

# Modern Vampires

Jordan Heisler

December 18<sup>th</sup>, a Saturday, the not so distant future

During northern winters, the sun never quite reaches its highest point. It almost moves horizontally across the sky so that shadows appear long for the entirety of a day. Dawn and dusk are nearly indiscernible because they are only hours apart. Northern winters are dark early and often. They are cold and gloomy even in the absence of clouds. Sure, it snows sometimes, and for a few days, the countryside brightens under a cover of undisturbed white. But it is not long though before the temperature drops well below freezing. The wind kicks up, and snow turns dark, dirty, hard like ice.

Allison Murray stared into these conditions from behind her car windshield as she returned to her hometown, Sascha, South Dakota. She had left for school in the Twin Cities only a few months prior. Her new metropolitan home, while similarly cold, contained a certain heat, a certain liveliness not present in the countryside. She shifted in her seat, trying to rid her back of stiffness after hours of driving. Dmitri, her boyfriend of the past few months, laid on the floor of the back seat, covered entirely by a reflective blanket. There wasn't much sun to speak of, especially after noon, but Dmitri couldn't tolerate any of it. He had this strange condition that had become common within major American cities. Dmitri had contracted it during a one night stand a little more than a year ago. That was the most common way to catch it – though it could be transmitted through any other exchange of bodily fluids: kissing, shared needles, biting. While not exactly life-threatening, the condition – known commonly as Sundowners' Disease – was accompanied by several symptoms which made normal living difficult: odd

dietary habits, sensitivity to sunlight, and impulsive behavior – to name a few. For this reason, people in less evolved places called guys like Dmitri “vampires.” Allison recalled that when news first broke about the spread of this mysterious condition, the locals in Sascha conjured wild tales of evil, bloodthirsty monsters. Many – including her own father – had even begun to stash holy water and crucifixes in their bedside drawers. Each resident, it seemed, had at least one wooden stake hidden within their home, just in case Sundowners made its way to the countryside. It should be noted, though, that all of these precautions were beyond ridiculous. Despite all of the hullabaloo among the residents of Sascha, people with Dmitri’s condition were human, of course. Vampires don’t exist. Allison knew that even if the smaller minds in her own town did not.

By the time Allison’s car pulled up to the Murray family household that evening, the sun had fully set. She thanked the Lord for small mercies. Her mother, Laurel, sat on the porch, awaiting the return of her baby girl. Allison’s father, Karl, was on his Lay-Z-Boy recliner watching the news – no doubt a program on the degradation of American values. To this point, Allison was unsure of the welcome she and Dmitri would receive from either of her parents. She had obviously told them about Dmitri and his condition. She had to – for his sake. As she expected, her mother had responded warmly, but Allison knew that was her default setting. She simply didn’t know how to be confrontational. It was a quality that had been completely bleached from her DNA. Her father, Karl, on the other hand, was repulsed. Though he never said as much to Allison directly, she could picture him storming around the house cursing under his breath the way he did at any minor inconvenience. Karl had, of course, heard about people like Dmitri on the news: “The scourge of city life. God’s punishment for immoral acts. The embodiment of sin,” his favorite newscaster had called them. In his mind, no boy could possibly be good enough for his daughter, unless, of course, that boy was Christ himself.

When Allison wheeled her suitcase up the walkway to the house, her mother rushed to greet her. Laurel pulled her daughter into a warm hug. She kissed Allison on both cheeks then embraced her once more. Laurel had always been affectionate when it came to her only daughter; however, since Allison had moved away, Laurel felt a glaring void in her life that no one could fill. Now in Allison's presence again, Laurel felt compelled to be close to her, to feel their heartbeats synchronize. When Allison finally squirmed from her grasp, Laurel turned to the young man who stood nearby. She thought him odd-looking, not unattractive necessarily but, perhaps, off-putting. Allison had told her that he was a bit older – in his mid-twenties – however, he had a remarkably youthful look about him. He was thinner than she imagined and taller too, though he slouched rather substantially. His skin was free of wrinkles, and he was ghostly pale, without even the slightest hint of blush on his cheeks.

