What You Have Tamed

by elveljung

Summary

After the bullying landed her in hospital, Naruto's parents decided to move. Which means she's The New Kid with Issues, and absolutely definitely completely not in love with the resident ice princess - who wasn't supposed to have quite so many issues of her own.

Narusasu, past kakasasu. Originally written in 2010-2011.

Notes

I wrote Tamed back in 2010-2011, and I think it definitely shows that it's an older fic - certainly I would've written it differently today. It's also rather an odd AU, in the sense that it's...a teen soap AU and also kind of a social justice warriors AU, because that seemed like a great idea at the time XD Still, I'm hopeful that it's an enjoyable read. There's also an epilogue written in 2018 (part two of the Project Thruple series).
Chapter 1

Whoever said sixteen is sweet? Was a fucking liar.

Sitting on the school steps in the dusty late-summer sunlight, Naruto feels damp and dumb with heat, and very far from sweet. It’s going on three weeks since her birthday, too, so the sweetness should have had time to settle in, if it were going to. Instead everything is gritty and grimy with frustrated heat, this last week of August when the thermometers jump towards thirty degrees.

She leans forward over her knees, fingers rubbing over the flaking scabs and catching in the stubble. She’s been in shorts since the semester started and so far the lack of shaving has only earned her eight “ape” and twelve “gross” – you can tell it’s a posh school, that she’s clawed her way up to one of the higher levels of high school hell.

“Hi,” an uncertain voice says above her. “Naruto, right?”

Naruto tilts her head to the side, squinting, and doesn’t point out that Sakura knows perfectly well who she is. “Yeah, hi. You wanna…?”

“Right. Thanks.” Smoothing her skirt, Sakura gingerly sits down beside her, arranging an armful of folders in her lap. She’s so tasteful, so appropriate, and Naruto’s hands itch for her the way her feet ache for the new snow every winter. “So, Iruka asked me to help manage his anti-ism thing, and I see you signed up on the volunteer list?”

“Yes,” Naruto says with a grin just shy of shit-eating. “I’m in. What are we doing? Like, mass meetings? Carnivals? Kick-Arse classes? Self defence, I mean, but really, you know, the best defence is a good offence!”

Sakura sighs and pushes hair out of her face before speaking, the movement revealing dark half-moons under her arms, which is oddly sexy: a flash of body in the prim dress. A year ago Naruto would have been crushing on her, would have been crushing so hard on normal and pretty and kind.
Then *normal* cut up her face in a school toilet while *pretty* giggled and *kind* looked the other way.

Naruto squints until all she can see is the grainy, sun-drenched pink of Sakura’s failed dye-job.

“I believe Iruka was thinking more along the lines of arranging seminars and helping him administrate the whole thing, really. Also, um. Perhaps you could try to be a bit more—” Sakura cuts herself off, waving and calling, “Sasuke! Over here!”

For such a tiny person, Sasuke has a blissfully large shadow; soaked in it Naruto can sit back, watching the school’s requisite ice princess lean unmelted against the railing.

*You’re such a stereotype*, she told Sasuke once, outside the headmistress’ office during her fourth lunch break at Sannin Academy.

*I prefer archetype*, Sasuke said, then took her raised eyebrow and perfect poise and left.

She watches Sasuke’s grating beauty, the waifish shoulders and enormous eyes and the breasts which are really about the same size as Naruto’s own but look radically bigger on Sasuke, and doesn’t hear the words in the mumble of voices until suddenly the conversation clicks and she has to pipe up: “*You’re* a feminist?”

Even Sakura has been careful not to use that kind of direct language, preferring to say she’s working with a wide range of anti-discrimination issues including but not limited to sexism.

“You’re surprised that I’m opposed to being on the wrong end of institutionalised discrimination?” Sasuke asks, showing impressive facial dexterity by once again raising a single eyebrow. “I guess some people really are as dumb as they look.”

“Well,” Naruto says, more curious than pissed. “You certainly don’t look like a feminist.”

“Impressive stereotyping you’ve got there. Just because I, unlike your cavewoman self, have the technical skills to master a razor.”
Naruto makes a sound of baffled outrage and something that could have been laughter, once, back when the world felt safer. “You’re one to talk! That’s so typical, that whole bullshit load of only white pretty middle class straight chicks deserve equality crap!”

Resting her elbows on top of the railing, Sasuke looks at her with amused contempt and lights a cigarette. Her cut-glass accent grates on Naruto’s ears like fucking glass splinters when she says, “Unlike me, you are white middle class. Admittedly, the dykeness comes through loud and clear.”

“I’m bisexual,” Naruto snaps. Jeez, people, get off your upper-class arses and look it up.

Sasuke’s eyes are marginally colder, half-lidded, or maybe she’s just squinting, sun-blind. “Which is basically gay-speak for slut, right?”

“Yeah, no. Actually it’s gay-speak for I’m not a stupid bitch too narrow-minded to like people for who they are instead of for their bits.”

“Do watch the sexist insults there, Ms Feminazi.”

“Right,” Sakura interrupts. “This isn’t constructive.” Not looking up at Sasuke, she uncurls enough to rearrange her files, pressing them to her chest as she stands. “Look, I’ll get back to you when I’ve got everything planned out, but – I can count on you both, okay?”

“Of course,” says Naruto, smiling at her until the whisker scars pull, because Sakura is pretty and kind.

“I suppose,” says Sasuke. She drops the cigarette butt and lights a new one, adding, “Someone has to make up for all the bad press you’re sure to garner.”

“Shut up, jerkarse,” Naruto snaps. It’s just the two of them now, but strangely she feels calmer, heavy with warmth.

“Whatever.”

“Great comeback.” She eases back down again, too heat-struck to fume. “Also, smoking kills, you
“Yeah, well.” The cigarette breaks the line of her smile, makes it somehow the most Sasuke-ish expression Naruto has yet seen.

As Sasuke keeps smoking and the sun keeps burning, Naruto lies back, resting the back of her head against her balled-up shirt and studying the area covered by Sasuke’s shadow; her own hand, an empty bottle, Sasuke’s feet. Clearly Sasuke is ice princess enough to be immune to tanning, because her skin is anaemia pale in the sandals. Naruto freckles in one day, burns in two, bakes in three, to the point where the freckles have become bright spots on her arms and face.

Sasuke shifts, flicking the cigarette butt away, and Naruto discovers her feet aren’t virgin white after all. There are marks beneath the heel slips of her sandals and between her big and index toe, nasty dark little circles.

Eventually Sasuke orders, “Scoot over.”

If Naruto could raise an eyebrow without its twin going along for the ride and her entire forehead scrunching up, now is when she’d do it, but she shuffles to the side to leave sitting room. Oddly, Sasuke, who stands and walks with easy adult poise, sits like a little girl who can’t quite decide whether she’d like to be a ballerina or a contortionist, chin on her knees, her toes curling around the edge of the step.

“Have you ever thought about working as a circus princess?”

Sasuke gives her a level stare half obscured by her fringe. “I’d ask if you’d considered working as a clown, except that might give the impression I care.”

Naruto has little idea what new madness her mouth would have released in response to that, but is distracted by the advent of Gaara, who nods in passing when she waves – nods at both of them, two slow but sharp individual movements, and Sasuke nods back.

“You know Gaara?” she demands, turning on Sasuke with newfound energy.

Sasuke shrugs, her tiny shoulder rising white and emaciated, not unlike a shark fin. “He was in our class before he got held back.”
“You don’t acknowledge half the people who are in our class now. And actually, Gaara’s even worse, I’ve seen him talk to like two people.”

“He nodded at you, didn’t he? And much as I regret it, I’m actually talking to you. Clearly our standards aren’t that high.”

“Look, I know I’m irresistible, it doesn’t explain why you two anti-social jerks would be all cosy with each other.”

Sweat rolls down Naruto’s face in the silence while Sasuke doesn’t answer and then keeps not answering until eventually, carefully, she remarks, “It’d take some real irresistibility to wave at Gaara and keep the hand. Irresistibility being one of the many qualities you lack.”

“Was that a question? Are you actually showing interest in something that’s not about you? Wow. All right, fine, Gaara and I obviously found each other via freakdar.”

Sasuke looks annoyed to the point of twitching, but she doesn’t leave. Why doesn’t she leave? She says, “What?”

“Freakdar! Like gaydar, except for finding fellow freaks instead of gays.”

“Most people wouldn’t need social radar to identify you two as freaks.” Her lips curl rather nastily, but it’s still marginally more of a smile than a sneer.

Is this a candid camera style try-out for She’s All That, or are they sort of bonding? Naruto would ask, but Sasuke’s mouth is terribly fascinating. It’s a Birth of Venus mouth, not quite smiling, so fucking beautiful.

“Gaara,” she says instead, tongue speeding nervously to keep ahead of thought. “What’s up with that?”

Because Sasuke will know. Kiba doesn’t, and Sakura doesn’t, maybe even Gaara doesn’t, but Sasuke must. She might be tight-lipped or she might lie, but she will know.
“According to popular opinion, only that he’s a kitten-tormenting, drug-crazed matricidal rapist.”

Naruto blinks. Sasuke doesn’t. With heavy unblinking lids she keeps staring at Naruto like a creepy snake.

“A drug-crazed what rapist?”

“Matricidal. Oh god, you imbecile. Mother-murdering?”

“Huh.”

“To be fair, the kitten part is true,” Sasuke adds, rising. It’s a gradual process, a slow, stretchy straightening of the queer lines of her circus princess pose.

“Hey, where are you going?”

“Class.”

“Oh. Right. Wait up!” Naruto stumbles upright and jogs after her. Sasuke’s pace doesn’t change, and Naruto ambles along beside her towards the classroom. Iruka said last week that they needn’t bring books this time, they were just going to talk, which is probably why the truancy ratio, although bolstered by late Tuesday lassitude, hasn’t reached epic levels.

She remembers what Headmistress Tsundae said, during their first terrifying interview on school grounds: At Sannin Academy we are concerned with results.

Dad was quick to remind her that while the school might not much care whether she cut class as long as she aced the work, he certainly did. Besides, it’s not as though Naruto would manage any acing if she cut.

What’s odd is, Sasuke likely could, whether because she’s rich enough or smart enough – a quick glance shows she’s wearing her classroom face, exuding bored superiority from every pore, and no
teacher has ever called her on the smugness – but her attendance record is perfect.

Well, Sasuke is odd altogether; Naruto would’ve assumed she sticks around for the attention of various minions and admirers, except she obviously doesn’t want it.

And then there’s today’s exciting mystery, the Gaara Nodding Incident.

While tortured kittens would certainly explain Kiba’s aversion to Gaara, Kiba’s also soft-faced around that shy, pretty Muslim girl who probably would not appreciate Gaara’s derogatory remarks on religion…

“All right, settle down,” Iruka intones, and Naruto hurries after Sasuke towards their table. In an effort to ‘avoid cliques and promote an open and friendly social environment’ Iruka, who has clearly consumed a few too many pedagogical texts, forces them to group alphabetically.

Sasuke, who come to think of it probably knows Naruto’s name thanks only to this arrangement, is already seated, pen and notebook in front of her, one leg slung primly over the other, and Naruto nods at Ino and takes the last free chair.

“All right,” Iruka says, shutting the door. “Capital punishment – right or wrong? Everyone in favour of it, hands up. This means if you keep your hand down, you’re against it, guys. There’s no middle ground today. All right, show of hands.”

Naruto is jolted awake from her half-doze by Sasuke calmly raising a hand, stares, and for a moment isn’t sure why, because it’s not as though it’s unexpected for Sasuke to have right wing nut opinions. But, she realises, she’d have never expected her to be so brazen about it, would’ve thought her far too politically correct for this bland frankness.

“You can take down your hands,” Iruka says. “Now we get to the interesting part: why? Sasuke?”

There’s no hesitation, her voice soft and clear and cold as she says, “I think some things should be unforgivable.”

“All right. Naruto, you look surprised, and I saw you didn’t raise your hand. Why?”
“Er, because killing people is obviously wrong?”

Iruka glances at Sasuke, who says, still so calm, “And locking them up isn’t?”

“Oh please,” Naruto interjects, “you of all people are not arguing against the inhumanity of prison.”

“Well, no. I’m not.” That smile-sneer hybrid is back, although Mona Lisa enigmatic in its subtlety.

“Looks like we’re going to have an interesting lesson today,” Iruka interrupts. “Everyone discuss within their groups, I’ll be circulating.”

Naruto looks across the table at Sasuke, energy like a buzz trying to break out through her skin.

“Did you have an opinion, Ino?” Sasuke asks, and Naruto feels abruptly doused in cold water.

It’s true Ino didn’t get much say last week, though.

Ino shrugs, shifting uncomfortably to her flip hair over her shoulder. “Not really, I guess. I mean, I’m not sure.”

“How unusual,” Sasuke says dryly. “Moving on. I take it the extent of your argument is ‘it’s wrong’?”

“Well,” Naruto says. “It is wrong, so yeah.”

“That’s not a rational argument.”

“If you actually were rational, you wouldn’t need any arguments to understand why it’s wrong to kill people.”

“Really?” Sasuke says, relaxing against the backrest of her chair. “Because rationally speaking,
certain offenders should be executed, not as punishment, necessarily, but simply to prevent them from committing further crimes.”

“There are other ways of doing that,” Naruto insists. “Besides, killing criminals wouldn’t prevent more crimes being committed, because hello, killing someone is still murder even if you call it execution.” She’s intensely aware of her own pulse, irrationally sharp and agitated and sweet, and of Sasuke fiddling with the topmost button of her shirt. This is irrelevant, but slowly it dawns on her that Sasuke has the most astonishingly beautiful hands, child-sized but woman-shaped, skilled and pretty and immaculate like in an old painting, and Naruto has the most astonishingly embarrassing thing for hands.

“Killing a criminal is not the same as killing an innocent,” Sasuke says, managing to be unbelievably condescending while keeping her face and voice neutral, ignoring that Ino has picked up her mobile and now starts texting. “In order to be recognised by society as a person, and access the rights that come with that, one must accept certain responsibilities, certain rules. If you break them, you’ve forfeited your rights. In other words, by killing other people, you’ve stripped yourself of your human rights, and as such killing you isn’t murder.”

“That’s insane,” Naruto objects.

“Oh the contrary,” Sasuke says smoothly. “If by sane you mean rational then actually it’s the opposite of insane.”

Naruto jumps at the abrupt yell from across the room, “Better death than fat camp!”

Ino looks up from her texting. “Seems Shino got to him again, huh.”

Everything looks amiable over at Chouji’s table, though, Iruka now presiding over the mumble of jeers and laughter, so Naruto – well, she’d have liked to think of it as turning back towards Sasuke, but truthfully she never really turned away. She says, “Look, killing someone is wrong, obviously, but doing it doesn’t mean you stop being a human.”

“I never said it did. I simply said you can’t have rights without responsibilities. I think the basic difference is that you insist on a fundamental equal worth which I don’t accept.” She shrugs, one-shouldered, her hand falling from the button. “For example, I think that my not torturing children makes me better than anyone who does. And if you agree that someone can be a better person than someone else, then you don’t really believe in equal worth, do you?”
“Someone being a better person doesn’t mean they get to kill other people! Doing that would make them not better people.”

The corner of Sasuke’s mouth curls, in what would be a grin on Kiba but a smirk on Gaara. On Sasuke, Naruto isn’t sure what it is. “So, plainly itching to murder me, does that make you a bad person?”

“Itching to slap some sense into you, maybe, you psycho arsehole.” Her voice comes out odd, in a tone she couldn’t identify if asked. The tension shifted so abruptly with the quirk of Sasuke’s lips.

“But that’s what I said. People aren’t the same, they shouldn’t be treated the same. Even if she’d said the same thing, you’d never hit Sakura.”

“I,” Naruto says. “That doesn’t mean I think you should die.”

“Okay, class,” Iruka booms, talking over anything Sasuke might have said in reply. Naruto blanks the rest of his speech, looking across the room at Sakura, polite and attentive, then back to Sasuke, who has really creepy fascist leanings and is beyond wrong about glorified murder, but utterly right about Naruto.

Sakura is… well, she’s Sakura, and Naruto has, or thinks she has, a pretty good idea of what to expect. If Sakura did sprout crazy shit, that’d be disappointing and it’d suck, but it wouldn’t change anything.

Sasuke’s something else entirely.

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The wind has finally picked up a little, although it’s currently shuffling the heat around more than dispelling it. Standing one-footed on the porch, scratching at her knee with her toes, Naruto tugs a tank top down over her head and shakes out her hair. It’s longer now, not enough for a ponytail but about right for two rubber-banded tufts to keep it out of her face, dripping residual shower water down her neck.

Not unusually, Iruka kept them late, and she barely had time to nod to Kiba before sprinting towards the bus. It was a good run, despite the weather, the kind when the ground stops being central and
becomes only something with which to implement the running. Too bad the following hour locked in
the bus, with the air so dry it burned her lungs, was decidedly less pleasant. She got stuck beside Mrs
Finn again, a nice lady to talk to but not to be crushed up against, especially now that stealing half of
someone’s seat also means sweating all over them.

But today was good.

She stretches forward contentedly, catching her toes.

Hell, today wasn’t good, today was, like, official Sasuke day. Which is really something quite
different from good.

Lured by the promises of the fridge, she pads back inside just in time to hear the front door opening.
It still sounds wrong; she’s got used to the looks of the new house, but her ears are more conservative
than her eyes, insisting that the old sounds of her childhood home are what should be heard.

“Hello,” Dad calls out. “Anybody home?”

“Right here. Juice?” Not bothering to wait for a yes, she fills two glasses and downs them both.

“Hey now,” Dad protests, slouching down on a chair. “I thought one of those was mine.”

“It was, before I got really thirsty. Here you go.” She jumps to sit on the counter, feet dangling from
the unfashionable height of it. “You’re home earlyish?”

“Yeah, well, it’s not that much to do yet, I figured I might as well enjoy being my own man and get
out of the heat.”

On a bad AC day the garage is actually even hotter than the bus, but it’s not the relative chill of
inside that makes something cold cramp in her stomach.

“Are we, I mean, are we okay?”
Not all car owners stay faithful to their mechanic when he suddenly moves towns, no matter how good he is. Things got pretty messy and abrupt, towards the end of last semester, much of which she spent hospitalised, and then when she was released she discovered Dad had reconciled with her previously unknown Gran Tsunade to get Naruto transferred into a school he trusted, outside of the old district, and Mum had got a new job and applied to a new university, and they were looking for a new house and a new garage.

“We’re fine, honey. It isn’t accident season yet, but just wait for the autumn storms and I’ll have more work than I ever wanted, don’t you worry.”

“Good. So. Can I have a puppy?”

He smothers a grin, laugh lines wrinkling light against his tan. “No.”

“Aww, come on. Akamaru’s sister just had her litter, they’re the cutest things ever!” Warm and cuddly, happy to be with you, and she’s not bullied here so surely it’s not just a pathetic defence mechanism to want one?

“You’ve already got Kiba, we don’t need two dogs in the house.”

Well actually, Naruto doesn’t say, at present there are no dogs at all in the house, seeing as Kiba has been persona non grata since the somewhat less than sober Saturday evening he and Naruto high-jacked a Chevy Dad had mostly fixed.

While the bruises have faded, they’re still working off the cost of repairing the resultant buckles.

“So, how was school?”

“Okay, I guess.” She shifts, made uncomfortable by the sudden tension straightening his shoulders. He won’t ask again, can’t, but she has to give him more. It’s just the happiness is so jittery, it’s awkward to make it into words. “We had Philosophy, and, well, Iruka obviously only teaches because there’s no counsellor job for him. I mean, he’s not a bad teacher, but all the PC babble, you know? And now he’s throwing this anti-ism thing and it’s going to be nothing but talk, talk, talk.”

“I think it’s nice he’s promoting tolerance,” Dad tries in a light tone. There’s a continuation to that, from overheard conversations, and it goes: after all shouldn’t you be grateful, he’s being pressured to
take care of your issues…

“I don’t want to be bloody tolerated!” But she does know that Dad has never said that, would never say that; bites back a yelp as her heel impacts with the counter, turns it into something like a smile. “Look, I mean, it’s not that I don’t appreciate not being beaten up, but…”

“I know, honey.” His large hand fits over her own where it’s rubbing at the back of her neck, her knuckles snuggling into the calluses. “That’s not how I meant it. I don’t think that’s how Iruka means it either.”

She doesn’t have to say anything before the door whines in the wrong way again, admitting Mum who’s glowing with post-seminar happy agitation. There are the customary hugs, and dinner-making and dinner-eating, and Mum talks about all the interesting aspects of the Master Program, showing the truly terrifying scholarly zest that has apparently forced a confession of classmate-ship from a patient. When eventually she asks did anything interesting happen today sweetie, Naruto is flabbergasted and grateful to choke on an over-large mouthful of chilli, because interesting would have to mean the complicated expression on Sasuke Uchiha’s very pretty, very versatile mouth when she said the kitten part is true, and there aren’t any words to translate Sasuke’s presence to people who haven’t experienced her, or not any words that Naruto has.

She might say something along the lines of, Imagine taking a bunch of stereotypes and mixing them all together so that when you think you’ve got it, that you’ve got her, then she does something and everything changes and suddenly nothing makes sense anymore.

Mum was right, probably, when she said stereotypes become stereotypes for a reason, the reason being that there’s something tantalising about the concept, and after awhile also something soothing and familiar to rest in, something comfortable and safe to make it easy to throw yourself recklessly into loving it. There’s nothing wrong with that, she said, the only problem is, after a while it becomes predictable and then it goes from safe to boring.

That’s when the stereotype analogy stops making sense, unfortunately, because Sasuke… isn’t boring, but rather cheats the whole idea by being utterly unpredictable yet retaining the fascination, which – well, which is actually exactly the sort of unfair play one would expect from a pseudo-fascist bitch queen.

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Wednesday is painfully dull, dusty and hot and anticipatory. Kiba is mending things with Shino, who is far too creepy for Naruto to join in the argument regarding whether Akamaru trash-ing a terrarium
was premeditated murder or self-defence. Letting the discussion wind down to an uneasy compromise about justifiable manslaughter on its own, she sets out to corner Gaara to… not talk about kittens.

She’d have assumed Sasuke was lying, except Sasuke is just about the only person who’d have no qualms greeting a known torturer of baby animals. Possibly it’s a shared interest.

She catches him outside the canteen, his hair a stoplight-red shock against the beige walls.

“Why are you here?” he asks. It’s not the belligerent demand it was the first time they met, when she stumbled over him on the way home from the shops and insisted on carrying some of his far too many bags for him, but the words are as flat and cold as his expression.

Naruto shrugs, beams at the progress of Gaara warming up towards human temperature and plops down next to him. If he didn’t hit her the first time, he won’t do it now. “I need a reason to talk to you?”

“Most people do most things for a reason.”

“Yeah well, I’m not most people.” She stretches, wriggling her shoulders against the wall.

“I suppose not.” He looks away from her, staring blankly at nothing, and Naruto relaxes, shifting idly through her mind for a suitable subject of conversation. Then Gaara’s head tilts sideways, birdlike, to face her: “I take it I am the less enticing, less risky substitute for Uchiha?”

“The fuck?”

“Come on.”

“No, really, what?” she says, feeling the frown and the residual jolt, reaching behind her to explore how badly she scratched herself up, jumping with her back too close to the damn wall. “How in hell is Sasuke riskier than you?”

“Ah, right.” He grins, all irony and really no pain at all, alluding without discernable movement to
the facial tattoo and the sleepless bags under his eyes. “I admit I’m curious: what did she say about me?”

“That you’re not an addict and you’re not a rapist and you didn’t kill your mother.” She shrugs.
“Which, not news.”

A sort of wary surprise softens the sharp angles of his face. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says, licking a ghost-trail of blood off her fingertip and, pulling her legs up closer to her stomach, deciding that if she bleeds through anything today, it won’t be the top. She’d understand hating periods except it’s whiny and contributes to the societal crap pile of dislike and disdain for women’s bodies. Shifting her hips to surf on the cramps, she grins at Gaara and launches into easy chatter about how they should totally hang out this weekend, and how does he feel about Rock Band? because he has that drummer look going for him.

There aren’t a whole lot of words coming out of Gaara, but the little twist to his mouth and the way he lets his knuckles brush against the love tattoo convey a damn lot more of substance than what follows, which is Iruka preaching about open-mindedness and golden rules and the struggle against prejudice. It’s not that Naruto doesn’t agree with most of it, it’s just talking about it never did anybody any good, save for the bullies who learned how not to sound like bullies.

There’s not a second of doubt that Sasuke could give this sermon every bit as well as Iruka, and with a good deal more rhetorical flair, and it doesn’t need telling that Sasuke’s quite astonishingly capable of cruelty. Just because it hasn’t been directed at anyone, not really, not yet, doesn’t mean it’s not there, almost-tangible like the mist diffusing your breath on frosty evenings.

Then finally it’s P.E., which Naruto has always pronounced as ‘pee’. Abbreviations are tricky when you’re only just learning to pair up letters with each other, and never let it be said Naruto was not a creative matchmaker, which in retrospect is probably why her parents didn’t correct ‘pee class’.

Besides, while she’ll buy the physical, it’s hard to find anything terribly educational about sweating and cramping and managing to keep breathing only because you’ll be damned if you stop cursing Gai.

Come to think of it, maybe Iruka would get the student attention and make the lasting impact he so obviously craves by putting on some neon spandex and engaging in push-ups – the phrase springtime of youth has been forever engraved onto Naruto’s mind, and at this point it’s really no more or less nonsensical than Iruka’s phrases, seeing as Iruka’s mouth is the place words come to… well, not to die perhaps, but to fall into a long hard coma.
Eyes glazing over, and mercifully so, she idly wonders if the stiltedness of Gai’s grin is due to Botox. When a bloke’s said “youth” fifty times in less than three minutes, you’ve got to wonder.

Presently he gives them a double thumbs-up and sends them running the five kilometre track as warm up.

“The man’s insane,” Kiba wheezes beside her. “Not even Akamaru runs in this weather, we don’t need fucking warm up!”

“Excuses,” Naruto tells him. “You’re just scared you won’t be able to keep up.”

“Fuck you,” Kiba says, shaking hair out of his face and lengthening his stride. “You’re on.”

They bicker and jog, leaving the slow-pokes trailing further and further behind them, hounded by Gai’s exuberant yelling. It’s not that you can’t take it easy, although the proximity to Gai increases when you do. If you want to make good grades, though, you run.

More importantly, if you’re not a quitter, you run.

Shortly before the halfway mark Kiba starts lagging, waving at her to go on ahead.

“Sucker!” she calls, still keeping pace with him.

Although he twitches, he manages a grin. “Nah. Only a loser would keep running.”

She scrunches her face up, tosses him a grimace over her shoulder, and accelerates. This is something she can do, can do well, and running is great and winning is great, and there are people to catch up to.

Rock Lee is visible far in the distance, skirting an apparently unconscious Shikamaru to begin his second lap because he is a crazy person (or maybe he’s a changeling, an alien implanted in a human home by his fearsome leader Gai? Because that’d actually explain a lot), but exempting the insane
aliens… The heat drags, but Naruto has spent ten years running from bullies year round and grabs an easy lead.

Or so she thought, before she spots someone just ahead.

What Sasuke has to run from she doesn’t know, but she keeps up.

Were she not so out of breath, Naruto’d say something, do something, but words are hard-won in Gai’s classes and Sasuke, also silent, whether because of the ice princess code of conduct or lack of air, tosses her a challenging look, and after that there’s only running.

A hundred meters, two hundred, three hundred, and Sasuke’s still keeping pace, four hundred, five hundred, and suddenly Naruto’s the one not keeping up.

Worse, she’s on her arse with a broken shoe lace.

Instinct has her hand rubbing at the back of her neck as she looks up, glad she was already as red-faced as she can get.

Running in place, Sasuke looks enviably cool and collected. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Fine.”

By the time Naruto’s fixed the stupid shoe and got back on her feet, Sasuke’s long gone and way ahead.
Chapter 2

She still finishes third, although admittedly only because Neji’s not present to beat both her and Sasuke, shuddering across the finish line high on adrenaline and lactic acid, low on air. Face and legs pounding with heat, she collapses against a tree and stares sideways at Sasuke’s perfunctory stretching exercises.

The sun couldn’t spoil Sasuke’s pallor, and evidently neither can exercise, because her cheeks are barely pinked. It doesn’t match the pulse slugging rapid and wild in the hollow of her collar bone.

Naruto hadn’t planned to say, “I’d have stopped for you, you know.”

“The difference is you care about beating me.”

“I will yet.” Naruto says, already hearing the dread sound of Gai approaching, driving a contingent of students before him.

The truly frustrating part is that she’s pretty sure Sasuke wouldn’t have replied anyway.

Kiba drops into a moaning heap beside her, Shino disgustingly untouchable behind his sunglasses on the far side of him, and this is when a normal teacher would let them catch their breath waiting for the stragglers to catch up, or in Shikamaru’s case wake up, but Gai is not normal, and after today there can be nobody left labouring under the delusion that he is.

“All right!” he roars. “Soccer time! Boys on the left field, girls on the right. First and second of each sex picks teams.”

Fortunately he himself will be going back on the track to encourage the remaining runners to pick up their pace.

In his absence Naruto follows Sasuke towards the directed patch of grass. There aren’t very many girls present yet, and even Sasuke’s body language reads as languid, or what passes for languid in the context of perpetually wire-tight angles and edges.
Temari stretches a pair of perfectly tanned arms, standing very close to Sasuke, close enough her movement brushes against the loose fabric of Sasuke’s tshirt.

It’s odd to see someone so near her, that’s all.

“Well,” Temari says after some length of time. “Let’s get this show on the road, then.”

There’s really no question of who Sasuke’s first choice is, which leaves Naruto in something of an awkward situation.

She never expected it to be awkward, the sudden novelty of being the picker instead of the non-picked, but it is.

“Er, Sakura, please,” she says, hand back at the nape of her neck.

She doesn’t really know Tenten, and Ino’s turned her back on the proceedings.

Next time around is easier, because by then Kiba’s would-be girlfriend has arrived. For a moment in between Naruto smiling at her and Naruto’s panic being rewarded by remembrance, things threaten to go way beyond awkward, because she recalls faces not names, but thank god, thank god, she pulls through.

Flushing brightly Hinata smiles back, and two rounds later they’re ready to play.

It’s the death penalty lesson all over again, because Sasuke looks like Naruto’s always imagined a ballerina would, with the thin over-bred butterfly lines (or actually, thanks to a certain Ballet Barbie movie, Naruto’s mental image of a ballerina is both blonder and bustier, but Sasuke has that quality of ethereality and tenacity that she associates with dancers), but clearly what she practices is martial arts. After years of training it’d be impossible for Naruto not to recognise the stances and turns, however modified, that make Sasuke’s feints and tackles so devastating and nasty.

Twelve minutes into the game, going by Gai’s insistent shouting over by the boys’ field, the ball chances to approach Hinata, and Sasuke is too close to her by far.
Naruto gives it all she’s got and runs.

Because that thought she had before, about Sasuke not having been cruel, that’s sort of person-specific. Saying what she did to Naruto wasn’t cruel, but saying it to Hinata would be. Just like tackling Naruto would be a challenge, but tackling Hinata would be abuse.

She really doesn’t want Sasuke to cross that line.

Skidding over the grass, she tumbles into Sasuke, and it’s the kind of situation Mum insists only ever occurs in fiction even though it happens to Naruto all the damn time; Sasuke twists under the impact but clearly didn’t expect it, can’t keep her footing, and a resentful glare later they’re on the ground, Sasuke’s knees cutting into Naruto’s stomach.

“Ouch,” Sasuke says with great dignity and greater rage. Clearly hell hath no fury like a woman tackled. “Get the hell off!”

Sucking in a sharp breath, because Sasuke’s demand was accompanied by a vicious jerk of her knee, Naruto plants an elbow on either side of Sasuke’s hips and glares right back.

“Quit it! Look, I will get up, cut it the hell out trying to kick me.”

If her legs didn’t ache already from the running, they do now from the fall, and the grass stain on Sasuke’s arm is accompanied by a fairly large abrasion. She’s still panting a little. Naruto wonders if it might possibly be from sheer fury.

“Er, sorry,” she offers, gaining her feet and extending a hand Sasuke pointedly ignores. “It’s just I couldn’t let you…”

“For god’s sake!” Sasuke snaps, standing up considerably faster than Naruto did and aggressively brushing dirt off her shorts. “Like I’d ever tackle Hinata.”

Sauntering up to them with a raised eyebrow, Temari interjects, “You all right?”

“Yeah,” Naruto says while Sasuke snorts and turns her back, marching away towards the others.
“Right, then,” Temari says, following her and nodding at Naruto and Hinata to come along. “Let’s avoid attracting Gai’s attention, shall we.”

“Fuck yeah.”

“Yes,” Hinata agrees very timidly, her voice soft as cream.

It’s not a large playing field by any stretch of the imagination; the syllable has barely met the air before the ball meets Naruto’s foot, and with a grin she kicks it back, picking up her pace to follow it.

Sasuke keeps her distance, doesn’t brush past Naruto again before Gai blows his whistle and enthuises about them being wonderful, lively creatures of spring and youth who should enjoy their muscles crying with joy from the workout, then finally sends them off to the showers.

Stuck in the tepid mass of undressing bodies, Naruto is hit with the fact that in spite of everything she really likes changing rooms, likes the idea of people just being naked together.

She remembers Chouji saying he hates them and someone from another class adding it’s distressing to have the intimacy of stripping forced upon you.

Which Naruto sort of gets, but also sort of doesn’t, since obviously lots of people are body-shy, but she isn’t and she’s not even sure she’d want to understand how to feel that way, because really changing rooms should be about bodies not having to be a big deal.

And, well, Naruto likes bodies, likes the warmth and promise and solidity of their physicality. Also there’s something, for lack of a better word, open-minded about stripping down alongside strangers.

Chancing a smile at Hinata, who’s blushing at her over the cocoon she’s turned her towel into, Naruto moves through the montage of limbs and idle sounds towards the showers, starting to sweat again because the window’s been bolted shut.

What stays with her afterwards is the raised circle of scar tissue marking out the centre of Sasuke’s shoulder blade.
Thursday dawns chilly, or what passes for chilly this time of year, a faint sheen of mist tempering the air. It’s cool enough Naruto is able to sprint for the bus stop and catch the bus she’s actually supposed to be on, arriving at school with time to spare rather than slightly late for the first time.

Unaccustomed to the extra time and still absent-minded from sleep, she takes to wandering the main building; passing by an exit, she catches sight of someone leaning against the outside wall, smoking. Only after she’s already edged the door open and slunk through, her mouth curving into a smile quite without her volition, does she realise she had no real proof it was Sasuke she saw. It was, though, it’s Sasuke staring skyward, slouching in her too-big jumper, her lips and fingers curling around a cigarette. However Naruto is rather more concerned with the spectacle of two guys circling a kid who must’ve decided to take the shortcut across Sannin Academy on his way to school.

Spurting forward, she catches hold of the closest guy’s arm before he can cuff the kid. “What the hell are you doing!”

“The hell are you doing, bitch?”

It’s not the first time Naruto’s had this conversation, but she still doesn’t have any words for it; rather, there are too many words, and none of them seem useful, until the only natural argument is a fist in someone’s face, and she can’t do that, can’t blow everything up.

Iruka said once, or said some philosopher or other had said, whichever, that there are instances of ‘if you don’t understand that, I can’t explain it to you’: times when a concept is so basic it has to be grasped organically, or when the person you’re trying to explain to is so far away you can’t reach each other.

Naruto felt the first tentative stirring of genuine respect when he added that he thought that was a coward’s way of thought.

“Stopping you being a bullying arse. Leave him alone.”

The guy she grabbed has turned to face her, back against the kid, and when the other bully pauses to laugh at her the kid seizes the opportunity and runs like hell, his arms swinging with something like desperation but a triumphant whoop lingering behind as he disappears around a corner.
It turns ugly very quickly, since the vaguely familiar wannabe bullies insist on there not being any harm in administering some peer education regarding kids not being welcome to frolic over their property, particularly when the kid is snotty and has been known to paint graffiti while passing through, and Naruto insists that the proper course of action would be to send the kid to Iruka for a talking to if he’s really such trouble. This evolves into some rather heated debate about teacher’s pets and where the line goes between bullying and a firm admonishing, and what’s decent behaviour anyway, and who asked you to pass judgement?

Teacher’s pet? Wow.

It doesn’t have quite the same ring as queer retarded bitch whore.

Then quite suddenly Sasuke says, “Enough.”

It doesn’t seem quite real: one moment there are loud voices and absurd insults and grabbing hands, then that one word and the next there’s scuffling shoes and Naruto is alone in the silence with its speaker.

It seems very real when she looks at Sasuke.

With her pulse still picking at her skull as though trying to break through it, Naruto stares in something like awe, like rage, at Sasuke not really doing anything at all and yet being so much, so intensely there.

She meant to say, to not quite scream: And why the fuck were you just standing there?

She says, not quite screams: “I don’t need your help!”

“Really?” Eyes hard and dark and something else, something complicated and aggravating, Sasuke stares at the whisker scars, and Naruto goes bone-cold.

“No,” she says.
Sasuke doesn’t reply beyond the standard raised eyebrow; checks her watch, shrugs, and goes inside.

It isn’t the first time Naruto’s had this conversation but it’s the first time it’s not ended with her beaten up.

xxxxx

Friday is golden, sunlight gilding every surface. Golden too is Iruka’s expansive mood, which allows them to finish the otherwise trying day, seemingly designed to drive home the fact that math is not only entirely useless but also extraordinarily painful, on a light note.

Naruto’s not sure how exactly the movie is supposed to relate to the anti-ism project, seeing as it’s about what her mum, in one of the stress-crazed harangues prompted by finishing her graduate thesis on The Gendered Gaze in… er, in some art guy’s work, might have called two cis-gendered, fully abled, white, heterosexual middle class twins who, to the profound disappointment of half the class, are not sleeping together. Still, it’s a goddamn awesome movie all the same.

Since Naruto also tears up over Disney movies, her crying when the smart twin dies in a traffic accident might not in itself be indicative of cinematic genius, but she’s not the only one whose eyes are getting glossy.

“So,” Iruka says at last, clearly trying to maintain a suitably solemn tone in spite of his success as he cuts off the credits. “That was the movie adaption of Peter Pohl’s novel I Miss You, I Miss You. I hope it gave you some food for thought – I see we don’t have any time left today, but we’ll be discussing it next week. Until then, everyone have a good weekend.”

It’s one of those movies, the ones that leave you new inside, bloated and unbalanced, as if things inside you have been shifted around to make room for what the film imparted. Feeling blotchy, she waves to Kiba taking off with Shino and Chouji, and to Sakura saying she’ll be in touch about the anti-ism planning later. Lucky bastards whose busses actually come by more than twice a day.

Left to wait, and feeling … not just good, but oddly full, Naruto heads accidentally on purpose towards the toilets. For one reason or another she hasn’t been to a school bathroom since she got her face cut up in one, and now she opens the door with baited breath, but stepping inside is nothing special and nothing very much like last time.

Sannin Academy is posh and proud of it, and certainly keeps the toilets fresh, with none of the filth
or graffiti she’d have expected, just a faint unpleasant smell caught in the tidy white-tiled room. Only one of the booths is occupied; only Ino is standing in front of a mirror adjusting her ponytail.


“Hi,” Ino replies, not taking her eyes off the reflection of that single closed door. Even when it’s pushed open and Sasuke emerges, Ino keeps talking to the mirror: “Putting our fingers down our throat again, were we?” The *anorexic bitch* is added in enough of an undertone to be discreet, but not enough of one not to be audible.

“Unlike some people,” Sasuke says, “I’m not quite that desperately in need of dieting.”

Ino blanches. “Look, I was just… I’m sorry, okay.”

“Fuck off,” Sasuke says. “You’re not my friend, and despite whatever delusions you harbour on that account, you’re nowhere near being my social rival either. So really, fuck off.”

“Fine,” Ino says, looking down; looking fragile and determined as she leaves. “All right, fine.”

After the door has swung shut behind Ino but before Sasuke can leave as well, or try to order her out too, Naruto says, “Why would you do that?”

For a moment Sasuke stares at her blankly. Her face is white and her lips mutely parted around another *fuck off*, but she doesn’t say it. When things get bad, get really bad, they silence Naruto, but Sasuke, who seems so quiet even when she talks, apparently puts words between herself and the bad shit.

“Because,” she says with a big blank smile, glittery like fake diamonds, “as a girl raised in a patriarchal society, I’ve been taught to despise myself and turn my rage inwards, so that when frustration turns to violence I attempt to assert control over the situation by directing the aggression towards my own body. It’s called a coping mechanism.” She leans forward to inspect something in the mirror, adding in a tone of weary disgust, “Or so my therapist keeps telling me.”

Ignoring the clichés, which obviously aren’t lies, exactly, but equally obviously are too simple to be truth, Naruto focuses on the central issue: “Actually I think that’s called self-harm.”
“Well,” Sasuke says lightly. “I needed something to replace the cutting, didn’t I.”

“Cutting,” Naruto repeats.

Mercurial and strange, this is not how she’s ever pictured Sasuke. Or, strange, yes, but not with these brittle mood swings, not saying, “God, you dipshit, as if I’d cut. Emo is out, even you should’ve picked up on that.”

“Um. Hey,” Naruto says, through the weirdness of Sasuke clearly having learnt from whatever idiot therapist she’s been seeing how to lie with little bits of truth, how to use words to avoid communication. “Tell me.”

Very astonishingly, Sasuke does. Sort of.

She sounds like she’s in shock or something, like one of those news anchors who are new on the job so you can tell they’re cheating, reading their lines off a prompter.

“Thirteen months ago I was in a traffic accident. With this guy. Who died.” When she laughs, mouth half obscured by the hand covering her face, it sounds like a cough, rusty and thick. “Well technically he’s comatose, but that’s just semantics, isn’t it. He might as well be dead for all the good he is now. Fuck, he is dead, they just haven’t turned off the heat and air yet.”

“Sasuke…” She’s standing close now, standing helpless, horrified, and yet… alight with, with trust, with you’re talking to me.

“It’s not like it’s a secret,” Sasuke interrupts. “Everybody knows.”

Really? Because if so, what the hell kind of business did Iruka think he had showing what amounts to a trigger flick? It doesn’t seem like him at all.

“Well,” Naruto says, and this she knows: “It’s not like that makes it matter any less.”
Sasuke sneers at her. “Don’t. You don’t get to think I’m a pseudo-psychotic fascist bitch and then pretend to give a shit. Lay off.” She says *pseudo-psychotic fascist bitch* very levelly, without any hint of accusation.

“Still caring is kind of what makes me not a psycho bitch.” Her wrist burning where it almost touches Sasuke’s arm, she tries a bit of a grin, because this is the kind of bad that’s way beyond the scope of conventional grief respecting practices, and Naruto’s never been any good with solemnity. “Also I don’t think that’s all you are.”

“Spare me.” She swallows, but her voice is even and supercilious. “I neither want nor need your sanctimony. I’m not your friend.”

“No? Then why are you talking to me?”

Talking to me about things hurting so much you can’t stand them, talking to me about *this guy*, which in Sasuke’s voice means *my guy*, means, *this guy who I love*.

Amazingly, Sasuke doesn’t actually sound nasty as she says, “Because you’re nobody.” There’s a smirk, sudden and elusive, and then quite a lot of nastiness after all. “I could tell you anything, it doesn’t matter what you know because it doesn’t matter what you think. I realise probably somewhere in your head there’s like a Kantian category reinterpreting reality into something in which your sad existence isn’t pointless, but the reality is you’re nothing.” She tilts her head to the side with an expression almost of curiosity. “It’s funny, really – you’re no one, and you’re the last to know it. Well. People are bullied for a reason.”

Naruto thinks about the kid on the schoolyard yesterday, she thinks about herself, but most of all she thinks about Sasuke as she snaps, “People are bullied because there are arsehole bullies who can’t lay the hell off them.”

“I don’t care what lies you tell yourself. It doesn’t change anything.”

“Shut up.”

Relentless, Sasuke does not seem to have heard her. Well, if you’re nobody you can just stay quiet, right?
“You’re still nothing. You’ll always be nothing.”

“Shut up. Shut up!”

Sasuke does when Naruto hits her.

“I heard scream– Naruto!” someone says behind her over the oddly sharp sound of her hand impacting with Sasuke’s face, snapping it sideways.

Flesh meeting flesh normally causes a heavy sort of noise, but maybe it makes sense for Sasuke to be atypical. She’s always doing that, looking at you like you’re real, because she would never see anybody who didn’t matter, then saying you’re nobody, you’re nothing.

Naruto makes to step closer, crowd her, whether to hit her again or touch her or shake her she isn’t sure, but a hand grabs onto her arm and keeps her in place.

Right. Iruka.

“Stay put,” he orders, then turns to Sasuke. “Are you all right?”

The act of straightening alone, facing forward again and adjusting her shirt, is proof Sasuke qualifies as an ice princess; measured, immaculate, her face absolutely blank.

Naruto is anything but, fracturing around too strong emotions and too many questions.

“I’m fine,” says Sasuke.

“Good,” says Iruka. “Then you’re both coming with me to the headmistress.”

Herded through the mostly empty corridors, in a private silence unbroken by outside noises, with Iruka’s hand not gripping anymore but just a warm presence on her arm, a reassurance almost, Naruto notices Sasuke’s neatness and prettiness in a new way, a way that has to do with how proper and expensive her clothes are, and how convincing she can sound, and how much authority figures
always love that.

The vividly red place where Naruto hit her is an extreme contrast to her collected pallor; looks like vandalism.

Naruto’s been dragged off to the headmaster’s office for brawling, or any number of other offences, most of which at least loosely based on reality, countless times before, and she knows how it usually ends. While Tsunade is supposed to be her grandmother, and while Iruka has always seemed fair under the naivety, there’s an “estranged” to go before “grandmother”, and probably you wouldn’t need even half of Iruka’s naivety to consider Sasuke the resident Miss Perfect.

When they reach the green door bearing Tsunade’s name Iruka doesn’t bother waiting, but knocks on and opens it in the same one move, ushering both of them in before him.

Tsunade looks up from a stack of papers and a glass, reclining in her desk chair with a rather testy, “Yes?”

Naruto doesn’t listen very closely to Iruka’s narrating how he passed by the girls’ bathroom and heard yelling, then found them fighting, walking in on Naruto getting violent.

She looks at the antique desk and into the sun-blasted greenery outside the window, until finally Tsunade demands attention. Most headmistresses can’t do that, that thing when they just look at you and you don’t even need to be looking back to know that it’s time you listen, and listen well.

“Right, then. Does either of you contest Iruka’s version of events?”

“No,” Sasuke says, and Naruto shakes her head.

“Then,” Tsunade continues, piercing Naruto with a glare in that way that’s also really, devastatingly, rare, “I take it Miss Uchiha deserved it?”

Fake understanding she’s met before, and mocking, but this particular combination is new. It doesn’t matter.
“Yes. No.” She struggles, embarrassed, horrified. “I mean. What she said wasn’t okay, but it wasn’t all right for me to hit her either.”

“And what did she says?”

Naruto finds herself saying, “Nothing.”

It’s not because she doesn’t rat people out. It’s not because she doesn’t think she’d be believed.

Mind, she doesn’t rat people out and she doesn’t think she’d be believed, but that’s not why she clings to secrecy.

It’s no one else’s business.

“Sasuke?”

“We were debating people’s ability to avoid unpleasant situations,” Sasuke says, not quite ironically.

Naruto supposes it’s even kind of true, if you’re a spoilt idiot who thinks of systematic abuse as an unpleasant situation.

“And that’s what set off this… incident?”

“Evidently,” Sasuke says coolly, every eye in the room focused on the redness smearing her cheek.

That’s when the lectures start, as if Naruto didn’t know violence is an unacceptable response, doesn’t know it’s a potentially expelling offence, especially when the victim’s daddy is a self-important prosecutor.

Sasuke’s been sitting immovable and distantly pretty in one of the visitors’ chairs for a good long while when they’re done, and she nods along with leaving “this regrettable incident” in the past.
Naruto, who’s been standing there nodding and not doing much else, stares at her with something that’s not quite surprise, then hurriedly turns her attention back to getting out of here.

She’s missed the bus now, she thinks, walking doggedly beside Sasuke through the main corridor. She’ll have to go down to Central Station and wait for the next one.

Through the door, and the outside air is dumpy, thick.

They aren’t kicking her out. Fuck, they aren’t even punishing her. Tsunade might tell Dad, in fact probably will, but Iruka said nothing about calling, so presumably it’ll be a family thing not a school discipline thing when Tsunade does.

Is it… do they know, then, about Sasuke’s beauty being barely skin-deep? Or are they, what? Trying to keep things quiet, hoping it’ll blow over? Sasuke did remain crazy calm the whole time.

And that stops her, belatedly, because Naruto remembers being hit for the first time, that nauseating twist in reality into someone’s hand on your face, doing violence to you, and so it’s inconceivable that Sasuke wouldn’t have reacted to the slap-punch hybrid Naruto dealt her. Hell, it wasn’t even an active non-reaction, it was that she simply didn’t react.

That is to say, there is, or there can be, a difference between the two, like there can be a difference between being quiet and just not saying anything. She’d not have been surprised at Sasuke being quiet, staying blank, but her just failing to react – that’s wrong.

Sasuke’s not staying silent now, though.

“If you ever touch me again expulsion will be the least of your worries.”

“I, yeah,” Naruto says, relief tugging forcibly at her face. “I mean, I wasn’t going to. But you’d better not give me reason to again.”

Not replying, this time very actively not replying, Sasuke veers off sharply to the left, towards the fancy part of town. Naruto’s left alone with the smell of boiling tarmac and the sound of fornicating insects.
She walks, she catches the bus, and she fumes and she’s elated and nothing makes sense. Which, well, sense is overrated, but.

The weekend is hell.

She comes home late and Mum’s snapping at her, stressed and annoyed about managing the new classes and having some difficult patients, and now also about Naruto not being on time, so that everything’s been delayed and she’ll be late.

“I’m sorry,” Naruto says. “You didn’t have to wait.”

“I promised I’d drop you off at the garage before I went to work. I just – I’m sorry, I know you didn’t mean to be late, but I’ve got a bit of a tight schedule here and I think you’re old enough to show some consideration.”

Naruto doesn’t say sorry again, because while she is sorry, she’s also angry, and frustrated, and really confused, and she doesn’t do so well with words.

That was certainly proven today.

“Are we going, then?” she says instead, and Mum picks up her purse and her new nurse shoes and ushers her hurriedly to the car.

The drive is silent. Mum leans over and kisses her cheek before taking off, but it’s still a relief to get out of the car.

You don’t get used to being a disappointment. Rather, you do, but you also grow goddamn tired of it.

Kiba’s there already, giving a lazy wave from over by the Volvo; they’re not allowed to touch the car they actually joy-rode into the vehicle equivalent of the ER, but have been directed to work off their dept on less refined machinery.

An hour’s good, two, but it’s Friday and Kiba’s taking off early, there’s a family dinner and then
there’s Shino. And, possibly, some pseudo-stalkerish attempt at befriending Hinata.

“You’re not going with them?” Dad asks afterwards, when Naruto’s sitting on the cement, letting its coldness soak her. “The dog brigade, I mean.”

“Nah. It’s their – you know, their thing. It’s like the bff version of makeup sex.” She leans under the car to look for the screwdriver and also to hide, a little. “You know he started hanging out with me because he and Shino weren’t talking.”

“I’m sure that’s not the only reason…”

“I know!” she cuts him off. “I know, I know.”

It’s cool and safe under the car, but increasingly uncomfortable, and the smell’s bloody awful. She crawls out.

“Er, Dad? I got in a fight. I – I didn’t mean to, and they’re not doing anything about it or anything. But I – I guess I should tell you before Tsunade does.”

“What was the fight about?”

“Nothing. Stuff. She said some things.”

Except it wasn’t really about that. No, it was, but not only.

It was about ice princesses melting and cracking a bit, as well, and Naruto not right knowing how to handle that.

But mostly it was about bullying, and about how having a crappy life isn’t a good excuse to indulge in it.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she says. “Damn it, just talk to Tsunade.”
“All right, then,” says Dad, with a sigh and that hurt slump of his shoulders.

Later that night Tsunade calls, and Naruto jumps from the table to pick up the phone. It’s strange she should be so positively weak-kneed with relief that Mum or Dad didn’t answer; she’s already told Dad, after all. Still.

Hi, she says, and Tsunade says, Hello Naruto could I speak to Minato, and Naruto walks back into the kitchen to hand over the phone. She’s glad when Dad retreats outside for the conversation, then ashamed when she sneaks a glance at Mum, who chews energetically on a carrot stick and doesn’t comment.

“Um,” Naruto starts, but doesn’t know how to finish. Things went to shit so quickly in the bathroom.

Which, yeah – no, she’s never been that good with words.

Maybe to make up for that, words being so important to Mum, important enough that sometimes Naruto thinks the sentences describing them matter more than the pictures themselves to her even though she’s supposed to be an art student, Naruto gets up again and starts picking up the dirty dishes.

Of course, today she doesn’t seem to be doing so well with her hands either, because she trips on the kitchen carpet and drops two of the plates.

Not the favourites, at least, she thinks, not quite numbly and not quite grimly but distressingly closer to it than she’s been since they moved.

“Ah, fuck.”

“Jesus,” Mum mutters, then adds, “Watch your language” before retrieving the broom from its hiding place.

Naruto spends the remains of the evening in her room.
By the time Dad comes by to say goodnight the place is a mess of things that have failed to amuse her, failed to relive the restless, palpable anxiety, and the hard rhythms of indie rock is lulling her to sleep.

“Good night,” she – she’d like to say she mutters it, but really it’s a whisper, unhelpfully wistful. Things could be… better.

Well. Tomorrow they will be, you’d better believe it.

She clutches at Kyuubi, one hand closing defiantly around the tail of the old plushie, familiar and dear. One of the good things about summer ending is the nights growing dark again, so you can rest safely in your earth, and soon enough she does fall asleep. That’s never been a problem.

Waking up sort of is, this time, because, as compared to Friday night, Saturday morning is brighter only on the surface manifest layer. Nothing’s easier.

She kicks the sheets off with more aggression than joyous energy, questing downstairs for breakfast and a run of Gaian proportions.

Sasuke says, or said really but it feels like present tense, feels like says: You’re nothing.

That you’re nobody and you deserved it, that’s not exactly inventive, any schoolyard bully can tell you that.

Given time, Naruto supposes they can even make you listen, and believe it. She didn’t, but then they never told her, or so my therapist keeps telling me.

And this is …fucking shallow, really, but they didn’t look like Sasuke, and more importantly they didn’t look at her like Sasuke does, either.

Naruto runs from a stupid conversation on the school steps and, and that dumb argument in class, and, damn it, from that P.E. lesson.

“You’re home,” Mum remarks when Naruto emerges from the shower, reclining on the porch with
her laptop balanced on her knees. “I thought you’d be off with Kiba.”

“Yeah, no,” Naruto says, right back where she started running from. “Not today.”

Later Dad finds her inside and asks doesn’t she have any homework, then?

While Naruto must grant him the point that pouting around the house is not very productive, that’s only a theoretical point because she doesn’t do pouting. Doesn’t have the mouth for it, nor the patience.

“None I feel like doing,” she says, and it doesn’t work as a joke because frankly it’s true.

“Naruto…”

And she’s so fucking tired of hearing Naruto, don’t you know better, Naruto shouldn’t you control yourself, Naruto there aren’t infinite chances here.

Nobody told Sasuke she’d better consider her actions more carefully in the future.

“I’m sixteen years old,” she says, feeling like the goddamn little mermaid. “I’m not a child anymore. Whether I do my homework or not isn’t really any of your business.”

She feels like shit about the words even before she’s spoken them, but she can’t regret them because this moment they’re so true they cut.

“You’ll always be my business,” Dad says. “Mum and I, we’re just worried. There’s this whole future ahead of you, and I know it’s difficult to focus on that now but it’s important. That’s why we worry about academia.”

“Well, you do that,” Naruto snaps. “I’m kind of busy trying to survive the present, myself.”

She retreats outside, not because she wants to avoid him as such, god she doesn’t, but because she doesn’t want to say any more nasty stuff, and there’s so much of that trying to break out of her.
“Well,” Dad says, after he’s followed her to the shadow under the plum tree, where she’s made herself uncomfortable leaning against the trunk, knees drawn up to far they brush her boobs. Given the distinctly modest size of the latter, that’s something of an accomplishment. “When I was your age I wanted to be a police officer. Or a mayor. Or maybe a travel agent. So I guess there’s plenty of time yet. I just think it’d be good if you had something concrete to aspire to, to make the school stuff more relevant.”

She smiles up at him, wanly and with her eyes squinted practically shut against the sun, but genuinely. “I’m gonna be a rock star.”

She can hear the grin in his voice, and the worry lines around it. “In that case you might want to try learning an instrument.”

“Hey!” Naruto objects. “I give great Guitar Hero!”

There’s no way he, nor any sane non-deaf person, could possibly argue against that, and for a while things are better.

Still, Sasuke said, you’ll always be nothing, and Kiba’s MIA, and, well.

Naruto has never been one of those secretly cool losers, like Sheldon Cooper or Peter Parker or Willow Rosenberg. She’s not secretly pretty or super smart, or an astonishingly good person, who was just oppressed by a shallow, non-comprehending society. She really is just completely awkward.

So she’s not a cool loser but a loser loser, because of which it kind of matters a whole lot more than it should what the local ice princess has to say on the subject of her mattering or existing.

Besides, if she’s honest, and Naruto’s not good enough with words for lying to work, that’s not the worst of it by far.

The worst is that regardless of everything that came after, the voice she cannot escape says, I can tell you anything, and even now Naruto feels sick from it, feverish.

If you’re nothing means I can tell you anything, doesn’t it follow that you’re nobody, you don’t
“matter to anyone means you’re somebody to me, you matter to me?”

Something more than a replacement friend or a pity case.

“Shut up!” she sneers, snaps, gasps at herself.

Jesus, this is mental.

Sunday isn’t any better, and she ambles out of the house to meet Gaara in the park. He likes feeding the pigeons; she realises it wasn’t a random impulse but a sustained habit, catching him again surrounded by a snowstorm of birds. Standing in the middle of the winged storm distributing bread crumbs, he looks small and scruffy and like the antithesis of a scarecrow.

Naruto wades through the birds and stands next to him for a bit, but she’s restless. Scuffs her feet, jangles what little change her pocket holds, until she can’t stand it anymore and pushes him into motion. The pigeons follow them, or him rather, as they start making their way around the lake.

“I used to kick them,” Gaara says, in a low and rather contemplative voice. “The pigeons, I mean. They called me the pigeon kicker.”

Naruto stares at him in disbelief. “Who the hell calls someone the pigeon kicker?”

He shrugs. “People. Soccer mums. You know. People from school.”

“Well, I guess it’s not really any worse than Dr Octopus.”

“I guess not,” he agrees. He’s dressed in what looks like his sugar daddy’s clothes, although knowing Gaara it’s more likely the skin of his downed enemies. Naruto likes oversize herself, but the bright colours and baggy lines make him smaller and paler, a very little boy needing a very big hug.

Naruto touches his arm, roughly enough he can take it as a punch if he likes.

She’s glad when he reciprocates, even though it’ll leave a bruise, but it fizzles out when he says,
“What’s up? You’re all,” he gestures, a jagged move, “all broken and jittery.” His eyes are flat and level, and not answering would be cheating, would be something she can’t do to him.

“I, er, got into a bit of a fight.”

“Kiba?” he asks with a calm that is suddenly dangerous.

“Sasuke.”

“Oh.” He deflates abruptly. “That’s more… complicated.”

“Yeah. No. It shouldn’t be.” She squares her shoulders, but can’t quite lift her gaze from the ground. The threat of violence has sunk back down through Gaara’s pores, but violence was never the issue: violence Naruto understands. It upsets her and occasionally it frightens her, but she can handle it, she knows it, owns it.

Sasuke, on the other hand, is balancing on that fine unravelling line between friendly teasing and cold-faced abuse. Has actually fallen down on both sides of it several times, but unfairly ignores this and just gets back up on it again.

Enough is enough, Naruto decides. The least she deserves is some basic clarity. She blurts, “D’you know where she lives?”

“Yes,” Gaara says immediately, point-blank. “In what amounts to a castle, complete with a number of dragons.” He pauses. “I could give you her number.”

“You’ve got it? Yes please!”

He shrugs a little, dislodging the neckline of his sweater. Drowning in layers of thick fabric he should be sweating buckets in the intense late-summer sunlight, but he looks icy. Maybe it’s a rich kid thing, maybe he and Sasuke have miniscule ACs sewn into their clothes. “She’s friends with Temari. Temari’s my sister.” He finds his mobile in a pocket and manipulates it with rather clumsy finger-stabs before letting it slip back out of sight. “There. I’ve texted it.”
“Thanks.” She can’t stand people delving into phone conversations when in irl company, so tingly frustration aside it’s pretty fortunate she forgot her mobile at home. She always does, much to Mum’s chagrin, but it’s not as though anybody calls her.

She took the bus home but is winded when she grabs her phone, which is suddenly heavy with the significance of Gaara’s text.

It’s a mobile number, she realises. No need for landlines, anymore.

She dials it.
Chapter 3

After the sixth signal the fourth time, three hours later, Sasuke picks up.

“Yes?”

Dad’s phone-voice is rugged and studiously good-humoured, Mum’s is light and very fast. Sasuke’s is succinct and sharp as her cut-glass accent, never more pronounced.

“Hi,” Naruto says into the immense distance, and also into the phone. She isn’t sure how to hold it, hasn’t used it enough to know where it should be positioned to work best with mouth and ear. “It’s me. Um, it’s Naruto.”

Sasuke hangs up. It’s another eleven tries before she picks up again. In the meantime Gaara calls and asks if she really felt it necessary to inform Sasuke of who leaked her number.

But I didn’t, Naruto protests.

Gaara sighs in that way that’s the vocal equivalent of a shrug, and she guesses it doesn’t matter, then, whether he believes her.

“Yes, well,” he says. “I should have known better.” He hangs up as fast as the words are out.

Presently she has finally got Sasuke to press accept instead of decline, but she’s not saying anything.

“I wanted to talk to you,” Naruto blurts into the silence.

“About what?”

“I was hoping that’d come to me.” She could say, I’m sorry, because it’s not all right to hit someone for grieving, regardless of circumstances.
On the other hand Sasuke was and presumably still is a right bitch about it, and it’s not all right to say the stuff that Sasuke did either, equally regardless of circumstances.

Also Naruto guesses a form of mutual apology was infused in the few choppy sentences from outside, after Tsunade’s office.

“Idiot,” Sasuke says, but this time Naruto’s all right with it, with the light insult and the silence of Sasuke hanging up on her again.

They’re back on level ground now, never mind if level ground seems like a wire pulled tight between dangerous extremes.

xxxxx

Next week Sasuke ignores her utterly, but it’s a private, rather muted kind of ignoring, decidedly at odds with the official sort that spreads outward like rings on water after a stone’s been thrown and been drowned, spilling through the popular groups and down lower until it encompasses the entire student body.

The disconcerting aspect is how much Naruto notices, when nobody else seems to.

Sakura finds her during lunch, flushed with success as she explains she’s mostly done with the planning. “I’ll need Iruka to approve it, of course, and there are some last chinks to be worked through, but…” She smiles. “Do you know Haku?”

“Er, no. Should I?”

“I’ll introduce you. You see, I was hoping to pair you up to lead one of the seminars – are you willing to do some extra reading?”

“Depends what kind of reading,” Naruto tries. Homework eats too much of her time without Sakura adding to it, but unlike homework this might possibly be interesting.

“Well, ideally some Butler and Foucault to start with, and if you’d like to branch out maybe some
Wittig, I think she’s a bit radical myself but I reckon you might like her, and personally I think there’s something to be said for Jameson. I mean, I’m not a Marxist, but some of his non-political writing is quite interesting.”

Naruto, who is a socialist, has never heard of Jameson; dimly recognises Foucault from Mum’s required readings.

“Um,” she says.

“That’s the general stuff,” Sakura goes on, “but, well, more specifically I was hoping you’d read up, or were willing to read up, on transsexualism. It’s not really what the seminar’s about, but some jerk always brings it up, you know?”

“I can try,” Naruto says. She’s fuzzy on the subject but probably Mum can bring her up to speed. “Just, why would anybody bring it up?”

“Well, because of Haku. She’s – right over there, see? In white, with the long brown hair.”

Naruto follows her gaze to an inordinately beautiful girl sitting alone at a corner table. Haku is model-tall and model-thin, prettier even than Sasuke, with the sort of determined mildness that leads Naruto’s thoughts to mothers.

“If you’re not sure,” Sakura says, “then I’ll work something else out.”

“It’ll be fine,” Naruto says, then goggles when realisation hits. Haku makes a more convincing girl than Naruto ever has, regardless of what sort of body’s under the dress. That’s why some arsehole would bring it up.

“Let me know as soon as you can, all right?” Sakura asks. “You see, I’m double-booked already, and Sasuke’s the only one I know has done the appropriate reading; Shikamaru’s so lazy, and Temari’s not gone in that direction.”

Naruto isn’t sure she wants to know, when things are so tenuous with Sasuke, but she can’t help asking, demanding really: “Then why don’t you pair her up with Sasuke?”
Sakura’s mouth thins unhappily. “Haku doesn’t need that.” She hurries to add, presumably as a result of Naruto’s enraged frown: “Oh, Sasuke’s never been less than perfectly polite to Haku, but she’s had a difficult time lately and now I’m not sure I’d want to risk it.”

Naruto translates that to mean that Sasuke’s inner bitch only truly came out to play after the accident. And she already slapped her around for that, so is left feeling sad rather than angry.

Picking up her tray and following Sakura towards the bins then towards English, she shrugs it off. She’s tired of thinking of Sasuke, sick of it, and anyway Mondays are gloomy enough just by virtue of all the weekdays to follow; what Naruto needs is some positive input, like a long good look at fairytale princess beautiful Haku.

Even better, after class is over Chouji too is left in school, another victim of the erratic bus schedule, and they head towards what Chouji declares the best café in town to meet up with Shikamaru.

It really is a very nice café – the kind of nice that makes Naruto feel distinctly uncomfortable with her awkward manners and cheap clothes. Makes her want to yell and throw things around. Chouji angles himself between the tables with the steady, determined ease born of diligent practice, and Naruto scampers after him, relived to reach the designated table without incident.

Shikamaru’s presence in the establishment makes a lot more sense once Naruto spots the two girls he’s sharing the table with. Although Naruto can only imagine she feels neutral at best about them interrupting, Temari nods in greeting; Sasuke studiously ignores them.

She has a variation of that circus princess/contortionist pose going on, legs stretched out but bent oddly over each other, lips and fingers curling around a cigarette rather like Gollum might curl around his one ring. Judging by the number of butts on the saucer, it’s not the first by far.

Naruto decides to take her not protesting the added company as a good sign, and pulls out a chair. It’s all red velvet and engraved tree, a bit like a throne from a grade school play, and utterly magnificent.

She ends up facing Sasuke across the table, or she would be if Sasuke looked up from her cigarette. It’s obvious the staff must have noticed her smoking, but nobody’s asking her to please go outside, probably because she’s doing that Sasuke thing again, owning the room, enhancing it somehow by her mere presence in it.
Maybe someone should explain to her that she’s obviously taken a wrong turn, got lost in a world where there aren’t supposed to be any real princesses left, and so she shouldn’t act like one, and more importantly shouldn’t be treated like one.

Indeed probably someone should start a revolution, and Naruto is half prepared to take up the task, except Chouji would never turn against Sasuke at a moment when she’ll let them have cake.

Glancing over his shoulder at the menu, Naruto discovers fancy script but no understandable words or prices. Chouji seems to know his way around it, though, perusing it with obvious delight.

Meanwhile Sasuke, who really could do with some more fat and sugar, continues just sitting; silent, smoking, superior.

Why is it obvious, her belonging in the sort of place too good for everyday English, too good for people who need to care about prices? What exactly is it that makes it plain as day that Sasuke’s simple top is the expensive kind of simple? The charisma itself is one thing, but Naruto isn’t interested in clothes and never has been; she shouldn’t be able to tell if they’re posh.

But she can, just like the wait staff are obviously aware Sasuke is what amounts to a VIP, in spite of how, to be honest, she doesn’t dress ostentatiously, the only jewellery on her person is a simple metal band circling her left thumb, she doesn’t even wear any makeup.

It may, she wryly reflects, have something to do with Sasuke magically exuding the attitude that the reason for this is that, quote, if you need makeup to be pretty you’re a hopeless case and shouldn’t embarrass yourself by trying, unquote.

Naruto, who can’t be bothered with makeup because why waste time and money on the commercialisation and objectification of women as sexual objects, had gaped at her.

Sasuke’d smirked. “The body’s artificial, just like everything else, at least in all the ways that matter. That’s not what I’m objecting to.”

“Then what are you objecting to? Cause you don’t exactly seem the type to celebrate a healthy natural body.”

“Well, no. Of course not. I just find it pathetic to sell out trying to achieve an ideal you can’t ever
reach, particularly such a paltry ideal as mainstream beauty.”

Of course people who look like Sasuke can afford to consider it paltry, much like people looking like Naruto can: it’s easy to disregard something you’re either comprehensively above or utterly below. The trickiness, the heartache over it, happens to the people in between, to the almosts.

Her reverie is interrupted by the waiter coming by to take their orders. Chouji asks for a number of… things…, and as Temari and Shikamaru have been previously served, the waiter turns an askance glance at Naruto after it’s become clear that Sasuke intends to remain basically catatonic.

Looking away from Sasuke staring blankly at the opposite wall, Naruto scratches the back of her head.

“Er, do you have cinnamon buns?”

They do, and the waiter promises to return with one for her along with Chouji’s various treats.

“So,” Temari says at last, rather pointedly addressing Sasuke even though her voice remains studiously bland. “Bad weekend?”

When Sasuke tilts her head, abandoning her cigarette on the saucer turned ashtray, Naruto realises she must have hit her quite harder than she thought. Rather, it felt like slugging her with all her strength, but she obviously can’t have done that, so she’s thought of it as more of a slap. Now she stares, briefly, at the small greenish knuckle-print on Sasuke’s cheekbone.

Stubbing out the cigarette, Sasuke replies, “In a manner of speaking.”

She wouldn’t be Sasuke if she’d just say, Sort of.

“Did Itachi neglect his medication again?” Temari is using the tone Mum does sometimes, her voice bland because otherwise it would be sharp.

“No,” says Sasuke. “For the last time, he’s not Gaara, he doesn’t turn into an evil psycho without the pills.”
“We know that,” Shikamaru interjects, before Naruto can tell Sasuke in no uncertain terms that Gaara is neither evil nor psychotic. She’d assumed his sister would. “I think what Temari is trying to get at is, we thought your father was out of town.”

“He is.”

Clearly Sasuke is not the only one who considers the proletariat to be objects, deaf as well as dumb.

“Then what?” Temari demands, her frown lines like trenches. Evidently pretty mini-adults have snapping points too. Naruto’s never doubted it, but the proof is reassuring. “You can’t tell me your mother would.”

“My mother,” Sasuke says, her fingers white around the cigarette grounded viciously into the saucer, “is not coordinated enough to hit me even if she’d dared to try.”

The balancing act is coming to a close, and Naruto doesn’t want it to anymore, not like this. Sasuke snapping looks to be a much less dignified affair than Temari doing it.

Her gaze stumbles over, sticks on, the edge of a scar peeking over Sasuke’s neckline, and all of a sudden Gaara’s tattoo seems not only melodramatic but moreover rather cheap.

Which isn’t fair, at all. However, at the moment Naruto is a good deal more concerned with the unfairness inherent in keeping her mouth shut. Jesus.

She is about to confess all, but the words are overrun by a high-pitched whine provoked by her knee imploding. Complicated home-life notwithstanding, even though it sounds like the sort that would be called fucked-up and abusive if it happened to somebody in Naruto’s income bracket, Sasuke can still kick like a bitch.

Like a bull, even.

Naruto remembers with astonishing clarity why she hit her in the first place. It’s just it’s the clarity of looking at a photograph – you can see all the details, and the colours are still vivid as in life, but it’s separate from you and how you see it has been changed, the time between the photo being taken and
you looking at it has twisted it somehow.

Provided she could smack Sasuke within ten minutes of finding out she had self-harm issues and had lost her boyfriend, it makes sense that she’d still do it, but everything feels different.

The waiter returns, startling her into banging her already abused knee into the table, and it’s a testament to the character building proprieties of being told to shut up or else for most of her academic life that Naruto manages to grunt out “thank you” instead of “son of a bitch”.

Chouji throws himself at his sweets with blissful abandon, and Naruto picks up her cinnamon bun. Shikamaru’s smooching off Temari’s tea, which Naruto thinks confirms his boyfriend status; Sasuke plays idly with the cigarette butts, and her hands are still the sexiest Naruto’s ever encountered, and once they too had a boyfriend’s to link with.

A year ago, give or take. It makes sense for Sasuke to have a boyfriend, she’s too pretty and popular and self-conscious for the lack of one to be accidental.

“How? Oh, yeah.” She takes a large bite of the bun, which really is extremely tasty.

“Am I what?”

Temari looks extraordinarily amused. “I believe he’s trying to ask if you’re hitting on Sasuke.”

Choking, Naruto realises that this is her cue to swallow before talking, or more specifically before listening, in the future.

How Sasuke has managed to smoke herself into a state of nirvana on unaltered tobacco Naruto will never know, but she’s smirking as she looks first at Temari, then at Naruto, and a long sultry look it is, before finally she returns her attention to Temari, sharing the sort-of-smile.
Naruto’s never seen her exactly grin before, in between the smirks and smiles and sneers. She’s also never previously known Sasuke to check her out, particularly not like this, so blatantly it felt like it was in jest but so brazenly it seemed almost real. The hot line of Sasuke’s gaze draws goose-bumps from her feet to the top of her head, the tension lying like a diadem over it even after Sasuke’s turned away.

“Well,” says Shikamaru, philosophically scooping sugar into Temari’s co-opted tea. “Why not? The two of you,” and he nods at Temari and Sasuke, “were quite hot together.”

Naruto splutters water all over the table.

Temari looks at her rather like you’d look at a cockroach engaging in a piece of performance art on your table.

“Yeah,” Chouji fills in with an expansive grin, recovering from his grief over the cinnamon bun that got away. “You see, there was this huge party, right after Gaara – well, last year.”

“Right after Gaara’d got properly medicated,” Shikamaru fills in, so Zen he’d be too serene in a Buddhist monastery.

“Right,” Chouji continues, “and there was this game of spin the bottle, and everybody was, nobody was really sober.”

In the sudden embarrassed silence everyone looks desperately uncomfortable. It’s kind of interesting how utterly different yet perfectly recognisable the same emotion looks on the varied faces.

It’s kind of even more interesting how everybody’s so contentiously not looking at Sasuke that outright staring appears polite.

“Why yes, we are all aware my judgement was somewhat less than pristine that evening. Moving on.”

For a moment nobody does, then Naruto blurts, “So is Gaara your twin brother? Because you’re the same age, right?” and the tension drains so abruptly she’s left bobbing. It’s a heady sensation.
“No,” Temari replies, her hands quite calm around her tea cup, which she holds the same way Naruto cups her hot chocolate on lonely, desperate winter evenings. “We’re not twins. We have different mothers.”

“Oh?”

“Well, yes. Kankurou and I are full siblings, Gaara’s a bit of an offshoot.”

Naruto takes it Kankurou and Temari are Daddy Suna’s kids with his wife, since a bit of an offshoot is pretty plainly highbrow slang for the mistress’ bastard offspring.

Focusing on that, or trying to, doesn’t change the fact that she can’t seem to stop compulsively imagining Sasuke kissing, those perfect hands knotted in another girl’s blond hair. Which she should stop, if nothing else then because there’s a line between appreciative curiosity and raw sexual fantasy, one that it would be damn skeezy to cross when it comes to people you actually know.

Not unusually, her staring has apparently been less inconspicuous than it ought to, which is embarrassing only, Naruto tells herself, only because after years of daydreaming through classes she should’ve achieved a modicum of discretion by now.

“Why so shocked?” Sasuke inquires, snakelike again; a cold, lazy predator without the forthright approach of its mammal counterparts. Naruto has never been especially fond of snakes, watched the nature programs featuring them with a repulsed sort of fascination. “After all this should be good news for you – girl on girl is hot enough even you might get some.”

If Sasuke thinks she can be coarse to someone who grew up considering the backstreets her save haven, she has another thing coming. At least Naruto wasn’t the only one who experienced difficulty concentrating on the intricacies of the Suna family structure.

“Nah,” she says. “I’m gonna be a rock star. I’ll have a billion groupies lusting after me.”

Sasuke quirks an eyebrow, almost friendly as she liberates a new cigarette from her pocket and sticks it between lips Naruto has no business looking at. “Do you even play an instrument?”
“I do great air guitar.”

At this point the gathering is broken up by the bus schedule, which dictates Chouji’s hasty departure.

“Er, right.” Naruto remembers when Shikamaru hands Sasuke the bills Chouji left, telling her with a shrug, your turn I think, take it as an incentive to actually order something next time. “How much do I owe?”

Sasuke gets to her feet in a movement like a shrug, the way snakes would stand if they could. “Don’t bother.”

“But Chouji paid,” Naruto says, mostly to Shikamaru since Sasuke has disappeared.

“Chouji also ate about thirty quid’s worth,” Shikamaru says. “Although I have the distinct impression he only left us twenty.”

“Oh.”

Temari smiles, her hip leaning comfortably against Shikamaru’s shoulder. “The draw-backs of dating the lower classes. And, Naruto – Kankurou’s birthday is coming up. As Gaara’s friend, of course you’re invited to the party.”

“I am? I mean, thanks! That’s – awesome.”

“I should certainly hope so,” Temari says. “Come on, Sasuke’s leaving.”

Outside the sun has sunk, coating everything with a film of thick orange-tinted gold. Admittedly this marks no great change for what vegetation has survived, as it has done so at the cost of any green or luscious qualities it may once have possessed.

“Well, we’re off this way,” Temari says, her hand around Shikamaru’s wrist in a grip vaguely reminiscent of Kiba fisting Akamaru’s leash. To be fair, Naruto reckons there’s no other viable option for holding hands with such an enormous slow-poke; if you’re not ready to drag, he’s not ready to walk.
“Bye,” she says, and then she’s alone with Sasuke, who hasn’t left but is reclining on the stone ledge bordering the wizened flower bed just outside the café. Naruto looks at her, and she’s the same as she’s always been. Smug, infuriating, selfish, bitchy. “I’m really sorry. I mean, I wasn’t before, really, but now – I’m, I’m sorry.”

A one-shouldered shrug later, Sasuke consults her watch and stands. “I bruise easily.”

“What? So?”

“So I think I got you rather worse.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Naruto insists, fisting her hands against the itch for violence, for contact, connection. “Violence is an unacceptable response.”

For possibly the first time she really agrees with the counsellors she’s parroting.

“For the record, I disagree.”

“Yeah, well, you disagree about almost everything. It just means you’re wrong.”

Sasuke smirks faintly, as though contemplating whether to reward a promising attempt with a reply.

Naruto hurries to continue, “You do martial arts, right?”

“I did.”

“Why d’you quit? Failed to meet the weight requirements?” It’s too bad she only bites her tongue after the quip is out. Mouth full of blood, she couldn’t honestly say if it was a challenge or a joke or the verbal equivalent of a punch.

“Actually I kicked someone too hard.”
“Yeah, that’s happened to me too. So, I thought, I practice, and Dad too actually, maybe we could…?”

“Why not? All right. Your place?”

“Sure. I mean, it’s just a couple of mats and stuff in the basement, but yeah.” There’s not enough air, the world gone strange and giddy, but she’s grinning, a bit wildly.

“Wednesday, then? Good. But, Naruto,” and she’s in half-profile, her face a new take on a very old picture; the lines are beauty of the timeless kind, how Mary and Juliet and Beatrice have always been depicted, but the abstract, rather garish shadow-play overlying it is modernistic, “you’re not my friend.”

“I don’t want to be your friend,” Naruto tells her, and wonders if she’s lying.

Glancing up from her preoccupation with yet another cigarette, Sasuke says, “With that sterling attitude, no wonder you’re so popular.”

“Because victim blaming is such an attractive quality in a person.” It’s never worked like that, never been about the victim, however for the first time she’s uncertain whether Sasuke understands this. But no matter how protected she is personally, surely Sasuke’s had plenty of exposure to the fact that popular people tend to have thoroughly unpleasant attitudes?

“I’ve no interest in being attractive to you.”

Naruto smiles, warm, at least partly because Sasuke could have but did not say, Indeed, you appear to find it madly attractive.

And Naruto never gets the last word, but getting the last word doesn’t mean you’re right, so she guesses she’s all right with that.
Kiba and Shino work through their honeymoon phase like they did the fight before it, settling back into the steady everyday comfort of a lifelong relationship; the ground has shifted, but Naruto discovers the earthquake did not swallow her house after all.

She likes Hinata better, but maybe Shino isn’t so bad.

Also, Haku is freaking lovely.

All of which means Naruto’s leaving the school premises in a rather up-beat mood, contentment pulsing through her like the beat of a kum ba ya ya drum.

Outside the gates fencing off the Sannin Academy property, apparently waiting for her, is the boy from the bullying incident.

Taking out his earphones and adjusting his cap with a toothy grin too young to be sleazy but too sleazy to be truly young, he is the image of a tweener skater boy. He is also swaggering up to her, hiking his trousers up every other step to keep them from exposing more than the topmost half of his underwear, the stream of students parting around him.

“Yo,” he says. “I’m Konohamaru. Er.” He pulls his jeans up again, seeming to gain strength from the ritualistic motion. “You were pretty cool the other day, I guess. And, well, you’re not really my type or anything, but you’re not all bad.” His lingering gaze reminds Naruto that although her upper body is flat, she has hips like a work mare. “So I thought we could, like, go out.”

Naruto swallows a raw, startled laugh.

From up on the first rung on the social ladder, looking down on everything she used to be, before people, before Sasuke, looked back at her – it’s a sickening thought, as though reality has twisted into something nasty and distorted, but for an instant she can understand, sort of, why people like Sasuke are able to think: people are bullied for a reason.

It’d make sense, of a sick kind, if they didn’t see the difference between being a freak and being a jerk.

The former can’t be helped, the latter very much can.
She wants nothing so much as kicking the entire stupid fucking social ladder into pieces. They could make a nice warm communal camp fire with the pieces, afterwards.

If Konohamaru had been a little older, she’d have told him where to stick it; if he’d been a little less removed from childhood, she might’ve ruffled his hair.

She says, “Nah. I find the whole white knight/damsel formerly in distress relationship dynamic pretty unhealthy.”

“Well?” Sasuke demands.

Wrestling her backpack from the steadily shrinking locker, Naruto reflects that it might have been a question, might even have been a passably polite inquiry, but in Sasuke’s mouth of course it’s a demand.

She has the looks for a light voice, but it’s shockingly rusty, like a much older woman’s throaty tones. Perhaps it’s because of the smoking, but if cigarettes gave you that particular voice everyone would smoke.

Except Naruto, of course.

It’s odd, but she’s patently sure Sasuke did not speak like this a year ago – there wouldn’t have been this rawness to her superciliousness, and definitely no curses.

“Hold your horses, Uchiha,” she mutters, the backpack tumbling free and hoisted over her shoulder in victory. “Right, c’mon.”

They hurry across the lawn, thankfully too fast for much conversation, and make it to the bus just before it leaves.
When Naruto was small and had trouble picking up new vocabulary, Mum used to play the dictionary game with her: they’d decide on any random object and come up with as many words as they could for which the item could work as a definition.

Perched beside her on the ratty seat in a public transportation vehicle, Sasuke is a stunning illustration of incongruity. A case could be made for pearls before swine, and possibly diamond in the rough, if you put a more literal spin on it.

The way she fusses with her dress, fastidious but helpless in the face of dirt as only someone raised around a cleaning staff can be, makes Naruto snicker. “Come on,” she says, fingers closing around Sasuke’s wrist to pull her down to sit properly. “I’m sure they’ve cleaned it since the vomiting incident.”

Sasuke glares at her in outrage and pulls her arm free, but sits without comment.

Gazing at her sideways, one eye out the window to keep the motion sickness at bay, Naruto remarks, “You look like a huffy China doll. Well, except they’d never paint such a mean face on one.”

Carriage stiff and every fold of the blue dress creased perfectly, Sasuke’s mouth thins in displeasure, before curving at the corner. “Why yes, I am well aware I am an art-piece of priceless and transcendent beauty, tragically caught in a frame of filth.”

“Yeah, right,” Naruto snorts. She’d have said vulnerable, where Sasuke put transcendent, but she doesn’t fancy another real fight. “More like a pretentious term project at art school.”

“Because you’re such an expert on the finer things in life.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says, stretching luxuriously all over the seat, an elbow smearing sweaty grease over the window. “I am.”

“You’re an – adequate diversion.” She pauses, the skirt rustling as she shifts her legs. “I guess what I said, before. That it’s still true.”

I could tell you anything, it doesn’t matter what you know because it doesn’t matter what you think.
Right this second, it doesn’t so much matter why exactly Sasuke can tell her anything, because Sasuke is an idiot anyway.

The next one it does.

Sasuke’s face is too much, her body, her hands; Naruto focuses on the ring circling her left thumb, loosely enough it bumps into the knuckle. She’d thought it was simple, but of course she should have known better than to assume Sasuke would wear unrefined jewellery. Engraved in the silver is an abstract pattern filled with translucent glitter that Naruto assumes is diamonds. Regardless of its owner, it’s very beautiful.

“You’re an idiot,” she says, looking up into Sasuke’s face in surprise when her own voice comes out thick. “But, Temari was still right. I really – I want to fuck you, you know that, right?”
Chapter 4

The words had to be spoken: she had to find out how Sasuke would react to them.

More importantly, she had to find out how she herself would react to them.

The answer, on both accounts, turns out to be, not much. Naruto is oddly calmer, the anxiety brightening into adrenaline.

Shrugging, Sasuke tells her to join the club.

It’s a long bus trip on the best of days, and given today’s traffic build-up it’s going to be over ninety minutes. The silence, their silence, can only last so long.

“So,” Naruto says, nestled comfortably in her seat, “Sakura was saying you’re a jerk about Haku. What’s the deal?”

It’s unlikely that this is what Sakura had in mind when she said she might have to pair them up after all, and could Naruto please check that this would work.

“Sakura’s over-sensitive.” A glance at the endless line of cars crawling in front of them convinces her to elaborate; with a sigh she even leans back into the seat, pulling her legs up so the skirt spills around her thighs, exposing several centimetres of skin. “Look, if Haku wants to live as a woman, that’s her business, and I do appreciate the separation of gender from physical sex. But this extreme fascination with gender identity is ideologically unsound – if gender is a social construct created to support a hierarchical dualism, then it’s really just a case of cultural Stockholm Syndrome, and you cannot be born the wrong gender because actually you’re not born any gender at all, that’s imposed on you later. It’s – I am a person. A female-bodied person, to be sure, but a person first and foremost.” She looks tired and cranky and alive, impassioned despite the lecture-style delivery, her fingertips rosy as she wipes sweat from her brow.

“But women are people. Persons. Also I don’t think it’s so much that Haku wants to live as a woman as that Haku is one.”

“Given our cultural context, I’m not so sure they are. At least, not the same way men are. And my point was that Haku isn’t a woman not because she happens to have a male body but because outside
of patriarchal socialisation there are no women.”


“Precisely. Which is why I’m opposed to the idea of trying to make people into just women, or just men for that matter. It’s, well, if I suddenly woke up a boy one morning, I don’t imagine that’d matter. That is, if I’d been born a boy I’d have been socialised differently, so of course that would’ve changed who I am, but.”

There’s this feeling, like reality has shifted unexpectedly into a higher gear, only unlike in the bathroom Naruto is less bloodthirsty and more effervescent, champagne bubbles bursting through her.

Sasuke is stupid so often, and in really creepy ways: not the simply dumb and can’t hep it sort of stupid that plagues Naruto in Math class but a disingenuous fascist kind of stupid. It takes a certain type of intelligence to twist reality the way Sasuke does, which makes it not only borderline evil but dangerous.

It’s the difference between a lowlife skinhead and Nietzsche. Whom Mum would throw a fit to hear called anything as simple as evil, but Naruto can’t see it any other way.

If you write that the vast majority of people are subhuman sheep that should be controlled by their betters, you’ve got to expect a certain amount of name-calling. Not to mention the racist stereotyping, or the frankly unbelievable sexism.

Given all this, it’s a giddy relief to discover that the reason she’s been fuming at Sasuke is that – well, that Sasuke’s mostly really right.

“I’d try wanking, I suppose,” Naruto confesses, pulling her legs up to sit sideways, her back to the window, motion sickness forgotten. “If I was suddenly turned into a boy, I mean.”

Sasuke, who presumably has quite a lot more experience with dicks, snorts. “Yeah,” she says rather softly. “I expect you would.”

“What? You wouldn’t?”
“Sure,” she says, taking the tone of an adult speaking to an ill-behaved child. Naruto’s brow furrows, both in annoyance and because thoughts linking Sasuke to masturbation should not be entertained in public. The skeez line is crossed, irreversibly, by the vivid idea of Sasuke flushed, touching, before Naruto snaps back into reality. Sasuke’s voice is livelier now, younger: “I’d be more interested in the social experiments, how differently I’d be interpreted, how the world would change around me. I mean, regardless of how one feels about it, in present society there are men and women, there are distinct gendered experiences.” For a second her face registers discomfort, then smoothes. “So if Haku is a woman in present society, then that’s how it is. It’s not the society I want, but, anyway it’s none of my business.”

“This is the death penalty thing all over again,” Naruto blurts, then hastily explains, “I mean you’re not acting like I thought you would.”

Except of course in the latter case Sasuke defied expectations by being upfront about her wrongness, which admittedly is a bit different from just plain not being wrong.

Naruto isn’t so much for words, she took Butler’s gender theory and ran with it; she couldn’t explain it, not coherently, doesn’t get the fancy terms, just feels the rightness in her bones. Practicing rather than theorising is what Mum calls it, but Naruto reckons terminology is less important. The theory people can do that, Naruto will be out there actually doing stuff.

Watching Sasuke talk is beautiful though, and, embarrassingly, inspiring in a way that teachers’ lectures or Mum’s insistence that you can get through this gradually and there’s no need to be ashamed for asking about the difficult bits have never been.

Then Sasuke says, “I do like the idea of a permanent solution, of something – final”, and Naruto splutters.

“What the hell? Do you actually remember how it turned out last time people started listening to a crazy guy with a final solution?”

Sasuke’s enormous black China doll eyes blink. “Did you really just compare me to Hitler?”

Naruto makes a gesture not quite like a shrug, indicating that the comparison made itself and was more or less sitting there waiting to be voiced.
“I’m fucking Jewish,” Sasuke snaps.

Shock and a pothole in the road combine to jolt Naruto into kneeing herself in the chest. “What? Seriously?”

“Yes.” There’s that exasperated adult tone again, stern rather than angry but not completely divorced from it.

Naruto’s too surprised to be insulted. “But, I mean – you don’t seem very religious.” It might make a certain amount of sense, though, because while Sasuke’s skin is among the whitest Naruto’s seen, white people don’t tend to come with hair and eyes so black they tint blue in sharp light. Sasuke passes as white to the casual eye but Naruto’s vaguely assumed an Asian grandparent. With the long history of wandering, she guesses it’s natural the Jewish community should be very multiethnic.

“I’m an atheist,” Sasuke tells her, then adds with what would be petulance save for the weariness, “It doesn’t matter. You’re Jewish if your mother’s Jewish, if she isn’t you’re not, it’s not something you can change.”

“Can’t you convert?”

“No,” Sasuke says flatly. “Look, you can’t just decide to become one of the Lord’s chosen; getting into paradise is a touch trickier than just hiring a removal company, you know?”

“I thought the whole idea was you’re supposed to choose to believe.” At least that’s how the non-crazy religious people have put it, which makes no sense to Naruto because believing isn’t something you choose, anymore than you choose your emotions. You know if it’s real, if it’s right, and if you can choose to turn it on or off then it most certainly isn’t. “I mean, I don’t, so I don’t know really, but.”

“No? I was sure you did.”

“You were?” She leans forward, feeling a smile form. You think about me, you are sure about me. “Why?”

“You seem the type.”
“I stopped,” she says. Sasuke’s cut at the raw, sensitive places before, but Naruto’s not voluntarily exposed them to her. “Or, I’m not sure I ever really started. But I definitely stopped when – one day I just realised, you know, not only hadn’t he saved me, but – I just really neither wanted nor needed him to. I mean, I never got the idea of a God Father letting people get hurt for their own good, it’s like, hello, there’s a reason criminal neglect is, you know, criminal. So either he doesn’t exist or he’s such an arsehole it’d be better if he didn’t.”

“Indeed.” She tilts her head to look out the window past Naruto’s shoulder. “How far out in the wilderness do you actually live?”

Twisting to check the increasingly narrow road, Naruto reports, “Another forty minutes, thereabouts.”

“Truly there is no god,” Sasuke complains dryly, arms crossed under her breasts. Naruto’s sure she doesn’t consciously intend to emphasise them.

Still Naruto tries to concentrate on them, because it would be easier if Sasuke’s fascination lay in her body.

“Hey,” she remembers. “Mum’s friend became a Jew.”

“Liberalism is cheating,” Sasuke says, then catches Naruto’s what? before it’s spoken, her answering voice steady and calloused as a hand: “Liberal Judaism is about belief not blood, that you can convert to. It’s just it’s a cop-out. Like the Christians conveniently forgetting all the nasty parts of the Old Testament.”

“Better that than the fundies, though. I mean I’d rather have someone who likes God because he’s nice than because he’s some dick on a revenge trip against humanity for their sins.” She shrugs, her shoulders jutting against the glass as the bus takes a left turn and asphalt is replaced by gravel. “People get so crazy about it, it’s weird, just look at the whole Muslims vs. Israel deal, they’ve been at it forever and it’s just getting worse.”

“Oh, fuck, you’re a Paki hugger. Of course you are.”

“One, shut the fuck up being racist.” After years of living next door to Mrs Afareen, the admonishing is automatic, vehement. Still, although Sasuke looks and certainly acts white, it’s pretty weird
accusing a Jew of racism, especially since Naruto herself is white to the bone. “Two, well yeah, you can’t just take someone else’s land.”

“Actually that is how every nation was made.”

“It’s still wrong. Fuck’s sake, you can’t treat people like that!” This is definitely the death penalty argument déjà entendu, and nothing has changed but everything has shifted, twisted; deepened somehow

There’s still the thrill of getting furiously up close to another person.

Naruto saying, you can’t treat people like that, burning with it, because half the time Sasuke does.

“I’d like to see you act calm and reasonable surrounded year after year by people who believe you don’t even deserve to exist.” Ignoring Naruto’s blank stare, casually shocking the air out of her, and Naruto honestly could not say whether she did it on purpose, Sasuke continues, “Well, I’d like to see you act calm and reasonable period. More importantly, aren’t you a socialist? I thought you lot were of the opinion land can’t be owned.”

Still reeling, Naruto spits, “That’s obviously sort of an everybody or nobody deal, or it won’t work.” It’s unclear if the question has anything to do with socialism when she adds, too defensively to be truly belligerent, “What do you know, anyway?”

“That it doesn’t seem to work particularly well in practice.” In Naruto’s mind haughty is an expression stuck firmly in works of melodrama, something to describe a fantasy princess or the villain threatening her, but Sasuke brings it alive in the mundane setting of the bus. “Actually, it doesn’t always work so well in theory either.”

“You’ve read Marxist theory?”

“Some, yes. Sakura got hung up on Jameson recently, I gave in to curiosity.”

Suddenly Naruto wishes very much to have read Jameson, whoever he is. While the Sasuke Uchiha CliffsNotes version is sure to be less accurate and more speckled with insults than Mum’s, it’s also certain to be a good deal more entertaining, but she’ll wade through hell and high water before she admits ignorance to Sasuke. “Cool,” she says.
“Not really. Jameson’s rubbish. If you insist on reading Marxist theory, at the very least read Althusser or Adorno.”

This swiftly confirms that almost-fascist, no doubt capitalist Sasuke is familiar with a greater number of Big Name Marxists than Naruto. Wow.

This either says something incredibly odd and interesting about Sasuke or something equally denigrating about Naruto.

“Why would you read all that stuff?”

Naruto knows from the experience of helping Mum search for quotes one horrible afternoon when all the careful bookmarks had been lost during the move that it’s not exactly light entertainment to slog through this kind of texts. No doubt they’ve broken lesser minds.

“I figured as a capitalist I’d better know mine enemy,” Sasuke says lightly.

“But Adorno’s about art. You read Marxist art theory.”

“Kakashi was a painter,” Sasuke says tightly, carefully, looking at something outside, beyond Naruto’s shoulder. “He did.”

“Oh,” says Naruto, struck silent, wanting to reach out, kindly, softly, only she doesn’t know how to do that, be that, not with Sasuke. There’s only one person this Kakashi could be, and probably Sasuke wouldn’t want Naruto’s sympathy, much less her touch, but then Sasuke rarely knows what’s good for her. “Er, Adorno, he’s the one who wrote about poetry, right?”

“Well,” says Sasuke. “He wrote about ‘the subject’s unquenchable erotic longing to be freed from itself in and through the Other.’” The citation marks are tangible but the quote doesn’t come out rehearsed: more like a song, a beautiful, though incomprehensible, fragment remembered by heart but spoken spontaneously, with feeling. She’d like to hear Sasuke sing. “Look, it’s complicated and you’re stupid. Another time.”

“Yeah,” Naruto agrees. Stupid, smiling: there’s going to be another time. “This is our stop, anyway.”
“Right.” Sasuke rises with precision but also with haste belying her composure.

There were not many people on the bus to start with, and at this point it’s abandoned, the two of them stranded with only the driver and each other.

Clearly, Sasuke has excellent reason to be eager to leave it.

Sasuke Uchiha, undisputed Queen Bitch of Sannin Academy, was possibly the last person Naruto expected to bring home, but here they are, at the bus stop only a couple hundred metres from her house.

“Will your parents be home?” Sasuke asks, in the particular toneless voice straight A students across the country have mastered, the one teachers think of as polite and Naruto shudders at the snideness of.

“I don’t think so. Dad’ll be home for dinner, Mum too probably.”

Sasuke nods, and they’re here, passing through the garden, Naruto digging through her pockets for the key, then leading the way through the crowded hallway into the kitchen. Unlike their old place, this is a house Naruto has seen from the outsider’s perspective many times, still sees from the outside every day, though the strangeness is blurring into familiar changes, but she can’t know how it looks to Sasuke.

Probably like the servants’ quarters, though.

After much agonising she decided yesterday that Sasuke visiting didn’t merit any cleaning, then broke and cleaned up anyway because not doing it would be ostentatious. Now the wiped counters and washed dishes are a mocking contrast to the half-filled moving boxes littering the floor, piled up in heaps in the corners.

Naruto likes the house, with the chest-high counters and yellow-painted Ikea furniture, but it’s odd having Sasuke in the middle of it.

“So, like, do you want something to drink?”
“I came here to fight,” Sasuke says, breaking the awkwardness and the homeliness both. “I’ve already endured a bus trip through purgatory for it.”

Taking her eyes off Sasuke long enough to open the basement door is an incredibly tense experience, Sasuke’s attention like a shiver up her back as she turns the handle. “Right through here. Have you got a change of clothes? Okay, go on down and I’ll just get my stuff upstairs.”

Sasuke descends the steps, her dress extremely blue in the half-dark before she finds the light-switch; Naruto turns her back and jogs upstairs to dump her school stuff and hurry into the gym clothes. The faded gray tshirt under her bed smells more of dust than of detergent, but at least there’s no hint of sweat.

The underground chill has smeared gooseflesh over Sasuke’s arms, exposed by the tank top looking, for a moment, almost like a corset, wound tight around Sasuke’s impossibly narrow waist.

“I didn’t bring – I’ll go back for a pair of shoes,” Naruto says. Dad prefers them both barefoot, but her trainers have served their purpose in scuffles, as good to kick in as to run in.

“Don’t bother.” Sasuke kicks hers off, striking a practiced stance, one heel resting against the edge of the mat. It bears stitches from frequent use, was bought off a gym teacher who’d finally got the budget to invest in a replacement, but it works well enough.

Naruto steps forward, taking distant note of Sasuke’s things neatly arranged on the one chair, just beside the not yet mounted sandbag and, admittedly, not so distant note of Sasuke’s breasts being suddenly very noticeable in the little top.

Beyond being appealing, they’re a relief: most of Sasuke is eating disorder skinny, the trousers hanging off the bones of her hips where Naruto’s bite softly into flesh, making an indentation there’s not enough mass on Sasuke to form, but provided Sasuke’s a bit young for silicon a minimum of extra fat is needed for that kind of boobs.

Then Sasuke brings her arms up, still measured and confident and careful, and Naruto follows her onto the mat, circling, feeling the sticky material under her feet and the hefty pulse in her hands.

She fights on instinct and impulse, sudden tricks and intuitions, has played around with Dad and fought for too real with too many kids. Sasuke has proper training and moves in patterns, breaking
them with calculation.

