

Copies?

There was a natural proclivity in Brianna to give voice to the things she feared, a neurological pastime currently exhibiting itself by shoving as much paper down her throat as physically possible in the next 40 seconds.

About 24 hours prior to her foray into pica, Brianna had no thoughts whatsoever about one day eating what would eventually be exactly six pages of ammonia-processed, non-edible paper made from the finest nondescript trees this side of the San Antonio fault line, but here she was, feverishly tearing pages with one red-rubbed hand while the other dutifully choked down already-processed shards.

Normally, Brianna would be halfway home by now, puke stained bus seat a constant reminder of how much she wanted her own car, but nothing had gone to plan. 24 hours ago, Brianna was alive and vengeful and giddy, talking with her locker-mate Wren about an upcoming date she had with Hubert Zimmerman, an absurdly-named but excellently boring member of the ping-pong team whom Brianna felt was in the perfect position to be manipulated into being her boyfriend. Mandibles clicking, Brianna had decided weeks ago what she needed was a “boyfriend” just long enough to convince her mom that she, a teenager, needed her own car to do cool teenager things, like have a boyfriend. Wren didn’t like her plan.

“Why can’t you just get a job.” She said dryly, opening their shared locker in the daily struggle to differentiate possessions.

Brianna rolled her eyes. She liked Wren, even admitted to her face she was pleased half the school was temporarily shut down after the police declared the south-east section “technically a meth lab” and forced a third of the student body to temporarily get cozy with their neighbors, but she lacked foresight.

“First of all,” Brianna said, as though Wren was deliberately obstructing justice, “ew, no. Second, what job around here is ever going to pay for a car in a *reasonable* amount of time? Exactly! And that leaves my *mom* who’s never going to budge unless she thinks I actually have a social life. Hubert--”

“I think his name’s Zack.”

Brianna blinked. “What?”

Wren shrugged, collected her homework. “I said ‘I think his name’s Zack’. Hubert’s his middle name.” Scratching her nose with cheetah-print nails, Wren tossed her bag over one boney shoulder and stared at Brianna as if the most absurd information hadn’t just dropped from her mouth like a rotten tooth.

Brianna gaped for a moment, forgetting her plan amidst the catch-up confusion, eyes screwing up as if sight itself was inhibiting her ability to comprehend, which made Wren chuckle. Brianna didn’t notice. Suddenly, as if rebooting her nervous system, Brianna tucked her long, pin-straight, brown hair behind unpierced ears and shook her head, immediately resetting her work.

“Wait, then *why* would he--”

“Go by ‘Hubert’? No idea.”

“How do you even *know* this? Are you two close?”

“Uhh...” Wren drawled, sucking her teeth. “Kinda? He was in a group project with me last semester, and his mom dropped him off this one time and called him ‘Zack’. Rest is history. Are you coming?”

“Yes, yes wait a second...” Brianna said, collecting her considerably thicker stack of notes and shoving them into a brutalist backpack, taking this opportunity to jump back into her explanation of why her genius plan with Zackary Hubert Zimmerman was, in fact, genius.

“See,” she said, walking to the parking lot, “he’s *perfect!* I take AP Calc with him and he’s *literally* the emptiest person I’ve ever met.”

"Empty?" Wren asked, face screwed up in disgust. "Like you think he's stupid?"

"No! Not *stupid*, just, like, uh..." Brianna stalled, trying to find the right words, hands pantomiming various shapes in order to conjure thought. "he's just so *malleable*, y'know? Like, he'll do anything that anyone says, even if they're not the teacher. The other day I gave him the wrong answer to a problem Mr. Phillips *just* explained and get this: *he wrote down my answer!* Because I was the last person he spoke to! Ah, he's *perfect!* Wren?"

Suddenly, Brianna realized she was walking alone. A few paces behind, Wren was standing with her arms crossed, lips pursed. Brianna sighed, prepared for her peers' inability to separate emotion from logic.

"Listen--"

"What's even the point?" Wren interrupted, dragging a hand through her hair. "And *don't* tell me I 'don't get it'. Just *what* is the point of all this trouble? Can't you convince your mom any other way that doesn't involve so much..." she paused, sneered, gestured vaguely at Brianna's person. "Creepiness?"

