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This Must Be the Place

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THIS MUST BE THE PLACE

by

JESSE S. FEINMAN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillments of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Creative Writing
in the College of Arts and Humanities
and in the Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
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Thesis Chair: Susan Hubbard, M.A.

ABSTRACT

This Must Be the Place is a collection of short stories that take place in Massachusetts, America. Each story exists as a subtle celebration of the ordinary moments of our lives that softly, and gradually, shape us over time. This testament to the every-day is characterized by detailed, tender depictions of brief conversations, picnics in parks, afternoon car rides, and trips to the grocery store with past lovers. Although the narrators and other orbiting characters in the stories are all different, they are bound together by an insatiable curiosity and fascination with the world and the human condition.

Inspired by works from authors such as Raymond Carver, Richard Brautigan, William Trevor, Carrie Fountain, and Andre Dubus, *This Must Be the Place* is a comment on how we, as people, are as defined by the decisions we do not make as the ones that we do. The characters in each piece confront choices and the invariable emotional consequences that will follow them, either temporarily or for the foreseeable future. These consequences propel the narratives, causing anxiety, uncertainty, and at times even excitement for all of those involved. Similarly, and perhaps more importantly, because of these consequences, the gears of the characters' hearts shift, ever so slightly, in new, unexplored directions.

As a whole, *This Must Be the Place* is about the understated importance embedded in every connection, misconnection, beginning, and ending.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank my mother and father for their years of continuous support, understanding, and kindness. I'd also like to thank Susan Hubbard for her tremendous patience and irreplaceable guidance. This entire collection, along with everything else I produce in the future, will be dedicated to Richard Brautigan, who I hope to one-day meet in the clouds.

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ARKADIA

Hannah and I sat in the field together. It was the field behind her dad's house in Holyoke. She was smoking cigarettes while I used her lighter to burn blades of grass. All around us small dandelions covered the field like white confetti.

She picked one up and held it near my face and said, "Make a wish," and waited for me to blow all of the seeds into the air. Once she realized I wasn't going to, she lightly put the dandelion down on the ground, almost as if she was placing it into an open grave.

"You're no fun," she said.

"Whatever," I said and she smiled.

"Did you want to do anything tonight?" she asked.

"I don't really care. I'm fine with this."

"I think I want to go out."

"Then let's go out."

"But you don't want to."

"I never said that."

She lit another cigarette then grabbed my hand and pulled me up. It was Friday night, and just getting dark, which meant Hank's was about to get busy. Hank's was the most popular bar in town and on Friday's everyone between the ages of eighteen and thirty congregated there to shoot the shit and essentially do what everyone does at bars. When Hannah suggested going out, I knew she meant Hank's.

For most people in Holyoke this would've be a fairly normal suggestion, but Hannah had broken up with the main bartender there, Ryan, about a month and a half ago. She also, coincidentally, had sex with me in the bathroom of Hank's that same night. Somehow Ryan never found out, and even stranger than that, never found out that we started actually seeing each other after the hook-up. Neither of us had been to the bar since.

Hannah and Ryan broke up at Hank's. Ryan was bartending and Hannah was crying because her mom walked out on her and her dad. Her mom left a note on a small piece of computer paper saying she intended on moving to Quebec by herself to start over. Ryan had been insensitive for as long as I could remember, ever since middle school, and I suppose was insensitive about what happened to Hannah. So Hannah smashed a glass at the old, wooden bar and stormed out of the room and into the street.

I watched all of this happen from the pool tables and paused my game with my friends Nick and Dan to go make sure she was okay. Outside she cried on the wooden porch while holding a lit cigarette in her trembling hand.

"He's a fucking piece of shit!" she had said to me.

"Ryan? Oh, I guess so."

"Fuck him. Seriously, fuck him."

"I'm sorry."

Hannah and I had a few classes together back in high school, but never really got close to one another. Up until that point, the only thing we knew we had in common was that we still hadn't left Holyoke. I guess that was enough.

She sat there on the single bench, took a drag of her cigarette, and blew smoke into the air. She wasn't looking at me.

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said.

Her free hand rested on her thigh. I stood there leaning against a pole, and after a few minutes of silence said, "Yeah, fuck him."

About twenty minutes after that we were in the bathroom together. I remember kissing her against the sink. I could see the waves in her black hair in the reflection from the stained and cracked mirror. From inside the stall we could hear someone pissing but we didn't care. She smelt like Georgia peaches and faded smoke. It was hard to stop kissing her.

Now Hannah and I were walking to her car, which was an older Toyota from the mid-80's, with a cassette player, two broken cup holders, and torn-up faux-leather interior. It was a gift from her dad three years ago. She named it Klarrisa after her mom. Hannah loved it, even though it'd been beat to shit.

"Where did you want to go?" I asked, already aware of the answer.

"We could go to Hank's. Jenny told me she was going. Did you know her and Rodrigo got together?"

Jenny was a long-time friend of ours who had just opened up a gallery in downtown. When we were in middle school Jenny told me she wanted to be a botanist, but changed her mind the second she saw a Wolfgang Tillmans photograph called "Arkadia." In the photo three boys were hugging one another. She had brought the photograph to our American History class one day and said, "Look at this. Isn't it so beautiful?"

Rodrigo was a mechanic. He always played The Doors and The Stooges in his shop. When we were freshmen in high school Ricardo would skip class almost every day to go look at all the trucks and Mustangs in the Senior parking lot. He wouldn't touch them or take pictures of them, just look at them real close-up. He dropped out senior year to work at a shop. He's still there.

"No, I didn't know that. That's funny though," I eventually said to Hannah.

"Isn't it? The two have had crushes on each other since, like, what? Tenth grade?"

"Something like that."

There was a pause.

"Hey, maybe we shouldn't go to Hank's," I went on.

"Oh. Well, I had already told Jenny I'd meet up with her."

"Couldn't we all go somewhere else?"

"Like?"

"I don't know."

"You don't want to see Ryan."

Hannah had a habit of putting words in my mouth. This would've been a problem, but for the most part she was right in her assumptions. We stood in her driveway. I looked at her face and her black hair pushed behind her ears. The streetlights turned on and they made her hair shine like black satin in the synthetic sun. I couldn't imagine seeing her under any other lighting. She wore old red shoes that needed new shoelaces. I thought about telling her that I loved her like Rodrigo loved the Stooges.

"I don't want to see Ryan," I said instead.

“I figured. I respect that, but I think we should still go. I don’t want him dictating our lives.”

“All right,” I said.

The drive to Hank’s was only about ten minutes. Nowhere in Holyoke was much further than that. When we got in the car Hannah put on a The Comsat Angels tape, *7 Day Weekend*, and manually rolled down her window. She always drove with her windows down, simply because she liked the way Massachusetts air felt against her cheeks. I rolled mine down halfway and she took out another cigarette. We didn’t say much to each other because we were both a little nervous.

Before Hannah I had been single for quite some time. I had been focusing primarily on my paintings for the past few years, which made developing relationships (platonic or romantic) pretty difficult. Like most “artists,” I liked to paint alone, and often. Sometimes I would paint for hours on end without even noticing it. It would just happen like that. I lost three jobs in the past year from simply forgetting to show up to work because I was so entranced in whatever landscape or portrait I was putting onto a canvas. The jobs, for the most part, were rather unimportant and unfulfilling, so each time I received a call from an unhappy manager or supervisor, it felt more like a relief than a punishment.

The only reason I had left my house and went to Hank’s that night was because Nick had been complaining to me, rather incessantly, about how I hadn’t hung out with him in months.

“Man, this painting sucks. Let’s just go play pool or some shit.”

I looked at the painting. It was a still life of a pair of worn-out brown leather boots. I guess it did suck.

“I guess it does suck,” I said, and then we were out the door.

After Hannah and I had sex that night I asked if she wanted to hang out the next day. She said yes, absolutely, and in the morning we went to the park we had both been going to since we were kids. We talked about things we mutually liked (scented candles, bookstores, Happy Hour, Ingmar Bergman films, roses), things we mutually disliked (soccer, Woodrow Wilson, crowded parking garages, standardized tests), and things that she liked that I didn't and vice versa. She told me that she liked scorpions, early morning jogs, and construction paper and I told her that I didn't. I told her that I liked leather jackets, slasher films, and cold showers and she told me that she didn't.

Hannah worked at a small bakery and brought us muffins and bagels and a couple of cinnamon rolls to eat together while sitting in the field. I told her countless bad one-liner jokes, and after each one she smiled at me with blueberries in her teeth. She had a small gap between her two front teeth and it filled with dark blue. Ants had gotten to some of the pastries but we didn't mind.

“We can go back to my place. I still live with my dad. I hope that's not weird or anything,” she said when it became time to leave the park and the ants around us.

“No, no. I don't think it's weird.”

We went back to her house and sat on her bed together. It had light pink sheets and photos had been thumbtacked on all of her bedroom walls. They seemed to cover an array of years, from photos of her as a young child to photos of her from the last year.

“You paint, I photograph,” she said. “It's not so different, really.”

There was only one photo of Hannah and Ryan. They were kissing in front of a waterfall. I didn't know where the waterfall was or if I had ever been there. She wore a black dress in the photo. It was the dress she wore the night they broke up. I wondered if she had made the connection yet.

She walked over to her desk and took out her camera, some dinky 35mm film thing you could get in the dollar-bin of a thrift store. She manually advanced the film and took a photo of me lying on her bed with her crushed pack of cigarettes on my chest. Then she tossed the camera over to me and I barely caught it.

"Now you take one of me," she said.

