

SARAH COFFING

Retaliation

The moment I open my eyes, I know we'll be meeting up soon. We do this every morning because we're both creatures of habit. Our meetings are something I know I can count on. I am allowed a few moments of peace before I fall asleep each night and after I wake up each morning, but that is all.

I rub my eyes and try to push the sleep away before untangling myself from the blanket burrito I've created for myself. I never sleep without dreams that I'm being strangled. I slide from the memory foam, letting my feet gingerly touch the floor, then raise my arms over my head for a deep inhale. My back cracks all the way down as I bend to touch my toes. Daniel says I should see a doctor about this, but I think it's just residue from my ballerina years.

I stand up, tilt my head to either side to crack my neck, then roll my shoulders. My dreams cause me to tense up quite a bit, so I'm always sore first thing in the morning. To complete this small routine, I turn my left hip to the side and

am rewarded with a satisfying crack there as well. It's been happening like that every morning since my surgery. It hurts, but I'm used to it by now.

I squeeze myself between my bed and my closet to turn on Grandpa Marvin's lamp—just one notch out of three. Too much light first thing in the morning is a sin.

As I leave my room and make my way through the dark kitchen, my feet seep in the coldness of the floor. It reminds me of my parents' old house with the hardwood floors. I should call my mom. I grab my box of Special K with the nutrition facts facing the wall, always away from me. I turn the box of Red Pepper Wheat Thins around on the shelf so that everything is facing the same way. It makes me feel better.

I grab the milk and a spoon and sit down for breakfast when my old friend pipes up with a perky "good morning."

I grumble back. I rarely speak before 9 a.m.

"How did you sleep?" she asks.

"The same," I say as I take my first bite. This is true. I get nine or more hours of sleep a night, but I never feel rested.

"Nightmares again?"

I nod.

"You should really start going back to therapy and talking to someone about your rape. Maybe then you'd stop having dreams about people trying to choke you and take advantage of you."

I look up to glare at her, and she shrugs. "I'm just saying. You have a lot of mental work to do. Not talking about it is just going to come back to bite you in the ass someday. Probably soon."

It's 8:02 a.m., and I'm not in the mood. She knows it, so she changes the subject.

"What all do you have to do today?"

I take a bite, trying to clear my still-foggy brain before answering. "I have it all written down in my planner," I reply. "I'll look at it when I'm done eating."

"Okay," she says. "But are you sure you wrote everything

all down? I think you forgot something for your Modern to Postmodern class. Remember? The paper about Virginia Woolf?”

“No, I wrote that down,” I say. “It’s not due until Wednesday now anyway, so it’ll be fine.” She shrugs again, barely satisfied with my answer. I take my last bite of cereal, lamenting the lack of red berries in Special K Red Berries for the thousandth time. As I get up to put the box away, I notice that the company is no longer promising to help women lose weight by starving themselves. Instead, the red-and-white cardboard promotes the “confidence in you.”

I set the box back in its proper place, nutrition facts facing the whiteness of the wall, rinse my bowl and spoon, and set them both in the dishwasher.

She gets up from the swivel chair opposite mine and follows me into my room where I grab my blue London mug. It has coffee stains along the sides, even though I just washed it yesterday.

“What are you doing for lunch today?” she asks me as I fill up the mug with Indianapolis water. Little specks of unknown parasites float through the water, but I pour it into my Keurig anyway and hit Brew. I like to assume the hot water will destroy any impurities.

“Salad, probably. I’ll eat between classes.”

“You didn’t make a salad last night,” she reminds me. “You watched *The Bachelor* then went right to bed.”

“Shit. You’re right. I was so tired, and I just needed a break for the evening. I’ll figure something out.”

“Okay,” she says, retreating into my room while I take a shower.

She stays quiet while I rinse away the day before with Pink Cashmere from Bath and Body Works. My roommate got this shower gel for me because it was the scent that “most reminded her of a grandma.” That’s what they call me: Grandma. I sometimes take care of everyone else before myself. A special compartment of my backpack is full of Ibuprofen,

Band-Aids (name-brand only), a stapler, Kleenexes, feminine care products, extra pens and pencils, White Out, Tums, and an extra flash drive, all for anyone who might need it at a moment's notice.

I get out of the shower and go through my routine of putting on moisturizer, picking out an outfit and wiggling into it, brushing my hair, putting in two products, parting it, and throwing it up into a towel. The nurse practitioner at my therapist's office says I have "obsessive tendencies." She also thinks I have seasonal depression despite winter being my favorite season, so who's *really* the crazy one?

I reach for my pills, and she comes out of my room to lean against the doorway of the bathroom.

"You're almost out," she comments as I reach inside the orange CVS bottle for two Lexapro.

I nod in response. I've known for days that I'm getting low; I just haven't felt up to dealing with the pharmacists and having to explain everything to them all over again. The one with the long nails and sunken-in eyes always gives me a hard time when I go in there. I think her name is Amanda.

"Do you have any questions for the pharmacist?" she always asks me through her drug-stained teeth.

"Why are you so bitchy?" I want to ask her. "And what are *you* on?"

My friend comes to stand behind me while I take a swig of water with each white pill. The one cut in half tastes bitter for the split second it sits on my tongue, but I'm only allowed fifteen milligrams, so this is what I have to do. I remind myself that I'll have my gummy vitamins to wash it down in just a moment. One red one, one purple. Those are the flavors that go best together. I'm not sure what I'll do when I have to eat two orange or one red, one orange. It stresses me out, the thought of not being able to do my perfect pairing each morning.