Brianna huffed, tossed her hair. "First of all, *rude*, and second, *no*, there is *not* another way around this. I don't know why, but my mom seems to think I need to be more social because she was or something? It's whatever-- I space out when she starts projecting, but the fact is I can't get a car until I convince my mom that I need one which, according to her, means "have places to go," and the fastest way to do that is get a boyfriend *without a car* for like three weeks! And anyway," she continued, grinning. "he already accepted, so it's settled."

Wren sighed, deciding she didn't care enough to be discontented with another's delusions, and continued down the hall. "Y'know," she said matter-of-factly, after a pause, "if you just went out more in general, this wouldn't be such a problem."

Brianna made a face. "Please, like *that's* happening. I spend too much time with these ingrates-- not you," she quickly added, "as it is. And anyway, it's not as though there's much to do around here."

Wren smiled shrewdly, repositioned her backpack. "Yeah, whatever, I guess so, but what's the point of the car then?"

Brianna raised one shapely eyebrow, highlighting the absurdity of the question. "I think I'd rather be left behind at Rapture than take a ride on that nausea-inducing hell-fest ever again. I am *not* ruining another pair of shoes."

Wren shrugged. "Okay, I guess. Wait, what happens if--" Brianna gave her a look. Wren gave one back. "Yeah, *if* you get the car? Can you even afford gas?"

Brianna flippantly waved her hand. "I'll get a job!"

And with that, the pair stepped out into the sweltering heat of late August Nevada, each immediately losing any will to prove the other wrong.

"Whatever." Wren said, shaking her head with a slightly exasperated sigh. "Just don't hurt anybody. Hubert's weird, but he seems alright."

Brianna smiled, rolled her eyes as the pair split directions, one towards a blue Honda Civic, the other a line of buses patiently devouring their willing sacrifices. "Oh, please, it's not like I'm marrying him or something. It'll be over in a second!"

"Yeah, yeah...wait, where're you two going anyways?" Wren suddenly asked, pausing by her car, shouting slightly to be heard over the many rumbling engines.

"Oh!" Brianna trotted over, excited to share. "He suggested going to some church thing, so yeah! His mom's driving us." She added at Wren's suddenly nervous expression, which softened slightly but still carried a tinge of suspicion.

"I guess that's better, but a *church thing*? That sounds awful."

Brianna waved her hand. "Oh, it'll be fine. And we're only going to be together 'a couple weeks so I've got to get this thing moving, and what better way than mimicry?"

Beaming, Brianna looked at Wren's less-than-enthused face and waited for a reply. When none came, she shrugged, said goodbye, and turned with a bounce in her step to bus four. Wren rubbed her eyes.

"What's the point..."

Hubert's mom drove a bright red Dodge Sprinter, the kind of van Brianna had only seen used to carry people to the airport for 20 bucks. Right now, it was pulling into their too-small driveway and most of Brianna's vision.

Quickly snapping shut the drapes before Hubert or his mom could catch her peering, Brianna grinned, turned back to the living room with a small bounce in her step, and adjusted her outfit, a floral skirt and blouse the sales lady assured her "looked churchy". Someone coughed. Brianna turned.

In the doorway of their kitchen, Brianna's mother was staring, eyebrow raised, small glass of wine in hand. They looked at each other. For a moment, neither spoke.

"You look nice!" her mom, whose name was Kimberly, finally said, taking a sip, though Brianna couldn't help but notice the smallest crease between her eyes.

She sighed loudly. "*What?*"

"Oh! Nothing, nothing..." her mom said, carefully waving her hands about. "It's just," she continued in a poor attempt to sound casual, "I never see you go out, much less with a *boy*, so..."

"Yes?" Brianna deadpanned, eyebrow raised. As expected, a great deal of hand flapping ensued, an exaggerated expression of compliance on her mother's lined face as she took a step back, picking up her glass. "It's nothing! I'm *glad* to see you out and about! It's nice! For a while I thought you'd *never* make any..." Noticing her daughter's heavy glare, Kimberly cleared her throat, repositioning. "Just..." she continued, taking a step closer, smiling in a way she hoped looked reassuring but in reality looked vaguely constipated, "wouldn't you rather go with a friend first? Just to have fun? Wren, right? She's your friend?"

Brianna rolled her eyes, irritably smoothed her hair down, resisted the urge to see what was taking Hubert so long.

