where you are?

“No. I don’t.” I’m not cold or hot or tall or short. There’s nothing to see except the woman. She’s at eye-level with me and she’s still smiling. Her eyes are a soft brown and her hair sits in coils over her shoulders. She’s wearing white. “I don’t know who you are,” I say.

I’m your friend, she tells me. Let’s take a walk.

#

You’re dead, she tells me. She’s standing right next to me but somehow I can hear her like she’s in front of me and behind. You died, and now you’re here, in heaven. So let me be the first to say welcome.

We’re still walking through eternal whiteness and I don’t see anything on the horizon.

“If this is heaven,” I say, “why can’t I remember anything?”

We like to start people off slow, she says. We're walking at an even pace, the perfect middle between a trudge and a brisk walk. If you remembered everything about your life on earth the second you get here, you'd have questions. And...

“And?”

Well, you'd remember your death, too. That might upset you.

“So I don't get to remember who I was.”

You will eventually. I said we'd be starting slow, not keeping you in the dark.

Metaphorically speaking. She gestures to the endless whiteness around us. I want to ease you into all this. Why don't you start by asking me any questions you have?

“Okay,” I say. I keep my eyes fixed ahead of me. No matter how far we walk, the whiteness in the distance doesn't change. “Is this all there is to heaven?”

This is all I'm letting you see right now.

“Then there's more.”

There is, yes.

“Is it all... I don't know, green pastures and castles made of clouds? Is everyone else who died also in heaven? Would I get to meet them?”

Is there someone in particular you want to meet?

I stop. “No,” I say. “Because I can't remember anyone.”

She smiles at me again. *I'll let you remember something small.* She bows her head and for a second I don't see her anymore. Instead there's a girl who comes up to my knees. I have knees. I'm at a playground, standing on woodchips. It's overcast but not cold and this little girl is tugging at my arm, asking me if I can take her over to the river. Then we're at the river throwing

stones in, watching them ripple across the water and then sink. They all go *plunk*. My ears hear the chirping of birds and the rush of the water and the laugh of this little girl when she sees her rock skip once on the water and then sink immediately.

Then I blink and I see the woman again.

Still with us? she says.

“Yeah,” I tell her. We’re back in the white space. “Who was that?”

Your daughter. Her head tilts to one side, like she’s taking me in. *Try and remember.*

You’ll find the memories. I’ve just given them back to you.

I try and picture my daughter. For a second, I can see her face. It’s small and round, framed by thin blonde hair and punctuated by the smile that hugs her chin. I can remember her sixth birthday party and her first day of school at Huron Elementary and putting Pikachu stickers on her backpack.

“Tessa,” I say. “Her name was Tessa.”

That’s right, the woman says. *I hope that wasn’t too overwhelming for you. I’ve given you back most of your memories of your daughter, but it’ll take time for you to recall all of them. If you need to take a break so you can catch your breath, just let me know.*

“Can I even breathe?”

She smirks. *No, you can’t. I was speaking metaphorically.*

We start walking again. “So Tessa,” I say, “is still on earth.”

She’s not dead, if that’s what you’re asking. She’s safe. She’s happy. She doesn’t really understand what happened to you, but she will eventually. She’s still young. It’ll take time.

“Is she alone?”

Your parents are taking care of her right now, the woman tells me. Your funeral is... well, I don't want to give you too much to think about. It's being arranged. Your parents are keeping Tessa happy while that happens.

“Can you tell me how I died?”

Do you want to know?

“I'm not sure.” We walk in silence for another moment. The horizon of white doesn't move. “Where are we going?”

Nowhere in particular, she says. Is there somewhere you wanted to go?

“I don't know. I guess I don't have to see the rest of heaven until I'm ready. I'm trusting your judgement on that.” I move to cross my arms, but I don't have arms. “Actually, what am I, right now? Am I... like, a soul? Is that why I can't see myself?”

Soul is a good word for it, even if technically, it isn't correct. She pauses before continuing. All that comes to heaven is your consciousness and your memories. Together, that comprises you. Now, you don't have all your memories right now, which means you aren't quite you, just yet. You're heavy on the consciousness side.

“Can I have a body?”

When you get your memories back, you'll remember what you looked like on earth—not just how you looked when you died, but at every point throughout your life. You can choose how you want to look. We're very flexible here.

“And who's we?”

She shrugs. *Everyone else in heaven.*

“Are you... God?” I stop, and so does she. “I actually have no idea if I was religious. Are you supposed to be like Zeus, maybe? Or... what else did people believe in?”

I'm not God, she says. I'm just here to make sure you're comfortable.

“Then who is God?”

She stops, looks me over again. *Why don't I let you remember how you died? That might answer a few questions.*

“Okay,” I say. “It won't traumatize me?”

You won't remember the actual moment of death. Just the moments leading up to it.

“Alright. Sure.” I try to take a deep breath and steady myself except I can't do either of those things. “Go ahead,” I tell her.

She disappears again.

In her place is a bald man. His eyes are bloodshot and his nose is broken. I'm heavier than I was before. I'm wearing durable canvas and have equipment strapped to me. I don't look away from the bald man. For a second nothing happens and it's like time is frozen but then the bald man moves and I reach down and draw a gun. I press the gun against his forehead and he stops moving.

“Stay where you are,” I say. My voice is smaller than it was in the white space. “Don't move or I'll shoot.”

“Then do it,” the bald man says. “Shoot me.”

