September 2012: Present Day

I find the diversity of noises in the city fascinating: Car alarms, sirens, the gears clicking on bicycles, the tick of the crosswalks, espresso machines pouring shots over ice as soymilk bubbles onto the counter... noises overlap and build. But, never from the people. People are quiet – plugged into their iPods and carefully avoiding eye contact. What I find most interesting is that here I feel completely invisible. I can blend into the environment and get lost within the people and actions around me; let the city of Seattle cover me in its sounds and shroud myself in a jarring silence.

However, as I sit beside the small tombstone in Lakeview Cemetery looking back on my life, there are no sounds. But there’s something tangible about this silence that I cling to. The way it fills your ears just the way music or voices do, the way you peel away layers of quietness to get at sounds beneath it. Layers that suffocate the senses; a heart beating on the eardrum – the same ominous tone with no decipherable pitch. I suppose I like it because I am always searching for noise — sitting up at three in the morning; the creak of the house and the metallic clack of a dog’s tags outside as his owner takes him for a pre-dawn walk and the wind against the glass of my window. It is interesting though because we never actually reach it. Silence is like being in the dark: we find shapes and sounds when we expect nothing. And silence means much more when you can never have it.

As a child I searched for that silent place. I found it, if only for seconds at a time. Silence was there in the moments when I pulled the sheets over my head. Under them I could listen past the owl perched on the branches as they swayed together in the night. I could get inside myself, and nothing else mattered. This silence
could block her voice from pouring onto my skin when she would rage. Under them I was untouchable.

I recall those nights. Ever since I can remember, their arguments would envelop the house. They would tear into me, lingering even after they stopped. Yet, like with the city’s noises, in their screams I found comfort. As long as there was screaming, it meant that my mother would not be bothering me. As long as there was screaming, I felt safe. Covered by sounds, I was invisible. Waiting in silence, I was prey.

Some ideas remain branded in my skin like scars that no one can see. I feel them everyday, scratching underneath the dermis and clawing at my intestines. All I could do was suppress them: tame my ghouls before they devoured me. But there came a moment when they broke through. And I had to think about what happened to everything I was and where I went wrong along the way; but I didn’t understand it – I couldn’t. I was engulfed in her shadows. I’m changed now, like everyone else exposed to her madness. The manipulation that lingers in my mind will always be present but I finally understand that it doesn’t have to be inescapable... An idea that can never be erased, only accepted. Through it all, I almost lost the ability to breathe. Yet through it all, I now understand that it’s okay.

March 1995: 11 years old

The door to my bedroom was cracked allowing a sliver of light through – the blankets stifled my breath. Wide-awake I laid there listening, careful not to make any movements and hoping that all remains calm. I did not trust the darkness because I could not trust her. But then it came as it always did. The screaming progressed quickly. Whispers traced the hallways, building as it crawled across the carpet gaining momentum with each fiber it consumed until it echoed throughout the walls and down my
And when my father screamed out in the middle of the night, I often wished that I didn’t understand what it was that haunted him. His cries were broken and shrill like old piano strings that played much higher than they should have been. Out of tune against the softness of his face, but accentuated by the liquor in his blood. Alcoholism plagued him and he succumbed to it. Over the years, he used spirits to drown out Thena. I guess I couldn’t blame him.

“AHHHHHHHHH!” Thena’s screams burst through the halls in the middle of the night. Her words were incomprehensible, the vibrations escaping her throat too powerful for diction.

“Thena, you have to stop this! What do you expect me to do? You blame everyone else, ask everyone else to change, why can’t you see that it’s you…” Jon trailed off as he started crying. I crawled down the hallway to listen.

“I have done nothing. I’m here for this family! Where are you?! You’re never home, and when you are, you’re not here. Always screaming in your sleep like a child.” Thena raged and punched the wall. “See what you made me do?” She cried, trying to make Jon out to be the bad guy, “This is domestic abuse.”

“Hardly, I’ve never touched you,” Jon said.

“You don’t have to.” The way she said it, I knew she was smiling. The corners of her lips raised just enough as if she were devising a plan to make it look as if he had. I heard her footsteps heading toward the door. I didn’t want her to find me listening, so I sprinted back down the hall. But as I turned the corner, I collided with Natalia.

