

# NYSSA

Monday, 12<sup>th</sup> March

Nyssa didn't normally like Mondays, par for the course with most people in the world, but this particular Monday was going pretty well. She'd woken up from a relatively good dream with a clear and painless head, and had made it to class on time without rushing. The rest of the day had gone by at a reasonable pace, and now Benny had gone to grab a sandwich from the C'n'D, while Hannah was busy making small talk with Nyssa at the tables outside.

"Did you hear that Archie's sent his résumé in for a posting at Peganward?", she whispered conspiratorially. Nyssa raised her eyebrows and scoffed as she took a bite of her scrambled eggs. They were good. Nyssa didn't know why she expected scrambled eggs to somehow be worse than sunny side up. If anything, this was a little better.

"Peganward, huh. I'd be damned if he makes it through first year," she said.

Hannah laughed before switching back to a conspiratorial tone.

"How many companies have you applied to?"

Nyssa laughed loudly.

"Hannah, love, you don't ask a woman."

Hannah burst into a short bark of laughter and smiled sympathetically. Nyssa hurriedly backtracked.

"I've put in about 70 so far."

Hannah sighed as she leaned back in her chair.

"Okay, cool. I was getting worried, because I've--"

She quickly snapped her mouth shut as Benny approached, saran-wrapped sandwich in tow.

"What did you get?" asked Nyssa.

Benny stopped, then looked at his sandwich, then turned back to Nyssa. The following nonchalance with which Benny tossed his sandwich at Nyssa could be called a work of art in and of itself, but the way Nyssa caught it single-handedly before even beginning to establish eye contact was undeniably dramatic, and yet seemingly routine, in the most perfect way.

Benny smiled a cheeky smile at Nyssa as he sat down next to Hannah. Nyssa rolled her eyes before glancing at the sandwich and sliding it across the table back to Benny.

"As per usual. At least I scrambled the eggs this time."

"At least you brought lunch this time."

Nyssa's lips curled upwards just the slightest amount, but Benny noticed.

And Nyssa noticed that he had.

"Eating? How hedonistic," she replied, glancing at Hannah. Hannah laughed and turned to Benny.

Nyssa watched in silence as he sat up straighter and turned to Hannah, but not before the gentlest twinkle appeared-- and just as swiftly, disappeared-- from his eyes.

"So, what were you guys talking about?"

Nyssa thought about Benny on her way back home, as much as she would have preferred not to. *He's good-looking.* (But not too much).

*He's got charm.* (But not a suspicious amount).

*He's smart.* (But not too much).

**Internal Nyssa #2:** *Also, being hit on just feels nice.*

*What-- shut up! We're a strong independent woman. We don't need some stupid boy's approval.*

**Internal Nyssa #2:** *You know, I told ya that we look a little like that model on the side of Shopper's Drug Mart. Maybe that's the appeal.*

**Original Internal Nyssa:** *Wait. Wait. We are a humble and confident woman. The Shopper's Drug Mart model was stunning and we do not compare ourselves to her.*

**Internal Nyssa #2:** *Well, Benny has a lot of options, but he doesn't flirt with all of them...*

**Original Internal Nyssa:** *Wait, does he have a lot of options?*

**Internal Nyssa #4:** *The Shopper's Drug Mart lady's pretty cute, would I see her with Benny?*

**Internal Nyssa #9:** *Matthew's kinda hot.*

**Internal Nyssa #7:** *Matthew doesn't know we exist.*

**Internal Nyssa #5:** *Fuck, who else do I have? Is Benny my only option?*

**Internal Nyssa #2:** *Maybe we're not the Shopper's Drug Mart lady...*

**Original Internal Nyssa:** *No, wait. Wait. We are a focussed girlboss with the right priorities. What is all this banal chatter about.*

**Internal Nyssa #15:** *Yes, we are focussed girlboss. Focus, Nyssa. We're approaching the elevator.*

**Complete Choir:** *Focus on the elevator.*

Nyssa pressed the up arrow and waited for the doors to open. The elevator doors were metal. And the paint was peeling off of the doors, too.

**Internal Nyssa #7:** *What would Benny's nails look like if they were painted?*

**Internal Nyssa #18:** *Have we seen Benny's nails?*

Very interesting Elevator. Hmm. The doors shook a bit as they opened, what a profound detail. As the doors opened, Nyssa spotted a girl leaning against the elevator wall with a backpack at her feet. The girl was looking at her. Nyssa blinked, then smiled.

"Hello," she said as she entered the elevator and pressed '4', "are you new here?"

The girl smiled.

"Yeah," she said, "Just moved in earlier today. Short-term gig."

Nyssa nodded.

"Oh...I see."

The girl appeared upper middle-class, just like Nyssa. She was probably a student, too.

"Do you just know everybody that lives here?" asked The Girl. Nyssa laughed sheepishly.

"Oh, no...I mean, I just... yeah, I guess. You see people around, you know, especially in a building this small."

"No, yeah, I get that."

Awkward silence.

"I'm Kyra, by the way."

"Oh. Hey. Yeah. I'm Nyssa."

"Nice to meet you, Nyssa."

"Likewise."

Nyssa would've asked more, but the elevator had reached her floor and the doors opened. She shrugged and nodded at Kyra.

"Well, goodnight, Kyra. I'll see you around."

Kyra smiled enigmatically.

"Oh, you will," she said. Nyssa forced out a laugh--a knee-jerk reaction-- as the elevator doors closed behind her.

*What kind of a response was that?? Is that normal?*

**Internal Nyssa #2:** *Are we out-of-touch? That was a serial killer response, was that not?*

**Internal Nyssa #5:** *I kind of like that. "Oh, you will."*

**Internal Nyssa #10:** *We should get to bed and stop hovering in the hallway, fumbling with our keys, like a creep.*

**Complete Choir:** *That's an idea.*

## NYSSA

Tuesday, 13<sup>th</sup> March

It was particularly bad this morning. Nyssa could barely breathe as she struggled to lift her back off her bed and prop herself into an upright position. Her shoulder blades seared with each movement she made. Tears were streaming down her cheeks and she was biting her lower lip to keep from actually yelling out. Her head was heavy, again, and the left side burned with pain, the pain spiking every time her curtains moved in the breeze of the ceiling fan to shine light on the room. She could feel her stomach turning, her throat straining to combat the waves of nausea that kept coming and going.

*Oh, God.*

She fell back onto the bed and cried softly as her left shoulder continued to scream. Her crying would only make the headache worse, but her shoulder hurt too much to stop the tears.

She tried the ascent again, moving ever so slowly, but even that wasn't enough care for her shoulder. A flash of pain that shot through her shoulder blade down her arm to the tips of her fingers sent her back against the bed.

*We should've taken the bloody pills yesterday.*

She cursed herself. She'd kept telling herself, ever since she got them, that the pills were absolutely necessary, and if they weren't, she wouldn't have gone to such pains to get them. She wasn't a wrongdoer. Yet, somehow...

She wasn't weak. This was just...stress. She'd get over it without drugs.

Until this very instant, nothing that couldn't be combated without drugs had really happened. But at this instant, Nyssa really wished she'd popped a good mouthful earlier so that she wouldn't have had to endure this.

Nyssa had somehow gotten out of bed. The pain in her shoulder was slowly receding, but her head still felt like it was being run over by a lawnmower. She groaned as she hobbled over to the medicine cabinet, being sure to open it with her good arm, and took out her pills. As per experience, she popped two.

Head n' Stomach situation was still miserable when Nyssa entered the classroom and slumped into her seat. It had already been 30 minutes. How much longer would the pills take to take effect? She watched as Hannah and Benny approached her.

"Ugh, is it the migraines again?" asked Hannah, her voice filled with concern. Nyssa nodded.

Hannah tutted. Benny walked over to Nyssa and pushed back her hair.

"What are you doing?" asked Nyssa, trying to roll her eyes up to watch Benny, only to feel a surge of pain through her entire head. She decided to keep her eyes closed as Benny began to massage her head.

"Hmm," she said, "that actually feels kind of nice."

Hannah laughed as Nyssa finally opened her eyes, Benny's head massage having ended. She *was* feeling better, though it was probably for reasons other than the head massage...  
...probably.

"Thank you, Benny," she said, smiling. Benny laughed.

"If engineering doesn't work out, I guess I should just become a masseur," he said, giving Nyssa a smile as he took his seat next to Hannah, who gave Benny a slap on the wrist. Nyssa hoped her face was not visibly red.

"He just wants an excuse to stomp on Prof. Raney's back," she quipped. Benny and Hannah laughed loudly.

The drugs had obviously taken effect by lunchtime, as evidenced by Nyssa's significantly elevated spirits and lack of chronic/everlasting pain. She took out the project from her bag and continued work. She couldn't wait for this whole thing to be over and for school to be out. She'd been working throughout the day and half the night for at least the past month, and she couldn't seem to shake off the nerves and shivers that plagued her all day.

She knew that she probably wouldn't get a summer work opportunity at Peganward (like anyone at C would), and that she might not even get the best opportunity out of all the people in her class, but she knew that the work that she was doing now would at least guarantee a good catch, if not the best. She'd had an eye on Salt Water Systems for a while now, and Prof. Raney was known for her influence, her recommendation worth more than her own weight in gold. If she just put in a single good word to a single person—and she would, based on the quality of the project—Nyssa was settled for the summer.

Screw summer, she was settled for the next decade!

Nyssa walked towards the elevator, still feeling well enough to work. The doors opened, as usual, and she walked in.

"Told you we'd meet again."

Nyssa turned in the direction of the voice to find the same girl from yesterday-Kyra, if Nyssa remembered correctly - standing there. She smiled at Nyssa. Nyssa blinked.

"Oh, hi," she said, "yeah. Hey. Kyra, right?"

Kyra nodded and smiled.

"Hey, Nyssa."

Nyssa smiled back, still processing the odds of this girl showing up at the exact same time as Nyssa in the elevator two days in a row. As she turned to press '4' again, she noticed something. Today, "8" was lit up. Yesterday, it had been "11".

Nyssa turned to Kyra, her gaze questioning. Kyra smiled at her.

"Yeah, um, which-which floor do you stay on? If you don't mind," asked Nyssa as the elevator stopped at her floor. Kyra raised her eyebrows.

"Oh, I don't stay on any floor. I'm just visiting."

The doors opened. Nyssa slowly walked out.

*"Just visiting"?? But then--what--*

"You said you'd moved in just yester"- she began, but the elevator doors had begun to close. Kyra put her hand out again, to which Nyssa gasped. Years of training had taught her not to attempt hand-to-hand combat with old elevators.

However, this time, after some wrestling with the door, Kyra managed to keep it open.

"Yeah, I did move in yesterday. Just not into any apartment."

She let go, and the doors continued to stand open. Nyssa frowned, then tried to cover it up with a laugh and fake smile.

“Oh--oh, well, wow, I-- is there a guesthouse or--haha, do you just live in your car? Rent ceiling at its finest, eh?”

*That was horrible.*

**Internal Nyssa #2:** *Well, what the fuck else am I supposed to do?? I don't have much to work with.*

Kyra laughed.

“Nah, I don't stay in my car.”

“Oh. Well, um... do you... where do you live, if you don't mind me asking?”

Kyra laughed again and shook her head.

*“Just here.”*

*“Here”?? But that's-*

Kyra continued smiling as the doors closed.

# NYSSA

Wednesday, March 14<sup>th</sup>

Nyssa walked into the elevator and pressed “G”.

“Good morning,” said a chirpy voice from behind her. She nearly jumped, but made it a point to remain composed as she turned around.

“Hello. Good morning to you, too,” she said, smiling at Kyra, who was sitting in a corner of the elevator and eating noodles. Nyssa saw a bedsheet folded underneath Kyra and a strange-looking plush toy poking out of her open backpack.

