

PYTHAGOREAN THEOREM

Amie Whittemore

On Thursdays, Irene paints her toes gold. Gold for Janet not because Janet is golden, like a 50th wedding anniversary, nor because Janet has princessy strands of golden hair—Irene doesn't go in for the princess-types—but because there's a kind of ripening with this one, Irene thinks. Like a pear plucked green from the tree set near a window to soak up sunlight, all the sweetness it could possibly stand, before one sinks one's teeth in it. Janet is such a pear: green and wanting.

Irene carefully paints from big toe to little toe on each foot, both of which lay on top of yesterday's *Chicago Tribune*. She almost wants to dab a spot of gold onto the beige carpet, out of some lukewarm spite she still feels occasionally for her ex-husband, but he is no longer around to remind her

what a bad housekeeper she is and in the last few months his absence has inspired a new cleanliness in her. Yesterday she dusted the blinds.

She has no domestic aspirations this morning. Janet called two hours ago, on her way to work; Irene heard the clatter of buses and bodies and car horns and El-tracks in the background. Irene listened to her lover complain about her husband, some silly fight they'd had the night before, and ran her hands along her waist and breasts, imagining Janet's touch. She murmured something she hoped was sympathetic when Janet stopped complaining. They agreed Irene would bring lunch to Janet's office at noon.

A Liszt concerto dips and trills from the radio and Irene blows lightly on her toes, wiggles them, feels that momentary giddiness she associates with adolescence and decides to spend the rest of the morning in her studio. For weeks, she'd been painting a portrait of Janet: Janet sleeping, her stringy reddish hair blocking half her face. But this morning, the project lacks depth. Lacks messiness. She will try to paint herself into the portrait. Also asleep; or maybe awake, staring at the viewer. She pulls a smock over her dress and longs for Janet to strip her of it. Janet who shivers when Irene runs her toes along the backs of her calves.

William unwraps a ham and cheese sandwich from wax paper and places his keyboard on top of his computer monitor. He peers into his brown lunch

sack and finds a napkin, which he folds in half and lays across his left thigh, then loosens his tie slightly and makes a mental note to himself to tighten it after lunch, staring at his reflection in the darkened monitor screen. He thinks he looks old, thinks the gray forming at his temples has migrated north. The Cubs are in the top of the third; he tunes the radio to clear the static. Taking a bite of his ham sandwich, he finds grim satisfaction in neither looking at nor thinking about the manila folder at the edge of his desk.

“Another sorry season for the Cubs, eh Will?” Dan asks, scooping up Will’s trash bin and emptying it into the large tub on his cart. Since William began eating more of his lunches at his desk and less and less of them at parks or cafés with his wife, Janet, he and Dan have taken to ribbing each other about Chicago sports.

“It’s only June,” William responds. “We’re still enjoying the dream. Ask me in August. Then I might agree with you.” Dan laughs and continues down the corridor between the cubicles and William takes another bite of his sandwich. He sighs and reaches for the manila folder; it is stuffed with the adoption research he’s conducted on his lunch breaks now that he rarely dines with Janet. Two months ago he and Janet were told they were “reproductively challenged” by Janet’s doctor and both of them agreed that if the tests they underwent resulted in such a prognosis, they would not proceed through artificial means. William remembers the cab ride home

from the hospital, how they sat on opposite sides, each staring out opposite windows. William feels slightly guilty that he has never asked Janet what she was thinking during that cab-ride; he thought only of the skyscrapers they passed, the cacophony of honking horns, and knew they would never move back to Michigan and raise their children in the same town where they grew up, the dunes just a ten minute drive away.

That night, Janet used the word *barren*, her lips stained red with wine and now William wishes he had done more than shush away her sense of—well, at the time he thought it *defeat*, but now he suspects she meant *brokenness*—and so he researches agencies and foster care and foreign vs. domestic adoptions and stuffs print-outs of all his findings in the manila folder he lays across his lap and rifles through. It feels heavy today; he closes it and, after tapping it against his thigh for several seconds, places it into his briefcase. Removing a toothbrush from his desk drawer and brushing crumbs from his lap, he stands up to walk to the men's room. Sometimes he hates his inability to eat a meal without brushing his teeth. Janet's gentle teasing keeps him from flossing at the office. It's too much, she told him long ago. Flossing five times a day isn't going to make you a saint. Or, she added, spitting toothpaste into their sink, save your teeth.

