

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: SOMERVILLE STORIES

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"Somerville Stories" is a collection of six short stories set in Cambridge and Somerville, Massachusetts. They revolve around themes of work and the communities that form through it, relationships and their dissolution, and how the routine and mundane shape life. Their protagonists come from a variety of backgrounds and walks of life, but share a common experience of young-ish adulthood under late capitalism.

SOMERVILLE STORIES

by

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## **Artist's Statement**

When I was living in Somerville, Massachusetts, any time my Lyft driver was a local guy over the age of 50, it was pretty much required that he say at some point, "You know, we used to called it Slummerville." Used to: Somerville is pretty gentrified now. It's a place with fancy bars and coffee shops, law firms, universities, bespoke tattoo parlors, artisanal donut shops. But not completely. There are still thriving Brazilian and Nepalese neighborhoods, still corner stores and pizza joints, still zine swaps and house shows. Despite having practically no buildings over three stories, Somerville is the densest municipality in the country. The wealth of stories in its narrow streets of wood-frame multifamily homes is enormous.

I lived in Somerville from 2012 to 2020, from the ages of 20 to 28. I was a transplant, like a lot of people who live there. I worked at a bookstore, a law firm, a start-up space, a science museum, a coffeeshop. I've always written, and I was writing that whole time, but doing it alone in my attic apartment, storing up my impressions and experiences like a squirrel preparing for winter.

It's been during my MFA that those acorns have started to shape themselves into a book. With a little distance and perspective I started to see the common themes running through my own writing—localness, labor, routine, the effort to make meaning within those things, relationships and the lonely spaces around them. Those threads have coalesced into a collection on Somerville and a certain type of precarious, transient millennial life there. The characters in these stories are all looking for something, but have work in an hour. They are bartenders and tattoo artists, parents and partners, artists and drifters. They're people I've known or people I've

been or people that rose up out of the city in my mind.

I've always struggled with brevity in my writing. There's so *much* in the world and I try to get all of it onto the page. It's just in the last few years at Maryland that I feel I've come into my own as a short story writer and learned how to take that big amorphous mass of experience and turn it into something focused and sharp.

## Sausage Gets Made

She was discharged on a Thursday and went back to work on Monday. Since getting home she'd been waking up at four or five every morning, covered in sweat and racing with energy, ravenously hungry. This was not normal for her. She arrived at her company's Kendall Square high rise at six, early enough to be the first there and to spare herself from having to make an entrance. She walked through the empty lobby and swiped her ID card at the elevator turnstiles and went up to the seventh floor. She walked down the hallway past the plate glass walls of other offices, the motion-detecting lights flickering on behind her, empty swivel chairs behind dead black monitors in the dark.

Her desk was one of twenty in her company's office, in a corner at the back since she dealt with confidential information and the management didn't want anyone seeing anything over her shoulder. There was a vase of flowers and a box of chocolates sitting on it. The attached card said *Welcome back, Michaela!—from all of us at Intellicycle*, although obviously it was from Sophie.

She moved the flowers aside. Her desk was otherwise exactly as she'd left it: a stack of paper coffee cups stained watercolor brown, paperclips, used staples, crumbs, legal pads and post-its and planners and colored pens, the wreckage of all the different systems of organization she'd tried to impose on herself. She opened her laptop. She had 186 unread emails. She opened the box of chocolates. She balled up the slip of paper that said what each one was in her fist and worked her way from one side of the box to the other, the flavors all blending together: peanut butter and cherry cordial, tangerine and mint. She replaced the lid and set the empty box by the

flowers. She'd keep it there for a week or so, as cover. She knew normal people didn't eat chocolates this way.

She turned her attention back to the emails. She started with the newest and found that her energy was for them was, actually, boundless, once she got going it was like a woven finger trap between her brain and the screen, a tunnel that only got tighter if she tried to pull back. She wasn't usually like this at all. It was like having someone else's mind for a while. She thought this must be what being on drugs felt like, must be why people did them.

A few of the developers kept weird hours and trickled in after she did; they went to their desks without acknowledging her. After that the ordinary early birds started showing up, Sophie among the first of them. She saw Michaela through the glass wall and started heading for her before she was even in the office. She looked the same as always in jeans and a black scoop-neck T-shirt that must have been some special brand that hung particularly well. She had a blue paisley head wrap holding her afro back today; she seemed to have an endless supply of colorful wraps. When she was close enough not to have to raise her voice she said, "How are you feeling?" She sounded like she genuinely wanted to know.

"Oh," Michaela said. "Much better. Thank you. And thank you for the flowers." Michaela was Sophie's boss, and Sophie was the company's HR coordinator, so she'd been the only person Michaela talked to directly about the situation. Even to her Michaela was vague about why exactly she'd been in the hospital, although Michaela suspected she'd figured out what kind of hospital stay it was anyway. Why would Sophie be so perfectly circumspect about asking for no information at all, if she'd thought Michaela just had the flu or appendicitis or cancer?

"Well, we missed you. Really."

"Thank you. Really."

"I'm going to go put my lunch in the fridge," Sophie said. "Do you want me to bring you back a coffee or anything?"

"I'm good. But thanks."

It was nice of her to ask, though. Michaela usually drank a continuous stream of sugary mochas from the touchscreen machine in the kitchen instead of eating real food. Sophie only ever drank green tea, from a heavy ceramic mug she'd made herself (she made ceramics as a hobby, she'd told Michaela during her first week.) She brought home-cooked lunches to work with her every day, curries and stews and pastas that always smelled heavenly. She'd eat them at her desk, right across from Michaela's, never spilling anything on the spiral-bound planner she always had open on her desk. She kept neatly color-coded agendas in it, which she neatly crossed items off of at regular intervals through the day.

While Sophie was in the kitchen the Sales Director came in with a large box from the artisanal donut shop on the ground floor. "Donuts for Kyle's birthday," he announced to no one in particular.

Michaela was still starving. She got up and went to get a donut, a thing the size of a softball and heavy with grease. The Sales Director nodded to her and a Lead Software Engineer said, "hey." As she was heading back to her desk, Sophie came back in.

"Do you want a donut?," Michaela said. "They're for Kyle's birthday."

"Oh, no thanks," Sophie said, holding her mug of tea in both hands. "I'm actually, uh. I'm vegan. They do look good though."

"Huh. I didn't know." Now that she thought about it, she'd never seen Sophie take any of



the donuts or cookies or pizza that people were always bringing in. "How did I not know that?"

Sophie shrugged. "I try not to push it in people's faces too much. You know. I don't want to be one of *those* vegans."

They were going in the same direction, so they walked awkwardly back to their desks together.

So if Sophie wasn't one of *those* vegans, why did Michaela still feel so watched and so judged as she mashed the soft sweet dough in her mouth and slid it down her throat?

"There is a small animal inside of me," Michaela said to the psychiatrist, poorly framed in the screen of her computer. "I can feel it moving around and poking at my insides."

"Can you see this animal? What kind of animal is it?"

"No. It's a metaphor. I picture a raccoon." She added, "Sometimes I hear people talking when there's no one around. But I know that can't be real. And I can never tell what they're saying anyway."

They psychiatrist's microphone thumped continuously as he typed, even when she wasn't talking. He said, "Let's bump you up to 30 milligrams of the Abilify."

When the appointment was done she closed her laptop and sat at her desk for a minute. It was mostly dark already, light that seemed like dust. She wandered into the living room. Her apartment was in a new building that looked like a 3D computer image, right next to the Davis Square T station, two stops from work in Cambridge. It was a two bedroom she shared with another woman she found on Facebook, but the roommate was almost always at her boyfriend's place. Michaela had told her she was out of town for the last two weeks, and the roommate had

no follow-up questions.

She sat on the couch. It got darker. She pulled up Wikipedia on her phone and searched for *vegan*. She wanted to know where the word itself came from. She learned that it was invented by a guy named Donald Watson in 1944 and was originally a play on words: "the beginning and end of vegetarian." The first meeting of the Vegan Society had about ten attendees, in an apartment in London. They started a newsletter to share recipes, tips for navigating life, enraged screeds. For decades they existed as a handful of far-flung subscribers, doing a thing everyone around them considered insane. Their slogan, on the front page of each newsletter, was "advocating living without exploitation."

She felt uneasy. She felt a prickling up the back of her neck. She pulled up Candy Crush instead. Candy Crush could be counted on to stop feelings.

The energy only got worse. The inside of her head felt pressurized, a force pushing on the backs of her eyes, splitting pain. She jiggled her knee. She had to focus each eye individually on her spreadsheets.

Kyle stopped by her desk and said, "You told the bank to stop payment on the shipment of batteries from Huangwei, right?"

Tim said, "I need those forecast reports for an investor meeting tomorrow. How are they coming?"

Katie said, "Which tax entity do I put on vendor invoices? Can you show me how to send a vendor invoice?"

Andrew said, "Do you know why my healthcare deduction was bigger this month?"

The thought of food was sickening, so she just ate fistfuls of Skittles from the dispensers in the office kitchen. Her palms were covered in sticky, rainbow-colored spots. She knew the sugar couldn't be helping the queasiness or the headache but couldn't stop. She was adrift on a vibrating sea of sugar.

Sophie said, "I brought this whole giant thing of hummus from home and it's way more than I can eat. Do you want some?"

"Oh, I'm good right now. But thank you."

After Sophie was gone Michaela considered that she probably suggested hummus because she thought Skittles weren't a great idea. Michaela tried to rub the colored spots off her hands and just smeared them all together. She typed into Google *are Skittles vegan*. The answer was no, they contained gelatin. Gelatin, she read, was the collagen rendered out of animal tendons, mostly pigs. She was eating corn syrup and pig tendons by the fistful. She rubbed her hands again.

Sophie came back with her hummus and ate it at her desk, working away. Michaela kept rubbing her hands. She'd get the traces of Skittles off, she thought, but soon after she finally did she got up and got some more.

"I feel like the earth is going to open up and swallow me," Michaela said. "Literally like the ground is moving underneath me and might drop out. I feel like there are bees inside my veins."

Her psychiatrist said, "Would you say you feel restless, uneasy, or unable to sit still?"

"Yes. I would say that."

"That's called akathisia. It's a common side effect of the Abilify. We'll get you on some

Remeron, it will help with that. Be sure to take it at night, it can cause drowsiness."

She walked around her apartment until late at night, pacing from her bedroom at one end to the front door at the other. She reminded herself to breathe. She got a text from her mom—*how are you doing sweetie? Did the pharmacy get those new medications from the hospital?*—and wrote back—*Yeah they sorted it out and I got everything. I think it's helping. I'm doing a lot better now.* She did not know one way or the other if this was true. She just couldn't think of anything else to say.

Now she could barely stay awake. The day was wall-to-wall meetings, constantly jerking her head in and out of sleep, with the founder, with the sales director, with the operations director, with the head of engineering. Whenever anyone wasn't sure who needed to be at a meeting they always invited Michaela. Whatever it was, it probably involved money, and Michaela should probably be there. In the first meeting of the day the founder had brought a box of gigantic cookies and conducted the rest of the meeting with dark, sticky chocolate on his teeth, feet kicked up on the table. They were all like this. They all kicked up their feet, wore slim khakis and untucked button-downs, had short-trimmed beards, made jokes and pop culture references. Michaela ended up eating cookies all morning, one per meeting, so as not to seem weird. She was still ravenous all the time. Her pants were already getting tight. She was half asleep and everyone needed something and she didn't know what else to do, so she ate cookies. They had the texture of a thick, oily modeling clay and made her stomach feel like an abscess.

When she finally got out of the meetings Sophie was waiting for her.

"I didn't see you all day," she said. "I didn't want to overwhelm you while you were still

adjusting to being back, but I had a few questions that came up while you were gone and some of them I think we need to address sooner rather than later."

She was holding a legal pad with QUESTIONS FOR MICHAELA written across the top in block capitals. Each item had its own line. It appeared to be several pages long.

"Oh," Michaela said. "Oh, oh, oh."

Across the room, the founder stood up on a desk. He climbed up awkwardly and the desk wobbled, the gesture not quite what he'd probably imagined it being. "We got the funding!" he shouted, raising his arms like a boxing champion. "We got it!"

Michaela found herself participating in a general cheer for the funding. This would be more work. This would be another mountain of work for her, on top of everything she was still catching up on. Not that the company didn't need it. She was pretty sure no one but her and the founder knew how precarious it really was, how little cash they actually had at any given time.

"I tell you what, let's all head down to Seabirds. First round's on Intellicycle. Hell, every round's on Intellicycle."

He jumped down from the desk and appeared to tweak his knee. Everyone funneled towards the door. Michaela looked around for Sophie but she was already gone, part of the throng heading to the bar.

Michaela wasn't supposed to drink with her medications, even before the hospital. She still did occasionally, but would become red-faced and sloppy after just one or two. She would say things she didn't meant to say. Usually she tried to keep a pretty tight lid on what she said, since she so often said the wrong thing, things that people uncomfortably ignored. She went back to her desk.

She stayed there working until eight, not getting much done but unable to stop. The lights turned off around her and she worked in the thin nervous glow of her computer screen. Out in the hallway a young man with large headphones came through with a cart to collect trash. He opened the door to the office and went around to the different trash cans. He didn't see her until he was almost done, and he jumped.

"Oh," he said. "Sorry."

"It's fine."

"I'll get that," he said, gesturing to her trash can. She scooted her chair a little.

He went on his way, finished the office, went back into the hall. He leaned on his rolling trash cart for support, hanging his head a little. She tried to snap herself into focus. Some people had actually exhausting jobs, she told herself.

The professionals always told her she needed friends. That she needed more people around her, a support network. They offered vague suggestions about taking up hobbies or going to meet-ups, which just felt insulting. She didn't know when she was supposed to be cultivating these hobbies, between work and appointments and her constant losing battle against the petty chaos and disorganization of her life. The meet-ups she'd tried going to had been tortured experiments in trying to think of the right thing to say, and how little interest she held for anyone who didn't need something from her. There was just something kind of wrong with her, that people avoided. She tried to tell herself this without emotion. She'd known other people like that before. The world has off-putting people in it, and logic says sometimes that person is going to be you.

She lay on her bed after work, tapping into her notes app. Her psychiatrist had suggested

she keep a mood journal. *There is a giant machine hovering right above me*, Michaela wrote.

The silence pressed in on her ears. *It is the size of a space ship and full of moving parts whirring very close to my face. I can't see it in the dark. The only noise it makes is a humming sound that never changes so it doesn't sound like anything. Sometimes I can feel a cold wind coming off it.*

Sophie met her coming out of a meeting, holding her QUESTIONS FOR MICHAELA pad.

"Hey," she said, "do you want to go to lunch to figure all this out? Get somewhere these clowns can't bother you?"

"Yes," Michaela said. "Yes yes yes."

They went to Seabirds, the gastropub on the building's ground floor, next to the donut shop. It was where everybody went out for drinks on Fridays, and sometimes Thursdays and Wednesdays. It had exposed ceilings and giant pop-art on the walls and tiny little bar stools that always swiveled you off of them.

"I can put this on the company card as a 'check-in,' so get whatever you want," Michaela said.

"Screw it, then," Sophie said. "I'll have a margarita. Intellicycle hasn't got student loans to worry about. It doesn't owe its soul to Boston University."

"The founder went there too," Michaela said, "so don't be so sure."

Sophie laughed. Michaela hardly ever made people laugh.

"Screw it," Michaela said, "I'll have a margarita too." It was a terrible idea, she knew, with everything she had to do that afternoon. Sophie could think she was fun, though, a person to get margaritas at lunch with.

Sophie ordered a veggie burger. Michaela, feeling sheepish, got one too. It wasn't bad and she could practically feel the vegetables nourishing the cells of her body. They worked through the items on the list. Sophie had been somehow managing the most essential of Michaela's job duties for a few weeks, but there were things outside her expertise. Michaela felt inflated with pride at all the things she knew. She knew so many things about this company, how it worked, where its money was.

"Oh, stopping bank payments," Sophie said. "Kyle said the charge wouldn't go through for a few weeks but I didn't know how to do it."

"Yeah, that's not on you. I'll take care of that." The margarita was already having its effect. She wanted to break a barrier. She wanted to climb over a fence. She didn't care about bank details. "I remember from your resume—you studied philosophy at BU, right? Or was it psychology?"

"Philosophy. Yeah."

Michaela tried to compose herself to seem smarter. "What made you want to study that?"

Sophie shrugged, self-deprecating. "I guess I just wonder why things are the way they are, you know? Like, we take so many things for granted about how the world works that—when you step back and look at them they're kind of insane, you know? How did anyone come up with monetary systems? Why does health insurance even exist? And I'm kind of, I guess I'm interested in how you reconcile the big picture questions, about God and meaning and stuff like that, with the day-to-day shit we deal with all the time. I wrote my thesis on chocolate."

"Chocolate?"

"Yeah. Because you know, cheaply produced chocolate is a really terrible industry. It



causes mass deforestation in, in Africa, there are huge problems with child labor and like, exploitive, like slave labor, is what it is. But then you get to the consumer end in America, where people are facing different kinds of oppressive situations, and cheap chocolate's one of the only luxuries a lot of people can afford. So I used chocolate in particular as kind of a case study, on the ethics of consumer choice and global supply chains and stuff. Because chocolate's so emotional too, you know, like if you told me I could never have chocolate again I'd jump out a window. But it's all complicated."

"That..." Michaela said. "That's so interesting." Some of what Sophie said sounded vaguely familiar: something across her social media feed about M&Ms and human rights violations. She hadn't paid a lot of attention. She felt suddenly, acutely ashamed.