"I'm pretty shit at taking photos."

"I don't care. Just try."

I began to get up and she stopped me. "No, no. Take it from there. Lying down. Just like that."

She posed in front of me without looking at me. As the flash went off I noticed her smile.

"I probably look so shitty," she said. She lightly chuckled.

Now Hannah was humming to the chorus of a song I didn't recognize as we pulled up to Hank's. She put the car in park and looked over at me.

"You seem on edge," she said.

"No, I'm fine. I think."

"Are you sure you want to do this? I feel bad."

"Yeah, I'm fine. I haven't seen Jenny in awhile. I have a few questions about an art show I want to talk to her about."

“Okay. Well, if at any point you feel, you know, uncomfortable, we can leave.”

Jenny and Rodrigo sat together on the bench on Hank’s porch. They were smoking cigarettes and holding hands under the white roof. Jenny had on a black t-shirt and had her red hair in a ponytail. She sprang up once she saw us getting out of the car.

“Guys! Hello!” she said. She had bright brown eyes.

“Hey, Jen,” I said.

“Oh my, Hannah, you look wonderful!”

“You too,” Hannah said, looking down at her shoes, almost as if she was searching for a reason why Jenny said that.

Rodrigo shook my hand. “Still painting?” he asked.

“Yeah, yeah. I actually wanted to talk a bit to Jenny about setting up a show.”

“Better leave that for another time. She’s booked up quite in advance, which is both good and bad, you know. Lots of artists, little buyers.”

“Right, I get it.”

“It’s not that you’re a bad painter,” he said.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Jenny showed me a painting you did. Of girls by the pool.”

“Oh my gosh, what a beauty that one is. Seriously!” Jenny interjected.

I made that painting after a brief trip Nick and I took to Cambridge in the summer. It was very hot so we decided to sneak into a Harvard pool. There were three girls sunbathing on matching burgundy towels. They all had brown hair and didn’t seem to mind us swimming beside them. In fact, I don’t think they even noticed we were there to begin with. It felt good to

be in the blue water next to three pretty girls who didn't know my name. Nick splashed me and I splashed him and when we came back to Holyoke I painted the girls lying there in the summer sun.

Jenny was asking Hannah some questions about the bakery. I didn't know what to say to Rodrigo. He looked at Jenny instead of me. He really had admired her for quite some time.

"Do you guys want to go inside and get some drinks?" I suggested.

"Oh, boy, yes!" Jenny said.

We all walked inside of Hank's. It was very crowded and there was a group of four kids at the pool table. Yellow lights with chipped Budweiser lampshades illuminated both the table and the four kids. They looked like they had just gotten out of high school. One wore a wife-beater and had a tattoo of a panther on his shoulder. Another wore a buttoned-up flannel shirt. I watched as the boy in the flannel took the pool stick and hit the 6-ball into the corner pocket.

"Fuck you, you fuckin' cheat!" the boy with the panther tattoo said.

The boy in the flannel laughed. Hannah held my hand. I looked toward the bathroom where we had sex for the first time. Two girls stood outside of it, faces illuminated by the low light of their phones. One girl whispered something into the other's ear. It felt like any night at Hank's.

"Drinks?" Rodrigo suggested.

"Yeah. What're you in the mood for?" I asked Hannah.

"Oh, gah, I dunno, any IPA will do."

Rodrigo and I approached the bar. It was crowded and everyone at the bar stood very close to one another. At the far right end stood group of three men, each with large, well-tended

beards. I watched them catcall some of the women who were circumstantially standing near them. None of the women looked amused but it didn't stop the bearded men from persisting. Rodrigo and I had nothing to say to each other. Sometimes in life you get placed next to a person you have nothing to say to.

From where we stood it was too crowded to see who was bartending. We were behind a few other people who were probably around our age and probably doing exactly what we were doing. One man was bald with a large pink scar that ran down to the top of his neck. Another had a full head of hair and no visible scars. They both ordered and walked away with their drinks a few moments later.

Their absence revealed, perhaps to no surprise, Ryan. He was pouring two shots of liquor for a brown-haired woman in a lime-green dress. His hair had gotten longer, and he wore a grey polo shirt that hugged his arms tightly. The woman in the green dress spoke to him about something while he focused on her drink. He nodded a few times, I'm assuming out of social niceties. Then he handed her the drink and she slid over a few dollars and a napkin with some scribbles on it. He nodded one more time as she walked away.

I think that whenever you find yourself in a dangerous, risky, uncomfortable, or generally unfortunate situation, you end up studying exactly what you've done to put yourself into it. Similarly, you end up trying to decide whether or not what you had done was "worth" placing yourself in said situation. In this particular instance, what I had "done" was Hannah.

I had assisted her in ending her last relationship with a handsome bartender. I had shared morning after morning with her in her bed, eating sesame-seed bagels and lightly scratching her back. I had painted her nude, wearing only my denim jacket, in the kitchen of Dan's apartment at

5 A.M. I had visited her at her job, time and time again, to look at want ads in the paper and doodle crude portraits of her customers while she worked behind the register. It didn't take much time for me to decide that, yes, of course, she was more than worth it.

“Oh, shit, hey, man,” Ryan eventually said to me.

“Hey, Ryan,” I said.

“It's been a little bit, hasn't it?”

“Yeah, guess so.”

“Guess so. How's everything? Are you still an artist?”

“Everything's everything. I'm still painting here and there.”

“I've always liked your paintings. I don't know why I never told you.”

“I guess it just never came up.”

I looked at Ryan's hands. They were each placed firmly on the table. They were large, burly hands, the type that action heroes in films have. If he were to punch me in the face, right then and there, it would unquestionably knock me out. It wouldn't be anything close to a contest. But then I looked at his eyes. And he looked at mine. He didn't know Hannah and I were together. He really had no idea that Hannah and I kissed for the first time fifteen feet away from him. In his eyes, this interaction was simply like all of the other inconsequential, brief moments he shared with meaningless people from his past.

“Right. Well, anyway, it's good to see you, really,” he said.

I then asked Ryan what IPAs he recommended, and he walked over to the fridge beneath the bar to grab them and pour them into glasses for me.

“Hey, double that order,” Rodrigo shouted over to Ryan.

Ryan nodded. There was a painting behind the bar of a woman in a white cocktail dress holding a martini glass with a red beverage in it. It was one of those paintings that everyone has seen thousands of times in their lives but means nothing to anyone in particular.

Ryan softly pushed the glasses over to me. We made eye contact again. I owed Ryan absolutely nothing but in that moment wanted to tell him everything.

“Hey, I hope this doesn’t sound weird, and I guess it’s none of my business, but have you spoken to Hannah lately? Hannah Dowley?” Ryan said.

“Hannah Dowley? No, not in awhile.”

“Oh. Yeah, I don’t know, her and I had a messy break-up here awhile back. She used to always come here. I haven’t seen her since.”

“Yeah, I haven’t seen her.”

“Well, if you do, could you like, you know, tell her I’m sorry?”

“For?”

“Just about everything.”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” I said.

Rodrigo and I took the drinks and headed over to our table at the opposite end of the large room. He didn’t ask why I told Ryan I didn’t know Hannah. He simply wasn’t concerned.

Hannah and Jenny sat together at a small red wooden table that had little hearts and letters carved into it. It was out of sight of the bar itself. They discussed at length the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, whom they both liked. Rodrigo sat drinking his IPA, listening attentively to every word that left Jenny’s lips. Jenny could have been talking about chemical sewage and to Rodrigo it would have still sounded like Al Green or a summer breeze.

Hannah put her hand on my thigh and kissed me on the cheek. Across the room the boy with the panther tattoo flirted with the two girls who were standing by the bathroom. They were giggling as he went on and on about matters I couldn't hear.

I was unsure why Ryan asked me to apologize to Hannah for him. I mean, I knew it was because, to some degree, he felt bad because of what happened, but at the same time, why did he ask *me*? Did he ask every regular at Hank's to apologize to Hannah, or was this some odd cosmic coincidence? Maybe he knew I lied to him. Maybe he knew I loved her.

"No, honestly, I think I like Bishop more than Gallagher," Hannah said to Jenny.

"Really? That surprises me. I think *Dear Ghosts* might be one of the most beautiful books ever," Jenny said.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm not saying it isn't, but I don't know. Just never really clicked for me."

Her hand was in mine. I had never read Elizabeth Bishop or Tess Gallagher. I just kept gently tracing circles in the palm of her hand. In the distance the boy with the panther tattoo walked into the bathroom with one of the girls. His hand was on her ass. The other girl laughed.

Hannah leaned over to me. "Was he there?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

"He told me to tell you he was sorry."

Hannah looked at me under the dim light. "He probably knows."

"Maybe. I don't think he does."

"I suppose it isn't terribly important either way."

I turned around in my seat. I couldn't see Ryan. He couldn't see Hannah or me. As I mentioned, her hand was in mine and in that particular moment it felt very gentle, almost as if it had been softened by waves like a piece of sea glass. Jenny went on about Tess Gallagher and her poems. It was like any night at Hank's.

CINEMA ON MAIN

Earlier in the day my dad left a note on the counter saying that he was leaving and wasn't coming back. It was written on the same light purple paper that my mom always made her grocery lists on. He had used a piece of paper from one of my school notebooks the last time he had written a note like this.

I read it a few times and looked around for my mom but she was nowhere to be found. I called her, but it went straight to voice mail.

Hello, you've reached Meredith Klein. Thanks for calling, but I'm not here right now . . .

I put the note down and decided to go out and catch the next bus into town.

