

A CAPPELLA JUST
GOT A MAKEOVER



WORTHY

NOTE

RILEY REDGATE

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AMULET BOOKS
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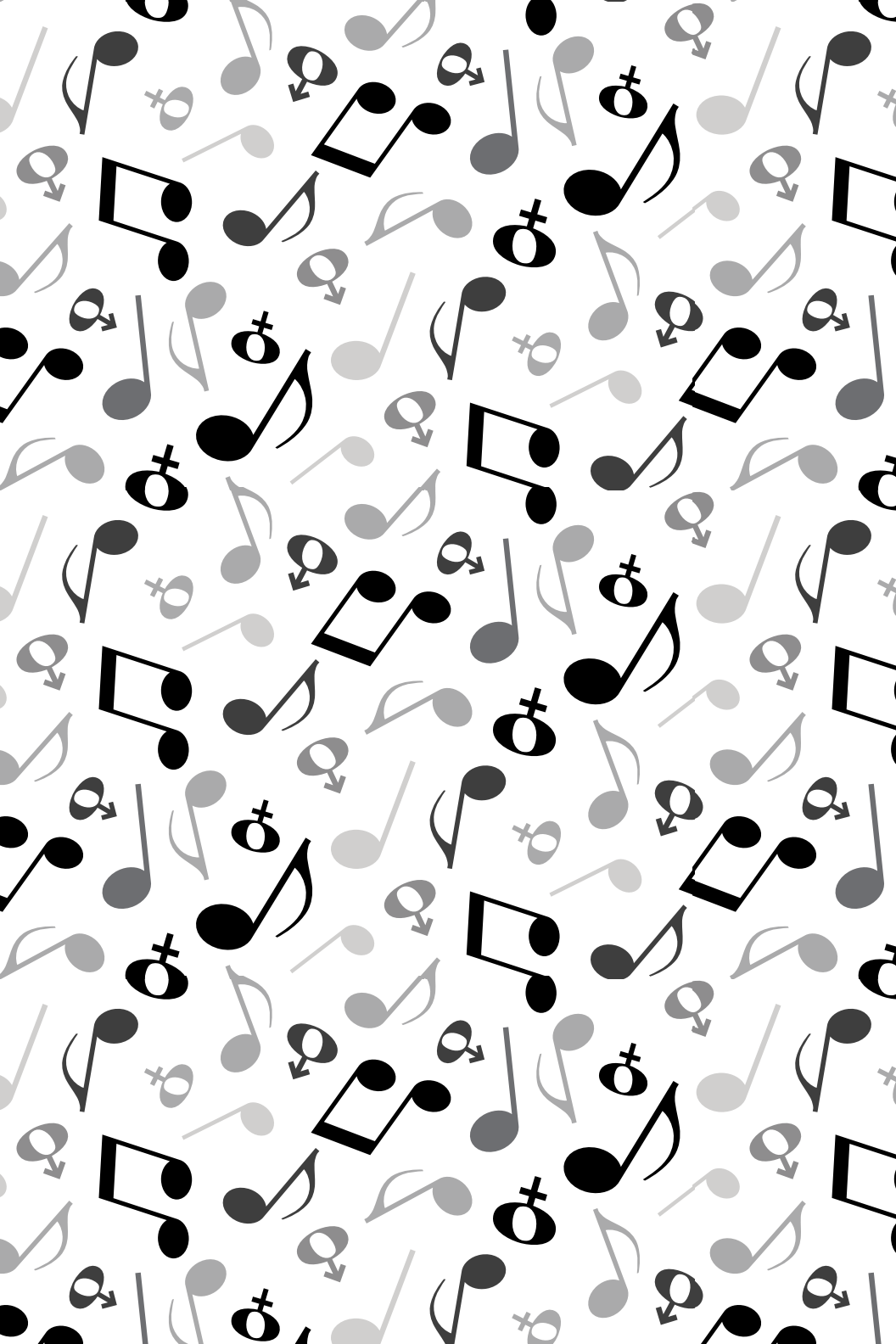
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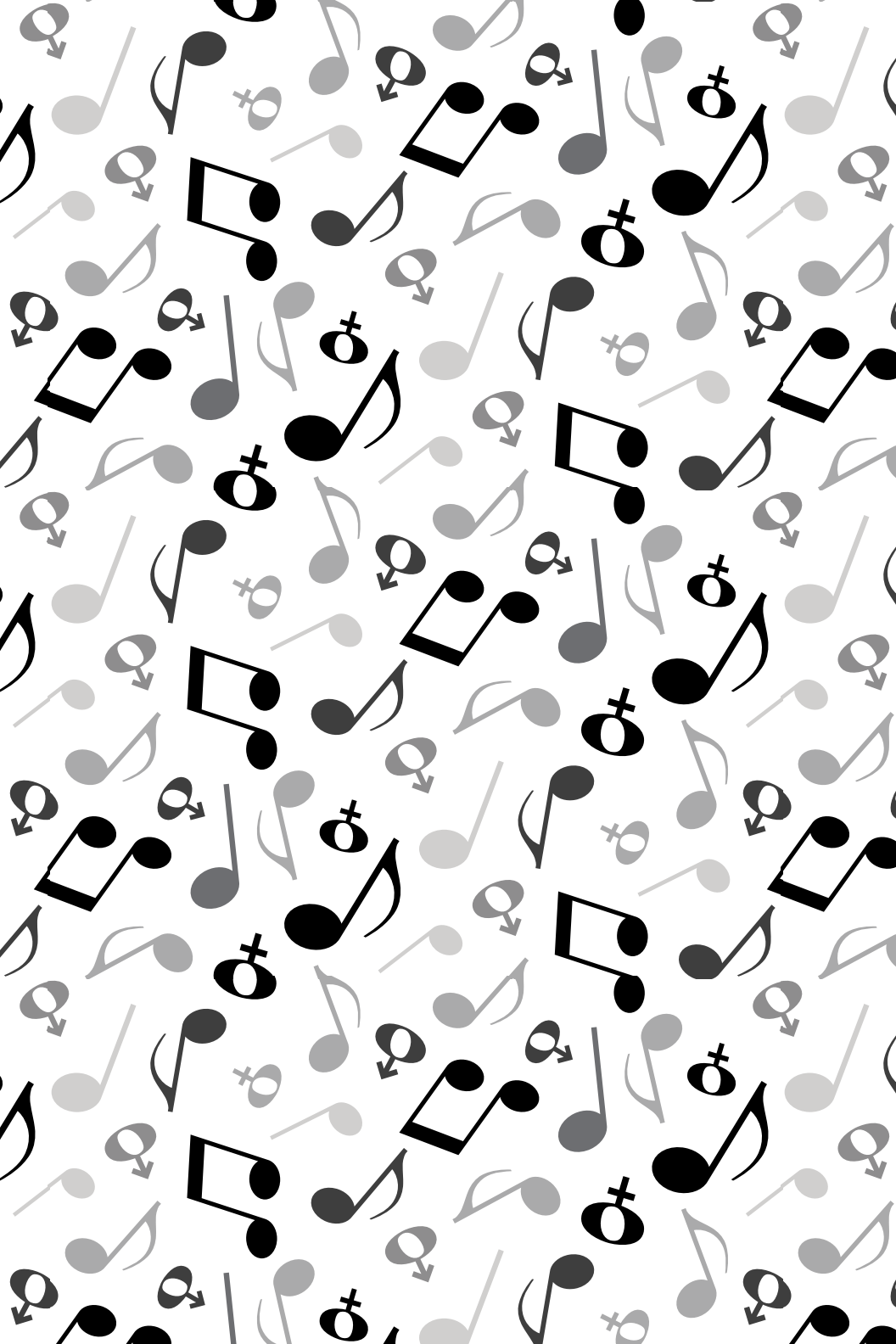
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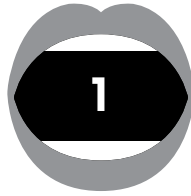
*for Marlene Hoirup, who gave music to my life
for Terry Hicks, who gave life to my music
and for Benjamin Locke, who taught
me what it means to give it all back*





