

Chapter 1

Michelle Doherty stood on the porch of her home in the high desert of California and watched the cloud of dust wind up the hill toward her home. Her mouth was a flat line as she turned her silver eyes from the black Escalade to the content of her mug of coffee. A layer of white scuzz gathered at the top; a byproduct of reheating the day-old remnants of her French press, and adding a dollop of sugar. The coffee's bitterness and grit brought back a host of memories; countless cups throughout the years. Rather than push them aside as she often did, she indulged, visiting the room unlocked by the taste.

The late-night hours hunched over a typewriter as one of her characters were being particularly difficult. Staring over the rim of one of her favorite mugs as she edited a draft, crossed out a word in censorious red ink, and killed her babies. The blank faces in Stockholm as she accepted the prize for Literature. Packing all of the accoutrements of her past life when her faculties failed, and she could no longer remember the spell to conjure a life out of thin air. Finally, the French Roast revived *her*, in all of her glory. The early days of their friendship, the pitched frenzy of creation as they set fire to their respective fields, and the falling away when their long association imploded under the combined weight of their egos.

Now, her friend was dead. Any chance of reconciliation had been eradicated like the cancer that destroyed Doherty's bosom friend, to borrow the phrase. The last of her memories were currently winding up the hill in the form of her friend's last contribution to the field of gastronomy: Memory Macarons.

When the Escalade rounded the boulder at the end of her drive, Doherty extended her arm and dumped the dregs of her coffee. It arced through the air, and splashed in the dirt. She stepped from the porch, and walked towards the black vehicle. For a moment, she was stymied by the young man that stepped from the driver's seat.

He was young. Younger than she imagined. Based on his voice, she thought he would be in his mid-thirties, rather than this gawky kid fresh from college graduation. His sandy-blond hair was disheveled, and he had a malnourished air about him, as if he was in need of a hearty meal, and a large piece of cake.

"Michelle Doherty?" he asked.

She nodded, slowly. Her arms were pressed against her chest.

"Brian Wade," he touched his chest. "Oh. Almost forgot," he smiled, sheepishly, opened the door, and reached across the middle console to retrieve a red Igloo cooler buckled in the passenger seat. He closed the door, and engaged the locks.

"I assure you, the coyotes aren't interested," she observed, drily. "They're partial to BMDs."

"Right," Wade nodded.

“Is that it?” her eyes indicated the battered cooler in his hand.

“The Memory Mac—”

“I know what they’re called, Mr. Wade,” Doherty interrupted. “Are they inside?”

He nodded.

“Is it safe to assume that you’ve kept them properly cold? They lose their integrity under direct heat.”

Wade nodded a second time.

The pair stood awkwardly in the driveway. Doherty let the silence fester, enjoying the boy’s discomfort. After a final beat, Doherty gestured towards the house. “I suppose you should come inside,” she turned. “Come on,” she added impatiently, when the sound of his footsteps against the gravel did not fall in line behind her. Brian quickened his pace, keeping several yards behind the infamously reclusive writer. She immediately put him in mind of a tattered knit sweater brought to life. There was something inherently lived-in about her. Her deeply tanned skin, and the tension around her mouth and eyes; he imagined she was underestimated often, much to the person’s detriment. Once ground had been ceded, it was impossible to reclaim. After the publication of her last novel several years prior, and a famously public falling out with one-time best friend and collaborator—multiple James Beard award winner—Gale Baldrige, Doherty retreated from the public eye. His eyes wandered to his surroundings finding it understandable why the cantankerous writer would never leave her home.

The property was nestled among the weathered gray and rust gold hued boulders. Piñon pine and desert oak dotted the landscape as well as the prickly, balloon animal-like cholla cacti. Amongst the riot of autumnal colors was a spectacular Joshua Tree; it’s branches turned to the heavens like hands in supplication. The house itself was constructed of cinder block, cut, and saw-cut to accommodate sliding glass doors, and large windows. Along the side of the home Wade noticed an outdoor shower, concealed with corrugated steel, a galvanized steel tub, large enough to accommodate one or two swimmers, and most tempting of all, a large observation deck, which overlooked the expansive valley below. “Is that a bed up there?” he asked. Doherty nodded. “I spend most nights up there.” “Doesn’t it get pretty cold up here?” “Well, Mr. Wade,” she made a sound at the back of her throat. “Thank god for blankets, yes? What would we do without them.” He brushed aside her rudeness, and reminded himself that this woman, despite his reception, was one of his favorite living authors. If her temperament warmed over the next few days, he might even mention that he was one of his favorite living authors.

“Take off your shoes,” she instructed at the sliding glass door that led to the kitchen. “It’s bad enough I have to entertain; I don’t need to invite the desert in with you. Well, come on,” she rolled her splayed fingers in the air. “Am I to lose my privacy *and* my air conditioning? Get inside!”

“Sorry,” Wade rushed to comply, snapping the door behind him, and casting his shoes beside an assortment of Crocs, and a clunky pair of brown work boots.

“I’ll take the cooler,” Doherty extended a hand towards him.

He held it tighter to his chest. “I’m afraid I can’t do that,” he explained. Birds flitted through his chest like a first-year grad student facing off against a querulous professor questioning his footnotes. “The will stipulates that I’m not to let it out of my sight until we’re ready to proceed.”

“You said over the phone that you’re part of a writing group in Minnesota. How did you even get involved in all of this to begin with?”

“It’s all a part of Ms. Baldrige’s will,” he replied, evasively. “It stipulates that the *Mémoire*--” he paused at the look of displeasure on Doherty’s face. “That the ‘contents of the cooler’ would be looked after by an unpublished writer with a degree in Creative Writing, and that you could only enjoy the—‘contents of the cooler,’” he emphasized the phrase once more in implied air quotation marks, “in my presence if, and only if, you narrate the experience for me to record.”

Doherty’s nostrils flared as she considered his words. After a moment, she mumbled something that sounded like, “*Gale*,” while shaking her head. Finally, she asked, “Coffee, tea?”

“Actually, I’d love to get the rest of my stuff out of the Escalade,” he motioned through the sliding glass doors. “Maybe walk around a bit. Stretch my legs. I’ve been driving almost non-stop for the last few days to get here.”

“Why wouldn’t *Gale* allow you to fly?” Doherty’s attention snagged on the finer points of instruction rather than Wade’s immediate needs.

“I don’t know,” he offered a crooked smile of embarrassment. “Your friend’s will was pretty specific. It outlined what motels I’d stop for the night; where I could stop for gas, snacks. It was a bit strange. Honestly, she was your friend, Ms. Doherty. Everyone at the writing group was hoping you might have some answers.”

He tried to gauge her reaction, but her body language remained a clenched fist.

She regarded him in silence, mentally picking apart his explanation. Finally, Doherty sighed and asked, “How much *stuff* do you have in your vehicle?” expertly deploying her own air quotation marks.

“A carry-on suitcase. I travel pretty light.”

“These motels *Gale* directed you towards; did they have showers? Soap?” she smiled, “Or, am I to assume that your bag will smell as stale as you?”

Wade’s smiles affably, already growing accustomed to Doherty’s general mood. “I’m afraid the desert didn’t do me any favors, ma’am. Old Spice can only carry you so far,” he eased into, what he hoped was a disarming smile. “My bag is fine. I can leave it on the porch if you’d be more comfortable with that.”

“Fine,” her hand fluttered dismissively. “Get your things. You can take a shower after you’re settled. You can leave the cooler on the counter over there,” she motioned towards a slate gray granite island in the kitchen to Wade’s immediate left.

“Ah, no,” he tapped the side of the red Igloo cooler affectionately. “I have to treat this like a nuclear football until we’re ready to begin. It stays with me,” he pointed to Doherty, index finger extended, smile, fully engaged. “But, five points for trying, Ms. Doherty. “Your friend’s instructions were adamant on that point. It also said you’d be stubborn about it. I guess she knew you pretty well.”

“You insufferable man—” Doherty stopped herself, abruptly, halting the insult by pinching the bridge of her nose. Head bowed, she said, “Can I at least *see* them? Is *that* too much trouble, or has Gale seen to that, as well?”

Wade acquiesced. He moved to the granite countertop and depressed the white plastic button on the side of the cooler. A small wisp of cold air sighed over the sides of his hands, as he moved the blue-gel ice packs aside, and retrieved a molded plastic container holding ten of the most dazzlingly colorful macarons he’d ever seen, which wasn’t saying much, given he wasn’t particularly fond of desserts.

Doherty took an automatic step towards the French confections. Her silver eyes were resonant with discordant emotions; melancholy, desperate longing, anger, irritation. She replaced her mask, regretting the involuntary display of emotions. “Two of them are damaged.”

Wade brought the package to his face. “You’re right. I did the best I could,” he paused, showing the proper amount of remorse. “It was hard finding ice packs on the road. Switching them out every few hours. Hopefully the memories aren’t too damaged.”

Doherty regarded him evenly. “Get your things,” she dismissed him. “Leave your bag outside of the porch. It should be fine. Worst case scenario, a coyote will abscond with it during the night, mistaking it for carrion. And, Mr. Wade?”

“Yes?”

“Did you see the shower stall outside?”

“Yes.”

“Use it.”

“Yes ma’am,” Wade smiled. He paused at the sliding glass door, and added, “It’s a pleasure to meet you by the way.” And, because, the hell with it, he added, “I’m a big fan, by the way.”

If she heard his comment, she did react.

After showering, Brian wade found his least wrinkled pair of cargo khakis and black v-neck shirt. He considered trading his tennis shoes for a pair of leather flip flops that beckoned from within his carry-on luggage, but decided against it. Wade chuckled to

himself, combing his hair with his fingers, as he imagined Doherty's face at the sight of his feet.

"Kindly put those...*things* away, Mr. Wade," he mimicked her tone as she reacted to his audacious effrontery. His recreation had a smidgeon of offended Victorian stodginess. "Preferably beside your rank clothes, and *only* if you've set them on fire." Satisfied with his appearance—sans sandals—he stepped outside of the privacy barrier of corrugated steel, picked up the Igloo cooler, and headed back inside the house.

Finding himself alone, he took time to do a cursory inspection of one of his idols' digs. He set the cooler on the floor by the sliding glass door, and whispered, "Stay," as he stood. "No," Wade warned, palm extended out toward the cooler, little and ring finger, slightly crooked, "I said stay," he repeated. "You'll be fine for a couple minutes." Whether it was the deepening bond he felt for the battered plastic container after their time spent together, or the general loopiness he felt after all of the miles traveled—or a combination of both—he felt a growing affection towards his little Igloo. Wade wandered past the kitchen area. It was complete with granite countertops, uncluttered shelves, and a small table surrounded by four Ikea chairs he was certain had a ridiculously difficult-to-pronounce-Icelandic name. The room bled into the living room. Its focal point was a Yves Klein Blue Table. Crafted with glass and plexiglass. Filled with dry blue pigment, it created a sense of a vibrant oasis amidst the arid space. The walls were hung with other abstract art. Wade approached a bookshelf. It was filled prior editions of Michelle Doherty's works, along with a collection of books concerning the culinary arts, as well as a handful of classics. A framed photo, laid down on its face, rested on the top shelf. When he lifted it, he saw it was a candid polaroid of Doherty and Baldrige. Obviously taken years prior, it showed the pair laughing, the framing, slightly askew. They hovered over a plate half-eaten tapas; a sunset caught in the distance, over their shoulders. "What happened to the both of you?" he wondered, as he ran a finger along the shelves, and nodded his approval when it came back free of dust or dirt. Perhaps she was overly fastidious, but she certainly kept the desert out of this hermetically sealed bunker of solitude.

A small reproduction done in washes of pale blue, violet, and pink caught his eye. Against the backdrop of the coming gloam, mechanically stick-like birds were reproduced in ink, perched on a wire, which was attached to a hand crank.

"Who's this?" Wade tapped the air near the framed artwork.

"Paul Klee," Doherty replied.

"I like it."

"One eye sees, the other feels," she answered, appearing to quote something from memory.

"Right," Wade turned from the painting. "Well?" he tapped the sides of his leg. "Should we get started?"

Doherty shook her head. "I've done enough talking for the day, Mr. Wade. Company is not something I'm used to these days. It tends to leave me a bit waspish," she grimaced. "If I've come across that way—"

"I'm crashing your life, Ms. Doherty," Wade held up a hand. "No need to say whatever it was you were going to say. I'll try to stay out of your hair as much as possible, and I appreciate you letting me stay," he smiled. "You could have easily made me stay in the rental or another rotten motel."

Satisfied, Doherty nodded. "I've made up my bed with clean sheets. Unfortunately, I don't have a guest bedroom, or a ghastly *futon*, so, it'll have to do."

"Where will you sleep?" he protested.

"Outside," she motioned to the dark pressing against the sliding glass door. "On my platform."

Wade watched her leave. When she had been enveloped by the night, he cursed quietly to himself. "*Are you hungry, Mr. Wade?*" he asked in an affected tone reminiscent of Michelle Doherty's. "Of course, I'm hungry. I've been driving for hours. '*Help yourself time whatever's in the fridge.*' That would have been nice," he stalked into the kitchen to torture himself.

It was fully stocked with an array of cheese, deli meats, and olives. He eyed a carton of eggs and a tube of anchovy paste greedily.

"She'll know," he sighed, and closed the door, dying a little when the light was extinguished.

Instead, he found a half eaten bag of sunflower seeds in his suitcase and sat at the kitchen table. He dined on salt and YouTube videos, before retiring to her bedroom.

It was done in the same austere color scheme. Her bedsheets were a soft gray. Despite his hunger, he was welcomed by Egyptian Cotton and a thread count he'd never experienced.

"Well, Lucy," he turned to the Igloo cooler beside him. "We made it." He clicked open the case, removed one of the ice packs, and picked up the container of Mémoire Macarons. No matter how many times he would look at it, the colors would astound him. Even after they were consumed, he would always remember; a box of crayons gone to riot.

Deep blood reds, the softest pink you could imagine. The vibrant, almost electric greens; so bright, you could taste the ozone in the air, feel the lightning coming. Golden brown kissed white, drizzled with chocolate. He took a long breath, luxuriating in the scent of sugar, and something indefinable. The taste of tears, a lost sense of youth; each batch of macarons was said to be unique, depending upon the memories they contained.

Whether Doherty was being kind, or she hadn't done a proper inspection when given the chance, it wasn't just two that were damaged. Five of the meringue shells were cracked.

Wade wondered if that would affect the integrity of the memories. He replaced the cookies in the container and mentally fortified himself for tomorrow. He was the gatekeeper. Where Doherty once molded words decorously, shaping them to elicit emotion and meaning, it would be his job to record her reaction. Her story. Baldrige and Doherty were counting on him to get it right.

Doherty stepped into the night air, relishing the cooling temperature. With a light shawl gathered around her shoulders, she walked past the outdoor shower stall, and arrived at the desert viewing platform. Taking two steps at a time, she climbed the structure, lost in thought.

When she had first received the call from the Literacy Group in Minneapolis, her first inclination had been to smash the telephone against the wall, and shout obscenities at the broken pieces. It was a combination of grief and rage. Doherty has always assumed that time would heal the rift between her and Gale, a rift she herself had caused. Unbeknownst to Michelle, who has sealed herself off from public life, the cancer ravaging Gale's body had other plans.

After collecting herself, she repaired the broken telephone, and called the Literacy Group back. She told them her address, and listened to Gale's stipulations before she would be awarded her bequest. As the bullet points were being explained, she found her temper rising once more. Even in death, Gale Baldrige knew how to manipulate a situation, knew how to 'get her goat.'

Michelle leaned against the railing of her platform, and looked at the wide sweep of desert. She could see houses in the distance from the town below. Illuminated squares of light. Cars moving about like fireflies on a specific course. Doherty couldn't say specifically when she came to hate them all. It's why writing had become nearly impossible to her. She didn't want to create characters to spend any amount of time with. The moment she breathed life into them, their petty idiosyncrasies caused a visceral reaction. Each word spoken was an affront to her privacy and way of life. After her schism with Gale, the person responsible for smoothing out the rough edges in her personality, people snagged on the hangnail of Doherty's soul; let them move about their anonymous lives without her. Let each wonder about their motivations, the drive, without a greater explanation as to their significance.

"God damn you, Gale," She sighed, heavily and wiped her face with the heel of her palm. "You ruined me." She let the words drift into the night, hoping they would come back with a response, a tin can connected by string to its twin, lost to time and distance. Doherty was both relieved and shocked by the silence. She wouldn't be able to claim that much longer, however.

Mr. Wade and his marvelous Mémoire Macarons.

An involuntary shudder coursed through her body. She wondered Gale's parting shots would be. After knowing that free-spirited woman for over forty years, what dirt would she dig up? Would there be a chance at reconciliation, even after she was dead?

She moved from the railing, and walked to the queen-sized bed in the corner of the platform. After removing the weather-proof slipcovers from the pillowcases and mattress, Doherty turned back the sheets, and slipped into bed, luxuriating in the coolness. Overhead, Jupiter and Saturn shone brilliantly together in the southeast, while the stars blazed like an infinite handful of jacks inexpertly thrown. She slipped her hand into the pocket of her tattered sweater and removed a joint.

Doherty could smell its skunkiness before she put the tip to flame. Inhaling deeply, the scent reminded her of Gale; their salad days together during the first blush of friendship. As she took a hit, and held the smoke in her lungs, Doherty extended her arm towards Spica and Antares above. When they coolly abstained from the medicinal quality kush, she chuckled to herself with a shrug.

*"You may tell that German college that their honour comes too late.
But they must not waste repentance on the grizzly savant's fate;
Though my soul may set in darkness, it will rise in perfect light;
I have loved the stars too truly to be fearful of the night,"*

She smoked the rest of her joint in silence, contemplating the heavens. Tomorrow she would begin. Three cookies a day, three and a half days.

