Past Appearances

By Jacqueline Scanlon

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Instructor/Thesis Advisor: Prof. Lionel C. Bascom
Department of Writing, Linguistics and Creative Process
Thesis Abstract

In a world where appearances are everything, 18-year-old Alexis is struggling to find herself beyond the brand names and fancy cars her parents buy her. With an alcoholic mom, gay brother, and heartless father, Alexis must find her place within it all. But will the pressure of her world overtake Alexis and finally make her crack? In this novella of self-discovery, Alexis will fight to become the person she dreams of being, while learning hidden secrets about her family.
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Prologue

She stared down at her reflection in the blade of the seven-inch butcher knife in her hand. Tears crept out of the corner of her eyes and fell onto the knife, blurring her reflection in the stainless steel. Wiping her eyes on her sleeves, she lifted her shaking hand and pressed the blade against her forearm. She clenched her teeth and tried to conjure up the courage to apply pressure against her skin, and expose the river of blood beneath. Just as she was about to cut herself, she heard the front door open. She quickly got up from the toilet seat, rolled the knife into a sweatshirt and brought it into her bedroom to hide in the closet. Maybe next time, she thought.
The More you Use your Eyes, the Less you See

Alexis pulled her black Range Rover into the concrete driveway of her house and threw it in park. She exhaled, her blonde bangs fluttering above her perfectly arched eyebrows, and grabbed her schoolbooks from the leather passenger seat. She walked up the red brick walkway, framed by green grass on either side, while passing the canary yellow mailbox proudly displaying their last name, “The Stantons”. Here we go again, Alexis thought with a sigh as she opened the front door.

“Mom, I’m home,” she yelled.

Silence answered her back. She threw her Prada backpack on the kitchen table and opened the fridge, searching for something to eat. Something sounding like feet shuffling against a carpet reached Alexis’ ears as she shut the fridge, not finding anything satisfying.

There was a note on the front of the fridge from her mom, saying she went to the grocery store. Who could that be, she thought, walking toward the living room.

She heard frantic whispering and the sound of a window opening as she opened the living room door. Alexis’ eyes grew wide with shock as she watched her brother handing a guy his pants as the unknown boy climbed out of the window. The two stood still as statues when they saw her. She pivoted on her heels and left the room before the swinging door even shut from when she entered.

“Alexis, look, umm, what you just saw,” her brother, James, said, his face filling with blood.
Alexis turned to face her older brother, her face as red from anger as James’ face was flush from embarrassment.

“You know you can’t bring guys here,” Alexis said, her hazel eyes glaring into James. “What if mom or dad came home early? Or what if a neighbor saw?”

“Relax,” he said, pulling a white t-shirt over his chiseled frame. “First of all, you know mom and dad stick to their schedules every fucking day. Secondly, a neighbor seeing Tyler come into the house wouldn’t just assume we’re dating. Just chill.”

“Whoa, wait a minute. You two are dating?”

“Yeah,” James said, a smile coming over his face creating dimples in his cheeks. “We’ve only been seeing each other for a little over a month. I was going to tell you, but I wanted to make sure I really liked him before I let him meet my fantastic sister.”

“You’re good. I was going to get mad before the compliment.”

James laughed and shook his head, the kitchen light reflecting off his blonde hair like sunrays.

“So, you’re not even a little surprised?” James asked.

“You told me you were gay three years ago, it’s not so surprising that you have a boyfriend. Seeing you half naked is a surprise, not going to lie. I just don’t want dad to find out.”

“He won’t, don’t worry,” he said. “I won’t bring Tyler back here. I promise.”

“All right, sounds good,” Alexis said, messing James’ hair with her fingers.

The siblings walked back into the living room and saw a now fully-dressed Tyler still standing by the window.
“I figured she already saw me, so I could stay and give you a kiss goodbye,” Tyler said, a goofy grin on his face.

“You boys have fun,” Alexis said, squeezing her brother’s hand and leaving the room.

Alexis made her way to the oak staircase and climbed up to her bedroom. She opened the sleek, white bedroom door that opened into her huge bedroom, complete with a bay view window. The carpet resembled the coat of a polar bear, plush throughout even though it was 4-year-old carpet. Her mother spent the days cleaning the house, which included steam vacuuming 11 carpeted rooms in the house. Alexis shut her door and fell onto the red comforter covering her king size bed. She lay with her arms above her head and long legs dangling off the edge, eyes closed. So he has a boyfriend, she thought, a tear rolling down her cheek.

I’m glad he’s happy, she told herself firmly. Just because I’m unhappy doesn’t mean he should be. Alexis kicked off her slip on heels and got under her crimson blanket, the only piece of décor her mother allowed her to put in the room. James and Alexis thought of each other as prisoners of war in the fake perfection of the house. They were totally different people when their parents weren’t around, and not nearly as happy. As awful as it was, Alexis couldn’t deny that she fed off of James’ unhappiness, dwelling in the fact that she wasn’t in it alone. Behind her cheerleading, blonde hair, and smile, Alexis felt like her soul was depressed. James understood this feeling. Not anymore, she thought, hating herself for being so selfish.

The front door slammed shut, and Alexis’ heart turned to what felt like melted butter. She jumped up from her bed and rushed to the window, where she saw Tyler...
running across the green lawn, blowing kisses back at the house. She sighed with relief, knowing her father didn’t see the couple. Alexis glanced at the alarm clock, blaring “3:32” in neon green lighting. Time for Dr. Rohen, she thought, sulking to her walk in closet to change into her cheerleading outfit. She grabbed her duffel bag containing pompons, a change of clothes, and her diary, and with one look in the mirror, full smile in place, she opened her bedroom door and headed downstairs.