“Damen, come on.” My sister hurried me to her room. We went to escape it, like most nights, in the hump of pillows and blankets that we piled in her closet. We closed the doors, and let the darkness take us.
“I can’t take this anymore.” I whispered.

“It’ll be okay.” Natalia gave me a soft smile. I could see her sadness too, even if she was trying to be strong for both of us. “We can get through this, Damen. I’ll get us out of here.” Before our breath could settle, the closet doors erupted.

“What are you two doing?!” Thena yelled at us. Enraged, spit flew from her lips. Her round face loomed above us and color spread over her like poison as if the remnant of the stretched out moon tattooed on her neck seeped into her veins. “Get your asses in bed, now!” She grabbed my arm and dragged me from my corner. Rug burns swell across my knees – they hurt but I didn’t cry, I would not give her the satisfaction. “You both know better to be up this late.”

“You woke us up!” Natalia yelled back. Thena’s eyes pinched at their tear ducts. I couldn’t help but be scared for her. Thena reached for Natalia and lifted her from the floor.

“You do not talk back to me.” She said as Jon ran into Natalia’s bedroom.

“Thena, what are you doing? You do not touch her!” Yet again they left us on the sidelines; unnoticed, my sister and I huddled together back into her closet, their screams looming in the walls.

October 1997: 13 years old

I sat on the splintering pine railing looking in the distance as the sun fell beneath the cracked rooftops of the houses rejected by the rest of San Diego. It was only as I sat watching that I could lose myself in nature – a moment of calmness in a world that housed only facades of morality. As clouds rolled in, I forced myself to go inside.

The burn of whiskey entered through my nasal cavity as walked through the door. The days I could smell the booze on my father’s breath were the worst, but dark circles were but shadows under his
eyes next to his ash colored skin. He’d sit there lifeless and hazed. My mother was awful, and she didn’t realize it, she wouldn’t. It was always everything else, everyone other than herself.

By the way he was sitting in his chair, I knew he had been there all day. Back pressed against the wooden posts as if his spine had dissolved into them, while he spent time at the computer mindlessly hitting buttons on the keyboard while the War Craft figures marched in armies across the screen, conquering computergenerated tyrants. His true problems remained untouched, and he was reminded as Thena’s torment continued.

“Do you even care about me anymore? Look at me!” Thena screamed like it was the God-given power that made her right.

“Hmm,” he mumbled without moving his eyes from the explosions on the computer screen. His eyes used to shine with some happiness. Now they’re just dead, faded with the change of seasons but without the beauty the leaves have as they die.

Scissors dangled out of Thena’s fingertips as she stomped her way toward Jon. I was nervous, and had no idea what she might do to him. I couldn’t trust her not to stab him.

“Mom! What are you doing?” I screamed as she raised the blades in her hand.

“I’m fixing this family.” She looked at me, and yanked the power cord from the wall and then snipped it in half. I could see nothing in her, it was difficult to even call her mom. Although, Natalia and I knew from experience what would happen if we didn’t.

Jon wobbled up from his chair, the bottle of whisky glued to between his fingers. He took a moment and looked into Thena’s eyes, shaking his head. Then he looked at me. His eyes twinged a bit, and for a moment I saw him as he used to be before the screams. A fire grew in him taking presence over the whiskey – eyes clear of their hatred, no longer sunken and dead. I wished I knew what he was thinking at that moment.

“Where are you going?” Thena said as she moved to block his
path.

“Away from you.”

“All you ever do is run away. You aren’t even a man. Go cry to your mother like you always do. Let her molest you like she did when you were a child.” She dug into him with her words. “You’re worthless.”

It hurt to watch these moments. Dust shaken from the opaque walls in her reverberations. My dad faded a little more with each word; Thena knew how to break him. He took swigs of whiskey as he walked, uneven steps making circles in the carpet. He kept drinking until he walked out the front door and there was nothing left to feel. With the lack of attention, Thena moved on to another target.

