

Chihiro

re.occurrence

(leo mara)

'Inland of odd. Land in odd.'
- a f*cked up and forgotten friend.

A sudden crash sounded from inside. Rattled ceramic shrieked through a few doorframes and the open interior of the good-sized ground floor flat.

"Is, are you alright?" Allison called inside, turning fringe and attention from the unending conversation in the garden instead toward the yawning patio doors.

Isla came through the aesthetic mismatch of her rented home, the scattered, rebirthed furniture, decorated shelves, gathered books and framed work. She passed her well-kept armchair and said "Shit, that hurt," when she returned outside.

Her fantastically tattooed arms were encumbered with two boxes, one on top of the other, each the size of a harder-edged picnic basket.

Allison twisted the screw of a silver bottle opener into a stubborn cork. "Are you alright? Did you hit something?"

"My hip. On the shelf in the hallwa-"

"Ils, that was like five minutes," Amy interrupted, "That's not 'digging'. Where'd you dig?" She persisted, casting assumption, "Under your bed?" picking her glass up off the coated aluminium table's circular open weave. She washed stain of the last cigarette from her mouth and sat back in one of the matching chairs going around the garden's table.

"Would you rather they took longer to find?" Isla deflected. "I'm all for making this eventful as possible, we've said for so long we were going to do this. If you want, get us some shovels, Amy, and we can get on a bus and go bury them somewhere on the coast, see if we can remember where to dig them up again." She bowed forward over her table, pursed her lips for Amy.

Amy lifted off her backside. She reached over, the cuffs on her hoodie retreating from her wrists, and put a cigarette between Isla's shaded lips.

"Light?" Isla asked, her pupils moving over to Allison.

"Oh," Allison left the opener's screw plunged, "yeah," and scurried one hand about emptied bottles to pick her disposable lighter up and set fire to the treated cigarette.

"Thank you," Isla managed to utter.

"Baby, you get some sleep. Kisses." Pari spoke tenderly into her phone, crossing her plain sweated arms. "Cuddles, too." She stood on the grass, just outside the perimeter of solar lighting. Away from the slate grey, four-person garden set, the centre piece of furniture for the late evening gathering. "Love you so much."

"Help me. Make space. Part the glasses," Isla asked as smoke crept into her chest, and she either needed to breathe it out or spew coughs. She aimed to land the two boxes onto the table's weaved spiral and set her hands free.

Amy picked up a bottle at a time. Any which wobbled, tipped or fell she swept back up and lowered instead to the irregular stone and tufts of unmanaged weeds beneath the gum soles of her relatively new trainers.

Allison grabbed the cleared-bar-crumbs platter and the princesses' fortress of beer bottles and wine glasses, hastily relocating all of it daringly closer to the table's rounded edge to make a purposeful space for the boxes. She swiped the wet of excess wine drips and other drabs dampening her fingertips onto the sleeve of her casual dress.

"Have you looked at any of it since putting it into the boxes?" Amy asked.

"I haven't," Isla answered, blowing smoke at the fairy lights she strung over the short square of patio, wrapped and strangling weak fence post and cracked plastic gutter. "Except." She flicked blonde curtain off thickened eyelash and earth-shadowed eye. "Wh- What was I at University? ...twe- twenty-two..."

"Think of the first time you'd slept with someone," Amy suggested, thinking then about the first time she slept with someone.

Allison imagined a whistle blow. "Hey."

"That wasn't to be mean," Amy casually pleaded, "You said that was the first-"

"I know." Isla wasn't offended. "No, the boxes were a present. They were for my twenty-fifth birthday."

"Oh my god, that's more than a decade ago. Why're we so old?" Amy whined, rubbing the lines on her forehead, envisioning more silver through her naturally near bronze hair.

"We're not old."

"From Grady?" Allison supposed, tracking back, "Were they a present, from Grady?"

Amy turned to Pari as the youngest of the four mates came back to fill the last seat, "Who's looking after your little boy tonight?"

Answers to both questions came simultaneously.

"They were," presents from Grady, Isla confirmed, re-tucking her collared sweatshirt into her pale denim shorts and taking her seat again at the round table.

Pari held her glass out. "She's with Rudra's mum."

Allison poured, and she asked Isla, "What were you saying a moment ago, since university..." before then topping up her own glass as well.

"Thank you."

"Oh. So- yes... I've looked," Isla admitted, peppering ash onto dislodged stone.

"You *have* looked?" Amy wished to confirm.

"One look. I looked once. That's all though, in the last decade. And honestly, I was searching for a few specific things for work and found what I was looking for, so I didn't properly sit down with all of it and relive it again."

Amy scratched her head and pushed her fingers through her hair. "Alright."

"Fuck doing that on my own anyway."

"Should I be afraid?" Pari dared to ask, looking at Amy, then Isla. She felt a chill in the late July, nine pm atmosphere.

"We can save this, we don't have to go through it tonight," Amy offered.

"No, I think we- I think we should, I just wanted to know what to expect. I'm here for it, but I'm also aware I don't want to be more scared for Ro."

"It was all scary to us once, Pari, is what I'd say to warn you," Isla cautioned, taking another drag, "But we're much older. And it was different when we were younger."

"Less emphasis on the much, please." Amy reached a requesting hand over to Isla. "As much as that is true."

"Should we look inside?" Isla asked everyone and fit the diminishing cigarette between Amy's pasty pink painted fingernails.

Pari swallowed. "Let's do it."

"Open the boxes," Allison directed.

Isla nodded first before sliding the box on top of the other onto the table. She pulled it even more towards herself as Allison and Amy caught a glass forced out the way, sliding on its base like a stubborn penny.

"Silence, please," Isla requested, amidst the silence. "Montre-moi de la pisse."

"Show me piss."

Amy stopped just as she fell back in her seat and was about to put what was left of the cigarette between her lips. "What? Show you piss?"

"Montre-moi de la pisse... is 'show me piss'," Allison translated. "Show me some piss. Montre-moi le passé, show me the past..."

"Montre-moi le passé," Isla retried.

Allison grinned. "There it is."

Lid lifted off the first box, Isla side piled and revealed a set of dense, variably sized and mute toned, hardbound sketchbooks and photobooks.

