

The Late Greats  
Stories and Part I of a Novel

By

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Thesis

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## INTRODUCTION

In the beginning, like Beto O'Rourke, all I wanted was to be in a band with my friends. When I was twelve, thirteen years old, nothing seemed better: four of us against the world, in denim or leather or whatever it was that band-people wore, living on the road, howling into the void. We'd play our songs, eat at roadside diners, crash on the couches of anyone who'd have us, and gradually forge our own strange, shimmering myth, which would reverberate for decades (or at least for Andy Warhol's proverbial fifteen minutes) in the hearts and minds of future kids like us. It would be hard in the beginning, sure; but the lean years would shape us, make us tough. And the hours of practice—the eleven a.m. unpaid farmers' market gigs, the Tuesday-night Union for Reform Judaism Pizza Party gigs our friend Jacob got us—would mold our sound into something the likes of which the world had never before heard. When *Rolling Stone* came calling, we'd tell them about those years we spent playing for organic strawberries and leftover pizza, and that would be *our* story, the beginnings of our myth.

Back then, my favorite artists' stories mattered as much to me as the music itself. After school, I'd spend hours online, reading about the eleven years the Flaming Lips' frontman spent working as a fry cook at Long John Silver's in Oklahoma City before his band landed a song on the radio; the Beatles' "apprenticeship" in Hamburg, where they played six-hour gigs, four nights a week, for less than three pounds a night; or Nina Simone's years as an aspiring concert pianist, which were cut short when an admissions committee denied her entrance to the Curtis Institute of Music on the basis of her race. I soaked up Bob Dylan's self-made rambler myths, which he revised countless times for different interviewers.

But what was so appealing about these stories? What's so great about a few people who get together, write some songs, and then get famous (or don't)? I certainly couldn't have told you then.

All I knew was that when I thought about being a musician, I thought about freedom—that slippery, loaded word. I thought about sliding through the surface of this world into another, brighter one. And when I thought about a life without music, I pictured a life hemmed in too close, with a pile of regrets and what-ifs stacked high in the spare room. In short, I had fallen in love, and the condition seemed terminal.

I'm not the only preteen ever to fall under the spell of popular music and the constellation of (counter)cultural ideals that come packaged with it. What kid wouldn't want a life full of Freedom, Authenticity, Love, Independence, and Honesty? As I've grown older, though, my relationship with these ideals, and with the music that transmits them, has become more fraught. Without the ballast of guitars and crashing cymbals, words like "authenticity" and "freedom" read like meaningless marketing copy. What is freedom for a middle-class white American in the twenty-first-century but the freedom to consume? What is authenticity but a buzzword used to get niche-market consumers to purchase one song (or, say, granola brand) over another? And who needs rock n' roll to feel independent? (Wouldn't it be quicker to get a decent job?) Yet the advent of my critical consciousness never managed to dull the visceral appeal of music and the youth culture that surrounds it. A song can still make me shiver, and I still sometimes long to embody the very ideals I've learned to criticize, to become as real as my musical heroes seemed when I was thirteen. This longing and the self-awareness that pushes back against it have come to define my young adulthood.

Writing, which also began for me as an uncomplicated pleasure and a means of transport, has gradually become a way of exploring the gap between my culturally received ideals and my lived experience, and a means of seeking both emotional catharsis and a deeper intellectual clarity. In the stories that make up my thesis collection, *The Late Greats*, I have tried to capture both the seductive beauty of the indie rock dream—the communities it brings together, the sense of self and agency that it can gift to a person—and the fallout from that dream. These stories also reckon with the

disappointment that waits in the shadow of unrealistic adolescent ideals, the unglamorous physical and economic realities of life as a small-time musician or music fan, and the long-term effects of what the poet Arthur Rimbaud famously called the “long, boundless, and systematized disorganization of all the senses”<sup>1</sup> (which is a lovely way of saying “booze and drugs”).

We are all, of course, already inundated with stories about the entertainment industry, to the point where one might reasonably wonder why we need any more. After all, one never has to wait long for a new Hollywood film about the music industry, and there is no shortage of books that chronicle the unlikely rise of a legend from rags to Grammys, the American Dream story dressed in a vintage jacket and a pair of torn jeans. (See, in the last two years alone, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, *A Star is Born*, and *La La Land*.) However, I’ve read far fewer stories about the millions of artists and musicians who never made it onto billboards or major labels, or who never wanted to be on them in the first place. There is enough joy and longing and drama in any town’s music scene to fill a book, and I am drawn to telling the stories of those aspiring musicians and artists who, as the songwriter Taylor Goldsmith once put it, are still “caught somewhere in between / the plans and the dreams.”<sup>2</sup>

In the spaces where musicians and artists work to build sustainable, meaningful lives for themselves—in small venues and struggling music stores and rehearsal spaces across America—other narratives thrive. Often, these are narratives of alienation and resistance that do not reinforce the American Dream so much as question it. In this way, my interest in portraying the life of the musical community I was part of in Boston intersects in fruitful and surprising ways with my other writerly concerns: the juncture of the personal and the political, the bildungsroman, and what rock-

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<sup>1</sup> “Le Poète se fait voyant par un long, immense et raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens.” Letter from Arthur Rimbaud to Paul Demeny, May 15, 1871.

<sup>2</sup> Taylor Goldsmith and Dawes, “Coming Back to a Man,” *Nothing is Wrong* (ATO Records, 2011).

music critic and academic Greil Marcus calls “secret histories”<sup>3</sup>—the stories about place and power that are left out of dominant cultural narratives and news outlets.

Through the lens of fiction, I am endeavoring to tell the secret history—or a few of the *many* secret histories—of the musicians, radio DJs, bouncers, bartenders, and fans that make up the complex ecosystem of Boston’s musical community, and to shed light on the uglier sides of the community I knew. I hope to capture some of the strange, unforgettable energy that surrounded me there, and to write towards what my friends and I were chasing when we first played together in dingy basements and VFW halls, on instruments we barely knew how to hold. Which glimmers of the dream did we actually manage to grasp onto? And what happened to us along the way?

\*

I can trace the conscious desire to write about the Boston music scene to the morning I left it behind. I was somewhere on the unremarkable stretch of Route 91 that runs between Manchester and New Haven, where I planned to meet my partner and drive on to Nashville. The night before, I’d played a record release show with my bandmates, and then we’d gone back to our rehearsal space, shared a final toast, and said goodbye—we’d play again, of course, but it felt like an ending. As I was driving that morning, wired on caffeine after a nearly sleepless night, I played the record we’d made again, and I heard it in a whole new light. I saw all the individuals who’d been part of the process of making it, all the people who’d come out to shows, and I was overcome with gratitude and a sweet sense of loss, even as I headed somewhere I wanted to be even more. When I stopped to gas up just north of New Haven, I jotted a few haphazard notes into my phone: the hush in the venue just before the doors opened; the faint smell of beer that lingered everywhere; the shy kids

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<sup>3</sup> Marcus is certainly not the first to use the term, but he is the first critic I’m aware of who applied it explicitly to 20<sup>th</sup>-century popular music. See Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

who started the show against the back wall and ended up in the middle of the dance floor, whipping their blue hair.

Over the weeks that followed, as I began my coursework at Vanderbilt and drove around Nashville hunting for cheap furniture, I kept making these notes, and I continued writing songs. In off moments, while I waited in parking lots and grocery lines, I wrote about the winter's night when I first met my bandmates, the storm that shut the city down and locked us in our practice space for three days, and the endless loading of drums and amplifiers in and out of tiny bars. Gradually, the notes diverged from my experience; the characters took on a life of their own.

The project had crossed the border into fiction, but it remained essentially formless until December, when a project for Nancy Reisman's Forms course forced me to funnel my notes into some kind of coherent shape. All semester we had been studying novels that experimented with form, and our culminating challenge was to write a story that attempted its own formal innovations. After much hand-wringing, I decided to structure my piece around a ten-song record by a fictional band called The Late Greats. I broke it into ten sections that began with a snippet of each song's lyrics, and I challenged myself to make the lyrics to try to speak to the action of the piece, which was about an aging fan's reckoning with the death of his friend. This story became "Roman Candle," the keystone story in my linked collection. By the time I had finished the first draft, I was certain that I wanted to continue to explore the story's characters and its setting—the icy streets, no-frills venues, and DIY spaces I'd known in Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville. The slapdash, nostalgia-driven notes I'd been making since August had found a form that could hold them, and the idea for a linked collection was born.

Although the linked-story form intuitively seemed well-suited to capturing the ins and outs of a music scene, I gained a better understanding of why that might be true when I heard the novelist Russell Banks give a talk about what he called "community tales." Banks used the term to



refer to fictional works, like his 1991 novel *The Sweet Hereafter*, that chronicle the experience of a whole community rather than a single person or family, and he framed the form in opposition to the modernist, (Henry) Jamesian model of the novel as a vehicle for the story of an individual's transformation. As he described his own discovery of community narratives by authors such as Louise Erdrich, Gloria Naylor, and John Edgar Wideman, I reflected on my own early literary inspirations, and was surprised to realize many of my favorites fit the mold he was outlining.

In high school, like many a teenaged boy before me, I was seduced by Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," which contains both a community and its elegy in the first line ("I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness"). In Ginsberg's poem, there was almost no separation between the personal and the communal; the speaker's own story went hand in hand with the stories of his lost friends, and they all spiraled together towards a shared fate. I loved that, and it felt true to me. In Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*, which I read around the same time, a first-person-plural "we" chronicles the deaths of the five Lisbon sisters and the ways the effects of their suicides ripple out through the town of Grosse Pointe, Michigan. And Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, which I read at a dead sprint during my junior of college, applied the linked collection form to subject matter that was closely related to my own. In thirteen linked stories, Egan told the story of an aging music executive, his assistant, and their early days in the punk scene in San Francisco, leaping back and forth across more than half a century and several different settings.

In college, not long after I read *Goon Squad*, I fell in love with the Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño's work and wrote my undergraduate thesis on it. Bolaño's 1998 masterpiece *The Savage Detectives* tells the story of a brief, ill-defined literary movement in Mexico City; crucially, it also chronicles what happens to the movement's members after it breaks up, as they spiral out across Mexico and into Europe and North America, haunted by the brightness of their early experiences and struggling, each in his or her own way, to find a place in the world. With fifty-two first-person

narrators, the novel is more emphatically a community tale than anything else I've read, and its chorus of voices raises an elegy, again and again, for that brief passage of youth and togetherness. In her blurb of the 2008 English edition of *The Savage Detectives*, Nicole Krauss described Bolaño's novel as "an ark bearing all the strange salvage of poetry and youth from catastrophes past and those yet to come." Like Krauss, I was struck by Bolaño's ability to hold up the brightness and beauty of his characters' misleading, youthful dream, even as he portrays that dream's erroneousness and its ravages.

In my reading, the central joke of *The Savage Detectives* is that no member of Bolaño's fictional literary group, the so-called Visceral Realists, can agree on what Visceral Realism really stands for, what combination of formal and thematic elements it claims to represent. The movement's leaders, Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima, are the closest thing the novel has to main characters, yet we never truly meet them; they flit in and out of the first-person narrators' homes and lives, reliably evading the reader's understanding. The whole novel circles the hot center of the movement, but that center turns out to be empty, or at least impossible to put into language. In this way, Bolaño manages to make that empty core stand for the irreducibility of youth, and for the poverty of language in the face of both transcendent and painful memories. Yet even as he eloquently expresses how inexpressible such things are, Bolaño is able to capture the rush of being part of this joyful, ragged group by dutifully filling in the details of their world—the neighborhood bars, dirty backstreets, and cramped apartments of 1970s Mexico City. Utilizing setting and the power of the first-person voice, he invites readers into that collective rush, that irreducible, frenetic, half-crazy state of mind.

In my thesis collection, the aforementioned Late Greats serve a similar role to Bolaño's elusive-yet-omnipresent Belano and Lima. Like the titular character in Elizabeth Strout's novel-in-stories *Olive Kitteridge*, the band appears in nearly every story, but often they play a minor role—as the background music, or the reason for other characters to convene. The band's name is a tribute

to a Wilco song of the same title, which is about a fictional band who wrote “the greatest lost track of all time” but “never got signed.” The song-within-a-song, brilliant as it was, is lost to time, and all that remains of it is the bright memory in the minds of those who heard it live: “You can’t hear it on the radio / can’t hear it anywhere you go.”<sup>4</sup> For me, this song has always captured the fleeting nature of live performance and the beauty of music fandom—that feeling of stumbling on things and letting yourself be transformed by them. The band’s name resonates with the dual sense of fleeting joy and lasting elegy that I hope the collection will convey.

The Late Greats only take center stage in the story “13 Ways of Looking at My Stupid Art Rock Band” which chronicles their inauspicious beginnings during a storm and the complicated romantic dynamics within the band. In “Roman Candle,” the collection’s keystone story, the band is the subject of a documentary that a former fan decides to make, years after their break-up, in order to attempt to piece his own life back together and reckon with the death of a close friend. In “Harbor,” the Greats play in the basement at a house party where two women begin a relationship that goes on to shape their lives, even after they’ve married other people and moved to opposite corners of the globe. My hope is that the Late Greats’ trajectory will serve as a mirror, reflecting the characters’ efforts to define themselves in the world, and to build, through community and art, a world that might suit them better.

In her essay “Some Reflections on the Concept of Place,” Karen Brennan argues that in the work of such twentieth century authors as W.G. Sebald and William Trevor, “the alienated self is generated and constructed by place.”<sup>5</sup> By *place*, Brennan means both the locales where characters experience alienation during the action of a story, and the places they’ve left behind, which can come

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<sup>4</sup> Jeff Tweedy, “The Late Greats,” *A Ghost is Born* (Nonesuch Records, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Karen Brennan, “Some Reflections on the Concept of Place,” in *A Kite in the Wind: Fiction Writers on Their Craft*, ed. Andrea Barrett and Peter Turchi (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2011), 221.

to represent a gold-limned, unreachable past when “a lost self, the utopian, idealized self who presumably flourished before these characters became displaced.”<sup>6</sup> Brennan was referring specifically to the literature of displacement and exile, but her observations also apply to contemporary experiences of gentrification and urban development. Small-time music scenes are constructed at the confluence of several kinds of alienation—from homes, from hometowns, from the society’s dominant norms. At their best, the spaces that make up the scene become sites of catharsis and healing where people who haven’t felt comfortable elsewhere can feel at ease. The stories in this collection, then, are concerned with these restorative spaces, and with their inherent tenuousness. Record stores, venues, and rehearsal complexes are rarely at the top of any city planner’s priority list, but their importance to the people that gather within them is as profound as it is unquantifiable.

In order to gesture at the mythology of place that hums at the center of any music scene, I have created a fictional neighborhood called The District, which corresponds roughly to the stretch of Harvard Avenue that houses such storied Boston clubs as Brighton Music Hall, O’Brien’s, and Great Scott. I have also incorporated elements of Cambridge and Somerville into this fictional District, which is both the canvas upon which the characters in the collection play out their wayward youths and the idealized “lost space” that some of them reach for years later, when their lives have changed drastically. In addition to the metaphorical loss that characters endure as they move from the open-ended, forward-looking plateau of youth toward the more limited horizons of adulthood, the physical District is erased from the landscape—the bars and clubs are shut down, the trash is swept off the streets until they gleam, and the neighborhood’s name slips out of the lexicon.

All of these themes converge in the novel section that forms the second half of the collection, *Holidays*. In the year 2018, Mick Edmonds, the older brother of the erstwhile bass player

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 217.

of the Late Greats, returns to Boston for the holidays first time in several years, plagued by moral and philosophical doubts and caught at a crossroads in his romantic and professional lives. He reconnects with his brother and sister, who are each drifting in the wake of Mick's parents' divorce and the 2016 election. Paralyzed by the moral complexity of Trump's America in ways that are at once laughably solipsistic and worthy of deeper inspection, Mick struggles to establish a new, more workable relationship with his family, his art, and himself—to find, in short, a new way of living in the world. Stylistically, the novel draws on the layered storytelling devices employed by the aforementioned Sebald and modern inheritors such as Rachel Cusk and Teju Cole, weaving together the action of the novel with several stories-within-stories told to Billy by the characters he meets along the way. This narration-heavy approach is intended to capture both the intensely inward-looking state in which Mick finds himself and the swirl of stories and anxieties that surround him. Following on the heels of three short stories that laud and mythologize youthful heyday and the act of artistic creation, this novel probes the questions that follow in their wake. Does any of that still hold weight in the colder country of adulthood, and in a time of global political and social upheaval? Is art, at the end of the day, fundamentally selfish?

My hope is that these stories will be about music, but also about the culture that music reflects and feeds back into. In *I'm Not Like Everybody Else: Biopolitics, Neoliberalism, and American Popular Music*, Nealon argues that we should take popular music to be “the *spine* of American cultural production in the late twentieth century (and beyond), rather than treating it as the frivolous younger sibling of literature, museum art, classical music, art-house cinema, or architecture.”<sup>7</sup> Nealon's argument is based on both the ubiquity of popular music—surely, the average person in 2018 consumes more pop music (“pop” in its broadest, most inclusive sense) than they do museum art or

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<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey R. Nealon, *I'm Not Like Everybody Else: Biopolitics, Neoliberalism, and American Popular Music* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 1.

Mozart—and on music’s singular role in the development of our cultural understanding of “authenticity.” The signifiers and attitudes that emerged alongside the music of the ‘60s and ‘70s as a genuine reaction to segregation, the Vietnam War, and the culture of consumerism, Nealon suggests, are now used to sell everything from jeans to cookies: “You can hardly move a product without a rebellious rock soundtrack coupled with an ironic wink and a nod.”<sup>8</sup>

Nealon’s ideas brought me back to my own experience, to the tension between longing to be *authentic* and *free* and knowing those words don’t quite mean what they purport to. This tension, I think, is endemic to the shifty demographic of young consumers that have come to be known as hipsters—a demographic that I, for better or for worse, fall into. Middle or upper-middle-class but careful to criticize our privilege, dressed in expensive clothes that are designed to look like hand-me-downs, we gather in trendy coffee shops to discuss what’s wrong with trendy coffee shops. We form bands to make fun of the idea of forming a band. We—or maybe I’m just talking about myself now—are wary of wanting the things we want, so we wear irony around like a bulletproof vest, avoid affect, and do our best to pretend that this is not a painful way to live.

In *Holidays*, Mick drifts through a world of designer peanut-butter sandwiches, hyper-violent karate films, and organic produce, trying to make sense of what is of value to him amidst all the products on offer. Angry protestors from all over the country are converging on Washington for the largest march in American history, and he wonders whether to take part. His relationship with his fiancée Maxine is driven to a breaking point by the sense of liberal guilt they share, but they go on doing all the things that have led them to this precipice, tied to the tracks of habit and social custom. In this concluding section of the thesis, Mick reaches the limits of a life given over to art and creature comforts, and he is faced with a decision: will he turn away from his art and his relationship

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 17.

in order to take action in the world, or turn further away from the world and into himself? The second half of the novel will detail Mick's direct confrontation with this question in the physical world, as he heads to D.C. to try to play his part and redeem himself. My hope is that the novel, and the thesis as a whole, can gesture toward some useful fusion between the personal and the political, toward a meeting place between the two.

**I.**  
**THE LATE GREATS**  
**(Stories)**



## ROMAN CANDLE

### Track 1 / “Gin and Listerine”

*Keep your ugly fingers clean  
Drinking gin and Listerine  
One day we'll forget the scene  
Drinking gin and Listerine*

The same week Tommy bought the camcorder, we saw the Late Greats for the first time. This was January of '03, the second night of a three-day blizzard. The night started with me and Tommy up in our tiny attic apartment per usual, re-heating last night's pasta, drinking screwdrivers out of plastic cups and playing Duck Hunt on my old Super Nintendo. The snow was creeping up the windowpanes, threatening to pull the balcony into the street while Tommy danced around the place with the new camcorder. He was filming a fake documentary about our unnamed band, which was just the two of us.

In the footage from that night, he narrates everything in a bad British accent. At one point, he turns the camera on me, on the boy I was then: pink Ramones tee-shirt, hair hanging like a lank mop over my pocked post-adolescent skin. Tommy introduces me quietly and carefully, me like a supremely stoned David Attenborough stalking a snow leopard. “And here's Danny-boy, lead guitarist and songwriter, drinking his drink.” The camera swerves towards the far wall. “Those are his paintings hanging over there—nobody knows what they mean. One thing is clear: our boy goes to art school.”

We'd been inside the apartment for about thirty-two hours straight at that point, with the heat pipes whistling and the Super Nintendo chirping away. While I blasted duck after duck out of the sky, Tommy went on about rock 'n' roll trivia. This was our primary mode of conversation back then: Tommy recited factoids he'd looked up on AllMusic.com—where Janis Joplin got her last haircut before she overdosed, who Prince dated in the second grade—and I pretended to listen. In

this way, like so many boys before us, we were able to talk about the fact that we cared for one another without ever talking about the fact that we cared for one another.

Anyway, at some point in that second night, we were out of vodka and sick of shooting pixelated ducks, so Tommy suggested we wander down to the District. Maybe, he said, we could go to Mickey's and see who was playing. It was only a mile down Macalester Ave, after all, and it wouldn't be closed on account of the weather—Mickey's didn't close for Christmas, New Year's, hurricanes, health inspections, or any other earthly reason. So we bundled up and headed into the night.

From inside, the storm had looked delicious—streetlights stark on the new powder, powerlines sagging toward sidewalks, roofs of cars peering above the snowbanks like remnants of another world. But as soon as we were out in the middle of it, the cold obliterated all thoughts of beauty and transport. Neither of us owned a pair of boots, and the snow was up around our knees, soaking the soles of our sneakers and the legs of our jeans. I had my dad's fur hat, a Soviet-looking aviator he'd abandoned during the divorce, but Tommy was hatless, and his teeth were chattering like a ticker tape machine. He sucked his head inside the collar of his bomber jacket until you could only see his eyes and the frozen green tips of his mohawk above the flaps. I thought about offering him my gloves. Then I thought: but they're mine.

As usual, there was no trouble at the door—we flashed our fake IDs and the bouncer waved us in. Mickey's Good Time Lounge & Grill was the kind of bar you could find in any city in America: low lights, keno sign, sticky floors, three-dollar plastic-cup mix drinks, cartoon sailors and busty women in pinafores on the bathroom walls, and an ATM by the door in case you forget it's cash only (and always will be). A little wooden stage in the corner, barely big enough for a full drum set, let alone a full band. Not the kind of place you'd take your mother, is what I'm saying, or probably even your lush of a dad.

That night, everybody in the District who couldn't go twenty-four hours without a drink was there: gutter punks and cashmere dads, off-duty snowplow operators, vanilla kids from Harvard in Patagonia fleeces, intimidating scene girls in their leather jackets and overalls, white Rastas rolling joints on the tables near the back. The air was thick with sweat and that winter smell that radiates off bodies coming in from the cold. I looked over at Tommy. He was still shaking, but his trembling lips had worked themselves into something like a smile.

We were making our way through the scrum of bodies towards the bar when we heard a high, grinding howl, like the roof coming loose under all that snow. For a second, the whole crowd seemed to inhale at once. Then the silence was punctured—*rat tat*—by two brittle hits on the snare drum, and the band came crashing in. Everything we'd carried in there—Tommy's constant worry about tuition payments, his fights with his adopted parents, my nagging suspicion that I'd never make a good painting and nobody would ever really love me—was blasted out of our minds. The singer screamed the chorus, that bit about gin and Listerine, and soon there was only the band and the sound they made, jagged as the meanest Pixies songs, raw as a young Iggy Pop. It was punk, for sure, but cut with a certain innocence that I've spent years trying to place. Maybe it was Cindy Q's acoustic guitar, or maybe it was the way the bass player grinned shyly at the crowd, like a kid who couldn't believe his luck.

"These guys rule," I shouted.

"The Late Greats," Tommy shouted back, pointing to a sign scrawled in chalk above the bar. He produced the small Sony video recorder from his jacket pocket—his new pride and joy, the reason he couldn't afford a hat. He lifted it to his right eye and started to film

## **Track 2 / "You Say Prozac"**

*You say Prozac  
I say Hallelujah  
You say godless*

*I say baby, yeah!*

There were four of them: Cindy Q on vocals and acoustic, José Cardoso on lead guitar and synths, Billy Edmonds on bass, Laura Laney on drums. When I watch the footage now, all I can think about is how young they looked. Black T-shirts, black jeans, unfashionable glasses. Cindy's blue hair, José's forearm tattoo of a sparrow blasting out of a cannon. They were children, and I was a child too, nineteen and unkissed, pushed against the wall by the mass of moshing bodies, shouting and shoving happily back. They could hardly play their instruments, but the songs were catchy, and the energy was humongous, hell-bent. They crashed into one another, kicked over guitar stands, attempted ill-fated backflips, kissed each other on the mouth. The Late Greats were squarely in the middle of their own stories that night; the makeshift stage at Mickey's was *exactly* where they wanted to be. Now, when I watch the tapes, I can't help but wonder when I let go of that feeling, or if I'd ever felt it in the first place.

Because here's the thing: Once you become conscious of a line between yourself and the things you dream about, the texture and taste of the world changes. You start to laugh at jokes that aren't funny. You start to compromise. You prioritize your day job over the nights you used to spend dragging paint across wood and canvas. You tell yourself: Sure, marketing isn't painting, but it's a steady job; sure, you're not in love with your girlfriend, but then again, love is hard to define, and who are you to ask for more? So you move in together—first a studio apartment in a gentrifying neighborhood full of coffee shops, and then, when Elyse finishes law school, a bigger apartment near more expensive coffee shops. When did you stop hanging out in the District? When did you stop seeing the scene kids, the smokers, the late-night acolytes? Some of them go back to college; some of them wig out and disappear. You start keeping your fridge stocked with beer. Two years pass soundlessly, without texture or weight. You take the rush hour train to the office downtown and sketch drum kits in the margins of the ad designs you're working on for a Chinese telecom

company. You try that new sushi place, that new exercise plan, that guided meditation podcast. You go to Paris, photograph the Seine, come home. You drink all the beer in the fridge and fill it again and propose to your girlfriend—call her Elyse. Do you love her? The question becomes even vaguer than it was in the first place. Just before your twenty-eighth birthday, you get promoted to Regional Manager, and your boss thanks you for all the high-quality content. Sometimes you think back to the years when you lived with your friend Tommy in an attic apartment full of spilled marijuana twigs and empty cans and half-finished paintings, and you're not sure if you miss it or if you're glad you made it out alive. Sometimes you and Elyse talk about children, but the conversation always trails off into uneasy silence.

