

Dreamscapes of the Metaphysical

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Dreaming in Color

Evander's life was colorless. His walls had been painted a pale gray ever since he moved into his one-bedroom apartment. He only really liked to watch movies in black and white. He didn't own any blue jeans, only black, and all of his jackets and shirts were black and white, respectively, to match. His eyes were gray, and his neatly-cut hair was black. Even his drink of choice while sitting on his gray-speckled couch at the end of a long night or in a dimly-lit bar downtown— a gin Maraschino cocktail without the cherry— was void of color.

When he woke up drenched in sweat from a dream that had been full of color, then, he couldn't think about anything else. He vaguely remembered a field of green grass and a bright blue sky, and when he opened his eyes, his room still shrouded in pitch-black darkness, he frantically tried to remember every single detail. Evander scrambled for a notebook, sticky notes, even a napkin in the drawer of his black-painted nightstand, finding a thin black-ink ballpoint pen first, but when he couldn't find anything he could write on, he opted to write on his own arm. As quickly as a half-asleep Evander could, he turned on the lamp that sat on his nightstand. He pulled up the sleeve of his long-sleeved black-and-white plaid-patterned pajama shirt and, popping the cap off of his pen, he wrote the details of his dream down on the pale skin of his arm. Or he would have, but the pen wouldn't write.

“Damn it, damn it, damn it!” He tried shaking the pen, all the while trying to grasp onto the scenes that took place as he slept.

“Come on, come on...” Evander mumbled as he tapped the tip of the pen against the palm of his left hand, trying desperately to coax the ink from its thin plastic home. Finally, speckles of black ink spotted his skin, and, frantically, he started scribbling down what little he could now remember about what he had dreamt.

He sighed when he was finally able to put his pen back in his bedside drawer. Looking at what he had feverishly written down, in rushed chicken-scratch handwriting, he could make out the words: “field, flowers, sky, bright? red.”

He read and re-read these words, over and over again, until his eyes became blurry, so he turned the light off, closing his eyes once again and laying back down. He tried again to fall back into his normal, dreamless sleep, but there was something about this dream that was nagging at him. He knew there was something more to this dream than a field and a sky, something other than vague images that looked fuzzy when he tried to imagine them, but what were they?

The more Evander tried to think about the dream, the less he seemed to remember. Opening his eyes in frustration, he decided that it all stressed him out too much now to be able to fall back to sleep. Yanking on the lamp’s pull switch a little too hard, Evander grumbled about his “stupid dream, keeping him up at night,” and as he looked at the time on his silver analog alarm clock, he was even more upset to learn that it was three o’clock in the morning. He ran a hand over his face, making sure to shut off his seven-thirty alarm so it wouldn’t go off. He didn’t have work that day, thank god, so he could go back to sleep whenever he felt like he could later on. For now, though, he decided he would go grab coffee so he could try and forget this stupid, frustrating dream of his.

Not bothering to change out of his pajamas, he slipped on some white fur slippers and shrugged on a long black jacket, anticipating the bite of the cold he felt when he walked outside. Being the middle of the night, it was still rather dark out, the streets lit by the dim streetlights that stretched like giraffes above Evander’s head. He knew that there were no cafes or coffee shops that were open at this ungodly hour of the morning, but he knew that there was a 7-Eleven that was only a few blocks away from his apartment complex. He figured, since the 7-Eleven

nearest to him was a gas station, it was probably open twenty-four seven, and, more importantly, he figured it would have coffee in some shape or form.

It didn't take him long to get there— all he had to do was walk the sidewalk for a block or so, cross the empty street, and go about another block or so before reaching the small gas station store, all the while glancing down at the notes he had left himself on his arm. He thought that maybe the cold would have snapped him out of thinking about what he knew— or, more importantly, didn't know— about the dream he'd had, but with the way the brisk winds nipped at his nose and the tips of his fingers, he needed a distraction. The breezy outdoor weather reminded him of the grass in his dream a little, each earthy green strand blowing gently together in the field he'd stood in, but he already knew about the field, so it didn't help him much.

Evander was glad when he finally made it to the 7-Eleven. When he opened the door, he could hear the bell above it ring, signaling to the cashier that there was a customer entering the store. He was appreciative of the warmth that touched his nose and hands when he entered, but was surprised by how bright the fluorescent lights on the ceiling were. Squinting for a second as the door closed behind him, an image flashed through his mind: there was the green field that he remembered, the sky blue above it, but the lights had triggered the depiction of the sun shining a bright, almost blinding beam of light across the field. He closed his eyes, trying to remember more, his heart racing at the mere thought of finally piecing this dream together, remembering the grass, the sky, the light, and then...

“Hi, welcome in,” the tired voice of the cashier cut through Evander's thoughts, and even though he frantically tried to hold onto that little piece of remembrance that he'd gotten from the lights, it was no use.

The dream was gone again.

“Shit,” Evander muttered when he realized he couldn’t make himself remember any more. Then, realizing how odd he must look to the cashier just standing there squeezing his eyes shut right in front of the door, he made his way over to the coffee counter.

The 7-Eleven’s coffee machine had more mediocre, sugar-packed options than Evander could handle looking at at once, so he started scanning the options one at a time, partially distracted by thoughts of what he’d dreamt. “White chocolate... caramel... vanilla... hazelnut...” he muttered to himself as he scrolled through the digital buttons, picking up a large styrofoam cup, brightly painted with the store’s logo. Absentmindedly deciding on the vanilla-flavored coffee, he slid his cup under the machine’s nozzle and pressed the button, waiting for the cup to fill.

The cup was only about halfway full, however, when a sudden blow to his right shoulder knocked the cup from his hands, spilling the dark coffee in a stream across the white speckled counters. Before he could even turn around, he heard a feminine voice start apologizing to him, telling him they’d help him clean up that mess, but when he could finally see who he was talking to, the apologies suddenly ceased. Standing in front of Evander was a woman with gold hoop earrings, wearing rings with all sorts of colored gems embedded in the tops, a long blue dress, blonde hair in loose curls around her face, and wide green eyes staring straight at him.

“Are you okay?” Evander asked her warily, and then took a step back from her when he noticed her hands trembling. *She must be on drugs or something*, he thought, prepared to make a break for it or call the police or something, until she said, in a voice just as shaky as her hands, “You have to listen... your prophecy...”

Evander couldn't do anything but stare at her in confusion. "My... prophecy?" he asked, still not taking his eyes off of her in case she tried to attack him or something. He had been on edge all night, and this interaction wasn't making him feel any better.

"Your— your dream, a prophecy, you have to listen." The woman looked like she was about to burst into tears.

Evander's heart dropped. "How... how did you...?" he asked, not even knowing how to form words anymore, too shocked to make a sentence, but before he could ask her what she meant, or how she even knew about his dream in the first place, she all but pushed past him, quickly, headed towards the door.

"Wait!" Evander yelled after her, panicked and nearly sprinting to catch up with her, "How did you know? And what prophecy?"

He thought he'd be able to reach her, or at least find her outside the store, but when he threw the door open, ringing the bell once more, it was like she had vanished into the night air.

