

Twice as Perfect

Louisa Onomé



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS

New York

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK
An imprint of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC
120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271 • fiercereads.com

Copyright © 2022 by Louisa Atto. All rights reserved.

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442 or by email at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Onomé, Louisa, author.

Title: Twice as perfect / Louisa Onomé.

Description: First edition. | New York : Feiwel & Friends, 2022. |

Audience: Ages 14–18. | Audience: Grades 10–12. | Summary:

Seventeen-year-old Nigerian Canadian Adanna Nkwachi must deal with an estranged older brother, uncertainty about her future, and helping her cousin plan a big Nigerian wedding.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021051174 | ISBN 9781250823502 (hardcover)

Subjects: CYAC: Brothers and sisters—Fiction. | Family—Fiction. | Nigerians—Canada—Fiction. | LCGFT: Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.O656 Tw 2022 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021051174>

First edition, 2022

Book design by Angela Jun

Feiwel and Friends logo designed by Filomena Tuosto

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-1-250-82350-2 (hardcover)

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Maka umuaka di ka m.



*The problem with trying to one-up yourself
is not that you might die by your own hands
but that you'll be able to justify why
without feeling anything.*

—Shazia Hafiz Ramji

“Conspiracy of Love,” in *Port of Being*



CHAPTER ONE

AUNTIE FUNMI PULLS ON THE measuring tape held tight around my waist. I hold my breath, suck in my stomach a little, because I want the dress to *fit*, like really fit. But Auntie Funmi is the best seamstress my mom knows, so she taps my arm—smacks, more like—and hisses at me in her strong, Yoruba accent, “Ah-ah! Adanna! So you want to be doing like this at the wedding the whole time?” And she holds her breath and shifts side to side like she can’t walk or bend her knees. “You will just look uncomfortable.”

Chioma snickers from where she’s sitting at the dining table. She has a swath of bright ankara fabric over one knee while she flips through a catalog of old-school dress styles. We lock eyes and she snickers again, none too remorseful

for the situation I'm in. Auntie Funmi is pissed she has to redo all these bridesmaids' dresses only two months before Chioma's sister's wedding, and she's taking it out on me just because I'm the last girl to be fitted. How is it my fault, though? Does she know how difficult it is to be me right now? I'm in my last year of high school—debate team, staying on honor roll, plotting my law school track—I have so many other things I have to do aside from plan what I'm going to wear for Genny's wedding.

Auntie Funmi wraps the measuring tape around my arm and tightens it, peering down her nose at the small black numbers that overlap. Her eyes flick over to mine. "Are you still losing weight?"

"I wasn't to begin with . . .," I murmur. Auntie moves on quickly. My eyes dart to the book she's scribbling in where she keeps our measurements. Auntie Funmi has been doing clothes for my family since I was very young, but I don't think I've changed that much from last year. Chioma's aunt and uncle had a dedication ceremony for their newborn, and the two-piece dress I had made still fits me just fine. Auntie Funmi is just being a busybody.

Chioma flips a large page in the catalog and scrunches up her nose like she's smelled something bad. Her thick Senegalese twists fall over her shoulder and she has to shimmy and shrug to push them back over. "Auntie," she calls, "are you sure the style Genny picked for the dresses is in here?"

Auntie doesn't bother looking up as she runs the tape from my shoulder to my knees. "Yes."

"But they're all so tacky," Chioma whispers. Auntie doesn't act like she heard her, but I chuckle a little. "She couldn't find something on Pinterest? Why does she want us to look ugly at her wedding?"

"*Tch*, as if you don't know your own sister," I sneer playfully, jutting out my bottom lip in arrogance. Genevieve, Chioma's older sister, who used to get both Chioma and I to braid, unbraid, and wash her hair while we were growing up because she just got shellac done and do we know how much shellac costs? Genevieve, Chioma's older sister, who used to crop family members out of pictures where she was the only one who looked good. Genevieve, Chioma's older sister, who went viral for a hot second as "Jesus girl at Riley's" last summer and leveraged it to the max.