Janet smiles weakly at her assistant as she leaves her office to head, for the third time this morning, to the ladies' room. She leans down to check that each stall is empty and then swivels the nozzle of the hand-dryer to dry the pit-stains on her blouse. Every morning before Irene visits she oozes sweat. Had she been someone else, say her sister Ruth, who, several months ago claimed to be a "polyamorist" —causing Janet to laugh loudly and call her sister an old-fashioned lush—she would find this affair less troublesome.

She returns to her office and closes the blinds so her assistant, Carol, can't spy on her agony. It is ten till noon. Janet stares at new emails as they pop into her account, each looking as if it were written in a foreign language, and fights the urge to bite her nails.

With the rest of her seventh grade basketball team, she had taken up nail biting as a sign of toughness, or at least, *not-girliness*, and carried it with her through her junior year of college. She quit when her crush, a Dr. Tallman, her political science professor who smelled of worn leather and pipe smoke, told her if she wanted to be a lawyer, she needed the hands of one. Looking at her manicured fingers, she thinks her hands do look good enough to go to trial, even though her property cases rarely do, but that though they look like lawyer hands, soft and sculpted, they do not look like hers.

She folds her hands together and imagines one of them is Irene's. They met when they were seated side by side at a nail shop: Janet in for her biweekly French manicure, Irene having her toes and fingernails painted lavender. Janet listened to Irene dismantle her recent divorce. "My husband is about as romantic as a dirty sock," she said before adding, "for the last five years we haven't shared the same bed, though," her eyebrows arching, "we *shared* beds. Just not with each other. Started with a kiss, ended with a handshake." She looked at Janet and winked: "His hands were always clammy. When he touched me it was like he was palming a basketball." Janet smiled politely and agreed to join this strange talkative woman for dinner.

Janet still finds Irene strange and talkative, she realizes, and hears her voice outside her door, exchanging pleasantries with Carol.

"Good afternoon, gorgeous." Irene smiles at Janet as she walks into her office, unwrapping a red pashmina from her shoulders and setting her bag on a chair by the door. She smooths her hands across her hips and waist, straightening her black and white print dress that falls just below her knees. Janet watches, a pencil twitching between two of her fingers as Irene closes and locks her office door. She sits on the edge of Janet's desk and runs her fingers through Janet's ear-length hair. "My cinnamon-girl," she says, coiling the fine strands between her fingers and leaning back on her opposite hand.

Janet admires how well Irene knows her own beauty: knows to wear a halter-dress to show off her muscular shoulders, knows the dress should flare to hide her hips, the stretch-marks that prove she's given birth; that somewhere in the world she has a daughter, who at 27, is older than Irene was when she'd given birth.

"Hello," Janet says, blushing under the compliment and rolling her pencil under the palm of her hand. Something about being around Irene makes her feel clumsy again, lays her back down in William's pick-up truck that summer after high school when they thought they were kicking free of their virginities, not starting a marriage.

"So, what do you want to do today, birthday girl?" Irene continues, slipping her sandals off her feet.

"It's not until Saturday." Janet too slides her feet out of her heels.

"I know, but I won't see you then. You'll be with the husband."

Janet nods and stands up from her desk, unfolds Irene's legs, and stands between them. She smiles and looks quickly into Irene's gray eyes before tracing the collar of her dress with her finger. If Irene blushed, her olive skin would turn a warm cerise; but Irene gave up blushing. Too many lovers. Too girlish. Like playing at not-knowing better. Irene knows better. Janet sinks her head into Irene's chest. Smells the lilac and jasmine of her soap. Irene grips Janet's waist and kisses her neck. She slides off the desk and holds

Janet – one of them a pillar, one light glancing off white stone – and she lays her down, does her best to turn the drab carpet into a riot of wildflowers and sunset.