He threw his head back in frustration, both of his palms pressing against his eyes to try and keep hot, angry tears from reaching his eyes. "Fuck!" he smacked a palm in the middle of his forehead, and then, when he noticed the cashier staring at him, looking scared, he brought his hands down and quickly said, "sorry!"

Going back to his spilled coffee, some thin white paper napkins in hand, muttering more curse words and confusions under his breath, he picked the cup up off the counter, but when he saw the line of coffee spread across the counter, he gasped. Another piece of his dream quickly passed through his mind— a dark stream splitting the green field in half.

Before the image left him, he hurriedly checked his pockets for a pen with the hand that wasn't full of napkins, and found a thick-tipped black Sharpie in the front left pocket of his

jacket. Why it was there, he didn't remember, but he also didn't care. He frantically pulled one of the napkins out of his other hand, then, remembering where he'd written everything else he could remember, he pulled up his sleeves and added "river?" in the empty space on his arm, but now he couldn't remember if it was actually a river at all. It could have been a crack in the ground, or a line in the center of his dream, but a river seemed like a good bet.

He also, not wanting the details from before to slip his mind either, added the words "light" and "prophecy," having to squeeze the last part of the word "prophecy" onto the back of his hand, leaving his left arm tattooed in various snippets of a dream he couldn't remember.

After filling up his new large coffee cup and making sure to pop a plastic lid on the top, he brought it up to the register, hoping he had remembered to bring a credit card or something. The cashier typed something into their computer, then told Evander, "that'll be three ninety-five please."

Evander fished around in his jacket pockets for a minute, nearly cursing himself again for being so aloof and distracted before he left his apartment, but he finally found a crumpled five dollar bill at the bottom of a lower pocket of his jacket and handed it to the cashier.

The cashier looked annoyed at the state of the bill, but they uncrumpled the bill and pressed a couple more buttons on their computer screen. Then there was a "ding!" as the register's drawer popped out with a surprising amount of force, and it took Evander back into the world of his dream, where, above the supposed dark river, two objects moved around something else, maybe a tree, but the other two things made some sort of strange noise. It was similar to the one the register made, the same high pitch, but Evander couldn't place it. He took out the Sharpie again and, seeing that there was no room on his left arm anymore, moved the pen to his other hand. In big, sloppy left-handwriting, he had written "sound," "two," and "center."

The cashier raised their eyebrows at him, probably wondering what was going on, and then they rolled their eyes and handed back the change. They counted it out as they handed it to Evander— one-o-five— and then told him to “have a good one” as they handed him back his coffee.

On his way out, Evander could hear the cashier mutter something along the lines of “man, I always get crackheads when I work these fucking shifts.”

Evander knew how crazy he must have sounded back at the 7-Eleven, but that didn’t stop him from rolling his eyes at the cashier’s comment nonetheless.

Almost as soon as the doors to the 7-Eleven shut behind him, it started to rain, a light drizzle leaving spots on the pavement in front of him. It wasn’t a particularly heavy rain— not yet, anyways— but it was still enough to be annoying to an already-frustrated Evander, who, in his reckless hurry to get any kinds of clothes on and leave his apartment, hadn’t checked the weather and forgot a raincoat.

“I could have at least brought an umbrella,” he grumbled to himself, pulling the collar of his jacket over his head with his left hand and holding his coffee with his right. While his jacket was raised, the sleeve of the jacket fell down over his left arm, and Evander could see everything he had written throughout the night, vaguely detailing the dream that had pestered his mind for well over an hour now. He looked at these key words all together, and tried one last time to think of the dream. He wasn’t looking at the street, but he had walked this path so many times now that he knew it like the back of his hand, and he therefore knew where the crosswalk was to get back to his apartment. Stepping off of the sidewalk and into the quiet street, he read and re-read the list a couple of times, even closing his eyes to try and visualize the parts of the dream that he was missing.

Field Flowers Sky Bright?

Red River Light Prophecy

Sound Two Center

He scanned the words that he had both seen so many times that night that they held no meaning anymore, but at the same time held so much more meaning than he could have ever imagined a few simple words could, all because of this bright, striking dream he'd had. Maybe it didn't matter that he didn't know what the dream really entailed— all of the set-in-stone details, what that lady meant by “prophecy,” why he'd had it in the first place, or what it meant— but what really mattered was that it had stirred something inside of him, and had begun to change him in a way he never thought was possible for his colorless, mundane life.

Thinking of the seven or eight different colors of Slurpee that spun in the machines on the next wall over from the coffee machines, and the large clear cups that would only have been half the price of the coffee he'd bought, Evander thought that maybe he could have branched out and bought a double-extra-large Slurpee cup and filled it with every flavor available. It would have tasted like shit— Coca-Cola mixed in with cherry and blue raspberry, pina colada with blueberry lemonade and blood orange with Mountain Dew, hell even the Vitamin Water flavor— but it could have kept him awake more than this second-rate vanilla coffee was. A rainbow Slurpee could have at least inspired more thoughts about his dream. Going for a run could have been an option to wake up, or distract, or help him concentrate, too, if he wasn't so stuck in his routine. His goddamned, colorless routine. He could have at least gotten a better flavor of coffee. Maybe even pumpkin spice.

He brought his other hand up to take the first sip of his black-and-white coffee, realizing for the first time that he had stopped moving, now just standing in the middle of the street. The

jacket pulled over his head had been obstructing his view of the street, and he had been so caught up in thinking about the details of his dream that he had forgotten where he'd chosen to stand. He took another step, but stopped again when he thought he heard someone on the street, and if it could be something else that could trigger another portion of his dream, he had to know what was there.

He brought his jacket down just a little bit, just to look at the road, just to take a glance and then move along back home, but in the split second that it took him to do this, he realized that the darkness of the streets, the deep blue that he thought would be consistent this late at night, had been replaced by a bright yellow light. Making eye contact with the two bright bulbs of a car he couldn't see before, Evander barely even had time to scream before the day that had brought color into his life ended in black once more.

Evander is standing in a vast, bright-green field. It's empty, but above it, a blue, cloudless sky rules over the land. Wind blows through the blades of long, unkempt grass in the field, giving movement to an otherwise silent setting. Everything seems normal, for where it is, and Evander feels somewhat at peace, feeling the wind blow softly on his skin, small nips of cold air brushing against his hair. He doesn't think to ask himself why he's here; he just is. Then Evander feels a second cool feeling against his skin, appearing little by little, and when he runs his thumb against the skin of his upturned palm, he can feel that it's wet, and when he looks up into the once-blue sky, it's now black with clouds, rain falling onto him from above.

Suddenly, a bright flash of light, something he assumes is lightning, spreads across the sky, split-second, jarring him from his peaceful state. He closes his eyes tightly, the light too bright to look at for as long as it's in the sky, but just as quickly, the light is gone, replaced with

the semi-darkness of the midday rain. As he opens his eyes, Evander notices that the scene is different: in front of him, instead of the seemingly-endless green field and the nice, calm blue sky, something had appeared. In the center of the field now sits a coppery-golden pillar, standing around eight feet tall, tall enough to make Evander look upwards towards the top of this long, Greek, sudden thing. Stretching from the base of the pillar, creating a sort of path leading to the pillar from underneath Evander's feet, is a group of maroon flowers, although Evander thinks that it could be a kind of deeper, darker red color than maroon. He can't quite place the color, but many people could describe it as "blood-red." The flowers aren't quite roses— the petals were much shorter and more bunched together, and there were no thorns on the stems— and the closest thing Evander could think of to identify the flower is "carnations." He doesn't know for sure, though. He doesn't know much about flowers, or about anything, really.