Her past would be excised.

She would see Gale one last time.

With her mouth full of cotton, her eyelids lulled.

"What, my boy," Doherty recited. "You are not weeping? You should save your eyes for sight;

You will need them, mine observer, yet for many another night"

A moment later, she closed her eyes and slept like the dead.

The next morning, Doherty woke shortly after sunrise. She crossed the platform, descended the wooden stairs, and quietly let herself into her own home as if she were the visitor. Rather than feeling rewarded for her consideration, allowing the young writer a chance to sleep in, she found him sprawled out on the off-white couch in her living room. His feet were on the cushions, a copy of her first book was open in his hands, and a cup of steaming coffee sat on the table beside him, along with the battered cooler.

He lifted his green eyes from the page and smiled. "Good morning! There's some coffee in there if you're interested; hope you don't mind," he added. "You didn't exactly roll out the red carpet last night, so it was *'Help Yourself Time'* in the kitchen when I woke up."

None of his words registered. Instead, she glared at the mug beside him. "Your coffee is on my table," she whispered in a dangerously quiet tone.

"There's more in the kitchen," Wade sat up and brought his bare feet to the polished cement floor. "Shoot," he glanced at the cup. "Is this your favorite mug, or something?"

"The *table*," she chose her words methodically. "That is a Table IKB."

Wade's eyes drifted towards the structure of plexiglass, steel, and blue powder. "IKEA?" he replied in confusion. He picked up his mug in a rush. Some of the coffee splashed over the rim, but he managed to catch it in his cupped palm.

"IKB," she watched the dripping coffee with wide eyes. "A Yves Klein table."

"Expensive?"

"Twenty-two thousand dollars," she watched as he took his coffee to the kitchen. Her eyes honed in on the abandoned cooler.

"Almost forgot," he smiled, apologetically and retrieved his precious cargo. Wade pulled a face and mouthed 'Sorry,' as he pulled a second cup from the cupboard.

Doherty accepted as he poured her a cup from the Cuisinart. "Mr. Wade—" she began, her blood pressure already elevated.

"Brian, please.

"Mr. Wade," she continued. "I'd like to get started."

He turned and lifted a cast iron skillet from the stove. "Do you want some eggs first? I made plenty. Halfway through the night I finished my sunflower seeds; woke up starving."

She pinched the bridge of her nose. With her eyes closed, she mentally counted to ten. "I don't want any of *my* eggs, Mr. Wade. What I'd like is to get started with Gale's cookies."

"Mémoire macarons," Wade corrected. He shrugged off her obvious irritation. "I know you hate the name, but it's best to get over it. Rip the bandaid off fast, right?"

"The macarons, then," she answered slowly. She could feel a headache developing above her right temple.

Wade replaced the skillet to the stovetop, and disappeared into her bedroom. He returned holding a leather satchel. He removed a piece of white copy paper from one of its pockets, reoriented the sheet with splayed fingers so the typed words faced her, and said, "Here's the list." He placed a notebook on his side of the counter, and a slim tape recorder. "I'd like you to take a look, and give me your first impressions. Does anything leap out at you? Do you recognize what the flavors might entail? A specific period?"

A rare laugh bubbled in Doherty's throat like activated yeast. Her attention went from the list to Wade, who was watching her attentively, recording notes. "Is this a joke?"

"A joke, in what way?" he answered, scribbling away. "Are some of the flavor profiles striking a chord?"

"They're ridiculous." Doherty held up the list and read from the inventory:

1. Toasted S'mores (*Damaged*)
2. Flaming Hot Cheetos (*Damaged*)
3. Key Lime
4. Vodka & Redbull
5. Chocolate Hazelnut & Raspberries
6. Champagne (*Damaged*)
7. Smoked Salmon (*Damaged*)
8. Scrambled Eggs & Prosciutto
9. Pistachio
10. ??? (*Damaged*)

A knot tied itself in her throat. Some of the flavors leapt from the page and throttled her memories before even sampling a bite. Carefully concealing these, Doherty let the paper hang wilt in her hand like a limp noodle. "These are absurd. Gale's tastes were never straight forward," she glanced at the list, shaking her head. "I can't make heads or tails of this," she lied.

Wade brushed off her skepticism. "Would you like to clean up, and get started? I left you a clean towel in the bathroom."

Doherty placed the sheet of paper face facedown on the countertop. "How thoughtful of you."

"Not a problem," Wade replied, picking up Doherty's first book. "It'll give me a chance to finish the chapter," he smiled. "It's been years since I've read this. I'd forgotten how good it is."

"Don't think I didn't notice that several of the macarons are damaged. I'll be writing a strongly worded letter to your writing group about your lack of professionalism."

"Coming from you, I'm sure they'll be pleased as all get out," he answered without looking up from the book, already immune to her subtle brand of vitriol. "The literary world hasn't heard from you in a spell, Ms. Doherty."

She took a deep breath and smelled almonds and vanilla. "Did you use my *shampoo* this morning?"

"I *did*," he nodded, eyes glued to the pages. "My scalp feels like it's singing."

Doherty left the room powered by the steam of her own irritation, and a quiet fear concerning the macarons in the battered cooler. Vodka and Redbull. Pink Champagne. Those flavors were dangerous.

Chapter 2

After her shower, Doherty returned to the kitchen with brown hair damp on her shoulders. Wade was scribbling away in his notebook. Reading over his square shoulder, she read a quote from Anthony Bourdain within the margins of his compact notes: *“Food is everything we are. It’s an extension of nationalist feeling, ethnic feeling, your personal history, your province, your region, your tribe, your grandma. It’s inseparable from those from the get-go.”*

She shook her head, and made herself a cup of yogurt and granola before sitting opposite the young writer. After taking her seat, he looked up expectantly. “All set?” he asked.

“I suppose,” Doherty countered breezily. Despite her outward calm, she could feel her heartbeat quickening.

“Great,” he rubbed his hands together and lifted the cooler from the floor. He opened the lid and set the plastic container of macarons between them. He removed the lid, and was about to lift the Toasted Marshmallow cookie from the package.

“Please don’t touch my food,” she said irritably. “If I wanted to taste something you’ve touched, I would lick my bottle of shampoo.”

Wade tilted his head and smiled. “To each their own, I suppose, but that’s fine,” he pushed the macarons an inch closer to her. “The toasted marshmallow is the one on the end.”

Doherty kept her eyes focused on Wade. “One more thing. I’ve had enough of this cooler. It’s obnoxious. From now on, you’ll leave the cookies in the refrigerator, and trust that I possess a self-control greater than that of a fussy toddler demanding an afternoon snack. Does *that* seem fair?”

“You put ‘that’ in italics, didn’t you?” he chuckled. Before she could answer, he held up his hands, and said, “That’s fine, Mrs. Doherty. Honestly, I was trying to follow the final wishes of your dying friend, but if that irritates you—inconveniences your sense of self—we can do it your way, no sweat.”

She wanted to wipe the smirk from his face. Instead, she squared her shoulders. “As long as we’re in agreement.” Doherty lifted the small pillow of air from the container and examined it in her hand.

The meringue shells were covered in chocolate and dusted with finely crushed graham crackers. Between was a golden brown layer of toasted marshmallows. Doherty held it to her nose and luxuriated in the scent of buttercream and vanilla.

“Remember,” Wade interrupted the experience. “Since the top shell is cracked, the memories might be a little pear-shaped. Just narrate the experience, and I’ll shape it into a cohesive piece, okay?”

Eyes closed, nostrils flared, and in the calmest voice she could muster, she replied, “I understood your instructions last night, Mr. Wade. Please don’t interrupt me.”

He held up his hands and mouthed ‘Sorry’ but said it in a loud whisper since her eyes were closed.

“Now,” she brought the cookie to her mouth. “Let’s begin.”

1.

Toasted S’Mores

A daydream is a meal at which images are eaten.

W. H. Auden

As Michelle Doherty placed the macaron on her tongue like a supplicant accepting the Eucharist, the room around her contracted like a pinhole. Her focus became a dim point in the distant past. A furtive glance into a peephole she was drawn through.

When she emerged, Michelle found herself standing in a campsite with aluminum poles in her rough chapped hands. They didn’t belong to her; the poles or the hands. Rough hewn, calloused, and almost twice their original size, they were the hands of a man accustomed to work.

She took a deep breath and felt someone tugging at the hem of her untucked plaid shirt, which were rolled up to her elbows. Michelle turned and found herself with a pint-sized version of her once best friend and creative partner.

Gale Baldrige was a tall, flat-chested ten-year old. With black hair, hazelnut eyes, and pale—almost translucent skin—she had yet to grow into the form that both men and women—would swoon over. The girl had those bright hazelnuts trained on Doherty. A shy smile was pinned into the left corner of her mouth, just below a small mole. “Hi, Shelley,” she said.

A laugh escaped Doherty’s lips like a raucous crow escaping a cage.

“You’re my dad,” Gale continued. “I’m not sure why, but ‘them’s the brakes.’ My dad says that all the time.”

Doherty found herself at a loss for words. No. That wasn’t true. She had too many words to choose from. Every iteration swirled through her head. Finding herself unable to string together a cohesive thought with a strong beginning, middle, and end—something she had won accolades for in her writing career—she landed on a weak, “Hi.”

Gale bent down and picked up some of the aluminum poles scattered on the ground. “I’ll help you finish setting up the tent, then you said we could go fishing.”

“Okay,” Michelle nodded. A distant muscle memory that was not her own, as she began to slip the poles into the sleeves of a small dome-like tent. “That sounds fine. I’m hungry.”

While the pair made short work of the tent, Gale looked up at Doherty. With a gravity beyond her ten years, she asked, “Am I dead?”

“Yes,” Doherty managed a whisper through the knot of grief in her throat.

“The doctors were right then,” the girl replied. “The bastards,” she laughed. “I was hoping I could beat it.”

Gale and Doherty stepped back from their handiwork. Arms akimbo, Gale nodded, and said, “Did you come see me before I died?”

Doherty shook her head.

Gale laughed once more. “You were always such a stubborn old bag. Ah well,” she shrugged. “What’s fine is done.”

Doherty remained silent. Ashamed.

“C’mon, daddy. Let’s go to the lake.”

Grandiloquent as ever, Doherty agreed with, “Okay.” Gale’s dad was a real talker.

The girl made up for the both of them. While they gathered up a pair of fishing poles and tackle box, an empty ice cream bucket, and a package of Oscar Mayer bologna, she chartered incessantly. About her plans for the summer. About her deepening love of Laura Engels Wilder. About anything, everything. Doherty luxuriated in the banal, understanding that—for a child—each seemingly disconnected topic was Gale’s way of saying I love you, I love you, I love you to the laconic man at her side, smiling in that crooked way she’d inherited.

They bypassed the main beach, and wound up at a strip of land that bordered the lake, and a muddy extension of a fast-flowing river that fed it.

Gale set down the tackle box and pole. Doherty, as her father, flipped open the plastic sleeve of bologna, and started tearing it into chunks. Gale threaded a piece on her hook. Doherty did the same. Rather than cast into the still lake water, the pair crept to the shoreline, and dangled them into algae-laden rocks piled just below the surface.

Doherty was unsure what they were fishing for until she saw a claw emerge from the shadow of flat, jagged rock. It was followed by the small gray-blue body of a, “Crawdads,” she smiled.

“Crawdads?” Gale laughed. “Crayfish, ya goof.” With alarming speed, she lifted her line from the water. A crayfish gripped the hook, tenaciously. Claws extended, it backed up through the grass, as Gale scooped the empty ice cream bucket into the lake water. Satisfied, she set it beside the crayfish, and plopped the little Decapoda into its plastic prison. She looked at her Dad-Doherty, and asked, “Just like that?”

“Yep,” Doherty nodded. “Just like that.”

They caught about ten more before they switched gears, and cast their lines further out. At the end of the afternoon, they’d strung five blue hills or

“Sunnies” as Gale called them. Each time the girl removed the hook from their mouth, she would squeal against the spiny dorsal fin, and drop it—wriggling in the ground.

They called it a day. On their way back to camp, Gale slipped her hand into Doherty’s. “I’m really glad you came, Shelly. I wasn’t sure I’d ever see you again.”

“I waited too long,” she agreed, quietly.

For dinner, they dined like royalty. Doherty heated a pot of water over the fire. While it came to a boil, she gutted the fish with a smooth dexterity that belied the relative inexperience of the person wielding the fillet knife. Gale placed a sheet of aluminum foil on the fire grate, marinated the fish in vegetable oil as instructed, and transferred the sunnies. By then, the pot of water bubbled with heat.

“You might want to look away,” Dad-Doherty instructed with a gentle kindness as he dumped out the lake water, and rinsed the crayfish with a gallon of distilled water, once, twice, three times.

“I’m not a baby,” Gale answered, petulantly. She stared intently at the dancing silhouettes of the crayfish through the plastic bucket.

Doherty shrugged, as he removed the lid, and dropped the crayfish in one-by-one. Intent upon her task, when she looked up at her daughter-Gale, the tracks of tears on her face were bright orange in the firelight. “I warned you,” Doherty replied.

“I know.”

They peeled the crayfish, flipped the fish, and used the remaining water as stock for a bright blue box of Mac and Cheese. When the water was drained, they dumped in the crayfish, and ate the grilled sunnies from flimsy paper plates.

Gale leaned back in her canvas chair sated, satisfied. A full smile lit her face, brighter than any fire or sun.

Doherty held up a finger, and said, “One more thing.” She came back from the car with a bag of marshmallows, a box of graham crackers, and a bar of chocolate. Gale pierced the puff of sugar, and extended it over the flame. Doherty helped with the dessert’s construction.

After taking a bite, Gale pulled a face. “Yuck.”

“You don’t like it?”

“It’s too sweet.”

“Maybe you should try burning the marshmallow,” Dad-Doherty suggested.

The girl dumped her first s’mores in the fire. As it burned, she pierced another marshmallow with her stick, and jammed it back into the fire. They watched it as the marshmallow browned, blacken, and burst into flames.

Gale’s black eyebrows jumped. She stood in panic and sliced the air with her stick. The liquified ‘mallow slid off the stick. It shot through the air directly at

Michelle's face. She knew before she wouldn't be able to avoid it. Instead, she turned her head and waited for the fiery collision...

"Are you okay?" Brian looked at her with touching concern. His pen was paused above the page.

"Gale told me that story a million times," Michelle smiled. Her face was flush. Perspiration matted her temples. "She said she fell in love with food during that camping trip. I played the part of her father. The cracked shell," she mused. "Maybe that's why."

"It's great stuff," Wade looked down at his notes. "A lot to work with."

Michelle looked out the window and noticed the change in shadow. She straightened her posture and smoothed her hair. After clearing her throat, she asked, "How long was I out?"

"A couple hours. Are you hungry?"

"No."

"Want to take a break, maybe? Clear your head? Sneak into the bathroom and lick a bottle of shampoo?"

"I'm fine," she offered a ghost of a smile. "Unless *you* need a break?"

"I'm golden."

"I'll do another."

"Sounds good." He inched the tray of molded plastic another centimeter towards Doherty. "Oh boy," he pulled a face. "Looks like Flaming Cheetos are up next. To your health," he tipped an imaginary glass.

2.

Flamin' Hot Cheetos

I always say that I don't believe I'm a chef. I try to be a storyteller.

Jose Andrés

Dad/Doherty walked into his home on Walnut Street. Paused in the threshold at the back of the house, he stared at the ceiling in the kitchen with his head cocked and ears pricked, a sentence even he understood was loaded with problematic imagery. Through the slight sag of water damage and peeling off-weight paint, he could hear his daughter's music. This week, her obsession was François Hardy, a French singer-songwriter from the sixties. The week before, it has been the Indigo Girls. At least he could understand the lyrics; that was a plus.

Doherty climbed through stares with patient long suffering, marveling at the framed photos on the wall even as her legs carried resolutely forward. With

each step, the music got louder. Had he understood French, or been a fan of the pop vocalist, Mr. Baldrige would have been able to sing along with 'Nous Tous:'

*Nous tous ici qui avons le même âge
Nous vivons pour l'instant au jour le jour
Mais parfois on réfléchit davantage
Nos vies vont-elles prendre un autre tour?*

*Si, jusqu'à aujourd'hui, j'ai eu beaucoup de chance
Toi qui l'attends encore, toi, sais-tu bien
Que d'un jour à l'autre après soudain tout change?
Qui peut savoir comment sera demain?*

He didn't. Doherty did however, having shared Gale's company enough to hear the record played on repeat throughout the years of their complicated association. Hovering outside of her closed bedroom doorway, knuckle poised against the wood, Dad-Doherty took a deep breath and reminded himself that he loved his daughter, and that adolescence was a phase. At the last moment, Doherty broke with the memory's script, and quietly pushed the door open, hoping to catch Gale in Siri.

Gale was laying on her bed, one knee crooked. A copy of *Hors d'Oeuvre and Canapés* by James Beard was propped on her knee. An open notepad and a bag of Flamin' Hot Cheetos sat beside her. With a pen twined in her fingers, she clicked the plastic tip against her straight white teeth as her eyes scanned the page. Gone was the sharp angled ten-year old with scrawny limbs and crooked smile. She'd grown into her body, easing into an approximation that Doherty would befriend within the decade. Her sleek, black hair tumbled to her shoulders. A small cleft had grown m exaggerated on her chin. High School volleyball had toned her arms, and a growth spurt had taken care of the knock-knees.

