

The Innocent

by Marley Korzen

Sidney sits across from the principal's desk, watching a fan drift across the office. Summer light funnels through the mid-century windows as papers rise and fall from the desk each time the fan shifts its way.

She sticks her finger under her front teeth and bites down on her glitter-painted nail as she studies the contents on the desk: ratty textbooks, packs of chewing gum, an Obama bobblehead, and a bottle of CBD oil labeled "Less-Stress" sit in the back of the gold nameplate.

Get me out of here.

Sidney's eyes jump to the clock: 12:44. *I should be on lunch right now*, she thinks briefly as her eyes move to the hideous wall of framed achievements: **Voted! Second best high school in Southern California, 2011**, next to it is a picture of their last principal shaking hands with the

mayor, then a group photo of the faculty, lined up with glaring smiles, each frame exhibiting more noxious enthusiasm than the next.

“Fuck!” she withdraws her index finger from her teeth to find the nail bitten to the nub, starting to bleed.

Squeak.

Her gaze is pulled as the door behind her is opened.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Sidney!”

Sidney turns to see the cat-like smile she has seen too many times. With her black hair wrapped into a lopsided bun, Denise pushes a few fly-aways from her face and adjusts the pink collar tucked under her thin white blazer. Sidney often wondered if parents were confused when introduced to someone who looked like a teenager that was in charge of their teenagers.

“Whoa. It’s really cooking in here, isn’t it?” Denise says to no one in particular and walks to the window to lift it open. Her arms struggle like twigs under a freight train, her face turning scarlet.

“Do...you need some help?” Sidney offers when it’s obvious the window won’t budge.

“Please.”

Sidney crosses the room, grabs the pane, and in one great tug, the window lifts, welcoming in a thrush of light, the scent of cut grass, and boisterous jeers from the soccer field below.

“Ah!” says Denise, with an air of annoyance. “What a lifesaver you are! We should get you out on the football team with those muscles!”

Sidney gives an awkward laugh and returns to her seat. “I’m not really into sports.” It’s the only thing she can think of saying without insulting her.

“Well if I ever need help out with a pickle jar at home, I’ll know who to call.” She says, returning to her desk.

Sidney cringes. It’s not her politeness, it’s whatever she says that somehow ends up sounding like Minnie Mouse.

“We’re just waiting on one other person. It may be a couple of minutes.”

“Sure, okay,” says Sidney.

Why do I feel like I’ve done something wrong? Have I done something wrong?

She starts thinking about all the things she did at school that could raise alarm. Buying a coke when she was supposed to be in trig? The harder she thinks the more concerned she becomes, feeling plagued by the concept of being unable to recount much of her own life.

What happened last week? Was that the week that Jane and I went to the beach?

“Sorry for the wait!” the door squeaks as a short, round woman with a blonde bob holding a clipboard scurry—a scurry that always reminded Sidney of a rabbit—into view.

“Thanks, Mrs. Lyse—oh—and can you close the door?” Denise nods, her lips tight.

“Oh sure, sorry!” Wincing, Mrs. Lyse doubles back. Using a considerable amount of force she closes the door, which opens again, causing her to kick it until at last, it shuts completely.

“Hey Sidney, how are ya?” her voice is as smooth as thanksgiving gravy. She looks at Sidney with a smile, taking the seat next to her.

Does this mean she wants a response?

“Good, I guess,” says Sidney, but Mrs. Lyse is not really paying attention. Her focus is on picking off a bit of fuzz that has stuck to her sweater.

“Golly, it’s hot in here, isn’t it?” fanning herself.

“I know, right? I kept asking my husband when it’s gonna feel like summer here, and now I’m like ‘take me up north, I want out!’” Denise giggles. Her velocity fills the entire room and feels especially strange after the dull impassive silence.

Mrs. Lyse gives a sympathizing nod, “Mmm so nice. I just love the Santa Barbara summer. It’s usually just right. Not too hot, not too cold.”

Sidney cannot bear this banter any longer.

“I’m sorry—did I do something wrong?” She speaks flatly. A callous vein of silence fills the room as the two women blink at one another.

“Um. Well. No. No, of course not, Sidney.” says Denise finally. “We have only good things to chat about today!” defensive smile, commanded by her immaculate set of white teeth.