Evander's mind feels hazy. He can't quite place a lot of things here. Why does he need labels at all, here? Why can't he just not know? Normally this kind of not knowing would bring him anxiety; instead, this confuses him, but this kind of not knowing brings some of the peace back to his body, similar to the beginning. Of what? He doesn't know, and now he likes it that way.

His surroundings stealing the peace once again, a sharp, high-pitched sound starts ripping through the air, causing Evander to fall to his knees, his hands shoved over his ears, desperate to soften or dampen the noise, anything to help stop his ears from bleeding. He looks up, his ears ringing with the constant, repetitive sound, trying to find what's making these sounds, hoping he can beg whoever it is to stop, please, just stop, but when he looks up towards the pillar, there are two birds, one a bright, almost-glowing red and one a sudden, stark color of blue, both of their beaks opening and closing their beaks in time with the sounds, deafening him

in unison. He wants to try to ask the birds to stop, even considering the language barrier between himself and birds, but it is as if just looking upon the birds brings him the pain that he has been in tenfold. He's sweating now, and he doubles over, throwing up in front of himself, in front of the pillar, in front of the birds. What kind of hell-birds are these, he asks himself desperately, but he can barely hear his own inner voice anymore over the sound

He's in pain, his head is spinning, he feels nauseous, sick to his stomach, it feels like his bones are snapping underneath his skin, within his burning flesh, and he tries to scream, scream out in pain and in agony and for help, from who he doesn't know, he doesn't even know if there's anyone around him, anyone in this whole world, who can help him and he can't scream, the air rips from his lungs and his throat hurts, everything hurts, but he just can't seem to get any sound out and he's panicked and frantic and writhing on the floor and he doesn't know he doesn't know he just doesn't know what to do or why this is happening to him and he tries one last time to scream and just as he looks up to try to scream he sees the two birds, each of their sharp, knifelike beaks headed straight for each of his eyes, and he tries to scramble back, he tries to get away, to save himself, he should have known it was a mistake to feel at peace in a place that was so unknown, and he knows now that he cannot escape the birds and curses himself in agony from being so stupid to stay here and feel at peace, and the birds reach him and tear through his eyelids and...

And then it all stops, and everything is black.

The not-so-green vastness of the asphalt streets mixed with the not-so-kind darkness of the sky surround Evander's lifeless body.

The deep-red flowers of Evander's blood spill across the street from the many places he's been opened up.

The red-and-blue of the lights on top of the cars of the police officers are the only things illuminating the dark, and even darker, streets, save for the streetlights dimly lighting where people will be walking in just a few hours, a few hours after Evander's body will be off the street and in a body bag and in the morgue of the local police station, and the still-on, still-blindingly-bright headlights of the coppery-golden car illuminating his body in the street.

The sharp, startling, high-pitched sound of an ambulance siren calls out in the distance, getting closer and closer to the scene before us, headed valiantly to try and save the unsavable, mixing with the grieving wails of the driver, who did not know Evander except in death.

The words he had written across his arms are smudges from the rain, and from the impact of the car, but Evander knows the contents of his dream, now.

He didn't even have a chance to call out, red mixing with the only color that was in his life before, and it's all fallen into blackness.

Theo's Dreams

Theo stood on a porch, the paint on the dark, wooden door was peeling, the side boards rotting. She didn't like the looks of this place.

Her hand reached towards the handle of the door, although she couldn't place why. It was as if she was being called to enter the house, whether by her own will, or by the will of her dream. Before she could really give herself a chance to think, the door opened in front of her. She didn't remember opening the door herself, but she shrugged and walked— no, walking seemed too voluntary... floated-- she floated through the doorway.

Just through the door, the house split three ways: on her left was one disheveled door, and it was open, leading into a bedroom, where a small bed, barely large enough for one, was covered with an ugly brown comforter. Theo shuddered at the thought of someone sleeping here. It looked awful and uncomfortable. There was also a nightstand, looking like someone had fished it out of a dumpster with a book of some sort underneath one of the legs to make them even, but it was still a little slanted where it sat, on top of which was a yellowed lamp with a dim light inside and a half-drunk glass of water. On the far wall was a closet, and while Theo couldn't quite catch what was in it, she saw a salmon-colored button-down shirt peeking out from the edge of the opening.

On her right was an open wall that connected the entryway to a room with a smaller thick wooden table and two matching chairs. Covering most of that wall was a blackout curtain, giving the dining area little to no light. Because of this lack of lighting, She looked away from that dim-lit room, facing now towards the center of the house.

She stepped into a hallway, strangely long considering how small the house is. The closer she moved towards the door, the more uneasy she became, another rock being added to her

stomach with every step, making it sink further and further. Despite wanting to run, she found herself about a foot away from the door, unable to move of her own free will.

All of the sudden, she heard a loud, hard sound coming from the doorway in front of her. She did not want to go down to wherever-the-fuck in the dark, and yet she found herself taking a few more steps forward.

“Damn it,” she cursed quietly as she got closer and closer to the mouth of the doorway, the darkness swallowing her as she floated over the threshold and into the blackness.

And then she stopped moving, and, for just a moment, all was silent.

Until the screams started.

“Let me out of here!” Theo heard a sharp, shrill, terrified younger woman’s voice from inside the darkness, “Let me the fuck out!”

The voice was enough to give her nightmares, but the second voice, a man’s harsh voice, more frightening, more dangerous than the woman’s, was the one that gave her chills and made her feel like she was going to puke right then and there, into the darkness: “Shut up! Bitch!” This was followed by what sounded like one person being slapped by the other.

Theo tried to turn, tried to run away, out of this house forever, but she couldn’t tell where the door was in the pitch-black void she was in. It felt like the darkness was closing in around her, almost pressing against her, and the woman in the darkness with her screamed as if she was being tortured, and Theo could feel tears running down her face and that feeling of overwhelm taking over her and...

“Theodora! Breakfast is ready!”

Theo woke up to the sound of her mother's voice calling her name. She looked around quickly, her body shaking and sweating from that all-too-real nightmare she had, and once she had made sure she was in her room and not that strange house she thought she was in, calming herself down enough to know that her dream wasn't real, she called back to her mom, "It's Theo!"

She hated being called by her full name. *Theodora* always sounded too much like she was some rich, pompous lady in the Victorian era, expected to wear big poofy dresses and marry a man as soon as her age permitted it and have children and die. Being sixteen, Theo could have been married to some thirty-something-year-old man if she lived in 1800's England, but she didn't. Instead, she lived in 21st-century United States, in Michigan, and she was dragging herself out of bed to get dressed and eat breakfast.

"Fuck, that dream was messed up," Theo muttered to herself, checking the time on her phone: 9:00 a.m. She never understood why her mother had to get the family up and going this early on a weekend. It was a Saturday, for god's sake, and she'd had school all week. Why didn't her mother understand that she needed the extra sleep so she didn't feel dead on Monday morning?

