

The Broken Teacup - Volume 4

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J. L. Yocum is a musician and poet living in Brooklyn. He holds a B.A. in English Composition, concentration Poetry, from the University of North Texas. His poems have appeared in *Albatross*, *The Orchards Poetry Journal*, *ionosphere* and *The Big Windows Review*. His musical endeavors span a few decades and a handful of projects, including work on the soundtrack of at least one award-winning film. He pays the rent working in a fine-art-adjacent industry and splits the bills with his wife and their indolent marmalade tabby.

The Solemnity of the Epiphany by J. L. Yocum

I'm so sorry to hear you
have wings, a half dozen, you don't look
like a seraph. I've never noticed you're full
of eyes. I am sorry to hear you

are really an empty throne, thousand-spoked
wheels under your soles,
forty teeth in your mouth and too-long arms.
You're so bright!

This must be hard, your feathers
unfolding, the razors of halogen, the blades
of sirens. Your wedding ring! How
brave for you to be

here. Who told you you're a dragon?
I study serpents, you're nothing
like a dragon. Sorry you hover
when you walk, lotus blossoms

spring underfoot, you are doomed
to free the innumerable beings.
Too many! You must wish for a normal
number of limbs.

I will love you the same. Will you
get better? Are you sure your doctor
is right?

Variations on a Theme by Lewis Carroll by J. L. Yocum

Why is a grappling hook like a toothbrush?

Why is a chrysanthemum like a hand

grenade? Why is my beating heart

like the surprise in your voice? Why

is a terracotta soldier like the cat on my lap?

Why is a falling knife like the sound of breaking

glass? Why is a stab of lightning

like a peal of glad laughter that splinters

into gnarled fingers clawing against the black

thick curtain of night?

the sun poem by Anonymous

my sunshine is just like all of yours,
it shines from miles away, but it keeps me warm.
but i love my sunshine differently than you do yours.

you take the sun for granted—you take the warmth and the light and that is enough for you,
and i suppose i cannot blame you. your sun does not smile the way that mine does, and as much
as you may love the sun, yours will never love you back.

my sunshine loves me back, and that draws me in—
i am building a staircase, i am laying brick and stone through the sky and i am breathing in
space, i am learning to be the first boy in the stars in a t-shirt and jeans—
the first boy to lie across the surface of the sun as if the fire was a cornfield.

you have your man in the moon, i will be the boy with the sun.

on my way to the sun, i will collect all the meteors in my pockets—i will pull with me the
nebulae, the lights and the dust drifting through the universe. i will bring the expanses of the
galaxy to the sun to make amends,

because the sun has been waiting for me.
my sunshine is a person i would burn for, i dream i'd never wake from, a riddle to solve and a
story to write and a hearth to return home to.
my sunshine is worth the perils of trekking my way to them because they have taken the time to
learn me,
and they're not tired of me yet. i do not hear the clock ticking with them.

i think you might grow weary of the repetition, and that's because you don't understand.
if you had the sun
if the sun loved you back—
you would want the world to know it was yours, too.

and you would want to remember,
as i want to remember,
as i remind myself—
i have the sun. it is okay to be delirious with joy.

Chloe Yue Zhou, is a poet and translator currently living in Shanghai. She is a member of the Zhuang ethnic group, a minority in southern China. Influenced by Zhuang culture, Chinese traditional and Western poets, her poetic contents and style are diverse and cross-cultural. Her work has appeared in *Tin Can Poetry*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *the Henniker Review*, and is forthcoming in *Moonstone Press* and *One Art*, among others. She can be found on Xiaohongshu (小红书) with @ChloeYueZhou.

If by Chloe Yue Zhou

love is too heavy, and
friendship too distant.
then let's have a little
chat, let's talk about our
recent life, the kitten
I rescued from
highway, a good book
you just read, loss of
your loved one, and
funny things that happened
to me, you would hold me
in your arms, leave a gentle
kiss on my forehead, and feel
breeze lingering against our skin, watch
diamonds glint above waves, sunset
turns colors among our
hair, like this moment is as
every other moment, like
nothing is important, and
everything matters.

Fritz Eifrig has been writing poems for a little more than forty years. His work has appeared in *The Loch Raven Review*, *After Hours*, *Last Leaves Magazine*, and *Ibbetson Street*. He lives, works, and gardens in Chicago, Illinois.

Parting by Fritz Eifrig

in the dying light

a rock a bone

split shivered

a cleft

in the heart

a rock a bone

rent riven

a fissure

scratched deep

into

days nights

wake call

a tear

a rock a bone

asunder apart

opening onto

a chasm

in the earth

Jeffrey Zable is a teacher, accomplished conga drummer/percussionist who plays for dance classes and rumbas around the San Francisco Bay Area, and a writer of poetry, flash-fiction, and non-fiction. He's published five chapbooks and his writing has appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and anthologies, more recently in *Uppagus*, *The Paradox*, *Cacti Fur*, *Witcraft*, *The Opiate* and many others.

THE WAKE-UP CALL by Jeffrey Zable

Watching a video on my general Facebook page
of a Komodo dragon sneaking up on an unsuspecting deer,
biting into its back, and swallowing it completely
in three tries, my first thought was, "At least the poor deer
didn't suffer very long!" And then my second thought was,
"What a brutish animal the Komodo is! I wish I could eliminate
all of them from the earth!"

But on further reflection, I realized what a ridiculous
and hypocritical idea that was, as what the Komodo does
is what a whole lot of other animals do to survive,
not to forget all the animals that are raised to be slaughtered
by humans and sold in markets throughout the world.

With that, I went to the fridge and took out two
already cooked pieces of roast beef, put them on a plate
and then into the microwave. . .

Meg Nadine Wenzel is a sophomore at Sweet Briar College in Virginia, though she grew up in the cornfields of northwestern Indiana. An English and Archaeology double-major, Meg loves to write sentimental poetry and historical short stories. Painting portraits, watching her favorite movies over and over, and collecting vintage dresses are some of her favorite things.

Fossil by Meg Nadine Wenzel

I let myself cry in front of someone
for the first time in centuries
trying to bloodlet you from my body
just to find you've fossilized in my marrow
like a petrified whale bone

swathy seafoam sparkling like seaglass
crash into my weathered skin as I count the waves
one, ten, one—
hundred
there is little left of you now

there's a lot of sunlight left in the day
you most frequent my thoughts once it dips under
that fifteen minutes of teal dark seawater-sky
ask it to gulp me down whole and spit me
into your pruned palm
I'm yours to permineralize

Joe Addison (he/they) is a writer based in York (the old one), England (the old one). He is currently doing an MA in Creative Writing at York St John University and has been published in Paw&Claw Ink's horror anthology *Consume* and the YSJ student anthology *Folklore*. Joe is queer and neurodivergent (AuDHD). His struggles and experiences with mental health, gender and sexual identity and his place in the universe fundamentally fuel his innate urge to create art and funnel it into something personal and impactful.

Am I Interesting Yet? by Joe Addison

I'm dipping tortilla chips you've never seen before
into dips you wouldn't understand.

The way I wear socks is completely unheard of.
How I smudge my lipstick on my front teeth is revolutionary;
no one has ever done it like me.

You just cannot fathom
how I drink mochas the way I do;
how I had a cat, once.

Clothing covers my body
in manners the human mind cannot comprehend.

That colour? With *that* colour?

It's okay.

You're not the only one.

When I'm chopping coriander
on a wooden board in the shape of a heart
with a brand-new £16.99 knife
from Argos,
people take notice.

Louis Faber is a poet and writer. His work has appeared in several anthologies and in *Cantos*, *Alchemy Spoon*, *New Feathers Anthology*, *Flora Fiction*, *Dreich (Scotland)*, *Prosetrics*, *Atlanta Review*, *Glimpse*, *Rattle*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Pearl*, *Midstream*, *European Judaism*, *The South Carolina Review* and *Worcester Review*, among many others, and has been twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

A PASSAGE by Louis Faber

In that once world
we were then lovers caught
in a passion of a moment
forgotten in the flow
of life, progression
on a road nowhere
unmarked, on the map
of my fading memory.
Now I am this side
of the razor's slice
a world cast off
the flash of your hand
your face familiar
evoking the void
for in my this world
here world
my mourning period
has ended, it is
a new face I dream, new lips
that dance across my soul.

Amelia Napiorkowski lives outside of Washington, DC on the Chesapeake Bay with her husband, son, and step-daughters. In 2025, she quit her government job in intelligence to stay at home with her baby and pursue her passion for creative writing. Her work appears in *wildscape literary journal*.

Our Little Baltic Paradise by Amelia Napiorkowski

Do not think your tenderness goes unfelt,
tolerance of my tears, gentle kisses
your eyes betray the bay, sea glass like they could crack-
my words will always fall short of what I want to say...
That you are a spool of thread I want to unravel for eternity.
That I love every part, the thick-clayed dirt, deep-rooted switchgrass,
big bluestem
that spread like salted butter and gooseberry jam.
We took things quickly, like sand, stretchmarks, fine-lines,
punch-needle embroidery
strong coffee set delicately on my bedside,
while you took an axe to the springs-
That you've given me the greatest joy, made everything beautifully raw,
bagged and boxed birch trees, juniper,
lavender honey.

Sarah (Ember) Bricault is a neurobiologist, avid crafter, and poet. Her fascination with the mind and how it processes information often finds itself in her poetry, as do themes related to mental health. Sarah's work can be found in *High Shelf Press*, *The Poeming Pigeon*, and elsewhere. For more information on Sarah, check out SarahBricault.net.

snippets overheard on my mother's birthday by Sarah Bricault

the comforting thrum of conversation
dips in and out of notice, like cycling through
radio stations to find something that sings.
out of the corner of cognizance, the flicker
of a thought pops into perception, like
we went looking for decaf chai tea
sipping the soft sibilance, the ebb and flow
of the everyday, and sometimes I'm of *the*
ones who pretend to be people
pretending to fit in pretending to be
happy, but am something else entirely, and some
have a friend in the room who doesn't talk back
that's me, I am the friend, I don't always know
the right way to say, to fit, the way to reach out,
and sometimes I try, But it never, quite, sticks,
like the snow outside, it threatens a blizzard
but fizzles and though *it was completely plausible,*
it just shouldn't always work it doesn't always work, and I
think of being the snow, looking in from the
outside, tuning half an ear to the conversation, and
in every other role, she's been a weird little creep
but no one judges me for this, and that is a gift
I treasure. and this poem is, perhaps,
similar in the degree to which it exaggerates things
in that, nothing is always true, and I am not separate,
in this moment I feel both ways — alone, but not lonely,
not typecast in the evil role or relegated to
whatever her name is, but a feeling of acceptance.
family. too often people *put in limits so that you have*
to pay for it, by which I mean anything outside
the norm is judged, found wanting. my mother sleeps,
mutters on occasion, and this is a gritty universe, in media
there are different tiers of them, a scale from optimistic
to pessimistic and in this one the tumor wins,
I think he just found what worked
and kept on doing it, by which I mean growing, and
growing, and at some point fighting fades, and
they're encouraging you to take the time

and cup it like tea at just the right temperature.
after all, *the kettle you gave me has changed my life*
by which I mean family, by which I mean I want
to simmer this slowly, as if this station will always
be on, but time passes, and *you can't opt out on this one*
and soon it will be a radio of mind, a warm memory
to partake from the outside in, the way you live a
memory but aren't there, the way I write instead of
talking, the way I am part and apart, and
I think that I should just wait for the right moment
for reentry, an opening to rejoin the flow, and
my mother sleeps, and the reason makes me
want to cry, but at a certain point you have to admit,
to say: *you're in an unbelievable universe,*
as if that makes it okay, so while we can't know
the ending, we know the end, like a mystery done well,
like *I don't know you and I don't even know*
how to start knowing you but I know you more
than anyone, does anyone know anyone, my mother
wakes and it is time to sit and be and drink deeply
of this moment of tea and home and if I ask myself
whatcha looking for?—this, and nothing more

Ally Okun is a writer of nonfiction and fiction, and a recent graduate from the University of Washington with a Master's in Library Science. Her work is forthcoming in *TrashLight Press*. When not writing or reading, she enjoys crocheting and taking long walks. She lives in Portland, Oregon with her partner and their cat.

Venus in the Ninth House by Ally Okun

A few days after I wrapped up the final exams for my second year of college, I found myself sitting in a dim basement bar thousands of miles from home. I sipped the cheapest lager from a dark brown bottle and listened to the soldier sitting across from me describe the drawings of serial killers he had in his room back home. This was the height of my true crime obsession, when I listened to *My Favorite Murder* and *Last Podcast on the Left* as I walked to and from class. Naturally, I was charmed by our macabre conversation.

The soldier was tall with deep brown eyes. Still jet lagged, I let him walk me back to my hostel, bid me goodnight with a kiss on the cheek, and nothing more. The following night was Friday, and the bar was livelier. I met the soldier again and we danced. Before long, sweat was trickling down my back, so we slipped outside for some air. A man leaned against the brick wall of the bar smoking a cigarette. We exchanged polite hellos.

"It's so hot here," I said, fanning myself with my hand. "I'm not used to it."

"You know, it's funny," the man said. "In warm places like this, everyone is always in each other's personal space. But in cold places like Russia they take personal space very seriously."

"That is funny," I replied. "You'd think it would be the other way around."

"No, we don't really care about personal space here," said the soldier, slipping his arm around my shoulder.

"Yeah, we don't care about personal space," I echoed, even though I had no claim to the 'here' he spoke of unless maybe here was next to him.

"Yes, I can see that," the man said. He stamped out his cigarette butt on the ground and wandered into the bar. The soldier and I meandered away in the direction of my hostel, beer bottles still in hand. He drained his and turned to me, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"Sometimes when I'm drunk, I like to cause a little chaos," he said, and smashed his bottle on the ground. Tiny brown shards of glass glittered under the streetlights like the sun reflecting off the ocean. A laugh was startled out of me.

"Try it, it's fun!" he urged. Willful destruction of any kind felt foreign to me, but then again, I was in a foreign land. And I was drunk too. So I lifted my bottle above my head and threw it down onto the street, where it exploded on the asphalt. Giggling, we ran off down the street, coming across a small fenced-in playground next to a squat building. Through the windows I could make out low tables and tiny chairs inside - furniture for children. This must have been a preschool, but I sensed it was abandoned. The playground was derelict, the chains on the swingset rusty.

We hopped over the fence and sat down on a little round structure, the kind you can spin by turning the metal wheel in the middle. It reminded me of those tea cup rides at carnivals. A couple guys I was sure we'd seen at the bar walked by on the sidewalk.

"Get it!" one of them yelled at us. I ignored them, turning the metal wheel as fast as I could so we spun around and around, laughing and feeling like a child.

“Stop spinning this thing, I’m going to puke on you,” the soldier said. For a moment I considered continuing to spin it just to mess with him, but I wanted to kiss him and felt that him vomiting on me might get in the way of that. As we slowed to a stop, the conversation turned to sexuality.

“Have you ever been with a girl?” he asked me.

“Yep.”

“Have you ever been with a guy?” he asked.

“Yep.”

With that subtle permission, he kissed me.

We wandered back to my hostel, but first I peed next to a tree on the playground and he knocked over a huge vase full of dirt, shattering it (accidentally, unlike the beer bottle). My dorm room at the hostel provided little privacy, so we returned to the playground. There was a dingy old mattress on the ground, and we lay on it cuddling and looking up at the stars. His limbs were lanky, but his body was big enough to enclose mine.

A young man appeared, looming over the mattress. He and my new lover conversed in a foreign language for a minute before finally the intruder left us alone.

“What did you say?” I asked my lover.

“He said it looked like we were having a nice time and he was wondering if we wanted to have a threesome with him,” he said. “So I told him politely to go the fuck away.”

The next morning as I walked down the street in search of breakfast I noticed a group of tiny children playing on the playground. So it wasn’t abandoned after all. There was the broken vase, with its dirt spilling out, and there was the filthy mattress where only hours before a stranger had propositioned a threesome. And there were the children playing on the spot where I had peed. I smiled to myself with the secret knowledge of what had occurred there last night, a secret that the soldier and I shared.

