

Even when Lydia closes her eyes, the stains still creep into her nostrils. Wall stains, bed stains, red stains, brown, white, yellow—they fuel her rage. She hates how the other girls pretend not to see the crusty rainbow arcing across the dank motel room. They laugh together, in blissful denial, as if the angular carpet pattern can hide the humiliations perpetrated by their self-proclaimed benevolent leader, Jesus. But Lydia remembers every single one.

The girls clear a space for their final ritual, pushing furniture aside at odd angles. That's what happens to things in this room Jesus doesn't need anymore. Pushed aside. At odd angles.

As Jesus emerges from the bathroom with a platter of golden snifters, Lydia vows that the rug burn on her temple will be his last stain. Their seven-soul sacrifice is about to go off with a Lydia-shaped hitch. He can't bring his tyranny to Pastora's garden of eternal bliss if he doesn't ascend. Everyone shivers with anticipation—especially Lydia, perched like a spider in plain sight. She plucks a snifter from the tray, locking eyes with Jesus for a tense moment as he studies her face. A lip quiver threatens to give her away, but Jesus continues passing out the drinks, then descends cross-legged into the circle, his middle-aged bones creaking. Chin to the heavens, he lifts his goblet. The girls follow, raising their snifters in unison to the soiled ceiling as they pray, “May the garden open unto us, and death protect our souls.”

He rests the goblet against his lips. Lydia follows with the others, the tarnished gold rim presenting a sweetly putrid scent. Dissonant heartbeats fill the air. They can't go back after this.

Jesus tips his goblet, and the girls toss back their drinks. Lydia pities them and their wide-eyed ecstasy, watching their excitement melt, contort, and froth. It happens both in slow motion and all at once, a time warp Lydia can't grasp. Her pulse races as theirs choke.

“What have you done?” His goblet still full, Jesus uses his cool and collected tone, the tone that always means bruises.