

“Sidney Allen”

No tears fell, but a hole seemed to slowly grow in circumference in the pit of her stomach. It was as if all the memories and thoughts of the future without him morphed into tiny creatures jabbing shovels into her insides carving out a bottomless pit. She felt each painful jab as the nostalgia of eighteen years flooded her heart and mind. Next to her stood a statue in black in the form of her mother, Olivia. Sidney could hear the soft sniffles and the sound of agitated fabric as her mother moved her arm up to her face to wipe away the steady stream of tears. She did not have the power to extend a consoling hand to her grieving mother nor offer comforting mumbles to her younger brother, James, also standing over her father’s grave dumbstruck and numb. Her personal grief consumed her as her father, Lord Allen, had been the head of the family, her steady stoic father, her idol.

It was 1974, and Sidney had just turned eighteen. At her all-girl’s private school in Oxfordshire, two hours west of London, Sidney found fleeting comfort for her father’s death in her studies and social life. Her grades were always exemplary, and this, along with her wit and charm, seated her in the good graces of her professors. Likewise, her peers looked to her as a fashion and personality exemplar. Her blond tresses fell just right to frame her high cheekbones and naturally pouty lips. Her tall, thin frame effortlessly swayed like she was modeling her traditional school-girl uniform each time she stepped. A flock followed her in hopes that by just being near her they would absorb a fleck of her intelligence and disposition.

In the days and months that passed, Sidney found herself wanting. She looked towards the comfort of her mother but discovered that to cope with her own loss, her mother was now devoting all of her time to her friends and entertaining the advances of a tennis pro named Stephan. Sidney was on her own to combat the tiny creatures inside her still fast at work carving her insides with added fury. The created void was not simply a product of her father’s death but of more. She needed to rebuild, to begin anew. Her heart, soul, and mind lusted for more.

One day on a school field trip to London, Sidney and her best friend, Gwen, deviated from the group during their lunch break to stroll along the River Thames. What started as a low hum suddenly grew into a loud

beat and interrupted their gossip. They peered up to witness a floating punk rock concert. Jumping around on a make-shift stage were two girls and a guy. The mo-hawk clad girls screamed into the microphones as the lead guitarist angrily shredded shrill notes with lightning quick fingers. Grins, free-spirited movements, and the carefree nature of the rockers on the barge became contagious. Sidney and Gwen felt smiles jump on their faces, felt rhythm spring into their bodies, felt freedom dance into their minds. They looked at one another with knowing eyes.

“They look reckless,” said Gwen.

“I know. I like that,” replied Sidney.

On the train ride back to school that day, Sidney and Gwen excitedly discussed the punk rockers. Sidney admired how the girls’ tight jeans hugged their bodies almost like a second skin, how their mo-hawks were like crowns projecting stature and identity, and how their sweat pooled on their necklines and underarms showing passion, not filth. The slamming into one another, no matter how rough it seemed, was genuine, purposeful, and appealing. Sidney’s soul seemed personified in the screaming, passionate music, and the nonconformity of the daytime concert attracted the young school girls. This lifestyle was enticing, and so Gwen and Sidney planned to meet at the train station in two days time to journey to London to learn more.

That evening Sidney mustered the courage to ask for her mother’s permission to venture to London. Her heart beat uncontrollably, her body shivered, and her legs felt weak, but none of this anxiety could be heard in her voice.

“Mom,” Sidney said calmly. “Can I talk to you about something important?”

“Sure, honey. What is it?” Olivia asked wiping the sweat from her brow. She had just finished her tennis lesson with Stephan and was twirling her racket in her right hand as she listened.

“Today on my school field trip, I saw something truly inspiring. Gwen and I were both awe-struck, and we feel the need to explore this further. I am a responsible eighteen year old and would like to ask for your permission to travel to London with Gwen. Ever since father died, I have felt an emptiness, and this is the first time I have felt motivated. Please let me take this journey. I would like your blessing,” Sidney said.