The year you turn thirty, you and Elyse start eating dinner with the television on most nights. She loves that show with the lawyers. You love that show with the doctors. She buys a Tempur-Pedic mattress for your thirty-first birthday, and then lies awake on it all year, claiming headaches. She starts wearing her hair long again, going for runs. You each try and fail to understand the other's desperation well enough to soothe it. One night, while you're home listening to old records, and Elyse is at a friend's birthday party, she meets another person—a woman, in fact, an undeniably lovely and gracious woman named, in this example, Celine. Over the next month, your wife seems like a stranger, like someone distractible and suddenly interested in the names of trees, but eventually you realize that she's just happy. You haven't seen her happy in a long time. You check your email and take out the recycling and wait for her to leave you. You tell yourself that you're ready for it, that you'll both be better off. But when you get the divorce papers in the mail, while she's at a conference in Cabo, it hurts so much you can hardly breathe. You try to keep it together, but everything in your life seems like a placeholder without her. So you quit your job, sell the apartment before it's paid off, and move back in with your mother, who's about to have hip surgery. You can't think of another person in the world who needs you.

This is just an example, obviously. But hypothetically, if you were in that position—divorced, unemployed, and sleeping in your childhood bed at thirty-three—you might wonder what happened since the last time you felt like you were inside your own story. You might remember Mickey’s Good Time and the Late Greats and how they looked that night. You might, for instance, find their CD buried in your sock drawer and bike to RadioShack to buy a used Discman so you can play it. And on the way home, with “You Say Prozac” blasting through your headphones, you might be so full of everything your life has and hasn’t been that you almost swerve into an oncoming truck. And in this example, as you pull yourself off the pavement, still alive and panting, you might begin to feel like yourself for the first time in years.

### **Track 3 / “Anodyna”**

*Anodyna, she’s the waitress*  
*Anodyna, she’s my queen*  
*She’s got pills to make you weightless*  
*She’s the only truth I’ve seen*

When I drive to the hospital to tell my mother I’ve decided what I want to do with my life, she looks up from her magazine and smiles in the way she does when the joke’s on me, a little meanness stirred into the mirth of her pale green eyes.

“Wow,” she says, “and you’re only thirty-three. I’m impressed.”

She’s propped up in bed beneath the skylight, sipping chocolate milk through a straw from a paper carton. Even in the hospital, she’s wearing her Red Sox cap, the pink one. It’s been two days since the hip operation, and they’ve got a morphine drip in her arm for the pain. She seems stable, if a little stoned.

“Well, don’t keep me in suspense, Danny,” she says. “What’s the master plan?”

I tell her I’m going to make a documentary about the Late Greats.

She says, “The who now?”

“The Late Greats. They were my favorite band in college.”

My mother’s brow knits. The drugs have not dimmed her capacity for skepticism.

“They were special,” I feel like a child as soon as the words leave my mouth. “They never got the recognition they deserved.”

“Well, who does?” My mother takes a sip of the milk, pushes it away, and then looks at me as if she’s just noticed I’m there. “Have you ever even made a documentary before?”

In spite of myself, I feel the old heat rushing into my cheeks—the mix of shame and anger that used to come when Elyse would ask me if anybody really bought abstract paintings, if I really thought I could make it work for us.

“No,” I say, “but I have a lot of footage. Tommy used to film every show.”

“Oh.” My mother shakes her head. “That poor boy.”

“I think I can track down the singer,” I say, because I’d rather not talk about Tommy. “She’s a professor now, according to Google.”

My mother yawns. “Well, I’m glad you’re excited about it,” she says, which is exactly what she said when I told her I’d decided to propose to Elyse. “We all need something to be excited about.”

With that, she presses a button on the tube connected to her right arm, and another dose of morphine floods into her veins.

#### **Track 4 / “Roman Candle”**

*A roman candle is a pretty dumb firework  
But it’s a decent way to set yourself on fire  
(repeat 13x)*

The Late Greats only ever released one album. It was called *Roman Candle*, and it came out in May 2004. They did the release show at TT the Bear’s Place, which was another local shithole, but a much more legendary shithole than Mickey’s—a shithole where bands like Weezer and the Pixies

and the Lemonheads had cut their teeth. In the year and a half Tommy and I had been following the Late Greats, we'd watched them play dive bars, county fairs, college parties, farmer's markets, church basements, church vestibules, right on the altar. But that night they were playing 'T's, and we felt like something was finally about to happen for them.

We were in the front row, per usual, and Tommy's camera was bobbing above the mosh pit like a boat on stormy seas. The only person I can properly make out on the tape is Cindy Q—her lightning-blue pixie cut, her black leather, her feral stare. As I watch her stutter-step across the frame, I'm reminded of what we all knew back then: there was no band without Cindy. Sure, she had the look, like a hapa Patti Smith, but what really mattered were the words and the way she spat them out. She sang like we were all stuck in a burning building and she'd just found the only exit.

It was Tommy who found out the basic facts about Cindy Q: Her real last name was Chu, and she'd grown up in the swankiest part of Newton. Her father was some sort of brain doctor. Tommy knew these things in part because he liked trivia, in part because he liked Cindy, and in part because he freelanced for the *Boston Rattle*, which—in addition to being a newspaper—was a rag sheet for scene gossip and show listings. But Tommy's thing for Cindy went beyond a fanboy crush. After shows, he'd wait in line at the merch table for hours, just to say a brief hello and tell her about our nameless band. Back at the apartment, he'd speculate endlessly about Cindy and José, the Late Greats' guitar player—how he'd heard the two were dating in secret, how he'd seen José lay a hand on Cindy's back after the gig at Great Scott. He had a long list of reasons why José wasn't half the musician Cindy was. He'd play it off like casual conversation, like the usual talk about Prince or Marvin Gaye or whoever, but then you'd see him at the shows. His whole face went soft while he watched her. Some nights, he stopped blinking entirely.

In the footage from the release show, his camera never wanders far from Cindy's face. During the climax of "Roman Candle," she races from end to end of the stage in a frenzy,



headbutting José and Billy, kicking Laura's cymbal over with her black Doc Martens. As the band descends into atonal chaos around her, she sidles up to the mic and grips it like a thing she wants to break. Right on cue, the band cuts out, and the venue goes silent.

“Okay,” she whispers, “we’re going to do a love song for you fuckers.”

### **Track 5 / “Lovesong #503”**

*I wanna love you in Morocco  
wanna love you in Tangier  
I wanna love you in the basement  
wanna love you everywhere*

Between January of '03 and December of '04, Tommy and I saw the Late Greats thirty-two times. I know this because Tommy filmed every single show we went to, and there are now thirty-two homemade VHS tapes strewn across my bedroom floor, each one labeled in Tommy's looping Sharpie scrawl:

1/16/03–MICKEY'S, THE FIRST TIME

7/2/03–MICKEY'S, THE FOURTH TIME

7/22/04–GREAT SCOTT, SPEEDBALLS IN THE BATHROOM

And then there's 9/23/04–MIDDLE EAST. The night I met Elyse.

Before the show, Tommy and I had snorted some cocaine he'd bought from Marcus Whitmore, this older scene guy he knew through the *Rattle*. The opener was some band called the Dipshits, and we couldn't stand them, so we went into the bathroom and did some more of the coke. Tommy took too much, and pretty soon he was having his usual freak-out about how me and him had to get the band off the ground soon or we'd turn out like Marcus: bitter, mustachioed, playing cover gigs at Mickey's and eating pizza in our apartment 'til we died alone. We needed to find a drummer. We hadn't been practicing enough, we hadn't played a gig, we didn't even have a *name*. He kept shouting things like, “I want to be more than my impeccable fucking taste,” and I

kept saying things like, “You are, you are, you’re good,” but really I just wanted him to shut up and stop ruining my high. Eventually, he left the venue to walk around The District and cool down, but not before begging me to stay behind with his recorder and shoot the show. I loved him, so I stayed.

Most of the footage I shot that night is uninteresting, even by Tommy’s very particular standards. (*Does the film capture the endlessly varied drama of Cindy Q’s face?*) For the first forty-five minutes of the show, I stood in the back of the room and filmed the whole band without moving, like a security camera. But at 0:45:15 on the tape, a new voice enters, so close to the camera’s microphone that it’s impossible to make out the words. The lens jerks away from the band and lands on a round, smiling face—Elyse’s, covered in fake henna tattoos from some Harvard party. Her mouth puckers at the corners. She leans in to say something else I can’t make out. The tape ends.

### **Track 6 / “Official Filler Track”**

*Might as well admit it,  
we don’t give a shit  
about this song, this song, this song  
(repeat 25x)*

From: [dmccreary@gmail.com](mailto:dmccreary@gmail.com)  
To: [cindychu@northeastern.edu](mailto:cindychu@northeastern.edu)

March 30

Dear Mrs. Chu,

My name is Daniel McCreary. You might not remember me, but your band changed my life. I found your email address on your professor page—congrats on being a professor, by the way! Very cool.

I’m in marketing. Or I was. Anyway. The Late Greats really mean a lot to me—I saw you guys thirty-two times. I was usually in the front, but people tell me I’m kind of bland looking. About me: I’m a white guy, I have brownish hair. Maybe you saw me, maybe you didn’t. The point is, you guys were great. The best, actually, better than the Pixies, better than the Sex Pistols. And I’ve got footage of *everything*—every show from January ’03 on. So I have a proposal: I want to make a documentary

about you. And then market it, *hard*. And then we both get famous, and maybe rich. (But realistically not that rich.) What are your thoughts? Do you prefer to meet random men who email you out of the blue for coffee or for beer? Just kidding.

But seriously, let me know, please.

Your biggest living fan,

Danny

### **Track 7 / “The Point of it All”**

(Instrumental)

From: [cindychu@northeastern.edu](mailto:cindychu@northeastern.edu)

*April 9*

To: [dmccreary@gmail.com](mailto:dmccreary@gmail.com)

Hey Danny,

Sorry for the delayed response—honestly, your email was a lot to process. First off, that’s the most ridiculous idea I’ve ever heard. Nobody wants to see a documentary about the Late Greats—I don’t even think *I* want to see that. Secondly, I’m probably not who you expect me to be. I have two children. I drive a Subaru. A documentary about my life would be mostly me taking the children places in the Subaru, plus a few juicy scenes where I read books or talk about them politely with undergraduates who didn’t read them. Lastly, I’ll take the beer, if you’re offering. I think Mickey’s is still open? - Cindy

### **Track 8 / “Nostalgia-rama”**

*Everybody used to be  
Someone they believed in  
Everybody used to be a star*

MEETING NOTES – 4/15/17

- Mickey’s is indeed still open.

- Nothing whatsoever has changed about the interior or exterior of the bar.
- Cindy Q doesn't remember me, but she does remember Tommy.
  - “Oh, *that* kid!” she exclaims once I've described all three of his t-shirts. “He was so adorable and awkward.”
- Cindy doesn't look that different than she did back then.
  - Pixie cuts suit professors of linguistics just as well as they suit punk rockers.
  - Her hair is no longer blue, though.
  - She orders a well whiskey on the rocks; I order a ginger ale.
- She seems totally cool and normal, but she hates everybody else from the band now.
  - “Never be in a band with men,” she says.
    - Billy spent half the band fund on weed.
    - José cheated on her with Laura for months.
- That's why the band broke up.
  - Tommy and I never really knew why.
    - Tommy's 1<sup>st</sup> theory: Cindy was too good for them.
    - Tommy's 2<sup>nd</sup> theory: Punk was over, had been over for decades.
    - Tommy's 3<sup>rd</sup> theory: Cindy broke up with José to be with Tommy, but never had the courage to tell him/didn't know how to reach him.
- “What happened to that Tommy kid, anyway?” Cindy wonders.
  - “He died a long time ago.”
  - “Oh, Jesus,” Cindy says.
    - We both stare at the ceiling fan until the ice cubes in Cindy's whiskey have almost completely melted.
  - “What happened?” she asks at last.

### Track 9 / “Oh No! (Cracks)”

*There's a crack in me, a crack in you (oh no!),  
a crack in mom and daddy too (oh no!)  
There's a crack in love, a crack in sex  
There's a crack in time, it never rests  
There's a crack in God, a crack divine,  
a crack in whiskey, weed, and wine  
There's a crack in everything unique  
A crack in light, a crack in sea  
A crack in everything we need  
A crack in you, a crack in me*

#### MEETING NOTES – 4/15/17 – CON’T:

- An abridged list of useless explanations for the mute fact of Tommy’s body lying cold on our sofa one April morning: he never met his biological parents; his adopted mom didn’t call much; he grew up middle-class in a town full of rich kids; he turned to music; he learned to romanticize pain; all his heroes died young, from Ian Curtis to Marvin Gaye; I told him to shut up when he was just trying to tell me about Tupac’s brother; I blew him off when he was telling me how Jeff Buckley swam out into the Mississippi and drowned; I never listened enough; none of the professors at school seemed to understand his movies; he got quiet when people talked about the future; he loved drugs; he loved a world that existed in songs but nowhere else; he loved Cindy Q but she loved José Cardoso; he lived in a tiny attic in Lower Allston with a guy who never listened to him (me); I met Elyse and started spending all my time at her place in Cambridge; Tommy met nobody and hung around the living room; we never found a drummer; the Late Greats broke up and we didn’t know why; the dream faded and we didn’t know why; we stopped having band practice; we stopped staying up late and talking about bands after art school; I went to New Hampshire one weekend to ski with Elyse’s family, even though Tommy asked me to hang out with him instead; I didn’t listen; I never listened; Tommy went out for a drink with Marcus Whitmore but it was never

just one drink with Marcus Whitmore; Tommy and Marcus consumed all the alcohol in our refrigerator; Tommy and Marcus consumed who knows what else; Marcus went home around five o'clock Sunday morning (as far as he remembers); Tommy was already home and the sun was rising; he called me around six-thirty a.m.; I woke in New Hampshire and saw the call and decided I'd call him back later; Tommy went into the bathroom and drank most of a bottle of Valium; I turned back into the warm space between Elyse's shoulder and her ear; Tommy staggered over to our couch and lay down; Tommy had already drunk all that booze...

- “Wait, you said he *loved* me?” Cindy Q says.
  - “Is it love if you don't really talk to the person?” I wonder aloud.
- “Christ, that's so sad,” she says.
  - “Yup.”
- “Actually, you know, he *did* talk to me sometimes. He'd always tell me about your band—what were you guys called again?”
  - “We never picked a name,” I say.
- Cindy can't think of anything to say to that.
- The bartender takes one look at us and offers us free whiskey shots.
  - We down them in unison.
- “Did you say you have footage of some of the shows?” Cindy asks after a minute.
  - “All of them,” I tell her. “Every single one.”

### **Track 10 / “Someone to Tell”**

*I hope we all remember this forever  
help each other through this ugly weather*

12/19/04: MICKEY'S, THE LAST TIME—The Late Greats linger to the left of the empty stage. They're doing the usual encore thing, pretending the show is done. But it's different this time, because everyone in the bar knows that soon they really *will* be done, forever.

As the crowd claps and howls *encore, encore*, Tommy spins the camera around to film the whole room, which is way over fire code. There are people standing on the tables, the speakers, the bar. All the scene kids are sitting on their taller friends' shoulders, and several of them are crying and smoking indoors.

"Hey, there's you!" Cindy Chu says, pointing at the screen. We're in the dark of my mother's living room, sitting on the couch.

And there I am, grinning my face off, arms wrapped tight around Elyse. Tommy's arm reaches from behind the camera lens, pats my buzz cut, grips the studded shoulder of Elyse's leather jacket. The camera shakes as he stamps his feet and screams Cindy's name.

My mother wanders in on her walker, settles down on the couch beside us, takes off her Red Sox cap. "That was such a silly haircut you had then," she says.

Just when the crowd's roar seems like it can't get any louder, Laura Laney leaps onto the tiny stage, a blur of blonde hair and black leather waving her drumsticks, and the band streams on after her.

I wonder if the noise from the tape is going to blow my television speakers.

"Jesus," Cindy says from the other end of my couch. "We actually looked like a real band." She still doesn't open her mouth, but a small smile forms at the corners of her eyes.

"All right, you fuckers," yells the stone-faced Cindy on screen. "We've got one more song."

The crowd's boo is unanimous and heartfelt.

"Needy, needy, needy," she taunts. "I'm serious. We only know one more."

I hear Tommy shout, "Play them all again!"

Cindy Q looks straight at the camera. “I love you guys,” she says. “But it’s over.”

When the band launches into “Someone to Tell,” we lose it. It’s never been the Late Greats’ most well-known song—it’s out of character for them, almost country in its openhearted sentiment—but it was always our favorite, mine and Tommy’s. On the couch, Cindy and I howl along:

*I hope we all remember this forever  
help each other through this lousy weather  
I hope we get our dreams and stick together  
But if it goes to hell, and you need someone to tell  
You’ll find me at the well  
down at Mickey’s.*

The band plays the chorus again and again, building towards a final release we all hope will never arrive. Tommy turns the camera around to film his own face, and we watch him sing along, his whole body contorted with joy, the veins on his thin neck standing out, his lips shaking.

Here’s what I want to tell Cindy, but don’t: The whole bright hopeless dream Tommy and I dreamed is written on his face. The reaching for another way of life, for a future that will always be this, always our arms around one another, always our favorite song, the one no-one else knows. I want to ask Cindy if she knows what I mean. I want to tell her that the dream is no less gorgeous for the fact that it is gone.

Tommy spins the camera around and around while the band dissolves into chaos on stage. Elyse burrows her face into my long-ago chest and I remember that I did love her, sometimes. José kicks a hole in the heart of the kick drum, Cindy sings the chorus again and again, my mother puts her glasses on so she can see better, and for a moment, I think all of us—Tommy, Elyse, my wide-eyed mother, both versions of Cindy, both versions of me—believe that the song will never end. But then, of course, it does.



## HARBOR

The email arrived at sunset, just as Elyse was finishing a case brief about premature bread molding.

“Dear Mrs. Elyse Jane Cavanaugh,” it began:

Please forgive me this mailing, which emerges, I am sure, from the bluest of skies. I am Carlos Maldonado, the husband of Martina Belen. Please excuse me, in addition, my impoverished English. I have located your email within your website (which is a very nice and professional page, if I may say this). I know that it is many years now that you and Martina are speechless; however, my wife always spoke about you with care.

I write you now with some news of a great sadness: Martina is dead now. She became dead two weeks ago, after many months of combat with a cancer of the lungs. She was sleeping when she became deceased, so that is one species of comfort. In one week, I will have a professional need to travel to Boston, which is your city—or so Martina said, in the days before she perished. Perhaps you can meet me in a coffee or a nightclub, for a small beverage? If you are unable to attend to this meeting with an unknown Spaniard, I will understand completely and without reproach. Nevertheless, I faithfully await your response.

Cordial salutations,

Carlos Maldonado, PhD

Facultad de Historia del Arte, Universidad de Segovia

\*

Nine years earlier, an unfamiliar girl had walked into the café where Elyse worked. The girl's thick black hair had hung around her waist in tangles, and she had a torn guitar case slung over her shoulder. It was very early in the morning, just after dawn. The girl looked like she'd spent the night on the street, but she also looked unfazed, open to life's possibilities. She strode in past the empty tables and leaned her guitar against the counter, pulled the curtains of her hair back from her pale green eyes, her freckled cheeks. Her full lips curve into something like a question. Heat had pooled outward from Elyse's core. She'd wanted to disappear, or else to stay there, unblinking, while the question on Martina's pale and lovely face bloomed into a smile. "I need a job," she'd said. "Do you have one of those?"

Elyse had nodded, though she'd had no idea if it was true.

\*

While Elyse put water on for tea, the fat sun sank into Boston Harbor, coating the kitchen's topography of pots and pans in tangerine light. After a year, the apartment still seemed like a movie set. But what a view: sailboats swaying back towards their moorings, gulls circling, lights flashing on in the windows of the tall office buildings downtown.

She waited for the kettle to boil. Martina's death hovered out of reach, still unreal. Somewhere, in a self-help book or an online listicle, she'd read that this was part of grief—it could leave you dry and stunned, it could take weeks to cry.

You blinked, Elyse thought now. You went to law school, you took a nap, you woke up married. The seasons changed, you got snow tires, blinked again. You were thirty-one. You sold your car and moved downtown, into the kind of apartment you never thought you'd live in, an apartment like a movie set. Your *husband*—the word sounded foreign—wanted to know if you were ready to have a kid, because it was now or never (though he'd never say that). And you thought of comfort, of a family laughing one day in a summer garden. You had that as a girl, you wanted to

have it again, to give it to someone else. The word *yes* slipped quietly from your mouth, unbidden. Elyse could almost hear Martina mocking her gently from the past, laughing at the careful woman she'd become.

Dan was working late: go-live for the marketing campaign was next week. Strange thing, still, her husband's seriousness. When they were dating, back when he'd still gone by Danny, he'd gone out to shows five or six nights a week, he'd been obsessive about his painting and his music. But now all that wandering energy had been redirected toward the future: toward savings, the apartment, their new efforts to have a child. Elyse, in theory, wanted these things too. Some nights, the life they'd agreed they desired felt like a vise closing in on them, like the end of possibility. But other nights, while Dan lay sleeping beside her, the child and the apartment seemed like a miraculous island, finally within their sights after years at sea. Both feelings were part of the truth, Elyse thought. Another part of the truth was that Dan's friend Tommy had overdosed six years ago, and Dan had come home to find him on the couch. He didn't talk about it, not even to her, but it wasn't too long afterwards that he'd stopped going by Danny, that he'd started coming home late. A person just wasn't the same after a thing like that, Elyse figured. A person got very sad or very serious, or both, and you still had to try love them.

The kettle crescendoed like an oncoming train.

By the time Dan came home, it was dark. He went straight to the couch and curled up in Elyse's arms, kissed her with tired lips that tasted of coffee and citrus. His long brown hair brushed against her neck, last vestige of his youthful rebellion.

On the same couch, a month earlier, she had told him she was ready to have a child. They'd been reading separate issues of the *New Yorker* while they waited for the take-out to arrive. Dan had turned to her, dropped his magazine, and raised the issue for the hundredth time: time was ticking,

life was blowing by. Elyse had stopped reading then, and stared at him across the distance of the sofa. It had occurred to her then that if they didn't have a child, then they might simply go on like this forever, perched at opposite ends of a teak couch, warm and well-fed, waiting calmly to die. She had felt sure, for the first time in years. She had gone to him, put her hands around his neck. Yes: she was ready, it was time. But afterwards, in the glow after love, all of her doubts had come storming back to her, stronger than ever, as if they'd simply taken a breather to redouble their efforts.

"Let's try tomorrow," Dan said now, burrowing into her shoulder. Elyse hated this new pattern in their relationship: the scheduling of sex. She'd only been off the pill two weeks, but he was already anxious. His long red hair, last holdout from his youthful heyday, tickled the back of her neck: her Danny, her Dan. She meant to tell him about Carlos's email, but by the time she found the words, he was already asleep. In the grey darkness, she pulled out her phone and settled on the simplest version of the reply she'd been writing and rewriting all evening: *When are you available?* After a moment's hesitation, she pressed send and waited for the telltale whoosh.

A month and a half—that was how long she and Martina had spent together. In the scheme of a life, it was a blip, the length of a summer camp stay or a celebrity's time in the spotlight. There were men Elyse had dated for longer whose names she could not remember. Somehow, though, the six weeks she'd spent with Martina had only grown brighter in the rearview, denser with the passing years.

That first morning, Elyse had taken Martina to a booth in the back of the café and interviewed her. She'd offered her coffee, water, a breakfast sandwich that Martina accepted hungrily. To the question of why she wanted to work at Café Solei, Martina had said, "I need

money.” To the question about her prior service experience, she’d shrugged and said she’d spent the summer on a cruise ship, playing pop covers for sunburnt rich people.

Elyse smiled: most people made up some story about loving people, loving coffee, how it was their dream to give coffee to people. That summer, Elyse had needed money too. She was been fresh out of college, working mornings at Café Solei while she waited for her life to harden into a recognizable shape—writer, journalist, famous pastry chef. She still thought of success as something imminent, fated.

There were traces of Catalan Spanish in Martina’s otherwise flawless English, a subtle hiss at the start of the words *strawberry* and *scone*. She said she’d been traveling for a year, on leave from her psychology program in Barcelona, traveling through continental Europe and England, playing cafés and dives for free meals and money to get to the next town. In London, she scored the cruise ship job, and she covered pop songs by the pool all the way across the Atlantic.

“Why did you stay in Boston?” Elyse asked her.

Martina gave her a look shot through with irony. “For love.”

“Oh,” Elyse said.

Martina laughed gently. “Just kidding. I don’t know why, actually. I was tired of being on the ship.”

Elyse laughed too loud.

“I like your sweater, by the way,” Martina said, touching the knit cuff of the thing.

The interview went on far longer than it was supposed to. Martina wanted to visit lots of places in New England—Mount Washington, Acadia National Park, Cape Cod. “I want,” she said dreamily, “to witness a moose.” Elyse forgot about the interview questions. By the time she looked away from Martina, a small line had formed at the empty counter.

“You have some customers, I think,” Martina said.

Elyse went to help them. When she turned back, a few lattes later, only the filled-out application remained on the table, along with a scrawled note that said: *Nice to meet you. Perhaps we can go to see a moose. xx, M.*

Elyse did not tell Dan about Martina's death—not the first night, and not in the days that followed. He was busy, after all; it would only distract him from the campaign. He was working closely with a wristwatch company in China, and because of the time difference, he often got home after Elyse was already in bed. She told herself he didn't need the distraction.