Once I got there I walked around aimlessly because I didn't know what else I was supposed to do. It was a particularly sunny day and I was mad at the sun, or maybe God, for making today so sunny. My dad had just abandoned my family for the fourth time and, as far as I was concerned, that warranted for it to be (at the very least) cloudy. But, still, for some reason, it was a perfect blue-sky sunny day.

As I walked down Main Avenue, I passed a café that had three tables outside of it. I noticed a generic attractive couple sitting at one of the green tables, drinking espresso from tiny porcelain cups while soaking in the sun. The handsome man had curly blonde hair and he was saying something to the beautiful woman and it made her laugh. Much like the rest of her, her white smile was beautiful. It looked like they never fought in the middle of the night or smashed vases against the living room walls. It looked like they had never experienced a rainy day in their

lives. I really didn't like it. I wanted to go up to the handsome man and beautiful woman and say, "Hey, just so you know, it shouldn't be sunny outside. It should, in fact, be very cloudy. Or maybe even rainy."

But instead, I kept walking down Main until I came across the local art-house movie theater. The building was painted dark brown, but it looked like it needed a new coat. It had probably been years since its last. Near the top of the building sat a red, chipped sign that said "Marathon Cinema" in cursive, and beneath it, the showings for the day. They were only screening a German film called *Christiane F.* I had never heard of it, but the tickets only cost six dollars and I figured seeing the movie would take my mind off of the sun, as well as my once-again absent father, so I bought one for the next showing.

Inside the front of the theater was a small snack bar that was not unlike most snack bars I had ever seen. Behind the bar itself was a big popcorn maker and soda machine and hanging on the wall was a large, faded painting of assorted drinks and unappetizing foods that resembled chicken fingers and maybe other things, too. There was a short line of people waiting to be served by the one snack bar worker and I joined it.

Standing directly in front of me was a girl with long black hair. She wore a plaid skirt and a black sweater that matched her hair. She stood by herself and I wondered why she was alone. It could've been because she liked watching German films on Sunday afternoons alone, or maybe her significant other was in the bathroom.

"Get us a big bag of popcorn with a lot of butter, and maybe some Twizzlers," they might have said before walking away without the girl.

Or perhaps, like me, she was just simply alone with nothing else to do, and her brown purse and beige hairclips were the only company she had. That very well could have been it.

Moments later it was her turn to place her order and she said to the worker, “Hello— ah, can I have a small popcorn and a small Coke?”

Her voice was soothing and warm like liquid butterscotch. I could only imagine how beautiful it sounded when she said things that weren’t a brief order at a movie theater snack bar. I decided at that moment there could be no greater tragedy in this world than for this snack bar worker to deny her a small popcorn and Coke. My dad leaving my mom and I had, somehow, become minuscule in comparison.

The worker attended to her order and within a few seconds she had the company of both popcorn and a Coke. She picked both items off of the counter and walked away without facing me.

“Next in line,” the one worker said.

I looked at him, unable to speak, and quickly left the line, following the girl into the theater room.

There weren’t many people in the room, no more than twenty or so, which made it relatively easy to spot the girl. She sat alone in the fifth row sipping from her Coke. Under the low lights of the theater her green eyes glistened like somber glass and I wondered why she had no one beside her to appreciate it. I sat down four (I counted) seats away from her and waited with my hands in my lap for the film to start. I thought about leaning over in my seat to say something to her but had no idea where to begin.

“Hey, I really like your black hair,” was too unoriginal.

“Hey, I’d really like to sit next to you,” was too forward.

“Hey, I’m in still in high school but smoke over a pack of cigarettes a day and hardly sleep at night,” was too honest.

Rather than overcoming my fear of speaking to pretty girls (and anyone in general), I stared at the large grey screen in front of me. The lights shut off and the movie began. It slowly became clear that it was about a boy and a girl who met at a club one night while taking drugs at a roller rink. They each couldn’t have been older than fifteen. In one scene, the boy and girl met with their three friends in the evening to take more drugs behind a shopping center.

Shortly after, the police came and chased the teenagers across the center while disco music played in the background. There was something almost cheerful in the chase, as the friends tripped over one another when they turned the sharp corners, or laughed as they broke the glass of the store windows for no real reason.

At one point, after it had gotten dark, the main boy and girl broke away from the other friends. They climbed up to the roof of a tall building that seemed to be the Mercedes headquarters, or something along those lines. They lay next to one another as a gigantic fluorescent Mercedes insignia slowly span above them. The girl looked at the boy while he talked to her and it appeared that she already loved him very much.

My mom had once described to me the time she knew she had fallen in love with my dad. It was after we found the note on my notebook paper.

“He had taken me to the Canary Diner in Worcester— oh, how he loved that place. He ordered us two hot fudge sundaes, each with cherries on top, and do you know what he said to me? He said, ‘Meredith, I don’t know much about the world, or how it works, but I’m certain

that you're the best thing in it.' Quite the romantic, huh?" She gave me a light smile. "He was no Shakespeare then, still isn't one now, but, you know, I could tell he really meant it. I know it's not the best story, but after he said that little line my twenty-two-year-old self belonged to him."

"That's a really sweet story," I said.

"I suppose so. He hasn't said something like that to me in so long."

"I'm really sorry," I said because I was.

"I think that's why I forgave him the first time he left then came back. I couldn't, and still can't, help but believe he'll someday say something like that again."

A love song started playing in the film. I think it was New Order, or maybe the Suburbs.

Oh, and love is the law, love is the law, love, love, love . . .

Finally, after what seemed like hours, the boy turned to the girl and began kissing her under the Mercedes sign. A man with a large head who sat in the front of the theater began to shout, "Ooh! Yuck!" as the romance unfolded. The two people (with smaller heads) sitting next to him each laughed at his fairly unoriginal spectacle.

I heard the girl with the long black hair laugh quietly and I looked over at her. She playfully covered her mouth with her hand. Even in the darkness of the theater (and her hand covering the entirety of her mouth and lips) I could tell she was beautiful. I watched as the soft light from the film ricocheted against the side of her tan face, illuminating it like a solar eclipse. She noticed my big smile and took her hand off her mouth. She smiled back at me and I, feeling both embarrassed and overwhelmed, looked away from her.

I have difficulty remembering most of the movie after that point because, as expected, my thoughts became dedicated strictly to the girl sitting alone four seats away from me. What she did on Thursdays, where she was from, what music she enjoyed . . .

I do, however, remember that the film ended however many minutes later with the girl taking drugs in her mom's bathroom alone. It was a sad scene that involved her curled up in the corner of her blue bathroom with her red hair blanketing her eyes. It reminded me of the night that I caught my dad doing coke in the bathroom for the first time.

"Oh, shit, sorry," I had said while quickly closing the door.

I rushed into my room and he very shortly after barged through the door, his brown eyes wide and bloodshot, his brown hair a terrible mess.

"Hey, about— about what happened in there. Don't, you know, your mother, she . . . She doesn't need to know about any of that."

"I won't say anything, Dad."

"Just keep this between us. Okay? Don't tell anyone else."

"Okay, Dad."

"Don't bring it up to her. I can— that was the last time. You know, with that."

"I believe you."

I heard them fighting in their bedroom later that night. They each yelled and their voices shattered across the walls. The sounds had gotten to be familiar and predictable, so it wasn't the noisiness of them that kept me up. It was the pauses in between them. Did my dad stop shouting because my mom had started crying? Did he stop shouting because he realized, for a brief moment, that he might be hurting her? After a while, there were no more pauses, only yelling

that got louder and louder and eventually stopped. I sat up in my bed and heard a door slam, then an engine start, and at 3:26 A.M. that night ended.

A David Bowie song began to play as the credits started rolling. I realized my time spent alongside the girl with the long black hair was, more likely than not, coming to an end. I looked over at her and she was folding her black sweater to put it into her purse. All of her movements were slow and careful like a child building a sandcastle in the summer. She placed the folded sweater gently into the large pocket of the brown purse then stood up. I got up as well, and headed toward the exit of the room because I had no reason to be in the theater anymore.

The girl followed behind me as I departed, and as I opened the door to the theater, she said, “Did you like the movie?”

I stared back at her, in disbelief at her initiation of conversation, my left hand still holding the door open as she walked through it.

“Oh, uh, yeah, I thought it was pretty good,” I said, trying not to make it sound like I enjoyed it too much, in the event that she didn’t enjoy it herself. “Did you like it?”

“Yeah, very much. It’s actually one of my favorites.” She had a barely noticeable, but distinctively buoyant, Portuguese accent.

We were now standing by the snack bar where I first saw her.

“That was my first time seeing it,” I said because it seemed to be the only sentence I could articulate.

“Oh? It’s such a great film, really. I’ve seen it countless times now.”

She spoke with an innocent kind of excitement, almost as if her greatest passion in life was discussing *Christiane F* with strangers on Sunday afternoons.

“I’ve actually never heard of it until today,” I said.

“Really? I suppose it isn’t terribly popular. Was there any reason that you decided to come see it?”

I wanted to tell her it was because my dad had left my mom and me again. I wanted to tell her it was because growing up in a broken home left me with very few options other than to see *Christiane F* alone. I wanted to tell her it was because even though all of this had happened before, and would undoubtedly happen again, I still didn’t have a clue how to properly handle it. But these weren’t things you could simply say to a kind stranger with long black hair.

“Oh, not really, no. I just didn’t have much else to do,” I finally said.

She looked like she didn’t know what to say. I was doing a really bad job at keeping this conversation going. I had been lucky enough that a girl like this happened to be sitting alone in the same movie theater that I was, and I had been even luckier that she had, for whatever imaginable reason, decided to approach me.