"What did you study?" Sophie said.

"Accounting. I did my thesis on annuities. No one ever knows what annuities are. You really don't need to."

"Still, it's important work. You're way more important here than I am."

"You're super important," Michaela said. "You're just underpaid. Seriously, you are."

Sophie shrugged and kept her face studiously neutral. "It's better than when I was working for a non-profit at least."

"It's like you were saying, though, it's all made up anyway. I got into accounting because I like numbers, but none of it needs to exist. I just do it because I have to do something."

"Well, that's what my whole thesis was about. Is maybe it is made up, but you've still got to live, you know, you still live here."

She knew meat was subject to industrial supply chains just like everything else was. She knew that any information she looked up about it would disgust and horrify her. She wasn't wrong: she quickly learned that pigs sound a lot like people when they scream.

She wanted to know if there were industrial farms in Massachusetts, near her. There were, she found, but it was impossible to find their exact locations. You could check census data and see how many factory farms were in the state and what counties they were in, but search for farms and all that came up were small, ethical, free-range places that did not supply the actual meat that was in grocery stores. The real farms, the ones that everyone's food came from, that Michaela's food came from, had no internet presence, no maps listing, no branding or public persona. They were invisible, invisibly sucking live animals in and spitting dead muscle out, neatly wrapped in polystyrene foam and plastic.

"Kyle," she said, trailing after him in a hallway, "Kyle, do you have an order confirmation for the Huangwei batteries? Because I need that to tell the bank to stop payment."

"Walk with me," he said. "We're going to the fab lab. Have you been to the fab lab?"

"No, but—I really just need an email—"

"You should come see the fab lab, Michaela! It's where the magic happens!"

"I—OK, I guess."

He went downstairs, gathering people as they went. They all piled into Connor's CRV, double-belted together. Connor started taking them through Cambridge across the bridge into Boston, further down into Dorchester. The houses got smaller and shabbier, the businesses had handmade signage, the roads were pocked and wide and hostile to pedestrians. The pedestrians

there were got darker in color. It was a thing she knew about Boston, that it was a sharply segregated city, but she hardly ever went anywhere besides the loop from work to home in white Cambridge and hardly ever observed it for herself.

"It's this best kept secret," Kyle said. "You can get warehouse space in the actual city for dirt cheap here. The place we use used to be a molasses plant. Molasses! There's all this reclaimed industrial space down here, it's great."

She made associations from high school history class: triangle trade, a hellish industrial accident. She hadn't said anything for a while but couldn't think of anything. She tried to think of what Sophie would say. She couldn't, so she tried to think of what she would say to Sophie.

"Is it 'reclaimed' if you never lived here," she said, "or did you just 'claim' it?"

Nobody said anything for a second. Her insides twisted. That had been the wrong thing to say. On panicked consideration she didn't really think she was wrong, but that didn't help the panic. Now everyone had to figure out what to do with her. She had killed the mood. They would not invite her next time.

"We're here," Connor said, pulling into a battered asphalt lot alongside a big box of a building.

They went in. It was like a cathedral inside, high ceilinged and full of light from the tall, paneled windows. A handful of the fab team were there—people like Kyle and Connor and Tim but wearing thick canvas aprons. The place was sparsely scattered with equipment, welding benches and laser cutters and 3D printers, a lathe, things with glass hoods that Michaela couldn't identify, and piled with parts. Canvas tubs that looked like giant laundry hampers stood around the walls and in the middle of the wide open room, full of pipes, bearings, circuitboards, gaskets,

bolts, wire, aluminum sheet metal.

"This is where the magic happens," Kyle said.

He and the others went to talk to some of the fab lab team, who were working on opened up electronic bicycle wheels, soldering things inside them. Michaela went to the tub of circuit boards. She was pretty sure circuit boards were full of minerals that had some kind of tension around them, stuff that was driving violence in the Congo, or poisoning people in central Asia. She didn't know exactly. She never knew exactly: most of her understanding of the world, she recognized, was formless dread. She should look it up, she thought. She picked a circuit board up and felt the bumps and rough pins on its surface, the plastic edges. She tossed it back into the others with a clink. She dug her hand into the tub of them, the sharp points tugging at her skin. She dragged her hand through, a feeling like digging through legos. Every one of them mined by somebody. Every one of them put together, probably in a factory in China, in factories with bars over the windows so the workers could not throw themselves out of them.

Someone said, "What are you doing?"

"Oh," she said, elbow-deep in circuit boards. "I was just—there are so many of them."

"Don't touch those," one of the aproned men said, hurrying over. "The oils in your skin."

"Sorry," she said. "Sorry, sorry, sorry." She pulled her arm out.

Kyle looked at her strangely. "Do you want a tour," he said, "or should we just head back?"

Back at her desk she watched the scratches and welts on her arm raise up pink and puffy.

In the psych ward no one had expected anything of Michaela. There were no important decisions

to make. Just how to fill the hours between meals and group therapy sessions, when nice Christians brought in simple musical instruments or bingo games about self-esteem. No one was more important than anyone else, and they all wore the same navy sweatpants and non-slip socks. Michaela napped a lot. She wandered up and down the hallway or half-watched the morning news and cooking shows going on the TV in the common room, perched on uncomfortable chairs made of a rubbery material and designed to be too heavy to be thrown. She had been provided a notebook to journal in but there were no pens, only felt-tip markers, so she just made large doodles in bright colors. Every morning after breakfast she waited for her name to be called, got her wrist band scanned, sat on a little stool to have her vitals taken and get her medication. She felt safe, static, contented.

Early in her stay a social worker brought Michaela back to her locked office in the back, a small dark room with tiny potted plants scattered around it. Michaela sat on an elementary-school style chair, wedged between bank boxes of paperwork and handouts on forming a mental health crisis plan.

"I fantasize about running away and becoming a hermit, like from the Bible," Michaela said. "I would live on nuts and tubers in a cave in the woods and contemplate. Townspeople would bring me food and small gifts for good luck and I would not speak to them."

"Do you feel your job is a major source of stress for you?"

"Yes."

"Is there a reason you have to stay in that job? What were you doing before?"

"I was working as a part-time bookkeeper. It was OK, but—I just don't want to be doing that forever. I don't want to be a person who's overwhelmed by anything more complicated than

counting money for gift shops. People depend on me at my job. They need me."

"I understand wanting a challenge," the social worker said. "I understand that. But your mental health is important too. Your value as a person doesn't come from your job."

"Where does it come from then?"

There was a mountain of paperwork concerning the investors. She worked on the mountain and it kept coming, like more mountain was being piped in from the bottom. Sophie sat across from her, eating wasabi almonds, ticking things off her to-do list.

The founder and Kyle came up to her desk, gesturing, hushed and tense. Her stomach fell out. She didn't know what it was, but it was something.

"There's a freight delivery of batteries downstairs," Kyle said. "There are pallet loads of batteries. The truck is blocking the loading dock. We can't even get them inside."

"The Huangwei order," the founder said.

"Oh God," Michaela said. "Oh no. Oh no."

"The charge," Kyle said. "You were supposed to block the charge."

"You never gave me the confirmation details."

"When did you ask me that?"

"So, to be clear," the founder said, "we're being charged for these batteries. For these however many—"

"Eight thousand," Kyle said. "It's eight thousand batteries. The wrong kind."

"We're being charged for eight thousand batteries—"

"Why would we be getting the delivery before the charge even clears?" Michaela said,

sorting frantically through tabs to find the company's bank page. "It can't have—it must be some mistake on their—oh God."

"What."

"No."

"The charge cleared yesterday," she said. "It cleared—I must have been in that meeting and not checked the page before leaving for the day—"

"Yesterday?"

"How big a charge?"

"It's." Michaela swallowed. "It's four hundred eighteen thousand dollars."

No one said anything for a second.

"How much does that leave us with?" The founder said.

Michaela couldn't speak. She turned her monitor towards him. He studied it.

"The investment money?"

"We don't actually have that yet," Michaela said. "It's theoretical money. It's not in our account. We have no money."

"We've got to figure out how to reverse the charge then."

"The batteries are *here*," Kyle said. "The truck's downstairs as we speak. It was a mistake but we did order them and they're here now. We can't just send them back to—can we?"

Sophie was sitting at her desk, right next to them, looking from one to the other. She said, cautiously, "I'm running payroll tomorrow. Is that..."

"There's no money," Michaela said. "We have no money."

"But you can't just not pay people."

"It's not—it's not whether we're allowed or not. There's no money. We can't give anyone money we don't have."

"So when can we run it? When is this going to be resolved?"

They all looked at each other, one to the next, never long enough to make real eye contact.

Sophie's eyes started welling up. "How the hell am I supposed to pay my rent this month?"

Michaela stood up. She walked away from them all, out the office door, into the bathroom, into a stall. She bent over a toilet and threw up her breakfast. Sausage and egg.

She ran the sink, rinsed her mouth, splashed water on her face, and stared at herself in the mirror for a while with the water going. She splashed herself with more water. She looked in the mirror again. She was still there.

The door opened. It was Sophie. Her eyes were puffy but her voice was under control. "Are you OK?"

"No," she said. "No. I'm really not."

"Michaela," she said. "I have rent to pay. I can't pay rent until this is sorted out."

"I jumped in front of the train," she said. "I wasn't just... 'in the hospital.' I jumped in front of a train. I didn't get hurt, I did it too early and they stopped the train in time. But they made me stay in a psych ward for a week and a half."

"Michaela" Sophie said. "I don't give a shit. I can't pay my rent. I'm going to be evicted. I'm going to be homeless."

"I don't think Massachusetts law lets them evict you just like that..."



"Jesus fucking Christ," Sophie said. "What the fuck is the matter with you? Why are you fucking like this?"

She didn't know what to say. That's what she'd been trying to figure out this whole time.

"OK," Sophie said. "OK. We're going to sort this out. We're going to send that shipment of batteries back and we're going to reverse the charge. Or else we'll figure out some way to expedite the investor money. I'll send an email to everybody. I'll send an email telling everyone paychecks are delayed."

"That shouldn't be your job. That should be my job."

"Yeah, well, we've seen how well you do your job. I'm sending the email." She walked out of the bathroom.

Michaela splashed some more water on her face. She wanted to say it wasn't fair, she hadn't asked to be the way she was, she couldn't help it, things were harder for her than they were for other people. But things were pretty hard for other people too, she knew. She was just worse at dealing with it, and Sophie wasn't wrong to point that out, when she had her own real problems to worry about.

She looked at herself in the mirror. Still here.

She kept her cards in an adhesive-backed pocket stuck to her phone, and kept her phone in her pocket at all times. She'd lose them otherwise. So when she came out of the bathroom there was no need to stop by her desk at all. She went directly to the elevators and down to the lobby and out to the sidewalk. There were cars on the streets but hardly anyone on the sidewalks: past the hour when people were coming into work, too early for lunch. She sat on a bench. She took out

her phone. She never remembered to close her tabs, so she went back and found one of the farms she had looked up, one of the ethical farms. Ethical. The word felt good, solid, grounding. She pulled up where it was on a map.

Renting the car was easy, she had an app that let her pick cars up from the lot next to the building. She drove and drove. The suburbs never seemed to end, the city went on forever. She kept driving. There had to be somewhere beyond it, somewhere to escape to.

She left the highway for a two-lane road, she twisted from that one to another one. She left her phone in the passenger seat and glanced over at the map once in a while, not being too careful, making some wrong turns. It was fine. She was in no rush. She saw a turn-off for small crumbling road between two big houses with wide, professionally maintained lawns. She turned from that onto a dirt road. It was finally starting to become rural, trees and a creek, grass, tall weeds flowering by the side of the road. She took the dirt road into a field. She let the car bump gently over the grass until it hit a puddle and wouldn't go any further. She got out. She didn't bother closing the door. It smelled like life here. She started walking, mud caking her thin leather shoes and splattering her ankles and the bottoms of her jeans. She came to a chicken wire fence. She climbed over it, bending it down with the weight of her body and slipping on the way down to fall in the grass. She slowly got to her knees, then her feet, and kept walking. She walked a long time. She had no idea at all where she was going.

She saw them from a distance, puttering around and rolling on their backs in a dirt clearing under some trees. They sat up and looked at her and lifted their ears as she got closer. One stood up, a little awkward, and did its mincing trot toward her. Such dainty feet for such a big body, body sunned and rested and caressed by the bodies of its comrades. They probably

think I'm going to feed them, she thought. They probably think that's what humans are here to do, just to feed them, at a place like this place seems to be.

She stopped when they met. It turned its flat moist nose up to her and grunted softly. She laid a hand on the dry, warm skin of its head and it flicked its ears but didn't move away.

She squatted down to its level. It blinked at her, beady little eyes with wrinkled lids, sun shining through its translucent ears. She felt its breath blowing out hot from its wide nostrils, from the cavities and organs of its hot living body. She put her arms around its neck and felt the coarse hair on her face and the twitching of its muscles under the skin. Even this one would be slaughtered.

## Fortunes

Jarom paced back and forth, setting the potted succulents swinging in their macrame holders. Noêmia and Imogen sat together on the couch facing him. Noêmia seemed to be trying to disappear between the couch cushions but Imogen sat with the posture of a ballerina, watching him.

When he stopped talking for a second, Imogen said "I'd like to read your cards."

"You'd like to—what?"

She took a well-worn pack of cards from a woven basket under the coffee table. She slid the deck into her hand and briskly shuffled it three times. She pushed it across the table in Jarom's direction.

"Cut the deck, please."

"You're doing—what?" He bent down automatically to cut the deck. The cards were larger than standard playing cards, with an Art Nouveau pattern on the back.

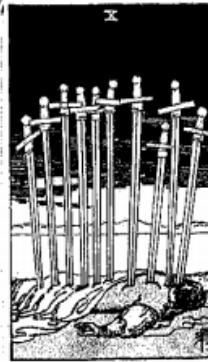
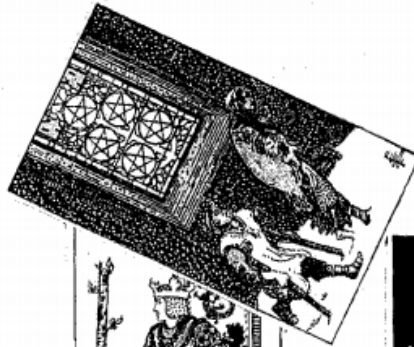
"I'd like to read your tarot cards. I think it will help us understand each other better."

"You're reading my what?"

"Watch," Noêmia said. "She'll be right about everything."

Imogen took the deck back and turned a card over on the table with a sharp snap. She observed the card for a long moment. Then she snapped another card down on the table, paused again, then another. She went on like this, observing each card carefully before laying down the next, until she had made an elaborate pattern with them. Noêmia leaned forward and Jarom stopped in front of the coffee table. Nobody said a word.

## THE CELTIC CROSS



## THE KING OF WANDS



"This is you, your attitude," Imogen said. "Wands are passion, excitement, sexual energy, fire. Kings are air—all about intellect and analysis and communication. The King of Wands is a revolutionary."

Jarom showed up that night already bursting out of himself with righteous anger. He had blasted Rage Against the Machine as he drove through the dark, twisting, one-way streets of North Cambridge—streets designed to keep outsiders out, streets for rich people. He knew their house from dropping Lily off there once in a while. A two-story single-family with a pleasant little yard full of lavender bushes and pretty rocks, a fresh coat of green paint on the shingles, warm light coming through the muslin curtains over the windows. He slammed his car door at the curb in front of their house, even though they didn't know he was there yet, even though he had to be

careful of the wobbly window casing. He knocked on their door unnecessarily hard, and unnecessarily, since he could have just texted. When they were married Noêmia had always accused him of stomping, slamming, and shouting. He would try to stop and she would still flinch at his most mundane actions. Now he could do it on purpose. It was the only intimidation tactic he had, and he was damn well going to use it.

Noêmia answered the door. It still surprised and saddened him to see her these days—not because she looked bad but because she looked good. She had filled out in the two years since the divorce, the bags under her eyes were gone, she wasn't so nervous and fidgety. She had dyed the ends of her hair pink and started wearing dresses, and it suited her. She could have done those things when they were together. He had never meant to stop her.

"Hi," she said, flatly. "Come in."

The first thing that caught his eye, right by the door, was a poster of a chakra chart, a translucent person sitting in lotus position with a rainbow of flower symbols going up their spine. On an end table in front of it were several rocks he identified as "crystals."

"I thought we left the LDS to get away from the crazy beliefs," he said, sotto voce. He knew it wasn't really the same—nobody was using chakra charts to excuse domestic abuse or hate gay people—but he wanted to dig at her. He knew she was less open about telling people they used to be Mormon than he was. She hated having it brought up.

She rolled her eyes but didn't respond. "Come on," she said. "In here."

## THE FIVE OF COINS



"Coins are earth, the material world," Imogen said. "Fives are cards of frustration, imbalance, feeling stuck. The five of coins is a card about feeling rejected or cast out. This is the feeling that dominates your situation."

He misunderstood the first text Noêmia sent him about it.

*I wanted to let you know that we are moving to California this summer. We need to talk about what this means for the custody agreement.*

*how long are you going to be there?*

*If it's June July August maybe I can do every weekend with Lily for May and September or something like that. Call me tonight and we can talk about it.*

*We're moving there permanently.*

*I'll call you tonight.*



He called her immediately—in the middle of the work day, sitting at his desk in the admissions office at Tufts. Among the things he said were:

"What the hell is even in California? It's on fire all the time anyway."

"So no plan. You have no plan. You're just going because—it is my business, this has crossed over into being damn business now."

"We have an agreement."

