

The past sixteen, maybe seventeen years of adolescence build up to this one chunk of six or so months, depending on how much you care. It strikes you across the cheek in the summertime of junior year for real; it's the moment when all clocks of the future turn to you to make the decisions that will "determine the course of your life". Supposedly.

On a micro scale, highschoolers all follow the same course of events one decisive night. They sit down, pull out their laptop, and start googling college websites.

*"Brown brings students together in creative, unexpected ways." "With world-class faculty, groundbreaking research opportunities, and a diverse group of talented students, Harvard is more than just a place to get an education." "Stanford: Preparing students to make meaningful contributions to society as engaged citizens and leaders in a complex world."*

Nobody knows what that means.

At least that's what Luna Fang does on a clear night of July 15th. The excitement of "one year left" had worn off, she had trekked up the cliff for sixteen years and now she looked straight down. And it was everything except dark, that was the scariest part; there were majors and minors, taxes and insurance, love and marriage, and it all stared Luna down with wide wide eyes of hope. Mostly because when you're young and staring at the rest of life, you cannot help but do what everyone tells you to do: get into a good college, make good money, settle down, raise a family. For the longest time, it seems like you can't get to the good money part, or the happiness part, until you've checked the good college box off. That's what's most daunting.

For Luna, this had been a task, a Google Sheet, an empty box, for a long time. Hers was outlined beautifully, pulsing and breathing with hyperlinks, application requirements, deadlines, due dates. Don't believe that though, it was all an excuse of procrastination, a foot dragging behind to avoid a future that could go wrong. Soft music played in the background to try and

distract from the suffocation of choice. She had three beverages prepared on her desk, there were matching coasters under each of course. There was a Peach Vibe Celsius for the caffeine and shallow optimism, there was water for hydration and pee breaks that would act as her reason to back away from the cliff, and there was a McDonalds freezy as an ode to her youth. Maybe it'd even give her the curious and attractive personality colleges love. Maybe that would make up for years of missed plans and naive fun that would've actually given her a personality growing up.

Adorning the wall facing her desk, a Grey's Anatomy poster stared her down with sterile, pure eyes of stability that would bring her future self "happiness". It was her parents' gift, their innocent push towards a sensible choice.

Luna's sensible counterpush was to drown the wall the poster hung on with paint, impressionist strokes of the Starry Night in grayscale instead of the classically vibrant yellow and blue of the original.

She sat down and promptly cradled the computer in her lap before turning away from that wall, now a little too gaudy and eye-catching. She opened a Google folder, made a Doc, and started thinking once she'd looked at the CommonApp straight on. There was a blank spot.

*Intended major:*

First and most obviously- the medical field. It was what her mom and dad had wanted for her since the day she was born; it was probably what most parents wanted for their kids. There's some hefty student debt, but there's financial stability in the long run, and it's a good industry.

She went back to her Google Doc and started writing. There were many questions on the application, and they all surrounded this one choice she would have to make. The intended major. What communities are you involved in, what passions have you pursued, who do you admire, what captivates you?

In this persona, Luna highlights volunteering at hospitals (probably not the 24/7 smell of death), her deeply psychotic yet caring need to save lives, her outdated obsession with Grey's Anatomy (even though she knows all aspiring doctors say this, they all think they're quirky and different), her deep captivation of a stethoscope and not just the technology but the emotional connectivity it provides for overworked night shift doctors dealing with sleep walkers, drunk drivers, and insomniacs alike.

Luna would peer down the fluorescent hospital hallway holding her clipboard. Patient 401. He has wandered into the hallways again. It's as if there is braille he can feel under his feet, he's become so accustomed to the floor plan that he walks around freely. It's been four months of aimless wandering, waiting for a proper diagnosis every day and night.

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This is why I became a doctor. I was brought to this case to help him, and I will. I slowly walk up to Zachary and gently push him towards his room. There are Star Wars curtains and bedsheets, and his mom, Ashley, is slumped over her chair next to his bed. She has a cot in the room but refuses to leave his side in the night. She doesn't know Zachary leaves her side during the evening, but I think she needs the peace of mind. Zach makes his way into the bed, and I exit the room. The floor seems relatively peaceful (although any medical professional will tell you to never say that), so I take a nap in the call room before 7 am rounds.

The blinds do an awful job at shielding the moonlight. But I fall asleep nevertheless, face to face with the most hideous still life painting of a bowl of oranges staring me down. I mean I love a good carrot orange, but everybody knows low-saturation colors are ugly, so why in the world someone would combine muted orange with puke green in the background- I'll never know.