Like any dignified and tolerant citizen of the New World, Nyssa attempted to mind her own business and act completely nonchalant about Kyra. Yesterday, she’d been caught off-guard.

Today, she was prepared to handle whatever strange stunt this girl was trying to pull.

*Maybe it’s some sort of prank show, she thought as she stepped out of the elevator, maybe this girl’s just pretending to, you know, live in an elevator.*

Of course that had to be what the girl meant the previous night. She’d said, “I stay HERE,” or something like that. She was constantly in the elevator, three for three. If she wasn’t just playing an elaborate prank on the building’s residents (or on Nyssa in particular, but timing as impeccable as this girl had achieved with Nyssa’s irregular schedule, in the absence of rigorous stalking, was impossible), then this girl actually *lived in an elevator*.

What was going on, though? She was obviously from an affluent, upper/middle-class family.

She’d probably come here for postsecondary education, just as Nyssa had. So what on Earth was she doing?

Nyssa got so distracted by this train of thought that she very nearly missed the green light while crossing the road. She chided herself for occupying her brain with such irrelevant, nosy, middle-aged-jobless-housewife-esque thoughts. What some girl in some crummy elevator did was none of Nyssa’s business, and knowing more about it was certainly not her priority.

During the break, Hannah reapplied some of the makeup that had come off over the course of the day. Nyssa wasn’t supposed to be paying attention, but she had noticed that Hannah’s makeup had shifted from subtle and light to loud and heavy over the past few days. Maybe an attempt to woo Prof. Raney?

*Nyssa, what other people do with their lives is none of your business,* she reminded herself.

She’d had to remind herself of that a lot these days. It felt as though she was slowly losing it to this stupid internship-placement-determining project.

“Nyssa seems extra strained today,” commented Benny, inciting a burst of laughter from Hannah. Nyssa simply sighed.

“No, it’s just that I’m a little tired today,” she said, “same stupid project.”

“Ugh,” said Benny, “I’ve still got like, thirty percent of mine left. What about you, Hannah?” Hannah shrugged.

“Who knows. Maybe around twenty to thirty percent? I think I have to redo some stuff.”

Nyssa’s jaw nearly dropped to the ground. She’d congratulated herself the previous night on getting through half of the project.

Nyssa entered the elevator to find Kyra there. Kyra smiled at her.

“Hello,” she said. Nyssa smiled back.

“Hello, Kyra,” she said, “how was your day?”

Kyra laughed.

“It was good, good,” she said, “I called my grandfather from a phone booth. I didn’t want to use my real number. I did some window-shopping at the mall, too, with my friends. What about you?”

Nyssa shrugged, trying to remain nonchalant as the doors opened at her floor, “oh, nothing much. Just work. You know how it is,” she said, turning and smiling at the girl as she walked out.

“Oh, yes... Big C. I’ve heard the stories about how y’all barely even have time for showers.”

*Nice dig, lady. Nice dig.*

Nyssa was, for better or for worse, used to these kind of jibes from people who didn’t get into C.

**Internal Nyssa #21:** *Wait. If she doesn’t go to C, where the fuck does she study???*

**Internal Nyssa #7:** *This girl lives in a goddamn elevator; maybe she doesn’t study at all. Maybe she’s a vampire who sucks the youth out of students’ bodies.*

**Internal Nyssa #2:** *Hahaha, good one.*

**Original Internal Nyssa:** *...okay but for real, who the fuck is this girl?*

Nyssa simply laughed and nodded as she walked out of the elevator, and, to her abject horror, Kyra followed her out onto the fourth floor.

“Oh... you’re getting off here as well?” Nyssa asked as she procrastinated in the hall. There was no way she was opening the door to her flat in front of this creepo.

Creepo seemed perfectly comfortable in the hall, though. She effortlessly moved on to the next topic.

“Are you an international student?” she asked. Nyssa shook her head and forced a smile.

“Oh, no, I’m not.”

*Please leave.*

Kyra raised her eyebrows.

“Oh. So you were born here?” she asked. Nyssa frowned.

“Yes,” she said.

*And you can leave...*

Kyra seemed surprised, then laughed to smooth out the awkwardness.

*Madam, it’s time to **leave**. Please.*

“Interesting, interesting. It’s just the way you speak, like I could tell immediately, like, ‘ooh, she ain’t American’.”

*Ugh.*

The words felt like a gunshot, and Nyssa’s first instinct was to recoil. Everything from the past five minutes, instantly erased. Her mind filled with all kinds of thoughts, but she pushed them aside. She wasn’t going to let some girl in a crummy elevator get the better of her.

Instead, she chuckled—or rather, pretended to-- in response.

“Yeah, I-I’m...just to straighten things out, I am very proud of my heritage, and I have spent many years outside of the United States. You asked me where I was born. I was born in America. I was *raised* in the world. And personally, I’d have it no other way.”

*“I was raised in the world.” Jeez, you should talk to this twit more often. Raney would swoon over this.*

Kyra’s face changed, as though her misspeech had finally gotten through that thick skull.

“Oh, yeah, I mean... for sure, that makes sense.”

“I know.”

Silence. Nyssa gestured to the elevator, terrified that if she opened her mouth, she’d somehow manage to humiliate herself even more. Kyra nodded and took the hint.

“Well... goodnight, Nyssa.”

“G’night.”

Nyssa stayed in the hall until the elevator doors closed behind Kyra. As she entered her room, she could feel it coming up. She bit her lip, but still couldn’t stop a couple of tears.

*Why are you crying over what that stupid idiot said?*

She could feel her heartbeat quicken as the tears made way for full-blown sobs. She clutched her head in her hands as she sat down by the door, quietly crying the night away.

## NYSSA

Thursday, March 15<sup>th</sup>

Nyssa doubted everything about everything in her life as she entered the elevator. She’d had a dehydration headache early in the morning, but was lucky enough to be able to calm it with Gatorade and a couple more pills. She cringed at herself.

*What is it about this girl? She’s irrelevant. She’s irrelevant.*

She couldn’t stop those words from repeating themselves again, and again, and again in her mind. This other girl’s accent was perfectly American. She was perfectly American, she seemed perfectly confident, perfectly educated, perfectly...

She’d judged Nyssa. She’d hurt Nyssa. She’d scared Nyssa.

Now, Nyssa didn’t want to even look at her. If she was going to be treated like scum, she might as well take on the role with pride.

“Hey,” said Kyra as Nyssa entered the elevator. Nyssa cleared her throat and exhaled loudly.

“Hello,” she said curtly, not looking at Kyra. She heard nothing.

As the elevator doors opened, Kyra continued to keep quiet. Nyssa didn’t bother looking back as she walked out.

Hannah and Benny were talking animatedly to each other as Nyssa walked in. She could feel her composure weaken, her fingers tremble, just as they had the first time she’d walked in here. She hated it.

She hated how someone with a cleaner accent could make her feel like crap.

*Nobody else has pointed that out, right? Your accent is fine. You are fine. She was probably just jealous about Big C.*

Benny turned and smiled at Nyssa. Hannah waved Nyssa over. Nyssa put on a smile as she walked towards them.

“Hey,” she said, sitting down opposite them, “what were you two talking about?”

Hannah shrugged as she gestured to Benny.

“He says he’s secretly in love with someone,” she said, “he just won’t tell me who.”

Nyssa’s heart began to race. Kyra and everything she’d implied the previous night were promptly pushed aside.

*Oh, it’s not you,* she told herself, although superficial humility aside, she kind of hoped-and knew-that it was her.

“Oh, that’s easy. Everyone knows that. You see the way he flirts with Prof. Raney?” she said casually, triggering a peal of laughter from Hannah. Benny sighed as he covered his face in his hands.

“Uh oh,” he said, “she’s found out.”



Hannah laughed some more as she pried Benny's hands off his face.

"Come on, be serious. Tell me," she said, making some sort of weird eye gesture at Nyssa. Nyssa attempted to act like a normal human being, but was aware of a wave of heat making its way across her face.

Benny sighed as he looked up at Nyssa.

"She knows," he said, maintaining eye contact, "she knows all about it. That's why I'm going to get an A- and she's going to get a C."

Nyssa and Hannah laughed.

Who cared about that girl in the elevator, Nyssa decided. The people who really mattered respected her. That's all that should matter.

Nyssa entered the elevator, her spirits successfully lifted. She'd barely done any work that day, and it felt strangely refreshing, instead of feeling like a waste of time. She'd almost completely forgotten about Kyra—

"You seem happy."

-except she couldn't forget about a creature that could never keep its trap shut.

"I am," she said matter-of-factly, avoiding eye contact with The Thing.

The Thing sighed as the elevator stopped at Nyssa's floor. Nyssa was about to step out when she heard The Thing clear its throat from behind her.

"Look," it said slowly, "...I'm sorry about last night."

Nyssa stopped. Slowly, she turned around. The Thing looked contrite.

"I know I hurt you, so there's no point in pretending like I didn't," she said. Nyssa said nothing.

The elevator doors closed, and the elevator continued moving up. The Thing continued.

"I honestly just meant that as a joke. I never thought you'd... take it this seriously, especially coming from me," she gestured around her, "I mean, you're doing so much better, and... I guess I never really thought it would be the same as you telling me something like that, but... apparently, it was. I'm sorry. I know how much it matters, before you try to act like it doesn't. I'm from the same place as you. I've grown up with all the same stuff."

Nyssa opened her mouth to tell this girl off—something, anything, to show that she didn't matter—but she couldn't get a single word out. Dammit, she should've just walked out instead of listening to this idiot's speech. She was higher in the Elevator Hierarchy! She'd always been higher! She didn't need this pest's words of encouragement!

"You... seem like a nice person," she said, but she was trapped anyway. The elevator doors opened on the eighth floor, and Nyssa didn't really feel like taking the stairs. Her lower left leg had begun to cramp, and the pest actually did seem... nice. Or motivated, but Nyssa couldn't imagine why anyone like this would have any vested interest in her.

You never know, though.

Nyssa pressed her floor number, but the elevator kept going up anyway. What? Did it need to complete an entire circuit in this fifteen-floor building before stopping at Nyssa's floor again?

Nyssa groaned inwardly.

Kyra smiled.

"Yeah, well, I'm sure I didn't seem like that yesterday."

Nyssa said nothing. Kyra shrugged.

"Maybe we can start over?" she asked. Nyssa sighed.

"Why not?" she said, extending her arm to Kyra, who shook it with a smile.

"I'd feel better if you spoke with less of a poker face and monotone."

“Well, I’d feel better if you thought for a few minutes before speaking. But we don’t always get what we want in life, do we?”

Kyra flinched, then smiled contritely and shrugged.

“Touché,” she said. Nyssa immediately resented how smoothly that went.

*What, do you actively want a fight? Be happy this weirdo didn’t deck you the second you came in.*

**Internal Nyssa #4:** *Stairs make excellent exercise, you know.*

The elevator made its way to the ground floor. Yep. At this rate, Nyssa would have to wait until it reached before pressing 4.

“So,” she asked, “about this... you know, elevator thing...”

“Oh, that,” said Kyra, “yeah, I’m just going to be here for a week. My parents don’t know. I study at Newhurst University. Well, study as in...”

Kyra laughed rather awkwardly. Nyssa smiled slightly.

“Well, Newhurst has a good garden,” she said. Kyra seemed surprised.

“You’ve heard of it?” she asked. Nyssa shrugged.

“Why wouldn’t I? It’s just a couple rungs below C. I’ve seen it before.”

Nyssa didn’t feel like mentioning that she’d once kept it as a backup option.

Kyra simply nodded, slowly. Nyssa nodded back.

