

AUNT CHLOE

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The Sweet Scent of Separation

Renee, Washington, D.C. 2025

After greeting me with a smile and shoving her only suitcase into the trunk of my car, Rose embraces me, sucking in air like she has waited a century for a single breath. Not even the noise of rushing from the Dulles airport can stop me from taking her in, the fullness of her body that has expanded with the weight she anxiously warned me she had gained. Her face was still round and beautiful with the same oval eyes, her top lip still darker than the bottom. I don't want to take my eyes off her. When I open my mouth to speak, her voice interrupts me with a question that seems to have only one answer.

“Can you smell them on me?” She asks. “I can smell them, at least one, on you.”

I don't know how to tell her that I don't need to smell them because I can see them. I can see the strange mingle of their faces breaking through her skin. This time though, the brown face that usually drowns in tears now has the cheekbones of the other.

“No,” I say. “I don't smell them on you.”

She rolls her eyes and murmurs something in French as she climbs into my car. On the ride into the city, she tells me about the bus ride from Grasse to Nice that she had to take and then the dozens of hours it took to get to Washington, D.C. to be right here, in front of me.

Rose was still a stranger to me. I know more about the two women she's chasing than about her. We met at a lesbian night club in Paris affectionately known as Hips but called something else entirely. She was there with a group of girls that she knew in her undergraduate days, and I was stranded in the city on a research tip that hadn't panned out. Disappointed and empty handed, I sat at the bar sipping a drink that tasted strong enough to kill germs, when I spotted her across the room. She wasn't radiant or smooth or particularly more beautiful than any other woman I'd seen, but there was something in her face. There was someone else lurking in her face.

She turned to the side, responding to the call of her name, and I saw the side profile of another woman ghosting through her skin, all cheekbones and dirt-caked skin. She threw her head back to laugh at a joke, and I saw an angular face with water droplets resting on the skin.

I had only turned away from her for a moment, to close out my tab, sure that I had been imagining things, when she appeared to the right of me. Staring at me, un-drunkenly and

unmistakably steady, asking me if we had ever met before. After promising that we hadn't, we spent the entire night making sure that I could never answer that question with no again.

A daughter of Grasse, she comes from a long family of forgotten perfumers. As a lonely archivist who chases leads on black women slaves, or enslaved black women as academia calls them, I understood what it meant to be purposely forgotten. She told me about the history of her family and how it all started with the two women that had been stolen from them. I soberly promised to add them to my list of black women I'd search for. She sarcastically thanked me, and we ended the night by slurping up the wetness between each other's legs.

The next morning, I awoke to an empty bed and a small note with her name and social media handles. I followed her on Twitter and Instagram, watching her life unfold like a distant friend. That had been four years ago and although we had interacted with each other from time to time on the apps, I wasn't even sure she remembered me. I reached out first, and one DM, five nine-hour facetimes, and a plane ticket has landed her in my country.

"I have been following them for two years now," Rose says. "This is their last stop and my last chance."

Estella, Grasse, 1715

If anyone had ever asked her, she would have told them that roses were her wildest dreams. She had always admired the way they swirled and twisted in on themselves. They appeared soft to the eyes and soft to the touch. She could not help thinking about them and what it felt like to be so inward all the time. She often fought the urge to swoop down and whisper secret questions into their folds, like, did it feel like velvet to be closed in so tight?

No one asks her about the night of which she reminds them. The two servants whisper about the severed heads that were placed on sticks. The elite and noble ones who once visited boasted in proud tones about the piles of bodies they stacked and how many of their own men were unharmed. But no one ever asks her about the seeds that she quickly braided into her scalp or the stems that she grabbed handfuls of. They only ever mention the blood and the rolling heads, but she remembers the wetness of the soil and the softness in its landing.

She remembers other things too. Her mother had different names for the things that sprouted from the ground. Was that what the French call flowers, like clover and hibiscus; her mother had a name with fewer letters that rolled off her tongue as easily as the petals felt in her hand. She remembered the coast and the way the waters rolled and lapped onto each other like they were racing to climb on top of the sand. If she let herself, she could stand for hours looking outside any window, thinking about the waves and her mother's letter-less names. She could imagine the life she used to have, yet none of it would change where she stood.

