

2016

Spell 21: a senior thesis portfolio

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Madison Vilkin

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2016

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The Wrist

I stand on the tube, feet wavering as I'm pushed forward. I hate confined spaces. Sweaty, dubious people clawing at each other for a spot. The tube doors close. Accidentally leave something, it's gone. It's all about the individual. My chest tightens and aches for a few years ago when all I had to do was follow my twin sister.

At the next stop, passengers flood the entrance, pushing me towards the handrail. I look down at my hand, criticizing the crinkles on each pale finger. Glancing up, a delicate wrist rests just above mine. I look higher and see a man's face. His eyes are large and soft, skin crafted over his bones. He looks straight ahead with a relaxed brow. My lips fall apart. His warmth rushes through me, lighting me up. I inhale, fingers tightening. I want to creep my fingers upwards, grab his wrist and hold it, hold it so tight it burns. I yearn to caress stroke, kiss, protect his hand from the world. I want to draw circles and stars on his gentle wrist. My pointer finger pops upward and roams dangerously close to his.

The tube halts, announcing my stop. My fingers brush his as I shuffle forward. I'm walking through quicksand. I glance back just as the tube doors close, stroking my own wrist through my long sleeves.

"Woah," I whisper, sitting down on the nearest bench. I throw my head between my knees and try to ward off the unfamiliar sensations. "Woah." After five deep breaths I check my watch. I shake my shoulders quickly, snapping out of whatever mood plagues me, and join the pace of those around me, a mindless drone in the machine of London.

My mind greys over. I've travelled the route to my host house enough that I should have it memorized: I don't. I scan my surroundings, each face floating in and out of focus. The pink gardenias guide me through the front door.

My host grandmum peers over her newspaper, eyebrow cocked. “You look distraught.”

“I’m okay.”

“So you say.” She sips her tea from hand painted china.

“I’m going to use the bathroom.”

“Loo, darling. You’ll be here a few months. Try to blend in.”

“Will do.” I tromp upstairs, tossing my bags on the bed. When I first met Doris a couple weeks ago, I was dripping with sweat and confusion. My trek from Heathrow to the city left me rethinking my semester abroad. Though UW bored me, I found comfort in the predictability. Everything and one had a place. Mine was simply... simpler than others. My days were filled with reading, walking, occasionally coffee dates with friends and my sister. Everything was fine and familiar.

I splash water on my face in my small bathroom, drying off with a blue towel. Doris’ grandson is coming over for dinner tonight. She’s insisted we dress up. My closet teems with practicality: jeans, button downs, comfortable loafers. My sister was always better with this stuff. A flush of pale pink catches my eye. It’s the dress mom bought me before I left.

I remember when she gave it to me. She smiled, her cheeks flushed against her fresh snow skin. Her eyes actually shone with glee. *Don’t tell Margaret*, she’d said, *I picked this out just for you. Have a smashing time, sweetie. Let yourself fall.* I’d chalked it to up to sentimentality washing over her on the eve of my departure. But then again, mom always had a way of knowing what was going on with me... even before I’d articulated it myself.

When I was fifteen I was in quasi-love with Chris Bucatinsky. Every day, his face consumed me. I lived for periods 3 and 6, when I could see him in the flesh. I stared at his perma-shiny lips everyday thanks to the balm he kept in his left pocket. He'd taunt, tease, toy with me. But I pined for him anyway. The entire summer before, I concocted our dream reconciliation, where he'd realize he'd fallen in love with me in level one Spanish, too. He'd see me in the hallway, push through the crowds and envelop me in a warm embrace. *I've been thinking about you all summer*, he'd say, *I couldn't stop. Do you want to be my girlfriend?* I'd say yes, and we'd share our first kiss. But alas, the Summer of Chris led to the Fall of Chris. He didn't like me. And everyone knew it. A few teachers told my mom I'd been acting strange. She looked me right in the eyes and said, *You like a boy. And you don't know what to do about it.* I hadn't even told Margaret I liked him.

I rip the pink dress off and its hanger and change for dinner, adding a stack of gold bangles on my right wrist.

"Hi, I'm Oliver." Doris' grandson extends his pale hand towards me. I shake his hand, edging his sleeve slightly upwards. He pulls away before I can get a good look.

"Willa. Nice to meet you." This afternoon prances across my mind, a loop tearing through my brain. "Do you take the tube?"

"In general, or..."

"Never mind." I sit at the table by Doris, vowing to keep my mouth shut. He's not the guy from this afternoon. He's taller. Thinner, maybe.

Doris claps her hands. "Dig in, darlings."

Tonight, Doris prepared a lamb roast. An upside to staying with a host family over a residence hall is the food. Doris home cooks every dinner. I don't know what exactly she does all day, but I have to guess while I'm in school she's planning the night's meal in between needlepoint sessions. I picture her sitting by the fireplace in her preferred lavender cardigan. She'll listen to the radio or watch her soaps in her rocking chair. Take a trip to Liberty of London to pick up another crafting project. Maybe call her friend Mary when she returns. Doris and I don't talk much. I read while she crafts in the living room. Sometimes I'll glance over at her. Doris always looks properly coifed. Her short white hair curls in at the ends, brushing her chin when she moves.

Oliver looks at me from across the table. "So, how are you finding London?"

I choke on my sip of water. He's looking right at me.

Doris pats me on the back before giving me a knowing look. I lock eyes with Oliver as he chuckles.

"Right, well... London is swell." I dab my mouth with a napkin. "It's a nice change of scenery from my school back home."

"What are you studying?"

"English Lit."

"Where are you from?"

"Washington State."

"I know it's a state." He leans back in his chair.

"Good. No one else here does. Everyone assumes it means D.C.... and that really bothers me. You know? Washington is an entire state for a reason and D.C people should

have to say Washington D.C. instead of just Washington because it's not fair that we're the state and we have to take on the extra word."