"Oh, wow." Amy stole one of the sketchbooks and parted its pages.

Isla tried to hand another to Allison but saw she was fixed to the same pages as Amy. She offered the next book to Pari instead.

"Ils, is this Quenton?" Through her glasses, Amy fixated on drawings on the white page. The pen work was intentionally distorted, obscuring depictions of a slender, male child with obvious deformities. His head as well as his arms were reversed. A hundred-and-eighty-degrees turned from torso and a correct lower body. A face disguised by effectively drawn motion blur.

Next to the full-scale drawing, was another. A disconcerting portrait of the boy's face.

"Backwards boy?"

Backwards Boy

The weather was shit. Not literal poo, but it was sad. Carpeted with colour-sapped clouds that casted infectious depression over the conjoined English housing estates. Scattered were trees, their spines restrained and cable-tied to yellowing bamboo uncreatively contained in rectangles cutout of slab and tarmac pavements and potholed crescents, ways, and avenues. Patches of sun-bleached grass were trodden to death and underlying dirt. The estates were quiet. There wasn't much movement about the lilac and daisies, repeated amber and beige brick homes and pebbled drives except the occasional

reversing car, dog walker or desperately torn ice cream wrapper. It was a Tuesday and for reason unknown, the nearest school was closed but presumed to reopen the next day.

Three fourteen-year-old girls and a younger boy changed back out of their ill-coloured uniforms at seven-thirty am. The dry toast and chocolate or honey cereals were yet to be properly digested. One of the girls picked up the landline in her hallway and called the other three children to coordinate their squad on a certain nearby corner scheduled for as soon as possible.

Feeling a skewed adrenaline from the mystery of their school's unexpected closure and the estates' surrounding silences, they chose to play a daring game. Owen and Allison knocked on strangers' front doors before all four together ran away and escaped, hoping they were not seen. The first two houses were new doors. Addresses undisturbed by their game until this day. The third house approached however, was victim to repetition. Owen seemed drawn to this house on every occasion that the game was played. And whenever they might've walked past it when coming home from school or heading out to park or field, he would turn in its direction and glance at the windows.

Owen knocked once and led the reactive dash. Only, he stopped hardly ten metres from the front garden. No one came to the door. The girls were relieved because they'd mimicked the boy and stopped, too, waiting to see whatever he was doing.

Owen snuck again up to the door. The three girls, Allison, Amy, Isla over his shoulder readied at a safer distance. As he gripped the silver knocker, held it away and suddenly whacked it hard against its counterpart more than once, his heart vacated. Through the narrow panel of obscured glass, he saw striding movement. Panicked, he left his arms, scarpered and ran as fast as his legs let him away from the house. Rather than flee straight, he shot around the first corner. The three girls tried desperately to keep up, escaping as fast as they could as well.

Owen slung around a slanted lamp post some ways down a roadside pavement, turning into an outcropping of white shuttered, time-stained garages. Shoving, accidentally-tearing, flimsily stretching bags of waste, spilling aged bean juice and the stickiness of tossed apple cores onto his fingers, he reached a jagged panel of broken fence leant against the outcroppings brick perimeter. Despite the pungent scent of urine, he crawled into the narrow gap, hid under the splintering fence like a startled insect.

The three girls rebounded about the outcropping. Two followed Owen. They squeezed as well behind the toppled fence. The other burpee'd, descended fast to her palms and stomach and dragged herself under the low axles of a dent-freckled white van.

Heavily breathing, a pudgy man jogged along the aligning path.

Between them, the children still lacked enough of a clear sight to accurately track where their chaser's attention was led. The girl beneath the van watched his unordered footsteps. She saw that he crossed the road, moving away from the garages as whispers trickled from behind the dumped fence.

Owen escaped his hiding place, stumbling over the overfill of binbags. Amy followed right after. They rushed out of the outcropping and back in the direction the four had come from. Treading the other side of the road, the man looked back toward the noise of pattering laces and jogged after Owen and Amy.

"We were knocking on doors, Owen thought it would be clever to hide around the corner instead of continuing to run like we always would. It's what we always did, and we were always fine," Allison shared with Pari, playing with her cheap lighter. Turning it over onto its end and on to the other on the garden table.

"I think he thought he needed to hide because we'd knocked at the same house twice, and he panicked," Amy explained, "He had a weird fixation with that house, do you remember? But I remember he said he'd seen they were by the door when he knocked again."

"So, he instead hid," Allison said again.

"Which was fine," Isla added, onto her third cigarette of the evening, "He hid. And we all hid with him. We were alright hiding. The man from the house who was chasing us caught up and he started to move on, but Owen fucking shot out and got seen again."

Amy sipped her wine, swallowed. "He saw where we were hiding."

"He hadn't seen us." Isla disagreed. "Owen soiled himself. Figuratively on that occasion. It makes sense you thought we were caught, because you ran straight after Owen. Allison and I stayed put."

Amy pushed her glasses up onto her brows and rubbed the bridge of her nose with her index. "I thought we all ran?"

"No," Allison confirmed, "Isla's right. I stayed behind the fence when you both went. Came out after like a minute and helped Isla get out from underneath the van."

"And we met you back at Allison's," Isla said, "Claire, Michael, 'Mr and Mrs Allison' weren't home. We let you in when you made it there, locked the door again and hid inside still anyway. Don't remember why, but we were whispering and crawling around the rooms on the ground floor."

"We thought that big dude might've followed you to my house and he was going to see we were in there."

Believing she heard the side gate unlatch, Allison broke away from the other girls spread uncoordinatedly over her parents' kitchen floor. She dragged her legs across the lino onto the carpet flowing into the living room. She looked around for anything to hide under. The sofas were too close to the floor. Chest of drawers too close to the floor, TV stand too close to the floor. The curtains? The curtains were apart, although she envisioned wrapping herself inside one and keeping just outside the view inwards through the beside wide set of windows.

In the toilet segregated from the rest of the downstairs bathroom, Isla sat on top of the white lid. Her scabbed knees were up near her chest as she stared beyond corridor and through into the kitchen. She saw Amy had moved out of sight, maybe out of the kitchen entirely. The doors on the cupboards beneath the sink were misaligned. Cereal bowls and washed and water marked glasses were bone dry on the draining board. Silver taps shined, and petals drooped over a potted plant kept on the windowsill.