Instead of typing up notes from the morning’s end-of-the-month meeting (it was his rotation to play “secretary”) and emailing them to his team, William flips open a legal pad and makes a list of what he needs to complete before Janet’s birthday on Saturday:

1. Buy a potted begonia for the sunroom and a dozen roses for her grandmother’s vase (in the hall closet, top shelf).
2. Buy breakfast spread: bagels, lox, cream cheese, fresh fruit from farmers’ market (if time?), champagne, orange juice.
3. Call Ruth to confirm dinner reservations/plans.
4. Buy gift bags and/or boxes and/or wrapping paper for gifts: freshwater pearl necklace and earrings; leather satchel; travel guide about Costa Rica for our winter trip.
5. Put new linens on the bed after work tomorrow.
6. Dessert – have waiters sing to her or not?
7. Call Mom, remind her to call Janet Saturday.

Pleased with his manageable list, he scribbles stars next to the two phone calls because he hates calling the women in his life about things like birthdays: they always add work. He taps a pen against the edge of his desk. The list was missing music.

William remembers how he and Janet began their life in Chicago, in a swell of music, that summer before she started law school at Northwestern, when he'd started at his marketing firm. Always music. On weekends they cooked together and listened to albums on the record player he'd inherited from his father. Each year for his birthday she bought him a new album, one he wanted but would never buy for himself; last year it was Dylan's *Desire*.

He knows if he were to play a record he'd have to wipe away months of dust from the turntable. Maybe after dinner Saturday he and Janet (and Ruth and whomever she brought with her, one of her "partners") could go see a show. Jazz. Bluegrass. Something. He'd have to ask Ruth for ideas; her volunteer work at an independent radio station made her more knowledgeable about these things. He opens a blank word document on his computer, types "Notes" at the top of it, then flips back to the front of the legal pad where he originally scribbled the meeting's agenda. He doodles a house, a yard, a minivan. Scraps of a life not in the city. Sometimes he feels like he and Janet have become city people: he knows the names of Chicago neighborhoods he's never been in, but could drive to. He's learned the El.

Neither of them owns a pair of grass-stained jeans nor remembers the last time they felt mud on their hands. He returns to Janet's list, draws musical notes next to Ruth's name as a reminder. Last fall he suggested they move to South Carolina. Janet asked why. "Because it seems so strange, doesn't it?" he said. "That people move there. That we could. We could leave tomorrow." And when she kissed him, he knew she was happy he said that and that she also knew he didn't mean it; he would always be dogged by Michigan: their widowed mothers, the smell of the lake. The fish silver and bronze, dying on the sand.

He adds "record store" to his list. He scribbles out the house, the yard, the minivan. He would buy a new record. It would play softly while they ate breakfast Saturday morning in bed. He could see Janet laughing, her face changing back into the face he knew growing up: her narrow nose, her profile that oddly reminded him of a finch drinking water from a puddle. The light freckles under her eyes.

"Well, do you?" Janet asks and arranges two chairs around her desk so she and Irene can eat. Irene unloads her canvas bag of cheese and olives, an apple, and crusty French bread.

"Think about her?" Irene responds. She sets a knife next to the apple. "No, I don't think about her. I mean, it was thirty years ago. I was eighteen

and saving up to backpack across Europe.” She slices the apple thinly. “I had stopped shaving my armpits.” Janet laughs and takes an olive from the Tupperware Irene had opened and set on the table. “There was no way I was going to be a mother.” Irene carefully breaks the bread into small chunks on a paper towel spread on Janet’s desk. Janet slides the olive pit onto the edge of her paper plate.

“But now. Do you? Do you think she will find you?”

“It was a closed adoption. I don’t think she could find me if she tried.”

“But do you feel her,” Janet persists. “Like... as a presence? Out there? I don’t know. That’s why I don’t want to adopt. I feel like it would bring all these other shadows into our lives. Like we were asking for some sort of drama to sneak up on us.”