He smirks. "Got it."

I kick myself under the table. "Sorry."

Oliver smiles. "I like a strong opinion. Right, grandmum?"

Doris nods her head. "That's how I raised you."

"Okay." I dig into my dinner. "What do you do, Oliver?"

"I work for a theatre doing lighting design."

"How do you like it?"

"It's swell." He winks.

I feel sweat accumulate under my knees. I can't help but think he's taunting me. I wonder if I looked at his wrists too long. Does he know? Does he know I was turned on by a wrist this afternoon? How could he? He's not the guy from the tube. I feel heat patter up my neck.

I stand up. "I'm going to use the loo."

I return to the table five minutes later, having giving myself a stern talking to.

"Wine?" Doris croons.

"Please." I instantly take three gulps of the red. I'd never been much of a drinker back home. But the pooling sweat under my arms stretches down my body, begging for relief.

Oliver leans towards me. His long fingers creep onto the table, his wrist calling me. "So Willa." He tilts his chin. The small gesture stretches his neck. His Adam's apple

bulges in and out. I want to stroke it. Kiss it. His neck must be a foot long. His jawline cuts through the air, meeting at a perfect point below his mouth. I place my fingers on the table, mimicking his. “That’s an English name, isn’t it?”

I clear my throat. “Yeah... my dad’s British.”

Doris pats my arm. “You never told me that.”

“He was British.” I dab my mouth with a napkin. “Was British, if you catch my drift. Pickin’ up what I’m putin’ down.” I muster a laugh. “He’s dead, so that’s that... I never met him, though,” Doris and Oliver stare back at me. This is why I never bring up my father: the look. I hate that look. I don’t even know what I missed, what I’ve been missing. I have no idea what kind of dad he’d be, mom barely knew him herself. I fiddle with the tight middle of my dress to avoid eye contact, cursing my pooching belly.

“You know,” Oliver raises an eyebrow, “My dad was also British.”

Doris and I lock eyes. A laugh slithers out of me. Quiet at first, then guttural. We all throw our heads back as if they’ll never snap.

I clutch my stomach. “Is he dead, too?”

Doris brings her hands to her face. “My son. Gone fifteen years.”

Oliver releases a big breath before raising his glass. “To our fathers.”

I clink my glass to his. His gaze holds mine. “To our fathers.” I glance over at Doris, “and sons. We all know sorry is never enough, but, I am sorry.”

“Me too.” Doris takes a gradual lean back in her chair. “I think I’ll head up. Take a trip down memory lane. Olly, will you clean up?”

“We’ve got this, grandmum.” Oliver looks to me. “Right, Willa?”

“Right.” I gulp as Doris leaves. I wonder what will happen once Oliver and I are alone. What do I want to happen?

After the dishes are cleaned, the wine has settled nicely into my stomach, and I’ve avoided any further embarrassment, Oliver turns to me in the small kitchen. His curly hair dances against the fading yellow cabinet. “Willa,” Oliver touches my right arm, “you’re staying in my old room, right?”

I glue my hands to the hem of my dress but don’t let my eyes leave his. “Yes.” His fingers pool over my shoulder and onto my back. He drums his fingertips on my soft sleeve as his lips pull apart. He’s so close. Unnecessarily close, even. I can’t remember the last time I was this close to a boy: a cute one, at that.

“I want to show you something.”

I manage a whispered reply. “What?”

“Come on.” He releases my shoulder and nudges me forward. “Let’s go.”

The room is too small for the both of us. His presence looms over everything. I’d never noticed how the ceiling slants downward, reaching a point in the corners of the room. Now that he’s here, I feel like I’ve invaded his sacred space. I shouldn’t be in this room. It’s his, so clearly. Each etch in the wood; nick in the wall, swatch of blue sings his name.

“So,” I sit on the edge of the bed, crossing my legs. “What’d you want to show me?”

He walks towards me. He moves closer still, until I'm in his gravitational pull. He drops to his knees and bends down, his head brushing my legs. I'd move, but I don't want to kick him. I'd move, but then I couldn't catch his scent. I'd move, but then he'd know what I'm thinking.

He pulls up a floorboard halfway under the bed. He grabs something, returns the floorboard, and then shimmies backwards until he's sitting cross-legged. He throws his gaze at me. His mouth stays wide-open, eyebrows to the middle of his forehead.

I chuckle. He looks like a little kid, all wild limbs and fragile enthusiasm. "What's with the pomp and circumstance?"

He pats the space between him and the bed. "Sit down."

I oblige, sliding off the bed until my knees brush his. My cheeks heat up as I pull my dress closer to my knees, patting it down between my legs. I turn my stare to the box. A shoebox. It's papier-mâché, faded, and adorable, somehow.

"What's this?" My eyes stay low.

"My box of bones."

My mouth stretches into a smile before I can stop it. "Really?"

"Oh, sorry. That's a different one. This...this is my game box."

I catch his gaze. "I'm shockingly competitive. And, as my sister says, I have a boner for rulebooks."

He laughs. "Noted." I can't tell if he got my pun.

"So, what's the game?"

"Olly Asks."

"You made it up?" I can't stop myself from pointing at him.

“I’m inquisitive. And an only child with lots of alone time.”

“Intriguing.” I let my back relax into the bed frame. My stomach warms from the wine.

“The rules. We take turns drawing cards. You have to answer. You have to tell the truth. No questions asked.”

“So truth or dare without the fun part?”

“Truth is the fun part.”

“We’ll see.” I crack my knuckles, then my neck. Each pop relaxes my muscles, softens my defenses. I let out a long breath through circled lips. “Ready.”

“You do that before every game.” He smiles and I shiver a little.

“How’d you know?”

