

Retraumatization

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Nyctophobia

These days, you pass for male more often than not. Though your face is still round and soft-looking, the hair which grows in bushy, curly spurts down the sides of your cheeks declares a masculine presence that you lacked before you started taking testosterone. You started injecting the stuff--oily, viscous, pale yellow--in January of this year. It's late September now, a month before you'll turn twenty-two, and you're frequently surprised at how much time has passed since your first shot.

You do just fine in broad daylight. You see yourself in black glass windowpanes and your reflection makes you feel relieved instead of disgusted. You enjoy the space you inhabit. At night, it's a different story. Something else happens to you at nighttime: mostly, you feel like like a sheep in wolf's clothing. You see a stranger on the street and wonder if he can somehow tell that you weren't born male, that you aren't just a coward but a dickless one, too. Who the hell do you think you're fooling?

You've been afraid of public assault since you were young and squishy and vaguely traumatized by catching glimpses of the Michael Jackson trials on your mom's TV-- in other words, for as long as you can remember. You thought that taking testosterone and looking less female would force you to, well, man up, and stop thinking about things like that. But it didn't. Walking alone at night still makes you feel so scared that you can't breathe. The distant wail of a car-alarm makes the muscles in your shoulders coil up; a cyclist speeds past, his wheels clicking louder than the cicadas that call out in summertime, and the scent of his cologne lingers behind longer after he has gone past you. When you continue the trip home from your Monday night shift, you keep your footfall deliberately slow—see, you are trying to calm yourself down—until suddenly you can't stand the tension anymore.

Suddenly, you run: past the construction site, past the Methodist church, past the neighbor's unhappy dogs that constantly bark like they're infected with something, past the mailbox, past the door of the neighbor who once exposed himself to you. You were pre-T then, soft and stocky and even rounder-faced than you are now, on your way home from some Dungeons and Dragons meet-up. He stood on his porch, pale and catatonic looking, and it took your eyes a few seconds of tracking to realize that he was nude. You still don't know if he was drunk or mentally ill, or if he did that on purpose--if he saw you coming. When you bolted past him and the other apartments, finding yourself at your own door, your keys stuck in the lock for just a second too long.

Tonight, though, the door unlocks and swings open. You're too relieved to speak; the complex you live in is so old that your mother lived here when she went to school, and the locks are nearly non-functional. But then you can't get the key to come back out again. God damn it. What, does your apartment door hate you? Does it want you to get attacked? You pull and pull. It won't budge. You are nearing a state of tears and just when you think you'll have to call a locksmith, the key pops out with a wet, metallic sound. You slam the door shut before something can get you.

Finally alone and deadbolted away, you take stock of yourself. Your breathing is ragged and scarce. Your sides ache. Your lungs feel like two punctured balloons. The binder that you wear to keep your tits flat has begun to dig into your skin. You've got to stop running while wearing this thing; don't you remember how strenuous exercise and Underworks go together like toasters and bathtubs? You could really hurt yourself--or your chances for successful chest reconstruction surgery. When the former fails to scare you, the latter always works.

Your keys clatter noisily when you drop them into the the bat-shaped ceramic dish a few feet away from the door. The noise doesn't do much to calm your nerves, but the acrid scent of the heater turning on makes you feel safer. Collapsing into the teal wooden chair closest to the door, you belatedly realize that it's unlikely someone would have touched you--of course you realize this, you have to realize this--but then, there's that thing people say about old habits dying hard.

As you get out your laptop, hoping to chip away at the next omnipresent analysis essay or otherwise occupy yourself until your boyfriend returns from his own night shift, you wonder if this fear will always live with you, if you'll ever stop imagining that people see you as meat. You wonder because you know the fear isn't exactly practical anymore. After all, these days you pass for male more often than not.

Filler Text

1.

You are eighteen years old when you discover the game called *Alter Ego*. It's an autumn evening, probably nice out; meanwhile, you're curled up in the computer room as usual. Your long-suffering office chair creaks unpleasantly if you so much as breathe, and bits of foam poke out from under the pleather in places that chafe your elbows if you sit the wrong way.

The game opens with a weirdly nihilistic personality quiz that asks questions ranging from banal (do you often feel angry?) to bizarre (when you're alone in a room, do you feel the urge to scream?). Then the actual gameplay starts and you're presented with the opening scenario: you are in utero.

In this game, you get to pick your birth sex. You also pick whether to play nicely with other toddlers, whether to burn your hand on your dad's overturned iron, whether to trust the family dog or run away crying. It's like a choose-your-own adventure, only instead of high fantasy or Indiana Jones, it's just normal everyday stuff that happens to everybody. You're not sure who the target audience here is--there are other simulation games who do this sort of thing more competently, and with actual graphics instead of just text--but you're bored and it's there, so you keep clicking on things to see what they do.

You breeze through *Alter Ego*'s first chapter, infancy, although even this early on you find a few of the scenarios a bit morbid. Your player character almost dies drinking a bottle of chocolate-scented mystery liquid which turns out to be wood polish and you can't help but wonder why the author sat down and wrote a game that involved drinking wood polish. You stop playing when you reach a paywall: only \$4.50 to see what happens next! You think, no thanks. After all, you could poison yourself for free.

2.

You don't pick up the game again until over two years later. This time, it's nearing midnight and you're at your aunt's house, sitting on the couch in her son's game room with a scratchy blanket draped over your shoulders. Her two giant, sad-looking Labs eye you warily from the other side of the room, shying away from your laptop's bright screen. You play through the infancy chapter again, finding yourself interested enough to get past the paywall and type your credit card information into the website's hungry maw, all the while vaguely unsure of why you feel so compelled to keep playing. Maybe you're bored again. Maybe you're lonely. Either way, you press on.

Sometime during childhood, the game directs you to a stranger's truck. The game describes the man as friendly-looking. You have the option of running away or approaching him. So you approach. What's wrong with that? He seems approachable.

"I'm a policeman," he says. "I'm looking for your friend. Can you help me look for him?"

No one else in the house is awake. One of your aunt's dogs snores softly. Your heart feels less like an organ and more like a thing you swallowed, something foreign, a choking hazard. Somehow this feels a lot worse than wood polish. You click "no."

