

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: A FRIEND COMES TO VISIT: STORIES

Meghan Collins, Master of Fine Arts 2023

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From a pathologically shy student who ghosts her classes in Paris, to a directionless college graduate who cheats on her girlfriend with a much-older coworker, and another who, in lieu of leaving a bad relationship, decides to move to an apocalypse-proof bunker under the ocean, the characters in these stories are unified by their shared traits of curiosity, confusion, embarrassment, existential dread, and by the magnetic pull of self-sabotage. They are painfully ambivalent, sometimes throwing themselves with reckless abandon toward the object of their longing, the next seeking the destruction of all avenues of possible connection. These stories evoke the constant and repetitive search for meaning, identity, and belonging that characterizes young adulthood. Beneath the angst and self-doubt that rules each character's mind, there is also a young person's stubborn belief in revelation: the hunch that enlightenment could come at any moment, and that, when it does, this will all somehow finally make sense.

A FRIEND COMES TO VISIT: STORIES

by

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THE COOK

Maggie met Jesse the summer after she graduated from college, while working in a restaurant called “Le Chateau.” Aspiring after the ambience of a ski lodge, it featured three fireplaces, lavishly exposed rafters, and a peeling mural of American presidents. The customers were mainly alumni of the local college who didn’t care that the food was overpriced and uninspired. They came for nostalgia, and to drink craft beer and local ciders while snacking on duck-fat fries with truffle ketchup. The first time the manager brought Maggie back to show her the kitchen, Jesse was shouting at Marion:

“I’m not making that.”

Marion’s responses came in a cold, seething whisper. “Yes, you fucking are.”

“Why would you tell them we have it when we don’t have it?”

“I know you still have some so shut the fuck up.”

“We took it off the menu.”

“I-don’t-fucking-care.”

Tickets were chugging out of the machine, customers’ orders curling out and drifting to the floor where no one seemed likely to pick them up. The manager said, “Guys, this is Maggie.” No one looked except Jesse. He winked at her, yelled *fuck* one last time in no particular direction, then started breading pieces of calamari.

Maggie was living with her girlfriend Caroline at the time. They had been dating for close to a year, but living together was new. Maggie still felt a sharp,

precarious thrill most mornings at the sight of Caroline's honey-blond hair fanned over the sheets beside her.

She had felt that way—sharp, precarious, like life had turned slightly surreal—ever since their first unofficial date, near the beginning of their senior year of college, when Caroline had texted: *Wanna come on a hike with me? I know a place.*

It was late September in the Berkshires, a Saturday mid-morning. Someone was throwing a party that sprawled across Maggie's front lawn and the neighbors', so she'd had to sneak out the back door and take the long way around to meet Caroline at the student parking lot. Once in the car, they ended up driving back down Maggie's street, where their peers were out on porches and milling in the road, the guys in neon tank tops, the girls in short white shorts. Maggie felt snug and impervious inside the car with Caroline, like they had a secret, superior agenda which the others could never appreciate.

On the narrow trail, Caroline took the lead. They panted up the steep switchbacks in near silence. In the absence of conversation, Maggie's stomach started to churn with the certainty that she'd already done something wrong, missed a precious chance. But afterward, back on campus, Caroline turned off the ignition and leaned over to Maggie's side to kiss her. Maggie remembered the smell of Caroline's wrists, salt and vanilla. Their hands in each other's hair. She remembered confessing that it was the first time she'd kissed a girl, and Caroline laughing, *Yeah, I figured.* Then Maggie alone in bed, later, considered her new reality. She squeezed a pillow as if trying to hold something giddy and wild in place by force.

Before that, Maggie had dated boys. Three in a row, they were sweet, sensitive, nerdy, and fun to kiss. She had liked being with them. She had liked having sex with them. When they broke up, it had been for un-blamable reasons, like they had graduated before her, or left to study abroad. She had separated from them easily, like cookie dough unsticking from a mold.

With Caroline, Maggie already sensed it might be different.

Spring came quickly, along with the question of what to do after graduation. Caroline was planning to stay in town; she had won a prestigious internship at the college art museum, which, despite its rural location, was fairly renowned. Maggie had won a fellowship to go teach English in Spain, a classic post-grad adventure she was already dreading.

They didn't talk about it. Maggie kept waiting for them to talk about it; she silently rehearsed some statements she might make. When alone, she was plagued by the certainty that, if she left the country, she and Caroline would break up. Maybe not right away, but eventually. No matter what was said, no matter what promises could be extracted—a year, at their age, was like a decade. Caroline would get bored. She would meet someone else. Maggie was sure of it.

Two weeks before graduation, she was walking down Main Street alone when the panic hit. She went into the first restaurant she saw and asked if they were hiring. Two and a half weeks later, freshly the owner of a Bachelor's degree in Spanish Language and English Literature, she moved out of her college dorm and into a little rented house with Caroline, two blocks down the road.

*

Maggie had specifically requested to work Back of House. The manager had shrugged. “Alright, I guess we could use another line cook.”

But on Maggie’s first official day, someone assumed she was one of the new hostesses. They sent her to the front, and Maggie didn’t have the nerve to correct them, so she was accidentally trained for the wrong position.

As hostess she swept through the kitchen twice a day to take coffee orders from the cooks and dishwashers. She wrote their orders on scraps of paper then returned to the hostess stand at the front of the restaurant where they kept the big espresso machine. She made syrupy iced mochas in giant cylindrical Tupperwares with straws, six sugar packets each, or frappes with caramel and cream. At first, she assumed that she had to fetch the kitchen staff’s drinks because they were too busy and important to leave their stations. Later, though, she learned there was a rule: Back of House employees weren’t allowed to walk through the dining room. “It would just look weird,” Marion explained confidentially.

After work Maggie hung her still-clean apron on a hook to reuse the next day, then walked or rode her bike home, to the one-bedroom apartment Caroline had found for them on Water Street.

Caroline had filled the place with ferns and candles and posters of famous artworks, made the bed, filled the cabinets, and put up gauzy white curtains in all the rooms before Maggie brought in her suitcase and the one piece of furniture she owned (a wobbly bookshelf from a church sale, which Caroline gently rejected and set in the alley by a sign reading “Free”).

Despite her failure to contribute to its décor, Maggie liked the apartment better than any place she had lived before. She liked how her ratty tennis shoes mingled with Caroline's flats and heels in a pile by the door. She liked the queen-sized mattress with no bedframe which they shared on the floor of a big high-ceilinged room. She liked getting up early to make coffee for herself to sip slowly, and toast in a napkin for Caroline to eat on her way out the door. And perhaps most of all—(though she didn't consider this a slight against Caroline)—she liked basking in the wake of Caroline's departures, when the whole apartment seemed to hum with the heady rush of newborn stillness.

*

After Maggie had worked almost two weeks as hostess, the manager pointed at her and said, "Didn't I hire you for the kitchen?" She nodded, and so, even though she wasn't dressed for it—a white skirt and sandals—he led her to the back and passed her to Jesse, who immediately put her to work peeling beets.

She was dumping a tub of sour cream into a blender by the time Marion clocked in.

"Hey, girl," Marion said, frowning. "What are you doing back here?"

"Cucumber soup. Oh, I mean, I think I'm mostly going to be working back here now."

Marion shifted a tub of silverware in her arms. "Is that...are you okay with that?"

Maggie nodded emphatically. Marion speed-walked away. Maggie finished the last batch of cucumber purée, stirred in a drizzle of honey, a handful of dill, a cascade of iodized salt.

Charlie came in, blond, skinny, and looking stoned as usual. He grinned and wrestled his hands behind his back to tie his apron while saying, “Oh hey. I like how you’re back here now.”

Maggie nodded in a way she hoped would convey that this was her prerogative, rather than some awkward demotion.

Charlie said, “It’s funny.”

Maggie didn’t know why it was funny, but she smiled as though she did. She moved to the sink, turned the faucet to a slow drip, wet her fingers and brushed some water over a rice wrap, the way Jesse had taught her, to make the edges sticky.

Charlie continued: “Me—I’m kind of, like, in limbo, too.”

Maggie looked up at him.

“Food runners,” Charlie explained earnestly, “don’t fit in either category. I’m both Back of House and Front of House. I’m the only job that’s *both*.” He waited for the gravity to sink in, then added, “Though I think I know where my allegiance lies.”

“The music’s better back here,” Maggie said, and Charlie agreed with a barking laugh. He was the only person Maggie’s age who worked there; most of the employees were a lot older; one or two were still in high school. Maggie thought Caroline would probably like Charlie. She made a mental note that if they ever had a party, they could invite him to it. They didn’t have many friends in town yet, and

almost all of their classmates had moved far away, to big cities or grad school or even to Europe.

Jesse came over then to give Maggie her next assignment: a pile of bell peppers, red, yellow, orange, and green. He demonstrated by picking up a red one and reducing it to a pile of miniature, identical square tiles in seconds, his movements too quick for Maggie to track.

Maggie nodded and took a green pepper for herself. She balanced it with her left hand, then carefully sliced off one side wall. She paused to admire the web-like inner cartilage, the cluster of its innards now exposed. She liked the way the seeds clung together in perfect formation, even after their surroundings had been torn away.

Jesse interrupted her reverie, saying, “Maybe shoot for a little quicker than that,” but he said it softly, smiling, and handed her a clean empty sixth pan before walking away.

*

“Hey! I’m home! What should we do tonight?” Caroline was already yelling as she burst through the door.

Maggie drifted into the hallway, bare feet cold on the linoleum, and watched Caroline flop onto the couch, mashing the spine of a book left open between the cushions.

“Sorry, I’m covering a dinner shift tonight.”

“What??”

“Yeah. I think now that I’m trained in the kitchen they might be needing me more often.” Maggie tried to inflect her tone with a disappointment she didn’t feel.

“That’s in an hour,” Caroline complained. “I just got home. Can you call in sick?”

“No...”

“Come on.”

“It’s just that I told Jesse I would do it. And it would be too late for them to get someone else.”

“You’re too good,” Caroline sighed. “I bet everyone loves you there.”

“Not really.”

“I bet they do.” Caroline’s tone was playful.

“Why are you saying it like that?” Maggie laughed.

“Just, like, I bet everyone there has a crush on you.”

“Yeah, right,” Maggie said.

“I’m *sure* they do. How could they not? When you’re so cute.”

Caroline held open her arms and Maggie joined her on the narrow couch, lining up their bodies and clinging to Caroline’s waist so she wouldn’t fall. She nestled her forehead into Caroline’s neck.

Maggie thought about it for a second, then timidly asked: “Did you bring that up because you think one of your coworkers has a crush on *you*?”

“No,” Caroline laughed. “Of course not. Well, not as far as I know. I would tell you.”

“Or you have a crush on them?”

“No. I was really just genuinely wondering,” Caroline said, lightly tracing her fingers over Maggie’s back. “Sorry for being weird.” She laughed again softly. Then

she angled her right arm holding her cellphone awkwardly over Maggie's head so she could text.

Maggie wondered whether Caroline had been trying to remind her that they were, technically, still in an open relationship.

They had agreed early on, back in college, that monogamy was a social construct; even, Caroline had suggested darkly, an accomplice to compulsory heterosexuality. But it sort of seemed, these days, like it had been a joke or a pretense, because neither of them had ever taken advantage of this supposed freedom. Yet they had deemed it so important, back in the beginning, to define the limits of their obligation to each other.

“Okay, it's fine if you have to work,” Caroline said after a pause. “Nina, you know, from the museum, is having people over. I wasn't going to mention it because I knew you wouldn't want to go, but if you're busy anyway...”

“Okay, have fun. I'll bring you home some food.”

On weeknights, the food runner was Dana instead of Charlie. Dana was the youngest person who worked there, still in high school, but she had a tattoo of a snake that coiled delicately around her collarbones, and there was something about her demeanor that made Maggie feel like the childish one.

Dana leaned against the countertop watching Maggie assemble salads. “That looks fun,” she said. “When I started here, I wanted to work in the back—Jesse wanted me there too—but fucking *Ned* said no. He said I was *too pretty* to be in the back.”

Maggie felt a surge of outrage, she wasn't entirely sure on whose behalf. She stammered something meant to comfort the younger girl, about how her appearance shouldn't be commodified, at least not against her will.

"Do you want me to talk to Jesse about it?" Maggie added. "Seriously, I could have him talk to Ned or even, bring it straight to the owner, because—"

"Honestly, it's whatever," Dana interrupted, laughing. She took the two bowls from Maggie's outstretched hands and pivoted.

Maggie watched her sway across the restaurant's glossy hazelnut floor. It was only after the kitchen door bounced shut to block Maggie's view of the dining room that the feeling of ugliness hit her.

She soaked in it a while. It was a familiar feeling, but one she thought she had outgrown. In college she had made an intentional effort to care less about her appearance. She had become enthralled with other things: books, languages, art, Caroline. Now, here, at the restaurant, her superficial insecurities became reignited. Maggie mused that if Caroline had worked here, she would undoubtedly have been one of those whom Ned refused to hide in the back. Even Jesse would have seen at once that Caroline was too beautiful not to be front-facing. This thought put Maggie on edge, until she realized with a wave of comfort that Caroline would never work in this place.

Maggie, unlike Caroline, belonged in the back. She reminded herself. She preferred it. Behind the steel counters, she felt safe. Dana, Charlie, and Marion came by with comforting regularity, their interactions brief and fluid, never lasting long enough to falter.

And the work itself felt right to Maggie: the simple, repetitive tasks triggered some rewarding mechanism in her brain. She had tried to explain this to Caroline, who'd said, "You're so cute. It sounds boring." It wasn't boring, though, to Maggie. Small challenges came her way like clockwork. Poach an egg, emulsify dressing, plate fish tacos. Jesse was patient in teaching her not just because she was new but because she was nicer and more soft-spoken than most of the people who worked there. Maggie privately relished the fact that she stood out, in this setting, by virtue of *not* yelling and *not* cursing. She started to sign up for extra shifts when they were offered. She checked the schedule ahead of time to find out when Jesse was working, feeling pleased when she saw he would be there, disappointed when she learned he would not.

She was pretty sure that Jesse liked working with her, too. He was always making her food without asking—grilled cheese, or crème brûlée with a splash of bourbon, pretending he needed her to test the recipe; scrambled eggs during brunch, or bacon jam on toast, and she ate it because it wasn't his fault she hadn't told him she was a vegetarian.

Bit by bit, she learned the details of his life.

That he grew up around here.

That his first job was in his best friend's dad's diner in high school.

That he'd never considered doing anything else.

At age 18, he moved to New York City with his girlfriend, where they were poor and happy for 10 years. He lived alone now, with two cats. He was 42. He had

gauges in his earlobes, which he regretted, and tattoos, which he didn't, on almost all his visible skin: willows and koi fish, stars, a frog, a compass, a deer, an arrow.

Maggie tried to imagine Jesse as an older, rougher incarnation of the kind of boys she'd dated in college: practical, shy, and reserved; the type to be lovers of art but not creators of it; all their efforts focused inward, undiluted by vanity or affectation.

Jesse claimed to hate art. He proudly boasted to have never finished a book. He owned two televisions, but no computer. When Maggie expressed shock over this, he claimed his Smartphone was a computer. Maggie tried to picture a life where she never needed to type anything into a Word doc, where she didn't constantly have ten tabs and several windows ready to open in a box on her lap. Jesse said most nights after work he watched whatever was on cable: *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *Roseanne*, *The Simpsons* or *King of the Hill*.

About his indigo-stained cuticles, he said, "I made jam with a friend— Sunday, we went berry-picking in the woods, then we made the jam at my house and gave it out to the neighbors—" And she counted him another point. How could you not trust a person like that? He tried to teach her how to chop more safely by curling her fingers under, so that the knuckles would guide the onion, instead of the fingertips—*See?*—but she couldn't get the hang of it. She nodded along and made a mental note to be more careful, but only really when Jesse was watching her.

*

On Friday, Maggie sat cross-legged on their floor mattress while she watched Caroline neatly pack her suitcase: balling socks into a zippered pocket and dropping silky thongs one by one into a small linen bag, which she then tucked beneath a layer of rolled-up shirts.

Caroline was going home to her parents' house for a long weekend, to celebrate her birthday that Saturday. Maggie had been surprised to hear this. She had practically forgotten they both had parents at all. It was like they had been living inside a bubble, just the two of them all summer so far. But Caroline was close with her parents. Of course she wanted to go see them.

"Maybe next time I'll go with you," Maggie said lightly.

"Yeah, maybe," Caroline said.

"Maybe?" Maggie tried to make her voice sound teasing.

"I've told you about how they act," Caroline said, sighing. "Around 'significant others.' Believe me, it's not a fun time."

"I know," Maggie said. "But I still kind of want to *try*. Don't you?"

Caroline didn't respond.

Maggie knew it was complicated for Caroline. Her parents were liberal voters who vocally supported same-sex marriage, but had reacted with inexplicable aversion to their own daughter's sexual orientation when she had come out to them early in high school. Caroline had brought former girlfriends to meet them, and the parents had managed almost heroically to maintain the pretense each time that they were meeting a friend of Caroline's, nothing more. By this point, Caroline had explained to

Maggie, she was tired of wasting effort trying to force her parents to acknowledge her love life.

