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## Basement Heart

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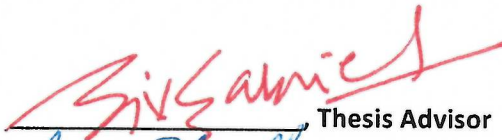
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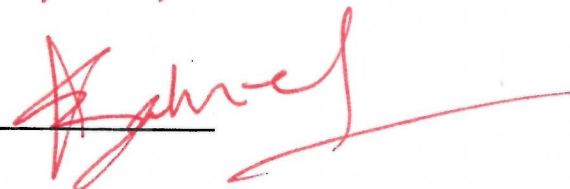
  
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Samantha Tkac

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## Table of Contents

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Basement Heart.....	3-9
Leaving them Dead.....	10-20
Seashells are made of Salt.....	21-29
I'm Yours.....	30
The Sticky Lower Realm.....	31-40
The Fall.....	41-48
Hot Thoughts.....	49-57
The Hill, Honey.....	58-73
Big Screens.....	74-82

## Basement Heart

There was nothing wrong with Chad in the bedroom, nothing at all. Ruth just wanted something more. Every fuck was the same pattern of contraction and relaxation, veins tightening and tendons flexing until everything collapsed and it was over.

Ruth wanted 300 pounds of flesh piled on top of her pelvis. She wanted suffocation of the genitals, suffocation of the face. She was sick, so sick of all the talking.

She stood naked in the bedroom doorway with her hip thrust and her breasts oiled over with Chad's hair shine product. This was an attempt for sex. But a half-hearted one at that. It took more than her bare chest to challenge Chad's libido. He had to be coerced.

"What's up?" Chad said over his *deltoid* muscle. It sat taut and raised atop his shoulder bone. She knew these names because he told her. He would point and say, this is what *this* is—tracing thick fingers along muscles and bones that were hard to find in her body, that only surfaced when she punched a pillow or fucked him on top, her arms braced against the wall.

"Do you want to...you know?" Ruth said, careful to not be too direct. He flinched. She hated that. He barely looked up as he mumbled his excuse, ("Honey, you know I'm going to the gym later") before he was re-immersed in the pages of *Muscle Man*, a magazine where post-sexual men, ripped beyond repair, flexed their rigged arms, legs and abs, all to the male-viewers scrutiny and delight.

"Steroids make your dick small," she said, and pulled on a pair of jeans. Chad snorted. Ruth ripped up the zipper of her jeans and winced, a tuft of pubic hair caught in the teeth.

"I'm going downstairs to Starbucks," she said. She hoped he would stop her from leaving. Hoped he would jump up and say, "don't you dare put that shirt on." But he didn't. They had reached a point where nudity wasn't a call for sex. Knocking into her bare breasts, Chad

would say, “did I hurt you?” with the gentlest of expressions. Whenever she stripped down, he’d look up from his magazine and say, “honey, aren’t you cold?” She rarely saw him naked anymore. He was always strapping himself into compression shorts and heading to the gym to build up his thighs, his arms, his chest--ensuring any soft spots were hardened over. On the rare occasions that Ruth dragged him into the bedroom, she realized that even when he was erect, there was no contrast between the hard thing between his legs and any other part of his body. It was like fucking a rock. Even his lips were firm and chewy, like leather.

“No thanks,” he said, and picked up a book beside him. His arm muscles were pleasantly flaccid, Ruth noticed. The muscle hung like fat. She wished it would stay that way. But he licked a red forefinger and his arm flexed as he turned the page.

“I’ll be no time at all,” she said. She tripped into her rain boots, and hurried downstairs to Starbucks.

Starbucks was where Billy worked.

Billy had a fat face and thick fingers. He had a stacked chin and a wide neck and swollen breasts. Breasts that were undoubtedly as big as hers. He hunched over the register, leaning on a stool that she knew he’d demanded from the manager, and asked for her order.

“I’ll have the pumpkin spice tea. Is that a thing?”

“That’s not a thing,” he said. She imagined the vibrations of his deep voice tickling his genitals. She took a breath, cracked her knuckles.

“Then I’ll have the chai tea,” she said.

She waited for her order at the end of the bar, and thought up a scenario: A threesome with Billy and Chad? No. She imagined Billy’s gooey limbs thudding against a mattress... maybe Chad would just watch. This was not a matter of needing a cuddle—this was a call from her

loins. She removed Chad from the fantasy altogether, her thoughts suffocated by imagining her thighs closing in over Billy's puckered eyes. She sat down with her drink at a rickety table and stared at Billy. She watched his pig fingers punch in numbers on the register. All the blood had seeped from her brain and pooled in her clitoris. She needed to fuck him--she knew it in the dungeons of her heart.

\*\*\*

"Chad, do you want to have a threesome?" she said. She hopped up on the kitchen counter and watched him do pushups on the floor. He pumped up and down, his lips grazing the shag carpet. She watched as his shoulder blades peaked and his spine held still between the rounded cliffs of back muscle. She took a long sip from her tea, narrowed in on her boyfriend's flushed face. "Following your pussy is as simple as following your cock," her uncle used to say. "A woman's clit gets just as hard, let me tell you. Like a tiny penis." Her uncle was a large, stationary man. Wherever he sat it looked like he'd been there for decades, gathering dust and bedsores.

Ruth slipped off the counter as her boyfriend popped off the floor. She pressed her tiny penis against the waistband of his sweats. She dragged a finger up his happy trail to his belly button, pulled out a nail full of lint, pretended to eat it.

"You're gross," he said, pushing her face away. But she flipped under his hand, slid down his forearm and bit his tricep. "Ow!" he said. "I told you. You can't keep doing that shit." She bit down again, softly, with her lips. He shuddered.

"I'm sorry," she said. She blinked up at him. She knew she was a pretty thing. She had the silky dark hair, the angular cheekbones, the blue eyes. She had matched her parts to those advertised in glossy magazines. She'd see a flat torso, a set of perky breasts and say to herself,

yeah, I've got that. Men were simple that way, she thought. What they see is what they want. It just so happened that her body fit the current trend. She used to think she could grip any man and lead him to bed like a dog on a leash. But Chad was different. Chad would take this very personally.

“You want a threesome?” Hurt bled into his face.

“No,” she said. She put her hand on his thigh, felt the sweat moisten her palm, and dug her fingers in.

“Good,” he said. Ruth felt deflated. But she was bored and wanted to feel something heavy pressed on top of her, so she groped him through his sweats, whispered, “Come on, sweetie” and they went to bed, despite her miniature erection being gone.

As he humped her, Ruth thought about a story she and her uncle had heard on the radio about a female store owner in Milwaukee, whose store was broken into by a male robber. The woman knocked the robber out, took him down to the basement and IV'd him Viagra. She raped him for two weeks until his penis was so raw that when she finally let him go he needed skin-graft surgery. She remembered how her Uncle had spat on the ground, called the woman a cunt. There was rage in his voice. Ruth liked that.

Chad came, and let out a noise that sounded like a moan and a scoff and then emptied all over her belly. He kneeled over her, squinting at her through the darkness, and collapsed beside her. Ruth scooped the white stuff off of her pelvis and wiped it down his neck. “Ruth!” he said. He ran into the bathroom, arching back to ensure that none of it slid down his chest. She smiled, felt a sort of warm tingling between her legs, and touched it. It spread. When he came back in, she stopped. “I'm going to the gym,” he said. *Good*, she thought.



Ruth waited for Chad to leave, then went down to Starbucks again.

“Billy,” she said. “Come upstairs with me.”

“What’s your name?” he said. “I’m sorry, we have so many customers and—”

“I’m Ruth. I come in everyday,” she said.

“I have some closing chores.” He picked at his neck.

“Outside,” she said. “Five minutes.”

Outside, she waited, and pressed her face against the cold glass of the Starbucks window. She didn’t understand this pull—this need for something other than what she already had. What was going to be so different about Billy’s penis? She already owned one, had pressed it inside of herself not a half an hour ago, yet now she wanted another. She closed her eyes, imagined different genitalia in a lineup. Sure there were different bends and lengths, widths and colors—but they were all equally ugly and equally tempting. She watched Billy as he swept the floor. He swung the broom back and forth, satisfied with the dust merely dissipating in the air, not caring where it landed. He turned away and gave every corner the same swishy treatment, never used the dustpan once.

Ruth noticed women passing behind her on the sidewalk as she flattened her nose against the window. She smelled their expensive perfume, listened to the delicate clicking of their high-heels, and kicked her shoe against the brick base of the building. These were the women Ruth hated. Women who took good care in advertising their bodies but flinched at the word “cunt” because they’d never taken a mirror to their own. Ruth opened her eyes—stared deep into the grey pits of her own reflection. Billy stepped out.

“Come on,” she said, and tugged him by the sleeve up to her apartment.

Chad was gone. She wasn't sure what she would have said to him, anyway. But the possible conversations that played in her head were all fuzzy, distracted by the large man standing beneath her fluorescent lights. In the cramped kitchen, Ruth saw Billy for what he was—a whale. He was a whale whose blubber couldn't be extracted, whose body served no purpose except for her own. Ruth brought him into the bedroom and climbed on top of him. His moan sounded like he was drowning in his own spittle.

“Shut up,” she said. She pulled down his pants, snapped on a condom. Billy cleared his throat, said he was sorry. She paid no mind. No longer did he have a voice. No longer did he have a purpose but to get hard, and he could barely do that. She wished she had planned this out better, wished she had an IV full of Viagra. When Ruth couldn't stick him inside of her, he offered her a pathetic palm-full of spit. She pushed his hand away.

“This is your clavicle,” she said with sharp enunciation. She took his hand and guided it along the smooth ridge, which was buried under layers of mushy flesh. “Doesn't that feel nice?” she said.

She dropped his hand and scooped up his rubbery breasts, massaged his elevated nipples, and stuck him in. When he came she took it and smeared it all over his face. He turned away when she was done, as if embarrassed for not turning away sooner. Ruth stroked his cheek, let her fingers linger at his fatty jugular, and pinched him, hard.

“It's my turn,” she said. But Billy's hands were busy fumbling with his black polo.

“How are *you* cold?” Ruth said.

Billy grunted.

“I need to get home, I have work tomorrow and--” he flipped his legs over the edge of the bed--Ruth cringed. It looked like sausages were packed under the loose skin of his stretch-

marked thighs. She wanted to feel the bumps and see what happened when she squeezed the soft spots. She scuttled back on top of him, pushed him down by the shoulders, and crouched over his face. He didn't protest. She gripped his head between her knees to make it a sure thing.

“Please?” she said. The slick pinch of nerves between her legs was so close to his lips—and why shouldn't she get a turn? She felt her lust for him stronger than ever. She looked down at his quivering pale face. She saw her heart above him, beating between her thighs.

## Leaving Them Dead

The first story Mickey submitted to the class was about mutilating a man in his sleep.

“Oh,” said the Writer, peering at Mickey over horned-rimmed glasses, looking at her as if she had a slab of meat stuck to her chin and was too stupid to wipe it off.

“Do you always leave them dead?” the Writer said. “Mickey?” Mickey opened her eyes.

“Most definitely, yes,” Mickey said, coming to. She shook the fog out of her brain like a dog shaking off sewer water. The Writer cocked her head. “It’s where the pen leads me, every time,” Mickey said. “The blood jet,” she said, clearing her throat, hoping that quoting Plath would shut everyone up.

“Blood indeed,” the Writer said.

She had flown to Chamonix, a small hiking and skiing town on the other side of the world, to attend a writing workshop. The cramped little city reminded Mickey of a Grimm’s fairy tale. The French town was bustling and attractive on the surface, but the way people ignored each other, their faces stone-hard, felt indicative of something darker, something lurking. She half expected to see lederhosen donned twins Hansel and Gretel nibbling on storefront siding, while a lecherous old woman waited around the corner for a chance to shove them into an oven.

There were all kinds of little restaurants with sprawling outdoor seating areas, which blended into the next eating area of the adjacent restaurant, and so on and so forth. Popular American songs from early 2000s played in bars and coffee shops. And, like anywhere else, all of the young people stumbled about, nose-diving into their phone screens. Mickey watched one teenage girl smack into a brick wall while snapping photos of herself; tongue wagging, cleavage

pursed, facial expressions twisting between hyperbolic representations of rage, lust, and grief. She simply turned and walked back the way she'd come.

Mickey walked past the rushing river which tore through the little town with such thrashing force that it made her weak in the knees. She was used to the slow, stagnant rivers that she'd bobbed down as a teenager, sucking on PBR and hoping that her inevitable sunburn might fade to tan. This river had a gravitational pull, and she felt a feeling akin to lust that made her ache to dip her toes in. *Just try it!* the river seethed, *just try it you stupid American girl*. She knew the moment her toes made contact it would grab her, pull her under, never to be found. She shivered.

Mickey kept walking down the long cobblestone road. She walked past the narrow and crowded streets, past quaint restaurants and big bellied men slumped in wire-backed chairs. They reminded her of dead whales on a beachfront. There was an all-consuming rot about them. One of the men sitting outside of a bar stroked his paunch like a child acquainting himself with his body for the first time. He grunted at Mickey in nasally French or English--hard to tell, and glared at her midriff as if trying to commune with it separately, as if it deserved severance, a freedom that only he had the right to grant. And Mickey felt lighter, as though she missed a button on her blouse and her guts spilled out into a neat pile by her feet. She'd been cat-called before, physically and emotionally groped--who hadn't--but this time felt different.

"Little girl," he said. "Little girl, how pretty." She could hardly ignore him, her whole body activated, but she tried not to look. He lifted his chin, expelling too much cigarette smoke from one man's throat. "Come here," he purred. Mickey stumbled on the cobblestone, hesitated, turned around.

What would he do if she stepped forward? Would he continue to gaze into her belly button as if it was a crystal ball, as if he was trying to summon the dead? Would he take her hand and slide her fingers against his own stomach? Would she feel a heartbeat? Because there was an alarm ringing inside of her own heart, she felt it ticking faster than a kitchen buzzer--warning her from thinking thoughts she shouldn't, that no person should ever think--

“Bonjour,” said Mickey, interrupting herself. She floated away, drifting through clouds of smoke that wrapped around her like warm blankets. She yelled up to the leering mountains: “Bonjour! Bonjour!”

\*\*\*

After dinner she went back to the bar and found the man. She sat closeby. She brought her pen and paper and ordered a glass of Merlot from a wispy long fingered server, and sipped the syrupy wine slowly as she watched him. They were both angled toward the cobblestone walkway that snaked through the town, him in perfect position to lurch, her in perfect position to watch him lurch. His eyes followed most women. He did not seem to discriminate based on age or size. His locked onto some aspect of them--what aspect she couldn't discern from her angle, she just saw his eyes get sticky and slow as the women got close. She was sure he wasn't looking at their faces.