But the deeper truth was that Dan had been jealous of Martina, back before they were married. It was no secret between them that she'd been with women—he knew, for instance, that she had dated her hall mate briefly during Sophomore year, and kissed other girls before that. Sometimes they even compared notes on strangers' looks, as a kind of joke at parties. Look at her lips, she'd say, and Dan would nod along, a co-conspirator. But on the subject of Martina, Elyse had learned to stay mum. For years after Martina went back to Spain, they still talked several times a week over Skype, but whenever she tried to talk to Dan about her or show him the photos she sent from Barcelona and Oxford—Martina playing a gig in a café along Las Ramblas, Martina in a sharp cream-colored suit on the day of her graduation—emotion came into her voice, unbidden and impossible to conceal. Dan would play along; he'd ask clarifying questions about her friend's degree, her music, but it was clear that the feeling behind her words hurt him. His jealousy tarnished the purity of what Elyse felt, made it seem small and wrong. One night, after she relayed a story about Martina's visit to the House of Lords in London, he turned to her and said, "Do you love her?"

She hated him then. "Nothing ever happened," she said.

“But you love her,” he’d said quietly. “You don’t get so excited about talking to anyone else.”

And so she stopped bringing Martina up then, and she didn’t bring her up now, when she had died.

The week went quickly, like water. At night, if they were not too tired, they had sex quickly, efficiently, with purpose. Afterwards, Dan would look up at her with his worried eyes and say: Maybe that was it. Maybe we did it. In the mornings, Elyse woke early and did not take the pill. She ran out along the docks as the city lit up and thought about Carlos, tried to picture him. As she ran past the fishermen loading their nets into the boats, the first whale watches leaving from the aquarium, she felt a strange feeling firing in her fingers and behind her eyes. It was only later that she identified it as hope.

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On Facebook, she found a Carlos Maldonado who was a semi-professional Scottish rugby player. Though nothing was impossible, she somehow doubted that this Carlos, strapping though he looked atop a pile of other muscle-bound men, moonlighted as a professor of art history. Nor were there any professorly Carlos Maldonados on Twitter, LinkedIn, or Instagram. In the end, all she could find was a profile, in Spanish, on the University of Segovia’s website, from which she gathered that Maldonado was a specialist in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese landscape painting. The profile did not include a photograph, but there was a CV—a PhD from a university in Madrid, a few books, a string of increasingly prestigious academic posts in various parts of Europe. That was all she had to go on until the morning of their meeting, when she received a text from an unknown number.

“I am Carlos,” it read. “I will be a man in a blue shirt.” She imagined several unhelpful replies—“I’ll be the white lady with the laptop.” In the end, she just described her outfit: a white blouse and a black cashmere sweater. Casual enough for coffee, but sober enough for a conversation

about death. In the bathroom mirror, she combed her short dark hair until it swooped just right over her forehead. She put on more makeup than usual.

The café they'd agreed upon was a red-brick affair in an old warehouse not far from her apartment. Elyse arrived first and sat at a table in the back corner. She'd been trying to picture the kind of man her friend might have married: a tall, lean man with salt-and-pepper hair, an expensive leather jacket, and impeccable taste in scarves. But when Carlos walked in, he was scarfless and blonde. He had a bright blue linen shirt, a thin hoodie, and a long bespectacled face that broke, as Elyse's eyes landed on it, into a cautious, crooked smile.

He took her hand in both of his. "You are so alike to Martina's pictures," he said, "and yet also so different."

"You must be Carlos," she said, though he wasn't the Carlos she'd imagined at all.

\*

After Martina interviewed at the café, Elyse didn't see her for weeks. Elyse gave the application to her manager, but without a work visa, there was no way he could hire Martina. So Elyse went back to her poems. She bought a houseplant, did a review of a punk show for a local 'zine, swept her tiny apartment until it shone. She returned, again and again, to the feeling of Martina tugging at the cuff of her sweater. Terence, the boy she'd been seeing at school, still called sometimes from California, but she started letting the calls go through to voicemail.

One night, a friend dragged Elyse to a basement show in the District, the student neighborhood. The friend found a boy she liked in the kitchen of the house, and Elyse wandered down into the basement alone. There was Martina, leaning against the cinderblocks, guitar case on her hip. She was surrounded by a crowd of flannel-clad boys, who were all clamoring for her attention. When Elyse walked over, Martina embraced her and kissed her on the cheek, as if they'd



known each other for years, and Elyse felt a thrill in her limbs. “This is my sweet Elyse,” Martina told the boys, “the most amazing barista in all of Boston.”

One of the boys looked at her solemnly. “I’m a barista, too.”

“Do you know the Late Greats?” said a second boy, whose mohawk was perhaps ten years out of style.

“The who?” Martina said.

The boy inclined the icy tips of his mohawk toward the band in the center of the basement, which was playing the sort of angular, moody guitar music Elyse had heard in other, similar basements. A crowd of people was gathered around them, dressed in black and focused in a way that reminded her vaguely of a wake. “They’re total legends,” the boy said.

“I don’t like them,” Martina said. She turned to Elyse. “Do you smoke, dear barista?”

For Martina, she would. Out in the warm night air, a few couples were huddled under trees, kissing, dancing to the thrum of passing cars. Martina produced a pack of clove cigarettes from her shirt pocket and handed one to Elyse. “I’m so happy you’ve come,” she said. “I was beginning to think I would have to listen to them talk about distortion pedals all night.”

While they smoked, Elyse watched Martina’s face closely, the small, eloquent movements of her brow. Martina told Elyse about her travels—the married lover she’d left behind in Prague, the cold-water flat where she’d lived in Paris, the old wealthy men on the cruise ship who wandered to her cabin door, late at night, leaving their wives and children asleep in bed, and stood outside while she pretended to sleep. Later, much later, Elyse wondered if all of this was true.

“I made a deal with the bartender on the boat,” Martina said. “I showed him the guys, and I told him: Every time one of them asks you for a drink, you put three extra olives in it, unless it’s a martini. If it was a martini, he put three maraschino cherries instead.”

“He didn’t have arsenic?”

Martina didn't laugh. "Where did you come from, Elyse?"

"Tonight?"

"Tonight, sure. Or in your life." She threw her cigarette into the street and lit another.

Elyse spoke generally at first—about her cramped apartment, about the poems and reviews she was beginning to submit to small journals. But Martina's patient attention, her way of leaning in, made Elyse feel that her own life, which had lately seemed so dull and shapeless, was once again vital and full of possibilities. Soon she was telling stories she hadn't told anyone in years—about her childhood in Lowell, about the kids who'd played youth league soccer with her and held her hand when her mother died. She even found herself talking about her years at Harvard—the shock of all that money, all those strivers and oil heirs—and the loneliness that had hounded her there, on the steps of famous buildings and in the library stacks. It was the first adult loneliness she had known, a quiet melody underneath everything.

They left the party and went out through the crowded streets of the District, past the shuttered windows of Café Solei. At a bar called Mickey's Good Time Lounge and Grill, they drank until closing, and then they wandered down to the river and sat on a bench there. Martina played Elyse her songs. The lyrics, written in English so she could shop them to American labels, were lovely and strange. They seemed to have been written by someone ancient, someone who was looking back on life from a distance. Elyse liked one about a father who took his children to the ocean; Martina taught her the chorus: *Only daughter, open water*. They sang it together, picking harmonies out of the air, while raccoons picked through the trash and cigarette butts along the banks of the river.

Toward the subway station as the sun came up. They stumbled down into the station together, all the way to the turnstiles, and fumbled their way into a brief, sisterly hug. They made vague plans to get lunch, like acquaintances, and Elyse had the sensation that she'd already lost

Martina, that she was losing her for good. When she turned to go, Elyse almost called after her, but she cut the impulse off. What could she say?

And then she realized—maybe Martina didn't have anywhere to stay. The thought filled her with hope. She sprinted out of the station, leaving the incoming train behind, and found Martina at the top of the stairs, studying a pull-out map of Boston. Martina looked up with a mild, confused expression.

"Hey, I was just thinking," Elyse said, "Where are you staying?"

"I have a friend here, from Spain. Well, he's sort of my friend."

Martina had made that joke about staying for love—if it had been a joke. "Well, if you need anything, you can always stay at mine. It's not the Ritz, but I've got a futon. Here. Since you don't have a phone." She scrawled her address on the back of the diner receipt and handed it to Martina."

"You are kind," Martina said, grasping Elyse's wrist. "But I will stay with my friend."

"Great." Elyse felt her throat contracting. She nodded and turned back into the station.

But less than a week later, Martina showed up on Elyse's doorstep with her guitar and her soggy backpack, shoes and boots and sweatshirts dangling from every strap. It was pouring out, and she didn't have an umbrella or a jacket.

"What are you doing out there?" Elyse called from the window.

Martina wiped the water from her mouth and called up: "Is your futon open?"

\*

"When Martina was dying," Carlos said, "she talked about you without stoppage. The time you two spent together—for her it was a big memory, huge. It was a part of her most central life, I think. She talked about the little towns you went to and the food you ate. She talked unendingly about hamburgers, shaken milk, and sandwiches of great width."

“We did eat a lot of hamburgers,” Elyse said. “It’s funny, I haven’t had one in over a decade.”

“To hear her talk of hamburgers was alike to hearing Cézanne speak of apples. For Martina, each hamburger was individual and perfect. Which is saying nothing of the highways. She spoke so much about the highways that I often ejected her from our bedroom with frustration, a frustration that fills me now with shame. Many times, I locked the bedroom door against her endless discussion of the North American highways. How interesting can a large street be? For me, not so interesting.”

So she had remembered.

Carlos went on, his eyebrows jolting up and down as he spoke. “In those days, she was a kind of—what is your English word?—a hippie. A big hippie, actually. Probably you knew her like this. She had many dreams, like to see the penguins in Antarctica, or to travel to small Scottish islands and photograph the rocks, or to change the nature of poorness. Hippie dreams, you know. My dream was more simple: I wanted only to finish a doctorate and talk about the paintings and sculptures in the university. It was a reasonable dream, I thought. When I first knew her, Martina always said, Carlos, do you not conceive something bigger? Truly, no. I have always liked paintings and sculptures more than other things.”

He lifted his espresso to his lips, took a tiny sip.

“Tell me,” Elyse said. “What was she like, later on?”

“First, when I was meeting her, she was playing many concerts, almost every night. I mean, I couldn’t find a time to take her to the restaurant because she was always playing concerts. I felt so attracted to her, because she was so—how can I say this?—comfortable about the uncertainty. She was a free person, very free. Not like me.”

“What were you like?”

The lines around his mouth deepened, a pair of parentheses. “Very serious, I think. I was forever wearing many sweaters. I was very anxious around my studies, and maybe also sad. In this way, I was like many graduate students.”

“Was she in school then, too?”

Carlos laughed. “Oh, no. If you find me in the year of 2010 and you say to me, Martina will be a professor, I will say you are crazy, no way. She was so excited then about the music, and people were coming to see her every night. We thought something was going to happen with her.”

“But it never did?”

He looked down at his hands. “She started to want other things. She became, I fear, serious, like me, and she started to think her music was a waste, a childhood thing. Today, I think maybe this is my fault. Maybe Martina was thinking that if she married me, she would have to change, to become—what is your word?—professional. But truly, I never desired that for her.”

“I’m sure you didn’t,” Martina said.

His cheeks quivered under the café’s warm tungsten lights. “You know, when Martina was dying, she was talking always of you. I must admit, I felt a great jealousy. You understand, we were living twelve years together. We had our own life, you see. Our own trips, our own plans. No children, of course—in that way were not lucky—but still, a life with many parts, and many dreams, and even something like happiness.”

Elyse’s chest tightened. “That must have been very difficult,” she said.

“I kept saying: Martina, I am right here, I am with you. And she kept telling me, the highways, Carlos, the lakes of America, take me there. And I am thinking, I don’t give a shit about your American friend.” He sipped the espresso again and looked Elyse in the eye. “Is that the correct expression? Give a shit?”

“Yes,” Elyse said. “I—”

“At the end, I had the sensation that I was disappearing. My wife was forgetting me, across from my eyes.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Elyse said again.

“How could you know?” He picked his glasses up off the table and placed them on his long nose. “Shall we walk?”

“Walk?”

“Tomorrow I will sit at the conference until night, but now there is some sunlight left.”

“It’s freezing, though,” Elyse said.

“Yes,” Carlos said bitterly. “Your country is always freezing.”

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They strolled out along the docks as the spring afternoon tilted into an evening the color of persimmons. Carlos told her about the house he and Martina shared in Segovía—an old house, he told her, with a sunny inner patio. As he spoke, Elyse pictured Martina moving through the rooms, grading papers, making tea, playing her songs to herself, welcoming parties of friends that flitted in and out. Her friend’s grace only deepened in her mind, as the dimples on her cheeks lengthened into lines, as her broad smile etched rivulets into the corners of her eyes. They’d wanted to have children, Carlos said, but Martina hadn’t been able to.

She and Martina had talked about children sometimes, in Elyse’s attic apartment, on those October nights when the heat stopped working and they’d slept by the open oven to stay warm. Never in my life, Martina had said. What an insane idea, Elyse had said. And they’d laughed, there on the kitchen floor in their sleeping bags, and curled towards one another, sliding a mug of whiskey back and forth across the linoleum tiles. On one of those nights, the coldest, Martina had reached across the distance between them and pulled Elyse’s head into the crook between her shoulder and their neck, and they’d held each other until they fell asleep. The smell of gas from the oven, the

cigarettes and soap on Martina's skin, the sirens calling in the street while Martina's breathing grew slow and steady. Elyse's mind had hummed with a brimming, threatening happiness; her body had been filled with a frisson that seemed to vibrate in her fingertips and her toes, as if something within her were about to burst free from her body and bolt out into the chilly air.

She led Carlos around the corner and onto the street that ran north towards her building. In the long silences that fell between them, she thought about Dan. Would Carlos understand what she meant if she told him how her husband came home hollowed out, how they binged television shows with the blinds down, how they spoke in a private language: a touch on the arm meant *leave me alone*, a touch on the lower back meant *always stay?*

"I wonder if you can tell me something," Carlos said. "Before we part."

"Sure," Elyse said.

"Why did you cease to contact her?"

Elyse stiffened. "What do you mean? Why didn't she contact *me?*"

Carlos paused, and his jaw worked up and down. "Because she believed you did not desire to know her."

"That's not true," Elyse said. "That's so completely untrue."

"Perhaps. But that is what she believed."

There in the doorway of her apartment building, with his hands in the pockets of his jacket, Carlos looked at once very old and very young. She'd stolen from him.

"God," she said. "I'm sorry."

The last of the boats were sliding back towards the harbor—little fishing dinghies and big trawlers, old-money yachts and sleek Sunfish. The breeze came cold off the water, and Elyse wrapped her jacket more tightly around herself. Carlos seemed to be looking at something in the far distance, where the water met the sky.

“It is strange,” he said at last. “I have lived all my life beside the sea. But still I am amazed when I see all these boats. So many, and so different from one another. Who requires so many boats?”

\*

The last time she spoke to Martina had been three years ago. Elyse had come home from the courtroom, emptied out, and huddled in the spare room of their last apartment to call up Skype. It had felt, by then, like an obligation, an empty ritual they repeated, though less and less often. Martina had cut her hair, and she looked like a different woman. They had the usual conversation, the only one they seemed to have towards the end.

When are you coming? Martina had said. She’d been drinking a beer, cross-legged on the computer chair, still dressed in collared shirt and suit-jacket. She had vacations in August, money to travel. I’ll come see you then, Elyse said. We’ll go to Galicia, walk along the cliffs. Good, Martina had said, though this was perhaps the sixth time they’d made such plans, and they’d never walked along any cliffs. Or I’ll come see you in Boston. We can drink in the old bars. Yes, Elyse said, we’ll do it. We’ll do it all.

Martina had grown quiet then. “But be honest—you won’t come, will you?”

It was true. Elyse knew Dan wouldn’t want to go, and she knew what it would mean if she went alone. She said that August might be busy, but next year was looking good.

“Why do you say that?” she said, aloud.

“Perhaps even when we are not making choices, that is a way of making them,” she said “At a certain point, the choice makes itself.”

Elyse felt the old tightening in her chest. “In August,” she said. “I’ll come in August.” But both of them had known it was the end.

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When Dan came home, hours later, Elyse was lying on the couch. He had a six-pack under his arm, and he seemed happier than he had in weeks. “We did it,” he said. “The campaign is live all across Asia and Europe.”

Elyse closed the computer, went to him, held him. He said he was exhausted.

“God,” she said, “so am I.”

They went into the bedroom and fell on top of the sheets without bothering to lift them. They lay there in their clothes for what felt like several minutes, feeling the familiar weight of one another. In the humming dark, Elyse wondered how she would tell Dan what had happened. What could she possibly say to him? That her conversation with Carlos had made her, in spite of everything, happy? That the news of Martina’s death had loosed a stone inside her chest that had been stuck there for years? Could she tell him she knew, at last, that what had happened that fall had not happened for her alone, and she was beginning to believe in possibility again?

Instead of speaking, she rose and went to the bathroom. When she flicked the light on, the room seemed overexposed, the walls too white and clean. Her own face in the mirror took her aback: her limp dark hair, the lines beneath her eyes, and the strange new energy glinting within them, as if a new spirit had taken up residence in her tired body. She flossed, brushed her teeth, washed her face. And then, crouching down, she rummaged around under the sink for a black cosmetic bag, which she’d hidden in the back, behind a bottle of toilet cleaner. She pulled the bag out, retrieved the circular sheet of pills within, and swallowed the one marked Tuesday. She closed her eyes and felt relief shudder through her, lifting the hairs on her arms.

When she crawled back under the covers, Dan placed his hand on the top of her flat belly as it rose and fell. His face formed into a smile against the skin of her neck, and he pulled her body into the curve of his own.

“Good day?” he said, his voice already full of sleep.

For a moment, she tried to find the words, but she couldn't.

"It was fine," she said. "No big news."

"That's good, love," Dan said. "That's so good."

## THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT YOUR ART ROCK BAND

### 1.

Say it starts when you're ten years old, home alone and sweating through your hand-me-down dress. Your friends are out of town, your sister's at camp, and there's nothing good on TV. The clock's minute hand is frozen in place above the mantelpiece. Your mom won't be home from work for hours. The afternoon stretches out in front of you like a big wad of nothingness. In a daze, you choose a CD at random off your sister's shelf, one of the bands she never shuts up about. You steal her Discman from under her bed and slide the disc in. You lie down on the couch and press play.

Say it all disappears: the midsummer heat, the odor of hot trash on the breeze, the whirring of the fan. A door opens, and you fall into another place, deeper and stranger than anywhere you've been before. It's as though someone has put a microphone up to the whole world. Joy and terror feel close, like you can reach out and touch them. But that's not the most wonderful thing—the most wonderful thing is that this place is inside you, it can be accessed with the press of the play button, with the plugging of a guitar into an amplifier. You can go there again and again and again. When the record finishes, you start it over from the first song.

### 2.

That's how it starts, but here's how it *really* starts: just before the worst blizzard since '86, knowing full well it's coming, you walk to South Station and take the Number Four bus two hours through the pre-blizzard traffic to the address José gave you at the open mic and go up the busted back staircase in the first snow flurries and knock and knock on the back door 'til a silhouette appears at the honey-glow window and the knob turns in your hand and there's José, holding a live-ass lobster in his non-door hand, claws and tail waving like it knows exactly what's coming, like maybe it's

heard war stories from older lobsters back in the ocean, and José says fuck man it's really coming down and gives you a side-armed hug even though you've only just met, and in a single twirling motion he turns around and lobs the lobster into a pot of water and leads you into the living room, which reminds you of your mother's living room except dirty and full of random shit like a beat-up banjo, a lava lamp, and a dog collar sans dog, plus a young woman on the couch with a toy piano in her lap, drinking chamomile and whiskey from a plastic mug, and even through the haze of marijuana and incense, you recognize her from the open mic, so you know her name's Cindy and she sings songs about California that are entirely goddamn lovely, even if they've got lines like "Los Angeles / brought me to my knees" and "played my final cards / on Sunset Boulevard," and when you walk in she looks up at you like you're a passing bird and just keeps plinking away at the child-sized piano while the lobsters die silently in the big gray pot and José draws a star in the window frost, and you investigate the shape of your hands until Cindy asks if you want to hear a new song she's been working on and you say sure, though you silently hope it's not about California, and while she's singing about the fleeting nature of joy and certain days in springtime, you feel like you've known her your whole life, like you're sisters, born long ago in that living room with the heat pipes whistling, the windows all fogged up, and the smell of melted butter, and you're just happy to be there because you've been so many places lately that haven't meant a thing to you, so you pick up José's drumsticks and stay for the blizzard, the worst since '86 like they said, and the Number Four bus doesn't start running again 'til Wednesday, even the 7-11 is closed, and you play Cindy's sweet sad songs until your hands hurt and the weed is gone and you've all fallen in love.

### 3.

Say it's the three of you at first: Cindy "Q" Chu on acoustic and vocals, José on lead guitar, and you on drums. You start playing that night at José's place, and you don't stop. Songs pour out of the

three of you like you share a mind; songs float in through the windows every time you air the place out. Cindy writes the best ones, and not all of them are about California. The ones you like best are about everyday things: conversations on the city bus, her favorite local bars.

That deep, strange place, the one inside you—now it's the three of you in there. There's no gap between you. Before you can say, let's slow this one down, José says it. Before Cindy tells you where she wants the beat to come in, you know it with your whole body. You've been in love before, but never like this. Never such ease, such thoughtless symbiosis. You decide to take a semester off from your Ph.D. in French Literature to focus on the band. You pick up a part-time gig at a shoe shop. You stop calling the girls you knew in college.

At first, you're always together: playing songs, cooking massive pots of store-brand spaghetti, drinking cheap beer down at Mickey's Good Time Lounge and Grill. You learn each other quickly—the fancy upbringing Cindy's always trying to downplay, the linguistics degree she's on leave from, the story about José's dad, who was killed by an American mine during the last year Gulf War. You spend hours talking about the sound, about finding a bassist, about the band name. (José likes The Catatronics; Cindy likes The Sun Patrol; you look up both and find out they're taken.)

It's always the three of you: Cindy with her studded leather jackets and her blue pixie cut. José in a black t-shirt, all the time. You like the way it fits his shoulders, the looks he gives you when you're playing well, when you're hitting the snare as hard as you can. You like his new tattoo, a sparrow that flies on his wrist as he strums. But you don't say so, because José's in love with Cindy. That much is obvious when you show up to practice and they're flushed and bed-headed. Everyone else you know is in love with Cindy, too—the boys who come into the shoe shop want to know what her deal is; the girl at the Starbucks gets so distracted by Cindy's mile-high cheekbones, she has to ask for Cindy's order twice. Your friends from college think she looks like a celebrity, and they're not wrong.

You don't care who loves who, at first. You're just happy to be there, happy to see them both every day. You're coming off a bad breakup, a year when you questioned everything in your life. It's a relief to find a new geography.

The strip of shops and bars they call the District, where you meet up every night to go to local punk shows. Cindy's attic bedroom with the futon in the corner and her drawings hung along the walls and the space heater you huddle around when the heat's been out for weeks. José's living room strewn with guitars, accordions, cracked-cover books of Buddhist sutras, VHS tapes from the '90s, threadbare sweaters. His back staircase that leads up to the roof, where you pretend the three of you are some tiny persecuted sect, huddling together for warmth under the sharp winter stars, talking talking talking about the Dream.

#### 4.

The Dream is that you'll stay together forever, and you'll somehow get paid to be sensitive. The Dream is that you'll be allowed to remain for your whole lives in a kind of adolescent state of attention, watching the ripples on the pond, the sun's progress across the lawn. The dream is also to be famous, to see your faces on billboards and the monitors at TD Garden, but nobody says that out loud. First, you should probably find a bass player. First, you need to book a gig.

So Cindy talks the bartender at Mickey's into giving you a Tuesday night slot, and José calls his friend Billy Edmonds to see what's up. Billy's the real, van-owning deal: hair down around his shoulders, twice the technical player any of you will ever be. He gigs three or four nights a week up and down the Massachusetts coast, playing with touring reggae acts and femme electro groups and middle-aged men who cover Journey songs. He does weeknights in the dive bars of Saugus and Boston and Winthrop and Newton and Somerville and drives up and down Cape Cod every weekend to play weddings and mitzvahs. He's obsessed with the bass to the exclusion of all other

interests, including food and sleep, and he seems to run on marijuana and caffeine and whatever else is on hand. He's perpetually cheerful and energetic, perpetually stoned.

You're stunned when he gives you the time of day. You drive out to Lowell, to the filthy house he's sharing with three roommates and two ornery cats, and he makes you all tea. He says he's sick of cover bands, sick of bad gigs in bad bars that don't pay. He wants to be part of something original, something he can call his own. He wants to be part of a group with a Plan, a Dream. And he likes Cindy's songs. He says they've got *soul*, whatever that means. He's also got plenty of ideas for the band—venues to play, connections to hit up all up and down the coast.

It's Billy who suggests the band name, one night when you're all smoking at José's place after practice. You're listening to the band Wilco, kind of a dad band, and this song comes on called "The Late Greats." Billy looks up from the bong and says, without much emphasis, there it is. That's the name. You all know he's right.

With Billy on board, you start sounding like a real band, at least to yourselves. You reel home from those practices, blood pumping, chord progressions and vocal lines churning around your brain. As you drive back to your co-op in Somerville, the streetlights and fast-food signs along Soldier's Field Road glow extra-bright. Whenever you pass a billboard, you imagine your faces on it: the four of you, the Late Greats.

The night you play Mickey's, there's another huge snowstorm, but Mickey's doesn't close. In fact, it's packed to the gills. All your friends are there: from college, from the shoe shop. Suzy Dipshit of legendary local act the Dipshits is there, sitting at a table in the back, laughing at something Cindy's saying. Your heart slams in your chest: the world is about to barge into that private space, that world you found on your mother's couch when you were ten. José sees you freaking out when nobody else does. He sees you shaking by the bar, trying to look tough. He comes over, puts a hand on the small of your back, and whispers: you were made for this. Your

whole body sparks. The sound guy wakes up from his nap, yawns, and says: Whenever you guys are ready. The lights go down. Your heart stills.

You look over at José, and you know exactly what to do.

