

Out of My Mind

In the bustling of all the minds pouring in and out of the diner, I wondered what everyone would order for themselves—and if that’s what they would receive. An unfamiliar vanilla iced coffee is placed in front of me by the waitress, who avoids the color of my eyes. Her heels stomp on the tile, clicking and clacking away. I reflected on how strikingly the brickwork outside was coated under a thin layer of the autumn sun. However, the street is coming down with a shadow thickening on the pavement that now seeps into the diner. Passerby’s hurry past the window in a haste with their sights set ahead. Each person that goes on by is a stranger. Some strangers look familiar, but I’m looking to see if I can spot someone familiar passing as a stranger.

Jen slams her hand down on the tabletop. Forks, knives, and spoons rattle against the booth table one second, and Jen points at me the next. “Quit thinking so hard,” she says, “you’ve already got a bad forehead wrinkle.”

“*Sorry*, there’s a lot on my mind,” I respond as I return to sipping the iced coffee.

“You look tired, Caroline. You’re letting Mark get to you.” She sits back in her seat to check on her phone. The sun covers her pale skin softly through the diner windows. She begins looking around the diner, which is experiencing its dinner-time rush.

Once our silence has had its moment, I trail off, “I promise you, I’m not thinking of Mark.” The thought hangs in the air. Jen raises her eyebrows before she rolls her eyes back to her phone. She taps one or two times. My phone vibrates suddenly. I pick up the phone.

“That was me.” Jen clarifies, “I sent you a cat video.”

“Oh.” I turned my phone off and put it in my pocket instead. Jen sits back in her seat with her arms crossed and lips pursed; her eyes remain fixed on mine as she studies my face through her pencil-thin glasses, refusing to break eye contact. I shatter her gaze, “Don’t be ridiculous!” I flail my hands up, “I’m not letting this whole Mark situation get to *me*.”

Jen remains slouching in her seat, “I thought you ordered a lemonade.”

“I did. The waitress put the lemonade in front of you by accident. Then you grabbed it by accident. And then drank it ... by accident.”

“It didn’t even taste good. Can I have my iced coffee?”

“But I’m thirsty.”

“You don’t even like iced coffee,” Jen says accusingly.

I gasp and exhale slowly, “I do too.” I take one sip of the vanilla iced coffee, which causes me to wince after a chill runs down my spine and shoots back into my brain. “Ah, brain freeze!” Rubbing my head, I curse under my breath, “Ay, mierda¹.”

Jen flicks out of her words as though they were a frisbee, “You know I don’t understand Spanish.” She scoffs, “All I’m saying, Care...”

Care? Reminds me of the Care Bears. They’re so cute and cuddly. I hope that’s what she intended to imply. The thought of her nickname causes me to watch her lips move, but the words do not connect with my senses as they should. The sun acts as a spotlight, still illuminating her skin—which is so smooth. And her hair is so perfectly straight. She *is* high maintenance, so it doesn’t surprise me that she’s this well-groomed on a Thursday afternoon.

Jen is a very *special* person. At least once every six months after a breakup, she is compelled to throw a party. These parties are Jen’s methods to mix, mingle, and dance

¹ Mierda: Shit

unresolved emotions down into her deep psyche—or press up against another guy. Thinking back to the night of her last party, Mark and I went together to support Jen’s newfound appreciation for single life. Moments before Markus Starr and I had gone our separate ways that night, we sat inside the house while the party roared with music and people chatting all around us. Sitting together, he was talking about his cat. I think. I’m unsure if he has a cat; he seems like a cat person. I watched Jen enjoy dancing with a few guys around her. I turned to look at Mark, who was already looking at me through the one segment of wave in his hair that barely covered his left eye. Unsure of his last words, I apologize, “I’m sorry?”

Sitting with dim lighting all around, our shoes showed through. My bright red gym shoes point the tips of their sole towards his black sneakers, which face the dance floor. His boots would be covered in shadow if not illuminated with the outline of his white soles that work up to the white laces.

“Don’t be,” he replied, “I should go.” He takes his time readjusting himself before he lifts himself off the couch. He stands there to look at me before taking his leave. I would’ve chased him, but some of me thought he would turn back.

That night, Jen was sober enough to accompany me home. I gave her a copy of my key in case she ever decided to crash at my place if she wanted to talk.

“...Mark’s in his mid-twenties and a Scorpio. He’s a player.” Jen continues, “He doesn’t let anybody into his heart or mind. You have to break them a little to peek inside. Also, you should’ve seen how he looked at me the other night, which blew his mind with the outfit I had going that night.”

I hunch over, stretching my elbows across the whole table length where my hands meet to clasp in the middle. Intertwining my fingers, I rested my chin on the bumps of my knuckles, “Yeah, I did catch that look on his face.” I study the scraps of dust and leaves that have worked their way into the diner floor, “You’re right, Jen: Mark is in my head. I wonder why he hasn’t texted me.” I look for an excuse, “He’s usually busy with work.”

“He is?”

“I don’t know.” The diner’s door floats open, allowing wind to fly in, blowing more leaves inside and a few strands of my wavy hair that gusts in front of my eyes. Pieces of my locks tickle my lashes; I palm the strands back into place before continuing, “He always does this!”

“He does?”

I sigh, “No,” which shuts her down, “we’ve only been seeing each other for about three months.”

“He’s a hard guy to track down. He doesn’t have any social media.” She admits, “I was doing some background research. Just making sure he was safe for you.” Jen asks, “When was the last time you saw Mark?”

I cross my right foot over my left, “At your house party two weeks ago.”

Jen scans my face, looking up and down before catching herself. Her tone lightens, “Hey, this could be something you put into your stand-up. Only someone as funny as you could spin this into true comedy.”

