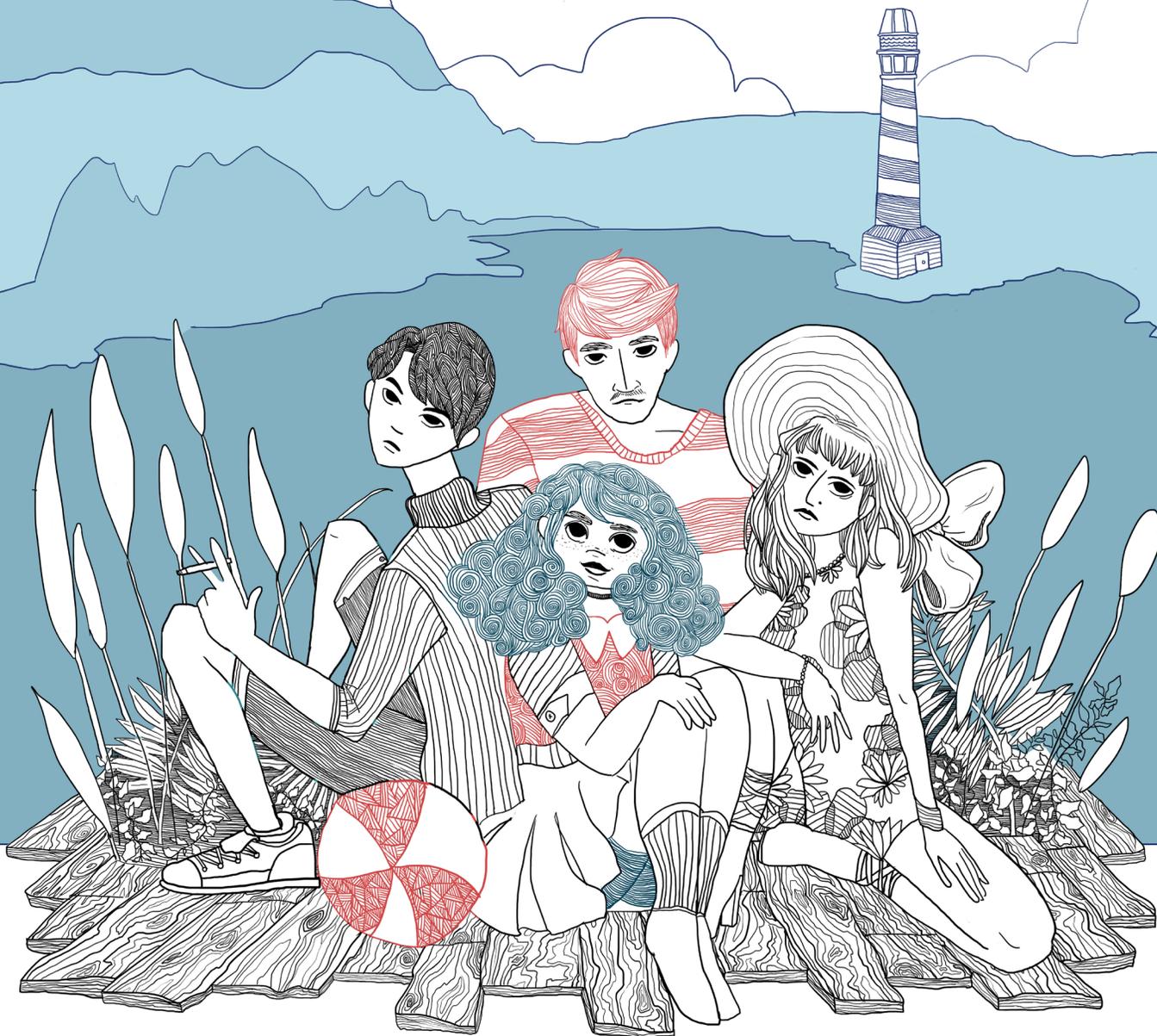
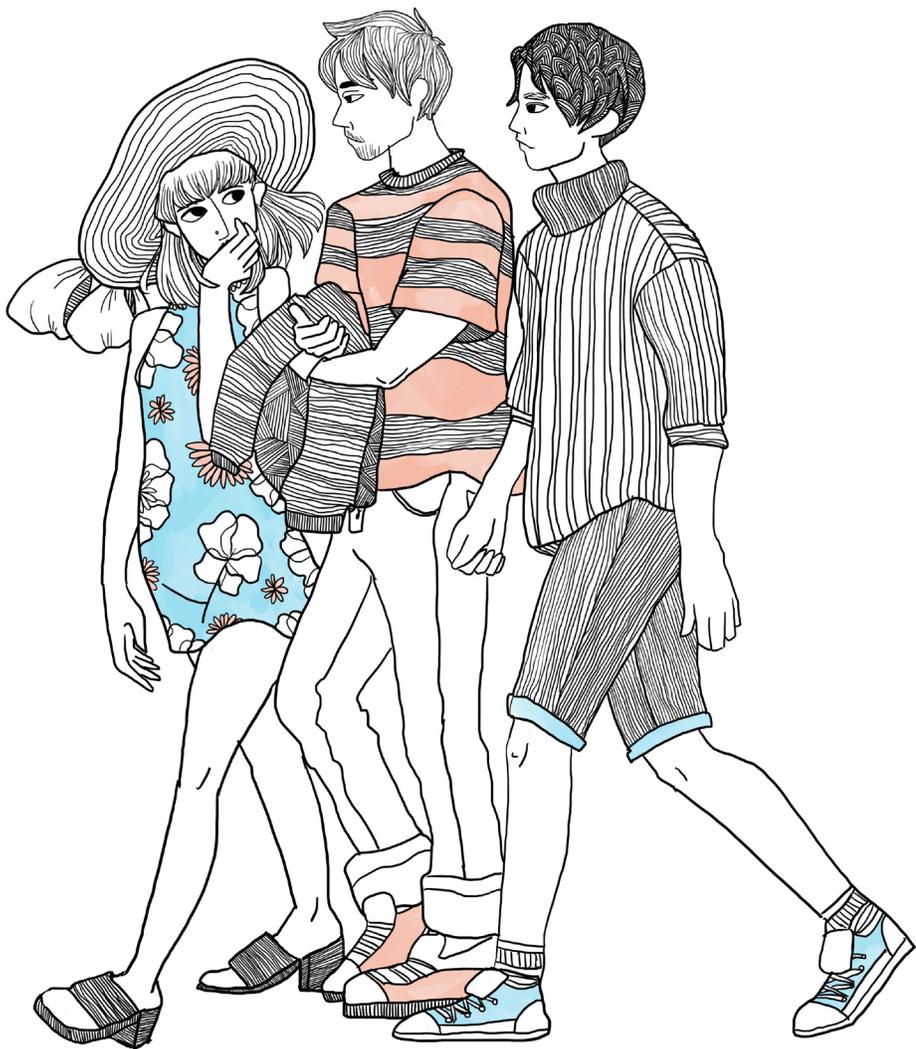


