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Secondhand

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Secondhand

I. Somewhat Nadia

I am Nadia today. Well, mostly Nadia. She is beginning to wear off. The smell of her citrus perfume is already fading, and I breathe it in while I still can. I wish that I could always be Nadia. Nadia doesn't hesitate when someone asks her a question; Nadia laughs so *so* easily, and smiles at people she doesn't even know. Nadia is a faded name written in black pen on the tag inside a color-blocked denim jacket. The jacket is pink, white, and gray, and there's a red stain on the inside against the white that I think must be wine. Maybe that's why she got rid of it. If it was blood, she probably would have thrown it away.

But Nadia is beginning to wear off. I wore her for picture day and everyone noticed me. They said that I should wear her more often. They like who I am when I'm Nadia. I like who I am when I'm Nadia, too. I'm wearing her today while I'm at work. I work at Pale Moon Vintage on the weekends, and that's how I got the jacket. Nadia dropped it off, alone. She's come in before, but it had always been with one or two of her friends. College friends. She's a college student.

The bell on the door rings and I straighten up. Mrs. L. doesn't like when her employees have bad posture while customers are in the store, so I always make sure to pull my shoulders back when the bell rings. I'm behind the register, so whoever walks in will see me immediately. The girl who walks in smiles at me, as she comes through the doorway. I smile back. I begin to idly sketch the outline of a face on a rejected receipt. It isn't a drawing of her. This girl is the type of person that you forget as soon as you look away from her; her brown hair is straight and somewhat greasy, and her clothes envelop her with their slouching hugeness.

She's probably a college student. Most people who come in here are. Mrs. L. always says the only reason she's still in business is because of the students. Her shop is fifteen minutes away from the liberal arts college and when they're on break, barely anyone comes to the store.

"Hi, welcome to Pale Moon! Is there anything that I can help you with?"

"No thanks, I'm—I guess I'm just looking," the girl says, giving me a small smile before quickly walking over to the cluttered racks of clothes to the left of me. She's definitely a college student. From what I've seen, liberal arts students always seem to be "just looking" for something. Or at least they want me to think that. And this girl is no different. She has that same faraway look in her eyes that they all have; it looks as if she's thinking about something that she thinks is important like the weight of existence or the possibility that life is a simulation, or maybe just her GPA.

I would never wear anything that used to be hers. I tried a few times with people like her when I first started working at Pale Moon, but when I put on their clothes they were far too heavy and spiraling and desperate. After that I became more careful about who I wore. I never want to be them.

Nadia is a college student too, but she's different from the other ones who come in here. Everything is easy for her: her laugh, her movements, her voice. She isn't trapped in her own mind. I'd hoped for ages that she would sell something instead of just buying. Every time she came in, she bought something—some piece of clothing that she would caress, her fingers examining the fabric for imperfections. Even if it wasn't in perfect condition, she would usually still get it. I do the same thing.

If it wasn't clothes, she would still look through the assorted sunglasses, rusted necklaces, and other worthless trinkets that Mrs. L. has amassed. When Nadia sold us her jacket, she bought a tiny bronze heart that opens and closes with a matching tiny key for three dollars and ninety-five cents.

I saw it happen. She was in a hurry, I think. But something about the bronze heart caught her eye and she stopped and picked it up, smiling slightly as she opened and closed it a couple of times. She grinned when she noticed me watching, then laughed quietly, and placed the heart on the counter. I don't think that even she knew quite why she wanted it. Maybe its smallness attracted her to it; maybe it was the fact that it had been lying, dejected, next to a somewhat cross-eyed plastic bust of a woman with ivory skin, cropped black hair, and red lips, topped off with blue sunglasses shaped like triangles. Maybe Nadia couldn't bear to see it left there all by itself.

"Excuse me?"

I look up and a forgettable face is floating directly in front of me. I need to stop getting distracted. Mrs. L. has already caught me twice, and she doesn't like having to catch people.

“I just wanted to buy this,” she says, shyly sliding a nondescript blue sweater onto the counter. The sweater looks almost exactly like the one she is wearing. I wonder if her closet is just a dark mass of fabric, each item congealing to the next so that you can’t tell where one ends and another begins. I smile at her, taking the sweater in one hand and shoving the receipt I was drawing on into my jacket pocket with the other.

“That’ll be \$11.95.” She pays with cash. “Also, if you’re interested, we have a raffle for a \$25 gift card.” I gesture toward the mason jar with raffle tickets next to the register and drop her change into her hand.