## 5.

Early days. Cold metal of keyboard stands against skin on February nights. One-dollar discount on any domestic draft beer. Tiny stages tucked into the corner by the Keno machine. Sweat dripping onto a tangled knot of cables. Lifting of amplifiers into trunks and backseats. Lifting of amplifiers back out of trunks and backseats, and then onto stages, basement floors, public lawns, and roofs of questionable integrity. Lifting of amplifiers into the same trunks and backseats again. Monday morning gigs, no sound check. Lyrics scrawled on the back of receipts, on diner napkins and the backs of flyers. Broken strings and borrowed gear. Fifteen-minute opening slots. Doing it for the exposure. Doing it because it feels good. Doing it because there's nothing else going on. Watching José's lips move against the rim of a foaming beer. Watching José look at Cindy like a landlocked kid looks at the ocean. Turning away, laughing at Billy's dead-on imitation of an angry moose. Talking the usual shit. Talking about Suzy Dipshit and her band's success, how to imitate it. Making and re-making the Plan.

The Plan is to quit your jobs, move to Vermont, buy some big rundown house with a big damp basement, acquire four shitty jobs and five decent mics, set up the mics in the basement, brace yourselves for winter, breathe the northern air, smoke a bunch of weed, watch the Green Mountains turn white out the basement window, forget about everything that used to matter to you, and make an album. Or that was the Plan last week. This week, the Plan is to drive out into the desert at night, burn your possessions, remember your adolescence, and *then* make an album. Cindy heard the lead singer of Animal Collective lives in a yurt in the Mojave with his wife, who's really pretty in a quiet



way, and they still love each other, even though they've been married for years. The Mojave's really far from Boston though, and Cindy also heard the desert drives you kind of crazy.

The Plan, short-term, is to hang around with Suzy Dipshit more. José heard she got written up in *The Boston Globe* last week. He heard *Pitchfork* sent her a courtesy mug last Christmas, with a picture of a guy in Warby Parker glasses frowning, or something like that. Suzy just *gets* networking. Plus, she seems genuinely nice, and she's kind of in love with Cindy, like everybody else.

## 6.

Summer comes around. It's so hot in José's attic that you all take cigarette breaks every fifteen minutes. You land some better gigs: The Young Rat, the Cellar. You start to see familiar faces cropping up at show after show: a girl who knows all the words, a boy with a mohawk who films everything. Cindy writes songs about fireworks, about the nostalgia. She writes a song called "Gin and Listerine," and you come up with a driving, syncopated drum part that everybody loves. All of you know it's the single. For weeks, you drive around singing the chorus: "Someday we'll forget the scene, drinking gin and listerine." Billy books the band some recording time with a guy he knows out in Western Mass, and you all get real excited, like you're about to win a Grammy.

One Thursday in July, the week before you go into the studio, The Dipshits are playing a set at TT the Bear's Club, and José wants to go check it out and network. Cindy's working late at the bar, and Billy has a gig in Salem, so you agree to go with him. You pick him up from his job at the supermarket around seven. He's wearing the black t-shirt; you never find out if he just has one, or if it's several versions of the same shirt, but he never smells bad. That night, actually, he smells like tangerine peel and cinnamon. Before his cologne can saturate your beat-up Camry, you roll the windows down to let in the city breeze. The day's mugginess has retreated offshore, and the night air is cool and buoyant. José says he likes your dress, and you laugh, because José's not the kind of

person who gives compliments unless they're about drum fills. It's the blue sundress with the tiny black flowers; the one you've been wearing to gigs all summer. In the rearview, you catch your own eye. You see how beautiful you look, how the summer has sewn strands of gold into your light brown bangs. The loneliness you felt last winter, before you met the band, is a distant dream.

The Dipshits are opening for some touring punk band with a monosyllabic name: Rug, Couch, Shirt. The Dipshits, honestly, are not that great—the songs are a little pat; a little fuck-the-system without the necessary specifics. But afterwards, you tell them they're amazing, of course. José buys drinks for everybody who wants one, glad-hands the bartenders, talks Suzy's ear off about her *sound, man*. You're struck by his gentle confidence, by the ease with which he works the room. Suzy keeps saying thanks, you guys have a lot of potential. She even says, we should all do a show together sometime. José leans in to listen, puts a hand on her back. You go to the bar for another gin-tonic, the kind that's almost all gin and comes in a tiny plastic cup. The touring band goes on, and you and José and all the pink-clad Dipshits mosh in the front row. The Dipshits' drummer keeps trying to touch you and hand you drinks, so you gravitate towards José and mosh inside the aura of his masculinity. José grasps the situation quickly, dances closer to you, and acts for all the world like he's yours. Sweat soaks through your sundress, and your bangs thrash around your eyes. During the last song, José leans in close and brushes them lightly away. This is the first time you have the feeling that everything is in its right place, that his body and yours are meant to be near each other.

Afterwards, you drive him to the bar where Cindy works so he can be there when her shift ends. You feel light and giddy, sated with sound and movement. You can tell José's in the same headspace: he's got the seat leaned way back, the window down, his tan arm lolling out the window of the car. When you drop him off, he hugs you a little too quickly and thanks you for the ride. Like

a brother, you think. But afterwards, when you remember the feel of his rough fingertips against your brow on the dancefloor, part of you hopes you're wrong.

## 7.

You all go west to record, to a barn that Billy's friend Muffin has converted into a studio space. If Muffin has another name, nobody knows it. On the drive, the four of you talk about the Story. In other words, what will you say when *Rolling Stone* calls and asks how the band got together? You need a Story so you can studiously avoid the truth, which is that you were all born with a certain degree of privilege, so you didn't have to worry about feeding yourselves or your parents or your own children, and you'd already tried going to India, going into social work, going *to* social workers, minor-league alcoholism, yoga, roughly two-fifths of a PhD in Contemporary European Literature, Crossfit, most illegal recreational drugs, five different SSRIs, dream journaling, regular journaling, going *back* to India, Zumba, Pilates, hypnotism, "spending more time with friends and family," veganism, vegetarianism, flexitarianism, and dog ownership, but none of that had given you the necessary sense that life was progressing towards something new and unknown and possibly wonderful; none of it had reeked of magic.

So you did the usual thing: you started an indie rock band.

As you pass the signs for Worcester, José says: Maybe the story can be, we're a punk band with two dudes and two chicks. We can focus our PR campaign on the ladies. Feminism's big now.

Come on, Cindy groans. Absolutely not. We've been over this.

Why do we need a story? Billy groans. Isn't rock 'n' roll enough?

It's not 1973 anymore, Billy, José says.

The barn-studio is at the end of a long dirt road, in the middle of a hilly stretch of pine forest north of Amherst. When your van pulls up, the man named Muffin comes striding out of the

farmhouse. He's probably six-seven, rail-thin, dressed in basketball shorts and a loose plaid shirt. He's eating a submarine sandwich. Come on in, he says, using the sandwich like a flight pylon to herd you into the barn.

While you ogle the gear—those amplifiers! the vintage guitars! that weird sound-proofing foam!—Billy and Muffin trade road stories. Muffin's saying things like, those guys in Backflip Attack were doing *way* too much Klonopin for it being a farmer's market. Billy's saying things like, that's brutal. Muffin describes an incident where his band's tour van nearly hit a moose on their way to Portland, and Billy does his excellent impression of a moose again. Everybody laughs. You all feel better about the Story and the Plan. Let's get to it, Muffin says. By which he means, let's all go into the woods, smoke a bowl, order some pizza, drive to pick up the pizza, eat it on the porch, watch half a documentary about the making of Radiohead's *OK Computer*, and then maybe start setting up microphones. By the time you're all set up, it's fully dark, and you decide to just start tracking in the morning. Muffin, who works as a contractor when he's not on tour, has converted the loft of the barn into a crash space for bands. There are four firm futons on the floor, a little kitchenette, and a TV hooked up to the generator. So you go up there, cook some pasta, talk about the plan. Through the thin walls of the barn, you can hear the crickets and the wind pushing through the pine trees. Some of that good feeling, the sense of being one mind instead of four, returns to you.

Let's get back to basics, Cindy says: get a chateau in France, take some drugs, make an album.

What is a chateau, though, exactly? José says. Is it that much better than a house?

You point out that you're actually making an album, tomorrow, and maybe you should focus on that before the chateau.

Everyone turns to you. José goes, That's a good point, Laura.

Later, you fall asleep and have a dream in which the sparrow on his wrist crashes, again and again, into a pine tree.

## 8.

On the first day, you track bass and drums for all ten songs. It's just you and Billy in the live booth for hours, with the metronome going tick tock tick in your ears, playing the same thing over and over again over and over again until it sounds like a machine. In this setting and no other, Billy is a perfectionist, an absolute tyrant about the beat. He stops playing and curses any time you miss a cymbal roll or hit a snare the wrong way. When *he* messes up, he storms out of the barn, smokes a joint, does forty push-ups, and then comes back in with the air of a penitent. He talks to himself between takes, says things like don't fuck this up again Billy. Meanwhile, José and Cindy are off in the woods somewhere, probably picking mushrooms and feeding them to each other. When it's over, you listen to everything back, and it sounds so good that you can't believe it's you.

On the second day, Muffin wants to track guitars with José, and Billy wants to lie on the cot upstairs and talk to his girlfriend, so you and Cindy decide to go into town. Town means a Walmart, a Dunkin Donuts, a pretty fountain, a diner, and two gas stations. You go into the diner and share a Lumberjack Special. Cindy smothers her half of the pancakes in maple syrup. She keeps fidgeting with her hair, trying to tame the blue tips of it so they all point in the same direction.

How are things with José? you ask, just to ask.

It's, you know. Cindy looks down. He can be exhausting.

Exhausting how?

You hope that your curiosity seems like it's just a gesture of friendship.

Instead of answering, Cindy says: We should start an all-girl punk band. We could be like Sleater-Kinney, or The Devotchkas.

Or Bikini Kill, you say.

Just think how much we could get done if we didn't have to deal with dudes, Cindy says. If we didn't have to manage their egos, tell them how good they're doing all the time.

You laugh, because it's true. The scene is overrun with dudes—dudes who want you to play drums in their dude-bands, dudes who try to feel you up in the mosh pit, dudes who offer you a show and then act offended when you don't want to date them. Dudes who say, come on back to my place so you can check out my vinyl collection.

That'd be amazing, honestly, you say.

Really? Cindy's smile invites you into the radius of her glow. This is just between you and me, obviously, she says. We could do it after we put this record out.

Hell yeah, you say. You smile back, all teeth, and you think about Cindy—about how unfair it is for a person so good-looking to also be sweet and smart. You wonder if you'd think the same thing about a man.

After breakfast, you drive to a pond Muffin mentioned: Puffer's Pond. (No surprises there, Cindy says.) You park the van beside a dumpster and go down the mulch path to the water. Cindy changes into a black one-piece bathing suit. She lends you her shorts and t-shirt to swim in, since you forgot to pack a suit. It's past noon, and the sun is streaming down on a few families, a few college kids smoking along the edges of the dirty beach. The pond is ringed with pines, and the still surface reflects them back, a perfect mirror. On the far edge, where the reflection meets the trees themselves, there's a floating dock, unoccupied.

Cindy charges into the water, whooping. She comes up sputtering, calls out to you. I'll race you to the dock!

You wade in, feel the water climb your legs. Cindy is already swimming out towards the center of the pond. You dive into the water's slimy warmth and start to swim. Out, out, out—the

lessons you did as a girl come back into your muscles, your arms wheel through the air. The sun on your limbs, the bass lines from yesterday still thrumming in your head. As you turn your head to breathe, somewhere in the dead center of the lake, you glimpse Cindy pulling herself out of the water, the electric blue of her hair dulling the blue of the pond. You think about how all of this—the band, the record, the fact that you’re here in the center of the lake—is because of Cindy. It’s all hers, at the end of the day. When you reach the dock, the two of you lie on the hot wood, baking the water off, staring up at the cloudless sky. Cindy takes your hand, tells you she loves you. She tells you she’s glad you’re here.

## 9.

On the drive back, you all listen to the unmixed tracks in reverent silence. It’s a good record; even *you* realize it.

Wow, Billy says, if we don’t fuck this up, maybe I can move out of that shithole in Lowell.

Back in Boston, you throw yourselves into booking. You play all over town, wherever they’ll have you. Fall comes around, and you do apple cider festivals, carpentry meet-ups, two weeks’ worth of basement Halloween parties in Allston and Somerville. Billy finds somebody to take press photos, so you all make serious artist faces in front of a brick wall. You do the cover design yourself, a single firework blowing up against a black sky. After months of trying, José finally reaches the booker at TT the Bear’s, and you land a Friday night in April for the release show. Cindy even convinces Suzy to have the Dipshits open it. It’s all happening.

Your mother calls to ask when you’re going back to grad school, and the thought seems ridiculous. You tell her it’s not like finishing your dissertation on Gustave Flaubert would really be a better financial move, anyways.

Things get serious. It's hard to tell what's going on with José and Cindy; they keep it hush-hush for the band's sake. Sometimes, she's there at his place when you show up for Saturday practice. Sometimes, she's an hour late, and it seems like they haven't seen each other in days. Whenever the band gets together, you just talk about the Plan and the Dream.

Before the release show, you buy some white paint and write 'The Late Greats' on a huge black sheet. On the night of the gig, you get to TT's early and hang it up behind the drum kit. Cindy shows up with a basket full of clothes she's picked out at Salvation Army and assigns everyone their outfit for the night—yours is a Corporate Olympics 1993 t-shirt and a tight black skirt. Cindy's got the usual look—leather jacket, Doc Martens, hair spiked, a little eyeliner. José wears a black t-shirt, but this one is a v-neck. Billy shows up an hour late and red-eyed, but nobody cares. He plays better stoned.

The show sells out, shocking all of you. It seems like everyone you've ever met is there—the college friends you've been blowing off, the boys who come into the shoe shop, Muffin and his band. José's mother is there, and she kisses you on both cheeks. Even Cindy's father, who's an eye surgeon, is there in the back row in his button-down, smiling proudly up at the stage. The sense of validation is immense and immediate—you play the opening drum fill in "Roman Candle," and two hundred people go nuts. The boundary between the music in your head and the music in the world has ceased to exist.

After the show, you all head to an after party with Muffin's friends. It's at some rehearsal space in Somerville, and it's packed. Marcus Whitmore, who runs the local scene rag, tells you he wants to do a two-page feature on the Late Greats. Suzy Dipshit loves your bangs. Cindy's nowhere to be seen, and Billy seems to have passed out in one of the other rooms. You want to find José, to share the euphoria you feel with someone.



When you finally find him, smoking out on the fire escape, he turns to face you, and it's clear that you're the one he wants to see. He's in his shirtsleeves, shivering a little bit, and you can see the hairs on his strong forearms standing up. You'll remember that, later.

Do you remember the last time at TT's? he says.

The Dipshits show?

Yeah, he says. The night we moshed.

You do remember that. Of course you do.

Things have gotten so complicated, José says.

So you kiss him, and you both fall into the Dream.

## 10.

You do what you can. You steal kisses in the van when Cindy and Billy are getting snacks at the gas station. You steal kisses in the alley behind the venue, in the green room just before you go on. José comes by the shoe shop when you get off work, and you go for walks along the Charles. You sit on the benches, arms around each other, looking around constantly to make sure there's nobody coming. When Cindy goes up to Portland for a couple days in June, José spends the whole weekend at your apartment. Neither of you go outside of lift the blinds. The sex is new, urgent, stolen. You talk about starting a new band together sometimes, just the two of you. Maybe a folk duo.

Cindy comes back. You watch her wipe the crumbs off the collar of José's t-shirt. You watch her lace her elegant fingers through his, put her head on his shoulder. She brings new songs to practice, and they're about love. They're about wanting a lover who doesn't make himself available. She calls you up sometimes, and you go to the movies together, just the two of you. You sit in the theater, staring at a car-chase on-screen, and feel ashamed. She's been nothing but good to you. All of this is because of her.

But then again, you start to notice little things about Cindy you didn't notice before. Her speaking voice is high, nasal, so unlike her singing voice. She accepts the world's admiration as a natural fact, like the weather. The moment the attention shifts away from her, she starts sulking. When you and José talk about playing another gig with Suzy, for example, she says, the Dipshits aren't even that good. She's right, but you still get annoyed.

Tension creeps into practice: José snaps at Cindy when she misses a note. Billy senses the bad vibes and checks out. He starts showing up late and leaving early, claiming gigs. He smokes even more than he did before. Everybody has scheduling conflicts all of a sudden, and you can't find another time to record. Some nights, José comes to you crying. I'm ruining everything, he says. I'm ruining all our lives. You ask José why he won't leave her, and he says: the band.

## 11.

Winter comes around again, and the glow has worn off. José's out back smoking again. Billy says he needs to devote more time his other bands. Cindy's working doubles Monday through Friday. You get fired from the shoe store because you don't know shit about shoes. You think about going back to school, about how safe the first twenty-three years of your life felt in comparison to the last one. Old men come up to you at Mickey's on weeknights, say they used to play in bands. They are thin, white, canyon-cheeked. Their hair is either very long or completely gone. They've all played in bands; they've all seen the Grateful Dead more times than they can count. You're one of us, they seem to say, join the club.

You start having thoughts like, *think of everything that's been given to you. Or: Art does nothing for the world, you self-obsessed little shit. Or: Your mother always thought you'd be a speechwriter. Or even: Think of what your grandparents went through to come to this country so you could have a better life; they sacrificed everything and worked shit jobs their whole lives, and what are you doing with that incalculably precious gift you self-obsessed*

*little turd you're selling shoes and playing the drums with your little self-obsessed friends while the country crumbles and your parents get older and your future passes you by.*

José overdraws his checking account trying to get a slice of pizza. The Dipshits get signed to a label, and you can't believe it, because they were never that good. You think about a cleaner life, about early mornings and exercise and financial solvency, about getting a coffee machine. You and José talk about getting out of Boston. New York, José says, Los Angeles, Montreal, and London. But he still won't come see you on weeknights. Actually, he won't come see you unless Cindy's out of the state. When she looks at him, some nights on stage, you realize none of this is her fault. You realize she doesn't deserve this pain. You understand at last that José is the only one who is winning—just one more boy living out the fantasy that was sold to him.

You begin to understand where this will end.

## 12.

Cindy thinks it's weird you want to meet for a walk, since it's December and the city's covered in ice, but she says, hey, sure. You meet her out in front of Mickey's and go for a walk through the District. As you pass the locked door of TT's, the posters for your own shows in the windows of cafes, you tell her what you've done. Part of you wants her to hit you, like in the movies. Part of you wants her to scream. But Cindy doesn't even cry. She just looks at you and says, Laura, I thought you'd be a better friend. She looks you in the face, so you can see how strong she's always been, how she will eventually forget all of you. You can see that the band is already over in her mind, and you feel sorry for everyone. As you watch her walk away through the snow, you try to trace this all back to its root—this whole passage of your life. You go way back, to before you met José at the open mic, to before the Plan, the Story, or the Dream.

### 13.

By the time you take your headphones out and open your eyes, the sun is long gone. Your mother's apartment is cool and quiet, and you're breathing hard in the new dark. Still sweating, still ten years old. The sounds of the street drift in through the window: neighbors chatting on the corner, engines revved and released like wind-up toys. You're far away; still inside the fading glow of your sister's record. While the music was playing, a door had been open. There had been a way of accessing infinity, a way of dodging time. Where is it now? You sit up dazed inside a living room that is only a living room. Familiar green chair, familiar painting of a sailboat, familiar stain on the coffee table beside the almond bowl. The clock is moving again. It's been moving again. The sun is gone. Your mother will be home soon.

The thought that life is only this, and not that other, richer place, is too horrible to entertain. So you go back into your sister's room, slip another CD off the shelf, return to the couch. As the machine whirs to life and the first guitars start their chiming against your eardrums, you close your eyes and wonder: Is it possible to feel this way forever?

**II.**  
**HOLIDAYS**  
**(Section One of Two)**

## 1. Christmas Eve

When I came home for the holidays, it was with a deep and abiding urge to confess. I knew exactly what I needed to say: I had been trying to be a good person for many years, according to the notions of goodness I'd received from various authority figures, peers, and media-relaying electronic devices, but it just wasn't working out. Every time I tried to be good, somebody got hurt, or I hurt the world. Also, I'd fallen out of love with my girlfriend, Maxine, to whom I had already promised both my undying love and my hand, antiquated and problematic though Maxine and I both agreed the institution was, in marriage.

I came home on the Greyhound—or rather, on several different Greyhounds, all the way from Nashville to Boston. This was not the fastest way to get home, but it was the cheapest. During the last leg of the two-day journey, it started snowing heavily. I sat near the front of the bus beside a man named Jacob who'd just gotten out of prison. He spent most of the three-hour trip telling me about the things he was planning to become now that he was out: a gym rat, a debt-free individual, a father of four, a National Park Ranger. If it weren't for that stupid cop who tricked me, he said, I'd already be all of those things. If it makes you feel any better, I said, you could have gone the opposite route. It wouldn't have made a difference. You could have done everything by the book your whole life, and you'd probably *still* not be the exact person you wanted to be. Jacob frowned. Real reassuring, guy, he said. He turned back to the blurry, whitening hills of central Connecticut and lowered the brim of his Red Sox cap over his heavy-lidded eyes.

We arrived on a Friday night—the night, as it happened, before Christmas Eve. I loaded my bags and guitar out of the bus's cargo hold, and went out onto the street. As usual, my sister Leanna was late picking me up, but I didn't mind. It was nice to be back on that particular stretch of

pavement outside South Station, where I'd waited for her so many times before, nice to be standing again in the quickening snow after two winters in the South. The neon lights of Chinatown fractured and pooled on the slushy pavement, lovely and exotic to me now in a way they'd never been before. I took off my gloves and let the snowflakes land on my fingers.

In what seemed like no time at all, Leanna's Camry pulled up along the curb. She leaped out of the driver's seat, wrapped her puffy-jacketed arms around me, and said: "Look at you, you're alive."

"Last time I checked," I said.

It had been nearly two years since I'd seen my sister, and I was struck, as she drove, by how much I'd missed her mannerisms—the way she drummed her fingers on the wheel, her closed-lip smile, her regional affinity for the word *mad* as a quantifier. There were mad new developments downtown, she said, and she was mad tired from her shift at the brewery. She'd shaved the left side of her head in the style that was popular that winter, so that her fine blond hair fell in an asymmetrical swoop over the sleek plain of her scalp, lending her an air of cyborg grace. She looked like she had recently returned from the future, bearing a trove of obscure, hip knowledge—which was the idea.

My issue with goodness, I told her after the usual small talk, was not just the usual nice-guys-finish-last boo-hoo thing. Lately, I'd begun to associate the very idea of being a good person with the most dangerous and insidious kind of evil—with *complicity* (which was one of Maxine's favorite words, as commonplace in our household as, say, the word *dinner*). Put another way, I'd begun to think that being good in America meant only that one was an untroublesome, tranquil subject of capitalism and empire, the sort of person who did not hinder, whether by stealing or injuring or just being a nag about recycling, anyone else's healthy enjoyment of the fruits of capitalism and empire. It meant being the kind of person who knew fossil fuels were likely to make the Earth uninhabitable

within a century, but would never dare ruin Thanksgiving dinner by fighting with Aunt Susan about either of her Hummers. In short, I told Leanna as she cut across three lanes of traffic towards the Cambridge exit, I didn't think that the kind of person I'd been raised to be—by a family of comfortable cloistered liberals, in a college town full of same, during a period when comfortable cloistered liberals rarely questioned the moral righteousness of comfortable cloistered liberalism—seemed like a useful kind of person to be anymore, given the current local, national, and global scenarios.

“Wow,” Leanna said. “Nice to see you too.”

We were back in the old neighborhood now, and every restaurant, ATM, and drugstore glowed before me in the soft light of memory. A shuttered burrito truck made me think of an argument I'd had with my first friend. A Dunkin Donuts conjured the earliest hangovers of my adolescence.

Leanna flicked the wipers on. “So how's music?”

I was momentarily unsure what she was talking about. I had nearly forgotten that there were still people who thought of me as a musician, or at least a music teacher. The truth was that since the election, my attachment to music had shaken loose from my identity, and I hadn't touched my guitar in months. But I didn't feel like explaining that to Leanna, so I said it was going fine; I was still playing with the band, and we were planning, believe it or not, a tour.

“Nice,” she said, stifling a yawn.

We parked under the snow-heavy branches of the old elm tree and went into our mother's house. The door opened out into the dining room, which was just as I remembered it. The chairs were in the same places, the vase by the bay window was still full of dirty water, and the pile of *New Yorker* issues on the table had only grown taller. In the dim light of the chandelier, I saw the orange and yellow mazes on my mother's old tablecloth, a souvenir from her years in India. The only



novelty was a preposterously large Christmas tree that stood in the nook—an homage, perhaps, to the massive Christmas trees my dad used to buy each December, back when he lived with us. Maybe, since all three of us were home for once, my mother intended the tree to invoke the spirit of those early, joyful Christmases, when we sat around for hours, basking in the glow of our precious new stuff. I half expected my father to slide out from under the tree, dust the needles off his jeans, and shake my hand.

When I expressed this sense of *déjà vu* to Leanna, she nodded. In her experience, she said, time got blurry around the holidays, as we hurtled through the annual round of rituals towards the end of one year and the beginning of the next. These markers were arbitrary, and yet they always produce a certain sense of circularity: the sordid old year, the shining new one. It was kind of reassuring, Leanna said. But she couldn't shake the feeling that all of it—the calendar, the rituals, the hope the new year promised—had been made up by someone, at some point, and possibly to sell her something.

“Deep stuff,” said a voice from behind us.

My younger brother, Billy, was leaning on the doorframe. He wearing an old Christmas sweater with a purple reindeer on it, puffing on a tiny black vape, and smirking in precisely the same way he'd smirked as a boy when he beat me at *Mortal Kombat*. His hair, which had already reached chin-length last time I saw him, tumbled now in a cascade of brown curls past his shoulders. I went to him, embraced him, and asked how the hell he was.

He shrugged and said, “Living.”

“Billy's working on a new movie,” Leanna said. “It's disgusting.”

