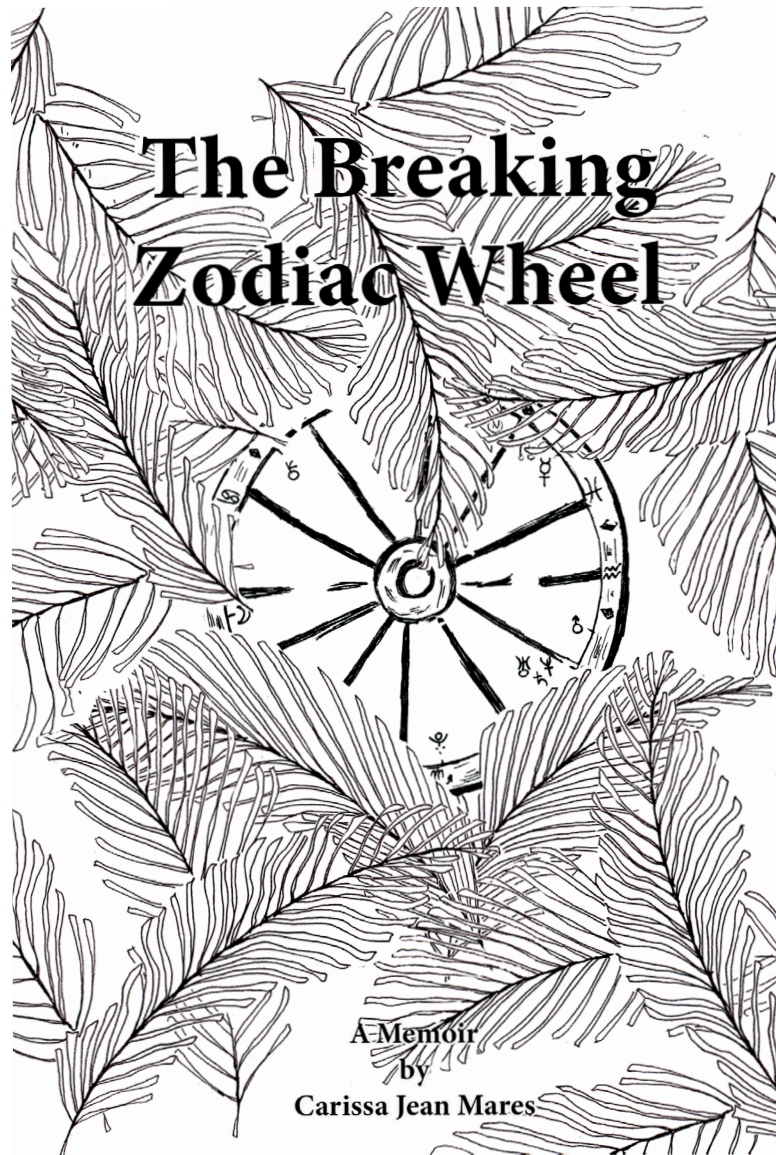




@charmingandferocious



# The Breaking Zodiac Wheel

A Memoir  
by  
Carissa Jean Mares

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*For Nacho*

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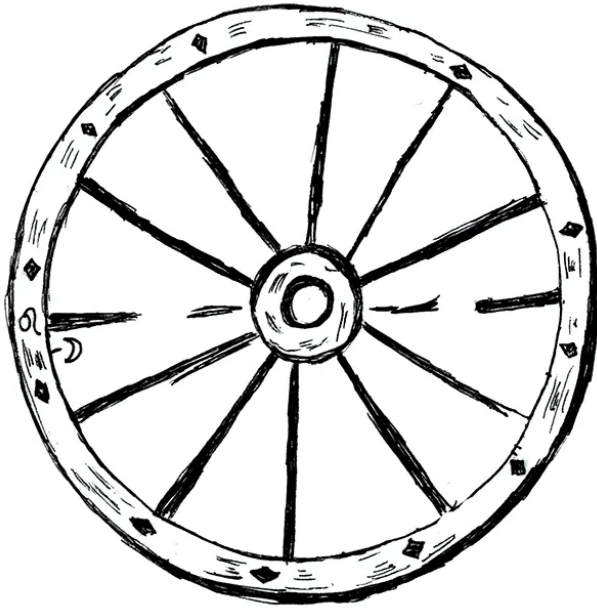
# FOREWARD

I've been referring to these as my silly little memoirs. A classic case of making a joke to ease the sting of vulnerability.

Honestly, I am simply not sure what should go into a foreward, what more you need to know before we begin. If you are a family member or loved one touched by this, thank you for your service in reading and digesting it. If you are someone with a lot of thoughts and opinions on what's discussed here, I kindly ask that you and your therapist sort that out amongst yourselves. If you're Pastor Dave, I hope you choke. If you're The Man I hope you're happy. If you're someone who has helped me get to where I am and are looking for your name, it's in the Acknowledgements.

There's a lot that's discussed in here that can be upsetting. I have a content warning on at least one chapter. Take care while reading and it's absolutely okay if you don't finish this. I love you!

# HOUSE ONE



The First House of Self and Vitality

**Home to:** Your Ascendant and Moon. Emotional needs and desires become the driving force of how you see yourself. This gets complicated as you are born into a family that would rather you didn't have any emotions or needs, or god forbid, emotional needs.

**In the Sign of Leo.** People will tell you this is how you present yourself to the world. They will guess that Leo is your sun sign more than they will accurately assume anything. In many cases this makes you feel as if you are both always on the center stage, and desperately finding ways to avoid it. Being seen is being known, and both are terrifying. You will be told you are a selfish attention hog, but what you really desire the most is to nurture your friends, feed your community, and pep talk anyone looking down.



Hello and welcome.

I have wandered the deserts and looked at my cracked and peeling palms and sighed at the sun. I am finally ready to start.



The kitchen of my friend Jennifer glows with the warmth of ceramic tiles, hanging plants, a coveted skylight, and wood fixtures hugging spices and tinctures. Jennifer gently tips my chin back and drips a spoonful of homemade elderberry syrup on my tongue. As its deep purple wiggles down my throat, they curtly

and empathetically state, “You’ve been around a lot of people today.”

My travels to Jennifer have included a nocturnal plane ride from Portland to Albany. An excruciating stay with my family upstate. The wonder and glory that is the Amtrak ride into the city. At least an hour of being lost in Grand Central, watching the same man go up and down the same escalator. Several subways, where I let Jennifer lead me so I don’t have to think. A quick stop, bags and all, to a beloved dive bar. The tipsy, glowing walk up the creaking wood steps to the top floor of the building she lives in.

The rooming house is full of a magic that cannot be explained and only exists in Brooklyn. This is a sacred place and I must accept the elderberry offering as both ritual and caretaking, a way to purify myself upon entering.

After I am baptized in immune support, I am brought downstairs to dinner. A communal affair, all these wonderful souls who have found each other and inhabit the same small space deeply caring for one another.

Roommate dinner is a monthly occurrence, so there is no pressure to attend every time. Tonight, it is myself, Jennifer, a couple who just got back from being arrested in DC while protesting for Veterans’ rights in John McCain’s office, and a woman who feels like an ageless embodiment of Martha Plimpton. This roommate is all short blonde hair, perfect ears, stunning jaw line, twirling into the room in her flowing skirt and tank top made for the sticky summer heat. I am instantly enamored by her.

The rhythm of dinner is exactly what we expect—and then some. It is too hot in the upstairs kitchen while the couple cooks, so

Jennifer and I go outside to poke and prod at the garden. For a moment, I completely forget that we are in New York.

The dining room where we will feast is in the basement but feels like an ancient cellar in the wilds of France. Herbs hung up to dry. Arches painted in earthen tones. A meal spread out on a large, wooden table. Glasses of wine raised to the sky. The laughter of people who refuse to treat me like a stranger.

A honey ocher glaze drips over us and envelopes our dinner in warm memories. Finally, at just the right moment, the gorgeous roommate whips out her phone and says, “Horoscope time.” Her long and delicate fingers gently hold aloft the device as she reads the succulent and sweet words of Astro Barry aloud to the table.

We begin with a general scope for the week to ground ourselves. Then, she turns to Jennifer and says, “Virgo, Libra, or both?” Jennifer, born on the 20th of September, has never identified with one or the other, instead picking what resonates most and side-eyeing what pricks instead of challenges. Tonight, the answer is, “both.” Lovingly, the roommate recites the incantations, as Jennifer sits back and listens. There is laughter when something hits too eerie of a nerve, and clucking of tongues at the realization that rocky seas are ahead for both Virgos and Libras—the summer being a time of hibernation for those who need to be born again on the Autumn Equinox.

Then, the phone is passed to Jennifer, who turns to me with the knowing gaze of a motherly confidant and boldly states, “Aries,” and begins to read me my future. The weather report is accurate, mentioning the twisted roots of my family of origin—the origin of my traumas, upbringing, fear of religion, and hatred of men. The origin of pulling all these ghosts out and getting to know

them. Hearing these words instead of simply reading them to myself, in private, brings it all to life in a way I wasn't prepared for. The communal hymn of being seen and felt and understood by this group of strange faces willing to see this pocket of me is a healing experience.

We continue to pass the phone around and tenderly call into being the wise words of Barry Perlman. Nurturing and soothing each other. Suggesting ways to feel prepared for the week ahead, calling out lovely yet possibly detrimental behaviors to watch for. This also goes down my throat, syrupy sweet and dark purple.

And it is here that I recommend the astrologer that made me fall in love with and finally trust spirituality: Chani Nicholas. We are thrilled. There is an electric air running around the table. Hushed voices, hands clasped, hair swooping down as we lean in over the phone together. We go to her blog, a modest yet luxurious experience. Her words are full of life and hope and care. Like a mother hen who does not want to peck her children, Chani takes care of all of us as we repeat the ritual of reading aloud to each other.

The basement is an oven. A glowing warmth covers us, but it's not the grime and grit of pavement and melted trash bags. It is a love, a spark, a joy.

Jennifer and I share her bed that evening and to fall asleep we talk about our feelings. I am dating a man I will eventually realize is dangerous, but it manifests as me asking Jennifer if I've gained too much weight. She reassures me that my body is mine and it is surviving and beautiful.

In the morning we nourish ourselves with coffee and greens with a soft-boiled egg and yoga that makes me sweat so hard I am

embarrassed to return the mat I borrowed. There's diner food and whiskey and bad beer that you can't say is bad because it's made in Brooklyn, and then Jennifer calls me a car to take me away from them for the rest of the time I am dating the man I eventually escaped.



As soon as The Man picks me up from the airport I am drenched in cigarette smoke and ask to open a window. He is annoyed by this so I never ask again. I try to retell my experiences, my hands are all excitement and fluttering. He is hungover and would rather I sit there quietly. So I do.

The bright thread begins to slip away as his hungry tires devour the rotten road toward our house on the other side of town. I press my forehead to the glass, trying to recreate the feeling of Jennifer reading me my horoscope.

We meet my friend Stephanie out at The Man's favorite bar. My bags are still in the back of his smokey car, saturating themselves in unholiness. The Man does not like Stephanie. He is polite to her in public, but will complain to me the entire ride home about how much of a pill he finds her to be. This is upsetting because she and I have been friends since we were ten, she was the first person to befriend me when I was a new arrival to Mrs. Nordstrom's fifth grade class. We bonded on being outcasts and picking on the one other girl who was more of an anomaly than we were. It's dangerous to be a child.

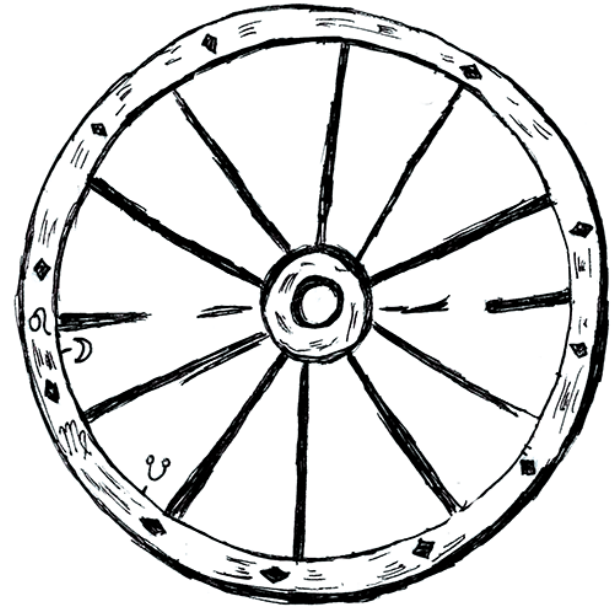
The Man sits and chain smokes in the corner, holding some sort of conversation about music with the assorted regulars of the

back patio. While he is distracted, I read Stephanie her horoscope aloud. She oohs and aahs in all the right places. We find Chani's words to be the most profound and some of the kindest things said to us all week. I have Stephanie read me mine, but her voice is drummed out by the tableside bickering about a musical sequence spoken in a language I don't understand. Instead of being nourished, the words I desperately long for float away from me. Up and out and tangled with smoke.