Sidney takes a deep breath and leans back, realizing she was sitting on the edge of her seat.

“We’ve been keeping a close eye on your interests,” Denise’s eyes pop with forged excitement “we see what a *talented* young woman you are. Science, technology. You’re even a stellar photographer according to what Ms. Lyse has to say about you!” she snatches a nervous pen off her desk and starts hitting the button with her thumb.

Click. Click. Click.

Denise looks down at a piece of paper. At once, Sidney can start to see where this is going.

“I haven’t decided yet,” says Sidney evenly.

“Haven’t decided—haven’t decided what?”

“College. That’s why I’m here, right? You need me to make a decision.”

Denise’s brows jump in surprise. “Well not exactly...we care tremendously about your future, Sidney. We really do. However, that’s not something we’re going to discuss today.” She makes eye contact with Mrs. Lyse, then nods to her.

“If...I may,” Mrs. Lyse says with the utmost force “I have been discussing college applications with Sidney for the last three months. We were discussing Brown?”

“Yes, well.” Denise lets out a long sigh “It’s not like I am unaware of your attributes. You’ve got strong grades. Always have. You’ll have no trouble getting into whatever school you may choose, Sidney. I’m sure of it.”

This is going oddly well? Why so much praise?

Sidney nods like she is listening as the praise swiftly digresses into a long monologue about scholars and alumni, trailing into ivy league oblivion.

“Which brings me to what I’d like to talk about today...*strength*.”

Sidney looks over at Mrs. Lyse, hoping that she can catch up by reading her expression. Yet the woman looks like she had mentally checked out long before her.

“What?” She did not mean it to come out sounding so antithetical.

“We need to...evaluate the last two...reports you filed.”

Mrs. Lyse makes a noise inside her throat that sounds like she is trying to start a Volkswagen bus.

Sidney turns to see her fidgeting with a bronze bangle on her arm. It's cheap. Probably bought from a sale at Macy's. She twists it tighter, leaving a red mark on her portly flesh.

Sidney nods, feeling both of their gazes fixed on her as if daring her to speak.

"The reports you filed on February first and June fifteenth. Do you recall these dates?"

How couldn't I? Sidney feels her throat stiffen.

"Yes, I recall." Says Sidney. She surprises herself at how confident her voice sounds.

"Mrs. Lyse has shared with me that you have come to her...several times with questions about managing stress—" gulp "even thoughts about suicide...but don't worry, you're in a safe space here, none of this information has or will be shared."

Sidney feels the room getting smaller. Her eyes shift to the fan again, moving like a stenographer in a courtroom, recording each word as it travels from one side to the next.

"I want you to know that here at Benson, we take reports like these very seriously. We have zero-tolerance for these...kinds of things here."

"Okay." Sidney keeps her eyes on the fan.

"We found some footage from the days you mentioned, and we'd like you to see it."

"What?"

Before she knows what is happening next, Denise rises from her seat and motions to Mrs. Lyse.

Sidney feels her heart speed as a thin, broken-down TV screen is pulled from the corner on a four-wheeled desk and the screen is turned on.

Without warning her life is laid bare in front of her, relived on blurry, blue-tinged pixels.

It's recess. A teacher stands in front of his desk as students pile out of the classroom. The teacher does not move. He stays there, appearing to do nothing at all. Sidney watches herself emerge on the tape.

She sees her pony-tailed head—from one month before—walking into the frame, carrying her brand new backpack. The backpack disappears from the frame and the screen turns black.

“Okay, so let's all sit back here a second.” Says Denise.

They all return to their seats. Sidney and Mrs. Lyse wait as she pauses to take a loud slurp from her mug. “So I saw two things on that tape,” her lashes flutter like a shaken doll “I saw kids leaving the classroom, and a teacher waving goodbye. Mrs. Lyse?”

“Yes. Yes.” Careful and direct “That's just what I was going to say. Sidney?”

Sidney turns from Mrs. Lyse to Denise, the air seeming to have been pilfered from her lungs.

“I—” She begins, then stops. Her throat feels like sandpaper and her cheeks are hot. She knows she is about to burst into tears but she cannot give them that satisfaction, so she holds it in and twists it into her body, hoping that it will evaporate.