ALLEGRETTO





MONDAY MORNING WAS THE WORST POSSIBLE TIME to have an existential crisis, I decided on a Monday morning, while having an existential crisis.

Ideal crisis hours were obviously Friday afternoons, because you had a full weekend afterward to turn back into a person. You could get away with Saturday if you were efficient about it. Mondays, though—on Mondays, you had to size up the tsunami of work that loomed in the near distance and cobble together a survival strategy. There was no time for the crisis cycle: 1) teary breakdown, 2) self-indulgent wallowing, 3) questioning whether life had meaning, and 4) limping toward recovery. Four nifty stages. Like the water cycle, but soul-crushing.

I scanned the list posted on the stage door for the sixth time, hoping my eyesight had mysteriously failed me the first five times. Nope. No magical appearance of a callback for Jordan Sun, junior. I was a reject, like last year, and the year before.

I moved away from the stage door with dreamy slowness. My fellow rejects and I drifted down the hall, unspeaking. Katie Woods wore a hollow, shocked expression, as if she'd just seen somebody get mauled by a bear. Ash Crawford moved with the

dangerous tension of someone who itched to smash a set of plates against a wall.

All normal. At the Kensington-Blaine Academy for the Performing Arts, half the students would have slit throats for parts in shows, dance pieces, and symphonic ensembles—anything to polish that NYU or Juilliard application to the blinding gleam the admissions officers wanted. Kensington loved its hyphenated adjectives: college-preparatory, cross-curricular, objective-oriented. “Low-stress” was not one of them. Every few days, you heard some kid crying and hyperventilating in the library bathroom. I, like any reasonable person, saved the crying and hyperventilating for my dorm.

Another failed audition. I could already hear my mom releasing the frustrated sigh that spoke more clearly than words: *This place wasn't meant for you.*

Familiar anxieties seeped in: that I should be back in San Francisco, working, making myself useful to my parents. That being here was a vanity project. That, as always, I didn't belong.

There was something alienating about being on scholarship, a tense mixture of gratefulness and otherness. *You're talented*, the money said, *and we want you here.* Still, it had the tang of *You were, are, and always will be different.* I was from a different world than most Kensington kids—I'd never been the Victorian two-story in western Massachusetts or the charming Georgian in the DC suburb. I was a cramped apartment in an anonymous brick building with a dripping air conditioner, stationed deep in the guts of the West Coast, and I'd landed here by some freak combination of providence and ambition. And I never forgot it.

I exited the cool depths of Palmer Hall onto a landscape of

deep green and blissful blue. Ahead, marble steps broadened, rolling down to the theater quad's long parabola of grass. To the left and right, Douglass Hall and Burgess Hall flanked the quad, twin sandstone buildings that glowed gold with noon. Nestled in the far north of New York State, a long drive from anything but fields and forest, Kensington in early autumn was the sort of beautiful that begged for attention.

Hot wind fluttered through the quad, dry heat that brought goosebumps rippling up my arms. I stood still, my too-small sneakers warming in the sunshine, as a stream of traffic maneuvered its way around me, confident hands fitting Ray-Bans over squinting eyes, shoulders shrugging off layers to soak in the heat. Neatly layered hair cascaded over even tans. Highlights snatched the sun and tossed back an angry gleam.

Over the banister, a line of backpacks wriggled up-campus toward the dining hall. I stayed put. I never skipped meals at school, but something had gone wrong with my stomach. Namely, it didn't seem to be there anymore, and wherever it had gone, my heart and lungs and the rest of my vital organs had danced merrily after it. Holding the full interior of my body was the dull roar of a single thought: *Fix this*.

