

“The M Word.”

Meeting.

Olivia was always generous with her unique talents. Most people in her life barely understood what she really did for them. What she didn't know on that cold day in October of 1991, was they would finally serve *her*, in particular, very well.

Just to the east of Halifax and along a rocky promontory that jugged into the ocean from Nova Scotia's southern coastline, Olivia busied herself in her workshop at dawn. Wearing a thick apron, she carefully took pieces of pottery out of a kiln where warmth still lingered from the previous night. Each new creation was placed carefully on one of two long wooden shelves. Eventually they would be inspected for defects before being moved to display shelves. She repeated the same process at the next kiln. It contained the work of her pottery students. Their pieces were placed on the opposite bench, available for them to collect at their next visit.

After emptying the kilns, she turned her attention to pieces drying on a benchtop while humming along to the music coming out of the speakers. These were small objects she'd made over the previous week and were different from typical pieces. No dishes in this batch. A few tiny chimeneas for incense, delicate clay animals, hollow with small holes to release aromatics that could be placed inside. Most pieces contained reliefs of different leaves from the trees and plants Olivia harvested on her small property. This meant every creation was unique not only to her hands but was a mirror of her ecosystem.

Dragging over a tall stepladder, she carefully placed them on a high shelf out of anyone's reach. Amulets, to be worn around the neck or attached to clothing, aligned neatly in rows. Next, a row of delicate birds; each with significance. Doves, representing love, for instance. Lastly, the other objects, curious that they were, finally made their way onto the last available space. With a woodstove burning for warmth, Olivia worked quietly and contently as the midday weather turned muddled and grim. There were no classes today and she hadn't seen a customer, which meant she could work undisturbed.



Ten miles to the west, Andy squinted through the windows of his rental car as the rain came down in sheets. His photo assignment was paid for up front; the provincial tourism board funded a program to highlight local artisans across Nova Scotia. He was asked, only *after* he took the assignment, to write up a few summary paragraphs for each artisan. “Maybe just a few sentences,” they suggested during a last-minute phone call. *Writing is additional work, and they didn't offer to pay for that.* He reluctantly agreed, knowing he'd have to talk people up and do some light interviewing. Setting off on this five-day project, Andy was again nagged by a sense of self-doubt. *How long will this last? Can I stay focused on this long*

enough to be successful? A thrice-failed professional photographer, Andy let opportunities slip by as his level of commitment faltered each time. Because of this, Andy's career, he felt, was a series of endings.

On the way from Montreal to Halifax, Andy scheduled a visit with woman who was opening her new shop named *Miss V's*. Andy was only vaguely aware that Valerie's works were described as ‘strikingly intimate and vicarious glass pieces’ and often sold in boutiques in Seattle, San Francisco, and even Paris. She'd opened this second shop in Halifax as a way to focus on new art pieces and escape some of the unwanted attention her artwork sometimes attracted.

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The visit to Miss V’s left him on edge. Nearly seventy, she spoke in an unsettlingly passionate voice as she gave Andy a tour of her showroom for handmade glass ornamentations. The whole time he was distracted by his next scheduled visits – and the thought of knocking over something or bumping a delicate glass sculpture with his camera bag. Avoiding the ‘bull in a China shop’ cliché and keeping on schedule, Andy walked out the front door with an eye on his watch. The visit lasted no more than thirty minutes. Without any delays, he would repeat the same process at a pottery shop and a whiskey distiller before reaching a hotel for the night.

Reflecting back on the visit, he couldn’t recall what anything in Valerie’s glassblowing shop looked like but had a page of bulletized notes he planned to review later that night. His foray into writing was, he had increasingly admitted to himself, just another attempt at what one of his friends referred to as ‘mock creativity to avoid a real career.’ Beyond some art appreciation courses and a single class in creative writing, Andy had no formal training in any artistry or craft. He lacked inspiration and his thoughts on accounting and bookkeeping haunted him. *Why did I write the word ‘sultry’ in my notes? What was I describing when I tried to remember how to spell ‘fuchsia’?* He felt self-conscious suddenly but pressed on as the weather began to look – he searched for a creative word and landed on *morose*. Frustrated that the weather was disrupting his plans, Andy considered heading back to Halifax as the roads began to feel like shallow seas. *Maybe they can give me an extension or just pay me half for what I’ve got.*

Through the cloud-darkened sky and the gusting wind and the pouring rain he noticed a sign alongside the road. It read *OceanCliff Pottery*, painted on a thick square of carved wood hanging from a signpost. As fate would have it, this was the place he was looking for and very nearly drove right by. Andy slowed the car, nosing into the side road.

After the first ten feet it became unpaved and just a narrow, rutted mud path through a pine grove. Andy then fully perched himself on the steering wheel trying to navigate through the blurry glass. He continued blindly. Just before reaching the bottom of a slippery decline, he felt the rear of the car give way slightly, slipping towards a deep gully that separated the road from the forest. He let his foot off the brake and the car instantly self-corrected and calmly rolled into a clearing in the trees. It resembled a parking area, maybe. Halfway across the muddy quagmire he felt all four wheels settle into deep muck and the car came to a standstill. Gently giving it some gas, rather than progressing forward, the car settled lower into the mud. In that moment Andy felt as though the trip became the physical manifestation of his career.

Peeking out the windows Andy gazed across the mucky mess that captured his car. About twenty feet away stood the pottery shop, he assumed. Seeing no other cars in sight, “Close enough,” he mumbled to himself as he cut the ignition. Looking to his right he could see a dark stone house just beyond the shop. The home’s muted granite façade mirrored the grey skies above. As he surveyed his surroundings, he noticed the ocean was just beyond a cliff as the name suggested. “A bit on the nose.” He’d remember to write for the article.

He grabbed his camera bag and threw his coat over his shoulder. Andy looked back at the car as he stepped out. All four wheels were masked in sticky thick mud. He slammed the door shut and made his way towards the safety of the shop. Like his car, his feet slipped out from under him two or three times, barely catching himself so as to not fall into one of the countless puddles. “Here’s the first sentence,” he mumbled to himself. “Her property is a bowl of wet clay that traps customers. No, that’s not it.” He was already thinking of satirical synonyms to describe this visit, “Muck dungeon, mud prison, messy...clay...oh shit!” He caught himself before falling again.

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As he opened and closed the shop door it struck a bell just like it would in an old black and white movie. Andy stood still for a moment, allowing the rain to fall off his coat and the mud to slough off his shoes. There was no one in sight, but lights were on. From a back room, he could faintly hear music playing over the low drone of an electric motor. Someone was working back there.

Mug.

Andy began to look around the shop, admiring the earthen-colored stoneware. Rows of cups, mugs, plates and platters, candle holders, and bowls filled the shelves. After a few quiet minutes scanning the shelves, he found himself holding an oversized mug in his hand. He liked the feel of it, running his hands over the glossy smooth glazing. Curved wide in the middle like a pair of hips, it narrowed at the base and top to hold in the warmth of its contents. Coffee on a weekday morning. Maybe tomato soup with a sprig of basil floating on top on a rainy weekend evening.

The hum of the electric motor in the back room stopped. Only the music was playing.

“Welcome!”

Shocked by the sound of a woman’s voice, Andy spun on his heels and gripped the mug not to drop it. His eyes wide from being startled, “Good afternoon.”

“I startled you, oh my, so sorry,” replied a woman in a clay covered apron. “I’m Olivia,” lowering her voice and tried again, “Welcome to my shop.”

“Andy. I’m Andy. Olivia, hello,” he replied, not quite able to focus on her. Again, like the glassblower’s shop earlier, he feared knocking something off a shelf and breaking it causing another delay to his progress.

As she walked around the countertop at the far end of the shop, Olivia wiped her hands, removing wet clay as best she could. Before they were completely clean, she stuck her hand out towards him.

“Nice to meet you,” he offered. Shaking her hand, he felt a thin layer of half-wet clay.

Olivia realized she’d just dirtied a customer. “I’m so sorry,” fumbling to grab a clean rag from a pocket of her apron.

The rain outside began to rumble on the thin roofing about their heads. “I’m glad I got here when I did,” thinking out loud. Then he refocused, “Oh right, I’m here for a tourism board project focusing on local businesses. Craftsman, or women. That sort of thing. I have a point-of-contact that - ” He reached pointlessly for a notebook in his pocket that wasn’t there. “Um, well, the name, right. It’s somewhere.”

Olivia stared at him for a second, remembering a voice message she received a few days earlier from someone at the tourism board only after she began to reply, “Yes, I think...uh sure, *yeah* sure!” laughing in a bit of embarrassment. Explaining her own forgetfulness, she admitted she’d never returned the call and arranged anything.

Andy gave a smile as concession. “It’s ok, you don’t need to do anything. I can just take some photos and be gone. You don’t have to do any interview or anything if you don’t want. It’s ok.” In his head he was thinking he could just escape the conversation, drive to a hotel and do some sham write-up that night.

Olivia stared at the mug in Andy’s hand. *Does he want that one?* She could recall over the past five years almost a half-dozen people picking it up and later putting it down, grabbing another. Each time she saw someone hold the mug she wondered if they were them. The man from Quebec



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City; she cringed at the thought. Another man from New York picked it up for just a moment, she remembered, hoping he wouldn't put it down. A red-haired woman about Olivia's age carried it around for five minutes before trading it for another. Then too, Olivia hoped the woman would want it. That would have been a first for Olivia.

Andy took in his surroundings for a moment. The shop was serene. Warm shades of tan and sage and sea blue used on her pottery helped calm his nerves. There was heat coming from the adjacent room and a subtle hint of wood smoke. Delicate herbal scents mixed with hints of florals. His nose picked up something like patchouli. *Does it evoke the Mediterranean or college dorm rooms?* He'd have to remember to write that down later.

