

"I'm going to fart now," he says between bites of grilled cheese. I thought, at the time, that I'd misheard him. I had also thought I mis-saw him order me lobster and himself a child's meal a few minutes earlier. Great, my senses weren't broken. I didn't know it the time but it was this man that was broken the whole time.

"You can't! It ain't proper at a place like this," I hissed in my most threatening inside-voice. My only goal, up until this moment I suppose, was to hide my southern drawl from his perfect New England-ness but I'm shocked. What man would say such things on a first date? Case Leeson would, I suppose. Like I said earlier, I didn't know he was broken when I bought him; I thought I just got lucky.

"Did you hear what I said, Aileen? I'm going to do it whether you acknowledge me or not, you know?" he smirks at me behind long dark lashes. I knew I had to stop him, no matter how good he looked.

"That's rude, though. Why on earth would you do something like that?"

"We all do it. Besides the faster I get the awkward, superficial bullshit out of the way, the faster you can fall in love with me."

"I swear on my meema—" I start to reprimand him but his face is screwed up tighter than the folds on a raisin, "Casey Daniel, don't—"

And he did it right there. Amongst movie stars and politicians, he tooted like a damn trumpet. A negro couple sitting next to us looks up. They wouldn't say anything not just on account they're Negroes but on account on who my date was. Hell, I couldn't say anything. He was my date and I felt responsible for soiling their good time.

"I feel better now, Aileen. Now, would you like dessert—or something more exotic?"

A knock at the door startles Aileen. Her body vibrates, knocking her notebook off her lap. It echoes against the hospital floor and settles under her bed.

"Come in," she croaks pulling at her oxygen mask.

"Ms. Aileen, it's time for your bath. Are you feeling up to it?" asks Cora, a middle-aged charge nurse donning white gloves.

"Why ask if you're gonna do it anyway? You Negroes always talk out of both sides of your mouths," Aileen grunts reaching aimlessly for the black and white composition book.

"Well, no one calls us Negroes anymore but the word for how you're behaving hasn't changed. Ready for a new book yet? Stop stretching the hose, Aileen. I'll get it," Cora removes her gloves and places the fallen book on Aileen's frail lap.

"Just add it to the stack, would you?"

"Is the mask still irritating your nose? I saw you pulling at it," Cora adds the book to the growing stack in the corner. Ten fill the corner so far. Aileen looks at the stack of fragmented memories and scowls. So many random, disjointed stories, at least forty years worth, and not a clue why she feels so compelled to write them now.

"It's cause of my nose ring. Damn, it irritates like the devil. And no I don't want to take it out. You'll just sell it and feed your kids, I bet."

"No kids I'm afraid. There is this prototype I'm working on with some padding for that stud of yours. Dr. Colman won't permit me to do a cut out for you. How's the story?" Cora rubs Aileen's pruny feet. The blood surges through her toes warming the rest of her body.

"Comes in spurts, you know? Can you rub my ankles? Sometimes it feels like I don't have a fucking feeling below my tits."

"What do remember today?"

"Grilled cheese and farts."

Cora laughs, but still rubs Aileen's frozen, pale ankles.

"Will you read it for me, Cora?"

"Christ, all ten books? We don't even know the order of the story yet."

"But we will, damn it. Don't touch me! Why can't you just answer me straight for once?"

"Write the words first, all of them, and then we will read them together, okay?"

"Get out of my room."

"Looks like more pages are in this book. I'll bring you a new one on Monday."

"Monday? Christ, Cora, I could be dead by then."

"You've lived through a thousand Mondays. Besides, it's Valentine's Day and my husband is taking me to Marco's island for the weekend."

"I remember shells sometimes."

"Then I'll bring you some."

"Who's on duty this weekend since you'll be fucking while I'm dying? And a white man too? You should be ashamed, Cora."

"Christina—and you told me your husband was white too. Dark haired like my Kevin, right?"

"Well, what else would he be? Ugh, Christina couldn't tell her elbow from mine. Here's a hint, hers would be the fat one. Her cologne smells like dead chickens."

Cora leans in and kisses Aileen's head smoothing her wiry gray hair.

"You will have a bath on Monday then."

"Only if you will get off my back."

"Fair enough. I expect good reading when I get back."

"Just don't forget my sea shells."

Cora nods and turns to leave the room.

"Why do we have to go to so many parties? I'm still hungover from New York," I wine tightening my bra strap. I watch him from the mirror and he stares at me from the hotel bed. Same bell bottoms and blazer with no shirt from the night before. He said he does it so the world hears his heartbeat. Even hung over, he looks like a god. He was a god. I sure as hell worshipped him.

