

XENIA

and other classics

by

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A CREATIVE THESIS

submitted to Southern New Hampshire University

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

School of Liberal Arts

October 17, 2020

This thesis has been examined and approved.

Faculty name Thesis Director

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SPRING BREAKERS

Allison stooped with her knee to the ground, studying the earliest coins displayed, silver and bulky at three inches wide. The relief of a gorgon stared back from behind the glass, tongue out, teeth bared, the circular edges of the coin stretched so much like Play-Doh she imagined the Greeks entrusting its minting to a child. She stood back up and was startled by a tall red-haired young man hovering over her. She knew his face from the opposite end of a scratched-up wooden table on the ground floor of Logan Hall. He apologized, but lingered as if they were already in the midst of a conversation.

He explained that drachmae were made of electrum, an alloy of silver and gold, but only made with a wee bit of gold once circulated under the Roman Empire. Allison guessed correctly that he was Scottish. She added it must have been hard to carry a bunch of those to the market just for a loaf of bread.

The two stood and chatted, surrounded by the ancient coin collection in the basement of the Penn Museum, a rare excursion for their “Disasters in the Ancient World” course, a senior year 300-level elective. He introduced himself as Grant, which she remembered as soon as he said it—the professor had been calling on them for half a spring semester in Disasters. He asked if she’d like to return to the museum together outside of class. Later that week, the two sat together in the museum’s lecture hall for a presentation on mosaic preservation during the Syrian Civil War, their knees a slim and trembling inch apart.

Once the Q&A concluded, and the professor was applauded, Grant asked Allison if she would like to go back and watch *I, Claudius* in his room. Allison said sure. It would be educational, she said, to see the inside of the International House dorms. The two waited in awkward silence for the bottlenecked aisle of elderly museum patrons to dribble out the back

door. Allison untied and shook out her two loose braids, careful to let her dirty blonde hair fall slowly out of her fingertips, knowing Grant was watching behind her. She turned around to find him frowning at a group of seniors lingering up the carpeted aisle.

Grant asked Allison for her top takeaways from the lecture while they walked through a light drizzle the three blocks from Spruce Street over to Chestnut. The other undergrads had left for spring break, and the newly verdant campus was quiet enough for them to hear birds chirping in the low-hung trees along Locust Walk. He was attempting to keep his Penn-branded umbrella over Allison, but she kept skipping ahead, not minding that her torn sweatshirt was getting damp. He asked again for her takeaways from the lecture. He ventured to give his own, and noted he was eager to look up the composition of the temporary adhesive the Maarat Numan Museum had improvised to hold their mosaics together. He led her through the cement hallways of the I-House to reveal his study zone: an extra-long twin bed, a desk and dresser made of blonde particleboard, a lamp trained on a small fern balanced on a window that looked onto the busy street below.

He queued up *I, Claudius* episode one, “A Touch of Murder,” on his laptop, and the two sat on the bed to watch. Allison was suddenly aware of a new smell, a pleasant one, of his laundry detergent or a light cologne, something floral. She wanted to touch Grant’s striped maroon and navy sweater, to feel if the material was more on the polyester end or a nice cashmere, she couldn’t tell. She would likely wear the same outfit he was wearing, his fitted sweater and fitted jeans were actually quite effeminate, and she didn’t know if that was a good thing or a troubling thing, it confused her. Grant asked Allison if she’d like a soda, and reached below the bed to produce a Diet Coke. He pretended to fumble passing it to her and put his hand on her thigh. Neither of them dared take their eyes off the laptop screen once it was clear the

hand would remain there. No sooner had Livia gently laid the poisoned Marcellus down on his deathbed than the two were kissing against the wall of the dorm room, Grant's hand stretching the fabric of Allison's black jeans from the inside.

Allison held her hand on the cool cement wall for balance and pictured herself handcuffed in a jail cell. She had been careful up until her senior year, exploring boys' bedrooms from the high rises to the quad, but always drawing the line at a certain point. Off-campus one night that fall, on the top floor of a rotting rowhouse, she was in bed with a computer science major from Pennsylvania. He ignored Allison when she asked him to stop, and he came quickly, excited by her squirming. She woke up the next morning in her own room, confused and humiliated, but relaxed—no longer anxious about her efforts in abstinence, believing it didn't matter one way or the other anymore.

Allison removed Grant's hand from her jeans and sat up on the bed. Then she said, "Don't you have something?"

Grant stood up and unwrapped a small navy blue wrapper stamped on both sides with the Penn crest. Allison recognized it as one of the free condoms laid out in baskets outside Health Services. He tossed the wrapper aside and they watched the glossy red and blue coat-of-arms twirl to the floor. "I always thought the fish on there was sort of strange," Grant said, and rolled the rubber up his pale freckled member.

"It's a dolphin, actually," said Allison, still staring at the empty wrapper. She held back an anecdote, then realized he was probably the one person in the world who would be interested. "It reminds me of one of my favorite pieces of ancient art, in Ostia," she said. Allison laid backwards on her elbows, stared wistful at the ceiling, and chatted away about a mosaic inlaid on

the floor of a second-century fish shop in Rome's old harbor, a discovery from a travel blog, while Grant pushed inside her.

"There's a dolphin, which ate all the fishermen's fish. So it's a pretty negative image for a fish shop. Then, 'inbide calco te' means 'I trample the envious.'"

"I love that," Grant said, rocking back and forth, trying to meet her eye.

"No one really knows what it means exactly," she said. She smiled up at him for the first time, reached to wipe the sweat down the length of one of his stray red bangs.

"Inbide calco te," Grant chanted. "Now you go."

Allison had to close her eyes to echo the Latin.

"I trample the envious," Grant said in a whisper. He came, and busied himself with dislodging and throwing away the condom while Allison laid there, unsure if she should have shared her secret mosaic.

Allison suggested New Deck, an Irish pub tucked away off a cobblestone alley, for their next date two nights later. She wore a men's tweed blazer and tied a red silk belt around her neck, put on makeup for the first time in a while. Standing nervous at the entry, she watched Grant skip up the stairs into the pub, passing the tacked-up football club scarves without a glance towards them, a small moment that surged in Allison an enormous amount of hope that Grant was one to ignore sports. He gave Allison a cheery he-llo and a kiss. Power couple, thought Allison, watching Grant put a handful of toothpicks from the hostess stand into his pocket. Someone with European sensibilities, a break from the cauliflower-eared boys she always seemed to find herself cornered with at parties. Grant shifted his messenger bag to his other shoulder, unwrapped one of the toothpicks and dug at a back molar.

The two stood by the bar and each dropped a shot of cream and whiskey into a pint of stout. They set down their wet and foaming glasses, marking their spot at the bar, though it was early afternoon on the Monday of spring break and the place was otherwise empty. Grant said he admired Allison for not even worrying about getting beer all down her face and dress, and she gave him a teasing push backwards, making sure to get a feel of his collarbone. They discussed the recently opened Nero's Palace, the excavated Domus Aurea, which stretched a full square mile under the city of Rome, and you remember it from Tacitus and Suetonius and Pliny the Elder, right? And did you know you can still see frescoes on the walls, two-thousand-year-old paintings there all this time, isn't that just insanity, and did you hear they found a pulley and other parts that suggested there actually was a rotating dinner table? Allison, feeling more open after a second car bomb, admitted to having not read any Pliny the Elder. At that, she thought she saw Grant's lip curl into a slight, unkind smile.

They agreed they would like to visit Rome someday. Grant was here on a St. Andrew's scholarship, and it was his first time out of the U.K. They even provided cash for his living expenses, otherwise there was no way he could've come over, they wouldn't let him work here without a visa. The classes at Penn were fantastic but he hadn't made many friends, he admitted—a wiry running mate he met at the gym who couldn't quite keep up with him along the Schuylkill, a Georgian neighbor in the I-House who would sit for a beer complaining about the fraternities, then inevitably find his way over to one, leaving Grant to read alone under the fluorescent light of the common room. He missed walking the West Sands, the frigid beach off St. Andrews. He couldn't find a Penn replacement for Drusilla's reading group. He spent every Friday night of his second year sitting on the dusty Oriental rug in his professor's living room, sipping on her reserve wine, listening to the neo-existentialists bicker with the post-structuralists,

soaking in every word. Allison tuned in and out, daydreaming that she was back in the I-House, watching his laptop on the bed. She imagined them strolling down Locust Walk, swinging hands between classes. They'd pass the Penngineer, who would seethe at their joy, regret everything.

Grant had never known his parents, he told Allison, which intrigued her enough to snap her attention back into the bar. His grandmother raised him in Glasgow, just the two of them. Allison said she'd been to London, but never to Scotland, and not anywhere on the mainland in Europe. Grant ventured that perhaps they would end up on vacation in Rome together, and Allison could barely conceal a look of glee.

When the check came, Grant waited for Allison to join him in pulling out a card.

Allison had an American Express card she recently received in the mail. The card was made out to a D.H. Burns, an amalgamation of her and her father Henry's names. His credit was shot, her father had explained on a phone call, and she didn't have a bad score yet, so he needed to take it out in partnership. And please, he added, don't ever use the AmEx.

Because Allison's needs beyond the dining hall were mostly cash-based (beers at the Khyber, coffee at the Green Line, admission at the door of Skull and Bones), she started asking her friends, when they were out in shops together, to buy random items on her card in exchange for the dollar amount.

"Actually," Allison said. She placed her hand over Grant's on the black padded check holder. "I could just throw this on my AmEx, and you could give me cash?"

"Why?"

"It would just be easier for me if I put the whole of it on the AmEx, if that's okay?"

The bartender swiped at the check holder, but Grant held tight to it, his lone card inside.

“No, that’s alright. I want to keep my cash,” said Grant, avoiding eye contact with Allison.

“Oh,” said Allison.

The bartender held up his palms. “You ready, or...?”

Allison handed him both of their cards.

“Well,” Grant said, getting up from the barstool. He signed his half of the check and gave Allison a quick peck on the cheek. “Off to the library.”

“What? But it’s spring break,” said Allison.

“Better chance at a rocking chair,” he said. “Augustine is calling. I have to get caught up in ‘Apologetics in a Wider World.’”

Allison rolled her eyes. Grant frowned down at her.

“I wonder, Allison. Do you think of yourself as a serious person?”

She toyed with the silk belt around her neck and glared at him, asked what he meant.

“Do you take yourself seriously? Waving your AmEx around.”

Allison sucked on her teeth and didn’t answer. Her memory of the bed in the I-House, of a stuttering Derek Jacobi and his toga, the cool cement wall, began to slip away.

“Anyhoo. Remember Aidos, Allison.”

“You mean ‘adios’?” Allison felt like she might cry.

“No, Aidos. The goddess of respect and modesty. Get it?” Grant picked up his messenger bag and headed out the door.

Allison felt frustrated that Grant left New Deck after only a couple of drinks. She had the whole rest of the night ahead of her, was too tipsy to read anything at home, and the campus was dead. She sat at the bar thinking through her options and growing increasingly annoyed with

Grant. The bartender asked her if she'd like anything further, which she took as a cue to leave. She paused at the end of the cobblestoned Sansom Street, and, instead of turning right to head back up Walnut to her apartment, turned left to grab the elevated trolley downtown.

At the Khyber, Allison ordered a well whiskey with a little bit of seltzer and drank it quickly. She ordered another one, decided she would throw the tab on the AmEx. Her father owed her at least a night out. He wasn't even paying for college. It was all borrowed and would all have to be paid back. Good thing she was majoring in Classics. Solid return on investment, Allison, great decision there. She was so checked out this semester, she'd gotten her first C, a paper on "Masculinity in the Baths and Other Rituals." No wonder she wasn't a "serious person," doubling down in her classes like Grant did, who was here for free, on scholarships. They gifted him thousands of dollars of cash each semester, just to buy food and stuff. It was all a wee bit of fun, as he might say.

What a horrible word, "wee." He wasn't even using it ironically. Wee was in regular rotation, in his everyday vocabulary. Did he really smile when she said she hadn't read Pliny? She replayed that bitter, spiteful moment, traces of curdled cream from the car bomb stuck on the red hairs of his upper lip. Had he laughed at her, too? Allison decided she might hate Grant.

Allison leafed through a roughed-up *Philadelphia Weekly* she found on the bar and listened to an amateur guitarist performing on a raised platform in the back of the room, his voice cracking at the highest notes of "Hallelujah." An elderly man in denim overalls and wild gray hair sat staring at her from the other end of the bar. She ordered one more whiskey seltzer and the check. The bartender ran the card, tossed it back at her spot on the bar, and told her it was declined.

Thumbing the AmEx, she debated calling her father. On the one hand, she didn't want him to know she was using his card. On the other, he could possibly right the balance so she could pay the bill and leave this bar. The overalled man had suspiciously moved three bar stools closer. She called her dad.

“What’s all that noise? You out with the new boyfriend?” Allison had made the mistake earlier of telling her father about Grant. “I can barely hear you, Allison.”

“Well I was, and now I’m actually at this place and I actually don’t have enough to pay my tab?”

The singer screeched at his apex, “it’s a cold and it’s a broken Hallelujah.”

“What? I can’t hear you but I’ll leave you with this. How does a Scots guy ask a girl out for a date?” She had also made the mistake of telling her father that Grant was Scottish. Allison looked to the door but didn’t want to take the call outside. The bartender might think she was skipping out on the bill.

“Can I borra yer chassis, lassie?” her father said.

“What’s a chassis?”

“Can I borra yer chassis,” her father said, raising his voice. “Chassis, it rhymes with lassie and it sounds like ass.”

“Yeah but I’ve never heard that word before.”

“Sweetie, I’m sorry but I cannot hear a word you’re saying,” he said, and hung up the phone.

Allison contemplated trying Grant next. If she could get him down here, they could explore Old City together, she could walk him by the Liberty Bell. On the other hand, he might

call her out for going to a bar by herself. Or he might ask for her top takeaways from the evening.

“Chassis is a car frame,” said the man down the bar. “The framework.”

She dialed Grant’s number and ducked into her phone.

“They use them up the street. For the parades,” the man said, and pointed towards the back of the room.

Grant picked up with a groggy hello. It occurred to Allison that she likely could have charmed this old man enough to pick up her twenty dollar tab, but now with Grant on the line it was too late.

“Um, Grant? I’m really sorry about this but I need your help? You know the Khyber, down on Second?”

The bartender leaned over to Allison and crumpled her bill. “Really, it’s okay. Get us next time.”

Grant said he’d be down soon.

“The mummers, they’re always building these little cars,” said the old guy.

“What’s a mummer?” Allison asked, finally deigning to look over to him.

“What, you don’t live here?”

Allison shook her head, then remembered she did in fact live here.

“My brother, he did the whole dress-up thing. On New Years mostly. I never got into it myself. But he was very much a part of it.”

She looked towards where he was pointing, a framed picture of a group of adults dancing in the middle of the street, City Hall’s gothic spire looming behind them. They wore hot pink costumes, oversized clay masks, jester-style hats. Rainbows of plumage burst from their

shoulders. They each had an instrument in hand, saxophones and banjos and cumbersome cellos. The picture, and the man pointing to it, with his self-satisfied smile, happy to be a part of this tradition even tangentially, connected by some brother who sounded like he might be dead, a dead brother whose memory was forever tied to clowning, all of this made Allison incredibly sad.

A flash of red hair entered the bar and Allison, sitting high on her stool, felt empowered. Perhaps she could treat Grant like the senior thesis she had not been assigned, having avoided the effort in her course selection. She could show him around the city all spring, get beyond the dogged cheesesteak and Ben Franklin-themed social events the University threw.

Grant slid in next to her and held out a twenty, asked her if she was ready to settle up. Allison swung around to give him her full attention. She dug her knee into the inside of his thigh and asked, “What do you want to do?”

Grant balanced an oversized book on the bar and told Allison he checked it out for her at the library. He flipped through the heavy matte pages, talking through the marble statues and other pieces housed in the Naples Archaeological Museum. “There’s a very thorough chapter on their coin collection,” he said.

“You brought a coffee table book to a bar?” Allison said.

Grant crossed his arms and sat back in his stool. “So you’ve just been getting sloshed alone here all night?” He ordered a Yuengling and pointed to a silver row of Roman coins, all different iterations of the head of Augustus. “Allison. I thought you were into numismatics.”

“See, in America...” Allison took the book and dropped it, pages down, onto the beer-soaked floor of the pub. “In America, college isn’t about what you learn. College is about who you meet.” She nodded towards the man down the bar. “Like Enzo.”

“College isn’t about what you learn? That’s the silliest thing I’ve ever heard.” Grant said.

He bent down to pick up and brush off the library book. “Where did you get that from?”

“That’s what my dad says,” said Allison.

Grant laughed out loud to himself, a ho ho ho type of laugh.

“Your laugh is extremely off-putting,” said Allison.

“College is about meeting people? What a squander,” he said.

“It’s a very nerdy laugh and I’d like you to stop it.”

“College is about sucking and fucking,” Enzo called out.

“Aye,” said Grant, and stopped laughing. They gave one another a pained look. Grant left a ten on the bar for his Yuengling and helped Allison off her chair. “Come on. Let’s walk back.” She took his arm and felt the rush she felt in the I-House, when he first put his hand on her leg.

They walked down Chestnut Street, Grant with the book under his arm. Allison pointed out the Liberty Bell, encased in a glass museum, to their right, and Independence Hall, the flat, brick Georgian, to their left. She couldn’t think of any history interesting enough to share. After a few more blocks, Grant turned to Allison with a serious look.

“I was thinking... I could use the last of this scholarship money on a trip, after graduation,” he said.

“You should,” Allison said. She looked up and down the street, desperate for a landmark she could comment on, but it was all closed retail, their iron gates pulled to the street.

“I was thinking maybe you’d want to come along?”

Allison cried out and broke into a skip. She took the large book out of Grant’s hands, held it up to him like it was a travel brochure. “We could do it... we could go see Rome and Naples. We could see Nero’s Palace!”

“I was thinking, actually, Chicago?”

“Chicago.” Allison didn’t know how to react, so she kept skipping, a heavier, angry skip, the oversized library book still in her arms.

“I’ve always wanted to lean against the window in Sears Tower, you know, like in the movie?” Grant walked faster to keep up with the skipping. “Cruise down Lake Shore Drive in a red convertible. Or at least get to see someone cruising in a red convertible.”

“Chicago, Illinois?”

They walked awhile longer in silence. A crowd came into view, an eclectic mix, groups of teenagers, college couples, solo older men, many in all black, milling around the sidewalk and in the street. Some were waiting in a line that snaked into the basement of a church and others were smoking. Allison and Grant peered into the basement’s open door from the sidewalk. Four women commanded a makeshift stage in a room lined with cheap faux wood paneling. The rec room was full of thrilled, dancing fans. A few of the more adventurous were being carried hand over hand over the crowd. The lead singer looked older than a typical punk singer, with a face that looked hard, committed, and eager. She had long dreadlocks held up in a tattered headscarf. She sang in a melodic warble, alternating English and German phrases. The drummer abandoned her kit and started banging kitchen spoons on the side of her snare.

“We should go in... right?” Grant asked.

Allison pointed at a piece of paper taped to the door, “\$10” sketched large in Sharpie. Grant frowned, considering the amount, when Allison’s phone lit up. Her father was calling her back. He either received a notification about the declined credit card or wanted to clear up the confusion over the chassis. Allison looked between her phone and Grant, and after a few uncertain seconds, clicked the phone silent.

“Come on then,” Grant said. He gave a defeated nod towards the Market Street Bridge, back to campus.

“For fuck’s sake,” Allison said. It came out louder and whinier than she intended. She would need to back up her grousing, make a dramatic move. She darted behind a bush, the library book still in hand, and followed a wooden sign pointing towards the church’s crypt. Grant appeared behind her, crouching and excited. She peered into a darkened window and saw a floor littered with plastic Playskool toys. She motioned for Grant to hoist open the window, and jammed the book lengthwise to prop it open.

“I hereby present my senior thesis,” Allison said. She wiggled her way through the window, and fished her foot around the dark until it found the sturdiness of a table. “I hope I am showcasing how my liberal arts degree can be applied to solving problems in the real world and, QED, successfully proving my seriousness as a person.”

“I’m getting a sense that you might be mocking me,” Grant said. He dove through the window onto the table head-first, as if he too had something to prove. He did half a handstand on the table, collapsed, and fell onto the yellow hood of a toddler-sized pedal car. Allison walked over and held out her hand.

“Inbide calco te,” she said.

“Inbide calco te,” Grant repeated.

They tip-toed through the daycare room and Allison pulled on a heavy door. A jittery bathroom line crowded their view of the wide rec room. Beyond, a deep and low-sung chorus, a repeat of the phrase “typical girls,” reverberated around the slats of the faux wooden walls. They elbowed their way past the bathroom line. They were in.

The couple lingered in the back of the room, watching the foursome in a tired trance. Allison fiddled with her earring stud while Grant balanced his library book against the back wall. The band played the beginning of a familiar song. Grant softly hummed along, trying to pinpoint the tune. They looked at one another when the lead singer burst out the chorus. "I heard it through the grapevine... how much longer will you be mine?" They recognized the cover at the same time and Allison reached out to hold onto Grant's clammy elbow. They watched the room dance in front of them, stray hands grazing the dropped ceiling, sweaty, panting faces escaping through the back every so often to join the bathroom line. Allison fiddled with her earring again and the small silver back fell onto the floor, somewhere between them.

"I'll get it." Grant bent down on his hands and knees. Allison looked down at him, watched him paw the scuffed and dirty tile. He bumped into someone's leg but was undeterred, he kept his head down and crawled in tight circles around her. He picked up a stray button, held it into the light, discarded it, and kept searching. Allison watched the women play on and tapped her hand in time to the spoons, letting him do the work while she still had him.

MIDDLE SCHOOL ADVENTURE A

“Lord, keep our young bikers and sailors safe today,” I say, my eyes closed, head bowed. “Bless us with sunny weather, if it is in your will. And Lord, I lift up our leaders. I pray that you reorient them to a sound theology. I pray that you remind them of Paul’s words in Romans 6:14: ‘you are not under law, but under grace.’”

“Liz...” someone grumbles. A few of the folding chairs creak. At my morning leaders’ meeting, the counselors at the Vineyard have split along ideological lines. The Catholics are standing, eager to get out there and teach the testaments, the saintly history, the cathedral-strewn relics. They stretch their hamstrings and blow on mugs of coffee. The legalists are holdovers from High School Immersion II. They roll their eyes from their folding chairs and shake their heads. After some of the wealthier parents complained that the Vineyard was getting “too Jesusy,” the youth group recruited me, an aspiring youth minister with a degree in ancient history, and the legalists are still bitter.

“I pray that we all experience your grace, in whatever path you choose for us today.” I open my eyes, look around the leaders’ room at the still-bowed heads. “Amen, you guys?”

A few of us were up late packing sandwiches and tending to a burst pipe in the boys’ bathroom, but we’ve got a big day of activities ahead. I read off the cabins slotted for the bike ride and the cabins slotted for the sailboat ride. The counselors stand, re-tie bandanas, grab a few extra seltzers. While Maggie, the retired Nightingale-Bamford English teacher, struggles to fold her chair, I ask if she’ll be Bike Team Leader. I ask her to make sure they’re back from their twenty-miler by three so we can fit in a game of capture-the-flag. I remind her to console any complaining parties with the promise that we are switching activities tomorrow.

I was able to take the job after getting through college without too much debt, ample funds available to me as the lone Paul Scholar in Wesleyan's Classics Department. The aging alumni donated grants in support of religious studies, a mismatch for my peers, who were looking to law school, or spending the majority of time on a double-major in Econ. I took over the Campus Crusade chapter from a couple of soft-spoken Midwesterners, made them suffer sessions dissecting the gospels, line by line, in Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew, until the free pizza was no longer enough enticement for them to continue showing up every Tuesday night. The Vineyard is definitely a step up in terms of fellowship. A BlackRock executive founded the camp in Bellport, Long Island to preach the gospel to students in nearby private and independent boarding schools, and I've been finding comfort in my month here so far, leading Bible studies in the ocean breeze. Even rich kids need Jesus.

Outside, I clang the bell on the Main Hall's porch and call out for the Green Cabin, the Blue Cabin, and the Yellow Cabin to gather for our boat excursion. I make my rounds between the groups of lounging middle schoolers, confiscate the ping pong ball and topple an early-stage Jenga tower. Our campus is tucked away in a forest enclosure but it's an easy walk to the ocean. My friends are suffering Montauk prices for weekends away, while I'm sleeping all summer under fresh cedar. The buildings that line our grassy half-acre are polished cabins, rustic enough to foster intimacy yet deluxe enough for the campers to return each summer, with friends. There's a secret gardening shack where we keep a fridge full of beer for any counselors who need a night off. I'm free to walk down to the marina any time, flash a badge and board a locals' ferry that motors over to a hidden stretch of Fire Island.