"Mom, I barely even *know* her-- until the whole meth lab--"

"Meth lab incident."

"Yes, meth lab incident is sorted, she's a friend. I guess. Acquaintance. Listen." Brianna suddenly said, entering phase whatever of her plan (she had forgotten to keep track). Turning towards her mother with (hopefully) innocent eyes, she wrung her hands, smiled shyly, spoke with hushed, happy inexperience. "I'm really excited about this, okay? I think I might actually make some friends..."

At this, Kimberly's features softened. Her glass clinked against the piano, and lightly cupping Brianna's face, her own a mixture of motherly nervousness and love, pulled her daughter into a warm hug Brianna gladly reciprocated. Pulling back, the pair smiled at each other in the warm space between errands until, suddenly, Kimberly's face tightened like a draw-string bag, eyes narrowing in a half-hearted attempt to mask a suspicious smile. "*Is that so?*" she asked, voice a full octave too high. Brianna gasped, pulled away, genuinely affronted.

"*You don't believe me?*"

"No! *No*. I'm not saying *that*," her mom immediately backtracked, though Brianna couldn't help but notice she didn't seem *truly* concerned. "I just don't really know if *you* might not-- oh, look, there's the door!" And then she was gone, quickly opening the front door where, admittedly, someone had been quietly knocking.

Ducking into the kitchen to avoid looking like she had been waiting, Brianna swallowed her retort for a later date. Momentarily putting aside the monumental terror that was her mom not buying the act, she took a deep breath. "*What's important is showing her I need a car.*" she

reminded herself as Hubert and her mom exchanged awkward pleasantries in the living room, stalling as much as she wanted after her mother dared to correctly assume she was full of crap. “Nerve of that woman...” Brianna mumbled, checking her face in the microwave. Everything would be fine. Stilling her hands, she stepped out into the living room, smiling. “Sorry for the wait!”

Immediately, almost instinctively, Zackary Hubert Zimmerman smiled back.

He was on the shorter side but still a little taller than Brianna, with mousy brown hair and dark eyes. He wore a checkered, short sleeved collared shirt tucked into clean blue jeans and brown loafers, an outfit that made Brianna immediately grateful for her own. Being 16-ish, a smattering of acne dotted his forehead, but Brianna could hardly fault him for that, and frankly, it only added to the quiet, slightly lame thoughtfulness that originally piqued her Machiavellian interest.

“Hi!” Brianna said, trying to sound equal parts shy and enormously excited, a difficult feat to be sure, but to her it sounded alright, believable even. “Ready to go? Sorry if you’ve been waiting long.”

“Oh, no, it’s fine.” Hubert said in a slow, almost lackadaisical manner, hands laid peacefully by his side. She wondered if he was raised around old people or something, maybe morticians or museum curators.

“Well, I’ll just grab my purse and we can go!” She chirped, perhaps a little chirpier than intended, and headed to her room, predictably followed, like a greyhound from the starting gate,, by her whisper-shouting mom.

“*Bri! BRI!*”

“*What?*” She mockingly whisper-shouted back. Kimberly opened her mouth, but Brianna, intent on avoiding the expected bombardment of questions, leaned forward, spoke quickly: “We’re going on a date to some church thing. We’ll be back in time for school. No I *don’t* need you checking up on me-- it’s going to be, like, vegetable platters and Bible games or something. And *no*,” she added at her mother’s expression, “this *wasn’t* my first choice, but neither of us can drive and his parents are usually busy so here we are. Can I go?”

Kimberly didn’t respond, but imperceptibly squinched her eyebrows together which Brianna took as a yes. Kissing her cheek, Brianna quickly bid farewell and nipped back towards the living room, oblivious to a twitching smile nipping the edges of her mouth. As she entered, Hubert smiled easily, dark brown eyes crinkling at the edges, and stepped aside to let her leave first, as if apologetic for deigning to exist. “Shall we?”

“Course.” Brianna said nonchalantly, all but twirling her mustache. But as they walked to the idling car, Brianna mused over her plan. Could she really do this for three whole weeks? Before, it all seemed so brilliantly absurd, so creatively cunning, but now Hubert was here and they were going to...church? Suddenly, Brianna realized it was Wednesday. Initially, she had assumed a “church thing” was some additional, “fun” activity like she used to attend with her cousins, but both Hubert and his mom were wearing nice clothes, not something you’d expect at a casual activity. Mrs. Zimmerman in particular sported a dark purple dress, hair tied in a French twist. Suddenly annoyed at her own skirt and blouse, Brianna leaned over.