I rocked forward on the balls of my feet like a racer before the starting gun. I tried to take steady breaths. All this excess energy, all this drive to get something done, and nowhere to funnel it. Zero options. I would have kidnapped the cast and deported them to Slovenia, but I didn't have sixteen thousand dollars for plane tickets. I would have sabotaged the light board and blackmailed the department into giving me a part, but I wasn't an asshole. I would have bribed the director with my eternal love, but she

was Reese Garrison, dean of the School of Theater, and I couldn't think of anything that probably meant less to her than my affection.

I squinted back up at Palmer Hall, its peaks and crevices blacked out against that signature blue sky. Reese had posted the list only twenty minutes ago. If I caught her in her office, maybe I could wring some audition feedback out of the endless supply of needle-sharp comments that constituted conversations with her.

Given her entire personality, I didn't know why I was so sure that Reese, at the heart of everything, wanted us to do well. Maybe it was because she respected wanting something, and there was nothing I did better than want.

With a squeak of rubber on marble, I turned on my heel and walked back inside.



Like all the offices on the top floor of Palmer Hall, Reese's was sterilized white and too bright for comfort, small lights gleaming down from on high. At best, it gave off the atmosphere of a hospital room. At worst, an interrogation chamber from a 1970s cop movie.

Behind a cluttered desk, Reese adjusted her silver-gray frames. Her lined eyes glowed up at me, amplified by thick glass. The lady had a way of making everyone feel the height of your average garden gnome, even those of us who stood five foot ten. She never got less terrifying, but you could get used to it, in the way that when you watch the same horror movie repeatedly, the jump scares start to lose their sting.

"I hope," she said, "that you're not here to ask me to reconsider."

"Heh, like that would work." It came out before I realized what I was saying, and as Reese's lips thinned, my life flashed before my eyes. It seemed shorter and more boring than I would've preferred. "Sorry!" I added. "Sorry, sorry."

I spent half my life whipping up apologies on behalf of my mouth, which I considered to be kind of separate from me as a person. I, Jordan Sun, valued levelheadedness, and also other human beings. Jordan Sun's Mouth did not care about either of these things. All it wanted was to be quick on the uptake, and the only people it behaved around were my parents. You had to be completely unhinged, borderline masochistic, to sass my mom and dad.

But the same went for Reese. Maybe I'd gotten too familiar—I'd known her from my first day at Kensington, first as a teacher and now as a housemother. The old housemother of Burgess Hall, the frighteningly ancient Mrs. Overgard, had gotten around to retiring at last, which meant that Reese lived three doors down from me this year, tasked with overseeing the dorm. This was a bit like living three doors down from a swarm of enraged hornets. Her definition of "quiet hours" was "if I hear music even one second after 11:00 p.m., I will personally rend to pieces everyone you love."

Reese let me wallow in a long moment of sheer terror. Then her small, sharp mouth assembled a toothy smile. "You're right," she said. "I don't reconsider. But I do take bribes in the amount of eight million dollars, unmarked bills."

Before I could laugh, or even register that Reese Garrison had made an actual joke, she asked, "What's your question?"

I glanced around her office, hunting down an inspired way to phrase this. Nothing in here was inspirational.

“Spit it out, Jordan.” Reese folded her hands on her desk. The collection of bracelets around her wrists rattled.

“Sorry, right,” I said. “I wondered if I could ask for audition feedback. Since you—” I cut myself off. Don’t accuse. Step carefully. “Since I haven’t had success in casting, so far, I figured it was a me thing.”

“A ‘you thing’?”

“A pattern in my auditions, I mean.”

Reese picked up a pen, spinning it between her nimble fingers. Tiredness passed across her face, a startling little specter of an emotion. She was so expressive, Reese, expressive and flexible—an ex-dancer who had floated on- and off-Broadway for twenty years. “As with everyone, it’s a combination of things,” she said. “Mostly, the parts just haven’t fit. I don’t need to tell you, do I? You’ve heard the lines. Subjective industry. Case-by-case basis.”

“Sorry, but—mostly?” I repeated, picking at the single weak spot in the spiel.

“What?”

“You said, *mostly*, the parts just didn’t fit me.”

One thin eyebrow rose. “And you’re sure you *want* to hear what I might have to say.”

It wasn’t a question. She was steeling herself. I waited.

Race, whispered something in the back of my head. Kensington’s race-blind casting policy was meant to give everyone the same shot at a lead part, but I couldn’t quite shut off the voice that said, *Of course you, Jordan Mingyan Sun, aren’t getting cast as a*

lead, when the leads are named Annabeth Campbell, Janie Wallace, and Cassandra Snyder. Or was it my height? The fact that I was taller than half the guys I read with during auditions?

Still, it didn't explain why she hadn't cast me in the ensemble. *Freshmen* got cast in the ensemble.

Reese set down her pen. "Then let me be frank, because this is something you'll want to consider when you're auditioning for college programs: Your singing voice is difficult to reconcile with musical theater. Firstly, there's a timbre to it—and I'm not saying this couldn't be trained out, but it's a harshness, almost an inattentiveness to the text. Like a rock singer, not an actor."

I blinked rapidly. Thoughts about race and stature evaporated with a twinge of embarrassment. "Wh—you mean my pronunciation?"

"That's part of it. It also affects your physicality." She gestured at me. "Your eyes close; you shift and sway; your hands move with the notes instead of with intention. Those tics are a challenge to eliminate."

"I can do it," I said at once. "I'll fix it. If—"

She lifted a hand. I broke off.

"Again," she said, "that's subject to change. Unfortunately, what won't change for the foreseeable future is the number of roles that fit your range. It's just so deep." She took her glasses off, massaging the bridge of her nose with her sharp fingertips. Wisps of her dark hair escaped over her forehead. "You've got a unique sound, Jordan; you don't hear many voices like yours, and I mean that genuinely. But musical theater will be a tough pursuit for a girl who's more comfortable singing the G below middle C than the one above."

For once, words wouldn't come. Instead, a horrible memory of eighth grade arrived, a middle school choir concert built of white button-ups, an array of bright lights, and a clutter of anxious feet on the bleachers. Our choir director had made every girl sing soprano. My voice had cracked down half an octave at the peak of the song, an ugly bray among the sweet whistle of the other kids' voices, and laughter had popped across the stage. My cheeks had gone as hot as sweat.