There was a brief silence, followed by Kyra clearing her throat and shifting in her place.

“So... to get into C... you’d have to have a SAT score of...”

*Aha.*

... meh. It was just a SAT score.

A SAT score of 1570.

“Yeah, 1570, first attempt.”

Kyra blinked.

“Dang,” she said, “and your GPA?”

Nyssa hesitated for a minute. The SAT score had been acceptable bragging, but she wasn’t sure if just blabbing everything at once was crossing a line.

Kyra scoffed.

“Why the silence? I’m sure it’s something to be proud of.”

Nyssa sighed and shrugged. Kyra had literally asked for it.

“Yeah, it was a 3.94 out of 4.”

Kyra raised her eyebrows.

“Wow,” she said slowly, “but... I thought you’d have gotten a 4.”

Oh, look who wasn’t contrite anymore. Nyssa felt a slight pang as she remembered why she’d gotten the 3.94 in the first place, but snorted inwardly as she thought about who she was talking to. She was calm, composed, and confident, and besides—she’s the one who made it into C.

“Yeah, I kind of-- I screwed up bio finals,” she said as casually as possible, “got an 86 percent.”

Kyra laughed.

“I got below 90 percent in three subjects,” she said, “math, chemistry, and English.”

Nyssa raised her eyebrows.

“Oh,” she said.

*And you had the gall to comment on my accent.*

No. Nope. That didn’t matter. That didn’t matter at all.

“Cool,” she said, as the elevator reached the ground floor. She pressed 4. She was itching to know Kyra’s SAT score, but she went to Newhurst anyway. It couldn’t be all that high.

Kyra sighed as the elevator went up.

“I got a 1480 on the SAT, second attempt,” she said, “everybody congratulated me.”

Hmm. Higher than expected.

“That’s not a bad score at all,” Nyssa said. The elevator reached the fourth floor. Nyssa turned back as the doors opened.

“I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, then,” she said, pasting a smile on her face, “goodnight.”

Kyra smiled and waved.

“Goodnight. See you.”

## NYSSA

Friday, March 16<sup>th</sup>

Nyssa gathered her stuff and practically ran out the door—or rather, would have actually run out the door if not for the sudden and mysterious cramping in her left foot. Today, a certain Prof. Raney was going to be bowled over by a certain Nyssa's finally-completed project. Some people had already gotten summer internship placements, but most of the big companies hadn't gotten back to anyone yet. Nyssa briskly walked into the elevator and took a deep breath. She heard Kyra clear her throat from behind her and turned around.

"Oh. Hello there. Good morning," she said. Kyra grinned.

"Good morning," she said, as she dug into a delicious-looking rice dish which had been packaged in a foil container. Nyssa gestured to the container.

"That's a nice-looking breakfast you've got there."

Kyra extended the container towards Nyssa.

"Want some? It's homemade. Got it from a friend's house. Her mom's just so sweet, you know. She made this for me."

Nyssa feigned a smile as the elevator doors opened.

"No thanks," she said as she walked out, "have a nice day."

"You too, C. You too," replied Kyra as the doors closed.

Nyssa sat down next to Hannah after leaving her project report on the T.A.'s desk, as instructed. Hannah seemed off.

"You okay?" asked Nyssa. Hannah immediately whipped around to face Nyssa, her eyes wide.

"You know what?" she hissed incredulously, "it wasn't just a rumour. It was real."

"What was real?"

Hannah seemed irritated at Nyssa's slowness.

"Grr, Archie! He really got the internship on Peganward's research team!"

Nyssa, like everybody in the world, has two lower jaws: the physical jaw, and the mind jaw. The physical jaw remained stationary. The mind jaw detached from the rest of her skull and fell to the ground, with a mental clatter.

"Y-You're kidding, right? That's-that's a rumour, right?"

Hannah shook her head.

"No, I'm not kidding. It's not a rumour, it's verified, everybody knows it. Barb even announced it in Mech II this morning! I don't think Archie believed it himself."

Nyssa blinked. No. This couldn't be happening, Archie was—Archie was—

Ugh, Archie was a loser!

"He was supposed to be on academic probation!" Nyssa nearly yelled. Hannah shook her head furiously.

"I don't know, I don't know! All I know is that the guy's got the internship placement at Peganward!"

Ugh, why did Hannah have to keep repeating that? Why did Nyssa prompt her to repeat that?

She'd slogged her ass off for the last month for... what, then? She knew she'd never get into a Peganward research internship program, and she was one of the best students in class. This idiot Archie...

“Anyway,” said Hannah, as if this insult to life itself was no big deal, “Benny told me he wasn’t feeling that great today, so he wouldn’t be coming to class. So it’s just the two of us today.” Hannah bumped shoulders with Nyssa, who simply smiled.

*Benny told you and not me?*

Nyssa sighed as she entered the elevator. Archie had come into class, acted as though nothing had happened, and had basically been extremely punchable.

The doors had barely closed, at which point Nyssa remembered that the elevator had a guardian. She turned around to find Kyra silently meddling with her phone.

*She looks grumpy.*

Nyssa opened her mouth to inquire, but then grew a brain and decided not to. It was none of her business, anyway.

Besides, Kyra didn’t deserve the basic consideration that she’d denied Nyssa, after only knowing her for a grand total of fifteen minutes.

*Well... she did apologize. Not everyone would.*

**Internal Nyssa #2:** *Well, not everyone would decide to camp out and live in an elevator after getting into a fight with Mama and Papa. Not everyone would choose to utter the exact right words, aimed straight at your heart, just because they felt like it in that moment.*

**Complete Choir:** *Impulsivity is nothing to be admired, nothing to be encouraged, and definitely nothing to feel sorry for.*

*... but is it not natural? Is it not forgivable? What kind of a person does it make me if Kyra could get over herself, but I can’t get over something that shouldn’t have bothered me in the first place?*

As the elevator doors opened, Nyssa turned back one last time.

“Goodnight, Kyra,” she said as she stepped out. Kyra didn’t look up from her phone.

Nyssa nodded at nobody in particular as the elevator doors closed.

# NYSSA

Saturday, March 17<sup>th</sup>

Nyssa woke up with a light throbbing in her head today. Her heartbeat was rapid. She'd had an odd dream involving Benny's birthday party—well, the subject wasn't so odd, since it was just two days away and she'd barely had time to focus on it while working on the project—it was the sequence of events in the dream that made her face flush when she recollected it. It had started off fairly mundane and acceptable: Benny was hosting the party in a bowling alley, and he'd invited Hannah, Nyssa, and a few other people. He and Nyssa had been talking when they'd magically been separated from the group, following which Dream Benny may or may not have dropped to one knee and proposed to Nyssa.

*God, Nyssa, don't be this thirsty.*

Nyssa had decided that she'd get Benny a little gift. They'd only known each other for a few months now, but their relationship seemed to be growing, and this would definitely help things along, especially given their mutual attraction to each other. She'd been stewing over what to get him in her free time, and had finally decided on a Benny-Hannah-and-Nyssa hand-drawn comics booklet, accompanied by a box of cupcakes and a small bouquet of lilacs—he loved lilacs. She'd put the actual gift-making-and-getting off until the project got over, but now it was over, wasn't it.

*Archie.*

She tried not to wince every time she thought about it, convincing herself that Peganward wasn't necessary and that in the long run, she'd prove that she was better than that dumby. Shit happened, didn't it. Hell, this was life. This was America. Shit was *obliged* to happen. This was just the beginning.

Besides, she wasn't the only one who had to face this kind of crap. Almost the entire class was better than Archie... if not as good as her.

Since she pretty much had the day off today (apart from some homework, which according to Hannah and Benny, only took "like two hours" to finish, and she needed some time off to recover from Archie anyway), she decided to set off on her gift-giving endeavour. She had to make the comic booklet first; she had to come up with a good narrative, draw out the pictures, and paste them in a multi-coloured booklet with a printed cover. She decided to start off with the simplest task: buying the coloured paper.

After breakfast, Nyssa set out on her mission. She entered the elevator and pressed '1'. She heard a grunt from behind her and turned around.

"Hello, Kyra," she said. Kyra smiled at her.

"Hello, Nyssa," she said, "how was your night?"

Nyssa shrugged.

"It was alright. What about your night?"

"Ahh, not that great. Just got into some crap with the fam. But that's life, eh?"

Nyssa laughed politely.

"Yup, that's life," she said, nodding as the doors opened and she walked out...

...Kyra following her.

"You're coming out?" she asked, trying to sound composed. Kyra shrugged.

"I don't know, you were going out, so I thought I'd join you. You have a problem with that?"

*Uh, yes.*

“Well, um, this is an outing I’d prefer to do on my own, so...”

Kyra raised her eyebrows.

“Oh, of course. I mainly just want to go out, don’t really care about your outing. I’ll see you in the evening,” she said. Nyssa laughed slightly, feeling just a little guilty--and a little mad-- as she raised a hand and waved a perfunctory wave to Kyra before turning around and walking out.

She reached the crafts store. She’d never actually been here for more than five minutes at a time before, but she knew it was a good store. She was happy to find that there was a flower stall right next door to the crafts store. Now she knew where to go for the lilacs.

She managed to get her hands on some chart paper with very rich and striking colours. She took a look at the price. Deciding that something so in-the-face was not a good idea for a gift component at this stage in the relationship, she dropped the chart paper and decided that the... *subtler* variant right next to it was suitable for the purpose.

She bought the chart paper, printer paper, and a pack of 2B pencils, along with a pack of colour pencils. She was confused as to which pencil variety was superior: the round, the triangular, or the hexagonal. The parameter based on which she normally made purchases was almost identical for all three, so now it was down to personal preference. She decided she’d try the triangular pencils.

Now she had to actually draw the comic strips. She’d come up with a story which she thought was a little over-the-top, but it seemed interesting and cute. Back in the days of her early adolescence, she was known for the gifts she gave people. They were the kind of gifts you wanted to save, the kind of gifts you felt like displaying to guests, the kind of gifts that inspired fond memories of the person who gave them to you. Nyssa hoped that this time, her gift would have a similar reaction.

She decided to stop at a little café by the store. She’d been here a couple of times before with Hannah and Benny, and it was a much better place to spend time than her cramped and dingy apartment.

She began to draw the comic strip. An elderly couple passed by her table and asked her what she was doing. She explained. They smiled at her, told her she was so sweet and that he would definitely like it, and left. After this incident, there was complete silence. Nyssa was completely engrossed in her drawings. She thought that things were actually coming along pretty well...

...until 12 PM. Somehow, from this point, everything started to go horribly wrong.

It had started with Benny’s nose on the fifth or sixth page. She’d drawn him a kind of stubby nose, as she always did, but somehow, on this particular page, it looked wrong. She’d seen the stuff that other people drew. She knew the nose looked more amateurish than cute. She decided to not skimp on effort. She would sit down and redo that nose, on every. single. drawing.

She redid the nose. So many times. So many tries.

She tried giving him a sharp, aquiline nose.

He looked like a deformed ostrich.

She tried giving him a pointy nose.

He looked like an experiment gone wrong.

She tried looking at her own nose through the reflection on her smartphone’s screen. She drew the best approximation she could on Benny’s face.

He looked vaguely like a chicken.

She tried studying a selfie she'd taken with Hannah and Benny, but Hannah occupied 70% of that selfie, and Nyssa occupied 20%. Benny's nose was too small to be studied. She frantically skimmed through all the pictures containing Benny on her phone, and they all looked exactly the same.

Completely distraught, Nyssa decided to take a break and order a coffee. She asked for a menu card, which she got almost immediately. After some study, Nyssa decided that it was safe to order a latte and a cheese sandwich.

She brought the tray back to her table, where a nose-less caricature of Benny was waiting to haunt her. She moved her papers over to the corner of the table to make space for her snack.