The kitchen had been redone in my absence, but the usual photographs still sat beneath their magnets on the fridge—Billy and I frowning at each other at a mini-golf course, Leanna grinning after a slam poetry competition, my mother in the flowing paisley dress she wore so often when we were children. These photos had been up for nearly eight years. Back then, they were the only pictures we had that didn't include our father, and nobody had bothered to put up any new ones since.

In the fridge I found these items: a half-finished slice of pizza, a pack of turkey bacon, a gallon of milk, a single ear of corn, and a twelve-pack of Harpoon IPA. The ear of corn was going white at the end. I held my breath as I reached past to retrieve three of the beers. While we drank them, Billy told us about the new short movie he was making with his friend José. They'd been starting and abandoning scripts since the eighth grade, but this one, Billy said, was going to be their breakout hit. He spoke with evident pride, waving his bony hands about with an enthusiasm he'd previously reserved for videogames and the band Sublime. Six months ago, he said, he and José had a revelation: Plenty of art was being made about technology, but none of it depicted in unflinching detail the ways we actually used our devices. Sure, there were dozens of films and TV shows that satisfied audiences' appetite for the dystopian, but where was the movie that could represent our compulsions as they actually were? It had dawned on them that global cinema was ripe for a second wave of realism—a neorealism, Billy said, for the internet era.

"Billy's been learning some new words," Leanna said

Billy ignored her and went on. After he and José had their revelation, they'd spent the last half-year writing a ten-minute film in which the central character, a young man in his late twenties, checks Facebook to see if anything of emotional, social, or political import has occurred, and then, finding nothing, checks Instagram—and then Facebook again, and then Snapchat, and then Instagram a second time, before turning back to Facebook. And *then*, Billy said, puffing excitedly on

his Juul, the protagonist gets disgusted with himself, swears he'll never use an app again, and goes into the kitchen to make himself an Italian sandwich. But he discovers he can't remember which cold cuts go in an Italian sandwich, whether it's prosciutto or salami or what, so he pulls out his phone to check the recipe. Ten minutes later, he's looking at childhood photos of someone he met at a party once in the eleventh grade, and the baguette is sitting half-cut on the counter. He can't even remember what he was meaning to look up in the first place, so he takes a nap. That's how it ends.

“Wow,” I said. “Sounds like you're really on to something.”

“I know,” he said, shaking his head. “It's wild.”

He produced an old Altoid's can from the pocket of his bomber jacket and popped it open to reveal several well-rolled joints. Normally, I would have refused: as I saw it, Billy had been stoned since the mid-aughts, and Leanna—his twin, his keeper—had been enabling him the whole time. This pattern, I'd long believed, had something to do with why my two adult siblings were still living with my mother. But after years of pretending to be the responsible one, I was beginning to wonder if my brother's preferred response to the complexity of the world might be the only rational, lucid one. Maybe he was actually a modern-day monk, a floppy-haired Thoreau, a neo-transcendental, couch-bound prophet who would only be understood years after his death, when everything was even more obviously fucked than it was now. When he held the joint out and lifted his eyebrows, I reached my hand out, cursed softly, and took it between my thumb and forefinger.

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We shut ourselves in the TV room so we wouldn't wake our mother, just as we'd done countless times when we were kids. The TV was still mounted on a stack of my father's old architecture textbooks, and his long white drafting table sat in the corner of the room. The room's elegant touches—the marble mantelpiece, the real fireplace, the leather chairs our parents had bought in the

'90s—were coated in a thin layer of dust that gave the impression they'd outlived their use, and that those who resided in the house had long since given up on the vanity of order. In my absence, I realized, my mother had ceded the house's first floor to my siblings, and my siblings had ceded it, in turn, to the forces of entropy.

As the air grew hazy with smoke, I thought of voicing these thoughts aloud. Perhaps, with the help of the CBD or the THC or whatever, we could finally have a real conversation about our lives and what had become of them. We could acknowledge that our mother had retreated from the world, and that our father had left us without an explanation. We could decide to demand an apology from him. Billy would decide to stop smoking so much and apply for graphic design jobs, and Leanna would recommit to her poetry, and I would finally figure out how to be a decent human being.

But instead, we got stoned and watched an Indonesian action movie that was famous for its stylized brutality. In the film, the leader of a Jakarta gang revolted against his fellow gang members in order to save a young girl's life, thus incurring the wrath of the gang's higher-ups and obligating the protagonist to protect the child by killing thousands of men. Nameless men were speared through the back by meat hooks and choked to death with shoelaces; they were hurled from the tops of skyscrapers onto the steeples of churches and beaten bare-knuckle into abject silence. Children cried while their fathers were skewered and shot in the eyes and broken in two by careening Mack trucks. Ooh, we said, and aah, and oh shit. All that murder energized us for a while, but gradually we became numb to it and drifted, one by one, off to sleep.

\*

When I came downstairs the next morning, my mother was on the couch, watching the news in her bathrobe. Her pale blonde hair, so like Leanna's, was tied back in a prim bun, and she looked

thinner than she had last winter, when she came to visit Maxine and me in Nashville. She looked up at me as though I were a mildly interesting cloud formation and said, “Oh darling, you’ve arrived.”

“Guess so,” I said.

She gestured with the remote control in the direction of the kitchen. “Well, do you want some cereal or something?”

While my mother poured us Kix and coffee, I cleared old *New Yorkers* off the table to make room for us to sit. It was quiet in the house, and Leanna and Billy were out. On the bus, I’d longed to talk to my mother, to tell her everything, but now I couldn’t remember what I’d wanted to say. My mind was submerged in goo. What on earth had we talked about, all those years that I lived here, all those nights when she drove me home from school?

“Thanks for the Kix,” I said at last.

“I made them myself,” my mother said, settling into the seat across from mine.

I asked her about her job at the university, and she said that little had changed, except that the Dean of Marine Biology had become the Dean of Regular Biology, which was creating administrative headaches for the professors. She asked about my teaching. I said that it had been going well, although if she remembered, last May, I’d taken an indefinite leave of absence from the private middle school I’d been working at, after an unpleasant dispute with one of the administrators. This administrator, I reminded my mother, said I was letting my personal political beliefs—I did the air quotes—spill out into the public sphere. A music classroom, he’d argued in front of a committee of my fanciest colleagues, was no place for a discussion of the pros and cons of a border wall, or any other non-musical topic, including—and here he’d looked at me very pointedly—the notion of reparations for slavery. What do reparations have to do with music? I rose from my seat so quickly that I spilled my coffee all over the copy of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* I’d brought to the meeting. Plenty, actually, I’d replied. Take, for instance, the robbery of

the formal elements of American popular music from black Americans by white Americans, I said, and the repackaging of those formal elements to appeal to white audiences, and the intentional exclusion, in many notable and publicized cases, of the original black songwriters and studio musicians from royalty schemes that might have earned them millions of dollars, which still—I'd shouted then, and nearly shouted at my mother now—wouldn't have come close to addressing the original injustice of the theft. Shock had rippled across my colleagues faces. People went *hmm* and *interesting*. Even my coworker Davis, the only person of color on the faculty, coughed audibly and looked away. The principal leaned her fingers together to make a little power-teepee. But why do the children need to know all that, she'd said, before they've even learned how to play "Three Blind Mice" on the piano? That teepee had marked the end of the meeting, more or less. For the time being, as I'd told my mother twice before, I was working mornings at a bistro that sold seventeen different kinds of savory crepe.

"It's all coming back to me," my mother said. She yawned and refilled my coffee cup. "If you'll forgive me for saying this, it seems like your generation needs to learn to keep its head down."

"That's exactly what we don't need to do," I said.

"I guess what bothers me," she said, "is the way in which all this save-the-world talk seems like a performance to me—a performance, I guess, of virtue. I mean, what good is a white boy yelling in a classroom about reparations?"

"Well, it's much better than a white boy never saying anything about it at all."

She stirred a second spoonful of sugar into her coffee. "And what does Maxine think about all this?"

"Maxine supports me completely. She's glad I left that awful school behind."

But this was true: on the one hand, it was Maxine who had originally led me to consider using my position of influence as a teacher to nudge future generations towards a brighter future.

On the other hand, Maxine was perhaps a little tired of having to support us almost single-handedly on freelance newsletter-writing jobs and the stipend from her Ph.D. program. Not long before I left for Boston, she'd come home from campus one Monday, visibly exhausted, and asked me when I was going to look for a new teaching job. I told her I was still recovering from the trauma of my last experience, and I'd look again come spring. She'd said okay, but it hadn't sounded one hundred percent okay—maybe seventy.

“Lately,” I told my mother, before I could stop myself, “I’ve actually been questioning my relationship with Maxine.

“Why would you do that?” My mother stared at me, blinking. “She’s the only one of any of us that has any sense.”

I tried to explain that I wasn't sure the life I led with Maxine was the kind of life I wanted to lead forever. Sometimes visions of other lives came over me suddenly. I would be standing in the grocery, or eating a turkey sandwich, when the fantasies ambushed me. They were various in shape and detail—a ramshackle house in Western Massachusetts with a colorful garden, a bicycle ride through the wineries of Northern California at dusk, a long porch where I sat reading with a lover—but the common denominator in these fantasies was that, whether I was pulling a fistful of radishes out of the soil or drifting wine-drunk through the dry Napa heat, it was never Maxine at my side. Sometimes it was Q, a coworker from the crêperie who made beautiful sculptures, but before Q there had been others: women, men. My fantasies were rarely sexual, I assured my mother; instead, they were about intimacy, compatibility—and that made them feel all the more like a betrayal of my relationship. It would be easier, I said, if they were just about sex.

My mother actually yawned. “All of us have our fantasies, Mick,” she said. “You must be aware that your father did, since he literally *did* move to Western Massachusetts, into a house with a little garden, with a woman who—you’ll note—was not me.”

“Oh, Ma. I wasn’t thinking.”

My mother cleared the plates. “I have this friend from my yoga class, Marguerite, who’s a marriage counselor. She says these sorts of fantasies—which don’t diminish as we age, but simply morph into new forms, like bacteria evolving to remain resistant—are actually necessary defense mechanisms that protect our psyches from the full reality of the world, a reality which, according to Marguerite, none of us would otherwise be able to tolerate. And so the only thing to do is live with the fantasies, accept that they’re healthy, and get on with our lives. Or so Marguerite says. I don’t know if she’s right, but she *is* the only person in our class who can stand on her head without using the wall.”

“So you’re saying—or this Marguerite lady is saying—that I should accept my lot and live with it?” I said.

My mother ran a hand through her hair. “I’m saying, honey,” she said, “that you work part-time at a crepe shop, and you’re twenty-seven, and you should think carefully about your options.”

I fumed—what about Billy’s stupid films? What about Leanna’s appeasement of Billy and his stupid films, what about my mother herself, who had slipped into herself after the divorce and left the rest of us to fend for ourselves? But before I could say something hurtful, her face softened, as if she’d suddenly remembered her own vulnerabilities.

“Look, I didn’t mean that, Mick. What I’m saying is: yes, accepting your lot would be one time-tested option. I know lots of people who’ve done it, and most of them are okay, most of the time.” She dumped the remaining Kix from her bowl into the trash. “Of course, you could just as easily split up. Most of the people who split up are okay, too, after a while.”

I thought about the life Maxine and I had built together over four years, and found it hard to imagine that we’d ever be okay.



“You know,” my mother said, handing me a terracotta bowl to dry, “it probably *will* hurt more than you expect. Marguerite says human beings are terrible at predicting or preparing for their own loneliness.”

With that, she dried her hands with a dish towel and went back into the living room.

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My mother and I watched a rerun of the news in silence. A Harvard dropout had invented an app-based service that allowed you to do your laundry without leaving your bed. Drones dropped firebombs on a small Iraqi city whose name I tried to internalize and then forgot moments later. Certain foods known as superfoods were good for your health. Coffee, which had been good for your health last week, was now bad for your health again. We were still at war. A new golf resort had opened where the community park used to be, on the crest of the hill I used to sled down as a boy. A Stanford dropout had invented an app that could translate any song you wanted into any language you pleased, for only fifty dollars a pop. In a thirty-second segment, experts estimated that certain populous and famous cities would be underwater in forty years. McDonald’s was planning offer a lobster roll next summer. Experts—five of them, white and male—debated whether the sexual assault crisis on college campuses was real, and determined that it was all very complicated. Three talking heads discussed the border wall over coffee. Vermont was trying to secede again. The potentially-terrorist-funded activist coalition known as SATURDAY was planning a march on Washington for New Year’s Day, and rumors had spread that they were planning to paint the White House pink, occupy the National Mall, and maybe plant a bomb or two. Sub-freezing temps were expected for the rest of the week. Had we tried the new Maple Bacon Walnut Donut at Dunkin’?

“Shit,” my mom said, “I forgot to buy presents for the twins.”

“Me too,” I said, though I’d been planning to buy presents at the last minute all along.

So we drove to Target.

The streets were sprinkled with chunks of blue salt, and children in bright puffy coats hurled their bodies like rag dolls into drifts of fresh snow, shrieking with delight. Every station on the radio was playing Christmas songs; no matter how many times my mother jabbed at the “seek” button, we could not escape the polyphonic cheer. Even on the college stations, we found a sludge-metal version of “Jingle Bells,” a rendition of “Holy Night” by a choir of Indonesian monks. In the lobby of the Target, I nearly walked into a life-sized chocolate statue of Santa Claus. The cocoa Saint Nick was standing in the middle of the lobby, marked only by a peppermint-striped sign that read: HO HO HO! PLEASE NO TOUCHING OR EATING.

My mother sighed. “Why do we keep doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“Christmas,” she said. “None of us even believe in Jesus.”

I reminded my mother that she’d just bought a tree the size of a small house.

“The tree is the only part I like,” she said. “It actually symbolizes something.”

“It symbolizes capitalism, you mean?”

“No, Mick. Why does it always have to be about capitalism? I’m talking about tradition. I’m talking about people looking at the same thing, year after year, even if it’s just a bunch of chintzy lights strangling a pine tree. It’s *nice*, you know? Things should be nice sometimes.”

We wandered around the Target, staring at gadgets. “Do you think your brother needs a Roomba?” my mother asked me. “Do you think *I* need a Roomba? How are you and Maxine doing, Roomba-wise?”

I said that Maxine thought gifts were a sinister tool of the free market. Maxine was in Philly for the holidays, visiting her family.

After a brief search, we settled on a new camera lens for Billy, and a Bluetooth speaker for Leanna. We wandered off into the facial care aisle and emerged several minutes later, as if from a dream, with several moisturizers neither of us needed.

“Okay, now go away for a second,” my mother said.

“Huh?”

“So I can get something for you, dummy. I’ll meet you at the car in ten.”

I wandered into Scarves and Wraps in search of a gift for my mother. While I was trying to remember if my mother even wore scarves, Maxine started texting me. It was not her style to send a short message; when she texted at all, she texted long. She’d been nervous all week about meeting up with one of her high school friends, Yolanda, whose overwrought Montauk wedding we’d attended the summer before.

so yolanda & i just had coffee in this bougie café off rittenhouse where all the lattes have special names like the winston and the buckminster mcfullerton or whatever, & she’s actually changed a lot,

though obviously not that much, since she still picked that particular café & showed up wearing strictly anthropologie & sent her special latte back because she didn’t like the foam art, but still

she’s different. i mean, she still works out 29/7 & takes her corgie-shih-tzu mix to those dog competitions, but she’s also somehow an activist now. all she wanted to talk about was how she’s

one of the organizers for SATURDAY in philly & how i should consider joining, because they're going to make history next week in DC. it's weird, yolanda still tells oil companies how to update

their sales software for a living, but now she's somehow part of a revolutionary movement. that's the weird thing about america—well one of the weird things—we kind of compartmentalize

our careers & our morals, so you can be, like, a staunch environmental-reasons vegetarian who also works for delta, or a philanthropist who literally makes the money he donates to poor people by

stealing it from other poor people. anyways, yolanda's all about this march now, & while she was telling me about it, i started feeling really bad about myself, because usually yolanda's the one

who's like, oh, there's poverty? & I'm the one who's like YES BITCH WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN? but all of a sudden activism is chic and she gets to be the chic one AND the one who

cares about the world. i felt like i was back in high school & we were still competing at track practice. like, maybe i really need to re-evaluate my own commitment to activism, because how is

YOLANDA more involved than me now? i'm probably just being petty, i'm sorry, but i just needed to vent to someone about this before i go home & have to help my mom bake pies all night :(

anyway how's boston? xx

Maxine and I had an understanding: if she sent me this many texts, I could call her back. When she picked up, I heard city sounds through the receiver. A car honked, the wind rustled past.

“Hey boo,” I said, “do you remember if my mom likes scarves?”

“You’re asking me if Denise likes scarves?” Maxine sounded distracted. “Wait, where are you?”

“I’m at Target. Thinking about buying her one.”

She exhaled audibly. “Maybe don’t buy a Target scarf for the woman who raised you. What about an extremely fancy soap? Everybody likes an extremely fancy soap.”

“You’re so wise,” The Philly wind picked up, rasping its way across the cellular network.

“That’s weird about Yolanda.”

“Not that weird, though,” Maxine said. “Most revolutions have been led by children of the bourgeoisie. Think France, think China, think Cuba. It’s a resources and education thing. Listen, I’m at the subway now, so I’m going to go. I’ll text you later, love.”

“Okay.” Although I’d longed to leave Maxine less than two days ago, I found that I didn’t want her to go. I wanted to listen a little longer to her tired voice, to hear more about Yolanda and her Corgie-Shih Tzu mix. I started to say that I loved her, but she’d already hung up. Dazed, I left the scarf section and wandered back to the cosmetics aisle in search of soap.

The family Christmas Eve tradition was simple: we all ate delivery Chinese together, and then my mother went upstairs to watch her shows while Leanna, Billy, and I lingered around the dining room table and got obliterated. This year's variations: China Delight was out of Szechuan Beef, so we ordered extra General Gao's Chicken. Billy sat in my father's old seat at the head of the table, in a ripped hoodie that said ALL-STATE BOWLING CHAMPIONS 1999. His eyes were redder than the chicken. Leanna told the whole family I was going on tour, and I had to pretend it was true by nodding a lot and seeming excited to spend time in a van. My mother gave a toast to "all her artist children." Billy leaned back in his chair and watched from an interplanetary distance while the rest of us discussed the various political crises of the moment. Leanna was thinking about joining the SATURDAY march, and she hoped they really would bring a bomb for the president. Mom pretended to be offended and said something about the power of nonviolent protest. Billy said, what a stupid fucking name for a march. He tipped so far back in his chair he almost fell over. After we had ice cream, as tradition dictated, Mom announced that it was time for her to go watch CSI. There was a nice bottle of Cabernet in the cabinet, she said, and we knew where to find the whiskey.

Billy poured Leanna and I shots of the whiskey and suggested a toast to family. It was impossible to tell if he was being sarcastic. It also didn't matter. We took the shots. Leanna made a face and said, "Did you read about those drones that bombed that city?"

Billy shrugged and pulled a joint out of his shirt pocket. "To be alive today is to be always responding to other people's pain," he said sagely. "The internet makes it feel like the whole planet is part of our community, that we're responsible for everyone's pain just because we've heard of it. But that's not a reasonable outlook."

"Wow." Leanna sneered at him. "You're so wise."

Billy lit the joint. “Think about it,” he said. “Three hundred years ago, people didn’t even know what kind of crazy shit was going on in the next town over, let alone four hundred miles away. Human beings didn’t evolve to understand groups larger than a hundred people, but here we are.”

“When did you become a libertarian?” Leanna said.

“I’m just saying stuff that’s true,” Billy said. He popped a fortune cookie out of its plastic sheath and ate it. I envied my siblings’ closeness, their ability to move from aggravation back to normality, and I felt separate from them. I wasn’t close with anybody like that except for Maxine.

“Maxine thinks I should go see a shrink,” I said, out of nowhere.

“A shrink?” Billy said.

“Yeah. But I don’t think I’m depressed,” I said. “I think I’m having the problem you’re describing, Billy—just a normal, neurotypical reaction to the current global situation.”

“Maybe,” Billy said, leering at me over his joint. “Or maybe you’re just afraid to go to the doctor because you don’t want to find out you’re actually depressed. Then you’d always have to think of yourself, for the rest of your life, as a *depressive*.”

Leanna stood up. “I don’t think making light of all this is helping any of us,” she said.

“Depression is a disease, Billy. Also, do you have to smoke that in here?”

“Just think,” Billy said. “if Mick found out he was depressed, that’d be the whole family! We’d attain one-hundred-percent medication!”

“Basically, what Mick’s doing with this no-shrinks thing, what you’re *encouraging* him to do,” she she said, “is ruling out the possibility of ever feeling better. You both think fatalism’s cool, but it’s not. It’s not even *interesting*.”

We did another round of shots. The indistinct chatter of mom’s shows drifted down the stairs and filled the kitchen.

“You know,” Leanna said, “I think whiskey was the first drink I ever drank. Do you remember that party, Billy? We were fourteen, I think.”

“Fifteen,” Billy said.

“Whatever. Remember, we rode the subway all the way out into the suburbs, to Newton I think, to go to somebody’s cousin’s friend’s house? It was a huge pain in the ass to get out there, but we were stoked, because José had said there was going to be alcohol, and we’d heard good things about alcohol. Mick, this random guy’s house was bigger than any house I’d ever been in before. We had to go through like sixteen rooms filled with spooky African masks and austere-ass chairs just to get to the party. Everybody was upstairs in some kind of attic rec room situation. José’s cousin and his friends were on the couches, passing plastic vodka bottles around and kissing one another.”

“You’re making it sound like an orgy,” Billy said.

“Fine, Billy, only some of the people were kissing. But I’d never seen people kissing like *that*, right in front of everybody. It was like, we’re adults now, wow! José brought us one of the vodka bottles, and we sat in the corner of the room like the little nerds we were. I remember having this feeling that the whole world was opening out in front of me, and the future, which had previously seemed so limited and predictable, had suddenly become wonderfully uncertain. It felt like we weren’t actually in this stranger’s big weird house; we were at the top of a rollercoaster, about to plunge down into the rest of our lives, which were going to be beautiful, I was sure of it, surer and surer with each sip: beautiful and full of surprises. We’d finally broken free from our childhoods into the wide pastures of adulthood.”

“*Wide pastures of adulthood.*” Billy did the air quotes.

“Shut up, Billy. The point is, that wonderful feeling of possibility didn’t last. Or it’s still there, but it’s wider, darker. Now, when I drink, I’m reminded that just beneath the surface of my daily life there’s this vast pit of uncertainty, and everything in my life—doing laundry, working at the brewery,



writing poems—feels paper-thin, arbitrary. I start to feel like if I make one misstep, I could fall right through the floor into total lostness.”

Leanna pushed her long brown bangs out of her eyes. “Some nights,” she said, “I feel like I’m a little glowing ship floating on the surface of this vast, unknowable ocean. Everybody’s life, in this metaphor, is a passenger boat with a leak in the hull, without compass or stars, sailing blindly through the dark.” She lowered her glass to the table and stared at it.

“Ugh,” Billy said.

“You really never should’ve given up on poetry,” I said.

“I didn’t,” Leanna said. “You’ve just been in Nashville this whole time.”

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After my siblings had stumbled upstairs to their beds, I went out onto the porch in my t-shirt. It was a clear night, full of the heavy stillness that precedes snowfall. I could see the stars through the light pollution. It was nearly four in the morning, but the light in my mother’s room was on. Her shadow was moving on the wall.

I opened my phone and saw a text from my father. Merry Christmas, Mick, it said. Can we talk? I lit a cigarette, smoked half of it, and decided to call Maxine instead. When the call went through to voicemail, I started talking. I told her that I hoped she had an amazing Christmas, even though we didn’t believe in Christmas, and that I hoped she got some good presents, even though we lived in the heart of late-stage global capitalism and the world was probably going to end this century, and I was sorry that I’d forgotten how to be a decent person. I said I hoped that her mother was happy, and her father was happy, and that she was really, really happy, all day long.

Then I went into the house and lay down under the tree. It seemed like a nice place to lie down for a second. It was warm down there, right above the heat vents, and the Christmas lights made it feel even warmer. The smell was like a whole winter forest. I thought of Maxine, asleep in

her childhood bed in Philly, and wondered what she was dreaming of. There was a time when Maxine used to tell me about all of her dreams—the recurring one where she went sailing with the Dalai Lama but he wouldn't answer her questions, the one where she was trapped in a snow globe, the one where all of our anxieties went away and we floated together down a wide flat river. But at some point I had stopped listening, and at some point she had stopped telling me. I was trying to remember when that happened, why. On the backs of my eyelids, sparks flurried this way and that, forming momentary patterns I couldn't keep track of, and then gradually they began to fade.

I woke to find my mother and sister standing above me, pajama-clad, laughing and pointing their fingers. I was covered in pine needles.

“Well, well,” my mother said. “The prodigal son returns to share his wisdom.”

“It was our fault,” Leanna told her. “We're bad influences.”

“Don't involve me in this.” Billy sidled in from the kitchen, holding a bowl of Kix.

Beneath the branches, I felt comfortable, cradled. More snow had fallen in the early hours of the morning, and the windows were nearly blocked by all that powder. I could hear the fireplace popping through the TV room door. It was just the four of us for a moment, enclosed in a private world. Before my brother extended a hand to pull me out, before my sister wiped the needles off my face, and before I staggered to the bathroom to be sick, all I could think was: this is nice.

## 2. Maxine Summarizes Christmas Over Text

holy shit mick

you would not believe the number of pies my mother wanted us to make this year.

two pecan, two blueberry, one strawberry rhubarb, one gluten-free strawberry-rhubarb for uncle nathaniel, two blackberry, one boysenberry—even though boysenberries are literally fucking blackberries,

they're exactly the same fruit—& one chocolate pie for my little cousin jeremy who apparently doesn't like fruit-based pies, & two kiwi pies. did you even know people made pies out of kiwis? because i

did not, holy shit. that was how i spent the entirety of christmas eve. & then we packed all the pies in the trunk and drove to aunt melanie's, & with the snow and the holiday traffic it took for-fucking-ever,

& by the time we got there the turkey was done & aunt melanie was making jokes how we're always late & how my mom was always late when they were kids. but then my mom was like hey did you see

ALL THESE PIES I BROUGHT FOR YOU, & that shut aunt melanie up real quick. at dinner the stuffing was unreal per usual. uncle nathaniel did his typical spiel about how the country's going to hell. it's funny, because that's exactly the same conversation you and i have all the time, except uncle nathaniel means it in the precise opposite way. this year he was on the topic of immigrants & how

no-one can get a decent job in this g-d country anymore, & my mom was like, respectfully, bro, you work at morgan stanley, i'd say that's a pretty decent job. man, my mom was really on a roll this year.