My chin rests on my knuckles, and I speak through my pouting lip, “I haven’t worked on it; I’ve been too busy with school.” I look up at Jen, then my iced coffee, and back to Jen. She

sighs and reaches with her long, skinny arms across the table with little effort to slide the iced coffee towards herself, ripping the soggy napkin.

“Saturn is in retrograde tonight. The planets are aligning in your favor, Care.” She readjusts the plastic straw, causing it to shriek, “Getting on stage will be *so* refreshing. I think you’re ready.” She pulls her neck down to take a sip of the iced coffee.

I pick my head up, “No one wants to hear some college girl get on stage and complain about how vulnerable she is!” I cross my arms, “People are gonna laugh at me.”

Jen sips from the plastic straw, swallowing hard as she says, “Isn’t that the point?”

“Y-yes? Well, no.” I focus on my point, “I’d much prefer people laugh with me rather than at me. You know?”

“Give it a try tonight. Down the street, they have an open mic at the comedy club tonight and tomorrow. I’ll send you the link.”

My phone vibrates again. I pick it up suddenly to check the message.

“Me again.” Jen says before continuing, “Get *him* out of your mind. Quit caring so much and maybe try getting into his head by being a better version of yourself.” Once again, Jen offers words of wisdom floating in the air while she sips the iced coffee.

I sit back in my seat, shoulders pressed against the back cushion of the booth. Looking at Jen while she attempts to finish her beverage, I cross my arms and say jokingly, “Worse comes to worst if nobody laughs tonight,” I dangle the thought, “I’ll strip.”

Jen spits her cold drink onto the table, “You’ll what?!”

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A gentle breeze speeds through the dimly lit streets, and the moon peeks out to laugh at me. As the lunar eye watches my moves, it criticizes each step. On other nights, the cars driving

by would leave a ringing in my ear as they passed on by, but as I left the open mic, I couldn't stop myself from focusing only on my breath. The buzzing of the cars only a couple of steps ahead sounds as if they were off in the distance. They accelerate in the street, which only adds to the vibration tickling my rib cage, and suddenly lowers to the inner right pocket of my cargo pants. Over and over, the vibrating does not stop. Pulling my phone out, I press answer because I know who it is and who it is not. And yet I put the phone to my ear, "Hello?"

"Care? Hey, I'm about to hop in the shower. Just shaving my," She thinks for a second, "legs!" I hear her extend her lip as she runs the razor on her skin, "Have you gone on yet?"

I watch the cars drive by, focusing on their relative distance, "Yeah."

"Yeah? Well? Tell me everything!"

Snapping back into focus, I have no choice but to admit that "I bombed."

"Bombed? As in, you caused an explosion of laughter?"

Clenching my teeth shut, I gritted them silently for one rotation, "Yeah, sure." Which sounds as unconvincing as it is.

"Oh, Care. I'm sure you did fine."

"And introducing to the stage: Caroline!" I heard 80-90 people in that cramped comedy club. Realistically, the club could only seat up to 50 people, but regardless, the crowd politely clapped as I gathered myself up to the stage. The host of the evening and I crossed paths on the stairs to the mic, "We're running a little behind tonight. You have 5 minutes. Keep it tight. Keep it clean." He firmly patted my shoulder twice while I continued to the little platform. Readjusting the mic stand, I commented on accommodating my 5-foot-4-inch self. There were a few chuckles that rose from the seats.

After catching up, I began: “I wanted to thank everybody for coming out tonight because you could’ve just *not*.” The echo hit the back of the club and vibrated back to me. I clenched onto the mic, holding on for dear life. “But you people *did* come out tonight, which means you *are* here.” I wait, “Although there are people who are not here tonight, they would be *isn’t*. But you people *are*. You people *is* here tonight.” The couple sitting together in the front row nervously chuckled for me, “Thank you, thank you. I was reading this philosopher René Descartes...”

“Yikes, I can’t believe you did the Descartes joke. Nobody reads anymore, hun.”

Solemnly, I respond, “I thought it was ready. You know what Descartes would say, ‘*I Think, Therefore I Am*.’” Each mangles words that dance so diligently in my mind, exhale as they exit via the tip of my tongue.

Jen leaves me hanging before finally saying, “Yeah... go on.”

Half a swarm of eyes surrounded me. A few eyes staring at me were so sharp they might as well have stung me. The still air was cut by a cough in the crowd from one of the back rows.

“I can sense y’all didn’t like the Descartes joke. It needs work.” My eyes searched the room for something to say, anything at all. A bright shirt, a funny hat – anything at this point. I squirmed for a moment, but clarity found me, “Well, I did promise my friend that if this didn’t go well, I would strip naked for all of you.”

“I was asked to leave politely.” I kick a pebble resting on the sidewalk, which rolls into a gutter a few feet ahead. As I walk down the sidewalk on my way back to my apartment, I prop my phone up on my left hand’s fingertips.

Jen bursts out with a hardy laugh that doesn’t match her typical silky smooth glow. Her laughter is rather jagged, cutting my ears with each forceful exhale. I hear her trying to stop herself, even covering her mouth with her hand, yet she continues. Attempting to get out a question, she stumbles over her laughter. She clarifies her words, “Why- why’d they ask you to leave?”

“Well, I motioned to take my top off. The host shouted for me to stop, which caused me to panic. He said stop, and all I could do was say, “Shit, shit, shit. Sorry, shit... Fuck!”” Jen stops me to ponder why they would take issue with such a thing, to which I explain, “It was a ‘For All Ages’ night at the club.” Walking up the stairs to the front of my building, I cycle through the keys on my keychain, thumbing around for the one unlocking the main entrance.

Jen echoes against her bathroom walls, “You mean there were children there?!”

With a slight gesture and inflection in my voice to match the whacky, spastic host’s voice to say that there were people, “Of “All Ages” apparently.”