She wanted him to look at her face.

She wanted to cradle his.

She jot down notes. He had wide set eyes, a nose that bumped out at the bridge and redeemed itself by curving in at the snout. He had big thick lips and a tongue that slid across them, about twice a minute. They were chapped, flecked with white chips of dead skin.

\*\*\*

The second workshop went better than the first. Mickey's story was about a woman who wanted to be physically inside of people--craved to crawl inside of them through the tear ducts or the nose holes. It was a story about manic, desperate projection of sexuality in the midst of a writhing rape culture. Her character was an innocent. Mickey thought people would like it.

"I read this character as autistic," said a dumbass undergrad. "Like, who actually goes through life unaware of sexual protocol yet is so obviously aroused by men?"

"I think that these characters need something motivating them besides sex," said the Writer.

That night Mickey dreamt of sitting across from the man in a steaming bubble bath. They sat in a lion-footed tub. The man was engaged in popping the enormous pink bubbles with his pinky fingers, the sound of each pop as shrill as a teenager snapping gum in a doctor's office. The sound racketed around the empty air until the water was still. And when she looked below the surface, there he was--a floating head. His gray cheeks were soft and still, his puckered scalp bumped gently against her abdomen.

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The town was small, but it felt as though she was dancing beneath a spotlight. The mountains stared down at her from all sides, goading her on.

She was exposed.

As though she loved being looked at, loved the attention. As though she was getting off to it. She pulled down the neck of her shirt, and incorporated a shimmy into her step as she strolled down the long circus of chairs and people and men, their fat heads shining like high-beams over the lingering clouds of smoke.

Mickey arrived to class late the next day. She didn't say a word, and neither did they. The class was engaged in a politics talk, and Mickey knew enough to understand what they were talking about, but didn't feel capable of participating. Mickey had submitted a story the night before. She wrote it in what felt like a rage, and that's all the story was: a woman raging.

"Not a single moment of peace, of interiority," said the Writer. The story was made up of violent and visceral scenes, hastily stitched together like Frankenstein's monster, about a girl who had been raped by her teacher, and who sought revenge by hiring a hit man whose daughter had been similarly abused.

The Writer said that Mickey's types of stories are very popular among her undergraduates, that she sees a lot of, "role-switching to where the women abuse the men, revenge fiction."

"I don't *believe* that the hitman would rape the teacher with a broomstick, I don't *believe* his anger," the Writer said. The dumbass undergraduate sitting beside her snickered. What's there to believe? Mickey thought. Anger is anger is anger is anger: a hot faucet you can't turn off. She imagined the Writer responding to this metaphor: "well, who turned on the faucet in the first place?" Mickey bit her lip and counted her pulse, her insides plumeing like flame in a grease fire. The Writer's words felt slick and wet, stroking her like water.

The asshole undergraduate approached after class.

"Where were you yesterday?" she said. Mickey didn't say anything, just pretended not to hear her. She thought of the man-whales blowing their smoke at the sky, she thought of the river.

\*\*\*



Mickey uncorked a bottle of wine. She sat on her balcony and didn't bother with a glass. She thought of what the Writer said, about her stories being typical. She supposed she was just typical, and she couldn't do anything about that. Perhaps if she convinced them of the anger, they'd understand. She swigs from the bottle. Falling slowly above her were paragliders. Two people were harnessed in tandem to each chute, but from far away they appeared as singular humanoid specs in the big blue, wired to bright fabrics that sway against high mountain winds she couldn't feel from this far below.

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She didn't realize she'd passed out. It is the next day, and class is in less than an hour. She dreamt that she was eating macaroni out a dirty hand, which only made her hungrier. She bounded out the door and down the stairs and charged up the street. She shouldered through the door of the first shop she comes across, which turns out to be a bakery. Lined before her are pastries so enormous and wet with cream that she can feel herself salivating, the spittle foaming at the sides of her mouth. She plucked at her ribcage, wondering when she ate last. But she can't do the math in her head, confused by all the time travel. She picked one by jabbing at the glass, pointing at the largest and wettest, mistakenly saying in Spanish: "Uno por favor." And then she bit in, thinking, *French food is the only decent substitution for sex*. It was filled with cream so dense and cold that it coated her teeth like a soft retainer.

"Merci," Mickey said to the cashier through her soft teeth. The cashier looked beautiful in her boredom, and didn't seem to be wearing a lick of makeup. She rolled a slim cigarette through her fingers, performing a lazy baton act.

"You're welcome," she said.

As she stepped out the shop door, a man pushed ahead of her. He moved his legs as if experiencing earth's gravity for the first time, shocked by the weight of it on his limbs. As she stepped around him she noticed his bulbous head tilting southward, down toward her ass. She had half a mind to lift her skirt, to shit all over his loafers. When she saw his face, she felt sick. It was him. It was the leaching man.

She arrived in class and doesn't even remember walking there, she was so caught up in her own thoughts. People in class had written about all kinds of things, there's a wide variety, sure, but none involve broomstick raping, and Mickey doesn't care to comment on them. Everyone is talking about a hike they went on the evening before. The Writer said that it's important writers experience things to expand upon them in your fiction; that it's not always necessary but always helpful. Mickey asked, "Well, in your book, the main character murders someone. Have you have murdered someone?" And everyone laughed and Mickey smiled, her teeth cabernet-red.

After class, the writer says in a low voice to Mickey, "you need to dedicate yourself to the craft. You need to be all in, or it won't happen for you."

Mickey nodded, and managed to stumble home. She masturbated on the hardwood floor of her apartment. She thought about the rushing river, how it splits the city in two.

Mickey realized the next morning or maybe it's the next-next morning, that she didn't know what day of the week it was. She corked open a bottle of wine and drank it like she's involved in a fraternity chugging contest. She threw on a dress and walked out into the little town. It was dusk. The paragliders flashed their bright colors high above her. She made her way to a bar, her notebook tucked beneath her arm. She had already consumed one bottle of wine, and decided that a healthy cut off might be two bottles of wine. I mean, when in France, right?

She walked to the pub where she knew he would be; where all of the fat men lingered on wire-back chairs and sneered at women. She stepped past them as a person does when walking past a nest of bees and told herself, they only respond to fear, while hoping in her gut that they lunge.

She sat at the corner of the bar, in view of the whales. And she began to drink.

A young man walked up to her.

“Hey, you a hiker?”

“No,” she said. “A writer.” But this felt like the worst kind of lie.

“Ah, I can see your notebook.” he said, in precise but heavily accented English. “What do you write about?”

She melted inside, words seeming useless—the luxury of. “Fiction,” she said, safely.

He paused and she realized it was her turn to ask him a question. She could hardly look away from her whale, who was burning through cigarettes like a rabbit chomping down a carrot stick. Chomp chomp. Chomp.

“I’m sorry,” Mickey said. “I have to go.”

She walked outside and grabbed the whale by the collar of the shirt.

“Follow me,” she said. She tried to smile, but didn’t think it passed. They walked, her in lead, down a dark alleyway, toward the river.

“You’re a pretty American girl?” The man said. They stood together, hand in hand, on the bridge. The river screamed up at them, only five feet below. The man was fat and smelled of cigarettes. He began talking in French, perhaps thinking that he was missing his mark with his broken English. But his French isn’t sexy like in the movies. It sounds like he’s talking with food

caught in his throat, a gurgling sound. The underside of his belly hangs over his drawstring shorts. How could he ever think she would want him? That anyone would?

Then his hands pressed all over her chest, as if searching for a secret lever. It felt no different, really, than being felt up by security at the airport. Mickey was fucking bored.

She whipped around, her backside split against his thigh, and arched backwards like a ballerina, plunging her elbow into his throat--thinking, now *there's* the lever!. He fell over the side of the bridge easily, too easily. She didn't even hear a splash. She pulled her notebook from her purse, preparing to document the experience. She paused, pen attached to paper, an inky blot expanding out from from the felt tip. Then she threw that in, too.

As she walked down the street she notices her upper thigh is wet, right above the hem of her dress. Perhaps he splashed, after all.

\*\*\*

The next day Mickey tried to write at a cafe. She watched people walk by while crouching over a rickety metal table with a session lager because she got nervous about mispronouncing the names off the wine menu, so said "Stella" to the waiter instead. People watching, she thought, was something writers do. But everyone began to look the same after a while, so she made up a game: she told herself to identify the qualities that separate American faces from European faces. Americans: their faces are younger-seeming, more innocent. Even old men and women have large expanses of eye and smile, ready to absorb whatever free samples the world is offering. Mickey thinks they look stupid, that she must look stupid, too. Europeans, on the other hand, have narrower expressions--not unpleasant or mean, just protective like shields.

She tapped her pen on the blank page. She thought about the fat man falling into the river, meditates on it. But the exhilaration seems trapped in that moment--she can't find an in. She felt as though, throughout the course of this trip, different parts of her personality and memory have been systematically restricted of access, that she's become a narrower version of her once exuberant, once fully fleshed out self.

That's when she saw him--a man who looked as though he spent the night in a river. His skin, even from afar looked gray and sagging, in need of a blood transfusion. He was clearly the type of person you crossed the street to avoid. Just a mere glance in his direction and your nostrils are at risk of being permanently injected with rotting stench. He wore the same sweats and yellow shirt he had on the night before. But his stomach was no longer hanging over his drawstrings, instead he had tucked his shirt into his pants in an effort to conceal himself, or perhaps to strap himself down as he bouldered up the hill, his stomach shifting back and forth in time with his angry, arm-pumping stride. Mickey smoothly lowered her sunglasses.

"You!" he said to a woman. He had stopped a few feet away, and was glaring down at a young woman who was sitting alone at a table, a thick book lying open on her lap. She had dark hair, longer than Mickey's, and is wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat. She looked up at the filthy creature, wedging her thumb in the book's spine to save her page.

"Excuse?"

"You are the girl?" the man said, losing a bit of his momentum, questioning himself. He placed his hands on his hips, leaning on one leg for support. Mickey wonders what the man was expecting--a confession, an apology? Maybe. Mickey wished she had someone to turn to in that moment and laugh, "Well, I didn't expect him to make it out alive!" She wondered if any such person existed.

The girl made a flapping gesture with her other hand, as if to say, “shoo now,” and leaned back into her novel, concealing her face beneath her protective hat. The man stood there for a moment or two with that same huffy look on his face. Then he took a few slow steps backwards, sweeping his gaze across the seating. When he turned up the street, his chest deflated, his shoulders hunched. *Was that it?* Mickey thought. She expected him to put up a fight. She got up, deciding that it wasn't a good writing day after all, and followed the man. He walked all the way back to the bar where she found him originally. He stepped up to a man smoking a cigarette and asked him for one. He collapsed into a wire back chair, never moving his eyes up from his lap, never finishing his cigarette. The butt dropped from his fingers onto the cool stone, and his head fell with it. He'd fallen asleep, his legs sprawled and arms tossed carelessly on either side.

Mickey stared at him, feeling what might be sympathy. There was a part of her, very small, that was glad he had made it out. There was a larger part that wished he hadn't. She wished he was tangled up with his arms whipping against the current, like trash caught beneath a rock. She stepped up to him and pinched him by his silver dollar sized earlobe. He woke up with a snort, and said what sounded like, “Gi-Gi?” There was a momentary softness in his expression that made her wonder who Gi-Gi was, whether she was a mother or sister or daughter or wife, or if he had simply readjusted the snot in the back of his throat. She released his lobe, cupped his chin, and pressed her mouth against his forehead, flattening her lips and teeth against his skin so that he could feel the difference between soft and hard things.

## Seashells are Made of Salt

Miles and the girl are brought together in celebration of a mutual friend's birthday on a yacht in the middle of a large green lake in South Carolina.

Couples cluster around Miles and the girl like spectators at a boxing ring, the men whispering to one another: *just go for it*, while the women whisper: *she looks so pretty*, and although Miles and the girl can't hear what they're saying, they can sense tension. So when they do notice one another—attractive, the same age, and standing in the middle of a salivating nucleus—they understand what's going on.

Their escape: the bar. She says hello, picks up a margarita from a line of pre-made drinks and walks to the back of the boat, leading with her pelvis, if that's possible. He feels the engine shuddering beneath the wake as he steps up beside her. She has cropped brown hair and wears a black polo shirt that is buttoned all the way up. She cups her mixed drink like it's a glass goblet, but tips it back like a goldfish, her mouth all the way open.

The girl points to the shore. "Do you see that house over there?" she says. To call it a house is an understatement—it is a mansion; five floors of Mediterranean pink sandstone stacked into a steep hill of tangled brush. Yeah, he sees it.

"That's my house," she says.

"Really?"

"No, but one day. When I'm rich." The girl leans against the railing and looks up at him for the first time. Her face shines bright white.

Things move fast. Soon, they are in the same city, in the same apartment, in the same bed. In the beginning they have regular sex, and then later, when he advances from his pelvic one-two-ing and she feels comfortable enough to relax her screechy porno-voice, they make

love. Afterwards, he tells her he loves her—takes her hand in his, tips her chin — and means it. And when she responds by telling him how badly she wants to crawl beneath his skin, to inhabit him like a creature from *Alien*, he laughs, because he likes that movie, too.

One night while he’s reading a Stephen King after a swirl of regular and love-making sex, she pinches his book by the spine and places it gently out of reach. She sits all the way up and talks at him like a drunk stranger at closing hour, looking a little past his face, up at the corner of the ceiling where she swears there are “active spider-webs.” It seems as if someone has inhabited her skull and slammed the shutters behind her eyes, because her baby blues look to be shallow, hazy and gray.

She starts talking as if in the middle of a conversation: “*actually*, the *Alien* franchise makes pregnancy into this grotesque *thing* and Ripley has to act like a *man* to be a hero,” and how it is all so sexist--couldn’t he see how it’s sexist? When she removes herself to go to the bathroom, he finds himself still nodding. Sure it makes sense, he thinks. But what he doesn’t understand, is why it seems as though he’s getting blamed for something. The girl comes back in with a t-shirt on.

“A t-shirt?” he says, dumbly. She usually sleeps nude.

“I’m cold,” she responds. But when she turns over in bed, he feels the heat radiating from her lower back, her dampness soaking the sheets.