Her room was a foodie's respite. Her bookshelf was crammed with cookbooks and mémoires. Loyal to a fault, Gale's tatty copies of the *Little House on the Prairie* series were preserved on the bottom row beside Willa Cather's collected works under a fine layer of dust. The top three shelves were heavily trafficked, polished and smelling faintly of lemon Pledge. A few titles jumped out at Doherty from across the room; Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, MFK Fisher's *How to Cook a Wolf*, and Escoffier's *A Guide to Modern Cooking* to name a few. The second shelf was a makeshift shrine dedicated to the works of Jacques Pepin.

Outside of the general disarray of the bookshelf, the rest of Gale's bedroom was meticulous in its cleanliness. A crate of neatly ordered records sat by the open window.

She could feel the atmosphere in the room change as lazily drifting dust motes were sucked out of the window, and the sunlight brightened. François

Hardy returned in all her Frenchy glory, and the memory marched inexorably forward.

Dad-Doherty jumped as Gale slammed down her book, and extended a crooked hand in his-her direction, cackling theatrically. With fingers stained an electric orange from the bag of Cheetos, Gale twitched them as if casting a spell and asked, "Who dares defile my lair? Speak now or forever hold your cheese!"

Doherty sighed, unimpressed. "Can you turn down the music, please?"

"Sorry," Gale answered, witchy theatrics gone. She leapt from bed, crossed the room, and turned the knob of the stereo. "So, What's shakin', daddio?" she asked, resettling herself atop her mattress.

"I tried to call you," Doherty replied automatically.

"You did?" Gale turned her eyes to the telephone on her bedside table. "I didn't hear."

"Yeah, I'd gathered as much," Dad-Doherty smiled. "I wanted to know what you wanted to make for dinner." His daughter elected to do it every night; had for the last couple of years. The selections became more obscure the deeper her obsession became with food. Sometimes, he had to travel to Minneapolis to find the ingredients she needed. "Apparently you were too busy *reading* about it, and—what do you say?—snarfing down that nuclear horse—"

"Ah-ah," Gale wagged an admonishing finger towards Doherty. "That's not how the script goes, Shelly. My dad did not say things like 'horse shit.' He was a straight-laced, corn-fed, all-American boy."

"I thought I'd improvise," she shrugged. "You brought me back here, after all."

"Did I?"

"Your cookies," Dad-Doherty sighed.

"Geez Louise. How many are damaged?"

"About half. I'm afraid you'll be seeing a lot of me the next few days."

That was always your problem, wasn't it?" Gale countered. "The fear?"

Doherty stiffened. "You and I both know it wasn't fear that kept me away."

Gale flicked a page. After a well-timed eye roll, she said. "I was thinking about foie gras."

The memory's needle slid back into its groove. "They don't sell foie gras at Rainbow Foods."

"What about Cub?" Gale arched an eyebrow.

"What about salmon?" Dad-Doherty countered. "Because, that's what I bought."

His daughter pulled a face.

"I know. Of all the cruel injustices," he replied. "Answer the phone next time." His eyes moved to the wall where an enlarged black and white photograph of Jacques Pepin was pinned. "And, he's too old for you."

"Why can't I love the things that I want?" she wilted into her mattress, applying a dramatic hand to her forehead.

“Ugh. I let you watch too much PBS when you were young.” He turned to leave. “Maybe start dinner in fifteen? I want to get cleaned up a bit.”

She jumped from her bed and met him at the door. “Sure thing, daddy.”

The needle jumped the track, and the music was replaced by a static hum. As Doherty stared into Gale’s hazelnut eyes, she registered the challenge and playfulness. Remaining frozen in the doorway, Gale leaned in and kissed her cheek, just above the corner of her mouth.

Her breath smelled atomic with spices and artificially produced cheese. Doherty could feel the heat climb into her cheeks.

Before she left the room, Gale hitched a smile and said, “I’m glad you’re doing this, yeah? Whether it was fear, or something else; It’s good to see you again.”

“It is,” Doherty agreed. She opened her eyes.

Gale’s bedroom was replaced with her own kitchen, and Brian Wade’s concerned face.

“What are you staring at, Mr. Wade?” Doherty asked. She found herself out of breath.

“I think we should take a break,” he suggested, as he walked into the kitchen. He returned with a tall glass of water. “You’re not looking too hot.”

She accepted it greedily. After gulping down half of it, she wiped her mouth with the back of her sleeve, and said, “Thank you for not sparing my vanity,” in a mildly peevish voice. Doherty glanced through the window and noticed the sun past its zenith. “I think we should break for a light lunch, and—please stop looking at me like that,” she said, without glancing at Wade. “I’m fine. This batch is particularly potent. It doesn’t help that half of them are damaged,” she aimed a jab in his direction.

“There she is,” Wade smiled. He stood, and stretched his arms wide above his head. “I’ll step outside; let my people know we’ve started the process.”

“Is there anything you’d prefer not to eat?”

He pointed to the cookies. “Outside of the memory bombs, no. I’m nondiscriminatory when it comes to my eating habits.”

She nodded. “It’ll be ready in fifteen.”

With Wade outside, Doherty stood on legs that felt as structurally sound as a piece of foie gras. Her hands trembled. Perspiration beaded her upper lip and matted her hair. When she tried to remove a skillet from a bottom cabinet, it clattered to the floor. She quickly looked over her shoulder to the backyard to ensure Wade hadn’t noticed. The last thing she needed was him fussing about the toll the *mémoire macarons* were taking on her.

His back was towards Doherty. Cell phone pressed to his ear.

As quickly as she could manage, Doherty slipped into her bedroom. From the pocket of her sweater she removed the last of her joint from the night before and a lighter. With

the bathroom door closed, she leaned against the counter, lit the tip, and inhaled the cottony smoke. It tickled her throat as she held it in her lungs. Clarity unfolded in her mind. Her hands stopped trembling. Images flickered unfettered.

Gale at ten. Gale at seventeen. Porcelain skin, mischievous smile, characteristic wit, sharpened and ready to deploy. Her boundless creativity, in word and act. The protean nature of raw creation at the tips of her fingers. The corners of her lips tipped upwards when a new way of doing something presented itself; *I know a secret, and I'm not telling*. But when she did confide, Doherty's mind staggered under the weight complexity made so simple. So clean. So beautiful. So Gale.

One cough, then another destroyed the sanctity of her thoughts. She flipped the switch for the overhead fan, and spritzed her clothes with a bottle of Febreze beneath the counter. The last of concealment was applied with Viscine to her eyes. With one last look in the bathroom mirror, she smoothed her hair, squared her shoulder, and nodded to herself.

Wade was sitting at the counter on a barstool. As Doherty passed, he began to smile. She bristled at the small gesture.

"Is something funny?" she asked as she moved a package of nova lox salmon, a red onion, cream cheese, and a small jar of capers from the fridge.

"Not at all," he replied.

"What are you smiling about, then?" She put two 'Everything' bagels into the toaster oven, and began to slice Roma tomatoes.

"It smells like a Joni Mitchell concert in here."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

The toaster oven dinged.

"I'm sure you don't," Wade replied, carefully arranging his face to avoid further recrimination.

Doherty finished constructing the Lox bagels. Once complete, she put a plate in front of Wade, and sat across from him.

"I get really hungry after I smoke, too," Wade managed after swallowing a bite.

"Would you like to sleep in your car tonight, Mr. Wade," she answered without looking up from her sandwich.

"Oh," He looped an arm around the back of his chair, and looked through the expansive windows. The sun was setting to the west, casting an orange silhouette atop the large boulders and chola, their prickly appendages, like dangerous balloon animals. "The platform wouldn't be so bad," he finally responded.

"No. *I* sleep on the platform."

"Maybe I'll join you for a bit. Light up some doobies, put on some Crosby, Stills, and Nash; stare at the stars," he chuckled.

Doherty arched an eyebrow. "The last I checked, it hasn't been 1969 for some time, Mr. Wade, nobody says 'doobie' anymore, and I never much cared for Crosby, Still, or Nash,

but mostly I disliked Crosby. The decade was certainly not the pinnacle when it came to men's facial hair."

"Fine, fine," he acquiesced. "And, it's 'Brian.'"

"As you've said, Mr. Wade. *Repeatedly.*"

The pair finished their sandwiches in silence.

"Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more?" he asked after Doherty gathered their plates.

She opened the refrigerator, and placed Wade's cooler between them. "Or close the wall up with our English dead," she answered resolutely.

3.

Key Lime

There is communion of more than our bodies when bread is broken and wine drunk.

M.F.K. Fisher

At twenty-five years old, Michelle Doherty walked the streets of New York City with purpose. Dressed in a light blouse and black skirt, she felt an excitement and optimism that matched the heights of the Empire State Building, if she had allowed herself to use such a tired cliché. She didn't, but felt good all the same. Her meeting with her agent had gone astonishingly well. She had received an advance on her next book, and signed a contract for three more based on the sales of her first. *The New York Times* celebrated her "quintessentially American voice" and hailed it as "an instant classic; guaranteed to be read for years to come."

Doherty seemed to glide through the streets of New York City buoyed by her startling success. She paused at the window of a pastry shop, tempted by the window display. The buttery creams and golden yellow light. In her opinion, a successful window display should be lit like the surface of a well-made baklava. Ephemeral, honeyed, and a crispy golden brown. Her eyes feasted, and stomach followed suit, demanding to be fed.

"What the hell," she thought. "I deserve it."

A bell sounded overhead as she stepped inside. The black and white checkered floors drew the eyes to the glass displays, populated with sweet treats. Truffles, macarons, the beloved baklava. Chocolate-covered, dusted with powdered sugar as fine as an alpine mountain. While she perused the patisserie's wares, her eyes focused on the reflection in the glass.

Behind her, a young woman sat alone at a small circular table. Doherty stood. Finding the cash register deserted, she turned toward the woman.

She had dark, voluminous hair which fell to her shoulders in loose ringlets. Her skin was pale, chin cleft, as if, in the moment of creation, God

himself placed his thumb below her lips as he surveyed his handiwork, and decided it was good, leaving a fingerprint behind. The stranger's eyes were hazelnut, and trained on a copy of Doherty's first book, *Our Twilit Youth*. A piece of pie sat in front of her, topped with a slice of lime.

"Hello," Doherty greeted her as she approached.

"Oh," the young woman replied when their eyes met. She looked at Doherty's photograph on the back cover. The surprise faded, and she said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Michelle. I'm Gale Baldrige."

"A pleasure," Doherty nodded. "I'm—"

"Yes, yes. We've already established who you are. Are you one of those pedants who need an entourage of sycophants?" Gale teased. "Is that why you came over? To announce your presence so I could bow at the feet of greatness. 'All hail The New York Times' brightest star. It's literary ingénue?'"

"No," Doherty laughed. "There was no one at the counter, and I saw you reading. Thought I'd say hello."

"You weren't looking for praise?" Gale asked, still smiling.

"I guess if you want to. Personally, I thought the first book was a load of twaddle, but people seem to like it."

"False modesty to boot." Gale pushed out the chair with her leg beneath the table. "Take a seat."

"Are you sure? I don't want to be a bother."

Gale gave the chair another kick. The legs squeezed against the tile.

Doherty sat.

"I took a little day trip myself," Gale offered without preamble. "I'm going to school in Hyde Park."

"Whereabouts?"

"CIA. The Culinary Institute of Arts," she explained.

"What brings you to the city?"

The pie. It's supposed to be the best in New York. You?"

"A meeting with my agent."

"Good news?" Gale took a bite of pie.

"Pretty good," Doherty shrugged.

Gale leaned forward conspiratorially. "Not exactly an *open book*, are you, Shelly?"

She smiled. Five minutes into their conversation, and the pair already seemed so familiar. Doherty removed the book from beneath Gale's palm and flipped through the pages without reading. "I save my thoughts for these silly things. Besides, I've already interrupted your pie. You came here to read and eat." She began to stand. "Really, it was nice to meet you, but I should—"

"Sit yourself right back down. I wouldn't have asked you to join me if I didn't want to talk."

"If you insist," Doherty returned to her seat without protest. Her knees bent with the force of this strange young woman's personality. "So, how long have you been attending culinary school?"

My dad wanted me to pursue something practical first; a traditional four-year. Something practical to fall back on if I changed my mind," she offered a slight laugh. "Seems sort of impossible since I've known what I've wanted to do since I was nine-years old, but I indulged him. He paid most of my tuition, so it was the least I could do. He died shortly after I graduated." She cleared her throat and picked at her pie with her fork. "After I got everything settled, I moved to New York to get my associate's degree in Baking and Pastry Arts."

"I'm sorry," Doherty replied automatically. She was surprised by both Gale's candor, and when she had the temerity to reach out to touch the young woman's hand. It was only an instant, and almost immediately withdrawn, but the simple act of kindness did not go unnoticed.

"Me, too," Gale nodded, unabashed as she wiped a single tear from the corner of her eye. "Such is life, though," she shrugged, banishing the grief in an instant. "The only thing to do with spilt milk is dump it in a bowl and bake with it."

"That's an interesting philosophy," Doherty chuckled. "Have you heard the joke about how to find the perfect piece of key lime pie?"

"I haven't," Gale offered a preemptive smile. "How *do* you find the perfect piece of pie?"

"It's impossible," Doherty smiles. "It all tastes like sour dog shit."

Gale laughed. She picked up her fork and said, "You wouldn't say that if you tried a bite." With a hand held beneath her fork, she extended it to Doherty, and said, "Try it."

Doherty initially waved the fork away, surprised by Baldrige's willingness to share food with a complete stranger. "I couldn't possibly."

"A bite," Gale insisted, jamming the fork closer to Michelle's laughing face.

"Fine!" her mouth closed around the fork. Tangy, sweet and light. The crunch of the graham cracker crust. Beyond that, this stranger's smiling face, beaming in triumph at the look of surprised satisfaction of Doherty's face. The small bite was seared in her brain instantly, indelibly, as one of the sweetest things she'd ever tasted. "You win."

"I knew it," Gale laughed. "You're a stubborn thing, aren't you."

"Said the woman who assaulted me with a pastry fork."

"A tine and place for everything." Gale shrugged.

"I'll pretend you didn't just say that," Doherty groaned.

Doherty and Baldrige sat in the patisserie for several hours. When the clerk returned to the counter, Doherty bought another piece of pie, and several cups of coffee. Before they left, they exchanged phone numbers and promised to call each other the next time the other was in town....

The windows in Doherty's reclaimed bunker were black squares against the off-white walls when she came to her senses like a somnambulist. The granite countertop had been replaced with the living room sofa. She had no memory of the transition. When she tried to stand, her legs collapsed beneath her. She fell back onto the sofa.

"Hey, hey, hey," Wade rounded the corner with a steaming pot in his hand. "Would you please be careful?" his brow was knit with exasperation. "That's a *Yves Klein* table." He rolled his eyes, removed a damp wash rag from his shoulder, and transferred it to the back of Michelle Doherty's neck before she could protest. "Dinner in five. I've been keeping it warm."

"How long?" she managed.

"A couple of hours."

"How did I end up in the living room?"

"You wandered in here about a half-an-hour ago. My little brother used to sleepwalk. I knew that I shouldn't wake you, and just let you do your thing."

Doherty nodded her understanding as Wade disappeared around the corner. She pressed the damp washcloth to her neck, her forehead, her face. Images flashed through her mind. Their intensity, as well as the emotions associated with them, drove her from solitude. Given the choice of being alone with Gale's echo, she stumbled into the kitchen, using the cool concrete wall as a ballast.

Wade was too busy, or too polite to mention her weakened state. Instead, he put the finishing touches on dinner, set the table, and opened a bottle of Nero d'Avola after getting a weary nod of approval from Doherty.

"Whore's Spaghetti, coming right up," he set a plate of heaping pasta in front of her, followed by a deep ruby-colored wine.

"Excuse me?" she replied, examining the plate of linguine, swimming in plum tomatoes, black olives, anchovy fillets, and chopped fresh parsley.

"*Pasta Puttanesca*' for those with a more *refined* palate," he smiled. "Eat," he instructed.

Doherty did as instructed, despite not having much of an appetite. If the macarons took this much out of her, she would be as substantial as the meringue shells by the end of the weekend.

"You're doing great, by the way," Wade offered, apropos of nothing. "I can see how difficult this is for you."

"Yes, well," was all she said in response.

"Were you and Baldrige— Wade paused trying to find a tactful way to phrase his question. "What *happened*?"

Doherty speared a forkful of olives, avoiding his eyes. "Creative differences," she finally replied.

"Was there something—"

“Mr. Wade,” she began. “Brian—I’m exhausted. I understand where your question is coming from, but lack the energy or inclination to answer tonight. Unfortunately, Gale is systematically destroying the life I’ve so carefully guarded. I’m a lamb to the slaughter—as it were—and for the next couple of days, you are in charge of the abattoir.” She wiped her mouth with a paper towel. “I don’t begrudge you the question. My answer tonight is *‘Wait and see.’*”

“Fair enough,” he nodded.

“Thank you for dinner,” she stood, and focused on the digital display of the clock in the kitchen.

“I might join you for a minute, if you don’t mind,” he stood.

“It’s well past midnight, and if I stay up much longer, you’ll find me even more unpleasant than I’ve already been to you. Good night.”

Chapter 3

Wade watched Doherty leave through the back sliding door. Her figure disappeared into the encroaching darkness. He stared at the empty space trying to divine meaning from the beguiling woman. Rather than sit there for hours untying the Gordian knot of her character, Wade gathered their dirty dinner wear. As he packed the puttanessa into a plastic dish, he chuckled aloud. “Whore’s spaghetti,” he murmured with a shake of his head.

With everything cleaned up, Wade lingered in the doorway of Doherty’s bedroom. The unmade bed did not call to him tonight. Nervous energy coursed through his veins. Rather than toss and turn in bed for hours, he boiled a kettle of water. When he was raiding Doherty’s shelf yesterday night, he found a dusty bottle of Sanka. Perceiving it as a sign of growth rather than capitulation, he mixed himself a cup of decaffeinated coffee and sat at the empty dining room table.