Suddenly, the racket left Olivia's hand and sailed towards the wall. Her ears burned crimson as she shouted, "There is no way in hell you are going to London with Gwen. Out of the question. NO! End of story." With that, she stormed out leaving her racket in shambles against the far wall.

Sidney remained standing stoic in the dining room of the Allen family estate. In fact, she remained standing in the same spot clear through the night.

The next morning, Olivia, shocked and still angry, found her daughter steadfastly positioned in the dining room. She noticed a red tint seeping into the inner corners of the whites of Sidney's eyes but no falter in her posture or disposition.

Sidney asked calmly, "Mother, may I please have your blessing to journey to London?"

Olivia replied, "No!" and strode into the kitchen where she slammed pans and clanked dishes during her breakfast preparation. She mumbled curses under her breath and furrowed her brow while she ate and glared at the stoic Sidney.

At lunchtime, Sidney was still standing in the same spot requesting her mother's permission. Olivia and Stephan dined and discussed the matter aloud cursing the young teenager and her whimsical ideas. However, Olivia could not help but notice Sidney's eyes. The redness had receded and had been replaced with a tangible persistence. Sidney felt the tiny creatures inside her body had momentarily slowed the progress on the void consuming her.

Finally, at 10pm, Olivia wrapped herself in her favorite purple fuzzy robe and slipped on her house shoes. She walked defeated into the dining room. With downtrodden eyes, she pointed to the door and said, "If this is what you want, then go. I can't stop you and don't want to deal with you anymore. Go. You have my blessing." Then she turned, shuffled back to her bedroom, climbed into her bed, and wept feeling the emptiness she so desperately wanted to avoid.

The next morning Sidney and Gwen, dressed with the dignity of their privileged upbringing and lugging suitcases, boarded the train for London. Upon arrival, they immediately sought a pawnbroker in SoHo. The two teenagers sauntered into the pawnbroker wearing posh blouses, designer skirts, name-brand high heels, and

carrying couture suitcases and strutted out wearing skinny jeans, high-top Dr. Marten boots, second-hand leather jackets, and carrying knapsacks with a spare black tank top and an extra pair of lacy panties. Sidney suddenly felt a new sensation – the cool breeze on either side of her skull – for Gwen and she had shaved the sides of their heads and spiked the remaining hair into fierce mo-hawks. They looked at one another, grinned, and jumped slamming into one another’s shoulder.

As the two rounded the corner on their way into town, their excited chatter was interrupted. Up ahead were three pairs of stumbling boots and voices loud with slurred chatter and laughter. Sidney and Gwen recognized the two girls and guy immediately and walked confidently towards them as if meeting up with long lost friends.

“Hi, my name is Sidney and this is my friend, Gwen. We saw your concert the other day on the barge from the shoreline and loved it. You guys rocked,” Sidney said.

“Hey, thanks, man. I’m Johnny and these are my two leading ladies, Siouxsie and Nance,” said the lead guitarist as he inched clumsily closer to Sidney. The girls raised their beers high, smiled, and took long swigs. Johnny’s eyes hugged the curves of Sidney’s body as he extended his beer to her. “We’re on our way to meet some friends of ours. You two look like you’d fit right in with our group. Want to join us?”

“We’d love to,” replied Sidney just before taking the beer, satisfying herself with a long gulp, and offering it to Gwen. Johnny swung his right arm over Sidney’s shoulders, and Siouxsie and Nance hooked elbows on either side of Gwen. Sidney and Gwen had officially been welcomed into the punk rock scene.

Weeks and months passed, and Sidney and Gwen found themselves swallowed whole by their new lifestyle. Sidney’s feminine, idealized look had been replaced by a hardened, vapid appearance, and her days found her depressed and combating hangovers as she begged on the streets for food and party money. At night, however, she was alive. Sweaty and drunk, she was always at the center of mosh pits bouncing and fighting against the other punk rock groupies. She loved losing herself in the frantic pounding of body against body; the human contact and pulsation of loud music fueled her. Then, the cycle would repeat the next day.