Through the window, was a small head.

This was unexpected. The head of a younger child unfamiliar to the girls. Its discoloured set of eyes peeked at Isla.

Allison kept behind the curtain. She held in her stomach, stayed on her tiptoes.

But then she'd screamed suddenly because a child in ordinary clothes, head impossibly backwards, slammed its whole muddled anatomy against the double-glazing. It beat the glass with immature fists, smeared greasy fingerprints.

"It wasn't only the one time." Allison held a separate card page with another of Isla's incredibly painted interpretations of Backwards Boy. "He'd appear if we were doing whatever outside and decided suddenly to run either to mine or Isla's house."

"And Amy and Owen always shat their pants." Isla rocked her chair. "Allison and I used to wait for the little backward fuck. But he, if I'm right to remember," Isla looked to Allison, "he never came unless we ran inside first? Even if we hid and tried instead to chase him, he just wouldn't appear from wherever he ever did."

"Owen shat his own pants. Not mine."

"What?"

"That's right," Allison said. "Yeah. No, Backward didn't play. Although, I suppose... you could argue he did play along? He might've worked out he was never getting inside. Maybe he couldn't. Owen used to leave the door open and still he just chased us in circles while we waited to see what window he'd pop up at. Especially when we tried to get him to go to the wrong window."

"What was the 'wrong' window?" Pari asked.

"It was something like the windows we had eyes on so he wouldn't make us jump."

A nostalgic sense of adrenaline tickled Amy's heart as she looked, too, at the paint. Memory of the long summers. Days unending, long before uninspired colleagues and plain offices inconvenienced her realms. "I don't remember that he ever got it wrong."

"He didn't," Isla confirmed.

"These were a part of your degree you said before, Is?"

"Third year," Isla yawned, exhausted even by thought of the time consumed compiling childhood recollections and producing abstractly detailed interpretations, "yeah."

Amy skipped to another question, "Do you think it was the house?"

Allison laid the painting back as it was as a bookmark between led-scarred pages. "My parents' house?"

"Do you think he's still alive?"

"Hadn't thought about it, but I guess when I think about it now, he never gave up while I lived there..." Allison turned a page over, "And I'm not sure, we might've been too young to have realised that at the time?"

"True, he only left us alone when you moved, Ali."

"Shit. We left Quenton," Amy realised, the jacketing comfort in recalled innocence slipped off her shoulders. "Poor boy, what if he's alone still on the estates?"

Allison's own put away emotions teased return in tingling her upper arms and mind as she appreciated a last impression of the Backwards Boy. In this even smaller painting, his arms hung, eyes were downward, pupils toward the undrawn ground.

"I hope he's still terrifying teenagers."

Pari picked herself up on her chair and brought it away from the patio's edge behind her. "Unless he ages?"

"Oh," Amy changed her belief, "If he ages normally, then I hope he has a hot wife and three little, weird-limbed child-chasers of his own."

"He might cover *more* estates if he's reproduced."

"Aw. I hope so."

Spider Face Chenille Wrong Stilth
Yeux Blanc Compartment Ushtuk Ari

Was Isla conscious? She laid in a creaking, pine bed, the frame staining and slats bowing over time. She alternated ears on her top pillow, trying to sleep as soon as possible when the time tipped over to one am on her clock. The mattress felt like cheap cushion laid over a fill of bony elbows and blunt nails.

Isla read until two because she couldn't sleep. At two, her eyes finally fought harder and won battle against her intrigue in what was going to happen in the next chapter. Ribbon in place of bookmark, she put the novel down and shut her eyes.

There were footsteps outside her room. Quieter were voices. The voices of her parents who were downstairs.

It was September. Lack of air conditioning, window locked, Isla sweated under covers. When she awoke, she laid in an expanding shadow of perspiration. Desperate for water, she opened her eyes, refamiliarizing her barely conscious mind with her bedroom, the walls, posters, drawers, and unorganised clothes. There was one thing different. Something that wasn't usually there.

That thing was a jarringly enormous face. An unmoving, colourless, adiamorphic face larger than an average male torso, partially hooded by lank, prickly extensions contracted like the retreated legs of an arachnid. Intensely and uncannily expressionless, it stared at Isla with white spotted pupils.

Isla heard her parents downstairs again.

The spotted eyes stayed on her. She closed her own eyes and hoped it wasn't there.

When Isla moved her attention on, she heard it crawl closer. Closer to the bed. Closer to her. It was almost as though no sound was heard, instead rather an unassigned sense that told her it approached.

Isla hovered outside the modular classrooms of her first primary school. Except the classrooms were realigned. And the teacher who looked after the only other class in the school, was present. And then she wasn't, and the classrooms moved. Two dogs barked.

Isla held her eyes shut when the dream first processed and then rejected another desperate attempt at slumber.

She felt it hadn't left her room.

If she were to look, it was going to be beside her.

Afraid to, Amy asked, "Who did you find?"

Allison tipped the parted pages of a battered A5 sketchbook toward Amy.

"Who?" Isla asked, holding an aged photo of Amy, red-eyed and sitting on roots.

"Frontward girl?" Pari quickly quipped, winding screw into another cork despite fair anatomic warning. When she tipped her head forward, she felt the wine pull.

Amy sniffed. She dipped nails into the straightened lines of her hair again. "I don't know that I can talk about it."

"Tell me," Pari suggested. The cork popped. "Share. Please?"

Isla straightened, moving up in her chair to see the pages and what it was Allison and Amy referred to. "Oh." She saw. "Yeah. Fuck. That was actually terrifying. The hardest to recreate with oil paints because I don't know I trust my own memory."

"What do you mean?" Allison asked, having an idea of exactly what Isla meant.

"I remember that all I saw was a massive, unmoving face with spider legs around it. I mean, not 'all', that's extremely terrifying, but what I mean is, it wasn't that unoriginal. I don't think it even had a face."

"No?"

"No. Do you know what I mean, do you remember? It's- It's like it's inside my head as two versions," Isla poked her temple, "a translation which is what I saw as a teenager, the massive face, white eyes, ten legs, and the other version is how I visualise it now as an adult."

