

Fault Lines

Juniper loves going on runs right before the sun goes down, saying that it adds a bit of urgency, racing the disappearing light - and I watch as she easily trots back toward me, from the opposite edge of the hill, shoes crunching on the loose bits of rock and scattered, fallen eucalyptus branches. I somehow always seem to forget how much effort I have to put out to keep pace with Juniper, every time I see her tight ass in those tiny black shorts, wandering around our small apartment. I'm built like a swimmer, with narrow hips and broader shoulders, so I can take on a fair amount of weight in the gym and my strokes in the pool are good, but I just don't have the legs that Juniper does and watching her run is like watching a seagull skim the waves with its pointed wings.

"Come on, Grace!" She says. "The view is fantastic!" Narrow cheeks flushed and dark eyes flashing, Juniper lightly punches my shoulder then bounds away, reminding me of those adolescent wolves I'd seen on national geographic, flaunting their youth and glossy spring coats, shiny as new grass. My hackles raise at this small arrow to my pride, and I sprint after her, swatting at the back of her shoulder and laughing and narrowly avoiding going over the edge as I make a sharp right, and end up on my ass.

Juniper lets out a laugh and I feel my stomach tighten with both annoyance and desire. I turn my back to her and listen as she walks slowly over to where I'm sitting. I watch the striated muscles of her quadriceps flex, with something akin to hunger, as she sits down next to me, and resist the urge to run my finger down one of the small creek beds that her taut muscles have forged in the side of her slim thigh. But I don't know how Juniper would take that; she's a tattoo artist for a parlor called Body Canvas, and we've gone clubbing, just the two of us, dancing right

next to the speakers, our bodies pressed against one another as the sound waves thrum through us. Yet at the same time she'll spend hours by herself reading something random and beautiful like, translations of obscure Russian poetry, or ornithology books, finding a corner seat in a coffee shop or even just the aisle of the city library. She never bothers to ask me if I'd like to join her, and I just want to shake her by her sharp little shoulders and yell, "What am I to you?"

So I resist the urge to touch her, and sit on my right hand, letting the pebbles press into my skin, and look down at Berkeley winding below us. I catch flashes of bright blue or pink; some of the more eclectic houses are hand painted, expressions of vision or quiet originality that I appreciate. I start tracing our running route, trying to identify all of the streets below us; this is an old habit I'd gotten into when I lived in Montana with my parents, and my father and I would go out for long rides through the open fields, to check for gaps in the fencing. I'd learned to find landmarks- a split oak tree in the southwest corner of our property where I'd seen barn owls erupt from the center at twilight- things to keep me on course and hold on to like totems to remind me where I'd been.

Juniper loves getting lost, and frequently does, taking random buses without consulting a route map, making her obscenely late for many of our lunch dates, where I end up burning my tongue trying to gulp down soup I order last minute, waiting for Juniper, before having to get back to work at the specialty running shoe store, Roadrunner. When we see each other back at the apartment I end up ignoring her, which she in turn ignores, until I throw my hands up in the air and yell, "Where the fuck were you? I had to sprint back to the store to make it on time."

"Good thing your uniform is athletic gear," she'll say, trying not to smile. "Did you burn your tongue again?"

“Yes I did, and you can get me an ice cube from the freezer now that you mention it.” I say, before beginning to smile myself.

“Had enough resting?” Juniper says, standing up quickly and bringing me back to the hill, and the night, and my unfulfilled desires. She pulls me up, and I watch as parts of the tattoos tracing one of her forearms- a tiger and a phoenix- move and flex. All of Juniper’s tattoos she’s done herself. Her tattoos are detailed and intricate, the colors realistic but tasteful; she said she has a modest collection compared to most other tattoo artists- she has about five tattoos that I can see, though I wouldn’t mind searching more thoroughly for any others.