# Not Here : Not There

Mckenzie Hyde







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# 1

## Initial Connections

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## Gabriela

The breeze slaps at my face, whipping my hair back and forth as I roll down the windows with the knob in the taxi cab. Its plastic handle is rough, and you leaves an imprint of where the handle was joined, beginning to fall apart, deep into your hand. Still, nothing beat these old cars, where the windows would roll all the way down so that the glass lined up with the outer rim of the car door. Suddenly, the world outside would be joined with the world that you grew to know inside.

I want to stick my arm out into the now open space, feel how the salty air would weave over and through my fingers as the car glided on past the coast. But another significant part of me would find myself imagining a car or some object slicing my hand while it waved on by. Ultimately, I kept my hands in my lap, my phone humming warm close to me. Feeling the breeze was enough, for now.

Soon I would see all of my friends from high school, er, college again, and though I knew they were all great friends, I was so gut-wrenchingly nervous. We would still sometimes talk online, sure, but that didn't stop my stomach from churning and weaving itself into tight knots. A part of me wanted to run far away from the situation, beg the driver to take me back to the airport. Tell him that I would pay all of the extra quota. After all, I wasn't completely to the manor house yet. I still had time, I suppose, to change my mind.

I had no clue how much we had all changed in the past four years, and my mind began to tumble through the various scenarios, one rotating after the other. I wished more than anything that the best scenario would be the truth, but also a large part of me seemed to just 'know' the worst would be inevitable.

It's Murphy's Law.

I mean, I don't know. How could I ever know? But as many times before, I know even with a plan and answer, my mind would still twirl and twist around the idea of being wrong. I still worried, worried, worried.

I need to stop overthinking absolutely everything. It's not healthy, I know this.

They are still your friends, even if...it's been so many years.

Sighing, long and drawn out, I glance outside to see the nearby village pass by the car. Small cobbled together homes and doors that barely fit the average height of the British man in the modern era. Lilac flowers that climb up to the third floor. Giant evergreen-colored bushes that guard those small cottages, mind a small dusty blue door with a small metal latch at the front. The familiar Post Office, with its red oval background and yellow lettering. Kids outside with pasties and ice cream, all muddy from some sort of game that they played.