After we met it was clear that there was nothing casual about our relationship. He told me I changed his whole life, and I wanted to let him change mine. Why should the fact that we lived on opposite sides of the world keep us apart? I was twenty years old and certain that love was enough.

Before I flew back home to Portland we were already discussing seeing each other in Greece, where I would be spending the fall semester. The words *boyfriend* and *girlfriend* weren’t spoken until later. We agreed that it didn’t really make sense for us to be monogamous when we lived in different countries. So we called what we had an open relationship, with little discussion of what that actually entailed. Thus began the long, hot summer between our first meeting and our reunion in Greece. We messaged each other nearly every single day. We talked on the phone for hours at a time, his thick accent charming me. The distance didn’t feel so difficult because we knew when we would see each other again. And I was just happy to be part of something with someone else. Everyone I met at school seemed only to want something casual; I was all or nothing, and *casual* wasn’t part of my vocabulary.

One night, at home in Portland, a friend and I used fake IDs to get into a club. Out on the dance floor a man approached me and we danced together for a few songs. When he went in to kiss me my thoughts were something along the line of, *Sure, why not?* His breath was minty so I continued kissing him. It was far from the worst kiss of my life, but it was nothing earth shattering either. The next day, however, my stomach tensed up at the thought of what had

happened. Making out with a random guy on the dance floor of a club didn't mean anything. And my lover and I had decided to be in an open relationship precisely because things like this happened sometimes. But I really only cared about my far-off love and even just kissing someone else didn't feel right.

I decided to send him a message about what had happened, to get it off my chest and to discuss my feelings about it with him. We could never really decide if informing each other of our dalliances should be a rule of the open relationship, but I felt like getting things out in the open would be better than letting unspoken words simmer beneath the surface. When I told him, it turned out he had his own little secret to divulge. He had also made out with someone else, except it wasn't just some random person. It was his friend he had told me about shortly after we met, and who he happened to have had sex with multiple times before we got together. That stung a little bit. A chance encounter with some random person who I would never see again was one thing, but hooking up with a former fling felt unfair, somehow.

I tried to play it off like I wasn't jealous, but I admitted that I didn't like being in an open relationship. I only wanted to be with my love and I didn't like the idea of him being with someone else. Plus, at this point it was only about a month out until Greece. We agreed to close things up between us, be exclusive. I felt pleased with the decision at the time, but it would not be the last time we changed the status of our relationship like that. In the months to come we'd flip back and forth, switching up the rules until the waters were almost too murky to swim through.

During my semester abroad in Greece, my class traveled far and wide across the country - north to the mountains, west to the Peloponnese, east to the island of Lesbos - but the night I felt most Greek was with my lover, on our little weekend getaway. He came to visit me in Athens for a couple weeks, with his stint in the army over and his thick brown hair starting to grow back in. We decided to go camping on the beach. We chose the island of Evia because we could take a bus directly there from Athens. We packed up everything we needed for an overnight, including the tent he stole from a music festival in Germany and the sleeping bags he borrowed from his brothers, and set off on a sunny Saturday morning. The bus took us through Athens with its sun bleached buildings and graffitied walls, out into the country with its clusters of cypress trees, and across the bridge connecting the mainland to Evia.

Once on the island, the bus drove parallel to the diamondlike waters of the Aegean Sea for a while before stopping in Chalcis. Despite this city being the island's capital, it felt like a tiny town. Once off the bus we had to walk a ways down the road to reach our campsite, carrying what now felt like far too much stuff for only one night - backpacks with clothes and bathing suits, shopping bags full of food and wine, the tent, sleeping bags. We headed back in the same direction that the bus had come from, exiting the center of the town and walking along the sandy beach next to the road. Eventually we made it to the campground and pitched the tent. There were a couple rows of campervans and tents separating us from the beach, but all we had to do was walk a few yards down, passing by palm trees along the way, before finding ourselves on a stretch of sand across the water from the mountainous mainland. Suddenly the long bus ride and walk in the sun carrying too much shit felt worth it.

As darkness fell we walked back toward the center of town in search of a place for dinner. There was a beachfront restaurant down the road from the campsite that looked promising, but it turned out they were closed for a wedding reception. We forged onward. I was captivated by how this little town felt familiar, like any of the New England beach towns I grew

up visiting, yet foreign at the same time, with its white buildings and stray cats and Greek lettering on shop windows.

The next restaurant we came across served meat almost exclusively. No good for us vegetarians. A little further down the street we found a typical Greek taverna. We sat at a little table on the sidewalk with a red and white checkered tablecloth. We drank pints of beer and ate Greek salad, feta, bread, olives, and slabs of mouth watering fried cheese called saganaki. Eating a long, drawn-out dinner on a sidewalk with your lover was, I was sure, the whole point of being in Greece. Even better that we would be sleeping a few feet from the sea. I wasn't sure how any other experience here could top this one.

We walked back to the campsite stuffed full of vegetables and carbs and cheese and feeling very happy for it. The wedding reception was in full swing at the beachfront restaurant as we passed by again, and "Can't Take My Eyes Off of You" was playing. The perfect romantic touch to our evening. I sang along as we walked by. *I love you baby, and if it's quite alright I need you baby...*

That weekend, we rode the crest of a wave together. I was certain that swimming in saltwater with my love before lying out to dry under the sun was all I needed to be happy in this life.

Back in Athens, we started to argue. Never about anything consequential, just little things, like me getting upset because we followed the wrong directions and now the ancient ruins we were trying to visit were closing for the night and the whole evening was a waste. And him losing patience with me for getting upset, which only made me more upset. I knew I cried too easily, was quick to freak out about things I should've just been able to let go, and I didn't want anyone else to know that about me. I began to wonder if I could handle exposing these parts of myself to someone else. And after he went home we returned to the question of whether we should really be monogamous or not.

In December, my semester in Greece ended, and I headed to Prague - alone. The man I loved had the same reaction as my mother to this plan: concern and worry. I expected it from my mom, but I was annoyed when it also came from him. He was supposed to be my partner, not my parent, and we were supposed to be equal. Didn't he trust me to take care of myself? I went to Prague alone anyway, and explored the cobblestone streets at my own pace, and the freedom of being alone was unexpectedly joyous. When I checked into my hostel I met a man with a blue mohawk and an accent I couldn't quite place. It was one in the afternoon and he wandered into the lobby with sleep still in his eyes. I wasn't sure what to make of him. But later that night at the hostel bar I learned that he was from the same country as my lover, and we bonded over that. His parents were American and that was why his accent wasn't as strong as that of my love.

I stayed at that hostel for five days, making conversation with strangers passing through and enjoying the nightlife. Inevitably, when the fact of my being in a relationship arose in conversation, people would ask some variation of, "Where is he?" or "You're here without him?" Always the tone of surprise. I grew frustrated. I was still my own person! I could still move through the world independently! A relationship was the thing I had always yearned for most, but now that I had one, I hated the idea of my identity being wrapped up with another person's. *This is why I'll never get married*, I thought. *I won't be a packaged deal with anyone.*

It was the off season, and the hostel was quiet. I was the only solo woman staying there. There were many men, though, and I couldn't deny to myself how much I enjoyed the attention. Someone who worked at the hostel told me where you could buy weed just across the street, but

I ended up never having to buy my own because there was always conveniently a guy around holding out a joint to me. And the man with the blue mohawk and I were growing closer. He became my favorite person to hang out with at the hostel. He kept dropping hints that he was interested in me, even though he knew I wasn't single. One day we went to a pizza place for lunch together. Another day he took my picture at the John Lennon Wall and then paid for our taxi back to the hostel. He told me that with my pink hair and tattoos I was exactly his type, and said things like, "If only you didn't have a boyfriend..."

On my last night in Prague, I was considering going out even though I had to wake up early the next morning. I had a bus to catch, to meet with my lover in Berlin to begin traveling through Europe together. I decided to stay in when I realized the man with the blue mohawk was also staying in, though if anyone asked, it was because of my early start the next morning. I wanted to spend a little more time with the mohawk man before I left. We hung out in the hostel common room with a couple other people for a while. Eventually they left and it was just me and him. I had had a few beers at the hostel bar and was feeling sleepy, so we stretched out on the couch and cuddled. I lay with my head on his chest. I could have fallen asleep, but instead he turned his head and kissed me on the lips. I didn't react at first, but my stomach burned with the feeling of doing something wrong and enjoying it a little bit. After a moment I kissed him back. It was unlike any other kiss I had had in my life. The excitement of illicit behavior coursed through my veins like a drug.

We kissed for another minute before I pulled away. "I can't do this," I whispered into his shoulder.

"I won't kiss you again," he said. "But feel free to kiss me if you want."

We continued cuddling for a little longer. I lay my head back on his chest. But then I kissed him again. I wanted another taste of that feeling. I stopped once more when it became apparent that if it continued it would escalate into far more than a kiss, and I would regret it. I briefly wondered if I was a bad person. I was less than twenty-four hours away from seeing my love again, after all. But I was also annoyed that I had to feel guilty for kissing someone else, because of how often the two of us had gone back and forth about whether we should be in an open relationship, whether that would make the distance easier. We had only just recently decided, once again, to be strictly monogamous, but if this kiss had occurred a couple of weeks ago it would have theoretically been just fine.

After I stopped kissing the man with the blue mohawk for the second time, a shit faced girl wandered into the common room, sobbing. We were lucky that no one had walked in during our indiscretion, because most of the people at the hostel knew that I was in a relationship. I said goodnight to the man with the blue mohawk and as soon as I got onto the elevator up to my room I sent my lover a message to tell him what happened. Just like with that guy at the club, I felt like that would be better than keeping it from him. But I still couldn't bring myself to be completely honest. I made it sound as though the kiss was unreciprocated, like the man with the blue mohawk just planted one on me and I was shocked by it and that was that. My lover wasn't angry at me, just upset with the man with the blue mohawk, and that made me feel guiltier. I sort of wanted him to get mad at me because I sort of felt I deserved it.

The next morning when I checked out of the hostel, the employee working at the front desk told me that the man with the blue mohawk requested I say goodbye to him before I leave. I slipped into his room and woke him up. We hugged and he kissed me on the cheek and said, "I hope we meet again."

"Me too," I whispered.

On the bus ride to Berlin, I stared out the window at the passing countryside and relived the kiss over and over again in my head. I couldn't get the electric feeling of it off my mind. I also continued to wonder if I was now officially a Bad Person. Was I a cheater now? Was it that black and white, with a clear before and after? And what about our flip flopping on the subject of monogamy? He was the one who kept pushing for an open relationship, after all. He was the one who felt like going a few months at a time without sex would be too difficult. I was the one opposed to the idea. Or, I had been.

The day my lover and I broke up was my friend's twenty-first birthday, a few months after I returned to Portland from Europe. The breakup came as no surprise; it had become apparent that we were heading in that direction. He applied for a visa to come spend the summer with me, and in my naivety I assumed he would get it without a problem. But he didn't get it. He was denied because he lacked compelling evidence that he had any reason to return home. The bureaucrats thought he would try to stay here in the U.S., since he apparently had nothing to return to at home. And that was part of the problem, too. He didn't have much going on in his life ever since he got out of the army. Still living with his parents with no foreseeable plans to move out. No job. No direction. He seemed ambitious when I met him, confident in his goal to go to film school and make weird, dark movies. But that dream seemed to be fizzling out with each passing day, and the motivation to live on his own or get an education or even just hold down a job appeared to be slowly leaking out of him.

Not only that, but after my European jaunt ended and I returned to the States, we decided to open our relationship once more. This time, though, it was my idea. In what I told myself was a strange coincidence, the man with the blue mohawk who I met in Prague got a job in Portland and we were now sleeping together regularly. The thought of losing my lover wasn't as scary anymore. I didn't love the man with the blue mohawk, not even a little bit, and I didn't dream about a future with him the way I did with my love. But at least I had someone to hold me at night while the one I loved was thousands of miles away. I felt guilty about sleeping with the same person who had tried to steal me away from him, but not guilty enough to stop.

When he told me that his visa application was rejected I felt almost no emotion. Usually, I was consumed by emotions. For most of my life I had felt controlled by them. I cried and threw breakable things at the wall and stayed in bed for days, wallowing. But when he told me that he wouldn't be coming to spend the summer with me after all, I reacted logically instead. Well, we would just have to break up, wouldn't we? It made sense. There's only so long a relationship can last without seeing one another. It sucked, and it wasn't how we planned it, but so be it. I had been destroyed by heartbreak more than once before and I just didn't have the energy to go through it again. All-encompassing heartbreak is exhausting. So even though I loved him more than anyone who came before, I closed my heart off to him as a cruel method of self-preservation.

After the news about his failed visa we agreed to give it a few days and then talk. Figure out what to do next. I spent those days mentally preparing myself to break up. Friday morning rolled around, my friend's twenty-first birthday, and I sat at the kitchen table, alone, and called my lover.

"I guess we should break up," he said, his accent that was once foreign now familiar to me. "Since we don't know when we'll be able to see each other again."

"Yeah," I said. "I guess we should break up."

The phone call lasted under five minutes. It was a cold exchange, when our relationship had burned hot for nearly a year. When we hung up I didn't cry. I didn't feel anything at all. I stood up from the kitchen, went into my bedroom, and applied thick black eyeliner. Now I had more motivation not to cry. I put on a long red dress with white polka dots and went to class. I saw a couple friends, including the birthday girl, and didn't tell them about the breakup. It was easier to say nothing.

That night my friends and I went out to dinner for the birthday girl. She picked a restaurant based more on the cocktail menu than the food and I was grumpy because there was nothing vegetarian for me to eat. I barely spoke a word at that dinner. We returned home to drink sangria she had made. The fruit sweetened it so much that it tasted like juice, not wine. I kept ladling more into my glass. My mood improved throughout the night.

Later the man with the blue mohawk came over. What a messy situation I found myself in now, although of course it was of my own doing. He knew I was in an open, long-distance relationship with someone else. I knew that he had feelings for me, feelings I did not reciprocate, and I invited him over anyway. Deep down I knew that my actions were morally objectionable and it was getting harder to avoid them, to lie to myself. Using him for sex didn't feel so wrong because at least he was getting something that he wanted, too, and I had made it explicit that our relationship was not romantic. But now I was using him for emotional comfort, too.

Lying in bed with him, I burst into tears. The cold, heartless facade I had kept up all day crumbled. I curled up underneath the covers and cried for a long, long time with the arms of a man who I did not love around me. I was still wearing the red dress with white polka dots. Eyeliner pooled under my eyes.

Two days later, I went to Canada on vacation. I went alone, the way I had learned to love to travel in Prague. When I told my lover about this forthcoming trip, before we broke up, he once again expressed concern about my safety. It once again annoyed me, made me feel like a child whose parent was checking in. But it didn't matter now. I was a free agent, so no one I met at the hostel bar would ask where my boyfriend was. The man with the blue mohawk drove me to the bus station at six in the morning, before the sun rose.

I was too tired to feel heartbroken. I had come to accept the breakup before it even happened. Instead of allowing myself to feel the loss of my relationship, I spent that week in Canada envisioning romantic feelings for the man with the blue mohawk, wondering if I could will those feelings into existence. He was here, after all, while my ex was far away. He was available to drive me to the bus station and wipe my eyeliner tears. I had no love for him and never would but somehow managed to stretch our affair out for the better part of eight or nine months after I returned from Canada. Almost as long as I was together with my ex, but not quite.

I stayed with the man with the blue mohawk even though we had little to talk about. I searched for qualities in him that my ex lacked. I thought that because he was older and had lived on his own for years that he must be more mature than my old love. I overlooked the fact that ninety-five percent of his diet consisted of pizza, and the dates he took me on to Hooters. Through this relationship I learned that the better the sex is, the more incompatibilities you can willingly ignore. But another reason I stayed with him, I'm sure, is that the longer I could play at a pretend love with someone else, the longer I could avoid thinking about, processing, reflecting on my relationship with the man I loved.