She dragged herself to the bathroom connected to her green-painted bedroom— which she hated, she wished the walls were black or purple, or even a blood-red color, anything that matched her aesthetic better than a bright, cheerful grassy green— Theo brushed her teeth, got dressed, and put her smudged eyeliner and dark lipstick on, rolling her eyes as she ran a hand through her short, dyed-purple hair and headed towards the kitchen, where breakfast— and her mom— were waiting for her.

“Jesus, Theodora,” her mother said as soon as Theo walked into the kitchen– not even a “good morning,” for Christ’s sake– “this is a respectable family. Why do you insist on looking like a delinquent?”

“It’s Theo,” Theo mumbled, sitting down in one of the eight chairs at their big kitchen table. Why did they have so many chairs? Theo never had anybody over. Her mom would hate the people she was friends with from the rebellious colors of their hair to the black or ripped clothing to the many piercings in each of their faces, and the music they advertised on their tee shirts. Given her mother didn’t even like *her*, she couldn’t imagine her mother liking anyone she associated with. Only her parents ever had people over, invited to insufferable dinner events where she would get judgemental looks from the couples who came over, and the ever-indifferent look she always saw on her father’s face that she would hide in her room, or go out to hang out with her own friends.

Her mother brought a plate with eggs, a half of a bagel with cream cheese, and some strawberries, set up like breakfast from a movie, and a clear glass cup of bright orange juice. She set these things in front of Theo with a sigh. Preparing her child breakfast was the last thing she would ever want to do.

“You see?” her mother sighed, running an exasperated hand over her face, “You don’t even appreciate the name your dad and I gave you.”

“I don’t not appreciate it, *Mom*, I just made it shorter.”

“No, you butchered it. You turned it into something it’s not. We gave you such a nice, pretty girl’s name, and now you’re using a boy’s name.”

“It’s not a boy’s name! Anyone can go by any name they want! Why do names even matter? It just suits me better than Theodora, but you want me to be who you envision Theodora to be, not Theo, right?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know what it means. It means you hate that I cut my hair short, and that I dyed it purple. You hate that I wear jeans instead of dresses, and that they’re not the modest blue jeans you wish I wore. You hate my friends, and the music I listen to, and how loud I am, and how defiant. You hate me. You wish I was the opposite of who I am.”

Her mother sighed again. “What did I do wrong in raising you?”

Theo stood up. “What did Grandma do wrong in raising *you* to hate your own child?”

“That’s enough, Theo,” her mother’s voice was dangerously quiet, and Theo sighed. She knew she was right, but she also knew that the more she tried to argue, the shittier she would feel, so she decided to call it quits for now.

“Whatever, Mom. Thanks for breakfast, I guess.”

She decided to take her breakfast into the living room, on the floor in front of the television, where her father sat in a blue leather reclining chair, seemingly oblivious to what was occurring in the next room. At least in front of the TV she wouldn’t have to talk to anyone.

Whatever was on would be distraction enough for all three of them.

Her father had been watching the news. She wasn’t really paying attention to the contents of the news— the news normally made her too angry, with the whole world hating women and minorities and the environment, and it was too hard for her to watch that happen and feel helpless and shitty about it, until there was a segment about a kidnapped girl. Her photo was displayed on the screen, a girl around Theo’s age, with long, waving blonde hair that fell down

past her shoulders and bright, happy blue eyes. Her smile was wide and genuine, her attitude matching the yellow flowers on her light green dress, the same color Theo wished her room wasn't. Theo became uneasy looking at it once she started really listening to what the newscasters were saying about this girl.

“...a photo of the sixteen-year-old girl, Alice Norah White, wearing what she was last seen in, to help people keep an eye out for the missing girl. Sources say that she was last seen walking home from Williams High School, but that she never made it back home.”

Now that she was starting to think about it, that name, or maybe that face, started to look somewhat familiar. Their mutual high school was big enough so Theo didn't know her, but she knew of her. *Maybe I have a class with her*, Theo thought, but she wouldn't know for sure, because she too often spaced out, or wrote or drew something else in her notebooks, occasionally raising her hand to make it look like she was participating but otherwise paying no attention.

“Be glad I drive you to school, Theodora,” her mother said, interrupting her thoughts once again as she sat on the couch with her own breakfast, “or you could end up on the news, just like this poor girl.”

“Is this the kind of child you want me to be?” Theo asked her mom sarcastically, “The nice, normal, flowered-dress-wearing sweet girl who gets kidnapped off the street and goes missing?”

“Of course I don't—” her mother snapped, but Theo just turned her attention back to the news.

“Local police say they believe that Ms. White has been kidnapped, but they are yet to find any leads on possible suspects of the kidnapper. Updates on Ms. White to come, and more news, up next.”

The news station switched to commercials that were tone-deaf to the missing-ness of her classmate. Her stomach hurt as she put her partially-eaten plate of breakfast down on the floor beside her, unable to eat anything else. She could feel her mom's icy glare from behind her, probably thinking about how ungrateful her daughter was for wasting the food she had spent time cooking for her, and for shortening her name to Theo. She didn't dare turn around, but she heard someone click a button on the remote, turning off the TV.

Glancing behind her, she could see her mother, still holding the remote, standing above her dad's reclining chair, her dad looking up at her mom in annoyance. "Hey," he said, trying to grab the remote back, "I was trying to watch that!"

Her mother gave them both a look. Theo knew what it meant almost immediately. Sometimes, when her mother wanted control over something, she would force her family on day trips. That way, Theo couldn't be with her friends, or get into whatever trouble her mom thought she got into.

"We're going on a picnic, at the park a little ways away," her mother decided, ignoring his grabs towards the remote by holding it out of his reach.

Theo's dad sighed, unable to reach the remote, and resigned to the newly-planned activity. "There goes my lazy Saturday..." he grumbled, gently enough that his wife couldn't hear.

"Mom, I have homework to do, and I already have plans for later, my friends--"

"You don't have plans anymore," her mom said in response. "After hearing about that poor girl, I've decided that we need to spend more time together, as a family."

Theo rolled her eyes. "Oh, *you* 've decided. You would decide my whole life if you could. I'm not going."

“Bring your homework to do in the car, or do it later. You *are* coming, and we are going to have fun as a family.”

“You can’t make me,” Theo started to say, but she saw her mother’s eyes grow dark, and changed her mind. That look scared her. She had never hurt Theo, not physically, but she was always afraid of the possibility. God, Theo needed to go to therapy, but until her mother was no longer her legal guardian, when she turned eighteen and graduated high school, she was just going to have to live with her mother’s manipulations.

“You are coming on this picnic. End of discussion.”

Theo swallowed back a mixture of anger and fear that was building in her throat. “Fine,” she said, “I’m going to take a nap. When are we leaving?”

Her mother’s cold gaze turned to a false smile. “We’re leaving at noon, so be sure to be up by 11:30 so you can get whatever you need to bring ready to go.”

“Okay, Mom,” Theo said emotionlessly, bringing her plate from breakfast into the kitchen and then making her way to her room. She closed the door quietly, although what she really wanted to do was slam the door as hard as she could behind her. Nobody ever asked her what she wanted, and she didn’t think they cared, anyways. They wanted her to be just like perfect Alice, even though Alice was gone. Maybe they wanted her gone, too.