Oh, good. Your character runs inside, hugs his mom. For a second, in real life, you close your eyes, stop reading, inhale. You press your palms flat against the couch, trying to orient yourself, looking for a reminder that your character isn't you. Whatever fabric the couch is made of feels rough under your hands, like corduroy. It's nice.

Meanwhile, your in-game mom calls the police.

"Do you remember his license plate?" she asks. Shit, you didn't even notice he had a license plate. But subsequent replays will reveal that indeed, there was one: OBO-237. You click "no" again.

"Well, you're lucky you ran away," your fake-mom tells you. You're starting to feel a little dizzy now. Sometimes your eyes water when you stay up too late, and it's nearly 2:00 AM now. You click some button and read the last line of text, this time narration instead of dialogue.

Intellect increases five points. This man hurts children.

3.

The next night, still at your aunt's house, you end up replaying the game. This time you force yourself to click through and see what happens if you get in the guy's truck. To the author's credit, there is not actually a graphic scene about child molestation. Instead of "this man huts children," the flavor text reads:

You are kidnapped and eventually killed. This game is over.

You find yourself wishing he had just driven the car into a ditch: "eventually killed"? God, of course you know what he means by that: the author might as well have written child porn, it's that obvious. "Eventually" means you suffered first. It means he fucked you before he killed you.

Stop that. None of this is real, asshole. And anyway, the author doesn't say that's what happened, so what right do you have to be so worked up? It's ambiguous, right? Left to the imagination? It's whatever. It's blah. It's fine.

You feel so sick, you could cry. Instead, you quit playing.

4.

You used to be on your high school's yearbook staff. In your years there, you picked up a concept that has sort of haunted you ever since.

In graphic design there's something called *lorem ipsum*. You once used it when you were working on an issue of your school's newspaper, and none of the authors had turned in stories yet. Only you needed something to fill the space, since it would have looked weird with blank space there. Lorem ipsum is about seven paragraphs of Latin. It probably means something, but you don't know Latin, so you don't care about its literal translation. That's the beauty of the thing, it's filler text. It's just taking up space.

That's what *Alter Ego* did to you. "This man hurts children" has become your filler text. The phrase got inside you. You don't know why; you sure don't want it there, but there it is anyway.

5.

This time, you're freshly 21 years old. It's October and your head hurts, but you want to keep drinking anyway because it's Friday night and you and your boyfriend finally don't have anything else going on. So you're drinking--and not fun drinking, like knocking back sour-candy wine coolers with your friends, but the kind where you pour a lot of whiskey into a plastic cup and try vainly to mask the taste with half a bottle of flat cream soda: sad drinking, in other words. Sometimes you know you've poured too much liquor into your mixed drink of choice, but then you make yourself drink it anyway because it'd be a waste not to.

One night you're drinking and you leave your boyfriend on the couch, wandering into the bathroom to grab the sink, steady yourself. When you get there, you catch your reflection's eye in the mirror. God, your face looks fucked up. All of a sudden you feel very ashamed, and very frightened, and very tired. Your boyfriend eventually comes in when he hears you knock something over (shampoo bottle? shaving cream? hard to say) and finds you curled up in an ugly little ball, hugging your knees on top of your moldy terry-cloth bathmat.

"This man hurts children," you say. You don't know what the hell you're talking about, why you're talking about this, why it still bothers you so much. "He always does. He always will. I hate that."

You still do--still hate how powerless you can feel when you think about what people are capable of.

6.

Sometimes the phrase occurs to you out of nowhere and you break into a sweat. Like you're trying to go to sleep, and suddenly you freeze underneath the duvet cover. There's that lorem ipsum terror again. The thing you're most afraid of is that you're fixating on it for a reason. Because there's something it's taking the place of. Something bad, something intangible, something about a man who hurt children back when you were a child yourself.

But of course, you can't remember anything. That's why they call it filler text: just paste it in when you don't have something real.

7.

For what it's worth, you do eventually play *Alter Ego* one last time. You're still twenty-one, but it's May now; many months have passed since your horrible drunk episode. One evening when your boyfriend is working late, you find yourself parked on his fairly-broken futon with your laptop resting precariously on your thighs. *Alter Ego* is loaded up on your screen.

You aren't sure what made you want to play again, but you're alone and it's evening. In other words, the time you're most likely to freak yourself out. The air from your laptop burns the skin on your thighs--you really should get the fans checked out--and as you click you skip through birth, skip your infancy, skip everything that could matter just to arrive at the same awful moment. Once again your character is outside, playing alone. Once again, that fucker pulls up.

But this time you are ready. This time you highlight the text and paste it into a Word document, so that you'll have his license plate number. This time when your *Alter Ego* mother

asks if you got his license plate, you are prepared. OBO-237. And what do you know, the police actually get him. The game further rewards you by explicitly stating what it is he did: "The man is wanted for child-molesting and murder in three different states."

Somehow you didn't think they'd actually say it, but there it is. And, still alone and sitting on that broken futon, you can't help but think there's something necessary, cathartic even, in putting a name to what happened. Even though you're sure you already knew what happened, deep down. You always did.

Thank You, Thank You, Thank You

What I really want right now is to make Eric less mad at me, and so I want to tell him something cool and quirky, and so I tell him the first thing I can think of.

“Dish soap tastes floral,” I say. “Like the way lotion smells. You know. The fancy department store kind. Huckleberry breeze or cyanide appleseed, or whatever.”

I am sitting on his bed. The sheets are scratchy. The bedspread tossed into the corner, no doubt because one night he got too hot to stand the thing. To be on his turf like this isn't just bad luck, it's downright mortifying. I'm showing him my belly. Oof. I hope he'll give a pity laugh, but he doesn't, even though he normally would.

I suppose I deserve that. I expected that eventually he would find out how I've been abusing our kitchen sink, though I didn't picture the conversation going this bad this fast. In my head, the scene was always filmed before a live studio audience, with a fuzzy Lifetime movie filter and sad, sweeping music. “I don't understand. Why are you doing this?” he would ask, tears welling up in those anxious eyes of his. And I would say something elegant and sad-sounding, and he would embrace me, and it would be a Very Special Episode, and I would not be sitting in an ugly curled up heap on his bed feeling like I'm twelve years old again.