"So we're talking about flying Lily back and forth across the country—how many times a year? That's—no, more than that, I'm not going to—it has to be more than that. My point is where is that money going to come from? She's not going to be able to fly by herself for years so we're talking about—about six tickets, in total, for every trip? How are we affording that?"

"What the hell do you mean it will work out? How will it work out?"

"So I just don't get to see her anymore. You're just—taking her away from me."

Noêmia was the one to suggest they talk about it in person in a few days. He agreed. When he put the phone down he saw that his officemate had put on headphones and was staring unwaveringly at her screen, despite being motionless, and that a group of three prospective students and their parents were standing outside the glass window in his office door, trying not to look like they were listening.

He had moved to Boston in the first place because Noêmia's family lived here. Her family was less hardline than his and had disapproved of their moving away from the church but not cut Noêmia off entirely. She was still marrying a nice Mormon boy she met at Brigham Young, after all, and they could almost pretend nothing was wrong. They wanted her closer to home and she wanted to oblige them, she didn't want to damage the relationship any more than

necessary. She still loved them, after all. They still went to family dinners once in a while after getting married and moving back to Boston. After Lily was born Noêmia's parents or sister-in-law could be counted on to babysit her for the occasional date night. Things were not entirely without tension, but the relationship was there, largely because her parents always believed that they would eventually come back. He no longer knew the details of the situation, but he did know that since Noêmia started seeing Imogen, her family wasn't a babysitting option anymore.

His family was a different story from the start. He had one sister who texted him when anything big happened, a birth or marriage. His mom texted him on Christmas and Easter to say she was praying for his soul. His family was Lily now.

Through his whole conversation with the students—about extra-curriculars and AP classes and SAT scores—all he wanted to do was grab these teenagers by their shoulders and shake them, make them understand that all their worry over where they went to college—what seemed like the biggest decision in the world to them—would be entirely meaningless in the end. He wanted to scream at them only to find the people they loved and hold onto them for dear life.

## THE QUEEN OF WANDS



"This is me," Imogen said. "Queens are feminine, maternal figures, aligned with water, so the Queen of Wands is fire and water. She's the anchor that domestic life revolves around and an unstoppable force. This position is your conscious sense of what will dominate the outcome of the situation."

The first time he met Imogen it was because Lily's daycare suddenly closed. Jarom got childcare through the Early Childhood Development Program at Tufts; they charged below-market rates in exchange for using the children as case studies. An outbreak of strep throat in the dorms had rendered their entire staff unable to safely be in contact with children. It was his morning to drop Lily off and he was supposed to be catching a train to an admissions fair at noon. A small flurry of texts sent standing at his kitchen counter while Lily screamed about oatmeal settled that

Imogen would take care of her for the day.

He had known there was a girlfriend and that her name was Imogen, and that she must either make or come from enough money for the nice house in north Cambridge that Noêmia had moved into the year before. Noêmia had virtually no social media presence and his searches for "imogen cambridge" had turned up nothing relevant, so he knew nothing else about her as he stood at their front door with Lily's stroller, waiting for her to come.

She looked, he thought, like the blonde singer from ABBA, if the blonde singer from ABBA had been one of those people who only eats fruit. She smiled with more genuine warmth than he deserved as her girlfriend's ex. She spoke in a slow, high, airy voice that did not allow for the idea of work and that you might be late for it.

"We're going to have a great time today," she said to Lily. Lily looked skeptical.

"Thank you," Jarom said. "Really. I don't know what I would do otherwise."

"It's no trouble," Imogen said. "I'm a yoga teacher over at Ahimsa Studio in Davis Square. I finished up my early class at eight and I don't teach any more until six thirty tonight. So spending the day with Lily will be a joy."

So it's family money, he thought.

After that he was able to look up "imogen yoga teacher cambridge" and get to her instagram. There was a lot to unpack:

Imogen in a bedroom, doing a funny pose with her shirt on backwards. *When Mercury retrograde's got you all out of whack.*

Imogen at the front of a roomful of people on yoga mats, standing on her hands with her legs jackknifed to one side, the expression of a professional killer on her face.

Imogen, Noêmia, and Lily, photographed at arm's length and a little blurry, all laughing.

*#foundfamily*

One night Lily drew a strange symbol in blue magic marker on a page of the sketchbook he'd gotten her. The lines were neat and evenly curved. The college students all praised her hand-eye coordination and fine motor control for her age.

"What's that?" Jarom asked.

"It's a Libra," Lily said.

"What's a Libra?" He thought vaguely that it might be a Pokemon.

"I'm a Libra."

"Ah. Oh." Then, "Who told you that?"

"Imogen."

"You shouldn't believe everything Imogen says."

But it was true: however much his life revolved around his visits with Lily, for her they were the anomaly. Her home wasn't here, her home was with Imogen. If Imogen said she was a Libra then that's what she was.

## THE TWO OF CUPS



"This is Lily. Twos are cards of balance and equal partnership. Cups are about emotion, nurturing, love. They're the water suit—like Lily, a water sign. When's your birthday?"

"March 29." His reflexive response was always to obey direct orders.

"Aries. I thought so. Libra and Aries are complementary opposites. This position indicates what you subconsciously or most deeply want."

Lily was two when they separated. She didn't understand the concept of shared custody and she certainly didn't like the practicalities of it. Every week when Jarom picked her up from daycare she would ask if they could go to Mama's house this time. Every week when they got in the door of his garden-level one-bedroom she sighed and said, "Oh, we're here."

She had adjusted to the situation pretty quickly, though. Her very favorite thing was Kpop music videos, and Jarom would let the Youtube algorithm feed her an endless supply of them on

the TV. They would dance. She told him he made better toast. She found him too loud, but instead of crying over it she would just clamp her hands over her ears and say, "Stop it, Daddy."

And he would say, "Sorry, Loobaloo."

For her the visits became part of her routine, a weekly fun night. For Jarom they were the only thing that felt important. His own life, he had decided, was a lost cause at this point. His job was just a job, he had no particular ambitions. The prospect of dating, choosing to become invested in some new stranger, felt shallow and alien. His marriage had been the only thing he was ever proud of, and look how that went. Lily could be a different story, though. He could pass something onto her besides bad teeth and hayfever. Even if all that was was knowing someone loved her and thought she was special. She was special. She was showing him that all the time.

"The ship is sailing across the ocean," she said, pushing a toy car across the blue carpet. "All aboard. They go—on the ocean."

"Where are they going?"

"They're going on vacation. To California."

He didn't think she needed to know at her age that one couldn't sail from California to Boston.

"Oh no!" She cried. She smashed a throw pillow down on the car and whipped it around, in genuine shock and horror. "Oh no! Oh no!"

"It's a tidal wave!"

"It's a tidal wave." She held the pillow up, poised. "All the people say, 'aah, oh no.'" She smashed it down again.

"But they're wearing life jackets," he said. "So they're OK."

"No," she said, forlornly. "No, they're all gone. All gone."

"But..."

"The people are at the bottom of the ocean now." She looked at her car with a strangely adult sadness.

"Where did... where did you learn that?"

She was quiet a minute. Then she said, "Can I have Blackpink?"

"Sure. Sure, let's dance."

Every night she wasn't there was just a matter of filling the long dark hours after work with anything that would take him out of his own head. He still didn't drink—he could never learn to like the loss of control—but almost wished he did. Alcohol seemed almost like a friend to the people who overused it. All he had was waiting until Lily came back again.

## THE STAR



"This is Noêmia. It's the only major arcana card within the cross, a fated event in life. The Star is



a guiding light that doesn't sway with what's around it. When it's a person is someone unique and magical who follows their own course through the sky. This position is what's in your past."

He'd met Noêmia at a freshman mixer at Brigham Young. She stood alone in the kaleidoscope lights of the campus bowling alley, clutching her plastic cup of root beer like it would save her.

"I'm Noêmia," she said, barely audible over the blaring music.

"Amy?"

"Noêmia. It's the Portuguese version of the name Naomi."

"Naomia?"

"That's... fine," she said.

"Are you from around here?" He said. He'd guessed she was an international student but she spoke English with an American accent. Her parents or grandparents were probably converted.

"No, I, I'm from Somerville Massachusetts. Basically Boston." She rotated her cup in her hands. "I came here to strengthen my faith. There are hardly any Mormons out there and it's, it's easy to slide, you know, when everyone around you acts like that's normal."

"I'm from Las Vegas," he said, "which you'd think it would be really corrupt and sleazy, but actually my suburb's all Mormons. But I just got back from mission in Canada, in Nunavut. Everyone got smart phones while I was gone. I forgot how to talk to people."

On their first date he learned how to pronounce her name correctly. On their fourth or fifth, she started trying some ideas out on him.

"You know, one of the reasons the LDS are such genealogy experts is because of their

mission work in Brazil,” she said, carefully, like she was placing something on the ice cream parlor table that might explode. “Because most Brazilian people have at least some African ancestry and they were trying to figure out who could join the priesthood, back before the 1978 revelation. My family probably has African ancestry.”

And standing outside the worship hall on a Sunday: “So—the doctrine that families are together forever in heaven. Have you ever felt like you don’t *want* to be with your parents for eternity? I think it’s pretty common for parents to love their children more than children love their parents. Or when people get divorced, that one of them still loves the other. So it seems like no matter what someone isn’t going to be happy, it’s not going to be heaven for somebody. That seems like it’s just human nature.”

Whispering, sitting on a blanket at an outdoor concert: “I think I might be bisexual. I don’t know. I’ve wrestled with it. I... I just have a hard time thinking God would punish people for something that doesn’t hurt anybody.”

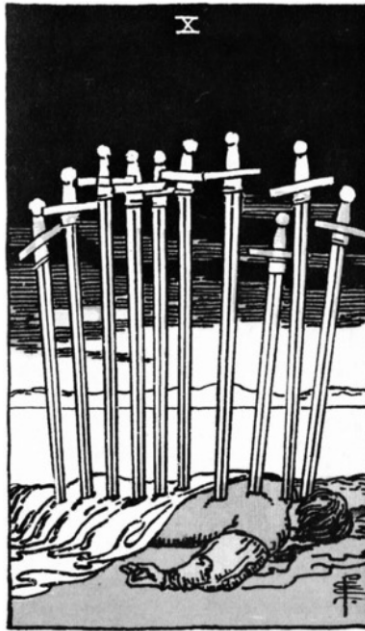
By junior year they spoke openly to each other about how stupid it was that they couldn’t freely and privately meet. Senior year they got married so they could. Once they were living together it wasn’t long before they both admitted that they were only pretending to believe anymore, so they wouldn’t be kicked out of school. It was even more thrilling than the sex. They were accomplices, double-agents. They sat next to each other in mandatory worship and exchanged looks.

After they moved to Boston, not long before she got pregnant with Lily, Noêmia said, “I feel so—free. Like we escaped. Like we’re just off in outer space now and anything is possible.”

She said it like it was a good thing. To him it was terrible—free, falling, with nothing to

catch him and nothing to hold onto. He could never have guessed that the years of secrecy and fear of being found out in Provo would be the best ones. That they'd start falling to pieces as soon as they restraints were off.

## THE TEN OF SWORDS



Lily wandered into the living room.

“Oh—sweetie,” Noêmia said, getting up. “I thought you were in bed.”

Lily leaned her elbows on the coffee table and looked at the spread. “Can I play?”

“This is a grown-up game,” Jarom said. “We’re having a grown-up conversation.”

“That’s boring,” Imogen’s hand was already resting on the next card, and Lily pointed to it too. “He’s dead.”

“Yes, he is,” Imogen said. “This card is about what you see for yourself in the future. I don’t think I need to explain what it means.”

He smiled. He didn’t know she had a sense of humor.

The first time he'd had that sick feeling, the bottom dropping out, was in Nunavut. He had been walking into the village with his mission partner, but in their parkas and balaclavas either of them could have been anybody. It was fall and dark nearly all the time; the road was lit with big sodium lights standing just close enough together you could see the next one, but nothing else. He was cold, sad, he missed his family and the sun, almost no one he'd talked to had converted and the few that had he suspected her doing it for the wrong reasons: because they were desperate, because they were grasping at any floating branch that came their way. He was miserable and he wasn't doing anyone any good by being here. He trudged towards the light, barely able to see his feet, on the flat expanse of pack ice in the dark.

This is God's plan, he thought.

He had a sudden feeling, a premonition so strong it felt supernatural. He had a feeling that it was his life he was trudging through: that all of it, future and past, was as real and as invisible to him as the tundra around him, that he was a single point moving through tangible darkness within it. It wasn't what people meant when they talked about God having a plan. It had nothing to do with God. It was pure terror with no escape.

The feeling stayed with him a long time. It still came back to him sometimes.

## THE FIVE OF WANDS



"These next four cards are more abstract."

"So—OK. That's enough," he said. He made his voice exasperated, even though what he felt was deeply unsettled. "I was patient, that's—that's enough. Do you understand me better now?"

"Yes, actually, I do."

He didn't follow up on that. "So, look, if you try to move to California I will fight you on it. Legally. That's just—all there is to it."

"And I already told you," Noêmia said, "that we talked to a lawyer and there's nothing for you to fight. We're going to offer you an equivalent, alternate custody agreement. You can get your own lawyer to negotiate with us about the details of that but there's nothing you can do legally to stop us from moving. You don't get to decide where I live."

"Equivalent?" he said. "A few weeks in summer is not equivalent to seeing her every week, Noêmia. Do you think a four-year-old's going to like uprooting like that? She's going to

hate it and that's all I'm going to get with her."

"She won't be four for long."

"That's—exactly what my problem is."

Imogen looked back and forth between the two of them. Noêmia put her face in her hands, then looked up. "I've lived here my entire life, Jarom," Noêmia said. "I'm stuck. I'm tired. I have so much baggage here, there's—nothing here for me anymore. This is the one life I get. I just need a fresh start."

"This is your idea."

"Yes, it's Noêmia's idea," Imogen said quickly, "but I fully support it."

"I only have one life too," he said. "I want to spend it with my daughter."

Lily clamped her hands over her ears and said, "Stop it, Daddy."

"Sorry, Loobaloo."

Noêmia said, "OK. I think we should talk about this another time. I think you need some time to process it. I know it's a lot, OK? I think we all need some time to cool off so we can hash out what's going to make everyone most happy."

"No," he said. "No, we're not—I will not be happy. We're talking about it now."

"Daddy!"

"Sorry."

Lily picked up the deck of cards from the coffee table. They slid immediately out of her hands and all over the floor.

"She needs to go back to bed," Noêmia said. "She doesn't need to see this."

Jarom said, "Can I take her?"

Noêmia and Imogen exchanged a glance, sharing information in their own private, non-verbal way. Noêmia said, "Yeah. That's fine. Her room's upstairs, first door on the left."

"Come on, Loobaloo," he said, taking her hand. "Let's go."

## THE SIX OF CUPS



Halfway up the stairs Lily said, "Why is the ocean there?"

"Uh. You know when it rains and the water goes into holes and low places and makes puddles?"

"Yeah." He didn't think she really followed him. She was focused on taking each stair.

"Well, the ocean is just like that, but really big."

"OK." They got up to a hallway. He had never been this far into the house before. The whole thing was like the living room—done up in colorful woven rugs and hemp twine. These

things had not come from Noêmia. She used to call him overbearing. At least in their home together she had her own decorations. Being a willowy blonde woman did not exempt you from the potential to be overbearing.

He opened the door to Lily's room. It was beautiful. The walls were blue and a slow mobile of lights projected across them, stars and moons. Her toys were organized in pretty baskets, her blanket had a tasteful batik pattern of fishes on it. She went to her little bookshelf and pulled a book off.

"Read it to me."

She got in her bed. He sat on the foot of it with the book she'd pulled out. This was what they always did, every night when she went to bed at his place. He didn't know whether she did it every night here, whether their little rituals and routines were private to the two of them or not. It didn't really matter. She knew to go pick out a book for him to read. He felt like his heart would explode.

"Oh hell, Lily," he said. "God. Sorry. Sure. Let me—I'll read it."



## JUSTICE



She fell asleep quickly, just a few pages into the book. Halfway down the stairs, as soon as he could see Imogen again, he felt his anger coming back. Lily did not belong to anybody, most of all not to Imogen. He was burning with it. He was, nevertheless, careful not to stomp his feet on the stairs.

## THE HANGED MAN



Imogen was on her knees on the floor, collecting the cards Lily had dropped. Noêmia was still on the couch, watching her. They didn't seem to have been saying anything.

He tried to think of what to do next—how to reach them if his anger meant nothing, if his despair meant nothing, if his feelings had no power to sway them at all. He stood there for a long time, waiting, immobile.

## House Things

### *Notebooks*

Sarah kneels on the floor, digging through one of the cardboard moving boxes that stand scattered around the living room at wild cockeyed angles. Three identical notebooks are stacked next to her, all bound in black leather.

Maddie comes into the living room in an oversized T-shirt and her underwear, her hair smushed in all directions.

Sarah says, "Where did you pack the other notebooks? Why do we use exactly the same notebook?"

Maddie says, "I think this new apartment has mice."

They stare at each other.

"I saw something in the kitchen last night, when I got up to pee. I keep hearing these scratching sounds."

"It's just I've got to get to work and I really need to find my notebook."

Maddie kneels in front of the box and starts looking too. "They're all in here." She feels around in the box for a smooth leather texture. She takes out another black notebook and opens it. Inside are two anatomically correct ink drawings of sharks, from different angles, minutely detailed and shaded. Written in the corner, bent around the shark drawings, are the words: *H — 12:30 9/18? ask — forms!!*

"See," Sarah says, "These ones are all yours."

