

1 NIA NOW

I sit staring out the window at the rustling leaves of the willow tree in my back yard. The leaves have begun turning yellow with the dropping autumn temperatures. The long limbs sway in the wind having a hypnotic effect on me. I am not sure how long I have been sitting here when my sister loudly enters the house.

“Nia! Good morning. What a beautiful day today. Ahh, I am loving this weather. We should take a walk to the lake after you have your coffee. Here it is,” she says in her cheerful morning voice as she sets it down next to my overflowing ashtray. I see her try to cover the look of disgust on her face when I glance in her direction. I always think about emptying it, but I know she will do it for me every morning so the effort seems unjustified.

“I had them put in two sugars. The raw kind. That’s how you like it, right? Well if you need extra just let me know and I will grab some out of the kitchen.”

At this point she is yelling from the kitchen. I take a sip of my coffee. Perfect. It always is. Noie is nothing if not a perfectionist and she accepts nothing but perfection from the baristas when getting my coffee every morning. She knows it is one of the only things I look forward to each day and she would never allow it to be wrong.

I hear muted clanking. Right now she is probably straightening the silverware. It’s one of her nervous ticks she actually enjoys indulging. I make a trip into the kitchen every day after she leaves and cause havoc in the silverware drawer. It’s how I let her know I’m still here and I love her. I’m sure there are better ways, ways she would appreciate more but it’s all I can give right now.

“Nia, what did you eat for dinner last night? There are no dishes in here. Did you order out? Have you tried the new Italian place on South 5th Street? Delicious. The eggplant parm is to die for.” She makes an exaggerated moaning sound as if just the thought of breaded eggplant gives her a feeling of ecstasy.

I didn’t eat last night. I usually don’t. It’s not on purpose, I just seem to lose track of time. When the sun sets, I look at the stars until I fall asleep in my chair most nights.

“Maybe we should go there for lunch. Or if you like the idea of going to the lake, I could get take out and we could have a picnic. It’s not too cold yet. I am sure a heavy sweater would be all we need. We can buy a loaf of bread for the ducks. Do you remember when we would sit down there with a bottle of wine feeding the ducks until sunset?” She laughs and lets it trail off. Guilt takes a hold of me. I know she longs for the old version of me back. I know I do.

I don’t know how she does it. She barely even takes a breath when she has these morning conversations at me. Eventually she will settle down in the chair next to me in silence. I know she does it in hopes one day I will fill the void. I might...one day. I’m just not ready yet. I haven’t learned the language needed to talk about what happened.

I grab my lighter and light another cigarette. The smoke swirls through the beams of light flooding the window. I watch the cigarette smoke like I watched clouds as a child, picking out familiar shapes as it moves towards the ceiling before dissipating.

I exhale and close my eyes as Noie sits down. Sixty minutes. The amount of time she sits is so precise, I have wondered if she sets a vibrating timer on her phone before sitting.

Her breaths have a calming steady rhythm. Mine are always staggered as I take long drags from my cigarette. Fifty-nine minutes. Counting down the minutes, I am thankful for the effort she puts in to creating some stability in my world which has completely fallen apart.

As the older sister, she has always felt some responsibility in taking care of me. We grew up in an upper middle class home with two loving parents who worked long hours at their corporate jobs to ensure we had

everything they didn't have growing up. Their absence gave Noie a mom complex over me. As a teenager, I hated it. She was always there as my voice of reason when I wanted to run off with people she felt were a bad influence. She always checked in with my teachers to make sure my grades were on track. It was suffocating.

Now, at twenty-nine, I couldn't be more thankful for her care taking. She owns an early learning center which allows her to fulfill her need of looking after and guiding others. The last six months with me have just been a bonus for her, I guess. Forty-six minutes.

My eyes fly open when she clears her throat and begins fidgeting with her wedding ring, a tell-tell sign she is uncomfortable about something she is about to say. I brace myself knowing it must be important if she is going to interrupt our quiet hour.

"So, Thanksgiving will be here next month and Jett wants to go to Tennessee to visit his family. His father has been sick and we haven't been there for Thanksgiving in three years. I was thinking you might really enjoy coming with us. Remember last time you came and you fell in love with the little deli on Main Street?"

I jerk my head towards her, my eyes brimming with tears and she pauses. I wasn't alone when I discovered the deli and she realizes she is invoking memories I don't want to relive right now. I toss my cigarette, that has long since burned out, into the ashtray and grab another one. After a few drags I relax back in my chair and she continues.

"It will just be for a few days and the kids would love to have their Auntie Nia there."

Low blow using the kids. I hate disappointing them, but I also don't want them seeing this shell. They wouldn't understand. I hope they never understand how empty I feel.

"There is no pressure. You can use the car we rent to drive into town and explore during the day. You will have your own room to stay in and no one will bother you." She pauses and studies my profile. Looking for any sign I might answer. Twenty-nine minutes.

I know she is just afraid to not be able to check on me every day. Jett loves me, but I doubt he is very excited about bringing me to his family's house. He probably suggested they go there so he and the kids could get the full attention of Noie for a few days. I wasn't making her come here every day. I also know Noie wouldn't have it any other way, so it is my fault, I guess. He has every right to blame me.

One minute left. "Well just think about it," she says and stands.

"I am going to the school to check on things and answer emails. I should be back about eleven with lunch." Her voice sounds defeated and I hear a frustrated sigh as she closes the front door. Just then I spot a clown's hat in the smoke.