Maggie knew all this, and yet, out of some morbid impulse, she found herself posing the question: “Do you think your parents would like me?”

Caroline was stuffing last-minute toiletries into the pockets of her backpack and didn’t respond for a minute.

“They can be really judgmental,” she said finally, looking up from the floor.

Maggie should have asked follow-up questions. But she hadn’t. Now Caroline was gone, and Maggie was left in the house alone wondering: what was it about her that Caroline’s parents would judge to be wrong?

Her double major in two impractical subjects? Her job at a shitty restaurant? Her lack of ambition? Her cheap clothes? Her low-class, Midwestern origins, her trace of a Minnesota accent? Was it her body, her looks that made her not good enough for Caroline? Was it the fact that Maggie had never been out of the country (and had barely seen much of her own country), that she had veered away from the one chance she had been offered to do something interesting—the fellowship in Spain, would taking that have made her worthy of Caroline? But then she would have had to leave Caroline. It seemed unfair.

By now, it was dark outside, and Maggie was cleaning the kitchen to distract herself. Her mind was stuck in a loop running over and over the blips of tension that had arisen lately in their home.

Certain subtle differences, barely noticeable back when they were living in dorms: Maggie hated, for instance, how Caroline bought expensive produce and let it rot in the fridge, throwing it out if it had so much as a bruise or a brownish edge. She hated that Caroline drank bottled water instead of tap, and that she filled the fridge with cans of seltzer, and that she called her parents to ask for cooking advice which could easily be searched online. Caroline, in her more outspoken way, hated when Maggie left the sponge in the bottom of the sink, and when she didn't run the garbage disposal, and when she made scrambled eggs too runny, and when she didn't wash lettuce carefully enough, and when she microwaved a mug of water for tea instead of using the electric kettle. As Maggie scrubbed the stovetop, she found herself going over these points of dispute in her head, rehearsing, pointlessly, her defenses.

In my parents' house, we were punished for wasting food.

I didn't grow up with a garbage disposal.

It's too loud, that's why I don't like to use it.

The lettuce is organic. Who cares if it has some dirt.

Maggie dropped the blackened sponge in the trash. Why was she arguing with Caroline when Caroline wasn't even there?

She slipped on her sandals and escaped into the humid night air.

Out of habit, she walked to the restaurant. The back door was propped slightly open, and she slipped in. No one noticed her at first, amid the usual evening chaos. She started to help unobtrusively, cleaning the counters, refilling the salad bar, running the dishwasher. When the clamor died down, Jesse walked up to her.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

Maggie shrugged. “Caroline’s out of town. I was alone in the house.”

“Ah,” Jesse nodded. “Were you scared?”

Maggie nodded yes. It wasn’t true, but she felt sick, too anxious and wired to go home. So when Jesse asked if she wanted to spend the night at his place, she nodded yes again.

She waited on the back steps as the sun went down. One missed call from Caroline. She held down the button on her phone until it powered off.

As she climbed into Jesse’s car, she looked back and saw Marion and Charlie looking at her. They looked surprised and confused, maybe even a little concerned. It made Maggie feel strangely warm inside. She imagined the next time she showed up to work, maybe Charlie would take her aside to ask what that had all been about. He would reveal some angle of protectiveness or care towards her. She would like that. She was thinking these things and fiddling with the car radio instead of listening to Jesse. He kept looking over at her, too often, and she pretended not to notice.

They pulled up to a white Victorian lined with yellow rose bushes. Jesse explained that it was divided into apartments. His was facing the back. When they went around the side of the house, Maggie saw a tortured-looking vegetable garden, presided over by a scarecrow wearing a dress, a bonnet, and a Spiderman mask, a stake through its back holding it taut. Jesse followed Maggie’s gaze.

“Oh, yeah, try looking out your kitchen window and seeing that at night,” he said. “Fucking terrifying.”

Inside, Jesse’s apartment resembled a one-room hunting cabin in the woods: smoke-smell in the carpets, flannel sheets on the bed. A rusty saw hung from the wall.

Maggie slipped off her sandals, and a small black cat hurried forward to twist himself lovingly around her ankles.

“That’s Leo,” Jesse said. “The other one...” He pointed to a roundish lump under a blanket. “...won’t come out until he learns to trust you.”

Maggie strolled around opening cupboards and touching everything on the shelves. Usually she would not be so forward, but she felt she was allowed to be nosy with Jesse’s stuff simply because she knew he was attracted to her.

Flipping through an album of sepia-toned photos featuring Jesse and his friends in high school, a small pain twisted her stomach. Jesse, at 18, was handsome in a careless way—tan and wiry, hair in his face; eyes she thought were cruel, full of an intensity she didn’t recognize. If they had been the same age at the same time, she thought, he probably wouldn’t have looked twice at her.

As it was, though, she felt proud for being half his age, almost like she deserved some kind of commendation, just for being young and comparatively bright with potential.

In a drawer under his coffee table, the same place he kept his weed, she found a small, black notebook. She was thrilled: she thought: this must be his journal, the place where he jots down his observations, inspirations, poignant moments, bits of dialogue. Maybe he was more like her than she’d thought.

Jesse’s handwriting was neat, tiny, all-caps, pencil. The pages were filled with recipes. Ideas for sandwiches: Apple Bacon, Apple Cheddar, Tuna-Avocado. Chinese BBQ steak tacos. Jesse’s secret notebook was full of menu items.

Maggie felt suddenly unbearably miserable and bored. She asked for a drink, and Jesse rummaged in the cupboards until he found a dusty half-full bottle of whiskey, which he poured into a glass with ice. He'd said he would make them dinner, but it was late, so they ordered Chinese food, and sat on the couch watching a bad comedy with commercial breaks. At some point Jesse stood up to refresh Maggie's drink and came back to sit next to her on the couch, unsubtly pressing his thigh against hers.

After he kissed her, and after she awkwardly prevented him from unbuttoning her jeans, and after she got drunk enough that she found everything beautiful and moving to the point of tears, she drifted off to sleep on the couch. She was relieved when Jesse didn't try to sleep with her. Instead, he picked up the little orange cat who had come out of hiding now—whose name she still didn't know—and dropped him gently on her chest, like a gift. Through the blanket she could feel its tiny claws. The cat, complacent, turned a few circles on top of her, then settled down, purring. The furry little weight against her heart.

*

"You're allowed to do whatever you want," Caroline said, her voice calm and sincere. She was kneeling in a dress, lacing her sandals. She had driven back very late on Sunday, so Maggie hadn't been able to tell her what had happened until just now—Monday morning, right before Caroline had to leave for work.

"I know," Maggie said. "But, aren't you mad at me?"

“That would be pointless, for me to be mad at you,” Caroline said briskly. “I’m not interested in controlling you or limiting you, Mags. I do wish you’d told me it was a possibility, *before* anything happened, instead of after, you know? I thought that would’ve been obvious.”

“I know,” Maggie said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Caroline stood up. “I don’t have time to unpack this anymore right now, though. Let’s talk later.” She smiled in a way that looked effortful and asked, “Are you working tonight?”

“No.”

“Okay.” Caroline picked up her keys. “See you later then.”

She left the room, and Maggie heard the screen door open, creak, then close, leaving her in a silence that, for once, did not feel like relief.

She went to bed early that night. She fell asleep quickly and woke up only when the sheets rustled, letting in a scoop of cold air, before Caroline edged in beside her, breathing heavily.

Around the time they had started dating, Caroline had gotten her first tattoo, a dove on her left forearm. For weeks, Caroline had slept with that arm punched awkwardly above her head, to prevent infection. Maggie hadn’t been allowed to touch it while it was healing. Now, in the dark, Maggie took Caroline’s arm and kissed the spot where she knew the dove to be. Caroline pulled gently out of Maggie’s grip, then tentatively draped her arm over Maggie’s waist instead.

It felt heavy. Maggie waited in the dark and the silence until she could no longer keep her eyes open, hoping that Caroline would speak—in fact, she felt sure that Caroline would speak, if now was in some sense a critical moment, she would take the lead, as she always had, if there was something that needed to be said.

*

But they didn't talk about it. Maggie kept waiting for them to talk about it. She silently rehearsed some statements she might make. Meanwhile, Caroline grew more and more distant. There were more and more nights when Maggie made it home before her. Caroline would come to bed smelling like wine and incense, saying she had been to a party at the art graduate students' house, or had a late work dinner with her boss.

Then, some mornings Caroline still wasn't home by the time Maggie woke up. A brief explanatory text. On those mornings, Maggie's brain felt like a device gone haywire, emitting sparks of malice she didn't intend or condone. Charlie was lazy. Dana was vain. Marion was bossy and boring. They were all such stereotypes. Maggie hated them for being so consistent.

Jesse got the worst of it. Maggie refused to make eye contact with him, then stole mean glimpses at the side of his face when he wasn't looking. She kept thinking how old and stupid he looked. She hated herself for smirking at the words he spelled wrong on the '86 board—“avacodo,” “romane,” she didn't correct him. Washing dishes, her hands covered in specks of multicolored wet debris, she started thinking: *Wait, this is the reason—isn't this the reason?—I went to college so I wouldn't have to do this. So I could do something—not better necessarily, but cleaner. A job that*

was mentally but not physically exhausting. People went to college, if they could, because it hurt to stand on your feet all day. It hurt, your arches ached and cramped, even if you wore the ugliest, most comfortable shoes your wages could buy. Wasn't that what education was really all about?

Another voice: *What, do you think you're too good for this? You're not.*

Maybe she belonged in the restaurant. But she didn't belong with Jesse. She knew that, at least, for sure. Maybe she was angry at him now because it felt like coming up against a brick wall. She was forced to admit they had nothing in common. Nowhere to go from here. She didn't know how to explain to Jesse that she had never meant to choose him.

That she had lost control, or had never had it. That she had slipped up, and could not take it back.

Even after Caroline moved out for good, taking the ferns and most of the furniture, and even after Maggie and Jesse started having sex in her and Caroline's former bed, Maggie couldn't bring herself to tell him that everything she did with him felt like wading backwards in quicksand.

*

She woke up on the first chilly morning there had been all summer, and the breeze outside sounded and smelled like fall. She got up to pull the windows shut before diving back under the covers, shivering. Nothing to trip over on the floor—the room was cleaner without Caroline's stuff in it; the mattress, though, too wide, and Maggie huddled to the side against the wall. She thought: *it is a privilege to have so*

much space. She saw one red leaf on the ground while hiking with Jesse yesterday. Lately she kept feeling like she was on the verge of a breakthrough, an epiphany or some very specific sensation, and once it came, soon, everything would make sense. She felt this so strongly while stepping outside under a bleak white sky, locking the door to the empty apartment behind her, and while coasting down the empty expanse of Main Street, as the wind shuddered the tree branches with an uncanny sense of purpose. And then again while peering through the oven window at a row of ramekins.

But she couldn't concentrate on the feeling because Jesse was behind her droning about turkey season, asking if she wanted to come hunting with him. She didn't. She really didn't. She had a desperate impulse to do something, she couldn't quite seize on what it was, but it had something to do with adrenaline, and distance, she was imagining maybe a mountain, someplace where the air was thin; but it was also somehow connected to the smell of sugar cookies baking, and this very specific memory of going apple-picking with a friend's family when she was little.

Jesse cleared his throat to point out that Maggie wasn't using the safer cutting technique he had taught her.

Maggie said, "It's fine. I'm not going to cut myself anyway, with this old thing." She held up the knife she was using for evidence. Jesse had told her that real chefs brought their own knives to work; she always just grabbed a shitty, all-purpose one at random each morning from the magnetic strip above the dish rack.

Jesse smiled grimly, shaking his head. "That's a common misconception. Dull knives are actually more dangerous—for one thing, they're more likely to slip.

Anyway, if you do cut yourself, it's better to have a clean cut from a sharp blade, than a jagged one from a dull blade. Get it?"

Before she left, Jesse said to "Wait, wait," and grabbed his jacket to follow her out. She wheeled her bike reluctantly to his car, where on the passenger seat was a package wrapped in newspaper with her name bled in sharpie on the outside. She tore it open. It was a knife, black handle, silver blade, gleaming, so sharp it instantly drew blood when she used the side of her thumb to test it, and Jesse said, "Jesus, be careful, or I'm taking it back. This isn't a toy, you know." She knows.

LYRA

Lyra drove us up into the mountains in her husband's white Subaru, smoking a cigarette and steering with her left hand. She was wearing black spandex shorts and a baggy orange t-shirt, smoking while telling us how much her husband hated tobacco and how she had promised never to smoke in his car. Jay—my boyfriend of 3 years—who I knew for a fact had smoked a cigarette just one single time in his life—started a passionate debate with Lyra about the pros and cons of particular brands. I was in the passenger seat, Jay in the back behind me.

Even though the physical distance between us was negligible, I felt alone up there. This was often the case whenever I was unable to physically touch or make eye contact with Jay. I knew it was a problem I had.

The problem was slightly worse than usual at the moment, because Lyra was my boyfriend's dream girl.

It hurts to admit a thing like that, but sometimes it's just so obvious it has to be acknowledged.

During the hour-long car ride Lyra kept glancing over at me with a hopeful expression. I felt she wanted me to chime in, but I couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't sound like, on the one hand, a prudish condemnation of the habit of smoking, or, on the other, a transparent attempt to suck up to the cool kids. I said nothing, frozen and impatient, until we pulled into a gravel-strewn clearing filled with cars.

“Shit, it's crowded,” Lyra said. “I hope we find a spot.”

I hoped we wouldn't. I had never attempted rock climbing outdoors, and I was afraid I would embarrass myself—in front of Lyra, in front of Jay, I wasn't sure whose opinion I feared the most.

The lot was level with the top of the cliff. We walked until we found a metal anchor drilled into the rock. Lyra dumped a bulging yellow rope out of her backpack and showed us how to attach it to the anchor. She sidestepped close to the edge, checked to make sure no one was below, then heaved the loose ends of the rope into the air. We watched them careen to the ground with a thud we were too far to hear. Then we hiked down a steep, winding path to get to the bottom of the cliff, where we would begin our climb.

Jay and Lyra were coworkers at a whitewater rafting company that summer. They were partners; they led trips together whenever there was a group of more than six. They got along well; so well that, when I glimpsed them talking and joking together, I almost slipped into thinking they were brother and sister, or friends since birth, even though I knew they'd only met at the beginning of that summer. I'd seen them laughing raucously when I pulled up to give Jay a ride home from work. I'd seen Jay punch Lyra playfully on the upper arm in a way he'd never done to me, even when we were flirting and getting to know each other back in college.

Also, I tried not to dwell on this, but I'd seen Lyra change out of her swimsuit top in front of Jay and several other coworkers in broad daylight in the gravel parking lot of the rafting company. Jay, I'd noticed, had continued talking as though nothing was happening, maintaining faultless eye contact; only I, because I knew him, could

see how his movements and hand gestures became a little more animated, his posture slightly more alert. He was thrilled it had happened. I knew.

It frequently occurred to me with a gloomy certainty that Jay would rather be with Lyra than with me. If he had met her before he met me, he would have tried to date her. Perhaps he would have failed, but I was sure he would have tried. I pictured them as soulmates in another dimension, rock-jocks living out of a van or cycling their way across the country.

My only consolation was that, in the dimension in which we were stuck, Jay could never be with Lyra, because Lyra was married.

She had been married for less than a year, to her high school sweetheart. At that point in my life, I had been firmly convinced that marriage was horribly un-cool, embarrassing and bougie. But it didn't look that way on Lyra; there was something ironically quaint and counter-culturally glamorous about the way *she* was married.

She was 23, the same age as me, married to her high school sweetheart. Her husband was three years older. Nerdy, Republican, and recently salaried, he was an engineer who made good money working on the dam that provided electricity to the entire county. He and Lyra lived in his parents' house, but planned to buy their own land soon.

That entire summer, I never met Lyra's husband. He worked long hours; we didn't. He sometimes called Lyra while we were at the beach or in the park, and she would answer sheepishly, apologetically, her tone of voice implying she had wronged both her husband and us by answering the phone at that moment. She would walk a

few meters away on the sand and talk in hushed, distressed-sounding clips for ten or twenty minutes before returning to her usual, grinning self as she dropped back onto the blanket beside us. If we ever asked about her husband she would say something like, “His boss is a jerk,” and roll her eyes as if to separate herself from problems that were not quite hers.

Lyra was a local, born and raised in the small mountain town, three hours east of Seattle, where Jay and I were spending a few casual months. We planned to work all summer and save our money before moving to New York City in the fall, where I would attend graduate school in creative writing.

We didn’t know yet what Jay would do in NYC, but I was sure that with his average-to-good looks, confidence, charm, and lust for life, he would do just fine.

Jay was good at being a boyfriend. He was affectionate, kind, and careful with my feelings. He paid me unique, heartfelt compliments, and often went out of his way to make my life easier. He wasn’t passionate about literature, but he devoted great effort to reading the books I bought that I thought he would like.

We were both doing our best to engage with each other’s worlds. When we’d met, freshman year at an aggressively alternative little college in Olympia—a bewildering place where I had landed almost entirely by chance—the fact that Jay was so utterly different from me made him a godsend. It was like winning my own personal travel guide to the Pacific Northwest: he helped me to do exciting things which, growing up in rural Indiana, I had never even known I should aspire to do:

backpacking, mountain biking, section hiking the PCT; attending music festivals at the Gorge and sleeping on the beach at La Push.