In the morning, he decides to surprise her by booking a room at a bed and breakfast. “Not just any room,” he says, and shows her a slideshow of the suite on his phone. It includes an enormous tub, a fireplace, and a king sized bed. The next day, they drive through a brightly decorated beachfront town, and pull up to a Victorian structure with three towering turrets and a gingerbread trim, all of which is painted a Barbie shade of pink. The girl is in awe. She kisses



him on the cheek and says, “oh Miles, oh thank you. Did you pick it because it’s pink?” When they climb up to their suite, she throws down her bags and runs into the bathroom. She squats in the oversized tub, grinning and stroking the sides of the ceramic as if calming a horse. “It’s too bad we can’t live here,” she says, turning her attention to the delicate soaps which are shaped like seashells and littered throughout the bathroom. “They all smell like lavender!”

They walk through the little town. They pass by stores that sell jewelry, polo shirts with palm trees sewn into the sleeves, and cat-eyed sunglasses in loud, neon colors. She looks as if she’s going to step into each store, but never does. Then they pass a tanning salon. In the window there is a poster of a bronzed blonde woman in a shimmery purple bikini whose head is chopped off by the top of the frame. The girl stops, and snaps her hand away from his.

“Wow,” she says, looking up at him expectantly. “Just, wow.”

“What?” His chest constricts.

“Don’t you see it?” she says, pointing to the poster. She doesn’t wait for his response, but instead jabs her finger against the window of the salon and says, “*this* is a prime example of objectification. Do you know what that is?”

“Yes it’s when—”

“It’s when women are cut up and their separate body parts are sexualized and they are *stripped* of their humanity.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Yeah, terrible,” she says. She turns and walks ahead, throws her head back and yells, “welcome to being a woman!” She doesn’t reach for his hand again, and he doesn’t reach for hers.

He made reservations at a home-style restaurant because he knows they serve the girl's favorite dish: biscuits and gravy. They are brought to her on a steaming plate and she tells him that they smell just like Meemaw's Thanksgiving. She seems to have calmed down, and he writes that moment at the tanning salon off as a fluke. She pulls the sleeves of her sweater tight over her palms, and squeezes his knee under the table.

"Thank you, thank you, I love you," she says. But in the middle of the dinner, she shrieks.

"A hair!" she says. She thrusts her fingers into the brown sauce on her plate and pulls out a short strand of brown hair. She holds it up to the light, letting the sauce from her fingers drip onto the white tablecloth between them.

She gives him the same look she gave him in front of the tanning salon. The *do something* look. Miles raises his hand, like an unprepared schoolboy, glancing in their server's direction. Is this what she wants?

"What are you doing?" she says. She places the hair neatly on her napkin, and folds her arms across her chest. "This place is disgusting," she says. She glares out the window, which is reflective due to the fading light, and he sees that she is making hateful eye contact with herself. He waves his arm at the server, no longer timid, and asks for the check.

When they walk back to the Bed and Breakfast, the girl points out that the pink wood has faded with the sunset, and that now it looks like the gray mansion from the movie, *The Conjuring*. She grabs his arm, and says that she's going to have to stay up all night because she is sure that their room must be haunted, that some dark spirit is going to penetrate one of her many orifices, maybe even the one between her legs because who *knows* what spirits are into, and if this happened—she will never be the same again. She keeps her word, and all night she

twists and turns. She whispers, “Miles, Miles--you see that chair over there? I bet you there’s some old-man ghost who is going to appear in that chair and he’ll get up and come over here and rip the sheets off and do God knows what else.” The next morning, he doesn't wait for her and walks downstairs in his pajamas to the elaborate brunch that he had been looking forward to the day before. He wants to tip face first into his scrambled eggs, maybe even pour hot sauce into his eye-sockets.

A half an hour later, the girl stumbles downstairs with big bags beneath her eyes and says that she’s so sorry, and, why didn’t you wait for me? It looks like she’s jangling loose change in her palms, and then she dumps five of the seashell soaps onto the table. She stacks them up in flimsy walls that don’t stay upright, that tumble and scatter dangerously close to the butter dish. She plucks one up that’s shaped like a conch, and points the spiral at his nose as if brandishing a tiny knife. “Seashells are just bones, you know,” she says. Then she says sorry again, and sniffles as if about to cry. He wishes to God that she would swallow her snot.

Back at home, Miles develops a deep and intimate relationship with video games, especially the ones where he shoots people and they die and there are no redos. The sound of the gunshots drives the girl away, and so she begins to walk around the apartment with headphones in, listening to, as she says, “girls-only” podcasts that reflect the same binary values his video games do: there are good and bad people in the world and the bad people deserve to be punished. One night while he’s playing, she stands in front of the TV screen, her arms on her hips and a nervous smile on her face that he hasn’t seen her wear for a long time. He doesn’t push her aside like he wants to, but he does ask her to move--please--because he he’s in the middle of something big here.

Soon, they inhabit separate corners of the house: he on the couch in the front room and the girl in the bedroom; him advancing level after level and her listening to podcasts that make her sad while looking up expensive vacations and snarling at photos of scantily-clad women.

They avoid at all costs having to see the other naked.

The first time he sees the cuts on the girl's legs is when she is stepping from the shower and about to curl into her robe. She has made little marks with a pair of scissors and says its no big deal. In a calm voice, she says she didn't have a choice, and that if he's going to blame anything, to blame the patriarchy. She tries to make her lights-out eye contact with him while she explains herself but all he can focus on are the red pellets of blood seeping into the forearm of her robe, the pink robe he gifted her for Christmas—couldn't she see that it would stain? When she stops her explaining, her face resembles a used tissue, and so Miles hugs her with the same reflexive instinct as a soldier in one of his games: you lead with a gun around corners; you hug your girlfriend when she is hurt.

Miles begins to fantasize about a woman at work. She is sturdy and quiet and his fantasies aren't exactly sexual. Mostly, he imagines sitting beside her in a comfortable silence, maybe over lunch, maybe while they watch a movie. At the coffee counter at work he asks, what do you think of the *Alien* movies? She smiles and dips a chamomile tea bag into a steaming cup of milk, and says, "Ripley is so cool" and, "I was on the edge of my seat the whole time." He smiles back, and hopes that his eyes don't look too sad so that he's not given away.

"Do you want to get lunch today?" he asks. She says yes.

They go straight from work, at the odd hour between lunch and dinner. He takes her to the nice part of town, to a French cafe called "Per Se," which has a private outdoor area around

back. It's attractive, too, with a white-planked fence and thick wooden pillars strung with blue lights. She orders a glass of chardonnay, he orders a beer off the tap, and they talk about what he wants to talk about. He talks about football and she nods and smiles and doesn't look bored or offended. He tries not to hear the girl's voice in his head: *NFL cheerleaders are sex props and they're only paid minimum wage*. He talks about Game of Thrones, but the phrase "misrepresented rape scenes" vibrates around his brain until he discovers that he's finished his entire 16 oz glass of beer in 3 minutes.

"Are you okay?" His coworker asks. To silence her he grabs her hand and realizes that her plain features are appealing up close—lips pursed and plumped, eyes flickering... His coworker squeezes his hand back, and he doesn't like that—he wants her to be soft and serene; any aggressive energy might shatter him, might remind him of the girl.

"Do you know anything about video games?" He says, releasing his co-worker's hand. She responds, "Sure, a little."

Miles and the girl have plans for the weekend, and he is dreading it. They are going to a beer fest. It is the first date they've had in a long while. He thinks about breaking up with the girl, and bringing his co-worker instead. But he doesn't, because the girl has been nice to him for a week or so. At the fair, they get their beers and watch an air balloon rise from a faraway field. The balloon is propelled by a thick blue flame, and it looks as though the canvas should catch fire. In this way, it is a thrill show and many people crowd to watch. He has been drinking, and watching this fantastical display with the hops tickling his tongue makes him swoon in the way that only summer evenings can make a man swoon. The girl stands beside him, not saying anything. She has always been beautiful, but looks especially so tonight. Her eyes don't dart from person to person. Her mouth is either shut or preoccupied with sipping. This feels nice, and

safe. But when she looks up at him he is so afraid of her ruining it, that he kisses her by grabbing her chin and smashing their faces together. With a strange mix of hate and lust, he feels something rising, something he hasn't felt for her in a long time.

When they arrive at home, he instinctually distances himself from her, and falls into the couch. He puts on his gaming headset, while the girl disappears into the bedroom. A few minutes later, while he is still staring at a blank screen, she reenters, and says, "it's been awhile." She is dressed in a teddy that she bought at that consignment shop they visited up in Raleigh. It is a made of burgundy lace and wraps around her pale torso in a web-like pattern. Big satin bows are sown above her breasts. She covers her left arm, the ruined one, with her right arm, a habit she's fallen into.

She gets on her knees, and crawls to where he sits on the couch, parting his thighs slowly, which makes the leather squeal,

"You ready for this?" She purrs, licking her lips for emphasis. Then, a long, tense pause: a blip of solitude that Miles wishes would last forever. "You know," she says. His body deflates. "I am not trying to be like a porn star, or whatever. I'm *choosing* to express myself sexually in what happens to be a mainstream way."

She keeps talking, keeps on puzzling it out for the both of them while Miles closes his eyes and thinks, *I get it*. I get where she's coming from. I'm the guy. Still, for comfort's sake, he imagines his coworker sitting beside him, and he grips her imaginary hand; a connection that he knows would feel solid and deep and makes him think of shipping anchors being tossed into the sea, how they sink and stay put. He remembers the girl pointing to faraway mansions and him marveling at how easy it was for her to dream. He remembers wanting to stand close to her. But now, he hears her say, "did you know" and "discriminatory practices" and when he opens his

eyes and sees the girl cross-legged on the carpet before him, he knows that she's still sinking.

And he wishes that she would drown already.

## I'm Yours

I promised you all of me. There's a chunk of breast on the coffee table for a spoon-dive during movie night. A graft of underarm hangs off your nightstand for a post-coital snack. You swallow it down with warm milk.

Slabs of stomach stack your fridge, and your cupboards are lined with knuckle jerky. My eyes are pickling in the mason jars on the windowsill, so I spend most days standing on sole-scraped feet, staring into darkness, wondering which part of me you'll hunger for next.

You chisel out my throat with the butter knife, and you tell me I'm beautiful as you ease your lubricated palms around my vocal chords. You milk them, back and forth, and the words are pushed up and out of my mouth like a stale glob of toothpaste: "I love you."



## The Sticky Lower Realm

Tyler realized something during the weekend: Lydia, his girlfriend, had stopped trying. Stopped taking care of herself, really. At first he thought, okay, because the pounds mostly went to her breasts. But she had worn a two-piece this weekend at her parent's lake house and he could see that it was sinking into her gut, hanging over the waistband like a fat scoop of ice-cream. And every time she *ate* ice cream he cringed because, couldn't she see what she was doing to herself? For God's sake.

He was flying back from DC where he and Lydia's family had driven down to their lake house on Smith Mountain Lake in southern Virginia. But where were the mountains, the sloping blue landscape that a Google search of "Virginia" had promised? The far-beyond was polluted with pine and spruce, and appeared flat and unremarkable. He had imagined a grand house on a dark blue lake: white, three stories, a yard stitched with color and straight-lines, maybe a stone walkway. He would have been happy if a single house on the drive had one of those ovular attic windows that made waterfront houses appear bookish and quaint. Instead he found himself on a narrow peninsula, surrounded on three sides by a sweating mass of brown water. The house was a *ranch*, (her mother's words)—a fancy way of saying it was one-storied and cramped. It was painted purple of all colors, and the lawn was overgrown, full of tiny thorns that buried beneath the skin on his feet like tics. They spent the weekend talking about irrelevant high school friends that Lydia had never mentioned until now and drinking Natural Light. The only "toys" the family owned were two kayaks, and when he finally gave one a go, he ended up spinning into the stinking marsh and brushing against cotton-thick spider webs, their long-legged inhabitants

scrambling towards his arms and face. And on top of everything, that night, Lydia had passed gas in her sleep so loudly that the air mattress had vibrated. *Horrible.*

Now, he sat in Economy on American Air and felt very lucky to be sitting in the back. He didn't have to fill the awkward bouts of silence with Lydia's mother or listen to her father's diatribes about the mental and physical benefits of joining the Marine Corps. Instead, he could watch the sleek female passengers maneuver their hips around the seats in front of him and struggle to shove their heavy bags into the overhead compartments. He watched a small blonde woman now, with the most delicate bird-like arms slip her way into her seat—tucking her purse against her lap and hardly making a sound. Lydia certainly made sounds now. Like *burping* after she drank a beer. "I'm sorry!" was a phrase he had heard one too many times this weekend. And he was astonished, most of all, in knowing he had seen Lydia as delicate once...all lips, chest and big eyes looking up at him, never down. And all of these down-gazing women before him seemed like they wanted to look up to something, at someone—and he felt he deserved to sink deep into the fantasy that *he* could be that person.

—

He must have fallen asleep because he woke up feeling sick, the pungent smell of overripe fruit activating his senses. He looked beside him, to where a woman, mid-thirties, maybe, was sleeping, and took a whiff of her scalp. Yep, that was where the smell was coming from. He hardly remembers her sitting down. He must have been out for awhile. He looked down at her—her lips were slightly parted, and just three more inches and her glossy forehead would be resting against his shoulder.

The flight attendant appeared in the aisle way.

“Something to drink, sir?” she asked. His seatmate woke with a snort. She clapped her hand to her face, dragging the sleeve of her sweater across her mouth. “Apple Juice,” she slurred. He supposed she intended this as a drink request, but was making eye contact with Tyler: her eyes a foggy blue, like a dog with cataracts. The flight attendant didn’t seem to hear her.

“Sir?” she prodded.

“Water,” Tyler said.

As the attendant passed water to Tyler, the woman beside him snatched the cup from the flight attendant’s hands, forming an unnecessary assembly line. She gripped the cup at the lip, dipping one of her lacquered fingernails into the liquid. When he took it into his own hands, she shoved her finger into her mouth as if sucking blood from a wound.

“Ma’am?” the flight attendant said. But the woman was still gazing sleepily at Tyler, smiling as if she was stoned. Perhaps she was. The flight attendant flinched as though embarrassed for her, and then regained her robotic composure with a grip on the steel handlebars of her cart and pushed on.

“I’m Cheryl,” the woman said, her finger still stuck against her lip.

“Dave,” said Tyler. *Why lie?* His brain immediately dove into cover up mode, and he pat his breast pocket to ensure that his boarding pass was tucked safely out of view.

“Hello Dave,” she said, elongating the “ave.” Did he sense a sneer? He longed for when she was asleep and almost beautiful, her features set in a permanent stillness. But now everything was animated, and sneering and frowning and pouting (in the horrible, non-sexual sense) were all very real possibilities. All he had to do was say the wrong thing, act the wrong way—and she might give him a look, or worse yet: say something harsh.