About twenty minutes had passed since she'd commenced her break. She'd finished the coffee, which was just so-so, and, after trying to get through the cheese sandwich, decided to ditch it halfway through with a heavy heart. She returned her tray to the counter and continued with her work, going to YouTube and typing out "how to draw a good nose".

About thirty minutes later, Nyssa thought she was ready. She began to draw the nose for Benny. After about fifteen minutes of painstaking work, she was finally happy. Yes. This Benny looked perfect.

*Thank you, YouTube!*

It was a bit grey, due to all the erasures and drawing-overs, but that didn't take away from the picture too much; in fact, it kind of seemed to add to the appeal. Nyssa's sense of pride had been restored. She was happy. She knew she'd be able to do it eventually.

In this zeal, she happily and swiftly erased all the other Benny noses she'd drawn until then.

Unfortunately, after about three sorry attempts on the second nose, she realised that certain successes are so successful that they are unrepeatable.

She initially decided to redraw the stubby noses, but then saw the Benny with the redone nose. It looked so good, so professional.

She would somehow replicate it.

She decided that maybe the greyish hue was what made the nose work, and decided to lightly shade some grey on the first Benny. She then tried copying the good nose that she'd drawn. It turned out that the same nose-drawing technique, when applied to a nose at a slightly different angle, failed miserably.

Nyssa tried again, and again, and again, on so many different pictures, for so long that she began to feel hungry. She looked up at the clock on the wall opposite her—it was 3:00 PM already. Half the damn day had passed in this café.

She sighed as she leaned back against the chair she was sitting on. Even if she were to give up right now and give all the Benny-s stubby noses, they'd look odd because of all the faded marks of Noses Past, and that was just doing a crappy job anyway. She should've gotten somebody else to draw this. She should've known she'd be no good. She should've decided on another gift idea. She couldn't believe how colossally everything had got screwed up. The day was gone. So was her gift.

She began to feel a tightness in her throat. She couldn't believe it. How could she get so worked up over something so insignificant? It was just a good-for-nothing "gift". Yes, she'd screwed up. Yes, she was untalented. Yes, all the great ideas that she'd somehow had had been completely twisted and thrown out the window.

It was 3:00 PM. She didn't want to start from scratch; there was no reason for a second version to be any better. She could try using ClipArt and image-editing software, but she didn't have the



time, and it wouldn't come out well. The only way to salvage this effort was to go ahead and make a photo booklet. She'd have to do something. She'd have to use the identical selfies she had on her phone.

She cursed herself so hard. Why hadn't she thought harder about what she was going to get Benny? Why hadn't she thought everything through way earlier? Why was she arrogant enough to assume that she could draw something gift-worthy with the skills she knew she had? Why couldn't she *do the damn thing right*???

Her stomach was growling. She angrily ignored it, burying her head in her hands. This was the kind of planning displayed by people who eventually buy you a nondescript gift from the discount aisle in the supermarket. This was the kind of attitude displayed by people who didn't care. This was the kind of job done by people who *sucked*.

Nyssa had begun to panic. Her stomach was still acting up. Her throat was tightening further. Her composure looked like it was close to bursting.

She hurriedly ordered a scoop of vanilla ice-cream. Maybe it would help her cool down, no pun intended.

She took the ice-cream in quick, small bites. It was creamy and tasted nice, but something about it—Nyssa wasn't sure exactly what—made it seem slightly old.

After the ice-cream, she felt a little better. She felt refreshed. She cleared her throat and thought about what she was going to do about Benny's gift. She still didn't want to ask for any classmate's help—it was *her* gift, not theirs—and she didn't know where to find a professional artist, and whether it was even worth it to get one for this.

The photo booklet was feasible, but it was boring and would wind up looking half-hearted. She needed to think of something else.

Maybe the cupcakes and lilacs were enough. Simple, subtle, and noncommittal, but sophisticated. She could convey the amount of attention she'd been paying to Benny's preferences through getting the exact flavour of cupcakes he loved—banana with whipped cream—and his favourite flowers. It wouldn't appear cheap, it would look... intentional.

It was 4:00 PM. After a lot of thinking at the café, she'd finally made up her mind. She was going to get Benny the cupcakes and the lilacs on the day of his birthday so that they'd stay fresh. She planned to write Benny a heartfelt birthday letter, enclosed in a handmade folder. That would be great. It was inexpensive yet classy, and she knew that it would be a demonstration of how much she cared. It was personal, and would be a true stepping stone to something... more.

Nyssa shook the thought out of her head. She wasn't supposed to think of stuff like that.

Whatever happened would happen. At the moment, she had to consider the status quo.

With a rather renewed energy, she stuffed the attempted cartoon into her bag along with her supplies and left the café.

Nyssa walked over to the bakery. Out of all the places she'd visited today, this was the only one she kind of - sort of frequented. She'd brought Benny and Hannah here once before, and they'd all enjoyed it.

"Hey, Nyssa!" said Pattie as she arranged a few pastries on a shelf. Nyssa smiled and waved.

"Hello, Pattie," she said, "I was wondering, if I gave you an order for around 4 PM, Monday."

"Hmm, Monday. Is it a cake, or...?"

"Do you guys make custom cupcakes?"

Pattie scoffed at Nyssa, pretending to be offended.

“Pfft, wouldn’t dare call myself a baker if I couldn’t. What would you like?”

“Banana cupcakes. Dozen. With whipped cream. Some drizzled chocolate ganache on top would be nice, too.”

Pattie thought about it.

“Anything else?” she asked. Nyssa thought about it.

“No,” she said after the quick consideration of a ludicrous idea, which may or may not have involved Benny’s face on a cake.

Pattie slowly nodded.

“Yeah, Monday, 4 PM is doable. Let me talk with Clancy and confirm.”

Nyssa nodded.

“Sure, I’ll wait.”

Pattie had given Nyssa a decent figure for the cupcakes. Nyssa had reiterated about a thousand times that the cupcakes had to be as perfect as they could possibly be made in Pattie’s shop. Pattie had nodded empathetically and had assured Nyssa that the cupcakes would turn out splendid. Nyssa believed her, judging by the quality of the cakes and pastries from Pattie’s shop that she’d tried until then.

At this point, she’d grown tired of the café and decided to go home. She wanted to give the flower stall a quick look before leaving. The flowers looked fresh and full, and came in a variety of colours and forms. Nyssa tried pre-booking a fresh bouquet of lilacs, but the lady behind the counter was not open to such activities.

“Whatever flowers I have on Monday, those are the flowers you get on Monday,” she’d declared gruffly after Nyssa’s second attempt at pre-booking. Nyssa had said, “okay” and then left.

She entered the elevator, her bag of supplies in tow. Kyra appeared bemused.

“What’s all that for? What’ve you been doing all day?” she asked. Nyssa felt a sudden surge of irritation at Kyra’s tone, but kept it down.

“Oh, just... it’s just a little thing for a friend,” she said, forcing a smile at the ground. Kyra raised her eyebrows.

“Oh,” she said, “that’s nice. What’s the occasion?”

“Uh, birthday,” said Nyssa. Kyra nodded.

“Wish her a happy birthday from me, too.”

Nyssa didn’t bother to correct The Pest. Her stomach was growling and she was dead tired. She didn’t know how she could be so miserable after doing practically nothing all day.

She turned around and spotted Kyra’s evening snack—a foil package of some absolutely delicious-looking noodle dish. Her mouth watered. Kyra caught her staring and extended the package in her direction.

“Hmm?” she asked. The elevator doors opened at Nyssa’s floor.

*Just go home. This is not a good idea.*

Nyssa was starving.

*This looks cheap. Get off the elevator.*

Nyssa sighed.

“Maybe just... just a taste?”

Kyra smiled.

“It’s all yours,” she said, gesturing to the food. Nyssa slowly approached Kyra, kneeling down

next to her. She accepted the plastic spoon that Kyra gave her from a packet of disposable spoons in Kyra's bag and took a good scoop of the dish, stuffing it into her mouth.

*Mmmmm*, She thought after a couple of chews. This stuff was delicious.

"Thank you. This is good," she said after she'd swallowed. Her stomach growled audibly, and she wanted to curse. Kyra grinned.

"You're obviously hungry. C'mon, it's a good dish. It's homemade. Have some more."

Okay. This was taking things too far. Accepting alms was taking things too far.

"Oh, it's fine. I'm good. Thanks."

Nyssa pressed the "open" button on the elevator and awkwardly scurried out of the opening doors.

Nyssa had finished preparing a part of her folder. It looked cute, but... she didn't know. She'd kind of expected it to look more professional, for some reason, and less like a child had pasted it together. She considered herself lucky to have a printer—her parents had insisted that she buy one of her own, and it had been a good investment—being able to take its availability for granted allowed her to be a little more scrutinizing. She could make sure that she did the perfect job for Benny. After quite a bit of tinkering, she began to feel hungry again. She ignored it, and continued with her work. Eventually, she managed to get herself a folder that she liked so much, she kind of wanted to keep it for herself. It was still childish, but charmingly so, and she thought that Benny might like the rather... well... *rustic* vibe that the folder had going for it. Despite the cover picture being 50% Hannah, it was cute, and it captured enough of Nyssa and Benny to fit the occasion.

There had been another selfie, too. In that one, Benny and Nyssa were looking at each other, laughing. Hannah had been laughing too, but she'd been looking squarely at the camera.

Nyssa hadn't wanted to put that picture on the folder. It was too... suggestive. It would look cheap. This was better.

Benny and Nyssa had showed up together at the restaurant to meet Hannah, who waved them over. It was the first time that the three of them were dining at a fancy restaurant together, a little pre-birthday get-together.

"Hey," said Hannah, giving Nyssa's shoulder a squeeze, "this is so exciting!"

It had been exciting. Benny and Nyssa had been alone in Benny's car, and it had been so... fun. He was actually funny, and he was way more animated than he'd ever been with Hannah. He seemed... excited about something.

He'd dropped her off at the apartment, too. She was a little embarrassed, mumbling an explanation about how her parents had wanted her to stay in this particular neighbourhood.

Benny had simply laughed and said that he was thankful she hadn't been the one to drop him home, since he didn't "like being judged". They'd both laughed and parted ways. Nyssa hadn't said much during the ride, since her stomach had begun to act strange on their way out of the restaurant. Her head was throbbing and she was overcome by an intense wave of nausea as the elevator doors opened. She slowly walked in, the lights seeming too bright all of a sudden. Kyra spoke up, and her voice sounded so... grating...

"Went out for dinner tonight?" she asked, cheerfully. Nyssa didn't say anything. Her eyes widened as she pursed her lips. It was coming up. It was definitely coming up.

The elevator doors opened and Nyssa practically dashed out. She couldn't bring herself to say goodnight to Kyra. She was too busy trying to make it to the bathroom in time.

She fumbled with the key and somehow threw the front door open. She didn't bother closing it behind her as she flung the bathroom door open, pushed the toilet lid up, and barfed out her entire dinner. She could hear hurried footsteps from her hall, and soon from right beside her. "Oh my god," Kyra was saying as she knelt beside Nyssa. Nyssa could feel the touch of Kyra's fingers against her skin as Kyra swept Nyssa's hair out of her face. She could feel Kyra's breath against the back of her neck, the girl was that close. A stranger was that close, and this wasn't public transport. It felt uncomfortable, but somehow the gentleness of the touch soothed Nyssa. At this particular moment, with her throat burning and her head spinning, she couldn't really care less. She'd seen enough of Kyra, anyway. There wasn't anything to be afraid of, not really. Right?

She still didn't feel any better. Kyra had insisted on staying with Nyssa.

"I'm fine," Nyssa had said weakly, to which Kyra had *harrumphed*.