"I've got to remember to ask about the forms," Maddie says, mostly to herself. "I'm

putting this on a guy's chest on Wednesday. It's his very first tattoo. Can you believe getting something like that for your very first tattoo?"

Sarah takes out another notebook. The pages of are filled with rows of neat block capitals coded in rainbow colors, annotated with arrows, asterisks, small circles and squares:

*-MCCP 2014 EPA report Cl<sub>2</sub> FOIA: 10/13*

*-D. Winter deposition c.r. 78 Fed.Reg.16612 1996*

"OK. Yes. This is the right one." She closes it and hugs it to her chest. "I feel like if we had mice we would have seen some signs of them around that pizza box we left out. How do you know what you saw was a mouse?"

"There was a sign, the sign was the mouse. How do you know anything is anything?"

Sarah frowns and blinks. "I'm sorry, I really have to go. We can talk about it later." She gets up and starts gathering her phone and wallet and shoes and keys. "I have like a thousand unread emails right now. Phil's doing an expert testimony about this mattress factory. Did you know most commercial flame retardants are organophosphate based? Which is the same stuff Sarin is made of. But it's just a coincidence, right, that so many kids in the area have learning disabilities and partial paralysis." She sits on a side table to tie her shoes. "Or that so many adults have, like, sudden onset memory problems and loss of fine motor control. Those things can happen for *all kinds of reasons* besides the corroded tanks of neurotoxin up the road." She stands and picks up her bag. "Sorry. I'm really mad about this one. I've been having stress dreams where I'm trapped inside our document management software. I've got to go. Kiss."

She leans down and briefly kisses Maddie, who kisses her back reflexively even as she blinks and stares at nothing. She whisks herself away.

Maddie remains sitting on the floor with the boxes. She looks at her shark drawings. She picks at her ragged cuticles and bitten down fingernails. She thinks about brain poisoning. She thinks about how it would feel to lose her fine motor control, her memory and cognition—a fading away from herself, chemicals locking her own brain away from her. She imagines the chemicals, the name of which she has already forgotten, a putrid chartreuse.

*"Sally"*

Maddie comes home at nine PM with ink smudged on her hands and face. She stops short. The room is a different room. All the boxes are gone. The furniture is arranged, books in the bookshelves and pictures on the walls. Sarah is standing in front of the coffee table, holding up a small animal skull in her hand. She's looking at it in deep concentration, like she's trying to understand what it's saying to her.

Sarah says, "So, we have mice."

"That's what I told you."

"I started unpacking the kitchen boxes and one of them already had a hole chewed in the corner and a whole bunch of mouse poop inside. I'm sorry. You were right. "

"You never believe anything I say until you can verify it yourself."

"I'm sorry, really. I should have just believed you. In any case, I unpacked and took out all the boxes, since they like cardboard. And I contacted the building so they can't hold us liable for any damages. They're sending out a pest control person on Friday." She says, "You're home late."

"Yeah. That shark piece ended up taking six hours. The client was all squirmy. I wasn't

able to brace against him so I was just standing over him with my back bent the whole time."

"You were drawing the shark for six hours?"

Maddie nods. Sarah looks at her the same way she'd been looking at the skull.

"Here, sit," she says. Maddie sits on the couch. Sarah sets down the skull and goes to stand behind her. She kneads her shoulders. She can feel the gnarled bands of muscle and tendon slide under her hands. Maddie sighs contentedly.

"You found Sally," she says, looking at the skull on the table. "I usually keep it in my art box. I didn't think you'd want a cat skull watching over you any time you came over to my place."

"I love it though," Sarah says. "It makes me think of a nautilus. Like an intricate natural calcium formation. You think it's a cat?"

"I think it's my childhood cat Sally." Her shoulders are slowly relaxing under Sarah's hands. "The asshole one that would pee on my feet. We buried her in the yard when I was seven or eight and ten years later I found this when a fencepost fell over."

Sarah says, "I wanted a cat so bad as a kid."

"And your mom said you couldn't have one because you'd be too sad when it died."

"Maybe we should just get a cat." She kneads thoughtfully. "It's so small. I didn't know their heads were so small. I thought it was a weasel."

### *Viola*

Sarah paces around the living room, holding her old viola like a ukulele and aimlessly plucking at the out-of-tune strings.

"The pest control person will be fine, won't they?" she says. "If he's working in Somerville he probably goes to trans people's houses all the time."

"I'm sure he'll be fine," Maddie says. "If he's not I'll slug him."

"And maybe I'm being classist. Maybe the pest control person has a trans kid. Maybe the pest control person *is* trans."

"You never know. My step-dad's like your biggest cheerleader and he's a craggy old townie dude."

"I love Fred."

"He loves you. He likes you more than me."

"I'll just imagine that the pest control person will be like Fred and stop worrying."

Neither of them says anything for a minute. Maddie watches the viola in her arms, the big hollow body and the dainty curls of the F holes and tuning pegs, the way Sarah's fingers still know by themselves where to go on the neck.

"When was it you actually quit viola?" Maddie says.

"Junior year of college, when I had my whole nervous breakdown. It was one of the factors, actually—I'd auditioned my way into this group that was mostly music majors and grad students. The director was really mean and expected everyone to practice for like six hours a day, and I was also taking a full biochem class load and interning at a law firm. I was getting up at like six and studying all day and then taking too much ADHD medication so I could practice viola until two in the morning." She strums, picks out a little melodic flourish. "You know, everyone acted like my going off the rails was about gender, but it actually had a lot more to do with the viola and organic fucking chemistry."

"You should get your bow restrung some time, so you can play for real. Just for fun, without a mean conductor yelling at you."

"God no. It would give me PTSD. I like it this way. It's like, the viola is powerless over me." She grips it by the neck and swings it through the air. "It's dead! It can't hurt me! I won!"

Maddie understands. At the same time she can't imagine cultivating so much skill at an art and leaving it to rot unused.

### *Paperbacks*

Maddie sits on the couch reading a mass-market paperback *The Idiot*. The front cover is already gone, and she tears out the pages and crumples them in her hands as she goes. Little balls of rough, pulpy paper wedge under her legs and between the couch cushions.

Maddie says, "Prince Mishkin would be a good name for a cat."

Sarah says, "I still don't understand why you do that."

"Do what?"

"Tear your books up."

"It's a three-dollar book. It's meant to be disposable."

"I think you're supposed to read the whole thing and throw it away at the end."

"This way I don't need bookmarks. I like the feeling of crumping up the paper. It gives me something to do with my hands. I don't like hanging onto stuff I've already read anyway. I want to be in the moment."

Sarah brushes some wads of paper aside and sits down next to her. "Have you ever done it with a library book?"



"Of course not. What kind of monster do you think I am?"

Maddie can tell that Sarah's on edge, so she stares her down, dead serious, until Sarah bursts out laughing.

The doorbell rings. Sarah runs to answer it. From where she sits on the couch Maddie can see Sarah go through her procedure for meeting new people who may or may not be safe: the frozen smile, nervous laugh that sounds almost like a hiccup, the excessively animated hand gestures and vocal tones and impulse to fill the air with chatter, as a kind of airbag.

The man himself has graying brown hair, glasses, brown coveralls: INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT. He goes through the same stages Maddie has learned to recognize from every person who meets Sarah: an initial non-impression because Sarah is short, a pause to consider, a closer inspection. Beyond that Maddie can't read his reaction at all.

Sarah tours him around the apartment, pointing out where and when they have seen mice or traces of them. Maddie puts her half-a-book down on the couch and follows them around. The man flicks his flashlight into corners, at the spaces between the floorboards, the partly-patched over holes in the walls where defunct and thickly painted boiler pipes come through them, the full opening to the basement underneath one of the kitchen cupboards.

Sarah has to leave for work. Maddie stands around as the man chooses two of the holes and stuffs some wire mesh stuff into them. He kneels down with a stiffness that suggests bad knees, setting snap traps in the shoe closet. He looks over his shoulder. She sees him take in the crumpled paperback pages. She sees him take her in: the tattoos all up and down her arms, the metal in her ears and nose.

He says, "What's that you're reading?"

"Oh. It's, uh. It's Dostoyevsky."

"Hmm," he says, lifting his eyebrows, like that's impressive. "Big reader?"

"I guess so. Yeah. I do read a lot."

"I like non-fiction myself. Have you read *Behold a Pale Horse*? You should check it out. You seem like an independent thinker."

### *Little Orange Bottles*

Sarah has only just set down her plastic Walgreens bag. The viola sits on the coffee table, the crumpled paper clutters the couch. Maddie paces around, waving her hands.

"He's a conspiracy theorist!" she says. "The mouse man is an insane conspiracy theory person!"

Sarah looks concerned. "Like QAnon?"

"No—or, I don't know. The book he talked about is older than that. It's all lizard people and Illuminati and the Kennedy assassination and stuff."

Sarah sits on the couch and rummages in her plastic bag without looking at it. Everything in it crinkles and rattles and seems to be made mostly of air. She takes out small white paper bags stapled shut, with folded pieces of paper attached. Dense columns of fine print, big letters highlighted yellow: WARNING. She says, "I actually get where the Kennedy assassination people are coming from. If we know for a fact the CIA did the Iran-Contra thing and MKUltra then why not that, you know?"

Maddie nods blankly. "But lizard people."

"Lizard people is crazy." She starts nodding too. "He was—talking to you about lizard

people?"

"No, but he told me to read this book and I looked it up and the book is all about this stuff."

Sarah eyes are filling with tears. Maddie comes and sits by her, puts her arm around her.

"He didn't seem threatening or anything, just—"

"No, I'm fine," Sarah says, and her voice does, in fact, sound fine. She absently tears into the paper bags as she talks, digging them open with her thumbs, and lines up the little orange bottles on the coffee table. "I get this thing where my eyes tear up any time I think about conspiracy theories. I always have. Even before the HRT." She looks at Maddie, laughing, even as her eyes start to drip. "Isn't that the weirdest thing?"

Maddie starts laughing too. "How did I never know that?"

"I mean, how often do conspiracy theories come up?"

"Every time you talk about your job."

"That's different!" she says. "Those are boring conspiracies. But you know. Maybe DuPont is run by lizards. That would explain a lot." She clasps a hand to her mouth. "Is that why I like my job? Has that been it all along? That I'm just obsessed with conspiracy theories?"

"Like... why though?" Maddie says. "I don't get it."

"Why are you able to sit still and look at flowers for three hours?"

They stare at each other for a second, searching for something.

Something flashes along the baseboard into the kitchen. Sarah shrieks and jumps to her feet, Maddie falls off the couch onto her tailbone, the plastic bottles tip over and roll in all directions.

Sarah runs into the kitchen and stands there, looking around. Maddie does nothing for a second, then starts picking up the bottles.

**Bupropion**

**Fluoxetine**

**D-Amph. Salts**

**Estradiol**

The bottles themselves are identical and less than half-full. Sarah is the most particular person in the world, she thinks. She can't understand how these little plastic bottles and nonsense words have anything to do with that.

*Steel wool*

Maddie wakes up late. Her first client today isn't until one, so she stays in bed. She looks over the edge of the bed to the floor. She thinks she can see a light glimmering up from the basement in the wide gaps. She can remain like this, immobilized and staring at some insignificant thing, for hours at a time. In another life—one like Sarah's, with parents who considered her a problem rather than a curiosity, with a job that provided consistent income and insurance and medical leave—she might have gotten little orange bottles for it. She could always get them now. But she still can't see how they have anything to do with this, the mud that accumulates in her brain sometimes.

She comes out finally to see another plastic bag on the coffee table, and Sarah lying on her back in the kitchen. She has an open package of steel wool next to her, which she is stuffing into the gaps underneath the cabinets. Maddie looks around the living room. There's steel wool

peeking out of every opening in the walls and floors, dust and fragments of it everywhere.

Sarah turns her head to look at Maddie. She says, "They're driving me insane. They're making me lose my mind."

Maddie can at first think only of lizard people.

"You're really supposed to wear gloves to handle this stuff. I didn't know that." Sarah holds out one of her hands. Even from across the room Maddie can see that her fingers are pink and raw. She goes back to tearing little bits of the steel wool. "I've got to do this now, though. I can't take another morning of this. It was crawling around on the clean dishes in the dish rack.

*On the clean dishes."*

"The mouse," she says, comprehending.

Sarah stops what she's doing and looks back at Maddie. "Oh God. Yes, the mouse. I haven't lost it completely." She waves some of the steel wool. "I read this keeps them out. They don't like it, they can't chew through it."

Maddie walks over and picks up a pad of it. It lightly abrades her fingers and drops flakes of dull gray metal on her shirt. She sees, closer up, that the metal flakes are all over Sarah's skin and hair and clothes, a dusting of sharp steel things.

"I'll help," Maddie says, and takes her wool to the other side of the kitchen to plug old boiler pipe holes. She is sometimes unsettled by how quickly she accepts things. She's doubtful the steel wool will actually keep anything out—she considers the mice inevitable by now—but it's at least making Sarah feel better. Maddie says, "You've been seeing it every morning?"

"Oh yeah. At like six AM."

"I see it every night. Or I know it's probably not the same mouse you see. But it kind of

feels like they're all the same mouse. This one individual mouse that has it in for us. Or I don't know, maybe he thinks he loves us. Maybe he just wants to be friends."

"I don't give a shit what he wants!" Sarah says. Maddie snorts, and inhales steel dust.

### *Orchid*

The mouse man comes a second time. This time he comes on a weekend and Sarah and Maddie both follow him around, looking for signs of strangeness or danger. He gives them nothing. He shines his flashlight into corners. He doesn't say anything about the steel wool job. He checks on the traps.

"Didn't I put one here? Did it trap anything?" he says.

"Oh—no," Maddie says. "I dropped my shoe on it and set it off."

He kneels to place another.

Maddie says, "It was startling."

He says nothing.

Sarah clears her throat and says, "So, realistically, is it actually possible to get rid of this thing? We've plugged every hole we can find. We're keeping the kitchen spotless. All our food is in secure containers—whatever it's eating is too small for me to see. So I don't understand how it's still getting in or why it's still coming here."

"If there's nothing to attract them they usually go away on their own," the man says. "The trapping helps. But it's tough, it really is tough to get them out once they're in."

Sarah sits at the dining room table and keeps her eyes on him, suspicious. Maddie sits across from her. She notices a set of puffy red scratches on Sarah's shoulder, some small scabs.

She reaches out to touch it, gently.

"What happened to your arm?"

"What?" Sarah twists her head to try to see her own shoulder. She tries moving her arm.

"Did something happen to it?"

"It's all scratched up."

She jumps up and goes into the bathroom, to look in the mirror. She pokes at the skin. "It must have been the steel wool. I must have scratched it up somehow when I was doing the steel wool." She looks at Maddie, distraught. "My orchid."

The scratches are, Maddie realizes, on Sarah's orchid tattoo. Maddie is hardly aware it's there anymore. She sees it on Sarah every day. She sees it more than Sarah does, this thing that Maddie herself etched into her skin. She forgets all about it, that it's not just a part of Sarah's body.

"It's OK," Maddie says. "That's just part of tattoos. Skin gets scratched up, or sunburned, or ages. They don't ever stay the same forever."

"But," Sarah says. "But it's *your* orchid."

The front door opens and closes. Sarah steps out of the bathroom and looks around. She goes toward the front door. She checks the bedrooms. Maddie stands still, watching her move, carrying this orchid drawing around on her skin.

"He's gone," Sarah says. "He just left."

"What the fuck? He just *left*?"

"What a fucking creep!"

*Mouse*

Maddie gets wrapped up in a piece, too perfectionist and zoned out on shading. She texts Sarah during a break, while the client is in the bathroom with plastic wrap on his arm.

*i got stuck in a rut*

*Not another rut!*

*alas, a rut. you'll probably be asleep by the time I get home.*

*OK. Goodnight then.*

*goodnight. love you.*

*Love you too.*

She comes in the front door quietly, lays her feet gently on the floor and presses a hand to the frame as she closes it. Sarah has left a the standing lamp on in the living room, enough that the house isn't dark but not enough to be harsh. Maddie sits on the couch and takes her little black sketchbook out of her bag, to prepare a design for tomorrow's client. She always procrastinates, takes too long, gets in ruts. It's supposed to be an animal skull. She's done enough animal skulls that she doesn't need Sally for it, but just to procrastinate a little more she goes to the shoe closet to get it anyway.

It isn't there. She thinks about looking for it in other places, but she knows this is where she put it. She feels something creep up her spine. It had to be the mouse man. No one else has been here. He was in the shoe closet when they were distracted. She thinks of what Sarah would say: *why would someone steal your cat skull*. But she knows. She knows because of this electrical field vibrating through her nerves.

She goes back to the couch and sits up very straight, staring ahead at nothing. She doesn't



exactly hear the small soft thing. She feels the vibration. She turns her eyes up without moving. The creature is standing at the doorway, regarding her, the lamp reflected liquid on its hard, round, black eyes.

After a minute it comes into the room. Maddie keeps perfectly still. It seems too small to be a thing with fur and a heartbeat and a brain. It moves in quick, fluid bursts, sniffing and quivering between. It runs along a crack between the floorboards, then rapidly digs at the dirt and lint in the crevice. It stops and lifts its head. Maddie can't stop looking at its eyes. It's looking back at her. She wonders what it could be thinking.

## **Exit, Pursued by a Bear**

From the wall we have all agreed is offstage left, I walk into the center of the room. My sneakers squeak on the matte black plywood floor of the rehearsal room. I hold my arms as though I'm cradling something in them. Jill the stage manager and Mark the director watch me from behind a folding table, thick binders laying flat before them. Violet and Peter and Diane watch me from a threadbare corduroy couch, waiting for their own scenes.