By now, we were a year out of college, and I had only a slippery grasp on what I wanted out of life. But I appreciated that Jay and I were in the same boat, adrift together.

I had told Jay I had three goals for that summer: to finish a draft of my novel; avoid getting sunburned; and make a new friend.

I hadn't made any progress on the first and third goals. So that was why Jay felt he had the right to decide: "Lyra will be your friend."

"She's your friend," I said. "I want a friend I find on my own." But Jay insisted. He made a date for the three of us to hang out. Speculating that it would be less awkward if we were all engaged in something physical, he asked Lyra to give us a climbing lesson.

I read his texts while he was in the bathroom.

J: My girlfriend is coming too. Bring frisbee

L: Oh yay!!! Can't wait to meet your lady

J: She very shy. Be nice to her

L: hahaha okay ;)

"You good to go first?" Jay asked me in front of the looming brown and gray wall. I shrugged. Lyra handed me a pair of her old climbing shoes to borrow. They looked like withered little dead creatures, blue and curled croissants. As I forced my feet into them, Lyra showed Jay her belay device, which was new and had an auto-

locking feature. If a sudden force was applied to the rope—meaning, if I fell—the device would instantly lock down on the rope, stopping my descent. Lyra wouldn't have to do a thing.

As if reading my mind, Lyra glanced at me and smirked. “Don't worry. I promise it works.”

I patted the wall looking for handholds. To my untrained eyes, the sheet of rock in front of me appeared utterly flat. It was nothing like the indoor climbing gyms Jay had taken me to before: no knobs of bright colors marking the path upward. Where was I supposed to grab? I scraped my toes against the rockface looking for anything that could pass as a foothold. Behind me, Lyra was telling Jay, “The only thing we honestly have to worry about is if the anchor at the top isn't secure. I mean, we have no idea who put that there, or when. We're just trusting it's fine because this is a popular spot and people use it all the time...that factor is completely out of our control, so, yeah, I don't worry about it.”

I wedged my fingers into a small hole, dislodging a flurry of ants and debris. I listened to Jay and Lyra chuckling together as I began to pull myself up, a series of painful, laborious lurches.

Five minutes went by, and I had a warm feeling that I was doing really well, all things considered. I had just conquered a long vertical crack by copying something I'd seen Jay do once: wedging both hands and both feet inside the crack, then awkwardly slamming the rest of my body sideways against the wall, dragging myself up bit by bit like an inchworm. Immediately afterward I glanced down, expecting

praise from Jay. But he wasn't looking at me, he was looking at Lyra, and she was looking back at him, not at me or the rope or her hands.

I turned my head quickly and kept climbing. Every time I looked down again, Jay was enthusiastically saying something to Lyra, and she was laughing or nodding, looking straight into his eyes.

I started to feel agitated and exhausted, like I had just sprinted a mile. The skin on my face felt hot and tight. I was sure I was getting a sunburn. I felt blisters preparing to form on my hands. A state of panic began to assemble inside me. I truly didn't know I was about to yell something until I did.

“Stop distracting her!” I practically screamed in the direction of the ground.

Jay stepped back, raising his hands. Lyra looked embarrassed for me. After that, every time I glanced down, she was staring studiously at my butt, threading the rope diligently between her fingers.

By the time I reached the top, Jay and Lyra were so small I couldn't see their faces at all anymore. I leaned back to rest in my harness, and swiveled to see the view.

It looked different, now that I had climbed it. The staggering depth and distance—the dark-green-quilted mountains, the sky, iridescent blue. My heart slowed, and I felt my fears dissolve into the perspective.

The contrast of my childhood was not lost on me. Where I'd grown up, it was all parking lots, chain stores, strip malls, corn. I'd spent most of my childhood indoors. How lucky I was to be there now, with all that space and light.

I told myself never again to forget.

Reluctantly, I came down. Jay and Lyra each climbed twice, both faster than I had been, though Jay, I couldn't help but notice, had a clumsy, aggressive style that contrasted with Lyra's dynamic ease. I declined to try a second route—my whole body still felt wired and shaky from adrenaline—and eventually Lyra pulled out a six-pack of beer. We sat in a circle in the dirt, shoes off, drinking, watching strangers climb while Jay commented indiscreetly on their form.

In the car on the way home, I felt tipsy, thus more confident. I asked Lyra questions about her job as an EMT, her hometown, her husband, her friends. Jay listened approvingly from the backseat. When Lyra dropped us off, she got out of the car, came around to my side, and gave me a hug.

“It was so nice to meet you,” she said.

“You, too,” I said.

She turned away from me and hugged Jay, as if an afterthought. Then she drew back from his chest slightly and held onto his elbows for several excruciating seconds. Casting her eyes over Jay's face, her smile shining with what seemed to me an obscene display of enjoyment, Lyra said, “We should do this again sometime.”

We never did.

But a few days later, Lyra showed up at the gift shop near the end of my shift.

I didn't recognize her for a moment as she strolled through the door. In that split second of de-familiarization, I saw her all at once for what she was:

the kind of girl who had always been pretty. Or at least, during formative years. Impossible to imagine she had ever passed through an awkward phase, battled acne, or weathered fluctuations in weight. She lacked that slight undertow of doubt or precarity which I always thought characterized those who, like me, had for any length of time believed themselves to be wholly unappealing. I would have bet anything on the fact that Lyra's body had been beautiful for as long as she had known it. Her nose and chin and limbs and proportions had always matched the glossy pictures she saw in magazines, therefore she had never had to question her worth.

The more I found out about Lyra, the more this impression was reinforced. She had been a cheerleader in high school. Not only that, she had played volleyball, tennis, and soccer. In college, she told me, she had quit organized sports, but then had neglected her studies and spent all her time rock climbing, snowboarding, and learning to paraglide. She hadn't graduated, but it didn't seem to matter; she earned enough working ski patrol in the winter, leading whitewater rafting trips in the summer. On top of that, she was an EMT. Twice a week, she rode in the front seat of an ambulance, speeding around the East Wenatchee metropolitan area saving people from drug overdose and diabetic shock.

I noted her flaws with relief every time I spotted one. Up close: acne-scarred cheeks. A few coarse hairs sprouting from the corners of her mouth. A skin tag on her left eyelid. A dated photo she was tagged in on Instagram where she looked at least twenty pounds heavier than she was now. Stretch marks over her hip flexors, cellulite on the backs of her thighs (perhaps only noticeable to me because I had those things

in those places, too). When she opened her mouth, I saw that her two front teeth were unusually small and square, smaller than her other molars, which gave her smile a sort of odd, animal look.

But then her smile was one of her most attractive qualities. When Lyra smiled, it was a dynamic event, so wide and warm it felt multidimensional. Like watching spring morph into summer. After spending too much time with Lyra, I would find that smile stuck in my mind like an afterimage of a blinding light. Standing alone in the gift shop where I worked, I practiced smiling like Lyra. There was a square, gold-framed mirror, not for sale, mounted on the wall across from the register. I opened my mouth into its tarnished reflection. I had straight, white teeth, but thin lips, and when I smiled too hard my top lip all but disappeared. If customers came in, I quickly resumed my standard expression: lips closed, head tilted to one side, the opposite of Lyra's smile—demure.

It took a while for it to dawn on me, that it didn't matter what Lyra looked like. The minor imperfections in her beauty would not save me. There were no boxes to be checked, no magic formula; she was simply perfect—why? I didn't know.

In all her perfection, that day at the gift shop, she walked right up to me. It was hard to believe she had gone out of her way and entered this cheesy tourist-trap just to say hi, to me. She leaned over the counter asked if I needed any help closing the store.

I wasn't supposed to close for another half hour, but I was the only one working. I said yes and handed Lyra a broom. Ten minutes later we locked the doors.

In her truck Lyra had brought a paddleboard, towels, alcoholic seltzers, tequila, a floating football, and a frisbee. Jay met us at the beach, and we got drunk on the shore.

Lyra was wearing a pale pink halter bikini top and low-cut black board shorts. She stood in front of me, recapping the antics of the rowdy tour group of middle-aged men she and Jay had led that day. I tried not to stare. I could see her nipples through her top.

She had small breasts, strong shoulders. Protruding hip bones; freckles on her flat stomach.

Now, at this point in the story, you probably expect me to give an account of my own physical appearance, to explain how my attributes compare and contrast to those qualities of Lyra's I have been so eager to describe. You might think it's only fair.

Well, you'll be disappointed. (Or, perhaps, relieved.) The fact is, I'm not capable of describing my body to you. At least, not in any way that counts. I could give you the basic data: 5 ft. 5, black hair, brown eyes, peach skin. Usually somewhere between 130-140 pounds. Bra size, 34C. But that doesn't tell you anything important about me. It doesn't tell you whether I'm attractive or repulsive; oddly-shaped or well-arranged; whether I carry myself proudly or wobble around, ungainly; most of all, it doesn't tell you whether or not I have that indefinable factor that makes people glow from the inside out. Like Lyra has.

For a long time I thought it was common knowledge that nobody could see their own self objectively. In my experience, the view in the mirror changes every single day and sometimes by the hour.

Hardly surprising, if since childhood you've been inundated by images of women who look one, certain way. The message is that not only are these women the ideal, *they're the rule*. You're implicitly commanded to look like them, or else. (Or else what? The fear is vague but corrosive.) The despair is too great if you don't look like them, so, in order to keep a semblance of your self-respect, you learn early on to live inside a fantasy of yourself, instead of in your tangible flesh. You strategize to deflect forever the horrifying question of what you might look like in other people's eyes. As long as you don't analyze too closely, anything is possible. Hope is alive!

I used to think everyone lived like that, holding their physical selves at arm's length, so to speak.

Then I learned there were people like Jay and Lyra, who live in a state of joyful physicality. For them, there's no disjunction between these three things: what they see when they look at themselves; what they want others to see; and what others do see. It's truly a gift. It's something that can't be learned or taught.

That day at the lake I crowded close to them on the paddleboard, which wasn't meant for three people; it was ideally suited to one; but we managed, with Jay and I sitting cross-legged on the ends and Lyra standing in the middle. For a while I felt anxious. Lyra looked so good in a swimsuit, I was afraid Jay was looking at her too much, I was afraid Lyra was more interested in talking to Jay than to me. But the alcohol helped me relax, and my manic jealousy started to loosen its hold. By the

time Lyra and I traded roles—I stood up and paddled, she perched on the tip facing the water—I started to feel really good, buoyant and strong like I had after the climbing lesson. In the middle of the lake we rested and talked, adjusting our bodies in reaction to each other’s movements, tilting one direction to keep from capsizing, slapping a palm suddenly to the board for balance.

Overall, I remember that day as being extremely physically pleasant: the gentle rocking motion when a speedboat passed, rippling the surface; the pleasant shock of cold water when we gave up and rolled ourselves in; the intimate swipe of wind in wet hair; the setting sun that warmed and blinded us as we made our way back to shore.

Lyra came home with us that night, to the place Jay and I were renting for the summer. It was a blue bungalow with three TVs, no air conditioning, and a pool in the side yard. It belonged to Jay’s Seattleite uncle and was the kind of situation Lyra said locals hated, because it was rich vacationers-slash-landlords like Jay’s uncle who made those homes impossible for anyone actually from there to afford.

Of course, Jay and I felt ashamed about this, especially when Lyra told us the outrageous prices of the properties she and her husband wished they could buy. But, Jay and I reasoned privately, *we weren’t* the problem; we didn’t own anything; in our minds, we were still kids, not fully capable of being at fault for anything.

When we stepped into the artificial light inside the house, Lyra and I realized we were both a little red on our faces and shoulders. Jay brought us lotion and a bottle of whiskey. We put on a movie. Jay sat between me and Lyra on the couch. I dropped my head onto Jay’s shoulder. I wanted to stay awake, but my eyelids kept drooping

closed against my will. Eventually I surrendered. In a half-awake state, I thought I could hear the leather of the couch rubbing and squeaking more than was reasonable, inches away from me, but I couldn't wrench my eyes open to check what was happening. I tried to open my mouth to speak but I was paralyzed inside my dreams. When I woke up finally it was because my head slid off Jay's shoulder and onto the couch cushions as he stood up.

He was telling Lyra firmly that she was too drunk to drive home. She was laughing maniacally, not protesting but teasing him by pretending to search for her keys. Finally she stopped and texted her husband to come pick her up. I staggered sleepily to the door to watch her go. Jay, perhaps as curious as I was to catch a glimpse of Lyra's husband, looked over my shoulder. But we couldn't see more than a shadow through the car windows before Lyra ran and jumped in.

I read Jay's texts the next day.

L: Fuck, sorry I got so lit last night. Hope I wasn't weird...

J: Nah we all did. Thanks for hanging out it was a blast

L: Thanks for having me!!!

There followed several weeks during which Lyra, Jay, and I went to the beach together almost every day. Sometimes we stayed for only an hour, if Lyra had dinner plans with her husband. Most nights we stayed until it was pitch-dark and the beach was empty and we heard sounds of shouting and firecrackers from the bridge above us and from the bars on the other side of the lake. It was July. The summer was going by too fast. The days fell away ruthlessly like an avalanche. It stunned me, how

quickly each day began and then was over. I packed my free time with diverse activities—jogging, swimming, reading, biking, cooking, painting, hiking, it wasn't enough. I tried to fill all the cracks between activities by pouring in mindfulness and gratitude. I reminded myself that soon, I would be living in a dense, artificial city, pining for nature. So I tried to slow down and look closely at everything around me. I urged myself to be in the moment, and to never forget:

The incredible sight of dark mountains layered over turquoise lake, visible from almost any spot in town.

The hot pink glossy curl of a flower.

The early afternoon light in tessellations on the surface of the water, white slicing yellow and green.

The pleasing foam-spray vector of a boat in the distance.

The sound of water lapping at the shore, a different rhythm than ocean waves: lighter, less consistent, less percussive, less sure.

While walking through our neighborhood, I would occasionally be overwhelmed by a painful ringing in my ears. I thought there was something wrong with me. Whenever I heard the ringing, I went home, drank a glass of water, and laid down to “recover.” I later learned from Lyra that many houses in the area, especially the ones nearest to the beach and bars, kept a security system which surrounded their property in a high-pitched tone that could only be heard by young people and dogs. The alarm was meant to keep drunk kids away, to prevent them from loitering or puking on people's lawns. It must have worked because I rarely saw drunk kids in the neighborhood where we lived.

Rather, they hung out on the bridges. There were two bridges, both of which spanned the part of the lake narrow enough to be called a river. The smaller bridge was reserved for pedestrians. The larger one was for cars, with a skinny strip of shoulder on one side where people weren't really supposed to walk but did. Both bridges had concrete railings and numerous red signs declaring: **DANGER!**
¡PELIGRO! DO NOT JUMP FROM BRIDGE!

People jumped anyway. Mostly teenagers. They boosted each other onto the railing, where they stood looking down, looking around, looking back at their friends, before leaping, sinking under the surface for half a minute, then emerging breathless, swimming sideways against the current to the grassy shore, and creeping back up to the bridge soaking wet to be high-fived by their friends.

The bridge-jumping worried me. I was worried someone would pass out when they hit the water, and drown. I was worried they would jump a little too far to the left or right and hit a rock no one knew about, and drown.

Jay, by contrast, thought it was a great idea. He tried to make eye contact with the teenagers, projecting warmth and excitement when we walked by a group of them preparing to jump. I could tell he would have liked to jump, too, and would have if it hadn't been for me.

I got anxious even watching Jay dive off the dock at the public beach. The lake was crystal-clear, and in most places you could see all the rocks under its surface. Jay assured me he could easily avoid them, he'd been diving into alpine lakes since he was a toddler.

Personally, I didn't like to dive into anything. I preferred to be gradually submerged, step by step.

Whenever the main beaches were crowded, Lyra would drive us to a less-popular swimming spot five miles down the highway. Not even Jay would dive there, because jagged rocks covered the bottom as far out as you could touch. A fixed wooden ladder made it possible to climb down safely into the water instead.

I started going there alone whenever my day off failed to coincide with Jay's and Lyra's. The spot was always empty, perhaps due to its morbid history. A large granite headstone in the grass commemorated two adults and three children who had died there in 1965, when their car had jerked off the curvy highway and into the lake.

In front of the monument was a basket of children's toys. A rubber shark, a grimy plastic horse, a naked Barbie. A humanoid cartoon-animal doll. A tin school bus. I sat in my wet one-piece shivering on the bench in front of the monument, staring at the toys. I read and reread the names of the deceased. I listened to the water seething over rocks, the sounds of the highway almost drowning it out behind me.

I was trying to meditate on the tragedy, to reach some state of understanding or acceptance about the cruel indifference and irreversible finality of life, but it was hard. My brain seemed to be malfunctioning, lately.

I had developed a despicable problem, which was that I could no longer come without picturing Jay having sex with Lyra.

It had been a gradual progression to that extremity of a state. At first, I'd only imagined such scenes against my will. While alone, masturbating—intrusive thoughts that probably arose from a need to anticipate how much hurt was coming for me.