She tries to remember how her voice sounded earlier, and wonders if she can try to replicate the confidence that has now abandoned her.

Do they think I'm lying?

But they would have to believe that she is a monster to make something like this up.

“I see something different,” she speaks slowly, catching her breath between words. “I see a bunch of kids leaving class, and a teacher saying goodbye. But what the camera can’t show is the teacher’s eyes.”

“The teacher’s eyes.” Repeats Denise, her smile fractured but not yet destroyed.

“Let me tell you something, Sindy—Sorry—Sidney,” she takes a moment to collect herself, smoothing her hands down her desk as if clearing her view before taking her to task. “A year ago I was at a Fourth Of July celebration over at West Beach. A young man lifeguard was there barbecuing, playing volleyball with his friends...you get the picture. One of the families in front of us had a child that was thrown by a wave and everyone went crazy looking for a lifeguard. So, I asked this man if he could help and he just looked at me blank-faced. And do you know what he told me? He wasn’t a lifeguard. The shirt was fake, he wore it just to look cool.” She sighed “The world does not work on what you can’t see. It works on facts. Not a little girl crying wolf.”

“It is a fact that Mr. Simmons looked at my crotch every day I went in that class.”

“Wrong. It’s hearsay. That’s something that you got to learn.” she says in sing-song. “Nothing is true until it is proven so. The cameras in the classroom are there to protect, and nothing happened. He is innocent until proven guilty.”

Sidney sits with anger searing her throat. Her stomach starts to churn, begging for her to fight back. “So...so, You’re saying that I’m lying?”

“This is not the sort of thing that we can split hairs over. I’m sure you understand that we’ve got a lot on our plate at the moment. Graduation is coming, and we really wouldn’t want any of this to affect the way you finish up the school year.”

The whole room slows as Sidney studies every inch. From the dust that sits on the desk, to the stickers of the human anatomy stuck to the wall—the vertebrae of a male and female standing next to one another.

“So we’re good here, Sidney?”

Sidney turns her head, but all she sees are two fat lips moving. Suddenly the words sink in.

“No.”

“No? No what? We’ve heard nothing but good things about Simmons. You’re the only witness—”

“The cameras are the only thing you’re going to believe? Even if I am ogled at every day of my life? The camera’s don’t show when he calls us ‘baby’, or when he asked me to give him a neck massage.” her chest heaves.

Click. Click. Click.

The pen sounds more like a stopwatch, whipping her ears with how little time she has left to make sense out of what they are doing.

“This is how it is. I know it isn’t the answer you’re looking for, but what would you have me do? Do you think that it would be right to listen to every young and impressionable girl that comes to us about Mr. Simmons? This is a reputable teacher we’re talking about, why would I ruin his life over an accusation that is factually incorrect?”

Sidney nods and holds her head down. Her eyes are unable to hold back tears anymore. She closes them in a final attempt to stop them from falling. She is beyond exhausted, as if she

had just run a marathon, and instead of being cheered someone has kicked her in the stomach.

Her eyes open to feel tears chase down her cheeks. She glances at Mrs. Lyse.

Twist.

Twist.

The bangle moves up and down her fat arm to her wrist.

Do something. Please, do something.

Sidney lifts her head, wishing painfully there was something she could say to stop everything or press a button that would—

“Now...we would like you to rethink your statement since you have viewed the footage and tell us what *actually happened.*”

Sidney opens her mouth to speak, but is cut off.

“Actually...let’s take a break.” Denise surveys her watch “I have a lot to prepare with Mrs. Lyse, so we can take a twenty-minute break and you can tell us when you come back. You must be getting hungry, aren’t you? I believe it’s meatball day!”

Sidney stands. “I’m not hungry.”

Denise adjusts her posture in her seat, shifting her eyes up and down Sidney’s thin frame.

“Of course.”

Sidney glances to the door. *Can I go now?*

“Just to let you know, we do have support for eating disorders here—”

Please stop.

“—Nurse Strider is specifically skilled with ED.”

Please stop.

Sidney gives a slight nod and takes step after step until—

“One more thing, Sidney!”

Sidney freezes and turns around.