“Oh, honey. You’re a Pisces. You’ll be fine. You’ll be back there in a week.”

“They took my picture. They’ve asked me not to come back.”

Jen shouts from the back of her throat, “No way!”

“That’s how I’ll be remembered there, as the Hispanic girl who wanted to show some skin to the many innocent families in the crowd. Immortalized on their wall of shame.” Following the carpeted steps up to apartment three-eleven, I stand in front of my wooden door.

“Alright, hun. I need my beauty sleep.” She blows some kisses, which feel as fake as they sound, “Nighty night.” She hangs up.

Pushing the wood door open, I find myself in my hidey-hole disguised as an apartment. The door shuts hard behind me as I flick on the light switch, which lights up nicely in the corner and spreads evenly throughout the living room. Against the left wall on the living room couch, a half basket of folded laundry sits next to a giant pile of unfolded laundry I promised myself I’d finish tomorrow. I shut the light off to mask the mess and walk down the hall. My keys fall through my limp fingers, and then my wallet lands on the tile, causing a cacophony of sounds to shank my ears. My phone is the last thing I hold onto, checking the lock screen for any text messages or any glimpse of hope between Mark and me. With no wishes fulfilled, the phone falls onto the floor into the living room, which is carpeted.

Taking a right through the doorway to my bedroom, flipping the bedside lamp on, the glow now wraps around me. Sitting just across from the lamp is a full-length mirror propped against the wall. I examine the wood trim counterclockwise before working my way to the middle, where the image of a short Hispanic girl hangs her shoulders too low—at least, that’s what my mother would say. Leaning against the edge of my bed, I recall my mother’s catchphrase, *Ponerse de pie recta*²! Which orders me to stand up straight. She would say this anytime we were out in public to embarrass me—or should I say, *encourage* me to round my shoulders back and flare my ribcage out, which is equally bad for your posture, but who cares as long as you don’t look like a bum, right? And to be honest, she was right. I need all the height I can get. I do that and stand up as straight as possible while looking in the mirror. I realign the sagging nature of my clothes. I pulled my shirt collar back into line and pulled my cargo pants up as high as I could on my waist to uncover a bit of ankle, which made me blush over the thought of my

² Ponerse de pie recta: Stand up straight.

untapped rebellion. I bought the pair that I'm wearing because of how short the length is. It makes my 5-foot-4-inch-self look like I'm just a little too tall for these pants. My teeth creep out in an ambiguous smile.

After a moment, my pants begin sagging low again, and my shoulders round back to the front. Dropping this image, I shut the lamp off to be immersed in the darkness from the window just off to the right. Tucking myself neatly into bed under a layer of sheets, my head connects to the same pillow from the night before. This pillow has been fluffed up with the remaining question of whatever happened to Marky Starr. The thoughts of Mark are mixed in with the months of built-up fantasy entwined in the happily-ever-after padding that is now propping up my head. I look past the ceiling, hoping my vision connects to the stars above to let anyone listening know, "I need your help." Biting down on my bottom lip as it trembles, I resist the warmth on the skin around my eyes. "Dear, the stars above, I see you. I see you in your presence and cosmic power, and in return, I want to be heard." The vowels are easy to choke on, "Mark, wherever he is, I wish to be in his thoughts." I shut my eyes tightly, "Please and thank you." I whisper while attempting to swallow, "I hope you can hear me." The utterance of this phrase gives away the weight I felt on my shoulders, which are now at ease falling into the mattress. Not a moment too long after, a blackness swallows me whole, and I leave my body for the night.

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A bird perched on a tree chirps a motif of her outside, fluttering from branch to branch; she welcomes mid-morning to the neighborhood. The sun is blinding. A slight breeze lightly brushes past the leg hair not protected by the blanket. The weary eyes before me open asynchronously, twitching in the process. A burly sigh falls before the roo as the muscles shift into gear to pick up each limb off the bed. Sitting on the edge of the bed, looking forward at the

mirror propped up on top of the dresser drawer that faces head-on with the face of a wavy, chocolate brown-haired young man with only striped boxer shorts on. He sits up, waiting for a coherent thought to amuse him. Using the nails of his fingers, he combs his hair into place. I watch closely because there's something familiar about how one segment of hair barely covers his left eye. I piece together softly, "Mark?" The name echoes around the space, sparking consciousness back into him.

His neck jolts forward in a twitch, and his eyes widen to scan the room. He calls out, "Hello?" He waits a moment before persisting, "Someone there?" He stands up from his bed, slowly putting on the sweatpants he must've shed the night before. He steps forward, places his arm on the bedroom door, and peeks down the empty hallway.

"Don't be scared." My message jumps out at him.

Mark slams the door shut, pushing his back up against it. The palms of his hands are smacked against the wall, and there is little traction to be had. He scans his bedroom before jumping to the floor quickly to get underneath his bed, where he pulls out his 9 mm pistol, "I'm not playing around. I take my privacy very seriously!" He points the gun firmly at his door.

Slowing my speech, I sweetened my voice, "Mark, Mark. There's no one in your house. I'm just in your head."

Mark points the gun at his temple with the finger tense on the trigger, "Ain't no way I'm about to be possessed by some demon!"

Quickly, I use the tension in my voice to shove out my name, "It's me, Caroline!"

His eyes relieve their tension. He is seeing but no longer looking at his room. Lowering the gun onto his dresser, where it points at itself in the mirror, he studies the room; he looks at several items scattered on shelves. Each item he lists off in his head brings him back down. His

sheets are unmade, pillows still pressed from his impression, and the window blows a breeze to tickle at the curtains. His mutter turns sharp, “Caroline?” His eyebrows raise slightly, which is cute. He finally spits out, “How?”

