

Hannah and Vince the Butcher

Thirty years earlier, on Hannah's first day of junior high school, Vince told her that her hammy face was ripe for a beating. Hannah had always thought her face was too large and too pink for her small body. All cheeks and chin; a cartoon face. She blushed easily, too, which made the problem worse. Hannah had hoped she'd grow into her looks over the summer the way her mother assured her she would, but on the first day of school she looked exactly the same way she always had.

When Hannah graduated from elementary school, she thought she could finally make some new friends with the junior high girls, and maybe find a boyfriend, because every other twelve-year old girl in Queens already had a group of best friends and had been hooking up with boys for at least a year. Hannah hadn't had friends since fourth grade and had never had a boyfriend. She'd never understood why her friends had turned on her, what she had done. She had gone to all the birthday parties and sleepovers, but one day they just stopped talking to her. They didn't ask her to eat lunch with them, left her out of their games, and neglected to invite her to their weekend roller-skating parties. One day, she simply fell off the face of the Earth. Not one of the girls ever told her why, and she had never worked up the nerve to ask.

Vince and his family moved in next door and opened a butcher shop right down the street. He was a cute boy all the junior high girls instantly loved, a mature boy who needed to shave, a boy who wore unbuttoned shirts halfway down his chest and a great big Italian horn on a thick gold chain around his neck. He told Hannah during first period homeroom she had a face like his Pop's famous boiled ham, that she was as ugly as an AIDS junkie, and her mother should have had an abortion. The junior high girls took their cue from Vince and wrote "Hannah looks like an ugly AIDS junkie" and

"Hannah's face is a disgusting mistake" on Hannah's new desk in black block letters. The chanting and singing became all the rage, and in this way Hannah became strangely popular.

She'd wanted to tell Vince that she hated her face, too. Would he have been surprised? Would he have still hated her?

But Hannah knew that sharing this information with Vince wouldn't have changed anything.

Thirty years later, it is still on the front line of her memory.

Hannah tracked Vince to a small town Upstate near the original site of the Woodstock festival. It didn't take long for her to find him. Just a few Google searches and a website dedicated to tracking down long lost lovers and friends for a small fee. He owns a butcher shop, an offshoot of his father's and grandfather's Downstate butcher dynasty, in a tiny shopping strip in the middle of acres and acres of unused land. There is a makeshift parking lot and a few other stores: a combined gun and coffee shop, a Brooklyn style deli, a check cashing window in front of a boarded up laundromat, a giant liquor store with hundreds of supermarket-sized grocery carts available for serious shoppers. The printouts from the town's website insist that the area is going through a change. A rebirth. Organic fruit and veggie markets, homemade candle shops, and stray animal shelters will replace the ubiquitous gun shops and payday loan storefronts found along the rural roads. Blueprints have been designed to make use of empty fields. The earnest children of the children of the original hippies who are funding this sea change wear flowers in their hair, retro tie-dyed shirts they bought in souvenir shops, and faux leather shoes. The website announced proudly, in capital letters, that the new-new Woodstock generation is moving in and taking over.

Hannah dug a small trench in the unused land's soft plowed soil facing Vince's butcher shop. It is close, but far enough away. She brought a tie-dyed t-shirt, a pair of giant black sunglasses, reams of Google maps, her website printouts, and a few provisions she picked up in the only hunting supply shop in Queens: a canteen she filled with electrolyte water, an oversized camouflage jacket, and the biggest and most expensive gutting knife that the shop had locked in a dirty glass cabinet behind the counter.

Night fishing, Hannah told the ruddy man behind the cash register even though she didn't buy fishing rods and he didn't ask for an explanation.

It is early morning. The sun is halfway across the sky. Fresh meat is being delivered from the local farms. A militant vegetarian group bussed in from Woodstock has started picketing early. They spray-paint "Bunny Killers", "Don't Eat Anything With A Face!", and "Meat Nazis" in red spray paint all over Vince's front window. They carry framed photographs of grazing, wide-eyed deer and shove pictures of mutilated cows into the faces of the farmers. They wear sweatshirts with raccoon heads ironed on the front and grind fresh carrot smoothies in portable juicers.