“You're going to fuck yourself up,” Eric says. He runs his hand in my hair, a gesture that might be intimate if the situation were different. Something awful is eating away at me, almost enough to make me genuinely nauseous. You'd think I had a real weak stomach, from how often I puke, but it's not true. I never do it on accident. The last time I got nauseous for real was in junior high. I had this boyfriend who liked to stick his hand down my pants while we watched movies on my mom's turquoise, dip-stained couch. And I felt so awful--plane crash, ringworm, wristcutter gutted--that I wanted to puke. So I did. And what do you know, I still do.

“Shut up, ugly,” I say. “You stupid whore.” Normally when I call him that, I’m just teasing. I never actually mean it. But today I can’t even muster the energy to sound facetious. It’s like eating a handful of packing peanuts: just doesn’t taste like anything. No substance, nothing. Accordingly, he doesn’t even flinch.

Eric stands from his bed, stretches his arms out behind him. He looks long and limber and thin.

“I’m not kidding, Ell,” he says. “You’ve got to cut this shit out for real.” Somehow I can hear his full spelling, Ell-not-L--he always spells it that way, in texts and in letters, and I’m pretty sure he’s had me saved as that in his phone since we were old enough to have phones. I guess that’s why it’s hard to take him seriously: I’ve known him since we were stupid babies, since before he got the sex-change, and although he passes for a born-that-way male quite fine, he still doesn’t unnerve me the way most men do. (And his hair is the color of a Froot Loop: washed-out lavender. What else is there to say?)

But a part of me cares what he thinks. I resolve to try.

“All right,” I say. I pull myself up. I feel like a puppet, only one that can control itself: I am the only person to pull these strings. “I’ll stop. For you.” And I’m not even being a liar this time: I really mean it, when I say it.

It so happens that I’m a very good sport about the whole thing. Better than I thought I’d be. Two weeks pass and I’m the picture of a saint: I scrub the bathroom, drop off my rent without him asking, even tidy up his room while he’s working the Applebee’s night shift. And I eat all my meals in front of him, portioned amounts, even though it makes me feel like the pudgiest peg in the Fisher-Price playset. But it makes him happy, so whatever.

What happens two weeks later is that ten o'clock on Friday night, I am watching the commercials in between fragments of *Cash Cab*. Eric comes in, wearing this outfit that'd look like shit on me, but he manages to pull off. Tight black shirt, tight black jeans, tight black boots. He must be aching.

"Wanna watch the Game Show Network?" I ask. When I look back at the TV, they're advertising catheters. The announcer promises that they're easy to install, though I notice he doesn't say anything about painless.

Eric barely looks at me over his phone.

"I'm meeting Lex at Boystown," he says, with a note of finality to his voice, as if that's supposed to explain everything.

"Cool. Who the hell is Lex?" I ask. Probably his latest fuck-friend. I consider making a nasty comment about how he's such a revolving door that our apartment might as well be Grand Central Station, but then I remember that I'm trying to be a saint and don't say anything at all.

"You've met him," Eric says. He does that thing where he feels for his wallet by slapping all his pockets, as if his wallet would start climbing out if he didn't. "He does burlesque."

I am reminded of a hulking, bearded hipster terror who wouldn't stop talking about how "progressive" this part of the city has gotten. Ah, yes. Lex.

"Have fun," is all I say back. I don't tell him, please don't bring Lex back here. I don't tell him, please don't make me talk to the guys you bang. I don't tell him, I am really worried about what random strange men are going to do to you. Because I think he finds it affirming, their attention. I don't want to ruin that. I don't.

Eric leaves, and I do what I always do when Eric leaves. I eat everything I can get my hands on.

Tonight it's bright, chewy Fruit-Roll-Ups, industrial packs of peanut butter crackers, a whole bag of Sunchips, Mystery Flavor Oreos right out of the sleeve--I don't even taste most of it, and I tell myself that I'll stop eating once this episode is over. Only after *Cash Cab* they show *Family Feud*, and *Family Feud* is the best one of all, so what choice do I have but sit and watch more, finishing the Oreos and moving onto the whole container of mango gelato that I know is Eric's favorite? I wonder if he bought it on purpose--you have to end on something cold, so that your throat will go numb. Who knows, maybe he knew I'd fuck it all up. It's not even like it'd be the first time.

The sad thing is that during commercials, when I head back over to that poor kitchen sink, I'm not even thinking of Eric. What I'm thinking is that I really knew what I was talking about: dish soap does taste floral. No matter how hard you scrub your hands, the taste of that shit will always stick to your skin. And you really do have to wash your hand before you stick your knuckle down your throat. Use scalding hot water. Scrub your hands until they're the color of Bubblicious. That raw kind of pink.

Now I'm thinking of Eric. It really is horrible that he has no idea. And that I'm doing this while he's out having fun. I am not worthy.

I turn off the faucet and grip the counter with my left hand. When I used to go to group therapy, there was this one twiggy anorexic chick--her name was Felicity or Felicia or something like that--who would always ask me, bug-eyed and appalled, if making myself throw up was hard. The truth is, it's not. When I get like this, I can barely keep my hand out of my throat. It's like it wants to be there. I didn't tell her that, though. Just like I didn't tell her that retching feels religious sometimes: every muscle in you working together for a higher cause.

He didn't catch me that time. It was too recent; I was too careful. I scoured that sink like I was angry at it. I chewed so much spearmint gum, I thought my jaw would fall off. I even bought him more gelato. Not that he would have noticed, but it was the polite thing to do.

But here's the thing about being a puker: you are playing a game you can never win.

It's maybe a month later when he catches me in the act. This time, I smell Eric before I hear him. I make fast work of removing my hand from my mouth.

I don't turn around, just inhale as deeply as I can. The air around him has already reached me: he smells like the walking distance bar, like he's lying to himself about where he went last night, like smoke and mirrors, and mostly smoke. I wipe off my mouth with my arm and look up from the sink. I can't help but notice he's wearing the clothes he went out to cruise in last time-- but no black, though the whole thing is just as tight. A crop of chest hair pokes out from his V-neck. That's new. I'm simultaneously proud and unsettled.

"Ell," he says. He sure does pack a lot of disappointment into that one little word. It feels less like my name and more like something he's calling me. If I didn't know better, I'd say he sounded bored. But he's looking at me so intensely with his Breakfast at Tiffany's eyes. They say in real life eyes aren't purple, but his are, and anyway, the thing about Eric is that he doesn't say anything if he doesn't care.

