

Something Domestic

Three yellow walls. Green, linoleum floors. Screams and whispers and sighs. A million sighs, I must have heard that night. Sighs of grief, sighs of frustration, sighs of pain, sighs of relief, sighs followed by anger, sighs at the clock, sighs in the waiting room, sighs of laughter, final sighs at departure, sighs of family members making tough decisions, sighs of the wind against the building, sighs of hope, sighs of the curtain in front of my bed as it slid open and closed, tired sighs, happy sighs, sighs of mothers seeing their child's eyes blink open for the first time, his long sighs as he sat in the chair, my sighs as I slowly drifted off again...

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I dreamt of the sweet, yellow honeysuckles my Mom and I used to savor down by our neighbor's tennis court back when we had the house in Watermill. They all grew high above my arm's reach and any doe's wet tongue, so she'd pluck them for me. There were wild, pink strawberries under the hedges and lemon grass in the fields. I used to imagine that, if I had wanted to, I could spend the rest of my life alone and vulnerable, scavenging for bits of food like the family of rabbits I once saw in our front yard. I'd swing high on the old rope swing that hung from a maple for hours, wishing for something just out of reach.

One time, I tried running away. My best friend at the time, Katia, was staying with us over Memorial Day Weekend. It was the end of third grade. Soon, we'd have the privilege of ruling the Lower School, participating in the colonial fair, learning about astronomy, and shoving our way to the front of the lunch line without anyone whining to Ms. Mansfield that we'd cut them.

Maybe it was a sudden flame of rebellion I'd been struck with from the *Harry Potter* movie we'd just finished. Maybe it was the promise of summer just a few weeks away. Maybe it was the way Katia drew a heart around our initials on my hand.

I packed my bag, quickly, while Katia stood crying in the corner. My pink puppies, the three pieces of blue sea-glass my Dad had found for me by the bay, a pack of fruit snacks, no raincoat because I refused to wear one, the feathered headband Katia had gifted me.

Taytum, please don't go.

Come with me.

We made it to the hedge, hand in hand, before she let go and raced back to the front door.

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I awoke, tangled in white, linen sheets and stared at the crack in the ceiling. Exhausted, I arched my back, stretching my legs out into the cool May air. A shiver travelled down my spine. Its icy fingers lingered on my bare skin. *Are you watching me?* I paused. Didn't breathe. Didn't blink. The clock ticked; it was nearly two in the morning. And then, suddenly, you were gone.

I was alone again, standing beside the bus stop at 79th and Madison, praying that my parents would't hear the apartment door latch close hours past my curfew. A noise startled me and I turned, but it was only a man. He pushed a shopping cart filled with cans, dragging sandled feet

behind him. He was dressed in life's burdens: a ragged, green sweater and jeans that were once blue. I doubted that, if I asked, he would remember his own name, but he was wiser than I'll ever be. I watched as he crouched by the trash can on the corner. He reached inside with bare, calloused hands, pulling out untouchable waste. I wondered if I should help, maybe give him the dollar or two I had in my pocket; but I've always been taught to look away - ignore the pain of others. *Don't feel.*

With vacant eyes, I checked my phone. No missed calls from worried parents, no texts wondering if I'd gotten home safe. Just a smiling picture of us at the beach that I knew I'd have to delete eventually.

The bus arrived, shifting gravel on the freshly paved street. I stepped aboard, and the driver, seeing my red eyes, waved the fare.

Rough night?

I ignored her lonely banter and sat towards the back of the bus, gazing out the window at my sleeping city.

For a moment, I felt your hands caress my cheek. Memories resurfaced. Riding on the back of your bike to Carvel's as you peddled barefoot. Slow-dancing to *The Notebook's* soundtrack. Our first kiss on the dock outside the house Lily's family had rented that summer out in Long Island. Giggling over the truffle chips my mom insisted we try. When I lied to you for the first time. The crease in your brow as you waited for me on the MET steps. Laying in the sand because we forgot to bring towels to the beach just off of Ocean Road. When you tried diving into the bay and scraped your back on some rocks. Your lips pressed tightly together with secrets. The taste of burning guilt.

Stop.

I pulled my shaking legs back under the white linen sheets and stared at the crack in the ceiling.

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We began in New York and ended in Miami. At least, that's when we stopped yelling and started whispering. Regret triumphed over anger.

But even then, I knew, deep down inside, that it had all ended when you died on the last day of April back when I was seventeen.

We met in college. I was studying literature and Anderson was an aspiring businessman. He liked the way my hair swept over the books I read in the library. He liked the way I never met his eyes across the room. He liked my uneven nails. I liked his rough hands. I liked how he listened to my stories and never questioned or critiqued. I liked how, similarly to a novel, he helped me escape.

