

BODY POSITIVE

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Kiki's doing her exercises on the floor of our shared bedroom at the rental, and when I enter in my beach getup, she stops mid-crunch to exclaim, "Ooh, nice suit! Is that new?" even though she knows I haven't worn a bathing suit in public since approximately eighth grade. I'm in a black two-piece with a sort of midriff-skirt that hangs down from the top and covers most of my belly—a compromise, I'd figured—plus the requisite translucent cover-up. She seems entirely sincere, just like she did when we embraced at the airport. "You look beautiful, Karebear," she'd said, leaning back to take me in. I wondered if she might somehow have confused the words *you* and *I*. She's the one who always looks like she just hopped out of a Katy Perry video, even in the yoga pants and baggy t-shirt she wore for the plane. She was a volleyball star at UNC. Her legs are long, tan, tapered and smooth. My rolls bulge over the edge

of my jeans; my skin is the pallid color of a cave-dwelling creature. I don't care. I've got other things going on.

It's our first family vacation in years. Kiki was always too busy with volleyball until graduating, then Nanna got sick, then Mom and Dad were renovating the house last summer. I was pulling for somewhere out west, maybe hiking in Yosemite, but Mom, Dad, and Kiki all wanted something more "relaxing." Three to one. So now we have a beach cottage in Bethany, Delaware, for a week. The cottage is cute, I'll admit—powder blue wood panel siding, white-banistered front porch, set in a shady sycamore grove a few blocks back from the public beach access, amid a cluster of sister houses. We've been emailing back and forth for weeks discussing plans for the trip. There are a couple state parks and a lighthouse nearby, and Kiki's heard Rehoboth, the next town over, is really nice. But the first day, of course, has to be a beach day.

Once we're all changed, we set out. Dad's lugging the cooler; the rest of us are laden with folding chairs, floppy bags, umbrellas. Despite the half-hour ride in the rental minivan last night, Mom hasn't yet finished apprising Kiki and me of vital developments back home. "I saw Nancy Robertson the other day at the gym. Apparently Timmy Robertson just moved back to Pittsburgh. He was in your class, right, Karen? He's working at PNC now."

“Cool. Good for him.” I remember Timmy Robertson as the boy who sat next to me in sophomore math class, with a frayed Red Sox cap that seemed to be Krazy-glued to his scalp.

A look passes between Mom and Kiki. “Have you seen Greg recently?” Mom asks, carefully casual.

“Uh, yeah, we saw each other last week.” I’m grateful we’re walking, so I don’t have to make eye contact.

There’s a suspended silence—I’m expected to say more—but mercifully, Kiki changes the subject to her boyfriend’s whitewater rafting trip with “the guys,” which conveniently coincides with our vacation. I picture Rob at the helm of a sturdy rubber boat, placing assertive strokes left and right to lead his crew to safety. I picture his triumphant return home, Kiki throwing herself into his arms, and the two of them later cuddled up on the love seat at her apartment, showing each other photos from their respective travels and nuzzling intermittently. Rob is gorgeous, as gorgeous a man as Kiki deserves, a former varsity rower with curly blonde cherub-hair and a cute cleft chin. More importantly, he’s not an asshole like most exceedingly handsome men. Most of Kiki’s previous boyfriends, if they talked to me at all, would just ask me a bunch of polite questions about my life, the surest sign that someone’s

only talking to you because they have to. Rob talks to me about things that actually interest him—sometimes too much so, when he gets on a roll about interest rates and the Fed. He argues when we disagree about something. He doesn't bend the conversation down to me like I'm a little kid who can't reach. So, I'm glad that Kiki found him. I don't begrudge the two of them their happiness.

We mount the wooden steps, gray with age, that lead up over the dunes and onto the blazing strip of sand. Seagulls wheel and squawk their plaintive alarm-bell cries. The weather calls for scattered thunderstorms this whole week; right now the sky is sunny, but there's a heavy pressure in the air, the tangible, volatile charge you get on the Eastern Seaboard in late July. A few dense, thuggish cumuli hover on the fringes, not large enough to be imminently threatening, but large enough to remind one of their presence. We drag our packs and bundles, caravan-like, past a couple of bathing beauties with their bikini strings untied, nude backs oily and exposed, as if to tease men walking by with the thought that they might suddenly sit up. Kiki is already far ahead, followed by Mom, then Dad, then me. I stumble over the little mounds like a toddler, the sand somehow nullifying my knowledge of how to walk. Sweat pools under my armpits and between my thighs and ungraciously

oozes out of my suit. As if the beach is trying to make a point, a lanky-haired guy in boardshorts plays paddleball with a boy of about ten nearby, their agile, monkey-like motions kicking up sprays of sand.