I say, "Thou art perfect, then, our ship hath touched upon the deserts of Bohemia?"

"Ay, my lord," Rex says. I can feel his gait as he follows behind me without turning to look at him. "And fear we are come in ill time. The skies look grimly, and threaten present blusters. In my conscience, the heavens with what we have in hand are angry and frown upon us."

"Their sacred wills be done," I say, looking up at the grim heavens in the exposed duct work of the ceiling. I believe what I'm saying. What we have in hand is evil, and we deserve anything the heavens do to us. "Go, get aboard, look to thy bark. I'll not be long before I call upon thee."

I turn to look at Rex. He stands at his spot, an X marked in green tape on the floor. Rex knows. Rex knows what is coming, and he can't say it exactly—the fairytale rules of the world we're in don't let him say it exactly—but he wants me to understand. He looks at me with a weight that wants me to understand it. "Make haste, and go not too far inland. 'Tis like to be loud weather. Besides, this place is famed for the creatures of prey that go upon it." What he knows has nothing to do with the clouds or wildlife. He knows about the heavens. He knows that we

will not be allowed to go unpunished for what we are here to do.

I look away again, down at my feet on this deserted beach of Bohemia. "Go thou away. I'll follow instantly."

I know I won't. He knows I won't. He says, "I am glad at heart to be so rid of the business." Although he knows he isn't really either. He knows, like I do, that neither of us will escape punishment for what we are about to do, for what we are still doing, even knowing this. Something electric has passed between us. Some real knowledge. We are here together in this space, for this instant, before it passes away to nothing.

Just as Rex turns to go back to his ship, Mark says from behind his table, "Can we play this more for comedy?"

Rex and I get cut at the same time. We walk to our company housing together. It is snowing lightly, tiny flakes stinging my face and blowing across the sidewalk down Mass Ave. We walk by a high-end furniture store, a Chinese restaurant that also sells subs, a sex shop with a mannequin in bondage in the window.

"It's not a comedy!" I say. "*A Winter's Tale* is not a comedy!"

"What does he want," Rex says, "the sea captain from *The Simpsons*? 'Yarr, go ye not too far inland...'"

Our company housing, provided to us by Actor's Repertory Theater per the requirements of the stage actors' union, is in a six story apartment block the shape of a VHS tape. It's about half a mile from our rehearsal space on Harvard campus and has ceilings that creak like the hull of a ship when anyone upstairs moves. It's still, Rex and I have agreed, not bad as

company housing goes; I've lived everywhere from a dorm to a director's uncle's vacant beach house. Before this, when I was doing *The Man Who Came to Dinner* in Cleveland, I lived in the attic above a donut shop for three months.

"It's a psycho fairy tale but with psychologically realistic characters," I say. "It's this nightmare vision of real, complex people trapped in a world with fairy tale logic."

"I don't know what it is," Rex says. "It's a paycheck. It's a chance to suckle at the Harvard teat."

"Just wait," I say. "Mark will have a mechanical bear..."

Rex laughs hard enough he has to stop walking. The snow dusts the shoulders of his coat.

This isn't the first time Rex and I have worked together. We were in a production of *Hedda Gabler* in Minneapolis two years ago. *Hedda Gabler* is not a show that should require tech elements, but the director of our production decided that everyone who came in from town needed to enter in a real carriage. The carriage became our cross. The carriage became the steam ship we had to carry over the Andes. The carriage would not roll forward on its tracks, only backward. The carriage would get halfway out on stage and then stop. The carriage would tip over, with poor Eilert Loveborg still inside it. The director tried having stage hands hold it upright. He tried positioning Rex and Mary so they could discreetly steady it. He tried having Dennis and I use one foot to push it along from inside, Flintstones style. Tech rehearsals dragged on into eternity. We stood under hot stage lights, sweating in our bustles and cravats. Rex started doing yoga in place. I leaned out the carriage window to stare up at the fly space and try to remember every state capital.

"No," Rex says, "he's going to put me in a bear suit."

Because ultimately the best solution was to have Rex subtly pull the carriage onstage. “I’m the horse,” he’d said. “It’s finally happened. I’m playing a goddamn horse.” Throughout the run he made surprisingly recognizable horse faces at me whenever he was facing upstage.

There was more to Hedda, though. It was mostly a good production. I was Thea Elvsted. Rex was Tesman. These were both interesting casting choices. Thea Elvsted is supposed to be pretty, earnest, pure. I come across as acerbic, ironic, plain. Tesman is supposed to be oblivious, nebbishy, weak. Rex is warm, charming, handsome. These choices, in my opinion, worked and brought something new to an old story. Today in rehearsal wasn’t the first time we’ve had a moment like that. We had moments like that in *Hedda*, the kind of moments that make this the only life I can imagine living.

“Hey, have you got anything lined up after this?” Rex says, once he’s recovered and we’re walking again.

“Yeah. *A Bright Room Called Day* at Woolly Mammoth in DC.” I’m playing the lead, something I almost never get to do. See above: acerbic, ironic, plain.

“I’m doing this new musical about music file sharing culture in Nigeria in the 2000s,” he says. “It’s going to have this whole immersive multimedia thing going on. The playwright’s this writer musician guy who got a genius grant to develop it. I think it’s actually going to be pretty good.”

“That does sound really promising.”

“I’m going to be one of the leads.”

“Oh, Rex,” I say, and grab his arm, “that’s wonderful. That’s huge for you.” To be a lead in a thing like that—an exciting new work, likely to tour, almost certain to transplant—could be a

career changing thing. I can be genuinely, ecstatically happy for Rex and also eaten alive with envy at the same time. Feeling multiple things at the same time is my job.

“Well,” he says, “it’s in Seattle.”

It takes me a second to understand why he says this so darkly. “Oh. Are you worried...”

“I mean, have you seen the news coming out of Italy? The—the people in the hallways at the hospitals?”

I nod. I’ve seen it.

“It feels insane. It feels like—everyone must be overreacting, or maybe everyone is under-reacting. But I just don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“Do you think it will be postponed? Or recast?”

“I don’t know if it’s going to happen at all.”

I say nothing. What do you say to a thing like this? How am I supposed to know what to say, when nothing like this has happened in any of our lifetimes?

I stand in the center of the room with my joggers stuffed into cowboy boots. The costume people tell me these are pretty close to the shoes I’ll wear in the show. I hold a deflated football full of sand, wrapped in a towel. The prop people tell me they will get me a better baby, although I think this one is fine. I don’t turn to look at Rex as he walks offstage behind me. “Come, poor babe,” I say.

Because this is what we have in hand, what the heavens are frowning upon: we are here in Bohemia to abandon a baby to die. The father, our king, believes he is not really the baby’s father, even though we all know this is an insane thing to believe. But since he is king, here I am,

doing his infanticide for him. Because I'm weak. Because I'm a puppet.

"I have heard, but not believed, the spirits o' the dead  
May walk again: if such thing be, thy mother  
Appear'd to me last night, for ne'er was dream  
So like a waking. To me comes a creature,  
Sometimes her head on one side, some another;  
I never saw a vessel of like sorrow,  
So fill'd and so becoming: in pure white robes,  
Like very sanctity, she did approach  
My cabin where I lay; thrice bow'd before me,  
And gasping to begin some speech, her eyes  
Became two spouts: the fury spent, anon  
Did this break-from her: 'Good Antigonus,  
Since fate, against thy better disposition,  
Hath made thy person for the thrower-out  
Of my poor babe, according to thine oath,  
Places remote enough are in Bohemia,  
There weep and leave it crying; and, for the babe  
Is counted lost for ever, Perdita,  
I prithee, call't. For this ungentle business  
Put on thee by my lord, thou ne'er shalt see  
Thy wife Paulina more.' And so, with shrieks  
She melted into air. "

I stop. I say to Mark, "Was that really Hermione? Or was it a dream?"

"It was really Hermione," Mark says.

"But she's still alive. Everyone thinks she's dead at this point but at the end we find out she's been in the sculpture gallery this whole time."

Mark nods slowly. His fingers are steepled in front of his mouth, he watches the scene with interest, but without personal involvement: the way you'd look at a painting or an interesting tree. "It's not a dream, though."

"So what is it?"

"It's an astral visitation," Mark says.

I nod, instead of asking what the fuck that means. I don't anticipate getting a good

answer. I don't think there are any good answers. The logic of the play is as it is and could not be otherwise.

I read *A Bright Room Called Day* on an elliptical machine at the Planet Fitness a few blocks from my building. The gym is in a garden-level storefront of a concrete Brutalist building, and architecture style that inexplicably pops up around here, among the Old World New England brownstone. It is drafty and cold and the television is silently playing CNN, which I don't want to see right now, so I focus on my book.

I don't know what real-world motion or activity elliptical machines are meant to mimic. They are mysterious. I only go here so I can be prepared to do the things my work calls on me to do: shimmy up and down ladders at neck-breaking speeds, change clothes in 30 seconds while running underneath a stage, sword fight, dance, project my voice to the back of an auditorium.

Thank God for chain gyms, though. I can go anywhere in the country and find some strange repurposed place that's been turned into a Planet Fitness.

I'm out of breath and sweating and deeply engrossed in my book when I hear, "Claire— Claire!"

I turn to look. For a second I hope I have somehow mis-recognized him, but no, it's Mark. It is very much Mark.

He approaches me, and I have too much momentum going to stop my legs circling around or extract my feet from the foot holders.

"So you found this place too?" He says. "What a weird little hole. It's freezing in here."

"I kind of like it. I kind of like seeing the different Planet Fitnesses in every city."



My home, technically, is in New York. That's where my permanent address is, although my permanent address is actually the home of an old friend from my MFA program. Where I actually live when I'm there is a succession of sublets. I spend so much of my life traveling for 10-12 weeks at a time that leases don't make any sense. Or furniture. I love New York, though. I get always get a light headache as soon as I step off the train into the garbage-scented air, which never really goes away until I leave again. I just take lots of ibuprofen. Also Halls for the sore-throat I get breathing in all the pollution and Sudafed for the post-nasal drip, IcyHot for all the aches I get jogging on concrete, Aquafor for the blisters and rashes, little blue capsules to sleep through the traffic noise, Tums for the nausea from forgetting to consume anything but caffeine and sugar all day. There's nothing to do about the way my body falls apart when I'm there besides stick it back together with mass produced drugstore chemicals. I love feeling like Frankenstein's monster. And anyway, I never stay there for too long before I get shot like a billiard ball to some other part of the country.

Mark says, "You're prepared for the cold, anyway," referring to my purple nylon sweatpants, which go *zip zop* with every rotation of my legs. I laugh nervously. Mark makes me nervous.

I did my audition for Mark for this show in New York. I'd been in a production of *Les Blancs*, the Lorraine Hansberry play that isn't *Raisin in the Sun* or the politely forgotten *Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*. It's about missionaries in Africa. Antigonus abandoning the baby is one thing, colonial oppressor is another. I played Marta Gotterling, an idealistic doctor at the mission clinic, pretending the stop gaps against the poverty of the place were somehow admirable. The character believes she's good. She's evil. That's a thing I can do. That's a service

I can provide: to represent evil in the world. I can be it, fully, with conviction, sympathy, understanding, I can believe what the evil people believe, sincerely, when I'm asked to, and stop as soon as the curtain comes down.

He shakes his head and laughs a little. "The things actors will put on their bodies."

He's wearing sleek technical clothes. I laugh too. I say, "Look, it's not my job to dress myself."

At my audition Mark had sat behind a folding table in a rehearsal room, a different but almost identical rehearsal room, staring at me from behind his fingers. I did my monologue, Goneril. I know enough to know I'm not Cordelia. It's the secret to my success.

When I finished he said, "Are you in *Les Blancs* at the Public?"

I noticed that my resume was facedown in front of him, he wasn't reading it. He must have just remembered me. I said, "Yes."

"And *Hedda* at the Guthrie a couple years ago, right?"

"Yes. I was Thea Elvsted."

He nodded and turned my resume over. He made a small mark on it in red pen. The stage manager for the audition told me I could go.

You always want to read meaning into every little sign you get at auditions. To think that they tell you anything about the machinations of these people who control your fate, who send you shooting around the country like billiard balls. But there's no knowing. A mark on your resume might mean a part. It might mean a big part. It might mean *Antigonus*, a part with one good scene. It might mean nothing at all.

I see him noticing the TV, which is displaying a picture of a graph curving sharply

upwards, a projected line going even further up. He looks at me. "Are you worried?" He says.

"I'm getting worried."

"I try not to worry," I say. "In general. It doesn't change anything."

I stand on the stage, the actual stage, in my boots, in my cloak, cradling a weighted baby doll in my arms. Mark and Jill and the rest of the cast sit scattered through the audience. The house lights are up—we're not into tech yet. We are just getting used to this space. I am just getting used to taking up all of this space.

I say, "And so, with shrieks,  
she melted into air. Affrighted much,  
I did in time collect myself and thought  
This was so and no slumber. Dreams are toys:  
Yet for this once, yea, superstitiously,  
I will be squared by this. I do believe  
Hermione hath suffer'd death, and that  
Apollo would, this being indeed the issue  
Of King Polixenes, it should here be laid,  
Either for life or death, upon the earth  
Of its right father. Blossom, speed thee well!"

I set the bundle gently, lovingly, on the ground at my feet, and next to her a rucksack—documents confirming her identity, money to help raise her, in the stupidly optimistic hope that someone may come find her. This my one possible salvation: that the baby may be found, that someone may be kind.

"There lie, and there thy character: there these;  
Which may, if fortune please, both breed thee, pretty,  
And still rest thine. The storm begins; poor wretch,  
That for thy mother's fault art thus exposed  
To loss and what may follow! Weep I cannot,  
But my heart bleeds; and most accursed am I  
To be by oath enjoin'd to this. Farewell!  
The day frowns more and more: thou'rt like to have

A lullaby too rough: I never saw  
The heavens so dim by day."

And here it comes. I look up sharply, hearing something.

"A savage clamour! Well may I get aboard! This is the chase: I am gone for ever."

But I just stand there. The stage direction that follows this speech is one of the most famous in Shakespeare. The direction is:

*He exits, pursued by a bear.*

No one knows what to make of this ridiculous fucking thing. It's not a funny moment in the play. Is it supposed to be funny? It's absurd in its directness: Antigonus needs to be done away with, so let's have him eaten. Sometimes it's a person in a bear suit. Some productions use lighting to make shadows. We have not yet decided. We have not yet decided how my improbable fate's going to come for me, whether it will be comedy or tragedy.

I say to Jill, "What's the bear going to be?"

She calls back, "We'll iron it out in tech."

Mark says, "Thank you. That was lovely."

I walk off the stage, myself, since I don't know how Antigonus is going to leave this earth.

In the green room after our first dress rehearsal Violet is passing around tequila—Violet, who plays my wife in the play, although my wife is my opposite in every way here, strong, steadfast, emotional, willing to risk herself for others, and strangely prescient and otherworldly. My wife, at the end of the play, it turns out, has been hiding poor queen Hermione all along. She has been hiding Hermione in her hall of statues, although whether Hermione was a statue or not isn't

known, why she hides her so long (16 years) when the king repents of his actions almost immediately isn't either. My wife, the keeper of secrets, the arbiter of happy endings. Violet has been doing this forever. She works always and has always always worked. She's been on some episodes of Law and Order in meaty guest spots. There are no cups, so she pours the tequila into the paper cones from the water dispenser. She wrangles in whatever stage hands and costume people she can find. I take on the job of passing the cones out. Even off stage I like to have business, little ongoing tasks to make me seem realistic.

I was on a TV show once. I'd been in LA for a show and answered a call for extras on *The Walking Dead*. They brought me to a suburb cleared of people at three in the morning to start on my make-up, carefully applying tattered flesh and festering wounds to my face as I sat at a counter in front of a mirror with a row of other zombies. My agent let me know about it, but I've hardly done any TV auditions before, just commercials here and there when they're easy to fit between shows. Regardless, when they said, "be a zombie," there in a sterile conference room with the chairs pushed up against the walls, me in my one nice suit of clothes I keep for auditions, I must have convinced them. I must have taken very naturally to being a zombie.

So I lurched and ran and clawed for the camera, and wondered if my parents would see it, or people I knew in high school, if they would recognize me, if I would be more offended if they did or if they didn't.

I've always loved zombie movies. I've always thought I would be the first to go. I would be the first one bitten, the anonymous casualty, the expendable person, the villager fleeing in terror. I've made peace with that.

The dressing room is full of posters and leaflets for shows past, old opening night cards,

drawings, post-its, in jokes, a water cooler and a microwave. The fluorescent lights in the ceiling have been left off in favor in a haphazard collection of floor lamps and desk lamps and string lights.

"I'd been saving this for opening," Violet says. "But we can have it now."

None of us want to articulate why. Because we don't know if there will be an opening anymore. Because opening is a question now. Because here we all are, in our cloaks and doublets and corsets, rehearsing away like the world is not ending outside, and here we all are, pressing forward without knowing really whether anyone will actually see this production. This production, which is nothing special, which is just another *Winter's Tale*, but has become the most precious thing I can imagine.

I give a shot to Rex, who sits on the arm of a couch staring at a wall. He accepts it. I don't need to ask what's become of his show in Seattle. I can see on his face how broken his heart is.

I give one to Diane, and notice that her hands are pink and raw. I've seen her in the bathroom the last week or so, washing them obsessively, mouthing Happy Birthday to herself and violently scrubbing between each finger.

Violet raises her own paper cone. "Remember SARS? Here's to this all being another SARS."