Suddenly, almost heroically, the man with the large head stepped out of the bathroom from across the lobby. He coughed loudly, and audibly said, “Shit! Fuckin’ dusty ass bathroom!”

The girl giggled and covered her mouth with her hand again and I could try to do justice to how lovely she looked with words, but there’d be no point.

“I really want to hang out with that guy,” I said.

“Me too. I think I could spend every day with him,” she said back with a large smile.

“You know, that’s who I aspire to be in twenty years. Fifteen, if I’m lucky.”

She laughed and, yet again, covered her mouth.

“You’re funny,” she said.

Her phone started to ring in her purse and she took it out to look at the screen.

“I’m sorry, I have to take this. It’s my manager from work. I’ll just be a minute, if that’s all right?”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” I said as she answered her phone and walked toward the women’s bathroom.

A handful of people entered the theater for the next screening. A line had formed at the snack bar again and at the back of it were a young boy and his father. The boy had his small arms wrapped around the top of his father’s legs. It would’ve been a rather endearing sight, had I not known what the boy would see in the film.

One of the only times my dad took me to the movies was when a theater by our old house screened *Jacob’s Ladder*. Apparently, it was his favorite movie.

“God, why won’t you just come see it with me?” my dad shouted at my mom.

“I don’t want to, Stan! It’s a horrifying movie!”

“You never want to do anything I want to do! This film means so much to me!”

“Stan, I’m sorry, I just— please don’t make me go.”

“Then I’m taking him!”

He ran over to the couch I was sitting on and grabbed me by the arm. We were out the door before my mom could dispute it. On the way to the theater he told me about the movie.

“Your mother doesn’t know what she’s talking about. It’s really not that scary at all. Everything that happens to the main guy, Jacob, you know, it’s all in his head. It’s not real.”

“Oh, okay,” I said back to him.

“She doesn’t know what she’s saying. She never does. It’s a great movie, and really depicts what war can do to a man.”

“I believe you,” I said.

I was no older than ten at the time, and, naturally, the movie scared the hell out of me. I also, naturally, cried for the duration of the ride home while he remained silent. I ran inside of the house to the solace of my bedroom, but on the way I couldn’t help but hear my mom say, “Stan, look what you’ve done to the poor thing!”

After some shouting between my parents in the hallway, my father slowly opened the door to my room. He didn’t come in.

“Sport, I— I’m sorry that the movie scared you. It was wrong of me to take you and I’m sorry. Sometimes I make poor choices but I’m going to try to fix that. Just try to remember it was all a movie, and I love you.”

He stood in the doorway for a few moments until he realized that I wasn’t going to reply.

“Stan!” my mother said from the other room.

“Goodnight, Sport. I’m sorry. I’ll make it up to you tomorrow.”

He slowly closed the door and I watched as the sliver of light shining through my room began to disappear.

“God, shut your mouth for once, Meredith!” he yelled from the hall.

The girl with the long black hair stepped outside of the bathroom and approached me again. There was something in her face, maybe the lightness in her eyes, which made her look slightly sad. I wondered if her manager had given her awful news: a building being burnt down, a coworker dying, a storefront closing. I hoped, for the love of God, she was all right.

“Bad news,” she said. “I got called into work and I have to be there within the hour, so I have to get going. I tried to get out of it, but you know how these things can be.”

“Oh. Well, that’s okay,” I said.

“It was really great to meet and talk to you,” she said.

“Yeah, absolutely, you too. Really.”

She looked at me briefly, for at most two or three seconds. During that time I wondered if I should ask for her number, her name, anything, to keep this going. I looked down at my hands and saw my father’s calloused palms and veiny fingers. My mom had once told me about how my dad and I shared the same dark eyes and cowlick, but never the same hands.

It made me wonder about what else he and I shared: the same temper, the same addictive personality, the same inability to stay around. Perhaps these were all things that wouldn’t reveal themselves until much later on. Or, perhaps these were all things that wouldn’t reveal themselves at all.

I looked back at the girl and saw something almost ethereal about her and her black sweater and beige hairclips. Something I was so unaccustomed to seeing at home or anywhere else I frequented. I could tell that she lacked the capacity to hurt anyone. For some reason, maybe because of her smooth tan hands, it was obvious. It wasn’t in her. And the biggest problem with that was I simply wasn’t sure if it was in me.

“Next in line,” the worker at the snack bar said in the distance.

The girl ran her fingers through her long black hair slowly, removing all of the knots and tangles.

“All right, well, I’ll see you around,” she finally said.

“See you,” I said back.

I watched as she exited through the two large doors of the theater by herself, holding her purse tightly against her waist.

After a few seconds I left the theater and headed to the bus stop near the café where the couple no longer sat. During the ride home I thought about when my dad’s truck would show up in the driveway, when my mom would smile with all of her teeth at the sight of him, and when this would all begin again.

THE WATER IN ALLSTON

Olivia's in the water and I'm sitting on a plastic chair with a slightly damp crossword puzzle.

"What's an eight-letter word for something that's 'Not entirely real, as a photo'?"

She comes up from under and gently pushes her wet hair out of her face. She looks like she's thinking hard.

"I dunno. 'Imaginary'?"

I count the letters in my head and with my fingers.

"That's nine letters. It won't fit."

There's chlorine blue water all around her. She's wading in it and gives me an impatient look.

"Won't you put that thing down and come swim with me?"

There's no one else at the pool. It's just us.

It had rained all morning and really wasn't a good day to swim by most people's standards. But she had insisted on swimming so we went to the community pool together.

"On the bright side, we don't have to worry about getting a sunburn," she said as we were leaving her hotel room just a few hours ago.

I put the half-finished crossword puzzle down and slowly submerge myself in the water. There are large grey clouds above our heads. Olivia's wearing a teal bathing suit and I've never seen her in teal before but I decide that she looks nice in it with her wet dark brown hair. It's only three in the afternoon but feels much later.

“So? What do you think?” she asks.

“About what?”

“The water. The water that you’re in.”

“It’s nice, yeah. But a little cold.”

“It could be warmer.”

“Just a bit.”

She’s going back to Seattle later in the day. There’s nothing I can do about that. I feel bad that her last day in Allston is a cloudy one but she doesn’t seem to mind. I suppose she’s used to it.

“Maybe we should get back soon so you can pack.”

“There’s no rush. I don’t have much. I’d rather swim.”

She drifts back and dips her head completely under the water for a few moments and then resurfaces again, appearing new but still the same. I decide I really do like the teal. She gives me a smile that tells me she knows that I do. There are two towels resting on a plastic table right next to the plastic chair that has my crossword puzzle on it.

On our way to the pool we laughed about how I remembered a crossword puzzle but not towels. We ended up stealing a couple from a Walmart just up the road.

“Just put them in my bag,” she said. “They’re small, it’ll be fine.”

“They’re only five dollars each. I could just buy them.”

“It’s more fun this way.”

So we put them in her bag and walked out of the Wal-Mart together holding hands because we were happy. Once we got into my car she gave me the pink one with small yellow crowns on it.

“You know, ‘cus you’re my princess and all that.”

She had picked the green towel. It was plain green with no crowns or other patterns on it. She wanted that one and I didn’t ask why.

All of a sudden two men in red Speedos open the gate to the pool. They each take off their tank tops and effortlessly dive into the water in careful syncopation. They look like they have done this a thousand times now. It’s certainly not their first time swimming together at this pool on a cloudy afternoon.

Neither of their towels is green or pink with small yellow crowns; I can tell from where I’m standing. For a brief moment I wonder if either of them are visiting from Seattle, or if they’ve ever been to Seattle at any point in their lives. I know I haven’t.

I swim closer to Olivia. She tells me to kiss her so I do. Her flight is at 8:00 P.M. and like I said there’s nothing I can do about it.

She’s only here because of a wedding, some aunt or second cousin, I don’t know. The company I work for catered it and Olivia and I met at the buffet. She wore a black dress and asked for seconds of the sweet potato hash that I made myself. It felt good to have her ask for seconds of something that I made, even though she had no idea I did.

“Sure, here you go,” I said.

“Thanks,” she said.

On my break I went to sit on a bench in the garden of the courtyard. Someone had left a day-old copy of the *Boston Globe* on the ground, and I began reading it and searching for words I didn't recognize. I had jotted down "gauche," "edacious," and "onerous" on my hand and as I was beginning to write "yawp," I noticed Olivia approaching me.

"Am I interrupting something?" she asked.

"No, no, not at all," I said.

She sat down next to me on the bench. "I've never seen a garden like this before."

There were roses and tulips all around us. "Yeah, it's a pretty good garden."

She studied the flowers behind her. "Do you work weddings often?"

"Every few weeks or so."

"So you've probably seen every garden in the Boston tri-city area, huh?"

"I guess you could call me an expert on the subject."

She smiled. Her hands were resting in her lap. "Do you like being at weddings all of the time?"

"I don't hate it. Everyone's pretty nice, especially when they're drunk."

"Oh, just wait another thirty minutes and everyone in there will be real nice."

It was my turn to smile. "Do you live around here?"

"No, I don't, actually."

Later in the night she showed me her hotel room. It was on the eighth floor, which she said she liked. It was high enough that when she looked out the windows she could see more than just a half-empty parking lot. There was a view of downtown Cambridge and all of the lights from the buildings and Harvard Square filled the air. Her room had a white bed, a painting

of a flower on the wall, a small TV, and a chair with an open suitcase on it. There were bras and underwear on the floor and an open notebook with a pen on the bed. A copy of *Dubliners* was on the small nightstand. It looked like any hotel room except that she was in it.