Editing was his least favorite part of his craft. He was pro-life when it came to his words. Much like decaf coffee, he never had much taste for “Murdering his Darlings.” Wade was sure that William Faulkner, or whoever the hell said it was either a masochist—or worse—a hypocrite; if there was anyone in need of a literary genocide, it was Faulkner. Yet, as he sat hunched over his pages, Wade’s red, felt-tipped pen moved swiftly across the page; like a magicked broom in that Disney film. Hours later, with the day’s work edited to his satisfaction, he stood and stretched. His back popped and gaunt face contorted into equal parts pain and pleasure.

He still wasn’t tired so he opened the sliding glass door, and stepped into the night.

Against the riot of stars, Wade could see Doherty’s silhouette atop the elevated platform, her elbows resting against the railing. A red eye hovered in space. He heard the sound of her ragged cough. Suppressing a smile, he moved along the redwood boardwalk towards an area populated with lounge chairs encircling a soot-blackened Chinese wok. In the corner of the concrete pad, he found a cord of wood. Gathering a load of brush, he fished a crumpled receipt from the pocket of his wrinkled jeans and coaxed a small flame to life using a green plastic lighter. He fed a steady diet of piñon pine and fragrant eucalyptus.

Wade leaned back in his chair and gazed at the gibbous moon. He reached into the pocket of his gray *Hamline University* hoodie, and removed a pack of *American Spirits*. The angry bead of Doherty’s joint was pointed in his direction as she watched from her observation platform. He lit his cigarette, and raised a hand in greeting.

Her silhouette remained unchanged.

Wade laughed around a mouthful of smoke. “Whatever you were up to, Baldrige, it beats me,” he said to himself in a whisper. “But, whatever it was, you must’ve had one *hell* of a sense of humor.”

A comet streaked across the sky; an upturned crescent, a galactic smirk of agreement. Cigarette after cigarette passed through his lungs as he sat beneath a Mexican blanket pooled around his knees, and wondered at the figure Doherty cut as she walked upon the sidewalks of New York. Even as an owl screeched in the distance, Wade imagined the sound of a distant overhead bell, and a brief, unguarded smile at the sight of Gale Baldrige lost in Doherty's innermost thoughts.

When she was under the spell of the macarons, the years seemed to melt away from Michelle Doherty. Gone was the sour disposition and the body language of a clenched fist. Transported, her eyes flashed with vibrancy in a way that almost broke his heart; the joy vanished the moment she 'returned' to the present.

With a flick of the wrist, he cast the butt of his cigarette into the flame as he thought of a twenty-something year-old woman with worlds tumbling from her fingertips, and a new friend to help her create from the raw materials of their imaginations.

He woke early on Saturday morning as was his custom. His fire from the night before was a pile of white ash. Before discovering how much his body would pay for sleeping on the lounge chair, he lit his first cigarette of the day, and wrote down some notes using an app in his smartphone. He looked up a couple of times from his work, and noticed Doherty on her elevated platform. She was covered with a Pendleton blanket, and sleeping soundly.

Wanting to enjoy the wide, boulder-swept High Desert, he grabbed his toiletry bag from Doherty's bathroom, threw a towel over his shoulder, and headed back outside. Once the water in the outdoor shower warmed, he shed his clothes, and threw them over the corrugated steel and wood half-walls.

Wade was lathering his hair when he heard the hollow sound of Doherty's footsteps against the redwood boardwalk. They'd stopped abruptly when they heard the unmistakable sound of running water.

"Mr. Wade?" Doherty called in a perfect mixture of peevishness and surprise.

"It's Brian." Rivulets of soap ran down his face. "My eyes are closed if you want to walk by. I won't peak," he promised solemnly.

"I'm not worried about *you* seeing *me*, Mr. Wade."

"Well, I'm not shy either, Ms. Doherty," he rinsed the rest of the shampoo from his blonde hair and slicked it back. "You can walk by. *Promise*. Won't think *any* less of you."

"Why didn't you use the bathroom inside?"

"I didn't feel like it," he shrugged. "It's beautiful out here."

After a beat of annoyed silence, Doherty asked, "Are you using my shampoo again?"

"Oh, most definitely," he grinned. "There was only a little bit left in the bottle, so you might want to get more."

Doherty stormed past the shower, eyes averted mumbling something that sounded a lot like "Horse's ass," to Wade.

"I'm kidding!" he called after her. "Good morning, Ms. Doherty! Hope you slept well!" The hard *'Whump!'* of the sliding glass door served as her answer.

Wade tilted his head towards the spray of water laughing, lathering, singing: *Don't worry 'bout a thing, 'Cause every little thing gonna be—*" Wade gargled a mouthful of water, and spit it to the boardwalk. He toweled himself off, dressed, and said, "All right."

He found Doherty in the kitchen, standing over a steaming pot of water. A carton of eggs, anchovy paste, and a crusty loaf of French bread sat beside her. "Are you clothed?" she asked without turning. Doherty wore a pair of flip-flops, gray chinos, and a tee-shirt, beneath her customary sweater.

"Last I checked," Wade pulled out a chair at the dining room table, and was about to sit when Doherty said, "You can wait in the living room. Breakfast will be ready in a couple minutes."

"I don't mind waiting in here."

"I'm sure," she replied dryly without lifting her attention from the steaming pot of water. "But, I've seen quite enough of you already this morning, Mr. Wade. I need to steel myself for the day."

"You're not exactly a 'Morning person' are you?"

"Nor am I one who employs phrases such as 'Morning person,' 'Rise and shine, or 'Up and at 'em.' In fact, Mr. Wade, the list of the things I'm not is so dizzying that I'm tempted to skip breakfast altogether and go back to bed."

"The early bird gets to tell the worm to go fuck itself, huh?" Wade laughed. "Do you ever go to that bar in town?" he asked to throw her off.

"Excuse me?" she added a glug of vinegar to the now boiling water.

"The bar," he repeated, nodding his head in thanks. "In town. Do you ever go?"

The tectonic plates in the old writer's shoulder blades shifted, casting the outlines of sharp peaks beneath her tatty old sweater. "The living room, Mr. Wade. Wait there. And, I promise you," she paused, sensing he was about to open his mouth in response. "If you tell me to call you 'Brian' the only thing you'll taste for breakfast is this slotted spoon down your throat."

"*Not* a morning person, then," Wade held up his hands, palms forward, in surrender as he inched out the room, smiling. He sat in the leather-upholstered, walnut-shelled Eames lounge chair adjacent to the Yves Klein coffee table. "Sirs," he tipped his head, feeling dwarfed by the furniture's comparative status in relation to his own.

Minutes later— several minutes more than she actually required to poach an egg, he suspected—Wade heard the clatter of silverware scraping against plate. He found Doherty seated, and eating. "Breakfast is done," she wiped her mouth with a napkin.

"I see."

“There’s more in the kitchen,” she continued. “I didn’t make you a plate since you’re a grown man, and I’m not your mother.”

“The resemblance is uncanny, though. She was a real nurturing type, too.”

She offered a pinched smile. “I wasn’t sure if you cared for anchovies either, and didn’t want to presume. There’s a pepper mill and sea salt in the cabinet beside the stove.”

Oddly touched by her passive consideration, he made his plate with another word of snark. When he took his seat across from her, he asked, “Any ideas what might be on deck for the day? Do the flavors remind you of anything?”

“I have an inkling, yes.”

Wade burst the yolk of his poached egg with his butterknife. Sunshine spilled across the bread. “Share with the rest of the class?” he suggested, before taking a bite, and washing it down with scalding French roast.

Vodka and Redbull. Chocolate Hazelnut. Pink Champagne.

A note of uncertainty flashed through her eyes. “Vacations we took together. A summer in France. The germ of the idea for *Mémoire Macarons*.”

“Does it make you nervous?”

“This whole process makes me uneasy, Mr. Wade. I don’t like strangers poking through my memories.”

“Says the critically acclaimed novelist.”

“You remind me of her,” she answered deliberately. “Your sense of humor—if you could call it that; I feel like she would have liked you. Considerably.”

“Why’s that?”

Her shoulders relaxed. Doherty put both hands around her mug as her eyes grew distant. “She enjoyed anyone or anything that could make me squirm. It was one of her favorite things to do.”

Wade nodded.

“Spicy foods, taboo conversations, a terrible pun; those were her bread and butter.”

“Do you miss her?”

Doherty’s posture stiffened as she considered the question. Her shoulders relaxed. “It’s complicated.”

“Are you ready to face her again?”

“Isn’t that why you’re here?”

He pushed his plate away and gathered his notes from his satchel in Doherty’s bedroom. Lucy waited steadfastly on the top shelf of the refrigerator. Plate in hand, he was about to remove the first cookie from the plastic container when he remembered Doherty’s preference to handle her own food. Instead, he brought the tray to Doherty and let her remove it herself.

She seemed to appreciate his passive consideration.

He removed the cap of his pen, and put the tip to paper. “Ready whenever you are.”

Doherty considered the macaron. Its metallic gray shell, and blue filling, as vibrant as the Yves Klein table in the living room. Wade thought he saw her hesitate as she brought the cookie to her lips.

4.

Red Bull and Vodka

“Sharing food with another human being is an intimate act that should not be indulged in lightly.”

M.F.K. Fisher

Michelle and Gale dropped their suitcases just inside the door of, what would be, their apartment for the next two months. Doherty was there to finish editing her second book, a task she had found nearly impossible in the suffocating heat of A New York City summer for the record books. Her publisher, aware of the difficulties she was having, offered to house her in the quarters of another of their clients; a Russian expat on a world wide book tour. His apartment in the Banyuls-sur-Mer, a quiet seaside village in the south of France, was gathering dust and cobwebs. He offered it gladly with the stipulation that Doherty feed the man’s goldfish and water his peace lily and spider plants. Doherty snapped it up without question.

Gale, in between jobs and graduate degrees, decided to tag along upon her friend’s dogged insistence. The two had become fast friends. The pair had toyed with finding an apartment together, and would use Banyuls-sur-Mer as a trial run.

“Home sweet home,” Gale did a pirouette through the front living area, sidestepping their bags.

The front room was sparse in decor. With the exception of a pair of bookshelves, the only piece of art was an icon of the Virgin Mary. The rest of the space was devoted to greenery. Spider plants hung from nearly every conceivable surface. On the coffee table, beyond a comfortable leather sofa that divided the front room from the living room, sat an enormous peace lily.

“Holy mother of god,” Gale reverently doffed an imaginary cap towards the icon. “That thing has to be four feet tall.”

“And demands our constant attention,” Doherty rubbed at the small of her back. “If he returns and finds it dead, he promised to find me, and ‘Split every infinitive from my American brain.’ His words,” she smiled.

“Sounds like a sweetheart,” Gale grasped one of its leaves and stroked it lovingly. “It’s gorgeous.”

“I suppose,” Doherty shrugged. “Have we paid the damn thing an appropriate amount of reverence, yet?”

"I think so," Gale stood. She flung open the door leading to a small wrought iron balcony, and stepped outside. The wide, flat, sweep of the Mediterranean unfurled to the horizon. "Wow," she stepped back into the apartment. "That's a lot more impressive than the East River."

"The East River is actually a strait."

Gale pursed her lips and shook her head. "What would I do without you, Shelly?"

"Toil through life under the mistaken assumption that the East Straight was a river." Doherty could already feel her mood slipping into peevishness. In order to counteract the effects of jet lag and a lifetime of sour-faced correctness, she took a stab at a Baldrige-style joke. "I think the garbage feels a certain amount of pride floating in a strait, don't you?"

"Decidedly more *offal*," Gale winked. She skipped towards Doherty, and said, "C'mon, *Shelly*. Lighten up. We're in France! Don't get cranky on me now!" She smiled. "Should we check the good Czech's fridge? See what we can toast the next two months to?"

"He's Russian," she replied, but found herself smiling, overtaken by Baldrige's characteristic gaiety. "Fine," she relented. "Check the fridge."

"Let's see what good ol' 'Comrade Denisovich' left for us?" Gale threw open the refrigerator door. Her upper torso disappeared. "Let's see: herring, cucumbers, sausage, sour cream..."

"You're joking," Doherty replied, arms crossed.

"I'm joking," Gale confirmed. "Pretty standard fare," she closed the door, and opened the freezer. "Ah!" She withdrew a frosted glass bottle. After melting the condensation from the label, she read, "Moskovskaya Osobaya." She found two glasses from the cabinet beside the sink, and plopped them down in front of Doherty. "To our success."

Doherty picked up her glass and examined its clear contents. Her expression was dubious. "I don't drink hard liquor."

"You're in luck," Gale darted towards her carry-on bag, and returned with a lukewarm can of Red Bull. "I bought it from the duty-free when we landed," she explained. "In case you or I needed to pull an all-nighter."

Something flashed through Doherty's eyes before she could mask it. A moment of indecision clouded her and Gale's face. "I assume you're going to be up at all hours editing your book," Baldrige explained. Her voice was quiet, uncertain.

"Of course," Doherty flashed a rictus of a smile. She banished the expectation from her eyes. "I knew what you meant."

Gale's posture loosened. She hitched her black hair behind her ears, and clinked her shot glass against Doherty's. "To the spirits of Nabokov and Pushkin!"

"To us," Doherty agreed. She swallowed her vodka followed by an immediate chaser of Red Bull. The sweet smokiness was almost too much to bear.

During the coming weeks, Doherty and Baldrige settled into a comfortable routine. Doherty would wake at five o'clock in the morning. She would put a kettle of water on the hob at medium heat, and open the balcony doors, allowing the Mediterranean to drift into the apartment. After pouring the boiling water from the hob over the fresh grounds, the tang of the sea would mingle with the coffee, and wipe the remaining cobwebs from Doherty's mind.

The Expat's apartment was small. With one bedroom, that put Baldrige on the couch, no matter how much Doherty protested to the contrary.

"You're my guest," she insisted. "I don't mind sleeping on the couch. I've always been able to sleep anywhere."

"Great," Gale countered. "Then you can stay in your bedroom, and leave me be. You're on a deadline. I'm an unencumbered woman on vacation," her eyes flashed mischievously. "I'm not sure when I'll be home each night, or who I'll be with."

"It's *whom*," Doherty countered.

"Trust me, grammar will be the least of their concerns."

Yet, despite her bravado, Baldrige's world revolved around the expat's kitchen. She would compose her own notes to the orchestral scents of their small flat, adding baking bread and pastries to the symphony. At some point each morning, despite Doherty's conscientious creeping so as not to disturb her, there would be a time when Doherty looked at the couch, and found Gale staring at her, glassy-eyed, and yawning.

Their morning greetings went something like:

Doherty: Jesus Christ, you scared me. Why don't you make a noise or something to warn me?

Gale: What's the fun in that?

Doherty would slip a mug of thick coffee into her hands, and she'd return to editing on the balcony, the surrounding cream-colored apartment buildings, and aquamarine shutters going vibrant in the rising sun. Since they were there in the off season, the tourists were few, the town quiet.

After her first cup, Gale would join Doherty on the balcony who hunched over her laptop as she hunted and pecked at her manuscript. Gale's tank top and shorts would eventually prove too distracting, at which point, they'd slip into familiar morning banter:

Doherty: Would you go put some clothes on? Half the neighborhood is going to be drooling at our door before long.

Gale: Such a prude, Shelly. Hopefully your manuscript is as tight as your ass.

Despite their snipes, the pair enjoyed each other's company immensely. When the noon hour arrived, they would lock up their flat, and walk the markets, buying produce for the evening's dinner, which Gale made without fail every night. While rolling fresh pasta or reducing a sauce, Baldrige would recount stories from her childhood; past camping trips with her father, frivolous crushes that went nowhere, challenging a particularly nasty professor from culinary school that she hated. Doherty listened, chin cradled in the palm of her hand, from the kitchen island, delighting in the process of cooking. Chemistry and whimsy perfectly balanced, expertly handled by Gale's soft touch.

After dinner, before Gale left to explore Banyuls-sur-Mer's discotheques, and Doherty returned to her unwieldy manuscript, Baldrige would fill their shot glasses with the expat's steadily dwindling supply of Moskovskaya Osobaya, crack the top from a can of Red Bull, and drink to the possibilities France had to offer.

In this way, despite being in close proximity to the vineyards of Banyuls, Doherty would always remember France for the taste of Russian vodka on her tongue, and Gale Baldrige, smiling, a challenge in her eyes....

"Hey, what are you doing? Slow down." Wade pushed Doherty's hand away from her mouth before she could bite the next macaron.

"What does it look like I'm doing, Mr. Wade?" she replied breathlessly.

"It looks like you're about to eat another macaron because you're upset." He placed a box of tissues between them. "Maybe you'd like to get some air first?"

The effects of the previous macaron lingered in her senses. Her apartment smelled of the sea, freshly brewed coffee, and crisp baking bread. It was almost as if Gale could walk into the room at any time, smiling defiantly, eyes flashing in triumph.

"I think not, Mr. Wade," she shoved the cookie into her mouth, and closed her eyes.

5.

Chocolate Hazelnut and Raspberry

Like most humans, I am hungry...our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of

one without the others. So it happens that when I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and the hunger for it...

M.F.K. Fisher

Once they each had a chance to wake up, Baldrige would busy herself in the kitchen, acting as Doherty's personal chef. If Baldrige wasn't around to force her to eat, it would be late in the evening before she remembered, ravenous and light-headed, cramming whatever she had on hand into her mouth to quiet the nausea.