“I’m not entirely sure, but before I fell asleep last night, I made a wish.”

He demands, “A wish?”

Clearing the reluctance in my voice, I tell him, “I wished to always be in your thoughts-”

“YOU WHAT?” He cuts me off as he parades around the room.

“I know! I know! It sounds silly, but the stars thought I meant it literally.”

“The stars? Was this Jen’s idea-” Marks stops himself, as he doesn’t want to get into that conversation. Refocusing, he sharpens his voice while fuming. He tries to look at his forehead. His hands wag openly with each syllable, “You’re in my head!”

I chuckle, “Well, on the bright side, at least we can say we’ve never been closer.” He refuses to reply, but I continue, “Through your eyes, Mark, I hardly recognized you.” The sentiment straightens his posture, and I notice warmth rising from his heart. I wasn’t gonna let the opportunity to acknowledge that tender moment pass by, “What was that?”

“What?” He replies. The feeling burns in his chest mildly and crawls up his neck, forcing him to rub his left palm against it.

I reply in an accusing manner, “You found that touching.”

“I did not.” He says in a feeble attempt to shut me down while he scans his closet for a shirt to throw on while we talk. His choice is a petal pink shirt that is as plain as can be.

“You did, and I know it.”

Darting his eyes from left to right, he swiftly examined the beige carpet. “I haven’t even invited you into my house,” he stammers to the previous topic. Hunching forward, resting his elbows on his upper thigh. “I never intended for you to see me like this.”

I start again, “I know this is a big step for us. I respect and understand how you’re feeling-”

“Us?” He interrupts. “Caroline, no.” He touches his chin to his chest and shakes his head. “At Jen’s party two weeks ago. Don’t you remember? I broke up with you.”

“You what?!”

Mark’s vision of his room blurs. Through his pupils, he begins to remember. He was staring at the back of my head that night—I almost didn’t recognize it because it’s not something you often see. However, I did acknowledge my bright red shoes shining in the dark basement. He cleared his throat to speak over the music and came out with it: “I’m breaking up with you, Caroline. I’m not ready to open up to you-” he lowered his voice, “to anyone.”

In the dim lighting, all he could focus on was the white in my eyes, but through the chaos, he heard, “I’m sorry.” Not as a question, but just as it was.

Mark’s heart sank in that moment, “Don’t be,” he replied, “I should go.”

The reels fizzle, taper, and burn off before returning our attention to his beige carpet from which he hasn’t broken his fixation.

I scream inside his head. I scream as hard as my voice can allow. I scream with the intent of filling his head with as much of me as possible.

Standing there waiting for me to breathe, he casually tossed, “If you intend to induce a headache, that’s not gonna work. Whether you whisper or yell, the volume is the same in people’s heads.” He smirks, “Go ahead, try it.”

The wide girth of my internal yelling pinches off. I suddenly shift into a whisper, “How can this be?”

“See, I told you.” Proud of himself, he moves out of his room, down a long hall, and into the living room, gloating about his victory. Just to the left, he enters the kitchen, hoping for something to sweeten his morning saliva. He picks up a muffin with a bite already taken out of it, and he peels the liner down seductively to bite his front teeth on the room-temperature muffin, which naturally rests in his right hand. “It’s gonna take a whole lot more to”

I start going off, “**¿Cómo te atreves a insultarme así? ¿Sabes cuánto tiempo has perdido por mí³?!**”

For some reason, in Mark’s head, Spanish is bass-boosted with a ton of reverb, which surprisingly Causes him to crouch low and bite down hard to clench his jaw so he can put pressure on his left temple, which he reinforces with his middle finger. I won’t stop for nothing now. He sets the muffin down on the kitchen island countertop, “Alright,” he bargains, “I’m sorry!”

“You should be! Jen had to drive me home that night. I gave her a key to my place instead of to you that night since you ditched me.”

Mark assured me that he did not mean to upset me. He moves slowly to the pantry closet built into the kitchen corner. He goes on this lofty spiel of how he’s taking the steps to grow as a man. Blah, blah, blah. That he’s working on himself. Blah, blah, blah. He reaches into the pantry

³ Cómo te atreves a insultarme así? ¿Sabes cuánto tiempo has perdido por mí?: How dare you insult me like that? Do you know how much time you've wasted for me?

but focuses his vision opposite to what he grabs and begins to unscrew the lid. I tune out his little speech to observe the thoughts flying by, but the line that catches me is, “I’m not saying never, just not now.” Of all the things he said, this one felt the most genuine. But the moment is ruined when he stands there cupping his hand with two aspirins, “Well, it’s been fun, but now it’s time for you to go home.” He palms the aspirins aggressively to the back of his throat, where he swallows them dryly. “So long.” He finishes.

Waiting approximately twenty-five seconds, he stands amid his kitchen, waiting to unthaw. His knees bent, fingers curled, and his focus on the ceiling, waiting for any sign of vibration. After the twenty-five seconds are up, on the twenty-sixth, he uncurls his fingers and corrects his stance. He chuckles, “I did it!” In his celebration, he bawls his fists and shoves them up high above his head. With his eyes tightly shut, he announces to the home, “I’m a genius.”

“Is that so?” I hear his ego shatter. My voice causes him to freeze. “Also, Mark, you’d be surprised how much room is up here.” I make sounds as if I’m stretching out, “Yup, I can prance around up here if I want to.”

“But the aspirin is supposed to get rid of headaches.” He whimpers.

“Firstly, aspirin doesn’t kick in right away. Secondly, you didn’t even wash it down with water, you psycho. And lastly, I’m not a headache!”

“You are to me!” He cries back, causing me to gasp. He motions himself to calm down. I await an apology, but he says, “I didn’t mean that. I’m saying you’re in my bubble, and I’m not thrilled about it, Caroline.”