Once fully gathered and counted, our group of twenty-two heads down the driveway. We cheer on the grumbling bikers as they cycle past us. I've got hold of a first-aid kit and Joe, my

co-counselor for the day trip, carries a gigantic cooler of sandwiches and sodas over his head and has his guitar strapped to his back. He is an alum of the program, a DuPont. Now free from family and in college, I'm helping him find his own way.

We round the driveway onto a street with some light traffic, and I'm startled when a couple of the girls cling to each side of my cotton dress. "Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes," they sing. They lead everyone into a rendition of "Seasons of Love" from Rent on our ten minute walk to the marina. I've got six girls from a music and performing arts school in my cabin. These private schools have all been specializing. We host Latinists from the Upper East Side, drama students from the Upper West. Choir boys from midtown, engineers from the Bronx. The Brooklyn Heights campers are somehow all involved in puppeteering. We made a run to Michaels for felt and glue guns to keep them engaged during free time.

My cabin of theater kids has a shared language of gestures. They've been raised to strive for roomfuls of applause. Getting-ready time turns into a chorus of vocal exercises. At night they break out their hair brushes and sing. Work on their choreo. This week I've got a three-season-streak Broadway star, orphan Annie herself. One of the chimney sweeps from Mary Poppins. A couple Newsies. A girl who played a chambermaid alongside the cast of Portrait of a Lady. I had to take a smoke break when I heard her coo how Nicole Kidman is so, so nice. They perform all day without breaking their wide smiles. My goal this week is to get them to take off their Greek masks and become vulnerable. I want them to leave here thinking about their relationship with Christ. I want them to leave here knowing where we go when we die.

My girls are twirling in the middle of the street, singing, "what about lo-oo-ove?" A Mercedes SUV rounds a sharp corner and I dive in front of them, take the brunt of a loud honk. We reach the marina and Joe, ahead of the group, greets four white-poloed men in the parking

lot. The Long Island Historic Tall Ships staff waves us down the dock towards an 80' sailboat that leaves the harbor's yachts and Boston Whalers in its shadow. The Argo, an old-fashioned schooner, with two fifty-foot wooden masts, is so expensive to rent out, it's the one camp activity broken out into a line item in the tuition section of the Vineyard's website.

We walk up a steel ramp, the campers theatrical with each wobbly step, clutching the rope with both hands and star-jumping onto the wooden deck. I take a moment to twirl around, look up to see nothing but masts and ropes and sky. I ask everyone to sit around the deck in a cross-legged circle so we don't get in the way of the crew. Joe strums lightly on his acoustic guitar. I read from Galatians while two young men untie the spring lines and glide us off the dock.

"I do not set aside the grace of God. For if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" I set the Bible down. "What do you all think Paul means here?"

"It's like, we always break the law, all the time," says one of the girls. She was in the Caribbean with her family before camp and her blonde hair is layered with colorful string wraps. "Like you were saying, about our sin being stored on a hard drive with unlimited gigabytes?"

One of the crew members reaches over my shoulder to grab a rope and I take in a whiff of suntan lotion. I steal a quick look down his unbuttoned polo, catch a glimpse of one of those stupid hemp necklaces tied by a shell.

"And what we do doesn't matter," says the boy who wears the same hat everyday. It's a dirty white UMASS baseball cap with the M scratched out in black Sharpie so that it reads 'U ASS.' "We can do anything, is what you're saying?"

I shake my head. "You don't have to 'do' anything."

"That's not what Maggie said," he says.

We hear the light buzz of an engine and the boat begins to move out of the dock.

“Guys. Don’t listen to Maggie,” Joe says with a sneer, looking over at me. I give him my ixnay face but he goes on. “She’s a legalist.”

“What’s a legalist?” asks U ASS.

“All that matters is faith in Christ crucified,” I say. A gust of wind picks up and flutters the onionskin pages of my Bible. “That is the gospel. As Paul writes in Corinthians, ‘there is nothing else but Jesus Christ and him crucified.’ That’s it. It’s not about being good all the time.”

“Is Paul the same thing as Jesus?” one of the boys asks. I sigh, then remember the parents, their request to ground the Christ stuff in historical context. I pick out a piece of printed paper I’d stuffed in the middle of Revelation. “No, Paul is not Jesus. He is one of the apostles and wrote much of the New Testament. Let’s dive into some other authors writing at this time. Anyone into Tacitus?”

I begin to lose the kids’ attention as the boat putters through Bellport Bay. The thin tip of Fire Island passes us by on the right, and they all wave at the suntanning beachgoers, who are too far away and too reclined to notice. Trails of cirrus span out forever in front of us and the sun glimmers off the flat bronzy green of the Atlantic. I feel a little guilty remembering I gave Maggie’s group the sailboat day with a higher chance of rain.

“Here’s Tacitus, from the Annals. ‘The originator of the name, Christ, was executed as a criminal by the procurator Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius; and though repressed, this destructive superstition erupted again, not only through Judea, which was the origin of this evil, but also through the city of Rome, to which all that is horrible and shameful floods together and is celebrated.’”

The crew member I sniffed earlier unleashes a hefty canvas sheet and runs to the other side of the deck. He straps into a harness, climbs rung by rung up the rope ladder fixed to one of the wooden masts.

“Though repressed, this destructive superstition erupted again... what do you guys think Tacitus means here?”

The boat picks up and a gust of wind hits us again. Tacitus goes flying. The students laugh and the girls from my cabin break out into *Les Misérables*'s “I Dreamed a Dream.” They hold their hands to their hearts and belt the chorus. Joe is excited by the creative outburst, he tries to keep up with the song on his guitar. He asks a nearby crewmember to sit down and join us, but the young man just smiles and continues to run around the deck, attaching rigging to various pulleys. The crew gathers around a braided rope to hoist the first sail, and then the second, and we shield our faces from the sun and clap as the cream canvases unfurl above. I point up at my crew member, and we gasp with excitement as we watch him hook his feet around a thick cable and pull himself hand over hand towards the other mast.

Joe transitions into one of the camp's favorite worship songs, the one complete with boy and girl rounds. I close my eyes and sing along as a gust of wind whips my hair over my eyes. My Green Cabin exaggerates the crescendos. Orphan Annie isn't the best singer. She hits the notes but there doesn't seem to be much passion for a Broadway star. She's not even swaying. She's just sitting there, her red hair blowing every which way, getting the words right. I throw my hands up to belt the song louder and hit someone behind me, whip around to see a flash of long black hair, a man's ponytail. The young man stumbles backward and drops a rope that's hooked to something above.

A sharp clanging stirs us out of the song and we hear a dull heavy thud come from the bow of the boat. My crewmember, who had been shimmying the cable above, is now lying on his stomach on the deck. His face is angled towards us, his eyes are closed and his mouth breathes rapidly.

We do nothing.

I hear from the group, later in the parking lot, that I was actually the only one doing nothing. All I remember is staring at the young boy's face, a desperate attempt at recounting what had just happened. Did I say anything to him in these thirtyish minutes? Is he the one who grabbed my hand and helped me off the ramp? How old is he? He looks short, maybe five foot five. I remember watching his calm face, his eyes closed as if napping, the shell of his hemp choker moving up and down with his Adam's apple, holding onto the beat of the song we'd been singing. I remember swinging my hands back, hitting the other crew member.

Apparently the girls from my cabin screamed their heads off while the other two cabins yelled at them to shut up. A few of the crew members propped the boy up on a crate of lifejackets. They asked one another if they should attempt CPR but they weren't sure that was the right course of action since he was still breathing. Joe found a flare gun from a nearby chest and shot it in the air, then was chastised by a crying crew member. The boat sped back to the marina where an ambulance and a few police cars were waiting.

We commiserate with the rest of the crew after the ambulance peels away, and learn the boy's name is Seth. He's a rising junior at Tufts, a fine arts major who was teaching the crew how to scrimshaw. He has a little station below deck with a bunch of shells that he etches

nautical scenes onto with a screwdriver. Climbing the rigging was quietly common among them, and shimmying between the sails a rite of passage for their young sailors.

“Are they usually attached to a rope from below?” I ask.

“Usually. Oh sure,” says one, his eyes wide, still in shock.

“He must not have asked anyone to spot him,” says the other, and I feel all the air leave my lungs. “Stupid kid.” He shakes his head and his eyes well up. Behind him, I recognize the black ponytail of the fourth crew member, the one who I had hit, who then dropped the rope. He keeps his head bowed and stays quiet.

There seems to be no point having all these kids waiting for nothing in a parking lot, so our group shuffles the three blocks back to the Vineyard. The campus is deserted save for some noises coming from the Barn. I swing open the porch door to see who’s in there. Claire, one of the lazier college-aged leaders, is there with one of her cabin’s campers, a girl wearing a makeshift sling out of a sweatshirt. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is streaming on the projector we use for the worship song lyrics. They’re sitting on the carpet surrounded by red and yellow plastic Atomic Fire Ball wrappers. “Lulu fell off her bike right off the driveway here,” Claire says with a tight smile, rolling her eyes above Lulu’s head so the girl can’t see.

Lulu’s lips are stained bright red. She smacks on a Fire Ball and keeps her dulled eyes on the show. A tall woman with long brown Hollywood locks is catwalking down a runway in a yellow and green dress styled like a pineapple. Lulu’s own brown hair is greasy and unbrushed. The navy sweatshirt tied around her arm is one of the Vineyard-branded ones from the Bookstore. She’ll probably get to keep it for free. I guess it would be up to me to ask for it back.

“Aren’t you a little old for fake injuries, Lulu?”

She looks up at me, surprised. “But... I thought...”

I stumble back out of the Barn and Claire calls out to ask why we're back so early. Twenty pale-faced middle schoolers and Joe stare back at me, awaiting instructions. "Let's all... let's all have free time for a minute."

"Shouldn't we pray for Seth?" asks one of the kids.

"Right. Yes, let's pray for Seth."

We sit on logs around the fire pit, full of black ash from the night before. Streaks of marshmallow and graham cracker crumbs are littered around the slate patio stones. I ask Joe to lead the prayer. He gives me a serious nod and resettles off the log, on the ground on top of the s'more crud. He grasps the hands of the kids to his left and right and the rest of the circle follows his lead, taking the hands of their neighbors. He lifts up Seth in his prayer. He asks for healing and for peace and for our group to emerge out of this closer to God. Then I break the rules and lead everyone down to the picnic bench by the inlet so I can have a cigarette. Joe lugs the cooler of sandwiches that we were meant to eat on the boat. We kill a couple hours, ask the kids what else they're doing with their summers, skip stones over the water until the group grows restless and bored.

I'm saved by a chorus of bicycle bells echoing down the driveway. The bikers are back. They make a show of their long ordeal, discarding their helmets on the grass, turning on the hose to spray each other with water. A group of girls takes over the deck of the Bookstore, lifts their shirts over their sports bras to tan their stomachs. I step over the girls' bodies and duck into the office. I call Long Island Historic Tall Ships and check in on Seth. They tell me the boy died of a traumatic brain injury.

Maggie appears with a dustpan full of broken graham crackers. “You know, I usually appoint a Firepit Master to handle that mess back there.” She leans against the wooden doorway, and asks me how the sailboat day went. “You know it looks like rain tomorrow?”

I look up at Maggie and shake my head.

I call an emergency Leaders’ Meeting. I’m as honest as I can be in the moment. I tell them I don’t have the energy to lead out the week but I feel there is a teachable moment here. They all offer earnest suggestions. We have to call the parents. Someone should deliver a death-themed testimony. We could send them all home, back with their families, while we deal with legal. If we do send them home, do we refund the tuition? Are their parents even home?

“Liz, why don’t you hit the gardening shack for the rest of the day?” asks Claire. “We’ll be okay. We could just watch movies and stuff until the end of the week.”

Claire’s babysitting instinct pains me. This should be a time for her to grow. I ask the teachers in the group if anyone has gone through anything like this at the schools where they work.

“A couple Nightingale parents died... nothing like this, where they all saw it happen,” says Maggie.

I try and meet Maggie’s eye. “You know he went to Tufts right? Seth?”

“So?” asks Maggie.

“Maybe they don’t understand... I’m just saying maybe they would relate to the whole thing more, if they knew he’s like them, a kid who went to Tufts.”

“Why would his college matter?”

I clear my throat to change the subject. “We need to agree on something important,” I say. “We need to align on how we discuss death with the campers. Claire, for example, is Catholic. She goes to Queen the Most Holy Rosary in Bridgehampton. I imagine she might have a different take than Joe, who attends the church that’s trying to reclaim the Limelight nightclub in Chelsea.”

“Is now really the time for theology?” asks Claire.

“I’d say it is exactly the time for theology,” I say. “It’s an opportune time to settle on what’s true, so that we can best set up our students to lead spiritually fulfilling lives.” I remember feeling my arm make contact with the warm leg of the crew member, whipping my head back and watching him drop the rope. The thud from the bow of the boat right after.

Claire looks distraught. “How can you pretend to know what is right in a time like this?”

“You weren’t even there,” Joe calls from the couch.

The meeting has turned too sour to be productive, so I dismiss everyone. Perhaps this is my morning prayer being answered. The cruel realities of the world, the finality of death, the brevity of life, have all been laid bare for Middle School Adventure A. My cabin will take their spiritual selves more seriously, enjoy the fruits of the spirit ripening inside. Outside I find my girls sitting on the grass cackling as orphan Annie force-feeds Lulu a plate of brownies. Lulu is laughing along too, with faint tears in her eyes. She ekes out the words “chubby bunny” after packing in each new brown square.

Joe is jogging around the campus, streaks of black facepaint under his eyes, rallying the kids for capture-the-flag. He throws the bikers a bright red t-shirt tied to a stick to hide on their side of the property and motions the sailboat kids to follow him with their own flag.

“Annie. Get up and play capture-the-flag.” I help Lulu up and push her towards the Main Hall to wash the brownie off her face.

“My name is Krista,” says orphan Annie.

“Right. I’m sorry. Krista. Get out there. Or we’ll spend the rest of the day going through Leviticus.”

“Is Leviticus cool?” she asks.

“No. Leviticus is not cool.”

The girls stand up off the grass and drag their feet over to the gathering crowd.

I crawl to a rocking chair on the porch. With one announcement I could stick all these campers on the next LIRR to Penn Station, and I would be left alone to grieve young Seth. Seth, who would never see his Tufts graduation. Never know the crushing debt of life as an artist. I imagine his mother swaddled in black, wrapping her hair in a tight bun, turning to a life of cruelty and gardening. I imagine knocking on her door, sitting down over a pot of tea, confessing everything.

Joe cradles two of the sixth-grade boys under each of his arms. He finds an opening and charges past three of the bikers, then dislodges his two teammates to the left and to the right. The three of them disappear into the forest. The morning has left me completely deflated. How does Joe have the energy? I sit in a rocking chair and watch the game and cry. A couple campers playing defense close to the deck notice me, throw me nervous glances. I think of Seth’s face slammed against the deck of the boat. He must have had an incredible view across the ocean before he slipped.

Maggie and a couple of her middle school boys emerge holding the sailors' flag from behind a tree. They sprint over the line, slam the flag to the grass, and dance around one another in victory.

While everyone's gathered, I ring the bell to make an announcement. We'll hold a cook-out to lift everyone's spirits, in lieu of the planned dinner of cod and spinach. Everyone cheers. I walk up to Maggie, who is chatting excitedly with her teammates, still riding off the high of successfully capturing the flag, and ask her if I can run the programming by her for tonight. I want to know if it's possible to bridge the gap between her law and my grace.

"I wish you'd stop putting it that way," she says. I propose we go in with Claire's testimony, it could be a good opportunity for her to step up. I could lead everyone through Romans 6. The wages of sin is death, but Jesus conquered death to give us eternal life, and I'd take questions about what all that means. Then Joe can launch into "I Am the Lord (Do Not Fear)." Followed by "Amazing Grace," "Prince of Peace," and then we can take any requests. Maggie says that it might be nice to open up the floor for anyone who wants to talk about what they're feeling, which I agree will be an appropriate addition.

We grill hamburgers and veggie burgers and hotdogs on a couple Weber grills outside the Main Hall, and the kids grab paper plates and help themselves to one meat unit, as well as a bag of chips and a soda and an Oh Baby bar. I make a plate and pass by a table full of the girls from my cabin who have befriended a few boys. I take a seat next to Claire, eat my burger quickly, and scribble notes for my talk on Romans. My cabin girls are showing off for the boys, trading phrases in exaggerated cockney accents and throwing me suspicious looks. "Cheers! That's me 'ot dog, govnah!" someone screams, and I'm forced to stand and shush them.

Claire pushes her uneaten burger away from her place setting and says she's not comfortable public speaking tonight, she's too sad and tired from all that went on today. I nod and put my hand on her shoulder. Then she goes on to say her one-on-one time with Lulu was so draining that she's actually going to take the night off and hang in the gardening shack. I tell her to just go.

So I'm left to open the evening talk. The campers toss their paper plates in the trash cans outside the Main Hall. They make their way across the grassy hill, zig-zagging slowly in small cliques, and stream into the Barn, chatting and sugared up from the Oh Baby bars. I stand up at the front of the room and ask them to settle down. My fellow counselors line the sides of the room, and I get started. I tell them I know how traumatic it is that half of us saw Seth fall today. I raise my voice over the continued chatter, and tell them what I learned, that the boy passed away. The room falls silent.

I step forward and clutch my heart. "But don't we all deserve death?" The room blinks back at me. They have to understand. "Think about your actions and thoughts over the last day. Would any one of us feel justified before God, if we're really being honest?" I'm comfortable up here, pacing back and forth, making eye contact with the kids in the first row.

"But there is hope," I tell them. "Jesus's death on the cross changes everything. The Lord has conquered death, so that we might have eternal life. Even the bad guys. The people who rob your corner deli, the bankers who rob your parents' 401ks." I see some of the kids scribbling down notes. I breathe in and say it. "Even the murderers." Some of the counselors cough from the sidelines. "And so that must give us comfort. It must. Otherwise there is no reason for us to be gathered here, in Bellport, Long Island, enjoying Oh Baby bars together. It would be a waste

of time. Do you all have any questions? If you don't have any questions, Joe will take it away with 'I Am the Lord (Do Not Fear).'"

Lulu raises her hand. "I have a question. I think we should discuss the sailing trip."

"Yes," I say. Seth's face flashes in my mind, the shell of his necklace drifting up and down his neck. I sit on the ground so I'm on an equal plane to the girl. I'm ready to tell her anything. "Yes we should."

"It's not fair that one group got to go sailing, and our group doesn't get to go."

Someone else calls out from the couches. "Yeah, and we paid for the sailing trip already." The kids start murmuring, talking amongst themselves.

I try and speak but my mouth just hangs open. Maggie pipes up from across the room. "Long Island Historic Tall Ships closed down. We'll figure out the refunds for my group."

Another hand shoots up, an older hand, with a silver watch hanging off the wrist. "Yes, Claire?" I say. She's sitting on the floor among the campers. "I thought you were off tonight?"

Claire stands up to speak. "I think it's important to point out the role of confession." She's slurring a little. I know she disappeared into the gardening shack for a solid hour earlier. "Versus this blanket eternal life you have just bestowed on everyone and their mother."

"Or, at the very least, the importance of John Calvin's writings on regeneration," Maggie calls from the sidelines.

"Kids," Claire says, looking around the room. "Our head counselor is what we call an 'antinomian.'"

The campers look between me and Claire. Some of them bow back into their notebooks and write down the new word.

“And what about those who are not strong enough to pick themselves up? The handicapped?” I point to Lulu in her sling. She’s struggling to wipe the mess of Oh Baby bar off her face with the one hand. “What about the clinically depressed? The very poor?”

“Liz,” Joe calls out from the front of the room. He picks up his guitar. “I believe that it is time... to kick out the jams.” Before I can say, no, it’s important to talk through this, the girls from my cabin make a show of standing up from the couches. They walk over their fellow campers lying on the blankets and announce they have been planning a surprise performance. Their new friends from the boys’ choir school stand to join them at the front of the room. The group passes around the facepaint from capture-the-flag and rub black circles on their cheeks. The rest of the camp chatters in excitement. I sit there dumb. Claire is still standing, arms crossed, glaring at me. Maggie has taken a seat on the floor, against the wall. The young group hops outside and marches back into the Barn in a single file, each hoisting Swiffer Sweepers and brooms and pool cues up and down in the air.

Joe, staring at his frets, begins a plucky number.

“Chim chiminey, chim chiminey, chim chim cher-ee. A sweep is as lucky as lucky can be.”

Flashes from the kids’ camera phones light up the dancers.

“Chim chiminey, chim chiminey, chim chim cher-oo. Good luck will rub off when I shake hands with you.”

All the campers stand, laughing and sweaty, and join in the dancing. The counselors stand too, shake off the stress of the day, lift up their voices.

“I did it. I let that boy slip,” I call out, but the whole room is caught up in the song. The singing is too loud for anyone to hear me.

I stand up and make my way out the screen door, walk down the hill and leave the joyful Barn, shining golden in the purple dusk, behind me. The rocking chairs on the deck are empty, and I curl into one, look up at the stars, tie my hair up into the tightest bun I can. I close my eyes and pray that Seth can't see me.

DOG TAXI

I find my first Frank rifling through a woman's trash up at the Phoenician Flea. My younger brother Tomás kicked me and our three other loft-mates out for the Fourth of July weekend. He told us to padlock our doors and to not leave anything flammable inside the rooms. Tomás has some arrangement with a group of high schoolers. He charges entry and they have their way with our raw space, plug in their strobe lights and get wasted on Everclear. He takes the cash after each party and stocks up on toilet paper and Vitamin Water and Brita filters for the house.

Tomás and I roamed the city separately through our twenties, him selling software, and me temping, shredding documents in closets throughout the Financial District. But last year we reunited after our grandmother's passing to sell her modest house in Queens. We lived there off and on, while the rest of our family ran a restaurant down in Costa Rica. Her duplex owed more in back taxes and missed mortgages than what it was worth.

We salvaged what we could from the estate and split a first month and security on a sprawling industrial basement in Bushwick. Tomás furnished the loft with finds from large items trash day: a broken piano, a bleach-stained ping pong table, a regulation size basketball hoop with a shattered backboard. He enjoys shooting BB guns in our small backyard, loves it even more when his older brother joins him. We line up the tech swag he brings home from his office—foam footballs, iPhone stands, wine coolers. The pellets ricochet backwards off those steel water bottles, I learned the hard way.

The loft was fun for a few months. Then I caught Tomás dismantling the smoke detectors in lieu of fixing the kitchen fan. He set up an elaborate marijuana farm along our lone cooking countertop. Pablo began renting out the back room for bands to practice. Each night from ten to

twelve, amps rattle my bedroom's thin walls. Dave from North Carolina is on some sort of drug that has him taking apart his moped and old laptops and putting them back together again, leaving stray engines and hard drives in the hallway for me to trip over. I am finding the living situation increasingly untenable but hate to let down Tomás, who is finally flourishing in a leadership role.

When Tomás asked me to clear out for Independence Day, I decided to try something new, explore nature. I packed up my little one-man Coleman tent and sleeping bag and caught the Trailways Bus to Phoenicia. Now I'm here, fresh off the bus on Main Street, in walking distance of a campsite, a grocery store, and a pizza place.

After setting up camp, I explore the town. I'm drawn into a flea market, its doorway draped in red, white, and blue crepe paper, and signs imploring me to shop local. I browse the tables of a few desperate vendors clustered in one corner of a vast, otherwise empty hall. One elderly woman looks like she might cry if I don't pick something up. She watches my hand graze over her dusty jugs, her mismatched silverware. She holds out an old Sears and Roebuck catalog with a shaking hand. I don't look up. I know if I make eye contact, I'll be lugging home an old copper kettle, or a painted wooden mallard, suckered into something useless. Then I spot the Frank. Messy bright primary colors reflect off a cracked mason jar. The woman jumps up from her folding chair and helps me unearth the thin piece of plywood. "That's one of Frank's," she says.

I blow the dust off the piece and hold it up to the hall's fluorescent light. A brown beagle is driving a red truck, and two other dogs sit face-forward in the flatbed. "Taxi" is painted in white on the side of the vehicle. One of the riders has a pink purse in her lap. The simplistic

horizon, where the green strokes of grass separate the brown of the road, suggest a painter nostalgic for the flat days before Giotto. Scrawled on the back in pencil: “Dog Taxi.”

She charges me twenty dollars and announces Frank himself might even be wandering around the town, selling his pieces out of a Radio Flyer. I walk up and down Main Street, Dog Taxi under my arm, eager to find what other magic this man could draw up. Frank is not around. I walk back to my tent, set up my first piece of owned artwork on the campsite’s Adirondack. I make a little fire and watch the creek bubble.