On the way home The Man tells me I am childish and stubborn. He does not like who I am when I come back from visiting the East Coast. I cannot figure out what he means by this, but I think it has something to do with my desire to speak more and louder and directly.

In a plume of indica and cheap beer and whiskey, the rest of the night shrouds itself in mystery. But I know two things for certain: We have sex and I mostly like it. I wake up the next day and go to the grocery store and cry because elderberry syrup costs more than I can afford.

# HOUSE TWO



The Second House of Finances and Material Wealth



**Home to:** No planets, but your South Node is here. The South Node is where you need to empty out, learn to let go, release the grip of control. This is confusing because you were born incredibly poor and raised in a family that was very tightly wound around finances. You never had anything that felt like yours in your entire life and are deathly afraid of what “releasing your finances to the universe” actually means.

**In the Sign of Virgo.** This is incredibly helpful for keeping your finances organized and your head above water. You will work hard and squirrel things away and keep track of tips and bills as you hop from job to job. Your best friend is the type of person who always has surprising and mysterious cash lying around forgotten in old coat pockets or winter hats left stored in closets. You find this very enchanting and thoroughly baffling.



Where to begin and where to continue. We are still under the surface of everything. The starting stages of grief and harmony. Opening this door will yield something grotesque. Are we sure we want to go in there?



How it started was sticky and sweet. The Man had taken my hand and led me to his bed, which was on the floor but he called it a “Japanese style” that I accepted because he was a Man who was

Older and Knew What He Was Doing.

I would sit in his living room, on the couch he purposefully bought to be just a bit too small for someone to sleep on so his friends would never be able to stay over and must always fend for themselves. With legs criss-cross-apple-sauced, I would gaze longingly at the records he had painstakingly tacked to the walls. Like a gorgeous, plastic encased, tiled wallpaper. The colors were warm and vibrant, the women were naked and smiling. It brought me peace and made me feel like an adult to be enjoying such lovable smut.

But the thing is, I was already an adult. Fully formed with two hands for wrenching and two feet for running. With the desire to be seen and the potential to be understood never realized.

We would go to our favorite bar together. Everyone there cared deeply for him. Everyone there cared deeply for me. The back patio, full of smoke and adults savoring in the second childhood Portland can provide, was our perpetual living room. Dollar beers and graffiti scribbled all over the tables, it was a place alive with a dirt under the fingernails. I often tried to feel like an adult here, but never could. Everyone at these tables was at least five years my senior, and either saw something in me they wanted to squish between their fingers, or patted me on the head and blinked slow at me like I was a kitten.

Then one day we decided to move in together. The Man took all the records off his walls, put them away, and drove them over to a house we called ours even though there was no trace of me to be found there. He then hung all the records up on our shared walls and I again got to sit on the too-small couch and stare at them in awe. I am a grown adult now, I will think to myself, living with

This Man and Playing House.

We worked in the same neighborhood and would drive in together. Back and forth in the smokey car, I was always embarrassed that I smelled like cigarettes even though I hadn't smoked in years. It felt like my childhood poverty was hanging over me, a stench that let others know I had to eat fast to get enough.

The Man did not like it when I talked to him during the morning commute, because he was never fully awake and I was bombarding him with too many things all at once. This made sense, but it still hurt. Who could I tell my dreams to if not him?

Silence was also preferred on the way home, as he had just worked a very long day and was so, so, so tired, please just leave him alone, please.

We don't go to our favorite bar anymore. Now, we go to his favorite bar, full of missing teeth men, charmless bartenders, and the loudmouth girlfriend of the one regular who will look me in the eye while talking. The Man does not like it when I talk to the loudmouth girlfriend, because she is loud and his head and stomach ache from years of drinking to keep everything screwed on straight. But if I do not talk to her, I will not have spoken to anyone I know all day.

The Man does not want to talk about his day, and he certainly doesn't want to hear about yours. The more you try, the more he will tell you how childish and annoying this trait is. He does not care about your interpersonal dramas, and refuses to understand why you are so sensitive when people are cruel to you.



There is a nightly ritual at the new house with The Man. After several necessary drinks at the bar, we will stumble back home where I will try to convince him to eat something healthy and good that I have prepared. He will open a can of SpaghettiOs out of anger and say his stomach cannot handle the food I make him because he grew up a different kind of poor than I did and I was spoiled to learn how to cook food from nothing. I will cave—out of fear, out of a desire to be accepted, to be loved—and join him in eating canned food. His compromise is to have a salad with this, and I do my best to agree.

The next part of the ritual is to open more tall boys of beer while he rolls a spliff. He will insist on sharing it with me, even though I will never get used to how potent it is. We retire to the basement so he can smoke and smoke and smoke and not be outside. It is in this basement that he will finally open up about his day, his job, his thoughts, his feelings. We must wait until after 10pm for this ritual to occur, which is unfortunate because I have to be up at five in the morning.

One of the first evenings we live in this house together, we are in the basement, slowly unwinding the threads of ourselves when an incredible stampede of boots and sneakers comes darting across our lawn. We cannot see it, only hear it. A hunt is on. A body is tackled and crunches its way to the ground. Another body heaves itself on top and the sputtering sounds of someone being choked waft into our sacred home. The gripping of fingers in our unkempt grass, digging into our dirt as lungs burn for air.

Growling of unintelligible words from the hands holding the neck.

The Man and I are frozen, staring at each other. I am too stoned to move, too scared to walk up the concrete steps. He is too quiet to speak out, too small to put up a fight. He tells me to call the cops because he left his phone upstairs. I look at him and whisper “I’m too stoned.” He makes me do it anyway.

Still frozen in fear, we are thankful to hear the sound of sirens. Two bodies in our yard pick themselves up. Tires crunch to a stop on our dirt road, a car door opens, a person is shoved inside, a door slams shut. Gravel hits our basement window as everyone disappears into the night.



My little sister and I get matching tattoos. We are in the sterile and bright station of her trusted artist upstate, Alexis. Little Sister sits so incredibly still as the needles go up and down up and down up and down into her. Alexis compliments her on this as she wipes the bleeding and raw skin free of any ink and fluids that should not be there. Our matching tattoos are a jawbone with script that reads “I fucking love you.” And it’s true, we really fucking do.

When it is my turn to sit, Alexis also makes sure to compliment me. My skin takes ink very well—I adore being told I lap up ink like a cat with contraband milk. Her gloved hand pulls the flesh of my upper thigh taught and she rhythmically brings her

machine to me, getting in the flow with my breathing. I am also good at relaxing under the needle, but not like my sister. She can lay there like a dead animal, eyes closed, no knowing where her soul is.

While Alexis alters me forever, we talk about the artform and industry of tattooing. My birth chart, at least what I understand of it so far, tells me I am an artistically inclined person with a penchant for a good aesthetic. I think this makes me a great candidate for becoming a tattoo artist, and Alexis agrees.

Little Sister loops arms with me and escorts us out of the studio to her beat up car we both hope our dad will fix for her but know he won’t. Before we cross the parking lot, Alexis chases after us like we have forgotten something. Shouting, as if she herself is too afraid of the notion, she tells me if I ever want to apprentice with her that the door is always open.

On the drive back to our parents’ house, Little Sister and I are scheming. It would mean I’d have to save money and eschew material things for at least a year. It would mean I’d have to move back in with the parents all the way across the country. It would mean I’d have to ask for The Man’s permission.



I am sitting in the passenger seat of my friend’s giant, rumbling, ancient SUV. The kind our parents drove when they were our age, dripping with unplanned children they were told would make them happy.

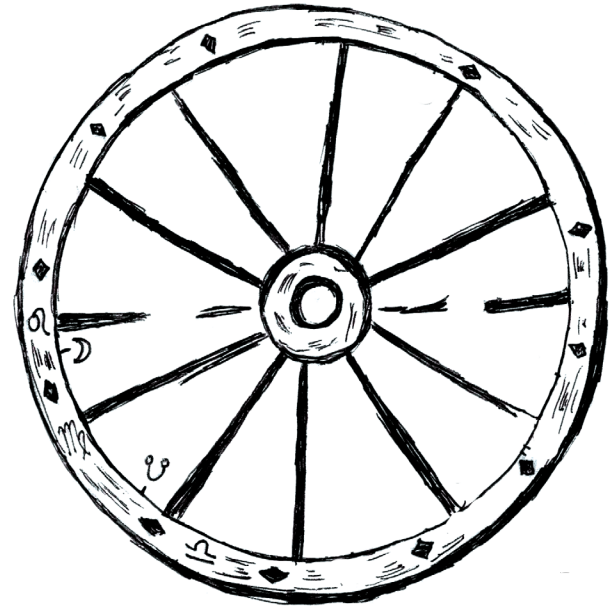
This friend and I are birthday twins and it always upsets us when we don't get along. As if the sacred, ethereal bond was meant for us to only see the good in each other. However, I am lucky enough to catch them during a good time in our friendship—where we are both struggling and gasping for air to call our own.

I had spent the night at their house, too sick to my stomach to be within the smoke stained walls of The Man's place. While nestling next to my friend in bed, I played them a fight I had secretly recorded between me and The Man. I had asked him if I could apprentice with Alexis and he spent close to an hour belittling me and calling me unbearably selfish. My friend tells me to delete the recording but I keep it for a while. My own *momento mori*.

As we jostle and bounce back to the house I share with The Man, my friend senses my unease. They stop the truck just out of sight of the house and we listen to the engine whimper before they say, "I can tell you don't want to go back." And they are right. All my muscles and sinews have cinched up inside me like the first time you try to climb the rope in gym class. We look at each other one last time before I get out.

I have to do it. I have to break up with him.

# HOUSE THREE



The Third House of Siblings,  
Routine, and Communication

**Home to:** Nothing. This place is entirely empty in your birth chart and even though you understand it still holds importance, you breathe a sigh of relief because your father is a Libra and you will spend most of your life trying to shed him like a snake emerging into a new skin.

**In the Sign of Libra.** You will read your siblings' birth charts and they will all have major Libra placements in the shape of your father. If you watch carefully, you'll notice how they embody this each in their own way. It feels like survivor's guilt because you were not dealt the same challenges.



I have never sunk my hand into a bag of wild oats, but I have most certainly done my best to sow them. Imagining the delicate grains filtering through my fingers as I gently toss them to the sky and watch them fall like confetti. Or rice at a wedding that will never be mine.

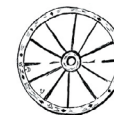
Floating like pollen on the wind, the oats twirl and land on my bed. Take the form of ghosts I thought I exercised but chose to invite back into me. Permeate my entire being like acid rain.



The old growth forest is on fire. A gorgeous shade of pink filters its way through my window curtain that is technically a white

bed sheet hung up and yellowing in the sun. My fingers twirl around the tendrils of my sticky hair. Everything is too hot to touch. My body, my face, my arms, the floor, the bed. It feels like I, too, am on fire.

The language of self-realization drips off my tongue like communion. I am gripping the paperback of *Facing Love Addiction* by Dr. Pia Mellody and actualizing my future. There is a graph on the page in the shape of a circle describing the cycle of the Love Addicted and Love Avoidant and I am reading it like my horoscope. It feels like the truth so it is. Scooping the puzzle pieces of myself into my open wounds and calling it a balm. It feels like help.



On Tuesday nights I go to the Independent Publishing Resource Center and sit in the same spot at the long table that I always do. Our cohort is whittled down to just the six of us. We are so close to graduating we can taste the perfect binding glue holding our final projects together. Each piece is coming alive in its own way and mine especially is pouring out of me like chunks of my womb.