It was all very nostalgic, and I couldn't help but leave all of the worries behind me, soaking up the British culture that I had a soft spot for, though I had never intended to do so in the past. It was almost as if nothing had changed, and yet-

The gates of our old school pass by, just for a brief moment. Trees had begun to cover the small road that led up to the main building. A chain held the bars, once keeping us all in, now keeping me out.

The Taxi driver speaks up, mumbling in a deep and hearty tone. "The place closed down a bit ago."

"Do you know why?"

He looks over to me, left hand on the wheel, right hand pointed beyond me, "They say... the place... is haunted!", then looks back to the road and proceeds to cackle, slightly gravelly as if stones jumble back and forth beating against the back of his throat.

"I thought it was because of legal action?"

"Eh" He sighs a bit. "But that's not as much fun as a ghost story,...now is it?"

"I guess so." I shrug, watching the various boutique storefronts pass by.

"Anyways, we will be there in 'bout an hour er so. Soer. Uh." He makes a 90 degree turn around a house sticking out into the road. "Be ready to get ur money and go."

"Thank you" I smile at him, even though his eyes now watch the road like a hawk. The speedometer pulls for-

ward as we pass the marker on the road for the speed limit increase. Outside the village. Now there are just fields again, flanked by endless walls of stacked stones.

I probably text should everyone on the group chat to let them know I'm almost here. Haven't said anything since I left the airport way back in London. I'm sure, somehow, I will be the only one on time, other than Eoin though.

I chuckle, then look outside again, and let the breeze push and pull through my hair, somehow accepting the chaos of everything colliding at once.





## JiHun

Geez, it's that time again. God, how many years has it been? F'king hell.

Eoin is going to kill me. But the finals took a lot out of me al'right? So I needed some me time. I needed to get away from absolutely everything. People just drive me insane sometimes. School does too, but I can tolerate it when I'm painting, when I can throw my jacks in and pretend I am entirely alone in this world. How all that I have is just me and this painting. I could sit there, jacks in, tuned out, for hours and hours on end.

I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing. Probably means I'm antisocial.

Shit, well guess I just have to own it right? I chuckle a bit to myself.

I look at my phone and see the ping for Gabby in the group chat, saying she's here and all that. The phone just keeps pinging and buzzing on my bed as every-one chimes in sending her good wishes. The noise per-mates the silence I just had.

Somewhere off in the distance there is a siren whirring back and forth, and at this point I realize that my window is cracked open. Realizing that's why I can feel a breeze upon my face.

Standing up, I reach my arms up, stretching, then let one arm fall down towards the center of my back. I lose balance for a second.

The world becomes dizzy. I...I can't concentrate. My vision is fuzzy and black checkered marks flash across the room around me. There is a brief moment where all I see is black, knees collapsing, head is heavy, before all the various parts of my room come into vision again easing from darkness into light.

I find myself in the center of my room. There is a painting, in progress on the right side of my wall. Various women and men that weave into each other into a mesh of lace and undergrowth. Many people have tried to find some sort of deeper meaning to it, but in reality, I just enjoyed drawing the body and nature. No symbolism there. But I will take whatever praise they

have. It's always fun to hear what people see or think.

Jeez, I've been working on it for the past year, ever since I moved into this place. It's almost as if the painting has become the wall itself, it's been there so long. The ends taped over and over to keep it in place. Sheets billow at the bottom and painting supplies litter the various cabinets surrounding it. Bottle after bottle of various experimental mixes of turpentine with other agents, some to thin the paint more, some to add a glow to it, stand on a shelf above one cabinet precariously. There are a few clamp lamps too, though the one big dusty one standing up is the most notable...likely due to the fact that some spider must have decided to make it home while I was out last night. A string ties the top of the web to the ceiling and open window nearby. The web desperately clings on as the breeze swings the thread back and forth.

My legs try to ease me forward but grumble in the process, stiff from partying the past few days. "I need water" I say out loud, suddenly as it dawns on me. That's all I can really try to grasp right now. It's been... a weekend. I roll my eyes to an audience of none.

The same legs pull me onwards, creaking at the knees, till I reach the mini-fridge. My stuttering hand then tries to reach for a liquid of any sort. My mouth is so dry, I can taste myself. But as I bend down to take a closer look, there is just leftover kimbap, from.... Tuesday? As soon as I have pulled it out I put it back into the fridge deep towards the back, far away from the responsibility of acknowledging its existence. There's some beer, and fried chicken. Also leftovers. Two sad apples sit on the top rack, slightly crinkled from waiting in the cold so long.