"You're not fine," she said, "I'm not going anywhere unless you call someone else in."

"Okay, then. You'll stay here to watch over me, Guardian Angel. What'll you do if something actually happens?"

"Duh, I'll call the cops! You'll have at least one able pair of hands in this house!"

"I *am* able. I'm not a goddamn idiot."

Kyra had rolled her eyes.

"Look at you taking everything as an insult. Maybe I'm just trying to help you out!"

"Jeez, I just puked, okay? I'm fine."

"No, you are not fine."

Nyssa had sighed and conceded. She didn't really want to tell Kyra that this kind of stuff happened on a regular basis with her. That ever since she came back to the States, this had been her routine. That she couldn't remember the last time she'd actually felt healthy and calm. She could've called Benny or Hannah to come over just to get rid of Kyra, but she didn't want to drag them into such a trivial issue.

*I'm sharing my room with a stranger.*

*I'm fine with it.*

*Huh.*

Nyssa had eaten some of her regular pills. Kyra hadn't asked about them. She'd just silently watched, assuming, probably, like most others would, that the pills were prescribed by a doctor and were necessary.

*Enough of this self-pity. The pills are necessary if they stop you from hurling every single night.*

*I'm sure Hannah or Benny or Kyra would say the same.*

"So," said Nyssa after she'd somehow mustered the strength to finish her bedtime routine, "this is my bed, where I will be sleeping. If you're okay with the couch, you can stay."

Kyra smiled.

"I'm okay with the damn elevator. Of course the couch is fine."

Nyssa felt a little twinge of guilt that she hadn't given the guest the bed, but this was an uninvited guest anyway.

"So... I'm going to go to bed now. I'm tired."

"Sure," said Kyra, "you'll see me tomorrow morning. Goodnight."

"Is it safe to sleep with you, Kyra?" Nyssa had asked, only half-jokingly, to lighten her own spirits a little. Kyra had bellowed.

“Well, Nyssa, as much as I’d love to, I’m straight,” she’d said with a wink. It had taken a second for Nyssa to realise what she’d said, and she reddened.

“That’s not what I”—she began, when Kyra cut her off.

“Chill, it’s fine. I know,” she said, “it’s fine.”

Nyssa wasn’t able to sleep for a while after that, partially out of the discomfort that arose from having a stranger in the same room as her, and partially out of the sheer embarrassment she felt. How could she not have caught the unintentional subtext in that statement? How out of touch was she, really?

Kyra had always been the cool one. Everything she’d done had been effortless, even if it was cliché, even if it was shallow. She was able to do whatever the fuck she wanted and still be... accepted.

Nyssa, on the other hand, was floundering. She was stressed all the time, she was just a little bundle of nerves. She’d been triggered, in some way or the other, by every single one of Kyra’s statements, but Kyra had never been triggered by her.

*Why are you so scared, Nyssa?* she thought to herself in the darkness.

*What are you so afraid of?*

# NYSSA

Sunday, March 18<sup>th</sup>

Nyssa awoke to the sound of a nuclear bomb going off. She started, shooting up and out of bed, only to find Kyra making breakfast.

“Oops,” whispered Kyra apologetically, as if there were still somebody sleeping in the room, “sorry. I really was trying to keep it down.”

Nyssa simply shrugged and stretched as she took a look at the time.

“Oh well,” she said, “it’s time for me to get up, anyway. Tomorrow’s a weekday.”

Kyra snickered.

“Of course it is. Many weekdays have passed at Newhurst, you know...without me.”

Completely unexpectedly, Nyssa laughed. Kyra looked surprised.

“I know,” said Nyssa as she sat down at the dining table, “so now that you’re here, Guardian Angel, what’s for breakfast?”

Nyssa instantly knew what had happened. She could feel it. Yesterday’s dose hadn’t worn off yet, and now she was buzzed.

“What’s for breakfast? You expect to be served breakfast?” asked Kyra, crossing her arms across her chest.

Nyssa shrugged.

“Well, I thought if you’d already made something, it’s not much extra effort.”

Kyra chuckled.

“Yeah, I’m just making cereal. You want me to hand-pick you a bowl, too?”

Nyssa reconsidered.

“Nah,” she said, getting up, “I’ll do it.”

They’d just finished breakfast when Kyra cleared her throat.

“You seem quite happy today,” she said. Nyssa nodded.

“I am. I feel so much better now,” she said. She began thinking about all the things she had to do today. She had her homework assignments, and she had to write the birthday letter to Benny, too. Kyra smiled.

“That’s good,” she said, “you didn’t stir in the night, as far as I know, but I slept like a log. Your couch is really soft.”

Nyssa raised her eyebrows.

“Wonderful,” she said.

*So that’s the real reason you wanted to stay here, hmm?*

That was a ridiculous conclusion to come to. Kyra had her own dorm in Newhurst, which was probably just a little worse than this apartment. If she really wanted to, she could’ve just packed up and gone there. Why indulge in all this drama?

Nyssa exhaled loudly. Kyra did this because she was a nice person—or maybe she just wanted to seem like a nice person, whatever. There seemed to be no other explanation for her behaviour.

*A nice person??? You remember what she said to you.*

**Internal Nyssa #2:** *Forget about it.*

The thought had crossed her mind, sometime in the night, that Kyra might’ve wanted to snoop around on Nyssa, but that was also ridiculous. What motivation would Kyra have to look through Nyssa’s things?

*Ooh, maybe she planted a bug, or a hidden camera! It’s part of that show she’s part of, that prank show, where she pretends to live in an elevator.*

Nyssa snorted inwardly. As if. If she were part of a prank show, she'd definitely not be stupid enough to bug Nyssa's house. That was illegal. If she wasn't part of a show, then Nyssa could believe she was just a flaky not-quite-adult trying to be "edgy", and there was no point overthinking that angle.

"You seem to be in deep thought," commented Kyra. Nyssa looked up from her empty bowl.

"Oh," she said, "oh, sorry. I was. I was in deep thought."

Kyra grinned.

"What were you thinking about?" she asked. Nyssa smiled at her.

"That's a secret. Here, pass that," she said, as she picked up her bowl and extended her arm to Kyra's. Kyra handed Nyssa her bowl.

It was 10 AM. Kyra had gone back to the elevator. Nyssa was doing her homework. Ma and Pa were supposed to call today, but she knew they'd end up forgetting, again. They'd forgotten about it the last week and the week before that, and had made up for it by calling on a weekday, when Nyssa just wasn't in the mood to talk with them.

*Maybe you should just call them this time. They're always the ones calling you.*

Nyssa sighed. She'd always thought that she'd call them herself one of these Sundays, but she never really felt like it. It had started off strong, with regular and frequent calls, but now they couldn't even sustain a weekly call, and she felt just a little ashamed at being thankful for that.

Nyssa was on the verge of tears.

Lunch was over—actually, lunch was way over, and the sun was close to setting. She'd finished her homework and had started working on Benny's letter. She kept conjuring up the right words in her mind, and yet, when she got to putting them on paper, they sounded like crap.

*Maybe I just shouldn't do anything on my own. Maybe I should just give him the damn cupcakes and flowers and get it over with.*

Her heart hurt every time she thought of that, though. She wanted to give him something personal, something of her own.

She thought about it, hard. She finally decided to scrap the letter. Letters were old-school. Letters were stupid. She'd have to think of something else.

She thought of writing the same story she'd come up with for the Benny comic. Oof, the Benny comic. She shuddered just thinking about that mess. She tried writing that story instead of drawing it out, but it sounded cheesy and stupid that way. She sighed and leaned back in her chair, thinking. Why was gift-giving so hard?

*Maybe you're overthinking this. Maybe if you just take another look at those comics—*

No. No, she wasn't going to take the easy way out. She was going to sit down and work until she got Benny the best gift. The perfect gift.

She had until tomorrow evening. She would use every minute of time she had to come up with something *good*.

It was dinnertime. Nyssa hadn't realised how much time had passed until her stomach began to growl. As usual, she ignored it. Her head was hurting. She'd really tried to make the story work, and she'd brainstormed like crazy, but she couldn't think of anything she could get Benny without looking cheesy and stupid.

She'd decided to ditch the personal bullshit about an hour ago. It just wouldn't work. She decided she should stick to getting something readymade, something Benny would like. What did Benny like?

She thought she'd finally got it. Tonight, she'd buy it. She'd scour the whole damn city until she found it. She'd run to the crafts store whenever it opened the next morning, buy some wrapping paper, and wrap up the gift. Then she'd pick up the cupcakes and lilacs after classes, and make a dash to the venue of the party.

Nyssa was jittery in the elevator. She'd requested Kyra to accompany her on her shopping spree. Well, obviously she didn't request-request her, she simply invited Kyra to dinner and the night out, as a sort of compensation/add-on for last night. Kyra promptly said yes, and told Nyssa that she was getting bored of the elevator and her "regular" friends.

Nyssa didn't want to ask someone she actually knew, since Benny would know them, too, and she wasn't interested in asking the relatives she never talked to. Going around the city alone late at night did not... *quite* appeal to her.

Kyra was as much of a blabbermouth as ever, but Nyssa didn't mind. As long as Kyra didn't ask questions.

"You know, there's this really good restaurant a few blocks away, on Miller's Road. It's called "Spicy China" or something. Shall we go there?" Kyra asked as they walked past the apartment gates and entered the main road.

"Oh, uh, actually," said Nyssa, "I was thinking we could do some shopping, too, like... *clothes* shopping? There's a whole cluster of stores, three stops down if you take the 74. There's a lot of activity in that place. We could eat somewhere there, maybe?"

Kyra's eyes widened and she clapped twice, excitedly.

"Oh, I know exactly what you're talking about! Yes, yes, yes, let's go there! There's an Indian restaurant there, it's called... ugh... I forget what it's called, but we'll know it when we see it. Come on."

They'd reached the Indian restaurant. Kyra had started shrieking the instant that they got off the bus that she was hungry and needed to eat right then, so they'd made that their first stop. It was a nice place, but the numbers that Nyssa saw on the menu made her instinctively pat her pockets. She was scared she'd wind up spending more on a dinner with Random Elevator Girl than on Benny's gift. This thought made her sad, as the thought of breaking principle typically makes us all.

"You okay?" asked Kyra as she dug into some biriyani. Nyssa smiled and nodded.

"Uh, yeah, I'm fine," she said as she took a few bites of her own dinner. Kyra shifted in her seat.

"I think it's really nice of you to, you know, invite me for dinner. I never expected it. Thank you," she said. Nyssa chuckled lightly.

"Uh, well, actually... it's... well... um..."

Kyra was looking at her. Nyssa suddenly felt very pressured.

"Uh... well... you know. You kind of started it, I mean, by... helping me out yesterday."

Kyra laughed.

"Oh, come on. You considered me more of a hindrance than a help."

"Well... I... might have poisoned your food."

Kyra furrowed her brow.

"What?"



Nyssa felt herself go red.

"I mean, because... you annoyed me yesterday, so under the pretense of paying you back for your help, I... paid you back. For your help."

There was a painful silence, suddenly broken by Kyra's boisterous laughter.

"Oh, man," she said, "you're so cute."

*Am... Am I?*

"Am I?" asked Nyssa, somewhat incredulously. Kyra shrugged.

"Yeah, you are. I think it's so cute how you're so awkward and touchy."

"Okay, come on. I'm not touchy"—

"You're touchy! You get riled up at everything I say. See? You're getting riled up right now."

Nyssa sighed.

"Okay," she said, "fine. I'm touchy. But... you've got to agree that some thoughts are best left unspoken."

Kyra suddenly went serious. Nyssa blinked, afraid that she'd ruined everything.