"And you must be Dmitri!" Laurel said. She reached toward him and squeezed his shoulder tentatively. "Alli has told us so much about you. Come in. Come in." Laurel grabbed the suitcase from her daughter's hand and began to head into the house.

Within a few hours of the pair's arrival, Laurel announced that it was time for everyone to retire to their sleeping chambers. It was, after all, Saturday. "Can't have all of us sleeping through Mass tomorrow morning," she said, cheerily. Not everyone, though, was so anxious to sleep. For hours, Dmitri lay awake on the basement couch listening to the seconds tick by on a nearby grandfather clock. These days, he spent most of his sunlit hours in bed while others were active. As a result, he spent a lot of his waking hours alone in thought. During times like these, his mind wandered. It filled with strange thoughts, with passionate sexual fantasies – waking dreams in which he had strange, beast-like powers, an insatiable appetite, an uncontrollable stamina. These thoughts were so real, so present that he sometimes felt he couldn't control himself. Such was the case tonight when, against what he supposed was his diminutive, better judgment, he

rose from the couch and made his way to the main floor. He snuck by Karl, who had fallen asleep on the living room recliner, and made his way up the stairs toward Allison's room. His feet were so quiet, his breathing so utterly silent, that a superstitious onlooker might have sworn that he was levitating, that he hadn't drawn breath at all. But, of course, that would have been ridiculous.

"Can I come in?" He whispered into Allison's door, which was cracked open just the slightest bit. He nudged the door open further and entered to find Allison awake, eagerly awaiting his visit.

### December 19<sup>th</sup>, a Sunday, the Lord's Day

Allison had awoken early, even after her late-night rendezvous. Of course, Dmitri had retired to the basement sometime while she slept, satiated. The first few times they had been together, she lay awake for hours afterward – too much dopamine, she figured – but recently, sex had become something less of a monumental thing for her. She first experienced someone in that way when she was 17, but few outside of her close friends had any idea. She had learned from an early age that discretion was the best practice here in Sascha. People here looked at a girl differently when they knew she was active. So, when she decided she was ready, she approached a boy in her class named Garrett, who she thought would be gentle and quiet about their affair. They explored each other curiously that first time, and in their subsequent meetups, they gained confidence and practice. She learned to tell him the things she wanted, and he learned to last longer than a few minutes. Things proceeded that way for much of their senior year, quietly. The two of them weren't quite a couple, not in public anyway, but there was something unspoken between them. Then, they graduated and went their separate ways. They didn't break up, not really. He had never been her boyfriend in the first place, nor had she been his girlfriend.

Not long after their split, Allison met Dmitri who, unlike Garrett, was experienced, learned, metropolitan. To him, sex was something that just happened between people, as inane as conversation. He and Allison had slept together on their first date and on pretty much every date since. That, Allison thought, had been fine for the first month or so. After all, Dmitri's impulsive nature made him unpredictable, exploratory, fun in the ways that Garrett didn't know how to be. However, she recently she wondered if sex was all they had in common. With most people, this might have been okay, Allison figured; however, every night with Dmitri presented a certain risk. She wondered what her parents would say if she contracted his condition. She had heard the things her father sometimes said about experienced women and imagined them, instead, directed at her. She pictured each word from his mouth like an artillery shell and wondered how many she could survive before they obliterated her entirely. Surely a boy with whom she had little connection would not be worth such assault.

Allison tried to shake these thoughts from her mind as she climbed out from under the covers and walked to the vanity. Without much thought to the contrary, she began to prepare herself for Mass. Her reflection in the mirror informed her that Dmitri hadn't shown an ounce of restraint the night before. He had this bad habit of kissing, sucking, biting on her neck when they were in the throes of passion. Last night, he had left a crimson splotch the size of a half-dollar. Make up wouldn't cover it, she figured, so she grabbed a green bandana that she often wore in her hair and tied it like a kerchief around her neck. A temporary fix, but maybe she could get through the week without her father noticing.