Where do I even begin with that story? Riley's is a vegan joint that sells pastas and things in Toronto's east end. Genny isn't vegan, but she was going on a date with this guy, I think his name was Jacob. He wasn't bad looking, but one time he posted a pic of him and Genny on his socials, and she told him to take it down because she knew it wasn't that serious for her. He was trying to become an influencer or something, so he was always filming things. Jacob gets this bright idea to take Genny to Riley's even though neither of them are vegan (we later found out it was

for a “First Time Trying Vegan Food” video he was working on). Genny gets to the counter and asks what the cheese is made out of, since it couldn’t have been dairy. The lady says “cashews” and Genny gets this blank look on her face like she’s transcended time and space. Her mouth cracks open a smidge and she pouts, unsure, before she narrows her eyes and utters, “Je-*sus*...” with the most contempt I’ve ever heard. It’s hilarious and you couldn’t go anywhere online for a month without seeing her face.

Cut to last Christmas when she and her girls were vacationing in Nigeria. They were in a club in Abuja when someone in VIP recognized her as the Jesus girl and invited her and her friends to their booth. Neither of us were surprised hearing this when Genny first told us because she’s always had that kind of effortless charm. She just gets things when other people have to struggle. But wow our mouths dropped when she recounted how she spotted the one and only Skeleboy sitting there. Yes, *that* Skeleboy, Mr. Obafemi Oluwadurotimi Balogun, arguably the best Afrobeats artist-producer-turned-philanthropist-artist-producer of our time. Skeleboy me, Skeleboy this money, everything na Skeleboy—*that Skeleboy!* Genny came back home after her vacation and they did the long-distance thing in secret with her slipping off to Nigeria here and there. Fast forward to one day when she comes back with a real diamond ring from Skeleboy—and plane tickets

(tickets!) for Genny and her immediate family to fly to his Lekki mansion in Nigeria to meet his parents. Unreal!

I'll never forget the look in Chioma's eyes when she barged into my house the day after she got back on Canadian soil, skin tired and blotchy, looking like a whole haggard wreck from the long flight. With manic eyes and a lofty, ghostlike twinge to her voice, she recited, "Adanna... Skeleboy me, Skeleboy this money... everything na Skeleboy o!" And we cried for an hour.

I can't believe I'm about to be related to Skeleboy.

Well, not actually related. Chioma and I aren't real cousins—our parents met each other when they immigrated here and wanted to hang with other Nigerian Igbo families. No, the only real family I have are my parents, and Sam. Obinna Samuel, my brother. He's older than me, but younger than Genny. He's not around anymore.

And we're not allowed to talk about him.

Chioma's ringtone goes off and it's a Skeleboy song, his most popular one, "Yanga." I laugh. "You're going to have to change that, bro. Imagine if your future brother-in-law hears that. So embarrassing."

She closes her eyes and begins to hum the song, dancing side to side, while she sings: "Do me, do me, do me yanga!" She sounds horrible.

"*Gpek-gpek-gpek*," Auntie Funmi teases, dropping her

measuring tape from my back and folding it into her hands. “Sounding like common fowl.”

Chioma laughs so hard the fabric on her leg slides down and she has to bend to pick it up. She folds it neatly and sets it back on the table. The gold and blue fabric will look so nice once all our clothes are made. I can imagine all us cousins lined up in our uniforms, posed super extra for the family photo—the family photo with Ske-le-bo-yeee. Oh god, how close will I be allowed to stand to him? Will his entourage circle him and Genny or will he want to hug us, suddenly enamored with our hybrid Igbo-Yoruba-some-Ika-some-Isoko-cousin family dynamic? Tribal conflict where?

Auntie Funmi closes her book of measurements and turns to lean against her table, arms folded. She says something in Igbo, and I know it’s in Igbo because suddenly she sounds more like my mom and less like the Yoruba of a Skeleboy song. When neither Chioma nor I move, Auntie Funmi begins to cackle. “What is it? You no know say I sabi Igbo?”