"Well..." said Kyra, slowly, "you're right. I don't say the nicest things. I kind of... I speak my mind, you know? I can be really forthright, and sometimes... sometimes it comes across as being insensitive or rude. I understand. But you, you're... you take things to a new level. You get triggered by everything!"

Kyra laughed.

Nyssa laughed back.

"Okay, fine. Yes. I am insecure, and I do get worked up. But I'd take that over being oblivious any day."

Kyra stopped laughing and raised an eyebrow.

"*Oblivious?*" she asked. Nyssa wanted to backtrack--

--*don't. Keep going.*

"Yeah, you're... you know... everything you say, it's... *insensitive*. It's *self-absorbed*. It's all based on what you feel in the moment, but..."

Nyssa's heartbeat had gotten so rapid that she couldn't bring herself to say anything more, instead choosing to wave her hands in the air.

Kyra didn't respond. She just looked down at her food. Nyssa stared at her, wondering if she'd pushed things too far. She hadn't said anything worse than what Kyra had said to her, had she? Had she??

Nyssa swallowed the lump in her throat as her heart began to race. She should be happy. She'd just defeated Kyra. Hadn't she?

After an awkward silence, Kyra spoke up.

"Why would you be insecure?" she asked. Nyssa blinked.

"Wh-what?"

"No, I was just thinking about what you said earlier. You'd said you were insecure and got worked up easily, but why... why would you be insecure? You... you go to Big C. You have a group of friends, or... I don't know... at least one friend. You're pretty, and smart, too. What... what do you have to be insecure about?"

Nyssa blinked and stared at Kyra. No. She wasn't playing this game, was she? Just pretending to not know what was going on, to pretend that what she'd said earlier wasn't meant to hurt?

*Also, you think I'm pretty?*

Nyssa temporarily considered the possibility of actually being considered hot by people here—that is, apart from drunken college-age students who yelled out stuff about her ass every once in a while when she passed by the wrong parts of the right side of town.

“What—what are you thinking about?” asked Kyra. Nyssa came back to reality—

*Mm, this biriyani smells so good*

-- and cleared her throat.

“You... you know *why* I’m insecure, Kyra,” she said, “You’d have to know.”

Nyssa didn’t give Kyra the blasting that she wanted to. She knew that doing so literally seconds after having conversed about her touchy nature was just giving this pest ammunition. Again. Kyra opened her mouth as if to say something, then closed it. Then opened it again. Then closed it. Finally, she said,

“I know.”

Nyssa furrowed her brow. Kyra sighed.

“I know,” she said, “I know why you’re insecure. I... I wish I didn’t, but... I do. There’s...”

Nyssa waited. Kyra sighed again and shook her head.

“I think I’ll just finish this biriyani and we’ll go shopping. Okay?”

Nyssa didn’t know what to say. Somehow, this time, she felt a wave of pride sweep over her.

“Of course,” she said, smiling.

The shopping was mostly done in silence. They’d agreed to split the bill at the restaurant. 50-50. They’d walked over to one of the nearby stores, and Kyra had gone over to the women’s section to purchase some dresses. Nyssa had gone to the men’s section. They occasionally sought each other out to ask the other’s opinion on their choice, but other than that, they barely even looked at each other.

Nyssa couldn’t find the exact shade of maroon she wanted for a long time, and when she finally found the right colour, the make wasn’t right. She tried explaining to the store lady what she wanted. The store lady was absolutely confused, but tried her best to get Nyssa the shirt she wanted. When Nyssa finally gave up and left empty-handed, the lady didn’t mind. She simply wished a slightly guilty Nyssa luck for getting just the right shirt.

“Whoever he is, he’s lucky to have you,” she’d said, making Nyssa feel warm and fuzzy inside. She thanked the lady profusely as Kyra purchased a dress for herself and the two of them moved to the next store.

They literally went through four stores, Nyssa doing the same thing at each one of them and finally leaving empty-handed. Some of the people at the store were helpful, like the first lady, while others were gruff and curt and did not want to be disturbed. Finally, Nyssa realised this wasn’t going to work. She thought back to the third store. The store guy had been pretty irritating with his sluggish and utterly unhelpful nature, but she remembered seeing a turquoise shirt with a lovely collar in that store. Benny would love that collar. He wasn’t much of a fan of turquoise, but he didn’t mind it. Nyssa knew that shirt would look good on Benny. Aside from that shirt, there’d been a very stylish purple shirt in the first store. Nyssa wasn’t sure whether Benny would like it or not, but she knew that he’d look great in it. After some thinking, she went back to Store number Three.

It was reasonably late by the time Nyssa and Kyra got to the bus stop, which was the only well-lit place in the vicinity at this time. Kyra decided to make small talk by showing Nyssa a couple of the dresses she’d selected. Nyssa told her the dark green one would look great on her. Kyra smiled shyly.

“Thanks,” she’d said, “so... that’s for the birthday boy?” she asked, her eyes moving to the bag in Nyssa’s hand. Nyssa laughed.

“Oh, uh, yeah. It is,” she said. Kyra grinned.

“Is this a... *special* boy?”

Nyssa reddened and shook her head.

“No, it’s... just a regular ol’ boy. Nothing special.”

Kyra... simpered? Nyssa wasn’t quite sure what she’d call that sound.

“I can’t imagine what you’d do for a special one, then.”

Nyssa looked at her. She looked at Nyssa.

“I don’t think I could imagine it myself,” Nyssa replied. Kyra smiled.

A pleasant silence reigned... for a minute.

“You know,” said Kyra all of a sudden, “I think you’re a good person.”

Nyssa frowned.

“Hmm?”

“I mean... I think other people think the same. I think anyone in their right mind, they’ll...

they’ll know that you’re a good person. They’ll know that they’re lucky to have you. There’ll be nothing for you to worry about, because... they’ll know.”

Nyssa blinked. A part of her felt proud that she’d managed to get Kyra to mellow down. Another part of her was scared that this might be pity and not respect. Another part of her wanted to cry, because Kyra had said all the right things so easily, and so naturally, in a way that Nyssa never could. Another part of her wanted to give Kyra a hug, and feel... safe.

“Huh,” was all she said, “you’re a nice person, too. I’m glad we had this outing, and that we can be good to each other.”

Kyra gave her a full, goofy grin.

“I’m glad too, Nyssa.”

The bus ride and subsequent walk back to the elevator had been a quiet one. Once the elevator reached the fourth floor, Nyssa bid Kyra goodnight. Kyra wished her a good night back.

# NYSSA

Monday, March 19<sup>th</sup>

It was time. The day had come. Nyssa switched off her alarm and sat up in bed.

Nyssa came back from the crafts store with the wrapping paper. She took out the box with Benny's shirt in it and gift-wrapped it as nicely as she could. She placed it in her cupboard before starting for university.

The day seemed to go by in a blur. When Nyssa checked her email in the afternoon, she found an email from Prof. Raney saying that her project report "bowled me over" and that "you will get very far with talent like this". Assuming the best but leaving room for caution, Nyssa simply sent the professor a short "Thank you. I am so glad that you appreciate my work." She, Hannah and Benny said nothing about Benny's birthday aside from a quick confirmation of the time and venue of the party. The party was at six o'clock, and Benny had booked a table at a restaurant + bar.

After classes, Nyssa stopped at the bakery and picked up the cupcakes. She then went over to the flower stall and asked for a lilac bouquet. The woman grunted, then made Nyssa a bouquet with lilacs and another type of flower which Nyssa didn't know the name of but which looked pretty.

It was 5 PM. Nyssa had put the bouquet, the cupcakes, and the gift-wrapped box in a gift bag and was entering the elevator. Kyra smiled at her.

"Oh, I didn't see you this morning," said Nyssa. Kyra laughed.

"Yeah, I got bored and decided to stop by an old friend's house. Today's the day?"

Kyra gestured to the gift bag. Nyssa nodded.

"Yep, today's the day. Wish me luck," she said. Kyra grinned and flashed Nyssa a thumbs-up.

"Good luck," she said.

Nyssa entered the restaurant. It was somewhat crowded, but not crowded enough that she couldn't immediately spot Benny's table. Her heart pounded as she walked over to where Benny, a highly decked-up Hannah and another guy were already sitting. They looked up on her arrival. She reddened. Benny's face broke into a smile.

"Hey, Nyssa! Come on in," he said, scooting over to make space for Nyssa to sit. Nyssa smiled and sat down next to him.

"Um, I... I brought you a gift," she said, holding up the bag.

"Oh, you shouldn't have," laughed Benny as he took the bag and placed it in a corner by his feet. There was no other gift to be seen. Had Nyssa made an informal event too formal? Should she have not brought a gift at all?

*Cool down, cool down. A gift is necessary. Remember, you want to further the relationship.*

A handful more people came. Nyssa recognised a couple of them from one of her classes, but hadn't even seen the others before. They all sat down around the table. Some of them had brought gifts, too. By 7:00, the party was in full swing.

"Come on, have a drink," Hannah coaxed Nyssa. Nyssa smiled.

"No, no drink," she said, "no drinks."

Eventually, she wound up taking a little bit to a background score of everybody at the table hooting.

“Your first drink?” asked a guy sitting opposite her. She nodded. He laughed loudly.

It had been fun and games for quite a while. They’d eaten dinner, laughed, goofed around, gotten a couple of complaints for being noisy. Nyssa was actually enjoying herself.

That’s when, at around 9, Benny stood up solemnly. Everybody looked up at him.

“I...I have something that I want to do,” he said. There was a very slight slur to his voice. “I would like to unwrap... presents.”

Everybody laughed and clapped. Benny sat back down and took out Nyssa’s gift bag.

“This,” he said, holding up the bag, “is from my beautiful friend over here,” he gestured to Nyssa, to which a couple of people whistled. Nyssa felt her face flush, but she couldn’t stop smiling. Of course, she’d had a couple of glasses by then, so maybe that’s where the fuzziness came from.

Benny took the bouquet out of the gift bag first. He whistled and turned to face Nyssa. The girl sitting next to Nyssa nudged her.

“You guys getting married or something?” she teased. Everybody laughed. Nyssa blinked.

“What?” she asked. They all laughed.

“You got him *the* Lilac Bouquet!” one person yelled. Before the gears in Nyssa’s alcohol-affected brain could begin to turn, Benny had intervened.

“It is wonderful, Nyssa,” he said, “thank you so much. It’s gorgeous.”

“It really is,” added Hannah, “really beautiful. Where’d you get it?”

“Uh, there’s a flower stall near the crafts store,” said Nyssa. Everybody nodded, as if they all knew where the crafts store was. Benny took out the cupcakes and unwrapped the shirt.

Everybody cooed.

“Oh my God, Nyssa,” Hannah said, “you’re so sweet!”

Benny had beamed at Nyssa.

“Thank you so much, Nyssa, you’re amazing,” he said. Everybody at the table hummed as Benny opened up the box of cupcakes, which got passed around the table.

Nyssa felt so fuzzy and good.

After this, Benny unwrapped the other gifts. Every single one of them was personalised, and each one was even more amateurish than whatever Nyssa had done over the last couple of days. She wasn’t sure whether to be worried or happy at her choice.

Finally, Hannah stood up, looking squarely at Benny. She cleared her throat.

“I... um... I got a letter for you,” she told Benny, extending a folded piece of paper in his direction, “I’d... I’d like you to read it in your head, once. Then I’ll say it out loud.”

Everybody had giggled in anticipation, including Benny, who sat down and read the letter. His expression was neutral at first. Then, slowly, he began to smile shyly. It was a smile he’d never quite smiled before. Nyssa began to feel an involuntary twinge in her gut as Benny looked up at Hannah, who cleared her throat again.

