

## Nonfiction

### Nights In Lights Out

I'm never quite sure how we always end up on the floor. Somehow, when our powdered sugar giggles crescendo into shrieks, when our words no longer flow off the tongue but dissolve into snorts, we sprawl onto the carpet and settle down. We huddle together for warmth in the safety of my dank, cold basement, illuminated by the dim glow of my too-old lamp. It's our little ritual, enacted without ceremony and steeped in tradition: drowning in the TV's rays, hiding from the creeping heaviness of life's slow seasons.

She nudges me. "Put something different on," she orders—as she always does. Our lack of blood ties doesn't change the fact that I'll forever be the younger sibling in our relationship, deferring to her whims and proclamations with nothing less than a smile. I oblige—as I always do.

Despite her insistence, "different" never actually means new. Her eccentric tastes permeate into her movie addiction. She's not looking for layers of storytelling; I still remember how flippantly she rejected *Parasite* as over-dramatic and predictable. She disavows anything that deviates from what she deems cinematic perfection—anything that might disturb the chaos she craves.

A *Fear Street* marathon fits her mold perfectly.

As the movie starts, I feel the rhythm of familiar absurdity—mere high schoolers running from machete-wielding maniacs, hair-raising screams followed by clumsy curses that fail to copy

contemporary slang, and blood spilled with the kind of reckless abandon only teenagers in slasher films seem capable of.

I follow her lead, echoing her giggles at the absurdity of the story, the way a little sister should. I remember how as a young girl I staggered about her bedroom, struggling to lift a massive mirror for her as she posed and sang, in awe of her every move.

And even now, years later, I find myself clinging to her every antic, every quirk: how she insists on drinking her coffee black, claiming “dilution is contemptible,” but can’t resist coffee ice cream. How she makes her own jewelry (Silver isn’t hard to work with), how she names each one of her tattoos (Never mess with me, or I’ll introduce you to Bertha), how she refuses to wear any floral perfume (What’s so great about fake cherries?). These soul bearing fragments anchor me, give me something to hold onto when I miss her, when she disappears to the faraway land of Seattle.

She tosses a pillow at my head midway through the second act. “How’s your life? School?”

“Easy,” I say, but the words feel hollow the moment they escape my lips.

She scoffs. “Always was for you.”

“Not true. And it doesn’t really matter—it’s college that I’m worried about.”

Even in the dark, I can see her raise an eyebrow. “College? You’ve got time for that.”

“Not really.” I sit up, pulling my knees to my chest. “I need to start thinking about applications, figuring out where to go, what I even want to do. It’s a lot.”

She watches me for a beat, the flickering light of the TV catching in her eyes, then turns back. “You already are thinking. That’s already a head start. You’ll be fine.”

“That’s easy for you to say.” The way her hair falls just so, even when she’s done nothing to it—effortless, like everything else about her. “You always make things look easy.”

“You think I have it figured out? Please. I’m a disaster.”

“No, you’re not,” I say, sharper than intended, but without apology.

Somehow, that gets her laughing, genuine but gentle, as if she doesn’t want to offend me.

“Well, no, I’m not. But you need to slow down. You treat yourself like you’re in some kind of race. And if you don’t win, the whole world’s going to collapse. But it won’t.”

On the TV screen, the kids are planning something, huddled together and shrouded in secrets. “I’m competing with my friends, even if they don’t know it yet,” the words fumble out of my mouth, as though I’ve swallowed marbles: no direction, no purpose, “All I do is think about my future.”

She considers my claim before muting the TV. Her voice is mellow and measured. “Why do you need to figure it out?”

“That’s what everyone says. Everyone says I don’t need to know, but that doesn’t make me care less. People pretend they don’t care when they do. Because you can only be smart if you’re nonchalant. Otherwise, you’re an annoying tryhard. I know it’s bad to judge people, but I do. And I hate that everyone pretends they don’t.”

“Why?”

The simplicity of her question makes me stop.

“I don’t really know.”

She speaks slower now. “Honestly, ask yourself—would you ever let yourself stop worrying?”

“I’m already lazy,” I mutter.

