

She opens the invitation on a Tuesday; the expensive cardstock slips between her thin grasp at the sight of the scripted words printed in sharp black ink: “*The Future Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence cordially invite you...*”

Just how long ago was it that she imagined herself with the same future last name, sending these same invitations to their shared friends? Not once did Marissa ever think she’d be the recipient of Tyler’s wedding invitation— at least, not one where it wasn’t her name printed beside his.

She stares at the stamp floating in the upper right corner of the envelope, wondering if it was he who stuck it there; if his calloused fingers hesitated over its ridges while silently thinking of the curve in her spine he’d always loved to trace. She allows herself to picture the way his eyebrows crease in concentration as he stares at the M in her name— that it hurts him just as much as it hurts her to see ‘Ms. Marissa Allen and Guest’.

She’d much rather think of this than the alternative— that he pays no attention to her envelope at all, that hers is just another name etched on a stone while passing through an empty cemetery. Because, in reality, that is what this is. Their love, buried beneath broken bones, long abandoned by nights with nameless strangers. They may share the storylines of the same memories – the memories they think of while standing in line at the grocery store, smiling faintly to themselves as the dust settles between the moments— but future meetings will be succinct and worthless; no space for another sentence to be written or remembered.

Perhaps, Marissa ponders as she continues to stare at the invitation, Tyler has already learned to forget about the time-zone they’d created; a space where the days were numberless, and the minutes were measured in secret touches. But to erase time is as impossible as it is to pretend not to feel anything at all. She is envious then, of how seemingly easy it must have been for Tyler to move forward, when she herself has been trapped inside a ticking clock.

She spends the next two months within a raging war, debating whether she should attend the wedding. There is no right answer. Is there ever? The battlefield is littered with mines: would he even notice? Better yet, would he even care?

Marissa dodges each explosive as she slips into the finest red dress found on the Macy’s clearance rack. She wears extra weight on her thighs now than when she was in college, but she feels good. The mirror is kinder than usual, as if it senses her return of teenage insecurity. Soon though, the sheetrock crumples around her smile— years of cranberry paint cracking— freeing the sadness from its concealment.

The church is cold and colorful; rainbow stained glass drawing glimmering shadows along the floor. The Bride wanted a winter wedding, but there is no snow on the ground— only bare limbs of trees swaying in the gust of February wind. Marissa tightens her black shawl around her shoulders, briefly regretting her decision to wear such a thin dress.

She recognizes Tyler’s mom, Theresa, in the front pew, amiably greeting the guests with her gap-toothed grin. Marissa sometimes wishes she took Theresa’s offer to continue their Thursday afternoon tea tradition— but it was too weird. She could not bare the thought of sitting in the Lawrence’s kitchen— a time capsule of the eighties— sipping an Earl Grey while Theresa

tells stories of Tyler's childhood as if he was no longer living. But she misses the woman she once considered a second mother; she misses the way Theresa calls everyone 'love' and 'dear', the way she'd always have Marissa's favorite flavored muffins in the house, and how her dark eyebrows furrowed together to show how deeply she was listening— the same mannerism inherited by her son.

A needle pricks a piece of her heart as she thinks of Theresa Lawrence and Tyler's soon-to-be-wife. Marissa's mind conjures the taunting image of the two women trading laughs over tea and freshly baked bread. Or, maybe they created their own unique rituals like a Sunday morning brunch or a Wednesday-night matinee. Marissa wonders if, after the wedding, the bride will start to call Theresa 'mom', and if Theresa will brag to the neighbors that Tyler's wife has an Ivy League degree.

The thoughts pelt Marissa's chest with bullets, nearly penetrating the metal armor she cloaked herself with in preparation for today. She distracts herself by scanning the other faces in the church. There's a low buzz of chatter, but she's too far from anyone to decipher any meaning. A young blonde brushes past her, and Marissa almost gasps. She recognizes the girl as Tyler's cousin, Jamie, whom she last saw at her Sweet-Sixteen, making her at least twenty-one now.

It's strange how we can mark the passage of time by measuring the growth of others. Marissa makes a mental note of this idea, planning to later turn it into a blog post no one will read. She watches Jamie walk down the aisle to stand with Theresa's sister, Mary— another face she hadn't seen in years.

Marissa feels the loss of Tyler's father, who had died before they dated, but knew based on the stories he'd shared of him, how close they were. She also knew, first hand, how such a happy occasion can be shifted by the absence of a single person. Lately, it seemed like most of Marissa's life was spent thinking and wondering more than actually living. Everything is determined by choices: the ones she had already made, the ones she did not make, and the ones that she will. The butterfly effect, Marissa thinks it is called— where one minor decision can change the course of a single life forever.

Was it one big choice, or a series of small choices that led Marissa to this moment? Could she have been the one in the white dress had she never left North Carolina? Was it not her decision, but Tyler's, to try long distance? If she took a different train. If he followed her. If she didn't push him away. If he stayed.

If. If. If.

She wants to trace every single path like a series of veins, and find where they all start. She wants to find the same door she sealed shut and pry it open, but there are too many handles and not enough keys. The past is gone and the choices were all the same answers in disguise.

Marissa sees Tyler's older brother and best man, Erick, standing at the end of the altar. He had always looked like he was about to laugh, which, Marissa notices, hadn't changed at all. Erick stands beside Tyler with a mischievous tilted smirk, rubbing his palms together and charging the air with anticipation. Marissa feels it begin to bubble beneath her stomach but

attempts to quell the increasing anxiety with a deep inhalation. She doesn't know why she's nervous and she doesn't know why she's here.

It is when her eyes finally fall on Tyler, the one person she'd been avoiding, that she remembers. She remembers why she couldn't throw away the invitation, why she slipped on the cheap red dress, why she walked through the church doors in too-high and too-tight heels: to see if Tyler Lawrence is happy and to pretend that she, too, can feel happy for him.

And he does look happy. Dressed in a black suit and starch white bowtie, which is slightly lopsided, Tyler is smiling in the same language she'd learned when they were eighteen. Marissa memorized the taste and the shape of those lips long before she knew about life itself. She knew how his left dimple would sometimes hide, and how she could coax it back onto his cheek.

His dimples aren't hiding today, but are on full display as he shifts his weight between his legs. A sign of his own anticipation. Marissa fails to remember the last time she saw him, but he looks older now— broader shoulders and shorter, neater hair. His face is clean shaven, which makes her needlessly happy. She hated when he'd try to grow a beard, always teasing him for how he looked like an unkempt lumberjack.

There's a second when she thinks Tyler sees her, and she wonders what she looks like from his perspective; if he can detect the green glow of grief reflecting from her eyes, or if he can see how the shape of her cheeks has changed with age. She wonders if he would notice how her hair is longer, or if his fingers would stretch in remembrance of running through the honey brown strands.

Marissa tries to smile, to tell him she is happy for him, to congratulate him— but he isn't looking at her after all. The church doors open, and the bells begin to ring. A woman in a white dress floats down the aisle and Marissa's vision begins to blur.

The ceremony is fast and is as magical as such an occasion tends to be. There is no grand interruption or declaration; just a couple who'd found love, making promises of forever— and a young woman mending a broken heart, all within the same four walls, sharing the same moment, but viewing it with a different lens.

It's a conglomeration of choices; questions and answers, moments and mistakes, decisions made and stories with absences of endings. Each choice made, or not made, leads them all to this day that they cannot undo. Not in this life, anyway.