For months after I last spoke to the soldier who had become my lover, I'd grow wistful from time to time and wonder if I'd ever see him again, while being grateful for the oceans and lands that separated us. I'd yearned for a relationship for so long, convinced it would resolve that feeling inside me of not being enough, but once I had one, I felt stifled. After the man with the blue mohawk left, I'd get into bed at night and breathe a sigh of relief that the space was mine and mine alone to take up, while wishing I had someone to share it with. When I walked the streets of a foreign city alone, I felt powerful, in control of my life. When I traveled with my ex, I wanted him to yield to me and grew frustrated when the inevitable need for compromise arose. I'd need to learn to find balance before I could find whatever it was I looked for in my ex. Until then, I would keep traveling.

Joanna Theiss (she/her) is a former lawyer living in Washington, DC. Her fiction and poetry have appeared in *The Penn Review*, *Chautauqua*, *Peatsmoke Journal*, *Milk Candy Review*, and *Best Microfiction*, among others. You can find links to her published works and her mosaic collages at www.joannatheiss.com. Bluesky: [@joannatheiss.com](https://bsky.app/profile/@joannatheiss.com)

Cool AF by Joanna Theiss

2006

I lean against the hospital room wall and try not to look directly into my sister's vagina. I am too cool for hospitals. I am the kind of chick who steals a teddy bear embroidered with the message *SORRY FOR YOUR LOSS* and gives it to her post-natal sister. I don't like babies but I steal a sniff of this one. She smells like paper.

2008

My sister finally trusts me to babysit, but the bulky car seat won't fit in my two-door. I push Sophie in her stroller along US-41 like the broke bitch my high school English teacher predicted I'd become. I am still cool, despite the sun melting my foundation and the hangover rattling behind my eyes. In a strip mall, I steal a pair of teeny Air Jordans. Black and red, the soles are the size of my palms.

2013

She says *stage two*. She says *mastectomy*. I am cool enough not to cry. I go with her to pick up Sophie from school because my sister looks how hospitals smell, like she shouldn't be alone. We are all locked too tightly inside ourselves. Only a crappy mall jewelry store can unlock us. At Claire's, I filch a ring for Sophie and two necklaces with dangling, broken-heart pendants. I give my sister the one that says *FRIENDS* and keep *BEST* for myself.

2014

I'm fired from the deli for using the phone to inform my piece-of-shit brother-in-law that if I ever see him again, I will slice him like a ham. My sister says *not cool*, but from her smirk, I know it is. I take Sophie back to the mall. In the food court, she dips her French fries in mayonnaise. This is disgusting, but I don't say anything. I hand Sophie the bathing suit she liked, because little things are easiest to steal.

2016

I finish my degree. I move out of state. I quit smoking, quit drinking, take out the ring in my nose and the bar in my tongue.

2019

I get a job that includes an office with a door I can close. I teach myself to be different. I bake sourdough bread and order organic produce and file my taxes. When people ask where I'm from, I don't say Florida. I say *here and there*.

2022

I don't visit my sister in hospice. I don't listen to my voicemails. I send her a check for five hundred dollars, which she doesn't cash.

2023

Sophie wears a crop top to the funeral, a punk-rock move that the old me admires. In response to my question, Sophie tells me that the mall is dead. Dillard's is gone. JCPenney has turned into an animal shelter. Claire's looks like someone bombed it. The look she gives me says this is dead, too, this aunt-niece thing, and that I have killed it.

2024

I buy a condo in a ski town. I have not been inside a mall in ten years. I call Sophie and listen to it ring.

2025

Sophie has a new scar on her chin and black around her eyes. She bites the end of her acrylic nail and asks how I found her, as if she doesn't film herself from this Sephora almost every day. This isn't a mall. It's a village of merchandise with matching roofs and miniature palm trees. As we swerve around families of tourists, I tell Sophie that I suck. I suck, but I am going to be better because my sister is dead, and I don't think we are dead, not all the way. I tell her I can be the one who shows up, who does the thing, who can do the thing even from far away, even if the thing looks different now, less anarchy and more dry-clean-only, fewer threatening phone calls and more carefully worded letters, and no petty theft.

Well, less petty theft. Because the cool part about being so uncool is that no one suspects me of anything anymore. While the cashier is scrolling on her phone, I swipe stickers, plastic necklaces, and a pack of sterling silver hoop earrings. I show Sophie the loot and she says, *aren't you a lawyer?* and I say, *not on the weekends*. When she smirks at me just like my sister used to, I hand her the sticker that says *COOL AF*. She hands it right back. She is way too cool for that.

Huina Zheng holds an M.A. with Distinction in English Studies and works as a college essay coach. Her stories have been published in *Baltimore Review*, *Variant Literature*, *Midway Journal*, and other reputed publications. Her work has been nominated thrice for both the Pushcart Prize and the Best of the Net. She resides in Guangzhou, China with her family.

Sand in My Shoes by Huina Zheng

I put on my new running shoes. The soft insoles cushioned my feet, yet I could still feel a stubborn grain of sand pressing against the sole. I turned the shoes over and patted them—nothing fell out. I reached inside, found nothing. But the moment I wore them, that faint sting followed me everywhere.

“These need to be returned,” I told my husband. It was already the twentieth pair this month.

He sighed. “You might as well go barefoot.”

Before I turned ten, I almost always did.

My earliest memory is from when I was four. My mother, heavily pregnant, was dragging me down a weed-choked path. What were we running from? I didn’t understand. She said if we were caught, they’d take the baby—my “little brother.” Back then, families were allowed only one child in China. Gravel stabbed into my feet with every step, sharp pain flashing beneath a rising, wordless fear.

In the mountains, I kept running barefoot. My parents were busy with the garden, the trees, the chickens, pigs, cows. My feet stepped on dry manure, sank into the fresh. I never minded. That brother never came—men found us, carried my mother away. When we saw her again, her belly was flat, her eyes swollen like ripe peaches. After we moved into the mountains, it was always just the three of us. “Once we have your brother, we can go back,” she’d said.

Glass shards, thorny plants, the needle under my mother’s lamp—my feet knew them all. Dirt never washed off. Mud clung under my toenails. Over time, my soles grew thick with calluses, hard as natural boots. These feet carried me through brambles for firewood, through waist-high grass for pigweed, chasing flashes of silver in the creek.

At ten, we moved to town, and my feet began their sentence. Slippers let my toes slip out. Sandals rubbed my heels raw. Cloth shoes pinched curled toes. Later, high heels were pure punishment. Looking down at these scarred feet, I remember the dirt roads, gravel beds, mossy stones that once held me steady.

Now I walk barefoot at home, measuring this concrete-covered world with the only sense I trust: touch.

Hank Kirton lives in New England and writes weird fiction. He has worked in factories, warehouses and kitchens from Rhode Island to New Hampshire. He currently lives and writes in Massachusetts. His books include *The Membranous Lounge (Apophenia)*, *Everything Dissolves (HST)* and *Bleak Holiday (Apophenia)*.

The Car Crash They Saw by Hank Kirton

Cherry Hasbro and Yvonne Gwynne sat at the gray picnic table on the front lawn of the Black Granite Bank in Giallo, Ohio. Yvonne worked behind a tempered glass partition as a teller at the bank. Cherry was a mortgage consultant and had her own office.

They were on their lunch break and the first truly spring-like day of the year had descended upon them like warm heaven, luring them outside with mild temperatures and bright sunshine.

“Can you believe this gorgeous day?” said Cherry, unpacking her lunch from an insulated red tote bag.

“Yeah, right? Especially after that crap winter we just had,” Yvonne replied. “I hope I never have to drive through another stupid snowstorm. Like, *ever* again.” She opened her lunch box—a retro-style tin box with the cast of The Golden Girls painted on the front.

“You moving to Florida?”

Yvonne laughed. “No, I guess I’m stuck here for now. In this arctic waste.” She unwrapped a tuna sandwich and crumpled the wax paper into a tight ball. She dropped it back in the lunch box.

The lawn they were on was brown and spongy from the recent snowmelt. Trace evidence of winter. There were still small pockets of dirty snow in areas protected by perpetual shade.

“Ohio is hardly arctic,” Cherry said.

Cherry Hasbro had moved to Ohio from Winnipeg, in Manitoba, Canada. Winter temperatures were dangerously severe there. Winter could kill. People suffered frostbite just walking to their mailbox without gloves. Stupid people.

Ohio winters simply didn’t compare.

She said none of this to her coworker. She avoided potential disagreements unless they were work-related. Cherry already felt awkward about her budding friendship with Yvonne since technically Cherry was Yvonne’s superior. She had managerial status. She made more money. If they had a personal falling-out, it would make working together extremely uncomfortable. But maybe that was just the Canadian in her talking.

Besides, they’d already crossed the line from colleague to confidante.

“I hear Bob took a leave of absence,” said Yvonne. “That gives us a break too. From *him* anyway.”

Bob was Bob Walsh, their boss at the bank. He was a fastidious, officious pain in the neck. He ran the bank like his own personal fiefdom. Cherry would not be shocked to learn Bob embezzled from the bank.

The northern edge of the lawn ended at a sidewalk and beyond that ran the wide boulevard of Spinney Street (also known as West Central Highway 41) split by two solid yellow lines dividing the highway and demarcating the opposing flows of traffic (East and West) and four broken white lines indicating that passing was permitted. The speed limit was a generous (some would say reckless) 45 mph. It was a busy street.

The sounds of rapid traffic made conversation difficult—words muted by the roaring passage of a semi trailer-truck or obnoxious motorcycle engine.

“Do you know why Bob’s taking a hiatus?” Cherry asked.

“No, why? Do you?” Yvonne decapitated a bottle of Orange Crush and took a gentle sip.

“Yeah, his kid’s real sick.”

“Oh. I didn’t even know he had a kid.”

“Yeah. I mean, he’s not a *kid* kid. He’s a grown adult. In his thirties, I think. Lives out in Seattle.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“He has AIDS. I guess he took a turn for the worse last year. Bob was estranged from him for years. He’s going out there now to reconcile and say goodbye.”

A truck roared past. Cherry held down her fluttering napkin so it wouldn’t escape the table. “It’s really tragic,” she said.

“What?!”

“It’s really sad!”

Yvonne nodded. “Yeah! It is!”

The noise of the truck faded away. It got quiet again.

“So anyway,” Cherry said. “That’s why he’s MIA.”

“Wow. I had no idea. He must be going through it.”

“He is.” Cherry ate a Lay’s potato chip from a single-serve bag.

Behind the bank was a shopping centre (*center* in this country, she reminded herself) with a supermarket that had a bank of vending machines out front. The employees at Black Granite frequented the convenient machines to get sodas and snacks.

That was where the potato chips came from.

“Any idea when he’s coming back?” Yvonne wondered.

A siren suddenly started wailing nearby and Cherry waited for the sound to pass. A red hatchback pulled to the curb in front of them and seconds later an ambulance raced by, its siren screaming in shrill decibels. Yvonne covered her ears and both women paused the conversation.

They would refer to the passing ambulance as “foreshadowing” when recounting their experience.

“So anyway, when’s Bob coming back?” Yvonne asked again.

Cherry shrugged her shoulders and then took a sip of her Diet Coke. “Nobody knows. It’s an open-ended leave.” She covered a burp with her hand.

“So he could come back today or in six months,” she said, with the inflection of a flat statement.

Cherry shrugged again. “Anything’s possible.”

“Great. Just what we needed. Work—with the added element of suspense.”

Another huge truck rumbled by, the diesel breeze ruffling the women’s hair. Cherry quickly smacked her hand over her napkin before it got loose.

The women waited to resume their conversation.

A line of Austrian pine shrubs protected the southern border of the yard and separated it from the shopping plaza. The shrubs were 10-feet tall and sculpted into conical shapes. Cherry gazed at the circular pockets of snow around the bases of the trees and thought wistfully of home. She missed so many people she loved. She felt expelled. Banished to a penal colony teeming with Americans.

Then the thought of Brandy still living in Winnipeg intruded and she changed the subject on herself.

As if telepathically eavesdropping on her internal monologue, Yvonne said, "So how's Brandy doing?"

Cherry began to dismember a small cluster of purple grapes with fidgety fingers. She tossed the empty pedicel of stems toward the hedge and popped a grape into her mouth.

Yvonne got the impression her friend was stalling for an answer.

"I'm sorry," Yvonne said. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"Oh no. It's okay," Cherry assured her. "Brandy's fine. I talked to her over the weekend."

Brandy was Cherry's six-year-old daughter. She still lived with her father, Guy. Guy had money. Guy had political influence. Guy was an asshole.

Guy had her child.

"That's great," Yvonne said.

"Yeah. She still likes school. She was in a play as a fairy."

"How cute!"

"Yeah." Cherry looked away, staring at the small circles of snow.

Missing the little fleeting events in her daughter's life felt as afflictive as a wound. As agonizing as a broken bone.

The sound of screeching brakes startled her and she twitched at the sound.

"Oh Jesus," she said, placing a hand over her heart.

An alabaster Coupe DeVille had halted suddenly and a red Civic Sedan behind it had stopped short to avoid rear-ending it.

"That was close," Yvonne said, laughing with relief.

And then a speeding 18-wheeler crossed over the painted lanes and smashed into the static traffic with a deafening metallic explosion that flipped the Civic onto the lawn and toward the picnic table.

Cherry and Yvonne scrambled away as the car rolled to a stop, upside down, five feet away.

The truck had then plowed into the alabaster Coupe and carried it forward, past the Black Granite Bank and there was another loud crash down the street that Cherry and Yvonne couldn't see.

All the traffic on Spinney Street halted. A few curious commuters climbed out of their cars to survey the destruction.

Cherry pushed away her shock and pulled out her phone. "I'll call," she told her coworker. She dialed 911. Several bystanders in the street were also talking into their phones.

Yvonne walked over to the red, upside-down Civic. The back end was a crumpled jumble, as if built with flimsy, colored cardboard. The rear window had shattered.

She ducked into the passenger-side window and saw the bloodied, broken body of the driver. It was a young woman. Her neck was angled back in a jarring dislocation and she'd suffered a badly fractured clavicle. She looked as if her entire skeleton had been disarticulated in the crash. Her face was masked by a sheet of blood. She did not move. She didn't appear to be breathing. Yvonne noted that she wasn't wearing a seatbelt. No airbags had deployed.

And then Yvonne heard the thin cry of a child inside.

She turned back to Cherry. "Hey! I think there's a kid trapped in the back!" she shouted.

Meanwhile, the rest of the bank staff had wandered outside to behold the commotion. Clara Guice, another teller, used the opportunity to light a cigarette.

Cherry thought, *Of all the times for Bob to be gone.*

His absence meant she was nominally in charge. She told the other employees to go back inside. She hoped they wouldn't resent her sudden assumed authority.

Then she ran to the overturned automobile.

A baby was crying behind the compressed, dented metal. The sound of the mewling cries punched Cherry smack in the heart of her heart. "Where is it?" she wanted to know, trying to locate the baby under the bent wreckage.

"I think behind the shotgun seat," Yvonne guessed.

The collision had twisted the Civic out of shape with frightening force, as if it were as malleable as aluminum foil. But now the crushed metal was rigid and unyielding again. The crumpled doors wouldn't budge. Cherry pulled and pushed at the metallic flections, trying to find a way inside. The cries of the child sounded more like terror than pain. Hopefully it had been safely strapped into a child car seat.

Hopefully.

Cherry began to climb through the missing passenger-side window.

"Hey, wait a second," Yvonne said. "What if it explodes?"

"More reason to get the baby out," Cherry told her as she slithered into the narrow tunnel of crushed steel and plastic and shattered glass.

She averted her eyes from the broken body wedged under the steering wheel.

The back seats were blocked by a wall of mangled metal. There was no way to reach the child. Cherry leaned down to peer beneath the buckled barrier.

She was relieved to see that the baby was strapped into a booster safety seat. She could see the bottoms of the child's tiny shoes. She could almost reach one of the baby's hands. It was dimpled, curled into a chubby little fist. She estimated the age of the baby to be around eight months.