"No bra tonight, Belle."

"I don't think the rest of the world cares about my heartbeat, Casey,"

"Fuck them. I just want to see 'em."

"You've seen them all night, you pig."

"Oink. Oink."

Aileen gasps awake. Her eyes slowly adjust to the dusky glow in her hospice room. The best that money could buy is still lonely at night. She flicks on the side lamp reaching for her eyeglasses. Without this light she wouldn't be able to see a damn thing. She needs to scratch down this memory before it disappears. Memory? What a funny word for these night flashings. She might be making the whole thing up but something about that man feels real. Sometimes if the window is open and the breeze blows a certain way it feels like a kiss. A very familiar kiss. He's familiar but no one will believe her. Not that she would tell anyone besides Cora. Maybe Cora will get her an encyclopedia so she can at least know if this man is real. He has to be real. She smells cigarettes ever time she thinks of him. Why would she make that up? Aileen stretches and fluffs her pillow. Grabbing her pen she jots down the dream on a piece of loose leaf. She writes the word "cigarettes" drawing circles around it over and over until her pen ink fades.

"Nurse. Damn it, nurse! Can no one get me a fucking pen?" She yells, flipping over the pill tray. She snaps the oxygen masks over and over on her face until her skin breaks. Something about that word snaps the cord connecting her to sanity. She is free falling into something dark. Cigarettes. Cigarettes! Cigarettes!

"Miss Aileen? What on earth? Calm down before you hurt yourself," Christina runs over to her pinning down her patient's flailing arms down. Aileen calms mostly from exhaustion. Why can't she remember?

"Let me go! You're suffocating me. Why are you suffocating me?" Aileen heaves feeling her own saliva trail down her neck.

"I will release you if you just calm down. The mood swings are from the drug abuse. You know that right? I don't want to sedate you—no one here does. So calm down, please," it's a lie but her veins drink the sedative slurping the last drop. Something is familiar about this. She's drank here before. And the giver of the first drink waits on the other side of sanity.

"Stop it, Case. You don't want to give a lady the hard stuff. Just roll her up a joint," admonishes a Negro band mate. I think his name was Billy.

"Hey, hey! Who's wife is she? Huh? She wants to know what I'm doing all the time, what I'm feeling, what I'm thinking, so I'm gonna show her, right?" Casey snaps, tying a thin belt around my arm. I don't know if this is the point where I say I should have known better or stopped him. I was scared of him most of our time together but I was also much older, if that means anything. I was thirty-five when got together but I could still pass for a twenty-something. Case called me the Louisianan fountain of youth. He was probably twenty-one when this first happened. I'm ashamed to say how old he was when he farted in the Ritz.

"Look, Bunny. He's right. I don't like needles no way anyhow. Let's just drink and relax, okay?" I pull away he grips my wrists tightly. It was the serious grip not to be confused with I-want-to-fuck grip. It meant don't fight him or else.

"Look, Belle. How many women cry in the papers and on the telly about wanting to know what their husbands' are thinking, eh? This way you will be in my head with all of my mellow thoughts. You, my love, will know all my thoughts because you will be in the same groovy space as me. Sound good?"

He hasn't loosen his vice like grip and my head seems to want the pain to stop so badly, it nods without my permission.

"See fellas! My wife was made for this life. This great life! Let's see if she likes it, hmm?" He tightens the belt on arm and produces a bent spoon.

"Do we have to use the needle, Casey baby?"

"Now, Belle, when have have ever complained about me being inside you?" Now he was talking about the other meaning for calling me his fountain of youth.

"Did you miss me?" Cora struts in the room with a plastic bathing bowl.

"You said Monday," Aileen bites back. She looks back down, scribbling away in her notebook.

"I planned to but Tuesday isn't bad considering I had food poisoning. I will never try anything raw again. My stomach was crying the whole trip. I have your shells in my pocket."

"Well, you people are always late. And the chubby nurse gave me a bath yesterday and a new book this weekend. I'm almost done."

Cora places the bin on table and pulls out a brand new composition notebook from the bowl.

"Oh, good. I'm on the last few pages now."

"Any new memories?"

"You believe they're memories, huh? Maybe I'm just an old druggie hallucinating."

"Heroin doesn't make you hallucinate necessarily."

"Well, that wasn't my only friend in the 60s. I'll tell you that much."

"What I know is it's the 90s now and you're not that woman anymore. You're sober now."