“Oh, uh...yeah! I guess I’ll do that.”

I give her a raffle ticket, showing her where to write her address and phone number. Her handwriting is small and neat. Nadia entered the raffle too. She seemed so excited about it and about the little bronze heart, even though she was in a hurry. I could still smell the bright lemon of her perfume for a few moments after she left.

I wish I knew why that heart caught Nadia’s eye. Even now, when I am her, I don’t know what she was thinking at that exact moment. If I knew that, maybe I could be completely Nadia and not just somewhat Nadia or almost Nadia. I wouldn’t need her clothes or her perfume to make me her. She wouldn’t wear off in a week or so. I don’t want her to wear off. But for now, I am mostly Nadia, and for now that is mostly enough. The smell of her citrus perfume is fading, but I breathe it in while I still can.

II. Real Nadia

Real Nadia is running down the stairs. She is going to be late for something; she can’t find her perfume, and she is sure that her housemate Kaylie was using it the day before. Kaylie says that she wasn’t though, and now Nadia will have to leave without it. She hates doing that, because I don’t think she really feels like herself when she doesn’t have it on. But she’s leaving anyway, deciding not to push it any further with Kaylie. There’s a very small possibility that she’ll make it on time if she leaves now.

She has gathered all of her things and is rushing out the door, pausing only to yell a quick goodbye. I don’t know how long it will be until Kaylie and Zoe—Nadia’s other housemate—will be gone too. Kaylie is still in pajamas in the living room. I can’t see Zoe, but I assume that she’s still sleeping. Nadia is starting her car now, and she backs out of the driveway, her tires bouncing slightly as she runs over the curb in her hurry to leave the white and red paint-chipped house behind.

The walls of the red and white house are thin, and I wonder if it stays warm in the winter. But that doesn’t matter so much now; today it’s hot so they have all their windows cracked open. Hopefully Kaylie and Zoe have somewhere to be soon. I have work at 2:00 p.m. and even though it’s only

9:24 a.m., I'd rather not be sitting here all day. There's also the possibility that they don't have anywhere to be and that would mean waiting here again all for nothing.

I move slightly in my seat, gripping more tightly onto the branch in front of me. The sun is beating down on my skin through the foliage, and I'm suddenly glad that my mom forced me to put sunscreen on this morning. I told her that I was hanging out with Lily today; she was happy since I haven't hung out with Lily for a really long time. To be fair, I haven't hung out with anyone for a really long time.

I told her that I was meeting Lily at the strip mall that has Pale Moon and a few other stores. It's only a fifteen minute walk from my house and I always walk there for work, so my mom wasn't nervous about me getting there. Nadia's house is a thirty minute walk, so it isn't that much further. My mom won't ask any questions or check up on me because she's just so glad that I'm supposedly talking to Lily again.

Lily was my best friend in elementary school and she stayed my best friend until eighth grade. I don't think that she purposely stopped talking to me, but it just seemed like she was busy all the time. I asked her to hang out a couple of times in the beginning of eighth grade, but she was always either at tennis practice or had a lot of work to do. And she never asked me to do anything, so I stopped asking. Lily wouldn't have stopped being friends with Nadia. No one would ever want to stop being friends with Nadia.

Now, Lily and I smile at each other in the hallway, but that's about the extent of it. And my mom doesn't understand that just because we *were* best friends it doesn't mean that we even talk in high school. Things have changed, obviously. It isn't like before when Lily and I were united against everyone else and made fun of the girls who dyed their hair blond and wore clothes from Hollister. We had always talked about working at Pale Moon together, but by the time we were both old enough, only I applied.

I applied in the summer before ninth grade, and I've been working there for a little over a year now. A few other employees have quit while I've been there, since they say that Mrs. L. is hard to work with. She does expect a lot, but I think that she just wants people to care about the clothes that she sells. She always says that I understand the clothes just like she does; she's the one who told me about how clothing retains a part of the person who once wore it, that it holds onto a piece of their soul.