Karl, after all, was the protective sort, the punitive sort, vengeful and unreasonable. He was a religious man through and through, molded by generations of patriarchal men. A father, in Karl's mind, was responsible for the moral wellbeing of his family. To him, the failings of a wife and daughter reflected poorly on a man's ability to shepherd his

flock toward salvation, so he couldn't afford to be lenient. The stakes were simply too high. And so, on Sundays, he marched around the house with the demeanor of a drill sergeant, barking and hurrying and chastising his wife and daughter all the way up the church steps. As long as he drew breath, Laurel and Allison would attend Mass every week. They would be on time, and they would sit in the first row. He would make sure of it – no matter if they were sick or apathetic or disinterested – because to not do so would be a failure on his part as a churchgoer and as a man.

That particular Sunday, the Murray family maintained their usual position amid the congregation. They listened as Father Gary lectured about living an ideal life in the eyes of the Lord. He said that the holiday season was the perfect time for everyone in Sascha to break with their sinful ways. He said casting off old habits required diligence and focus but that the rewards would be plenty in the afterlife. Though Allison tried to dissociate herself from the priest's suggestions, she still felt the chafe of Dmitri's unshaven face on her chest and neck. The places where he had touched her the night before suddenly stung with guilt, as if some part of her couldn't shake the weight of Catholic authority. She figured her own upbringing had conditioned her to feel this way after she had done something so patently forbidden, but perhaps she genuinely felt the light of divine intervention, God telling her to avoid her ongoing sins of the flesh.

December 20<sup>th</sup>, a Monday evening, at dinner

Dmitri didn't eat much of anything during his time in Sascha. For one, he had adjusted his diet so that he was more or less a vegetarian at this point – not for any moral reason, though. He just found that his condition rendered some food inedible. Meat wasn't the only food that disagreed with his stomach, though. Pungent dishes often caused him problems as well. Garlic, for instance, now made him violently ill. So, when Laurel heaped a mound of spaghetti and marinara onto his plate a few days after their arrival, his stomach

began to churn loudly – begging him to reject the poison set before him. None of the Murrays seemed to notice though as they had begun to bicker amongst themselves. Allison had just told her father that she didn't want to be a nurse anymore, that she now wanted to pursue a women's studies degree. Karl's face had turned red at the suggestion, but he didn't immediately burst with anger the way Allison had expected he would.

"Women's studies?" he asked, his tone thick with superiority. "What do they teach? How to properly burn a bra?" He had heard of "new age women" and "feminists" on his television programs. Certainly, his little girl hadn't become the liberated type, the type to attack the bedrock of American society, right? The two of them went back and forth, each thinking they might succeed in winning an unwinnable argument. Eventually Karl turned to Dmitri. "What do you think about all this? You really want to be married to a feminist?" Karl asked him, trying to find allies to aid his cause.

"I dunno," Dmitri responded, honestly. He didn't know that he and Allison were to be married. Girls, he figured, dated all sorts of guys in college. He imagined that he represented the first in a line of men Allison would eventually bring home to meet her parents. He also didn't quite know what feminism was. Sure, he posed as a feminist at bars when trying to bring women home, but it wasn't something he had put much thought into.

"Dunno, huh?" Karl continued. "Laurel, you hear your daughter?"