They neither of them follow the rules of holding back; there’s an almost languid first few minutes, the fight getting its feet, the jabs testing soft, but the violence spirals fast and furious.

There’s tumbling and crashing, Sasuke feinting and twisting and turning everything around and around, like a demented carousel, and Naruto hits her everywhere she can, kicking pushing pulling as they go rolling. Larger and heavier are good, but then it’s pretty obvious that everyone Sasuke’s ever fought has probably had better reach and more bulk, and certainly Naruto never expected it to stop her.

For a moment she’s breathing into Sasuke’s ear, her fingers scrambling over the sudden roughness of the scar, a knee burying in her thigh.

Forcing herself past a jabbing elbow, Naruto fists Sasuke’s stomach and twines their legs, falling over Sasuke for a bright instant before the movement pushes her sideways, and Sasuke eels away, on her feet again and furious, but a good kind of furious, Naruto’s chest aching with new bruises she didn’t notice getting as she too scrambles to her feet, just out of range, agonisingly aware of every minute shift of Sasuke’s body.

Just after a headbutt there’s an intrusion, a sound that’s not Sasuke’s breathing or Naruto’s heartbeat, and Sasuke kicks her twice in the ribs before Naruto catches her ankle, both of them pausing to listen.

“Naruto? You down here?” Dad’s footsteps are louder than usual, over the insane disco beat of her pulse.

“Yeah,” she calls back. “Be right up.” With a certain regret she lets Sasuke retract her leg. The ankle fit in her hand, tendons twitching hard enough to tickle under the sweat-slick skin. Like a clown or a puppy, Naruto’s hands and feet are too large, out of proportion with the rest of her body except for the extensive hips; she hasn’t always been glad for it. “Guess we got kind of carried away, huh?”

“I suppose,” Sasuke agrees, stepping off the mat with feet Naruto has now discovered to be lined and dotted with round black patches.

“Don’t worry, I’ll beat you into the ground next time.”
“You could barely keep up,” Sasuke scoffs, sweat pearling like glitter on her cheek.

“Whose foot got captured just now?” Naruto taunts, moving towards the steps. “Grab your stuff, shower’s upstairs.”

“If we hadn’t been interrupted, you would’ve realised why I let you do that,” Sasuke insists behind her.

“There you are,” says Dad from over by the oven, then registers Sasuke. “Oh, hello.”

It must be hours later, the kitchen light on and dinner cooking.

Sasuke says, “Hello, I’m Sasuke, it’s nice to meet you” in her for-adults voice. Nearly everybody has one, although Naruto’s is more curt than polite: what differentiates Sasuke’s from almost everyone else’s is its taking on the quality of an adult speaking to another adult.

“This way,” Naruto says, pulling Sasuke along up the stairs and towards the bathroom. The door to her bedroom is open but Sasuke doesn’t look.

Thankfully the bathroom’s always clean. Mum enjoys a spot of bohemianism and Dad, well, Dad works in a garage, but he’s anal about the toilet, so the tile is shining, though rather worn.

“I’ll get you a towel,” Naruto offers. “Er, feel free to use anything else you want.”

On her return she finds Sasuke taking off her clothes.

Naruto freezes in the doorway, sweating again, her skin hot and tight, as though it’s been thrown in with the wrong batch of laundry and come out shrunken and red.

Her expectation of Sasuke’s back, gradually revealed as Sasuke pulls the tank top over her head, as a manifestation of rose prose, as blandly perfect, is so strong that for a moment it lays superimposed over reality, which is made of hollows and a few scars, and something, just above the slipping waistline of her trousers, that may actually be freckles.
Groves of shadow nestle under every individual bone of Sasuke’s ribcage, skin pulled taut over the jutting vertebrae climbing her back. It looks like vivisection, like experimental art, with nothing really pretty about it.

What makes it porn is Sasuke looking at her over her shoulder, the same way she did in the basement.

When Naruto said, *I want to fuck you* it was theoretical truth – she thought she did, with enough awareness and enough distance to test the words. It’s real now on a physical level, deeper than Naruto can make words reach, real like her cunt cramping and if she stays she’s going to touch her.

For years Naruto’s miniscule impulse control has been trained in headmaster offices to little avail; why should she not touch her, except there was another bathroom, in which Sasuke said, *this guy* with a hint of vomit still on her breath.

“Towel,” Naruto offers, and Sasuke expresses her gratitude by shutting the door in her face.

Naruto butchers stretching exercises, sweaty and antsy, because this shit is crazy, but happy all the same because it’s never been like this before, has never been Sasuke alive with rightness and snarky with wrongness and kicking her in the stomach with a grin. Sooner than she’d have honestly expected, and possibly due to Sasuke preferring to limit her exposure to poor people germs, the shower is turned off, and Naruto jerks upright, her face bright red from bending to touch her toes. “All done?”

“All done.” She’s back in the dress, which makes her beautiful by adding another twenty pounds to her appearance. It’s the kind of dress Naruto’d expect to see on Ino, or Sakura – cut carefully just loose enough to hide any extra fat, suggest a model silhouette. It makes Sasuke’s very real weight issues seem fake, a feat of expensive tailoring.

Naruto sidles past her, their hands brushing in a badly timed high-five before she’s locked in, pulling sweat-stuck clothes off and discovering that Sasuke too leaves wet towels on the floor.

Naruto’s grabbed her wrist before, and certainly there was hand-to-hand contact during the fight, but responding, however hesitantly, to the high-five is the first time Sasuke’s touched her just because. The imprint of Sasuke’s knuckles is swelling red and sore on the inside of her fingers, and Naruto wants to hold her hand, wants to weave their fingers together and press them between her legs.
She manhandles her clothes into the laundry basket and steps under the shower.

Returning scrubbed and wearing her favourite shirt, she finds Sasuke has made herself quite comfortable in Naruto’s room. Really there’s no call surprise: where else would she have gone? Hallways are not a suitable frolicking ground, seeing as Sasuke Uchiha isn’t the type to sit on floors.

“Hey,” she says, and Sasuke looks up from where she’s sitting cross-legged on the bed perusing Naruto’s bedside stack of comics. Buffy and Spiderman volumes are fanned out on the floor, thankfully obscuring the odd issue of Anita Blake. She hurries across the cold floorboards, her bare feet jubilant to reach the rug, and plops down next to Sasuke. She hasn’t felt large since the growth-spurt that hit with puberty, but she’s lanky and gangly next to Sasuke, doesn’t know what to do with herself to contain this awkward, helpless feeling of belonging.

Sasuke closes Neon Genesis Evangelion 8 and places it atop a volume of Battle Angel Alita. “When does the next bus leave?”

“Er, shit,” Naruto tries, rubbing at the back of her head. “Last one was hours ago. I’m sorry, okay, I didn’t think about it.”

“Of course you didn’t,” Sasuke says. “I should have known better.”

“Wait,” Naruto snaps back to attention, halting Sasuke’s fingers busy with her mobile. She is intensely, ridiculously, aware of her own body and its proximity to Sasuke: belonging is what she’s been chasing after, sort of, her whole life, and it hasn’t always been sitting next to her. Countless times it’s drawn her in, Dad’s or Kiba’s arm draped across her shoulders, but she’s never wanted to fuck Kiba and she can’t pretend it’s the same. “Look, it’s fine, there are buses and commuter trains over by Bridge Station, Mum or Dad’ll drive you, it’s ten minutes away tops.”

“I wouldn’t want to impose,” Sasuke says in quite possibly the snottiest voice Naruto has ever heard. It’s weird, in a funny comforting way, how the lack of insults still translates it to yes, thanks.

Hidden treasure-deep silence descends in the kitchen after Sasuke’s declined the dinner invitation and Mum’s bundled her into the car, leaving Naruto stuck on sauce guarding duty.

“You had fun, I take it?” Dad asks eventually, his face a mess of lines and wrinkles as he concentrates on seasoning the root vegetables. Fancy dishes are apparently required for Tsunade
coming to dinner this weekend, and practice is probably a good idea.

“Yeah,” she beams. “It was bloody awesome, I haven’t really fought somebody in forever, not really, it was – awesome.”

Dad smiles sideways, careful, maybe just of the dish but maybe of her, too. “She’s … very pretty.”

“No shit. Rich as hell, too.” Total enemy of the people, I get it, okay.

“I could tell,” Dad agrees, kneeling to tamper with the oven, his shoulder a warm pressure against her hip. “I thought the prettiness was more noticeable, though.” Flushed hot, Naruto can hardly deny this. “She’s a lot different from your other friends.”

“We aren’t exactly friends.”

“No? You seemed plenty friendly to me.”

“Shut up,” Naruto grins, warm and tingly with spent adrenaline, flushed with exercise and cooking and the tense exquisite maddening contact with Sasuke.

Who really isn’t her friend, or particularly friendly, except she was today. Sort of.

Thinking about pushing that blue skirt up Sasuke’s white legs, over knees and thighs and hips, is not constructive, but Naruto’s damned if she’s able to stop. Probably she won’t be until she’s had some alone time with her hand down her knickers, infuriating truth be told.

It’s not what she should focus on, but being pretty matters, regardless of whether she thinks it should, which she very much doesn’t, only it’s never mattered quite this much before. Beautiful people always get away with crap uglies wouldn’t, can smile themselves to new chances, which is endearing on one level even as it’s sickening on another.

Money tells, Tsunade says, but Dad’s right: you see the pretty before you see the rich.
To an extent, anyway. Ino’s pretty, she supposes, but it’s never mattered, or at least doesn’t anymore, because Ino lacks the charisma to keep it compelling. Also she vaguely recalls that the first time she saw Gaara he made her think of nothing so much as the bastard lovechild of a toad and a badger which had been managing its emo pain by indulging in rat poison, and now he registers as sort of cute.

Of course, all of this will be moot when Naruto conquers the world as history’s first ugly-and-proud rock star, reforming society in her glittering image.

Possibly she could make room for Sasuke to be her fangirl.

“Someone’s happy,” Mum says, looking up from her stack of what Naruto assumes to be essays.

Dad turns from the coffee pot, a baggy shadow framed by the window. “Someone’s awake. Did I oversleep?”

Naruto sticks out her tongue, accepting the juice Mum hands her. The world is bright and shiny, unspoilt by the ungodly hour, her body loose and happy from the exercise, aching softly in the best kind of way and still bubbly with relief.

That is, and she rubs uncomfortably at her face, she’s never actually wanked to thoughts of someone she knows before, because of the enormous icky factor, and she’s still sort of abstractedly grossed out about it, but there came a point yesterday evening when it became frustratingly obvious that the only way to stop the dirty daydreams was to act on them, and god, she hasn’t come that hard in years. Slept like a valiumed baby in sheets smelling comfortingly of cunt and cotton.

As she swallows the last of her toast, her brain gradually kicking in despite seven a.m. not falling within its normal working hours, it suddenly occurs to her to wonder if Sasuke’s straight.

Or, Naruto doesn’t believe in straightness as anything more essential than being prejudiced and not having met the right guy or girl to change your mind, but she reckons Sasuke might.

Mind, not that that will ultimately make any difference, as Naruto’s never backed down from a challenge, but it’d probably be pretty useful information. At least she was cool with kissing Temari,
and entirely unruffled to hear Naruto wants her, so whatever other faults she may have she’s hardly homophobic.

“Honey, bathroom now or you’ll be late again.”

“Ah, right, sure,” Naruto mumbles, wiping excess butter off on the sleepshirt. She’s humming to herself as she goes, inadvertently and rather stupidly sprinkling the shirt with toothpaste but not stopping until she’s running for the bus again and needs her breath for spurting.

Sasuke merely nods when Naruto comes upon her outside the classroom, and – well, she’d hardly been expecting Sasuke to fall passionately into her arms, and it’s progress. Naruto grins at her before Kiba drags her inside, grumbling about blocked doorways, and stop fucking waving, you ridiculous prat.

The anti-ism project is finally taking off, and Naruto spends a depressing amount of time putting up flyers. Her initial demands for assistance were met by Kiba’s laughter and middle finger, but he changed his mind with extreme and gratifying haste upon discovering that Hinata too has been roped into flyer-duty, no doubt courtesy of Sakura and her sneaky wiles.

It’d be nice, if she weren’t so hung up on Sasuke, to develop an embarrassingly huge crush on Sakura, who’s the sort of person who deserves being crushed on, deserves it so much and for the kind of reasons that mean she rarely is.

Of course, after Lee got on his knees in the cafeteria to declare her his cherry blossom of love, with petals sweet and fair, Sakura may actually be relieved not to have more suitors.

Tacking the millionth flyer to the main notice board, which may possibly be cheating since it already has a set of quadruplets sitting there, Naruto discovers a copy of Lee’s ill-fated sonnet and chokes on the revelation that the petal line was followed by talk of a stem. And being mounted.

“My fucking god,” Kiba says, coming up to read over her shoulder. “Fuck, I wish I’d heard that bit.”

“I think it was sweet of him,” Hinata opinions shyly. “It’s a little, er… inappropriate, but I’m sure he meant well. He spent hours on it, too.”

If that itself didn’t do it, then the sight of Kiba courting an aneurysm stopping himself either cursing
or laughing would be enough to send Naruto into stitches.

Then there’s the project commencing in earnest, and while Iruka’s introductory lecture is about as rousing as could be expected, at least they get out of Science. About which, well, Naruto’s hoping she made a damn good impression slicing up the frog last week, because while she may have the iron-lined stomach and steady hands excellent for dissection, that’s about as far as her competence reaches. Before fully committing to her rock star future, she used to want to be a vet, but although she’d be great at the actual job she’d never manage the education.

Thankfully Iruka’s verbosity is limited by time-constraints, and Tsunade’s short addendum makes for a refreshing change of pace.

“Is she…?” she whispers to Kiba.

“Drunk?” he finishes. “Hell knows, but I hear a couple of seniors got shit-faced for a week on the stuff they found breaking into her office last year.”

“If Shizune follows Iruka’s example, I could use some of that myself.”

“Amen to that,” Kiba agrees, but it turns out Shizune keeps her lecture short and sweet, directing them to the first seminars almost at once.

They end up in a classroom with all the chairs angled towards the front, where Neji and Temari get busy unpacking the invisible knapsack of white privilege.

Temari is a gleeful surprise of distilled awesome, but the real question is how Neji got roped into co-hosting duty. His unruffledness is so complete, so smooth, that it’s obvious it’s a carefully, painstakingly crafted illusion.

That or he is a really very creepy combination of a university professor and a Zen monk.

Also it stands to reason, no matter how suave Neji is, that explaining Racism 101 to and fielding sometimes really rather offensive comments from a bunch of clueless white people cannot be a particularly comfortable experience for a person of colour. Sannin Academy caters to the privileged – the school is so white it might as well have been practicing racial segregation.
It’s a trite comparison, but the remembered discomfort of being surrounded by aggressively straight people crawls under her skin, and it’s not like there’s a PoC closet for Neji to stay in, even if he’d wanted to.

The second seminar, which occurs the next day, is a rather less Zen affair. Among its many other attractions, it features a few spectacular meltdowns courtesy of Naruto, and quite a lot of tactful explaining from Sakura. In Naruto’s opinion its best moment is Sasuke verbally bitch-slapping a guy so hard he probably got whiplash, but, well, this wasn’t really what she expected she was signing up for. It’s not on her to justify her desire for people not to be ignorant arsewipes, she doesn’t enjoy being treated like some fucking learning experience.

All right, so a lot of the time she doesn’t mind explaining, people wanting to know better is a good thing and should be encouraged, or if that fails enforced by fist, but god, there’s a limit, and also she’s just not very good at it.

“Because not doing it makes you a bigoted shitface prime for shunning, you enormous dickhead,” is not the Iruka-approved answer to whinage about why people should refrain from arseholery. She’d like a realer, flashier, more immediate scene than the classroom with all its stupid rules and carefully constructed sentences.

Still, the teachers seem pleased, for the most part, and Shizune’s happy with them when History rolls around, happy enough to restrain herself to a stern glare when Naruto comes in late.

She makes it just in time for the announcement of the upcoming group project. They’re not big on those in Sannin, but she supposes it had to happen sooner or later.

She looks around her, a little wildly, because everything has been so good but her pulse still jumps instinctively at the words group project. She shouldn’t have been late, or maybe that was actually a mercy, because most everyone seems already to be paired up. Kiba and Shino have managed to snag Hinata, Chouji’s with Lee and a Leia-haired girl whose name Naruto loses track of.

This will be great, she tells herself. I am awesome and this will be an awesome project with an awesome group.

Close by there’s Shikamaru, once again framed by Temari and Sasuke on either side, which leaves Naruto looking at Sakura tentatively rearranging her notes and Neji being smooth and untouchable and really rather annoyed.
This has promise, Naruto decides. She believes it a lot more after the swift silent negotiation apparently taking place around her is over and Sasuke and Sakura swap groups.
Chapter 5

Dinner with Tsunade is a tense affair, which on Naruto’s part was less than unexpected, as headmistresses are not among her favourite things. Last time she saw this one, she got a tongue-lashing so hard her skin is still pink from it under Granny Stranger’s unreadable eyes.

In the bathroom that time – it’s not the hardest, by far, that Naruto’s hit someone, nor even, anymore, the hardest she’s hit Sasuke.

It’s still possibly the hit that’s hit her the strongest.

She eats the slightly burnt meat and the slightly soggy root vegs and the slightly sour sauce, easing up progressively as Tsunade empties her wine glass and then the bottle. Mum and Dad don’t want Naruto drinking socially, or preferably at all though they’ve bowed to reality on that one, but frankly it seems unrealistic, or at the very least astronomically hypocritical, for Tsunade to mind.

Even faking it as a teetotaller, Naruto’s far and away the most comfortable person around the table, which is saying some decidedly sad things about the purported magic of alcohol, but all in all Tsunade is a pretty good grandmother. Not that Naruto has anything to compare her to, but once they leave stilted questions about schoolwork behind to roam the great wide savannah of anecdotes and jokes it’s very clear indeed that it could’ve been worse.

Expelled-worse, even.

Still when the phone rings she fumbles out of a punchline and into the hallway, locating her wayward mobile in her backpack. “Yeah?”

It turns out to be Gaara, calling to invite her to/demand her presence at his house tomorrow. “It’s,” he says. “Temari’s having a few people over. I’m required to participate.”

“Just admit you’re pining for me, there’s no shame in it.”

“House is on Maple Street,” Gaara goes on unperturbed. “Right where it crosses The Boulevard.”
“See you tomorrow,” Naruto says, and doesn’t doubt it until just shy of seventeen hours later, a little groggy from napping on the bus and squinting against the sunlight glinting off every street sign. The temperature has finally dropped a little, to the point that wearing long sleeves is an option if you keep to the shadows, but the brightness tears her eyes.

Maple Street is a lame cover name for what is clearly Rich and Flaunting It Street; central, hushed, giving the silence is gold adage a very literal cast. Somehow she’d expected him to live in a house, a mansion like in the movies, with acres of garden to fence it in. It’s stupid, really, when you think about it, of course there aren’t mansion houses in the middle of a city, but the idea of Rich People is still fictional, something you watch on tv not something you go to school with.

Save now she does, and while the money remains abstract knowledge, she’s caught on to the Sabakus being among the wealthiest of the lot. Which means she ought to have expected the multi-storey buildings on this residential street lying like a secret in the maze of hot and happening central, and now she just needs to figure out which building is Gaara’s. He said the one just before Maple crosses Boulevard, didn’t he?

Right before it crosses Blue Boulevard a rounded, off-white concrete stem rises; right before the intersection with Henderson Boulevard there’s a rectangular, grey one; and right before Fifth Boulevard a simpler house crouches.

“Well, fuck,” she mutters, patting herself down with increasing agitation until she finds the mobile hidden improbably in her sleeve. She hasn’t managed the speed dial function yet, has to do it the messy way with the telephone book.

“Sorry,” Gaara says. “I forgot you’re new. The Boulevard is Blue Boulevard. Henderson is Henderson and Fifth is Fifth.”

Oddly that makes her feel more out of place than the never quite articulated knowledge that even a single month’s rent here, if people even rent when they have that kind of money, probably they just buy, don’t they? But if they did rent that a month in one of these buildings would cost more than Naruto’s new house, a large part of the attraction of which is the same as with second hand clothes: someone else has already worn them in, they come familiar and dear, to someone else if not yet to you.

She enters the concrete stem and checks the impulse to wave at the doorman, or worse make a face at him, and sort of nods, slipping into the lift. It’s large as the lifts in hospital shows, with mirrors and carpet and gilded edges that Naruto touches with a fingertip to see if the gilding is real or just paint. The warming metal pressed smooth and impersonal against her skin reveals nothing.
The seventh floor arrives before she’s ready to abandon the mystery of how to tell if gilding is fake; chewing her knuckle in thought she steps off the lift and into what would be the hallway in a normal house but seems too big and official to be called that. It’s an atrium maybe, with a stone floor and indoor trees. “Er, hello?”

“You made it.” Temari leans over the railing at the top of a staircase.


“Well, you are standing in the hallway,” Temari says dryly, so apparently it can still be called that. “Come on up.”

Upstairs is clearly where the family does its living. There are still pieces of dark heavy furniture and large paintings that Naruto thinks aren’t reproductions, but also colours and messes.

“It’s a lot more Gossip Girl than The O. C.,” she’s saying as Temari leads her into a bright room housing a staggering amount of equipment.

“That it is,” agrees a heavily made-up boy fiddling with a gaming console. “Also, hi. I’m Kankurou.” He leers, dropping his console to lean against the couch, which is leather and surprisingly a bit worn around the edges, and also, far less surprisingly, an excellent daybed for Shikamaru. “I take it you’re Gaara’s bird.”

“Shut up,” Gaara orders from his position cross-legged on the floor. He doesn’t turn around.

“Ahh, lighten up,” Kankurou says, winking at Naruto. “You don’t give me nearly enough material to work with, embarrassing you. Makes me feel remiss in my brotherly duties, that. So, how’d you two lovebirds meet?”

“Fuck’s sake,” Gaara says. “She’s a dyke. She fancies Sasuke.”


“You’re not pining for Sasuke?” Temari asks, kindly but the sort of kindly that a cat may express
towards a mouse it plans to play long and hard with.

“Well,” says Naruto, who despairs that plausible deniability is rather out the window after you’ve told the object of your affections that you want her in the naked way. “Yes. But, but I’d still – want. If she were a guy. So.”

“Naughty,” Kankurou says and laughs. “Do let me watch if you get her drunk.”

As indicated by the abrupt stony silence, he is the only one amused by the idea.

“What? Come on, what else are we inviting her to my party for? I’d kill to see Sasuke with a blond chick not my sister.”

“Shut the fuck up right now,” Gaara says, still without turning, and this time it’s wariness not good humour that curves Kankurou’s face. “Come play Mario Cart with me, Naruto.”

“Fine,” Naruto says, passing by Kankurou and Shikamaru to sprawl beside Gaara in front of the widescreen. “Just don’t come crying to me when I wipe the track with you.”

Beyond a snort Gaara doesn’t reply verbally, but Naruto’s gaming control is thrown at her with barely restrained aggression.

It’s a long and heated battle, and Gaara cheats by being boringly impervious to her taunts, but Naruto does quite well for herself. Six wins out of ten is a championship, even if Shikamaru proceeds to ruin her triumph by acing the game in his sleep.

“Don’t worry,” Kankurou offers ruefully. “He does it to all of us.”

Even so Naruto did beat Gaara, which means he can no longer shrink from his destiny as a Rock Band drummer. Kankurou is a very enthusiastic singer, and Naruto gets into a bout of heated guitar master competition with Temari.

Who as it turns out can actually play the instrument, but declares this to be more of a hindrance than a help.
It’s after hours of laughing and arguing and fierce competition that Naruto finds herself alone with Temari in the kitchen, filling glasses with inventive mixtures of soda and alcohol. Well, nominally alone, as Shikamaru, having apparently objected to keeping staff at some previous point, was brought along to help carry but has dozed off on the table.

For a moment, as Temari gives her a startlingly real look, Naruto suspects that this is tact on his part, subterfuge. She forgets it when Temari speaks.

“You’re a good person,” Temari says, with none of that you seem like a nice girl nonsense. “They’re not. You need to understand that.”

“What?”

“Well of course I’m not either,” Temari amends, “but that’s not the point, that won’t hurt you. They will, this will, if you let it. So just, be careful with yourself.”

“What?” Naruto objects anew, as Temari swishes away. “What does that even mean?”

“It means,” Shikamaru speaks up, a little muffled, “that you’re being troublesome. It means if Gaara gets you alone after he’s forgotten his meds it won’t matter that it’s not his fault he’s sick. He’s hurt people, really hurt people. Also it means Sasuke’s so far out of your league she might as well be in a different galaxy.” He stretches, putting a finger against one of the glasses and drawing stick figures in the condensation. “Look, this is all a big needless bother, but Temari’s decided she likes you now, or at least that Gaara does, and maybe Sasuke, and Sasuke can be fucking callous with the people she even notices, so. Loneliness and hormones are the root of all evil and make everything worse. Just think about it.”

He leaves too and Naruto doesn’t want to follow him back to the playroom anymore.

Gaara finds her in the kitchen mute and dumb with a sick, winded sort of enraged denial, her knuckles perfectly steady but white as ice around the counter.

“What’s up?” His head is tilted a little to the side, and she thinks maybe this is Gaara-speak for, Are you all right?
“Nothing,” she says. “It’s fine. You should’ve told me they’re all crazy.”

His careful, bird-tilted gaze is very eloquent.

“No, really,” Naruto says. “You’re the normal one.”

Sasuke said, *I kicked someone too hard.*

And Naruto said, *Yeah, said, That’s happened to me too.*

Only Naruto’s version of too hard is probably a lot more like Gaara’s than like Sasuke’s. Because Sasuke might be creepily pro-Nietzsche in theory and has maybe broken someone’s leg, but Sasuke isn’t a berserker type. She’s a nasty bitch but she’s in control of herself, she’s sanitary in her meanness, she cuts with words so you’ll cry but you won’t bleed. Or so that if you do bleed she has plausible deniability.

Naruto would never do that, but if things like intent and self-defence and *I didn’t mean to* are just excuses and maybe even lies, and if something being really wrong means there can’t be any justifications or it wouldn’t be really wrong, then Naruto’s done some bad stuff.

Sasuke’s a mean girl but Naruto’s a bad girl. Or bad boy fits better, the danger clinging to bad girl is of a moral and venereal kind, which, no. Fuck, she wishes she could have slept around, that she could’ve been warm and close in casual friendliness, but the only people who would’ve had her would’ve wanted to rape her not sex her.

If Gaara got her alone after he lost it and he wasn’t armed, will it matter if it’s not her fault?

“I should go,” she says. “I’m – I have an appointment.”

Well she does now, she thinks as Gaara nods and leads her back through the atrium-hallway and into the lift. She walks fast out of the building and into the twilight outside, feeling gradually lighter as she passes under the streetlights. She does now, even if she’s the only one who knows it yet.

She doesn’t have Sasuke on speed dial either, but this number is ingrained in her fingers from
“Hi,” says Sasuke after only seven rings. Her voice is softer and hoarser over the phone than Naruto remembers it.

“Hi,” says Naruto, her mouth smiling, her grip around the phone too hard and possibly sweaty. There are ants in her legs, rushing spasming flesh-eating ants. “Where are you? I need to see you. Like, now. I really.”

“Whatever,” Sasuke says, but after a fleeting pause she adds, “Waterfront parking lot.”

“Good. I’ll – good. Stay there.”

She hangs up on Sasuke’s snort, looking around for the nearest Underground entrance, her stride lengthening, picking up speed. The waterfront isn’t far, but she can’t wait and her sense of direction is abysmal, so she takes the tube to the closest station, runs panting up the stairs, the sea air smearing itself over her lips.

Their’s is a water city, commercialized as a sea queen poised at the edge of land, but Naruto’s suburb of a suburb of another suburb is in the other direction and she hasn’t been to the shore. Most of the property is private, and Dad has been very strict about not climbing any fences, they might be electrical or there might be dogs, and then of course there’s the police.

Naruto says land can’t be owned, and Dad says yes I know but the cops don’t, didn’t you learn that last time?

Sasuke and water made her imagine, if she imagined, which she didn’t consciously but seems to have subconsciously, something inspired, painting-pretty, reality aligning itself with a poem.

Of course that never happens, and it’s nothing like that.

Far from the bridges and waves, Sasuke’s sitting in a bus shelter, bundled in a clean but dingy man’s jacket over what appears to be a cocktail dress, in any case something tight and green.
“I’m here now,” Naruto says, which sounds all cool and manly in movies but astonishingly cretinous in real life.

“Joy,” Sasuke mutters, but doesn’t protest as Naruto sits next to her in the damp-smelling shelter, jostling against her for warmth in the stupid summer clothes. “What the hell, here.”

Taking the offered bottle, Naruto realises Sasuke’s… far from sloshed, but more than tipsy.

Drinking, feeling the soft-sweet burn of unidentified alcohol, she has a brief shameful thought about drunk Sasuke snogging blond girl friends.

So far out of your league she might as well be in a different galaxy, but it doesn’t matter. They’re not playing, and Sasuke’s very present.

“Why are you here?” Sasuke asks.

“What, you don’t think I’m the type to get drunk in abandoned bus shelters?” Her arm presses against Sasuke’s shoulder as the bottle is reclaimed. “Why the hell are you here?”

“Taking in the scenery,” Sasuke says dryly, her lips moist and her lashes very long, like they’re covering for something. “It’s none of your business. I told you already. I’m not your friend.”

“Well, I’m yours, though.”

“Fuck,” says Sasuke, burying her face in her hands, the bottle dangling precariously. “You are such a loser. Such a fucking loser. But at least your parents don’t think your name is Not Itachi.”

“Well, no,” Naruto says. “Sometimes they think my name is Our Problem, though, or These Unfortunate Incidents. Is that why you’re out here, then?”

“I’m here because that woman insists on celebrating his return with a family dinner, and I cannot fucking stand it.”
“Who’s…”

“Right, right, retard speech required. Daddy’s home. Mum’s happy. Thus, family dinner. The joy.”

While Naruto’s parents may sometimes talk about her as The Issue, they’ve never chased her out of the house, inadvertently or otherwise.

Also Naruto’s friends have never seen her bruised and asked about Dad.

And possibly that’s because Naruto had no friends and everyone knew who gave her the bruises, but even so.

“Let’s go,” she says, standing and grabbing at Sasuke’s sleeve, the jacket falling open to reveal that Uchiha family dinners apparently require formal wear: the shiny dress, a necklace, hose. No shoes. “Are you sober enough to climb the fence?”

“Why the hell would I climb the fence?” But she stands, letting Naruto tug her out of the shelter and toward the shore. The water is audible, slurping up the shore.

“Because I want to wade.”

“No, I meant. Idiot. I have a key.”

“Oh.” Of course she does. “D’you have it on you, though?”

No doubt Sasuke’s raised eyebrow is intended as arrogant, dismissive, but in the queasy streetlight it looks more like uncertainty. She pushes the bottle at Naruto, who’s forced to let go of her to take it, and pats down her pockets, eventually coming up with a key ring.

One turn of an ostentatiously sized key later she pushes open the gate, walking with light ballerina feet on the stones. Supposedly there’s a sand beach hidden away somewhere, but their path to the water is all gravel and limestone.
When the sound of the sea becomes overpowering Sasuke sits down with her back to a boulder and the bottle cradled between her thighs, legs stretched out to let the waves lap at her feet in the torn hose. Naruto kicks off her shoes and splashes out with a jubilant cry. This is the sea. The real sea, not a pool not a lake but the real freaking sea, salty and chill over her knees.

When she returns, feeling an embarrassing bit like Ariel’s ugly stepsister, Sasuke glances at her over the bottle; decadent soiled innocence, party princess, bohemian chic, waif, Lolita.

Clearly Sasuke’s not the only one who’s had a little too much to drink.

So far out of your league she might as well be in a different galaxy is right next to her, a welcome smell of alcohol and wind and shampoo as Naruto plunks down beside her, giggling a little.

Face tight and old, or at least older than before, sterner, Sasuke does not giggle back.

“But why are you here?” Naruto reiterates. “You don’t, I mean. If you hate family dinners or whatever so much, why don’t you, I don’t know, rebel, tell them, why don’t you…”

“Why don’t I cause a scene, you mean.” Her face is sullen, or would be if it was just a little less finely carved, but she sounds very adult, aged with the weary, vicious bitterness. “They’d ship me off to boarding school, if I was lucky, or some godforsaken psych ward. It’s what they did with Itachi, you know. A couple attempted suicides in private, that’s fine, but a public freak-out, can’t have that.” She laughs around the mouth of the bottle, a ragged sound like strangling. “Their precious fucking Itachi. When they packed me off to that lunatic therapist, it wasn’t because I felt like shit, it was because me being – being in low spirits might be uncomfortable for him. It’s – as long as he was perfect I didn’t even exist, and now they’ve decided he’s defective and I’m supposed to…”

“Jesus, you spoiled bitch,” Naruto mumbles, slinging an arm around Sasuke’s shoulders to protect her swaying neck from the boulder. “What’s wrong with him? With Itachi.”

“Bipolarity.” Sasuke divulges with a shrug, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and wiping some of the intoxication off. “Pretty severe. All doped up on meds and treatments now because the whole thing went public, which makes it an actual problem instead of family business, you know. Mum’s keeping with the better part of valour about her alcoholism, so I guess she doesn’t need any interference.”

Clearly the way to make Sasuke talk is get her upset and get her drunk. She’s coughing under Naruto’s arm, the short hairs at the nape of her neck soft as kitten fur, bristling with a brother complex and *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* quotes.

“Well,” Sasuke says, measured again, the rusty drunk hysteria a barely audible undertone. Her hands are calmer now, too, as she fumbles the bottle back to Naruto. “There’s thin, there’s really thin, and then there’s Itachi calling the doctor thin. Funny thing is they all praised it right up until he made the call, said how constructive and pretty and in control I was. But then of course there was the doctor, and then I was a disappointment and pathetic and ugly. It’s, I never even had an eating disorder, as such, it’s just – I just didn’t have any appetite and over-trained a bit and things out got of hand, but of course nobody listens to me.”

“How much, I mean how much did you actually weigh, when he called?”

Sasuke says, *thirty-four, I think*, which is an impossible number until you remember Sasuke is built like a china doll, with birds’ bones, and quite a bit shorter than Naruto, who’s on the short side of average, and then after you remember it’s still an impossible number.

“Actually yeah,” Naruto grouches, “you do have an eating disorder, as in, nobody stops having an appetite long enough to lose ten kilos too much without being sick.”

“Whatever,” Sasuke mutters, reclaiming the almost empty bottle with suddenly steady hands. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says. “Yeah, you see, it does, and if you stopped being selfish for a fucking second you’d see that.”

“Because we’re supposed to live for other people, right? Or because life is sacred, it’s a bloody gift, isn’t it? Well I never fucking asked for it, and I didn’t ask any of these stupid people to care for me, they don’t anyway, they don’t even fucking know me.”

She tries to stand up, fails, and only Naruto’s arm behind her head saves her from cracking her skull open.

“Jesus,” Naruto mumbles, twisting towards Sasuke, face pressed against her hair. Her heart is drunk, tumbling wildly out of control in her chest. There’s silence for a bit, the waves and her pulse acting
background singers to Sasuke’s breathing, disconcertingly close and smelling of whatever they’ve been drinking. Naruto’s where Sasuke was when she found her, not drunk but closer to it than to sober, when she says, “So it’s like, I dunno – you watch *Buffy*?”

Sasuke repeats, *Buffy*?

Yeah, you know, *Buffy* the Vampire Slayer, awesome blond chick killing big bad things that go boom in the night?

I know who *Buffy* is, yes.

Then you know Cordelia? From the firsts seasons.

The bitch?

Yeah, exactly. Hey, I knew even you couldn’t close your heart to the awesomeness that is *Buffy*! Anyway, what I was saying was, she has this line when she’s like Homecoming Queen or something, no, wait, they called it something else I think…

Did you have a point hidden somewhere in the inane babble?

Yes, shut up, I always have a point! And it’s, like – so, Cordelia’s all dressed up and waited on hand and foot by her minions, and *Buffy*’s all lonely and miserable looking at it, and you’d think Cordelia is just this totally happy princess who’s got everything, right, but then she goes, *Sometimes when I talk everyone’s so busy agreeing with me, they don’t hear a word I say*.

…So if I’m Cordelia, that’d make you Xander?

I guess. Yeah. It would.

…Who’s Willow, then? Gaara?

Yeah I guess – except no! No. There’d be no Willow. Or, we can’t have no Willow cause Willow’s
awesome, but there’d be nothing like that cheating stuff. It’d be more – we could be Cordelia and Xander except more like Buffy and Angel. Hey, that’s even better! I get to be Buffy!

I fucking hate Angel.


I hate Angel because he’s a stupid emo wuss. I also hate Anya.

You’re emo. And dark and broody and mysterious and way hot and stuff. Kind of like Angel, that.

Angel is not hot.

Eh, he’s not too bad.

I’d rather be Cordelia than Angel.

Fine by me. Why d’you hate Anya?

Because they so obviously brought her in to replace Cordelia when they realised they needed someone to say the bitchy lines, but Anya does it because she doesn’t know any better, which ruins it. The whole point was that Cordelia knew what she was saying.

Huh. I get your point, kind of. But also, hey, if you like being the ice princess you could be Blair.

Blair Waldorf?

Oh my fucking god, you actually know who that is?

Itachi watches a lot of tv when he’s in the depressed periods. He’s not very discerning. Also if I’m Blair you’d have to be Dan Humphrey – which would make us, you know, the one non-incestuous
pairing that hasn’t happened on that show.

Good point. Hmm, you could be Lily instead I guess.

Why am I always the girl?

Look, I offered to let you be Angel, you’re the one who’d rather cosplay Cordy.

Angel isn’t a man.

You know what I mean.

Yeah, whatever.

So is there any tv you watch cause you watch it? I mean cause you like it, not like…

Some Mentalist. House is okay I guess.


Actually I like Cameron.

Cameron?

Yeah. I think she’s hot.

Seriously?

She’s the one with actual character development. She has ethics, and I may not agree with them but
she has them and she sticks to them. And it’s not just words, she actually does do what she believes in. Wilson just pussyfoots it, dicking around with House and then being an arsehole when he’s not playing martyr. Cameron’s different.

Like how? I mean I like her but I like Wilson too. Most of the time, anyway.

Like in the rat episode, you know, there’s this old guy who experimented on babies or something, and he wants euthanasia, and Cameron actually does it, after she’s seen sense. She grows.

Huh. And I was so sure it'd be Foreman.

Foreman’s character development is called Fourteen, and that is an abomination.

Fair enough. Thirteen’s even hotter than Cameron though. Although I kinda like Cuddy best.

Also he stole her article. I didn’t have much of an opinion of him before, after that he’s just – that’s pathetic. It’s just low, he goes on all the time about how she’s this little girl and he’s the smart doctor, only apparently he’s not too smart to not steal from her. Stupid arsehole.

It’s kinda funny that the thing you have a problem with is his stealing her article and not his, you know, poisoning her.

That’s different. I get trying to survive. I don’t get stealing academic cred from someone who’s supposedly dumber than you.

You could totally steal my papers anytime you want.

I don’t want your papers. Even your teachers don’t want your suck-arse papers.

You’d think, but they just keep asking for them!

I guess cause they’re masochists, I mean why else would they be teachers?
To torture me! They’re like sadists.

You’re just stupid.

I’m not.

You watch Gossip Girl. Of your own free will.

Actually I watch it with my dad. He loves it. Also sometimes we watch it with Kiba if he’s there, he thought it was way stupid and gay at first but I think he’s kind of getting into it.

Are you sure he’s quite up for the intellectual challenge?

Dude, we’re talking about a series starring Nate, who, by the way, I think Kiba has kind of a man-crush on him. But, point. Point was, with Nate as a hero you’d think a lot of dumbfucks would watch, cause they could like identify with him and stuff. Only they wouldn’t be Ken-doll pretty I guess. Which is sad.

Whatever.

So, like, what else do you do? Except being emo and a grind and watching stupid tv with your brother?

I read. A mysterious and baffling practice to you, I’m sure, but…

Is not! Why does everyone think I’m all anti-reading?

Cause you said in class that you hate literature?

That’s, like, totally taken out of context. I meant I hate lit class. And, like, I don’t see the point of reading something if they’ve already made a film of it, you know? And all the books Kurenai assigns
are boring.

So what kind of books do you like? Little Johnny Learns To Read?

No, bitch. Tom Sharp’s cool. Riotous Assembly is fucking made of win.

Well.

Hah! You totally like it too!

Shut up, Sasuke grumbles.

It’s chilly now, outside the protection of alcohol and body heat; Naruto’s pulled her legs up to her chest, the arm not around Sasuke circling them, and presently leans forward on them, laughing, tilting her head close – and Sasuke is very close, and sort of smiling in that crooked careful Sasuke way, like smiling is stepping into the lion’s den, her lips half-open and wet and red.

“I really,” Naruto says, or thinks, or just feels without the words, and isn’t quite clear on how it happens but very clear on the fit of her mouth on Sasuke’s.
Chapter 6

Sasuke doesn’t move.

Naruto’s never kissed anyone before, not like this, there was just a stupid boy when she was twelve who’d made a bet, which is nothing like having Sasuke’s neck in her hand and Sasuke’s breath on her face, the sheer golden glory of every hair tickling her fingers, the chapped edge of Sasuke’s lower lip.

Still, she’d thought it’d be less complicated, remembers the smooth easy movie kisses. In reality the inside of a mouth is smaller than you’d think, and hotter and slicker, and tongues are unwieldy, desperately too large, not exactly dexterous.

Still she laughs in helpless triumphant bliss into Sasuke’s mouth, grabbing for her, her hand slipping as Sasuke finally moves, down over her shoulder and the lapel of the leather jacket, and god, that’s the dress, that’s – make it or break it, and her whole hand is full of breast, and even through the stupid fancy bra it’s the best, it’s what her hand was made to hold, like god or nature or random chance constructed Naruto and all the parts of her and made them so they’d fit this hand, and made the hand so it’d fit this breast.

A shrill rendition of _Mad World_ explodes into the air, and the stones are hard under her knees again and her arm’s cramping and her mouth is wet, her tongue inside her mouth is wet with Sasuke’s saliva; actually Naruto is damp all over, the sea water still hiding out between her toes, sweat breaking all over her, her cunt filling like the tide coming in.

Sasuke elbows her in the head, not very hard, and when Naruto sits back she raises an annoyed hand to ward her off, the sort of hand you raise at children or puppies and that Naruto assumes Sasuke uses on over-eager servants. She slaps it away but doesn’t inch closer again as Sasuke finds the mobile in her jacket pocket and answers it.

“Mmh,” she says. “At the beach. No, of course not, well just a bit. Couple meters down from the gate, I think we left it open. Some girl. From school.”

After she’s dropped the phone back into the pocket she continues to ruffle through them, searching presumably for cigarettes but coming up empty.

“Someone coming to pick you up?”
Sasuke shrugs. “Itachi. You’re a lousy kisser.”

“Am not! Also you’re one to talk, you didn’t do anything!”

“I make it a habit not to encourage unsolicited groping.” Ignoring Naruto’s sharp intake of breath and the words that were supposed to follow but won’t come, she locks her fingers around Naruto’s shoulder and tries to stand. She manages, leaning against the boulder, but only after Naruto’s scooted closer and helped out.

It’s not unsolicited groping having her arm around Sasuke’s hips when Sasuke would have bloody fallen on her way up without it.

“What the hell kind of drunk are you?” she complains. “Can’t stand up by yourself but bitching worse than when you’re sober.”

“You can leave any time.”

“I don’t want to leave,” Naruto says tightly. “Even though I should, who the hell hangs out with someone using fucking Mad World as the ringtone for their mentally ill brother?”

“He’s the one who chose it.”

“Really? Huh.”

From over by the gate someone, a man, a young man, calls, “Sasuke?”

“Over here!” Naruto leans out from behind the boulder to wave at the guy, who loops closer with astonishing speed. Her world has slowed down with the drink, or he’s greased lightning in human shape.

There’s nothing greasy about him. Even in the ambient light from the fence he’s astonishingly like Sasuke, same eyes same build same carriage. His hair is longer, like Naruto thought it weird, in the
beginning, that Sasuke’s isn’t, and there are wrinkles under his eyes. Also there’s something grounded about him, heavy and smooth like a stone lying for a long time underwater.

He shakes his head at the discarded bottle. “If you want them to pay attention you’re going to have to pick something more expensive.” His voice is younger than Sasuke’s, almost kind. He offers Naruto a nod, calm and brisk as he moves in and catches Sasuke. “Come on,” he says, hoisting her up in his arms. “They’ve gone to bed now.”

“I’m not a child,” Sasuke says childishly, and Naruto stares.

“No,” Itachi says. “Sometimes I wish you were. Now go to sleep.” He turns with astuteness, as though carrying his baby sister is an everyday occurrence. Possibly it is a weekly occurrence, or monthly; Naruto doesn’t know how often Daddy Uchiha is gone, how often he comes home. “Goodbye…?”

“Naruto,” she fills in. “I’m Naruto.”

“Go home, Naruto,” he says, and leaves.

She does, she goes up the beach, then back down to find her shoes; back up again and past the bus shelter to the underground entrance, waits for the tube and takes it, then waits for the commuter train for fucking ever, sleeps on it, and of course hasn’t brought her bike so has to walk home, sneaking in during the early hours of the morning.

On the Sunday she calls Sasuke probably about fifty times, before breakfast and after the shower and also after she puked; on the breaks from working in the garage and when she remembers Sasuke hot and open, truth spilling from her parted lips and then Naruto filling the gap with her tongue.

In the end a voice that’s not Sasuke’s answers, saying, “This is Itachi.”

“Er, hi,” says Naruto. “It’s Naruto. From yesterday. I wanted to talk to Sasuke.”

“I doubt it. Hung over isn’t one of her more pleasant moods.”
“No,” says Naruto. “No I reckon not, but, look…”

“She’s not going to pick up.” Then he adds: “She’s not going to pick up because the phone’s home and she’s not.”

Naruto’s never actually wanted it to be Monday before.

xxxxx

Sasuke wakes up alone and sick, which is not an uncommon combination. On mornings like this, which look bleak and smell like bleach, she can understand why an allegedly allmighty god felt the need for a day off.

She showers cold, like she likes it, like a proper ice princess. Naruto’s neither as original nor as cuttingly funny as she thinks calling her that, a nickname slur compliment that’s been with her for years. They’d have never managed it on their own, the minions and rivals and bootlickers, but they picked it up quickly once she’d launched it on a whim, wryly or so she pretended, to see if it’d take, if she could.

She was thirteen, thought she was post-modern about it; I enjoy stupid epithets ironically, that whole thing.

She’s either too tired for or tired of it now, in either case tired.

Tired is a stupid word, but less pretentious than weary. Fatigued, she likes better. Yes, she’s fatigued.

There’s a familiar sick taste in her mouth that may have been left behind by vomit or the words. Another possibility that she prefers at present not to entertain is that it was left by Naruto’s tongue. Stupid fucking Naruto who won’t leave her alone.

At least now it’s clear what she’s sticking around hoping to get. Same as everyone else, really, although… well, perhaps not exactly.
Downstairs smells of coffee from halfway down the staircase, quickening her steps over the acres of carpet and hardwood into the kitchen where Itachi’s fiddling with the coffeemaker.

“Morning,” he says, ruffling her hair. She lets him even thought it makes her feel colder than when she woke up. “Coffee, yes?”

The staff know to stay out of their way, so she nods and falls into a chair, all painful angles; elbow too hard against the table, knee smarting from the underside of it, her heel grazed by the leg of the chair. Itachi hands her the large red mug and says it’s funny, she slept in the dress but got up today wearing a pyjama.

Given no reply, Sasuke’s mouth deliberately busy with the coffee, he sits down too and says, in his kindly, distant, condescending big brother voice that he never had when he actually was her big brother, “Was that your new girlfriend, then? She seemed like she’d be good for you.”

Withering glares are wasted on Itachi, are pointless with regard to what they’ve become to each other. Sasuke says, “She hasn’t known me for two months.”

“You needed a lot less than two months to decide you were going to marry Kakashi.”

Carefully, maturely, Sasuke doesn’t say, *Are you off your medication you sick psycho fuck?*  

In front of adults she pretends, like she needs to, that she’s above it, that it’d never enter her mind, saying that. In reality it just feels a bit beyond her, right now.

She says, “That wasn’t the same.”

“No, but it’s not very different either.”

Emptying the cup, she doesn’t say, doesn’t need to say, *You stopped being my brother a long time ago.*

It’s not his fault he’s ill, but Sasuke’s self-aware enough to also know that it doesn’t matter, it not being his fault, although maybe it should. Intentions aren’t magic. The fact he didn’t mean to, to, well
be melodramatic and call it abandon her, doesn’t mean he didn’t do it all the same.

For a while, for fucking years, she was a good sister, they were friends, back when she was happy, when she could afford it because she had something better than a mental brother.

Right now she’s not a good anything.

In any case it’s her own fault for allowing herself to be placed in a position which made abandonment possible, inevitable. Everything else is excuses.

“I’m going out,” she says, turning her back on his sad nod. Yes, she is selfish. Well, yes, she is human.

Wrapped again in the coat that was Kakashi’s then Itachi’s now hers, so keenly intellectually aware that it ought to comfort her that she can’t be sure if it does or if she’s imagining it or if over-thinking it has erased any potential comfort from the worn brown leather, she slips out the door, into the lift, out of the building.

Although it’s September it’d be too hot for a jacket if not for the hangover chill, but it doesn’t matter. Too stubborn to pander to the fashions, she is certainly too stubborn to pander to the weather.

She walks into the road with impunity, cars breaking for her. Shrugging into a taxi, her feet sore from the barefoot stint yesterday but not as sore as her head, she gives the driver the address and leans back, eyes closed.

Like Moses parted the Red Sea, she thinks, dryly, yes, but half-amused. It’s such a trite, obvious simile, the very triteness fitting the situation even if the original cliché doesn’t really.

He said once, years ago, she must have been …ten? Eleven? No, they were in an ice cream parlour, she must have been ten, his long square-tipped hand covering her head from nape to crown, petting her like a cat and, for god’s sake, she didn’t mind, and the smell of sugared dairy didn’t sicken her, and he’d said, presumably to Itachi though she can’t remember, Our little girl’s not used to waiting. You never queue to be served, do you, they always queue up to serve you?

She didn’t mind being called his little girl, or not too badly, because she had already decided they would be engaged then married, and boyfriends, even future ones, are allowed pet names.
But she’d stiffened a little, startled. She had never before actually realised – it had never occurred to
her, anymore than she’d taken note of rain falling from the sky of all places.

That’s the level of privilege I’m coming from, she could tell Sakura, or Iruka, because it does make
the anti-ism project a bit funny, doesn’t it? She makes all the right motions and says all the right
words, she even thinks most of the right thoughts, but she was almost eleven years old before she
realised that… well, that other people were also people, but were not like her.

Funny, too, that it was a spoiled rich boy angling to get on her good side who’d pull the wool from
her eyes. He was a right Little Lord Fauntleroy, Kakashi, an orphaned prince stranded in boarding
school, going on to become a lapsed Capitalist and lapsed Marxist, juggling the belief in his bones
and the one in his head, making a joke of it so it’d be amusing if he dropped them.

A phase, her father called it. He liked Kakashi, who was a good and proper boy after all, so of
course any socialist leanings must be a rebellious phase.

Don’t worry about it, Sasuke agreed, not because it was a phase but because you cannot suddenly
stop believing that you’re worth more than other people, that people is you and others are just extras,
are yours.

We got that with the Jewish blood, Itachi teases, along with the godawful stubborn depression – you
know, wandering the earth, always striving for the highest ideal and failing.

Occasionally she suspects he half believes it, or at the very least speculates about there being
something believable about it, which is frankly embarrassing, because ethnically they’re one-eight
Jew, a single non-wasp grandparent, and culturally, well their father thinks it’s rubbish, traditions he
has no part of, and it’s possible Mum even agrees, certainly she has never argued.

More importantly Sasuke doesn’t believe in blood carrying anything more ephemeral than
biochemical substances.

She doesn’t believe in a lot of things period.

There’ve arrived and she leans forward with her teeth a gateway closing on vomit, handing the driver
some notes. Stumbling out into the air, and god Itachi carried her last night, and fuck she should care,
she waves off the offered change and enters a smaller, lighter lobby than the one in the house the
parental units are living in and which she and Itachi are also supposed to live in, and do live in, but never really pretend is home anymore.

The lift is reminiscent of a cupboard; small, industry-white. She leaves a cigarette butt in a corner, then stares at it, blank. Is she marking territory or trying for the modern version of Ariadne’s web, or vandalising? Defiled by littering, bloody hell.

Then she’s unlocking the door marked Hatake and this is home, which is worse, because it being home means even now there’s this instinctive emotional pull, this base expectation of security and comfort, of being loved. She shuts the door carefully behind her to keep the Kakashi smell safe inside.

Sooner or later she’s going to vomit; might as well get it over with on her own terms, and afterwards she can take the painkillers without risking them coming back up. The bathroom mirror shows her ghost-faced and pasty, but it always has, the light is odd in here, wrongly placed and glancing off the green tile, and also the mirror is an antique, old enough to subtly distort what it echoes.

The stupid shower won’t go cold, so she takes it hot, washing off the morning coffee with Itachi and the taxi ride afterwards, sitting queasily on the floor and trying with only very moderate success to smoke around the jets of water.

She kept telling him to get it fixed, the light and the shower, but he never did and now she won’t. The flat looks precisely as he left it, or rather, as if he hasn’t left it, as if she’s just kept living there like nothing’s happened, as if they’ve both kept living here. Books and sketches in varying stages of completion are littered over the floors and excess furniture, removed only from the most necessary spaces. She replaces the toiletries and foodstuffs she finishes, the particular green soap on the hand basin and the rotting apple core in the kitchen sink. Kakashi never picked up after himself, used to the cleaning staff at boarding school and at the various holiday residences the Uchiha family frequents, to which he had a standing invitation as a matter of course, of course he did, Itachi’s best friend and Sasuke’s too, or boyfriend, depending on how laissez-faire you are, with the word and with your views on underage entanglements. He left a token fruit core in the sink, found the smell artistic. Genuine, was the word he used when he took the piss about it, always teasing, always serious about it really.

That was then, this is now.

She sits in his bed wearing his clothes, cradling his ashtray, an inherited piece he didn’t actually use, and chain-smokes until she feels lightheaded and like ash, burnt then gone.
She decides to avoid Naruto, having little desire to be bothered by a fool who is no longer funny. Adequate distractions are only adequate for so long, and with her head pounding from sun and the remains of the hangover, Sasuke’s entertainment standards are exponentially higher than they were last week. It’s a little amusing and a little sickening, and mostly very boring, how Naruto’s increasingly ferocious attempts to corner her simply won’t stop.

These days Sasuke keeps her phone on vibrate and turns it off before going to sleep, and catches a rumour over breakfast about some blond rascal being escorted firmly off the premises the previous night. It makes her smile faintly into her coffee.

She’s just – she makes it clear she does not want Naruto near her, and Naruto is kept away. Sasuke doesn’t have to think about it, she just needs to want something and it’s hers.

Princess privilege, they called it, Itachi and Kakashi, as though they were not the same, back when Itachi still teased her and she still let him.

“Hey,” Temari interrupts, sitting down beside her. “I thought you might like to know there have been some rather frantic, if passably discreet, inquiries about abusive home situations.”

“I’m not surprised,” Sasuke says. It hadn’t entered her mind, but she’s not.

“Did anything happen?” Temari insists, bristly blond hair brushing Sasuke’s jaw. It’s a darker shade than Naruto’s, which is funny, as Sasuke is reasonably certain Naruto doesn’t dye her hair. In fact, objectively she should be pretty, Naruto – she’s not deformed, she’s white-tanned with blue eyes and naturally blond hair and she smiles a lot. While she definitely doesn’t act pretty, that alone doesn’t account for her slide towards ugly. Maybe it’s the lack of proportion, that you couldn’t call her thin because parts of her body are lean and others well stuffed, as though the growth-spurt hit selectively, that her face is too broad and the scars asymmetrical, her nose uppity; that she’s tall through the torso not the legs, that her scars hands hips feet are too large for the rest of her.

Normally Sasuke wouldn’t know this, wouldn’t be consciously aware, but then she does not normally accompany strangers home to fight with them.

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” she says.
“If you say so. In any case Gaara told her it was no worse than is normal, and – damn it, Sasuke, I’m your friend, when I have to hear about you by listening to Gaara talking to some random stranger…!”

“Didn’t you know? Gaara and I are very intimate.”

“For fuck’s sake, Sasuke…”

“I’ve told you, he didn’t hurt me.”

“I can’t stand you sometimes,” Temari says, her hand closing hard around Sasuke’s shoulder before she snaps to her feet.

People being scared of her or scared for her, is there really such a huge difference?

From across the schoolyard Naruto stares at her bold as sunrise, the overhead clouds turning her eyes the deep dull blue of predawn sky.

“Sasuke? Class.”

“Right,” Sasuke mumbles, and stands up to follow Temari after only a very brief hesitation. She’d like to study compulsively, burn with the focus, drown herself in it, but one of the drawbacks of being intelligent is that school doesn’t require its students to be smart. For as long as she can remember Sasuke has aced her tests on the merit of half-listening to a couple lectures and perhaps glancing over the required reading during commutation to the relevant classroom. It was different when she was trying to ascertain she wasn’t inferior to Itachi, but it was years ago now that Itachi became disqualified, and Sasuke no longer has anything to prove.

It doesn’t matter if her grades are inferior to Itachi’s, because his As are special person As, special needs As.

It also doesn’t matter, she tells herself when she remembers to, because she doesn’t want the approval of parents who treat their own son that way.
It’s almost certainly hypocritical, but at least there’s more objective legitimacy to her criticising their behaviour towards Itachi.

Now there are more of Iruka’s seminars, which are Sakura’s really if she’d but own up to them. Sasuke doesn’t see the point in them that she’s sure Iruka does, but some of them are faintly satisfying. Today there’s the spectacle of Naruto yet again being ridiculously upset, on fire with it, all spluttering outrage and too sincere to be truly ridiculous.

Tomorrow there will be Haku, which makes Sakura and to an extent Temari tense. I’ve never hassled her, Sasuke could say, almost did say to Naruto, but of course she’s never considered it her business to stop any hassling, either.

If being a woman is a physical state, determined by chromosomes and hormones and genitalia, then quite clearly Haku is not a woman, although baring the chromosomes this can and presumably will change.

If being a woman is having the experience of being socialised as a woman, is having your personality formed by being treated as a woman, then Haku’s claims on womanhood are feeble.

If being a woman means identifying as one, then certainly Haku is a woman, and much more of a woman than Sasuke has ever been or ever will be.

Womanhood seems to Sasuke a silly thing to want, but of course that’s easy to say when it’s always been yours for the taking.

The reason they’re not friendly is simply that Haku transferred in during the black year after the accident, when Sasuke was not friendly to anyone.

If Sasuke fancied kissing girls on beaches at night, then that’s the sort of girl she’d pick – tall, well-spoken, with a steady quiet charisma. Utterly unlike Naruto, who is presumptuous, grabby and whose enthusiasm is not matched by her technique.

If Sasuke fancied kissing girls, then Naruto’s the sort she would grab on a wild drunk prowl when she felt like exploding, every beat of her heart an implosion.

Haku would be a choice, Naruto would just happen and then keep happening for quite a bit before
she realised there was any choice involved.

Afterwards she collects her things, coldly satisfied to have fictionalised Naruto, turned her into a hypothetical.

In place of studying Sasuke takes to running, her feet tracing miles after miles of ground. With all the smoking running is most definitely a challenge, which is welcome, the burn in her lungs legs body blotting out the rest.

Itachi grows worried, but worry grows in him like weeds, and she only lets herself throw up twice a week. She doesn’t want to damage her throat, after all.

Sometimes, in spaces in between like a film put on pause so it doesn’t count, she watches Naruto, who is after all relatively entertaining. There’s even, possibly, a potentially interesting aspect.

She can’t avoid her anymore, and doesn’t quite recall why she originally wanted to, when the group project rolls around. On the way to History Naruto comes bounding up to her in another absurd get-up, her orange tshirt almost neon, and Sasuke remembers the fight, in the bus and then in the basement, and doesn’t move away.

She’s entitled to a distraction.

“Hey!” Naruto snaps, half admonition half exuberant greeting, grabbing onto Sasuke’s wrist. “You’re avoiding me. Stop avoiding me.”

“No,” says Sasuke, with pointed glance at Naruto’s hand on her. “I’m not. I’d think that’d be obvious.”

“But you did!”

“Yes, I did. Now I’m not. Let it go.”

Naruto does, hanging on momentarily before sticking her tongue out and letting Sasuke’s wrist slip free. “So,” she says, walking close beside Sasuke and then sitting down in the next chair. “What’s
“Ask Neji.”

“If you don’t know, why don’t you ask him?”

“Why? Why can’t you tell me? He’s not even here yet.”

“Because I wasn’t listening either.”

It’s a bit of a novel experience, even though it shouldn’t be, anymore. Her automatic assumption is still to be able to relay any instruction verbatim, although she hasn’t been able to once after the doctors’ final verdict on Kakashi was etched into her memory, burning out all the rest.

Naruto grins at her, kicking her legs out in front of her, thoroughly owning the chair and looking perilously close to tipping over backwards.

It’s said the truth will set you free, but Dad Itachi Sasuke has been careful to add: of course, only until the person you told it to uses it to lock you up. However Naruto would be a lousy jailor, so that’s all right. It is. After all, like Sasuke told her, she doesn’t matter, she should be safe. She’s also, somehow, enough of a person that she can be talked to, unlike the shrinks.

There’s something restful about her energy, and Sasuke closes her eyes and basks for a moment, because whatever Naruto sees when she keeps staring at her, it’s not what Sasuke sees in the mirror: something that was left behind.

It’s not what her family sees: Itachi 2.0, the inferior version. The failed upgrade, the backup. She’s the Windows Vista of the family.

Like if two parents have a sick kid and produce a sibling to donate a perfectly matched organ, which isn’t wrong. Actually not doing it and thus not saving your beloved child would be unconscionable, but it’s what she feels like across the table from them, an organ bag, only it’s something less solid they want from her.

“Hello,” Neji says, shortly before Shizune waves them off to get to work, and Neji leads them outside and explains the project guidelines, which have morphed into a far-fetched crossover with English. “I was thinking lyricism,” he elaborates. “We’ll need to decide on a more specific genre and a period as well, of course.”

“Maybe something about the move towards free verse in love poetry mirroring society’s move towards the practice of free as opposed to marriage-bound love,” Sasuke says, rather dryly. “It sounds like something Shizune would like.”

“Kurenai too,” Neji agrees. “Yes, that could be a very reasonable approach.”

Let us go then, you and I. It’s been whispered into her skin, many times. Sing to me, then, or drown me.

For a moment she closes her eyes, rubs at the lids until the darkness erupts into colour.

And would it have been worth it, after all /.../ To say: “I am Lazarus, come from the dead”

Although lately she feels more Celan than Eliot.

Normally Sasuke and Neji would simply divide the work between them, then edit it together at the last minute, but Kurenai has the unfortunate habit of demanding active, overt participation from all members of the group, which means they will have to make allowances for Naruto. Perhaps she can provide some cover art? Sasuke is not looking forward to reading over Naruto’s no doubt aneurism-inducing texts, but she’s not dumb enough to successfully ghost write them for her.

“Library?” Neji suggests.

“Er,” Naruto says, rubbing the back of her head, a bit flushed under the tan. “I’m kind of banned, actually.”

“How exactly did you manage that?”

“Shut up! Look, it’s – well, it’s surprisingly easy, really. That librarian woman, you know, the one with the glasses, she was all, no, vile devil spawn, that is not a whisper! Only whispers are allowed
in my kingdom! Exile!"

“Well,” says Neji after a long moment’s silence. “I have a rather strict curfew, currently, so I’m afraid I can’t be anywhere outside of school where parents can’t verify I’m doing homework.”


For once Sasuke entirely agrees with her, and certainly she would never accept it herself, but Neji’s family business is Neji’s family business.

She’s too tried to deal with this. She steps on Naruto foot in warning.

“Be that as it may,” Neji says. “Perhaps we could talk things through in someone’s house?”

“Sure,” says Naruto. “I live pretty far away, though, I mean you’re welcome but it’s an hour, maybe two, on the bus.”

“My place, then,” Neji surmises. For the first time he looks squarely at Naruto, does it with faint distaste. “I live on Crown Street.”

“Sure,” Naruto says again. “I just need to be back at Central before six, or I’ll have to wait forever for my train. I could maybe walk over to there with you guys, though?”

“You take her,” Neji says. “I have another class first, but since Shizune wants the raw drafts in by next lesson we really should get started. I’ll be done at three thirty, I can meet you at home say twenty minutes after that.”

“Fine.”

Of course Neji has an elective giving him a free pass on guide duties, and unlike Sasuke he never skips class. She likes him for that, for being a hard-working genius and better than her because and only because she’s not putting in the effort.
She likes him decidedly less for dumping ninety minutes of Naruto on her.

“So,” Naruto says, letting Sasuke lead her by the lockers and out of the gates. “Spill.”

Sasuke’s gives her a nonplussed look.

“Gah, you know perfectly well what I mean! What’s up with you? You can’t just pull shit like this! Why are you all,” she gestures, hands flapping wild and uncertain as sea birds, “you know. Avoiding me, and stuff.”

“Why would I not be?”

“The hell! You just chose to be in a group with me!”

“I chose to be in a group with Neji,” Sasuke corrects her, walking rather fast towards the AC of nearby establishments. “I could hardly leave him stuck with Sakura and you.”

Naruto’s, Why not? comes out half accusation, half whine.

“She’s terrified of him and you’re hopelessly retarded. It hardly seemed fair.”

“She is not!” Naruto bristles. A moment of fuming later she adds, “He’ll enjoy an ableist bitch so much more.”

“Yes he will,” Sasuke replies, automatically and truthfully, facing an instant of actual startled perplexity. If not retarded then which phrase would be appropriate? All the usual ones, stupid and dumb and moronic, are children’s words, whereas the fancier outdated ones like cretinous would hardly be understood by anyone properly described by them. She could delve into a spiel on how it’s not the word itself that’s problematic but the underlying stereotype it draws strength from, but she can’t be bothered. “You’re one to talk,” she says instead, a childish derailing which is immensely satisfying, stepping through the door into the sweet chill of Alexander’s. “You just said Neji’s uncle is crazy for disagreeing with your views on parenting, that’s ableist language at its finest. Not to mention your fondness for bitch, the lovely cultural shorthand for ‘woman know your place’.”
“That’s not the same,” Naruto objects.

Sitting down in the draft, Sasuke notes with amusement that Naruto is not at all an accomplished liar. “No? Anyway, there are no safe insults. That’s why they are insults, because they aren’t safe.” She lights a cigarette, waving at the closest server to bring over an ashtray and some drinks.

The truth is she’s discomfited, cold-slick sweat breaking involuntarily, by retards, or whatever the politically correct word for them is: people who aren’t… right in the head, and who aren’t wrong in the sense Itachi is, where the intelligence, the personhood, remains, but the ones who are stunted – developmentally impaired, halfwits, the ones who’ll never grow up to be critically reasoning adults.

Some of this is communicated to Naruto, not in words so much, perhaps, as between them, and there’s the obvious objection, yes, needless to say there are far too many fully abled people who don’t grow up to be reasoning adults either, but that isn’t the point, because it’s the inherent, unavoidable inability that arouses Sasuke’s disgust and fear. She runs and sometimes drinks in order to stop thinking, but to not be able to, or not at the appropriate level… Well, there aren’t many things worse than death, indeed she strenuously objects to the idea that rape or torture would be, hell, her grandmother is happy she survived Hitler’s camps, but that would be one of them. It’d be like having a pre-birth lobotomy.

She was speechless with cold horror for weeks after she’d seen One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest when she was thirteen.

Yes! How odd; two years later it made Naruto cry with rage.

The strange atmosphere of half-worded sentences, of Sasuke too strung out on too little sleep and too much nicotine to quite keep track of what exactly is said aloud, is dispelled by the waiter delivering her order.

“How’d you do that?” Naruto demands in – well, the tone is that of a whisper, but it’s too loud to really qualify as one, leaning forward over the table. “You didn’t even tell her what you wanted!”

Sasuke gives her a rather smug look over the edge of her ice tea. “Look, I’m well aware I’m in a position of privilege. I rather enjoy it.”

“You’re disgusting,” Naruto says, and she’s not lying but she says it with something like awe. Given her tone, Sasuke rather expects that, had Naruto possessed a slightly more extensive vocabulary,
what she’d have been called is incorrigible.

Shaking her head, not taking her eyes off Sasuke, Naruto moves to fill her own glass from the pitcher, spilling ice tea over her hand and most of the table but laughing it off after a first curse, mopping the worst of it up with a napkin. She’s a little flushed, still leaning forward, elbows marking territory over the table, her legs stretching out. There’s a kick at Sasuke’s ankle, inadvertent going by Naruto’s yelp, then the steady sweaty warmth after she fails to remove her leg.

Taking the loop-sided, rather soft grin into consideration, Naruto is entertaining a fairly enormous crush on her.

Knowing Naruto, she will think she’s in love, if she thinks about it.

“I’m not going to be your girlfriend,” Sasuke tells her.

Naruto glows bonfire bright.

After the weekend on top of everything else, Sasuke can no longer say, I’m not going to be your friend, not with absolute certainty.

“Er, look,” Naruto says, rubbing furiously at the back of her head. Diffidence is a rare look on her, maturing rather than childish. “What you said, about unsolicited kissing, I mean, I get it, that’s not…”

“The kissing was fine,” Sasuke cuts her off, watching the blue of Naruto’s eyes expand like lakes aiming to flood her face. “Well, no, actually, it was rubbish, but it doesn’t matter.” She takes a sip of her tea, feeling Naruto’s foot on her ankle and remembering what a lousy jailor she’d be. “I want to fight you again.”

“You’re on!” Naruto erupts into a gleeful mess, enthusing rather enervatingly on the subject. “So,” she says eventually, “why was Neji so pissy?”

Possibly she’s asking: Did I do something? Possibly she’s not.

Sasuke shrugs, indicating to anybody who knows the first thing about either her or Neji that
supposedly he had another row with his guardian, unfortunate of course but not much you can do about it. Social earthquakes are like that, inside families.

She isn’t sure if she’s doing him or Naruto a favour, or being particularly nasty, when she offers, “He’s expected to marry Hinata, you know.”

“I – what?”

“You heard me.”

“Obviously, that’s not the point! How, who’s supposing him to do that? Is this like some kind of fucked up medieval betrothal business? Cause that’s not been legal for a hell of a long time.”

“Nevertheless. He’s been supposed to marry Hinata since they were children, much like Tenten is supposed to marry Whatshisface, and Kankurou’s engaged to that girl from overseas.” Some high-bred heiress or other, about what he deserves.

“You?” Naruto asks suddenly. “What about you? I mean are you engaged to someone too?”

“Well,” says Sasuke with a brief smile. “Not anymore.”

“Well, no, but – before, was that…?”

“No,” she says, sighing. “Nobody tried to arrange that, but then I suppose they didn’t need to. They certainly approved of him.”

She always did have splendid taste. Picked designer dresses at preschool, designer boyfriend before she hit her teens.

“They did? Cause Itachi, he seemed pretty protective, and I figured, I mean isn’t that what big brothers do? Beat up their little sisters’ potential boyfriends?”

Sasuke finds herself staring at her, equal parts indignant and liberated. For possibly the first time it
occurs to her that she has never previously spoken to somebody who doesn’t know, who hasn’t sunk their claws into her personal info.

“They were best friends,” she says, terse, light, not quite brittle. “As a matter of fact we had a bit of a fucked-up threesome dynamic going on. Also Itachi is very anti-violence.”

“Seriously? Like, threesome threesome, or just…?”

“What the hell is wrong with you? No, I’m not actually fucking my brother, but thank you for asking.”

“You’re the one who said!”

“I know what I said. Fine, mea culpa, I keep forgetting who I’m talking to. Now get up, it’s time to go.”

xxxxx

Storming out of the café, Sasuke closes off like a clam, pearl locked greedily inside. She does quiet anger frustratingly well, much better than Naruto’s ever managed, not wasting a word and not needing to, with that withering, dismissive glare going for her.

Naruto isn’t going to hit her again and isn’t going to kiss her, so is reduced to words, which don’t fucking work.

Well two can play at this game, except Sasuke’s the only one playing to win, because Naruto doesn’t fight with silence, no matter how mutually quiet and fuming the commute to Neji’s is.

Or it is after Naruto’s latest attack got rebuffed by a furious, “And how about you, Naruto? You want to share? Tell me about your scars, then.”

What makes her choke up is that if Sasuke had asked before things went to shit, she’d have answered.
If Gaara’s home defied expectations by flaunting its riches inside a building too modern to seem its natural shelter, Neji’s is soothing. Dropped down along a wide street on the outskirts of the city centre is a row of large houses surrounded by gardens, the Hyuuga one white as a snow-castle.

Sasuke marches up to the front entrance, an elaborate affair and a much more fitting backdrop to her than the school buildings; she should stay in her stupid fairytale and stop spoiling things for people in the real world. Nevertheless Naruto hurries to catch up, following Sasuke inside, goggling at the maid, an actual maid, letting them in. There were servants at Gaara’s too, but she saw them only as glimpses in different rooms.

She remembers reading in some old school assignment novel that servants are supposed to be like ghosts.

It’s demeaning and barbaric, of course, but kind of cool, too, in a sick way, to see something so outrageous and fictionalised made aggressively real.

The maid mumbles directions and Sasuke takes off again, Naruto stumbling over the slippery floor in her haste to follow. “Hey! Wait up!”

Sasuke does no such thing, and Naruto clenches her teeth and walks faster.

The ceiling is staggeringly far overhead, the walls liberally decorated with art pieces; this is how Naruto’s imagined rich people live. Well, the vast majority of the rich people she’s seen on tv and based her impression on are western, so she hadn’t included the Arabic theme in her half-formed vision, but except for that.

Neji is waiting for them in a library which should be much pleasanter than the school’s, with wide windows and bookcases of dark wood, but which comes off as a museum, all frustratingly forbidden pretty things you must be careful not to touch.

“Hello,” Neji says, actually rising from his seat at the head of a table in the same style as the bookcases, his voice and face so politely expressionless he might as well have been grimacing at them. Frankly Naruto would’ve preferred the honesty of that. “Please, make yourselves comfortable.”

Naruto figures that if Sasuke can kick one of the chairs into position and sprawl in it, already fishing
for a cigarette, she can dumb her backpack on the table.

It’s a disaster.

They do manage to get some things decided, Sasuke and Neji talking at length in faintly sarcastic, dryly supercilious voices, using a great many words that, when Naruto demands clarifications, turn out to not mean very much, but they also keep sniping at each other in that horrible polite way that Mum and her fellow students sometimes do when they get into academic quarrels.

It’s not a language Naruto’s ever going to be fluent in, nor does she particularly want to be, but she’s picked up enough to know that “I fail to see the basis for that assumption” is adult speak for “you’re so full of shit, you stupid fuck”.

Neji doesn’t like Sasuke smoking indoors, a sentiment Naruto personally happens to agree with, although his reason is it’s not allowed, rather than the more pertinent gross smell and unhealthy consequences of second hand smoking. Before she met Sasuke, Naruto honestly believed herself too mature to find smoking sexy.

Before Sasuke she also believed she liked nice people.

“Look,” Neji says finally, tightly, “if you want to crash and burn then go ahead, I can’t stop you, but don’t try to drag the rest of us down with you.”

“Believe me,” Sasuke replies, sounding controlled now, in control and lazy and cruel with it, “if I snap then it won’t be me crashing or burning.”
Naruto is on her feet, Sasuke’s shoulder enclosed for a moment in her palm before Sasuke irritably shrugs her off. “We should go. Thanks for having us, Neji, let’s finish this in school, yeah? Come on, Sasuke, we’re leaving.”

“That might be best,” Neji says softly.

Sasuke pushes her fringe out of her face, slow pained movements. “Maybe.” They exchange a look of what seems to Naruto mutual understanding, not quite apology but close, and Sasuke leaves with her, walking slowly enough Naruto doesn’t risk getting lost in the house even after she’s had to run back for her forgotten backpack.

“You can leave,” Sasuke tells her on the pavement outside, walking purposefully now if not a lot faster.

Naruto chooses to interpret that as less dismissive and more apologetic than it was probably intended, searching through her backpack for sunglasses. “Nah, I’m not mad at you. He was a bitch too.”

Sasuke’s laugh is thick and rough, the same as it was on the beach. She stubs her cigarette out against a tree. “Leave me the fuck alone or fight with me.”

“I’ll take you down anytime! Er, in the middle of the street, though?”

“Good,” Sasuke says briskly. “And no, you idiot, we need privacy.” She closes her eyes for a second, mumbling something about gym bans and stupid fucking Itachi tattling. “Right then. My place. Don’t talk to anybody.”

“You are not the boss of me,” Naruto declares, but relents at Sasuke’s black gaze being ringed in black not by makeup but by sleepless shadows. “Fine, not like I’d want to, anyway.”

As they pass by the Underground entrance, Naruto’s about to point out that Ms Too Good To Guide You missed it when Sasuke lifts a hand, performing what looks to Naruto like arcane magic, prompting a taxi to materialise in front of them.
“I don’t have taxi money.”

Her well-worn shoes shrink under Sasuke’s glance. “I could tell.”

“Quality doesn’t need surface fanciness!” Naruto declares on behalf of her truly lovely and truly loved orange Converse. “Also that means we should take the tube.”

“Come with me or don’t,” Sasuke says, opening the car door. “It’s not as though it’s more expensive because you’re along for the ride.”

“Well, no, but…”

But she bundles herself into the backseat close to Sasuke, shoulders and knees brushing. It’s a small car.

Admittedly it’s not made larger by Naruto taking the middle seat instead of the one by the door.

At this point she has some experience of walking standing sitting next to Sasuke, and based on friends being a fair bit like family, the feel of Kiba jostling and hugging her enough like Dad’s that he could be her brother or at least cousin, it should feel a bit like home.

Instead it feels like a carousel, like being drunk and speeding that Chevy.

Like riding a dragon, tingly, suspended in freefall, roaring on a knife-edge of wild joy.

Above the muted taxi stench there’s the smell of warm flesh – sweat, deodorant, body-smell, and from Sasuke’s direction a hint of something Naruto assumes to be extremely expensive hair products, on account of them not smelling like products.

Within fifteen minutes they’re back at the seaside estates from which that wanker guard dragged her. The air is wonderfully cooler, a salty mist of chill being blown around in between the few large houses. Some of them are buildings along the lines of Gaara’s, others are proper houses, designed for a single family and just drastically oversized.
Hoping the bastard guard is watching, Naruto takes care to offer all available surveillance cameras either her tongue or her middle finger.

The house Sasuke leads her to is one of the miniature mansion ones, a tasteful, airy thing circled by jasmine bushes.

“I thought you’d live in one of those,” Naruto says, nodding at one of the high-raisers.

“I do.”

“So the reason we’re in front of this house is…?” Naruto prompts. “I’d like to be told in advance of any B’n’E activities.”

“I meant normally we live on Blue. This is a summer house.”

“You know, it’s pretty weird to have a summer house half an hour away from your normal house, even for rich people.”

Sasuke shrugs. “Unexpected inheritance.” Her mouth quirks, rather meanly but also in a manner that can only be called teasing. “The real summer houses are a fair bit further off.”

There’s no maid opening the door for them this time, just Sasuke stomping hurriedly through the first floor and towards a staircase. It’s lighter in here than it was at Neji’s, white spaces tinted golden by sunlight from the window-wall facing the sea.

It’s awesome in that way Gaara’s and Neji’s houses just failed to be, too stiff, too much designed for other people than the ones living in them.

At the sound of a voice Sasuke stops abruptly, as if she’s really a robot and now her power cord’s been pulled out, and Naruto turns towards the timid, “Hello, dear.”

What must be Sasuke’s mother looks remarkably like her daughter, and at once older and younger
than Naruto’s own mum. That is, she looks young the way oldish people on tv look young, the carefully crafted youth of plastic surgery and makeup, but there’s something faded about her, as if you’re looking at a portrait where the colours have started to blur instead of at a real person. Her hands are shaking a little against the folds of her deep red robe.

“Mother.” All of a sudden Sasuke’s smallness makes her look childish instead of elegant.

“Hi,” says Naruto into the silence, taking a step towards Sasuke’s mum and uncertainly bringing her right hand down from where it’s been rubbing at the back of her head. “I’m Naruto, I go to school with Sasuke. It’s nice to meet you!”

“My pleasure, dear.” Sasuke’s mum smiles at her, beautiful and gratified, and Naruto feels a bit sick that anyone should light up like that for a single instance of kindness. She knows what it’s like, far too well for comfort. “I’m Mikoto.”

“If you’ll excuse us,” Sasuke cuts in, continuing up the stairs without waiting for any reply.

“I should probably…”

“Yes, you go ahead, dear,” Mikoto allows, gesturing for her to split.

“See you later,” Naruto says firmly, following Sasuke’s ascent. In the dimmer light of the upstairs corridor she catches up to Sasuke’s back framed by the doorway to a room that Naruto realises with a jolt must be Sasuke’s. Sasuke’s bedroom. “She seemed sad,” she says. Asks, really, with maybe a hint of accuses.

“She usually does.”

“Look, I just meant, it’s not gonna get better because you treat her like shit.”

“If she doesn’t want to be treated like this, she can stop acting like this. It’s up to her, it always has been.” Hand on the doorknob, Sasuke speaks in a calm, controlled voice, and they both know they are one word away from, Get the hell off of my property you sanctimonious arsehole, how dare you try to judge me.
She thinks of Sasuke even smaller, with a mum who cared more about a bottle than her, and the sort of father that made Temari look at a bruise on Sasuke’s face and ask about him. Thinks about how Dad still can’t really look at Tsunade.

Sasuke said, *I think some things should be unforgivable*, and maybe this is one of them.

Naruto doesn’t like the idea of unforgivable, of unfixable, but…“All right. Let’s see where the wicked witch sleeps.”

The room is not impersonal per se but very neat in an impersonal way, the walls blue and the floor light. Roughly two and a half times the size of Naruto’s humble abode, it’s dominated by the large windows and ditto bed, the desk and chairs lighter, briefer, more of an afterthought.

“Stop staring like that,” Sasuke orders from halfway inside the wardrobe.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re perusing the setting of future masturbatory fantasies.”

The scoff answering Naruto’s spluttering protests sounds quite a bit like a laugh.

Then, wandering over towards the window, she discovers the treasure chest: on the desk, a paper box, open, brimming with photographs.

Her fingers are sticky around them, like hands holding an egg or a china piece.

Sasuke in the backseat of a car, her face the largest part of her, a balloon on a string, with hair halfway down her chest. To her right sits a boy Naruto recognises as a younger version of Itachi; on her left is a tall, fair boy with hair so blond it’s almost white.

Itachi and the blond boy dancing outside, Itachi smiling thinly, the blond boy draped over him and grinning, wrapped in a flowing yellow dress maybe intended as a toga.
Sasuke’s entire body curving towards the blond boy, his head on her shoulder, whispering in her ear, his hand on her leg.

“Here you go,” Sasuke says behind her, and she turns in time to catch the ball of clothes thrown at her. “You can change in the bathroom.”

“Right,” Naruto agrees, and doesn’t mean to say anything further, to delay the longed-for adrenaline fest of kicking Sasuke’s scrawny arse. It just slips out: “Why did you cut your hair?”

“I didn’t.”

“Come on.”

“No, really. It got shorn off in the accident. Then I realised I like it better short.”

“It’s nice,” Naruto says, teetering on the edge of blushing but chilled underneath by the idea of Sasuke in an accident, the image of screaming metal and screaming people inside it, and the broken silence after; images taken, honestly, mostly from the House episode with the bus crash, and a thousand action movies before that, with Sasuke superimposed over them. Even so it casts Mum and Dad’s rage at her and Kiba’s drunk driving stint in a more reasonable light.

“Obviously,” Sasuke agrees, indicating the discreet white door that allows Naruto into the bathroom.

This far, to her, the concept of summer houses has retained, despite her presence in this overdone villa, a taste of something small and lovingly DIY-renovated, a little red hut in a forest somewhere, with gnats to kill and berries to pick and an outside loo to hunker down over. Sasuke’s bathroom, and Naruto realises it is exactly that, Sasuke’s private bathroom, severs that connection.

It’s about the size of Naruto’s room, so clean the muted tiles positively sparkle. The thread count of the towels is probably astronomical, and the cabinets are filled with endless rows of bottles and appliances emitting a vague scent not quite Sasuke’s.

“Spoiled bitch,” she mutters, not entirely without fondness, and exchanges her clothes for the ones she was offered. The trousers are a bit short but the tshirt must be oversize on Sasuke and fits quite well.
In the bedroom Sasuke is still half naked, track suit bottoms on but nothing else. There are the hollows of her collarbones always teasingly hinted at by her necklines, laid out in their entirety; the scar from something that must have passed clean through her body, present on both sides of it; and her breasts, Jesus fucking Christ, triangular, small hard nipples, and there must be more, must be stomach and hips and ribs, but Naruto doesn’t notice. She’s held the pulse beating through that breast in her hand, about a week ago she held it in her hand.

Her fingers are lonely for it.

“Do you mind?”

“No,” Naruto blurs, flushing as Sasuke laughs, or does something very close to it; a sort of whispered laugh, maybe, a grin edging into sound. “I mean,” Naruto hurries to add, trying to explain that it’s weird, sort of, no not sort of, it really is weird, but she can’t stare in the locker room because obviously that’s creepy and wrong, however she didn’t count on walking in on Sasuke here, so it wasn’t intentional, and also it’s different in a way because unlike in the P. E. changing room, here is Sasuke choosing to strip, with or for or at least around Naruto.

Picking up a bra and slipping a tshirt over her head, Sasuke quirks an eyebrow. “I trust you do realise that undressing in the same house as somebody else does not in fact equate to inviting them to play Peeping Tom.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says, and of course she does, but all the same she didn’t leave and Sasuke didn’t tell her to.

It turns out, less to Naruto’s surprise than it would have been a few hours previously, that the perfect beach house comes with what Sasuke refers to as Itachi’s playroom and Naruto can only call a rather fantastic but ridiculously sparkly gym.

“Most of this stuff doesn’t even look used!”

“Some people are careful with their things.”

Naruto looks from the beat-up equipment that plainly does get a lot of use, to the shiny untouched parts, and to Sasuke, who gives a movement just a touch too uncomfortable to be a proper shrug.
“Itachi went through a bit of a phase, then he got over it and wasn’t interested anymore.”

“Huh,” says Naruto, contemplating an existence in which buying oneself a gym on impulse is not only possible but perfectly acceptable. “He seemed so normal.”

“He is normal!” Sasuke snaps. “I swear to god, if you ever accuse *me* of being ableist again!”

You’d have to be an idiot not to realise that the vast majority of Sasuke’s prickliness is just her, but you’d need to be an even bigger idiot not to realise that some of it is defensiveness; however it had never occurred to Naruto that part of it is there as a defence for others.

She wants to – to take Sasuke in her arms and dance her around like Itachi did with, well, with Kakashi in that photo.

At the thought she restricts herself to a smile. “That’s not, I meant he seemed normal in the not a spoiled rotten rich kid way.”

“Mind you keep it that way,” Sasuke tells her, but she seems pleased, maybe a little embarrassed, although it’s the first time Naruto’s known her to cover that with gruffness.

Or maybe just the first time she’s seen Sasuke embarrassed privately, without anything else going on to hide or distract.

Gaara told her it was no big deal, and it’s not that she doesn’t trust him, but even so she’d like to hear it from Sasuke.

“About your parents, I mean when Temari saw that bruise she just assumed, and I reckon she knows you pretty well, yeah? Are they like, hurting you?”

“Not really,” Sasuke says flippantly. “No more than is legal in some countries.”

“So he’s hitting you.”
“Not for a long time, now. Look, it was never that bad.”

“You’re his kid!”

“Fuck, Naruto, you’ve hit me worse than that.”

“That’s not the same. That’s not even in the same freaking ballpark!”

“No, but it’s none of your business and it’s pointless to talk about it. I shouldn’t have said anything. Neither should you. Now shut up.”

It’s no help talking about the whys and hows of hurts, Naruto does know that, feeling the cheek scars under her fingertip, knowing with every skin cell that they’re not just another callous.

How bad is no worse than is legal in some countries, even discounting the ones where a man is free to kill his family any damn way he pleases?

It’s funny, about those sick corporeal punishment justifying laws, pretending that if you call it something else abuse stops being abuse: if you did it to your wife, who can at least leave you, it’d be battery, but it’s fine if it’s your child, as if the fact the kid is dependent on you to love them makes it less instead of more fucked up for you to hurt them. Actually it’s a lot like the fuckheads claiming it’s not rape if it’s your boyfriend violating you.

Not that Naruto couldn’t name a few children who’d do well with a smacking, but if you’ve raised your kid so wrong that it hurts people for no good reason, then you’re sure as hell not the right person to punish them for it.

Sasuke will have asked for it, and she’ll have got it, too.

It’s not a mental image Naruto can stand, her own hand replaced by a grown man’s, a father’s.

Sasuke’s tense, not actually looking so good, with skin straining over the tips of her bones and her
pulse a visible tremble just underneath it, veins a blue latticework, runny ink blot art; a Rorschach test spilled over her skin.

Naruto is not a liar, not to anybody really.

“I’ve really hurt people. I – Temari was saying about Gaara, and you don’t hang around him or anything, but – but I’m not sick but I’ve really hurt people too. I almost killed someone once. Or a couple of times, I guess, depending on how sticky you are about almost.”

A guy with four broken ribs and a badly punctured lung, who was one good shove away from having no non-ruptured lungs left.

A guy with a severe concussion who was ill enough from it he might have possibly had a light skull fracture.

A guy who got his knife twisted around on him and ended up with the handle poking out of his stomach.

She didn’t mean for it to happen, exactly, but she didn’t mean for them to jump her either, and can you say you regret it when you still think it’s better than the alternative?

“I’m not afraid of you,” Sasuke tells her with something like fond amusement under the snottiness, looking every inch the defiant warrior princess even in the baggy gym clothes. “Anyway I expect they deserved it.” Unlike with Iruka there’s nothing ironic about how she says it.

“Yeah,” says Naruto, because that’s the way it has to be, isn’t it? She decided they deserved it when she did it, or at least that they deserved it more than she did.

Sasuke said, *There’s a difference between killing an innocent and killing a murderer to prevent further atrocities. One is a crime, the other it would be criminal to fail at.*

Naruto doesn’t want to be a murderer, but she doesn’t want to be a gang bang victim or eyeless either, and while she’s not kidding herself that hurting someone is a good thing, preventing them from hurting others sure as hell is.
The tip of her right pinkie was surgically reattached the same night the guy with the knife in his stomach was patched up.

Then they moved.

“That’s settled then,” says Sasuke. “Now do your worst.”

Is this loss of control or loss of inhibition? In either case Naruto’s grin fucking hurts, it’s so happy.

It was true, too, what Sasuke said about not finding Naruto intimidating; Naruto kicks her in the stomach, hard as she can, harder probably than she should, because this is Sasuke, this is real, it means the world, means probably more than it should — and Sasuke doesn’t scare, she catches the leg and twists it, and brings Naruto down with her.

Afterwards, when she’s been showered and changed and bundled off to the Underground, she still aches with the wonder of it, bruises breaking out over her skin like freckles under sunlight, high on the antiseptic smell of the gym mats and the warm tangle of limbs. In the stifled tube air she itches with after-sweats and doesn’t care, giving the lady opposite a smile that causes anxious whispers on the subject of young people today and their horribly liberal views on restricted substances.

She splays her hand over the window, the hand that hit Sasuke’s face, cradled Sasuke’s breast, mimics the movements of Sasuke’s own hand during lectures, the snapping and drumming and twirling an imaginary pen. Hazed by the heavy words emanating from the lectern, Naruto’s spent hours studying them, uneven cuticles, short unpainted nails, bones visible as shadows under the skin.

Kakashi’s hands were larger, long square fingers, scarecrow-bony and a little tanned, obvious and familiar on Sasuke’s and Itachi’s bodies.

In all those pictures Sasuke was so young, and neither innocent nor perfectly happy, and clearly adored him beyond all reason, that rare way that lets a scowl, lets every expression, mean, I love you.

Kakashi touched her like you touch something that belongs to you, something that’s been yours to love forever, brilliant and unchangeable as sunrise.

Sometime before that, supposedly, he will have touched her the way Naruto does, with tension
fuelling the thrill of it, when you grab for it every chance you get and could never imagine doing it casually.

She gets off the train with a spring in her limp.

“Naruto!” Dad exclaims upon catching sight of her in the garage, the static sound of panic in his voice. She hasn’t heard that in a long time, not since the police officer’s son got a knife in him, and Naruto got half a finger less and six new scars. “What happened? Sit down.”

It takes her a moment to realise that with the sun behind her he can’t see her expression, will only notice the slight limp, the hurt way she holds her body.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” she protests from the chair Dad’s pushed her into, looking from his strained face to Kiba’s perplexed one and smiling and smiling, feeling Dad’s hands on her shoulders loosen, turning to heavy warmth. “I went over to Sasuke’s, we kind of kicked the shit out of each other.”

“Crap,” Kiba interjects. “Didn’t think she had enough muscle on her to do that much damage.”

“It’s no how big you are, it’s what you do with it,” Naruto quips, following his gaze to a rather spectacular bruise swelling into existence on her arm.

They work in quiet for a while after that, Naruto sitting rather gingerly but glowing like a freaking light bulb, before Kiba says, “So you’re sure you don’t want one of the puppies, then?”

“On the contrary,” Naruto mutters, a tone and words she’s picked up from philosophy class. The tongue-out-sticking is all her, though. “I am very sure I want one. Unfortunately someone is equally sure I can’t have one.”

“That’s good,” Kiba says quickly. “Because I sort of gave it away to Hinata.”

“You’re on puppy giving terms with her?”

“Good going, Romeo,” Dad agrees. Naruto can see his smile all the way through the layers of car metal between them.
“Shut up,” Kiba grumbles. “Or, actually, don’t. I mean you’re basically my Mr Miagi, right? Time to impart some old man wisdom crap, yeah?”

“Well,” Dad says, coming back to their side of the garage and kneeling to examine something, “if you’re sure you’re ready for it, I shall impart to you the great teachings of Master Yoda. Love, my young padwans, is like a gnat bite – it sucks the life out of you and gives you poison in return, then the more you scratch the more it itches. Also, don’t get caught peeking.”

Guwaffing, Kiba disappears under the main body of the car, shooing an overeager Akamaru away with a monkey wrench, resurfacing two changed tires later to whine about the History/English project. “And you know Shino, with his sick bug obsession, and then Hinata likes poetry, so we ended up with, what was it, The Evolution of Nature Themes in Poetry. Like, what the hell is that? At least you got two straight-A cranks in your group, you won’t need to do shit. And I mean, man, do they coordinate these things to cause us the maximum amount of pain? We just finished that bloody Philosophy paper, give me a break here!”

The Philosophy essay actually went pretty well, though, as Naruto is thrilled to discover on Friday. “Good work, everyone,” says Iruka, and for once he’s really, really right.

At their table Sasuke barely glances at her A+, Ino glowers at her A-, and Naruto pumps her fist in the air. Cs she’s had aplenty, but there’s rarely a + after them, nor mainly nice words in the red ink.

*Good work, Naruto!* Iruka has written. Given your involvement and participation in class, I’ll be bumping up your overall grade for this part of the course to a B. Try to keep a tighter rein on your temper, and to use more appropriate language and sources, and we might be looking at an A in the future. Glad you transferred over!

There’s a prickling in her eyes. Nobody has ever, no teacher has ever even nearly…

“Thank you,” she blurts to Iruka afterwards, feeling at sea and ready to grab at him to steady herself, hug him for dear life, this kindly teacher she’s never counted on at all.

“You earned it,” Iruka says. “I could tell you’d really taken in Sasuke’s arguments, even if you still didn’t agree with them. That’s part of why I like us to discuss the topic in class before I give the writing assignments. Just, and this is more of a favour, and I’ll be telling them too – maybe you could try to include Ino a little more? You and Sasuke get so caught up, and that’s great, but it’s a bit of a pity for Ino. Her essays are good, I wish she’d participate a bit more in class.”
“You got it,” Naruto promises. She’ll personally throw herself between Ino and every one of Sasuke’s barbed arguments if that’s what Iruka wants.

Mum too is pleased with her results, for the first time Naruto can remember since the crayon paintings era in grade school.

“That’s great, honey,” she says now, smiling wider than she normally does, wide enough the wrinkles show in earnest. “But please hurry and get in the car, there’s been a bit of a scheduling emergency at work.”

Naruto plops into the shotgun seat. “Yeah?”

“I’ll have to get back for a bit. I’m sorry, honey, you’ll be stuck in the hospital for an hour or two before Sara comes by to replace me.”

“Ah, jeez, the whole point of getting picked up is getting home faster.”

“Yes, well, there’s not much to be done about it, now. Did you bring something to read?”

Yeah, fat chance. “I’ll come up with something.”

“That’s my girl,” says Mum, and Naruto can’t argue with that assertion. She concentrates on trying to pester the AC back into life as Mum takes off, driving a comfortable fifteen KPH over the speed limit and finishing with a rather elegant double-parking in the hospital employee lot. “I can always say it was an emergency,” she explains with a grin Naruto has often seen in the mirror but rarely on her mother’s face. Apparently getting his designated parking space occupied is the least he deserves, the schedule-fumbling busybody who ruined their afternoon. Naruto’s hard pressed to disagree.

This particular building might be new to her, but beneath the surface all hospitals are the same, and between being a patient and a runt waiting for Mummy, god knows she has more than a passing familiarity with them.

After Mum’s hurried off to change into her nurse scrubs Naruto explores her usual haunts; the sweets dispenser, the info desk nurses she’ll need to stay on good terms with, and most importantly the
children’s ward. There’s something to be said for people too sick to avoid you.

Sometimes they die from you, though, after they’ve stopped wanting to avoid you.

Only now it doesn’t have to be like that.

On a subconscious level she must have known from the start, but she admits to what she’s doing only when she’s already inside the coma corridor. It’s quiet here, in so far as hospitals are ever quiet, machines buzzing like distant bees, and the lights dimmed.

She recognises him through the little window in the door, the same shock-pale hair he had in the photos, a younger face than most in this ward.

The door inches open easily under her hand.
Head slumped sideways over the pillow, his face sullen with sleep under the fringe, he’s boyish the way someone who isn’t actually a boy can be boyish. His hair has taken on a silvery tint, turned a very light ash blond.

His skin is as pale as Sasuke’s, shading into yellow and grey where the light can’t reach, like paper so old it would disintegrate under a touch.

There are barely any machines. All on its own in the empty room his chest rises and falls, his heart beating numbers into the bedside monitor.


For a little more than a year now, Naruto counts up laboriously, her mind plunged underwater and treading numbers to keep from drowning. He’s three years her senior, will be nineteen this year, only it doesn’t matter because at seventeen he was in an accident and now Sasuke says he’s dead.

“Er, hi,” says Naruto into the silence.

He’s too pale and still to look convincingly asleep, but there’s no reason for it that she can see. The lower half of his face and the topmost part of his neck are scarred, the skin glossy and tinted a strange orange-pink, with darker smudges beside his mouth and along the line of his jaw. Some sort of chemical burn, glossed over with skin grafts? Is that what would look like that?

One of his eyes is hidden under a patch.

“Naruto?”

It’s a woman’s voice and emanating from the wrong direction, but for a moment she shudders with the certainty that he’s spoken.

But of course not. In the doorway there’s a nurse asking what she’s doing here, your mum’s looking for you.
“Right, sorry. I’ll be along.”

Twisting for a last glance over her shoulder, she finds him unchanged, and yet so different. He was very pretty in the photos, a bright lanky curve of movement, precocious eyes and fox’s grin and grabby hands, unsettlingly present-day present-time for a 2D paper presence.

Without the lens to halo him he’s rather ordinary; a thin teenager, not particularly good-looking, with hair like a wizened dandelion.

“Kushina! Here we are, I found her in the Coma Ward, of all places. Well, have a nice weekend.”

“You too,” Mum smiles, ushering Naruto outside at speed, clearly as eager to get out of work as Naruto is to get out of school. It’s only after they’re in the car that she asks, “What were you doing in the coma ward? I was sure you’d be with the kids.”

“I know – I mean, there’s this guy there that someone I know knew. Kakashi Hatake.”

“Oh, the painter! Right. Such a pity about him, he was so young. He used to be a student at my university, actually, before he was in that accident, although he made the paintings instead of studying them.”

Of course he was. He’ll have lived here, in this city, and read Marxist art theory and loved Sasuke and been alive.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“We don’t know,” Mum says with a sigh. “Not really. The brain’s complicated, you know, it’s not always perfectly clear what’s gone wrong. He’s healthy as far as we’ve been able to discover, and we haven’t detected any brain damage, so… Theoretically he could wake up, but after this much time has passed that’s very unusual, even though there’s no discernable reason for him not to.”