Lunettes de Romans, jam-filled pastries dusted in confectioners sugar, *raspberry pain au chocolat*, *pain de mie*, buttered toast sprinkled with shaved milk chocolate; of all the breakfasts piled upon her by the eager pastry chef, Doherty's favorite was simple: a thick piece of buttered brioche, smothered with chocolate hazelnut spread, topped with fresh raspberries from the market.

When Gale handed her the first slice, still warm from the oven, Doherty examined it judgmentally. She pushed her laptop aside, and made room for the plate. "This is going to be a mess."

"Correction," Gale held up her index finger, hair blowing in the gentle breeze. "It'll be delicious."

"I might need a napkin."

"You *might* need medical attention if you don't shove that piece of toast in your goddamn mouth, tout de suite."

Gale watched, her smile expectantly as she sat on the edge of her seat, waiting to tell Doherty 'I told you so.' The taste was a revelation. The richness of the lightly toasted brioche, the saltiness of the olive-oil kissed butter. Small pieces of crunchy praline were sprinkled throughout the decadent, chocolatey hazelnut spread, touched with the tartness of the fresh raspberries, gathered from a market in neighboring Perpignan the previous day from an ancient woman with skin the color of a walnut, and pure white hair.

A soft moan of pleasure escaped her lips. She wiped at a dab of hazelnut spread gathered in the corner of her mouth, unwilling to let the smallest morsel escape consumption. "Oh my god," she looked at Gale's wavering image.

Baldrige handed her a sweating jelly jar filled with thickly frothy milk to wash down to heavenly concoction.

"Don't spoil it," Doherty held up a hand to quiet the words waiting on the tip of Gale's sharp tongue.

"Spoil what?"

Doherty motioned to the remainder of the toast in her hand, the vibrant red of the fruit, the pure white dusting of confectioner's sugar. She set down her milk and motioned to the azure coastline, the cream-colored apartments, the space between herself and Gale. "*This*." She took another decadent bite. "*This* moment is perfect." Overcome with an almost post-coital serenity, she handed

the remainder of the toast to Gale, and melted into her chair, knees folded to her chest. She closed her laptop, and eyes, smiling peacefully.

The sound of Gale chewing her portion only added to the magic. The rightness of their now, as if the pair were devouring the scenery around them, as if they had the power to swallow it whole.

Gale polished off the last bite and brushed her hands free of sugar, the whisper of sandpaper. "*Fin.*"

After lunch, Doherty spent the bulk of her afternoon lost in the tangled skeins of her own thoughts, untangling knots, and threading the needle of her own thoughts. The last thing Gale would see after lunch was her friend alone on the balcony. Baldrige would close the door to the apartment with a soft click, a smile forming on her lips. Freedom. To eat. To swim. To explore. Unencumbered. In this portion, the memory shifted focus from the pair's interactions, and followed Gale through her solitary expeditions.

Doherty looked at the world through Gale's expectant eyes. Inhabiting her willowy body, the tension Doherty felt on a minute-to-minute basis evaporated completely. She smiled openly at those she passed in the market, sitting alone in the cafe, her Moleskine notebook of recipe ideas open in front of her, and stopped to marvel at whatever caught her eye. A fishing boat in the old village captained by a man who insisted she share his lunch of freshly-scaled anchovies swimming in olive oil, and beached on a crostini of French bread.

"Un classique," he assured her, hand to his heart. "Croyez-moi. Croyez-moi!"

Laughing, she swallowed the salty fish and moved along. Sometimes she would catch a bus and explore the boulangeries of the Pyrenees Orientales, diving into the flaky, buttery crust of whatever wonderful treats they had to offer. Appetite slaked, she would enjoy the pebbled beach near their apartment with the other locals, finding a deserted cove to claim as her own if the crowds got too thick. After shedding whatever slouchy tee shirt she was wearing that day, she stripped to a blue polka-dot bikini top, and wrapped her waist in a matching sarong, and stared at the water for hours beneath the brim of her floppy sun hat.

It was during these expeditions that the idea to capture memories first came to her. Enamored by the sights and sounds of southern France, Gale's mind wandered to her first food memories. She recalled her father's legs at the stove as she watched from beneath the kitchen table; the smell of browning garlic and sizzling meat; their twinned aromas suffusing the air with expectation and a certain kind of magic. Her father's gaze skipped through her mind, glassy with the dementia that would take him. Those overcast eyes would clear momentarily when she would cook him food; a well-seasoned, piece of crispy salmon skin, delicate foie gras, or, his favorite, a pancake fried using the raw yeast from a sourdough starter she began at fourteen, sprinkled with sliced scallions and browned sesame seeds. Her mind turned over algaed pieces of shale in the lake

of her mind, revealing bright red crayfish, and delicate sunnies, silver scales flashing in the dying sun. The tang of key lime pie, and the flaky crust of her first pastry. Then, she remember Shelly's face that morning; the sheer delight of satisfaction created by a simple piece of toast.

Food had always been the intersection of taste and memory; hallowed ground reserved for the most prized. She was determined to find a way to make those experiences into a single delicacy; a chance to recall what was lost in perfect clarity, if only to see the smile on Doherty's face, the quiet satisfaction of peace and delight, to trap it with butter, with sugar, with crust, like an insect in amber.

Thus, the idea of Mémoire macarons was born...

"That's it, huh?" Wade leaned back and placed his hands behind his head. Smiling, he interrupted Doherty's silence, and said, "A piece of raspberry toast was the engine behind a culinary revolution?"

Doherty blinked. She wiped the sweat from her brow and took a large gulp of the ice water Wade had set in front of her. "Do I detect derision, Mr.— *Brian?*"

His smile broadened. "Not derision. Maybe surprise? For all the shit that millennials take for the revelatory properties of the 'avocado toast,' and you GenExers have the exact same thing. It tickles me; that's all."

"I'm sure Gale's spirit can rest now that she knows a nameless writer has been 'tickled.'"

Wade's eyelids went to half-mass, but retained their humor. "You're a regular cloud of 'Fuck you, sunshine,' when you come out of these fugue states, you know? You're a lot more pleasant to be around in your books."

Her eyebrows lifted a fraction in surprise. "You've read them?"

"Sure," he nodded, ticking off the titles on his outstretched fingers. "*January in Stasis, Memory's Child, An Ode to Amelia Cecil.*"

"I'm oddly touched."

"I didn't say I *liked* them," he chuckled. "But, no. They're brilliant."

"Why didn't you say something sooner?"

"Why didn't I out myself as a 'Stan' a couple of days ago? You don't really strike me as the type to accept your fans with open arms, if you know what I mean."

She stared at him blankly, stalling for time. Playing dumb. "I *don't* know what you mean." Admittedly, something she was not very good at. Wade saw through the poorly constructed lie before it had left her lips.

"Writers typically want to talk about their projects. Hell, I would if I ever got published."

Doherty took another drink of water, pensively. She let it roll across her tongue, cool it, before she replied. "I think there should be a modicum of shame involved with creation.

A sliver of self-reflection. A moment when they ask themselves if the voice they've added to the general cacophony of noise needed to be added." She looked at her glass. "Yes. I think a good writer has to believe all of those things."

"Maybe that's why I haven't been published," he laughed. "I don't even have a 'barbaric yawp' to 'sound above the rooftops' to begin with."

"Oh, you have a 'yawp,' Brian. You just need to find the right echo chamber."

He walked into the kitchen and returned with a bag of baby carrots from the fridge. "Okay, enough of all that. The one thing I've got in spades is unearned self-importance, and I don't know anyone feeding into that." Wade tossed the rest of the carrot into his mouth, and the dampness of fingers against his shirt. "I've made an executive decision while you were out. I thought you should know, since it concerns you."

"What, pray tell, have you decided?" Doherty replied, thankful to move away from the topic of writing, and the titles of her books. "Tell me what you've decided."

"We're going out tonight."

"Excuse me?"

"Now, hang on," Wade held his hands, palms out towards Doherty. "Before you retreat into your sweater like a scared fabric turtle, hear me out." He took her silence as a tacit agreement. "We wouldn't be going for *you*, so, let's stop that train before it leaves the tracks, okay?"

"I live on a steady diet of Top Ramen, white rice, and—when I'm feeling particularly refined—a turkey sandwich with actual vegetables from the supermarket, yeah? Since I've gotten here, I've done nothing but catalogue food porn, and eat the finest ingredients money has to offer. Nova Salmon? Smoked anchovy fillets? Baby carrots?" his eyes widened as he looked down at the bag in his hand. He tossed them at Doherty as if they were burning his fingers. "I need beer. I need chicken wings. I need 'honky,' and-or 'tonk' music, whatever the hell that is. So," he sighed at the end of his pitch, "*will* you do the honor of accompanying me to the bar this evening?"

Before she could answer, he added, "You could even silently judge everyone for having a good time, and generally wasting their time on frivolities like 'company' and 'fun.' Whaddya day?"

Doherty flattened her smile with her index finger. After a moment, she nodded slowly. "I accept."

Wade's eyes brightened considerably. He sat up in his chair. "Yeah?"

Doherty indicated the plastic mold between them. "Before you whisk me away on what is categorically, and without question, *not* a date, I have one more macaron."

"Champagne," Wade replied after checking against the list.

The meringue shells were a pale gold. They were bound by A pearlescent buttercream.

“It’s broken,” Wade noted. “Are you going to be okay? These ones tend to be a bit more potent and head screwy.”

“I’ll be fine,” she answered, lifting the macaron from the package. While Wade returned his focus to his notebook, pen poised, Doherty swallowed against the tension in her throat. It tasted of fear, and the ghost of flavor left by the hazelnut.

She knew what would come next, and it frightened her, a little.

6.

Champagne (*Damaged*)

Champagne, if you are seeking the truth, is better than a lie detector.

Graham Greene

Michelle Doherty opened her eyes and found herself standing in her darkened apartment in Manhattan from years before. The floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked an abandoned city; streets clogged with stationary traffic, and fog belching from sewer grates. December in New York City, and to her, it never appeared so tragically beautiful, so isolated. The sound of her shoes echoed against the bare wooden floor, as she slipped her shoes off, and rubbed her feet.

“Gale?” Doherty’s voice was vulnerable, unguarded. She understood dimly the rules of what was supposed to happen, as in a dream. Despite the familiarity of the apartment, she’d never known it completely drained of sound. Muffled voices through the walls. Traffic leaking in through warped panes of glass. The apartment had always been a beating heart, and it’s stillness unnerved her. None of the lamps or light switches worked, either. The place, populated in her memory with warm, welcoming light, was bleached. Abandoned. “Gale?” Doherty called out, cautiously. “Are you in here?”

Her fingers trailed the tops of bookshelves and end tables. Everything was covered in—what she initially thought was—a patina of dust. However, when she brought her index finger to her lips, she realized it was powdered sugar. Before she could fully appreciate the realization, a small group of crayfish clicked past at her feet, claws extended, en route to a destination only they seemed to know. Piles of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos obstructed their path. They did their best to navigate, oblivious to the wide swaths of Nutella smeared against the walls.

“Gale?” Doherty repeated, growing more and more anxious.

From the kitchen, she heard Baldrige reply. “I’m in here, Shelly. Hurry up! It’s about to drop!”

Her voice acted as a switch. It lit up her apartment like the Christmas tree in Rockefeller square. Gone were the crayfish and cheetos, the nutella, and darkness. The apartment sprang to life, momentarily cheering Doherty.

She walked into the kitchen with a spring in her step.

Seven years had passed since their time in the south of France. Since that time, the pair had lived together, until Gale leased a space in ——— to open her own critically acclaimed pastry shop. Combining her culinary education, and a burgeoning interest in neuropathy, and the nature of memories, Gale had worked in tandem with a group of scientists to figure out a way to synthesize the enzymes used in the formation of memories. As her reputation grew throughout the city, Gale's name, and tasty creations, were on the minds and tongues of everyone in the city.

Memory's Child had been a resounding success, further cementing Doherty's reputation as a modern master of literature.

"Fie-nally," Gale smiled, as Doherty walked into the room. She handed her a flute of champagne. A small colored television sat on the kitchen counter. "Where the hell were you?"

"Calling the super about the drain thingy."

"Don't say 'thingy,' Gale pulled a face, taking a sip of Monet. "You're a wordsmith, for God's sake."

"Dongly thing?"

"There you go," Gale touched her nose. "You weren't on the short list for the Pulitzer for nothing. Besides, you don't have to lie. You just got here, right? Well," she paused. "This *version* of you just got here." She nodded her head towards the kitchen table in the corner of the room where younger versions of Doherty and Baldrige sat, champagne in hand, watching Dick Clark's New Year's Eve show on the small television. "They've been here a while."

"Ah, yes," Doherty observed the Mémoire macaron version of themselves. "This is the night—"

"Things changed," Gale completed the thought. "Did they change, or was it simply an acknowledgement of what we already knew?"

"I don't know."

"Sure you do," Gale replied. "But, I won't push it. I did enough pushing."

"Maybe I should have relented more."

"Maybe," Gale agreed. "But, what's to be done about it now? It's funny," she laughed. "For all my success capitalizing memory, nostalgia is a tricky thing, isn't it? Too much, it becomes maudlin and sticky. Too little, and your experiences are lost forever."

"Nostalgia is like rubber necking at the scene of a fatal accident," Doherty observed. Drive by. Look at the body. Look at the blood. Thank your lucky stars it wasn't you. Move on, and forget about it."

"Yeah, well," Gale timed the arch of an eyebrow and a shoulder shrug. "You never were a huge fan of the cookies."

"I was a huge fan of you."

"If only that was enough," Gale's voice was wistful, tinged with a champagne bubble of wistfulness. "Here it comes, Shelly," she lifted her glass. "A

toast to the future. Tap the brakes, roll down your window.” She nodded towards the younger versions of themselves. “Witness the sweet destruction.”

Young Doherty’s cheeks were flush with champagne and Gale’s presence. The year crowded around them, brushing their shoulders, as the delicate structures collapsed. Reports of gunfire sounded over the television. Bullets to ring out change. Bullets to cut it short. Bottle rockets screamed. Fireworks cast weeping willows of light.

“10-9-8-7....” their younger selves called.

Older Doherty looked at Gale longingly. Noticed the smooth forehead, the wrinkles creeping in around her perpetually smiling mouth.

“6-5-4...”

Gale turned her head and winked. She held her glass towards the kitchen table.

“3-2-1! Happy New Year!”

Young Gale leaned in and delivered a chaste peck to Young Doherty’s cheek. Rather than pull away, their faces lingered against each other. The pair seemed to be holding their breath. Young Gale turned her head, and found Young Doherty’s lips waiting, eager. Hands found hair. Hope found purchase....

Later on, Doherty stared through the passenger window the entire way into town. She pinched her bottom lip between her thumb and index finger, and tugged gently before releasing. She watched herself execute the exercise in the reflection of the window, oblivious to the sprawling canyon or the beautiful sunset she loved so much.

Wade put on NPR to break the silence. They listened as Lakshmi Singh interviewed a farmer in Iowa about the rising costs of milk and beef and how that the price correlated to the Narwhal population off the coast of Svalbard, Greenland, a fact that Mikåle Olsen vehemently denied.

When the bar came into view, Wade perked up in his seat. “Are you ready for this?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Doherty replied, dryly. “I haven’t left the house in months.”

“Exactly,” Wade snapped. “That’s *exactly* why you need to get out there. I’m glad you came around.”

Doherty lazily arched an eyebrow. “You threatened to withhold the rest of Gale’s macarons if I didn’t come.”

“Come on,” he rolled his eyes. “You and I both know that was a load of horse shit. Besides, you would have killed me with a shovel, and dumped my corpse in the backyard before I could say, ‘Boo.’”

“The coyotes and vultures would have picked you clean before anyone noticed you were missing.” she answered wistfully.

“You could have used my skull as a tchotchke in your living room,” he pulled into a parking space in the gravel lot beside the bar.

“No,” Doherty sat motionless. “They’d find the skull right away. It would have to be something small. Maybe one of your metacarpals,” she glanced at his hands.

“You know what they say about guys with big metacarpals, right?”

“No.”

“Damn,” he sighed. “Me, neither.”

She unbuckled her belt, and reluctantly followed Wade.

The exterior of the bar was made to look like a saloon in the Wild West. It was decorated with rusty license plates, and clever signs like, *Fine Ware for Fine Folks. Cracked Pots for the rest of Y’All*. The building was lined with spiny, waist-high aloe vera plants. Laughter and music spilled into the night from the bar’s open door.

“After you,” Wade extended an arm.

After taking their seats, a curvy waitress approached. Before she had a chance to greet the pair, Doherty looked up, and said, “I’ll take the Kale Salad,”

“No, no, no,” Wade removed the menu from Doherty’s hands. “No, she won’t.” He looked up at the waitress. “*Don’t* write that down,” he instructed. “*Don’t* even *think* about writing that down, okay?”

“Okay,” she smiled so damn wide, Wade thought her dazzlingly white teeth might burst from her fluoride-enhanced mouth.

“*Don’t* listen to him, miss. Miss!” she snapped impatiently. “*Excuse* me?” The waitress—her name tag read ‘Gwenney’—redirected her attention. “Scribble it down in that little notebook of yours; Kale salad.”

“*Little notebook*,” Wade mimicked. “How dismissive. Gwen— Gwenney, right? Lovely name,” he added, quickly. “You’ll have to forgive my friend’s dismissiveness. She’s been living on a steady diet of Kale and bitterness for several years. You know; because of all the kale,” he mouthed. “It tends to make her a bit cranky. She meant no offense.” He folded the menus decisively, and said, “She’ll take the Cowboy Combo,” his elocution was perfect, and designed to provoke Doherty’s maximum irritation.

Gwenney looked at her pad. “Do you want half-chicken, half-baby back ribs, or half-tri-tip? You get to pick two.”

“Hell, she’ll take all three. Is that possible? Can she do that?”