She reached the bottom of the stairs and saw her mother, father, and James talking in the kitchen.

“How are you going to get better if you don’t practice more,” her dad, Derek, said to James, spit flying out of his mouth. “Are you trying to embarrass me or something? I can’t have my son missing catches and fumbling the football like a faggot in front of the whole goddamn town.”

“You’re right, dad,” James said, his eyes focused on a spot over his father’s Armani clothed shoulder. “I’ll practice more. I want to get better.”

“I’m leaving,” Alexis said, turning the door handle.

Her mother waved bye, almost spilling her martini on the floor. Her father looked annoyed that he was interrupted.

Alexis grinned wide and fake, while James made the motion of wrapping a rope around his throat two times and hanging himself. Not a bad idea, she thought, walking out of the house while her mom turned to get a refill.
Not Strapped in

Alexis climbed back into the Range Rover, a 16th birthday present from her parents. The kids at school were envious of her shiny new car. This is exactly what her parents, mainly her father, wanted—people jealous of the family. Alexis knew he didn’t buy anybody anything without consideration to his own agenda.

She put the car in reverse, passing her brother’s Lexus, and pulled out onto the street. Dr. Rohen’s office was out of town, about a half hour away in Norwich. She knew nobody from her rich, Clinton neighborhood would visit the middle class neighborhood of Norwich, so her therapy sessions would remain a secret. Dr. Rohen guest lectured at Alexis’ school, Clinton High. She discussed how teens often have suicidal feelings, feel like they don’t belong, or feel like they don’t have anybody to talk to. Most of the kids in the audience scoffed and threw paper airplanes around while the doctor talked, but there was something about Dr. Rohen’s smile and the passion behind her voice when she talked about her work, despite the fact that the majority of the students weren’t listening. The doctor gave everyone a bag filled with informative pamphlets, and her card. Most of the kids threw it in the trash once they left the auditorium. Alexis called Dr. Rohen the next day, asking for a meeting. After a single session of Alexis telling the doctor about her family, Dr. Rohen decided to do therapy pro bono sessions with Alexis. Three months later, Alexis was attending regular therapy sessions every Monday and Thursday while her parents thought she was at cheerleading practice. Two days a week Alexis really was at cheerleading practice, but her parents thought she practiced four times a week. They loved that she was so motivated and hardworking.
Alexis pulled her car into the parking garage attached to the building where Dr. Rohen’s office resided. She got out of the car, slung her duffel bag over her shoulder, and slammed the door. She clicked the automatic lock button on her key chain, and headed toward the elevator, her footsteps echoing off of the cement walls of the parking garage.

Alexis got off the elevator on the third floor and entered the familiar office of Dr. Rohen. The walls were painted a deep red, Alexis’ favorite color, with hardwood floors throughout. The receptionist’s desk was white and horseshoe shaped, with cat knick-knacks covering the shelf behind it. The receptionist, Tara, sat in a black swivel chair, always smiling her slightly crooked, but endearing smile.

“Good to see you again, Alexis,” she said, tossing her black braids over her shoulder.

Tara embodied true beauty in Alexis’ eyes. She had dark, smooth skin with plump lips. Her long eyelashes framed deep, brown eyes that always gave Alexis a warm feeling. Even thought Tara always wore black, professional clothing, she always accessorized with bright turquoise jewelry.

“Hey Tara,” Alexis said. “Is she ready for me?”

“Yep, you can go right in dear.”

Alexis opened the mahogany door and stepped into Dr. Rohen’s main office. Her wooden desk always had fresh lilacs in a vase that filled the room with a light, summery scent.

“Alex, have a seat,” Dr. Rohen said, gesturing to the red couch sitting against the beige walls.
Dr. Rohen’s appearance spewed sophistication from head to toe. She wore a white, v-neck sweater that ended at her narrow hips, leading to a black pencil skirt. Her hair was cut into a short, dark brown bob that framed her heart shaped face and bounced when she walked. The thing Alexis liked most about Dr. Rohen, or Kathy as she preferred to be called, was that she was so real. She grew up in Brooklyn, New York and worked to get herself through school. Her mother died when she was 14 years old, and her father worked so much that he barely had time for her. Kathy created her own success and made herself who she is. Alexis admired that spirit, and sometimes felt stupid for her own problems, when Kathy seemed to have it so much worse.

“So,” Kathy said, pulling up a chair next to the couch. “How was your day?”

“It was alright,” said Alexis. “I went to school, came home, saw my brother fooling around with his new boyfriend, and then came here.”

“Oh your brother has a boyfriend?”

“Yep”. Alexis looked down at the nails her mother made her get manicured every weekend.

“Does it bother you?”

“No. I mean, I’m really happy for James. He said he really likes the guy, and he’s happy, so I’m happy for him.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yeah, I just don’t want dad to find out. I think it’s a big risk, especially bringing him to the house. He stayed back a year so he’s going to be graduating with me in June in three months, and can do whatever he wants once he moves out. He’s crazy and he’ll do
anything to protect his image. His image includes what his family is like. I don’t think a gay son is really in his master plan, ya know?”

“He would get mad, but couldn’t it be worth it for James to be honest?”

“No,” Alexis said, moving her gaze from her fingernails to Kathy’s eyes. “He would make his life hell.”

“How?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Don’t you think it would help if you did? Alex, you’ve done so well these past couple of months, but when we get to the subject of your dad and his temper, you immediately clam up. Why?”