Hannah watches Vince press his face against the vandalized window and stare at the angry people marching in front of his butcher shop. She puts on the tie-dyed shirt and the giant black sunglasses. She falls in line with the picketers.

Peace, she cries with them, her voice rising to match the high-pitched hysteria. Peace!

When the first day of junior high was finally over, and Hannah thought she could finally breathe, Vince caught up to her as she headed out the front door. He put his arm around her shoulders, his breath warm in her face, and pushed her in the direction of the

chainlink fence that separated the junior high school grounds from the rest of Queens. He pinned her against it with the weight of his body. His black curls fell over his eyes, and Hannah wondered if he could see her through his hair. She tried to look in his eyes, to make eye contact with him, to be friendly, as her mother had instructed her to do with boys. The girls yelped hyena yelps and gathered around them. Cinnamon Russo, who had been her best friend in the second grade, was best friends with a new girl named Angela with yellow bottle blonde hair -- a color Hannah's mother thought was too beachy and sexy for a junior high girl -- by the end of that first day.

Hannah's father had made fun of Cinnamon's name, the homebaked brown rice snack bars she brought to share with Hannah, and her hippie dippy smelly not wed to Cinnamon's mother reefer-smoking-free-love-having-still-thinks-it's-1969-and-anything-goes-screwing-the-next-generation-of-young-girls-in-tie-dyed-t-shirts-broomstick-skirts-and-open-toe-sandals-out-in-the-orange-Volkswagen-van-parked-half-on-and-half-off-the-sidewalk-father. He accused the Russos of being missionary vegetarians, dumb do-gooder Woodstock liberal hippies, and not having the good sense to vote for President Reagan.

Cinnamon, who had once showed up to play in hemp and burlap dresses with knotted clumps in her hair and dirty fingernails, laughed out loud at sleek, beautiful Angela's joke. She high-fived her, and Angela laughed a throaty, womanly laugh.

As Vince pressed himself closer, the girls' voices sounded tinny and far away, their voices fading in the distance. For a moment, the whole world closed in and it was just her and Vince.

I'm going to be here everyday, Vince whispered in her ear.

He was letting her in on a deep, dark secret.

His breath heavy; his lips almost touching hers.

By junior high school, Hannah knew about AIDS and abortions, so she'd

understood Vince's intentions behind his remark about her face. Girls who had sex without condoms needed abortions. There were older girls, high school girls, and one who was still in eighth grade but looked older because she wore silver eyeshadow and purple lipstick -- Hannah's father said she looked like an alien from a seventies movie -- in her building and around the neighborhood, who got pregnant and needed abortions.

In her elementary school health class, the fat teacher didn't mention abortion except to say she wasn't allowed by law to discuss them. She told them, in no uncertain terms, that if any young ladies spread their legs for some dope fiend high school boy, get knocked up and have questions about a baby-killing abortion, she is required to say they should talk to their parents or religious leaders. She was allowed to discuss AIDS, but only if she followed the prepared curriculum. The teacher checked the hallway for eavesdroppers, closed the classroom door, and told them that since they were bound for junior high they were old enough now to know the truth, even if the Board of Education and the Principal didn't agree, and it was her duty to keep them aware and informed. She stretched a condom over a giant unpeeled banana, tore the tip open, and warned them about the dangers of ruined young lives.

This isn't just about a few homosexuals in San Francisco or Alphabet City junkies anymore, she said.

When she said the words homosexuals and junkies, she wrinkled her nose and rolled her eyes to the ceiling.

Anyone can get it now, she said.

She looked directly at the girls.

Other people will lie to you, but I will tell you the truth, she said. Don't think I don't know you're all a bunch of little sluts. Don't think I don't know you're all going to get AIDS and die.

Hannah had dreams about giant purple AIDS lesions flowering, blooming, on her

arms and legs and then bursting through leaving her torn tender skin exposed.