“The main reason I am in this role is so I can invest in my students. I once was like you, study-smart and dedicated. I truly want to use whatever power I have to see the students I trust and believe in the most, and have a hand in kickstarting their future. Sometimes I even write a note of endorsement for college applications. I see a lot of potential in you, and I’d like to see you thrive in a life that can sustain you.”

Sidney feels her face going hotter and hotter. Her hands are so numb she barely feels them as she pushes them on the door at last. A humanizing feeling settles in as she walks from the office, away from solicitous gazes.

She walks through the half-empty hallway, staring at the orange linoleum, and stops when she sees a word written so small on the floor that she isn’t surprised that she’s never noticed it.

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You were easy prey. You take it too personally. It’s just like this. Why would you tell someone you were uncomfortable when it’s such a little thing? When it’s such a little thing you can’t even notice on a screen. Did you actually believe you would win? Did you actually think

that you would watch in victory? Did you actually think that you deserved that? Did you actually think that they believed you worthy? How did you believe that?

You were everything a girl should not be and more some. You were everything a girl should not be and more some. You were everything a girl should not be and—

Her phone buzzes and she looks at the screen: Mom.

“Hi.” She says as cheerfully as she can muster.

“Hi! I just got done with all the shopping for the trip, it was a lot but I think we have everything now so that’s good. How did the meeting with the principal go?”

Sidney stops walking, presses her back up against a locker, and slides down to sit in the hallway. “Okay, I guess.” Her words sound small and insignificant, barely feasible throughout the long hallway. She thinks about hanging up and running out of the school to somewhere she can breathe.

“Honey? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know.” Talking feels like scraping something out of her throat that is hiding there, clinging on for dear life.

“Take a deep breath and go back to where you started, okay? Why did they want to talk to you?”

“It’s what I told you about.”

“The Simmons man? What did they say?”

“I don’t know exactly.”

“Honey, you have to remember. Please, try to remember. Just start from the beginning, okay?”

Sidney takes a breath and touches her head with her black, bitten nails.

“I sat down, and she brought in Mrs. Lyse.”

“The counselor? Okay. And?”

“And, she says that I look like I have a future and they want the best for me. But then they had to show me the footage from the days that I filed the assault.”

“Okay.”

Tears fight their way out. Her chest clenches like a fist.

“But the footage just showed me walking past him. It didn’t show anything. It made me look like a lunatic. They told me that I had no reason to file anything.”

“They’re bribing you to drop your case?” Her mother’s words echo in her ears.

“I—I guess so.”

“What the actual fuck!”

Sidney pulls the phone away from her ear, her voice so loud it impacts the walls, just as a girl student walks past in a red jacket, sideways at her.

“Mom. Calm down.”

“No, I’m not going to calm down! They are saying that you need to drop your case against him or else you don’t have their support in applications? They are doing absolutely nothing to protect you. How long ago was that when you filed the first one? Spring?”

“February.”

“Winter! Winter! And now they are just getting around to addressing it because they want to make sure that their records are clean for the next school year. What kind of negligence is that? I’m going to come down there myself and tell them what’s up!”

“Mom, no. Please don’t.”

She can feel her chest tightening again, and her stomach twisting in nausea.

“Aren’t you angry? Honey, they’re messing with you! They’re telling you that you are nothing, that he is more important! It’s all a scam because they don’t want to have to deal with having records of this. If they get you to change your story, he will be innocent and they will have a clean slate. That’s all that this is about.”

Her chest turns from clenching to overwrought palpitations as her mother’s words escalate.

“Mom, you have to stop talking for one second, or else I’m going to hang up on you!”

She can hear her mother biting her tongue, waiting for her to speak. Sidney chooses her words carefully, although she knows they will be rejected.

“Maybe I was wrong to even mention anything. Maybe it was wrong of me to tell them something that isn’t an offense *on camera*. I just don’t want this to hold me back. I think this whole thing was a mistake.” The empty space on the phone hums as her mother remains quiet. “I just don’t think I have anything I can do now. I tried, and it’s not something that they can prove.”

“Are you finished?” Her mother’s words lash like a self-appointed lawyer. “Listen. I have never done something like this before. I’ve had creeps do shit like this to me all my life and I never knew I had a choice. I told Payton about this—”

“Mom—”

“—and she told me that you have every right to take matters into your own hands if they do nothing to protect you.”

“What does that mean? Go and tee-pee the principal’s house?”