“I just hate him, ok? He’s awful, and everything is about him. He would do anything to protect his image, even if it hurt his own family. He would make Tyler disappear.”

“What do you mean, hurt him?”

Alexis chuckled nervously and averted her eyes. “No, I don’t think he has the stomach for something like that. I think he’d probably pay Tyler’s family to make him leave James alone. Money is a very powerful tool, that much I know.”

“When do you think you first learned that?”

“Oh I’ve always known. Everyone wants to be my friend because of the car I drive, who my parents are, what I look like, and the money in my wallet. They don’t know me, or care to know me. No matter how many times I am rude to someone, they still want to be my friend based on this outer shell. It’s depressing.”

“Do you think it would help if you did have a friend?”
“Why would I want to be friends with people who would let me walk all over them? They don’t have an ounce of character or self-respect in them.”

“So you choose to be alone?”

“I’m the only person I can count on. And James. Although he’ll probably be much busier now that he has Tyler.”

“Is that why it upsets you? You don’t think James will have time for you?”

“James is my best friend, and the only person who really gets me. I guess I’m selfish and just want him to myself. Plus I always thought that we could live together once we graduate, but now he’ll probably want to live with his boyfriend.”

“You aren’t selfish, Alex. You two have just been dependent on each other for years because nobody else understands your home life except for one another. I think you should get to know other people. Try giving people a chance.”

“I have tried, and it didn’t work.”

“When did you try?”

“I think the sessions over for today.”

“Alex, don’t walk out.”

“I’m done with this. You don’t get it.” Alexis stood up and grabbed her bag.

“So help me get it.” Kathy stood up and grabbed Alexis’ arm.

“Don’t ever touch me,” Alexis said, her eyes piercing and her mouth tight.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you. I apologize for touching your arm. Please don’t leave.”

“I’m not in the mood today, doc. I’ll see you Monday.”
Alexis opened the door and made her way across the waiting room, ignoring Tara’s goodbye.

She sat in her car with her head pressed against the leather steering wheel and cried for ten minutes straight. Why can’t I be normal? She thought, wiping the mascara from underneath her swollen eyes. She had to drive around aimlessly for 45 minutes before heading home, or her parents wouldn’t believe she went to practice. Alexis drove through the crowded city, watching the happy couples eating at the local diners, and families heading to Friendly’s for dessert. She hoped to herself that these people appreciated the fact that people loved them. Then again, she thought, they could all be wearing masks like me.

She pulled into her driveway around 5:30 and turned off the ignition. Alexis grabbed her duffel bag and walked back up the walkway to her house. The sun was a soft yellow, casting a glow on Alexis’ face. She stopped in that spot, feeling the heat on her face and listened to the birds singing in the distance. A loud crash from inside of the house pulled her out of the rare serene state she was in. Alexis shook her head from side to side and opened the front door to see her father’s face as red as the tomatoes in the salad bowl on the table.

“See, here she is,” her mom said, her eyes wide with fear.

“It’s about time,” her father said, snarling. “What took you so long?”

“I was at practice. I always come back around this time.”

“Well isn’t that nice?” her father said, condescendingly. “I’m starving.”

Alexis washed her hands in the kitchen sink and sat down at the table. She stared off into space as she mechanically chewed through her steak.
“You probably shouldn’t finish that steak, Alexis,” her father said. “You’ll want to continue to fit into your uniform.”

“Being fit is important,” her mother said, nodding her head.

“She looks great,” James said, glaring at his father.

“Yeah, and she’ll want to continue looking great, so she shouldn’t eat too much.”

“I’m not hungry anyway,” Alexis said, pushing her half-eaten steak away without making eye contact with anyone at the table.

“There ya go,” her father said. “That’s the motivation that makes a father proud.”

He’s proud that I barely eat, she thought. What a fantastic father.

Once they finished dinner, her mom poured herself a glass of merlot and started in on the dishes, while her father went to his study to do some work on his most recent case. Alexis raised her eyebrows at James and gave him a quick grin before walking up to her bedroom. She changed into pink sweatpants, a white tank top, and climbed into bed with her current book Ophelia Speaks, which was a collection of stories from teen girls around the world about their lives. The topics ranged from suicide to bulimia, and the amount of stories that Alexis could relate to scared her. She was getting into one about anorexia when she heard a knock at the door.

“Come in,” she said, with little effort at raising her voice.

James walked in, holding a plate with a turkey sandwich in the center.

“Here you go, my love. Everyone likes a girl that eats,” he said, looking down at the title of the story she was reading Lighter than Air. “I guess I’ll have to watch and make sure you actually eat it.”
“Oh please, you know how much I love food,” she said, biting into the sandwich. “It’s the suicide stories I relate to.”

“Don’t joke about stuff like that,” he said, the smile disappearing from his face. “I would never forgive you for leaving me by myself.”

“You’d have Tyler.”

“Tyler isn’t you, and he doesn’t know everything you do. You’re my sister, and I’d like to not have to visit you at a cemetery until you’re 101-years-old.”

“Oh 101, huh? You think I’ll live that long?”

“I’m sure of it. You’re a fighter,” he said, shoving his sister. “Plus, you go to practice four times a week. That’s a good heart booster.”

“Yeah.” She looked down at her empty plate. “Well you better bring this down to mom before she leaves the kitchen. You know how she counts the plates to make sure she has every dirty one clean and in the cabinet.”

“Yeah, she’s a freak,” he said, taking the plate from Alexis. “Hey..is there anything you want to tell me?”