“And if he did, then he’d be okay?”
“As I said, I don’t know. As far as we can see he’s healthy, yes, but if there wasn’t some sort of damage that we’ve not been able to discover, then he should be awake. But provided he did regain consciousness that ought to have been sorted out, so yes, he should be all right, after physical rehabilitation. Bear in mind, though, honey, this isn’t likely to happen. When they’ve been comatose for more than a year, people don’t usually wake up again. I think you have to count on it that he won’t.”

The doctors must have told Sasuke some variant of that too, something long-winded and full of fancy words and evasions that won’t have worked, not on Sasuke, and she’ll have known what they were really saying was, *Well technically he’s comatose, but that’s just semantics, isn’t it. He might as well be dead for all the good he is now. Fuck, he is dead, they just haven’t turned the air and heat off yet.*

Frankly Sasuke might have been happier with a gravestone, because you aren’t supposed to give up on people who are still alive.

That night Naruto spends an entire five minutes googling for Love Poetry Project stuff before breaking down and typing in “coma” in the search bar. After skimming half a Wikipedia article she abandons the pretence and hesitates over the empty search bar again.

Googling names is a bad idea, or can be. All the shit they posted about her, the relentless humiliation morphing from words and pranks into words and images on the net, and she tells herself this is different and to an extent it is, but it's not as though she doesn’t know Sasuke would disapprove.

On the other hand, if she catered to what Sasuke Uchiha approves of, they’d probably still not talk to each other outside of Iruka’s class.

The search words Kakashi Hatake yield news clippings about the tragic accident, suspected double suicide, of the Hatake couple, who went off a bridge in January 1998, leaving behind an estate estimated to an undisclosed but eight-digit number and a little boy.

Then there are the newer entries, sparser pickings: listings of students accepted to Konoha Boarding School, to Konoha University. He’s mentioned as having participated in a student union carnival and to have won some form of prize for a portrait.

At the very top of the page they’re back to accidents, a major collision involving a drunk bus driver and eight dead, fifteen severely injured and brought to the hospital.
Her hand is slick with sweat against the mouse; she feels filthy. Just like every time she’s googled herself.

To him it happened, the stuff her old school hoped would happen to her and wrote delightedly gory descriptions of.

For amelioration she googles Sasuke. This is genuinely different, not even really an intrusion; Sasuke has not slept any privacy between herself and life, she’ll have looked at this herself, everybody does, and Naruto’s willing to bet more money than she has that anybody posting unapproved entries would be dealt with swiftly and mercilessly.

She’s almost disappointingly right, as Sasuke is only mentioned in official contexts, figuring in a few stray pictures and more clinical lists of students attending a number of activities related to Sannin Academy. She gives Naruto a severe black stare from the screen, her head on a level with her father’s hip, and then again, the same demanding eyes from a school trip, Sasuke and Sakura at a beach, Sasuke’s legs so long they’re almost disproportional, beautifully rounded though the knees are still a bit knobby.

It reminds Naruto of Sasuke half-dressed in her bedroom, charging at her in the playroom, kissable on the beach, and she has to put her hand down her pants for a bit.

xxxxx

While lounging in the park next day, Kiba decides that he is adamant they go swimming. “It’s Indian summer! The last we’ll have of it, and I’m freaking boiling here!”

“It’s not Indian summer,” Naruto argues, angling her leg towards Akamaru in what is hopefully an alluring manner, itching for even a dog tongue to sooth the gnat bites swelling like volcanoes on her skin. “It’s just summer.”

“It’s bloody October,” says Kiba, which it must be admitted is a fair point. “Which makes it Indian summer too. There just wasn’t any autumn in between it and the usual summer. God, I can tell you’re new here, it’s always like this, every damn year, then when it turns it turns fast. We’ll be seeing snow in a month, trust me. Which is why we need the swimming to happen now.”

“Then go to the swimming pool,” Shino says, his attention remaining firmly fixed on whatever insect has taken to using his hand as its landing pad. “Or if you’re going to stay, shut up disturbing the
“Bugs.”

“Fuck you,” Kiba grouches. “I hate the bloody swimming pool.”

“You mean you hate the fact you’re banned from it on account of smuggling in Akamaru that one time.”

“I said shut the fuck up, Shino! He needed a bath too! Anyway, fuck swimming pools. I want the sea! We live by the seaside, I should get a go at the sea, yeah? C’mon Naruto, can’t you get Sasuke to unlock for us? Or even Gaara, if he stays the hell away from me, the creepy little shit.”

“He’s not a shit,” Naruto says, profoundly unable to argue the rest of the verdict. “Anyway I don’t think he likes swimming. Ask Hinata, why don’t you?” The size of the Hyuuga House, there’s no way they don’t have access to the ritzy beach.

Kiba gives her a looks that implies she’s daft and also that he’s embarrassingly in love. “Yeah, no, I’d rather not ask someone who actually cares about upsetting her parents.”

“Guess you’ve got a problem, then.”

Would Sasuke care about upsetting her parents?

Well, of course not her mother; as a matter of fact Naruto suspects Sasuke rather enjoys that. But her dad’s a different matter.

“You suck,” Kiba starts, but is interrupted by his mobile beeping. “Yes! Fuck yeah! Sakura and Ino’ve seduced the key out of Kankurou, everyone’s going there, come on you lazy tossers.”

When they get off the tube forty minutes later, it appears everybody is indeed on the beach, about half a kilometre south of where she kissed Sasuke. The ground is mostly sand here instead of stone, a pristinely white sand Naruto suspects to be only achievable through the intervention of spray-paint. She can only guess how many upset complaints are going to be rolling in by day’s end.

It is, simply put, quite spectacularly awesome.
Waving at Sakura in passing, she lets Kiba drag her towards the main grouping of towels. Haku’s missing, which is a pity but not really a surprise, and there’s no Gaara either, and worse she can’t spot Sasuke, but everyone else seems to be present. Including, to Tenten’s very vocal protests, Akamaru.

There’s quite a bit of stripping going on and Naruto follows suit, dropping what little clothes she was wearing in a heap on her towel, feeling the sun hit and start to weld previously unexposed skin. It’s a good thing they have enough hedges around the garden to allow for naked sun bathing, or she’d burn to a crisp.

It occurs to her only after her shirt is off, but with the force of real impact, that her stomach being bared means the scars being bared.

There’s a lot of them, too, a black bundle of scar tissue and tattoo ink curling over her skin from just under the edge of her swim suit bottoms to just below her sternum, swirling out horizontally from edge to edge of her front.

There’s a reason she wasn’t sorry, right then, that she got that knife twisted around on its user, that she isn’t all that sorry about it now, or not only sorry.

She’s got used to the whisker scars, to people seeing them, but not to her stomach being exposed.

“Cool shit,” is Kiba’s comment, accompanied by a gesture towards the red tattoos on his own cheeks and arms. “Damn, now I feel all emasculated.”

Where Kiba saw the body art, Sakura, sitting demurely on a towel, clearly sees scarring, marring, but restricts herself to a sympathetic look.

Thankfully, and she is a horrible person to be thankful for it, but there it is, thankfully Kiba’s distracted almost immediately by Chouji disrobing, making a sound of disgust to match his face. “Fatso.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being fat,” Naruto hisses at him, trying to make up for how happy she was that he looked away from her abdomen, if only to deride Chouji’s rather voluminous appearance.
Now she’s not only selfish but also hypocritical, because frankly obesity isn’t anything she finds attractive either. On the other hand not being attractive to Naruto isn’t the same as being disgusting, although on some desperate occasions the line has been pretty thin.

“No, cardiac arrest is great,” Kiba says, coming with her towards the inviting surf, sand burning just this side of painful under their feet.

“Look, you love dogs, you take risk with them, Shino’s the same with his bugs – Chouji loves food, he takes the consequences.”

“Tch,” says Kiba, rather playfully. “You’re one to talk, you’re dream girl’s about five kilos away from being an anorexic corpse.”

It’s an old conundrum, that: on the one hand Naruto doesn’t want to think of herself as pathetically brainwashed by society, and on the other she doesn’t exactly like the thought of being personally responsible for finding some really rather repellent beauty ideals to be actually very sexy.

“I don’t mind some extra fat,” she says, filling her hand with the love handle flesh of her hip. Her bathing suit was purchased last summer, before the lengthy stint in a hospital bed after the toilet incident, which is to say about ten kilos ago.

They’re at the water now, Akamaru jumping around their feet and splashing her legs, and she laughs and runs, the way she’s always got herself soaked, running until she trips.

Kiba was right, she has to give him that: swimming pools have nothing on the actual sea. The water is brackish, more sour than salt, the temperature of a body on a cold day.

Much later she drags herself back to land, her body soft and languid with exercise and laughter, lungs bubbling with swallowed water, and collapses between Shikamaru and Shino in the shade provided by Chouji’s sitting bulk and the deck chair Tenten’s lounging in. The “blanket of sunlight” that she’s always considered a daft metaphor is solid reality, woollen, with something flightier woven in where the wind breezes through it.

“Gaara says hi,” Shikamaru surfaces from sleep to tell her.
“Yeah?”

“Well, as a matter of fact what he actually said was ‘huh’, but he was holding that new racing game. I took it to mean he wants you to play with him.”

“Will do. Figured he wasn’t a swimmer. Where’s Sasuke, though? I mean, isn’t this basically right next to her house?”

“Temari called her, I think,” Shikamaru says, his voice coming muffled from under the sunhat covering his face. “But she’s not much of a beach-lover either.”

“But it’s the beach!” Naruto protests, flabbergasted into a gesture of incomprehension and look at all the pretty. “What’s not to love?”

“I suppose for one the fact she can’t tan,” suggests Tenten, who very definitely can. She snorts. “Although of course pallor is more classically aristocratic.”

Laughing, probably a little drunk, Kankurou leans over the back of Tenten’s chair, hands dangling close to her body but not actually touching her. There’s the predictable, what’re you talking about; oh just Sasuke not liking the beach enough to grace us with her presence. “Well, Ino’s enjoying it, at least,” he says. “Been acting like a right crown princess.”

“Ino’s all right,” Chouji says, unexpectedly firmly.

“Oh, she’s more than all right,” Kankurou leers. “It’s just it’ll be worst for her if she gets ideas.”

Naruto plants an elbow in the sand, the wet grit of it crawling into her pores, drilling their way in then curling snugly inside, and twists her head to keep up with the conversation.

“She’ll be fine,” Chouji says. “She can handle herself.”

“Against Sasuke? Are you fucking kidding me?” Kankurou shakes his head rather like a bad actor portraying befuddlement, leaning more heavily on Tenten’s chair. “Look, man, Ino’s hot and she’s a nice girl, but it’s not the same. Sasuke’s the queen bitch here, Ino shouldn’t try and mess with that.”
“You can’t blame her for trying,” Tenten says, closing her glossy. “I reckon she got a taste for it last year. If Sasuke loses interest, or if she’s gone a lot again… Of course Ino’s going to try and pick up where she left off. Look, Temari may be the official crown princess but we all know that’s a technicality, she’s never been seriously interested.” She looks over her shoulder at Kankurou. “Unless you’ve heard different.”

“No,” he says. “No I haven’t, but…”

“Exactly,” she cuts him off. “And what’s Sasuke been doing lately? Mostly nothing. No social events, no new prince consort, god, she’s been off slumming it with New Girl. No offence.”

“Are you jumping ship, then, Tenten?” He’s still languorous and drunk and his hand is still too close to Tenten’s breast, but for the first time Kankurou doesn’t come off as a joke, or as joking. He’s Gaara’s brother and Temari’s, and must have been cut from the same cloth after all. Which should have been obvious all along, in retrospect, but wasn’t.

“Of course not. Ino would need something really heavy to have even a chance, and if Sasuke was out of the picture it’d be civil war. No, I like the status quo. Besides, Ino…”

“Exactly,” Kankurou cuts in. “She’s not good enough.” He laughs, not happily but with a certain satisfaction. “Fucking middle class thinking they’re the new noveau riche.”

“Of which you’re such a classy example,” Chouji says. “So Ino’s parents work for ours, so do Kiba’s, what’s it matter?”

“You’re rich?” Naruto blurts. “No, er, sorry, I mean you seemed normal. God, is everyone here disgustingly posh?”

Chouji smiles, wide and nice. “I try. And, well, Shikamaru’s on scholarship.”

“What I was saying,” Kankurou continues, long-suffering, over the light sound of Shikamaru’s snores and Shino’s mumbling to his latest bug lady, “was that yes, in any other school Ino would be the shit, but this is Sannin, we love us some classism. Also she has no minions, can you see Sakura doing minion work for her? Besides Ino doesn’t know what she’s doing, half the time she’s meaner than she intended, the other half she’s not mean enough.”
“Yes, fine,” Tenten says, waving him quiet with an impatient gesture. “Ino’s Mary Stuart, Sasuke’s Elizabeth I, we all know how this’ll end.”

Chouji quirks a grin at Naruto, adding, “I guess that’d make you Robert Dudley, then. At least let’s hope you’re not Essex.”

Laughter bursts from Tenten, startled and sudden. “Yeah, right! In that case Ino might actually have a shot.”

Kankurou’s sniggering too, fingers brushing the curve of Tenten’s chest before she slaps them away. “Yeah, not that I wouldn’t like to see it, but as if, Sasuke would never.”

Except Sasuke gave her a distinctly come-hither look in the bathroom, after their first fight in Naruto’s basement, and she let Naruto kiss her, and while she might just have been too drunk and surprised to protest, she’s not bothered about it, she said it was fine, and she didn’t tell Naruto to leave when she was changing, instead she looked at Naruto looking at her and seemed …if not exactly pleased then closer to that than to anything else.

“See you later,” Naruto says, pulling her cut-offs and tank top on over the drying swim suit.

The street accessing Sasuke’s garden has pulled a disappearing act, but the seaside garden wall should be an easy climb. It’s about two meters rough off-white stone, with enough cracks for some greenery to be growing on it, hot from the sun but not untouchable.

“Right,” Naruto mutters, backing off a bit to start with a running jump. The cracks are smaller when you’re actually trying to fit your fingers into them, and the stone hotter the closer to the top she pulls, dragging her weight up inch after porous inch of wall. One good stretch from the top her foothold gives out, two seconds of freefall pressed to the stone before she manages a new one, swearing at the abrasions.

When she finally swings up a leg to straddle the damn wall, she discovers a sunglassed, dark-suited man looking up at her from between the flower beds. “You have got to be kidding me. What is this, Neighbourhood Watch meets James Bond?”

“Can I help you, miss?”
“Ah, fuck. I mean, no. Yes. I’m here to see Sasuke.”

“If you’re invited, may I ask why you’re climbing the wall?”

“Would you believe me if I said I couldn’t find the street? Yeah, didn’t think so. Anyway, I come in peace, could you just, like, take me to your leader so she can tell you to bugger off back to your guard stuff?”

His mouth’s not moving but she swears he’s laughing at her behind the glasses. “All right, miss. Can you get down?”

“Sure.” She swings her legs over, pushes, takes the impact on her knees. After a barefoot summer her skin is burnt to leather, barely prickles at the contact with the ground.

The guard is surprisingly polite, keeping only a light hand on her shoulder as he ushers her into the house, which is as cold and lovely as she remembers it, a snowcastle beach house.

Sasuke’s reading in the parlour, implacable and beautiful in the receding sunlight.

xxxxx

“Miss Uchiha?”

“What?”

Thompson might not be the most sickeningly obtuse of the neighbourhood security, but he is nowhere close to as captivating as Monica Fagerholm and her infuriating, repetitive, inescapable prose. Sasuke is certain the odd effect is merely the result of an incompetent translation, but then she was also certain of that three hundred pages ago and she has yet to put the book down.

“We’ve a trespasser who says she’s here to see you.”
Sasuke finishes the paragraph and looks up at Naruto’s stupid grin and stupider wave. “She’s hardly a trespasser.”

“My apologies, miss, but I discovered her climbing the wall into the garden.”

“What?” Sasuke demands before she can stop herself. “Why the hell would you…? Never mind, you can go, Thompson, she’s all right.”

Naruto misinterprets this as an invitation to beam and plant herself next to Sasuke on the window ledge, bodies touching from knee to shoulder. “I couldn’t find the damn street, I kept telling him but he wouldn’t believe me!”

“Did you honestly expect him to?” What makes the situation special is that it’s not a rhetorical question.

“I guess not,” Naruto admits, unconcerned. “You weren’t at the beach. What’re you reading?”

Sasuke dislocates Naruto’s head from its unwelcome perch her shoulder. “Diva.”

“Are you kidding me? That’s perfect, that’s like an evil overlord reading The Prince!”

The irony is that Sasuke was a shy child, big-eyed and quiet, before Itachi took to freaking out and Mum took to drinking.

She barely recognises that version of herself, which seems now like a fictional character she read about long ago, who had never met Kakashi and would have had little interest in him if she did, who didn’t often understand sarcasm and whom Dad had never hit or yelled at, not because she might fight back or get someone else to do it for her but because she was his little princess, when he remembered she was there.

“*The Prince* is actually rather entertaining.”

Is it better for a Prince to be feared or loved?
Back then, when she was eleven and read it for the first time, when she was loved and always had been, though not always by the same people, she’d wanted the fear, that cold safety and power of being untouchable, like stepping into a factory freezer and everyone else is already hanging on the hooks from the ceiling.

“You’re sick. Although the size of that book should’ve told me that already.”

“I like long novels,” Sasuke tells her. “You’re not pulled out of them right after you’ve got in.”

All the same she puts it away, because… because she was staring out the window in between pages, and time passes and the leaves shift colour and fall, and when Naruto says, “So we’re friends now”, she says, “Fine, whatever.”

It makes her feel better until she feels worse again, or that’s what she’s come to expect, only now with Naruto she doesn’t feel worse again, or not immediately.

Naruto is being her usual hyperactive self, feet tapping, fingers playing, over the hem of her own top, over Sasuke’s knee for a brief moment, over the backs of books, leaving greasy marks on the leather. This room’s for show, with the monochrome old collections on display.

“Don’t you have any graphic novels? Or, you know, something people would like to actually read?”

“If by people you mean yourself, then no. However if by people you are referring to individuals who are actually literate, this is a very satisfying library.”

Personally Sasuke finds the one upstairs, with the paperbacks and the newer novels, much pleasanter, but winding Naruto up is one of the few games she’s had to play recently.

“Bah,” Naruto scoffs. “You’re not telling me you’re reading through, what is it, five different editions of the bible for fun.”

“That’s the Torah you’re holding.”
“Same diff.”

“More or less,” Sasuke admits, because hell if she’s going defend a religion she neither subscribes to nor approves of to someone lacking the intellect to appreciate her Devil’s advocacy.

“So I know the bible’s all, a man should not lay with another man the way he’d lay with a woman – which also I don’t get, because of the whole, you know, it being physically impossible. Except if one of them was a transman, I suppose – anyway, does it say anything about dyke stuff?”

“Not that I’ve ever heard of,” Sasuke replies. “Lesbianism has a long and illustrious history of being erased, couldn’t have the major religions excluded from that.”

Naruto scrunches up her nose, a tide of freckles rolling up her faintly pink cheeks. “Guess that’s one of the many parts that should be ignored.”

“Religion’s not a buffet,” Sasuke says, tired of the argument but interested in a better answer than Neji’s been able to provide her. “If you ignore parts, or change them – well, then it’s something, certainly, some sort of belief system, but it’s not the original religion anymore. Imagine a Marxist who’s in favour or private ownership, that’s a fake Marxist.”

“But they change stuff all the time. Hell, Roman myth is just a couple centuries of reinterpretation away from Christianity.”

Which is the same response Neji gives her, only cruder and funnier and far more unexpected.

“Why do you do that?” she asks, shifting until Naruto, who’s been staring at the books to avoid staring at her, meets her eyes. “Why do you pretend to be an illiterate idiot?”

Naruto rubs the back of her head, a positively infuriating gesture at this point. “It’s just Mum stuff. I can do it for a bit, but I always get lost in it halfway, and then it’s worse. I guess either you have to believe in it, I mean believe it really means something, talking that way, theorising everything, or you’ve got to not believe it at all, so you can just pretend. And I – well, I believe parts, sort of. Like there are little tidbits of meaning hidden in all the blabbing. You know?”

“I see.”
They say talking makes it real, but in Sasuke’s experience it’s quite the opposite. Talking about something makes it be just words, puts the words between you and reality.

“Do you believe in anything?” Naruto asks her, crawling closer again. She must have been rolling around on the beach, there’s sand rubbing off from her skin and onto Sasuke’s clothes.

Sasuke cuddles into her oversize jumper, a knitted one she couldn’t have worn in this weather if she hadn’t got so thin she’s always cold, the misery almost soft inside her. “All those Eastern beliefs – every atman is a drop, Brahman is the ocean – I used to find it terrifying. Worse than death, the total eradication of the self, drowning it in some communal soul sewer.” She swallows. “But now I find it oddly comforting.”

She needs a smoke, why the fuck didn’t she bring the cigarettes?

“What’s the problem then?”

“Well obviously that it’s not true, you fucking moron!”

There’s stillness, and almost panting, and she really needs that bloody smoke.

And then Naruto tugs at her sleeve, lightly, at her elbow. “It’s freezing in here. Come on, you stingy bitch, gimme the jumper, you’ve trousers and everything.”

There is no actual reason why she shouldn’t.

Of course there is even less reason why she should, but Sasuke’s dressed under it and Naruto’s cut-offs and very small top can’t be warm, in the stretch of time after the sun’s started waning but before the AC has calmed down.

Also it’s her jumper now, hasn’t been Kakashi’s for a long time.

“Fine,” she says, not quite sure why, hastily because quite probably she could not endure knowing
why, and pulls it over her head.

“Nice!” It’s like a dress on Naruto, almost to her knees and longer than the cut-offs, a greener blue than her eyes. She’s smiling, the sort of serious smile Sasuke didn’t think she could manage. Sasuke can’t: she can be adult or she can be smiling, she can’t combine them. “Why did you do that, before?” Naruto asks. “Ignore me.”

“Just felt like it.”

“Well, don’t fucking do it again, do you have any idea…!”

*How it feels to be nobody, to care for someone so much you need them to exist, and then they decide you don’t.*

Yes, Sasuke knows, and precisely because of that she’s tempted to do it again, erase Naruto with a simple persona non grata verdict, but it turns out not to be practically possible at the moment.

“How it feels to be nobody, to care for someone so much you need them to exist, and then they decide you don’t.”

“Just so we’re clear, you can’t do that,” Naruto insists, hand closing around Sasuke’s elbow, bare now, “don’t you fucking dare, I need you to be a decent person, okay.”

Although the parlour door is open Mum knocks lightly on the doorframe, she always does. “Sasuke – oh, hello, Naruto. How nice to see you again.”

“Hi, Mrs Uchiha!” Undoubtedly there’s waving, but Sasuke spares herself the sight of it.

“Dinner will be served in a few minutes,” Mum continues. “Would you like to join us, Naruto?”

“Sure, thanks!”

Sasuke gives her a look of loathing, but Naruto’s already on the floor. Well, all right, then. If Mum thinks Sasuke’s so easily rattled that an undesirable dinner guest will earn her a reaction, she is in for a disappointment on par with that of her life in general.
Anna has set the table for them in the yellow dining room, white linen and heavy cutlery in the thick golden light. Itachi is lounging beside a window, clearly not intending to relocate to the university dormitories this week either.

Why are you here? she has asked him, nonchalance covering the demand, the fraying quality permeating the situation.

Mum is uncomfortable otherwise.

I’m not entirely comfortable with you being here.

Careful, pretended vulnerability, and he will know, surely he will still know, that it’s code for, And why the hell would you care what she thinks? Since when do you give a fuck about her?

Sasuke is here because the beach house is chilly and calm, a better alternative than the penthouse or a hotel suite, and because the flat on Lilypad Drive must be administered in small doses; she can’t afford binging on it anymore.

If she had a dormitory room, indisputably hers, legit and not a refuge – well.

The happiest nights of her childhood were spent in a dorm room, although not hers: when Itachi had snapped and been exiled to boarding school, and Sasuke had just learnt to turn her back.

Mum was pleading crying whining and Dad was yelling, everywhere things were breaking, and she must decide it was not her problem anymore, did decide that, again and again.

Konoha Boarding School was only an hour and a half away, less at night when the traffic wound down.

The first night she spent there was a balmy late-September one, during Itachi’s first full semester at boarding school. He’d been there for the last few weeks of the spring semester, and then there had been the long hot summer when he brought his orphan room-mate and new best mate home and Sasuke had decided to marry him.
Then, in September, she was the escaped princess. They gave her free reign over Itachi’s half of the really rather small room, the two boys curled up together in Kakashi’s bed under much cursing and jostling. Shortly Itachi re-emigrated to his own bed, which was more comfortable for him an account of Sasuke being smaller than Kakashi, but quite hot and bothersome for her.

Everything was better after Kakashi had realised they really were going to get married, and there were the hundreds of nights she slept with him, his hands curving over her, his breath at the nape of her neck, hair and secrets sneaking into her ear. In the morning when Itachi went out to bribe the RA she’d stayed curled up warm and safe and helpless in the smell of Kakashi and sleep, at home in every romantic cliché, until he woke up enough to touch her and she had to get up before she begged, never mind Itachi or statutory rape laws.

Sitting down at the table, she ignores Itachi’s polite murmurings of how they met already, didn’t we, a pleasure to see you again.

“Nice jumper,” he adds with a look at Sasuke.

“Isn’t it.” She says it like that, without question mark, because honestly, Itachi, you used to be better than this. I’m not twelve anymore, I’m not drunk on the smell of him.

Unsurprisingly Naruto is completely inept at social niceties, however as a flaw it slips under the radar in the face of her even greater ineptitude at table manners, especially since Sasuke can’t be bothered with politeness either. Mum and Itachi ask the expected questions, make the expected remarks, Naruto blushes and laughs and gives the wrong answers, and Sasuke stares stonily into her salad, keeping her mouth too full to accommodate any words.

In the doorway, afterwards, when she’s dragged Naruto out of the horrible dinner, there’s a moment when Naruto leans down towards her. Sasuke’s used to more advance warning in this situation, used to boys being empathically taller, her head on a level with Kakashi’s chest so she could always hear his heart.

“What are you doing?”

But she’s let Naruto’s face get too close, she shouldn’t be surprised when Naruto’s mouth quirks, cheeks so flushed they’re a faint red even under the tan, and then she’s being kissed again, a brief too-hard pressure of lips not quite aligning with hers.
Pushing her off is easy. “Don’t fucking do that again.”
Chapter 9

Though Naruto sticks her tongue out, her eyes are dark.

“Why not?”

It’s the eternal child’s question, the question of the helpless. Why have you abandoned me?

She extracts her hand from Naruto’s, giving her the ice princess smile. “Because friends don’t kiss friends who don’t want them to.”

To drive it home she doesn’t pick up when Naruto calls on Sunday, and if she sneaks over again Sasuke doesn’t know about it, locked up with Neji and a staggering number of cigarettes in the library.

“You know you can’t smoke those in here.”

She gives him a nasty face, the one she’d direct at the head librarian too enamoured with her bookly calling to care for her betters or their bribes, had she not been concerned with a banning. “Just think of them as my comfort blanket.”

“I’d… really rather not.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

Even after four years in the company of herself and Temari, Neji is jolted by every instance of foul language originating from a girly mouth, and while Sasuke would like to think she’s above being affected by unintentional reverse psychology, spending time with a guy who has been known to say “darn” does tend to dirty her mouth.

“You do know that it’s only social climbers who need to concern themselves so overly with these things, yes?” she says.
Being a lady is following all the rules; being royalty is breaking and remaking them.

Neji picks up the reading glasses he is far too young for, and which consequently Sasuke suspects of being window glass, and studiously ignores her. As he always has; he was a prince once too, before he was exiled.

_Do you want to go back? Would it be like going home?_

_The place I called home doesn’t exist anymore._

Isn’t that the truth?

Then on Monday Naruto returns the jumper washed and incorrectly folded, a million creases unfolding under Sasuke’s fingers to emanate the cheap-sharp smell of Uzumaki detergent.


“Think nothing of it.”

“Erm, no, I thought about it quite a bit, actually, seeing as it’s, you know, a borderline nice thing you did, right before you went back to the bitchy ignore routine. Which, not cool, what is up with that?”

“I’m going to kill Gaara for giving you my number.”

“Yeah, right.” Naruto scoffs, but it’s far too simple to ease her anger. “He’s like the one person who’s not afraid of you.”

She always did talk to Naruto, said too much. It’s been a very quiet year since everyone she used to talk to …became unavailable, a year of lonely staring into the abyss, and now here’s Naruto and there’s been build-up, of words and upsets, and it’s really only logical.

She rubs a tired hand over her face, it slips out, just a little cynical, “Actually I’m like the one person he is afraid of.”
Naruto’s look of concerned confusion is almost comical; if she’d seen it on TV she’d have shaken her head at the poor, overdone acting. She moves her hands out of expanding reach. “Look, let’s be clear on this. If I was interested in girls, which for the record I’m not, then I’d be interested in attractive girls.”

“But you said! You don’t even think girls exist.”

“I don’t think they have to, or that they should. I never said there aren’t girls in existence today.” Her phone beeps. “We’re back at, it’s complicated and you’re stupid. I’ve class.”

Naturally so does Naruto; from her seat by the window at the far side of the room Sasuke can hear her dejection at an apparently failed math test.

Sasuke chucks her own returned test. It’s an A, would’ve been an A+ if she’d waited to smoke until she’d finished the last equation.

This gives her pause.

In all her life she has never once got a lower grade than A. There were many, many papers and tests she didn’t write last year, but she has never tried and failed, never handed in anything that didn’t exceed every expectation except those that mattered.

This is probably going to change, now, if she can’t… snap out of it, pick up the pieces, become herself again, pull herself up by the bootstraps, whatever useless cliché you want to use.

This semester she’s doing her work, just about, and it’s not – it mightn’t be sufficient.

“Who cares?” she mutters, with a certain bitterness, because she does want to care. It was a pleasant fever to study for and burn through the summer exams to make up for all the courses she’d missed, and if she could only have that… but it’s too simple like this, it’s not a challenge, she can’t scrounge up any interest.

If she starts bringing home Bs and Cs, like a badly trained cat trying to curry favour with its owners by offering them mousse and birds, what would happen, if anything?
The therapist again, she supposes, the stupid one baffled as the idea dawned that her clients might lie to her.

Sasuke was kind to her, even so; she made out as though she was the exception. Then they didn’t talk to each other anymore, it was just Sasuke sitting in the over-stuffed chair in the office with her cigarettes and her iPod and a book, out-waiting the clock.

When she shakes a cig out of its package now, she finds her fingers unsteady from what might be her caring about it after all, or more likely stress, underfeeding, nicotine addiction.

1. E. on the other hand is served well by her occasionally-obsessive training, although for this unit they’re dancing. With the notable exception of Naruto and Kiba tripping all over each others’ feet, and Rock Lee bemoaning Sakura’s unavailability, the class breezes through the gym building. She catches a strand of smooth brown hair that has fled Neji’s ponytail, the same way that drove Itachi to distraction during their children’s ballroom classes, but stops before it makes him uncomfortable. It’s one of the things that brought them together, the dislike of being touched casually.

Mum brought her into the piano room for dancing from the age of six, when she’d grown from the chubby phase into the coltish one, her body all graceless shaky legs. So first there was Itachi tugging her around the room and dropping her on her arse in the way of big brothers, with Mum laughing encouragement from the piano stool, playing the instrument Sasuke was much more interested in learning than she was in dancing. She liked her fingers far better than the rest of her body, back then; her hands and her head were her, the rest was a dress she hadn’t grown into yet.

Later on there was Kakashi, all the years when she was old enough to want but not to get, and then the years when she had everything.

The body was hers by the time desire happened to it, and she’d wanted him so much. The slow hot burn of embarrassed desire had become alarmingly close to permanent, a constant hollow tingle in her skin. Although this emerging woman’s body was more hers than the girl’s had ever been, her possession of it was new, tentative, awkwardness abounding. It’s never been very clear to her why puberty would alienate girls from their bodies, since puberty is when they become useful, when they grow into you; still, there was a learning curve, and she was so breathlessly, dizzily desperate.

Love will do that, she supposes. Pure hormones never have, though it would have been simpler, cleaner somehow, if they had.
The summer of her twelfth year will always be the summer the aunts stopped saying, “Look how you’ve grown.”

Kakashi said, “I remembered you as taller.”

Height really is relative; she was a tall, gawky ten-year-old, turned an average, clumsy eleven, became a short, fine-faced twelve with aspirations on grace and curves. Her new sort of growing wasn’t the vertical kind approved for comment by elderly relatives.

She’s always wanted to smother herself in him, merge skins, slip beneath it, into the warmth, the scent, the deepest secret kernel of personhood. He wasn’t keen on it, anymore, or if he was suddenly too keen, it wasn’t very clear to her at the time.

*The problem isn’t the age gap, the problem is you’re pre-pubertal.*

She must have said something about Anko, can no longer recall what over the remembered sound of his voice, breathy and cracking with irritation. There weren’t any scars on him then; could he still talk, now? The doctors claim he could, but then they also claimed things would be all right.

So she doesn’t remember what she said, a more subtle version of, *If I were pre-pubertal there wouldn’t be an issue.* There was a look, past the increasingly obvious curve of her chest, obvious mainly because they were both so aware of it, the nave around which the situation turned. She will have said something more, or he will, something about – what was it? Hypocriticism, perhaps, or age being a cultural idea irrelevant in the fact of actual emotional and physical development. She will not actually have said, *Don’t tell me you wouldn’t have killed for a lay at my age,* but she must have said something, done something to prompt his response.

A short laugh, breaking halfway before his voice was light and even again, the deeper tones hidden away. She was lying back on her elbows, tense but not yet unpleasantly so; maybe she’d been trying to drag him down with her, maybe he’d pushed her, she’s no longer certain, both scenarios have played out so many times.

“Urges… yes. Tell me, do you masturbate?”

She may have gasped before sitting up, very properly, legs crossed, hands on knees because otherwise she might have hugged herself. This was pulling off scabs, she was lost and raw and sore, a half-cooked butterfly abruptly out of its shell, no longer treated as a child.
As an adult, a few years later, she would have taken it for teasing, would have responded to it as teasing; now it was an attack, but a triumph too because he would not have said that to a child. This was different from their usual game of cutting with dulled edges, or only at the shielded places.

There were a lot of things she almost said, wanted and didn’t want to say. “Yes.”

Sasuke is logical, systematic, had charted the developing territories and logged changes and reactions with methodical precision. She couldn’t honestly say she enjoyed it; or, rather, enjoyment was not the primary emotion, what there was of it was dulled by curiosity and distaste. She couldn’t bear to look at the raw places, after the first glance, but she’d analysed them by touch and taste.

Lying sideways in moonlight, sticky with summer sweat, she’d experienced her pubic mound like a baby creature – surely nothing so obvious as a kitten – between her legs, something quite alien from herself although – liked, mostly, something she might feel estranged from but, cautiously, welcoming towards.

And the wild, giddy, disgusting thought: how much weirder must a penis be, that alien contraption fastened to one’s body.

He was taken aback but only very briefly, leaning minimally towards her. “Do you think of me, when you do?”

Adding him, the idea of him, would have exploded control away, would have made it not an experiment at all.

“How much more weird must a penis be, that alien contraption fastened to one’s body.”

And of course he had, he was fifteen and in love, she could tell even then, although it was also obvious he didn’t want to want it.

“He wasn’t even the only one. They were expected to be representative when Dad had people over for dinner, she and Itachi, ornament the table with clean and pretty faces, and the guests no longer looked only at her face. She didn’t mind, although even then she knew she should have; she made a better woman than she ever had a girl, and being interesting, being desired, was the only power she’d ever really had, at that point. Suddenly there was so much more of it.
Right now there is Gai being customarily unconventional, clapping his hands and shouting, “Right! Beautiful, everybody!” Some griping about youth and love and sweat later, he decides exercise is the golden god of spring, and they’re going to be playing basket.

Neji says, “Sasuke,” then gives her a slow odd look and picks, “Naruto.”

Shock becomes delight becomes a cheeky grin as Naruto joins them, and Sasuke considers that Gaara may not be the only boy she has to kill.

Iruka frequently protests that having students pick teams encourages cliques, bullying and insecurities, and should be abandoned in favour of the much fairer and nicer system of the teachers dividing them into groups, but Gai isn’t known to listen well to criticism, and at least this method is efficient.

It breeds competition, Gai claims.

Yes, says Iruka, that’s the problem.

Gai doesn’t appear to understand this opinion. Sasuke’s grasp of it is highly theoretical, and as the game starts it grows increasingly tenuous.

Naruto and she make a surprisingly fierce team. Sasuke wouldn’t have expected it; Naruto’s so sloppy, so erratic – an exciting opponent, but not somebody Sasuke would have thought she’d be able to successfully work with. Sinking the ball to the soundtrack of Naruto all but tackling Kiba out of the way, she finds she’s almost laughing.

True to her word, Naruto doesn’t peek in the changing rooms, and, absurdly, while Sasuke certainly wouldn’t have considered it acceptable if she had, the restraint rankles.

Naruto not treating her as a piece of meat implies Naruto being serious, implies Naruto seeing her as a person and possibly caring for her, respecting her; makes Naruto a real person herself, instead of just another stupid stalker.

That was never the idea.
In some kind of twisted retaliation she deprives Naruto of any peeking opportunities when changing for what they call martial arts training but is really a good deal closer to brawling. They do it fairly regularly at the beach house, now, since Itachi has made sure gym personnel will not accept any bribes from her, and the trek out to Naruto’s shack is atrocious.

“Your room,” Naruto says, this time, revealing no obvious disappointment upon finding Sasuke fully dressed. “You just let me in.”

“We do have cleaners walking in everywhere twice a week.”

Her bedroom in the penthouse is different, and of course the flat on Lilypad Drive is beyond private, approaching sacred.

Like with the basket Naruto is sloppy, untrained but inventive, and naturally they are both stubborn. It’s the best on offer, since Itachi prevents her from rejoining the proper classes.

Just gain the weight, he says, and there won’t be any trouble. Fifteen kilos is all I ask, I’ll even be satisfied with ten.

With distant horror that she tells herself is surprise, sick relief, not the frightening vertigo of freefall, she discovers that she has gained, a little. Nowhere close to Itachi’s requirement, but for fourteen months every time the digits have changed it’s been because she’s shed, and now instead her volume is increasing, sneakily, marginally, but increasing all the same.

Good, she tells herself. This is good.

This is good and she will not go running, she will not stop eating, she will not take up purging again.

Probably she should set a number, forty perhaps or forty-five, and decide on it, force herself there, and so she will still be in control, she will still be reshaping herself, reigning in the situation in. Surely it would be better than these half-hearted shocks, the unintentional happiness of losing and the forced self-conscious non-terror of gaining.

It must be due to Itachi hounding her about the training, and to stuffing her mouth with food at dinner.
so as to not make room for words.

It must be due, also, to Temari dragging her to all those cafés, where Chouji orders for everybody and Shikamaru drags her into game after game of chess, which whets the brain appetite for caffeine and sugar. She always loses, but she’s not very good at giving up.

Occasionally Sakura joins them, presumably a tool in one of Ino’s spying schemes but welcome because Naruto obviously likes her; and if Sasuke is ever going to beat Shikamaru at chess she needs something to distract Naruto, and neither Kiba nor Gaara is fit for polite company.

As the seminars wind down, she even takes a public stand by inviting Haku to sit with her. Sakura looks startled, Naruto beams, and Ino can hardly believe her luck.

Haku gives her that serene, superior expression and asks, “Have you been learning tolerance lately, then?”

“I learned you’re an interesting person.”

It’s what she should’ve expected from the ungrateful bitch, never mind that nobody has snubbed her to her face for years. She should have known there was a reason Haku isn’t half as bullied as she ought to be, that the bullying is of the quiet kind.

A year ago she would have known it, would never have made any mistakes, shown any softness. Really, she only has herself to blame.

Still Naruto likes it, and Ino likes it even more: the freak show court, the queen and her fools, the fool queen.

On all accounts Sasuke decides she is rather beyond caring.

“You’re really going to take that from her?”

Ino is staring at her, once again in the bathroom although a different one, her fingers clenching and unclenching on the taps as she stares at Sasuke, directly this time. There’s something that could be
worry in her face, apprehension soaking her.

“It’s a little below me to put a fatwa on a transwoman.”

“Face it,” Ino snaps, her voice too soft for the tone she adopts. “You can’t afford that anymore.”

The thing is that Ino is right, that Sasuke knows that Ino is right.

It’s standing with a blank test, on the scale, in the hospital waiting room, feeling control slipping like water through her fingers, eroding her until she can’t even care.

“If you need to worry about what you can afford, you’ve no business playing this game,” she tells Ino, which, depending on the level you interpret it at, is either a cheap barb or blatantly untrue.

Energized, high on and falling off the adrenaline, like at the end of a run, she decides it’s no longer below her to put a fatwa on Ino, come to that. Even so, fighting for a title she gave herself as a joke at thirteen seems a touch pathetic.

She walks towards English, deciding, furthermore, that she will have to cut down on either the running or the smoking.

“You’re coming, right?” Kankurou asks her outside the classroom, just a shade of humility saving it from being a demand. “To my party.”

“I suppose,” she says, oddly discomforted, moving as though through water.

In fact she’s supposed to help plan it, it’s a tradition of many years and Temari has given no indication of expecting otherwise. Neither has Sasuke; a year is a long time, considering, and events only have importance if you grant it to them, ignorance is bliss and control.

She wonders, not for the first time, whether Kankurou actually knows what happened. Gaara wouldn’t have told him and neither would Temari, but there’s the possibility he might have gleaned it all the same.
It doesn’t matter. She’s not going to grant it, or him, any significance, hasn’t ever and won’t now. He backs out of the way to let her slip past him into the classroom. It’s colder now, a warm but definite autumn, and she pulls her cardigan closed around her.

Kurenai decrees they are required, on pain of receiving Fs, to write their own original poetry in addition to the historical and literal analyses, a task that falls largely on Neji, who actually does write poetry, and to an extent on Naruto, on account of her not being much good at anything else. No doubt her sonnets will be atrocious, but Sasuke is less concerned about this inevitability than about her fucking up the real texts.

“I’ll write the poems for you if you coach Special Needs,” Neji offers afterwards in the library, when Naruto’s been dragged off somewhere by Sakura.

“That’s sweet,” she says absently, “but really, if you wanted a date, all you had to do was ask.”

It’s probably true, too: she’d say yes. The last experiment in that direction may have failed spectacularly, but she’s past due for a rebound fling, and also Naruto would be delightfully pissed off. Itachi might actually get off her back, even.

He gives her a look of disgust; it’s something of a compliment, from him, an unveiled emotion. “I can imitate your voice well enough, it’s better than downloading anything. But I’ve got enough on my plate with Hinata without being bothered by your special friend.”


“Good.” After a moment he even says, “Thank you.” There’s a pearling of sweat at his hairline.

“Right,” she says, sitting down next to him. “How’s her doomed love coming along?”

For the first time today he meets her eyes; for the first time in years his are bleak and frank. “He asked her out. She asked me what should she tell him. How the hell should I know?”

She takes the cigarette she’s been playing with inside her pocket out, offers it. He jerks it out of her fingers and lights up, rueful, for a second so full of hatred, whether for himself or for her.
“So what did you tell her?”

“I said ask her father.”

“So not only did you tell her no, you told her to go get herself punished.” She pushes back her chair and grabs the bag, stands. “Get cracking on the poems.”

The leaves have finished changing colours and are busily falling when he demands, helpless, suddenly dangerous, “What would you, if you…”

“I’d never be Hinata.”

He makes a sound of the kind that would be sighing if it were less aggressive. “I meant if you were me. You almost were. You were all set up for the perfect wedding, all of that, the perfect man, your parents couldn’t have chosen better for you if they’d tried, you were doing everything right!”

“It wasn’t really like that.”

“Now, if they were to, if they choose somebody new…?”

She collects herself, trying to reassemble the pieces in a better order. “I think you only get to tell people what to do if you’re better than they.”

His laughter sounds like crying. So would hers, if she let it out.

That evening she must have let slip enough for Naruto to gain some base understanding of what occurred, or didn’t occur; she scrunches up her face, sprawling over Sasuke’s bed, dragging dirty feet over Sasuke’s coverlet. Sasuke grumbles at her to stay on the floor like a proper pet, but instead of subpar repartee she gets a, “So your parents, not exactly politically aware.”

The way they treat Itachi makes that painfully obvious; the fact they do it in front if visitors, implying they do not even realise the problem.
“No shit,” she says, legs up, back against the wall, half a bed away. She hates them now, she does, she loved them too much, wanted their love too desperately much for anything else. She snorts, or that’s what it comes out as, the choked-off sound that wanted for vocalisation. “I stumbled into this discussion with Dad once, after he’d ragged on another feminist editorial. I tried to explain, you know, you do realise there are cultural factors at play here, that there are certain policies that have become culturally institutionalised. He asked me do I menstruate.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

“Pretty much.” She stares at the ceiling, her lips tight around the emptiness from the cigarette she won’t allow herself. “I told him actually I don’t, but apparently my opinions still weren’t valid. I guess removing the womanly taint just makes you unnatural.”

Mr Uzumaki will be an idiot, given the way he ambled around all awkward charm and the way he’s raised Naruto – and yes, Sasuke believes he has raised her, which is alien; startling – and Mrs Uzumaki could be interesting. Clearly she’s done more with her undergraduate work than Sasuke’s Mum has managed with her PhD.

“You what – shit, you’re that thin?” Naruto’s turned towards her, just a little too close, her eyes ridiculously wide with alarm, which Sasuke’s all right with only because Naruto’s never nagged her about the weight. “I thought you’d chubbied up a little.”

“I’m on the pill, you idiot.”

“But I thought – I mean, you’re not…”

“You can skip tree out of four periods, of course I’m on the pill.”

Except Sasuke hasn’t needed to worry about periods for a long time, seeing as they stopped bothering her eight kilos ago, but there is no way on earth she’s elaborating on the reality beyond the smokescreens. She doesn’t bleed because she’s on the pill, she’s on the pill because she doesn’t want to bleed, end of story.

Naruto rolls over onto her stomach, residual dampness from the shower sticking fabric to her body and hair to her face. “You don’t think that’s, like, buying into shame culture?”
“I shave my legs, Naruto. I wear dresses. If you can’t beat them, join them and rule them.”

“But I’m going to beat them!” declares Naruto, whom they both know can’t get enough of Sasuke’s legs in a skirt.

“You do that. Just stop paraphrasing Shikamaru in the meantime.”

Naruto sticks her tongue out but keeps her peace, rolling over onto her back, arms behind her head, legs asprawl.

Although she’d like to believe, did once – only, no, no fuck it, she’s grown out of that.

Admittedly it was a pretty damn good seminar, Shikamaru’s concluding one; god knows what Iruka offered him to give that talk about body-shaming culture, with body- and sex-words used universally as insults and expletives, fuck and arse and wanker and crap thrown around as though there were something wrong with their signifieds.

Be that as it may, Sasuke is not going to embrace an inconvenience, nor a belittling identity. Her body is something she lives in, not something she is; has shaped her the way any external condition for her life has shaped her.

“Fine,” Naruto grumbles, and this could be philosophy class except she sounds rather playful. “I just got to thinking. He’s pretty smart.”

“Duh,” Sasuke says, a little playful too, to temper the desperation (*I am a person*). “He’s a certified genius.”

“Certified? Is that even possible?”

Sasuke shrugs, tugging the coverlet back up from where it’s been kicked almost off the bed. “If a priest certificate is available over the net, I’d imagine a genius one is too. Anyway Mensa’s been headhunting him for years.”
When Naruto, full of snickers and disbelief, curves her hand around Sasuke’s leg, Sasuke lets her for about ten seconds before she kicks the hand away.

xxxxx

It’s light, a cold clear light tingled murky by reflection in puddles and bright rotting leaves; sound of wind and things being moved by it, water and rubbish pushed down the road. She feels a bit like a snake, leeching warmth from the sun-warmed stone wall she’s sitting on. Her sleeve’s unravelling and has got itself caught on it.

This isn’t how it was supposed to be.

…saying this as a friend, nota bene

No, fuck, Nauro didn’t say nota bene, she said a lot of other stuff, a shit heap of words.

…saying this as your friend, nota bene, this whole… I get that you miss him, obviously, but don’t you think this is a little Twilight...

Naruto’s never followed the plan, but she’s never so thoroughly betrayed it before.

“Yes,” Sasuke says tightly, ripping free her sleeve, “it’s so strange and pathetic that the loss of what amounts to a family member should make me sad, or trigger any latent issues. It’s really exactly the same as some dumb bimbo trying to kill herself over the stalker freak she’s been dating for a couple of weeks. Thank you for pointing that out to me.”

She’d imagined, or she would have imagined if it had ever occurred to her, that she’d cry or scream or hit something, destroy something, if such words were spoken to her. Instead she just feels destroyed, hoarding empty words and unravelling fabric to her as best she can.

Once she leaned back in a plush chair, two days before her therapist resigned, two weeks before her therapist lost her licence, and said, Do I perceive that I am being pathetic? Well, yes. However, do I perceive that it is pathetic of me to be being pathetic? Well, no.
There are limits. There are bridges that can’t be crossed no matter how much water has flown under them, bridges that’ll burn if you set foot on them.

Fuck you, Naruto Uzumaki.

This is worse than the bathroom, this is worse than the beach.

“I didn’t know he was family!” Naruto says, a spazzy placating gesture accompanying the yelp. “Which, you should tell me those things.”

Obviously Sasuke should do no such thing – she’s not told Naruto anything that isn’t semi-public info, things that anybody with the right connections and the right tenacity could have found out. Naruto wouldn’t have, on her own, but still it was a liberty that Sasuke thought was safe.

She supposes she’s been wrong about Naruto before, though not usually unpleasantly so.

Presently Naruto grips the edge of the wall, tilting her face back to bask in the bleak sun. “Twilight, though, kind of enjoyed them actually.” She laughs again, briefly and fairly close to embarrassed. The skin on her face has paled until it almost matches the freckles. “I mean, I get they’re offensive as fuck in about a million ways, but all the same. Up until that creepy antiabortionist baby, they sort of had something going for them.”

Her snort comes out perfectly even, not at all shaky. “I guess.”

“Totally! It’d have been a lot less disgusting and a lot more interesting if she’d just had an abortion, like, with realistic consequences and dealing with having to do the mature thing, and it’s not like it’s difficult, right?”

“No,” says Sasuke, utterly calm now. “It’s very simple. You just go there and they give you pills and you bleed. It’s not a big deal.”

Naruto is warm beside her, warmer than the stone, so completely alive, trying to be concerned now and failing because nothing she feels is safe or soft enough for concern. “Are you actually telling me…”
“That I had an abortion?” If Naruto can really be her friend. If she lets the cat out of the bag, all the cats – if this can be different, if this can happen. If Naruto. “Well. Yes.”

“Holy shit. Whoa.”

It might be a twig or it might be Naruto’s knuckles touching her hand. She feigns ignorance because it’d be too revealing to actually move it.

This is freefall again, sink or swim. A challenge, a gift. She’s never understood the pleasure of giving, but it’s a sort of power all of its own, possessing knowledge and emotion and being able to share them as you wish.

“It wasn’t – I’d stopped taking the pill. Wasn’t any reason for it anymore, you know. And so. I made a mistake. Fortunately it was an easily correctible one.”

Kankurou’s birthday party last year, extravagant because finally Gaara was too medicated to ruin a proper celebration. She was drunk, drunk enough to shrug and comply when the bottle used in a game she’d never agreed to play pointed at her. Her memories of kissing Temari are fake, reproductions of the tape she’s seen of it, before she had it destroyed.

Gaara was just there.

It was very easy.

He was the right combination of familiar, unknown and fucked-up, the perfect mirror image. When she pulled at him and fell, he fell with her.

“God,” says Naruto, her face scrunched almost sweetly. “So it wasn’t, would you have kept it if it had been his? Kakashi’s, I mean.”

“For fuck’s sake, I was barely fifteen.”

“Well, yeah,” says Naruto, who clearly has no business calling Bella Swan a fool for love, “but, if he was so important, and it’s not like you’d have another shot at it right?”
She probably shouldn’t have said anything. “I’ve never wanted children.”

“No at all? I do. I want tons of them. Like, too many to count them.”

“More than two, then, if it’s enough that you lose track of the number,” Sasuke says snidely. She recalls reading a quasi-scientific report to the effect that ugly babies, infants not conforming to the universal standard for symmetrical beauty, get less cuddling from their parents than cute ones. It’d certainly explain why Naruto’s so desperate for some touchy-feely.

Sasuke doesn’t remember being held by her mother, but she supposes she must have been. It would have been expected, conventional, and there are photos and Itachi’s memories of it, empirically reliable and therefore in some sense real.

No, that’s not true. She remembers her mother holding her, Madonna and child, it’s just those reminiscences are drowned out by the more immediate ones of wanting to be held, and of the discomfort when she was; the itchy party clothes, the large warm hands, “she’s such a doll!”

“Fuck off,” Naruto dismisses, then visibly sobers, so bloody obvious it’s downright shameful that Sasuke still hasn’t got her figured out. “But, so, is this something else everybody knows?”

The vulnerability is viscous, tangible; like Naruto could touch her insides, has her fingers skimming along the nerves and bowels in her abdomen. Nobody’s been able to do that, to touch her on the inside, since Kakashi didn’t wake up and then kept not waking up.

“No,” she says, dryly, “just you.”

She’d been going to tell Itachi, had still been in the habit of telling Itachi all the important things, or letting them be understood between them if they were too raw or subtle for outright speech, but he had been torn up in his own way, which in a sense was much worse than hers.

At least nobody had needed to sit watch over her after she’d overdosed on medication, deliberately or not, although it would be demeaning and ridiculous to assume a collected genius could do it by mistake.
In the morning after Mum had taken over presiding over Itachi’s sickbed from the nurse – and Sasuke didn’t trust her but Itachi was asleep and the nurse seemed solid, and the room was starting to swivel in front of her eyes – she went to the clinic and they gave her the pills, and it was all rather like the first day of a bad period; the cold debilitating cramps, the helpless warm flow.

She’d been very brisk about the entire business, testing herself then scheduling the appointment as fast as possible; had to get it over with; left with a bottle of painkillers when the abortive drugs had been administered, sitting clam-skinned in the taxi home. Some hours later, after Itachi had woken enough to be forced to eat, she flushed down the last thick remnants in her own bathroom.

“Did it hurt?”

“No that badly.” She’d bitten her knuckles bloody, face sweaty and hot with the panic of pain, crushed in between her knees, panting to keep from fainting. They’d said if she was worried about hurting, which was a possible though not an inevitable consequence, she should stay in the hospital until it was done, where they could give her stronger painkillers, but the narcotics had done worse things to Itachi than his actual condition, before a competent specialist was found for him. She’d gone home, never regretted it, hated the bleeding afterwards, four long weeks of it.

Physically her shoulder hurt worse, from where an overheated part of a vehicle had pierced it during the accident, and emotionally she didn’t feel much, back then.

Now, when feeling’s creeping back, an estranged relative, she’s been – there’s been too much else, too many actually important things.

She was required to produce a modicum of emotion to present the consultant psychologist with, before they’d schedule her for the procedure, but all she’d been able to come up with was: bothered, sick, really tired. But it wasn’t as though it was a mystery why she, why anybody in her position, wouldn’t want a child, and in the end she hadn’t needed to lie much to avoid follow-up sessions; after all the consult was mere courtesy.

Cloth rasps over stone beside her as Naruto lies down awkwardly on her elbows, her upper body rather too long for the width of the wall, legs hanging over the edge and braced to keep her balanced. Looking at Sasuke with her eyes tilted somehow down behind her fringe, and god, is that Naruto looking shy?, she pulls her shirt up, exposing the massive mess of scar tissue and tattoo ink that Sasuke’s glimpsed in changing rooms but never seen in its entirety. It’s an uneven but roughly circular figure, elaborating into twists and points and unexpected angles, thick dark thin light concave smooth rough marks intertwining. “This—”
“Look, this isn’t a sleepover secret sharing ceremony.”

Naruto smiles, a softer expression than she usually gives Sasuke, bruised-tender and caring-tender all at once. “You actually telling me you don’t want something to hold over my head in return?”

“Fair point, well made.” She feels crisp; thin, sharp, crunchy.

Kakashi has scars too now, and she, and worst is Itachi’s self-inflicted ones.

She can’t imagine being dragged into a bathroom, have what seems to her revolting minions turn on her, spit running down her face, hands wresting her down, and then the knife.

She would have had to react if somebody got their face cut up in Sannin, but she would hardly have cared; surely there’d be a reason for it. After all it’s never happened to her, to anybody she knows.

Naruto’s an obvious target, an obvious survivor, but Sasuke would’ve never … no, did she think her a victim, at first? She can’t remember it anymore, not with any conviction.

“…and then I got the knife from him, they’d gone lax, I guess I wasn’t struggling so much anymore, guess I was more screaming or something, and I just twisted, like forward, I don’t know, I think I was trying to get away, get up and run away, but I’d want to think that – and I stabbed him, pretty bad. Like, a lot deeper than they’d done to me, none of that was very deep, it was just lots of it, and. And so then there was the hospital and some police stuff but I guess nobody wanted to make an issue of it, and then, and now here I am. It was – they said they couldn’t remove all the scarring, or if they could but it’d be complicated and expensive or whatever, and I’d sort of, I guess I’d mostly got used to them, the ones in the face are kind of cool really if you look at them in the right light, but I couldn’t just have somebody else’s mark on me, you know? So it was just easiest to have it tattooed over.”

Her stomach and Sasuke’s hand, poised just a touch above it, tremble in sync.

“Shut the fuck up.”

Naruto roars laughing.
Gobbling a generous mouthful of popcorn, Naruto snuggles up closer to Dad on the couch, somewhat embarrassingly delighted to watch Jenny Humphrey, the Evil Cinderella of *Gossip Girl*, get the dissing of a lifetime. There should be something more sympathetic about the character, the poor lonely girl trying to make it in a rich man’s world, but Naruto’s always had this sort of maternal crush on Blair, the wicked Queen Bitch with the brittle heart of gold. Jenny’s crossed lines Blair never would, and although of course it’s easy to say, intellectually, that Blair hasn’t had to, has been born into socioeconomic advantages that lets her keep her hands cleaner than Jenny’s working ones can be – well, emotionally it’s a different matter.

“God, I hate commercial breaks,” Dad says, slouching back from the previous tense forward crouch.

“I keep telling you, we should just download. Or stream, if you’d get us a better connection.”

“And I keep telling you, I like it old-school – couch, popcorn, an actual TV. As for the breaks, well, they build tension.”

She pokes him. “You only just said you hated them.”

This sound argument is waved off, salt and oil raining over the couch. “So, you’ve been spending a lot of time with that cute girl lately, what was her name? Saskia?”

“God, shut up. Sasuke. Her name is Sasuke.” Which, really, given the amounts of ranting, some of it rather wistful, that Naruto’s done on the subject, she’s quite convinced he knows.

“Of course. Everything going good? You’ve been over at her place quite a bit, right?”

“Yeah,” she says, pulling her legs up Indian style, fingers closing around the familiar shapes of her feet, damp through the thick socks. “Her Mum’s sort of, I guess unreliable’s the word, but Itachi’s cool. Also their house is fucking huge. I mean she’s all, oh la this is just a modest summer abode, but it’s like trice the size of our house and full of museum stuff.”

“Itachi’s her dad, then?”
“Ah, no, he’s her brother. He’s at uni but he mostly lives at home, I think. Her dad’s not been around that I’ve seen, but the way they talk about him – it’s like, like the sort of person who’d read *Derailing for Dummies* and think it was actually good advice. And that’s supposed to be our head of prosecution!”

She was going to say, or thought she was going to say, *I think he hits them,* but she can’t, not after the bathroom incident when she did, and particularly not after Sasuke looked at her all pale and tense and smiled that way that’s worse than crying, that’s like crying, which probably Sasuke doesn’t do, because outside of fiction that means swollen eyes and runny nose, which isn’t really Sasuke’s style.

“But you’re getting along, I take it? Despite the excessive bruising, which, by the way, be careful.”

“*I will. I promise.*” And she’s glowing rather than annoyed, can hardly contain herself, because god, good is entirely the wrong, the inadequate, word; too weak, too simple, too… solid.

It’s odd, really: Naruto’s the one who says with every word and every gesture, as it sometimes feels with every damn breath, *I want to be naked with you,* but it’s Sasuke who, twice now, has started stripping without further ado. Perhaps after the time she looked over her naked shoulder, and Naruto walked into a bedroom full of her bare breasts, there was little cause for surprise on top of that graveyard wall. And really surprise wasn’t it, she was startled, a bit, but mainly something deeper, something huge and hot that startled was only a small part of.

Sasuke has them all marked out on her mental map, every graveyard in the city – apparently Itachi likes them, finds them *peaceful, ethereal, with some eternal quality about them.*

*I used to like them myself,* Sasuke added, in what Naruto doesn’t think had to be reinterpreted into defence of Itachi.

*Oh yes,* he’d said, sadly, fondly, then extremely teasing: *We used to play tag in them when she was little, and she’d use the flower ornaments left on the graves to dress up as Titania.*

Which provides a mental image almost as adorable as ridiculous.

“Oh yeah,” she adds, “Itachi’s in this fancy program and skipping ahead like mad, he’s going to be some sort of posh academic or law person, but he also has this course on Western culture, and he’s writing this big paper on *Gossip Girl* for it. Well, it’s about, like, the economics of power in ‘tween pop culture, but it’s mostly about *Gossip Girl.* How awesome is that? He said I could read it when it
was done. Apparently the other students are scared stiff of him, since he’s picking, you know, actually fun subjects and still getting A+ on like everything.”

“I take it we might cart you off to university yet,” Dad says. “Do let me have a look if he lends you the paper – oh, finally. Go Blair! If only she’d realise Dan’s the one destined for her, this storyline would be perfect.”

It’s true, Itachi writing about *Gossip Girl* sounds a hell of a lot more inviting than Mum writing about obscure painters. Maybe she could pick courses like that, if she manages to graduate with good enough grades to have anything to pick from.

Rockstar and social revolutionary still seem like more realistic career paths.

The episode’s winding down when Mum emerges from her work at the kitchen table to do more than shake her head at their occasional squeals. “Ready to go, honey? And you’re sure you’re not up for it?”

Dad makes an eloquent gesture towards the swollen snot volcano his nose has transformed into, and is left behind as Naruto sets out to accompany Mum to the university’s art exhibit. Some ‘really interesting little pieces, a lot of student material, very promising’ is supposedly going to be shown.

Since when does she says supposedly so much? It’s such a Sasuke word.

The university is comprised of a sprawl of buildings, some stout and red, others bleak blue skyscrapers, and yet other models glimpsed beyond these ones, but Mum steers them confidently towards a low-slung brick house crowded by smoking, talking, gesticulating people. Apart from some obvious parents and academics, most of them are the typical black-dyed, second-hand shopping art people. Leather jackets, Palestine scarves, Converse shoes.

While the science and linguistics and law buildings are far off and presumably of a different character, it’s difficult to imagine Itachi Uchiha attending the same university as any of these students.

Presumably though Kakashi will have had lessons in this building, with these professors, will have talked and smoked – did he smoke? – like these students.
She imagines him languid, jovial but with a sarcastic edge; a shadow in the sun, one eye closed, although back then he would’ve had two good ones.

Inside several rooms have been dedicated to the exhibit, and Naruto wanders around at random, caught by a glimmer of colour here, an interesting shape there. Then there is the left wall in the yellow room: a girl’s naked back, her shoulder against a boy’s leg. Sasuke’s never sat like that, not that Naruto’s seen, with that tense sort of relaxation, like – it’s a trite, tired comparison but really the only one that does it justice: like a predator animal relaxing into the long tense wait for the prey to run out of its hiding hole.

Rather, that particular anti-tension’s often been there, but it’s never been paired with the calm, overwhelming trust evident in her leaning on that leg; a spindly limb, belonging to somebody not very tall.

And Sasuke’s older now, broader if not a lot taller, and the scar isn’t in the sketch, and the hair pulled forward over her shoulder in the picture is gone from reality, but there’s no uncertainty.

After weeks and weeks of soaking in every part of Sasuke, inadvertently memorising, after splaying her own hands over those shoulder-blades, Naruto knows exactly what those coal lines represent.

“I didn’t know you had an eye for art,” Mum says, behind her suddenly.

“I have an eye for girls,” she says, shaky around the brazen words that aren’t even really true, anymore. She’s not looking for more than one girl, now.

“We might pick up a copy in the shop, if you like it,” Mum offers. “I’m not sure they have all of them, but there’s a fair chance. It’s quite nice, I’d be surprised if it didn’t sell well.”

And god, no. “I couldn’t,” she says, pathetically upset. If Sasuke should hang on somebody’s wall it should be in full colour, oils, with a gilded frame; and not just anybody’s wall, either. To find her exposed and produced for sale, cheap format for the students and the casually interested public, reduced to a glimmer of potential in an undergraduate sketch…

“All right?” Mum says. “Look, I’m going to go over to Dr Hyuuga for a bit. Tell me later if you change your mind.”
A kiss dropped on Naruto’s head, and she’s gone.

Naruto would sort of like to go too, but stands vigil over the sketch for a moment more, before yet again there’s a voice behind her, abrupt as a touch.

“The funny thing is, he was never satisfied with that one.”

She twists around to face Itachi, his features drowning in a peculiar melancholia, rendered indistinct by it. It’s weird, that his face is almost identical to Sasuke’s and yet looks nothing like hers.

He’s hand in hand with a tall woman in her late twenties whom she’s never seen before but who is all shaggy hair and sharp-toothed grin, muscles erupting into motherly curves.

“The whole Titanic bit, he didn’t do that,” Itachi continues.

“I know,” says the woman, not at all softly.

He ignores her. “If he wanted human models for something, he mostly used us, yes, but mainly he did still lives, some landscapes. Some sketches of separate body parts. It’s – this is all wrong.”

Naruto realises the leg was of course his, Itachi’s, and not as she’d dimly assumed Kakashi’s own. It’s childish in a sort of horrible way that this makes her like the picture better.

“Au contraire,” says the woman. “I think it’s kind of right; do you imagine for a second he’d have liked the real pieces put up on display?”

“Well,” says Itachi. “Well, no. I certainly would not have.”

“I didn’t think you would,” the woman agrees, rather amused. “Not to mention your sister would explode, although maybe that’d be good for her. Now, I need a smoke, I’ll find you later.” She pulls her hand free and waves, walking off in hardcore leather boots that are awesome with her slinky dress.
“I’m sorry,” Itachi says. “Hello. That was Anko. I’m a touch… preoccupied.”

“It’s fine.”

“He’s done much better ones,” Itachi tells her, eyeing the sketch of Sasuke’s back and the aquarelle rendering of clouds beside it; the still life of lemons and cups and the sketch of somebody’s foot. The foot’s actually very good, at least in so far as good translates to: I like to look at it, it’s interesting, it’s like a picture of a thought I’m about to catch hold of. “There’s this gorgeous series of sketches called Sasuke Waking Up. But Anko’s right, those were real, those were intimate, he never showed them to anybody.”

They were best friends. As a matter of fact we had a bit of a fucked-up threesome dynamic going on.

It sounds more like a triangle than a threesome; siblings, best friends, lovers.

And yet it’s obvious, it’s extremely obvious, anybody seeing that sketch of the Uchiha children will know whose back Kakashi couldn’t stop thinking about, whom he couldn’t see enough of. Itachi’s leg beside it is just a leg.

“She sounds like she knew him too,” she says. “Anko.”

“She did. A long time ago.”

In the not-quite-awkward, not-quite-bewildered silence that follows she has one of those total brain blackouts: “So is she like your date?”

He gives her a tolerant smile, the one that makes Sasuke see red. “Something like that, yes.”

“Wha – for real?”

His smile grows rather more genuine. “I think perhaps I’m a little insulted.”

“No, no,” she tries to explain, almost elbowing a passing lady as she lifts her arm to scratch at the
back of her head. “It’s just, you know, you never seemed interested in stuff like that.”

“And my sister does?” He’s clearly entertained now, using the tone that would be restrained sharpness in Sasuke’s mouth but comes condescending out of his.

“Well, kind of, yeah.”

Sasuke’s open to people in a sense that Itachi just isn’t; she’s trying desperately not to feel, having to try desperately to keep it a bay, while Itachi is just struggling to feel.

“She’s Kakashi’s ex,” he says presently. “Anko, I mean. He had a bit of a mother complex, really, he liked them about twice his age. But then – god. You know, I teased him to death that my twelve year old sister could hen-pick him into ceasing relations with them. Well, her, he was only seeing Anko at that point.”

“Shit,” says Naruto, with feeling, although exactly which feeling remains unclear to her.

“Ah, no need to worry – she and Sasuke quite like each other. Well, they had to, didn’t they? Not liking one another would have implied there was competition, which, besides being completely untrue, would have naturally been quite beneath both their dignities. I – you know, I’m sad too. I lost my best friend.” He flashes her a tempered version of Sasuke’s ice princess smile, nodding politely before starting off after Anko.

For a moment she is running after him, thoughts rushing ahead and her feet just making to follow them, before Mum is back to collect her, and in the end she doesn’t know Itachi as anybody but Sasuke’s brother, he’s not hers to comfort or rile. Anko will.

At last glance the sketch is very different from photos, which dilute and diminish Sasuke into a flat image of conventional beauty, no longer somebody who’d make you turn after her on the street. The sketch would make anybody gape, although in it she’s not even pretty; she’s something vaster than that, something beyond the scope of prettiness.

xxxxx

In real life, Sasuke can be nothing short of surprisingly petty.
Or that’s what Naruto thinks when the redhead cries; when the brunette storms off in a fraught temper. It’s a childish phrase but Sasuke will have made them cry, made them upset, and looks right smug about it, her off-white skin smudged, black under her eyes and yellow on her fingertips.

But then Naruto realises, comes upon the cold implacability underneath – it’s not pettiness, in fact it’s a kind of vastness – Sasuke doesn’t take pleasure in small acts of nastiness; she doesn’t care about them, doesn’t register them as real. In Itachi’s phrase she considers it beneath her.

The boy whose hide Naruto rescued weeks ago, who asked her out, is connected to this partly because he’s an astonishing example of Sasuke not caring about her social inferiors and, more importantly, partly because Naruto stumbles over him when wandering off in a disillusioned huff.

He’s getting it good this time, from one of the guys she chased off and two others, vaguely remembered from when she first moved here, before being friends with people inured her from serious attacks. Gaara’s friend, member of Kiba’s gang, Sakura’s acquaintance are not openly harassed, or not a lot at any rate.

They do their worst and then they just leave, just leave her alone, or left, even, because lately it’s not been happening, and their worst is what used to be warm-up, used to be nothing, normal: they call her names and push her around, and that’s it. They don’t even hurt her.

It’s made her curious, sometimes, what the official version says she is to Sasuke. She’s heard the lacklustre jokes, the queen’s fool who wants to fool around with the queen, whom the queen’s making a fool of, etcetera.

But when even Naruto can’t tell, of course nobody on the outside has any real clue.

So it’s been a clean break, a wonderful break, but now she’ll be hurting people, again, possibly a lot.

Konohamaru’s yelling to cover his own sobbing, hands flailing protectively over his face.

Now the weather has turned, running has come again, and there’s been ample fighting with Sasuke, but she’s also hampered by that, because it’s not so much fighting Sasuke as fighting with Sasuke, despite everything implying the contrary, and so she hasn’t wanted to do real harm, at least (if she is honest with herself) not harm of this crude superficial sort.
Now she gets a bloody nose and a kick that feels like it chops her left leg clean off at the knee, but she gives as good as she gets and more importantly she gets Konohamaru away, gets him free and safe and the arseholes lumbering off.

They’re not used to her, she discovered. They weren’t expecting a real fight, weren’t ready for it.

*What really matters,* Dad said, *isn’t brute strength, it’s knowing how to use it and thinking fast, and more than you think is just plain pain tolerance. Be tougher, be rougher, and strength won’t get you.*

He was dead wrong about this at her old school, but around these prissy weaklings he’s bloody Yoda.

“Hey, thanks,” Konohamaru says, indistinct due to the mess his mouth is swelling into. “You sure you don’t want to go out with me? Cos we could like just say you’re my girlfriend and you could be really my bodyguard.”

“Pretty sure, yeah.” She presses her scarf under his nose, dragging her free hand under her own to wipe away the worst of the blood and snot. “Can you get up? We should get the hell away before they come back with reinforcements.”

He’s as wide-eyed as the bruising will let him be as he yelps, “They’ll do that?”

“Haven’t they before?”

“No. But then they’ve never needed to.” His grin turns into a grimace as his lip erupts again, then becomes an even wider grin.

“What was it this time?” she asks, letting him take over holding the scarf to his nosebleed.

There’s a certain pride to his skittish nod; letting her gaze follow it, it lands on the exceptionally inartistic rendering of soldiers, girls and what is either Kraken or Godzilla on the A-House wall.
“Really? Is it worth it?”

And god. Just Jesus bloody Christ, did she say that; simple, natural, the mature thing to say, to do. Fuck that.

_Come on, Naruto, damn it, will you just stop asking for it?_

“You’re fine,” she says, ruffling his hair. “You’re fine, right?”

“Yeah,” he says, cockily pleased. “Takes more than that to bring down the great Konohamaru.”

For a while they trade brags and compete in spitting blood; with both his lip and his nose busted Konohamaru manages a greater quantity of it, but Naruto has far more experience and skill in the noble sport of distance spitting.

She’s still sitting in the gravel, Konohamaru gone, wiping the last of the blood away with her scarf and trying painfully to massage feeling back into her dully throbbing knee when Sasuke appears, an imposing wraith from a lost world of civilisation; perfect, immaculate, controlled.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Naruto stares at her, eyebrows raised in unintentional parody of Sasuke’s signifier gesture. “What?”

“Jesus Christ,” Sasuke snaps, kneeling beside her in evident disgust, dainty calloused fingers too fastidious to quite touch the ruined scarf. “This is what comes of philanthropy, just like with that damned ingrate Haku.”

“What the hell?”

It’s a screaming match, very soon they are both on their feet, because Sasuke feels Konohamaru deserved it, is neither regretful nor ironical about exactly the kind of language Naruto gagged on; and Naruto doesn’t think people like Konohamaru or Haku or herself need to do a damn thing to earn being treated like human beings; and Sasuke thinks not everybody is of equal value, and while obviously it’s not their fault, necessarily, it’s equally obvious that they are simply lesser; and of
course Naruto hasn’t exactly forgotten, as such, that Sasuke occasionally professes such opinions, but they’re so absurd, so incomprehensible – like irl trolling, something that must be a tasteless joke, coming from somebody otherwise sane, wonderful for all their obvious flaws, somebody whom she – cares about, really cares about.

So it’s a real screaming match, red-faced, like she’s never had with Sasuke, like maybe Sasuke has never had with anybody; no, there’s Itachi, she will have.

Naruto’s hoarse very shortly, sweat breaking hot as pain over her skin, and the things she says – about the hypocrisy mostly, the way Sasuke treats people, the exact same way, isn’t it, or close enough to hurt, to really fucking hurt, that Sasuke’s parents treat Sasuke.

Afterwards there’s no voice left in her, with her knee on fire and tears leaking down her face, new snot and new blood from the weeping, choking up phlegm on the empty gravel. All is quiet; the last classes must have left out while she was tending Konohamaru. That must be where Sasuke came from, the class Naruto didn’t mean to skip.

Everything is very quiet; her panting, the crunch of gravel, the wind. There’s the sound of her blood pulsing, sore against the flayed skin on her knuckles, palpitating through her heart, which is beating so hard she feels all bruised inside.

The things we said (the things we meant?)!

Sasuke doesn’t talk to her again until the day of Kankurou’s party, which Naruto might have predicted if she hadn’t been too upset and unfocused to attempt any soothsaying. That talking happenings in Philosophy class, too, so there’s little choice involved; Sasuke blank and polite the way she only gets when she’s too furious to waste words on you, perhaps to articulate even to herself.

“Fuck,” mutters Naruto. She’d have screamed it from the rooftops, except the roof exit was locked when she and Gaara tried to sneak up to have lunch there.

Her nose has unswelled and her knuckles are skinning over, which is fortunate; when Dad asked, uncharacteristically terse, if these injuries were because of her fooling around with that Sasuke girl, she said no, because they aren’t really, but it came out a lie and he’s been sighing and looking at her funny ever since. Beyond telling them about Konohamaru she couldn’t explain, she’d used up her all words yelling at Sasuke, and she needs Sasuke to stop starving her of new ones.
“I’m so fucking tired of it,” she tells Gaara, grabbing her sandwich pugnaciously. “Who the hell acts like that!”

If there were a vocal equivalent of an ellipsis, it’s what would go with his corresponding expression.

“Are you coming tonight?” he asks abruptly. “Or tomorrow? Did they change it to tomorrow?”

“The party? Yeah. On both accounts.”

All right, so it was Sasuke’s friend not hers who invited her, but she wasn’t invited as Sasuke’s friend but as Gaara’s.

According to the independent opinions of Sasuke and Gaara both it was a sugared pill she was offered: you’ve been good for him/me, obviously she’d bribe you with an invite in ridiculously good time to keep you being good for him/me, god, why else, she barely knew you but she does care for him/me, for some reason. No, it’s not strange, lots of people would do far worse than being friendly to him/me to get that invitation.

She isn’t sure what to wear, how you dress for these things; the last time she went to a party it was still customary to come in pigtails and ballerina dresses, or cowboy outfits if you were a boy or a notorious skirt-ruiner.

She tries on jeans, and then a different pair, and really it looks much the same. How are you supposed to tell which is the winning look?

“What the hell acts like that!” she decides, turning a defiant back on the mirror and pulling a neon-orange tshirt on over the random jeans she tried last.

This is it, then: she’d feel like a clown if she tried fixing anything else, like a child dressing up to go to the adults’ party, which… no. There are smudges of purple nail polish left on her fingers from when she was bored this morning; that and her shoes and the present will have to be enough. Will be great.

She’s giving him some stage makeup and weed, which, after turning down Gaara’s offer to either ignore it or let him get something, is reportedly the only thing Kankurou’d like that she can afford. Which, fair enough, his atrocious costumes probably have to be privately ordered at hideous
expense, since no way can they be sold at profit commercially.

“Take care, honey, have fun,” Mum says, beaming up at her from her writing, a momentary lighthouse.

Dad, dropping her off close to the Sabaku building, adds, “Don’t get too drunk.”

The flat, or whatever you call it when it’s an entire floor big enough to house several normal flats, is lit in a distracting fashion, every room a twilight zone of shadows and fickle lights; music pulses, a recording of what sounds to Naruto like a monk choir, and there’s talking, laughing, shouting over it. People, drinks, movement, the smell of expensive alcohol spilt on expensive fabric.

Veering off towards the massive dining table to deposit her gift at the foot of the mountain of presents, she hears Kankurou telling somebody, “I wanted to rent out a club, but Pater Noster wouldn’t hear of it.”

He’s wittier than she’s given him credit for, unless it’s Temari’s nickname he’s using, but it doesn’t matter because over by the window there’s Sasuke, talking to Neji, the lights shimmering over her red shirt, god, she’s an annoying arsehole but she’s never worn red before and it’s gorgeous, she’s gorgeous.

It’s not that Naruto forgets to be pissed off, it’s more that her pissed off-ness remains on the backburner where it’s been simmering the last few days.

But she’s not bloody here for Sasuke, in this modernised fairy land like something out of a high school movie-inspired daydream.

She looks around for Gaara, eventually stumbling across Temari and asking after him.

“He went out. Needed to cool off, he said.”

“Oh.” Of course he’d choose the party night to go broody and lonesome. “Where?”

“Nowhere you need to look,” Chouji interrupts. “He’ll be back.” This, Chouji’s tone suggests, is
rather a lamentation, but he continues, “Come on, the games are starting.”

“Games?”

“Indeed,” Kiba grins, emerging from behind a pillar, somehow smelling distinctly, groundingly, of dogs and wet earth over the scent of over-enthusiastically employed men’s perfume. “Half the fun of getting drunk is getting to do stuff you couldn’t face up to sober, right?”

“Hinata’s not here,” Chouji confides in the wake of Kiba striding purposefully off ahead of them. “He’s determined to drown his sorrows, I suppose. Right when he’d finally got up the courage to try and learn to dance, too.”

Was Hinata even invited? But of course she was – she’s Neji’s sister or cousin or fiancée or something, must live in that ostentatious mansion with him. It’s just easy to forget wealth and power that’s never flaunted, doesn’t seem a part of her at all.

There is a lot of dancing and drinking and extraordinarily stupid party games getting funnier with every round of drinks. Naruto was rarely invited to those so she might’ve got it wrong, but isn’t Truth or Dare what you play at children’s parties?

“Moot point,” Kankurou declares. “I’ve got a bottle. You know what this means, guys – it’s tradition!”

They sit in a jeering, pulsing circle, transfixed by the spinning of the leaking purple bottle. Kankurou must’ve rigged it, somehow, because he gets to swap saliva with both Tenten and Ino and Sakura before he’s chased off to the dance floor for cheating, dragging a pretty girl from the another class along.

She’s not gonna lie, watching Ino and Sakura kiss, and after a few whistles the peck indeed develops into a real kiss, lip gloss smearing over Sakura’s chin, is definitely enjoyable.

Every now and then, though, in between the swirling, she goes distant from the game.

Sasuke’s not playing; she’s sitting on the kitchen counter, so deeply steeped in conversation with Neji that her hands are moving in time with her words, their heads close together.
“Maybe that’ll come to something,” Tenten mutters. “She could use a pick me up. They both could – hell, we all could.”

Which is strange, because can’t everybody see that Sasuke’s looking at him the wrong way for that to be it?

She’s looking at Neji the way she looks at Itachi; fond, exasperated, asexual. Interested in a familiar, devoted, entire intellectualised fashion.

So many adjectives: she tried to sum Sasuke up once, snare her in a list of adjectives for an English assignment that she pretended was about a fictional character, but it didn’t work. She needed verbs for Sasuke, scenes, nouns, qualifiers, and could never quite pin her to the page.

Behind her Shino clears his throat, a noise Naruto is disastrously too late to reinterpret into, “Ahem, I fear it is our turn, madam”. She turns, her inquiry interrupted by a pair of thin lips. Her face as caught in the reflection of his sunglasses is comically horrified, her lips parting around a laugh even as her stomach rolls at the thought of what manner of insects his mouth has recently been in contact with.

Shikamaru kisses light and dry, brotherly; Kiba with a flush and his eyes closed, presumably thinking with a guilty thrill of Hinata; Sakura is wonderful, sweet lipstick and gentle pressure; Chouji, surprisingly, is very good at it.

Sasuke is still in the kitchen; doesn’t play, doesn’t dance, barely drinks. Rather, Naruto’s seen her drunk, has seen her loose and miserably gawky with it, and now she’s nowhere closet to it, despite the handful shots she knocks back.

When Kankurou approaches them on his way back to the bottle-spinning circle, Neji whisks her onto the dance floor, where they float around as stilted and nineteenth-century as they did in gym class, looking almost drably comfortable together in the atmosphere set for wild romance.

Naruto sits back, legs sprawling in front of her in what looks like an impossible feat of contortionism but feels quite nice in a numb sort of way, watching most of the crowd edge towards the dancing. Supposedly the games have got them drunk enough for it, by now.

Sasuke passes from Neji’s arms to Temari’s, dancing in her stiff, beautiful, model-awkward way in the indisputable centre of attention. If Naruto made the same moves, it’d be a ridiculous robot dance,
with nothing graceful or touching about it.

Beauty isn’t fair, but then neither is gravity, neither one really negotiable.

When Sasuke slips away Naruto follows her, out of the main area and up a shady staircase where the music thins out. Sasuke doesn’t remark on her presence, just walks, and of course she’s perfectly at home here, of course the flat is familiar to her as the back of her own hand, slipping idly up the banister.

“I like your hands,” Naruto says, rather stupidly, because she’d meant to say: don’t keep this shit up, just let me in. “Like how you can see these little white bits on your nails.”

“The lunulae,” Sasuke supplies, her stride not altering.

“Yeah, those.” It’s an intriguing word, caressing.

Passing a snogging couple, skirting a furniture-crowded hallway, Sasuke steps out through an open set of glass doors, leaning her hips against the balcony railing as she light as cigarette. Inside air and alcohol keep Naruto warm, tint the moonlight soft.

It strikes her forcibly that this is where it must have happened, a year ago – not here, on the balcony, or she assumes not, that would be crazy, but then Sasuke was in a state and Gaara too, so who knows really, but in any case here in this flat, in the mirror image of this party – Sasuke and Gaara, when Kakashi was newly comatose.

It seems so preposterous it hasn’t even affected her, hasn’t stayed in her mind when she’s talked to him.

Maybe she could have said something, reached for an, Are you all right?, if it hadn’t been for that screaming fight and also, sort of, for the fact that a year ago Naruto spent hours spewing up toilet water after almost drowning from a dunking.

“I thought you were mad at me,” Sasuke says.
Naruto’s head snaps up. “You’re not mad at me?”

“I’m angry, yes, but I’m not the one who followed you here.”

“You and your fucking logic.” Why is she here, though?

It is logical, really, if you think about it. Sasuke made her real, made her real-for-somebody-else in a way she’s never been before; Sasuke gets it and she doesn’t care about it, usually, the greatness and the darkness and the Naruto-ness, and Naruto’s never had that from anybody else.

Also she’s gorgeous and annoying and fucked up, rubs her the wrong way most of the time but keeps rubbing her which is the main thing.

“I guess Kakashi never said stuff like that to you.” She locks her hand around the nape of her own neck, where it’s gone automatically, to keep from pulling the cigarette out from between Sasuke’s lips and just – make a mess of everything.

“He didn’t go to school with me.” She grinds the half-finished cig out against the railing. “Also he was a very theoretical Marxist.”

Naruto says, has to say, although it’s herself she has to remind: “You’re such a git.”
Chapter 11

It’s a late and strange and drunk night, which accounts for Naruto remembering, even as she hears them, Sasuke’s words as a quote they can’t be; she’s saying something very similar, but in her own words, not the ones borrowed from Buffy that Naruto hears, like you might hear something in one language but remember it in another when you’ve been switching too much.

*I may be dirt, Slayer, but you’re the one who likes to roll in it.*

Which isn’t what she says, of course it’s not. But it’s close, or feels close, despite that Sasuke would never call herself dirt, and hardly talk about rolling, and very likely there would be something thrown in about Naruto’s intellect being developmentally stunted.

Sasuke sucks with idle but as it appears intense concentration on a new, unlit cigarette. “Don’t you ever think there’s a reason you were bullied?”

And this is it, the magic at the core, that Naruto can be flippant because Sasuke will know she isn’t really. “I guess I was too awesome for people sucking that bad.”

“Come now,” Sasuke says, dropping the cigarette and heaving herself up to sit on the railing, her back against the wall, “everybody knows you’re not a real victim if you aren’t plagued by guilt and shame.” But she’s grinning, that small secretive Sasuke smirk. Yes, Sasuke can grin a smirk.

Naruto scoffs agreement and steps forward, grabbing at Sasuke’s arms to keep her safe and there on the thin ledge, fitting her hands around Sasuke’s arms, hugging the sparse flesh with her fingers, her palm curving over a jutting elbow. Sasuke’s leg twists, maybe failing to kick at her, finally ends up tangled in the railing and around Naruto’s knee.

It’s not how she’d imagined it, it’s honestly not at all what she’d planned, but she’s kissing Sasuke again, pressing their mouths together and their bodies, and, for god’s sake, Sasuke’s kissing her back. Slowly her head tilts, her stance loosens into Naruto, and the hair at the nape of her neck really is soft as kitten fur; Naruto knots her fingers in it, stumbling as she inches closer, her breast crushed uncomfortably against Sasuke’s ribs, teeth locking around Sasuke’s lip to keep it. She palms the bubble where Sasuke’s spine turns into neck, between the tendons, Sasuke’s tongue like an adder in her mouth.

And then abruptly it’s over. Sasuke slips away so easily, it’s outrageous.
“No,” she says, with thoughtful mischief, her lips soft, wet, but her eyes sharper than the cut glass of her accent. “Still not my thing.”

“What?”

“I gave it a shot, all right? That’s it.”

Too high on happiness to grab for her, Naruto remains on the balcony as Sasuke returns inside, pressing her fingertips to her lips, feeling the pulse in them. The idea of leaping onto the railing and shouting, *I'm the king of the world!* is inordinately tempting, but then so is the option of keeping her neck unbroken.

She reminds herself that she got it wrong, before, thinking of cut glass as glass splinters to cut with – Mum laughed, ruffled her hair, explained that no, honey, it refers to the type of expensively cut drinking glasses that only the upper classes could, well can really I suppose, afford. Which does make a great deal more sense in general, although not in Sasuke’s specific case.

But all she is really aware of is the taste of Sasuke’s tongue in her mouth, the taste of saliva and cigarettes, heat and expensive alcohol.

Back inside the party, finally there’s Gaara, looking rather furtive and frazzled under the stoicism.

Hey, she thinks, maybe sort of says but she hopes not, if Sasuke can be over it, so can he, and sitting around in the Castle Emo that is Gaara’s room listening to depressive soundtrack albums is not how a party is supposed to end, even Naruto knows that.

Actually ideally it could’ve ended in Sasuke’s room.

“What?” says Gaara.

She laughs and shakes her head, marching him towards the dancing crowd, loose-limbed and energetic with drink, the beat of the music struggling to catch up to that of her heart.
Sasuke went back to the house on Henderson rather than the beach cottage for privacy, but it becomes clear as she emerges from her bedroom, dripping shower water and yawns, that she wasn’t the only one.

The flat is the twin of Temari’s, only more sophisticated; more angles, less colour. If one is not in the mood for sophisticated, as indeed Temari seldom is, appropriate synonyms would be depressive and melancholy, but Sasuke likes the image of a modernist cave. Pausing at the top of the staircase, which falls into the same sharp curve as the Sabakus’, she listens for the clinks of cutlery and conversation from the kitchen. Itachi’s voice, and somebody else’s; it’s too far really to identify, as one is able to discern only a murmur, more a particular quality to the silence than an actual sound, but she’s grown up with Itachi and would recognise his footsteps and his breathing in her sleep.

In the kitchen there’s the smell of his coffee and his shampoo, long loose hair falling wetly down his back. Rather less familiar, for the last years, is the sight of Anko leaning against the counter, sipping from Mum’s cup. She’s dressed in the large, worn, green dressing gown that Sasuke doesn’t even think about as Kakashi’s anymore, it’s been hers for so long.

“Good morning,” she says. “I didn’t realise you were sleeping over.”

“Hiya,” says Anko, with a bit of an awkward wave of her cup, nodding towards the coffee machine. “Want?”

“Yes, please,” she says, and lets Anko serve her, then takes the steaming mug, hot white china between her cold fingers, and sits down at the table opposite Itachi, stares at him preparing toast.

He does look rather happier, in that shabby morning after way. His wrinkles have regressed to lines that will eventually become wrinkles, there’s a mouth-shaped bruise on his clavicle, visible under the open collar of his shirt, and if she knows Anko right there’ll be scratches up his back, although she prefers not to see those.

“I didn’t see you, either,” he says. “I hope we didn’t disturb.”

“Not at all.” She accepts the buttered and jammed square of toast he slides her, the bread slightly burnt, the spread glittering a dowdy purple, just the way she likes it.
Or at least it’s just the way she liked it when she still ate white bread and spread for breakfast, five or six years ago.

She has the impulse to say, Look, see, I’ve gained already, stop fussing, be – be proud of me?

She eats it in silence.

Anko joins them momentarily, making short work of a large helping of cereal, wiping sticky hands on the dressing gown.

“Right,” says Anko finally, pushing her plate away. “I’ve gotta go.” She also says, “See you later, kids”, kids being plural, but while Sasuke mumbles, “I’m sure I will”, Itachi follows her out into the hallway, presumably to kiss her, possibly to set up a date or make sure she gets her clothes.

“I wouldn’t have been here,” she says when he returns, after she’s finished the toast but not the coffee. “I didn’t realise you were so intimate.”

He gives her a rather ironic smile, for all its warmth; possibly a replacement for saying, Oh but how often was I only a room away from you and Kakashi, over on Lilypad. When neither of them could stand it anymore, and Kakashi’s flat turned into a refugee camp de luxe.

He does say, in a careful considerate voice that’s been largely gone, lately, “She came with me to the exhibit.”

“Indeed.”

“I asked you first.”

She looks up from her contemplation of the still life consisting of crumbs and sugar flakes that has assembled itself on the table. “I wasn’t aware you were so desperate for company.”

“Look,” and yes, it is the big brother voice, the one she missed for far too long for it to evoke at present anything but resentment. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have – that wasn’t my dressing gown to lend. I didn’t think. It’s – none of my things fit, and I didn’t want to give her Mum’s.”
“That’s all right.” Anko is almost a full head taller than Itachi, both their parents towering over him as well as herself.

“I,” he says, “I loved him too, you know. It’s been horrible.”

“I know,” she says, and she does know. But is he wanting her to say, *He loved you too*?

He starts putting the breakfast things away; there won’t be any servants until the family returns. Which they ought to have already, considering the beach house is supposed to be for summer and it’s November.

“So was it a nice party?”

“Yes, rather, actually.”

“That’s good.” He pauses, his small careful hands hovering over the coffee maker. “I was… Last year, there were some very disturbing rumours.”

“Rumours are always disturbing. Otherwise what would be the point of them?”

“Don’t deflect.”

“I trust you’ll excuse me if I was a little too preoccupied to pay much attention to rumours at the time.”

It was the first time in four years he’d seriously tried to kill himself. It was also the first time, in longer, that she’d let herself slacken in vigilance.

She’d cried, furious. She hadn’t cried over Kakashi but she cried in Temari’s room until she couldn’t breathe every day for a week after Itachi’s attempted suicide.
“I’m sorry,” he says, the light going out of him with a sigh that hunches his shoulders.

“Don’t.”

It’s silly, yes silly, because the horror of it happened when she was nine, and all the safety in the world erupted like a volcano. She’d maybe tried to tell him that, that he was the only family she had, the only adult, when she opened the bathroom door after her whining hadn’t made him open it for her, and he was in the shower and not, well, not conscious really.

Kakashi’s stopped him more than once, before it got that far.

She says, moved by sudden benignity, “I never meant to exclude you.”

“I know,” he says, softly, kindly but not in the big brother way. “I think you even meant not to. I guess that’s how natural it was, that it still… None of this is your fault. None of it will ever be your fault. You’ve done more than anybody should have to, and if I ever hurt you, that’s on me and it’s unforgivable.”

“It’s none of it your fault either.” Which she knows to be true, intellectually, knew even when she was a child and wanted to scream, But you were supposed to take care of me! She smiles a little, thinly, not quite managing dryly. “I suppose that’s the problem with having inadequate parents.”

“I suppose. They could be worse, though. They – I think they try, sometimes.”

“Intentions aren’t fucking magic.”

“No,” he says, slowly. “No, but they help, a little.”

“Not really, no.”

“Well, perhaps not, but I’d like to imagine – that they must.” He puts away the last of the used cups, picking up the phone instead, weighing it thoughtfully in his hand. “I thought I might call Kisame.”
“Right,” she says, unable to add anything without collapsing her attempt at sympathy. Kisame after all is the Inuzuka of Itachi’s generation.

“He has his moments,” Itachi says.

For what it’s worth, even when weighed against his fish fetish, this is unarguably true. There was that one comment, framed by the genuine laughter of the outsider, before Itachi’s second suicide attempt, when he was still popular, and Kisame had attended his umpteenth Uchiha family dinner: “So first he whines about how he’s treated like a walking credit card, and then, and now this is the funny part – then when he’s told he’s an absent and disinterest fuck of a dad, he says he’s always provided well for the family, and he thinks he’s really made a solid argument there? What the hell, man?”

There is some more talk, sleepy languid should be comfortable Sunday morning talk. Itachi says, strikingly, in the understated, meticulous voice he uses for oratory, “I doubt very much that it is possible to know somebody – truly know them, really deeply intimately know them, I mean. There’s always at some point a stop, where you reach a difference, and must say, ‘but if you don’t understand this then I cannot explain it to you’, and you can’t live with them not understanding, and so. It’s over, on a fundamental level. This is why we’re most alone with others.”

He also mentions the movie they watched a few days ago, in which there had been a catastrophe and the characters were struggling to decide who should live and who should die; common fare these days but a commendable production. Sasuke says, “To resort to a lottery – I think that’s irresponsible, cowardice.”

“Yes,” says Itachi. “But is it worse to be a coward than somebody who’d decide in cold blood to leave people behind?”

“You’re still leaving people behind. The difference is whether you’re leaving the right ones.”

“I thought so too, once, before.” Before I joined the ranks of those rationally to be left to die.

“No,” she says, surprising them both. “I’d take you.”

He stares at her like he’s not dared to for years, something startled and tender in his expression. “Thank you.”
He’s hers, for better or for worse.

“Well,” he says, heading out of the room with a last smile. “I’ll make that call. I’m sure you’ve got your own intimates to catch up with.”

_I told her not to date Kiba. She’s soft. She’d become fond of him. That wouldn’t end well for anybody._

It seems to her the right decision, although Neji was harsh with distress, since beyond the undesirability of Kiba, if one’s timid enough to ask permission to pursue a relationship, one isn’t qualified to handle it, and no doubt this one would require plenty of handling; skill and tenacity Hinata doesn’t possess.

However it’s none of her business, because of which everything she said to Neji was, essentially, I see, I understand.

In Itachi’s absence, with the fog lifted from him, she leaves the mumble of his voice and steps into the foyer, returning up the cold steps of the staircase. Angling for light, she rests on her elbows with the book propped against her pillows, surreptitiously trying to fasten her fringe behind her ears.

Beyond her dismissal of them as building blocks, manipulative tools, she likes words. It feels to her sometimes like she is constructed from them – or is it that she’d like to be? – an airy fancy being perpetually rewritten and wrongly read around, so she must insist, a core deep down, something volcano-like, associated with adjectives such as thick and dark and hot; in any case something intense and ineffable, almost impersonal.

As she turns the seventh page there’s a crash in the hallway outside, her door pushed open.

“Hi!” Naruto waves at her awkwardly from the doorway before bounding over, landing with a thud on the bed next to Sasuke’s elbow.

“How are you doing here?

“Hello?” She keeps her fingers on the page but lets the paperback close around her hand. _What the hell are you doing here?_

_Duh, I wanted to see you._
Pulling up her legs to sit Indian style, Naruto tries to finger-comb her messy hair and ends up getting herself snared. “Goddamn…! Anyway, since when are you back here? I went down the beach house and it was all empty, it was forever before I ran into the security guy and he said you’d left, and then I had to call Gaara for the address.” Finally she rips her hand free, grimacing as a few strands of hair follow it. “Also the doorman here didn’t want to let me in, so we had to call up for Itachi to tell him to let me through. Like, what is this, the Bat Cave?”

“It’s a private residence,” Sasuke tells her, flatly to hide that she’s a bit – amused? Pleased? In any case something she shouldn’t be.

“I wasn’t sure you’d be home,” Naruto says, calmer, collecting herself against the headboard. “Or alone. I mean, I crashed at Gaara’s, didn’t want to get home at dawn or anything, and I think most people sort of stayed together.”

Suddenly after last night being alone with Naruto means, potentially, kissing Naruto.

You’re a lousy kisser, she told Naruto, before, and it wasn’t a lie. It’s just it somehow stopped being about Naruto being a good or a bad kisser, and in any case Sasuke should have sufficient expertise to see them both through, come to that.

Actually it had felt pretty good – far better, certainly, than her last memory of intimacy, which is Gaara – the intensity of potential; the slickness of tongues and sweat pressing together. A hand on her neck, the inside of Naruto’s knuckles against her throat and the warm insipid beat of its pulse, and abruptly she rather wanted Naruto to kiss it.

It had been acceptable then, at the party; indeed, not that far removed from expected.

She’d felt like she’d just passed a test, and passed with flying colours as a matter of course again rather than the mere tired scrap-bys of late. She still feels a little like it.

She’d expected Naruto’s body to feel more like her own. Winterson refers to it as a type of mirroring, two women making love, but it’s really not.

“Who’d be here besides Itachi?” she asks. For there was a question in Naruto’s words, only Sasuke doesn’t understand it; it’s so self-evident, what was she really enquiring after?

So perhaps it was just Naruto’s accustomed ignorance. Good.

Sasuke mirrors the shrug, a light uncomfortable movement given that she’s still got most of her weight propped on her arms. “She has her brothers, I have mine.”

That is enough of that, which evidently Naruto perceives and, more rarely, accepts. “Yeah, I guess she just hadn’t got up yet.” She leans forward rather precariously, matted blond hair getting in Sasuke’s face. “What’re you reading?”

“Mrs Dalloway.” She sits up to find the bookmark and deposit the book on the nightstand. She’s been rereading Woolf lately; was reminded.

Naruto obediently moves back to let her put the book away, then springs forward again to goggle at the elaborate notebooks piled up on the nightstand.

“You keep diaries?”

“No.” It’s the height of tiresome egotism, time wasting away between the pages.

“They’re not yours?” Her hand hovers over the topmost notebook.

“They are now.”

“Oh.”

She smiles a little, to show it’s all right; surprisingly it is.