Of course this was why. Being an Alto 2 in the musical theater world is sort of like being a vulture in the wild: You have a spot in the ecosystem, but nobody's falling over themselves to express their appreciation. In this particular show, even the so-called alto ensemble parts sang up to a high F-sharp, which seemed like some sort of sadistic joke. For those unfamiliar with vocal ranges: Find a dog whistle and blow it, try to sing that note, and the resulting gurgling shriek will probably sound like my attempt to sing a high F-sharp.

"The last thing I want to be is a naysayer," Reese said, slipping her glasses back on. I bit back a skeptical noise. Naysaying was basically the woman's job description. The arts world, Kensington wanted to teach us, was brutal, so everything here was "no": no's at auditions, no's from our teachers, no, no, no, until we accumulated elephant-thick skin, until we made ourselves better.

"But," she went on, "remember. It's the greatest strength to know your weaknesses. It just means you have a question to answer: How hard will you work to get what you want? And that's the heart of it: from your career, from your time here, from everything, really—what do you want?"

I stayed quiet.

The world, I thought. The whole world, gathered up in my arms.



Nothing kills productivity faster than feeling helpless. That night, I sat at my usual table in the corner of the Burgess common room. My hands were fixed to my laptop, which whirred frantically under my palms in the computer equivalent of death throes. The library had slim MacBook Pros to lend out short-term, but for long-term loans like mine, they apparently leased equipment dating to sometime in the Cretaceous Period.

I pressed my hands closer to the computer, absorbing its warmth. The common room was always a few degrees too cold, a perfect studying atmosphere. Even the thermostats at Kensington knew the philosophy. Don't get too comfortable. Stay on your toes.

The evening burrowed into night. Stacks of books shrank around everyone else, vanishing from the scattering of cherry tables at teardrop windows, but my work went untouched. I stared up at the brass chandeliers and out the window at the star-strewn country sky. I stared at the seat beside me, which had belonged to Michael every night last year. He'd sat with a hunch that gave him pronounced knots in his shoulders; beneath my fingers they'd felt like stone beads worked deep into bands of muscle. His hands dwarfed his pet brand of mechanical pencil: Pentel Sharp P200, sleek, black, reliable.

In the opposite corner, Sahana Malakar, ranked first in our class, was highlighting her notes. By the gas-jet fire in the hearth, Will Teagle was mouthing lines to himself, brow knitted. These

were the kids I'd been comparing myself to for two years already. Kensington was divided into five disciplines—Theater, Music, Film, Visual Arts, and Dance—and the five schools hardly ever mixed, so although we had 1,500 students, Kensington could feel insular, even isolating. We lived with the kids in our discipline, went to every class with them, and spent our free hours on projects with them. “Full immersion in your craft,” Admissions bragged, “and with your partners in learning!”

As my time trickled away, my brain supplied me with the usual helpful spiral of consequences: *If you don't finish this essay, you won't have time for your English reading, and you'll never catch up, and by next week you'll still be on page 200 when everyone else has finished the book, and O'Neill will look at you across the table with his bushy eyebrows doing that knowing wagging thing, and he'll realize everything you're saying is bullshit, and you'll end up with a B, and your class rank will slip, and goodbye Harvard or Columbia, goodbye to your parents being proud of anything you—*

I managed to cram in about two paragraphs around the thoughts, as they spiraled into *Why do you bother?* and *You're never going to make it* and *Give up, give up, give up.*

Finally, mercifully, my phone interrupted. Cheerful music sliced through the common-room ambiance.

The housemaster, Mr. Rollins, squat and well-postured in an armchair across the room, looked up from the play he was annotating. A few studiers shot me disgruntled glances. I mouthed an apology and stuffed notebooks and laptop into my backpack, yanking the stuck zipper so that it chewed black teeth together in an uneven zigzag. I slipped out the door.

The halls of Burgess were a maze of corkboard, colored nametags taped to doors, and embossed silver numbers. 113. 114. 115. I dashed to 119, locked myself in, and took a deep breath before hitting *accept*. “Hey, Mom.”

I delayed the audition talk as long as possible, but I couldn't put it off forever. My mother took the news about as well as I thought she would: with a wandering string of Chinese and a lecture that whipped into life like a tornado.

My parents tracked my school performance like baseball nuts tracked the World Series. I never told people about it. A fun side effect of being Chinese is that people assume this about you already. It felt weirdly diminishing to admit it about myself, as if it simplified me to just another overachieving Asian kid with one of *those* moms, even if I was in fact Asian and did have one of those moms.

I weathered her tirade for a few minutes, cradling my phone between my ear and my shoulder. “Okay,” I murmured halfway through one of her sentences, not thinking. She broke off.

“Don't ‘okay,’” she said. “It's always ‘okay’ this, ‘okay’ that. Don't ‘okay’ me. How about you explain why this keeps happening?” A disbelieving laugh. “It's every single audition since you've gone to that place! It's not just singing. Why don't they put you on the, those, the regular plays?” I imagined the agitated fluttering of her hand as she tried to grab the words, put them in the right order. Mom's English tended to fracture when she didn't give herself time to breathe.

“Because,” I said tiredly, “mainstage straight plays always have, like, eight-person casts, and the parts always go to seniors.”

"I don't know, Jordan. I just don't know. All we get is bad news. What do you expect us to think, ah?"

"Mainstages aren't everything," I insisted. "I can find a student-led show in October. And my GPA's fine, and everything else is fine, it's just . . ." *that you've trained yourself to sniff out my weak spots*. The sentence I could never finish. Even this much talking back was pushing it. My mother and I had the sort of relationship that operated the most smoothly in silence.

She heaved her knowing sigh. I could picture the slow stream of air between her lips, her mouth framed by deep, tired creases. The sound punctured me.