“No,” she said, looking at him from the corner of her eye. “Is there anything you want to ask me about?”

“Nope, just wondering,” he said, walking to the door. “Enjoy your book. See ya in the morning.”

He closed the door harder than usual, leaving Alexis wondering what he meant. Did he know she was in therapy? How could he know that? It was probably the suicide joke, she thought.
She looked over at her alarm clock displaying “7:30”. Alexis couldn’t get over how pathetic it was that her family rarely said a word to each other after seven at night. Everyone just goes off into separate rooms, and individual worlds.

“Pathetic, pathetic, pathetic,” she muttered under her breath as she walked to the bathroom to brush her teeth and wash her face. Shuffling her way down the hall, her feet cold against the hardwood floor, she looked at the framed photos hanging on the walls. The middle picture was a family portrait, the four of them smiling bright and fake. On either side of the portrait were two collages her mom made of pictures the family took on vacations. Alexis and James weren’t older than five in all of the pictures, back when they actually had fun together. This was before her father got a promotion and her mother got her drinking problem.

Alexis shut her door and climbed back under her blanket. She pulled out her diary from her duffel bag and grabbed a pen. Kathy wanted Alexis to bring her diary to therapy so they could discuss what she writes. The doctor told Alexis to write in her diary at least every other day, but on days that she stormed out of a session, she had to write that night about why she did so. She put the pen to the paper.

3/11

Today I left the office again. I don’t really know why. Well, I guess I do, but it’s for a couple of different reasons. James is my best friend, and I’m afraid he’ll be taken away from me. The doc and I talked about that, but the other reason is that I’m truly afraid of what dad would do if he found out. I don’t want James to find someone, fall in love, and then have him taken away. I know this from experience.
Alexis paused to wipe the tears that were falling down her face. She always tried to avoid the subject she was about to write about. She exhaled air and picked up her pen.

I had a boyfriend when I was 16. His name was Dylan. He had brown, messy hair, a crooked smile, and a laugh that never failed to put a smile on my face. We dated until I was 17. I met his parents and he was getting sick of the excuses for why he couldn’t meet mine. I finally told my parents that there was a guy in my life that I loved very much. Mom was ecstatic, in the way a happy alcoholic is, but dad looked uneasy. He asked his last name. That’s it. Not how long we were dating, if I was happy, not even his first name. Dad wanted to know who his family was. I told him his name was Dylan Mitchell. Dad told him to bring Dylan over, since he didn’t recognize the last name. Dylan came over, looking so handsome in a new suit, with his shaggy brown hair slicked back for the occasion. We had dinner and dad asked him a bunch of questions like where he lived, what his parents do, and what college he planned to attend. Dylan lived in a trailer park in Norwich, his mom worked at a department store and his dad was a mechanic, and he didn’t think he would have the money for college. Dad wasn’t impressed. A week later, Dylan called me and said his parents came into some money, he wasn’t sure how, and were moving across country to California. He even got early acceptance to UCLA. Dylan knew where the money came from. I could tell by the guilty tone in his voice. I confronted dad for the first time in my life. I yelled that he got rid of the single most important thing in my meaningless existence. Dad slapped me across the face and said if the neighbors heard me, he’d do a lot worse than slap me.

That’s why I can’t talk about not letting people in, or my dad’s temper. And why I think dad will do more than just freak out if he finds out about Tyler.
Alexis threw her journal on the floor and cried into her white pillow until she fell asleep.

**Stroke of Talent**

Alexis wasn’t the type of person that had vivid dreams every night, but that night was an exception. She dreamed she was walking in an open field with lilacs growing from the random trees. The smell hit her nostrils, and she smiled- every dimple in her face prominent. She closed her eyes and felt the sun warming her cold skin. She rubbed her hands against her arms, attempting to help the sun warm them up. Something sticky was in the palm of her hand where she rubbed. She opened her eyes and saw the skin falling off of her flesh. A scream escaped her dry throat as the skin continued falling off the five feet five inches of her body. The green meadow turned brown, and the lilac trees fell into the ground. She stood in the middle of the gray field, with her skin completely stripped away exposing her insides. Instead of seeing red flesh, her insides were darker than the field around her. A black liquid came pouring out of her, darkening the ground beneath her feet.

Alexis woke up, with her hands clenching her sheets, sweat clinging to every inch of her body. She sat up and put her head between her knees, her tears mixing with the perspiration in her sheets. Glancing at her alarm clock reading “6:00 am”, Alexis reached for her diary on the floor next to her bed. She turned to a fresh page and wrote down the details of the dream she just had.

Alexis threw her diary in the nightstand and got out of bed to get ready for school. She walked to the bathroom and turned on the shower’s faucet. Waiting for the water to heat up, Alexis stripped out of her pajamas and ran a brush through her blonde hair while
staring at her reflection in the mirror. Her thoughts ran to graduation in the upcoming months. She always felt equal part fear and anxiousness when she thought of leaving high school. Her father already got her early admission to Harvard, with the understanding that Alexis would study pre-law; something she had little passion for.

Alexis stepped underneath a showerhead that was two times wider than her head, and let the warm water clean the dried sweat off her body. The nightmare was still lingering in her mind as she ran the soapy washcloth over her body, half expecting her skin to fall off and get sucked down the shower drain. She finished washing, skin still intact, and grabbed the white cotton towel hanging off the back of the door. Throwing her hair into a towel, Alexis walked back down to her bedroom and shut the door to get dressed.