Once I've dropped my cargo on the patch of territory Kiki has claimed, I dig into my bag for the greasy tube of SPF 45, which I have carefully separated with a towel from my well-thumbed copy of *Wuthering Heights* and new issues of *The Wicked + The Divine*. Kiki is already splayed out on the ground in full UV-absorption mode, eyes closed, earbuds in, limbs carefully positioned so they don't touch any other part of her body. Even her hands are spread out stiffly so the spaces in between the fingers will get tan. Dad has settled his hairy bulk into an upright lawn chair; he won't move from that position for the next six hours. He faces the sea, his eyes open but unseeing, blank. He never brings a book, an iPod, nothing; it's like his whole goal in life is to achieve these catatonic states and remain in them as long as possible. Irritation, like a wave of seasickness, passes through me as I watch them, observe these stupid habits I know so well. They're so obvious, so guileless, so creaturely. Sometimes I can't believe I'm related to these people.

"Can you do my back, Mom?" I hate that I have to ask this.

Mom stops making her beaverish little preparations—tucking her towel into her chair, placing her sunglasses alongside her, adjusting the position of her bag—and takes the tube from me. She squirts a thick white slug into her palm.

“Ugh, you don’t have to *saturate* me with it.” She always gets way too much. It’s like she thinks the more lotion you slap on, the more sun protection you accrue. There are a lot of things like that—science things, logic things—that she just doesn’t seem to understand.

“What?” she says defensively. “You don’t want to get burnt, do you?”

The sudden cold of the lotion against my skin makes my neck muscles clench. As Mom kneads the stuff into the pale flesh of my back, I can’t help but wonder what she’s thinking. Back at the cottage, when I stepped out into the living area in my bathing suit, her eyes flicked over me before returning to the magazine she was reading, as if she were trying not to show any reaction. I’m used to that. Maybe as she rubs the gunk into my skin she’s recalling when she used to give me baths in a little plastic tray, when I used to fit into the crook of her arm. It must be strange for her to consider what that cuddly seven-pound lump of clay has morphed into: Karen, 29, five-foot-six, 194 pounds, single, city-dweller, wanderer, loner, dreamer. It’s difficult to think

that I came out of this woman's body, that we were once part of the same agglomeration of blood, tissue, cartilage, fluid. My mother has always been rail-thin. Above my swimsuit line are doughy, rounded mounds. Maybe she's thinking, *there should be a shoulder blade somewhere in there*. I try to stop thought. Where do these ideas spring from? When she's finished, I mumble, "Thanks," without meeting her eyes, and lie down on my stomach to bake.

§

That night, unpacking our clothes into the empty dresser drawers, Kiki asks, "So, how *are* you and Greg doing?"

We're sharing a room with two twin beds, just like we did as little girls. The bed frames are white-painted wicker. Chintzy beach landscapes in water-color hang on the walls. The sheets I'm sitting on are slightly sandy and damp from the sea air, but this is somehow comforting—maybe it's the associations with vacations past, naps in half-sunlit rooms after returning from romps in the ocean.

"Uh, we're doing all right."

"Seemed like you didn't want to talk about it when Mom asked."

"I just don't like expounding upon my love life for Mom and Dad."

Kiki pauses with a handful of socks. “Big words, remember? I’m not an English major.”

“Sorry. It just means, like, explaining in detail.” I knew, as I was saying it, that it was an unnecessarily abstruse word. Why do I do these things?

She resumes unpacking. “Well, you can *expound* it to me, right?”

“Sure. What do you want to know?”

“Nothing in particular. I guess for starters, how serious are you guys?”