So, she spent many moments of her life not remembering or pretending she didn't remember. She had become very good at it, and sometimes couldn't tell whether there was something she didn't know or something she told herself to never know again. She knew that everyone here called her Estella, but she was almost certain that hadn't always been her name; there were too many letters. It wasn't her mother's style, or at least that's what she mostly thinks. Bermuda might have been the place that she was born, although it could've been another country. She's mostly sure that she was given to Madame Scarron as a gift, except when she was presented to the noblewoman, she merely rolled her eyes and shook her head. Another boat trip and racing waves and she was here, in a castle with winding stairs, a garden, and one guard for protection and supervision. She was no longer a gift but labeled as goddaughter.

Estella slept in a room located on the west side of the castle. A gaudy room decorated with a gold four-poster bed frame, a square window overlooking the grounds, a double-sided armoire, and a wooden chest at the end of her bed. Most days, Estella spent her time reading books, daydreaming, and wandering. Inside the castle were ragged stairs, high ceilings painted with scenes of angels, open windows, and furniture made of hideous patterns. Outside the castle, there were various buildings made of grey stone and circular towers each topped with a triangular roof. Endless tides of grass were surrounded by rows of jasmine flowers and May roses. They were planted in a circular pattern that spiraled strategically. In the middle of the circling flowers was a glass orangery. Though she could leave the grounds as she pleased, she often chose that spot to climb into her own thoughts.

When the noblewoman visited, she brought guests with her. Estella learned to anticipate her arrival by sudden boxes arriving with dresses larger than her body. When the boxes appeared, other women who looked like her were allowed entrance into the castle.

She always noticed the differences between them. They sometimes had wraps around their heads or wore dresses as thin as sheets on her bed. Always though, they would greet her with a thin smile. First, they would try to speak to her in a language she does not know or used to know but can't remember. When she stared back at them and replied in French, they would shake their head and speak to her with even more restraint. When they left, she would pull out a small notebook and write down, as best as she could, the words that they said to her. She found that in the twelve times that the noblewoman has visited, Estella has only heard six of the women say the same greeting.

On the day that a maroon-colored box arrived, it was carried in the arms of another woman, one without a headwrap or thin skirt. She was wearing a beige dress that fell to her ankle with puffy sleeves and an apron to cover it.

She knocked first and then opened the door to Estella's room. Estella's chest tightened at the sight of her. She had cheekbones as sharp as knives and eyes so brown they looked like soil. Her hair was braided in a circular pattern that reminded Estella of a necklace. She placed the box on

top of the chest at the foot of her bed. She didn't bow or clumsily curtsy. Instead, she smiled. Two dimples deepened on the apples of her cheeks.

The woman greeted her in another language. The words slipped smoothly from her mouth. They reminded her of the words her mother used to say to her. Without thinking, Estella repeated the words back to her. They both stared at each other, Estella stunned that the words felt so right running over her tongue and the woman who might not have expected it from her. The woman spoke to her again with the same language, but Estella shook her head and asked her to speak in French.

"I'm Leica," she extended her hand.

"Estella."

Renee, Washington, D.C. 2025

A little before the sun sets, we pull into the parking lot of the archival warehouse for the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture. I've been working here for over almost ten years now. It was my first job and the only reason I got to travel to Paris. I used to be proud. Here, now, with Rose in the car, the building looked unremarkable. Made of blue stone holding four floors of stacks and stacks of blue and grey archival boxes and objects, it used to be a place that gave me purpose. Now, it was just a house of stolen memories.

As soon as I park, Rose has already opened the door. The dimmed yellow rays of the sun glow against her dark skin.

"Wait," I shout. She turns to face me.

"You don't have to come in with me," she says. She has her hands on her hips as she stares into my face. If it weren't for the adrenaline or the fact that I'm terrified of what we're doing, I would probably blush.

"No, I'm coming," I stammer. "I want to do this."

"Think of it as justice. They do not belong on display, in a land that was never theirs."

She reaches for me, at first, it seems to pull me in for a hug. It's an awkward embrace which results in her grabbing my key fob from my hand and opening the trunk. She reaches inside and grabs the bag that held the two fake recipes, and the fake remains. Everything looks realistic and not as though the bones are silicone molds that have been dyed or thinned and skimmed rags torn to shreds to mimic sixteenth century paper.

“I don’t have time for second guessing,” she says. “Look, you can even say I robbed you. I will be the villain.”

In truth, I didn’t even realize that I was reaching out to Rose until I had already clicked on her social media profile and DM’d her that Leica and Estella were here. She was the only one who could understand, the only one who could help.