Sometimes the virus became a nasty little creature with an eyeless face and sharp yellow fangs, worming around in her flesh, eating chunks of her whole. In some dreams, Hannah was pregnant with hungry AIDS babies who ate through to her spine before she could get an abortion.

The night before Hannah's first day of junior high, her parents sat her down for a little talk.

Her mother was a bit concerned about all the neighborhood junior and high school girls having sex setting a bad example; her father, on the other hand, was absolutely frantic. Hannah's mother had to calm him down. She thought he shouldn't worry so much because Hannah didn't talk to boys or go on Saturday night dates, didn't seem to even have girlfriends anymore. His twelve-year old daughter won't turn up pregnant or dying of a strange, horrible illness anytime soon.

Don't you dare get pregnant before you're eighteen and become like one of these nasty girls who live around here or tell us you're sick with some crazy liberal disease only homosexuals and Bowery Bums are supposed to get, her father told her. Doctors think they know, but they can't figure out a goddamned thing. First it was the gays, now it's everybody? Even my goddamned twelve year old daughter? What the fuck is going on?

Don't mind your father, her mother said. That's just the way he is. You know he loves you. Listen, Hannah, when I was a young lady, the thought of screaming babies and the clap were the only reasons to use birth control. I was told that if only young hormonal girls would one afternoon with an inconsolable baby, they'd weigh their options before allowing a boy to put his penis inside them before college or marriage. And that was enough for me. If young hormonal girls nowadays could understand that the stakes are higher -- it's not just about itchy privates and a shot of penicillin anymore -

- maybe they'd reconsider.

At twelve, Hannah could barely imagine being eighteen years old. Or pregnant. Or having AIDS. To be eighteen was a wonderful dream but impossibly out of reach and far away. To be eighteen and a grown up! To be eighteen and living far away from the girls at school who were no longer her friends and her sex-obsessed parents and teachers!

At noon, the picketers went back to their headquarters in Woodstock. Hannah puts on her camouflage jacket on over her tie-dyed t-shirt.

Vince unlocks the front door, shakes hand with the first customers to venture out of their cars and walk, minding the surroundings and keeping an eye out for rogue picketers hiding behind the trees, into the butcher shop. She watches Vince shake hands with his customers, slice meat, and help old ladies out of the door.

Hannah knocks on the front door. She sees Vince press a button under the counter. The door unlocks. She keeps her black sunglasses on.

Vince has aged. He looks older than his years. His black eyes are still clear and bright, but the skin on his face and neck is pale and loose. He's bloated, huge, in the middle; his center of gravity has changed. Hannah knows him as a skinny boy with a concave stomach. He had always seemed to lean forward, always curious, intrigued by what was in front of him, but now he leans back on his heels in order to accommodate his new girth. His black curls are gone; only a few tufts of dry gray wisps remain. The same gold Italian horn hangs around his neck on the same thick chain, but now he also wears a rusty wedding band on his fleshy ring finger.

Hello there, Vince says. Can I interest you in the Delmonico steaks that are on special today?

She shakes her head.

Vince points to her t-shirt.

You're not one of the crazy veggies are you, Vince asks. He takes an uncertain step back.

No, Hannah says.

Vince wipes his forehead with his bloody hands.

Good, says Vince. I worry all the time that they're going to bomb my store. They're not going to stop until they close me down. That's what they want, but I've been here for a long time and I'm not going anywhere. Crazy people. Anyway, what can I do for you?

The Delmonico steaks sit patiently side by side with the rabbit heads in the glass counter who stare up at her with their pale glazed eyes.

Two pounds of the Delmonico steaks, Hannah says.

I'm glad you changed your mind, Vince says. Those are my favorite, too. They're fresh from the farm down the road. Cow was alive this morning. Never saw it coming. Calm, content cows who think they have all the time in the world taste the most delicious. You won't be disappointed.

He winks at her.

Hannah smiles.

Maybe I can find you an extra quarter pound in here for you, he says.

Thank you, Hannah says.