“Well, we don’t, so . . .,” I say. The wave of shame is not lost on me, and it’s like saying it aloud brings about a layer of guilt I don’t need right now.

Auntie Funmi’s cackle is almost sinister. “I know, o! You oyinbo children. I said, ‘Okay, that’s it, you can go.’ You don’t even know that one?”

Those magic words have me slipping away from Auntie

as fast as I can and darting straight for my sweater and bag in the corner. “When do we pick up the clothes?” I ask over my shoulder.

“Give me, hmm, one month,” she says, chewing her bottom lip in contemplation. “I will call your mom and tell her.”

Chioma gets to her feet and we both thank Auntie Funmi, even though it was only me getting measured. Chioma came because I need her to drive me to Williams after. It’s four thirty on a Thursday and I promised to be at Williams Café before five to go over debate plans with Justin. He thinks Mr. Patel may have slipped him our topic for the next competition, and Justin can be dramatic and ugly competitive sometimes, so I’m not surprised at all that he wants to practice so early. Too bad this was the only time I could come and get measured. I’m just lucky Chioma can drive and her dad agreed to give her his old rusty-ass sedan.

I settle into the passenger’s side and tap the dashboard like we’re in some movie and someone is chasing us. “Okay, fast fast, hurry,” I say, bobbing impatiently in my seat.

I’m half kidding but Chioma is whole-annoyed. “Don’t fast fast me, Ada,” she hisses as she turns the key in the ignition. The old car roars to life, but just barely. Its engine is loud and it’s taking seventeen years to back out of its parking spot. “If you were in such a hurry, you should’ve asked Tayo to drive you.”

I feel my heart thump in my chest at the mention of his

name, and at the thought of me being alone with him in a car. It's not like I haven't been alone with him before—we're friends and, most of the time, we do everything together. We're just close like that. Still, I stumble over my words, "Wh-what? No?"

"Why not?"

"He *just* got his license! He'd kill us. That boy can't even parallel park."

"No one actually can, though."

"And he's busy anyway."

She grins, glancing at me. "So you did ask him?"

I button up quickly, unsure if my next words will be my last. Chioma is always teasing me about Tayo, probably because he's a boy and I'm a girl and we're both the only Nigerian kids in our grade. Plus, like I said, he's my friend. We're *friendly*. God, why am I even getting into this with her? Chioma graduated high school already, but she's so interested in my life. Doesn't she have university things to care about or something?

"He said no?" she presses again. "Huh?"

"I didn't ask him," I tell her. "I just *know* he's busy because I saw him at school earlier. Whatever. Turn right here. It's a shortcut." I quickly point down another road and Chioma does as she's told.

At a stoplight, Chioma quickly plugs her phone into the aux cord and turns on "Yanga." I snicker as she rolls

her shoulders, bobs her head, and gets ready to launch into full car dancing mode. “Get it out of your system now, o!” I tease in pidgin, in my acquired Nigerian Igbo accent. It doesn’t sound quite as authentic as Mom’s or Dad’s, but it works for us cousins. We talk like this sometimes when we’re all together. Our vernacular and sentence patterns change like we’re enjoying malt and chicken somewhere outside a restaurant in Ikeja—or, whatever it is that Lagos youth do, anyway. “You can’t be behaving like this in front of your in-law.”

“I know, I know,” she says, still giddy. “Sing with me.”

The beat tricks us and Chioma starts to sing a whole five seconds before the first verse, which has us laughing even more. By the time Skeleboy launches into his first “do me,” we’re clawing over each other trying to match up to his rhymes. “D-do me—do me! Do me yanga, o!”