“Why were you in DC?” The woman said..

“Visiting family,” said Tyler.

“Oh,” she said, laughing in the way a cartoon owl might hoot, her eyes bulging and lips pursing into a delicate beak, producing a high-pitched sound that made him want to slap his hand over her mouth. She gripped his thigh and leaned into the aisle, whipping around to look at the attendant, who was now five rows away.

“She forgot my vodka tonic,” she said.

“You didn’t ask for one,” said Tyler. Cheryl gripped him harder, her claws digging in.

“Dave, I am *silly* today,” she said, hooting again, her eyes peeling back into black-rimmed circles.

Tyler chuckled from the bottommost corner of his lungs, closest to his bowels—a foul sound that made him shudder. He turned to look out the window beside him, at a black sky that may as well have been a curtain.

“I’ve been all over,” said Cheryl, waving her arm in the air in hope of attracting the attendant. Tyler turned up the display light on his phone to create a little tunnel of light that she hopefully wouldn’t feel a part of. He scrolled through the apps.

“Yep. Try New York, Boston, Chicago, in that order,” she continued. She twisted on the light above her, and flicked it, making a clacking sound. “She’s ignoring me,” she said. She tipped her head back into the aisle, “ma’am?”

“What do you do?” Tyler said, trying to distract her from yelling again. Cheryl pondered this.

“FBI,” she whispered. “Kidding!” she said, not letting the joke sit for a second. “What do you do?”

“I’m ...” Tyler thought about it. “A professional soccer player.”

She laughed, slapping his thigh. She was getting closer to his crotch. “*Now* we’re having fun,” she said.

The people behind them were talking about how sweaty they were, how hot and humid it had been in DC. He heard the word, “cesspool.”

“What is a cesspool?” A male voice asked.

“My bed during the summer,” the female voice responded. They laughed.

So this is what it has come down to, Tyler thought. Women are not women anymore. They are disgusting, sweating, pooping, demanding creatures. To imagine a woman sweating, going to the bathroom, God, he couldn’t think anything worse. And he *knew* Lydia had at the lake house. She was in the bathroom just a bit too long in one morning, and he didn’t hear the water running or hair dryer blowing. Couldn’t she have covered it up? How could she expect him to still desire her?

He remembered pressing his ear against the bathroom door, focusing in on that image of her, doing *that*, when she flung it open and he stumbled straight into her chest.

“I…” he said, standing up and taking her all in. He felt nothing seeing her naked. A thousand times he’d seen her body and probably only felt something for it the first forty. He wasn’t good with math, but he knew that was a low percentage.

“Would you like to join me in the shower, sir?” She tickled his chin with a slender finger. There, she was back. The version he recognized.

“I need to use the loo,” Cheryl said. She got up, ass in his face, and lumbered down the aisle towards the restroom. He knocked his head against the window, and tried not to imagine her pulling down a pair of sticky panties and slapping onto the tiny seat. An image of Lydia, from

behind, how one time he saw coarse brown hairs surrounding her anus. Filth. It was as if he deserved nothing good and clean. Cheryl came back quickly, clapping her hands together with what he hoped was hand sanitizer.

“Roomy in there,” she said. “Bigger than those damned United bathrooms.” Tyler went, “hmm,” still leaning against the window. He could see the smooth blonde locks of a woman sitting in the seat in front of him. He would focus on those sliced, even strands and calm down.

“I used to be a yoga instructor,” Cheryl said. This peaked Tyler’s attention, he had to admit. He’d hardly seen her body in the right lighting, anyway. Maybe beneath her baggy clothes was an Adonis of a woman, lean and ready to be flexed. She continued, “now I have terrible bunions. They’re like second heels on the front of my feet.”

“I’m not sure I needed to know that,” Tyler said.

“What do you need to know?”

He wasn’t sure how to respond, so didn’t. Besides, it felt good to stay quiet. It was starting to feel like he was following a script she had written for him. She pulled out an airplane bottle of Burnett’s raspberry flavored Vodka, and then another miniature, parrot-donned bottle of Tequila.

“Pick your poison,” she said with a laugh. “I’ve always wanted to say that.” A part of him felt he owed her something, and so he went along with it. Besides, he was never above a healthy dosing of alcohol. He chose the Tequila.

He thought of Lydia, this past Saturday, the moment in the kitchen. It was morning and she was buttering toast and wearing one of his t-shirts, (she didn’t ask—had just taken it). And from the back, her shoulders appeared masculine, broad in a way he didn’t notice when she was

wearing a thin-strapped top. And, standing in the direct light, and he could see the cellulite puckering like craters down the pack of her thigh.

“Baby,” she said. “Did you sleep all right?” She had this big smile on like nothing was different. Like she wasn’t a completely separate version of the person she had been in Chicago all this past year—the legs-crossed, polite, *shaved* woman he had agreed to date. She started buttering his toast for him, and the knife scratching along the surface of the burnt bread made his eardrums thrum. If he closed his eyes—this image--her in the kitchen, making him food, would have been all he ever wanted. But it wasn’t perfect. Her thighs—he never did like cottage cheese. He thought of talking to Lydia’s mother, who didn’t seem to need anything from him. She was a quiet woman from a state like Montana or Wyoming, where there were endless expanses of space and never any pressure to fill them.

“When did you and Ted buy this place?” Tyler had asked her one evening, sitting out on their back porch, gazing at the swamp. Lydia’s mother plucked a ripe dandelion from beside her bare foot, looked at it’s furry globe for a second or two, and asked him, “weeds or wishes?” Before he could answer she gave it a mighty flick, and the seeds took to the wind. He never did receive an answer to his question. He just finished his beer and boiled beneath the Virginia sunset. That’s how Tyler felt now, like Lydia’s mother must have. He could stare at this strange woman and let the silence drag, like a canal through a dead city. It wasn’t a bad feeling.

“Do you have parents?” Cheryl asked. *Parents*. It was exactly the kind of conversation topic alcohol introduced. He could smell the vodka on her breath, like stale Irish breakfast mixed with gasoline. A strand of dark hair fell over her face and she flicked it off.

“Everyone does,” he said, paused. “At some point.”

“Do you like yours, though?” she said.

Her hand was still on his thigh, but he hardly noticed it anymore, despite the fact that it was inching upwards every few minutes.

“I dunno,” he said.

“My mother was awful,” she said. “She used to fat-shame the hell out of me. Forced me into ballet, cheerleading, squeezing me into uniforms that were always too tight.” She pulled a Snickers bar from her purse. “Wanna split?” He surprised himself by nodding. She broke the bar in half, the caramel clinging together, unwilling to separate. “What about your mom?” she said. He took a tiny bite.

“She died,” he said. Another lie. But he liked the way her face went swollen with sympathy.

“That’s terrible,” Cheryl said. She’d finished her half of the bar and was back to nursing her vodka. She looked at him as if waiting for a story.

“She was fat, like you,” he said, hoping to pop that look off her face, watch it drain. He felt as if he was slowly sliding her pieces of a puzzle, without giving her a single clue as to what the final product should look like. Cheryl didn’t say anything. Her oily skin bloomed crimson.

“Well fuck you then.”

“I have a girlfriend, you know,” he said. He thought of Lydia, who bared all this weekend and he couldn’t take it, like a baby exposed to the sun for the first time.

“Good for you,” Cheryl said. But she leaned in, curious as ever. Was she pretty? Wide-set eyes, thin lipped, flaring nostrils. Circumstantial beauty, maybe. Maybe that was the reason for his confusion. Because there they were, shooting through the sky, hundreds of miles above the earth, packed like fish in a vessel with a woman who wouldn’t remove her goddamn hand. Tyler downed the rest of his Tequila. Her fingers had weakened their grip, but barely. Why



wouldn't he remove them? Why were they starting to feel like tethers to a sticky lower realm he desperately wanted to be a part of?

"Is she heavy, too?"

"She has some—," Tyler gasped down a burp, "imperfections." In the space between the chair and wall of the plane he could still see the strands of the blonde woman in front of him. Her locks were beginning to appear blade-like.

"Like, what?" Cheryl asked. "Bumps? Lumps?"

"Cellulite," Tyler said.

"Where?"

"On her legs."

"I have bumps, too."

"Where?" Tyler asked. He felt he couldn't breath. But he could—he could breath. He was safe.

"I have mangled feet, I have moles on my stomach, and one breast is much larger than the other."

Tyler stared straight at her, at her imperfect face, the fat on her cheeks, her oily skin.

"Do you like me?" she said. She didn't flash him the same whining eyes his ex-girlfriends used to, or present him with the self-sufficient blank gaze, like shiny marbles in a glass vase, that Lydia did. It was somewhere in between—and he was confused by it. Not a statement or a demand, but a real question.

"Not really," he said. "I don't think I do." His body felt light.

"I'm not sure I like you either," she said. Her fingers had finished their journey, and he rejoiced it.

When she stood up and took his hand, he followed her to the bathroom.

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He knelt on the floor while she sat on the toilet. He thought of the wind turbines on the drive from Chicago to St. Louis, how their white propellers moved with the same certainty of any wind-blown branch, how they were no longer an alien species but a permanent, heightened part of the earthly scape. He was a propeller, and this woman was a hurricane, and he would turn. He would beg for it, even. And like the many men before him, there was a moment of resistance, *I'll forget all about this*, he thought, but the back pocket of his mind was overflowing with things to forget. He fingered the hem of her skirt, gripped the hairy caps of her knees. A boyish smile broke out across his face, and he asked her what she wanted.

## The Fall

Wind poses a threat when you're fifty feet above the ground, sitting on a ski lift attached to a mountain that sits 30,000 feet above the ocean. Humans have a hard time breathing up that high. The sharp cold aggravates lung and throat, making every breath sound like dying one. Jack made that sound when he fell off of the ski lift. There was nobody around to hear him--but Sarah did. He gasped when he realized gravity had snatched him up, and he thumped when his body connected to the ground. It's less dramatic than one might expect, and not as loud. From where she sat above, he looked like a poor man's snow angel, sunken deep into the bank, hidden except for the erected red tips of his rental skis. He didn't have any poles with him, thank god, because was a beginner. *I wonder how much that damage is going to cost*, she thought. It's all much less dramatic than one might expect. She should have lowered the safety bar.

The lift continued, as it should, and Sarah was no longer cold. She peeled back her three layers of neck wear, and glanced back over her shoulder at the red ski tips in the snow, quickly fading from view. She heaved the safety bar down over her head. Her skis felt heavier than usual, pulling her down like the heavy end of a seesaw, tipping her toward that white whirlpool below, and she thought to herself, would it even hurt to topple into that fluff?

Behind her were the Rocky Mountains. One could stare for hours and not be able to comprehend all the divots and crevices, all growing and stacking and morphing into something bigger and bigger, accumulating over millions of years, creating the gorgeous monstrosity that was now Colorado's landscape. Watching them made her want to sing, cry out, to orgasm, even.

And her husband...alone in the snow. How he was ruining everything, lately!

The lift came to a stop at the platform on top of the mountain. It lingered there longer than she thought it ought to. Sarah scooted off the metal bench, surfing down the steep slope toward the lodge, clicking her heels together and slicing through the snow at a sharp right angle. This was the very top of all

of Aspen. The only way to get down was to shoot down one of the multiple black diamonds, or by falling like a chump off the lift, she supposed.

Her dicky hung loosely beneath her chin. It was damp with sweat and starting to ice over. She pulled it over her mouth and bit down, grinding her teeth into the cotton fabric.

She faced the mountains once more. There was no growing used to them. They ripped across the horizon like molars in a dog's mouth, rows upon layers of spearing peaks. Beside her was the Aspen Lodge, where she wanted to bring her husband. It had a quaint little cocktail lounge. She liked the contrast between the sweating, leaking skiers and sugar rimmed martinis, well-placed olives and impeccable service. The lodge was a triangular wooden structure, with wide-eyed windows that lit up the foggy trailheads and the ski lift platform behind her. The lodge's doorway was littered with skis and snowboards. Skiers with chapped red faces clamored around inside—she could see them through the window—their bulbous helmets lurching in stride with their mechanical gait, as they chomped across the lodge clad in heavy metal boots.

A man, she noticed, had appeared beside her. He appeared in the same way a housemate appears around the corner of the living room. It was a little shocking but not entirely surprising because they live there, after all. He wore a thick hide skin across his shoulders and no pants as far as she could tell. He spoke, his voice roughened by the dry air.

“You didn't put the bar down,” the man said.

“Funny thing is,” she said, “—Jack wanted to go to the beach.” She clapped her gloved hands against her thighs but the wind swallowed the sound. “Quiet up here,” she said, trying to be polite.

“You're a funny one, Sarah.” He seemed familiar enough but she knew enough about chance and circumstance to say,

“How the hell do you know my name?”

“Don't be afraid,” he said in a voice that wasn't nice, that was very matter-of-fact. He spat on the ground— dark globs that cut through the snow with a suddenness akin to chucking a handful of rocks into

a river. She turned back toward the lodge. The lights had gone out, no sign of life from inside. The once bright and shining windows had gone black, and gazed back at her with a sedate emptiness, like freshly mowed road kill.

“My mother always told me not to tether myself to a man,” she said. Sarah was pretty enough to believe this. Or at least she’d been told she was pretty over and over by doting aunts and jealous classmates, and she was sure it was the same thing: believing you’re one thing and being another.

“Turn and look,” he said, pointing back toward the lift. But that request felt impossible. The mountains had swollen, she was sure of it. They had shuffled closer, pushing in on her--on *Jack*, making her husband’s body even more insignificant, smaller somehow.

“There are some things you can’t take back, but that you can fix,” he said. He took two steps back and re-pointed, this time toward the mogul run titled, “The Drunken Frenchman.”

“Quit the Yoda bullshit,” she said. She propped her hands on her hips. “Now, I don’t know about you, but I could use a cosmo.” She was on vacation, after all. She and her husband, Jack, had made their way to Colorado despite his hesitancy of the elevation, of his mild-experience. “You can take a ski lesson,” she had said. She was a strong skier and he wasn’t. She’d grown up in Dutch Country, Pennsylvania, raised to ski on the icy slopes of the Allegheny Mountains. He was raised in the Midwest and had skied once in his life. But despite her experience, the elevation was only 1,000 feet in Allegheny, and now she was 11,000 feet above that. Her body felt light from lack of oxygen. She inhaled, sucking up as much air as she could fit.

“Up here, one drink equals three,” she said.

“You never were a good listener,” the man said, and coughed onto the ground again. The pebbles of saliva looked red this time, and one glob exploded against the toe of her boot.