Back home on Sunday, the house comes together to assess the damage from the high school party. I clean up some crushed red Solo cups and a few smoldering cardboard firework tubes off our cracked concrete floor. Then I hammer a nail in the wall to hang my Frank.

“No personal effects in here besides the Playstation, Georgie,” Tomás says. He puts his nose up to the piece and drags an oily finger along the raised acrylic. “Did you paint that?”

I slap his hand away.

Our Hawaiian roommate Eric recently donated his gaming console to the house. The Playstation is tearing us apart. They are all addicted to some shooting game, punching controllers deep into the night, every night, leaving me to toss in bed, clutching my pillow over my ears to muffle the sounds of gunfire. Eric ends their sessions by placing an ice pack over the machine to cool it down.

Tomás presents our roommates a bounty of fresh household grocery items, spread across our weathered corduroy couch. The weekend was so successful, Tomás sprung for three bulk packs of IPAs and a couple of much needed new frying pans. Our roommates each run off with an item to shower with or restock. I take down the painting and hang it in my windowless room. The new addition highlights how naked the rest of my walls look. In my mind, I highlight

rectangular opportunities to the left and right of Dog Taxi, so that I might someday cocoon myself in Frank's innocent renderings.

A few weeks later, the high school kids are planning a big blow-out for someone named Vinnie's eighteenth. I pack up my Coleman and head north. I take out five twenties from the corner bodega's ATM in the hopes of discovering and purchasing some new paintings.

The campground owner, faceless under a wide-brimmed, army green fishing hat, and made further mysterious by an attached neck flap, is ringing me up when I spot a patriotic flyer on the bulletin board. "FRANK SWEENEY FOR MAYOR," it reads. The headshot of a wiry man in his fifties smiles back at me. He's mostly bald with a thin tuft of hair, and his right eye is lazy, resting over his tear duct like a pinball waiting to be fired back into play. Bullet points pledge investments in the arts and the schools, as well as a promise to bear-proof all of Shandaken's waste management receptacles. A clip-art border of pixelated American flags lines the page.

"That's our Frank," the campground owner says. I tell him I'm keen to buy another one of his pieces and ask if the Phoenician Flea is open. "If you really want to flip through some Franks," the man confides, leaning over the counter, "a buddy of mine is selling some out of a truck on the road up to Woodstock." I ask with a salty grin if he thinks Frank has a shot at mayorship. The man lifts the brim of his hat, and surprises me with his seriousness. "If a black man can win a thousand votes around here... he can do anything," he says. He throws me a couple of free firestarters and disappears out the back door to his fishing setup along the creek.

I set up camp quickly and catch the city-bound Trailways bus fifteen miles back east. The country calls for a car, I'm beginning to realize. I'm still learning the area. After walking a mile

up a leafy, windy road, I find the RV, a purple wooden peace sign attached to its grill. A withered man with a long blonde beard sits outside on a lawn chair, and beckons me to go inside, explore, enjoy. Piles of paintings on plywood lean against the walls, and even more are laid out along a sagging bed in the back. Dogs and cats mow the grass, play poker, and sit nervous atop benches in doctors' offices. A mouse with long eyelashes and a black bra grips a stripper pole. An elderly armadillo couple sits in rocking chairs, guarding their porch with shotguns. A donkey's throbbing fifth leg urinates. Many of the animals are drawn with eyeballs darting in opposite directions, a detail I hadn't noticed in Dog Taxi.

There is also a political section. I flip through but they leave me cold. The over-the-top representations of W choking on a pretzel, or Obama spanking Trump with an American flag, don't live up to the dark charm of Frank's animals. I emerge from the RV with two pieces: A mosquito standing on a basketball court in a red ball cap, hands in the pockets of his mesh shorts, a sheepish look in his humongous eyes. And the stripper mouse.

"Did you see the JFK?" the man asks. He puts out his cigarette and hops into the RV, and comes back holding an oversized canvas. The pale-faced Kennedy, silhouetted by a midnight blue background, is slathered in garish red blobs of blood. The portrait is overrun with holes, wooden shards slicing outwards. "He shot at it with his gun."

I immediately think of Tomás, his BB gun, his love of violent sport. Perhaps with this piece, I could make a Frank fan out of him.

The man asks for sixty apiece. I hand him my credit card, noting in my friendliest tone the uptick in price since July. He points to a Honda parked to the side of the RV and offers me a ride back to the campground. Along the drive I ask how Frank sees the returns. The man keeps his eyes on the road and sidesteps the question, going on about how Frank is a true character, a

true artist, kind of a troubled guy but everyone has something, not many people could see the value in his art but he always did, he had been a collector before all the young couples from the city started coming up and asking for his pieces by name. The man makes the turn into Phoenicia and waves hello to the campground owner.

I set my three new Franks up against my tent. I crack a beer and wade deep into the wide stretch of creek, careful on the rocks, rooting myself to feel the cool mountain water run over my toes. The sun is hanging low. It's the golden hour. Ideally I'd be camping here with someone, some affable girl to fill the silence, so down-to-earth she'd enjoy getting dirt under her nails. A creative type, eager to join me in this one-man art crawl. I long for someone to discuss Frank's obsession with animals, his penchant for painting lazy eyes. Perhaps his own ocular handicap allowed Frank to evoke flatness so well, I would say, and this hip young lady, she would disagree, counter with something about undermining the intentionality of his brush strokes. I've been so worn out fighting Tomás on each of his new apartment schemes that I've put no effort into dating. He's the dapper one, pulling off a casual style I would guess to be European minimalism, with his skinny black jeans and tight button-up shirts. I've been getting softer each year, relying on free food found around the offices, which only makes me more shy. And I've been too ashamed to bring anyone back to the loft.

I kick a small rock towards the setting sun and drain my beer. Circling back to the campsite, I freeze. A tan-nosed black bear is sniffing around my tent.

"What do I do? Stay here?" I call out, though nobody is along the creek. "Or go in?"

The bear does a few slow laps around my tent. He seems young to me, a cub maybe, though I have no other bears to compare him to. Or her to. He pauses in front of Stripper Mouse and sniffs the edges of the plywood. He moves over to JFK and paws a bullet hole. Then he

looks out into the creek, and we make eye contact. The lid of a dumpster slams from somewhere deep in the campground, and the bear scurries off.

Falling asleep to the sounds of warcraft is much more pleasant now that I can gaze at my four Franks. I haven't yet presented Tomás with the JFK. I came home to find a few of the high school girls from Vinnie's party lingering, taking up residence on our couch, hogging the bathrooms to apply thick globs of mascara. I figure he owes me at least a few days with the piece due to our awkward increase in occupancy.

One night that week, I take three melatonins and forget to switch off the lamp at the foot of my bed. I wake up suddenly, coughing, in a haze of thick smoke and goose feathers amid the dim light of my muffled lamp. All I hear is explosions and the rapping of machine gun fire. The edge of my down comforter must have rested against the lightbulb and ignited. I roll off the bed and unhook the four paintings from the wall and burst out of my door, collapsing and panting on the common room floor.

A heavy-eyed Tomás appears from behind a couch cushion. "George. Clear that smoke out?"

My roommates and the high school girls don't look back. They sit transfixed to the television. I scramble up off the floor and look down, realizing I'm only in boxers. Before the girls can see, I cover my flabby tummy, my drooping nipples, with JFK's headshot. I stride over to the common area's smoke detector, which is left hanging by a thin wire, stand on a folding chair, holding the painting against my side, and screw it back in place. A violent screeching overtakes the room.

“Beep, beep, beep,” I call over the noise. “See, people? It’s a machine that tells you there is danger.”

They bury their heads in the couch cushions to block the sound. Tomás stands up and goes over to inspect my room, smoke and feathers still billowing out the door. I clutch the JFK, unsure of how to get down off the chair without exposing my stomach again.

One of the high school girls, her dyed black bangs matted in sweat, peers up at me with big bloodshot eyes. “Is that a Frank?”

“You know him?” I click the hush button on the smoke detector.

“My friend had one but had to toss it when he got canceled.” She rolls off the couch and sits on the floor, an inch from an open bag of Doritos on the coffee table. “She had a horse in an apron waiting tables.”

Pablo picks up the Playstation controller and resumes his game. Dave sneers at me and takes a screwdriver to the back of an old graphing calculator. He asks one of the girls to hold a tiny screw while he tears out its circuit board.

Tomás hands me a towel and says I have a real mess on my hands back in the bedroom, but not to worry because he just bought us all a jumbo box of garbage bags. He takes the JFK off my hands and I climb down from the chair. “Are these bullet holes? George, how much did you pay for this thing?”

“Franks are going for like two hundred each these days,” the girl says. “Thanks to all the drama.”

Tomás picks up and shakes the bag of Doritos, beckoning the girl across our vast concrete floor to our side couch. We grill her on what she knows. Karen, she tells me her name is. Karen calls Frank an “outsider” artist, says his name was floated around her Vassar precollege

fine arts program that summer. Apparently when Frank was gathering signatures for his mayoral campaign, a woman claimed he forced his way into her house and assaulted her. There is a counter-rumor that a group of racist hippies stole a whole RV's worth of his pieces, and had incentive to get him locked up on a phony assault charge to turn a profit. I grit my teeth and ask her if she's sure about the racist hippies, that seems like an oxymoron. Karen gives a vigorous nod and Tomás and I watch her bra strap fall down her arm. Tomás reaches out and pulls it back up for her.

The next morning, after most of the smoke has cleared, my brush with death forces me into a sober reckoning with what the hell I'm doing with my life. Karen is on my mind, not Karen specifically, but someone who has exciting stories, someone who would have gone to something like a Vassar precollege program, someone I could properly host on those weekends that we are free of the high school kids. I also think about what, if anything, I owe Frank, given these new revelations from Karen. Benefit of the doubt? Money for the stolen pieces? A police-led investigation? I search online for Frank's website or contact information but it seems he is living off the grid. He must be angling for a grassroots campaign. I admire that. It occurs to me he must be running against somebody, and that somebody should have a web presence. The incumbent, I find, is hosting a fundraiser over Labor Day weekend in partnership with the Phoenicia Rotary. The Facebook event promises free hot dogs, the release of thousands of rubber ducks down the creek, and a legislative commitment to farmworkers' rights. Frank would likely be around, or I would root him out, ensure his artistry is on display, so that voters can make a fair and informed decision on who they want as their next mayor. Then I would hold Frank's feet to the campfire, learn the truth about these assault allegations.

I spend the next week on assignment at Bank of America. I sit in a cubicle walled in by Redweld file pockets and spend most of the days plotting the Labor Day trip up to the mountains. In the early evenings, I find Karen still lounging around the loft. I consider making a move, though what kind of move I'm not sure. Maybe just wedging myself beside her on the couch. But I'm deterred by the memory of my grandmother. When they're young, they run, she would say.

Thursday evening, I come home to find Eric and Karen in the kitchen, Karen hanging off his toned arm. I'm too late. Eric pours double his usual amount of frozen berries into the blender and grins at me. "Dave put the blades back in, so we can make smoothies again."

"Heading up to Phoenicia this weekend," I say, eyes on Karen, ignoring Eric. "Hoping to get the truth about Frank."

Eric pours a lumpy pink mixture into two tall plastic cups, blocking my view of Karen's spandex shorts.

"Sounds like an adventure," Karen says. She takes a long sip of the smoothie and Eric watches her face for a verdict. She gives a dramatic pout. "My mom says my summer adventures are over for me. School starts on Tuesday, ugh."

Eric and I look down at the floor.

On Friday, I pack my Coleman tent and take a long look at Stripper Mouse, pray to her that Frank won't let me down. I padlock my room, catch the Trailways bus, check in and walk through the campground. I stop to watch a bear rifle through the campsite's dumpster, breathe in the fresh air, and feel like I'm home.

The morning of the Rotary event, a man in a yellow feathery duck costume walks up and down Main Street, calling for people to buy raffle tickets and join him at what they're calling

The Quacktacular. He's not wearing the head of the costume. This feels like cheating. These are the people Frank is up against? At the end of the street, I see a crowd gathering, a grill smoking. The flash of a red Radio Flyer parked to the side of the creek. I hold my breath and speed-walk over there.

Frank is wearing a styrofoam skimmer hat with a red, white, and blue striped lining, and sits smoking a cigarette in a fold-out beach chair. The campground owner and the RV hippy, also smoking, sit alongside him. They have some of his art displayed against the Radio Flyer, which is piled high with more pieces.

"George," says the campground owner, standing up and giving me a pat on the back. "Meet the artist you're so fond of."

I shake Frank's hand and try not to look at his lazy eye. He holds out a clipboard and asks me to sign his ballot petition, which of course I do. The pieces displayed are his political-themed ones. Obama swatting away a cloud of drones drawn to look like flies. Hillary Clinton sitting on a comically-tall pile of emails. Bill Clinton playing the saxophone, his black-and-white cat Socks holding his paws over his ears. I am about to suggest he lay out some of the weirder animal art when an elderly woman steps up to a podium a few feet away and introduces the current mayor. The three men watch on, smirking. I sit down on the grass next to Frank's chair.

The mayor is short, gray-haired, looks to be in his fifties. He speaks slowly but with passion. Farmworkers of the region will not be left behind, he says. He talks about the Chobani Greek yogurt factory, applauds their decision to sever their corporate contracts and commit to buying from the smaller, struggling dairy farms. He announces a plan for Shendaken to hire and house five hundred refugees over the next four years. He pledges that the town will always be a safe haven for the undocumented. At that, the RV hippy lets out a long, low boo.

Frank leans down to whisper to me. “The Rotary Club likes things the way they are.” He holds out his clipboard to a young white couple on the outskirts of the crowd. They smile and shake their heads, and turn back to listen to the mayor. “See? They’ll never let a black man be mayor in this town.”

The campground owner sits back in his chair and speaks loudly, so I can hear him over the mayor. “You may have heard a story about old Frank here and an unfortunate altercation with a lady.”

I nod.

Frank shakes his head, turns in his chair to spit. “That’s exactly what they are: stories. The Club’s out there, telling stories.”

The mayor thanks the crowd, urges everyone to bring a friend when they vote. He passes out the first round of free hot dogs.

I stand up and hover over the Radio Flyer. “May I suggest setting up some alternate pieces, ones that might spark some interesting conversations? Don’t you think people need a break from the Clinton dynasty?”

All three look up at me with newfound respect. I rub my chin and rifle through the pile. I set aside a few of the most eye-catching, and shelve the Obama and the Clintons. Soon, folks wander over with their hot dogs, point at the paintings, chat amongst themselves.

“Look at this one. A flamingo with a weird eye, singing in the shower. As they do.”

“Doggy DMV. It’s a line of dogs at the DMV. Amazing. How much?”

“I’m asking seventy.” Frank holds out his clipboard. “Don’t forget to sign my ballot petition.”

“Can you tell me what inspired Duck Divorce?”

“Pig Driving Helicopter is a reference to Nam, right?”

Frank shrugs and smiles, ignores their questions. His mysterious air works in his favor, and he hands over piece after piece, pockets wads of tens and twenties. I continue to flip through his stacks and pick out my favorites. I balance them on the wagon, lay them flat on the grass. His friends sit and smoke, watch the artist in action with amused reverence. I am a funny addition to their crew, their young chubby assistant, sweating and hustling while my elders relax.

“Why is the cat barking? Is this a comment on gender roles?”

Frank, his hands in his pockets, delights in the attention, but doesn't engage much. He is running on a different platform. Did he really push his way into that woman's house, force himself on her? I think of Karen hanging off of Eric's arm, sipping on her smoothie, and feel nauseous. All the young girls who sleep in our living room, silencing the calls of worried parents. I expected some sort of confrontation while Frank is here, out and about, surrounded by the public, a moment of judgment to dissolve the swirling rumors. But the mayor established such a jovial vibe, it doesn't look like it's going to happen. Frank sells half of his wagon that afternoon, with prices from fifty to as high as one-fifty. The pages of his clipboard are worn in and covered in black ink.

At three, the mayor announces it's time to release the ducks. Even Frank and his crew gather around the creek to watch. Kids in the crowd climb down the rocks to get as close as they can. The man in the duck costume walks across the small bridge to join three elderly men in golden-gear Rotary Club tees. They each hold up a garbage bag, count to three, and dump the contents into the water below. Thousands of bright yellow rubber ducks tumble into the water, somersault, right themselves, and zig-zag down the stream. Frank packs up his Radio Flyer, and invites me to join his friends for pizza.

We sit outside on patio furniture, the Radio Flyer parked to our side. The dispersing crowd walks past our table and cheers Frank's name, plywood art under their arms, a parade of adopted cats and dogs going home with their new owners. Frank tells me I have an eye for art that is true and good, perhaps even a better eye than he has. I venture to say it's because he only has one, but the table keeps a straight face. "This is serious," Frank says. "I'm serious when I say this. No one hawks my pieces like I just saw you do out there." He asks me if I'd be interested in taking over the RV sales. The crew is shifting gears to focus on the mayoral campaign. If I park the RV outside this particular cafe in Woodstock, Frank says, handing me a piece of pizza piled high with mushrooms and peppers, I'll eat and drink coffee all day for free. He recommends an old motel converted into apartments, right off NY-28. I could rent a room for two hundred dollars a month. The idea of my own fridge, my own bathroom, even windows, certainly appeals. A place I could safely bring a woman home to. The knowledge I'd be included in Frank's meteoric rise in the art scene seals the deal.

As a show of trust, Frank drives the RV over to my campsite. He says to take all the time I need, so long as I'm back up here selling his art at the Bethel Woods Harvest Festival next Saturday. He can't make it, scheduled to make a speech and gather signatures at a community board meeting over in Margaretville. I take down my tent and fire up the RV. I haven't driven in years, but passing each sign leading back to the city, feeling the freedom and power that comes with driving, I'm more and more confident with the decision to move up north.

Back at the loft, I park the RV right in front of our industrial building. I head inside and find the usual stoned group in the living room, staring up at the glow of the television, Tomás and Pablo punching controllers. Then I see Karen alone and crying, curled up and trembling on the second couch.

“Hey Georgie, welcome back,” Tomás says, and looks up to give me a wave. I point to the second couch and mouth, what the hell? He looks over to Karen like she’s a mess he’s left on the stove. He hits pause on the game and we approach Karen warily from either side.

“What’s going on...” Tomás hesitates. “Kaitlin?”

“Karen, it’s Karen,” I say. Now with the upper hand, I wedge myself next to her on the couch. Karen lets out a cry and I move to rub her back, then think better of it.

“I can’t go back in there,” she says, and nods towards Eric’s closed door.

Tomás and I look at one another and cringe. We don’t know much about Eric beyond his eating habits, his videogame preferences. I’m pretty sure he waits tables at L’Express on Lexington. “Eric? Did Eric do something?”

“I don’t want to go back in there,” is all she says.

“You don’t have to go back in there,” I say, and plant my hand firmly on her back. I rub it up and down in time with her sobs. “Can I drive you home?”

“You? You don’t have a car,” says Tomás.

“I’ve recently come into an RV.” I shoo Tomás away, and he heads back to his spot on the couch. “Where is home, Karen?” She keeps her head down. I keep my hand rubbing from the top of her neck to the middle of her back, pressing hard on her slight body, feeling each tremble of her spine. “Didn’t you say school starts tomorrow?”

Karen dodges out from under my hand, sits up and rubs her face dry. She doesn’t look at me, but off into the far corner of our concrete floor. “I really can’t go home right now,” she says, in a stronger voice.

I tell her I have an idea, and grab her arm, pull her up off the couch. We walk outside and I unlock the RV, open the side door. Four golden retrievers in the sit position, lined up outside a building that says “DMV,” smile back at us.

“You stole the racist hippy van?” she asks.

I jerk my thumb towards the fold-out bed in the back of the van. “If you’re up for it, you can take the back. As long as you want.”

I help George carry his mattress and futon and chest of drawers and boxes out of the basement loft and into the RV. This place was fun, until it wasn’t. Vinnie’s eighteenth ruled. Eric hangs off the top of the frame of his doorway, flexing, his eye on me as I struggle with one end of George’s chest. The way Eric’s voice dropped in bed that night, like a flipped switch, I’ve never heard anything like it. He went from dopey surfer to icy hissing as soon as the lights went out. When I came outside for help, the group of zombies didn’t look up, kept playing video games. Made me sick.

George carries his Franks out last, clutching them tight to his chest like they’ll make his fat go away. He offered to drive me up to the Catskills for the weekend, said I should browse the art at the Harvest Festival, it might inspire me to paint again. It’ll be nice to disappear for awhile. If Mom calls and apologizes, I’ll let her come pick me up. But I’m feeling like that’s a big if.

“Karen, it’s been real,” Tomás says at the doorway. He holds up his hand for a high five.

“It’s Kaitlin, actually,” I say. I leave him hanging.

“Tomás... I have to admit,” says George. He’s holding out the painting of JFK with the grotesque bullet hole through his head. “I bought JFK for you, and I kept it. But I want you to have it.”

Tomás gives the painting a quick look and shudders. “Hey man, why don’t you keep it.”

“C’mon. Keep it. For me.” George bends down and leans the piece on the front tire of Dave’s disassembled moped. He lingers his hand on the top of the painting, then lets go. Frank might be a sexual abuser and an asshole, but I’m feeling more and more endeared towards George’s earnest shtick. The way he uses these simplistic, charming names—Doggy DMV, Stripper Mouse, Dog Taxi—makes me think Frank could keep selling well, with George’s help.

“Remember,” Tomás says, leaning into George’s ear, but making eye contact with me. “When they’re young, they run.”

I scowl and stomp out of the loft for good. George asks me to sit up front with him in the RV, but I say I’ve gotten comfortable in my room. He takes out some of the boxes so I can climb back in there. He wedges his own metal bed frame on either side of where I’m sitting, pinning me in place. He sets his Franks on top of some boxes. George calls back to see if I’m okay, then slams the side door of the RV, and makes his way around the vehicle to get in front.

With a lurch, we’re off. I can’t see George or the front seat at all from my spot in the back. He takes a hard turn on what I guess is Bushwick Avenue, and the four Franks tip off the top of the box and clatter to the floor. I have to hold onto the RV’s headboard to keep from falling. Dog Taxi slides down the length of the RV and disappears under a dresser. Stripper Mouse bangs against the side door and stays there. I let go of the headboard for one second to shift my weight just as George makes another hard turn, and I hit my head against the bed frame, a metal spring narrowly missing my eye. I hear George’s voice call out from up front. “You alright back there?”

“Yep,” I call back, and then whimper softly to myself. We drive smoothly for a long time, maybe an hour. I grip the headboard and wonder what a Harvest Festival is like. He said

it's hosted at the real Woodstock, not the town but the original farm field where they had the concert, leading me to hope I'll be able to find some drugs, which would really help tune out George's dorky anxiety. Suddenly the truck takes a hard turn, then another, then another. Then we stall. I hear George's voice bark out the window. Two Big Macs, two large fries, one Coke, one Diet Coke. Large, large, yeah. We drive forward to pay. Fly in the Red Cap is now wedged between my foot and the RV's shelving. I stare into the whites of his huge eyes, the right dot for a pupil resting low against the wild elliptical, the only detail of the painting I can make out in the dark. The RV shuts off. George unlocks the side door, slides out the legs of the bed frame from my left and my right, and drops them to the pavement with a clang. I climb through boxes and hop out of the car. We sit on the harsh curb of the parking lot and eat our dinner.

COUNTRY CLUB

I soured on the RV guy after I lost my job. When I was working, our interactions were brief and innocent and only in the evenings. I'd worm my way between the street and his humming engine, dodge his gigantic rear-view mirrors. Smile as I jostled groceries to unlock my building's outer door. If I was feeling bold, I'd give a small wave. He'd never wave back. Never even look my way. He would usually be sitting in the front seat, fidgeting with his radio. He's older but not old, a rough thirty-five, overweight and bearded. His RV is either yellow or yellowing. The wings of a brown "W" logo stretch across the length of the vehicle. The back window's cardboard shade is disintegrating into itself.

During the day, I know now, because I am unemployed, he takes over the whole Scholes Street block. I push my weathered wooden table to the street-facing side of my balcony and watch him from six stories above. I dangle my legs over ripped astroturf, and lean on the concrete barrier to get a view of the street. I love this table, which I found a few weeks ago on large items trash day. My apartment is full of street finds. No fabrics—the bedbugs are fierce in this neighborhood. But I now own an antique schoolboy's chair with a little writing desk attached. Two oversized canvases blessed by an amateur painter, swirls of clouds and mudstorms left unfinished. A scuffed-up glass coffee table. An old charcoal grill I've been learning how to use. Even my television, big-screened and bulky, was free. I earned it, lugging that dinosaur up six flights.