There is nothing for me in this fridge, and it just gives me more of a headache, more than I wanted to acknowledge before. My shoulders slump, and I can hear my mother, far off in a distant memory whispering a slur of accusations at me for how useless and lazy I am.

I sigh and grab a glass from the counter, one that looks to be the most clean, filling it with the water from the tap. Dealing with whatever quality of water pours out.

"I just need to wake up." I press my fingers into my forehead, squinting, only feeling slightly relieved by

the water.

My phone still on my bed, lost in the covers that are piled on top of it, manages to ping a few more times again.

"Suppose I have to now answer back right?" I mean, at the end of the day I do care about those three people, if I have to care about anyone. I smile, thinking of all the adventures we had in the past.

God, it's been so long. So much time, and yet I don't feel like I've changed much at all. Now with water in my hand, I walk over to my bed and shift through my covers to find my plain cellphone staring back at me. Unlocking my phone with a swift '4321' I pull out my metallic lighter, rolling it around my thumb and index finger before reaching for a cigarette in my back pocket.

\*flick\*

The end of the cig starts to darken into shades of gray, smoke wafting into the air, creating a hazy mist around me. My eyes water, but it's become a feeling I've understood. It's not so bothersome anymore.

Inhale. \*puff\* Exhale.

I guess I'll just send some sort of gif of a cat collapsing to sleep to the chat, followed by "See you soon Gabby-glad that you're still conscious". That's not ironic at all.

She sends back within the next few seconds a rolling eyes emoticon, followed by laughing and "Thanks Ji-Ji lol- See you".

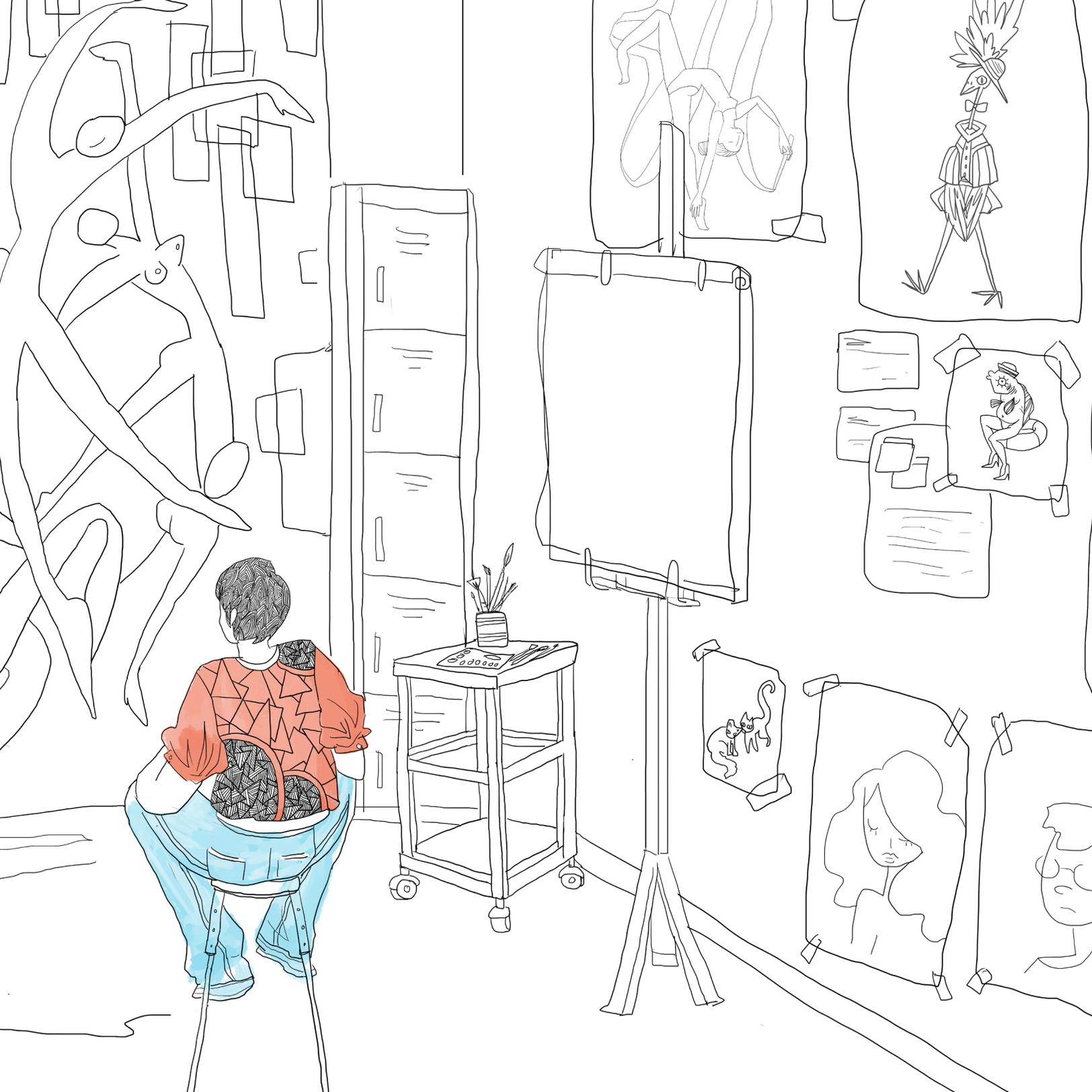
I stare at the phone for a second.