Finally, one morning while sitting head in hands on the street corner, Sidney could no longer ignore the intense jabbing in her insides. The void continued to expand despite the temporary nightly fulfillment. She poked Gwen in the side to focus her glassy stare and said, "I've been thinking. The destruction, tight clothes, and drinking is just a front, an image to uphold. It seems like everyone is just chasing a high."

Gwen wiped her nose with the cuff of her leather jacket and replied, "What are you talking about? You love this. I love this. Think of how much fun you're having." She then pulled her jacket up to cover her head as the rain began to fall. Sidney rose to her feet and moved a few store fronts down to shelter herself under an awning. The sound of the rain on the metal pierced her mind jumbling her thoughts.

That evening, despite the downpour, Sidney and Gwen attended the Iggy Pop concert. In honor of the punk rock God, the two girls moshed harder than ever, drank more than ever, and screamed louder than ever. During her favorite song, Sidney was lifted onto the hands of the crowd. She could feel the palms and fingers of strangers transporting her thin frame feet first towards the stage. She relaxed her body and gave into the movement. Ironically, amongst such an anti-consumerist, anti-capitalist group, she felt like a product on a conveyor belt being moved towards its final processing stage. Once at the stage, Iggy grabbed her hand pulling her towards him. They shared the microphone and screamed the remainder of the song in unison. During the shouts and frantic clapping after the song's end, Iggy escorted Sidney backstage where she was invited to stay, party, and attend the after-party with the band at the Lancaster Gate Hotel. She accepted and Gwen followed suit.

In the morning, Sidney awoke to the smell of smoke and the sound of rain pounding on the window. She removed the empty beer bottle piercing her side and rolled over to notice naked bodies, empty pizza boxes, and clothes strewn over the tv, nightstand, and floor. After blowing the smoke from his long drag, Sid Vicious said, "Good morning, sunshine."

Sidney rubbed her eyes to ease her pounding head and to jolt her blurred memory of the previous night's events. Sid Vicious, noticing her pain, offered her the beer in his hand with a smile. She said, "I'm out of here" and began scouring the room for her clothes.

“No, wait,” Sid Vicious said. “You’re a great bird. Why do you have to run off? Let’s party.”

Sidney ignored him and hurriedly stepped into her clothes. She gathered her boots into her hand and ran to the elevator. She repeatedly pushed the down button willing it to ascend faster to whisk her away from this evil place.

Gwen ran to Sidney wearing only her black tank top and lacy pink panties. Surprised, she asked, “Where are you going?”

“This isn’t for me anymore. I’m going to find something new. You should stay. You seem to like this lifestyle. I have to go find me.” The ding of the elevator sounded and Sidney boarded, alone.

The rain was pouring, but with hands tucked tightly into her jean pockets, Sidney strolled down to the banks of the River Thames. Her mo-hawk wilted in the moisture, and her eyes were downcast in search of the receding shoreline. Kicking rocks every few steps, Sidney reflected on the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. The tiny creatures were still at work chipping away and had been doing so consistently since her father’s funeral. She felt so desperately alone.

Without realizing it, the rain had ceased as Sidney had slowly made her way down to Chelsea. She quit the shoreline and went in search of a warm cup of tea. As she approached a local café, she noticed a middle-aged man sitting alone at an outdoor table. His crisp gray suit was tailored to perfection and his thick, brown hair had recently been styled and cut. He had a gentle smile in his eyes and looked at Sidney as she approached with the interest a young boy has with a lost puppy. Sidney smiled out of the corner of her mouth and entered the café to order a cup of tea and a pastry.

Moments later, she exited with her bounty in search of an open seat. The comely, suited man looked above the edges of his magazine to see if any seats were available, and when he saw there were none, he slowly closed the pages, caught Sidney’s eyes, and gestured to the open seat across from him.

“Thank you for your kindness, sir. I will not disturb you,” said Sidney as she placed her coffee mug and sandwich on the table and slowly pulled out the metal chair so as to not make a disturbance.

“Don’t be silly. I’d love some company. My name is Cameron. I’d be pleased to have you join me.”