If I peer over to the roof next door, I can wave to the blueberry plant I bought at the hardware store for thirty dollars this past spring, a failed attempt at nesting. The wind blew it off my balcony's edge on its first day home. Now that it's ninety-five degrees, deep into the New

York summer, the plant is stuck on its side, burnt to a crisp. A giant, windowless Verizon building takes up half the block across the street. It's probably giving me and the RV guy cancer.

By ten every morning the man is roaming outside. He stores a beach chair and a card table and a mini Weber grill behind our garbage cans. He sets those up on the sidewalk, and then douses the grill with lighter fluid. He retrieves raw chicken thighs from somewhere deep inside his RV and wraps them in tin foil and throws those on the grill. Some days he rips off an even bigger piece of foil, balances it under his chin, and lies back in his chair to suntan.

Meanwhile I'm lunging and squatting, doing calisthenics across my living room, and bookmarking listings from Indeed. My mother told me to apply to at least three jobs a day. I copy and paste and edit cover letters politely asking to be considered, and send them off into the abyss. I say I identify as a female, as a Caucasian. I say I am not a veteran. No, I don't have any family who work or who have worked at Oracle, at Siemens, at Adobe, at Petco. I'm living off scrambled eggs and a recently discovered jumbo can of handcooked Virginia peanuts, which I gifted to my mother last Christmas and she left behind as some kind of statement. I keep *Frasier* running in the background to keep my wit sharp and my mind nimble.

But by the afternoon, I'm in free fall. I'm working down the last case of Lionshead Pilsner that I lugged home two months ago for my layoff party. It's a terrible beer, brewed near my hometown in Pennsylvania. I'm nursing a box of other leftovers from that night: a bottle of Jack, half full, some residue on the edges of a gram-bag of coke, and a tin of Cadbury Roses chocolates from a British friend who I haven't seen since. I haven't really seen any of those friends since. I can't afford the bars or restaurants they go to. I can't even afford a MetroCard, so I've been getting to know my neighborhood.

The Lionshead caps have rebus puzzles on the back, pictograms and symbols that spell out phrases. I have to solve the puzzle before I can drink the beer. Screw nut + e + as + fruit basket + cake. Nutty as a fruit cake. Flick the cap, try and hit the blueberry plant. I sit on the balcony table and drink the beer and sweat. I keep tabs on the RV guy on the sidewalk below. This afternoon, he's wearing his usual stained wifebeater and a bright pair of madras shorts. Even from this high up I can see his fleshy back peeping out through the woven straps of his beach chair, and that he's smoking a cigarette. I suck the chocolate off of five melting Roses and then call my mother.

"Allison. Hi. I'm just in the middle of something..."

"Wow. Must be nice to have a job."

"Why don't you take the LSAT? I'll buy that course for you."

"I'm starving, Mother. I'm living off that jar of Virginia peanuts I bought you for Christmas."

"Sugared?"

"No. Salted and cooked in peanut oil, I think?"

I hear her typing.

"Mother, I'm serious. You're always so freaking distant when I call you."

"You only call me in the middle of the work day."

I crack open a Lionshead and turn the cap over. "Owl... buys... this circle."

"Kaplan. I just sent you the info."

"Oh wait. Not owl. It's who. Who buys this round." I flick the cap over the balcony and miss the blueberry plant by a good ten feet.

“Why don’t you come down here and we can work on your resume and make a budget and you can fix my LinkedIn?”

I bring the gram-bag out onto the balcony while she goes on about accidentally launching two LinkedIn accounts. Holding the clear little baggie up to the sun, I lick my finger, rub off the tiniest of white debris, and spread it along my top gums. She’s saying I should work at Sotheby’s or maybe the Smithsonian. She’s saying I should get that test over with and apply to Harvard Law. “Mom, I gotta go. I really gotta go.”

At 4:55, I scrounge for quarters from under my bookcase and start out towards the Country Club.

Swinging open the apartment building’s door, I almost clip the man’s beach chair. I mumble a sorry. He looks up but doesn’t make it past my legs. I’m wearing an old blue cotton babydoll dress from high school, which is hanging even looser these days. The peanuts and calisthenics are doing me good. He’s grilling Johnsonville brats, the best brand of brats, a rare find. You can’t even get them at the local Key Foods. He’s set up a small TV in his open driver-side door. Judge Judy’s on. She has a stern look trained on a sheepish young man with a spider web tattooed across his entire face. I spy some colorful plywood in his back seat that looks to be a stack of children’s paintings. Creepy. The RV guy has a beagle in his lap. When did he get a dog?

I speed walk past his setup and almost run into two cops around the corner. The mayor has ordered more patrolling across city neighborhoods this summer, to flatten out the numbers from over-policing Brownsville and the Bronx. They have to stay out on the streets all day and night. They have nothing to do. They just stand there. I consider pointing them towards the RV, complaining about the grilling on the sidewalk. I consider asking them, hypothetically, if it’s

illegal to live out of a car for months at a time. But the RV is within their sight and these two don't seem to care. They're swaying back and forth, thumbs hooked through their belt loops, kicking McDonalds trash from the sidewalk into the street. They give me overeager hellos and I give them a nervous hello back.

The Country Club is a bar for children. They have a shelf of ratty board games and four holes of mini golf in the backyard. The furniture is an eclectic mix of torn leather armchairs and plush seats pulled from vans. The bar is lined with plastic Dixie bowls full of cheese puffs, and the walls are painted black and decorated with velvet Elvis art. Once a vintage lit-up Schlitz sign fell on my friend's head and they cleared our whole tab so he wouldn't sue. The whole place reeks like cheese slices melted onto a radiator. If you order a drink as fast as you can upon entering, you won't notice the smell. I choose a stool in the middle of the bar and order what is both cheapest and will last me the longest to drink, a shot of Jager and a Pabst tallboy, and pay the bartender with sixteen quarters.

The bartender doesn't say anything about my lack of a tip. He's glued to a Dr. Who episode on a TV mounted at the back of the bar. A man in a full-body potato costume is dancing around a basement, waving a homemade space gun. What's new with you, the bartender asks out of the corner of his mouth, his eyes glazed over. I tell him I was laid off while promoting an app at a teacher's conference in Orlando. That I used my last day there to visit SeaWorld, even after seeing the documentary. The ticket was much cheaper than a DisneyWorld pass and it happened to be within walking distance of my DoubleTree. I did see the Orca Encounter live show, but feeding the stingrays was the highlight. I spent eight dollars on a feeding tray of dead minnows. The slimy stingrays swam around and around a shallow pool labeled a lagoon. When they

fluttered over my hand to take my outstretched fish, my whole body tickled. I figure I should tell one person at least one story so the coke isn't wasted.

“That’s dope,” the bartender says, though I think he’s referring to Dr. Who.

There’s a worn-out young bike messenger playing erotic Photo Hunt on the kiosk in the corner. He’s brought his bike with him into the bar, and he’s playing the game with his one hand and sort of hugging the bike with his other. He’s wearing a sweaty red handkerchief rolled tight around his neck and he has brown dirt all over his face. I watch him bang his finger on the glass of the screen, circle mismatched breasts on duplicate pictures of a naked woman in a cowboy hat. He drags his finger down the leopard print robe of a woman writhing on top of a poker table. I brought a book, open and pretend to read about Lily Bart avoiding Mr. Rosedale, then stick my hand into the bowl of cheese puffs and feel something wet.

A crew of preppy twenty-five year olds congregates near the table by the window. They take their first sips of alcohol in a happy daze, smiling dopey smiles at one another. They’re each, no doubt, coming off a long and satisfying Monday of deskwork. I gaze longingly at their summer-thin blazers, their office-appointed iPhones. The bartender seems to feel sorry for me and quietly cracks me a second, then third Pabst, until a girl who looks to be a teenager, with thick black bangs and the tiniest red Soffee shorts, steals his attention down the bar. I call halfway down the bar to the bike messenger, ask if I can play Photo Hunt against him on Two Player. He pretends not to hear me. I text my mom.

Me: as I was saying, thanks for leaving those peanuts at xmas

Mom: What do you mean?

Mom: Please call

Me: they're the only thing keeping me alive right now

Me: leaving my gift... best gift you've ever given me

Mom: Why don't you come home for a little?

Me: *YouTube: Rent (Original Broadway Cast Recording)*

Me: It's called RENT. Ever heard of it??

Mom: I could come up and you can show me Belmont?

I brush hard past the bike on my way to the bathroom. The handlebars droop to the side and I touch the bike messenger's shoulder. It's still warm from bike messengering. "Sorry! I am so sorry about that."

He looks up from his game, then right back down at it. "No worries."

The door lock is broken so I try and move fast in there. I squat over the toilet to pee, stand and clean up the yellow droplets that landed on the seat with a piece of tissue. I assess the state of my makeup-free face through the small area of mirror between sticker and graffiti. Country Club is famous for its latrinalia. Someone wrote "NIMBY VS. YIMBY: fight to the death" across the entirety of one of the walls. There's a life-size drawing of a scientist with a sunburst-shaped head, a cartoon character I've seen around but couldn't name. "Our band is better than your band" is scrawled in black Sharpie on the back of the door, with carets adding two l's in green, so that it reads "Our bland is better than your bland."

I slide onto the stool next to the bike messenger and call out what's different between the side-by-side Playboy outtakes. Twin black-haired editrixes, nude and straddling their desk chairs, stare back at us. They're both pushing thick-framed glasses up with a pencil. He won't click on

the lamp that I point out is clearly not in the second photo. The red timer bar dissolves to zero and the screen flashes “GAME OVER” in neon purple.

“You a fan of *Frasier*?” I ask, now that he has to pay attention.

“I heard you talking about SeaWorld,” he says, staring down into his beer. “Did you not see the documentary?”

“I’ve mostly been watching *Frasier*, non-stop.” I right the handles of his bike.

“You should check out *Blackfish*,” he says. He puts another dollar in the kiosk and continues playing Photo Hunt. I have seen *Blackfish*.

It’s around eight but the night is still sweltering. I walk the three blocks home, a row of gray and orange-bricked projects to my left. Most peoples’ windows are open, fans working overtime. A gigantic NYPD spotlight is set up and pointing towards one of the buildings, the light hitting someone’s apartment window. I wonder how they are coping with its intensity from the inside, if they’re hanging all the sheets and fabric they can find to keep the light out.

I stumble over a green piece of plastic on the curb. Two oversized white eyes stare back at me, and my heart races a little faster. It’s one of those old-school Little Tikes turtle sandpits I had as a kid, bright green, built to hold a toddler party of four. I look around for the convex shell cover, but someone has just thrown out the base. I hug my arms around the rim of the plastic and pick it up, settle it under my armpit, and walk the last block home.

The two cops laugh as they watch me approach lugging the turtle. “You got it?” one of them calls.

I place the sandbox on the sidewalk and my dress catches on my sleeve, revealing my black briefs, and catch one of them sneaking a peek. I quickly unhook my hem and push the dress downwards. Were these the same cops from before? They’re both over six feet, dressed in

the full long-sleeved navy uniform, NYPD patch over both shoulders. One is bald with a fat pale white face. He's wearing sunglasses even though the sun just set. The other is a little more tan with a brown crew cut, the sides of his hair shaved. He asks if the turtle is heavy.

"It's not heavy. Just bulky." I catch myself slurring a little, and clear my throat. "You guys bored out here?"

"Extremely bored," the crew cut guy says. A luxury pickup truck with tinted windows stops at the corner. We hear blaring mariachi music even though the windows are up. Both of them swivel to watch it pick up gas and pass down the street.

"See that RV?" I point down my block. "This guy has been living here for months."

The cops laugh.

"It's not fair, is it? I have to pay rent. And he uses my building trash cans. And stores stuff behind my trash cans."

"Well," the bald guy says. "It's not technically illegal to live in an RV."

"And he's allowed to park there," the crew cut guy says. "Just not on street cleaning days between 9:30 and 11."

"He grills out on the sidewalk," I try. I know cops hate grilling on the sidewalk. "I'd get evicted if I grilled on my balcony."

I pick up the turtle sandbox and the two of them follow me towards the RV. It's pitch dark inside. The bald one knocks hard on the driver's window and the other one circles the car, attempting to peer into the shuttered windows. "I guess he's out."

"Where could he possibly be?" I say, a little too loud, and give the back tire a light kick.

"Woah, woah, now," the crew cut cop says.

The three of us stand silent, me clutching the turtle under my armpit, swaying a little from the drinks, holding off hiccups, the two cops, uprooted from their corner, unsure how to pose in this new variation, shifting weight between their boots, hooking and unhooking their thumbs through their belt loops. There are fresh streaks of black feces embedded into the sidewalk and I tell the cops about the RV guy's new dog, and ask what kinds of fines they have for not picking up after an animal. They don't really answer, just keep folding and unfolding their arms, looking up and down the street. I ask them if they know what goes on in the windowless Verizon center and they say they don't.

"Three more hours," the bald one says to his partner.

The bike messenger was a lost shot at making this week slightly interesting, but what if I had cops to work with? What a delight if I could get these two guys to come up and hang on the balcony, swap stories of their correctional adventures, vent about any family they might have in Staten Island or City Island or Queens. Maybe we could even break out the handcuffs, see if I could get them off with the key in my mouth. "You guys wanna come up?"

The two look at one another and shrug. "Hey, maybe for a minute," the bald one says.

"Here, we'll help you carry this upstairs," the crew cut one says, and lifts the turtle out of my arms.

The hallway's fluorescent lights glisten off the bald head of the cop climbing the narrow stairs ahead of me. The other is behind me, carrying my turtle. The sandbox will go on my balcony. I'll fill it with water and splash around during the day. I have a pool now. Handcuffs jangle with each stair and they're both panting pretty hard around floor four. Shouldn't they be in much better shape than me, a mere citizen?

Once inside my studio, the cops look around, take in the layout: stove, fridge, bathroom, tiny living square that fits TV and futon. My own little Weber grill sits in a pile of ash on the balcony. The two of them lean on my shabby chic side table to catch their breath, the table I found discarded outside the Cutie Calls nail salon. “Nice place. Wait. Is there no bedroom?” I turn on the overhead kitchen light and point upwards to the lofted area. Now in the light, they both look older than they did in the dusk outside. Their armpits are sweating through, they’re wiping wet brows after the six flight climb. So odd they have to wear such heavy long-sleeved uniforms in this heat. Their utility belts have shiny black handguns holstered, the butt of the guns much larger than I thought a butt of a gun would be.

I open my fridge, wave the door to circulate some cooler air. “Do you want a Lionshead?”

The two stare at me. “Is that beer?” the bald one asks.

“We’re working,” the other says.

“Right,” I say.

We stand around, nodding, and I begin to realize that I have invited two cops up. Two policemen with two oversized handguns and two overzealous appetites for the law, here in my apartment, and they didn’t even need a warrant. I glance over to my living room, my cardboard box of party reserves ten feet away on my futon, the little cocaine baggie sitting on top of it all. And the grill. Cops hate grilling on the balcony. “I also have Capri Sun?”

“I’ll take a Capri Sun,” the crew cut one says.

“It’s even hotter in here than out there,” the other says.

I pick up the turtle sandbox, hoist it in the air so that it shields the grill from their sight. I open the balcony door and place the turtle on the astroturf. It's way too wide for the balcony. I curse and kick in the turtle's head, try to wedge it tighter into the concrete.

One of them calls out, "You okay out there?"

"Fine!"

The bald guy pops his head out the sliding balcony door. "What, you hiding? You got drugs or something?"

"No," I say sadly.

He stares at my grill and I stand frozen, one foot in the turtle pool. Finally he says, "Can I use your bathroom?"

I wave the bald one to the bathroom, and hand the other a Capri Sun. He leans against my kitchen counter and unwraps the plastic on the mini yellow straw, and attempts to toss the plastic into my trash can. The static on the wrapper makes it stick to his wet palm, and he shakes his hand until it falls.

He pops the straw into the small foil hole of the silver pouch. We stand in silence while he sucks the juice down. I shrink backwards into the kitchen, try and think of what to politely say that will get them to leave. I have a sudden urge to get my mother on the phone, let me talk boys, let her talk Belmont.

"Try talking to your neighbor," he says.

"Who?"

"The man downstairs. First step in a conflict resolution."

His partner exits the bathroom, zipping his fly. "Let's hoof it," he says to his partner. The two give me a see ya round and a wave and head out my apartment door. I listen to their heavy

boots and jingling handcuffs trail down the stairs. I make sure they have fully exited the building before closing and locking my apartment door. I drink the rest of my reserved bottle of Jack so that I'm sugared up enough to kick the turtle sandbox into formation on the balcony. But it's too big. I watch the *Frasier* episode where Martin drives tuxedoed Frasier and Niles to a New Years party in his Winnebago. I get some air on the balcony and assess the state of my kiddie pool. The turtle's head is irreconcilable, one white eye bent abruptly into the warped green plastic. Resigned, I hoist the turtle onto my shoulder and head back down the stairs, ready to set him free on the eve of large items trash day.

The young girl in the red shorts from the bar is standing by the open door of the RV. She's holding the beagle by a leash, watching the dog sniff tufts of crabgrass down the cracked sidewalk. The street is otherwise empty, the cops are gone. My building door slams behind me and I drop the turtle besides the line of trash cans. They both look up and the dog starts barking.

"Hey, one of those turtle pools," the girl says. "So retro."

I try to make out if anyone's in the RV. "Are you okay?"

She walks over to the turtle and inspects its concaved head. "You're throwing this in the garbage, are you crazy?"

"Isn't this guy a little old for you?" I say in a whisper. "Are you... taking care of yourself?"

"Who, George?" The girl mimes a jack-off motion. "He's out at an art function, you can talk normally. Didn't I see you earlier at the Country Club? Playing Photo Hunt? I'm Karen."

"Allie." I almost say we should play sometime, then catch myself. "So you're sleeping in there?"

“And this is my mini hundchen Blinky Palermo. We’ll be enjoying our pied-à-terre here on lovely Scholes Street for a few.” She leans down to pick up the turtle. “You sure you don’t want it?”

I imagine George stuffed into an old-fashioned bathing costume, melding tall green walls onto the turtle’s plastic, filling the pool with water and doing a high dive off his RV’s roof, taking a luxurious swim while I sweat from above. “Actually, maybe I’ll—” I say, reconsidering. “I mean, no. It doesn’t fit on my balcony. All yours.”

The next morning I do my daily calisthenics and apply for a couple product management jobs I’m not qualified for. My mom calls and I’m too depressed to pick up, I watch the phone ring and ring until her name dissolves. I pop a Lionshead on the balcony and hoist myself onto the table to see what Karen and George are up to. She’s nowhere in sight. He’s in his chair, suntanning with the tinfoil under his chin. He’s got the turtle pool out and filled to the brim, splashing his feet up and down in the water. Little Blinky Palermo is jumping around the turtle and barking with delight.

LAST DAY

The utility company turned the water off
for repairs. If she'd told me, I would've stayed in the gold-leafed hotel
not back here in my mother's house
in the suburbs, bickering and distracted
with bills for her new white marble counter left unopened
on her white marble counter, and the bronze mailbox still flecked
with the mailman's blood
thanks to our overly protective, dearly departed Rottweiler
Phoebe.

"I'm going to look all greasy, Mother."

I show off and pluck the heel of my black tights
and a magnificent cloud of dust and dander
fills her bedroom. "How do you get these things clean?"

"You could start by washing them," she says

"Here. Borrow my St. John—
but don't you dare take it up to New York again."

They need me to go down to the hotel
and take a group photo, take
several group photos

so I can post on the Dean's LinkedIn
with a caption announcing we met top-tier leaders from the human capital
management and wealth management industries to talk partnerships
maybe do a little cropping, adjust the brightness
break out that smudge tool if I'm feeling generous
to the woman from PepsiCo with cocktail sauce on her blouse.

How did I get here.

"Don't pull at that thread," my mother says
while I adjust the long black knitwear
with the gold buttons. We love the St. John blazer
it makes us look skinny and profesh
as long as we keep our shoulders back
is what she likes to say.

I'll say that I left it in her trunk
but really, I'll roll it up in my bag
that's the plan—
this bad boy is coming to NYC, baby.

It's getting late and she's talking me through her weekend
a tailgate before the horse race down in Middleburg
and Clyde said he is going out of his way to make lemon drops

just for her. I need her to drive me downtown to the Mayflower
so I can greet all my stupid managers
at the check-in location noted on the agenda.
I'm holding onto the side of her bedroom door, swinging it open and closed
looking at the bedside clock, looking at my phone
looking at anything but her
as she wraps a new blonde hair extension into her thinning bun.
She's confused why I'm acting so nervous, cocks her head and asks
"Are you okay?"
What a wild question
to ask her twenty-nine-year-old
when she is the one who's sick.

If I had known there was no water, I could have
stayed at this fancy hotel for free. Slept in, ordered room service
snuck a mimosa before the group photo
but now I look all greasy and my tights smell.

"Can we just go please."

I enter the hotel with a smile
plastered, camera turned on and ready to snap.
I take photos of the big guy in situ
shaking hands and nodding gravely

I keep the flash on. There's nothing natural in here
to light these aging bodies, masks of cakey foundation, napkins crumpled over
crotches wedged into pant suits, skirt suits, crumbs bouncing down
nametags, leaving trails of oil
that I capture and store away in a Dropbox.

I'll email the team, Dear colleagues
please find high resolution images of the Dean's meetings [here](#).

I'm getting a lil' old for this

I could run data queries or give TED Talks
launch million dollar marketing campaigns, trick families into booking
cruises, whatever they want me to do, I could do it.

I know SQL.

Well not really.

When the Dean finishes the keynote, I let the room relax

hold, hold, hold

and just as the chatter gently rises

before the networking gets too aggressive

I raise my voice and say, "Would everyone please gather round for a group photo?"

using a slight British accent for some reason.

We arrange the chairs.

We all arrange the chairs.

Even the CHRO of PepsiCo arranges the chairs

and I take the group photo.

My mom drives all the way downtown to pick me up and take me to Amtrak

I tell her about the fancy pesto sandwiches

and the mini fruit tarts, the berries encased in glaze

while I'm sippin on a glass bottle of Diet Coke

that was also totally free.

"Are you still consuming?" she asks

in kind of a mean tone. I tell her we are late

I tell her to step on it.

Crap. I'm still wearing the St. John

I forgot to roll it up and hide it in my bag

to kick off my grand ruse.

She eyes me eyeing the St. John

and says, "Don't even think about it, missy."

Now that's the good stuff—

we're buddies, after all. We drive in silence.

I would have filled the silence

with more of the good stuff

if I had known this was our last day together.

In a different world, I'd have told them, guys, I'm out

bird's-eye view, people! It ain't livin' if it's livin' to work
and send a final email, with a link to the Dropbox.

I would have stayed back, gone on the longest walks around the neighborhood, pretend
Phoebe was still tugging us along, snarling and lunging at young children
ordered a lemon drop at the horse race party, booked us flights
to the Virgin Islands or the British Virgin Islands or wherever.
Whatever she wanted me to do, I could do it.

She once said she wanted to see St. John
because it's the classiest island down there
though I think she had it confused
with the jacket.

She double parks at Union Station and it's stressful,
cars honking and buses whizzing by.

I get out of the car and take off the St. John
and hand it back to her. I lean through the passenger side door
stretch all the way to the driver's seat
and give her sort of a one-armed hug. I don't think I gave her a kiss
that time. Or she me.

I run through the station and print my ticket and hike up the train steps and later on the
phone she says,

"I didn't think you were going to make it."

JOSIE, THE WRATH OF GOD

The invitation to the full moon party at La Patria promises resolved karma, a reconciliation of our wild extremes, and overall positive vibes. Tomás is a former co-worker who abandoned his Bushwick loft to return to his homeland of Costa Rica. He built up an abandoned family plot in the outskirts of San José. He mowed the grass, cleaned the pool, and restored a coal brick oven. La Patria will be the destination pizza restaurant and rock venue for weekend warriors, gates open wide to the city's artistically-inclined and otherwise alienated youth. All are welcome to come together for a smoke, a slice, and a swim, we learn from the email.

My husband Matthew and I watch the promotional video Tomás posted to Facebook. An underwater camera follows a woman in a sequined blue bikini doing kick flips off a stucco-sided pool. Don't look, I tease, shielding the laptop screen from Matthew's view. But we are both mesmerized by the low-hanging lemon tree skirting the surface of the pool, and eager to discover what else has grown in Tomás's life. The video cuts to a stop-motion scene, a plastic T-Rex figurine eating, bite by bite, a slice of bubbled-up cheese and pepperoni. Then, in flashing neon pink script: *Vengan a la Patria para el Festival de Luna Llena*. The production value is very impressive.

"Allie. We have to go to this."