Olivia walked backwards towards the shop counter, facing Andy as she retreated slowly, "Ok, what do you need?" As she gathered herself, she studied him for a moment. He was early thirties at most, she guessed. One or two years older than her age of twenty-seven? And he was soaking wet from head to toe. She didn't want to gawk, but she needed to be sure she was seeing things correctly before she continued.

"Can I get you something?"

"Nothing really, I'll just take some shots of your shop. Maybe some over here." Andy surveyed the display area noting that there was little light coming in from the windows. "I'll get a few of the shelves, and then..."

"No, I mean can I brew you something to warm up? A cup of coffee, or tea, or hot cocoa?" She waited a second, "A garden hose and towel?" Then she smiled, "You look like a dog that ran through a mud puddle."

Andy walked over to the counter and put his bag down, "A cup of coffee would be great." He was already feeling like this stop would delay him. He'd have to fake interest in her shop while also arranging a tow truck to pull him out. He smiled, "Only if you have some already made." Andy stuck his hand out holding the mug. "Please. This one? Can I have coffee in this one?" Olivia looked at him curiously as she took the mug from his hands. Andy registered her curiosity. He stammered, "I was hoping to buy the mug. That mug. I chose that for myself. Might as well get its first pour from the person who made it, right?"

She paused for a second. With a grin she asked, "You chose this clay chalice to contain your coffee?"

Andy couldn't help himself. "Are you fan of alliteration?" Letting out a snicker, "Or are you trying out for a role in *Macbeth*?"

Tilting her head slightly, "Mocking me, are ya? Nice touch." Olivia's inquisitive smile remained, like she was solving a puzzle. "I'll clean and fill it." She disappeared through a doorway.

After a few minutes, Olivia returned with two mugs of coffee and handed him his cup with special care, ensuring he took it by the handle. "You took this off the discount shelf." She pointed to where he'd found the mug. "That's where all my mistakes go."

Andy saw a piece of cardboard taped to the shelf he hadn't noticed before. In black marker it read, '*Scratched, cracked, or otherwise dreadful. Price as marked.*'

He raised the mug up to eye level, careful not to spill its contents and examined it near his face, amusingly looking for a crack or chip. He noticed the shiny glaze was missing from the handle. It didn't seem like an imperfection. Maybe that's why he didn't notice when he took it off the shelf. He looked at the mug in his hand again; it was full to the brim with coffee. He studied it another second, "I wouldn't say dreadful, but maybe I don't take any closeups," he teased giving her a smile as he motioned to his camera bag.

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“Oh, you’re quite a joker, are you?” Olivia jovially nudged her elbow into the air. “How lucky am I you showed up on this dreary day?”

Suggesting it was a full pour, Andy took an exaggeratedly cautious sip the brim of the mug, “I guess I’m here for a while,” slurping the hot coffee.

Taking a sip from her cup, “It was like you were destined to stick me for a free cup of coffee.”

“That’s not what I…”

“Just a bit of mockery.” She waved her open palm, “It’s one of my flaws.” With a bit of animation, she put her finger to her lips as she thought out loud, “Or is it one of my gifts?”

“The world is too serious. Too grim and fearful. A *gift* says I.” Warmth radiated into his hands as he held the mug. The curve in the middle fit perfectly in his palm. He relaxed a bit and looked around the shop, taking it in for the first time. Andy’s mind jumped back to reality. He had work to do. He needed to get back on the road and not, as so many times before, allow something to distract him. *How am I going to get my car out of that fucking mud trap out there? Get in and gun it? Pedal to the floor and hope for the best? A tow truck? If I call now, I can get out when I’m done with this coffee. Just call this visit a complete loss and be on my way.* Lost in his thoughts for a moment, he remembered all the previous times he let something come to an end because he lacked the conviction to finish it.

He inspected each piece of camera equipment ensuring it didn’t get wet through the bag. First the camera body then the lenses. He crouched over his gear moving carefully. He looked up to find Olivia standing close to him holding a towel. He wasn’t startled but realized he never heard her walk over. Looking at the boots on her feet, they had thick and heavy soles. *She’s got a light step.*

Olivia asked, “Have you visited any other shops? Local artisans?”

“Started before dawn. I was down by the Halifax waterfront. Visited a boatwright and sailmaker. Then the glassblower downtown.”

“Oh, Valerie’s glass shop,” Olivia smiled, knowingly. “Nothing I make here will compare with what you saw in her shop, sorry.” She wasn’t blushing but suggested something in her reply. Andy didn’t know what she meant by that but lightly commented that he wasn’t comfortable during his visit with all the delicate glass. He also mumbled that Valerie made him nervous which caused Olivia to chuckle.

As she reached over the bench to grab something, a patch of bronze skin of Olivia’s shoulder was revealed by her tattered sweater. It was then he realized her skin was a shade darker than he first noticed. In fact, her complexion was the same shade as his coffee. Just then he realized when she poured his cup, she made it the way he drank it.

“You put cream and sugar in my coffee,” he stated calmly but matter-of-factly.

“Yeah.” There was a flatness in her reply, like she hadn’t prepared to discuss it.

“How’d you know?” Andy was honestly surprised.

Olivia leaned slightly forward through the doorway; her clay-covered forearms arms spread, allowing both elbows to brace her against the frame at shoulder height. “You didn’t arrive in an eighteen-wheeler so that rules out *no cream, no sugar.*” She blew an errant strand of black hair out of her face. “You don’t act like a sociopath, so that rules out *cream and no sugar.*”

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“Hm.” He sipped his coffee. “And here I was hoping you were a psychic or something,” he replied with a smirk. “A trained barista maybe?”

“Nope.” She gave a spirited glance before she spun around and went back to the workbench.

What was that flash? One hand holding the handle and the other wrapped around the mug for warmth as he waited for thunder to follow the flash but there was none. As he lifted it to his mouth for each sip, he took in a gentle scent. Sometimes he thought it was vanilla. Another whiff seemed more like cinnamon. *What brand of coffee is this?*

Leaving Andy alone to dry off, Olivia walked over to the large window to check the weather over the ocean to the south. *I wouldn't say no to a little more wind. Maybe knock a tree down,* she thought to herself. Looking up, she paid particular attention to the way the clouds moved. Almost like she was whispering to the storm. “Ok, ok. I see what you're doing. You're still building,” nodding her head in acceptance. She realized she'd been thinking out loud and worried that Andy would hear her. She finished her thoughts in her head. *I only have a few hours to figure this out.* Olivia feared she be the only woman to fail in her generation. Their pity would be crushing, heartbreaking even. In the window's reflection she noticed him looking at her. When she turned her head, he averted his eyes to the rest of the room.

“The storm will be worse soon. The dirt road you took down the hill will be flooded in ten minutes.” She said it like she'd decided something, not a prediction.

“Is that right?” Andy called back to her. “Does that happen regularly?”

Olivia walked to a window facing Andy's car in the mud. “It's up to the axles now.” Then welcoming him to the window with a kind wave of her hand. “You're stuck now mister.” As if on cue, the rain, which was already coming down with great intent, doubled its strength. The sound of it hitting the thin roof created an incredible din in the display area.



Mystic.

Andy followed Olivia into the large work room. It was warmer than the shop where customers visit. A broad room with a high ceiling held by thick rafters. His eyes followed rows of shelves that extended to the top of one wall. On the opposite wall above another worktable was the large south-facing window Olivia was gazing out just before the storm kicked up. Pottery wheels were lined down the center of the room. Beyond the tables and pottery wheels, was a pair of heavy electric kilns, each one about four feet square. Past the kilns the room became a sitting area. The far wall was divided by a door, likely leading to the main house. On the far wall, where Olivia stood, was a table that held the coffee pot on the right and an iron wood-burning stove on the left.

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“Put your things over here on the chairs so they don’t get clay on them.” Olivia gestured to him with a delicate motion in her wrists. “Make yourself comfortable. Look around. Take pictures. Write notes. Do your thing.” She opened the door next to the counter. Closing it behind her, she offered, “I’ll get you a bite.”

Letting Andy into her working area and where she taught pottery classes served his purposes of taking photos for the article. For Olivia, it allowed her to dig deeper into who Andy was. For a moment Olivia was nervous; she’d never made it this far. *This shitty cold rainy miserable day?* She would proceed carefully. There would be no repair for any miscalculations, she knew.

After finally retrieving a notebook, Andy did as she suggested and looked around. He took photos and as he examined the worktables tried to map out each step a potter takes to turn clay into tableware. As he made his way around the room, he came to the large south-facing window. He could see a storm had taken over the sky. Beyond a cedar grove and over the cliff, the North Atlantic was stirring. *Why was she staring out the window earlier? Did she conjure this storm or is she really good at weather forecasting?* Andy’s imagination always served as a welcome and entertaining distraction when work was to be done.

Knowing what he was thinking, she offered, “I told you the storm was going to kick up harder.” Olivia closed the door behind her and presented a small plate with an assortment of tiny pastries which she placed on a table by the woodstove. “I just go back to work, yeah? I’m falling behind.”

As Olivia began to work a lump of clay, Andy walked around the room taking photos and jotting down notes. Andy asked a question every now and then. How long have you owned this shop? Where did you learn your technique? Do you work here alone? What kind of business growth you see for yourself? Do you just create individual pieces or have large orders for complete table settings or kitchens? Do you grow the herbs and flowers used to make these impressions in the clay? What kind of coffee is this?