“I dunno. We probably see each other about once a week. I wouldn’t say it’s super serious.” I met Greg on OkCupid about six months ago. His profile caught my eye because it included a Carl Sagan GIF in the essays section and name-checked a few bands and writers I like. He’s a software engineer. I was a little worried at first that he’d be too computer-techy for me. And he is pretty techy. But he’s also a decent conversationalist. On our first date, we geeked out about singularity theory, and he cracked me up with his impression of Chris Farley ripping his pants. He even admitted to liking *Pride and Prejudice* when he read it back in high school. So that was something.

“Okay. What do you guys do together?”

“Oh, you know, mostly just—hang out.” I narrowly avoided saying *Netflix and chill*. “Sometimes go to movies, ball games, things like that. You know me, I don’t need any big fancy dates or anything.”

“But you do...*like* him, right?”

A turbulent cloud rolls into my stomach, a gray color that reminds me of the persistent whine of airliner engines. It takes me a second or two to answer. “Of course I like him. I wouldn’t be dating him if I didn’t like him.” Nothing technically untrue in that statement, even if we haven’t talked in the past two weeks.

“Well, I don’t know. You don’t really have that much to say about him.”

“That’s just—” I grope for words, words, my only shield. “That’s just because I’m not as much of a sharer as you. I don’t tell you all the...all the little things he does. He can be really sweet. Like, sometimes he sends me these random texts just saying, ‘Thinking of you,’ or something like that.” He did do that once, though the actual text was *Just walking by Dunkin Donuts and thought of you haha* 😊. Inside joke, sort of. “He’s a big softie. Like, you should see him when we watch rom-coms together. I swear, he cries more than me. It’s adorable, really.” I am not accustomed to using the word “adorable.” Where

am I getting this stuff? The noises coming out of my mouth don't feel like mine; they feel more like Kiki's.

"Aw, that's cute. I wish Rob would watch rom-coms with me. He always wants to watch, like, *The Hulk* or something stupid like that."

Together we laugh at the incorrigible dopishness of men, as girlfriends in rom-coms are wont to do. I don't mention that I love *The Hulk*.

After a moment's lull, she glances at me sidelong. "And have you...*mm mm?*"

I make an indignant gasp of a laugh. "Kiki!"

"What?" She smirks impishly. "We're sisters. We can talk about these things."

"I know. I just wasn't expecting it."

"So? Have you?"

"*No*, we haven't, if you *must* know." I put on a show of ironic prudishness. "It's not that serious yet. We're just...taking our time to get to know each other."

"Well, don't take *too* much time. You don't want him to lose interest."

"Don't worry. Greg's...not that kind of guy."

"What do you mean?"

Again, it takes me a few seconds to respond. “I just don’t think that sex is his number-one priority.”

The corner of her lip slides upward, playful but pointed like a dagger. “His? Or yours?”

“Hey! Not nice.” I give her a shove. As she rebounds, our eyes lock, and for one instant, I think she’s going to force the moment toward its overwhelming question. My heart races, the clouds roil as thunderheads rise to the heights, full of potential, yearning to explode.

But she just smiles and shakes her head, and we resume unpacking.

§

I know what Kiki thinks. She pities me. Last Thanksgiving, I overheard her talking to Mom and Dad in the kitchen: “...just that she’s never had a real boyfriend before, so even the smallest little things are built up in her mind to be a huge deal. Like, to her, holding hands is practically a declaration of eternal devotion.” Thankfully I was at the top of the stairs, far enough away to act like I didn’t hear. She sees me as stuck in sixth grade, clinging to Disney fairy tale notions of love. She thinks I’m putting the penis on a pedestal, making sex into some humongous thing. It’s the second decade of the twenty-first century! The sexual revolution happened fifty years ago!

And maybe she's right—maybe I *am* putting it on a pedestal. But why shouldn't I? Maybe it *is* a big deal. Maybe I *like* thinking it's a huge fucking deal. I'm putting it on the pedestal, and at the same time I'm not, because I don't think I *need* it. I don't believe that crap. I know that I can live without sex, because I have, for a long, long time.