“He was always leaving them lying about, obviously hoping to catch me reading them – he must have come up with a really good line for the occasion.”
It’s just something else she’ll never hear, and this one at least she can stomach because she knows about it. Worse, really savage on the bad days, are the millions and millions of things, of futures, she will never know anything about.

She is so unbelievably fucking tired of living a life in the minute spaces between might-have-beens, should-have-beens, have-beens.

Changing tack, Naruto over-reaches herself, almost toppling off the bed, and grabs Pakkun by the scruff of the neck, pulling him from the chair he’s been lying on, half obscured by laundry. Sasuke supposes it shouldn’t be surprising that Naruto has an eye for finding stuffed animals; she inspects it now with evident delight. “Oh my god, this is like The Fox and the Hound!” At Sasuke’s blank look, she makes an impatient gesture. “I have a fox one. Kyuubi.”

“You’re… not exactly a vixen.”

“I never pictured you as a dog person, either. Actually, what I really didn’t picture you as was a plushie person. What’s his name?”

“Pakkun was a gift.”

Not one that she’d wanted, at the time.

“Hello, Pakkun.” Naruto’s giving the pug a considering look, head tilted sideways and mouth tilted up. “Yeah, you totally look like a Pakkun. Haven’t got a lot of love, though, have you?” And she returns her eyes to Sasuke. “No way you got this as a kid.” Because naturally Naruto’s expertise lies in estimating the age of children’s toys based presumably on their wear and tear. Sometimes she displays flashes of normal intelligence and it seems like brilliance against the laissez-faire stupidity: “I really never pegged you for the kind of girlfriend who’d get plushies. Jewellery, yes. Stuffed animals, no.”

“That was the point.”

“Erm, yeah, that makes no sense.”
She twists the ring around her thumb. “Regardless of circumstances, he’d given me his mother’s ring. He was – I suppose he was trying to slow down, or discourage me.”

Woolf is right in writing that everything and nothing is autobiography; putting words to memories changes them, turns them from memory into words, which aren’t the same at all. Fashioning sentences, imposing control by punctuation – the raw reality becomes modified, perverted, a mere simulacrum.

“His mum’s ring? You were engaged?”

“It wasn’t like that, really,” Sasuke says, shifting. “I took a fancy to it, after I’d found it lying around. I’d been looking for something else, I didn’t even know… and he just shrugged and said I should have it, there was no better use for it.”

“Er, yeah – how old were you actually when… you know, when you got together or whatever?”

“I’m not sure. It didn’t matter.”

“Hell yeah it matters. I mean, shit, you were pretty young, right.”

“It’s not really any of your business.”

But she still can’t quite say whether she’s more annoyed or amused.

And Naruto just cares so much, about everything.

“Come on,” Naruto says, gliding down to half-life beside her. “Isn’t this girlfriend talk? Like, you’re supposed to gossip and be intimate and shit?”

She arcs an eyebrow. “I decided to marry him when I was ten.”

“Go Team Childbride? What the fuck, he agreed to that? No, no of course he didn’t, dating a yucky paedophile wouldn’t look so good.” Naruto, though still on her back, has half turned towards her,
her face close enough to lose some of its structure. And she asks, after some flushing and ellipses, how old were you actually when…? and obviously she means, when you had sex, and in Sasuke’s place Naruto would be crude, if she got to the point where she got the words out, would say something like, do you mean the first time he fucked me or the first time he touched me until I came? but Sasuke’s not Naruto and says, define sex.

Rubbing at her face, Naruto’s hand has dirty nails and startlingly pale skin between its fingers, where the tan has faded entirely. Her leg is hot where it lies against the length of Sasuke’s. She smells strong and lively, animal.

Naruto’s not very good at defining sex.

Theoretically Sasuke could give her the information quite easily, although in practice of course she’s not going to because it’s none of Naruto’s business, could say, kissing at twelve, mutual orgasm at thirteen, intercourse at fourteen; could say it all neat and tidy, say it was this and it was that, and then Naruto would react like so, with dude! and gross!, because she would maybe find it hot but not romantic, although no doubt she was touching herself at eleven like everybody else, the hypocrite; but Sasuke prefers to fast forward through that, so just says, Mmh, in the voice that always worked on Kakashi, with whom she was perfectly safe, always, safer than she’s ever been with anybody else. Herself included.

Beside her Naruto breathes loudly. She can feel every pore, all over her skin.

There is something of the cheap comfort of physicality. After the accident it's been scarce, her body dulled, distanced, everything gone gray. Itachi’s hugged her and Mum’s tried to, Temari’s held on and Dad’s done some slapping, Gaara slept with her, but none of it felt like present tense, even while it happened. The time for touch had gone, and everything now must be an echo, an anachronism.

Itachi says his curse is to feel too strongly; first the immense pain pleasure frustration rage hope, then always grief stronger.

In the dulled foggy state he’s reached by yoga and medication, and she’s been drawn into too, she can remember when she was still a child but no longer a sweet one, and control was untenable, her entire being quivering with rage, with love, and the internal alienation: watching with bemusement how she blushed and sneered in ways she had not meant to, didn’t intend to permit herself.

It’s funny, somebody told her once, or she assumes somebody must have told her because it’s an old thought, one implanted when she was too young to have constructed it herself, that it’s socially acceptable, required even, to lose control from love, from desire, but never from hatred or anger. It’s
odd, really, the latter is harder to prevent.

Growing up Sasuke had to learn both, feeling they belonged together; then must unlearn control about the sex to avoid freaking Kakashi out, and so the rage has simmered low and controlled, mostly, and at this point the real anger, the real feeling… well, she’d thought it all spent, before Naruto screamed at her and she started screaming back, which she really shouldn’t have allowed herself but won’t dignify with regret. It was refreshing, before it became cauterising.

“So you had this fairytale first kiss and everything? Like in kids’ movies?”

As a matter of fact her first kiss occurred in the corridor right outside her room, when turning eight gave Itachi aspirations on being a teenager. Kisame and he had been playing drinking games with their juice, and to crown the endeavour Itachi chose to consider being roped into watching Peter Pan with her a date.

Probably what Naruto referred to was later, after Itachi had stopped pecking her and her forehead had been branded by Kakashi’s kisses, her eyelids thrilling with them; later probably when she was lying in bed, in Kakashi’s bed, half-dressed, inarticulate with sleep and a cold, and his mouth was warmer than the fever.

He’d been coughing too, his chest rutting with it under her hands.

She’d arced a brow – no, she hadn’t managed that yet, had had to raise both, and it was explained that endorphins were required to fight off the dreariness of sickness.

“Not exactly, no. How about you?”

It emerges – speaking of fairytales, hah – that this was bestowed by an individual referred to as Toad – like, you know, they didn’t deserve their real names, right, if they just called me all that other stuff – in circumstances that after minimal prodding reveal themselves as being highly suspect.

“Are you saying he actually…?”

“What, no, good god, no. No, they were of the mindset, I don’t fuck animals.”
Naruto moves restlessly like a dreaming cat, little shifts startling through her. The new tilt of her head frames the curve of her jaw, its line stretching then contracting as she again faces Sasuke, wispy hair clinging to her skin. It’s darkened a little with the weather, corn blond now instead of wheat blond, but even in its present unwashed state it’s quite evidently natural.

Her fingers sneak up Sasuke’s arm. Sasuke startles, almost sits up to move away.

“You’re not supposed to touch without reason.”

Naruto’s hold hardens, her hand gripping Sasuke’s shoulder; she smiles so wide she’s almost laughing, savagely. “Oh, I have reason.”

Mmh, Sasuke’s sure she does.

With sudden simplicity she palms the ridge of Naruto’s spine, draws her in.

Naruto’s clumsy and can’t seem to get their limbs sorted, but kneeling awkwardly over Sasuke she’s the picture of apple-cheeked, flushed a dusky red, grinning so hard all the flesh of her face has been pushed into suddenly rounded cheeks.

And it’s stupid but there’s a sizzling element of real danger, the thrill and reality of knowing this could do damage. Naruto is devastatingly genuine, and Naruto is a good person. The idiotic escapades with Konohamaru, her witless arguments and dumber unquenchableness when those run out, and the obvious earnestness; the blatant lack of gain, since Sasuke isn’t prepared to seriously believe the idiot does it to annoy her.

Shifting to keep her shoulder from being pierced by Naruto’s elbow, she becomes aware that she’s not wearing very much, Naruto’s body heat quite intimate through her pyjamas.

“You smell like sweat,” Sasuke informs her.

“Ah, yeah, well, I guess,” Naruto agrees, finally getting their legs sorted out, her calf jutting out over Sasuke’s ankle because of course Naruto is much taller. “I always start sweating when the hangover lets up, it sucks. Well, not so much the nausea going away, that part’s awesome, but the sweating, not so cool. Anyway though I sort of like it, you know? When it’s not too much, it smells sort of like – like really ripe almost decaying apples.”
At this point Sasuke sits up to push her away, only she ends up sitting straight up into a kiss, and falls back on her elbows. Naruto’s still abominably bad at it, hard-lipped and over-eager, earning a hard grip on her neck and a sigh that prompts a moan, prompts Naruto to collapse over her, resting most of her weight on Sasuke. It does improve the angle of the kiss, considerably.

Sasuke’s used to her breasts being smoothed out against the flatness of a man’s chest, not opposed by another pair. Naruto’s at least are protected by her jumper, where Sasuke’s are agonisingly bare under her thin sleep shirt, the nipples visible knots of tension.

Taking control of the kissing, Sasuke lets her free hand sneak up Naruto’s jumper, over the hot damp skin at the back of her hips, with the curves and dips and extra flesh. It’s – all right, it’s good.

Leaning sideways a little, mumbling into Sasuke’s mouth because she never does shut up, Naruto fumbles over her front, over her breasts, her nipple, and sort of pulls, and desire happens again her. It’s good, as Sasuke clings to her and tries to get her hands further down her shirt, that Naruto doesn’t tease, doesn’t lick around and around when all you want is for her to plunge in.

“Oh, fuck, ouch,” Naruto mumbles, mouth slippery against Sasuke’s cheek, jaw, neck, one of her hands all soft on Sasuke’s face, the other still groping her breasts. “Fuck, wait, my shoulder.”

Sasuke’s hands fall free when Naruto removes hers to push herself up, rearranging her clumsy over-large body. It shouldn’t be that difficult, as objectively it’s pretty average, larger than Sasuke’s certainly but smaller than half the class’, but then objective reality has never had much truck with Naruto.

Naruto’s blushing now rather than flushed, breathing a bit hard and smiling harder still, trying awkwardly to shift into a comfortable position. There’s a shine to her eyes – wet? Feverish? – that had better be from the hangover.

Sasuke’s relaxed, in the imbecile comfort of another’s body on hers, not properly propped up but lighter all the same than what, even now, she was expecting. Although she’s rarely taken Kakashi’s full weight, only for a few moments sometimes after lovemaking, before he caught himself.

“You know,” Naruto says, not moving off her but tilting her head to avoid suffocation by pillow, her chin jutting into Sasuke’s shoulder when she speaks. “This room – actually this whole place – is a lot more you.”
“Really?”

“Yeah.” She sighs rather happily, fingers playing lazily with Sasuke’s. “The beach house is all light and airy and modernist, which, not really you. Now, this, on the other hand,” her free hand flaps about in an incomprehensible gesture, “this is the dark heavy stuff, more like a castle. Old treasure, heirlooms, gloomy majesty.”

The red carpet reached her ankles when she was a child, before it’d been trampled down. The draperies are heavy, and the furniture as well; heirlooms, indeed, continental pieces of lovingly preserved and in some cases restored woodwork. It’s true this is home, although the walls are blue in both her rooms, edging towards slate in this one.

From this the story is born; they start to invent, although ‘they invent’ might be more properly understood, at first, to mean Naruto embarking on a wild flight on fancy and Sasuke, along for the ride, reclining with an arced brow and much acerbic criticism. Still, as the undisclosed quotation claims, One’s relationship to another is, at heart, the telling of one’s stories, of one’s mutual, communal stories.

It’s human nature, she supposes, telling stories. Today, she’s prepared to indulge.

So the story goes brushing past caves – dude, you are not Batman! – and medieval fantasy – castles without floor heating are not desirable – on to elven lands, sidestepping a bit of a tiff regarding Naruto having read YA and Sasuke having read Shakespeare, and stumbling into the eastern lands, regarding which Naruto claims, as she obviously thinks ingeniously, “It’s not appropriation if you’re actually Jewish!”

“My maternal grandmother was a European Jew. My father’s of pure white stock.”

“Oh,” Naruto says, nevertheless sounding content, burrowing into Sasuke’s neck, one arm curving around Sasuke’s hips. “Well, we could…”

“Let go.”

“Wha? Why?”
“Bathroom,” Sasuke says shortly, slipping from the suddenly lax hold.

When she returns, face washed clean of expression, Naruto beams, gesturing with one of Kakashi’s notebooks. “He’s a genius! Kakashi, I mean! Genius! We should totally be *magical ninja*!”

Topmost on the nightstand lies the file of drawings, open to a colourful tableau. “That’s the New Year’s party,” Sasuke says blankly. In the middle of one of what was still referred to as his intense phases, Itachi had wanted a masked ball, and so of course he had got one. The photo, altered by brush, shows Sasuke in what Itachi had considered a splendid warrior princes costume, and Itachi himself as, she believes, Robin Hood against a backdrop of fireworks.

Peaking out from beneath it is the twin picture, the one called *Lethe* and bearing the rather pretentious caption: put stones in his pockets and push him into the river.

“It is a New Year’s party,” Naruto allows, “which has been *invaded by magical ninja!* Come on, this is genius! See, see, these are the magical ninja attacks!”

Sasuke takes the picture away from her before her pointing leaves oil stains on the fireworks. “Don’t touch my stuff.”

Naruto gives her a look that says, *Erm, dude, you just let me touch your boobs,* but says, “I was just sitting up and stuff fell over, and then I saw the picture. Sorry?”

“Whatever,” Sasuke huffs, but rejoins Naruto on the bed, where the latter is sitting cross-legged, leaning forward over her ankles. Too close, really, smelling strongly of sweat and toothpaste. “I should know better than to leave anything around for you to break.”

“Hey,” Naruto objects, but laughingly, moving her hand to rest her knuckles against Sasuke’s knee.

Fairy tales, even ones unconventional enough to feature magical ninja, demand extremes, and really the only way to make Naruto more of an outcast would be to render her an orphan, as well. There’ll need to have been some extraordinary event, involving prophecies or demons, but it can wait. Her father will have been somebody significant, more like Sasuke’s oddly, a hero of the land – yes, yes, the dead hero king. On the other hand her mother, no longer secretive in spite of all her translucent words, is the secret instead. Indeed Naruto herself will be a secret, sort of, the way children are if their mums are, tied to them for the eternity of childhood.
The new leader, then – should it be the customary old man, crushed and crippled under the weight of all those who have been lost or maybe, maybe Tsunade? Yes, Tsunade could work, they could even keep Iruka on as a ninja teacher.

Pakkun perhaps could be a familiar – do ninja have familiars? If so then Naruto of course must have Kyuubi, except in the lore to which ninja belong foxes are treacherous creatures, magical in and of themselves, so maybe a rather more august position would fit him better. Well, well there’ll be time for that eventually.

In order to properly come into her own, Sasuke too needs to be orphaned – but they were hers, she’d need revenge – and also how are they supposed to have died? Well maybe she snapped, right? She, or Itachi, or both of them – no, no, Itachi must go, Sasuke is very firm on this, so all right, then, say he snapped and killed them all, and then… disappeared? Well he can’t be around, it stands to reason. So eventually Sasuke will need to make a bid for vengeance, although she can honestly say she’d rather he killed them than himself.

They are negotiating over the bit players – Gaara is Naruto’s, and Kiba, whereas Neji and Temari are Sasuke’s, Sakura’s a nice compromise – when Itachi knocks.

“We were thinking we’d get some Thai food. Would you like anything?”

“Yes,” says Sasuke. Kisame’s the one who really enjoys the cheap grease of takeout, well, he and Kakashi; they’ve not had it much lately, she or Itachi.

“The usual? Yes, I remember. How about you, Naruto?”

“Ah, sure – er, what time is it?”

“Let’s see… five forty-five.”

“Oh shit. Sorry, shit shit shit. I have to go.” As it turns out her parents were informed she’d probably sleep over in town, the long tired journey home during the predawn hours not being a tempting prospect, but she was supposed to have called, to have been home, quite a while ago, damn it, I was just going over here for a bit, you know? I didn’t think it was this late already!

She dashes away with a wave and a glitter of smile that would probably, had either the time
constraint or Itachi’s presence been removed, have been a rather ardent attempt at a goodbye kiss.

“Should I offer her a ride?”

“Nah,” says Sasuke. “She’s a good runner.”

Eating bad food and watching bad television between pages, she feels all right, feels good, until eight eighteen when she has to purge herself utterly, throat and mouth burning with acid as though she were new at it, and then afterwards when she’s empty she’s all right again.
Chapter 12

“Honey,” Mum says, when Naruto’s been hugged and yelled at and sent off to the shower, stirring her tea. “I can see you’re happy, and that’s great, but…”

“I know I should’ve called,” Naruto interrupts, jittery, almost twitchy with joy that wants to send her running, laughing and yelling her triumph. Stuck at the table she curls around the sensation, feeling it like a hot-air balloon swelling warm and unstoppable inside her. “I’m sorry, I lost track of time, okay? I’ll be more careful.”

“You have to understand that we were worried,” Mum says. “When you didn’t pick up your phone, and then Kiba didn’t know where you were.”

“I just – I’m not real used to the mobile. I’ll get it back Monday, Gaara’ll bring it.”

“Well, the main thing is you’re home now,” Dad says.

“Well, yes,” Mum says, “but… You’ve been so up and down, lately, so… I don’t want to say obsessed, but – very focused on this Sasuke girl. And with all these mood swings, and the fighting, and now this partying and being home late, I’m just not sure it’s a good idea.”

“That what is a good idea? Sasuke? Bcause she’s, you know, a person.”

“I know that, honey, I just meant maybe you should try and step back a little.”

Naruto stares at her blankly, then flashes a hard grin. “Do you, like, know me? At all?” But it’s Mum, who loves her and wants the best for her, always has, her and Dad the only ones who have. She adds, tentatively, almost cajoling, “Anyway I thought you said you could never dislike anybody who liked Woolf? Because then Sasuke’s your girl.”

“She reads Virginia Woolf?” Dad says. “How pretentious.”

“Shut up, you,” Mum says. “There’s nothing pretentious about appreciating good literature.”
“Only Woolf isn’t good literature, she’s highbrow code.”

“Hey,” Naruto objects. “I liked *The Hours*."

“I didn’t know you’d read that,” Mum says, bright suddenly as if lit from within. Books do that to her; seldom Naruto, although that may be all the issues. It’d be a pretty sick Mum to be happy to hear her kid got into trouble again, and that’s mostly all she gets to hear. “But you should try *Flesh and Blood* – if you haven’t already? It’s more rooted, grounded; fleshier… Cunningham’s best, no doubt about it.”

“Er, I meant the film.”

Mum’s “oh” is comically – yes, comically, it should be comically, damn it – disappointed, but the issue is diffused. Naruto spends the rest of the evening deciding Kyuubi should definitely be a demon, or – or maybe a nature god?

She thinks at length about Sasuke’s particular way of ascending staircases, tip-toeing her way up; about her mouth and her hands, the skin of her fingertips so thin the veins look like cuts.

She’s sprawled sideways across her bed, hugging Kyuubi so hard her arms are shaking, when Mum stops by. Sits on the bed for a bit, rubs her head, scratching behind her ears in the old kitten game. Eventually she says, in the soft amused Mum voice, “I spoke to her a little, you know, when I drove her to the tube station. I didn’t think you liked the intellectual, argumentative type?”

“Yeah, well,” Naruto says, blushing a bit, lacking the words to explain that it’s different now, that demanding *why* and *will you motivate that* and *on which precise arguments are you basing that* and all those things – that she suddenly understands them, also, as a way of reaching out into the world, of trying really to connect with somebody.

That what’s really hoped for, sometimes, is an answer.

She told Sasuke she was just sitting up and stuff fell over, and then she saw the picture, sorry, but the file with the drawings wasn’t the only thing that fell open, and Naruto had more than an accidental look. She falls asleep with the reels of illicit words spinning over her mind’s eye.
1. reading a mass of Virginia Woolf books (H. Lee magnificent, though L Desmond more thrilling). Was v. verbal, v. defensive; somewhat raw. Of course identifies dreadfully with V. W. although remains theoretically aware that role fits I. better. Suppose Fugaku does make rather a good Father Leslie, especially when he’s been drinking; the dreadful loops he falls into, the monstrous egotism of demanding attention he has never been able to give – the sort of man in short who will always recommend everybody the same books; the ones he himself likes, regardless of the person’s tastes, with wh. he cannot be bothered.

“So I resent my father. That’s nothing special, most people do.” Suspect in her circles this no exaggeration. Perhaps just as well, I reckon, I did not get much reason to hate mine, though honestly I’ve managed it all the same.

“I suppose then what would set me apart would be resenting my mother. You’re supposed to have ambivalent feelings about her, but really I’ve never managed.” As I recall this originated from the homefront war over the Fröberg painting; Fugaku had hung it in the living room over v. livid protests from …well, everybody, it was horrid, clearly a reproduction although he wouldn’t believe it until the art dealer told him and he binned it in a rage, S. hated it with a terror. So after he’d left for some conference or other S. & I. took it down; and of course Fugaku too became livid. She said as I remember (it was before I met her, but I remember it all the same, I feel, through them both) in this haughty child’s voice that if he were at liberty to put it up without her approval, then it followed that she was at perfect liberty to take it down without his. There is of course a certain logic to it, which I assume is what infuriated him so much; nobody would’ve given a damn what he hung in his own room, but after all the living room is communal, made out to be a democratic project. Naturally the aftermath was stormy, indeed I. gave me to understand she did not speak to him until weeks after the swelling had gone down.

One day I will kill that man.

But the thing of import, really, in context – Mikoto rather took her husband’s side, or at the very least failed to take theirs. Which of course could never quite be forgiven, even I suspect by me.

There had been until then the hope – no the assumption, I suppose, fuelled by the deeply felt though never spoken “well after all how could she possibly not” – that she was …confused, torn, that her vacillating would end and she would be on our side. After all we would certainly always be on hers, regardless of the precise issue. But after that reality asserted itself, and all of that changed, acceptance I suspect eroded care.

Anko called about exhibit May. Look over sketches from ‘S. waking up’ series, maybe the landscapes at I.’s beach house.

And in the other book, the yellow one, with crisper, more adult writing:
trying to talk to Fugaku – feel certain responsibility to call him out; Sasuke girl and Itachi mentally ill, but I after all also rich, white, heterosexual, cis-gendered, fully-abled upper class male. Orphaned yes and not yet eighteen, which why must tread carefully after all, but there is palpable end in sight. I can be lightly ironic, can keep distance from the issues and the insults he hardly understands are damning, can be joking even pleasant.

Like talking to an over-privileged, under-stimulated child. This frightening incapacity to self-analyse, this unbelievable disinterest in other people, almost pathological.

He honestly, or so I think, honestly believes he is liberal, kind; a good man. Feel like my teeth are rotting, somehow, when he talks to her, to either of them, as though he has done nothing wrong, as though perhaps they should even be grateful – as though he has deserved to have a relationship with them.

I laid it all out – well a pure biology is eternally unavailable, it is the thing in itself and as such beyond us; not only can we not find a human mind that hasn’t been affected all its life by society/culture, but we view it, also, through those lenses. But above all it is opinion, ideology – it is not possible to prove this one way or another, it is about taking a moral stand. And embracing biology, the inherent, well, that is reductive, oppressive, that is fascism. It is saying you were born this, you cannot change this, you are trapped in that body, the body is you. Saying no, this is ideology, this is culture, man is man-made – this is to say, we can change this. We are made by society, but society is, also, made by us. It is to allow everybody to be subjects, to define themselves.

And at times you can see a glimmer in him, the first tentative grasp towards understanding, but then always it snuffles out.

“No. I believe – no. We are biological creatures.”

Well, yes, sir, there is a biological factor, I don’t think anybody would argue that, but it’s an external influence; the significance of the body isn’t itself, it’s what’s made of it – anyway, of course, and I bite my tongue because how to say, respectfully, well sir of course you prefer this version of things, it privileges you. if it is nature itself that means you are the real person and everybody else is just not as good, then nothing needs to change, you do not need to question yourself, you have the moral high ground and the sense and get to keep the power. If you’d said, no it’s just coincidence, the biology doesn’t, should not, doesn’t have to matter, what we make of it does, and this should change, it is wrong... I am wrong...

Well of course he wouldn’t do that. And so we walk circles of talk, and I feel tired of it and like laughing. It’s so tempting to say: well yes but everybody hates you. well yes it’s an opinion, and no I
can’t prove it, but the same is the case when I say ‘it’s wrong to kill children’, and yet I’m damn sure I’m right. well yes I suppose we will just have to wait for the tide to turn, and leave you behind, you are sickening.

Childish, of course, but the worst part is, I don’t think he’d understand.

How do you explain the fluidity of subject, the intricacies and power of the social matrix, to somebody who does not even know the names of Butler, Foucault, Althusser, who has never dreamt of Kant or Quine? How do you speak intelligently to somebody refusing to learn the language, refusing to understand that there is a language to be learnt?

How keep a civil tongue in your mouth to a man who has utterly ruined his wife, to the point she is helping ruin their children, whom you – well, whom I love.

After Extra Math on Monday Gaara finds her, offering the battered mobile that must’ve slipped out of her pocket after she fell asleep on his couch.

“Hey, thanks, man.” He recoils, but not much, when she leans forward to peer more closely at his face. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“You sure? Cause you look kind of pale, I mean like ice pale, and also on Saturday you were sort of twitchy.”

“I’m fine,” he repeats, in the voice that sends most everybody running. “Parties – aren’t really my scene.”

“Yeah, no, I guess they’re pretty much the emo antithesis. Hey, ouch!” Jolted by Gaara’s push, she bites her out-stuck tongue and curses around the bleeding.

“Stupid fuck,” Gaara mutters, but returns her one-fingered salute with a fairly amicable wave as he wanders off.
Sasuke naturally doesn’t attend Extra Math – and, truthfully, usually neither does Naruto, but the test’s creeping up and after the lateness fiasco it’d probably be a good idea to make a serious attempt at passing – so Naruto’s jittery, too antsy and volcanic to be safely contained inside her own skin, taking off towards Social Science to see her.

And there she is: Sasuke!

In her usual clothes now, not the party-red nor the ratty old pyjamas, familiar and dear, she’s searching for something in her bag, talking softly to Shikamaru.

The corridor light is institutional, at once drab and over-bright, an ignominious background, against which Sasuke alone is in colour, fucking beckoning.

Naruto can feel the silly grin, goofily big, teeth and lips and desperation. “Hi!”

“Morning,” Shikamaru mumbles, his eyes uncannily awake above the yawn.

Sasuke looks up from her bag, notebook in hand, nods. “Hello.”

On instinct, moving into the classroom, Naruto reaches for her, fingers barely brushing her wrist before she moves it away.

“Don’t get ideas,” says Sasuke, whom Naruto remembers with acute clarity kissed her back, melted under her, and let her curl afterwards, snuggly and content. At first Sasuke was rather – well, rather on the outside of the touching, Naruto can see that now she’s had the real thing, but then she got into it, she really did.

“My ideas are gold,” Naruto mutters back, then has to shut up abruptly as Ms 19th Century Teaching Methods commences the lesson.

Social Science can be fun – hell, they had Iruka substituting when Medusa here got smote down with influenza, and it was a blast, Naruto and Lee leading the Socialists in a glorious revolution after they’d lost the general election to Neji’s Liberals – but this endless monologue on the gratefully-forgotten details of governmental structure gets very tiring very fast. This should’ve been at least one grade in the bag, but at this rate she’ll be lucky to remember the info by the end of the lesson, much less until the actual test. Damn it.
Also Sasuke ought to be looking back at her, not taking notes. Or maybe Naruto could crib those?

As the day moves on and then the week, Naruto can only conclude that it’s not fair, how somebody as painfully vivid as Sasuke should be so elusive. If you’re fucking unignorable, you damn well shouldn’t get to ignore people.

Not that she’s ignoring Naruto, exactly. In fact she’s possibly paying more attention than she has before, in public, but as compared to the weekend… well, she’s not declaring her eternal love or offering sexual favours, which is bad enough.

“I haven’t seen Kiba around for a while, except at the garage,” Dad remarks. “Everything all right on that front?”

They’ve not talked about Sasuke since last weekend. Or, rather, Naruto’s talked, indirectly when possible, because she can’t shut up about it, but Dad’s restricted himself to nods and murmurs.

“He’s nursing his broken heart,” Naruto tells him cheerfully. “Also his massive hangover, but mostly his heart.”

“Hangover from Gaara’s brother’s party? I thought that was all high-end, invite-only?”

She shrugs, stuffing her face with gingerbread. Mum insists it’s too early to start baking Christmas cookies, but if the shops can start decorating for the holidays halfway through November, what’s to stop her? “Well, yeah, I guess, but he’s friends with Shikamaru. Who’s the longstanding boyfriend of Temari, sister of the party-thrower.”

Dad laughs, rubbing at the back of his neck with one hand and reaching for gingerbread with the other. “In some ways it was easier before you had so many friends to keep track of. Who broke Kiba’s heart, then? Anybody I know of?”

“She’s Hinata Hyuuga. Neji’s cousin, you know, Neji I’m in a group with for English/History. I can see why he likes her, I guess, she’s all sweet and cute and kind, although I thought he’d be more into like outdoorsy types. Anyway, she’s really shy and stuff, maybe that’s why she said she couldn’t go out with him. And you know at first I thought – I’m sort of really ashamed of this, but yeah, they’re like immigrants and she’s pretty much the media stereotype of the brow-beaten Muslim girl, so I thought maybe she wasn’t allowed, you know? But Neji’s basically the frenemies kind of bff with Sasuke,
and she’s Jewish, so yeah, probably not so much with the conservative leanings.”

And she’s gone full circle, right back to Sasuke. Furthermore the English History project is drawing to a close, so she really ought to get cracking on those poems. She’s not seen much of Neji, considering; he and Sasuke appear to have split the lion’s share of the work between them, Sasuke demanding that Naruto hand over her texts well before deadline to have them checked over. While this caused some serious bristling, Naruto’s got to admit she’s not entirely adverse to the notion of it improving her sadly lacking grades.

She does peek at Sasuke in the shower, this week, just a little bit, because she can’t seem to help herself and also surely Sasuke has sort of allowed her, or at least un-disallowed her.

1. E. itself is stupendously horrifying: in keeping with the theme of anticipating Christmas way too early, Gai has exchanged his usual green spandex for an equally neon Santa Claus costume. Possibly more disturbing yet is Lee dressed up as Santa’s Little Elf and clearly regarding it as an especial honour.

Fair enough, Gai did say last lesson that coming in costume to the Christmas dance practice starting today could conceivably improve their grades, but apart from Lee Shikamaru’s the only one who’s taking him up on it, arriving with a Santa’s Elf hat pulled down over his eyes. Truly he is a genius.

Still, apart from the wild look of terror that even she could not escape during that fateful gym class, Sasuke seems once again perfectly in control of her crumbling empire.

During lunch one day Naruto, separated from her usual clique by the interference of Konohamaru once more getting himself into trouble, runs into Haku in the cafeteria. She’s prettier than ever, statuesque and loose-limbed in a purple jacket, but it’s a beauty seen as though through water. Naruto’s become frustratingly inoculated to any appeal that isn’t Sasuke’s.

“Come on, I haven’t seen you in forever since Iruka quit with the seminars,” she says, and Haku lets herself be dragged along. With Kiba’s table full and Gaara nowhere in sight, Naruto is practically obliged to steer her steps towards Sasuke, who’s unlikely to be eating but presides over a corner table, flanked by the usual cronies.

It’s an odd word to use in reality, for reality, one better fit for a ninja world. Maybe, she suggested at one point, maybe Sasuke could just be the Ice Princess, sorcerer royalty; but no, Sasuke was very tired of that, had no patience for the proposition.
Sasuke looks none too pleased with their presence, but it’s one of the minions who says, “Pardon?” in that unbearable snotty voice you use for disgraced pets, and when Haku says, “I believe I was previously invited”, Sasuke offers a gracious hostess smile. “Indeed.”

“Tell me,” she says pleasantly after they’ve sat down, affecting what actually looks like genuine concern. “How is Zabuza? I understood there had been some trouble.”

Haku goes stiff beside her. “He’s fine,” she says. “Thank you for asking.” Then she doesn’t say anything more until Sasuke turns her attention elsewhere and Sakura begins chatting softly to her. They seem happy enough, so…

“So,” Naruto says, turning excitedly to Sasuke. “Can you ride a horse? Cause I don’t know about ninja, but mounted knights are pretty wicked. Also, horses are awesome.”

“Yes,” Sasuke tells her, with a slow smile that draws warmth like a tide up Naruto’s body. “I can ride a horse. I’ll take you along to the stables sometime.”

“Really?”

“Sure,” says Sasuke, adding in a low tone, “I expect watching you fall on your arse will be worth the bother.” She turns back to the closest minion, and Naruto to Sakura and Haku, listening to Sakura stressing out about having finished her part of the English/History project weeks ago and being stuck now waiting for Shikamaru to start his bit.

Probably Sasuke and Neji are done too, and Naruto handed over most of her texts to Sasuke yesterday. Time to start on the next Philosophy paper, then, and prepping for tests in Math and Social Science – the usual end of term torture meted out by increasingly sadistic teachers.

When they’re leaving, Haku taking off and most of the minions, Naruto demands, “Who’s Zabuza?”

“Haku’s delinquent boyfriend. Friend of Kisame’s.”

“What sort of delinquent?” Probably nothing too bad, since going by Sasuke’s tone being friends with this Kisame character is a far worse offence, but still…
“There are different sorts?”

“You know, is he like a bad guy or just somebody got in some trouble?”

The curve of Sasuke’s lip is ominous, but in the end she shrugs. “I wouldn’t know. I’ve never met him.”

“I’ve not heard anything worse about him than about Gaara,” Sakura interjects. “And I’ve never seen Haku anything but happy around him. He does look pretty scary, though. I think he was convicted of robbery once? Before he was old enough to be punished for it.”

“Good,” Naruto says, and it is, although the worst things Sakura will have heard about Gaara aren’t true, which means Zabuza might’ve still done way worse, might’ve done really bad stuff. Naruto has zero faith in the courts sentencing the right people, but being victimised by the state has never stopped delinquents victimising other people.

During Philosophy Sasuke as always makes Naruto’s blood boil, but it’s a more complicated sort of boil now, with happy bubbles bursting like laughter on the surface of the heat.

Ino tilts her head, chin resting in her hands. “Are you two friends now or something?”

“But Ino, I was given to understand you were very sure we were a lot more than that.”

What?

But Ino merely grimaces. “Oh, come on, it’s not like anybody believes it.”

“Don’t worry,” says Sasuke, smiling thinly. “I’m not upset.”

That level of condescension has sent humbler people than Ino into frothing rages; Naruto certainly would’ve had a minor explosion. Ino goes white then very quickly pink, her lips tight around her silence.
“You’re really bitchy today,” Naruto remarks afterwards. Not so much to Naruto, or no more than usual.

“Payback rather famously is supposed to be,” Sasuke says, ruining the line of her ice princess smile with a cigarette. “Now run along, I’ve got electives.”

Naruto sticks out her tongue but obeys, taking off back towards her locker. On the way she passes a bench, on which Ino and Sakura are perching, Ino like a bird, Sakura curving sideways towards her. “…and if you actually got it, Ino, what would you do with it?”

“Are you with me or not?”

“I’m not against you,” Sakura tells her with a sigh, arranging and rearranging her notebooks as Ino storms off.

“You all right?” Naruto asks, approaching awkwardly, rubbing at the back of her neck in a gesture Sasuke claims is as ubiquitous as asinine.

“I’m fine,” Sakura says. “I just… Sasuke doesn’t seem to care anymore, it can’t just be that she’s depressed anymore, can it? She’s outgrown it, surely, I think, and Ino really wants it. And Ino’s my best friend, and why shouldn’t she get to have it? I like Sasuke, I always have, I admire her – I think I’ve liked her a lot more, actually, after I grew out of the sycophant stage and could stop all that resentful adoration. But it was always Sasuke’s, even if Ino got it, it wouldn’t fit her, she’s not the one it was made for. Even if she got some support, even if people went against Sasuke, it wouldn’t matter. It wouldn’t be enough. The uppercrusters would never accept her. It’s not even that they like Sasuke, though some of them do, it’s just that Ino’s below them. She won’t realise it, and I… I want to help her but it’s a fool’s errand, I don’t want her to get hurt.”

“Then she makes them accept her,” Naruto says. “Uppercrusters, fuck that.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Worked for Lenin.”

“I’m not,” Sakura starts, ending in an awkward little laugh. “Acknowledging the problems caused by a classist environment doesn’t…” She smiles ruefully. “I thought you of all people would be on
Sasuke’s side.”

“Not for those reasons, that’s for damn sure,” says Naruto, who has never thought of herself as being on Sasuke’s side and isn’t sure she is.

Of course if it was real she would be, there wouldn’t even exist any other sides for her to be on, but this sort of silly squabbling – it doesn’t seem important enough to merit loyalty.

Is it important to Sasuke, though? Naruto’s never actually asked, and Sasuke’s never mentioned it. If she had Naruto’s sure she’d have said it was beneath her, maybe that she was tired of it, but then Sasuke lies to herself more than she lies to anybody else.

xxxxx

That night she struggles through the sonnet. Fourteen lines of iambic verse in a rhymed pattern, with a romantic theme and a twist at the end, just as required.

Except Naruto’s no better at counting syllables than at counting out the answers to her math problems, so it might maybe need some tweaking.

Neji insists that at least this bound verse shit comes with conventions, staple imagery – the difficulty lies in getting the technicalities right. It’s nothing, supposedly, compared to the creative agony inherent in free verse.

As she puts her pen down at two forty-eight am, Naruto’s sneaking suspicion that Neji’s full of pompous self-important bullshit is officially validated.

Mission: Romeo is ready to commence, though.

That Saturday morning she sneaks out before the sun can spot her. At least when the snow comes it will be lighter, brighter, instead of this cold late-autumn drabness with its lugubrious streetlight-lit darkness and the interminable rain. Now the last brown leaves have tumbled down there’s supposed to be snow, or hail at least, but obviously the tear in the ozone layer is much like a tear in nylon, ripped wider with each day; she’s more wet than cold in her woollen jumper, jogging through the empty Saturday morning streets towards the commuter trains.
Lulled to sleep by the long lonesome journey, she’s jerked properly awake at Central by the first dim dawn-light greeting the passengers scurrying off towards the Underground. It’s good, in its way, that Sasuke lives in a ritzy neighbourhood, because if Naruto was aiming to take the tube to someplace non-posh this early on a weekend morning, she’d be stuck waiting for a good long while. Probably the city authorities would be spammed with hatemail if they prevented the maids from rising with, or rather a while before, the sun and immediately setting off to acquire breakfast stuff.

Naruto shudders, whether at the idea or from the cold, and jumps on the train, losing a bit of her scarf to the doors snapping shut behind her.

When she returns aboveground the sea air is moist and heavy, almost white with fog; Sasuke plus family is back at the summer house, either, depending on who you listen to, because her father is pursuing a devilish vendetta against good taste, or because they’re refurnishing. Sasuke’s been bitchy about it without any real bite, the morose sort of bitchy that lets on she’s unhappy, wants to go home, but in reality Naruto’s mission would be mission impossible if they hadn’t relocated to the beach house.

At this point she’s way familiar with Mr Security, who has gone from bemused to amused at exchanging waves with her before she climbs the garden wall. It’s easier now she has gloves and winter boots, and a lot of practice. Mr Security kept reminding her, for a while in the beginning, that as an actual guest with no aspirations on B n E action, she would do well to use the front entrance, but it’s pretty awkward running into Sasuke’s mum, and she’s always been tempted by the idea of mountaineering. Also if Romeo, the little emo paedophile, could scale a freaking house, then Naruto can damn well manage a simple garden wall.

For a moment she’s stopped short by the realisation that Sasuke would very likely object to her labelling Romeo a paedophile on account of his seducing a thirteen year old, but then again Sasuke would no doubt consider Juliet too retarded to be able to consent, regardless of her age.

The garden is surprisingly still pretty – it was so summery before, she hadn’t thought it’d manage this sort of austere prettiness.

Sasuke’s window is easily located, as every other one has boring white drapes or, in Itachi’s case, much darker ones. This is it.

She helps herself to a fistful of the gravel lining the flowerbeds, squints, and lets fly.
She’s had to replenish her ammunition before the drapes are pushed aside, revealing an indistinct Sasuke-shape who doesn’t return Naruto’s exuberant waving.

She has to throw some more gravel before Sasuke jerks the window open, narrowly avoiding getting hit.

“Shit! Sorry!”

“Piss off,” Sasuke tells her, her voice too sleepy even for anger. “I don’t care what the fuck you’re doing, go away.”

All right, so Sasuke’s not a morning person. Naruto can respect that. She’ll just have to provide a nice incentive for Sasuke to shake off sleep.

After some stressful pocket-searching she brandishes a copy of her sonnet, crafted with sweat, blood and tears.

Three lines in she hesitates over a word, mentally cursing her handwriting, and Sasuke breaks in: “Oh Naruto, Naruto, wherefore are you such an unmitigated imbecile?”

“I am not!” Naruto protests, giving up on the illegible word. Dove, maybe? Love? Doesn’t matter, either one should work. “Not appreciating romance just means you have a dead soul!”

“Fuck off!” Sasuke tells her again.

Deciding on dove, Naruto continues her recitation. This is brilliance, it’s just that, like all great art, it requires its public to get used to it gradually before its greatness can fully dawn on them.

Sasuke’s disappearance from the window is troubling, and Naruto can hardly believe her luck when she returns with a rope ladder.

Stuffing the sonnet back in her pocket, she starts climbing, only to find herself in sudden freefall just when she made to grab hold of Sasuke’s floor.
“I said piss off,” Sasuke says, shutting the window on Naruto’s tumble back to earth.

“Ouch,” Naruto grumbles, rubbing at her arse. “Bitch!” The house being low-slung and the windows reaching all the way from floor to ceiling means it wasn’t a particularly tall fall, despite Sasuke’s room ostensibly being on the first floor, but the sheer freaking gall of just dropping her! When she was being all nice and sentimental, too!

Leaving the rope ladder in a heap on the ground, she hurries towards the front entrance. While Mr Security eyes her muddy clothes with a highly entertained expression, Sasuke has clearly never retracted her initial instruction to regard Naruto as welcome and not to be bothered.

“Thanks, mate,” Naruto says, kicking her shoes off and running fast and barefoot up the stairs. Like a magical ninja, in fact.

Outside Sasuke’s door she hesitates for a moment, the handle heavy under her suddenly sweaty palm, but she’s come way too far to go anywhere but forward now. A quick twist and the lock opens for her, letting her inch the door silently open.

Sasuke’s back in her bed, only the back of her head visible above the coverlet. She looks small, curled up like that.

Well, Sasuke’s always small, technically, but she doesn’t usually look it, unless you’re so close you have to tilt your face down to find hers.

Pulling off her damp, muddy jumper and dropping it on the floor with her scarf, Naruto approaches, oddly short of breath.

“Hey,” she mumbles, sitting on the edge of the bed. “You only heard the half of it, you know.”

Sasuke twists around with astonishing speed, glaring blearily at her but clearly unwilling to abandon her cocoon. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Nothing!” Naruto protests, toeing her socks off and starting to pull a bit of the coverlet towards herself. “I’m not the one trying to commit murder by rope ladder here.”
“Naruto,” Sasuke says in a dangerously calm voice, the sort mums and headmistresses use. It says: one chance now. “What are you doing in my bed?”

‘Warming up, duh’ would probably not be an acceptable reply to Sasuke, and definitely isn’t to Naruto herself.

“I wanted to be let in.”

“Yes, well, forcing the lock rather precludes that, don’t you think?”

“Erm,” Naruto offers, rubbing at the back of her neck and feeling her eyes suddenly burn, halting her advances with her legs knee-deep under the coverlet. “It was a really easy lock?”

“You fucking stalker freak,” Sasuke mutters, pushing the coverlet off herself and sitting up. She’s in something sleeveless, almost a dress; a tall, thin man’s tank top. “If you ever accuse me of being a Twilight character again, you freaking Edward Cullen…”

“But, look, actually girls like having him in their bedroom, so really, no reason to complain.” She’s cold and hot in waves now, pulling the coverlet tight around her knees and her knees to her chest.

“Stupid bints like him in their rooms,” Sasuke corrects, then makes a face at Naruto’s legs. “Get those muddy things off or get off the bed.”

“Well if the shoe fits…” Naruto teases, struggling out of her jeans and socks, leaving the tshirt that’s only a bit damp on the shoulders and a rather worn pair of knickers, every hair on her body standing on end. For possibly the first time in her life she feels self-conscious.

For one thing body hair on women, if mentioned at all, is always described a downy or golden, but it’s not, or at least hers isn’t. It’s soft enough she supposes, but she has a thick mop of hair on her head and an amount to match on the rest of her body, and it’s not golden but darker, eyebrow-coloured.

Sasuke doesn’t seem to care, though.
“Watch it,” she says, but in a sleepy throaty tone that isn’t discontent. She’s not pushing away, she’s sitting right there, they’re both half-dressed, no half-naked in Sasuke’s bedroom in Sasuke’s bed, the coverlet lying discarded over their feet. “You can’t do this, you can’t just act like this.”

“But you can act however you please?” Her voice rises over the last words; she’s happy, astonishingly happy, but this has been a fighting issue for some time. “This whole hot and cold thing, and now you were all ignory again…!” She gestures without thinking, fingers brushing cold-hot like fever across Sasuke’s thigh.

“You lunatic, that’s not…” Sasuke starts, visibly reacting to the touch. Naruto can’t say what the reaction is, but there very obviously is one. “You’re a – private indulgence.”

Naruto laughs, a hoarse startled sound, not sure whether she likes the idea although she definitely likes the word, long and thick and sexy. “I’m an indulgence?”

“Shut up,” Sasuke orders briskly, responding to Naruto’s leaning closer by pushing her back by the shoulders, until Naruto’s lying on her back with her head on Sasuke’s pillows, which all of them smell like Sasuke, and sliding a leg over hers, fucking straddling her.

Her mouth is soft, soft, her hands hard on Naruto’s face, cupping her jaw and twisting in her hair.

This is the best, Sasuke kissing her, the best there’s ever been. She’s ready now, she’s really ready, every particle of her trembling with that feeling just before coming, when you think oh please let it be a good one.

Sasuke’s mouth slips down her jaw, Sasuke’s hands sliding down her body; Sasuke’s lying more than leaning now, chest and stomach pressed to Naruto’s, and when Naruto’s hands find her thighs she moans, a brittle smothered sound that makes Naruto realise belatedly that there have been noises for a while, movement against bodies and bedclothes, heavy breathing and moans and moans from herself.

They’re moving in rhythm now, a bit, torsos rubbing together, and if Sasuke would just lower her hips… Her hand strokes up the last inch of Sasuke’s thigh, up over her arse, her other hand finding Sasuke’s neck and pulling her head back up from where it’s been kissing down her chest.

As Naruto kisses her, pushing herself up as best as she can, Sasuke’s hands keep busy, gliding over
her chest in a shock like falling before grabbing the edge of her shirt and starting to pull. She hooks her fingers in the sports bra under it too, pulling them both off over Naruto’s head.

Sasuke’s got a considering look on her face now and a knee between Naruto’s thighs, and it’s really embarrassingly difficult to keep from rubbing herself against it.

Sliding her hand down the neckline of Sasuke’s tank top and reaching for her breasts might not be the most sophisticated distraction technique ever, but damn it, it works. Sasuke’s breasts love her with unprecedented love, or so she thinks until Sasuke touches one of hers with her tongue and the breast love reaches a new dimension. It’s just a quick lick but god, god, and Naruto’s trying to kiss Sasuke’s mouth and neck and chest at once, Sasuke’s hands busy following the lines and swirls of her tattoo.

“You too,” Naruto grounds out at last, tugging at the tank top, and Sasuke pulls back enough to take it off.

Naruto would’ve expected her knickers to be either white cotton with discreet lace and bows or else slutty satin with not so discreet lace, but as it turns out they’re perfectly ordinary, blue, boxerish, not very different from Naruto’s own.

She hooks her fingers under Sasuke’s knee to bring her back, can’t get enough, her hands and mouth are going to be empty forever now without Sasuke to fill them, her nose is going to go to rust without Sasuke’s smell, and her ears without her sounds.

She tumbles them over without quite meaning to, legs tangled, and her hips are moving now, rubbing her against Sasuke’s thigh, and Sasuke’s pulling her knickers down. Naruto’s hands are slick with sweat as she fumbles to return the favour, and it’s too much, she’s so ready it hurts but it’s too much. She’s rubbing herself half against Sasuke’s thigh, half against her cunt, and she had no idea it could be like this – another person in the middle of it, the pleasure thudding through her, so strong and suddenly alien that it’s something to struggle with, and with it this togetherness.

She whines Sasuke’s name into her neck, Sasuke Sasuke Sasuke, forcing a hand between them, right there, Sasuke sliding against it and Naruto too, and she comes like fireworks, like a hand has reached into her body and ripped it from her.

Afterwards she lies breathing Sasuke, sucking every sound and every smell into her lungs, curling naked and sticky around her. Boneless and clumsy with orgasm, Naruto can’t stop touching her, lips brushing against Sasuke’s neck, fingers skimming her arm, her stomach, their legs still all over each other.
She only realises she’s humming when Sasuke tells her to shut it, in a thick rusty voice that prompts Naruto to roll up on an elbow and kiss her, messily, sliding over her lips and cheek and chin and not caring, too happy to care about anything but touching Sasuke all over, again and again, every part of her.

Sasuke doesn’t kiss her back. Shrugs Naruto loose by sitting up, reaching for her discarded tank top and pulling it back on. “This does not mean you can just come to my house uninvited.”
“Okay?” Naruto says, half-sitting as well, resting an arm in Sasuke’s lap, around her waist. “I guess that means no public groping either, huh?”

“There’s never going to be any public groping.”

Naruto feels a frown coming on, her body still singing softly in contentment but her mind cooling by the second, heart falling like a loadstone. “Look, are you like, ashamed of this?”

Of me.

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Then there is a knock.

It’s soft, polite, but it might as well have been an earthquake for how it makes Naruto jump.

“Honey?” Sasuke’s mum says from outside the door, the door which Naruto, stupid impatient overeager Naruto, left unlocked, left fucking ajar. “Are you up?”

“No,” says Sasuke, and doesn’t need to add, Go away.

“Won’t you come have breakfast with us? Itachi’s made your favourite.”

Sasuke closes her eyes for a moment. “Fine, I’ll be there.”

“Really? Honey, I could…”

Naruto smothers a panicked giggle in the curve of Sasuke’s hip, the bone cutting into her cheek, the skin soft and wonderful and still smelling quite strongly of sweat and sex. It’s a good smell, Naruto’s
always liked it, and she likes it even better on Sasuke. “Tell her you’re wanking, that’ll send her off.”

“Shut up,” Sasuke hisses in a scandalised voice, tugging at her hair. “I’ll be down shortly.”

It’s a very final tone, and at last Mikoto’s step fade away, and Naruto explodes into smothered laughter.

“Get up,” Sasuke grumbles, standing and stepping off the bed. She throws Naruto’s shirt at her. “Time to leave.”

“No way,” Naruto protests. “I want your favourite.”

“Too bad.”

“Oh come on,” she says, lightly because that’s the only way she can keep her voice from breaking into sharp dark bits. “You’re not just throwing me out. Especially after I had to get that stupid security guy to let me in. Where are you manners?” She feels out of breath when she stops talking, like she’s just run one of Gai’s marathons, or had sex, except those are good sorts of breathless and this isn’t, this is the tight-chested, thick-throated one.

“Fine,” Sasuke says, retrieving a few items from her wardrobe. “Fine, whatever, just get dressed.”

She stalks into the en-suite bathroom and Naruto starts hunting for her discarded outfit, lingering a moment over Sasuke’s still-wet knickers before getting dressed, leaving the jumper lying.

Sasuke’s unfortunately dressed too by now, glaring at a lovebite on her neck that she has no business complaining about going by the sound she made when Naruto put it there, a sound going on instant playback in her mind and just the memory of it sending a freaking shivery shudder through her.

Even stiff and angular with irritation Sasuke’s body cries out to her, and it’s a tempting prospect to just up and hug it, but, “I need to pee.”

“Jesus Christ,” Sasuke mutters, taking her things and slamming out of the loo.
“Touchy,” Naruto mutters. What she needs is for Sasuke to be still a second, to just look at her, so Naruto can scream some sense into her, and have Sasuke scream back, and then they can fight and when they’re tired they could get on with some belated post-coital snuggling. She has touches she wants to offer, to share, and words, and…

Still, there’s something to be said for the relief of emptying your bladder.

Sasuke’s waiting impatiently by the doorway, correcting something she’s reading with aggressive stabs of her pen.

“So, hey. Is your dad home?”

Sasuke looks up from her paper with eyes that stab. “You wish,” she snorts, in so far as you can snort with a voice trying to be cold and ending up sort of brittle. “If he were we’d be fucking on the table.”

“Kinky.”

The kitchen is arranged like the set of a historical film; silverware, cloth napkins, enough food to feed a large extended family, with crumbs left over for the servants that will have arranged it. Mikoto presides over the laden table, her smile more brittle than the china. “Naruto,” she says with startled, wary pleasure. “Good morning.”

“Hi,” says Naruto, rubbing at a spot of mud on her leg, from when she took a roll through the flowerbed under Sasuke’s window. Maybe she should’ve tried to borrow something clean, but everything Sasuke owns that would fit her seems to be inheritances from Kakashi.

At her voice Itachi turns from his preoccupation with something on the stove, a tall statuesque woman turning with him.

It’s light outside now, a soft precocious grey-yellow light. In it she recognises the woman from the painting exhibit at the university, Itachi’s date, formerly Kakashi’s.

Which is a disgusting male-centric way of thinking of any woman, of course, but Naruto can’t for the
life of her remember the lady’s name.


“Early,” Itachi reiterates softly, putting a tea caddy on the table and pulling back a chair for – oh, yes, right, Anko – for Anko, whose expression is one of sceptical bewilderment at the gesture but who does sit.

“Yeah, well,” Naruto says, sitting down too, in between Mikoto and Sasuke, still full of this Christmas feeling she never has on Christmas, goodwill to all men. “She’s been nagging me about it forever, demanded I hand it over the second I was done – what could I do, right?”

Sure she might be a bad liar, but at the moment technically she’s not lying at all.

“Of course,” says Anko, knowingly. “Yes, thanks, Mrs Uchiha, I’m a coffee girl. Irish, please.”

There’s a moment of absolute silence before Sasuke says, “Naruto, this is Anko Mitarashi.”

“Yes,” Anko interrupts. “We met at the uni exhibit.”

“Pardon?”

Sasuke’s voice and Itachi’s face match perfectly: a stricken arctic wasteland.

“My mum brought me,” Naruto says into silence like a still pool, treacherous depths, and if you stop swimming you’ll sink smooth as a stone. “She’s an art history student there.”

“Right,” says Sasuke, and it’s like being thrown a rope.
Apparently Sasuke’s favourite is burnt jam toast and some weird sort of tea that smells mostly like wet ash.


“Coffee is for when you have to get up,” Sasuke says dismissively. “Tea is for enjoyment.”

Anko adds, “Also it goes better with nicotine.”

Which is probably true, going partly by Sasuke’s silence, partly by the cig-and-coffee heavy French films Mum becomes periodically addicted to. Naruto sticks staunchly to her orange juice, happy with a morning beverage shining like a private liquid dawn in her glass.

This is spectacularly awkward and particularly wonderful. She could, theoretically, put her hand on Sasuke’s leg under the table.

“Sasuke?” Itachi offers her a plate of toast.

She sips from her tea cup, not taking it. “I’m not hungry.”

“Oh, come on,” Naruto says, exasperation and cereal filling her mouth. “You can sweat it off later when I kick your arse.”

Sasuke raises an eyebrow, her forehead enlarging queerly as it disappears up under her fringe. “Are you suggesting I’m fat?”

For a moment Naruto can only stare at her. “No! God!”

*I’m suggesting Itachi was right and you obviously do have a freaking eating disorder.*

Which she seems to have under a modicum of control, but still. All that pro-ana bullshit notwithstanding, there’s a difference between body-autonomy and illness, and Sasuke’s certainly treading a fine fucking line.
Sasuke’s snort is relatively amused, and finally she brings the toast to her mouth, nibbles on it the way she does her cigarettes. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Heh,” Naruto says. “It’s just you know I’ll have you flat on your back in two seconds.”

Sasuke stares at her. Possibly she is not the only one, but her stare is of the consuming kind, level as a chain. “Fine. You’re on.”

The fight is major and explosive. It shouldn’t have been; Sasuke’s in her jammies, they’re both barefoot, god, Sasuke has finger toes. Then again, Naruto has never believed in letting her life be controlled by ‘should’.

So it’s major and it’s explosive. Sasuke hits harder than usual, and is more sluggish to avoid retaliation, shields instead of dodges. While Naruto imagines this is how Sasuke would ideally like to fight, burning through opponents, it’s not her usual style, damn it, it’s the antithesis of her usual style, and will only ever work for her in very, very short fights.

Fuck, Naruto must be at least half again her weight, and she couldn’t do it. This hasn’t stopped her trying, anymore than it does Sasuke, but the results haven’t been pretty and they aren’t now. Naruto ducks, kicks, catches Sasuke’s elbow behind her ear and spits a curse.

You just can’t act like a rhinoceros when you’re built like a bird.

So it’s a very short fight.

She collapses in a heap with Sasuke mostly on top of her, sweating again and her pulse hot and hard and frantic just like before, only now it’s painful.

She tries to kiss her, or something, tries to get it back, the good feeling, but Sasuke slips between her fingers.

“This was a really bad idea.”
“Was not,” Naruto argues. “It was great. Come here.”

God, please, come here.

Sasuke doesn’t want to; Naruto wants her to want to; insists she does because to hell with it, what else has ever worked on stupid stubborn Sasuke, who insists in turn that she in fact does not want to, don’t want you, and you’re bloody bad at it, too, one would think you’ve never been to bed with anybody before in your life!

“I’ve had sex before!” Naruto yells back, then continues in a much quieter tone: “Just not with, you know. Other people.” Red-faced again, painfully so, she adds without thought, too raw: “Also if I suck so hard then you’re pretty damn easy!”

And wow, she’s slut-shaming now? Great going, Naruto, but she’s can’t take it back, would pour everything out if she opened her mouth, ever last bit of herself, and Sasuke’s scraped her raw already. Panting and teary-eyed she stares back at Sasuke.

“Go to hell.”

“Wait!” Naruto calls after her, struggling up and stumbling over the mats. “Wait, damn it! I’m sorry, you stupid bitch! God damn it, wait!”

Predictably Sasuke doesn’t, leaving Naruto to stumble-jog alone and increasingly desperate through the labyrinth corridors, trailing sweaty footprints on the carpet.

She’s made it back to the downstairs hallway when Anko materialises in front of her, looking more natural than Naruto’s seen her yet, as though suddenly the memories of her in a short dress, in the oversized shirt this morning, are evaporating under the force of the utter rightness of Anko in combat pants and a ponytail.

“You going, then?” she says. “Come on, I’ll give you a ride.”

“No, really, it's fine. I mean, thanks, but I should probably…”
“Nonsense,” Anko cuts her off, picking up a jacket and throwing it at Naruto. “There you go. Now get marching.”

The jacket is Sasuke’s and too small for her, but fuck, it’s not her problem if the sleeves end before her wrists do, or if it’s so tight she can barely move her shoulders. Sasuke can either stop being under-sized or she’ll only have herself to blame if Naruto pulls a seam.

Anko’s car is a four-wheeled jeep with serpent paint, flames and scales and claws lovingly sprayed onto the metal. Naruto swallows the instinctive lecture on how environmentally unfriendly and thus selfish and stupid these vehicles are along with some snot, and curls up gratefully in the shotgun seat. It’s large as a stuffed chair and bloody comfortable, though the car stinks of weed.

“Where am I taking you?”

“Just Central station is great. I’ll take a commuter train.”

“Fair enough,” says Anko, and floors it. While Naruto’s initial, helpless reaction is to grab her seatbelt in horror, because dear fucking god, Anko is insane, this is way worse than how she and Kiba handled their drunk-driving, and this is a fucking residential area – well, while that’s her initial reaction, she can’t hold back a gleeful laugh at the sight of a couple Mr Securities throwing themselves off the road.

Anko grins at her, apparently not bothered about keeping her eyes on the road, and frankly why should she be because it’s not like she can drive much worse, offering Naruto a high-five.

Two streets later, when Naruto’s snuggled down in her seat, Anko says suddenly, “You can do better.”

She startles, almost hits her head against the window, but she’s sure about this. “Not really.”

“Yeah, really,” Anko insists, giving her a sharp glance before turning back to the road.

Naruto snorts. “Did you say that about Kakashi too?”
“No. He was a bit of a twisted bitch, too. They all are, when you get right down to it.” They’re almost there now; traffic’s sparse on late Saturday mornings. Anko pulls over, turns a smile on her. “But best of luck, you’re both gonna need it.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says, slipping out of the car. “Thanks.”

Anko waves and takes off, scattering pedestrians before her, and Naruto turns to head back into Central. On the way she stops at a vendor and picks up a hotdog; the weather’s nice enough now, inside the jacket, although she can’t warm her hands in the sleeves like she’s used to, and there’s a large supply of change in its pockets, more than enough for a soda to go with the food, sugared bubbles bursting on her tongue, burning against the cut on her lip. She’d have preferred the leather jacket, which would’ve been comfortably oversized on her – Sasuke drowns in it.

Seated on the train she finds she managed to bring the infernal mobile and plugs in the earphones. With the *Juno* soundtrack playing through her ears she dozes, realising as she can finally get up and off that she’s been sufficiently out of it to drool.

Mum stares at her for a moment when she comes through the doorway, gobsmacked, before breaking into laughter. “Oh, honey…! Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Naruto says shortly. “What?”

Catching sight of herself in the hallway mirror, Mum’s reaction makes a lot more sense. Her face and neck is swollen and red, from the sex and the fight and the upset, she’s wearing a too-small, incredibly prissy jacket and her jeans are muddy.

Over-tired, to the point the world is brittle-bright and distant and her bones feel old, she stomps upstairs and into the shower, where she freezes, stands there stupidly in the cubicle without turning the water on. She stinks of sweat but also, a little, of sex.

Of sex with Sasuke, and she doesn’t want to wash that away. Wants to keep it close forever, more like.

Which is frankly ludicrous, and she wrenches the water on full blast, spluttering when it hits her face.

How did everything go so wrong so fast? It makes no goddamn sense!
First there was the badness of getting dumped on her arse, yeah, but then, then Sasuke freaking slept with her, and now they’re not talking again? What the fuck? Why is it always like this, everything knife’s edge and overwhelming?

Eventually she settles in for a *Gossip Girl* marathon, which should be awesome as there’s her favourite blanket, heavy rain outside, Dad and crisps both within easy reach, but somehow the soap intrigues of the Upper East Side are less effective as escapist entertainment when you’re involved in the irl equivalent.

Dad’s thankfully quiet, even though, as she discovers upon venturing to the bathroom, she has what is pretty obviously a bite-mark on her jaw to compliment the split lip. “You fucking bit me,” she says aloud to the mirror, voice coming tender from her scowl, touching a fingertip to the bruise.

On the way out she dumps her clothes in the laundry basket, keeping Sasuke’s jacket with her after some hesitation. It’s black, woollen, almost knee-length on Sasuke, the sharply cut sort you tie at the waist. It looks a lot fancier now she’s taken it off.

While it’s probably all kinds of unacceptable, going through the pockets, it’s also all kinds of irresistible. Paper napkins fresher than they have any right to be after their tenure as pocket-livers; a stub of a pencil; this month’s subway pass, also curiously undamaged; half a packet of cigarettes; a lighter; the money Naruto didn’t touch, the money that’s not spare change. Ninety in bills, plus the leftover coins.

Of course there’s nothing personal, anal retentive people don’t keep personal stuff in their jacket pockets; what is, what she wants, is the smell, discernable over the one of wet wool. It’s embarrassing how much she wants it, she didn’t even like it at first and now it takes a struggle not to bury her face in it, to sleep with just Kyuubi clutched close.

Stupid fucking Sasuke, if she wasn’t such a touchy bitch Naruto could’ve just clung to her instead and there wouldn’t have been a problem.

In her dreams Sasuke’s sitting in the water, staring at her and maybe speaking, but if she is her words are drowned out by the waves breaking all around her.

Stepping closer in the twilight Naruto sees her mouth is glowing, a small red ember in her face.
And clearly she wasn’t speaking before, because when she does now Naruto hears her perfectly: “I really loved him, you know. I love him.”

“I know,” says Naruto. “It’s all right.”

“No,” says Sasuke. “The dead are far more alive to us than the living.”

Naruto wakes up mortified that her subconscious, clearly talented at producing vivid renditions of Sasuke, couldn’t have gone with less bullshit and more sex.

It wouldn’t even be more unsubtle.

“That’s not fair, though,” she tells Kyuubi. “She never said that.”

Kyuubi stares at her with blank haughtiness befitting a demon.

“It’s not like I forgot,” she says, “I mean she was wearing his ring when we were…doing it.”

The words chase a laugh out her mouth, a blush up her face, but a good blush. Weak-kneed, soft-faced, she slips her hand under the sleep shirt, to the marks on her abdomen traced out by Sasuke’s small hot hands. It was sort of like having a bee crawl over your skin; ticklish, and any moment it could leave or could perforate you, and for a moment you feel like a flower. Naruto’s always been more of a fruit girl; sturdier, tarter, more lasting than a flower.

She would very much like to say that Sasuke’s fingers cut her deeper than the knife. It would be a lie but she would like very much to say it.

It wasn’t deeper but it mattered more, in its way. Stopped her short the same way the knife had. It was she supposes a relative kind of mattering – Sasuke touching her stomach wouldn’t have been more important than Sasuke touching anywhere else, would it, had it not been for the scar.

Sasuke’s hands there, they didn’t take it away like she’d imagined once, before she grew thicker skin to cover the cuts, back when she’d wanted being cared for, caressed, to smooth away the sore edges, but they changed the whole thing, remade the meaning of the mark. It’s still there of course and it
She lives the majority of the day in her hands; spends most of it picking things up. First the last of the late-fallen apples in the garden, gone soft and scurvy, roofs caving in over the worms living in them. Mum is disgusted, but Dad’s promised to make his fabled apple pie if they finish it up for him, which is a powerful incentive indeed.

“Right,” Mum says at last, standing up straight and rubbing dirt off her fingers. “You go on in, I’ll stop by the shops and get some fresher ones for the pie.”

Up in the dusty cold of the attic Naruto kneels among the forgotten boxes, packed in a hurry before they moved and untouched since, their winter things lying forgotten. Most of it can wait, but it’s grown too cold now not to dig some of it up, especially since being friends not only with Kiba but with Akamaru as well means needing a lot of spares to change into after all the playing in increasingly muddy parks.

In the end, though, Sasuke is everywhere inside her.

It’s different now; before it was Naruto pushing and Sasuke letting her or not. This time it was Sasuke climbing into her lap and going wild.

The phone beckoning, she traipses downstairs and calls Gaara before she can call Sasuke.

Gaara’s barely picked up before he calls, “Uchiha! It’s for you.”

“Hello?”

“The hell, you’re at Gaara’s?” slips out before she can stop herself.

“No she’s not.”
Sasuke sighs. “You don’t get to decide that, Naruto.”

“Neither do you!” she blurts. “I mean, I mean…”

She isn’t quite sure what she means – no, she is, but she’s not sure how to explain it, cut it down into words. She tries anyway, saying how people don’t get to decide what to feel, they just do, just feel a certain way, and maybe they’re told to change it, or they just want to change it, but really, if they can, if they can just up and decide not to feel it anymore, or to feel different, then they never really felt it in the first place: then it was never real.

Mum’s always so annoyed by people lingering in grief after breakups, always says they should get over it, like it was simply a matter of deciding to, which is a view Naruto’s never understood: controlled love isn’t, really.

“True,” says Sasuke.

Giddy, clinging with something like helplessness to the kitchen counter, Naruto listens to her breathing. She feels like she could give her the moon: like the incentive of giving it to Sasuke alone would enable her to pluck it down from the sky and hold it glowing and full in her hands, easy as a laugh.

Sasuke says, “Before, at the art exhibit. Which pictures were there?”

Naruto explains about the clouds and the still life, which were nice but nothing special, and the foot; and Sasuke’s back, a child’s back but unmistakably Sasuke’s, leaning against her brother’s leg, and Itachi saying the intimate ones weren’t for show.

Would the magical ninja one count as private? Sasuke smiled in it in a way Naruto’s never seen, private and wild and open, in a way she’s pretty sure nobody’s seen since Kakashi.

“The foot was good,” she says. “I mean, I liked your back cause it was yours, you know? The foot I just liked. Or was that yours too? It had finger toes.”

But it wasn’t a girl’s foot, it was a man’s, and she’s about to say, _No, of course, stupid me, Itachi’s, right?,_ when Sasuke says, “His, actually.”
“Oh,” says Naruto; thoughtless, distracted. “Huh, so your kids would’ve definitely had them too, then.”

That, she realises in the following silence, is what social suicide sounds like.

This is possibly the worst thing she’s ever said to anybody, and she has no idea how to take it back.

“Suddenly,” Sasuke says in this bland tense voice, “I understand why everybody hates you.”

“I didn’t – I’m sorry, I…”

She might as well not have spoken. “I wonder if it will be worse, now you’ve been liked? I think it will be.”

Is this what it means to be liked? This feeling of hypothermia, her mind overheated and choking, her limbs numb, like the important bit of her, the centre, isn’t here anymore, is in Sasuke’s hands now not her own.

She’s never wanted anything else so badly in her life, has never wanted anything else, but she didn’t realise this was it, that it’s like this.

“Please,” she says, because she needs this now, she needs it like breathing, and you have to listen, you have to, all my words are for you. “Those other things, about how you’re way too much the same sort of jerk as your arsehole parents and how you should really do something about that – I mean that. I didn’t mean this.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Sasuke says, but she says it like she did in her bedroom, with a peculiar fondness to the irritation, like it’s a real question.

Like she’s looking for an answer.

“I don’t know,” Naruto says.
It’s easy to see what’s wrong with Sasuke: abusive father, alcoholic mother, difficult brother, lost boyfriend; social stress, mental strain.

It’s not so easy to see why Naruto’s always come off as wrong, what she did or was that made her strange and wrong to other people, that made them make her be wrong.

“Is there?”

“Something wrong with you?” Sasuke snorts. “Aside from how you were clearly dropped on your head as a child?”

“Was not,” Naruto objects. “My mum’s a nurse, for god’s sake.”

Grounded again, solid like a plant with reaching roots and sun on its leaves, Naruto pushes herself up on the counter, sits leaning against the wall, the phone cradled like the children Sasuke doesn’t want, and again listens to their breathing.

She slips again, the entire conversation a frozen lake and Naruto a clumsy skater throwing herself across it with a child’s courage, but doesn’t land badly, this time: “Is it awkward? With Gaara.”

“No,” says Sasuke, the word almost a sigh. “He didn’t have much to do with it.”

“Erm…”

“I mean,” she says impatiently, but the good sort of impatient, the sort that means, understand me. “It wasn’t about him. It could’ve been anybody and it wouldn’t have mattered.”

“I guess that was the problem, huh?”

“On the contrary. It made everything simpler.”
“Does he know?”


She does remember that, and feels for a moment that she’s reaching through the phone, collecting Sasuke in her hands, but: “I’m not nobody.”

“No,” says Sasuke, and it’s like somebody screaming: yes! yes! yes! “I reckon you’re not.”

“Heh,” Naruto says, then, “I’ve been picking apples all day. I’ve been all jittery.”

“Indeed. Just finish the damn English History project so we can hand it in before Neji loses it.”

“I did hand it in. Sort of. The sonnet was the last bit, right? I’ve given you everything else already.”

“Right.”

“So I thought I’d call Gaara, and then there were you. What’re you doing?”

“Hanging up,” Sasuke tells her, in a voice trying to be flat but falling just short, falling over amusement, over something like warmth.

“Wait,” says Naruto, bubbly and sunlit inside when Sasuke does.

“Idiot,” Sasuke mutters at last, and the phone clicks off.

Which is all right, now.

Less all right is her sonnet, which Sasuke returns to her littered with red ink.
“Fix it,” she orders imperiously. “We need to hand it in.”

This is easier said than done, since if Naruto knew how to spell the words or count the syllables, she wouldn’t have done it wrong in the first place. In the end Neji is the one who does it for her, because while Sasuke declares she’s not Naruto’s secretary and Naruto’s possibly clinically impaired English is not her problem, Neji is anxious enough about his grade average to fold.

“I can do it,” Naruto protests, because he’s apprehensive rather than annoyed. “I’ll have it fixed tomorrow.”

“I’ve got it,” Neji snaps, and fine, it wasn’t written for him to read but he can’t know that, and if letting him at it will relieve her of dictionary duty…

“What do you figure we’ll get for it?” she asks, playing with Sasuke’s sleeve. “Cause I could really use a grade burst.”

“If they do group grades you’ll get an A,” Sasuke says, as if it was the most natural assumption in the world and not a freaking miracle. “If they’re individual maybe a B if they’re feeling gregarious.” And she says this too straight-faced, as though she really doesn’t have any inkling that Naruto has always considered Cs a great success.

“Also, er,” Naruto says, procuring Sasuke’s jacket, snuggled and cleaned and rolled up in her backpack. “Here. Anko let me borrow it, I used some of the change, reckon you had enough it didn’t matter.”

Sasuke accepts it in silence, and Naruto half expects her to hand back the jumper Naruto left on her floor but she doesn’t. Naruto prefers to believe she wants to keep it, so doesn’t mention it.

They’ve migrated to a relatively secluded part of the schoolyard, close to where the teachers go to smoke pretending the students won’t see them so they’re not being bad role models, and Sasuke pulls a cigarette from her pocket, twirling it absently before plugging it abruptly into her mouth.

She says, “It was a stupid mistake. Okay? Okay.”

“Stupid, maybe,” Naruto says, moving up closer until she could take the other end of the unlit cigarette in her own mouth. “It wasn’t a mistake.”
“Yes,” Sasuke starts. “It–”

“The hell it was,” Naruto says, sure now because she has to be, because you don’t doubt something you feel thrumming in every particle of your being, and presses closer still, one hand on Sasuke’s waist, the other on her face; the wall against Sasuke’s shoulder-blades, the cigarette falling away, their mouths…not quite colliding, but not exactly merging. Naruto’s tongue slips over her lips, the thick damp curve of flesh lying taut over her teeth.

Sasuke’s body is warm, pushed closer to her by the movement of its breathing. Her hands come up to Naruto’s chest, curling around the fabric of her jacket before pushing her away.

She says something indistinct, still half caught between Naruto’s lips and then stuffing another cigarette in her mouth, lighting it as Naruto makes herself comfortable on the tigh-high heap of leaves, says something that might be “fine” or “fair enough”. Over the thick smell and murky frazzled sound of the leaves, Sasuke continues, “Uchihas don’t make mistakes.”

“I thought you thought your dad was basically the worst idiot ever.”

The clouds are moving overhead, drizzling light like snowflakes. Sasuke’s beautiful, Naruto’s reminded. It’s been easy to forget, how intimidatingly pretty she is, when you’ve grown more concerned with every shift of expression, the twists and bends of her features, so that the objective quality of them blends into the background.

At first she thought Sasuke was beautiful like art is beautiful, an unearthly and sort of irrelevant beauty. Then she awakened to the attraction, and forgot about pretty in favour of sexy; Sasuke didn’t become sexy until she got ugly, but she’s still sexy now, Naruto can’t stop thinking about pulling her down into the leaves with her, and plunging her hands into all the secret depths, going treasure hunting under Sasuke’s clothes.

“There’s a difference between intentionally making what I consider bad decisions, being too stupid to realise they’re fucking bad decisions, and making mistakes,” Sasuke says, flicking ash from her cigarette. “If he didn’t mean to fuck up it’d be mistakes, but the result is exactly what he envisioned. No, mistakes are for commoners.”
Before she can answer, Naruto is bowled over by an assault from behind, Akamaru yapping away as she falls into the leaves. “Stupid damn dog,” she mutters, but he can’t be that dumb, because he clearly knows she’ll still like him, knows to keep a respectful distance to Sasuke.

“There you are,” Kiba says, smirking at her as she finally struggles back on her feet, brushing rotting leaves off her person. “I was wondering where the hell you went off to, come on.”

“I suppose class is about to start.” Sasuke concedes graciously, revealing troubling pyromaniac tendencies by chucking her cigarette in the demolished pile of leaves.

“Er, yeah,” Kiba says, giving her a look of, I’m not talking to you. “Hey, Naruto, there’s this thing…”

But whatever the thing is, Kiba doesn’t mean it for Sasuke, and Sasuke’s walking with them and Naruto won’t, can’t, slip away from her.

Which leaves all three of them trotting off towards class in silence, taking the route by the bike stable to leave Akamaru with his babysitter, Konohamaru.

“What?” Naruto mutters at Sasuke’s sceptical look, her extremely conspicuous failure to return Konohamaru’s greeting.

“I wasn’t aware they allowed animals on school property.”

Naruto knows for a fact that Kiba wouldn’t look so pissed if he knew Sasuke was not actually referring to Akamaru.

“Shut up,” she says. “Also hurry up, I don’t need any more absences.”

“Yeah,” Kiba agrees. “Fucking uptight teachers, they always get like this.”
Holidays do tend to have that effect, authority tightening to strangling in anticipation of going slack, and the semester is drawing to a close, unravelling.

She gets a D- on the Math quiz, which is great because it means passing: means not having to do it over, and it’s difficult to concentrate on abstract numbers when all she wants to use them for is counting Sasuke’s lashes, her pores, every potential freckle. She’s spotted one on the backside of her earlobe.

But it’s not Sasuke who corners her afterward, slipping on the bus and plopping down in the seat next to hers, out of breath, hunched over, exploding, “I need you to go on a date with me.”

Naruto stares, slack-jawed. She can actually feel her jaw hanging, chin so low the tendons ache. “I don’t really like you that way,” she says. “Also I think Akamaru would be jealous.”

“No!” Kiba snaps, jolting upright so fast he almost dislocates Akamaru. “I didn’t mean it like that! I mean – see, you remember Hinata wouldn’t go on a date with me, right? Obviously misguided, but she’s a bright girl, she’ll realise the error of her non-dating ways.”

“I remember,” Naruto concedes, shuffling down in her seat to scratch Akamaru.

“Well, right – so. She won’t go on a date with me. But she will go out with me if it’s not a date!”

“That’s great? What’s your point?”

“My point is I’m getting the date!”

“But you just said…”

“As long as she doesn’t realise it’s a date, everything will be fine,” Kiba declares in much the same tones a priest blesses something: old words, stale words, powerful through repetition now and nothing else. “That’s where you come in.”

“You want me to chaperone your date? Wouldn’t Shino be a better option? He’s way more – chaperonish.”
“Shino’s creepy,” Kiba dismisses, which is a sentiment with which Naruto would be hard pressed to argue. “All girls think Shino’s creepy. Also you’re not so much a chaperon as a distraction. An alibi. So she’ll think of it as a friendly hang-out, relax and realise I’m irresistible, and then she’ll agree to go on a proper date with me. You see?”

“That you’re crazy, sure,” Naruto says, but of course she will have to go with him. It might even be a good thing: she’s been curious about getting to know Hinata, sometimes, and also it would probably be difficult to top turning up under Sasuke’s window to declare her admiration in rhymed verse. Collecting the story of Kiba’s no doubt abysmal dating attempts will give her new material for next time.

When Kiba, reportedly having little faith in her punctuality, comes to pick her up the morning of the date day, he’s cleaned up. He’s sporting a forest green college jumper under his school jacket, the one his mum doesn’t let him out to play with Akamaru in.

Naruto scratches her leg with the toe of her other foot, pushing up the worn flannel of her sleeping trousers. “Should I dress up?”

“No,” Kiba says after a moment’s hesitation, ear turned to Akamaru outside. “It’s better if you don’t. Right? But – clothes.”

“Clothes it is,” Naruto says, pulling on fleece and thrift shop jeans: Akamaru clothes. “Remind me again how you got her to agree to go out with you.”

“It’s,” Kiba starts with an impatient gesture, nervy as an over-bred race dog. “It’s not a date if you’re there.”

“What?” Dad asks on a laugh, wandering by with his coffee cup. “I thought a girl being present was exactly the thing that made it a date.”

Naruto sticks her tongue out, shooing him off before Kiba can get lost in his twisted explanations.

“What I meant,” he says, “is it’s not a date if you’re there too.”
Naruto waves an I know, I know, pulling on her boots and dragging Kiba with her outside, where Akamaru eagerly waits to ambush them. He too has been groomed, his fur slick with dog soap, his neck circled with a broad black collar she’s never seen before.

“Also I promised her puppies,” Kiba continues, disjointed, trying to look smug, she thinks; looking sick. “All girls love puppies. Except I guess Sasuke. And Ino, I suppose, and maybe Temari, and – never mind, the point is every true woman loves puppies.”

Kneeling to give Akamaru a proper cuddling, Naruto arcs an eyebrow, or tries to; fails, lifts them both.

“Yes, see,” says Kiba, “those people saying you were a dyke freak? Were totally wrong. You’re the true soul of woman!”

“Uh huh,” Naruto says. “Come on, let’s go before you lose what little sense you’ve left.”

They’re meeting Hinata in Elm Park, ten minutes from Kiba’s, thirty from Naruto’s, one of the respectable greenery areas, the sort with a few children and dogs but mostly joggers, old people, couples. They’ve settled on a bench when Hinata arrives, all three of them restless; Akamaru wants to chase ducks, Kiba wants to chase Hinata, Naruto – well. Naruto would’ve liked a non-date of her own.

She’s so invested in the thought that Hinata strikes her, for the first time, as very much like, striding towards them, very much like Sasuke. They might have been related; short, pale, with black hair, which is short on Sasuke and looks short on Hinata, pulled back into a bun, sometimes covered sometimes not. Hurrying, alone, Hinata moves differently; less circumscribed, less careful; more like Sasuke.

“Hi!” Kiba has jumped to his feet, stands awkwardly, gawkily upright; a too-young sentinel.

“Hello, Kiba,” Hinata mumbles with that little stutter she has. “Naruto. Akamaru.” She bends to pat him, very delicately, on the head. Her hand is tiny, plump, with coral-coloured nails.

They take to walking the lakeside path, close to its innermost edge to let the joggers past. Akamaru, prevented from taking off running, is being contrary and slow, insisting on smelling every crevice on the road. Taking the leash, letting Kiba walk a little ahead with Hinata, Naruto tells him no, she can’t blame him, she wouldn’t like being pulled along on a chain either, but for god’s sake, it’s duck shit,
how good can it smell?

Conceivably he’s being considerate, mature, leaving Kiba in peace to pursue his princess, but then this isn’t a kids’ movie, which means anthropomorphism is silly. “Mongrel,” Naruto mutters, jumping aside as Akamaru retaliates by rubbing his muddy side against her legs. “Goddamn stupid dog.” But they’re smiling at each other.

Up ahead Kiba is gesturing in jerky stabs, his hands retreating to his pockets between each jab in the air. His talk is fast, interspersed with Hinata’s silences.

Halfway through the second lap Kiba sidles up to her, kneeling to take Akamaru into his lap. Two meters away, three perhaps, Hinata is pulling bread apart in her hands, throwing it into the water, feeding the ducks.

“What the hell do you do on dates?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” Naruto admits, jerking sideway to avoid a faceful of dog tail. “I’ve never been on one.”

“And no wonder,” Kiba mutters, smirking. “But you’ve sure been hanging around Uchiha a lot lately, don’t tell me you don’t wish that was dating – so what…?”

“Well,” says Naruto. “Last time I kicked her in the chest. It was pretty awesome.”

Sasuke after all had split her lip, which is a breach of rules: not the face, no marks where anybody can see.

Of course Naruto had, at that point, left a hickey on her neck.

“God, you’re useless.”

“I’m not the one who can’t even manage my own non-date. But fine. Write her poetry? Have sex?”
Turning her back on Kiba’s grimace she walks up to Hinata, tries the smile Sasuke calls cartoonish. “Got any duck bread left over?”

“Oh, certainly,” Hinata says, smiling back very softly, a whisper of a smile that might invite you to lean closer to catch it. “Please, help yourself.”

For a little while all three of them stand on the edge of the lake, throwing pieces of dry white bread into the water, before eventually Hinata mentions that Kiba had said something, unless she misunderstood? But she thought he had spoken of puppies?

“Yeah,” Kiba says, a grin edging its way onto his face, and before long they’ve caught the bus, bundling Akamaru in hidden under Kiba’s jacket because it’s the cranky driver today, and ventured to the Inuzuka home and kennel.

This late in the year even the smallest of the puppies are toddlers, walking and talking in their way. Hinata kneels in the barn and Naruto too, straw and puppy teeth needling through her trousers, Kiba taking off to feed another litter. She picks up one of them, the reddish one climbing her leg, the one that should’ve been hers, if Dad hadn’t been in one of his stingy bastard phases.

“I should’ve asked earlier,” she explains, to Hinata or the pup, “I guess that’s irony, right? Because back when I was fresh out of hospital he’d have given me a whole bloody zoo if I’d asked for it, but of course I didn’t know about these sweeties before I’d met Kiba, and if I already had a human friend….” It’s so typical, they couldn’t have pets in the old flat, it would’ve been cruel, keeping animals locked up on the fourth floor of a town building, but there’s a garden now, and parks and dirt roads. It could’ve been glorious.

“I’m sorry,” Hinata says softly. “I used to want very much to have a kitten.”

Naruto tilts herself towards the puppy, brushing hair out of her face. The dampness makes it crawl, worming out of the pigtails; it’s longer now, the longest she’s had in years, but not heavy enough yet to resist frizzing. “Ever get it?”

“No,” says Hinata, smiling a little with the corners of her mouth tucked neatly downward, stroking a puppy’s ear. “I did get a sister.”

“Next best thing, right?”
“Perhaps,” Hinata allows, startling when Kiba reappears, the beloved idol of the entire flock of puppies, who turn on him like a yappy furry tide.

“Big Sis is doing the dress rehearsal for the Christmas baking,” he says. “We could...”

“Awesome!” Naruto agrees, putting the puppy that should have been back on the floor. “I keep telling Mum it’s not too early to start on that, but will she listen.”

“That sounds very nice,” Hinata says, and Kiba smiles, again, and moves towards the exit.

After much scrubbing they’re allowed into the kitchen, which has been transformed into the likeness of a fire-lit cave, the flaking walls reaching inward to embrace the glowing heat of the oven. The smell is everywhere of dogs, of baking, of the red Christmas flowers collected on the window sills. Hana, presiding over proceedings with a floury fist, seems a first eminently grown-up, very formidable.

“Hey, kids,” she says then, and smiles Kiba’s smile, catching him full in the face with a fistful of flour.

Naruto’s primary experience of elder siblings is Itachi, which is very different indeed from Hana.

Naruto and Kiba both have done their fair share of helping out parents, but the star is Hinata, rosy with confidence, perfectly at home.

“Wow, Kiba,” Hana says, “you’ve managed to snag yourself a real wife there.”

For all the sarcasm she says it warmly, kindly, and Kiba’s blush isn’t displeased.

“No,” says Hinata, unexpectedly firmly. “No. I am just somebody who likes to bake.”

Well, of course, they hurry to concede. Sorry, it was just a thoughtless joke. But the atmosphere has gone tense, stays worried until Kiba, catching sight of himself in a window turned mirror by darkness, turns the flour still covering more than half his face into elaborate designs, into what he declares to be the new Inuzuka tribe paintings.
While Naruto already has her own facial markings, and as such only gets a snowball of flour lobbed at her, Hinata isn’t allowed to escape unmarked. She smiles a little, fingers jittery on the counter, as Kiba traces white circles and triangles on her cheeks.

So it’s a success, in its way; and the biscuits and buns and cakes are spectacular.

And yet when they’ve gone, Kiba waving in the doorway, Naruto and Hinata back on the bus, Hinata wrings her hands, a delicate moment, fingers getting lost in her sleeves. Naruto’s said something generic and enthusiastic, about fun and stomachs ready to burst.

“This thing, it’s not.” Hinata stops, looking mortified. “Kiba, he is very nice. But.” She struggles for another moment, seeming ready to reach out, but then she doesn’t, composes herself, sitting straighter. “Please, if you could let him understand… I don’t want to lead him on.”

“You don’t like him?” asks Naruto, leaving unsaid that if Kiba can’t take no dating for an answer, he’s the one leading himself on.

“It’s not about liking,” Hinata says. “I don’t know him very well. We’re very different.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says. “But you could get to know him. If you want, I mean. He obviously wants to. Though, I think Sasuke said once that you were, like, basically engaged to Neji. I mean, she says a lot of stupid shit, so I don’t know…”

“Well, yes. But it’s… Neji doesn’t want me.”


“You seem like a good person,” Hinata tells her abruptly, looking tortured and grateful and with flour still on her face, from when Kiba put it there. “During Iruka’s seminars, I noticed that you – you are very kind.”

“Thanks?” Naruto mumbles, rubbing the back of her head and probably getting flour in her hair. “I – try. Thank you. But do you? Want Neji.”
“Neji will be a great person. I admire him very much.”

“But if you don’t like him—”

“But I didn’t say that.”

She’s not, it becomes evident, being coy; when Naruto points out that in this instance, failing to say yes will be translated to mean no, she says, “But that’s not fair.”

Which, well, yeah. They sit in silence for a time as the bus rocks beneath them, but silence doesn’t agree with Naruto, it has always made her want to be loud.

“Hey,” she says, hesitant; or she feels she ought to have been. “Can I ask? About the veil.”

“The veil,” Hinata repeats. “Ah, yes. I’m unsure about it, I suppose.” She touches a self-conscious hand to her hair, very lightly. “I wear it when there are people around who like me to. When I’m with people who like me not to, then I refrain.” She sighs, looks past Naruto out the window, which is dark now and will only give back her own reflection. “My sister never wears it. She says it’s a symbol of sexism and oppression, a war against women, that a woman electing to wear it would be akin to – no, I can’t repeat it.”

“I heard,” Naruto says. “You mean Hanabi, right?”

What she won’t repeat is that her sister says a woman electing to wear a veil is akin to a Jew choosing to wear a swastika.

Hinata nods. “And of course I can see where she’s coming from, I’m not an idiot.” She adds the last clause in the voice of somebody used to assuming that those she is speaking to think exactly that. “My father likes it, he isn’t forcing me but he likes it, and if it pleases him and doesn’t hurt me – well, of course people like Hanabi would say it does hurt me, and of course I can see that – well, that there’s reason to think that. But I don’t feel hurt by it, I’m comfortable with it, and it stands for other things too.”

“So it’s a religious thing?”
“No. If God – I mean, he’s God. He must be above what people choose to wear.”

“Let’s hope so,” Naruto says, leaning back in her seat, curving sideways to face Hinata. “Is Neji, does he like veils?”

Hinata gives her a tired, incredulous look. “Neji’s best friend is Sasuke Uchiha. Can you imagine for a second that she would wear anything of the sort?”

“Yeah, no,” agrees Naruto, who can imagine with aplomb the explosion if somebody tried to make her.

“Quite,” says Hinata. “Of course, men have peculiar double standards about the women they consider their own.” She shifts, collecting her jacket from where it’s been sprawling over her lap. “This is my stop. I had fun.”

“Me too,” says Naruto, putting her feet up on Hinata’s abandoned seat and thinking for a moment more about Sasuke and peculiar double standards; Sasuke with her odd hang-ups about Jewishness, although furtive about it, as though uncomfortable about claiming it when she has white privilege oozing out her ears. Sasuke who would spit on any religion containing prayers thanking the lord for not making me a woman, and who doesn’t believe in multi-cultural relativity at, as she claims, the expense of individual liberty.

Speaking of, Naruto’d better get the notions, about truth and culture and relativity and universality and interpretation, sorted out, as Iruka is expecting a paper on Truth: A Cultural Fallacy? very soon indeed.

Iruka whom she dismissed once, but who didn’t dismiss her in turn, as just another delinquent, even after he caught her hitting Sasuke; who said she did well, said she could get an A.

Iruka whom she is suddenly terrified of disappointing to the point it might be better to just not turn in the paper.

After the bus she walks through the damp November darkness feeling oddly full.
Then, inside, Dad is waiting, wiggling his eyebrows at her. “Good date?”

“Erm,” says Naruto, suddenly embarrassed.

“Oh, come now, you know I like Kiba.”

“Yes,” says Naruto, pulling off her boots and climbing out of the jacket, her own now so the right size, but clingy with rain. She’ll have to get a new one, maybe, some more water-proof winter clothes. “I like Kiba too.”

“Exactly. Now come here and tell me all about it. You know, I don’t advocate settling, but I’m glad if you’ve stepped off the Uchiha ride. You and Kiba have a lot in common, too.”

“Kiba went on a date with Hinata,” she says, sitting down and watching Dad’s face rearrange itself. “Or, he wanted to, but she’d only go if I went too.” She reaches for an orange; too stuffed for dinner, but peckish the way empty carbs make you. “Also I think I sort of have more in common with Sasuke. Where it matters.”

Sasuke doesn’t drunk drive or play in parks with her, but she could. Kiba on the other hand could never be a magical ninja princess with her, or look at half-spoken words and say, I know, or burn through at once to bone-deep level with his touch. There’s – there’s a kingdom inside Sasuke, with room for all of Naruto, a big bright scary adventure, a labyrinth she can feel her way through, indistinctly, where the heart is home.

“Oh,” says Dad. “Well, that’s good too. Heh, maybe you could charge him for chaperoning? It’s kind of the same as babysitting, right? Lots of cash in that.”

She snorts a laugh, explains it’s the sort of sitcom entertainment Kiba could charge viewers for.

There’s no way she could possibly explain Sasuke, or the feeling of going with her towards her home, to which she knows the way now, knows at which time of day to take the tube and when to prefer the bus, in which weather to walk or jog.

The flat in town is habitable again, and close to the school, if traffic doesn’t block you. But they’re barely past the school gates when Sasuke stops her. “You’re not wearing that in my house.”
“What?” She follows Sasuke’s look, haughty and discomfited, a look like a tugging at the Palestine scarf she unearthed from the moving boxes. “Why the hell not?”

Sasuke’s expression is disbelieving. “Grandmother almost died in camp.”

“Camp – you mean?”

“The Natzweiler/Struthof concentration camp.”

“Oh! I’m – I didn’t know, should I…” She’ll have been a child, Sasuke’s grandmother, or young at any rate. “I didn’t realise you – cared – no, I mean, that it was, like, personal.”

“I don’t care.”

“So… is your grandmother around?”

“No,” says Sasuke, clipped. “We don’t see her much. She never quite recovered.”

“Oh,” says Naruto again, softer; curious. “I didn’t think you protected your mum.”

Sasuke’s gaze shifts past her, impossible to follow, before locking with hers. “This is something that merits protection from. The shit she does to herself isn’t. There’s a difference.”

“Yeah,” says Naruto. “I guess there is.”

There is also the bus, on which she cuddles closer than Sasuke usually lets her; Sasuke’s distracted lighting a cigarette, ducking behind Naruto to obscure it.

“I thought you’d cut down,” Naruto says, giggly, breathing against her hairline.
“I also gained two kilo,” Sasuke mutters. “Shut up.”

“Mmh, I can tell,” Naruto mumbles, rubbing up against the jacket, which is too bulky to reveal any potential weight gains. “You crazy scarecrow.”

She disentangles only to unravel the scarf from around her neck, balling it up and dumping it in her backpack. Really Jews of all people should sympathise with the struggles of a people without a homeland, but there’s political discussion and then there’s being an arsehole by upsetting someone just because.

The bus drops them off practically outside Sasuke’s building, on the other side of the street. Blinking against the light, Naruto lifts her arm to wave – Itachi’s there, leading Anko into the house – but Sasuke catches her arm halfway up. “Let’s go to your place.”

They haven’t been, since that first day, but school let out early, before the worst of the traffic hits. “To the commuter trains,” she says. The seats are actually pretty comfortable, once you get used to the baffling placement of the built-in pillow, seemingly designed to fracture your neck rather than rest your head. They share the headphones to Sasuke’s phone, Naruto holding her hand, her arm, her leg, Sasuke dozing.

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“Behold my trusty stead,” Naruto says outside the station, gesturing at her bike, a bedraggled orange spectacle, unlocked and Sasuke supposes unstealable. “Hop on.”

She arcs an eyebrow but obediently climbs onto the back, shifting her weight on the metal bands, holding onto the saddle, Naruto’s buttocks brushing her hands with every other push. Naruto hardly seems to notice, looking back over her shoulder laughing, hair in her face, the bike trembling drunkenly across the road. “I feel like a rickshaw driver!”

Sasuke could tell her that if so there’d be no tip, but fills her mouth instead with the crisp sun-flecked air. It’s a good day.

Around the butt of a cigarette she said, this is stupid. Indeed, Naruto agreed with her, it is enormously stupid. However Sasuke has spent sixteen years being smart, and feels very much like finally being stupid, monumentally, breathlessly, unmendably stupid.

“Do you know Hinata?” Naruto asks then, looking forward now but speaking clearly, wanting to be
heard, to be answered.

“No,” says Sasuke. “I know Neji.” Even Naruto understands that one precludes the other. After a moment she says, “Why?”

Naruto’s back, in only a shirt now, the jacket relegated to Sasuke’s lap, moves with her pedalling, with her shrug. “No reason, really. Look, we’re here.”

Still Naruto’s house is a rather macabre apparition, a villa gone to seed, transforming into a hut. Naruto leads her through the garden, the grass so wet with the morning’s dew it might as well have been a low moat, and into the vaguely remembered hallway; crowded like last time, darker.

“It’s cleaner now,” Naruto says, “cosier. So, do you want anything?”

Naruto’s rosy-faced like last time, tense like last time, although it’s a ripened condition. Boxes have been unpacked and thrown away, their contents exposed now.

Sasuke hangs her jacket beside what must be Naruto’s father’s, a large dirty coat. “Have you got a lighter?”

“No,” Naruto says without having looked, without looking at anything but Sasuke, leaning close, kissing her neck, with too much teeth but Sasuke’s always liked that. Naruto laughs at her, a laugh like purring. “If vampires attacked you’d be the first to go, and you’d go with a moan, god.”

“Shut up, Cullen,” she says, but she doesn’t pull away. Her spine hits the wall and still she doesn’t pull away.

Her body’s woken with a vengeance, after all the quiet months, the long comatose year. Practically every night she dreams, though never about Naruto: lying on top of him, the two of them alone in the luscious light of memory, kissing, rubbing against him, her thighs around his stomach, rubbing and rubbing until everything else is gone, and coming, being rolled over onto her back, still shuddering, burning, helpless as he begins to penetrate her; boneless for a moment before she can begin to move, all the strength of her legs locked in the curling of her toes.

Pressed up between the jackets hanging in Naruto’s hallway she’s awkward as a teenager, as she hasn’t been for some time; not since she became one. Her hands end up in Naruto’s face because
she’s used to reaching higher, she almost collapses them because she’s used to her weight being
hefted easily, without thought.

Itachi would always carry her, when they were small, proud that he could lift her. She kicked at him,
insisted she could walk by herself, but she didn’t meant it; then later when her walking was no longer
contested she teased him, saying he’d have to marry her because he couldn’t manage carrying
anybody heavier over the threshold.

“Whoa,” Naruto says, glowing, catching herself with an elbow against the wall. “Upstairs?”

“Mmh,” Sasuke agrees, tugging Naruto’s head down for a quick kiss that turns longer, a brutal kiss
like stealing, a ninja kiss. “Upstairs.”

The stairs are rickety; the walls in the upstairs hallway have light patches where pictures have been
pulled down. Sasuke walks fast, until she’s back in Naruto’s room, which, unpacked at once, looks
exactly the same. There are the unsteady piles of graphic novels and dirty clothes, the desk used
mainly for storage and the bed populated by bright blue pillows and a disgusting stuffed animal.

More importantly there are Naruto’s hands on her hips, damp heat through her clothes, through her
skin, Naruto’s breath at the back of her neck.

They’re on the bed; she kicks Kyuubi away, leaning down over Naruto, somebody’s breathing loud
in the room. Naruto will mewl for touches of the tattoo, and in a lighter voice for her nipples, which
are sturdier than expected, darker, but what’s funny is her knees, how a particular swirling stroke of
them makes her twitch and gasp as though she were being tickled, collapsing in on herself, bright
red.

“It’s funny,” Naruto says, too, but as it turns out not about her knees but about how it’s oddly so
quite different from masturbation, when really it shouldn’t be that much of a disparity, physically –
yet wanking, as she calls it, is something to do to when overstimulation of whatever form
overwhelms, to wind down.