“Natalia, get in here now. We need to have a discussion.” She pulled a journal out from behind her back. Printed on its worn red cover was my sister’s name. Natalia entered the living room, her hands shoved into her pockets so she wouldn’t bite her nails. “Trying to hide things from me now, I see.” She waved the journal in from of my sister’s face to emphasize her intention.

“Why do you have that? You had no right reading that!” Natalia screamed as she tried to grab back the book. Her worry was overwhelming, trembling all the way down her arms and into her fingers. But through her fear, she stood tall and stared Thena down.

“I bought it, I have the right to read whatever I like.” Thena took the challenge, throwing her words like bullets that wouldn’t ricochet.

“No you don’t! That’s my life.”

“No, it’s where you decide to write nasty things about your mother, and hide the fact that you’re already a whore. Sixteen years old and already spreading your legs for everyone.”

“You’re one to talk, and you don’t know anything! You had your first child at sixteen and you abandoned her. Left in the hospital
and ran!” Natalia screamed back. And Thena’s hand raised so quickly I barely saw the motion. But there it was spreading across her cheek, red and purple waves growing; a drop of blood gently falls from where Thena’s ring scratched her just beneath her cheekbone. Thena stared crying as if her violence somehow hurt.

“That was mean, Natalia.”

“I’ll give you something to cry about!” Natalia pushed her backwards and Thena’s head slammed back into an empty picture frame that already hung crooked on the wall. Before the frame could fall to the ground, she dashed to her room and slammed door behind her. A war was on its cusp, lingering only in the distance between my mother and sister. Thena stomped toward Natalia’s room, closing in on her as if she was prey. The house creaked with each booming footstep. I wanted everything to stop. I needed it to. I went to my room and locked myself in.

An hour later, I could still hear Thena and Natalia screaming back and forth in her room, but something else felt off. I couldn’t tell what. I walked down the hall calling for my dad; he didn’t respond. The door to his bedroom was open. No. No, no, no, no. You didn’t. I said in protest to the idea in my head. When I looked inside, I collapsed. In shock, it was too difficult to deal with. Everything was disheveled, drawers hanging open, and the room was scarred with all the screams that they had held in. I knew all of his belongings were gone. He was too. But it wasn’t over yet.

As I passed where my dad had sat on the steps, I looked down. “I’ll find you,” I said, and stared running. Houses changed to pines and willows, pavement to dirt, and graffiti to clouds. As I ran, a crack sounded in the sky and clouds crept into view. Dissonances of the lightening made me pause. The darkening sky warned of a storm as rain began to trickle down. The rain swept across the road in downpour. I stood there and breathed in the rain. As if to let my bones grow tall like the sycamore, for there was no fear or
lack of trust. To simply be free and to soar up into the sky. And I wished for a life outside of her, I prayed for it – for all of us. The rain pounded against my face; nothing changed.

Miracles didn’t exist. Thena did, and her wake was unsettled in my veins, and worst of all, Jon had left… without me.

May 2000: 16 years old

It was interesting feeling being left in the sidelines. Thena rarely noticed me, I felt like an orphan especially since Jon was gone. It had been a few years since I spoke to my father and I hated him for it. Yet as time moved forward, chances of finding him grew thin. Thena even moved us to Washington, and though she would never say it, it was an attempt to block any attempt of contact. Those years were full of sorrow. Without Jon around, Natalia wasn’t as fortunate to escape our mother. She always tried to protect me though, but in doing so she took all of Thena’s torment.

No matter how hard Natalia worked, she never worked hard enough. If she didn’t get proper grades, Thena would march into the principal’s office, blaming them for her daughter’s failures.

Natalia started to lose herself: dying her hair, wearing chains, hating everything. Other students gossiped, and their lies spread quickly. She was chased with garbage cans, books knocked from her hands... Her friends didn’t stay around long either. However, no matter how awful her days were, she was always there for me at home.

“How are you doing, Damen?” She asked as we walked home. She cared; she encouraged me to go farther because no one else did.

“I’m alright, as good as I can be. Mom’s still a raging bitch and Dad’s still missing. I can’t seem to find any information on him, no public records. Nothing. I don’t even know if he’s dead.”
Although as we spoke, I could feel her sadness radiating down from her toothless smile to her untied shoelaces.