"Can't tell if that's a good thing or a bad thing."

"You were gonna tell me about new memories."

"He always wore a velvet suit, no shirt though."

"Velvet in Florida? He must have had a death wish. Wait, what happened to your face?"

"You would know if you were here."

Cora grabs a tube of ointment and rubs it on the abrasions.

"Let's run the oxygen through your nose 'til this heals."

"You asking me or telling me?"

"Telling."

"Fine. And to answer your question it wasn't Florida that I remember. It's always the northeast. I think he has famous."

"Oh."

"Don't give that shit. I was a fox. A regular sex kitten even before I left Lafayette, Louisiana. Big thick bouffant blonde hair. Long come-get-me legs. And these age spots used to be cute little freckles once upon a time."

"Well, I'm sure those baby blues tempted a lot of men."

"Damn right. At least I never got fat."

"One good thing about the drugs then. How's that?" Cora adjust the oxygen hose behind Aileen's ears careful not to disturb her bruised face.

"You should ice that cheek."
"I'm sorry I didn't know I worked here."
"I'll be back with a pack. Don't go anywhere."
"I'll make sure my round-the-world cruise is back in time. I'll be writing so don't break my concentration."

"I want a baby, Casey!"
"That's not possible, Belle. What of the tour, hmm? The fans! You love the fans. Hell, they love seeing you come on stage and shake it with me."
"You're not on tour year round though. I'm gonna wrinkle eventually you know. I can't wait much longer to have one before I look like it's grandma!"
"We live in hotels and vans. You want me build a fucking crib by the mini bar and hope my pals don't get blow on it?"
I slapped him hard across his face as tears dropped like lead weights down my face.
"I'm pregnant and I'm leaving you for good this time, Case. Hell, I didn't have a father and I figured it out."
"Belle, we belong together. Don't let a baby take that away."
"I want a family, a house in Connecticut, a dog too!"
"They don't like heroin in houses in Connecticut."
"I stopped."
"Your arm says different. Do babies like heroin? Cause that's news to me, kitten."
"Fuck you."
"I'll pass. Not in the mood."

Methadone is no longer working. Why should anything work after you've used it day in and day out for over thirty years? They weren't lying to her why they told her the healing is lifelong. Life has been long enough. If she could die it would help. Dying is the hardest thing she's ever done in her life. Her mother once told her it was like letting go, collapsing on the breasts of God. Horse shit. She has let go so many times that every day she wakes she looks at her pruny fingers and wonders how something so frail could hold on so damn tight. Maybe it's the man. Maybe if she could put the story together she could finally let go. Maybe it's not her own feminine hands holding her to life but a big strong shadow looming, anchoring her to this side of consciousness.

"Will you get me an encyclopedia?" Aileen winces as Cora stitches her palm. Today's injury comes from grabbing the tails of a pair of scissors too tightly. Cora's not even sure how they got in her hands. Hell, she's not even sure how they got in her room.

"You plan on banging your head against it?" Cora says as calmly as if she were ordering breakfast.

"I'm not that stupid. I just need something to read. I hate television. I don't understand the music and the people seem to have gotten stupider."

"No, same level of stupid. It's just in color now."

"Speaking of color, does every show have to have a Negro sidekick?"

"Even if it's pretend, you should still see everybody God created."

"Then why are you the only black nurse in this hospice? Whatever. Encyclopedia? Yes or no?"

"Because this hospice isn't pretend. I'll ask Kev to pick it up after his class."

"Why can't you get it?"

"Because I'm taking care of you."

"Maybe after today's rounds? If you leave early, I ain't telling noone."

Cora scoffs, not sure how to tell Aileen 'no.' No one else will work with her onerous patient if she is on the floor. To care for Aileen she must work twelve to sixteen hours a shift or go in when she's not working—like today.

"When I get off the library may be closed. You want it or not?"

"Cool your jets, Cora. Just curious is all. Aren't you too old to be on your period?"

"Which letters do you want Kevin to get? I'm not having my husband bring 26 damn books across the county."

"Alright. Alright. Well, can't he check them all out and leave it in the car?"

Cora flashes Aileen a warning glance.

"Just L—for now."

"Fair enough. I'll tell him to grab it after class."

"Still teaching at his age."

"College professors don't know how to retire, I'm afraid. I rather him do that than sit around all day watching tv." Cora bites her tongue too late.

"No need for the penance. I put myself here, damn it. When am I going to meet Kevin any way? I swear you people have no manners."