Olivia would answer, sometimes pausing to give more thoughtful answers depending on the question or to hand him something to explain how it was crafted by hand or sculpted with custom-made wooden tools. She showed him things with intentional use of her arms and hands and voice, deftly using her skills honed over the years.

What Olivia was not ready to reveal was that pottery was only some of what Olivia grew up learning from the women in her life and years of practice. It was her passion, a source of happiness and, if her faith in prophesy was well placed, it would play a role in her fate. Hidden inside her was the regrettable acceptance that her fate was sealed. If her eccentric aunt was right, it would end soon. Olivia hung her future on believing in that fate.

Aunt Josephine was eccentric, yes. Josephine had a flare for the dramatic and sometimes spoke in riddles, yes. Josephine, to Olivia’s recollection, was never wrong in matters like these. Olivia promised Josephine she’d keep the story hidden away until it was safe – essential even – to share.

Olivia called Andy over to show him a few of the hand tools she used. First, she pulled out some flat wooden implements called edgers, which she explained she used to finish the rims of pieces while still on the wheel. Then she produced a handful of sharp metal tubes with handles. Coming in a few sizes, the metal hole cutters, she demonstrated, were used for pushing holes through clay for design or even functional purposes like a teapot spout. “This one I had made specifically for me.” Olivia demonstrated using a heart-shaped cutter in a flat piece of clay.

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“Despite your explanation, I can’t stop thinking about the kind of damage they would do in someone’s arm or chest,” Andy explained while entertaining himself with the tools. He pretended to stab at himself with one of the edgers, “Or an innocent man’s eye.”

Olivia quickly and comedically removed all the tools from Andy’s hand and motioned for him to move away from the worktable as she carefully put the tools away. Her eyes squinting sideways as he backed away cautiously.

Moving around the room, Andy found himself standing under a portrait. It hung just above eye level on the stone wall near the woodstove. A woman in an ankle-length embroidered skirt stood barefoot in the middle of a small garden. Her arms fully extended as the wind blew her skirt like an untethered sail. A red scarf wrapped in her black hair; the two ends trailed in the breeze like pennants. Her chin was raised, and she smiled in joy as the sun radiated on her face. The painting looked like it was decades old, muted by age. It couldn’t be old because Andy recognized the woman in the painting was Olivia.

Olivia saw him admiring the painting. “Your thoughts?”

Playfully acting like an art collector evaluating a classic Andy declared, “The piece is a compelling composition of warm sunlight and dark shadows. Note the glow around her figure as she stands in the pale sky amongst the emerald-colored garden herbs and flowers. The brilliance of the white peasant blouse. The trees and contrasting backgrounds are cloaked in darker – but not dour - shades of brown and grey. Clearly the artist was a student of Francisco Goya and has captured his bohemian subject, Olivia, as a nomadic earth goddess.”

Olivia took a tone of false grandeur, “Did you just proceed from assuming me a psychic to now praising me a... what? Nomadic earth goddess?” she jokingly called across the room.

“Or a barista,” he reminded her.

“Smartass. For that you owe two logs in the fire,” motioning to the small stack of wood near his feet, and took a lighter tone, “No seriously, chop chop! Can you grab them? It’s getting chilly and I need to get this clay out of my hair.” Olivia smiled as she shook her hair out with her fingertips.

Andy plopped two logs into the stove and fanned them until one ignited. Despite the familiar feeling of procrastination, he stood again to admire the painting.

“Can you keep my secret?” Olivia quietly asked, now standing inches behind Andy. So lost in the painting he didn’t realize she’d sidled across the room.

Twisting his neck, “Sure, I won’t tell any of *them*,” looking across the empty room.

“Everyone compliments that painting.” Olivia began with a guilty grin. “I’ve never told any of my students or visitors.”

“Ok, go on,” Andy turned his hips to fully focus on whatever she was about to say. “No wait,” he interrupted, “When the painter was done, you buried their body in the garden?” Before Olivia could reply through a chuckle, “No that’s not it; you’re going to tell me that’s a stolen masterpiece by Francisco Goya. You killed the thief, threw them over the cliff into the ocean and kept the painting for yourself.”

Olivia condescendingly put one hand up to Andy’s mouth, placed her other hand on his shoulder right above the shirt pocket, “Shush. No dead bodies around here.” She paused dramatically. “My secret is...”

He stood frozen by her touch.

“That’s not me,” she whispered.

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Stepping back from Andy, Olivia turned to face the painting. She arched her back and crossed her arms over her head, resting them in contemplation. She continued, “That painting gets so many compliments. I never tell anyone that it’s not me. It’s my Aunt Josephine. Her husband, my uncle Nicholas; he painted this portrait of her sometime back in the mid-sixties.” Still admiring the painting, Olivia’s stare locked onto the tiny brushstrokes of the red silk scarf – her favorite detail.

Andy looked at Olivia, then at the woman in the painting, returning again to Olivia’s standing pose.

“She and I were very close. My mother insisted I keep the painting when Josephine passed. ‘*Josephine es va reencarnar*’ she used to say to me.” She sensed Andy’s silent stare, “It means ‘*Josephine reincarnated*’ in Catalan.”

“Were *they* close? Your mother and Josephine?”

“Close like sisters. Which means sometimes my mother would say it to me lovingly and other times she’d yell it at me while swinging broom in her hands,” Olivia laughed, then pantomimed she was gripping a stick with both hands, “So anyway, yeah, that’s my secret and now it’s your secret too.”

“I’ll take that to my grave,” Andy assured her taking a seat in one of the soft chairs and taking a bite of pastry. Softly, “Why did you give that secret to me?”

Olivia didn’t answer him.

Memory.

Andy kept forgetting what brought him there in the first place. His mind drifted back to the slippery ride down the hill. The rainy roads. *It’s past two now and the skies are still getting darker.* He thought this visit needed to wrap up if he was going to salvage the rest of the day. “Oh right, I’m supposed to be working, not lounging by a crackling stove and having...”

“It’s baklava,” Olivia finished his sentence for him. “It’s from Greece. It’s made with pistachios and honey and – “

“I know baklava when I see it, ma’am,” Andy put his hand up playfully in self-defense, “I was going to say *a liter of coffee.*”

“I have more if need be.” She winked at him again. “The storm will break later tonight.” Again, she spoke factually, like she was deciding everything as it occurred. She realized Andy was troubled. She worried for a moment. “What’s the matter?”

Andy’s doubt about his commitment to this project – any long-term commitment really – haunted him. He’d been wandering through jobs for years, never finding himself feeling a part of something long-term. Andy’s internal dialogue fell out of his mind and into his mouth, involuntarily answering her question. “Most of my friends are project managers or mechanics or nurses, but I have no title next to my name. Nearly thirty, I can’t answer the question, ‘*What do you do for a living?*’ in under a paragraph of fractured sentences.” Olivia listened some more knowing he’d continue. “This tourism article, or whatever. I find myself again, struggling to commit to this project without being pulled in a different direction and it’s only been two days.” His mind returned to the room he was standing in. “Honestly, at some point I need to consider getting back on the road,” he said while peering towards the window as a burst of wind-driven rain needled the glass pane. “Is it possible I’m being held captive?” He laughed, pointing his finger towards a kiln dramatically, “If I don’t get my car unstuck, you won’t burn my body in a kiln, will you?”

Olivia choked on a piece of baklava, laughing at his suggestion. “Well, that took a very ugly turn Andy. No more talk of bodies, if you please.”

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“Sorry. Too much?” Andy shrugged his shoulders with a sheepish grin. “Too paranoid?”

She took a sip of coffee and pondered his questions. She knew not lie to him, but being a little evasive might not be a bad idea at this point. Still chuckling, then offered, “I will state empirically I have the power to turn clay into a very useful coffee mug.” She pointed to the cup in his hand, offering a smile, “And I brew a fine cup of coffee.” Olivia continued with a dramatic and playful flip of her hair over her shoulder, “But I cannot create a storm.” She paused after her last comment. *Was he thinking it or did he say that? Did I hear him thinking that?* Olivia let a moment of silence hang in the air before adding, “Oh, right, nor will I kiln you.”

They both laughed some more. From any other woman he’d have taken her antics and generosity as flirting. Olivia, it seemed, was speaking to him with a sense of familiarity. He too, felt comfortable around her.

“It’s good we put an end to that.” Olivia looked over at Andy as he continued drinking coffee. He noticed the way she was looking at him. Olivia, he thought, was looking at him as though she was doing for the hundredth time. Like she already knew him.

He couldn’t make sense of it to himself. Andy comically wagged his finger in the air as though he’d caught her in a lie. “*Did we put an end to it?*”

Olivia stood up, turning to a worktable and with a playfully crinkled nose, “Now you’re being creepy. I’m going to make a lump of clay into something interesting. You can continue do whatever it is you do while I work.”

“Are you self-taught or is this something you studied? What *is* your background?”

“Oh well, it’s hard to say simply.” Olivia wondered out loud, “Though I did spend years in school. Mostly the classic sciences. Meteorology at a school in Toronto. Horticulture and botany in Spain. Anthropology in Greece.”

“A nomadic student of the world.” Andy quipped, pointing at the painting. “Did I call it?”

“Well not an education that would earn a college degree, but I studied what I needed,” Olivia replied. “I spent years learning about the natural world and physical sciences.”

There was something about the way she explained the topics as *needed*, he thought.

“And I’ve been here for quite a long time. Maybe not so nomadic anymore.”

“But your pottery business?” He asked as Olivia leaned over a workbench preparing a heavy mass of ochre clay to be turned later.