“Says the married woman to her illicit lover.” Irene holds Janet’s gaze until she feels her squirm, slightly, as if her slip shifted beneath her skirt. Irene winks and the slip shifts back into place. Both women laugh; Irene sits down and spreads brie onto a piece of bread. “But, in all seriousness: do you think the husband wants to adopt?” Irene pours them glasses of sparkling water, and as she passes Janet a glass, she notices the hazy knots in the back of her hair. She reminds herself to tell her to comb her hair before she leaves.

“I don’t know what he—what William—wants. He hasn’t said. Neither of us has said anything since... well, since we stopped trying.” Janet looks at the bread in her hands. It is hard for her to say “since the affair” although that is also true. She knows that’s what this is, she knows Irene makes her feel strange and vivid and fluttery—like the zinnias her mother grew along the east side of their house—but. She sets the bread on her plate and, noticing a missed button, rebuttons her blouse. It is hard to say. “I just know that the apartment feels awfully quiet now. And all the rooms seem to be painted pale blue, which doesn’t make sense, I know.”

“No, I understand,” Irene says and begins to explain, but Janet doubts anyone understands. When she told William the same thing last night, he suggested they paint—yellow he said, buttery yellow. She said she hated yellow. He said it had been the color of her bridesmaids’ dresses, the color of the gerbera daisies she carried down the aisle. Yes, she said. Exactly, she huffed. And he left the living room, where they had been watching the evening news, and went to bed. He knew he seemed irritated to her, even angry. He lay in their bed and stared at the walls; they did seem blue, as if a blue dust had settled over the white walls. But he couldn’t tell her that. He brushed the dust off an old newspaper, folded it to a crossword puzzle he left unfinished months ago, and began to work it. Janet sat in the living room and stared at the television and thought about her wedding—her friends

had worn yellow. A swallowtail had drifted between her and William and the photographer. This morning she had put on a yellow blouse and William had kissed her on the cheek.

Janet fingers the yellow silk of the blouse. She smiles at Irene, unsure of what she said, hearing only her ex-husband's name, and the phrase "spoiled milk." "Yes," Janet says. "That's exactly how it is."

Irene smiles. She pats Janet's hand and then turns her wrist to read her wristwatch. "I should leave soon."

Janet nods, chewing an apple. "I'm glad you came today."

"Me too." Irene clears the table, stacking the glasses one inside the other. Irene motions for Janet to turn around and she smooths the back of her hair with her fingers. Only the tiny sound of fingers, hair tearing and untangling. "You know," she says, "you should use conditioner. Your hair will be brittle like a broom by the time you're my age if you don't."

Janet nods and pats down her hair while Irene jots down her favorite brand of conditioner on a scratchpad. Irene would also like to make a list of clothing stores, shoe brands, would like to make a present of new eyeglasses to replace the old-fashioned wire-frames Janet uses to read, but she restrains herself. "Monday?" Janet asks and Irene pulls a day calendar from her purse and tightens her lips, thinking.

"No, Monday won't work. Tuesday?"

“Tuesday.”

Irene writes a note in her calendar and moves toward the door. She pulls her wrap around her shoulders. “Sometimes I do,” she says, reaching into her purse for her sunglasses. “Think about her.” She gently closes the door behind her while Janet watches her leave, her mouth slightly open until she closes it into a frown.

Janet decides to walk home from work: she skips the gym, skips the train and walks however many miles from River East to their brownstone in Wrigleyville. Light slants between the buildings and glazes the river as she crosses it, making its caked-mud and green color seem almost pretty.

Though she has never considered herself someone who belongs in a small town the way William did, on summer afternoons such as this, when the lake air laces its cool fingers between the spines of the skyscrapers, she sometimes misses small-town life: a river unbounded. Backyard ponds. Decorative windmills, stone geese with sun-stained clothes. Which was not to say she did not like this life, this city—she likes her life, she thinks, as she tugs her purse onto her shoulder and heads west and north block by block.

Had she been a different woman, one who was never told to watch her posture by doctors and basketball coaches and nervous English teachers, one who had been born with perfect vision, Janet might have overcome her

need to look at her profile in every passing window. She sees herself in the glare of covered bus stops. She sees herself in the windows of cafés and restaurants and bodegas. And when she walks alone, as she does today, each glance makes her hold her shoulders back, makes her aware of how her weight settles on her feet—she'd been slightly pigeon-toed growing up—and with each step she grows more erect and more precise in her movements until she reaches a curb and, blinded by the silent, diligent alignment happening in her body, nearly walks into a taxi. She backs onto the curb and looks both ways before crossing again, her heart tittering on its heels.