I so badly want that to make me feel better. It doesn't, but I sure do try for a second there.

"You look like a whore," I say back.

"I really thought you'd quit," Eric says. His voice cracks a little; I know he hates when that happens, but I almost find it endearing. I need to say something. What am I doing at the sink?

“Actually,” I say, and there are so many ways I want to finish that sentence. Actually, I feel really sick. Actually, I messed up again. Actually, I miss you.

“I’m pregnant.”

I’m not pregnant. I don’t even think I can get pregnant; my period stopped coming about a month ago. Why did I say that? God, I want to take that back. It’s the worst lie in the world: he’ll never buy it, no way.

His hand twitches. He’s holding a red party fuck-me cup and I wonder if he’s going to drop whatever he’s drinking all over the carpet. He doesn’t, though. Instead he lifts it to his mouth and takes a long, bewildered sip. Whatever he’s drinking, I hope it’s strong.

“I didn’t know you were seeing someone,” he says. He’s speaking carefully. Talking into that red cup. I almost can’t hear him, the liquid almost absorbs everything he’s saying. But if I strain myself, I can.

“Yeah, well.” That’s all I say. I don’t even bother to finish the thought. What is he going to do? I haven’t had a boyfriend since junior high, although he might not remember that far back and he certainly doesn’t know why. But maybe it’s not totally out of my range to go the one-night stand route--yeah, it’s trashy, but that probably wouldn’t stop me. It certainly doesn’t seem to stop him.

“Thank God you’re just knocked up,” he says. Has he really thought this through? Best case scenario I had a desperate bar-fuck because I was lonely; worst case scenario some guy held me down and made me. And Eric says, thank God.

I mean, I can’t exactly blame him. I did that to him. That’s all on me.

"I thought you were puking again," he says. "I'll drive you to the clinic. My treat."

For the first time in months he is wrapping his arms around me. Underneath the veneer of bar smoke is, faintly, the smell of cherry shampoo. If I didn't know better I'd think it was the same shit he used when we were kids.

I hold him back, as tight as I can, wondering if I'll be any better at keeping this lie up than I've been at all the others.

Eric's bedroom is warmer than mine even though we have the same thermostat, in the same apartment, in the same city, with the same climate. Even when I'm pissed at him I often slink into his room because it's less effort than pulling down one of the itchy satin-trimmed blankets from the top shelf of the linen closet and dragging it onto my bed.

"Need something?" he asks. He sounds so occupied that I half-wonder if he's got a guy in his room, but when I look I don't see anyone else and all my muscles unclench. He's got headphones plugged into one of those laptops you rent from the library, but when I get closer he takes an earbud out.

"No, I'm just cold," I say, sitting on his bed with my legs criss-crossed. I look down at my stomach and wish I could roll the fat off of my body like Play-Doh. No wonder he bought the pregnant thing.

"That's okay. I'm not doing anything." After a few minutes he closes the laptop and sets it down on the end table next to him. "Can I say something?"

“Anyone can say anything,” I say back. He takes his glasses off and rubs them on his shirt because he’s nervous; I can tell because his glasses aren’t dirty, they’re scratched, and you can’t un-scratch glasses lens by rubbing them on your shirt.

“I wanted you to know I was serious about the clinic,” he says. “I mean, I’ll really drive you. Get you an appointment and shit.”

“I’m not going to any clinic,” I say. Then I tell him I need a second opinion. He’s shocked at that, real shocked.

“I thought you wanted this thing taken care of,” he says, and I agree.

“Sure,” I say, “but there are other ways. Pills, for instance.”

“Yeah, but you don’t have any,” he says. He’s wrong. I do have pills, plenty of them, ones with girlish names like Prunalex and Equalactin, as well as their ugly sister: store brand Fiber Laxative Supplement capsules. But I know what he means.

Nearly two o’clock in the morning and I’m deliberating the pros and cons of Sprite and orange juice as emetics when Eric accosts me at the fridge. I put both of them back and wonder what the hell he’s doing up so late.

“About this second opinion,” he says, and internally I am screaming because for an air-headed twink, he sure is putting a lot of emotional effort into my bullshit pregnancy. I start to talk and he holds his hands up in front of himself, protesting. He smells like bathtub cleaner and buttercream frosting: I remember the sugar cookie vodka he bought himself last winter and

decide to bookmark this scent for future reference. Goodbye, Sprite and OJ: meet the new vomit queen.

“I know someone,” he says.

“Of course you do,” I say.

“He’s an ex-boyfriend,” he says. His eyes have this glint to them.

“Is that right,” I say. I don’t even ask it--there’s no uplift when I talk, just one flat line coming from my stomach and out my throat. I feel like I’m talking around a stomach-pump tube.

“Yeah, it’s Dean,” he says. “You remember Dean. Works at Lakeshore. You don’t mind him coming over, right? I mean, I know you want to explore your options.”

Dean has broad shoulders and an easygoing smile. GQ looks. A stand-up guy. He was once convicted of breaking and entering, but other than that he’s a real party animal. I’d rather cut off my arm with an axe than let him in my house.

There’s no way Eric’s not fucking with me. He’s playing one cruel game, that’s for sure. And one that he’s going to lose.

“Of course I don’t mind,” I say. I feel like I’m watching myself talk. “Yeah, we’ll make a day out of it. It’ll be this whole thing.”

I wanted a second opinion and I got one. Here in our living room is Eric’s ex-boyfriend, Dean, who works at a hospital not too far from our apartment. I really want to ask what kind of hospital hires felons, but Eric’s doing me a favor to hear him tell it.

Every few seconds I shut my eyes as tightly as possible, trying to trick my brain into thinking I'm somewhere else. But even if I can't see them, I hear them anyway. Eric tells Dean that it's very impressive how he's stayed at the medical center all this time, then repeats himself with a falter when Dean only grunts in response. When Dean does deign to talk, his voice has the consistency of gravel and I only pick up about every sixth word: purge, necrosis, carcinogen.

We all settle into place: Eric sits between Dean and me, which is good and bad. Good because I'd rather not touch Dean, bad because it allows Eric to ghost his fingertips over Dean's shoulder, laugh too loudly at his jokes. He's like this with all his exes. Eric couldn't slash and burn if he tried.