"What do you mean translation?"

"To make it make sense to us when we were teenagers. How do you describe something if it's unlike anything you've ever seen before?" Isla asked rhetorically. "We said it had spider legs. It didn't. It had ten legs, and they weren't furry or scaly or like anything that we can... Do you remember? And back then- then that I was older in university, I tried to paint what it looked like if I didn't try to compare it. I used to describe it to classmates as 'roadkill'. Because roadkill never quite looks like what you quite think it should."

Allison sort of understood, "Interesting."

"Like I say, it was the hardest." Isla massaged her throat. "We also never saw it not in the dark."

"You got all its names written down," Allison read through the scribbled list. "Do you remember them still?"

"Face spider," Pari offered.

"That is actually one of them. Well. It was Spider Face, but same difference."

"Oh, wow."

"Chenille. I remember Chenille," Amy added, her expression like she'd eaten rotten pineapple. She twisted the loose lid off the bottle of tequila she bought and brought. "Which was French for crawler?"

"Six left," Allison counted.

Amy gave in, "I don't remember any others," and poured herself a shot.

"Wrong"? Was 'Wrong' one or am I wrong, was that something else?"

"Wrong's right," Allison verified. "And we made up 'Stilth', 'Yeux Blancs'."

"White eyes."

"...Compartment', 'Ushtuk', and 'Ari'."

“What did it do?” Pari asked, “Was it just there watching you some nights?”

“I’m going to the bathroom, scouts.” Amy got up. “And only to pee, but I’m going to take my time until I’m sure it’s safe to come back out here.” She skirted around the table, careful of the emptied bottles about their feet. “Please make some sort of noise when you’ve moved on from talking about Ari.” She went inside.

“Is she okay?” Pari checked.

“She’s fine,” Allison felt, then took the tequila and another shot glass.

“What was it?”

“The thing in our bedrooms? This probably isn’t a bad impression,” Allison showed Pari the small painting, “I remember it more cartoonish. It’d hide in my room, walked on *eleven* legs I thought. Had an extra leg on its left. It came into Amy’s and Isla’s bedrooms. Not mine. And I don’t think Owen’s either. It came in if we were falling asleep. Often in the summer as well, when we sweated.”

“If you were asleep, it’d take you,” Isla said. “If we were asleep, it would take either me or Amy. It’d pick us up and carry us to elsewhere in our houses. It picked out different spaces. Gaps, or other holes in or under furniture and it’d fold us into literally impossible ways that you couldn’t get yourself in, in ways in- in where if you tried, you’d break your bones. Once we were folded, it put us into the holes.”

Pari’s reaction was silence.

Allison let that silence be. It felt like validation.

Isla finished the scene, “And it’d leave you there, and crawl away.”

Isla was afraid to move. With enough thrust, she might have come unknotted before she’d escaped the fridge. Rather than dislocating arm or leg or fracturing her spine, she feared headbutting shelf, knocking over sauce or spilling milk and waking her parents. She wouldn’t have suffocated. The door was left ajar, and the cold, inside light marked a widening line on the kitchen’s floor.

Isla moved too soon. Chenille saw and right as it was about to crawl into inexistence, it instead froze. It turned its white eyes back to the cold storage.

Not knowing how else to react, Isla frantically unfolded herself before the muscular pains grew so intense that she could no longer stop herself crying out. For as long as she moved, Chenille retraced. When she stopped only for a moment, so did Chenille.

Pari stayed focused on Isla who rubbed muck off her garden table with a wet fingertip, “Until?”

“Until you were sure it was gone. You had to stay there, wherever it put you, and you’d fall back to sleep. If you tried to move right away, it just turned around immediately and picked you back up, reknotted you, and put you in the same space again. Once it left the room you were in, it hid. Again, if I tried to go back to my bedroom, it put me back. You just had to go to sleep with your head in your vagina or elbow pressing into your tit so when you woke up, you’d know that you outwaited it.” A shot of tequila. “That was Chenille. Or Ari.”

Following a brief pause, Allison impersonated an erratic alarm, “*Wrok. Wrok. Booopp.*”

Pari looked at Allison, wide eyed. Her impression that Allison was the most grounded amongst the four of them might've altered.

Isla recognised what Allison was doing. She made a similar and yet, extremely different siren with her own chords, "Wee. Wee. Wee. Wee."

Eventually, Pari understood and so, she joined in, too. "Awoo. Awoo. Nuuuuuuuuuuuuuooooooooooooorrrrrr."

Two Sides

Amy hesitated.

The plastic lid of the toilet reversely bowed under the weight of her backside. She slouched, hung her chest ahead of her parted knees. At first, she thought she heard the women outside and could be partially relieved to half-hear the conversation had moved on from Ari and onto something else creatively embodied. Through the house, the conversation sounded less cathartic. It quaked and fluctuated in volume and tone. The back-and-forth utterances and interjections quickened. The breaks between inputs were less relaxed.

Were the women arguing? Amy was sure she heard arguing. Or at least highly suggestive traces of an argument. Certain muffled voices first acquainted in childhood environment. She shuffled nervously. She tore off toilet paper but was not yet ready to stand.

It wasn't Allison. It wasn't Isla and Pari. Their conversation in the garden went on as the argument came closer. It fluctuated. It fell to whispers, then changed in tempo and shot up in volume before another descent. It sounded to Amy, like an interaction between two women. A confrontation. Two sides nipping the ends off each other's constant counter arguments. What little Amy was able to decipher, she felt imitated their get together. Stirred impressions. She heard Pari's accent with Allison's intonations. Isla's loose swearing, Allison's bluntness. Another impersonation of Pari. An unlivid argument played out with their characters, then *stop*. It cut. And the voices vanished.

A knock followed. A hard slam which shook the bathroom door and rattled the gold bolt. Amy shot an arm forward, ready to try halting the door if it were flung open.

"I mean the thing literally was iridescent smoke. Smelt of burnt toast, and honestly, a little bit like c-u-m," Pari spelled out, then swallowed her third sip of a second shot.

"Oh. Which... I'm hoping, you didn't know," Allison replied, "when you were that age?" as she again played with her lighter and surrendered to a cigarette.