When we do finally graduate and walk up to the front of the room to receive our certificates, the teachers have us all write a word on a piece of paper and consume it. My word is “friendship” because when I started this course the phrase I repeated the most was, “I didn’t come here to make friends.” The tendrils of *The Man* were still wrapped around me, pushing me down to

the ground every time I spread my horizons. But here, these five other people who used to be strangers but are now putting paper to their tongues are the lifeblood I've been looking for.

The Artist who has recently taken a battering ram to my heart and broken up with me on the eclipse is also at the graduation ceremony. He has brought me flowers and I am both so angry with him and want him to place his hands on me again.



Once I tunneled my way out of the cave that was living with The Man, I promised myself a year of freedom. With great desire and fortitude, I made mistakes, danced again, did my best to have one night stands that remained exactly that, learned I didn't actually like making out with men, and discovered the term "jean jamming."

In the heat of the summer, when the air is pieces of ash that look like snowflakes, I am finding myself opening up my heart and stomach to The Artist. He is tender and beautiful and emotional and I am both excited by his attention and feel as if I deserve it (leave it to a Libra to make you feel so fucking special).

We ride our bikes to watch the eclipse in totality. It is magical and stressful and I understand why my ancestors were afraid of such moments. The fish come up and bask for air, the temperature drops to freezing, the perfect halo around the sun lasts for under a minute and everyone around us breathes a sigh of relief that life is returning. By the time we get back to the city, The Artist heads

home without me and I can tell that he is done with me.

Two days later he tells me I am too accommodating and nice for him to be attracted to me. As a punishment for refusing me, I watch the movie *Mother!* in theaters twice and get naked in a photobooth. Unfortunately, The Artist and I make the same kind of art and so we see each other on a regular basis. I can tell all he wants in the world is to be forgiven, and I go back and forth on whether or not I ever give this to him.



Towards the end of my year of singledom, my mouth works its way around the words of generational trauma. I begin to see how everything is connected. How I am stuck in my ways because they kept my ancestors safe. And how the ancient beings that live within my ribcage desperately want me to be so, so, so happy.

There is a thrill to piecing myself back together like I am my own mystery to solve. My body is Bess and I am Nancy Drew and in this version, we kiss.

The thing about doing all this work, is suddenly realizing you are a fish in a tank and possibly you are outgrowing it. A fear begins to set in. If I continue to learn something new, will my gills stretch out beyond the limits that have kept me safe?

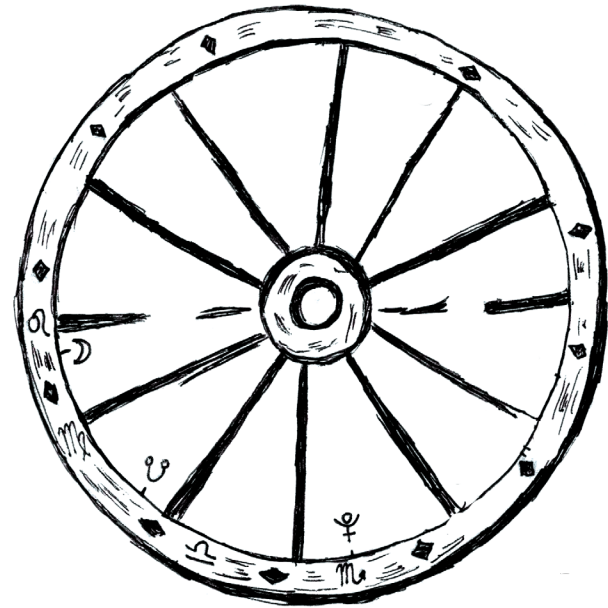
I wonder all this as I stare at my partner, Lukie. We are driving across the country for the first time. I cannot believe he loves me enough to pack up a U-Haul and move so far away from

everything we know. But he has been there by my side as I have outgrown the place of my recovery, the place that kept me safe.

I have also outgrown Chani. No longer do I pass the phone around, hoping for a verbal communion. I don't even use Whole Sign Houses for astrology anymore. What was once glittering and gold and brand new now feels dull and unpolished. There is a growing mold in my stomach that finds itself angry with a woman I do not know. The feeling of betrayal wraps itself around my teeth as I try to explain to Lukie why I have stopped reading her horoscopes. He does his best to follow along while I speak in an ancient tongue lost to time.

My hands are gripping for something to hold onto as my body is being washed out to the sea of growth and danger. And there is the shadow of a famous astrologer back on the shore, watching me drift away, shaking her head at me for abandoning her.

# HOUSE FOUR



The Fourth House of  
Foundations and Family of Origin

**Home to:** Pluto and you laugh every time you remember this. Power struggles and tearing down authority gradually become something you pride yourself on, after running away from it all childhood. Although, you never quite stick the landing. You will quit jobs with no notice, you will refuse to speak to several familial elders for the rest of your life, and many people you love will take these actions personally because they are afraid you will do the same thing to them.

**In the Sign of Scorpio.** Most Millennials have Pluto in Scorpio and how our collective lives continue to unfold resonates with this. We will survive many a “once in a generation” disaster, and still be blamed for the death of industries our parents wanted to share with us and can’t can’t can’t understand why we’re covered in blood and scars and rejecting a night out at the Mazatlan down the street.



Shave your head and tell me about  
the nineteen-year-olds who look at you  
saucer eyes full of hopeful hunger

Blood sops up the corners  
where I crawl and mourn  
the weight of you  
evicted from my bed, my arms, my chest

Pry apart my lips  
slice off my tongue

on a plate  
it will make the perfect anniversary gift

Late night communion  
draw the border lines  
patrol them ruthlessly  
do what must be done  
to stop asking me if I'm up



There are things The Man would desperately want to keep locked inside me. To the point that he will deny they ever happened. Like the time I woke up to his tongue in my mouth and he claimed I invited him into my room and told him to kiss me. Too terrified to do anything else, I mumbled about how my dad used to talk in his sleep and maybe that's what I was doing too. He hung his head so low his ears dipped below his shoulders and through tears asked why he was hearing of my somniloquy for the first time.

Later that week I moved out of the house we shared for several years. We had already broken up and he was beginning to grow agitated at the fact I was avoiding the space that was slowly filling up with broken objects and terrifying growls from the basement at night.

There is an accusation of betrayal when I do move out. He admits he knew it was over but that he thought I'd at least remain in the house for a month—a dust speck floating around, glimmering in



the slats of sun filtering between the shades he refuses to open. I had already paid him rent for the full month, but I cave and give him rent for the next month too. I tell myself it's to buy him time to find a roommate, I tell myself it's still my responsibility to take care of him, I tell myself this affords me the ability to whisper the whole truth to some of our friends (but never, never, never use the word "abuse" because that will be an invitation for him to find me and and and...)



I am a pastor's daughter. Are you surprised? I am not.

When I was in high school, I went to a youth group that my friends who still speak to me from that time used to call a cult. And it was. There weren't robes or elaborate rituals—but there were requirements. And we were all expected to do them without asking questions. If we didn't do them, Pastor Dave would call us up on stage and berate us in front of our salivating peers.

Pastor Dave was a "no excuses" kind of guy. The type of man in his early forties who one day realized he had power over a room full of young, breathing, listening, heaving, growing, teenagers. The sort of man who would call Immigration and Customs Enforcement on the new Latino youth leader because he was young, attractive, and all the girls seem to be whispering about him and jockeying for position when it's time to hold hands and pray in a circle.

One of the things Pastor Dave enjoyed the most was exposing us

to a brutal relationship with honesty. We must always be looking at ourselves and digging under our fingers, separating nail from skin to find our sins. And then we must tell them to our assigned prayer groups, so they can hold us accountable.

Accountability looks like waking up at four in the morning to drive to prayer group before school, knowing full well you won't be back home and able to close your eyes again until after ten at night. Accountability looks like hands digging into your forearm and lips leaning in real close to hiss at you that your brothers in Christ can see your bra underneath your shirt and you have to go cry in the bathroom while you change because you have become a stumbling block. Accountability looks like pushing a new arrival to the youth group to the brink of taking his own life because he trusts you enough to open up about his deep and hidden feelings towards other men.

What Pastor Dave solidifies inside me is that spirituality happens on a binary. For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, but you, you especially are bad and must be punished to be fixed. But also, you're precious in His eyes and are inherently better than other people because you are a chosen one and you hold yourself accountable like a real good girl.

I am lucky enough not to be Pastor Dave's daughter, but my own pastor father placed me in the baptism bath that snapped shut like a carnivorous plant around me. Drowning in holy waters, I learned that the most important thing in any religion was to not make the man in charge of it mad at you.



Right before I performed my famous disappearing act, The Man came home from a concert. He had recently shaved his head and our relationship was unspooling itself in front of me like a trail of rotten bread crumbs. We were at that point in any dying star where the first words said to each other are never “Hello. How was it? Are you hungry?” So the first thing he tells to me is a story about a girl he figured to be about nineteen who was staring him down the entire time. How going to shows in Portland is like shooting fish in a barrel when it comes to finding young women who want to worship your dick like it’s the best thing they’ve ever seen. All these broken dolls who can only be put together by middling and aging alcoholics.

I toss his story over my tongue, feeling it search my mouth for the right words to say. My gut instinct is to take the side of the young woman, as I am most likely only a few years older. He snorts at my silence. Proof that I am outgrowing a preferred age.

What’s the most surprising of this entire interaction was that he was able to stand at all. As our time together circled the same drain for close to a year, his body was debilitating itself. Speaking in a language I understood, yet he refused to listen to. It was wailing, desperately crying out to be taken care of, to be listened to. And I tried, I really did.

When his stomach was so sour it felt like a rotten pomegranate, dripping and full of seeds desperate to get out, I would make him smoothies. Buy him the expensive gut bacteria pills. Make yogurt

from scratch. On any given day you could open our fridge and find a forest of spoiled, growing, moving cultures. Abandoned by time and a stubborn will.

He fell down the stairs drunk more than once. He blamed this injury on something happening at his job so he could get worker’s compensation. This made everything harder and more complicated. He could only go to a specific doctor at a specific location, and I was never allowed to go with him. Even when he was in so much pain he couldn’t find the right office. Even though medical facilities made him desperately anxious. And especially because he was once escorted off the premises by security for causing a scene over their refusal to refill a prescription.

During this time, he would not accept any help, yet demanded I pity him. He would berate me for leaving him behind when he had to use crutches. He hated it when he could tell I was waiting for him.



The night of the 2016 election, I was driving back to our house after an evening spent with my Independent Publishing Resource Center classmates. As the evening progressed, we had all just gotten more and more quiet until we silently looked at each other and left for the comforts of elsewhere.

The Man was not at home, so I went to the bar across the street to find him holding onto a glass of whiskey and a beer like salvation. The writing was on the wall.

“Looks like you and your loudmouth feminist friends are going to have to get in line,” he says, swirling his drink towards the results scrolling across the screen.

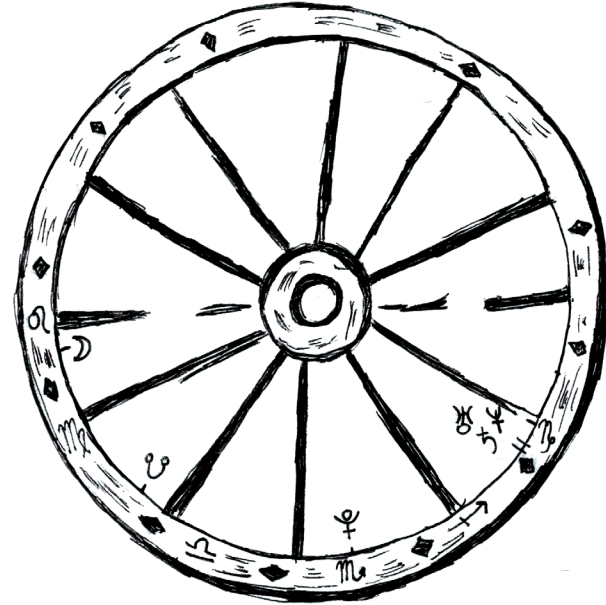


Pastor Dave is crushing us with the weight of diligence. We must always be vigilant—that is how we know that God comes to our youth group and not any of the others littered across the high desert. He visits us because we are pure and holy and anointed and hold ourselves to such high, high standards. So high that none of us notice Pastor Dave sticking himself inside my current prayer group leader. I love her very much and she sees me and understands me in a way I always find safe and when she is blamed for his misgivings, I promise to burn down everything about the religion that raised me.