Eric holds himself like he's some socialite who dressed me up and took me in. I can't stand it. It's a dead ringer for our high school days. He gets this way around all the guys he dates, I've seen it. Then when it's just us, he slides into depression like it's the coziest bed in the world.

He looks at me now and his expression is sullen, hot. I wonder what his angle is. If there is an angle. God, I need to relax. Not everyone's as psycho as me.

Halfway through drinks—I don't partake, because I get horrible acid reflux when I drink, and also I don't want my fake baby to get fake fetal alcohol syndrome—Dean confesses that he's not actually a doctor.

"I work in the morgue," he says. "I don't really know anything about babies. I know a guy who can pull it out, though. He has a big tank of, what do you call it, nitrous oxide in his van. You won't feel anything. Let me give you my number."

"Laughing gas. I'm familiar," I say quickly. "Thanks, but I'll be okay."

They talk. They banter. At one point they make bedroom eyes and I consider just leaving, but it's my apartment too and why should I have to leave? I get the impression Eric wants me to go to my room, but I don't. It's my living room, too.

Sometime later Eric shows Dean to the door.

"I'll see you later," Dean says, clearly not to me. Eric closes the door and looks at me coldly.

"There," he says, and I can fill in the rest of the sentence: *are you happy, now?* If I felt like pushing my luck, I might tell him that Dean's clothes smelled like embalming fluid and that it made me feel some type of way given my condition. Instead of pushing my luck I just say the same thing back.

"There," I repeat. I don't understand how he can love people like that.

I am in my own cold bedroom a few hours after the ex-con has left our apartment and even though he didn't smell like anything I still feel like I need a shower, as if he's left a thick, greasy film all over my body. The inside of my duvet cover has migrated to one corner like a tumor, but I don't bother to reach my arm inside and fix it all up because I don't have the energy, and anyway I shouldn't move around so much, oh no, not with my condition, I shouldn't. Where the hell does he meet guys like that? I always ask these questions when Eric is gone, impossible ones. Where does he go? What does he do? Who with? Why? They're none of my business, but I ask anyway.

I can't sleep and feel stupid trying, so I make my way to his room. When I knock, the door gives way with little resistance. Shirts, pants, and boxers everywhere--I briefly wonder if he went out commando or if he's just a slob. The smell of cologne hangs in the air. It's as thick as popcorn butter.

Soon my mind is careening down the train tracks of a thought I'd rather not follow, but of course it's too late, and soon I can't stop thinking about the sex they're having: is he rough with Eric, did he hurt him, did he cover Eric's mouth with one of his big, square hands, make him lie real still, like one of the slabs? I would never let anyone touch me. I will never let anyone touch me.

People say, good sex leaves you breathless. I've never had good sex and I don't think I want to.

Most vodka you can't drink straight. Most eight-dollar vodka, you certainly can't drink straight. But I feel vindicated by his betrayal and hey, what do you know, the stuff really does taste like cookies. I allow myself a few indulgences: how dare he leave me, he never loved me, and all that. It's true, but crazy to actually say. Okay, Ellen, that's enough. No, really, that's enough.

Soon my head is heavy and wet. I expected that. I find myself crouched over the toilet in our shared bathroom--I actually do feel nauseous, so it's legitimate for once. Too much too fast. I stay there for a good five minutes. I think I could do it if I felt like it, but I'm out of the mood now. I'm both proud and angry at myself, an ouroboros of indecision. And mostly I wish I could keep people from leaving. Even my junior high boyfriend left eventually; I don't know that I

wanted him around, but I sure as hell didn't want him to leave. Freddy Fingers-Me was a real loser, but at least he liked me for a little while. I checked his Facebook once--he's married with kids. He went to a state college and majored in English. He's one normal fucker. I wonder if his wife knows what trash we used to be together.

After all, it's not like I ever stopped him.

I try to stand up, find I can't. So I curl up on the floor, hugging my knees as close as I can. I fall asleep there, my cheek pressed to the cold, dirty linoleum.

I am curled up like a dead roach, woken suddenly by the turn of Eric's key in the lock. He has one of the gas station bags on his arm. Red print on white plastic: thank you, thank you, thank you. Oh, he's alive. Alive and home and untouched by anything. Thank you, thank you, thank you. The noise it makes when he sets the bag down is somehow the loudest thing in the world: I am worried for my hearing. He crouches down in front of me.

"You made it home," I say. I try to touch his face, and he jerks away. "I thought you and Dean were gonna--"

"We needed more orange juice," he says. His eyes look red, but he doesn't smell like he's been smoking. I wonder if he's been crying but dismiss it immediately--he hasn't cried since before he started hormone therapy. Probably can't even do it anymore. His tear ducts must have turned to dust.

"Listen, I know I'm drunk," I say. "But I didn't throw up this time. See!" I make myself laugh. *Ha!* The noise doesn't really mean anything--it feels like something that came from

outside my body. Mostly I want him to laugh too, like little kids grinning gummy mouth-shapes so their moms will do it back. Then I realize--moms.

“This looks bad. I’m not pregnant,” I say quickly.

“No shit,” he says back. “Ellen, I have to be honest. You’re a fucking psycho.”

“And you’re supposed to be better? Inviting your creepy ex to come rough me up a little if I don’t behave?” I try to laugh again, but it comes out as more of a snarl. “I guess the hormones are working! Because, let me tell you, you’re acting just like a guy. I mean it.” Clueless and horrible. I could kill either one of us.

“Rough you up? What the hell are you talking about?” He looks confused and flustered. “Dean wouldn’t touch you. He did petty theft, he didn’t *rape* people.”

I finally laugh for real, a horrible sound that clatters like a mouthful of pennies.

“Yeah, all right,” I tell him, hoping he knows I don’t believe it.

The next morning my chest burns--I wish the heartburn were part of the lie too, but it’s not. The stillness in the apartment betrays that I am alone, which I can’t help but thank God for. For the first time in a while I’ve found that I really do not want to talk to Eric.

I locate my phone and find I wish I’d taken Dean’s number: not for him, but for his friend. Because god, there is a lot in me that I want taken out.