“I was born into this. Every woman in my family has a craft or artistic talent. We have some lovely seamstresses that can do miraculous things with satin and all sorts of fabrics. We all make candles or tend to bees.” She saw he was still intrigued so she continued, “I’m certainly not the only potter, and we have a few glassblowers and woodcarvers.”

Writing notes, he looked up realizing she referred specifically of the women in her family. His interest, his curiosity, got the best of him. “Just the women?” Andy asked. He quipped, “What are the men? Real Estate Agents and accountants? Or do they get killed off?”

“Again, Andy, a bit dark.” Olivia giggled. “More craftsmen. Some artists.” She sat up from the pottery wheel to think, “My father and my uncle became accomplished painters later in life. Another uncle was primarily a mason, but also a self-taught stone sculptor. We’ll have photographer or writer eventually. One cousin is a furniture maker, and another is a tailor. My sister Franny married a boatwright,” happily lost in her accounting of family history, “soon after, my cousin Julia married another boatwright. Both of my grandfathers were blacksmiths. There must be more, but you get the point.” She looked at

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Andy, “It’s who we attract. It’s who we are.” She sounded like she was persuading him of something. As though she was removing a doubt from his mind.

“No musicians?” He quipped.

She held a smile back from becoming a full-face beam. “Actually, yes,” she confirmed with pride. “Every single one of us. Guitars, pianos, violin, a horn player here and there.” Olivia paused to make sure Andy caught her hint. “Some of us are wonderful singers,” she said confidently.

“*Us?* You sing?” Andy perked up.

Olivia could barely hold her tongue, “Like a siren,” she implored with a cheesy grin. Again, Andy thought he saw one eye glimmer as she glanced at him. She added, “There’s a better word, I’m sure.”

Moments.

He sat for a while in a comfortable chair by the fire. As the storm continued to howl, Andy visualized the ride up the hill to the main road. He thought it still likely he’d slip into a ditch or tree stump. He walked over to the window again and sighed. The storm persisted. “Should I check to see if your road is really flooded?” He wondered out loud. “Meh, I’m here.” He thought about the distiller he was hoping to visit today. He wouldn’t make it. This assignment was delayed, yet he was increasingly worry-free. He calmly meditated as he looked out the window. As his eyes traveled to the right, they landed on the garden and recognized it was the same one from the painting. The view of the ocean beyond was unchanged. Even though it wasn’t in its summer bloom, he could see it was larger now. Talking to Olivia while his face leered through the glass, “I see you put your botany and horticulture to good use.”

“Yes,” she replied from the seat at the pottery wheel.

Andy turned around to face her, leaning back comfortably against the windowsill. Softly, he spoke. “I feel slightly guilty about accusing you of murder.” They looked at each other from across the expanse between them.

“*Slightly* guilty.” Olivia jabbed with a smile. “You came to my shop of your own accord. You picked the -” She caught herself and changed the subject.

“Come,” she waved her hand for Andy to take a seat, “Let’s make something.”

He did as she indicated.

Olivia handed him one of the aprons that hung on the wall. As he pulled it over his head, he felt her hands reach from behind and pull the ties across his lower back and tie them. The hair on the back of his neck tingled.

She pulled a stool over and joined him at the wheel and caught herself feeling nervous. The pressure she was feeling was certainly self-imposed; so much to do in such a short time.

She sensed tension in him thinking to herself, *this is part of the process, but for now just go about it as you would with any other new student*. She continued talking through some of the basics of pottery. Looking over at Andy, pausing to let him absorb what she was saying. A natural teacher, she knew to move at the pace of the learner.

With him this close, Olivia discerned his detailed features. He was much larger than she. Even seated opposite each other, he loomed over her. He had soft features and patient eyes that showed the sensitivity of a scholar. Eyebrows that matched the mop of light brown hair that got in his face every so often. Shaggy and almost long enough to put in a ponytail. A clean-shaven face accented by a rosy hue in his cheeks. She wondered, just for a moment, if he was still cold but somehow knew they

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were normally that shade. *It is him.* Sitting right there in her shop, wearing a thick flannel shirt with mud still clinging to the bottom of his jeans and boots.

Olivia showed Andy how to form the lump of clay into a uniform dome shape. “You’re getting started, but let’s continue.” With her hands covered in the slip mixture, she took his hands into hers and showed him how to begin forming the dome into a column. She did most of the beginning work, slowly giving over the creation to his inexperienced hands.

“Each piece we create has a purpose. This isn’t random or luck.” Pausing to consider his progress, “Well, maybe this one needs some luck,” Olivia teased.

When they began, Andy was curiously nervous. With each step of the process, he was increasingly calmed by her voice and the rhythmic hum of the electric motor. He could feel its vibration in his knees, which pressed against the sides of the machine. After a few errant attempts, Andy was able to start the basic shape of a wide cylinder. He realized Olivia hadn’t told him what to make. What spun in front of him was too wide for a cup or mug, too short for a vase.

“So, we’re making a bowl, it seems” Olivia playfully noted as though she too was waiting to see what direction Andy would go with his clay. She humorously squinted again, “Maybe a miniature vat of some sort?”

Olivia wet her hands in the dish of slip again and helped him refine the basic shape. Even as Olivia backed off the clay, Andy felt their proximity. It felt comforting. He looked up from the spinning shape and noticed Olivia’s dark eyes. Her brows were thick, and her upper eyelids were shaded, not from eyeshadow, but her natural skin tone.

“This is starting to feel a bit like that scene in *Ghost*,” Andy joked nervously, “You know, with Demi Moore and Patrick...” He stopped himself.

“Yes, it is,” she interjected. With a friendly and supportive tone, she continued, “It’s nice though, right?” Olivia smiled at Andy. She still wasn’t quite sure where his head was at the moment. In a moment of trepidation Olivia offered, “Obviously everything hand-made is going to be unique.”

“That’s a very kind way to say this isn’t going well.”

“Oh, stop it. It’ll be fine” Olivia wasn’t talking about the clay creation, she realized. She was reassuring him, but also herself. She realized she was getting lost in the moment. She needed to stop herself from letting her efforts drift.

Olivia leaned back on the stool, letting Andy work as she refocused herself. “I mean that things made by hand can have other things imbued in them. Sculptures, paintings, glassware.” She rubbed her tired hands. She’d been working all morning, not expecting to be at the wheel this late in the day. She stretched her forearms and then started making small circles with her hands as she craned her neck up towards the ceiling in a body-lengthening stretch. Olivia was self-soothing as she talked to Andy. “As you work the material, the emotions of the person are being transmitted through their hands into whatever their crafting.” Andy’s gaze unconsciously drifted from the wheel to Olivia’s pose. Before she could notice, he returned to his task and refocused.

After some time, he looked up from the tips of his own fingers and saw her hands were now mirroring his, wrapped around the lip of the opposite side of the bowl. It now gradually rose from the base and then tapered in towards the mouth. It startled him. He never noticed she’d put her hands back on the bowl with his. He didn’t know what happened, but whatever it was, he was left with a sensation as though it was complete. He felt light-headed.

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Olivia reached over and carefully took Andy’s hands off the spinning bowl. Their hands were warm. The slip that covered their hands and fingertips was warm too. “That’s good.” Olivia said it in a tone that could have just as easily said, *‘It’s going to be alright Andy.’*

They both stood slowly. Olivia carefully took a piece of wire and separated the new piece of pottery from the metal plate after it stopped spinning. She serenely moved like she’d just finished resetting a dislocated joint or successfully breathed life into a body starving for air. “We’ll leave it there for a bit and later we can move it to one of the worktables.” Standing back to admire their work, Olivia wiped her hands and took off her apron.

Andy stood and removed his apron as well, mindlessly mirroring Olivia. He felt slightly dazed. Mystified really. Olivia could see confusion on his face. “Is everything ok, Andy?” She asked as she gently rubbed his upper arm, “Are you alright? You look a bit off.”

She didn’t expect him to look disoriented. She teased, “Were you staring at the wheel too long? Ya’ dizzy?” Seeing he wasn’t joking, Olivia felt badly, offering him comfort by placing her hand on his elbows as if to steady him, “Oh, you poor thing. I’m so sorry. It happens sometimes.”

Andy looked at Olivia, then out the window. It was no longer day or even dusk. The rain still fought fiercely, and the wind continued to shutter the windows facing the sea. The night, however, had long since fallen. The once grey sky was now an inky mix of blue and purple and black that hid the sight of the storm. Reaching to his upper arm, Andy cupped his hand over hers, gently holding it in place on his arm just above the elbow.

“Is it nighttime? He asked. “Was it that long? It wasn’t, was it?” In his mind’s clock it felt like they were at the wheel for only twenty minutes. He quickly looked around the room for clues, his eyes landing at the woodstove. Through the small opening, he could see logs were black and reduced to small chunks. Just the hint of an orange glow from the remaining bits. “The fire went out. It was burning when we sat down. Were we sitting there for hours?” He felt a twinge of panic, repeating himself, “It’s late. Were we here for a long time?”

Olivia thought about it for a moment. She too scanned the room. Andy was right; it had been much longer than she’d perceived. Working the bowl together into the night. She didn’t expect that. She wrapped her dirty hands loosely around his upper arm with mutual concern. “I guess we were.”

They stood feeling bewildered but otherwise safe and contented. She assessed what she was feeling inside. Everything else felt right, Olivia thought. Needing to recenter and reassess Olivia offered, “Let’s go inside the house. I’ll get us some food.” As Olivia turned off the lights and closed up the shop Andy grabbed his camera gear. They walked silently through the workshop, into a small vestibule that connected to the house.

Meal.

Unlike the wood-framed workshop, the main house was an old stone structure. Thick walls insulated them from the din of the ongoing storm outside.