“No. It means that if they will not act like adults, you need to.”

“I’m seventeen.”

“And they will treat you that way for the rest of your life.”

“Lunch is almost over so I got to go now...I have class.”

“Okay, okay. Just think about it. You have time.” Her mother’s voice softens. As much as Sidney longs to be right next to her and hug her, for her to tell her everything is going to be alright, she feels her chest burn in anger.

I wish everyone would fuck off and leave me alone.

“Is there anything that you need from me?” musical, and delicate.

“Just leave me alone.” Sidney hangs up. A twinge of malice and guilt slips in and under her skin.

She pulls herself up, runs down the hallway to the girls’ bathroom where she thrusts herself at the sink and turns on the tap. She goes to the other sink and turns on the tap, then the other one, then the other one, until all taps are flowing water. She grabs her face as a deep, barbaric scream forces its way out from the pit of her stomach and echoes through the stalls. Hot tears fall from her face.

Like dominoes, each tap stops on its own and she is left drowning in her own thundering wails.

She turns to see herself in the mirror; blotchy and broken, mascara saturated with tears racing down her cheeks, colorless snot pouring from her nose, her eyes shot with fear and her recently dyed black hair hanging loosely below her shoulders, more ugly than she could ever imagine. She recalls the week before when she dyed it with Jane. It was a celebration of the new

Killers album, the both of them decided to dye their hair a different color. Now it just looked silly. In fact, her whole outfit; ripped tights under denim skirt, sheer black mock neck top over a silk white top, looked silly. Even her features; fog-blue eyes and thin lips, her front teeth that desperately need straightening, looked silly.

The bathroom door thrusts open to a girl with dark brown hair, in skinny jeans and a sweatshirt. Sidney immediately recognizes the face that rushes past her into the stall. People nicknamed her Camp-Amy because she spent most summers at religious camps.

Sidney grabs a paper towel and starts to sop up the snot from her nose, erases the mascara on her cheeks, then rinses her hands. As she begins drying her hands with a paper towel she hears a stall fill with hushed sobs.

“Hey.” Says Sidney, drawing herself close to the stall door, graffitied with X’s and O’s and heart-shaped testaments of Toby and Tina forever.

“Hey, are you okay in there?”

She hears a snuffle.

“I’m fine.” Says Camp-Amy, crying harder.

Sidney stands awkwardly. She racks her brain for something comforting but she can’t think of anything. “It’s gonna be alright.” It’s the only thing she can think of, even though she doesn’t half believe it.

“I’m—” Camp-Amy’s voice breaks “I’m—I’m disappointed in God.”

Sidney waits for her to say more, but only silence follows.

“What are you disappointed in?”

“I asked him to make Jason choose me, but he clearly likes Monica. He flirts with her like—all the time. I—I’m not jealous I just don’t understand why God wouldn’t listen to me when I asked him specifically not to have Jason pick her.”

A laugh abruptly forces its way out of Sidney’s throat. “I’m sorry. I just... God doesn’t do shit.” She realizes quickly this is the wrong response, but she doesn’t care. “You know why? Because Jesus is the man and God is the man and Mary is just some side ho. Even the word ‘genius’ sounds like Jesus, so women will never be geniuses. They are insignificant. Of course God isn’t going to listen to you.”

Silence drones yet again throughout the bathroom.

“You’re wrong.” Camp-Amy’s voice rises louder behind the stall door, as if a switch had been flipped. “Jesus loves you.”

The stall clicks open and the girl’s watery brown eyes look directly into hers. Not sure what to say, Sidney just stands there as Camp-Amy draws the crucifix from her forehead, both sides of her shoulders, and her heart. Despite it being a gesture of love, her tight lips and piercing eyes make it feel like she’s saying: ‘fuck you’.

Within seconds Camp-Amy is out the door and she is left studying the obscure graffiti on the stall doors.

Nausea creeps inside of her throat and begs for a release. She moves back to the sink and grips it with her chipped nails. She waits to see if something comes up, but it doesn’t.

She feels her legs move to the door. Outside, the hallway is crowded with students shuffling their way to their lockers. She dodges backpacks, her ears deafened by empty chatter. Her heart races in panic as her feet move through the hallway, and back to the office door.

THE END