I mock, “Blah. Blah. Blah.” Then proceed, “You tried to kill me!” I say, accusing him again in hopes of inspiring shame in him.

“I thought the aspirin would just knock you out of my head and send you back home.”

“Oh, yeah.” Putting more sass into my voice, I let loose, “Let’s talk about *your* thoughts. *You* thought *you* were so clever as you go on this spiel about how you’re “changing” and “working” on your “self,” but all I could focus on were the thoughts flying by in your head laying out the plan you were unfolding to get rid of me.”

The thought escapes his breath, “I didn’t think you could see that.”

“I know!” Awaiting a response, I’m met with none; however, I continue, “I can’t believe you never texted me after that night.”

“You could’ve texted me—or called.” He brushes me off annoyedly.

“I was awaiting our next date plan. That’s your job as the man!”

His body tenses.

I continue, “Knowing we broke up is news to me.”

“News? Is there anything else I can educate you on?”

I blurt out, “Yeah, I’d like to know what it’s like having a dick!”

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Mark belines out his front door, keeping his sights low to the ground, and zips up the navy blue sweater he threw on over his pink t-shirt. He escapes from his home into the front yard, where the wind blows cold through the trees. A neighbor walks by with his dog, a chihuahua, on a leash.

In hopes we turn back inside where the warmth is, I plead, “Wait! No tour first?”

“I’m pretty sure I clarified that I don’t want you in my thoughts. I don’t want you in my house. And I don’t want to see you again!” On his last point, he turns swiftly to jab his finger at the front of his house. Mark turns around slowly to see the neighbor and chihuahua, who’ve

stopped to watch his outburst. He goes on to save himself, “Sorry,” he laughs, “an ex-girlfriend is running around my mind.”

From across the street, the neighbor shouts, “Ah, jeez. I hate when that happens!” His dog walks ahead, and the leash pulls him off, “Good luck with that!”

“Thanks!” Mark shouts back with a smile that leads to a nervous chuckle. He whispers to me, “This has to stop.” He pauses, “Caroline?” He begins to panic, “Caroline?!”

“What?!” I snapped, “I thought you didn’t want me to talk to me anymore.”

“We gotta get you outta my head first.” He gets into the driver’s seat in his black sedan and turns the key to start the car. Looking in the rearview mirror, he tosses out, “Any ideas?”

“Maybe we can go find you a new girlfriend to give your head to.”

“Wow, hey! No need for that.” He backs out of his driveway and bolts ahead.

“How many girls have been in your head before me, huh?! How many are gonna be in here after?!”

He and I momentarily scream nonsense at each other before he calls it quits by turning on the radio. He twists the slider as high as he can, blasting the song “Help” by The Beatles, which his voice cracks along to. “Come on! Sing along, Caroline! *HELP! I need somebOdy! HELP! Not just anYbOdy! HELP! You know I need someone! HELLP...*”

Mark has this stupid grin on his face. However, as he tries to sing, the trees we drive under blossom with color on this cold autumn day. Before, the color of his eyes was mild and muted, but now I can’t help but want to sing along, too. In unison, we sing, “*My independence seems to vanish in the haze!*” Which causes him and I both to crack up,

He lowers the volume on the radio slightly, “Man, that takes me back.” Glancing at his reflection in the rearview mirror, he starts up, “I was wondering-”

Cutting him off, “The comedy club. That’s the last place I went before home last night.”

“Oh,” he remembers, “forgot you can see my thoughts.”

“I know, Mark.” I giggle quietly.

“On the bright side, we can finish each other-”

“Sandwiches!” I scream like a little girl, “I’ve always wanted to do that.”

He laughs softly, then questions, “Comedy club?” He takes a second, scrunching his brow, and puts the thought together, “I thought you said you weren’t ready to perform.”

“I wasn’t, but I didn’t know what to do. I hadn’t heard from you,” With a joking tone, I chime in, “I guess I was desperate for attention.”

While driving, he listens, taking small instances to glare into the rearview mirror so he can nod lightly, “That’s amazing,” he continues to grin, which activates the dimple on his left cheek to poke out, which I can see when hitting bumps in the road which bounce it into the frame, “I’m proud of you. That took guts.”

“You don’t mean that.” I challenge his praise.

“To get up in front of strangers and talk about what I think? I could never talk about myself so openly.” As he smiles in the mirror, I can’t help but notice the wrinkling in the corner of his eye. Clearing his throat, he goes back to focusing on the road. He sternly says, “You gotta get out of my head.” Getting back on track, he asks, “Am I headed in the right direction towards the comedy club?”

“Yeah,” I continue, “It’s down the street from that diner we went to on our second date.”

“The one where the guy got our orders wrong?”

“Exactly, that was the first time I saw you upset.”

His shoulders tense up, “I ordered a burger. I wanted a burger. I didn’t want calamari!”

Giggling on, “You looked so offended when he put that plate down before you.”

“It seemed like a sick joke. I didn’t even see calamari on the menu.” He laughs it off. It’s good to see him somewhat peaceful again. Until then, I thought we would just bite at each other, but talking about our second date brought out something good.

“Good times,” he says. “You were always funny, Caroline.”

“Thanks, Mark. But that’s not true.”

“You could always make me laugh.”

I hush myself, wondering if he could feel what that meant to me.

For half the car ride, we sat listening to old-school hits from the late 60s and 70s before ABBA came on, which nagged the car into silence. I forgot how far we lived from each other. He shut off the radio, and we sat for another 20 minutes. Silence would seem like a bad thing in this context, but for us—for him and I, it felt... natural.

Under the three o’clock sun, Mark unbuckles his seat belt to exit the car. He arches his back and extends his arm in a stretch. Walking towards the club, he asks, “Should I give them your name? You think they’ll remember you?”