Sidney peered into his charming eyes as she lowered herself into her seat. “Nice to meet you, Cameron. I’m Sidney.” She felt a smile overtake her face.

Three hours and four cups of tea later, the two were still dining, sharing stories, and exchanging advances. To an observer, the couple looked odd – Sidney with her smudged make-up and filthy concert clothes and Cameron with his professional attire and tanned complexion. However, a longer look would reveal that subtle, soft touches and longing gazes dominated the meeting. There was a genuine spark between the two.

Finally, Cameron said, “Sidney, it has been wonderful spending the morning with you, but I do have to get back to work believe it or not. I’d love it if you came by my shop. It’s called Jigsaw, and it’s right around the corner within walking distance. We sell couture women’s clothing. Would you be interested in coming by to see me later this afternoon, say around 3?”

“I’d love to,” she replied coyly.

“Great. See you this afternoon,” Cameron said as he pushed in his chair. Sidney watched him depart and then like a giddy school girl opened his magazine and buried her face in the glossy pages giggling.

Before leaving the café, Sidney freshened up in the bathroom and decided to window shop to pass the time before seeing Cameron again. She felt a sense of excitement deep within her. It was as if the tiny creatures were on break and were dancing with sparklers instead of jabbing her painfully and methodically. Perhaps this happenstance meeting would lead to something, something Sidney was anxious to discover.

Eventually, Sidney sauntered into Jigsaw a pre-planned twenty minutes after the agreed time. She perused the racks lining the front of the store fingering the silks and sliding the heads of the hangers back on the racks. She looked without seeing for all she truly wanted was Cameron.

While petting the sleeve of a peach chiffon blouse, she spotted him standing in front of a set of mirrors next to a model. She witnessed him squat down and delicately measure the seam from her ankle to her inner thigh. He then effortlessly glided his hands around her waist to turn her to face him so he could measure the curve of her hips. Slowly, he rose and lifted her arms above her head instructing her to “keep them there” while he almost hugged her to meet his hands behind her back. Sidney watched him gently glide the tape measure from

one hand to the other to measure her slim waistline. Then he moved up to her bust where he focused his gaze on the delicate skin between her breasts as he whispered measurements. Finally, he slid his hands up her arms and grabbed her wrists guiding them to fall naturally back at her side. He placed his fingertips on the dimple in her chin and turned her head slowly to the side to gently glide the tape measure around her delicate neck.

“Can I help you find something?” a salesclerk asked.

“Yes. Cameron. But I can find him myself,” Sidney replied over her shoulder as she walked towards Cameron.

“Ah, Sidney. You came,” Cameron said turning towards her approach.

Sidney carefully placed her left hand on his lapel and lifted onto her tippy toes to whisper in his ear. She placed her left cheek to his and let her delicate voice dance in his ear. Upon return to her flat feet, Cameron twirled the pencil in his right hand, grabbed Sidney’s hand with his left, and placed the pencil in the coffee mug on the register on their way out the door. The pencil circled in the mug until coming to a final resting position.

Just as the sun was setting, Sidney awoke to the tickle of Cameron’s kisses on her bare shoulder. She inhaled deeply, uncurled her legs, and turned to face him. Cameron tucked the thin blond wisps of hair covering her cheek behind her ear and returned her smile. They laid underneath the white down duvet cover touching and gazing as the orangey pinks from the sunset peeked in through the windows of Cameron’s minimalist apartment.

“Who are you?” Cameron said at last grinning.

Sidney, amused, said, “Well, there are three things about me that will tell you all you need to know – I can think, I can wait, and I can go without.”

“All admirable qualities. Interesting,” Cameron said with thought behind his eyes. “I have someone that I’d like for you to meet but first....” With that, he rolled over on top of Sidney and began kissing the sensitive skin beneath her jaw.

The next morning Sidney awoke to the aroma of brewed coffee and the sizzling sound of bacon. She slipped on the white terry cloth robe strewn across the foot of the bed and attempted to tame her blond tresses before shuffling into the kitchen to find Cameron.