“Watch it!” she said. The man had begun to look like more and less like Jack every time she glanced back at him. His nose appeared pinched and elongated, like he’d gotten a really good nose-job, while his mouth had expanded, all crooked teeth and red gums, up his cheeks. She turned from it.

“Do you love him?”

“Yes. I mean, sometimes.” Her legs ached from standing in the slight squat her ski boots forced her into. She unstrapped the top buckle. Blood warmed her calves, relieving her knees.

“Hasn’t he been good to you?”

“Is cheating ‘good’? Is talking me into an abortion ‘good’?”

“You didn’t tell him before you went to the clinic. You told him about it a week later.”

“I knew he wouldn’t want it.”

“He might of,” the man said. She wasn’t sure what hole in his face the man was speaking out of. His face seemed to be made completely of of grit teeth.

“He wouldn’t have wanted it.” She fiddled with the zipper on her coat. “And besides, he’s probably frozen by now.”

“You two fell apart after the abortion. That’s why he cheated.” The man put his furry paws up in defense. “Not that there’s any excuse.” His bony shoulders convulsed in what she supposed was meant to be a shrug.

“I cheated, too.” She jabbed her poles into the snow. “But it doesn’t feel the same when you’re the second one to do it.”

The man didn’t respond, only sighed and licked his furry hand. With a tight fist, he began to beat at his bare chest, spurring a synchronous pattern within her own—faster, faster—her heart chugging, trying to match his rhythm. She turned to face the hill. An icy wind shot up her coat. She felt a little hurt in her chest--like a warm compress that made her want to stay grounded in place forever.

“He cheated on me,” she said, settling into her boots. She breathed out, coating the inside of her goggles in a white mist. The man abandoned his posture and let his arm fall. He looked at his bare wrist, as if checking a watch.

“Can’t you put it behind you?” he said. His face was switching back and forth, like a glitch on a streaming site. One version of face was Jack’s, and the other version was doggish, in-human. She wanted it to stop.

“I want him to make it up to me forever. I want him to drown me in apologies.” She sniffled. “But he won’t. He thinks one big “sorry” is enough.”

“He loves you.”

“Sending flowers to the house? Please,” she said. She still wasn’t cold, though she knew she should be. She was so close to the edge of the steep hill of the trail, that when the man gave her a gentle push, she started down the mountain.

The rake of her skis against the ice sounded like nails against metal. The waves of wind yanked her side to side like an untamed parachute behind her. She couldn’t go fast if she tried. It didn’t matter anyway, she realized, as her knees buckled and her shoulders sank, because she’d forgotten how to ski, let alone how to ski fast. Her left ski caught on an ice curdle, and her limbs collapsed in four different directions. She rag-dolled down the mountain, rolling until she was face down in a pile of ice chips that scissored into the soft spots beneath her eyes. When she lifted her head, she saw the man’s bare feet beside her. She felt icy fingers against the back of her neck and was lifted into the air, back on her feet.

“Stop screaming,” he said. “Stop punching.” Was she screaming? She felt dreadful. And the man’s face was also dreadful. He wore an expression of both fear and hunger mixed into one; a combination of emotions that confused Sarah, made her look back out across the mountain peaks, wishing she could use one as a knife.

“I wanted the stupid baby,” she said. “Why did I do it?”

“There’s only so much time,” the man-ish thing said. He dropped to all fours, and licked his bicep with an unsettlingly long tongue. Had he always had thick down-coat of grey fur, which grew in patches along his arms, his face? His fingers, she saw, had curled into his knuckles. Each was bisected with what looked like a thorn, or claw, or something.

“Time for what?” she said.

“You pushed him away long before the abortion,” he said, on all fours. “You made each other into the worst versions of yourself. That’s why you went to the clinic.”

“And he resented me for it?”

“Yes, he resented you.”

“Screw this,” she said. She got up and continued down the hill, gaining speed. Every hard turn in the snow pressed against her shins, the hard plastic tongue of her boot piercing through her socks. She skid to a stop when she saw the lift chairs. Looking up, she saw that the lift had stopped moving, each empty bench dangling in the wind. He was close now, she knew. The image of his tangled limbs in the snow flared brightly in her mind. The look on his face as he fell--a familiar one, one she’d seen hundreds of times, was a helpless shattering of expression. How morbid, how sick of human nature that the expression of fear and pleasure are so closely entwined. He had fallen thirty feet, and slipped before she could even think to extend a hand. “You’ll be fine,” she had said when they entered the lift. But in the air, her skis had mixed with his and when she pulled them apart he fell forward: off and down. In her mind she had extended an arm in an attempt to grasp his. She’d done that, hadn’t she?

Sarah turned to a stop near the treeline. The man crawled out from behind a snowy brush to her left. His grey hyde wrapped around his arms, his torso, combining with his pink, leathery flesh. His face was a dog’s face. His hairline, once receding, had grown thick and full.

“You’re close,” he said.

“I’ll never forgive him,” she said.

“And he’ll never forgive you.”

“I hate him,” she said.

“Hate, my dear, is not the opposite of love,” he said.



She pushed off and skied harder, squatting to gain speed. She turned a corner, and spotted four skiers ahead of her on the trail, all wearing red medical ski suits. One of them skied up beside her, his voice strangled by the wind. “Accident” he yelled, “off of Olympia lift!”

She cut him off and shot-gunned into the woods. The long shadow of the man extended out, twenty feet away. He leapt out from behind a rock, and she barely stopped in time to stop herself from colliding into him, her skis criss-crossed over one another. His head was enlarged, elongated, his nose wet-black and rounding at the tip.

“I’m trying,” she said.

“Thanks, baby,” he growled. He padded back behind the tree on all fours. She swore she heard a snarl before his shadow slipped into the dark.

The dread had balled like a used gym towel in her gut. She pushed off, dipped around trees, skidded over rocks. She slid down the icy peaks of moguls no skier was ever meant to combat. She fell hard and then harder and then got back up. That’s when she saw him—Jack. The hurt had spread from her legs to her heart, biting into her chest with an intensity equal to any burn.

It was dark now, and the emergency light from the main hill didn’t press this far into the woods. The medical team was trailing somewhere behind her, or maybe somewhere ahead, calling out “SKI PATROL” and “SHOUT IF YOU CAN,” but none of them were close to where she was, to where Jack was, and besides, this wasn’t their problem. It was hers.

So when she heard the doggish whimper from behind the trees she wasn’t surprised. The animal trotted toward Jack with such grace and silence, it looked to be on top of the snow. The wolf sniffed at the body, whining like a child. There was a moment when the rage and fear mixed together so violently, she saw purple. She crashed through the snow, screaming at the wolf, “get!”, howling to combat the silent forest, the deafening mountains. The wolf looked up at her with a smirk, backed into the trees, and slithered into the dusk.

She looked down at what she dreaded most—Jack’s body. It wasn’t as tangled as she thought it would be, wasn’t the mess of limbs she thought she saw from the lift. She looked at Jack’s eyes, fluttering like a ballerina’s. She took her thumb and index finger and drew them shut, like she’d seen it done in the movies. She knew the fluttering was merely a trick of the mind, and a desperate one at that. She bent over his face, ready to mourn, practically kissing his crystal blue lips.

“He’s here!” she screamed into the woods, hoping the medics would hear her, hoping they brought one of those body-bags she’d seen carted down mountains before. “My dead husband is here!” But Jack’s eyes--they reopened, fluttering once again, unmistakably this time, with life. Sarah cupped his face with her hands. She glimpsed a red coat in the distance. She moved her fingers to find the pulse in his neck. It thumped a weak, unspectacular rhythm. She felt no synchronization with this beat. Her fingers twitched, and she squeezed until her heart felt dry. She stood, and she yelled again into the woods, “he’s here, he’s here!” But this time all she saw was a brown coat, close to the ground, with an unfamiliar face, a toothy smile.

## Hot Thoughts

Blaire threw her car into park in front of the large window of the Quicky-Mart. This is where she watched Gus, the cashier, work the register. She stepped out onto the uneven sidewalk, her purple three-strap stilettos making a satisfying *clack* against the concrete. A gust of wind blew her hair across her face, and she brushed it aside to check out her reflection in the car window. She had broad shoulders and tube-like arms that didn't shrink at the elbow. Her mother recently described her shoulders in a poem as, "two large reminders of her father," during their ritualistic Friday night poetry readings. Blaire loved listening to her mother read poetry, despite their often-irksome subject matter, because of the soothing sound of her mother's voice. Her mother, an elfin-featured woman, had a gentle voice that could cut through the air when excited or angry. *From her dark eyes to her narrow hips, she's her mother's daughter.* Blaire recited her mother's poem in her head from memory. *Yet hugging her is like being stuck between two large reminders of her father.* Blaire was used to being the subject of her mother's poems, but last Friday was the first time her mother had incorporated her absent father into her work: "*What do you mean?*" Blaire asked. "*What reminders?*"

*"Your shoulders, dear," her mother said. "You have your father's ugly shoulders."*

"Hello," Blaire whispered into her palm for practice, preparing to open the gas station door. She heard somewhere that it's impossible to smell your own breath, but she always could.

The bell rang when Blaire stepped inside the store. It smelled like bleach and cigarettes, like it always did. The tobacco stench was from the comings and goings of truckers wearing yellowed, smoke-soaked shirts. But the air around Gus smelled clean. Last Wednesday, she heard him say to a hefty driver paying for Marlboros, "I quit five years ago this Monday." He'd sounded proud. The truck driver hadn't responded, but Blaire felt happy for Gus, and wanted to knock past the customers in line and squeeze him in a hug.

“Morning!” Blaire said, turning toward the front desk. Her left pump lodged in the tile floor and she rotated off balance. When she caught herself she was facing Gus head-on. A smile spread across his pock-marked face. She steadied herself, and adjusted the collar of her sweater to hide the heat rash crawling across her chest.

“Good morning,” he said. Blaire blinked away the jittery, excited thoughts that urged her to dive into his arms and lick the oily slick of skin separating his lips from his nose. *Violent affection*, she called it. She had vivid fantasies about crawling *inside* people—often through their nostrils or tear ducts. Being tucked under a person’s flesh seemed the closest two people could be. These thoughts produced beads of sweat that scuttled from the top of her skull to the tail of her spine.

Blaire noticed that Gus was wearing his navy-blue flannel today, the one with a drizzled mustard stain on the right breast pocket. Blaire stepped into the snack aisle and fingered through bags of trail mix and chips, thinking of something to say.

“Do you know if it’s supposed to storm today?” she said. She snatched up a bag of trail mix. No response. She stepped up to the counter. His head was in a book titled, *Winter is Coming*. A pen had appeared in his breast pocket, its cap effectively hid the stain. He rested the book in his lap.

“Is that a book about *Game of Thrones*?” she said.

“No. It’s about the rise and fall of the Soviet Union,” he said. His eyes fluttered, never meeting hers for more than a few milliseconds. His cheeks flushed. He re-creased his dog-eared page with his thumb.

“Can’t say I know much about what’s going on over there,” she said. She snapped open her alligator skin purse and spilled out three crumbled bills onto the counter. They had been having conversations like this for months now. The register shook open, and Gus pressed two coins into the sticky center of her palm. When he pulled away, his knuckles brushed against her curled fingertips. Blaire shivered.

“Are you free tonight?” He said. They both hesitated.

“Yes,” said Blaire. *Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.*

Blaire drove home without the radio, unwilling to disturb her peace of mind. She felt like a big wave had swept her up onto shore and carried her onto the warm sand. She was already mix-matching her wardrobe, pairing potential outfits in the hope of achieving a look both sexy and classy for their date. She stopped at a stoplight and looked to her left, where a cluster of teens stood beneath a cloud of smoke. Four boys scattered into the woods, scared off by the car. But the three girls stayed put. Two of them peered over their shoulders, clutching whatever they held into their chests. One girl spun around, her hair cresting and falling like a wing. With a loose upturned wrist, she dangled a blunt between her fingers like a ‘40s starlet with a slender cigarette holder.

It was the aged look in the girl’s face that shocked Blaire. There was something cruel shoved in the bags beneath her eyes. Cruelty set in such a pretty face provoked a strange and sudden surge of empathy from her, and she wondered if what she was feeling could be described as *maternal instinct*. Something her mother said she had none of. She refocused her attention on the road, tipped an invisible hat, and drove on.

Blaire insisted that she meet Gus at a place outside of Phoenix. She worked at almost every nicer joint on the West Side, where all of the hip dating restaurants were, and she didn’t want to run into a peeved former customer or bitter co-worker. She was let-go from every serving job she had, and both co-worker and customer alike knew her as the mid-thirties woman with, in the words of her former boss, “boundary issues reminiscent of a side-street Italian.” But how could she stop herself from touching? When a person’s smile revealed a pillowy tongue, their face pores cratering from the moisture rising from their plates, how could she resist from closing in? Blaire shook her head, and the hot thoughts giggled and dashed into hiding.

In college, when she began receiving attention from drunken boys at dark house parties, she initially mistook their lust for love. Even when she realized the difference, she continued to pull boys by the sleeves of their shirts to anonymous upstairs bedrooms. She liked being touched. She liked touching.

She stopped at another stop sign, and looked down at her breasts. They were bunched atop the padding of her bra, the edges of loose skin folded like curdled milk. She hoped, in her heart of hearts, that she would be touched tonight.

Blaire stepped into the house, her chest icing over with a thin layer of anxiety.

“Mother?” she said. She knew she was in the drawing room off the second dining room, where she sat every night since Blaire realized that her college tuition was being used up in the renovations and begged her mother to stop. When the project drew to a close, her mother became as sedentary as the house. It was only her voice that flooded the long hallways, terse and heated, moving with a force of its own.

In the sitting room, the gas fire was turned high. Its controlled blue flames licked its steel frame, and the room danced with green shadows. Blaire’s mother was hunched over and scribbling on a large yellow legal pad. She did not acknowledge her daughter. It was Friday, which meant that her mother was going to read a poem that night. The past few weeks her mother assumed such a manic persona during her readings, Blaire was sure she would have a stroke. Her mother was always an arrogant woman, but envious peers interpreted this trait as “fearlessness” when she was young and agile. In her withering, isolated state, the confidence that was once diluted into separate aspects of her life was concentrated only on these performances. Her Friday Night readings were nothing short of explosive. These weekly performances were the only thing her mother had left.

“I have a date tonight,” Blaire said.

“I thought you had given those up,” she said.

“No, mother.” Blaire sat down next to her and peered at the notebook in her lap. Only a few words were legible. Most lines were crossed out ten times over.

“The poetry reading will be at eight,” she said. Blaire nodded, an instinct. Then she caught herself, and slowly shook her head.