It's not like I've never come close. A late-night dorm-room hookup in college...a walk back to my first apartment in D.C. with a boy I'd met at Fantom Comics... I know how it's done. You invite them in for tea or something, or else they invite you in. The business proceeds. But I've always stepped back from the brink; my own choice, as much as any external exigency, has enforced this condition. Why? It sounds strange to say, but I think I'm too proud. I'm a successful, independent woman with an intellectually demanding career. I keep up with world events, take part in the national political discourse, read *The New Yorker*. I appreciate great masterworks of literature. I have a rich and capacious interior life. I might have to sacrifice a little in the looks department, but I'm not going to just sleep with the first (or second or third) man-thing that comes along dragging its knuckles on the ground. I'm holding out for beautiful love, extraordinary love—the kind of love where the lovers are

always goading one another to be better, brighter, lovelier versions of themselves, building off each other's best, lifting off of one another's exhalations, so that their souls rise together to ever greater heights. *Eros*. Vertical love. And if that never comes for me, then so be it. At least I didn't compromise my ideals. At least I didn't settle.

§

Friday night, two and a half weeks ago. Greg and I lay on his couch, our heads at either end, our feet entangled in the middle. Some lethargic footsie earlier in the night had petered out in the face of *Barefoot Contessa*. Improbably, it was a commercial that suddenly snagged me—a beautiful, laughing couple prancing around the white deck of a cruise ship, exploring rainbow-painted reefs with snorkeling masks together, placing morsels of moist cake into each other's mouths. The man, incidentally, looked a bit like Rob.

I looked around. Takeout cartons crusted with lo mein sauce, the remains of our dinner, littered the coffee table. Greg's massive flat screen dominated the room, squatting atop a shrine of game systems, tangled wires, stacked DVDs, and dust. His few attempts at decorative touches—a cheaply framed commemorative Ravens poster, a tin sign bearing a frothy mug of beer and the words, *Why Irish Eyes Are Smiling*—only accentuated the walls' barrenness.

I imagined Greg when he was moving in, pounding a few nails in at random, then collapsing onto the couch to veg out with ESPN after the strains of this labor. At such moments, I would often feel a sort of protective affection—*my pathetic lonely clueless boy, he needs me*, etc.—but when I looked over at him now, the shape of his mouth hanging slightly open annoyed me.

I shifted on the couch. Greg continued to stare hypnotized at the food porn. I coughed. No response.

“So, are we gonna just watch this all night?”

Greg rolled his eyes toward me, grunted, and tossed me the remote.

“No, I mean are we just going to stay here and watch TV all night.”

He lifted his head high enough to look at me, now with some concern.

“Did you want to do something else?”

“No.”

He peered at me through his wire-rimmed glasses. “Are you sure?” Thankfully, he only wore them for movies and television, as they made his eyes look small and beady. His weak, rounded chin bore a day’s coating of stubble, not enough to look roguishly grizzled. The top of his head was balding.

I didn’t respond. Greg eventually lowered his head onto the cushion again.

“Well, it wouldn’t kill us to go out once in a while,” I finally said.

“You want to go out? We can go out.” He was up on his elbow now, but still horizontal. He’s always horizontal. “Where do you wanna go?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well...what sort of thing did you have in mind?”

“I didn’t have anything specific in mind. Just...getting *out*.” I stood up and walked over to an IKEA shelving unit on the wall, played with one of the unopened mini-bottles of expensive liquor he kept there. I’d never seen anyone drink one, including him. He kept them the way people keep fire extinguishers, as if he were waiting for a day when a party might spontaneously flare up in his living room. The problem with Greg was that his notion of love was too pedestrian, too bland. He’d never had a real girlfriend—the closest he ever came was a girl in high school with whom he would get pizza on Friday nights—so his notion of relationships was formed entirely on the basis of his male companions. He sees love as just like an everyday friendship, I thought, like two people who watch stupid movies and play stupid video games and talk about stupid stuff together, except more frequently. A difference in degree.

He huffed a laugh. “That doesn’t give us very much to go on, does it.”

“Well, you can be creative, right?” This came out with more barb than I intended.

He looked bewildered and hurt. “Okay...I guess...we can go to a bar or something? Solly’s? Want to go to Solly’s?”

“Fine.”

Solly’s was a sports-themed dive bar down the street. Inside, I ordered a fruity martini, the most expensive cocktail on the menu. Greg got a Blue Moon. He was like a puppy that doesn’t know why it’s being punished. At a loss, he watched the baseball game on the screen above us. Losing oneself in the safety of passive consumption, I thought—our most reliable human fallback. I looked out the window, across the bar, anywhere but at him. I couldn’t stand the slight roll of his second chin, which I usually found endearing. It reminded me of my own.