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The main room was lined with built-in shelves and framed artwork that looked like scenes from Europe a century earlier. All the wood trim accents, crown moldings, and shelving were painted white, providing brightness and warmth. Despite the austere appearance from the outside, the interior was quaint and lovely. Andy felt welcome.

“Make yourself at home.” Olivia called from the kitchen that laid beyond an archway.

Andy plopped his bag down on a chair. Inside the open flap, he saw his notebook waiting for him. He thought about the work that was falling behind. *When will I make up all this time I’ve spent here? I’m doing it again; finding reasons to halt progress; distracted by something or someone.* Deadlines and schedules and expectations were waiting. He’d been in this position before; a failed commitment. Ducking into a small door, Andy visited the bathroom. Before stepping out he looked in the mirror and washed his face. The towel smelled floral and calming. Andy paused and took a deep breath, inhaling the scent again. His anxious mind calmed.

When he was done, he joined Olivia. She handed him a warm cup of apple cider. It smelled of cinnamon and spices. Without hesitation he took it from her. In her other hand was a cup she poured for herself. They both touched cups. “Cheers.”

He was about to say something, but Olivia spoke first, “Here’s what’s going to happen next,” she announced quietly and calmly, “You’re going to offer to help me put some food together because you’re a gracious guest. But no, you cannot. I cook alone. You can take a seat over there,” she waited until he turned his head and acknowledged she was pointing at a large desk against the wall, “and you’ll get the writing done that has been long overdue because we were messing about with clay and coffee all day.” She waited until his gaze returned to her. Continuing, “Then, knowing the storm will pass, you’ll be ready to finish your visits to other craftsmen tomorrow.”

Andy wasn’t sure if he was just invited to spend the night. Still slightly dazed by what happened earlier, he asked, “Olivia, what time *is* it?”

“Ten thirty.” She gazed up at him, “I know, right? I checked three clocks to make sure. It’s ten thirty. I can’t explain it myself.” She was telling the truth. This was not what Olivia expected. She was confused but had no choice but to trust the process. She was so far down the path now it couldn’t be wrong.

Andy worked at the desk with his cup of cider. His notebook had scribbles from the last few days and half-finished ideas of other stories and little sketches and diagrams of random ideas for future projects. He caught up on his notetaking. First by cleaning up his notes on the sailmaker and glassblower. Then starting on Olivia’s pottery workshop.

He made observations about her display shelves, the shop, and all its contents. Then he made some bullets about Olivia and described her story about being in a family of artisans. Every so often he’d stop to shake out his writing hand or to stretch his arms.

Flipping more pages, he went back to his notes, adding thoughts about the apparent loss of time they’d experienced. *How can I weave that into a short story?* he wondered. He felt flush as he read the description of Olivia he made earlier in the day. *Did I really write that?* He stared at the words.

Leaning back in the chair, Andy’s eyes wandered to his left and right. A small table with candleholders and photos in the corner. A wooden sculpture of a bird emanating a wisp of floreated fumes. A stone carving of a person holding a branch. A glass leaf that looked like one from the shop earlier that day. A wooden box, or framed lithograph next to a leather-bound volume of something with goldleaf letters on the binding. A stack of books on the wall over the writing desk where he sat.

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Some of the lit candles gave off a light organic scent as they burned. None of these felt like knick-knacks, but things display-like importance and history.

Behind Andy and out of his view Olivia stood in the archway to the kitchen. Watching him write from across the room. Seeing him pause every so often and reach his arms into the air. She let him scan the room without distracting him. He needed to ease into things at his own pace. She needed to be calm in order to be observant.

She resisted the urge to saunter up behind him and wrap her arms around him and squeeze him tightly. *He seems happy.* Or was she convincing herself? For now, he needs to get some work done. He’s an artist too, she knew. Glassblowing, writing, painting, photography, writing music; it’s all artwork. After twenty minutes, she could wait no longer.

“Taking it all in?” Olivia asked, letting him know she was standing right behind him. Andy calmly spun around in the chair. Not startled this time. He may have sensed her standing there all along and didn’t acknowledge it. He wasn’t sure.

“Yes. You have a wonderful home.” Standing up from the chair he arched his back, releasing a few cracks from his lumbar. “I have so many questions,” he said with a strained voice, talking to the ceiling as he leaned as far back as he could. The room was intriguing, and he wanted to look around more closely, but it seemed too forward.

“You do,” Olivia replied as though she was in complete agreement. “I’m obliged to answer questions. You may begin your interrogation.” She smiled and slowly backed away towards the small dining table. Andy pointed to a painting on the wall. It was an old stone building. He opened his mouth to ask a question. “Dinner is ready. Take a seat.” She winked at him. Again, he swore she just made one eye twinkle. His head turned to the side again. She offered, “We can talk, but I’m starving.”

Olivia already had two plates placed at the table. Each plate held a small piece of roasted chicken, grilled green beans and herbed potatoes. A slice of buttered bread and glass of white wine beside each plate. She reached for a remote control, aiming towards a small sound system across the room.

“I’ve got a favorite playlist if that’s alright. Lots of women jazz singers, Fleetwood Mac, and Madeleine Peyroux?”

Andy nodded. “Madeliene Peyroux; she sounds so adoring it makes me want to hug someone. And Stevie Nicks is so...”

“Enchanting.” Olivia finished his thought.

“Yes, that’s it.”

“I haven’t had a home cooked meal in months. I’ve been mostly travelling between short-lived projects, each one ending and forcing me to start another.” Andy rotated his shoulder on his writing arm working out some kinks. “That’s what sent me to Halifax this morning.”

“Oh right, you mentioned that earlier; you met Valerie?” She perked up. “Valerie and I are related, in a way. She’s sort of my aunt. Kind of.”

“Really? Well, she seems very nice.” There was a pensive tone in his voice.

Olivia could read him like a book already. “Oh, she’s a character alright,” letting him off the hook, “She speaks like she’s a *film noir* love interest, right?”

His face lit up, “That’s exactly what I thought.” Thinking that just a few minutes ago as he was writing a summary of her. “A real *feme fatale*.”

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Olivia nudged Andy with her foot under the table, “Did you buy anything?” She asked like there was something playful about it, flicking her eyebrows up as she asked. He looked at her, mid-bite of eating. She had a look on her face of curiosity, but also mischief.

He chuckled curiously. “Why do you ask?” He asked just before putting a big bite of food in his mouth. He chewed slowly, as if to buy himself some time. She didn’t answer, so after a big swallow, he went on telling her about his visit to her shop, describing his nervousness. Olivia listened as he talked about visiting her shop and was preoccupied with making sure his camera bag didn’t knock anything over. She realized that, despite all odds, Andy may have never noticed many of Valerie’s glass designs are fetishes, or totems. Like Georgia O’Keeffe, Valerie’s glass lilies and other blossoms take inspiration from *the source of a woman’s beauty and power*, as she calls it. Olivia couldn’t help but chuckle.

Then Andy began describing his thoughts about Valerie. “She said things in a funny way,” he began. “Like, ‘*Some of my designs are more robust than others, as you can see.*’” Andy took a sip of wine, “And no, I did *not* see what she meant.”

Taking one of his hands, Olivia placed it in between her palms. She squeezed his hand gently and lovingly, “Andy, you dear sweet simpleton,” she began with a condescending tone, “You never noticed, did you? Her shop is filled with beautiful floral representations of femininity sculpted from colored glass.”

Andy stared at her. “Feminine...” For a second, he thought she was joking. “I’m not sure I understand.” He thought back to the sailmaker. “Is this why Gerald told me to make sure I buy myself something pretty at Ms. V’s?”

Olivia erupted with laughter, “Gerald the sailmaker?” she cackled, “He’s probably spent his life’s savings in there!” Olivia gestured to a shelf across the room Andy had examined before dinner.

From his seat, Andy looked at the piece of glass on the shelf. An elegant sculpture with fluted edges accented in pink. The glass leaf no longer looked like a leaf.

He squinted, slowly realizing, “Hohm... yeah. I can’t not see it now.” Feeling a bit awkward. Bluntly, “She makes glass vaginas.” He forced his eyes away from the sculpture.

Olivia tried to restrain her amusement throughout Andy’s mental journey. She failed miserably and happily, bursting into raucous laughter. Calming herself, she managed to utter a question.

“So how did you summarize your visit if you never even realized what you were looking at?” Olivia was intrigued at how his mind worked and processed information. Still humored by his misunderstanding, she spoke through a grin. “I’ve spent my life creating with my hands. Andy, however, you use a camera to capture images for the eyes and words to create images for the mind. I showed you how I make pottery. Show me how you make a story.”

Grabbing a small notebook from his pocket, “Here it is. You won’t understand my bulletized notes.” Andy read out short phrases and ideas he’d captured. ‘*Valerie: Oddly seductive. Mysterious. Simultaneously welcoming and aloof.*’”

Olivia took a sip of wine and leaned in close to Andy and placed her head near his shoulder. She closed her eyes as he spoke. Anticipating he’d only have fractured descriptions, she trusted there was enough to create images in her head.

Andy’s voice softened, reacting to Olivia’s close proximity, “Here’s something, ‘*glass shapes, some over a foot tall, delicate and natural, Flower pedals, translucent rose and pink and blush towards the edge, lustrously crimson towards the center,*’” He flipped another page, “Um here’s some more, ‘*single tulips,*’ ‘*a row of delicate feminine lily blossoms. Graceful and gilded in scarlet-hued tips.*’”

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Putting what she knew about the shop out of her mind, she was able to transfer his words into new images. She let him flip through a few pages of notes before she spoke again. Olivia lifted her head and gazed at Andy, “You know what that sounds like, don’t you, honey.” She was playfully teasing him, giggling. “If you’re looking for a job as an erotic writer, I’d pay to read your book,” she teased reassuringly.