“Uh, yeah. They’ll remember me.”

Hesitating at the club doors, he initially pushes the door and then stops to work up the courage to walk in. He approaches the hostess watching the stage, “Excuse me?”

The hostess dressed in black turns around. She’s blonde with freckles. A streak of hair outside from her ponytail gets caught on her nose ring. She softly greets Mark while using her index finger to guide her loose strand back into place. Parting the piece back to the side, she uses both her hands to tug down on her strand of hair to keep it from looking unkempt.

In my book, she was a P.Y.T.—that’s right, a Pretty Young Thing. However, Marks pulls out his phone with little acknowledgment of her. He unlocks the screen and pulls up his photo album. While doing this, he asks the hostess if she’s seen the girl in the picture he had. The picture was of the two of us the night we drove to the party. We were in his car, parked under a bright orange street light. The flash kicked on and lit up our faces for the shot. He got caught smirking with his eyes closed, and I presented my freshly flossed teeth. The hostess points behind Mark at the wall of shame, where he notices a rosy-cheeked girl pouting her bottom lip to the camera. In astonishment, he says, “No way. You must’ve been hysterical.” I deny his comment, but he persists, “I gotta know what you said.”

Nasselly, the hostess, mocks, “She got on stage and tried to strip.”

Mark laughs, “Aha, hardcore!” Leaning against the countertop, he presses her for the info, “Did you get any footage?”

The P.Y.T. giggles, “You’re funny.”

I respond with, “More like funny looking.”

Mark repeats my joke in a smoothly drawn-out voice, “More like funny looking.”

She giggles harder that time, biting her lip and swaying minutely. She asks Mark if he’d like to take her spot, “Sometimes they have the kitchen staff go up to fill in if we don’t have enough people. You can go up next if you’re interested.”

“Me? No- Well.” Mark thinks about me, “Is it okay if I let the person in the back of my head feed me my jokes?”

“Uh, yeah,” she nervously laughs out.

“Mark, what are you doing?” I press him.

“I want to know.” He walks firmly to the stage, “Remember, you could always make me laugh. You shouldn’t waste your talent on me.” Walking up the steps to the mic, I feel the tingle run down his neck and spine. His hands are moist. He fidgets with the mic for half a second while he asks me to tell him what to say. I pause before I start.

“I wanted to thank everybody for coming out tonight-” He catches himself and whispers to me, “It’s three thirty in the afternoon. But anyways,” he continues, “You could’ve just *not*.” He almost hits the timing. The crowd chuckles a little. He eases up on the mic, loosening his grip. “But you people *did* come out today, which means you *are* here.” I tell Hitler, “However, some people did not come here this afternoon. They would be *isn’t*. But you people *are*. You people *are* here. Th-they *isn’t*.” He chuckles shyly into the mic without my help, “Words are kinda funny.” The crowd approves of this thought. His heartbeat begins to quicken. I feel him trying to list the items in the room, but it’s so dark on stage that you can hardly see. I helped him with the following line, “I was reading this philosopher René Descartes.” I hesitate to give him this joke. It’s sink or swim time. “H-he was known for saying, *I Think Therefore, I Am*.” He laughs at how the phrase feels coming out of his mouth, “What? That sounds like some high schooler Instagram caption.” His reaction to the line gets a few claps from the crowd, to which I add, “There are people who don’t think, would they be *Am-Not*?” Which receives a few hesitant laughs and is dispersed throughout the club. Ignoring this, Mark continues as I tell him, “But you people that *is* here, which means you *Am-Did* think, which means that you *Am-Are* here, which coincidentally means you *Am-Is*.”

Moving on to the next bit, I feed Mark, and he runs with it. “I’m starting to get old, and I’m having to come to grips with being alone. I was talking to one of my girlfriends, Jen, who has difficulty being alone.” Headmitss, “She has a new boyfriend every three weeks.” Which I

let him get away with. “One night, we were sitting together, and she told me she had difficulty being alone. She said she **couldn’t** be alone.” The crowd is invested, and they’re listening. Mark knows it and continues, “I offer some advice. Maybe take up reading, journaling, or meditation—which is great for you to get in touch with your thoughts. To which she replies, “Ugh, I can’t be alone with my thoughts.” He pauses, and the crowd recognizes the ignorance in Jennifer’s comment. Mark jumps onto the following line, “You can’t? That’s all you *are*. That’s all you *Are*. That’s all you, bro!” He laughs, and I tell him to close the show, and he repeats, “Thank you everyone. My name is Caroline. Have a good one!” To which I hear their confusion break up the applause. I should’ve told him to say his name, but at least I got recognition somehow. It was the least he could do to get on stage and say to *my* jokes.

Mark runs past the hostess, who watches him pass by with a confused look. Outside the comedy club, he asks, “How’d we do?”

“You were there.” I sulk.

“Yeah,” he says while panting, “I kind of blacked out there for a second. It felt like I was running on autopilot. Mostly, it felt like you were telling the jokes.”

“Because technically, I was!” I continue to pout, “I can’t believe you did that.”

He paces around the sidewalk outside the comedy club, “But it went well. From what I can recall, they seemed to like it.”

Mark’s upper arm gets slapped hard. He turns to face some random guy that must’ve been in the crowd. “Nice job, Caroline.” He shoots Mark a thumbs up before unknowingly walking to his car in the parking lot.

Mark stutters and, with little air, replies, “Thank you... See Caroline, he liked it.”

“I guess.”

“I’m sorry. I wanted to show you just how funny you are. Until now, I feel like you refuse to believe it, Caroline.”

“Maybe that’s something that I should’ve figured out myself!” I let him have it, “I didn’t need to hear that my jokes were funnier when told through a man’s mouth!”