“Lucky guess.” He rubs his palms together before opening the box. He pulls out the stack of cards and places them between us. “I’ll start.” He lifts his pointer finger and swirls it in the air. Zooming down, he draws his card. He smiles. “Do you have any siblings? If so, do you have a favorite?”

“Easy,” I exclaim. “My twin sister, Margaret. It’s just us, so. She’s the one.”

“Are you identical?”

I slap my knees. “I thought you said no questions asked! That’s a flagrant violation!”

“Not literally no questions asked. Figuratively.” His smile is so self-satisfied I want to smack it off. His knees push harder into mine.

“There are no figurative rules in games. That’s not how it works.”

“This is called Olly asks, remember?” He drums his long fingers on his knees. They stretch onto mine and my face heats up. His sweater inches up to reveal a sliver of wrist. Instinctively, I clutch my own.

“We’re identical. And clearly, this game is completely self serving.”

“Perceptive.” Oliver pushes the deck to me. “We’ll get back to the twin thing. You’re up.”

I plunge my hand into the deck as I raise my eyebrow. “What’s your favorite memory?”

He scratches his head. I put my hands on my knees and lean forward, anticipating a grand story of debauchery and deceit. I can see him out with friends, crawling from pub to pub. He’d find a street pole and swing across it gracefully, landing in a crouch that makes all stare. “I went to Ireland last year with my mum. I saw where she grew up for the first time. It was special. We sort of struggled with communication when I was growing up, after my dad died and all. But... I think it was good for us.”

I smile. “I’m glad you got to experience that.”

“What about you?”

“Hm?”

“What’s your favorite memory?”

“Gosh.” I look at the ceiling as if it will tell me what to say. “I guess I’d say... getting into college. I’d never worked so hard before. I was so stressed out about it that I started breaking out all over my chest. And I’d cry. For no reason. In the middle of class. At lunch. Wherever, really. But I got in. And that was special.” I release a breath; embarrassed I’ve told him so much.

“That’s sweet.”

I raise my shoulders and wiggle slightly, shaking off the stress. Oliver’s eyes glaze over, eyeing the V-neck of my dress. “It’s your turn.” I cross my arms, not sure if I want him to keep looking.

His eyes snap upward. “Right.” He picks a card and exhales. “We don’t have t-”

“Are you quitting on me?” Before I can think twice, I grab his knees and shake them.

“No, I just did-”

“Just read it!” I slap his knees before pulling my hands back. He looks down into his lap as he bites his lip. “Hey, I’m sorry.” My therapist told me to put myself out there. But I don’t want to make him uncomfortable. “I’m not sure I’m myself tonight. This is all...new. We don’t have to play.”

“It’s okay.” He smiles. “I want to know you.”

“Me too,” I whisper.

He looks into my eyes. I can feel him searching me, scanning for something. I want to let someone in. Why not now? “Have you ever wanted to kill yourself?”

My lip curls.

His eyebrows drop.

My stomach swells.

His head tilts.

“That can’t be on the card,” I choke out.

“It is.” He grabs my right hand and pries it open, placing the card face up.

I look down. Its edges are frayed. *Have you ever wanted to* is written in black. *Kill yourself* in red. “Why would you write this?” He’s still holding my hand.

“You’ve never wondered about death?”

I swallow down a wave filled with spit and fear. “Of course. But...” I look into his eyes. In this moment, he looks so young; the kind of young that doesn’t block off dark thoughts. He embraces them. But I can’t. This is too much too fast. I thought, at most, I’d get a kiss tonight. I didn’t expect him to shine a light on my deepest struggles. It’s all wrong. This shouldn’t come first. I can’t let it.

I yank my arm backwards with more force than I meant. My elbow hits his bed frame. “Shit.” I stand up and cradle my elbows. “I’m sorry.” I can’t meet his eyes. “I don’t want to play anymore.” My jaw tightens. I need to get out of here. Get out of this stupid fucking dress. I walk to the door and pry it open.

Oliver stands up and stalks towards me. “Willa, I just...”

“What?” I stare at his soft eyes, his perfect skin. “What did you think would happen? Asking me that? Asking *anyone* that? I barely know you. I, I don’t talk about that with an...” I trail off when Oliver’s face slowly moves towards mine. His eyes flutter shut, his lips pucker. I grab his wrist, softly at first. His lips continue the slow descent to mine. I squeeze his wrist tighter and tighter until my fingers turn white. This can’t be it. This can’t be my first kiss. Everything keeps happening out of order. Nothing inside me is connected, like each tube is slightly off balance. I need to press pause. So just before his lips touch mine, I take his hand and throw it against the door. He steps backwards, leaning against the doorframe. “This is wrong,” I blurt.

Oliver's mouth hangs open. "I'm sorry." He walks out the door as I begin to shake. I slam his stupid blue door. I breathe out over and over again as my chin quivers. Clasp my hands behind me, I grope for the zipper.

In the bathroom, my dress and bangles rest in a pile under the sink. I stand naked in front of the mirror. I run my hands over my fat, my scarred right wrist, my pale, damaged skin. I put my phone on shuffle and sit down in the shower, the hot water burning me. I trace swirls and zags along my thighs. The red skin turns white. I stare at my wrists. My veins bulge blue. I imagine the Dementor coming towards me, grabbing me by the wrists and kissing away my soul. I can't stop him. I never could.

I don't move for the rest of the song. I let the water drip down my back, my hair, my eyelids. I sit alone. If I wanted to cry I wouldn't know how. If I wanted to scream I couldn't find my voice. If I wanted to die...

The song ends.

If I wanted to die...

Silence.

If I wanted to...

No music still.

If I wanted...

Nothing.

If I...

The water drops.

If...

My skin aches.

If I wanted to sit in silence, I wouldn't have put the music on shuffle.

So I get up.

Middle School Bachelor

Part 1: Orientation

Rachel, a thirty-something brunette who recently quit smoking, stands in the middle of the classroom, ruler in hand. She smacks it against the chalkboard. “This,” she hisses, “is Middle School Bachelor. Who’s ready?”