Today is the day before the last day she will be 34, and, somehow, that seems significant. She unbuttons her suit jacket and straightens her blouse and doesn't worry if her skirt, just short of knee-length, rides up her thighs as she walks. This afternoon a beautiful woman made love to her on the tenth floor of an office building in America's third largest city. This was something. That and a man standing on the corner playing a clarinet. In front of her two teenagers sit on a stoop and draw on each other's arms with magic markers. She tries to count their piercings: four in each of their faces and at least three in each of their ears. She smiles at an elderly woman passing, her groceries strapped to the cart she drags. She likes the sound the woman's

heels make on the cement. She neatly avoids a green splotch of chewed gum.

Were she not married, these tokens of the day might have gone unnoticed. Had she not tried for the last five years to become a mother, 35 might be just another birthday. But she was married, and she had tried, and when her cell phone rings and she sees William's name, she answers it boldly: "Well, hello husband."

"Well, hello wife," he says and laughs. "Where are you?"

"Walking."

"Walking where?"

"Home."

She listens as William checks his watch and she imagines him looking at the sky for signs of approaching nightfall. "When will you get here?"

"Oh, it'll probably be an hour or so."

"I was thinking we could make dinner together tonight. It's been forever." She didn't hear any question in his voice; she'd almost tired of looking for it. She felt sure he didn't notice even the most usual of signs—her lack of sexual interest. The fact that her friend Irene never phones anymore, that their foreign movie nights have dwindled away. And of course the missed lunches. But then she too, without guile, misses cooking with

William, his excitement about the names of spices. The night he whispered *garam masala* and kissed her neck while a curry simmered on the stove.

“Yes, let’s,” she says and bends to pick up a nickel from the sidewalk.

“Should I stop at the store?” She tucks the nickel into her heel.

“Pick up some wine. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Ok.” She turns off her phone and slips it back into her purse. She looks at the crosswalk ahead of her, the walk-sign counting down the seconds from seven. She is tempted to slip off her shoes and dart across, but she knows, if, on an evening such as this, so bloomy with June and approaching dusk, she begins to run, she will not stop and it would be her tenth birthday all over again.

She ran then. It was a game of tag and though she and William argue about it, she is certain he hadn’t been there. Some other boy (was it Joey Steele?) chased her and called her a wimp and so she ran down the street, past the elementary school and through the baseball diamond and out into the chive fields and when she finally stopped to look back all she saw was her own town, its southern edges fading into farmland. When she returned home, her mother sent her directly to her room and Ruth, delighted to be ceded the limelight, offered to unwrap her presents and high-fived her as she slumped to her bedroom.

Today, Janet's feet have the same twitch in them—to dash. The nickel slides beneath her toes and it feels cool and warm at once. *To or from*, she thinks, like *heads*, or *tails*, and she thinks of letting the coin decide. She imagines Irene in her art studio sculpting female forms out of wet clay. She sees William in their kitchen setting the table, pulling out candelabras from her grandmother's hutch. She slips off her shoe and dumps the coin into her hand, takes all the change from her pocketbook and grips it in her fist, determined to spread what wealth she can to any beggar she meets, even the crazy man ahead of her howling at a wastebasket, if he asks.

That evening, Irene realizes, as she circles her classroom teaching her adult education class how to paint the human form, that she had told the truth to Janet, though she'd set out to lie. Though social rules bothered her, she had a set of her own: don't wear brown and black together. Don't ask other artists about their influences. And don't ever talk about the adoption. In the center of the room, tonight's model sits cross-legged: an overweight middle-aged man with a tattoo of Betty Boop on his left shoulder who blinks heavily. Irene knows he and her students need a break. They have stopped caring. She has too, as she paces around them, nodding. She imagines her daughter—a college graduate by now?—sitting in a classroom, bored, twirling her hair. Maybe with a pierced nose or eyebrow. Teeth straightened

by adolescent years of orthodontia. She knows her hair is the color of dark chocolate, much darker than her own, and curly; she smiles grimly—she didn't entirely break her rule. It had been an open adoption.