“Well it would be nice to find out something,” she pat me on the back as we walked down the gravel path to our house. But before we went in, I hugged her.

“You told me once to hang in there. We both can. Just think, you only have one month until graduation. We can get through this on our own, and then we’ll be okay.” I told her, but she didn’t believe it. Not as long as Thena had a grip on us. Natalia and I decided after her graduation we would leave together.

Before June could arrive, tragedy struck as a rivalry between two gangs progressed too far. It happened on our walk home from school. One burst of sound and Natalia fell; I dropped down with her. Everything in chaos. Bullets collided with brick and flesh as the black Cadillac sped by shooting at the houses to our right. I dialed 911, and waited by my sister’s side, watching as red spread across her abdomen and seeped into her shirt.

“Natalia, you’ll be alright. You have to be… I need you to be.” I wanted to cry, but I couldn’t. I felt broken, paralyzed as I held her hand.

“Damen,” she looked at me as she said my name. “It’s okay… you’ll be fine. Don’t let this change our plan.”

“I can’t…”

“You will.” She looked peaceful as her eyes closed; through the dirt smudged on the right side of her face from where she hit the ground. She was gone before the ambulance could arrive.

After Natalia’s death, I spent most of my time writing in the graveyard. The spot next to Natalia’s tombstone felt more like home than anyplace else I’d ever been. It reminded me of all the time we spent in her closet – safe and blanketed in silence and protected from the world. It was here I made the decision to get
emancipated. Leave as we had planned. By sixteen, my father disappeared and my sister was taken because Thena moved us to this neighborhood; I wouldn’t let her take anymore away.

A week later I told Thena I was leaving. The trepidation in my words was overwhelming as I spoke. “I can’t stay here anymore.” Her face remained still, emotionless, and quiet. But it didn’t have to change for me to know she was scheming.

“So you’re just going to leave me like everyone else?” She said while her tears started to fall as if on cue. “I’m your mother… You’re supposed to love me.” Tears rushed down, chest trembling, her face contorted with faux pain. She could be an actress when she wanted to, but I didn’t fall for it.

“I don’t have it in me to love you. You ruined everything you’ve touched. Every life in pieces. How can you possibly still believe it’s everyone else?” I almost begged her to understand. She stopped crying almost immediately and all that was left was her gaze. A gaze that could burn.

“You think you can leave me?” She asked in a harsh whisper. “You’re an ungrateful brat. I’ve been here for you your entire life. Where’s your father?!” Her voice grew in intensity. “He left you, he doesn’t care! I never left!”

“You’re right, you never left. But I wish you would have.” I screamed back at her. I lost my composure, but it didn’t matter. “Because of you, I lost everyone that mattered to me. And because you, they lost themselves. I’ve never loved you, I couldn’t. No one could.” I saw it in her eyes as she reared for the charge, an earthquake waiting to rip me apart. She raised her hand to slap me, but I caught her arm. “You will never touch me.” I threw her arm back at her, deepening her quake. “Every person who has ever been in your life, you manipulated! Your husband, your daughter! You took each of them to their breaking point, and then tipped them over. You consumed them. Every last crumb.”
And then I ran, but this time I didn’t come back.

July 2006: 22 years old

I took careful sips from my coffee, lucidly watching shadows roll away from the cracks in the road and dew slide from the grass as they dropped within the light of the sun. I listened to the city until my attention was shaken. Across the porch, a couple tried to keep their voices low. I could tell they were in the middle of an argument. Her pursed lips grew firmer and fierceness overtook her eyes. As the man spoke to her, the swirls of her fiery hair seemed to tighten.

“These discussions aren’t working Ariana, and you know it just as well as I.” He said as he compulsively stirred his coffee. The spoon tapped the mug in disjointed pulses – staccato and hallow but it accented his words.