"Karl, dear, she can be whatever she wants," Laurel said timidly, refusing to look up from her plate. In all honesty, though, she hadn't paid much attention to the conversation. She was a woman with a rare and untapped imagination. In another world, she could have been a famous author or a painter, a brilliant artistic mind. She frequently lost herself in vivid imagery, in fantastical movie scenes which were infinitely more entertaining than her reality. For the longest time, Laurel hadn't been a sexually adventurous person. On her wedding day, her soul had been as clean and white as

her dress. She had only ever been with Karl and, despite her creative tendencies, she figured it wasn't her place to question the kind of love that he gave her on a given night. Then, one day, she had an epiphany, an awakening like a dam rupturing. Ever since, she had difficulty paying attention to any given moment for longer than a few seconds. If she wasn't actively speaking, in all likelihood she was imagining herself in the arms of a man. She had a particularly bad habit of imagining Father Gary, Sascha's resident priest, folded into all sorts of sexual positions—even though he was more than two decades her senior. At Mass that Sunday, she had imagined herself coiled around Father Gary like a snake, mating like wild beasts in the jungle. Now at dinner, she pictured the two of them kissing so passionately that their teeth scraped against one another.

Karl squinted in her direction, now. He had never liked it when she contradicted him. It wasn't her place. His reading of the Bible told him that a couple united in marriage should be equally yoked, united in body, mind, and spirit. Without a word, he aggressively excused himself to the kitchen. Laurel also pushed herself from the table and moved to start clearing dishes. But, she remained quiet, still lost in thought. Her mind had moved to another man, James Schultz, who had died in a farming accident the year before. Together, they were reenacting her favorite scene from *Ghost*.

### December 21<sup>st</sup>, a bustling Tuesday night

People all around the region knew the lone bar in Sascha, the Duck, as something of a hot spot. Here, the townsfolk had tequila on Fridays and whiskey on Saturdays. Then, they'd visit St. Michaels for wine on Sundays. The bartender, Tom, had a reputation for serving drinks to whomever was tall enough to see over the bar. For that reason, many nights—and especially on weekends—Sascha would nearly double in population as various underage patrons poured in from the surrounding towns. So, it is, perhaps, not surpris-



ing that this is where Dmitri and Allison found themselves on an otherwise sleepy small-town night.

Allison, who mostly abstained from drinking, now found herself excited at the prospect of imbibing some cheap booze. She hadn't seen some of her closest friends since she had left Sascha in the fall. Carrie, Allison's closest confidant, had planned to go to school in the Cities as well, but then she had gotten pregnant with her boyfriend Greg's baby in the fall of their senior year. Now they were married with a kid. No time for school. Barely enough time to sneak away to the bar one night a week.

Initially intoxicated by each other's presence, the Sascha High grads shared round after round after round at the bar that night. Meanwhile, Dmitri mostly drank water. To him, the conversation was too filled with inside jokes to be comprehensible, and as a result, he began to dissociate from the joy of the rest of his party. He also found himself irritated with his date – who was too lost in drink to realize his discontent. In his mind, she seemed decidedly less complex when around these particular people. To him, she had always been a city girl, a metropolitan figure born in the wrong place. She had come across as a person with big ideas, with forward thoughts, a unique taste in arts and culture. Now, he thought maybe he had been mistaken, as if his lust for her had clouded his better judgment. Frustrated with his lack of attention, he eventually took himself to the bar to order another pitcher for the table. And, when he found the conversation with the bartender, Tom, more inviting, he ultimately stayed, assuming that Allison wouldn't notice his absence.

When it was eventually time to head home, Allison, Carrie, and Greg uttered incoherent farewells to one another outside the bar. Then, they went their separate ways, stumbling in opposite directions down the empty streets of town. On her way back to the Murray household, Allison initially swerved playfully from one side of the street to the other, but when she noticed Dmitri's more somber demean-

or, she stopped, self-conscious that he was silently judging her.

“Noticed you were talking to Tom quite a bit,” Allison slurred, trying her best to fill the silence between them.

“Yeah, nice guy.”

“You know he likes to get little girls drunk,” Allison continued, reckless, uncontrolled words spilling from her mouth without her consent. “He has a reputation, you know. Not sure I’d want to hang around with him if I were you.”