I raise my mine and drink it down. Violet goes around refilling them, silently, before anyone even asks.

"You know," she says eventually, when we are getting to our third round. "My mom never wanted me to be an actor. Even when it was going well. She always said I should be a nurse or a teacher so I'd be safe. Ha!" She takes a shot. "Joke's on her. Safe! I'll take unemployed over dead

any day." But she says it in a way that makes me wonder if she really would. I know I wouldn't.

And then we are all on stage together, under warm lighting, in sundresses and linen suits, singing, dancing, playing mandolins. Antigonus reborn, reincarnated after his improbable fate, as Mopsa the shepherd maid. You could also say they double-cast me because I'm one of the only people in the production who can sing, and Mopsa has a song. But here, now, for me, it is Antigonus's second try on the karmic wheel, fresh, light, innocent. Rex's mariner is returned too, from the bottom of the ocean, raised dripping and born again as a bumbling shepherd's son buying me gloves and tawdry lace from peddlers, in suspenders and a straw hat. The conceit of the show is to have Sicilia—the scene of the crimes and jealousy, the tyranny and paranoia—costumed in the clothes of the 1890s, and Bohemia—pastoral, freewheeling, full of music and joy—in the clothes of the 1920s. It is fall, harvest time, the sheep-shearing festival, everyone is in their finest clothes, especially because we are finally in dress rehearsals. Violet's even here to fill out the scene, dressed in a bonnet and kept toward the back since she is a major character in her other life.

Peter shows us ballads from his peddler's pack. "Here's one a very doleful tune, how a usurer's wife was brought to bed of twenty money-bags at a burden, and how she longed to eat adder's heads and toads carbonaroed."

Mopsa has no idea what toads carbonaroed are, so neither do I. "Is it true, think you?" I say.

"Very true, and but a month old."

"Bless me from marrying a usurer!" Diana says.

I grab Rex's arm. "Pray you now, buy it."

He says, "Come on, lay it by, and let's first see more ballads. We'll buy the other things anon."

"This is a merry ballad, but a very pretty one," Peter says.

"Let's have some merry ones!" I cry, because I am merry, because life is ribbons and bows and merry ballads, and the sheep will soon be sheared.

"Why, this is a passing merry one and goes to the tune of 'Two Maids Wooing a Man.' There's scarce a maid westward but she sings it. 'Tis in request, I can tell you."

"We can both sing it!" I say, proud of us, knowing the popular tune. "If thou'lt bear a part thou shalt hear, 'tis in three parts," I say, to prove I know what I'm talking about.

"We had the tune on't a month ago," Diana says.

"I can bear my part," Peter says. "You must know 'tis my occupation." He gives us the page—which is a yellowed copy of Pachelbel's Canon—and snatches a banjo from a nearby villager. What he actually plays is guitar, but Mark thought a banjo was funnier, so he learned just enough for our song. And it doesn't matter, since he's Autolycus, he's a shyster, and he'll stretch and inflate any scrap of skill he has if it will benefit him, and we all know this, we all know, but we still take the fun he brings us. Diana holds up her tambourine, and he makes a 'hit it,' gesture at her. "Have at it with you!"

She counts us off on the tambourine and then, all at once, we are singing, the first time through in separate parts, then a second time together, in three part harmony soaring up to the catwalks and the curtains, spinning out from our open throats into the cosmos.

*"Get you Hence, for I must go"  
"Whither?"*



*"O Wither?"  
"Wither?"  
"It becomes thy oath full well  
Thou to me thy secrets tell"  
"Me too, let me go thither"  
"Or thou goest to the grange or mill  
If to either, thou dost ill"  
"Neither."  
"What, neither?"  
"Neither."  
"Thou has sworn my love to be."  
"Thou hast sworn it more to me  
Then whither goest? Say whither."*

Rex starts moving to interrupt us, waving his hands—as he's supposed to do—but Jill interrupts him.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I'm sorry. We have a problem."

Everyone stays where they are for a minute. We all knew. We have all been pretending this whole time we don't know, acting like this production will happen, acting like our lights and our costumes and our care and our selves are for anyone but ourselves.

I sit on the curb outside South Station, the main train station of this city, with my suitcase beside me. The cement is so cold it makes my ass hurt.

This is just a gesture. American Repertory Theater has not literally kicked me out on the curb. I can stay in company housing until the end of the month, a couple weeks from now. The cast has transformed into a dust devil of text messages flickering across my phone: where are you going, where am I going, what will happen to us. Violet's going back home to New York; her husband has a "normal" job and can float them for a while. Rex is going to stay with his sister in Indiana for now. Diane is afraid to travel, and is thinking of taking unemployment and finding a

temporary place right here in Boston.

I have not contributed to these conversations. It doesn't make any sense for me to stay here, doing nothing. There's no point in going to New York, when auditions for everything are on hold. I came here to think about it. The station overlooks a little plaza settled in the midst of high rises, a place that usually has food trucks and buskers and office workers taking their lunches in the grass on nice days. It's empty now. Rehearsals for *Bright Room* are supposed to start in DC in six weeks. The shelter-in-place order is supposed to last for four. I don't know how to begin to think about what the world will look like that far in the future.

*A Bright Room Called Day* is a play written in America in the eighties—the Regan years—about Germany in the thirties—the Hitler years. The comparison is made directly. The characters are artists, activists, queers, immigrants. They are the people who end up in the camps. And slowly, as things get worse, they all start getting out. All these people who had believed in art and a better world, they flee for survival. Except for the lead. She stays, until she is all alone. Because she will not believe that what is happening is happening. I was going to be her. In my heart I was already starting to be, I had my heart so set on this show.

I go into the station, go to the ticket window, buy a ticket for the next train to DC. I have no particular reason to go there. The show's not even starting yet. But I have no reason to be here either. I might as well be there as here. At least it might be warmer.

The train station is nearly empty. The wheels of my suitcase make a pleasing sound rolling across the floor. The Dunkin' Donuts kiosk is still open, even though nobody's there, and the one employee standing behind the counter looks both bored and uneasy. Usually there are pigeons inside stations like this, waddling around and hanging out in the beams of the high,

cavernous ceiling. I wonder why there are no pigeons, why the pigeons haven't taken this place over, and then realize it's because the door hasn't been opening and closing. They're shut out. They can't get in this big empty shelter unless someone accidentally lets them in.

This isn't how it's supposed to happen, the end of my career. It was supposed to be one of the reasons everyone has been telling me all along: that I would become too old, too poor, too exhausted, too unpopular. My career was supposed to break down slowly, I was always told, and this period of relative success was nothing but a delay on the road to figuring out what I'd do next. It was supposed to be in some way my fault, to play out my tragic flaw of ever believing I could do this in the first place.

This is not a tragic catastrophe. This is a banana peel I've slipped on on the sidewalk, and fallen and fractured my skull. This is absurd. No one would believe it. A *deus ex machina*. *Ursus ex machina*?

The train is more than half-empty. Unheard of for the Northeaster line. A few people are wearing paper surgical masks. A few people have bandanas tied around their faces like cartoon bandits. I don't have anything on my face. I didn't know we were putting things on our faces now. The passengers all regard each other with suspicion. We do not, none of us, have a solid grasp of what is irresponsible behavior anymore. Most people appear to be trying to keep their air to themselves, sinking down in their seats and hunching their shoulders, breathing shallowly.

I look out the window somewhere from somewhere in the Northeast corridor. I see piles and crumbs of indistinct plastic trash, colorful fragments of branding in the mud by the train tracks, bold bright graffiti in clean and pleasing lines, smashed together and on top of itself, on

the gigantic and perfectly rectangular canvases of concrete industrial buildings and defunct train cars, power plants laid out in clean geometry, delicate alien shapes like robot insects in parade ground formation, I see houses laid out below the tracks, the backs of buildings, rows of row houses with one or two in the middle boarded up with the paint half-stripped off and the bricks crumbling like a missing tooth in the line with its neighbors, backyards, human trash and laundry, tricycles, above-ground pools, decomposing cars, I see abandoned factories with rust stains dripping down their sharp elaborate corners, jagged holes broken out of grid panels of small square windows tilted open to give a sense of the vast empty spaces inside the carapace. I've been blasting DeBussy through my headphones and not paying attention to the station announcements, seeing the buildings get taller and denser and glossier and thinking, is this Philadelphia? Do the names of cities matter? They're all clumps of the same stuff.

I keep thinking to myself, "the anthropocene, the anthropocene, the anthropocene," like an incantation over this worthless stuff the train rolls past. Haven't we made the world into the things we find most pleasing to us, bright colors, clean shapes, smooth and glossy surfaces?

Let's say I love everything that's obviously fake. Including: bad wigs, animatronics, small plastic toys, stickers, countertop veneers, particleboard, the inner guts of cheap furniture, the smell when you walk into Bath and Body Works, diet soda, synthesizer violins, push-ups bras, advertisements. I like the way these things decay. The ways adhesive peels apart and plastic goes brittle and cracked, the bitter chemical aftertaste. I like things that can never be repaired once they start to fall apart and aren't worth repairing anyway. Onto the junk heap with all the other fake broken things. I love the junk heap. I love how it only grows and never shrinks.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I take it out—an incoming call from "Cheryl Wooly

Mammoth." The production manager of *Bright Room*, whose real last name I've forgotten. I take off my headphones. I reject the call. I know what she's going to say.

## **Bad Winter Emulsion**

Last night I dreamed my ex-husband had moved back into our first apartment. A drafty attic-level one-bedroom. It was exactly the same as the last time I saw it, almost ten years ago, down to the stains on the floors and the dents in the walls. My ex-husband was standing at the stove cooking something. His hair was falling in his eyes. He needed a haircut, like he always did. I sat at the kitchen table and watched his long back.

"The same apartment just happened to be on the market again?" I said. "I thought you hated it here. You never stopped complaining about it."

"Let me see your eye," he said. "I can fix it."

He took my head in his hands and manipulated my eyeball in some obscure way, fingers pressing into the hard round surface of it. I wrenched myself away. Whatever he had been cooking was producing a black, acrid smoke now.

He started crying. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I want to make it up to you."

I got up and left him there in the kitchen.

Now it's morning and I feel like something is following me. I had not known I remembered, exactly, my ex-husband's voice and gait and the hunch of his shoulders. I had not known I remembered every dent in the walls of that place. I was not prepared for these things to leap out of my unconscious like that, fully formed, in vivid color.

It's my day off of work at the bookstore. It is April and snowing. I can wander around my apartment touching things, my bed and my bookshelves, my coffeemaker and my cat. The beige walls of the basement studio I'm lucky to have. I am proud of my life. I am proud of myself for

being stable, conscious, sober. Even so. There's always this time from my early twenties that lives in my memory like a separate animal, more alive and active than any of the better things that have happened since.

I sit down dumbly on my bed. I wonder where my eyepatch ever went. This question feels very urgent to me, at least right now, at least until the sun comes up.

#

We got married in the spring of our senior year at UC Santa Cruz, day-drunk on a Tuesday, when we happened to walk by city hall. He was already accepted to the graduate school at Tufts, a PhD in Renaissance literature, and I was already planning to go with him. We thought getting married was hilarious. His parents were upset we hadn't planned anything or included them. My mom said, "Oh," and frowned, and kept any other opinions to herself.

In the fall we moved to Boston and I took the first job I could find, a receptionist at a corporate law firm. I mostly remember the commute. It was a freakishly bad winter that year, the snowstorms came early and kept coming. I got up hungover most mornings, brushed my teeth, tried to get the wine stains off my lips, and went down to the street. It was cold enough to freeze the snot inside my nose. Everyone in the neighborhood walked single-file along tunnels carved out of the snow. By the time I got to the train station the crowd had usually overflowed the platform and spilled up the stairs—each successive snow storm brought longer train delays, like the train workers were slowly losing the will to resist. Eventually the crowd would press me onto a train. I'd sweat into my coat and breathe into the coats of others, my head spinning slowly on its pool of day-old alcohol like a lily pad, and try not to throw up.

I got off at State Street station in the financial district, went past the homeless people

sleeping on benches underground, into the lobby of my office building, into the elevator and up to the 40th floor. I popped my ears. I settled behind my desk with the multi-line phone I never quite learned how to use. *Stone and Weyfarth, how may I direct your call? Stone and Weyfarth, how may I direct your call?* Sometimes I turned around to look out the plate glass windows at flurries of snow blowing off the tops of neighboring buildings.

I remember more than that. Nobody in the office talked to me. I mostly looked at the internet all day. I read the Craigslist personals. I told myself I liked them because they were funny. Really it was that they were obscene. I liked seeing people shout their filthiest desires into the void. I felt a tenderness for them, a kind of communion through the computer. Sometimes I forgot I was sitting at my silent, sterile reception desk.

On my lunch breaks I made a cup of coffee in the break room and went down 40 floors to the sidewalk. I popped my ears again. I stood there with my coffee and tried to get through two cigarettes before my fingers got too numb to work the lighter. There was a sign on the sidewalk in front of the building: CAUTION, FALLING ICE. They were in front of all the high-rises. It didn't seem like a helpful warning to me.

When I came home from work my husband would usually be sitting at our kitchen table with his laptop and a mason jar full of Yellow Tail. The cheap Australian wine with the kangaroo on the bottle, which tastes like old water pipes or blood. As soon as I got in the door he abandoned his work and followed me around the apartment, telling me about how stressed he was, waving around his jar of wine.

He said: "You know who's dumb? Deconstructionists. Deconstructionists are just the



dumbest. They're all, 'oh, the coercive power of language,' and I'm like, 'do any of you ever enjoy some cake, or watch a TV show?'" Or something like that. He said a lot of things.

I poured myself a jar of Yellow Tail. I never remembered to pack lunches and couldn't afford to eat out, so I was always starving when I came home. The wine distracted me.

Our apartment had two rooms with steeply vaulted ceilings we were always hitting our heads on. There were bubbles trapped under the vinyl floors that would squash down under your feet and pop up somewhere else. The windows were flush with the floor. We didn't insulate them that first winter. No one told us we were supposed to. We thought everyone suffered like this.

There was a fire escape out our bathroom window, a platform of metal grating propped on the building's tarpaper roof. We went there to smoke. When the snow started in earnest we cleared it off with our hands and laid trash bags over the metal slats. We dragged the blankets off our bed and huddled under them for warmth. I remember this as a composite, a memory of all the many times we did it, and I also remember particular times that we did.

One time I said, "You still like the poetry though, don't you?"

"Yes. God yes. Here, hold this."

He handed me his wine jar, flicked his nearly-done cigarette over the edge of the roof, and climbed back through the bathroom window. I waited. He came back through the window with one of his school books. He read me a poem, an Andrew Marvell poem, tilting the book in the poor light. I remember which one. The poem about the garden.

I said, "That's beautiful."

He took his drink back absently. "I have to write six pages about it by tomorrow."

At least a few times it rained while we were out there with our blankets. The blankets got

wet and we shivered under them for the rest of the night. We didn't stop dragging them outside. They developed a smell: rainwater, dead leaves, stale smoke, spilled wine, our own sweetly rotting alcoholic sweat.

#

I drag a chair from the kitchen to the closet and take a shoebox down from the top shelf. It's where I keep worthless objects I don't want to throw away—my old college ID, faded concert tickets, Polaroids with former friends, a single costume earring. I don't know if other people keep boxes like this. I've taken it with me through half a dozen cheap apartments around Boston by now. I only vaguely remember why I wanted to keep most of these things.

I dig around. There's a Boston Tea Party commemorative shot glass, a Bic lighter with a photo of a golden retriever on it, a torn off half of a dollar bill. I find three half-filled stamp cards for Raven Used Books, creased and going soft at the edges. These I do remember, in a way I can feel in my body. A basement-level storefront under a liquor store, piles of yellowed books on the floor and behind the counter, plywood shelves, metal bars over the street level windows, Lou Reed playing always. I bought *The Recognitions* there. It didn't fit in their paper bags, so the clerk gave me an old Raven tote bag he found behind the counter to carry it home in, gratis.

I lost the bag at some point. I used to lose things a lot. Raven Used Books closed a few years after I moved to Boston. The stamp cards will never be completed. I can't get new ones anymore. This is why I can never get rid of them.

Ten years ago I couldn't have imagined myself as a person whose main life project was Being Sober. Who practices at things like mindfulness, detachment, compassion for myself and others, who keeps practicing even when it doesn't come naturally. I would have felt betrayed to

know I could become so boring. I really thought stupefied and suffering was an interesting way to be.

I linger over the things in the box but I don't find what I'm looking for, the eyepatch. I would not have thrown it away. It has to be somewhere. I can see it in my mind. Black, domed, made of foam with a silky finish. I can feel it on my face.

#

We didn't see ourselves as dissolute people. We made attempts at being some other way.

For instance, I got the idea to read *The Recognitions* by William Gaddis.

I had studied literature in school too. I thought of myself as an intellectual, but no one else seemed to think of me that way. I had no particular talent or aspiration, I stayed up late reading unpopular books and biting my nails, I got too drunk at parties and hooked up with indifferent strangers. Only my husband seemed to think of me as anything at all. I hoped I was a late bloomer. Lots of interesting people were late bloomers. I imagined my life then, the receptionist job and the train and the Yellow Tail, as a stepping-stone towards some as-yet-undefined life of the mind. I thought *The Recognitions* would somehow move me forward on that path.

*The Recognitions* is something like a thousand pages long, all of which are adversarially dense. It took me at least six or eight months to finish it. I persisted. I carried that book with me everywhere: on the train, to work, walking around town. Any time I had a few minutes I would hoist it out to read a single long sentence three times before getting distracted.