She opened her closet door, grabbing a pair of jeans and a cotton t-shirt. She threw the outfit on her bed and noticed a large envelope by her pillow marked “Harvard: Important Pre Law Information”. Alexis sat down in her towel and opened the envelope containing brochures and information for pre law undergrads. The smiling faces on the brochures looked almost as fake as hers. She walked across the room and stuffed the envelope in the top drawer along with a bunch of others.

Alexis dressed, slipped on a pair of sandals, and went downstairs to the kitchen table. The other three members of her family were already there, chewing in silence. Her mom already had her makeup on and was dressed, but it was clear that she was hung over and tired. Alexis knew that look very well by now. No matter how tired she felt, Alexis’ mom always got up and made the family breakfast, like a good housewife. She started her drinking when the family left for school and work.
James looked up and relief washed over his eyes.

“Hey Alex, I got you some toast. Do you want to take off for school now?” James asked, standing up.

“Yeah, sure,” she said, taking the jelly-smeared toast from him.

“Have a great day at school kids,” their mother said, handing Alexis her backpack.

Their father didn’t even look up from his newspaper as they left the house. Alexis and James walked to James’ black Lexus and climbed in.

“What’s up?” Alexis asked.

“I’m picking up Tyler. I told mom I had to leave early and meet with my guidance counselor about Yale.”

James pulled out of the driveway and left the tree-lined street of Bergundahl Lane.

Alexis stared out the window, watching the sun cut through the clouds and dance on the tops of the cars.

“What’s wrong with you?” James asked.

“What?” she asked, nibbling on her toast.

“Why are you being so quiet?”

“I don’t have anything to say.”

“No you look more depressed than usual.”

“James, really, I’m fine. I just have cramps.” Alexis said, knowing that would get him to drop the subject.

“Ew. Well cheer up; I want Tyler to meet my funny sister, not this crabby robot.

You do realize mom and dad aren’t in the car, right?”
Alexis smiled at her brother. “I guess I’m still in daughter mode. So, anything I should know about Tyler.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like horrible things from his past that I shouldn’t bring up. If he’s got a huge mole on his back, I don’t want to bring up my fear of moles.”

“Alex, why would you ever bring that up?”

“You never know where a conversation could lead,” she said, tossing the last piece of toast in her mouth with a smile.

“Alright, well moles aren’t an issue, but you may not want to bring that up in your very first conversation.”

He pulled the car into the driveway of a blue, ranch-styled house. The two sets of window shutters facing the street were chipping white paint, adding dimension to an otherwise flat piece of wood. The front yard was decorated with a small wooden windmill, slowly spinning in the light spring breeze. Two matching red tricycles sat in parking spots marked with sidewalk chalk on a side driveway. This was like Alexis’ dream home. It looked lived-in, even from the outside, and screamed family.

Tyler came out of the house waving as he walked to the car. He was wearing a gray shirt with “Abercrombie and Fitch” printed on the front, paired with dark-washed jeans and white Nike shoes. His messy, but obviously styled, hair bounced when he walked and made his sea green eyes pop. Alexis was surprised that she didn’t realize how good-looking Tyler was before. Well, probably because he was jumping out of our window, she thought. Alexis slid out of the front seat.

“Hey Tyler, I’m Alex,” she said with a smile.
“Hey, it’s nice to meet you when I have clothes on,” he said, leaning in to give her a full hug.

Alexis returned the hug, with a pat on his back and her butt sticking out.

“That was a weak hug,” he said, easily picking up all 120 pounds of her and spinning her around.

Alexis laughed, and slapped his strong shoulders in fake protest. He rested her gently on the ground and she got in the back seat, both of them laughing.

James had a smile on his face and soft eyes as he leaned over to give Tyler a kiss.

“How you doing, babe?” James said, running his fingers through Tyler’s hair.

“Fantastic. I wish we could actually enjoy this weather instead of being stuck in class all day,” Tyler said, resting his head against the leather headrest.

James pulled back onto the road and headed for the school ten minutes away.

Alexis leaned forward, resting her forearms on the two front seats.

“So, Tyler, are you sure you’re gay?” she said, dramatically batting her eyelashes.

Tyler and James laughed in matching, deep laughs.

“Yeah, I’m pretty set in my ways. Lady parts scare me.”

Alexis snorted in surprised laughter and quickly covered her mouth.

“Charming,” James said.

“Well, Tyler, I know it’s early, but I think you have my approval,” she said.

“I’m honored. A measly sophomore like me getting the approval of a senior.”

“You have the approval of two seniors,” James said, pulling his car to the side of the road. “But we can’t be seen walking into the school together.”
“I know, I know. I’ll see you after school. Bye Alex,” Tyler said, climbing out of the after brushing his lips against James’ cheek.

James pulled the car back onto the road and turned the corner, revealing their brick high school in the distance.

“What was that about?” Alexis said.

“Come on, Alex,” James said with raised eyebrows. “He’s openly gay. If people saw us walking in together, they’d assume I’m gay, rumors would start, and it’d get back to dad.”

“Good point. It just sucks you have to ditch him.”

“It’s like a two minute walk,” James said, turning into the school parking lot. “I told him dad wouldn’t be ok with the whole gay thing, and he gets that.”

James pulled the car into his usual, front row parking spot and the two got out. Even though Clinton High was a public school, it didn’t matter. The overwhelming majority of kids came from prestigious families and cared about status above anything else. Since Alexis’ family had one of the highest incomes, and were considered beautiful, everyone wanted to be friends with her and James.