“If you say so,” Dmitri said, grabbing her hand. He quickened their pace, hoping to minimize their conversation. He had liked Tom after all. They had been able to talk with one another, as in truly talk. No forced pleasantries, no drawn-out pauses. It felt natural, like conversing with an old friend.

“Hey, D?” Allison started again after a moment of silence, her tone noticeably different than moments before.

“Yeah?” Dmitri responded.

“Are we for real?” she asked. By now, she had wrestled her hand free of his and had stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. Their early days had been filled with parties and hook ups and indiscretions. It had been a honeymoon of sorts—the way all new relationships are—and Allison had enjoyed every moment of it. But, now that they were far away from the city lights, she saw Dmitri differently than before, a stranger. She felt her hesitations about him more strongly, and without the buffer of sobriety, she heard them materialize into words for the first time.

“What do you mean?” Dmitri tried to grab her hand again.

“Are we real—I mean—as a couple?” she asked again, doing her best to evade his grasp.

“Jesus, Alli, what kind of question is that?” he swiped for her again.

“No, wait. I just—we don’t talk. I was thinking about it, and I can’t remember a time we had a serious conversation, just us, you know?”

“I dunno, Alli. Can we talk tomorrow when you’re more—you know?” Dmitri fumbled for the right words but

never quite found them. He swiped for Allison's hand one more time – to which she finally responded in open frustration.

"I said stop!" Allison flailed to evade his grasp, and in doing so, the back of her hand caught Dmitri across the face. At this point, the whites of his eyes turned red, and his pupils dilated. He grabbed at Allison's coat, and in her attempt to avoid him, she fell backward into the street. She landed flat on her back, her head snapping downward onto the gravel underneath with a crunch. The trees and homes nearby mocked her while Dmitri stood overhead, a suddenly violent presence in her eyes. His teeth had morphed into fangs, his face twisting and contorting into an animalistic snarl. In response, Allison did what anyone might do when in the presence of a monster. She pushed herself to her feet again and began to run in the opposite direction of her parents' home.

"Alli, wait!" Dmitri called after her, but she was gone, her footsteps echoing down the abandoned street. Even if he could catch her, he figured, she wouldn't likely go anywhere with him at this point. Defeated, full of regret, he returned to the bar. He knew he couldn't very well sleep at the Murray household if Allison wasn't there. Luckily, even after two in the morning, the Duck remained open. Tom was still serving drinks to eager patrons. Dmitri was thankful for that small mercy because, suddenly, he had a craving for whiskey.

### December 22<sup>nd</sup>, a Wednesday, the morning after

Allison awoke to the screaming cries of Carrie and Greg's baby. Her head felt tight, almost swollen, last night's alcohol still corrupting the blood in her veins. She lay next to a toilet in an unfamiliar bathroom. Her phone – which was on the floor nearby – told her that she had two unread messages. One was from Dmitri, apologizing. The other was from Carrie. Apparently, someone had seen Dmitri leave the Duck with a strange girl in the early hours of that morning. Word

gets around quickly in towns like Sascha. “I just thought you should know,” the message read.

Carrie agreed to give Allison a ride home after some more bickering with Greg. Nothing was more than a few blocks away in Sascha, but Allison couldn’t bring herself to walk. Carrie’s car, though, smelled like stale cigarettes, and Allison struggled for the whole of the ride home to stop the world outside from spinning. She put her hands on the dash to stabilize herself. She stared at her feet. Her mouth welled with saliva. She knew what was coming.

“Not in the car!” Carrie begged.

“Drive faster,” Allison managed — though every sharp turn and untamed pothole already threatened her shaky disposition.

The short time spent between houses felt eternal, and when Allison spilled from the vehicle into her parents’ yard, she retched instantly, all booze and bile. Ignoring her parents entirely, she made her way up to her room — or more accurately the adjoining bathroom. And, for much of the afternoon that is where she slept and heaved and cried — not for Dmitri though. She didn’t have the wherewithal to even think about him, what he had done and with whom. No, she cried like one does when begging for death.

