

It had been eight days, seven nights, and several packs of cigarettes since Ivy had first picked up the invitation. The crinkled, foiled, and clearly mass produced note was single folded, down the front, etched in fake sharpie-esk gold charm and black outlines; the faint sign of a tiger paw visible through the water damage. Only God knew how long the invite had been actually out front.

For the London sky was an unforgiving beast in itself, the clouds hung over the neighborhood of Farley as if God taped an umbrella to the city, but the damn thing only worked in reverse. The clouds hung over Ivy's head as tea bags do over a china saucer. Days like these, where the time couldn't be told by the skyline because of the never changing scenery, were ones that the native Londoner dreamed of escaping from and her partner dreamed of escaping too.

But, her so-called 'partner' had already made her escape and this placid haven under the lower laying cloud line was just around the corner. Holding the invite closer to her chest, so the already damaged goods wouldn't proceed to worsen by the time she reached the author's flat, Ivy Davis made her way down Oak Island road just out of the heart of London.

Her footsteps quickened as the nimble footed editor made her way to 299 Myrtle Avenue. Splashes of puddles dotted her clothing with speckles of mud and ringlets of water, the woman's well worn boots trekking easily through them. For Ivy was on a mission, one that leads to self-destruction, not from herself, but from her partner; but Ivy didn't know that, in fact, Ivy was striving her best to keep the two afloat.

Like a pebble getting skipped across a lake, so was the life of Leontine Majors, each bounce getting her further and further from the shoreline, now quite a distance away. Now it wasn't Ivy that had thrown this certain pebble across the lake, she had only bent down into the pool of forever speaking rocks, carefully selected the one that would be the most aerodynamic as well as profitable, and gave it a good once over. Eventually the arm wound up and threw, but that truly wasn't the brain's fault, which meant that it wasn't Ivy's.

But, it was Ivy's job now to make sure that this pebble, this miniature boulder, wouldn't sink as quickly as some of the others have. Because even if the brain strived to command the arms and legs to move swiftly into the water and breach the cold to save one piece of grit from the lake bottom, the limbs would never move, not even so much as flinch. Which led Ivy to the conclusion that she would somehow willfully bend her mind to make sure that this rock stayed afloat, that with each skip it made sure to land on the water's surface again. So, she stood on the

shore, watching Leo bounce and bounce, skipping and she'd keep her eyes and mind focused on her, at least until this certain pebble raced past into the fog; finally out of sight.

As the sounds of rain pattered down on the cobblestone pathways, making for an uneasy trip for most tourists, Ivy kept her eyes narrowed and up, her body braced and ready for the onslaught of the droplets. London was a fickle city, lights bright and colors daunting, with a heinous underbelly to show. Its veins made of carefully laid brick-ways and shops are made of stone. Pollution, smoke, and the sounds of backfiring cars or horns that pierced the air made Ivy ever so wish she could leave, and it made her question even more on why she picked this certain pebble from the bunch.

Something about the way she shined, the way this rock seemed to be born to be thrown, that was what Ivy saw. And in all honesty, that is what the object saw in herself as well. The very thirstful need to become not just a rock, but a skipping stone, was ingrained in this mountain chip's fissures. This rock needed to leave an impression on the lake just as much as Leotine needed to leave an impression on this world.

Ivy Davis made her way down one more flat piece. The brown of the mud darkened her the burgundy of her shoes, some of it scraping off as she moved up the stone steps and onto the tattered welcome mat outside Leo's door. Looking down at the thing, she scraped her shoes roughly.

A right hand swiftly came to grab the knocker. Her two fingers missed it, but her pinky barely snagged it. Wincing as the crooked knob slammed her finger in, Ivy stood straighter, making a mental note in her mind to tell Leo she needed to fix that. The rain beside her began to pick up, causing the soft ironcast railing of the oval steps to shake, in turn making Ivy pull her pinky from the knob and push her body softly to the door frame.

Mind sharp and awaiting, she stuck the reddening appendage in her mouth as her shoulders shook from the outside cold. The wind ripped through the lithe girl like it does through trees, shaking the leaves down until it's bare. Eyes focused on the ground, pinky being sucked on, and body huddled inward from the cold, the door swung open and an amber glow enveloped Ivy.