I reach for my toothbrush and toothpaste and put the thought away. As I start brushing, I realize that the toothpaste

I bought yesterday is the wrong one. I always use the same one, but Crest has changed their branding, so I can never be sure anymore which box is the right one. I stood there for five minutes in the middle of Marsh with one box in each hand.

“Daniel...” I started to panic. “Which box is the right one?”

He stood a few feet away, trying to pick out steaks for our fajitas. “I don’t know babe,” he said without looking over. He doesn’t worry about toothpaste.

They all promised to kill millions of bad-breath germs and whiten your teeth. The one in my left hand had blue accents on the box; the one in my right hand had silver. I tried to remember the way the previous box looked, but everything except Crest was blurred on the image stored in my brain. I got frustrated, set one box down, and harrumphed as I purchased the one with the blue accents.

It was wrong.

By the time I’ve sorted all this out, we’re ready to leave for class. I never leave without her, and she never leaves without me. We go everywhere together, she and I.

She walks behind me as I shut the door quietly enough not to wake any of my roommates. “You almost forgot and let it slam,” she tells me.

We start walking.

I think we started spending time together when I was in elementary school. She was always there for me when I was nervous about not understanding homework or thinking that my parents hated me. She was especially present when I got on the Tube in London for the first time two years ago. It was my first experience with public transportation, and she clung to me like Velcro.

Maybe she’s been with me since before elementary school, but I don’t remember back that far. Some of my friends think we’ve been together since the day I was born. No one can really know for sure at this point. All I know is that for the last few years, we have been inseparable, sown together at the

hip, as my parents would say.

As we walk, I keep my hands inside the pockets of my blue coat to protect them from the sharp cold. In the winter, they always turn red and splotchy in anger and eventually start to crack open and bleed. When I was little, my mom used to put me to bed, hands lathered in Vaseline and covered with socks. When you're in college, no one reminds you of that kind of thing.

I have an entire drawer of my bathroom dedicated to Bath & Body Works lotions, but somehow I never remember to use it. I also keep a spare bottle of lotion in my backpack, in the same compartment as all the other emergency necessities, but I'm worried that someone might be allergic or hate the smell of vanilla, so I rarely use that, either.

I clutch my phone so tightly inside my pocket that I know my fingers are turning white from the pressure. Holding onto something smooth, like the rose gold surface of my phone, helps me feel better, more in control somehow. As my boots hit the pavement with a counted rhythm—one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four—I remind myself that I left with fifteen minutes to get to class. Fifteen minutes to perform roughly a mile.

If I make it to the bell tower with eight minutes left before the start of class, I will make it in time, but barely. Any less than that, and I'm late. I pass the gym and my heart starts to pound. When was the last time I worked out? My cereal surely is turning to fat inside my stomach right now. I need to get back to the gym.

"You should really run sometime today," she says to me, following my gaze to a row of sorority girls in philanthropy t-shirts jogging in synchronization on the elliptical machines. "Otherwise, that wedding dress is gonna be a squeeze."

"I have no time today," I grumble back. "I'm in class from 9:30 to 5, remember? And then I have to read about two hundred pages for tomorrow, make dinner, and somehow get enough sleep to function in the morning."

“Suit yourself,” she says.

It’s not a matter of suiting myself. It’s a matter of priorities, but she’ll never understand that. To her, everything is of utmost importance and urgency. She never lets me relax.

I grip my phone tighter, and it vibrates in my hand. I know it’s Daniel, letting me know he’s gotten to work safely. He takes the same route every day, Lantern Road to 96th Street to I-69 to 62nd Street to College to 65th, but I’m still always worried that someone might have the audacity to be drunk at 9 a.m. on a Monday and cause a fatal accident, leaving me without a fiancée. Or maybe he’ll forget to stop next to the Panera on 96th and run the light.

Or maybe, on days like today, there will be too much ice, and it’ll be black, and he won’t see it, and he’ll run off the ditch, and I won’t get the text from him, but I’ll read his name on the news. I never watch the news, but I’m certain this is how I would find out.

“Do you think Daniel’s doing better with his diet than you are?” my friend asks me. “He probably is. You know he loves blueberries. You should really eat more blueberries; they’re so good for you. Antioxidants and all that. They help prevent cancer. You don’t want to end up like your mom. Also, you should probably do a quick self-examination soon. You have to start getting mammograms at age 25, and I’m pretty sure that little bump you felt the other day could be something. I would check it out if I were you.”

We pass the bell tower and I pull out my phone. Eight minutes left till class. I pick up the pace a little and do my best not to invade the personal space of the girl walking in front of me. She has one of those backpacks with the spikes on the back. Edgy. Much more edgy than I could ever be.

My heart and my legs pick up speed. She keeps going.

“Also, did he get his tires fixed? I hope so. Otherwise this would be a dangerous drive this morning, huh? One wrong slip with that stick shift and he’s a goner. That would suck for you.”

I've almost had enough. I wish that, just once, I could ditch her for the day. Unfortunately, the relationship we have requires both parties. She wouldn't exist without me to feed on, and I wouldn't be myself without her here. Still, she really can get on my nerves. I muster up enough courage to snap at her. "Could you please just be a little more positive for once? The goddamn sky isn't going to fall today, and it's not going to fall tomorrow. We're going to go to class, it's going to be a good day, and everything will be fine."

We're reaching the pharmacy building now. Five minutes. Walk faster.

"But what if it isn't?" she asks. I've pissed her off now. "You need me. You are nothing without me here. What would you be without me? Tell me."

I don't have an answer.