Eight girls, ages twelve to fourteen raise their hands in glee.

“Let me lay it out for you, ladies. You all have been chosen for your beauty, your charm, your int...” Rachel looks down at her script, brows furrowed. “You will be competing for the ultimate prize: a date to the homecoming dance. Who’s the man in question, you ask? None other than eighth grade Varsity basketball captain Eric Matthews!”

The girls giggle, whoop, and cheer.

“I know you’re all excited. But this won’t be easy. This process will test your determination, temperament, and ability to apply camera-ready makeup. You up for the challenge?”

“Yes,” they shout.

Rachel leans forward, letting a hint of smile onto her face. “I know you can do this. Be yourselves, okay? Just amp it up a notch. Wouldn’t want to go unnoticed, would you?”

The girls shake their heads.

“I didn’t think so. You all are too smart for that. Wait here while we set up the next location. Someone will be in soon to monitor you.”

Rachel walks out the classroom door. She barges into the restroom, aka the makeshift video village, camera crew in tow. She turns to her director, Taylor. “Who wrote this shit?”

Taylor looks up from the handheld monitor. “Intern Maria. Just hired her.” He points to the corner where a teenager in braids offers a small wave.

Rachel nods. “Maria, are you in high school?”

Maria steps forward. “Yes. I want to be a reality star when I graduate so I thought it’d be awesome to go behind the scenes.”

Rachel turns back to Taylor. “I don’t have time for this. Where’s the production schedule?”

Taylor runs his hands through his greasy, receding hairline. “Chillax, Rach. This is low-budge, low-pressure. Our financier wa-”

“You mean Eric’s dad,” Rachel interrupts. “Anonymous, my ass.”

Taylor sighs. “Mr. Matthews wants this to be a fun experience for Eric. We don’t have to be wound so tightly this time, okay?”

“Shove off. Let me do my job.” Maria giggles in the corner. “Where’s the kid?”

Taylor glances at Maria. He coughs until she looks down at her clipboard. “In room 12, waiting to be interviewed.”

Rachel cracks her neck. “Testimonial time. I need crew A with me, crew B with the girls in holding. Maria, go make sure none of them snuck in phones, books, computers. We need them completely isolated. If they have to piss, you follow them. Understood?”

Maria nods.

“Great.” Rachel turns around to the camera behind her. “It’s show time.”

Part 2: Bachelor's Testimonial

“Hi. I’m Eric Matthews. I’m fourteen, 150, 6 feet tall. And ready for a date to the dance.”

Rachel leans forward in her chair across from Eric. “Great job, Eric. Can you do that again, but say you’re ready for love?”

Eric runs his hands through his golden bowl cut. “Love? I don’t want love. I want second base, maybe.”

“Don’t we all? But this is just for the viewers, we’ve gotta make them feel it, you know?” Rachel offers her sweetest smile.

“Fine.” Eric coughs. “Hi. I’m Eric Matthews. I’m fourteen, 150, 6 feet tall. And ready for... love.” He leans back in his chair, a small smirk forming.

“That’ll do. So, I know this is your first time on camera, an-”

“Second,” Eric interrupts. “I was in a commercial for my dad last year.”

Rachel smiles again. “Must have missed it. Since you’re a pro, let’s continue.” She motions to the cameraman to keep recording. “I want to know more about your life. Who are your closest friends? How do they feel about you doing this show?”

“My bros are Tommy, Nelson, Joe, and Pat.” Eric counts them on his fingers before continuing. “They think the show is cool, I guess.”

“Would you say they’re jealous? Of you being the Bachelor?”

“Sure, they might be jealous, but they’re my buds. We have a code. All these girls are off limits to them.”

Rachel flicks the arch of her right brow up. “Even the girls you eliminate? You don’t want your friends with them?”

He laughs. “Why should my friends have my sloppy seconds? They were mine first.”

“Noted.” Rachel makes a mental note to soften the kid up. “I totally get where you’re coming from. You wouldn’t want to have anything jeopardize your friendship.”

He shrugs.

“That’s sweet. Can you verbalize that for me?”

Eric exhales. “I wouldn’t want my friends to date anyone on the show. Bros over,” Eric looks to the sky, “eligible young women.”

“So what about the girl who wins? What are you looking for in a date to the dance and a potential lover?”

He scoffs at ‘lover.’ “I guess I’m looking for someone athletic, like me. She’s got to be pretty, obviously. But smart, too. I don’t see myself with an airhead.”

“Good. Just a few more questions.”

Part 3: Set Up

“Line up, ladies,” Rachel screams into her megaphone. “It’s group date time.”

The girls squawk and cheer as they take seats in the first row of bleachers. Rachel moves behind the camera. She turns to Jay, one of several middle-aged operators. “It’s too empty.” She brings a finger to her chin.

Jay shrugs, adjusting the shoulder strap for his camera. “It’s spring break. What’d you expect?”

“Not this,” Rachel mutters.

Maria taps her on the shoulder. “I have an idea.”

Rachel waved her off. “I don’t have time fo-”

“There’s another gym.” Maria smiles.

“Where?”

Maria motions behind her. “Just through the locker rooms. It’s the small gym. They use it for JV games.”

“Did you go to school here?”

“Of course.” Maria twirls her braid ends.

Rachel nods. “Good. Bring the girls there. I want to get some basketball coverage in here before we move over.”

Maria bounces on her toes and heads over to the girls.

Rachel, camera crew A, and Eric stand in the gym. Rachel tosses the ball to Eric.

“Let’s do this!”

Eric catches the ball. He stands in the center of the court, dribbling from side to side. “Just warming up.” Eric furrows his brows and sways. His butt sticks out too far while his shoulders rest too high.