“Sure thing, hun,” Gwenney replied. “Anything else?”

“Yes. We will have a platter of your *finest* nachos, and—which do you prefer—red or white wine, Michelle?”

“Red,” Doherty replied. Despite her flashing gray eyes, a reluctant smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

“Perfect. And, the cheapest bottle of *white* wine that you have, Gwenney. She would also *love* some ice cubes in that, if at all possible. I’ll have a pint of lager, too, please and thank you.”

Gweny smiled coquettishly before wilting under Doherty's flat gaze. She disappeared from their table, promising a speedy return with drinks.

"Quite the performance," Doherty steepled her fingers. "I regret agreeing to this already."

"Don't be like that," Wade waved dismissively. "C'mon. Let your hair down. Live a little, huh? Where's that crazy anchovy-swilling maniac living it up in Banyuls-sur-Mer?"

"Dead by a thousand cuts," Doherty replied.

"*Oh*," he stuck his bottom lip out, and pulled a face. "So dramatic." Wade offered his most charming smile when Gweny returned with their drinks and a platter of black bean nachos. When she left, Wade took a long pull from his mug of beer, and, remembering himself, said, "Oh, shit," and hastily clinked his glass against Doherty's sweating Chardonnay. Beverage aloft, he added, "Prost! If the past is a macaron, and the future a fortune cookie, then here's to today; the delectable graham cracker crumbliness of plans going to shit, the marshmallowy joy of discovery, and that chocolatey 'je ne sais quoi' of the here-and-now."

Doherty laughed, while shaking her head, and lifting her glass. "You've just described a mallomar."

"Here's to the mallomar!" he lifted his glass.

"The mallomar," Doherty examined the ice cubes in her white wine. She rolled her eyes, met Wade's glass with a soft chime, and drank a generous portion.

Doherty made a show of pretension before dropping it altogether and digging into the nachos. Glass after glass was brought to their table, followed by their food.

She pushed her plate away after eating her trio of meat. Cheeks flushed, she squinted an eye to steady her doubling vision. "Tell me, good sir: why haven't you published anything?"

For the first since they met, Wade squirmed uncomfortably in his seat. "Well..." his voice trailed off.

"Have you tried?"

"A couple of times. I tried to ride the query beast."

"And?"

"Boilerplate rejection letters. That was a few years ago."

Doherty eyebrows knitted together. "I thought you were a part of a writing group in Minneapolis."

"I am," he took a long drink of his beer.

"They don't push you to get published?"

Wade dragged his fingers through his five o'clock shadow, which was way past it's bedtime. It would feel like shit in the morning. "I don't know that I have much to say. No," he corrected himself. "I have a lot to say. I just haven't found the voice that needs attention. No one is clamoring to hear me shouting from the rooftops."

Doherty scoffed. "En casa de herrero, sartén de palo."

He rolled his eyes. "Let's pretend I've never traveled further from Minnesota than the High Desert of California, yeah? Don't speak Spanish either."

"In the blacksmith's house, his pans are made of wood."

"Okay, now explain it to me like I'm the president of the United States."

"You're a writer, and all of your pages are empty."

Wade gestured to Gwenny for the check. As she approached, Wade said, "What about you? Is *Ode to Amelia Cecil* the last thing you're going to publish? That was over a decade ago."

"I've said all I've wanted to say."

Wade leaned into the table. "I think Gale's calling your bluff, Michelle," he smiled. "What's more: I think she's calling it bullshit." He slapped the table in rapid stucato. "What do you think? Want to get out here while I can still drive you home?"

A half-hour later, the pair walked in darkness towards Doherty's home. Their footsteps sounded dully against the wooden boardwalk. When they arrived at her elevated viewing platform, both slowly. Wade dug his hands into his pockets. With his face highlighted in a patina of light from the headlights of his Escalade, which had yet to automatically shut off, he said, "That was fun. Thanks for letting me kidnap you for a couple of hours."

"I had a good time," Doherty answered, surprised she was telling the truth. In the darkness, her cheeks were flush with umpteen glasses of watered down Chardonnay. "Gale would have been happy that you forced me from my home. The biggest shock would have been that I ate something called 'The Cowboy Combo,'" she laughed. "My god; what's happening to me?"

An owl sounded nearby, followed by the yip of a coyote.

Wade gestured towards the house with his chin. "I should go in. You must be tired. Do you think you can manage the stairs on your desert watchtower?" he joked. "I won't find you in a broken, bloody mess amongst the boulders tomorrow morning, right? I would *barely* be able to live with myself if I did," he paused, considering. "I think I'd find a way to move on without you, eventually, but only after intense therapy and a steady stream of mind-numbing pharmaceuticals."

"Do you want to come up?" Doherty flicked her eyes towards the platform, challengingly. If a look could have swagger, this one would have.

"For a cup of coffee, right?"

"Sure," she nodded. "A cup of coffee. You could even join the cool kids under the bleachers."

As Wade considered his response, the Escalade's headlights went out.

He felt Doherty's hand in his, smooth and cool.

“Okay,” he agreed.
Doherty led him upstairs.

Chapter 4

Wade sat staring into the burned out ashes in the wok firepit. He'd wandered down from the platform earlier, and spent several hours feeding the fire before falling asleep in the lounge chair. He took a drag of his cigarette, and let the smoke settle into his lungs. As he exhaled, he heard gravel crunching behind.

Doherty stepped around the outdoor sofa and sat beside him. He handed her the cigarette without being asked. She held it in her hand, smoke twining between her fingers.

"I don't want to talk about it," she said after inhaling a plume of smoke. Wisps of her hair danced in the wind. Sunlight fell off her bare where her sweater had slouched down.

Wade's head bobbed as he considered her request. With a subtle, yet decisive shake, he replied, "You called me her name."

"I did."

"And?"

"And, I called you her name. What can I do about it now?" she shrugged. "You can choose to interpret it however you want, Brian. That's the luxury of being an adult. We get to responsibly process disagreeable stimuli."

"*Disagreeable stimuli*," Wade chuckled, flicking his cigarette into the fire pit. "Okay, Michelle. I'm processing." He stood. "Should we go inside?"

She turned and looked at the thin banner of cigarette smoke. "In a minute," she replied, her eyes distant with introspection.

Brian turned towards the house. He reconsidered, and asked, "Was last night about me, or her?"

"I'm processing, as well, Mr. Wade," she sighed out her response. "I don't know."

"Suddenly it's *Mr. Wade* again," his feet sounded against the boardwalk. "Whatever it is, Whoever I am; it was great. Don't talk yourself out of that."

She remained motionless, shoulders hunched.

Wade took a shower, then prepared oatmeal for the both of them. After finishing his last bite, Doherty entered through the sliding glass door with a sigh.

"There's food on the stove," Wade said with his back turned. He rinsed his bowl in the sink, and set it upside down to dry.

"I'm not hungry."

"You should eat something to soak up the alcohol."

"I said I'm not hungry," she took her seat at the dining room table.

Wade chuckled bitterly. "Suit yourself." He removed the plastic container of macarons from the refrigerator and sat across from Doherty. Their eyes met briefly before falling away to the table.

In the ensuing silence, Wade ordered his notes. Doherty filled a mug with coffee and asked, "Would you like some?"

"I've already had mine, but thanks."

She nodded and returned to her seat. "Let's get this over with, shall we?"

He opened his mouth. She held up her hand and shook her head. "One trauma at a time, Mr. Wade. We'll talk later."

"Can I ask you one question?"

Doherty shook her head. Her clear blue eyes focused on Wade. "I imagine it's going to be a taxing day, Brian. These three focus on the end of my relationship with Gale. The final days. Understood?"

"Yes."

"We'll talk later. I owe you that, yes. But, not now."

7.

Smoked Salmon (*Damaged*)

I think that when two people are able to weave that kind of invisible thread of understanding and sympathy between each other, that delicate web, they should not risk tearing it. It is too rare, and it lasts too short a time at best....

M.F.K. Fisher

Michelle Doherty took the cream-colored macaron, stuffed with salmon-flavored mousse, and sprinkled with black sesame seeds, and brought it carefully to her lips. Having known her, the tremble in her hand, and the small beads of perspiration dotting her upper lip could have been easily misconstrued as nerves. However, the author rightly interpreted them as a stealing of nerves. A strengthening of resolve before the plunge into disquieting memory. Much like the *mémoire* macaron before it, this one was also damaged.

A special kind of horror in that the memories would be protean. Ever changing and changed. Rather than look back with quiet reflection, the memory could, and would, look back at her; not as a fellow voyeur, but an active participant.

She pursed her lips at the author's question, "Are you alright? Would you like a moment to collect yourself before we start?"

Doherty deftly brushed aside the concern and bit into the cracked shell. For a moment, she savored the chew. The taste of salmon blooming across her palette. Soft. Mild, and delicate in sharp contrast to the nuttier--slightly

bitter--taste of the black sesame seeds.

Had her eyes been open, which they weren't, the author would have noticed Doherty's eyes dilating; a slight change in her body temperature, and a quickening of her heartbeat, and then...

She's in her mid-thirties standing in the doorway of her bedroom. Her bathroom was cinched at the waist. A wistful smile played at the corner of her mouth as she watched Gale making breakfast in the kitchen.

Gale wore a bathrobe of pale blue. It was untied, and revealed a pair of matching underwear, and a white tank top. She hovered over the cutting board slicing red onions and tomatoes. She'd woken before the sun had risen and baked fresh 'everything' bagels, which lay toasted, awaiting the cream cheese, which Baldrige had folded black sesame seeds into. Once completed, she sprinkled briny capers, removed a package of nova lox salmon from the refrigerator, and set it delicately on the bread, followed by the tomatoes and red onion. With her back to Doherty, her voice was laced with humor when she asked, "Are you going to spy on me all morning, or would you like to eat?"

"I'm satisfied with spying," Doherty's smile widened. She pushed herself from the door jam, and walked into the kitchen. "Although, is it spying if I'm doing it from the safety of my own apartment?"

Gale's back straightened. "Grab a plate," she replied in a flat voice.

"Did I say something wrong?"

"It's fine, Shelly. Just grab a plate, yeah? We wouldn't want our breakfast to get cold."

"It's already cold."

"Colder, then," Gale took the plate Doherty offered her and put her portion of their breakfast onto it. She handed her a jam jar of grapefruit juice, and shooed her away.

The pair took their places at the kitchen table. After she swallowed her first bite, Doherty wiped her mouth, and asked, "Are you going to tell me what I said?"

Gale shrugged. "'*My own apartment*,'" she glared at Doherty.

"This again," Doherty sighed.

"Yes, 'this again.' Every time I bring it up, you change topics, or act like I haven't said anything to begin with."

"Listen—a couple of years ago? Fine. That would have made sense, but we're grown women with successful careers. If we moved in together, people would talk."

Gale pushed her plate away. "Let them talk. What do we care what they have to say? The only opinions that matter are yours and mine."

"People would know our business."

“And?” Gale’s voice rose. “You’re a writer, Shelly. People already know your innermost thoughts. What’s wrong with a peek in your private life? Or, do you need that anonymity. Crave it. This far, and no farther.”

Doherty stared into her jam jar of juice. “I don’t see what’s wrong with keeping elements of my life from public view.”

“Because I’m the ‘element of your life’ that you’re hiding. I’m the piece you’re ashamed of.”

She reached out and took Gale’s hand. “Please be patient with me, okay? I’ve never been in a relationship like this before. It’s all very new.”

“It’s been a year,” Gale replied as she squeezed Doherty’s hand. “I can’t wait forever.”

“Just a bit more, okay? I’m processing.”

Gale let out of breath through her sharp, flared nostrils. She fixed Doherty in a piercing glance before relenting.

It was at this moment that Gale’s persona slipped through the cracked macaron shell. Her face went smooth, as she leaned back in her chair and crossed one leg atop the other, exposing her smooth stomach and pale thigh. “And, I believed you, huh? Even after all this time, I’m surprised.”

“Me, too,” Doherty nodded. Her expression settled into one of regret. “I didn’t lie to you on purpose. At the time, I believed it. I thought I would get comfortable with the idea. That I’d—”

“Let go?” Gale smiled. “Maybe we were both lying to ourselves. You’ve always been terrified of your living in your own skin, Shelly. That’s why you write. Maybe that’s why I cooked.”

Doherty pushed Gale’s plate in front of her once more, and picked up her own bagel. Despite taking a substantial bite, she had trouble swallowing around the knot of sorrow in her throat. “Maybe we should enjoy it now, like we did after our fight.”

Gale repositioned her plate. “We went to the market afterwards. Enjoyed the laziness of our Sunday. Wound up in bed once or twice.”

Doherty brushed at an unshed tear. “It’s a nice memory.”

“This part is,” Gale agreed. “But, I don’t think we were the same after this. We put our blinders on and soldiered on for a few more years, but there was always doubt in the back of my mind. I knew you were holding a piece of yourself back.”

“The salmon was delicious though,” Doherty smiled. “The bitterness of the sesame seeds is the best.”

Gale looked skeptical, and dissolved before she could respond.

Wade tried his hardest to ignore Doherty’s shuddering sobs. When he knew the retelling was complete, he left her at the kitchen table, and wandered into the living room, ruffling through her book shelves. His eyes fell on Doherty’s third book

An Ode to Amelia Cecil. Rather than return to the living room, he settled on the sofa, careful to avoid physical contact with the specter of Yves Klee's Blue Table, lest Doherty shake of her sorrow, and lash him with a piece of garden hose, he opened the book, and thumbed through the pristine copy.

Even in the mood he was in, and its recipient, he was soon lost in the web of words she delicately spun with surprising ease and grace. Given what he had heard over the weekend, he had no trouble identifying the underlying context of the novel; Gale Baledridge was Amelia Cecil. The entire book was an open love letter.

She observed the dust motes performing pirouettes through the air as Cecil sat at the kitchen table in quiet repose. In that moment of reflection, years melt away, and she can see Amelia at the age of five; pale skin, skinny legs and jutting elbows, her hair, a waterfall of obsidian. Her lips, cracked in a perpetual smile, the color of raspberry preserves.

As Amelia stares out of the apartment window, her gaze is fixed on the middle distance, watchful of her swath of concrete jungle. Her arm is draped across the back of the kitchen chair, her chin rests upon the same arm, and she is smiling. Though, to call it a full smile would be misleading. Some may call it a smirk, but she found it difficult to pin the word to Cecil as much as she would a dazzling Morpho Adonis to a piece of tag board.

The smile, full smile, the one that dazzles as fully as the Adonis, is in constant waiting. As she watches through the rain-splattered window, a stray umbrella might trigger it. Inverted spine. A bright splash of red against the landscape of drab concrete; a knife stroke of sunlight piercing the clouds. Yellow beetles inching their way through traffic, their horns as ineffectual as the vendors attempting to hock their wares to passing tourists. Amelia Cecil watched, and waited for the humor, knowing she would find it if only she looked...

As she stood in the doorway watching Amelia, precious Amelia, she knew she would disrupt the calm. Her presence would shatter the calm presence, the Sunday stillness, with tense shoulders and the coiled possibility for an argument, a careless phrase, a terse word. She watched, and listened, as she counted to ten and prepared—

Wade put his finger in the page as Doherty cleared her throat.

"I'm ready," she said, quietly. Her face was splotchy with tears, but composed. He nodded.

"I don't want to interrupt you," she offered. "If you'd like a couple of minutes?"

"I'm fine," he was about to place the book on the coffee table, but thought twice. Instead, he carried it with him to the dining room table, cover pressed against his chest.

Doherty read the spine, but held her tongue. She settled in her chair, and used the blade of her palm to press the skin beneath her eyes. "Okay," she breathed, tremulously.

8.

Scrambled Eggs and Prosciutto

Too few of us, perhaps, feel that breaking of bread, the sharing of salt, the common dipping into one bowl, mean more than satisfaction of a need. We make such primal things as casual as tunes heard over a radio, forgetting the mystery and strength in both.

M.F.K. Fisher

Two years later, with the success of her budding pastry enterprise, and the recognition from medical and culinary journals, Gale Baldrige was able to buy a small plot of land in Westmere, upstate New York. Coupled with Doherty's longevity on the *New York Times Best Seller List*, and the reception of the Booker Prize and a Pulitzer finalist for her third novel *Death in Winnepesaukee*, the pair lived comfortably with a spacious, hand-designed kitchen for Gale, and a wide bay window for Doherty, in which she could stare at the autumn foliage, and the empty pages loaded into her trusty Smith Corona.

Despite their seemingly idyllic setting, all was not perfect in their world. A stiffness had grown between them like the layer of skin on gravy. Their silences took on weight and substance. They spent an increasing amount of time in their solitudes, losing themselves in the alchemy of baking, or untangling a skein of words. The activity of breaking bread became an exercise in nourishment, rather than a chance to revel in each other's presence.

The emotional distance extended to their physical outings in Westmere. Whereas before, the pair would walk arm-in-arm (when Doherty was feeling particularly uninhibited), as the wind chilled, and mitten and scarves were brandished, when they brushed hands, reaching for the same apple at an orchard, or a bottle of hand cream in the local apothecary, it was swiftly withdrawn; a mumbled apology. A growing chasm grew between them in bed; a line of demarcation, drifting continents on separate tectonic plates. Eventually, it left Doherty

stranded in her work space: downstairs, her desk pressed against the bay window.

Within the throes of writer's block, the autumnal foliage did nothing to alleviate her frustrations, or make the words materialize. Her ideas stagnated in a stagnant pool of confusion. On those nights, she longed for the busy streets of Manhattan. The bustle of traffic. Of people watching from her perch. The wind throwing dervishes of ideas like trash bags whisked into the swirling air.