Two weeks prior to my message, the museum sent dozens of boxes to me for processing for the newest exhibit, “The Scent of Blood: Indentured Servitude’s Role in the Fragrance Industry.” The exhibit touches on everything from the history of perfume, the creation of soap, scented candles, oil, and even the making of scented gloves. Split into three series, Europe, North America, and Africa, most of the documents followed a similar pattern. From America, records entailed lists of unnamed slaves making soap, scent recipes, loan payments, correspondence between slave owners and corporations. From Africa, the records focused on the forced migration of flowers, unnamed servants harvesting them, and the places these items were shipped. Then, when it switched to the European documents, I found Leica and Estella’s recipe in an elite Frenchman’s correspondence. As I dug deeper and deeper into the transferred boxes, I found their letters, their clothes, and finally their remains.

The first time I lifted one of their skulls, sharp pains traveled from the tips of my fingers to my elbow. Turning my hand over, circular blue and purple bruises flowered over my skin. Crawling and spreading by the second. I dropped the skull back into the box. The bruises retreated from my skin, like bugs scattering at the flicker of a light. I pulled out my phone and held it up to my face, stunned when both the iPhone and I didn’t recognize the faces attempting to unlock the screen. Two different faces were ghosting through my skin; the right side held a dirt-caked face with pointed cheekbones and the left held a brown wet-looking face. As soon as I could steady my hands, I messaged Rose.

Now, Rose snatches my keycard from my waist and walks ahead of me. I follow her even though my heart feels loose in my chest. I want to stop her, pull her face closer to mine, like staring into her eyes will somehow comfort me. Even though I don’t think anyone except me will notice a difference in the artifacts, it still feels like I am committing a grave injustice by righting another. We are only their vessels because they are trapped. We are all they have, the closest thing to freedom, but I am scared. I don’t know what will come from me setting them free. Just one touch of them and my skin was not my own. How will I change? How much of me will be left when they are gone?

The Letters, Grasse, France, 1715

Dear Estella, April 12th

I cannot be sure, but I think we are sisters. I suppose I should instead write that I am certain we are sisters because the more that I see you, the more I see myself. Are you ever allowed outside the confines of those stone walls? I would like to show you more of this place. There are more people like me, which means there are more people like you.

Will you meet me by the orangery? I shall be waiting for you when the sun goes down.

Dear Leica, April 15th

To say that I am in disbelief of learning of this other world brewing beneath my very nose would barely scratch the surface of my annoyance with my ignorance. Though I know they do not call it slavery here, a servitude that you cannot escape presents itself as the same. I know it is outrageous to even utter, but I will always think of you as a free woman despite your wretched situation. Those words are so complicated and yet, they are not. It is in the way that you are. I could tell by the way you came into the castle that day, unbowed and unashamed. I know the significant difference between our lives is not only present but obvious, still, I truly had not ever pondered on the idea of freedom until you came into my life. I was far too consumed with my own existence to think outside of myself. You have shown me that there is so much to freedom that cannot be accomplished without friendship.

I am indebted to you for that. Likewise, and nearly as important, I am indebted to you for taking me to The Navire. Perhaps, I mostly thank you for taking me there. So many of us are here. It wasn't just the music or the food or the beverages. It was like discovering a pulse that now has a rhythm. Oh, how invigorating!

I feel obligated to help you obtain your emancipation. You are nearly there. There is no need to wait more years if I can help you now. I will send a letter to the noblewoman. There is no one more deserving than you. I cannot wait for your return.

Dear Estella, April 19th

I care for you so I must tell you, with honesty and great caution, what I am feeling and what I am thinking. You are correct, there is freedom in friendship, but there is responsibility in both. However, you are wrong when you say that there is no one more deserving of emancipation than me. There will always be one that is more deserving than me. For me, my dear friend, there is no worth attached to emancipation and there should never be. I am grateful that you care so deeply for my life to get involved, but you need not act solely for my sake. Act because it is the righteous and noble thing to do, because no person should ever have to pursue freedom at all.

I must confess that I hold the same feelings of friendships for you that you have for me. Perhaps, many lifetimes ago we were also friends then, maybe more.

The Navire is a favorite among us here. After we leave the building on M. Costa's property, we find refuge there.

I hope that you will never come to the property of M. Costas. It is composed of acres of land with a small house and one large building. The building, our working quarters, has no windows but does possess rows of tables with flowers, glass bottles, needle pins, oils, and heating stations made from small fires. He is committed to building his legacy on perfume. We spend so much time pressing flowers and blending oils and burning ourselves and splitting glass between our hands, that I feel the secret ingredient in his concoction will be the smell of our blood.