"Slam your pinky again?" Leo asked, her head cocked to the side, eyes deep and dark in the light, a never-ending sea of unknown. As always, Ivy had slammed her pinky into the

crooked doorknob; the faint knocking a given sign that her publisher and closest friend had once again appeared on her doorstep.

"Well, are you just gonna stand in the cold or do you actually wanna come in?" Leotine asked, playfulness in her lower voice, the roughness giving Ivy information that she should have already known; that Leo had started smoking again.

"Menthols or swishers?" She asked, Davis stepping in, dripping as her coat droplets began to form a small ocean on the hardwood of the flat. While Leo's apartment may have been small, the woman wasn't.. Her eyes were intense but seemed to always glow with intent.

"Swishers. I can't do menthols anymore." Shutting the door, Leo slowly strode over and without hesitation she hung up Ivy's jacket on one of the ironcast horse hangers that decorated the right side of the wall. Her bare feet padded against the ground, enjoying the different texture that the water made underneath the balls and arches of her feet.

Ivy followed behind the larger woman, looking around even though she knew the apartment like the back of her hand, she had been one of the few people to help her pick it out and had been only one of the very select few that was allowed in. Past the small area used for shoes and coats, lead a tight corridor with a semi-clean bathroom and messy bedroom that is cluttered with knick knacks at every inch. Each inch of that room was decorated or filled with some form of love that Leo had for the media, herself, or very seldom, the people in it. Maybe that was why she had nothing else to give, the love was spread and touched every little centimeter of that room.

But, before all of those rooms, there lay two left, the kitchen and living room. The few times she had used or even been in that room for more than ten minutes was when her folks came over and she was forced to act like she knew what she was doing, which involved cooking; or at least showing the basic signs that she knew and cooked for herself on a daily basis. Which was an utter and complete lie.

Leotine, in fact, could count on her hand the amount of meals she had made in that room and it was only for her parents and potential siblings that may pop up on occasion. The 29 year old could bother being an adult only for small spurts of time and this self-draining energy was only used whenever she needed to pay the bills or talk to anyone other than Ivy. Lucky for her, it was just the two of them right now and Leo could be herself, still a child.

She wasn't a child in the sense of innocence. She was a child in the sense of her temperament and within her attention span. Almost like a puppy, a large great dane that was at the ocean, and had never before seen water, never touched sand, and had rarely met other humans. Constantly awake, constantly going, and almost constantly doing something, stillness was not a word Ivy would have used to describe the young woman.

To many of the other publishers or bosses that Leo had gone through before Ivy, they had used the words 'eccentric' or 'off'. She was rather a snobby drug addict with a sense of class, still desperate; but desperate with money and a sense of fashion. She still had barely any standards, but beggars can't be choosers.

She always chuckled whenever her old friends back in college or high school would joke about her personality as if she was always on drugs. Which she wasn't at the time, her characteristics were always like that. Thus making it a lot harder now to tell when she was high or when she wasn't, the puzzle always a challenge and proving to be one currently for Ivy Davis.

Sitting down at the large red chair that could fit at least two more Ivy's comfortably, the lithe woman watched her employee sit down across from the maple table and watch her. Her brain, as of current, was more scattered then it had been in a while. The ritalin wasn't taking effect quick enough, so she had mixed in a pill or two of adderall, still it seemed like the clusterfuck of her mind was running a million miles a minute.

Cracking her neck, she felt the emptiness that the drugs gave her. A sort of spacey haze that let the brain drift from thought to thought, dissecting each one to the fullest. She would be thinking about how the light from the window bounced off the dusty old grand piano's black sheen before reflecting onto Ivy's watch. That was pointless and was getting her nowhere except taking her back into finding beauty in the mundane. The mundane life of an author looking for inspiration but finding nothing but perfection in the imperfect.

Stretching her feet out and down, she cracked her toes against the hardwood floor. Leo watching Ivy wince and she let a small smirk that began with her bottom lip and turned swiftly into a half snarl. "You don't like it?" She played, toying with the other woman as friends do. Or at least, the way that she used to play with her friends.

Ivy read the woman rather quickly and felt the pause in the air, as if she was to play along and continue the bridge that the two had been trying to build, mostly one sided from the

introverted extrovert writer.; or she could easily shut her down again and let the young lady place place stone after stone trying to get closer to Ivy.