The blinds continue to do a bad job a couple hours later when shielding the morning sun, but at least I don't need an alarm. I leave the room after fixing my hair and walk into Dr. Thompson conducting her check in, his last before I take over. I hover near the door frame for a second before Zach starts seizing. Dr Thompson immediately presses call buttons, she lowers the bed, nurses brush past me and flood the room, nurses usher Ashley out while comforting her, but it doesn't really seem like she needs the comfort- this isn't her first time.

I step out of the room and lean on the wall. I can't do that. Dr Thompson directs nurses and needles left and right as Zach continues seizing. It's been like this for four months. Four months of normal childhood lost, but it's been ten years of hell for this little kid, and now his mom pays thousands of dollars when nothing seems to work. How does anyone act like they can fix him? How does anybody look at Zach when he's watching his Star Wars and ignore the nurses still leaving the room, the needles poking out of him, the ghostly pale of his skin? He sips his juice and laughs at the screen. Ashley hasn't even come back into the room because she's sobbing in the bathroom Room 401 was placed conveniently next to. Everyone knows how torturous diagnosis is. I can't even look at him anymore. There's days when I think letting him run off to Bora Bora and be a kid are all more worth it. At least get the kid out of stupid Utica in stupid upstate New York. Everybody in this god damn building looks him in the eyes every single day and acts like they can save him. They reassure Ashley, *one more week, one more test, and we'll get it. We're almost there.*

I need to get the hell out of this room. I slip out as the nurses continue to defibrillate the kid- "Clear!" I run into the stairwell and up two flights until pushing the heavy metal door open to the morning air. There's a chill that separates the strands of my hair and dehydrates my hands

but probably not enough for more than crossing my arms over my chest. My forearms cover the vibrations and beeping of the pager hanging on my lanyard, and I'm grateful.

Sometimes, when the sun's light isn't great enough, the moon continues to linger in the sky even during the day. It looks nothing like its irradant, daytime counterpart; about half of the rock blends into the blue and there's this transparent quality that tricks the human eye into believing the moon is a piece of paper Scotch-taped to the sky. The craters seem like the weak parts of the paper filament, where the blue sky peeks through from behind and threatens its already rare daytime appearance.

I'm glad it's not the same type of blinding light it is at night.

My phone rings in my coat pocket. It's Laura, the hairdresser.

"Hi Luna, just calling to confirm your appointment tomorrow at 4:30? It's the usual cut I assume?"

"Yes please. I'll see you then, Laura."

I hang up, and the phone almost slips out of my clammy fingers over the balcony railing and down three stories.

I am not to be assumed. I went to Laura for the first time when I moved to Utica to dye my hair brown from the artificial platinum blonde of my highschool years. I'd received the same haircut by the same middle aged woman for the past five years. I'd met up with old highschool friends and answered, "Oh, where's Utica?" (it's in upstate New York, about a 6 hour train ride outside of the Big Apple) for the past five years. Stupid Utica.

My pager continues vibrating. I think Zach is still seizing. Ashley is still in the bathroom bawling her eyes out (with good reason). Dr Thompson is still standing in a corner contemplating

dinner plans. The nurses are still trying to revive him. I'm still outside of it all. I only wish I would've chosen the other life I imagined for myself.

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I scour the museum for different paintings untainted by memories of sickly spilled peach. It's funny watching the museum goers. I've noticed there are almost always more people standing near the blue, sullen, miserable pieces of the artists at their very lowest in life. The people start to thin out in the modern and contemporary art sections of the museum, and it's understandable. It's hard to get much out of an orange circle or an aquamarine square, but it's Brian Biles' orange circle of rage going for three months rent and Nick Wyatt's modern take on Van Gogh's Blue Period. People like Brian Biles and Nick Wyatt make it so much harder for the rest of us. Most of us pour hundreds of dollars and gallons of emotional symbolism and trauma into a piece the 21st century seems to turn their heads around for monochromatic minimalism. I try to validate this profession. But in my head I know I'd argue it isn't worth the hassle, having to rely on rich peoples' interior designers for money or combing through odd job websites to babysit Martha's cat or clear the Weebles' toilets.

I walk home and find the local newspaper on my doorstep.

"Top 15 Up and Coming NYC Artists To Look Out For... #14: Luna Fang'" on the second page of the Villager Express.

It's something.

I unlock my apartment and sit down on the couch with the scroll in my hand.