You see Estella, we love The Navire not just because it is ours but because there is only one smell prevalent, the sweet scent of separation. When we are there, we are not his, we are only ourselves. We of course enjoy the windows as well. It was once a building intended for schooling, but many teachers traveled here with a mission in their heart and surrendered once they realized it would take some of us servants longer to read and write. I am the only lucky one because M. Costas began my schooling when I became his servant. He estimates I was around eight years of age. I was his first and he regarded me as his own child before the other four servants came along. His benevolence has waned since then.

I have never had someone to write to so frequently, I intend to fill any fleeting moments of leisure writing my thoughts to you. I expect the same from you. I'll be seeing you soon.

Dear Leica, May 3rd

Whilst I did not mean to offend you with my words, I will be more careful with them. Having never lived your life, I am bound to stumble. I implore you to think of it as ignorance rather than carelessness.

Is this the reason for your distance in our last encounter? You must admit that the marks on your arms and neck were alarming. I did not mean to intrude or offend but it was concerning. Should I be afraid for your safety? I realize the irony in that. I am only now asking after your safety, when this must be a concern of yours always.

Dear Estella, May 7th

It is not what you think. M. Costas has been trying new mixtures of his latest concoctions. My skin is not agreeing with the oils and perfumes. He reminds me that irritation and various patches of rotting skin are merely a small exchange for the cane and sugar fields he rescued me from. I have yet to see adequacy in the trade. It seems my body was always destined to pay a price.

I maintain grave feelings of disdain and contempt for the man and probably always will. He is as mediocre as the sky is blue. I could do a better job with perfumes than he. I still have memories from my home. I was taught to make this scent that all the women used in their bathing water. It

was intended for enchantment. I believe that if I bottled that up, it would sell quicker than anything M. Costas could ever make. They call the flowers here red clovers. They have such strange names for things. They have such strange ways.

Dear Leica, May 10th

Tell me, were you taught to use what is called hibiscus flowers? It seems so familiar to me. It is strange, the more I talk with you, the clearer my memories become. Yet it feels truer than a mere memory. We must talk more about our homes the next we are together.

Dear Estella, May 15th

They would often urge the women to chant their lover's name three times. Did they tell them that where you are from?

I apologize but must speak frankly for a moment. Prepare yourself, as you are reading these sentences, armor your mind and put a shield around your heart.

I cannot be sure, but I think our letters have been compromised. A stack of your letters is missing, and Costas is not himself. It is as though he has swallowed silence whole and kept it burning inside of himself. We have passed each other many times and it as though I no longer exist, only I know he sees me. I should have considered the consequences of our correspondence before, but that is the problem with the shaping of this bondage. It seems benevolent some days, when, in truth, each day it is the opposite. Perhaps he regrets teaching me to read. It is too late now.

I worry what will become of me. Truthfully, I worry about this all the time, but more when he is silent. It is easy to destroy me when I am ignorant of my condition, but it is a more difficult task when he has invited me into his world and given me tools to finesse it with skill. Where he could belittle me with lies and tricks, he must now show me the decency of killing me with his bare hands.

I want to write you something, but I fear I cannot. I should not have even written that sentence. There might be freedom in death, but I am not sure I want either of us to find out.

I will instead talk more about the bathing spell. There can be no harm in two women conspiring about a savage love spell. There are things here that were not present where I was born and then there are things there that I will never ever see again. So, I propose we just create something new entirely. We can start with things that we remember like red clover, hibiscus, and the thrice chanting, but what else is there? We both talk so much of freedom, and it seems neither of us can ever obtain it. If you could bottle it up as if it were a perfume, what would it smell like? What ingredients would it take to make you feel free?

Dear Leica, May 20th

Pink roses and hot water. There is something in the gentleness of the petals. I do not know that I can label it as freedom, but it does dull the numbness of my life. Could that be comparable to freedom, at the very least, enough for it to count for something?

I agree that there is probably freedom in death and I, too, am too fearful to think of that day for me or for you. I do sincerely hope that when I am dead I may return as a rose. I have spent enough time with my hands in their petals to be able to live as one.

I know what it is you wanted to write because I want to write it too. I have wanted to write it since the very day we met, and I have grown increasingly closer to writing it since. I don't even allow myself to dream of it, even that threatens our lives. It is as though they can smell it. It is best not to agitate our hopes or their suspicions. I know your fate would be far worse than mine and anything that harms you, harms me. So, I will stop myself.