He stands there, letting the breeze speak for him. Propping himself up, he keeps himself relatively rigid. Let the sweat drip down his neck to be picked up by the cars, stirring the air as they pass. Looking off into the distance, he reaches down to his crotch to separate what feels like a piece of skin from his leg.

“What was that?” I ask.

“What?” He replies. Using his left palm to wipe the sweat from his neck.

“Did you just scratch your balls?” I say accusingly.

“They were stuck to my leg,” he whines.

“You’re out in public! People can see you!”

“T h e y w o u l d u n d e r s t a n d !” He bellows. Once he’s had time to cool down, he puts his head down in shame to begin walking.

I interject, “Where are you going?” This catches him off guard.

“To the diner!” He pauses, “Damn!” He says, “For someone who can read my thoughts, you ask many questions.”

Mark and I follow the sidewalk down to the diner, where the sun glimmers off the windows, which Mark so desperately avoids any glances with. The brickwork is crummy. There are patches of brick that have been discolored by weathering. He pushes open the door, letting a gust of wind blow in on him. He calls out to the owner, manning the orders at the register, “Water, please.”

He says as he slumps into a booth in the diner's corner. Of course, he chose the one part of the diner where the sun doesn't reach. He apologizes sincerely. I hear him, and I understand him. For me, it felt good to see that the jokes worked. I knew I had to get back into my body to get back on stage and use my willpower to tell my jokes... at a different comedy club... since I was still banned from that one.

The owner walks over to Mark's table and lays a steak dinner down, "Something on your mind, son?" Mark doesn't reply. This causes the owner to raise his right eyebrow and lean in to push further. "Or someone?" Mark looks up quickly to lock eyes with the owner, who has let the stress of owning this place take his hair ever so slightly.

"Yes," Mark says, knowing the man before him does not know the tragic irony of his question.

"Ah, yes. I knew I recognized that defeated look." He pats himself on the back, "Is that somebody a girl?"

"Yes," Mark replies with exhaustion.

"Go see her. Look upon her with your own eyes." The owner's words pumped Mark up; this was the call to action, and he needed to put himself back on the go. He jumps out of the booth and runs to the door before stopping short and returning to the owner. "Just letting you know, I ordered water, and you laid a full steak dinner on my table." He gestures to the diner, "Whatever is going on with the orders here, you must fix it." He points at the steak, "I'm not paying for that." And then he runs out of the diner.

"Where are you going, Mark?"

"I need to talk to Jennifer!"

"You were thinking about Jennifer?!"

“Yes! Well ... Kinda. Remember, you told me that Jennifer has a key to your place.”

“Yeah, so?” I asked.

“The owner of the diner asked if I had somebody in mind. Some. Body. Your body must still be at your apartment.” He deduces, “Maybe if I can find some way to get close enough to you with you in my head, you’ll be able to jump back in.”

“That’s a stupid idea,” I attempted to shut him down.

“You made a wish to the stars, and it worked. It’s worth a shot.” He pulls out his phone and runs to his car. He unlocks the door and hops in, “What’s Jen’s number?”

“I’m not giving you her number.”

“Caroline. Please.” He begs.

“Fine,” I read off Jen’s number from memory. He dials into his phone to call. The phone rings, and each second that goes by grows tense. The tone stops. For a moment, nothing, then suddenly:

“Oh. Hello, Mark.” Jen answers.

Mark thinks to himself, does *she have my contact info?*

I replied, “Of course she does. She had to do some digging to ensure you were safe enough for me to go out alone on our dates.”

“Hey, Jen. Caroline asked me to ask you if I could borrow her keys to get into her place.”

“Why? So you can rob her?”

Mark starts the car, “No, she left for the day, and she told me I can come by while she’s not there to grab my stuff.”

“Your stuff?” I hear her grow excited, “You guys broke up?!”

“That’s none of your business,” Mark replies.

“You’re such a Scorpio, Mark! I’ll meet you outside her building in about 10 minutes!”

Mark hangs up, presses the on button for the radio, and begins to sing, “*So I put my hands up to play my song, and the butterflies fly away.*”

• • •

Outside my apartment, the autumn sun barely peaks through the office buildings and apartment complexes in the distance, although the orange glow still manages to spill down the road. Mark sits on the steps outside my building, picking up tiny crumbles of chipped brick and pavement to examine. When he’s done looking, he whips them into the street or tries to roll them into the storm drain where they fall, and you can hear them rattle for a moment before resting in the abyss.

After a short while, two feet eagerly stomp their way into Mark’s view of the sidewalk. Looking at the feet tucked tightly into heels that just barely fit, working his way up the leg, he notices the rushed shave job of the rashed but freshly lotioned pale legs before him. The legs stretch long up to a non-proportional torso that extrudes lengthy burley arms that cling to the tiny and vibrant pink purse that makes Jen look like a modern-day giant. Mark’s jaw gives in to gravity. His tongue falls to the back of his throat, which induces a light gag reflex.

“That’s what Jen looks like to you?!” Someone as beautiful as Jen could look so hideous through someone else’s vision, which I can’t help but wonder: What do I look like to Mark?

“Markus Starr, a Scorpio, and Jennifer Crowley, a Cancer, such a dangerous combination,” The base of Jen’s voice connects to Mark’s ears. She crinkles her oversized nose with a sinister little grin that flairs out her nostrils. I can’t help but notice that she isn’t wearing her pencil-thin glasses. She reaches into her pink bag with her ape-like hand using her sausage fingers, digging for an aggressive second or two before eventually tugging out the spare key to my apartment.

Mark watches her sharp jawline as she plays dumb, “A little birdie told me you needed these.” She dangles them in front of Mark’s face, where he notices the curled hair on her knuckles jump in the motion. I can’t believe her, that backstabbing bitch!