& all through the meal i kept thinking about yolanda & her latté, about how we're all part of the problem. but knowing that is so useless. seriously, acknowledging your complicity is about as helpful as

being a firefighter who gets to the burning building, turns to her partner, & says: you know something, we lit that. anyway all I can really say with any confidence is that kiwi pie is very, very tasty.

travel safe tomorrow. xx, oo, etc.

### 3. Greyhound

On the morning I left Boston for Nashville, the sky was unnaturally blue, as though someone had turned up the contrast on the world's display. The buildings downtown cast long chiaroscuro shadows across the frozen streets, and the cold penetrated into the bus, where my seatmate and I sat wrapped in our coats. At first, my seatmate, a young woman with short lightning-blue hair and a septum piercing, seemed to be dozing, but as we slid past Sturbridge and Charlton, she pulled out a sketchbook and graphite pencil and began to draw the blur of the highway as it slid by, imitating with long, broad lines and surprising precision the sensation of being in motion. I couldn't help but compliment her work. She accepted the compliment gracefully, with the slightest of nods, and asked if I drew too.

For as long as I could remember, in fact, I had wanted more than anything to make something beautiful. As a boy, that had been my whole plan: I would make something beautiful, and then people would love me for it, and they would see that I was good. First, I told my seatmate, I had tried my hand at painting, since that seemed to be the most Art of all the Arts. During art class in elementary school, while the other students were happily sketching suns, moons, and anatomically bizarre horse-dogs, I insisted on painting dense, non-representational abstract works. My third grade art teacher, Sister Louise, was always saying things like, is that really your idea of a horse? But I didn't aspire to draw horses. Some part of me knew, even then, that Art was meant to be complex, irreducible.

"A horse alone isn't art," I told my seatmate, "but a brown, horse-inspired blur might be."

"I guess that's one way to look at it," my seatmate said. She produced an alluringly fluffy travel pillow and turned away from me towards the window. Something in her manner, in the certainty with which she carried herself, reminded me of Q, my coworker from the crepe shop,

though they looked nothing alike. I felt a small thrill at the thought of seeing Q when I got back, and then a predictable twinge of guilt at the thought of Maxine.

Sister Louise gave way to other concerned Sisters—Maryellen, Margaret—who didn't understand my interest in abstract expressionism. I wanted to be like Mark Rothko, my father's favorite painter, whose big brown paintings made people cry in museums. The multi-layered études in brown I'd labored over throughout the seventh and eighth grades never succeeded in looking like anything other than, well, a bunch of brown paint. What was the difference between my brown and Rothko's brown? I had no idea, but I couldn't handle the negative feedback, so I dropped painting forever and took up the bass guitar.

“And that,” I told my seatmate, “was when I really started to get into trouble.”

It was only when I stopped talking that I realized she was fast asleep. Her face was smushed against the windowpane, and the pillow had slipped down around her neck. Connecticut flew past the windows, a flip-book of steeples and strip malls. From Philly to Baltimore and Baltimore to Richmond, while the land grew greener and signs for pistols and silencers appeared along the highway, she went on snoring in the same quiet way, unmoved by the changing landscape. The sky reddened above the rolling hills of Virginia, and by the time we reached the Blue Ridge Mountains, there was nothing left of the sun but a orange-blueness limning the furthest peaks. We drove past a red billboard that said JESUS CHRIST, with a phone number beneath the name. I wondered what would happen if I called it.

It was strangely soothing to think of all the lives out there, all the ways there were to live. I thought of Leanna, who tried to hold everyone together, to keep the threads of the family from coming unspooled. I thought of my mother, who had found, in work and TV, a way of insulating herself from the painful immediacy of the world. I thought of Billy in his self-imposed daze, trying to turn his alienation into something he could sell. As the bus's movement lulled me, I dissolved

again into the multiplicity of things. Figures came and went from the windows of the housing complexes along the highway and the mansions set further back into the hills—figures who woke early and went to work in factories or offices or fast-food restaurants, who returned home and held each other, who fought at dusk over burned dinner and remembered their childhoods. Figures who dreamed at night of drones flying their Amazon packages across the mountains and the cornfields; who dreamed of palm-tree vacations, long-dead friends, heavenly grace, an end to war; who dreamed of hot sex, Cadillacs, and forgiveness. In some windows, surely, figures believed in the Lord Jesus Christ and His Resurrection; in others, they believed in the saving power of love, or in nothing but themselves. All of us were striving, I thought; each of us was sure that his or her life was the most vivid and important life in the world. In a rush of sentimentality, I sent Maxine a photo of my family—my siblings and I around the Christmas tree, visibly hungover, and my mother grinning bigger than I'd seen her grin in years.

When the bus reached Knoxville, just after midnight, the conductor reminded us that passengers headed to Nashville would have to make a transfer. I left my catatonic neighbor in her seat, collected my bag and guitar, and went into the brightly lit terminal. Men dozed on their packs beside the blue plastic chairs, and dozens of travelers huddled around the charging station, gripping their phones and tablets. In the wide aisle near the vending machines, children were playing soccer, five-on-five, with a miniature pink ball and suitcases for goal posts.

The new bus was supposed to arrive momentarily, so I got in line at the gate. I checked my phone, but Maxine hadn't responded to the photo. While I was wondering whether she was asleep in Nashville or still driving back from Philly, a woman's voice came over the loudspeaker. Attention Nashville-bound travelers, she said, we are experiencing some delays. I couldn't help but admire the phrase—as if delays had no knowable cause, as if they were naturally occurring phenomena that simply had to be endured. A groan caromed around the room, and one of the children kicked the

soccer ball directly at a vending machine, sending a Coca-Cola rolling across the blue and white tiles of the terminal.

“Stand by for further information,” the voice said. I sat down in one of the plastic chairs, between a tall, pale man in a hat that resembled a turkey and a blonde woman in a pajama suit. The man’s long, worn face suggested he might be in his fifties or sixties, and he was wearing a yellow silk shirt adorned with dozens of silver baubles. From the moment I saw him, I could tell he was going to talk to me. He leaned forward to catch my eye, and the baubles jangled like door chimes.

“Now, this here’s a compliment,” he began, “so don’t take it the wrong way.”

For years, I had frowned in public in an effort to offset my open, guileless face, which made strangers want to tell me their stories, but it never made a difference.

“I’m getting a real Where’s Waldo vibe from you,” the man said. “You’re tall, and super skinny. Seriously, if I was your mother, I’d be worried. I’d be thinking, let’s get this boy a solid meal. And then there’s that striped shirt you’re wearing.”

He shook his hands out of the long sleeves of his shirt and made a frame with his thumbs and index fingers. He focused it on my shirt. “You know what I’d like to do? Get myself a nice red marker and make all those stripes red, put you in one of those poofy hats, lose you in a big crowd, and then find you.”

Hit pupils were wide and glistening. I said nothing.

“Hey, don’t get offended!” he said. “I’m a huge Waldo guy. Have all the books.”

The blonde woman on the other side of me leaned in. The words Peace and Love were printed all over her pajamas. “He really does,” she said. “*Where’s Waldo Now, Waldo in Hollywood*, you name it.”

The man nodded proudly, and then turned his attention to my guitar case. “Do you know how to play that thing? Or do you just carry it around to seem interesting? You know, you could fit



a lot of contraband in that case. Like, for example, show dogs, or drugs. Maybe even Waldo himself.” He grinned. “Ah-hah! You’re probably lugging around the real Waldo in there, keeping him locked up so nobody will realize you’re not the real deal. That’s genius, man.”

He leaned closer to me, so I could smell the cigarette stink wafting off his jacket. It made me want a cigarette myself. He asked me where I was from, anyway. When I told him, his eyes grew even wider, and years of worry slipped from his features. His thin, angular face, which had seemed so pale and pinched a moment earlier, became handsome—I saw the prim ridges of his cheekbones, the firmness of his jaw. With a jittering hand, he reached into his back pocket, retrieved a duct-taped billfold, and rifled through several receipts and business cards. Finally, he found what he was looking for: a laminated photograph of a pretty young woman with light brown bangs and an expression of mild amusement.

“This is my daughter, Magdalena,” he said. “She lives in Massachusetts. She’s a nurse at that big hospital they’ve got up there. You ever run into her?”

I said I was sorry, but I didn’t recognize her

“Oh.” His smile drooped. “Well, let me know if you see her.”

I nodded and said that I would, though I knew I wouldn’t.

The woman in the pajamas reached over and took the picture. “She looks beautiful here.”

“Are you her mom?” I asked.

She burst into laughter. “God no,” she said, putting her arm on the turkey-hat man’s knee. “I’m just the love of this one’s life.”

They wandered off to the restroom together. I tried to read an article about the SATURDAY March—the group marching from Austin and now comprised over ten thousand marchers, and one hundred thousand were reportedly coming from New York—but I was hungry,

and I couldn't concentrate on the details. There was speculation about money wires from the Middle East, about bombs built in bathtubs. I wanted to care, but I didn't.

Maxine still hadn't responded to the photo, so I sent her two more texts:

good day? stuck in knoxville bus station woohoo :(.

also, do i remind you of Waldo??

\*

Around two a.m., the loudspeaker crackled to life again. "Attention Nashville-bound travelers," said the same woman who'd addressed us earlier, "I want to inform you that we are still waiting for your bus. Until it comes, we will be waiting for it."

A wash of ambient sound filled the terminal: heated chatter in English and Spanish and Creole and Chinese, the clinking of the turkey-hat man's baubles as he returned from the restroom, paler than he'd been before. The kids were shouting at one another about who was Spiderman, who was Batman, and who wasn't even a superhero at all. Christ, I was hungry. There was nothing in the vending machines except processed candies, and Maxine and I had made a pact to avoid processed candies, so I decided to smoke a cigarette instead. I gathered my pack and guitar and went out of the station into the night.

On the sidewalk, a crowd of men in long coats stood smoking, talking loudly, and passing flasks. The Knoxville skyline glinted behind them, unremarkable except for a building topped by a big, gold-plated globe. Sirens sounded in the distance. Standing by the smokers' pole, separate from the crowd, was my seatmate from the first leg of the trip. I recognized her brilliant blue hair immediately. When she saw me, she inclined her head, and I went over.

"Oh yeah," she said coolly. "You had lots to say about art."

She introduced herself as Fabiola and said she'd started her trip in Vermont, and she was on her way to Houston, where she'd grown up. I said that I'd been to Houston once, on tour with my band, but Fabiola didn't ask me any questions about my band.

"Are you excited to be going back?" I asked her.

She thought this over. "Mixed feelings."

I had no intention of pushing her further on the subject, knowing myself to be, in relation to Fabiola at that moment, a strange man who'd approached her on the pavement outside a Greyhound station at two in the moment. But she seemed to want to talk.

The move, she said, had been motivated by the end of her relationship with a woman named Sophie, whom she'd met in college at a New Vermont Collective meeting.

"A what?" I said.

"It's a secessionist movement," Fabiola said. "Basically, we were trying to get the fuck out of the country. At least, that was the idea."

Now I was interested. To break free from America, from Americanness! To let the mantle of imperialism fall from my shoulders, and forge something new with a group of likeminded people! Maxine and I had often talked about the possibility of leaving, of starting over in a more suitable country.

"After college," Fabiola said, "Sophie and I moved together to a farm run by the Collective, in the mountains north of the city." The idea, she said, was to stockpile resources, learn sustainable farming practices, and strategize for the transition to a U.S.-free Vermont. Her first few months at the farm, she said, were among the happiest of her life. She described the communal dinners at length—steaming plates of farro and zucchini, vast beet salads that tasted faintly but not unpleasantly of dirt, and conversations about the future they wanted for their new country, which would have universal healthcare, racial equity, and local produce. But the golden period didn't last.

Sophie was promoted to a managerial position at the farm—the New Vermont Collective didn’t believe in wage hierarchies, but they did believe in certain people having the right to order other people around. Initially, Fabiola was proud of her partner, but then it sunk in that almost all of the managers were white, like the leaders of the Collective, while most of the entry-level farmers were black or brown, like Fabiola herself. When she brought it up, Sophie flatly denied it. There was a Chinese-American girl in charge of livestock, she pointed out, and a half-Indian woman who ran the underground newsletter.

“That was it for me,” Fabiola said. “I packed my things the next morning. I mean, how can a person live with you for that long and still remain completely blind to what your reality is like?”

“That’s awful,” I said.

Her expression soured. “That’s exactly what Sophie used to say. That’s *awful*. People say that when they can’t think of anything else to say.” She dropped her cigarette into the smoker’s pole. I watched it smolder there and felt ashamed. During one of our worst fights, Maxine had said I was the kind of privileged person who romanticized suffering.

I turned to Fabiola and said, “I’m sorry.”

She blinked and said, “For what?”

The sirens in the distance grew louder, more individualized. We turned towards the end of the empty street, and moments later an ambulance appeared. The crowd of drinkers stowed their flasks inside their coats and fell silent. The ambulance parked, and two blue-clad EMTs jumped out of the cab. They rolled a long white gurney off the back and hurried it through the dirt-streaked double doors of the station.

A murmur rose up from the drinkers. Not another one, someone said, shaking his head.

Fabiola pulled another cigarette out of her pack and brought it to her lips. “Anyway, that’s my sob story. Are you going to tell me yours?”

“Oh, mine’s not very interesting.” I was still thinking of the farm, of the dream of a new America. In a new country, perhaps, I could become an entirely different person, a person who understood goodness. But then, wasn’t that what all the colonizers had thought?

The terminal doors swung wide again, and the EMTs rushed out. There was a body on the gurney now, covered in a white sheet. One of the EMTs shouted for assistance. Two of the drinkers rushed over and pulled the ambulance’s heavy doors wide. As the gurney went up the ramp, the sheet slipped, and I thought I glimpsed the tip of a turkey’s clipped yellow bill—though it could have been a lock of hair, or the brim of a baseball cap.

“Are you okay?” Fabiola said. “You look totally spaced.”

“I think I met that guy.”

But what difference did it make to the man under the sheet if I had met him or not? It would do nothing to help him.

The EMTs heaved the metal doors of the ambulance closed and ran around to the front.

“God,” Fabiola said. “I can’t wait to get home.”

The word sparked a cascade of visions: the old house in Boston, my hungover siblings around the tree. I thought of the messy condo I shared with Maxine. I saw the cramped kitchen where we cooked side by side, our bodies colliding as we chopped and stirred and the onions frying in the pot began to give off their mundane, wonderful smell. I heard the birds clattering around the air conditioning unit, the trains’ horns sounding as they barreled down the track behind our fence in the night. Now the ambulance’s hazard lights ignited, shedding their red and blue warning on the drinkers’ coats and the bare concrete wall of the bus station. Fabiola and I watched from the sidewalk, lost in our differing dreams of home, as the vehicle sped down the block, turned at the corner, and disappeared.

#### 4. Don't Stop Believing

During the last delirious hours of the ride, while the bus stereo played Lynyrd Skynyrd and a baby reconfigured my understanding of how long babies could scream, I made a plan. I was going to tell Maxine all my doubts—about myself, about my ability to love her, about goodness. I was even going to tell her about my attraction to Q. We could work through it together. Shame, after all, was one of the pillars of our relationship.

It had started one night, early on in our love, when we were having beers down at Dino's with Eduardo. Dino's was our favorite local dive, and Eduardo was our best friend in the city—we played music together, and he was also in Maxine's Ph.D. program. Maxine was feeling guilty that night because she'd lied to a friend about being sick in order to come drink Tecates with us.

"Come on," Eduardo said. "All of us have done that. I've done worse things this week."

"Oh yeah?" Maxine said. "Like what?"

Eduardo and I began to list the shameful things we'd done—he'd stolen cups from a hospital café. I'd eaten at a fried chicken restaurant run by a famous homophobe and loved it. Eduardo and his husband had peed on a famous country singer's topiary wall.

"That's nothing," Maxine said. "Yesterday, I pretended to be my mother on the phone and told the fundraising people from my college that I'd died in a tragic wakeboarding accident, just so they'd stop calling me."

"Wow," Eduardo said in a tone of pure admiration, "that's actually really fucked up."

It was so much fun to compare our badness, we decided to turn it into a game. We called it "Who's the Worst," and developed an elaborate numerical system to evaluate who had done the most reprehensible thing each week. Lies of omission were worth two badness points, while outright lies were worth four. Throwing something away in the neighbor's trash bin gained you one point, while knocking over the neighbor's trash bin and then blaming it on an imaginary raccoon so you

wouldn't have to clean it up netted you five. The winner had to drink, and the loser had to drink, too.

Maxine loved the game, maybe too much. Some nights, in bed, she would drape her arm across my chest and whisper her transgressions into my ear. Killed a mosquito by accident, she'd say. Threw a cardboard coffee cup in the glass recycling. Didn't help an old man who was crying in the street. It fell to me to listen to her, to stroke her hand until she fell asleep.

\*

When the bus reached Nashville, the sun was already high in the sky. Although I was opposed to ridesharing apps on principle, I called a Lyft from the station to our condo, because the idea of walking or taking the city bus was more than my body could bear. In the grey light that was typical of Nashville in the winter, the city looked wan, as if all the blood had been drawn from it. The Lyft driver, a young man named Asaf, played classic rock on the radio, and I leaned against the window and watched the city slide by—the empty bars and honky-tonks on Broadway, the grey Cumberland river, the peaks and plateaus of the car graveyard peering out above a long brown fence, and then the lovely bungalows of the east side, with their colorful facades and white-columned porches. The city had seemed so ugly to me when I'd arrived three years earlier, so bare and unfinished in comparison to the dense, vertical cities of the Northeast, but now I found the open space comforting and humane. It seemed to offer a margin for error, a slowness those vertical cities could never permit.

Asaf dropped me at the edge of the driveway. Our squat duplex, so unlike its stately neighbors, looked smaller now than it had before I left. Frost had killed the vines that grew along the brick exterior, and the mailbox overflowed with grocery-store catalogs and holiday fundraising queries. Beneath all that, I found a holiday card from my father and his second wife, Loreen: a picture of them in seasonally appropriate sweaters, standing in front of the ocean. This year's photo

had been taken at Montezuma Beach, where the sweaters weren't really seasonally appropriate at all. There was a note printed on the back in a frilly all-capital font.

IN 2018, DAVID VISITED PITTSBURGH, TRIED THE FAMOUS PITTSBURGH CHEESECAKE, AND WELCOMED A NEW NEPHEW, LITTLE MITCH. LOREEN GOT PROMOTED TO DEAN OF LINGUISTICS AND OVERCAME HER FEAR OF SCUBA DIVING (!) ON OUR TRIP TO COSTA RICA (SEE PHOTO) FOR LOREEN'S CONFERENCE, WHERE SHE GAVE A WELL-RECEIVED PRESENTATION ABOUT THE HISTORY OF THE UMLAUT. WISHING YOU HEALTH AND HAPPINESS IN THE NEW YEAR, THE O'CONNELL-MALINS.

Underneath this missive, my father had scrawled a note. *Happy Christmas, Mick*, it said. *I know you might not want this card, but I wanted to send it. You know where to find me. Love always, Dad.* I turned the card back over and inspected the picture. His hair was going gracefully grey. I wondered if he dyed it. He looked happy, there on the beach in his red cashmere sweater. Maybe he'd figured it out. Maybe the way to be good was to abandon the things and people you didn't love, so you could find better things and people and love them instead. Maybe he'd whittled his life down to the best, most essential parts, like Q did with her sculptures.

I threw the card in the recycling bin and went inside to find Maxine.

\*

Maxine and I met, as lovers do, on the apps, where we could be the platonic ideals of ourselves. On the apps, I was a touring musician with photos to prove it, a lover of nature and long conversations, and a vocal feminist. I had been seen, at least once, in the company of an alarmingly cute dog. Maxine was a committed activist with a fun side, attendee of protests and all-night underground club happenings, devotee of tacos. I messaged her to inform her that I also liked tacos, and we realized we had a mutual friend—Eduardo.



Maxine had gone to college in Boston; oh my gosh, I was from there! I too liked the Esplanade in summertime. I too thought the ocean was cold but lovely. I liked Maxine's hair, which was the orange of a coastal sunset, and her direct manner: by the end of our first date, I'd already learned that she hated cilantro, loved the band Sleater-Kinney, loved the Philadelphia Eagles, and hated the hypocrisy of the mainline Democratic Party. We decided to get food again. A week later, beneath the awning of a well-reviewed falafel truck, while I was telling Maxine about my band's new album, she kissed me, probably to shut me up.

One of the things I liked about Maxine was that she was interested in things other than fame. In those days, I was new to Nashville, and I only knew other musicians, so most of my conversations were about fame: how to get it, who had it, who was going to get it soon. Eduardo and I played in a two-piece rock 'n' roll band called Quiet Sad Americans, and nobody thought we were going to be famous. Our music sounded too much like our name. We had a Monday-night residency at a bar in a trailer forty minutes outside Nashville, and our social media presence consisted mostly of pictures of Eduardo's dog—the very dog whose adorable mug had made a guest appearance on my Tinder profile.

We passed, as lovers can, through a period that glowed—not as brightly as our first loves, not pop-song bright, but brightly enough to obscure all of our less appealing qualities for almost a year. In those first months, it was almost as though we actually were the people we'd purported to be on the apps. I did not notice, for instance, that Maxine always left her pants on the floor before getting into bed. And Maxine did not (or so she told me later, during a fight) initially perceive my capacity for indecision and avoidance. After all, decisions in that period were uncomplicated: Should we go to the taco truck or make love? Should we make love on the couch or on the bed? Should we go for a walk, talk about our wonderful plans for the wonderful future, get tacos, and *then* make love?

Maxine also didn't notice, in all that blinding light, my reliance on irony as a defense mechanism, my instinct to turn everything difficult or profound into a slanted joke. When her friend Yolanda got married, for instance, I walked out of the ceremony because I was so overwhelmed by the power of the vows, by the groom's unadorned but heartfelt expression of his desire to stay, always, by Yolanda's side. I went alone to the bathroom and held my head in my hands and cried. But instead of letting anyone see how moved I was, I later made fun the kitschy pink flamingos the couple had used for centerpieces and the best man's halting speech about high school basketball exploits, I told a friend it sounded like the vows had been composed by an automated vow-composing program.

Even our own love, robust as it was in that period, was not safe. As I kissed Maxine beside a bridge in springtime dusk, I couldn't help but think, we're kissing beside a bridge, the roses are in bloom, how predictable. In the dark of Maxine's small bedroom, as we expressed our mutual commitment, my mind went: oh, now we're *Defining the Relationship*. I recognized this habit in myself, and I hated it, but I couldn't stop. It was a reflex I'd learned from the culture, from indie songs that mocked suburban life and celebrities who performed ambivalence in order to get ahead in society, who masked their love and their ambition in an effort to realize both.

Later, when the light was not so blinding, Maxine saw that part of me, and I saw the pants all over our bedroom floor, the way she used her political righteousness to win affection and shame others. We had to figure out what to do with the people we really were. What we did was this: we moved in together, bought a television, and fought for a year and a half about who was the worst. We pulled and pulled, as lovers must, at the seams of each other, until all our ugliest sides had been dragged out into the light—Maxine's trigger-finger judginess, the racist jokes I'd posted on Facebook when I was fourteen, her hunger for affirmation, my ambivalence towards my family. The gleam of those early days faded to a distant dream, and my mind began to wander: to other lives, to

distant cities, to the way Q's sinuous hands folded a crepe. But in spite of it all, there were so many nights when we sunk into the comfort of each other, when I fell asleep with my face buried in the crook of Maxine's neck. By the time I got home that morning, all I wanted was to see her, to go where I was known and would be held.

\*

But when I walked into our unit, Maxine was not there. In the ashy light that leaked in through the blinds I saw a thin layer of dust on the coffee table, a skillet of congealing tomato sauce I'd left on the stove, and a tiny spider web strung between the bedroom door and the wall. She was not in the living room, not in the bedroom.

"Maxine," I called, like some guy in a bad movie. Nobody answered. My calls went straight to voicemail. "Maxine," I said after the beep, "Maxine?"

I sat down on the couch and tried to think. Maybe she was out getting groceries, or the car had broken down while she was driving back from Philly. Maybe she'd gotten tired on the road and pulled over at a motel off Route 81. Or maybe, I thought, the car had slipped off the side of that mountain highway and plummeted down a ravine, exploding like a firework and frightening a family of deer. I pictured large men with sinister intentions coming up behind Maxine while she pumped gas in rural Virginia, headlines about all-night diner employees who pulled out automatic weapons, typhoon-like landslides rushing down steep Shenandoah slopes toward her unsuspecting Volvo. When I called Maxine's mother, she didn't pick up. *You've reached Gloria Cellucci*, the recorded message said, *but you actually haven't reached her, because she's not here right now*. I tried Eduardo, but he said he hadn't seen or heard from Maxine since Christmas Eve.

"Can I come over?" I asked him. "I'm kind of freaking out."

But Eduardo was in Houston, visiting his partner David's parents, and they wouldn't be back in Nashville until the following afternoon. I tried to distract myself with television, but

everything that came up on my Netflix queue seemed to be a police procedural. Even *Parks and Recreation* had a running gag about a masked kidnapper. The news was no better: White supremacists were throwing fundraising galas in Indiana, Finland, and Brazil. A Yale dropout had invented a digital watch that could recite the *Aeneid* in its entirety. Experts said millennials were killing the napkin industry. The whole of northern Sri Lanka was flooded. Experts said nothing about Maxine. I decided to go for a walk.