§

Apparently, Rehoboth is a haven for gays. Kiki neglects to mention this until we’re driving in for dinner on Wednesday night. Once we’re aware of it, though, the signs are everywhere: pairs of men walking around hand-in-hand, a shop called “The Proud Bookstore,” etc. Dad grunts—in acknowledgement, disgust, indifference, who knows. Mom, for her part, makes small disapproving noises from the front seat. Eventually, holding her tongue becomes too much

of a burden. “Geez, look at all the rainbow flags. It’s like they’ve taken over the whole town.”

Kiki immediately flares up with indignation. “Mom, get *over* it, okay? The Supreme Court already decided; gay rights have won. Why can’t you just be happy for them that they can love who they choose?”

“Fine if they’re happy, but they shouldn’t have to flaunt it in our faces.”

I’m not saying anything. We ride by an open-air restaurant deck filled with fit, neatly groomed men in pairs and quadruples, carousing ebulliently. They seem to be doing just fine.

After parking, we pace up and down the main drag of Rehoboth Ave., looking for a suitable dining spot. Waddling seagulls pick random garbage out of the meridian’s strip of dirty grass. Up close, with their sharp beaks, boastful little chests, and black BB eyes, they look full of malice, nothing like the regal white creatures you see borne aloft on the beach. Kiki calls for a pit stop at a gift store because she sees a plush crab that looks adorable. “For Rob,” she adds unnecessarily. We’ve all heard multiple times about Rob’s half-ironic collection of stuffed animals. While she decides which critter to purchase, I hover towards the back of the store, fingering the snow globes and novelty back-scratchers. *Maybe I’ll get Greg a shot glass to go with his liquor bottles*, I think.

From the other side of the store, a mechanical trout blares an obnoxious tune. Kiki is checking out. I place the glass I'm holding back on the shelf.

We finally find a restaurant without an hour-long wait. "What is arancini again?" Kiki says as we survey our menus. "Isn't that like bacon?" I decline to answer. A pair of men perch nearby with their bare, shapely calves crossed trimly. Mom's eyes dart over, combing them critically. Does she think no one can see her? One of the men slices into a round, steaming mound of cake and releases an ooze of molten chocolate, so rich it's almost black. Dad already has breadcrumbs and flecks of olive oil on his chin. All around, people babble noisily as they quaff amber ale and fork succulent meat off the bone, faces aglow with the heat of sensual enjoyment. Their gusto annoys me. Our whole culture is pleasure-mad, burying itself in food, drink, sensual delight. Have a taste of this. Have a sip of that. Look at the vibrant colors in this painting. Hear this rich, evocative music. Feel this fabric, soft as silk. Feel my skin.

I'm not body positive. I think the term is a bullshit euphemism for giving credit where none is due. I like my body exactly as much as it deserves, which is not very much. I'm thought-positive, brain-positive; I'm proud of my intelligence. Bodies by themselves don't do anything for me. I've tried looking at porn, but absent a story—some context of romance and desire beyond the

merely physical—all I see are gross sacks of flesh slapping against one another. In another era, I sometimes think, I might have become a nun. I used to be pretty religious, all throughout high school and well into college. But even the churches have been infected with body-obsession. Birth control, abortion, “in-
trinsically disordered” sex, purity rings, molested altar boys, covert lesbian nuns. It seems that everyone’s forgotten the wisdom of the ancients: The body is a prison.

All the same, the aromas of glazed lamb chops and roasted bone marrow make my mouth water. By the time the waiter places my plate in front of me, I can’t wait to stuff my face.

§

After we come back from the beach on Thursday, Kiki goes out onto the porch to talk to Rob. She’s out there for a good hour and a half. I’m reading on the couch, but I can see her pacing back and forth, a frown carving deep trenches along the sides of her mouth. She leaves the porch and stalks off down the street, still talking.

Seeing her fight with Rob gives me a sick satisfaction. I know it’s a bastard feeling; I order it to slink back into its cage. But when it’s gone, all that’s left is a deep sadness, humming so low it’s nearly imperceptible.