The wind picks up and I suddenly feel cold in all the places that I’ve sweat, and the smell of the eucalyptus trees below us hits me sharp and rich. Juniper’s turned to me straight on, and I look down at the dark blue cotton shirt she’s got on and I can see the material just below her left breast shivering- her heart beating. Before I can stop myself, I close the two-step gap between us and place my hand right there, and feel the center of her vitality and it’s glorious and terrifying. I find her eyes almost defiantly, wanting her to know she’s not the only one who’s spontaneous or interesting, that if she were with me, I’d make it worth her while; I’d treat her right. “Juniper.” I say. She smiles softly, and lets my hand linger for a few more seconds, before gently but decisively brushing my hand aside. I can see that she’s starting to think too much, her eyes are clearing or clouding, and she’s not perfect, and neither am I, and I’m not her usual order of a six-foot-tall guy, and things just don’t come so easy to girls with dads who don’t love them or are dead. I feel like sprinting off into the semi-darkness, feeding my embarrassment, my hurt to my muscles, letting the fibers burn them away. But as I look over at her, her pale skin tinged light blue in the twilight, I realize that I want her too much to leave her alone; I’ve swum out to

the buoy and have found out too late, that I'm too tired to swim back to shore. We start our way down and home in silence, Juniper falling once again into her break-neck pace, and me falling behind a little. Still, I'm far from giving up, and as she turns her head to check for cars, I think I see a slight smile.

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One cool August night when Juniper and I first started to live together, we started having one of our late-night talks and fell upon the subject of parents. We'd found that both our mothers had been control freaks, pushing us to those extracurriculars like piano and debate club, ones that kill a social life and instill less character and more resentment. Juniper is an only child, and her mother became clinically depressed when she was ten. "It was like I could see her fading, like watching taillights of a car driving through the dark." She paused and swiped away a stray hair from her eyes, her hands hidden in her sleeves. She looked over at me nervously, as we both felt the plate glass barrier between us begin to melt. Juniper said that she thought that her father had always loved her mother more than her anyway. "He needed her to need him," she said and I could tell she was no longer there but back about ten years, her short dark hair suddenly long and in braids, "He would take her to their bedroom and turn off the lights, and I remember thinking that that was just making it worse, that he was making it worse, but the way he would look at me if I tried to go in with them, told me I was the one who got in the way." I watched her brown eyes shine beneath the lamplight and I'd wanted to kiss her so badly, to lay my lips on her wound despite the blood, but instead I got up and made us both a cup of tea.

When I sat down again, both of us clutching at the canary yellow mugs, I told her about my own father. I told her about Montana, and growing up on a cattle ranch, with two oak trees

and a tire swing and a sweet sheep dog, Rowdy. I told her about my Chinese mother always pushing me to do something with my life, to study harder, and how much I'd disappointed her when as an undergraduate, I'd said I didn't want to go to medical school, that I was majoring in art. Six years later, I can still hear her voice trembling through the phone, as she quietly told me that I was making a huge mistake, and that I could forget talking to her every Sunday, since I was apparently doing just fine without her help, before she hung up. I'd stood there, cell phone in hand and felt loneliness and fear flutter in my chest. I'd never truly stood against her before, and she was still the mother who had held me at night when I was little and tribes of coyotes howled and roamed in the fields outside my bedroom window.

I told Juniper about my father. How I called him a Viking because he was so tall, with a big barrel chest that seemed to amplify his thunderstorm laugh, and had big rough hands to wrap around ribs and lift you in the air above his head, his grey eyes sparkling, and the straightest smile you ever saw. One day in January, when I was in fifth grade, he went out to check a line of fence in the south east corner of our twenty acre property, and on the way there his horse spooked and threw him from the saddle, and he broke his neck and that was it, and for a while Mom had no idea what to do about anything, and I had had to fill the spaces for a while, before she had sold the ranch and moved us to southern California, where her sister lived in a nearby town, and the only sound I heard from my window was the rush of cars and the occasional screech owl.

After a medium moment of silence and weighted thoughts, we looked up at each other from the steam and ghosts swirling in our tea. I say I think I might go to bed, and get up to head

in the direction of the living room, where I'd been sleeping for the past few months, when Juniper asked if I wanted to start sleeping in the same bed.