She rolled her eyes and flopped onto her bed. She wanted to hit something, to punch the wall or scream into her pillow, but she also just wanted to sleep, to be anywhere but there, even in that creepy house she had dreamt of the night before, which is what her mind found as she entered a restless sleep.

Just as she had wished, Theo was standing at the door of the rickety wooden house from before once again, but this time, the dark wooden door hung open for her, as if it was still ajar from the last time she was inside the house. A slight breeze followed her here.

She felt a little braver this time around— maybe it was the open door inviting her in, maybe it was the slight familiarity of the house now that she'd been inside— and this time she stepped into the house of her own will. She looked left into the bedroom, and she looked right into the dining room area, and instead of heading straight towards the dark attic door, she walked into the kitchen where the photographs were spread out on the table.

The yellowing wallpaper of the kitchen where she stood was peeling off of the wall. There were dishes piled in the sink, and mold was starting to grow on some of the plates and pans towards the bottom of the sink. A fly licked old milk from a bowl on the top of the pile of dishes. Every time she looked closely at this house, it seemed, she felt sicker and sicker, unable to even imagine who would be able to live there. She knew she could never live in a home in such a state of disrepair. Even her room, which could get a little chaotic at times, could get a little messy, but it never got dirty, or to the point of flies or mold.

She didn't want to get any closer to the kitchen area, out of fear that she would be able to smell the dishes she saw. She wanted to see the photos, and she didn't think she could stand being in the room with the smell of the dish pile.

She turned away from the dishes to survey the stacks of photos on the table: she saw one of a girl in a blue jean jacket and short brown hair, another of a young girl in a tank top and sunglasses, and a third of a girl with long black hair...

Theo had to pause. She recognized the girl with the black hair immediately. It was her friends, Lola, who was a grade above her. She again felt sick, but this time for a different uneasy

reason, as she continued to look at the photos from the table. Brushing some of the photos at the top of the pile away, she saw more photos of high-school girls, some Theo knew, and some she didn't. There were too many to count, and her head felt dizzy looking at them, until two of them made her stop cold in her movements.

Towards the back of the table was Alice White's photo from the news, the one with her long blonde hair and her innocent grassy-green dress with the little yellow flowers scattered around it, but that wasn't the most terrifying part. Right beside Alice's photo, staring back at her oh-so-familiarly, was her yearbook photo from last year.

Theo felt a cold sweat start to bead on her skin as she held both photos in her hand, her hands now starting to shake. How the fuck did her photo end up in this pile on a stranger's table?

SVomit rose in her mouth, but she forced it back down her throat as she heard the creak of a door, and heavy footsteps walking closer in her direction. Theo froze, trying not to make a sound, holding her breath, and walked towards the back of the table, ducking behind it, hoping that the darkness shrouding the room would save her from being seen.

The footsteps didn't enter the kitchen area at all. Instead, Theo heard them fade out, and she heard a second door close. Her heart was pounding, and she didn't leave from behind the table for a while after the footsteps fade away, but once she was sure that whoever the menacing figure was was gone, she slowly stood up, glancing around to make sure no one was present.

Looking down at her still-shaking hands, she realized that she was still clutching the two pictures of herself and Alice, and she put her other hand over her mouth to keep herself from audibly sobbing. What the fuck was going on?

She dropped both of the photographs onto the floor where she stood, the papers barely making a sound as they fluttered to the dirt-and-whatever-else-stained tiled floor, and she immediately wanted to get out of the kitchen. She felt gross just being in that room, and she had to get out before her skin crawled off of her flesh.

Trying not to gag on her tears, or the stench of the dishes that finally made its way over to her nostrils, she ran out into the hallway, facing the closed door to the dark basement space. When she got out into the hallway, she felt like she had been suffocated, and that she was still trying to gasp for air. Her chest felt tight, like she couldn't breathe, and there was air and tears and bile all stuck in her throat at the same time. Finally, after what felt like hours of sitting in the middle of this terrifying stranger's house and dying, she threw up in the middle of the floor.

This purge made her feel a little better, but she knew that that was not going to last very long, so she sprinted towards the door she thought would lead her outside, into the fresh air and out of the house. Instead, it was pitch-black, and when she tried to feel for a doorknob, it was like the door had disappeared behind her. What she could find, though, was a light switch, so, in her panic, Theo switched the light on.

She immediately wished she hadn't.

She didn't see anything abnormal at first— it looked like a regular almost-empty basement, with some boxes of stuff the owner of the home didn't want to get rid of shoved into corners, floors made of slightly cracked concrete, a small leak here or there. But the thing that made Theo recoil in horror was the girl she saw, handcuffed to a pipe on the basement wall directly across from her. She was skinny, her skin bruised, her hair tangled and matted in the places where it stuck to the blood that caked certain parts of her light-blonde head. Her dress was torn and stained with red, and when she looked up at Theo, first with fear and disgust and

then with tears of relief and hope, her blue eyes meeting Theo's own green ones, she knew who this girl was right away.

"A-Alice?" Theo was barely able to squeak out the question before stumbling back on the stairs, unable to keep her eyes off of the girl but still wanting to get out of there before she ended up like Alice, chained to a pipe in someone's basement.

"Theo?" Alice asked in response, and her voice sounded defeated, as if any semblance of a happy high school junior had been forced out of her. It made Theo want to cry.

The lightbulb hanging from the ceiling flickered, making the room dark for a split-second more, and Theo screamed. She could see the door again, but as soon as she turned around, frantically, to reach towards it, to try to escape with her life, Alice spoke once again from behind her. "Theo, please. Wait." She sounded desperate, as if her throat had already become raw from yelling and screaming for help. Theo thought of what had been on the news earlier that day, and she turned around.

"I- I can't be here-" she stuttered, feeling the contents of her stomach rise in her throat once again, but she stopped herself this time.

"Please," Alice begged, "Please stay. I don't think you're really here."

Theo didn't say anything. How could she not be there?

"I- I'm not in pain. I'm always in pain when I wake up. I think... I think I'm dreaming, and if you're real, if you can talk to me, then I think you're dreaming, too."

Theo looked at her in confusion, then, slowly, started to stand up, using the railing of the basement stairs for support. She patted her own body first to make sure she was really there like she thought she was, and it felt real. This couldn't be a dream. How was she speaking to another real, actual person in a dream?

She also remembered, though, a hazy dream she'd had... at least, she thought it had been a dream, she wasn't quite sure, where she had been in this house. Maybe it had even been Alice's screams she had heard before her dream had ended.

"Maybe I am in a dream, but if I'm in a dream, where are you?"

"I think, somehow, we connected in our dreams, so I am really talking to you, but in our subconscious states of sleep. And I— I don't know where I am. I need you to help me."

"But I— I don't know—"

"Please, just listen to me," Alice was almost begging her to stay, to listen, just for a little longer; her voice choking up with tears, "I— I don't know where I am, but if you're able to be down here you must be able to go to other places in the house."

Theo nodded. Alice's voice sounded rushed, and Theo didn't want to interrupt her more than she already had with details of the house.

"Have... have you seen anyone? While you've been here?" Alice asked, and she sounded quieter, as if whispering any louder would draw attention to whoever was holding her captive.

"No."