Matthew and I agree the full moon party would be a worthwhile investment. We haven't left the country for two years, not since the Tulum trip we took after my mother passed, where I spent a week staring at the seaweed-soaked beach, weeping into full cups of smoky mezcal. Costa Rica could be a nice getaway before Matthew starts his law school finals. We should be good friends and support Tomás's small business debut. Plus, we need to swim in that pool. It's

impossible to swim in New York. So we book a couple of JetBlue tickets direct to SJO, pack light, and take a cab straight to La Patria.

Tomás greets us looking as if he's just woken up from a nap. I barely recognize him in an oversized t-shirt and soccer shorts, a far cry from his skinny jeans and fitted collared shirts, the dapper outfits I remember him wearing around the PaganDB office. He'll give us the grand tour, he says. He walks us past a terrace, covered by a roof of vines, with one worn reclining chair, freshly imprinted with the length of someone as tall as Tomás. A pizza oven in the back sits dark and cold, Modelo cans and Pepsi two liters and other recycling stacked in front of its brick maw. He walks us up a small grassy hill, the smacking of his flip flops the only noise between the three of us. I'm just about to nudge Matthew to whistle or show some sign of encouragement when the pool comes into view. A green garden hose lays to the side, dripping onto a stained stretch of concrete. Mildew has grown up the orange stucco where the glittering woman once performed her kick flips. The lemon tree hangs even lower than I remember from the video, so low its skirt collapses into a heap of branches rotting into the plastic of a broken deck chair. I look down into the empty pool and feel my heart sink to the bottom of its drain.

"We were hoping to try a local beer," Matthew says quickly, to distract Tomás from the tears forming in my eyes. "Do you have any local beers?"

"Nothing on hand," Tomás says, and lights a joint. "Man. I just couldn't get that whole party together in time." He bends down and swivels the garden hose across the dry edge of the pool. "This place is going to be so amazing once it's ready to go."

"Allie and I have been traveling, you know? Would love to pick up some beers."

Matthew elbows me to chime in.

I break my stare from the hose. "Or maybe we can walk to a place you like?"

“Here. I can take you,” Tomás says.

We drive down the street in his newish Subaru to a bar that seems like it’s made out of clay. Three TVs are mounted along the walls, each streaming a different soccer match. We eat crispy fried plantains and juicy pork empanadas while Tomás tells us his family history. They came over from Hamburg and changed their name from ‘Löwe,’ the German word for lion, to ‘León,’ its Spanish equivalent. “My grandfather bought that piece of land for a song,” he says.

“Ach so,” says Matthew. “Welches Lied?”

“Oh, I don’t know any German,” says Tomás.

Matthew and I sneak a private smile. We bonded trading botched German phrases, quoting ’70s-era Herzog movies projected at our favorite outdoor bar, many years ago.

Back at La Patria we sit and drink Modelos on the cracked cement floor of the terrace, update Tomás on gossip from PaganDB, Matthew’s progress through law school. Our host laughs sadly along to our stories while sucking on the tail of the T-Rex toy from his promo video, which he’s since hollowed out to use as a bong. Tomás pulls out a bulky board game around midnight. “Check it out. I got this limited edition Settlers of Catan, ‘The Struggle for Rome.’ Here’s what you need to know. The Visigoths, the Ostrogoths, the Vandals, and the Franks founded their kingdoms—”

Matthew gives me a desperate look. Tomás is removing the last of the box’s saran wrap when I speak up. I tell him it’s been a really long day.

“But tomorrow, right guys? I finally have enough people to play Catan.”

“Tomorrow, totally,” I say, standing up and brushing off the dirt from my legs. “And maybe we can see some monkeys?”

“Monkeys,” says Tomás. He stares off into space, and we lose him. “Sure... we’ll see the monkeys.”

Matthew and I sleep head-to-toe on the living room couch. He turns out the last light and reaches across the length of the couch as far as he can up my t-shirt to give me a sleepy squeeze. He grazes his finger down my side, but retreats his hand when he hits the high-waist of my control top. I recently came into a treasure trove of inherited underwear, discovered inside one of my mother’s Vera Bradley quilted paisley weekender bags, which I unearthed from the back of my closet for this trip. Her pairs are utilitarian, their waistbands still in order, most with light control tops, many with a lingering funk along the crotch. I’ve been wearing them, throwing out a pair of my own as a trade each time. Matthew could only stare at the more youthful, colorful bikini-styles draped over the lid of our trash can, not daring to say a word. I fall asleep on the hard couch, feeling slightly sorry for not reassuring Matthew, but grateful for the moisture in the underwear that I know is not my own, the extra time with my mother I’m getting away with.

We wake around nine, eager to explore the city, and circle the entry to Tomás’ bedroom. I get on my knees and peer under his darkened door crack. Matthew finds and makes some coffee, and I pull out our Costa Rica Lonely Planet.

“We’ve only got two more nights. I say we make a move. To the beach.” I hold up a photo of the country’s famed “whale tail,” a sand formation jutting into the Pacific Ocean. Uvita is a few hours south of here. If there’s one thing I’ve learned in the past couple of years, it’s that life is short. I remember sitting through several sales pitches that Tomás flubbed, forgetting basic database vocabulary in front of Fortune 500 execs, while I screened the calls of my then-sick mother. I remember going a whole year in New York City without ever touching toe to open

body of water. It's not every day you get to go to Costa Rica, my mother would have said. Don't let some failed sales guy derail your trip, she would have said.

"Wow. I want to go to the whale tail," says Matthew.

"And, they have monkeys." I show him a picture of a screeching howler, then a timetable listed in the book, the buses from San José to Uvita. "One more bus today. It's now or never. We gotta make a move."

"Well it's your friend, your call..." Matthew says.

"No." I pull his arm to join me in breaking the news. "It's our call."

I rap lightly on Tomás' door. Nothing. I knock harder. I let myself in and find Tomás in a deep sleep, curled into his comforter. Framed on the wall is a blown-up photo of himself, posing on the Williamsburg Bridge with his skateboard and a wild grin. On the other, a graphic rendering of JFK's assassination in elementary school acrylics. I shake Tomás awake.

"Hey buddy. Morning. We're actually... I think we're actually going to head to the beach."

"You're... you're leaving? Allie, you just got here," says Tomás. He rubs his eyes and sits up in the bed.

"We've only got a couple more nights, you know. And if there's no full moon party..."

"You should come! To the beach!" Matthew pipes up from the hall.

Tomás looks up at me. "The beach, huh?"

"Yeah, you should come," I say, the 'come' a little too cracked and high-pitched to be convincing.

Tomás shakes his head. “I need to chill, take care of some things here.” He stands up. He’s wearing the same t-shirt and soccer shorts from the night before. “So how much longer do we have to hang? Can we play Catan?”

“Actually, the last bus to Uvita leaves in like twenty-five minutes.” I show him the Lonely Planet page with the bus timetable.

“Oh.” Tomás looks down at his rug, no longer able to make eye contact with me. “Don’t forget sunscreen out there. The sun is vicious.”

“We wanted to know... if we can get a ride?”

I drape my legs over Matthew’s for the four hours down the coast on a luxury coach bus. We feast from a family size box of Cheez-Its and marvel at the scenery out the window: a foggy brown volcano, an intermittent jagged coastline, the rolling hills of coffee farms staked out by wooden planks and blue tarps. We make way for the doped-out young American guys who stumble down the aisle in Mexican blanket ponchos. I point out a group of crusty iguanas clinging to a branch that’s wedged against our window, and we stare transfixed for the length of a bus stop. It’s a nice break for us. Matthew’s conversations have been getting more painful over the past year. He’s been harassing me with new words like “torts” and “replevin,” but still hasn’t been able to recover my mother’s dissolved pension. And I’ve been getting meaner.

A group of surfers gets off with us at the Uvita bus stop. Matthew and I, duffels over our shoulders, watch in awe as they pass with their pastel longboards, heading in the opposite direction. We start down a pebble road, hoping to find the hostel we’ve marked in the Lonely Planet. The surfers call back to watch out for snakes, and we walk a little faster.

After a sweaty couple of miles, the cries of the cicadas growing louder, and the afternoon sun lowering into early evening, Matthew points out a painted piece of tree bark for “Hostel El

Dorado.” Drumbeats waft from the other side of a tall fence. We approach an imposing wooden gate, and Matthew pulls a string that must attach to some sort of bell on the other side. The gate cracks open an inch, revealing a smiling face framed by a yellow lion’s mane of wild long hair, fried from the beach.

“Hey! Pura vida, pura vida,” the girl says, in some sort of European accent. She shoves a concrete brick aside with her flip flop and opens the door wide. “I am Josie.” A string of lights around a courtyard bathes a party in a golden haze, sun-kissed travelers dancing around in faded t-shirts and bathing suits, swigging beers and milling around a tiki bar. A man under a drooping straw hat stoops to slap a trio of bongos. A group to the side of the fence scoots an oversized set of chess pieces across a black and white checkered mat. Chickens bob around everywhere.

I look over to Matthew, who’s still staring at Josie. This girl is in all black—black bathing suit straps peek out of her black racerback, she picks at the hem of frayed black cutoff shorts, and her black velvet choker, worn in this heat, seems slightly goth. She has gigantic blue eyes and thick, overly wide lips. Her golden yellow hair is desperate for toner.

“Hi Josie,” Matthew says. I excuse myself past Josie, and drag Matthew to a check-in counter set up by the bar.

We are assigned a treehouse for twenty dollars a night. Matthew and I venture up a ladder and shove our duffels across a wooden platform. Two hammocks are bolted between the tree’s thick branches, and Matthew dips under the mosquito net of one to test out its swing. I store away some of our clothes and our box of Cheez-Its in the one piece of furniture, a little side table. We climb back down the ladder and find Josie alone at the tiki bar. She recommends we order the cacique, a fiery, clear shot of liquor, which we do, which makes us fast friends.

“Prost,” Matthew says, clinking both of our mini one-ounce plastic glasses with his own.

“Kannst du Deutsch?” Josie asks, turning to face Matthew.

Matthew is leaning towards Josie with wide, expectant eyes. He gets overexcited when he’s given a chance to speak German. “Wir sprechen Deutsch mit großem Herzen und großer Leidenschaft,” he says.

Herzen, Leidenschaft. I try my best to translate. I’m not sure what he said beyond some mention of a big love, or maybe a big light. I give Josie the gesture I always give when asked if I know the language, wincing and apologetic, holding my thumb and forefinger an inch apart. “Nur ein bisschen.”

Josie tells us she’s been living in this hostel for three months and is avoiding going back to Berlin. She’s practically an employee at this point, she says. We all look over at the bartender. He keeps his eyes down on the limes he’s slicing and doesn’t respond. Matthew and I practice what little German we know, and tell Josie about our friend’s failed pizza restaurant in San José, how his family had come over from Germany as well.

“His family, likely are Nazis,” she says.

Josie introduces us to a few surfers, who approach her seat at the bar warily and don’t stick around to chat. The three of us play a game of life-size chess. Matthew and I learn how to bend our knees and drag the pieces by their hollow plastic base. Josie leans backwards off her rook, smiling for my photo. We abandon the game halfway through, after Matthew gets too worked up when I tell him pawns are not allowed to move backwards. Josie shows us how to pick up and throw the chickens, and we bowl over watching them flap their feathers and squawk. I tell her about my deep desire to see monkeys. A family of little black monkeys, lined up and grooming and weighing down the limb of a tree. Or the screechy howler ones. Josie cocks her

head at me over the chicken she's holding against her chest. Just one monkey, from afar is fine, I tell her.

Josie smiles, her fleshy lips stretching so wide, I feel she is mocking me. She tosses the chicken in the air, and leads us to the back of the property towards a chain link fence enclosure. There, she points to a giant leathery snake in the corner, a protruding lump the size of a soccer ball stuck in its middle.

"No monkeys today," Josie says. "It's a boa."

"Is it really?" I take a wide-eyed step forward towards Josie and lean hard against the fence, enough for the metal links to leave an imprint on my forehead.

"He ate a chicken in the middle of the night. Then they lock him up here until someone comes to take him away. But he'll come back and eat another chicken."

I step away from the fence and rub the grooves on my face, savoring feeling something new for the first time in awhile. "Nature is vile und base," I say, trying for a German accent. "You know the Herzog quote?"

Josie doesn't answer. She's still staring at the snake.

"Prost," the three of us cheer again, back at the tiki bar, more cacique in hand, until the sky turns black and we are the last guests out on the grounds.

"Viel Glück on your Geburtstag," I add, though it is nobody's birthday. Someone shushes us from one of the treehouses above.

"Ich bin der Zorn Gottes!" Matthew yells, standing up from his stool and clattering it to the sand-covered floor.

"Please, shut up, shut up," I say, and push Matthew back down. We hear a more aggressive shush from the treetops. The bartender stretches cling wrap over his mixers and asks

us to make our way to our hammocks, citing curfew. Josie flashes us a peace sign, which I have not seen anyone do with their fingers in many years. She disappears up the ladder to her treehouse.

Up in our own, we're careful not to make any noise. I snap my fingers to get Matthew's attention, then make a show of changing into one of my remaining pairs of bikini-style underwear. I fall backwards into the hammock, one leg in the air, toeing the ring that connects hammock to tree trunk. Matthew tries to crawl into my cocoon, but knees me in the rib and tips me out onto the floor in the process. He retreats to his own hammock and begins to snore. I fall asleep imagining Josie and me, leaning together against the chain fence, a boa's head arched in our direction, its body slithering slow and steady towards us.

The next day, Josie is nowhere to be found at breakfast. Matthew and I borrow a couple of boogie boards and set up camp on the beach. We get caught out on the whale tail at the morning's high tide. We swim our way back to the beach and spot a toucan and a sloth in the treetops. We bash a coconut against a rock and scrape out its white meat. We forget to wear sunscreen. When we return to the hostel, badly burned by the sun and exhausted by the waves, we find Josie sitting by herself at the tiki bar.

"It's the lobster couple! Ha, you two look ridiculous." She's wearing a faded Sisters of Mercy t-shirt and black bikini bottoms with no shorts. Her yellow hair is so tangled I can make out patches of her bare scalp. "You look so stupid and all red."

We sit down next to her and begin to moan, feeling the burns' first stings. Josie stands to grab an icy can of Imperial from behind the bar and rolls it across the back of Matthew's neck. He looks nervous, tucks his stool tighter into the bar. I give him a spiteful smile.

That night we hang around with Josie again. We toss back cacique and practice our German. We play chess and look at the boa. We throw the chickens. I remember our late afternoon flight the next day out of SJO and feel restless.

“Are you going to see your friend on the way back?” Josie asks.

“Who?” I say. “Oh Tomás. Oh no. We’ll take the bus straight to the airport.”

“You should definitely visit New York sometime,” Matthew says.

“I’ve never been to New York,” Josie says.

“You can always stay on our couch,” I say.

“Natürlich!” says Matthew.

Josie rocks back and forth on her stool. “But most importantly, I have to figure what to do with my life!” She throws her hands up in the air.

“Yes, that’s always hard,” I say. I remember the work emails I need to send before getting lost in transit over the next day.

Back in New York on Tuesday, Matthew disappears into Bobst Library to study. I spend the morning catching up at work, and when the office quiets down in the afternoon, I send a carefully worded thank-you email to Tomás. His La Patria Facebook page has been dormant. I click through some of his old photos and feel a wave of nostalgia for the one night we spent there. You’re going to make it work, I just know it, I add in the email.

I catch the M at 14th Street on my commute home. When the train emerges above ground, launching my subway car over the East River, a notification pops up on my phone that a Josefine Weber added me as a friend. I get off the train at Lorimer and stop at a bodega for a few groceries. I consider a box of Cheez-Its, a nod to our weekend adventure. The pang of a stomach

cramp has me continue down the aisle. Once home, Matthew greets me from the couch, textbooks and binders spread out around him. I place the grocery bag of eggs and beer down on the dining table, and my phone dings.

“Josie...” I look up at Matthew. “Josie... wants to stay with us?”

“What? When?”

“She’s at JFK?”

“You’re joking.”

“She says she’s at JFK and is asking for our address.”

“But... that’s ridiculous. I’ve got finals.”

I try to envision what Josie would look like in real life, try to picture her standing alone and stranded in an airport. Her odd hair and jarring smile are impossible to relocate. I can only think of Tomás, lying back on his terrace chair, the hexagon-shaped Catan board set up on the floor for one player. “You told her she could stay here, Matthew.”

“You told her she could stay here!”

I look at my phone, type out our address, and hit send. “You were overexcited with the German.”

“So? What are you going to say to her?”

“She’s... getting a cab,” I say, reading the response. I look up at Matthew. “Try and be a more flexible person.”

So now Josie’s here, her bag of sandy bathing suits and shell fragments sprawled across my rug. She’s on the floor of my closet, picking out a couple of long-sleeved shirts and dresses for the brisk New York April weather.

“Your feet are so big. Are you German?” Josie holds up one of my leather riding boots. “I have very small feet for a German myself.”

I show her a printed-out email, a list of bars and restaurants and tourist attractions that I circulate for people who visit the city, but she won't even give it a peek. She's going through my clothes, unfurling my folded sweaters, taking the dresses off their hangers, and tossing them all in a big pile. She tells me she is so grateful that she met us, she really needed to get out of the Dorado. Josie takes out my dead mother's old Hermes box full of silk scarves and models one around her neck, then unties it and tosses it on top of the pile. She was running out of activities there, she said. She had an opportunity to help this girl make soaps and sell them to guests at the various hotels in the area, but then this other girl swooped in, and the other girl had a car. So she had really been at her breaking point with all the politics.

“But you could afford a plane ticket, so last minute?” I ask, picking up the Hermes scarves and re-folding them. She shrugs, and pulls my father's old Vampire Skis sweatshirt over her head.

Matthew appears at the door. “Josie,” he says, with a stern nod.

“Matthew. Still looking very red. Your forehead especially,” Josie says.

We couldn't even sleep last night, tossing and turning, searing in pain with every touch of skin to sheet.

Josie picks up the Vera Bradley filled with my mother's control tops. She's about to rummage inside when I grab the bag out of her hands. She gives me one of her creepy wide smiles and asks, “Shall we all go to dinner?”

“Just so you know, Josie, I won't be around much this week. I've got finals,” Matthew says, and the way he lowers his voice with the word “finals,” the reverence he assigns it, really

sets me off.

“Studying for Pensions?” I ask, glaring.

“Hon, that was last semester,” he says with a laugh. “Remember, Professor Katzki?”

I watch our guest test a handful of my Chanel lipstick shades against her hand, and wonder if Josie could be some sort of karmic retribution sent by the offended host of Tomás, the enraged vengeance of the La Patria estate. I pick up a few pairs of underwear that have tumbled off her growing pile in the closet, sniff to check if they’re clean. The scent reminds me of sitting beside the sushi shack trash cans on Bogart Street in high summer. Then I remember the upscale pizza place next door.

“Josie, let’s leave him buried with his books. I’m going to show you the best spot in New York,” I say. “It’s what our friend was trying to do with La Patria.”

The two of us walk a few concrete blocks past the pizzerias and bodegas of Bushwick Avenue, past the hole-in-the-wall shop that upsells old, heavy bicycles, to the restaurant, an industrial garage turned pizzeria with a farm on its roof. I guide her by the hand through the bustling interior styled like a wood cabin at Christmas, past the green shipping container that’s been given a window and converted into a radio station. Together again, I feel the kick of excitement from my first night discovering Hostel El Dorado, and hope I can recreate something similar for Josie.

“There used to be a little kiddie pool back here,” I say, pointing around the garden, which is now arranged into neat rows of picnic tables. “And a little area where you could play video games. And you could order a beer bong, and people would gather around and watch you chug out of a Yankees helmet and everyone would clap.”

“Used to?”

“Once this place got really popular, and all the finance guys and lawyers started coming, they had to firm up the rules, I guess.” I sit down on a picnic bench and pass her a paper menu.

Josie sits across from me and reads through the list of pizzas. “And isn’t Matthew studying to be a lawyer?”

“Yes, well. I’m not talking about us.”

Josie fits in here. The rip down the front of my dad’s worn brown sweatshirt contrasts with her velvet black choker. Her smoky black eyeliner looks comfortably lived in, like she applied it days ago and forgot to wash it off. She looks like the type of person the staff might secretly want around, the type who had always been a regular before the place blew up.

“I don’t like pizza,” Josie says, setting down the menu. “Alcohol is my treat. I can’t have pizza too.”

“They’re known for it. You’ll like it,” I say.

“I’ll order... the romaine salad.”

Josie eats half of my clam and chile pizza while I pick at the bubbles forming on my sunburnt forearms. She’s going over what she might do in the city tomorrow, something something SoHo something Empire State. Now that the golden haze of the Dorado has lifted, I’m realizing that Josie is too young, like a little sister. I peel back a white web of skin, get a good three inches off before it breaks. I brush the dead skin to the woodchips below our table, and dab the lone piece of crust left from the pizza into a pool of olive oil.

“So,” Josie asks. “Can you recommend a place that does tattoo?”

“Josie. Don’t get a tattoo,” I say.

“You will come with me?”

I explain that I go into an office on the weekdays. It's important that I am in my seat by nine so I have time to diagram out how our distributed database can help Nationwide Insurance make sense of all its raw data, so that they can better predict risky bets, like people who don't have jobs. And I need to script out the presentation so that I come off clear and charming. "I'm trying to be more clear and charming at work," I tell her. "And I'm trying to stop saying 'sorry.'"

"Boring," Josie says. "You Americans work all the time."

The olive oil has spilled over the lip of the silver pizza plate, darkening the wood of the picnic table. Josie picks up my credit card and asks if I'd like another drink from the bar.

"So how long do you think you'll be staying?" I ask, but she's already out of earshot, pointing at the chalkboard wine list. If Josie had asked me anything about myself, I would have told her this was where Matthew and I had our first date, those early years when the restaurant projected movies onto the shipping container. We watched *Fitzcarraldo* in German, Klaus Kinski playing a rubber baron obsessed with moving his boat through the jungles of Peru. Matthew and I lingered in the restaurant's garden for hours after that film, leaning our heads together, watching old clips of the director's interviews. Herzog told the cameraman that he found nature vile and base. That when birds sing, he does not hear melody, but rather screeches of pain. Matthew and I lost it at that, locked eyes and howled, shaking off all the nervous pretension from dinner, then dropped the phone to the ground, startled by a thick rat muscling between our table legs.

After work the next evening I find Josie splayed on the couch watching the Bravo channel. She's lying across the books Matthew didn't take to the library that day, and surrounded by colorful shopping bags, the hard-backed ones with the cloth handles, the ones you get from

the good boutiques. I can't make myself enter the living room, into her orbit, so I hover by the sink. I ask about her day and turn the sink on, then off, not knowing what else to do.

"I'm so tired, I walked everywhere, all over SoHo," she says. "Here, I bought you a gift."

My face lightens. I turn the sink off and take a step into the living room. Josie reaches into a Duane Reade bag and pulls out a bright blue pack of Oreos. "I know you are the type of woman who likes sweets."

Matthew walks in and finds the two of us staring across the room at one another, Josie extending the Oreos, me hugging my sunburnt arms to my chest, and now it's the three of us, together in the apartment.

Josie puts the cookies on the coffee table, sits up off the couch, and picks up a mini plastic bottle from the floor. She rocks her leg over her neck and reveals a black etching on the back of her thigh, the area of skin swollen and red. Black lines criss cross into the tiers of a skyscraper, with a long spire lost up her black jean shorts.

"Is that the Empire State Building?" I ask.

"Check it out. Empire State Building!" says Josie, her leg still twisted over her neck.

"Which floor is Bank of America?" Matthew asks.

She ignores Matthew and applies the bottle to the back of her leg. A thick glob of clear grease drips down the whole of her thigh and lands on an open page in a binder labeled "Deconstructing the Carceral State." Matthew lets out a high-pitched sound and puts his hand over his mouth. He runs to gather all his books in one armful, and carries them into the back bedroom. Josie is undisturbed. She keeps her eyes on a housewives' dinner party flashing across the television and rubs more of the solution into her thigh.

Matthew returns to the living room, his face a shade redder than his sunburn had just looked, and asks Josie to please supply us with her plans, and the day she will be leaving. After all, he says, we are not a Costa Rican hostel, where you can leave packs of Oreos around. From the looks of it, he says, with all these hard-backed shopping bags, she could likely pay for a hotel, she would find it much more comfortable in a hotel, much more fun. I chime in that the AllSaints bag and the Kooples bag suggest she could probably even afford a hotel with a pool, like the William Vale or the Gansevoort, which would be a wise move because it's impossible, otherwise, to swim in New York. And come to think of it, maybe we could all visit Josie at the William Vale and go swimming.

Josie rolls off the couch and stands. "You guys. I have to say. I am direct. I tell the truth. I am not smiling all the time like you, telling lies."