“Well? Have you ever seen such a beautiful room?”

“Not even in my dreams,” I said.

The men in Speedos are casually doing laps around the pool. They’re paying very little attention to us and laughing about something as they swim. They’re not worrying about leaving one another in just a few hours or what the traffic on the highway may be like. They’re unaware of how lucky they are.

I look at Olivia and I don’t know what to say. I suppose at the airport we’ll have to have a talk about all of this, about what happens next, if anything does.

“I think I’m gonna go dry off now,” she says.

I had watched her dry herself off earlier in the morning. The sun hadn’t even risen when Olivia opened up the hotel bathroom door, waking me as steam filled the room. I could barely see her silhouetted figure walking toward me.

“I want an ice cream sundae. Do you think room service will bring us one?” she said. She was now sitting at the foot of the bed wiping the small spots of water off of her arms.

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t think so. It’s only 5:30 A.M.”

“Well, I really want a sundae.”

“At this hour?”

“Yes. It’s as good as time as any to have a sundae.”

So we both got dressed and drove forty minutes out to the Canary Diner so that Olivia could have her sundae. She made sure the waiter put two cherries on the top— one for me and one for her.

“Do you like cherries?” she asked.

“I like cherries just fine,” I said even though I didn’t.

She took one of the two candied-red cherries and fed it to me. It was cold which made my mouth tingle. Olivia watched me chew with her grey eyes and it made swallowing the cherry all right. The diner was nearly empty, so our waiter put “Up on the Roof” by the Drifters on the jukebox. It felt like it played just for us. Outside it had begun to drizzle and we could hear the drops gently hitting the windows and the sidewalk.

I watch as she walks out of the pool and wraps the green towel around her teal bathing suit and tan skin. The sky is still full of large grey clouds but I know that it won’t rain again. She runs the end of the towel up and down her legs slowly, being careful not to miss a drop of Allston water that may be overstaying its welcome. She looks rather beautiful while she does it.

“Do you want to come dry off too?” she asks.

“Sure,” I say as I climb out of the water.

Olivia hands me the towel and gently touches my wrist for a brief moment. There’s maybe a foot between us as we stand together. In a few hours there will be much, much more than that.

GROCERY SHOPPING IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

I saw Amy at the Stop & Shop on Liberty Street. She was in the bread aisle and had some off-brand loaf of whole-wheat bread in her hands. She studied the plastic packaging carefully, with attentiveness similar to an experienced surgeon. I watched as she slowly turned the loaf in order to further examine all possible aspects of it.

It was clearly a very significant ordeal. If, somehow, all of the loaves of bread behind her caught on fire, there's no way she would have noticed. All that mattered to her were the contents, ingredients, and nutritional facts of this off-brand loaf of whole-wheat bread. I doubted that she even considered the possibility of the bread behind her setting ablaze.

I found it all to be a little odd. During our relationship, she never liked bread. When we would go out to eat for lunch and the waiter asked, "Sandwich or salad?" Amy always replied, without a moment's hesitation, "Salad, please." She would always eat it happily, not giving a second thought to any of the possible sandwiches that she could have ordered. She never even asked to try any of mine.

I usually kept off-brand whole-wheat bread in my pantry, which she frequently visited, and I couldn't remember an instance where she even acknowledged it. "Hey, I ate all of your whole-wheat bread," was never a sentence that left her lips. "Hey, I ate three slices," wasn't one either.

But perhaps the end of our relationship sparked the beginning of hers with bread. I suppose people change after they break up. I had gotten hired as the manager of the framing department at the Michael's in West Springfield since her and I stopped being together, and she began to like bread.

All of a sudden, her attention broke from the bread she was so devoutly fixated on and she looked in my direction. She still had the same light-blue-almost-periwinkle eyes that she had when we were together. Those hadn't changed even a little bit. Her long, blonde wavy hair draped across her back like Mia Farrow's before she cut it.

This was the first time we had seen each other since we broke up. When I set foot in the Stop & Shop, I expected to buy some soup, dishwashing fluid, frozen pizza, apples, and an off-brand loaf of whole-wheat bread. I had not expected to see Amy standing there, alone, publically displaying her newfound affection and interest for bread. The whole thing felt like a gigantic surprise.

I stood about ten feet away from her.

"Fancy seeing you here," she said. Her voice hadn't changed either.

"Yeah, real fancy."

I wasn't sure if I was supposed to walk closer to her or stay put. I positioned myself somewhat near the end of the aisle, which gave me some comfort. If the conversation began to go poorly, it would be quite easy for me to leave her alone with her bread.

"There's a sale on pickle spears," she said. "I know how much you like those."

"Oh, thanks. I'll have to buy two jars then."

On our third date we took her car out to West Springfield High at night to sit on the bleachers of the football field together. Neither of us had attended the school at any point in our lives, so it made the simple action of sitting on cheap steel feel slightly forbidden, and as a result, very exciting.

She wore a Husker Dü t-shirt that said “Makes No Sense At All” on the back. It was August, which meant that even in the middle of the night you could wear only a Husker Dü t-shirt and still feel comfortable. The shirt was burnt-red, which paired well with her almost-periwinkle eyes. They were the same then as they were at the supermarket.

“I heard the principal of this school got fired for throwing a glass jar of pickles at one of her students,” she said.

“Why’d she do that?” I asked.

“Apparently he called her bow-legged. And she happened to be really sensitive about her legs. Because she was bow-legged, I guess.”

“Why’d she have a glass jar of pickles in her office?”

“I’m not sure. She must have just really liked pickles.”

That made sense to me.

“It’s a shame that she had to waste a perfectly good jar on a student,” I said.

“It is a shame, isn’t it?”

We laughed about what the meeting with the principal’s supervisor must have been like. It was about one in the morning and we both laughed together on the bleachers imagining a woman losing her job over a glass jar of pickles. We watched as the sprinklers turned on to water the August grass that seemed to go on forever. Amy got up from the bleachers and ran through the falling water and I followed her. It felt good to cool ourselves off in the field of a school neither of us had any sort of relationship to.

Now she was telling me about a pickle sale. I found it to be a thoughtful thing of her to do, all things considered. I very well would have left the store without any pickles, had she not told me.

She stood there with the off-brand bread now in her basket. Her inspection had finally ended. She must have been relieved.

“Are you still over at Michael’s?” she asked.

“Yeah. I manage the framing department now, believe it or not.”

“Oh. That’s exciting.”

“Yesterday I helped an old woman frame a photo of a giraffe. She took it at a zoo in Wichita.”

“Really?” she asked.

“Yeah. She had brought in this big photo of a giraffe, you know, and she goes, ‘Can I get this framed? It’s for my grandson. His favorite animal are giraffes, but he’s never seen one in person before.’ And, anyway, I’m thinking I can have it ready for her to pick up in just a few days.”

As I soon as I finished telling her that story I felt silly. She didn’t care that her ex-boyfriend who she hadn’t seen in months framed a photo of a giraffe for an old woman. Why would she?

I wouldn’t.

“I’m sure when she gets the photo back she’ll be very happy,” she said.

We were in the bread aisle of the Stop & Shop. I didn’t know what to tell her. It wouldn’t be worth it to go in depth about how I had *finally* sold all of my Miles Davis records, or how my

apartment just got fumigated for termites for the third time. She didn't need to know that I'd only had sex once since the break-up— at Dan's party in Cambridge with a girl named Molly who worked for Yankee Candle. She didn't need to know that all of the plants in my tomato garden died because of my neglect, either. At this point, we had been broken up longer than we actually dated. So, naturally, these weren't details that concerned her life or required her attention any more.

A bald man was looking at the brand-name bread at the opposite end of the aisle. He had four watermelons in his shopping cart, which seemed like a lot for one bald man.

"That seems like a lot of watermelons for one bald man," I said, pointing in his direction, even though it wasn't a detail that concerned her life or required her attention.

She turned around for a brief moment. She shrugged. "It could be for his family. Maybe they all really like watermelons."

The thought hadn't even crossed my mind.

"So you're suggesting a shared watermelon-obsession."

"Yeah, I guess something along the lines of that."

That made sense to me. Her ability to dissect incomprehensibly complex situations hadn't changed, either.

"You must be right," I said.

Seconds later, the bald man left the aisle, leaving us alone with the bread and each other. I assumed he had been mentally preoccupied with his watermelons from the moment he walked into the aisle. He hadn't found the same level of interest in the bread that Amy did.

She had on a pair of dark blue shoes that I had never seen before. She also wore a familiar worn-out denim jacket that she had gotten before she and I began dating. I really loved that jacket. I would always let her know how nicely it fit, almost as if it had been made just for her.

She looked wonderful in her new shoes and old jacket.

On the jacket was a pin that said, in crudely written letters, “Consider Reading,” which made sense for her to have. She always loved reading when we were together and when she was alone.

“Are you still working with that publishing house?” I asked.

“Oh, no, not anymore.”

“You never seemed to be happy with them anyway.”

“Yeah.”

I remembered when she came over to tell me she got the job as an Assistant-Editor at Beverly Crane Publishing. She was still in college, studying Political Science, but was bored with it. She would always complain about this professor’s grammatical mistakes in his Power-Point presentations or that professor’s misuse of the Oxford comma in her tests. It drove her mad.

“Honey, honey, I got the job!” she said that afternoon in my apartment, just minutes after the termite guy left for the first time.

“That’s incredible!” I said, not knowing that she would never seem to be happy with them.