We'd both put down offers on the place, a decent sized apartment in downtown Berkeley, with a full kitchen and an open-air balcony. The building owner had contacted us both, asking if we would like to exchange contact information and see if we wanted to split the rent. So we'd phoned each other and had met in Philz coffee shop where they steep grounds from around the world, and the drinks have names like, Purple Haze. Juniper had been a half hour late. She'd shown up in a loose black button down, and tight jeans torn at the knees. The edges of a tattoo on her chest played around the lower rim of her shirt. I'd said yes almost immediately.

But from this, and the way she'd said it, I'd gathered that we'd be sleeping next to each other and not "together." Still, I feel a rush of excitement flow through me, and sit back down, trying to pass for casual as I say that I wouldn't mind having a door at least.

"We're cut from the same fault-line, and," she paused, something I liked about her, how she always seemed in constant exploration for the right words or clarifying metaphors without seeming preachy. "And, I like you." My eyes moved a bit too quickly and I surreptitiously searched her face, moving from her amber eyes, down her straight nose, along the shallow lines around her cupid's bow mouth, but could discern nothing. I'd told her about my being gay, and she'd laughed and said that she'd always wanted to kiss a girl, before she had put the final touches on her makeup and flown off to go pick up guys.

From then on she'd be a bunch of mixed signals, like a broken traffic light, where the drivers are all on edge and looking at each other, waving hands through windshields, while legs pump gas and brake pedals simultaneously and really no one gets anywhere fast.

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There are times when I find myself reconsidering my mother, and I realize just how intelligent she is. It's not that I ever thought that she was stupid, it's more that I am amazed that someone can see so far into me, like those portions of the ocean, that are so clear you can see the coral reefs and the blades of seaweed from miles up.

When I was in high school, and my best friend of five years had gone to the principal's office for the seventh time that year, for cutting herself in the girl's bathroom, my mother had told me that I, like her, cared too much. My friend's name was Jennifer Coleridge. Jen had told me about her parent's divorce, and her older brother's drug problem. "My life is shit, Grace." she'd said one day when we'd been sitting in my room, my mother having just poked her head in to make sure we were studying before dropping off some smoothies she'd made us. Jen hadn't even touched her drink, and looked right through me, her voice lifeless. Her vulnerability pulled at something inside me that automatically made me want to protect her, to wake her up and see her smile like she used to. I'd told her that I cared about her. And I did. More than I could ever tell her. I loved the way her dark hair was cut close and boyish, and the way her shirts were always a little too short. So when I'd heard she'd cut herself, I'd skipped class and tried to call her every five minutes, pacing the baseball fields until my mother came to pick me up, livid when she'd gotten a call saying I'd missed three of my afternoon classes. I hadn't even thought about it. But somehow, when I told her about Jen, me crying so hard I couldn't breathe, she understood. "I was afraid you'd be like this," she said, but when she looked at me, it was with something close to sadness, as opposed to disappointment.

"What?" I asked.

“You’re like me. You’re a fixer, and as a fixer, you’re drawn to broken people. Just like I was drawn to your father. I thought I could help him, could make him change.” I knew she was talking about how Dad drank too much sometimes, how he got so angry, and silent, and the lines around his face arranged themselves in a way that made him unrecognizable. “It’s something I’d hoped you could stay away from, because let me tell you, kiddo, this life, my life, is not something I want for you.” We turn a corner, and the sun flashes bright through the yellowing leaves of an elm tree. I feel like she’s just told me about some sort of malign genetic trait that’s been pasted down to me.

“I really like Jen, that’s all. I just think she’s worth more than she knows.” I look down at my hands, and I wish that I was with her, that I could hold her and press my lips to her wrist and tell her to never do that again. “It just hurts so much.” I say, and look at my mother, as if she could take the pain and anxiety away.