I have nothing against these people, Vince says. I don't hate them. But I know who they are, what they're capable of, so I'm prepared.

Vince pointed to the cameras on the ceiling and 911 at the ready on his phone.

I do think we can co-exist, he said. My Pop wasn't so sure, he had trouble with these people too -- down in Queens of all places -- but I think we can all get along. I'll tell you though, I do wish they'd leave me alone. I'm just trying to keep the family business running smoothly for my boys.

Hannah looks at the signed twenty dollar bills and the dozens of family pictures on the walls. There is one of Vince, a short woman in glasses, and two scraggly boys in front of a small old house.

My wife and my boys, Vince says. And that's our home. My boys work here after school, just like I did for my Pop. After I'm gone, they're going to take over for me. This is their legacy. It's their birthright.

He hands Hannah the steaks wrapped up neat and tight.

I'm just a why can't we all get along kind of person, you know? Vince says.

Hannah's father was excited that Vince's father and grandfather opened a brand new butcher shop just down the street from their apartment building, there was nothing Hannah's father liked better than a hen or a nice rib-eye for Sunday dinner, until small bands of militant vegetarians started picketing outside just as the delivery trucks pulled up every morning. Hannah's father said the vegetarians were coming from parts of the City he despised -- the Village, mostly -- where they shopped in stores that smelled like grass and garbage. The kind of places where they sold dried fruits, unidentifiable nuts in bins, and something called bean curd. Liberal food. The kind of food that dumb do-gooder Russo family likes to eat. Hannah used to play with their dirty-faced little girl with the stupid name. What was her brother's name? Horizon? Aquarius? Who the fuck knows.

Thank God you're not friends with her anymore, Hannah, her father said. I'm glad you finally came to your senses. What does that family eat for Sunday dinner anyway? Grass chops? Next thing you know, the veggies will take over the neighborhood and bring their hippie Jesus freak food with them.

Hannah's father thought second-generation hippies with their spoiled screaming children and their touchy-feely everything were even worse than the original version. He

thought that uptight people with screwed up ideas and fascist leanings coming into their neighborhood armed with Sharpee pens, posterboard, and their high falutin moral attitudes should made to learn a lesson. Somebody should ship the veggies off somewhere where they would starve to death unless they slaughtered and ate an animal.

Let's see how long they hold out, her father said. I bet they cave fast. I bet a few days hungry to the core of their souls will beat the veggie right out of them.

Hannah's mother didn't think it had to be that violent.

Oh yes it does, her father said. It has to be that violent or even more violent than that. People don't understand things until the situation becomes violent. Want to know why AIDS is spreading all over the goddamned place? These are the kind of people who spread AIDS. And we have to be harassed when we're trying to pick up a nice roast or some chops for dinner.

A few weeks after junior high school started, Hannah's mother told her not to daudle the way she usually does on the way home from school. They were going shopping that afternoon. They were going to stop in and check out the new butcher shop down the street.

No, her father said. I'll go when I get home from work. I don't want you dealing with those people. They're dangerous.

I'll be fine, her mother said. Hannah's coming with me. If I'm with a child, they won't bother me.

Of course they will, her father said. That's the point. That's what they want. They want you to bring the children. They want to recruit the children and turn them against their parents. It's like Big Brother all over again. They kidnap little girls, marry them off to the elders in the group, and make them have as many babies as they can so they can repopulate the Earth with their own kind.

Don't be silly, her mother said.

You better believe it, her father said. You're not going.

That's not true, her mother said.

I don't want to go, Hannah said.

I need your help, Hannah, so please don't argue with me, her mother said.

This is why we should be allowed to buy guns right over the counter, like aspirin, her father said. This is why liberals pass all those gun laws. They don't want the rest of us to be able to defend ourselves. I don't want you or Hannah anywhere near them.

The picketers circled Hannah and her mother as they headed for the butcher shop's front door.

Don't go in there, an extremely skinny man said.

Excuse me, her mother said.

We don't think you should go in there, the man said.