Other people say that Mrs. L. is crazy and old, that she never stops talking. I think that I'm the only one who listens. Mrs. L. likes when clothes become hers when they used to be someone else's. I never want the clothes to become mine. So, I don't really feel the exact same way about that. And I think—

I jolt forward as I hear a quick rustling, and then a white and gray bird lands on a branch directly next to me. I slowly turn my head toward it, and

its beady eyes fix on mine, unmoving. Its eyes are black with a ring of yellow around them. I take a shaky breath and try my best not to move. If I shoo it away, someone might see a sudden movement from this tree and check if there's anything strange in it. I take another breath. The bird is small, but up close, its beak looks sharp, and I hope that it isn't thinking of poking my eyes out. Is that a thing that birds do? It opens its mouth and my heart almost beats out of my chest, but it just lets out a strange, grating cry and then becomes silent again.

It turns its head away from mine and just continues to sit, shifting its feet every so often. Looking at it again, the bird's body is all soft lines and feathers, completely opposite to its beak, but I avoid thinking about that. I almost wish that I had brought my sketchbook, or even just a piece of paper. I reach into my pocket where I still have the receipt half-filled with the featureless face, but I don't have a pencil. I tear my eyes away from the bird and realize that the two cars in front aren't there anymore. Kaylie and Zoe must have left while I was distracted. I start to let go of the branch in front of me, but the bird cries out again as soon as I do. It sounds kind of familiar now that I hear it again.

I look at it and it gazes back at me for the second time; I have the distinct feeling that I am being reprovved. It doesn't matter. I don't care about what a bird thinks of me. I begin again with the process of carefully climbing down the tree, and as I swing my leg to the side, the bird unfurls its wings. After some more quick rustling, it's gone. Good. I make it to the bottom of the tree safely, but not without cutting my left hand on the trunk. My hand is all scraped up now and there's blood, but I was careful not to make any noise.

I got blood on the sleeve of Nadia's jacket and I hope that it'll wash out. It doesn't matter so much to me now though. The jacket is barely hers anymore, and I'll have something new of hers soon. Then I'll be able to figure her out. I won't need her clothes anymore to stop her from wearing off. It'll probably be some old shirt that she won't even miss. I open the gate at the side of the house, making sure that no one is around.

It is 10:47 a.m. on a Saturday morning and the streets are empty. The only place where that makes sense is a college town. There is a window on the side of the house which has a busted screen. They need to get it replaced; bugs must keep getting in. Since the window is open, it's easy to pull away the screen and to push myself through, head first.

I'm in the house again. I cringe slightly at the smell of vanilla air fresheners and beer that hits me as soon as I walk in. I doubt that Nadia chose vanilla. It seems far too heavy for her. I walk up the stairs, and the smell grows a bit more bearable as I get closer to Nadia's room. I stop in front of her door. She has her name written in colorful, bouncing letters on a white sheet of paper that is held up with scotch tape. I smile at the simple loudness of it.

I open the door.

III. Two Nadias

On her desk, there is a framed picture of Nadia in the jacket with a few other friends. In it, she is laughing at something, and her curly brown hair is falling over half of her face. The jacket complements her olive skin perfectly. It will never look as good on me as it did on her. I look down at my own ghost white skin and frown. Maybe that's part of the problem. My skin will never look like hers, just a pale imitation. And my hair looks so washed out and dead; I tried to curl it, but after an hour it just fell back into its usual dull straightness.

The walls in her room are covered with pictures strung up with fairy lights and her blanket is blue and white tie dye. One of her pillows is on the floor. She didn't have time to make the bed this morning. I consider making it for her, but I think she would probably notice that. I walk over to the nightstand next to her bed and sitting on it is a silver domed alarm clock, pink heart sunglasses, tangled bracelets, a little bronze heart with a key, and a tiny silver ring with a glossy green serpent on it. I suppose it couldn't hurt to have something other than clothing too.

I pick up the ring with my unhurt hand and hold it closer to my face, examining the way that the silver meshes with the snake, trapping it in a pretty cage. Its mouth is open and I'm not able to tell if it is screaming for help or merely showing off its formidable fangs and tongue. It doesn't look helpless though; it looks as if it's incapable of fear. I wonder how the serpent came to be caught in the silver. It almost looks as if it has—

“Umm...hello?”

My heart drops into my stomach, and I shove the hand with Nadia's ring into my pocket. There's a crinkling noise as my fingers make contact with the crumpled receipt. I can feel my heart crawling up my throat as I slowly turn around, already knowing who must be behind me. Nadia. Her eyebrows are stitched upwards in a look of confusion, and she is holding three textbooks. She doesn't seem angry that I'm here.

