

## ON HOLD

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They reply by mid-April. I open the online application and three things happen: I discover that NYU and UPenn have closed my application with no offer. I almost free fall into some unnamable depth when next to Columbia reads ‘On Hold’. I have been placed on some God-forsaken wait list that summer research program coordinators will insert into a nondescript beige folder which will then be forgotten on their desks for weeks, further adding to the heap of rejected applications slaughtered with bloody ink. I know myself: I’ll be stuck gnawing at the walls while they tackle the long list of ecstatic students answering that 917 area code with tears further cracking their already broken way of screaming yes to such an amazing opportunity. I freeze by the computer, waiting for someone to notice they way I’m not breathing, the way I’m turning indigo in the face, the way I stay absolutely still until spectacular crimson comets explode on the screen and I pass out over the keyboard—but I’m alone in the computer room and nobody notices the dirty puddle I’ve melted into.

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*Summer research*, the Honors Program directors repeat throughout the semester, *summer research*, *summer research*, *don’t fucking forget to apply for summer research opportunities and bring your graduate career that much closer to reality!* I apply in February, but it takes two whole months for them to write back their decision, because summer program coordinators are busy people and we students have midterms to tend to—we shouldn’t worry too much about waiting by the computer, praying and hoping for an escape valve from this God-forsaken island for two months in the Northeast, preferably New York City. No, we students are successful in our own way, we have our own merits, many of which program

coordinators might be oblivious to. We need not stay up night after night in case they call and eat our nails down to the cuticles, scour every inch of our apartments with Lysol and elbow grease, disembowel lambs for the gods rumbling in their Olympus hoping they strike us down with an acceptance letter, search for the universe's unmistakable signs that Luck has finally tipped in our favor—just like I do.

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I trudge through classes hocked up on my anxiety pills. I drunkenly answer the professors' questions. Every fifteen minutes I pull out my phone, log onto the online application, and suffer from three seconds of palpitations. Every fifteen minutes I pack a single backpack with which I would travel to New York City for a whole summer and conduct research on *Poeta en Nueva York*. Every fifteen minutes I sit on my uncle's stoop on 15th and 7th, fan the half-moon sweat stains on my Puerto Rican flag mesh shirt, and curse at the heat and the taxis and the summer that just won't end. Every fifteen minutes I'm stuck at my grandmother's house for two whole months because I run out of money after maxing out my credit cards, and my roommates can't afford the rent without me so they're also stuck at their parents' thanks to me, so I scratch at the walls in distress until the next semester starts and the directors once again emphasize the pride and value of making summer research an integral part of our undergraduate career. And I again start to feel like an idiot with the phone hanging by my ear, teeth grating against the muzak, on hold for over twenty-four more hours because God forbid I let go of my phone for a second.

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It's Thursday and my roommates are off drinking and rolling blunts without me. I can't afford these binges anymore, I tell them, maybe you guys should just go on without me, I have a very limited supply of money and there's no way I can buy another dose of X, I dropped too much acid on Spring Break, anyways, and I still haven't set up the water bill and the landlord is about to evict us so I should get on that, anyways, just thought you guys should know—oh, and I might not be able to pay rent next month because I've been put on hold for a summer research opportunity in Columbia—why I still have to set up the water bill despite the possibility I might not be enjoying the water I'm paying for, I can't really tell—so maybe I should just stop buying food and filter-feed till summer arrives in case I have to travel to New York City for two whole months, can you believe it?, yes, I'm still waiting on their reply, do you think I should check? I don't really tell them that. They walk out while I pretend to be knocked out by my pills on the couch. Once they turn off the light for my benefit, kiss me on the cheek and wish me the

highest of dreams, once I hear the front gate close me off from the world and the objects in the house turn towards me in spine-tingling anticipation, only then do I check the online application.

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First thing I will do once I arrive in New York City: cash in that five-thousand dollar stipend and go shopping, travel down 5th Avenue with my uncle whistling at boys and trying on bright-yellow tanks and overpriced gold bangles, finally buy the new MacBook and not have to hole myself up in the library's most frigid corner hoping for acceptable computer speed. I pack my one backpack with three thong underwear, in case I feel sexy, two Bermudas and matching tanks, in case of the heat, and an extra pair of Vans. I hug my grandmother and soak her shoulder with bittersweet tears, crying because I hope she makes it throughout the summer without me living so close to her. She's getting so old so fast, she can't help but cry because of the trouble she knows I'll get myself into in New York City; she can't help but relive the past when she hugs my uncle goodbye in the eighties and he comes back to the island infected with HIV and addicted to crystal meth. I promise her not to come back with something incurable, I whisper my desperation into the gray nimbus rumbling over her head, but she won't answer, or doesn't hear me at all. I nearly have a panic attack when we take off but the pot brownie kicks in and for the five-hour flight I dream with my roommates scouring the island looking for beaches to skinny-dip in at midnight, with my fellow students conducting summer research also arriving at New York City biting their nails down to their cuticles, with the program coordinators hiding behind closed oak doors at Columbia ready to greet us with our welcome packages and our dorm room access keys and the fattest check I'll ever see in my lifetime. I spark the green, take another icy hit and click on the next episode of *Third Rock from the Sun*. My roommates are working and I'm stuck in the living room, sinking into the couch and checking my phone: still on hold.

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A fierce blaze envelops the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Columbia University. Summer research program coordinators set the building ablaze after receiving too many emails from Honors Program directors from across the globe asking about their pride and joys' applications being put on some God-forsaken, probably misplaced wait list. The blaze envelops most of Morningside Heights and South Bronx, and the university, despite centuries of stability, disintegrates in a tower of ash. I walk through the rubble looking for survivors, looking for a reason as to why I have spent the rest of my money on a plane ticket to New York City to knock down the summer research program coordinators'

door, when I'm greeted by walls of fire and the soft curling of corpses under mountains of bent steel and glass and marble. I realize I'm walking on train tracks and sit down thinking I am nothing but a speck of dust in a giant's eye. By sheer luck, a sizzling breeze throws at my feet my printed application, burnt halfway, with two words still a brighter, bolder red than the embers surrounding me. I start screaming and my professor asks me, in his calmest French, to please exit the room. I look down so that the rest of the class doesn't notice the redness, the weeks of insomnia hanging from my lids, and walk out, unblinking.