The man's skin was shrink-wrapped across his bones. He was almost blue. His eyes stuck out their sockets so far Hannah was afraid they might fall out of his head. She wanted to push them back in. She wanted to touch his hollow face or his sharp shoulders. To see if he was really alive.

We don't think you really know what goes on in the back rooms, he said.

My daughter and I need to get past you, Hannah's mother said. We have every right to shop in this store.

The man planted himself in front of them. His knees buckled a bit, but he remained firm in his stance.

Not until you fully understand the decision you are making, he said.

The protesters swarmed behind him. They showed Hannah and her mother life-sized pictures of penned animals and cooped up chickens.

They're beating them to death with tire irons, the skinny man said. Look, they're electrocuting them.

There was a picture of a woman with short, coiffed hair, a billowing shirtdress, red lipstick, heels, and a screaming baby in each of her arms. Her throat was sliced and blood trickled down on the babies' heads. Underneath was the caption "Still want a hen for dinner?" and "What will this hen's chicks do when you eat their mother?"

Don't be silly, Hannah's mother said. I'm just buying a chicken for dinner.

She grabbed Hannah's hand.

If you eat a mother hen, it's the same as eating a human woman and leaving her babies motherless, the man said.

Inside the shop, Vince's father and grandfather greeted them in bloody white aprons, plastic hair nets, and rubber gloves. They pulled the shades and locked the doors behind them.

Hello there, Vince's grandfather said. I'm sorry, but it gets harder and harder everyday.

It's a full-on attack, Vince's father said. They're not going to stop until they close us down, but my son's here so we got big, strong Vincent Junior to protect us. Vincent, come out here!

Vince's grandfather winked at Hannah's mother.

Are you really old enough to be this nice young lady's mother, he asked.

Hannah's mother smiled.

You're very kind, she said.

Just telling it like it is, he said. How can I help you?

Hannah's mother gave her order.

This is a wonderful place, Hannah's mother said. I don't care about the people outside. I'm just so glad I don't have to walk all the way over Queens to get a nice hen or

a rib-eye anymore.

We are a full service butcher, Vince's father said. We've got three generations under one roof working hard to provide you with whatever you need. Vincent, come say hello to our new neighbors!

Vince came out covered in blood.

Here he is, his grandfather said. My grandson.

He squeezed Vince's shoulders.

He's almost a man, he said.

Comes to work right after school, Vince's father said. Stays until after the dinner rush, cleans up after closing, goes to bed tired after an honest day's work, don't you, Vincent?

Vince nodded.

Vince's father looked right at Hannah.

What's your name, honey, Vince's father asked. Have you met my son?

He winked again at Hannah's mother.

Is this my future daughter-in-law I'm seeing here for the first time? he asked.

Hannah looked away.

This is my daughter, Hannah, her mother said. It's nice to meet you, Vincent.

Nice to meet you, ma'am, Vince said. Hannah and I know each other. We go to the same school.

Isn't that nice, her mother said.

Hi, Hannah, Vince said.

Hannah nodded.

Vincent's talking to you, her mother said.

Hi, Vincent, Hannah said.

Nice to see you, Hannah, Vince said.

He grinned.

When they got home, her father refused to talk to her mother until she leaned in and kissed him slowly on the cheek. Her red lipstick left a waxy mark.

Hannah's father frowned.

Don't worry about us girls, her mother said. We can take care of ourselves.

Did you get a hen, he asked.

Yes, her mother said. And a couple of rib-eyes too.

Did they bother you? What did they say?

It was fine, her mother said.

Did they say something, her father said. What did they say?

Hannah, Vincent likes you, her mother said. Maybe he'll ask you to go to the movies this weekend.

He doesn't like me, Hannah said.

She's a little girl, her father said. Stop encouraging her. She has plenty of time.

Sure, he does, her mother said. Maybe you didn't see the way he looked at you. You think I don't know that look? Your father used to look at me that way.

Hannah's father rolled his eyes.

Vincent definitely likes you, her mother said. And he's a good-looking boy, too. Does he talk to you at school?