“Did Kaylie or Zoe let you in? This is my room, not one of theirs. Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you.” She smiles at me and walks into the room, dropping the three textbooks onto her bed. I look down. The book on the top of the pile is blue and green and says *Behavior Modification: Principles and Procedures*. I know that I should say yes, but instead I just look back up at her, my hands beginning to shake. She is wearing black bike shorts with an oversized orange and yellow T-shirt that has a bleary-eyed sun on it. Her smile begins to fade.

“I”—My mind is blank and I have forgotten her question and my left hand is really starting to hurt.

“Are you...did they let you in?” This time her voice is less sure and she backs away from me slightly. “Wait, that’s my jacket! Well, not my jacket anymore, I guess, I sold it to”—She looks intently at my face and her eyes narrow in suspicion. “Wait, you—you’re that girl who works at—what are you doing here? How do you know I live here?” I open my mouth but no words come out. “What are you doing here?” she repeats, slowing her voice down as if she thinks that I don’t understand what she’s saying.

“I just”—My voice cracks, and I pause as I hear how weak I sound. I squeeze her ring and then desperately hope that she doesn’t notice.

“Just what? Did you follow me home one day or something?”

The words are slow-acting venom. My whole body begins to shake. “No, I didn’t follow you,” I say. “You wrote your address down for—for the Pale Moon raffle.”

“What? Like that’s so much be—why are you here?” Her voice shakes on her final word.

“I just want to be y—like you. And, if I have your clothes”—

“You want my clothes?”

“Yes!” I almost shout it. She understands.

“You’re trying to steal my stuff?”

“No! Well, I just need”—

“You know, you could have just asked me where I got something from. I would’ve happily told you. But you can’t just steal”—

“No, please, you don’t understand. I need *your*—I have your jacket but—it’s wearing off, and if I could have one more thing I would”—

“What?”

What can I say to help her understand? “I thought that I could change my skin but I know”—

“Your *skin*? What—what’s wrong with you? Are you high?”

“No, I—”

“You need help,” she says, shaking her head slightly. “Get out of my house.”

I curl my fingers even more tightly around Nadia’s ring, my bleeding hand beginning to drip onto her floor. Her mouth is open, and she stares at the blood on the ground, her eyes wide. I don’t think that she noticed my hand before.

“Nadia, I”—

“If you don’t leave right now, I’m going to—I’m going to call the police.”

“Okay, I’ll leave. I’m sorry. I’ll leave.” I can feel my throat tighten and I look down. I want so badly for her to understand, but I can’t get arrested. My parents would kill me. I look back up at Nadia. She doesn’t look angry. Not that she looks happy, either. Her eyebrows are furrowed, her jaw tense. I try to make eye contact with her but she avoids it, turning her head away. I can’t

tell what she's thinking. I turn my head away too. I walk out of the room as she gestures toward the door. She follows behind me as I walk down the stairs, keeping at least a five feet between us. I reach the front door of the house, and I hear her footsteps stop.

"Don't come back," she says. The finality in her voice makes me wince. "Or I will get the police involved."

I turn around, my heart trailing at my feet, and look back at her. She averts her eyes again. For a second, I think that maybe she feels guilty. But as I wrap my bleeding hand around the cuff of her jacket, I think I understand. Nadia's eyes aren't guilty. They aren't apologetic. They aren't beginning to understand. Nadia just pities me.

"You should fix the screens on the windows," I say.

"What?" I can tell that she heard me.

"That's how I got in," I explain. The jacket feels rough and itchy now, and I have a sudden urge to rip it off, to throw it to the ground. As I put my hand on the doorknob and open the door, the serpent ring falls out of my hand and hits the ground with a tinny scream. I don't look back at the red and white house. I don't look back at her. A squeaky gate mimics a gray and white bird. I leave.

IV. Not Nadia

I'm lying on the floor in my room, the sun streaming from the window onto my ghost skin. My dad calls from downstairs that dinner is ready. I don't answer. I burrow myself deeper into her jacket. My jacket. My dad calls again, louder this time, "Sophie, dinner's ready!" I don't answer. I'm repulsed by my very being, by that look on her face, by bronze hearts, by birdsong. I'm not at all Nadia anymore. I sprayed her citrus perfume all over my body but it sits, heavy, on my skin as if it knows that it doesn't belong there. I can't be her. I can never be her. I will go to work tomorrow and maybe someone else will come into the store and they will be even better than her. Maybe they won't wear off. No. I won't let them wear off.