Later, I started to torture myself with the predictions, on purpose, wallowing in my anxious misery. Eventually, allowing the cataclysmic scenes to unfold became a form of release, almost indistinguishable from pleasure. And then I was stuck. The visions flowed inside me as vivid and specific as memories: Jay biting Lyra's neck, kissing her collarbones, scraping his teeth over her nipples. Jay tracing the soft blonde hair on Lyra's stomach, slipping two fingers inside her shorts. Jay pushing Lyra's face into a wall, pinching her waist to fuck her from behind. I fantasized like this even while I was actively having sex with Jay. Even when Jay was giving me the most exquisite, loving attention, doing exactly what I liked him to do, I had to let Lyra into my mind before I could finish.

Afterward, I felt like I had betrayed Jay and violated Lyra. Still, I kept doing it.

I considered confessing to Jay. I was pretty sure I knew exactly how he would react. He wouldn't be upset or judgmental. More likely, amused and aroused. It could have even become part of a mutual fantasy we played out together, instead of something I kept shamefully inside. But I didn't tell Jay, because I was afraid I would too successfully plant the idea of Lyra in his mind (if it wasn't there already), and end up ironically causing the very thing I feared.

Around the time this private agony was looming so large for me, the fires started.

They came every year, yet it seemed to me like all the locals were surprised. Maybe they had forgotten. Or maybe it was that fire season had come a little earlier this year, and was a little more severe, and a little harder to contain. Our town was

lucky, we never had to evacuate. But everyone got headaches, some people threw up, and the sun went blurry under an unnatural reddish haze. It was over a hundred degrees outside, which wasn't unusual for the area, but the typically dry, windswept heat had turned thick and oppressive. It felt like humidity, except it was smoke in the air instead of moisture. My boss at the gift shop told me not to come in, so I stayed at home, alternating fitfully between the claustrophobic heat inside the house, and the hazardous air quality outside.

On the third day I was out of work, Lyra asked Jay to ask me if I wanted to meet her at our regular beach spot. Her rafting tour had cancelled last minute because of the smoke. Jay's group hadn't.

At the beach Lyra was uncertainly wearing an N95 mask against the smoke. She handed me an extra, and we threw out our towels and laid down side by side. It was the first time we'd been alone together, and I worried we'd have nothing to talk about. But Lyra filled the silence, telling me about her wedding, her best and worst camping trips, her friends who already had kids. We took sips from a liter-sized water bottle filled with vodka and juice. Eventually we removed our masks and went for a swim, but almost immediately Lyra started coughing in a broken-glass-sounding way, which freaked me out, so I suggested we go back to my place and stay inside the rest of the afternoon.

Walking home, we could barely see anything a hundred meters away. I pitied the tourists who had unwittingly chosen this week for vacation, expecting sun and fresh air. Instead, the lake stunk like fish corpse, it was vaguely painful to breathe, and anyone who had left their porch furniture out overnight had found it covered in a

layer of grime. We passed families with young children, clinging to ice creams and glistening sodas, looking disoriented and malcontent. Everything was ugly that day, except Lyra. Over her damp swimsuit she was wearing a red crop top and gray denim shorts. Even in a bulky medical mask, with her wet hair pulled up into a thin, bumpy ponytail, I thought she was the most beautiful person I knew in real life.

Impulsively, I reached over and caught Lyra's hand mid-swing. For a moment her small hand just hung there like something I had killed. Then she seemed to reconsider and gripped my hand back. Ridiculously, my stomach fluttered.

It's true I was a little bit drunk. I was eager to get home and sit in front of a fan. I liked the idea of being alone in the house with Lyra, though I don't know what I thought was going to happen. She had given me no signs that she liked me as more than a friend. Maybe I hoped it would be like a slumber party: we would tell each other secrets; I would confess I thought Jay was attracted to her, she would confess she wanted to cheat on her husband, but not with Jay, with someone else, a stranger; or she would confess to gratifying insecurities I had never imagined possible, or tell me she didn't have any close female friends and thus was exceedingly grateful to have met me. We walked, hand in hand, her grip slightly looser than mine, while I had these far-fetched thoughts.

We were about to step onto the narrow shoulder that lined the larger of the two bridges. Ahead of us, a group of teenagers in swimsuits ran out, and we slowed to let them fill the path.

I couldn't help looking at them, though it made me uncomfortable to do so. They might've been anywhere between 12 and 16. The boys, though they were

probably the same age as the girls, seemed far less mature: pale, hairless, clapping each other on the back and whispering into each other's faces before laughing too loud, clinging to each other for social security in a way the girls did not deign to do.

One of the girls, tall and skinny in a floral print bikini, trailed at the back of the group. She stumbled, then turned around abruptly, walked a few steps, and sank to the ground. She folded her arms around her shins and arched her neck, staring blankly at the concrete. Cars zipped past a few feet from her toes. Her friends kept walking for a few moments before anyone noticed. One of the other girls turned around, mouth open in a surprised smile, then whipped her head back the other direction and sped up, as if to prevent any association between herself and the girl on the ground.

Lyra and I had stopped a few meters short, reluctant to get in the way of whatever was happening. Lyra had dropped my hand by then. Two of the boys, one with long hair in a ponytail, one with bangs in his face, returned and crouched over the girl. I couldn't hear what they were saying. The girl didn't respond. The boys looked at each other, concerned, but more than that, amused, and, most of all, impatient because the group was getting away from them and they didn't want to be left behind with this despondent girl, no matter how beautiful and desirable, they preferred to shadow the girls who were having fun, who were creating the fun. One of the boys made a gesture as if about to pat the sad girl's shoulder, but he didn't quite make contact. He said something in a low tone, then the other boy said something in a louder, cheerful tone, then they jogged away, looking back once, twice, then that was it, she was alone.

Lyra turned to me and said as quietly as possible: “Should we do something?” Her breath smelled like vodka and she was swaying on her feet a little.

“Do what?” I said. We stared at each other.

“I don’t know,” Lyra said. “She seems like she might be drunk or on drugs or something.”

I made a face. “What, no. They’re so young. I don’t think they’re on drugs. Do you?”

Lyra raised her eyebrows like she had just realized how dumb I was. Then she shrugged. We resumed walking. The shoulder of the road was so narrow I had to step over the sitting girl’s ankles in order to pass.

As I passed I looked down into her face. I thought about saying something to her. *Are you okay?* I imagined asking. I imagined the precise tone I would ask it in. Kind and caring, friendly, selfless, serene. With that tone I would convey the wisdom that came with my age. I would make it clear that I had been in her shoes before, when young, so I *understood*; but now I was older, I was past all that, I had put the trivial problems of teenage angst into perspective, and that was why I was qualified to help her at this moment, when her shallow, childish friends could not.

But I didn’t speak to the girl, not even to ask if she was okay. The only excuse I can give is that I was afraid to embarrass myself. I was afraid the younger girl would look at me with contempt and sneer, and Lyra would see it, and I would lose her respect instead of gaining it.

We were halfway across the bridge when we heard a startlingly weird sound, a wet smack with a deep metallic thud and a sort of ringing vibration in its core.

Screams followed. I looked over the railing. Below, a speed boat had switched off its motor and was drifting away from the bridge. Its occupants, a group of tanned adults, had their hands on their faces, looking at the water. They were doing half of the screaming. The rest was coming from the group of teenagers as they leaned over the edge of the bridge looking down. I searched among them for the girl who had been sitting on the cement, but she was gone. Before I could register what it meant, Lyra had already said to me, “Call 911,” kicked off her sandals, climbed onto the railing, and dove.

I leaned over to watch her blond ponytail bob up far below. She swam a few strokes and then was supporting a body in a floral print bikini, cradling the girl’s head while kicking her legs and moving the two of them as a unit toward shore.

By the time I found my phone, fingers trembling, I could already hear sirens. I bent down and picked up Lyra’s sandals. They were faded purple flip-flops, the soles worn thin. I could remember wearing some exactly like that in high school, when I never had money to buy new clothes or shoes. I remembered how you could feel every twig or piece of gravel through the flimsy material.

I walked over to the scene surrounding the ambulance, but there were so many people standing around that I couldn’t even see Lyra. I put the flipflops in my backpack and turned away. I figured her fellow EMTs would give her a ride home. When I got home, heart racing, and told the story to Jay, his eyes went distant. I saw him register the contrast between Lyra’s importance and my impotence at that critical moment. It struck me that all summer, I’d been craving and fearing an event like that

one, when something crucial would break through my superficial equilibrium. It had come, and it hadn't involved me at all.

I waited impatiently for the next time I would see Lyra. I thought she'd show up at my work like before, or make plans through the usual channel of Jay. I wanted to go over all the details of the rescue with her, find out what had been running through her head as it happened. I looked into the gold-framed, not-for-sale mirror on the wall and practiced my facial expressions for when Lyra would explain to me how she had been able to react so quickly and irreproachably.

But I never saw her again. The smoke dissipated, ushering in a fresh, optimistic wave of tourists, then there was a lightning storm, and the forest was a tinderbox. An elderly couple in the gift shop told me their house was burning down in the next town over as they purchased a pack of souvenir playing cards.

I kept Lyra's purple flipflops like hostages, assuming she would have to come back and see me in order to get them. I could have easily given them to Jay to bring to Lyra; I know he saw her at work a few more times. But I didn't want to involve him. During our last few weeks in town, I saw that Jay texted her a few things like, *Hey, wanna give us another climbing lesson? And Should we get a group together and rent that boat like we talked about?* Lyra apologized for how busy she was. She had started a new, third job teaching art classes at a local community center. On top of that she and her husband were planning a belated honeymoon at the end of August, an Alaskan fishing trip.

By the end of the summer, I realized I was on some level disappointed by the fact that Jay and Lyra had evidently never had the affair I'd been imagining. I had

been anticipating it with an adrenaline-fused dread bordering on excitement. Now I felt cheated by the fact that Jay hadn't cheated. What had all my vigilance been for? Around that time, Jay and I started fighting a lot. I felt like he was picking fights with me on purpose, for no good reason. He complained about things such as: I didn't show enough interest in him; I didn't understand how compost worked; I never planned anything fun for the two of us to do together, just waited for him to come up with ideas to entertain me. Eventually Jay admitted that he didn't want to move to the East Coast with me, after all. He liked where we were living; he liked the small town vibes, the lake and mountains and living close to his family. He figured he could get various seasonal work the rest of the year, and his uncle would discount rent if he managed the property. He offered me a hundred dollars toward my plane ticket, and I'm not ashamed to say I took it. When I moved out, I took Lyra's flipflops with me.

By now you might have guessed that Lyra was not my first Lyra. It would be optimistic to say she'll be my last.

The truth is, she could've been anyone, but at that point in my life, my options were somewhat limited, so she was Lyra.

In New York, there are infinitely more people I could turn into Lyra, if I wanted to. Even in the middle of winter, with everyone whipped by the wind, wet eyelashes, snot and bulky coats, there are people here who embody themselves so fully it terrifies me. And yet there is not a single person here like Lyra.

What really scares me, though, is how I always seem to be falling down a rabbit hole inside my own head, I make up a story about how things are going, and then it turns out my view of reality is laughably far removed from everyone else's.

For instance: in real life, Jay was never in love with Lyra. I was. Obviously. And here I've been acting like Lyra was so gorgeous she should have been a supermodel, her appearance so arresting and exquisite that any innocent person might find themselves accidentally mistaking it for the most important thing about her. But no. That was just me. As far as I know, I might be the only one in the world who is this shallow, petty, lascivious and vain.

My only hope is that those qualities fade with age. Or will they ferment? I can't yet say.

MARLA IS MANY THINGS TO ME

Two years ago on a summer Sunday, Marla announced to me over the phone that she was done with writing—creative writing, that is. She used to write these really great short memoir pieces, occasionally fiction, too. But the climate was in free-fall. Society was broken. As a journalist, she had more important topics to address than her own tiny life and emotions.

I admired her decision. I thought she was wise. Still, I couldn't help feeling regret. It was the end of an era, one where we had each been writing mainly for the other, we had been each other's audience.

Marla lives in Washington, D.C. She calls me once or twice a week. Sometimes, when especially stressed, she asks me to promise that we will both retire early, like comically early—in our late thirties or forties—and move someplace like Northampton or Bennington, Vermont. We'll be artisans and form a commune. I always say, let's do it sooner. Seriously, just tell me when.

I'm fairly certain that writing will never pay my bills, so it's good to have a backup plan. What worries me is that sometimes Marla sounds like she might be joking, about the early retirement plan.

Other times, I know she means it.

*

The first time I had a short story accepted for publication, I sent it to Marla right away, without thinking. It was about a pathologically shy young woman with low self-esteem who falls in love with a beautiful, ambitious extrovert.

That was where the real-life material ended.

In my fictional story, titled “The Cook,” the cowardly introvert feels undervalued by her confident, classy girlfriend, and she cheats to bolster her self-esteem. The confident, classy girlfriend serenely disdains the introvert and moves on swiftly.

The cheating was a lazy narrative decision: the most obvious kind of catastrophe between lovers I was capable of imagining back then. Beyond that, though, the characters are un-subtly, terribly ill-matched. When they break up, it’s no great surprise, no tragedy.

“I come out like a real asshole in this story,” Marla said on the phone, sounding like she was trying to sound sardonic rather than mad.

“Oh my god, the story isn’t about us,” I tried to explain. “The girl in the story isn’t you. It’s fiction.”

“I know it’s fiction.”

“Do you want me to withdraw it?” I asked, my heart racing. “I will if you want me to.”

“No,” she said. “That’s not what I meant. I don’t care if other people read it. It just upsets me, like, if this is how you saw us.”

“It’s not.”

Eventually she said she believed me.

For a while, though, she didn’t call as much. She stopped sending me her articles every day, and I had to look them up on my own if I wanted to read them.

Eventually I went into the document on my computer where I'd written "The Cook" and feverishly added the kind of notes that I usually left on stories still in an early drafting stage. It was too late to really edit this one, but I typed up anyway:

***Notes/plan: Make the extrovert character better, rounder, more likable. She is the HERO not the villain. Make it clear that __narrator__ is the stupid/self-destructive/mean one. Do these two people belong together? Probably not. But that's no one's fault or is it*

I was wary after that. I had distorted truth for the sake of fiction, and it had almost destroyed something invaluable in my real life! I knew I couldn't risk it again. Not with Marla. I resigned myself to telling only true stories about her, or truer ones, at least.

***Most importantly: Give the full picture, don't simplify for narrative sake. Be clear about what Marla is and is not*

My first attempt was this.

*

Part 1

Marla is many things to me.

First let me tell you what Marla is not.

Marla is not my best friend. (Kate is my best friend; she has been since we were five.)

Marla is not the person I love most in the world. (That would be Elise, my younger sister.)

Marla is not my girlfriend, though I have told some people--strangers, coworkers--that she is.

I admit it was a stretch. We have not yet used that word. I admit I get excited, at least in part by the novelty. By the idea of being a girl who has a girlfriend. Especially a beautiful, blonde, crunchy one. Not quite a lipstick lesbian, Marla wears peach chapstick, long dresses, no makeup but sometimes eyeshadow. She studied environmental policy in college and spent every summer literally saving the planet. Protecting bugs and nursing marshes back to life. She knows the names of a hundred different ferns, and forages for fiddleheads in spring. Paradoxically, she refuses to go barefoot with me by the river in spring. I have told her this is incongruous, but she worries about glass shards and dog pee.

Marla is not my first love.

She is not the first person I've had sex with.

She is not the first girl I've had a crush on. (Though she is the first girl to like me back.)

She is not my idol. She is not my muse.

She is not my mentor. She is not my inspiration. She is not the (only) reason I want to be a writer.

But she is my only writer-friend. She's the only other (amateur) (hopeful) writer I know my age. She's the only person who asks me whether I've been writing lately, and if so, what. She gets jealous when she knows I've been writing a lot, and she hasn't. When it's the other way around, when she's the one writing, and I'm the one blocked, she feels genuinely sorry for me. She casts me as a tortured artist in a drought, pining for inspiration, instead of just a lazy normal person.

No one besides Marla truly cares what I do. Elise and Kate, my friends, my parents—they all care *about me*. When I share my writing with them, they pretend to be interested; they say it's good. But they don't really hold a stake in whether or not I keep doing it. If I were to quit writing and devote my life to a soul-sucking job in advertising or some other such sell-out, they wouldn't hesitate to support my decision. In their eyes, my worth and health is in no way dependent on my creative output, or lack thereof.

(Only Marla and I know they are wrong, wrong, wrong.)

Marla is the extrovert to my introvert. Since college I have kept in touch with only a few close friends, but Marla moves comfortably through all the best circles: the literary folks, the social justice activists, the agriculture nerds and gentle anarchists. She gets along best with people about twenty or thirty years older than us. Her closest friends are silver-haired feminist professors and sun-wrinkled environmental-center directors with children.

(With all these friends, I don't know why she keeps me, but she does.)

Marla is the social butterfly to my caterpillar cocoon. Once, when I had retreated to our bedroom post-dinner to read, she followed me, flinging open the door, and exclaimed that we were going to play charades; me, her, and Didier, the young lawyer who lives in the second bedroom in our little rented house.

I stared up at Marla speechless from the corner of the bed like a deer in headlights.

She took my rudeness in stride. She drew herself back, pretended to check an imaginary chart for a patient, and said in a theatrical voice, “Aha, wait. Oh yes, I see—you are in need of your ‘alone time.’ Of course, I should have known. How fascinating. The introvert in her natural habitat.”