“No, that’s when I’m meeting Gus,” Blaire said. She knew what her mother would say next, what she always said.

“Then bring him by,” her mother said. “And before you go out, let him have a show.”

Gus arrived right on time—signified by the chimes of their elaborate doorbell. Blaire opened the door, they said hello, and he pulled her into a single-shoulder hug. He was dressed in a dark green Ralph Lauren Polo and khakis, and clutched a bouquet of daisies bundled in pink wrapping.

“Thanks for coming,” Blaire said.

“Sure,” he said, scratching the back of his head. “This place yours?”

“No, my mom’s house,” Blaire said. She took the daisies, and thanked him with a tight smile. Gus coughed into his fist.

“Before we head out,” Blaire said. “My mother would like to meet you.” She didn’t meet his eyes when she said it.

The last time Blaire left the house without introducing her date to her mother, she had called the police and told them that her daughter had been abducted. Once she told the police that her daughter was thirty, they didn’t commence the search. It was uncomfortable when Blaire showed up at home with her date and she found the cops sitting across from her mother in the sitting room. Her mother was pushing two old-fashioned into their uniformed chests, looked up and said, “There you are, darling! Won’t you persuade these nice men to have a drink with me?”

Blaire led Gus down the narrow hallway off the foyer, and arrived in the sitting room.

“Mother, this is Gus,” she said. Her mother didn’t seem to hear. She mumbled something that sounded like the word “finicky,” and continued to scribble illegible cursive in her notebook. “Mother?”

Her mother jerked her head up, and then revolved towards them.

“Hello, Gus. Hello Blaire,” her mother said. She patted the couch cushion beside her. “Come sit, let me tell you all a story.”

“We’re going to go out,” Blaire said. “I just wanted you to meet Gus. So you wouldn’t worry.”

Her mother stood up. The notebook fell to the floor.

“That’s silly. Sit down for a drink, please. Dinner can wait.” Her mother snatched the daisies from Blaire, and crammed them into a waterless vase filled with plastic roses on the coffee table. “There we go, freshening things up a bit. Blaire make me an old-fashioned, and Gus, what would you like?”

Blaire looked at Gus and gave him an apologetic smile. He shrugged.

“The same, that’ll be just fine,” he said.

In the kitchen, Blaire unbuttoned her blouse. Then re-buttoned it. Then unbuttoned it again. She glanced at her reflection in the freezer door. *I belong in there*, she thought. She may soon grow icicles from her nostrils. All she wanted was for her flesh to feel hot. Hot on hot. Blaire on Gus. Gus on Blaire. The hot thoughts ping-ponged inside of her breasts. To keep them from rising to her brain, she scooped them up with her cold palms, relishing the sudden warmth that spread throughout her chest. She massaged them, felt her dry nipples swell between her fingers. Blaire made the drinks, neat and fast, and spilt a little liquid on the tile floor near the sink, in the sighing hope that her mother would slip and break her back. When she returned to the sitting room, she saw that her mother was cozied up next to Gus on the couch.

“Gus agreed to stay for the reading,” her mother said. Then, “Blaire you’re practically half-naked. Button up your shirt.” Blaire stared at her mother’s hand, which was planted on Gus’s thigh. Her mother slipped it off, and busied herself by twirling a lock of silvery-blond hair and staring at the ceiling. Blaire handed them their drinks, and buttoned up her shirt.

“Gus, are you sure you want to stay?” Blaire said.

“It’s fine,” he said. His face flushed. He looked at Blaire’s feet, and took a long sip from his drink.

“Did you make reservations anywhere?” Blaire said, wishing she could sit down next to him on the couch. But it was crowded with the two of them. In an ideal world, he would get up and sit down next



to her. His meaty hand would be on her thigh. She'd squeeze his wrist, pull it between her legs and tell him—

“No, I was just hoping we could get in somewhere,” he said. She felt sick.

“Mother, when is the poetry reading?” Blaire said. Her mother was still staring at the ceiling with her milky blue eyes.

“What was the name of your last boyfriend? You know, the architect?” She angled her head towards Blaire, while inching her spidery hand along the back of the couch. She draped it right behind Gus's neck. He leaned forward, took a longer sip. The ice clinked as it piled against his lips.

“He worked construction. And he wasn't my boyfriend.” Blaire smiled at Gus, but he was staring into his drink.

“Anyway, he was a real burly fellow. Let's call him Harry. That's a man who couldn't hold his liquor. I swear he only used to come around to use the bathroom. He'd be in the loo for practically an hour! IBS, Blaire called it. She would just wait for him to finish and drive them to dinner! Where, I'm sure, it would happen all over again!” Her mother cackled. She threw her head back, and spilled her drink on her white blouse. “Look at me, always the klutz.” She began undoing her buttons.

“I hope you can handle your liquor Gus. Not like that dud Harry,” she said at button three.

“Oh, I'm sure I'll be fine,” Gus said. He made eye contact with Blaire's kneecaps.

“Mother, can we talk?” Blaire said. She got up.

“I'm fine, dear.” The blouse of her shirt hung open. Her pointed red bra revealed her aging cleavage.

Gus stood, shakily, his jacket slung over his arm. He pet it like a cat, his wrist limp.

“Are you leaving?” Blaire said.

“Yes,” he said. “I'm sorry, this isn't what I ...I'm sorry.” He walked out of the sitting room, and turned the wrong way. Blaire followed, and didn't correct him.

“Do you not find me attractive?” she said. She felt wasp-like with desire. She wanted to pin him down, force his hands in the places she wanted them.

“Is this the right way?” he said. She trailed him closely and breathed in his aftershave, his deodorant, his sweat, as he walked further into the house, past empty rooms that were never furnished, that they couldn’t afford to furnish. When he walked past the fourth empty room, he stopped and turned around.

“I’m headed the wrong way,” he said. But Blaire couldn’t let him leave. She inflated her chest, and leaned one arm against the wall.

“Do you not find me attractive?”

“You’re great,” he said. “Where’s the door?” Blaire heard her mother cackling from the sitting room.

“Blaire darling, bring me your boy!”

“I really like you,” Blaire said with a stiff-necked shake of her head, intent on ignoring mother. Gus moved past her. Blaire leaned in, puckering her lips. He palmed her forehead and trudged past. Blaire flexed her jaw, resettling the juices, and lunged at him, grabbing him around the waist.

“Leave...me,” he said. He kicked her off, and she shriveled on the floor, covering her head as if preparing for an explosion. He made a sound between a scoff and a whimper, ran to the front door, and was gone.

Blaire trudged back into the sitting room. Her mother was sprawled facedown on the couch, her green-veined calves protruding from beneath cashmere blanket.

“Honey, is that you?” Her mother’s voice sounded far away, muffled by the pillow. Blaire sat beside her, and patted her affectionately on the backside. She ripped the blanket off of her mother, and wrapped it around her head. She breathed it all in, the softness, the fibers. She snorted and sucked until she felt like her skin had been replaced by the cashmere and the cashmere had been replaced by her skin.

Then she turned to go upstairs and fix her hair, and thought that perhaps she was in the mood for some hard candy, the specialty kind sold at the downtown convenience.

## The Hill, Honey

Nikki wished she had a bucket of animal blood to dump on the head of the PETA advocate standing between her and the rest of the sidewalk. He was older, and his flier arm was cocked and ready to plunge into her chest when she walked past. Nikki put her head down like a rhino warning a predator, but when she thundered past, she was clotheslined, all the same. Nikki hissed at the pink flier in her face. This one had a crying puppy dog on it.

“No, thank you,” she hissed, before tripping over the chair leg of a man lazily waving his 9/11 denial poster in the air. This was Pennsylvania Avenue in the heat summer--passion, combined with humidity, and the crowds to take it all in. Across the street she saw a group of tourists who wore shirts they had obviously bought off of a street vendor, with messages like, “Legalize Grass!” and “Say Yes to Tacos” emblazoned on them. The crowd milled around a short man wearing a neon crossing-guard vest. He flapped a map at the dreadlock donned teenage girl beside him. “Listen to me!” he seemed to be saying, but he spoke French, so he could have been saying anything.

She was going to be late.

She started jogging, dammit. Because this she needed this internship about as much as it didn't need her.

Nikki finally stopped in front of John Hopkins International Studies Center. Women glided past her, wearing pencil skirts and sneakers, their heels stashed away in their name brand leather tote bags. The men in this part of town cared about appearances, too. It was easy to spot a Hill Man. They were tall and smooth-shaven, cruising down the blocks in grand strides. They were either furiously texting or scrolling, their phones inches from their faces, and she marveled that they walked in such straight lines. There was a big broad shouldered one coming toward her

now. Nikki scooted onto the curb, tight-roping walking on the sidewalk curb, but it felt like she was about to fail a game of tetris. He swept by her, and she spun on her heel, breathing him in. She imagined his day, filled with firm handshakes and meetings followed by congratulatory splashes of Glenfiddich Scotch in crystal glasses. What she really wanted was to fit right into his chest, so she could ride those broad shoulders right up the marble steps into the Capital.

She used the key fob on the main door to get into the lobby of Johns Hopkins. She took the elevator to the fourth floor, hardening the slosh of thoughts tipping back and forth in her mind. *I am a robot. I know nothing but work. I am a machine.* She imagined herself as a wind-up toy. She wound up her big metal butterfly wings as the elevator doors sighed and pulled apart, revealing the ceiling to floor glass doors of the department. The two marble-top receptionist desks sat behind a set of glass doors. Braxton, of course, beat her in.

He sat at the desk pushed against the right wall, his hands flexed over a dainty white keyboard. When she closed her eyes after work she could only envision Braxton as a firm jawline and a frosting dollop of brown hair. Perhaps it was because he so rarely changed his facial expression. He typed loudly, with the same clack-click-*ding* enthusiasm of a newspaper man from the 1920s.

He lifted his gaze from the screen, resting his hands in his lap.

“Bad morning?”

“What?” She glanced beside her into one of the mirrored walls. She resented being constantly reflected in the walls of this room. It meant she could never pretend that she looked how she thought she *might* look. Today, the dark circles beneath her eyes were a bit puffier than usual, though she had gotten the same amount of sleep she always had, performed the same half-

assed 10 minute workout on the elliptical of her building. “I’m fine.” She dropped her satchel behind her desk, and collapsed into the high-backed leather chair.

“I put a few documents on your desk.” He sniffed. “You do remember what Claudia said yesterday, about how to input them into the new database...well, nevermind.” Braxton’s clacking commenced. Nikki flinched. She didn’t care what people said about how people don’t radiate energy. They had never met Braxton. He could fuel an entire city by the way he cracked his knuckles. He was a walking, breathing nerve. Today he wore a fitted Armani suit, yellow-striped cuff links, and a Rolex watch, which blinking back at her from his hairless wrist. He was wildly overdressed for this gig.

“You going somewhere after work?” She dropped her satchel at her desk and checked the coffee pot that was hidden behind them on a short end table. At least he brewed their coffee good and strong, just the way she liked it.

She got up to pour herself a cup. He stopped typing, again. She could feel him pulse. NPR’s WAMU could be heard, faintly, from the speakers above them.

“I have an event this evening, so I’d like it if we could try and finish up everything quickly, today.”

She knew that his use of “we” was really a “you.” She was slower than he was on Microsoft, Excel. And at everything else. But not to the extent that she had ever held them past five PM. Perhaps that was the reason for his anxiety, for his cuff-links. She was intrigued. She emptied out three packets of non-calorie sweetener into her cup, forming a little white mountain on top of the liquid.

“What kind of event?”

“Something my dad wants me to attend.”

Braxton's dad had worked on multiple campaigns for congressmen, and was known to be well connected.

"Do you think I could come with?"

Braxton's face flushed, his lips thin.

"Maybe," he said. "I'll have to ask my dad."

Nikki sat back down at her desk, turned on her computer. It made the warm sunrise sound that she'd come to appreciate. She opened her mouth, raking over the budding idea for any snags.

"Want to do lunch? I was thinking Georgetown."

"Georgetown," Braxton said. "Yes, all right."

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They had an hour for lunch, and Georgetown was a five-minute Uber ride away. Nikki proposed a walk along the Potomac. In Georgetown, the river never smelled, and rarely did she see any trash. They walked past three Yachts tethered to the red-wooden docks. They waded sturdily above the rocky ledge of the river.

"I like that you can't get to Georgetown by Metro," Braxton said. She jumped, surprised by his voice.

"Why?"

"It makes it nice and... secluded, doesn't it?"

"Exclusive, more like," she said. Her chest blushed from a feeling of subtle smugness. He didn't respond. They passed an enormous two tiered boat that sat still from the wake of the river, unperturbed by the windy day.

"If I had a boat that nice, I'd live in it," Nikki said.

“A little up that ways is my dad’s boat,” Braxton said, pointing up the Potomac, deeper into Georgetown. It wasn’t a brag, he was just stating a fact. His face looked sullen for a moment, resentful, almost. A quick wind jumped across the water, flinging pellets of river into the air. He didn’t seem bothered by the chill.

“Does it have a name?” She said, wiping the moisture off her bangs. She caught a whiff of something sweet drifting down from one of the restaurants up the steep cobblestone road to their right, and realized this was the street they were meant to turn up.

“To be, or Yacht to be,” he said. She glanced up at him, and was confronted what might be considered a smile.

“That’s clever,” she said.

Lunch was at Patisserie Poupon, a French Cafe. Her senses were seized by the rich smell of cheese and freshly baked bread. The room was packed with lacquered yellow and red striped tables and chairs, the walls stacked with canvas paintings of gray moors and of blue-grassed fields. Nikki was impressed. She’d never been here before, had only heard about it.

Nikki ordered a crusty baguette with thick slab of brie and tomato. Braxton ordered a Brioche sandwich with cornichons, smoked salmon and duck mousse made from liver, cream, fat, and wine. He chewed fiercely, his eyes fluttering with every swallow. Nikki swept some crumbs from her slacks.

“So, what kind of event is it?”

“A fundraiser,” he said.

“For what?” She said.

“Oh gosh,” he said. “Breast Cancer?” He picked up a fallen sliver of cheese from his plate, popped it into his mouth.



“I think I’d be a good date then,” she said. Her stomach roiled with regret. “Errr...”

“Why?” Braxton said.

“Because, I have breasts?” He flinched. Nikki inspected her nail beds, she could feel him examining her face. She wondered what he was looking for, hoping she didn’t have lipstick smeared all the way up her cheek. She looked away, hoping to emit some tragic beauty, like how a princess gazes out of her locked bedroom window, awaiting her knight in armor.

“You don’t mean that,” he said. “The date part, I mean. I’ve asked you out before...so.”