About five years after graduation, we moved from the small apartment to his late father's place near the beach. It was lonely at first, but he made friends with other women and I guess I made friends with our children. But they were always Anderson's children. It was always Anderson's house. It was always his bedroom and his bills to pay and his car collection and his boat and his silverware and his job and his espresso every morning and his sofa and his TV turned to ESPN and his traditions of opening three presents before Christmas and his life.

Our youngest, Brooks, had two buck teeth and they were all you could really see when he smiled. Blonde, curly hair wrapped around his little head and his eyelashes were long, but nearly transparent.

Harper was nine. She pretended not to believe in Santa, but she still wrote lists to him every year and always insisted that we get his reindeer carrots. She loved gymnastics and would often get scolded by teachers for doing handstands on the jungle gym during recess. She got along well with most girls in her grade, especially Amelia and Emma who were always at our house. I was friendly with their mothers, but when we met for up for lunch, our conversations were filled with judgement and gossip.

On the last day of April, about two years after our wedding, the housekeeper found Colby in front of the gate to the driveway. I brought him straight to the hospital. He didn't cry once as the nurses poked him with needles. I immediately called Anderson, insisting that we adopt him. *Whatever you want, Taytum.* Anderson was in Singapore on business and couldn't fly back in time to see Colby. That's what he told me. But according to his assistant, who I later found out had shared his bed, he was in the Bahamas. *Oh, you didn't know?* If I couldn't have Anderson, at least I could have you again.

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Yellow tulips were my Mom's favorite. They reminded her of spring. May, she said, was rebirth.

So we sent your family yellow tulips in May. I wrote a note by hand in blue pen, sealed it in a crisp, white envelope. And that, somehow, should have made me whole.

It isn't your fault. You didn't do anything wrong. He loved you. You loved him. He was in pain.

When I was ten, Riley died. Then Darcy's dad died. Then Baron, my Nana's poodle, died.

How does a parent explain death to a child?

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My freshman year of high school began with hello and ended with see you. See you in two weeks. See you in two more. See you over zoom. See you behind a mask. See you if you've been tested. See you next year.

I met Tess and Maddie and Carolina that year. We wore skirts to school with black tights underneath. Our hair was always straightened. Expensive shoes, designer bags to carry books in, gold bracelets, pearl earrings.

I loved Tess the most. She lived across the street from me and we would walk to and from school together everyday. *See you tomorrow*, we called, as she ran across the street to her building. She wore this purple jacket during the winter months. It was large and puffy. I remember holding her hand inside the pocket of that jacket. *To keep us warm*, I told her, *my fingers are cold*. Over the summer, when we exchanged the crowded city for crowded beaches, we would lay on her roof, listening to music and counting the stars. *Make a wish*, she whispered, and my heart fluttered.

I remember we went to a bonfire one night. It was August. The breeze carried songs from the ocean and we all swayed to their rhythm as we walked around, chatting up boys much older than us.

Tess had let me borrow one of her tops. It was blue, which brought out my eyes *in the most beautiful way*, she had exclaimed. I hated the straps and the plunge of the neckline, but wore it anyways.

A boy there, named Jameson Cohen, walked up to Tess. I knew from the way her lips parted slightly as she listened to him drunkenly rave about his new car that all hope was lost. I pretended to see someone I knew in the crowd, leaving her alone with him.

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Three yellow walls. Green, linoleum floors. Yellow tulips beside the bed. Cards in white envelopes scattered on a chair. He sat on the bed, now, hands in prayer. I wondered if he was praying for it to be over.

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Katia and I stopped being friends in fourth grade. We were in the same homeroom class, but she sat next to Mary and I sat next to Annie and without saying a word to each other, we simultaneously chose to forget.

Riley Sandler, sat across from me at lunch that first day. Mrs. Cummings, who sat at the head of our table, introduced us. Riley was new to the school and didn't have any hair. She had moved to the city from Quebec with her mère.

Riley immediately became friends with Katia and Mary and Francesca, who all seemed to have something I didn't. Instead of playing tag or manhunt during recess, they would huddle together near the teacher's bench, throwing their heads back every so often in laughter. Sometimes, I would watch them from the top of the jungle gym, wondering what they were saying.