“Good morning. Ready for breakfast?” Cameron said pointing to the place setting awaiting her arrival at the kitchen counter. She carefully slid out the bar stool noticing the tidy, tasteful décor and feeling as if her touch might muddy the stark white, sterile environment.

“Thank you,” Sidney said as she added milk and sugar to her coffee.

“You know? I was thinking about those three qualities you told me about last night – how you can think, you can wait, and you can go without,” Cameron said excitedly giving away that he had been awaiting this conversation all morning. “I think you can make a good life for yourself, and I have someone that I’d like for you to meet.” With that statement, he placed a three egg omelet topped with avocado slices and bacon bits on the placemat in front of her.

“Wow. Thank you. For the breakfast and for the opportunity,” said Sidney excited about what was to come. The two then spent all morning together in the apartment but were eventually forced to clean up for the meeting Cameron had arranged for later that afternoon.

It was 3 o’clock and Sidney stepped off the elevator to be met with two large glass double doors etched with the name Kahn Fashion. She smoothed her hands over the front of her leather jacket and tucked her left hand into the front pocket of her skinny jeans. Taking a deep breath, she opened the heavy glass door and walked confidently up to the oversized, mahogany receptionist desk.

“My name is Sidney Allen. Cameron Bryan set up an appointment for me,” Sidney said to the top of the red headed receptionist.

“Take a seat,” she demanded without glancing up.

High heels, pencil skirts, and lengthy black eyelashes met Sidney’s gaze as she plodded her Dr. Martens to the uncomfortably low and stiff waiting area couch. She sat admiring the dance of beautiful men and women gracefully gliding from cubicle to conference room carrying glossy photos, typed copy, and clothing sketches. Pieces from the newest line hung on clothing racks and waltzed past. Sidney felt like a wallflower, an outcast, a reject.

Just as she rose to leave, red head summoned her to follow. Sidney, in fear of being impolite and disappointing Cameron, followed and found herself facing the back of a seated woman with a chestnut brown bob haircut.

Red head nervously announced, “Mrs. Kahn, this is Sidney Allen, Cameron Bryan’s friend,” and then swiftly exited.

Camille Kahn, the queen of British fashion, finished reading the latest fashion news and swiveled her chair around to face Sidney. Kahn stared at young Sidney expressionless. Finally, she said, “Who are you? What do you want?”

“Cameron sent me to work for you,” Sidney replied meeting and maintaining Kahn’s stare.

Just before what Sidney assumed would be a mocking dismissal, Kahn’s phone rang loudly. Kahn answered and disgustedly threw down the papers in her hand at some remark from the caller, and Sidney bent to gather them. On top was an unfinished sketch of a model with a simple blouse but no bottom. Kahn had swiveled back around in her chair and was yelling and gesturing wildly at the caller, so Sidney grabbed a pencil and began sketching. She added embellishments to the blouse and created a wide-legged flared trouser, a welcomed article opposite to her second skin pants from the past few months. Sidney sketched with ease making the flat drawing spring to life with a fashionable, flattering outfit. Just as she was adding a strappy, platform shoe to the right foot of the drawing, Sidney felt the silence. Kahn was standing over her, and when she noticed Sidney had stopped drawing, she snatched the piece of paper and turned on her heel. On her way out the door, she held up the drawing and yelled, “Peter, a new piece for the collection. Sidney, you’re hired.”

Over the next 11 months, Sidney established herself at Kahn Fashion and in the good graces of Camille Kahn herself. She transformed the production of the Kahn clothing line by offering her fresh perspective and helped streamline the business thanks to her accounting expertise. She even calmly dealt with the aloof, erratic, and demanding “Nuclear Kahn,” a feat many staff members never mastered. Sidney was able to climb the company ladder quickly ascending from assistant to designer.

After her first fashion show at the semi-annual New York Fashion Week, Kahn escorted Sidney onto the catwalk following the last model donning her designer clothing line. Kahn and Sidney paused at the end of the runway, and Kahn pulled her trademark black sunglasses atop her head like a tiara, raised both hands to her left at shoulder height, and prompted the audience to applaud with her for Sidney, her fashion prodigy. Sidney curtsied in ecstatic appreciation as cameras captured the moment to print alongside the newspaper headline “Newest Fashion Icon: Sidney Allen.”