"No," Pari answered, "No, it was a swimming pool, like chlorine, was how I probably would've described if I'd had told anyone when it happened."

"Was it friendly?"

"I'm not sure that it was... Which is upsetting to think now."

Weight on top of her. Weight of nothing regular.

Pari stood, a little shorter than the shade on the side table's lamp. She stared up at the smoke which never rose. Which rather, held in place. Levitated above the heavy chest of varnished wooden drawers. Its interpretable scalp flattened against the textured ceiling as she might have imagined an aggressive expression.

Pari pulled a chair out from under the dining table. She aligned it beneath the shimmering cloud, clambered onto the chair's base and reached for the lowest wisps. Her dark braids frizzed. The surface of her cheeks, few moles, and dress dampened. A sultry ambit hung below the smoke. Pari scuttled off the narrow chair and went to the family home's wall-hugging stairs.

As she went one step after the next, the shapeless presence wetted the ceiling as well. It turned textured white to a puddling shade darker where flakes of ruined paint peeled and few shed like flakes of snow through its body and down towards the drawers. Pari was curious whether the smoke was cause for the mould in other rooms. Moving to the highest where there was still view of the ceiling, Pari crouched and put her shoulder against and arm between banisters. She reached again, feeling more of the smoke. It was a feeling without similarity.

As she peeked through the bannisters, she saw the smoke reshape. A sad, gritted expression formed.

"Did it feel like anything?"

Pari searched to find the repressed sensation. Through her skin, through a stutter in her breathing, a fear of someone finding out, she reconnected pieces. "Felt a little bit like hair. Curlier hair. Like pubic hair."

"It did?" Allison questioned, breaking from her cigarette. Facing Pari with not quite fully processed suspicion.

"Pubes?" Isla said.

Amy returned to the garden. She sunk back into her unlevel chair and looked warily at the two open books, glad not another featured night stalker was in view.

"Speaking of versions or altered states. It'd be one of two. It could smell like burning," Pari described, "Like a petrol station crossed with when the crust falls off toast and gets stuck inside the toaster and when you use it again the next morning, the piece that's stuck is completely incinerated. When it smelt of burning, if I could reach it, it'd feel like melting marshmallow. Light, and sticking all over my fingers except there wasn't anything on my fingers when I took them out of the smoke."

Blurred visuals of Pari's father played in her thoughts. He held her hand, helped her onto stool, asked she hold out her hands as he pumped the soap dispenser and ran the hot tap. They washed their hands together.

"What have we moved onto?" Amy asked, attention retargeting the conversation.

"And sometimes it smelt of seamen and felt like pubic hair," Pari hastily rounded off, deciding then to down the rest of her shot.

Again, Amy wanted to know, "What have I missed?"

"Do you think it's possible," Isla wondered, "that you were cupping a ghost?"

"Did you find the toilet, Amy?" Allison asked, quietly inviting her back into the circle.

"Yeah. Otherwise, I'd have asked you where the toilet was when I just came back out."

“Alright, bitch,” Allison said without malice. “You okay? Are you done? Or do you want another cigarette and to keep looking through our troubled childhoods?”

“I’m good. But I want more beer. Were there anymore bottles or did we finish them?” Amy asked the group as she scoured both table and stone for a bottle with a cap still on. “This isn’t everything I’d thought you kept, IIs, by the way. We had more photos.”

“It’s all here, Amy.”

“Where are our photos?”

“Two sides’.”

Across pages were a collection of pencil sketched, inhumanly attached humans. Two-up-to-four persons in each sketch were merged into each other, connected unevenly and uncoordinatedly by rigid bone, cramping muscle and pulling skin.

The eyes of one homo ingredient seemed to follow Allison’s from the book. “Are some of these our parents?”

“No.”

“The others are less familiar- No?” Allison checked the pages again. “Really?” she asked with emphasis put on surprise rather than the doubt she instead felt. “Is that just me? I see your mum. Okay, and I see your dad, I see both your parents in this drawing, Is. And Owen’s parents. Or his mum and his stepdad.”

“We never saw Two Sides,” Isla said. “I pulled from imagination on those.”

“We had Two Sides in a photo,” Amy contested. “If you had the photos, IIs.”

Allison couldn’t recall... “Did I experience Two Sides?”

Amy used the nose light of the bought-from-aunt mountain bike to see what she was doing under the cover of darkness. She hung the unlocked padlock through a belt loop on her baggy jeans and yanked at and pulled open the shed’s door as it routinely caught its sunk bottom edge against the garden’s grass. She wheeled the wet-tired bike in. Moonlight and a distant streetlamp shone through the single pane window where the obverting oil-greased towel came away. A pale radiance reflected on all the rusted metal, shears, a spade, broken bike pump.

From the end of the back garden, Amy saw the lights on in half the rooms in her home. She was unsure if she heard raised voices inside or expected them out of routine.

Marching toward the house, she paid less attention to the stepping stones she’d always hopped across a few years earlier but was still careful not to crush any snails. The grass was wet under the soles of her scuffed ‘work’ trainers.

Amy tried the conservatory door, hoping not to need to return all the way around to the front of the house. Fortunately, it was unlocked. Purposely so, she assumed.

She peeled her trainers off and dropped her misshaped rucksack first before going any further. She considered the contents of the fridge. What there probably was, and what she’d had wished for instead, ingredients to make something less troublesome, fast, and however else suitable for dinner at eleven pm. She picked a potato out a top cupboard when she spotted a crystal on the floor and then, scattered, a few tinier specs of glass that shined as she shifted her head.

With a dustpan and an older brush, Amy swept the shattered fragments up and tipped them into an emptied granola box already in the bin. In that card box, there appeared the

rest of the drinking glass. And in the sink, was most of a second broken glass with drips that hadn't escaped down the drain.

Amy tucked the potato in the microwave and searched the rest of her home. The door to her parents' bedroom was closed.

In bed, Amy left her skin. She chewed, swallowed the last buttered and barbeque-sauced mash then put the plate on her bedside. As she searched for something to watch, she heard voices. Two voices. Two sides of a multi-tempoed altercation. It went from cries to whispers. Noise which moved up against the wall of her bedroom, powerful enough to drown the competing volume of her television.