Sasuke almost says, _No, this would be more to wind one up_ , before recalling abruptly that penis
jokes don’t apply anymore, and for a moment she feels herself paralysed by the abject stupidity of it
all.

During the instant of her being struck dumb Naruto rolls her over, pulls up her shirt, puts her mouth
on the scar between collarbone and breast.

It’s not a part of herself that Sasuke usually touches, at this point. She has very little feeling there but all the same chokes.

Pushes Naruto’s head down, away, and Naruto complies, skittering downwards, sucking on her chest instead, catching ribs between her teeth, licking along the pulse, sucking at last on her breasts.

She has her head thrown back, her feet sneaking up Naruto’s legs and her hands clenching a bit in Naruto’s distressingly coarse hair, too much like… Naruto looks up, flushed, uncertain, her eyelids catching gold in the light, light that is everywhere, on her swollen lips and the pimple beside her nose, slipping down her face like water. “Erm, is that a good sound or a bad sound?”

“Hmm?”

“The sound!” Naruto clarifies with some agitation. “That you’re making? Which, hot. But is it cause it feels good or cause I’m hurting you, here?”

There’ve been sounds, Sasuke is aware, but at one remove, and the sounds are too meshed into each other for her to catch retrospective hold of the one Naruto’s referring to.

“A bit of both, actually.” Her voice sounds hoarse and far away.

“Oh, should I…”

“Go on.”

“Oh. Oh, right.” She smiles so wide the whisker scars arc all over her face, bends to it.

She continues lower down, over Sasuke’s stomach, to the plane between her hipbones. Sasuke pushes herself up on her elbows, is sitting when Naruto kneels half-dressed between her legs and slips a hand very slowly down the waistband of her trousers. Fingers fumble over her underwear, inside it, sliding low to lie against her. Naruto stares at her, breathless and flushed, kisses her, before the hand starts moving.
“You like that, huh?” There’s laughter in her voice, triumph in the curve of her mouth; a touch of terror around the corner of her wide eyes.

“If I didn’t, it’d be a sign of a defective clitoris.”

“Really?” She looks genuinely surprised, interested, shifting until Sasuke realigns them both to lie facing each other. “Cause you’d think, but pretty much everyone denies it, you know, saying how they need like emotion too for it to work.”

“I need a fucking smoke.”

“What? No, wait. Sasuke…” Bewildered, which is oddly less familiar than tender or hungry.

“All right, no,” she snaps. Sighs, half-sitting, Naruto’s hand curving around her, Naruto’s fingers curving inside her. “I wish the idea of certain stimuli equals certain response worked. I’d love a sexual diet of nothing but emotionally unattached one night stands. But I guess I’m a repressed maiden after all.”

Naruto looks at her in silence, mouth half-open as if undecided on which shape it should form but her eyes calm.

“Most people are annoying idiots,” Sasuke says, calm now too, in an ashy controlled tone. “I can’t be attracted to that. And if I’m not – if there’s nothing there except the body… that’s not sex, it’s just a ridiculous and unsatisfying set of acrobatics.”

Naruto presses an open-mouthed smile to her shoulder. “Good thing your cunt loves me, then. Hey, what?” She wiggles her fingers. “It totally does.”

“Vulgar much?”

“It’s called reclaiming,” Naruto argues, quite happily, moving a little, her free hand petting Sasuke’s hair, getting caught in a knot. “But, so, what do you call it?”
She looks fixedly at Naruto’s wrist disappearing into her trousers. “We – I always called it the delta. It’s from – well, I suppose it’s not actually from Jong, but it’s where I picked it up.”

“Jong the German psychologist? Like, the Freud 2.0 guy?”

“Jesus, idiot, no, not Jung. Erica Jong. The feminist writer.”

“Oh, right, yeah, her,” says Naruto, who apparently had a crush on Fanny Hackabout-Jones in the eponymous novel.

“Yeah, whatever.”

“Yeah,” Naruto echoes, with a truly disgusting smile, her nose scrunched up like a lapdog’s. “Let’s take a dive in your delta, then.”

“That’s enough,” Sasuke says, making to sit up properly; and god, god, it is enough, it’s more than enough, the way the movement rubs her against Naruto’s hand. Her entire body curled around the sensation, her face is pressed hot into Naruto’s shoulder, and Naruto shudders around her.

Sasuke grabs her face, licks the whisker scars: they fall on the bed, trousers are tugged off, there are hot hands on hot skin.

Very shortly her own fingers are searching downward. Naruto’s entire body is heaving with her breathing, slippery and solid at once, perpetually in motion. Her skin tastes good.

Tentatively she strokes, a finger getting lost in the channel; she hesitates – where exactly is she supposed to…? Both, probably, both will be best, Naruto’s going to be blown away, she rubs circles with her thumb, pushes a finger inside.

Naruto grabs her hand, which stilled as Naruto shuddered, obviously climaxing, moaning, “ah, no, wait”, rubbing it once, twice more against herself, twitching and gasping before falling back, gazing up at Sasuke with dazed half-closed eyes. She’s stretched luxuriously on her back, legs curved queerly underneath her, her chest still heaving, her face not soft at all and then, looked at from another angle, the softest it has ever been.
She lays her hand on the pulse-point where Naruto’s throat becomes Naruto’s chest, collecting breath in her palm. Naruto’s saying the silly things, I want you always; the polite phrase for, orgasm is awesome. She’s also curling around Sasuke, proprietary, animal, her chin on Sasuke’s thigh, Sasuke’s calves arching over her stomach.

“Before,” Naruto says eventually. “Was it awkward?”

“No. Well, he knew what he was doing.” Sasuke didn’t, of course, then. Yet it was easier – it was understood she had never touched a man, she was so young it was sweet, innocence instead of incompetence. And she loved him and he was attractive but they were still, unavoidably and absurdly, generally understood also to be in beauty and the beast territory: she was giving him something.

She’s not so young now and she took, she chose to take, this woman’s arm and say, let’s go to your place, and certainly it’s understood she’s probed deltas before. One, years ago, but all the same… She taps her foot, heel rubbing against Naruto’s back.

“Hey, ouch,” Naruto mutters.

“Hm?”

“I think you… Stupid pimples.” A colony of them has erupted where the bra normally lies against Naruto’s back, several of them close to the breaking point. “Why do you never have pimples?” Her face is grumpy and relaxed, snuggled close.

On instinct she strokes the inside of Naruto’s left elbow, a square movement, a particular flick of her finger; Naruto looks at her soft and happy, but it’s a blank, generic pleasedness. There’s no particular desire attached to it, no memories. Sasuke grabs for her trousers and the cigarettes in their pocket with clammy fingers. Flayed fingers, it feels like. Light-headed, her body very heavy, she smokes slowly, Naruto pressing a kiss to her hip. “It’s, it was different from last time.”

“Yes,” says Sasuke.

Naruto stretches, sighs, kisses her hip again, rather harder than before, while Sasuke finishes the cigarette. The light has turned yellowish, thick and smoky, when she puts out the cig against her thumb nail.
“That…!” Naruto says, erupting into a sitting position, her hands grabby on Sasuke’s feet. “You sick fuck, are you all right?”

The black circles that once lined the soles are faded now, paler than the remnants of Naruto’s freckles. Naruto’s thumb is inordinately hot against them. Sasuke says it’s fine, it was a long time ago, it was just a few times, she was just trying to feel.

“Things aren’t just fine,” Naruto says. “Not just like that, after.”

“Fine is really boring,” Sasuke says, sliding on top of Naruto, biting at the scars on her cheeks.

Immediately Naruto’s arms are around her, her body open wide as her eyes. “You’re excited because I—” A gasp interrupts the exclamation, Naruto’s lids slamming down as Sasuke moves on her, kissing now below her ear. When she speaks again her eyes are soft and solemn; outrageous. “Because I know something real.”

Sasuke’s about to tell her where to show that condescending pseudo-insight, but Naruto’s caught hold of her hands, stroking them, licking them, but with her eyes always on her face. “I remember, before, it was – when pain was the only connection I could have to other people, it, well it started to seem pretty tempting. Though I was always a lot more into inflicting it.”

Helplessness is sudden and strange on her face, her hands heavy and lax around Sasuke’s. Hands that have been laid on her with almost every emotion, with calluses and small round fingers which are too short for their knuckles.

“Extrovert,” she says, rubbing circles on Naruto’s thighs.

“Mmh. But. Oh, gross, ash.”

Naruto kisses her neck instead, until very soon the taste, which Sasuke no longer feels, ceases to be a problem.
Later she’s lying between Naruto’s legs, resting on her abdomen in the light of the bedside lamp. “These are new.”

Naruto twitches as Sasuke presses her fingers against the bruises surrounding Naruto’s knee. There’s a thrill in her own legs, a muted jolt like that of kicking. She has kicked Naruto very many times, although never as hard as she did that boy; but Naruto wouldn’t have got her suspended, Naruto would have kicked back.

“Ah, yeah, I fell down running. There’re these damp leaves everywhere now.”

Not on the meticulously kept roads Sasuke runs, which are mostly gravelled stretches of coastland, grey with limestone and mist. “You could come,” she says. They haven’t raced each other since that time in P. E., and in any event competing in class is pointless because only Sasuke knows how to bend rather than break rules.

“Yeah? Cool.” Naruto shifts a bit, elbowing a pillow under her head, a hint of her clownish come face in the line of her grin. “Hey, is Neji all right?”

“Why wouldn’t he be?”

Neji has always been all right, never more and never quite less. Rightness is his defining feature.

“No, I meant – is he an all right person?”

“No,” Sasuke says, sitting up, swathing herself in the comforter. “He’s a miserable person. He’s a great person.” Sitting too, Naruto tugs at the fabric, though not very hard. “Why?”


…something, Sasuke infers, that is sort of personal, private, but this is more so, Naruto is so much closer to Sasuke that it would be a greater betrayal to withhold.
“Hinata said, she’d confirmed they’re kind of engaged, I asked if she liked him and she said she admired him and he didn’t want her. It was weird.”

“I fail to see what’s weird about it.”

“Er, hello, you’re supposed to like your boyfriend?”

“He’s not her boyfriend.”

“Yeah, no, well, I guess. That’s really fucked up, though.” But she’s speaking the last words into Sasuke’s skin, nuzzling her neck, arms around her.

Later when Sasuke has long since stopped thinking that it’s perfectly natural Hinata should admire Neji, and that he shouldn’t want her, when Naruto is, lazily but also with dedication, licking her buttock, pinching her toes, there’s steps like knocks on the stairs. “Naruto? Dinner’s ready, honey.”

For a moment Naruto’s face is blank, as though they are submerged, and suddenly a human voice has reached them, and they’ll drown. She parts her mouth from Sasuke’s flesh to call back, “We’ll be right down!”

It is to be assumed that Kushina has seen Sasuke’s jacket, discarded on the hallway floor, where it fell, because her steps recede without further comment. It’s entirely dark outside now, Naruto’s room a shadow-land around the bedside lamp. Through the holes in the carpet, the floor is cold under her feet.

“So, food,” Naruto says brightly, bending over to expose a long lines of bite marks and also to find her shirt. “Food is good.”

“I’ll be off,” Sasuke says, pulling on her jeans.

“No way.” Naruto’s half dressed now, her shirt on and her underwear, struggling with her trousers. “The next train won’t leave for another,” she unearths her watch, “hour and a half, almost.”
“Right,” Sasuke says tonelessly.

“Oh, come on,” and Naruto tugs her towards the door. “Food’s good for you.”

“I thought love was supposed to make you lose your appetite,” she says snidely, which for some reason prompts Naruto to look at her with wide dark eyes and then kiss her in the doorway until her mum calls again.

The bed is a mess; they are a mess. Naruto’s lips are swollen, her skin flushed and erupting in little bruises and nicks, and she smells, Sasuke can’t feel it but they must both smell. Sasuke’s not in the habit of going from bed to dinner without showering, or indeed in this general state of disarray.

She squares her shoulders and walks after Naruto down the stairs. They creak under her feet, all the way into the dirty kitchen with the yellow wallpaper, where Naruto’s parents are sitting at the table, which has been laid for four.

“Hi,” says Naruto’s dad, who has Naruto’s hair and Naruto’s eyes, Naruto’s way of blurting bright nonsense and Naruto’s way of scratching at the back of his neck as he realises it.

“Thank you,” Sasuke interrupts, sitting down beside Naruto. “Dinner would be lovely.”

If she can’t take the train she’ll have to call Itachi, will have to sit beside him in a car for close to an hour in the silence of not speaking of Anko.

“Potatoes?” Kushina offers, the pot passing inexorably from her hands to Sasuke’s.

Sasuke offers her a blank smile, feeling the pack of cigarettes keenly in her pocket. But it’s no use pretending: there have been innumerable dinners before made bearable only by the presence of somebody beside her, by somebody drying on her thighs.

Turning from Naruto’s cheerful chewing beside her, she watches Kushina, who sits like a hostess but moves her hands like a server, whose smile is girly in a sense Naruto’s has never been. She would be easy, if Sasuke would only try.
“So you’ve ventured back out into our backwater wilderness,” Minato remarks.

This could be the occasion for a fine socialist rant: bereft of public transport she’s forced into submission, left to the mercy of others. Only when the state ensures the inalienable rights and comforts of everybody can true freedom be attainable for the individual. Take that, libertarians.

In actual fact of course Sasuke is at liberty to call a taxi, should she feel like it.

“It’s quite an adventure,” she says. “You never know quite how you’re going to get back.”

Naruto looks at her very oddly, mouth half-open in what might be incredulity or the beginning of a laugh. It strikes Sasuke a moment later that outside of school Naruto has never seen her courteous persona, will never have seen the Mr Uchiha’s Daughter one at all.

The conversation straggles into the question of strange haunts, and it’s mentioned that Naruto once slept in a library. Not the place she’d normally go, obviously – which made it a go-to hiding spot, and by the time they came after her, silent now, she’d climbed on top of a bookcase, was lying in the dusty half-dark just below the ceiling of one of the research rooms, the boys’ hushed howling passing by underneath. They didn’t leave until the library started closing, they were still in the corridor outside when the lights started going out, and she’d glimpsed a chain, taken from a bike and sharpened, and she was tired and everything ached, and what could she do, really, if she chanced to slip outside? She’d be caught, and she’d go down fighting but she’d go down, and she’d done that so many times, so many days. Eventually in the quiet she fell asleep.

Naruto’s words are light and far apart; it’s Sasuke filling them in with the remembrance of being scared, huddled in a wardrobe, under a blanket, when things where thrown and broken downstairs. When she was too small to answer the screams.

She decided to change her position in the world, and she has, to a degree.

Naruto keeps insisting she’s going to change the world.

“You look like you had a good workout,” Minato says between forkfuls of meatballs and potato, which are easier to swallow than Sasuke had anticipated.

Naruto goes a bright red, the embarrassed happiness of a Christmas light; Kushina swallows then
turns to Sasuke with the concentrated attention bestowed on one’s children’s approved friends. “So the holidays are coming up. Are you nervous about your grades at all? I’m sweating blood over my paper, I can tell you that.”

“I’m sure it will be fine.” She is not exactly clear on how an art history student would look at pictures; what she’d see in Sasuke’s back, Kakashi’s foot.

“Confident, aren’t you?” Minato beams with approval. “I understand you have some lovely teachers – that Iruka character, for instance. Have you any idea what you’re going to do afterwards? I mean Naruto here is all set on rock stardom.”

“I thought I might become a doctor.”


“Well, Itachi already called dibs on law school, I figure doctor’s what’s left for me.” It’s something real, too, not a manufactured job designed to add flattering titles to prestigious names.

“Law school schmaw school, he should totally be a *Gossip Girl* scholar.”

Sasuke is prepared to concede that undeniably there’s a certain sense in believing a teen soap to be the only worthy recipient of Itachi’s genius if you also, like Naruto, believe in becoming the president of a constitutional monarchy.

xxxxx

The week the first snow falls Sasuke makes good on her saying, that day with Haku, that she’d bring Naruto over to the stables.

“Oh my god, horses! And snow! And almost no more school!” Naruto tips her head back, trying to catch a snow flake on her nose. “Truly we’re living in a golden era.”

“If by golden you mean cheaply gilded,” Sasuke says, dropping her cigarette as the bus draws up. “Fuck, I need to turn eighteen. I need my driver’s licence.”
“Yeah,” Naruto agrees, stomping the snow off her feet. Lacking a licence has never stopped her driving, but it’s only safe out in the countryside, where the police controls are a negligible danger. Though if she got Sasuke in the car with her, maybe they could just bribe off the coppers. “Is it far?”

“Twenty minutes. Ten if we’d just got the taxi.”

“I told you, the bus was just coming! Private use of motor vehicles is not really defensible with the environment in this state.”

“Whatever,” mutters Sasuke, whom Naruto is sure would love dearly to make a crack about Naruto being unable to afford a cab, but with the crazy rightwingers in charge public transport has got so expensive that it’d fall kind of flat.

Sasuke’s got better with buses, too, or perhaps has just grown more natural around Naruto; less teasing, in a better mood. This isn’t a line Naruto’s been on, having little reason to frolic in the rich suburbs at the eastern outskirts of town. The seats are cleaner, the departures more frequent, although funnily the driver is a lot less snotty. Smiles back kindly, in fact, when Naruto waves in passing.

“But, so, hey,” she says, plopping down next to Sasuke, their legs connected; touching, tangling. “You kept it down the other night?”

“It was bad when I was about eleven, twelve,” Sasuke says levelly. “It flared up last year, when everything else happened. I’ve got it under control.”

“Okay,” Naruto says softly. Fussing never made her own hysterical outbursts better, nagging never stopped anybody’s coping mechanisms. Time can, sometimes, if you’re lucky and it blunts the edges, and maybe trust, with the right people, the right ideas, and most importantly yourself.

For a moment as the snow melts on the floor it’s the same colour as Kakashi’s hair, and she does wonder, furtively, what he will have said, to and about his anorexic child bride.

Maybe that he liked some curves on his women, look at Anko – no, no, he knew Sasuke well, better perhaps than anybody, at that point, will have known it would’ve made it impossible for her to gain, will have anticipated the reply of female bodies not existing to please male eyes; for Sasuke to accept him he will have even agreed with it.
So what did he say? Did he say he loved her?

She intertwines their fingers, Sasuke’s hands cold and pliant for a moment then deliberately left in hers; a momentary squeeze, half warning then only presence.

“And did I go down well, with the parents?” Her tone is dry, ironic, at odds with Naruto’s voluble loudness; even now she can’t be silent; over the hum of the bus engine her joints are creaking, her clothes shuffling against the seat; her breathing, the little sounds between her words.

“They love you,” she says. “Of course, they still love pretty much anybody who hangs out with me without cutting me up, so.”

“I think I’ve done plenty of cutting.”

“Yeah, but you did kiss it all better.” She shifts a little, closer, face resting against Sasuke’s. “It was sort of – they said you were very, how’d they put it, very obviously raised by adults.”

“Actually Itachi and I mostly raised each other.”

“I figured,” Naruto says, sitting back a little, rolling her shoulders into the seat. “Like, it was odd, that’s why I remembered it. I guess you’re like people in fiction who’ve been raised around adults.”

“Oh, I was raised around adults, all right.” She plays with a cigarette, doesn’t actually light it. “My first date was with one of Dad’s colleagues.”

“Seriously? Gross. I mean, how old were you? How old was he?”

“Twelve,” Sasuke says with a shrug. “He was – old enough to believe me when I said I was sixteen.”

“Why would you want to do that?” Her fingers, independent of her will, quest up Sasuke’s sleeve to touch above the inside of her elbow.
“To prove I could, obviously. Why do you defend that little graffiti mongrel?” Her look is blank and level, shrivelling the touch.

“Because it’s the right thing to do! Jesus.”

“Sure it is.”

“You…!”

But the bus stops; they’re there. Sasuke stands with what Naruto thinks of as a video game movement, as though her body were a single contracting limb. Outside the sun is very bright on the patchy carpet of snow, already melting it off the green tiled roofs. Everywhere there are horses, trotting and rolling through the pens, white and grey and brown and golden horses.

“They’re beautiful.” It’s a bit of a gasp.

Strong long legs, tufty winter fur, and the dark limpid trust of domesticated animals’ eyes. She’d love to see them running free, at home in the wilderness, but she’d also love to cuddle them and feed them apples from her hands.

“Come on,” Sasuke says, walking along between the horses towards the stable buildings.

Naruto hurries after her, feeling her head move from side to side like a kite-high bird’s, taking in the black ponies previously hidden behind a shed. “I can just picture you as one of those pony girls, all apple-cheeked and with those, you know, those white riding trousers they all have.”

“Temari was the enthusiast,” Sasuke says, pulling open the door for them.

“So you were the sidekick.” It’s a ridiculous thought – Sasuke was born the heroine.

The building they’ve entered is one of the smaller ones, the air thick with dust from straw and fur. A cat stalks towards them, so presumably there are rats, but it’s clean and warm and wonderful.
“So, is this, do you have a horse?”

“We retain a time share,” Sasuke says shortly. “They should have brought her in… Ah, here.”

She stops outside a stall, exchanging greetings with a sleek roan horse, who lets Naruto pet her face, dragging soft wrinkled lips over her fingers in search of sweets.

“Look,” Sasuke says. “Do you have any experience at all with horses?”

“None.”

“Of course you don’t,” Sasuke mutters, in the what have I let you get me into tone of voice, the same one she used before she pulled Naruto down into her bed. It seems impossibly far away now, with Sasuke crisp and dressed and distant, even standing beside her.

Once Sasuke said, because Kakashi had said, because some fancy academic guy had said, the subject’s unquenchable erotic longing to be freed from itself in and through the Other.

Mum showed her a book and said that’s a paraphrase, the original was in German, and unquenchable in this instance should be taken to mean unfulfillable.

Sasuke had better not believe in it. Well, if she does Naruto will have to prove her wrong, which really wouldn’t be the first time.

When Sasuke presses a brush into her hand she presses in turn a quick kiss to her lips. “You know, I might have been hasty about the rockstar thing – I think perhaps cowboy is my true calling. Isn’t it, pretty? Hey, Sasuke, what’s her name?”

“Dog,” Sasuke says, edging them into the stall and starting the brushing, Naruto mimicking the easy sweeps, burying her nose in the thick fur. Horses smell far better than any other animal she’s sniffed. “Also that is completely stupid.”
“Is not! Hey, gay cowboys are in!”

“Except that one, they’re really out, and two, they were shepherds.”

“It’s called self-labelling,” Naruto teases, sticking her tongue out and ducking under Dog’s neck, from where she croons, smothering giggles against the mane and getting horse hair in her nose, “Oh, Sasuke, I wish I could quit you.”

Except she doesn’t, good god, she doesn’t. They take care of the horse uninterrupted safe for a wave from a passing pony girl, Naruto falling hard and fast for Dog. It’s the most awesome horse name ever; evidently Gaara came up with it, years ago when Temari had just become a pony girl and had dragged friends and siblings to the stable with her, and it stuck, of course it stuck, it’s brilliant; and Naruto, reminded of Gaara as a child with animals, and Shikamaru saying be fucking careful – well, she’d have asked, but when it’s not about Itachi Sasuke can be so freakishly ableist; and Naruto’s busy mentally cooing at the image of Sasuke as a little pony girl, and also there can be no question of chewing Sasuke out for being curt or dismissive about Gaara, especially when she’s always been pretty kind about him, considering.

Dog stomps on her toes when she fails at getting the right grip cleaning out the hooves – are they called hooves? Feet? – which is rather hurtful, as they were supposed to have a connection; shit, there was enough of an attraction for Naruto’s gaydar to ping the damn horse as a girl!

“I didn’t realise Kiba’s bestiality was infectious,” Sasuke says, stretching ridiculously to get the saddle on Dog.

“Jealous?”

“Incredibly,” Sasuke says dryly. “Try this on.”

This is a helmet with ITACHI scrawled inside it in compulsively neat children’s writing; the sort of neat that only comes from a hand exerting great effort and concentration in forming its letters. It fits reasonably well, squashing her fringe into her eyes.

Finally Sasuke leads Dog outside, where the snow has stopped falling, and into a paddock. She swings herself up easily, which is interesting and impressive considering the stirrup hit her at chest level, sitting like a painting in the saddle; like a pastel lady from the 19th century, with the perfect carriage and perfect skin, in spite of her shabby trousers and the ruddy grin, Naruto’s hand suddenly
“This is how you hold the reins.” Sasuke’s hands, encased in gloves with little rubber pebbles knit into them, are curled loosely in front of her, the leather running between her fingers. It seems pretty simple, as far as the basics are concerned: tug the left rein, and the horse goes left. Pull on both and she stops. Nudge with your feet and she walks, faster if you nudge again.

“Like driving.”

“I wouldn’t know. Now, if you trot, you’ll need to move with her. Step back a bit.” Naruto, having walked along beside a docile Dog, retreats a metre or so, watching Sasuke urge the horse into – what was it? a trot? In any case the horse version of jogging – rising and falling in the saddle.

Naruto had originally hoped for wild chases through the woodlands, but as Sasuke returns and slips off Dog, nodding at Naruto to climb on, she decides this might be quite good enough, for a start. Although Sasuke adjusts them to hang further down it’s a struggle to heave herself from stirrup to saddle, and the perch is – not comfortable. Potentially exhilarating, like straddling a living bike.

Dog moves like a dream, sudden jerks and in between them the smoothness of clouds. “Have you got it?” Sasuke asks, still holding onto the reins.

“Sure!” Dog starts walking when Naruto presses her heels against her stomach, a long-legged gait that makes her sway in the saddle, hands scrabbling over Dog’s neck; for purchase, in praise.

“Mind the reins,” Sasuke says. “Sit up straight.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Naruto says impatiently, tilting her head back to catch the sun on her face and almost falling as Dog takes a step sideways. “Jesus!” She’d thought Sasuke would laugh, but the glare directed her way is dark. “I’m fine, okay? You can let go.”

“All right.” She steps back sharply, her eyes like a loadstone, their gaze the chain connecting to it.

Dog moves under her, obedient to tugs and shifts that aren’t intended as instructions, are just Naruto getting comfortable. Finally she gathers the reins, moves with the horse, gets the I can do this thrill.
And she can, so certainly now, so naturally, that she’s calm about it, the elation soft. Time to go wild: she presses her legs into Dog’s sides, leaning forward, urging for speed. It comes with a complaining sound from Dog and a sudden lurch, throwing her forward to catch herself around Dog’s neck, left foot squirming desperately to stay in the stirrup. Slowly she can push herself back to sit in the saddle, but those up-and-down moves Sasuke did looked way easier from the ground.

Somewhere in the background Sasuke is snorting, the snorting that would be a laugh if she didn’t strangle it, but Naruto doesn’t care right now. The rhythm is settling into her legs, letting her raise and fall almost at the right moments, no longer bouncing around like a sack of potatoes.

It’s not long before her uncoordinated movements leads to a bit of a kick at Dog’s stomach, and the horse shifts into a higher gear. It’s amazing: wind in her face, the smoothness of the faster gait. She leans forward, half standing, hands locked around the saddle to keep her steady, laughing. This is what she should have always been doing, way better than chasing speed thrills on bikes or cars.

She, if not Dog, has a necklace of sweat when eventually Sasuke halts them. Naruto’s legs are sea-soft, sea-shaky when she’s slipped down Dog’s side, remaining for a moment pressed to the warm heaving flesh. There’s something so reassuring about animal closeness, the silence, their not caring if you get snot in their fur.

Back inside the stable it’s warmer; she hadn’t noticed it growing colder outside until the door closes behind them. Dog is kinder about having her hooves cleaned now, and while she’s not allowed to give her sugar, she can have Dog smearing apples all over her hands, eating messily and happily.

“She’s wonderful! It’s wonderful – I’m in love!” She rubs the mess off on her trousers. “So is there anything more we should do? Like, take her back outside or something?”

Sasuke scans the building, dustier than usual, her hands smelling of horses and leather. “We might as well throw down some hay.”

They climb up the ladder to the loft, the steps soft and grainy under her hands, more stable than Sasuke’s rope ladder. The light is dusky and slanted, thickly yellow, the floor wooden, mostly obscured by straw; it’s the idea of a hayloft, reproduced in photos and imaginations.

“These ones,” Sasuke says, passing by the pile of loose hay and lifting a square package of it, moving to dump it down the hole. “Ten of them should suffice.” She says suffice without the expected tone shift, the one indicating you’re imitating somebody else’s language; the phrases of adults, of word-mongers.
Naruto grabs a pair of hay squares, and they move in tandem for a little, the woollen sweater sticking to her neck, pieces of hay sneaking below her neckline. It’s not the jumper she wore on Mission: Romeo; she likes that Sasuke hasn’t returned that one.

“Right,” says Sasuke, kicking the last bundle over the edge. “What are you doing?”

“Hunting for hay,” Naruto says, groping down her own shirt. “Don’t give me that face, it’s bloody itchy!”

Of course the only viable response to Sasuke’s continued supercilious amusement is to stuff a handful of the stuff down her neckline; of course after that it isn’t long until they’re kissing in the hay.

It’s sort of like a rustic porno, rolling around with another girl in an actual haystack, kissing and laughing and cursing how the straws pinch and itch everywhere Sasuke exposes her skin.

“Jesus, fuck, ouch.”

The hay treacherous as well as aggressive, she slips and slides down, but lands well, ensconced between Sasuke’s legs. Sasuke’s shirt has been pushed up, her stomach a quivering stretch of skin. It shouldn’t be this smooth, teenagers are supposed to come with pimples and rough patches, but not Sasuke, never Sasuke. She sighs as Naruto nuzzles under her navel, her breathing hitching a little as the fastening of her trousers is undone.

Maybe it’d be best to just… She’s far too excited to want to stop, every cell buzzing the way Sasuke always makes them, but cutting to the chase seems a really good idea. She kisses lower, pulling the trousers out of the way, and the knickers.

It’s a damn awkward position, trying to reach despite the trousers getting in the way, but after some wriggling and adjustments she can rest her face between Sasuke’s thighs. It’s – odd, really. One lick, tentative, and in one sense this is the closest, most direct sex she’s ever had with Sasuke, but in another it’s the most distant, Sasuke’s face and eyes and mouth and sounds up above. She eases back a little, catches sight of Sasuke’s parted lips and slit eyes, and licks with new vigour. The taste started out all right, becomes gradually good as Sasuke clenches a hand around her shoulder, trying and mostly failing to move her hips.
“Fuck, suck!”

There’s an instant of surprise, she’s pleased but it’s startled pleasure, there’s an unformed joke about something you should be telling me here?, and then she gets the hang of it, and then Sasuke’s reclining sweaty and gorgeous with hay in her hair. Naruto’s resting quite cosily in the hay as she gets up, dusting herself off and trying to dry herself with the fabric of her over-long undershirt.

When it’s Naruto spread out in the hay, the whole world gone scent-based and spinning, looping through wet wool and hay and dust and horse and skin and sex, she understands the importance of sucking. Forget talking, forget eating: this is what mouths were made for.

“Hush,” Sasuke mutters. “Shut up or they’ll hear.”

Brought out of her daze, Naruto becomes aware of sounds from downstairs, where evidently somebody is walking, talking to the horses. “Oh, hell, why now? I – Oh. Oh!”

“I said, shut up.”

That’s not going to be possible; Sasuke reaches sideways, into the boxes, and stuffs a carrot into Naruto’s mouth. She’d protest, only Sasuke goes back to making nirvana happen between her legs. And god, now she’s never going to be able to eat Mum’s carrot cakes with a straight face again, and god, it is so worth it.

She languishes in the hay afterwards, slick with satisfaction to the point the itching doesn’t even bother her. Sasuke mutters something about her disgustingly happy face, like the human version of a smiley.

“Duh! I just go a – is it still called a blowjob?”

She gathers from the continued mutter that what does it matter, anyway it certainly tastes better than sperm.

Downstairs is quiet now, and Naruto rests her chin on Sasuke’s shoulder. “This was totally ninja level stealth sex!” She slides her arms around Sasuke’s stomach. “What are you doing over the holidays?”
They could build a snow castle, a cave, and nuzzle and fuck in it all through the vacation.


The cheer has left her entirely as she stomps back downstairs, leaving Naruto to hurry after her.

xxxxx

“Ooh, how about this one?”

Gaara looks through the shop window Naruto’s pressed her nose against, his forehead scrunching up a little, indicating a lift of a non-existent eyebrow. “I don’t think he’s that far gone yet.”

“You sure? He sure seems like a bling guy to me.”

Finishing her phone call, Temari joins their staring at the studded faux-diamond necklace on display. “It is tempting.”

Laughing, Naruto swirls around. Looking for Christmas presents, for friends, with friends, is thrilling and scary. Though even she can see that a bling necklace would be a nasty surprise for Kankurou.

“It does look suspiciously like the one Lee gave Sakura last year,” Temari adds thoughtfully.

“Oh god, why didn’t I get to see that?”

“Count your blessings,” Gaara interrupts in his usual chilly monotone. “It wasn’t pretty.”

“That’s the point.”
“No, really,” Temari says. “It got ugly after she wouldn’t accept it and he started crying about hara-kiri.”

“Oh shit.”

“Pretty much.”

Their outing is anything but shitty, though, full of Christmas lights and tinsel, hot chocolate in the mall café as a compromise between Temari’s preference and Naruto’s budget. The doll shop afterwards is less cutesy than she’d anticipated, more about parts and craftsmanship than ruffles and lace.

“I thought they were kidding when they said he played with dolls.”

“Really?” Gaara asks. “Because usually people just think it means sex dolls.”

“Okay, eww.” She reaches for a porcelain hand, fascinated, and curses as it almost slips from her grip. “Are we done here?”

“A moment,” Temari says, finishing up her purchases. “We’ll need to stop by Taylor’s.”

“No,” Gaara says.

“Yes indeed,” Temari insists, leading them out of the shop. “There are going to be a great many social events, and seeing as one of them happens on the 19th you’ll need to be dolled up too. God knows I wouldn’t have brought you otherwise.”

“What’s the 19th?” Naruto asks.

There’s a moment of Gaara being silent before Temari says, “His birthday. We don’t celebrate it separately since it’s so close to Christmas.”
“We don’t celebrate it because it’s the day I killed my mother.”

We’ve been over this, they both say: Really Gaara please drop it and realise we’ve been over this, it wasn’t your fault.

“So it was manslaughter not murder,” he says. “She still died.”

“More heads will roll if you don’t step up,” Temari says tersely, and Gaara follows her obediently into Taylor’s, which turns out to be an incredibly fancy dress shop Naruto would have never been allowed inside if she came alone.

“They say he loved her,” Gaara tells her in between the awkward trips to the changing rooms and people staring, in the smell of perfume and exclusive fabrics. This is probably the sort of place Sasuke shops in, sometimes, the sort of place she got that green dress she wore the evening she was drunk, when Naruto first kissed her. “You know what they say, marry for money, get a mistress for the lovely fucks. I guess that’s why he hates me.”

“Jesus,” she says, her voice coming out low and cracked, too light. “Does everyone except me have a fucked up loser dad?”

“Not quite,” says a voice above her, and she looks up to find Shikamaru sagging against the wall beside them. “Damn, this place is troublesome… Even Chouji deserted me.”

“I’ll find him,” Gaara says, and responds to, but wait, with: “I’ll bring him back.”

Shikamaru sinks down in the chair beside her, a hard-backed but soft-seated one likely provided for impatient boyfriends and husbands. Maybe for wives too, since the shop carries men’s clothes as well. “I take it you’re not getting anything?”

“Nah. Some go with Prada, I prefer Salvation Army.”

“Yeah, me too. Heh, scholarship kids of all lands, unite.” A few minutes later he says, “I knew Kakashi a bit,” and Naruto startles. “You’ve been good for Gaara, for Sasuke – and you’re curious, right? You want to know.” He rolls his shoulders, settling down, his head tilted back, lids half descended. “He was a good guy. Smart, sharp, very good at working around damage. Good at smoothing his edges and angles, though he had a lot of those. He was so in love with her he could
barely function. Had this sort of laconic sarcasm thing going for him. Liked to pretend he was lazy, but he wasn’t really.”

Then Temari is back, and Gaara and Chouji, and they’re off.

While Naruto finds far more wild ideas than actually plausible Christmas presents on the shopping trip, she eventually procures a smiley-faced voodoo doll for Gaara and a package of allegedly genuine Scooby Snacks for Kiba. Typically, Sasuke brings complications, like she has from the very beginning, with that promise of brilliance and the threat of failure.

“Mum…” Naruto procrastinates, idling in the study. “What would somebody like to read who likes Virginia Woolf and Monica Fagerholm? And probably, like, George Orwell and Sylvia Plath. And who’s memorised Adorno quotes but is all scoffy about him?”

Because maybe a book? Sasuke likes books, books are personal, books aren’t too expensive. Unfortunately Naruto isn’t very good with books.

“What would somebody like to read who’s named Sasuke, you mean?” Mum asks with a dry smile, sipping from her tea cup.

“Well, fine, yeah.”

“Honestly, honey, you know her better than me, but… Are you thinking about Christmas presents? Well then, are you two,” she makes a convoluted hand gesture, “dating?”

“I don’t know,” Naruto mutters, feeling suddenly – wrong, temperature wise. Too hot around the chest, too cold on her hands. “It’s – I’m not sure. I mean it’s not like dating dating, not like you see on TV or anything, but that’s silly anyway. And we’re not – but I guess we’re more – I don’t know.”

“Well, do you know what people usually give her?”

“Nothing I could afford. I mean, I think mostly jewellery and stuff.”

She remembers Sasuke’s hands in a box full of it once, dainty and disdainful but there all the same,
remembers tuning out the lecture about stop going through my stuff Naruto.

“But you don’t even wear any,” Naruto said.

Just the ring that never leaves her thumb, and once a necklace, with the cocktail dress. Although perhaps the people who’ve got the money to give her these things only ever see her dressed up? But there were even earrings, though Sasuke’s ears aren’t pierced.

“They’re not for me to wear,” Sasuke said, looking very much like somebody trying to look world-weary but too young for it, so that the annoyance and tiredness and melancholy disgust don’t quite match up the right way. “They’re to show they can afford to give them.” She shut the box. “This is just some of it. I suppose if I ever get disowned it’ll be a nice trust fund.”

Mum rests her chin in her hands, saying, “No, well, that might be a little… I’m sure anything would be fine. It’s the thought that counts, right? Don’t scoff at me, if you’ve got that much money you don’t need to bother about wanting material things, do you? Surely her friends don’t give her jewellery.”

Naruto shrugs. She’s been given to understand that Sasuke and Neji exchange volumes of pretentious poetry, preferably untranslated first editions, but she wouldn’t be surprised to hear Itachi or Kakashi or even Gaara present her with precious trinkets.

Which Naruto neither can nor wants to.
Chapter 16

She arranges the dressing gown around her, the flannel worn to threads in places and smelling always of childhood, sips her coffee.

“She’s gone,” Itachi says, returning from the hallway. “I appreciate the gesture, but you don’t have to keep drinking it.”

“I often drink coffee.” This is true.

“Not when you’ve slept late.” This, also, is true.

“Maybe Anko’s coffee is just better than yours.” This is not.

“Don’t be snippy with me, Sasuke.”

“I’ve not said a snippy word about your deranged relationship with that woman.”

“I don’t know why you have to be like this.” His hands, very like their mother’s, of the type referred to in layman’s terms as pianist’s hands, with long square sensitive fingers, are tight on the back of his chair. He isn’t yet, but Itachi can be vicious. Of course so can Sasuke. “Anko is a great person.”

“Mnh,” she says, “but you’re not dating her because she’s a great person, you’re dating her because she’s Kakashi’s ex.”

“It might have started out that way, but she’s – great. Not everything has to be about the past.”

“If you want to leave the past behind, you probably shouldn’t be dating your ex best friend’s ex girlfriend. But whatever, I don’t know why you even brought it up, I haven’t said anything.” She keeps her voice level, even, surprised it isn’t a struggle.

Lately there’s any number of absurd dating schemes – Kiba’s aspirations on getting Hinata and Neji’s attempts to lose her. Though it should be noted that Naruto’s version of events is significantly
funnier than Neji’s.

“I don’t care,” she tells Itachi, standing to leave.

“No, you’ve been busy lately yourself, haven’t you.” His face is careful, concerned, the sweet older brother; his voice is underhanded, nasty. This is the sort of strain Neji talks about when he talks about his engagement, the bleak tensions and silences that Hinata can’t handle and Naruto doesn’t see. Ploughs straight through.

“Yes,” she says, “quite,” and leaves before either mood can triumph. Itachi is obviously stressed out of his mind about the Anko situation, there’s no point staying.

There’s a curious liberty in stepping outside, her hair still damp from the shower, Kakashi’s old jacket really too thin for the weather. Rather it should be – only ten years ago December meant snow lying lasting on the ground, temperatures always below zero, but these days it’s rain and bleak winds.

She adjusts her scarf, a new green one, bought to cover Naruto’s failure to stop sucking too hard at her neck, and signals a taxi.

This is the road, the road on which it happened, sixteen months ago. She passes it almost every day, remembers Itachi being plagued by guilt at not developing an aversion to it. She didn’t either; it had never occurred to her, in those dim hellish hours and days and weeks when everything was a near-sighted blur.

The car rumbling around her, she plugs in her earphones and starts on her voicemail. Sasuke listens to Naruto’s rambling messages the way most people listen to music: background noise, soothing, entertaining, something to tide you over when you’re stuck. Naruto talks about food and horses and school and ninja, her voice rising and falling. It’s not a remarkable voice in any sense, except for its extreme ordinariness as compared to the words it says, to its owner in general.

It’s detailing a rather dirty idea as Sasuke pays the driver and steps into the hospital parking lot, the greenness of her scarf suddenly intense in the institution-bleak whiteness; fog, worn paint, life paling.

Her feet remember the way, which is disconcerting in the extreme: her mind doesn’t. She is certain that she has never in her life seen these walls, these doors, never smelt this smell or heard these noises, but her legs walk steady and confident through it all, and her hand lies familiar and easy on
It’s dim in the room, as though he really is sleeping. He never looked like this asleep, though. Now he just looks dead.

The breath and heartbeat of the machines are muted, her steps loud over them as she shuts the door behind her and goes to sit on the bed. She can’t touch him – he’s dead, she can’t touch him being dead.

“Kakashi,” she says, and is ignored.

One of her therapists once suggested she pull the plug: a literal way to lay your ghosts to rest. Kill your darlings.

Sasuke had her fired, because even for a therapist it was nothing short of impressive to miss the point by that much.

Her mother believes Sasuke is being a good person, presumably because that’s what she needs to believe. Really Mum should’ve been a Christian – blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Sasuke has never understood the sublime quality of being a doormat, or of pretending forgiveness is anything but the cowards’ and the weaklings’ substitute for vengeance, placebo justice.

She sighs, sitting on the bed in which he isn’t sleeping.

It’s not that she thinks it would be wrong to turn off the life support: on the contrary, it’s the humane option. It’s simply that corpses don’t merit consideration – Kakashi’s gone, this is for Sasuke.

“They say it gets better,” she says, fiddling with a cigarette she doesn’t light. “Or they kept saying it. But it doesn’t. You get better at functioning around it but it doesn’t get better.”

His chest lifts and falls, breaths slipping between his lips. He’s warm, even through the blanket and her clothes and the empty space between them she can feel his warmth.
You belong to somebody when you’ve given them the weight of your head on their chest, your fingers clenched in their hair, the way you breathe smells in the morning, the way your toes move when you dream.

She knows technically you’re supposed to return your gifts when you break up, but it seems impossible to get yourself back: or if you did, it wouldn’t be the same you.

That’s fine, though. Sasuke has never liked herself in retrospect, never been able to look back at her past selves and say, That’s me, or, That’s who I want to be.

So she gave an earlier version of herself to Kakashi. Itachi received a still earlier one; and Temari; and once Mum took one for herself, when Sasuke was too young to stop her.

She stares at him blankly, with slick hatred. The ice princess – whom Naruto insists must be a fire elemental, duh, it’s the genius sort of obvious: Trust me, says Naruto. I’m telling you stories – and her scarecrow prince. Except it’s the princess who’s supposed to be lost in the bois dormant, and while Sasuke theoretically approves of trope subversion and unsugared endings–

“You were supposed to save me,” she says.

There’s irony there, she’s far enough away now to see that, irony in an arrogant misanthropist expecting to be saved, and by love of all things, love which is not, in fact, stronger than death, but irony is only a veneer. Irony is the comme il faut expression of sublimated darkness, the thing you make out of grief when you can’t handle grief. She read once, somewhere, that Life is one long demand for restitution.

If you don’t wake up now, then that’s it, she says. Then you’re not the prince anymore, or the princess, you’re the wicked witch, and Naruto can be the prince, she woke me up, then.

His heart beats weakly and steadily under her palm, unmoved and unmovable. Sometimes in the twilight she curled under his blanket, under his arm, her head on his chest; going to sleep together so that then they’d wake up together.

She hasn’t done that for a long time, hasn’t got anything left to be eaten away by the emptiness of being awake lonely again in the transparent ghost-light of hospital dawn.
She’s given a fair bit to Naruto, now; the weight of her head on her chest, her fingers clenched in her hair. She’s seen the way Naruto’s toes move when she sleeps.

*Are you jealous, ever? I mean of Kakashi.*

A forlorn, inimical question not meant to be spoken.

*No. It’d be like being jealous of a ghost. I’m here now.*

“Answer me,” she says, but although his voice is only a few clicks away on the phone it doesn’t have any new words. She used to fall asleep with him mumbling in her ears, caught on tape, and for a long time ghost listening was Itachi’s particular vice. They raided the public archives – Christmas films, birthday recordings, a taped school presentation, a news clip – then shared sisterly their private stashes, voice mails, half conversations stuck in limbo. In real time Itachi was always discreet, judicious, but afterwards, huddled together two sad addicts needing just one more fix, he listened avidly even to lovers’ gossip, the sounds of sex caught on a forgotten phone recording.

They have one of those shared silences, filled with words that don’t need speaking, from a book they once read, Mum and she and Itachi, Kakashi and she, she and Naruto: *I love you. You know that. I won’t bother you again.*

It’s a silence they’ve had before; a lying silence, but then supposedly truth is relative. Or at least you have to pretend it is, to live with people.

She snorts, her thigh cramping where it lies curled under her, his ribs cold and hard, or if it’s her that’s cold and hard. She gets off the bed.

She kisses him and he doesn’t wake up.

She turns, then, and walks away, and there’s a nurse in the doorway smiling at her, and Sasuke nods and makes to walk on past, but the woman pats her arm. “So nice to see you here! He doesn’t get many visitors, does he? I’ve not seen anybody stop by in forever, except Kushina’s girl, and honestly I think she’d got a little lost – she’s mostly with the kids, you see. Kind girl, though, very nice with the children.”

“I’m sure,” Sasuke says automatically; truthfully, even.
She supposes that if you’re stood up on your play date because your friend is dead enough times, it starts to seem all right to be stood up because nobody wants to play with you.

The hospital closes behind her, silent. She feels blank, empty, like a fire place that has been raked through leaving only ash and embers, and until they flare again there’s nothing, just this coldness.

She feels like running.

She was right before; it’s been pretty good, lately, running with Naruto, who is bright and bubbly and competitive, somehow always with breath to spare to elucidate on her own imaginary triumphs or curse Sasuke, or saying how this flatland is way easier than the forest, where it’s all up and down, though she sort of misses the downs, and also this is way better than trying to run with Dad, who’s, like, Daddy Longlegs, except not in the icky sense.

Sasuke recognises that; Kakashi was a hopeless running partner for her and Itachi both, his legs and lungs twice the size of theirs. Itachi was better, and Temari, until Temari decided not to, as she put it, support this demented anorexia: Itachi believes in doing good even within an inherently evil system, Temari prefers stepping outside of the system altogether.

On the way out to the running area she stops by the flat on Lilypad Drive to pick up a change of clothes, and finds herself caught in the doorway thinking this is one room Naruto won’t – her mind skims over the verbs, slipping through enter invade penetrate.

“…won’t be away for all the holidays, right? Cause I thought we could…”

She’s thought they could have snowball wars, and make snow angels, and put Sasuke to the ultimate ice princess test by going skating, and bake and stuff their faces with Christmas goodies, and watch stupid cartoons, and the Christmas decorations in town, with everybody, passing by the kids sitting on Santa’s lap, and Kiba would say and Sasuke would think crude things about little children and strangers, and Lee would be dressed up as Santa’s Little Helper again, and Sakura would be blushing about it but pleased because her grades will have been golden and she can finally stop worrying about them; and Gaara’s hair and tattoo, in the blinking rainbow lights, will look less like blood and more like holiday cheer, and Hinata could bring her awesome biscuits, and Haku could bring Zabuza, and Konohamaru would try the Santa routine and attempt to steal extra presents, and get spanked for his trouble.
But Sasuke is stiff beside her, doing an impressive impersonation of a twiggy, snowy little tree.

As finicky about her surroundings as about her food, Sasuke keeps well away from the walls and the cars, stepping lightly around the oil specks on the floor. It’s funny, she was fine with rolling around naked in a dusty haystack, but a badly cleaned garage has frozen her in an attitude of defensive disgust.

“I was sure I left it here,” Naruto mutters, leaning inside a car to look for her history textbook.

“Whatever, hurry up,” Sasuke complains, and then Naruto can literally hear her freeze as the radio coughs to life behind them, commercial break over and music spilling once more into the garage, a very soft male voice promising that wherever you go, whatever you do, I will be right here waiting for you; whatever it takes, or how my heart breaks, I will be right here waiting for you.

She scrambles out of the car sans textbook to beat the crooning song out of the machine, hitting the buttons with enough force it actually switches channel. But there must have been a conspiracy, because the new sound is bloody Savage Garden, and Sasuke strides towards the door to the soundtrack of one of those Mum songs Naruto is loath to admit she quite likes too.

*If you need to fall apart, I can mend a broken heart; if you need to crash then crash and burn, you’re not alone,* and the door crashes shut after Sasuke.

*If you jump I’ll break your fall, lift you up and fly away with you into the night,* the last word fading as Naruto too runs outside. Standing by the bus stop, Sasuke’s scuffing her oil-greasy shoe against the snow, messing with her lighter.

“What’s with you?” Naruto demands, half pissed, half jocular. Anxiety isn’t on. “You’re all pissy lately.”

“I’m so sorry noxious car fumes don’t improve my mood.”

“Sod off, not like you aren’t fond enough of toxins,” Naruto snaps, gesturing to the ubiquitous cigarettes peeking up from Sasuke’s pocket.
“It’s none of your business,” Sasuke tells her, in the old cold way, from before they’d got friendly, the way that burns like frost.

But Naruto’s got thick skin, and now, also, layers of protective clothing. “The fuck it isn’t,” she says, hands waving choppily. “We’ve been over this, you can’t fucking well just – this, us! and then just say it’s none of my business.”

Sasuke tilts her head a little, bird-like, snow on her cheek. “And why the hell not? What’s it to you?”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Naruto snaps. “I’m your friend. Fuck it, I’m basically your girlfriend.”

“Is that what you think?” Sasuke’s voice is still the indescribably sexy sort of deep and rusty, but Naruto doesn’t want to hear it anymore, doesn’t want to hear another word.

Protective clothing, yes, but it was Sasuke who gave it to her. There’s Kiba too, and Gaara, and Iruka and Sakura and Hinata, but most of it was always made of Sasuke.

“What the hell else would I think?”

It wasn’t meant to be a question.

“Jesus fuck, Naruto, why would I want – why would anybody want you for their girlfriend?”

The sick thing is that they’re friends, they’ve been friends, Sasuke’s not even bothering to deny that, and so Naruto’s got pretty good at gauging Sasuke’s honesty. It’s not that Sasuke lies much, it’s more that you have to misunderstand the right way, see what’s being said in spite of the words – but she’s not lying now.

“Then what the hell have you been playing at, you psycho bitch?” she demands. Her voice is strident, her fingers locked into fists, but she’s weak, the world gone porous and pallid.

There’s that clammy, shocky sensation of something being too much, of not feeling the pain yet, just the muted discomfort of keeping the pain at bay.
Sasuke’s saying well, I’ve told you haven’t I, you’re an adequate distraction, too dumb to get it, I didn’t think you were quite that oblivious, but fine, it’s not like it was ever about your intellect. She’s saying you know I tried with Gaara but I suppose he wasn’t the thing, it didn’t work out so well, but you – stellar, really, I guess pointless sex really is the thing to take your mind off things. It was never real, how could you be real.

“I’m not a fucking distraction,” Naruto croaks, with something like hatred for the first time since Sasuke looked at her in the school bathroom.

“Then leave. I never fucking asked for you.”

“Fuck you.”

It’s only five steps before she realises Sasuke’s not going to call after her. It’s only ten steps until she’s rounded the corner and can break into a run, skidding headlong over the slippery streets before finally catching herself on a lamppost and stopping, resting her forehead against the metal, the air slippery and hot with her panting.

And it’s – Sasuke’s been – kind, lately, kind of, not like this, never like this after the first time Naruto slipped in, pushed and crawled and climbed her way inside. After Sasuke finally started opening the door she’d been kicking at.

And sex is just sex, but nothing is just with Sasuke, who’s laid cuddled with Naruto, and whispered Naruto’s name, and who brought her to the stables, and licked her scars, and told her secrets nobody else has ever heard. She’s been Naruto’s, in between all the nasty and cold and sometimes truly horrific things she’s said and done, which were easy to laugh off or ignore since they weren’t, mostly, about Naruto, or about anybody in particular, and they were muted, they were sometimes sort of affectionate, she never said, you’re nobody, you’re nothing, and she acted like – like Naruto was somebody, and now that shared world is a wasteland.

Maybe like a volcano eruption, and then cold ash afterwards, like they talked about in Geography. Mount Sasuke exploded.

When she laughs it comes out a thick wet sound, the defiant version of bawling. Fuck you, Sasuke Uchiha. The hell with you.
She kicks her foot numb against the lamppost, almost falls, and clinging once more to it she starts crying for real, thick sobs, snot all over her face, just dragged out worse when she tries to wipe it off with a mitten.

Eventually Dad’s the one to find first the history book and then Naruto, hurrying up to curl himself protectively around her, checking for bruises even as he presses her against his chest.

“Honey? Honey, I’m here, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she says, because, Everything would be too horribly melodramatic and too horribly true, and she can only tell him they had a bit of a tiff, she and Sasuke, just a tiff.

A long deep breath leaves him. “She didn’t like you back?”

“I guess you could say that.”

“Well,” he says, tugging her along, back towards the garage and the car and home. “I’m sorry. I guess she’s probably just straight.”

“Oh, she’s fucking bent all right,” Naruto mutters, with enough venom for Dad to leave the subject well alone, driving in a silence broken only by Naruto’s hiccupping breaths and the low soft crooning of the radio voices.

It’s horrible; she’s too angry to just cry, too sad to work off the anger with any sort of exercise. She lies on the bed, hugging Kyuubi and cursing and crying and kicking at the wall until her feet are sore and skinless.

Tomorrow, and all the days after tomorrow, there will be school. There will be Sasuke who’s not Naruto’s Sasuke anymore. How can that be?

She sits in compact silence during Iruka’s class, feeling like she has a fever cold, hot on the inside, cold and shaky on the outside, her head thick and sore and swollen with crying. Even Kiba, never a sensitive soul, has taken to avoiding her sullen outbursts for most of the day, leaving her with a smuggled-in Akamaru as some kind of fucked up consolation prize.
Sasuke speaks in modulated, controlled tones to Iruka when she’s called on, then in a lower voice, a little, to Ino. She doesn’t give Naruto the courtesy of a hateful stare, or avoidance, just looks through her as though she’s never been, blanks her utterly. Her hands, hands Naruto has reached for a million times and got hold of, are steady and emaciated, the veins colourful under almost transparent skin, Kakashi’s ring rather loose on her thumb.

They’re not thinner than before, her hands, but now that she’s gained a bit, visible around abdomen and thighs, they look skeletal.

It’s a mercy Iruka spends most of the lesson going over the last test they’re going to have, and taking people outside for grade talks, because quite possibly Sasuke could have spoken to her in polite impersonal tones as though nothing was wrong, as though nothing had ever been right with them, and Naruto would’ve bashed her head in if she did.

“Naruto,” Iruka calls at last, and she’s glad, glad to flee the classroom for his office down at the far end of the corridor.

It’s a very Iruka office, with what looks like children’s paintings on the walls and comfortable visitors’ chairs. She sinks down in one of them, her things bundled in her lap so she won’t have to go back inside the classroom for them; they’re supposed to sit off the time revising for the test, but she’s at the end of the list and she can’t read a word of Plato under the extremely present absence of Sasuke’s gaze.

“Right,” Iruka says, fiddling with his papers the way he always does, like a happy homemaker plodding around in her kitchen. “So things have been going well, I think. Don’t you? Yes, yes, the essays could stand to be a bit more formal, we’re not writing debate articles – but I liked the last one a lot. I could tell that arguing things through with Sasuke really helped, you were much clearer on the ideologies you didn’t agree with. And you’ve always been active on the lessons, so – unless anything drastic happens on the test, you’ll be finishing the course with a B. Sound all right?”

“Great,” says Naruto, and a few days ago it would’ve felt great.

“Is everything all right? You seem a little… glum.”

“It’s fine,” Naruto says. “We had a fight, is all.”

“Oh,” says Iruka. “Well, you seem to fight a lot. I’m sure you’ll sort it out.”
“Mmh,” says Naruto, and half jogs out of his room. Because the vast majority of their fights have been Naruto being very temporarily upset, or Sasuke being pissy – it’s never really been mutual before, when it’s mattered, they’ve never both been hurt and angry at the same time, except for that first day, when Naruto hit her, and there’s no bloody reason for Sasuke to be now either.

“Stupid bitch,” Naruto mutters into her locker, but she’s not entirely sure it’s Sasuke she’s referring to.

It’s been all well and good for Naruto to know they’re meant to be, but she’s come to realise she needs Sasuke to know it, too.

“You okay?” Kiba asks, appearing behind her with Shino.

She slams the locker door shut. “Not really.”

“Fight with the wicked bitch of the west, huh?”

“Something like that. Don’t call her that.”

And she probably shouldn’t, she knows she shouldn’t, but she stalks off and home because right now she can’t fucking stand Kiba and his thoughtless jokes and puppy-dog eyes.

She can’t even fucking stand herself.

He does call later, but it’s mostly about Hinata, his voice gone pubertal again, breathy and tinny, and when she has to stop herself saying, *Just quit pretending, Kiba, she knows and she doesn’t want you, give it up* she knows it’s time to hang up.

It’s hopeless, trying to make the best of things, because being Naruto has become so bound up with being with Sasuke; half her words are formed for Sasuke to hear.

“Stupid *fuck*!” she erupts, breaking the sandbag, but it doesn’t help, the bag doesn’t respond.
It’s probably not surprising, doesn’t feel surprising, that she gets into a real fight next time she spots Konohamaru being hassled. Time and again she’s told him to grow a brain, why does he need to take this shortcut anyway, but she’s grateful now that he never listened, grateful he kept on not giving up and grateful for the simple fury when Jerk One swats him over the head.

She’s tougher today, rougher, doesn’t play at being diplomatic anymore. She knows how to start a fight, and it’s not long until she’s kicking a guy in the shins.

There are four of them but they’re pampered, used to intimidating victims not real struggles, and Naruto’s never learnt how to playfight. She laughs roughly, spitting blood, when they scream at her, because seriously, *rabid bitch*? Sasuke says more hurtful things than that when she’s trying to hold herself back.

They end with a whispering audience and three furious teachers dragging them apart, half the school staring as they’re pulled along the Golgotha road towards Tsunade’s office. Not Sasuke, though. She’ll have minions with camera phones, she’ll have the means to be watching from an empty classroom if she wants, but she’s not there and it’s pathetic to hope she’s checking it second-hand. Kiba’s wide-eyed, Hinata very pale. Then Naruto doesn’t look at the other people anymore.

The nurse comes by to fix the worst while they’re waiting outside, under heavy teacher surveillance, for Tsunade to finish calling the parents. Iruka shoots her a troubled look from where he’s kneeling beside Konohamaru, his face all bewilderment and worry and disappointment as the nurse gives her a cotton swab for the split lip and feels her ribs for potential breaks.

Jerk Three is spewing in the paper bin, quite probably concussed, so the lucky bastard is going to get out of the lecture as soon as the ambulance arrives. Jerk Two has a dislocated shoulder, and tomorrow he will have a black eye.

Jerk One was a coward and mostly stood around, so he got away with some bruises; Jerk Four, the gigantic arsehole, was tougher than the rest and still looks mostly untouched, with only a line of faint knuckle-prints on his jaw, but she knows she got him good in the stomach.

“I don’t think they’re broken,” the nurse says, “but there may well be a fracture, and I’d like you to have an X-ray to be sure.”

“Whatever,” Naruto mutters, taking a timeout from the glaring contest to face the nurse. “You’re just gonna bandage them anyway.”
“Be that is it may,” the nurse starts, but is interrupted by the arrival of Jerk Three’s ambulance, and shortly afterwards the first parents. It’s lateish; probably both Mum and Dad will come. Probably everybody will come, since Tsunade isn’t exactly the type to call often.

Jerk One’s mum looks kind, greying hair and a worried smile. Jerk Four’s seems nasty; Jerk Two’s parents are busy.

“Naruto!” Mum says from the doorway, and then she’s kneeling beside her chair, waving the teacher away. “What’s going on? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” says Naruto. “Really. I’ve had worse from Sasuke.”

This is not, strictly speaking, true, because Sasuke knows better than to kick this hard at ribs if you’re not fighting seriously, and Sasuke would never stoop to picking up stones to try and hit her with. There have been limps and bruises and sometimes even scratches, once a dislocated arm, when she’s fought with Sasuke, but there hasn’t been real menace. Sasuke helped her set the arm, afterwards, her hands warm for once, and soft on her before they became steady.

Finally Dad opens the door, holding it for an elderly gentleman, and Naruto couldn’t say what exactly it is that marks the stranger as a gentleman, like in old films, but he indubitably is, nodding at Tsunade as he sits down beside Konohamaru.

This is so much like all the other hopeless times, but Tsunade likes her, she thinks, a bit, and when she doesn’t already have a history as a psychotic trouble-maker, it seems rather preposterous to punish a lone girl for defending herself against a beating from four larger men. It could turn out all right.

“Right,” says Tsunade. “I think we’re all here.”

She gives Naruto a sceptical look, no more friendly than the dryly hostile ones bestowed on the boys, and on Konohamaru as well, but it does go well. There are witnesses, mostly unprejudiced ones, and while Konohamaru trespassing and vandalising is a known problem, so is his harassment.

Jerks One, Two and Four protest, obviously, but it turns out Konohamaru’s grandfather is some kind of big-shot, and very pleased with the notion of somebody standing up for his boy. For a thrilling, vertiginous second, they are the ones in the wrong.
But she did look for a fight, and she gave as good as she got, and she’d never deny that. In the end everybody is eager to leave the ‘regrettable scuffle’ behind, and hopefully all the involved parties have learnt their lesson – especially now with all the finals, suspension would be inappropriate.

Konohamaru’s grandfather and Tsunade retire to her office to talk, the rest of them file out. You’re dead, Jerk Two mouths. Konohamaru tugs at her hand, You’re the best!

“Let’s go,” says Dad.

Yeah, yeah let’s.

There’s a victory ache in her ribs, but it was the wrong fight all along; her rib cage feels hollow, curling stubborn and strong but around empty air.

Too bad she doesn’t have the necessary haircut to really pull off the emo mindset.

“Do you need to go to the hospital?” Mum asks when they’ve got in the car.

“I don’t think so. You can just check at home,” Naruto says, looking out the window because it’s better than looking at the backs of their heads.

Dad needs to get back to work, but Mum drives her home and stays home with her. “Dad said you’d had a fight with Saskia,” she says, careful and meticulous as if she was stitching up somebody’s arm.

“Sasuke,” Naruto says automatically. “Her name’s Sasuke.”

“Oh? I was sure – I suppose I must’ve got it mixed up, I did that thing on Rembrandt’s wife and…” She settles against the kitchen counter, gesturing for Naruto to sit at the table. Naruto stands, feet scuffing against the floor, hands locked around the back of a chair. “Look, honey, I know this is what adults always tell you, but there’s a reason we say it all the time: these things happen. They pass.”
Naruto thinks that if all Mum’s adolescence emotions have passed, then she can’t have ever felt any real emotion at all. You don’t just fucking stop feeling what you feel.

“You came here and everything changed,” Mum continues gently, “and I’m so happy for that, so happy for you, and I can see she’s all bound up in that, but…”

“Mum,” says Naruto, like a gunshot. Like a slap. “Shut up.”

She doesn’t need to say, You don’t understand. It’s screamed so loudly in the silence it breaks sweat over her skin.

“I suppose I don’t understand, at that,” Mum mumbles. “Let me see those ribs.”

Naruto sits on the chair now, obedient, penitent, pulling jumper and undershirt over her face, unable still to speak. Mum’s hands are efficient and familiar, like the oddly cinnamon smell of her hair bent close in inspection.

“It should be fine,” she says. “Just be careful about them. We’ll put on some bandage just to be sure.”

“Mmh,” says Naruto, lips closed greedily tight. The sound tastes like dry blood. The nurse got the worst of it, cleaned up her lip and knuckles, but the hot numb sensation left by a good blow throbs steadily. At least she doesn’t feel like crying anymore.

When Dad comes home after finishing with whatever important client he had to meet, the concern, for of course he will have been concerned at first, desperately so, has abated, until he’s angry and proud in roughly equal measure.

“The kid seems all right,” he says, and Naruto nods. Konohamaru will be okay, she’s sure of that even though she’s not sure why he has that same ferocious need to put himself to the test, without having been bullied to the point it seems the only way to be alive, be real to people. “And you?” says Dad.

“I’m fine. No, look, we both know ignoring bullies doesn’t work in reality.”
“No,” he says with a sigh. “I guess it doesn’t.”

In fact, despite what all the Learning Moments on television and in stories tell you, being the bigger person just tends to mean being the victim.

Then the phone rings, and her parents are embroiled once more in the Tsunade Question. Naruto’s not seen much of her, apart from the dinner: lunch, once, at Tsunade’s house, and Mum and Dad went over for dinner last week, came back with Dad in one of his black moods. There’s been talk of spending Christmas with her, but it seems uncertain.

So they’ve met a little, in and out of school, and for the most part Naruto likes her grandmother fine. But she loves Dad, and while she’s sure Dad and Tsunade sort of love each other too, she’s seen what having an alcoholic mother has done to Sasuke, and to Itachi too.

“It’s fine by me,” she’s said, has had to add: “Either way.”

They seem to think she’s uncomfortable, that it’d be unfair to pressure her to take sides in a family conflict.

She would tell them that’s ridiculous, that of course there could never be any question of her being on any side but theirs, that she belongs with them, except naturally she would prefer it if they all got along, and she doesn’t want to push Dad, who would feel pushed if she said anything.

Sasuke thinks some things should be unforgivable; Naruto thinks the goal, the thing to work for, is for there not to be any unforgivable things.

But she shouldn’t think about Sasuke. Already Sasuke is so much in her, is part of the fibre which her mind is made from – there’s no use thinking about her as well.

This is probably why she lets Konohamaru tug her aside outside the school gates next day, tired and sullen with the need for a distraction.

“So I know we’ve had our differences,” the kid says, surreptitiously adjusting his scarf. “But the main thing is you’ve been cool through it all. And yesterday you were freaking awesome, even Grandpa thought so! So I figure, the least I can do is take you out someplace nice to show my gratitude.” He puts a hand up smartly, to silence any protest: “We don’t need to call it a date, or
anything. Although you do have boobs, so – anyway, we don’t have to call it a date. We could hang out. You could teach me to fight like you!”

“Fine. Sure.”

“What, really?”

She shrugs, hoisting the backup up on her shoulder. “Why the hell not? Let’s go.”

“Now? Okay. I mean, now is fine. Now is great!”

And if Konohamaru’s idea of someplace nice is rather far from Sasuke’s, constantly implied through the presence of unworn jewellery and napkin rings on the breakfast table, then so much the better.

They stop by the gourmet version of a hamburger bar, which is surprisingly comfortable; soft light against the darkness outside, faux-rustic benches.

“Look, can you afford this?” Naruto asks, checking the menu. “Because I can’t.”

For a second, after the pride has stopped swelling his face out of all proportion, he looks genuinely confused. It’s easy to forget that even this little brat is a capitalist prince, that this is probably pocket money for him, never mind all the winter expenses of hot chocolates and new mittens and Christmas presents. Unlike Sasuke, unlike most people at school, he doesn’t act rich.

It emerges as they eat that although Konohamaru has been in training for years, he’s not an accomplished fighter, and not sure why.

“It’s not so much about training,” Naruto says, sipping her soda. “Training’s good, but anybody can train, and untrained people can still win.”

“Yeah, but,” and he deflates then becomes enthused in the space of a mouthful. “But it can’t be about brute strength and stuff, you’re way smaller than them and they were four.”
“It’s about fear,” says Naruto. “And pain. Or pain tolerance, really, whether you’re afraid of pain. If you’re cool with hurting people, and with getting hurt, then you’re going to win, because you’re not holding back anymore. But if you’re scared of pain, or you’re not used to really trying to hurt somebody, then it doesn’t matter if you’ve got training, you’ll still lose. Or you won’t win, at least.”

“Huh,” says Konohamaru, solemn for a moment before he says: “You sound like some kind of Mr Miyagi. Like a ninja master or something.”

Naruto chokes on her drink and agrees to go to the cinema to get out of the light, out of the talk. Since Konohamaru footed the bill at the eatery, Naruto buys them an obscene amount of popcorn while he gets their tickets. Unfortunately this means she’s not present for the film choice, and ends up half-dozing through what looks like the butchered remake of *Alien vs. Predator*, or some truly quality crap like that. Konohamaru only tries to feel her up twice, so aside from the overdone soundtrack it’s pretty peaceful.

Afterwards Konohamaru is in high spirits, sufficiently so that Naruto gets suspicious about the coke he’s been drinking. Which he laughs at, and as they walk towards Central he regales her with a wild tale of how he once faked a cold to get a prescription for cough syrup that he tried drinking for the morphine content but ended up barfing.

“You really don’t have to come with me to the train,” she says at last. “Are you sure you can even get back home afterwards?”

“It’s cool,” he insists. “I’ll just get a taxi, it’s ten minutes.”

Silence for a bit, and then, “D’you – I mean, do you like, like any of the guys in school?”

He’s grabbed for her hand and now she keeps hold of his for a moment, all sweat and knuckles.

“No,” she says. “No, I don’t like any of the guys in school. I like – you know Sasuke Uchiha? That’s who I like.”

He goggles, half stops. “Seriously? Because I’d sure as hell do her, but I wouldn’t get in a relationship with her in a million years.”

“That’s why you’ll never win a fight,” says Naruto. “You’re a coward.”
Chapter 17

Calling Konohamau a coward is nasty because it’s true, but he has no fucking business talking about doing Sasuke.

Although Sasuke has been a bitch lately, the almost deranged sort of cold bitch that people like Konohamaru are wise to realise they shouldn’t try to have relationships with.

She rules the school with an iron ice princess fist, destroying people left and right. If she thinks about it Naruto supposes Sanin has taken on a hothouse atmosphere, less probably due to the finals and more due to the numb slow-boiling terror of its tyrant.

Ino preens as a lady-in-waiting after her apparent pardon, Tenten has come out to play, and the entire student body is simmering with suppressed violence. Across the hall Sakura throws her wide-eyed glances that say, rescue me.

One day she approaches Sasuke, it’s in the upstairs corridor, relatively late because orange sunlight is slanting through the windows, and her hand’s curving in the air, it’s known from that summer evening on the beach of the breast it was made to hold.

“Hey…”

Sasuke turns on her heel and walks away.

Naruto staggers home and there’s just Kyuubi with her for the rage and the lonely terror and the wild love-struck grief, Kyuubi she bites and hugs and twists and blows her nose on.

Was this how Sasuke fought with Kakashi? Who folded then?

Never Sasuke, Sasuke bloody Uchiha doesn’t bend, but Sasuke would never date anybody who folds, either.

Maybe they didn’t fight, but no, impossible: Sasuke could never have a real relationship that wasn’t confrontational, couldn’t live with that too being always glossed over and suppressed.
Finally, after she’s thrown even Kyuubi away, she lumbers to Gaara’s house, presses her forehead against the house façade and her finger against the intercom button.

They let her in at once. Maybe they have a list, like a party, maybe she’s on it.

On the other side of the door stands Temari, her nose swollen red and her voice croaky when she demands, after a cough, “What the fuck?”

There’s not a lot Naruto can say to that, and when she shrugs, apologetically, angrily, and makes for Gaara’s room, Temari doesn’t stop her.

Gaara too has been suffering from a murderous cold, but he’s sitting up fully dressed on his bed, head tilted back against the wall, earphones on. She crawls over the extra blankets until she’s sitting beside him, kicks his knees until he shuts off his music. He’s silent until she’s told him the whole sad story, and then he’s silent some more before he says, “Oh.”

“Yeah.” She shifts, trying to get comfortable with her spine pressed against the wall. “Haven’t you ever wanted to just throttle her?”

There’s another silence, stunned.

“Well, no,” says Gaara, carefully. “Not really.” He fiddles with the earphones. “I think – if she told you all that because you’re nobody, and then gradually you started to matter. I think that’d be scary.” He pauses, looks out the window for a long second. “I couldn’t give anybody as much, as much of myself as you say she’s given you.” He makes a strange face. “Well, she’s always been a bit of a bloody mess, aside from being”, and here the air quotes come out to play, “perfect.”

Nonsensically, Naruto remembers the rope ladder kept in Sasuke’s bedroom in the beach house, the one from before it was Sasuke and Temari, from back when it was Sasuke and Temari and Kankurou. Wouldn’t Gaara have been there, too? He’s the same age as the twins.

“No,” he says, dryly. “I wasn’t a real Sabaku child.” He snorts. “I guess I was supposed to bond with Itachi – he’s the good psycho brother, you know, he only hurt himself.”
“He hurt a lot of people that way,” says Naruto, who’s seen how Sasuke and Mikoto look at him—cautiously, unstoppably, burnt children with fire. She rubs at her face, tired but not, bubbling over. “Didn’t it hurt you when she used you to hurt herself?”

It strikes her almost immediately that Gaara probably didn’t think she knew. Probably thought she’d just heard the wild rape rumours.

“Not at lot, no,” he says eventually. “But then I don’t care about her.” He drags his knees up, laboriously. “Or, I feel I care about her, but I can see that most people care more for—well, for anybody really, than I care for even the ones who really matter to me. So I’ve got to conserve the little caring I’ve got for those who really merit it, I guess.”

She wouldn’t believe Sasuke if she said these things. Rather, she’d know she could fix them. She could always make Sasuke feel, care, something.

Gaara’s shut down.

“You sound like you’re seriously on the wrong meds.”

“Maybe, but at least they take the edge off.” He’s talking faster now, perhaps still a little feverish. “I don’t want to risk messing around with them—I hurt people when they don’t blunt down the rages. So this is better, now.”

“Do you often fight with people?”

“No, not anymore. Not even then, not fight with them really. Er, look, I’ve—I sort of collect, well, voices. I’ve got yours too, but…” He trails off, sneaking forward off the bed to grab his laptop.

“Like Ursula!” Naruto says when he starts up Media Player. “From The Little Mermaid? Oh, come on, I know Kankurou loves Disney movies, no way you haven’t seen it!”

Gaara whacks her over the back of the head, then says, “I was trying to understand. Her, maybe, after. And us, me and Temari and Kankurou. People. I don’t remember who she was talking to, maybe Sasuke, maybe Kankurou. Maybe herself.”
In the sound clip a younger Temari says the reason rich kid siblings don’t fight as much isn’t that we’re better raised – we’re not. It’s that we can’t afford infighting when we’re already living under siege from the parents. And when you know each other sibling well, you already know who’s going to win any given fight. So the one who’d lose anyway just folds at once, instead.

Kakashi and Sasuke always knew the score, like Kankurou and Temari. And they too had somebody to mind, their own unstable brother… y’know when she was, what was it, eleven, and she made it clear he was no longer to see anybody else – you’d think he’d have laughed, or done it behind her back, or just told her to mind her own business, but he just did as she said. And sometimes, you know how she doesn’t take directions from anybody – but sometimes when he told her something she just obeyed, no questions asked, like she wouldn’t have, ever, for anybody else.

It’s all about knowing whose side you’re on, and playing for keeps.

“I know what it’s like to be alone,” Naruto tells him, afterwards. “But you don’t have to stay alone, I know that too.”

He takes his hand away from her, but he does it rather kindly.

Anyway it’s not the one she wants to hold, though for a moment she wishes, almost, that it could’ve been.

xxxxx

Things really have gone to shit. It’s almost Christmas, lunch hour on a day that is almost the last; she should be three weeks ago, giddy and nervous about grades and holidays and gifts, not staring along with Chouji and Shino into the faces of a Arsehole Squadron.

Not too long ago her, “What?” would’ve been a challenge, untainted by resignation or defensiveness or even wariness. Chouji and Shino would not have been apprehensive, anxious, Chouji’s fingers fat and white like worms around the edge of the table.

She doesn’t expect them to help.

She’s got shoved around a lot more lately, and cursed at, but then most low caste students have, so she’s not paid it much mind. Everything’s turned darker, and compared to her fierce private Sasuke
mess, this hasn’t seemed important. Maybe it should have, because it’s suddenly extremely,
poignantly obvious that there’s no Sasuke present to look conspicuously unamused, no Kiba whom
she would expect to lend a righteous fist, no Gaara with his blankly intimidating glare and the love-
scar on his face.

As the first jerk grabs her arm, she realises there aren’t any teachers around, either.

She stands with a slam, knees him in the thigh, but there are many of them and they’re expecting a
fight, this time, and Chouji and Shino aren’t people she wants caught in the crossfire.

It’s not too long since it would have been unthinkable for her to be grabbed like this, dragged like
this, but now she is; but they’re not heading for the bathroom, or behind the gym, they’re going –
and this is when her squirming and her muttered protests freeze – they’re going towards the court
table, up at the other end of the cafeteria.

Sasuke looks up from lighting her cigarette with what strikes Naruto as shockingly obvious surprise.
Perhaps only shockingly obvious to her, time dragging slowly with a lugubrious sort of dread,
Sasuke’s expression caught in her memory like a series of images, like a film reel, every minute
change cherished and recognised.

She forgets about wanting to stomp the arsehole’s foot, where he’s put it too close; she has the boots
for it. She wants to give Sasuke another slap almost as much as she wants to kiss her.

Sasuke’s fingers are yellow, a smudge of ash under one nail. It looks at though she’s actually burnt
herself, a little, on the bridge of flesh between thumb and forefinger. It doesn’t look intentional.

So have the idiots brought her in an attempt to suck up to or threaten Sasuke? With a sudden
gallows’ humour hilarity she remembers all of Ino’s silly slanderous rumours, which were always
entirely true.

“Yes?” Sasuke says at last, when the tension has mounted so high Naruto can almost feel her ears
pop.

She could probably break free now, but finds herself standing paralysed as one of the jerks, a guy
whose name she should likely know because she recognises him as a wannabe dark horse in the
school hierarchy, starts talking. He says something completely ridiculous that isn’t clever enough for
Sasuke to be amused, isn’t clever enough to pass over the heads of the ladies-in-waiting or even his
own minions, or Naruto. Her cheeks are warm, her hands cold. He might as well have just said, Hey, Sasuke, this loser dyke here’s in love with you.

“Much like ninety percent of the rest of the school population, then,” Sasuke replies, dismissive, preoccupied with the cigarette she has yet to put in her mouth. “Truly, I’m fascinated.”

Nameless Arsehole turns to Naruto, grabbing her shoulder in a massive sweaty palm and shaking her. It’s still unclear what he hoped to gain; though Naruto doesn’t particularly want to know this, Sasuke is sometimes genuinely pleased when people bring fresh meat to the slaughter, but Sasuke has also never really been careful about keeping her...thing...with Naruto secret.

“Hey, watch it, arse! This shirt’s designer!”

Bright orange, with a stick-figure Kyuubi on the chest. She designed it herself, when they had to make clothes in home economics two years ago.

“You tell her,” he sneers, but he takes his hands off of her. Wise move, aresface. “Out of the mouths of fools, after all – you’re in love with her, yeah?”

She stares at him in confusion for a moment – is this still a ploy to gain favour with Sasuke, or outmanoeuvre her in some way, or is he just trying to haze Naruto now?

Nobody does anything. In a smug distant corner somewhere in the back of her mind is Mum’s voice, saying bystander syndrome, tragic of course but very interesting.

Naruto doesn’t find it very interesting.

But all this is only for a moment: there’s Sasuke to look at, Sasuke looking at her.


It’s strange – she always thought love is love, that there wouldn’t be much difference. But she’s always loved her parents, have never questioned it – and yet with them never had that sudden feeling of sunlight on her soul that is being in love.
Sasuke puts the cigarette, burnt out, on her untouched plate, rests her chin on her hands, entirely unmoved – Naruto had expected *something* – before leaning back, sprawling wild and majestic and loose.

For the first time the similes that spring to mind aren’t cold and coddled, porcelain and snow, china doll or ice princess, but the flattery dedicated to the other end of the spectrum; a lioness, no, those run in packs – it will have to be a tigress, a black one.

“I suppose I ought to be in the market for a rebound,” she says, in the rusty confident voice that makes the words obvious, makes them natural, so that people don’t start really reacting until she adds, “and you’re… not actually repulsive.”

“Bitch,” says Naruto, feeling the restraining hands melt off her, her own hands fisted, tears and the widest grin imaginable fighting for possession of her face.

Sasuke gives that smirk-smile she has, the one Naruto thinks of as her expression. “Half-wit.”

Sasuke stands and steps around the table, jacket collected from where it hung over the back of her chair and folded over her arm, and they’re walking, they’re both of them walking through the explosive silence and then out, damp muggy chill and Sasuke’s breath a little fast.

“Let’s go,” Sasuke says. She’s striding fast now, with something that looks like it’s supposed to look like purpose but is really only desperate haste. Her fingers are pale and cold and fluttery, arranging her scarf.

“Hey,” says Naruto, Sasuke’s hand heavy in hers.

They pass the school gates. “I suppose social suicide is better than plain old suicide.”

There will be taxies one street away, an underground entrance not far behind.

“Thanks, you know,” Naruto says, somewhat awkwardly. “I – nobody’s ever done that for me, before. Something that wasn’t just words.”
Sasuke’s eyes look at her, big and dark and still a little wild. With her free hand she hails a taxi.

It’s magic, they always stop for her.

Sasuke’s phone starts ringing when they’re still settling on the sticky faux-leather backseat, the car idling on slowly, the driver looking at them expectantly.

“I thought…” Naruto starts.

Sasuke looks up from her mobile. “Yes. Your place, your place.”

When Naruto’s told the driver her address and turned back, slouching beside Sasuke, shoulders elbow hands knocking, Sasuke’s turned off her phone.

It’s a long ride, although twice as fast as the bus route. Naruto is stupidly, depressingly preoccupied with how she left all her things at school, until Sasuke shifts and it doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter.

It actually really doesn’t because the exams are done and there are hardly any real classes left.

She holds Sasuke’s hand and leans her head close enough to smell; Sasuke’s shampoo and woollen jacket instead of the oily taxi smell.

They slip into conversation, completely absurd; the dialogue equivalent of the *What I Did this Summer* essay prompt. You could call it words as an excuse for voices.

Naruto brags about her immune system being super kickass, absolutely ninja material, god, you should’ve seen the Sabakus, that was the cold from hell! Well maybe not hell, because that’s supposed to be hot, right, and a cold would be, well, cold…

“Dante,” Sasuke interrupts, and at Naruto’s what-face adds, “Hell’s cold all right.”
“Yeah, okay, anyway, it was complete defeat – not a sneeze. Did you know Gaara’s all sound artistic? Maybe that’d be cool, or – he could be my DJ or something, when I’m a rockstar.”

“I thought you’d given up on that.”

Naruto hand-waves this: “I’ll be a magical ninja rockstar.”

Sasuke snorts, but they’re almost there and the driver asks her to point out which house. It’s colder out here, away from the accumulated warmth of the city, a fresh good chipper cold, a thin layer of virgin snow breaking under their feet.

Her keys, and the happy frog mascot chained to them on the key-ring, are locked up in her locker, snug and cosy in her jacket pocket; shivering a little in her jumper, she stoops over to hunt for the spare key hidden below one of the veranda’s loose planks. The tree is soft with rot under her fingers, a textured sort of fur.

She’s only just found it when Sasuke catches up; Naruto hurried out of the car, unwilling to watch Sasuke pay the driver a no doubt hideous amount. Hideously embarrassing, because she doesn’t have any money on her, would probably balk at paying half even if her wallet wasn’t left at school too.

Sasuke’s eyes are eloquent on her arse, Naruto’s cheeks heating as she stands up under the heavy gaze, brandishing the key. Sasuke follows her inside, about to light up a cigarette which she at least didn’t smoke in the car, and follows Naruto’s lead in kicking off her boots in the hallway. The floor is littered with old news papers for wet shoes to dry off on, crinkling under their feet. The winter smell – of moulding paper, cold, dust, Christmas flowers, wool, the mustard she spilt on her trousers at lunch – makes it a lair.

Her bones are singing. Naruto can’t sing for shit, but there’s a feeling like, like – birdsong in her breast, something like that.

They should probably talk. She takes a step closer and Sasuke’s pressed up flush against her.

With Sasuke’s fingers knotted in her jumper between shoulders and breasts, nails breaking into the whorls of the knitting, lighter clattering to the floor, Naruto pushes the scarf away, scopes out the mole cupped by Sasuke’s collar bone.
It’s the same feeling as during Kankurou’s party, only not shocked now, the world tilting on its axis with the sudden thrilling certainty that Sasuke’s going to let her.

Sasuke’s breathing into her neck, warm light breaths, her breasts pressed below Naruto’s, her skin warm too when Naruto edges a hand under the back of her shirt.

“I didn’t make that dramatic exit for a bit of hugging.”

Naruto could say, Why did you?

She would, if not for Sasuke already saying, better social suicide than the regular kind. If not for Sasuke being very warm and very close. Instead she drags her hand up Sasuke’s spine, Sasuke’s back flowing smooth under her calluses. She presses hard, so her nails would break skin if angled differently, Sasuke does like hard, rough, furious.

But is that about intensity and trust, or is it a guilt thing?

“Er,” she starts, but ends up mumbling it into Sasuke’s mouth, in a long slow sweet kiss. There’s a lot of bite to it, though, there always is.

Sasuke’s hands wander, one migrating upwards, climbing her clavicle, shoulder, neck, the other slipping downwards, spreading over her breast.

She’s not usually particularly into that; Naruto’s had the impression Sasuke touches them because she likes Naruto’s reaction to it, as a declaration of skill and daring, rather than because she likes touching them.

Everyone does think Sasuke’s straight, even Ino is mostly joking.

More fool them, Naruto decides, and kisses Sasuke harder, and pulls towards the stairs. Sasuke comes easily, they pivot a little, almost like last time they were here, when Naruto pushed her into a wall and nearly fell, only this time it’s the railing against Sasuke’s back, and Naruto’s better braced, hands clenching bruise-hard when Sasuke goes with it, sliding her legs up Naruto’s, locking them around her waist.
For just this one second Naruto stops being happy Sasuke’s approaching thin as opposed to anorexic.

Then they’re stumbling forward, creaky steps and a laugh that’s almost a moan, and her bedroom door is left half open behind them. It’s unfair, really – Kyuubi’s the one who’s never left, who’s never turned his back on her, but he’s pushed off the bed with nary a thought, buried under a pillow on the floor.

Sasuke’s just better, so very much better, and it makes her sick because it makes no sense.

She still can’t stop touching her, everywhere, continuously, compulsively, loving it so much, so very much.

Afterwards, pulling off the stray sock left dangling on her right foot, she rests on her elbows, doesn’t want to sit up yet, wants to stay coped up in body-heat and skin-smell. Her forehead presses against Sasuke’s shoulder, their feet holding hands, toes intertwining clumsily.

The fairy hairs on Sasuke’s arm, too fine to be visible, tickle her mouth with every word: “What was all this about?”

Sasuke shrugs, one-shouldered, almost taking out Naruto’s front teeth. Naruto reels back with a curse, then catches Sasuke’s hand, restless and obviously ailing for the cigarettes left downstairs. When Sasuke pulls free she puts her hand on her thigh instead.

Sasuke’s face and voice are carefully, superciliously comfortable in the way that indicates she’s deeply uncomfortable. “You’d – we’d got a little too real,” she says, dry, light, with the sophisticated humorous irony she’s never managed before and doesn’t now. “I decided I was fine on my own. But that was boring.”

Her kiss is greedy, generous: a siren’s kiss.

And really Naruto’s always felt a life with wax in your ears is no life, and being tied to the mast sounds damn inconvenient.

Somehow still it’s she who has to prove herself – she has Sasuke twisting on her fingers, that particular sensation of – what does a vagina feel like, beyond the arousal, the intimacy? Slick and hot and tight are trite descriptors, common and cheap, everybody’s words, used up. Perhaps in reaction
to the flowery euphemisms of her childhood’s historical romances, from when she was eleven and thought Elizabeth Chadwick wrote actual good historical novels and she tingled at certain parts of them, she’s hounded by the idea that it feels like the inside of a flower. Realistically it’s more of an organ, like pressing your fingers into somebody’s beating heart.

She twists her ring finger, keeping her thumb tucked carefully against her palm; she let slip she’s not sure if there’s such a thing as vaginal orgasms, to which Sasuke says they’re rare but possible— and here they are.

*I said they’re possible with a penis,* Sasuke remarked dubiously.

*Dick, fingers, big difference.*

*Quite a bit of one, actually, yes.*

Naruto hadn’t wanted to be reminded, and also remained unconvinced since dicks and fingers are the same general shape, do the same thing, in fact fingers are more flexible; at which point Sasuke intimated it was the psychological impact, the emotional reality of the situation, that made the difference, but at which point the endeavour was already underway.

When Sasuke finally comes she’s had to roll them over, lying sideways, nose-tips kissing, her free hand skirting Sasuke’s arse even as she strains rather desperately against Sasuke’s wrist, trying to avoid the knuckles doing clever things and distracting her.

She rests her head in the hollow between Sasuke’s stomach and hip, hot and accomplished even as Sasuke grimaces above her. It was a lousy orgasm, Naruto can tell, one of the ones that make you work for it, goads you into desperation, until that heady moment of knowing it’s going to break like a wave over you and wanting to drown in it, and then suddenly it’s gone, nary a shudder and it’s gone without having ever quite happened, and you’re left miserable and somehow hornier than you started but unable now to relieve it.

Still she gloats a little – didn’t touch the clit once, and if a vaginal means Sasuke needs a good dose of emotional arousal, then clearly Naruto does it for her. “Before,” she says, her voice husky, but unfortunately not in a sexy sense; more like she has a sore throat. Sasuke’s skin is heaving under her mouth. “You were saying?”

When she looks up through her fringe Sasuke’s eyes are all lashes. “Things got a little intense.”
“Isn’t that the point?”

And yes, Sasuke likes her, Sasuke likes her likes her: said herself she had to know somebody to like them, had to like them to be attracted to them, and Naruto leaning forward, over her, suddenly intense, so she might as well be saying, *I’m going to get you* – Sasuke’s posture changes, opens somehow, tensing and relaxing at once: take me.

“Maybe,” she says at last.

Sasuke’s nipple, gone a soft pale blank, visibly perks when Naruto tilts her head, dropping a wet teasing kiss on the side of her labia.

But Sasuke squirms away from her, not closer. “No, wait, it’s not going to work yet.”

Naruto laps up a speck of dried stickiness but desists, jerked suddenly sitting by the shrill, entirely innocuous sound of her mobile going off.

“Fuck! Where…?”

Under the collapsed pile of graphic novels on her nightstand, shaking with the force of its call. The caller is unknown, but she might as well take it.

“Sasuke,” Temari’s voice demands.

“Er, no, it’s – right.” Come to think of it, of course Gaara’s not her private source of phone info.

When she turns to hand over the mobile, Sasuke is already reaching for it, half-dressed in one of the old flannel shirts Dad’s discarded, too stained and ripped to work in but perfect for sleeping in.

“Yes – yes, that’s – no, no – look…”
As Sasuke wanders outside talking Naruto pulls on pyjamas trousers and a tshirt, rolling onto her back and picking up *Bleach*, although Rukia, a favourite character and so often a guilty masturbation substitute for a certain irl miniature pretty-girl bitch, is less engaging than usual.

Two chapters later Sasuke ventures back inside, closing the door behind her and returning the phone. The bed, never spry, dips under her weight, Naruto’s feet abruptly pressed against her side. The comic falls to the floor, Naruto sitting too, hand hovering over Sasuke’s knee.

“So… wanna play video games?”

“Not really,” Sasuke says. “Unsurprisingly, not being a pre-pubertal boy.”

“Video games are, like, totally a valid cultural narrative. Also, everything all right?”

“One, they are not. Two, fine. I’ll just have to get her the perfect Christmas present.”

“One, they so are. Lots of games have good stories. Two, speaking of, if she and Kankurou are twins, how come it was just his birthday party?”

“One, if you want a story, you tell me one. Two, she had hers later. She keeps these things a good deal more private.”

Naruto fishes for Kyuubi on the floor, closes her hand around his scrawny hug-worn neck and hurls him like a pillow-fight projectile into Sasuke’s helplessly unsuspecting face. Sasuke stares, mute, Kyuubi splayed askew over her lap, her hands fisted loosely around his body, and Naruto explains with a chuckle that comes breathless, but with her voice firm, that since Kyuubi’s been so casually evicted, it’s time he menaces her in revenge.

“Oh,” Sasuke says, non-committal, lifting him by the scruff of his neck and disposing him, rather high-handedly, among the rumpled pillows. “I’m not sure this was a good idea.”

“Wha – you can’t throw down your spire for true love then take it back!” That’s not how it works.

“That’s not what I – I’m not taking it back.” She sits cross-legged, entirely collected, a fair
intellectual distress tinting her face in a finer light, seemingly ignorant of the scruffy shirt baring half her delta. “Also I didn’t throw down my spire for true love.”

Naruto stretches out beside her, on her stomach, her shoulder level with Sasuke’s knee. “I’m sure Ino will be happy no matter why.”

“But why would – no, you idiot. I’ve spited her.”

“Huh?”

But it makes sense, considered from the right angle, however counter-intuitive that may be: everything Ino has worked so hard for, has sweated and cried and bled for all these years, thrown capriciously away, a sudden whim, worth less to Sasuke than some casteless fool.

“I’m not sure I threw anything away, exactly,” Sasuke says. “Also Temari says she’ll hire Ino as her weather forecaster, I think that shall be considered worse than being the queen’s fool.”

Sasuke’s wrist twiggy in the curl of her fingers, Naruto works her legs beneath her until she too is sitting, and it bursts from her, water boiling over in queer spurts and burst bubbles, how she saw now there’s a difference between never having had and losing, how Sasuke had better not be taking anything back, because to have had it then lost it then had to had to had to get it back…!

“I’m not an it,” Sasuke snaps, but can’t get her wrist loose.

“No, no of course, but the – the time we spent together, our relationship – fine, ‘relationship’, that’s an it.”

“Of a kind,” Sasuke says on an exhale, sounds weary, secretive: very private. Colour floods her face as, leaning back minimally, she discovers how indecently the shirt has been arranged.

They slip into easier talk, mundane, with the tangible glitter of solid things – what have you been doing lately, aside from raging and grieving? Reading emo poetry?

The only poetry Naruto likes is Celan, which arcs Sasuke’s brow over a deep black stare.
“Nothing really,” Sasuke says of her own activities. Some school things, Naruto supposes. Itachi is on a Dead Poetesses Auto/Biography kick, gorging himself on Woolf and Plath, Kandre and Boye and Södergran.

It’s pathetic, Sasuke says, though at least Södergran didn’t kill herself.

Kakashi read posthumous journals and letters too, and her mother can’t get enough of them – it’s the only reading she manages. Not Sasuke: “I’ve always felt there’s something stunted about reading other people’s diaries.”

“Maybe,” says Naruto, who did read once in Kakashi’s diaries, which must at this point surely be considered to be Sasuke’s.

In any case Sasuke is disconcerted, mildly as she claims, but the frown is very real, although probably prompted mostly by Itachi binging on brilliant suicide cases – in any case Plath employs a spatula of overt female imaginary, content and expression, particularly expression, so very womanly, and as if she has an obvious natural unquestionable unalienable right to it, as if it’s perfectly clearly hers; her.

The adjective abuse betrays clearly that Sasuke’s sticky, thorny struggle with the idea of womanhood has not at all abated.

“I like bodies,” Naruto says, dragging her hot greasy palm up Sasuke’s thigh, and Sasuke is calm and pleased enough to lie back, her back propped up against the headboard, her legs slightly parted and for a moment her lips too. “But also, yeah women are equated with bodies, but men are too.”

“Yes,” Sasuke says after a grudging, thoughtful moment. “You might have something there.” She becomes animated then, her fingers moving with it.

The difference is women are bodies as objects, to be used: a womb. Men really are just as much bodies, but bodies as agents; just think how supposedly they can’t control their sex drive, or their aggressions, how the penis is called junior – man is the body as a rapist.

And Naruto laughs, half convinced, and bedazzled, because Sasuke. “I thought you liked sex with men.”
“I do,” Sasuke says pensively. “I did. With one man. Everybody else – it never mattered very much. It was never quite real.”

Speaking, she’s pulled herself tighter together, legs up against her chest, her arms forlorn around them. Naruto looks at her, drinks her with her eyes, the ridiculous cliché becoming astonishingly, amazingly, almost agonisingly real, the minimal particles of Sasuke’s visibility sucked into Naruto’s starving salivating loving eyes. She looks at her and then, Sasuke apparently having forgotten about Naruto’s hand lying dislodged on her lap, Naruto takes the opportunity, never previously guessed at, to tickle her.

When she scratches at the stomach Sasuke squirms, swats and swears at her; it’s when she finds the sensitive skin at the hollows of her thighs that she collapses, contracts.

“You arsehole, you fucking arsehole,” she gasps, struggling free, Naruto too infected by the strangled laughter to hold her down.

Sasuke pushes her down, hands like claws at her shoulders, spitting fury. Mouth still soft and open with giggles Naruto tries to kiss her, but Sasuke’s too angry.

“Don’t ever fucking do that.”

“What?” Naruto protests, intertwining her fingers around the knob at the nape of Sasuke’s neck. “Doesn’t Temari, Kakashi…?”

“No,” Sasuke says, the syllable smooth, like a door snapping shut.

She’s surly, and obviously itches for her cigarettes again, badly, but Naruto’s got good at reading between the lines, better anyway than she’s ever been at conventional reading, and eventually it emerges, sort of, that Sasuke was tickled once in childhood by Itachi, in front of adult guests, and clearly, rather endearingly, this has evolved into a worst, horrible memory of helplessness: the shocky inability to defend because you can’t truly believe, stuck on but how could this possibly happen to me, so the frustration and hatred and desolate, devastating powerlessness can’t hit you, or they hit you all right but they can’t be processed, handled, so instead they linger.

“All right,” she says, maternal almost, pushing her head under Sasuke’s arm, like a child seeking forgiveness. It’s only a few seconds before Sasuke relents, softens against her. Resting her chin on
Sasuke’s shoulder, Naruto reflects that frankly cuddling isn’t very comfortable. Unlike Kyuubi, or Mum, Sasuke is all hard awkward angles, more of a stranger really than at any other time, unpractised and alien. Their hands fit together, though, did from the first.

In the smell of Sasuke’s skin, with the ridge of Sasuke’s spine pressed against her, she remembers, amused, still too star-struck for pondering, “What’ll it be like tomorrow?”

After Sasuke took something from her that she’s never had before, and gave her something more – something – everything you’ve ever dreamt.

“I assume you’ll be playing Hangman with the groundskeeper,” Sasuke says in her dry, off-hand manner. “Isn’t that what you usually do? Can’t imagine why, since neither of you can spell.”

She tweaks Sasuke’s nipple in exasperation, gets a tiny hiss. “Obviously I meant – you know, with us.”

“I’m not coming.”

“Cheater! Also, coward.” She sticks her tongue out, genuinely startled; although could never mean those words.

“I’ll be on a plane,” Sasuke says. “I told you weeks ago, we’ll be celebrating with the fancy set.”

“But – but school’s not done yet. I thought you were all anal about your grades.” One of the many things Sasuke is not actually very good at hiding, except maybe from herself.

“School’s finished, we’re just marking time now. Lots of people are leaving – Neji and Hinata certainly, Temari I think in two or three days.”

“They take Gaara to Christmas reunions?”

“They take Gaara to a hotel somewhere nearby the Christmas reunions. Don’t – they rather envy him, Temari and Kankurou.”
“Jeez,” Naruto mutters. “Christmas is supposed to be happy.” She loves it, always has, best time of the year, except for the long liberty of summer.

“I prefer birthdays – people just give me things and leave me alone.”

She tugs Sasuke with her, lying on her back with Sasuke arranged half atop, half beside her. “Isn’t it difficult to give you stuff? To come up with things.”

Sasuke smirks, but her tone is dry. “And yet somehow they manage.”