“Uh, Hubert?” she asked, strangely aware of how his name sounded in her mouth. He stopped, turned, eyes enormous, expectantly silent. “Um,” she continued, unsure of how to phrase her question-- was this insulting? Whatever, it couldn’t hurt to ask, and it was *Hubert*. He barely counted as human.

“So, what’s this thing again?” she asked, hoping that sounded acceptably vague.

Hubert stared for a moment, slight knit in his brow, then almost immediately softened. He shrugged, as if unsure, but spoke directly: “It’s just service.” he said, as if that explained everything. Brianna waited for further elaboration but none came. She nodded slowly, walked to the car.

“Here, honey.” Mrs. Zimmerman said softly, a dreamy, listless woman Brianna couldn’t help but imagine as the human version of a goose down pillow, politely ushering her from the car before violently wrenching the broken door closed with an aluminum *SLAM!*

Blanching slightly, Brianna smiled. “Thank you.”

Mrs. Zimmerman nodded.

Beneath the scorching sunlight, surprisingly welcome after the car’s heavy air conditioning, Brianna took a deep breath. They were parked in front of a huge, corrugated steel warehouse, unadorned except for a beige paint job and a collection of potted cacti clustered around a fiberglass door. A suddenly nostalgic Brianna was reminded of the church she and her mom attended back in Carlin.

“Ready?” Hubert asked.

“*God!*” she yelped, spinning around to see a recently-materialized Hubert looking much more concerned by her outburst than any other high schooler might have been.

“Sorry!” she said before he could apologize, embarrassed at her uncharacteristic twitchiness, but Hubert only shrugged, placed a hand on her shoulder in an almost grandfatherly manner, and turned her towards the door. “It’s alright,” he said, “I shouldn’t have popped up behind you.”

Brianna could feel her temperature rising, a smile spreading across her face. “It’s okay--” she started, but Mrs. Zimmerman called her son and he dutifully answered, which Brianna thought was a little lame, but whatever. Leaving the pair behind, nervous she would soon start noticeably sweating without suitable accommodation, Brianna continued towards the entrance, then froze. Parked just outside the bland building was a shiny black Porsche and not one but *two* acid-green Lamborghinis nestled beside minivans and 1990’s stick-shifts. She stared, confusion twisting her face into a sneer.

“What’s--” she started to say, hearing her hosts approaching, but was quickly ushered into the blessedly cool interior by Hubert and his mom, each apologizing for the wait, and immediately forgot her question amid cool air.

Eyes adjusting to the gloom, Brianna saw the inside to be as underwhelming as the out, nothing but folding chairs and bare walls filling the surprisingly large space. But as they moved further in, Brianna saw the pulpit, or what she assumed to be the pulpit, and her head tilted. It was ordinary for the most part, maybe raised higher than most she’d seen, but surrounded by a dozen huge, gold thrones. They were built on a sloping platform, almost like a wheelchair ramp, so each subsequent throne was higher than the previous until the very last was nearly five feet in the air, circling the pulpit.

Before she could take further stock of the situation, she was suddenly engulfed by a large group of friendly, chattering birds, members of the congregation, all shaking her hand warmly then moving away, making her feel a bit like the suddenly-vacated telephone wire beneath the feet (talons?) of a thousand small birds.

“Here’s where we usually sit.” Hubert said, pulling her from her reverie, gently guiding with the barest graze of the elbow towards a few middle seats, not near his mom who was multiple rows away, idly chatting with another woman.

Slightly flushed, Brianna nodded and filed down the row, unsure of what to expect but not unhappy. Sitting down, knees pressed tightly together, she twiddled her thumbs, reminded herself not to tear her nails.

“Hey.”

Brianna looked over, perhaps a tad faster than normal, to see Hubert smiling gently, his ping-pong physique and slightly dopey mom haircut giving him the air of an apologetic orderly, maybe a scallion kept too long in someone’s pocket. “You okay?” he asked, sounding as though he might actually want to know the answer. Brianna shrugged, deciding her questions weren’t worth a whole *thing*, especially since she was mostly surrounded by strangers.