What a shitty way to start a life.

Behind its cries she heard the merciful gathering of sirens.

"Okay, baby. It's gonna be alright. Help's here. We're gonna get you out of here."

Cherry crawled backwards and then hoisted herself through the window. She landed sprawling on the squishy tract of grass.

"You okay?" Yvonne asked her, helping her to her feet.

"Yeah," Cherry said, brushing mud from the front of her dress.

"Did you find the baby?"

"Yeah. I think it's okay."

"Well thank goodness for that."

Several police cars had finally arrived, along with two ambulances and a fire truck.

A Channel 7 news van had also arrived right behind the emergency services.

Cherry and Yvonne returned to the picnic table to watch the rescuers in action. Both women felt dazed and weak, as if the event had prompted psychological shock.

The emergency workers used hydraulic cutters and spreaders to extricate the victims from the wreckage. The woman was limp and when they pulled her from the car Cherry thought of a scarecrow filled with wet straw. The EMTs didn't even attempt to revive her, didn't bother to check for vital signs.

She obviously didn't have any.

When they freed the baby from the wreck, Yvonne stood up and moved closer to the scene. One of the cops ordered her back to the table.

“Cute kid,” she said to Cherry, sitting across from her again. “I think it’s a girl. Doesn’t seem to have a scratch on her. What a lucky baby.”

“I wish I could have saved her,” Cherry said. Her voice sounded far away.

“She *was* saved.”

“I know. But not by me.”

Yvonne gave her friend a puzzled look, and then turned back to the accident.

The women remained silent until they were asked to give their witness statements to a female police officer. There were no discrepancies in their accounts of the tragedy. They saw everything. Together. All their details matched.

After they dragged the twisted wreckage away, Cherry and Yvonne reentered the bank and went back to work. Cherry found it impossible to concentrate on her paperwork.

Yvonne suggested they go out for drinks after work but Cherry declined. She needed to be alone.

After the bank closed, while walking to her car, Cherry bent over and picked up a small shard of broken glass. She placed it in her purse as if she’d discovered a diamond.

Tangible proof of her distressing experience. She couldn’t wait to get home and tell Brandy all about it.

Wolfgang Wright is the author of the comic novel *Me and Gepe*. His short work has appeared in over fifty literary magazines, including *Harpur Palate*, *The Bombay Literary Review*, and *Dark Yonder*. He doesn't tolerate gluten so well, quite enjoys watching British panel shows, and devotes a little time each day to contemplating the Tao. He lives in North Dakota.

Fuk Bird by Wolfgang Wright

It had been her friend Clara's idea. She'd seen an ad online about a new senior living community in the Caribbean, and even though her son had warned her repeatedly never to click on ads, she'd clicked anyway; and once she'd worked out how to navigate Hermosa Vida's website, which included a 3D tour of the premises, she fell in love. She told Minnie about it, and though Minnie had no intention of selling her house and moving, let alone to an island she'd only just heard of, she could see how excited her friend was, and agreed to accompany her on a visit. After all, Hermosa Vida was paying for everything, and better yet, it would give her an opportunity to point out any flaws she found along the way, because the last thing Minnie wanted was to lose Clara, the only person she confided in anymore after the death of her husband and her daughter's decision to stop speaking to her.

By the end of the trip, however, it was Minnie who had fallen in love with Hermosa Vida, or HV, as the locals called it, pronouncing it in the Spanish manner, that is, "ah-chay-bay." They had gone the week after Thanksgiving, and the sudden burst of warm air that struck her cheeks when Minnie got off the plane served to remind her of just how much she disliked the frigid winters of North Dakota. She was also enamored with the size of the furnished apartments, much more spacious than they had appeared on Clara's laptop, to say nothing of the views from the terraces, which were, to use a phrase from her youth, to kill for. The beach was only a half a mile's walk from HV's front entrance, and if you were so inclined, you could rent a seat on a boat and sail out into the sea at a senior discount. Soon memories of her mischievous childhood on the West Coast began resurfacing like cliff divers after a well-executed plunge, and she suddenly felt herself longing to return to a life of lying about on the sand and dipping her feet into the clear blue water of the ocean. But on the flight home, to her surprise, her friend informed her that she was no longer interested.

"I'm sorry I dragged you all this way for nothing," Clara remarked between sips of her mimosa. "I really should have listened to my son—though don't ever tell *him* that."

"I don't understand," Minnie replied, preferring a bloody Mary. "I thought you were having a good time."

"Oh, it was *all right*. It was a nice place to visit, a nice vacation, as far as things went, but now that I've seen everything *up close*, I can't say that it struck me as somewhere I'd ever want to *live*."

"What about all the wonderful people we met, and the games we played? And the food? Now I know you enjoyed the food. You ordered seconds at every meal."

"Yes, well, they were obviously serving us their best in order to hook us in to making a down payment."

"Oh, I know what this is about. It's the hurricanes, isn't it? You're afraid of them. But you mustn't be. Sure, they're more dangerous than our snowstorms, but you saw all the precautions they took in building the place."

"This is not about hurricanes."

“Well is it the money? Because if I can afford it—”

“It’s not about that either.”

“Well what then? Tell me.”

Clara lowered her voice. “I didn’t care for the staff.”

“The staff? But they were so friendly.”

“Too friendly, if you ask me. Like they were hiding something from us.”

Minnie paused to contemplate what her friend was telling her. “This isn’t because they were black, is it?”

Clara urged her to keep her voice down. “No, it’s not that. Not *just* that. It’s about the way they talked. Even when they were speaking English I could barely understand a word they were saying.”

At that, Minnie couldn’t help but smile, for she had spent her life teaching Spanish and French to teenagers who couldn’t roll their r’s or elide their vowels, and so for her, to hear these languages being spoken by those for whom they were their native tongues was exhilarating, even when she struggled to comprehend the accents; and as for the other idioms she’d overheard while traipsing around the island, well, that just reinvigorated her desire to learn. But for Clara, who had worked as a secretary to her husband, a man whose entire vocabulary would not have filled a phrasebook, hearing such a wide variety of dialects must have seemed intimidating.

“Well, I assure you, dear, after living there awhile you’d come to understand everything. In fact, you might even pick up on some of the local lingo.”

“I don’t want to pick up any lingo,” Clara responded gruffly. “I’m happy with the words I use now. No, my mind’s made up. I’m staying put. And if you want my advice, you should do the same.”

Minnie moved to Hermosa Vida six months later, right at the beginning of the hurricane season, though when her plane touched down on the island there was nothing but blue skies and a soft breeze. It took her a few days to settle in, time she spent organizing her apartment and re-familiarizing herself with the locations of HV’s various amenities—the exercise room, where she could do her step ups and spinning, the library, which had a full selection of Agatha Christie novels, and of course the cafeteria, where she planned to eat the bulk of her meals. As it turned out, Clara had been entirely wrong about the food, for what Minnie was being served now, when she had already signed on the dotted line, was every bit as delicious as it had been on the tour. So, too, were the staff just as friendly, helping her to program her new TV, connect to the internet, and show her how to use the in-house call system, which had been designed to work even when her cell phone service went down. What’s more, one of staff members, a young man named Jerique, had remembered her from her previous visit.

“And here I would have thought all of us old, white-haired ladies look the same to you,” she teased him as he pushed a couch under a painting of the school where she used to teach. Her husband had painted it himself, as a gift for their twenty-seventh wedding anniversary.

“Ah yes,” Jerique replied with a full-toothed grin, a few of which were golden, “but I cannot forget your French.”

“That’s right! We spoke about the beach. You know, with all the hassle of moving in and getting situated, I haven’t had a chance to get back out there.”

“You may wish to go tonight. There will be a traditional dance to ward off storms. My cousin will be participating.”

Minnie snapped her fingers. “Oh shoot, but I’ve already agreed to join the Feiler sisters in the rec room for bingo this evening. Perhaps I’ll pencil in some beach time for tomorrow after breakfast—they’re serving crêpes!”

The walking path which led from HV’s entrance down to the beach wound through a forest. On the way Minnie came across a snake, which gave her a fright, though judging by how fast it slithered back into the underbrush, the snake was far more afraid of her than she of it. When she reached the beach she discovered that it was all but empty, and so she decided to do a little exploring before settling down to her book. Along the way she found a small seashell, no bigger than her thumb, and she slipped it into her tote bag so that she could look it up later and determine what sort of creature had made it.

As it turned out, the Christie novel she’d brought along was one she’d already read, and not one of the better ones, and so after a while she set it aside in favor of a nap. The chaise lounge she’d chosen from amongst the several strewn about the beach was rather comfortable, and she drifted off easily enough, the sound of the ocean waves working on her like a soporific; but after a half an hour or so, she was awakened by a different, much coarser sound. Lifting the brim of her sun hat, she caught sight of two boys some distance away kicking a soccer ball around. But it wasn’t their feet striking the ball, nor the strange cackling noise the taller of the two was making, that had disturbed her from her sleep. She could have sworn that one of them had cursed, and in fact, after another moment, he—whichever of the two it was—said it again: “Fuck!” The word pierced her ears like a needle, and had the boy been closer, she would have scolded him and told him to stop. But by the time the two of them had made their way over to where she was, she had come to notice just how young and innocent they were, and, softening, decided it best to leave well enough alone. After all, she was starting a new life in a new land, and did not want to fall back into old habits, such as reprimanding children for their use of language. And so, when they passed in front of her, she simply smiled and asked them if she might take their picture, and afterward, reached into her bag and gave the shorter of the two her seashell.

But on the walk back to HV she had another encounter in the forest, this time with a bird. Though in terms of mass, the bird was much larger than the snake she’d seen earlier, Minnie was not the least bit afraid of it, what with its docile movements and its brightly-colored feathers, orange and green and blue. And in fact, when her presence failed to scare it away, she considered going right up and petting it; but before she was able to do so, the bird turned its beak to her and squawked, a squawk which to her horror sounded just like “fuck.” It repeated the squawk several more times, until another bird of the same species landed nearby and produced a similar sound, at which point the two of them flew off together.

By the time she got back to her apartment she was in a panic. She had to take a pill just to calm herself down, and even that wasn’t enough, so that by dinner she was still in a tizzy, and had trouble controlling her emotions as she explained to the Feiler sisters what had occurred. She was expecting them to be just alarmed as she was, but instead they responded as if they’d heard it all before, which of course they had, having lived here for over a year now.

“Officially it’s called an ortan or something,” the elder sister explained.

“Yes,” said the younger sister, nodding along, “but most people around here call it a fuk bird, spelled f-u-k for some reason.”

“They even have a saying,” the elder sister added. “What is it again?”

“Who gives a fuk?”

“I’m just trying to help Minnie.”

“No, that’s the saying. Only it doesn’t mean the same thing it does in America. It’s more carefree, like saying, ‘What will be will be.’”

“But how come I never saw one of these ortans when I came for my tour?” Minnie asked.

“They’re migratory,” the elder sister replied. “They clear out right before the first major storm and don’t return until the season’s over.”

“But don’t worry,” the younger sister assured Minnie. “You’ll get used to it after a while.”

But Minnie wasn’t so sure, for although she had never been able to put her finger on exactly why, foul language had always been the bane of her existence—in fact, it was the very thing that had triggered the rift between her and her daughter. Growing up, Minnie had washed Cerise’s mouth out with soap whenever she caught her swearing, and apparently that was “too barbaric” for her daughter, who used her father’s funeral as an opportunity to accuse her mother of enjoying it. Minnie tried to apologize, but in doing so became defensive, contending that, what with there being so many beautiful words in the world, it just seemed wrong to sully one’s vocabulary with filth—perhaps a reasonable argument to make with a fellow pedant, but only served to increase her daughter’s resentment. After a few more choice words of her own, Cerise stormed off, and the two hadn’t spoken to each other since.

For the next few weeks, Minnie brought headphones with her whenever she went outdoors, and if she happened to hear an ortan squawking away, she put them on and listened to Dolly Parton instead. But she hated doing so, hated the fact that she was having to block out part of the otherwise idyllic world that surrounded her. Worse, the mere sight of one of these birds began to annoy her, because even though she could override its vulgar calls with music, she knew very well what noise it was emitting when it opened its beak.

Then one day she was cleaning her windows in her bedroom, and in order to get at the outside, she had removed the screen. It was around that time that Jerique came knocking at her door to tell her that the dryer in which she had placed her delicates had broken down. She asked if he would move them to another machine for her, but he politely explained that the staff was not allowed to do that sort of thing without her being present.

“But I’m giving you my consent,” she said to him in French.

“Sorry, Mrs. K,” he replied shruggingly, “but those are the rules.”

“Oh, all right,” she said, and went down to the laundry room to tend to the clothes herself.

When she returned she was tired, so she sat down on the couch for a moment to watch some TV. As she was flipping through the channels, she came across a commercial in which a man was dressed up as ortan. She couldn’t believe it, he was saying “fuck” over and over again at midday on network television in order to sell used cars. Disgusted, she turned the TV off, but the swearing didn’t go away. Now it was coming from her bedroom.

Her first thought was that an ortan must have landed in one of the trees outside her open window, and so she proceeded incautiously into her bedroom only to discover that the bird was standing on her bed, picking at its feathers. She screamed and ran off to the bathroom, where she grabbed a towel, and when she returned she snapped it at the bird in the hopes of driving it back through the way it had come in. Instead, the bird flapped its wings and came at her. At the last second, she managed to knock it away, and then ran out, closing the door behind her. She used the in-house call system to call down to the front desk for help, hoping they would send Jerique again, but instead a larger man whom she had never met before came to the door. He was polite

as far as things went, but when he went to check out the bedroom and was unable to find the bird, he returned to the living room and looked at her like she was senile.

“I swear it was in there,” she said.

“Do not take screens off,” he barked at her.

“I wanted to clean the outside of the window.”

“We do that,” he said. “We have people.”

“All right, now I know.”

“Leave fuk birds alone. What they ever do to you?”

“It tried to attack me, that’s what.”

“It thought you were other fuk bird. It wanted to mate with you.”

“What, because I waved a towel at it?”

“Do not disturb these birds. They bring good luck.”

A few weeks later, she caught one of the residents, a man with a colostomy bag, throwing seeds around in the courtyard. Technically, the seeds might have been for any type of bird, but Minnie had done her research, and recognized that the particular kind of seed that this man was spreading was especially favored by ortans. She went right up to him and told him to stop.

“Stop what?” the man asked.

“You’re not allowed to feed birds in the courtyard. Especially that one bird.”

The man gave her a funny smile. “And which bird do you have in mind?”

“You know which. The ortan.”

“What’s the matter? You got something against them?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. They make that terrible sound.”

“What sound? Fuk?”

Minnie winced. “Yes. I don’t like that word, and I don’t want to have to hear it while I’m cutting through here.”

“You are aware that the birds don’t know what the word means, and besides, it’s only natural for them.”

“Yes, well, just because something is natural doesn’t make it right.”

“But they’re such beautiful creatures to look at. In fact, you’re not so bad yourself.”

Minnie placed a hand on her chest. “Excuse me?”

“How old are you? If I had to guess, I’d say you’re not a day over sixty-five. Are you sure you’re allowed to live here?”

“Listen, I didn’t come up to you to flirt.”

“Then allow me a more direct approach. How about a date? Perhaps some shuffleboard, and then back to my place for some wine and Parcheesi, and whatever else may arise.”

Appalled, Minnie walked away, and when the next community meeting came around, she made it a point to attend. After listening to several of her neighbors’ concerns, all of which seemed rather petty to her, she got up and requested that more be done to enforce HV’s bylaws.

“I was also thinking we could take a more proactive approach to keeping the wildlife at bay. Perhaps there’s some kind of smell, or something, that we can put out that would deter them from coming near our buildings.”

“Is this about the fuk bird that flew into your bedroom?” the chairperson replied with amusement, for the incident had made the rounds; even the Feiler sisters had made fun of Minnie for trying to mate with it. “Because it was clearly stated in your purchase agreement that we would take care of cleaning the outsides of windows.”