They make love again – Naruto never thought she would say make love save in parody, has always stuck to fuck and sleep together or have sex, but it’s the natural world, springing unquestioned to her mind. Then Sasuke calls for a car, whether Itachi or a taxi Naruto remains unsure, and is getting dressed, pulling on clothes and respectability.

She doesn’t make for the shower, which is gratifying: scent-marking isn’t meant to be simply washed off.

“D’you want some underwear or something?”

Rather to her surprise Sasuke accepts, dropping her own nonchalantly on the bed and prompting Naruto to paw through her wardrobe for the pair that shrank in the wash. They’re loose on Sasuke, the ridiculous pink-grey shade of something white slipping into a batch of colour laundry; and ridiculously gratifying.

They wait for the car in the kitchen, Naruto picking at making dinner as a peremptory suck-up measure in case the school bothers to call about her skipping. There are potatoes to peel, and the oven needs to heat up in preparation, and in the middle of it there’s this absolutely astonishing moment, a moment of vision, homey, charged, Sasuke peering dubiously into a large pot, Naruto’s arms natural around her, Sasuke familiar and loved and covering Naruto’s hands with her own, heavy against her as she kisses her neck, too overwhelmed to suck in the helpless breathless gleeful giggles.

“You’re fucking retarded,” Sasuke says, and Naruto is obscurely ashamed to be happy, happy Sasuke is relaxed enough to let slip a horrifying ablist slur.
“I’m still smarter than you,” Naruto says, which claim Sasuke doesn’t dignify with a reply.

A car horn going off outside spirits Sasuke away, slipping like mist from Naruto’s only half-jokingly grasping hands.
Chapter 18

In the silence, because the muted sounds of food preparation might as well be complete quiet now Sasuke’s noises are absent, she turns the radio on high, moving with helpless antsy happy energy, compulsively chopping and twirling to the blaring music.

She’s in the middle of a crazy shimmy, potato peels splattering over the counter, when the radio is turned off, the silence a sudden deluge in her ears.

Red-cheeked and laden with bags, Mum smiles at her. “I take it you made up, then.”

Naruto feels her grin too large to fit on her mouth, splashing all over her face. “Yup.”

It’s not really a hard deduction to make, when you come home to your daughter blubbery and flushed happy, dinner waiting on the table, but nevertheless the words jolt bright and pleasant through her.

And then later, Sasuke’s things in her room! The underwear still on the roughed-up bed, the cigarettes rescued from the hallway; a previously forgotten jumper, some books, a pen. Sasuke’s things in her room.

In school next morning people are going insane; she missed Sasuke, sleepily, already on the bus, but god, the esteemed queen bitch should see this.

Thankfully Sasuke was right about lots of people taking off for their holidays, as, alerted to the fact, Naruto notices about a quarter of the student population gone, and even some teachers have packed up, leaving them with substitutes or cancelled classes.

Gaara’s presumably still out cold, but Kankurou is on her the moment she steps off the bus.

“Dish! God, I cannot believe I missed that – when Tenten called I was sure she was fucking with me – but then it was all over the internet, and Temari confirmed, and – spill.”

Naruto blinks. “If it turns out you’re, like, an alien from a parallel soap opera dimension or
something, I will not be surprised.”

“Oh, god, I wish,” Kankurou says, stepping carefully around the bus stop mud, his shoes still the gleaming white of unused purchases. “Soaps are so much more exciting than life.”

“Oh, right, she must’ve turned it off after…”

“Yeah, no, that’s not—”

She’s interrupted by a Kiba-led stampede, Shino and Hinata and Chouji and Akamaru crowding around her.

“Dude!” Kiba bellows. “You’re doing Sasuke Uchiha? What the hell? I tried to call you all fucking day yesterday, you wouldn’t pick up!”

“Oh, right, she must’ve turned it off after…”

“So,” Chouji pipes up. “Is she like your…?”

“That is so fucking hot!” Kiba cuts in. “I mean except for the part where you’re there.”

Kankurou laughs long and heartily at Kiba’s face when he realises he’s spoken thus in front of his would-be lady-friend.

“I’ll thank you not to talk that way about my girlfriend,” Naruto says, keeping her tone prim and snippy just barely halfway through the sentence before breaking into laughter. She means it, though.

Inside the school everything is hushed, back-stabs and pacts and gossip travelling by whisper. Tenten comes to lead Kankurou away; Temari sends Ino off in tears. Sakura comes to sit with Naruto in English, looking a little shell-shocked.
“Congratulations, I suppose,” she ventures, smiling a little, shifting. She’s more comfortable talking about grades, and next year’s assignments – which is cool, since it means if she can get Kiba to accept his natural station in life and cosplay as Ron Weasley, Naruto now knows the perfect Hermione Granger to complement her own Girl Who Lived if that rumoured masquerade event ever happens.

Sasuke would make a smashing Draco Malfoy.

“Iruka wanted to talk to you,” Sakura says as the lesson draws to a close. “I think he’s probably in his office.”

“Right, thanks.”

Although she doesn’t feel particularly thankful about the realisation that shit, he’s gone strict on her and will have to explain in his kindly surreptitious way that it was all a great big misunderstanding, that of course Naruto could never get a B.

Bent over his desk, frowning at whatever paper he’s reading, he doesn’t hear her knock. She pushes the door open, sticks her head inside. “Er, Iruka? You wanted to talk to me?”

He breaks into a smile, waves her in, and this is just cruel, getting her hopes up. “Sit down, sit down.”

It turns out it’s not about her grades at all. No, no, it’s just Iruka is ridiculously overbearingly kind as usual, and has got himself involved in a local charity organisation for children in difficult circumstances, and now they’re trying to arrange a good jolly Christmas for the kids, and he needs volunteers, and would she maybe be interested…?

“Hell, yeah. I mean, of course!”

Iruka laughs a little, forgoing an admonishing for cursing, and shakes his head at her rubbing the back of hers. “I thought you might, what with – well, the anti-ism project, and then the Konohamaru affair. That’s great, I’m grateful, and the kids will be happy. We’re still juggling dates right now, but I’ll get back to you asap, all right? Within the next few days, I’m sure.”
“Awesome,” Naruto says, and means.

Back home Mum and Dad are talking again about Tsunade, and she feels it best to leave the room; making snowballs in the garden, practicing her aim on the trees. Mum gets called back to the hospital, there’s been a traffic accident and they need everybody they can get, so Dad and Naruto, neither in the mood to cook, get ramen.

“About Grandma,” he says, playing with the chopsticks he’s discarded in favour of a fork.

“It’s weird that you call her that,” Naruto says after she’s chewed and swallowed, after it’s become clear he’s not able to continue yet. “I mean, she’s your mum.”

“Well, yes. She is. But she’s your grandmother too and I suppose that’s easier to handle.”

“She seems nice,” Naruto offers. “Nice in the way a war elephant is nice if she’s turned the right way and demolishing your enemies, sort of, but nice.”

Dad laughs, a little, gives her hand a brief rub. “She’s a bit like you. Quite a lot like you, actually. Just not with your… drive, I guess.” He sighs, rubs at his face under guise of pushing the overlong fringe away. “It’s, when it started – my dad had died, and her little brother, my uncle, too – she’d practically raised him. They were army brats, and my dad was a solider too, that’s how – well, I’ve been a pacifist ever since that funeral, I can tell you that.”

She leans forward over the table, so her arm presses against his. “Was she in the army too?”

She can picture it easily, Tsunade in a uniform bellowing orders, scaring the enemy into running the other way.

“Oh, no, she hated all that. Was so damn tired of the killing. She was a doctor.” He laughs again, mirthlessly. “Until she made a drunken mistake with a patient, and couldn’t be a doctor anymore.”

“Shit. She killed somebody?”

“No, no, they got to him in time, but if somebody hadn’t noticed…”
“Wow.”

“Pretty much. And now I’m grown up, and I realise she went through hell – lost her mum early, then her dad, then her husband and little brother almost at the same time, and finally the job she loved. But I lost things too, and I can’t pretend that didn’t happen, or that it’s okay.”

“If you want her around,” Naruto starts. “I mean, I think she’s cool. But I’m on your side.”

“Eat your ramen.”

And it’s ramen, so she puts an obedient chopstick-full in her mouth. Dad too picks his fork back up.

“It’s just you shouldn’t have to pick sides.”

“I’m not exactly a little kid anymore,” she says. “Also I’m pretty sure I shouldn’t have got bullied either, but I handled that pretty well.”

And he’s hugging her, one-armed, and the air is teary for a second but lighter, dominated again by the present tense of ramen and gingerbread.

School finally lets out two days later, and she brings home grades twice as high as any she’s ever got before, to Mum who’s never understood not making straight As and can’t convincingly pretend she’s happy or impressed by mostly Cs, and Dad who twirls her like a fairytale princess.

Kiba’s tagged along to the garage to finish the penalty labour and also to hand over the Christmas flower and cake sent by his family. Dad says thanks and that smells really good and I’m sure Kushina has something for you at the house; and then his eyes light on Gaara, finally rid of his cold and unaccountably social, and Shikamaru, too lazy to change buses until it was too late, behind Kiba.

Within minutes the heavy snowfall has prompted them outside, and once they’re standing in the shower of snow flakes it’s only a matter of moments before they’re engaged in a snowball war as nasty as it is epic. Dad has reach, but is also a far larger target; Naruto and team Kiba&Akamaru ought to have by far the most experience; Gaara is *vicious.*
Shikamaru almost causes multiple heart attacks by falling asleep behind a dune.

When she gets home, clothes wet with sweat and snow sticking to flushed skin, there’s a message from Iruka saying if she’s still interested they’re throwing Christmas for the kids on the 23rd, and Sakura will know all the details. Naruto calls her up, and is ordered in to help clean the place early tomorrow. So much for sleeping in during the holidays, but then she’s never been very good at that anyway.

She dozes on the train, but finds the address wide awake, slapped into awareness by the sudden damp cold. It’s a rather nice building, considering, large and red, on the outskirts of town. Definitely out of use, though, going by the spider webs and dust in the foyer.

“Hello? Sakura?”

“In here,” a voice calls, not Sakura’s but familiar, deep but in a different sense than Sasuke’s, more motherly and less TB.

Haku and Chouji are mopping the floor in the central room, Haku immaculate and beautiful despite the hour and the work, Chouji yawning around what is either his second or third breakfast. “Grab a mop,” Chouji tells her. “Sakura’s negotiating with the tree seller, Iruka will be by later.”

“Shouldn’t he be here first?” Naruto grouses, liberating a mop from the open closet. “He is the teacher, and stuff.”

“Probably busy laughing at us,” Chouji says. “Not every teacher manages to get his students to get up and work when they’re finally done with school.”

“I thought the whole idea was we went to school so we’d get out of doing this sort of work,” Ino says from the doorway where she’s appeared next to Sakura.

“I enjoy cleaning,” Haku remarks placidly.

“You would.” There’s no real ire in it, though.

xxxxx

Naruto arrives next morning with excitement buzzing over the pleasant heaviness yesterday’s cleaning workout left in her body; there’s not been a lot of running after the snow fell thick, and working out alone has lost most of its charm now she’s got used to having Sasuke’s company, somebody else’s strikes and steps to measure her own against.

The place is the institutional version of awesome, too, thanks to Sakura charming the tree seller into cutting them a generous deal, and Ino, for all her bitching, doing a stunning job decorating it. Blue and silver may not be the traditional Christmas colours, but until Iruka had sighed and gone home to collect his own things, it was all they had to work with, and Ino triumphed. Make it work, Sakura said, with aplomb worthy of Tim Gunn himself, and Ino stuck out her tongue and did.

Today she’s home with her family, and Chouji’s lording it over the kitchen, where several of the older kids are supposedly helping out, in fact mainly trying to get their hands on extra goodies. Having missed breakfast, Naruto seriously contemplates joining them, but the threatening way Chouji wields his spoon lends urgency to Sakura’s summons.

It’s easier missing Sasuke when careening around a house-sized room with a horde of unruly kids, bellowing Christmas carols and ducking the occasional thrown marshmallow. Haku and Hinata, exuding a magically calming air, serve treats and console the younger ones; Naruto and Sakura have been thrown laughing and yelling into the thick of the celebration.

When the day’s drawing to a close, she finally sees Zabuza. Gigantic and scarred, rather like an old oak used to weathering storms and scaring off woodcutters, he nods at them – at Haku, at least – from outside.

“I forgot my gloves,” Haku says, and slips back inside the main room. Faced with the freezing wind from outside, Naruto hurries after her. They’re going to have to come back and clean tomorrow, maybe the day after too: you can tell a good time was had.

Pulling on her gloves, a startling red against the soft greys and blues and greens she usually wears, Haku smiles a little at her, a complicated, discriminating expression that doesn’t really look like a smile at all. “Merry Christmas.”
“You too,” Naruto says, finding her jacket under an over-tipped chair.

Haku hesitates, then speaks, several steps away. “I maintain you deserve better, but I admit I did like her, that day.”

“Yeah?” Losing interest in the jacket, Naruto beams up at her. It’s a silly expression, she’s caught it in the mirror when Sasuke’s unexpectedly intruded, walked rudely through her mind without knocking, but she can’t help it and right now she doesn’t care. “Cool. I mean, I like her every day, but…”

“Yes,” says Haku, quite dryly. “I could tell.”

xxxxx

If she tilted her head back she’d be able to see the tip of the church spire, through the window. The sky is a soft unobtrusive blue, neither blinding nor dark.

At least there’s no snow.

She shakes out her skirt and doesn’t look up at the characterless spectacle. Her lateness has passed the fashionable point; maybe she should simply stay away. With luck they’ll be either too drunk to be certain afterwards of whether she was there, or locked away in the business offices.

It’s not very fair to Itachi, or by all means to the other unwilling guests, but Sasuke’s not overly invested in fairness.

She represented yesterday, and the day before, and she will again tomorrow. Today she’s going to sit in a pew until any chance of being seen has passed, and then she’ll languish in the churchyard.

There are too many people in the church; she’d forgotten the holidays will have drawn out the religious set. Instead, finally, she collapses behind a large headstone, probably getting grass stains all over the dress as she fishes for her mobile.
It’s a very ugly dress, one of the ones worn because Mum’s distress is uglier.

Earphones plugged in, she scrolls through her messages before pressing speed-dial two.

“About time,” says Temari, and relief rolls through Sasuke like a rush, like the sudden absence of pain.

“Hey.”

It is the second Christmas in the world without Kakashi. Possibly more devastating: it is the first Christmas in the world with Naruto.

“Listen up, you little bitch,” Temari says. “I wish you had talked to me. That you would talk to me.”

“There isn’t much to say.”

They got used to it more than fifteen months ago, she and Itachi, the new era; the Post Kakashi age and the incision that made in their life.

Temari scoffs, but she wouldn’t still be Sasuke’s friend if she couldn’t handle silence. “Kankurou’s driving me madder than Gaara,” she says. “We’ve been through four seasons of Project Runway, and now he’s starting on America’s Next Top Model. He’s threatening us with The Vampire Diaries.”

“Please,” says Sasuke. “That’s Twilight 2.0, not The Vampire Diaries. Elena’s blond. She has a little sister.”

“Ah, yes, you did rather like those books, didn’t you?”

She smiles. “As if you didn’t know.”

“Believe me, I’m busily trying to forget – Kankurou has got it in his head it would be a splendid idea to LARP them again. Only now he wants to be Elena. Like I told you when we were kids, I’m the
“blond here.”

“More importantly you’re the only one who’d fall for Stefan with Damon around.”

“Speaking of falling,” says Temari, and yes, Sasuke walked into that one with her eyes wide open. “I’m not surprised, honestly – obviously you’ve been pining for a hot blond chick ever since that party. After me, how could you possibly be satisfied with a man?”

“Oh yes,” Sasuke deadpans. “I’m planning how to oust Shikamaru from your affections as we speak.”

“At least now you don’t have to worry about getting a surrogate mum to keep your figure,” Temari says at last.

“I don’t want kids.”

Naruto would’ve gone on a rant about how the surrogate mother business is completely evil, reducing poor women of colour to wombs to be used by wealthy white people.

Sasuke tilts her head back, resting it against the headstone. No doubt Naruto would be right, but then there’s also no doubt that most of what Naruto owns has been made by child labour in the third world. Choose your battles, except Naruto seems to think “everything” is a completely reasonable and possible option.

“Me neither,” Temari says. “But options are good. Look, I have to go, I’ll call you later.”

It didn’t use to be like this. But Temari’s taken on the mummy role for her too now, like she did long ago for Kankurou and Gaara, and mums are concerned with keeping you afloat, and out of trouble, in as blissful an ignorance as possible.

In the pallid sunlight she reads Neji’s Christmas book until Itachi calls to ask where the hell she is.

“Park.”
“Are you drunk?”

“No.” She snaps the book closed. “Of course not.”

“No? Where are you sitting?”

“I told you, in a park.”

Is that answer more or less childish than simply saying, that’s none of your business? Kakashi asked her once, amused, old suddenly.

“Bench? Café? The ground?”

“What the hell does it matter? Did you want something?”

“Sasuke, you only ever sit on the ground when you’re drunk or with Naruto.”

“Piss off.” She presses the end call button harshly and sideways, cracking her nail. Hairline fracture, bisecting the nail almost to the root. Fuck.

She’s had enough to muddle through, to smile, to say yes and please and thank you. Not enough to be really drunk.

Maybe it’s time she was. Going out hasn’t happened for months: last time the alcoholic tide rose so did real waves, after Naruto dragged her down to the sea.

She props a cigarette in her mouth and sets off. The streets are mostly empty, cobblestones and weak sunlight, a sensation of spring come too early. She likes her seasons traditional, structured, each allotted a quarter of the year.

In a convenient boutique she picks up trousers, a shirt, leaving the stained dress in the changing
room. Nobody knows her here, her name, her face will be blanks. She feels blank, idling away an hour or two with wine and smoke and Neji’s poetry in a café with too many candles. Her ID says she’s nineteen but nobody asks for it. Last time anybody did she was thirteen, and it wasn’t a question of not serving her, it was flirting.

The background music grows louder as the evening wears on, more people stopping by. She stonewalls the attempts to share her table, speak to her, buy her drinks; remembers the reason she hasn’t gone out lately is she doesn’t much like it, strangers and shallowness, stupid surface conversation and no silence. Outside of ballroom class she’s an atrocious dancer, according to Neji, her prettiness alone absolving her of ridiculousness.

On the other hand Neji is both pretty and ridiculous, and when all is said and done this is still better than heading back before everything has calmed down.

Eventually there is a young man with very blond hair who speaks to her in good English, another tourist most likely because his accent is unfamiliar, and who sits down opposite her.

Normally she prefers to buy her own drinks, but Itachi has been known to check her credit card bills and she’s used up all her cash, so when he offers her one of his two glasses she takes it. It’s a horrible combination of champagne and vodka, the sort you have to be drunk to drink.

“You’re here alone?”

And it’s so inane she doesn’t answer.

He tries a laugh, embarrassed or just tipsy, and starts talking about how lovely and exciting he finds the city. Sasuke’s found it as dull as his monologue on it, but then she hasn’t been here for years and no longer knows her way around, wouldn’t find the places he namedrops, not distracted and inebriated.

An hour later, maybe two, she has accepted enough drinks to soothe his fears of rejection, which must have been considerable because most men ask if she has a boyfriend after the second glass.

“No,” she says.

She never went out with Kakashi; there were family parties, university gatherings, but she was so
very young and they were so personal, trying to keep themselves private, and Itachi didn’t always do very well in clubs. Dancing with Kakashi was simple, and humiliating, consisting mainly of being an accessory for him to dance with.

Then she says, “Girlfriend.”

xxxxx

Naruto hasn’t called much, presumably feeling secure. She’s probably recovering from overeating, Itachi says when his phone sex jokes go unappreciated. He’s still tottering between amused and bitter regarding Naruto routinely finishing Sasuke’s helpings as well as her own when eating with the Uchihas.

“Nah,” says Anko. “She’s a fighter. Death by snowball, I should think.”

In appreciation of Anko vomiting whisky in her great-uncle’s lap the previous evening, Sasuke refrains from cutting remarks.

Between the faked headaches to avoid social events and the real ones from attending, left antsy and aggravated and flaking, Sasuke’s not tended to answer her phone.

She does now, walking outside with the mobile pressed too hard against her ear.

Naruto’s voice washes over her, yet another idiot metaphor made real, loud and half-laughing, the words garbled by the speed with which they’re uttered, thrown from her mouth like lassos.

“Christmas is awesome!” she declares, launching into an involved tale about Iruka sucking up to his own conscience and Naruto being too naïve to realise that the only thing this implies is he must have done something really bad, to merit all this charity nonsense atonement.

“Fascinating,” she says eventually. The floor is warm under her feet, as it’s too early to get properly dressed the morning after alcoholic overindulgence.

The fact she can hear Naruto stick her tongue out is due less to romantic telepathy and more to
Naruto being extremely vocal about it. “It’s not my fault you never pick up! And when you do, you’re all, ‘nothing’ every time I ask what’s up.”

“Whatever,” Sasuke mutters. “Come up with a better question if you want a better answer.”

Predictably Naruto insists it’s a fabulous question, and Sasuke’s inability to meet its standards reflects badly on nobody but herself.

The normal subjects – grades, presents – are dealt with, and Naruto asks if Itachi’s been teasing her, saying it’d only be fair because Kankurou couldn’t shut up about lesbian sex or very bad Cinderella jokes.

“He’s not really said anything,” Sasuke says. “He just keeps looking at me funny. I except he’d consider it cheating to bring it up directly – he’s supposed to be able to just tell whether that sort of rumours are true.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Naruto laughs, although she likes Itachi too much for it to carry the snide, victorious edge of Sasuke’s own comments. “The price for upholding your genius label.”

What stops Sasuke short for a moment is that Itachi is a bona fide genius. Sasuke’s smart, but she did not spend playschool solving advanced equations, or learning Latin. So she’s just beautiful and intelligent and talented, and in almost any other circumstances that would have been enough, would have been something, without comparison.

Kakashi skipped ahead in school because he was a borderline genius and worked himself to the bone after his parents’ accident, trying to prove whatever he needed to prove, although he quit fast enough once he realised there was nobody else around anymore, and proving it to himself didn’t cut it. Itachi walked through school like a staircase, his legs tree times the length of anybody else’s, taking the steps four or five at a time while the rest where still struggling to get on the stairs.

Their parents thought maybe he’d been stressed, when he started breaking down. Better under-stimulated than insane, so Sasuke didn’t skip at all.

Naruto’s saying how it’s an excellent Christmas, the best ever; and yet the worst too, because of how normal life is good now, really good, which accounts for the bestness and worstness both, you know?
“No,” Sasuke says, thoughtlessly, dodging her aunt. The best Christmas ever they were at home, snow thin over the rotting grass and birds under the sky, when she was young enough to wake up early and slip through the hallway, into the white quest room where the sunlight was blinding even in winter, and crawl into Kakashi’s bed every morning. That break Itachi taught her to make coffee, and she taught herself to drink it.

Although she was tall, the tallest she’s ever been, she fit under Kakashi’s arm.

“No?” Naruto echoes. “What do you mean, no?”

“Never mind.”

“Fine,” says Naruto, and starts telling her about having Grandma Tsunade over for Christmas – well it sort of explains how I got into Sannin, right? – and Sasuke can see her rub at the back of her head – Dad was uncertain, and Mum too I suppose, but I think it went pretty well – she got drunk, yeah, but no worse than anybody else, so…

‘They’, by which Sasuke assumes Naruto means her father and Tsunade, reportedly fought a bit the day after, but Naruto seems to think this is a step in the right direction, a clearing of the air.

“Idiot,” Sasuke says. “Who do you think you are, a fucking lamed vovnik?”

Catching sight of her mother, whom her hypothetical future children will never meet, at the far end of the corridor, she ends the call. Those hypothetical future children will be subjected to Itachi, and possibly to Gaara, but their grandparents they will be spared.

The phone vibrating in her pocket as Naruto tries to call again, she turns her back and escapes outside. It’s too early, she’s too hung-over, to face any bawling.

Hours or days later, time gone circular and slow, she’s splayed out in a sun chair, feet hidden in a woollen blanket. The sun falls on her face like rain, tangible but runny.

At the sound of footsteps on the gravel behind her she turns up the volume until she’s certain she would feel the vibrations if she touched the outside shell of her ears, but it’s just Anko, bohemia-chick in a creatively stained shirt which is probably intended to look like a loan from Itachi but is in fact far too large for him.
This thought is catty and arguably childish, but it doesn’t currently feel beneath her.

A chair is pulled up; she reluctantly removes her earphones as Anko sits down, lighting up and offering Sasuke the pack.

She shakes her head.

First there is silence, then the sort of small talk that might as well be silence. Anko’s never been the type for it.

“So,” she says, “I hear you’re a dyke now. Wanna?”

Sasuke feels the corner of her lip turn up. “That’d be a little too incestuous for me.”

Anko leans back in the chair, hands hanging lazily off the armrests, breasts trying to escape the confinement of her shirt. “I always thought that was such an irrational prejudice.”

Sasuke supposes that objectively she’s right. Biological issues are easily countered by contraceptive, and any social problems are coincident with, not logically caused by, the actual incest. That’s simple sense, but then nothing encourages idiots more than being proved wrong.

“Well,” she admits, shrugs, “there are plenty of people who’d be worse than Itachi, I guess, come to that.”

“See? He’s hot stuff.”

Lifting an eyebrow, Sasuke lets it be understood that she’s not given much consideration to Itachi’s potential hotness.

“Really? He said you were his first kiss.”
“I was five,” Sasuke says. “Hotness was not a primary concern.”

“I was hot for tons of people when I was a kid,” Anko says. “It was easier then, before you asked for so much. Just a smile or a wave or a particular way of walking, and you’d have a brand new crush.”

Probably Anko would actually punch her if she said, I hear it’s common for sexually abused children to become over-sexualised.

“So does your mum know? I take it Daddy Dearest doesn’t, or you wouldn’t be fit to show yourself in public.”

She’s on the verge of saying, A few too many witnesses for any of that, when it strikes her that she doesn’t know how he would react. Maybe he would go insane, maybe he wouldn’t care.

“Not that I’m aware. It’s none of her business.”

Anko shrugs. “If Fugaku loses it, it will be.”

“Unlike some of us, she’s free to leave him.”

“She’d have to leave you too, though.”

“For all intents and purposes, she did that a long time ago.”

“I guess,” says Anko, who will have heard the same tune from Kakashi, from Itachi. From herself, maybe, back before she broke free of whatever past she has. “Might be she’ll want the best for you.”

“Oh, yes,” Sasuke says, her voice thick with sweetness, wobbling under the weight of it. “She always wants what’s best, what’s easiest.” She scoffs, staring past Anko at the sky. “Because the heteronormative lifestyle has been so easy on her.”

“You have a point.”
“I always have a point,” Sasuke says, standing. “Leave me alone.”
Blinking under the hair towel, she hisses in irritation at the patch of mud on her trouser leg. Stupid freaking Akamaru, she’d counted on not having to do any more laundry over the holidays.

“Mum,” she calls, hobbling barefoot down the cluttered stairs. “D’you know where the strong soap is?”

Right in the hallway, Dad closing the door behind her, is Sasuke.

The last few steps fall away under her feet, until she’s stumbled off the stairs and stands frozen on the news-paper carpeting. She’s so busy staring, she has no idea what Mum’s talking about when her voice issues from the kitchen, “Did you check under the sink?”

“I think she forgot,” Dad says mildly, slipping back towards his tea pot.

And after the eternal almost two weeks of curt phone calls and antsy missing and euphoric daydreams Sasuke is here, stepping forward around the discarded shoes.

“Hey.” It’s a very breathy word, completely unlike her normal voice.

“Hi,” says Sasuke, and Naruto’s not quite sure how it happens but she’s got her now, arms around her, fingers burrowing in the thick winter clothing to find the nooks in her hip they like to catch in. Sasuke tilts her face, resolute and pale and happy, and kisses her.

It’s so good, finally and so good.

When she looks up it’s with Sasuke’s arms looped around her neck, Sasuke’s body caught against her own – into the startled faces of her parents.

“Sorry,” says Dad. “You just went all quiet out here.”

Mom chimes in, “Tea?”
Naruto says nothing, mouth too busy smiling, too caught up still in the kissing for words.

Sasuke says, “Thank you, Mrs Uzumaki, I’d be delighted.”

While Naruto knows the polite smile, demure but glittering, is false, it doesn’t look fake. Sasuke slides off her coat and scarf, following Naruto into the kitchen. Though she must have come right from the airport, in the slacks and jewellery she could be the host of one of those TV shows about rebuilding some scruffy family’s home.

She curls up on one of the ratty kitchen chairs with none of the hesitation she showed on first taking the low-rent bus line, accepting a cup of tea but no sugar, preferring honey or nothing to sweeten it.

“So,” Mum says brightly. “I understood you spent Christmas abroad? It must have been lovely.”

“Quite,” says Sasuke, prompting Naruto to look up from spooning half the container of brown sugar into her own cup. Obviously Sasuke is keen on changing the subject, as she immediately reverts to being charming about academic debate. As words like Nietzsche and discursive theory trickle with increasing enthusiasm through the air, Naruto and Dad share a moment of complete understanding.

“Hey,” she mutters, nudging Sasuke. “English.”

For the first time she fully appreciates Sasuke’s restraint concerning Naruto’s behaviour in the Uchiha home, as Sasuke now refrains from any dig at her intelligence.

“Ah,” Mum laments, and her rosy face and the fingers moving in front of her, sketching out her words, prompts the possibility of regret. “You see what I have to deal with – uncultured oafs all around.” But she’s smiling, standing to collect the tea things. “I’m sorry, but there’s this TV interview I was hoping to catch.”

Dad too starts putting the things away, rinsing mugs and drying them languidly, in ritual almost.

For a moment, at the table, there’s only foolish grinning; the sort of foolish you can spot on others but which feels like wisdom on your own love-struck mouth. Then, briefly, she’s surprised, given the overly cordial behaviour minutes ago, that Sasuke doesn’t offer to help cleaning up. Naruto might’ve
even complained about Sasuke reverting to treating her parents as servants rather than teachers, except she treats her own mother the same way.

Needless to say this isn’t anything Naruto would label okay, but then Mikoto’s behaviour towards Sasuke isn’t either.

In a second Sasuke will move; shift pointedly, open her mouth.

“Oh, right,” Naruto remembers, a colony of butterflies erupting violently in her stomach, twirling madly under her skin. “I left it …here.” Under Sasuke’s blank gaze she stands on tip-toe to rummage in one of the cabinets, where the gift was put after Mum relented at the sight of crumbled paper and multiple cuts and helped her wrap it. “I, er, got you something.”

While steady, Sasuke’s hands are extremely cautious around the brightly wrapped gift, several fingers lost under the explosion of ribbons. “I – thank you.” She doesn’t sound grateful as she mechanically unwraps it, staring at her own fingers with something akin to curiosity, as though she had not made them move.

The wrapping flutters to the floor, crinkled Santa Claus faces gazing mournfully up at them. The book in Sasuke’s hands is disappointingly boring: a slim blue paperback without any flashy pictorial adornments.

“I thought,” Naruto says. “I mean, you like all that fancy-pansy academic stuff, I figured this’d teach you to turn your nose up at sci-fi.”

“I don’t believe I’ve heard of her,” Sasuke says, her fingers softer now, almost caressing the lacklustre front page.

Naruto goggles. “You’re shitting me. You’ve been dissing sci-fi without reading Jones?”

“Well,” Sasuke says, after a very short silence. “Not anymore, it seems.” She puts Deconstructing the Starship: Science, Fiction and Reality carefully on the table. “I’m not,” she says, abruptly, with a blunt hard neutrality. “I didn’t know we were doing gifts.”

“It’s fine,” Naruto waves her off. “It was just this idea.”
“The hell it is,” says Sasuke, surprising her by swearing in the same room as a parent, although a preoccupied one. After a bleak, furious moment she relaxes marginally, reaching behind her to unclasp her necklace. It dangles between them before collapsing in Naruto’s palm, a thin golden chain to which is attached a slender pendant, golden too and not quite circular, compelling contemplation of the tiny unspecific irregularity.

“It’s beautiful.” The words sound different in her voice, huskier and less polite than when spoken by adults, or on television.

“Merry Christmas,” Sasuke says, sounding but not looking ironic.

Dad nods at them and slips away, the coach croaking audibly in the other room as he joins Mum.

“Do it up for me?” She’s holding the ends of the chain together behind her neck, and Sasuke sighs to cover what might have been a smile and walks around her, pulling Naruto’s hair out of the way. It does strike her, though she’s not sure how seriously, “Isn’t it rude to give away gifts?”

Through the hand still resting lightly on her neck, she can feel Sasuke’s characteristic one-shouldered shrug. “Some of our acquaintances are too nouveau riche to realise it’s gauche to give money.”

With new-found interest Naruto studies the pendant — something Sasuke chose, bought for herself.

There’s no mention of Sasuke leaving; she follows Naruto’s circumscribed route up the stairs, smirking at her the way only somebody who hasn’t suffered a million splinters in the feet would. In the summer it was one thing, the soles of her feet impregnable from walking on gravel roads, but now winter has softened them and she has to curse herself day after day for forgetting her slippers.

Naruto’d snap at her, feeling another wooden splice sinking into her toe, save that when she half-turns, leaning on the wall to pluck out the splinter — oh god! the tenderness — Sasuke is holding the Starship pressed to her breast.

The door clicks shut behind them, and it’s early for sleeping but late enough for bed. They’re at their best together naked.
Her clothes are dropped haphazardly on the floor; she’s more concerned watching Sasuke undress under the soft familiar glow of the lion cub-shaped nightlight that has followed her since her fourth birthday, the movements efficient and sensual and somehow obvious, like they’re a real couple.

Real, maybe, as in established, grown up, secure.

“When did you change the sheets?” Sasuke demands, giving the unmade bed a highly doubtful inspection.

“I don’t know, couple weeks ago? Look, I told you the heater’s acting funny, half the time the only way to be in the room is under the blankets. No point changing them when I’m just gonna use them dressed and dirty anyway.”

Her face the blank that’s considered the polite version of disgusted, Sasuke keeps her undershirt and underwear even as the icy draft chases her under the comforter. Naruto follows her, sliding a leg between Sasuke’s and drying her damp hair on Sasuke’s shirt.

“Cut it out!”

“What? I lost my towel downstairs somewhere. It’s cold.”

In reality of course it’s very hot. Her blood flushes through her, as though pulled by the tide. Which would make Sasuke the moon, and could potentially spawn another horrendous sonnet. Sasuke’s swatting hand is caught, Naruto licks her wrist; they roll over, tumble under the comforter. Straddling her stomach, rather than laughing Sasuke looks so triumphant Naruto almost cries with tenderness when Sasuke leans down and starts kissing her.

Burrowing in the curve of Sasuke’s neck, Naruto smells and nuzzles and bites until they’re on equal ground again, pushing impatiently at Sasuke’s shirt.

“Wait,” Sasuke mutters, disentangling. “Don’t rip, you’ll pull the buttons.”

Naruto pushes herself up on an elbow, spitting hair. “Who cares?”
“I do.”

It’s really not so bad watching Sasuke’s refined hands work, pushing button after button out of their holes, then sliding the fabric off her shoulders, actually, infuriatingly, taking the time to fold the shirt before putting it away on a nearby chair. The fact that she takes the opportunity to also remove her bra is pretty good consolation for the delay, though.

Naruto pulls her back down and quite soon her toes are curling so hard she cuts herself on an overlong nail.

“And to answer your previous question,” she – purrs is the wrong word, it sounds more like Akamaru did when he’d eaten those bad eggs – says afterwards, resting her face in the sweaty hollow of Sasuke’s shoulder, “I am totally a lamed vovnik.”

Never has a raised eyebrow looked so adorable. “You’re not even Jewish.”

Naruto pulls her closer, pleased when Sasuke’s fingers play idly over her ribs. “That’s discrimination.”

“I think the correct phrase is affirmative action, but whatever. I can’t believe you remembered it long enough to ask your mum what it means.”

“I resent that. I could’ve so known what a lamed vovnik is.”

“You don’t even know anything about Christian mythology,” Sasuke argues, sufficiently invested in the argument her pupils have shrunk to normal size though her voice is still lazy. “There’s no way you’d know enough about Judaism to appropriate it on your own.”

Naruto sticks her tongue out, half inadvertently licking Sasuke’s collar bone. “So how was it really? Christmas. You said…”

Well, it was more about what she didn’t say.

“It sucked.”
“Yeah, I got that. Details?”

“No,” Sasuke says. “You tell me something. Something real.”

“I,” says Naruto, and does. She talks, a little, about rage, about not feeling human anymore, and about being very close to death: almost killed, almost killer. About how, it’s funny, sort of – of course that’s not okay, but probably she could do one of those crimes passionnel.

“I couldn’t fall seriously in love with anybody who wouldn’t kill me if I cheated.”

“That’s… unhealthy,” Naruto remarks, the words erupting from a tight, sore throat after it’s become evident that Sasuke is quite serious. She’s half sat up, cradling Sasuke against her.

“You’re one to talk,” Sasuke says very dryly.

Anyway, and perhaps fortunately, Sasuke very much isn’t the type to cheat. Never would she lower herself to that squalor.

There’s an interval of perusing Sasuke’s feet, petite and pretty as her hands, on which the cigarette marks have faded a little, dark grey now rather than black, of Sasuke kissing beneath her ears, and counting the veins in which, through the skin, resting her hands on Naruto’s back, she can feel a pulse.

“Is he actually any good?” Naruto asks then, idly, tracing picture patterns on Sasuke’s skin. A goblin, a cloud. “That guy Mum’s always referencing, Nietzsche or whatever.”

“It’s pretentious sexist bullshit,” Sasuke dismisses. She rolls over onto her stomach, pushing herself up on her elbows, face resting on her interlaced fingers. “It’s much like all the so-called great texts, they’re reinterpreted into something complex and profound, but if you look at the original it’s nothing much.” She stretches. “What time is it?”

“Don’t know,” Naruto mutters, reaching for the clock on the nightstand. “Let’s see, about half ten.”
“I should go.”

“No,” Naruto says, instinctively. Their eyes meet again, Sasuke’s surprised but not displeased, a little tired and wary. “Stay.”

A moment of post-word communication, and then Sasuke says, “All right.”

Her arms are full again, full of Sasuke, warm ungainly weight.

“I need to call Itachi,” Sasuke remembers, struggling free and leaning out of the bed to locate her mobile. During the short conversation Naruto dedicates intense study to Sasuke’s hip, mapping it with eyes and nose and hands and tongue, even pressing her ear to it, to hear the secret singing of the flesh. She’s always hungry with Sasuke, not always famished but never without some sort of yearning tugging at her.

It’s the first time since childhood that Naruto’s slept with anybody other than Kyuubi – with somebody who murmurs back, and swats at her, and takes up so much hot space.

It’s a lot more difficult than she’d thought it would be.

Their limbs tangle, she seems to have at least one arm too many, and all the bony interruptions on Sasuke’s body cut into her.

Except then Sasuke says, “Idiot,” and does it so easily, so naturally, curling up with expertise, adjusting Naruto’s grip until they’re both in an endurable position. Her skin smells of what Naruto thinks is the plane, something faintly artificial, institutional.

And Sasuke’s lying in her bed and Naruto’s lying around her and it’s working, it’s happening.

For a long time she’s too thrilled to fall asleep. Usually she has to hoard wakefulness, hiding it away in the crevices of her mind before her head hits the pillow and unconsciousness descends upon her in one fell swoop, but today it’s Sasuke’s breathing that evens out, oddly going lighter rather than deeper in sleep. Of course, Naruto wasn’t the one spending slow weary hours on a plane, or reading through the holiday nights because stress overpowered sleep.
She mumbles into Sasuke’s neck, the short soft hair tickling her face; plays a little with her breast, at home cupped in her hand; manages to get a pubic hair snagged painfully under Sasuke’s arse as she shifts in dreaming.

Next morning she wakes early, sweaty and cramped and with Sasuke’s elbow spearing her stomach, grumbling for a dizzy second before delight swiftly overpowers discomfort. Glutted on cuddling, she sits up, pulls her legs to her chest and studies Sasuke; the way her eyelids lie heavy and still without a flutter, the way her toes move when she dreams. A fleck of something white that must be dried spittle rests like a freckle at the corner of her mouth; the skin beneath her nostrils is rosy and looks soft.

But her movement must have disturbed Sasuke.

Eyes filmed with sleep, dark blank blind like Kiba’s puppies’, Sasuke mumbles, “Kakashi…?”

“No,” says Naruto, on the far side of a sudden internal earthquake. Her heart thuds sluggishly, not just pausing but stopping between every beat. “Me.”

A deep, thick breath undulates through Sasuke, sliding tensely out of her. “Right.” She sits up under the comforter, majestic and childish with sleepy disarray and her complete ignoring of it. “Were you watching me sleep?”

For a crazy instant Naruto’s tempted to stick her tongue out and say, *It doesn’t count as an Edward Cullen symptom if I’ve slept with you first.*

“Do you think of this as cheating?” she demands. “This, being with me.”

“No.” The word is smooth, slurred still with sleep, but Sasuke standing is like an incision in the scene. “Not anymore.”

Naruto throws herself forward, through the strangling clinging desert of used sheets, naked on the bed and laying claim, begging remorse, demanding response. It’s the intense sort of hug, the sort of hug that will leave bruises and doesn’t really fit the simple, child-friendly word.

Sasuke’s hands are very terse on her shoulders. “I love Kakashi,” she says, astute now and cold, every word dragged heavy from the depths. “That’s never going to change.”
“I love you,” Naruto says, the pendant around her neck cutting into her, pressed too hard to her chest by Sasuke’s stomach.

Sasuke pulls away with a movement somehow gruff, has poured herself into a shirt and turned her back in the curiously delayed blink of an eye.

“If you leave now so help me…!”

Sasuke’s back, visible inside the billows of the shirt, freezes. It is so tense it actually quivers.

She comes to sit beside Naruto on the bedside, her legs long and thin and all tangled up in each other.

In silence Naruto clutches her hand, and Sasuke lets her, Sasuke’s fingers curling around hers too, whether intentionally or to avoid an uncomfortable position.

Finally Sasuke says, crisp but still subdued, submerged somewhere. “I need a shower.”

“Me too,” Naruto says, her voice high with suppressed hysterical laughter. “Can we share? There’s not enough water for four people.”

Normally she wouldn’t ask, because she’d just walk right in with her.

“How could I refuse,” Sasuke says tonelessly. She picks up her bra and jumper, her jeans and socks and knickers. “I should have brought clothes.”

“Some of your stuff’s here,” Naruto offers, nodding towards the wardrobe. On the only clean shelf is collected a tank top, a tshirt, three pairs of knickers, a sports bra, a number of socks, a slightly ripped skirt and a shirt Naruto suspects is Itachi’s. Too large for Sasuke, too small for Kakashi.

Naruto liberates some clothes of her own, throwing on her trusty orange robe for the trek through the hallway. “You probably want some slippers.”
Wordlessly Sasuke slides her feet into the extra pair Naruto reclaimed from the debris under the bed. She thaws in the bathroom, doesn’t even look desperately out of place anymore, snorting at Naruto and returning the splashes like she’s done again and again, after fighting.

Her fingers curl on Sasuke’s stomach, which is so acutely winter-pale that Naruto’s hand looks tanned, the navel like a crater.

Afterwards, serving Sasuke breakfast – Naruto wouldn’t expect her to start looking through cabinets even the owners can’t make sense of, like Kiba always does, but most people fidget when waiting for their host to do the work, service them. Sasuke looks happy and relaxed, surprisingly healthy in the morning sun despite the darkness under her eyes.

She takes tea and some toast, crumbling more of it between her fingers than she actually eats. Probably she’d be a lot more pleased if the yellow stain on her thumb was nicotine instead of butter.

Her parents are good about it, Mum having already cleared off to what they call her office, the little room upstairs with the fake 19th century-ish rose wallpaper that used to be a walk-in closet. Still she feels a little like a pet animal trotting up with its prey dangling proudly from her mouth, dirty and blissed out. Dad smiles and says good-morning but is mostly done with his coffee and papers, doesn’t stay long. She realises with a start as he puts his things away that he has entered the age of reading glasses.

*I love you, Naruto thinks. I love you. I love you.*

She can no longer remember which she said.

“Try the ramen,” Naruto says, pushing her own laden plate towards Sasuke. “What? It’s good stuff, and you obviously don’t like the bread.”

“Ramen is not breakfast food,” Sasuke mutters, “in the sense that it’s not food at all.”

“Not for sucky mortals like you, clearly – it’s like, what is it? Nectar and ambrosia. Food of the gods!”
Snorting, Sasuke glances at the paper, but Dad only left the sports part, and Sasuke’s respect for sports fans is on about the same level as her respect for religious people.

Naruto chews her mouthful of salted carbohydrates slowly. She’s onboard with the notion that there’s having different opinions and then there’s having opinions that are actually damaging, but she’s not so jolly about the idea that harbouring certain opinions makes you a lost case, essentially subhuman.

For a moment she wonders if Mikoto is religious.

Maybe it wouldn’t matter, though, because Sasuke’s all about, or wants to be all about, being reasonable, impersonal, and if being a person/subject/human is considered dependent upon your intelligence, then obviously subscribing to illogic will mean you’re less of a person.

Yet here she is, within touchable distance – so does that mean she’s into bestiality or that Naruto’s a secret smarty?

Her smothered giggle raises Sasuke’s brow, but no comment is forthcoming.

And Sasuke stands, and dumps her cup in the sink, and directs a suggestive glance at the basement door.

Naruto’s smile grows and grows, hot on her face. “You wanna…?”

“You don’t?”

“Duh! I just, I thought for sure you’d be anal about brushing your teeth and shit first.”

After some poking, Sasuke reveals, completely without shame or apparent understanding of her own insanity, that normally she indeed would have, however she had jam on her toast, and as everybody knows jam contains fruit juice, after the ingestion of which one is recommended to wait at least one hour before exposing one’s teeth to tooth paste, so as to avoid damage to the enamel.

They descend the stairs, loud croaks above the pitter-patter of rats growing fat and warm inside the
walls.

It’s a better time than they’ve had for a while; not so desperately, honestly aggressive that you have
to hold back or do damage, real damage.

Sasuke laughs a slow low laugh, as relaxed as Naruto has ever seen her and back in the circus
princess pose, legs spread spidery around her, with an entirely different sort of grace than the usual
strictness. She seems a little drunk, which, considering, is pretty sad.

Feeling quite like a seal, fat and cuddly and content, Naruto rolls over.

Seals are actually rather vicious predators, Sasuke objects, but really that only improves the analogy.

“You said you trained with your dad,” Sasuke says, using an overlong toenail to scratch her leg.

Embarrassingly glad she remembered, Naruto explains that yeah, she was always considered an
overactive and aggressive child, and Dad used to be into martial arts, so he decided to, as he put it,
channel her energy in a constructiv e direction. Probably it saved her life.

“Is it different, fighting in like clubs?”

“It’s dull,” Sasuke dismisses. “Too much holding back, lots of nobodies who shouldn’t be there.”

“Don’t you know anybody else who does?”

“Neji can’t hit girls.”

“What a pussy.”

“Yeah,” Sasuke says, exposing a long lovely stretch of throat by leaning her head back. “I tried once,
despite his protests, he wouldn’t do anything.”
“Wouldn’t Temari know how,” Naruto muses, chewing on her lip. They fought, and squabbled and laughed, until her entire mouth tastes like blood. “I mean, if Gaara was all aggressive before.”

Either Sasuke is marginally tenser or Naruto is imagining her to be marginally tenser as she says, with a careful sort of nonchalance, “She won’t enable me.”

“Enable you to what, exactly?”

One shoulder juts up in a shrug, not de-scrunching Naruto’s frown. “Over-exercise is supposedly part and parcel with self-starvation.”

“You’re not that skinny anymore,” Naruto objects. “Like, way skinny, yeah, but not sicko skinny.” She shifts forward, born on a sudden happy glow. “Hey, even after a week and a half with all the hateful relatives, you’ve still kept the weight.”

Sasuke looks disgusted and quite desperate for a cigarette. “That’s because I’ve been boozing, Naruto.”

“Oh. Okay, less awesome, but still, silver lining.” She sits down beside Sasuke, just far enough away that only the tips of their shoulders are touching. “Why did you start the whole anti-flesh regimen?”

“Supposedly I have control issues,” Sasuke says in the tight slick voice she uses to diss her therapists. “And possibly anger issues.” Naruto braces for it and then, yes, it comes: “Why did you get bullied?”

It’s like a lump, all the same: like getting shot, and having the bullet lodged cold and tearing and obstructing in you. “Supposedly,” she echoes, “I had loser freak issues.”

“I don’t like loser freaks.”

“Actually,” Naruto says, getting on her knees, getting in Sasuke half-turned face, “I think you sort of do. Face it, there’s me, and when you tried the one night stand thing you picked Gaara, and Itachi’s not exactly the model of normalcy either.”

“Fuck off.”
But the hand on her shoulder isn’t really pushing at her, is a suggestion not an order.

“Also couldn’t you train with Itachi?” she remembers. “I saw all those trophies in his room.”

“No,” says Sasuke. “What the hell where you doing in his room?”

Naruto waves this away, “Door was open. Why not?”

For the first time in weeks Sasuke gives her a glare of actual fury. “Because I always lose.”

“So? It’s not like I could beat Dad.”

“You can’t beat your dad because he’s twice your size and twice your experience and he’s your fucking dad. I can’t beat Itachi because nobody can ever beat Itachi. Itachi is a genius. Itachi is the best at everything always. He just fucking dances through it, he’s so far ahead. Body chess, Kakashi called it, he could just –” She makes an inarticulate sound, the sort not sure yet which word it will become. “Sometimes I’m glad he’s cracked. It’s the only way I could do anything he hadn’t already done better.” Another stillborn word, although her voice has been laced with calm. “The only thing I ever got over him was Kakashi.”

“What the hell, are you saying…?”

But Sasuke doesn’t want to talk anymore and Mum is calling for them, asking if Sasuke would like to join them for lunch.

xxxxx

Years ago when Naruto was small, her little legs took forever to tult through the days. Every summer was its own separate infinity, and even the shorter Christmas holidays sprang eternal, lay solid and secure in her hands like a large golden cake of freedom and safety. Now there’s just this thin sweet slice, time racing forward like greased lightning.
On a Thursday morning she sees Fugaku for the first time, in the flesh, unedited by her uncharitable imagination. He's exiting the building just as she’s coming in, doesn’t look at her, doesn’t seem to realise it’s his flat she’s going to. Shockingly tall to be Sasuke’s and Itachi’s father, he’s got salt-and-pepper hair, handsome frown lines and very beautiful hands, bare of gloves, the XXL version of Sasuke’s. Hands that have hurt her, but must have held her too, that surely at some point she must have loved.

She passes him by, lounges in the elevator, comfortable and amused now by the whore-red carpet and the ostentatious looking glass. It goes beyond vulgar and right back into stylish, with added detachment and edge.

Or she guesses that’s the intention. From what she’s seen of the neighbours, a good many of them probably like it unironically.

“Yo, bitch,” she greets Sasuke, waving at her across the marble kitchen counter. “What up?”

“I’m fine, thank you,” Sasuke says pointedly, an eyebrow up but one corner of her mouth too. Later she says, “He’s been fairly tolerable, since we got back.”

She seems too tentatively happy, too brittle in her focus, for Naruto to prod. Better save the fight for taking public transport, or legs, instead of a taxi, because she can’t afford being driven around all the time and damn if she’s going to abandon her Dutch Date policy.

The weather’s pretty nice, faint sun and melting snow in the gutters, and for once Sasuke’s underlying exercise mania stands her in good stead: she’s putting on her comfortable boats, without even an argument.

It’s not far to what Naruto privately refers to as the Sabaku building because she can never keep the ridiculous street names right; mixes them up with fictional ones, gets lost searching for roads never actually made.

It’s weird, all of them hanging out together, but then Naruto subscribes to the Weird Is Good school of thought. Still, she does not get the Sasuke/Temari friendship dynamic, would not have called it friendship at all if Sasuke hadn’t. They don’t speak much; when they do, little seems to be said.

Then again Sasuke and Neji apparently saw pages upon pages of deep meaning where Naruto only saw pretentious nonsense, so that might just be her.
“So are you still the All-Mighty Queen Bitch?” Kankurou tosses over his shoulder, tongue stretching out in concentration as he overtakes Naruto and Gaara on the *Crash Team Racing* court.

Not deeming to soil her hands with video game controllers, or more likely afraid to have her arse epically spanked by Naruto’s l33t PS3 skills, Sasuke’s holed up on the couch with Shikamaru, carrying on a low-voiced conversation and intermittently a game of Go.

“No way,” Shikamaru interrupts. “I know how much money you’ve got riding on that bet, no tips for you.”

“Aww, mate, throw me a bone here.”

“I’m hurt,” Sasuke drawls. “Won’t you be my fanboy anymore if I’m not?”

“Doll,” Kankurou says, fisting air and glory as he wins the race, “there is no way on earth I would not fanboy hot lesbian action. No way on this earth.”

“Keep up the creepy fetishizing and there won’t be any hot action for you, lesbian or otherwise,” Temari tells him, holding out her hand for Gaara’s controller.

Gaara scoots back against the couch, hugging his knees in a way that would be vulnerable on anybody else. “Would you like to play?” Shikamaru asks. “I’m ready for a take-over.”

Silence, glances, faces unreadable in the ambient glow from the telly.

“Yes,” says Gaara.

Sasuke angles the board towards him.

Hours and hours later Naruto gives into temptation and asks, studiously casual although they are by now alone, “Should we anticipate, like, *The Bitch Queen’s Empire Strikes Back*, though?”
“Let’s not spoilt it,” says Sasuke, not sounding very dapper anymore.

As it transpires, though, school reveals itself to be a remarkable anticlimax. But it’s good to see Sakura again, who has become taller and tanner over the break and has cut her hair until it’s shorter than Naruto’s, sneaking along her jaw line. Naruto almost hugs her; Sakura almost lets her: tension is running high, but different, in some sense. The tension of change instead of revolution, maybe, or if you want to be all poetic and pretentious you could say perhaps it’s the tension of something being born instead of something dying.

Presumably though birth is often far more painful than death, which makes you wonder – as you are bound and morally obliged to wonder about anything but geography during geography lessons – about most everybody going along with vaginal birth as though there were no alternatives, instead of just having C-sections, which give you just as much baby for a fraction of the pain.

Now, Naruto thinks it’d be kind of cool, for a very profound meaning of cool, to have a baby the old-fashioned way, pressing through the craziness and pain and exhilaration and really being there to see somebody partly of her own making being tugged out into the world, but then Naruto is pretty apt at handling pain. Most people aren’t, and shouldn’t be, shouldn’t have to be, despite how savage she can be sometimes, how sick of all the fooling around and not knowing anything about real stakes, real life.

Then when they’re having lunch with Sakura and Haku and Neji and the undivided attention of a truly sad number of uninvolved students, she remarks on the atmosphere and Sasuke says, “Ah, yes, quite fin de siècle really.”

“I would like to call on you,” Neji says, too solemn for the high school version of court intrigue to affect the sudden gravity, “later.”

And so it is arranged that Sasuke and Neji will join Naruto for chaperone duty on Kiba’s suddenly acquired second non-date with Hinata.

The park, the same park as last time but made different by two months of relentless snowing, stretches sullen and mostly abandoned before them. She’s not sure why they’re here again, as neither Hyuuga seems particularly outdorsy, and it’s a fair drive from the ritzy residences.
Next to the iced-over duck pond, a vendor has set up a stall renting out skates, and also loudspeakers blasting ‘90s pop hits.

“Come on!”

Kiba and Hinata respond easily to her tugging, Akamaru pissed to be left behind but catching up as they get stalled at the vendor, Kiba and Neji caught up in the controversy of who’s going to pay for Hinata’s skates.

“I-it’s really not necessary,” Hinata tries, but the words get stranded in her scarf and don’t make it to the boys.

Ruddy-cheeked with cold and embarrassment, she’s extremely cute, despite the weirdness of her and Sasuke looking a bit like the before and after pictures featured on a particularly strenuous gym’s ad campaign – they’re both winter pale, with the same dark hair, even though most of Hinata’s is hidden away; with the same sort of finely cut features, the high cheekbones and large eyes that make for classic beauty, glossed over for the present with the simple prettiness of youth. According to Tyra Banks, that is – Naruto’s love for trash telly has gone beyond quirky and straight into embarrassing, but when Gaara begged her to take one for the team by replacing him as Kankurou’s couch buddy, how could she refuse?

At least now she’ll get Sakura’s jokes about the SYTYCD judges.

She gets her skates laced, almost biting through her own tongue in concentration, and kicks off across the ice, swerving for ducks and kids and bumps.

“Always dreamed of being a skating princess?” Against the cold still backdrop Sasuke seems almost warm, light with her smirk, tentative on the skates, one hand still on the railing.

“Nah,” says Naruto, moon-walking backwards mostly because she can but, also, partly because Sasuke obviously can’t. “I did want to be Buffy, though, and she says in this awesome episode, it’s somewhere before Angel went crazy and stuff, anyway, she says how skating has always been her thing.” She tilts her head back, catching snowflakes, drifting like confetti from the sky, on her face. They melt off like tears. “I was really into it, for a while. Being Buffy, I mean. Heh, I even had the right hair for it, sort of.” She tugs at some blondness peaking out from under her knit hat.

“Sarah Michelle Gellar isn’t blond,” Sasuke remarks, still very light. Well, ice is light too, before it
crushes you under. She’s away from the railing now, twiggy and tense but skating relatively smoothly.

Naruto shrugs. “Buffy is.”

If this really was Buffy Sasuke would be an ice queen, some sort of winter siren, ethereal and lethal, luring you down under the ice.

Naruto’s thinking it would’ve been one of the episodes where the slaying is forgone in favour of some soul-restoring.

Except Sasuke doesn’t believe in souls, and neither really does Naruto. At least, she doesn’t have a clear articulate-able concept of what they’d be.

They’re distracted by shouts and giggles; Neji is reluctant to part with the railing, as indeed he was to part with his shoes, and Hinata wobbles, Kiba standing around being in her way, too shy to white knight it. Akamaru’s chasing ducks with abandon, pushing people over left and right.

“No!” Kiba wails, as one of the mothers alerts what looks like some sort of security guy. “Akamaru, down! Come here!”

Ducking between less proficient skaters, Naruto joins his chase for the delighted dog, finally catching up and blocking him off, enabling Kiba to collapse over him, taking firm hold of the collar.

“Sorry, sorry,” Kiba tries, one hand restraining Akamaru, the other held out in placation. “All my fault… so stupid… won’t happen again… hunting dogs, you know how it is, bred and trained for it.”

“He’s really a hunting dog?” Naruto asks as they’re escorted off the pond by several admonishing stares. “As in, you hunt with him?”

“Well, sure,” Kiba says, as though baffled by it not being obvious. “It’s what we specialise in, with the kennel.”

“That’s fucked up.”
“No it’s not,” Kiba objects. “It’s a – a time honoured tradition. Also it’s fun!”

“Yeah, totally. Hi, everybody, my hobbies are playing sports, watching telly and, oh yeah – killing things for kicks. Come on, there’s no way that’s not sick.”

“B-but,” Hinata interjects from where she’s appeared behind Kiba, twiddling her thumbs and looking up through her fringe, “by that logic, shouldn’t one have to be a vegan?”

“There’s kind of a difference between hunting for sport and hunting for food. Right?”

“Well, yes,” says Hinata, her voice soft and feathery as the wind trying to steal it away. “But we’re not in circumstances where we need to anymore. Nobody here has to eat meat. It’s just about thinking it tastes better. Isn’t it?”

“Hah!” Kiba yells. “Owned!”

“I do disapprove strongly of hunting for sports,” Hinata tells him, mild and kind and absolutely decided. “It’s – I’m sorry, but it’s barbaric. Taking lives is always wrong.”
Sasuke mentally curses the tension headache nestled in the back of her head, not sure what exactly she is supposed to be tense about.

“At this point,” Itachi used to tease, “it’d make more sense for you to be tense if it suddenly disappeared.”

Beside her Neji adjusts his hair, ironed so flat it can barely move in the wind. She could never get hers like that, when it was long; only Itachi managed.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he says. “It’s just.” He gestures towards Naruto, Kiba and Hinata, a loud, violently orange clique in between the waddling ducks and children. Her necklace will be beneath Naruto’s clothes, where it looks odd, unfamiliar suddenly although Sasuke has worn it herself several times, but strangely not out of place. “So does this mean you’ve changed your mind?”

_I told her not to date Kiba. She’s soft. She’d become fond of him. That wouldn’t end well for anybody._

“No,” says Sasuke, “I have parents who pay no attention to me, you’ve the opposite problem.”

“That’s not the word I’d choose.”

“I’m sure it’s not.”

“She doesn’t want to marry me.”

She shrugs. “I doubt she wants to go down the aisle with Inuzuka either.”

Half a pond away, the subjects of the conversation are being chased off the ice. Glad to be rid of the skates, Sasuke and Neji follow them, stepping ashore to hear Hinata doing a kiddie interpretation of
profoundness. In the interest of honouring her sibling-related truce with Neji, Sasuke refrains from comment.

They set off towards the edge of the park, Naruto saying how she went vegan, for a bit, but then she got really hungry.

“So by a bit, you mean...?”

“A few hours, yeah. It’s just, that fake food tastes like rubbish! Of course they’re right, it’s the right thing to do, but it’s really icky.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Sasuke says. “I’m sure there’s nothing as natural as meat in ramen.”

Inuzuka laughs; and they’re at the bus stop, breaking up. The dog and his boy are laughing with Naruto, stealing hopeful glances at Hinata as they bundle into the vehicle; the stillborn contempt on Neji’s face suggests he’s coming around to her child-free position.

“Can you care for somebody you look down on?” he stays in the stillness after the bus has left.

“You’d have to define care.”

“You’re right. Never mind. What will be, will be.”

“Whatever.” She turns her back with a wave, walking away, her throat scraping sore, replacing cigarettes with Itachi’s raspberry cough drops.

She’s cold the moment she opens the door, cold and still. Everything’s been so good lately, so easy, a tenuous lullaby, and they’ve followed it like stupid children entranced by the pied piper. She even tested the waters once, made a quip to Dad about lesbians, and under the glaring, amused dismissal and fallocentrism, he sounded relatively tolerant. Like maybe it wouldn’t be a big deal.

Like maybe he isn’t only a retard jackass, maybe there could be something more there, something to salvage.
But now Itachi’s entire body is clenched shut.

The coffee cup holds when she touches him, his fingers spasming around it but not breaking it. “Tell me what he’s done.”

“Nothing,” Itachi says, “nothing,” and when he adds, “He’s not been home since yesterday” she starts to believe him.

“It’s nothing,” says Itachi. “I just. I thought we were exclusive. She didn’t.”

The odd part is that Sasuke has always rather liked Anko. Even when she was sugar mummying Kakashi, there was something there to latch onto with interest, with a modicum of respect.

“It’s not her fault,” Itachi says. “It’s not like we’d sworn faith and fidelity. She did nothing wrong. We’d not discussed it.”

“I shouldn’t think you’d need to.”

“Dating can be casual.”

“She knows perfectly well you have no interest in seeing other people, why the hell would you agree to an open relationship?”

“Perhaps because it’s better than no relationship. I don’t know.”

“It doesn’t work like that.”

“It’s easy for you! People always – people have always – they keep falling for you, they keep caring even when you try to push them away. I’m sorry, but it’s not like that for me. Everybody likes me at a distance.”
Her hand falls from his arm. “I’m right here.”

He turns to face her, smiling sadly, shaking his head; gets up, leaves. “Don’t.”

She falls into the empty chair, breathing slowly through her mouth, every new rasp of air a cut inside her throat.

It’s better at school, where really nothing has changed; not when Itachi collapsed, or Kakashi appeared or disappeared, certainly not now.

Tenten watches her with speculation, a detached sort of curiosity. “So?” she says.

Sasuke doesn’t deign to answer, and of course that’s answer enough.

She hasn’t pressed the issue; neither has anybody else, not even Ino, skulking around with wide hurt eyes – finding out to her cost that not taking action is also a form of action, a choice with consequences. Now what everybody remembers is that Sasuke blew them off for a lowbrow dyke, and yet Ino didn’t topple her; despite the mumbled discontent, it’s done more for her reputation than anything she’s schemed since she was thirteen.

“Besides,” says Temari, “bi-curiosity is in.”

Outside the school gates Anko is leaning against her monster truck, beckoning. Thinking of Itachi, distant and drawn, Sasuke finds it in her to approach.

“You seen Itachi?” Anko wonders. “We were talking before, we were going to meet up, but now I’m only getting voicemail. Is he okay?”

The fact that there’s genuine worry present in the last question makes Sasuke furious. How dare this callous harlot assume she can hurt Itachi, damage him? How dare she give it her best effort?

“If he’s finally dumping you, he must be.”
“Right,” says Anko. “You’re a bit of a bitch.”

“And you’re a cheating whore,” Sasuke tells her with a bright, practised smile.

“Mmh, it’s really insensitive how I didn’t think fooling around with your old bff’s ex sugar mummy is the stuff of epic romance. In fact, I understood you told him much the same thing. I have to say, it’s good to see you care about him.”

“I guess that makes one of us. Excuse me.”

“Sasuke,” Anko calls after her. “I really do need to talk to him.”

“Not my problem.”

Hopefully Itachi has ignored her calls. If, more realistically, he’s turned his mobile off out of respect for hospital rules, Anko will find out eventually.

He’s been visiting Kakashi a fair bit, lately. Reports that “he doesn’t talk back so much anymore.”

xxxxx

It’s extremely weird to hear somebody actually say, “You always get so angry,” in the resigned, condescending tones actors adopt when they’re portraying middle class people fighting, which Naruto’s always thought is a bit like portraying impotent people having sex.

She’s kicked off her shoes and advanced through the hallway, rubbing warmth into her hands; pauses in the kitchen doorway.

Sasuke and her dad are sitting at the table, which is spread as usual with cups and papers and far too much silverware. Standing against the wall, cradling his own cup with tense thin fingers, Itachi nods at her, his face a more resigned version of its usual polite blankness.

There’s nothing polite about Sasuke’s blankness, over-careful and sharp. “Yes,” she says, “it’s so
strange for me as a woman to be angry about sexism. And of course you do realise that invalidating and belittling that anger is in itself sexist.”

Fugaku sighs, a practiced court-room sigh. “You call me sexist no matter what I say.”

Staring at him in silence, Sasuke’s eyes actually widen a little. She’s not the only one struck speechless, or at any rate a version of speechless, because there are words – oh, there are words – but, Naruto realises with her mouth already half open, there are no words Sasuke knows that he’d be capable of taking in, or that’d let them both stay living here if spoken.

Explaining to little brats is usually Naruto’s area of expertise, as Sasuke’s never managed to lower herself to the appropriate intellectual level without becoming insulting and incredulous in almost equal measure. It takes a particular sort of skill to explain logic to somebody who hasn’t already understood it, and Sasuke overall is not good at explaining.

They both heard quite a bit of this sort of shit from people during the anti-ism project, and whoa, Naruto remembers the verbal bitch-slaps and sucker-punches Sasuke dealt then. She waits now with baited breath, tension like strangling in her throat.

Eventually Sasuke says, very calmly, the sort of calm that can only overlay extreme agitation, “If you’re called sexist no matter what you say, that’s probably something you ought to think about.” At first, given her enormous superiority complex and the acrimonious disdain for her dad, Naruto thinks she’s going to disengage there. She doesn’t. “If a woman tells you that you’re being sexist, or a person of colour tells you that you’re being racist, one would assume there is a basis for this. The only reason your reaction would be, they’re saying things I don’t want to hear so I don’t need to listen to them anymore – well, it certainly implies they had a point.”

His large beautiful hand adjusting the paper, Fugaku replies, “You never keep to the issue at hand.”

There’s another long, tense silence during which breathing becomes audible and Itachi stares at his dad as though he cannot believe he said what he did.

Sasuke’s mouth has taken on an odd shape, caught between a frown and a smirk. “Funny you should say that.” The stress on you is light, but Naruto’s got used to listening closely.

She says, “What’s going on?”
“Shut up,” Itachi hisses.

But Fugaku turns to look at her, offering cordial greeting. The issue seems to be that if pregnant women suffering from serious back pain are denied sick pay because mild back pain is considered a natural consequence of pregnancy – well, Naruto isn’t sure what the issue is, apart from the rampant sexism, until it dawns on her that apparently Fugaku has failed to realise the sexist part of the problem.

“Only women can become pregnant,” he’s saying now.

“That is my point,” Sasuke replies, in about the same tone that made Naruto slap her, all those months ago.

“This incessant talk of discrimination – pregnancies are voluntary.”

“How is that relevant?” Sasuke says after a moment of what Naruto assumes is letting a smaller issue slide to focus on the larger one. She wouldn’t like to think it’s about Gaara. “Severe back pain isn’t.”

“They could always choose not to become pregnant.”

“Victim blaming is such an attractive quality in a person.” Naruto appreciates the truth, and also the irony, of this statement. “Jesus fucking Christ, men can have all the children they want for five minutes of fun, but of course women should be obligated to suffer for them? Women are being refused sick pay because of their pain being a complication of a condition only women can experience. How exactly is that not the definition of sexism?”

“Not all pregnant women suffer back pain,” Fugaku says patiently into his coffee.

Sasuke’s stare is blank again, but a different sort of blank: confused, desperate. “When did I ever claim they did? What does that have to do with anything?”

“We’re not getting anywhere.” The paper comes up with an audible crinkle, a sound like a slap.

Fuck you, Naruto thinks. But for an accident of birth, he’d never touch her, but he’s getting to her
now. He’s not earned this. If he weren’t her sperm donor, if she didn’t need his money, she’d never have lowered herself to listen to a word out of his mouth. Now her cheeks are bright, a sore hot red.

“Yes, because of course it’s up to you alone to decide when a conversation involving two people should be ended.”

Sighing again, that weighty, obscurely satisfied sigh, Fugaku lowers his papers. “You can never take in arguments.”

“The problem we keep having,” Sasuke says, “is that your — statements, shall we call them? — aren’t actually arguments.”

“So that’s up to you to decide?”

This is about as close to helpless, to unravelled, as she’s seen Sasuke in casual conversation. “There are definitions. Words mean things.”

“Ah, yes.” He folds his hands. “So who decided on this particular meaning?”

“People who speak the language? The entire academic community?”

“Yes, well,” Fugaku says, adopting what would appear a caricature of a schoolmaster’s tones if she hadn’t heard Iruka use them as well, “but many people thinking something does not in fact make it so. Why, during the Dark Ages every scholar was convinced the sun revolved around the earth.”

“If you seriously cannot see the difference between how language and natural sciences work, then I don’t think this conversation is going anywhere.”

“And now it’s you suddenly terminating the discussion.” The little grin is smug enough to be Sasuke’s, but tinted with an almost childish sort of happiness that Sasuke would never display.

Although she did once. She wore it well in the photo Naruto sneaked a peak at, the one that showed her laughter-eyed and leaning against Kakashi.
Clearly girls being speechless and looking ready to cry with humiliated rage is just that great. He adds, “There’s simply no point talking about these matters with you.”

“Then you might consider not bringing them up.” Sasuke says, her voice calm again: bland, tired, full of distaste. “You may recall I haven’t initiated conversation with you in years. I would appreciate it if you showed me the same courtesy.”

“Years is a long time.” Once again there’s a wannabe-scholar headshake. “These are complicated issues. We’re both adults, there’s no reason we should not be able to talk.”

Sasuke takes a deep breath and repeats the standard reply she and Sakura made Naruto memorise, back during the anti-ism project: “At a certain point ignorance becomes wilful, becomes indistinguishable from malice. Again, there are two possible reactions to being called a sexist – one, you engage in some introspective work, see where you go wrong, and work with yourself to do better. Two, you decide she’s a bitch and you don’t want to listen to her. Now, choosing option two does mean than, yes, you are a sexist.”

“You’re always so condescending.”

It’s funny he should say that, considering the little speech was created to replace Naruto’s “you gotta really fucking work to stay so conveniently ignorant about this shit”, and Sakura’s long-winded “sexist isn’t an identity, it’s about actions and behaviours, many of them unconscious, internalised, that can be worked on and changed”.

Naruto’s really tempted to tell him to take his tone argument and put it where the sun doesn’t shine.

“I really don’t think you’re in a position to be complaining about that,” Sasuke says tightly.

“Look, we’ve been over this, I like women. I’m very fond of them. If you’ll remember, just the other day I was remarking how Koestler was absurd – how obviously the reason there haven’t been as many great queens as great kings is that there haven’t been nearly as many queens as kings period.”

Naruto’s eyes have staged a rebellion against their sockets, are trying to explode them, clamour out.
“It’s impressive how you’ve managed to state a perfectly obvious fact as though grasping it means you deserve praise instead of just meaning you’re not clinically retarded.”

“Dad,” Itachi interrupts. “We need to leave now, to make it in time.”

“Right,” Fugaku says, rising smoothly, nodding at Naruto as he breezes past her.

“Hey,” she says, moving forward until the table digs into her thighs, standing opposite Sasuke.

Sasuke’s still holding her coffee cup, soft and distant in her sleeping clothes – although the silky green pyjamas are admittedly a fair bit more formal than many of Naruto’s regular outfits.

“I need to go change.”

“Sure. Cool.” She fumbles around the table to follow Sasuke out of the room and upstairs, reaching for her hand and ending up grabbing her hip. “We can stay in.”

“Why would we?”

“Er…” The brief, rueful grin answering her own tells her Sasuke realises she fed her that one.

“I thought you were all hung up on the butterfly house.”

She shrugs, pushing Sasuke’s bedroom door closed behind them. “It’s just Kiba asked me to check it out, see if it was okay for Shino’s birthday. Butterflies are sort of insects, right?” Kiba himself has been busy at home with a litter of puppies taken sick.

“I’m sure Shino thinks so,” Sasuke says, in the distant, pleased tones that mean she’s busy not thinking about something. “If he’s gay.”

“As long as it’s got eight legs, I doubt he cares about the other parts.” She steps closer, getting her hands on a currently half-naked Sasuke before she can pull on a shirt, resting her forehead against the nape of her neck. “Hey. You were right. He was an arsehole.”
“I’m always right,” Sasuke says very softly. She’s also saying, Drop it.

When she starts pulling off her pyjamas trousers, Naruto gets too dry-mouthed to disobey.

Sasuke leans into her touch, parting her legs a little to allow Naruto’s hands access, but slips a bra and then a shirt on. “I’m not in the mood.”

She whines in disappointment, nuzzling her face against the back of Sasuke’s unmarked shoulder, before stepping over to the window, inspecting the early-February slush covering the pavement.

“Do let’s be on our way.”

xxxxx

Inside the Butterfly House the air is thick with fake summer, the smells and sounds and temperature of it. Sweat sticks between her shoulder blades, slips down her neck as she does battle with her clingy winter clothes, the wool gone itchy with the heat.

Within minutes she realises the mittens and hat and scarf won’t all fit in her pockets, she’ll have to lug around a huge bundle of cloth. “Well, this was pretty rubbish. I don’t see any butterflies.”

There are flowers and grass, too bright and untrodden to be natural, and further away she can hear what sounds like a well, but so far none of the advertised main attractions have put in an appearance.

“Keep scaring them off and you won’t,” Sasuke says, cool and unbothered in her coat.

Naruto sticks her tongue out and strikes out alone, hiding behind a bush to stake out the ever elusive butterflies. Finally as her knees start aching, more sweat beading in her hairline, a swarm of blue wings alight in the faux meadow in front of her.

Good enough – they’re pretty, and they’re cool, only they’re fake. Where’s Sasuke?
Naruto stalks around cursing, until she finally catches sight of her over by the jasmine bushes. “I was not implying anything,” she’s telling her mobile. “I called her a whore. Yeah, I know.”

“What the fuck? You can’t smoke in here!” Naruto hisses at her, slapping the cigarette out of Sasuke’s hand. “We’ll get thrown out!”

“Why do you care?” Sasuke asks, pocketing her phone. “Shino’s a loser, and I’ve had enough house parties this Christmas to last me a lifetime. If you want to party we can just go out.”

“It’s his damn birthday!”

“So give him half an hour to play with Inuzuka’s fleas.”

“Okay, right, that’s it. We’re not doing this. You’re obviously upset about your jerkarse dad, and...”

“Fuck you,” Sasuke snaps, turning on her heel.

After a fuming half an hour spent kicking the anger out of her body, pacing herself calm, Naruto finds her on a secluded bench, hidden behind a bunch of continental tourists. “Hey. Look, I’m sorry your dad’s an arse, okay?”

“I don’t care about my father.”

Naruto perches on the bench beside her, stroking jaggedly down her arm. “You can’t just stop caring about people.”

“Kindly don’t project your own failures onto me.”

Immediately Naruto is on her feet, hotter than ever even though her dropped winter clothes pool around her feet. A deep breath later she sits down again, closer than before, Sasuke’s sleeve pressing against her arm. “Your failures are nowhere near epic enough for me.”

Sasuke snorts, a snort a little like a mangled laugh, looking at her sideways through her lashes.
Untouched by mascara or tongs, they curve a little inward at the tips, prone to poking at the eyes they’re supposed to protect. “He’s hopeless. I shouldn’t have bothered.” Planting her hands behind her on the bench, she leans back on her arms. “You know, at some point Itachi had been reading this book for his English class and asked him, ‘Is it rape if somebody purchases a child and uses it as his sex slave’ because he had some nutter in his class and wanted to be able to say, ‘even my bigot dad realises…’. His response? ‘Well, under certain circumstances’.”

Naruto gapes at her, half laughing because there’s no other response and she has to say something, do something. “Oh my fucking god, for real? Can he, like, read?”

“Oh, he reads. Loves Conrad. Did you know *Heart of Darkness* is anti-racist? Since Marlow doesn’t like the colonies, apparently it’s anti-racist.”

“That’s, er, that’s a pretty special sort of logic,” says Naruto, who didn’t make it more than two pages into the horrible novel but did watch the film. She leans forward to offer a loop-sided grin. “But, you know, to quote a great work of literature, ‘leaving behind a little bit of sperm doesn’t make you a father. It’s what you do afterwards.’”

“Since when do you read great literature?” Sasuke scoffs.

*Anita Blake* is greatly entertaining literature,” Naruto says, seeing Sasuke’s disdainful brow-arching and raising her a blown raspberry. “Really, though, I’ve never got this notion that parents are supposed to be some sort of revered authority. They’re the ones who chose to have kids, right? We didn’t get a say in it. So actually,” and she feels herself flush, warming to the topic, “actually it’s two adults getting themselves a child, who’s completely dependent on them and never had a about choice being with them at all. Any other situation, that’d be called coercion and Stockholm syndrome.”

Sasuke laughs, a strangled, stuttering, bright-brittle little laugh. “I thought you liked your parents.”

“I do. I love them. But just because I lucked out, it doesn’t mean the system isn’t fucked up. I mean, parents own you, from the start, you haven’t chosen to belong to them. That’s wrong.”

Sasuke snorts and says the one thing that’d make her embrace the socialist commune would be if it got her out of the fucking Freudian family, so fair enough. “At least he’ll be leaving soon,” she adds. “Now let’s go.”

“Butterflies too sweet and happy for your emoness?”
Apparently they are, since Sasuke’s noticeably more comfortable outside, despite the slush and hail that needle Naruto’s pride into surrendering to a taxi.

“Where to?”

“We could hit the Pre-Raphaelites,” Sasuke says. “Get tomorrow off.”

Their class is scheduled to spend a half-day at the National Gallery, but Sannin isn’t exactly known for inconveniencing its students by enforcing a strict timetable.

“Yeah, cool. Wait, do we have to pay if we aren’t there for school? How much is it?”

“Jesus Christ,” Sasuke mutters, giving the driver his orders. “It’s not anti-feminist to let your date pay if she’s also a girl.”

“Yeah, well, it’s still kind of uncomfortable.”

“Much like settling for substandard products, then. Get over it.”

Even Sasuke must be aware that that’s an unlikely proposition, but they end up paying for each other, since unlike Naruto Sasuke brought her student ID card and is offered admittance for half price. Mumbling about how the museum exhibits are public property anyway, so it’s totally scandalous to extort entrance fees, Naruto follows Sasuke to coat-check and then into the low-lit silence of the art rooms. There’s no answer to her whispered lecture on how this is just another way to keep the highbrow cultural capital from the proletariat.

For a movement with such a romantic name, the Pre-Raphaelites sure painted some ugly girls. “Dude,” Naruto mutters, glancing over yet another rendition of what Sasuke refers to as an equine ingénue.

Sasuke’s stopped in front of Millais’ Ophelia, looking far more tragic and beautiful with her nicotine-deprived frown.
“I’m so over this place,” Naruto confides. “Are you done yet?”

“I suppose.” She slants an amused glance Naruto’s way, turning her back on the floater. “What did you think, then?”

“I sort of liked that one,” Naruto says, shrugging in the direction of *The Lady of Shallot*. “I mean it looks like the cover of a historical romance novel, but at least it looks like a historical romance novel I might read.”

They’re heading towards the gallery café, and while normally Naruto buys ten times as much sweets for half the price at a discount shop and pigs out in peace at home, this place stands a much better chance of enticing Sasuke to join her.

Mostly she smokes, but she does eat the complementary piece of chocolate that came with her tea. Maybe it’s a good thing, sort of, since Naruto speculates it wouldn’t be practical to throw up that little, so that at least it’ll stay down.

On the other hand Sasuke’s said, or strongly implied, whatever, that she doesn’t do that anymore, and Sasuke isn’t actually a very good liar.

Naruto looks up from her second helping of apple pie, gagged for a moment by a delicious mouthful before she can say, “So, before – just calling somebody a whore, that’s pretty crude.”

“Yes, well, a déclassé insult for a déclassé insultee.”

“Who were you talking to?” she demands with mounting agitation. “You wouldn’t say that to, like, Ino.”

“What does it matter?” Despite the cigarette, she presents the same image she did this morning, with her father: somebody trying and failing badly to be calm, removed.

“Of course it matters,” Naruto says, feeling like she’s reaching over a chasm rather than just across a small café table. “You’re upset. I’m your friend. Your *girlfriend*. You’re supposed to talk to me. Share.”
“I don’t really share well. I thought I’d made that clear.”

It’s funny and touching and heart-breaking, and makes Naruto want to kiss her and punch her and hug her forever, that there’s concern shading the last sentence, like she’s making sure Naruto knew what she signed up for.

It’s also funny and heart-breaking that she’s so wrong: it’s grown on Naruto that she wasn’t kidding about *a bit of a fucked up threesome dynamic*.

Or about *it’s supposed to be secret but you’re supposed to be nobody so I’ll give it you*.

Which pisses her off all over again, until a movement drags Sasuke’s – her – necklace against her skin, cold and tangible under her shirt.

“Stop it. Just spill.”

Sasuke spills ash in her tea. “What’s your worst memory?”

Naruto bites her spoon. “I – I don’t know.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not. It’s just, I never got how people rank that stuff. There’s lots to choose from.”

There’s a beep, prompting Sasuke to slide her mobile from its pocket, stare with extreme blankness at the screen.

“What?”

Already Sasuke’s rising, collecting her things, dropping money on the table. “Fucking Anko,” she mutters, walking briskly towards the exit, “stupid bitch can’t keep her knickers on.”
“But I thought she’s with Itachi,” Naruto protests, struggling with her scarf.

“Exactly.”

“Oh. Oh.”

“Indeed,” says Sasuke, signalling for a taxi. “And now I have to be so careful.”

“He’s a big boy,” Naruto tries, getting in the car too before Sasuke can slam the door. “I’m sure he can handle himself.”

Clearly Sasuke’s far past being bothered about talking, about exposure. “Four times he’s tried to kill himself.”

“Fuck, I’m sorry. Look, I get it, it’s…”

“You do not. You have no idea.” Sasuke stares out the windscreen as the car accelerates through the evening, talks in stabs, incisions. “You said it yourself, never having had isn’t the same as losing. Stop trying to compare everything.”

“Fine,” snaps Naruto, fuming and with the fight or flight instinct a brutal kick in the chest. Normally Sasuke’s the one to walk away, but then normally they’re not arguing in a moving vehicle.

Shifting on the seat, scooted far away from Sasuke until the seatbelt cuts into her throat, she stares out into the snow-sprinkled darkness between the streetlamps until the car halts at a parking lot and they’re emerging in front of a large familiar building, Naruto’s knees suddenly leaden as she gapes at the Konoha General Hospital sign.

“Oh shit – Sasuke! Sasuke, wait, is it…”

But Sasuke’s movements are too measured for catastrophe, her face too spiteful. “He’s just visiting.” Half a corridor later she tells Naruto to go away, but she can’t have expected that to work and Naruto doesn’t bother answering.
Sasuke manages to combine stomping and sweeping, then loses all momentum, stops several paces from the quiet room.

“Come on,” Naruto says, nudging the door open.

Itachi’s sitting on the visitor’s chair, elbows on knees, hair revolting against its ponytail and falling around his face.

Kakashi’s exactly the same. One of the nurses must have changed the sheets, washed him, but his bandages and blankness are identical. Now that her reference is January-dwellers, his pallor is less striking.

“I need you to get the fuck out of here.” Sasuke too is watching him, her face gone soft and ravaged and, for the first time, truly inscrutable. It’s not Naruto’s face anymore.
“Sorry,” Itachi says. “I didn’t realise you were busy.”

“It’s fine.”

Between the two of them, they’ve taken white lies and grey and black ones, run with them until they’ve become a language of its own.

Keeping her back to Kakashi, so aware of him she might as well have been staring, she perches on the bed, bending forward until her forehead almost touches Itachi’s.

“I really am sorry. You shouldn’t have to be here.”

“Neither should you.”

It’s difficult to breathe in here, it always has been. The air is heavy, grudges her lungs.

“You can stop with the inspection,” he says, redoing his ponytail. “I talked to Anko. I’m fine. I shouldn’t have bothered you.”

“Right.”

“Right.” He tries a smile, hangs onto it as he stands. “Let’s go.”

Outside, with Kakashi closeted away behind them and Itachi their customary arm’s length away, she can breathe again, breathes dust and winter air and smoke.

“You really should quit,” he says, is rewarded with a level sideways glance, because at this point the nagging is less infuriating than the worry, the dark circles and the frown lines stretching hungry beneath his eyes.
They’re in the backseat of a car when she finally asks, “So why did you text me?”

She’s even sorry, sort of, but there were too many sorrys for the question to be avoided.

“I was,” Itachi starts. “I was dreaming. But I was, for just a second I was sure he’d moved.”

Unlike their father, Itachi has never hit her. He’s never needed to.

She locks her fingers around her knees, cutting through the cloth, to keep herself from jamming them down her throat.

Why are you doing this to me?

But Sasuke always answers, Because I can, and no longer asks it of others.

She follows him past the elevator and up the stairs at Lilypad Drive, watching passively as he unlocks the door with the twin of the key in her own possession, triplet to the one that should be Kakashi’s.

“I thought I’d make some tea,” he says. “Do you want anything?”

It’s tempting. She could fill herself unto bursting, then force it out, control the stinging emptiness.

“No. I’m fine.” Still she stays in the kitchen as he takes things from the cabinets, a pot and tea from a package they’ve both been careful to replace. “You talked to Anko?”

“I did. We’ll try to work things out.” He takes the kettle off the stove, pouring water into his cup, the neurotically white one so polished it glows faintly in the dark when one ventures up at night for some water. “Are you sure you don’t want some?”

“I’m sure. So what exactly are you trying to work out? Your pesky monogamy or her promiscuity and raging ephebophilia?”
He pours milk into his tea, which she knows he doesn’t like but has trained himself to drink so as not to worry their mum, who inexplicably tears up at the idea of drinking unsweetened tea. “I appreciate your concern, but it’s none of your business.”

“It’s always been my business.”

“Then it’s time to change that. I can take care of myself.” The tea ripples as the cup hits the table. “Look, I know you and Kakashi enjoyed playing some sick kind of house with me, but I’m an adult and I can take care of myself.”

So spoke Itachi, who tried and failed to take care of her for years, before trying and failing to take care of himself.

“You’ve certainly done a sterling job proving that.”

She says it lightly, the only way she can say it instead of scream it. One can’t take care of oneself, can’t expect anybody to believe one can, after one’s sister and one’s best friend and one’s mother have all found one trying and failing suicide.

Even, or perhaps especially, Itachi realises this. He swallows. “Be that as it may, it’s not about you.”

“If you want me to leave, just say so.”

But he won’t, he looks at her almost with pity, because of course she can’t leave him alone.

And he can’t have expected her to take this isn’t about you seriously after he held her hand in the hospital, listened outside her bathroom door while she was vomiting, heard her lose her virginity from the guest room.

After she held his hand in the hospital, and found him dying, and breathed sleepy little breaths against his neck for years and years.
“I’m tired,” she says. “I’m going to bed.”

She’d like to say, going to sleep, but it’s a futile proposition.

“I’ll come too,” he says, and realistically he just wants to check that she doesn’t use the bathroom for retching, but she doesn’t protest. The bathroom is the one Kakashi and she shared, but Itachi’s things are in it too, at this point. There’s none of his sleepwear in the main bedroom, though, which maybe is and maybe isn’t why he uses a set of Kakashi’s over-large pyjamas. Violating the traditions of the bed, since she’s not about to sleep naked with Itachi, she dons his tshirt but her own worn flannel trousers.

It’s a relatively large bed, with sheets that still smell faintly of Kakashi, and a little of Itachi, and mostly of her.

Finally after the streetlamps have blurred into imaginary stars, and Itachi’s sleepy breathing sounds almost like somebody else’s, she dreams. She steps into his hospital room, barefoot on the linoleum, and the tactile sensation is ridiculous, fictive, because she’s never touched linoleum in her life. But she doesn’t care about that because he’s sitting up in bed, warm and alive – somehow she can feel he’s warm even at this distance. His eyes are open, both of them, his face scarred but smiling, that loop-sided half-smirk beckoning. So she goes. Of course she goes to him. Sits in his lap, straddling him, her hands on his chest, his face, on his skin full of pulse and life. He’s naked. He says he loves her, in his customary way: you know, your face is pretty interesting from that angle. Oddly they don’t kiss as they make love.

Gradually she becomes aware that they’re being watched. Not turning from him, her hands cupping his face and her hips riding the thrusts, the trust, she doesn’t turn, but still eventually she knows.

In the dream Itachi and Naruto are standing by the door watching, watching them, watching her.

She wakes up with a cramp in her right foot, toes curling tensely into themselves. She wakes up with a man’s chest pressed against her back; breaths tickling her neck, hips pushed up against her derriere, a hand curled loosely across her breast. Holding her.

It makes a certain amount of sense, she supposes, although they’ve not shared a bed for years, not since they were children and not quite not afraid of the dark: makes sense because Sasuke learnt snuggling from Kakashi, who, like Itachi, was taught it by Anko.
This is a better fit, the two of them the same size, and calm sleepers. There’s none of Kakashi’s too-long limbs getting lost or tangled, none of Naruto’s kicking or elbowing.

All the same, she suddenly wants Naruto fiercely.

For some time now Naruto has been a murmur inside her; it’s the first time she’s been a scream, a roar.

When she moves his hand Itachi wakes up, not quite startled and not quite displeased. They will have breakfast, and maybe do more talking than snipping. Then she will call.

As she’s brushing her teeth and he’s drying his hair, Itachi confides, “She said we’d try being exclusive.”

She nods, quiets, waits.

“I can’t be sure – I never can – I don’t want her to agree to that to coddle me. Or because she feels pressured, if she thinks I might…”

“You want her to do it because it’s normal.”

“It’s not normal,” he says, sounding supremely unconvinced. “Just – common.”

She rinses the toothbrush. “I think the word you’re looking for is preferable.”

“Maybe I should try it, instead. It stands to reason it couldn’t be too difficult to – hook up with somebody.”

“For a certain meaning of difficult.”

It wasn’t difficult to fall into bed with Gaara. It was difficult to get out of it.
“You wouldn’t have shared him.”

“No, of course not.” She meets his eyes in the mirror; it’s far more difficult to meet her own. “I wouldn’t share Naruto either.”

xxxxx

It’s not easy having Sasuke as your girlfriend, but then if Naruto had ever been one for the easy options she’d have killed herself years ago, before Sasuke ever spoke her name; during the time nobody did, when she was bitch and whore and idiot or sweetie and baby and honey.

The two of them and Sakura are crowding around the Haruno living room table, chipping away at homework. Or, Sakura is – Naruto’s too stupid for it, and Sasuke’s too smart. Homework is pointless anyway, a sadistic cheat-code for bad teachers who can’t give you what you need during actual lessons.

When Sasuke wanders off for a phone call for the fourth time, Naruto chucks her pen in disgust. “I hate this stuff.”

“Maybe I can help,” Sakura offers, looking torn between the instinct to baby her and the equally strong impulse to defend her beloved school. “Where are you getting stuck?”

“On Freud being a psycho arsehole,” Naruto mutters, angling her notes towards Sakura. This semester lovely Philosophy with, in retrospect, wonderful Iruka has been usurped by Psychology with a pudgy guy who grins every time he says ‘testosterone’ and gives them five breaks during every forty-minute lesson to avoid being torn to shreds by his bored and angry students.

“Right, well, I’m afraid he’s not been very fairly represented in class. He really did have some fascinating insights, aside from the problematic aspects.”

On the one hand Naruto’s not especially interested in any so-called insights had by a boring dead guy, and yet on the other she can’t help being sympathetic to anybody who’s being mangled by their current excuse for a teacher. At her old school she’d give him two weeks tops before the inevitable breakdown – now it’s more a matter of whether he’s stupid enough to repeat to Tsunade any of the rubbish he sprouts in the classroom, because he’s sure as hell not smart enough to understand all the insults he’s already being peppered with.
Flipping her phone shut, Sasuke returns to perch against the back of her chair. “Kankurou’s finally got with Tenten, Temari’s taking him out to celebrate the cessation of his pining. Will you be coming with?”

“But there’s a test coming up,” Sakura says, which monumentally increases Naruto’s desire to say hell yes even though she’s not in Sakura’s Latin class.

“People who need to study for tests have no business taking them,” Sasuke says, dismissive but not exactly unfriendly, sharing her smirk with Sakura who, although shy rather than smug, smiles back.

“I suppose,” she says, “Can Ino come?”

“I’m certainly not preventing her.” Which is a blatant lie if Naruto’s ever heard one, but seems to make Sasuke coldly happy.

“Don’t pretend it’s that simple,” Sakura says. “It’s not like they’d let me in if I didn’t come with you.”

“Ino’s a big girl,” Sasuke says. “She’ll know who to call.”

“I suppose,” Sakura says again, even though it’s unclear why Ino would want to go out with her, albeit unrequited, nemesis plus assorted friends and minions.

No, that’s a lie: Naruto too has always chosen being somebody hated over being nobody. Mum called it insidious, internalised self-hatred; Dad called it hope.

“Right,” says Sasuke. “We’ll meet them at Ritz about nine.”

When Sakura has finished her paragraph and vanishes in search of a certain dress, Sasuke perches on the table in front of Naruto, carelessly displacing the notes Naruto’s been wanting to sweep to the floor for hours. Her toes curl daintily on Naruto’s thighs, a slice of chest visible as she leans forward, smiling against Naruto’s cheek and scar and mouth. She catches Sasuke’s lip in her mouth, catches Sasuke’s wrists in her hands.
When Sasuke pulls back, her lips, normally only just shy of too thin, are wet and dark, pouty. They’re no longer smiling, but there’s potential for it in the tilt of their corners. “We might have to doll you up,” she says, her fingers sliding off Naruto’s jaw to brush the pendant. “The rest of what you’re wearing is an insult to it.”

Would Sasuke wear her brand like she does Kakashi’s? Like Naruto wears hers.

“I don’t have any doll clothes,” she says, “and I wouldn’t fit in yours.”

It’s moments like these that catch in her veins, moments when Sasuke could get angry but doesn’t.

“You and Temari should be about the same size,” she mumbles, although Temari is thinner around the waist and thicker around the chest than Naruto will ever be. “I think I’ve still got some of her stuff. And Itachi’s, if you’d rather go butch.”

She’d never borrow Sasuke’s best friend’s or Sasuke’s brother’s clothes to play dress-up with Sasuke’s admirers, but it’s almost as comforting, flattering, as it’s insulting that Sasuke so casually assumes the possibility, includes her like just another detail.

“No way.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’d rather go as me? Also I really should finish this stupid paper.”

Peering down between her thighs at the essay notes she’s sitting on, Sasuke arcs a brow. “I believe the word you’re looking for is start.”

“Shut up,” Naruto grousches, resting her cheek against Sasuke’s knee, which hurts quite badly. “I don’t know what to say. I mean, ‘Freud is stupid’ wouldn’t go over so well.”

“Just write about what you said before. You know, familial love as Stockholm Syndrome.”
It’s a little like getting struck by lightning and liking it, all frizzy and lit up with transparent heat. Naruto’s ideas don’t generally do well as essay topics, don’t usually resonate with other people.

But Sasuke’s not exactly other people, and says, one shoulder jutting up in a shrug that’s nowhere near self-deprecating, that she’s spun golden thread from rougher wool than that, collecting large clear As to write her future with.

“You are so fucking arrogant,” Naruto mumbles into Sasuke’s leg, thrilled with it and disgusted; it’s hilarious and disquieting because she’s right about it, too.

“I’m arrogant?”

Naruto squints up at her, because usually Sasuke doesn’t protest the label, from her or from others – indeed, half the time she seems to consider it a compliment.

“You’re the one who just stomps into people’s lives and demands to know them, for them to listen to you telling them who they are.”

“That’s not – I’ve no – do you think I’ve been wrong?”

“Am I interrupting something?” Sakura asks from the doorway, the intruder’s awkwardness spelt out in all-caps across her face. Which is ridiculous, since it’s her place.

No,” says Sasuke, sliding off the table. “We’re done.”

“We are not,” Naruto objects.

Sakura’s look of discomfort reaches desperate levels. “I should go.”

“Not at all,” Sasuke says. “Come away, Naruto, we need to find you something to wear.” She smirks, thinly; nasty. “Perhaps something Freudian.”
Sasuke recently remembered that she doesn’t particularly like the over-popularised practice of going out: she doesn’t fancy dancing, she dislikes talking to strangers, and, much like Itachi with his meds and his anxious carefulness, she cannot in good conscience, nor in bad conscience either, approve of drinking.

Naruto clearly enjoys all of these things. Well, Sasuke’s known that as long as she’s known Naruto, who was desperately gangly and gawky when Gai forced them to waltz but power-dances through the room now with a laugh loud enough to be faintly audible over the music. She’s still clumsy, and careless about it, though part of that might be from drink.

Now, if Sasuke were a conscientious girlfriend, she’d know Naruto couldn’t afford anything here: wisdom imparted by Ino, who has turned up, defiant and sullen on the arm of some nameless bloke, and who would certainly know.

Well, Sasuke did know. It’s just she considers it rather funny, watching it.

Moreover people keep buying her drinks, and Naruto consumes more than half of those; Sasuke’s tastes are particular, Naruto’s are not, even though she grimaced over some of the more adventurous concoctions.

Temari too is dancing, a trained sort of casual dancing; relegated to the boyfriend table, Shikamaru snoozes beside Sasuke’s elbow. For a second, spotting Kankurou and Tenten on the floor, she is overcome with nostalgia from when they used to bring Gaara.

No, it was before the time when Gaara could be brought anywhere, by anybody. When Gaara imposed himself.

Unlike his siblings Sasuke was never afraid of him, mostly because of some dim notion that Itachi was far more dangerous and would never hurt her.

Of course, Itachi has, quite inadvertently, hurt her far worse than Gaara could probably ever mange, but that’s not how inebriated tweens think.

They’d sit in a corner dark with their self-indulgent misery, and get drunk and maudlin together. Sometimes they’d even sort of dance, jagged hard movements with no rhythm. He was the one thing she did wrong, she was the one thing he did right. It was a balance, sort of. They even sometimes
liked each other, sort of, in between all the sober disinterested dislike.

But ultimately Gaara doesn’t get it, because his problem is and always has been that he’s cracked, that he’s outside of society.

Yours is the opposite, he said, which pissed her off, made her feel small and stupid and girly, even though secretly she’d thought the same thing.

She was with him maybe because he’s her best friend’s brother and maybe because she wasn’t supposed to and maybe mostly because of the possibility of real danger. She’s been very close to death, two seats away from it, but unlike Gaara, unlike Naruto, she’s never been close to killing. It makes a difference, that real danger in Naruto’s eyes, a hot sick thrill sometimes when they’re fighting. Sometimes when they’re not.

It’s childish, she can see that it’s cliché and pretentious, but none of that stops it being true – not even as a child did she like kittens, puppies, it was always tigers, wolves.

She drunk-dials Neji and discusses punctuation in non-Western poetry with him until his words get slurred like he’s the drunk one. It’s not unexpected: he often takes the opportunity to spill like a drunk when she’s sloshed. Sometimes even when she’s just tipsy.

She’s only seen him drunk once, doesn’t think there are many more times she doesn’t know about.

“Just marry her,” she says, tilting her head back sharply to pour a shot down her throat. “Stash her in the attic."

He sounds exasperated, but that’s what you get for taking a drunk-dialler’s calls. “I don’t want my house burnt down.”