She gave me a hug and a big kiss on the cheek. We went out to Da Luca's, an Italian sub shop across the street, to celebrate. She ordered a Cobb chicken salad and deliberately ignored all of the sandwich options on the list. Our waitress opened one of the many windows in the shop to let some of the mid-late-afternoon breeze fill the air. She had a cast on her arm with several signatures, all in different colors and different levels of legibility. I figured mid-late-afternoon breezes helped her forget about her partially immobile arm. It seemed like a good coping mechanism to me. I considered asking her if she always opened the windows during this hour of the day, or if she only started doing it after she suffered her injury. It made me wonder if she'd still open windows when her arm healed.

“Someone wrote, ‘At least y-o-u-r not dead!’ on her arm,” Amy said.

“And it should be y-o-u-apostrophe-r-e.”

“Right!”

It was hard to find things that excited her as much as editing and correcting. When we went whale-watching in Maine, she experienced greater joy from spotting the improper use of a semi-colon on the ticket receipt than she did from seeing a baby and mother whale and three puffins. Although we hadn't been served by that point, I knew finding the mistake on the cast would satisfy her more than any Cobb chicken salad ever could.

I really did think it would be wonderful for her to work as an Assistant-Editor for Beverly Crane. But I was wrong. It wasn't.

They had her work primarily on children's books, which never stimulated her mind enough. When she complained about it to her higher-ups, they told her nothing could be done.

After all, she was merely an Assistant-Editor with an incomplete degree in Political Science. Her drive and passion meant little in the grand scheme of professional hierarchy.

“Have you found a new job?” I asked in the bread aisle.

“Yeah, I’m bartending at this bar in Holyoke. It’s just a temporary thing.”

Her eyes were on the ground. She had no interest in talking about her temporary bar job. It must not have been making her happy either.

“I’m sure you’ll find something better,” I said. “Better than children’s books or bars.”

She smiled and placed her hand gently on the bread, almost as if to reassure herself it was still there. Her confidence in her understanding of object-permanence had clearly decreased. It could have been a result of giving up on editing manuscripts for children’s books, or starting to bartend. Because I possessed no experience in either, I really had no way of knowing.

“I hope so. Maybe one day.”

“Maybe one day you’ll become a manager of the framing department at a Michael’s.”

“Oh, jeez, you’re just saying that.”

“I swear I’m not.”

I looked in her basket. She had three red nectarines underneath the bread and nothing else. No spreads, condiments, butters, anything. Just bread and three red nectarines.

On one of the days where she had gotten particularly upset with her editing, I drove her to Mount Greylock. We both figured being closer to the clouds and further away from Beverly Crane, at least for a few hours, would help her escape some anxieties and frustrations. When we got to be a few minutes away from the mountain, we stopped at a small market off the highway to buy drinks and food.

At the front of the shop was a display advertising a sale on nectarines. They were three for a dollar.

“Do you like nectarines?” Amy asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t think I’ve ever tried them,” I said.

“Oh, they’re really something else,” the woman working the register said. “I’ve been eating two a day for the past week and a half.”

Amy trusted the woman’s input and picked up three nectarines and placed them on the counter.

“That’ll be one dollar,” the woman said.

When we reached the top of Mount Greylock, Amy and I found a small rock to sit on and rest our legs. She took one of the nectarines out from the plastic bag and bit into it slowly. The 6:00 P.M. sunlight grazed against her skin as she chewed and took another bite.

I watched as she swallowed with unfiltered pleasure.

“They’re delicious,” she said. “Here.”

She handed me the nectarine and I bit into the bright yellow center. It tasted fresh and sweet and went down my throat gently as I sat next to her. I handed it back to her and could feel her soft fingers pressing against the tips of mine. She dug her teeth into the skin of the other side of the nectarine slowly and indulgently. In that moment, Beverly Crane had become a distant world; one replaced with decadent stone fruits and Mountain Ash trees.

Once she finished the fruit, she got up from the rock and threw the nectarine’s pit off the cliff as far she could. She walked back toward me, smiling, all of Western Massachusetts existing as a backdrop.

I handed her another nectarine and took one for myself. We didn't say anything to one another because we didn't need to. Her head rested against my shoulder as it got dark.

We never discussed nectarines after that night, so the mere presence of them in her basket rivaled the shock I experienced from the bread. I wonder if she was buying the fruits in hopes of them providing her comfort from some of the other dissatisfactions in her life.

Perhaps nectarines were her form of opening the window to feel the midafternoon breeze.

"Well, I think I'm gonna check out now," she said.

"Oh. I was about to as well," I said, which wasn't true. I quickly glanced down at my basket. Most of what I needed was missing, including the jarred pickle spears.

"We could check out together," she said.

"We could."

"Then let's."

We walked to one of the registers at the front of the store. We chose register three because there was only one other person in the line. He had short black hair that matched his black flannel shirt.

He had placed what seemed to be an endless amount of items on the register's conveyor belt, like pomegranates, Doritos, frozen chicken nuggets, avocados, big jugs of Gatorade, and countless others buried under one another. If the four watermelons seemed like a lot for one bald man, this amount of food seemed like an extreme profusion for one black-haired man.

Amy didn't even have room to put her nectarines or bread on the belt.

"What do you think he's getting all of this stuff for?" I asked.

She thought for a moment. "Maybe a party. Or maybe he has, like, seven kids."

“Do you think they all have black hair and wear black flannels?”

“Definitely.”

“Do you think this guy buys all of the same things every week? In his black flannel?”

“Maybe. I guess I’d assume so.”

The man’s endless array of items dwindled as the plastic bags in his cart piled up. A boy at the end of the register had been working diligently to bag the groceries as quickly as he could. It looked like he had already worked up a sweat. He clearly wasn’t accustomed to bagging this many items for a single customer.

Amy finally had enough space to place her bread and nectarines down, which meant that, invariably, she’d be checking out and leaving the store in a mere matter of minutes. I began to accept the fact that I’d never know why Amy was buying what she was buying.

I could already imagine the woman working the register handing Amy her receipt for her minimal yet mysterious purchase. I could already imagine no longer being next to her.

We had broken up on a picnic in February. We both had the day off, so we decided to eat some fruit together in the park. I had stolen a couple of small butterfly nets from Michael’s the night before because I knew that Amy really liked American Copper butterflies. I thought it’d be fun to try to catch them and eat strawberries with her for a few hours.

And, for a little while, we had a good time feeding each other strawberries and being too slow with our nets to make anything even close to a catch. But Amy seemed particularly distant, saying very little as the day went by.

“Are you having fun?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Is it too hot outside?”

“No.”

“Do the strawberries taste okay to you?”

“Yes.”

Although Amy had never really been the talkative type, the behavior made me nervous. I hoped, perhaps, she was simply lost in thought about Beverly Crane or going back to school. But, eventually, she lay herself down on the picnic blanket and, while looking up at the sky, told me it was over.

“Oh,” I said.

“Yeah. I don’t think I’m really right for you and all of that.”

“Oh,” I said again.

“I’m sorry. I really am. But, you know, you’re just such a curious, analytical, inquisitive kind of guy, and, well, I don’t think I am. I don’t want to waste your time being incapable of fulfilling all of your questions and wonders.”

That made sense to me.

We packed up the picnic basket and I threw the nets away in a nearby trashcan. She drove me home and when we pulled into my driveway, I said bye to her, not knowing I wouldn’t see her again until we were both at the Stop & Shop however many months later.

The bag boy finally finished the black-haired man’s batch of groceries, and was now placing Amy’s nectarines and bread into a single plastic bag. His job had suddenly, and thankfully, become much easier. He was much more gentle with Amy’s items than with the black-haired man’s.

“That’ll be \$6.61, Hon,” the cashier said.

She rummaged through her purse and handed the woman a ten-dollar bill. As soon as Amy received her change, she’d be out of my life again, enjoying her bread and nectarines elsewhere, either alone or with someone else I’d never meet.

“\$3.39, dear,” the cashier said.

Amy held out her hand to receive her money. She looked over at me, for a fraction of a second, until the bag boy said, “Here’s your items, Ma’am.”

The cashier began to scan the few things I had put down on the belt. Amy was standing at the end of the small checkout lane.

“It was nice bumping into you,” she said.

“Likewise,” I said.

“If I ever need something framed, I’m glad I now know who to call.”

All I could do was smile back at her. She walked toward the exit of the Stop & Shop, which was just a few feet away, with her bread and nectarines.

“She seems lovely,” the cashier said as we watched Amy leave.

I nodded, feeling the subtle afternoon-warmth enter the store from the glass door she had opened.

SMILING AT STRANGERS

We were at a diner and Melissa was picking at her salad and I was staring down at the plastic table.

“Maybe you shouldn’t look at it that way,” she said. She had said that before and would undoubtedly say it again.

“Maybe I shouldn’t, but I’m still going to,” I said.

“I wish you wouldn’t be so stubborn.”

I had left my fourth job interview in the past two weeks to meet her here for lunch. The interview hadn’t gone very well, and if the others were any indication of a pattern, this one wasn’t going to result in a callback either. Melissa was on her break, which would be ending in a matter of minutes.

“I’m not gonna get the job,” I said.

“Don’t be like that.”

“Sorry.”

She put her fork down and looked at me. She had worked every day this week, sometimes both jobs, and was scheduled to work every day next week, too.

“Look, I’m gonna— I gotta get back to work. Here,” she said, handing me a twenty-dollar bill to cover her salad and my sandwich.

“No, it’s fine, I can—”

“Please. Stop,” she said firmly.