She laughed before shutting the door softly behind her. I leaned back against the wall, paperback flopping from my hand. I didn’t feel patronized, or snubbed, the way I might have if anyone else had seemed to mock me that way. Listening to Marla laugh with Didier out in the living room as they considered what games could be played between two... I savored the lonely spot she’d put me in.

How had she known that was exactly what I wanted? To be alone, only within a space guarded by benevolent others. I wanted to be, not ignored, but set aside, gently, with intention; wanted to be treated like a loved and skittish animal, handled with care.

(A paradox, isn’t it, that I want so much attention for my quality of not wanting attention? I often ask myself: am I just an introvert, or also a narcissist? Are introverts always narcissists?

Are extroverts less self-aware?)

I like to be alone in the mornings. This much I know.

But it's too late now. I made the exchange. In return for not going to sleep alone every night, I do not wake up alone, each morning.

If I wake before dawn and try to slip out of bed without Marla noticing, she, without fail, notices, and comes drifting out of our bedroom five minutes after, sleep mask pushed up on her forehead like sunglasses, looking weary and chipper, face of a happy martyr as if she's doing me a favor by refusing to let me be alone in that precious quiet hour before work. If I wait for her to get up first (feigning sleep until she gets dressed and I hear first the bedroom door squeak slowly shut, then the front door slam), it's Didier who'll bother me instead, rushing around the kitchen acting like he's late even when he's not, crowding the stove in his crisp white shirt and tie to poach eggs for Eggs Benedict, a process too elegant and refined for me to condone on an average weekday morning. I steel myself, I say: this is what it is to have people.

Perhaps, most accurately, Marla is my roommate. Perhaps that's all I can really say for sure.

Before we were roommates, we were classmates. We went to the same small college, where we knew each other's names, though I'm not sure how, and knew each other's faces, from crossing on narrow paths in the quad. But I don't remember

having a single distinct thought about Marla until senior year, when we happened to be the only two people who signed up for a course called Advanced Memoir Writing.

It was the first creative writing course I'd taken. The professor let me in without prerequisites only because she would have otherwise been forced to cancel the class. Marla had a little more experience with writing than me, and a lot more talent. She submitted prose that read like epic poetry, about her eating disorder, her open heart surgery, coming out to her friends in high school, her hope to not have children. Everything she wrote was heart-wrenching, acerbic, and close to perfect. Her writing gave me a feeling I can only compare to the childhood memory of scraping down a steep paved hill on roller-skates on weekend springtime mornings. It also made me sick to my stomach.

Faced with the complexity of Marla's inner life, I felt ashamed and inspired at once. It was agonizing, simultaneous pleasure and revolt.

All in all, it made me want to kiss her.

Our professor was a famous author of historical fiction. We called her "Professor Maslow" to her face, "Hannah" when we fan-girled after class. Our infatuation with her gave us an excuse to start texting. The first time we hung out alone—pretext of writing and reading together at the off-campus pub—we went back to her dorm room after two drinks and I accidentally ripped her tights taking them off. My own aggression surprised me. Every time I'd had sex in the past—incidentally, always with men—I'd been less focused on my attraction to the other person than on the act of sex itself, or more precisely on an image of myself having sex—enjoying

the feeling of feeling sexy. It was an entirely different thing to be attracted to the person.

The semester was almost over and we were set to graduate, revising our theses and writing final papers while I couldn't think of anything else but sex with Marla. I don't remember how the decisions were made. Or maybe I do. Marla, first, I think, announced she would stay in town after graduation, at least for the summer and maybe the fall. She told me this while we were tipsy in the dark, cuddled under a blanket on a porch swing. To me it felt like a hint. She knew that my future was wide open and that I had nothing, at the moment, to tie me to any particular place—except, potentially, her.

The next day I applied for any and all jobs that would let me stick around in our tiny, rural college town, surrounded by mountains and retired professors (and Marla) and not much else.

We were the only two people we knew who were staying. Everyone else was moving to Boston or New York or in a few special cases San Francisco. But Marla had an original idea to spend the next several months working as a freelance journalist for small local papers in the rural area around our college town. It was a way to collect real-life experience, pay her dues, and of course sow seeds for recommendations that might serve her in the future. I boldly suggested Marla and I rent a place together for the summer. Marla amended that we might as well share a bedroom. And that was how we came to be living together before we ever agreed to be dating.

We signed a lease. We felt incredibly mature. We made references to our plan, which was that we would ‘figure it out as we went along.’ To be safe we bought two mattresses for the room we would share, but now we only sleep on one of them. We moved the spare mattress to the living room, where it serves as extra seating.

Under the covers on the mattress we share, we stay up late and whisper. We press our bodies tight together. We trace each other’s hips with our fingers. Our chilly ankle bones knock together. I like to look at her so close my nose touches the space between her eyebrows. I say things like, “You smell good. Not perfume good. Just person good.” When she likes something I say, she climbs out of bed to write it in a journal. She’s good at that; always combing through life and noticing which bits should be saved.

She is not always fascinated by me.

But I am always fascinated by her. I dwell on the little things she says and does.

Sometimes I worry. Maybe my infatuation (lust?) deceives me. Maybe I am not really falling in love.

Since I’ve never been in love with a woman before, how can I be sure? Maybe this is just what an extremely passionate female friendship feels like. Most people don’t talk about ‘falling’ into friendship the way they talk about ‘falling in love.’ But maybe that’s what’s happening to us. We could be having a beautiful friend-romance, falling head over heels into platonic love, certainly with some physical attraction mixed up in it, but those things don’t always have to be clear and separate, do they?

(Why do I keep trying to talk myself out of this?)

One thing I know: I want Marla around more often than not. I want her presence in greater quantity and with more conviction than I've ever wanted anyone else's. I want her for the foreseeable future. So does that mean love, necessarily, romantic love?

(By when must these questions be answered?)

Sometimes Marla invites me to tell her whether I'm interested in seeing other people, and I answer, "Not really."

But sometimes, late at night, I whisper other people's names to her. "Rob," I say. "Rob and his friend Teo. I want to get to know them better. Remember that guy, what was his name, Thomas, at the bookstore?" I don't know why I do this. "You should introduce me to your friend Ray. I think we should hang out with Will." Marla smiles indulgently. Periodically she hosts parties at our house where she invites everyone she knows in a 50-mile radius. We spend the evening on opposite sides of the room flirting with different people, pretending not to track each other's movements. By the end of the night, we make them go away.

When Marla's mother came to visit, Marla asked me to help her drag the spare mattress from the living room back into our bedroom. We dressed it in a comforter and one fluffy pillow. Marla's mother looked in and asked, "Which bed is yours, honey?" Marla pointed at the spare.

Recently we had our first fight, because I referred to us as “tentative lesbians”—just in passing. It was meant to be a joke. Marla was angry. She said that was *my* description if anyone’s, and, more importantly, what was I trying to say? Was I having *tentative* sex with her, was that what I was saying?

I was sorry.

I made her a cake to apologize. Didier helped me dump German chocolate batter into a cast-iron skillet, and we baked it in our countertop convection oven. Later, Marla dug a spoon into its underdone center and licked it with a somber air. For once, she wouldn’t tell us what she was thinking. The three of us ate the whole thing straight from the skillet, on the grass outside in the dark, while Marla cried audibly and fireworks went off overhead.

Marla cries often, both from pain and pleasure. I never cry except when alone. Marla expresses her enjoyment of things. I don’t, or can’t. She exclaims out loud when a sunset, tree, or song is too beautiful to stand. I suffer those feelings in silence, afraid that attempting to describe a thing will ruin it.

Marla, on the other hand, talks so much it’s almost hard to believe. Sometimes I wonder: Does she think she has to talk so much to compensate for my silence? Does she despise my barely audible voice and half-hearted replies, which too often trail into nothing? Does she resent me for my inability to entertain her friends? Would she prefer if I were more like her?

One day in the middle of the summer it grows unseasonably cold. The wind is screaming outside. We turn off all the box fans and close the windows for the first time since we've lived here. Didier makes us hot toddies, and we bring out musty blankets from boxes in the basement. I feel bizarrely thrilled. I turn to Marla and lamely say, "I like this."

She somberly nods. Her arms and shoulders are tangled under a purple afghan, a warm mug balancing on her knee. "I know what you mean. I don't like being cold, per se, but I like the impulse of seeking warmth."

I spend a long time thinking about the truth of this. How much we enjoy plugging our basic instincts. If I had to choose a favorite instinct, it would be that one: the need to move toward fire or up to the light or into a wind-sheltered corner. It's an easy, primal satisfaction. More basic than food and water.

I don't tell Marla but it reminds me of what it's like to be in her presence, sometimes. Like the feeling of willing the sun to come out and it does.

*

One morning, we're reading near a window at the café closest to our house. I'm reading a novel, and she is reading her former professor's new essay collection. Every so often she'll come across something funny she wants to share with me. She starts laughing, catches herself, then places her hand on my wrist, waiting until I reach a good place to stop so I can put down my book and listen. Eventually Marla wipes tears from her eyes, pulls her laptop from her bag, and promises to stop distracting us. She has an assignment to finish before noon.

I like to read the articles she publishes online. She writes with ardor about local government, fundraisers, and city council meetings. I think she could make anyone care about anything.

I wonder whether she's still working on that other piece, too, the one she emailed me weeks ago with no subject line or comment. In it, she's writing a story about two tentative lesbians, an introvert and an extrovert who can't get inside each other's heads no matter how hard they try.

*

***Notes/plan: need to start over now. obviously. Now that everything has changed*

*

Part 2

Marla is many things to me.

First let me tell you what Marla is not.

Marla is not my roommate.

Marla is not my girlfriend. No debate about that anymore.

The other day, my sister referred to Marla as my ex, and that didn't sound right either. Or maybe I just didn't like it. "Ex" hurts my feelings. "Ex" sounds so shallow. "Ex" feels cruel, like I'm relegating Marla to a discrete, darkened past. And I don't want to do that.

Marla is still my friend, I want to say, but the word is hollow when applied to her, it captures nothing.

Marla is still my only *writer*-friend. (I'm thinking about applying for MFA programs, so if I get into one of those, maybe that will no longer be true.) But for now, she's the only one who asks me whether I have been writing lately, and if so, what. She's the only friend of mine who gets jealous of things like that. She's the only one who can make *me* jealous of things like that.

It wasn't until after Marla moved to a city eight hours away that she started sharing her writing with me in earnest. Maybe it's easier to be vulnerable now that we aren't physically together; we don't have to see each other in person every day. (We don't have to see each other naked.) Paradoxically, we now feel more comfortable baring our souls. She calls me once or twice a week. Mostly she wants to talk about her job. It sounds demanding, nerve-wracking, and rewarding. Somehow, for the first year or two she finds time to keep writing fiction for fun on the side. She always asks me for feedback on anything new. She says she needs me now more than ever, because I am her only writer-friend.

A while ago she gave me access to a Google doc with a draft of a story called "Octopus Screaming like a Monkey." You'd have to read the story to get it, that wacky title.

The characters are two young women who live together and wonder about being in love. All the while, each one is stealthily gleaning tidbits of personality from the other. Each, angling to subsume the other. To define and conquer. When Marla and I talked on the phone about that story, I pretended to see no resemblances. I gave her my feedback, stream-of-consciousness-like. She thanked me. We hung up.

The next day I was sitting alone at the café. I pictured Marla across from me all those times we came here, tapping out those lines in secret while all I did was re-read the same novels I've loved for years. I felt jittery, but not in such a bad way. I stared out the window at the Christmas market across the street until my coffee was cold. Then I opened my laptop to read through Marla's story again. I scrolled through the Google doc, then stopped when I saw a pink space bar traveling steadily across the page. A tab labelled "MW" slid along the blank background, letters streaming from its wake.

I hadn't known it until now, but this had always been my deepest desire: to be a fly on the wall observing someone else's writing process from (as close as one can get to) the inside of their head. I watched as Marla poured out three or four sentences at a time, backspaced, highlighted and paused, backspaced, clicked undo, cut and pasted. I restrained myself from correcting the typo "anyhting." Then Marla stopped typing so long I thought she must've left the computer, or noticed my presence and picked up her phone to call me. I checked my cellphone. Nothing. Eventually, she typed, "TBC," and her avatar disappeared from the window.

At the bottom of the page I found a section she had added called ***Notes/plan*. She had transcribed my comments from when we talked on the phone about her story the day before. She had highlighted phrases:

a general fear of intimacy thing.

anxious avoidant obviously

she needs sanctuary, and if this person won't be that for her, she's in trouble.

is it about these two women specifically, or something else?

what do they want from each other? what do they think they want? what do they need?

what is in the way

I was the one who had posed the questions, verbally, over the phone. Marla had transcribed them word for word. I knew I was not required to give the answers. But they were staring me in the face, and I had no idea what to say.

*

In the weeks since Marla moved out, Didier and I have transitioned to spending most of our nights reading side by side on the couch. We've let the recycling pile up. Our shoes are scattered on the floor. Without Marla to keep us accountable, we've gone back to eating meat and wasting food scraps. Sometimes I think my actions are subconsciously designed to provoke Marla from afar, in the hopes that she'll come back to scold me.

I spend a lot of time writing both about and to Marla. I wrote several whiny, nonsensical letters I'll never send. I wrote a poem about her in the half-filled notebook she forgot to pack when she moved. Everything I write is trite and melodramatic. I know I can't show any of it to Marla. Lately I want to impress her, and maybe, if at all still possible, spark envy, so I send her my most scandalous stories about sex with men. I know this strategy is unlikely to work. I know it's crude.

For the first few months after she moved away, Marla didn't tell me anything about her dating life. But then one day she told me she was in love. Her new girlfriend is a biology professor. Marla gives me frequent updates about their

relationship, as if I'm not her "ex" at all but her mom or her sister, someone who couldn't feel anything but uncomplicated joy at the idea of Marla in love with someone else.

When she first started telling me these things, I was sad, but then I was grateful; because why would Marla take the trouble to tell me this kind of intimate information, if she didn't want and plan to keep me in her life, in some form, for the foreseeable future?

Dear Marla,

I was not just using you. I promise. I was not just experimenting.

If I believe it, does that make it true?

Dear Marla,

You had an ideal childhood. You admitted it. You were a happy kid. Not like me. I've never lost the childish feeling that there's nowhere I fit in.

Dear Marla,

My mother is Catholic, and yours has made her discomfort very clear. So we agreed it would be better not to tell them the precise nature of our relationship, when we could already sense its expiration date.

Maybe for another, I remember thinking, I would be ready to tell my family. Maybe for another she would want to tell hers.

Dear Marla,

The excuses I keep finding seem horribly outdated. Sometimes I feel like I'm grasping at straws.

Dear Marla,

One thing you never got to know about me (fortunately for sure), is that I like to be paralyzed. I like my drugs in doses high enough to be debilitating. I didn't want to be that way with you. You're so careful. You can't even drink. I mean you can't drink two glasses of wine without a headache the next morning, so you tend to avoid it, wisely I agree. Alone, I can drink gin instead of dinner, and not even feel like it's a put-on, like I'm just trying to make people worry about me. (That's one good thing about being alone—you never have to question whether you're acting authentically.) Or I can spend a whole day in bed too stoned to move, with the music so loud it's not even fun. Do you think that's pathetic? What do you think? In general? I'm desperate to know.

Dear Marla,

In the morning I'm relieved not to have to extricate myself from your warm elbows and golden hair. I don't need to be careful not to wake you.

Dear Marla,

And I think about how small your shoulders were, how they felt in my hands.

Dear Marla,

Will you marry me? I know that sounds stupid, but hear me out. It doesn't have to be a typical marriage. We can redefine the concept. Remember when we met that feminist writer who platonically married her best friend as a statement about gender norms? She said something about the under-valuing of female friendship, and the over-valuing of traditional romance.

Marla, we could figure it out as we went along.

That's the kind of stuff you don't send to people unless you are more than 100% sure it wouldn't be a mistake.

*

After Marla told me she was done with creative writing, I decided to rescue that story she showed me--"Octopus Crying Like A Monkey"--from its Google doc grave. I thought I might try to pick up telling where Marla left off.

But it got more complicated the more I read into it.

In my version of the story, the one I'm writing, I'm the octopus, and she's the monkey. (They're equally unflattering caricatures; it makes a certain sense.)

But in the story Marla was writing, back when she was writing it, she was both. In her draft, she was a mass of tentacles, reaching out for me, and she was a clowning ape, screeching, blabbing, undignified, and what was I? Not a sea creature, or a mammal. If anything, I was the ocean, dark and silent, spinning away.

*

Because what if I sent that letter, and Marla said yes?

Marriage isn't permanent, of course, but those kinds of words are permanent, at least in principle, and if you say them and it turns out they're not, you're a very cruel person. And I do not want to be a cruel person, leading Marla on, forcing her to reopen the matter, to consider again what I am to her, when the fact is, I know myself too well.

I know how fickle I can be. I am immature and insatiable, I want what I can't have. I'm attracted to six different people at any given time. Some people are like that. Marla is not. My worst secret is that if someone wants to have sex with me and I want to have sex with them I will not stop myself. I'll barely consider stopping myself.