As shadow moved beneath her bedroom door, Amy begged not to be pulled in. For it not to involve her in its woes.

"Not that you ever told us," Amy replied to Allison, noticing Isla didn't have a shed in her garden.

"...I know it was more prominent before Owen and I had our moment in time," Isla recalled, "And then after we'd stopped. We never saw it entirely. We heard it more than we saw it, caught a limb or a shadow before it disappeared. Like A-R-I."

"I can spell, IIs," Amy nipped.

"Sorry."

Amy looked left, "Allison, if you want to talk about the shit we were all involved with, we should talk about Alice."

Alice

Allison confronted her laces. She felt off-balance. She felt an amplifying desire to cut short the adult sleepover and take a cab home. Wake up in her own bed, shower, and suppress past experiences once more.

"Amy, are you purposely being a shit?" Isla asked, scratching a forearm and pushing another finished bottle inwards from near the table's edge. "If you sneak off to the bathroom we'll know it's not Ari you're thinking about again."

Amy smirked, toying with a second tequila. "*I'm* being a shit?"

"Girls, you are fantasising about a child," Allison reminded them.

"No!" Isla exclaimed.

"I'm doing no fantasising." Amy threw back the shot, "*Ugh*."

"No. No, me either, no, we're not. And Alice was eighteen, she was—"

"How do you know she was eighteen?" Allison asked, bringing her face up. She yawned, then carried on, "And if she was, to be honest, to think about her now given that she wouldn't have aged... it feels a little predatory."

Amy wiped wet from her lips. "Are you serious?"

Isla said, "She was older than us, Ali,"

"Was," Allison picked out.

"Yes. Was. When we knew her. In the context that we're talking about her *in*."

“And if she hasn’t aged?”

“Ali, I can’t tell if you’re fucking with us. What?” Isla put her elbows on her seat’s armrests. “Alright, and if I can’t know her age, how can you know she hasn’t aged?”

“We don’t know what she was, and whether it ages.”

“Yeah, stalemate.”

“Could she be the mother of Backwards Boy’s backwards children?” Pari dared joke.

“Could be,” Amy entertained.

“I promise you, Ali, she was eighteen. Or, then she lied and just told us she was,” Isla was sure. “You’re going to say again I was obsessed with her after I say this, but believe me, she said she was eighteen, and I know that... because I was fixated on the point that she was older than we were. Which, in fact, makes *her* the predator. Even still if Amy wasn’t giving her much of a choice.”

“You still think I liked her?!”

“In Amy’s defence, Is...” Allison eyed the contents spilled out over the outdoor table, “if we’re considering who’s got boxes under their bed, keeping paintings of her inside of it-” she said while half chuckling.

“Well... then I’d agree... but I didn’t paint her. I didn’t paint Alice.”

“Oh, there’s no question who infantilised Alice,” Amy fired. “Isla, you loved her.”

“Alright, infantilised is a little extreme. I admit I liked her, yeah.” Isla made her point, “We were children, so anyone who smoked and rode a bike and was, well for you guys, was of the opposite sex, was attractive to us and we liked, did we not?”

Allison thought again about her shower. “You didn’t draw her?”

“No. Because she was different, wasn’t she? We didn’t ever really know if she was one o’ us or one of them,” her words incidentally slurred. “So, it felt weird to include her when I was making these and still had dreams of becoming a successful artist and not a health and safety supervisor.”

“Never say never.”

“Did anything ever happen between you and Alice?” Allison examined.

Isla pinched her shorts, and sat suddenly unsettled, “I kissed her with my eyes closed.”

“When you were with Owen?”

“Mhm,” Isla admitted, “Yes. When I was with Owen.”

“Oh, shit,” Amy reacted.

“Okay. And now tell Allison what you were already aware of, Amy, please.”

“Nice. Thank you, Isla, pull me down with you, you cheat.” Amy said to Allison, “I fingered her, Allison, I’m sorry. That’s all I did, and it was long after when she’d changed her hair-”

“You fingered her? Amy,” Isla threw a hand outward, her dimples appearing, “I meant Owen. We knew that Owen made out with her. You fingered her?”

Pari followed an ant on the stone. She’d slowed down, leaving her drink to rest for a half hour. She asked Amy, “Did you ever think you’d apologise for a finger?”

Amy looked directly over the table, “I’m not sure that’s the first time.”

“I thought my experience with the smoke was intense. What was Alice? I hope that she was a lot hotter than the others if you were all trying to touch her?”

“She was a girl,” Isla first answered, “She-”

"She was Allison," Amy said.

"She was something."

"You're calling the girl who we should assume slept on the street, 'something'?"

"She was something," Isla repeated. "Clearly. We all tried to do what we could with her."

"We did. But... we appreciate, Allison, that we are adults now," Amy retied her laces, "And it may have been wrong as your mates, how much we got involved with her given that she-"

Isla lit the last of her cigarettes. "I wouldn't have stood in the way of Allison and Screaming."

Allison smiled.

"Bloody hell, ladies," Pari fidgeted in her seat, "how much happened while you were growing up? Is Screaming something as well?"

Isla sat forward, "Screaming was-"

"Wa- Wait- Wait... Alice," Pari asked, "Allison, did you say Alice- you say she looked like you?" She asked the group, "Did you say she looked like Allison?"

"They looked similar."

"Similar'?" Amy said, "Isla, she was her doppelganger."

Allison raised a hand, "I struggled to tell us apart... Only obvious difference, was her knees."

"Her knees?" Isla blew smoke. "What? What about her knees?"

"Oh... interesting. No one else knew? Okay. If you saw her knees, you all might've felt different about her."

Isla slouched to one side. She flicked ash off photo and book and disregarded Allison's words, "She had normal knees."

"You'd think unless you saw her knees."

"Amy," Isla turned, "did you see her knees? What was wrong with her knees?"

Allison gritted her teeth. "I almost don't want to tell you-"

"Because there was nothing about her knees," Amy decided. "You're pissed. And I said sorry for us. It was also decades ago that any of this happened, Alice."

Isla interjected, "Allis-"

Allison beat her to the correction, "Allison."

"Ali. Fuck." Amy pushed her palm onto her forehead and swapped over her leg cross.