“No, it’s not about that. Not *just* that. I just feel like we should be doing all we can to promote strict boundaries between nature and where we live.”

“Jesus, lady,” someone said out of turn. “This ain’t the fifties anymore.”

Minnie turned and saw the man whom she had accosted in the courtyard getting up.

“Get over it,” he said as he walked to the exit. “It’s just a fucking word.”

But Minnie could not get over it. That night, she had a dream in which an ortan landed on top of her while she was lying in bed and repeated its dirty call as though on a loop. Suddenly, the bird transformed into her husband, who began making love to her, only he, too, kept repeating that awful word. She tried to stop him, both from saying the word and from having sex with her, but it was as if he could not hear her, as if they existed in different but overlapping realms, and so she had to lie there, suffering through it, until he came, letting out a final, resounding “FUH-UCK!”—at which point she awoke in a sweat.

The next day she went to see a therapist, or rather a neighbor of hers from down the hall who had retired from his practice but was nevertheless willing to listen to her concerns. After a few sessions together, he convinced her to undergo hypnosis, which resulted in her recovering a whole host of repressed memories about her father, memories in which he came home drunk and cursed at her and her mother and even threatened them both with violence. Unfortunately, bringing these memories to the fore only made her feel worse.

“What am I going to do?” she said, weeping into a tissue. “I can’t go on like this. I’m at my wit’s end.”

“Perhaps we might try exposure therapy,” the former therapist suggested. “I could swear at you until the effect is deadened—or better yet, *you* could swear. Yes, that way you’ll hear it from your own mouth and realize that it’s not so terrible after all.”

“I don’t know,” Minnie wavered. “I don’t think I’ve ever sworn before.”

“Why don’t you start by spelling the word?”

“Which one?”

“Minnie.”

“All right, I’ll try,” and after a few deep breaths, she slowly spelled out the worst swear word of them all. “F-U-C-K.”

“Good. Now try pronouncing the first part. Say ‘fuh.’”

“Fffuh.”

“Good. Now try the last part.”

“Kuh.”

“Now, without concentrating on the meaning, put the two sounds together.”

“Fuh...kuh. Fuh...kuh. Fuhkuh. Fuck.” She flinched. “No, I can’t. It’s too awful.”

“But you just did it. And if you keep doing it, in time the stigma will go away. Trust me.”

She didn’t trust him, but she tried anyway, because she was desperate. At first, she would only swear in the morning, that way she would have the rest of the day to overcome the effects it had on her before bedtime. After a few days, however, she began swearing every time it crossed her mind, sometimes a hundred, two hundred times a day, until she got to the point where she could tolerate it, at least when the words were coming from her own mouth. Still, it bothered her to hear other people swearing, and so, too, when she heard an ortan making its noise. In fact, her issue with the birds was exacerbated one day when she crossed paths with a particularly ornery ortan who just wouldn’t shut up. Finally, she said to it, “Oh, go fuck yourself,” which just happened to be overheard by the man she had accosted in the courtyard, who began to laugh. She

was so mortified by the thought of him going around and telling everyone that when she got back to her apartment she washed her own mouth out with soap, and for the next several days barely left her apartment. She even went online and began looking for somewhere else to live, which was how she found out about the approaching hurricane.

Her weather app warned that the hurricane could be as high as a category five, though by the time it reached landfall, it had been downgraded to a three. Still, it was a sight to behold. She had endured numerous snowstorms in her day, and several times as a child had felt the ground beneath her quake; but the hurricane was *awesome*, in the full sense of that word. Indeed, being in the midst of such a force, watching through her window as it tore trees right out of the ground, submerged the island in water, and carried off all manner of debris, moved her in ways she was not expecting. Suddenly, the agony of the last several weeks seemed so trivial. Had she really allowed herself to get so worked up over a single word, and not even a word, but a bird call? She began to cry, and tried phoning her daughter to apologize for all the awful things she'd done to her, but of course her service wasn't working, and so instead she settled on using the in-house call system to check on her neighbors, make sure everyone was okay.

And when the storm had passed and the sun came out, she left her apartment and went outside to explore the damage. Shards of wood and glass were everywhere, and mud covered the roads and also the walking path to the beach. But this didn't deter her. She traversed the path anyway, taking care where she stepped, until she came around a bend and heard someone calling for help. Without warning, Jerique came rushing out of the forest, panting and out of sorts.

"Ah, Mrs. K!" he shouted. "Please, I need your help."

"What is it, dear?"

"Come quick."

She followed him into the underbrush, and soon they came across a wounded ortan. For a moment, she felt her emotions stirring within her, as though she were about to suffer a full-blown panic attack. But when she looked more closely at the bird, and saw how terrified it was, the sensation ceased and calmness overcame her.

"What do we do?" Jerique asked worriedly. He was obviously stricken.

"I, I don't know," she stammered, for she could see that at the very least the ortan had broken its wing, no doubt before the hurricane had even made land, or otherwise it would have flown away with its kindred. "Perhaps there's nothing that we can do."

"No, we must save it. To do so will bring us luck."

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

"At least we should try. You stay here and comfort it, and I'll run for help"—and before she could object, he was gone.

Now she was alone with the bird. Scrutinizing it more intently, she wondered if perhaps it was the same one that had invaded her bedroom, although there was no way of knowing for certain, as they all looked alike, all the males anyway. What surprised her though was that her initial impression of the bird's beauty returned, as if there had been no turmoil suffered in the interim, and as she was crouching down beside it, she found herself once again wanting to reach out and pet it, just as she had desired to do on that first encounter.

"You know," she said, "you're not so bad to be around when you're not making that awful sound."

"Fuk."

She frowned. It said it again.

“Fuk.”

And again.

“Fuk.”

And again and again and again.

“Fuk. Fuk. Fuk.”

“Stop it,” she whispered. “Stop that right now. Please, for both our sakes.”

But the bird wouldn't stop. It kept saying it, and all at once she felt her newfound strength disappear, replaced by another, more sinister strength. She stood up and looked around. There was no one in sight, no sound but the bird's. She remained standing but turned her gaze back to the ortan, which still looked helpless to her, vulnerable. With a deep breath she placed her foot on the bird's neck and pressed down with all her might.

The bird scrambled. It tried to make a noise, but its throat was blocked. Soon, its struggling stopped, and it died.

Minnie returned to the path just as Jerique came running back with a heavysset man whom she'd never met before.

“Mrs. K?”

“I'm afraid it's dead, dear.”

“No, it cannot be.”

“You're welcome to have a look,” she said, gesturing to the forest.

Immediately, Jerique ran in, while the man grimaced at her, somewhat apologetically, as if to say, “Kids.” And once he had gone in as well, Minnie continued along the path to the beach, noticing how bright the day appeared, in spite of all the destruction. And when she was sure that she had gone far enough, and that there was no one else around to see her, she did something that she hadn't done in ages, indeed, for as long as she was able to remember: she skipped.

Hallowed Gaze by Lorelei Thomas

Inhale. Exhale. Up and down, over and over again, Holly's chest expands and contracts with each breath she takes. She lies there, eyes closed and hands folded over her stomach: the eighth wonder of the world. I don't allow myself to stare at her often, but it's one of my favorite pastimes. When I do indulge, it's a near religious experience. The sunlight coats her in a warm honeyglow, turning Holly into a haloed saint.

We lie on her quilted blanket in the center of our little clearing, our typical setup. Holly's tote bag with snacks, drinks, and two towels sits beside my boombox that serenades us with the Elliott Smith tracks that I perfectly curated and burned onto a CD for this summer. A warm breeze rolls through the trees, pulling Holly's pin-straight hair across her face. As she sits up sputtering, I divert my attention back toward the book I've definitely been reading.

"Well good morning," I say, not looking up.

"How long was I out?"

I check my watch. "Tough to say." An hour and three minutes.

Holly pushes herself up from the quilt and stretches her arms above her head. I can't help but smile to myself as her t-shirt rides up slightly. I'm getting greedy now.

The walk back to main camp is my least favorite part of our Sunday breaks away from our campers. The walk down is fine—there's still the anticipation of reading while Holly looks for pretty rocks, slipping into the lake, or sleeping under the trees—but the walk back is a sweaty, uphill mess. "Which day are you leaving?"

Oh. I didn't think we were actually going to acknowledge it yet. "Probably Friday," I hesitate. "But really, whenever my dad shows up and tells me to pack my shit." That earns a snort. "You?" She sighs a deep, long sigh. "I'm not sure. I haven't heard anything from The Warden." "Well, when she does reach out, can you tell her to give me a call?"

Holly glares at me. "You're so not funny, Jamie."

"That's actually crazy because last night I could've sworn your mom said—"

"Oh would you shut up!"

We fall into each other laughing, stumbling back toward the circle of cabins we've called home for the summers of the past eleven years.

My trunk sits at the end of my bed completely empty. If I start to pack, the summer is over. If the summer is over, I have to go back home. Back to mud-caked trucks with too-bright headlights, back to boring farmland as far as the eye can see, back to Dinwiddie High School, the bane of my existence. Worst of all, it means being away from Holly. The school year is hard on both of us, being trapped in the Bible Belt, but Holly's always managed the social aspect better. She's got plenty of friends back in Nashville, she's even a youth group leader at her church.

Meanwhile, I slog through my days at school alone and get dragged to Mass by my parents on Sundays. I wouldn't mind putting up with it so much if I got to see Holly at any point during the school year, but it's just too busy for either of our parents to justify the four-and-a-half-hour drive to meet in the middle, and even though we've both had our licenses since the day we were able to get them, The Warden would never let Holly drive that far alone.

A knock on my cabin door pulls me from my staring contest with my barren trunk.

Holly walks in without waiting for my response and ops down onto my bunk. "You've gotta start packing," she groans.

I roll my eyes and sit beside her. "You know how I feel about packing."

"I'm not gonna do it for you this time," she says teasingly.

We're quiet for a while, something that I can't stand when it's anyone else. I listen to the sound of her breathing. Inhale. Exhale. "I'm scared," I admit.

"Of what?"

"School."

Holly hums. She knows I struggle with the loneliness. She's quiet though. Holly has never been good at comforting me on things she can't relate to.

My dad has loaded up the car. Ten candy striped friendship bracelets from my campers line my arms. Holly pulls me into a hug. "You'll write?" I say into her shoulder.

"On my best stationery," she answers.

"And Polaroids from your school dances?"

"Of course," she says, pulling back, leaving her hands on my shoulders.

I nod. She nods. I wipe the one tear I allow myself to cry in front of her.

"One summer left," Holly smiles. "The best one yet!"

She pulls me back into a hug and my arms snake around her torso. The Warden glares at me behind Holly's back and calls her to their Range Rover. Holly freezes around me. She pulls away and gives me a small smile. "Bye, Jamie." Her eyes shine with tears as she turns away from me. I watch the car drive o down the camp's gravel driveway and my floodgates let loose.

Holly,

9/1/98

How's school going? First week of senior year! You won't be surprised to hear that I hate it here, it's the same terrible people I've been stuck with my whole life. At least I've got the new history teacher; he's great.

What's happening in Nashville? I wish I could come visit you there and meet your friends. I hate living so far apart.

Anyway, the new history teacher assigns so much homework, so I should probably get on that. Talk soon,

Jamie

Jamie,

9/15/98

School is fine, I think I've also got some pretty great teachers. If I'm not doing homework then I'm at church for praise team rehearsal, and if I'm not there then I'm at cheer practice. The Warden has been on my back about everything recently, too. It's exhausting to be the perfect daughter.

I'm sorry that you hate it at your school so much, I wish people weren't so awful to you.

Homecoming is next week and The Warden picked out this pink dress for me...I think I hate it, but there's no way I could tell her that. I don't even really want to go to the dance, but that's not up for discussion either. I miss you.

Write soon!

Holly

Holly,

10/1/98

That Homecoming dress is beautiful. I mean truly, you must've been the most beautiful girl on the dance floor. I'm glad to hear that school is going well and it sounds like you're staying busy. Dinwiddie is boring as ever. Well, there was a tractor pull last week and the football team is losing, so there's been a lot of chatter, but other than that, I still can't wait to get out of here. I went to Homecoming too (my mother made me), but my dress was not as pretty as yours, and I forgot to take a picture to include in my letter.

I can't wait for summer. I miss campfire nights, I miss Sunday breaks, and I miss you. I wish we could live there together forever.

Jamie

Holly,

11/10/98

I haven't heard from you in a while, are you doing okay? I've been so busy with college applications, and I'm sure you've got a lot going on with cheer, so no worries. I'm so looking forward to winter break. Two weeks of no bullies, no ridiculously long homework, and no wishing I was anywhere but here. Well, I'll still be wishing that...I wish I could spend it with you! I miss you.

Jamie

Holly,

12/20/98

I'm worried about you. Can you just let me know if you're alright? Merry Christmas.

Jamie

Jamie,

January 5th, 1999

Holly is perfectly fine. Do not write back.

Mrs. Richardson

Inhale. Exhale. I pick up my trunk and heave it into my cabin. One summer left. My campers won't arrive until tomorrow, so I've got the cabin to myself for the night. The metal bed frames creak under my weight as I precariously balance to hang up my cabin's decorations. When I finish hanging up the soft white Christmas lights (stolen from the attic) on their familiar nails, I sink to the floor beside my bunk. Just there, beside the bedpost. The wood of the cabin is worn underneath my fingertips that trace the letters carved into it.

"Where did you get that!"

"Grabbed it from Sierra's counselor bag," she shrugged, turning the knife over in her hand. I looked at her, jaw dropped. "You, Holly, stole a pocket knife from our camp counselor's book bag? I don't even know who you are anymore."

"Relax," she drew out. "I'm going to put it back."

"Why did you take it in the first place?"

She looked from the knife, to me, and back to the knife. "I don't know. Thrill, I guess?" We sat there together for a while, our backs against the cabin wall, knees to our chests. I broke the silence.

"Can I see it?"

Holly handed me the knife and watched as I carved two letters into the sea of other childhood graffiti.

"Now we're here forever," I said. When I looked back to Holly, her eyes were shining.

She reached for my hand and squeezed it in her own.

My eyes sting at the memory. I wipe the back of my hand across my face and push myself to my feet. One summer left, and I'm going to make the best of it, despite whatever is going on with Holly. I can see her cabin from my window.

Against my better judgement, I decide to knock on her door. The hinges creak as she pulls it open. Her face falls. Whatever speech I had prepared in my head has left me, and the only thing I can think of to say is, "Holly." My voice shakes.

"Hi," she says. Her fingers anxiously fidget with the tail of her braid.

"Um, how are you?"

"I'm fine."

I nod. "Good! That's...good." My hand rubs the back of my neck.

"Did you need something?" She twists the knife.

I feel my body freeze. "Sorry, what?"

"Did you...did you need something?"

Holly and I had been friends since the first year of camp. We'd spent every day of every summer together since Kindergarten, but now I'm just the counselor next door. "What happened to you?"

"Excuse you?" She sounds exactly like her mother.

"Why are you acting like this?" I can hear the desperation in my voice.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Did something happen at school? Or with The Warden—"

"Don't call her that." Her expression is icy, but I know Holly. Her eyes are shining.

"What's wrong Holly? What happened?" My legs feel unsteady beneath me and I reach to touch her shoulder—either to support myself or to offer comfort to her, I'm not sure.

She flinches away from me. "People grow apart, Jamie. You're a bad influence on me, and my mother helped me to see that."

The knife drives into my chest again and again. I nod, looking to the ground.

"Oh." "I don't think we should talk anymore."

I nod again, sniffing back tears. "Yeah," I look back up to her. "Yeah, okay. Have a good summer, Holly."

I walk back to my cabin and fall into my bunk.

Inhale. Exhale. Up and down, over and over again, Holly's chest expands and contracts with each breath she takes. I watch her as she starts a camper's friendship bracelet for them, wrapping and weaving yarn around itself with a gentle smile on her rose lips. I am two picnic tables away, only partially watching my own campers play tag. Before, I poured my love into her with each gaze. Now, I'm just searching for any hint of recognition.