I sat cross-legged on the bed with the book open in front of me. My husband looked at me for a while, then said, "You know, if you don't like it you could just stop reading it. It

wouldn't make you dumb."

"I do like it," I said. I was lying. At no point did I like it. I remember the cramp I got in my neck from sitting that way and weight of it pulling my back out of alignment. I can't really remember what it's about.

My husband went in a different direction. One day when I came home he was standing by the stove, ladling a deep-yellow, greasy liquid into our blender. Both of our two pots were coated with it, starting to crust. He was making Hollandaise sauce.

"You're supposed to make it in a double-boiler over low heat, so the egg yolks bond to the fat in the butter," he said. "But I read that if you get the butter hot and the eggs room temperature you can get the same result in a blender."

"Huh," I said. There was an open bottle of Yellow Tail on the kitchen table, among the egg cartons and boxes of butter and lemon peels. I poured some wine into my dirty glass from last night. The coils on our stove were warped and sometimes made loud pinging sounds. We were not people who owned a double-boiler.

"It forms an emulsion," he went on. "Which is a stable bond between two things that usually don't mix. You know what else is an emulsion? Hot dogs."

"What do you put Hollandaise sauce on, though?"

"Eggs Benedict. Cuts of meat. Anything, really." He turned on the blender.

He kept trying after that first attempt. He tried different techniques. Hovering a pan just over the burner, soft cooking the egg yolks before putting them in the blender. He never got a double-boiler. The results were consistently disgusting, but we ate them anyway. We would not give up on our first, terrible ideas.

There was November and December: the dark descending earlier and earlier in the afternoon, mornings colder than I could have imagined possible and the mornings after even colder, my husband's anxiety winching a little tighter each week as his finals approached. We started fighting. We fought when we'd been drinking too much or when we hadn't been drinking enough. We fought because he teased me too much, because I expected him to read my mind, because he dismissed my work exhaustion, because I dismissed his school stress, because he insisted on making elaborate sauces, because I didn't appreciate the sauces he made. They weren't especially heated fights. We always trailed off before they really landed, silent, drunk, and petulant.

We weren't having sex as often as we did in college. We told each other that it was normal, we were both tired and stressed. We wanted to be mature and proactive about it. Our idea was to watch porn together. My husband put his laptop on our bed and pulled up a website. I'd never been to a porn site before. I found the ads off-putting. It took us too long to choose a video and when we did it had buffering issues. We tried taking our clothes off, to see if that would make it more exciting. It didn't. We never tried it again.

There was one night I walked in the door from work and he asked me to edit a paper of his that was due the next day, fifteen pages about a theorist I'd never heard of. I tried but couldn't make sense of it, he got upset, I told him he didn't respect me and walked out of the house. I bought three nips of Fireball and a Dunkin' Donuts hot chocolate and stood behind a dumpster to combine them. I wandered around the snow tunnels getting drunk and ignoring his calls for a while, then went home and locked myself in the bathroom until late.

Once we drank several bottles of Yellow Tail and he stood across from me in the bedroom telling me I was selfish and adolescent and did nothing but feel sorry for myself until he passed out, fully dressed with all the lights on. He later claimed to have no memory of this.

But that wasn't all of it. For instance: one night we snuck a bottle of vodka into an art house screening of *Repo Man*, then mocked the people we saw through the windows of the fancy Harvard Square bars.

"Suckers," my husband said. "Squares. Money won't save you, assholes! Death comes for us all!"

"*Ordinary fucking people,*" I said. "*I hate 'em!*"

We passed an abandoned gas station where the snow had been allowed to pile up untouched and decided to cross it. We waded into the drifts and tumbled through them, cold bright sharp points on our skin. We should have gotten hurt but we didn't. We just laughed the whole time, hysterically.

I kept going back to the porn websites. I watched porn whenever my husband wasn't around, after he went to bed or weekend afternoons when he was at the library. The images had a nervous, flickering quality and the sex looked grotesque and uncomfortable to me. I liked that. I liked the performance of abasement. I liked having a secret tucked away from my husband, to prove I existed.

I went to work and came home: wine stains, snow tunnels, coat breathing, *The Recognitions*, ear pop, Craigslist, StoneandWeyfarthowmayIdirectyourcall, CAUTIONFALLINGICE, ear pop, coat breathing, snow tunnels. My husband was standing at

the stove when I came in—every day, but also this particular day. He had a glass mixing bowl of viscous yellow stuff sitting on top of a saucepan on the burner.

I came up to the stove to look. I said, “Are you sure that thing’s heat resistant?”

He said, “I’m not getting it that hot,” and then the bowl exploded.

There was heat and force and a strong feeling that I couldn’t open my eyes, and my husband saying, “Oh my God, oh my God.” Shifting, sparkling shapes in red and white floated across the inside of my eyelids. A light buzzing started in my ears.

Everything that happened after that happened in the dark. The explosion had all gone in my direction. My husband wanted to call an ambulance but I told him I wasn’t dying and my insurance wouldn’t cover it. He found a number for a cab instead. He guided me by the arm down the stairs and over the snowbank on the curb. He led me into the emergency room at Somerville Hospital and filled out forms for me. He had to ask me about all the questions. Did I have any allergies? When was my last period? What was my social security number?

The doctors were all disembodied voices, and they made sounds of surprise when I removed the dish towel I’d been holding to my eyes. Someone said, “A kitchen injury? You said this is a kitchen injury?” They pulled and prodded and shined lights. I had a laceration on my left lower eyelid and a corneal abrasion. There was nothing wrong with my other eye. It was just reacting sympathetically.

My husband was asked to leave the room. I hadn’t known he was in it. The hospital people asked me if anyone was hurting me at home. I said no. They asked if I was sure, and I explained what happened.

“My husband’s not abusive,” I said. “He’s just stupid.”

They laughed. They laughed for a while.

I got four stitches in my eyelid, some antibiotic drops for my cornea, and an eyepatch I'd have to wear for two weeks. A little deeper and the shard of glass could have permanently blinded me, they said. They said it could have been much worse. I nodded. I was aware that things could be much worse.

#

I still have a scar going down my lower eyelid. And a scar on my cornea, a light fuzz in my peripheral vision on one side. I'm still afraid of stoves. I jump away from them at every little rattle. I'm not thinking about the accident when I do this. It's an unconscious reflex now.

I take out my phone, sitting there on the floor with my shoebox and my meaningful detritus, and compose a quick email to my ex-husband:

*Do you remember what I ever did with my eyepatch?*

It's not strange for me to email him like this. We started writing a few months after the divorce, first about some practical things and then terse little updates on how we were doing. For the last few years we've been sending long, rambling things back and forth every week or so. He tells me about his data entry job and his own apartment back in Santa Cruz, I tell him about funny customers at the bookstore I manage, we recommend each other books and movies. He got sober before I did. We talk about it. How hard it makes dating, the dumb things we do for kicks now—I drink coffee until I feel sick, he gets hot sauces that make his head sweat and lips burn. We are careful and sparing with references to the past. I'm not sure why we write each other like this. To confirm each other's continued existence, I guess. I like him a lot better as a penpal than I ever did as a husband.



#

We got home from the hospital late and exhausted. The kitchen floor was covered in broken glass, blood, and Hollandaise sauce. It had congealed together into geometric planes, like cracked desert mud. We stood in the doorway. The blast radius blocked the path to the bathroom.

My husband said, "I'll... clean this later."

He stepped over it and got a flattened cardboard box we had failed to take down to recycling for months. Our kitchen table had come packed in it. He laid it over the mess on the floor.

I remember, as a composite: carefully unsticking clots of blood from the sharp points of my stitches as I changed the gauze on my eye every morning; the antibiotic drops, which were greasy and yellow and always got in my hair; the light suspense of navigating stairways and snowbanks without depth perception, dropping things and missing doorknobs, a queasy and dissociated feeling. Like I was seeing the word on a computer screen. It was only two weeks and it still forms own, special lagoon in my brain.

We went to an overpriced gastropub a few days after the accident, to console ourselves. My husband said, "You do look kind of badass though."

"I think I just look diseased."

"You could be a Bond villain. Or John Goodman in *O Brother Where Art Thou*. Or Captain Ahab."

"Captain Ahab didn't have an eyepatch. You're thinking of cartoon pirates."

"Fine, a cartoon pirate then."

I remember saying, "Can you just stop, please? I'm getting really tired of this joke."

Which means he must have already made it several times.

“I mean it affectionately,” he said. “I’m trying to lift your spirits.”

I don’t remember how I responded.

Strangers saw the eye patch as an invitation to tell their own eye injury stories.

Coworkers who had never spoken to me before stopped at the reception desk to ask what happened. A paralegal told me about when her brother-in-law got a fishhook stuck in his eye and tried to pull it out himself. He had a glass eye now, she said. On the train, with my eyepatch and my thousand-page book, a man told me about when his buddy accidentally shot him in the face with a nail gun. He showed me the dimple just below his eye, like a beauty mark. When I told waiters and bartenders how it happened they all had their own exploding glassware stories. It was the most conversation I’d had with anyone other than my husband in months.

I had always felt unattractive, slapped together, depressing—skinny limbs and a beer belly and greasy bangs—but I knew there wasn’t anything really unusual about me. I didn’t create any special impression on other people. The eyepatch changed that. It nudged me out of the normal and into the magnetically grotesque. Technically anyone could have an accident like mine, but the people who actually did always seemed to be failing in a more general way.

I know my husband and I had sex at least once during the time of the eyepatch. I didn’t want it to get twisted and my husband didn’t want to look at it, so we quietly agreed that from-behind was best. The lack of visuals let me think about porn. My husband became unimportant. I could pretend I was someone else, a subject of bottomless lust. Somehow the less appealing I was in reality the easier it was to imagine.

#

A phrase of my ex-husband's pops into my head: "queasiness of soul." I don't remember whether he said it when we were married or wrote it in an email years later. I put the things back in the shoebox, the shoebox back on the shelf, drag the chair back to the kitchen. I don't owe it to the past to sit here recreating it. I don't owe the past anything.

I open a cupboard and forget why. I sit in the chair, stand up to pace around the room, then sit back down. My life is not made of discrete chunks of time that exist only in the past. And even if it was, there are other times besides that one, with different characters, different miasmas. I can remember the one three years later, after my husband quit grad school and I got fired from the law firm for missing too many days to hangovers, when we were both temping and scrambling and too miserable even to fight anymore. I can remember sitting on the bus home in summer, my forehead against the window, seeing people on the sidewalks, going by the pizza places and corner stores and gas stations. I can remember walking up the stairs to our apartment door, already knowing what I was going to say.

My husband was standing at the stove. I stood in the doorway, sweating—in summer the apartment was unbearably hot. He looked up at me. His face went slack and blank.

"What's wrong?"

"I. Uh, I. Uh."

He said nothing. He watched me stutter for a while.

I said, "I can't—keep doing this. I. I think we should get divorced." The word felt luxurious in my mouth. Spacious. *Divorce*. Like the sound of fabric ripping.

"Oh," he said. And then, "I'm not really surprised, you know."

He stirred the pot on the stove. I took off my shoes and went to the window. He really

wasn't surprised. I wasn't surprised. There were no surprises.

I have remembered this scene so many times it's like a worry stone now. Heavy, and worn a little smoother every time I touch it.

My cat jumps onto the kitchen table, right in my face, arches her back, and then sits there like an owl, staring at me. She's not supposed to be up here, but I don't bother removing her anymore. She never learns to stop trying.

#

My husband finished his finals and started his winter break. He spent his days playing online chess like it was his job and meeting his grad school friends for beers in the afternoons, often passed out or uselessly drunk by the time I got home from work. The department stores around my office put glossy orbs and fake wrapped packages in their windows. The people on Craigslist made holiday-themed sex requests: *I'm all alone on Christmas, come be my slut*. There were always new tins of cookies from clients in the office kitchen. When no one was around I stood at the counters eating one after another in lieu of any other kind of food. My eyepatch was gone but the scar on my eyelid still looked fresh and raw. People avoided looking at my face.

I didn't say anything about my husband being unconscious or gone all the time. I appreciated the space. I told myself I would plow my way through *The Recognitions*. What I actually did was drink entire bottles of Yellow Tail and watch porn until late in the night. The lights took on a stark, ghoulish quality at 3AM; the slanted walls seemed to close in around me. I sat in the bathroom, it felt safer. We would both go home to California soon, I told myself. We'd go home to California for Christmas and come back and try again.

On one of these late drunk nights shut in the bathroom, I went to a website that pairs you

a random person to video chat. I just wanted to talk to a stranger. I found it easier to talk to strangers. Most of the chat windows that came up were just naked torsos stroking their penises. I rejected them. I talked for a while to some teenagers in a carpeted basement in a place they called “Bumfuck, Georgia.” They were playing video games and drinking Mountain Dew and seemed tired of each other. I liked them, I sympathized. I was once a teenager. Then they left and it was back to the gallery of headless masturbators. I started insulting them, for some variety. “Is this just what you do for fun? Is this your hobby?” “That’s nice. That’s what gets a lady going.” That kind of thing. I kept them coming. The supply of penises was endless.

My low-resolution webcam mostly hid what was wrong with my eye. At some point one of the men on the screen asked me to show him my boobs and I did. They all asked. I don’t know why I chose that one. I may have thought, *fuck my husband* or I may have thought, *lucky me, a stranger is interested in my boobs*, or I may not have thought anything at all. I know I felt a kind of power. I could be the obscene, flickering image. I could be the thing people couldn’t look away from. He asked me to touch myself and I did. He asked me to moan for him. I moaned for him. He came. I felt accomplished. Like it counted more, happening across computer screens.

I shut my computer and put on a T-shirt and got into bed with my husband. He didn’t move. His face was vulnerable, snoring, drunk. I hated him. I wanted to smash his soft face in. I lay there shivering for a long time, trying to feel guilty. I couldn’t. I still can’t.

#

I get up to make coffee. This feels like a decisive action. I focus on just being alive: the liquid popping sounds of the machine, the snow collecting in my window, the grey light filtering through it, the creaking of the building, breathing in, breathing out. I rub the cat’s soft head with

my fingertips.

“It's OK,” I say to her, “The eternal now, you know? The eternal meow.”

She stares back at me with the same dumb expression she always has. This is a good life, just being alive.

My phone lights up with a notification. An email from my ex-husband. He doesn't usually respond so quickly.

*We burned it in the sink. I think we doused it in vodka to get it to light. It smelled like burning plastic and set off the smoke detector. You don't remember that?*

Now that he says it I do. Or rather, I remember the fact that I did it and the scorch mark it left in the basin. I don't remember actually doing it: the smell or the feel of lighter. I set my phone face down on the table. I can't explain myself. My story's full of holes. I'm full of holes. I try to come back to the things around me now, the cat the snow the window the breathing. Burning the eyepatch. It both does and doesn't sound like a thing I would do.

## Patrick

His hands are sticky and with lime juice and burning red in the nicks the nutmeg grater has spread across his knuckles. The pain in his shoulder emanates up his brainstem and cradles the back of his skull; his hands are shaking, a flutter no one else can see but he feels as a marionette tug in the tendons. JC down the bar is frantically cutting limes, the blade of the knife coming dangerously close to the skin of his knuckles, chapped from all the plunging his hands into tubs of sanitizer; he's letting limes roll away from him down the counter, and the tickets keep chugging out of the machine, winding around Dan's arms like pool garlands and breaking away to drift to the floor, and the weight of the people across the counter staring at him in their crisp organic cotton clothes and herbal scented bespoke hair products, mixing with the smell of spilled amaretto, and all this because it's 6:25 and Patrick was supposed to be here at 5:15, and one bartender and barback cannot handle all this, they need more bodies behind the counter, and where the fuck is Patrick?

Maggie the general manager shows up over his shoulder but just stands there, not helping. Hands at her sides, limp.

Dan says, without looking away from his shakers, without stopping the movement of his hands, "Did you get a hold of Patrick?"

JC calls down the bar, "Where the fuck is Patrick?"

Maggie says, "He died."

Dan's hands continue to move. He sees in his peripheral vision JC's rapidly slow before stopping, poised over the cutting board.

"He—like—he's dead?" Dan says.

"His girlfriend called just now. It was. It was pneumonia I guess. Not the contagious kind. He just died."

Dan feels as though his arm is shaking the cocktail shaker by itself. He's overshaken it by now, or else time just seems to be moving very slowly. Either way he can't stop it. The parts of his body feel very distant from each other and himself. He had been imagining Patrick sitting at home, smoking weed and watching TV, having misread or misremembered the schedule.

"I didn't mean to tell you right away," Maggie says. "I meant to wait until the shift was over."

"He was in the hospital?" JC says. "How long—I worked with him on Saturday, how could he..."

"Just since last night," Maggie says. "It happened fast. I guess pneumonia can do that."

Dan's arm loses momentum and stays suspended, gripping the shaker. A lime rolls off the edge of the counter and JC bends to pick it up. He holds it in his hand.

Maggie acts first. She takes the shaker from Dan's hand and pours it neatly into the row of glasses he'd lined up while he stands there dumbly.

"Get the bottles you need," she says curtly, taking the tickets from Dan's arms and separating and sorting them. "The best thing is to keep going. We have to keep going."

"How do you just die of pneumonia?" JC says.

(Dan thinks. He remembers: Patrick coughed into his elbow and then examined his sleeve.

"Gross dude," Dan said.



"No shit I was coughing up blood this morning," Patrick said. He thumped his fist against his chest. "Don't smoke, kids."

"Do you think you should see a doctor?" Dan said, not out of concern for Patrick but for himself, in case it was contagious.