Do you think we should bottle up our concoction and sell it down at The Navire?

Dear Estella, June 23rd

I was right, our letters have not been our own. When I was cleaning the master bedroom, I found the missing ones tucked beneath the mattress. It angers me to think that the same words that bring me comfort are what he puts beneath him.

I wish my life was different. No, I wish I did not even have a life. I wish I could be unborn. What so little treasures that have kept me fulfilled are sullied by his eyesight. Why should I write when my words are not my own? Estella, why should I breathe when my breath is not my own?

Promise me you will keep this letter and all the others in safety. The next time we meet, I will give all the letters I have. I am not certain that I can write anymore. I will have to act differently now that I anticipate his watching.

And to answer your question, I do not think we should bottle up our concoction and sell it. It is the only thing that is ours. We should keep it that way. I know it is selfish since it was inspired by freedom, but I am starting to think that nothing and no one in this life has control over freedom. If there is no freedom, let there at least be some things that are sacred.

Renee, Washington, D.C. 2025

We stood on the inside of the warehouse, inches away from the artifacts. Everything was how I'd left it. There were two worktables and one black office chair in the middle of the room. Scattered around them were all the items too big to fit in archival boxes.

In front of the table, there was the cherry-colored bathing basin that had circled up and around Estella's body. Rose walked to it. Slowly she placed her hand around its edges. To the left of the table was Estella's armoire full of gowns that stood tall. Each of the dresses heavy with the weight of a corset and the remnants of a lonely woman still inside. It didn't matter that the gemstones still gleamed or that the pearls were real. To the right of the table was Leica's bed, a small cot made entirely out of wood with a thin mattress stuffed with rags for a soft landing.

Turning to the worktable itself, Rose looked over every item. There were the mismatched skeletal bones, the decaying skulls, and the two recipes. I walk over to her. Their cursive words were curled and slanted, Leica's to the right and Estella's to the left. Even in writing, it was as if they were still reaching for each other. In both Estella's and Leica's original handwriting, all the ingredients were spelled out and listed. Estella started her recipe with pink roses and Leica with the word freedom.

The Letters, Grasse, France 1715

Dear Leica, June 26th

I will make sure that our words are forever hidden. I have had so little control over my life, this one thing I will do as if it is the only purpose of my existence. I will miss your letters. They have sufficed as tangible evidence of us having befriended each other. Although they will no longer continue, I am pleased that they had ever happened.

Still, I will write to you. You must control your words, but I do not have to control mine.

I have been told that The Navire has been seeing less of you these days. What is the meaning of that? If you are not going there when you leave M. Costas, where are you?

Dear Leica, July 8th

I misspoke, writing to you is not the same when I know you will not write me back. It is emptier somehow. Or perhaps it is because your words are so few even in person. You have not been yourself. I know that you live a life I will never fully comprehend, and I do not mean to further burden you, but I cannot help myself in asking where has my friend gone? It is not just that I need you, although I truly do, it is that I fear you are disappearing inside of yourself. Forgive me for this comparison but it is the only way I can make sense of it. Seeing you, in the few times that I have, has made me think of the wilting roses that hang on the outside of the bushes. They are there, lifeless and rotting, weighed down by the life of the others. My dear Leica, I am asking, is that you? Are you weighed down by the life of others?

Dear Leica, September 10th

I have not seen you in two months. I know that you are avoiding me. People at The Navire say that you are alive and still under M. Costas. I am fearful of the meaning of your silence. Have I offended you again? I take back what it was that I said to upset you. I am unsure how a friendship that started off with such chemistry can end like this.

Dear Leica, September 17th

I attempted to come to you. It was late into the night. I had a monologue prepared and stored into the cheeks of my mouth. I was prepared to be stern with you and remind you of the responsibility that you said comes with friendship. I predicted that once I said these things you would relent and embrace me. I never prepared myself for not seeing you.

I was not even allowed on to M. Costas's property. All the people from The Navire looked nothing like themselves. They were so solemn. Yet, it was not our usual solemn, not the kind that keeps our heads lowered. I know what it looks like for us to keep our heads low. Their heads were bowed. Leica, why did it look like they were praying? Why were our friends so overcome with sadness? And, my dear friend, where were you?

Estella, September 22nd

Please be informed that Leica is now among the deceased. We found her remains in the working quarters. She will be dearly missed by the others and of course by me. Please refrain from sending her letters as she will no longer receive them. Please greet your madame for me.