Dmitri felt a different sort of sick when he awoke that same morning. His nighttime companion had left the blinds open, and the rays of the sun had begun to burn his skin. It wasn’t a spontaneous combustion like in those silly vampire films. Dmitri’s symptoms were more like an intense sunburn, accompanied by boils and blisters. Today he also felt nauseous, exhausted, dehydrated, guilty. He crawled from the bed and began to close the shades. The girl in the room with him stirred ever so slightly. She hadn’t dressed herself after their foray, neither of them had. He sluggishly moved to find his scattered clothes from around the room: underwear, a sweater, tattered skinny jeans.

A clock on the bedside table told Dmitri it was just past eleven in the morning. Best to let the woman — whoever she was — sleep as long as possible. He dreaded the thought of

asking to “hang out” at her place until the sun went down. So, Dmitri crawled back into bed, silently, trying not to move the mattress in any capacity. He pulled the blanket up over his companion’s shoulder, right up to the marks he had left on her neck.

That evening, Dmitri walked home through blocks of identical houses, all dilapidated, all crumbling. Each had broken and missing shingles from harsh weather. Each saw its paint chip in more than a few places. Eventually, though, he found one he was looking for: the one with Allison’s car parked out front and his own belongings packed and waiting for him on the porch. He thought about trying to reason with Allison, about asking if he could stay, but instead, he grabbed his suitcase and wheeled it back to the Duck. He thought if anyone would take him in until he figured out a way back to the Cities, it would be Tom.

#### December 23<sup>rd</sup>, a Thursday

Allison felt better the following day – physically at the very least. Some part of her felt dirty even after a shower, like she had a stubborn grime clinging to her. She could still feel Dmitri’s body rubbing against hers, his lips on her neck, his sweat in her pores. She thought of him and the things they did. She thought of him doing those things with someone else. It hurt – but not necessarily because she was broken-hearted. She had often questioned the longevity of their relationship anyway. She was rather bothered by the fact that Dmitri could do these same things with just anyone. It made her feel replaceable, like he had kept her around to nourish some unfulfilled need. It was for this reason that Allison visited Sascha’s lone grocery store, the Kwik Mart. Garrett had worked the register there throughout high school. His parents owned the business, so he was something of a mainstay: stocking shelves, cleaning, ringing up groceries. Allison now hoped that he had come home for break, that he might be working shifts at the store to make a few bucks before his return to school.

When she entered the store and saw Garrett standing behind the counter, she abandoned any pretense of the reason she was there. She approached him directly, spoke to him bluntly, and within fifteen minutes he was “on break.” He led Allison out back to where he had parked his truck, and the heat between the two of them soon filled the vehicle. He unbuttoned his pants and pulled them to his ankles, and she took off her shirt. He fumbled with the clasp of her bra, and she undid the bandana that was still around her neck. “I’ve missed you,” he said, but Allison didn’t say anything back. He tried to climb on top of her, but her legs were bent at ninety degrees, and his non-slip shoes pressed against the car door. The angle was all wrong, so she climbed on top, ready to do what they had done many times before. That was, of course, until he saw the marks Dmitri had left on her neck days before.

In a matter of moments, they were dressing themselves again. “Look, I’m sorry, okay?” Garrett said, trying desperately to backtrack.

“I have a boyfriend, Garrett. I’m not sure what you expected.”

“I guess I wasn’t sure either.”

By now, Allison was mostly dressed. She pulled the bandana from under Garrett and tied it back around her neck.

“I just thought you’d be a little more hesitant to jump into bed with someone else,” Garrett said, pulling his own pants back up. He realized too late the cruelty in his comment, but before he had the chance to apologize, Allison had exited the vehicle.