Rachel crosses her arms. “Want to start moving across the court, Eric?”

He runs one hands through his hair. “Sure.”

As Eric runs, his tongue never retreats into his mouth. His hair flops in his own wind. His feet hit the floor like overeager paws.

Rachel coughs. “Can we get some free throws, Eric?”

Eric runs to the free throw line. He takes five shots. He makes zero.

“Keep playing, Eric.” Rachel backs up. “I’ll just be a minute.” She dashes into the locker room, AKA another makeshift video village. Rachel slams the door behind her. “What the fuck, Taylor? This kid sucks.”

Taylor looks up from his monitor. “Does he?”

“Were you even looking?”

Taylor rubs the sweat from his hands. “I don’t know anything about basketball.”

“Neither do I.” Rachel walks towards him until she’s mere inches from his face. “But I do know that this kid looks like a fat puppy when he runs. It’s completely unsexy. So on top of his shit technique, he can’t even make one shot. We can’t use any of that footage.”

“We don’t need it.”

“Yes we do! This whole show is built around the hot jock. Look, I need you to step up here, okay? You’re good with boys. You can get through to him. I need to prep and interview the girls. Work with Eric, get a body double, do whatever you have to. But

when I come back in thirty minutes, I need footage. Okay? Footage of a baller. Footage of a Bachelor. We clear?"

Taylor smirks. "Crystal."

As Rachel makes her way through the locker room, she calls "Don't let me down."

Part 4: Contestant Testimonials

“Ladies,” Rachel calls, “I’m going to take each of you behind this curtain to conduct interviews. Okay? Your dates with Eric can start as soon as we get your testimonials. Who’s ready?”

Sadie, a blonde with an ever-present eyebrow furrow, says, “We’ve been ready all morning. Literally. We’ve just been sitting here for five hours doing nothing.”

“That’s showbiz, baby. But why don’t we start with you, Sadie? Come on back.”

Sadie sits on a barstool across from Rachel. She picks at her nails as she slouches.

Rachel clears her throat. “Can you tell me your name, age, and why you’re ready for love?”

Sadie huffs. “I’m Sadie Kingston. Thirteen. My mom signed me up.”

“Why’s that?”

“I was homeschooled last year. She thinks I need to be more social.”

“What’re your first impressions of the other girls?”

“Mariah’s a bitch, Kenzie’s got a rep, Lainey thinks she even stuffs her bra, and I think this whole thing is weird.”

“Next,” Rachel calls.

“I’m Mariah. I’m fourteen, 5’7”, 103 pounds, and I’m ready to win.”

“What makes you think you’re ready?”

“Sorry to be that bitch, but, have you looked around? This isn’t exactly the upper echelon of Middlebury Middle. You know?”

“I can’t say that I do. Can you give me your first impressions of the some of the other girls?”

“Well, Kenzie, the busty brunette over there? She only twelve and she totally stuffs. It’s sad really. Plus, I feel like my connection with Eric is stronger than anyone else here.”

“Have you met before?”

“Well, no. But look at me.”

Rachel smiles. “Right.”

“I’m Kenzie. I’m twelve. I’m really excited to be here.”

“We’re excited to have you, Kenzie.” Rachel drops her clipboard to the floor.

“I’ve got it.” Kenzie bends over as Rachel cranes to see down her shirt. No hard evidence of stuffing.

“Kenzie, tell me a little about yourself.”

She pats her long, chestnut hair. “Well.” Her doll eyes well up. “My ex-boyfriend, Eddison, moved last year. We watched five episodes of ‘The Bachelor’ together. So I’m doing this for him. I know he’s looking down on me, smiling.”

“I’m sorry for... your loss.” Rachel hands Kenzie a tissue to wipe the crocodile tears. “How old were you? When you two dated?”

“I was ten. Why?”

Part 5: The Date

Rachel stands on the sidelines of the small gym with Maria. Though Taylor pulled through and got some basketball footage, Rachel decided to change the date. Instead of basketball, they'd play dodge ball. It was significantly easier to look skilled at. Hopefully Eric could keep his tongue in his mouth for the entire game.

"Hey, ladies." Eric smiles at the girls. If it weren't for the bowl cut, he'd look handsome. "Today, we're going to play a game." Mariah cheers, inching closer to Eric.

Eric scratches his chin. "What do I say next?"

Rachel sighs. "Dodge ball, Eric."

"Right." He laughs. "Today, we're playing dodge ball. And the winner has a shot at my heart. And a date to the dance." He winks. "So let's play! But first," He turns directly to camera A, "Head on down to Matthew's Family Furniture Store for the best custom furniture in the Mid West region of the Mid West."

Rachel shakes her head. "Yeah, we're not using that. Play!" Eric grabs a ball from the center of the court and races behind the basket. All eight girls trail after him. Eric looks to Rachel, eyebrows furrowed. "Control them!" Rachel snaps her fingers. "Be a man!"

"Half of you, to the other side! Stat!" Eric tosses a ball and promptly falls on his butt.

Rachel plops onto the bleachers as camera crews A and B cover the game. Through wincing and a makeshift finger screen over her eyes, Rachel thinks she witnesses biting, hair pulling, and profanities from the girls. The more action, the better. She jots

down an editing note: Mariah equals The Bitch. She sees Mariah pick up some toilet paper that fell out of Kenzie's shirt.

She holds the toilet paper in her hands, spinning around in some sort of victory dance. "I knew it!" She shrieks.

Sadie sits next to Rachel on the bench.

"Get in the game, Sadie. What are you doing?"

Sadie sighs. "Dude. Are you even paying attention? Eric's gone."

Rachel looks around. The girls pounce about in various states of combat. They leap frog over one and other, chucking balls left and right. But Eric is nowhere in sight.

"What the hell." Rachel stands up.