My parents come over to my "quaint" apartment, and I guess I am happy. It's like clockwork, they come in, comment on a new piece of furniture I found on the streets of the Upper East Side for free, and take a seat for dinner. I splurged on that Chinese place down the

street and plated it all on glassware from my neighbor. I bring up that one piece the family on Billionaires Row commissioned from me when I first got out of the art school I practically begged my parents to attend with a full scholarship. They start to mention how my first and only sale was five years ago, and so I bring out the wine I lucked out on when the winery in Tribeca closed down from bankruptcy. I shuttle them out with a cab and a couple brochures for my new exhibitions in the middle of nowhere, right around who knows what, a couple streets down from that drug dealer who was arrested a year ago. I respect his hustle.

The morning after I stay in until the afternoon sun begs to differ. It's New York City: go dream, go live, or at least go get drunk. So I go out to my favorite lunch spot, maybe the last one left undiscovered by "lifestyle/beauty influencers" who probably make triple my rent being pretty.

Do they genuinely like their sponsorships and followers and subscribers? Is that what keeps them going? Because sometimes I really can't tell if "artistic and creative freedom" is worth it. The Earth is warming, our government won't adjust gun regulations, my best friend's boyfriend's cousin in Tennessee won't be able to get an abortion next month, did I mention the Earth has a perpetual fever?

After lunch, I walk past Kate Hoftstader's Climate Clock. I think of my own work, and I don't think I can be called an artist.

I find my friends, a loose group of similar minded, slightly miserable artists. I can't say exactly what happened after that, but there were flashing lights and we ended back at Jessie's apartment when the moon had reached its peak in the sky. It's the one phenomenal thing about Jessie's shoebox apartment; that one window that seemed to make everything else entirely insignificant. At some point, they'd dug up some old creme developer and hair dye under her

sink. I thought-- hey, who is judging your hair, you're an artist for God's sake. I might as well get a new hairstyle while I'm here.

Woke up three hours later at 4:47 am. Up a staircase. On the balcony. Very high. Windy. Ooo shiny rock in the sky. Sit in the chair. For a long time. I cry. My hair doesn't reflect light anymore. Healthy hair is shiny and soft and reflects light.

I left the apartment with that bright orange bob, a cup of LiquidIV, and two ibuprofen. I'm starting to think it's possible to hate myself more than I hate the color orange.

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Luna did not think she could imagine a world where she lived in Utica. Her hairdresser could predict her haircut without fail. She would save lives, but would she really? The people undiagnosed, the kids whose cancer comes back, the psych patients who relapse the second they get out.

But neither could she imagine a world where she liked orange. A world where she didn't have the money to redye her hair back to something that doesn't hurt her eyes. There's a bright line between freedom and too much freedom. Orange is on the other side.

She summed up her thoughts.

Never in her seventeen years of life had she thought she'd encounter this sort of dilemma. When she'd spent those seventeen years building a foundation of options and choices, something both impressive to a college admissions officer but also favorable and liberating for her future, she was supposed to have an influx of paths to choose.

She stood up from her chair and tripped on her case of paints. She picked it up and threw it across the room. Meredith Grey's eyes follow her around the room like Mona Lisa's. She



opened her bedroom door to the darkness of her living room and promptly went outside. The second door out of her apartment broke some sort of vacuum seal on her psyche.

The darkness was a different type of comfort. Different from the fluorescent titanium forced sympathy of doctors who tell themselves they're happy with "saving lives" and different from the headache of psychedelic, colorful freedom that could afford virtually nothing.

The nighttime air offered her something she needed-- freedom. Momentary freedom, but it was something other than the perennial smothering she'd felt anywhere else at all times, stuck trying to make the most important choice of her life. So even when she couldn't stop the rapid beat of her heart (her crisis), it was okay because there was something in the air that made it okay. She sat down on the wooden bench in front of her apartment complex. She bent her legs and hugged them before leaning her head back.

The moon was in the most uncomfortable, inconvenient places of all nights. It was directly above Luna's platinum head of hair; she had to look directly upwards to attain the comfort of the rock.

It was worth it. The moon shone in 3 different shades: white, gray, and, black. But most would argue white could become gray if Luna squinted hard enough, and gray could become white if she let her mind wander hard enough. If a painter depicted the scene from behind, the color palette would be perfect. It could be a picture of harmony and balance, black and white.

Luna sighed. In this almost perfect picture where everything became only 3 shades of gray, she felt fine again. She felt she could see the next day, even if she couldn't tell you what she was doing.