Ughhh. I hate that name, but for them I will tolerate it. I don't think they ever catch on what it means. Otherwise I'm sure all of them would apologize. Maybe someday I'll tell them, but not now.

I chuckle to myself again, and lay back in bed, looking forward to getting together with old friends again. I'll get myself ready as soon as I can fully wake up.







## Katarina

Normally, I would be there on time, all ready to go, properly dressed in my finest linen. Something made out of cotton I would suppose. Definitely not polyester. I really hate polyester, it just makes me feel so... gross in it. I'm not really sure how to explain. It's really unpleasant and I just know when something polyester comes into contact with my skin. Call it a party trick, I suppose.

I would think that a nice pearl necklace to accent the slope of my sharp clavicles would also work. And of course the pearls would have both the beauty visually but meaning equally of its relation to the sea. Plus, all classy women wear pearls. I don't buy the fact that only older folks wear them nowadays. It's utter bullshit.

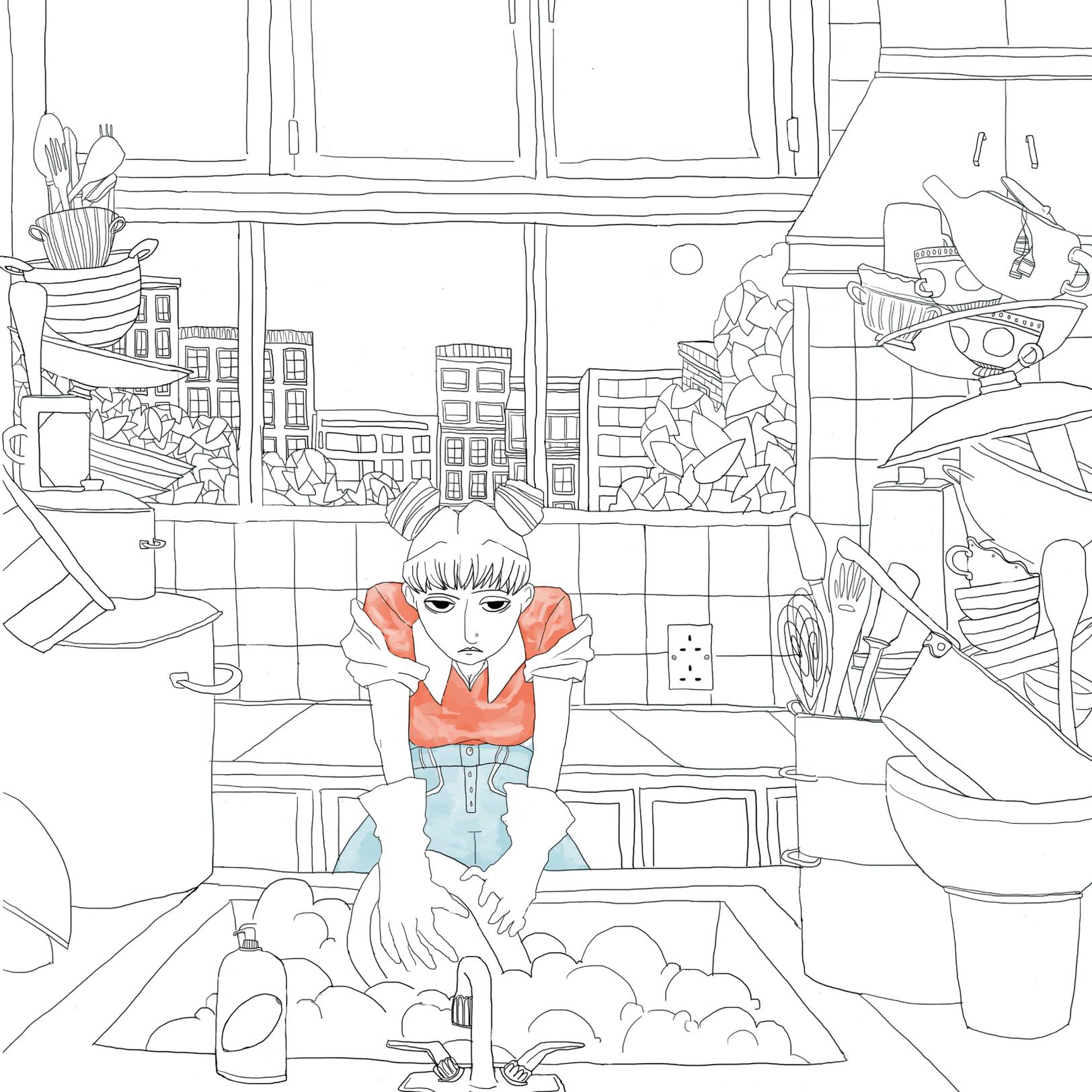
I sit on the small couch, sipping lady grey tea and think through organizing every part of my luggage too for the weekend. All the parts of my suitcase would be organized by their color, their weight, and use. I would most certainly separate the clothes from my utilities. Maybe in another smaller, but matching suitcase. I would triple-check to make sure that all of the individual bottles of shampoo, conditioner, body wash, lotion lined up perfectly within their own individual ziploc bags.