Sadie crosses her legs. "He went into the locker-room five minutes ago. I kept playing to see if the other girls would notice. But, clearly, they're a little busy killing each other over a guy who can't even be bothered to stick around."

Rachel storms through the center of the court. Miraculously, she dodges each of the four balls thrown her way.

Part 6: Finale

Rachel shoves the locker room door open. She finds Eric shirtless and pressed against a row of lockers. The presser, in question: One braided intern named Maria. To further complicate matters, Taylor lurks from the side, filming the entire exchange.

“What the hell?” Rachel grabs Maria and pulls her off Eric. “What are doing? This is child porn. Shut it down, Taylor. Shut it down.”

Eric runs both hands through his sweaty hair before looking at Taylor. “Were you filming that?”

Taylor opens his mouth, but Rachel jumps in. “Maria aren’t you in high school? And eighteen? And Taylor, now you decide to get involved? Really?”

Maria straightens her top. “I’m seventeen. It’s not weird.”

Rachel rubs her temples. “Why are you doing this?”

“I told you I wanted to be a reality star. I need to practice causing drama. It’ll compel me to the viewers. I’ve studied enough shows to know.”

Eric clutches his bare right nipple. “You’re using me?”

Maria smirks. “Sorry, babe. That’s show business.”

Eric’s eyes well up. “That was my first kiss. And, and you’re using me for my body? Just like dad in that stupid commercial he made me do.” Eric motions to Taylor. “Dad, did you do this just for the publicity? Are you using my heart for mass entertainment?”

“That’s your dad?” Maria and Rachel shout.

Taylor sighs. “The store’s struggling, Eric. Youth culture controls everything now. Having two jobs is really hard, I thought cross promotion would help.”

“What the fuck, Taylor?” Rachel walks towards him. “What kid buys their own furniture?” He shrugs. “Forget it. I’m ending this.”

Rachel and Eric stand in the middle of the court facing the bleachers. Maria left when she realized her work was done. Rachel asked Taylor to stay and explain himself, but he called an uberX and fled the premises. Seven contestants sit on the bleachers. Sadie left when she realized no one was forcing her to be here.

“Ladies.” Rachel claps her hands. “Eric has something he’d like to tell you.” She steps back.

Eric pulls a sheet of paper out of his pocket. He clears his throat before reading. “Ladies. I’m sorry to report that Middle School Bachelor is over. I had an inappropriate relationship with a staffer that has disqualified me from pursuing relations with any of you. I’m sorry that I’ve discredited the prestigious Bachelor name. The truth is, I’m not a boy, not yet a man. I was confused and acted stupidly. I let an older woman use me for my bod. It was wrong. I never got to know any of you. I didn’t even try. For that, I’m sorry. Good night and good luck.”

After a moment of silence, Mariah raises her hand. “So, sorry to be that bitch, but, does this mean I can be the Middle School Bachelorette?”

The Flight Attendant's Fiancée

This is flight 1657, service from MSP to PDX. Please direct your attention to the front of the cabin. Flight attendant Macy will demonstrate our safety procedures. She's got that gorgeous red hair. All natural! You can't miss her!

Macy smiles wide. "Thanks, Cap!"

The corner of her mouth twitches. Macy, an attractive, early thirties, color-assisted redhead, flies this route once a week. She loves sunscreen, action movies with strong romantic sub-plots, and her fiancée, Brent. She charts her weight loss every flight as she demonstrates the seatbelt around her own waist. Macy's goal is to shrink her waist in an effort to achieve a perfect hourglass figure. She is four inches off.

Macy's muscle memory carries her through the demonstration. Thanks to her past as a Junior Varsity cheerleader, she has excellent movement control. Macy scans the plane as she tightens the detached seat belt. A redhead in a middle seat throws her head back in glee. An elderly couple kisses across the aisle. Her eyes widen when she finds her target; an approximately eight-month-old baby with chubby cheeks and roly-polly skin. It should be noted that since the age of eighteen, Macy's ovaries blaze at the sight of any and all children.

With the completion of her demonstration, Macy returns to the front of the cabin. Crystal, a Princess Snow White wannabe with an under bite, bumps her on the way into first class. "Bitch," Macy mutters.

Crystal turns around. "Hm?"

"Witch. I think there's a Wiccan on the plan."

Crystal raises an eyebrow. "I'll keep an eye out."

"Great." Macy smiles as she elongates the syllable.

Macy and Crystal's rivalry began three years ago. Their other crewmembers consisted of fat, old slobs. Thus, Macy and Crystal began a battle for The Pretty One. Every crew has one. The one who charms the passengers, flatters the pilots, reads the room. Though Macy was objectively better looking, Crystal never loosened her grip enough for Macy to solidify her position.

Macy rubs her hands together, preparing herself for takeoff. Wanda, the middle-aged, cherub-esque flight attendant, sips water before turning to Macy. "How're you doin', honey?"

"Deep in wedding planning. Yourself?"

She shrugs. "Just waiting for my husband to die so I can be left alone."

"Wonderful." Macy is no longer fazed by Wanda's sense, or lack thereof, of humor.

A large man bumps into Macy from behind. "Sorry," he mutters, keeping his head down.

Macy turns around, a smile bursting onto her face. "Brent? What are you doing here? I thought you were going to New York." She flings her arms around his neck. She hears muttering from Wanda as she nibbles on Brent's ear. "What a nice surprise, baby."

Brent wraps one arm around Macy. "Boss rerouted me, different client to meet, you know."

Wanda clears her throat.

Macy rights herself, but keeps her left hand on Brent's rear. Her neck veins bulge. "I know the seatbelt sign is on. We just need a minute, Wanda."

Wanda shuffles through the first class curtain. "Just clean up after yourselves."

“Did you see me during the demonstration, baby? How did I not see you boarding?” She squeezes Brent’s left cheek.

Brent looks behind him. “Seen you do it enough times in your sleep.”