On her walk home, Allison’s mind filled with venom for the various men she had known: her father, Dmitri, Garrett, even people like Tom and Greg and Father Gary. She resented them all. To her, they were broken and backwards people. To her, their lives – all their means of satisfaction – came at the expense others. They latched onto people and used them for fulfillment. As she approached the house, she couldn’t help but wonder what they would be if they weren’t able to sustain themselves on the blood of those

around them. Would they wither? Would they shrivel up and die like leeches without a host?

### December 24<sup>th</sup>, the night before Christmas

Christmas Eve was a day for feasting in the Murray household. Laurel prepared a dinner of roast beef and mashed potatoes, green beans and yams and stuffing. She did these things without the help of Karl or Allison – the latter of whom had spent the entirety of the evening in her room. Laurel, though, was not one to complain. She had been conditioned to cook large meals on behalf of her family as her mother had done before. It was as much a part of the holiday tradition as opening presents. The Murrays celebrated as they did on Christmas Eve because Christmas Day was about the Lord, according to Karl. That meant it was a day to be spent in reverence. It was not about presents or food or sports. In fact, Karl insisted that, from Christmas Eve dinner until mass the following morning, the family should fast in preparation to receive the Eucharist.

“Alli, dinner time!” Laurel called up the stairs after she had arranged the dining room table. She had raised her voice intentionally so as to wake Karl who had, for the last few hours, been asleep on his chair. He stood slowly and shuffled to the table. He began immediately helping himself to the food that Laurel had dutifully arranged. He was so singularly focused that he didn’t notice Allison seat herself across from him. If he had, he would have noticed that his daughter had dressed herself rather formally for their holiday dinner. She had on a black dress, a cocktail dress – low in the neck, sleeveless, extending to the knee. It had a small cutout that revealed a fraction of her stomach just above her belly button. Not necessarily revealing, but perhaps risqué by Karl’s standards. It was her favorite article of clothing, but she hadn’t planned on wearing it while in Sascha. She wasn’t even sure why she had packed it.

“Oh my, Allie. Don’t you look nice!” Laurel put an arm around her daughter as she came back from the kitchen

where she had already started her post-dinner cleaning. It was only then that Karl looked up from his plate in Allison's direction. He didn't really notice what she was wearing as much as he noticed what she was not. Absent from her neck was the bandana that had been a mainstay in her recent attire. The marks on her exposed neck were dark, more the purple of a bruise than the red of blood.

"What are those?" Karl asked, though he needed no explanation.

Allison shrugged, innocently, a coy smile stretching across her face.

Karl's reaction was not what she expected. He didn't actually say anything in return. He just stared at her, his gaze shifting back and forth from her neck to her eyes. He formed countless thoughts that he wanted to say aloud, but some part of him couldn't put them into words. After a prolonged silence, he just let out a sound that was something between a laugh and a shriek. He tossed his plate full of food on the table, grabbed his coat, and made for the door. Without much in the way of notice, he was gone into the night.

It was only now that Allison began to help herself to the food her mother had prepared. Laurel was still in shock, confused at the scene that had unfolded before her. She looked to her daughter, to the marks on her neck. Some part of her, she thought, felt something unfamiliar, perhaps a cautious pride? "Karl?" she called toward the door. She started to follow after him, but she stopped when she heard Allison's pleading voice from behind her.

"Mom?" she said. "It's okay. Let him be."

Laurel turned back to the table, then glanced at the door one more time. After a short pause for consideration, she pulled her chair close to Allison's.

"Merry Christmas, Mom," Allison said, gripping her mother's hand. Laurel responded with the faintest hint of a smile.



December 25<sup>th</sup>, Christmas Day

Allison didn't sleep much that night. Lying there restless in her bed, she decided it best to leave before the sun came up. She had outgrown this place. That was obvious to her now. The previous night with her mother had been nice, but her father would return soon. Things would regress to their normal state. She saw no way around it. After all, her father had generations of precedent on his side.