Alice sighed, but she shook her head, as if she was coming up with another plan to replace her old, foiled one. "Okay. Here's what I need you to do. Quickly."

Theo's breaths quickened.

"Listen. I need you to find out where we are— where I'm being held."

"How do I—?"

"Listen!" Alice snapped, and her eyes were steady. She was serious, and Theo shut up and listened. "Once you figure out where we are, I need you to call the police and get me out of here."

“Call the police?” Theo asked. “But they would never believe me if I told them–”

“Theo,” Alice cut her off. “I need you. Please. He’ll kill me.”

Theo took a deep breath, and instead of asking more questions, or doubting herself, she just nodded. “Alice,” she said, “I’m going to get you out of here.”

With that, Theo turned towards the door, but there was no door out of the basement. Behind her she could hear Alice’s screams and a man’s voice yelling at her, and as the light flickered once, twice, and a third time, there was the sound of breaking glass, and everything turned black.

Theo gasped as she awoke in her own bed again, but this time, instead of waving the thoughts off as just a dream, her heart was pounding, and she was sweating as if she had just come from that house.

She wanted to go back to sleep– no, she *needed* to go back to sleep– so she could figure out where the fuck Alice was being held. As she started to become more awake, she could hear the sound of her phone’s alarm going off, and when she looked at the time, she realized that it was fifteen minutes past when she was supposed to have woken up. She only had fifteen minutes until her family picnic bullshit.

“Shit.” Panic started to set in when the extent of her situation dawned on her. She had to get back to sleep, somehow, but her parents were making her go on this dumb picnic. What was she supposed to do, wait for hours until she fell asleep again? She figured she could just take a nap in the car, but after just having taken a nap, she was no longer tired. She tried to think of ways she could go back to sleep that would only take her fifteen minutes– make that fourteen, now– before she’d be able to sleep again.

Closing her eyes and fidgeting with the hem of her blanket, Theo thought that some of her parents' nighttime tea would help, but she didn't like tea, and that would raise suspicions. She thought that maybe she could just pretend to be sick, but seeing as she didn't have a fever, and that she had argued with her mom against going on this stupid trip anyways, she concluded that her parents would see right through her and make her go anyway. They'd also run out of NyQuil last cold-and-flu season.

In a momentary stroke of genius, she remembered that every time they traveled overnight somewhere, her mom would bring melatonin gummies, and since they weren't staying anywhere overnight this time, the melatonin gummies would probably be somewhere in her parent's room, or their bathroom. Genius.

"Theodora, are you ready to go yet?" she could hear her mother yell from the kitchen. She would have to be quick.

"Almost!" she yelled back, and then, making sure both of her parents were in the kitchen and not in the bathroom or their bedroom, she slipped across the hallway and into her parents' bedroom.

The room felt unfamiliar to her. When she was very little, she would run into this room when she had nightmares and throw the light on, revealing the same soft blue comforter and China-patterned pillow cases, but she hadn't relied on her parents' comfort in a long time. Theo guessed that the melatonin must be in one of the bedside drawers.

Trying to be as quiet as she could, she opened the drawer on the leftmost nightstand, but all that was there was a pair of reading glasses and a small bottle of ibuprofen. Theo sighed. This must be her dad's side of the bed. She quickly moved towards the other side of the bed, sliding the drawer open, and as she dug around in the drawer full of things like hair ties, small papers,

pens, and other little trinkets, she finally found a container in the back of the drawer, and when she pulled it out, she saw that the blue label scattered with stars did, in fact, read “Melatonin Gummies: 2.5 mg.”

Theo wasn't sure what the dosage was, or how long it would take them to work– she didn't have time to read the bottle– so she just guessed, screwing the cap off and taking out three of the fruit-shaped gummies. She shoved the gummies into her mouth, and she put the bottle into her backpack, along with the homework she had to do, so she could look at it more closely later.

She nearly ran out the door, catching up to her parents, who had been packing the car. She was right on time. Her dad closed the trunk, and then she followed her parents into the car, taking her place in the back seat.

Listening to her parents chatting in the front of the car, Theo took this distraction as her chance to actually read the label for the melatonin. “Serving Size: 1 Gummy,” it read, and Theo could feel the extra gummies swirling around in her stomach. If she was only supposed to take one, she was even closer to returning to that wretched house in her sleep, and that thought made her nauseous, but before she knew it, she had drifted off to sleep once again.

Now, Theo found herself in front of the now-all-too-familiar doorway of the dilapidated house. She straightened her back, trying to be less scared and more confident, and she walked, once again, through the front door of the house. She walked straight towards the kitchen, standing now in front of the table littered with pictures of girls from her high school.

Taking her right hand, Theo swiped her hand across the table, the photos spilling over the edge of the table and onto the floor. She saw her own picture flutter off the table, and in a burst of anger and disgust for whoever was twisted enough to have that photo, let alone to have

kept Alice in his basement, she tipped the table forward, photos like a waterfall of faces staring back at her, begging her to help them as Alice had just a little while ago. She looked for any signs of old mail or an envelope with an address on it, but found nothing.

“Shit,” she whispered, and, not knowing where else to do, she walked back into the hallway. As soon as she stepped foot outside of the kitchen, however, she heard Alice’s screams, loud and clear and full of pain and suffering, and she froze. She wanted more than anything to drop what she was doing and run to Alice, to tell Alice that it was all going to be okay and that she’d get her out of there and to just hold on a little bit longer and she’d be out of there, but... but she couldn’t. She didn’t know how long she was going to be asleep for, and she didn’t want to waste any of that time doing tasks she knew would be pointless.

She had to think, but it was impossible to concentrate with the sounds of crying coming from the room over. She ended up in the room with the same old cup of water on the bedside table. A buzzing sound came from the corner, and she could see a fly, swimming with one of its wings already submerged in the water, using all of its limited energy to try and escape. Just like Alice. She fished the fly out with her finger, leaving it on the bedside table.

The small drawer at the front of the table was locked. She shook it, attempting to wiggle it out, but to no avail. She crouched down even further so she could see beneath the bed. She lifted up the side of the faded brown comforter, and she recoiled immediately. The smell of dishes and moldy food, the same smell that had caught up to her in the kitchen the time she was at the house before, punched her in the nose, causing her to double over and slap a hand over her mouth to keep herself from throwing up.

She hated this place.

And yet, she remembered seeing the shadow of something long and bulky underneath the mattress, on top of the bed frame. Making sure to hold her breath, she slowly lifted up the side of the comforter once again, and quickly she peeked under the bed, looking towards the bottom of the bed frame. There was an ax, with a long, thick handle. She was about to drop the comforter back down, but she thought she saw something else on the ax...

When Theo saw that the ax's blade was caked in blood, she bumped her head on the bed trying to get out from under there, and when she accidentally hit one of the dirty dishes with her elbow on her way out, she just about gagged. She had to get Alice out of there.

Frantic now after having seen a weapon covered in old blood, Theo started going through every part of the room that could hold any information for her: she tore the closet apart, finding nothing but clothes, she checked the floor for any loose floorboards, which there were none of, and she even shook the end table again to see if she could get into the drawer, but it was still locked.