She claps her hands together as if shaking them free of chalk-dust and tells the class to take a ten-minute break. The model shakes off his sleepiness and begins to pull on a robe. Students gather their cigarettes and purses and jackets to head to the vending machines and the smoking patio. She sits at her desk and sips lukewarm jasmine tea. She thinks about the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet in her studio at home, filled with envelopes from her daughter's adoptive parents, only a handful of which she's opened. Even those she hasn't read. When she does open the folder and glances at the face that joined her own with the idiot boy she had thought she loved, her chest aches; she lies down in bed and draws the curtains closed. She knows that the last envelope, sent nearly ten years ago when her daughter turned 18 is addressed in her daughter's hand. That if she opened it—well. She pours the dregs of her tea into a potted aloe on her desk. Well—what then?

She knows she won't open the letter. Her classes, her little affairs like truffles each season, her summers teaching in Greece—plenty. A brimming life. There is no need to make a mess of things.

She files her nails and closes her eyes, tells the image of the small girl in pigtails, her mouth full of metal and rubber-bands, to go away. She knows she won't tell Janet any of this. She thinks of what she will say: sleep with your husband. Say, I don't mind. Irene knows this affair is a moment's warm passage that began that night they went to the movies and Janet wept and Irene took her back to her home in the suburbs. They drank wine and Irene tried to build a fire though the logs were damp and smoked, causing both women to cough and laugh, their coughing and laughter like a flock of bats sputtering around an attic. Irene kissed her and Janet kissed her back. And whatever started then caused other things to stop. That was it. She would tell Janet she shouldn't stop.

William sets the table for dinner and after he finishes, stands in the kitchen looking for something to do. He doesn't want to start cooking without Janet. She called ten minutes ago to have him choose between a Sangiovese and a Tempranillo. He said, get both. And she said, what are we celebrating? And he said, you pick and when she laughed he imagined her staring up at the ceiling of the liquor store and he thought she might have wiped a tear from her eye, and then she said, oh I don't know. Let's celebrate red wine.

So he waits. He organizes the mail into a pile of his and hers. He washes and dries his water glass. He stares at the packet of adoption research, trying to decide where to put it, how to bring it up in conversation. Maybe, sipping wine after dinner, Janet pushing back her chair and stretching her legs across his knee, he would massage her feet through her pantyhose. He would say to her, “So, during my lunch hour I’ve been...” but if he starts like that, it might sound like, *during the lunch hours you’ve cancelled our dates...* and that is not what he means.

He knows, even though Janet doesn’t mention it, that it is Irene with whom she lunches most of the week. He found out weeks ago, when he called shortly after noon and Janet’s assistant answered and told him. He felt relief: Janet had someone to lean on. She wasn’t hiding under her desk, biting her nails, falling apart midday most Thursdays, some Tuesdays, and occasionally on Fridays. Irene, who he remembers is an artist and laughs too loudly at restaurants, and is, he thinks, divorced; Irene, who is helping Janet through this.

William carries the manila envelope to their bedroom and sets it on his dresser. This way, Janet can’t accuse him of making some sort of presentation. He’ll say, casually during dinner, something like, *You know, Richard, in accounting? He and his wife just adopted a little boy and... Yes.* That’s how he’ll say it. And, after he uncorks the wine and Janet pulls two

glasses from the cupboard, he'll suggest she invite Irene to join them for her birthday dinner. To show her that he understands. That nothing needs to be said. Yes, that is what he will do, though part of him wishes he were a different man, one who could forget dinner and simply scoop his wife into his arms when she walks in the door and carry her to bed; undress her; sing to her; but he is not that man. He returns to the kitchen and pulls vegetables from the refrigerator. He is hungry and he likes to cook, and he knows Janet does too, and when he hears her keys in the door, he spins the spice rack and begins pulling small bottles from their slots.

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