Allison messaged Dmitri telling him to pack his things. Some part of her knew she couldn't just leave him in Sascha. She hadn't suddenly forgotten what he had done, but she wasn't petty. She pulled her car in front of the Duck which, even at five in the morning on Christmas Day, was somehow open and serving drinks. She walked in to find Tom behind the counter and her father seated at the bar. He looked like he was about to tip from his stool, and he probably would have without his firm grip on the the counter in front of him. From his appearance, Allison assumed that he had walked to the bar directly after leaving home the previous night. Dmitri was waiting in the corner, flipping through the records on the jukebox, trying his best, for the time being, to avoid Karl's obvious vitriol. Other than the whine of a warped Bob Dylan song that Allison didn't know, the Duck sat entirely silent. Karl squinted in her direction as she entered, trying to make sense of the blurred shapes around him, but he immediately returned his attention to his double whiskey. That was fine, Allison thought. To her, he was a man who hadn't spent enough time in silence, thinking about the ways of the world.

"D, come on, let's go," she said, startling Dmitri from his trancelike state. He turned and began to wheel his suitcase in her direction. He stopped next to the bar, however, and gave Tom a hug. Then, against his better judgment, he put a hand on Karl's shoulder and thanked him for his hospitality.

"Get your fucking hand off me," Karl responded without looking up. He slugged the rest of his whiskey and motioned to Tom to pour another.

For a moment, Allison looked at the three men and wondered if, under different circumstances, they would be different people entirely. Could her father have been in a punk rock band? Would Tom have been a world traveler? Could Dmitri have been a priest? Maybe, had each of them been born somewhere else, had different parents, lived in different eras, they would be strangers to one another and to themselves.

“Ready?” Dmitri asked as he reached the door.

“Yeah,” Allison said. She waved goodbye to the drunken man at the bar. Then, she and Dmitri loaded their belongings into the trunk of her car and began their long drive to the Cities.

Not long after, Laurel awoke to a quiet house. Karl had not come home yet. She half expected to find him in his chair, sleeping off his anger from the night before. On the kitchen table she found a note in Allison’s handwriting. As she read it, she couldn’t help but feel conflicting emotions. She had missed her daughter over the course of the past months and knew she would miss her again. Yet, some part of her felt happy for the person she was allowed to be when away from this place.

Karl shuffled into the house as she read. He smelled as if he had found the bottom of a bottle. He began to stumble up the stairs, but then he stopped and turned to Laurel, steadying himself on the railing. “C’mon. Time to get ready for Mass,” he said. Then, he continued up to the bedroom.

“Be right there,” she called after him. She folded up the letter and walked to the kitchen. She tucked it away in a junk drawer until she could find a better place for it. Then, she wiped away the tears that had formed in the corners of her eyes and began to ready herself for the Lord’s Day.

Allison and Dmitri had been on the road about an hour when the sun started to peek upward from the horizon. Allison grabbed her sunglasses from the dashboard and put them on. The next few hours were shaping up to be unbearably bright.

"Hey, Alli?" Dmitri called from under his blanket in the backseat.

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "For everything."

"I know," she said.

"What's this mean for us?" he asked after a moment's pause. His voice was filled with fear, with desperation. It was vastly different from what she was used to. He had always seemed so confident, so powerful when they were together, when he held her body against his. It must have been only now, Allison figured, that Dmitri realized he might find himself entirely alone with no one to help him occupy his sleepless nights.

Allison didn't respond to him though. She didn't really know the right words for that precise moment, and she figured Dmitri could stew in his emotions a bit longer. She turned on the radio to fill the silence of the car. A muffled voice sounded from the speakers, a jockey from some nearby town talking about the destruction of the nuclear family. The sun was gaining strength now as it continued to rise. As the light touched Allison's skin more forcefully, she felt its caress warming her, burning her pale skin.