"And you're saying I shouldn't hold onto any shit I'm still feeling. Do you want to talk about Ari again?"

"Okay. Fair enough." Amy shivered. "Then tell us what was wrong with her knees."

"Alright." A memory of water played in her head. Sitting on submerged sand, t-shirt soaked up to chest.

"Thank you."

Slow waves warped the unfamiliar face and hands unsuccessfully disguised under the mucky surface. Allison breathed in through her nose. She said, "There were a pair of hands on one, and a face on the other."

"A face?"

"What do you mean-? Did she- she had tattoos of a face and hands on her kneecaps?"

“Not tattoos. No. She had three wrinkly hands coming out of her knee,” Allison demonstrated, putting out her hands in front of her together as though cable tied at the wrists with her fingers like blossomed petals. “Like this. And then a living head trying to escape the other. Almost like she was pushing a mature-faced baby out of it. That’s why she wore super baggy jeans whatever the weather...” Allison eyed her own legs. “Those pet-friendly emo alternative vibes were above the belt exclusive.”

Isla and Amy both stayed silent in reaction. They scanned back over the courses of their memories of Alice, in search of a moment that contended Allison’s claim.

Pari imagined, but she asked, “What did that look like?”

“Weird... if you can believe it...” Allison answered, sarcastic. She continued to indicate and scale with her hands, “The head was a bit smaller than her knee. I remember it was sort of a paler colour... Had a disgruntled face... with small eyes that looked like they needed moisturising. They were white and crusty like eczema underneath-”

“She wore jeans that were ripped on her knees,” Amy suddenly remembered, tapping a glass bottle on the table with her finger.

No, she didn’t,” Allison replied. “She wore jeans ripped on her thigh.”

Isla coughed and caught splinters of spit in her covering knuckles. “How would we not see the bulge of a head and three hands through her jeans still?”

“You tell me, Is, I don’t think you were really looking at her knees. Or you, none of you, Owen included, *wanted* to see it so you didn’t see it.”

“You didn’t tell us. Why didn’t you warn any of us?”

“Did you forget? I didn’t know you didn’t know, and that you were actually taking turns to put your tongues and fingers in her.” Laughter fell out with Allison’s words. Her eyes were wide as she smirked. “And also... ‘warn’ you? Shallow.”

“Really?” Isla swallowed, then said, “What you would’ve married and had George’s children if he’d had a shrivelled mutant head coming out of his fucking shoulder, knee or toe, would you?”

“When did you see her knees?” Amy further investigated.

“Swimming.”

“Bullshit.”

Allison fiddled with a lighter, constantly turning it in her fingers. Her legs were flat and out ahead of her as she was half reclined on the mile-long stretch of mucky sand, stone, dried seaweed and departed pink shells. Her elbows were imprinted with the English shoreline pick-n-mix.

“I think we float,” she said, “I don’t think we move on right away, I think we get to stay a while, floating just higher than peoples’ heads. They can’t see us. And we just watch them until we fade away. Watch our families for a while.” She hung her head back, eyeing the clear, shortly-after-sunset sky. “What do you think?”

“I think we’re right to be afraid,” Alice shared, trying to balance a tower of pebbles beside her hip as she was lying down next to Allison. “I don’t think we go anywhere.”

The two over-eighteen teenagers wore similar mustard t-shirts. But the rest of their clothes, and their hairstyles and makeup were reasonably unlike.

“That’s depressing,” Allison thought, as she spotted a flickering star.

The pebbles fell. "Maybe."

Allison rolled over, dragging her limbs, causing the stones to make a reactive racket of noise like a hundred marbles or magnets knocking into one another and clambering down themselves. Once she was standing, she unbuckled her belt, dropped her jeans so only her t-shirt draped her underwear.

Alice looked. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going in the water."

"Are you high? It'll be so fucking cold out there."

"Fuck it. I'm not going to die," Allison replied, kicking off her trainers then immediately turning around and heading toward the calm sea. "Am I going alone?" she called back.

"I can't swim," Alice said loud, watching the pits of Allison's knees.

Allison marched on. "Then hold my hand and just don't go in past your stomach."

"Can you wait for me?" Alice asked, rising to her feet.

"I'm waiting," Allison said, stopping with her toes only inches from wet sand.

Alice gathered medication and cigarette carton and tucked them in her boots before walking after Allison, bare footed. "Can you turn around?"

"Yeah." Allison span. She watched the ocean. The waves which amounted to little, gathering over shallow water to surrender before reaching the drawn, surfacing lines and spirals of unseen insects in the sand. She scanned the ripples further off in the distance. The darker shaded lines easily mistaken for shoe, seal or sea creature.

Allison nosed before she asked herself why. She peeked over her own shoulder, catching a glimpse of Alice's bare legs as she took off her baggy trousers.

Screamer

Isla, Allison, Amy and Pari all laid down in a circle with their spines on the patio's stone. Arms and legs were all over, on stomachs, or fitted about the table and chair legs and bottles. Feet hung off, onto the near level grass. Their heads were all together in the centre. Blonde and dyed brunette slivered and tried to tangle and weave.

The overhead constellation of string lights singed their visions and exposed their unsober states.

"We are the dreamer." Isla announced with unchecked volume. "...dreamers."

Her eyes closed, Allison smiled at Isla's misstep before imagining her youngest son appearing in the garden, walking up to his mother and wondering what was going on.

"She-" Isla stuttered. "She is a Screamer."

"A Screamer," Allison and Amy both, followed.

"A Screamer," Pari caught up. "...Naughty."

"Together..." Isla went on.

"Together."

"To-"

"Together."

"We repeat the number five," Isla recited. "And we wait then, for her to arrive."

Their timing was awful. As a collective, the four women struggled to speak aloud the ritual.

"Five. Five."

"F- Five."

"...Five."

"Five. Five."

"Eight."

Allison slapped the back of Amy's hand as she held her own mouth straight.

"Five. Five."

"Did we call her 'Screaming' earlier?"

"Who's supposed to set up these rituals? Is the thing being summoned expected to sort it out itself?"

"Five."

Amy's stomach growled. "We definitely fucked this up."

"Screamer, my love," Allison spoke up, "It's been too long... if we have summoned you- if we've successfully summoned you, then please... speak." She paused. "Speak. Speak... now. Or forever hold your scream."