Silence spread across my room. I'd been one of twenty Burgess residents to draw a single this year. It was twice the size of my room at home. Everything I owned stretched thinly across the space, making it look like an empty model room you might find, three-walled, sitting in the middle of a furniture store. I'd pinned my two posters, *Les Misérables* and *Hamilton*, as far apart as possible, thinking that it might make the white cinderblocks look busier. It hadn't worked.

The only thing I had in numbers were books. They lined up single-file on the shelves, quietly keeping me company. It was impossible to feel alone in a room full of favorite books. I had the sense that they knew me personally, that they'd read me cover to cover as I'd read them.

My mother had always been aggressive about getting me to read, scouring garage sales and libraries for free novels, plays, or biographies. She'd always wanted me to learn more. Do more. Be more. She spent her life hoping for my way up and out.

"I'm sorry," I said, my voice tiny, and for a horrible second, I thought I was going to cry. She never knew what to do with that.

I searched the photos I'd tacked to the corkboard above my desk, trying to distill reassurance out of the patchwork of familiar faces. Near the top hung my best friends in San Francisco, the four of us, arms slung around each other's shoulders. Shanice pandered to the camera, pulling that picture-perfect sun-white grin. Jenna had her eyes crossed and her tongue stuck out, and to the left, Maria and I were in the middle of hysterical laughter, both of us shaded brown by the end of the summer.

I took a stabilizing breath. "How's . . ." I started, tentative. "How's Dad?"

"Fine. We're fine." She sounded weary. I didn't reply. If they'd been fighting, she wouldn't have told me, anyway. And what did it change, for me to know whether they were in a peace period or a war period?

"I need to make dinner," Mom said, her voice softening. "Bye. Talk soon, okay?"

"Yeah, I—"

Click.

I dropped my phone, my whole body heavy. At least it wasn't ever anger with my mom—just anxiety, a nerve-shredding worry on my behalf that made me feel inadequate like nothing else could. Every time I dropped the ball, it made visible cracks in her exterior.

It felt like my parents had been gearing up their entire lives for next fall, my college application season. Last year, I'd read a one-man show for Experimental Playwriting in which a man decides over the course of forty-five minutes whether to press a

button that will instantly kill somebody across the world, a random person, in exchange for ten million dollars. If you'd handed my parents that button and told them the reward was my admission to Harvard, I swear to God they would've pressed it without a second thought.

And if you asked them why? "Because it's Harvard." Conversation over.

In a way, I was lucky that they banked on name recognition. Their faith in the arts as a legitimate career path hovered around zero, so if Kensington hadn't been nicknamed "the Harvard of the Arts" by everyone from *USA Today* to the *New Yorker*, the odds of my going here also would've hovered around zero, scholarship or not. I was fourteen when I convinced my parents to let me apply to Kensington, and—when I got the full ride—to come here. I'd cajoled them into it every step of the way. But they would never be happy until I was the *best*. Here, you were more likely to have several extra limbs than be the best at anything.

I slid off my bed and measured my breaths. *Stop thinking about college—stop thinking at all—give your brain a rest*. It was always busy in my skull, always noisy, a honking metropolis of detours and preoccupations.

I hunched over my desk, studying my corkboard. There hung a creased picture of my dad and me, his knees leaning crookedly in his wheelchair, one of my hands set on his shoulders. Beside it was a shot of my mother standing on our building's crumbling stoop, stern and stately, wearing a summer dress with a red and green print. The pictures were three years old. They seemed to be from a separate lifetime. Before Kensington, before the fighting, before Michael, a mirror reflecting a mirror

reflecting a mirror, every layer of difference adding a degree of warp.

The corner of a stray picture glinted to the side, snagged behind a family photo. I swiveled it into sight and yanked my fingers back. The image of Michael's face made something clench in my chest. His dark eyes peered out at me accusingly.

Why did I even have that? I could've sworn I'd put all those pictures in the garbage, where he belonged.

The flare of hurt withered into disgust. Three months, and I was still circling the carcass of our relationship like an obsessive buzzard. The worst thing about breakups was the narcissism that trailed after them, the absolute swallowing self-centeredness. Every movie about heartbreak had turned into my biopic. Every sentence about aloneness, every song lyric about longing, had morphed into a personal attack.

I snatched the photo down, crumpled it, and chucked it across the room at the trash can. It missed, landing beneath the open window. The dark ridges of the balled-up photo shone. Outside, a yellowing harvest moon was rising over the treetops.

I approached the window, flicked the scrap of glossy paper into place, and gazed through the glass at the moon. For a second I lost myself in the sight. For a second I could breathe clearly, the first instant of clarity since that morning.

Kensington was beautiful through everything. When I didn't have anything else, I had this castle in the countryside, this oasis, this prize I'd snared. Some days it was a diamond, and I almost couldn't understand how lucky I was to have stumbled upon it. And other days it was a living thing, trying desperately to free itself from me.



"WHAT AN IMPERTINENT THING IS A YOUNG GIRL bred in a nunnery!" Lydia jabbed an accusatory finger at me as she approached. "How full of questions! Prithee no more, Hellena; I have told thee more than thou understand'st already." Lydia Humphreys, my ex-roommate, had a football-helmet-shaped bob of platinum blonde hair and a voice that bounced off the amphitheater steps like a solid object.

I flashed a coy smile and sauntered backward. "The more's my grief. I would fain know as much as you, which makes me so inquisitive. Nor is it enough to know you are a lover, when . . ." I grimaced and rewound. "To know you are a lover, when . . . *shit*."

"Should I start again?" Lydia said, drifting out of character.

"I don't think it'll help. I'm so sorry, I should know these."

She waved it off. "It's a short scene. We have until Friday."

"Yeah. I'll get it together. Sorry."

"Really, it's fine," Lydia said. I hunted her freckled face for a trace of displeasure and came up empty. She looked mild and unbothered, but then again, she always looked mild and unbothered. Lydia had grown up with her grandparents and inherited all of her grandmother's mild, unbothered facial expressions. When

she took the stage, her face full of life and outrage, she was unrecognizable.