The song goes into its last verse while Chioma pulls into the Williams parking lot. There are a few cars littered around, but it doesn’t look like it’s too full. This place gets packed on the weekends with university kids who need that perfect blend of coffee-shop ambience and two-for-one espresso to ace a test. It also gets packed during the evenings, but I wouldn’t know anything about that. I’m usually at home by the time the sun goes down, studying in my room while my Spotify playlists rotate through the night. Mom and Dad don’t like me going anywhere in the evening

these days, that is, unless Chioma is with me. Can't believe they trust her so much, honestly.

I turn down the music in Chioma's car really fast. It's quiet out here and I don't want to disturb the peace. Plus, we can't be that car blasting Afrobeats after hours in this neighborhood. There aren't a lot of passersby on the street, but I can still feel phantom eyes on us. People are probably looking through the windows at Williams to see whose car is making all that noise, you know, who's disturbing their second two-for-one espresso deal.

Chioma recoils at the sudden emptiness in the air. "What's wrong with you? Let me finish my song," she says.

"This is a public place," I say, sounding a lot like my dad, and quickly gather up my things before she can spike the volume again. "Thanks for the ride. Tell your parents I say hey."

She manages a wave even though she's frowning, still mad about the volume. She's acting like she isn't about to turn it up the second I leave. If there's one person who doesn't know that her sister is about to be married to a top star, well, they'll definitely figure it out by the time she's done belting the next song.



CHAPTER TWO

MY NAME AT SCHOOL IS Sophie. My name at home is Adanna. Everyone at school calls me Sophie, my middle name, and whenever I hear it, it's my trigger to put away the Skeleboy and brazen Afrobeats playlists, to stop slipping in and out of pidgin English, and turn on my white voice. Chioma laughs and says I shouldn't call it that, but I can't even lie, that's what it is. My voice boosts half an octave, my words are fuller, and I start saying things like, "if I remember correctly" with the same sharpness as someone who has just been given the wrong drink at Starbucks.

In kindergarten, everyone still called me Ada. But when my parents were called in once for teacher-parent interviews, they cringed at how badly my teacher butchered my

name—their words, not mine. Instead of the short *a*, they pronounced Ada like “ay-da,” and my parents snapped. The next day, my teacher was calling me Sophie and I adapted to who a Sophie was: smart, vocal, tenacious. At home, I was still Ada, also smart, also vocal, also tenacious. It may not sound like there’s a difference, but there is. It’s just a feeling. Sophie and Ada cannot mix.

That’s why when I hear “Sophie!” called out in the poorly lit café, my ears perk up, my demeanor changes, and suddenly I am Sophie Nkwachi who spends her time thinking less about Genny’s wedding to a Nigerian mogul and more time thinking about how to streamline her way into law school.

Justin is sitting in the middle of the café. We lock eyes and he waves me over once, twice, before diverting to a video on his phone. His hair is getting so long in the front that when he leans over, his phone practically disappears underneath it. From far away, he looks more like his white Canadian dad, but when he pushes his hair back and I can see more of his soft cheekbones and high brow, I am reminded how much he looks like his Chinese mom from up close. Celia Lam John’s face is plastered all over the city, especially now that her home renovation show just got syndicated on cable. Justin’s mom is legit like a celebrity. He hates it, but he also drives a Mercedes, so really, he probably doesn’t hate it that much.

“What are you doing?” I ask, shuffling into the seat opposite. We’re seated at a table for two, and beside us in another table for two are Joshua and Arjun, the other members of our debate team. I wave at them and they return the gesture fast before diving back into their case notes. Sometimes we all prep together, even though our region does British parliamentary style, so it’s not always necessary. Josh and Arjun are partners like Justin and I are partners, but if they score high at a competition, it doesn’t mean we score high too. So yeah, we’re all teammates, but we really have to look out for ourselves.

From where I’m sitting, I have a clear view of the counter: fresh cakes behind a display, LED menu blinking overhead, harried baristas running back and forth with piping hot mugs. This place makes me hungry even if I’m not.

“Look,” Justin says and turns his phone around to show me.

I frown instantly. “A debate video.”