Dan Schiff is a nonprofit professional residing with his family in the Columbia Heights neighborhood of the District of Columbia. He has not previously published a work of fiction. Dan exists as [@schiff.dan](#) on Instagram.

Untitled (for Brigid) by Dan Schiff

*Speaking of people from college, you follow Brigid on Instagram, right?
Mainly for those kids of hers. Cuteness overload. And the husband, whatshisname.
Ali.*

He seems kind of basic. But he's definitely an eight, borderline eight-and-a-half. Has he had Brotox?

I mean, he's a corporate lawyer in D.C., it's a type. My cousin Sam works at Ali's firm, and says he's decent. Plus he paints on the side.

Like, houses?

Non, un vrai artiste. Abstract stuff. He might have some talent. Not that I'd hang any of it in my house. Lots of weird shit swirling around. Brigid used to post pics of his paintings like, "My husband the tortured artist LOL." At least he's got some layers to him.

Ah, a man with layers.

And his family has a villa or something in Turkey where they took the kids. So Brigid did pretty okay, at least on paper.

Oh yeah, I saw the pics of their toddler fishing on that trip. Fucking adorable. I forget that one's name.

It's like Tom or Scott. Or Philip? The only one with a regular-ish name.

Gotta say, Brigid looks incredible after three kids. And I saw an update on LinkedIn, she's killing it at work, too. How the fuck does she have energy to get out of bed?

Having a live-in au pair doesn't hurt.

Gucci. How's Brigid liking that setup?

Oh, no idea. I haven't talked to her in years.

Brigid was surrounded by paint, gobs and smears of it, signifying nothing. Canvases upon canvases on her floors, leaning against each other, leaning against walls, below other canvases hanging at eye level. She'd married a frustrated artist-lawyer, this was no big surprise. But Ali had become like a general contractor taking over her house for a never-ending project. Paint was everywhere, but nowhere she wanted it to be.

The paint had once added depth and a hint of mystery to Ali's personality and body. She would undress him and uncover secret smudges of dried acrylic on his arms and neck, scratching at them softly until they flaked off under her fingernails. He painted in muted colors, punctuating his scenes with random shapes and glyphs. While he was hardly the next Basquiat or Kandinsky, Brigid found his dedication to the craft endearing.

Ali didn't title his paintings, preferring to keep them open to interpretation. That left Brigid to give them droll unofficial nicknames. When he presented a newly completed work for her approval, she would take on the airs of a pompous art person, examining the canvas from all angles before dubbing it "Gas Station Sushi Explosion," or "Jelly Belly Space Orgy," or "Still Life with Skidmarks." Ali would laugh in spite of himself, knowing Brigid was playacting as a

Midwestern rube to satirize the art world writ large, not him specifically.

After Brigid stopped deigning to christen Ali's new works, she would at least identify something to praise. *Hmm, that swoop of mauve is striking, it really draws the eye.* In the next phase, Brigid would offer an intrigued *Hmm*. Finally, her responses became about logistics and storage. *Where shall we put this one?*

Ali's art was hardly disrupting the aesthetic of the rest of their home, which burst with mountains of preschool art projects. There were toilet paper tube caterpillars slathered in green paint and stuck through with pipe cleaner legs, hastily colored animal masks made from paper plates, mutant family portraits etched against a crumbling sky. It had all been pulled from the depths of their kids' backpacks and tossed on the coffee table, to be immediately forgotten by the artists themselves. Brigid didn't mind any of it, her sons' shitty artwork was made to be discarded. Ali's, on the other hand, was done in such thick, permanent oil. His work endeavored to be an enduring statement about life, a snapshot of the universe.

Nine months into their courtship, Ali had taken Brigid to the Art Institute of Chicago, where he'd made her sit with him in front of Alma Thomas's "Starry Night and the Astronauts," a wide expanse of staccato blue blobs, interrupted by a fiery red and orange object—Was it a comet? A rocket? A cheeseburger? Ali asked her to humor him and said they would observe it silently for ten minutes, he even set an alarm for the exercise. After seven minutes of letting her mind boomerang, Brigid got serious about the painting. At the nine-minute mark, she finally noticed herself having a reaction. Her breathing slowed, her sightlines widening to take in the grand sweep of Thomas's space. She began to notice a rhythm and purpose to the blue mosaic, feeling a deep sense of comfort as she floated through the frame into infinity. Ali's phone alarm gently chimed. The last few minutes, Brigid had forgotten her boyfriend was there, hadn't realized they'd been holding hands. He shook his head, gobsmacked by it all, and turned to her.

I don't care if I ever sell a painting or hang in a museum or a gallery. Or a coffee shop. If I can create something that's even a fraction of this, that gets just a few people to change how they think and feel and experience the world, even just for ten minutes. Re-color someone's reality. Then... it's all worth it.

Seconds later, Ali was excitedly mumbling about how Brigid had re-colored his own reality, then he was opening a small black box in his palm and kneeling in front of her, just as a tour group streamed into the gallery past their bench, the docent enthusing about Georgia O'Keeffe's love affair with the New Mexican desert. Brigid couldn't recall much else about the proposal or its immediate aftermath. She knew that she'd eagerly accepted and the tour group had cheered, then they'd gone for celebratory ice cream. And she'd always remember Ali's little soliloquy about his art.

Ten years later, Brigid wanted to know what it meant when art ceased to change people. Or changed them in ways they didn't wish to be changed. Or when an artist constructed around his family a museum for which they hadn't bought admission.

Ali was talking about donating a new painting to the Legal Aid Society gala fundraiser in the fall. He'd just made partner at his firm and saw an opportunity to give back. Even Brigid agreed it was a way for his art to make change in the world. More importantly, it would get at least one fucking canvas out of their house.

@BrigToSomewhere: *Just another night out in the Windy City with the Kellogg Krew!*
#workhardplayhard #nofilter

Spring 2013. The night Ali met Brigid was at a rare mixed gathering of Northwestern law students and business students. The JDs and MBAs, Pritzker and Kellogg, the Capulets and Montagues, thrown together in a rambling group house on Chicago's Northside. The party's host was pursuing a joint JD-MBA and wanted to bridge his two worlds, at least for a Friday night.

Officially, it was a stoplight party, designed to encourage mingling and maybe more. But the two schools' factions circled each other for much of the evening, everyone content to drink with their own kind and talk shit about professors. Ali hadn't planned on staying long, he had moot court practice early the next morning and a contracts exam on Tuesday. Just a couple drinks, some facetime with the Law Review deputy editor, then home to bed. Ali had hooked up with a study group partner during 1L, a grievous mistake he would not repeat. He wore a deep red polo to signal his unavailability.

Ali stood perpendicular to his classmate and housemate Mateo, who was shod in fuck-me green and topped with an emerald St. Patrick's Day stovepipe hat. As an exclamation point for his outfit, Mateo had ordered cosmic green contact lenses. Ali and Mateo bobbed their heads to an old-school Ludacris track, waiting for the party to turn fun.

Surveying the assembled mass of future business leaders, Ali's eye caught on a beam of bright yellow that slashed through the crowd like a highlighter through a law textbook. At a stoplight party, yellow outfits signaled, "It's complicated." Except this freckled girl in the lemon drop dress seemed thoroughly uncomplicated. Ali could see her embracing the uncertainty of the evening, her laughing hazel eyes aglow. She led a round of shots with a circle of Kelloggians, then shook her limbs in an excessive white girl version of the Wobble. It occurred to Ali that maybe she didn't give a shit about the party theme and just happened to look lovely in yellow.

Eventually, Mateo ran off to the bathroom to lubricate his gag contact lenses, which were shooting daggers into his eyeballs. Ali elbowed the party's host and asked what he knew about lemon drop girl, now scarfing a slice of pizza and pouring herself a Smirnoff appletini on the far side of the kitchen island.

Who, Brigid? Yeah, she's real salt of the earth. Wants to be CEO of McKinsey one day.

As Ali approached and asked about her favored regional pizza style, her face contorted into a question mark, soft peach fuzz cheeks buzzed with alcohol. Brigid's lips parted slyly as she laughed at his awkward small talk and his polo. Didn't just chuckle but defiantly pointed at it, cackling at the prospect of this red-shirted barrister-in-training flirting with her, pausing only to take swigs of her booze. She soon was telling him what she thought about law school types, so fucking uptight and self-righteous. Brigid gulped down her last drops of appletini and asked Ali if he wanted a drink.

Two weeks later, as they fished for carp in Humboldt Park, Brigid excitedly reeled in a clod of mud and glass shards. Ali chortled, bending down to kiss behind her ear with a husky whisper.

Nice catch for my nice catch.

She wheeled around, almost smacking him with the rod as she glared lasers.

I'm not your catch, I'm fucking Jaws. Watch out, fish boy.

She snapped her teeth at him with a playful menace, barely missing his chin. Ali flinched, then gnashed back at her. As they kissed leaning against the pier railing, Ali thought how lucky he'd be to have this girl bite him in half.

They moved in together to start the fall term, an apartment in Edgewater near the Thorndale red line station. It was a geographically undesirable compromise, with Kellogg forty

minutes north in Evanston and Pritzker forty minutes south by the Magnificent Mile. Brigid had been happy to jump ship on her former roommate, the chirpy scion of a Minnesota commercial real estate family who left ropy clumps of hair plastered across the walls of their shower and bloody tampons festering in their kitchen trash.

Ali had bailed on Mateo and five other law school pals, who remained ensconced in the group house they'd nicknamed the Sandy Banana, a grungy yellow South Side townhome near Oakwood Beach. Mateo made clear his disappointment with Ali: *You have the rest of your life to live with some chick, but only one more year to live with your sweet, loving bros.* Ali had mostly enjoyed his Sandy Banana days: the poker games, cigars on the fire escape after midterms, occasional ragers, the poignantly diluted grad school fulfillment of frat boy dreams. But the idea of living apart from Brigid for almost a week at a time put a cramp in his arms and another in his loins.

The Windy City blew Brigid and Ali in opposite directions each morning; classes, study sessions, extracurriculars and networking events kept them apart until late every evening, when they'd reconvene just long enough to kiss and collapse. Sunday mornings at eight-thirty was their weekly sex appointment—Brigid wrote on their bedroom whiteboard every Friday night, *DON'T FORGET HAVE SEX*—followed by a day together, a walk through Garfield Park or an art museum, or watching a Bears game on the projection screen at the Sandy Banana. Ali knew it was love, that he'd rather spend his precious Sunday hours with Brigid than painting. He'd shut one eye and frame her against shimmering Lake Michigan while they strolled along Lake Shore Drive, trying to capture some essence of light and composition that he could use for inspiration, for later.

After grad school, Ali and Brigid married in northeastern Turkey, near his grandparents' home in Artvin. Friends and family flew across the ocean and laughed as the sparkly bride gave Ali's foot a clean stomp with her heel at the end of the ceremony, foretelling that she would have the upper hand in their marriage. Ali, smiling sheepishly and rubbing his sore foot, had forgotten all about the tradition. The wedding party got drunk on crimson Boğazkere wine and marveled at the sun-dappled green mountains lining the Hatila Valley. Dessert was honey almond ice cream, Brigid's new favorite Turkish sweet treat, paired with the freshest hazelnuts anyone had ever tasted.

Honeymooning in Cappadocia, they decided they'd lived through enough Chicago winters. Ali wanted to be back on the east coast, and the law firm where he'd been a summer intern had more associate opportunities in D.C. It was late 2014, the capital city still abuzz with low-key hope and change. They found a Capitol Hill rowhouse with bedrooms to spare, plus an attic large enough for Ali to make a small art studio. Ali's parents pitched in for the down payment, and they began settling into their new lives.

Brigid had an old friend from Alpha Kappa Psi in college, Arin, who now worked in healthcare strategy consulting in McKinsey's D.C. office. She figured the connection could get her a look, maybe an interview. Arin enthusiastically received Brigid's message on LinkedIn, happy to reconnect. *Wow Brigid, great to hear from you. Amazing that you're in DC now!* After Arin ghosted Brigid a few messages later, her well-lit visage continued beaming at Brigid from the circle on her profile page. Beaming out confidence and competence, arms folded, in front of some doric columns, maybe the Capitol or the Lincoln Memorial or the lobby of her condo building. Offering solutions, analytics, expertise, transformation, brilliant teeth, understated jewelry, classical architecture, beaming.

Brigid F. (Innovative MBA changing the world through multidisciplinary approaches to IT leadership | Cybersecurity | Agile Evangelist | MomBoss): *Hey LinkedIn Community, I'd love to know what my fellow #MomBosses think about this article in The Atlantic, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All." All I can say is: Hold. My. Wine.*

Brigid landed an associate role in the information technology practice at FinnSlidell, a mid-tier consulting firm with ninety thousand global employees. Finn was well-connected internationally, but saddled with a white-bread reputation among the big D.C. consultancies.

Two years in, Brigid was the fast-rising team lead for an aerospace engineering client, designing and implementing change management around global procedures for data privacy training. Brigid's deck of more than three hundred slides for the client quickly became regarded among her colleagues as the Holy Grail of deliverables, weaving together virtuosic quantitative and qualitative analysis, demonstrating mastery of the subject and her audience. Over just a few months, she'd gotten under the hood of a maddeningly complex company and diagnosed their challenges as if she'd spent her entire career there. FinnSlidell senior executives had their assistants print out full-color copies of Brigid's deck, which begged to be read on paper like a great novel. One VP told Brigid her work reminded them why they'd fallen in love with consulting in the first place.

FinnSlidell did not have a rich history of nurturing and elevating female consultants. To lock up her massive talent, Brigid became the unofficial face of the firm's newfound commitment to Millennial women. Finn stood behind Brigid during three maternity leaves, allowing her to jump back in the saddle after each baby, whenever she was ready. But Brigid was always ready; her pregnancies amounted to brief out-of-office messages and her children would not slow her ascent. Senior consultant Brigid suddenly was an associate vice president, then a global VP for the Asia Pacific region. Multinationals and foreign governments sought out Brigid by name, she whispered to them the secrets of cybersecurity transformation, and they made her a millionaire.

Meanwhile, Ali ambled along the partner track for nine years at the law firm of Gillespie, Villani & Stahl, LLC. At the office, his bespoke suits were always immaculate and snappy, hosting a seemingly endless collection of pocket squares. *Dress for the job you want*, Ali's wardrobe said to the firm. *Yes, but window dressing has a place here, too*, the firm whispered in reply.

During the hardest, darkest days of law school, Ali had waxed poetic to Brigid about the law in a way that mirrored his feelings about the power of art. About law as an organ of intellectual life and vehicle for moral navigation. He admired the work of Felix Frankfurter as much as that of Helen Frankenthaler.

In Gillespie's corporate and financial services, Ali helped the merely rich navigate the road to obscene wealth. Many of his clients were milking the cash cow of tax-advantaged real estate deals in so-called Opportunity Zones. Nothing stood between them and more windfalls; they would close their deals whether it was with Ali or some other associate. He would negotiate the picayune details, the percentage points that might determine whether his client netted eighty million dollars as opposed to seventy-eight million dollars.

Who had chosen this career path for him? It hardly mattered anymore. The original plan, hazily recalled, had been to sock away a few years' worth of big firm experience and earnings, then shift gears into something that required brain and soul. Now he'd invested too much of

himself into the partner track and its corresponding wardrobe, pocket squares included. On any given day, Ali's pocket square choices were nearly infinite. He could go for a patterned or solid-color square, he could fold it in a puff or a scallop or a crown or a multi-point arrangement. It was square one for building his outfit. Then he'd move on to the other areas of his closet, addressing the questions of shirt, socks and tie. Maybe no tie at all.