“I do not.” She said seriously, breaking the snarl into a frown and Leo was back staring at emptiness. She knew why Ivy was there, a new book or at least some way of knowing that something was getting done. Her eyes traced over the raindrops that raced outside of her window, before her lanky legs folded themselves underneath her.

All sharp angles and soft turns, Leo watched as the two raindrops that raced became one heavy droplet before careening downwards to the windowsill. There seemed to be sadness in the mundane as well, if you looked hard enough and gave the right things all of the right symbols. Out of the corner of her chocolate eyes, she witnessed Ivy pull something out from her green sweater, one of those sweaters that looked like it could be a rug or even worse, a hand knitted blanket from your grandma that you just had to keep because it held sentimental value.

“What’s that? Another notice?” Leotina asked, already seeming frustrated before they even began. It was written all over her stance, her face, and the tone of resentment that dripped off of her words like the rain that dripped down off of Ivy’s jacket and it slid off of the other woman just as easily. “Well, I have one of those. But, this was in your mailbox. I thought you might want to read it, ya know? Maybe inspire you to finally go back to the states.” Ivy threatened back, her arms crossing showing the large difference in the women before them.

Ivy knew she had all of the cards. But, Leo held all the pieces. It was as if they were playing poker and chess at the same time and while Ivy may hold a royal flush, Leo had her in check. Thus was the relationship between publisher and writer, the never ending debate as to which held the control and which one obeyed. Between the two of them, Ivy knew she would have to fold at some point and leave the other woman to just stare at the chessboard for infinity if she didn’t get at least one sherd of information out of her.

“Are you gonna let me have it?” Leo retorted, her tan hand reaching over to grasp nothing but air. The table highlighting the estranged distance between the two, just as forced, just as designed; like the universe was filled with irony (which it was and still is) but had just as much fun with symbolic metaphors that writers did.

“Thank you, Ms. Davis.” Leo played, almost snatching the memo from her and that was the moment Ivy understood that the woman across from her, no matter how dense or how high she seemed to be or actually was, she could still pick up on the cues that she was laying down.

Ivy mapped out her feelings like a game. A game of Clue that involved no murder (not yet at least), no weapons (except words), and of course the occasional insult. It was Clue with the verbiage of Mean Girls and up until that point, Ivy had almost no idea if it was working or not, but something must have stuck.

Pursing her lips outwards, almost as a pout, Ivy nodded. “Finally showing me some respect. It's a little late.” She promised, sitting back as she watched the other woman read over the simple text. Leo hadn't been expecting one of these.

‘You’re invited!’ it read in all caps and golden fleshed out letters, followed only by ‘Ten Year Reunion of Phillips High’s Class of 2019’. Reading those words actively gave Leo heartburn, she felt her own chest heat up with stomach acid and couldn't help but feel her hands get sweaty. Her hands tapped against the piece of home as she sat it against the oak table, almost as if it was a simple white flag that waved itself in front of Ivy as a surrender. It was now the publisher’s turn to snarl. There was just silence as Ivy figured her out for the first time in a long time and Leo became oblivious to try and hide up any emotions that were bubbling up to the surface.

“Who gave you the pills today?” Ivy pondered out loud, Leo answering without hesitation. “They’re prescribed.” She said, electing a chuckle from the now confident woman. “By how many doctors?”, the room only to be filled with silence as Leo bit down on a shaky nail that was barely starting to peek its head out from the nail bed. Tearing it off unceremoniously, she watched as blood trickled from the hidden area.

It was a simple yes or no to everyone else, but to her it was like a constant set of maybes. Just like everything she did. It was a choice filled with ifs that changed her answer each time. Indecisive wasn't a word that often crossed people’s vocabularies when it came to the tall woman, impulsive was the normal choice.

The term narcissism always filled her head with wonder because on every occasion almost, the thoughts of others, she in turn thought they were about her. And she knew it was crazy and she knew it was stupid, but the idea that people were thinking of her was a double edge sword that Leotine wielded poorly. She desperately wanted to be noticed, to be special, and not the type of special where it's watered down to the simplest generic feelings. No, she wanted to be special in ways that were beyond the extraordinary, in ways that left people in awe, in ways that

she wanted people to want her, to want to be like her, and to look up to her in more ways than just physical.

Leo figured it stemmed from childhood, just like most driving factors due. Distinctly remembering the moment where other children were selected to read more advanced books out in the hallway and she was forced inside to read the given texts, made her quake with such shame and doubt, that she swore it would never happen again. But, it did, and after each time, she strived to make herself better, a self-made genius or a self demanded prodigy.