I took the money and she got up from the table and left.

Melissa and I started living together back in April, about a week after her twenty-fourth birthday. I lost my job at AutoZone a few days later for telling my manager to fuck off. Melissa had been a substitute teacher at a couple of nearby middle schools, and since I had gotten fired picked up a “part-time” job bartending at Loosey’s. She often left in the early hours of the morning, only to return home for a nap on the couch or a quick lunch before leaving again until very late in the night. She had told me that I didn’t need to worry about staying up for her, and I usually didn’t, unless I was drunk, which hardly counted, really.

I sat at the table for a little while longer and thought about what I could do with the rest of my day. I thought about Melissa and the exchange we just had. It wasn’t very good. A lot of the conversations we had recently had been like this.

I had overheard one of Melissa’s phone calls with a friend of hers a couple of weeks ago.

“You really think he’s that bad? No, no, come on. He’s trying. How much longer can I put up with this? Put up with what? Oh . . . Well, I guess I see your point . . .”

It made me very upset. I went into the bathroom and looked into the mirror and punched it as hard as I could. The glass shattered and Melissa came running over.

“Jesus Christ, are you— why’d you do that?”

I wanted to tell her that her friends were all idiots, that they needed to mind their own business, but instead I said, “There was a big spider.”

“So you had to fucking punch the mirror?”

I saw her reflection in what was left in the mirror. Her blonde hair was parted down the middle and she had no makeup on. Her green eyes had grey bags under them. When we first started seeing each other, they didn’t.

“Sorry,” I said.

“You know *I* have to pay for this, right?”

“I’ll pay you back when I can.”

She left the bathroom and walked into our room and slammed the door. I left the house to get drunk with a friend because I figured that, more than anything else, would help make it feel easier.

I put the twenty down on the table and stepped outside. Across from the diner was a salon called Twine. A girl I used to date named Jen worked there. Or used to work there. I didn’t know if she still did. From where I stood I couldn’t see her in the salon, so maybe she got fired or quit for some reason that I’ll never know.

Jen and I used to fight a lot about small things. She liked sex with the lights on and I didn’t. She liked lighting candles at the dinner table and I didn’t. She liked pasta prepared al dente and I didn’t. Little stupid shit that added up.

I remembered the last fight very clearly.

She had lit a pomegranate candle in the bedroom and accidentally knocked it over while taking off her robe. It badly burned the sleeves of a stack of records that my dad had given me as a kid. It made me very mad so I kicked a hole in the wall before putting out the fire with my boot. She cried and told me she was sorry and I told her to leave. She said I was an insensitive asshole who never cared for her to begin with and I again told her to leave.

In a few ways Melissa was like Jen but for the most part they were very different. Melissa had blonde hair and usually looked down at her hands when she talked. When we watched scary movies she insisted on having two blankets because one sometimes wasn’t enough to cover her

eyes. She also liked to dance in our bedroom to Otis Redding cassettes while I tried to sleep. And she also loved me. Or at least said she did. I think she meant it. Jen had said that she loved al dente pasta, but never me.

I got into my car and headed to the liquor store to pick up a pack of PBRs to drink in the kitchen. Ray was working and he gave me a small nod as I passed the register. He was an older man, probably about sixty, who had white hair that reminded me of worn-out wire. He wore the same red and beige flannel shirt every day and was always behind the register when I came in. He liked to talk to me while I browsed the discount section of the store. A while back he had told me about how he won the lottery but lost it all to his wife who divorced him a few weeks after the fact. She moved to Los Angeles and he said he wrote to her from time to time but has yet to hear back. I asked him why he still writes to her but he couldn't give me an answer. He just rubbed his chin in a sort of solemn way without saying anything much. We never talked about her again.

“Hi Ray, how's it going?” I said. I put the PBRs down on the counter.

“It's going, it's going.”

“Yeah.”

“That'll be \$6.40, son.”

I took out my wallet and handed him seven of the last nine dollars I had.

“Bring that pretty girlfriend of yours here and next time it'll be \$5.40.”

I smiled.

“I'll bring Melissa here if you change that fucking shirt for once.”

He laughed and looked down at his shirt.

“Hey, no reason to change something that ain’t broke, son.”

The liquor store was in a small run-down plaza in Allston where every building was painted the same faded off-yellow. Each business had a generic red sign above the door. “Chinese Food,” “Nails,” “Appliances.” At the front of the plaza was a sweaty bald man apathetically twirling a large arrow for the “Technology” store. He twirled the sign with the same enthusiasm you’d expect from someone making roughly \$9.00 an hour to stand outside in the sun all day.

I had written a story once about a man who made a living by twirling arrows for different small businesses, mostly local cellphone repair shops. The only sex he had was paid for and he nicknamed his favorite hooker Denise. It made me wonder about this bald arrow-twirler’s sex life. I couldn’t see the front of him but judging from the back it was probably pretty nonexistent. I glanced down at the PBRs in my hand. He probably needed them more than I did.

Once I returned to Melissa and my apartment I took one of the beers from the cardboard container and put the rest down on our wooden kitchen table. I opened my laptop to edit and delete old drafts of stories I had abandoned. The first story I opened was about a man named Mr. Russo who worked for a towing company. He liked to be referred to as Mr. Russo by everyone, even people he met at parties or in grocery store aisles. I deleted it. The next one that I opened was about a woman who was in love with a woman she met at the bowling alley. I deleted it, too.

On the table sat a book of photos that Melissa and I took together while on our trip to Vancouver. I opened the book and flipped through photos of Melissa smiling and of the coastline and of Melissa smiling on the coastline. There was one photo of her outside of a bar wearing a

floral print dress. We had gotten into an argument about me flirting with our bartender and she stepped outside. She wasn't happy when I took the picture. You could tell in the photo, too.

"Why'd you put that one in the book?" she had asked the first time she saw it.

"I don't know," I said.

"I was so mad at you that night," she said with a big smile.

"What else is new?"

Suddenly the front door opened. It was Melissa. I closed the book and got up to see her. She rushed into the bathroom, shut the door, and turned the shower on. I knocked on the door but she didn't answer. Then I knocked harder.

"What!"

"Hi, Mel, it's me."

"Yeah, what? I have to rush over to Loosey's. I'm scheduled for six."

I took out my phone. It was already 5:15 P.M.

"Oh, I guess it's really nothing."

She didn't answer so I went back into the kitchen.

I found it sort of sad how distant I felt from Melissa in that moment, even though she was just down the hall from me. I supposed I really deserved the distance. For everything I had done and all of the things I forgot I did.

I think in the beginning of all of this Melissa was attracted to my problems. She had known beforehand that I struggled with maintaining relationships. She liked that I was temperamental, prone to quitting, and depressed about all of things that were out of my control.

I'm not completely sure why, but I guess, maybe, she interpreted it as an interesting challenge, something she could try to conquer or overcome or study.

Or maybe it was just love.

But, anyway, I think the romantic attributes that she attached to my shortcomings began to go away as we got deeper into our relationship. Melissa was kind and you could see it in the way that she gently took a glass out of the cabinet or watered a plant with a particular amount of care. You couldn't say the same thing about me, and I believe that started to slowly weigh down on her.

Once we started sleeping in the same bed every night together, I noticed that Melissa would always pay very close attention to my movements in the morning. She would watch over me as I adjusted my boxers or flipped over a pillow that I had between my legs. For the longest time I never understood why, but I realized that she wanted to see if I had changed from the night before. She was searching to see if the way in which I rubbed my eyes could tell her that I wasn't going to drink until 5 A.M. anymore, or if the way in which I cracked my knuckles would let her know that I would no longer scream at strangers for bumping into me.

After awhile, she stopped studying what I did. And, suddenly, the simple action of turning onto my side at 7 A.M. started to feel like performing a play to an empty theater. I didn't tell her any of this, because I didn't want her to know that I knew she had given up, and I guess more importantly, part of me didn't want to believe that she had given up.

At 5:23 P.M. the water turned off and the bathroom door opened. I listened as her footsteps trailed off into our bedroom. I walked inside to find her standing there, bare-assed, with small drops of water hugging the back of her thighs.

“Hi, Mel,” I said.

“Oh, hi” she said as she reached into her closet for her uniform.

“You look really pretty.”

“Come on, stop.”

I went over to put my hand on her shoulder but stopped myself from touching her. I couldn't touch her.

“Do you have any plans for tonight?” she asked while buttoning her shirt.

“Well, I'm gonna wait around here for a little bit longer to see if I get a call back from the interview. If I don't, I'll probably just invite Nick over or something.”

“And get drunk on the couch?”

“Something like that.”

She turned to me, put her hand on my arm for a fraction of a second, and began to walk toward the door.

“Hey, wait, Mel. Maybe I could come visit you at work. If you wanted.”

She seemed slightly taken aback by the suggestion but gave me an unsure half-smile.

“Well, yeah, I don't see why not. Our Happy Hour is at eight tonight.”

“I'll see you then.”

“See you,” she said.

She was out of the room moments after that.

I had never been to Loosey's before. I asked Nick to come with me, in case Melissa was busy actually working, but he got caught up with an old girlfriend of his. I took the bus

downtown alone as the last hour of sunlight disappeared. On the ride there I checked to see if I received any voicemails in regards to the interview, but found nothing.