When we were planning the trip, I was relieved that Kiki didn't ask to invite Rob along. Now I've discovered that it wouldn't have made much of a difference. He's still here, implicit in every conversation about life back home, hovering behind every smile Kiki gives. Maybe it's just my imagination, or the UV rays she's been soaking up, but Kiki seems to have an additional shine about her since she started dating him. As if Rob ensconces her in a force field of comfort and love. If it's possible, being around Kiki in Rob's non-presence makes me feel my own deprivation even more acutely than in his actual presence. Not that I'm secretly in love with Rob or anything. We get along well, but I know that we could never be together. We're not for each other.

When she comes back in, she looks exhausted. She goes into our room. After fifteen minutes, I follow her. She's lying on her bed, face down in the pillow. I sit down gently next to her and rub her back. "Hey...everything all right?"

She moans. "No."

"Want to talk about it?"

After a few seconds, she rolls over onto her back. "Everything is so screwed up."

"Why?"

She sighs. “I don’t know. It’s just...weird. He says I don’t understand him.”

“About what?”

“I don’t know, he won’t tell me. That’s why it’s weird. He says if he has to explain it, then it just goes to show he’s right.”

I pat her thigh, trying to think of comforting words. “It’s okay...I’m sure he doesn’t mean it. It sounds like he’s just in a bad mood.”

“No, it’s not just a bad mood. He’s said this before, a bunch of times.” After a moment she rolls onto her side, facing me. Her legs are curled up to her chest, and I suddenly remember holding her hand to cross the street when she was a toddler, giving her warm bottles when she was a baby. She looks up at me. “Has he ever said anything to you?”

“About what?”

“About this. About me not understanding him.”

“Uh, no...it’s not like we really talk.”

“Yes you guys do. You talk all the time, when he’s visiting. He always says how you’re such a great person to talk to.”

“Really?” I guess he has confided things in me, things about his work and his family, but I had always assumed that these were things he also told Kiki.

“Yeah.” She sniffs. “Sometimes I think he likes talking to you better than me.”

I feel as if a battering ram is breaking through my chest. It dislodges a chink that lets in rays of pride and grief, light and despair.

“Yeah, right. If he did, he would be dating me, not you.” The logic is faulty, but I’m trying to cheer Kiki up. “The only times he’s ever talked to me about you, it’s been about how awesome you are.” This, at least, is true.

“Of course he says that.”

“Look, no relationship is perfect. Take Mom and Dad—they have their issues. Mom feels like Dad barely talks to her; Dad feels like Mom’s hypercritical and overly sensitive. But they still get along somehow. Relationships are work, right?” I’m aware that I’m basically just spouting clichés, but I have to say something. “This might just be something you guys have to work on. But I know Rob loves you. It’s obvious. His eyes light up whenever he looks at you.”

She rubs the corners of her eyes. “Okay. It’s just that sometimes...sometimes I get the feeling that people think I’m just this stupid little girl.”

I suck in my breath; the chink in my chest cracks open wider. “No, Kiki, you’re not...nobody sees you that way.” Is this a lie? It’s hard to say for certain. I don’t know that it matters, though.

“*I see me that way.*”

“That doesn’t count. You can’t see yourself objectively; nobody can. Everyone’s biggest blind spot is their own self.”

Kiki smiles weakly. “Thanks, Karebear. You can be so wise.”

I roll my eyes. “Not that it does me any good.”

She squeezes my knee. “It will.”

There are times when I actually believe this.

§

At first, my virginity was merely accidental. Then, it became unusual. Finally, it became a thing. It became a power, a mark of distinction, a special knowledge I possessed. Virtually everyone knows what it’s like to have had sex by age 29; virtually no one knows what it’s like *not* to have had sex by age 29. When I think about this, I feel strong. Usually. Sometimes I think maybe I’ll just defer indefinitely, and keep on growing stronger and stronger, until at one hundred years old I’m the strongest person anyone’s ever known.

Or, maybe I’ll save up until I meet someone who can bear it. The Freudians thought sexuality was a pressure cooker. If you kept it sealed off for too long, it would drive you insane. That’s not how it works. But they were right that something builds up. The longer you wait, the more intense it gets inside.

Like a laser cannon storing up charge. And when you release it, if the lover isn't strong enough, he might be destroyed by the blast. That's why, the longer you hold it inside, the harder it becomes to release it to anyone. Not to just anyone. If you discharge all the time, anyone can handle the weak flickers you give off. There's a reason prostitutes used to be called "dissipated." But if you spend a long time—a whole life—gathering charge, you have to find someone who's able to withstand that power. Someone whose love can rise as high as your own.