The partner track kept Ali running in place, but not enough to maintain the body of a newly minted law school grad. With time, Ali found his fitted shirts could barely circumnavigate his midsection. He managed to secure the shirt buttons but they screamed, choking, through their holes. His Italian suits squeezed him ever tighter, pressing down on the expanse of his musculature with every microtwist of his torso. He'd get all of them tailored once he finally made partner, he promised himself. In the meantime, Ali yearned to fight back against the uniform in which he'd imprisoned himself. He dreamed of busting through the seams, sending the threads of worsted wool reeling back onto their spools, shattering windows with the zipper that would explode forth from his crotch. He'd shed the finely combed yarn and polished cuff buttons, leaving the remnants of his work skin crumpled beneath. Then, finally, he could ascend to his attic studio, the last place he felt unencumbered.

@BrigToSomewhere: *How am I supposed to get work done when I'm surrounded by so much handsomeness? XOXOXOXO to all the men in my life, big and small, who bring me such joy every day. #boymom*

In the middle of 2024, Ali and Brigid's sons were seven, five and three. Each one vexing in his own way, all of them histrionic and petty.

The eldest, Soren, had nothing but disdain for his younger brothers, convinced that they would have to ultimately go away and make him an only child once again. Middle child Thornton was serious and bright, but given to punching anything he could reach: desk lamps, supermarket produce, dogs' faces, adults' genitals. Will, the loose cannon preschooler, would scream the milk out of his cereal if his breakfast order arrived slightly off.

Since their earliest Serious Conversations About the Future, Ali told Brigid that fewer than three kids felt incomplete, imbalanced. As if a family with two adults and merely two children risked toppling over. Growing up, Brigid had concluded that two kids was more than enough; her feckless younger sister pulled enough dumb shit to make Brigid question the sense of her existence. But Brigid wanted her husband to be happy, with no excuses for feeling unfulfilled down the road. *If I'm going to have it all, my guy should have his, too*, she'd tell Ali with a sweet-tart peck on the cheek. Though if Ali wanted more than three, Brigid cracked that they'd all have to move with her back to Grand Rapids so she could pitch collagen boosters to the other neighborhood moms she'd gone to high school with.

In his family designs, Ali had never envisioned children like the trio he and Brigid created. There were daily epic meltdowns over dead iPad batteries and misplaced toys. Their gaslighting came innately; Thornton punched holes in two of Ali's canvases, then defended it as a valid artistic choice that had improved the pieces.

And there was fighting, unendingly, for no apparent reason. The boys went after each other with blind rage, teeth bared and fingers primed to gouge. Without adult intervention or iPads to pacify them, they'd have reduced each other to mounds of bone splinter and gristle. Ali was astonished, numbed at the depth of his children's utter contempt for one another, the

fraternal murderousness that overwhelmed their small hearts. They still barely know each other, he thought. There were baristas he'd known longer than these kids had been brothers.

That summer, Ali reasoned the boys were old enough to appreciate the "It's a small world after all" joys of international travel. The family sojourned to Turkey, Ali believing that, by some mystical mechanism, his ancestral roots would reset his sons' relationships with each other, and with him. Brigid offered pursed-lips endorsement of the trip, rubbing Ali's shoulders to signal she understood it was important to him.

The five of them stayed in the Black Sea cottage that had belonged to Ali's late grandparents and remained in the family. Ali's cousins, whom he hadn't seen since his and Brigid's wedding a decade earlier, lived nearby with their families and all came out to greet their American *kuzenler*. Soren, Thornton and Will had been practicing Turkish with Duolingo on their tablets for months beforehand. Once they arrived, the language lessons seeped out through their young pores without leaving a single Turkish word or phrase they could offer their hosts.

At a few points during the visit, the boys tired of their own prickliness and seemed to surrender to the idea of having fun in this strange land. They went several days without mauling each other. Brigid managed to snap photos of them trout fishing, their squinting into the sun close enough to smiling for the sake of social media optics. They even tried lamb kebabs, which Soren admitted to liking.

Still, there would be no epiphanies on this trip, no communing with the spirits of Ali's long-deceased *dede-nine* while they hiked beside the majestic Mencuna Waterfalls. At the end of two weeks, Soren, Thornton and Will waited in line with their parents at Trabzon Airport, attempting to throttle each other with the retractable belt barriers. Flying back across the Atlantic, Ali sat beside his sons, their iPad screens dispensing taffy-colored cartoon hellscapes into their unblinking American eyeballs, as if Turkey had never happened.

Brigid sat solo in the row ahead to do some work, occasionally turning to catch Ali's eye, offering a pale smile between the headrests. She pitied him, he thought. Despite her pro forma support, she was no doubt baffled by this trip and what he'd meant to accomplish. These plane seats were a valuable commodity, a world-historical luxury item that he'd wasted on a triumvirate of ingrates, and every other passenger knew what he'd done. Ali spent the flight trying to fold himself, make his body small enough to crawl inside his noise-cancelling headphones.

Back in D.C., Ali and Brigid finally addressed the elephant that had taken up residence in every room of their home: They needed full-time help. Salvation arrived in the form of Merceditas, an au pair from Uruguay, who settled into their English basement. Mer was twenty-five, petite and curvy. She wore a Morrissey t-shirt with scarlet lipstick, her dark hair in wide-curved bangs, to meet her new charges in their dining room. She was a natural storyteller: *Ah, let me tell you a story*, she said in her lyrical, accented English. The boys began lining up nightly on the staircase to listen to her spin fantastical tales of the Río de la Plata, enraptured as if no one had bothered telling them a story before.

Outside on the back stoop, the boys let Mer cut their mops of hair, which they'd previously forbidden even a comb to graze. In the kitchen, her savory asado vegetables were a smash; suddenly, the boys were eating enough fiber to be able to shit on a regular basis. Brigid and Mer also hit it off, giving Brigid the opportunity to refresh her study-abroad Spanish, now rusty. Over glasses of wine in the dining room, Mer would recount her travels, her odd jobs, the boys and girls she'd romanced. The two women cackled in lilting Spanish, *jajajaja*. Ali blankly did the dishes twenty feet away, comprehending nothing.

He suddenly had more time to himself, which he spent mostly painting up in the attic. He was there late one evening when the long-anticipated email arrived on his work phone, letting him know that Gillespie, Villani & Stahl had elected him partner. He cradled the phone and spread out on the loveseat in gauzy rapture. As a partner, he'd have to bring in more business, meaning more conferences, schmoozing, self-promotion. He'd figure it all out. For the moment, he would bask in his worthiness. On the phone, he pulled up a memo he'd sent two days earlier to several Gillespie partners about a pending case. Ali re-read his own writing, nodding along to how forcefully he'd crafted the message, how succinctly he'd structured his points. As a partner would.

Over his shoulder on the end table, his personal phone buzzed with a text message from his law school friends group chat. Mateo, Ali and the other guys had kept a thread of connection going, barely sustained by fantasy football trash talk and faint memories from the Sandy Banana. For years, there'd been chatter about planning a guys' long weekend: All seven of them, in Vegas or Nashville or a cabin near some lake, no wives, no kids, just beer and meat and cigars and poker chips. It had become a running joke. The new text came from Mateo.

Memorial Day weekend, boys. Kentucky Bourbon Trail. It's finally happening, 2025 let's gooooo.

A phone in each hand, Ali leaned back, looking up toward the rafters, through the roof of his attic and the city's smoggy lights, past the blinking red beacon atop the Washington Monument, into the midnight blue expanse above.

The next night, Ali and Brigid went out to celebrate his promotion at a wine bar in Eastern Market. Brigid seemed genuinely happy with him and for him. The October evening was pleasantly warm, and she held his hand, softly massaging his knuckles with her thumb as they walked down Eighth Street. Ali figured they'd get buzzed and gossip about work bullshit, grab some late-night ice cream, then go home and fuck for the first time in months. But by nine o'clock, Brigid's work had found her: mayday calls and emails from the next morning in Asia, about a data breach at a server farm in Manila. Brigid furiously texted the other side of the world as Ali poured the last of their bottle of pinot. *Do you need to go?* he mouthed. She shook her head, extending an index finger to indicate this would be quick, before turning and inserting the same finger into her free ear, instructing her colleagues to escalate the breach to their Philippine government liaisons. Ali swished the final pours around in his mouth and tried to detect notes of Bing cherry or caramel or whatever the sommelier had said.

Please, love. Go out on the patio, or to a bench outside on the sidewalk. Or to an Uber back to the house. Brigid. Leave me here, let me taste something, anything.

@BrigToSomewhere: *Congrats to my sexy husband for making partner! I've known for a long time what an amazing partner Ali is, and I'm thrilled that the attorneys at @gillespielaw agree with me ;-)* #biglaw #bigdaddy

Brigid couldn't remember when Ali had started conducting his morning routine in nothing but an undershirt, and she hated it. He'd strip off his boxers to take his first leak of the day, but leave on the top while he shaved his neck and brushed his teeth, his dreary balls just beyond the reach of the shirt's hemming. They lolled about like a panhandler outside the supermarket, trying to catch Brigid's line of sight. It was egregious, him spending twenty minutes every day in this liminal state of dress, a bleak no-man's-land between nudity and

semi-decency. Better to just lose the shirt, free his gut to billow over the sink counter, let his cock swing freely.

Ali's cock, that was another story. At some point, it had stopped being his *cock* as she'd once considered it. The word recalled a time when Ali and Brigid had transformed almost daily into a pair of rutting animals, staring deeply into each other's eyes, looking for only one thing.

Cock had fit snugly into their monosyllabic coital dialogue: *Fuck me, baby / Your pussy, so wet / Yeah, make me come with your big cock / Fuck baby fuuuck*. The words would catch in her throat and popcorn out of her mouth, *Your: Big. Cock*. It was filthy and so corny, and he liked it and she liked how much he liked it.

The cock had been Ali's emissary inside of Brigid, bending and swelling to reach uncharted territory, clusters of nerve endings she hadn't felt fire before. It was warm and comforting, a secure grip for her love. Some mornings they'd awaken and find Brigid had unconsciously wormed her hand inside Ali's boxers during the night, her fingers wrapped around his shaft, the quiet throbbing in her wrist synced with his femoral pulse.

He usually called it his dick. As in, *Brig, could you grab me an ice pack? Thornton just punched me in the dick*. She found it rather inelegant. *Dick* sounded close to *cock*, but Brigid mostly heard the *ick* of it. When the stars aligned and their kids went to bed at a reasonable hour, Ali used his dick to have sex with her. Making love to her husband was still a good thing; it kept her grounded, yes yes, so important. Afterward, Ali would spoon Brigid as she sighed *That was lovely*, trying to ignore the gelatinous dick melting against her hip.

More recently, Brigid had simply begun to acknowledge it as a penis, a word she'd always loathed, the way it drooped with clinical drabness. *Penis* summoned Brigid's memory of the first time she'd encountered one, or at least a depiction. It had been attached to the illustrated body of some naked goober splayed akimbo in her seventh-grade health textbook, the fleshy components helpfully labeled. *That? That's all it is?*

Even worse, Ali's penis was merely one in a houseful of them. A parade of penises, wherever Brigid turned. Miniature, hairless replicas of their father's, flitting about during bathtime, dribbling urine on toilet seats, wagging in her face while she dressed her somnolent boys for school. One time, Mer called Brigid downstairs in a panic, watching in wide-eyed horror as Thornton and Will, pants down, dueled with their pint-sized erections. The boys swiveled their hips and thrust at each other, in a mix of genuine rage and confused proto-pleasure, while the two women crouched behind the sofa, laughing so hard that Mer nearly asphyxiated. Brigid afterward had to check her own underwear, unsure if she'd peed herself.

Like his cock, Ali's body had devolved. When they'd first moved to D.C., he'd gone on afterwork runs around the Mall and played midfield in a semi-competitive Sunday soccer league. He'd been trim and knifelike, sliding crisply into his suits like a pencil into an electric sharpener. From the neck up, Ali's outward handsomeness became more deeply etched over the years. But his loosening midsection now loomed ever larger. The love handles that Brigid once playfully pinched now were closer to boxing gloves, enough to almost swallow her fists.

She further sensed that Ali's body had become a burden to him, could feel his synapses clench when she drew him close, his insides swiveling. As if he needed to escape his body to be somewhere else: another room, his office downtown, his studio upstairs. Mostly, Ali's body needed his phone, his fingers clutching the air in its absence. Brigid knew the text thread with his law school friends had recently entered a renaissance, the alerts buzzing at all hours. Mateo, now twice-divorced with one kid by each mother, was resurrecting the idea of their legendarily postponed "boys' trip." Brigid would believe it when she saw the boarding passes in Ali's inbox,

the Airbnb booking, the Google Doc itinerary. She would gladly deliver Ali to the airport herself.

Guess how old Mateo's new girlfriend is, Ali marveled aloud without looking up from his phone. Brigid rolled her eyes and clicked her tongue synchronously. The answer was usually twenty-seven, except when it was twenty-five; the age range hadn't changed much in the years since Mateo's most recent divorce. During their Northwestern days, Ali's friends had become momentarily Brigid's, too. Though she'd long since culled most of them from her social media accounts, she still could see Mateo's activity on Venmo, which Brigid had once used to send Mateo fifteen bucks for a pizza party. On Venmo he would flare up like a digital STI, never quite gone from Brigid's smartphone. The app's feed offered a steady stream of Mateo's financial outlays: forty dollars for a beer mugs emoji, seventy-five for a golf hole emoji, one hundred twenty for a squirting water emoji paired with a boat and a porterhouse steak. This was her husband's best friend.

The texting would go late, Ali supposedly working but mostly just snickering at his phone. By that point most nights, Brigid had long since retired to bed. For years, she'd committed herself to a full night of sleep, every night—unfathomably deep, center-of-the-earth sleep. Occasionally, Brigid stirred awake around midnight, the light from their en suite bathroom whispering under the door while Ali softly grunted on the other side. She could hear the soundtrack of some vanilla porn clip streaming from his phone, the loose toilet lid squeaking under his ass. For the briefest moment, Brigid would consider rising, opening the bathroom door wordlessly, slapping away his phone with one hand and pushing down her panties with the other, to sit on Ali's cock, hello old friend, kissing his mouth to smother the look of surprise on his slack, beautiful face. But who was she to interrupt when it sounded like Ali had things well in hand, she smiled to herself. Sleep reclaimed Brigid quickly, the reverie dissolving back into dream.

If Brigid wasn't up at four-thirty for a Zoom call with her counterparts in Asia, she was up at five for a session on the Peloton bike in their den. Her preferred instructor was Krystal, late twenties—too ancient for Mateo—with the body fat of a Giacometti sculpture. She held the class in such thrall, smoothly announcing her resistance transitions and shouting out the leaderboard with a twinkling eye and snaggletoothed grin. Krystal wielded her glistening, Lycra-sheathed body with a nimble self-assurance that Brigid had once felt about herself, before kids. Brigid had become fixated on her own expanding imperfections, especially at the junctures of body parts: where her neck met her jaw, where her belly met her hips, where her butt met the tops of her legs. Most worrying was the puckering between Brigid's armpits and boobs, the flesh cauliflowering out from her core, spuming into formerly clean gaps. Krystal wasn't conventionally pretty, but every aspect of her was assembled with precision, her trunk demarcated like the creases of an envelope, lines pointing down toward ice cube tray abs. Brigid and the other Peloton denizens virtually gathered round Krystal for each class, fueled by her asinine yet nourishing motivational speak: *That pain you feel is love / you're loving your body so hard right now / put your phone down / don't dare check your email / I'm pumping here with you / pick your head up and look at me / we're finishing this together.*

Brigid's eyes were locked with Krystal's on the screen the first time the Peloton brought her to orgasm. Devouring the handlebars with her sweat-slicked upper torso at resistance level eighty, Brigid dipped back down for a moment's rest before the final stretch. She settled onto the seat at such an angle that numbed her fingers and toes, her inner thighs instinctively clamping down on the saddle. She stayed glued to the sides of the seat while thrusting downward into its cushioning, again and then again, going momentarily cross-eyed and losing sight of Krystal.