“It only will be if you give her matches.” Is that witty, or comprehensible, if you’re sober? “Anyway you could just get a mistress, or a divorce.”

Except of course the problem isn’t really marrying Hinata. Marrying Hinata was always a symptom, never the disease, but you do what you can with what you can. Or something.
“Look,” he says, his voice so snappy, acrimonious, so intimate, and yet he’s never, through all the years he’s used it with her, he’s never tried to make it their normal tone.

She sighs. Is it part of the disease that Neji’s probably gay?

In any event it’s not really any of her business.

After she’s ended the call and had a smoke Naruto comes to sit with her, bubbly but rather quietly so, comfortable. Sasuke could – melt into it, almost, the sticky comfort.

Her skin’s sticky too, hot with alcohol and irritation in the crowded room, her armpits – ugly word. Why do they call them armpits? They’re not pits, they’re shallow hollows. Nice.

“Let’s go.”

Naruto’s hand pulls her outside, stays in hers in the car. They could, probably really they should, head towards the beach house, but she needs to check up on Itachi, needs to keep abreast with the Anko denouement, so the risk must be run, and thankfully as it turns out Dad’s not home.

They tumble into her bed, Naruto insouciant because tumbling is, like, part of her nature or something, Sasuke far less pleased about it but too buzzed to argue. Some fumbling follows, not quite sex, or if there is she isn’t aware of it.

She shifts, burrowing her face deeper into the pillow, remembers Naruto did sort of ambush her in bed that day with the sonnet, didn’t see a problem with it and is unlikely to have learnt better since Sasuke set a probably unwise precedent by sleeping with her.

That’s the real problem, that Sasuke didn’t see a problem with it either. She knows she should mind if Naruto touched her in her sleep, self-respect would demand she mind it quite ferociously, but she wouldn’t genuinely. She doesn’t believe in belonging to somebody halfway.

In view of this it should perhaps not be surprising that she falls asleep next to Naruto and dreams of Kakashi.
Blurrily, she realises she must have spoken aloud when Naruto, not usually jealous, hangover pale, says, “Look, I’m really tired of Kakashi.”

Sasuke’s standing up before thinking about it, the sweet cold shock of the floor a relief from her feverish morning after state. “I’m really tired of you.”

It’s one of the many times she’s lied to Naruto.

Who looks sick and – but – which conjunction fits? – whom she’s starting to sort of need. Sunlight strokes her face in heavy warm caresses, and so, soon, do Sasuke’s fingers. She’s kneeling on the bed and Naruto’s letting her, their breaths close and disgusting.

She wants to mingle with her like breaths mingle. Wants to look up from her book or computer and when she does for Naruto to be there, looking back. Wants Naruto to hear the words she says.

Wants, sometimes, even, to listen for Naruto’s words. Or, does the listening whether she wants to or not, at this point. Usually wants to respond.

They’re kissing as the front door opens and closes heavily.

“Fuck,” says Sasuke. “You have to go.”

It’s not the first still-drunk friend she’s dragged past Fugaku, but she always hopes it’ll be the last.

Itachi’s out, which since it’s Saturday means either jogging or Anko or some project at school. Unwilling to openly sink to Anko’s stalkerish level, she’ll see to it that Mum makes sure of which.

Her head is pounding but not too badly; she drinks copious amounts of Itachi’s organic fair-trade orange juice. Driven by an inexplicable impulse – inexplicable because sentimentality makes little sense as a cause, there are no grounds for it – she steps on the bus to the stables. Dog is outside being exercised by one of the pony girls, to the proprietor’s distress, but it’s fair enough, she didn’t call ahead. More importantly there’s hardly any discernible difference between the animals.

Temari talks about them, or used to when she was truly invested, as though they were personalities,
if not strictly speaking persons, but really, all Sasuke’s been able to tell them apart by is colour and size.

Of course, Temari has been known to joke that that’s about all the difference Sasuke sees between most people, too.

This naturally isn’t true, but it’s not baseless either. She saw that then, sees it know, still has little problem with it. Recognition has to be earned.

In the end she decides her nose has been in such intimate contact with the animals that it will suffice for the rest of her too; bends to let the stable cat sniff her fingers, gets bit, to the blood, and kicks at the thing.

Jesus fucking Christ, it bleeds worse than she’d thought it would, burns like a paper cut, and probably the cat carries all manner of infections. Those paws have walked through horse manure, cut rats.

She washes her hand under the cold spray available, tries to remember when she had her last tetanus shot.

On the Sunday, having been informed that Itachi was at his university but in unidentified rude female company, she meets Naruto, who has apparently just dumped Gaara on Kiba – the theory seems to be that the faster they learn to get along the better, and supposedly a sink or swim situation would force the issue, ideally force them to cope with each other. Seeing as Kiba too has a creepy sidekick, it’s not inconceivable that it could work.

Naruto’s smiling but also rubbing at the back of her head, pushing her woollen hat down over her eyes. “I wasn’t sure if you’d still be mad.”

“Why would I be mad?” Sasuke asks blankly, hiding cold fingers in her pockets.

“You were freaking pissed when I called you yesterday.”

“You were an idiot yesterday.”
“So I’m if I’m not an idiot today…?”

“Your mastery of the painfully obvious never fails to astound me.”

“Ah,” says Naruto, with a rather fond sort of irritation. “So it was a theoretical sort of non-pissiness, then.”

“Shut the fuck up,” mutters Sasuke, genuinely annoyed again despite how Dad has finally taken off again and the mess with Itachi seems temporarily sorted.

Naruto laughs at her and Sasuke lets herself be tugged along, in out of the cold. It’s the sort of fast-food place that’s always full in winter, when places letting you inside for the city’s cheapest cuppa become oases. “I went to your fancy club or whatever,” Naruto argues, and Sasuke must shrug agreement.

Likely a single breath in the establishment contains more calories than what she considers a full meal. Munching fries, Naruto is clearly unsurprised by her refusal to eat.

“I started on the psycho essay last night,” she confides between mouthfuls.

“Weren’t you still drunk last night?”

“A bit,” Naruto shrugs. “I mean, I certainly was after I hung out with Kiba. Guess that’s why I even got the idea to start writing it.” She rubs at her face, smearing grease over her cheek. Sasuke makes a mental note to avoid contact with it for the foreseeable future. “Anyway I was thinking maybe you could have a look at it.”

“I thought your mum did that.”

And she does, only it turns out her crit is so wrapped in praise and encouragement and over-ambitious suggestions Naruto can hardly ever make it out.

“You should just ask to do it orally,” she says, “but all right, I’ll have a look.”
Mum and Dad always go on about people looking innocent in their sleep, and Sasuke’s confirmed in far less flattering terms that Naruto tends to drool and slurp and make odd faces, but the concept certainly does not apply to Sasuke, who curls up childishly enough but frowns almost constantly.

Maybe it’s a genetic thing, as it would explain why Itachi has wrinkles at nineteen, although Sasuke’s frown lines cut like needles along the root of her nose and not below her eyes. She’s in the flannel nightgown a clueless Tsunade gave Naruto for Christmas, got cold feet and hands last night and went up to appropriate it from the bag of stuff to be given to the Salvation Army.

These days Naruto only finds it cold to sleep alone, despite winter clinging on into technical spring territory. Global warming suddenly seems like a really good idea, except for how the cold makes snuggling up next to Sasuke under the blankets much nicer than it was when it led to a sweat-feast. Her fingertips seek out the warmth hidden in the hollows of Sasuke’s collar bones, armpits, navel.

“Mhn,” Sasuke mutters, twitching away from the cold and pushing a sleepy elbow into Naruto’s sternum.

Sasuke’s head on her pillow, face obscured by her fringe, only the pout revealed, has become – she would say familiar, and guesses it is familiar in the sense she’s seen it a lot of times, but the thrill of it is still the shaky, overbearing thrill of something so new it cuts, blinds.

When she wrote that sonnet, having power-read a bunch of steam punk manga, she tried to catch it, or a version of it, Sasuke’s eyes locking suddenly with hers, tried to put it into words like a wrenching in her abdomen, bolts tightening and loosening in her chest, her heart pumping lightening fuel instead of blood. It’s not that they’re wrong, exactly, but it’s not mechanical, it’s all blood and warmth and connection.

Sleeping Sasuke differs from awake Sasuke insofar as her grumble is incoherent rather than painfully articulate as she rolls over onto her back, her shoulder blade cutting into Naruto’s neck. “Hey, ouch! Watch it!”


The drapes are open, March noon sun flooding the room, rising high around their ark. Pushing off
the coverlet, Naruto pads over to the window, cracks it open to sniff the snowfall. “If this continues we’ll still have snow at fucking Easter.”

“You will,” Sasuke mutters, tugging the bunched-up nightdress over her head and chucking it, still cocooned in sleep and blankets. “I’ll have continental spring, thank you very much.”

Naruto’s reminded that she never really took to Cinderella because (a) wouldn’t the actual daughter inherent instead of the new wife? (b) the ridiculous notion that years of abuse are suddenly all fixed because some guy who doesn’t know you thinks you’re hot, and (c) socio-economic differences suck.

It’s not news, in fact it’s become trite, trite the way a handful of gravel in her shoe is trite, that Sasuke prefers taxis, fancy eateries, first class tickets to Naruto’s busses, fast-food places, reduced prices, and has very little patience for Naruto not being able to afford the former.

In theory it’s sort of reasonable enough, even generous: Sasuke hates the low-rent version of things and doesn’t mind paying for Naruto so that they may both enjoy their more expensive incarnations. When it comes to food Naruto tends to go with it, because then at least Sasuke eats something, but she’s still searching for a way to say, “I don’t like being the poor relative” without sounding like a – what’ve been the adjectives – like an unreasonable, petulant, ungrateful child. Well, to be fair Sasuke’s never said ungrateful, probably because she doesn’t consider it anything one ought to be grateful for, was raised to take it for granted and has even admitted she would expect a male date to pay for her.

That’s unexpectedly backwards, Naruto said, which received only an annoyed shrug, quite distinct from the neutral or amused one, in reply. Later she realised that in all likelihood Sasuke hadn’t been joking when she’d remarked that once that she’d never except (nor, Naruto inferred, accept) gifts for less than a couple hundred from anybody not in her innermost circle.

“Well,” said Shikamaru at one point, looking asleep but sounding uncannily awake. “Are you all right with that?”

“Are you?”

He’d shrugged, as far as it’s possible to shrug while lying down. “I’ve made my peace.”

It’s just, Naruto’d said, like she had to Sasuke except Sasuke’s a capitalist and so pathologically
incapable of seeing the problem, it’s just it’s obviously wrong – people aren’t poor because of a lack of resources, they’re poor because of unequal distribution. Which makes it kind of a no-brainer that this sort of undeserved individual wealth is a blight on social justice.

“Obviously,” said Shikamaru, without Sasuke’s irony. “Your relatively enormous wealth is unconscionable too, compared to the real poverty it should be trying to level. It’s just there’s no good way to make it do that efficiently, on an individual level.” He locked his cigarette in the corner of his mouth, kept it there despite a yawn. “Personally, I found the egregious flaunting sort of entertaining.”

Aside from the whole cool as a cucumber thing that Shikamaru has going on, it might be easier to think that with prestigious scholarships and internships raining down on you.

All things considered, Naruto might have to put her rock-star career on hold in favour of focusing on her future as a socialist revolutionary.

“Close the blinds,” Sasuke grumbles. “Come back to bed.”

There aren’t, as Sasuke ought by now to be well aware, any blinds, just cotton drapes too thin to withstand midday light, but she’s happy enough to slink back under the covers, chasing Sasuke halfway across the bed with her icy toes. “Come on, wake up, it’s way late.”

Sasuke turns her back, less demonstratively than unconsciously, the nape of her neck lying like an egg on the pillow. It fits between Naruto’s teeth as she tugs the coverlet away, kicks it to the floor, out of easy reach.

“Jesus,” Sasuke sneers, as she often does sitting up and rubbing at her face, clutching for blankets. “Fuck!”

She may well be grumpier than usual because of the developing Itachi-related uncertainties, because of how when Naruto picked her up yesterday the Uchiha flat was a cold war zone. It’s not very different from the usual shades of battle and refugee camp, but the coldness and the hostility were pronounced, crossing the room like walking over a frozen lake knowing somebody had planted explosives under the ice.

In the kitchen Sasuke was staring down her mother, keeping their eyes locked the way a predator will to hypnotise a rodent with fear, so the poor woman could barely spare enough attention to return Naruto’s wave with a nod.
Poor woman, she’d said to Sasuke once. *I mean yeah, she fucked up big, but shouldn’t you help her? She fucked it up for herself too.*

Sasuke had looked at her and then seemed like she was going to look away but instead just kept looking. It made something turn over inside Naruto, her heart seasick with the sudden somersault. It was a look that said, *you were supposed to be on my side.*

And she was, she is, wouldn’t have said anything otherwise, probably.

Eventually Sasuke said, *She doesn’t want help.*

Since Sasuke has never had any compunctions about openly denying aid, Naruto’s inclined to think this is true, but it’s utterly baffling.

Or it was, until her mum said, *Well, but admitting she wants, or needs, help, it would be admitting her entire life has been one big mistake. If she couldn’t do that for her children, why do you expect she’d do it for herself; when she’s lost them and so many more years of her life to this – this normalisation of the situation.*

Well, Naruto expects it because nothing else makes sense, because it’s the right thing to do.

On the other hand, expecting the right thing from people got her dragged into a toilet and her face slashed open, so.

“Hush,” said Sasuke, and after a moment Naruto picked up on the conversation bleeding through from the hallway.

“…she doesn’t need to be informed at this juncture,” Itachi was saying. “There might not even be anything to tell.”

“Jesus Christ,” Anko snapped, “would you stop infantilising her! It’s her business too.”
“She’ll know when it happens, if it should happen, but at this point telling her would do more harm
than good.”

There had been footsteps, until the last word was punctuated by the closing door.

“Hell,” said Sasuke, extremely composed and white with a tired sort of fury. “I do not need to be an
aunt.”

While the idea of a pregnancy has subsequently been heartily renounced, it remains manifestly
obvious that Sasuke doesn’t believe the assurances she’s been force-fed.

Naruto recognises that the possibility of an Itachi/Anko hybrid offspring is giddily terrifying, but,
“Wouldn’t she just have an abortion?”

“I’d certainly hope so,” Sasuke snips, reaching for her clothes, “but you never know with Anko.
She’s not – dependable.” She sighs, pulling on bra, undershirt, jumper. “Even if she did, Itachi
would be torn up about it, you know how he’d get, all guilty and rejected with his ridiculous family
fantasies. Like he could take care of a child, he can’t even take care of himself.”

In fact Naruto does not in any empirical sense know how Itachi gets, but it’s comforting to be
included in the in-group. Sasuke’s thin-lipped, white-lipped frown is considerably less so. “Guess
that’s one point in favour of the so-called ‘fake sex’,,” she quips, tries out her smile and sees it have a
bit of thawing effect. “God, that woman, just – shut the fuck up, I wanted to scream at her.”

“As I recall you did,” Sasuke remarks, bending over the edge of the bed in search of underwear lost.
She always, or almost always, puts the clothes she intends to wear the following morning in a neat
pile beside the bed, but Naruto’s trip to the window ruined the arrangement. “Or at the telly, at least.”

“Yeah, well, she was infuriating.” She has to pause the neck-rubbing because wow, god, she said
infuriating. “Just, perpetuating these, these – fallocentric fallacies, has she no shame?”

Finished with her knickers and socks, Sasuke’s attempting to wiggle into her trousers without leaving
the comforting warmth of the blanket she’s re-conquered, but stills now. And she’s had a justifiably
grumpy morning, but presently she doesn’t look grumpy, she looks serious and sort of constipated,
like when Naruto’s failed to realise a painful and painfully obvious fact. “It wouldn’t count as sex if
you were a guy, why should it count as sex just because you’re not?”
“Because – but – you can’t,” Naruto splutters. “Just last night you came so hard you were fucking crying, don’t try to pretend you didn’t.”

“Obviously it’s sex in the wider sense, it’s – getting off,” Sasuke concedes with brisk ill grace. “But it’s not sex sex. It’s not what’s culturally understood as sex.”

“Then culture is wrong,” says Naruto, which elicits merely a shrug as Sasuke buttons up her jeans. “But fine, I don’t care about that right now. I do care if you think it’s not real sex.”

“What does it matter, I’m still doing it, aren’t I? Is that suddenly not good enough?”
Staring at her, Naruto tries to say there’s nothing sudden about it, how could I have thought you thought that? To say, we’re supposed to be together, it’s supposed to matter, I’m supposed to matter to you, how can you say it’s not real? You’re supposed to care about me, you don’t get to fucking erase me.

None of that really makes it out, really makes it from words into sentences inside her own mind.

Standing, Sasuke quirks an eyebrow. “Are you coming?”

Naruto starts pulling on her clothes but remains seated on the bed. “You can’t just drop something like that and then expect me to drop it.”

The bed creaks loudly enough to almost override Sasuke’s impatient snort/sigh as she sits back down. “Fine. What’s there to talk about?”

“Do I even fucking matter to you at all?”

She doesn’t really doubt it, her stomach going through a stillborn rollercoaster ride as Sasuke’s eyes – no, her entire face – narrows. “I’m here, aren’t I?” That sounds calm enough, but she’s shooting to her feet as she speaks. “I told you things I’ve never fucking told anybody, I told the entire damn school I’m sleeping with you! Clearly that doesn’t matter! It’s you who just – you just sweep in and decide you like me without even knowing me and then when you do know me you insist I change to suit you!”

“Wanting you not to be an arsehole isn’t trying to change you!”

“No? Because I seem to be an arsehole an awful lot of the time.”

Which is true, and so Naruto tries to explain that loving somebody isn’t the same as approving of everything they do, and liking somebody you like to not be mean to you isn’t trying to reprogram them, come on, Sasuke, it’s not like you don’t realise this.
“I don’t even like the people I’m supposed to love,” Sasuke says – no, not just says, that’s too bland – admits? Challenges?

“See? I don’t like you when you’re being an arsehole, it doesn’t mean I don’t love you.”

“I don’t think I like you either.”

I love you. It’s not actually the first time she’s said that, but under Sasuke’s eyes on the cold bed it feels like it.

“Now are you coming?”

Naruto puts out a hand and Sasuke – long-suffering? Obedient? Grateful?, and/but there, there there, she’s there – takes it, tugs Naruto towards herself, off the bed.

Only then when they’re having breakfast and washing up, and when she tries to teach Sasuke the finer points of playing video games and then finally when they’ve given up on virtual fighting in favour of its real counterpart down in the cellar – when all of this is happening there is the undercurrent, swift and deep, of is this touch real? How about this one?

Does any of them count, pass muster as genuine, brushing Sasuke’s shoulder with her own, their fingers touching around the control?

Fuck yeah, except how real can one-sided reality be? What is that saying, if you’re a tree in the woods and you fall without anybody seeing, did you fall?

When Mum was babbling about it Naruto gave her a shrugged, Duh, and didn’t much get the pained explanation that did you fall, in this context, means, sort of, did you fall in a meaningful way, are you part of perceived, experienced reality, which is really the only sort of reality to which humans have access, and… Well, and Naruto had said how several realities didn’t even make sense in sci-fi, so don’t try to drag them into the real world, but the point is she sort of maybe gets it now.

Going against the bullies’ idea that she didn’t count was far easier than going against Sasuke’s.
It’s silly but she’s being pushed around, preoccupied with, of all things, Kyuubi and the scar snaking across her stomach, tripping over her own feet as she tries to duck, until finally Sasuke’s straddling her, barely pink, hands careful on her throat.

It hasn’t been for real, but she doesn’t seem cranky about it, goes along without protest when Naruto tugs at her hips and rolls them over, feeling warm and heavy and solid lying between Sasuke’s spread legs, torsos pressed together. Her pulse is beating faster now than it did during the work-out, sick vicious little jabs in her chest, but soothed, a little, as Sasuke’s picks up in response. “So if we got, like, a strap-on it’d be real, then?”

Sasuke does that thing with her mouth, stopping a sequence of stillborn movements. “You’re not serious,” she says, and then, softer, “we don’t have to…”

“That’s a no, then?”

She must sound tenser than she feels, because Sasuke gives a sort-of shrug and then a sort-of smirk. “Look, Jesus, we can get a strap-on if you want.”

Her smile should be exactly the same as it was before Sasuke’s reply, since the muscles used to make it are the same, she does nothing to change expression, and yet it feels suddenly utterly different. Once again she tries Sasuke’s trick of lifting an eyebrow; once again lifts both, like somebody’s taken hold of them and pulled them up. “Really?”

“I don’t see why not,” Sasuke says rather tersely. “I do enjoy getting fucked.”

It’s a challenge, and Naruto’s always enjoyed those. Her face is hot, so many different sorts of heat – desire, tenderness, anger, jealousy, she can catch them with those names, nail them up like insects; wants to bash Sasuke’s head into the floor then kiss it better.

“All right,” she says. “Let’s go, I’m sure they’ve got one.”

“Who?” Sasuke collects herself slowly as Naruto sits back, rebuilding her grace one limb at a time. “Your parents?”

Naruto shrugs a, yeah, duh.
Sasuke’s face goes pale and scrunched up like an old prune. “Why?”

“I don’t know, I never really asked. For pegging?”

“Disregarding that,” Sasuke says after a moment, “are you insane? I’m not using a used dildo.”

“Why not, though?” Naruto asks even as she sits back, legs looped over Sasuke’s. “I know for a fact you’ve used a used penis.”

“I wasn’t having sex with a penis, I was having sex with a man.”

She’s come wonderfully alive, pinched and spitting furious. Naruto wants to kiss her even more than she wants to slap her.

A harsh indrawn breath whistling through her nose later Sasuke says, with something like amusement tempering the upset, “You wouldn’t use somebody else’s underwear.”

“If they were yours…”

“…they wouldn’t fit you,” Sasuke finishes smugly. “Now get off me, I’ve appointments.”

“Really?” Though she does obey, retracting her legs from their perch across Sasuke’s.

“Appointments?”

“Quite.”

Although as it turns out when they talk on the phone later her appointment was apparently just needling Itachi, who “is still denying the pregnancy thing, to my face!”

“Well, can you blame him?” While Sasuke audibly swallows a huff, Naruto chews her toffee. “You can be pretty judgy.”
“When people have done something wrong, judging them is the appropriate reaction.”

Naruto’s about to add that it’s also the arsehole reaction, but her mobile battery’s in its death throes and Dad’s blocking the landline. Typical, as it’s not always easy to get Sasuke on the phone. On the other hand she should probably try to finish her assigned reading – it’s unfair, really, that the people able to successfully just pretend to have read it are also the ones who wouldn’t have trouble actually doing the reading. Cliff Notes aren’t much help when the teacher is lovely and interested and wants personal analyses, although hopefully Gaara, with his unhealthy love for depressing tedium like Anna Karenina and Madam Bovary, will be able to fill her in if she falls asleep before finishing. Mum overdoes it, and Sasuke can’t be bothered to read them when she can fake her way through, unless she’s getting into literary catfights with Neji, in which case faking is nowhere near good enough.

The only time Naruto got involved was when the debate shifted to whom Clarissa Dalloway should hook up with – to Naruto it was obviously Sally (“hello, she did say the happiest moment of her life was kissing her!”), while Sakura was rooting for Richard (“he is her husband after all! They’ve had a good marriage, and a child, and they obviously care for each other, they just need to work on it”), Neji preferring Septimus (“obviously her shadow-self, and while of course I am not advocating an actual romantic union, they are clearly the twin pillars on – or rather around – which the novels is built”), and Sasuke opting for Peter (“he’s the only one who actually knows her, Clarissa”).

Sasuke says she likes Deconstructing the Starship, though, or at least parts of it, the later essays, even though she’s hardly a fan of the author’s novels.

Five dreary pages and very many breaks later Mum knocks, on the doorframe because the door is open, and Naruto is delighted to chuck her book, summoning her scattered body parts from where they’ve been sprawling all over, and indeed partly off, the bed to sit up, making room for Mum too.

“Everything all right, honey?”

“Yes?” Naruto says, turning into the caress, Mum’s hands stroking her forehead. “Did I fail something? I thought the school didn’t call about that anymore.”

“Have you failed something?”

“Er, not that I know of. I mean, no. Course not.”
Though still looking a little wan, a little wary, Mum smiles back. “Right, then, that’s nice. Though I was actually talking about, well, more personal matters. I couldn’t help overhearing a bit, before, it seemed you were fighting? With Sasuke, I mean. And it’s, well, you’ve been so up and down, you’re so intense with each other.”

“Yeah, well,” Naruto mutters, pleased and mortified and red-faced with both, rubbing at the back of her neck. “I know where we stand. We’ll be fine.”

“All right, then,” Mum says carefully, her mouth a little pursed the way it almost always is, swelling with unsaid words.

All the same, as she curls up gratefully under Dad’s arm with a cup of tea and some trash telly to remedy the classics-induced headache, So if we got, like, a strap-on it’d be real, then? remains with her.

She tells herself sex should not be about proving things, or trying to exact revenge by bowing to the ideas you were trying to revolt against, but it doesn’t help much. Not only is talk cheap, in fact this makes the idea hotter.

Also the objective, untwisted hotness of it sort of grows on her, although it’s more of a warm glow than the flare evoked by the twisted bit.

Sasuke did in fact smile back and take her hand in front of more or less the whole school.

So it’s kind of by chance that when Dad twists his wrist and asks her to pick up some painkillers from the pharmacy, her glance is inevitably drawn to the shelves labelled ‘intimate’, where rows of over-priced pads and tampons, packets of condoms and bottles of embarrassing medicine fail to obscure the sex toy selection.

She can feel the heat in her cheeks like crimson made into sensation, but proving Sasuke wrong – or is it proving her right? – has always taken precedence. Also she’s always thought there’s a certain very appealing something about hedonism.

“Can I help you?”
Her fingers almost brushing the box of *Trust in Lust, Jiraiya’s Paradise Sex Products*, Naruto whips around to find an obese old man leering at her, all shaggy white hair and red vest and a square, leathery face.

“No,” she says. “Or, actually, by going away right now, yes.”

She’s blushing so hard she’s actually paralysed, blood beating furiously at her skin. Caught ogling sex toys by some gross pervert, Jesus fucking Christ.

The man ignores her, brandishing the box she almost touched. “Interested in this, were you? Well, I don’t mind telling you, it’s got a good thrust in it, and I’m especially pleased with the latex surface. Great for those lonely nights.” He winks. “Or days.”

Naruto turns on her heel so fast the linoleum screeches under the force of her boots, only to be tugged sharply back and almost falling as the pervert grabs her arm. “Hey, wait, girlie, it’s just…”

But Naruto isn’t interested in what’s just. Naruto’s interested in kicking him in the balls.

He’s pretty spry for his age, so she only gets him on the thigh, but at least he lets go of her and bends forward with a curse.

Considering it was completely all his fault and he’s probably a menace to young girls everywhere and also to the sales figures of the shop, it’s baffling and unfair that they both get kicked out.

“You freak,” she mutters, trying to sort out her change without taking off her finger-less mittens – then realising the man, escorted out while she was still paying for Dad’s stuff, is still here, slouching against the wall and hopefully getting chewing gum in his hair.

He wiggles his fingers at her, grinning. “I wasn’t the one trying to kick somebody in the nuts, wildcat.”

“I should hope it’s a reaction you’re familiar with,” Naruto snaps, “perving on people like that.”

“I like a little firecracker in my girls,” he informs her with another huge leer. “However, I was not
perving. I was advertising my wares.”

“Advertising your wares?”

He interrupts further outrage by quickly adding, “I’m Jiraiya.”

“Oh. Well. Right. No wonder you’re desperate for people to buy if you accost customers like that.”

“Let me make it up to you, then.” He waves off her suspicious glare. “All I require is a little customer feedback, and maybe a little, you know, mouth to mouth advertising. Finally got the pharmacies to start carrying my brand, but they won’t take any of the fun stuff and they’re ridiculously over-priced. Not my primary market, if you catch my drift.”

“And what is your primary market?” Naruto huffs, although they’re outside now, walking side by side. “Kink brothels?”

“Of course not, that’s illegal.” Ignoring her snort, he pulls a scarf from his pocket and winds it round his neck. “Say, if you’re not sure what you want, we could try out some different things together. Free of charge, of course.”

“I’m gay.”

“Right,” he says, with more delight than disappointment. “So it wasn’t so much a dildo as a strap-on you were after, then. Count yourself lucky I was there, they don’t have that stuff at the pharmacy.”

“Right,” Naruto repeats, pulling her scarf up against the drizzle and realising that either his shop and/or house is in the same direction she’s going or he’s stalking her. Which is more all right than it would’ve been ten minutes ago, now they’ve been thrown out together and he’s been revealed as a sad, humorous pervert rather than a crazy, threatening one.

“This is me,” he says suddenly, interrupting a vainglorious retelling of a hooker joke, nodding towards a brightly lit shop two streets from her bus stop. “Come have a look. I’ve got just what you’re after.”
“You’ve no idea what I’m after,” she says, but there’s the reassurance of other customers glimpsed through the window, and admittedly she is curious.

“That’s just it,” he says, holding the door open for her, gaze lingering on her arse. “I’ve got everything.”

The thing is that Naruto herself doesn’t quite know what she’s after; sees little difference between the products he shows off, couldn’t say which functions or which size would be best.

“For somebody the right age for sex, drugs and rock’n’roll, you are disappointingly vanilla. How about we just try a standard piece, they’re cheapest too, and you can come back later – which colour would you like?”

“Orange,” Naruto says, before abruptly remembering that Sasuke hates orange. “No, wait.”

He laughs at her, but she’s already filled her embarrassment quota for the night, just shrugs, even grins a little – he’s not that bad, and in the end she does leave with a bag.

xxxxx

God is being a sneaky bitch, hiding the second coming of the deluge as snow-melt, turning their city into a shabby suburb of Atlantis. Opening the door for Sasuke lets in a wave of cold air so wet it crystallises into drops and mould.

“Damn fog,” Sasuke mutters, toeing off her boots and slipping out of her jacket, inspecting its stained hem. “Fucking Kisame.”

“Fucking who?”

“Kisame,” Sasuke repeats impatiently, appropriating Naruto’s old slippers – royal blue plush and hardly worn, the kind she only ever used during the ‘tween years, when her feet grew too fast for her to wear out shoes. They’re more or less Sasuke’s now, by the ancient degree of finder’s keepers. “Kiba two point oh. Itachi’s recycled BFF. What the fuck sort of twenty-year-old jumps in puddles?”
Naruto shrugs, snorting down a giggle. She’ll have to nag Mum about getting that new pair of Wellingtons.

After surprisingly little needling, Sasuke takes her up on a *Street Fighter* death match, perched delicately on the back of the coach, toes curling around the cushions, hammering like a manic on the control. For somebody who insisted only two short weeks ago that video gaming wasn’t for her, she’s sure become focused. And deadly

“God damn it!” Naruto erupts from her rumpled position on the floor, almost biting through her own tongue, protruding between her lips in concentration. “You’re cheating! I know you’re cheating!”

“Hn,” says Sasuke, who clearly does not need any handicaps in spite of being such a noob.

Gah, fine, that’s it! Though, being the august, although cheating, winner, Sasuke is entitled to choose the film title.

“What’ve you got?”

“Hmm, let’s see… boring, boring, boring,” as she passes over Mum’s stuff, “*Gossip Girl, One Tree Hill, 90210, Sex and the City, The OC,*” as she gets to Dad’s collection. “Oh, hey, *Dirty Dancing.***

“Porn? Really.”

“It’s not porn! Well, except to Dad.”

Sasuke’s eyebrows are so far up her forehead they’re merging with her hairline. “You want to watch your dad’s porn with me?”

“No! Jesus. Fuck, how can you not have seen *Dirty Dancing?* And you people think you’re educated.”

For the first half an hour Sasuke does the prim girlfriend act, sitting snug and pliant under Naruto’s arm, knees together, hands in her lap, mouth shut in a half-smile. Then she says, “This is stupid,” and turns the screen black as her own shrivelled heart.
“It’s not stupid, it’s awesome! Well, maybe it’s a little stupid, but that never stopped anything being awesome! Corny is a genre.”

To illustrate this, and also because one of the things games has over films is interactivity, Naruto starts explaining the rest of the thrilling storyline, showing off her awesome dance moves in the process.

“Nobody puts Baby in a corner?” Sasuke repeats. “Seriously? That is considered a great line?”

“It is a great line. In context. Shut up!”

Under the light shove, not enough really to more than nudge her shoulder, Sasuke falls back on the couch. Dressed Maya, sort of, posed and very angular against the cushions. Naruto follows her down, always has, she should be too big now for the rabbit hole, should get stuck like Pooh Bear, but she kicks and claws and slithers her way through, less graceful probably than Alice, and fonder perhaps of the Cheshire Cat and the Queen of Hearts.

Things get very intense very fast.

“Hey,” she mumbles, fingers halfway down the waistband of Sasuke’s jeans, climbing Mount Venus. “I got something. Mmh. Mhmh. We should, should go upstairs.”

“Upstairs it is.” She’s breathy, almost giggly, for Sasuke, flushed. It’s taken Naruto a long time to recognise that for what it is, since Sasuke doesn’t go red or even pink like normal people but just sort of glows, her skin suffused with colourless heat, tinted warmer somehow, a bit golden to love-struck eyes.

She smirks her way up the stairs very fast, Naruto’s fingers tangling in her hair, her fingers, the belt loops on her jeans.

And it might be monumentally stupid but with Sasuke bathed in the wintry sunshine, she rubs the back of her neck with one arm, rubbing Sasuke’s leg with the other. “I, er, sort of got something.” Sasuke eyebrows rise, predictable and on their way to loveable, as Naruto gropes under her bed for the bag. “See, I was just getting something for Dad, and then I ran into this guy, and dude, he was – well, at first I thought he was a sick fuck, and I guess maybe he is, but then he was sort of funny, like, sort of almost sweet in a really sick way, and…”
“You actually got some sort of dildo.” It’s not quite a question, or if it was it stops being one when Sasuke picks it up from the bag, still wrapped securely in plastic. It looks bigger in her hands, when the idea becomes real to put it inside of somebody.

“We don’t have to use it.”

“Hm,” Sasuke says dismissively, still studying the item. It’s embarrassing, more than it should be, but Naruto is jittery with heat. “Oh, we can use it.” She looks up then, putting the plastic oblong down beside her thigh. “Or did you change your mind?”

Shaking her head she leans forward, is met, catches Sasuke’s mouth for a bit. Her lips taste weird, a sugary medicinal taste from the lip balm applied to cold-chafed fractures. The underlying blood where they’ve split is better.

“D’you reckon it’s, you know, about the right size?”

“I suppose,” Sasuke says with a measuring sideways glance at the dildo/strap-on/thing. “I was smaller then, this ought to be about right now.”

Fumbling through unspeakable words, Naruto’s mouth moves silently with the realisation that Kakashi must have a rather small dick. Not that it matters, she’d just always assumed – assumed otherwise.

On the other hand it makes sense, Sasuke’s totally fairy-sized even now, and Naruto’s never got the appeal of stuffing things up your slit. Stroking inside it, yes, really filling it up, no.

They sit facing each other, legs tugged up and curling in a large communal mess. Naruto nuzzles at her neck; Sasuke finds the hem of her shirt, tugs it up over her head, only half scalping her in the process.

“This wouldn’t be a problem if you actually brushed your hair.”

“Just cause you don’t have any to brush,” but she’s pressing the smile into Sasuke’s throat, leaning forward on her hands to reach around, biting at the nape of Sasuke’s neck until there’s the soft-sharp
gasping sound and Sasuke’s, I’ll have you know it takes… trails off.

“Mmh hmm. What was that?”

“Shut up.” But she’s taking off her own shirt, unbuttoning slowly, one maddening button after the other, her stupid perfect hands ridiculously hot in slow motion. Tugging off their socks, Naruto pushes the unbuttoned parts of the shirt away, exposing a slice of stomach, a tourist-friendly moonscape, white around the central crater. They both get distracted when she starts kissing around it, so that Sasuke’s jeans are undone and her knickers pulled off before the shirt actually comes off.

“You too,” Sasuke insists, no less bossy for the slight panting, and after a few frustrated fumblings Naruto slides off the bed to get her trousers off. “God, your underwear.”

“There’s nothing wrong with Care Bears knickers,” Naruto says, and wins the argument by more or less gagging Sasuke with her tongue. All right, unsexy metaphor, but then you don’t need sexy language if you’ve got actual sex, or at least Naruto doesn’t.

Some time later she becomes aware that Sasuke’s free hand, the one not brushing her thighs, is lying on the dildo.

“You wanna?”

“Yes.”

The plastic is tenacious, ripping in bits and pieces, until at last the dildo is revealed. It’s smooth, vaguely cold to hands newly occupied with skin.

“Right,” Sasuke says, untangling the straps. “So this is where you fasten…”

She is incredibly sexy; concentrated, chill with distance and warm with interest, the study-time face Naruto’s wanted again and again to molest, smear with blushes.

“Here,” Sasuke orders. “Get up a bit, it’s like a harness.”
As she closes it, arms around Naruto’s hips to do it, nails light against Naruto’s skin as the fastening clicks shut, she looks up into Naruto’s face and, whoa. Just whoa.

Once the straps have been adjusted to fit it’s pretty comfortable, and the ridiculousness of the look is the ridiculousness of belting disco karaoke – a ridiculousness hot with pleasure and sharing it. Absurdist chic, sort of.

“And I said I’d never wear a g-string.”

“At least there aren’t any Care Bears on it.”

Naruto erupts into giggles at that, falling forward until they’re kissing and kissing, the dildo pressing against Sasuke’s leg, pushing the fastening against Naruto, a thick solid centred pressure.

How to…? but Sasuke’s sinking back, angling her leg so the tip glides from thigh to groin.

“Now?” She puts her hand there too, stroking, like Sasuke’s stroking up and down her arms, lightly lightly and then suddenly bruise-hard, breathing on her breasts.

“Yes.”

It’s such a great word, yes. In pretty much every language, yes, ja, oui, hai turns the corners of the mouth upwards, sketches a smile, where no, nein, non, iie is still, facially mute, or tints into a frown.

She has to guide the thing in with her hands, parting the labia with her fingers and angling, Sasuke pulling her forward in a lazy sprawl, the sweetness where the fastening pushes against her so intense it’s dizzy. She’s being obliterated, grabs at Sasuke’s hips to keep grounded, pulls them up to meet her, and god, this was a really good idea.

They’ve become good at sex.

Digging an elbow into the mattress, she forces her head up, captures Sasuke’s eye, the one visible
from under the fringe, Sasuke’s mouth, her skin skittery under Sasuke’s palms ghosting across her arse.

This is going to be a fast one, movement thudding through her, Sasuke open under her, open eyes mouth arms thighs cunt, head thrown sideways. She slips over the edge with that particular childish gasp, and Naruto jumps after her, crashing and euphoric.

“Hn,” Sasuke says, her tone a contemplative kind of cranky, “ouch.”

Naruto struggles to turn her face towards her, leaving a string of drool on Sasuke’s shoulder. “Ouch?”

A hand pushes, quite softly, at her chest. “Move.”

Dislodging Sasuke’s legs from around her hips, Naruto starts to slide off her only to be caught by the harness, realising she – well, not she, really, but sort of she, surely – is still buried to the hilt. “Oops. Shit. Sorry?” At least the surprise adrenaline powers her sitting back, fumbling to undo the straps but failing and dropping back down with it still attached. Whatever, she’s more invested in tugging Sasuke closer, although it’s not entirely unlike watching a candle flame, wanting and wanting to touch it but burning yourself whenever you try, and trying it anyway. Even on top of the bedclothes there are definite disadvantages to post- as opposed to pre-coital snuggling, as sweaty Sasuke is far more given to batting her away than freezing Sasuke.

“So was this,” she adds air quotes, “real sex? Measure up to expectations? Since, well, I am a sex god, but you knew that, so I expect your expectations were pretty astronomical.” Rolling over ends badly, the harness cutting off circulation in her left buttock and the dildo twisting painfully into her groin.

Snorting, slit-eyed, Sasuke orders her on her back. “Raise your hips.” Naruto suspects she looks about as ridiculous as she feels, but Sasuke’s not laughing, one fingers gliding up the dildo. For a moment Naruto thinks, given the angle and the open-lipped smirk, that she’s going to take it in her mouth, and almost chokes on her own indrawn breath.

“Worse than a bra clasp,” she jokes as Sasuke’s hands slip around her, undoing the fastening to let Naruto struggle free of the harness. Discarded on the coverlet, the dildo is slick with wetness, and really a far more arousing sight than it should’ve been.
Sasuke’s index finger plunges inside her, relief like a wave finally cresting, the knuckle of her thumb circling Naruto’s clit, pulling new tide like the moon.

“To answer your earlier question,” she says, very calmly, edging over into smugness only when Naruto grunts in frustrated non-reply, “it’s not a real dick.” A flick of her fingers and Naruto’s frown is turned upside down and sideways. “But then who needs dicks?”

Naruto might’ve kissed her for that, the sloppy non-sexy kissing on nose and lip and cheek that Sasuke doesn’t like, if she weren’t so busy cursing her and coming.

Then she says, tracing circles on Sasuke’s leg, “I liked it, though.”

“Obviously.”

She hitches herself back up on a sore elbow. “You didn’t?”

“Jesus Christ, idiot, I would have imagined it was obvious I – did.” You don’t often catch embarrassment on Sasuke’s features, but you’d be hard pressed to call her present expression anything else as she snatches up a bathrobe and stands.

“You don’t want a go, then?”

Sasuke sniffs at her. “There’s no way on earth I’m putting that on.”

“Fine, fine.” It makes little sense, but then the same might be said for Sasuke as a whole. No, that’s not true. Sasuke makes perfect sense, it’s just a different kind of sense – a coherent one, not a correspondent one. “Where are you going?”

“I’d like to shower before your parents come home this time.”

“You know they don’t mind.” Although she’s dropping the offered strap-on back on the bed and standing too, grabbing for clothes.
Going by her blank expression, it has never occurred to Sasuke that they might. “I mind.”

For the most part her parents have stopped asking Sasuke to dinner, partly because of the commuting issues, partly, presumably, because Naruto can’t be the only one able to translate “I’m afraid my mother’s expecting me, but thank you” to “your food is shit”, but today Dad, tying on his new running shoes, ambushes them to ask if Sasuke would like to come with him jogging? Snow’s finally been cleared off, and he knows she runs too – Naruto has to stay home with schoolwork, but…?

“Oh, I’m afraid I pulled a muscle,” says Sasuke. “I thought I’d let it rest.”

“Ah, I’m afraid I pulled a muscle,” says Sasuke. “I thought I’d let it rest.”

“Oh, ouch. Just now?”

“Yes. Not enough stretching, I suppose.”

Naruto chokes in the doorway, feeling her heart beating red through every pore of her face.

“What the hell were you doing?” she demands when Sasuke’s safely off to the bus stop and Dad’s back from his jog, sweaty and, honestly, pretty gross. It’s an odd observation, but with Gai having been forced by Tsunade’s decree to lay off the relentless marathons and focus on indoor sports until the weather breaks, Naruto’s come to associate running with Sasuke, who makes the post-jog look quite attractive.

“Just trying to get to know her a bit.” Stretching his arm backwards exposes his arm pit to the room, gassing it. “I know you guys run around a lot, and, hell, you’re head over heels for her, she’s around a fair bit, of course I’m curious.” He shrugs, head tilting sideways that way he’s picked up from Mum. “I didn’t think you’d mind, you never did about Kiba.”

“That’s,” she starts, “Yeah.”

It’s true, except it’s all different, Sasuke being – being Sasuke. Being so much further inside her, so that showing her off is like showing yourself naked, no skinless. Taking your heart in your hands and holding it out, see, here it is.
Chapter 23

She’s half asleep, twisting minutely to avoid the bad patches of Naruto’s mattress. It’s really less than brilliant how she keeps sleeping over, given that the bed is fairly large for one person, as well it’d have to be given Naruto’s penchant for rolling around in her sleep, but it’s uncomfortably small for two people, and also uncomfortable in general.

On the other hand Naruto’s dad is rather nice, and her mum’s sober, and she doesn’t have any siblings to drag home unfortunate friends or girlfriends.

On the downside, Naruto has a penchant for unfortunate friends herself.

“Shut up,” Sasuke grumbles, forced into wakefulness on pain of her half-asleep dreams being invaded by Kiba, whose voice is so loud it echoes through the phone and between the walls in Naruto’s room.

“Sleepyhead,” Naruto mouths, patting or slapping her shoulder – Sasuke’s too drowsy to tell the difference, especially since the response to either is a glare – and continues talking to Kiba, who as it appears has finally given up his ill-considered pursuit of Hinata.

*She just doesn’t like me, mate. Guess I’ll just have to take it like a man and let it go, you know?*

Sasuke isn’t sure that spending weeks moping like a little girl about two faked dates not working out falls within the definition of taking it like a man, but then Kiba’s English leaves a lot to be desired at the best of times.

He’s still harping on about it when her own mobile goes off with early-morning shrillness and she has to venture out from below the comforter to get it. “Yeah, what?”

It isn’t supposed to be like this. It’s just Itachi, he’s not supposed to make the world stop.

The mind/body distinction, so often derided as a destructive fallacy of Western patriarchy, turns out to be firmly based on reality after all, because Sasuke’s still lying on the bed in the cold dumb vacuum of a stopped world, Itachi’s voice trickling out in her ear and bleeding away, but her body’s staggering across the room, pulling on clothes as it struggles onward, through the doorway and the hallway and down the stairs, clinging to the railing because every step is falling.
“Sasuke?”

Minato’s hands, large and burningly hot in the blank chillness, find her shoulders, halting her even as her feet keep moving, treading air. Naruto’s coming up behind them.

What’s going on? Are you all right? Did something happen?

_I have to go to the hospital_ she says several times, and at last it comes out aloud, so they can hear.

“All right,” Minato says quickly. “I’ll drive you. Come here.”

He’s stepping into his shoes, grabbing the keys, and after a moment she remembers she should do that too, put on her shoes, and does. He drapes a jacket over her shoulders and Naruto hovers beside her. “Sasuke, what is it?”

In the backseat of the car she manages to say, “Itachi. Itachi called.”

“I know,” says Naruto, her eyes the exact same blue as Minato’s in the rear view mirror but looking at her entirely differently. “What about him? Is he hurt?”

“He’s lying. He’s always lying, he’s saying it so I’ll come, so he won’t have to admit he’s done something again. He must have done something bad, or he wouldn’t. He wouldn’t say that.”

“Say what?”

“Itachi,” Sasuke repeats, frustrated with Naruto being all over her, so close she can smell the sleep on her skin, and yet not hearing, not listening properly. “He’s woken up.”

“He – Kakashi’s woken up.” Naruto sits back abruptly, wide-eyed and slack-mouthed and not at all comical.
“Of course he hasn’t, he’s not fucking Lazarus.”

“He’s also not dead.”

“Stop it!” Sasuke screams at her, Naruto’s knee digging it hers and Naruto’s hand around her wrist and Naruto’s mouth silent at last.

The parking lot is endless, but since the world’s stopped, that doesn’t mean much. She’s not aware of how she does it, she’s still lying on the bed, in Naruto’s bed with the phone, but her legs walk, fast and steady, don’t falter until the dry hospital air hits.

Stopping isn’t possible, she staggers towards the room, Naruto’s hand slipping off her arm when Minato’s closes around Naruto’s shoulder, holding her back.

One imagines something. One imagines it and imagines it, until the imagination eclipses reality so it can’t actually happen.

The door closes behind her and they’re all staring, staring so hard at her she’s actually aware of it, Itachi and two nurses and a doctor. Him.

“Sasuke.”

She’s standing by the foot end of the bed, he can’t reach her. His voice is raspy but he doesn’t look like a corpse anymore, half-sitting, propped up and meeting her eyes with his one. The other lid hangs, the pupil fixated, but it’s Kakashi like it’s always been Kakashi looking at her like he’s always looked at her.

“Hello,” somebody starts, a man, the doctor.

“If we could have a moment.” His voice is steadier now, if still reedier than it should be. His mouth barely moves; if it weren’t for the voice you could have sworn he hadn’t spoken.

They troop past her, Itachi and the hospital people.
He holds out his hand. He’s moving like a very old person, in slow trembling fits and starts, like his hair should be silver grey instead of silver blond.

“Sasuke.”

“Yes,” she says. “Yes.”

Moving then, over the floor and onto the bed, stopping, freezing, just beside him, until his hand catches her arm and … not quite tugs, lies heavy on it, calling, and she sinks down on the mattress. His body under the sheets feels entirely different where it presses against her hip, now.

“They told me it’s been,” the scars around his mouth move visibly the way his lips don’t, “going on two years.”

Twenty months, he’s twenty months ago, at the accident.

“I,” and she’s grabbing at him, clawing really, her fingers digging into his torso. Her head falls forward a little, she’s breathing oddly.

He does the thing where he reaches for her hair clip, his fingers bumping against the back of her head where it’s cut short now. The light falls on his elbow, a million shades of light on his skin. He cups her cheek instead, all the way from chin to forehead.

She remembers thinking, as a child, that this was it. This was love. Somebody to catch your face in their hand.

He says, “I’ve got you,” and it’s true. She’s never once doubted it.

“Good.”

Her voice is weird too, deep and fractured. Old.
She sits sideways across his lap, leaning against him, her legs a bridge over his, head tucked securely under his chin, his arms loose around her. His smell has grown strong again from mobility, the smell she pressed her nose desperately close for when she slept beside his husk, sniffed and sniffed after, pressing herself into his pores to find the real smell hiding under the hospital stench.

Suddenly it seems ridiculous.

Her head moves minutely with his breathing, his heart beating against her cheek.

“How have you been?”

There’s no possible answer that isn’t a joke or an accusation, an insult. She breathes small silent breaths until his pulse, momentarily heightened, has lulled back to its previous pace.

“You know, there’s a difference between not answering because you can’t and because you don’t feel like it.”

“It’s a stupid question.” Hers wasn’t, all the unanswered, why have you abandoned me?

But he’s always professed his like for stupid questions, for using them intelligently. She takes his hand, re-tracing the nape of her neck, and pushes it down under her neckline to press against the scar. Careful, a little cold, his fingertips follow its trail.

“So give me a stupid answer.” Stilling, his hand stays there over the scar. “It feels old.”

“It is.”

“Not to me.”

It occurs to her to wonder whether he’s seen a mirror, catalogued the eye and scars that have waited with her for him to notice them.

There’s a knock, then the doctor and Itachi return. It’s a thin, dark man that she thinks she should
remember, from the first terrible weeks after the accident.

He offers his hand, and is definitely familiar; she blanks the name but recalls the traces of an accent.

“I trust you’re still feeling well? Excellent. Now, we’re waiting on results and we’ll want to run a few more tests to be on the safe side, but everything seems to be in order. Do you have any questions at the moment? No? Right. Please alert the nurses should anything come up, and I’ll be in to see you again later when we’ve got the first test results back.” He smiles, wide and seemingly genuine. “It’s wonderful to finally have you back, after all that teasing.”

“Teasing.” Sasuke says when the door’s closed behind him.

“I’m a regular Snow White,” says Kakashi.

To his credit, Itachi doesn’t turn away from her.

_She doesn’t need to be informed at this juncture. There might not even be anything to tell._

There’s static crackle in her head.

“I take it at least Anko’s not pregnant.”

Kakashi startles against her, his entire body fluid with the involuntary movement after the stiffness and struggle before. “What?”

“Nothing,” Itachi says. “Are you tired?”

“No.” He sounds tired, but in the agitated over-tired way of a child aware something terrible has occurred but denied any definite knowledge. She recalls it well, although Mum and Dad did it to her far more often than Kakashi and Itachi, who treated her sometimes as a very much younger little sister but never precisely as a child. Itachi, though, he thought they were playing house, she and Kakashi, with him as their baby, their domesticated little enfant terrible.
She says, “They’ve been seeing each other.”

“Yes,” says Itachi, who cannot be surprised about her loyalties being what they are.

“Huh.” Surprise makes him sound a little blank, before something else can colour the tone; warmth, humour, lazy and with some sting. “Well, good on you. She’s a catch.”

Itachi’s deliberately not looking at her, as though he really is questioning, as though trust and allegiance could really have been assumed to have shifted, like – remembering Naruto is like a punch in the gut. Like everything connected to Naruto, an impression so vivid it takes on a semblance of physical reality.

Then she is back, fully back, and the only real thing in the world is Kakashi’s arm around her back.

“The doctor warned us not to tire you,” Itachi says.

“Warned? What the hell does that mean, warned?” She hates her voice for betraying her, shrilling. She’s shrill all the way through, a contradictory echo chamber.

Kakashi too has turned to him, turned on him, and Itachi yields. “Nothing, I’ms sure.”

Another knock, brisk, and the door is again slid open, for a nurse this time, younger than the previous ones. In a terribly high-pitched, earnest voice she explains about testing muscle dexterity and deterioration, wanting to see if there’s any hint of nerve damage that might have been missed while they were gymnasticising him during the coma, and you might want to wait outside?

Plagued again by the cold internal shakiness that comes with shock or too little sleep, she scrambles off the bed and outside, Itachi following after a moment. “Are you…?”

“I’m going to the bathroom.”

For some reason she expects to run into Naruto in the corridor, but it’s plastered with unknown faces only. Itachi doesn’t follow her now.
Alone in the bathroom after a pointed stare at the two women washing their hands, she stares at her reflection without recognition; with some curiosity.

“Get it the fuck together, bitch,” she whispers, the sink clammy under her hands, the mirror fogging up. Patting down the haphazard clothes she threw on, Naruto’s green jumper but her own trousers, she finds her cigarettes, her lighter, and smokes eight in quick succession, dropping the butts where she stands until they’re circling her feet.

The nurse is outside when she comes back, saying to Itachi that of course physical therapy will be required, but as he’s young and healthy he should be well enough to leave the hospital quite soon, and there is no reason to suppose he won’t regain full mobility within a relatively short time, if he puts in the work.

Fucking Snow White, indeed.

Presumably she would be able to appreciate the momentousness of the wave breaking over her if she weren’t standing in the middle of it trying to keep her footing.

This time when they go inside they both sit on the bed, Sasuke beside Kakashi, touching shoulders elbows hips, Itachi at the foot end.

“There was nothing else the matter, then?” Kakashi says. “Apart from.” His hand finishes the sentence, ghosting over her scar.

“No.” The word comes out unaccountably thick, rustier than the chain smoking merits.

Finally, fucking finally, Itachi realises, “I need to step outside for a moment.”

Somehow she has turned towards him, has her head on his shoulder, breathing hard with her eyes closed. His hand comes up like it’s supposed to, fitting like it always has around the nape of her neck, in a comfortably oversize sort of way.

“There was just you.”
“Temari…”

She shakes her head, feels a smile twist her face in utterly the wrong way.

He does the demented smiley expression, lifting both eyebrows and quirking them. She knows full well he can raise them independently, but he rarely ever does.

With the paralysed eye and the tired, wasted state of his facial muscles, it’s a far more solemn expression than usual.

“Things got a bit strained when I aborted Gaara’s bastard the same week Itachi decided sleeping pills should be ingested by the handful.”

It sounds funny, her voice distant and blank over the desperate bawling rage.

“How is he?”

“There’s been,” and she finds herself quoting her mother of all people, the strained ridiculous phrase they’ve all heard so often, “a lot of down on the up and down scale.” She shrugs a little, feels her shoulder dig its way into his armpit. “But he’s better now. He’s been stable for the last few months.”

“And…”

“And,” she cuts him off.

It strikes her that she might look fatter than he’s used to; her breasts are large enough now to be present under the baggy jumper. They were always big on her, but a little smaller then. Likely her face is thinner, though.

He rests his face against hers, a careful aligning of two sets of very sharp jaws and cheekbones, his breathing slowing, whatever he says running into a mumble. She realises after some time that he is asleep.
Limp, gone, fucking gone.

She scrambles away, gentle with him but with all her gestures too large, falling off the bed, landing with bent knees and scrabbling hands.

The overhead light is over-bright and frazzling, the corridor flashing past. She feels like a shadow.

The toilet bowl is cold and welcome between her legs, her knees digging into the floor, her feet aching pleasantly under her weight. It doesn’t burn, coming up: the experience is very calm, very dry, until sweat breaks between her shoulder blades, her eyes tearing. Her lips are chapped, rough under her hand. She smokes until she runs out of cigarettes.

Somebody opens the door, runs a tap. Sasuke chucks the empty package and rewinds through the corridor. When she touches his shoulder, sloped in sleep under the hospital pyjamas, he wakes up. This time he wakes up, his expression somehow swollen and childish, as though the childishness brought with it an illusion of returned baby-fat, filling out the hollow cheeks.

It’s completely different from the gaunt post-nightmare face she shares with Itachi, but she’s back on the bed with him before his hand has closed around her hip. Her body has taken over again, doing what it’s meant to with her mind left behind; curling up next to him, angling forward to let his hands find the line of skin where her undershirt doesn’t quite meet the hem of her trousers under the jumper, taking hold of his face, the new scars rough against her palms, far broader than Naruto’s.

“I was,” he starts. “It was,” and somehow or other she is given to understand he dreamt of when the world crashed to a halt, and burned, and something had got on his face and she was gone, he couldn’t see her for the debris, and the world crashed and burned.

By the time Itachi and the doctor return he’s calmed down, they’ve both calmed down. Really he did what he’s always done, took a few deep breaths and a few cheap one-liners and repressed. Sasuke was the one with shaky fingers, but that might just be the extra nicotine, four times her daily dose within the span of three or four hours.

“As expected,” the doctor says, “the results that have come back are looking good.” Sasuke blanks the medical talk about levels and percentages, hangs on to looking good, recovery, discharge as soon as we’ve got all our results and got started with the physical therapy.
It’s Itachi thanking the doctor and shaking his hand, no doubt taking notes. He never needs to, nor to study, but he always does.

She does tune back in when it’s revealed that the stress of waking up is likely to cause tiredness, because of which it’s no cause for concern, indeed to be expected, that Kakashi will need quite a bit of sleep to start with.

And just…

Fuck that, there is no way she will handle that. As Kakashi starts to drift off she kisses his forehead, his fringe bristly as Naruto’s isn’t, sharp little pokes at her nose, as leaves Itachi to mind him.

The corridor remains unfathomable; she makes it halfway, to the largely deserted bend leading to the now closed cafeteria, before sinking to the floor, numbness against her back and buttocks, strain in her knees, pressed too hard to her chest.

This time Naruto does come.

xxxxx

“That’s not your reunion,” Dad says, his voice kindly but somehow stern, the cruellest he’s ever been to her. “You all right?”

“I’m not the one who’s been in hospital.”

He nods a little, considering, she supposes. Sasuke’s no longer visible, gone beyond a curve in the corridor. Naruto knows to where, could map the way blindfolded. Her feet always did have a better sense of direction than her mind, though, so maybe that doesn’t say much. “You never could deflect before you started hanging out with her. Really, though, are you all right here? I need to be at the garage to receive some new cars, but I could drive you home right after.”

“I’m fine. I’ll go home with Mum. You go.” She even squeezes his arm, never looking away from where Sasuke disappeared, and amazingly it works; he nods, walks off.
It’s still not her reunion though.

There is absolutely nothing to do in a hospital, which makes sense in that hospitals aren’t built for healthy people, but still. Instinct steers her steps towards the kids’ ward – no, instinct would set her running after Sasuke, but sense pushes her towards the children, where she stays telling stories and building Lego until lunchtime, when she ventures to find Mum.

The receptionist remembers her and is friendly, asking are you all right, honey, you look a little pale? Your mum’s in the cafeteria.

“Right, thanks.”

And there she is, with a salad and some friends, with only the salad after she’s caught sight of Naruto, who can only sort of laugh and say, “I’m fine, everybody’s fine, he’s fine too I guess, he woke up.”

“He – oh. Oh, honey.”

If she’s hugged she’s going to start bawling, and the few tears leaking sluggishly down her face are quite enough. “Don’t fuss. Please.”

“And Dad couldn’t drive you home?”

“I didn’t want him to.”

Mum strokes her face, soft and home and smelling strongly of disinfectant. “Oh, honey, this is a bad idea.”

Jumping out of windows is a bad idea too, but when there’s a fire behind you, you jump if you want to live.

“I just need to be here, okay.”
“All right. I’m off at five, come find me here.”

Mum who always said, *chercher l’homme*, which Itachi found hilarious and pissed Sasuke off.

Unable to face the post-lunch rush of parents in the children’s ward, she chews half a sandwich and then her nails, and calls Kiba, who she discovers has sent several upset messages about what the hell are you doing just hanging up on me like that.

Akamaru’s adopted some of the new pups, taking a tough love approach to teaching them proper Inuzuka dog manners, which is apparently adorable – a word Kiba never uses but which is so strongly implied it drowns out the ones he actually does say – and which he’s sure Hinata would’ve loved to see, except not, maybe, because things got so awkward, and Shino says I should get over this ‘inane infatuation’ or whatever, but hell if I’m taking romantic advice from Bug Man.

Naruto makes a horrible joke about Shino being Kiba’s Ladybug, and is almost deafened by Kiba’s howls of protest and laughter.

Then Kiba needs to help his mum out with something and Naruto’s left remembering those photos, where Sasuke smiled like Naruto’s never seen her smile. How he didn’t touch her like Naruto touches her, with that shuddering disbelieving joy. He touched her like it was natural, warm like the sun, and happy, no more extraordinary or alienable.

She has to see her, just a peek. She won’t disturb if they’re busy.

Hell, she might even say, like, welcome back. It’s not everyday somebody wakes up from a year and a half of coma.

There’s no need.

Sasuke’s on the floor, arms sprawling at wild angles over her tucked-up knees, rag doll royalty.

Seven steps and she’s there, bending forward, hands all over her, brushing hands arms knees face.

Sasuke looks up, sharply but a haggard sort of sharp, the back of her head knocking against the wall.
She grabs the neckline of Naruto’s shirt, her knuckles white around a thin red cut from Naruto’s thumb nail, pulls her down and kisses her.

It’s the sort of kiss Naruto can’t help but give her sometimes, desperation and melting and need. “You should, you should go home,” she says afterwards, wiping her lips. The lower one has split, another thin line of blood, a little of it smeared over Naruto’s mouth too, without obscuring the underlying taste. Naruto knows what bile tastes like.

Probably she shouldn’t have fallen in love with Sasuke in the first place, but Naruto doesn’t deal so well with probablys or shoulds.

She sits down too, holding onto Sasuke’s hand. “I guess.” She glances at the clock, tugs at Sasuke. “Come on.”

Sasuke comes.

Though the surprise registers on her whole face, Mum doesn’t say anything when they both follow her to the car, and Naruto’s death glare stops the imminent question of where she might drop Sasuke off.

“What’s going on? How was it?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know.” After a while she adds, “He’s asleep.”

“That’s perfectly normal,” Mum interjects, breaking the precarious backseat bubble, but the words are good to hear.


She’s slumped against Naruto’s side, head heavy against the edge of her shoulder. Fingers tucked in her sleeves, she must be cold.

Dad’s at the stove when they return, continuing his endless quest to imbue boiled potatoes with actual taste; Mum bustles in to warm her hands, gloves forgotten at the hospital; Sasuke finds the
half-full cigarette pack in the pocket of the jacket she left this morning and clutches it. “I need a shower,” she says, trudging upstairs.

“She all right?” Dad asks about the same time Mum inquires, “Are you all right?”

“We’re fine. We’ll be fine.” She sort of snorts, isn’t quite sure what sound it is, just that it’s thick. “Her dead boyfriend just woke up, there’s a bit of an adjustment period.”

“Yes, well, I’m going to go change,” Mum says. “Do her parents know where she is?”

“Sure,” says Naruto, because I really doubt they care wouldn’t fly with Mum.

Dad slings an arm around her shoulders, drawing her in close until she nuzzles into his side. They stand like that, silent, until it’s time to take the potatoes off the stove.

Putting plates on the table, Naruto pauses, then takes the plunge while Mum’s still away. “When she says she doesn’t want any, don’t ask again.”

“But she always begs off at first,” Dad says. “Always assumed it was somebody’s idea of politeness, raising her like that.”

“Don’t ask again because if you pressure her she’ll eat.” The words are difficult, she’s no good at talking around stuff but she’s not really good at betraying Sasuke either.

“Well I should think that’s a good thing, get some food in her stomach to steady her up.”

She closes her eyes, opens them, and fine, she can’t do subtlety. “Problem is it’s not gonna stay there.” She dumps the last plate with a thud. “She’s thrown up enough today.”

“Oh. Naruto, honey, you realise she needs help with this? You’re not doing her any favours keeping it quiet.”

“They know. I mean, her family. People. They’ve been sending her to therapists and stuff.”
“Well, good.”

What’s the good of it, Sasuke being treated the exact way to make her not listen? Fuck, Naruto barely scarped together that Freud paper and even she knows enough reverse psychology to know that that’s exactly the wrong way to handle Sasuke.

But the shower’s stopped, and Mum comes back, and shortly afterwards Sasuke, in the same clothes as before but with her hair damp, a half-smoked cigarette between her fingers. Given how much she smokes it’s weird that she’s so inept but she can’t really talk with the cig in her mouth, prefers to take it out between drags.

Sasuke sits through dinner mostly silent, stubbing out the cigarette but not replacing it with anything, playing with her food skilfully until it looks eaten but isn’t.

They trudge upstairs immediately afterwards, Sasuke staring out the window in Naruto’s room, managing not to look vulnerable even with her arms wrapped around herself.

“Hey, Sasuke…”

“I don’t really want to talk.”

“I do.”

“I don’t fucking care.”

“The hell you don’t,” Naruto snaps.

Sasuke jostles her shoulder but not enough to dislodge Naruto’s chin.

She says, softer, rustier. “I really don’t want to talk.”
Last time Naruto said, *so why are you here?* and Sasuke said, *I can leave,* and there were yells and stabs and awfulness, and then sex and too much silence before the angry distance was bridged. It worked out pretty well, at the time, but now Naruto says, “Fine.”

The bed groans a little under their weight, Naruto sprawling on her stomach, a comic between her elbows, Sasuke curled around a book, Mum’s *Essential Virginia Woolf* left from when they read *Mrs Dalloway* for English, her feet resting against Naruto’s legs.

It’s only nine o’clock when Sasuke elects to go to bed, which is more than fine by Naruto, who’s happy to chuck the comic whose title she’s forgotten. Sasuke lies beside her under the duvet, her spine curving in a half-circle against Naruto’s side, like a warm stone in the bed, and falls asleep astonishingly fast, breathing in those little gulps she does when dreaming.

She sleeps through the vibrating phone, letting Naruto roll off the bed and find it, sneak outside to see the caller ID spell out Itachi’s name. It was precisely for situations like this that Sasuke, although with much smirking and brow lifting and plainly not believing they would ever occur, taught her the pin code.

“Hi,” she says. “It’s Naruto. She’s okay. She’s asleep.”

“Right. I couldn’t be sure.”

“Yeah. So, are you good? You and, you know. Kakashi.”

“We’re good. He’s asleep. I’m – really good.”

“Oh.”

“Naruto,” he says very kindly, very gently, like she used to pretend her hypothetical big brother would, so she could kick him in the shins for condescension but be secretly relieved, “I just got my best friend back. There’s no ambiguity in this for me.” There’s really nothing she can say to that past the screaming lump in her throat, which he must realise: “Go back to bed.”

“Bye,” she says, and does, can’t sleep for watching Sasuke, her eyes following her always like well-trained puppies.
Next morning Sasuke is steadier, puts on her own clothes from the stash of washed and pressed outfits for when she sleeps over on school nights, eats a white-faced breakfast with only a very low nicotine component. But she did fist the front of Naruto’s sleep shirt before putting on her socks, grabbed it and kissed her and kissed her.

Having brushed her teeth, she goes straight for her boots.

“You’re going back to the hospital?”

“Of course I am.” She is careful to meet Naruto’s eyes, completely. “I need to be there. I love him.” Her mouth twists. “Also I should probably tell him about you.” She bends down to ties the laces. “You should probably stay away.”

Naruto’s never stepped into her trainers so quickly. “Yeah, no, that’s not going to be happening.”
“I am, I’ve been,” Sasuke says, “seeing somebody.”

Oh. He can feel the shape of the oh on his mouth, surprised certainly but a little arrogant too, a little amused perhaps. He can’t take it seriously, although of course she’s serious.

It’s – she’s taller, from his perspective, from one day to the next, everything and she too looking different when viewed with one normal eye and a damaged one, which sees only indistinct shapes and shades of redness.

This sudden tallness is suspicious, too, since measured in proportion to him she is exactly the same size she’s supposed to be, still fits against him like – like a doll in its box, like a person in shoes worn for years and years, like any number of inappropriate similes – so somehow has contrived, has learnt, to look taller, which is of course far more impressive and far more of a real growth than actually being taller.

“Oh?” he says.

“Yes. Naruto.” Speaking the word changes her mouth, breaks it into a mess of expressions, a bit of a smile and a hint of a frown.

He leans on an elbow sore from the minimal exertion. “So tell me about her.”

“She’s Naruto. She’s – my girlfriend, I suppose. She’s Naruto.”

“If you dumped me for a lipstick lesbian, you could at least fill me in on the steamy details.”

“You were dead!”

His hand closes around her on instinct and she clings to it. He remembers that feeling, that situation, after his parents died and before Itachi and Sasuke, one’s whole world turning round the nave of somebody being dead. “I got better,” he says, forcing his other arm past the inertia and muscle pain, up around her back.
She breathes harshly, frowns a little as she sits back. “Also she’s not a lipstick lesbian.”

“No? Is she butch?”

She smiles then, a smirk in shape but really a smile, incongruous in her cynical face, the smile of somebody quite convinced he hung the moon. “Only compared to you.”

His fingers, stiff and dumb, feel like his again intertwined with hers. “So sum her up for me.”

“Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!”

There’s no irony in the quote, except for its recipient.

He pulls her down and she comes easily, kissing him back as though she’s never done anything else.

Last time he saw her she was fourteen, just shy of fifteen. He was only just eighteen.

Time’s not supposed to just disappear like that, no matter that he’s never put much stock in the idea of objective, linear chronology as a meaningful measure of experience. Now he’s on the wrong end of the cheating to appreciate it.

Far too soon he has to stop kissing her, short of air, needing to lay back and rest. She snorts at his atrophied lungs, ignoring the hand she’s got clenched in his pyjamas shirt, rubbing against his chest. “One would think you’re the smoker.”

“You don’t smoke that much.”

Surprise twists the corner of her mouth. “I went through three packs yesterday.”

He considers a quip about how she’s pretty enough to get her picture taken without being the poster child for lung cancer, but discards it as lame. It would have to be carried by very careful irony, and
his voice still comes faint and with some struggle.

At least she’s not lost weight.

“Consider me beaten,” he says instead, picking up her hand again, which has shorter nails than he expects it to, a scratch across the knuckles. It’s warm and safe and far from the crash, the ring still too loose but no longer threatening to slip over the knuckle of her thumb. “Though that physical therapist is making me sorely tempted to start up again.”

“Hn,” says Sasuke, “be glad it’s not Gai.”

“I don’t know, I think he’d be pretty fetching in spandex.”

That doesn’t get her hackles up anymore, like it did when she was twelve; she snorts, bumps her head against his shoulder.

“I never thought a school would hire him,” he remarks, remembering Gai as a sort of universally feared freelance trainer terrorising gyms and schools in need of P. E. substitute teachers. “I feel new respect for Tsunade.”

Sasuke snorts again, a considerably less friendly sound this time. “She’s a crazy alcoholic.”

“Yes, well, I doubt she’d have hired him otherwise.”

“That’s not funny,” she hisses, all aflame, before calming, still clinging to him. “I suppose Itachi will bring Mum to see you.”

“So I reckon. How’s she been?”

Because he can’t forgive her, but that doesn’t preclude pity.

Sasuke’s never had that problem, rubs at her face. “When you were gone it, it got bad.”
He’s not thought of her as a child for years – and god knows she resented it back when he did – but he’s never actually dealt with her as an adult before.

“Itachi said you were both living at home again.”

“Yeah,” she says, looking tired, skin stretched tight and shadowed across her face. “Itachi wanted to stick around her. I didn’t care.”

*I didn’t care* about the dad she hates or the mum she can’t stand or the suicidal brother, or, which is what she’s really saying, herself.

“She shifts, fringe down over her eyes and the lashes too. “How long will you be stuck here?”

The preliminary discharge date is Tuesday, and given all the commuting necessitated by the intensive tests and therapy, he’s been inclined not to press for an earlier release.

“That’s soon,” she says.

“I’m fine.”

“People don’t lie unconscious for a year and a half because they’re fine.”

Still working on a comeback for that, he can only sigh. Her thighs are bony under his hand, under his eye too now she’s dressed in less loose clothes. He’s so weak he’s probably not even bruising her despite holding on as hard as he can, his fingers aching and trembling and desperate, like an old man clinging to life.

“I suppose you’ll be coming home with us for the immediate future,” she says in her official voice, measured and wonderful and for strangers. “It’s closer to the hospital, and there are people around.”
“Fine.”

“What?”

“Look, if you don’t want to go home with me, that’s fine.”

She stares at him and for a moment he thinks she might actually cry with humiliated fury. She snaps forward and kisses him hard, teeth and pressure, her fingers cutting into the scars under his chin.

“If you want me to lug your lame arse up and down three staircases, then I fucking will.”

The diffusion is palpable as he says, “I can’t believe you didn’t get the lift fixed.”

He’s faced with her profile. “It’s not actually my flat.”

“Of course it is. It always was.”

_Do I even still have a flat?_ he asked Itachi, calm about it really, much calmer than he’d thought he’d be. He’d expected resigned but it wasn’t that.

Itachi said, _Like we’d let that go._

They shared the pre-pubertal version of a manly grin that bonded them all those years ago, knew the word to fit into that sentence wasn’t _that_, so proud of their macho sophistication.

His best friend, still, even if they were rendered suddenly starkly reticent because of everything that was Sasuke’s to tell, for Sasuke to be told.

An orderly comes in with a lunch tray, leaving them both perusing the still life perched over his stomach.
The right side of Sasuke’s face twitches, the eyebrow and the corner of her mouth quirking upwards. “Do tuck in.”

“Itachi promised to come back with something edible. Will you…?”

She lifts it away, dismantling the temporary tray and sitting next to him again, toes drumming restlessly against the mattress.

He has to break through that.

Fabric bunches under his hand as he lays it against her stomach, just inside the hollow of her hip, soft blue jumper and fleshless pits underneath. He had an idea once, an anxiety, about his own child in there, after they’d been careless and slightly drunk, days flowing together during the holidays and pills gone missing, forgotten. “How was it?”

“It just was.” She shrugs a little, the one-shouldered one, sharply, the tip of the shoulder almost up to her ear. “I was busy with other things.” She slants a sideways look at him, her face in profile but her eyes straight on his. “Itachi doesn’t know.”

He lets the non-verbal Oh? form on his face.

“I was picking up his pieces, trying. Afterwards there was no point saying anything.” She breathes deeply, her stomach moving with it. “Nobody knows, just – just Naruto.”

And yes, Naruto, and yes, Sasuke is clearly serious about her. He must communicate something of this, because she says, wryly, sadly, twisting the ring around her thumb, “I don’t do casual relationships.”

He could say, “I know”. He does say it. He says, “It’s just a bloody ring.”

Instead of a tolerant reply to the effect of, Symbols are larger than themselves, that’s what makes them symbols, her entire body freezes with hurt; stricken.
And he was lying, too, and if she takes it off, never previously a possibility, he will vomit. That ring is heavy with the weight of expectations and years and commitment, with trust and family and us.

His hand locks around her, the ring cutting into both their fingers. “I didn’t…”

The brief, broken up smile that flashes over her face lets him know she contemplated saying, *If you want it back*, contemplated pressing the issue. He can’t be sure whether she refrains because she can’t take it or because she feels he doesn’t need to.

“I know.” Their hands relax, sprawling together instead, the diamonds a familiar opaque glimmer. “I don’t do casual.”

Perhaps he should not say this, but between them honesty has always counted for solace. “You did Gaara.”

“That was just a fuck.” She shakes her head, a small movement, the short hair fanning over her cheek.

He is honestly curious, right now that’s the only feeling he is able to have on the matter, “Did you come?”

“I don’t know.” She pulls a pack of cigarettes from her pocket, props one in her mouth and lights up, her fingers a lot more comfortable with the tasks than they were two years ago. “I was drunk, we were upset, I don’t even fucking know.”

“Give me one?”

She lifts an eyebrow on what must be reflex, does.

Two thirds of a cigarette later he says, “I like your hair.”

“Me too. It got caught in something, in the crash. I realised it’s better short.” Again she’s breathing deeply, in out in out, looking away and then straight at him. “Did you hear anything? When you were comatose, did you hear me?”
“No,” he has to say, which is unfair because: “To me the crash happened yesterday.”

Again her hand, previously relaxed in his, clenches around his wrist. Her pulse thuds against his, racing it.

All she says is, “Itachi’s late.”

Not for the first time he considers that language is the armour one dons against reality.

Words are just starting to build up critical mass in his mouth when Genma intrudes, stands leaning on the doorframe. “This is a non-smoking area.”

Sasuke’s previously perfected spoilt princess look gives way to its queen bitch counterpart, not dignifying him with a takedown.

Slouching, shrugging away from the subject, Genma says, quite chirpily, “Ready for some more phys therapy?”

Kakashi doesn’t suppose it matters whether he’s ready, but nods, angling his legs over the edge of the bed. Although it must have been once, he can’t remember it ever being difficult before. “Sasuke, this is Genma,” he says, considering, undecided, whether it was to distract her.

“Ah, sorry,” and Genma’s stepping forward into the room, long loose steps, extending his hand.

When they fall silent again Kakashi has managed to stand. Coltish, his mum said his legs were coltish when he was a child. He ran before he could be trusted to stand, supposedly.

Genma is beside him at once, hovering over his arthritic steps.

He wishes he could find it funny. He can’t hit him so he wishes at least he could find it funny.
“I’ll find Itachi,” Sasuke says.

He nods, almost falls as he tries to turn back towards her to do it, is grabbing for Genma almost before Genma’s reaching for him.

She has the kindness not to pass them by, to wait until they’ve got into the corridor, suddenly crowded. Shoulder-blades against the wall as they wait for a gaggle of family members to walk by, Kakashi tilts his head in question.

“Accident,” Genma says. “Let’s – no, there’s another batch. I’m sorry, but I think they’ll keep coming. I’ll get a wheelchair.”

That’s really not necessary, he says inside his mouth, not to Genma’s receding back. By the time he returns, Kakashi’s knees are already aching in sharp bursts, distracting from the low-level grinding soreness that has never quite abated since he woke up in the future. Probably he shouldn’t throw stones at Sasuke’s purging or Itachi’s cutting, because in a sick way it anchors him.

“Do you play sports?” Genma asks, swerving fast around the bystanders.

“I liked to swim.”

Genma says something encouraging about trying to incorporate that in their schedule, but they’ve arrived and Kakashi tunes him out, concentrates on standing, walking, concentrates on his body, lives in it. People talk about going somewhere else when something bad is happening, leaving your body behind. He does the opposite, hiding in it, letting his mind splinter and be subsumed into his cells.

“Yes,” he tells Genma, “yes,” and “yes” and “yes” until he’s too limp to move. That’s been the word of his relationship with Sasuke for as long as he cares to remember, the most significant word he’s ever said.

“You should have told me when your knee started to hurt,” Genma says, taking him back to the room. “We should have stopped a bit earlier.”

Kakashi is not in a position in which stopping is an option. He’s supposed to sleep but feels energised, only a little worn. Finding Sasuke’s jacket within reach, he’s going through the pockets
for a diversion when something – something bright, feeling heavy, catches his attention.

Just past the bend of the corridor, a blond girl is staring furtively, defiantly through the window on his door.

It is not with any especial anxiety or consideration that he waves her in – a family member, a young woman, entertainment.

Then she comes inside, fraying orange converse tracking mud, and she smiles at him, this awkward honest wobbly grin, and he knows. He thinks he must have known.

She’s tall, but then his reference is Sasuke, on the pretty end of the ugly scale; large hands, blue eyes, big hips.

“Hi,” she says, her voice too loud, a hand rubbing at the back of her neck. “I mean, er. Hi.”

“Hello.” With some effort he pulls his legs up, resting his arms on them, hands dangling between his knees. His voice is his own again suddenly, mild and laconic, coming smoothly in spite of some remaining rustiness. “I was wondering whether to be self-conscious about the scars. I suppose that’s not a problem.”

Reasonably they will have grown used to them when – when watching him sleep, and they have never been mentioned. He sees them in the mirror and doesn’t quite see himself, but Itachi looks past them as though they aren’t there and Sasuke hasn’t seemed to notice touching them. Meeting his eyes is done differently now, has to be, but the new tight skin on the lower half of his face and neck might as well be all in his imagination.

“Yeah, no.” She stutters out a laugh. “So, see, I wasn’t going to – no, I totally was, but. Okay. So, I’m Naruto. I guess you knew that. This is totally way more awkward than I thought. I’m – glad you’re better.”

“Me too,” he says, slipping into what Itachi calls his fox face; eyes closed, a smile which is all jovial lines and far sharper than a smirk.

She is so very physically present, so embodied and vibrant with it.
He reminds himself that Sasuke has been sleeping with her. It seems incredible, if anything she’s his type.

“So, er…” she starts, but the door opens behind her and suddenly they’re both focused on Sasuke.

She doesn’t even glance at him. “Naruto. What the hell are you doing here?”

“I–”

“I invited her.”

The focus shifts until it’s entirely on him, Naruto all surprised pleasure, Sasuke doing an indeed face.

“Itachi got caught up with the doctor,” Sasuke says. “I brought the food.”

She puts the miniature table back down and perches on the bedside, Naruto hovering uncertainly behind her.

The take-out bag reveals his favourite dish from their – his and Itachi’s, he and Sasuke have another and she and Itachi yet a third – favourite Thai restaurant. It’s grown chilly, the temperature he’s always preferred for greasy foods.

“Would you like any?”

“Yeah, sure, thanks,” Naruto says, starting forward before Sasuke’s glare stops her. “What?”

Slumping down over her own body, arms sprawling off her legs, Sasuke laughs a short, rough laugh. “I know I told you about questions that only have one socially accepted answer. This’d be one of them.”

“Just because some of us actually like food!” Naruto snaps, flushed, but when she kicks at Sasuke’s
feet Sasuke kicks back, and then Naruto sinks down on the bed beside her, close enough they’re touching.

Kakashi would have rather shared the food, but to be fair the bed was not made for three people and Sasuke’s back is pressed to his legs too.

“So,” Naruto asks, “how are you? I mean, with the – you know, the eye and the sleeping muscles or whatever?”

He chews slowly. “It’s certainly a new perspective.”

His eye sees the world in shades of red, with shadows moving through it. With the light behind them Sasuke and Naruto are a very dark auburn.

For a while it is the three of them in the room, Sasuke against his leg and against Naruto’s side, Naruto’s hip, he believes, brushing lightly against his foot, until eventually Itachi and one of the doctors return. He was never good with names, took care not to be. That was his mother, impeccable knowledge of every relation and birthday and secret shameful middle name.

“I should go,” Naruto says.

“It was nice meeting you,” Kakashi says, not exactly lying.

“Yeah? I mean, yeah. You too.” She gives him that big broad smile that scrunches up her nose and her scars.

Then Sasuke and she are staring at each other, and clearly the natural progression, what Naruto obviously meant and still wants to do, is for them to kiss. Sasuke doesn’t and Naruto doesn’t press, steps backs and waves at them and leaves.

Everything is proceeding well, the doctor says; inspects the chart and nods, shakes hands, is beeped away. It’s not particularly late but he still tires easily, both eyes half-lidded and his replies tending to “mmh”.
“I take it I should probably leave too,” Itachi says, and Sasuke’s visibly hanging on to his smile, which is a touch lugubrious but not depressed. “I’ll let them know not to bother with dinner?”

“Goodnight,” she says, and Kakashi nods, like he’s done a million times, until it’s approaching ritual.

“Yeah, goodnight.”

Itachi nods back, picking up his things, the strict immaculate black jacket and the hippie chic backpack, and going away with steady clipped steps.

She remains perched on the bedside for only a very short span of time before getting up to dim the lights, pulling off her shoes and jeans and socks, jumper and bra, slipping under the comforter beside him in her shirt.

He could say something about Naruto, could perhaps test the waters with a quip about letting her down gently, but that’s not how they work and never has been. People talk about relationships as something which has to fit circumstances and be worth it, as conditional, and that has never been true for them. They’ve always been central, the thing everything else must be rearranged around.

They’re like gravity.

So when Sasuke stays over in hospital, sleeping of course with him in his bed, he only says, “I rather doubt there’s enough pillow for both of us.”

“I’ve learnt to bring my own.”

It’s a large thick one, which is nice since his neck’s starting to crank. She sleeps with her head on his arm or on his chest, or sometimes, in winter, on his stomach, huddled under the comforter. The weight of her now, the breathing living pressure, eases a tension so deep he honestly had not noticed it, had thought it was just part of him, now. He’d have liked to be naked.

They talk about old things, mythologized memories turned bedtime stories, and a little, in bits and pieces, about grief and mad missing and the fucking desolation.
They don’t usually say, *I love you.*

He falls asleep with his face in her hair and her leg loped over his.

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When she wakes up she’s lying in the crook of his arm, and his face is closed in sleep, angled towards hers so the scar tissue on his chin scratches her cheek. They’re in a busier part of the hospital now, outside the quiet of the coma ward, and she can hear a mumble of voices and movement outside. The woken tension in her body must wake him as well, because his eyes slide open, the regular right and the perpetually half-closed left one with its fixed pupil and pinkish white.

She should be used to it, is used to it, but as something belonging to the coma, not to him.

“Hey.” He coughs, rolls his shoulders, kisses the side of her face.

She half-sits, kisses him properly, slowly on the mouth. “Hey.” The noise outside is increasing, the smell overwhelming. “I really hate this fucking hospital.”

He manages to lift himself on his elbows, to balance himself on one of them while getting the pillow tucked behind him so he can mostly-sit against the headboard.

“You could just adjust the bed.”

He glances at the remote, which is on the nightstand, which has been pushed a bit further towards the window, out of his reach unless he stands, walks.

“I’ll get the lights.” She kicks off the comforter, has stepped onto the floor, which is warm and clammy under her feet, when he speaks.

“What’s wrong with you and Itachi?”

“Nothing. I don’t know. We broke up.” Button sliding sharply under her finger, light on full blast,
she turns back and he’s looking at her, just looking, that intent superior sympathetic looking.

“Itachi says the two of you were always about taking care of each other, that when I was gone you both needed to be taken care of and neither could provide it, so it fell apart.”

A stranger probably wouldn’t hear the difference in inflection when he says gone. “Then why are you asking me?”

“Jesus, Sasuke, when have I ever taken anybody’s word about you?”

She can feel her shoulders relaxing a little. They’re still tense, drawn, have been for long enough that it’s a constant ache. “I recall there was that once when Itachi told you about the Care Bear costume.”

“Oh, you’ll remember I was very eager for the photographic evidence.”

She’s old enough now, for the first time, to say, “I rocked that outfit.”

He laughs, a short sound, genuine but huskier than it used to be. “Touché.”

A retreat to the bathroom is in order; cold tile all around, her bag of toiletries the only spot of colour. In the mirror she’s pale too, around the red pillow-crease scrawled over her cheek. It’s been so long since she ate that she has the light, burnt feeling like after a purging.

It is, afterwards, a very typical hospital day; bland, beige, ellipses. Naruto is an exclamation mark, Kakashi a semi-colon, her mother a parenthesis. Sasuke likes to think of herself as a full stop, final and self-sufficient, but most days she feels more like a hyphen, stretched perilously and endlessly between the words, or sometimes like a slash, dividing.

Itachi said he’d prefer to be an ampersand but felt himself stuck as a question mark.

Both of which are absurd, considering he’s obviously a set of square brackets.

There are meals she doesn’t touch and Kakashi hardly either; rehabilitation therapy; doctors talking
and nurses for Kakashi’s particular, familiar brand of laconic flirting. Left alone outside the pseudo-gym, she reads Nietzsche.

It’s a Monday so presumably Naruto must be in school. Sasuke of course isn’t, nor Itachi. They’ve been kept at bay this far but in the afternoon Mikoto and Anko arrive. Her father, thankfully, is abroad.

Anko blazes in first, smelling strongly of winter air, Itachi trailing in her wake. She hugs Kakashi and he hugs her back, at ease, or as much at ease as he ever is with people. When she leans in for a kiss on his mouth he turns his cheek, catches her lips on the edge of his nose.

It’s fitting, he wouldn’t fight jealousy with jealousy, that’s not how he works.

It’s when Mikoto titters inside that she can’t stand it anymore and slams out, closing the door on all their frozen polite smiles and the too-bright cheeks.

On the main entrance floor she runs into Naruto.

“Couldn’t stay away, huh,” Sasuke mutters, focusing on the ruddy scarred cheeks rather than the eyes above them

“No, actually, I guess I couldn’t.”

She looks up then, at Naruto getting snow in her hair rubbing the back of her neck, and nods towards a less crowded corridor. “Let’s go.”

“Yeah, sure, right.”

Swallowed by the abrupt quiet, Sasuke repeats, “So you couldn’t stay away.” Her lips are dry. She forgot the chap stick, doesn’t often need it.

“No. It was, it was crazy. Being in school, you know, just sitting around and trying to act like everything was cool and nothing was happening, I… It sucked.” She scuffs her shoe in rhythm with Sasuke, who forces herself to stop. “I’m – I’m really glad he woke up, for you and for him and for
Itachi and everyone, but things have gone all crazy and I – Sasuke, what’s *going on*?”

“I don’t know. Shut up.”

And Kakashi’s hand fit perfectly around hers, was what her hand had been grasping for always, but so does Naruto’s.

Naruto’s voice sort of contracts, her eyes a little downcast. “You told him?”

“About you, yes. He knows.”

“Good. So, like, how did he – what did he say?”

“Nothing,” Sasuke shrugs.

“Come on, what?”

“No, really. Aside from the obvious quip about watching, nothing.”

“Huh,” says Naruto, close again, her eyes no longer circumspect. “That’s… weird.”

“Not really. How do you feel about him?”

It’s sarcasm, but sarcasm doesn’t work on Naruto.

“I don’t – I’m not. I am glad, I am, but it’s, it’s fucked up. You’re, you’re with me.”

“Jesus Christ,” Sasuke mutters in the absence of a proper answer. “I should get back.”
“Yeah,” says Naruto, absolutely desolate around that stupid fucking grin. “Yeah, I guess, but Sasuke…”

“I’ll call,” Sasuke snaps, walking fast.

No hand grabs at her, no footsteps chase her. Her mother has left, Itachi and Anko lingering like vultures.

She should – eat, or something. She’s too vicious, spinning out of control, shouldn’t be. She lights a cigarette with unsteady fingers, breathes in relief and control.

“As I was saying,” Itachi says, watching her pass them by and sit beside Kakashi on the bed, “I spoke to the landlord and he assures me he’ll have the lift in working order by tomorrow noon at the latest.”

“Good,” Sasuke says blankly, tossing the pack of cigarettes into Anko’s outstretched hand. “Great.”

“I thought so,” Kakashi says, looking at her carefully, and it’s too much, she sinks down on his shoulder. She is happy he can go home. That they can go home.

When Anko gets dinner she forces herself to eat and tries and tries to keep it down, is left shaking and sweaty over the toilet anyway, three hours’ struggle later.

Her sore throat is punished with two cups of coffee, half a pack of smokes and a cafeteria sandwich.

That night is given over less to sleep than to blacking out, Kakashi in the middle of the bed, Sasuke against his side; Itachi in the chair.

Tuesday morning greets them with a glare, Kakashi rosy and recovering, Sasuke seeing her own wan Zombie Film Extra expression mirrored on Itachi’s face. On this final day there’s a last battery of tests and checks and infomercials about recovery groups, Kakashi subjected to endless doctors and physical therapists, Sasuke dozing off. He walks short distances well now, he’s fine, he’ll be fine.

She’s never been one to listen to public announcements, anyway, preferring to go straight to the
source with her demands.

While Kakashi’s in the phys centre, she and Itachi sit together in his room, holding feet if not hands. Although she’s smoking between bites, they’re both eating the strange sweet meat he bought on a whim.

By the time he’s back it’s late afternoon and they stick him in the bed again, letting him rest while waiting for Anko to bring her car. Even if he’s not, Sasuke’s certainly regretting Itachi’s green stand to reject private motor vehicles.

Anko arrives with cold-roses on her face and a truly hideous Hello Kitty jumper peaking out of her leather jacket. “Mummy’s here, kids!”

“Thank you for coming, Anko,” Itachi says, with a very Itachi smile, one edge of his mouth noticeably higher than the other.

“Everyone ready?” Anko inquires. “Great. Let’s get a wheelchair, I parked pretty close but you’re going to have to walk a bit outside.”

Forestalling any protests, Itachi disappears to procure one. In his wake Kakashi sits up with his legs over the edge of the bed, putting on his shoes and jacket over the hospital pyjamas. He’d wanted his own clothes, but they’d refused on the grounds it wasn’t worth it for the trip. He’s dressed by the time Itachi returns with the wheelchair and lowers himself into it with a grim smile, Itachi pushing him and Sasuke and Anko carrying the two bags of their assorted personal belongings.

From the reception desk, hair pulled back into a tight bun but glowing red as a Christmas tree bulb, Kushina looks up at them, face caught between expressions and wordless.

Outside air, wind and rain, hit her for the first time since Sunday morning.

“It’s not September anymore,” Kakashi lets slip, sounding rather like he should’ve been saying, *We’re not in Kansas anymore.*

“Nope,” Anko says. “April. Here we are, then. Mind the wheels.”
Easily the tallest of them, Anko offers her shoulder and a boost, getting Kakashi settled in the shotgun seat. Itachi returns the wheelchair; Sasuke stands outside the car for a moment breathing before climbing in the back.

“Does it look weird?” Anko asks, out on the streets, away from the paralysis of the hospital but not yet anywhere else. “With the eye, I mean.”

Kakashi shrugs, resting heavily against the back of the seat. “World’s always looked plenty weird to me.”

_Suck it,_ Sasuke thinks uncharitably, her own mind empty of small talk, or big talk either. Anko laughs, the rough rowdy laugh Sasuke imagines Itachi finds sexy.

She does, a little.

When they arrive Anko ruins whatever suppressed attraction Sasuke might have felt for her by having the manners to stay in the car, being acceptable.

“I’ll be right back,” Itachi says, leaning over to kiss her cheek before getting out and helping Sasuke with Kakashi, who’s upright but wobbly. Deciding to leave their things in the car, Sasuke pulls his arm over her shoulders, wishing she were taller. She used to, often, had forgotten about it.

Itachi taking his other arm, they move slowly into the building, over the entrance floor and to the elevator Sasuke can barely remember using. It’s different now, one wall still gaping rawly open where they’ve mended cable, the floor splattered with paint.

“I’m fine,” Kakashi insists, leaning against the wall and against her, pulling free from Itachi’s grip. He does look better, more alive, moves smoother when they reach the right floor, Itachi going ahead to unlock, standing by outside to let Kakashi in before turning to her.

“I’m going back with Anko. You all right?”

“I’m fine.”
His mouth tightens; he hugs her. He hasn’t done it in months and she’s not sure why she lets him now.

She shuts the door behind him and it’s – as it should be, finally. It’s like a blow, it blows her away.

“Kakashi.”

And he’s turning, fast again, whipping towards the sound as best as he can, and she falls into him. Back where she belongs.

One arm around his body, one heavy around his neck, she presses herself against him as hard as she can. While she was talking to Itachi he moved further into the flat, stands barefoot in the pyjamas with his spine pushed into the bedroom doorway. She kisses him feeling intense, almost violent, everything fast and real, pulling him closer and closer, and then down over her on the bed. Bright and shiny with need, pulls him down and takes him in, hears the moan of the bedsprings and can’t move for the aching bliss of finally, finally, so at first lies there stunned on her back with him inside her, angled awkwardly to reach her mouth, but he’s still sore and weak and also the height disparity is too large for missionary to be ideal, so she rolls them over and rides, comes fast and hard and shuddering and then again softer, deeper, when he does.

Thighs cramping, she sprawls on top of him, breathing into his neck. The one of his eyes currently visible to her is sliding shut, she can see the wrinkles in the eyelid. Loves belongs drowning in it yes, yes this is it, this is home, this is them, us, this is love love love.

They’re both still mostly dressed; she wants the clothes gone but can’t stand to separate enough to accomplish it without struggle. He laughs at it, a thick intimate sound like sobbing, like her own, until they’re bare together under the comforter.

It’s fantasy reality after that, trauma cut out of time, everything surreal in a private world.

“Does the world look different now?”

“No,” he says. “Tinted a little differently, but no, not really.”

It does to her.
“Will you paint it? The tint?”

The walls are covered with images, his and others’, and she can look at them again, they’ve reverted to being just pictures instead of memories.

He’s stretched out on his back, which isn’t how he usually lies but more comfortable for the sore muscles; she’s half on top of him, a leg between his, her chin on his chest, the comforter over her shoulders.

His chest moves with the short laugh. “I think the only thing I’ll be painting for the foreseeable future will be caricatures of certain phys therapists. Genma even threatened me with a regular therapist.”

She rubs her chin against his ribs. “Then we can compare notes.”

“Oh?”

“They packed me off to a couple shrinks. Hell, Itachi and I were forced to couple’s counselling.”

“My god, I cannot have missed that.”

“There wasn’t much of it.” She shrugs, feels a smirk quirk her mouth, softer than her usual ones. “We broke them in two sittings.”

“Do tell.”

“No need,” she says, and because it’s him there isn’t. “You know how Itachi can be.”

He does, they both do: it’s now shown often, or to many people, but certainly there is a vicious darkness to Itachi. The therapist never stood a chance.

She’s not proud, in retrospect, that she egged him on, because he crashes afterwards, but it had been
irresistible, with all the sharp edges inside her, to see somebody else being cut to the bone.

“I know,” he says, but he’s clearly more busy, they are both more busy, with his fingers trailing up her body.
Chapter 25

In the night, after traffic has eddied away, she gets up to turn off the lights and get them appropriately ridiculous midnight food – the weird tea she’s no longer worrying about being able to replace, the disgusting wasabi/cherry nachos he likes, cold fish and Itachi’s fried apples.

It’s much better than in the hospital bed, light falling from the right direction, their smells on the sheets, more space that strictly speaking isn’t needed since Kakashi doesn’t kick or even much shift in his sleep. He’s larger and a horrible pillow-hogger, but he’s never been difficult to sleep with, is something steady and warm to curve around.

By morning he’s rolled over onto his side; burrowing deeper into the bed to avoid the light, she’s nestled in the crook of his body; wakes to a snort-laugh and a tap on her nose. It twitches, keeps twitching until she tries to roll away and almost falls off the bed, caught at the last moment by an arm around her chest and a foot against the floor and sliding back to Kakashi in the middle of the bed, awake now.

“That’s cheating,” she says, hears her voice come low and rusty with sleep.

“That’s my favourite sport.” His arm’s still cradling her chest, wrist pressing against her breast, and the pulse in his thigh thuds against her hip. She shifts onto her back and opens her mouth for him, opens everything for him until they’re having sex again. Missionary might be awkward since she’s facing his chest, but the weight of him moving is grounding, is even better than the breathy childish gasp of her name.

“Off,” she mutters sometime later, nudging his shoulder with her forehead. “Shower.”

It’s different with a man’s body, taller and heavier, bigger bones and less flesh.

“Ah, but I like being covered in you.” He says it with a grin, with the dorky not-quite-sarcasm that accompanies sappy clichés he really does sort of mean.

“You do your exercises, I’ll draw a bath.”

“Fine.”
Personally she can’t stand baths, the pruny skin soaked in dirty water, Itachi’s blood splashed over the side and never quite forgotten, always still there in the corner of her eye, but Kakashi rather likes them and she doesn’t want him standing on any slippery surfaces after the exertion.

They pass each other in the bathroom doorway with a peck, like a 50s couple, when she comes out from the shower and, also very 50s, goes to make breakfast.

If you can call it making breakfast, taking things from the cabinets and the refrigerator and putting them on the table, starting the plug-in kettle. She’s only on her second cigarette when he returns, fresh and damp, in real clothes now, fingering a patch of scar-tissue. “It feels rather odd.”

“Like asphalt made into fabric,” she blurts, promptly giving the cigarette a betrayed look. She’s a far too dedicated smoker for the nicotine to go to her head.

“Mnh.” Even as he kisses her he’s picking up a sketch, the latest, left just where he put it on the counter going on two years ago. “This isn’t – I’ll need to rework these proportions.”

She’s leaning closer again, in a sort of response, never having quite left the oblong of his arms, when her phone goes off.

*I’ll call.*

Not surprisingly, Naruto has left just short of 8000 messages. Four are from Temari, the latest of which saying, *I spoke to your mum... Oh my god, Sasuke.*

“So I reckon it’s out now,” she says. “I’ll have to go to her.”

“Of course.”

It doesn’t occur to her until afterwards that she never clarified, that by her she of course meant Naruto.
To her eternal humiliation, she, unlike Naruto herself, knows Naruto’s timetable by heart; checks the
time on her mobile and realises Naruto’s classes will be over, will have been over for the last ten or
fifteen minutes. Already her finger’s pressing speed-dial nine when she catches sight of blond and
orange, Naruto’s body stretched between hair and shoes. There’s only half a parking lot between
them, six cars and endless puddles.