“Not just *any* debate video,” he presses on, already sensing my annoyance. How many of these is he going to show me before he realizes I never want to see another one again? Mr. Patel is always showing us these at the club and I’m tired. If I have to sit through one more dry-ass point of inquiry . . . “These kids won college nationals in 2007.”

“Ancient. That’s why I can’t see anything with this quality,” I utter, trying to zoom in just enough that I can make out something other than this janky frame rate. “Why are

we watching college kids, anyway? That's not even at our level."

He furrows his brows, confused. "What? We're in the top percentile of our grade, we always get chosen for opening team, *and* we won Mr. Patel's debate tournament trophy. Of *course* that's our level."

Josh clears his throat from beside us and gives a roll of his eyes. Josh thinks Justin is full of himself, but I bet that's because he's not on Justin's level, which means he's barely on my level. No offense, of course.

It's hard to forget that Justin and I have practically been top of the class together since middle school. It's either him or me. One of us is a one, the other is a two, but there hasn't been a one or two that wasn't him or me in ages. I should hate him for it, for all this heavy academic competition, but I don't. We get along okay. We're real friends. And if I'm being honest, maybe I wish we were more than just real friends. Maybe when I picture myself with someone else, half of the time the person I'm picturing is Justin. But every time my mind starts to wander, I gotta reel it back in for my own sake, and my family's too. If only his last name was Okoh or my family knew his family or something, then it could work. Then it'd be easier.

The video ends and I'm jogged back to attention. I am no longer thinking about Justin and how we'd make a really good power couple, both of us ultra-smart and ultra-ambitious

lawyers or angel investors or something. Instead, I let my mind fill up with nothing but the sounds of the café, the rich smell of cold brew coffee, and the *scratch-scratch-scratch* of Arjun's pencil across his notebook. "Okay, so?" I say. "What does this video have to do with us?"

"Everything." He clears his throat and sits up straighter, adjusting the sleeves of his sweatshirt. Josh and Arjun glance over. "We have a new motion now. Mr. Patel is sure this is the right one this time," he tells me. It takes all my willpower not to roll my eyes at the idea of Mr. Patel being sure about something. He thought our last two motions were legit too before he switched them out on us. He gets new tips each week, it seems. It's mad unethical, but he's best friends with one of the chief adjudicators and he keeps feeding us motions that he thinks we may get for the competition. If anyone finds out, we're dead. This is technically cheating, but Mr. Patel has that "they have to catch me first!" attitude and it's started to rub off on us. He's a good talker. I guess that's why he's spearheading the debate club. "He talked to his adjudicator friend and he's absolutely one hundred percent sure our motion will be related to..." Justin spins the phone back around and resets the video before turning to me again. This time, I notice the title. It's real obvious and I wonder how I didn't see it before. My eyes scan over the words at the same time Justin's voice pierces my ears: "Cultural appropriation."

I cringe immediately and flip the phone around so it's

facing him again. I lean back, so far back that I feel cool air in the space between where I was leaning against the table. Justin isn't fazed by my reaction. Fact: We're friends, but do we ever see eye to eye? No. Number 102 why we'd never work as a couple and I should let that dream die. So I groan, "No way. It can't be," and press my knuckles into my cheeks.

He chuckles. I've heard him laugh so many times before, but somehow knowing it's because of me makes my face warm with a hidden shyness I normally don't show. I push my hair over my shoulder and channel Genny: fierce, strict, firm. Genny is not shy. She is a mogul's future wife. "I'm not doing it," I tell him.

He raises an eyebrow. "We literally have to switch the topic, though."

"No, no way," I push on. "Mr. Patel is sure he knows what our motion is going to be every week. He has us switching motions like mad out here. We did *too* much research on economics in South Africa."

"Yeah," Arjun cuts in with an apologetic smile. "I actually never want to say the words 'I believe that South Africa would abandon the African Union's plan for a single currency' again."

"Exactly!" I grunt. "We did way too much research to scrap everything now and just assume our official motion will be related to cultural appropriation. There's no way they'd give that to us. You think they were like, '*Oh, this*

school has all the ethnic kids. Black kid, half-Chinese kid, Filipino kid, Sri Lankan kid. Let's go with cultural appropriation'?"