No, Hannah said.

Well, twelve-year old boys can be shy around girls. Girls develop faster, you know.

I don't think so, Hannah said.

Emotionally faster, her mother said. But I did notice peach fuzz on his chin.

Hannah, how many times do I have to tell you that you need to make more of an effort? Be friendly! Make eye contact when he talks to you. If I've said this once, I've said it a

thousand times: boys like friendly, confident girls.

Vince told her she was ugly every day. He called after her in the hallways. He reminded everyone just how he felt about her face. He always found Hannah no matter where she was hiding. A crowd would form in front of the chainlink fence, and his grinning face would appear before her, shaky and shimmery, like a hallucination.

One day, halfway through their first year in junior high, with the whole class egging him on and Cinnamon and Angela accusing Hannah of calling Vince a dick, of trying to start a rumor that he had AIDS, he pushed her up against the fence with more force than he ever had before.

At first, Hannah didn't think Vince was actually upset. She thought he looked more amused than anything, enjoying the performance and the instant approval of his audience. But when the girls raised the bar, spitting out more and more accusations against her in their shrill screechy voices -- Hannah said Vince wasn't just a dick, he was a cocksucker; Hannah said Vince had AIDS because he was gay, a gay AIDS junkie -- she sensed a shift in him. By then, Hannah understood him, could feel him thinking, his mind racing, trying to figure out the most appropriate punishment for her verbal transgressions. Vince looked her dead in the eyes and hit her in the fat part of her pink nose with the full weight of his fist. Then he pulled back and hit her again. And then again and again. Hannah's face grew hot. An instant fever. Her skin split and blood seeped out slowly, tentatively, almost startled at being released from its protective layer. Her eyes swelled up and she could only see in black and white.

When Vince stopped, he stood stock still. Frozen in time. Hannah and Vince stared at each other. They were the only two people in the world.

Vince jumped the chainlink fence and took off running down the block. The crowd,

including Cinnamon and Angela, quickly left sensing the yard monitor's inevitable approach. Hannah was alone.

In the emergency room, they set her nose and stitched up her face. Her cheekbones and jaw severely swollen and bruised but not broken. The doctor and her parents drank coffee out of paper cups. They talked quietly in his office.

The next day, Hannah's parents took her back to school. They asked her a thousand times who hit her, but Hannah couldn't say his name. Her mother was furious, confused. She didn't understand why Hannah just wouldn't tell her. She wanted to go straight to the Principal, and then the Police, the authorities would know what to do, but Hannah's father had other ideas. He grabbed Hannah's hand, dragged her into the classroom, and slammed the door behind them. The class was expressionless, their hands clasped, their elbows on their desks. Nobody looked at her. They were suddenly a class of well-behaved students who never spoke out of turn or said a mean word to anyone.

The teacher jumped up to greet them.

Hannah, are you okay, the teacher asked.

Who punched my kid, her father said. Huh? Who punched my fucking kid? Who did this? Who broke her fucking nose?

Hannah kept her head down.

I'm sorry about Hannah, this is a terrible thing, and I promise you we will get to the bottom of it, but you need to make an appointment with the school, the teacher said. You can't just walk into my classroom.

When somebody's fucks up my daughter's face, I can do whatever the fuck I want, her father said. My daughter won't tell me who's fucking with her, so I'm going to find out for myself.

That'll be enough, her teacher said. You have to leave now. You should go see the

Principal.

Who is it? her father yelled. Who is it? Goddammit. Fucking Goddammit. One of these fucking kids fucked with my daughter's face and I want to know who it is.

Her father pointed at Cinnamon.

You're that hippie kid, right, he said. I remember you.

He leaned over her desk.

Who the fuck did it?

Cinnamon shrugged and looked away.

Her father stormed out the room.

Vince sat in the back of the room, silent, one curl hanging languidly over his left eye. Hannah left the classroom and joined her parents for the long walk to the Principal's office.