"I'm sorry, Josie," Matthew says. He looks down at the floor.

I cross my arms and do what Matthew cannot. I stand up for our apartment, our family, our future. I accidentally mimic her accent. "Ve are not telling lies. Ve are clear and charming."

Josie stretches out a too-wide smile. "If you did not want me to stay and hang here, you should not have told me to come hang." She holds out her grease bottle. "Here. Try my potion."

She stands up and rubs the clear liquid into my burnt forearm. I'm flooded with icy relief. I let out a loud sigh. I hold out the bottle for Matthew, and rub some under the opening of his polo. His tense face relaxes and I feel his chest loosen. The three of us stand around the living room, and spend a few minutes greasing up together, until, at once, we all know the moment is over, and the awkwardness becomes unbearable for all three of us, even Josie.

Matthew looks at me to do it. I hand Josie back her grease bottle.

"We cannot have you stay and hang here," I say, and hang my head.

Josie marches over to the couch and begins to condense her purchases into her Kooples shopping bag. She pulls out jeans and strappy dresses and gladiator sandals and repacks them. She leaves the emptied bags tipped on their sides on our floor. She disappears into the back bedroom. “I need to borrow a bag,” she calls back. She emerges with my mother’s Vera Bradley.

“Hey, that’s my... weekender.” I picture all the good quality control top underwear inside, probably three hundred dollars worth, all still infused with my mother’s four humors, the blood, the bile, and all the rest, the only connective tissue I have left.

Josie’s packing quickly now, pushing everything but the law school binders into the Vera Bradley. She slings four or five of the boutique bags over her shoulder, and her yellow hair gets caught in the straps. “Scheiße.”

Matthew opens our apartment door and leans against it, waiting for Josie to leave.

“Josie, I need that bag back.” I walk over to her and pull at the cotton handle. “Hold on a minute. Which hotel are you thinking?”

Josie shoots her head up from her hunched position to glower at me. A few strands of yellow hair, tangled in the bag straps, rip off her scalp. The three of us stand there, staring horrified at the lock of hair that floats to the floor. She tries to hold in a cry and a tear falls down her cheek.

I’m still holding onto the black paisley strap, and give Matthew a pleading look.

“Let it go, Al,” he says. “We’ll buy new underwear.”

Josie pulls hard on the Vera Bradley, and I tug it backwards with both hands. Josie looks me in the eye, plants her feet and tightens all the muscles of her core, her perfected El Dorado surfing stance, and pulls until I stumble forward and drop the handle. She rushes past, but not fast enough that I can’t make out a red patch blotting against the side of her head. Then all we

see are bags tumbling out of our door, and all we hear is the brush of the paper against the halls of the stairway.

After a minute or so, once we confirm a definite slam from below, Matthew closes the apartment door. We reclaim our couch and open the package of Oreos. I change the channel to the BBC, a documentary series called *Monkey Planet*. A group of macaques are taking turns climbing up a tower and dive-bombing into a pool of water. Limbs and tails splay wildly as they soar through the air. Then there's the splash, and the monkeys claw their way up the clay wall to do it over again. Matthew scrapes the white cream off an Oreo disc with his top teeth and asks if I agree with him that this is the best show ever made.

A monkey crashes backwards into the pool with a screech of joy, and a spray of droplets hits the camera lens. "I admire their energy," I say, and stretch to lie down behind Matthew along the length of the couch. He flashes a look of disappointment, the same wince he thinks I don't see when I cycle in a pair of my mother's underwear. I close my eyes, feel the familiar seal crystallize, that light crust along my eyelids that has been so permanent these last two years. Reaching under my jeans, I touch the lining of my last pair of the control tops, feel reassured by the stretchy microfiber, the smothering dampness of the connecting cotton. I roll away from the TV to face the back of the couch, and ask Matthew to clean up the hair and the bags littered all over the floor.

WHO ELSE IS COMING TO THE HOUSE?

Liz didn't tell her brother Tom that she invited too many people to the cabin. They split the rental fifty/fifty, and she knew he'd push back, give a hard no to hosting any of her friends. She helped Tom gather dry brush for tonight's bonfire, nodded along as he lamented his latest failed money-making scheme. He thought deck sales would soar this summer. He could recite all the pros and cons of vinyl decking, took the time to learn all the state and local regulations. He didn't think the company's commission-only disclaimer was a red flag. By the end of the quarter, he only sold one minor gondola repair. The woman was still leaving him lengthy voicemails long after he completed the job. Liz told him his fear of being chained to a desk was hurting him financially. She told him all his time spent trying to hit the jackpot was time wasted. She did not tell him that Chad and Tara and their two infant sons would be dropped off at 6am by the bus from the city the next morning.

That night, Tom and his wife Melanie placed a grill over the bonfire and cooked ribeyes they'd bought in the city. Liz and her husband Santiago worked together at a gourmet food and wine delivery app, Liz in operations and Santi a buyer. They introduced the other couple to how delicious raw radishes could be when coated in Kerrygold butter. They drank four bottles of a juicy Gamay and sat back on the tall wooden slats of the Adirondack chairs on the deck, pointing out the constellations they knew. Melanie opened up about her low egg count and cried a little and Tom broke out his weed. They listened to dogs howling in the distance.

The group passed out around midnight, retiring to the two available bedrooms, and all four slept soundly until they were awakened by the thwack of the cabin's screen door at 6:10am. Then, the sound of bags thudding to the living room floor. Then, high-pitched screaming and crying, followed by desperate shushing. After a few minutes, Liz could make out the screaming

to be from one child and the crying from another. She knew Chad and Tara had a colicky six-month-old and an older toddler.

“I guess they know about the new people now,” Santi said. He gathered the quilt around his ears, rolled over, and snored on. Liz squeezed her eyes shut and didn’t dare get up.

Around nine, Santi pulled Liz out of bed, and they stepped into the cabin’s living room to greet their guests. Melanie looked up from the coffee maker and gave Liz a tight smile. “A family is here,” she said. The family was all set up on the couch. What was once a bare, dusty little room was now full of diaper bags and stroller seats and bottles of milk.

Chad hoisted the older boy off his lap, stood up, and wrapped Liz and Santi in a bear hug. They hadn’t seen each other since the electroclash lock-in at the Basilica Hudson. Chad showed off the bags of groceries he brought. The couple was on a meat-only diet. “And on the weekends, we eat,” Chad said. He pulled out a massive tomahawk steak, using its bone as a handle. He stacked five more tomahawks across the counter. Santi rustled around the bags and, excited, took out sliced prosciutto, packets of bacon, several cans of foie gras, three whole chickens, and a variety pack of squeezable Gerber pouches.

Liz greeted Tara and the two babies while Tom hovered in the doorway. She picked up the six-month-old, and the little boy started to wail. She waved him in circles in the air, not knowing what to do to calm him down, and gave Tom a guilty smile. He shook his head in disgust, retreated into his room, and shut the door.

“It means so much to us that you invited us out here,” Tara said, raising her voice over her children’s crying. “We haven’t been on vacation since this little guy came along. And then there was the whole thing with the ICU, and I picked up pinkeye from somewhere in that hospital, and then the lil guy got the pinkeye from me, and I could barely see my new little boy

while I was wiping his eye out for a whole week. And of course he's screaming the whole time because of the colic."

"Then I got Tara onto the meat and her eye got cleared out right away," Chad said.

"Where we sleeping?"

Tom emerged from the bedroom with a large canvas bag and crossed the room to Liz.

"Put your friends in the tent," he whispered.

"What?" said Liz. "I can't hear you over the baby."

He dropped the tent at her feet, and went over to inspect the steaks.

Melanie took a seat on the couch next to the toddler and handed him items from the coffee table. "Dad always does this with my sister's kids," she said. "They're kids, they'll play with anything." The little boy picked at the rubber buttons of the remote for awhile, then moved on to ripping up a *Town & Country*. Melanie collected the magazine scraps as he worked and made a little pile on the table.

Santi and Liz helped Chad set up the tent and then the group came together to decide what to do with their day. They all changed into their bathing suits and set out on a thirty minute hike through the forest to find the beach. Santi pointed out a wooden sign announcing that the Rocky Neck State Park Wolf Preserve was one mile away. They craned their necks in the direction of the sign's arrow, but couldn't make out any fences or buildings in the distance.

The group emerged from the trees, and the beach's murky hazel water came into view. Getting closer, they made out curious piles in the sand, glistening in the sun. The beach was littered with dead jellyfish. This stretch was protected from any waves by the sound, and the water lapped gently along the shore.

They all laid out their towels, stepped out of their dresses and shirts and pants, and splashed around in the water. Tara and Chad stayed ankle-deep, each holding one of their babies upright in the sand. Santi speculated about the wolf preserve. Would the wolves escape once they smelled Chad's stockpile of meat? Would their flimsy lean-to cabin be enough to protect them?

"We're in a tent, though," Tara called from the shore, and the parents gave one another a worried look.

Tom and Melanie finally seemed at ease now that they were in the water, Tom staring up at the sky and guiding Melanie back and forth while she floated on her back. Liz thought this might be a good time to bring up the fact that her Latvian friends Raimonds and Ieva were arriving on the 6am bus from the city the next morning. Liz swam over to her brother and sister-in-law and asked if they were excited for the fancy dinner. "We might need even more food for tomorrow. We might have a bigger party..." she said.

Tom glared at Liz. "What do you mean?"

"The family brought foie gras. Gotta say I'm a little nervous about the foie gras," said Melanie. "Mom would buy it sometimes at Christmas but I've never tried it before."

"Why do you always say 'Mom'?" asked Liz.

Melanie asked what she meant.

"I mean, why do you drop the possessive pronoun? When you talk about your parents?"

Tom glared harder at Liz.

Liz continued, "We don't share a mom, so wouldn't it be 'my mom'? Isn't it weird to preface it as, 'Mom'?"

Tom guided Melanie's body away from Liz. "Liz, can you just—" At that moment, a jellyfish soared through the air and clipped the side of Tom's ear. They looked over to see Chad

grinning from the beach, his toddler draped over his shoulders and cackling. Chad told his son to hold tight, leaned to scoop up another jellyfish, and took aim at Santi. Santi dove forward and scurried to the shore to join in. Liz watched her brother's face turn downward, into a humiliated shock. Tom could not take a joke. She knew it was his worst quality, the most tragic part of his personality, she was always telling everyone. Liz felt liable. She should have warned her friends about her brother's anxiety before they agreed to come to the house. Yet somehow, Tom's face relaxed, and he shook his head and smiled. He dunked his wife below water and freestyle-swam to the shore.

Soon all the adults were out on the sand, plucking up the transparent slime, flinging and dodging. Liz was hit in the thigh and she watched the jelly slide down her whole leg. She was too afraid to touch it to move it along. Which was ridiculous, she realized. If the jellyfish still had stinging power, her whole leg would be throbbing in pain. Melanie pulled dismantled strands out of her hair and Tara removed a jelly from the cup of her swimsuit. The six of them paused to take a breath and assess the battered and stretched carcasses of fish lying around them, and agreed it was time to head back.

At the cabin, Tom got the bonfire started while everyone else took turns using the shower. Liz came out to join him, her wet hair darkening the shoulders of her blue cotton dress.

Tom jumped up and down on the deck. "Feel that bend? That's rotting wood."

Liz sat in an Adirondack chair and rested a cold pack of bacon on her thigh, which was aching and swelling from the jellyfish sting. Tom was going on about the different types of decking he would recommend to the cabin's rental company, should he still be working that job, when their heads shot up at the sound of crushed branches. In the distance, a man in a kelly green polo and khakis sprinted between one clearing of the forest to the other. Liz looked up at Tom.

“Was that a park ranger?” The two watched the trees in silence until the others joined them on the deck. They all pressed their white wine glasses against their jellyfish stings and Melanie asked if she should make a salad. Santi recommended she throw together some lavender goat cheese and arugula to pair with the steak, if they had any. She disappeared into the cabin but came back empty-handed, reporting that the only vegetables they had on hand were a few radishes.

Chad manned the grill that evening. He cooked the tomahawks one at a time, and piled the bleeding medium rare steaks in the middle of the table. The group sat around and pecked at the foie gras with forks, having no crackers or bread to spread the rich paste onto. The two babies were on their best behavior, the toddler dangling strips of prosciutto into the flame of the citronella candle, the baby half-asleep and drooling on Tara’s shoulder. They all fell into a silence, enjoying the sounds of the birds and the warm, gentle breeze over the deck, watching Chad flip the last of the steaks, when all of a sudden Tom pointed towards the woods and said he saw the flash of a kelly green polo. He threw his chair back and waved his hands in the air.

“Hey! Hey, there!”

The man jogged over to the cabin. He stood by the deck, a few feet below their flip flops, low enough for the group to have a bird’s-eye view of the bald spot on his skull. He was older, in his sixties, and his bearded face was flushed and sweating. His polo’s pocket was stamped with Rocky Neck State Park Wolf Preserve and a small cartoon of a wolf’s snarling jaws. “I’m sorry to tell you guys this but... the fence of our pen broke open today. Romulus and Remi are out here somewhere. Brother and sister and both vicious.”

The group stared down at the ranger.

“Shit,” said Santi.

“I should probably text Raimonds and Ieva...” said Liz.

“What?” Tom whipped his head from the ranger to his sister. “Who?”

“I would cool it with the grilling,” said the ranger. “They love that smoky meat smell. And maybe stay inside and close all the windows and turn off all the lights. And don’t make any sounds like crinkling bags or rolling dice or talking.” He sprinted off back where he came from, huffing and puffing.

“So...” said Santi. “This whole time? There were wolves running around? While we hiked?”

“Oh God. Oh God,” said Melanie.

“Oh my God,” Liz said, looking to Melanie to see if she caught her correction. “Oh *my* God.”

“I do not feel safe having my babies sleeping in that tent with wolves running around,” said Tara.

Liz stood up and hugged Tara and stroked the baby’s head. He woke up, looked at Liz, and began to wail.

Chad placed the last steak on the pile and rested the grill tongs on the table. “Someone’s got to switch with us. We can’t stay in that tent. A wolf will thrash right through.”

Tom asked Liz to repeat what she mentioned right when they heard about the wolves, about people named Raimonds and Ieva. Liz recommended her brother take some meds for his anxiety. “Can’t you just relax, get a little face time with my friends?”

A wolf howled in the distance. Tara clutched her babies tight to her breasts and started to cry.

“Seriously though, Liz,” said Tom. “Who else is coming to the house?”

Liz picked out a plastic bottle of Perrier from the cooler and told the group the couple she and Santi befriended in the Latvian section of their local wine store would arrive on the 6am bus the next morning. Liz found the pumpkin wine they'd persuaded her to buy to be sickly sweet, but they had kept in touch. Raimonds and Ieva will tell us tales of their home country and add a really nice, educational energy to the group, Liz promised.

"Okay, okay, okay," said Melanie. "We have to leave, right? On the morning bus? I have to call Mom and Dad."

The sun was setting and the golden oranges and pinks turned the group's attention to the sky. Santi poured everyone more wine and Chad passed out plates. They chewed the tomahawks for awhile in silence. Liz scanned the forest back and forth, whipped her head when she saw movement in the nearest crowd of birch trees. A tail sailed between one tree to the other, so light it seemed as if it was made of a furry black gas. Liz let out a loud gasp. "I saw... I saw the flash of a tail," she said.

The group sat forward in their Adirondacks and peered through the surrounding trees. "It was definitely a tail, a wolf's tail. It was held out straight and flew forward in a beautiful hop," Liz said.

Chad stood up and grabbed a garbage bag. He shoveled everyone's plastic plates, still piled high with steak, into the bag, and told Tara that they should set up for the night on the cabin's couch.

"Raimonds and Ieva... sort of already claimed the couch," said Liz.

"And I mean, your stuff's already in the tent..." said Tom.

"Your kids were super loud this morning," said Melanie. She clutched her wine glass and sunk deeper into her Adirondack.

“Goddamnit,” said Chad. He threw the garbage bag on the ground, and one of the tomahawk bones skidded off the deck into the bush below.

“Liz just saw the wolf,” Santi said. “Which means those escaped wolves are probably circling this cabin, eager to rip our eyeballs out and gnaw on our spleens.” The baby stopped crying then, noting the seriousness of Santi’s tone. “We have to all pack up and get on that bus to the city at 6am tomorrow morning. We have to keep each other safe.”

The group moved inside and locked the cabin door and turned out the lights. Chad broke out a pack ‘n play and put the kids to sleep in the corner of the room. They set up the card game spoons, the game most joyful when the sixth person realized the five spoons were gone and they all erupted in a silent, knee-slapping laughter. They finished six more bottles of wine, Tara fell asleep on the couch, followed by Chad on top of her legs. The others retired to their rooms, and they all slept through the 6am bus the next morning.

Liz and Santi and Melanie and Tom woke around 6:10am to the thwack of the cabin door. Liz recognized the harsh syllables of a Baltic language, and heard the opening and closing of the cabinets. She peeked out of her bedroom. Tara was changing under a blanket on the couch and Chad was standing to introduce himself to the newly arrived couple.

Tom’s head emerged from the other bedroom door. He took in the scene and then spotted Liz. “You didn’t tell these people about the wolves? Are you insane?”

“I guess I forgot, in all the excitement.”

Tom rested his head on the splintered wooden door. “I overslept.”

“Me too.”

“Is the family gone?” Melanie said, swinging the door open and facing everyone. “Oh. Hi.”

Raimonds popped up over the open fridge door. He and his wife had striking white-blond hair. “Nothing for vegetarians in here? We would go to the store, but we do not have a car.” He took out a couple of radishes and the butter.

Santi fell out of the bed behind Liz and asked her if it was time to head to the bus.

“Thank you so much for inviting us to this small cabin, to meet your large group of friends,” said Ieva. She walked over and gave Liz a stilted hug. “You know, you smell as if you are made of meat.” She sniffed Liz’s shoulder. “The smell of flesh is seeping through your pores.”

Tara sat petting her toddler on the couch and made calls. She begged the bus company to pick them up but they reiterated they only had one bus a day, at 6am, and she would have to wait until the next morning to catch a ride back to the city. She called the police and they advised her to stay inside until their officers could find and shoot Romulus and Remi. Raimonds and Ieva picked up what was going on, their inherited danger, and braved the deck, peering through the trees. Liz went back to bed and slept as long as she could to avoid the awkwardness of the full living room. She rejoined the group around noon.

Tom was waiting for her. “Liz. You have to be honest with me. Is anyone else coming to the house?”

She looked down at the carpet. “I don’t like your tone,” she said.

“For the love of God, tell me.”

“Don’t be so dramatic. No.”

“You are sure? Are you lying?”

Liz took out and checked her phone. A chat with Matthew and Allie lit up in her notifications, but she didn’t dare open the texts. “No one else is coming to the house.”

There was commotion on the deck, then three distant gunshots. Chad poked his head into the cabin. "The cops are driving up and down the clearing and firing randomly into the woods." He added that it might be a good idea to enjoy their last bonfire now, early, while they had some protection from the police. The gunshots drew closer and the two babies started to wail.

The group assessed their resources. They had three chickens, some bacon, a handful of radishes, and the variety pack of Gerbers squeezables. Raimonds brought three bottles of the pumpkin wine he said Liz had loved. Chad and Santi lit the fire outside and made a spit for the chickens out of some duct tape and the cabin's croquet set. They bent and fastened all the metal hoops into a straight line and balanced it between two mallets. Tara bounced her young son up and down on the deck and tried to get him to stop crying. She pointed at Melanie and asked if she could check on the toddler. Melanie cursed under her breath but headed inside.

Chad strung the first chicken through the makeshift spit, and balanced the wire, heavy now, between the mallets. The contraption collapsed, and the hoops and chicken and duct tape tumbled into the fire. Santi placed a big rock over one of the burning logs and placed the second chicken over it. This seemed to work, and soon they were breathing in paprika crackling off the roasting chicken skin. At the smell of meat, the Latvians turned moody. The couple sulked and sucked on Gerbers pouches. The gun shots picked up. The group sat back in their Adirondack chairs, sipped on the sugary pumpkin wine, and watched the two police cars crawl up and down the clearing.

Over their early dinner, Liz and Tom told stories of the several stepmothers they had growing up, while everyone else listened and grew bored. They debated the details of the one from their junior high years. This stepmother's family was very famous in Colombia, but they forgot why. Tom swore the woman was related to an assassinated member of the country's

Communist party. Liz said no, her relation was a bigger deal than that. A Colombian president, but from a very long time ago.

“The communist thing makes sense,” Tom said. “He got shot and the family had to flee before they all got shot too.”

“She fled to the U.S. and was so desperate, she agreed to marry Dad,” said Liz.

“Don’t you mean, my dad...” Melanie murmured.

“Why are you always taking cheap shots at Dad?” Tom asked.

“Why don’t you ever take shots at Dad?” Liz asked.

“Why did you invite all these people to our cabin?” Tom said, his face growing red.

“Why didn’t you even tell me?”

Liz leaned forward in her Adirondack, opened her lips to feign a response, but flicked her Perrier bottle towards her brother instead. A splash of seltzer water streaked down his shirt. He slammed his Adirondack chair backwards and pointed his finger in Liz’s face. Santi hovered over his wife and shouted at Tom to stop shouting.

“You can’t throw water,” Tom said. Melanie nodded her head in agreement. Chad and Tara kept their heads down, busied themselves by doling out more chicken onto everyone’s plates. Raimonds and Ieva whispered something between themselves. They had gradually pushed their chairs backward so they were no longer a part of the circle.

Liz stood up to shout back at her brother. “How is it okay for you to throw a jellyfish at my face but not okay for me to throw a tiny bit of water onto your t-shirt?”

“It’s about respect. This is a brand new t-shirt.”

The toddler, sucking on a chicken leg, stumbled away from the shouting towards the forest clearing.

“Stop, stop, wait,” Melanie said, trying to pull Tom down back to his chair.

“Throwing water is a sign of disrespect, as we all know very well,” said Raimonds, from behind the group.

Tom turned in his chair to face him. “Thank you, Raimonds.”

“Your split between brother and sister, east and west, is of course familiar to us, growing up under Soviet rule. Ieva’s great-grandparents were Thundercross, tragically, which made for complicated relationships, but my family has always strived to build up community, celebrate populism.”

“What’s Thundercross?” Liz asked. She twirled her Perrier on the table and made a point not to look at Tom.

“They were like Nazi, very anti-Semitic, but also anti-German,” Ieva said. She sat back in her chair and nodded to her husband to continue.

“Something to think about, as our friend here ventures into his senseless slaughtering,” said Raimonds, gesturing towards Chad. Chad didn’t look up from slathering creamy foie gras over his chicken breast. “I will tell you the tale of four heroic animals who exemplify the fraternal, sororal ideal. In my hometown of Riga we have a famous statue of a dog, a cat, and ass, and a cock.”

Everyone listened to Raimonds with rapt attention while the sun set over the trees. Santi poured the group more pumpkin wine.

“The statue is a gift from Bremen. Bremen is of course famous for the Town Musicians of Bremen, a fairy tale. The story is simple. The dog, the cat, the ass, and the cock are worked almost to death on a farm. They decide to escape to Bremen and live a life of music. On their journey they spy a house being robbed. A bear, a lion, and yes, our own neighbor, the mighty

wolf, are ransacking this place. So the dog barks, the cat scratches, the ass kicks, the cock crows. They send the robbers away. Bremen erected the statue of the animals stacked on top of one another's backs, working together, supporting one another, each with their own talent. Thirty years ago, Bremen gifted our town of Riga a copy of their statue, with a twist: the four animals, stacked upon one another, are stepping through a crack in a wall. The crack is meant to symbolize the Iron Curtain. They are looking at the new world in front of them and asking one another, is it safe? Whenever Ieva and I pass this statue near the old Saint John's Church, we make sure to join the tradition and rub their little bronze noses."

"That is beautiful," said Santi. "And Liz and Tom... they are stacked atop each other, playing to their own strengths?"

"Riga was part of the Hanseatic League," said Ieva. "Bremen is our sister city."

Santi nodded. Liz gave his knee an appreciative rub under the table.

"Do you guys hear that?" asked Melanie. They all quieted down and listened. A deep, long howl rose up from the trees.

"Hey. The gun shots stopped," Santi said, looking around. "The cops are gone."

The toddler, a few yards away, fell down in the grass. Chicken grease dripped down his chin and the last rays of the sunset bathed him in a red-golden light. The boy held out his drumstick towards something moving in the trees closest to them.

"I don't understand why we're not already inside," said Melanie. She hissed at Liz, "Can't you get your friends to take care of their children?"

Tara overheard Melanie. "I take care of my kids. You don't even have kids."

"We are not all fitting in that cabin," said Tom. "Liz—you're taking the tent."