“Dear Benny,” she said, smiling, “I would like to wish you an amazing 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. You totally deserve all the happiness this world has to give you. You’ve been an amazing friend. You’ve been the rock for me to find support when I needed it. You’ve been the ray of light to guide me when I was lost. You’ve been the happiness and love to fill my heart whenever I feel lonely. Benny, you’re... you’re everything to me. So, on your 19<sup>th</sup> birthday, I ask *you* for a gift. The truth is... I like you, as way more than a friend. So... if you feel the same... can we... go on a date?”

Nyssa blinked. A silence fell across the table. Nyssa turned to Benny, who was grinning at Hannah. He stood up and took her hand.

"I like you too, Hannah," he said, inching closer to her, "and the answer is... yes."

Hannah and Benny leaned into each other and shared a quick kiss on the lips. The rest of the table exploded into applause, coos, whistles, laughs. Nyssa simply sat there, still as a rock, her head spinning.

The rest of the night was a blur. Everybody had made merry, making ridiculous toasts to the new couple as if this were a wedding and teasing Hannah and Benny. Benny had revealed shyly that he'd liked Hannah for a while now, and that he and Hannah had confessed their feelings to each other before, but that they needed time to think.

"The incredible thing is, that... the more I thought, the more certain I was about it," Benny was saying animatedly, "we would exchange these glances in class, but... we'd never want to act on it, you know. I just... it feels so good for this to be out there, to finally be able to... you know... make it real!"

Everyone laughed. Sex jokes whizzed around the table as though a sex joke spark had just been ignited. Hannah was blushing. Nyssa said nothing for a long time, but only Hannah appeared to take notice. She declared to everyone that she needed to use the bathroom, and asked Nyssa to accompany her. Nyssa somehow got up on her jelly legs and followed Hannah into the ladies' room.

They entered the bathroom. The second the doors closed behind them, Hannah gave Nyssa a contrite smile.

"I'm sorry, Nyssa," she said. Nyssa was startled. What? Did Hannah know about—

--"I'm sorry that I didn't tell you this earlier. I know that, you know, as my best friend, and as Benny's best friend, you'd think you deserved to know, but... we were just confused about it, you know. We didn't want to tell anyone until we were sure, but... Benny's such a great guy, right? I just thought I'd... you know... let loose on his birthday, you know?"

Nyssa kept quiet. She decided that her feet were an interesting subject to study, as she couldn't bring herself to look Hannah in the eye and say something.

Hannah sighed.

"Nyssa, don't be this way. I just"—she began, but Nyssa cut her off with a sharp intake of breath. She slowly looked up.

"I'm sorry," she said, somehow mustering the courage to look straight into Hannah's eyes, "I think the alcohol's getting to me, I just... I'm a bit moody. Give me the night. If I just get out of this funk, I'll... I'll understand."

Hannah and Nyssa stared at each other, and that's when Nyssa knew that Hannah knew. It was just a flash, just a moment of unspoken communication, just a moment of pure and complete understanding. A moment of cold, hard calculation. Just like that, though, it had passed, and the softness had come back to give Hannah's eyes that friendly glint as the life practically flowed out of Nyssa. In that moment, everything had been said, and both parties knew that.

"Okay," said Hannah as she gave Nyssa's shoulder a quick squeeze, "I'll give you some time in here, just be out soon, okay? I don't want to miss too much of you."

Nyssa forced a smile and nodded.

"Of course," she said. She waited for Hannah to open the door and walk out. She waited for the door to slowly close, leaving her alone in the restroom. She waited until she'd gotten into a stall and put the lid down on the seat. She waited until she'd sat down, fighting the lump in her throat,

the stinging in her eyes, the throbbing in her head, the pounding in her heart. She waited until she'd clicked the lock in place on the stall door. She waited for a second to make sure nobody was right outside. Then, unable to wait a second more, the emotions exploded, forcing their way out her mouth in the form of a loud, full, gut-wrenching cry.

Nyssa wasn't sure how much time had passed by the time she'd regained her composure. She rested her head against the bathroom door, thoughts swirling through her brain in an incoherent mess. She felt so... scared. She felt so small. She felt so stupid. She felt... *weak*.

She wanted to be angry, but somehow, she couldn't. She wasn't sure which was the overpowering factor here: the fear or the alcohol.

She decided she would have to leave. She couldn't sit here for however long this damn party was going to drag out and watch Benny and Hannah together. She had to leave. If she didn't, she'd just wind up making a fool of herself in front of everyone by breaking down or losing her cool. She washed her face a couple of times in front of the bathroom mirror, making sure she looked perfectly presentable before walking out. As she approached the table, she noticed that only four people including Benny and Hannah were still there. Benny raised his eyebrows upon seeing Nyssa. Nyssa felt ashamed to even look at him now.

"Oh, you're still here!" he said, smiling, "I thought you'd gone home, and I was so upset that I'd missed you, after all the lovely things you gave me! Come on, sit down!" he said, gesturing to the seat opposite his. Hannah now sat next to him. Nyssa wondered what Hannah had told Benny after coming out of the bathroom, or whether she had needed to say anything at all.

Nyssa smiled at Hannah, wanting to avert her eyes but also wanting to make a point. Hannah smiled back, as though the conversation in the bathroom had never happened.

30 minutes. It took 30 minutes for the party to disperse after that, but it felt to Nyssa like over an hour. Benny and Hannah offered to drop Nyssa off at her apartment, but Nyssa refused. She couldn't bear the thought of having to travel in a car with them and be forced to say something while they indulged in their lovey-dovey-ness. Benny and Hannah were both concerned.

"Going all the way to the bus stop alone at this time is really not a good idea, Nyssa," Benny was saying. Nyssa simply shook her head.

"It's fine, I-I'll go by bus. I feel a little tipsy from the alcohol. The very thought of being tossed around in a little car is scary."

She forced a smile. Benny and Hannah looked at each other and sighed. Hannah turned to Nyssa.

"Fine, then, how about we drop you off at the subway? It's much more crowded there. You'll be safer. It's just five minutes from here and it's en-route Benny's house. We can drop you off at Parkside station."

Nyssa thought about it for a minute and conceded. She didn't want to argue and leave a bitter taste.

Nyssa got off at the subway station. Hannah and Benny both got out of the car to see her off. Hannah came up and gave her a little hug.

"Be safe, okay?" she said to Nyssa, who nodded.

"And be happy. Okay?"

Nyssa didn't say anything. She just nodded again. Hannah drew back and gave Nyssa another squeeze on the shoulder before turning around and joining Benny in the car. Nyssa waved at them as they drove away.

Guilt. It practically emanated from Hannah, and Nyssa knew that Hannah was trying to help, but she only made things worse.

Nyssa went over to the route map and tried to locate the route to the station closest to her apartment. There were so many lines. Nyssa felt overwhelmed trying to make sense of them. She couldn't seem to concentrate for long, and this was the first time in a long time that she was taking the subway. She decided that this was actually a bad idea, and that she should've just allowed Benny and Hannah to drop her home.

Finally, she found the line that she needed to take. It was the purple line. About three—no, two—no, three stops down was a station called Charlemagne Circle. She would get down there, and from there, she just had to take two consecutive left turns and walk a little to get to her apartment.

Great. She could do that.

She walked over to the counter and purchased a token to Charlemagne Circle. After paying the fare, she got past the turnstile and walked over to platform number 2.

Suddenly, she had her doubts. Had the woman behind the counter said platform 2 or platform 3? She remembered that the woman had pointed to that particular turnstile, but now that she'd made it past, was it 2 or 3?

Nyssa slapped herself for not paying enough attention. This was practically her first time taking the subway, and at this time at night, she really should've been more careful. What was she thinking? This was daft behaviour.

At a loss for alternatives, she walked over to a woman leaning against a pillar on the platform and asked her if this was the platform for the train leading to Charlemagne Circle. The woman looked up, gave Nyssa the once-over, and said, "yes."

Nyssa was relieved. She smiled and thanked the woman. The woman gave her an obviously insincere half-smile and held a perfunctory hand up.

Nyssa cringed as she thought about how she must look to the others on the platform. It was, what, midnight already? She knew she was fumbling with her words, and that her breath probably smelled of alcohol. She knew that if Kyra had heard it, everybody she spoke to from now on out would hear the same roll of her 'r's, the same neutral but vaguely stilted accent. In fact, it should be way worse today.

The train pulled up. There was a huge crowd. Nyssa somehow found her way in and managed to grab an empty space by the door. She watched out for Charlemagne Circle.

Nyssa had gotten off the train and out of the station. Thankfully, the streets were fairly crowded, even at this hour. She took the two consecutive lefts, and ended up in a vaguely familiar place, but she couldn't find her apartment anywhere. With the help of a group of high school kids standing outside a random diner enroute, she managed to get directions to her apartment. She'd thanked them profusely, to which they'd smiled and nodded. She was convinced that she'd heard them whisper and giggle as she turned around. It was hard to not imagine that they were talking about her. She cringed inwardly again, her throat burning and her eyes watering.

Somehow, she'd made it into her apartment building after fifteen minutes of walking. She pressed the "up" button, ready to just curl up in a ball and try to sleep. The elevator doors opened and she walked in, pressing '4' and leaning against the wall, biting her lower lip.



“Ooh, must’ve been a pretty wild party,” chirped Kyra from beside her. Nyssa kept quiet. She wasn’t in the mood to talk.

“Goodnight,” she managed to croak as the elevator doors opened. Kyra stood up.

“Nyssa, what happened?” she asked. She slowly approached Nyssa and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Are you okay?”

Nyssa crumpled. Kyra rubbed her back and made cooing sounds, as if Nyssa were an oversized baby.

Well, that’s how Nyssa was behaving, anyway, so she supposed the treatment was justified.

After a couple of minutes, Nyssa managed to regain enough of her composure to speak without breaking down. Kyra looked concerned.

“Are you okay?” she repeated. Nyssa scoffed.

“No,” she said, “I’m not. I suck. I’m stupid.”

Kyra furrowed her brow.

“You were right,” blubbered Nyssa, “I’m touchy, and I’m insecure, and I think a hundred times before doing or saying a single thing. I think so much for everything. I haven’t slept properly for months. Months! And in the end, everybody else is happy, everybody else has their place, and I’ve been played for a fool. I’ve been played for a fucking fool!”

Kyra looked flabbergasted. If this exact same sequence had played on TV, Nyssa might’ve actually laughed.

Now, she wasn’t laughing one bit.

“I suck!” she yelled, stifling a sob, “everyone thinks I’m stupid! I’ve tried, Kyra, I’ve really tried, and nobody fucking cares!”

Nyssa had finally calmed down and was sitting on the elevator floor. Kyra sat opposite her in silence.

Finally, Nyssa sighed. Kyra looked up.

“Feeling better?” she asked. Nyssa shrugged. Kyra exhaled loudly.

“Okay,” she said, “maybe you’ll feel better if you just tell me what happened.”

Nyssa leaned her head against the elevator wall.

“It’s stupid,” she mumbled. Kyra bit her lip.

“Well, I’ve”—

--“why are you helping me anyway, Kyra?” Nyssa snapped. “Why do you care??”

Kyra looked taken aback. Nyssa raised her eyebrows.

“Huh? Now you’re all quiet. Isn’t it time for you to say something witty, to point out how I roll my fucking ‘r’s?? Isn’t it time for you to rub your fucking superiority in my fucking face?? Why are you so quiet?”

Kyra simply stared at Nyssa. Her eyes seemed to shine a little. Nyssa didn’t care.

“Why do you do this, anyway? Why is it so fucking important that you make me feel like shit?

What did I do to you, huh? Fine, you’re great. You’re fucking wonderful. You always come up with the right things to say at the right time, and--oh, oh! How could I forget! You don’t roll your fucking ‘r’s!”

Kyra continued to stare. Nyssa began to sob.