In the quiet of the late afternoon, Hannah sleeps in her trench. She rests her head on her maps and her printouts and her camouflage jacket. The steady stream of shoppers has slowed. The picketers are gone for the day.

In her dream she is in her junior high classroom. The ground buckles and becomes her locker, then the brick wall of the school. It becomes the chainlink fence. Vince is off and running. He has her head in his hands. Her hair wrapped around his fingers, pulling it out of her scalp, pounding her pink face with so many punches she can't keep track. Cinnamon and Angela cheer Vince on. Hannah's face is bloody, pulpy. Her nose and eyes and ears smashed and swollen; her cartoon face a distorted Picasso. Vince's Italian horn swings from side to side like a pendulum, keeping time, counting every second of her beating. His face is cold and deadly. Hannah can't see past his black curls. Panting and sweating and his hair shiny wet. He is unable to control himself. Unable to stop. He's not going to stop. Hannah knows it. She knows it.

Noise forces Hannah's eyes open. Garbage trucks have pulled up in front of Vince's store. Vince attempts to clean his front windows, sweeps the ground, crumples up leftover posterboard. He loads dozens of bags into the truck. He shakes hands with the garbage men and waves when they leave.

Vince turns and looks in her direction as if he had sensed all along she was watching him. He stares right at her. She freezes for a moment. He half-smiles, waves uncertainly. He quickly goes inside and pretends to be busy, but Hannah can see him peering at her through the smudged window.

Vince never returned to school. For a long time, Hannah didn't know where he went or what had become of him. She didn't know how they found out it was him. The Principal told her Vince was gone and would no longer be a problem. That was that. She shouldn't concern herself with the details. Hannah's parents did everything they could to avoid discussing it. After everything settled down, they seemed embarrassed by the incident, as if they had been involved in something untoward and had learned something deep and intimate and troubling about their daughter. They told her to move forward instead of looking back. They sent her to school in Brooklyn.

A few years later during a jarring random conversation with a friend of one of her high school friends who knew someone who knew Cinnamon, Hannah learned that some of her former classmates knew what happened to Vince. The story had become warped, different: instead of punching her, Vince had stabbed her with a knife. The friend of a friend had no idea who told on him or that Hannah was involved. The whole incident became legend. Vince was sent away, somewhere Upstate, to live with relatives and learn the family trade full-time in another of his father's and grandfather's brand new stores while he finished his mandatory education at an alternative school for difficult boys.

Hannah watches Vince clean the windows and close the store. She puts the expensive gutting knife in the pocket of her camouflage jacket, takes a long drink of electrolyte water. Despite the Upstate afternoon chill, the Delmonico steaks are rotting. She throws the bloody package, her maps, her printouts, and the canteen into the garbage.

Vince closes up the store and pulls the shades. He locks the gate against the picketers that will show up bright and early in the morning to remind him he's a weak and immoral soul. They can save him if only he'd see the error of his ways.

Hannah stands in front of the door. She can make out his silhouette in the semi-dark through her giant black sunglasses. Suddenly, Vince is in front of her. He points a carving knife in her direction. He is immobile. Still. Focused. A look Hannah knows so well crosses his face. She recognizes the shift in him, how he moves so easily, so deftly, from one reality to another. It's comfortable, familiar.

Vince has married, had children, made a life for himself, but he has stayed in the place of his exile. A man without a home.

The fear and the pleasure that crossed Vince's face when he looked at her smashed and ugly face. At what he had created. She was unrecognizable. A blank slate. He had made her his.

But she healed. Just the way the doctors and her parents promised. Now it is an unremarkable adult's face adorned with wrinkles and lines. An ordinary display of the ravages of time. No longer special.

Why are you following me, Vince asks.

His pupils open. He looks for her face in the bluish streaky darkness.

The warm gutting knife trembles in Hannah's hand. It wants to do what it was made to do, but she loosens her grip, lets her arm and the knife hang lifelessly at her side.

Hannah and Vince stare at each other.

This where she belongs. There is no future without him.

She walks towards Vince and his adult body and his butcher's carving knife.

It's like coming home.