"It's nothin--"

"Oh!" Hubert interrupted, craning his neck to see past the pulpit as the rest of the congregation became noticeably quieter. "*I suppose it's beginning.*" Brianna thought, curiously trying to see what was piquing Hubert's interest, but at that moment a man in his late 40s emerged from a side door near the lowest throne. Proudly walking towards the pulpit, face strangely somber as if contemplating the mysteries of the universe, he carefully dragged a palm across the side of his thick, dark hair. He wore a dark blue suit and matching tie with a small, bright orange pocket square poking elegantly from his breast. Standing behind the lectern, he paused a moment while the congregation remained inconspicuous, two giant hands, emblazoned with what Brianna assumed to be class rings, resting atop the cheap wooden stand. For a moment nothing happened, as if the building itself was pausing mid-chew. Brianna wondered fleetingly if they had gotten the wrong address until, suddenly, he threw his hands in the air, smiling resplendently.

"Good morning!" he bellowed, making Brianna jump. The congregation remained silent.

"What a wonderful day!" he continued, joyfully infectious, and as he spoke more men filed in from the side door, each better dressed than the last, sitting in heavy, wooden chairs directly behind the pulpit, not, Brianna noted, on the thrones. Turning to Hubert for some sort of clarification, she was met instead with a stolidly focused profile and swallowed the thought, surprised at how *still* he was.

"Children!" the preacher said, softly this time, without bravado, but still with the same inflection that made Brianna feel as though he watched *Lord of the Rings* too many times. "In my hands I hold a book!" he called, voice rising and falling seemingly at random, presenting a plain black book high above his head. "This *book!* Is the SALVATION of the world! *This* book is THE salvation of THE world! It has ALWAYS existed! We must spread this word! And YOU!" he suddenly shrieked, voice pitching far higher than Brianna would've assumed possible from a man his size, "Are the *reason* this work is conTINued! Con-tin-UED!"

By this point Brianna was sweating and Hubert, along with the rest of the congregation, began gently swaying back and forth to the weirdly inflected words of the pastor. Brianna shrank into herself. On one side was Hubert, but to every other was someone else, and the rows were too close to comfortably leave. Where was Mrs. Zimmerman? Glancing around, Brianna spotted her swaying figure multiple rows away, a dreamy, electrified expression on her thin face. Brianna turned back and settled in her seat, realizing it didn't matter much, considering who drove.

Not wanting to join the rhythmic swaying though no one seemed to notice, not even Hubert, she focused instead on the preacher whose face was also becoming similarly speckled. "With your GENEROUS donations," he declared, "we are able to *translate* this *book* into ALL languages, even THOSE *NOT conceived!* YES my children, your donations make this WORK possiBLE! SISTER KATE!"

Pits all but awash, Brianna watched as the crowd suddenly let out a series of whoops and whistles in apparent jubilation of this announcement, though she couldn't possibly fathom what "languages not conceived" even *meant*, much less how they would be distributed, or whom they would benefit. But now, a woman in her late 60s, assumedly sister Kate, stood and the crowd clapped. Glowing, she joined the preacher who placed a strong, familiar arm around her shoulders and raised his free hand, as if heralding the skies themselves.

"This sister has GIVEN four HUNDRED dollars! Take your *place* sister!" Cheered on by an increasingly frenetic crowd, sister Kate took a seat in the lowest throne and practically *purred*. For the next 20 minutes or so, this process repeated until all 12 thrones were occupied by exponentially smug members of the congregation, ending with a Mr. Blaine who had apparently donated \$2000 that week, nearly a full month's pay. Sitting five feet above the congregation, tight little smile on his wrinkled face, Brianna could almost feel the crackle of radiation wafting off him.

Stapled to her chair, she tried to think of nothing, but all she could see was her stupid car. She had printed out pictures of a 1996 Dodge Viper GTS, blue with white stripes, stuck them in the mirror in her locker. Wren had even said it looked cool. Her wallet, trapped in her small, stupid purse, held a picture of that dream. She'd imagined speeding along, fast enough to blind side a jet, windows down, hair free (not in her mouth), sunglasses gleaming, alone. Sometimes, she wasn't alone. Sometimes Hubert was there. A weight dropped through her throat and splashed in her stomach.