“Aww that’s sweet, thanks dear.” As soon as Andy said that he realized that he and Olivia had started using terms of endearment. It didn’t feel odd.

“I’ll call it ‘*The House of Ladyparts.*’”

Olivia snorted out a chuckle and broad smile, “More accurately, *sigils.*” She thought a moment. Adding as though talking to herself, “I guess *talisman* would also be correct.” As Madeline Peyroux sang a silky passionate ballad in the background, Andy looked at Olivia, sitting nearer to him. “Where? I mean, what are, or is, *sigil* and *talisman*?”

“You’ve heard those terms before, haven’t you?” She continued, “Basically, they’re objects created with a meaning. An intention. Something to heal or to harm or to protect.”

Andy remembered, before they sat to eat, he was going to ask her about her history and the fascinating things on her bookshelves. “Wait a sec,” Andy said as he was stacking their now-empty plates. He looked to Olivia with playful suspicion, “I was supposed to interrogate you.”

“You’re not a very good investigator, are you?” she replied with a side-eyed gaze.

Mother Nature.

Andy felt a little foolish. *Did Olivia derail me on purpose?* He looked around the room, deciding where to start. He slowly stood as he wiped his mouth. He picked up his glass of wine. Walking over to the painting he noticed before dinner, “The home in this painting; it’s a family home, yes? Someplace in Europe?”

“Catalonia actually.”

“Greek and Catalanian; you come from gypsies?” Andy asked with excitement. He didn’t expect a reply. Andy looked away from Olivia and to the bookshelves. Slowly, he walked around the room while she sat on the couch. The titles of the books came into focus as he walked over to them. He gestured to the shelves with his glass of wine.

“Do you have specific questions, or should I just narrate as you silently walk around?” She teased.

He put down his glass and, with his hands held behind his back, proceeded to a shelf. Thick books bound in muted brown and green and red. Some had worn gold leaf accents, chipped lettering or faded broguing. He turned his head back to Olivia and humorously poked his chin in the direction of some books signaling her to begin.

“Those are grouped by topic. The thick hardbound volumes are about herbs. The ones next to them are about cloud formations and weather and the oceans.” She paused so see if he was satisfied. He moved over a few steps and gestured her to towards the next row.

Olivia smiled. She liked how he veiled his curiosity in silly antics. Continuing, she squinted with one eye and aligned it with her outstretched arm as she pointed at what she was looking at. “More about weather. The blue one is observations for each season. Next to that is the seminal work by Gavin Pretor on *cloud spotting.*” Andy continued to scan the wall as she acted as a guide, “Old gardening books. Not just backyard vegetable gardening, though they are there too, but more detailed topics

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like medicinal herbs, organic planting practices. Gerald Durrell’s *The Amateur Naturalist*. That’s a signed copy, by the way. That big red one is all about aromatics.” Realizing Andy wasn’t going to let up, she began to summarize, “Next shelf: Geology, chemistry, types of trees, and bees. Shelf to the left of that is history, religion, and a bunch *more* chemistry and some really scientific shit about minerals and types of wood.”

Olivia now stood but remained back from Andy. She gave him the space he needed. Cautiously, she watched his eyes travel from left to right across a shelf, reading the titles. Examining the topics. Then he’d start again and pass tacitly from right to left. When she stopped talking, he turned to her raising his eyebrows in expectation. Olivia giggled at his antics, “Top shelf: Printed studies on the earth and how to craft raw materials. Below that: advanced techniques for stonework and carving.”

There was no question in her mind, not for a minute; she knew Andy would start to put the pieces together on his own. She didn’t need to beat him over the head with it. In fact, it would be best if she let him come to her to fill in any blanks.

She could see him leaning in towards photos and paintings. On a shelf by itself was a framed black and white photo of seven women standing side-by-side on a porch. Her voice softened as Olivia spoke with fondness and love about the photo. “That photo was taken nearly sixty years ago.” Andy, she knew, would see Olivia’s eyes in some of the women. Her hair in others. They were the women she spoke about earlier in the day. The glassblowers and potters and musicians. When he reached a shelf with an antique lantern and carved stone and wood pieces her softer tone continued, “Those are gifts from uncles and aunts, or family heirlooms passed down to me. You’re welcome to pick them up and admire them. That’s what they’re for.”

She let him continue on his own as she put things away in the kitchen. Olivia walked back into the living area where Andy was standing, now looking at Olivia instead of the room’s contents.

Again, he noticed the curve of her hips and the soft bend of her shoulders.

Knowing he was admiring her, she walked with a slightly exaggerated sway, “We *are* gypsies, yes. I’m Andalusian, Catalanian, and Greek. We came to Nova Scotia sometime around the middle 1800s. At least that’s how the story goes in our family.”

“That makes sense,” Andy calmly spoke as he continued to gaze at Olivia.

“What does that mean?” She teased.

Andy reached out to her, placing his hand on her exposed shoulder, just at the base of her neck, “Let’s be honest Olivia, you’re not Canadian.” His fingers remained on her shoulder as he took another step forward, continuing his thoughts as they came to him, “Skin like this. Soft and tan.” Andy was lost in his own thoughts. Not speaking but inside his head. *I’m drawn you.*

He snapped out of it. Still resting his hand on her shoulder, he couldn’t bring himself to remove it. He couldn’t step back. Olivia looked up at Andy. She should tell him now. Before the night goes any further. Moving back a foot so she could look him clearly in the eyes, “Drawn to me? That’s not completely inaccurate,” she replied.

Andy saw it again. Her eye twinkled. It was obviously something she was doing intentionally. He was sure of it now. He took a step back from her, smiling and with a sense of joy he couldn’t explain. He took a sip of wine and looked around the room.

“Did I say I was drawn to you?” He asked, realizing he only thought it.

Olivia smiled kindly, “You *are* drawn to me, Andy. It isn’t random or chance. It’s supposed to be.” Standing in the middle of the room, Andy was able to take it all in.

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She returned to his side, handed him his wine glass again. Then she walked over to the desk he'd been working at, picked up his notebook and put it in his other hand as they sat the couch together.



Meaning.

Oddly, Andy didn't panic or feel anything other than serenity and a slowly growing sense of understanding. Smiling, "Are you using some sort of...m-"

Olivia held her hand up, "Don't say it."

He asked, "Is there a better word?"

"One word to replace it? No. It's not that simple." She sat back, knowing to choose her words carefully. She held her wine glass in one hand. Thinking a moment, she silently placed her other hand on Andy's leg. She knew he may not have noticed her hand, but knew he'd feel the spirit healing warmth that only comes from a soul that reaches out to another soul.

Olivia softly spoke, "Charming, enchantment, behold, embrace," she paused, "all those words are better, yes? They feel kinder. More romantic and more sincere."

"They do."

"We use words to influence someone's emotions. Everyone, I mean. You do as well. You use words to illicit a response as much as your photos." She focused on the energy coming out of the palm of her hand and waited for the sensation of his leg taking the energy in. "Other words can cause harm, create fear or hatred or illicit all sorts of responses."

Andy sat silently. Olivia could tell he was receiving her energy. She continued slowly. "Words create potential. When used properly. Like *"motivation."*

Andy stared at Olivia. He was skeptical. "Manipulation."

She paused a moment, "No. Maybe the right word is *influence?"*" She began. Andy sensed a longer discussion was coming.

Olivia took her hand off Andy's leg, she leaned in, and Andy thought for a moment she would kiss him. Instead, she gently took his notebook from his other hand. "I bet I can find you using," she waited, then with a hint of sarcasm, "*influential* words in here."

Without any protest from Andy, Olivia put her wine glass down and opened his small brown leather notebook. She flipped through the pages respectfully. He watched quietly. Curiously. He waited for her. "Apparently your pen doesn't have spellcheck," she said without looking up. She felt him squeeze one of her legs. A silent playful protest.

“The M Word.”

He watched her fingertips glide along the pages. Olivia softly observed, “Your descriptions; they’re choppy and abbreviated.” He didn’t say anything, anticipating there was more to her thought, “but you never skip adjectives and adverbs. You describe more than *the physical*. There’s depth to what you do. The sensation or experience. Interesting.” Her voice was soft and thoughtful, like she was allowing everything she was reading sink in.

It was quiet. The only sound was a ticking clock across the room and Stevie Nicks’ haunting voice coming from a speaker. Olivia reached his pages from earlier today. Andy’s notes about their visit. “Here, in my very own shop and home.” Without raising her head, her eyes looked up to his, “You were writing with words of enchantment.” She looked back at the page. “You think you’re just describing things like furniture and pottery and people. But you’re doing more, Andy.” Olivia turned the book so they both could read together. She pointed to his descriptions. As her finger progressed down the page, they silently reviewed his notes. ‘*Rows of pieces. Lined neatly, but easily, on the shelf. Appealing to the eye, ‘draped with delicate glossy hints of sage, plum and lavender,’ ‘welcoming wooden display shelves, varnished clear, honey-toned,’ ‘a wide bowl invokes a stew scented with rosemary,’ ‘tall vase, conjures images of a floral arrangement.’*

Andy shrugged. He thought maybe she’d say he was overly descriptive. “That’s what I’m supposed to do, right? Describe things?”