But while my phone is in my hand, I decide to dial Eric’s number. Now. Get it over with. So I scroll through the names in my phone. Eric is the only “E”. E for easy—to find in my

contacts, that is. I wander into my room, sit on the bed, and lean back against my pillows for a change.

The dial noise stops, so I know he picked up, even though he hasn't said anything yet. I feel better anyway, knowing he's still alive. He did come home, after all.

I start to say his name, but his pre-recorded voicemail message cuts me off, almost like the way people actually speak on the phone. I'm strangely used to it. That's how it is on the phone. There's always a little lag, one hot second where you both exist at the same time.

More Intimate Than I'd Care For

“Almost five hundred thousand people per year die from smoking,” I tell him. “In the U.S. alone.”

Thomas grins, but I can tell he's disappointed. I look him over, and you know what I think? No one should ever work food service. It ruins your life to see for yourself, behind the scenes, that the guy who puts pineapples on your pizza probably doesn't wash his hands after drying off his dick at the urinal. Or that when orders are slow, he runs off to smoke in the employees-only bathroom. Hardly anyone cares, though, least of all Thomas. He sneaks off more than anyone else who works here. More often than not, he talks me into coming with him. It might bother me more if we ever got orders, but we hardly ever do. Our store is in the middle of nowhere, and if I couldn't bike here, I wouldn't show up at all.

“You could have just said no,” Thomas says. He reaches for the carton sitting on the slightly damp counter and inquisitively takes out a cigarette, holding it, picking it up and setting it down quite a few times. The light from the windows high above the sink bounces off the latest of his gas-station lighters. It's red, almost translucent, and covered in stickers, my favorite of which depicts an alien smoking a joint.

For the fourth time since we came in here, I scan the ceiling for a camera. There's not one. Of course there isn't. For one thing, it's stupid to think they could put one up in the first place. They'd get sued if they tried.

Still, whenever I go too long without checking, I feel this pressure build up inside me, like a full-body migraine. The drive to check isn't just a want, it's a driving force, which is what I mean when I tell people that it hurts not to. It doesn't help that if there were cameras, we'd be screwed, both of us. I never smoke but I watch him do it. Plus, the employees' bathroom is pretty

small, so I'm sure the smell will get into everything, from my hair to my apron to my socks. You have to imagine that'd be more than enough if they wanted to get you for something.

I hate that I think about things like this. It's completely involuntary.

"But you know what? Good for you," Thomas says. I have to physically move my head away from the ceiling to look at him again. Something I always forget is that he's lopsided everywhere: one ear pierced, one tooth chipped, nose crooked like he got in a fight as a kid and never let it set correctly. He grins at me in this sort of manufactured way, almost like a wince, with barely any teeth showing. "It's a stupid habit. I don't know why I started."

When I nod at Thomas, it is deliberate. Not only do I understand—god, I understand—but I wonder if anyone else is even capable. Because I never know why I do anything: my memory from before I dropped out is as ground-up and gooey as the mechanically separated meat they use to make our frozen chicken nuggets. I used to think I was developing early Alzheimer's. Rare, but it happens. I would make myself remember three things that happened within the last month, just to prove I was okay. The trouble is that I remember my present life just fine: it's everything else I'm missing. Occasionally if I'm stressed, I make myself do the memory exercise anyway, even though it won't help.

(Saw a movie. Bought new non-slip sneakers. Mom's birthday party. Suddenly it's like I'm there, like I can taste the frosting from her birthday cake at the back of my throat: bright red and almost bitter, the fake grocery store shit that stains your teeth.)

The relief that comes when I finish reciting. God. How can something so stupid make me feel so much better? But at the same time, it's a shallow kind of relief, like the kind you feel after vomiting. Because the memory exercises only work for what's recent. It won't help me get back the stuff that's missing. Probably nothing will.

So I have the rituals. Not just for memory, for other things, too. They are exhausting and there are a lot of them. And when I'm not doing rituals, I'm wondering what horrible thing happened to make me like this. I don't think it's genetic because my family is full of normal people. Farmers, mostly. No history of suicide, no depression, nothing like that. I guess it could be a coincidence, but that seems unlikely. But thinking about it never gets me anywhere. It won't help me remember my childhood. It won't help with anything.

I think about this shit too much. Sometimes I'm late to work. More often, I just space out in front of the fryers. The first time Thomas caught me like that, I had to tell him what I'd been thinking of. It was another memory exercise. I expected him to laugh, but he was nice about it.

"Sure, it's weird," he said, "but there's worse ways to deal with stress." He gnawed unhappily on the side of his thumbnail. "If it feels good, who cares?"

Now, though, he's mostly quiet. Instead, he tells me he'll see me later, and unceremoniously shoves both the cigarette carton and the lighter into the pocket of his apron. Then he hops off the counter, his thick-soled boots slamming so hard onto the tiles that even after he's gone, I swear I can still hear it echo.

We take our next break just before four o'clock, and I'm glad to see that the sun is still out. It makes the whole parking lot shine brighter than a ball of aluminum foil, what with the cars and the gravel and all. Our store is in the center of a strip mall, so all the buildings are the uniform, tan and medium-height. It's nice because they're tall enough to keep the sun from being blinding, but short enough to keep from casting a shadow. So I can see everything: dust, stray pebbles, the couple of fat, malted-milk ball sparrows hopping nervously around the parking meters. Not for our store, of course (who'd pay to park here?) but for the nail salon next door.

“I changed my mind,” Thomas says, just before our break is about up. “I’m having one anyway.” Thomas lifts an imaginary cigarette to his mouth, then tries to pantomime lighting the end of it, in case I don’t know what he’s talking about. I don’t say anything, even while he sets to the work of getting the cigarette out and lighting it. I’m not as worried, at least, this time. After all, we’re outside. The only thing I do is walk around, put myself between him and the sparrows. Though it’s all for nothing. When Thomas exhales, he blows all the smoke in my face and gives me this goofy, wideset grin. Much more genuine than before. It’s so wide, in fact, that I can pick out his crown, which sticks out on account of how white it is compared to his actual teeth. I wonder if there’s anything I’ll be able to do about the smell, or if it’ll stick to me forever.

“Nice,” I say when I’m finished coughing. “Real nice. You’re such a burnout. You look like you snort acid.” I was hoping to hurt his feelings, but he actually cackles. His nose twitches when he laughs. I think it would be cute on a girl. Then again, I’ve never seen a girl laugh that hard.