My sleepy neighborhood, with its bungalows, its locally-sourced restaurants and oily-leaved magnolias, was full of cops that afternoon. On the corner of Gallatin Avenue, two pale men in rain jackets and army fatigues stood smoking, staring up at the darkening clouds. Had one of them taken Maxine? Had Maxine ever loved me? Had I literally imagined our whole relationship? My head was an ant's nest. As I crossed Gallatin towards the supermarket, I saw a flash of blue hair passing through the market's double doors, and thought it was Fabiola. I called out to her. But no, that was impossible. Fabiola was still on the bus, on her way to Houston. I stood in the middle of the five-lane road, staring at the space where the woman had been. A passing truck driver rolled down his window and said, what the fuck are you doing, do you want to die? The rain began in earnest.

I took the long way home, thinking maybe Maxine was at the ramen shop, maybe she'd gone to get a coffee. But she was not in the coffee shops, not in the ramen shop, not ogling the dogs in the neighborhood dog park. Her face was not pressed to the glass of the lit-up city buses; her voice did not call to me across the quickening wind. She was not among the matching bachelorettes who passed on the party wagon, howling "Don't Stop Believing" into the rain. "Maxine?" I called, and the one with the tiara turned and took a photo of me with her phone. She showed it to her friends, and they all laughed.

I reached the far corner of my street, where a crowd was gathered. Maxine was not in the crowd. There were three cop cars, two ambulances, and a full-sized fire truck, but no Maxine.

Everybody was looking up at a house, watching smoke billow from the windows of the second floor. I pushed my way through the crowd, looking for Maxine's red hair. Could Maxine be in the house? "Who's in there," I asked anyone and everyone. "Who's inside?" A teenaged boy pointed at a family on the sidewalk, sooty but alive. They were watching the firehoses smother the second story of their home. I knew that I should feel something for them, but I didn't. I wandered away from the burning house, in the direction of my own place.

The birds in the trees were rioting like it was spring instead of late December. Planes sliced through the air overhead, headed for Tampa, London, Tokyo. I saw our duplex's misshapen roof, the old red door of our unit. Maxine would be waiting for me there, lying on the couch in her sweatpants. I knew it. The car was not in the driveway, but that was just because she'd taken it to the shop. As I was about to open the door, my phone vibrated, and the texts began to ping in:

oh mick,

i'm sorry i haven't been texting you back. you & your family look so good in that photo. i'm also so sorry to be texting you what i'm about to text you, i know it's terrible form

& just generally terrible. but i don't know if i can say the words aloud right now without breaking down & saying everything completely wrong, so in the interest of clarity ~

do you remember that movie about the couple that spent all their time together & then lost the ability to speak? well, it was a good one, you should watch it again, but i've been thinking

& thinking so much over this break, & sometimes that couple reminds me of us. i'm so proud of you & can't imagine my life without you & yet i also think maybe we've become too attached ~

you're older than me so you maybe don't feel this way, but i got into a relationship with you when i was still basically at the beginning of my 20s & didn't know anything about

anything. & it was wonderful, really it was the best thing that had happened to me so far. maybe that sounds hallmark but i'm not kidding. in those days i thought of you constantly &

never wanted to go anyplace without you. i want you to know that this is not me breaking up with you, or saying i don't love you anymore/this is the end, because in the first place

our relationship has never been reducible to stupid teenage categories like "in love" or "the end," & in the second place because i DO still love you & this is NOT the end. but.

after i saw yolanda the other day i felt completely shook, like maybe everything i'd been doing with my life these past years was just a holding pattern & maybe i've settled for certain

bourgeois comforts - e.g. organic food, marriage - that will slowly sap me of energy & passion & distract me from the fight against oppression, which is all that really matters

so i guess what i'm saying is, i'm going to stay up in Philly for a week and write my dissertation up here while i try to figure out what to do next, because i just

don't think i'll be able to think clearly if i'm down in nashville with you, eating organic food, and so on. but it's not your fault & i'm sorry to harp on the food,

it's just an example of the broader stupor i've been in lately, which has nothing to do with you, really, i swear

The texts stopped coming. My body felt light, and I hadn't eaten in twenty-four hours. I opened the door to my unit and took a moment to take in the full fact of its emptiness—the unmade bed, the full sink—before the phone buzzed again.

sorry got distracted by my mom – going to brunch soon. anyway here's what i'm proposing. don't say it isn't fair, because I already know it's not fair & i'm sorry in advance –

what i'm proposing is: you stay down in nashville for a week, and i stay up here, & we don't talk until sunday, new years day. we take a little time for ourselves. & if at that time we both

feel like our lives still need to change then we will cross that bridge and have a talk? please reply yes/no to this plan & know that i love you & this is not the end &

i'm sorry

## 5. Mick Summarizes Big Sur

I wasn't in the habit of calling my mother every time something difficult happened, but that night she was the only person I really wanted to talk to. I wanted her to cut me down to size, to make me feel like none of this really mattered.

"That doesn't sound like Maxine," she said, after I told her about the texts. I could hear the TV on in the background. "Something else must be up with her."

"Well," I said, "Maxine did disappear once before, actually."

"What? You didn't tell me about this."

"Two years ago," I said. We'd been in California, driving south from San Francisco to Los Angeles along Highway One. It was such a well-known route that we'd both felt foolish for wanting to go, but our embarrassment was quickly overcome by the sheer beauty of the drive. At the Monterey Aquarium, we saw galaxies of shining jellyfish, abalones with shells like spilled gasoline rainbows, tornado-like schools of mackerel swirling in the tanks. Afterwards, as we drove south across the Bixby Bridge, and we began to feel like characters in a film. We're bank robbers, Maxine said, headed for the border. No, no, I said, we're lovers on the run. I'm a congresswoman, Maxine said, and you're my rival's husband. Let's find a town along the coast, she said, buy a home, and fade away into comfortable obscurity.

Just before the turnoff for Big Sur, though I didn't say all this to my mother, we parked on the shoulder and climbed down a jagged path in the cliff towards a rocky beach. The beauty all around us—the deep greens and reds of the sandstone cliffs, the waves frothing against seal-adorned outcroppings—made us both feel, I think, completely happy. But the feeling was short-lived. A landslide had ruined Big Sur, and the highway was closed all the way down to Mud Creek. We tried to make up for it with a hike around a creek, but our good moods had evaporated. Maxine kept



saying she was hot, she was hungry. We'd planned to see waterfalls, sea lions, and canyons, but now all we had was this stupid brook, and there wasn't even cell-phone reception. I kept saying things like, can you please relax? Right there, in the presence of all that beauty, with the glinting ocean still visible through the prehistoric trees, we argued like petty teenagers. Eventually Maxine went off alone. Fifteen minutes passed, and then forty-five. Maxine had said she wanted to read some plaque about the redwoods, and she'd be right back. I went back to the car, but she wasn't there. In a daze, I drove back and forth between the gate to Big Sur and the Bixby Bridge, looking for Maxine along the shoulders of the highway, thinking: I've lost her, I've lost my life, I will not be loved again.

"Jesus," my mother said. "I didn't raise you to be so dramatic."

After an hour or so, I said, ignoring her, I pulled over at the same cliff where we'd stopped earlier in the day, in despair. It was then, as I was watching the sun sink into the Pacific and thinking about how my life was over, that I noticed the outline of Maxine hundreds of feet below me, standing with her ankles in the crimson water.

"What the hell was she doing down there?" my mother said.

It was the happiness, Maxine told me later, that had made her walk away. When we were looking at the ocean and the cliffs, it had seemed to her for a moment that our futures were going to be wonderful, our lives were going to be an unending parade of beauty. But right on the heels of that bliss, she'd felt a painful longing, a bottomless need for something even better. She'd understood that this was America: this constant, reflexive need. Suddenly, the billion-dollar homes on the plateaus above us had seemed like one more hopelessly human way of reaching after the impossible—like feeble hands, Maxine said, stretched out towards eternity. In this most perfect of places, she said, we still weren't satisfied. If we couldn't be perfectly happy on a day like today, she said, how would we survive the rest of our lives?

"Wow," my mother said quietly. "You guys are so, so, so, so young."

## 6. P.B.E.

“Maxine *texted* you all this?” Eduardo said, lowering his cocktail to give me an unobstructed view of the shock and sympathy on his wide, trustworthy face.

“And then she went to brunch.”

Eduardo was trying his best to comfort me while I finished my third Singapore Sling. We were in a low-lit booth near the front of P.B. & Jarvis, a new cocktail lounge whose supposed advantage over all the other new cocktail lounges in Nashville was its commitment to gentrifying the peanut butter sandwich. The menu offered not PB and J’s but PB Experiences. Eduardo’s was called The Hampton, and it came on toasted challah with bacon and guava, while I, in my confusion and desperation, had ordered something called the Aloha Smash Supreme that involved both pineapples and taco strips. The \$15 cocktails we were drinking came in colorful plastic glasses with separately packaged straws, and they arrived, along with the Experiences, on huge red lunch trays. The place was like some sort of mixed metaphor for childhood.

It was nearly one a.m., and the bar was full of handsome, longhaired people in denim jackets. I couldn’t tell who was flirting and who was doing business. At the table beside us, a young couple in matching all-black outfits were feeding each other forkfuls of Experience and batting their eyes.

Eduardo and I were not wearing denim. He was wearing a pressed blue Oxford and a casual black suit jacket, having just come from the university, and I had on an old Sonic Youth tee and sweatpants. From our booth by the bar’s floor-to-ceiling windows, we could see several other businesses: an empanada shop staffed entirely by white people, a Starbucks, and a store that sold high-concept napkins. P.B. & Jarvis was housed inside a recently opened Urban Playground Concept—which was, Eduardo had explained, basically just a mall for people who didn’t like to think of themselves as mall-goers. The Concept was called The Infirmary, because the building had

once housed a free clinic for the city's homeless citizens. Now, the only evidence of its original use was an old white hospital bed, which sat in the middle of the building's interior concourse, encircled by a rope and marked with a plaque that read "Original Hospital Bed, 1937. NO SITTING."

The bar had been Eduardo's idea. In theory, he frequented places like the Infirmary as research for his dissertation, which was about the appeal of repurposed industrial spaces to young urbanites. But I secretly suspected that Eduardo himself—a young urbanite, after all—also just liked fancy bullshit. This tension between critique and enjoyment was typical of the students in the sociology Ph.D. program he was in. Parties with them were like "Who's the Worst" writ large—veritable Olympiads of self-denigration and privilege-checking. They went something like this:

*Student 1, pouring tequila shots:* Ugh, my mother wants me to come up to the family's place in Maine again this year, but I don't know if I can be around that much generational wealth. It makes me sick.

*Student 2, slicing limes:* Totally. My family wants to go on a *cruise*. Can you believe it? I keep trying to educate them about the crazy wastefulness—the fuel costs, the storage costs, the neocolonial undertones—but they don't even care.

*Student 3, who didn't come from money, frowning:* I don't know, a cruise sounds kind of fun to me, actually.

*Student 2, ignoring Student 1:* The terrible thing is, I think I'm going to do the cruise. My mom is *making* me.

*Student 3, rolling eyes:* I feel really bad for you.

In this scenario, to his credit, Eduardo was the third student—a brilliant kid from South L.A. who'd won a scholarship to Brown and then worked nights all through college so he could send money home. But this did not prevent him from being susceptible to fancy bullshit.

He put his Experience down and gave my shoulder a brotherly squeeze. “Look,” he said, “Maxine just needs a minute for herself. Everything will go back to normal.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You guys have been through worse,” Eduardo said.

The waiter approached. He was as long-haired and sleek as the clientele, and his arms were covered in tattoos. I was sure he was in a band, and ninety percent sure he was the singer. A flash of jealousy shot through me when he approached in his languid way to ask us how our Experiences were. Couldn’t he see we’d once been in a band, too? Couldn’t he see we weren’t just regular customers? I told him there were too many pineapples in my Experience, and he said: The Aloha Smash Supreme comes with pineapples. And yet, I said, there are too many. The waiter made a face that indicated he’d rather not keep talking about the pineapples. I ordered another Singapore Sling.

“So let me get this straight,” Eduardo said. He leaned in and made the sort of reassuring eye-contact he excelled at. “Maxine is staying in Philly because she’s thinking about how to be a better activist?”

“It’s not that simple,” I said. I had called Eduardo, had even neglected to protest when he suggested this trendy hellhole for drinks, because Maxine and I were having a problem with goodness, and he was my best friend. I don’t mean my closest friend, but my most unfailingly *kind* friend. He opened doors, compulsively picked people up from airports, remembered dietary preferences, and comforted crying strangers, and he never expected appreciation or admiration in return. I was hoping, though I didn’t say this aloud, that he could help me.

“You said you’re having a problem with... goodness?” Eduardo asked me now. “That seems pretty broad.”

I nodded. “Lately, I’ve been feeling like everything I’ve learned about how to be good has actually led me to cause harm,” I told him now. “Every time I buy organic fruit, for instance, people

suffer on a plantation, thousands of miles away. The earth's atmosphere is growing thin, the ice caps are melting, and half the world's population is in poverty, all because people like me want nice strawberries year round."

"Uh huh," Eduardo said. "We've been through this with the strawberries before." He took a bite of his Experience, wiped the guava from his lips, and said: "But what do you mean by being good? Like, what specifically do you want to change about yourself?"

"I don't know," I said. "That's the problem."

"Well, that seems like the first thing to figure out."

"What do you think I should change? How can I learn to be kind?" It sounded ridiculous, but that was where I was at.

An unfamiliar sadness entered Eduardo's hazel eyes. All his life, he said, people had suspected him of kindness. In grade school, his teachers had often commented on his kind eyes. Friends' parents had trotted him out in front of their children as a kind of good example. For everyday acts of politesse—cleaning up after himself, saying please and thanks—he often received outsized praise, as though he had done something far better or more generous.

"It was something about my face, I guess, or my voice," he said.

I'd seen pictures of Eduardo as a boy: he had been small and timid but handsome, and he'd slicked his hair back with mousse, like his father.

He sipped his Gimlet and said that often, the way others perceived him felt utterly at odds with the way he felt inside. While he was externally thanking someone or smiling his gracious smile, he would sometimes be teeming with mute dissatisfaction or anger. For as long as he could remember, he had been plagued by the idea that no matter how well people liked him, they would never really know him, because he was constitutionally incapable of expressing what he really thought or desired. "Could you pass the salt?" he added.

At the table next to us, the black-clad couple, who had so recently been playing with each other's hands, began to shout. The man said something like, all you care about is how it looks online. The woman said, is it a *crime* to think you need a little haircut? Just a little snip-snip, is that so wrong?

Eduardo glanced at them and then turned back to me. "At some point, when I was a teenager, I figured out that I had this reputation for kindness. From then on, for some reason, I felt like I had to keep it up."

"Why?" Was Eduardo saying that he, like me, had been flailing around all these years, just trying to figure it out? Or was he saying he'd truly figured out how to be good?

"Well, people had always told me I was nice, and I was afraid that if I proved them wrong, then they would have nothing to say to me at all." He looked up at me. "But sorry, this was supposed about you."

"No, no, I'm interested in everything you're saying." I still believed that Eduardo could tell me something, that he had the kernel of wisdom that would bring me back to myself, back to Maxine.

"Hold on," he said. "I've got to pee."

\*

I had a missed call from Leanna, a text from Q, and a rare individual text from Maxine, whose long string of messages I still hadn't responded to.

Q: Are you working tomorrow? We've missed you.

Maxine: did u get these or no?

An irrational happiness went through me at the sight of Q's text, followed reliably by shame. Maxine had not been gone three days. I decided not to respond to either text. It was nearly closing time, and the couple beside us had given up their fight and left, along with the other beautiful

people. In their absence, the whole bar looked absurd, like an error some kid had made while designing her house in *The Sims*. The exposed brick walls and hanging tungsten lamps clashed with the white cafeteria tables, not to mention the bright plastic trays and the chintzy plastic straws. It no longer seemed like the kind of place anyone would want to spend their time or money, and it was wondrous to me that I had just done both.

One of the theses of Eduardo's dissertation was that young urbanites liked to dine, drink, and fraternize in former industrial spaces because it made us feel subconsciously connected to an era of American prosperity and homegrown industry that was now, as Eduardo saw it, mostly over. There were other factors, of course—not least among them the fact that many former factories and warehouses became abandoned in the '80s and '90s and were therefore cheap for developers. But mostly, according to Eduardo, we frequented places like this because they made us feel useful and authentic in the way we imagined our ancestors might have been, whether or not they'd actually been that way or lived in the U.S. I wasn't sure he was right, but it was a nice thought.

While I waited for Eduardo, I watched a man in a janitor's uniform push a large mop across the empty expanse of The Infirmary. Right in the path of his mop, the black-clad couple from the bar was canoodling on the Original Hospital Bed. They'd integrated themselves fully into the velvet-encircled exhibit, just behind the NO SITTING sign. If they noticed the janitor as he passed by, they made no sign, and went on tugging at each other's clothes. He paused briefly in front of them and then went on with his work.

When Eduardo returned from the bathroom, we flagged down our waiter and asked for the check. Eduardo offered to cover it, and I let him.

"What I fear more than anything," he said, as if our earlier conversation had continued without pause, "is that someone will see my kindness and think it's all calculated, just another

manipulative way of reaching for power and status. Maybe I'm hiding my bad intentions from myself.”

“That doesn't seem true of you,” I said. “Of me, maybe. But not of you.”

Eduardo shook his head. “Listen,” he said.

As told me about the friend who'd cut her wrists, the friend he'd betrayed his voice quavered. When he was in high school, he said, he'd befriended a girl named Luisa who went to a private girls' school on the other side of L.A. They'd bonded at a dance over the fact they both loved bands from the eighties—the Smiths, the Cure, anybody with eyeliner—but they didn't know each other too well. He was surprised, then, when Luisa messaged him one night to say that she needed to tell him something, because there was no-one else she could talk to.

“And you went, because that's the kind of guy you are.”

“I waited until my parents were asleep, and then I stole my father's car keys from his coat and drove to meet her at an ice cream shop in Santa Monica. When I got there, she'd already ordered me a root beer float—for some reason, I've always remembered that. Anyway, as soon as I sat down, she said her parents were getting divorced, but that wasn't why she wanted to talk. She rolled the sleeves of her hoodie up, and there were scars all up and down her lower arms. She said not to get alarmed. She said she'd started again after her father left, and she was only telling me because she thought saying it aloud would help her stop. I was the only person in her life she could trust.”

“But you hardly knew her,” I said. The waiters were putting the chairs up on the tables, turning off the lights in the kitchen.

Eduardo shrugged. “She must've been very alone—which makes what I did more horrible. In the moment, I comforted her. But two days later, after baseball practice, some of the boys were cracking jokes about her, saying how she was always pulling stunts to get attention. I wanted them to



like me, so I told them about the cutting, and they thought it was hilarious. Then, of course, one of them turned around and told her what I'd said."

"Oh, no."

Eduardo put on his coat. "That was the first truly deep shame I'd felt in my life. The worst part was, Luisa forgave me. She said sometimes she did things just to be liked, too. But things weren't the same, obviously. A couple years later, she was sent to some reform school in Montana." He stood up and ran a hand through his coiffed hair. "I don't know why I just told you that," he said. "I've never told anyone about it before."

"Maybe you needed to confess," I said. I wanted to say something that would reassure Eduardo, to tell him that I had done similar things in my life, and we all had flaws, we were all worthy of forgiveness. But the truth was that his story had filled me with misery, because now I knew he was as lost as I was. Who was going to help me now?

We put on our jackets and walked out through The Infirmary's atrium, our shoes echoing on the concrete floor. Outside, it was raining steadily, a thick cold mist. We broke into a run toward Eduardo's car. Eduardo ran clumsily in his khakis, like a high schooler who hasn't yet gained control of his limbs. Just before the parking lot, we passed the black-clad couple, who were taking a selfie together beneath the awning of a macaroon shop. They looked for all the world like they were in love.

## 7. Mick Drafts Texts

### SENT:

1. Hey Maxine. I did get your messages. Thanks for communicating.
2. We can talk on Sunday. Happy New Year.

### UNSENT:

1. Hey Maxine, thanks for your message. I understand your concerns about wanting to be a better activist. Honestly, I'm a little taken aback, because everything seemed fine two days ago. However, I'm willing to wait until the 1<sup>st</sup> to talk, as you suggest. Love you.
2. Hey Maxine, thanks for all those messages. I understand your concerns, but did you think about how this would make me feel, even a little bit? Talk to you Sun, I guess.
3. Hey M, I get your concerns, but what the ACTUAL fuck?
4. Hey it's actually probably for the best you're staying in Philly for a while, because there's someone else.
5. Like you said, hate to tell you over text, but there's someone else. Remember Q, from the bowling alley that time? Yeah, well, I'm seeing her tomorrow. We're gonna make some crepes, and then who knows. Have fun trying to save America.
6. hey how do you like this text maxine? i'm using all lowercase & ampersands because it makes me feel like an intellectual. but like, a casual intellectual. do you love me again, now that i'm a casual intellectual like you?
7. wow i am a terrible person
8. unworthy of love
9. please come home

## 8. Q Flips Crepes

In the morning, I called a Lyft to the bakery. From the backseat, I watched the trucks on Route 40 churn whirlwinds of mist into the air, and the world was beautiful again. The light was bright and tender all along the puddled roads, newborn in its soft brilliance. My head was pounding, and it was difficult to think. I called Leanna back twice, but she didn't pick up.

In the kitchen that day it was me, Q, and Marcel. Q made crepes because it was a relatively low-maintenance job and the crêperie was conveniently placed between her apartment and the art studio she rented downtown. Marcel made crepes because he was an actual pastry chef who'd trained in Paris. I made crepes because I was no longer sure what else to do, and because I liked it—liked the precision of the mix ingredients, the satisfaction of a well-flipped crepe. Here was something, at least, that I could control.

We made a pretty good team. While Marcel barked orders from his outpost by the service window—*One Nutella! Two Eggs and Bacon!*—Q and I worked steadily, beating eggs and milk and sugar together, pouring the thin batter onto the industrial-sized griddle, flipping it just as it began to firm. From time to time, as she poured and flipped, I stole glances at Q's long, capable hands, at the way her strong forearms tapered into sleeves of her plaster-dusted Cher sweatshirt. I was consistently surprised, even now, by the gentleness that suffused her movements, the attention she paid to the placement of every berry and every piece of bacon. For the first time in days, I was not thinking of Maxine.

While we worked, Q told me about a big commission she'd done over the holiday for a hotelier in Atlanta. The hotelier, a middle-aged man, had requested a life-sized sculpture of a woman—a beautiful woman, he'd specified, but not one of those busty pin-ups. Those were the exact words he used, Q said, grimacing: “busty” and “pin-ups.” The idea was that the beautiful-but-

not-busy woman would be placed in the lobby of his latest hotel, and that guests would feel, upon seeing this woman lounging on a stone leaf in a state of near-nudity, that they were in the presence of what the hotelier called “lasting class and grace.” Q wasn’t sure what that meant, but it was a lot of money, so she agreed and signed the relevant papers.

“Three Blackberry Deluxe!” Marcel called from the front. “Two fucking Kale and Apple, stat!”

Q had worked on the sculpture for several months, she said, but she couldn’t seem to get it to look how she wanted. She abandoned twelve different versions of the sculpture before she made something she was halfway satisfied with, and spent a considerable portion of her advance at the quarry, buying more alabaster to replace what she’d used. Finally, the hotelier said he couldn’t wait any longer, so she picked a sculpture at random and delivered it. The hotelier stared at it, stroking his tie. And then he said: she’s too big.

“Out *loud?*”

Q nodded and reached across me to grab a handful of mint. Her forearm brushed mine. I stifled a smile. “He kept saying: make her thinner, make her smaller, make her *classy*. I was so pissed off. I went back to my studio and worked for three days and three nights, until I had a sculpture of precisely the same proportions, with the same hips and shapely feet as the last one, except the new version was smaller than my own hand. I went back to the hotelier’s office and said: here is your small woman.”

“What did he say?”

“Well, what do you think? He threw me out and refused to pay the rest of the commission. That’s why I’m still here, flipping crepes with you.”

“Lucky me,” I said.

She gave a small smile and looked down at the crepes.

“He never would have said that to you if the sculpture had been a man.” It seemed like the thing to say.

Q was focused on folding a crepe. “Maybe I’ll make him another sculpture, pro bono: just a big, hairy, strangely proportioned man—a man with massive knees. I’ll make a man as big as a Mack truck, and hire a crane to lower it onto his lawn.”

“Four fucking Nutellas!” Marcel shouted. “What are you two chattering about?”

“Men,” Maxine shouted back.

“Fuck men,” Marcel said. He turned back to the window.

\*

Q had none of the effete airs I’d come to associate with artists. She was a former college basketball player, over six feet tall, strong and lean. Sculpture, for her, was not an affectation or an aspirational pursuit. It was simply the thing she enjoyed most, and she would go on doing it forever, whether or not anyone ever paid any attention. This certainty of hers was a quality I lacked completely; a quality that Maxine, for all her righteousness, could only seize onto for brief periods of time.

It was a weird thing to think about, but Q’s personality reminded me in some ways of my father’s. He too had possessed, when I was growing up, a kind of animal conviction about what was right and wrong for him. (Right for him: long camping trips alone, neoclassical architecture, the music of Thelonious Monk; wrong for him: short trips with the family, playing catch with his sons, music by anyone under thirty.) He was tall, too, and his years as a college track star had left their mark on his posture. He too had the ability to change the air in rooms, make everything brighter. He dressed sharp, in pressed black t-shirts and a wide variety of pea coats.

During my middle-school years, he became my first real model for goodness. By watching him, I learned that the way to be good was to be well-dressed and detached, and also to stay up late watching old movies. Sometimes, after the twins had gone up to bed, I’d creep to the door to the

living room and watch through the crack while my father, laid out on the floor, stared at black and white classics: *Jules and Jim*, *Breathless*, *Casablanca*. Back then, I thought this was a ritual every father performed alone, late at night. It was only later that I realized he'd probably been fighting with my mother on those nights, or he was trying to delay going to bed with her.

I adopted his fashion sense and his worldly airs. I wore a long black pea coat to seventh-grade dances, practiced expressing disdain for worldly things—pop stars, organized sports—and turned down social invitations because (and I always said this in the same affected tone) I had to go practice my bass. This strategy didn't make me popular with my classmates, who referred to me as Pea Coat Mick when they referred to me at all. But in the bathroom mirrors at school, I was world-weary and sophisticated beyond my years, and my peers' disdain was merely a sign of my latent genius. I would be a great painter of browns, the next Rothko.