My mother and I leave the church building the day of the announcement that Pastor Dave is stepping down due to his infidelity. Which certainly is one way to describe something where we will never know to what extent consent was involved. Dave was this woman’s boss, landlord, and twice her age. Infidelity is maybe not the correct word here.

Starting the car, my mother looks at me and says, “why do we sing songs about how wonderful God is when life is so awful?”

# HOUSE FIVE



The Fifth House of Creativity and Sexuality

**Home to:** Uranus—the planet of unpredictability and independence. Sitting right next to Uranus is Saturn, the rigid ruler of boundaries and responsibility. This duo being so close gives you an aura that can feel troubling to others. You are both Kool-Aid Man bursting through walls, and insisting on other walls being built. You often notice this cycle repeat itself in your creative practices, much to your enjoyment and cultivation of skills. Further away, but in the same house, is Neptune. The planet of the dreamer, erosion of boundaries, head of the ethereal plane. You feel a bit lost and confused at her being here, as Capricorn isn't the best sign for Neptune to be in. But you love the worlds this placement helps you create.

**In the Sign of Capricorn.** The sign of your mother, your partner, your aunt, your dear friend. In each of these people you see a caring if not stoic way to nurture. A cool yet exacting view of the world, with enough distance to allow things to bloom and grow without needing to hover over them. There is so much tenderness in each of these individuals, and you do your best to bring this to your creative pursuits.



Most facts about wolves are only known by viewing them in captivity. When we take these giant, howling, snarling rulers of the wilderness and place them among strangers, only then is it possible to draw certain conclusions.

Females will attack the hind parts of their competition to secure their mating prospects and pack position. This fact is a metaphor.



I am working on my final project to complete my graduation from the IPRC. It is emerging from me like the story was always meant to be told. I am surprised at how sure I am of it coming together. My teacher doesn't quite understand what I am doing and I leave our first one-on-one meeting pummeling back tears. A classmate I will come to cherish forever reaches out afterwards to check in on me. This outrageous kindness feels like a stranger.

I have always been the girl in the shadows, so broken and longing for attention. If you showed me any sort of kindness, I would either try to possess you or flee.

My crushes would consume my body and spit out just the bones. Slowly, I understood the much-maligned woman. If you cannot love us, we deserve to ruin you.

It is this my final project is poking at. Using available research on the behavior of wolves to draw a comic about my upbringing and struggles with being safe and whole and the only girl for you (how many times, oh how very often I became the other woman or was made to find out there was more than one of me; it hurts and it wails and it simply does not understand what is so rotten about me that people feel so comfortable tossing the paper of my body out the window).



The first time I have my birth chart read it is by my coworker who graduated from the IPRC's poetry program. In many ways, this person introduced me to my future.

As we go through my planets and placements, this coworker diligently and lovingly unfolds their meanings, like astral body origami. At the end of it all, I am left with a familiar yet terrifying feeling.

Years later, I will open the book *You Were Born For This* and have a similar wave of nausea and nostalgia rip me out to sea. This book becomes a holy text I let drip off my tongue as I hold it aloft as a tool to study myself and anyone who dares to share their birth time with me.

What I tenderly coax out but do not trust is that I am special. There's a lot of gifts in my natal chart. I am valuable and destined to do something great.

So why doesn't anybody love me?



Growing up, I used to play with paper dolls. With impatient, determined fingers, I would cut the designs out from their books and fold the tabs over the chosen vessel. Often the two dimensional woman I would choose to be was a blonde, homemade riff on a Barbie archetype. I would try other doll bodies – black hair, brown hair, tan skin. But they were just side characters, the ones

I would dress in dowdier clothes and shove into the shadows of “librarian best friend,” or “princess of a faraway land who doesn't come to visit often.”

Snip the corners crisp. Fold the layers over your nakedness. Meditate on all the ways you are hard to love.



In later years I will feel Chani shifting her offerings like sand running out of my fingers. What helped glue me back together after exploding apart will no longer taste sweet like elderberry syrup. Instead, it has the mouthfeel of wrought iron and sucking on a pinprick oozing blood.

Leading up to this change, I begin to feel scolded by her horoscopes. As if she is looking at me, all fire and longing, and telling me: you are unlovable because you jump to conclusions and talk over others. I do my best to be silent for the rest of the week, but so much of me is longing to be felt and heard and understood. These parts of me are surely what is smothering others. What is causing me to agree so easily to be the secret of someone who will stick his fingers inside me while his girlfriend is asleep upstairs. Or to be the young woman who will be cheated on because she told her older boyfriend she loved him and he wasn't ready to hear it. Yes, yes, if I can just work on not speaking because I am an Aries who rushes into things and doesn't consider the feelings of others, that would solve this.

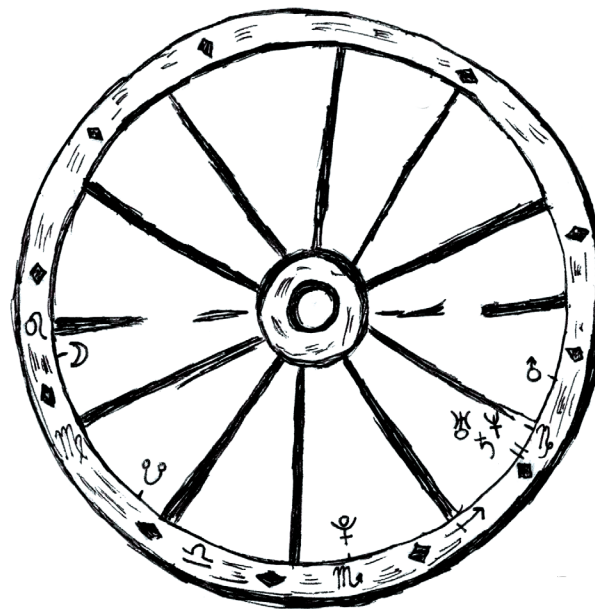


There is a hunger inside me that I do not understand. In captivity, wolves are fed a strange mixture we assume is close enough to reality. Although, I can only imagine that a newly broken *Canis lupus* would be baffled at the sight of dry kibble, vegetables, and chunks of frozen rabbit.

As my hands wander closer to finishing my final project, I see the threads that I have used to tie myself back together. The folding of paper tabs over my two-dimensional body creates the illusion that I am whole. All my pieces have come together, limbs moving in sequential motion forward.

You cannot put the flat dresses back in the book for paper dolls. They will just slide out.

## HOUSE SIX



The Sixth House of Work and Health

**Home to:** Mars. You are perpetually hard working and often take your jobs a bit too seriously. When you are a child, before the age of ten, you will race to answer the family phone. Upon picking up the receiver, you will confidently state, “Mares residence, Carissa speaking, how may I help you?” And the adult on the other end of the phone will ooh and aah and delightfully ask, “may I speak to your parents?”

**In the Sign of Capricorn.** Just like my mother.



For a while there, I had to stop listening to true crime podcasts about murders and missing white women. Instead, I turned my attention to the multi-level marketing scheme podcast, or documentaries on the cult in the desert near where I grew up. The resounding theme in all these works was the overwhelming presence of the commodification of spirituality. People wouldn't move across the country, pack their cats and children and wife and two cars and trailers full of family heirlooms and it's fine that all your relatives are over a thousand miles away for the rest of your life, for nothing. God said so.



There's a brief and dazzling time where I dabble in being a copywriter. In my heart of hearts I am a Joan and never a Peggy. But this adventure does afford me the luxury of peeking behind the

curtain deep and wide enough to know when questionable ethics and misleading copy collide.

It's a snowy afternoon in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Lukie and I are walking through the back trails of a network of parks that strings itself through our neighborhood. I am trying to talk to him about how sinister I find the most recent Chani newsletter.

The headline to the email encourages readers to update their astrology app; when, in reality, to gain access to the content the newsletter discusses, you have to upgrade the app. A simple update will not fix the problem of having a free account. This type of copy is common in businesses that are either unsure how to present feuding information—users do need to update the app to fix a glitch, but the glitch is not mentioned in the email—or simply want to hide the truth under the guise of a system error. Either way, Lukie isn't paying attention.

He, like many people I try to explain this to, is confused as to why this bothers me so much. I do my best to piece together the perfect arrangement and harmonies on how getting into astrology can feel like quicksand, you slip in and aren't sure what path brings enlightenment and what brings carrion.

Before I can finish this sentence, though, a series of three mountain bikers come bounding down the slush of the lone single track in the woods. I see Lukie's thoughts follow them into the bare trees, certainly not to return for the remainder of the conversation.

But the point is, swimming in any form of spirituality requires a level of responsibility. You do your best to make sure the thing you're practicing is right for you, but this also comes with a trust

towards whoever is lighting the way forward. And Chani was someone I felt I could recommend.



It is the summer in the high desert and our sticky thighs are thankful for the one room that's air conditioned in our youth group building. Under the tutelage of Pastor Dave, we have upgraded from a module-like building to an actual church. There's a stairway and a foyer and a kitchen and a game room that no enjoyable games will ever be played in.

Glowing at the front is a television on wheels like the kind substitute teachers used to have. We are watching Way of the Master and Kirk Cameron's smug face and too-white teeth are teaching us that good Christians proselytize and bad Christians say things like "love the sinner and hate the sin" because we are supposed to make everyone realize they need Jesus. This tape is to teach us about how to approach strangers on the street and subvert their pride—because sinners have huge egos that want to rip our jugulars out and drink our blood like the war hungry heathens from history.

What these tapes actually do very well is set up a situation where you engage with strangers and trick them into holding an entirely two dimensional and opaque debate with you. By removing nuance, you can win every time.

In the place of logic is morality. Expect to be confronted by sinners when you do this, especially atheists as they have no

moral compass because they have shunned this ancient being that once demanded the sacrifice of children.

This is another way Pastor Dave holds us accountable. If we don't go out and do this work, we will be dragged to the front of the room and made to confess as to why we couldn't do it and then be told there's no excuses. However, we get extra points if we face our teenage fears and talk to strangers alone.



"How to be afraid and do it anyway." A post from CHANI Inc.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes being scared is just the push you need to do something great. #overcomefear

#mindfulness #Astrology #Wellness #WellnessApp #CHANIapp



Did you know on the CHANI app, you can only have one birth chart per account? You can't even share this experience with a friend unless they, too, have the app. This is especially poignant when, in the middle of the lockdown portion of the pandemic, I receive a horoscope that instructs me to mind my own business—because of course Leo risings are constantly shoving themselves onto others and inserting a foot into a slamming door. It is a

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIE0A2vLJin/?igshid=MDJmNzVkMjY%3D>



reminder that what we seek in external validation is always within ourselves.

If this were the case I don't think the need to self-isolate would terrify the vast swaths of humanity so desperate to escape their houses.

I am handed another horoscope a few months later that reminds me I am a social creature in need of attention and love, but to get what I need most I must offer it up to others. What infuriates me about this is the assumption that I am not already doing it, that due to my Leo placements I solely navigate my life on a selfish plane. Chani never used to make me feel this way—like I am all the bad parts.

I am told I must adore others to be able to receive adoration in return. My lungs and folds of skin so desperately wish it were all this simple. If only I could give and give and give of myself and receive and receive and receive. Maybe then the world would stop assuming I am the only stumbling block to getting fed.

Next, I am told to adopt an attitude of gratitude. I can't fully express why, but this sentiment has always made me want to grind my teeth down to just the noise of fingernails on a chalkboard. I have often been told I am negative, sensitive, and don't take criticism well. Because of these things I simply must not be grateful enough. I can clearly see the good and positive and privilege I have, I just refuse to fucking choke on it to prove I am worthy of care.

In my next horoscope I am told I need to rigorously examine myself and be willing to give up power that wasn't mine to begin with. To confront the fear, greed, and shame that prevents me

from making any lasting changes in my life. I am to think more of others, and to think of others more. For I am the only obstacle, just like Pastor Dave always said.



“The hill each sign would die on.” A post by CHANI Inc. <sup>2</sup>

Aries:

First thought, best thought.