When she finally went into a full-body shudder, she had the presence of mind to slam on the resistance knob for the emergency stop. As Brigid fought to catch her breath, she unclipped from her shoes and collapsed to the floor, jamming her knee against the bike as it wobbled, just enough to keep it from toppling onto her. Krystal's encouragement leaked thinly out through Brigid's dangling ear buds, still plugged into the screen. She stayed supine for seven more minutes, staring up at the tin ceiling tiles, one hand on her chest, the other between her legs, her heart rate returning to orbit as she tried to remember when she'd last come so hard.

How do you dudebros feel about Lake Tahoe?

What happened to Bourbon Trail?

Too expensive. Everything booked up.

LMFAO. Mateo, enough already. Planning to bring your kids along?

Nah, they'll be with their moms. Other ideas? Palm Springs? Branson?

I'm with Mateo, let's just go somewhere before we're all forty. Who's down?

Sadly got a case in May, I'll be in Minnesota that whole month.

How about brunch at TopGolf in Scottsdale?

Love you fuckers. Ask me again in three years.

A Saturday morning, March 2025. Mer had taken the kids to the zoo and the house was bizarrely still. Upstairs, Ali perched on his stool before an early-stage canvas, which he hoped would become the painting he'd promised to donate to the Legal Aid Society's charity auction in the fall.

His studio was little more than negative space in their attic storage, a hollow whittled from the stacks of bankers boxes that contained the detritus of his and Brigid's lives. Clustered in the room's center were Ali's easel, a stool and a round metal end table; a leather loveseat slumped off to the side. A mug of Turkish apple tea steeped on the end table as Ali began painting in earnest. After a few brushstrokes, he glanced over at the loveseat and gave in to the distraction of memory. Once upon a time, before kids, Brigid had snuck upstairs in her bathrobe while Ali mixed his paint. She'd shimmied out of her robe, letting it cascade down to her ankles, then sprawled out on the sofa wearing only a wide grin.

Jack, I want you to paint me like one of your French girls.

He'd cracked up at his goofy wife, as brazenly naked as she'd ever been. Ali had put down his palette knife to join her on the cushions, there would be no painting that day. The memory of her body lying there had once reliably made him both hard and awestruck, his own private O'Keeffe. Now the only discernible fragments left were his dick and the loveseat; Brigid's figure had melted into a slurry of apricot and cerise.

Ali's phone buzzed him back to reality with the paroxysm of a vigorous group text. He picked it up from the arm of the loveseat and glanced at the screen. He and his law school pals were now trapped for eternity in the Sandy Banana WhatsApp group, running on a hamster wheel toward their mythical boys' trip. He read through the stack of text bubbles, shaking his head at the latest setback. A motherfucking funeral, thought Ali. That's what it'll take to get these assholes together.

Just as he put the phone down on the end table and returned to his canvas, footfalls echoed up the staircase. Brigid rarely visited the studio anymore, so the sound caught Ali by surprise. Suddenly, she was there in the room, plopping onto the loveseat, wearing jeans and a

chunky white sweater.

He'd slathered the canvas in acrylic ultramarine, with an undulating black form in the upper right. It looked weirdly out of place as soon as he'd painted it in; now with an audience, Ali felt especially self-conscious about his work in progress. From the side of the room, Brigid focused on him. He'd noticed months earlier that she said nothing about his art anymore, barely looked at it. He wanted to have a real conversation, one that wasn't about their children or what takeout to order on a night Mer wasn't cooking. A conversation about what, he wasn't sure.

Ali exhaled slowly and rested his brush on the palette. Brigid finally broke the silence.

The company wants me in Singapore. And I want to go. I'm a VP for Asia, I need to be there.

Ali remained motionless on his stool, making sure he'd heard her correctly, though they were alone at the top of a noiseless house. He flashed back two years, when FinnSlidell had last raised the possibility of her relocating. Will was barely a toddler then, so it had dissipated like most other impracticalities in their overstuffed lives. Ali made partner in the interim and was now more or less tied to his office. He knew Brigid knew this.

Brig, please let's talk through this.

She'd undone her ponytail and stretched out the scrunchy coils across the span of her flexing fingers. With her other hand, she restlessly began pushing her long amber hair into place on the left side of head, over and over, swooping her hand up and around her ear. Even global vice presidents have a nervous tic, he thought.

The kids should all come with me, we can't separate them. Mer, too. Finn will handle our visas, and the housing and school. It's a twelve-month placement. Then we'll see.

Ali was astounded at how obtuse he'd been. Brigid for years had complained that D.C., capital of the free world, felt small for her grand ambitions. She'd taken one extended work trip to Asia before the pandemic, then last year it was three trips. And since the election, he'd notice her glancing warily up Pennsylvania Avenue toward the White House. The inmates were running the asylum, running it positively into the fucking ground.

Brigid continued.

You could fly out every month or so, if your case schedule allows. And babe, think of how much you'll be able to paint. You know. Re-color someone's reality.

He was shocked at her baiting him like this. He wanted to throw something, solid but not breakable, to topple a stack of boxes on the other side of the room. But within reach was just hot tea and paint and his phone. He convulsed with a pathetic rage, at Brigid and at having nothing to throw.

Jesus Christ, Brigid! Seriously? Fly to fucking Singapore every few weeks like it's the shuttle to Chicago? This is our family! Fucking unbelievable. You would actually do this to us?

Brigid stopped sweeping her hair off her face. She held still but with eyes blazing, like the night they'd met.

This isn't for us. This is for me.

Lifting herself off the loveseat in a lethally smooth motion, she strode back to the staircase and down the steps, firmly shutting the door at the bottom. As the tide of silence washed back into the studio, Ali began trembling. For a second it felt like he would projectile vomit all over his canvas and thought that could be interesting.

Then it was the boys. They'd matured since the Turkey trip and Mer's arrival, remarkably so. Now they'd be enthralled with the idea of a crazy adventure on the other side of the world. A moment from last fall popped into Ali's head.

He'd taken all three out for a lazy weekend afternoon outing, Soren and Thornton behelmed on their mini scooters, Will whining in the stroller. Less than half a mile from their house, in Capitol Hill East, they'd stumbled upon a triangular pocket park with a modest playground. The older brothers scrambled up the scarlet oaks and crape myrtles that ringed the green space, while Will busied himself digging in woodchips alongside other neighborhood kids. Ali settled on a bench and instinctively checked his work email. Twelve minutes passed without incident.

Dad, called Thornton, draped over a sturdy tree limb seven feet off the ground. *How come we never came to this park before?*

Ali stared up at his son, momentarily dazed, before carving his face into a wan smile. *I didn't know it was here.*

Now he looked through the space that Brigid had vacated on the loveseat and tried to picture his year ahead. He saw nothing, a calendar without gridlines.

He gradually calmed himself and grabbed the brush, reloading it with blue paint. He would drown the random figure in the upper right, obliterate it under the waves. With his other hand, he picked up his mug and took a sip of over-steeped apple tea, lukewarm and acidic.

Goddammit, Brigid. Fucking Jaws. She had swallowed him whole.

His neck, that was the first thing she'd noticed at the Northwestern house party. Ali had nearly six inches on Brigid, so she'd had an ideal view of its gentle striations. It was a fitting pedestal for his handsome head: dense forest of hair, oil-slick eyebrows, warm brown eyes, aquiline nose, soft mouth.

His opening had been lame, he'd asked her thoughts on Chicago versus New York pizza. She'd replied, ha, actually no, Detroit pizza is best, then mocked him for trying to pick her up at a stoplight party while dressed as a red light. He seemed a good sport, so she piled on, giving him a hard time about wanting to be a lawyer, oh great another fucking lawyer, just what the world needs. With a polo shirt tucked into his khakis, he mostly looked like a cop. He started matching her drink for drink, their banter unfolding into conversation. She was genuinely interested in his family in Turkey, his loving account of fishing for trout in the Black Sea with his grandfather. Brigid downed two more red Solo cups of appletinis, then accidentally spilled most of a third cup down the front of her lemon drop dress. Ali inched nearer, his neck positioned close enough that she could count the dots of his stubble and smell his earthy musk, whispering in her ear.

Excuse me, ma'am, would it be safe for me to proceed through this yellow light?

They'd meekly waved farewell to their respective friends then bounded out of the party together, half speed-walking, half necking, traversing the five blocks south on Halstead to her apartment. Once inside, he feigned interest in her shelf of business leadership books while they chugged glasses of water, before setting back upon each other and collapsing on her futon. Under a canopy of string lights that had followed Brigid since her freshman dorm in Ann Arbor, with Phoenix's *Love Like A Sunset* trickling through her laptop speaker, she finally made full contact with his neck, tasting its grooved saltiness.

They stayed mostly dressed but mashed bodies and faces, hands flailing about in search of a grip. Eventually they got each other off through their underwear and succumbed to a drunken slumber, still enmeshed. Sticky crotches pressed together in a tangle of legs as the night pixelated into early morning.

Around six-thirty, Ali tiptoed out to catch a taxi, to get home and shower before mock trial practice. He texted her proposing dinner for that night. Brigid spent the Saturday afternoon pretending to work on a microecon problem set, her mind stuck on him, the slick law student who represented everything she found annoying about lawyers. And yet the thought of him triggered a warmth that bloomed across her body.

A dozen years later, that weekend still felt close enough for Brigid to touch, if she only reached for it. The frisson of anticipation for their first real date, their first real night after. It was the last time she'd ever feel that way about anyone.

She'd claimed his beautiful neck and pressed every ounce of her being into it. That was the Ali she could still daydream about, the one she first knew when she didn't know him at all.

@BrigToSomewhere: *Ni hao Singapore! Um, can we just live in your stunning airport? We're already picking up some Singlish phrases and can't wait to explore this amazing country!*
#JewelChangiAirport #LionCity

Ali was insisting on twice-weekly Zoom meetings with their sons. With the twelve-hour difference, he'd call during an evening break in his work, sounding exhausted, just as they were having breakfast in Singapore Standard Time. Ali quizzed them about school and what new foods they'd tried that week, eliciting distracted one-word responses from the younger two. As the eight-year-old man of the house, Soren was mature enough to sense his father struggling; he shifted anxiously in his chair, trying both to indulge Ali and escape his interrogation. Brigid would quickly wave to her husband then busy herself out of frame in the kitchen, or plot out the day with Mer, until the calls were over.

A Sunday morning at the park, mid-October, she sat on a bench, ankles crossed, watching her sons rampage over the playground. They'd made it through Singapore's southwest monsoon season and were enjoying drier, breezy days on the strait. The boys had found a favorite spot, the Coastal PlayGrove, with a labyrinthine play tower. Mer took Sundays off, so Brigid was on her own; she tried to keep her three wild things in the tower where their movements were at least semi-constrained.

Brigid fingered her phone in her pocket, thinking she should get some new pics of the kids for Instagram. If nothing else, she wanted people back home to see how Singapore did public parks, holy shit. It made the rusted neighborhood playgrounds in Capitol Hill look positively Soviet.

They're holding hands down the slide together. The boy is one of yours, right?

Brigid hadn't noticed him claim a spot on the adjacent bench, the man speaking to her. She saw him point toward the second level of the tower, where Will and a girl clad in purple flowers were grasping hands and giggling as they slid down in tandem.

Brigid smiled and turned toward the man. He wore a pressed light-gray cotton chambray shirt, blue chinos and wholecut leather oxfords. His hair was expertly parted. His round face and handsome features were hard to immediately place, maybe part-Chinese, part-European, Brigid surmised.

Who the fuck dresses like this for the playground on a weekend, was her next thought. Brigid turned self-conscious about her fleece vest that Will had stained with blueberry syrup.

Ha, oh yeah. What a cute couple. Your daughter?

Yes. Lianne. She's four-and-a-half. Yours?

Will. He'll be five in December.

The familiar pause in conversation between strangers, nothing in common except their children frolicking together for a brief moment in time. He pressed on.

American, right? Sorry if that's presumptuous.

Ah, you're very correct anyway. Are we that obvious?

Brigid again touched her phone, thinking she needed to do more Rosetta Stone. Her Mandarin had a long way to go.

Not at all. I spent the past few years in the States myself. Just moved back for business.

Really. We came from D.C., a few months ago. Also for my work. Sorry to ask the classic D.C. question, but what do you do?

I've got an ed-tech startup now, early stage. In New York, I was at McKinsey, data privacy.

Brigid froze and glanced down at her trailrunners. She shook her head and exhaled an amused snort, which he didn't notice as he kept talking.

So your whole family is here now?

She absentmindedly rubbed her left fist into her right palm, feeling the metallic pressure of the wedding band that had long ago fused with her body and disappeared from her mind.

My husband's still in D.C. He's a lawyer, working on a big case. He's joining us here soon.

Now it was the man's turn to eye his own gleaming brown shoes. Brigid spotted a tan line on his right ring finger.

And how about you?

He looked up and blinked into the late morning sun.

It's complicated.

He cleared his throat, signaling they'd arrived at another pause. He made a show of looking for his phone, extracting it from his pants pocket to check the time.

Lianne and I have a brunch date at a friend's, we should be going. Nice chatting with you. We're here most Sundays, hopefully we'll see you and Will again soon.

The man rose from the bench, giving Brigid a slight but warm bow of the head, before turning to pry his daughter from the play tower. Brigid watched his sharp chinos stride away. She hadn't asked his name.

A Sunday morning, barely thirty-six hours after meeting, Brigid and Ali awoke together in his bedroom at the Sandy Banana. The reds, yellows and greens of the stoplight party seemed impossibly long ago. Now they were just streaks of fleshtones loosely wrapped in navy sheets, their bodies still fresh and electric. Ali's index and middle finger delicately circumnavigated Brigid's areola, she lightly traced the creases in his neck.

Ali could bear the tender silence only so long before he craved the sustenance of grad school small talk.

So, where do you see yourself in five years? I'm hearing CEO of McKinsey?

She opened her mouth to defend herself and the offhand half-joke about McKinsey that she'd made months ago during a business strategy seminar. Then she paused before restarting.

Honestly, I have no idea. After B-school is kind of a blank space right now, but it feels good. The best way to describe it is like, being on your way to get ice cream. Whatever flavor you get, it'll taste pretty great. I mean, it's ice cream. But the anticipation before choosing, I've

always loved that the most, it's the sweetest part. I know what I'm capable of, I'll fill in the blank eventually. Whatever it is, fuck whoever tries to tell me what kind of ice cream to get.

Ali softly whistled, then lay still for a moment, staring at his plaster-cracked ceiling.

So... where do you see yourself in the next five minutes?

Brigid glanced down at the rumpled sheet that barely cloaked their nakedness. A form, vaguely conical in shape, was rising up under Ali's side of the blanket. Her body half propped up on her elbow, she pushed her hair up and over her ears with a pair of hand swoops. Then Brigid looked in Ali's eyes, flicked her tongue, and beamed.

Ice cream? and rolled on top of him.

So we'll be in Hanoi for a few days, then Ho Chi Minh City, then Bangkok. First time in Asia! The cruise has great reviews.

Sounds ridic, you'll love it. What about Singapore? Is that on the itinerary?

Oh shit! Brigid is there, isn't she? I should really try to see her. It's been sooo long.

Singapore's amazing, you need to go. You saw Crazy Rich Asians, right?

Yeah, of course. I mean, I watched half of it on a flight, without sound.

Send Brig a DM, see what she says. But I'm not sure how she's doing right now.

Oh? What's going on with her?

I told you my cousin works with her husband Ali, right? So Sam was at this charity gala thing with the firm, and Ali donated one of his paintings for the auction. Except... uh, Sam sent me a pic, let me text it to you.

Got it. Wait. What am I looking at? This is a painting? It's just blank.

Yeah. Sam and everyone at the event spent a long time looking at it, like trying to see if there was something there. It's really just a blank canvas. But that's not the worst part.

Jesus, what?

It's called "Untitled parentheses for Brigid."

You're kidding me.

If only. Obviously, no one bid on it. Sam said it was so fucking awkward. And nobody could get hold of Ali to ask about it.

I mean, what... Wait. Is Ali not in Asia with Brigid and the kids?

Nope. He stayed in D.C. Didn't you notice he's not in any of her Instagram posts?

Oh God. I just assumed he was the one taking all the pictures.