“You’re not. But I’m not talking about laziness. I’m asking you whether, if you got the chance, you would actually dedicate yourself to things you love. Would you choose differently?”

Pause.

“I’m not sure.”

She reaches over to fondly rub my hair. “Try being kinder to yourself, and maybe you’ll care less.”

Her words settle over me, firm and tangible. It isn’t the first time someone’s told me to ease up, but coming from her, it feels different. As though she sees something in me, something I cannot yet see myself.

Eventually, she unmutes the TV, and we both flinch at the abrupt burst of sound before dissolving into silent laughter at our own reactions. These moments, where we let the sharp edges of life intrude into our atmosphere, are rare; I despise dragging the pungency of reality into the taut, safe bubble we’ve created. Yet somehow, she makes it bearable—not bland, vanilla, but warm, like cinnamon folded into sugar.

Red washes over the screen as fake gore coats the neon-lit sets. Watching these teens, I feel something rising to the surface, gnawing at my mind before subsiding: that our lives aren’t so different from theirs. We’re not running for our lives, but in a way, we are. We’re still caught up in some plot, stumbling our way through the messiness of growing up.

“I don’t think I want kids anymore.”

On screen, a knife slams into wood. A Fear Street teen yelps, clutching his arm, his splattering blood too bright to be real. Her words cut through it, sharper than any blade. Since we were kids, she was always frolicking with dolls, cooing over every newborn. Now, she stares blankly at the screen, her expression unreadable.

“Why not?” I ask, hesitating.

She shrugs, but her shoulders remain tightly coiled as though she’s bracing for something. “I just... I don’t think I’d be good at it. What if they turn out like me?”

The words come out rushed, like she’s embarrassed to say them, as though the act of admitting it might summon the exact fear she’s trying to avoid. She won’t look at me. Her eyes stay glued to the masked, machete-wielding man on screen, slicing through the screaming teens. “What’s wrong with being like you?” I counter, because it’s true. She’s brilliant in a way that’s hard to define, the kind of person who can make a bleak room feel like it’s brimming with possibility.

She doesn’t answer right away, and the sounds of the movie—survivors sprinting down dark hallways, yelling at each other to hurry up, fear bubbling into anger, into panic—fill the silence.

“It’s not just that,” she says finally, her voice quieter. “I’m scared I’ll mess them up. You know? Like, what if I screw it all up? What if I can’t be what they need?”

Her words hang there, raw and more terrifying than anything Fear Street could conjure.

“You wouldn’t,” I say, and I mean it. But I know it’s not that simple. And maybe that’s what scares her—the idea that no matter how hard you try, you’re bound to make mistakes, bound to leave marks you can’t erase.

She sighs, running a hand through her hair. “I look at them”—she nods toward the screen and laughs at something that doesn’t quite come out—“And I worry that’s what my kids would be.”

“They aren’t bad,” I offer, then add, “Surely better than these amateur archaeologists.”

“No. I know.”

But the silence doesn't sit right with me. The explanation was too easy. The tension builds between us and the film itself quiets down.

"I think about it too," I admit. "Sometimes it feels like... like there's this part of me that I can't control, something that's always going to mess things up no matter how hard I try. And the idea of giving that to someone else, of watching them struggle because of me..."

She finally looks at me, her eyes searching mine. "Yeah. Exactly that."

We sit there in silence, the haunting music growing louder and louder. The killer follows the teen, relentlessly chasing them through the woods. It's ridiculous and predictable—the way they keep stumbling, unable to escape what's coming for them.

"It's not that I don't love my parents," she says finally. "They're great. I just... I feel like I took all the best parts of what they gave me and turned them into this." She gestures vaguely at herself, her laugh bitter and short.

"That's not true," I say automatically, but the words feel flimsy, inadequate.

"I know they'd never say it, but don't you think they wonder? Like, 'Where did I go wrong?'"

Her voice cracks ever so slightly, and immediately she coughs.

"I don't think that," I say firmly, hoping she can hear the truth in my voice. "And I don't think they do either."

She doesn't answer, just leans back against the couch with a sigh.

But I continue anyway. "I think you're incredible. And I think you need to take your own advice."