“No, what’s not working is us. You don’t even try to work with me. What would our daughter think if she knew about your debaucheries?” Tears flowed down her face. He looked as if he could laugh at her sight. A barista came outside to grab their plates. They stopped arguing, yet the tension loitered. The man excused himself from the table, and she just sat there shaking her head, tears still flowing. I watched her, growing envious and reminiscent at the same time. My eyes were dry like they normally were, but unlike the woman, my tears never fall. I stared at the lines and discolorations in my mug, and recalled memories of my childhood. What happened to me… I already knew; it was undeniable, even if I didn’t want to know it. Perhaps I should have seen it coming. Then again, as a boy I never thought about how my mother could change me. My hands clenched and shaking, growing white at the seem against my coffee cup. It had been years since I was able to cry, let
alone feel anything and I’m frustrated. I’ve avoided my past for so long hoping that I could move forward. The city was a nice change of pace, but I hoped I can find some peace within myself as news of my father’s whereabouts was on its way.

“Good morning, Damon.” I hear from behind me.

“Andrea, thank you for coming.” I say as I get up to greet her. “I hope your drive was alright.”

“It was painless enough,” she said. As she took a seat I noticed how beautiful she was. A slight scent of roses radiating from her hair. She wore a tight leather jacket, a charcoal tank top, and scarlet skinny jeans. She could turn anyone’s head, not to mention her golden eyes. No one could guess that she was a private detective. With all the time I spent talking with her, she was the closest human connection I had to friendship.

“It was a tough case but I found your father.” Andrea looked directly at my face, tracing the dilation of my pupils. “He changed his name. That’s the reason he hasn’t shown up on any records.”

“What? Why would he do that…” I said, more to myself than to Andrea. My mind raced with questions, cracking my knuckles with each one.

“I suppose he didn’t want to be found.” Andrea gave the obvious answer but absent of the reason why. That’s is the real question.

My mind delved into the question. He disappeared years ago with no word, and no one seemed to know anything different until now. He had been just another family member I’d lost; yet, there were so many things I wanted to ask him. Andrea looks at me, hesitant of my reaction.

“Where is he?”

“He lives in Oregon now. Bend to be specific. His name is Charles Paevan. Also, he remarried four years ago. His wife’s name is Melina. They have one child.”

“What,” I laughed. I was in shock. I spent years looking for him and the truth was that he just abandoned us to live a different life.
You know I never blamed him for leaving, only how he left. He was just gone. Now I just feel hate.

“I know this is hard to hear.” Andrea has been supportive of my goals since before I hired her. Now I wish she had been there when I was younger so I wouldn’t have wasted my time. She took a manila folder out of her bag. “All the information I found is in this folder: Mailing addresses, phone numbers…etc.”

“Thank you for your help, Andrea. I truly appreciate it.” I said, not yet understanding what this information really meant to me. She got up from our table and pat me on the back, but no words were exchanged.

I watch her walk away and wish I wasn’t so broken. I wish I could feel, could love. Something or someone to remind me of the good that has been in my life, something I can count on. The one person who was always there for me died before she could live. And now my father had not only abandoned me as a young boy, but completely erased his connection altogether. My eyes trailed Andrea’s path until she was out of view; all while my hands had grown firm around the folder.

June 2006: 23 Years old

Over the next month, I found it difficult to concentrate at work. I spent my day clearing out spam from the CMS server rather than collecting research for future projects. Some days I even called in sick because I was too pissed off and depressed to be productive. But I had to keep working, I had to push through it. My attendance and quality of work was sure to get me fired if I didn’t start looking past my personal issues. A fake smile at least maintained a paycheck, and I was well versed in avoiding my issues. The information I had been given was just something else to lock up.

From my cubical, the sky had been clear. An oddity around
here and paleskinned Seattle clung to it. It’s one of the only times you could see everyone walking around in skirts and cargo shorts, shades covering their eyes, not used to the bright sun and blue sky. I preferred the darker days – thick air and opaque skies, rain drizzling on my face as I walked around town, reminding me that life goes on even when your godless prayers aren’t answered.

Five o’clock never fails to come when I need it the most. As I went to clock out for the day, my phone vibrated: Incoming message – Brian Stark. “Duchess!” Brian is the type of guy that takes what he wants. A theatre major who built his own fashion brand-building agency. And for some reason he always called meduchess. I never saw a connection.