She catches up just a meter from the Uzumaki family vehicle, a monstrous red thing suggesting
Naruto’s dad isn’t as far away as one might have hoped from his midlife crisis. He is also not as far
away from here as one might have hoped, peeking out from the driver’s seat. He must have come to
pick up Naruto. Of course he has come to pick up Naruto.

“I’ll be here,” he says, and Naruto turns, confusion melting off her face, leaving it so open it feels
raw.

“Sasuke!”

“Yeah. Hi.”

Perhaps it’s good after all that Mr Uzumaki is present, because when they’ve walked a few paces, as
many, she thinks, as they could bear, she doesn’t know what to say.

“You didn’t call,” Naruto says, then, fast, “Mum says you took him home.”

“Yeah.”

Home. They’ve called it Kakashi’s place or the flat on Lilypad for the past year.

“So he’s… he’s okay?”

“Yeah,” Sasuke says for the third time. “He’s with Itachi and Anko.”

If she gives Naruto a few seconds she’ll say, Huh, isn’t that kind of weird, her face scrunched-up but
smiling, and they can be on top of the words, using them as a lifeboat to make it through the deluge.
Perhaps it’s childish but Sasuke believes in the captain going down with their ship.

Also Naruto deserves better. She offered better than stupid words, she should get something real back.

Sasuke has to tell her, “I did sleep with him. I love him. I always will.”

“What are you, are you breaking up with me, is this the break-up speech?”

Over Naruto’s shoulder she sees her own reflection in a car window, white and stiff and pinched, so silent her quiet becomes a visible quality. Although she’s not looking at her, she sees from the shift of tension in Naruto’s arm when she realises Sasuke can’t speak, can’t break up with her.

“So you love him,” she says instead, doing the Naruto version of inflectionless.

“Yes.”

A fast word that could be but or and, followed by, “you love me.”

She can’t look at her own face any more, but staring at Naruto’s was a mistake.

“Fine. Fine, yes, I fucking love you, how does that make anything better?”

She feels like she’s been crying, hoarse and blotchy, scraped raw down to empty bone. Naruto’s by her side instead of in front of her, close but oddly not too close, her grin a relieved, loving take on gallows’ humour. “Shit just got real, huh.”

Sasuke’s laugh comes out a bubbly choking sound. “That’s stupid, that doesn’t even make any sense.”

Shit has always been real.
Naruto shrugs; they are quiet together before Minato calls, “I’m really sorry, girls, but I’ve got to go. Are you about ready or should I pick you up later?”

“Ready,” Sasuke says, to Naruto. “Just. I will call, but.” She picks up her phone, starts texting. “It’s the landline, don’t use it, he doesn’t need this now.”

Even Naruto knows better than to ask, then why are you giving it to me. Just squeezes her hand before she goes to the car, from the window of which she keeps staring and waving and making weird faces that are likely intended to communicate something besides her being immature and sort of ugly.

In the flat, after Itachi and Anko have left, Kakashi is playing with a camera – “looking for evidence of lost time”.

There isn’t any, not caught on film or in the digital equivalent thereof. It’s standing right in front of him.

“I talked to Naruto.”

He puts the camera away. “Yes, you said.”

“She’s in love with me.”

“So I gathered.”

The cigarette breaks between her fingers. “It’s not – I can’t say it’s unrequited.”

“Yeah,” he sighs. “I gathered.”

“Pardon?”
“I knew,” he says, sadly, gently, backlit in front of the window. “I do know you. I knew back in hospital, if you didn’t love her you would’ve talked about her in the past tense.”

“Oh.” Honestly she can’t remember what she said to apparently indicate her supposed love for Naruto.

He catches her face in his hands, clearly visible, his outline no longer fuzzied by light. “You know I love you.”

“Obviously.” It comes out surly, but it’s absolutely true and he doesn’t comment on her tone.

“Tell me about her,” he says, sinking down into a chair. “About you. She knows about me, about us, yes?”

xxxxx

*Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death.*

That’s what Sasuke gave him, when he asked for Naruto. Well, huh.

If Sasuke were to have a lady lover, he would have expected it to be – to be somebody fitting rather more a quote along the lines of, *She walks in beauty like the night.*

He’s at home, alone, in his own flat, in daytime, in silence. Sasuke went to school, Itachi presumably is at uni; what Anko is up to, god only knows.

It’s a relief, the sunlight thick as cream, melting into the room. He slept late – woke when Sasuke left but not for long, dreamt of screeching tires and screeching voices, rolled out of bed too fast and fell. Bambi on ice.

For a moment, long and slow as his movements now, he considers, then picks up his phone. He updated the contact list by copying relevant parts of Itachi’s, and was unsurprised to find a Scarface listed among them.
“Hi?” Her voice is loud over the background crackle of wind. “Sasuke?”

“No,” he says. “It’s Kakashi.”

“Huh – oh. Um, hi? Why are you, did something happen?”

“I’m bored all on my lonesome. We should do lunch.”

“But isn’t Sasuke?”

“School,” he says. Either Naruto is an awesome liar, or Sasuke’s learnt to keep things from him, or they’ve coincidentally not seen each other all day. Although to be fair it was to be expected that they wouldn’t have a lot of classes in common. “Then she’ll have to hash things out with Temari. So how about it, I’m sure we could both use the company.”

“Okay.”

“Excellent. I take it you know the way?”

“To Blue? Yeah.”

“I meant to my place, actually. On Lilypad?”

“Your place,” Naruto repeats. “Right. I thought, I thought you were staying with Sasuke. Like, with her family.”

“Why would I do that?” He’s genuinely puzzled – she didn’t give a Family Values impression, and surely if she’s… close… to Sasuke she will know to stay away from the Uchiha parents. “It’d be a waste of silver lining.” He doesn’t like his in-laws, but at least he has no close relatives of his own.

“Lilypad,” Naruto says, decisively, with a sort of buzzing energy just short of pugnacious. “I’ll be
there."

He texts her the building’s door code before snapping his phone shut and inspecting the cabinets. His cooking is boarding school cooking, orphan cooking, based on microwaves and creative use of spices and leftover takeout to hide the burnt or undercooked parts, but he’s had years to perfect it.

Half an hour later, give or take, she’s knocking. Or he’s presuming they must be hers, the hard arhythmical bangs.

“Hi,” she says, face flushed, her hands tugging at the straps of her backpack.

“Come in.”

Shoulders squared, she closes the door behind her and wrestles out of her winter clothes, scoping out the room. She really hasn’t been here before.

Back in the kitchen, spatula in hand because it always makes him feel like the parody of a star chef, he extends the customary drink offer and is declined, Naruto standing around uncertainly but her eyes hungry, watching everywhere.

“I hope you like imaginative cooking.”

She visibly breaks away from the wall she was staring at – from his grey phase, rather endearingly depressing in retrospect. “Trust me, if Sasuke can eat it, I won’t balk.”

“Hmm, I didn’t picture you as a spiced bread girl.”

The answering grin is dog-like; friendly, but baring all her teeth, her face with the scars on it scrunching up in origami folds. She scratches at them, or at her cheek in general, it’s hard to see the difference. “I’m really not a picky eater.”

No, she wouldn’t be, so comfortably and empathically embodied. He’s far reedier himself, starved down to Sasuke’s proportions during the brutally extended sleep.
“We could be a support group for people with facial scaring.”

“I guess, yeah.” Her hand pauses, falls, her head tilting a little. “Do they itch? Mine did like crazy in the beginning, but I guess, I mean, I guess yours aren’t technically new.”

“No. I don’t feel them unless I,” he leans forward to adjust the stove settings. “Unless they’re touched.”

“Should I do something? Lay the table or, you know, whatever?”

“Please. I’m about done, here.”

He watches her hunt down plates and glasses, the only difference is he’s more discreet about the scrutiny.

“I admit I’m jealous. Yours look quite a bit more deliberate,” he remarks. His are just a collage of skin tones, thrown together at random.

“They are.” Looking up from setting the table, she meets his eye head on. “Deliberate, I mean.”

He’s expected to say, I’m sorry. Failing that, he’s expected to say, You probably got what was coming to you.

“They’re quite flattering. Milk?”

“Um, yeah. Thanks.” She holds out her glass. “Milk is awesome.”

“It is indeed.” There could be, now – there is the opportunity for a conspiratorial smile, because they will both know Sasuke despises it, but. No, he couldn’t do that.

“So, like, how are you feeling?” she asks, stuffing her face. “Hey, this is good stuff!”
“Smashing. You?”

“Weird,” she admits, and launches into a tale of school and crazy rumours and Kiba and Gaara and people going mad, and… and the central part, the one they’re not speaking of.

“Gaara’s the Sabaku bastard, Kiba’s…?”

“He’s not a bastard! I mean, or, yeah, he is, but he’s not. He’s totally cool now! Like, I heard he was sort of bad before, when you were around I guess, but he’s way better now.”

“I was referring to his parentage.”

“I knew that.” But her pugnacious face is dissolved by a rueful grin. “Kiba’s in our class too. And also awesome.”

“I’m not familiar with that name, I’m afraid.”

“Right. Well, you might know him as Bitch Boy. Or Bestiality Boy, depending on how much he’s annoyed her.”

“That does sound more familiar, yes.”

The smile seems to catch her unawares, broader and softer, more personal, than any she’s shown him before. She tilts her face sideways, possibly to secret it away, her eyes catching on something and the smile shifting, twisting into a more… sardonic is the wrong word, it doesn’t fit her, but it’s the closest descriptor.

“Dude, seriously, Leo DiCaprio much?”

He follows her gaze to a full-body picture of Sasuke, roughly half of it painted, her legs still only present as an outline – they’d been doing people in one of his few good art classes, and for all her whining Sasuke makes a very good model, beautiful and familiar and content to sit still for hours
with a book or computer.

“Says the love poet. Anyway, aren’t you too young for Titanic references?”

“Dad loves it,” she says, offhand, but her face, her entire body, has gone defensive around the hurt. “She said that? About the poetry?”

“Itachi did.”

And it would have been easy to say, yes.

It would be even easier to maintain he told her the truth because he wanted to take the moral high ground, because it’s right. Really it was because Sasuke would have found out if he’d lied.

“Oh. Right. Good.” It would be false to call that new smile private, since it’s clearly intended for somebody, but it’s extremely exclusive. “Why did you ask me here?”

“I was curious,” he says, which is the truth if not the whole truth. “You’re obviously important to Sasuke. I’m … glad you were there for her.”

She’s kind of cute when she looks up, too wary for a smile but glowing.

“Aren’t you jealous?” she blurts. “Because I am. I mean, not that I think… Whatever.”

“Yes,” he says. “Maddeningly.”

“Cool. Or not, but you know what I mean.” She takes a hearty bite of her sandwich, slurping milk and soup. “What?”

He shrugs. “I like your hands.”
“Really?” The plainness of her disbelief is comic, her left hand held up between them to be scrutinised.

“Sure. They’re interesting.” Her eyebrows venture if possible even higher. “Look, it’s – take Sasuke’s hands. Now obviously I like them because they’re hers, and they’re aesthetically pleasing, but they’re not aesthetically interesting. They’re classic, symmetrical – predictable. Yours bring something original.”

Love and war notwithstanding, it is not fair doing this to her. It is not fair at all.

Fair is for losers.

She’s still goggling at him when the lock rattles, when Sasuke’s steps enter the hallway, pause, and then tap quickly and decisively into the kitchen.

“What the hell?”

The talk with Temari must have gone at least relatively well, because she tensed when she saw him and Naruto, was rather soft before that, in one of the comfortable jumpers she wouldn’t have worn two years ago.

“Hi,” says Naruto. If she was glowing before, for a moment, she’s positively shining now. Walking in, Sasuke might as well have said, let there be light.

“Have a seat,” he says, gesturing towards the empty place between him and Naruto. There is a dining room but they rarely use it, having long since brought an extra chair to complement the two that came with the miniscule kitchen table snuggled up against the counter.

“Fine.” Slipping onto the chair, she’s glowing too despite her surliness, at Naruto but at him too, still looking at him like at a miracle. It might’ve been the Lazarus stunt, if it weren’t the same look she’s been giving him since she was ten, the same one she offers, grudgingly, to Naruto. She picks up one of the spice-fried breadsticks, biting into it even as she fiddles for a cigarette with her free hand. “I need a drink. Not milk.”

Turning in the chair to open the refrigerator, he finds Itachi and Anko have polished off the wine as well as the juice but left half a bottle of champagne.
Sasuke drinks it from a water glass, Naruto declining, Kakashi tempted but advised by Genma not to indulge. He’ll save that for the nightcaps which may be necessitated by nightmares or loneliness, if Sasuke leaves.

“So what were you talking about?” It’s more of a demand than a polite inquiry.

“Art,” Kakashi says, which Sasuke seems to find about as believable as Naruto did his compliments.

“So, being back in school,” Naruto interjects. “Weird, huh?”

Sasuke says, “Yes. Yes, I suppose. Are you going back to university?”

“I haven’t decided. Sooner or later, I assume. I’ll have to call them.”

“Yeah, that must suck,” Naruto says. “I mean, like, you dropped out in the middle of the semester, right? I hate having to catch up.”

“We’d hardly got started.” He leans back a little in the chair, wishing it were padded where it cuts into his spine. “Done a lot of dropping out, then, have you?”

“No, well, not really. Sort of.”

“That’s enough,” Sasuke snaps, dropping her cigarette butt and bread crust in the half-finished soup.

“All right.” He glances at the clock. “If you’ll excuse me, the meds are beckoning.”

Out of the room he hears running water, clinks of porcelain and muted voices.

He takes his time in the bathroom, movements slow and deliberate rather than slow and pained, which would be quicker if more demeaning. Two pills to be taken after food, calcium mostly and vitamins. The muscle ointments are left for the night.
The kitchen tap has been turned off. Naruto must have prepped the dishwasher, because the dishes have disappeared and her hands are wet where they circle Sasuke’s hips. They’re standing so close together the scene would have qualified as intimate even if they hadn’t been too focused on each other to notice him. Naruto mumbles something, something tense and sort of grumbly, and then they’re kissing, Sasuke’s mouth sliding open easily, naturally.

She tilts her head more, doesn’t have to reach as high, but she kisses Naruto like she kisses him.

Like somebody she loves.

Naruto says, “We have got to sort this out.”

“Yes,” he says, and then Sasuke’s standing between them, Naruto’s fingers still curling around her hips, his hand cupping the back of her neck.

A swallow moves Naruto’s throat. “I mean,” she says. “We’re,” grip hardening, she tugs a little at Sasuke, “but,” and she nods, in the wrong direction but her point still stands, “that’s the room. The room where you sleep together.”

“Yes,” Kakashi says again, oddly helplessly.

“Yes,” Sasuke echoes. She probably wants to move but any movement would bring her closer to one of them, further from the other.

Despite the clock above the oven he’s not sure how long they stand before his leg starts cramping. “I’m going to have to sit down.”

Sasuke follows him, her front brushing Naruto’s as she turns to come with him to the closest chair.

“I guess I should go,” Naruto says. It’s true, the feel, the tension, has shifted completely. She adds, “Thanks for inviting me,” with the careful forethought of one who has to consciously remember to say these phrases.
Sasuke remains silent and stark while he goes through the exercises, bathes, rubs ointment into the areas he can comfortably reach until his fingers shake with exhausted pain, her back turned as she bends over a mountain of homework he knows for a fact she could copy from Neji.

“How did it go?” he inquires last, in the bedroom. “At school?”

“Yes.” Her gaze lands on the ointment tube on the nightstand. “Should I…?”

“You really don’t have to.”

At that she gets up on the bed, sitting with her legs tucked neatly under her in what he did not use to find a painful position. “I can’t break up with her,” she says, her tone going brittle towards the end. “I can’t.”

But their knees are touching, there is the tangible understanding, *I could never leave you, I cannot even speak the words, I could never.*

“I can’t,” she says. “I don’t know what, I can’t, I can’t.”

“It’s funny,” he says, catching her body in his arms, her short sharp breaths against his shoulder, “I like Naruto. I hate her, of course, but I really like her.”

She laughs, rusty and thick, roused enough to arrange for him to lay down in what Genma would consider an advisable position, she herself pressed close and incidentally supporting his arm.

In the darkness he says, “I always thought time machines would be cool.”

“Yeah.” She says it sadly, her chest moving evenly now.

Instead he’s just a little out of synch with reality, with everybody in it. Potentially it’s a fascinating perspective; the actuality is bleak, is terrifying.

Her heart’s beating just above his and it’s bloody well staying there, but she was glowing for Naruto,
who smiled at them, glowing too and then sparkling.

Perhaps there is only one solution.

Of course, perhaps there is no solution.

"Honey?"

Her throat’s too thick for her to answer, so she stands in silence except for the crinkling newspaper under her boots, looking anywhere but at Mum watching her unwind the Palestine scarf she’s not allowed to wear at Sasuke’s house but which is apparently kosher with Kakashi.

"Honey, what’s going on?"

"I don’t know."

And she loves adventures and surprises but she feels like crying with how much she doesn’t know.

“Oh, Naruto.” She leans into Mum’s arm around her shoulders, letting herself be ushered into the living room and sat down on the sofa. “You talked to her today, right? You said somebody’d called.”

“I, yeah, but that was, that was Kakashi.”

Mum’s eyebrows creep up her forehead, in tandem and a reddish brown, so that they really shouldn’t remind her of Sasuke. “What did he want? Trying to warn you off?”

She half laughs, swallows it before it turns into anything else. “No. No, he was nice. He’s pretty cool. I guess he wanted to talk because he knows I’m, like, important to Sasuke.”

“And what did you talk about?”
“Stuff.” She shrugs, caught again in the memory, in the flat Sasuke’s never mentioned although it’s clearly more her home than the beach house has ever been.

In fits and starts, little bursts of sickness, she’s imagined their morning after, following one of those romance fantasy nights, all earnest talk and cuddling and lots of sex, a whole night and morning being one big *I love you.*

Realistically Kakashi doesn’t currently have the stamina for that, and Sasuke gets very cranky on less than ten hours of sleep, but all the same she couldn’t stop herself and couldn’t stop being cold and desperate and disgusted at the thought.

Then there was the flat, with Kakashi in it and then Sasuke, was reality. There’s lots of Sasuke’s things in Naruto’s bedroom, books and clothes and toiletries – anyone walking in could see she’s a frequent presence. That’s not at all the same as the Lilypad Drive flat, where every room was full of her, her natural backdrop, her home. Maybe Itachi’s too, although Naruto’s significantly less good at spotting his traces.

Certainly it was big enough for all three of them.

She pulls her legs up closer to her body, fiddling with a hole in her sock, where her toe nail has cut through it. They really need to get a new pair of nail scissors, one she doesn’t dread using.

There was the weirdness of being back in school, after a weekend that might as well have taken place in a different universe, Kiba and Chouji coming through muffled, as though through a plate glass window, then suddenly too loudly; of knowing Sasuke was supposedly present on school grounds as well but not seeing her; and then the phone call, Kakashi’s voice suddenly close in her ear.

How at home Sasuke was at Lilypad, how at home she was with him.

How it was everything Naruto doesn’t get, fails at, fights about – the right look, the right food, the right manners, right clothes, accent, decorations.

Naruto’s always been closer to the toad-shaped version of Prince Charming.
Mum strokes her forehead. “Did you get anywhere?”

“Maybe.”

“It’s, I’m sorry, it’s a really difficult situation.”

“No shit. Look, I’m just gonna go for a bit.” Just going to run from everything until she finds what she should be running towards.
Chapter 26

Itachi’s steps were the first she learnt to recognise, quick discreet ones trying and only just failing to sound like a servant’s. He comes up behind her while she’s packing, desultorily looking over, rejecting, folding – she has not actually lived at Lilypad for close to two years, and is far less prepared to make do with Kakashi’s clothes, books, toiletries now that she has Kakashi himself.

Going through the wardrobe, it had become obvious that the outfits she wore at fourteen still fit her body but no longer her taste, and for once it’s nice to be back in the penthouse, in what is empathically her own room.

“Are you moving back in with him?”

She neglects to turn around. “For the moment. Are you?”

“I’ve not wanted to impose.”

“We’re family,” she says, tightly, forcing a thick shirt into the bag. The penthouse is warm, warm enough that she’s barefoot on the rug, but Lilypad’s always been chilly.

“Yes, well. You’ve always come first with him.”

They stood like this, almost exactly like this, several weeks ago, in Kakashi’s bathroom, Itachi just behind her shoulder, after they had slept there together.

“When you said I’d never share him – did you want me to?”

“Does it matter if I did?” Presumably he feels her stiffen, bracing for the crash, because his hand comes up to squeeze her shoulder the way he knows she hates. “No, Sasuke, that’s absurd.”

That would be a hell of a lot more reassuring if their entire life wasn’t absurd.

“You should come,” she says, careful the way she is with Itachi sometimes now.
The only ones who have been over are him and Anko and Naruto; Mum’s easily discouraged, and Temari is keeping her distance. Ask him over for dinner, Dad said, but retracted without argument when told Kakashi is still convalescing.

“I will,” he says. “What are you going to do about Naruto?”

“Go to hell.”

“Sasuke, be reasonable.”

“No. I don’t ask you about Anko.”

“Anko’s not your best friend.”

The thing is that she is at the end of her rope, dangling from it over the abyss, feeling it slip and fray between her fingers.

“If she were I’d be talking to her.”

This is a lie, slips out far too easily to be truth.

“I should,” Itachi says. “I will. But you’re my sister. You’re the one in the middle, it’s not like he doesn’t know what he wants.”

“When exactly did you turn into the gay best friend cliché?”

“About when you started to need one.”

And fine, she set herself up for that one, she can see that. It doesn’t change anything. “Leave me alone.”
For some reason when he does she can’t concentrate on packing, or on pacing, and calls Neji, the original gay best friend cliché in her life. She talks to him standing in front of the window, tracking the slush raining down. Maybe it would be easier if the two of them just got together. Forget Hinata, forget coming out of a closet he might not even be in, forget Kakashi and Naruto. They’d be safe together. White wedding, carefully orchestrated prenuptial agreement.

Except she’s not a loser or a quitter like Neji.

“You’ll be eighteen in less than two years,” she says. “Then take your trust fund and tell him to go fuck himself.”

He laughs a short breathy laugh, cuts it off abruptly. “Is that what you’re planning to do?”

“Why wait?”

For the past four years she’s regularly made it clear to her father that she hates him. It’s pretty clear he doesn’t care.

“I have to go,” she says, pocketing the phone and her disappointments, slinging a backpack over her shoulder and walking out. Learning to turn your back, indeed.

The weather has finally, though in all likelihood temporarily, broken, long-standing champion winter knocked out and dazzled by spring. She walks fast, slush bleeding through her shoes, earphones thudding. The voices, Kakashi’s and Naruto’s and sometimes Temari’s, Itachi’s, she can no longer stand. Instead there is music, the digital equivalent of a mixed tape Kankurou pressed on her.

Or, curse him for the devil, perhaps it was Tenten who insisted on this particular song.

Someday, get up on my way/I think I’ll be okay/for a while/I know you/ were never mine to keep/I know that I’ll see you/ in my sleep.

It would be ironic if she put her queenship on the line for Naruto and retained it, only to lose it now over Kakashi.
But whatever, fuck it. If Tenten and Ino prefer a bitch oligarchy, Sasuke can’t summon the interest to stand in their way.

Her phone buzzes in the lobby, redirecting her from the elevator to the stairs. “Yes?”

It’s Naruto, of course. One way or another it’s always Naruto.

She’s hung up outside the door, slams the key in the lock and twists, metal slipping and cutting against her palm.

Kakashi is lounging in the broken-in stuffed chair flanking the sofa, hair heavy with damp over his face. Presumably he is able to detect her raised eyebrow psychically at this point, because he answers it, “Genma took me for a stroll.”

He must only just have showered. Same brow-lift, different question as she looks around the flat.

He answers that one too. “I won’t have him in the house.”

It was the same with the girls, all those years ago, always him staying over at their place.

Perching on the armrest, she picks up a book – a worn copy of *The Years*, not the elegant edition but the one that’s actually been read, actively and often, with an open mind and an eager pen. A thick black streak of what smells like old eyeliner underlines the words, *they are aware of each other; they live in each other; what else is love?*

The quote left in her mind by the book, rather dull, was of a different ilk. *Happy in this world* – *happy with living people.*

Really *The Years* is a tedious slump of a novel, without even the exciting aspects of failure evident in *The Voyage Out* and *Jacob’s Room*. No real character, no life, barely any ideas either, or at least not any new or appropriately developed and framed ones.
Below it on the coffee table rests *The Prince*, and below that *Guilty Pleasures*.

And she’d thought Itachi’s *Gossip Girl* volumes were bad enough.

Peeking up from lowest in the pile is a grey, defaced edition of *1984*. The official Hatake party line proclaims *Animal Farm* to be far superior, bemoans the Julia character and storyline are a travesty, but really he’s a sucker for it. Teared up at thirteen when reading, *when men are different from each other, and do not live alone*.

“So,” he says, sitting more alertly though still rather slouched, slinging an arm over her legs. “Tell me about Naruto and the tragic past. Those were some pretty impressive facial scars she had.”

“I can’t.”

“Come on, I’m sure it’s riveting.”

“That’s not – it’s none of your business.”

The words are an earthquake, the safe steady world erupting into abysses.

“But your business is mine, mine’s yours. Isn’t that what we said? That’s how it works.”

His voice hasn’t broken for years but it comes close to it now.

“That was years ago.”

“I didn’t realise it was a temporary sentiment.”

The last frayed ends of the rope are out of her fingers now. Freefall.

“Neither did I.”
They breathe in the quiet, she’s painfully, completely aware of it – the effort, the loneliness of it. She clutches the arm still sloped over her lap with shaking fingers.

So where does this leave them?

In a place where for the first time there’s a piece of her that isn’t his, that’s Naruto’s.

In a place where maybe there’s a difference between on the one hand having a relationship and then keeping on having it, and on the other having it and having it end and then resuming it. Maybe especially there’s a difference if it only ended for one party.

xxxxx

“You didn’t like me being there. At Lilypad, I mean.”

Sasuke takes a long, slow drag on her cigarette. “It’s not exactly that I didn’t like it. It’s not – you don’t belong there.”

“You live there,” Naruto snaps, and Sasuke’s too pale in the spring sunshine. “You never even mentioned it but you live there.”

“I don’t tell him about you, why should I tell you about him?”

“There’s a difference between telling me about him and telling me about you. That you live somewhere with your boyfriend, that’s kind of about you!”

Sasuke did say, perfectly plainly, *I did sleep with him*, but Naruto was so grateful then, so hungry for any scraps at all. Also she gets, at gut level, the whole falling into somebody’s arms that you’ve loved, that you thought you’d lost. Moving in with them, that’s something else, something daylight and deliberate.

“What do you want, then? For all three of us to hang out?” She spits out the cigarette, rubs at her
mouth, roughly until her lips are red under the layer of dead chapped skin. “What is it you’re even after, are you trying to be friends with him or find weaknesses?”

“I don’t want to hurt him,” Naruto says eventually, grabbing for any words that are true. “But yeah, I want you. Any way I can.”

“I’m right here.”

“You’re fucking living with your boyfriend that you were going to marry.”

“If you’d been the one alone after a coma, I’d have been staying with you.”

And she hates that. How can you hate a guy who just woke up from a freaking coma, who’s never done anything wrong except love his girlfriend?

Except how can you not, when she’s your girlfriend?

No, fuck that. Naruto’s better than that. She’s going to be better.

Maybe they should have just gone to class, because she needs to figure this out, and this is going to be ugly, she’s so raw and ragey with that dizzy needy burn for Sasuke.

And loving somebody shouldn’t mean, shouldn’t ever mean, wanting to take away from them anybody else that they love, but honest to god Naruto doesn’t believe in light-hearted dating, not really, she believes people really do belong to people, not just to themselves.

“I need more information,” she says, realises it was said and not thought when Sasuke snort-laughs.

“Not arguing.” She turns around, and Jesus fucking Christ Naruto is sick of her turning away. “Bio ought to help with that, come on.”

She steps forward very quickly, quicker than thought which drags behind all the time these days, catching Sasuke round the neck. It’s half a hug, half a strangle-grip, her elbows jutting out at
awkward angles, her nose pressed into Sasuke’s jaw.

“I’m trying not to be selfish,” she says, feeling Sasuke’s chest move with the fast hard beats of her heart, “I really am. But I need to know, I need you with me.”

Sasuke goes very still before she turns, Naruto’s arms still looped around her neck but loosely now, their jackets bunching up between them. “You’re so bloody ridiculous,” she says, but their faces are touching, in fact pressed quite hard into each other. Sasuke’s killer cheekbone scratching Naruto’s scars. “Stop trying to make everything high drama.”

“I’m not trying,” Naruto insists. “That’s the problem.”

“Um, guys?” Kiba says from behind her. “Are you about done or should I start filming?”

“Fuck off, Inuzuka,” Sasuke says, and Naruto seconds this with a furious, disbelieving glare as Sasuke slips free of her and starts walking, Naruto and Kiba coming with, across the dirty half-melted ground and into the forbidding confines of the Natural Sciences building.

It’s pretty ridiculous that the subject even rates a building, since frankly you’d be going to a different school if that was your thing, but it figures somebody donated it and wanted that name.

In bio they have assigned seats, the bad seeds like Naruto and most of her friends grouped together at the front for easy scolding access, Sasuke hidden behind her among the other members of the Straight A Squad.

Whatever their teacher is harping on about goes in one ear and out the other, but it was true what she said before, she does require more information, just of a more pertinent kind. This requires ninja skills, sneaky friendly ninja skills.

Beside her sits Kiba, who somehow scored two fake dates with Hinata.

Unfortunately, trying to pump him for information gets them both chucked out of class.

“You good?” Kiba asks outside, messing about trying to fit his notebook into a gigantic pocket.
“Didn’t mean to interrupt before, or anything.”

“It’s cool.”

“Cool,” he repeats, his grin managing to be bashful despite the canines. “So, I was going to catch the bus, get home, you want to come with?”

“Yeah – but. I need to ring somebody.”

“Right. Well, I’ll see you later then.”

“Right.” She stands alone in the corridor while the echo dies out, her mobile cutting into her hand. She didn’t remember to save Kakashi’s number from when he rang her, but it’s still there in the call history. She presses the button.

It’s funny, she always thought it was completely anticlimactic when the big gesture in a film was button-pressing, but it feels pretty damn apocalyptical now.

One, two, three, four, five, six rings later he says, “Yes?”

“Hi it’s me I mean Naruto hi it’s Naruto,” she says in a rush. “I mean. Hi.”

“Hi,” he repeats, and his tone is snarky and supercilious but rather warm too, considering.

Subterfuge be damned – she’d probably make a better samurai than ninja anyway. “I wanted to – know you more. About you, I guess.”

“Huh,” he says, thoughtfully, and then he keeps not saying anything more.

“I thought, since you called before, I figured…”
“Indeed. You’re quite correct. Do stop by.”

“Yeah, I will. Like, now?”

“I’m not getting out a lot.”

It strikes her only after she’s ended the call that he won’t have seen her nod. No matter, they were pretty much done, no need for awkward goodbyes.

Lilypad is easier to find this time around, the thin bluish house rising in front of her. Up on the right floor, there are voices, or at least a voice, which becomes familiar underneath its angry sarcasm as she comes closer to the door. Kakashi’s door, which is slightly ajar, a sliver of privacy just perceivable in the gap.

“Someone’s grumpy,” says Itachi over the noise of what is probably him taking his shoes off, in a tone of voice that wouldn’t go over well even with Sasuke, who actually is his little sister.

“My girlfriend’s dumping me for a hick dyke, grumpy is not the word I’d choose.” It’s past sneering and teetering on snarling territory.

The door falls open under her hand, half inadvertently, slams against the wall. Her face feels hot, she feels ridiculously like crying, and then hitting something until she stops.

“I really fucking wish she were.” She swallows around the thick words, painfully. “I have these fantasises of really savaging you and everything.”

He laughs, sort of, rubbing at his ruined eye. Does it hurt, that limp glare?

“Well, shit. You shouldn’t have had to hear that.”

Maybe she shouldn’t, although maybe he needed her to. She shrugs.

“Savage me, huh,” he continues, with a sudden smile that stuns and charms her, all spoilt easy glitter.
“Tear my throat out, or maybe the heart would be more appropriate.” He holds out his hand, offers it, the smile twisting into something both meaner and realer. “No, let’s be friends. Whoever comes out on top will want to rub the loser’s face in it, after all.”

“Yeah,” she says, knowing perfectly well that if Sasuke leaves her for him she will never want to see Kakashi again, her eyes will bleed. “Totally.”

His hand is smooth, incredibly smooth with the long sleep, chilly. He doesn’t do the hand-crushing thing at all. Maybe she does, a little.

From half a meter away, shoes now entirely removed and reaching to belatedly lock the door, Itachi snorts. “I cannot believe the two of you just made my sister look like the mature one.”

“Unless you’re speaking to console me, shut the fuck up,” Kakashi tells him.

Not even Sasuke speaks to him that way; simply, casually, something she needs better adjectives to catch, or a better verb.

“Big baby,” Itachi mutters, but leaves it at that.

“Do come in.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

She fumbles off her shoes, a frustrating procedure since snow always sticks in the zippers then freezes them shut, and pads after them. It’s a nice place, she has to admit that, lots of light and air and lots and lots of Sasuke; her things, her pictures, furniture she will have liked, will have maybe chosen.

Itachi disappears somewhere, presumably to the bathroom, and shit, is it weird to be curious about that? People’s bathrooms are pretty relevant, all things considered. There will be Sasuke’s toothpaste, and tooth brush, and hair brush, and nail clippers, and soap, and shampoo, and conditioner, and lotion, and razors, and BC pills, and supplements, and makeup, and deodorant, and tampons, and ipecac, and throat medicine, and emergency extra cigarettes, and painkillers, and cotton wads.
Kakashi’s voice jolts her out of her reverie, but she’s missed what he actually said. Probably something about the house, it’s what she thinks polite strangers are supposed to talk about; he doesn’t seem like a weather talker kind of guy.

“It’s not like the penthouse,” she says.

“No. They were more of a power couple than a dynasty, my parents.”

“Oh. Sorry. About the dead thing.”

“It was years ago.”

“I figured it wasn’t the kind of thing that stopped mattering.” Her hand snaps to the back of her neck, embarrassment reflex. “Er, that came out kind of snotty, huh.”

He waves it away. “It’s a fair point, I suppose. But it was a very long time ago. It matters like the other basic constituents of one’s existence matters.”

“Like – gravity? Capitalism?”

“A personalised version of something like that, yes.”

“Huh,” says Naruto, restless without quite knowing why, in that terrible febrile way, her entire body achy and jittery with frustrated energy.

Itachi returns from wherever he was, and she takes the excuse to move towards the sofa group, the part of the room that’s for using rather than looking; they’ve been standing in the extra space before the windows, the kind of extra space sorely lacking in her own house, bought to be empty. She likes it.

It isn’t cosy, but there’s a freedom in it, an ease. Plus, the worn stuffed chair and having the walls full of pictures at least a third of which are your own, like a child, negates any excess formality.
Her fingers, itchy, skid over the rim of an ashtray. It’s elaborate, sort of nice – before the chain smoking girlfriend she would not have recognised its function.

“Did she always smoke so much?” slips out, idle, curious. She hadn’t expected to be able to feel friendly, even in a wary sort of way.

“No,” Kakashi says. “She didn’t smoke at all. Pot, once, and the regular ones I think twice, almost threw up.” His mouth twists a little, an expression that becomes subtle in its contradictions; tenderness, ruefulness, a certain sentimental humour.

Naruto’s struck abruptly and absurdly cold with the realisation that of course she’s not the only one who’s seen Sasuke loose and soft and ridiculous with drink, not the first one to hold her up.

“She started up in the waiting rooms,” Itachi divulges. “There was a packet left in your jacket pocket and, well. I suppose it was a way to kill time, to do something.”

Kakashi falls back on the sofa, slouching elegantly and very wearily. “It is comforting to know I am such a corruptive influence.”

“Oh shut up,” she mutters, in response to the plaintive tone not the words.

There’s surprise in his grin, but honesty.

She upsets a baby-pile of books, scatters them over the coffee table and, cursing, grabbing for them, catches sight of an embarrassingly familiar front page. “Anita Blake? Are you shitting me?”

“God, you still read that dreck?”

Kakashi flips him off. “You’ve no room to talk, at least my vampires don’t sparkle.”

“One, I’m reading that for my thesis. Two, at least mine don’t engage in anatomically improbable orgies.”
“You say that as if it’s not a further point against them.” He turns to Naruto with what is too amused to be a leer. “I take it you’re familiar with our esteemed vampire executioner turned vampire lover?”

“Yeah, it’s like crack, they jumped the shark books ago but I can’t stop. Also, vampires! Besides, until about eight books ago Anita was pretty awesome. At least we’ve got the telly to pick up the slack now.”

“Really?” He leans forward, elbows on knees, chin on his interlocked fingers. “Tell me more.”

It emerges that Kakashi too is an avid fan of the televised version of True Blood, at once woeful and gleeful at the prospect of a missed season. She calls chicken when he admits to not having watched The Vampire Diaries for fear of having his book memories soiled, books he apparently started reading only to tease Sasuke but fell in love with himself.

“You need to watch that, it’s totally awesome in all its different-ness. No, really, look, with the books I was all for Stefan and Elena, in the series Damon is way more fabulous. And Caroline! You are so watching this.”

“I yield to your expertise.” He’s sat back again, but the pleasedness remains, like a stray cat deciding it might not like you but it likes you feeding it. “Friday, perhaps? You’re joining us, of course, Itachi – we will need extra hands to hold down Sasuke until she awakens to the glory of teenaged vampires.”

And so it is decided. Friday will bring unhealthy doses of supernatural telly and snacks, and hopefully the brainwashing of Sasuke into happy fanhood.

Itachi, who has been roped into chauffeuring Kakashi to a PT session at the hospital, offers Naruto a ride to Central. “It must be difficult for you,” he says, rather non-committaly, the hospital disappearing behind them, Central fast approaching.

“Yes. I reckon it’s pretty tough on everyone. Thanks for the ride.”

It is difficult. Living like everything is normal, with people who insist everything is normal, when it so manifestly is not. It’s like life has been scanned into Photoshop and Naruto’s ended up on a different layer than everybody else.
There’s this crust over reality, sitting beside Sasuke in school talking about inconsequential things, like the hard topmost layer of snow, which has melted then snap-frozen into a brittle roof over the thick messy stuff underneath.

The cracks deepen, as if she’s poured hot water over them, when she picks up the phone to Gaara’s monotone. “Hi!” Someone has to supply the exuberance due a conversation between friends, and Naruto rolls onto her back, feet against the wall, a touch dizzy from letting her head drop over the edge of the bed.

“…hello.” There’s a long pause, she can’t even hear him breathe. “I was given to understand there is to be a vampire party. Am I required to attend?”

“You mean the thing at Kakashi’s? It’s not exactly a party, I mean, there will be awesomeness, but not really of the party variety, you know?”

“I’m not sure how that’s relevant to my question.”

“Er, I guess you should come if you want? I didn’t even know you were invited. Oh my god, do you secretly know Kakashi? How could you not tell me that?”

“I don’t,” Gaara says, his monotone a touch more displeased. “He knows my sister’s best friend. She’s invited too, by the way, and Shikamaru.”

“Huh. Okay. Well, I’ll see you there then. You’re going to totally love True Blood.”

Gaara doubts that very much, but then Gaara’s is a barren sceptic’s soul.

Naruto, who was going to anyway because she’s not sure if she’s supposed to bring anything, calls Kakashi. Her hands still fumble with the unfamiliar number. After some pretty unsubtle beating around the bush, which by the way Naruto has always wanted to do non-figuratively, she blurts out a completely awkward line about hanging around with all these younger kids. She really did not consciously mean to call him a paedophile, but either the implication was only obvious to her or he doesn’t care.

“It was thought it might be a touch uncomfortable with just the three of us,” Kakashi says. “It was further surmised that it would be unfair to you if only Itachi and Anko joined us.”
“How – oh. That’s pretty nice of you.”

“I can hardly claim credit,” he says, which she thinks might be code for, *It’s not like Sasuke wouldn’t have had my hide if I neglected to invite anybody you know.*

“I never thought, I mean it never occurred to me that you’d know them too.”

“They’ve been friends for a long time. Besides, Shikamaru’s the only decent chess competition around.”

It occurs to her to wonder, as Friday evening approaches, whether Sasuke’s okayed Gaara’s presence. They’ve done all right at the Sabakus’, but they’re hardly bosom buddies. It’s unexpectedly nice of her, if she’s included him for Naruto’s sake, what with Sasuke not being, in general, a nice person, hardly prone to gestures of either pity or friendliness.

After the train ride, her neck growing red and scratchy from the wet scarf getting stuck in the jacket zipper, kids dancing and yelling their way towards the city’s Friday night, she picks up the bag with DVDs like she might have picked up her shield and mallet during a previous century.

Mum’s face when Naruto said, no, she wasn’t going to Sasuke’s or Gaara’s, actually, she’s headed to Kakashi’s, was incredulous.

They’ve been friends for a long time, Kakashi said about Sasuke and Temari. Which is true, which Naruto knows is true, although the last f in bff seems in danger of being rubbed out, and sometimes, frankly, the b too.

They must’ve been a lot closer before, because Temari evidently is friends of a kind with Kakashi too, is comfortable standing close enough their clothes are brushing, although she has never once struck Naruto as touchable.

Of course, originally neither did Sasuke, really, but even Shikamaru rarely gets any sort of physical in public.

“Naruto! Yo.” Anko saunters over, lifting one beer bottle to her mouth, offering Naruto another.
Shikamaru waves; Gaara nods; Itachi pokes Sasuke’s forehead, mumbling something very like, *get over it, princess*; when they turn towards Naruto they both wear the polite, professional smiles Mikoto must have taught them.

“Well, cheers,” says Anko. “That’s everybody, let’s get this show on the road.”

She must have been late, later than she thought; the living room furniture has been rearranged, snacks and drinks distributed. On the other hand she brought most of the films, courtesy of Dad’s love for teen dramas, so it’s not like they could’ve started without her.

There’s momentary awkwardness, an avalanche of it, as they drift off to be seated, and Naruto realises eight might be an unlucky number, cleaving so easily into couples. Itachi and Anko would make one, and Temari and Shikamaru, and nobody except Naruto could feasibly team up with Gaara, which leaves Kakashi and Sasuke.

Unless he’d so carefully noted that her friends were invited too, it wouldn’t have occurred to her to think this may be deliberate.

Except Temari’s on Kakashi’s left side and Anko on his right, Sasuke snug between Temari and Itachi. Naruto plonks down in between Shikamaru and Gaara and takes a large gulp of her beer.

It goes pretty well, though, even though a lot of drinks are required to smooth the conversational path. Shikamaru snoozes between occasional quips, Anko’s laughing her head off at most of the action scenes, and Itachi’s taken out his notebook and is busily scribbling.

Between the lovely familiar shows, and the beer and crisps and Gaara’s solid presence, Naruto goes from tense to relaxed to comfortable, laughing at Damon’s crazy brand of awesome and then at Gaara utterly failing to grasp it.

“Bah, dump the angsty good guy already,” Anko tells the heroine. “Go for the antihero.”

“Damon’s abusive,” Temari argues. “Stefan may be boring, at least he doesn’t snack on your friends.”

“They both suck,” Naruto says. “Go Caroline.”
“She’s a messed-up bitch,” Sasuke grumbles.

“Maybe I like messed-up bitches,” Naruto says, the words so obvious she only blushes afterwards, hard, when she recalls everyone else, Kakashi. It’s true, though, and guarded or not Sasuke smiles at her, after she’s snorted.

“Troublesome,” Shikamaru mumbles, which is a welcome excuse to laugh. If this continues she’ll have rubbed the nape of her neck skinless before summer.

After half a season of *The Vampire Diaries* and some *Buffy* highlights, it being implicitly understood that *True Blood* would be way embarrassing to watch around your girlfriend’s brother or rival significant other, Temari gathers up her boys to leave, and everyone left migrates to the sofa, Sasuke in between her and Kakashi, Itachi and Anko on the far side of him.

Sasuke’s wearing that soft blue jumper, with sleeves down to her knuckles but snug across her chest. Naruto’s warm and sleepy and content, in all the crazy awkwardness of Kakashi just one girl away from her. It’s the beer, maybe, or counting the freckles at the base of Sasuke’s neck for the millionth time.

Kakashi, who’s been mostly quiet, turns out to have an eye for quality vampire drama, is in fact the first person to agree with Naruto’s assessment that Caroline deservers far better than Mat.

“Yes! Exactly! She’s awesome, she should be with someone who sees that!”


“You’re both crazy,” Sasuke interjects. “It’s a kid show.”

“Yeah, well, maybe some of us are mature enough to be childish!”

A laugh rumbles through Kakashi’s chest, moving Sasuke softly against Naruto’s side. “I’m siding with Team Caroline on this one.”
And maybe this is a peace offering, and maybe he’s just teasing Sasuke, or maybe it’s just further proof of what Naruto already knew, that he has impeccable taste in girls. When you’ve got used to the sort of indolent irony, he’s easy to talk to, surprisingly easy. She doesn’t notice when Anko and Itachi leave; they’re there when the re-watch of a contested Buffy scene starts, gone when it’s over. The beer has made her fuzzy, the world sweet-sour around her, Sasuke hot against her side, and for a moment she feels sheer panic.

It can’t be like this.

It is, though, and it’s – kind of okay. She rests her head against the bony jut of Sasuke’s shoulder, and for a moment everything’s sort of all right, sort of possibly great.
Chapter 27

She wakes because Sasuke moves, jerking loose from under the weight of her head. It is morning now, soft outside light on the furniture, on Sasuke as her footsteps thud out of the room.

Naruto, over-balancing, tumbles forward through the space that was Sasuke’s and further, down into Kakashi’s lap.

“Um, ouch.”

Peeking up from a world suddenly over-turned and dark, she realises she basically just head-butted him in the nuts.

“Erm. Shit. Sorry.” Digging and elbow into the sofa cushions, she spits out the taste of his trousers, too sleepy even for sheepishness, until she catches his eye and the hangover tiredness dissipates.

Sasuke stormed off. Sasuke stormed off towards the bathroom.

“Oh fuck.”

She’s rolled off the sofa and is halfway across the room when he calls, “Naruto! Crutches?”

They’re stood against the wall, tall linoleum-grey sticks, heavy. She turns to hand them over with a quick smile and he takes them slowly, carefully, like a very old person. A night on the sofa, she and Sasuke weighing down his right side, cannot have been good for him.

There’s water running on the other side of the bathroom door, the toilet flushing. None of this proves that Sasuke was just puking her guts out.

Naruto kicks at the wall until her toes are slush and Sasuke opens the door.

Things were okay.
Now she’s right back in the confused red rage, and doesn’t know which way to turn to make it out of it.

The opened door reveals the bathroom she’s familiar with now, and also Sasuke, who strides past her. Fuzzy, short of breath, Naruto fails to grab her and has to hurry after, skidding on the carpet.

There’s an accusation, something like, *I can’t do this, I knew this was a bad idea, I can’t*, and Sasuke continues straight past Kakashi just managing to stand and through the hallway and out.

Naruto runs after her, down the stairs and through the foyer and out on the street, but buses never stop for Naruto and this one doesn’t either, carrying Sasuke away.

She hits speed-dial five with shaky slow-burning fingers, gets no answer.

Her things are still up in the flat, with warmth and water and Kakashi. She trudges back up the stairs, finds him in the doorway, holding Sasuke’s phone.

“Well, fuck.”

“My sentiments exactly.” He actually manages a smile, stepping aside to let her back in, awkward on the crutches.

“Hey, are you okay? You seem sort of stiff.”

“I just need to get my circulation going.” He makes towards the kitchen, slowly but she follows behind anyway, picking up her jumper in passing and pulling it over her head. “Coffee and aspirin this way.”

“Great.”

Naruto doesn’t usually drink coffee, but then she also doesn’t usually wake up slightly hungover in her girlfriend’s boyfriend’s flat, much less in his lap.
Still she says, with the hot cup cradled in her hands and her throat constricting around the aspirin, “This isn’t working.”

“No. For a while I thought – before you woke up, when she was just stirring,” his face twists into a strange expression, tender yes but sardonic too, “she was on my shoulder, you were on hers – I thought perhaps, but… No, you’re right.”

“Having us both here, when she can’t…”

He shuts her up with a look, this intense, considering scrutiny, this – trust. Eventually he says, “How do you feel about sharing?”

His voice was bland, humorous, a little brittle but then it often is.

At first she thinks, is he serious? Then she realises it doesn’t so much matter if he is. Then she realises that yes, he is, he must be.

“I,” she starts, but her voice has gone into hiding, curled shaking deep inside of her. She picks up her backpack, mostly empty but she can always come back for her things. “Er, do you need anything? I’m guessing sleeping on the sofa wasn’t great for you, maybe.”

“It’s fine.” He lets go of the crutch to wave it off, supporting himself on the kitchen counter. “I’ll call Itachi if anything comes up. It’s his fault for leaving, anyway.”

“Okay,” she says, and then, “Cool.”

xxxxx

She talks to Dad because who else would she talk to? Sasuke called several hours after she got home, very briefly, just to not say she’s very sorry and embarrassed. Her tone made Naruto picture her knuckles white around the phone.
“It’s okay,” she said. “It was good, kind of, we could, we could talk.”

Sasuke sighed, audibly swallowing words like swallowing poison, and very shortly hung up.

Since she’s not going to mark her territory by peeing in Kakashi’s flat and isn’t in the mood to joke about it, she doesn’t call Kiba, despite the lure of Akamaru. Mum is at work, which is good, and she doesn’t in-depth discuss Sasuke with Gaara, never has and never would.

She washes out the last of the hangover buzz with a beer and runs, runs until she reaches the garage with her face a red mask of sweat and snot. There aren’t any customers on Saturdays, usually, but she knocks on the doorframe all the same.

The floor groans as Dad rolls out from under the husk of a car, looking up with something more like terror than worry. “Baby?”

To be fair, she’s not been this close to crying since – well, since Sasuke stopped talking to her, before Christmas, although from the looks of it that’s not what he remembers.

“I’m fine,” she says, sounding like a fourteen year old boy, her voice breaking all over the place, shattering across the room.

It does calm him down, though. She’s stepped into the light, where he can see there aren’t any bruises on her, just turmoil.

“Did it – did it not go well?”

“I,” she says again, and shrugs, and tries to explain about it being very good and very bad, and how does she feel about sharing? She looks up at him hopefully at last, can feel her eyes too wide, too dry now.

“Well, honestly that sounds – that sounds insane, honey.” He’s grimacing, uncertainly, handing her a towel, which is great because her sleeves are already stiff with snot and couldn’t handle more.

“Well, yeah,” and she laughs, a big hulking laugh that splatters snot all over the towel. “But what
else is there?"

And unlike Mum he’s not good at talking around things, doesn’t put words between himself and what he’s saying, so he doesn’t say anything about options.

Of course there aren’t any.

Say Sasuke dumps Kakashi, which would suck for him and for Sasuke too, and Naruto should not, really should not, want to take love away from her, and it sucking for Sasuke would mean it sucking for Naruto, too.

It’d probably just be a matter of time before there was cheating, anyway, the way Sasuke looks at him, and then there would be heartbreak and destruction all around.

Or say Sasuke tries to, say she dumps Naruto and…apocalypse. End of the world, or it might as well be.

Finally Dad sighs, cupping her face in his hand, leaving a smear of oil on her cheek. “You do what you want, Naruto.” He smiles a big, hurt, lovely smile. “You always have. Just be careful with your heart, it’s not the kind of gift you can retract intact.”

Naruto knows it’s worse than that: it’s the kind of gift you can’t retract at all.

She should probably talk to Sasuke again, before, but Naruto isn’t much for should, and doesn’t speak to Sasuke again before going to see Kakashi. For a moment she tries to do that thing Mum talks about, stepping back to really see, grasping more truth by being more objective, but it doesn’t work. That he’s tall and scarred, scarecrow royalty, she knew already.

He says nothing, just nods and lets her in, into a flat that is already starting to become familiar, that is a little hers by being so much Sasuke’s.

“I,” she says, and chokes. Her feet are still moving forward though, and then her hands, as she ploughs into him and grabs, hanging on. It’s so strange, both of them shaky, and the difference of his body; Sasuke may be angular but she’s built on curved lines. Kakashi’s… not. Her head fits under his chin when she leans closer for a second, searching for something steady. “Yes. I’ll – I can share.”
“Ah,” he says. “I see. Well, given the nature of the agreement, I believe this is more fitting than a handshake.”

He’s relaxed a little, although Naruto still feels her skin stretched taut with tension, ready to erupt. He smells kind of good.

“I guess.”

A cold fingertip strokes along her nose. “I’m sure.”

She says, “Good, that’s good” until it starts to sound true.

xxxxx

She’s walking so hard the pavement punches her feet, a sharp solid pain with every step, and welcome.

*It’s okay,* Naruto said, when Sasuke couldn’t put off calling anymore, had to know Naruto was all right, even after Sasuke had proved so conclusively that she’s not. *It was good, kind of, we could, we could talk.*

Given that every other bloody traitor had left, and that she and Sasuke were not exactly talking, the person she’d made a we with must, by process of elimination, have been Kakashi.

Kakashi is good at pretending, but Naruto’s not, isn’t supposed to be.

She can’t fake wes, can’t fake thems.

Sasuke is supposed to be good at pretending, but she isn’t really.

She wants to bang open the door but that would be childish.
So we talked, Naruto said. Like I said. Er, me and Kakashi, I mean. A sorted laugh and she corrected herself, added, Kakashi and I.

Like she was repeating it to make it real, make it stick, like she was talking to a teacher.

She takes the lift, consciously training herself so it will be second nature to make for it always, so she won’t keep edging towards the stairs Kakashi can’t walk yet.

We said, I mean, we agreed there’s no way around it really, so I guess we’ll just kind of share. You know, you?

She had no words for Naruto, after that. Naruto had taken all the words, and turned them the wrong way, against her.

She stabs the key into the lock, must again stop herself slamming open the door.

Kakashi is nowhere to be seen, and further inside she hears the shower running, stomps through the bedroom and, yes, this door she does slam.

“Sasuke?”

It’s hot inside, she felt flushed but now she feels cold, the air thick with damp. He pushes aside the shower curtain, pulls on a bath robe.

She perches on the edge of the tub, to let him, because his legs look steady now but she can no longer trust that to last.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she hisses. “We can’t do that to Naruto. I don’t know how you manipulated her into it, but–”

He twists to squeeze water out of his hair, in need of a cut after it grew and grew when everything else about him had stopped. The drops hit the bottom of the tube like spring drizzle. “I simply
mentioned the possibility. She could’ve dismissed it as a joke.” He shrugs, stares back at her. “She’s the one who chose to take it seriously, chose to come back and accept.”

Clutching its edge, her fingers are the same nuance as the tub. “It’s not fair. It’s insane. I can’t, we can’t do this, to her.”

“But we can to you, and to me, then. What did she say?”

She rubs her face, wants to tear at it, pressing against her eyelids until the world is a single aurora borealis. “That we already are doing it, and there’s no other way.”

Kakashi is an adult. She can trust him to take care of himself.

She trusts herself to take care of herself.

She doesn’t trust herself with other people, or with wanting so much, too much.

“Exactly,” says Kakashi. “It is, I think, less doing something than acknowledging what is already being done. It’s better to make the best of it than to constantly wait for the other shoe to drop.”

“You want to share me with Naruto. With my girlfriend.”

“No. But I want it more than I care for any realistic alternative.”

“That’s not…”

“Are you going to dump her, then? Because yes, that’d make me very happy. Don’t imagine it would her, though, or you.”

“I’m not. I won’t. I can’t.”
He nods. “So what did you tell her, if I might be so bold as to enquire?”

“Nothing,” she says. “I told her nothing.” Couldn’t, had nothing to tell.

She can see it makes him glad, can see him contemplating pulling her closer or suggest calling Naruto.

“Don’t worry,” she says dryly. “She’ll have learnt to take a lack of protests as agreement.”

“I shall then be able to consider myself involved with two girls. King of the castle, indeed.”

She snorts, takes the hair towel he doesn’t quite reach, hands it over. He nods, dries his hair with slow, idle motions.

“I didn’t realise you were already crushing on her.”

He shrugs. “I’d have loved her if she were Itachi’s girlfriend.”

“Yes. I suppose you would have.”

“Yes.”

“So we are…” She puts her hand out, more tentatively than she has in years, since probably the first time he took it like it was natural, necessary.

Their fingers entwine. “Yes.”

Sasuke didn’t ask, then, Is this the kind of sharing where I share both of you with each other, too, or the sort where my life is cleaved in two halves, and I give one to each of you? Likely this was good,
because he doesn’t have an answer to give that he can be certain of.

Naruto didn’t ask either, but that, he’s fairly sure, wasn’t a deliberate choice the way Sasuke not asking always is.

He’d have liked to know Naruto Itachi’s girlfriend, Naruto Sasuke’s friend. He’s not at all sure he wants to know Naruto Sasuke’s girlfriend, but he’s equally unsure that the alternative is tenable, endurable.

“Do they know about you and Naruto?” he asks, adjusting his tie. He didn’t use to wear them much, but with the scars open-necked shirts are out, and his fingers aren’t subtle enough for cufflinks yet. “Your parents.”

“She presses lipstick to her lips and then a cigarette. She’s beautiful, in an impersonal kind of way. For the first time, that he’s seen, she doesn’t look like she’s trying to look grown up in the dinner dress. She still hasn’t had her ears pierced. He did his once, he and Itachi did, with whiskey and a needle and an ice tap plucked from their window, but the hole’s grown over now, new skin covering the hollowness.

They’re headed to an Uchiha family dinner, parents and children and future in-laws taking their seats around the off-white dinner table. He would lie if he pretended the idea of Anko and Fugaku forced together like the opposing ends of magnets does not provoke equal amounts anticipation and apprehension.

He eschews the crutches in favour of a cane which was once his grandfather’s, familiar from child-bright, child-fuzzy memories in which it reached above his head, even when he perched on Grandfather’s knees.

Cane in one hand, Sasuke in the other, he makes it outside, and to the cab, and then eventually back into the penthouse. It is not so very hard anymore. Someday soon he will run up the stairs again, like he did years ago, the first summer, when he first saw her, a scrawny child with waif-eyes perched on a kitchen chair, pretending not to want attention from the cook. She’d had a colouring book, since filled with communal sketches and secret messages, Itachi’s meticulous handwriting and his own extravagant scrawls added to Sasuke’s sloppy square letters.
Mikoto smiles at them, as expected. She smiles a lot, Mikoto. He used to find it reassuring, back when he assumed it was fake.

Fugaku shakes his hand, Anko hugs him; the trappings of intimacy, necessary when the feeling they are meant to represent is lacking.

Anko once joked, or pretended to joke, that he’d paid for his place around the table with a diamond ring, but that’s untrue. His place was given when he first took Itachi’s hand and held on to it.

They eat very good food off the green plates Fugaku persists in calling oriental. Mikoto will have cooked some of it, will have chosen the wine and the courses.

It’s good, the way it’s always good; pleasant company, pleasant food. He must talk of his accident and recovery with Fugaku only a very little. Overall, dinner conversation confirms that the best topics are the eternal ones, independent of current events.

He and Sasuke are he and Sasuke like they’ve always been, to the extent that he’s startled when Itachi pulls him aside in the corridor.

“So?” he asks.

The wine has been drunk, and the brandy, cigarettes smoked, dishes cleared. It might be forgiven him that he doesn’t understand, that he fears delayed brain damage or Itachi gone delusional, before the question becomes clear to him, when he remembers his claim on Sasuke has been reduced to a timeshare.

“We’re experiencing the excitement of the ménage à trois condition.” Except they’re not, since Naruto isn’t living with them, but why mince words, with Itachi? “Unconventional and continental, that’s us.”

“I see,” Itachi says, blank with carefulness. “Is it the triangle or threesome version?”

“Give it time,” he says, and doesn’t quite laugh. “Give it time.”
Everything collapses, triangles will collapse, although into what he dares not say.

In Sasuke’s room the signs of Naruto are everywhere, her things, her subtle messes, left by the maid who’s not allowed in the family’s bedrooms and then, more significantly, by Sasuke. The books on her desk are in the wrong order, there’s an additional phone charger plugged in, made for a type of mobile Sasuke would never own. The room itself is the same, the furniture, the posters – he would have expected her to remove any evidence of him, photos or drawings, but they were never there to begin with. This has always been Sasuke’s space, exclusively.

Now there are Naruto’s things in it, marking territory, like his have never been, never done. He had his own room, half a corridor away, next to Itachi’s, what used to be Itachi’s.

Soon it was so permanently his, with his knickknacks and his photos, the ones he did not dare subject to the dormitories, that it kept being his even after Itachi almost died in the shower in the room next to it, and was moved elsewhere, with thicker carpets and thinner walls.

Sasuke takes his arm. She’s tipsy enough to do it, not drunk enough to need it.

“She seemed better,” he says. Suddenly it doesn’t matter about the room, the mattress sinking under his weight and then a little more, when she perches on it too.

“I suppose you’ve been gone long enough to be considered a stranger.”

“You wound me,” he says, not quite dryly because she’s removed his fumbling fingers and is undoing his buttons and then his belt. He didn’t use to wear belts, but the trousers are too large now, the waist gaping hungrily around his hips.

She pulls off her dress and lies down on her side, next to him. Their silence is a silence that carries.

Sasuke does not typically allow Naruto to hold her hand in public, but she’s letting her now, her fingers passive as Naruto clutches at them, teasing the palm with her thumb. Sakura is watching them, dumbly and dourly, from over the demolished lunches on the table. Naruto’s eaten her own and most of Sakura’s, as Sasuke didn’t bother getting one.
“It’s so weird,” says Sakura, fiddling with her fork.

“What?”

“The project? For Religious Studies, you know?”

“Strange,” Sasuke agrees, dead-pan. She has grown to like Sakura’s careful avoidance of anything controversial or contrary. It’s cowardly of course, but very restful.

“Was it weird?” Naruto asks when Sakura has gone to dump her left-overs in the bin.

“You’re going to have to give me some context, there.”

Naruto rolls her eyes. “With your parents! Don’t tell me they’re cool about the whole threesome thing.”

“Naruto, they don’t even know about you.”

“Oh. But, I thought – I just, I’ve been over so much. In the mornings, and everything.”

“Yes,” Sasuke says, feels the smirk tug painfully at her mouth. “You’re such a good friend. Possibly even a phase.”

“Oh. Fuck that. When are you going to tell them? D’you want me to be there?”

“Why would I tell them?”
“Because it matters?” Her voice is getting higher, thinner.

“They don’t,” Sasuke says, and stands. The school cafeteria is not the place for this.

Naruto grabs her arm outside, her face a mess of anger and sadness and confusion, and the love underneath it all. “Of course they matter, they’re your family.”

“I realise you like your parents,” Sasuke snaps, tugging free. “Good for you. I don’t.”

Naruto stares at her, wary and sure all at once. “Liking somebody isn’t the same as them mattering.”

Which is true of course. She doesn’t like Itachi. She doesn’t fucking like Naruto either, she never has.

Like is for people like Sakura.

“Are you trying to wreck my home life?” she hisses, mindful still of the congregation of upperclassmen further down the corridor.

Naruto’s face goes childish; sullen, worried. “I thought you were living with – him now, anyway.”

“Yes,” says Sasuke, because she has to. She also has to add, for a different meaning of has to, “So does Itachi.”

There is his room in the penthouse, and the one in the beach house, and his never-used student room, and the room in Kakashi’s flat, and no doubt a welcoming bed at Anko’s place, too.

“Would they suck? If you told them?”

“Yes,” says Sasuke, softer now, with people closer and Naruto closer still.
“Okay,” says Naruto, rubbing at her whisker scar.

Some time later it emerges that her parents do know, because of course Naruto hasn’t suddenly learnt to shut the fuck up about anything, and of course they’re concerned.

“It’s weird,” Naruto says, rubbing at the raw skin at the back of her neck. “They say they want to, like, meet him or something, I don’t see why it’s suddenly such a big deal.”

“He’ll go,” says Sasuke. “Just tell him when, he’ll go. He’s good with parents.”

“Oh, being good with your parents probably doesn’t say much.”

“Why, no, no offence taken.”

“Come on, you talk shit about them all the time.”

“If you really don’t see the difference, fuck off.”

“Whatever,” says Naruto, and it’s a while before she asks, “You really think he’d be cool with it?”

Sasuke nods, and Naruto, her face uncomfortable under the thoughtful expression, agrees that yes, he does seem pretty laid-back, huh?

Sasuke bites her tongue and doesn’t say, well.

Kakashi was extremely serious. Arrogant the way that comes with drive, pushing everybody else away by pushing himself so hard. Then he mellowed.

That was after he’d told her, after she knew that yes, Mr and Mrs Hatake were supposed to have died in an accident, but really Mr Hatake had screwed up at the company and killed himself. His wife too, there’s no knowing whether it was a double-suicide or a homicide-suicide.
She was jealous of him. She maybe still is. If you’re going to be unloved, at least your parental relationship could end with a bang.

It’s ironical, she’s never once envied Naruto her caring, attentive parents.

“Am I supposed to be there? For the big parents/boyfriend meeting.”

In spite of everything, Naruto’s smile is wider than her mouth as she squeezes her hand.

xxxxx

They settle for inviting “your friends, and of course that young man” to an early barbecue, the first one this spring, when the snow’s gone but the threat of it still lingers on the north wind. Sakura and Gaara wisely decline, but Sasuke and Kiba turn up loyally. Loyally in Kiba’s case, Sasuke pretty much has to.

“Fucking trooper,” Naruto says, almost bawling, and fist-bumps him.

“Yeah, well,” says Kiba. “Not like I could deny Akamaru all these grilled goodies.”

This is greeted with enthusiastic agreement from Akamaru, who scurries over to the grill to receive goodies and long-awaited absolution for that chewed-up DVD case.

While they clearly recognise each other, nodding in passing, she can’t imagine Kiba and Kakashi are friendly, no matter how adept Kakashi evidently is at charming Akamaru. She’d never have figured him for a dog person, but the point is, she’s with Kiba, Kakashi’s sticking with Sasuke, aside from shaking hands with her parents, and right now she can’t blame him.

These are trying circumstances. In fact, given how trying they are, it’s a shock to see Sasuke so calm, to have it thrown in her face how obviously at ease Sasuke is with him, like she’s never been with anybody else.

As the meat finishes, they troop inside, everybody caught in a blizzard of arms and legs and jackets in the tiny hallway. It might have been more risky than originally anticipated for Kakashi to eschew
his crutches.

He’s graceful though, albeit a very different kind of grace from Sasuke’s beside him. Sort of, maybe, like the difference between the grace of a falling leaf and the grace of a viper.

It hasn’t occurred to her before, but with all of them crowding around the table, her back pressed painfully into the counter on pain of being gutted by the table edge, she wishes their kitchen was at least on par with the one on Lilypad. Large enough to allow for a big family, large enough for everyone you want in it.

With his long weak legs Kakashi has got the best spot, beside Dad, where there’s more room for feet, or at least would be if Akamaru wasn’t occupying it.

There’s food in her hands, in her mouth, Kiba beside her and Sasuke, but she can’t, doesn’t think any of them can, really focus on anything but the tableau of Kakashi and her parents. It’s a strange sort of tension, the potential for second-hand embarrassment coiled tight and desperate in her stomach, like the first-hand kind never is.

They’ve never been around outsiders as a… double couple, or whatever, before, never been seen with any eyes but those of friends.

There are the usual politenesses, a homey home and interesting rustic food, and how well you look, how happy I am to see that recovery is going well. He shuts that topic down swiftly, smoothly, leaning back in the chair in what might once have been an attempt to look shorter, years ago before it became habit, became comfortable.

Like Sasuke, he talks to her parents like one adult to another. Seeing him do it is both more and less unsettling, because he actually is one. Nineteen, going on twenty, although he was only just eighteen, only days past his eighteenth birthday, when time stopped for him.

There are so many stories about that, people trapped in Fairyland, or under the sea, coming back to everything changed, or like Snow White and Briar Rose, with everything just looking better in the morning.

Moving here, that was like wading across the river of blood, like stepping into another world.
He talks with studied ease, smiling at Dad hearing he has good taste in telly dramas, saying ah yes, but he still prefers *Buffy*, and Dad of course agreeing in turn, the golden nineties; he’s not sure when he’s going back to uni – or, Naruto supposes, even if he is, it’s not like he needs to work or anything, although supposedly art isn’t a subject you take with a view to making money, anyway. He makes polite inquiries about their work, even sounds pretty interested in Mum’s, and Naruto’s been around Sasuke and people like her long enough to know this means he doesn’t have anything complimentary to say about the décor that wouldn’t sound ironic.

She bristles for a second before remembering all she said about Lilypad was that dig about the Sasuke drawings.

Most people look worse under almost-fluorescent lights, but they’re kind to Kakashi. Sickly and pale in softer light, he’s given a bleached patina, a kind of beauty.

She’s not all that good at reading faces, or at least not relative strangers’ faces, so looks at his hands, steady for most of the meal, starting to tremble just softly towards the end. He’d have to wait that out before starting to paint, even if he didn’t have to readjust to having just one good eye.

Sasuke said he’s good with parents, which Naruto hasn’t seen any evidence of, but he’s certainly smooth. Smooth enough for all of them to glide gradually into the conversation, which is about things like the food and the weather but still, sort of, communication.

She kind of wants to scream, stamp her foot, throw things.

It passes, though.

There’s a moment, when they’re standing up and dishes are being moved, people moving through space and being conscious of it, when it might have been demanded, what the fuck do you think your doing with my girl?, but that too passes.

Then she’s in the hallway, in the doorway, Sasuke awkward and beloved in between them as she watches Kakashi button his jacket. He has pianist’s hands. Or, actually, she’s been told real pianists’ hands don’t look at all like his, but it’s how she imagines them. Long, square fingers, a lot of knuckle, veins under the skin.

“D’you play the piano?” she blurs.
He looks up, fingers still on the last button. “Yes.”

“Really? That’s cool.”

“Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, it kind of is.” He dons up the button. “You play anything?”

“Just air guitar.”

“A fabulous instrument if ever there was one.”

“I know! And so, like, portable.”

She doesn’t want Sasuke to leave with him. Doesn’t want Sasuke to leave at all. Holds onto her hand until it becomes weird and after it has.

“I’ll go ahead,” Kakashi offers, and does.

He didn’t even sound pissy about it, maybe a little condescending.

“I don’t like this,” she says, but she’s touching Sasuke more so it comes out like a lie.

“You’re the idiot who agreed to it.”

“I liked the alternative less,” Naruto grumbles, resting against Sasuke. “But hey, if you want to go dump him, that’s cool with me.”

“Really,” Sasuke says tonelessly.

This isn’t fair.
“Maybe not really,” Naruto must admit, the words coming muted into Sasuke’s shoulder. “I want…”

I want you, but I want you to be happy, too.

“Tomorrow,” Sasuke says. “They adjusted his med levels, I need to be there tonight. But tomorrow.”


Sasuke’s mouth opens for her like it always has, but then it closes and she’s gone.

After the car has left Naruto closes the door and retreats inside, distracted enough she almost trips over Akamaru.

“He’s so young!” Mum says.

Dad laughs. “I was just going to say he’s so old for the girls.”

But they’re looking at each other and smiling, a little sadly, as if they understand each other perfectly.

Meeting Kiba’s eyes, Naruto confirms that she’s not the only one who doesn’t get it.

“Closed like a clam,” Mum says.

“There’d better be a pearl inside,” Dad grumbles.
The sand is cold and gold and gritty under her feet, sparse between the stones. She wonders if it’s the same sensation as that first night Naruto kissed her, can’t remember past the alcohol and distance.

“You look freezing,” says Naruto, who’s kicked off her shoes and socks as well, and hiked up her jeans to wade in the shallows.

“I’m not.” It’s warm, for April, and Sasuke’s used to being cold. Bad blood circulation, her feet and fingers going white and nerveless in winter. “It’s a beach tradition.”

It is, too. She can do without Christmas trees and birthday cake, the stale staging of holidays, but spring means bare feet on the beach.

It’s more comfortable then getting sand in one’s shoes, too.

“It was okay,” Naruto says, making a sand castle with her feet, demolishes it, rebuilds. “They kind of liked him. Mostly.” She bites her lip, smiles, a wedge of blood stretched over her mouth before she wipes it off. “I guess your parents love him.”

Sasuke shrugs, brushing off a boulder and sitting down. Her legs are still too fucking short to reach the ground. “Mum likes that Dad approves of him.” The stone is cold and very old. It lay under the ice, probably, when it covered the land. After a while she adds, “Really I suppose she likes you better.”

Naruto’s head snaps up. “Really?”

Sasuke’s left shoulder juts up in a shrug. There are gulls circling overhead, screaming. “You’re nice to her.”

“Well, duh.”

“I’m not,” Sasuke says. Reminds her, really, it’s not as though Naruto hasn’t been there, enough times by now even if not during the worst of it. “Nor is he, really.”
“But she’s your mum.”

“I told you the first time we spoke,” Sasuke says. “Not everyone believes in forgiveness.”

“That wasn’t the first time. The first time was, we were outside Tsunade’s office, you said you prefer archetype. Over stereotype.”

“Oh. Right. It doesn’t change that forgiveness if the last recourse of those too weak for vengeance.”

“It takes a lot of strength to forgive people.”

“Not really. What it takes is a lot of is stupidity.” She tilts her head against the wind. “Tell me, if somebody hurt you, or hurt somebody you loved, would you forgive or forget? If they weren’t punished, would that be justice? You’d just let them go?”

“No.” The word is hard and aches like a pebble stuck in your shoe. It gives her a certain vicious satisfaction, which is the best kind.

“Exactly.” She rolls her head back, staring up into the sky, until Naruto palms the back of her head and pulls her back down.

“Forgiveness is good,” she insists. “It’s just not really the same as justice.”

“I’m not very interested in justice,” Sasuke admits, slipping her arms under Naruto’s shirt. For warmth.

Naruto grins at her, nuzzling. “I’m freezing my arse off.”

“Idiot.”

“Shut up.”
Shoes are picked up, steps retraced, across the sand and gravel and finally tarmac, until the feet are mostly dry.

The beach house is quiet, all soft filtered light. It’s always felt faintly fake, although Itachi likes it so much.

She hangs up her jacket, Naruto’s dropping to the floor, Naruto cursing and laughing and ruddy-cheeked next to her. Sasuke hasn’t slept with her in what feels like forever. The thought surprises her.

“Here,” she says, touching a clothes hanger.

Naruto reaches for it and grabs her arm instead, grabbing it so Sasuke can feel the bones of her fingers. It’s nice.

“Mmh,” says Naruto, her chin finding the hollow of Sasuke’s shoulder.

“No,” says Sasuke. “Yes.”

They do it right there in the hallway, the door closed but unlocked. The floor is scratchy, she realises for the first time, it’s always felt smooth under the soles of her feet, under the sand dragged in by the feet.

Standing, stretching, Naruto is unselfconsciously naked in the light that makes her look like a panting, all thick oily colours and textures you want to touch with your eye.

Sasuke pulls on the closest jumper, which hits her at mid-thigh, and lights a cigarette.

“Would you have sex with him on the floor?”

It’s asked mostly with curiosity, the competitive edge blunted.
“Certainly not. There’s no telling how he might injure himself.”

She collects her wayward legs, pulls them up to her body until she can rest her chin between her knees. Naruto sighs and plops down beside her, tugging a shirt closer with her toes.

“We should go upstairs.”

“Sure,” says Naruto. They leave the clothes behind.

It’s still not really her room, in still not really her house. It’s Itachi’s house, Itachi’s dream, coloured everywhere by what he wants to be. Sasuke’s never been comfortable with that, prefers them to live in what they are, but it’s easier today, cleaner somehow, now that everything has gone so dark and twisted. Shades of light, impersonal air, nothing consecrated.

This is the bed where she first slept with Naruto, but it doesn’t feel like it. Doesn’t feel like her bed, although it’s welcoming enough, like in a hotel. She’s never properly appreciated hotels before.

Naruto wears a shirt that she probably thinks used to be Itachi’s.

The window’s tinted open, just enough for the air to smell like sea; like water, salty moving water. The bed doesn’t dip under her as she sits, gingerly, lightly. It does dip under Naruto, who rolls across it like a seal, the shirt flapping up above her waist.

“You’re ridiculous.”

Naruto snorts and sticks out her tongue. “You know you love me.”

The problem is that Sasuke does.

“So if, you know, with the whole magic ninja thing – I think I’ve found the secret super technique.”

Naruto fucking tickles her.
Red-faced, breathless, the tale is eventually continued. It’s about ninja, and forgotten homework, and
stupid parents, and dangerous missions, and did I leave my other jacket at your place? Sasuke even
remembers to ask about that annoying brat she used to protect, where has he gone?

“I told him he was a coward,” Naruto says, the skin of her fingers hot and rough up Sasuke’s leg. “I
let him take me on this, on this date, but then I had to tell him he’s a coward.”

“Oh,” says Sasuke, which feels reasonable enough at the time.

“I just,” Naruto says, eventually, looking up from where she was biting Sasuke’s shoulder, her
fingers tight over the scar. “I feel like a coward.”

Later she’s sitting on another bed that isn’t hers, that has been theirs for years and was his before that,
tied down and reassured by all her things, memory stored in material, the furniture and books and
clothes and wallpapers. The Hatake diamonds circling her thumb glimmer softly in the flame of her
lighter.

Kakashi’s fingers too spill over her shoulder. Unlike Naruto he doesn’t leave marks, so none of the
bruises, none of the sore sweet little swellings he’s touching, will be his.

He’s the one she’s coming home to. Stay classy, don’t be ostentatious.

Unlike Naruto he would think before biting down.

“So what did you two do?”

“Stuff,” she says, turning her face away, giving his hand full access to neck and shoulder and breast.

“I like stuff,” he agrees, and it’s a while before he says, “So what did you talk about?”

“Ask her,” Sasuke says, sighs. “I’m not telling you.”
“I don’t like that.”

“Take that up with her.”

xxxxx

*Talk to her,* says Sasuke, which may actually be fair, though it doesn’t feel it. He’s not sure what he’d say, but he might want to talk to her, Naruto with the big smile and the hovering hands, nasty scars and sunshine hair.

His legs are mostly all right by now, like he’s had a long-draw flu. They carry him down and out, into the early May warmth. Sannin Academy isn’t far, eighteen minutes on the bus. He passes the bus stop, signals for a taxi.

They were on a bus that day, a year ago, two, when the world crashed to a stop. It’s moving slowly still, every step gingerly, necessary.

The school buildings are bathed in spring light, made softer by it, careworn. The kids are smaller than they used to be, younger. Loud, loud voices, loud colours on their clothes. An impressionist scene in neon Technicolor.

Sasuke’s classes will be over soon, Naruto’s too – he found the greasy folded print-out, with the little teacher caricatures in the margins. He puts his hand in his pocket, takes it back out with an old packet of cigarettes and a lighter. They’re Sasuke’s cigarettes, not the brand he would have bought for himself, but then he doesn’t smoke enough to buy his own.

He fiddles with it for a moment, catching it between his fingers. It’s good to be well enough for vices.

There they are. In the cluster of students emerging from the buildings, he spots them, leaving together, with Shikamaru. Naruto is either insecure enough or secure enough to respect Sasuke’s ridiculous rules about no hand-holding in public.

Shikamaru sees him first, veers off sharply around the corner of Ross Hall. Naruto visibly discovers him next; Sasuke’s eye lashes are down, it’s unclear whether she’s noticed him.
“What are you doing here?” Naruto demands. “School is my time! Are you – are you okay?”

Worry tinges her mouth, but underneath there’s desperation. It’s true, Sasuke goes home to him, goes to bed with him, eats or doesn’t eat breakfast with him. Naruto’s are the days, the school hours and the early afternoon.

It was never formally agreed. It was perhaps better that way, simpler; he knew it, he assumed she knew it, would have had to infer it.

“Went for a walk,” he says, finally lightening the cigarette. Sasuke takes it from his mouth, gets in one good drag before Naruto steals it, drops it, stomps it out. He adds, “I thought I’d run into you.”

They look up in perfect sync, identical question of very different faces, three eyebrows climbing foreheads.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

Sasuke walks fast, always has, walks faster than Naruto even though Naruto’s legs are easily a decimetre longer. Four streetlights later the pavement isn’t broad enough to accommodate three people, and Sasuke falls back into step with him, Naruto awkward and alone just in front. He would, he might have felt bereft if he’d been alone behind them, but he can’t – it’s the condescension, he’s not glad his girlfriend chooses to walk beside him because she still fears he’ll fall.

It’s Naruto who stops them, tension erupting through her back until it stops Sasuke short. He’d thought it’d be more of a relief.

“I want to know you,” he says.

Naruto stares at him with something like disbelief, with something like hope.

“All right.”
When eventually she offers her hand he must take it. Her eyes are wet, no leakage.

“You’re crazy,” says Sasuke, very calmly.

“You love it,” he choruses with Naruto, for the look on Sasuke’s face, the look he’s been watching out for, to tell him if this can be right. It comes.

She nicks a cigarette from the package she left in his pocket more than a year ago, smokes it fast and with relish.

“Is Itachi good?” Naruto asks. They take a left turn, to where there’s room for three under the trees. He’s okay with trees. Never been one for communing with nature, but trees are nice. She rubs the back of her head. “Haven’t seen him in a while.”

“He’s fine,” they say. This time the chorus isn’t intentional, although it’s not unexpected. He adds, “Anko’s been good for him.” Sasuke adds, “His thesis is coming along.”

“Good,” says Naruto. “That’s good. He said I could read it.” She scuffs the toes of her orange converse against the ground, stirring dust.

“He did?”

“Yeah,” says Sasuke. “I remember. Although to be fair I’m not sure Interrelations between Moral and Narrative Collapses in Gossip Girl is quite up your alley.”

“My alley’s wide,” Naruto says. “There’s room for all kinds of stuff.” There’s a pause before she wets her lips and adds, “I really just said that, didn’t I?”

He nods, closing his lips around a laugh. Sasuke smirks around her second cigarette.

“Never has that quote been more appropriate.”

This seems to make her happy. He’s made her – a little happy.
“You recognise it? Clearly someone understands the full awesomeness of *Buffy.*”

“We already did Trashy Telly Night,” Sasuke reminds her.

“Well obviously we didn’t do enough of it! You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Season six always rang the most true to me,” Kakashi muses.

“Yes!”

Finally even Sasuke yields a grumpy, “Fine, yes, it was clearly superior in every way.”

“Another thing to know about me,” Naruto says. “I like rubbish food. Often. Come on, you can buy me a hotdog.”

There’s a vendor close by, whose wares must have roused her appetite. Sasuke’s busy stubbing out her cigarette; he finds some change in his pocket, forks it over.

“Hey, thanks. And they say chivalry is dead.” At least that’s the quip he thinks she’s trying for, around the sausage in her mouth. “Want some?”

“Nah,” he says.

Naruto transfers her intensely blue gaze from him to Sasuke, who eventually breaks with ill grace, dropping the cigarette butt and taking a tentative bite.

“Fine,” she says, and then, “It’s vile.” She chews it though and she swallows.

Naruto laughs, a loud gleeful, joyful sound. It’s how a grin would sound, if it were laughed, a shit-eating grin. “You almost done with the PT?”
“Yeah,” he says. “Getting there.”

He’s going to start painting again. Has been sketching, some, still-lifes, Sasuke’s feet and ears, the little quirk of her eyebrow and her mouth, the quirk of her little fingers when she raises a glass or a cigarette. He might go back to school next semester, after he’s seen how the summer treats his fingers, his eye.

Sasuke wipes her mouth with her sleeve, the way she wipes her nose during winter, the way that drove Mikoto to tears six years ago. It’s an old feeling, to have so many years to look back to, so many unlived days on his record. He doesn’t quite feel twenty, but then he doesn’t feel eighteen, either.

“Good,” she says.

“Yeah. Yeah, it is.”

“Are you going to keep the eye patch?” Sasuke asks. He hadn’t expected her to bring that up in front of Naruto. It’s either a concession, support, or it’s pretty vicious. A vicious form of support, then.

“Haven’t decided.”

“Isn’t there surgery?”

“So they say. I don’t know that it’s worth it.” They could lift the dropping eyelid, but the pupil would still be fixated, the world he saw would still be shadowed red. He doesn’t want to be put to sleep any more, would like to sit up night after night after night, collecting his tomorrows.

“Okay,” says Naruto. “Yeah, it’s crappy, surgery and shit.”

He can’t help wondering what more scars she has, below her face, below her clothes. No doubt they’re deep.
“I like scars,” Sasuke says.

Naruto finishes her hot dog. Sasuke lights another cigarette. Kakashi catches a falling leaf.

The sunlight is a heavy cover, lightening over every curve of every piece of furniture, spreading over the flat surfaces. The drapes are pulled, letting it spill unfiltered into Kakashi’s, into Kakashi’s and Sasuke’s, living room. It creeps over the back of the sofa, slithers up the walls to spill over the pictures.

Naruto’s grown comfortable sprawling in it, soaking it in. It’s warm as a touch on her nose, a tactile light, a weight of heat on her eyelids.

She rests her feet on a pile of books, mostly Bloomsbury, fiction and biography and autobiography in all its forms, memoires, letters, diaries.

*The struggle between self-expression and self-protection*, Kakashi said, which apparently made sense to Sasuke.

Kakashi likes, she knows now that Kakashi likes, Lytton Strachey. Desmond Morries was a bit of an arse, supposedly, divine talker or not, and Grant and Fry and the Bells were painters, and he doesn’t so much take to other painters.

“I like Leonard Woolf,” Naruto says. She does, too, and can elaborate under the raised brows that the poor guy’s the one who really did something amazing, being a good husband, more or less, to his brilliant bipolar wife, and giving his all to the political struggle. *The Village in the Jungle* is pretty damn good, too.

“His autobiographies are disappointing,” Sasuke says.

Kakashi snorts. “As compared to Nigel Nicolson’s, they’re pure genius.”

“Yes, well, clearly.”
“So you do read,” Kakashi adds, to Naruto, and not in a tone that necessitates insult, either.

“So just a little,” she says, opening her eyes then closing them again under the crush of sunlight. “I like Szymborska, too. And, and _Random Acts of Senseless Violence_. Like, dude, the title alone!”

“Yeah,” says Sasuke, standing close to her so her thigh rests against Naruto’s knee. Her elbow might brush Kakashi’s shoulder, if he moves. It’s all right.

She tilts her head sideways, squints at his hand moving with slow but terribly deliberate focus over a paper, leaving chalk links, shadows smeared over his skin from where he rubs the paper. The sunlight makes the hairs on his arm stand out in contrast, lights his nails corral.

She can see now that it’s beautiful. Before there was nothing, now suddenly she is staring at his arm, his hands, and they are real and they are beautiful. Even having touched Sasuke they’re beautiful.

Then she realises Sasuke’s looking at her, a very definite, very indefinable look, soon shared with Kakashi, and though everything remains perfectly calm on the surface, Naruto has the feeling a beast, a leviathan, has rolled through the depths.

Something’s different about her pulse, like it’s adjusting to a new rhythm.

It’s inevitable, perhaps it always was but after that moment it definitely is inevitable that they should eventually talk about sex.

Fittingly, they talk about lust while unleashing their gluttony on a pizza. So you’re – not precisely gay or straight, then?

Naruto shrugs, “A nice arse is a nice arse”, because she can’t talk about feelings right now.

Later, not much later, Kakashi says, “I don’t think sexuality is an identity.”

“So you’d do a guy?”
“If I met the right guy, I suppose.” But Sasuke’s not a guy, and neither was Anko. Nor is Naruto.

She remembers Sasuke talking about how it can’t just be anybody, man or woman, how it must be someone who sparks for you, how for that sparking to happen you must know them, a little, know them enough to take in their … aura, charisma, thing.

She drops back into the conversation in time to say, “But if Foucault is all, homosexuality is the necessary contrast that allows heterosexuality to exist, well, isn’t that super heterocentric?”

“Well, the reverse is true as well.” Sasuke puts the pizza in her mouth, bites down, grease glistening on her upper lip. Her cheeks and throat work around the food.

Kakashi’s leaning back, eating pizza salad with chop sticks. “I suppose it’s mostly about undermining the idea that heterosexuality is something in and of itself, rather than a fictional construct dependent on other fictional concepts.”

There’s nothing particularly fictional about bodies, or about sexed bodies, or desire for them. She didn’t use to want Sasuke so much, in his presence. She likes to eat with them, to watch them eat, Sasuke methodically, Kakashi with a sort of fluttery, lackadaisical enjoyment. A mouthful of wine, a glassful, two, and she sleeps over.

The bedroom is eight steps away, as counted from the doorway. The bed is eleven steps away.

It’s also soft and blue, yielding under her hand, her weight. She’s never laid in this one before, kicks off her jeans and the sheets are new against her skin. Sasuke has naked legs, Kakashi a naked torso. Naruto has naked feet, after some struggling with the clingy socks, and what feels very much like a naked heart.

Sasuke’s light beside her, princess of air and darkness. The bed moves like Naruto’s idea of being seaborne.

She sleeps, warm and heavy, with Kakashi’s arm brushing her side. He didn’t touch Sasuke where Naruto could see while awake, but as his eyes fall closed his body curves into hers, and his arm, draped over her hips, is too long to stop there, knuckles soft against the side of Naruto’s chest. The hairs on her arm moves under the wind of Sasuke’s breath.
She wants to say something pithy and poetic and meaningful, something like love, captured in words and offered, shared, something Winterson-ish, but words come hard at the best and worst and most casual of times. She half-mumbles, a little animal sound, fitting her knee against Sasuke’s thigh.

It’s somewhere between beautiful and sexyugly, focus on the ugly.

They sleep. They will wake up.

xxxxx

She wakes up with a heavy head and a heavy stomach, bloated under the press of arms. There’s Kakashi’s hand curling around her hip, Naruto’s half cupping her breast. Normally she doesn’t sleep on her back.

She sits up, not precisely carefully, limbs falling around her. Naruto burps, Kakashi sniffs. They’re neither of them quite awake. Sasuke goes for the coffee, bare feet on the floorboards, two bodies left behind her on the bed. In the bed.

It’s not really fair to leave them there, but then Sasuke has never much cared for fair. She does make enough coffee to sustain them all, at least through breakfast. She smokes, feeling submerged, waiting for the world to creak back to life, out of the grey-golden unreality of early mornings. Ashes sprinkle over the floor, over the sheets. She sits between their heads, with a newspaper and coffee and her cigarette, reading the headlines over and over because she is barely containable inside her body. Sometimes she just, what’s the saying – some men just want to watch the world burn.

Her fingers are stiff with the temptation to stab the cig out in human flesh, not her own this time.

Naruto rolls over until her face is buried in the curve of Sasuke’s hip, and there’s the sudden vicious urge to knee her in the face. It would be so easy, it’s not fair. Naruto should not make it so easy for her. Easy is very difficult to handle.

Probably she should adjust Kakashi’s pillow, ensure a restful position for his neck. Very gently she kicks at it. She’s sick of adjusting.
Naruto wakes up. Every morning it’s a visible process, she stiffens like a dreaming dog, twitches, and then her eyelids fall open.

“Mnh,” she says, right into Sasuke’s hip. Her nose twitches as she rolls over onto her back, her face soft and swollen pink with sleep.

Sasuke is glad they won’t be able to share biological children, because it is easy to imagine that this is how Naruto’s parents saw her every morning through her childhood, and Sasuke will not have that kind of ruddy chubbiness deface the Uchiha progeny, will not have Nordic bone-structure or easy tans.

Kakashi might be acceptable, in case Itachi can’t be persuaded to find a better egg donor than Anko. Sasuke has superior genes but Naruto likes children, wants them, so she could carry them. Surrogate mothering isn’t that different from adoption.

“What?” Naruto asks, rubbing her nose with the back of her hand. “You’re looking all constipated, what’re you thinking about?”

“Family planning.”

Redness spreads over Naruto’s face until her freckles are pale marks against it. She glances at Kakashi over Sasuke’s thighs.

“Do you like sex with him better than with me?”

“No.”

Still glancing at Kakashi, Naruto grabs onto her leg, hot and tenacious. “You said you didn’t want children.”

“I don’t.”

Naruto gives her what could possibly be a crafty look hidden under the sleepiness. “I’m better. If you don’t want kids. I mean, I’m better anyway. But.”
This is true.

This is annoying.

“Contraception isn’t exactly rocket science.”

Naruto tilts her head, its crown resting just under Sasuke’s knee. “You’re no good at rocket science.”

Sasuke twists her nose until she yelps, muffling the sounds against Sasuke’s legs and clawing at them to get free.

Eventually Sasuke says, “You want children, though.”

There’s movement, rustle, as Kakashi stretches his arms.

Everything is quiet until he says, “You want kids?”

“Yes,” says Naruto. “I mean, not now, obviously, but… Yeah. You?”

“It depends.”

If it had been Sasuke speaking, Naruto would have demanded, Depends on what?

She clutches very hard at Sasuke’s leg, then scrambles off the bed, mumbling, “Hafta bathroom.”

Kakashi rustles the sheets again. Sasuke looks him over as he sits up. “If you knock me up I will abort it.”

He lifts a lazy eyebrow over his lazy eye. “I’ve enough brats running around the place as it is.”
Snorting, she edges closer to get her feet back under the comforter.

After a moment he says, “I’d be all right, but she’d freak. If you got rid of her kid.”

She rubs her face. “I know.”

Naruto would cry and scream and beat her up. She’d still love Sasuke, but it’s a good thing she hasn’t got a dick.

It’s a good thing she has a certain naive propensity for double-think, too, and for depoliticising the personal, because technically she does realise that infringing on any woman’s body autonomy ever is pretty much the definition of misogyny. Sasuke could never have liked her otherwise.

On the other hand, Sasuke could never have loved her if she couldn’t say, \textit{it’s different it’s us} and mean it.

Kakashi offers her one of his lazy half-smirks. “I was going to shower. Want to join me?”

As a matter of fact she does. “Later.”

“If you’d rather get in with her, I could totally watch that.”

For the first time it strikes her that he might mean it.

“I didn’t think you fancied her.”

“You do. Just because I don’t see it doesn’t mean it’s not happening.”

“I’m fine with it, if you want to watch.”
“Is she?”

“You’d have to ask her.” After a second under his steady, amused glance and the tension lines around his eye she amends that to, “I’ll ask her.”

Itachi saw a lot, although never with desire. It stopped being mortifying and started being comforting, somewhere around the twentieth time he walked in on them, when he smirked instead of gaped.

Naruto is comfortable naked, and competitive as fuck, but she won’t have a history stretching back almost as far as she can remember of wanting to share with Kakashi everything that can be shared. That’s little enough, really.

“Hey,” Naruto says from the doorway, teeshirt riding high as she pushes hair out of her face. “What did I miss?”

“My enthralling company, I should hope,” Kakashi drawls.

Naruto sticks her tongue out at him. “I want breakfast. I’m making breakfast.”

“I don’t know,” Sasuke says snidely, for no good reason. “Does taking it out of the box count as making it?”

“No tea for you then!” Naruto says. “Or toast.”

“Don’t tell me Itachi’s defiling the cabinets with toast again,” says Kakashi, a yoghurt man at heart.

“I’ll defile your face,” says Naruto. “With toast.”

Sasuke supposes that escaping to the kitchen is a workable way to get the last word. She drags her feet across the coldness of the floor until she’s there too, in between the coffee maker and the sink, the counter pressed hard across her spine.

When Kakashi comes too, when he has put on a shirt and muscle ointment and slippers like an old
man, fuzzy slippers with Scotch patterns which he loves with an unnatural passion, the kitchen will be very full.

Close, crowded. If someone moves too much. They will crash into each other.

Naruto’s voice, brash as a bell in the mornings, shatters the silence in a hundred thousand pieces. Kakashi opens his mouth and swallows them, rolls them smooth with little sighs and creaks as he repossesses his body, grows back into it as he does after every night’s sleep.

She decides to move.

The world stands, trembling but steady under her feet. There is all the room in the world to walk to the table. They sit next to her, sullen with sleep but sweetening.

Naruto snorts into her very generous helping of cereal. “I guess if I can still stand you now…”

“I like you better now, actually,” Kakashi says calmly.

She’s fuzzy from the earliness, Naruto, like a bright finger painting. Her clothes are haphazard, spilling skin into the room.

“Pass the sugar.”

xxxxx

“Who would she pick, if she had to?”

Itachi is, uncharacteristically, leaning against the fence as he poses the question. Kakashi blinks and narrows his eye against the sun, and notices Kisame breathing in, standing suddenly alert beside Itachi. He imagines Bestiality Boy posing the same question, rather more belligerently and so far more obviously caring. Maybe Temari does too, although she can’t be expecting an answer.

If Sasuke had one, Itachi wouldn’t be asking him.
“I don’t know,” he says. Eventually he can add, truthfully, carefully, “That’s why I’m comfortable with it.”

“Comfortable,” Itachi repeats.

He shrugs, shading his eye from the sun. The movement makes his elbow jut out, outside the shadow, sunlight sniping at it. “Relatively speaking.”

Parents will worry, as is their lot in life, or they will not. Unfair, really, that the good parents, like Naruto’s, carry so much more pain, carrying it for their child. Maybe friends will worry too, until there is no worry left for they themselves, the – well. The three of them, now.

“I thought you rejected relativist ethics,” Itachi says.

He squints at the sky, which is very bright. His eye tears a little. “Ever heard of trying too hard?”

“You don’t believe in good and bad?” Itachi says it mildly, with some genuine curiosity. Kakashi knows that Itachi’s phone is in Itachi’s pocket, heavy with Anko’s messages and perhaps his supervisor’s, and with notes for his projects. He’s put it on vibrate, and silently it moves the fabric of his trousers. Real trousers, Itachi was never one for jeans. All his trousers are tailored after the same lines as the boarding school uniform, the one Kakashi was loath to wear even when they actually attended the school.

There are the obvious objections and the less obvious ones. *But she gets everything!* He has actually heard Naruto’s Kisame, the dog boy, say this.

Really of course what Sasuke got is what everyone gets who gets anything, a chance and a hell of a lot to lose. He got less and Naruto too, but they have a bit more to gain.

*She’s eradicated,* it’s been muttered, Temari has muttered. He’s not sure whether she believes it. *She’s so silent now.*

But Sasuke submerges in silence the way fish do, comfortable and awake. She’ll break the surface where it glitters, when she’s got her fill of the dark depths and whatever sunken, discarded treasures
“Are you still a stoicist?” he asks Itachi. The world has stopped spinning under his feet, although it is not yet entirely steady. He rides it like a surfing board.

“I’m trying to find religion,” Itachi says. He shrugs. “I’m not having much success.”

“Imagine that,” Kakashi says, too lightly to be really dry. “Are you looking for an actual existing god or just for belief in one?”

“Ah, no. The concept of a personal god is far too – anthropomorphic. I’d like a system. Principles. Structures.”

“Try Buddhism,” Kakashi says, shrugs, reaches for one of Sasuke’s cigarettes. He shouldn’t smoke so much but talk of religion always makes him keen on vices. “I think you’d rock the shaved look. Also the orange.”

Except orange is Naruto’s, is Naruto. Itachi’s silence confirms this.

“Well,” he says eventually. “Perhaps. I have some difficulty with the myths.”

“You would.” Kakashi could believe in that part easily enough, the sheltered prince and the fall into grace, the lovely temptresses and the disciples transforming depression and laissez-faire into metaphysics. It’s the philosophy he has trouble with, the projection of meaning and order onto life. Life is just life, until it isn’t.

Suddenly Kisame breaks in. Kakashi had not forgotten him, in the same sense he’s not really forgotten gravity or drawing breath. “If she were, like, a dude?” he asks. “Naruto. If she’d been a guy.”

It is Itachi’s turn to be silent, on a long indrawn breath.

“I imagine I would have killed him,” Kakashi says. His voice is airy, without hesitation or falsehood.
Kisame barks a laugh that he must have hoped would be diffusing. “You can barely even run, I think she could take you.”

“I don’t fight people I don’t beat.” It wouldn’t have been difficult. People die a lot more easily than they live, from being poisoned or tripped or stabbed.

“That seems a somewhat problematic attitude,” Itachi remarks. He wouldn’t say that if Kisame weren’t present, diffusing after all. Kakashi can’t leave in front of witnesses, can’t hit back.

“It’s a somewhat problematic situation,” he says after a little while, measured. He drops the smoked cigarette.

Naruto, who must know the answer, has never asked him that question. He appreciates her tact, her not confronting him about it. Sasuke would hate her for it but he is genuinely grateful.

He will be asked one day, and they will know it’s the future because it will be when his answer doesn’t hurt anymore.

“I like Naruto,” Itachi says. “Always did. Then of course I resented her, for having made me like her.”

“Because that made things complicated.”

“No,” says Itachi. “No, things were difficult, but they were never complicated.”

“From the mouth of babes and fools,” Kakashi mutters at length, rather bitterly.

“Yes, well,” says Itachi. “Go home to your babes.”