Sidney became a household name. She traveled to Milan, Paris, Rome, and New York showcasing her production line in the world’s top fashion markets and expecting to be treated like the world’s top fashion designer. She only stayed in five star hotels, only dined in five star restaurants, and only dared to be seen with a-list celebrities. Sidney Allen was the new ‘it’ girl in the couture fashion industry.

Sidney worked hard and worked her assistants harder. Finally, after several weeks of feeling nauseas, she allowed her assistant to squeeze in a doctor’s appointment between her travels and media appearances. Sidney had been putting it off claiming fatigue and poor nutrition, but she couldn’t keep anything down. This was hindering her work, so she acquiesced hoping to be prescribed a quick fix.

Sidney heard the rapping on the door and said, “Come in” as she sat looking through head-shots for her next fashion show.

“Hi, Sidney Allen? My name is Dr. Feldman,” the ponytailed white coat said. She extended her hand to Sidney, but Sidney remained preoccupied with the shuffling of glossy photos.

“Just prescribe me something for nausea and fatigue. I don’t have a lot of time,” Sidney said with a curt glance.

“Yes, I understand. I don’t have a lot of time either with all the patients I need to help, so here is your prescription to control the morning sickness. Be sure to make an appointment on your way out for a month from now. That’s when you’ll be able to hear the heartbeat for the first time,” Dr. Feldman said as she signed and handed Sidney her Compazine prescription.

The photos collapsed in Sidney’s lap and spilled onto the floor. “What? Morning sickness? Heartbeat?”

“Yes, Ms. Allen. You’re pregnant. Your urine sample tested positive. Congratulations,” Dr. Feldman said as she closed the examination room door.

Sidney sat in silence, her mind racing with thoughts and questions. What would she tell Kahn? Could she still travel? What would her clients think? How would she tell the media? Last of all, how would she tell Cameron?

Thirty-four weeks later, Sidney and Cameron welcomed a 6 lb, 9 oz baby girl. Cameron was overjoyed and loved that she resembled Sidney so closely. Sidney loved her baby girl but was obsessively concerned about losing her fashion status she had worked so hard to establish. In fact, she had worked tirelessly during the whole pregnancy and had to be pried away from a conference call by her assistant when her contractions became unbearable.

Sidney felt she could not afford to take her full six week maternity leave, so four weeks after having the baby, Sidney found herself on a plane to Milan leaving Cameron to fend for himself as Mr. Mom. At first, she would call home at every opportunity when she was away on business, but those phone calls lessened. At first, she would sketch and make business calls from home, but those hours at home lessened. At first, she would skip dinner parties and vacation opportunities, but those skips lessened. Finally, Sidney left Cameron and her daughter altogether.

The newly single, fashionable Sidney surrounded herself with the wealthy, posh crowd. She would dress in her couture attire, have a make-up artist paint a smoky eye, and have her stylist curl her blond tresses before attending the discos every night of the week partying from 6pm to 7am. There, she would lose herself in the music, the free flowing alcohol, and the available drugs. Then she would sleep all the next day in the comfort of the penthouse suite of whatever hotel in whatever city. The cycle would then repeat the next day.

One afternoon, Sidney awoke alone in her dark hotel room to the painstaking jabs in her insides. The tiny creatures had continually been at work since her father’s death but had just recently seemed to trade their shovels for pitchforks. The jabs made her physically wince, and so she curled up like a ball, pulled the covers over her head, and hummed a lullaby to silence her pain.

That evening was Camille Kahn's birthday bash on her personal yacht near Henley on the Thames. All the big names in the fashion and film industry were in attendance. Sidney dressed in a purple Halston halter dress that was draped perfectly for her figure and dancing. She schmoozed with all the right people, said all the right things, and partied all night long. Everyone regarded her highly and begged for the chance to be near her. However, the void had consumed Sidney again.