“I meant as friends,” she said. She couldn’t look at his face anymore, this was too awkward even for her. She looked at one of the gray-moored landscapes--the gray hills seemed never ending.

“Right.” Braxton straightened up. He dapped his lips with the cloth napkin, and folded it neatly beside his plate. He checked his Rolex. “I think we should head back.”

After work, Nikki ubered back to Georgetown. She liked being near all of the fitted suits and skirts, it was like playing a game of pretend. She walked past people with tanned faces, enamel-white smiles that, maybe if they turned her way, might assume she was some wip-smart journalist because of her ratty hair, her off-brand slacks and scuffed Keds.

Hunched over in the coffee shop facing the narrow edge of the Potomac, she tried to pretend that she was a part of the triumphant chorus that sounded loudly on the Hill and trickled its way down to a sweet soprano across the polished, cobblestone streets of Georgetown.

She wandered towards towards the bridge that went over the canal and watched as high-heeled women strut across the cobblestone roads as if it were hardwood. She watched compact military men jog up the steep hills towards the college in nothing but skimpy bottoms that, if she was lucky, caught wind off the Potomac. She told herself that it was a small difference, the

difference between her and these beautiful people. But the difference was enormous and she knew it. The difference was that they had money. She dug her banana out from the bottom of her purse. It was soft in the middle, but she chomped through anyway, letting the last piece linger in her throat before swallowing.

She kicked rocks beneath the bridge for awhile, sniffing at the Potomac and leering at the overpass above. She collapsed onto a concrete bench across from a kayak rental shop, staring down at her Keds, feeling every bit of resentment toward Braxton. She dug the toe into the dirt, which is when she saw something glimmer. It was a shiny black credit card.

She looked to her left, to her right, picked it up, studied it. The card read: “Anastasia Kennedy.”

“That is *not* a real name,” Nikki said. But it was a real name. She imagined Anastasia as an icy-blond with creamy skin, clad in a pink chiffon A-line dress with red velvet heels. She imagined her staring across the Potomac from the white-planked docks of National Harbor, thinking, *What a silly klutz, I must have left my card at the Spa. I suppose I’ll pick it in the morning*, before being whisked off to Cape Cod on a private jet. Or probably an even nicer vacation spot. Why couldn’t she think of a single nicer vacation spot? And she was a Kennedy? Without thinking, Nikki shoved the card in her jean pocket. Without thinking, she got the hell out of there, made her way to to the shopping block.

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“Ms. Kennedy, would you like to add the matching clutch to your purchase?”

“If you think it would match,” Nikki said. She was perched atop a leather chair in an oval room lined with pink velvet drapes. The sales girl, Nina, kneeled in front of her, and kept stealing glances. Nikki recognized herself in the girl’s gaze--one that lingered too long on the

cashmere fitted tight against her breast. She's probably thinking, *if I had that dress, I'd look slimmer, better.*

"Is there an event tonight?" the girl said. She slipped off the suede stilettos and prepped a pair of ankle boots by massaging her palm against the heel of the shoe. Three pairs of shoes and five dresses were zipped up in garment bags and boxed up behind Nikki, all of which had been summoned with a flick of her fingers during her initial romp around the store.

"Lift up," the girl said softly. She cupped her hand around the base of her calf, and guided Nikki's toes into the shoe. "If I'm being honest," Nikki said, "I *do* have an event tonight."

"What kind of event?"

"Breast Cancer awareness," said Nikki. She blew on her nails as if the polish was still wet, despite having them done over an hour ago. The sales girl went back to fashioning her shoe. The girl nodded, didn't look up. "That sounds, amazing." She stood, offering hands. Nikki pulled herself upright in front of the floor length mirror. She sparkled.

Nikki couldn't glide across Georgetown's cobblestone in her stilettos yet, but she managed not to trip as she made her way to the nearest posh bar. The thin manikins poised in the window of Saks Fifth Avenue that were always gowned in pearls no longer aggravated Nikki. She hiked up her dress and shouldered into the nearest bar, intent on experiencing it all as fast as possible. She popped on top of the nearest barstool. The bartender smiled at her like the sales girl had, with respect and a touch of inferiority. Nikki ordered the fanciest drink she could think up: a Cosmopolitan. A few spots down, a man lifted his head. Peering up from his Martini, he tipped an invisible hat.

"How are you?" he said.

She took a sip of her pink drink.

“Fabulous,” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “Better than that, even.”

“You goin’ somewhere tonight?” He had the Southern charm. A brazen, hapless confidence that made his chest look sturdier and his smile wider. Was he a...could he possibly be...a Hill Man?

“I have an event,” she said, and took another dainty slurp from the glass.

“That’s fun,” he said. “So do I.”

“Would you like to close out, Miss?” the bartender said. Nikki tightened up. She was afraid of showing her ID and her credit card in such close sequence. Nikki shook her head no.

“I’m Dean,” he said.

“Anastasia,” she said. She held out her manicured hand and he shook it.

After another Cosmo she began to appreciate the curve of his Adam’s apple, the dark hair peeking beneath the collar of his shirt, the cuffs of his sleeves. She wanted to be ironed out, smooth and stiff, like him. She arched her back and sat up straight. The base of her spine pressed back into the metal prongs of the barstool.

“What time is your event?” He glanced up from his phone. He looked as if he was preparing to leave.

“You tell me,” she said, panicking. She took another big gulp of her drink. He winked at her. A wink that looked practiced, if not mastered after years of shooting women with that same sideways glance. Nikki blushed, the heat feeding all the way down and back up again.

“Are you looking for a hire?” he said. *Who did she want to work for? President? Vice President? Washington Post?* She hadn’t thought her backstory through. She didn’t answer, and politely shrugged.

“I’m surprised I haven’t seen you at some of the functions. I work under Andy.”

“I’m not around here often,” He laughed. Had she said something funny? He kept talking, but she was no longer listening. Because right before her very eyes entered a confirmed Hill Man. In one hand he gripped a snap-shut briefcase, with the other he pinched off his aviator sunglasses, revealing a raptor-like intensity that scanned and illuminated everything before him. He strode past and Nikki breathed him in (cardamom, cinnamon, wood-burning fireplace) and the moment he sat down at the far end of the bar he seemed to disconnect from the main-frame—for when he rested his elbows on the bar-top, his board-straight shoulders fell by just an inch. Perhaps it was a trick of the dim lighting. Perhaps he exhaled.

“If you keep staring like that, he’ll think you want an autograph,” said Dean. He stiffened a little bit, took a sip of his drink.

“Who is that man?” Nikki said. Hill Man had ordered his drink, and *dammit* she didn’t hear what it was. “I think I’ve seen him around before.”

“That’s Kyle Stovall,” he said. “He works under the Vice President. He’s infamous for knowing pretty girls like you.”

“Oh, stop,” she said. She was distracted from Dean’s quickly evaporating charm. The bar filled with more Hill Men by the minute. They greeted each other with solemn nods, but didn’t talk besides that.

“Will he be at your party?” she said.

“Possibly,” Dean said. He leaned in. “You look fantastic.”

“Thanks.”

“How much for an event?”

“What?”

“How much...” He looked her square in the face, the way a jealous spouse does when suspicious of a lying partner.

Her mouth fell open. “For tonight?” Was she slurring? She felt her mouth wasn’t moving the way it should.

“I thought you were...you’re just so beautiful.” But the way he said it sounded like an insult. He cleared his throat, and then turned himself towards the bar with a petulant child.

“You’re not wrong.” She said. “I just didn’t see you as the type of man willing to...?”

He smiled. “Honey, don’t you worry about that.” She tried out a giggle, and then excused herself to the restroom. Nikki gently closed the stall door before hyperventilating. *What is this? Who am I?* She reopened the door and leaned against the counter.

“What the fuck am I doing?” But there was a bigger push towards it then away from it.

She never expected to really *go*. Dean and Nikki took a car to Foggy Bottom, where they were swept through the heavily guarded archway of red and white wreaths into the Ritz. Dean got her in by saying, “*she’s with me,*” and giving the secret service man another one of those angled Mr. Macho winks. The room opened up like a greenhouse, with a curved ceiling made entirely of glass, casting the room in a shocking mix of natural and fluorescent light. Women with red mouths spoke in quick, self-assured tones as Dean escorted her by. Men with thick, gelled-back hair pulled at their sleeves while waiting for a drink at the white reflective surface of the hotel’s ovular bar. Their eyes held when she looked into their faces. They smiled, a warm smile, she thought, and she nodded in return. The bar curved—she turned to look while still managing to follow Dean—around three of the four walls of the room. Dean lead her to the far corner of the massive bar, through crowds of people who all seemed so much taller than she was, despite the fact that she was wearing 5-inch heels.

“What do you want?”

“A tequila shot—” He placed a finger against her lips, turned to the bartender.

“The lady will have a Martini. Neat.” She looked out into the crowd. That’s when she saw him. The man from the bar. She tugged on Dean’s coattail.

“There he is!”

“I’m telling you--you don’t want to talk to him,” he said. He leaned into her neck. “What is that you’re wearing?”

But Nikki took off towards him. This was her *chance* after all. She wasn’t sure what she was going to say but she was sure she was going to say it. *Hello, I’m Anastasia Kennedy. I wanted to thank you for your service.* And who knows, maybe he’d hire her on as a personal assistant. Maybe he’d whisk her onto the dance floor and spin her around in her 800 dollar dress.

People watched her as she wound around them, like dominos their heads cocked in sequence. Her movements felt too fast for this crowd. They seemed content on moving as if suspended beneath the sea, tipping their drinks into their barely parted lips, their hands lingering on each other for too long. And their laughter died off as if traveling through dense matter in the deepest part of the ocean --a tinkle from the women, a bass drum from the men--percussive sounds that we’re snatched from the air the moment they were made. Nikki dug for her own instrument—

“Hello!” She stood feet from him.

“Hello,” said the Hill Man. Beside him was a woman who looked as though she hadn’t eaten for a decade. Her face was taut, the skin pulled back over the bones. But her cleavage was grotesque in its magnificence. Nikki tried not to stare.

“I’m Anastasia. I love your policy. Thank you for your service.” She fumbled with words, knowing she was saying too much but incapable of slamming herself shut. He gripped her around the wrist.

“Speak up, honey. You’re from the service?” The woman beside him suddenly looked much stronger than her thin frame suggested. Her heavy chest heaved. “I’m some kind of lucky fellow.” He grabbed Nikki by the hip and pulled her close. He ran his hand up her side, like a doctor inspecting for lumps. Nikki stepped back, burning. The woman beside him mouthed, “fuck off,” with a level of precision she didn’t think possible from lips that bloated with filler.

Then in the corner of the room--she saw Braxton. He stood by himself, but was looking at the back of the Hill Man’s head. He took a tiny step towards them, and then spun around entirely. She stepped to the left of the man and waved at Braxton. No look--he was staring into his drink.

“Have you ever seen a room with walls made of velvet?” The man said. The skinny woman beside him looked as though she might commit a black-out rage murder for a split second, and then re-admitted herself to boredom-land.

Nikki glanced back at Dean. He had his hand on a tall woman’s lower back at the bar, and seemed perfectly content without her.

“Fuck it,” Nikki said.

“What was that, dear?”

“I’d love to,” Nikki said, with the vocal equivalency of a courtesy.

She followed the couple to the red velvet room, which was just a few doors down the hall outside of the ballroom. The walls and ceiling were completely coated in red velvet, which made the space appear smaller than it was. There was nothing cozy or comfortable about it, though. It



seemed as though one long curtain from a palace had unspooled, and someone had stapled every inch of it in place. The pair sat beside one another on the gold trimmed red velvet couch. Nikki stood before them.

The Hill Man patted the skinny woman's knee and the skinny woman shook her head ever so slightly, invisible to the untrained eye, but Nikki was too familiar with her own disappointed expressions to not recognize one in another. The skinny woman deflated, her limbs collapsing atop one another like a badly constructed tower of twigs. And then she snapped to life. It was like the stage curtains tore open and she jumped into character with the same amount of exuberance as the understudy to the understudy of a lead actor who never wanted to do the play in the first place.

She pushed herself off the couch with a pelvic thrust and dragged herself over to Nikki. She got to it quickly. With a tug of hair and a strong breast-grip, the skinny woman had maneuvered her lips onto Nikki's face. Their mouths mashed together in a way that resembled two women pressed head to head in a yelling match.

She could hear Hill Man saying, "yes" and realized in that moment that she was playing out some fantasy of his, and that he probably had never seen a woman shave or pee outside or any of the real things women do every day. Which was unfortunate because just as she thought of squatting behind a tree to pee with skinny woman's tongue on her neck, Nikki's laughed. She clapped her hand over her mouth.

The skinny woman pulled away, giving Nikki a look of initial disgust, then a flash of smile, then she resumed her ambivalence.

They both turned to Hill Man, who had his hands down his pants, and didn't remove it even as he cleared his voice and said, "I need to make a phone call, if you ladies wouldn't mind clearing the room."

Nikki and the skinny woman stood frozen in this moment, and Nikki was scared of meeting the woman's eyes, because they might show a vulnerability that would shatter the illusion of this evening. She needed this woman to be the expert on what to do, on how to immerse herself in this world. The woman shrugged and walked out of the room. Nikki followed her, glancing over her shoulder at Hill Man. He cleared his throat and shooed her away with his free hand. When Nikki entered the hallway, skinny woman was gone. Nikki felt her zipper coming undone, all by itself, until her dress, loose as a towel, fell to her ankles. She fixed herself back up, and hurried back into the main room.

Nikki found Braxton, she gripped him by the elbow.

"I don't like it here," she said.

"What are you doing here?" He said.

"I don't know, but I shouldn't be here," she said. She felt a hand touch her lower back and then slowly make its way up her spine to the base of her neck. She spun around-- Dean stood taller than she remembered.

"Your zipper was a little...undone." He said. He fingered a tendril of hair that had come loose from her updo. "I was wondering where you ran off to." He was void of charm, and she could smell the hard liquor on his breath. It reminded her of too many nights on the toilet in college, and she dry heaved.

"Are you all right?" Braxton said. Nikki nodded, slightly bent. Braxton stepped toward Dean, and Dean retreated with a smirk.

“You can take her home, man,” Dean said.

He stumbled back to the bar, where there was another woman waiting for him with the same smile Nikki was wearing a few hours back--smug, like she knew a secret. There were no secrets, though.

## Big Screens

She waited in line to receive her free refill while trying to catch the barista's eye. Robbie was being so self-involved lately, what with his gaming and his nine-to-fiving--so *boring*. The other day she even straightened her hair and he didn't notice. He was all like, "Did you pick up the Musinex?" in that nasally voice he gets when he's sick. She chucked the box of pills at his chest and that was the most fun she had that day.