She rolls her eyes slightly, but when she looks at me I can see a trace of anxiety. She's searching for something.

“Yeah?” she asks, decidedly casual.

Screw casual. I match her look with one of mine.

“Yeah. Be kinder to yourself.”

After that, she doesn’t say much, just silently leans on my shoulder.

Onscreen, the survivors gather their courage, ready to face the killer one last time. It’s foolish and brave and doomed. But they do it anyway.

In true Fear Street style, one of the adults pours blood all over the villain. As killers chase after him into the tunnels, he’s confronted one last time with the main character. She distracts just long enough, before delivering a final stab.

The movie rolls on and suddenly two lovers share a final kiss, loitering over the grave of the so-called witch. They really should be in school.

And just like that, it’s over.

“Ridiculous,” she mutters, but her tone is softer now, more at ease.

“Yeah,” I say, “Again?”

We settle back into the couch. The screen goes dark but the moment lingers, stretches into the quiet.

“Nah. You pick.”

## On Losing

*In the kingdom of Hastinapura, there were five brave princes and their guru, Drona. The princes had learned many ways to fight, but the most important skill was archery.*

*Drona wanted to test his students. He took the princes outside and showed them a bird sitting on the branch of a tree.*

*“Your target is the bird,” he instructed.*

*Yudhishtira, the eldest, stepped forward first.*

*“What do you see?” Drona asked.*

*He peered out into the woods, looking low and long.*

*“I see the bird, the branches, the tree, the leaves, and the sky beyond,” Yudhishtira responded.*

*Drona just turned silently away.*

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I lunge forward and sink my shoes into the carpet, preparing my muscles for the match. *Win, win, win.* I loop a chain around my neck and fiddle until it's flush against my collarbone. *Win, win, win.* I sheath my rackets in my bag and slip my hands under the straps as I walk downstairs to the courts. *Win, win, win.*

Peering past the curtains, I catch a glimpse of her; she's braiding and unbraiding her long blonde hair. In theory, she's ready—her bag dropped by the bench, the can of fresh balls popped open, the small spill from her leaky water bottle wiped up. Yet, no matter how tight she tries to close it, it will drip the whole match.

I know this girl well—the fear of loss, the dare to hope, and the reluctant acceptance. I've been her before.



But today, I'm not. I'm better.

We begin. I bend down, contract my body, and bounce the ball on the ground, one, two, three times. *SNAP*—stretching like a broken band, expanding into my serve, I nail it into the pocket of the service box.

A decent start.

We play on. My shots are clean, neat, purposeful. They anticipate her strategy before she can even create it. I know, in my core, this match is mine.

But with each passing shot, my patience grows thin. Suddenly, I double fault.

I try to smooth my hair and my brain down. But I've lost my target. My gaze shifts from the ball to the 5-0 scorecard and boredom begins swelling in my chest. I stand, rooted in the dusty blue court, whacking a ball back and forth and back and forth, a whisper of the rhythm I once had. There's a thin line between rhythm and monotony.

I can't help but laugh when I call out the score (love forty), then as I flippantly turn over the card. I can't help but wonder when instead of string to string, the ball goes string to net, then net to game, game to set, set to match. I can't help but giggle as I watch her stare at our hands for five full seconds before running up to the post and rushing out. Up to her proud parents, up to the scorekeeper, up up and away.

The high fades. The shame creeps into the corners of my mind as I walk off the court.

But nothing is lost if it was never mine. So I let my gaze drift upward, past the court, past the stands, to the vast expanse above.

## The Bow

*Bhima, second son of Kunti, stepped up to the line. Before Drona spoke a word, he drew his terrible bow, and stood, poised. Between his arms stretched enough force to rip an elephant in half, yet he remained still as a tiger.*

*“What do you see?” Drona asked.*

*Still unmoving, Bhima spoke.*

*“I see my arrow ripping through the bird, rending its life from its body. I see it fall to the ground.”*

*A flicker of strain passed through Bhima’s mighty shoulders as Drona turned away.*

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*This is the worst thing I’ve ever done.* I toss underneath my too-heavy blankets in this too-dark room in this too-tight prison of my mind.