Loosey's had a bright pink neon sign glowing at the top of the building. The door had a pink handle in the shape of an L and I pulled it open. The room was very open, with a few pink booths and grey tables sporadically scattered about. Photos of miscellaneous celebrities wearing all pink outfits filled the walls. Inside the bar were people, a lot of people, mostly in their twenties. Most of them were smiling or laughing over a joke or something their date had said. There was a blonde woman who was laughing a seductive, subtle kind of laugh and playing with her date's hand. She wore a light blue dress that matched her eyes and she seemed happy to be with her date.

Everyone, for the most part, seemed happy in that moment.

In the back of the room at the bar was Melissa. I had expected her, for whatever reason, to look somewhat miserable. But instead, like everyone else in front of the bar, she was smiling. She was talking to a man who was at the bar alone, perhaps waiting for a friend, or perhaps attempting to make new friends. Within a few seconds that man left and two other ones approached her for a drink.

Melissa smiled at the sight of them and listened to their orders and then assembled cocktails for them. Every couple of seconds she would look over her shoulder to laugh at something one of the men said. When her back was facing them, one of the men whispered something into the other man's ear. I figured it was about Melissa. Her hair was parted down the middle again. Maybe they were discussing that. Or the way her shirt hugged her waist. It must have been about her.

She then handed them the two drinks and the two men got up and approached my direction. They each had on black button-up shirts and shared the same height and skin tone. One had slicked back blonde hair and the other had slicked back black hair. I wanted to beat the shit out of both of them. They each had on a stereotypical smug smile. I figured that was the permanent look on their faces.

By the time the two men passed me I realized that Melissa had spotted me. The smile on her face, which was present around a multitude of strangers, became something else. Not necessarily a frown, but something like the look a mother gives to a child who has knocked over their cup of milk for the umpteenth time. It made me feel bad. It made me want to beat the shit out of the button-up boys. Instead I walked up to the bar.

“What can I get for you?”

“Surprise me,” I said. Her black shirt had a few stains from assorted liquids on it, but she didn’t seem concerned.

“Uh-huh,” she said as she turned away from me.

“How’s tonight been? Busy?”

“Yeah, I guess,” she said, still facing the other way. “It’s always packed in here. It gets hard to breathe sometimes.”

“Really? I dunno, you seemed to be having a decent time with those other guys.”

She turned back to me and rolled her eyes.

“I mean, if you’re referring to those last two . . . They were just, well, I don’t know, you saw them. “

“Right.”

“I’m just a piece of meat to them. But I have to be nice, you know, because they’re the kind that tips the best when you’re nice.”

“Yeah. Seems sort of demeaning.”

“Sort of?”

“Really demeaning,” I paused. “I’m sorry.” It felt like the fifteenth time in this day alone that I had said that to her.

Tom Tom Club’s “Genius of Love” played over the speakers. I looked over my shoulder and saw several couples dancing with one another. Two women, one in a red sweater, the other in a striped sweater, were poorly tangoing together. They were laughing hard as they fumbled in and out of each other’s arms. It had been a long time since I had seen Melissa laugh like that.

On one of our first dates together we went to a club called the Camino. We met up around 11 P.M. because she had a night class for her Astronomy major, which she soon after dropped. It was some shit basement club in Cambridge with neon lights and very inexpensive liquor. Melissa and I danced to house remixes of Whitney Houston songs. We both sweated from the heat of the room and she smiled at my lack of rhythm and wet t-shirt. It had gotten late and I was intoxicated, so I suggested sneaking onto the roof.

She followed behind me through the moving crowd and up to the fire escape. At the top of the steel stairs were two men kissing one another as cars passed by. Between the club music below and the city-sounds around us they hadn’t heard us. One man had his hand down the other’s pants.

Very drunk, I asked, “Hey, uh, could you guys get out of the way so we could get onto the roof?”

The man with his hand down the other's pants stared at me. He had crystal-blue bloodshot eyes. "Man, fuck off with that," he said. He went back to his kissing.

I spat at the man for not letting us on the roof. Melissa took me by the hand and pulled me away. I yelled some unkind words as we descended down the staircase that I don't remember and that they probably didn't hear. When we got to the ground near the entrance of the club Melissa started laughing. I didn't bother to ask why because it wasn't important. It wasn't important that we couldn't get on the roof. It just mattered that she was laughing at 2 A.M. with me. The two men in the fire escape immediately became a far-away, foggy memory.

She handed me the cocktail then touched my hand for a small moment. "Here you go," she said.

I cupped the drink with both of my hands. Another customer came up to the bar and Melissa began talking to her and making a drink for her. And then another customer. And then another two. And so on.

Melissa barely had time to look in my direction, much less speak to me. All I could do was watch as she gave a caring, inviting smile to everyone she encountered. Her green eyes softly glimmered under the pink neon lights of the bar as she poured alcohol for people she didn't know.

I felt a distance from her again, almost as if there was a thin layer of glass separating us from one another. It was almost hard to believe we weren't strangers with no shared past or memories. It was almost hard to believe that all of our morning conversations in bed, all of our afternoons in Boston, all of our evenings reading to one another, had even happened.

I didn't know what to do other than sit there and drink. I couldn't tell if the seemingly permanent smile she had on her face was falsified or sincere, if she enjoyed or hated being there.

At a certain point, a textbook handsome man approached the bar.

"Hi, what can I get for you?" Melissa asked.

"Just a Bud, if that's not too much trouble," he said. He had brown hair that went just past his ears and a tattoo of a spider web on the side of his neck. He wore a Motley Crüe shirt that was supposed to look vintage but was clearly some cheap reproduction of sorts. He appeared proud to be wearing it, probably because he thought it was actually old, or something along the lines of that.

"It's not too much trouble," she said.

She turned away to get the beer from one of the refrigerators behind the bar. I followed the man's eyes, which were clearly studying every part of Melissa. He had no idea that her boyfriend sat just a few feet away from him. I assumed that, even if he had known, he most likely wouldn't have cared.

Melissa twisted the cap off of the glass bottle then softly pushed it toward the man.

"It's five even," she said.

He placed a ten-dollar bill on the table.

"Here," he said. "Keep the change. My name is Cliff."

"Oh. Thanks. I'm Melissa."

"Melissa," he said back to her. I watched as he stared directly into her eyes. "I knew a Melissa once. Incredibly beautiful girl. Long legs and all."

Her eyes were on the counter while Cliff kept studying her.

“Nothing in comparison to you, though,” he said.

“Oh,” she said as she quickly glanced at me. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, of course.” He took a sip from his beer. “It’s not every day you see someone like you working behind the bar of a place like this.”

She didn’t say anything back. I kept my hands wrapped around my drink. It was apparent to me that Melissa had become nervous. Not necessarily because of Cliff’s advances, but because of what I would do about them.

“I’d love to see you, well, somewhere other than here sometime,” he said. “If you’re ever free.”

“That’s flattering, but I don’t know . . .”

He took another sip from his beer. “Anything I could say to change your mind? To make you know?”

“Hey, guy,” I said. “She’s not interested. Just leave her alone.”

Cliff looked over at me. His beer was in one hand, while his other was on the table. He wore a ring in the shape of a skull.

“Can I help you?” he said.

“Yes,” I went on. “By leaving her alone.”

“If she wanted me to leave her alone, she could tell me herself.”

Melissa took out a washcloth from underneath the counter and began to wipe down some of the glasses behind her, facing away from us.

“I just really think you should leave her alone,” I said.

Cliff could've kicked my ass if he wanted to. He wouldn't have to break a sweat to do so. His eyes drifted back toward her.

"Is that so?" he said. His fingers tapped on the counter.

"Yeah."

"Do you have a problem?" His eyes were now on me.

"Yes. Leave her alone, Cliff."

He kept his eyes on me while running his fingers through his hair. Then he sighed. "Hey, Melissa. I'll talk to you later. When this jackass isn't around." He put a small white card on the counter and stood up. "Here's my card."

He walked over to me and lightly patted my shoulder. "I'm sure I'll talk to you later, too, Bud."

I didn't say anything back. Melissa put down the washcloth and glasses. Cliff left.

"You didn't need to do that," she said quietly.

"I didn't know what else to do."

"You could have just kept your mouth shut. Or, maybe, for once, spoken kindly."

"I'm sorry."

"And he was right, you know. I could have just told him. I was going to, for that matter. And, God, I mean, you saw that guy. He could have killed you. I don't know why he didn't."

"I know. You're right."

Three women approached the bar.

“I’ll be with you guys in just a second,” Melissa said to them. The bags under her green eyes appeared more present than they had before. “I can’t talk about this right now. I’ll see you at home, okay?”

“Yeah. I was just leaving.”

I exited Loosey’s and leaned against one of the windows on the side of the building. I checked my phone again for a voicemail or missed call but still found nothing.

Under the stars I thought of Ray’s wife in Los Angeles, living a life completely separated from his, with different people, different weather, and different feelings. I wondered if it made her happy to walk out in the middle of the night and leave Massachusetts, liquor, and Ray’s one flannel shirt behind for endless money and palm trees.

I could almost see her now, asleep in bed, with a new love, listening to the radio play in the background as the Pacific Ocean waves softly break against the shore. On her desk are stacks of letters from Ray that she doesn’t have the heart to throw out. They remind her of times that, at a certain point, meant the world to her, but now hold a different value— the kind of value we assign to things that, somewhere along the way, we forgot how to properly love.

Through the opaque glass I could vaguely pick out Melissa’s silhouette amongst the dense crowd. Countless strangers had obstructed her face, green eyes, blonde hair, and waist, leaving me with nothing but a faint outline. For a moment I tried imagining her in Los Angeles, too, away from Loosey’s and broken mirrors, waking up in the morning to the sun painting stripes on her bed sheets through the blinds of the window. And next to her, no one.

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