Or, maybe they're right. Maybe I'll go insane. Maybe I already have.

§

When we got back to Greg's apartment after Solly's, he said, "You wanna come back in for a bit?"

I looked at my car parked on the curb, envisioning the dark streets on which I would drive to get back, the empty apartment to which I would come home, the tea and cookies that I would eat standing up at my counter, the glaring sink light under which I would brush my teeth, the rumped double bed in which I would curl up with myself. I looked at his stubbled chin, the buffalo sauce stain on his shirt. Classic Greg. He was the kind of guy who would spill all over himself, but who also knew a trick to get out every type of

stain. He would explain the chemical principles to me until I told him to shut up.

“Fine,” I said.

We got back onto the same couch, this time under a blanket. He put on Comedy Central with the volume low. I thought of his Chris Farley impression on our first date. He had been so nervous, so desperate to make me laugh.

I leaned into him the slightest bit. When he put his arm around me, I didn't object.

After a few minutes, I felt his weight shift toward me. I turned my head and received his slightly chapped lips against mine. His breath tasted like old tea, musty, but not in a foul way. Our bodies shifted sideways on the couch, the bulge of his stomach pressed against my own. His hands slid and roamed over my back.

The sensation of foreign flesh against mine sent shivers through me. Only two thoughts flickered through my mind in rapid oscillation: *This is not unpleasant*, and *How far, how far, how far?*

His hands began to explore further. *This is Greg*, I felt the need to affirm to myself, *Greg the software engineer, Greg the guy you are dating*. I flashed back on the four-hour conversation we'd had over coffee at a frilly cupcake

bakery, on the black-box theater where we'd watched one of my friends perform bad improv comedy, on his company's Nationals game outing, where he had stood shyly apart with me as if he were the one who didn't know anyone there, not me. Flashed back on the last few hours, watching the Food Network, drinking irritably at Solly's. Flashed back on the whole thin, pathetic history of our relationship. Greg was running his hand along the inner thigh of my jeans.

I couldn't. It wasn't enough.

I gently picked up his hand and moved it onto my waist. We continued kissing, but after a few minutes he slowed down, drew back, looked at me.

"What?" I said softly.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Why?"

He shook his head. "I can't tell if you're enjoying this."

"I am enjoying it."

"Would you tell me if I were a bad kisser?"

"It's not that. You're a fine kisser."

He sighed and shifted so that we were lying next to each other, rested his head on my shoulder. The couch was wide, but barely wide enough for both of us.

After a few minutes of silence, I let out a long breath. “I should...probably get going.” We both sat up, blinking blearily. He looked sad as I picked up my purse and keys. I felt I should say something, but didn’t know what. It’s not you, it’s me? How true would that be? I settled on “I’m sorry,” and “Don’t take it personally. I’m just in a weird mood.” He nodded.

“See you soon,” he murmured without conviction as I let myself out. He was still on the couch where I had abandoned him.

The ride home was just as I had imagined it. I cried softly into my pillow at the end.

§

Opening my eyes, I am blinded by the sun’s brilliance. I immediately squeeze my lids tight again, then open them a sliver, using the lashes as filters while I adjust to light. I lift my head and peer across the span of my body, spread out on a towel. Mom and Dad are in chairs, tilted back in the sun. Kiki lies flat on her stomach, earbuds in. All of them have their eyes closed. From the sun’s yellowing cast, I guess it’s around four o’clock. I have to pee.

I stand up, grab sunglasses and hat, and trudge toward the boardwalk's public restroom. Halfway there, I look out across the beach toward the ocean. An array of ponderous, high-foreheaded clouds is amassing far out over the water, though the sky's great lamp still beams over their tops into a velvety, royal azure. Two snowy seagulls catch my eye. They pirouette around each other, spiraling upward together in what might be a mating dance, black-tipped wings buffeting each other, lifted on a plume of hot gases into the heavens. I lose them in the glare. Realizing that I've been holding my breath, I release it and continue on my way.