M. Costas

Dear Leica, October 2nd

I have begun saying your name three times before I step into my basin. You are not my lover, but you are the only person that I have ever loved.

My friend, my only and most dear friend, I cannot accept that you are gone even as I can feel your absence in my bones. I fear I cannot go on without you.

Dear Leica, November 13th

I have not come to this letter lightly. Nothing has been light for me since you have been gone. I wish that we had more time together. I wish that in another life there was you and me and The Navire and a garden of flowers and freedom that wasn't in a bottle.

I know now that it is too late for wishes and if we had known your life would end like this, perhaps we should have written everything we wanted to say anyway. We feared your death, but even in caution and calculation, we could not stop it. Do you think there can be freedom in

recognizing you are already dead? What would our life have been like if we had accepted that neither of us were ever alive?

They have given me a new basin. It is bigger than the last. It is big enough for the both of us to fit inside of it. When I sit directly inside, only my head is visible. I begged to keep the last because it smelled like our freedom. It smelled like you.

I am taking a bath for the last time. I know that I will chant your name three times, maybe more, maybe until I no longer have a tongue. I will drop every ingredient into the water and tears too. Do you think that was the missing ingredient, the thing that desperate women before us used to get the spell to work? Did we forget about the tears when we were dreaming up freedom?

I will stop these questions now. I will ask you when I see you. My dear friend, I do hope they have another Navire where you are.

Do not let worry seize your heart. I have hidden our letters the best way I know how. Consider your only request fulfilled, no one will ever find them. We have had our final words and they will remain between only us, eternally.

Estella.

Renee, Washington, D.C. 2025

We take them and the recipes home with us, all wrapped up in cloth. When I open the front door of my apartment, I suddenly realize how much of a home it isn't. There are no photographs or artwork on the walls. This one-bedroom studio is decorated by two tan-colored bookshelves, a two-seat burgundy couch, a candy-red kitchen table, and a half-made queen-sized bed.

Rose walks past everything and into the restroom which is as sadly decorated as the rest of the house. Hardly-used skin care products and my purple bullet vibrator sit on the counter. Rose knocks everything on the counter into the sink. From the bag on her shoulder, Rose pulls out a lighter, the two skulls, the two recipes, a bag of rose petals, and a pile of dried clover and hibiscus flowers. She places both skulls inside the tub.

“Don't just stand there,” she says to me without looking. “Help.”

I drop down to my knees next to the bathtub, turning the water as hot as I can stand it. I turn around, reaching for the recipe, and stop myself before drying my hands. I remember why we are here. I grab onto the thick pieces of paper even tighter. I reach for the rose petals, tossing them into the water. I grab the bag of dried flowers and spill them into the bath. Next on this list is a lover's name, and to step inside the water.

When I stand to my feet, I feel Rose's hand underneath my shirt. I turn around to face her and she is already naked, beautiful, unafraid, and waiting for me to join her. I step out of my clothes and reach for her hand.

We turn away from each other and towards the bathtub. As I step in the water with my left foot, Rose steps in with her right. When we are finally both standing still with the water coming to the back of our calves, we say their names, Leica first and then Estella. In what feels like seconds, their faces come through the ripples of the water. Leica on the left, in front of me, sharp cheekbones, face caked in dirt, with patches of rotting skin. I want to bend down and wipe her clean. Estella to the right and in front of Rose, face round, brown, skin no longer wet in the water. I want to scoop her up with my two hands and dry her eyes.

I look over to Rose who is already reaching behind her for the two recipes and a lighter. She hands Leica's recipe to me, keeping Rose's for herself. She strikes the lighter until it works. She burns a small corner of the recipe in her hand, watching as the paper turns to ashes. When she hands me the lighter, I do the same.

With every ash that drops and sinks into the water, the women's faces clear. The dirt is no longer caked on Leica's face and Estella's face is somehow dry and unafraid. There is a small moment when their faces are so clear, I can see them as they once saw each other, youthful, beautiful, and full of love. The four of us, two alive and two finally unalive, can see one another without sneaking through the skin of someone else. When I turn to face Rose, she is already looking at me beaming with a glee so unchecked that I nearly laugh. She looks away and down at the water. Estella and Leica are looking at each other the way they must've centuries ago. They look at each other the way two people do after traveling through lifetimes just for one more glance of the other. They look the way two people look when they are finally seeing freedom in their grasp. They stay like that, eyes locked, smiles fixed, until their faces dissipate into the water, leaving floating flowers and my hand in Rose's.