“You’ve never done acid, then,” he says. “For one thing, you don’t snort it. It’s oral.” He half-heartedly pokes his tongue between his teeth, as if to demonstrate, but now I’m barely listening.

There was this anti-drug PSA we had to watch in high school, all of us huddled criss-cross-applesauce on the splotchy mauve carpet. You know how it is. This is what passes for a health class. Somebody wheeled in a projector, and everyone craned their necks to look up at the screen. Then the VHS started and we saw some guy take acid—I don’t remember how he administered it—and, in a matter of minutes, start tearing his skin off with his bare hands. Just like that. Not only on his arms, but on his face, too. He must have thought it was burning or melting or something.

I look over at Thomas and get the worst mental image of his skin sloughing off his slender frame, the way breaded chicken always falls apart on the bone. I scrunch my eyes as tight as I can, but it doesn't matter; in fact, the mental image is brighter now, clearer, bloodier. I have a choice. I have to let the thought fester or get rid of it, so I choose the second one. Counting back from serial sevens used to be hard, but now I've practically got them memorized. Start at one hundred, then ninety-three. Get all the way to two and you're golden. It's like a game. Sort of.

Thomas congratulates me when I'm finished. He's not smoking anymore. I must have missed him stub it out.

"Sevens again?" he asks.

"Yes." I'm not used to talking about it, but he says it so casually that I feel disarmed. I must have been muttering them.

"It's cool, dude," he says, running a hand over the stubble on his scalp. He's wrong. It's really not. As far as I'm concerned, there's nothing that could possibly be less cool. Junior year, my last year of high school, I had to read all of my assignments over seven times. Math sheets? Okay, fine. But in-class essays and timed tests? Nah. School's just not for me.

"Thanks," I say. It feels like I coughed the word up. I know I could just tell him to shut up, but I never want to upset him. I don't know what I'd do if he stopped talking to me. Probably go back to listening to NPR while I work the chicken wing station. Which wouldn't be apocalyptic. I'd get over it. But, anyway, once you start having friends you really don't want to go back to being alone.

When Thomas first started working here, he refused to wear his uniform. He still talks about it sometimes.

“No one used to give a shit,” he tells me, leaning against the freezer where we keep pre-made apple pies. “I could have showed up naked.”

“You probably could have,” I say. “You applied in August. That’s when the college kids leave for school.” It’s a yearly thing: they put in their two-weeks by the fifth, and drive back to school by the twentieth, no longer needing us. Mel, the manager, hired Thomas because she was desperate. I mean, I assume. God knows he couldn’t have passed the drug test.

“That’s inconsistent, though,” Thomas says. “Nobody ever sees me. I don’t work the counter. Who gives a damn what I wear?” He goes on to tell me that there are lots of things, in fact, that he doesn’t like to wear: socks, aprons, condoms, and plastic gloves (although Mel makes him wear the gloves, thank God.) I tell him I wish he wouldn’t talk about things like that, like the condoms.

“Oh, there’s no reason,” he says, answering a question I didn’t ask. “It just feels better not to.”

“And girls let you get away with that.”

“Sure, they do. Girls, guys, miscellaneous. Everyone.” He says so in the same couldn’t-be-assed tone he always speaks in, but there’s something else there: an edge, somehow. Too casual. I must have given him some kind of look, because he continues.

“I’m not a bugchaser, if that’s what you think. I’m real careful. Scout’s honor.” He holds up the dinky little two-finger salute. I feel like he’s telling a joke that I’m not in on.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. It’s none of my business who you sleep with.” It’s all I can do to keep from picturing Thomas’s condomless dick, but the mental image is more

funny than it is upsetting, and so I'm able to lose the thought with barely any effort at all. I look over at the screen and see that someone has placed an order for two apple pies, and what do you know, by the time they're in the fryer I'm already back in work-mode. If nothing else, it was a welcome distraction. The good kind of forgetting.

I get two days off per week. Which days depends on Mel's mood when she makes the schedule, although it hardly matters. In fact, I suspect I'm Mel's favorite because, without fail, I'm willing to work weekends. It's not like I have anything else going on. Regardless of what days I get off, most of the time I don't do anything important.

But today I ride my bike down to the library, right on the edge of town. The drivers aren't very careful, but I am. I'm always careful. I walk it across four-lane traffic, I always look out for mothers with their strollers, and I never ride on the shoulder even though it's technically a bike lane in my district. The only thing I don't like is wearing my helmet. It cuts off my peripherals, makes everything behind me into one big blind spot. But I still wear it, mostly because Mom would lose her shit if I died on her watch.

I lock my bike up against the rack and let myself in through the big glass doors. I try to let the door close as softly as possible so as not to make noise, but once I'm in I realize there's almost no point. Hardly anyone is here. I don't know if it's because people buy their books on Amazon now, or if it's because our library is kind of falling apart. Not in any serious way. You could still take your kids here. But the bookshelves are cracked, there's water stains on the ceiling, and I can't help thinking that the construction paper snowman that someone put up last December shouldn't have been placed so close to a window. His Sharpie-inked eyes are grey, and his body is yellowed and curled up at the end.

Somewhat comforting is the fact that I have a routine: I head straight to the back wall, with all the blocky Dell desktops lined up next to each other, and I look up how to get my GED. I overwhelm myself with how-to articles, sponsored content (you can get your GED if you just buy our shit!) and can-do stories from other reformed drop-outs. Their stories bother me because of how simple they are. Like, of course Sandra the teenage mom got a Pell Grant and went back to school. Greasy Pizza Hut cook with zero charisma who still lives with his mom? Seems significantly less heartwarming. Or likely.

Some days I spend hours looking into everything, figuring out what I'd have to do. Other times, like today, I get annoyed after ten minutes. But the worst days of all are when something else prompts me to quit for the day: serial sevens, memory routines, or anything else that forces me to remember why I dropped out in the first place.

I log off the computers and walk outside, to the benches scattered nearby the entrance. They're all clustered around a fountain that could really be something beautiful if anyone ever bothered to fill it. But it's been drained since July.