She found herself standing alone with an empty bottle of wine on the front of Kahn's yacht early the next morning. The jabs in her insides were unbearable as she thought about her fashion lifestyle. She thought about how the clothes, the gossip, and the money were all just a front, an image to uphold. These material items and fake friendships served as a band-aid for her pain but did not and could not cure the infection. Sidney felt alone, and staring into the water, she saw the reflection of her daughter in the moonlight. No tears fell, but the pitchforks jabbed tirelessly and eventually tossed her overboard.

In her dream, Sidney felt suffocated. People around her rushed by and made eye contact with the disheveled, desperate Sidney, but no one paused to help. She tried calling out, but her voice was silenced by her uncontrollable shivering. A dark cloud seemed to be stationed permanently over her weeping its contents and distorting her vision. Occasionally, a blur would walk up to her as she crouched grasping her arms and legs tightly. The perplexed person would poke Sidney's side as if to check if she was alive, shrug his shoulders, and then walk away. She felt cold, invisible, alone.

The poking continued in this cold, wet, suffocating environment but one blurry image did not recede. A muffled lady's voice sounded in her subconscious and slowly became more clear. Finally, the poking and voice manifested themselves as Sidney came to on the shore of the River Thames.

She opened her eyes halfway and felt the rocks that had kept her afloat and alive bruising her back and sides. Her Halston dress had wrapped around her waist, and her right foot was the only one to hold onto its shoe. Sidney suddenly lifted herself onto her right side and vomited. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she looked up to find the blurry image from her dream still standing over her.

"Are you alright?" the middle-aged woman asked.

Sidney tried to lift herself off the bed of rocks, but her muscles and will surrendered causing her to slip. The woman grabbed her arm before she slid completely underwater and bent to help support her weight so that she could be assisted to the safety of the shoreline.

“My name is Valerie Dingy, and I run the ferry on the Thames. I’m going to help you to my ferryboat and give you a coat and a warm cup of tea,” she said.

Sidney did not reply and did not fight.

Wrapped in a blue parka and holding a mug of steaming tea, Sidney sat on the ferryboat next to Valerie in reflective silence. The hum of the boat, the cool breeze, and the smell of the water encapsulated her senses and drowned out the chaos of reality. The tiny creatures worked tirelessly as usual, but she felt thankful for their presence for it meant that she was still alive. With a blank stare, Sidney sat riding and gripping the steel mug all day.

As the sun was setting, Valerie asked her passenger, “Do you have a place to stay?”

Sidney shook her head and met the gaze of Valerie for the first time.

“You can stay with me if you’d like. I live just up the way,” she said pointing to a wooden shed just up the shoreline from where she docked her ferryboat.

“Thank you,” Sidney mumbled. Her voice felt foreign, but those words were the only ones she could muster.

The two ladies clad in matching blue parkas strode up the dirt path to Valerie’s humble shed. Inside, Sidney noticed the cramped but homely feel. It was a one-room shed, but it felt more inviting than any hotel room ever had.

Valerie pointed to a second cot and said, “This one’s yours.” She handed Sidney a wool blanket and soft pillow and the two settled in for the night.

Just before closing her eyes, Sidney whispered, “My name is Sidney.”

As the weeks, days, and months passed, Valerie and Sidney became inseparable with one another and with the River Thames. They established a daily routine consisting mostly of ferrying individuals across the

Thames and enjoying their simple existence. Sidney's blue parka, tan work pants, and waterproof boots became her uniform and preferred outfit. Her demeanor relaxed, her talk became simple and reflective, and her appreciation for the river increased. Many ferry riders remarked at how similar in disposition and appearance Valerie and Sidney were, and many routine riders mistook one for the other.

One day while standing at the side of the ferryboat, Sidney looked overboard into the river. She thought about her life involving its presence – the floating punk rock concert, her walk along the shoreline towards Cameron, her attempted drowning due to her bourgeoisie excess, and finally her ease of anxiety, fear, and gluttony. The river had witnessed it all and had helped lull the tiny creatures inside her to sleep with its ebb and flow. She felt calm; she felt secure; she felt peace.