My father, meanwhile, noticed nothing—not even the pea coat. Perhaps he was so accustomed by then to wearing pea coats that he did not think it odd that I, a twelve-year old child, should wear one. Had he looked around, he might have noticed that most of my classmates were sporting puffy primary-colored jackets or sweatshirts that said, for example, Stone Cold Steve Austin. My mother, at least, had the good sense to try to get me to wear normal jackets. Things went on like that—me doing my best to act exactly like my father, him doing his best to pretend nothing in his life was real—for several years, until the spring of my junior year of high school, when he abruptly packed his things into the back of a new Mazda Miata and drove out of my life.

The morning rush had ended, and the few remaining customers had been served. Marcel was out having a smoke break, and Maxine and I were wiping down the counters.

“It's not that my dad never tried to rekindle a relationship with me,” I told Q as I scrubbed at a particularly sticky patch of syrup. “He broke a fundamental bond of trust with me and my siblings.”

“But people get divorced all the time,” Q said.

“Sure,” I said. “But usually they give you some kind of notice.”

Q poured herself a glass of water from the kitchen sink and downed it. “How’s Maxine?”

The two women had only met once, but they’d gotten along splendidly. We’d gone out, along with Eduardo, to a bowling alley that was also a nightclub (Eduardo’s decision). Maxine and Q beat us at candlepin over and over again, hugging and high-fiving as they bowled strike after strike. I caught myself thinking: if Q likes Maxine this much, then I’ve got no chance.

“She’s fine,” I said. “Still in Philly with her family.”

“So you’re suck home alone, then?” Q said. She reached over and brushed some flour off the sleeve of my shirt.

Marcel came blustering in through the back door of the kitchen, smelling of tobacco and bacon. “You two are like birds, talking talking talking,” he said.

“Is that what birds do?” I asked him.

“You *know* what I mean,” Marcel snapped.

“Mick was just telling me about his father,” Q said.

“I had one of those once,” Marcel said. “He was a jerk.”

\*

After my shift, I went out into the lot behind the restaurant and tried Leanna again.

“Christ, Mick,” she said, “where have you been?”

“Work,” I said.

“Listen, I’ve been trying to tell you, because I know Billy won’t bother—he just sold his script to a production company in L.A. Yeah, the one about the guy who tries to make a sandwich. They want to expand it into a whole show.”

I could not find the words. “How?”

“I guess a friend of his from Wesleyan is an agent out there.”

“But the script sounds so...”

“Insufferable?” Leanna said. “You’re not wrong. But there’s a lot of money flying around out there right now. Apparently it’s like, if you’ve got some words, and they’re on a page, they’ll buy the words, develop them into a pilot, and see what happens. Or at least, that’s what Billy says. Anyway, he’s rich now.”

I sat up. “How much?”

She quoted a sum that, while not astronomical, was more than I had ever made in a year as a private school teacher, and more than I could make in two at the crêperie.

“Wow.”

“Anyway, the real reason I’m calling you is because we’re flying to D.C. tomorrow to celebrate. Billy and I want to check out this whole march situation. We’re wondering if you want in.

“Let me get this straight,” I said. “You’re celebrating the sale of Billy’s TV pilot by expending fossil fuels to fly to a climate march?”

“It’s not *just* a climate march,” Leanna said. “They’re marching against, like, everything. Don’t you know what SATURDAY stands for?”

I did not.

“Students Against Tyrants, Unrepentant Racists, and Apolitical Yuppies,” Leanna said.

“They actually don’t mention climate in the name, but they’re marching about that too.”

“That *is* a terrible name. Also, isn’t this supposed to get dangerous? I heard something about bombs.”

“Maybe!” Leanna seemed excited about the prospect. “Billy’s planning to make a documentary about it, so we’re kind of hoping something exciting goes down.”



This was why I had needed time away from my siblings. “Well, I don’t think I can make it. The flights will be super expensive, especially around New Year’s Eve. I just got back to Nashville.”

“Oh don’t worry. Billy’s paying,” Leanna said.

“That’s not a sentence I thought I’d ever hear,” I said. “But I have work.”

“Suit yourself,” Leanna said. “See you next Christmas!”

“Be safe,” I said, but she’d already hung up.

I was about to call a Lyft home when Q caught up with me in the parking lot. The light had hardened since morning into something full and mundane, and Q’s hair came loose and light over her shoulders and down into the torn V of sweatshirt, which was covered now in grease and flour.

“Hey,” she said, “do you need a ride?”

The thought of Maxine came and went from my mind, wavering somewhere between duty and longing. Q had to stop by her studio to pick something up for an exhibition she was mounting the next day, so I agreed to stop by there on the way home. As she drove down Broadway toward the tall buildings downtown, we talked about the places we dreamed of moving to. Montréal, I said. Mexico City. She wanted to move to Western Massachusetts, where she’d gone as a child to visit her aunt. The visions came to me again: the two of us tending a garden together, growing old side by side. Q’s strong hands harvesting peaches from the trees in the summertime.

“Funny,” I said, “my father lives there.”

Q’s studio was in a complex right off Broadway, less than a block from all the honky tonks and tourist restaurants. It wasn’t dark yet, but the street was already beginning to get in costume for the night. Blonde women and bearded men with guitars ambled into the honky tonks, coffee thermoses in hand, and middle-aged tourists wandered up and down the street in a happy daze. Some of the bars had already put on the neon lights, and country songs came keening out of the darkest dives, where the night’s earliest drinkers had begun to gather.

It took us nearly half an hour to find parking in front of a store that sold cowboy boots and American flag decals. As we walked down the strip, Q said that this part of town always reminded her of a poet she liked, who'd said that clichés were simply exhausted fragments of language. Through repetition, the poet had said—she couldn't remember his name—the most memorable phrases were gradually sanded down over time, until they lost their singularity and specificity. But this very same process, Q said, made them easier to access: once a piece of language had solidified into its simplest form, it could spread—as one such phrase went—like wildfire.

“What made you think of that?”

“This street speaks a visual language. The cues here on Broadway—cowboy boots, loose white blouses, whiskey brands, leather hats—are a kind of dialect. The so-called country aesthetic has been honed down and stripped of its complexities, so that it can be more easily understood and sold. Market research has demonstrated that people liked cowboy hats and songs about tight blue jeans, so that's what they get, again and again.”

Q had lived in Nashville all her life, and she'd watched the original bars and honky tonks be replaced or cleaned up by corporations. Today, the street offered one streamlined, fabricated experience, carefully designed to convince visitors that they were part of something authentic—something connected to a certain notably Caucasian idea of what it meant to be American. Nashville had reached the precipice where language tips towards cliché and dived straight off the edge, Q said. Now, whenever she walked around this neighborhood, she had the sensation that she was witnessing not the city's fabled music scene but a carefully constructed *facsimile*, calcified and reproducible.

“But these are all real musicians,” I said. “They play here night after night.”

“Sure,” Q said, “but they're playing cover songs. They're actors in a re-enactment of some golden era that probably never fully existed. I'm not blaming the musicians—the tourists are actors

too. They hop on planes, carrying dreams about Nashville, synthetic dreams that somebody made up. They buy boots and drink overpriced whiskey and howl in the honky-tonks, and every time they do it, the concept of the place gets narrower.

As we turned the corner onto Second Ave, we passed an old man who was sitting on a paint can on the corner, playing an old Neil Young song about the moon. Lately, Q said, she'd begun to wonder if it was still possible to have an unadulterated experience in the age of globalism and digital media. We rarely came to a new experience without first being introduced to it on the internet or in a film. An afternoon in an English pub could never be merely be itself; it always stood in reference to the *concept* of afternoons in English pubs. Nashville had always to be paying homage to the *idea* of Nashville, and so on. Even in a huge city like New York, where she'd gone to art school, she had felt that all her experiences were colored by films, TV shows, and books. She was wearing filters over her eyes and ears.

"That's when I started to question whether my desires, my ways of being in the world, were truly my own," she said. "You can't even move to Brooklyn without becoming *someone who moves to Brooklyn*—a cliché, part of the exhausted language of our culture. Which is funny, because the whole reason people like us move to places like Brooklyn and Nashville in the first place is to become individuals, whatever that means. But god, I'm talking a lot."

We came up on the studio complex. It was an unremarkable brick building, the kind of place Eduardo might have been interested in for his book. When we reached the front door, Q pulled a massive keyring out of her pocket and tried one silver key after the other in the lock. She led me up a dark concrete staircase and down a hall that smelled of acrylic paint and mold. She stopped short in front of a white door with the number nine on it, and I nearly walked into her. She put a hand on my chest to steady me. "Not so fast," she said. Heat rose to my cheeks.

As she opened the door, she turned over her shoulder to look at me. The studio was a narrow but tall-ceilinged room; the floors and the ceiling were grey concrete. In the watery late afternoon light, I saw the outlines of twelve alabaster women. They were propped up against the walls, mounted on small plinths, lying on the floor. Q went to the far end of the room and flicked a switch. When the lights came on, I saw that all the women's facial features—their eyes, their noses, their mouths—had been chiseled off.

## 9. Nightfall

That night, while I wondered quietly at the length of her black lashes and the shape of her shoulders, Q told me about her mother's death and her father's paintings.

We were sitting on the plaster-flecked floor of her studio, passing a bottle of vodka across the thin white dust. The light was draining slowly from the studio's tall windows. Out on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, neon signs advertised New Years' hoedowns, drink specials, two-for-one deals on American flags. It felt like we were looking of a space shuttle at an alien planet.

Q had been five when her mother died. A teenage girl had mistaken the accelerator for the break, she said: how sad, how pointless. For nearly a year after the accident, her father hadn't been able to bring himself to sleep in the master bedroom. He slept in Q's bedroom instead, on a camping pad on the floor. He read every children's book in the house aloud to her, and then he went out and bought more. Every night, he told her about elephants, balloons, and fairy godmothers until they were both exhausted, until they'd reached the brink of forgetting. For a while, it seemed to Q that this period when her father slept on the floor would never end. But one morning in the spring, her father brought his paints and canvases up from the basement and announced that he was going to move into the guest room and turn the old master bedroom into his new painting studio.

"Things changed after that," Q said. Every evening, after her father picked her up at kindergarten, he brewed a pot of green tea and disappeared into that wide, light-filled room, where he painted large, layered abstract works. Sometimes, he allowed her to sit quietly and watch him work. On long summer evenings, as the light changed in the room, the paintings transformed. Blues revealed themselves to be green; specks of brilliant silver appeared in the center of pitch-black canvases.

“There was a particular piece I loved, light green on the surface, with a darker green beneath it that reminded me the bottom of the ocean. But made my father angry. He would stare it at for hours, and then say: it’s not right, it won’t ever be right.”

“Sounds like that runs in the family,” I said, gesturing at all the discarded sculptures around her studio.

Q made no sign that she’d heard me. “One afternoon,” she said, “I asked my father what the green painting was supposed to *mean*. This question, I now know, is the wrong one to ask an abstract artist, but my father was patient with me. He said he wasn’t sure, but the painting reminded him of the train station across the street from his family’s apartment in Buenos Aires.”

“Your father was from Argentina?”

She nodded. “His family emigrated when he was nine. Anyway, what bothered him about the painting was that his green was not quite right. He wanted the painting to take him back to that train station, to make it real again. But it didn’t do the trick, and that drove him crazy.”

I lay down onto the chalky floor and put my jean jacket under my head. What was happening to me? My whole life seemed far away. I watched Q’s hands perform their gentle, precise choreography, opening and closing as she told me about the smell of acrylic and orange-peels that filled her father’s studio, about the kids who had played soccer outside that train station half a century ago. And then she grew quiet, and turned to look down at me.

“Is Q your real name?” I asked her. “I’ve wanted to ask you since I met you.”

She didn’t seem to mind the question. “Legally, yeah. But my birth name was Quintana.”

“That’s a lovely name.”

“I guess,” Q said. “It’s super old-fashioned. Growing up, the other girls called me Q when I played sports, because they couldn’t pronounce it, and I always liked that. It felt like somebody else,

a person I could make into whoever I wanted. Quintana was hopelessly tied to history, but Q could be anybody. It felt American in that way.”

She eased herself down onto the floor beside me. Her body was very close to mine. Her black hair spooled in the sliver between us, a storm system viewed from space. My skin burned against the cold concrete. As she reached over and took the vodka bottle from me, I longed to take her hand, to lean forward and kiss her.

But Q was still thinking of her father, still waxing philosophical. “People think of artists as wild, but most of the artists I know are like me: they create things because they are terrified, because they need to break the human experience into manageable chunks. If you have a painting, or a song, you can say: here, this is longing. This is a train station I loved and will never see again. It’s a means of control: you hang longing on the wall, and then get on with your life.”

All around us, the sculptures stared blankly at us. Two of them, side by side on the worktable, looked up at the ceiling fan like stargazing lovers. The tips of Q’s hair brushed my arm. I wondered if she wanted to kiss me, too.

“I used to write a lot of love songs,” I said, “but I’m trying to stop.”

Q’s eyebrows knitted together. “Why? Are you falling out of love?”

I tried to explain that since the election, making art about my private experiences—about love, loss, and the passage of time—had seemed outdated and selfish. While our country was sponsoring the sequestration of children and the impending heat-death of the species, I was still trying to sing about love and loss. I was speaking, in short, in a dead language. The words sounded pretentious even in my head. Q took another drink from the vodka bottle, and I thought about how what I needed most now was to be quiet, to listen.

“But the world has always been terrible, and people have always sung about love,” Q said gently. She pushed herself up off the floor and went to the window, brushing the plaster dust off her jeans. Had I said something wrong? Was she angry?

“That’s true,” I said. “But it *does* feel like things are different now. There’s that march in Washington—my brother and sister are going.” That morning, I’d read it was predicted to be the largest protest in U.S. history—bigger than the 2017 Women’s March, bigger than the original March on Washington.

“Yes, but our country has been at war for most of our lifetimes,” Q said. “It’s nice people are noticing, I suppose.”

She pulled the blinds wide so that we could see, across the street, a group of partygoers at a rooftop bar, swaying against the floodlit purple sky.

“Anyway, I don’t think you should stop singing about love. That would be a bad precedent to set for the human race.”

I went to her and stood with her at the windowsill. I was conscious of the quickness of her breath, of the distance between our hands. I heard the band in the bar next door playing the second chorus of “Sweet Caroline,” saw the crenellations in the pattern on Q’s sneakers, smelled the faint quotidian tang of her deodorant. Down on the avenue, hundreds of revelers were laughing, embracing, kissing each other on the mouth. Some of them were wearing cowboy hats, leather boots, and jeans; some of them weren’t. It was impossible to tell where the real Nashville ended and the neon fabrication began. But it didn’t matter to me anymore. Oh, to be down there, in the midst of all those bodies and all that light, caught in something bigger than my own mind. I felt like a teenager, all hope and abject terror. I had the sense that everything might soon be completely different.

“What do you think,” Q said. “Are you drunk enough to go dancing?”



*The night took us into its hands*, I thought, what a ridiculous phrase. The night took Q and I down through the damp hallway and into the street. The night took us through a sea of bodies and into a bar flooded with blue light, to a dancefloor where sweaty people moved to a live country band, and then upstairs to another dancefloor where the DJ played EDM remixes of classic Patsy Cline and Johnny Cash songs. And the night said *dance*, knowing there to be no difference between real and fake when a body is drunk and the bass is loud enough. The night watched as we lost track of our bodies, our hearts, our names. The night was vaguely proud of us, like a parental figure at a sporting event, as we switched from vodka to tequila, bought cocaine from the singer in the band downstairs, forgot to do it, and then danced onstage anyways. The old man on the corner of Second Avenue was still singing Neil Young songs on his beat-up guitar, and the night watched us watch him play a gorgeous version of “Harvest Moon,” leaning with his tired kind voice on the word *closer* as we pushed into one another, slid hands into jacket pockets and sweatshirt folds, pressed faces into shoulders. And the night was listening, surely, when Q asked me about Maxine. It must’ve been listening, godlike, just before our lips met, when I told her that Maxine and I had decided to take a break, that things had not been right between us for a long time. The night knew: lies that felt true were as good as true, sometimes. A bright feeling blew away the wars, the rising seas, the thought of Maxine, and the guilt that followed me everywhere. It felt like the beginning of a story, like the chorus of a pop song.

## 10. Who's the Worst?

When I woke up in Q's bed, I knew at last that I was the worst. I was a liar, a cheat, and a habitual squanderer of tenderness. I wasn't good to my mother, and my sister had been calling me now for days with no response. I was the ungrateful inheritor of generations of privilege and good will. I'd been to seven countries and learned nothing. I'd gone to college, but I didn't pay attention. I wasn't that great of a guitar player. I was a cliché, a new tawdry verse in an old, predictable song. I hurt the ones I loved.

Q was already gone when I woke up, and I found myself all alone in her quiet, bright house. I had a hangover the size of Tennessee. She hadn't left a note, but there was a box of cereal, a bowl, and a spoon waiting for me in the breakfast nook downstairs. I tried to eat some corn flakes, but my body refused them.

I was my father's son, the apple that falls. I was a piece of American English spoken into exhaustion. I was a whole group of middle-school boys huddled behind the jungle gym, ranking girls from one to ten. I was the self-satisfied white man giving the press conference after the bombing. I was the problem with our country.

We'd left Q's car downtown, I remembered that much. I recalled one of her featureless statues between us in the backseat of the Lyft, and the driver looking warily back at its smooth head. We'd slept in our clothes, Q's long body wrapped around my smaller frame, while trains and sirens sounded in the night. We didn't have sex; I was too drunk, or too ashamed, or both. I remembered saying—as we were falling asleep, over and over—that I was sorry.

I wandered through a living room filled with sculptures and bright house-plants—a fiddle leaf tree, a cactus. In the tiled bathroom, I took a shower and used several of Q's skin products. The

steam flooded my nostrils and softened my eyes, but I did not feel clean. I put on my syrup-stained t-shirt and my jean jacket and got out of there.

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Q lived in a quiet, hilly neighborhood on the south side of the city, a part of town I'd never been to in my life. I had no idea where I was, and Google Maps led me to a bus station that didn't exist anymore. I chose a direction at random and started walking. It was a neighborhood full of modest brick houses with basketball hoops out front, the kind of neighborhood that would've been full of flowers if it weren't the dead of winter. While I walked up and down the hills, I called Maxine several times, but she didn't pick up. I looked up flights to Philadelphia. If I could find something tomorrow morning, I'd arrive in time to spend New Years' Eve with her. We could share in the ritual of newness together, arbitrary though it was. I could tell her everything.

I went into a church and asked the pastor where the bus station was. From the way he looked at me, I could tell he knew I was the worst. I could tell he knew I hadn't prayed a day since I left Catholic school in the twelfth grade. He could see that even before then I'd been a little shit, faithless and contrarian. He pointed me right back in the direction I'd come.

I called Maxine again, but this time her phone was off. I called her mother, and her mother said: "Oh, Maxine didn't tell you? She's in DC for the march tomorrow."

"What?"

"She's there with her friend—what's her name?—Yolanda," Gloria Cellucci said. She was breathing heavily. "She didn't tell you? Hey, sorry if it's loud, I'm at the gym right now."

"I—thanks, Gloria."

"It's so exciting," she said between breaths. "Your generation is really trying to make a change."

"Well, we have to," I said.

But I wasn't making any changes. I was lost in South Nashville, and I hadn't been to a political rally in months. I'd just betrayed my girlfriend of four years, who was probably going to leave me anyways. I was not good, and I was not famous. My private shame was not worthy of attention. I had not been able to turn it into something marketable. I was another sad spoiled babe crying over nothing in the American wilderness, and I was out of cigarettes.

It was clear to me then: I had to be in D.C. by tomorrow morning, or I'd be the worst forever.

The quiet residential street opened out onto a barren stretch of Nolensville Pike peopled by title loan stores, bail bondsmen, and abandoned fast food restaurants that felt like it could have been anywhere in the country—along Route One outside of Boston, for instance, or in the small towns off of the Pacific Coast Highway. It was a set piece in the grand backstage tour of capitalism. It felt like I'd reached the very ends of the earth. I lifted my phone to my ear, and I called Leanna.

“What?” she said.

“I take it back,” I said. “I'm coming to D.C.”

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Five hours later, I was boarding my flight. A man ahead of me was trying to load a small instrument case—a violin, I assumed—into the overhead bin. While he struggled to shove it in among all the other suitcases and backpacks, the whole line waited, shuffling from foot to foot and muttering into their phones. Finally, the violinist decided to give up and hold the case in his lap. The line began to move again.

When I reached the row listed on my ticket, I realized I would be sitting right next to the thwarted musician—in fact, I had to ask him to get up so I could shuffle past him to the window.

“These planes are getting smaller and smaller,” he said, in a friendly tone.

I couldn't tell if the comment was meant as a jab or an apology, so I laughed.

“It’s funny,” he said, “they put us twelve kilometers in the air and fly us across the world, and all we can think is: the seat’s smaller now, and where are my pretzels?”

The stewardesses gave us a hearty welcome and thanked us for flying Delta. They mimed the actions we should take in the event that the plane should catch fire and fall out of the sky. The most important thing, the captain’s voice said over the loudspeaker, was not to worry about your neighbor’s safety before your own. Even if your neighbor happened to be your child, the best thing was to make sure the mask was safely secured over your own nose and mouth before attempting to help anyone else. If everyone looked out for their own survival, she said cheerfully, we’d all have the best shot possible. In any case, she concluded, she hoped we had a comfortable and pleasant flight.

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My favorite thing about flying had always been the illusion that the world, viewed from such heights, was a tame and logical place. From the ground, you could see all the randomness that went into shaping the world, the ever-shifting confluence of chance and selfish interest that went into every decision, but from the air, you saw only an intentional tapestry—rivers that forked like lightning through gridded farmland, highways spiraling off towards glistening cities. By simple virtue of being up in the air looking down on it all, you could be duped into thinking you had a hand in it all—in the creation of all that glorious complexity. You could be duped into thinking that the humans down below were good to one another, that you were good to them. Of course, that was exactly how I—imperial child that I was, cheater, great squanderer—*would* want to feel.

Maxine had once argued about whether the world viewed from the air looked more like a beautiful organism or an extraordinarily complex machine. To her, all the cities seemed like beating hearts, and the highways were veins running between them. The earth below was a being in harmony, breathing in and out as the tides came and went and the electric lights went on and off, on and off. But to me, it looked like nothing so much as a computer’s motherboard, a network of

thousands—billions, if one could only unfurl the horizon and see it all at once—of networked transistors and microprocessors. Both of us were right—ultimately, it was a matter of how we wanted to see ourselves.

The violinist had a light Irish accent, with a little of the American South baked in. He looked about forty, dark-eyed and handsome in the thin manner of an aesthete. He was a touring musician, he told me, or he had been until now. He was on his way back to Dublin, and he planned to get married and stay there for good. When I confessed that I too was a musician, the violinist did not, as a fellow musician might have done in another city, make any comment or inquiry into the nature of the music I made. This was Nashville, after all, and there was nothing duller to be in Nashville than a guitar player with big dreams. It would get you further at most parties to be some sort of niche accountant.

“For twenty years,” the violinist said, I spend most of my life on the road.” He was out of Nashville for months at a time, mostly in Europe and Australia. When he was home, he barely had time to lick his wounds and call his friends before it was time to leave again. In the beginning, the tours had been closer to Nashville, conducted in rented vans and dive bars and friends’ cousins’ living rooms. But eventually, one of the bands he played for took off, and the vans became buses, and then planes—an endless parade, he said, giving me a sly look, of complimentary pretzels.

I couldn’t help but ask him why he was giving it up.

As the violinist thought it over, his forehead creased in a way that evoked not age so much as elegance.

“After a while,” he said at last, “it started to seem like everybody around me was constantly reaching. “Everyone I knew was always trying to find a way to be more themselves, more authentic. But what that really meant was that they wanted to become *less* human, and more like the people in magazines: airbrushed, Photo-shopped, all blemishes edited out. I’ve seen lot of money spent in the

name of that dream: photoshoots, hair, makeup, public relations fees, plastic surgery, brand consulting, on and on. And when you spend all your time around people like that, day in and day out, you get tired of it. After a while, I missed the first people I knew, who never cared who I knew or who I was appearing with, who just wanted my presence and attention.”

“I know what you mean.” Not that I’d ever been famous, but I was familiar with the way fame could distort everything around you. For years, that was all I wanted: to become somebody other than myself. I was the worst, some part of me had always known it, but maybe if my face was on the billboards, if the blemishes were edited out and I had my story together, then no one would ever find out.

The violinist closed the in-flight magazine he’d been reading. “If you’ll forgive me for speaking in broad generalizations about your country,” he said. “I’ve never been somewhere else where the lust for transformation is so prevalent. Of course, it’s like that in Ireland too. It’s still capitalism, but it’s an older place. There’s a certain kneejerk skepticism, a weariness of transformation. Over here, though, it’s constant—everybody is always thinking about how they can improve their body, their mind, their spirit.”

I thought of Quintana who became Q, of the faceless women in her studio. I thought of her mother on the treadmill, of my newly wealthy brother signing a check, of Fabiola who had wanted a new country, of Maxine’s guilt and my own, of the figures marching towards Washington from every corner of the country, hoping for change. I was suddenly very glad to be joining them. At the very least, we could wait for the new year together.

Just then, the stewardess arrived with her cart. The violinist ordered a soda water, no ice, and I asked for a ginger ale. Along with the drinks, she gave us not only salted peanuts, but an entire box of little off-brand Oreos.

“On the bright side,” the violinist said, “the snack selection is above average.”

He went back to the in-flight magazine, and I put my headphones in and looked out the window again. We were at cruising altitude now, above the clouds, but every once in a while there was a break in the white blanket, and I caught a glimpse of the world below, where everything had been created according to a precise plan and humans were wise, humans were noble. Tomorrow night, the new year would come barreling in over the highways and the prisons and the concept restaurants, over the machine or the organism, bright and glistening, heavy with the same old hopes. I thought of saying something about it all to the violinist, but when I turned away from the window, he was asleep. As we flew over Delaware, his head lolled sideways, bit by bit, until it came to rest on my shoulder.