I drifted into a sitting position on the rough stone of the amphitheater stage, eyeing the graduated rings that rippled up and out from us. Weeks at Kensington-Blaine all followed the same trajectory, a sine curve of stress that peaked on Wednesday afternoons. You got the sense, Wednesdays, that even if the Gods of Time came down from on high and magically inserted eighty-two extra hours into that evening, finishing your work would be a stretch. But I needed to find time somewhere to memorize this, get it into my muscles. If you had to think about your lines, you weren't doing it right.

This past weekend's audition had put a permanent twist in my focus. Since my conversation with Reese, whenever I talked, I resented my voice. What did you do with a problem you couldn't solve?

I could tell that Lydia wanted to ask what was wrong, but she stayed quiet, tentative. This was fair. We hadn't had a real conversation since freshman year, which was absolutely my fault, since I'd turned into that apocryphal girl who gets a boyfriend and vanishes into the ether. I wasn't proud of it.

I rubbed the heels of my palms into the seams of my closed eyes, exhausted. Suggesting we rehearse here had been a terrible idea. I saw Michael everywhere in the amphitheater. As last year had dwindled toward summer, we'd snuck out every other night, ducking up the quad fastened at the hands, and we'd always wound up on this stage, a stone circle that glowed like a second moon. We stayed until our voices buckled and our eyelids drooped, because soon he was going to graduate, and it'd be NYU

for him and junior year for me. Soon there'd be no more secret hours to steal. Now, there was his ghost at the edge of the stage, six foot two of burning presence as I remembered him: a muscular knot of motion. Watching him move was like watching a firework twist up into the evening before it bursts.

Lydia broke the silence. "I'm sorry you didn't get cast."

I glanced up at her. I'd forgotten how blunt Lydia was, in a way that was never cruel, never for selfish satisfaction. It was so you knew she was always what she appeared to be. She could take a scalpel to a conversation, work it down to the bone, spot your fractures before you could describe them to her.

She smoothed the edge of her skirt. Splashes of pink on white. Lilly Pulitzer, a Humphreys family favorite. "It really is subjective," she said. "Seeing how Reese chooses people is actually very eye-opening." Lydia was assistant-directing the show, which seemed like a brave move. I would never have subjected myself to that quantity of Reese Garrison.

"For real," I said. "What's she looking for?"

"It's different for every part. Way fewer guys audition for the musical, so for guys' parts she's basically like, okay, which of these people can actually sing a high A and sound good? Whereas for girls, there's another whole checklist of stuff."

"God, maybe that's why Michael got leads three years in a row," I said, and instantly hated myself for bringing him up. It was a weird compulsion, like picking at a scab.

"Well," Lydia said, "he was also great. At everything."

"Yeah, I know." Michael could pull on a persona like a well-fitted costume piece. Accents especially—teachers sat up straighter when he did them, taken aback even after twenty

years of teaching. He had a flamboyant Italian character he'd nicknamed Angelo and a simpering Frenchman I'd dubbed Pierre; he used to tug them out over the tables at dinner. And he did such a pitch-perfect Dublin accent, burbling out the corner of his mouth, that it was obvious he'd spent three summers in a row there, badgering all the Dubliners to speak more slowly so he could slip their words into his pockets.

His favorite was the noir detective, all flattened and nasal and fast-spoken in a transatlantic twang. Last year, he'd watched about six noir films in a row and then considered himself an expert. He whipped up vaguely hard-boiled-sounding lines about kids and teachers, dragging us into his made-up worlds. "Reese Garrison was a dame whose legs went ahhh'n 'til next Tewsday," he'd drawl over my shoulder as I tried to write. "I gave 'er my essay, and she gave me three bullets, one for every danglin' modifier . . ."

And I'd groan, or I'd laugh. Or—mostly—I'd let him distract me. "It rained that summah," I'd drawl back in my smokiest femme fatale voice, playing along. "It rained 'til my conscience felt damn neah clean again." Then he'd reach forward and mess with my computer, and I'd swat at his hands until he'd take my wrists and pull me in, everything else forgotten. Characters abandoned. There we'd be in private closeness, silent all of a sudden and real.

I could still text him. I could break the three-month silence.

The second the thought came, I stood. *Get over this.* "Okay," I said, yanking the folded script pages out of my back pocket. They were an inked, highlighted disaster. I had notes annotating my notes. "Can we maybe run lines?"

“Sure,” Lydia said, tucking her phone away. Instantly, I felt selfish for asking her to stay, but before I could offer her an exit strategy, she started the scene. “What an impertinent thing is a young girl bred in a—”

Noise spilled into the amphitheater. Lydia broke off, and we looked up. A group of vaguely familiar-looking boys was jolting down the steps, a herd of pastel shorts and tank tops. They caught sight of us and faltered but didn’t stop. Soon they were pooling around the front of the stage, and a pair of them jogged forward.

“Hey there, ladies,” said one of them, dark-haired, with even eyebrows that winged out over hazel eyes. He was unreasonably tall and unreasonably good-looking, and he’d also said the phrase, “Hey there, ladies,” which obliterated any potential interest with the merciless speed of a plummeting guillotine blade.

“Are you leaving soon?” said the other boy, a redhead who was a more acceptable sort of tall, and whose words sounded so bored it was a miracle he’d mustered up the interest to open his mouth.

“Actually, we’re in the middle of a rehearsal,” Lydia said, the picture of neutrality.

“Like, just the two of you?” Tall looked at Taller and laughed. “Okay . . . uh, when’s your big important rehearsal gonna be over?”

Lydia’s lips pressed together almost imperceptibly. The Grandma Humphreys equivalent of taking out a shotgun. As my cheeks filled with heat, I remembered, suddenly, where I’d seen these guys: onstage, at their concerts. They were the New York Minuets, Kensington’s douchiest a cappella group. This was an impressive title to hold, since the Kensington a cappella scene was a shade or two less friendly than the mafia, and a shade or two

more exclusive. I wondered if the exclusive vibe was something they manufactured on purpose, or if they just fundamentally lacked the ability to befriend people who didn't spend all their time singing nonsense syllables.