“I hate you!” she screamed, “I hate everybody! I hate this fucking place! I hate myself!”

She put her head in her hands, trying to level her erratic breathing. Kyra remained silent.

“Damn,” she said after a few minutes, “you’re *still* angry over something I said a week ago.”

Nyssa didn't answer. This was pathetic. She hated it.

Kyra sighed again.

"Well, I can't blame you. It was a stupid thing to say. And I wish you believed me when I said I was sorry. Because I was. And I am."

Nyssa kept quiet. Kyra continued.

"I want to help you because I like you, Nyssa. And I wouldn't be apologizing if I didn't care."

Nyssa looked up.

"Okay," she said, "why would you like me? Why would you care? You don't know me. Maybe you think you do. But you know nothing."

Kyra sighed and looked down.

"I... I... well, you're from C, aren't you, and you're... you're pretty, and... I like the fact that you're not confident. I like the fact that you kind of bumble around the place. I think it's... cute."

Nyssa frowned slightly.

"Oh," was all she said. She was pissed. This wasn't going to cut it.

Kyra shrugged and continued, looking at her feet.

"Usually, people like you, they... they act so confident, you know? And, well, unlike you, they... you know, actually... succeed. I... I don't know, it just always seems like they know they're special, and... it gives them some kind of entitlement. They're entitled to stick up their noses at... people... people like me."

Kyra's voice broke slightly, but she cleared her throat and maintained her composure.

"Me, I'm... I feel so average, so mundane in front of people like you, Nyssa. People like you, who are pretty, and smart, and... special. I guess that's why I keep poking fun at you, because I can. You let me mow over you, Nyssa, just like you let everybody else, and... I took the opportunity. Making fun of you made me feel better, and... that's the truth."

Nyssa stared at Kyra, who continued to look down at her shoes.

*But... why would you feel insecure?*

Of course. If Kyra had known exactly why Nyssa felt insecure without Nyssa saying a thing, Nyssa had to know why Kyra would feel insecure after the massive speech that she'd just given. How did Nyssa not see it before?

Nyssa felt a little better, but also a little worse, at the same time. She took a deep breath.

"Well... I... I always thought you were really cool and stuff, you... you always seemed to be... you know, savvy."

Kyra looked up.

"You called me insensitive," she said, "you called me self-absorbed. You called me impulsive. You basically just called me a mean fuck. And you know what, you were right. So save the bullshit."

Nyssa blinked.

"I... well..." she began, but she was at a loss for words.

Kyra smiled. It was forced, this time.

"You didn't think I would take that personally, did you?"

Nyssa didn't know what to say. Obviously, a part of her had known that her words would hurt Kyra. Obviously, a part of her wanted her words to hurt Kyra, and yet... some other part of her shut those intentions and those thoughts out, as if the conscious part of her brain could somehow separate from the rest of her and be a better human being.

"We both meant to hurt each other, I guess, and yet we both didn't mean to hurt each other," was all she said.

Well. That sounded way stupider in real life than it had in her head.

Kyra just looked at Nyssa. There was silence for a minute.

Finally, Kyra laughed. It was a real laugh, a full and uninhibited laugh. Slowly, Nyssa began to laugh too.

“See?” said Kyra, “I told you, you look lovely when you smile. Like, when you *really* smile.”

*What?* Nyssa thought, *you never told me such a thing.*

All she decided to say, though, was “You look lovely when you smile, too. Like, *really* smile.”

She meant it, too.

After a few minutes, Kyra fell silent. Nyssa fell silent, too. They both just sat there for a few minutes. But it wasn’t tense. It wasn’t awkward. If anything, Nyssa finally felt like she’d been set free. Like an invisible rope that had her tethered to her fears and her hopes and dreams and expectations, a rope that was fraying little by little with each passing day, had finally been cut clean, in one fell swoop.

It felt like it was just etiquette to extend the same favour back.

“I spent two days of work and six months of longing on this boy,” she said, her voice hoarse and shaky, “you were right. He was a special boy. I didn’t want him to be, but he was. And it turns out he liked someone else the whole time. She was supposed to be my friend. And so was he.”

Kyra stared intently at Nyssa, but didn’t say anything. Nyssa shrugged.

“It just made me think,” she said, “I thought I was pretty. I thought I was good enough. I’m genuinely not sure what she has that I don’t. But at the same time, I’m supposed to be happy for my friends. And all I can sit here thinking of is how I got played for a fool by them both. And I can’t bring myself to feel happiness for the people who willingly sat back and let me get hurt.

“But is it wrong? Is it wrong to feel this way? Is it wrong to seal yourself off and be unwilling to forgive? I... I don’t know. All I know is that I have nothing figured out.”

Kyra smiled wanly before looking down at her feet.

“There’s so much I still don’t understand,” she said, “not even my own actions, sometimes.”

Nyssa laughed.

“I think I understand my own actions. On the flipside, I understand close to nothing else. at least you’re 50-50, you know? A good mix.”

Kyra threw her head back and laughed.

“Oh wow, we got a Queen of Backhanded Compliments here.”

“I’m sure you could do better if you tried.”

“Look at that, another one.”

“What can I say? My parents raised a passive-aggressive nerd.”

“And mine raised a passive-aggressive, oblivious idiot.”

“Nah, Kyraaaaa. Don’t be like that. Your parents raised a passive-aggressive, oblivious *queen*.”

Nyssa and Kyra laughed together. This went on for a while. Fun, jokes. Somehow they got to talking about carnivals, and then Dilbert comics, and then Moon landings. At any given moment, the probability of Nyssa wondering how she got here was 90%, but the probability that Nyssa was smiling was 100%.

Finally, a silence descended upon the elevator. Nyssa cleared her throat.

“Time?” she asked. Kyra gestured to Nyssa’s watch. Nyssa threw her head back and laughed.

“Oh, this is a bracelet!” she chuckled, “as if anyone with normal vision can read what this dial says.”

Kyra grinned as she looked at her phone.

“Oh man,” she said, “it’s 3:30. Goodness.”

Nyssa tutted.

“I can’t take the day off tomorrow. Benny and Hannah will be waiting for me. They’ll jump to conclusions if I take the day off.”

“Okay, goody-two-shoes.”

Nyssa glared at Kyra with mock severity as she got up, to which Kyra giggled lightly. Pins and needles had begun to take over Nyssa’s right foot. She stomped twice on the ground with it before pressing the “open” button on the elevator.

“Goodnight, Kyra,” she said, turning back. Kyra smiled.

“Goodnight, Nyssa. And...”

Nyssa waited, hovering just outside the elevator doors.

“And?”

Kyra smiled and shook her head.

“Nothing,” she said, waving as the doors closed.

# NYSSA

Tuesday, March 20<sup>th</sup>

The alarm rang. Nyssa was groggy as ever. Thank goodness, she hadn't drunk enough the previous night to get a hangover. She yawned and stretched as she procrastinated in bed. The memory of the previous night was clear, and yet there was a kind of fuzziness to the events that had taken place. They felt rather ethereal, as if she could've easily dreamt them all up. For some reason, the only thing that felt real was when she and Kyra exchanged a "goodnight", at 3:30 AM.

*Oh shit!*

Nyssa woke up with a start. She'd dozed off. She checked her phone for the time. It was 8 AM. If she hurried, she could make it on time. Not that making it on time really mattered anymore, since things were winding down for the semester, but she wanted to at least try.

Just before leaving, Nyssa picked up the letter that lay on the table. She smiled slightly.

*Hot damn, Raney needs to see this.*

Yesterday, in her alert fuzziness, she'd penned what she thought (at the time) was a lovely letter to nobody in particular. The first thought she'd had once she woke up this morning was to give it to Kyra, since she was leaving anyway, but now, after taking a second look at it, she decided it would be fine in a safe place in her closet.

She was about to open the door and walk out when she spotted a little note on the floor by the door. She kneeled down and picked it up.

*Good morning, Nysa. This is Kyra. I have to leave today. It was scheduled, as my cousins have invited me. I shall go back to Newhurst after this—not permanently, lol— so you won't be seeing me in the elevator anymore. I'll try to make a visit sometime in the future. All the best for your endeavours. Bye.*

Nyssa stared at the letter. It was amusing to see her name being misspelled, and to know that she had mentally misspelled Kyra's name, as well. She knew Kyra wasn't coming back, despite what Kyra had written, and for some reason, this abrupt goodbye didn't bother her, at least for today. This time, for once, the unwritten words in this hastily-scribbled goodbye letter didn't bother Nyssa.

She folded up the letter and kept it in her closet with the letter she'd written the previous night before turning around and walking out the front door.

*Hello.*

*This is Nyssa, on the night of March 19, at 3:45 AM.*

*This sounds so stilted. Maybe I should pretend I'm writing it to someone, then I'll feel more in form.*

*So. Hello, Someone.*

*Haha. You didn't see that coming, did you?*

*While you're here, I just wanted to say that while tonight sucked, it was possibly sucky enough to go full circle and come back to something great.*

*In my life, nothing has been concrete. Not even my nationality. I've been shuttled around between two countries, back and forth, and I've never had the heart or the caliber to call either home.*

*I've gone back on so many promises, because I've been taught that promises mean nothing. I've had so many people go back on their promises to me, too. I've said so many things that are just meaningless. You ever get that feeling that you've been talking for so long, and yet you haven't actually conveyed a single meaningful idea? It's a safe and comfortable place to be in, this world of uncertainties and fluidity, but it's an unhappy world. I want a place I can call home. I want people I can call friends, or family. I want to make my ideas concrete.*

*Alas, that's not possible, is it? Unless everybody in this world were to come together on this, the person who lives for such an existence is a fool.*

*So, in a world of maybes, in a world of could-bes, in a world where one can so easily get swept into a life they'd die to maintain before they can even understand it, I want one thing to remain concrete. I want this letter to be concrete.*

*Take it away with you, wherever you go, 'cause tomorrow things are going to go back to normal, and if not tomorrow, then the day after, and if not then, the day after that. So take this memory of a Nyssa who, for a minute, knew what she wanted and was sure of who she was. Make this minute an eternity. Create a world where I actually know—or at least, believe that I know—what I'm doing and where I'm going.*

*Today's Nyssa is empowered. Today's Nyssa is emboldened. Today's Nyssa is happy and, more importantly, content. Tonight, I do not wish for more. Tonight, I am willing to accept what I have, and stay in it forever.*

*Goodness. Do I sound like a lunatic? I probably do. I probably am a lunatic. What point was I trying to make, again? Hmm. I got so carried away, I forgot!*

*Anyway. Tonight, I am happy, and I am determined not to spend another night crying over every little mistake, every fault. I am determined to hold my head up high and believe that I am beautiful, that I am capable, and that I will do what I think is right, understanding the consequences. I am determined to remain as confident and unafraid as I am in this moment, to be as comfortable as I am tonight in my own skin, to stop obsessing over how I appear to every stranger whose path mine crosses.*

*This is how I feel now. I know I won't feel like this for long. I know the rhythm of my life will come back and make me dance, drawing me away from tonight and back into reality.*

*But... tonight is reality too, isn't it. It's just a different reality from what I'm used to. Maybe it'll come back in spurts, and it'll feel just as good. Maybe it'll stay with me for longer than I anticipate. I don't know. But, tonight, I'm sure about many things. And through this letter, let things stay this way.*

*Benny is Benny. Hannah is Hannah. Kaira is Kaira. I am me. The world is what it is. It's beautiful and treacherous, monotonous and exciting, good and bad.*

*Tonight, I am willing to take it and celebrate it for what it is, in my own way.*

*On this paper, tonight is an eternity. These words create a world which stays through tonight and tomorrow.*

*And to this world, I say,*

*Goodnight.*