“I know it does, Grace. But you just can’t let people pull you down.” She shakes her head, and I know now that she knew she wouldn’t be able to change my mind about Jen. That I would follow in her footsteps. Because I have. I feel the same way about Juniper, when she leaves to go fuck strangers, and party until morning, as I did about Jen. I can see the strain loving Juniper is putting me through, rise to the surface of my skin, in the bruised circles beneath my eyes, and the way my jeans fit better because sometimes I just can’t eat I work myself up so much over her. Jennifer ended up killing herself our senior year, and I lined her up right behind my dead father. Not Juniper though. Never Juniper, and her wonderful smile, with her naturally straight teeth and the way she laughs with her whole body when she’s happy. I’m too fucked up, and I think that I just don’t deserve another death any time soon.

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My time living with Juniper is full of these wonderful, shining moments where she drops her guard and I catch glimpses of what we could be, like breaks in a thicket of trees where the path home lays waiting and sure. Once, the day after I'd told her my mother was in the hospital for having chest pain, Juniper came home from her shift at the tattoo parlor, with red dahlias crinkling in plastic paper and thrust them at me, saying, "I saw these blazing in the sun on Fulton Street, and thought of your shoulders and the way the sun hits your skin." To which I had no reply but an open mouth and a hurried thank you. Another time when I was sick in bed, she got in with me and slid her cool hands over my burning back, and I'd started crying because the fever left me tired and bare. She curled up behind me and whispered that it would be all right, and in a choked voice I asked why couldn't it always be this way? She laughed softly and said that really, she had my back, and who says it couldn't? We fell asleep that way, but halfway through the night I felt her slowly shift away- a universe between our backs.

Other nights, when I didn't need her- but I did, I always do- she just won't come home, some times two, three days at a time and I race through my own day half awake and half dreaming up all the terrible things that could have happened to her, my phone in hand in case she's gotten lost, or taken, or needs me; I'd run to her no matter what. But then she'll be back by night number four and telling me about what guys she met and fucked while shucking her clothes and putting on a tank top- no bra, holy shit- and those damn black shorts, and climbing into bed next to me asking me if I could rub her back, because Enrique apparently liked weird positions, and I'm back to square one.

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It's October, an evening that Juniper is out, and I find myself at home trying to pick out a song on my guitar, pressing my fingers hard into the steel strings, while the candles I'd lit and set on the floor around me—I have a thing for unique forms of lighting and should Juniper come home early, how sexy would that be—flicker with each violent strum. The phone rings, and I spring up, nearly catching the edge of my jeans on fire, and am surprised to hear my mother's voice on the other end. We'd sort of made-up my senior year of college, me saying that I planned on getting my work featured or, after a couple years of raising money, that I would try for a master's of fine arts degree. Still, things hadn't been the same, and I would only come home for Thanksgiving and Christmas, and she barely acknowledged the fact that I was gay- it was another big bump in the Chinese-way road. So when she tells me that she's just sitting at home with old Rowdy, and figured she'd see if I was home, I have to make up some mental ground and say it is nice to hear from her, and that I am doing fine.

“Where's that roommate of yours. The skinny one with the dark hair?” I could hear her smiling. My mother is a mesh of walking contradictions; her iron principles and higher-than-the-moon expectations, contrasting brightly with her blunt humor and hunger for excitement. “It's why I came to America when I was eighteen.” she used to say, laughing and leaning back in her chair, her long hair up in a messy bun. “Real Chinese girls can't have fun until they're married, and then all they do is cook and play Mahjong. Fuck food and Chinese dominoes! I wanted to go to Fleetwood Mac concerts, and marry David Bowie.”

“You mean Juniper?” I ask her, laughing. “She's out dancing. I told you, Ma, I'm not screwing her.” I put my guitar back in its case and walk over to the candles on the floor, phone in hand, and blow them out, watching as the tiny scrolls of smoke dissipate into the air. I sigh.

“What’s up, babe?” she says. I can see her sitting at the kitchen table, leaning far back into her chair, a cup of jasmine tea steaming next to her, and I for a moment I wish very badly, that I am there with her. We could talk about the latest celebrity gossip and eat salty chips from the bag. I could fall asleep in my old bed, and there would be no one to wait up for, to worry or hurt for, at least not at so close a range anyway.