"Everything would be perfect." I breathe in and slowly look towards the kitchen, facing me, right there. Right there on the other side of the room. I can still see the dishes when I don't look, and the tea doesn't really help me concentrate either. I can only think about those dishes, the dirt, the organization. The room around me is pleasant, sure. I live in a loft in London, the top floor. The ceilings are short and the room's diameters are not much bigger either, but it's ok. It's not like I'm that big of a person. Plus, it's a wonder what organization can do for small spaces. Not to mention how close the whole place was to all of the museums that stole my heart so many years ago.

Most of the time, I really don't have this issue, fixating so much on cleaning. Not being able to get any work or preparation done.

I sip the tea again and shift my body to the window to my left, looking down towards the busy street below. Black cabs darting across my vision, one stopping brief-





ly to let a old man in plaid and young blond lady into the back. There's honking, shouting, shifting and turning and whirring. But eventually all of the sounds mix into each other and create their own melody. It's the only way that I can allow myself to enjoy such chaos without the constant need to meddle and micromanage in affairs that are none of my own. The sun, slowly moving over the apartments across the way shifts suddenly into my vision, blinding me briefly.

I look down towards my tea again, and take a few sips, blinking rapidly, still seeing reds, blue, and green in various circular shapes twirling around the dark violet liquid. My vision tilts over to the kitchen again, and this time I can not forget the dishes. I have to obey the need of cleaning that wills me forward step by step till I reach the marbled counter.

Somehow my roommate did not have the time to finish her cleaning- she told me that she 'loved to clean', though I doubted this such when she would leave all of her dishes out, piling up on top of each other within the sink. I would scold her each time, but ultimately I also couldn't just leave them like that.

Some days were better than others. Last night she had a 'small' party, so now only a few sections of the kitchen countertop were left spacious. One near the sink, one next to the stove, and one on top of the fridge.

Normally I would get her to clean her mess, which Eoin told me to do, and I'm trying to get better about that. Trying to be less passive, and more active. More kind to other people and explain how it makes me feel.

But I needed to go away for the weekend.

And....well...

No way in absolute hell was one thing going to be out of place or dirty before I left.

So I cleaned all of her dishes again, scrubbing so hard that I imagine I must have cut my finger at some point. Though I could have mistaken blood for the mess of pasta sauce that covered the bottom of the sink. This time, other than just cleaning the dishes, I needed to organize everything in the kitchen, clean every niche and make sure that it looked brand new.

I knew, deep within my soul that those people, my roommate and her friends, would likely mess it all again. And a part of me died inside thinking about this. I knew ultimately that it was pointless to clean so much when no one would maintain it, and yet it gives me some sense of security to clean it all anyways. When I cleaned all the unease would soon pass, leaving me to rest in silence. I could breathe and just enjoy the the small sounds of the apartment. The simplicity of doing utterly nothing. I cleaned all the time till I could feel such a sense of peace.

And, looking across at counter, shining in the mid-afternoon light, pots and pans stacked according to size, oven smooth as the way we found it months ago, I felt really happy. There were no tasks that I needed to do. My job was fulfilled.