The two walked away from the Porsche and BMW-filled parking lot toward the large, double-doors that enclosed the inside of the high school.

“Have fun today,” Alexis said, turning away from her brother and walking to her locker.

She turned the combination on her white locker and stuffed her bag inside. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and noticed her eyes were wide and teary,
eyebrows raised in sad annoyance. Alexis pulled her eyebrows down and smiled into the mirror, ready to face another joyful high school day.

“Hey, Alex!”

Alexis jumped back in surprise to Jamie’s high-pitched voice all of a sudden in her ear. Jamie had one of those really obnoxious, baby voices that pierced straight to Alexis’ brain and made her cringe inside.

“Hey, Jamie. Love the outfit,” Alexis said, pretending to admire Jamie’s cotton candy pink shirt and tight jeans. Alexis wondered if Jamie could even breathe in the outfit, especially while trying to balance on her Manolo Blahnik stilettos.

“I know, right?” Jamie said while applying pink lip-gloss that matched her shirt.

“So I was thinking, now that I’m head cheerleader we should have practice for two hours instead of one.”

“You think that’s necessary?” Alexis said, grabbing her calculus book from her locker and shutting the door. “I think we’re doing pretty well. Plus, the girls need the time to go prom dress shopping.”

Jamie looked like she was going to get mad until she heard the word prom.

“Yeah, you’re right. We’ll look hot whether we’re practiced enough or not.”

The two walked down the wide hallway to their first class. Display cabinets with trophies inside lined the hallway walls and white and green banners with the words “Go Wolverines” hanged from the ceiling. The two went their separate ways-Jamie to Algebra and Alexis to calculus.

Alexis went through the motions of going from class to class, talking to people she didn’t care about and who didn’t care about her, and pretending to pay attention to
class lectures. The dismissal bell rang at 2:15, and everyone headed to the parking lot so they could stand around their expensive cars and talk about the beautiful summer vacations they were going on. Alexis walked away from the crowd and went to the art room on the second floor.

Even from down the hall, Alexis could smell the scent of fresh paints, musty charcoal, and rubbery eraser. It was her favorite smell by a long shot, and it made every worry in her mind momentarily disappear. She opened the wooden door with the numbers “210” proudly displayed, and walked into the art room.

“Hey Alex, right on time,” said the art teacher, Mr. Bronson.

Mr. Bronson was the most talented person Alexis ever met. At only 28-years-old, he perfected his art of sculpting, and made some of the most beautiful pieces Alexis had ever seen.

“Hey Mr. Bronson. Do you want to get my baby out?” Alexis said, placing her bag by a chair in front of an empty easel.

“Yes, she’s right over her,” he said, picking up a canvas and placing it on the easel in front of Alexis.

The colors in the picture were dark. Mixtures of dark blues, black, and gray were forming the shape of stones lining the sides of the canvas, leading up to a waterfall in the background. The foreground remained empty, ready for Alexis to finish creating this serene world on her canvas.

“I’m really proud of you,” Mr. Bronson said, his blue eyes focused on the canvas. “You only started painting a year ago, and you’ve progressed so quickly. Your natural ability is really inspiring.”
Alexis felt tears build in her eyes, threatening to spill over onto her cheeks. She looked down at her lap and tried to subtly dry her eyelids with the side of her forefinger. It didn’t work.

“Are you all right?” Mr. Bronson asked, kneeling down beside Alexis and taking her hand.

“Yeah,” she choked out, “it’s just..that was really nice.”

“It’s the truth. You have a passion and talent for this, Alexis. Don’t give it up.”

Mr. Bronson squeezed her hand and walked to his desk in the front of the classroom to go through some paperwork.

Alexis took her empty palette and squeezed blue, gray, and green paint onto it. She mixed the colors with her brush, delicately moving her wrist in a circular motion. Alexis didn’t hear anything when she had a paintbrush in her hand, slowly stroking the bristles against the canvas, creating a body of water between the mountains and connecting them with the waterfall. The body of water looked peaceful and untouched in the painting. The calming water she was creating was in perfect contrast to the violent waterfall in the background and the jagged mountain rocks on either side of the water. Alexis was an inch away from her painting, using a thin brush to accent the jagged rocks, when Mr. Bronson told her it was time to go.

“Wow, it’s already been two hours?”

“Yeah, you never realize it,” he said, looking at her painting. “It really looks great Alexis.”

“It really does,” she said, not hiding her pride in her art. “I can’t believe it’s almost done.”
“A masterpiece in a month. You should teach that.”

“I’ll leave the teaching to you,” she said, putting her painting away.

Alexis grabbed her stuff and walked through the empty halls to her car in the parking lot. The sun was attempting to break through the clouds in front of it, causing random rays of light to light up the earth below. Alexis smiled the whole way to her car with the image of her painting in her mind. She felt good having something to be proud of. The smile didn’t fade from her face until her house came into view.
“Where have you been?” her father demanded as soon as she walked into the house.

“I told you, I’m getting tutored in calculus on Fridays,” she said, putting her backpack at the bottom of the stairs.

“Don’t be lazy, bring your bag upstairs. And maybe you should keep studying calculus. It doesn’t look good that you need a tutor.”

On that note, he turned away from her, his parenting done for the day. Alexis couldn’t remember why she was smiling the whole way home anymore, and sat down for another fun-filled dinner with her family.