“It’s just that, well, I do like her. I really like Juniper, and...” I try to explain and condense the past couple of months that she’s missed, the late night runs, the sleeping in the same bed. It’s her turn to sigh. I hear her chair creek as she leans forward, and I know she’s about to get serious, her Chinese is taking over.

“Well, Grace, I think she does like you.”

“You do?” I interrupt, I mean if my mother thinks that...

“Let me finish. I think she likes you, but it sounds like she’s not the type of girl you want to get involved with. She needs a lot of work, that one. She tattoos people’s asses for a living, and she sounds flighty. She sounds like your father.” I can feel myself getting angry. I walk into the kitchen and get a glass of water, slamming the handle of the tap down a bit too hard, and wince.

“What do you mean she’s like Dad?” I ask, even though I know exactly what she means, and have been worrying about my obsession with Juniper the basket-case for months now. I check the clock on the stove. The neon green numbers read eleven pm. Juniper won’t be home for another three or four hours probably. I wish she’d told me what club she was going to.

“Your father was funny, and charming, and handsome. But he had his issues.” She says, pausing, and I know she’s taking a sip from her tea. “Your father needed someone like me.

Someone to tell him how strong he was, someone to do the stroking. Don't you remember when he'd get upset? When he'd come back from a hard day out in the fields, when cattle prices were getting low, and how he looked? He wouldn't even say hello to you, when you asked to be picked up." She sounds almost like she's pleading her case, after all those years of hard Asian parenting and, our shouting matches, but really she doesn't have to. She and I were always on the same team, somehow, and I did remember those nights, and as I sat in my dad's lap on his good days, I could never truly relax, wondering if that other man he turned into would suddenly come back, his grey eyes growing dark.

I listen as my mother tells me to be careful, because ultimately, I am like her. "We are the pillars, Grace," she says, and I can feel her brown eyes searching to hold mine in her laser stare. "Juniper needs someone to hold her up, and I just don't know if you want to be the one to do it."

I tell her thanks for the advice, and it's been nice talking to her. We discuss whether I'll be coming home for Thanksgiving as usual. Fair chance I will be. She says Juniper's welcome to come too. I laugh and we hang up on better terms than we've been in a while. The stove glows twelve thirty. I go to bed, listening for the sound of her shoes on the hardwood, like the heavy clunk of my father's boots as he walked through the door, not sure whether I want to be awake when she does come home, so I turn my back to the door, and try not to feel sad.

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Juniper and I have been running for thirty minutes and are about halfway home. It's been a few weeks since my mother called; I never told Juniper about our conversation, though ever since then I keep wondering if I'd be willing to carry her. Before crushing my doubts with

thoughts of all those times that Juniper was there for me, and the way she can make me laugh, and how she looks when she reads me poems by Neruda.

Night is rustling its wings as it settles in, and the streetlights have come on, creating eerie pools of off-orange on the sidewalks. Juniper is taking us on one of her winding routes home, weaving through one-way streets, and the less-than-safe suburban neighborhood, where broken down houses have fences overgrown with vines and knee high crabgrass. I start to feel uneasy. Every now and then men in hooded sweatshirts and beanies swagger by, some even call out to us, commenting on our “assets.” Juniper ignores them completely, and I keep them in sight for as long as possible, listening for the sound of sneakers behind us, while leaves skittering in the gutters make me twitch. Juniper’s three hundred meters ahead of me and turns a corner, so I lose sight of her. I speed up and am about to yell for her to slow down, and maybe we should take Haste Street instead of Blightly Way, which will lead us into a better neighborhood, when a sound like a gunshot rips through the night air. I hear Juniper scream my name, and I run toward her faster than I’ve ever run, shoes swiping the ground like matches being lit. Just as I reach the corner Juniper bursts out from around the other side, and presses her face into my chest, sobbing hysterically.