Macy giggles. “Come on, let me show you back to your seat. You deserve the best care.”

Brent wipes his upper lip. “I want to try something first.” After another glance behind him, Brent pulls Macy into the bathroom.

“Wait, Br-” He silences Macy with a kiss.

After some clumsy tongue action, Brent pulls away. “What’s that smell?”

“Ugh, Wanda was in here before. Switch spots with me, I’ll take care of it.” They rotate, fully pressed against each other. “Better?”

Brent runs his hands over Macy’s chest. “Let’s talk.”

“About?” She bites her lip.

“I think we sh-”

“This is killing me.” Macy hikes up her skirt and sits on the toilet seat, pulling Brent on top of her. “Come here.” She kisses him again as he half-sits, half-squats on top of her. She reaches up to unbutton his shirt. Brent leans forward, his elbow bumping the flush button.

“The seat’s not closed,” Macy yelps as she sinks into the toilet. Water shoots onto her skirt. “Help me up!” She jolts upwards as Brent pulls, launching her skull into Brent’s nose.

“Shit.” Brent clutches his nose as red dribbles through his fingers. He stumbles against the door. “This is so not hot.”

“Are you okay? Take some napkins.” Macy reaches for Brent’s face.

“I got it.” Brent leans into the door, exhaling.

“I’m sorry, baby...I think I know what’ll make this better.”

Brent moans as he dabs at his nose. “Enough. We tried, it’s fine.”

“Do you at least want me to,” Macy moves her hand to her mouth, tongue bulging into her cheek.

“Did you practice? I call you ‘Bite’ for a reason.”

“Dammit, Brent, don’t make fun of me for that. I was trying to be adventurous. Let me try again?”

“Read the room, Macy!” He grabs another tissue and shoves it up his nose.

She fluffs her hair. “Fine. Let’s go. I’ll take you to your seat, bring you a first aid kit.”

“I don’t need a first aid kit. I can take care of it.” He reaches for the door handle.

Macy follows him outside. “Let me help you.” The redhead Macy spotted earlier blocks the aisle way. Macy shoves past a silent Brent. “Can I help you, Miss?”

She smiles. “I’m just wondering why you were in the bathroom with my boyfriend. Is everything okay?” Her mouth closes. In this moment, Macy notes two things. First, the trollop in question has lips the size of Canada. Second, the hair on her arms is red: naturally red.

“Your boyfriend?” Macy turns to Brent. “What’s going on?” Brent takes the tissue out of his nose and crumples it in his fist. “We’re engaged. We’re engaged. We are,” Macy frantically points between her and Brent, “ENGAGED.”

At this moment, Wanda walks through the first class curtain. “What’s going on here?”

“Shut up, Wanda,” Macy screeches. “Let me get this straight.” Macy turns to the Brent. “This is your girlfriend. And I’m your fiancée.”

Brent backs himself against the door of the plane, exhaling. “Yes.”

“What’s your name?” Macy asks the girlfriend.

“Patricia,” she replies, cracking her fingers.

“Patricia, would you like to assist me in serving justice to our man?”

“I was born ready. I’m a black belt in karate.”

Brent flits his head. “You never told me that.”

Patricia jolts forward. “Don’t test me.” She turns to Macy. “Shall we?”

Wanda clears her throat. “I don’t know what you girls are talking about, but this flight has gotten out of hand. Crystal is in the cockpit having intercourse with the captain AND the copilot. All the passengers are standing up. Did y’all even notice? They literally look like they’re about to take arms against you. And furthermore, this ugly beef head clearly has a redhead fetish, which I just think is sacrilegious.”

“Sit down, Wanda.” Macy points at the flight attendant’s chair. “Sit. Now.” Wanda buckles herself in. She pulls a small vodka bottle out of her bra and begins to chug. Across from Wanda, Patricia strokes her hair, her trouty mouth downturned. “Buck up, Patricia. We have a job to do.” Macy reaches for the microphone by Wanda. “Attention, passengers. I don’t know why you’re standing. Frankly, my dears, I don’t give a damn. Just don’t move for five minutes. Someone’s about to get voted off the island.”

Brent muffles a cry. Macy exchanges a nod with Patricia. Together, they push Brent down. They pry open the cabin door and kick Brent into the sky. Macy squares off, throws her head back with fervor, and lets out a laugh so shrill that Wanda's vodka bottle breaks.

“And that, ladies and gentlemen, is why employees must never attempt to join the mile high club. We understood?” Gary, the Delta airlines manager, sits back with a satisfied grin.

The flight crew stares at the screen, mouths agape. Flight attendant Fiona stares down Gary. “You spent money on that?”

He nods. “Want to watch it again? I directed. And wrote it. I narrated it. I even have a cameo. If you look to the right...”

Spell 21: Chronicles

I feel restless, lost, hopeless.

Afraid, betrayed, dismayed.

Pained, slayed, lost.

Hurt.

I ache. I breathe.

I die.

I leave.

I cry I heave I die I leave I try to flee I can't oh please help me help me help me.

Oh...please...

I need to flee.

Fight or flight, I feel the knife.

I feel the knife, it turns it aches it cries, subsides.

It dies with me.

We... flee-d.

Phone Transcript. April 4, 2014, 5:30 pm

Girl: Hi, mom.

Mom: I just dropped your brother off at practice. What's up?

Girl: I want to talk to you about something.

Mom: Are you okay?

Girl: Yes. It's just... I've been having a hard time, lately. I had a giant breakdown in my therapist's office. I, I went nuclear. I lost it.

Mom: I know it's been stressful. Your dad just called the school again today. No call back. You've got to play by their rules.

Girl: I know, I am. It's just, beyond that. I'm starting to think... my therapist suggested... that I need more help. Like, with medication.

Mom: Honey, medication? You don't have a problem. There's nothing wrong with you.

Dad (muffled): You're perfect just the way you are.