The inside of the closest bar to our old house was all honey ocher yellow, making my memories of it glow with a fading drunken light. The very first time I set foot in the bar was on the Fourth of July but it was still light out and the bartender was in the process of closing up because it was so slow. The Man was incredibly annoyed to hear the bar was closing early as it would mean we wouldn't be able to find any whiskey before heading to our plans for the evening. In my rattled brain, I had all my firefighters working on the explosion of trying to keep his anger at bay. Who knows how I actually felt about this situation. My first thought was simply, “where do we go next?”

As the years unfold, this bar gains new ownership and quickly becomes the place on the block I prefer over most others.

2

<https://www.instagram.com/p/Cpxh0p6LNtk/?igshid=MDJmNzVkMjY%3D>

Although, to be fair, there's a lot to love in this scrappy nook of Foster-Powell. This one, though, is the only one I can sometimes convince The Man to go to when I am too tired of being surrounded by old men who talk over me while shifting their stance to encroach into my sacred space.

It is here that I will begin making art again. My mouth latches onto and suckles on Shaq Time (a mysterious event that takes place on Tuesday evenings and includes avant garde music videos and shots at midnight). I plan birthday parties, I befriend the best bar dog in the world, I sleep with one of the bartenders. I feel so incredibly safe here, even while dating The Man, and it's where I draw the line in the sidewalk as "my bar" in the breakup.

Slicing into the memory cake of this space, I am aiming for a piece that's right after The Man and I broke up, but before I moved out of the house. It is hard for me to access this exact moment—all barbed and covered and moldy and deserted. I hate it here, but I have to show you.



It's not yet officially winter, but it is November in Portland and everything is never fully warm. A deep and permanent wetness seeps its way into our bones and no matter how many layers we wear, we're constantly shivering. Hopping over puddles, pulling my hood up over the drizzle, I leap into this very special bar. I have already slept with someone else, doing that slightly shitty thing where you wait until you break up with someone to spring into the bed of the crush you've been keeping on the back burner.

It's only a betrayal if you let it be.

Probably, I am texting this crush-turned-hook-up. But more than likely I am just looking at the news (November 2016 was full of a lot of NEWS) when The Man enters and stares at me until I acknowledge him. As soon as I do, he proceeds to talk at me—loud and cruel. Other patrons can hear his words, even though he is doing his best to hiss through gritted teeth. These people who I thought were my friends surround the both of us, whispering to each other, "how sad." Circling itself around the expanse of my stomach is a cold snake with a shaking rattle. *No one here will take your side*, it whispers.

After what feels to be an hour of The Man opening his dangerous jowls and snapping at me, I reach for my phone. In the back of my head, this is just to check the time, but really I am looking for a way to remove myself from what has been thrust upon me. The Man has not paid for any drinks, he is not even a customer tonight, he's just been standing there, yelling at me in hushed tones. As soon as I reach for my phone, he beats me to it in one swoop and hurls it—narrowly missing the bartender.

"I know you guys are going through a hard time right now, but I can't have this in my bar." And with that, the bartender hands me back my phone and kicks both of us out.

In the cold, bleating rain I shiver and try to hide under an awning. The Man has now begun to both calm down and get more aggravated with me. He has been sputtering this entire time about how uncomfortable it (I) made him that I (I) would ever insinuate that he kissed me without consent. That he's been accused of this before and never thought I would be like one of those girls—who would only see the bad in him. I convince him

I just need some space for the night and go back inside to pay my tab.

I wait until I know for sure he is back at the bar he prefers, a block down the street. Then, I scamper to the house and do my best to barricade myself into the guest room. I shove moving boxes and stacks of books in front of the door. It's not an impenetrable fortress, but it will at least wake me up if he tries to come inside again.

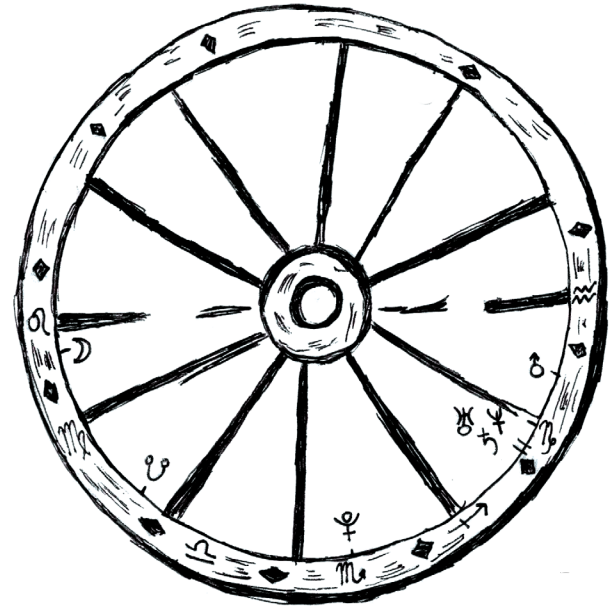


“What each sign needs micromanaged.” A modified post from CHANI Inc. <sup>3</sup>

Aries:  
The half dozen hobbies they started and never followed through with.

Leo:  
Their iPhone storage (yeah, it's full of selfie deep cuts that your ex threw at a bartender once).

# HOUSE SEVEN



The Seventh House of Committed Partnerships

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/CpiLjFHLazx/?igshid=MDJmNzVkMjY%3D>

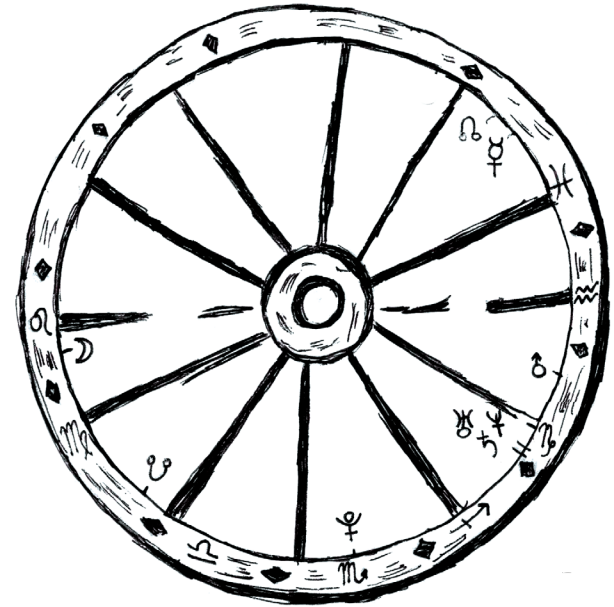
**Home to:** An emptiness you understand, long for, and run away from.

**In the Sign of Aquarius.** And if you've been following along, you'll notice Saturn has been transiting through this sign for the past almost three years. In this time you and your partner will move across the country twice, fall more in love, struggle with communicating, and can't quite bring yourselves to make a chore wheel.



AND THEN I MOVED TO MICHIGAN WITH MY  
WONDERFUL PARTNER AND I ALMOST DIED AND I AM  
NOT READY TO TALK ABOUT IT YET.

# HOUSE EIGHT



The Eighth House of Sorrows, Shared Resources, and Mental Illness (Owes and Woes)

**Home to:** Your North Node. You will have a constant ache to be understood. Your ribcage will long for nothing more. Also home to your Mercury. The detriment, the fall, the horror. Your hands will ruin things and you will wonder why words come out of your mouth but no one seems to hear you. It feels like being at the bottom of a pit and the top of a kingdom of frustration.

**In the Sign of Pisces.** It will never cease to be a chafing of the legs and a chapping of the lips to have to explain the dots you see and connect.



“During these few weeks, our fantasies weave a mesmerizing spell. Take advantage of this moment to replenish your inspiration. Immerse yourself in watercolor lessons or take up beachcombing. It’s a season to center art and tenderness with your collectives, so swim toward the people who make the currents of your imagination swell.”

-Chani Nicholas horoscopes for Venus in Pisces, 2023<sup>1</sup>



In the house The Man and I share together, there is no space for me. All my treasures are stowed away safe in the attic like a secret wife we’re afraid might burn everything down. My own bed—the

<sup>1</sup> <https://chaninicholas.com/horoscopes-for-venus-in-pisces-2023/>

kind that comes with a frame—is in the guest room where all the windows are nailed shut. The Man and I still sleep on his bed on the floor.

Carefully, I have brought my watercolor paints down from the attic and spread the necessary supplies across the coffee table in our ~~shared~~ living room. I am painting women’s hair. It’s the only thing I feel good at. My silly little illustrations and their silly little colors and my silly little love for them. Brush to textured paper—water, rinse, repeat.

The front door bursts open and the unfiltered air of the neighborhood wafts into me all full of dust and drought and the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting beginning across the street. In a silence that simmers off of him, The Man enters—sunglasses on, jaw clenched.

“How was your day...” tries to choke its way out of my mouth, but before I can finish he spreads his hands out, fingers wide and paces with agitation around the ~~threatening~~ living room.

“How was my day? Well, I spend all day sweating my balls off at work just to come home to you, treating our house like it’s your dorm.” He mutters a refrain I will hear often from him, something about my being a spoiled brat.

My mouth is open but my body is frozen. I have two finished illustrations in front of me, paintbrush poised and ready to complete the holy trinity of a third. As pointless as these pieces seem, they are for something. I have an upcoming show at a local coffee shop and want to offer smaller, affordable pieces too. But maybe he doesn’t take it seriously because I also work at this café and therefore haven’t earned my place in the world.



Dear reader, did you know that I never lived in a dorm and I never finished college?



It is the beginning of the third year of the time The Man and I will officially spend together and I am staring at myself in the mirror. My hands gently pat my sagging jowls, my forlorn eyes dig into the folds of my stomach. I do not like these things being here. Not because they don't belong, but because they make me feel tired and older than I am. My body can carry this weight, but I am not ready for it yet.

I do yoga with everyone's best friend Adriene. She talks about birds and her dog and how important it is to support yourself instead of just making shapes. I nod my head while learning how to breathe through impatience.

Again, The Man erupts through the door to witness me doing something in the living room. I don't have the guts to buy my own mat, so I just sweat onto the carpet at his arrival. He hangs his head in a way I will begin to grow familiar with. Corralling all the mumbles he can muster, he emits a devastating, "Every time someone I'm dating starts working out, they leave me."



"Your canvas is your entire journey; this moment may just be a brush stroke upon it, but what it accents helps the rest of you come alive."

-Chani Nicholas horoscope for Aries the week of January 25th 2021<sup>2</sup>



There are certain phrases and meanings that stick to the ribs of anyone who has escaped what many of their friends will troublingly whisper was actually an abusive relationship. But we are all so strong and good at surviving, that to come out the other side physically unscathed feels like a betrayal to everyone we've ever known who has had to be good at makeup design on the fly.

I've never been a procrastinator, but I am bad at active communication. Or at least, that's how it felt when the committed relationship I was in had perpetually moving goal posts. It's not that I forgot to tell The Man things he maybe needed to know, it's that I was afraid to tell him. Who knows when Mount Etna might erupt again.

So imagine my surprise, years later, when Chani's horoscope for

<sup>2</sup> <https://chaninicholas.com/horoscopes-for-the-week-of-january-25th/>

Leo Rising includes a snippet about how “procrastination is part of the process.”<sup>3</sup> As if sitting with something and evaluating it before being bold enough to speak is procrastination. It is as if she and he are sitting on the same side of a children’s soccer game, where I am referee, coach, and goalkeeper. Why do I always feel the need to defend myself to strangers?



For the Full Moon in Taurus, 2020, Chani tells all Aries to hand their matches over, so as not to burn bridges.<sup>4</sup> Because all Aries are just spoiled brats who live in dorm rooms and don’t care about our extended resources or relationships. Silly Aries!

This same lunation, Chani tells Leo Rising to second guess their needs and beliefs, to never assume you are right. “Remember to consider how your choices impact others,” she coos. The Man nods along behind her, mouthing the words, “remember how your choices impact me.”



“Speaking of art, Venus’ snorkeling sesh through Pisces may help to transmute your grief into poetry, song lyrics, or delicate washes of watercolor. If you can weave the subtler realms of deep image, song beats, or color theory into your healing journey, you might

3 <https://chaninicholas.com/horoscopes-for-the-new-moon-in-virgo-2020/>

4 <https://chaninicholas.com/horoscopes-for-the-full-moon-in-taurus-2020/>

be surprised at what gunk can be dislodged.”

-Chani Nicholas horoscope for Venus in Pisces, 2022<sup>5</sup>



For the New Moon in Libra, 2020, Chani reminds Leo Rising that not every battle is ours to win and there is a strength in silence.<sup>6</sup> This hangs over my head like a crown of thorns as I look at every time I kept quiet in my past, over fear of burdening or angering others with my insights.