Even back when Marla loved and trusted me enough to share a bed, I tested the limits of what she would accept. I couldn't admit that before. It's like a blurred spot in my memory, the specific way in which I seeded our end.

I remember asking Marla, drunk, if I could sleep with someone else: a man, a specific man, and she said yes. It aligned with her principles and all, she thought monogamy was bad. I didn't, really. I had always pictured myself eventually growing old with just one person. But at the time I felt so greedy. I wanted so much. I didn't want to deny myself anything I wanted.

I remember that Marla granted us both our freedom but she didn't use any of it herself.

Neither did she hide the fact that it made her sad when I left overnight. I kept doing it anyway.

I didn't feel the effects of what I'd asked for until a little bit later. My actions had subtly snipped away some of the bonds that held us together. Not all of the bonds, just some. Our relationship couldn't be destroyed, but it was different.

Is there a way to change it back, I sometimes wonder.

What if Marla and I dated again, this time with the agreement upfront that it would be an open relationship. It's not out of the question that she would agree to something like that. She could keep her professor-girlfriend, I could keep my indulgence in impulsive hetero sex. Would it work?

Lately I'm inclined to say it would not.

I imagine, very selfishly, how my prospects would then be limited: I would have to draw from a pool of people who were comfortable with polyamory, which is, more people today than ever, but it isn't everyone. And then, how many, even among those open-minded individuals, would want to endure being on the sidelines to whatever amorphous, central commitment I had going with Marla, when they could find someone less hung-up, less desperately attached? It would not be guaranteed that anyone else would ever agree to cross into my and Marla's unconventional boundaries and love me, or love her. Not with their full heart.

What if every person only gets one such absolute commitment in a lifetime? I fear. Because Marla is many, many things to me, but I don't know, in all honesty, if I want her to be all.

*

A morning at the farmer's market with Marla, a morning like many others, but for some reason it's this one I remember most often. After buying green beans, turnips, and a wisp of a newborn basil plant, we sit down on a picnic bench to watch two teenagers play violin under an awning. It's almost noon and our stomachs are growling. We pass the carton of green beans back and forth, eating them raw. As the strings gnaw away at the crisp, clean air, and Marla winds her arm through mine, tapping her fingers on my palm, I start to feel an intangible feeling.

It's like nostalgia, but for the future.

(Is that a thing? Or is it just a convoluted way of saying 'hope'?) I catch a whiff of another life. A life where Marla and I live near here, or in a similar quiet mountain town. Maybe we're high school teachers, or journalists at the local paper. Or we could work in a bookstore or a diner. Our jobs are less important to us than our leisure. On Sundays, we buy coffee and sandwiches and read outside while listening to music, watching the green mountains in the distance with infinite patience. We run into people we know and talk about world events and books that were recently published. We never overanalyze them, the books or the people. We're not nervous about leaving any potential half-filled. There is no wait for the sickening drop between how we dreamed the other to be, and how they actually turn out to be, once chained to the level of consistent daily life. The best part of the fantasy is how it's possible to know exactly what we want. We know what we want. We ask for it. The other one says yes.

COUPLES' ATLANTIS

Rainey discovered the boyfriend's second infidelity on a Friday, but she couldn't break up with him until Sunday at the earliest, because they were supposed to host a party at their apartment Saturday night.

The party was for a friend's birthday, so it would've been unfair to cancel.

Hosting alone was not really an option. Rainey had only agreed to throw the party in the first place because she was counting on being able to offload the burden of entertaining onto the boyfriend.

The boyfriend was an extrovert, not eloquent, exactly, but talkative, comfortable, and recklessly awkward in a way that people really seemed to like. It was what Rainey liked. The boyfriend could always carry the conversation when necessary, and Rainey could nod, smile, and withdraw, thus saving her energy for more important activities, like thinking.

When the boyfriend would, for instance, warmly intercept a question he knew Rainey didn't like to be asked; or step up first to confront an overly gregarious barista; or spend the whole evening chaperoning a newcomer who didn't know anybody else at the party, Rainey would toss out her standard line, whether anyone was listening or not: "That's what I hired him for." Only half joking. She wanted him to be the first line of defense between her and everyone else, to shield her as much as possible from the indignities and impositions of the outside world, so that her inner life could remain more pure. Whatever that meant. She had learned from an online quiz that she was 99% introverted, and that was pretty much all she needed to justify her tendency to hoard and protect her thoughts and feelings, her moods and vague

impressions which she was sure could only be properly perceived in the space of a long, long silence.

“Fuck. I’m sorry,” the boyfriend said, “I don’t know why I did it,” his freckled face blanching pale and sick when he entered to catch Rainey scrolling through the messages on his laptop. He dropped his backpack and sat down hard on the bed, creaking the springs. He was breathing heavily, hands cupping the back of his neck. He whispered Rainey’s name with a stinging intensity. She didn’t look up. She was engaged in a careful study: matching the time stamps on two conversations, comparing the messages the boyfriend had sent to his HookMe date at 6:42 p.m. on Tuesday, punctuated with smiley faces and exclamation points to finalize the logistics of a meetup—the boyfriend teasing the date about how her “infamous” curls would fare in the rain; with the messages he had sent her, Rainey, at 6:35pm and 6:47 p.m., saying he hoped she was enjoying her trip, that the pillows had almost lost her smell by now and that he couldn’t wait to grab her and pull her on top of him the moment she walked in the door. She read all the messages, moving back and forth between the two devices, noting the boyfriend’s spelling errors with only a little less derision than usual. Then she tucked them away, a dark flutter under her ribcage, and told the boyfriend they would talk about it after the party, which had been planned for Saturday, and which could not, unfortunately, be canceled.

At the party some of the guests were meeting Rainey’s boyfriend for the first time. They came up to Rainey afterward to confide warmly that he was cute; that they couldn’t believe it had taken this long for them to meet him; that the boyfriend

seemed passionate, funny, well-informed politically. Rainey's favorite coworker said: "I fricken love your boyfriend. He's over there talking about cooking and planting bulbs and stuff and I'm like, wow, he's so cool and smart and sweet."

Rainey said yes he was those things, and meant it.

*

The next morning she woke up with period cramps, late for her shift at the café, neck sore from sleeping on the couch, and remembered that she owed the boyfriend money for three months' rent, as well as for the last two concerts they'd been to together.

She swallowed some pain pills, called out sick from work, and took a walk. She walked all the way to the pond and around it twice, only coughing and crying a little bit, throat aching from the cold. She walked for a long time because she already knew the decision she was about to make and she wasn't ready to make it yet. She needed just a little more time to hover around the thought which was lying ahead of her, still slightly out of focus.

She acknowledged dimly that there were people she could talk to. She had a sister. She had a father. She had a best friend. But those people all lived physically far away. If she were to call one of those people on the phone, now in her time of need, they would subsequently make a point of checking in with her more often. They would ask follow-up questions for days and weeks afterward, wanting to know what Rainey was planning to do, worrying, suggesting, encouraging, empathizing, and she was too tired for that. What she wanted was someone to whom she could scream "I'm trapped," and hang up with no repercussions.

Rainey stopped walking and sat down on a bench, rubbing the unseasonable goosebumps on her arms. She thought about the pointless urgency with which her body responded to betrayal.

It didn't feel like being sad. It felt like having the flu.

There was an edge inside her stomach which she kept rolling over about once per minute, like a blind interior carnival ride.

At least it was interior, though. That was one thing to be grateful for: she hadn't cried in front of him, this time. Last time, she had fallen apart in full view, over a series of three days: the first night, sobbing into his chest in bed while letting him touch her miserably all over until they ended up having sex, coming so hard at the same time that she almost thought it was worth it, if the betrayal had somehow contributed to one of the most intense orgasms of her life. The next night, she had cried quietly the whole way through dinner at her favorite restaurant, her tears falling slickly into the bowl of shiny green olives the boyfriend had ordered for her. The third night, hideously drunk, she had looked coldly down at him from the couch—he sat cross-legged on the floor like a kid at story-time—and listed everything she hated, including his ill-fitting suits, his pretentious taste in movies, and his nose. Strangely, Rainey retained the conviction that it was this third evening, her unspeakably ugly discharge of cruelty, that had saved and sealed their relationship, that time.

By contrast, this time she had accepted the situation almost immediately. A stunned, silent reckoning: no, she could not trust him; no, she could not forgive him; but she would stay with him. Forever, probably. No wonder, that after all the years

they had spent slowly grafting their innermost selves onto each other, she saw it as impossible to extricate herself from him. She wasn't strong enough (emotionally or financially) to be alone in the world. She could not imagine a version of herself that ever would be.

Maybe there was another way to frame it.

Some days, there was another way to frame it. On those good days, Rainey wished the boyfriend to be a mind reader. On those days (and those days only) she wanted him to be able to see inside her head, where he would be humbled by her clarity of vision, the height of her intelligence which allowed her to look out over a vast plain of indifference.

Or maybe what she wanted him to see was the opposite: her depth. She wanted to show him how much more real and profound her emotions were, compared to his.

Or something that was not quite the opposite: a vacancy, her soul's dark abyss. If he could look inside her, he would see that she stayed with him not because she was weak or had low self-esteem or anxious-avoidant attachment issues, but because she was a nihilist.

Was that it? Nihilism had always attracted her because she thought it gave her permission to be lazy. Maybe she was just lazy. Or, she was a hedonist. She enjoyed the sex with him, too much, the soothing physical contact, the way his confident laughter plugged all the cracks in her worldview. She was addicted to it. A financial and existential buffer—maybe that was all she wanted and needed him to be.

Rainey wanted the boyfriend to be made to understand all of this, without her having to resort to the words.

That was, in retrospect, why she took him to Atlantis.

*

Rainey had been in grad school before she met the boyfriend. She had started grad school, three times. Philosophy, Graphic Design, Library Science. She imagined there was a mental or spiritual muscle that controlled the ability to follow through on things. Hers had atrophied, or had always been diseased.

She had also been in three romantic relationships before she met the boyfriend. She could hardly remember the details of them now: the joy of falling in together, the pain of coming apart.

*

Three days after Rainey discovered the boyfriend's second infidelity, there was wildfire. From the couch they watched it burn, as the newscaster declared it the most catastrophic fire in North American history.

They never said so on the news, but everyone knew that a fire like that was no isolated tragedy. It was one more small nail in humanity's coffin.

Because everyone knew that the world had been ending, for over 200 years. (It was taking longer than expected.) It was nobody's fault, or it was everybody's. It could not be stopped, or it could be easily stopped, if humans weren't such an unwieldy mass. No matter which—the world was ending, and it had been dragging on for so long that all the proclamations to the effect of “*This is the apocalypse right*

now” had lost their verve. Most people were able to valiantly pretend that they did not know they were living through an apocalypse, or else they died in a natural disaster and thus were spared knowing it.

Rainey sometimes wondered whether she would be one of those who made it to the end of her natural life—she was 30 now, so, 60 or 70 more years?—before being thrown into some kind of incredibly frightening, unimaginably painful calamity that would end it more violently. It seemed improbably lucky if she did.

She didn’t believe in life after death, though she had been raised Catholic and her parents had done their best. Since leaving home, she had tried being a Zen Buddhist, a Quaker, and a Stoic. She had briefly joined a Numerology cult, before she realized it was a cult. (The defining factor for her was that the members of the cult unfortunately turned out to *mean* everything they said, literally, whereas she had wanted to believe that their scheme was more like a metaphor or a literary device or even just a game to make life more bearable—that was all she wanted, really. That was what she thought religion should be.)

The boyfriend wasn’t tempted by these kinds of esoteric ways of making meaning out of life, because, by his own report, the meaning of life was not an exigent question for him.

When Rainey had started dating the boyfriend, after her third failed attempt at a career, and her fourth failed attempt at a religion, it had been part of a secret initiative on her part to take life less seriously. When she was with the boyfriend, she had found it for the first time possible to believe that she didn’t need a religion. His whole way of being seemed designed to hint that life might be a lot simpler than

she'd always made it out to be. Perhaps this effect was traceable to the boyfriend's unflagging good cheer, his untouchable self-esteem, or his relative lack of emotional intelligence. Whatever it was, when Rainey was with him, it seemed clear that there was nothing much to 'figure out' about life. She could see that she would be fine and continue to exist and then eventually die, whether or not she 'figured it out' (figured what out?); whether or not she reached her goals, or had any.

The boyfriend strategy had been working well for Rainey, and maybe it would have continued to work forever, if it hadn't been for the cheating, which had rattled Rainey badly enough that she could no longer cling to the boyfriend as tightly as she needed to in order to survive.

She could no longer cling to him, but he was, at the moment, clinging to her. He gripped her hand tightly in front of the TV. A color-coded fire map showed a nasty shade of scarlet completely covering the suburb of Los Angeles where the boyfriend had spent childhood summers at his grandparents' vacation home.

Some tears escaped his eyes and he said in a tone of grief and resignation, "Let's go out for breakfast."

They went out for breakfast at a place called Lulu's. Framed paintings of onions dotted the walls. Porcelain cats and wooden angels kept watch from the windowsills. Underneath the restaurant chatter and clink of dishes there was a sweet sad strain of music coming in and out of hearing range, a song Rainey recognized from middle school or early high school, the kind of song boys used to put on mix tapes for her to prove that they were deep and complicated, that they had been hurt before. The boyfriend was following the news on his phone while texting rapidly in

his family group-chat. Rainey looked out the window, past the gaze of a particularly anguished-looking angel. The parking lot overflowed with empty cars. Rain fell on their glossy exteriors. Rain fell on a pink billboard advertising a crisis pregnancy center, the kind designed to trick desperate women into waiting just long enough that it would be too late to get a legal abortion. Rain fell on the green-and-white awning of a weed store called *CBDifferent*. Rain fell on a sign that read ACCIDENT? in giant red letters followed cryptically by a phone number.

“Nobody’s loving life right now,” the waitress was saying cheerfully to the couple in the nearby booth. “We might be surviving, but!”

There was rueful laughter and a general consensus about the equal spread of misery.

But we’re the lucky ones, Rainey thought.

They were the lucky ones. They were all in a restaurant, eating eggs. And what did that say? How ungrateful they all were, most of the time. Why did their lives seem hard? Very little was expected, and it was still too much. Rainey stood up quickly, startling the boyfriend. In the one-stall bathroom, she threw up, bile and milky coffee. A sign above the toilet questioned in cursive letters, *What if you woke up today with only the things you thanked God for yesterday?*

Sometimes things like that really got to Rainey. She would wake up with nothing.

*

It was later the same night that Rainey started reading about Atlantis.

She had heard of it before: bits and pieces on the news, or her coworkers bringing it up as a novelty fact for entertainment during long shifts. She wasn't sure why it had drifted to the top of her consciousness just now. But she latched onto it, a welcome distraction. She took a deep dive.

There seemed to be roughly two opposing views of Atlantis, as represented by the proliferation of op-eds, podcasts, and blog posts that had sprung up around the subject:

One: it was a fairly harmless hippie commune with values not so far-fetched for its time, the only thing unique about it being its intent to relocate to a giant underwater bunker, rumored to have been under construction for decades already. All things considered, Atlantis might be one of the more reasonable responses to the unreasonable chaos that was life on Earth.

Its opponents, by contrast, deemed it a cult. A group of doomsday alarmists, about to launch an unauthorized scientific experiment with human subjects, one of the Seven Great Horrors of the post-postmodern world.

They had a website.

Rainey had to refresh the home page three times before a block of text appeared.

We do not claim that retreating from the world and living the way we do is right. We do not recommend this path. For most people, it would be a mistake to choose this path. But for you, the word mistake no longer has meaning. You are being asked again and again to choose. You choose. It never lasts. You've always wished to live in a way that would absorb you. You've wondered why it was so hard. You know

that there exists a kind of peace, only slightly out of reach, for which you would give everything. And you do mean everything. We are speaking only to you. You who live as if trapped, when you are not.

Rainey clicked around the website, looking for pictures. There were none. It was 3 A.M. As her eyes glazed over with need for sleep, Rainey filled out a form application, requesting consideration for acceptance to what they were calling the First Generation of Atlanteans.

She was genuinely shocked, a week later, when she learned they had accepted her.

She had not even answered the actual questions on the form. In each empty text box she had written variations of the same desperate thing. She had complained about her life. She had been angry and petty. She had described a massive, pressurizing thirst.

*

There remained the question of how to present it to the boyfriend. Rainey needed him to go with her to Atlantis. That was nonnegotiable. She was too mistrustful to leave him behind. She imagined hordes of women traipsing in and out of their house, the boyfriend reveling in his freedom, knowing Rainey was out of cell service and would likely never find out.

Luckily there was this line, seemingly an afterthought that came all the way at the bottom of the emailed acceptance letter:

Accepted applicants are permitted to bring ONE civilian companion for any reason they may have. The reason does not need to be disclosed. The companion will NOT have full access to the commune's resources but will be adequately provided for. Their status at the commune and any potential changes to that status will be handled on an individual basis as best fits the needs of the accepted applicant and the commune as a whole.

“It’s a two-week trial visit,” Rainey told the boyfriend, “for both parties to decide if it’s a good fit.” Technically this was not the arrangement that had been offered, yet, it didn’t seem implausible to her that their first two weeks at the commune would function somewhat like a trial period, letting them decide if they both (or if only one of them) wanted to stay and join for good.