Frustrated, Theo shoved the end table back into the wall, the glass tipping off of the edge of the table and falling to the floor, glass shards shattering and spreading all over the floor. She wanted nothing more than to scream and cry and break more things in this man's house, but she knew she had to focus. She looked down at the glass that now lay before her feet, and next to it was a fork. Maybe she could use it as a weapon. There was no way in hell she was going to use the bloody ax from under the bed.

Walking back out into the hallway, Theo felt defeat creeping up inside of her, but she heard a loud shriek coming from the basement and it gave her strength. Alice needed her.

She looked towards the open front door and realized: this was how she was going to find the home's address. Theo gasped, her eyes widening as she sprinted out the front door, which had

been kept wide open since she'd come inside. Outside, there was a long stretch of driveway, a dirt path leading her away from that wretched house and out to the open asphalt road that led away, away, away from here, but away wasn't exactly what Theo was looking for.

At the end of the driveway, out of breath from running, Theo looked for the house's mailbox, and sure enough, on the right-hand side of the end of the driveway was a thin metal mailbox, leaning to one side on its wooden stake, and at the foot of the mailbox was a long, thin, bright-green sign with the numbers "9202" in a big, bold white font down the front, and on the sign next to it was the street's name.

9202 Birch Road.

She didn't have the best memory when it came to studying, or remembering the names of her parents' friends, but she knew that she had to hold onto this address like it was her own.

9020 Birch Road. 9020 Birch Road. 9020...

She repeated this address to herself, over and over again, standing at the end of the road, until she woke up.

Theo still felt groggy from the amount of melatonin she had taken, and she could hear her parents talking quietly to each other.

"What's wrong with her today?" Theo's mother asked her father, who responded with a shrug.

"Some teens just need more sleep. You did wake her up earlier on a Saturday. Maybe she just needed to sleep in more this morning."

"But she's taken two naps today. Do you think she's sick? Do we need to take her to the doctor-?"

All of the sudden, Theo was fully awake, everything she had just seen and done in her dream hitting her all at once, as if a brick was pitched into her chest and stomach like a baseball. She gasped, and both of her parents turned around to look at her, her father turning back around to focus on the road.

“Theo, are you okay? Do you feel sick?” her mom asked her, looking into the rearview mirror to try and check on her daughter.

“Mom, I need you to find an address,” Theo said quickly.

“What do you mean, find an address? You mean look it up in my phone’s map directions or something?”

“Yes, and then we have to go to that address, and we have to call the police to meet us there, and—” Theo felt out of breath as she spoke.

“Woah, honey, slow down. What’s this even for? I thought we were going on a picnic, or we can take you to Urgent Care if you’re sick ...”

“Mom, please. You have to trust me on this.”

“Maybe we do have to take you to a doctor...”

“No, Mom, you don’t understand.”

“Then please tell me so I can. What is this about? Whose address is it?”

“It’s about Alice– the girl from the news. I know where she is.”

At this, her mom decided to pull over before she tried looking back at her daughter. “You *what?*”

“I know where she is,” Theo repeated.

“Wh– how– why...” Theo’s mom stumbled over her words, looking at Theo in disbelief.

“Mom, please.”

Theo's mother was silent for a moment.

"No. Nope, I'm going to need a lot more explanation from you in order to drive to some location because you think a kidnapper is there."

Theo's dad had been silent, listening to the conversation while his face turned white because he recognized that girl's name from the news earlier, until, very quietly, he said, "She's from your high school, right?"

Theo nodded.

"Look, I don't know what kind of Nancy Drew shit she's been up to, but she's a smart kid. If she was the one that was kidnapped, we would do whatever it took to get her back. We should listen to her, Laura." Theo's dad looked at her mother, and whatever had kept him neutral in most situations was gone, replaced with a stern determination towards getting that girl back to her family.

This was quite literally the first time her dad had really stood up for her against her mom, and he had taken her side.

"Thank you, Dad," she said to him, and then, turning back to her mom, said, "Please. Just this once, Mom, I'm going to need you to listen to me. Trust me. And Dad. I need you."

Theo's mom had tears in her eyes now. She looked at her husband, then her daughter, and she sighed and closed her eyes. Then, when she opened them, she pulled out her phone without a word to either of them.

"Mom?" Theo asked quietly, thinking that by now her mother was probably looking up the phone number for the nearest mental hospital or therapist or something, but her mom looked back up at her.

"What's the address?"

Again, Theo didn't know what to say. She'd never really had one parent on her side, let alone two. "Theo, if this is as important as you say it is, I'm going to need the address so I can get us there."

She repeated the address that she had spent a good chunk of her dream memorizing: "9020 Birch Road."

Her mom nodded, typing it quickly into her phone, and then she turned to her husband. "Lewis, I'm going to need you to call the police on our way there, explain the situation as clearly as you can to get them to go to where we're going."

"But what do I say?" Dad asked, already pulling out his phone to dial 9-1-1.

"Just say anything! Tell them we've found the missing girl and that they have to meet us at this address!"

He nodded and brought the phone up to his ear.

Theo had never seen her mom drive more than two miles above the speed limit, ever, but the backroads they took to their favorite family picnic spot allowed her to drive as fast as Theo had ever seen anyone drive.

The drive that was supposed to take twelve minutes, according to the app, took five, and by the time her mom had fully gotten down the dirt-paved driveway, two police cars pulled up right behind them. As the police officers got out of their cars, running towards the house with guns in hand, Theo got out of the car as well, watching the police break into the house. She held her breath— what if she had been too late? What if Alice was already...? No, she couldn't think about it. She just had to wait.

After what felt like hours, but had only really been minutes, before the police officers came out of the house. One of them was leading a handcuffed man into the back of a police car.

He had on heavy boots– the same boots Theo had seen and heard in the hallway in her dreams– and he wore scuffed-up blue jeans and a long-sleeved red shirt, and on the shirt Theo noticed some darker red stains mapping out his crimes. His face, though, was what stood out to Theo– as the door to the police car closed, trapping him inside, he made eye contact with Theo, and, recognizing her from the photo on his table, he smiled.

Theo felt like she might vomit right there in front of this horribly-familiar house, until a couple other police officers came out of the house, holding up Alice by her arms, and for a second, Theo thought the worst, until Alice’s eyes opened, and she smiled weakly at her. Theo ran up to her, as close as she thought she could with those officers around her.

“Alice, oh my god,” she said, almost crying from relief at the sight of her now-friend, alive. She walked with Alice and the police officers, wanting to hug her but not wanting to hurt her.

Alice smiled again. “Theo,” she responded weakly. “Thank you. I knew you would save me.”

There were so many questions: *How was I here? Why was I able to do this? Why me?* But she kept them to herself, watching as Alice was gently placed into the other police car, hearing an officer talking to Alice’s parents on the phone, telling them that their daughter was okay, watching her parents look at her with tears in their eyes, watching the house she stood before become something she was no longer connected to and feeling at peace. Everything was going to be okay.

Your Reading with Circe

In the middle of a small, dark room in the city you live sits a table, a purple velvet tablecloth covering the wood below it. A woman sits on one side, the dark skin of her hand sitting warmly against the otherwise cool, gold-leafed back of a deck of uniform purple-backed cards. Slowly, she takes the full deck into her hands and, closing her eyes, she begins to cut the deck in half, separating the cards with her long, painted nails, then shuffles them back together, the cards finding new ways to intertwine with each other.