What do you want, Brian? I’m guessing you’re in town for business?”

“Well obviously business and PLEASURE!”

I walked down four flights of stairs to avoid any and all interaction with my coworkers. “That means I’m taking you out for some clubbing!”

“I’m not really in the mood,” I walked down 1st avenue, staying on the left side of the street so I could pass through the smells of scones and sourdough rolls from Macrina Bakery.

“Well get in the mood, and meet me at Richard’s place in 20 minutes. I wont take no for an answer.” His nonchalant ‘cool’ guy persona was hard to love and he can be difficult to handle sometimes, but when he wanted something to happen, it did. I’m still not sure how we even became friends… Just one drunken night out at the bars by myself and I had been swooped up by the crazy crowd.

“Fine, but you’re buying.” Message sent. I thought that maybe a night out would do me some good. I flagged down a cab.

“The Olivian.” I told the driver. Compose new message: “You win. I’m hopping in a cab. I should be there in five.”

“Perfect. Oh, and there’s a margarita waiting for you.
Compliments of Richard, of course.”

“Well I know you sure as hell didn’t make it.” I shoved my phone back into my pocket. With everything on my mind lately, I really could use a drink.

A short cab ride later and the Olivian was in view. Twenty-six floors of glass walls and just steps away from bistro eateries, boutique shopping, and entertainment venues. Rich people.

It was a tedious process every time I went to Richard’s, so many steps just to get upstairs. Sometimes I didn’t even think it was worth the trouble: All guests must be buzzed in by the doorman if not accompanied by a resident of the establishment, and then the desk manager has to activate the elevator. Within an allotted amount of time, the condo owner had to send down the automated code for guests to use to go up to the predetermined floor.

I dialed Richard’s room on the call box. “I’m here. Now give me the damn code.”

“Oh chipper up,” Richards says. “2905976.”

“See you in a minute.”

The doors open at Richard’s floor, but before I can leave the elevator, Richard and Brian get in. “Are you kidding me?!” Irritated that I just dealt with the desk manager for absolutely no reason. They both just laughed.

“Yep, this one definitely needs some shots.” Brian thinks everyone needs shots, so this isn’t much of a surprise. Brian pulled a bottle of vodka out from behind his back and the drinking had begun…

Neon pant covered my face and dripped down my neck as the music pounded against me. Enticed by it, I didn’t even notice the people swaying out of rhythm against the vibrations pulsing around us. The repetitive progressions of over-processed beats mixed with vodka and cigarettes, and ate their way up my spine like an acid trip I’d never taken. But it was there. I didn’t know when it would relapse. Everything was out of focus until Brian
grabbed my arm and lead me to the bar. From here my glimpses got worse.

“Time for shots, boys!” he said without stumbling through his drunkenness. He placed the glasses of tequila in front of each of us; Richard, Bernie, and I down them in seconds. As I put my glass back on the counter, Brian handed me another and winked, I went with it. Drink, Drink, Drink. It was the theme of the night. Shot after shot I keep going. I lost count to how much I actually had.

I blinked and found myself in the bathroom staring at the mirror, confused at how I got there. Sweat dripped down my temples, my eyes were glassy, but I smiled blankly at my reflection.

“Hey buddy, you alright?” some man asked from behind me and I stumbled back.

“Yeah.” My eyes were still on the mirror, I couldn’t see myself, but my white teeth shined back at me.

“You sure? Maybe you should let me take you home.” He approached me, but I would’t have it.

“No!” I shouted and pushed him back. I staggered forward and shut my eyes thinking I was going to fall. But when I opened them, I was back on the dance floor. A girl danced in front of me next to the video screen. An overwhelming smell of perfume clung to my shirt and it made me sick; I could taste the vomit in my throat. In desperation, I peered around the room for an exit.

“Damon! There you are. Come on we’re leaving.” Richard pulled me away. I groan and black out again.

Buildings loomed overhead, as if watching me. A glance at my phone told me it was after 3 A.M.

“It looks like it’s his first time,” Bernie laughed.