Brianna slowly looked over, but Hubert didn't seem to notice. Eyes gleaming, shoulders gently rolling, he was oblivious to anything but the preacher who had, after assigning the thrones, raised his hands high, head tilted upwards. There was a long pause.

"SPEAK!" he suddenly shouted, throwing out-stretched, veiny hands towards a random member of the congregation, reminding Brianna unintentionally of Gandalf. Immediately, as if struck by lightning, the person in question, a man no older than 30, stood and wailed, arms flailing, torso convulsing, blathering nonsense, shaking and screaming until the preacher finally released his spell and the man fell back into his chair, panting, and the process repeated. For more than an hour Brianna sat, marinating in her own juices, as people, when compelled, stood and screamed, interjected occasionally by a passionate testimony from the pastor about the "book" which he never read from.

She didn't understand how this literal book or its copies could have existed from the beginning of time, before language, but still require money to fix its inadequate marketing, nor how, not to beat a dead horse, "languages not yet conceived" could be of any use to anyone. So she sat quietly and when Hubert was chosen by the preacher's flying fingers she watched with the rest of the congregation, transfixed.

Screaming, shouting, shaking, Zackary Hubert Zimmerman moved with a power Brianna had never seen, saw him wail as though his eternal soul was burning from the inside out, as though these screams had been waiting God knows how long to burst forth, guts scorched and charred. His hands, thin and sallow, flew like snapping flags, his eyes, bugging to the point where Brianna thought they might pop from his skull, crawled the length and breadth of the building, never resting, not quite seeing. His mouth opened and closed with gulping, stretching movements, every glistening tooth made visible. In her head, Brianna was at school and Hubert was asking for help on a calculus assignment, his big, weird eyes and quiet, steady mannerisms speaking to a depth of character Brianna didn't understand. Now, he shook and howled and gnashed his teeth, tore at his clothes, sweat pouring down his forehead, not yet old enough to drive, strangely secure. Alive. Brianna wondered if she had ever felt that secure. Right now, she mostly felt sick.

Eventually, service ended after almost two hours of "speaking" interjected with much-deserved breaks where the pastor talked about the "book" and how it existed beyond human understanding but also needed a great deal of money in order for people to experience its wonder while never actually opening it.

Accepting her current situation, Brianna's new mission was clear: leave. However, this was harder than expected with Mrs. Zimmerman nowhere in sight and a feverish Hubert only looking to talk loudly with other members.

Clutching her purse, Brianna opted to awkwardly stand amidst strangers, contemplating escape via spoon-dug tunnel until a pretty young woman, apparently smart enough to not wear makeup, approached her.

"Hi!" she said, voice full of feminine congeniality, dark blonde hair falling over her shoulders, yellow blouse making Brianna think of any small-town insurance salesperson. Against her better judgment, Brianna *did* immediately feel more at ease, but that might have just been relief at someone acknowledging her existence.

"I'm Claire." the woman continued warmly. "You came with Zack and McKenzie?"

"What? No, I came with H--" Brianna began, then realized. "Ah, yes. Yes I did."

Claire smiled, looking nothing like the screaming worshippers Brianna witnessed mere minutes previously.

“Okay!” she said, placing a motherly hand over Brianna’s. “Let’s get you taken care of. Zack?” she called before Brianna could ask what that meant.

“Yes?” Hubert said, emerging from the crowd, making Brianna jump. He smiled sheepishly. “Sorry.”

Claire gave Brianna’s hand a squeeze. “Want to escort-- what was your name again?”

Brianna glanced at Hubert.

“Brianna.”

“Oh, that’s lovely. Off you go!” And with that, Claire wandered off and Brianna was led away, Hubert by her side. He looked fine. His hair was neat again, his manner relaxed. Besides a little redness around the temples and a slight wrinkle in his shirt, it was as if everything from ten minutes ago was some bizarre dream. At this point, Brianna wasn’t unwilling to rule out the possibility.

Smiling uncomplicatedly, Hubert gently took her through the crowd to the same door the preacher and his men entered from, and before she could think of what to do, walked inside, Hubert following.