Olivia looked into Andy’s eyes with a deep intimacy. “Listen again,” she moved the palm of her hand to lower his eyelids closed. “Just listen this time.” Olivia trailed her finger down the page again, this time only focusing on certain words, “You could say *flower* or *plant*. Instead, you chose, *sage, herbal, rosemary, lavender,*” pausing between each one. “Those are *aromatics,*” she indicated lightly. She paused, letting him digest what she was reading. She continued, her voice more delicate and melodious. “Have you ever felt differently after reading something? Or hearing a song?” He barely nodded his head. “Does that make them spells? That is the weight of words. More of your words, ‘*Honey, vanilla, chocolate.*’ You invoke a sense of taste. You didn’t use *purple*, you wrote *plum*. Not just *pink* or *red* but also *rose petals* or *scarlet* and *crimson* and *blush*. Those invoke senses of passion and love, yes?”

Andy sat transfixed. His eyes closed, peaceful and relaxed.

Her voice became a whisper, within an inch of his ear. Maybe closer. “You wrote these words too, Andy.” Again, pausing longer as she read each word melodiously, almost singing, “*enchant, invoke, conjure*. Those sound like a spell, yes?”

Olivia’s voice was now inside the rim of his ear. Barely perceptible if not for her close proximity, her words became a melody. She faintly sang, “Was one of us being enchanted?”

Her tone had his body fixed in place. He radiated warmth.

He opened his eyes. Olivia was not within an inch of his ear as he so surely perceived. No, she was a fair distance, leaning back against the arm on the far side of the couch.

Dumbfounded, Andy tried to understand how her voice sounded so close to his earlobe. His mind wandered back through the day. *How did we lose so much time at the pottery wheel? How does she keep appearing next to me without me knowing? What is she doing with her eyes that make them sparkle?* And he wonders why she talks about the weather like she knows what it’s going to do before it does it.

“Andy, did you write anything about me today?”

“I did.”

“Would you read it to me?”

“The M Word.”

“Are you sure?” Andy reddened. “I don’t know.” He stood up nervously, creating a distance between them. He felt pensive, but somehow compelled to continue. There was something going on and he knew enough to participate in it.

“I can’t judge your spelling if you read it,” she quipped.

“Fair enough,” Andy chuckled a bit, flipping some pages. He stood a few feet from the couch where Olivia remained comfortable. He found the page he’d written earlier in the day. It was in the back pages, nowhere near where Olivia was reading his notes on her shop.

Olivia, reclined on the couch with her eyes closed as though she was waiting for someone to come by and massage her feet, sat patiently as Andy began reading his notes.

“*Olivia; early thirties. Sole owner of OceanCliff Pottery. It sits on a cliff overlooking the ocean. Who would have guessed that?*”

“Sarcasm. A nice start I suppose.” She smiled from the couch, pretending to maintain a Zen-like state of mind. “Sorry. I mean, go on Andy.”

Andy laughed a bit too; glad the moment didn’t carry too much gravity. “Um, let me see.” He continued, “*Shaping clay for years. Her skin is permanently imbued with the earth*” “*How strong are her forearms and hands? When I’m in the room with her;*” Andy stopped. “Ok, so this is...” He paused but then gathered himself and continued to read. “*Sometimes I smell vanilla, sometimes patchouli. Cinnamon or lavender. Calming scents. Her skin looks like it was poured from a cup of coffee with cream. Flowing raven hair spotted with dried clay, the materials and her come together. When she reaches into her hair with her hands, focused on her craft, it...*’I swear I’ve never written about a stranger like this.” Again, Andy paused, “*...reveals the curve of her clavicles, shoulders, and inviting nape of her neck.*”

Andy looked up from the page and turning to Olivia. “For the record that wasn’t for the article.”

“Is there more?” Olivia calmly insisted from the couch.

Andy looked back to his book, turned the page, and continued reading as he walked over towards the couch, “*Her curves would ease the stress of the neediest hands. Denim covered thighs – each one a sculpted like the mug she created for me. Playfully Sarcastic. Lighthearted and silly yet somehow profound. Welcoming and kind with a wisp of mystery. Her voice becomes more captivating the softer she speaks. Mahogany eyes that mesmerize without eyeshadow or mascara. Her eyes could draw a heart from someone’s chest.*’This last part was just my imagination, ‘*Do they twinkle on demand?*’”

Olivia didn’t think he’d written more than a few words and was surprised by his notes. “Do you see how your words reflect a deeper understanding, Andy?” Olivia opened her eyes and sat up on the edge of the couch. She took a sip from her wine glass and continued, “Who’s doing the enchanting now?”

He was now back by the bookcase. When Andy turned around to look at Olivia, he didn’t turn to where he last saw her reclined on the couch. Instead, he turned directly to where she’d silently moved, now standing in the room a few feet from him.

“Are you taking it all in?” she asked. “Take a moment to really see *everything*.” Olivia watched Andy silently nod as he pieced together parts of the day, replaying moments in his head, but now with fuller clarity. As if watching a recording of the entire day, Andy could now see their interactions from a third person view almost. When she handed him the mug, he didn’t realize it at the time, but she touched the inside of his wrist and placed a salve on his vein. He looked down at his wrist and felt the small dab of oil residue that remained after cleaning his hands from dried clay. A blend of aromatics on a pulse point.

“The M Word.”

He now realized Olivia made his coffee knowing to match her skin tone, not his preference in coffee, though they were identical. Andy now recalled his reactions to the scented towels and aromatics covertly placed on the handle of the coffee mug. The enchanting twinkle her eyes, he now could see, was not his imagination. The baklava and other pastries were flavored with honey and almonds. When she read to him, she started to sing in his ear knowing how he would react to her voice. It was still more than just food and scents, though. His entire visit was a series of well-placed smells and tastes and sounds.

Andy looked over to his camera bag by the desk. Walking just a step closer to the bag he could see just inside a side pocket the amulet she discretely placed in there. A dove. A love talisman. Reaching into his shirt pocket, he pulled out a string of tiny stone beads. Within the strand were porous stones that held oils from roses and vanilla. In his mind's eye he now saw her put them in his pocket as he admired the painting of Josephine.

Finally, he replayed their time at the pottery wheel. Again, as though he could watch it from another point of view, he saw her hands placed over his in the silky warmth of the clay they shaped together. She wasn't just helping him turn a piece of pottery, she was embracing his hands and fingers. He didn't realize it at the time, but the piece they made truly reflected their interaction. It was, as she suggested, imbued with their shared experience.

“Yes,” Andy softly replied, “most of it is clear.” He looked over to Olivia leaning against a bookcase. She was waiting for him to speak, knowing the question he would inevitably ask. How long would it take, she wondered, for him to ask a question that oddly, might be the easiest to answer.

Andy was considering what to ask next. As much as he was realizing what was happening, it begged so many more questions. As he looked at Olivia standing a few feet away, he slowly sat in the chair by the desk again. He noticed something odd about her.

“What are you looking at Andy?”

He looked at her chest. From under her soft sweater and through her skin, there was a glow radiating that wasn't there before. He was sure it wasn't something he missed, but something that only existed in her now. He struggled to understand what his eyes were telling him.

Looking at Olivia kindly, curiously, and warmly, “Are you a m-”

“No, don't say it, Andy. That word is for children's movies and books.” Again, as if she was in his mind, Olivia smiled. She noticed him slowly looking around the room, “What are you looking for?”

“I'm looking for a black cat and a broom,” he said flatly.

“Oh, you ass! Now that's just insulting.” Olivia smiled at him, knowing he was kidding, maybe a bit of nerves and not trying to be demeaning of the situation at all. *He still has a sense of humor. That's a good sign.* “You know all those women hung centuries ago? You know what they *really* died for? Because someone's husband fell in love with them or because they were using natural cures or didn't go to church on Sunday. Literally they died from puritanical bullshit, right?” Nothing could prepare him for this moment, she knew, yet she'd been anticipating this conversation, this shared experience, for quite some time. Olivia's instinct was to let him process everything in his own way. Andy's mind drifted from question to question, not hurriedly or with any sense of panic, but calmly. Finally, he reached the question Olivia had been waiting for.

“Is this... ..I mean, am I just...? He struggled to define the vacant space he was trying to fill. Then finally, softly, after a moment of silence he uttered the most important question Olivia would face today. “Why me?”

“The M Word.”

Olivia motioned for Andy to sit on the couch again as he'd been slowly moving around the room. Nerves probably. *That is to be expected.* Again, Olivia had a full view of everything, but he was only now coming to a slow realization of something he barely understood.

Andy sat on the couch as Olivia took her turn to move silently through the room. She opened a long shallow drawer in the bookcase, just about the waist high in the shelves. It was right there amongst the thick books of natural sciences and the collectables and memorabilia. He hadn't noticed it there and he'd been standing right next to it earlier. From the drawer, Olivia produced a wooden box about a foot square and only an inch deep at the most. With her hip, she pushed the drawer closed and carried the box with her. Sitting next to Andy she began what might be, beyond all the scented aphrodisiacs, clay pieces and artistry, the sweet treats, and all her other efforts, the most mysterious yet telling evidence of her intentions.

She opened the lid of the box as she'd done countless times over the recent years. “You already met Josephine in the painting, yes?” Olivia began to gently slide a sheet of paper out of the box, “She was a soothsayer of sorts, I guess. Someone who can foretell things. The future maybe or something unseen or unrealized.” Olivia was speaking and considering her words at the same time. “I suppose that's the best word. Unrealized.” She settled on that word comfortably. “Someone who studies sociology might call it precognition... or *precognitive phenomena*.” Olivia paused, again knowing she was far more well-versed in this sort of thing than Andy. “Essentially, every so often she had dreams that - according to her - were prophetic or especially insightful. She would write these dreams down.”

“Was she related to Nostradamus?” Andy joked.