"Melanie can't even have kids," said Liz.

Melanie howled. She picked up a fork and threw it towards the forest.

“What did you just say to Melanie? About kids?” Tom asked Liz.

“I mean, it’s not like you can even afford to have kids,” said Liz. “You can’t even sell decks.”

The group fell into a shocked silence. Liz even shocked herself. A wolf howled again in the distance.

“Fine. We’ll take the tent, happy?” Liz stormed down the deck stairs over to the tent and fiddled with the zipper, which was caught in the folds of the entry. “If you’re so offended by every little thing I do.”

Santi raised his hand. “Sweetie, um, I might...”

“And you’re what, a failed camp counselor? Turned grocery store worker?” Tom followed Liz down to the grass and grabbed the tent flap out of her hands. “No one’s taking the goddamned tent.”

“It’s a grocery app, asshole,” Liz said, and pushed Tom hard. He stumbled backwards and tripped over the rope of the tent’s fly. Behind him, two jet black wolves emerged from the trees. They stood with their chests puffed out and took in the cabin scene with ice blue eyes. The taller wolf turned to the other and licked it across the face with a long pink tongue.

Tom and Liz, closest to the animals, froze. Chad swooped forward and retrieved his son from the grass, hoisting the small body over his thick shoulder like a rug. He ran back to the rest of the party and they all hurried up the stairs of the deck. The wolves pitter pattered towards the tent in starts and stops, hopping and yipping and pliéing around one another. They paused every few steps to take a pant and size up Tom and Liz.

“Should we stay here? Or go there?” Liz called from the side of her mouth, not wanting to make any sudden movements. She stood planted and knees bent beside the tent, her arms out to the sides for balance.

The group on the deck stood dumbfounded, staring at the wolves with hands over open mouths. Melanie and Santi leaned over the wooden railing on opposite corners of the deck, straining to make out Tom and Liz’s outlines in the graying dusk. Tara quietly slipped into the cabin with the two children and shut the door.

The wolves stuck closer together, their hides touching, as they sniffed the air and skulked towards the tent. Tom sat balanced on his hands, tummy-up and crab-like. “Should I make a lot of noise? Scare them?” Tom called back. No one answered. Liz could see now that one of the wolves was bigger than the other, with a broader snout, a fuller chest. She guessed that one was Romulus. Romulus took a bold step towards Tom and sniffed Tom’s sweating, planted hand. “I think... I think they’re friendly?” Tom called back.

“Boo!” Liz rushed the wolves and flapped her hands up and down. Romulus growled and bared his teeth, crouching over Tom, who was now trembling and had tears rolling down his cheeks. Remi followed her brother’s lead, crouching and growling, and the two pivoted to look back in the direction where they had come from. Then, surprising Liz, the two bolted forward, past her and the tent towards the cabin. The wolves darted up the stairs of the deck. Chad, Santi, Melanie, Raimonds, and Ieva shrieked and rushed to the far railing. A loud cracking sound ripped through the air and echoed between the cabin and the trees.

Romulus jumped onto the table and lapped up scraps of the roasted paprika chicken. Remi disappeared under the stairs and emerged with the runaway tomahawk steak that had been kicked into the bushes the night before. The deck’s far wooden railing bowed outwards, snapped,

and crashed to the grass below, Chad, Ieva, and Melanie tumbling down with it. Romulus and Remi, grasping all the meat they could in their jaws, leaped down the stairs and ran back into the woods.

Tom crawled to a stand and wrapped Liz in a hug. “Oh man. Oh man,” Tom said, wiping away tears. “I thought that was the end.”

Liz blew out a long breath. “Did you see the deck?”

Santi and Raimonds peered over the side of the deck, now looking bare and expansive without the railing. Chad helped up Melanie, then Ieva, steadying Ieva, who seemed to have rolled her ankle, onto the side of the cabin.

“That’s rotting wood,” Tom said, in awe. “Wait. Come on, sis. It’s our last night.”

Liz smiled at her brother. “I got you.” She called towards the deck. “Guys. Tom wants to take a group photo.”

“We have to take a group photo.” Tom ran over to Melanie and brushed the splinters of wood off her dress. Raimonds helped his wife around the deck and back up the stairs. Chad, his face flushed and excited, poked his head into the cabin and asked Tara and the kids to come back out, that it was safe. Santi posed with the duct taped spindles of their failed fire spit and they all gathered around him for a picture. Tom held his phone out as far and high as he could. Tara and Chad held their babies up in the air towards the camera like an offering. Raimonds held a kiss to Ieva’s cheek. Liz wrapped her arms around Melanie and whispered that she was very sorry about revealing all the private information from before. Melanie tried to shrug Liz off and smiled for the camera. Tom shouted one, two, three.

“And that’s a wrap on Rocky Neck State Park,” Tom said. He put his phone in his pocket and wiped the nervous sweat off his brow.

Liz and Santi forfeited their bed to Raimonds and Ieva that night, and, exhausted, fell asleep easily on a pile of blankets on the kitchen's linoleum floor. They all slept through the 6am bus the next morning.

THAT'S HALIFAX

The wedding took place in a repurposed council chamber in the East London borough of Hackney. Allison, in a luggage-rumpled navy silk dress, followed a chalkboard sign pointing to the groom's side. The guests stood to let her pass and introduced themselves as the Oxford crowd. They pointed towards the bride's side, warned her not to mix with any of those dodgy Cambridge tabs. The couple processed to Mendelssohn, and friends and family leaned forward on the chamber's wooden desks, laughed when the bride's flower crown toppled to the floor, chanted in response as witnesses.

Allison felt less nervous after the ceremony. She packed into an old fashioned trolley with the rest of the crowd, who were sitting on one another's laps and grasping onto the strap handles. Two young men wedged themselves next to Allison and engaged her in excited chatter. Allison Burns, she introduced herself, and they adopted her as Burnsy. One talked about his job in Parliament, and the other leaned over his boyfriend's lap, staring up at Allison, sucking from a silver monogrammed hip flask. She told them she grew up with the groom, her best friend in Pennsylvania, before his family moved back to England when they were in high school. That her husband was stuck at work but she'd been waiting for this wedding for a long time, that she was also planning to head north for a day to visit some relatives. They offered Allison a pull of whiskey from the flask, and she felt warmed up and ready when the trolley pulled up to a three-story venue, an old Victorian pub remodeled for film and photo shoots.

Everyone had been asked to bring their own cakes. Allison, the out-of-towner, laid her generic Sainsbury's sponge on a table already heavy with colorful tiers of fondant and buttercream, strings of homemade bunting and floral garlands. Dinner included steak, salmon, and a spirited game of trivia about the couple. Allison knew all the answers about the groom's

childhood preferences. His favorite animal was... the manatee, she whispered to her tablemates. The strange condiment he put on his pasta was... ketchup. Allison drank very good white wine and red wine and more champagne. She walked over to the main table and finally managed to get a word in with the groom, and he introduced her to his table as his childhood neighbor. His London accent had thickened since she'd last seen him, and the way he pronounced "childhood neighbor," with an incredulous tilt on the word neighbor, sounded alien to her.

The tables were pushed to the side to make way for a dance floor. Amy Winehouse's smoky voice commanded the speakers and the couple danced their first dance, "Valerie," while Allison hung by the bar and took shots with the boys she met on the trolley. Then karaoke ruled the night. The party dissolved with echoes of nostalgic new wave, Allison's head pounding as she joined a rowdy group walking back to the hotel.

The next morning, she entered the breakfast room and a full table called out, "Burnsy!" She sat with the Oxford crew, picking at a bowl of hot oatmeal and listening to them recap the night, dissecting their accents in her mind.

"I'm going to Yorkshire to reconnect with my fambily," she told the table. "Fambily. Isn't that how they pronounce it?" She was intent on picking up more Britishisms over the course of the trip.

"Ey up, Burnsy," they said. "It's a whole other language up there." They promised to show Allison a night out on the West End the next time she was in London. They were up for anything but *Mamma Mia*. Standing to hug her fellow guests goodbye, she still felt the giddy warmth from the previous night.

The hangover set in while Allison checked out of the hotel. She walked slowly to the Bethnal Green tube stop, and her bags felt somehow heavier when she picked them back up to

exit at Euston, knowing she was closer to the train that would take her north. She cursed at the Virgin counter, realizing the ticket prices were four times the online price when bought in person. She bought a cold bacon butty on the train and watched the outskirts of London disappear out her window. She knew her aunt and uncle would meet her in four hours at the Halifax train station, but she didn't know what else was in store for the day. There were a pair of cousins, twins, a few years younger in their mid-twenties. She hoped to make a good impression, tap into the benefits of rediscovered roots. Allison chewed the cold sandwich and looked down at her cotton dress. She was covered in crumbs. A few stray bits of bacon stained her collar with gray circles of oil.

Allison's father moved to D.C. after he graduated from Durham. He last set foot in Yorkshire fifteen years ago, and suffered some blow-up at Christmas, an irreconcilable falling out. Allison had no idea what had happened. Her father claimed to not remember. He said the fight happened during a blackout. Allison didn't believe him at first, but after a few interrogations during their dinners together, Allison filling and refilling his whiskey tumbler to jog his memory, he could not pinpoint why or how he crossed a line. All he knew was that it had something to do with conversation about a cruise, or a cruise ship. A glass table may have been shattered. There may have been a debate about religion. Something over the reality of the devil. But his sister wasn't willing to rehash or even reconnect. So now Allison's father was stuck state-side, having severed the last family ties of his hometown.

He had given Allison a list of demands for the day. They are now your relationships, he'd told her, not his. But still, she wasn't allowed to return without answers. She took out the back of the envelope with his scrawl and reviewed the list. One: He needed to know how her Aunt Linda and Uncle Hobby could afford the trip to Mallorca he saw posted on Facebook. What was Hobby

doing for work these days? Two: she must ask Aunt Linda if she was in the 1958 reception class photo that he had found in a box, which he had Allison bring on the trip, and if so, which five-year-old was she? And lastly, would Linda and Hobby consent to give their data to the family genetic tree he was building? He reiterated that these questions should come from Allison, not from him—he was adamant that it was not his responsibility to break the ice after all these years.

A leftover copy of NME magazine peeked out of the seat pocket in front of Allison. She flipped through and read the first two paragraphs of a Britpop retrospective, but soon felt too hungover to make out the words without feeling sick. So she just stared out the window. The rain started, and picked up throughout the ride, the thick streaks marring her view of the sloping green farmlands and mossy stone fences outside. Allison forgot to wash her hair that morning, and the lingering smoke and sweat from the previous night's party hung around her shoulders in greasy black strands.

At Leicester, the coffee cart came by again and she fished out three pounds twenty and asked for a bag of chips and a Diet Coke. She reached in the cart's straw basket full of Walkers and pulled one out at random. The pink bag read "Prawn Cocktail," with the tagline "fresh taste guaranteed," which she first read as "fish taste guaranteed." She looked back to change it but the cart was already halfway down the aisle. With a lurch the train pushed off from the Midlands. Allison opened the bag and took in a whiff of sugary tomato powder. She gnawed slowly, chip by chip, lingering each on the roof of her mouth. She hoped the moistened bread would pillow her queasy stomach, but the chips just left her bloated and sweating.

Closer to Leeds, the white-bricked buildings turned sooty, fifty year old coal stains no one bothered to paint over, the sad murals of the north. The conductor called out Halifax.

The rain came down in torrents, and the ramp from the rail station to the street was flooded over. Allison held her bags tight under her arm and jumped from one edge of the sidewalk to the other. She landed in a squat and looked up to a rosy apple face, the same apple shape as her own, overwhelmed by the Burns nose, which she knew all too well. Linda lifted her umbrella over Allison and they embraced, Allison pressing her chest into the fullness of her aunt's, perhaps a little too close for it being a first hug in some time.

"Have you eaten? Your cousins are waiting," Linda said, and turned to lead Allison up the cobblestoned street.

"And Hobby?" Allison asked, keeping halfway under Linda's umbrella.

"He's off actually—getting the car tuned, running some errands."

That couldn't wait, if his niece was here for just one day? Allison thought, but didn't say anything.

"Are you all still in the house I visited last? Must have been Easter... 2006?"

"Aye. Still right by the petrol station."

Allison remembered her aunt driving through an actual lane of the gas station to access her house's driveway, the bright yellows and oranges of the Shell sign glinting through their dining room window. Linda hosted her for Easter and scattered bags of crisps across the table to serve as sides for the ham. The family's eyes didn't stray from the TV once during the lunch.

They walked up a steep street. The buildings of her father's small hometown were a few centuries old, made of sandstone, the brownish yellow making way for colorfully-loud cell phone and grocery store signs across the ground floor retail. Halifax looked empty, the stores open but quiet for a Wednesday afternoon. Linda led Allison up some concrete stairs to a newish complex, a movie theater and a restaurant. They entered the brightly-lit, vast Wetherspoons, and

Linda pointed to a table in the back where her two daughters were sitting. Allison walked past a long line of silver taps on the bar. She remembered with great joy that one beer could dull the symptoms of her hangover and snap her into the day.

As soon as her cousins came into view, their names escaped Allison completely.

“Right girls, you remember your cousin,” Linda said, bringing her voice down to a whisper.

“Ey up,” the two murmured, not looking up from their menus.

“Both a bit shy,” Linda said to Allison, in an even lower whisper.

With their heads bowed, Allison got a good look at her cousins. The girls both had a vague steampunk vibe, wore matching black stretchy polyester coats with plastic army buttons. Their black hair was dyed in wild highlights of pinks and blues, the one on the left more pink and the one on the right more blue. They wore leather necklaces holding a gem and an eyeball, respectively. The blue-haired girl dared to look up from her menu and caught Allison staring. She widened her eyes in fear and shot her head back down.

“You’ll have to get the fish and chips, Allison,” Linda said, pointing to a brown photo on the menu. The list was overstuffed with trademark symbols. The appetizer nachos were marked with three small chili symbols as a warning. Allison turned the menu around to the list of draughts. A Kronenbourg would be what she would order on a normal day, the golden-bubbled lager closest to a champagne. But her deep thirst called for something heavier, more bready. A Newcastle would blanket her whole body in its brown funk. A Boddingtons might just taste flat enough for the moment.

A waiter appeared at their table. “What you having?”

Linda ordered a round of Cokes and fish and chips for all. Allison's mouth hung open, her finger still pointing at the list of draughts, as she watched the waiter walk away.

"How was London, then," Linda asked. "Was it so expensive?"

Allison told them about the wedding, the old council chamber, the bring-your-own cake tradition, the karaoke.

"We were down there, what was it, two years ago now?" Linda asked, trying to get her girls to look up.

"Got to see *Mamma Mia*," the blue haired girl said in a whisper. Allison could see the corners of the girl's lips turn up into a smile.

Allison had no idea why they were all talking so quietly. She considered excusing herself for the bathroom, ordering a Newcastle at the bar, and drinking it down in secret. The fish and chips arrived before she could make a move. Allison stared down at a neon green blob on the side of her plate.

"Ordered you the mushy peas, thought you'd like to be authentic," Linda said, and gave her daughters a conspiratorial smile. "And a couple slices of the black pudding too." The three of them looked at Allison and waited to watch her eat.

The tail of Allison's fried fish curled upwards and the french fries, cut in thick chunks, were soaking in a pool of oil. Allison watched her green mush of peas settle and melt into the side of the fish. Two charcoal discs sat stacked on the side of the plate, looking out of place, like they belonged in a garage. The plate smelled like nothing at all.

Allison remembered the photo her dad sent her off with, and thought she could divert the attention away from having to take the first bite. She pulled it out of her purse and asked her aunt

if she was in the class. Linda held it up to the restaurant's fluorescent light, and the girls, to Allison's relief, started eating. "That's me, sure," Linda said. "Where did you get that one?"

"From my dad," Allison said.

At that, Linda looked around the restaurant as if her brother might be hiding behind one of the high top tables. The twins burrowed back down into their plates. Allison let the silence hang for a minute or so. Then she asked Linda about their recent trip to Mallorca.

"I'm not sure you heard, but a few years ago, Hobby lost his job at the food plant, in Kirklees. He'd been there over twenty-five years," Linda said.

"Oh, I didn't know," said Allison. She made a little barrier with three of the fries around the mushy peas.

"He was doing janitorial work over at the school for some time."

"Really."

"Then he lost his thumb, operating the ride-on floor scrubber."

"How awful."

"But he won quite a tidy settlement and retired."

"Fantastic," Allison said. She said it in the British way, ending on a hard "ck."

"We actually got out of Halifax for a change, booked Mallorca for a full week when that came through," Linda said. She did a little dance in her chair.

"Islands are good for healing," Allison said.

"Rolos are from Halifax," the pink-haired cousin whispered.

"Sorry?" Allison asked. She hung on the "o" instead of the "r" so that it sounded like "soor-ey."

“Rolos, the candies. They’re small chocolates, like little barrels,” the girl said in the tiniest voice. Allison had to lean her head down to hear, and looked to see if the girl was even opening her mouth at all while she spoke. “You bite in and there’s caramel gooing out of them, and they’re made here, in Halifax.”

Her sister kicked her under the table. “She doesn’t care about Rolos.”

“I care about Rolos,” Allison said.

Linda gave Allison an approving nod.

Allison had completed two of her father’s three asks. She would need to pitch the 23andMe carefully, make Linda think it was her idea to contribute. But first she would need that secret beer. “Excuse me,” she said, getting up to hover over the table, matching their whisper. “I’m going to find the... WC.”

The bar was in the lobby of the restaurant and attached to the hallway that led to the bathrooms. The table was still in view but Allison chose the very end of the bar to stand next to. She leaned over the bar flap to flag the bartender, thinking her black cotton dress might blend into the black wall behind her and her party wouldn’t notice from afar. She asked for a Newcastle and left three pounds on the counter. She downed the pint in two long sips, and felt her brain swell, her headache fade, and the sweat on her forehead dry. She looked back at the table to find all three of them staring at her.

Allison used the restroom and returned to the table. Her cousins were deeply involved with their meals, passing back and forth the plastic bottles of condiments: the malt vinegar, the HP brown sauce, the salad cream. Allison stared at the yellowy bottle that her pink haired cousin was squirting across the length of her fried fish, wondered if salad cream needed to be refrigerated, wondered why anyone would choose to coat fried fish in a thickened dairy mixture.

“You haven’t had a bite of your meal,” Linda said.

The mushy peas had lost their original whip, and sat flat and soaking into the fry barrier, turning the inside of the hunks of potato a light gray. Allison pulled at the tail of her fried fish. To her horror, the tail detached from the fish body and was left shaking in her hand.

Linda pointed at the black pudding on Allison’s plate and said something about wobbling on the pud, Allison wasn’t sure because she said it so quietly. Allison pictured herself picking up the knife and fork and cutting into the black disc. She imagined the disc, once punctured, would spout out something gooey like a Rolo, and she saw her plate flooded with black gravy, burying the fish and chips and peas for good under a thick gloss. She looked up at her aunt and, with a deep breath, asked if she would consider her father’s request to sign up for 23andMe and opt into the DNA Relatives feature, to offer her genetic data up for the benefit of the wider family and in the name of science.

At the mention of her brother, Linda once again darted her eyes around the room and sunk into her chair. The girls finished off the last of their fries.

“What did he say exactly, the last time he was here?” Allison ventured. She stressed the word “exackt-lee,” like her father did. “I never really understood what happened.”

Linda just shook her head.

“Something about a cruise ship?”

“It’s not for me to tell.”

“A table, a glass table, was broken?”

“It was horrible, horrible.”

“Something about the devil?”

“I truly believe Satan came and possessed your father’s body that night.”

Allison gave up. She always blamed her father for his lost connections, knowing he was one to be too easily offended. But her aunt's stubbornness surprised her. It was a new level for a Burns, one she had never seen before, and Allison felt ashamed. The waiter came over to clear their plates and Allison ordered a Newcastle and the check. The table sat in silence for a while. When Allison's beer arrived, she took a sip and tried the 23andMe pitch again. "Aren't you curious? Maybe you have long-lost cousins in Spain or somewhere." As she spoke, she grew sad, thinking of her father at his desktop, his reading glasses on, intent on adding empty row upon empty row to the family tree, with no data to plug in. "It might help pinpoint any genetic patterns we should be wary of," Allison said, and Linda caught Allison's eyes trailing over to her cousins.

After a light argument over paying the check, Allison relented and let Linda put her card down. They gave Allison a tour of the town, pointing out the main department store, and walking her through an underground market, which seemed mostly closed. A second-hand vendor was hanging stained baby onesies across a clothesline. A little deli sold dusty cans of baked beans and peas. The girls advised her which stall was best to purchase sweets. One had discount tins of Roses and Black Magic, they said. But the other sold all kinds of individual sweets in these jumbo plastic bags. It was amazing to hear the girls finally opening up. Allison watched her cousins rifle through the plastic bags of colorfully-wrapped chocolates and realized she never asked what they did for work. She wondered if they were happy in such a small town, if they ever traveled around for a music festival, or a Renaissance fair. She wondered if she could have grown up here, if she could be happy here. England was so small. The cars were small. Her British family had not once visited the U.S. At first she thought her family's lack of mobility was due to financial constraint. But with the news of Hobby's losing his thumb in the floor scrubber, and the windfall, she realized they likely preferred it that way.

“Well, that’s Halifax,” Linda said, once they had walked past the last of the locked-up stalls. “Not much else to do, I’m afraid. You could come to mine and watch telly?”

Allison remembered that long-ago Easter. She pictured herself back in the same dining room chair, angled to the television, eating prawn crisps, her aunt and uncle explaining the context of each Little Britain sketch. Allison was certain they would not have any alcohol if she followed them back there. She wondered if that coffee cart on the Virgin train sold beer.

“It’s 3:15,” Allison said. She didn’t know if Linda also knew there was a 3:30 train back to London. “So you know. I’d better be off.”

Allison downed a sleeve of Jaffa Cakes and three tallboy Boddingtons over the four hour train back to London. She had one more night in the city before flying home the next day. She took a quick cab from Euston straight to the Roxy off Tottenham Court Road and drank gins and tonic and danced by herself and bummed a couple of rolled cigarettes off a man with hair growing out of his ears. Once back in her hotel room, she sprang for the half-bottle of red wine in the mini bar, drank it and passed out.

The next morning, Allison gave her father a quick call before leaving for Heathrow. She told him she needed to keep it short with the international rates, but she had a fantastic lunch of fish and chips at Halifax’s brand new Wetherspoons.

“Oh, did you?” His voice brightened over the line. She told him Hobby lost his thumb in a janitorial accident, which pleased him. She told him that was indeed Linda in the reception class photo he found, and that she was too afraid of websites selling her data to sign up for 23andMe. She told him his sister sent her love.

XENIA

The holidays are looming and my admissions gig at Fordham Law gives us two weeks off work. I usually laze about, enjoy a brief reprieve from my daily commute. A break from all that inane paper pushing, the watery indignity of the K-Cup machine. A chance to shake off a year of navigating the egos of faculty, the misery of administration. My walk-up apartment overlooks Brooklyn's Columbia Street waterfront, and I like to sit on the windowsill and keep tabs on the Manhattan skyline I've abandoned.

These past few Christmases have been pretty boring. Not much family left. All the good ones are dead. The others are down in Costa Rica. Karen was the one with the big family. So the last couple of years, Christmas has just been me. I enjoy the church service in the morning. The kids all dressed up in angel wings, robes and long white beards. I watch them run around the pews during Coffee Hour. I help pick up the various pieces of costume that fall to the floor. Then I head home and put Star Wars on loop. Watching hours upon hours of those low-fi lasers is the only holiday tradition I've got at home these days. I do the original trilogy on Christmas Eve, then skip over the prequels, the boring stuff about the trade war, the awful alien with the vaguely Jamaican Patois. Christmas Day I queue up the newer ones, strap in for another seven hours. I've got two cats who don't usually pay attention to the TV, but they'll sit with me for a Star War, their little gray heads swiveling to follow the laser beams. I close the night out at my local dive, 40 Knots. They throw a hell of a Christmas party.

But this year, a few days after Thanksgiving, I run into Mitzy at the Key Foods on Henry Street. Mitzy's Kitzies, she calls her cat sitting business. She runs the whole operation, a hundred sitters.

“Mitzy!” I call across the vegetable aisle. I hug the package of breakfast sausage I’m holding under my armpit and salute. “Thank you for your service.”

Mitzy’s black sweater is covered in white and orange cat hair, as well as some sort of dried spittle. “George. We’re gearing up for the big season. Understaffed!”

“You’ve got the whole of south Brooklyn under your wing, huh?” The grocery store has a plate of cheese samples out. I motion her to follow me over, help myself to a sample, and offer her a toothpick of gruyere.