You sit on the other side of the table nervously, watching as Circe, your local psychic medium and tarot reader, spreads the cards out evenly in a small arch in front of you.

“What would you like to know?” she asks, and her voice is beautiful, full of melody, drawing you in.

You tell her you just want to know about your future, and how to have the happy, fulfilling life that you’ve always dreamed of.

She nods and gestures to the uniform cards splayed before you. “Pick three. Whichever ones call to you.”

You lift your hand hesitantly, looking at all seventy eight cards in the center of the table. You slide a card from the left of the pile, placing it into Circe’s palm. Another card is plucked from the middle of the deck, and one from the very end, both set on the first card, in Circe’s hand.

She carefully lifts the cards from one hand with the other, making sure that the backs of the cards still face upwards, kept in their shroud of mystery, and she sets the cards down, one by one, next to each other. She scoops the deck back up into her hand, straightening it out quickly

by tapping the cards on the side of the table three times, then sets the deck back down so you can see the three cards that have now replaced the deck in the table's small center.

You sit in anticipation for a few moments as she does this, but you don't need to wait very long before her slender fingers flip the first card over. The image on the card depicts a woman, standing in confidence, large on the card, looking out at you from the card, and a lion below her, its stance mirroring the woman's in his powerful conviction. The card, to Circe, is upright, but to you, the card is upside-down.

Circe points at the card. "Ah," she says, "the Strength card, reversed."

"What does that mean?" you ask, a little scared.

"This first card represents you in your past. This card in reverse means that, in your lifetime so far, you have been through much suffering, both physically and mentally."

You nod, and she continues.

"You've been fearful, and angry, pushing people away and doubting yourself because of this suffering, but you have always been able to pick yourself up and carry on, healing in the process."

This sounds correct so far. You've been through a lot, but you're still there, alive and breathing, and in front of Circe.

You take a deep breath as Circe flips the second card over, and you wince at the sight. This one appears to you right-side-up, but that doesn't help the fact that the image on the card shows a person, genderless because of the state of their body, lying at the end of the card in front of a body of water. Covered in red, the person has ten long, thin, silver swords jabbed into their back.

“Hmm,” Circe contemplates the card for a moment, then looks at you. Her eyes seem golden, although they are probably just a bright hazel.

“This is the Ten of Swords. It indicates overwhelm. Are you feeling overwhelmed in your place in life right now?”

Your eyes widen at the question. You confirm that this is true to Circe, because it’s why you came to her in the first place.

Circe nods. “Ah. As I thought. You feel exhausted and burnt out. It’s like you’ve hit a dead end, and you don’t know what to do. You feel like you have nowhere else to go, and no one to turn to. You feel lost.”

Tears burn the corners of your eyes. You’re not one to get emotional like this, and you mutter a quiet apology. You can’t look directly at Circe like this— it’s hard to maintain eye contact when you’re wiping your eyes with the back of your hand— but you can tell she’s still looking at you as you hear her flip the third and final card.

When you’re done making sure you can see properly again, You’re wary, because of the other two cards, but you can’t help but feel a sense of warmth come from this card. Pictured on the card’s face is a large orange sun, whose eyes are smiling as it sits above a vast field of sunflowers.

Circe smiles at the card, and you can’t tell if it’s a good thing or a bad thing until she starts to explain. “The Sun card is a very lucky card to have pulled,” she says, drumming her fingers on the table beside the card, where she’d flipped it over.

You ask her why that is, still a little wary, your leg shaking under the table.

“You see, The Sun, upright, as your future card, means that your life will be happy. You’ll find success in the places you need it, and joy in your career and relationships as well, and your

confidence will be boosted in all of this so you feel overall better about yourself and where you are in your life.”

You smile. You like hearing this. This is good news, and for a moment, you are excited and happy, but then you look back down at the card, and suddenly, you’re confused. How are you supposed to reach a point of success and joy in your life if you don’t know where to start?

“What’s wrong?” Circe asks you, seeing your crestfallen face.

You sit for a moment, taking all of this new information in from your entire reading, and then ask her to elaborate, voicing your concerns to her.

“What do the cards mean, though, really?” you ask, wanting clarification, or more insight, something to help you with what’s going on in your chaotic life.

She tells you that she has to sleep on it, to talk to her spirit guides as well as yours. She has to ask them clarifying questions on your behalf, and that you should come back tomorrow for the answers you seek. You’ll have to pay her more, though, and you’re okay with that. You agree to meet her back at her psychic office tomorrow with the extra payment.

You fall asleep quickly that night, and so does she. She sleeps, however, with sage diffusing on her nightstand and crystal pillars made of gray aventurine, amethyst, blue lace agate, and clear quartz sitting next to it, in line with the beams of the full moon peeking through her window. She sleeps on her back, not on her side, tonight, and she falls asleep quickly.

You come to her the following morning, just as you had planned the day before. You hand her the money you owe her, and she smiles as she counts it out. Once she is sure you have given her the correct amount of money, she turns her attention back towards you.

“I dreamt for you, last night,” she tells you, and you nod.

“What did you find out for me?” you ask her in return.

“Ah,” she says. “As I dreamt, I asked my spirit guides, how will you reach the path of success you are destined for?”

You nod again, anxious for her response.

“At first, the spirits gave me the sensation of being frightened.”

You look at her with wide eyes, but she waves her hand at you as if to signal that it’s not as bad as you think it is.

“No, no, it’s not intended to make you frightened yourself. No, it is actually to let me know that, although you may have many worries now, those worries are temporary. Fleeting. Whatever you are worried about now will not last long, and the success in your life will come sooner than you think.”

You let go of the breath you were holding. This is relieving news.

Circe continues. “Next, my spirit guides showed me a rather odd image. This image depicts a vampire standing before you while your palm is read, but when you look up at it, you smell incense, and a bright light drowns out the sight of the vampire. You laugh, and you are now shown to me as a fortune teller.”

You blink, having barely taken any of that in. That is a weird image, but you keep quiet and listen.

“This image shows me that you are contemplating the direction that your life is going, and possibly rethinking your goals for the future. The rethinking of goals or restructuring of how you live your life is crucial for making the changes in your life that will lead you to joy and success. It also points me towards the direction of responsibility. If you are not serious about making these changes, or about creating joy and spontaneity in your own life, then you will not succeed in the things you dream about. However, once you begin to choose the new direction

your life is going, you will start to be successful, as well as finding joy in other people and in your work and hobbies as well.”

Knowing that you probably want her to be more specific in her readings, Circe continues. “It seems, through the dreams shown to me by my spirit guides, that you need to re-evaluate your day-to-day life. Is there something, or maybe a number of things, that you are not happy with? Are you bored, or tired of your routine? Once you have thought this through, cut everything you dislike as well as you can and insert yourself in places or situations that will make your life more exciting. Try new things, and do them for yourself, not for the sake of others. Through this, you will find a new sense of joy in everything you do, including the place you work, at home, and with friends and family. You will also have a successful journey through your life if you keep up with the things you want to change to make yourself happier.”

You take a deep breath. That, again, is a lot of information to take in, but when you walk away from Circe, after thanking her once again, you feel lighter. You believe, after Circe’s directions, you can change your life.