Cora laughs and then glances at the clock. Ten minutes until her patent shift ends. If she gets caught working off the clock again, it could cost her license.

"Time for your rounds, huh? Don't let me find out you're spending more time with the Negro patients than me! I may be old but I'm not stupid."

"I wouldn't dream of it." Cora squeezes Aileen's good hand and heads out the room. It's only six o'clock. Perhaps she'll get the encyclopedia herself after all.

Cora gingerly closes the oak door hoping not to run into any of her staff. The sterile halls are quiet with the soft glow of bleached fluorescence. Thankfully she got done visiting Aileen before shift change.

"May I speak with you, Cora?" The familiar voice is none other than Dr. Colman, Aileen's doctor.

"I was just on my way out, George," she says sheepishly.

"Then I'll be sure to be quick, especially since you aren't on the clock."

"I—."

"Nurse Weinstein why are you are in my hospice?"

"She has no one."

"That doesn't answer my question. It's a liability to your other patients, my other patients, if you are working eighty hours a week. Especially unpaid. You and I both know it's a union matter also. Christina—."

“Christina hates her. Every nurse on this wing hates her. You know this.”

“She’s not your only patient. What’s the matter with you?”

“I feel bad for her. Jesus, she won’t be around much longer so what difference does it make if—if I’m nice?”

“The difference happens when you, you Nurse Weinstein, are exhausted and make an error that kills someone. If I see you here when you aren’t scheduled, expect disciplinary action through the hospice and nursing board if I have too. I mean it this time. She is not worth your license or any of my other patients’ lives. Her bills here aren’t even paid so it’s either she dies or we find the next of kin to foot the bill. This is a private institution. I’m not opposed to transferring her.”

“Enough. I get it.”

“Jeanette in billing is looking into what Medicare options she has but with Alzheimer’s, a long history drug abuse and self mutilation it’s not looking good. She’s combative to staff and I have to reflect that in my referral.”

“You say this like you’ve already decided.”

“I’ll let you know but I have to make recommendations each quarter. I’m the administrator too. You know that. So that’s all I will say on that.”

“Maybe if you shift my easier patients to Christina and Miguel—”

“Listen to yourself. Enjoy the rest of your day off. In fact, take tomorrow too. No discussion.”

Yes, sir.”

Cora folds her arms over her black scrubs as the white-coated Napoleon leaves with the flap of his white coat. Dr. Coleman wants his acting position to be sealed in blood it seems. Her phone vibrates from somewhere in her scrubs. No need to look. Kevin will be asking a familiar question: why the hell are you at work?

“I’m on my way, Hun,” she hangs up before he can answer. One reprimand is enough. No matter he’s calling back

“What did she do now?” asks Kevin before she can speak.

“I got in trouble. Hang on until I get to the car.

“Kev?”

“I’m here. Why’d you get in trouble?”

“Politics.”

“Politics aren’t that bad.”

“It is when you’re the student.”

“Ouch.”

“Hey, I’m going to the library. Leftovers are in the fridge. You can have my barbecue.”

“Let’s see. I have a Poly Sci 101 at 6:30 so I can meet you there after, babe? I have a premonition class will end early. I think I caught your stomach bug after all.”

“Sure. Bring coffee please and thank you.”

“I love you and chin up, Belle.”

“I love you too.”

Page after page after page and finally there he is: shag haircut with a blonde bouffant doll hanging on his hip.

"It can't be—" Cora stares at the Le- section rereading the description of one of the "Founding Fathers of Classic Rock and Roll." He stares at her from glossy eight and a half by eleven inches pages, leaning on the arm of Elvis on one page and Bob Dylan on the other. But none of the musical gods catch her eye like the blonde. By the description, it could be Aileen. Aileen and this Casy Leeson even share the same last name but the woman in the picture is not named. Why not? Cora lays on her stomach in a corner of the library propping her elbows up on the old book.

"Are you doing research or napping? And don't lie. I'm a professor so I'll know," asks Kevin. He holds two hot cups of coffee.

"She's not crazy?" Cora groans rising to her feet. Her knees ache from being on the floor and her scrubs now have deep creases in them.

"Who are we talking about exactly?" Kevin pushes his wire-framed spectacles back on his nose. Per ritual the tie is already off and the two top buttons have been undone.

"My patient. She's—oh my goodness. What does this mean?"

"Um, the crazy, kind-of racist one or has someone topped her for Most Cranky at Cozy Oaks?"

"Yes and keep your voice down."

"I don't think the patient privacy police comes to community college libraries."