The barista wasn't as cute as Robbie but somehow more attractive. His head was shaven in a punk-rock way. He had a red beard and salmon-pink lips. He would be a fantastic cast in an indie rom-com, she thought. A sort of B-side hot, the kind of sad-boy attractiveness that meant he could never be Marvel, but maybe DC. And not too attractive to seem out of place in a movie set in a New England beach-front town, progressively winning over an ambitious city girl in a series of silent, facial close-ups. She could see it: the ocean roaring behind him, reflecting his loneliness, and passion...

"What can I get for you?" he said.

"My free refill," she said. "A Grande mocha, please."

"That only applies to regular coffee," he said. He ran his hand over his smooth head, glanced at the register, then at the customer behind her. She felt as if she were in a French film, her world cast in black and white, her skin aglow in soft lighting. She raised her fingers to her lips, and *ooh la la*, his flicker of eye contact wrapped a warm blanket around her cold heart. The audience felt the deeper implications of that glance. Perhaps it was a look conveying a deep and brooding lust, perhaps it was a look of love.

"I'll have a regular coffee, then," she said.

"\$1.80," he said. He took her Visa and their fingers touched. The audience swooned. "Next!"

She went back to her table and sat with her back to the barista. She didn't want to lead him on. She wiggled her shoulder blades, and ran her hands through her hair in the way some actresses did when the camera shot dragged up their body, from the ankles to the nape of the neck.

“I’m going out tonight,” she said, standing suddenly. The crowd swooned. She blew a kiss to the barista, towards the door.

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Before dressing, Anna set up her phone camera and its timer. She ensured that the natural light from her bedroom window hit her face from the angle she wanted as she propped up her phone and clicked the button to make the camera flash down from ten. She leaned in and smeared her lipstick every so slightly while pressing her tongue against the inside of her bottom lip so it appeared larger, more supple. Ten seconds to get it all right, ten seconds before she was on the big screen. She could hear the photographer yell: whinier, poutier, sadder! Think sad and sexy! Make it sex-ie-er! She scooped up her breasts, shifting them around her bra until they formed a tight crease of cleavage. She took twenty pictures and thumbed through them all. Some of them she deleted on sight. Others made her pause and think *potential* as she squinted at the curvature of her smile, her ambivalent expression.

She owned six photo-editing applications. FaceTune (\$1.99) was her favorite. She uploaded the picture and grazed over the phone screen with her finger, smoothing out the lines around her mouth, erasing the faint cluster of pock marks crawling up her cheekbone. With practiced mastery, she zoomed and pinched, until her waist was slimmed to proportion and her breasts ballooned out over her ribcage. The face was hardest. She fine-tuned the lips with the tip of her pinky finger so that they were the tiniest bit plumper. She dragged up her eyebrows until she looked the tiniest bit happier. She scrubbed at every imperfection until her whole face was velvety beige, until it looked like she slept for ten hours every night and never, ever smiled. Then she posted it with the caption: “going out tonight!”

She arranged her outfit: a dark (faux) velvet a-line dress. She laid out her aunt’s emerald earrings that she forgot to return two Christmases ago. She would spend the night at a fancy cocktail bar and to tantalize tall, handsome men with a single look. It was a look she dreamt about mastering—a look that would split open her personality, would reveal the brightest, most irresistible part of herself. She checked her phone every three minutes. She was up to fifty likes. She had posted dangerously late in the day, so

this was expected. 10 AM was peak posting time. People were over-stimulated on coffee and double-tapped whatever they come across on social media. Around 1PM people crashed, workload peaked, and people wanted to go home. Around 6 PM, the wine flowed, and the love for integral narratives (the beauty, the happiness, and the endless tropical vacationing) was rekindled.

“Where are you going?” her boyfriend, Drew, said. Had he been sitting on the bed this whole time? His computer sat on his chest and its screen blocked her view of his head. She felt the impulse to take a picture. At this angle, it would look so funny, like his head had been replaced by a rectangular block. He wore headphones, and was likely playing World of Warcraft.

“I’m going out tonight,” she said.

“Why?” he said.

“Because I want to get out, to do something.”

She hadn’t thought about inviting him, or even telling him. He’d fallen into an online gaming hole Friday after work, and she couldn’t remember the last time they shared prolonged eye contact in the past 24 hours. When he fell into this private, timeless space, she accepted that any interruption was met with a split second look or a gruff “what do you want?” He never paused his red-knuckled hands, which were always at work, his fingers tracing sharp shapes against the keypad, his thumb vibrating against the spacebar.

“You weren’t going to invite me?” He slid his computer off his stomach.

“I didn’t think you’d want to come,” she said.

“Depends on where you’re going,” he said.

“The city, maybe.”

The more it became a reality the less she wanted to go. New visions of the night swam across her vision. She saw herself sitting with Drew at a rickety bar table. There would be a small TV in the corner broadcasting whatever sport was on, that he would strategically position himself in front. She would converse with him while he stared right above her eye line, until finally she would turn to see what’s *so*

*important* and it would be one of those 10-minute long infomercials, the kind that sells Hair Growth products: a photo of a bald old man next to a photo of a thick-haired doppelganger.

“I’d like to go alone,” she said.

“Okay,” he said. He didn’t seem hurt, just surprised, she supposed, that his girlfriend wasn’t going to nag him to get up, to shower, to help her pick a place. And he was relieved, she also supposed, just like she was relieved. He lay back, snagged the remote, and turned on the TV.

She went to go and pour herself a glass of wine. She saw herself on the big screen: a woman mistreated and unaware of it. She could feel the audience clenching their fists in frustration--*just leave him*, they seethed through bared teeth. The music stopped and her ringtone blasted. She knew it was work and so she let it ring out, filled up her wine glass a bit higher.

Drew stood in the doorway of the bedroom, holding her phone.

“It’s work,” he said. “Don’t you have a shift?”

“I did,” she said, and took a sip of wine. He scooted past her to get to the sink. She shuddered inwardly, pinching her lips. She felt the audience grind their teeth, their heads expanding like red balloons, ready to pop.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come?” He asked. “Sure you don’t just want to watch a movie tonight?”

“I’m going out, Drew. Alone.”

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She called a cab and was dropped off at the chosen bar: an upscale cocktail lounge in Adams Morgan, downtown DC. The lounge was shrouded in a haze of white light, a light that seemed to shudder as she stepped through the second set of plate-glass doors and into the crowded space. Why it was hazy she couldn’t tell, but it made the wide, tall room feel cozy and muted. She heard the faint tinkling of glasses and many conversations being held all at once, which sounded a bit like gurgling water, except, in a calming sense. She blinked and at once was watching herself in a wide shot: a young woman taking in a

room. The camera panned out and the audience watched as she made her way toward the crowded bar. Women sat on most of the bar stools except for one in the very middle. Blocking her entry were tall, handsome men. She pushed them gently aside, mumbling, “Sorry, I’m sorry, excuse me, I’m sorry.” She had decided on wearing the faux-velvet, and felt wildly underdressed amidst the knee-length sequined chiffon and Georgette body-con dresses worn by Amazonian beauties who looked as though they stood naked every morning with their arms splayed while tailed-to-fit clothing drifted down from the heavens. But Anna did not let this intimidate her. The camera moved to a point-of-view shot so that the audience could feel what it was like in her shoes: the claustrophobia-inducing bumping and shoving of being the shortest person at a crowded bar. The chests of men and women framed the shot as she meandered through. This shot, of course, encouraged sympathy for the protagonist, who the audience knew had a disadvantage both physically, and socially.

When Anna was within range she pounced on the stool to confirm her claim. Her phone buzzed, a text from Drew: “Will you need me to pick you up?” She didn’t respond. She decided that that bit would be cut. The bartender stood at the far-end of the bar. He was one of those slender, big-eyed “cute” guys. The kind of guy who would never be handsome but always cute and possibly “so sweet!”. He was the kind of man women considered “safe” because he didn’t pose a physical threat--AKA, most girls could kick his ass. He was a perfect man to be cast in a supporting role, purposed as a contrast to the leading man’s proclivity for one-night-stands, to show the audience what rewards are found in living a responsible, stable life.

She flagged him down, and when he arrived she realized that she had no idea what to order. In a panic, she said: “Martini, dry.” She felt a close-up happening: the young woman bit her lip, glanced to her right and left. The bartender arrived with the drink, and her face lit up. The audience felt like there was something deeper happening here. Her eyes looked so barren and cold when she waited alone, but when the bartender appeared, she bloomed! The audience realized that the young woman *wants* attention. They



felt her anxiety as she continued to sit alone, flinching against each sip from her bitter drink. *There wasn't even an olive*, the audience cried, *isn't there supposed to be an olive?*

A few minutes passed and then the bartender stepped up to her again. She smiled, and the lights behind her twinkled. An over the shoulder shot commenced, the camera sitting right behind the bartender.

“Are you waiting for someone?” he said. She took a sip of her drink, smiled again.

“No,” she said.

“Would you mind moving? So that someone else can place their order? It’s a busy part of the night, and unless you’re going to have another drink…” He looked to the person next to her and said, “One moment, sir!” Back to her: “Maybe you can move to one of the tables behind you? Thanks!”

The man who was supposed to wait one moment shouldered past and planted his elbows securely on the bar. Anna half-slid, half-fell off of her seat into the sea of beautiful people who no longer seemed like Gods and Goddesses, but more like slabs of concrete that wouldn’t get the hell out of her way. She pushed her way back to the bar.

“I won’t move,” she said. Her voice carried little sound amongst all the noise, which cluttered her thoughts. She momentarily refocused on the bright map of applications on her home screen. *Weather. Snapchat. Instagram.* They were so quaint, so comforting to look at with their smoothed corners, their bright colors. With just a little tap of her finger she could be whisked away into a series of little letters and pictures—she could escape. And now she was here, in a world that didn’t feel as real as it did when she was gazing into it on her phone screen, tucked beneath her covers. She was shoved back into reality by the elbow-man.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” he said. She looked at the bartender for support, gave him one of the pouty faces she’d seen the Insta models do—except without the right lighting and lip enhancing software—could a look even suffice? He could capture her at all the wrong angles. Before she could say anything in response, the elbow-man shoved her off the bar. She found herself standing with her face against his back. She turned, and as a guide, lifted the brightness of her phone screen, and dove back into the mass of

bodies. She was spat out right where she started the night not thirty minutes ago. She felt a blue icy heat in the middle of her chest: anger. She felt anger. This emotion didn't make sense during this point in the film, which she thought was a light drama with an *Under the Tuscan Sun* vibe, in which a romantically oppressed woman realizes that she doesn't need a man to love herself and her life.

She scanned the room for an open bar table, but they were all taken by groups of people who looked like they enjoyed each other and who didn't flinch when they sipped their fancy drinks. She looked down at her disgusting martini and considered swallowing it like a shot. She paused. She needed to take a picture. She flipped on her camera, and felt a feeling akin to driving a corkscrew into a wine bottle. She felt the weight of importance on this moment like the importance of twisting in the metal just right, so that the cork popped off like it should, so that she didn't have to wait to have that goddamn drink, didn't have to wait for the buzz that moved from tongue to brain in a single swallow. There was a rule to taking a picture alone in public. A person only has a few chances to get it right, or faces the risk of becoming a topic of pure loathing for everyone around them. The thought of going home picture-less made the night seem worthless.

She held up her arm, made sure the angle and the lighting were right. She saw herself in a pivotal moment on screen: the young woman, in a desperate attempt to prove herself worthy of a night out alone, aimed to document her proof of existence to the world. Anna stretched her arm as far as it would go, tried to capture the faces of the strangers behind her, because she suddenly felt self-conscious she was alone, very conscious of what the post would look like. Caption: "night out #solo." Well shit, is that even a good thing?

Back to the screen: Anna took three steps backwards, positioning herself *very* closely to the crowd behind her, practically standing at their table, practically, one could say, trying to take a picture with a couple of strangers. Her face burned red out of pure exhilaration for her self-made efforts at female independence. The audience contorted like a giant eyeball, blinked out a giant happy tear. A tear of pure and unadulterated happiness! They cried: *Look at her go! A wild night out! What fun!*

Anna's phone buzzed, it was Drew: "I'm worried. I'm coming to pick you up." She slid the message away and was about to click the capture button on her camera to take the stupid goddamn picture because god dammit she was already embarrassed enough when— her phone died. The screen went black and everything.

She felt naked—was naked --without that blue light warming her face. A man walked up to her.

"How is your night?" he said. He radiated an energy she wasn't sure she'd noticed in another living person before—similar to the warmth of her laptop against her thighs. Perhaps it was his narrow chest, or the tuft of dark hair peeking beneath the collar of his shirt. Still, she couldn't place him--a lead? An extra? He repeated himself, yelling over the noise. It was sobering to be spoken to without distraction, to have to look into a face and watch as his eyeballs watered and blinked, as his cheek fat twitched--was the camera capturing this?

"I'm fine," she said.

"I can't hear you," he said. He pointed to his ear. Anna looked around them. The crowd was loud and boisterous, but they were all on cue. The timing was still *just* right. She felt a few eyes turning to watch their interaction, their gazes as bright as burning bulbs in her periphery. Anna regained her composure.

"Hello!" she said. She cleared her throat, looked up into the strange man's big, HD eyes. "How are you?" She tucked her phone into her pocket, while the crew crept forward, the camera lens sitting inches from her face. Her eyes did not blink or water or waver.

"I hate these things," he said, with an exaggerated shrug. She mimicked him, shrugging. She tucked hair behind her ear. "I'd rather be home." He looked over to an empty corner of the bar, and she lead the way.

"Why home?"

"I just feel like..." He looked at her face the way she did when she zoomed in on a photo, inspecting her for imperfections. "Like--I can do everything at home that I can do here, except for..."

It was the same reason she had been pulled out into the night--to experience that tiny but essential piece of gratification that her phone could never give.

“Is it this?” Anna said, planting her hand on his shoulder. “I’m trying to figure it out, too.” But no sparks flew like they seemed to in the movies. Her hand was just...sitting there. She removed it, blushing.

“Maybe it’s touching, definitely something to do with that,” he said. “I think that’s what drives most people off their couches...into these...cest-pools.” Her face cramped from smiling. She wiggled her jaw.

“Do you want to know a gross fact about phone screens?” He said.

She giggled. She liked his *edge*. He was handsome, she realized. Or, his personality was handsome, was that possible? She zoomed out while she waited for him to speak. She watched herself: a well dressed young woman, and him: a dapper young man, attempting to connect; connecting.