Couple those feelings of failure and self loathing at a young age with the distinct need to please, and of course the extinstail dread of anyone growing up in the 2000s, and she was a trainwreck leaving the station. The track she was on led her to be successful, painfully aware of her success, and of course, in a desperate need for more validation because there would never be enough. That wasn't how the world worked, if things were that easy; she would have stopped when she made it outside to the hallway, she would have stopped when she passed her exams with flying colors, and she would have stopped after she finished her first book.

Critical fame and money were two very powerful motivators and she lusted for both of those. In this game of poker, Ivy just saw her fold and in chess, Leo just put her king in a corner, one move away from check.

“If you go, I’m going to have to take those away.” Ivy admitted honestly, which somehow awoke the woman from her trance. Her eyes flashing upwards to eye the woman across from her, she was astonished to say the least.

Never before had Ivy ever threatened to take away something from her. “I can just get more.” Leotine stated bluntly, honestly, just the way her mother had told her to talk. The ability to get to the point of anything, a habitual fault buried deep within the Majors bloodline. Her aunts, uncles, and even her grandparents all fought with the love of a good story. And a good story delves into the details of those around them, which let on quite a bit and Leo was by far the worse one about it. She could even see her mother now, congratulating her on a job well done that she was being blunt.

“You know you’ll have to drive, right? Your parents don't live there anymore, which means you’ll have to pay for a hotel room, pay for a rental, and then drive yourself there. You can't be serious if you think I’m gonna let you drive around in your state with other living

beings on the road.” Ivy stated just as blunt as well, which made the reality set into Leo that Ivy was rooting for her to go.

“Do you really want me to go?” She asked, for once the brave woman seemed timid, weak almost, which Ivy guessed that she really was weak. “I think it might help cure your writer’s block.” Ivy paused to gauge her reaction and couldn't help but be taken aback by the absolute lack of interest in her eyes. Those earthy hues were an absolute sense of pleasure and joy in them, there was always a sense of sadness buried in them. They were like leaves fallen and banished from the trees like angels turned to demons, each with an underbelly for being trampled on by the soil below. Hell was in those eyes.

“That is what you have isn't it? Writer’s block?” She finished and Leo nodded, going along with anything at this point was better than actually diving into her own psyche. In truth, she had held her breath and breached those waters a few times and every time she reemerged, she was always someplace different within herself. Whether that be striving to find her own feelings, finding the basis of her own sexual frustrations, or just trying to understand why she was the way she was, Leotina never really blossomed. She was always stuck in her cocoon waiting for something to heat her up far enough so she would emerge as either a butterfly or a moth. She didn't even know at this point which one she was born as anyway, angel or demon, leaves or pine, she was too scared to even look nowadays.

“Writer’s block that could be broken by a trip down memory lane. Who knows? Maybe that’s where your next big idea will come from. You even said it yourself, that most of your heroes stem from your old friends.” The scent of inspiration teemed on the edge of her tongue, it had been there for so long that Leotina was forgetting what her normal body felt like.

The need to write has always been engraved into her fingertips, into her body and hands. It stretched her out like a fire makes a forest stretch out; the forest not getting any bigger but seeming more barren. To expose yourself by your own hand is its own way of camouflage, a faulty one.

Her palms began to sweat even more, powers that she had only ever dreamt about felt like they could flutter out of them at any moment. So, Leo clenched her fists, digging what was left of her nails into them and closed her eyes. Taking her hands away, she pressed them down against the oak and felt the pleasure that ached out of her body and to her core from the feeling. It was strange to say that it felt like sex, but it was even stranger to say that it felt better.



The pressing down of her palms on the wood when thinking about writing, always elicited something from the woman. It was as if her significant other had just finally bit down on her neck for the first time. Leo had always known that her purpose was to write, to speak through unbreakable metaphors, to begin building that bridge of what was normalcy and broken rules.