Girl: I don't think so. I, I think I need some help. It's too hard. I shouldn't have to sob after sending every email. I, I just don't think it's right. I don't *feel* right.

Mom: Don't cry. You're fine, you hear me? You can do this. We know how strong you are.

Girl: I don't. That's the problem.

Mom: You don't need medication. You need to be yourself.

Girl (muffled): I disagree. I'd still be me, just be-

Mom: This isn't on the table now. When you're home for the summer, you can see another therapist here. Get a second opinion.

Dad (muffled): I love you.

Girl (crying): I love you guys, too. I have to go.

__Before__

Stomach to the brim with dread

Eye run dry of tears

Red splotch, blue splotch, two splotch, more

Chest squeezes in, breath so ragged I faint

__After__

Stomach one-fifth of dread

Eyes moist, alert

Pale face. Purple skin

Chest weighed down by breasts—not fear

Phone Transcript, April 20, 2015, 3:00 am

Mom: Hello?

Girl (breathing hard): Hi mom. Can you wake up dad?

Mom: Yes. Are you okay?

Girl: I just need to tell you guys something.

Mom: Okay, honey. Give me one minute.

(muffled sounds)

Mom: Okay, we're on speaker. What's wrong?

Dad: We're here.

Girl (crying): Okay, so, I... I'm just really scared. I, I woke up and realized that, that I thought I should kill myself. I, I called the suicide hotline at school, but, but I didn't want to talk to them. I'm not gonna do anything. I'm just really scared. I'm having a really hard time, and, and, I don't know wh...

Mom: It's okay, honey. It's okay.

Dad: We need to bring her home.

Girl (crying): No, I can't leave. That'd make it worse. I, I just needed to tell you guys because I don't know what to do. I don't know. I can't do this anymore.

Mom: Do you need me to come see you? I can come and stay with you for a couple days. It'll be no problem.

Dad: Let mom come and help you. We love you.

Girl: Will you really?

Mom: Of course. I'll get a ticket this morning. I'll see you tonight, okay?

Girl: Okay.

Dad: Honey, just promise me that you won't do anything. Don't do anything until mom gets there. Okay?

Girl: Okay. I love you.

Mom: We love you. You're going to be okay. I'm going to come.

Girl: Okay.

Dad: Mom's coming. You're going to be fine.

Girl (sniffling): Okay, bye.

Mom: Bye, sweetie.

Water Barre

She stared down at the water. This is what she always imagined. She felt breathless or reckless. Like she could jump or fall into the sea with the point of her foot. Could she disappear forever underneath the blue? Did she want to? She breathed in deeply, the ocean's perfume rich and lush. It twirled into her nostrils and down her throat. It moaned inside of her. She moved closer to the water, toes flicking through the sand. Her arms floated to her sides, clutching the invisible barre. She inched forward. Her fingers crept along in parallel lines. She danced towards the liquid velvet. She turned and tucked until her feet hit the wet grains. She wanted to drop to her knees. To crumble. To forget. Instead, she danced deeper into the ocean until her knees cut through the cold flow. Her scarred skin moved freely, gliding like satin on silk. Here, in this water, under this moon, she didn't fret over the nicks and marks on her body. Because in the ocean, she realized, she was light as a feather. She walked further until her chest was under the blue. She tipped her head back. She stared at the moon and smiled before howling with all of her might. She sunk into the water, head down, and never came back up.

Phone Transcript, November 2, 2015, 10:20 am

Mom: Hi, honey.

Girl: Hi, mom. So, I'm fine. But I'm walking to class right now and I feel it happening again. I feel myself spiraling to the dark place. It's like, I'm walking but my feet are so heavy and my stomach is swirling in all this black and I just know that if I don't do something I'm gonna be bad again. I feel it. I texted my therapist but I can't talk to her because I have to go to class. I'm freaking out. I don't know if I can handle this again. I don't know...

Mom: It's okay. When you're out of class, call her again, okay? I'll talk to her in the meantime. You're going to be fine. You're going to get through this.

Girl: Okay.

Mom: Talk to you soon.

Phone Transcript, November 2, 2015, 5:30 pm.

Mom: Hi, honey.

Girl: Mom?

Mom: What's going on?

Girl (crying): I, I didn't do anything, but I alm- I just got tunnel vision and I picked up my pocket knife and I touched it to my skin and I, I almost cut myself. I threw it outside, but I don't know what to do. I don't know. I don't know.

Mom: It's going to be okay. I booked a ticket to come see you. I'll be there tomorrow. It's okay. You're okay.

Girl: Okay....okay.

Mom: The next time you feel like doing something, call me, okay? Call me and I'll help you. You won't hurt yourself. Do you hear me?

Girl: Yes. I'm going to go now.

Mom: I'll see you tomorrow. I love you.

Girl: I love you, too.

Blood Rush

She stares herself down in the mirror, critiquing every line, space, and discoloration. Her stomach feels heavy and clogged. Something sharp rests inside her gut. How will it come out? Her bowels? Her mouth? A cut, so deep it bleeds? She pictures the thick, red liquid oozing from her stomach and shoulders. It drops down each fingernail. It glides down her crouched legs, cascades over her hard kneecaps and into the cracks between toes. Her pelvis cloaked in a red sheen. Would it make her feel better or whole or free or alive? Would it save her? She takes a deep breath, sets down the knife, and shuts the door forever.

Spell 21

Witches and bitches and cunts and whores,

Get inside and lock the doors.

Now is the time, the time to unite,

Let's all hold hands and channel our might.

Double, double, toil and trouble,

Shall we burn this place down to its rubble?

My laugh is wicked, my wish is mad,

Work your magic, dear potion, and I'll be glad.

Fly up, up, up and away,

Slay our demons as we pray.

Our bodies are homes and we are strangers,

Spell 21, expel our dangers.