When I come out of the dank concrete box of the bathroom, it's like being born again. I feel emptied out. Hungry, but pleasantly so, the kind of hunger that feels like both a lightheadedness and a sharpened awareness. From the spot where the boardwalk meets the sand, the line of brightly colored beach chairs is distant; there's about a hundred yards of blazing strip between us. I'm carrying my sandals so that I can enjoy the feeling of the hot, sliding earth between my toes. The headiness is heightened by the sun beating down on my scalp. My bowels have been replaced by feathers.

Gazing along the beach instead of across it, so that nothing but sand fills my vision, I become a lone wanderer in a desert. The volleyball net in the far

distance is only a mirage. I am a nomad, I have been wandering without food or water for days on end, and all of this—the folding chairs, the boardwalk, the beach houses, the family I left behind, the downtown job and the apartment in the city, the person called Karen, the life I feel I remember—is a shimmering fever dream that will vanish, that will dissolve into thin air when I take another few steps. I will suddenly remember that I am someone named Mu'ab Al-Mu'tasim. Or that I am nobody, just a spirit of the air. For a moment, I believe that I do not exist. The only thing keeping me tethered to my self, my body, my whole personal history as Karen, is the slight thread of my own will, and if I were to snip it, I would at once float away, a free, undifferentiated, characterless being.

The proud, towering pillar of Karen out over the sea bursts and spreads all the way across the ocean and along the beach, covering all the swimmers and sunbathers and coolers and umbrellas and dune grasses and sand crabs and beach shacks and ugly high-rises, everything in sight bathed in undifferentiated love, broad love. Not Karen's love, for that would be too limited, and Karen no longer exists, but is identical with every object her love touches, every object within reach of the vapors of her eyes.

Then the moment passes, and I am still Karen, still walking across the beach in Bethany, Delaware, toward my family's paltry encampment of chairs in the sun. When I arrive, I look down at them, all sleeping, still. They seem so small. Dad's getting burnt, the little mounds of his man-boobs creating divots of white skin above his hairy gut. I notice that Mom's hair is grayish-brown at the roots, different from the rich chestnut of the rest; I hadn't realized she was dying it. Kiki's beach book, a silly YA dystopian novel that she tells me has been on the bestseller list for twenty-one weeks, sticks out of her bag. Again, I feel like my sternum is cracking open, crumbling; the debris lies all around my feet. *This* is my family. This is *my* family. Flesh of my flesh, bone of my bones.

Kiki stirs and opens her eyes. She uses her hand to shade them. "What are you doing?"

"I don't know. Just went to the bathroom."

"Want to go in the water?"

"Sure."

We splash in together, and although we don't pretend the waves are sea monsters coming to get us, it feels like we are little girls again. The day is almost up. There will be a next day, then a next and a next, and then they will all be up.

§

After showering, I go onto the front porch and shut the door behind me, sit down on one of the white wicker chairs. Stand up, walk to the banister at the edge. Walk back. My phone is sweaty in my palm.

Greg answers on the fourth ring. A pause slightly longer than normal says everything. "Hey you. How's the beach?"

"It's really good, actually. Very relaxing."

We make small talk for a few minutes. I tell him about the house, the town of Bethany, our incursion to Rehoboth. Then another pause, longer. My mouth is dry.

"Hey...I've been thinking. About the last time we saw each other," I finally say. "Yeah...I've been thinking about it, too."

"I just wanted to say, I'm sorry."

"Sorry? For what?" He sounds surprised. "I was going to say that *I'm* sorry. I mean, if it felt like I was pushing you."

“No, no. You didn’t do anything wrong. I was just...” I grope for words, the magic combination of words that will allow me to lower my shield. “I’m a weird person,” I finally settle on. “I don’t understand myself.”

“I don’t think you’re weird. I like you.”

“Thanks.” I watch the patch of sky visible through the sycamores. It is still blue here, but a deepening, darkening indigo that threatens to swallow us up. Feathery gray fingers of cloud creep into the corners. “I like you, too.”

We’re both quiet for a minute. The rubble settles down more firmly, on its way to becoming sediment. Layers that, once laid down, cannot come back up. I am satisfied, I think. I am content.

But above, the gulls keep screeching, wheeling back around on the gathering front.

J. M. Kuhn’s work has appeared in *Hobart*, *The Rumpus*, *The Columbia Review*, *Superstition Review*, *Shooter*, and elsewhere. Kuhn holds an MFA from George Mason University and was the fiction editor for the journal *Phoebe*.