"Don't you guys have music buildings to practice in?" I asked.

"Don't *you* have a theater to use?" said Taller, adjusting his perfect hair.

"Yes," I said. "You're standing in the middle of it."

Tall lifted his freckle-spattered hands. "Okay, calm down."

"I am calm," I said, thinking that there was no faster way to enrage a calm person than by telling them to calm down. These music guys had some nerve, anyway, trying to boot us out of a space specifically built for the School of Theater.

To be fair, near the back of their group was a kid I vaguely recognized from the theater school. Even though it was dominated by music kids, a cappella was technically extracurricular. Anyone in any discipline could audition for the half-dozen groups, and as a result, a cappella had become one of the few things that tied Kensington's five schools together (the others being the newspaper and a universal disdain for the administration). Even Visual Arts kids, who hardly ever stepped off the Northwest quad, could be spotted at a cappella concerts, begrudgingly jamming along to some remixed version of a pop song by Justine Gray or Sam Samuelson. The fall Sharpshooters concert was like our version of a Homecoming game—the guys' octet was our oldest group, and, if possible, even cultier than the rest of them.

Behind these two, the rest of the New York Minuets aimed questioning looks at me, murmuring to each other in an inaudible rumble. Tall glanced up at Taller, looking for guidance.

“Look,” Taller said to me, in a *clearly-you-don’t-understand-the-gravity-of-the-situation* sort of voice. “We have a competition we’re preparing for. So if you could just—”

“You mean the one in December?” Lydia said flatly. “Three months from now?”

Taller looked at her. He seemed to have lost the ability to speak. Lydia’s blue eyes were flinty beneath the blunt line of her bangs.

We’d gotten a bottomless pit’s worth of e-mails about the competition. Aural Fixation, an a cappella group made famous by competition-style reality TV, was visiting Kensington right before winter break. Since their latest lineup had a couple of Kensington alumni, they’d be picking one of our a cappella groups to open for them during the European leg of their international tour over winter break. This, hilariously, meant two straight weeks of sold-out stadiums in London and Rome and Madrid and Lisbon. For concerts that consisted of people pretending to be musical instruments. Unreal.

There was no logical reason for a cappella to have exploded like this. It was the geekiest thing in the world, filled with terrible pun names and obscenely technical singing. It’d been born out of barbershop quartets and doo-wop, for God’s sake. Its DNA was filled with strains of undiluted nerd.

Taller found his voice. “See? Even you’ve heard about it,” he said, dripping condescension.

Lydia and I traded a disbelieving look. Even us! Mere plebeians! “So,” he continued. “You get why we need to practice.”

“Right,” I said. “In this space, specifically. Because there isn’t an entire campus’s worth of space just on the other side of those steps.”

“Right,” he agreed, and flashed a brilliant smile. I narrowed my eyes at his perfect teeth.

Lydia and I stood in deadlocked silence across from Tall and Taller. For a minute, I was determined to stand there until the natural world eroded me to dust, but then my eyes fell to the other Minuets’ hopeful faces, and guilt crept into me. Maybe Tall and Taller weren’t the nicest human beings, but these other kids just wanted to get on with rehearsal. There *were* more campus spaces for two people than sixteen, and anyway, at this point, it seemed like the options were to back down or waste another half-hour testing out new ways to explain the words “go away.”

I sighed and relented. “Come on, Lydia. Let’s find somewhere else.”

There was a smugness to the way Taller said “Thanks” that made it sound distinctly like “I win.” Although, to be fair, his entire persona oozed “I win.” This kid was really leaning into the Kensington type. When people heard “Kensington-Blaine,” they envisioned an alarmingly specific person: He was a third-generation legacy from New England with great bone structure; he was a he, because the school hadn’t gone coed until 1985; he was white, with a name like Oliver or Henry or Phineus; and his trust fund was roughly the size of Iceland’s GDP. With Kensington’s aggressive diversity initiatives, though, the type was transforming, blurring out of boxes and categories by the year. They were a diminishing breed, the Olivers, Henries, and Phineuses (Phinei?).

As Lydia and I climbed out of the amphitheater, her hand was tight over the navy tote bag that hung on her shoulder, and I plucked hard at the patches of wear in my jeans. With every step,

I got angrier at myself for backing down. Why did it always end up like this? Why was I always the one to cave? Why did I feel guilty that we'd stood up for ourselves, even temporarily?

I tried not to hate the dark-haired boy down the steps, because anger didn't *do* anything, and besides, if I let myself hate him, it wouldn't entirely be for the way he'd acted. It would be for selfish reasons. All my failings were his successes: He could ask for what he wanted without feeling like an inconvenience. He could be totally sure of his own importance, not second-guessing a word out of his own mouth. That kid was handsome and rich and had a voice I remembered, a soaring tenor that was everything it should be. It's too simple to hate the people who have doorways where you have walls.



That night, in my room, I scrolled through the flood of back-to-school audition advertisements. The e-mails had slowed to a trickle and finally stopped over the weekend, and I'd been glad at the time, but now I imagined turning back the clock and trying for any of these, instead of throwing away my chance on the musical. I could have run sound or lights for one of the senior capstone projects. I could have auditioned for *Trazba*, an experimental two-person play inspired by 1950s science-fiction films, in which one of the people is pregnant and the other person plays the fetus, because I guess every other idea for a play was already taken.

The e-mail system refreshed, and the thin stripe of a new e-mail appeared at the top. The subject line read, "Audition Call." My heart leapt, my mind yelled, *FATE!* and my finger stabbed the clickpad.

The message loaded. My excitement died. A cappella *again*.