One morning towards the end of October, Gale set a plate of scrambled eggs in front of Doherty. When they'd first met, Doherty was content with making scrambled eggs the way she'd done since she was a child: beat the eggs with some milk, and pour into a hot skillet. Stir the mixture occasionally, until the curd-like shapes form; salt and pepper--et voilà!--it's done. Gale showed her the error of her ways, demonstrating how to break the eggs into a cold pan, and gently combine the whites and the yolks. When they began to set, she would add butter, moving the pan off and on a low flame, adding Crème Fraîche, chives, and flaking sea salt at the last minute.

Doherty looked at her plate of eggs and prosciutto, two slices of wheat toast, and raspberry preserves. As she placed the first bite in her mouth, her viewpoint shifted to Gale's eyes.

Doherty-Gale watched herself eat half of the eggs. Her eyes welled with tears, and a knot of sadness formed in her throat. At the memory version of Doherty bit into the crispy piece of prosciutto, Gale reached out, and placed her hand onto the table between them, stranded like a beached whale.

"It's over, Shelly." she heard herself speak in Gale's voice.

"Excuse me?" her memory counterpoint replied, quietly. Her mouth frozen around a piece of ham.

"I'd like you to move out."

"Why?"

"It isn't working. It hasn't for a while."

"Surely we can discuss this." She motioned to her writing area.
"I've been stuck lately."

"That's not it," Doherty-Gale shook her head.

"Then what is?"

"I've met someone."

Doherty swayed momentarily, almost toppling from her chair in the dining room. The ceiling fan whirred overhead, and the High Desert blazed through the windows; her rods and cones assaulted by their brilliance. Reflexively, she reached across the table and made to select the ninth macaron to punish herself further; to match the sweetness with pain, but her fingers closed around empty air. She opened her eyes.

“No.” Wade’s gaze was gentle, yet firm.

“What do you mean, ‘No?’” she rasped, gulping down water to clear the sandpaper from her throat.

“No,” he repeated. “You’re not doing another one right now. You’re going to take a break.”

“Gale’s will was clear. Ten cookies, three days. Three, three, four,” she stammered, trying to gain the upper hand.

He leaned across the table and felt her forehead. “Yeah. You’re burning up. And, while I applaud you for your mathematical wizardry, in the end, I could give two shits about what Gale wants. Right now, you’re sitting in front of me, so, you’re what I’m worried about.”

“Of all the absurd—”

He lifted Lucy, his red, battered Igloo cooler into view, and tapped it affectionately. “While you were talking, I grabbed the ice packs from the cooler, okay? Your macarons are in here.”

“I want them now!” Doherty snapped.

“I’m sorry,” he replied in a tender voice. “Not gonna happen, Michelle.” He stood, and said, “C’mon, Lucy. Let’s go for a walk.” Wade turned towards Doherty, and added, “Maybe you should get some sleep, yeah? In your own bed. We can start again when I get back if you’re feeling better.”

“You’re holding my memories hostage!”

He pulled a face with an unspoken, *‘And you’re being a bit over dramatic’* as its source, and exited through the sliding glass door with *An Ode to Amelia Cecil* in his back pocket.

When Brian Wade left Doherty’s cinder block bungalow, his feet sounded against the redwood boardwalk. He stopped beneath the shade of the viewing platform and considered the weatherproofed lawn furniture. Images flashed through his head from the night before—Doherty’s hungry fingers. Her bright, focused eyes. Exposed skin in the moonlight—he shook his head clear and decided to stretch his legs. At the end of her drive, he turned right and descended the winding dirt road, buttressed on one side by a canyon wall. After walking for ten minutes, he began to concoct scenarios involving tal bloodthirsty scorpions and rattlesnakes, tails at the ready, fangs bared. Having grown up in

Bloomington, the only horrors Wade had to face was the dreaded state bird of Minnesota: the mosquito. A cluster of shaded boulders called to him invitingly, and he made himself comfortable.

He pulled Doherty's copy of *An Ode to Amelia Cecil* and began to read for over an hour, mindful of the Baldrige connection.

...And, there, in the corridors of her mind, she walks the hallowed halls of her youth, revisiting sights and sounds that would always be sacred. Her father's spicy aftershave mingling with the scent of Lemon Pledge; the undercurrent of caramelized sugar, of baking bread. Through the forest of her youth, she pictures her father; his sure stride, left hand grasped around a fishing pole, damp with algae. His fingernails caked with lake mud and pulverized stone. Golden-skinned, arm hairs smoking—too hot by the fire—they gleam in the firelight, silver scales reflecting back silver disks, as if he were a molting sea creature whose description was lost in the shrouds of time and antiquity. Amelia smiled as the image decays into one of fragility. Her father, sick. Her father, weak. Her father, truly only himself when presented with a dish she used to make the pair. Smoked salmon on a bed of asparagus. Rosemary and garlic roast potatoes. The magic of foie gras; the spell recalled and evoked. And—there!—through the fog of failing memory, he's been reborn. The smile Amelia inherited—mischievous, open—settled into the fault lines of age, and it was him. "Amelia Cecilia," he greeted her effusively. "It's been a minute."

"Hi, daddy." A tear would leak from her eye as the world righted itself, momentarily, lifted by her father's inexhaustible steadiness. Then, they would eat. Breaking bread to stave off his broken mind.

Table cleared, dishes washed, and put away, she left her father behind, vowing to never forget the firelight, the foie gras, the freedom he allowed her to experience and experiment with good food, bound only by its geographic proximity to their home in Ames, Iowa.

Staring at the remnants of crust on the table, the husk of the bread she had baked earlier with care and attention, Amelia thought of her husband, sunk into a stupor in the living room. Having inhaled the meal without thought, he had pushed his chair from the table without a word of thanks, excusing himself without ceremony or thanks. When she was a child, even when she was in charge of cooking, the final words were always a ceremony. An agreed upon end to the sacred ritual.

"Can I be excused?"

"You don't have to ask me," her father would laugh.

"I know, but I want to."

"You made it."

“You shared it.”

He would bow his bearded head, his eyes closing to half mass, that mischievous smile broadening. “You may be excused. Thank you for dinner, Amelia.”

Her husband did not appreciate food as she did. It was a vehicle that gave him enough energy to move from point A to point B. As reliable as his beat up pick-up truck, and as well tended to. He lacked the imagination to witness the sights and sounds of any given meal. The variation in textures. The explosion of acid, the tang of salt in all its varieties...

He would never love food as she did, and it pained her.

When the realization finally struck her, she began planning her escape...

He closed the book knowing with utmost certainty that the inspiration behind ‘Amelia Cecil’s’ husband was Michelle Doherty herself. He pictured her alone in the house, secluded from the outside world, hunched over her typewriter, creating a world for Gale Baldrige, a landscape in which the food she prized was truly appreciated as a main character. Having transcribed the memories the macaron evoked thus far, he understood a fraction of the complications the couple had faced, and how much Doherty’s closed fist of a heart—trembling at each beat—had stood in the way of her own happiness. There, in the gathering shadows of his boulder nook, Wade silently forgave her for uttering Gale’s name in the throes of passion the night before even though it wasn’t his place to do so.

As he walked back towards Doherty’s home, he thought of a poem by Rilke, and said it aloud, timing the words with his steps:

*Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final...*

*Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.*

Give me your hand.

An hour later, Wade stood at the side of his bed. He reached out, and gently touched her shoulder.

Doherty grabbed his arm and breathed in sharply. She let it out in a sigh, and in a surprised voice said, “You’re in my bedroom.”

"I am," Wade agreed. "I didn't mean to startle you, but you didn't answer when I knocked."

"I was sleeping," she sat up and rested her back against the headboard. "What time is it?" Doherty eyed the blackout curtains, and noticed a scrim of dying light surrounding them. "How long have I been asleep?"

"A couple hours," he replied softly. "I didn't want to disturb you."

"Yet here you are."

"I made dinner. Thought you might want to eat something."

She smashed a goose down pillow to her face with a quiet groan. "I feel like I've been eating all weekend."

"Such is the human condition," he walked to the doorway in the darkened room. "I'll save you some."

"Of my own food?" she quipped.

"Magnanimous, aren't I?" Wade's profile was momentarily framed in the light before he closed the door, leaving it open a crack.

From the kitchen came the unmistakable scent of *Campbell's* chicken noodle soup. When they were together, Gale had tried to wean her from the habit but—like in some many other things—stubbornly refused. "You can have your *foie gras* and *smoked salmon*," Doherty would laugh, as she held the can high above Gale's head, fending off her darting arms as she tried to steal it away. "But, like it or not, I'll always be the girl from Ames, Iowa! My food memories include Campbell's soup and bologna sandwiches."

Doherty smiled, spiritually warmed by the memory of the broth, salty and thick. Small squares of gray meat swimming in pale yellow juices; the mysterious yellow floating clinging to the inside of the bowl.

When she walked into the kitchen, Wade shook the empty can. Its lid flopped up and down like an exploded top hat in the old cartoons. "What would Gale think of *this*?"

Doherty took her seat at the bar top in the kitchen. "She admitted defeat years ago." She clutched the sides of the warm bowl Wade had placed in front of her. "Thank you."

"It's *your* soup."

"For forcing me to slow down earlier."

He tilted his head and casually flicked his shoulders. "You're welcome."

"Are you going to have some?" she swallowed a spoon full.

"I only eat that when I'm sick." He lifted a plastic bag with a couple of stacked styrofoam containers inside. "I grabbed some carry-out from The Bar while you were sleeping. If you twist my arm, I'd probably let you have some when you're done with your soup."

Doherty shook her head. "No. This is *perfect*." She took another bite. "About last night..."

Leaning against the kitchen counter, he held up his hand. "Please," his voice was kind. "There's no need."

Her eyes brightened. She looked at the wilting fries in his hand. "Are there any more of those left?"

"Can you see it? The enameled cast-iron crockpot, waiting like an incubating egg atop the lowest wrack of the over. The steam rises from the baking sheet where you've poured the boiling water to generate steam to help the boule rise...

Can you smell it? The sugars and amino acids combine, the yeast billowing it's heady aroma throughout the house. People have labeled it the Maillard Reaction; pity. As if you can reduce an ethereal bouquet into something as bland as words...

Can you feel it? The piping hot ear, blackened at the seems, too hot to handle

Can you hear it? The hollow innards after tapping it. The slight crinkle—like tissue paper—after gently squeezing the freshly baked loaf after it finished curing in the oven...

Can you taste it? But, can you?

Amelia Cecil never understood how people approach food like a passive consumer. She looked aghast at the servers in the restaurant as they pushed their carts between the tables with fresh rolls, throwing them casually at the diners with hands raised, ready, mouths pulled into stupid grins, as the attempted to catch the result of hours of work, of care, and preparation, only for them to miss the carbohydrate bullet as it rolled beneath their table.

Amelia Cecil's husband was one of those grinning idiots, who treated food—who treated her—with casual passivity.

He would find her note in the morning on the kitchen table. If he took the time, before the envelope was opened, before the words were read, he would first miss the Saturday morning aromas of her presence. Freshly ground coffee, rich butter, and frying eggs. Back browning, casting rendering fat skipping across the skillet. Those would be gone, too.

He might miss them, but they were never his to begin with. He never took the time to appreciate them, to make them truly his."

Wade clicked off his flashlight and closed *An Ode to Amelia Cecil*. He was in a lounge chair across from Doherty's platform bed. The two had gone up after they'd finished eating, Doherty growing restless indoors. Her fever had abated, and she had craved her amphitheater of stars. She sat cross legged. Her eyes shone bright in the darkness as they reflected the moon.

"That's you, isn't it?" he asked. "You're 'her husband."

She blinked. "Parts of me are," she confessed. "But, I never lacked appreciation for her food. It was her presence I took for granted."

"How did she react to the novel when it was published?"

The bed springs creaked as she shifted her weight. "I don't know."

The surprise was evident in Wade's voice. "She never wrote? She never called?"

"It was shortly after things ended. By then, I was back in Manhattan, and she was opening up restaurants on the west coast. I'd heard from one place or another that she'd gotten married."

"To the neuroscientist that helped her create the *Mémoire macarons*," Wade shook his head. "I can't believe she didn't call," he marveled. "I mean, even if you guys weren't together anymore—*Amelia Cecil* was a *masterpiece*."

You're being kind."

"I'm being honest."

A noisy crinkle filled the air followed by a distinctive crunch.

"What the hell is that?" Doherty's shoulders tensed. Her back straightened.

"Cookies." Moonlight reflected off a shiny cylinder in Wade's hand as he extended them towards Doherty. "Want a couple?"

A small chuckle escaped her lips. She leaned over the foot of her bed and snagged a pair from the sleeve. She held them to her nose. "What kind are they? Where the hell were you hiding these?"

"Girl Scout Thin Mints," he leaned back in his chair. "Im addicted."

She took a small bite.

"Don't worry," she could hear the smile in his voice. The dark shadows of his fingers moved through his moonlight-infused hair. "As far as I know Girl Scouts don't have Mindfuckeroo cookies, yet. They're working hard on it, though," he added.

Doherty heard him take another bite. With a mouthful of food he said it again, quietly mystified. "I can't believe she didn't call you."

"She might have had there not been a final blow out between us."

"How do you mean?"

Doherty unfolded her legs and scooted back until her shoulder blades rested against the headboard. "Come over here," she patted the empty spot beside her in bed. "No funny business, though. Voices carry through the canyon."

Wade stood with a smile. "I'm sure the coyotes and jackrabbits have been dying for you to spill the tea."

"Shut up and move your skinny ass."

"Pushy, pushy," the chair creaked as he stood. He removed his shoes and took the place beside her. Once they were comfortable she slid her hand in the crook of his arm.

Her voice was a quiet whisper full of warmth. “It wasn’t long after *Amelia* was published that Gale called to let me know about her Prestige Series, *Baldrige the Memorius*.”

Wade nodded. “That’s what really put her on the map. It was a collection of what—he patted his empty pockets, looking for the research he had left on the dining room table. “Her own memories, right? For public consumption.”

Doherty’s grip tightened on his arm. She nodded. “She was calling to let me know that a couple of the cookies involved our relationship.”

“How’d you respond?”

“With characteristic calm and aplomb,” she replied bitterly.

“Translation?”

“I think you’d say, ‘I flipped my shit.’”

Wade turned his head. The moonlight fell across her smooth brow. Her eyes were trained to the middle distance. Sensing his scrutiny, she pressed the lower half of her face against his shoulder. “I did a lot of research about *Baldrige the Memorius*,” Wade continued. “I couldn’t find anything. What little I did explained that they were bound by an NDA—a Nondisclosure agreement—for those who bought a package of the series. Surprisingly enough, everyone honored them. Sure, I found snippets here and there, but they were all pretty nondescript: *‘Astonishingly Beautiful’*—*‘As delicate as they are heartbreaking’*—*‘A whispered secret to a friend,’*” he shrugged. “Everyone honored their contracts.”

“As I said: the phone conversation did not go well. I refused to let her speak. Told her never to call me again. That for all intents and purposes, our friendship—whatever you wanted to call it—was over.’

“After that, Gale went public. She allowed her methods to be published. There were imitators. Snake oil salesmen, promising ‘Authentic Mémoire Macarons.’ She was hands-on with the medical community; explaining the recipe, demonstrating the science in partnership with her brand new husband.” Wade detected a note of bitterness, but did not interrupt.

“People with Alzheimer’s, Dementia, other neurological disorders, they all benefitted,” Doherty continued. “None came close to Gale’s genius. Hers were the gold standard and—even though people tried—they could never capture the attention to detail or the emotions her macarons could elicit.

“Did she ever reach out to you after things calmed down?”

“You mean, after I calmed down?”

He rested the side of his face atop the crown of her head. “Yeah. I guess that’s what I mean.”

She shook her head. “Gale honored my wishes. She never tried to call me again, until she was dying, that is. She tried to make it right before the cancer took her.”

“You wouldn’t hear her out?”

“No.”

“Do you wish you had?”

Doherty lifted her head and looked at him with a gentility reserved for the simplest of dullards. “Of *course*. At the time, if only to rub her face in it. To prove to her that she had wounded me deeply, like the selfish, spoiled child I was.”

The pair lapsed in silence. They stared at the stars, Doherty’s head fixed to Wade’s shoulder; their shared warmth, a comfort to the gathering chill.

Chapter 5

After planning, and executing her escape, witness Amelia Cecil in repose. For her, success realized itself in the form of a cramped workspace in the back room of her shop. Perhaps at one time an abattoir or makeshift operating room, the tiled floors, the same shade of mottled green she associated with the two. Water stains ride the wall, and the place smells of age. She observed her kingdom, head tilted, leaning against the upturned platform of her hand. Black hair disheveled, spackled with forgotten pieces of solidified levain, receipts and ledger books, piled atop her desk, her smile, despite her dismal surroundings, serene. Accomplished. When her eyes fell on a single framed photograph—a seaside village in the south of France—her smile faltered.

She was in high demand, it was true. People wanted her bread, her intoxicating bread. While her inbox was stuffed with messages from politicians and painters, artists and musicians, trend-setters and iconoclasts, neurosurgeons, veterans with PTSD, cult leaders on LSD, people with ADD, war criminals and widows, housewives and activists, religious fundamentalists, and white nationalists alike, when she looked at that photograph—the aquamarine shutters, the pastel-colored buildings, framed in that magical quality of light—she returned to idyllic days of her honeymoon. The wrought iron balcony and the salt-scented breeze; freshly grated chocolate melting on her tongue, as she moved toasted brioche from side-to-side, lest she burn the roof of her mouth—she desired an audience of one, palette ready—finally attentive to the prize had lost.

Instead, she received a phone call

From the epilogue of the 10th anniversary edition of *An Ode To Amelia Fay*, Michelle Doherty

9.