“Okay...” the boyfriend said. “It sounds pretty, like, out there, from what I’ve heard. But you’ve researched it more than I have. I guess I’ll come with if you want me to?”

“I want you to,” Rainey said.

The boyfriend looked slightly disappointed—or was Rainey imagining it?—then he relaxed and changed his tone. “Yeah, I mean, I don’t like the idea of you going there alone, of course. It doesn’t seem totally safe. But I guess it could be an adventure. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, right? They don’t just let anyone in to see their stuff... You must have written a really good essay, babe. What did you tell them about me? And, hey, Seattle is a cool city! We can do some sightseeing while we’re there. Maybe get out of the commune one of the weekends, rent a van

and go to the mountains.” He looked much more upbeat after considering that possibility.

Rainey wondered whether his mustered enthusiasm was meant to be a trade: forgiveness for the Tinder incident in exchange for his cooperation in this freakish hippie experiment. Well, maybe a trade was what she wanted, too.

They left at dawn on a Sunday, having asked the neighbors to water their plants for two weeks, having posted on their respective social media pages that they were taking a vacation off the grid. Rainey had mailed three letters as well: one to her father, one to her sister, one to the best friend she’d had since childhood. The boyfriend thought the letters were a good idea. He thought they were a safety measure, detailing to their emergency contacts exactly where they had gone and how to find them in case they didn’t come back.

Rainey’s prevailing thought over the next 48 hours was that it was almost too easy, how each step of the journey rolled forward without error or delay: as they boarded the plane from Boston to Seattle; as they stepped into the cab that met them at the airport and brought them to the Atlanteans’ mainland office: a shabby, repurposed Victorian home in Ballard, where three good-looking people in their early thirties moved around incredibly slowly, staring wide-eyed at the newcomers in a way that seemed meant to be welcoming but in fact was rather concerning; Rainey kept wondering if there was something on her face, or if perhaps they had short-term memory loss and needed help remembering who she was. Then Rainey and the boyfriend signed waivers, which were quickly whisked away like something shameful. They relinquished their cellphones and laptops into a metal lockbox

emblazoned with the word “unplug.” Then they boarded first a bus, then a ferry, then a smaller boat with a growling motor, which brought them to the island: daunting rock formations and dashing waves, two flights of slimy stone steps, a muddy path between trees, and, finally, in a clearing, a towering wooden lodge, a delicate circular widow’s walk on its roof, which the boyfriend quickly snapped a picture of on his antique disposable camera, before the huge front door swung open, and someone called them inside.

*

It was Themis who had called them inside. She was barefoot, wearing a black short-sleeve shirt and loose black sweatpants. She had the same disconcerting habit as her colleagues on the mainland of staring wide-eyed into Rainey’s eyes as they shook hands, her expression one of general astonishment and cultivated openness, as if she was making an intention in that very moment to see into the very center of Rainey’s soul. She was a few inches taller than Rainey, with a round face, black shiny hair streaked with silver at the temples, and bright green eyes set unusually far apart. Maybe it was the eyes—or something about the luminous quality of her skin, or the fluid way she moved her limbs—that gave Themis a certain resemblance to a fish. Rainey made a mental note to share this rude but compelling observation with the boyfriend in private later.

Themis addressed Rainey: “You’re the applicant?”

Rainey nodded and gestured to the boyfriend. “Yes, but they said my—”

“Of course. Come with me. Cerulean will take your companion where they need to go.”

Rainey had not even noticed the girl who must have been Cerulean, standing off to the side. She was beautiful and tall. Her hair was dyed blue and braided, and she smiled, parting her bow-shaped lips when they looked at her. The boyfriend raised his eyebrows at Rainey and shrugged before ambling over and taking the hand that Cerulean extended, following her down one of the five hallways that branched from the entryway.

A small twist disrupted Rainey's stomach. She had to prevent herself from demanding that the boyfriend be brought back and remain by her side, under her watch, for the rest of the visit. She took a few deep breaths and forced herself to calm down. *Jealousy has no place here*, she told herself. *Don't get distracted*. This was her trip, after all. It had been her idea.

Themis was watching Rainey's face. "Ready?" she asked, and Rainey nodded.

She followed Themis to a half-moon-shaped little room, dotted with round windows like portholes. Rainey went to one and stared out, transfixed by the clotted mess of stars. She hadn't seen such density in the night sky since childhood. The window emanated cold and damp. Rainey was about to touch it, then she felt a warm hand on her shoulder. She turned and saw Themis holding two small crystal glasses full of a fluorescent blue liquid.

"What's this?" Rainey asked.

"It's a drink we make here," Themis answered. "Derived from a type of seaweed. If you stay long enough, you'll probably get to help harvest it. We all take turns doing every aspect of the work here."

Rainey waited for more information about the drink itself, but that seemed to be all she would get. She took a gulp. It tasted like gum after it had been chewed too long, with a pinch of salt. Themis drained her own glass quickly, and Rainey followed suit.

By the time she took her last swallow, a sense of ease had taken over.

Rainey investigated the feeling.

The feeling was that whatever she did or said tonight it would be right. There was no wrong. Nothing was ever wrong, it just *was*. She saw that life had always been that way, only she had been too distracted to notice. She reached up to tuck her hair behind her ears, a simple gesture, but it felt exquisitely purposeful. She walked slowly to a set of armchairs on the other side of the room, sat on one, and curled her legs beneath her, all the while marveling at how her body and mind seemed to be moving in perfect harmony with each other, neither getting dragged behind. There had been a phase of Rainey's life when she had meditated for six or more hours a day, on Buddhist retreats or on particularly desperate days at home, just to access a semblance of this feeling—equanimity, mindful awareness, whatever you wanted to call it, the drink had made it as plentiful as air.

Themis took a seat across from Rainey and held her gaze. "Why did you come here?" she asked.

Rainey had been expecting this question. She nodded. "Your mission just makes sense to me. Our world is broken. It's dying. It's almost over."

"Yes, well, people have known that for a while. Why do you choose to escape it now?"

“I was unhappy. My unhappiness had reached a peak.”

“Why were you unhappy?”

“Several reasons.”

“Tell me.”

Rainey began: “My boyfriend cheated on me.”

“So?” Themis said.

“So?” Rainey replied. “It was bad. It hurt me.”

“Why did it hurt you?”

“Because...we made a promise to be with each other. To be with *only* each other. To treat each other...special. That’s what people do.”

“Monogamy is a myth,” said Themis.

“Atlantis is a myth,” Rainey countered, taken aback.

Themis smiled. “True. Okay, let’s try again. Why did you come here?”

“I was unhappy,” Rainey said. “I was confused. That was almost worse than being unhappy. I was confused, more so than most people. I don’t know how true that is but that’s how it seemed, like I was the only person who felt that way. For a long time I had been feeling like I couldn’t take it anymore. And that something had to be resolved, soon. But then life went on. And on, and I forgot that confusion was the root problem, and instead I found myself with all these other problems that knit up my mind into like a tight, angry fist I couldn’t open.” Rainey stopped when she realized she had been speaking with her eyes closed. She opened them and looked at Themis. “I’m sorry. Can we pause for a moment? You didn’t exactly say: Is this an interview? Is this how you decide whether or not I can stay?”

Themis frowned. “Not exactly.”

“Are you the leader here?”

“No.” Themis said, sounding slightly offended. “We don’t have hierarchies. I’m simply assigned to be your guide, or, you could think of us more like partners.” She settled back in her seat. “Now, let’s get back on track. I sense there are some things you need to work through before you can honestly approach our central question.” She waited for a moment, reflecting, then raised her eyebrows. “Is this the first breakup you’ve been through?”

“What breakup?” Rainey said.

“No breakup?”

“I—that guy I came with, we’re still together. But—yeah, I have been through breakups before, in high school and college. Not really serious ones, though, I guess.”

“Ah,” Themis said, “Myself, I recently went through a breakup. Two, three years ago, I think it was. Hard to remember now. It was before I arrived.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Rainey said, wondering if Themis was somehow ‘not over it’ by now and if so, what was wrong with her—“Breakups are hard.”

“Yes,” Themis said, nodding sagely, “And the hardest part?”

Rainey considered the question, calling on squalid memories from her early twenties. “The worst part of a breakup,” she said finally, “is that you have to face life on your own again. You’re forced to recognize that the person you were in love with was just a means of distracting you from your own pathetic emptiness. It was a strategy, and the strategy failed.”

“I don’t think that’s the worst part of a breakup,” Themis replied.

“What’s the worst part, then, in your opinion?”

“The worst part of a breakup is the way the good memories get soured. All those happy, treasured images which had become a central part of your identity and your life story, the story you told yourself about yourself—they’re suddenly poisoned. Such a large portion of your memories, gone bad all at once. That’s what makes you feel depleted. Not the loss of the person, really, but the turning of the memories. It’s a crisis for your brain. It devalues you from the inside out.” Themis paused before continuing. “And yet you do, eventually, recover those memories. It doesn’t seem possible at first. But it happens. I am speaking from experience. And the lover—the ex-lover—can still be featured in those good memories. Of course, the ex-lover will *not only* be the hero of those good memories. They will always from now on be also the person who hurt you. These can coexist. You see. The memories can remain. The memories still matter. Even though the person who helped create those memories—is not yours. Does not matter, to you, now.”

Rainey swallowed. “That’s...interesting. Thank you for sharing.” The drink must have been wearing off. She was already feeling less calm, less confident.

Themis gave her an understanding smile. “Time to sleep now. We can resume our talk soon. Just one last thing, before bed.” She crossed the room and pulled a thin volume bound in black leather from a shelf. “This is the manifesto. Do you know it?”

Rainey shook her head no.

“Well, it hasn’t exactly been published,” Themis acknowledged. She opened the book, flipped around a little, then cleared her throat and read aloud:

We love only those things which matter.

We firmly believe that nothing matters.

We are nothing.

*From nothing we come, and unto
nothing we shall return.*

*Therefore we love ourselves, our sisters,
and every atom in the universe that might have
been us but wasn't.*

Now and forever, world without end.

Pretend.

“Who wrote that?” Rainey asked.

Themis placed the book back into the empty space on the shelf. “It’s written by the founders.”

“Do the founders live here?”

“Some of them, yes. And some went ahead,” Themis said, breaking into a radiant smile. “They’re already down there, breaking ground.”

“That’s amazing,” Rainey said, struggling to sound like she believed it wholeheartedly. “Will I get to meet them?”

“They choose when to communicate with us.” Themis opened the door for Rainey to leave. “It’s important to trust. If you can’t trust, you won’t survive here.”

That night as Rainey tried to sleep on the bottom tier of a three-level bunkbed, the boyfriend squished beside her, snoring, she heard the moment the clouds broke and the rain started.

It would be raining without reprieve for the rest of the time Rainey spent on the island.

Every morning, in the lower level of the lodge, the members lined up and chose a strip of paper at random from a giant bowl. Rainey did not know how these strips of paper were produced. They displayed one-word commands: *Fish. Forage. Cultivate. Cook. Trap. Rest. Research. Clean.* Sometimes the commands were very clear, other times vague, requiring subjective interpretation.

Rainey learned to fish and hunt. She learned how to set traps for crabs, and how to root for clams in the wet soil on the beach. She learned which greenhouses were which. She learned which one to go to if she needed onions, or peppers, or potatoes, or herbs, or the tiny orange tomatoes that burst sweet and sour when crushed in the back of her mouth. She began to gain an intuitive understanding about which mushrooms in the woods were probably safe to eat; and which ones definitely were not.

She learned that mushrooms preferred to be eaten raw and whole, and should never be sliced. The Atlanteans believed that fungi possessed consciousness, and probably represented a higher form of life than humans. This did not mean they could not be eaten; mushrooms, it turned out, were so enlightened that they welcomed their own death; they only wanted the dignity of not being cooked into oblivion first. Their deepest desire was to face the moment of final surrender awake and intact.

The boyfriend giggled conspicuously when he heard things like this. Rainey worried he would get them in trouble. She was glad he could not sit in on the daily

interview sessions she had with Themis, since he certainly would have laughed at those, too.

Themis asked dramatic sweeping questions like: “What’s wrong with the world today?”

“I really don’t know,” Rainey said.

“Try to answer.”

“Okay.”

They both waited.

“There’s a lot of anger,” Rainey finally said.

“You’ve been in the world more recently than I have,” Themis said. “What are people angry about?”

“Different things. A lot of people are angry at their governments. A lot of us are angry at rich people. Others are angry at poor people. They’re angry at people who have what they want. Or who want what they have. Or who they think want to keep them from getting what they want to have.”

Themis gave Rainey a curious look. “I notice you say angry ‘at.’ Not ‘about.’ You and those you’ve lived with, you’re conditioned to be angry at people, not forces. Not the way things are. Not the system itself but the people who profit from the system. Your anger is misdirected, maybe. Maybe it’s better that way. If all the anger you felt toward individual people tried to pinpoint its true source, it would be unable to attach, it would implode and scorch us all.”

These conversations were always held after lunch, in the half-moon room, while they sat on armchairs facing each other and sipped small cups of the blue drink. The topics were mysteriously appointed by Themis. Soon Rainey stopped feeling like the conversations were meant to test or trick her. She began to believe that she and Themis were really just communing with each other as two equal people. After her appointments with Themis, the work shift was resumed for a short time, during which no one seemed to feel the need to work as hard or as fast as they had during the morning shift. Then at some point in the late afternoon everyone would seem to know by unspoken signal that it was time to stop. Rainey would go back to the dormitory and lie in bed alone, fixating on the whorls in the wood of the ceiling. It was easy to be still after hours of physical work. She felt hyperaware of her heart beating and her blood moving under the skin. She rested one hand on the soft pillow of her stomach and the other on her sternum. She felt herself breathing. These were precious hours. She didn't know what the boyfriend did during this implicit downtime. She rarely saw him until the music started playing outside.

The music would begin freeform and wandering, somewhat jarring at first, not entirely pleasant, but it gained harmony and momentum as more people joined. The residents shared a collection of guitars, flutes, fiddles, small handmade and colorfully painted mbiras, drums, and other instruments Rainey didn't recognize. They played in the covered clearing behind the lodge, where an outdoor fireplace was almost always lit. Around the fire were huge plush couches that looked like they had been exposed to the elements for years. Rainey found herself surprisingly un-squeamish about sinking into the moldy furniture. People sat close to her every time, a welcome

warmth when the evenings were always at least a little bit damp and cold. They sunk into a corner of the couch with her like lovers. Someone leaned a head on her shoulder like they'd known her their entire life. They shared blankets, and cups of the blue drink, which made Rainey feel for the rest of the evening like she was moving through diffracted light. She could see every small movement for what it was, a quiet spectacle worthy of her attention, never again to be repeated in precisely the same way.

Sometimes the boyfriend was the one who sunk into the couch close to Rainey in front of the fire. She would let him put his arms around her and kiss her like everything was still normal. Other times, he would watch her in the flickering firelight as she nestled into strangers' sides, his expression not one of jealousy, but a look like he wished to understand and did not.

Rainey had realized that the jealousy and paranoia she so often felt around him had begun to fade; as did her second-hand embarrassment when he did something awkward or uncouth. This might have been because she knew that the people around them did not conceive of Rainey and the boyfriend as one combined social unit, as everyone had when they lived in the real world. People on the island didn't seem to know they were a couple at all. If there were other couples on the island, Rainey couldn't tell that they were couples. People touched each other often, hugged, kissed, and cuddled in public, but it was impossible for her to tell what was platonic and not. Lately she cared less; when she saw the boyfriend interacting with the other women in the commune, if he stood too close to them, if he seemed to be

flirting with them, if he put a hand on their shoulder and leaned in to tell them something, Rainey perceived it with a blankness and moved on to other thoughts.

In the half-moon room Themis asked, “Are you afraid of death?”

“Of course,” Rainey said.

“How afraid?”

“How afraid?” Rainey said. Then: “Oh, very afraid. I used to not be. Now I am. I used to think I was excited for it, when I was a teenager, and death seemed incredibly far away, I was sure it would be like this welcome relief, or even a reward, like going to sleep at the end of a long day. I didn’t really understand in the novels we read in high school when the themes were always about, like, a man struggling valiantly to cope with the fear of death. I was like, it’s fine, death makes everything more beautiful and more meaningful as well as meaningless at the same time! It’s awesome. Why can’t everyone see that? Then, I don’t know what happened, one day it became real. I started thinking way too hard about what death really *is*—like how my subjectivity, my awareness, will be completely gone and there won’t even be a me-like presence to know it’s gone, to know the moment when it leaves—and I was completely terrified. Where will I be then, what does it mean for me not to be? It’s truly an unbearable concept when you really consider it.” Rainey took a deep breath. “And then—to stop existing is probably the *best possible* option. But have you heard of the theory that your body produces DMT in the very last moments before you die? So, it might be the case that everyone sets out on a psychedelic trip right before dying, which very plausibly could *feel* like it lasts forever, because psychedelics do

that to time—and if it’s a bad trip, well then, that’s literally hell, isn’t it? Eternal suffering. And then there’s the idea that time is elastic, like right now the universe is expanding so it feels to us like we’re moving forward in time but once it reaches a certain point it’ll snap back and start contracting again—so in that case what if we die and then immediately the next thing we’re conscious of is zooming backward through our same life again this time without control—”

“That’s good,” Themis interrupted her with a smile. “I think that’s enough.”