Knowing her purpose, knowing that she was finally pleasing someone was something that flipped a switch on. The ability to please was by far the peak of everything that Leo wished for. She felt the waves ripple through her down to her core and she opened her eyes to find herself craving someone to finally get something to take her edge off, whether that be writing or maybe a pill or two more, was still up in the air. "You alright?" Davis asked. "Do you think it would be good to go?" Leo asked, her hands moving away from the table top as she cracked her neck, fingers, and back all in a matter of a few seconds. Ivy withstood the onslaught of disgusting sounds that emanated from the girl's body before she finally let herself answer. "I think it would be good not only for your writing but your health as well." She said, looking around at the dreary flat. Leo still seemed hesitant, even more than before. "We'll pay. At least for your airfare and it would give the company sometime to get off of your back if you promise to have some form of writing outwards by the time you get back." Ivy relented and that peaked Leo's interest.

"You could make a new hero, something the world hasn't ever seen." Ivy said, striving to pump up the other woman's confidence like a balloon that constantly was deflating; it was tiresome work to say the least. But, that was what she did. Leo created heroes that she wanted, that her friends wanted, that she desperately felt the need for in her childhood and teenage years. The world's first comic book writer turned novelist.. That was who she was and that was who she had been meant to be.

The need to please others is once again prominent in almost every aspect of her life, the need to please and surprise those around her with something that they've always wanted to see. It was just a matter of making sure that someone else derived pleasure from something she was doing, no matter how much it took from Leontine; she was willing to give it. Because some piece of her derived pleasure from the ability of herself to please.

In some sick way, she understood the validation of others, she understood how toxic deriving one's self worth from those things was, but truth be told; she enjoyed it. She got off on it and it was beyond her control now, because it was her life's work. And right now, her work

depended on it. "I'll go." She whispered. "Good, we'll RSVP for you, get your tickets, hell I'll even pack for you. Just try to get sober before you get on the plane." The older woman warned, standing up her eyes watching as Leo didn't even flinch. She kept her eyes focused on the ground, seeming to be off once again in her own little world.

"Have a nice night, Ms. Majors." Ivy said unceremoniously as she grabbed her coat and slipped it on smoothly as a snake slips on their new skin. Sometimes Leotina was beyond help, high out of her mind, barely able to communicate. Or even worse, when she was sober and beyond repair. This meeting went pretty well the more that Ivy thought about it. The door opened revealing the storm to be fiercer than ever before and without hesitation, Ivy Davis slipped out of the flat and into the arms of Mother Nature; more willing to face her wrath than an evening with the woman left inside.

Left to her own devices, Leo's well-being could be sustained for a significant period of time. And by that, a significant period of time would be about a week. One week alone with old friends and old flames would be a mess, but if she locked herself away and hid in her hotel room; she just might be able to make it.

Devising the plan in her mind, she began to think about who she would meet, who she would see, reasons to go, reasons to stay, and by far what she would wear. Every single small scenario filled her mind between having to go to the bathroom during the president's speech and having to either hold it or leave, to something as catastrophic as seeing *her* there.

Her body gave an involuntary chill and before long Leo craved the taste of smoke on her lips and in her mouth. Reaching into one of the many drawers of the oak table, she pulled out a cigarillo, placed it upon her chapped lips, and lit. The house smelled of sweet cream for about three minutes before the taste of tobacco flooded all of her senses, enhancing the others. That was always some way of writing, writing well, and writing something she was proud of.

The easy steps to be a successful writer were simple for Leotina Majors to explain.

Step One: Take away one or more of your senses.

Plug in earbuds and crank music up until you can't breathe or smoke something, pop something, do anything to take the edge off. And by anything, she did truly mean anything. Extreme lengths must be taken discreetly every once in a while, even for the more self classified preparatory drug addict.

Step Two: Tap into trauma.

Step two was what the *woman* was doing now, the thoughts of running into the one person she had been running from since sophomore year flooded her brain and she laid her head against the side cushions of the earl gray sofa. Every single piece of excellent writing stemmed from a sense of trauma. Each superhero is born from a tragic backstory. It takes pain to showcase the pleasure in life, it takes sprinkles of heaven to highlight the hellish nature of man, and it takes authors to force the presence of existential dread on its readers so they know to shut the book and live in the moment.

Smoke left her nose and she closed her eyes, enjoying the mundane silence. “Can you hear the silence? Good, now become part of the silence.” She quoted, the rain outside striking her window panes like the constant tapping of those in her brain. The constant rapping of her own fingers becoming raw under the weight of the coil in her chest, the utter need, the lustful desire to finish something, anything, to give back to the world making them bleed. That was all she heard. That was all she ever heard.

Step Three: Write.

And that was always the tricky bit.