Olivia chuckled too, “Go ahead and laugh, smartass. If she were here, she'd say she was.”

Andy started to wonder. His mind drifted quickly in a familiar direction. *What rabbit hole have I gone down today?* The thought of his work and career and the assignment he was supposed to be focusing on seemed miles away. Days or weeks away. This is a narrative he's recounted and reflected on for years. It became well-rehearsed doubt. Yet, in this moment it didn't quite matter as much as it did just a few hours ago. *No one I know would believe me if I repeated any of this. Nothing in my head makes sense yet it doesn't feel distinctly wrong either.* He sat back, took a slow breath, and waited.

Olivia held a few sheets of paper in her hands, explaining, “These are from Josephine. Before I show you them, just understand that she had a flair for the dramatic,” Olivia cautioned. “It would have been nice if she just made things easy. Just put facts to paper. It took me months - dozens of repeated readings - to figure out what she was trying to tell me. Reading it again... now... it will probably be more obvious with you sitting here next to me.” Olivia was feeling a little optimistic. “You know how sometimes you really don't understand the lyrics to a song until the writer tells you what it was about. Unless someone explains a Picasso, much of his work looks like a jumble of shapes.” Olivia was thinking out loud again. She looked at the top sheet of paper, “That's what it was like when she wrote. It was like she was only trying to capture the implications and feeling behind her dreams. Not the facts.” Olivia paused for a sigh of frustration. “Details without much explanation. Like complex song lyrics that you know mean something to the person who wrote the song. Only these lyrics were for me to understand. Not even she could help explain it. Well anyway, this is the first one she gave me. Maybe ten years ago.”

“The M Word.”

She handed Andy a wrinkled piece of paper. He took it and noticed the elegant penmanship. The writing was filled with flourish and drama, but still legible. Olivia let him hold it as she read it, quietly.

“Before the sands of time have nearly run out, this decree emerges from the shadows. Lurking within the folds of this enigmatic prophecy lies a daunting task, shroud in your secrecy. Know this: Held captive by the storm, this whispered sonnet unfurls, foretelling of an enigmatic arrival – yes, just the one of many others - concealed until you relinquish their presence to you both. Ever here and there, they wield the power to suspend existence itself, preserving moments in a flat image of ethereal stasis. In self-imposed solitude, they create concise musings, treasuring reverie. They distract themselves with visions instead of thoughts. You will show them otherwise.”

They sat quietly for a moment. Then Andy looked at Olivia, “Did she sleep with a thesaurus beside her bed?”

“You have no idea.” Laughing, “It drove my mother nuts. Like I said, she had a flare for the dramatic. You can see there’s something about today in there. I certainly didn’t welcome that storm. Bad weather drives away customers. But at some point, I realized today’s storm wasn’t random.”

“And here I assumed you conjured it with special powers.”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Did you now?” Handing him another sheet of paper, “Two or three months later she gave me this one.” Again, handing it to him and reading it in her soft voice.

“Amidst the whispers of other fates, silence becomes your trusted ally. Like no other in your family, this is your path to create love: for ere your thirtieth be graced, a charmed blessing beseeches thy soul. To enchant the one who, by their hand and will, grasps the vessel you crafted, unknowingly and discreetly, for them alone. Trust the muck and mud for it is your medium in art and love. Match with the rain and wind and the brief time they provide. Embrace the moment with your arms out wide – as my painting is a mirror of you. In the shadows amidst a world of cynicism and an air of their own uncertainty, they take preference in your satirical embrace. A spoken veneer of snark, tho they write with passion. An unwavering attraction to hue of your skin and shape; their obsession laced with unrealized desires of an affair only you can fulfill.”

“Ok, I feel a little attacked,” Andy smirked. “Veneer of snark? Kind of a cheap shot from ole’ Aunt Josephine, don’t ya think?” Andy wasn’t sure what to make of this. “...grasps the vessel you crafted, unknowingly and discreetly, for them alone?” You called it a chalice, so maybe I’m the wrong guy. Have there been others? How many coffee mugs have you planted out there?”

Olivia liked that he was taking this in stride. She pursed her lips, holding back a smirk, waving a finger in the air to animate everything she said, “Oh no you don’t. You’re it. And that is the only mug. I know because she later told me I had to make one for this purpose. You’re here and I’m here and it’s not chance. It’s...” She reflected for a moment, “faith.” Then with a dramatic flip of her dark hair, she added, “There was a lovely lady who grabbed it once, but her girlfriend must have sensed something and made her put it back.”

“The M Word.”

Andy stared at the pages. He looked over the first one, reading it to himself. Slowly. He saw what Olivia was seeing. Then, placing the second one on top, read it again to himself as Olivia watched patiently. She’d spent so much time with these letters. She knew he’d need some time as well.

She put another sheet of paper into his hands less ceremoniously than the previous two. “Read this one yourself, Andy. She gave this one to me... ..about a year after the first.”

He took the page in his hand, gave a lighthearted ‘ahem’ and began to read.

“Drawn like moth to flame, you to turn them aglow, adorned with cheeks kissed by the hue of delicate rose. You will see words more than they do. Show them the power they wield. Know, once they begin succumbing to what you possess, disclose these truths to them alone. Know also, beyond any doubts your mind possesses, they come to you of their own free will, unknowingly pleading for the talents and knowledge in your possession to envelop them in their own dreams of you guiding them forward, and them, you.”

Again, they sat in silence back on the couch. Olivia surely knew them front-and-back, having read them over and over. Leaning back and staring up at the ceiling, she recounted phrases that now made more sense to her.

Andy went through the pages again, in order. Reading them to himself. His attention was drawn to certain phrases or words. His finger traced a few sentences as he re-read them to himself. ‘... *once they begin succumbing... ..disclose these truths to them alone.*’ He thought some more. The meaning was blurred to him. “So, you can’t lie to me, right? Is that what this say here?” Andy asked.

“No, I suppose that’s the cost of this,” Olivia stated flatly, feigning some sort of resignation of her own fate. She turned to Andy and looked at him with a smirk. “Maybe I can lie to you tomorrow. Or next week. We’ll test it out,” she wondered out loud.

Andy was unsettled again. “Have I been deceived? Is this something being imposed on me?” Andy asked, not in an accusatory tone, but one that suggested he wanted to fully understand what was happening or already has happened, he couldn’t comprehend that either.

Lowering her chin and turning towards Andy, Olivia considered his question before replying. “Does anyone fall in love and feel deceived?” Olivia continued posing questions that she pondered herself for years, “Or is falling in love no different than falling under someone’s spell? Doesn’t everyone, at first blush, feel as though their heart is taken captive by the one they’re attracted to?”

Olivia stared at Andy. “You’re concerned about something else?”

Andy needed to decide once and for all if this would be another distraction to his life or would it be something else. “What did you give up? I mean, have you put faith in a cryptic letter from Aunt Josephine?”

“Maybe.” Olivia raised her eyebrows. “But isn’t that the essence of faith? People do all sorts of things in the name of faith. History is filled with it. Religious faiths from every culture. Faith in friendships, in your parents, in government, in ourselves. Faith in fair and equal justice. Economies are built on the faith that people will invest, create value, and participate in the market, leading to economic growth.”

“The M Word.”

“Really? Government and economics? Where’s your books on that?” Andy chuckled, motioning to the bookshelf again. “Did you study those too?”

Olivia dropped her chin to her chest in assent. “Ok, you got me. I was getting a little preachy.”

“Yeah, but I get your point.” Andy was silent for a moment.

Olivia kept her chin down but looked up to meet Andy’s gaze. “Faith in yourself?”

“What?”

“Do you have faith in yourself? It sounds like maybe you don’t.”

Andy blushed. “Jeesh, Olivia. It’s not like…”

“I know, I know.” Olivia put her hands up in surrender. “But seriously, maybe you’re missing something.”

“How did this conversation become about career planning?” Andy seemed frustrated. “A career of stops and starts.”

Olivia put her hand on Andy’s cheek, “You poor silly fool.” She said with playfulness in her voice, “Don’t you see? Life isn’t filled with endings, but a series of beginnings.” His eyes drifted to a small window on the back of the room. He slowly walked over to it, admiring the bright orange dawn sky beginning to ease its way from East to West. The storm had passed. He considered what she was suggesting, but there was more. His life was absent something, for sure. He always knew that but assumed it was a lack of conviction or a proclivity for idleness that stood in his way. He thought now, after thinking a few moments more, “I always thought it was *something* I was wanting, but maybe I’ve been lacking *someone*?” He slowly spun on his heels and faced Olivia again. “Is that what you’re trying to say? Have I been trying to live without inspiration?”

Olivia squared her shoulders as both she and Andy stood, facing each other just inches apart. She knew what was done was done for a reason. She could sense Andy’s emotions. She could sense his thoughts, almost. He wouldn’t fight it but still struggled to understand why – the two of them among all people - become connected. “Admittedly, I can’t explain everything…”

Andy rolled his eyes. “You don’t…”

“But.” Olivia took a step closer towards Andy and put her hand on his shoulder. “Maybe, just consider this: I believe that you and I are here, now, for a reason. That reason is to help each other grow and become the best versions of ourselves. While you may doubt your abilities, I have unwavering faith in your potential. Your aimlessness and my trust in fate brought us together. What happens now us up to us, I suppose. Like any other two people brought together.”

“That puts a bit of pressure on you.” Andy was speaking in a soft tone as well. “All I have to do is not question why we were paired together. To just have faith.”

“I am what I’ve always been.” Olivia spoke in a whisper as their eyes were locked.

“What’s that?”

“To be a…muse.”