“We’re expanding to dogs. They need to go out twice a day. So that’s two guaranteed appointments a day per client.” She takes three toothpicks of cheddar off the tray. She chews them all together with her mouth open. “Big money in dogs.”

“I’ll be around this year,” I say. “I don’t have much going on…”

Mitzy’s head shoots up to meet my eye.

“If you’re overbooked, maybe I could pitch in.”

She smiles, then laughs out loud. A bite of orange goo flies out of her mouth and hits the handle of my grocery cart. “Would you really?”

“Sure. I could take a couple of appointments off your hands.” Mitzy’s a little crazy, but she’s always been good to me and Karen, fit us in when we asked for help at the very last minute. We relied on the service for years, whenever we needed to head out to her parents’ in Chicago, or when we had the chance to jet down to Cancun every few years.

“I’ll be in touch,” Mitzy says.

I wheel my cart through the checkout and pay for the food. I shift the plastic bags to my left hand and light a Camel Blue. Walking the leafy three blocks home to Columbia Street, I peer into the living rooms of those richer than I, admire their chandeliers, or the oversized Edison

bulb lighting fixtures that have become popular. I'm trained to note the toile wallpaper of their entryways, the upholstery on the chairs they have backed up to the windows. I told Karen it was exhausting to lust over the wealthy like this, but that's how we always walked the neighborhood together, and it's hard to shake the habit. The brownstones disappear once you reach Columbia Street, the beer distributor trucks parked at the Port Authority on the one side, the entry to the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway on the other. I unlock the dead bolt of my building and take a mental note to bug the landlord about power washing the aluminum siding. I put the sausage and milk and coffee and eggs away. My phone buzzes as soon as I shut the fridge door. Email from Mitzy. Then another, and another. She's adding appointments into some system, one by one. She's loading up the same calendar I use when I need to request a sitter.

I sit in my Fordham-crested Captains Chair and stare at the website's login screen. I bought the ridiculous chair for myself as a joke a few years ago, having not graduated there, and hating the job. But I now prize the wood chair for its gold-painted tips and cherry arms, my nicest piece of furniture. I try a few failed logins to the cat sitting website from my desktop. By the time I reset the password and log in, Mitzy has assigned me twelve appointments a day, Christmas Eve through New Years.

I wouldn't say I love cats. I've never been a "cat person." I kept our two cats, Atlas and Titan, when Karen left. The two gray tabbies sleep in a pile on top of my feet at night. They're more into each other than into me. We have a deal: I keep them alive, and they keep my feet warm.

Cats are fine. I'd rather have a slobbering dog to come home to, a big, long-haired stately one, like a golden retriever or one of those brown and black Bernese mountain dogs. But the landlord won't allow it.

I consider writing Mitzy. *Isn't this a little much? I agreed to pitch in for a couple of appointments, only if necessary.* I think of her sad black sweater, all that cat hair. I click through some of the assigned addresses. Mostly Brooklyn Heights. There's one right on the famous Promenade. I've never been inside any of those houses. I think of Mitzy's apartment, filled to the brim with other people's house keys.

A couple of addresses, I note, are more far flung. Gowanus. Red Hook. Bay Ridge. Really? Seems a little extreme to give to a newbie. Especially since I do not own a car. I paid twenty dollars a sit when I last booked them. What would Mitzy's cut be? Under her giant billboard of keys, I imagine endless stacks of twenties.

I write her a note. *Wow, you really know how to keep a man busy over the holidays!* Sure, I'll do it. Get out of my comfort zone. Why not see some fancy apartments? Brooklyn Heights was made for Christmas. Brownstones with green garlands wrapped up the staircase bannisters. Antique chairs roped off with tassels. Framed photos of sad children in elaborate silk dresses. Beats being stuck in my one-bedroom, eating stale pantry items, too lazy to venture outdoors. *Excited to jump in,* I type, and send the email.

Her out of office bounces right back. *Mitzy's Kitziess is at capacity for the holiday season. We will not be taking any new appointments right meow.*

Christmas Eve I wake up early, just before seven. My head rings from a few too many of those beer and shot combos at 40 Knots. I wanted a little fun before all this holiday work. It's the one bar in the neighborhood that's held on to a little bit of edge. The prices are right. Karen and I would meet there for happy hour a few times a week, let our hair down, bicker loud enough to

get the bartender's attention. I feel sorry for you two, stuck with each other, Jen would say, and join us for a shot of well whiskey, gratis.

Mitzy left a plastic grocery bag of what looks like a hundred sets of labeled keys in my mailbox. I open the Mitzy's Kitzy's app and a bouncing cat head prompts me to open my GPS, queued up for a nonexistent driver. Here's hoping walking up and down the neighborhood will make me a little more limber, energized for the new year ahead.

The first appointment is in a high-rise building with a view of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. This client has a Christmas tree in the living room. Pine needles are scattered everywhere below its sagging, dehydrated branches. I plug in the colored lights. There's an overstuffed bookshelf and cat toys are littered all over the floor. There's a drained fish tank with a cracked pane of glass. A bean bag chair and a stained futon are stationed in front of a big flatscreen television.

"Char-ming," I say aloud. I look down and find a white cat staring up at me. I reach down to pet it. The cat arches its back, hisses, and slinks into a back bedroom.

The app provides a checklist for each appointment's process: soak the wet food bowl, scoop the refuse out of the litter box into a little green baggie, refill the kibble, refresh the water, open the wet food can and serve it. Make sure to take all the resulting garbage out and recycle the can. Then for fifteen minutes, engage the cat physically, emotionally, and mentally. Make it chase a feather toy around the living room.

When I finish the feeding, I sit on the couch and circle the laser pointer in and out of the bedroom, trying to coax out the animal. I eye the books on the shelf. Mostly nonfiction, American history, biographies. The white cat eventually emerges. I check its profile: the cat is a

female, named Jinx. “She likes cheek rubs and cuddles.” Jinx rubs against my leg and I reach down towards her. She hisses and swipes at my arm.

It’s still early, eight in the morning, but I have to send my text update to the client before leaving.

All’s well here on Hicks Street! Hey I saw you have a copy of The Power Broker! Love that book.

I wave the laser pointer halfheartedly. Love that book? Not the most interesting way to introduce my Caro fandom, my years-long appreciation of the master biographer. I pick up my phone again.

I can never stop thinking of how intense that must have been, when they built the Cross-Bronx Expressway right smack in the middle of the city.

The woman types back after a couple of minutes. *Thanks! Can you send a picture of Jinx?*

Shoot. Forgot the most important part—the cute photo op, to put the client’s mind at ease. I wrap some yarn around the cat’s body while it spits and snatches at my hand. I snap my fingers above its head. The cat looks up and I get the perfect shot.

I scare off the more nervous cats. Probably because of my big puffy jacket, which is coming apart at the seams and stinks of cigarette smoke. But once I settle in on a living room couch, most of them come over for a sniff. They nuzzle into the folds of my sweater and I give them a hearty rub. I have a big body, but my fingers are long and slender, good for petting.

After the first six appointments in Brooklyn Heights, I doubt I’ll get to see the inside of the tony apartment I originally imagined. What I’m learning very fast is that the people who scout out Mitzy’s Kitziess are all sort of strange. Their real estate might be pricey, but money

can't buy you class, as Karen used to say. These living rooms are entirely devoted to their animals. Lit-up bouncy balls and mouse toys are scattered across the floor. Scratching posts tower. Armrests are shredded. Bags of litter and kibble dominate the kitchen counters. The fridges are filled with half-empty wet food tins. There's always a persistent, lingering smell of ammonia.

Maybe the job would be easier if I didn't gag at that wet food. The way the greasy brown chunks slide down the sides of the can. The smell is something else entirely once the chunks and gravy congeal in the fridge. I develop a tactic after a few feedings: hold my breath, flick the can hard with my wrist in one swift shake, set the bowl on the ground, and stand back up before gasping for air.

I figure I better get some grub around four. It's that part of the late afternoon on Christmas Eve when businesses start closing for the next day and a half. It might be the last time I get to talk to a real person until Christmas happy hour the next night at 40 Knots, which is closed tonight, unfortunately. I head south to the Brooklyn Heights Deli on Henry just above Atlantic, a run-down bodega with a high tin ceiling and an antique wooden counter. I saw Paul Giamatti in here once, bantering with the two Iranian guys who own the place. "You ain't bringing home any Merlot, right Paul?" They were all on a first name basis.

"It's swell! Catch the Knicks last night?" said Paul Giamatti.

The actor picked up a bag of those fancy Terra chips that look like potpourri and threw it overhand to the guy at the cash register, who made a show of catching it and mimicking an alley-oop towards the window.

The store looks empty of anyone, even any employees, at first take. Then I spy an older man, maybe late seventies, slumped in a folding chair behind the deli meats, maybe sleeping. I

saunter over his way and take my time studying the menu. They have some odd combinations listed.

“Evening, sir!” I lean over the counter. “Merry Christmas!”

The man looks up and gives me a small wave, then lets his head fall back into his hands.

“You serve your chicken salad hot?”

The man puts his palms on his knees and hoists himself out of his chair. He walks over and readies his pen and pad. “You want that chicken salad on a roll or a bun?”

“No, no. I didn’t want to order the chicken salad. I just wanted to know why you serve your chicken salad hot?”

The man stares dead-eyed at me, his pen and paper hovering.

“Seems a little strange, like putting a whole jar of mayonnaise in an oven.”

Pen and paper still hovering. “So what’ll you have?”

I order a warm chicken cutlet with mozzarella and tomato on a roll.

The man grunts, and leans over to pick out the ingredients from their plastic trays in the display case. He turns his back to me and heats the griddle.

“Hey,” I say, leaning over the counter a little farther. “You ever see Paul Giamatti in here?”

The man doesn’t look up. He bats his spatula on the grill and scrapes my chicken onto a wet-looking roll.

“The guy from *Sideways*? Remember? ‘If anyone orders Merlot, I’m leaving.’”

He stuffs the sandwich in a paper bag and leads me to the register. “That’ll be eight seventy-five.”

“I am not drinking any fucking Merlot! Remember?” I take out three ones and a five and hop on my right leg to feel for any quarters in my jacket pocket. “I think I’ve got three of ‘em here... I can make exact... change for ya.” I fish out two and slam them on top of the bills, then stick out my tongue and continue the search for a third quarter.

The man throws up his hands. “Trying to get home to my family here, c’mon.”

I hand him another dollar instead and he gives me change.

I unwrap the sandwich on the kitchen counter of the next spot. I open the Mitzy’s Kitziess app and select ‘check in.’ The app then sends an email to the client, notifying him that the cat sitter is in his apartment. This time, a small light clicks on from somewhere high up in the kitchen. A panoramic camera is strapped to the cabinet with duct tape.

I try not to look directly at the nanny cam. I lean down and pick up the cat bowls and soak them in the sink. Two black tuxedos scamper from under the couch and retreat into the back bedroom. I sit back down and take a bite of my sandwich, and my phone buzzes with an email. It’s him, the client. *Please be reminded that we do not allow shoes in the apartment. Please refrain from eating in the apartment.*

I sneak a look up at the camera and sneer. I wrap my sandwich and place it back into my tote bag and kick off my sneakers. I take a look around the place. There are two oversized La-Z-Boys in the sunken living room. A crate filled with board books and plastic Playskool shapes suggest a toddler lives here. I feel a wave of nausea at the newfound presence of a kid. I always said no to the idea of having one, the city being too expensive.

That’s when I remember the reason I sought out Mitzy’s Kitziess those few years ago—it was the absolute cheapest service available in the area. None of these clients would be fresh-garland-up-the-bannister people. I duck into the bathroom to get out from under that camera.

Maybe they have a little bit of Xanax or something. A Christmas treat, I think, as I swing open the rusted mirror. The medicine cabinet has no orange bottles, no toiletries. It's filled to the brim with cardboard toilet paper rolls, stacked up in neat little rows, two rolls deep on each shelf. There must be fifty toilet paper rolls in here. I close the cabinet door.

The next place houses slanted IKEA lack tables and two gray cats batting a cockroach carcass between them. The next is a white box in a high rise, spotless and tidy aside from a fresh trail of brown vomit along the carpet. I soak it in some cleaner I find under the sink before locking up and leaving, praying it's not poisonous to animals. The next is three miles east, on a litter-strewn, dim-lit street in Gowanus. The walk takes longer than the previous three apartments combined. Then it takes me twenty minutes to get the sticky key copy to jump all the way around the deadbolt. I feed an overly aggressive cat with one eye and watch it turn the living room light off with its paw. Just for kicks I light the candles on a tableside menorah, and blow them out after just a few seconds, in case the client took note of the wick lengths. I make my way back to Columbia Street, going out of my way past 40 Knots to try the door, just to confirm they're closed. I head home, drink two glasses of Cab as fast as I can, forget to feed Atlas and Titan, and pass out on top of my comforter with the cats circling my bed, mewling and crying.

Christmas morning I wake up with a backache. All that walking and bending roughed me up. I pop a Tylenol. Yesterday's visits took twice the time the app predicted, so I don't dawdle. I walk twenty minutes up to the top of Brooklyn Heights and then remember I forgot to settle up with poor old Atlas and Titan again. They could wait a few hours longer. And I could really go for a big strong coffee and an egg n' cheese, but all the stores are closed.

A long-haired white Persian greets me in the first doorway, and turns circles around his tail to usher me into a dusty studio apartment. I take one look at him and launch into a sneezing fit. Maybe I'm allergic to the long-haired ones. Male, Rex. I scoop his litter and refill his food and shake a ribbon toy around until the excitement throws my back out. I'm sneezing so much I can't even see straight enough to judge the apartment. I sit out the rest of the appointment, and watch the clock tick up to minute twenty. Then I straighten my lower back with my hand, struggle off the couch, zip up my puffy coat, and head out the door. I check out of the appointment on the app, and look up the second address of the day.

Outside the streets are chilly, still quiet, not many cars on the road. I find the only way for me to get down the street with my sore back is to grasp a nearby black iron gate with my left hand and hold up my lower back with my right hand. A pair of elderly ladies in fur coats shuffle past me, avert their eyes from my whimpering, hunched effort along the gate. They side-step ice and make their way up the stairs of a red-bricked Presbyterian church.

Not to be a quitter, but I'm beginning to doubt it will be humanly possible to see eleven more cats today and make it to 40 Knots to catch the tail end of the party. Definitely no time to take a break at home and watch a Star War. At 40 Knots they'd be playing *Christmas Songs by Sinatra* on loop. Jen would be in her Mrs. Claus costume, going down the bar pouring peppermint patty shots into open mouths. There might even be free bagels. I make it down to Montague and am forced to let go of the iron gate. The next building is a walkup. I clutch the stairway's metal banister, pull myself up the four flights, wipe cold sweat off my forehead.

Number two of the day is a gray Scottish fold named Fredo. I refill his kibble, scoop the litter, and collapse onto a scratched-up leather couch. I decide to write Mitzy a sternly-worded email. I keep it professional, reasonable. *Mitzy, I'm having some health issues. My back has*

given out and it is difficult for me to get between all the apartments. Is there anyone on staff who can take some of these off my hands?

Her out of office bounces right back. *Mitzy's Kitzies is at capacity for the holiday season. We will not be taking any new appointments right meow.*

Fredo glares at me from an armchair across the room. If I didn't show, this poor guy would be left without food or drink for days. The owners have left their trust in me. They're likely cross-country, visiting sick and aging loved ones. Followed by a well-deserved reroute to a sun-drenched beach. A rotting container of yellow curry left in the sink indicates they may have even traveled east. Too far for me to cancel on them, for them to make it back in time to save this poor flat-faced kitten from starvation and/or depression. People say cruelty to animals is associated with psychopathy. I'd have to be a psychopath to ignore all these needy animals, to leave them to fend for themselves.

I text the client. *I'm here at your apartment! Don't worry... I'm not a psycho.*

The woman texts back right away. *What? Who are you?*

I look back at my previous text. I can see how she might have misinterpreted the psycho comment. Karen called me a psycho, quite a few times, that night of the final fight. The night she threw out my beloved outsider art collection. The night I pulled her hair a little bit.

I reach down for a feather toy and a fresh sharp pain shoots through my lower back. I am in no condition to engage this cat physically, emotionally, or mentally. When would Mitzy get back to me? I put my feet up on the leather couch in the meantime, give her some time to reschedule the appointments. I decide to loop Karen in about my crazy morning.

Hey K—Merry Christmas! Got myself into a bit of a situation doing a favor for Mitzy. Spending the next few days running around the city scooping cat litter. Turns out I'm allergic to

the long-haired ones? And I threw out my back—on Christmas! I'm still doing our annual 40 Knots party tonight ha ha. You should swing by.

The client texts again. *Who are you and why are you in my apartment?*

Oh, ha ha, sorry. It's the cat sitter! Just checking in to say Fredo is happy, safe and sound. Merry Christmas! I send her a gif of a cartoon cat in a Santa hat falling into a fireplace.

The phone lights up again. *Thanks! Can you bring in the mail?*

If nothing else, this whole affair has certainly reminded me to treat staff better. The last few years I've watched this city split into a city of servers and consumers. Going forward, I'll second guess voicing concern when my items aren't double-bagged. I'll stop tracking my delivery guy's location on the food app. I'll leave my back-unpatted when I sign a full twenty percent. These guys might be the only people I talk to all day, considering my Herculean efforts to avoid all colleagues at work. I take a note to tip Jen well tonight. Especially if she pulls through on those peppermint patty shots.

My phone lights up again and I grab it, eager for Mitzy's reshuffling of the schedule. It's Karen.

Merry Christmas!

I look up at Fredo and roll my eyes. Karen's probably out in Chicago, knee-deep in shredded tartan wrapping paper, holding someone's baby. The cat jumps off the armchair and steps into his litter box. He keeps his eyes locked on mine while he shakes his hips and squeezes out a shit. Karen texts again. *And happy new year!*

I check out of the appointment and look up the next address. Finally—the Promenade. The app says the next cat is a female Russian blue named Xenia. I shield my eyes from the icy wind and look up at a four-story brownstone. Two six-foot wide wreaths look professionally

installed. The building is marked a national historic landmark, a stamped plaque mentioning something about slavery. There's a birdbath. Not even any buzzers for separate apartments.

Xenia must have this whole place to herself.

I'm halfway up the brownstone's stairs when I check the address on the app and notice the "Garden" apartment designation. Below, steps descend into a darkened sub-basement. Squinting from on high, I can make out tarnished bronze letters nailed to the wall: "KAREN." I take one last longing look at the house's antique wooden door, and reluctantly head back down the stairs to get a better look at what Karen's got in store for me.

It's "GAR EN," with a faint discoloration of a D on the side of the brownstone, the metal letter itself swept away to history. I take the deep stairs one by one, leaning onto a rusted thin handrail. The key goes easily around the bolt and I rattle open the industrial metal door. I blink through the blackness and feel my hand along the wall to find a switch. A struggling fluorescent light reveals an unpainted concrete studio. Half of the apartment is lined with wooden shelves, and a futon and TV are set up on the other side. The back cement wall is blocked off to any garden view of any Promenade. A twin bed is pushed into the corner—I actually own the same plaid comforter. A red felt Christmas stocking is tied to the stove handle by its CVS tag. The cat is nowhere in sight. There's a stack of gardening tools and cleaning supplies by the door. I must have been hired by the building's super.

The super even has a back brace laid out on the bed. I place the straps over my shoulders and buckle myself in. The app reads, "Xenia, female Russian blue. Loves her ribbon teaser toy. Doesn't love to be touched. A vial of penicillin needs to be injected into her neck each morning."

Doesn't Mitzy have a couple vet techs on staff to handle these ones? There's a needle and jar on the table, ready and waiting for me on a spaghetti sauce-stained placemat. I watch a

YouTube video of a chubby young nurse pinching a clump of skin on a gray cat that must be tranquilized, it doesn't flinch or screech or do any of the usual cat stuff when she plunges the needle into its back. I re-watch the video, try to imitate how the nurse draws out the liquid from the jar, but I keep getting distracted by the white sliver of love handle peeking out of her scrubs.

I slide a bag of litter off a shelf and there's the Russian blue.

"Come here girl. I know you don't like to be touched." Saying it aloud, I think of Karen and shudder. I cock the needle through the vial of penicillin, pull it back, and lunge. Just as my hand touches fur I remember grazing Karen's hair that final night, bickering in our building's hallway after one particularly drawn-out session at 40Knots. It was one of those lifeless evenings when we had nothing to say beyond ordering more rounds. I remember the precise moment I lost her. I was leaning on our hallway's wall for balance. She was crouched one stair below me and swaying like a Street Fighter. I looked down to see I was holding a fist full of her hair. We locked eyes. I softened. I thought it was our one chance to turn the night around. Make up, cuddle on the couch and watch Bravo. But she doubled down. Squinted her eyes and curled her lip. I decided to go ahead and tug.

In my hesitation, Xenia turns and lands a deep bite on the side of my forearm, and the needle clatters to the floor. I sneeze and throw my back out again. The cat releases me and I fall face-forward, down to the ground.

I lie on the floor and call Mitzy. There's no cell service so the call keeps failing and I keep redialing. I try FaceTiming Karen over the WiFi but hang it up like a coward after the second ring. I crawl towards the fridge and try the handle. It won't budge. There's a lock on the door. A giant Zip Tie is looped between the dirtied white fridge handle and a rickety sideboard. The super must believe me some petty thief.

I open the lowest cupboard and find a box of Triscuits. I open the plastic within carefully, memorizing each crinkle of the bag so I can recreate it when I fold the bag back down later. Munching on woven tiers of wheat I wonder if Karen will ever catch glimpse of my corpse once they find me. She got really into healing crystals towards the end. I'd stumble over piles of pink and black quartz in the hallway. It's like she was choosing to become stupider.

When the superintendent returns from the holidays, I'll be free. Maybe he's really having a ball this year, some all-out New Years ski trip, carving the slopes of the Matterhorn, clinking champagne with a group of jolly Germans. Looking at the various tools and bottles on his shelves there's no doubt he's worked very hard this year. Landscaping and bleaching and recaulking. The man deserves a break.

Atlas and Titan, of course, will starve to death in my absence. My money's on Atlas surviving the other. Only because he's a little fatter. I never really paid enough attention to their distinct personalities to make an informed gamble. One day, maybe the first or second week of January, absolutely famished, he'll sink a bite a little too hard on Titan's neck, snap it. Enjoy a few bites of fraternal flesh before choking out a last breath of his own.

My back is burning and I can barely breathe with all the pain. I focus on stretching each vertebra straight along the cement floor. Xenia, perched on the couch now, watches me cry. I try and relax, think of that nurse from YouTube. I imagine running my hand down the back of her pink scrubs. My mind keeps turning back to the stairway, watching Karen's brown eyes cloud over, never to light up for me again. She pushed me as hard as she could down the stairs. Shoved me into the second half of my life, a new era, marked with chronic back pain and a fresh divorce.

The nanny cam is now pointed at a lower angle than before, turned right down towards me. Did it move? The super's Christmas stocking, tied to the stove, dangles above. A cursive

“Xenia” is drawn in glitter puff paint along its white belt. I pull the stocking hard enough to break it off the stove handle, and Bonito flakes from an opened package confetti the air. The fishy pink flakes flutter for a few seconds, then come to rest around me like an outline at a crime scene. Xenia pitter patters right over. I pick up the penicillin and plunge the needle into the cat’s neck. I give her bony skull a kiss goodbye, pull myself up the basement stairs, and call a cab to take me to 40Knots.

“Where’s your wife at?” Jen asks. She’s wearing a tight green V-neck and her Mrs. Claus hat. The beer taps are draped in red tinsel. There’s a stack of free bagels at the end of the bar but I gave it a look and the plate looks a little picked over.

I launch into the Karen story. How I was always the one who kept life interesting. The one who signed us up for curling lessons, the one who rented the ZipCar to see the leaves turn. I was the one who booked the trip to Cancun to pet the dolphins. Jen nods but keeps rubbing the bar down with a wet towel. There are a few men dotting the bar, some a little grayer than me. Karen couldn’t get past one little fight. I told her she was likely suffering from a state of disassociation. A prolonged state of disassociation, one that she might have a chance to wake out of if she would just meet me for a goddamned drink at 40Knots on Christmas.

Jen pipes up. “Don’t you mean ‘dissociation’?”

I pay the seven dollars and hold my mouth open for a peppermint patty shot. A young female bartender I haven’t met before comes up from behind me, and drops my stool halfway backwards to the floor. Jen straddles me with the clear bottle of peppermint Schnapps in one hand and the brown bottle of Hershey’s chocolate syrup in the other. With a half-hearted, somewhat grim smile, she douses me with the Schnapps. She then squirts a generous amount of

syrup into my mouth and the other girl rights my stool with force. The pair moves on to the next man down the bar.