I bury my head into my pillow, replaying the catastrophe once more. *It’s not my fault I had to quit.* It was my teacher, my guru. She left me with nothing. I was, once, a star student. I had been ready to perform my crowning dance, my *arangetram*, since 7th grade. How could I have been the problem? “It was her!” I declared. For who else could turn such a strong mind and body into this limp, dazed girl? I was excellence, I was perfection. And She, wretched She! She, who once praised me in front of my examiner as the prize of her academy, had left me like roadkill to rot. She deserted me in favor of others, gilded ones who could never stretch as far as I could or smile as wide.

It’s not as if I don’t know what dance demands. I know that to invoke this power, you must apologize to the earth for trampling on her, explain that to etch your mark on the world you

must stamp your existence into every step, and eliminate the competition in your audience's crowded mind. I know there is no room for feeble swinging of the arms, for meek tapping on the floor. You respond with every lunge (*Yes, that is my name*), with every stretch (*Yes, this is my purpose*), with every leap (*Yes, I am*). You never play a character—you rip off the skin of the past and embrace the present. The worst thing to be is muddled.

Yes, I know what dance demands. I just don't know when I lost it, when as my offering I had to scrape together *alright* and *passable* instead of full, round perfection.

I flip over and kick off the sheets. *Maybe it's not her fault*. It was I who never practiced, who gave precious time to other "priorities." No longer was I the snake, poised to strike. Instead, I lay limp as a fish—shaking, convulsing, gasping for the air—as if I'd been raised from the ocean of my home into reality's piercing net.

My legs ache, taut as a bowstring, drawn between the rage of my fallen sun and the despair of the cold ocean. With each passing moment, the weight tugs on my quivering limbs, an arrow threatening to fly.

Day and night, this cycle consumes me. Somewhere in the darkness lies Icarus.

## The Eye

*At last, Arjuna stood alone, his bow drawn.*

*"What do you see?" Drona asked.*

*"I see only the eye of the bird," Arjuna replied.*

*"What of the rest?" Drona asked.*

*"There is nothing else."*

*Drona's eyes gleamed. "Shoot," he commanded.*

*And Arjuna's arrow flew true, hammering down the target.*

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Reverberance, ringing, resonation. How I love sounds!

Oh, but silence? The blessed silence that fills the room after that ungodly run of our last song?

For that, I'm willing to praise the lord.

Though certainly one of our most focused, this rehearsal was one of our worst. I'm frustrated, more than frustrated. I know that I have practiced and that I have put in the time and work required- we all have- yet I can't seem to *do* it. Something is off. But I've never had perfect pitch to identify it.

We stand straight as my teacher rubs her eyes once, twice, and sighs. She wearily rubs her jaw as if our stretched-wide mouths have overwhelmed her, too. Instead of wasting her voice, she saves the precious remains of music and nods to the door. Our signal to get out.

We move quickly. The aura of despair is almost tangible, so close to each of our tongues that I swear I could bite down on it. It's choking me.

Two of my friends and I cram into my car. I slump into the warm seat and shut my eyes, trying to flush the echoes of clashing notes from my mind. I wish for meditation, for the darkness to cleanse my racing thoughts but instead, a spiraling storm draws me in. The silence begins to chatter in my brain with countless "*Why didn't you*"'s and "*You should have*" 's, and I feel myself succumbing to its gravity. But before I can even think, I've clicked my phone into the cable, and music fills the air.

This isn't a hymn— it's quite the opposite. Yet, I feel some kind of reverence, some twinge of respect for all things holy. I begin to hum. From behind me, I hear quiet harmonies arise until the three of us are full-on shouting.

Cacophony? No, this is anything but noise. Noise has no purpose. This is purer than any second of that 90-minute rehearsal. I feel the escape from my lungs (not my diaphragm!) as I laugh and shriek and sing.

As I arrive at each of the houses, the voices taper off. One by one, it fades to me alone and the silence returns, but in a new light. It's glittering, floating like magic in the air. I blink it in, inhale the sweet scent like the slightest hint of perfume.

At last, I truly see it.

At last, I can breathe.