There's a radio receiver strapped to my chest. It crackles, and then a voice starts talking. *“Converging on your position. Over.”*

My hand reaches down and clicks the receiver. “Copy that. Over.”

I keep my gun pressed firmly against the bald man's forehead and he doesn't try to move. I keep my eyes glued to his, but I can see peripherally that he isn't wearing a shirt, that there's a cut on his chest, and that his arms ripple with bruises.

"Why won't you shoot me?" he says.

"Shut up," I tell him, my teeth gritted. "Shut the fuck up."

"If you want me to shut up, then shoot me."

For a fraction of a second, I relax my grip on the gun.

Then he ducks his head out of the way, grabs me by the arm, and pushes me down to the ground. The gun is out of my hand and clatters somewhere behind me. I keep waiting to hear shouting, the sounds of other people coming to take care of the bald man and pull him off me, but they don't come. The bald man presses a knee into my chest and wraps his hands around my throat. He keeps squeezing and squeezing. I try to open my mouth but I can't get any words out. I can't pray. My hands are feeling for the gun that's dropped to the floor but I can't find it and then things start to go white.

And then you died, the woman says.

The white space is back. I try to put my hands around my throat, feel the pain I now remember being there, but I no longer have hands or a throat. "That was horrible. That was the most horrible thing."

It's the only horrible thing you remember, she says, her voice gentle. *There are other bad things that I'll let you recall, eventually.* She pauses, shifting her stance, maybe stepping back a bit. *You said you didn't know if you were religious. I hope that made things a bit clearer.*

"I tried to pray," I say.

Right as you were dying, yes. What does that tell you?

“That I wasn’t religious when it mattered.” My voice sounds like I have a sore throat, but I don’t have a throat, don’t have vocal cords. I shouldn’t be able to talk. “But I still made it to heaven.”

That’s right.

“Why?”

Because you died, and it’s time for your essence to move on to the next stage of existence.

“But why did I get to heaven? I was going to kill that man.”

She’s quiet for a long moment. *You didn’t kill him.*

“But I was going to. You saw me, didn’t you? You saw those memories too.” I turn away from her and start walking in the opposite direction, and then I stop, because it still doesn’t seem like I’m going anywhere. When I turn back around she’s right behind me. “I was going to kill him. I had a gun up to his forehead.”

If it makes you feel any better, she says, you were doing it as part of your job.

“So my job was to kill people.”

Your job was to apprehend individuals who presented a significant danger and bring them to justice.

“And did I kill anyone?” I look her straight in the eye and she looks me right back. “Did I? How many times did ‘bringing someone to justice’ mean I had to kill them?”

I think you’re forgetting about self-defense. She’s no longer smiling.

“But I’m in *heaven*. And the number one thing you’re supposed to do to get to heaven is *be a good person*. As in, don’t kill people.”

If you want to discuss what it truly means to be good, then we can have that conversation. But you're in heaven because we believe you were good. We want you here. You deserve to be with us.

“You still won't tell me if I killed anyone.”

She keeps her eyes trained on me. Then: *You lived for thirty-six years and you killed eleven people while you were alive. A beat. Is that what you wanted to know?*

“I shouldn't be here.”

I just said you should. You belong here.

“If I murdered people, I shouldn't be here. Isn't that—isn't that the point? That only good people can be here? If I killed someone, then by definition, I'm not a good person.”

What if the people you killed were bad?

I stare at her. “I can't believe you would honestly say that. Isn't the whole point of heaven that—that it's where the *best* people go? The ones who value human life and don't make judgement calls like whether or not someone deserves to be killed?” I turn my back to her and start walking away again. “I shouldn't be here. I have to leave.”

What about your daughter?

Her voice still surrounds me, no matter how far away I get. “What about her?”

If you don't stay here, you'll never see her again.

“Good. Because that means she'll get to heaven and actually deserve to be there. She won't turn out like me.”

She's quiet. I keep going. Then:

You won't have the rest of your memories.

“Keep them,” I mutter. “I don’t want them if they’re all like that.”

How do you know they will be?

“Because that’s what I was like right before I died.” I turn around again and she’s still right behind me, like I haven’t moved an inch. “That’s proof enough, isn’t it? You might tell me that I lived a whole life and that I wasn’t the sort of person who ‘wanted’ to kill anyone. But I still killed eleven people. And the fact that I was about to kill that bald man and make it twelve means I was exactly that sort of person right up until my death. That’s the kind of person I was when I got into heaven. And if—if that’s the kind of person you let in here, then I want no part of this. None of it.”

I don’t turn my back on her, not yet. I’m waiting.

You don’t know anything about what it’s like here, she says. You haven’t seen any of it.

You aren’t even going to give it a chance?

“No.”

Well, if that’s what you want. Her expression stays flat. Go ahead. I won’t stop you.

“How do I get out of here?”

She shrugs. *I don’t know if you can on your own.*

“So I’m stuck?”

No. But you’ll have to ask me for help. Her voice sounds closer, like she’s whispering into ears I don’t have. I’m the one who took away your memories and I’m the one who’s preventing you from seeing the rest of heaven right now. So if you want me to send you away altogether, you’ll have to ask me to do it.

“Fine.”

You'll have to be sure. Once you leave, you can't come back.

I wait. She's still only looking at me. She doesn't frown but she also doesn't smile, and she doesn't try to come any closer than she already is.

"I'm sure," I tell her. "Let me leave. Please."

She nods. *Behind you.*

I turn, and this time, instead of whiteness on the horizon, there's a door.