However, due to this, I was already an hour over schedule to get ready to go for the weekend.

I should have checked the organization in my luggage again.

I should have been halfway through carefully layering my make-up.

The pings of my phone keep ringing, and I know that it is Gabby, so I send a text to her cheerfully welcoming her back, but anxiety fills me again so that it becomes hard to concentrate. I don't know what to start with. I don't know what to do.

I .... I have to text them that I need another hour at best to get ready. I can't go out like this. No, this is not acceptable at all. I must have everything as perfect as I can.

I smile, and start walking towards my bedroom, putting earbuds in and listening to calming classical music.

Perfection takes time.

## Eoin

Leave it to me to be the only one on time. The one to get everything set up and the one that everyone relies on to just 'figure it out'.

I start laughing, knowing that no one is here to see me. It's just me in the car right now anyways.

"Yes Eoin, you're the most reliable one out of the group, so you have to go to the house to make sure that everything is ok." Kat's voice echoes in my memory.

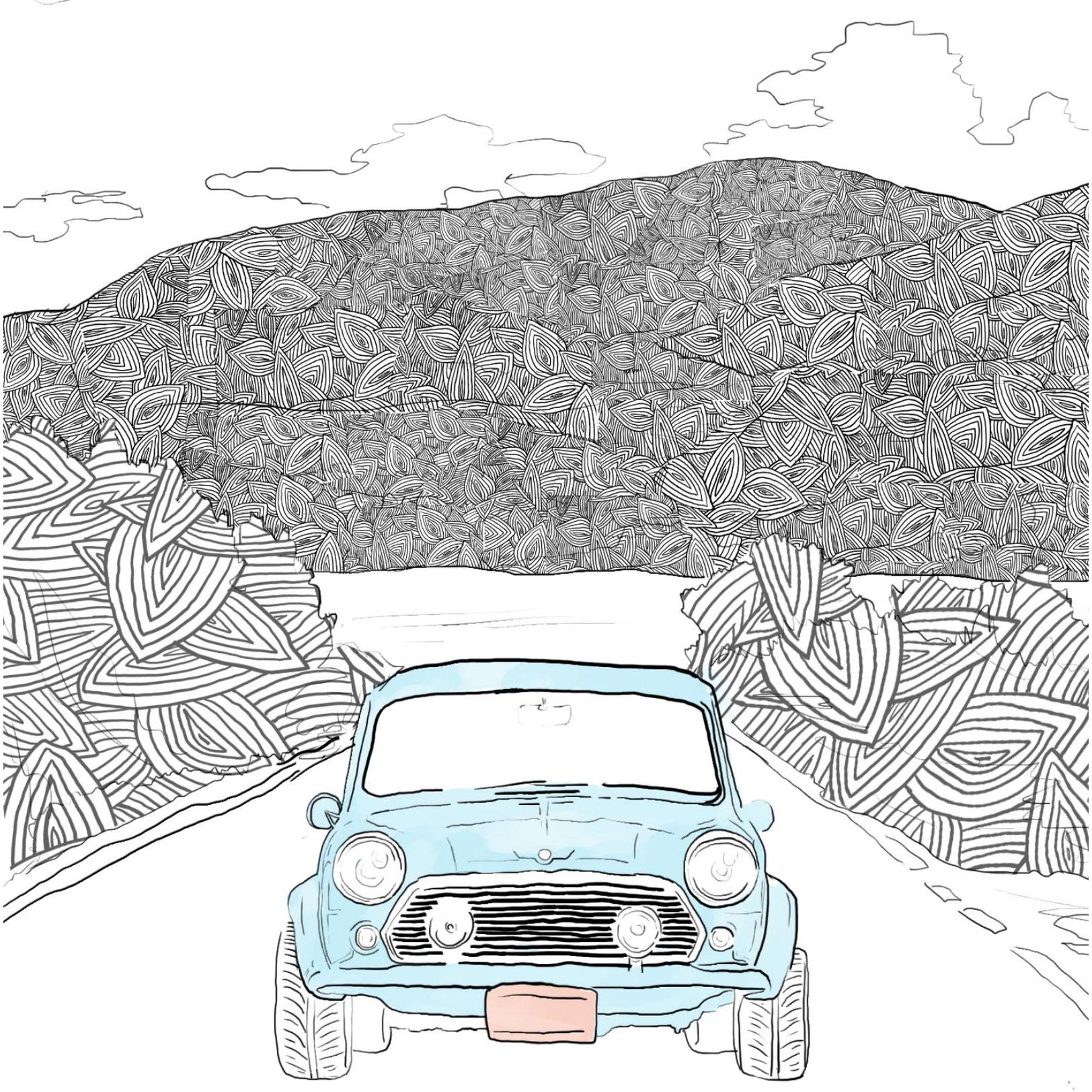
I roll my eyes, still laughing a bit, and gesture towards the road ahead of me. "It's just because I'm the 'man' of the group right Kat? The big guy checks the house out to make sure that there's no big baddie monsters lurking around."