Later that day, the sound of heels clicking on the dock alerted Sidney. She turned her attention towards the clanking to find a younger version of herself. The eighteen year old's swaying hips modeled her couture clothing and swung over her shoulder was her designer handbag. She wore a browbeaten expression and asked Valerie to speak to Sidney.

"Hi, mom. Dad died when he was visiting grandpa in Northern Ireland. A bomb," Chelsea Girl said in a monotone voice.

Sidney stared blankly. Her life with Cameron seemed like it had been something she had read in a romance novel, not something she had actually lived. Chelsea Girl was looking to her mother to fill her void – she was lost without her father despite the couture clothing, expensive education, and upper class lifestyle – but Sidney was at a loss on how to be a mother. She did what society had taught her and wrapped her arms around the stiff girl. She led her up the path to her humble shed, showed her a cot of her own, and offered her a mug of hot tea as she wrapped her in a warm, blue parka.

Chelsea Girl crouched at the foot of her cot hiding behind her steel mug. She sat with furrowed brow watching as Sidney nervously flitted around playing mother. Chelsea Girl couldn't help but notice the change in her mother's appearance. Her father had always shown her pictures of her mother dressed in designer gowns, not a hair out of place, and a red lipstick smile. Now her appearance screamed plain and masculine. She wore a

beanie to settle her hair, oversized manly clothing, and no make-up. She imagined her mother smelling like fresh lavender soap but was slapped with the smell of dead fish instead. Her mother had fallen into disrepair.

One afternoon, Sidney returned to the humble shed to check on Chelsea Girl who refused to accompany her and Valerie on the ferry. As she walked up to the door, she heard glass shattering, stomping footsteps, and grunts. Worried, she quickened her step and burst in through the front door. Chelsea Girl turned quickly and hurled the steel coffee mug at Sidney's chest. Sidney winced in pain and glanced around at the material carnage. Her eyes widened and fury welled up inside of her.

"How dare you," Sidney said.

"Screw you, mom. This place is pure hell. You look like shit, act all high on nature, and suck as a mom. I hate it here," Chelsea Girl spewed and stormed out.

Sidney exhaled and stared at the far wall. Several moments later, she felt a comforting hand appear on her shoulder and squeeze. Sidney's hand reached up to grab it, and they stood in silence. Valerie waited for Sidney to start the conversation.

"I don't know what to do. She's so destructive, rebellious, and sad," Sidney finally muttered with downtrodden eyes.

"Have you tried setting limits or talking sternly with her?" Valerie questioned.

"No. It's hard to mother someone who is more familiar with your picture than with you," she said.

"Just remember – life is more difficult on a child without limits than on a child with limits," Valerie said.

Sidney asked to be left alone and wandered down to the river shoreline. She sat with knees to her chest on a rock jutting out into the water. Skipping rocks she tried to gain the perspective of Chelsea Girl. It took her back to her childhood and feelings of emptiness. She vowed to help Chelsea Girl silence the tiny creatures inside of her like she had finally been able to do.

Walking back to the ferry to tell Valerie of her decision, she saw the backside of Chelsea Girl as she plodded down the dock. "Chelsea Girl – wait!" she yelled.

Chelsea Girl did not stop, did not turn. Instead, Sidney witnessed her right arm ascend into the air and her fingers form into the universal gesture to piss off. Sidney never saw her daughter again.

From that day forth, Valerie and Sidney commenced their routine, peaceful lifestyle. They had become one with the river and often spoke to it as if it were a sentient being. The river was their livelihood, their confidant, their peace.

Eventually, gray hair replaced Sidney's blond tresses and Valerie passed away of old age. Sidney maintained the humble shed and the ferry, and the ferry goers did not notice that there was only one ferrywoman. The riders did not know Sidney's name and just assumed it was the same woman who had always been there. Valerie Dingy and Sidney Allen had morphed into one.

Life, change, death. From the hills to the sea. The river sees everything at once.