Mrs. Zimmerman was already there, along with Claire and the preacher and some other people Brianna didn’t recognize. Unfurnished but for a table and few chairs, Brianna was led to one where she dutifully sat, bouncing her leg. Across her mind, a 1996 Dodge Viper GTS, blue with white stripes, burst through the beige walls and ran screeching down the street. In reality, the preacher stood and shook her hand with both of his, the sheen on his face mimicking the shine of his hair.

“Sign here, and here...” Mrs. Zimmerman said, indicating a sheaf of papers, Hubert’s comforting presence hovering just out of sight. Someone was touching her back.

The questions on the papers were ridiculous. What was her name, age, weight, gender, phone number, social security, etc. She lied about everything except her first and last name. Down the table, next to an indicating Clarie, a boy, hardly 14, was also signing papers, grinning excitedly the whole time, slightly sweaty. Brianna looked away, morphed her face into a respectful smile and, when finished, leaned towards Mrs. Zimmerman, telling her she loved coming but had to leave to get enough sleep for school tomorrow.

Mrs. Zimmerman and Hubert frowned, looking more sad than annoyed, saying service wasn’t technically over for a few more hours, but agreed. The car ride back was quiet but not unpleasant, during which Brianna faked multiple polite yawns. Arriving home, she slowly removed herself from the car, Mrs. Zimmerman assisting with shutting the door again, and walked, not ran, back home, thanking them for the trip. Hubert waved from the car, Brianna waved back.

Inside, she found her mom watching reality TV and crocheting, asking about the date. Brianna said nothing, simply curled up on the couch and laid her head on her mom’s lap, who in turn said nothing, stroking her daughter’s hair.

That night, lying in bed, Brianna thought about God and the Bible and stuff, something relatively unlike her, until suddenly, everything became clear:

“*You stupid bitch!*” Brianna hissed aloud in the dark, heart heavy, eyes wild, breath short and quick, covers pulled tight to her chin.

—

School the next day was weird, but Brianna didn’t care. She navigated the linoleum hallways like a nudist covered in knives-- highly aware of her body. She didn’t speak to anyone on purpose, avoided Hubert like the plague, and kept staring at every piece of paper for a needlessly extended amount of time, which probably attracted more attention than if she’d just walked away, but it paid off and soon 3:00 arrived without incident.

Hunched by her locker, haphazardly shoving everything in her bag, Brianna made no plans further than getting on the bus and doing this again tomorrow. If she could only--

“Hey.”

“*Oh my God!*” Brianna screeched, leaping forward so suddenly her head made sharp contact with the locker door, sending her falling backwards with a warping, metallic crash.

“*Brianna!*” Wren said, laughing, leaning down to see if she was okay. “What the heck?”

“It’s nothing! I’m fine, I--”

“Hi Brianna.” said Hubert, appearing from the crowd, and Brianna froze, mouth dry; in his hands was a small, neat sheaf of papers. Reaching forward, she clutched Wren’s hand, the latter looking quite confused, glancing between the pair. Brianna said nothing, not that it mattered.

“We were looking over your papers,” Hubert said, as though presenting a petition concerning the theme for homecoming, “and some things were wrong. I tried calling you but someone in Las Vegas picked up?”

Brianna stared, throat caught in a vice, still on her butt.

Hesitantly clutching the papers, *her* papers, Hubert smiled and, Brianna realized with a sickening jolt, did so genuinely. He was truly confused as to why this was happening. Actually trying to fix the problem. Certain she had no ill intentions.

For a moment Brianna gaped, forgot about her car and Wren and her mom and the papers and even Hubert. Then, in a sudden, spontaneous flash, flung forward and snatched them right out of his hands.

She didn’t look back to see if she was being followed, just ran until she found somewhere safe-- the gym. Slamming the door behind her, Brianna spun for a moment, terrified, looking for another place to hide, then, as none leapt to her aid, fell to the floor and ate the papers up, splitting her lip in the process.

It was disgusting, but by the time Wren eventually chased her down, they were gone, chewed and swallowed, already pulp.

“*What is happening?*” Wren shrieked, barely audible. Brianna didn’t bother answering, feeling her stomach gurgle. “I missed the bus...” she muttered numbly.

Wren boggled. “*God*, did you *eat* them?! And the *bus*?! *I’ll* drive you! Don’t know why we haven’t done this *before*...!” and on and on she went. Hubert was nowhere to be found.