In a black-and-white photo, eight boys in sport coats and ties sprawled in bored-looking positions on the steps to the Arlington Hall of Music. Stone lions flanked the steps, prowling on the columns that guarded Arlington, carved muscle rippling beneath their alabaster skin. Calligraphy font across the photo read *The Sharpshooters*, and beneath, the audition notice said:

ONE SPOT HAS OPENED IN THE SHARPSHOOTERS,
KENSINGTON-BLAINE'S PREMIER ALL-MALE A CAPPELLA
OCTET. WE INVITE TENOR 1S OF ANY YEAR TO SIGN
UP FOR AN AUDITION SLOT USING THE FORM BELOW.

Below that, they had an honest-to-God coat of arms, which displayed a pair of crows peeking around a quartered shield. Each crow carried a corner of a banner in its beak, stretching the cloth out to display *VERBIS DEFECTIS MUSICA INCIPIT*. I forced back the urge to laugh.

To be fair, the Sharps had been around since the 1930s, so the crest and the Latin hadn't been these guys' idea. Besides, with the way the school treated them—basically, with the type of reverence usually reserved for religious figures—how could we expect them *not* to have egos the size of your average planet?

Something about the Sharps made people lose their minds. The all-girls' group, the Precautionary Measures, packed Arlington Hall for their concerts, but for some reason it wasn't quite the same. Our whole student body—girls and guys alike—fawned over the Sharps; they were a blank canvas that people could write their dreams onto, a blend between boy-band obsession and

artistic admiration. Even Michael had harbored a secret dream of joining the Sharps up until graduation, not that he'd ever had time to audition.

Maybe that was why the Minuets were so unpleasant. An inferiority complex. The thought pleased me a little more than it should have.

I scrolled back up and paused over the photo. The Sharps looked nothing alike, but something about them was identical. The crisp lines of their jackets, maybe, or the loose way they held their heads and hands and bodies. Or maybe just their expressions, which wore the thoughtless confidence that came with practice.

I would've bet all my worldly possessions that the Sharps would win that December competition, and just like that, they'd have a shot at fame. The envy in my mouth tasted hot and bitter. Liquid gold.

Then my eyes fell to the audition notice, to the words *TENOR 1*, and my hands went flat on the keyboard as an idea hit me like a thunderbolt. An idiotic, impossible idea.

"*Your range,*" echoed Reese's voice, as I straightened in my seat. "*It's just so deep.*"

It could never work. Of course not.

Could it?

The feeling of failure still itched across my skin, a brand I was desperate to claw away. *How hard will you work to get what you want?* demanded Reese's voice. I remembered that kid from this afternoon sneering at me, and now, eight impassive faces stared out from this audition notice, daring me, questioning if I had what it took: Could I be a Sharpshooter? Could I be hyper-confident, hyper-competent, all my self-consciousness forgotten?

For the sliver of a chance of performing across the sea, maybe I could.

This competition was three months out. Find my way into the Sharpshooters, stay under the radar for ninety measly days, make damn sure we won, and there was the springboard to my future. An international tour would be a shining star on my college apps—something not every other overachieving arts kid would have. It was downright depressing, the lengths it took to feel special when you wrote yourself out on paper. All As? Who cared? That was the standard here. Some shows, some activities? Big deal. How were you changing the world?

Sometimes, when I wasn't too busy, I wondered why we had to change the world so early.

I went for my wardrobe and yanked it open, eyeing myself in the full-length mirror. From my dresser, I grabbed a tissue and rubbed off my purple lipstick, my eyeliner, my blush. Cheap chemical remover stung the air. Barefaced again, back to monochrome tan, I flipped my hair up the back of my skull and over my forehead, the fraying tips hanging above my eyes.

Everyone told me I looked like my dad. Never my mom, who had a delicate nose and chin. I had Dad's prominent features and his stubborn mouth. But I'd inherited Mom's height, plus a spare inch that had come from God knows where. "American food," she'd said, shaking her head, when I'd growth-spurred past her at age fifteen.

I released my hair. As it fell halfway down my waist, I remembered the endless row of wigs in the costume shop. I could even picture the one I wanted—short, shaggy, black. We were supposed to sign them out, and for only three days at a time, but

if anyone ever confronted me, I could say I'd forgotten . . . innocent mistake, right?

I worked my dresser's top drawer, gummy with age, out of its slot and rummaged around for the finishing touch—a blunt-tipped pencil, worn down by use. I started filling in my eyebrows, shading the ends out with the tip, making my brows thick and serious.

I gathered my hair up and postured in the mirror, hooking one hand into the pockets of my jeans. Legs swiveled to shoulder-width apart. Tilting my head, I stuck my chin out.

"Hey," I said to myself, and again, deeper. "Hey. What's up?"

I was unrecognizable.

For the first time since Monday, I didn't hate the sound of my voice. I couldn't fix it, but I could use it. I'd solved the unsolvable problem, kept my answer and rewritten the question.

Two knocks came on my door, and I flinched. In the mirror, my shoulders buckled in. I shrank two sizes.

"Hey, lights out," called our prefect, Anabel, from beyond the door. Heart pattering, I flicked the switch, but my desk lamp still shed a remnant of buttery light. As I turned back toward the mirror in the dark, lifted my hair back up, and pulled my guy-stance back on, limb by cautious limb, I felt free and empty and new.

This had the potential to be the most embarrassing stunt in Kensington history, but I had nothing to lose except my dignity, and I'd lost so much of that in June, the prospect hardly fazed me. Besides, theater was all about risk. Risk wasn't scary. Insignificance was terrifying.

The light drew streaks down the thick lines of my arms. I rubbed one elbow, my throat tight. *Michael Jordan*, they'd taunted

me every other day in middle school—not so much the girls as the boys. *Incredible Hulk*. *Hey, Jordan, can you sell me some steroids? Whatever you're on, I want some*. Early growth spurts and a thick frame had gotten me so much shit back then. I'd come out of middle school thinking, that was it, I was done caring what anyone thought.

Of course, if I didn't care, I wouldn't still be trying to prove myself, would I?

I wouldn't still want to win.