A few weeks later, there is a horoscope telling Leo Rising to appreciate the golden light that is silence. She then tells me to trust the timing of surprises and to disrupt my own cycles. If only I could figure out which part of me she would like me to edit out, so I could submit the perfect essay for the final grade.



“I’m so excited to announce the launch of my new app, CHANI, available for iPhone. Download it now to get the most personalized, daily astrology information out there, a full birth chart reading, all of my monthly workshops, and access to a library of meditations. Start your free trial before January 1st to lock in our lowest monthly subscription rate.”

5 <https://chaninicholas.com/horoscopes-for-venus-in-pisces-2022/>

6 <https://chaninicholas.com/horoscopes-for-the-new-moon-in-libra-2020/>

-Included in all Chani horoscopes, December solstice, 2020<sup>7</sup>



It is towards the rounding out of eclipse season 2020 that I decide to step away from my relationship to the work of Chani. I continue to try to give the app a chance, but I am actively looking for other, deeper, kinder resources for my spiritual journey.

Perhaps the final nail in the coffin of me taking Chani seriously is this moment from the Lunar Eclipse in Gemini, 2020: “Don’t mistake your natural tendency towards confidence for a way forward.”<sup>8</sup>

Maybe it’s that I don’t have room for a spiritual leader who wants to see something in me that needs to be snuffed out. Perhaps it’s that I don’t actually have the inner confidence to trust that what I want is right. It could even be that I’ve been beaten into submission by the universe enough times to know that just because I think I am confident and capable doesn’t mean I will get what I want, no matter how hard I work for it.



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7 <https://chaninicholas.com/horoscopes-for-the-great-conjunction-solstice-december-2020/>

8 <https://chaninicholas.com/horoscopes-for-the-lunar-eclipse-in-gemini-2020/>

“These color-changing pigment salts by Boulder Colors are fun, unique, and ideal for any artistic-leaning Aries. The home-school-project-turned-small-business even uses locally grown and sourced plants and food waste to make these vibrant water-color pigments, so they’re environmentally conscious too. Shop Now →”

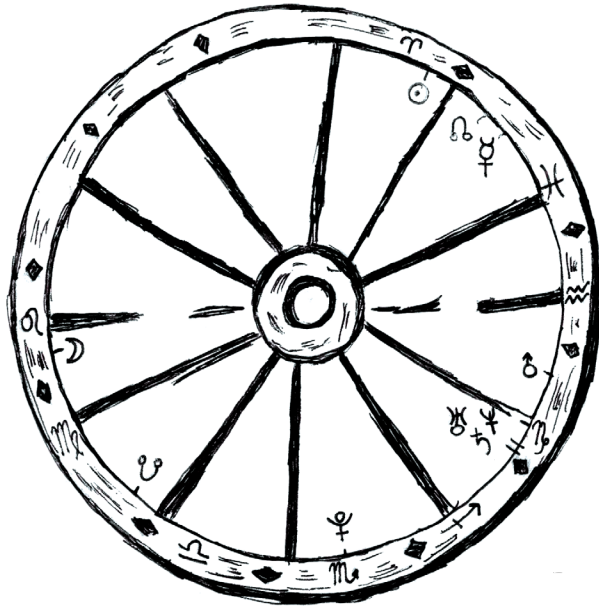
-Chani Nicholas, the Ultimate Gift Guide for Aries & Aries Rising, 2022<sup>9</sup>

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9 <https://chaninicholas.com/the-ultimate-2022-gift-guide-for-aries-aries-rising/>



# HOUSE NINE



The Ninth House of Big Ideas,  
Publishing, Travel, Philosophy, and Astrology

**Home to:** Your Sun and sense of self. Enjoy this burden, this gift, this exaltation. It is yours and you love it and you want to feel special and you really do believe that all your ideas are wonderful and deserving of love and respect. Much to the cackling and licking of the lips of your inner critic and perpetual self-doubt.

**In the Sign of Aries.** You are the eldest daughter of a pastor. You are bold, first, and tough—but scared. Stating your sun sign will get you ignored on queer dating apps and shunned by professional astrologers. What a complicated and hilarious thing to be. Your sense of self is wrapped up in a mixture of emotions, but you relate most to your favorite dog on the planet. He is a rescue. He vibrates when he's scared and bites out of fear even though he knows he's safe. His name is Nacho and you are both always so excited to see each other and hold each other and nuzzle each other and understand each other. Why can't everyone be the same way?



In Michigan, my dreams fill up with fallen out teeth and my waking life is full of a deadly anxiety that curls up my fists and brings them to my own face. It is time for a change. Do we want to be somewhere that is magical or close to family?

Lukie pokes his head through a door and smiles like a child.  
What if we didn't have to choose?



It is what should be a lazy part of August, seeping into September. Lukie and I have traveled to the Bay Area to commemorate the anniversary of his grandmother's passing. The space that used to be hers now an emptiness at the table. No weathered yet steady hands to pass slices of fruit around, no one to tell the 49ers to pick up their feet when sprinting to the end zone. Just a century of memories.

Fortunata Manzano was loving, strong and lived to 100. We all believe she would have lasted for many more years if the isolation of a pandemic hadn't been the bookend to the spring and winter of her life.

In her house, I am shaking off the crumbs of trauma from surviving our time in Michigan. We still live there, but I am so incredibly thankful to be back on the west coast, kissing the sands of the sea and letting the fog float through my hair.

Our plan for this glorious break is to see family, friends, and then drive up to Portland for a wedding. But I always forget that being surrounded by family, even if it isn't mine, is still stressful. I don't know how to be around another familial unit, even if it needs nothing from me. I shake like a chihuahua in the corner, concerned that my space is being taken up, always on alert for strangers.



In the year 2022, Jupiter will start performing a very personal tango with my natal Sun. Going in and out of being conjunct and circling back and moving forward. I've never been good at dancing in tandem with another, I both want to lead and don't know how. Same as it ever was.



While lying on my back, trying to envision tight muscles loosening so they won't creep to become a headache, I get an email from our landlord in Michigan. My body remains lifeless, a deep and intense unwillingness to deal with anything erupts from within me. This trip to California has already been fraught with the hemming and hawing of relatives wondering what our next decisions will be, I do not know what more I can carry.

We moved to Michigan because I had been offered a job that quickly took the shape of a Trojan horse, but explaining why it wasn't working would take too much effort and always puts me in a defensive position. I hate having to explain to older generations why it's inappropriate for a boss to tell me he refuses to believe anything I say. That the men in the office get privileges the women certainly don't, that raises are more frequently awarded to those who share the same religion as the CEO, and that women who choose to start a family will see bonuses that others who can't or won't will not. That all it would take is one

person to sue and the whole thing would burn down like a paper house. “But the health insurance,” they will wail from the rafters.

A bud trying to burst out of the ground first takes the shape of our current landlord giving us 60-day notice to a \$300 per month rent increase. The blossoming takes the form of our friends telling us about a rental unit in Woodacre that’s about to open up for the same rate. If we’re paying Bay Area prices, we should at least be in the Bay Area. (Ann Arbor whispers in my ear, “there’s nothing for you here, anyway. Get out while you can.”)

We learn of this morsel of freedom by meeting Bill and Amanda for beer and chicken sandwiches in the Richmond District. My body cannot contain how I feel when I am around them, they each make me feel so alive and seen and whole and loved.

Lukie used to live with them in a house in North Portland where he was nursing the hangover of his own relationship with someone who looked at him and only found things she wanted to tear apart. Bill and Amanda pieced him back together and held him and let him walk their dog and fed him and watched him bloom back into a carefree man of whimsy. And once again, they are offering such a reprieve.

For the rest of the trip, Lukie and I begin to joke that we’re moving to the Bay. Relatives light up at this. It gives me something to talk about other than my failure of fumbling to make it in the media and tech world. It feels like home.



By the start of 2023, Jupiter has meandered its way back into conjunction with my natal sun. We’re almost caught up. The journey is strange and large and confusing. Sometimes it resonates and I feel the world expand and open up to me. And other times it is closed off and awful and I begin to wonder if maybe I’m reading my birth chart wrong, or missing something, or if my ideas are not ones that need expansion. The fear that I really am all rotten begins to take hold of me. Reaching out for a handhold, I casually flip to see what Chani is up to these days.

The brand has disintegrated into something gimmicky and overly simple. Easy enough to roast the sun sign generalizations, but I am always amazed at the number of comments responding with “exactly!” and “so true!”



The bay and hills of California hold Lukie’s living ancestors like the tiled walls hold Jennifer’s spices and tinctures. Being so close to family has always triggered a gag reflex for me, but I am learning that his is one to trust. They provide a love, a space, a patience that I was not afforded in childhood.

This doesn’t mean they escaped the heaviness of life. But it does mean that they handled the ebbs and flows with better timing than my pastor father who insisted on cracking his knuckles to suffocate anything that appeared to disagree with him.

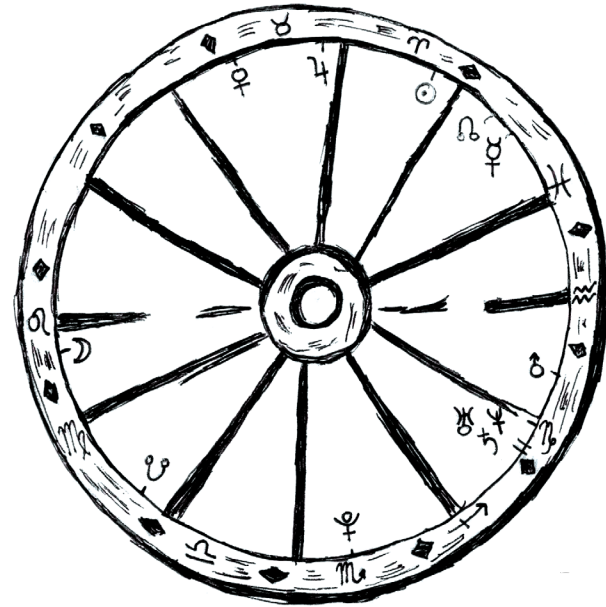
I am perpetually thankful for Lukie’s sister. She and I have a

conversation on the back patio, overlooking Grandma's Garden, discussing the needs of an industry that she can harness but wants to consume me whole. She talks to me from her perch down below, holding her coffee in one hand. I absolutely adore her and her husband. She is an Aries, he is a Leo, what in me is there not to love about them?

By the end of our stay, as we load everything into the rental car to drive up to Portland, we are already scheming. What if I didn't have to feel trapped? What if there was a way out that led to a bright and honeyed future?

I understand now why there was a rush towards these hills of gold, and I desperately hope to strike my own.

# HOUSE TEN



The Tenth House of Career and Public Roles

**Home to:** Jupiter—the beneficiary of growth and expansion. This lends you an idealistic perspective and a frustration when new skills do not come easily. Also home to Venus, a luxurious exaltation. Most importantly, this is home to your Midheaven, where your hunger and passion and desire for career and public praise will fuel you to one day start a personal beef with a famous astrologer under the guise of writing your memoirs.

**In the Sign of Taurus.** It is an impenetrable skill you have that allows you to collect ferociously stubborn friends and lovers. You believe that slow and steady should be sustainable—and refuse to engage anyone in a philosophical debate about it because they are wrong to disagree. You deserve the best. Your loved ones deserve the best. Be careful who you attach yourself to, dear one, as you will find it hard to let go.



There's a certain level of knowledge we can ascertain on our own when digging into astrology. Like good dirt under the nails, it feels like growing something profound and useful. Along this path, we often find the basics—the houses, the planets, their relationships to each other—and then we stumble upon craggier earth. Points and angles and asteroids.

A journey this important isn't something to rush into, and most of us DIY astrologers know that finding a teacher is vital for sustaining a journey forward. Maybe we start with a blog. And then an app.



In 2021, the CHANI app unleashes the next level of premium content. There is an email blast and a corresponding post. However, what this extensive press release fails to mention, is that all the shiny, new information is entirely behind the app's paywall.

I have struggled with including snippets and links to this. Am I being defensive in my need to share this at the top? Is it relevant information to what I'm trying to say? Is it something I've already said in a previous post and I am being too precious towards my audience?