While Alexis chewed on a piece of chicken, she tried to tune out her father nagging at James to practice, study, and date more. In the middle of his speech about how unbelievably embarrassing it was to have a son that didn’t date, Alexis caught a glimpse of her mother at the end of the table. Usually her mother had eyes that looked glazed over because of the amount of alcohol she drank. Now, there was something new in them. Something that broke Alexis’ heart a little, and she didn’t know why. Her mother looked immensely sad and lost in another dimension. It lasted for only a second, though. Her mother looked up and caught Alexis looking at her with confusion. Jill blinked, shook her head, and refilled her martini glass with a smile on her face. Alexis recognized the fake smile as one she saw in her own reflection many times before.

Everyone signaled that they were done eating by throwing down their napkins, dropping their forks, and leaving the mess for Jill to clean up. Before tonight, Alexis
honestly believed that her mother liked cleaning. Why else would she do it to the extreme that she does? Her heart stung a little for her mother.

Just as Alexis was about to say something to her mother stacking the dirty dishes, her father walked into the room.

“Instead of standing there, how about you go up and study. Maybe you could actually earn your spot at Harvard,” he said, brushing past her on his way his office.

Alexis looked at her mother who stopped to hear what her husband had to say. Once he left the room, she continued stacking the dishes as if nothing happened. All the pity that Alexis was feeling for her mother during dinner suddenly left her body, and anger filled its void. How could she sit there and not say anything when her husband berates her children every single day, she wondered. Alexis threw her napkin onto the table her mother just cleaned and walked up to her room.

While trying to sleep that night, Alexis dreamed of killing herself and the people around her. Her dreams were becoming violent, and she was starting to get worried about them. The next morning, she called Dr. Rohen and asked if they could meet that afternoon for an extra session. Dr. Rohen agreed to come in on her day off to see Alexis. She felt pathetic, but also special that the doctor agreed. After showering and making up a lie about going out with friends, Alexis climbed into her car and made her way to her therapist.

Alexis pulled into the familiar parking garage, and mentally prepared herself for another therapy session before taking the elevator to Kathy’s office.

“Hey Alexis, how are you doing today?” Kathy asked, taking her sit across from Alexis.
“I think I’m ready to actually talk about stuff today,” Alexis said, her eyes casting down.

“That’s really great. Take your time.”

Alexis could see the anticipation in the doctor’s eyes. After three months of sort of talking about things, Alexis never really talked about the issues in her life. She felt ready to let Kathy in, and hoped she could help.

“Alright, well, my dad donated money to Harvard so I could get early acceptance. I don’t know how much he donated, but I know it was a lot. Anyway, I don’t want to go there, I want to go to the Rhode Island School of Design. I have a passion for painting. It’s the only time of the day I feel that I’m actually doing what I want and that I’m actually alive.”

Alexis caught her breath, realizing that she didn’t take one in her tirade.

“And you feel like your father won’t accept your dream?”

“I know he won’t, but it’s not even the point.” Alexis stood up and walked to the large window across the room. “I feel so ungrateful sometimes. Yes, my parents don’t let me express myself even a little, and I don’t think my dad loves us at all, blah blah blah. But there are people that have it so much worse. I never have to worry where my next meal is coming from or if I’ll have somewhere to sleep that night.” She turned away from the window and headed back to the couch. “Hell, I’m complaining about having to go to Harvard next year.”

“It doesn’t make you a bad person,” Kathy said, looking intently into Alexis’ eyes. “People have all different types of struggles. You are fortunate because you were born with wealthy parents, but if you weren’t affected when you feel that your dad
doesn’t love you or that your parents don’t care, then you’d just be materialistic. It’s a good thing that these things matter to you more than the money your parents throw at you.”

“Yeah, I guess. Sometimes I’m worried that I don’t know who I am behind it all. I know I want to be truly happy, but I don’t know how to make it happen. I’m worried that behind the façade I play everyday of this rich, happy girl is just an empty shell.”

Alexis didn’t realize she was crying until the tears dropped down her chin and onto her clenched hands. She felt her face turning red in embarrassment.

Kathy reached over and took Alexis’ hand. Alexis flinched like a current of electricity went through her body, but she let the doctor hold her hand while choked sobs escaped her throat.

“You’ve done really well today, Alexis. I hope you continue sharing, and not feel embarrassed or ashamed that you are unhappy. I think it’ll help you to get these things out in the open.”

Alexis nodded, still staring at her clenched fist with Kathy’s hand around it.

“I think I’m done for today,” Alexis said, taking her hand away.

“That’s fine. I want you to write down your personal goals for our next session,” Kathy said, sitting back to give Alexis space. “Tell me what you ultimately want from life. Forget about any obstacles that you foresee, and just write your ideal future. We’ll go over it on Tuesday. Sound good?”

“Yeah, sure,” Alexis said, wiping the mascara from underneath her eyes and standing up to walk toward the door.
Right as she was about to turn the doorknob, Alexis turned back toward her therapist.

“Thank you for today,” Alexis said with a small smile and walked out of the office.

Alexis sat in her car for a few minutes and tried to understand exactly what she was feeling. She knew that she would open up to Kathy eventually, and she thought when that day came, she’d feel a wave of relief. She felt a little relief, a little like she wasn’t being pushed into the ground by an invisible weight on her shoulders, but she also felt a nagging, uncomfortable feeling in her gut.

Maybe I said too much, she thought, biting hard on her lip. No. That’s what therapy is for. It’ll get better.

Alexis started her car and headed back home.
Outline for the remaining chapters of the novella

Unraveled

Alexis makes her way home from her therapist’s office. She’s confronted by her father, who found out that cheerleading practice is only two times a week, and demands to know where she has been going the other two days when she said she was at practice. Backed into a corner, Alexis is forced to admit that she has been seeing a therapist. Her father is quickly enraged and slaps her across the face, causing Alexis to fall onto the floor. Alexis stands up and runs to her room, away from her father’s screams to himself.

