

She's there if you look up. You never intended it to be this way, but you can't bring yourself to go back now. These days, you don't see her very often. Your world is right in front of you, a foot from your face. Almost everything you know is contained in the flat light of that screen. When it goes black, you take a moment to stare at your own reflection in the dull glass.

But today, with the tone of a disconnecting call still ringing in your mind (it was bad news, again), you take a moment to see her.

The wall behind your desk is covered in little pieces. You started taping them up two days after the night when the wind ripped through the city, every photograph and newspaper clipping and doodle of hers that you could find. For the first year, you weren't sure if it helped with the emptiness or made it worse. Now, you don't care. That will always be a question without an answer.

Your eyes find the first picture taken of you and her together. Freshman year homecoming. It only takes a glance for the memory to overwhelm you, the remains of gritty popcorn in your mouth and the sweat trickling down from your shoulder blades. You, her, and three other friends are squeezed together in a dark photo booth, wearing feathered scarves and chunky plastic jewelry from a prop box in addition to your strappy dresses and button-up shirts. You are in the front, leaning on a friend's shoulder, an oversized straw hat casting a shadow over your eyes as you smirk for the camera. She is just behind you, eyes wide, grinning like she's won some grand prize. For some reason, she is holding a red plastic lobster aloft, as if it's her trophy.

So many years have passed since those five kids bounced and swayed and spun on the dance floor like the world was ending and they wanted to make the most of it. Of the three others, one sends you holiday cards of himself with his twin daughters. Each year the girls are pictured in adorable matching dresses. Another lives in the same city as you and tries to convince

you to go out for coffee every few months. Sometimes, in a moment of weakness, you say yes. With the third you've lost contact entirely.

The homecoming picture is taped on the wall, right next to a picture of you and her in front of the hospital after her junior year car crash. The dark circles under her eyes are disturbingly visible. Even from the distance of the camera, you can see the individual stitches holding the gash in her cheek closed. You drove her back home. She didn't talk the entire way, just listened and stared out the windshield, hospital wristband clenched in her fist. In the four years you had known her, you had never seen her so silent. The memory of that crash stayed with her long after the bruises had faded and the stitches were out.

Below those two pictures are countless others from your time in high school. In most of them, she's front and center, laughing. The pictures show off her many different hairstyles, all held back from her face by an assortment of pins and clips. She would inevitably drop a few along the way. When you gave friends a ride, they would find pins left on the passenger seat cushion and stuck in the cupholders. "Well, I guess I know who you've been riding around with!" They would say, usually with a smirk. Sometime in the middle of junior year you started to find pins in the pockets of your jeans, tangled in your own hair, in the creases of your notebooks, on the floor of your bedroom, on the counter in your kitchen. Once, towards the end of junior year, you even found a little red clip inside the fridge.

As a going-away gift when she went off to college, you gave her a box full of every single pin and clip you had collected throughout the years. She took the box from you, declared it was the best gift she had ever been given, gave you a kiss on the forehead, and boarded a plane for the other side of the country. Until that windy Friday, it was the only time she ever left you without a promise to return.

For six years, you aren't in a photograph with her, and then, suddenly, you reappear. You are almost surprised to see yourself, sporting glasses and a smart new haircut. The two of you had moved to the same city and decided to split the rent of a little apartment. Just like that, her laugh and smile and hair pins and quick jokes were back in your life. She wasn't an easy roommate, of course. It took some convincing to get her to clean up any messes she left, and she had a habit of turning the TV volume up high and then falling asleep on the couch, leaving it running all night. It wasn't always easy, but she made up for it by welcoming you back from your dreary office job with a cake in the oven and a game of backgammon set up and ready to play.

When you left that apartment, moving across the city together to be closer to her new job, she snapped pictures of every room from every angle. "So we'll always remember this rabbit hole," she said. You loved her expression so much that you started to affectionately refer to the new apartment as Rabbithole Two.