There was this one corner of the playground we called the sad corner. I sat there in the turf more often than anyone else, brushing my hands through the fake grass and feeling miserable over nothing in particular. *Where's Taytum?* My few friends would ask. *Did you check the sad corner?*

I took my first real test in October on the fifty states and their capitals. I got a 98 and Katia got a

100. In PE, we learned how to play volleyball. Katia was first pick every time. I was close to last. English was my favorite class because I loved to read. But Katia could read faster and she knew every word without having to look it up. I was better in Spanish, but the following summer, Katia had a tutor and she was moved a grade above everyone else.

I walked in Francesca's shadow. Everyone did, even Katia and Riley. She had perfect teeth without having ever worn braces. Her hair was blonde and her eyes were gray. She wore jewelry to school even though we weren't supposed to and her uniform skirt was at least three inches shorter than everyone else's. I never met her eyes in the hall. Maybe it was out of fear. Maybe it was because I knew I would be put under her spell. Maybe it was because I secretly loved her.

Riley reminded me of a shell I had once found on the beach. It was a clam shell, but more beautiful than the others. On the outside, it was plain and simple and white, with little grooves running through it. I remember running my fingers along those grooves, tracing them like the life lines on my hands. When I flipped it over, I nearly cried. It was as though Nature herself had painted the inside with salmon pink and orange and a little bit of yellow.

A few months later, she was dead. I imagined her in heaven, running through a field of yellow tulips.

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Waves grasped at the sand on the beach before being pulled by some invisible force back into the sea. Salt sparkled in the air and fluttered through the breeze like crystal snowflakes. I breathed it in and out and in and out and in and then held my breath deep in my chest until my mind grew fuzzy and the mood began to fade. I exhaled, letting out those broken emotions I had been holding within me.

Tess.

Katia.

Ellie.

All the girls I had loved.

Riley.

Darcy's dad.

Baron.

Grandma Ginger.

All the people I had lost.

The bonfire continued while I stood stationary on the outskirts, stuck in a moment of reflection.

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Three yellow walls. Green, linoleum floors. He stood by the open curtain, as if pondering whether to leave or stay. His fingers moved rapidly on the screen of his phone. I wondered briefly if he was texting my Brother or my Mom or my Dad or our children. But he was smirking and doubt crept into my mind. I closed my eyes again, all hope leaving my body as I waited for death to come.

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It was the night of your sixteenth birthday. We'd licked chocolate cake from our fingers,

laughing at nothing and everything and anything. Your mom had taken our photo and you'd complained, but she'd insisted. Later, we moved to the living room. You put on *Crazy, Stupid Love*, our favorite movie. We recited the words to the opening scene.

I got you something.

You didn't have to.

I handed you a black box tied with a black silk ribbon. You made a big deal of opening it: untying the ribbon slowly, admiring the gold letters beneath it, gently shaking the box and guessing that there was a basketball enclosed within it. I laughed and called you a silly goose because I knew you hated it.

I watched your face, carefully, as you unfolded the wrapping paper. I studied the slight smile on your lips, the size of your pupils, your flushed cheeks.

I love it. I love you.

You swept me up off my feet and swung me around and around until you grew dizzy and fell back on the couch, pulling me down with you. *I love you too.*

You took me to T-Bar the following weekend. We sat at a table by the window and we watched the people walk across town. You wore the shirt I'd bought you. It was green like your eyes.

What's your deepest secret?

I don't have any, I told you.

July. August. September. October. November. *I love you.* December. January. February. March. *I love you.*

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Love fades like a golden sunset. It is a momentary beauty. But slowly it disappears from the sky as the burning light that enflamed it falls beneath the horizon.

I was his sunset until other suns grew more brilliant and he turned towards them instead. I was his sunset until my belly bulged with children and I could barely walk. I was his sunset until our nuptial night turned to morning. I was his sunset until his pockets grew deeper and deeper.

The other suns came and went, but I remained through it all, an everlasting star to protect him from scrutiny.

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The sheets rose and fell, gently. The blinds weren't closed, which was unusual, and a dim light in the shape of our window was drawn onto the wall closest to my side of the bed. Almost childishly, I held up my left hand, casting a long shadow across the light. I was reminded of the shadow puppets my youngest brother and I used to make inside pillow forts. Twisting my hand, I formed different animals. A coyote, a rabbit, a snake. When I spread my fingers like roots in the ground, I noticed a small bump in the shadow of my ring finger. I glanced over at you, still

fast asleep, and removed the diamond ring.

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You had been clinging to our relationship as if it was your life. And I had selfishly taken it from your grasp, strand by strand, until you had nothing left to hold.

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Three yellow walls. Green, linoleum floors. He was finally gone. I blinked, adjusting my eyes to the brightness of the room. That's when I saw you, sitting in the chair, smiling at me with those green eyes.