She screams and cries into her pillow, suddenly understanding the suicide essays from Ophelia Speaks now more than ever before. Her mother knocks on the door and asks to come in. Alexis screams that she doesn’t want to talk, and accuses her mother of never having an interest in her anyway. Alexis tells her mother through the door that she drove Alexis to therapy with her drinking and never standing up to their father. Her mother doesn’t respond.

An hour later, Alexis walks out of her room and into the bathroom to find her mother on the toilet with a blade to her skin and tears streaming down her face. Judy is shaking, and she doesn’t notice that her daughter is in the room until Alexis starts screaming. The knife slips out of her mother’s hand and Alexis runs over to her, but she had already cut a deep line vertically down her arm. Alexis grabs a towel to apply pressure to her mother’s arm and screams for help while holding onto her shaking mother.

James and their father come running into the bathroom and are shocked at what they see. Alexis yells for them to call an ambulance, while the mother slips into
unconsciousness. Their father tries to justify not calling an ambulance, and insists that they can take care of the situation. Alexis looks at her father in absolute disgust as he watches his wife bleed onto the floor. James already left to call the ambulance.

The ambulance arrives 10 minutes later. Everyone that is home in the neighborhood is out on the street, wondering what happened to the perfect family. Before Alexis gets into the car with James to follow the ambulance, a neighbor asks what happened. Alexis looks at her father, who is looking at her sternly, as if trying to tell her to make up a good lie. Alexis doesn’t break her father’s stare when she tells the neighbor that her mother tried to kill herself. The neighbor covers her mouth in shock and the kids drive away from the scene, leaving their angry father behind. He gets into his own car and makes his way to the hospital.

What Remains

The family arrives at the hospital. The two kids run inside ahead of their father so he doesn’t have a chance to yell at them. The three meet up in the waiting room after hearing that their mother is going to be all right, but needs to get stitched back up and then time to rest. The doctor commends Alexis for holding the wound shut and applying pressure, as it made her mother’s blood loss less severe than it would have been.

The three sit in the waiting room in silence until the two other people in the room leave. Their father walks over to his two kids sitting on the opposite side of the room from him and starts in on them, asking why they wanted to ruin him. The kids look at their father with swollen eyes and Alexis asks why he cared more about how he would look than his wife’s health. Paul disregards the question and asks what she was thinking
telling the neighbors what actually happened. Alexis said she’s tired of living such a fake life. Paul mocks her, saying that she must have such a tough life driving around in a Range Rover and living off his work. He ends the conversation by saying he isn’t going to pay for either of the kids’ college tuitions if she thinks her life is so bad. James decides he has nothing to lose and wants to hurt his father, so he blurts out that he’s gay. Hospital security is called and their father is restrained, and then arrested, after punching his son three times on the side of his head. James has to get stitches in his right brow line, but he is all right. Despite the madness around her, Alexis realizes that she has never felt freer than that night.
Epilogue

The scene begins with Alexis moving into her dorm at the Rhode Island School of Design. After finishing her painting over the summer, Mr. Bronson submitted it, along with her other paintings, to RISD. While they didn’t give her a full scholarship, they did offer enough so that Alexis would be able to work her way through college without taking out loans.

Her mother and James are there with her to help move stuff into her small dorm room. Alexis thinks that even if her father were still living in the family’s house, he wouldn’t have helped her move into the college of her choice. The narrative leads to what happened in the last month. Alexis’ father was kept in jail for the night after punching James at the hospital. He got out the next day after James decided not to waste his time and press charges. All he asked was for his father to remain out of his life. In turn, Paul took the cars away and all his belongings from the house and moves to an equally large house across town. Their parents are in the midst of a rather easy divorce. Their father decided not to cause a big scene and gave their mother the paid-off house, where she lives with two dogs that she always wanted but their father wouldn’t allow her to get. She is living off the money she got from the divorce, and is working as a nanny even though she doesn’t need the money. Alexis thinks it’s because her mother wants to treat other people’s children the way she should have treated her own. It’s like her mother’s second chance.

Over the course of the summer, Alexis, Judy, and James became close. They were all finally open about everything. Their mother talked about her alcohol addiction, Alexis opened up about her therapy sessions, and James told his mother that he was gay. By the
end of the summer, James’ boyfriend, Tyler, was like a son to their mother. Dr. Rohen made weekly appearances for dinner at their house, and Alexis’ mom even shared secret recipes with her.

Alexis, James, and their mother ended the summer by going on a week long vacation to Cape Cod like they used to when they were younger. Alexis and James don’t hear from their father unless he calls to talk to Judy. They both agreed life was better that way.

James got accepted to Yale months ago when his father donated money. He decided to stick with the decision and attend as a premed student. Alexis knew that this decision is finally for him and not for their father.

The novella ends with Alexis getting a call from Dr. Rohen. Dr. Rohen is in town for a conference and decides to surprise Alexis. Once Dr. Rohen is in the dorm room, Alexis, between sobs, thanks her therapist for everything she has done for her, and Judy does the same. Dr. Rohen and Alexis hug, and Alexis feels like she has a true family for the first time in her life. Everyone says goodbye to Alexis after a few minutes, because James has to get back home to get ready for his move-in day the following weekend. She lays on her bed and smiles, knowing that she is just starting her life without hiding behind a fake version of herself. She can’t wait.