Patrick just shook his head and went back to measuring out cardamom pods for the syrup he was making. It was before six on an off weekday, time for preparation. "I dunno. I'm not into doctors. They just take all your money and then tell you not to go to work.")

Kayla the server has been watching them with interest—Dan could see her watching them when she emerged into view among the tables of suits and finance bros in the murk of mood lighting and too loud-music, coming and going from the stark lights and clatter of pans on stainless steel at the kitchen window. She looks at Dan like 'what the fuck' as she approaches the bar, the smile she stretches taut over her face for customers still in place.

She puts the drinks on her round tray and hoists it, elbows in and elevated to absorb shock like she always does. She says, still smiling, sotto voce, tipping her head toward Maggie, "What brings Missus Thatcher behind the bar with the commoners?"

"Patrick died," Dan says, quietly lining up bottles. "Today."

She stops. She says, too loud, loud enough Maggie looks over, "You mean our Patrick?"

Of course he does. Who else would he be talking about. Some customers look over too, the people right around the bar station: two people Dan pegged by their body language as a bad first date, three women likely office friends, two men discussing something business-y in their best TED talk voices. Kayla swallows. The martini glasses briefly tremble and clink.

"So we're really doing this? We're really just going on with the shift like anything is OK?" She lifts her tray it, the tendons on her hands popping out as she pivots the weight on her wrists, and strides off. The customers return their full attention to each other. They don't even know, Dan thinks, disbelieving. They don't even know. He twists a sliver of orange peel over someone's drink. He watches JC's hands working. He knows everyone's hands. He knows everyone's hands better than any other part of them. He tries to think of what else he knows about JC. He's from Michigan, he dropped out of Berklee, he's allergic to peanuts but not like he'll die. And he knows JC's hands.

(Patrick's hands had words tattooed on the knuckles, one letter per finger joint. They were faded blue-black and watery with little pockmarks and gouges from the thousand little scars you get working food service. One hand said CITY.)

Dan can't remember what the other said. He never asked about them. Even after staring at the for hours and hours, day after day. He can't remember.

The work friends leave together and the date people leave separately. Maggie changes the music from pop to jazz. JC laughs darkly.

"What, is she trying to be respectful? A little late for that now."

The customers replenish themselves wilder and more demanding, drunker people who had time to change clothes into something sharper or sexier after work and people whose after-work drinks extended and transformed unexpectedly, already getting sloppy in button-downs and blouses at 8PM. Dan moves like a machine. JC takes up mixing and pouring, unasked, frantic and making a mess but trying. The servers start ducking under the partition to the bar to pour

their own drinks when they can. The news spread almost instantly. Dan remains aware of it—a light tense buzz, between the bar station and the beer taps, over the kitchen window, along with grills and between the dining tables. Patrick, Patrick, Patrick.

"Pneumonia?"

"The girlfriend."

"Coughing up blood."

"Why are we still here?"

The special this night is one Dan came up with and didn't think through, a thing with a sugared rim and egg whites. It's popular. He has stopped bothering to wipe the slime from his hands between drinks. His black apron is covered in snail trails.

(When Dan came up with the recipe Patrick said, "I can't do that shit," watching Dan crack an egg with one hand and deftly separate the yolk. "I don't even eat eggs, they gross me out. Can we just separate a bunch of them into a quart bottle ahead of time? Or better yet, make JC do it?"

"That's a good idea," Dan said, dropping ice cubes in the shaker. He raised his voice over the sound of them clattering against metal as she shook. "No time for panache during after-work rush."

Patrick tapped a tattooed finger to his temple. "See? There's some brain left in there that isn't rotted.")

Dan empties a plastic carton, peels off the masking tape label and throws it in the overflowing dish bin at his feet. Only when he is looking in the fridge for the next one does he realize the label was in Patrick's handwriting. The bar fridge is full of Patrick's handwriting, the

walk-in too, lower case scribbles in sharpie on masking tape. He has an impulse to fish the label out of the trash: *egg whites*. What a stupid idea. Like any part of Patrick is in the cartons of mixers and syrups he made every day.

Jerry the prep cook starts helping with barbacking as he can, dropping in and out to pour and chop and juice so JC can make drinks. There is something a little off about Jerry, as a person. You get that sometimes with prep cooks.

"How old was he?" Jerry says.

No one says anything for a minute.

Finally JC says, "I don't think he ever said. Not to me anyway."

They all work quietly.

JC says to Dan, "Did he ever tell you how old he was?"

"No. He did tell me once he saw *The Matrix* in theaters his junior year of high school. So..."

(He'd said: "I liked it but I went around shitting on it to get a rise out of people.")

They aren't allowed to have their phones out on the floor. It's unlikely Maggie would reprimand anyone about it tonight, but it's a habit—none of them take out their phones. They all just search their memories and calculate.

"It came out in 1999," Jerry says. "No, 2000. No, 1999."

"So he'd be 37 or 38," JC says, "depending on when his birthday is. Was."

Dan lets the work stop him from having to say anything.

After a while JC says, "You need to step off the floor for a minute man? I mean, Christ,

we all understand. I'm barely holding it together myself. You two were close."

Dan keeps his face tilted down. Was this what counted as closeness? "No, I'm OK. I'll be OK."

The crowd starts to thin, finally, around eleven. These things happen predictably, the same tonight as any other night. Jerry goes home hours later than he was scheduled.

"Thank you for staying," Dan says. "Really, thank you."

"Mo work mo money," Jerry says. "I'm not complaining."

JC goes back to his barbacking work without saying anything. Dan's glad—JC's better at barbacking than Jerry, which makes sense since it's actually his job, but it feels like a spiritual superiority in this moment. Eventually JC says, "I hope I'm not working at a bar by the time I'm 37."

Dan says nothing. He's 31. People often think he's younger.

"I didn't mean that in a bad way," JC says. "I wasn't judging or anything. Patrick was a great guy. I just meant—things *happen* to people like us. Like what happened to Patrick, they just... they could happen to anyone, you know, but they *do* happen to people like us."

"They can happen to anyone though," Dan says.

"Oh, for sure."

"I think Patrick had the life he wanted, you know? He liked being a bartender."

"Oh, yeah, yeah I didn't mean it like that."

"It's just..." Dan searches for a word. "It's just sad. Sad things happen."

"Yeah. True. Really true." JC loads glasses into the sanitizer. Dan takes the spouts off

empty bottles and puts them in the recycling bin. "There's nothing wrong with being a bartender. I just wish the world was a better place."

"It's how Jim Henson died," Dan says. "Really suddenly, of pneumonia. Jim Henson was the guy who made The Muppets."

"I know who Jim Henson is," JC says, starting to smile a little. "I'm not *that* young. I loved *Dark Crystal* as a kid. It was like my favorite movie. I must have seen it a million times."

"He was on TV a few days before, I think," Dan says. "I read about it once. The hospital says it was because he overworked himself."

"Isn't that what Patrick did?"

The shift finally ends. The lights go dimmer, the music goes off. Just a tinkle of glassware, footsteps, rustling garbage bags, the rhythmic scrape of wire bristle brushes scraping the charred stuff off the grills. Usually they would all argue over what music to play. Dan flushes taps and rolls up thick non-slip rubber padding from the floor.

From where she sits, among stacked chairs in the dining room rolling silverware into napkins, Kayla announces, "Maggie sent an email, guys."

Dan stops what he's doing and takes out his phone. So does JC. The scraping in the kitchen stops. Kayla leaves a napkin half-rolled.

*Subj: Sad news*

*It is with a heavy heart I inform you that Patrick Gifford passed away yesterday. I know this must come as a shock to many of you. We will all miss him dearly, he was a generous spirit and mentor to many of us in the Seabirds family. Things will not be the same without him.*

*I will let you know when a memorial is scheduled. In the meantime, please consider donating to this GoFundMe set up by Patrick's partner.*

There was a link below. Dan saw over JC's shoulder that he had followed it. Dan looked away. The idea of looking at a photo of Patrick now made him nauseous for some reason.

(He remembers Patrick taking the laminated daily checklist from its slot under the ice machine and studying it. No one ever used the checklist. "You know what no one wants to talk about? How expensive dying is. That shit's *costly*." He put the checklist back and grabbed at a ticket before it was done printing. It tore. "She and my mom weren't even close, they hated each other. You know it's hard to feel too beat up about an 89-year-old you only ever heard terrible things about." He opened the bar fridge and closed it again. "But my mom's putting the whole thing on a credit card and here I am having to miss work for this stupid thing." He never said anything else about it.)

Dan slowly, hesitantly goes back to putting glassware on a shelf, but keeps looking back at JC's head. The foot of a glass catches the shelf edge and the glass crashes down on the counter, then a second time on the floor.

Everyone at once jumps, everyone's face shows the pounding of their hearts. After a few suspended seconds JC puts his phone away and goes to get a broom. Dan squats down to get a paper bag. He picks up the big pieces, carefully, and drops them in. It seems absurd, being careful, when chance can come for anyone regardless of what they do.

He works quickly so he can get out before anyone else. He goes down to the basement, doesn't bother turning on the lights. He walks along a hallway lined with industrial aluminum shelving

stacked with a fortress wall of canned goods, past the mop sink. Little flickers of movement that are gone before you can look at them. Mice.

In the staff room, which doubles as Maggie's office and as overflow paper goods storage, he throws on the light. He kicks off his clogs and sits on a stack of crates to put on his street shoes. It made his shoulder ache worse. It had been aching this whole time, he realizes.

On the desk, wedged next to the Windows XP Maggie used to play music and run payroll, was the metal lockbox for their tip envelopes. He picked it up. It rattled. (Patrick's remark: "What does she do all night, sit down there counting out change like Scrooge McDuck?") Tips went out on Sunday. There was an envelope with Patrick's name on it in there, filed away alphabetically with the rest of them. The money in it was for work Patrick already did, drinks he served before he died. The weight of this—that his entire life's work, what he did all day—drunk down in second and pissed out hours later—he couldn't stand it, it made his chest so heavy he felt like the bottom would burst out. He wondered what would happen to the tips. If Maggie would redistribute them to the rest of the staff or give them to Patrick's family. Was there an obligation to pay dead people?

As he stood there he heard footsteps thumping down the basement stairs and felt the hall light turn on at his back. He put the box down and rushed out, brushing between a busser and a row of pineapple juice cans, Sysco brand. As he went out the back door someone called something to him from the dining room, but he pretended not to hear.

The walk home from work—from Davis Square to his apartment on Winter Hill—all the glossy Davis Square gastropubs closed, the pizza shop and convenience store and pawn shop that were



still hanging on against the tide of gentrification barred with metal shutters, all the multi-families along Highland Ave dark except for lone windows here and there, night owls or other service workers whose lives he always tried to spy into even if he rarely saw anything interesting—was usually his favorite part of the day. He's usually gregarious at work. He's usually gregarious in general. He makes people laugh and talk about themselves and smooths over tension, he notices things about people, he makes them feel listened to, he is socially graceful with everyone. He has always felt it's the one special thing about him, this grace. And the walk home is usually the peace that follows from using it. Today it is ominous, guilt-ridden, unbearably long. He doesn't know what exactly he feels guilty about. None of this is his fault.

("So where'd you go to college?" Patrick tilted when he first started at Seabird, the obvious getting-to-know you question.

"I didn't," Dan said lightly. "I'm secretly a lifer."

"No shit!" Patrick said, and went for a high-five. "So you actually know what you're doing. You from around here?"

"Yep. Cambridge Rindge and Latin. Back when regular people lived in Cambridge."

"Get out," he says. "Get out. Actually from here."

"I don't have to ask you," Dan said.

Patrick laughed. "What can I say. The linguists at Harvard should study my 'regional dialect' before it dies out."

Dan said, "You know, I understand about gentrification and stuff. But sometimes it's just like, where the hell did everyone go? Where are they all hiding?"

"I hear you. I do hear you. Here we are, the last native Bostonians. Two mediocre white

dudes. Checks out.")

He decides, impromptu, to take pictures. He does that sometimes, just walk around taking photos. When he was 22 or 23 and thought photography might be his "thing" he took a class on it at the Cambridge Center for Adult Education. He didn't have any talent for it and he still doesn't have a "thing," either. The pictures he takes on his photo walks aren't particularly artistic or well-framed. No one looking through his phone would know why he took them. They wouldn't know this was the most accurate portrayal of himself it was possible to get.

He takes a picture of a gabled roof just touching the moon. A broken CD on the sidewalk reflecting the orange street lamp light. He goes down a side street to get a tomato plant in someone's yard, behind chicken wire, one single red cherry tomato hanging from it this late in the fall.

The pictures aren't coming out especially well in the dark. His shoulder hurts, his feet are tired and cold. A scrunchy circling the post of a chain-link fence. An overturned traffic cone with a hole in the side. A cloud. He can see these things. He can record them. He has documentation he can show to prove that he is here, alive. A striped cat in a backlit window. A mannequin in a bright hat standing alone in a storefront. Alive, alive, alive.

When he gets home his roommate Stephanie is standing in front of the bathroom mirror with the door open, music playing from her phone sitting in a glass tumbler, French braiding her hair. She turns to look at him with her hands still over her head, knotted elaborately into her hair. It is about 2:30 in the morning.

"I was about to text you to make sure you weren't run over or something," she says, and

returns to her own gaze in the mirror. "Was closing that crazy?"

"Yeah," he says, without thinking.

She turns to him again. "Are you OK?"

"Do I not seem OK?"

She frowns, tying off her braid. "I gotta get to work but like, let's have self-care day after I get back. Watch some movies and have mimosas. I can sneak us out some scones. I think we both need it."

"Yeah," he says. "Let's do that."

They have been living like this for three years—on opposite bakery and bar schedules, watching movies together in the afternoons, swiping on each other's Tinder profiles for fun. He's probably closer to her than anyone else in the world. His roommate. He considers saying something about Patrick but doesn't know that she'd understand. He's not sure he does. It's not his grief to feel. It's not even grief, exactly. It feels false, like he's forcing it, like he's trying to feel sad, but at the same time he really can't stop thinking about Patrick.

She leaves.

He looks around the room—the curbside furniture and succulents in Goodwill glassware, both their sweaters thrown on the couch. He takes out his phone and opens his text history with Patrick. The last one is from two weeks ago.

*Sorry to bug you at home did you ever get the lillet yesterday? Can't find it in back*

Patrick had replied the next morning

*sorry dude wasn't looking at my phone*

*we got it i think jc unpacked look in the case he keeps putting stuff there*

*i'm coming in later tonight i'll look too*

*NP I used vermouth and they were none of the wiser*

*LOL*

*eat the rich amiright*

The whole history is like that.

He opens the GoFundMe page. He is not prepared. He is not prepared to see Patrick's face staring back out at him, the living meat of it, the blue eyes. His eyes had always seemed too pretty to belong to this haggard Southie punk and Dan had always avoided looking directly at them. He looked at them now, for a long time. It was just an ordinary photo, Patrick's face, his dog poking its nose up from the corner of the frame, a cluttered room behind him. It tells Dan nothing. Maybe there's nothing to tell.

He's pretty sure that when you die of pneumonia you suffocate. You drown from the inside.

He has a feeling like the photo of Patrick can see him too. Like it's looking back at Dan from somewhere else, from wherever Patrick's dead face is right now. Like it's judging him.

Dan hits the "give" button. He switches apps to check his bank balance. He goes back to the GoFundMe. He puts in \$300—exactly what he can pay and still make rent, more than he can afford. He hits pay before he can think harder about it, anonymously. What does it matter anyway? So he'll suffer. By the time he's suffering it will be too late to do anything about it. It will just be ordinary suffering.

When he arrives in the staff office for work the next day, twelve minutes late, Maggie is sitting at

the office computer, looking worried. She relaxes when she looks up and sees that it's him.

"Oh," she says. "You're here. Good. You're here."

"Yeah. Sorry."

"That's OK," she says. "It's OK. It's fine."

She turns her head back to the computer but doesn't do anything with it. She doesn't seem to be focusing on any particular thing on the screen, just turning her head towards it and away from Dan. She says, "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine," he says. "I mean, I'm sad."

"I know. Everyone is." She passes a hand over her face. "I got Giselle to come in today. Since he was scheduled. She'll be here in like an hour. JC's trying to handle things himself upstairs."

"Oh shit," Dan says, and gets his apron on faster. "Is he doing OK?"

"He's handling it," Maggie says distantly. "He's good at handling things. I'm going to promote him. Since we need a new bartender now. That's what I'm going to do, instead of hiring someone new." She looks up again. "I feel terrible to be thinking like that. But—we still need a bartender."

Dan says, "JC's ready," and leaves. He doesn't want whatever it is that Maggie is or isn't feeling.

Upstairs he nearly bumps into Kayla, who snaps at him, and a customer asks him where the bathroom is before he can get behind the bar. There is a roar of sound: people talking, laughing, indistinct but overloud music on the speakers, wooden chair legs on tile floors, hissing and clanging from the open part of the kitchen, the ticket printers, people yelling information and

instructions to each other. A room full of different people than the ones here last night. He squeezes past a table edge and ducks underneath the hinged part of the counter to the bar. He's probably served drinks to people who since died. How would he know.

Behind the bar JC is dumping liquor into shot measures and taking ice from the ice bin with his bare hands and squeezing lemon wedges in his fists. There is a string of tickets pooled up on the counter, nothing where it should be, nothing properly prepared, and he is spilling everywhere and dropping shards of ice and getting citrus pulp in his hair when he pushes it out of his face. He sees Dan coming in, still crouched down to pass under the counter to the bar and says, "Oh God, thank God you're here."