Isla rubbed her knee. "Scream, you fucking bitch."

Amy laughed. "*Isla*," she uttered, before a short silence was won. They waited for a certain fiendish response. The first since their earliest twenties.

A sudden scream spewed.

Amy had screamed. She spat by accident, and coughed and laughed as the other three reacted, hearts beating fast. Reactive to the noise, they all jolted. Pari's arms flew up, and her hands went over her eyelids. Isla's whole body responded, her spine hopping from the ground, shoulders stuttered. Allison turned enough onto her side to reach at Amy and slap her on the chin and teeth while trying to cover her wide-open mouth after she'd already stopped screaming.

Stood in Isla's compact kitchen, Pari vertically bended. Concentration proved challenging. Her pupils wobbled from sink to chopping board, to scraps of cracker and to a reflection of herself above sink, exposed by the overhead spotlights.

"I think you should speak with him for a moment," her mother said over the call.

"What's wrong- what's wrong with him? Is he not going to bed?"

"He was in bed. I'm not sure, I don't know, I think you should talk to him."

Pari contained a burp inside her own mouth. "You can't talk to him?"

"I can't talk to him, Pari, no." Her mother was impatient. "I think he should speak to his mother. Do you want me to tell him you can't speak?"

"No. Okay," Pari abandoned her contention, and desire to provide opportunity for her mother to be better with her grandson than she was with daughter. "Will you pass him the phone?"

Her mother went without reply. Scuffles took over for a moment before... "Hello," came from a small voice.

"Hey, frog." Pari spoke again with a gentle voice. "Is everything okay? What are you doing awake?"

"I tried to go to bed."

"Yeah? You did?"

"You were in the room."

Pari pitched herself with one arm locked straight and planted on countertop. "I was in the room? I wasn't in the room with you, baby, I'm with my friends tonight, remember? Through the night, so I won't be home until tomorrow. Was Mummy's mummy in the room with you? We can be easily confused maybe, if its dark."

"No," her son uttered.

"I wasn't in the room, baby. Could it have been a dream?"

"No."

"Okay. It was me?" Pari watched herself in the window's reflection. "What was I doing?"

He made an uncertain noise. A noise suggestive of an accompanying shrug.

"You're not sure?"

"I couldn't see you."

"Because it was dark? It's hard to see in the dark. How do you know I was in the room?"

"You were smiling at me," he answered, stuttering not out of fear.

"He thought he saw you standing near the door," Pari's mother interjected, speaking up, a little further from the phone. "It got him out of bed."

Pari asked, "Was it you?"

Amy perched on Allison's lap as they shared another cigarette and Allison read to her a pencil-written description, "...finding shelter at seemingly vacant properties along less developed streets."

"Where's Dalk?" Amy wondered. "That poor fucking dog."

"Was it a dog?"

"I thought it was a dog."

"What was its thing? Wh- What made it not a regular dog?"

"I mean..." Allison pictured Dalk, "the one eye. It was missing an eye and a leg. Those few minor details. And that we all were sure it was immortal as well."

Amy moved off Allison's lap, filling her own seat again. "Is it true about Alice's knees?"

Allison took a long drag and blew the smoke off sideways.

Isla watched her guests through the kitchen window before rushing to put on a battered oven glove, open the oven and withdraw a tray of fried goods to satisfy past midnight hungers. She slid the lot off the tray, onto a dinner plate and upon realisation that it'd not all fit, brashly transferred it all instead into a deep bowl. She tossed the glove, turned off the oven and headed back to the garden.

In the hallway before her living room, Isla heard something move behind her. The conversation in the garden was unbroken, and she was sure to have seen all three of the other women, Allison, Amy, Pari, relaxed in their respective seats.

Whoever was in the toilet, tried the handle.

Isla held still, her composure and her heart only just in their right places rather than in her throat.

They tried the lock next. It clicked, and the door opened.

Isla stood unprepared, except with hot food ready to throw. “Hi,” she said, “I thought you were outside.”

“No,” Allison answered and closed the toilet door behind her before following a slower Isla back out to the garden.

“Compelling as seeing all your old work has been, IIs,” Amy said with unclarified genuineness as Isla returned with a bowl of food, “can we find the other photos?”

“You want me to find the photos tonight? I don’t know where to look?”

“Are you sure that they’re here?”

“I thought they were.”

“I don’t have anything,” Allison thought to include, “I didn’t take anything when I moved out of my parents.”

Amy watched another photo on the table warped by bottle. She concluded, “Then they’re here, or they’re gone.” A figure in the photo seemed to move. “Why’re they not in these boxes?”

Unnoticed by the rest of the group, Pari peered over Isla’s dropped right shoulder, toward the open patio doors and into the flat.

Allison snatched a chicken goujon. “What happened to Owen?”

A shadow stretched and shot across the light left on in the kitchen. Pari saw that it was gone as fast as it was apparent. When Pari focused again on the conversation, she realised it had stopped.

Isla had frozen, soggying a bite of spring roll in her mouth, watching her home. Allison did similar. She’d all but stopped moving as her eyes looked for the source of substantial scatters. Amy lifted her backside off her seat.

Another wild scream zapped the setting. This time it unfortunately was not Amy. A wretched, dysmorphic being fell out through the patio doors, tripping on a corner of the crooked door matt.

As it flailed and aggressively thrust back to its disjointed feet, Pari, Isla, Amy, Allison leapt or rolled out of their chairs, tripping on the ground level crowd of bottles and removed shoes. Allison grabbed at Amy who kept her up as she almost fell.

They all desperately scrambled for the high gate to escape the property. The four caused and kicked broken glass, caught each other’s hair and choked and spit bits of food as Screamer, face masked, in underwear torn across its buttocks, charged at the table, taking no breather between its endless scream.

Isla held one of her heavy sketchbooks. She shoved Amy through the back gate ahead of her, then quick-turned and launched the Bachelor of Arts contents at Screamer as it caught up.

She missed completely. However, she made it out of the garden before even knowing. Screamer landed against fence. It dragged itself out the garden and after the women.

~~Le cut.~~

Le fin.

chihiro/thousand
re.occurrence
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