Blood Orange

Doherty-Gale eyed the braying telephone with a mixture of exhaustion and expectation. Since the press release announcing her Prestige Collection, she was inundated with requests, those eager to snap up a golden ticket; one of the precious few—fifty in total—to win a coveted *Gale In Memorius* series. Ten macarons, ten memories.

She set aside her glass of freshly-squeezed orange juice and picked up the receiver, her eyebrows spiked at the sound of her former flame's voice.

"You've done it now, haven't you?" Doherty's cut through the line like a dagger.

Doherty-Gale rubbed her hand against her forehead. She'd been waiting two years to hear that voice, and now that she did, she was already tired of it. "*What* have I done, Shelly?" she sighed.

"Don't call me that right now. Not Shelly. My name is Michelle."

"Fine, Michelle," Doherty-Gale bit the word into two syllables. "What have I done?"

"*Gale in Memorius*," the sound of fluttering paper sounded through the telephone as she held up the newsprint and read the article. "*For those interested in finding out about the eccentric baker, enter for a chance to win an 'egg-white' peak behind the curtain at her enigmatic life.*"

"Okay," Doherty-Gale drew out the word as she leaned back in her rickety wooden chair. "What's wrong with that?"

"Your enigmatic life, Gale?" she hissed through the line. "An egg-white peak' behind the curtain?" Doherty's voice pitched and turned every word into a question. "What do you suppose they'll find when they bite into one of your cookies?"

"I won't discuss what the macarons will cover," Doherty-Gale replied automatically. It was the same response she gave to reporters, and those hungry for a taste. "Part of the joy in eating them is the discovery." She moved aside one of the piles of papers and studied her ever-growing list. "Would you like me to send you one? Someone will be disappointed, but I don't care. If you'd like one, just say the word."

"No, I don't want one," Doherty's voice was incredulous. "And I don't want our personal life to be passed around like a sleeve of cookies by some drooling, voyeuristic troglodyte."

"Is that what this is about?"

"Of *course* that's what this is about!"

Doherty-Gale rolled her eyes. "Poor, poor, Shelly," she replied, as she leaned back in her chair and stared at the ceiling. "You're not the only one with a difficult life, you know. It's not always sunshine and butter cream for me, either."

"You think this is a joke, Gale? You think I like being this way? That I don't find it exhausting, as well?"

Doherty-Gale imagined the writer placing her fingers around the collar of

her sweater, and pulling at the suffocating fabric. “To be trapped in my head at all times? To choose every word, weigh every punctuation mark? Then, once it’s been said, once it’s been written, to go back a million times, wondering if I’ve made the right choice?” she gripped the receiver of her telephone and heard the plastic buckling. “Writing isn’t like one of your *curries*, Gale. There’s no spontaneity once the ink’s dried. It’s *canon*.”

“A bit melodramatic. I’m worried about the same things you are, Shelly. I deal with squid ink and dough. Cardamom and turmeric. Cinnamon and sugar. Do you know how difficult it is to build a legacy on things that are *consumed*? At least you have something to leave behind. Your books will gather dust long after I’m dead. Meanwhile, I’m busting my ass to stake my own claim. To make my own mark. To be remembered for more than just a goddamned cookie, or a nice piece of pie. The macarons; those are my legacy. My way to speak the truths that needs transmitting.”

Suddenly, she was about to step back and listen to their argument from an outsider’s perspective. Two celebrated artists bemoaning the medium they had chosen willingly. Like a gust of summer air through an open window, she realized how ridiculous they both sounded. She laughed, cradling the phone. “Shelly, this is silly. Come down to the shop. I’ve been working on something I’ve wanted to show you for ages. What do you say?”

Silence.

“Are you there, Shelly? For old time’s sake, yeah? I read your book. It was--”

The line went dead.

The walls began to crack and shrink like drying mud in the desert. Before the memory disintegrated completely, Doherty thought she saw Gale turn to the camera in her mind’s eye, wave with her index finger, and offer a melancholy smile.

She awoke with a damp washcloth pressed to the back of her neck. Crescents of sweat had bled through her undershirt, and her forehead was beaded with moisture. Wade had a hand pressed to her back, as he leaned around, examining her eyes as they slowly came into focus.

“Did you get that?” she asked, as her eyes skipped from his to the notebook on the dining room table.

Wade nodded. “You finished about ten minutes ago,” he replied. He grabbed a chair and scooted it beside her.

“Why is my voice hoarse?” She accepted the glass of water he offered and took a drink. The iciness burned her throat.

"You did a lot of screaming in that one," he smiled, gently. "I'm surprised. I thought you communicated your anger with passive aggression and a dash of resentment."

"Just you wait, *Mr. Wade*. Stick around long enough, and you'll see it all. She stood and moved around the dining room table to watch the sunrise paint the canyon walls. The last of the stars were dying, while the moon looked like a transparent disk. "It's beautiful, isn't it? I'm afraid between Gale and my theatrics, you haven't really had a chance to enjoy the view."

"I didn't come here for that." Wade watched her from his chair, legs splayed out, comfortably, his hands, folded against his stomach.

"Well," she shrugged. "If you ever come back, you'll have to see the sights."

"Let me guess," he replied. "Does it involve cacti, maybe? Giant boulders? I've already seen a few of those. They were breathtaking."

"You joke," Doherty turned her head and swiveled her waist, "but, I'm serious. The next time you visit, we'll spend the day outside, no cookies and no surnames allowed?"

"What about chilled white wine?" he wiggled an eyebrow, rakishly.

"We'll see," she turned back to her prized view.

"Who said I was coming back? Maybe I've grown weary of your brand of hospitality."

Her head bobbed from side-to-side as she considered. "We still have work to do. We'll need to punch up your manuscript to get it ready for publication. I'm sure my agent would practically shit himself with gratitude and excitement to hear from me."

"You haven't even read it, yet," Wade replied as Doherty returned to her chair.

"I know," she cupped his scratchy chin with her hand. "I've been waiting until I finish Gale's macarons. I'd like to read it when I'm done if you'll allow me."

He patted her hand, and affected a professionally disinterested air. "I'll consider it." Their fingers intertwined a moment before he let them unravel. He walked around, and took his seat, turned to a blank page, and turned on his tape recorder. "You've been so honest with me the last couple of days," he flicked a scraggly piece of fringe on a page of his notebook. The act was endearing. Vulnerable. "I feel like I should offer you the same kindness." He took a deep breath. "I'm kind of seeing someone."

"Oh," Doherty leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. "I see."

“You’ve actually already met her,” Wade lifted his red Igloo cooler onto the table, and patted it affectionately. “She’s the one who brought us together,” his face finally broke into a grin. “It seems wrong to cast her aside like a piece of garbage.”

Doherty rolled her glacial eyes as her muscles relaxed. Elbows on the table, she shook her head, and—over the sound of Wade’s self-satisfied laughter—said, “I’m already reconsidering the offer.”

He placed the nearly empty tray between them. Their humor deflated like a pricked balloon.

The last macaron was cracked and discolored falling between a gritty brown and anonymous gray. The top shell was sprinkled with a fine green powder. The filling was a mustard yellow.

“Any ideas what it could be?” Wade handed her the deformed cookie.

“Heartburn?”

“Seriously, though.”

Doherty shook her head, observing the macaron in her open palm.

“The last interaction I had with Gale was the phone call.”

Wade looked at his notes. “It really didn’t focus on the Blood Orange, did it?”

“I didn’t really give her a chance to drink much of it.”

“That’s true,” he nodded. Pen poised, he hovered over his notebook.

“Do you want me to do anything? Draw the curtains? I could make you breakfast before we start.”

“No,” Doherty brought the last of Gale to her lips. “I’ve kept her waiting long enough, Brian. All the wrong I’ve done her; I owe her this much, at least. No more stalling.”

- **10.**
- **???** (Damaged)
- “I close my eyes and I want to understand where I am, cooking is about emotion, it’s about culture, it’s about love, it’s about memory.”
- Massimo Bottura

Doherty found herself in a white-room overlooking a turgid sea and a dazzling sky. She held her hand up against the sheer brilliance of the room as the light attacked her eyes. A hospital bed sat in the room at the end of a hallway hung with framed photographs. Beeping machinery drew her forward as the walls flickered and buzzed with white noise and radiation, reminding her of a wooden television set she had as a child. Before she could get very far, nine-year old Gale Baldrige stepped out of one of the rooms lining the corridor.

She studied the doorframe intently as she picked at the white peeling paint. “You can’t go down there, yet.”

“Why not?”

The girl looked up quickly before dropping her eyes and returning to the flaking paint. “It’s not *tie-muh*,” Gale gave the word two syllables, emboldened by the absurdity of adults. “You can take a walk with me, if you want. Dad’s at the lake catching crawdads.”

“That sounds fine,” Doherty smiled, extending her hand.

Nine-year old Gale took it, smiling.

The beach house dissolved. They found themselves in the woods.

“What *took* you so long?” Gale’s voice became richer, her grip firmer. Doherty noticed her growing taller in her peripheral vision, becoming the teenager obsessed with François Hardy, Jacques Pepin, and eating foie gras with her father.

“Stubborn as a mule,” Doherty shrugged. “You must have known this was a possibility; waiting too long.”

“I did,” twenty-five year old Gale leaned her head against Doherty’s shoulder. “I hoped you’d swallow that stupid pride of yours. *Did* you?” Gale tugged at her arms. The dense woods fell away, and they stood in the Russian Expat’s apartment. The Mediterranean infused the room with the scent of salt.

“Did I what?”

“Visit me before I died?” After a beat of telling silence, Gale dropped Doherty’s hand and stepped into the sun. With her hands gripped on the wrought iron railing, she subtly shook her head. “You waited too long.”

Doherty nodded.

Baldrige’s shoulder blades danced as she chuckled. She turned to face Doherty, leaning against the railing, arms folded.

Even trapped in the amber of memory, Gale’s precarious position made her skin crawl. She wanted to shout, “Get away from there before you break your neck!” The irony wasn’t lost on her, given that Gale was already dead.

As of reading her mind, the chef laughed once more. “I’m not even sure why I’m disappointed. I’m not even Gale, for starters. I’m just a projection of her consciousness. My ‘Galeness’ is a construct the real Gale Baldrige concocted to fit comfortably between two meringue shells.”

“It’s felt real enough.”

“That’s the way it’s supposed to feel,” she smiled. “I’m not saying that I’m a *complete* fabrication. This smokin’ hot body,” she gestured to herself, and did a casual spin, “my sparkling eclat—they’re a distillation of who Gale Baldrige is, but I’m a creation, rather than the mold.”

“Because—“

“You squandered your time, and now I’m dead.”

Doherty winced.

“Hey, don’t feel bad, yeah?” Gale joined her back inside. “We had a lot of great years together.”

“We did.”

Gale waved at the blank horizon. “You can add some sentimental bullshit here about the journey being more important than the destination. I’ve never been one for words. You on the other hand...” her voice trailed off. “You always had the tiger by the ‘T-A-L-E.’”

“Don’t tease me. Not now, please.”

“I’m not *teasing* you,” her image flickered to the girl she met in the pie shop. Clear-eyed. Self-assured. “Remember who I was reading when you walked into the shop, giddy with success. That was you, Shelly. All you. I’ve always been your biggest fan.’

“Me? I thought of myself as a magician. It sounded a lot better than ‘cook’ or ‘baker.’ So dismissive, don’t you think? Almost like a curse word.” She took Doherty’s hand once more as the South of France flickered.

The spider plants withered and died, and the giant blossom of the peace lily, regal and proud, crumpled under its own weight. Aqua marine shutters rattled against the building whose exteriors crumbled, and the sea boiled away. The pair were left standing outside of their old house in upstate New York.

The trees blazed with their last gasp of autumnal glory. Fiery, polished apples dotted the yard to complete the quintessential picture of the fall.

“You were never that impressed with my tricks, though, were you, Shelly? You saw through me like an irritated parent at a children’s birthday party. The Aztecs mixed concoctions of cacao and red chilis, and used the mixture in their ceremonies. Herbal remedies and recipes passed down for generations. No, no,” she wiggled her index finger, laughing. “Not you. You would look at something and say, ‘That’s chocolate. Nothing more.’ You looked at me, and thought, ‘Nothing special. Nothing I have to fight for.’” Gale craned her neck and observed the trees rattling in the wind. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it? At the end of the day, you can always find something to appreciate in a life well-lived.”

“I loved you, Gale,” Doherty replied. Her voice was soft, yet full of conviction.

“You did,” Baldrige agreed. “Maybe not enough at the time.”

Hoping to steer clear of maudlin finales, Doherty took a breath to steady herself; to quell the emotion kneading her throat. “I think I’m ready to see you now.”

Gale stepped from Doherty’s side to face her fully. Baldrige held her hands, squeezing them affectionately. “I might not have had the chance to enjoy this last bit of time with you,” she said. “The real Gale, I mean. But, that doesn’t mean *you* can’t. You’re not dead, yet. No matter how hard you pretend to be.” She squeezed Doherty’s hands one last time, and offered a trademark smile, full of mischief and joy. “Be good to yourself, Shelly.”

Doherty nodded as New York fell apart around her. When she opened her eyes, she was in the white-washed beach house. Every door along the hallway was closed, now. The only one that stood open contained the hospital bed, and it’s beeping machinery.

Doherty stepped inside with shoulders squared, and a tight smile.

Gale Baldrige lay ensconced in a blanket much too large for her diminished frame. Even with her once-raven hair, now white, and her skin like the parchment paper she sometimes used to bake bread, that spark of life—guttering perhaps—still flamed. She looked at Doherty and blinked slowly. A small chuckle escaped her chapped lips. “About goddamn time, Shelly.”

“You look like shit,” Doherty took the seat by her friend’s bedside.

“I feel every bit of it, too,” she sighed. She turned her hazel eyes to her coastal view. “I don’t think I have much left to say.”

“No,” Doherty smoothed the static flyaways of white hair against Gale’s head. “You’ve made your point.”

“I love you,” Gale said with finality.

“I love you, too,” Doherty replied. “And, I’m sorry for holding so much of myself back.”

Gale settled her head against her pillow. “I want you to pretend this happened before I died, okay? Let me give you that, at least. You picked up your phone and dragged your ass back to New York and said a proper goodbye.”

“Deal,” Doherty stood. With her hand pressed to Gale’s cheek, she leaned in and kissed her gently on the lips. “Thank you,” she gestured to the room, for all of the iterations of Gale from the previous macarons, watching them from the doorway. “For this. For being a part of my life.”

“Buh,” Gale waved her away. “Pull yourself together. You’re getting soft. Oh, and Shelly?”

“Yes?” Doherty answered.

Gale wiggled her fingers in a complicated gesture. “Abracadabra.”

The room went dark.

Doherty tossed her reading glasses on the dining room table and placed Wade’s complete first draft beside them. She looked up at Wade, who watched her with expectant eyes.

“Well?” he rubbed the back of his neck, and brought the hand through his disheveled blonde hair. “What do you think?”

She opened her mouth to reply, but found herself at a lack of words. Instead, she placed her hand on top of the manuscript and nodded. “It’s beautiful,” she answered. “That’s it. It’s beautiful, Mr. Wade.”

Despite the praise, he shook his head. “How many times do we have to go over this? My name is Brian.”

“I know what your name is,” she smiled. “Your first name *and* your last name. I’ve known it since you parked in my drive on the first day.”

Brian avoided her eyes.

“Should we try this again?” Doherty asked, picking up the manuscript, and tapping the bundle of paper to make the pages flush. “The introductions, I mean?”

Brian smiled his characteristic smile, slightly abashed, like a school boy caught in a lie.

“I’ll go first.” Doherty placed her hand against her chest. “Hello. I’m Michelle Doherty, and I’m a crabby old pendant living in seclusion to avoid bastards like yourself.” All of this was said with a spark of amusement in her eyes. She motioned for Brian to proceed.

“My name is Brian Gillespie, and I’m not an unpublished writer. I helped Gale write her first book, *Knowing When To Shut My Mouth and Eat*. When she named me executor of her macarons, she thought it best that I keep my real identity to myself.”

The silence that followed was punctuated by Doherty’s dry chuckle. It eventually cracked into a rare peel of full blown laughter. Drawn in by its contagious quality, Brian started laughing, too.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

Doherty walked into her living room and pulled Gale’s first book from the shelf. When she returned, she tossed it on the table. On the back, inside dust jacket, were twin black and white photographs of Gale and Brian. “It might be easier to hide who you are if your picture isn’t printed on your books.”

“We just thought—“

Doherty cut him off. “Even when I thought I hated Gale, I never did. I suppose I was mad at myself. The pearl of great price, and all of that. With that said—“ she held up her finger, “I almost ran you off of my property when you showed up, but I was too curious. I wanted too see what Gale was up to.”

Brian shook his head. “I’m impressed. You certainly fooled me.”

Gillespie turned in his seat and followed Doherty’s eyes. The sun was rising above the canyon walls, tangerine and gold; a deep russet. “What does this mean for us?” he asked.

“Between you and me?” Doherty took a breath and held it. She tapped the top page of Gillespie’s manuscript. “The first thing we’ll be doing is getting this into shape. You’re a fine writer, but everyone needs editing. Once we’re happy, I’ll reach out to my editor and we’ll see where we go from there.”

“What about *us*?” he emphasized the last word meaningfully. “The other night...”

Doherty watched the sun rise a moment. She thought of the South of France and upstate New York. She thought of Gale’s laughter and spontaneity. Champagne at midnight, and golden brown bread in the oven. In her mind, she heard a tinkling bell overhead, and gleaming checkered tiles; a girl sitting at her table, alone, reading. Her

attention shifted to Brian, waiting, eager. Doherty smiled and asked, "How do you feel about Key Lime pie?"