You spent the next eleven years skipping from job to job together, renting the cheapest, tiniest apartments you could find and escaping for weekend adventures. She made the plans, taking you sightseeing, river rafting, go-karting, skydiving. There are plenty of pictures on your wall showing you and her on different crazy outings, but your favorite is from a more ordinary day. In the picture, she is sitting on the beat-up red couch in Rabbithole Seven. You are sitting on the floor just in front of her, looking down at the carpet and grinning as she rests her chin on the top of your head and stares right into the camera. You let her put a few pins in your hair, just for that day, and the light from an out-of-frame window makes the cheap metal glint. She's wearing a friendship bracelet of aquamarine and hazel-brown string that you made for her in high school,

tattered and fraying after so many years of wear. You can remember the moment she curled her hand into yours.

The last photograph of her is taped right underneath, taken about a year later. You had made the plan for a change, taking her to a local production of Romeo and Juliet. The picture is blurry and poorly lit. In the background, Romeo is onstage, holding the lifeless body of his lover. In the foreground, she is turned away from the play and smiling for the camera, despite the tears streaked across her face.

You tear your eyes away from the wall and look at the clock. Your bad-news phone call ended forty minutes ago. There are things you need to write down, emails you need to send, but it's too late now. She's here with you again.

It was a Friday night and the lights were low in Rabbit hole Eight. You pulled dinner out of the oven, set it on the counter, and went into the living room to watch a brassy reality show and wait for her to arrive home. A few minutes in, you fell asleep. Later, you would go through every frame of that show, trying to figure out exactly what was happening the moment you closed your eyes.

When you woke up, it was dark outside. A cooking competition was now humming along on the TV, already past the first elimination round. Dinner was cold on the counter. She was still not home. When you checked your phone, you had six missed calls. You turned off the TV and sat for a moment, listening to the wind run through the city outside, a herd of wild horses tearing the leaves from the trees. The warning call before a storm.

You found the recording of her mom's voice left on your phone. Pressed play.

After her accident during junior year, it had taken her years to regain her confidence driving. You had been so proud of her when she got behind the wheel again. In that moment, as

you listened to her mom sobbing on the other side of the phone line, you wished that confidence had never returned.

You gave the eulogy. You didn't want to, but her mom insisted. You tried to write something beforehand, but the words never looked right. So when it was time, standing in front of the funeral crowd, you spoke without a script. You don't remember what you said.

The task felt more impossible than that step out of the plane when she took you skydiving ("Never again," you said afterwards, and she laughed and ran a hand through your windblown hair and flew back up to jump again by herself), but you tried to keep going. You started paying full rent for Rabbit Hole Eight. You learned to cook for one and not record all her favorite TV shows if you didn't want to watch them. You stopped bothering to open the curtains. You lost yourself in your work, and cried, sometimes, late at night. Four years passed.

And now you sit, staring up at the collection of memories above your desk. You've been waiting so long for the pain to fade, but it doesn't, really. How could it? Even now, you still find her pins hidden away in corners of the apartment. Every time you find one, you hope it's not the last. You add it to the box that she kept, all the way through college, and then gave back to you when she reentered your life. You keep the box under your bed. It has to be luck.

She was the brightest, most joyful person you ever met. Sitting at your computer, in your stale apartment, fridge filled with leftovers because you forgot to halve the recipes you know by heart, you know what she'd say if she saw you now.

She loved you. Looking back, there are so many things you can't remember, so many things you'll never be certain about. But that's one truth you know you can always hold to your chest on cold nights. An ember of warmth, even though she's nothing but ashes scattered in the town where you both grew up.

You loved her. You built a life around that truth. And you still love her. But this love, now, with her four years gone, can't hold together these pieces any longer. Maybe it's time to let the wind scatter the ashes.

So what are you waiting for?

You take a deep breath. You close your computer. You put on a pair of shoes. On a whim, you snatch a pin from under your bed and tuck it into your hair. *I can at least take a walk*, you think to yourself. So you do. Out here, in the heart of the city with the sun casting long shadows and the wind howling through the skyscrapers, you can almost see her when you look up.

There will be more pins and more rabbit holes, more photographs and memories. She left you a whole world. Her story might be over, but yours isn't yet.