“Juniper! What happened? Are you all right? Fuck!” I hold her away from me and scour her body for bullet wounds and blood, but find none. She shakes her head, eyes wide, and looks over her shoulder ever three seconds.

“We have to go,” she pants. “We have to get out of here, I saw this guy get shot. He got shot, Grace. Right as I was running toward him. This other guy, he comes out of his house and points his gun right at the guy getting in his car and just shoots him in the head.” “Holy fuck, I

saw his brain, pieces of fucking brain!” She drags her hands down her face hard enough to leave white marks where the blood’s been momentarily pushed away. My mind whirs, and all I can think to do is hold her tightly to me. So I do. I pull her to me and hold her for what seems like five years, and thirty seconds at the same time. All my senses feel amplified yet drugged. I judge that we’re about a quarter of a mile away from where it happened, a fair distance away from most things, but entirely too close for a shooting. I listen hard for the squeal of tires, or voices yelling, any sign that the shooter is coming our way, but all I can hear is the buzz of the streetlamp above us, and it’s deafening. Juniper is calming down slightly, her breathing evening out, but she keeps her face in my chest, and for a moment I feel like apologizing for the sweat, but we’d run three miles, and I don’t think she cares. I kiss the top of her head; her hair smells dusky and sweet, a combination of sweat and her shampoo. *Don’t*, I think, as I feel her lips brush my clavicle, *now is so not the time*. “We should get home, June.” I say to her gently. She nods her head into me. We turn and start heading back the way we came.

“I don’t remember how to get back.” She says, covering her face with her hands. “What is wrong with me?! I’m so sorry, Grace.”

“It’s okay.” I say, putting my arm around her. I’d memorized the way home, just like in Montana with dad.

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It takes us an hour to walk the three miles home, yet our slow pace seems to have dragged the energy from our bodies. It was like our minds had simply shut down in the wake of grasping that we’d been so close a man being murdered. Juniper is taking it harder than I am, and everything seems like a joke to her. I let her unwind and loosen, afraid to slam her back to reality

so quickly. So in the narrow kitchen of our one bedroom apartment, Juniper Carson and I decide that a dinner consisting of protein shakes and margaritas sounds perfect. Or just margarita protein shakes. Or tequila protein shakes. We're sweating and ravenous. Juniper pulls out the blender. I pour the tequila. We both can't stop laughing through our glasses of water—at least we'd be hydrated—and think that we're definitely on to something with this alcoholic protein shake business.

I tell Juniper to put in whatever the hell she wants, that I forgot to check the mail this afternoon, stepping quickly out the door and down the stairs. Through the thin apartment walls I can hear her running the blender. I get the change I'd swiped from the dish we keep on the counter while Juniper had been adding the frozen strawberries, and place them into the pay phone at the bottom of the stairs, near the parking lot. Moths fly and bounce off of the concrete walls and ceilings above me, and I have to duck when they swing too low. I call 911 and report the murder. Better late than never I figure, though I doubt my or anyone else's efforts will make the worse parts of Berkeley any better. The operator asks for my name, I tell her I'd like to stay anonymous and hang up. I walk back up the stairs, feeling better and much worse at once. I think of Juniper, and teeter back towards better.

The shakes taste terrible. The tequila made the protein powder clump, and had completely over powered the fruit we'd added, but we are twenty-five and independent and already high off endorphins, each other's company, and the death of a man. The alcohol hits both of our systems like lightning to a metal spire, our pumping hearts, and quivering muscles, fresh and vascular, absorb the drink and set us spinning. "I'm never doing this again," I say, fingers clamping down on the cold counter edge, my forearms flexing, but I feel nothing, like they aren't

mine. Juniper laughs, and leans against the fridge hard enough to rattle the bottles of orange juice and beer inside, and I imagine the half a roast chicken turning to the hotdogs and asking, what the hell you think is going on out there? I laugh as well, feeling giddy and breathless all of a sudden and I can't tell whether it's the tequila or because Juniper suddenly walks over to me and meets her pelvis with mine. *God yes*, I think and she leans in smiling, bending slowly to run her tongue from the rise of my left breast to my collar bone, raising her dark brown eyes to meet my pale green ones. "I didn't know you where..." *what? that drunk?* But she just continues to look at me silent and steady.