"Come on, you know that's exactly what they said," Justin jokes. "But think of it this way: We have a higher statistical advantage at winning if we're given a topic like this. The past college winners? Racialized topics, ahead by varying points."

"It's true," Josh says, turning so he can face us. We really should've just gotten one table of four. "Check the stats for the latest regional competition."

"Okay, but..." I reach for Justin's phone and skim through the related videos. Just as I thought. "Here, look. All the kids are black," I say, gesturing loosely to the phone. "Look at us. We're clearly down a black kid here—down *three* if you count both our teams."

That makes Justin laugh, like really laugh. The lines of his face stretch with warmth. He throws his head back and rubs his hands tiredly down his face while he sighs, "Oh my godddd." It makes me chuckle too but I purse my lips tightly to keep the giggles out. I like that I make him laugh. His smile makes me think about what our future could be like even though I—should concentrate on work. I need to concentrate on debate. "What do you expect me to do about that, huh?" he teases, and I want to reach forward and pinch his face and I don't know why.

"I don't know," I chuckle. "Find me a new debate partner, damn."

“Wooooow—”

“Someone tall, though, with a nice fade so at least if he’s not smart and he tanks my chances, I can stare at him while my future crumbles.”

“Just, *wow*.”

Josh and Arjun share a look before Josh pipes up, “L-let’s focus, guys.”

Justin is still smiling when he says, “We *are* focused. This will be fine, don’t worry. I got an idea already.”

I snort. “Of course you do.”

He knows that isn’t a compliment, but he grins anyway. “Most of the judging panels in our district are pretty white,” he goes on. “I know white people. My dad is one.”

“*Please* stop talking.”

“Cultural appropriation is a notoriously white issue.”

“Yeah, and it will make people uncomfortable,” I say, letting my eyes land on the phone screen before I look at Justin. “You want to make a room full of white people uncomfortable? We’re never going to win that way.”

“Sophie’s right,” Arjun grumbles. He’s put away his notebook and is facing our table too. “And, like, we obviously want a bench sweep, so don’t do anything stupid.”

“Of course not. So let’s say we flip the topic,” Justin tells us, and I sigh loud enough that I’m sure the others can hear it over the whirring of coffee grinders at the counter. “According to Mr. Patel, we could either be hit

with ‘the house believes that cultural appropriation is wrong’ or ‘the house believes that cultural appropriation and appreciation are byproducts of a capitalist society’—”

I snort. “Sorry?”

“Yeah, exactly.” He rolls his eyes. “But if we completely divert from popular theories related to the white gaze—like, just sidestep anything that assumes our audience is white or all appropriators are white—we could probably get away with it. We just gotta distract the judges with points on, for example, third-culture kids or cross-cultural kids.”

Josh raises his eyebrow. “Meaning?”

“Well—”

“And, to clarify, I meant what is *your* point, not that I don’t know what a cross-cultural kid is.” Wow, he really brought the “just to clarify . . .” all the way to Williams? Now I know he’s pressed.

“I’ll answer,” I say, shooting up my hand like we’re in debate. I’m being corny on purpose and Josh rolls his eyes because he can tell. “The point is that by directing the judges’ attention away from assuming that *all* appropriation is done by white people, we can create room for points on how third culture and cross-cultural kids—that would be, kids who have grown up and/or created a meaningful relationship in two separate cultures, one of which may be different from their parents’ culture—are handled within the larger discussion of cultural appropriation. Like, is it okay

for someone who comes from a marginalized culture to take on identities or aspects of another marginalized culture, even if they actually belong to it? Stuff like that.”

Josh doesn’t look impressed, but he rarely is. Justin has stars in his eyes and it makes my face warm to think he’s even a little bit in awe of me. “Now,” I begin, a mischievous smile on my lips. “I’ll tell you why that won’t work.”