“Do you think I’m insane?” Rainey asked, laughing now.

Themis stood up and retrieved the manifesto from the shelf. “There’s a lot in here about death already,” she said, tapping the cover but not opening it. “Most people, when they first arrive, are as obsessed with death as you are.”

“Then what? They learn from the mushrooms how to be happy about it?”

Themis laughed for the first time since Rainey had known her. Her round face lit up, animated, and Rainey had a momentary vision of what she might have looked like back when she, presumably, had a normal life. Maybe she had used to wear makeup and clothes that weren’t black; maybe she had had siblings, parents, and a group of friends who she went out for drinks with at bars. For once it did seem possible.

“Yes, well, it sounds silly when you say it like that,” Themis said lightly.

“I didn’t really mean to dismiss the idea,” Rainey replied. “I actually kind of like to think about it.”

Themis nodded. “Well, let yourself think about it. Keep an open mind. Humans might be capable of *knowing*, objectively, that dying is a natural, healthy part

of life, even a noble thing we do for the good of the collective. Making space for the next generation. Letting ourselves be disassembled to make new life materials. We can know that in our hearts but we'll never fully believe it. Our self-preservation instinct is too strong. That's why so many things that shouldn't hurt, hurt."

Rainey nodded. She felt slightly embarrassed that she had spilled all her rambling thoughts about death. She wished for another blue drink. Themis, maybe, sensed her discomfort, because she reached out—they were sitting close to each other in armchairs, and rested a hand on Rainey's arm. It was more surprising than comforting.

As Rainey didn't say anything, Themis continued to speak. "Fear of death also has something to do with our pathology around relationships, I think. We want a bond that feels more permanent than the temporary bond we have with life. We search for everlasting love, that's the highest standard, we act like it's each of our due. Again and again we realize that the bonds of love between people are equally fleeting and temporary. A relationship is like a little life, therefore it also must die."

Rainey nodded. "That's so true."

"If you think it's true, we can add it."

"What do you mean, 'add it'?"

Themis took the manifesto from her lap and passed it to Rainey. Rainey rifled through the pages. Half of them were blank. Where there were words, they were sparsely distributed, handwritten in ink or pencil, some cursive, some print. Some entries looked older than others, some were smudged and faded, barely legible. Others looked like fresh ink.

Rainey looked at Themis and asked for a pen. She set about etching the important parts of their conversation in, exactly as she remembered them.

The boyfriend was not receiving similar interview sessions with anyone. Aside from that, he followed the same daily schedule as everyone else. Yet where Rainey thrived on the enigma and routine of Atlantis, the boyfriend withered in the absence of sun and freedom. Rainey felt a pang of guilt when on rare occasions she really looked at him, and noticed how pale and cautious he looked, so unlike his past self.

She reminded herself that he was free. He participated in the commune's daily routine by choice; he could ask to leave at any time. She told herself he wouldn't even still be here if he didn't love her—more than the life they'd left behind, more than surfing in warm waters and gliding on his skateboard under bright skies. More than his own happiness? Was that what she wanted? It was hard to think straight. She felt intoxicated by the relief of having the upper hand.

Sometimes she recognized that her attitude toward him was cruel, but hadn't he been cruel too? It was difficult to recall the specifics of what had happened between them: whether it had been intentional, or forgivable; whether it mattered now, or had ever.

The boyfriend said, "Rainey. Rainey."

He said her name too often, lately. He couldn't seem to stop saying it.

"Let's go home," he said. They were in the dormitory after dinner, minutes before the lights would turn out. Anyone could have been listening. "Rainey, please,

let's go home. Okay? This place is fucking strange. And their plan? To live on the *bottom of the ocean*? It's insane, you have to see that, don't you? It's literally impossible."

"You don't know that for sure."

"Okay, yeah, I don't know that for sure. But you don't have any basis for believing that it *is* possible. I'm skeptical whether anyone in the world has that kind of technology, but if anyone does have it, it's definitely not them. Have you seen any evidence at all that they're working on, like, the technology that this kind of enormous project would entail? Anyway, why would you want to live underwater? It would be hell. Humans aren't meant to live down there."

"That's why humans won't live down there."

"Exactly! Let's go home. It's been a long enough visit, right? You got to see this place, you got to meet them—so cool! Don't you miss our friends, though? Don't you miss home?"

She didn't miss home. And whenever she thought about the people she'd left behind, she took deep breaths through her nose and waited for the pain to pass. But it was less and less often that she thought of them. The letters had served their purpose: in them—though the boyfriend didn't know this—she had explained, more or less, to her sister, her friend, and her father—how it was that she could love them, yet not want to stay in their world.

The boyfriend said, "Now that we've seen this place, we can go back and have that much better an appreciation for our normal lives. That's the best thing about

taking a trip, right? It makes you realize how grateful you are for home.” He was trying to pass Rainey her suitcase, which he had fished from under the bunkbeds.

“I don’t think that’s the best thing about taking a trip.”

The boyfriend sighed. “Rainey.”

The lights snapped off.

“What?”

“I’m so cold.”

Rainey felt warm. Like a fire had burrowed into her.

*

To love is to fall head over heels in between the cracks made by the pain of others.

Can you be that open? Can you be so brave?

It’s okay if you can’t.

Most people can’t.

Honestly, none of us would blame you if you can’t.

*

On the day the boyfriend disappeared, Rainey woke to a thunderstorm. She had slept longer than usual—probably an effect of having the bed to herself for once.

It took several seconds of staring at the ceiling, trying gently to pull back the dream she'd been having, before she registered that he was gone.

No one seemed to remember the last time they had seen Rainey's boyfriend. They spoke as if they could barely remember meeting him, as if they had never quite been told his name, though Rainey knew that some of them had held long conversations with him often, gone hunting with him, eaten next to him almost every day for—how long had they been there? More than one month, less than a year, Rainey thought, though suddenly even of that she wasn't entirely sure.

She skipped her work assignment and spent the whole day searching. She walked an entire lap around the outer ring of the island, realizing how small it was. When she returned to the lodge, rain-soaked, throat raw from ocean spray and fear, she went straight to Themis' room.

"I know you're worried," Themis said calmly. "But I have news—good or bad, depending how you think. Last night, around midnight, a group of new members were dropped off here. Then, unusually—the boat turned around straightaway, and returned to the mainland. I can only guess that your person secured a ride somehow."

She didn't say she was sorry for Rainey. She didn't ask Rainey how she felt about it. But she opened her arms, and Rainey melted into the embrace. Her cheek rested on Themis's sharp collarbone. She couldn't remember the last time anyone other than the boyfriend had held her in such an intimate way. Her family had not been the hugging kind. She squeezed her arms tighter around Themis's torso, feeling the gelatinous curve of her waist. Themis began to draw her nails in circles over Rainey's spine, making Rainey shiver.

After a while Themis gently disengaged herself from the hug and ran her cold smooth hands down both of Rainey's arms. "Trust that this is all for the best," she said.

Back in the dormitory, Rainey looked under the bunkbeds. It was still there, the black duffel bag in which the boyfriend had packed an array of pastel-colored polos and slacks he'd never had a chance to wear on the island. It made Rainey sick to her stomach, though she tried not to think too deeply about why.

The next morning Rainey's work assignment was a slip of paper that said: *REFLECT.*

She climbed the widow's walk for the first time since she'd arrived on the island. She looked out over the tops of the trees, through the rain, which was thin today, recuperating after yesterday's storm. Perhaps she was supposed to reflect today about the boyfriend and about the end of their seven-year relationship. But the thought of him made her want to throw up.

One effect of his disappearance was that she didn't see any way that she could possibly change her mind now about staying at Atlantis. If she were to leave, now, what would she have to go back to? Maybe she would find him back at their apartment and they could continue on as if this interlude hadn't happened. Maybe she would not find him there.

Both scenarios filled her with dread.

She had spent a lot of time imagining the kind of place they were going to under the ocean, and had settled on it being a primitive stone city enclosed under a kind of see-through dome, through which she would be able to look out and observe

the bizarre, lit-up spectacle of deep-sea life around them. It was a wonderful fantasy. If something like that really existed, it would be a miracle.

Like the religion of her childhood, Rainey understood what she was being asked to do. In order to continue living in the commune, and to avoid a constant agony of doubt and fear, she would need to disarm her thinking mind. She would need to make a leap of faith.

The truth was she liked the concept. It was a return to something she had rejected and scorned for most of her adulthood, but now here it was, attracting her with the force of long-repressed nostalgia.

She remembered how, when she was eight years old, two of her friends' mothers had been diagnosed with breast cancer within a few months of each other. Rainey had become obsessed by the fear that her own mother would get breast cancer, too, and die. At night in bed she had come up with a foolproof plan. It was the first time she had prayed, really prayed, not just reciting scripts like the Hail Mary or the Our Father. She had posed in her mind the theory that, if she promised her utter devotion to God, if she trusted Him and banished all scruples or reservations, and opened her soul entirely to Him—whatever that meant—then He would certainly protect her mother from death. Years of Catholic school had given her the vague but grandiose language and the propensity for magical thinking to do this. She did it. She cried in bed in the dark and sacrificed her will to His. Because it had all felt fairly immaterial she had decided to conjure a symbol to represent her faith: an eagle. She put all of her love, fear, and vulnerability into this huge bird, envisioning it flying out of her chest, gathering speed in the night sky, and then sweeping into her mother's

room, and she knew with more certainty than she had ever known anything before or since, that her mother was now safe, because of her.

Rainey's mother had never gotten breast cancer. But years later, when Rainey was a young adult and no longer a believer in god, her mother had been one of the first victims of an epidemic flu and died in the hospital under quarantine. At the funeral Rainey had remembered the eagle for the first time in two decades and marveled at how odd and delusional she must have been as a kid, to believe that a thought could protect her, could protect her loved ones.

What did all that have to do with Atlantis? Rainey wasn't sure, but she had been told to reflect, and this was what had risen. Was she supposed to pray, now? She considered trying to pray, and realized she had lost the ability. She wouldn't know where to start.

*

We think we want so many things.

But all we want is not to suffer. When faced with suffering, the only thing we want is the absence of suffering.

(You know that, right? You just forgot)

Also, re: suffering—

There is extreme suffering, and then there is bearable suffering. For extreme suffering, there are no words.

(If you are here, now, your suffering has always been bearable.)

For bearable suffering, learn to coast on its wave.

Look down. Look around. Look into it. Practice wonder.

When you achieve wonder in the face of your suffering, pain remains, but despair loses teeth.

*

At Themis's invitation, Rainey began sleeping in the spare bed in Themis's private room, instead of in the dormitory, which was quickly filling up as more new members seemed to be arriving every day. Every night before sleeping, Themis read aloud more lines from the manifesto. Sometimes, Rainey responded out loud, and Themis would take up a pen and record Rainey's statements or questions. In the night if Rainey woke up mumbling from nightmares, Themis woke up, crossed the few feet of space between them, and slipped under the sheets beside her. She raked Rainey's hair through her fingers and whispered kind words in her ears. When, eventually, they kissed for the first time, it felt to Rainey like Atlantis was unquestionably a good thing.

When Rainey tried to ask specific questions about the plan for the commune's move underwater, and Themis deflected, turning away or giving a cryptic non-answer, Rainey felt like Atlantis might not be so safe and good after all. But then Themis would make up for it with her gentleness and intrigue, and Rainey would

again find herself caring less about the reality of the future than about the pleasure of her present state. She had never in her life felt so constantly engaged.

One day she chose a new name for herself, as all Atlanteans were asked to do. Themis showed her a list of names she could choose from. Rainey had no idea who had curated it, or where the names had been drawn from. She chose “Rainey” because nothing like the torrents of dirty water that coated the island nearly every day had ever made her feel so seen.

She still liked to fantasize about the future, about her new life under the crushing force of so many leagues of seawater. It wouldn’t be able to touch her, but it would be looming above at all times. She imagined the ocean shaping her into something like a soft and rounded stone.

*

One night, almost a full year later, Rainey was lying in bed, feeling slightly cold and peaceful like a smooth, hollow vessel as she closed her eyes. Themis had just left to go get a glass of water. Rainey rolled onto her side, and it all came flooding gently back to her.

No sharp edges to the memories anymore. No poison, no regret, just a tumble of soft vignettes connected by the fact that they all revolved loosely around a person she used to know.

An ache seeped into her throat. For a moment, it felt like grief. But it wasn’t grief. It was awe.

She searched her mind for the object of awe and found it: the power of time. So simple. Everyone says that and no one believes it but here she was, living proof. Healed, and having forgotten, until now, to even probe her wounds.

*

The boyfriend had woken her one morning with the idea to stay the night in an abandoned hunting cabin he'd heard of, a little ways up the mountain. Rainey had agreed. It was late November, and there was snow on the ground. They had packed cheese and crackers, oranges, wine, and whiskey. It snowed again while they were hiking. The boyfriend worked up a sweat and took his shirt off. His chest turned red and splotchy, an ugly contrast to the glittering sheets of snow and ice coating everything else around them. Inside, the cabin was the same temperature as outside. They collected twigs from the woods, and Rainey's hand froze to the point where she couldn't move her fingers for a few minutes. Back inside, after the sun went down, they couldn't light a fire in the woodstove. They shivered and paced, searching until they found a yellowed notebook in the crevice of a filthy broken couch. They crumpled up its pages one by one as fire starters. Each page burned in a brief, merciful flare, warming their cheeks for several unbelievably joyous seconds at a time before dying, invariably failing to pass the fire to any of the damp wood they had dragged inside. The boyfriend yelled "Fuck" several times, and Rainey felt embarrassed for, or of, him. When the notebook paper ran out, Rainey took her sketchpad from her backpack and they burned its blue-inked pages one by one. They discussed hiking back down in the dark and driving to a motel, though it was already midnight and they didn't know where the nearest motel would be. They were

squeamish about the idea of going back outside. Eventually they wiggled into the same sleeping bag, so tight they couldn't zip it all the way. They piled the other sleeping bag and both of their coats on top, then read aloud to each other from a copy of *Crime and Punishment* they'd also found in the couch cushions, amusing each other by reading in pompous British accents. Rainey laughed so hard her stomach hurt. Somehow they managed to have sex inside the sleeping bag, and it was cramped but liberating because it made them warm and no longer afraid. They fell asleep, woke when the sun rose, and hurried off the mountain with unabashed relief, never to speak of that adventure again.

Much earlier, they had been walking in the woods behind the boyfriend's childhood house. Rainey was wearing the boyfriend's old high school sweatshirt, its insides soft and worn down to little nubs of fabric that tickled her stomach. They had stretched out on their backs, crushing pine needles on top of a mossy hill inside the woods. The late afternoon sunlight flashed through black branches. Their view of the river was blocked, but they could hear the sounds of a regatta taking place on the water. The tinny echo of an announcer's voice. Scattered, canned shouts and cheers. Rainey pictured the long, skinny boats, their gliding force. She felt an affinity for the bravely gliding boats, even though she herself was firmly landlocked, at the moment. She could feel the mass of the earth where it pressed into her, the damp seeping through the fabric and chilling her skin. She turned her head, her right cheek pressed into the cold, mulchy ground. She studied the boyfriend's thick dark eyebrows, his wet and marbled eyes, his tongue and crooked teeth as he parted his lips to smile.

They had kissed for a long, long time. She remembered thinking, how long can this last? She remembered thinking, even if it didn't last, it was more than she had ever hoped or expected to feel in her lifetime. So lucky. So special. So safe.

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For Rainey's last above-ground trip, she requested a secluded, gray strip on the coast of Oregon, a place she had never been. The boyfriend had shown her pictures of this place, the site of many a family camping trip when he was little. All day, Rainey alternated between walking on the beach, sitting, and lying down on the warm rocks and narrow spits of sand. She petted strangers' dogs, drew pictures in the earth, erased them. Near the end of the day she settled on a boulder in the shallows to wait for dusk, when Themis would come to collect her.

She watched two tan adults wearing brightly colored vests and leggings packing up the remains of a picnic. Here was a chance—the thought intruded—to change her mind, to escape, if she wanted to. They would help her, if she asked. But why was she thinking about help? She didn't need help.

In her life before, she had needed help. She had experienced such upheavals. Joy, lust, fear, panic, shame. She no longer felt such lows and highs. Now, she thought of her “self” as a constant drumming of raindrops on sand, each moment of her consciousness easily soaking away into the next moment.

That was worth everything.

The last rays of light were concentrated, almost painful on her salt-bleached, sundried skin. The generation after hers would not know how it felt to be turned golden by the evening light reflecting back on them from the water. But they would

have other things. Other freedoms. Freedom from the threat of apocalypse. Freedom from the dismal persistence of humanity's destructive presence on Earth. Freedom from the kind of soul-sapping questions that privileged people could not stop asking: *Yes I'm happy, but am I as happy as I could be?* They would have fewer options, to be sure. Which meant fewer opportunities to make mistakes. Fewer quandaries. Fewer fears. And where was the problem in that? Rainey asked, and heard no answer. In place of natural light, they would know the purest form of dark, and there was beauty in that, too. Yes, maybe, that was one way to frame it.