“As if.” I went with it, not thinking about what would come next; entirely numb, oblivious to the cold air as the alcohol
coursed through my veins.

“He’s doing better than you,” Richard snapped. “At least he didn’t vomit all over my back.”

“Don’t eve..”.

“Hurry up boys, lets just get back.” Brian cut off Bernie mid sentence; his comment put everyone back into focus. He was always one for taking charge. Must have been his Las Angeles roots; however, right then his coolness really didn’t put me at ease.

We made our way up to Richard’s suite on the top floor. The glass walls revealed a new side of the city; twenty-six floors up. Even in my haziness it was a grand sight. Behind me, my friends had gathered around the table, and the white powder was placed in lines. A Benjamin was rolled up between Brian’s fingers as he looked at me.

“Damon, you take the first hit.”

“I don’t do that, Brian,” I protested clinging to the end of the table so I wouldn’t fall over. Yet I inched my way over to them. The lines of cocaine looked so harmless. My dad’s face flashed in my memories tarnished by booze; he left me and I wasted my time trying to find him as if it would make everything about my life suddenly become clear.

“Come on, what happened to the life of the party?” Egging me on, trying to get me to fault. The truth was, he didn’t have to. I was ready to let loose.

“Ugh! Fine, but only one hit.” I knew it wasn’t a good idea, but I was too drunk to stop myself. Lowering my head close to the table, I inhaled quickly. Oddly enough, I felt normal... Sober and irritated at life.

“That wasn’t so bad.”

“There you go! I wouldn’t have had you try it if I didn’t think you could handle it,” Brian’s grin was much too big for the hour while he blasts the music from the entertainment station.
Richard was in the kitchen making more drinks: Patron mixed with triple sec and lime juice. We didn’t need any more alcohol, but we kept drinking without any regard to that.

We drank, no longer tasting the alcohol; rather, just going through the motions. My face grew numb, tingling spreads throughout my body. I felt like my brain was asleep, yet my body kept going. Another glance at my phone: 4:48.

“Brian, I’m getting tired.”

“I know just what you need,” Brian was always smiling, unsettling my nerves. He pulled me over to the kitchen counter and took out more cocaine. In my drunken haze, I couldn’t count how many lines were made this round. Brian handed me a bill, and took one for himself. I watched him inhale the powder, too drunk to care. Going line by line I was gone.

My entire body convulsed. Hands quivering as my body danced on the floor. No one was coherent enough to stop me. I tried to scream, but bursts of cocaine flooded my mind as blood gushes out from my nose. My brain pounded against my skull as my face smudged into the floor; seizing, flashes of my sister, my father, Thena all rushed through me and the neon paint printed into the oak as I realized what I’d done. And everything went black.

When I came to, blood had crusted across my face and neck, but I could move. The bodies of friends laid scattered across the room passed out and unmoving. I was thankful not to be dead.

January 2009: 25 Years old

I started seeing a therapist after my mishaps with drugs and alcohol. The substance use was easy to get passed. The real challenge was getting through my personal issues – specifically dealing with my childhood; he said it would help me move on. It took a few years to build up the courage to confront my father.
When I arrived, I found it difficult to approach the house. It was small, painted brown with forest green trim. There was no lawn; rather, assorted wood chips were sprinkled across the front yard and between the few shrubs dispersed at random along the house. On the left side, a pathway led up to a set of sliding glass doors covered in window stickers as to make sure a child didn’t run into them.

The front door was green; a type of dark green that was somehow inviting as if part of nature. A sign that read, “The Paevan Family” hung above the knocker on the door. I held my breath as I grasped the piece of rounded brass in my fingers. This was it, everything I had searched for across my life. And it was time it was finished. Brass struck three times and then a woman answered the door.

“Hello, can I help you?” She said with much curiosity, clearly not expecting anyone. She appeared to be closer to my age than from what I remembered of my father.

“Is Charles Paevan here? I would like to speak to him.” I wouldn’t say she was attractive, but she had some attractive features. Her blue eyes were striking, as if her irises were rolling with waves.