I can just imagine her rolling her eyes, all huffy, shoulders raised and retorting back some snobbish statement to try to support her own reasoning. I'm not sure if she ever quite got the fact that I just liked getting a bit of a kick out of her. Teasing.

Maybe she just doesn't have that much of a humor.

It was charming though I suppose, in a way. If you could ever label a snobby European 'charming'. I crack a half smile and wave to a driver to my right, easing past my car on this tiny little dirt road. He nods in a cheerful thanks, and waves as we both speed away from each other.

I pause for a moment, thinking through every word that she told me, and what I thought in response. Holding the the wheel tighter in concentration, making a sharp left after a sharp right past some houses, I talk aloud again. "I s'ppose that's true." I guess I am the biggest one of the group, and knowing Ji-Ji, he's likely sitting in a room of smoke or hung over right now. Or sleeping. Likely all at the same time. He was a master of somehow doing so much and so little at the same time. Kat is likely organizing her luggage to perfection, or yelling at her roommates for one thing or another. I guess I feel bad for those girls, but in some ways they deserved it, knowing what they were signing into when she told them that she was, quote "a perfectionist clean-freak that doesn't tolerate a speck of dirt".



She never told them in person though. Maybe that's why they never really 'got' it.

Several birds fly down close to the road as I move on past, swerving around the vehicle as if it is some sport to them.

Honestly though, I'm really glad to have Gabby back in group. She was always the fellow adventurer and historian of the group. I always loved hearing about the US history, and her father's military books were something to marvel at, stacked up in shelves lining the walls. Patriotism was in her veins. So it made sense that she went back to the US for education. Though I think, if she didn't have to fly so far back from the US, she would have probably been to the manor house and moved in before me.

Slowing down, moving across the carriageway to the next small road, I take a second to enjoy being back near the beach again. The rolling hills that flow into another before cascading into sharp cliffs that fall straight into the water. The smell, salty, burning, but in a way that was much more mellowing than most would assume. It sparked the imagination in a way that no amount of woods or cityscape could ever do. The scent brought me back to all the times that I had forgot, memories long past of summers where we would run by the cliff bottoms. Our calloused feet bouncing and jumping between each rock, chasing after each other deep into the maze of stones before the tide moved in. The rocks digging into my feet, the breeze drifting by, the sun most of the time covered by a mist or haze of sorts.

Today it's more foggy, but it's not all too unusual either to see the fog like this in the morning. Just put on the fog lights, and watch for cars coming the other way. Swerve to the left onto the grass if there is not enough space for both cars. Wavin' thanks to the other driver for moving.

Standard procedure.

Keep driving. Keep watching.

By the time I had reached the manor house however, most of the fog had cleared. It was still a bit cloudy, but the sun had reached enough out of the clouds for

me to be able to see the home distantly down the side road, deep in the mess of trees that reached from one side of the road to the other joining their limbs together somewhere towards the top.

The manor home is difficult to describe. This is not because it is so otherworldly that no description could match it, but rather quite the opposite. The house looks just like any other nice home you would see in England. Just a nicer version of the usual 'model' you would see in these parts anyways. This didn't surprise me, after all it was standard practice to keep the natural beauty of the countryside...beautiful. I suppose anyways.

There is a wooden gate at the front, the same as the ones that you would see at country farms in the Cotswolds, or even up further north hiking. Anywhere hiking really. The gate locks only on the left side with a sliding lock. On both sides are wooden fences of equal lengths. They don't look like they're used for much else but for aesthetic appeal, any animal could get through them. Small trees, bright green in the ever growing sunlight line the fence, creating a pathway that leads directly to the center front of the house.

I open the gate, drive my car through, and then close the gate respectively behind me.

The car slowly crawling down the dirt road minding the holes that litter the main path, I glance up to see where we'll be staying for the weekend in further detail.

The sky grows dark, for just a moment, as the clouds move over the sun overhead. In this light, the house transforms from a standard home into a far more ominous presence. I try not to think about it, brushing away the thought as soon as it comes up.

I slide my car to the parking space on the right. Taking notice as I get out of the looming tree overhead that sways slightly in the breeze, the leaves shivering in the morning air.

I begin trying to look for the front door.