Mark closes his mouth to reintroduce moisture so he can begin to speak. After a swallow, he rushes to snatch the keys, “Appreciate it.”

Jen shifts herself back, now facing the keys away from Mark. “The stars have aligned, Mark.” She extends her arm back into the street to hang the keys over a storm drain, “It’d be a shame to drop these keys in a place that’s hard to reach.”

“No!” Mark yelps in desperation. He cries to her, “I need those.”

As I spectate, I shout, “Don’t give her anything!”

Mark bites, “No, Jen! You’re her best friend, what would *she* think?!”

Jen plays dumb, “Who Cares?”

“No, not ‘*who cares?*’” He clarifies unnecessarily, “Caroline.”

She looks at him with a bit of dread. Her grip begins to loosen. The keys cry out for help.

“I’ll give you whatever you want, please,” Mark drops his shoulders and then exhales, “I need the keys.”

Jen picks her arm up to extend her meaty index finger into Mark’s chest, “I want your heart, Marky Starr, to feel its rhythm and song transcribed through your lips.”

“You monster!” Mark grits his teeth. Mark’s neck tenses up. Once again, he’s frozen. Scanning left and right, he feels like the attempt to run is futile. Jen’s stride would outpace him within seconds.

Jen leans in. Slowly, Mark notices the five-o’clock shadow growing on her face. Her facial hair matches Mark’s pursed lips, which he’s attempting to hide. Mark looks at her as she

forces herself upon him. For a moment, I can hear a bit of static, to which, in the buzzing, I find the courage to say, “Jen, you **PUTA!** Get off of him!”

Pulling away swiftly, Mark falls back, crashing his butt onto the pavement. The keys rattle on the floor in front of him. Jen looks at Mark, who is holding her head sorely. Jen looks around before running off down the block, where she disappears within seconds. Mark wipes his lips and shivers over the thought of what just occurred. Mark confirms that Jen is entirely out of sight. He recalls, “I didn’t think Jen could outdo herself after that outfit she wore to the party.”

“Yeah.”

“I mean, with all that arm showing.”

“Yeah.”

“No shame.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Mark picks up the keys and collects them before going to the door. My neighbor, Mrs. Howard, from three-thirteen, opens the door to the building and holds it for Mark, “I saw that blonde you were with runoff.” A sharp exhale is pushed out, “Where have all the good women gone?”

Mark laughs nervously, “Apartment three-eleven, I think.” He says as he walks inside, where the front door closes behind him. Walking up the stairs, he whispers, “Well, we don’t need the key to get in.”

“But you will need the key to get into my apartment, so this wasn’t all for nothing, Mark.”

He puts the key in the lock to apartment three-eleven. The wooden door is one handle twist away from being open.

“Wait,” I chime in, “I’m not sure about this.”

“Okay,” Mark says as he leaves the key in the lock and steps back to where he leans on the opposite wall to my apartment door. The hallway stretches long on either side of him. “We don’t have to do anything you’re uncomfortable with.”

I reconsider, “Well, I’m saying, just take it slow.”

Mark slowly leaned forward, smiled reluctantly, and lightly turned the key with the handle, lightly cracking the door open to the apartment. He steps inside, and the door shuts behind him. He looks down into the living room. He turns the light on and steps onto the carpet, where he sees my couch with laundry still half unfolded.

“Weren’t expecting visitors, huh? At least you got it half-folded.” Mark turns right into my bedroom, where he comes upon a face. I wanted to criticize her, the girl that Mark’s heart begins thumping over. Even in the mess of her apartment, her black hair is the messiest of it all—her strands of hair spill onto her pillow. The black in her hair seeped away all the Hispanic color that once was there, and she now sits there pale and lifeless. Her rounded face is at ease. A calm beckons his attention. She lay in her bed at peace. Shoulders rested where they needed to be. Her body is tucked neatly into the sheets, her hands resting on the blanket at her sides. He inches closer to her, where he crouches up to her bedside. He slides his middle and ring finger into the palm of her hand, where he squeezes tightly with the rest.

“You’re not supposed to see me like this.”

Mark combs a strand of hair around her ear as he attempts to align his face with hers; he’s as close as he was to her face as he was back at Jen’s party. But instead, this time, his lips connect with hers. The coldness of her unmoving lips taps into guilt in Mark’s heart.

For a moment, there's darkness. Then, an overwhelming light inspires warmth back into the lips locked with Mark's. I reach my hand around the back of Mark's head, resting my four fingers lightly rubbing what I would imagine moments before. After the passionate exchange, he pulls away with an intoxicated look on his face.

"You're blushing," He smirks. Our foreheads remain against one another.

"I thought you said I was a headache."

"You are, but you're *my* headache."

"Then why the kiss?"

"Well, Caroline." Mark pauses, "You've been on my mind all day." Mark's eyes stay focused on mine; they slide their gaze back down to my lips, where he slowly leans in.

I turn away from him, "This isn't a good idea. Mark, I think you should go."

"But I-" He looks down, "I understand." Mark gets up, eyes glued to the carpet. He turns back before walking down the hall to the door. "Caroline."

"I know, Mark."

He smirks, looks down, and walks his way out. The door slams behind him as he exits.

I untuck myself out of the sheets, holding myself close to the mattress, m. Myllow, still imprinted with the shape of my head, beckons me back to bed. Forgetting my surroundings, a violent buzzing starts in the living room. I walk out to find my phone still lying on the floor from the night before. Picking it up, the phone rings while the screen reads 'Jen' in a desperate tone. I shut the phone off before storing it in my pants pocket. After a few steps, I plop onto the couch next to the pile of clothes waiting to be folded. I promised myself the laundry would be folded entirely today. Looking out the apartment window, the sun sets over the horizon; I still have time.