"Still—here look."

Kevin scans the encyclopedia and laughs.

"What's so funny? She said she married him!"

"Impossible. Casey Leeson, besides covering my high school and college bedroom walls, was a notorious bachelor. Hell, he has a song called Belle about the drug that is a woman's beauty. It's why I call you that," Kevin pecks her cheek to soften the blow.

"Don't remind me. Look, see the blonde?"

"She's—I mean gorgeous but what's the point?"

"I think that's my grumpy, old lady."

Kevin adjusts his frames and squints examining the entry.

"There's no name. She's prob just another groupie or one of the other band mate's girl. Hell, they may have shared her—"

Cora slaps his arm and snatches the book. She sets up her research station on an empty desk.

"Honey—honey, you're not seriously considering this woman's claims."

"I'm saying nothing. You're saying everything for me right now."

"I'm trying to be a voice of reason because you just abandoned fresh coffee for an encyclopedia entry. You don't even like rock and roll. Hence why all my Rolling Stones and Kiss vinyls are in the garage."

"It's not that I don't like it. I just like jazz better. I should take this with me—"

"No, you shouldn't. You're going to give her false hope! It's not fair to her."

"I'm taking it anyway."

“Just—don’t hurt this woman anymore than she already is. I can't imagine how hard her life is. And I know how you get.”

“And just how do I get, Kevin?”

“Tell you what I'll meet you at home. Use my name at the front desk so you can keep your book. Regular folk can't check out encyclopedia books. Truce?”

“I'll see you at home.”

“Cora, can you grab some Oseltamivar for me pretty please?” Christina says as Cora skirts past her and three other nurses chatting at the nurse’s station.

“I can't. I’m already late because of construction on 54. Plus, my lady will be bellowing for me. I didn't tell her Dr. Coleman gave me another day off,” Cora tosses her stethoscope over her shoulders and keeps marching forward.

“Cora, wait—”

Christina alternates between looking at her and the floor.

“Spit it out already. I'm already late and I have a surprise for her.”

“She—she passed yesterday. She's gone. The body was taken by the family this morning. I thought you knew.”

Cora stares through Christina. All she can see is the encyclopedia in her purse: the image of the blonde smiling and full of life. The rock star clutching her hand like she's his most prized possession.

“Where are her notebooks?” Cora spits out.

Christina’s eyes widen but she won't answer.

“The books. The composition books. The mountain of books, Tina. Where are they?”

“I—threw them out. Her son didn't want to take them. There were so many—”

Cora runs past her and the sound of the stethoscope clangs and scrapes the sterile floors behind her. Christina is yelling something but she can't make it out. She can't turn around. She found her. It's not too late. Her rubber shoes stop her dead in front of the room. Gasping for whatever oxygen she can salvage she leans against the propped open door. A chair holds her open. After her time off, the smell is ripe. It's age and dust and staleness. The air is thick with it even as she pushes the door open with her feet, the scent rises and falls, seeping into the fibers of her cotton scrubs. The window is open and the faint breeze swirls the dust in an ominous dance. The window is never open but to those who rarely frequent this room, the scent must have been unbearable. Sunlight projects off the wisps of dust and lint and the breeze settles it on the bed. She must have just missed her. The outline of her friend is still creased into the sheets. A haunting reminder that if she had passed on a second cup of coffee with Kevin, if she paid the damned toll and taken the expressway, she could have been here. She hesitates as she walks to the bed and then quickens her step. The pillows still feel warm and still reek of ointments and that conditioner she liked that smelled like mint juleps. The sheets are stained with sputum and dried ink. She must have been scribbling and scratching to write even with death climbing, no ambling through the window. From her bed, if the blinds were open just right she would have seen him. Did she have enough paper to get down those last thoughts? In her bag leaning on the encyclopedia are two brand new notebooks. Perfectly lined and empty

waiting for those scribbled memories. How did the story end? Why wouldn't her son take the notebooks? Her son. Cora can't recall her mentioning a son but Aileen's mind was fading. Her mind was with Casey. She left her mind and heart in another time. Her body was all that really remained in this room and Aileen cared nothing for that body. If she did, she wouldn't have pumped it with drugs. Or maybe she would have. Either way she did. It's done. She's gone. And she has left nothing but the dusty outline of where those books were stacked. A lone rectangular outline against the plaster wall is all that is left of Aileen. Damned woman. She would leave without saying goodbye. Perhaps she had already said goodbye. In her own way all that needed to be said was already said. And all that needed to be written had already been writ.