All I know is that this is included in the email blast:

**Not seeing these new features? Try closing and reopening your app. If that doesn't work read how to update the app here.**



I am about ten years old and folded in front of the television. My current favorite outfit is jeans, a boy's t-shirt, a hunter green windbreaker, and my gold Tigger earrings that I tell everyone are really Hobbes. Outside the glass door of the living room, the dark gray forests of New Hampshire bend and break trying to wave at me. I shiver and return my gaze to the flickering lights of the TV. Rosie O'Donnell is on. She is interviewing Tom Cruise, much

to the salivation of the studio audience. I do not like to miss an episode. Rosie makes me feel safe and always gets me to laugh and I am enamored by how unafraid she is to be herself in such a public sphere.

Me and my destined-to-be-queer knobby knees support my wiry elbows as I stare longingly at the hum of the television. The plastered smile of Tom Cruise does not interest me. What begins to sprout and float through my growing mind is what I would say in an interview with Rosie. First, I'd have to have a project I've finished that we can talk about. Maybe I've written a book or have starred in a movie. I always like the concept of the limelight, especially when I am young enough to equate it with singing into a hairbrush in front of my parents' mirror that has lightbulbs down the side like it's a dressing room and nothing else.



Hello sweet angels,

I am a long time Chani reader, listener, and subscriber and I value the work being done here. However, as a copywriter and editor, the use of the term “update the app” really feels disingenuous and misleading. What is really being asked or suggested is that subscribers upgrade their app. There's nothing wrong with a good sales pitch and pointing readers to a call to action is part of running a business. But being inaccurate in the wording can be a slippery slope, especially when it comes to being trustworthy. Astrology is an especially difficult pursuit as it's hard to find reliable sources that resonate and can hold our hands with

empathy and support. And telling readers to update something without being honest about the monetary cost of this action does not build trust (in fact, it has caused myself to discontinue my paid subscription a while back as I felt the branding didn't align with what initially drew me to this platform). I know a lot of changes are brewing, and good things are aligning, and that my unsubscribing is personal and won't change anyone's big picture. But it does give me pause to continue to use Chani as a trusted source moving into the future, and I know I cannot be alone in feeling this way. I hope my gentle suggestion is taken to heart and more transparency can be found in the future. I love what you do and know that you touch a lot of people.

Thank you for the time and space of reading all this! I hope this week treats everyone well and y'all are safe and healthy.

Warmly,

Carissa Jean



I am now eleven and we've packed up all our things and moved across the country to the high deserts of central Oregon. It's the Fourth of July and my father is the associate pastor at a tight knit evangelical church in the dusty outcroppings of Redmond. My dad has caved to my desire to be on stage and allowed me to sing beside him during worship service. I just like closing my eyes and pretending it's all real.

Ever the patriotic daughter, I chose to wear a red, white, and blue tank top with exploding fireworks all over it and a denim skirt. The top is made of a stretchy spandex material and I have maybe outgrown it ever so slightly.

After the entire church service has ended, I am pulled aside by a woman my mom's age with short orange hair that looks like juniper branches blown apart by time. She grips my bony shoulders and tells me that she can see my blossoming nipples through my top and it's entirely inappropriate for a pastor's daughter—an ambassador of the brand—to dress this way.

When I tell my mother this, she shakes her head and rolls her eyes and informs me that woman should have kept her mouth shut. I am always grateful to have a mom who deeply understands children. Still, the black tar of self-criticism has seeped into me.

My next day dream of being interviewed on Rosie is one where I am on the defensive. Rosie, of course, is on my side and agrees that I should never be scrutinized by such mean people. That everyone who feels evil towards me is wrong and will be punished.



Hello there,

Thank you for reaching out. This is an automated message to let you know that we have received your email.

## 2022 Year Ahead workshop bundle and Guidebooks

Three new Workshops have arrived on the CHANI app! Premium subscribers can access the 2022-Year Ahead, Intention Setting and Letting Go workshops on The workshop tab of the CHANI app. Be sure to have the most up-to-date version of the app, so you can access the new content. Learn more about updating the app [here](#). We will send out a push notification when new content is available and recommend closing then reopening the app to refresh it with the new content.

Our 2022 Guidebooks are sold separately in our holiday store as a separate and distinct product offering and an excellent accompaniment to the app.

If you're an app user, we recommend installing the most recent CHANI update (requires iOS 14.2 or higher) that resolves a number of issues.

Click on a question below to learn more:



Once we've moved to the high desert, I end up writing a trilogy of fantasy novels. They're each well over one hundred pages and have a plot that stands up to the scrutiny of my elders. My friends read them and tell me what they think. All the boys in the group say that I make the male characters in the story too stupid. I roll my eyes.

As I grow older, I slowly put my writing away. It was too hot to the touch. Once, I won a poetry contest and ended up missing my chance to be published because I was twelve and it required me to respond to them via the mail or a phone call and I was too terrified to do it.

By the end of high school, I have a voice and a distinct style of writing that grates against the eardrums of my college credit English teacher. He tells me that incomplete sentences are not appropriate for young writers as we don't know what we're doing with them yet. They are forced down his throat anyway.

I then abandon writing for a few decades. It's always there, in small ways, but never what it once was. I guess I thought I would always be able to tap into the fever dream of sitting and writing three novels like my fingers could just create them. Much to my surprise, every time I try to fold in front of a blank page nothing comes out.

After graduating from the IPRC, I take screenwriting classes at the Northwest Film Center. The stories flow out of me in familiar yet different ways. I am in love with the medium, although my teacher tells me I write too close to prose for the industry. It is a good reintroduction to rejection. As that's all there's been for my writing ever since.

My instinct has always been to write. And every path I've tried to go down has been full of so many refusals and let downs. When do you know to stop? At what point do you realize your knuckles are down to the bone and your forehead is blistering apart from banging your head against the wall? And when do you know to take a deep breath, clench your fists, and keep going?



Hi Carissa, Thanks for taking time to reach out with your honest and heartfelt feedback. We really appreciate it and I will be passing it onto the team. I did however want to clear up a few misunderstandings.

When we asked readers to update their app we meant update not upgrade. We have released a new version of the App last night and all users (including premium subscribers) need to update to that version of the app to see the new content. There is no monetary cost associated with doing so. The links at the bottom of the page take you to the Apple app store where you can download the free version of the app. If you wish to upgrade to the paid version you must download the app, navigate to the paywall, select a payment option with prices clearly listed and then confirm your payment via the Apple Pay method you set up on your phone. We take great pains to make sure it is something that would be difficult to do accidentally.

I know that a number of our features are behind a paywall, and we completely understand that frustrates some people - most apps are free and \$11.99 seems pretty steep in comparison. To give you some context for where we are coming from ... (1) We are not VC funded which means we actually have to use the profits from the app to cover the cost of making the app. That's great for you because it means we will never ever sell your data but it also means we can't give everything away for free. (2) We also believe in paying everyone who shares their labor with us a thriving wage. Every smidgeon of content that you see on the



app is created by our mostly QTBIPOC team. We are committed to not just hiring QTBIPOC folks but paying them well and charging \$11.99 per user per month is what it costs us to do that. I hope that helps.

Once again, thank you so much for sending your feedback and have a great day.

- Chani Nicholas Incorporated



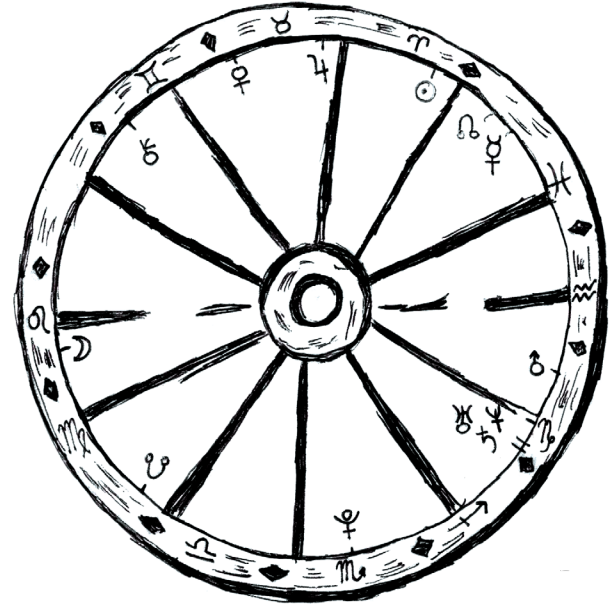
Being stuck between the desire to be known and the fear of being refused is a deep and dark crevice we all must crawl down into. The dark and jagged edges will catch your skin and bruise your knees, but you must climb down to the bottom if you're ever going to know yourself.

But once we get there, way down at the bottom of everything, there is a safety and a knowing. No longer will we feel the need to defend our artistic choices to those who will never understand. We can stand by our decisions to pivot and expand our brand without needing to point to all the other good we do.

To be honest, my fingers have not dug into the final layer of earth to actualize this. I am still somewhere in my descent, disoriented but close.

I hope that helps.

# HOUSE ELEVEN



The Eleventh House of Community and Friendship

\*Friends, there is a content warning on this one. I discuss my sexual assault and dive into some of the more emotionally abusive aspects of how I was raised. Take care when reading and know that I love you and hold you even/especially if you have to tap out of this one.\*

**Home to:** The wounded healer—Chiron. This makes sense as you’ve always struggled to find your place in the crowd. Even as a bold and brash leader, the thrill of doing all the work for the group project wears off fast. Many times you will try to tell people you think are your friends your deepest secrets just to have them say you’re not a real virgin because you were assaulted as a child. People in the church especially will hold this against you. At age 13 you will attend an evangelical conference centered on purity and how important it is to wait until marriage because nobody wants something already broken and none of them will ever say, “of course it’s not your fault this was taken from you without your permission.”

**In the Sign of Gemini.** It’s a bit like a dark vermouth—equal parts warming and slicing. The sign of such optimism and options, so full of all these arrows stuck in your side. A refusal to stop limping forward. A dog perpetually wanting to show strangers its stomach.



In the summer after we graduated high school, a friend of mine got a tattoo on her inner forearm. In blunt yet feminine font it read “improve silence.” When asked about it, she told me it’s a

reminder to think before speaking, that sometimes not saying anything is the wisest option.

During the summer of 2020, I think of her and this tattoo often. I wonder if anyone is mad at her now that silence cannot be improved, only eradicated.



Like a premonition, the sound of something large and full of life is unfolding itself down the dirty streets outside my front window. I am partaking in a new favorite pastime only afforded to me by the ravaging of a pandemic: getting incredibly stoned and curling up on the gray couch in the living room to watch the shadows change.

Lukie and I bicker on how we feel about this couch. The eyesore of its innards slowly unraveling their way out, due to diligent destruction from our cat—his ferocious muscles strewing fibers and baring the upholstery to the bone. But it sits so perfectly in the bay windows. I can rest my head back, prop my feet on a disintegrating arm rest, and trace with my big toe the butterfly bush outside the window, flailing and flopping.

Just like it is impossible to capture the howls and terror of coyotes catching a kill in the woods, there is no way to describe the sound of thousands of bodies diligently marching outside my house. The rumbling, stomping, sweating, chanting, breathing, living, trying-to-keep-surviving masses of my community parade past this window.

Resting my chin on the back of the couch like the family dog, I watch this beautiful display of moving, angry, righteous bodies. There is a woman drenched in the fire and suffering of her ancestors leading the charge. She shouts into the bullhorn: “No justice, no peace.”

“And fuck the police,” I finish from my lounging. To my surprise, the group outside simply repeats the words of justice and peace, completely leaving any disdain for our oppressors out of it.



I am four years old. I come home from the Babysitter and eat at the dinner table with my Pastor Father and Very Pregnant Mother. I tell them what the Two Sons of the Babysitter did to me that day. We do not go to the doctor. We do not go to the police. There is no record of this event outside the walls of me, the boys, and our families. My dad says it is important to maintain a relationship with this Babysitter and her Two Sons as they go to our church. Don't worry, he's talked to the boys about how what they did was wrong.



We are told nature abhors a vacuum. Maybe this is why we tied ourselves to anything we thought would keep us afloat during lockdown. To avoid the eternal internal void. Many flock to social

media, holding our screens closer and closer to our faces, hoping that maybe our phones will unhook an unseen jaw and swallow us. What we do in our isolated landscapes is both visible and invisible.