“Yes he is, just a moment.” She closed the door, and I heard her yell for Charles inside. Seconds away now, and I grew anxious. I couldn’t help but close my eyes. Footsteps grew closer and closer to the door. Creak, creak, creak… the doorknob twisted as I opened my eyes.

“Who am I speaking with?” he asked as the door swung inward.

“Hello, Jon.” I looked him in the eyes. I used to be happy to share them; but now, I wished I could dye mine as if removing the swirls of brown and honey would separate our genes.

He looked at me, searching for the connection. Eyebrows furrowed, the lines on his forehead deepened. And then he realized it. “Damen? Is that you?” He asked himself, not me.

“Surprised to see me?” My tone was direct, and forceful. I was
not hear to indulge in catch up.

“Oh my god, it’s been a long time!” He sounded happy. Could he not see how angry I was…

“Don’t. We both know that was your doing, not mine.”

“Damen,” his voice got softer, “you don’t understand.” Did he actually say that.

“Really? I don’t fucking understand? What is there to understand? You left us and never looked back. And you know what the shittiest part is? I spent years looking for you, thinking that if I found you my life would magically be better.”

“You don’t understand, Damen. I had to leave, I was dying. I’m better now, I’m changed.” Tears had started to fill his eyes. I couldn’t help but grow angrier because of it.

“And what about Natalia and I? You don’t think we were feeling the same way? You don’t understand what situation you left us in. Do you even know that Natalia is dead? Probably not. You weren’t even at her funeral.” He didn’t, I could see it in his face. His lips parted as his eyes sunk down.

“How?” He asked it in a whisper. He didn’t deserve an answer. I gave him one anyways.

“Shot in a drive-by after Thena moved us to a worse neighbor than the ghetto of National City San Diego.”

“I’m sor…”

“You don’t get to apologize,” I cut him off.

There was silence for a few minutes after. He kept his face down while my eyes were aimed at him. I paced back and forth through the woodchips as if accentuating the distance between us while I waited for his words to come.

“Damen,” he raised his head but still did not look at me. “I left because I had to for my wellbeing. I’m sorry but I couldn’t contact you. It was too difficult. I loved you and Natalia, but you both were a reminder of Thena and of my mistakes. I needed time, but by the time I felt like I could it felt like it had been too long.”
“That’s your explanation? Really.” I could not believe that he had said this. “So you felt like you had to hide from your responsibilities, rather than face them. Like you’ve done your entire life. The only thing that you’ve changed is your name and the people in your family.” A little girl appeared at the door, tugging at my father’s jeans.

“Daddy, who is that?” She said. Her face was soft, unmarred by the hate that I faced growing up. Her hair hung tightly in little blond curls; she barely came up to Jon’s waistline.

“That’s your…”

“I’m an old friend.” I cut him off again. I didn’t want her to know our real connection. I didn’t know if I could stand to be in her life. But she smiled and looked up at me. I couldn’t help but smile back, I was happy for her. She appeared to have a good life, one that Natalia and I hoped for growing up. I looked back to my father.

“You were selfish to leave us behind. There isn’t any other way to see it.” The way his shoulders sunk down told me he understood that I was right. I had said everything I needed to. “You didn’t want me in your life, and that’s the way it has to be now. Be good to her.”

I left them standing in the doorway. And strangely enough, I felt a little more at ease.

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September 2012: Present day

Cloudy skies hang above the rows of graves while rain sprinkles down and wind flows like fingers as it traces the paths of cobblestones and fondles the freshly mown grass. As I trace the letters of my sister’s tombstone, I remember everything.

In a moment drowned out by delectation I could breathe. And it
gave false hope. I understand my ignorance now. A broken home can do more damage than any of us can physically see, and no matter how much I pushed my past away, how much I tried to forget, it lingered, waiting for its chance to come out. And when it did, I didn’t understand. But the truth is, I lost myself as a child. I avoided everything and clung to ideas that made no sense, ideas that warranted nothing that could fix what I felt inside.

I take one last moment to compose myself and hold in a breath for just a moment. No longer searching, I wipe a single tear from my eye and leave my journal resting on the side of my sister’s grave. Embroidered on the front cover:

“I miss you, Natalia. And you were right.”