Justin and Josh switch reactions. “Ha!” Josh breaks into a grin at the same time Justin raises an eyebrow and says, “Are you serious?”

“It’s pretty much impossible for many reasons, but the main one being this.” I clear my throat. “I think cultural appropriation needs the white gaze. Without a dominant white culture hanging over, siphoning, and stealing from racialized cultures, I mean, then how could you have appropriation? That’s how it works, right?”

“Not necessarily,” Justin goes on. “Cultural appropriation just needs a dominant culture. If we focus it that way, then we could get away with it.”

I lower my eyes at him. “Isn’t that a technicality? What if their definition doesn’t work with what we’re planning?”

“What do you mean? For sure it will,” he says simply.

I dream of the debate competition and what it’ll be like when we’re standing on the stage in front of those harsh, beaming lights. We will be dressed similarly, of course. I think of how married Nigerian couples dress in the same

fabric at events, but I have to squash that thought because we are not married and we—*he* is not Nigerian. I imagine the stage, how it creaks under my polished dress shoes, and how I'm going to try my hardest to focus on just one judge so I don't get nervous. And if that one judge opens his mouth and says something like, "Sorry, our definition is actually a bit different . . .," well, not even God could save Justin from how loud I'd scream.

My eyes wander as easily as my mind does and suddenly, I'm imagining—Sam.

Wait. Sam?

I can see Sam. In real life. I'm not imagining it. This tall black boy at the register with his back turned to me, pointing out which cake he wants to buy. He has to crouch a little to get a better look at the display case, to take it all in. My breath shuts itself in my throat and refuses to come out. Memories flood my brain, knocking around, trying to win the others out. Memories of us frying chicken—why is that the one memory that comes out on top? Mom brought chicken out of the freezer one time when I was seven, and she told Sam and I to fry it before she got home. "Protect your arm," Sam had warned, gesturing to my exposed wrist. "The oil will splash and you'll get burned. So flip, and then dip." He flipped over a piece of chicken, and then backed away before the oil popped. I followed suit, but got burned, two thin splashes just above my wrist. Sam pressed sea salt

on the burn while I held my breath, sighing through the pain. He tried to smile for me. “At least it’ll be a sick temporary tattoo, eh?” And he laughed.

Why does my mind still hold so much space for someone who *left* me?

Still, I push my chair back from the table, wide-eyed and staring, willing him to turn around.

And then he does.

And it is not him.

Justin watches me the entire time, casting uneasy glances over his shoulder to get a better look at whatever it is I’m seeing. He frowns, confused. “Are you good . . . ?”

“Yeah,” I answer, my voice suddenly small.

“You know that guy?”

“N-no. I thought I did, but no.”

Justin and I stare at each other: him, unsure of what to say next, and me, breathing heavily through this weird twist of shame and guilt and resentment. All resentment. Of course that isn’t Sam. How could I think it was? How could I, when he probably looks so different now? He probably doesn’t have the locs in. Or maybe he does. Our parents always hated them, so if he’s smart, he would’ve shaved them off. Or maybe he kept them because he can do whatever he wants now. If he’s even alive. And if he’s still around, why not call? Why not tell me what he’s done to his hair? Why not talk to me about his aesthetic choices while I gripe about . . . about

how hard I've had to work to fill the void he left in our family? How I've had to study, never get anything below an 80 because I am afraid of disappointing the parents he abandoned. Disappointing the *family* he abandoned. Like me. I am the family. Me.

I hate him.

Mom and Dad won't even speak his name, and for a long time, I was curious as to what must've happened, but I don't even care anymore. If someone can just walk out and leave their family like this, then they don't deserve my curiosity. He doesn't deserve anything.

I fucking hate him.

But then, but then I remember him coming into my room that day before he left, smiling at me. Who's to say I'm not making up his face, his voice, in my memory? I can't even hear the way he pronounces my name anymore: Ada. A-da. In my head, everything is beginning to just sound like Sophie.