She knows what she's doing. This is intentional. It's not a mistake, and hell knows I've been wanting this, wanting Juniper Carson, since the day we met in a coffee shop five months ago. But then I see the realization, the memory drag through her mind, and watch as she comes back on, lights go green, and the reason why we're holding alcoholic smoothies, and why the front of my shirt is damp from sweat and Juniper's tears, is almost too much to bear.

"I need to take a shower," Juniper says, closing her eyes, taking off her shirt and throwing it disgustedly to the floor. "Let's take a shower, Grace," she says, and I can hear the, *I don't want to be alone, tonight*, at the end, giving me mixed feelings about Juniper and how the desperation hanging around in her eyes makes me find her irresistible. She takes my hand in hers, and pulls me up straight, out of my thoughts. I flip the kitchen light off as we pass the switch, but I figure the tequila smoothie can wait to be washed until morning.

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Juniper Carson is mine, I think as I lie in bed next to her, feeling her breath light and warm on my shoulder. Juniper Carson, who is strange and sexy and wounded. Juniper Carson

who is all long limbs and stretching torso, and watching her move is like seeing a scarf descend from a dying breeze, effortless and smooth. She shifts in her sleep, turning toward me, placing her arm across my chest, fingers curling unconsciously around the chain of my necklace, like she's attempting to ground herself while she dreams. My heart beats a little faster and the feeling I get in my fingertips reminds me of fireworks I've seen at Fourth of July, the ones that burst into sprays of gold dust that crackle and shimmer on the way down. I pull the covers up over her shoulder, and listen to the sounds of Berkeley at night. Somewhere amidst the hush of car wheels and distant buses, notes from a violin—played poorly—flow through the cool air.

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When I wake up, I know immediately that Juniper is no longer beside me. I know she's not there like you know that it's morning the second before you open your eyes and see the silver light painting your bedroom walls. I feel deprived. Sighing, I look up at the ceiling, and think of how I should feel ecstatic that not only did I have great, mind blowing sex with Juniper Carson, but she was the one who initiated it. For months I've wanted to hold her, to run my hands over every inch of her body, letting the millions of tiny sensory receptors in my palms pick up the texture of her skin, the weight of her limbs, her heat. And now it's like I've acquired her body's signature; I have access to all of those everyday movements—Juniper extending her arm for the sugar in the high, right hand cupboard, the feeling of her back and shoulder muscles tightening to complete the action, Juniper shifting from one foot to the other, the muscles in her thighs alternately flexing and contracting to support the small shift in weight. I can look at her, watch her and feel those delicious, and almost imperceptible changes in her body from across the room.

Yet, reaching over to Juniper's side of the bed, I can feel that the sheets are as cool as if she hadn't even been there. I throw the covers off and get dressed quickly, finding a shirt on the ground, my shorts clinging to a chair and my bra tumbled amidst the sheets. As I pad down our narrow hallway, feet feeling the shock of the cold hardwood, registering the crumbs, I'm still holding out hope that Juniper will want me, need me the way she did last night. But it's more than just needing to be needed; it's Juniper coming home with red dahlias, it's Juniper reading me poetry, it's Juniper leaning over me, her bangs tickling my cheek as she meets her lips to mine. It's Juniper naked next to me, moonlight striping her skin through the blinds, and two tattoos I've never seen before.

I try to walk quietly into the kitchen, but my knee clicks loudly, cartilage catching, and Juniper turns toward me, a cup of coffee held out, her hair sticking up in all directions. She's unearthed my old bus route maps from my desk and has them scattered on the table, and she smiles faintly. "I don't want to get lost again," she says. I set the cup down on the counter and pull her to me, thinking, I could hold her up, that I'd love to be her pillar, or at least a crack on the same fault line.