Here is a garden. A loaf of bread. An experiment in natural dying clothes. Facts about police brutality. A flier to attend a rally, marching from the park by our house all the way to downtown.

We have all seen this flier—the kind that pops in one story and then rapidly circulates to the point that all our friends have the same image pulsing within their icons. One friend namedrops the person organizing the event, claiming it would be rude to this individual if you, a total stranger, did not show up. Another highlights how it is, in fact, our diligent duty and utmost responsibility to attend, to hold hands and take part in this movement. After all, silence is violence.



I am 18 and coming home from a late night makeout session. I am still a virgin, but I've started drinking. My father bursts into my room exclaiming he has stayed up, waiting for me. “Worried sick,” he says. He is concerned for my purity. I point to the four year old buried deep within me. Where was this concern when she was in danger? He tells me that I, a toddler, told him I was okay and didn't want to see a therapist or make any sort of report and he was simply honoring my wishes. I can still remember the outfit I had on the day it happened. He had picked it out.



Once upon a time, in a past both distant and not, a young man walked to the store to buy gatorade and skittles. He did not make it home. His killer is now financially successful.

When the murderer of Trayvon Martin was acquitted, The Man was overly distraught. We blasted every single Public Enemy record he owned, cried listening to Tupac, and shouted the lyrics to “Fuck Tha Police” out the car window.

The Man took me to my first ever Black Lives Matter protest. We walked around City Hall with a handful of others, chanting and shouting. We gathered in the park across the street and listened to speakers—both selected and of the moment. One woman distinctly made eye contact while reminding me that sometimes, white bodies can go where Black bodies cannot, and to remember this when I am in a position of swaying authority.

We leave after an hour and sneak back across the bridge to our favorite bar. We feel good about what we have done. A sense of completion fills my body.

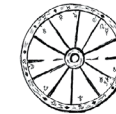
I start reading Angela Davis and bell hooks and Toni Morrison (although, I have always read Toni Morrison). I learn about Gary Webb and how the CIA is responsible for the crack epidemic. I devour books and anecdotes on the redlining of North Portland. I explain it all to my coworkers at the specialty coffee shop in the heart of the most gentrified neighborhood of this fair skinned city.

There is a ravenous excitement to this knowledge. It fits inside me like perfect puzzle pieces and I love that it’s there.

But by the time I am ready to break up with The Man, I have other priorities.



I am 22 and staying with my parents. Family friends come over and try to pick a fight about abortion. When I refuse to engage in their bad-faith argument by walking out of the room, my dad whispers, “I think she’s had one.” It is easier for him to assume things than to get to know me. The worst part is he says this in front of my younger brother which is extra surreal because I know my dad used my childhood experience to give my siblings “the talk.”



In the scum of being forced to sit with any previously overlooked privilege and the intoxicating mortar blasts of white guilt, summer 2020 turns heated. The river is pockmarked with a scum from the nightly tear gassing of residents. Soil tests taken at local schools some years later turn up concerning findings.

Whenever those in other countries ask why we in the United States don’t riot like they do in France, I like to remind them that

secret police kidnapped people during the Portland protests.

But do not worry, Little Beirut will rise again.



I am 33 and my dad waits until the clock strikes midnight and it is no longer my mother's birthday for him to meet his friends and drive down to Washington DC. If you look closely at photographs from January 6, 2021 you might see him. You might not. I tell this to Lukie's family and they do their best to be reassuring but that's not what I want.



In the midst of the summer of unrest, those of us who don't suit up to go into battle every night are often bombarded with social media posts talking about what we can and should do. Very quickly, this becomes a series of white people explaining to other white people what to do to be a good white person.

One sentiment that begins to wrap around the jugulars of many of my loved ones is the concept of educating our familial elders when they behave or speak with racist intonation. That it is our sacred duty to point out the error of their ways, that our silence in these matters is indeed violence.

There is another pernicious ideology. Anyone who refuses to

attempt conversation with these dangerous family members is labeled as part of the problem. That we are giving up instead of pushing forward. Our understanding of the boundaries and beliefs within our familial units is up for debate in an effort to push us outside our comfort zones.

The hands of Pastor Dave begin to move toward my neck. This feeling is a familiar one.



It is possible for my father to be a very bad man. He is not my responsibility to fix.

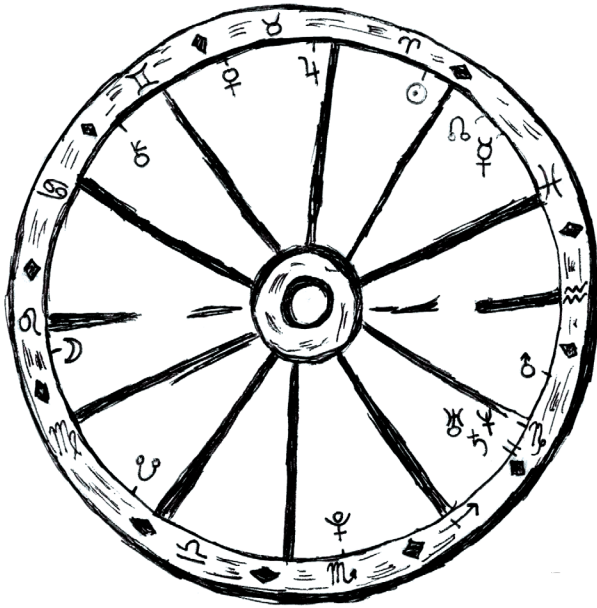
It is possible that my refusal when my father tries to ensnare me into a debate is seen as condoning his beliefs. He will not listen to me.

It is possible I will never have a father. He cannot give me what I long for.

I must mourn the loss of a parent, while being told by strangers and lovers that I am not doing enough in the fight for racial equality. My choice to let my father make his own mistakes, have his own opinions, hurt others with his own, adult actions is seen as a betrayal to my community.

There is no one here to tell me "of course it is not your fault this was taken from you without your permission."

# HOUSE TWELVE



The Twelfth House of Hidden  
Sorrow and Behind the Scenes Plans

**Home to:** No planets, points, or asteroids. A simple void with currents as vast as the ocean. A murky darkness that is both comforting and terrorizing. Dip your head into it and come up washed clean and whole.

**In the Sign of Cancer.** Your first and earliest Cancerian friend is Stephanie. You meet when you are both ten and had your lives disrupted in ways that left you all shaken. Both of you were Conflict Managers on the elementary school playground and your chrysalis childhood bodies felt everything. Yours mostly felt anger. Hers mostly felt sorrow. You collect and hold each other.



## Elderberry Syrup<sup>1</sup>

- 3 cups ripe, fresh, black or blue elderberries - stems and unripe berries discarded (or 1 ½ cups dried elderberries)
- 3 cups water
- 1 ¼ cups raw honey

Place berries and water in a large pot and bring to a boil over medium heat.

Lower to a simmer, uncovered, until contents are reduced by half (about one hour, but if things seem to be moving too fast, partially cover the pot).

Remove pot from heat and let cool for at least 30 minutes or until

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.growforagecookferment.com/elderberry-syrup/>

about room temp.

Strain out the elderberries, pressing as you go to release all their juices (use what you have, but a cheesecloth is recommended).

Discard berries however you see fit—extra points for composting.

You should have about half a quart of liquid at this point.

Add the raw honey while the liquid is still lukewarm—stir until fully dissolved.

Pour into your chosen vessels, seal them tight. Let cool completely. Store in the fridge for up to 6 months (conversely, you can place this in the freezer until you forget that you have it and wonderfully discover it in the height of fever mania).



Have you ever encountered a spiritual portal? There is a route to get to my home where you dip off the main road and are instantly shuttled into a tunnel of trees bending over to welcome you, the sun peeking through limbs reaching to cup your face and kiss your forehead. On the other side of this entrance is the winding road to the top of the hill where the house nestles. The second or third time driving up this, Lukie and I herd a pack of deer because they couldn't figure out how to get out of our way and we looked at each other and laughed and laughed and laughed.

There is also the home of Amanda and Bill, where upon entering

you will be handed something you didn't know you needed. A book, a meal, a baby. When Amanda cooks for you the entire heavens part and your soul is nourished in a way that reminds you of home and being with your mother. Often at this house there's an assortment of pets, some of them belong there, some of them don't. Community care includes things like watching your sister's dog while she works a twelve hour day.

The food bank is less than a mile from our house and in the middle of winter we receive eggs, citrus, and avocados because we live in a place of bounty. This overflowing cornucopia of luxury allows Lukie and his best friend to day dream and get to know the land in such a way that cocktail recipes and tinctures and special brews begin to emerge.

On Christmas Eve the two year old will escape from her bedroom because she knows everyone is hanging out without her and she will pose in front of the tree as a baby angel. On New Year's Eve your friend's husband, who is originally from Italy, will ask you, "The ball in New York, why does it drop?" and there's something about explaining this strange and wonderful ritual that feels like a communion you never got to have.

When you live in a spiritual portal you'll find yourself naturally surrounded by people who love and accept you and you love and accept them and you all hold your own boundaries with grace and care. There is so much space to change, heal, weep.



Before leaving Michigan, Lukie and I go to Buffalo to visit my best friend and her son. Her son in particular is enamored with Uncle Lukie in a way that gives me hope for a tender type of masculine future.

This friend and I complete each other's puzzle pieces. She is the youngest daughter of five and I am the oldest daughter of four. In me she has a younger sibling to nurture, and in her I get to experience being shown things for the first time.

In her house it is always warm, even in the winter. Jars of prepared preserves live within the limited shelving space and her fridge is always full of hidden treasures. Lukie and her son are in the other room smashing cars together while she and I perform a ritualistic whispering to one another. Without looking up from slicing tomatoes, she asks if I have heard from The Man recently.

She was friends with him first. Before he even met me. But their friendship has become frayed and split over time. Her life is full of her son and everything that goes into being a single mother. His life is full of the desire to have everyone be available to him when he needs them. Their convergence has now become a rupture.

Without returning her nonexistent gaze, I tell her I have blocked him for a while now. Raising an eyebrow, she knows something. Pausing what she's doing, her eyes finally meet mine and she's tilling the internal soil of wondering if I should know the truth she holds. My mouth does the reassuring. Yes, of course I want to know what's going on! I will be fine, I swear, no matter what it is (but my fear is that he has died).



Stephanie and I still send each other daily messages. Two elder crows tossing pebbles over the mountain to share. They are mostly of our cats, but sometimes they are mourning the ending of something and not being ready for the beginning of what's next.

I am incredibly thankful for a friendship that insists on the rest of the world slowing down to hear us out. That our experiences are harsh and everyone should look at them and feel them too. One of my favorite ways to refer to those lucky enough to be born within the Sun sign of Cancer is: they are always willing to bury the hatchet, but they will certainly remember where it is buried.



Never fear, The Man is still alive. He simply got married, something he swore he would never do with me. It was what attracted his body to mine—a mutual unwillingness to participate in cultural norms passed down through nihilistic paternalism. But then I stopped being in my young 20s and his perspective of all things changed.

When my best friend tells me this news, I do what anyone would do upon hearing it. I hold it in the moment, put it somewhere for safe keeping, and decide to have a wonderful evening. We circle the table and eat and sit patiently when the toddler has a



meltdown and then retire to the playroom so we can put on Peppa Pig and let his tiny system cool down. After he is sound asleep, my best friend returns to the guest room and sits on the edge of the bed and we talk about life and her sobriety and we tiptoe and then loudly joke about how I am moving so far away from her again. We stop and go to bed before the real tears come.

When I return home I get a little bit drunk and look up The Man on social media for the first time in a year or two. And there they are: photographs of a backyard wedding, his mother and step father in the front row and I am filled with a balloon of phantom longing.

The Man looks mostly the same as I remember him, and his bride is gorgeous. There is hand holding, vow saying, and a sprint towards the back gate. I envision The Man wanting to be done with the whole thing and ready to walk out of the yard and enter into his new life. I sense his restlessness through the photos and the distance of time. His bride holds his hand and smiles.

I hope that they too have found their spiritual portal.

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Carissa Jean is a screenwriter, sensitive poet, and maker of zines. With a talent for getting to the bottom of what scares her, she writes with profound and often brutal honesty. She is a graduate from the IPRC and has had photographic works published in *Girls Like Us* and *Grimoire*. You can find her annoying her partner and their ornery cat in Woodacre, California.



@charmingandferocious