I sit on one of the benches. A group of little tan birds with broad wings are approaching the fountain, inquisitively, beakfirst. One hops up onto the ledge, craning its head down into the cavern. For one stupid second I wonder if they're confused. Do they know why it's empty? They aren't looking for water, are they? It's probably some moral failing of mine—the fact that I care more about birds than other high-school drop-outs. But realizing it's screwed up doesn't make it less true.

By the time I ride my bike home, it's always late enough that my mom is asleep.

It's a morning shift today: not opening, thank god, but close enough. I wander towards the back of the kitchen to start the daily grind. Check the till, attach my nametag, duck into a corner to check my phone.

"Dude, you are so fuckin' fired," Thomas says.

I look behind me. First over my left shoulder, then my right. It's dark enough back here that, for the few seconds where I don't recognize him, I almost think I'm looking at a demon. It takes a second for my eyes to adjust to him.

"Didn't know you worked today," I tell him. I slide my phone back into my left pocket. "I wanted to see if Mel sent our schedule, but she hasn't."

"A likely story, slacker." He opens the door to the freezer where the crusts are kept, as if he's going to take one out.

"It's not like there's anything else going on," I say. Briefly, I wonder if they'd fire me. Probably not. Not until the college kids come back, anyway.

(The thought is like swallowing a handful of fire ants. No. I have to keep this job.)

"Doesn't matter. If you have time to lean, you have time to clean." He's still holding the door open. Already his nose and cheeks look pinker from being exposed to the freezer air. It's different because it's a walk-in: the place where we keep apple pies and chicken wings is more like a fridge. This, though, is like a closet. I spent my first week here obsessed with the idea of getting locked in until I realized that it also unlocks from the inside.

But the way Thomas is. I can imagine any number of scenarios: he trips and breaks the lock off, a pie tin falls on his head and he passes out, he tries smoking there once and decides to live there.

I walk over and shut the freezer door.

“You’re letting the cold out,” I say. “Go wash dishes or something.”

Thomas looks at me contemptuously. I can’t tell if he believes me or not.

“You need a joint,” he says.

I laugh reflexively, almost monotone, a strange Speak-and-Spell type of noise that doesn’t actually sound happy at all. *Haaa.*

“I mean it! You have to relax sometime. I can’t even imagine being as stressed as you are. I’d die.”

“You know what? That’s fair. You’re probably right.” I feel a strange combination of excitement and nausea. I’ve never done anything worse than drink the dregs of my mom’s Chardonnay bottles when she doesn’t feel like throwing the rest out. And pot, to me, exists in this weird abstract pop-culture cloud. A fun party thing.

Thomas’s expression is one of shock, at first, but before I can track his movement he punches me hard in the arm, probably as hard as his scrawny upper-body can manage.

“Sick! We’ll go to the Goodson’s parking lot after work,” he says.

“Ow. What now?” That might have been too lackluster. I’m not sure I sold it. Still, I look at him expectantly. He glances down at my arm.

“Hope it won’t bruise,” he says. He shakes his head emphatically, like he wants to shake off the thought. “But seriously. Hardly no one goes by Goodson’s, and I’ll smoke you out in my car. You’ll have such a good time. You’ll love it.” Panic has me in a stranglehold. What do I tell him? *This is a shitty idea. I rode my bike here. C’mon, I don’t smoke, you know that.*

I can see his crown again, his smile is so wild. Oh boy.

So what do I tell him? I tell him, sure thing, can’t wait. I make my face smile-shaped. I spend the rest of work thinking of those stories where people get so high, they can’t remember

shit. Sometimes they can't even move. Like sleep paralysis that lasts for hours. I'm grateful for the people who come in for lunch. Food service can be mechanically comforting like that. When you've made one pizza, you've made them all.

Thomas drives a '96 black Chevy, covered as densely in stickers as his lighter. I don't have time to read all of them while I wait for him to clock out, although I'm definitely partial to the big, yellow one that says "Keepin' It Squatchy!" in blocky text, aligned next to the most crooked Sasquatch I've ever seen. Poor guy looks like he has scoliosis. That's messed up.

He comes out of the store in his street clothes, save for his work hat. I consider telling him he still has it on but decide against it. He wears it like some hipster who found it at a thrift store. You'd never suspect he actually worked there.

We get in the truck and everything's fine until he starts the car. He's scarily cold. Two hands gripped tight around the wheel. Eyes straight on the road. I guess that could be comforting in some cases, but it's so intense that I'm still bothered by it. And he doesn't talk the whole time. Won't say a word. He won't even play music. No radio. Nothing. I try to think of something to talk about, something to force a lull in the silence. But my social skills fail me. All we have to listen to is the rattling of the truck's big, rubber wheels against the gravel as we drive away from the parts of town with paved roads. The strip mall fades into the distance.

When he parks, it's late enough that I can't really see Goodson's up close. The roof looks tapered, and there's white panelling along the sides. It occurs to me that I have no clue what the hell Goodson's is. It could be some grandma's house. Or a donation center, like the one the Episcopal church used to run by the library before it shut down. Guilt creeps over me. I don't want to smoke pot by a church.

Thomas turns the key in the ignition, and the Chevy's rumbling comes to a full stop. He slumps back against the seat and lets out a long exhale through pursed lips. Closes his eyes for a second. And if he waited a second longer to reach up towards the dome light, twiddling with the switch until light flooded the Chevy, then who knows? I might have thought he was asleep, or dead from stress.

(The thought of his dead body comes too easily. It's not a graphic image so much as a persistent, throbbing phobia, though; I am able to count forwards from seven, like the times table, instead of the usual backwards from one-hundred routine. Images are always worse than thoughts. More persistent, too.)

He's still lying against the seat like that when I open my eyes. It occurs to me that he might be more stressed than I am. For once.

"We don't have to try it tonight," I say. My voice sounds awkward: god, it feels weird to talk after that sharp, quiet drive. His expression changes to one of confusion.

"What? No. Of course we will. I said we were gonna." He unbuckles his seatbelt. "I just suck at driving, that's all. Open the glove compartment." I'm expecting to find a giant, gallon sized bag of the little green nubbins I've seen on news stories and memes, but there's nothing inside besides a couple of napkins and a black pen.

"I think you forgot your shit. This is all that was in there, besides napkins," I say. I hold up the pen.

"Great, thanks," he says. He reaches forward and takes it from me. "Hang on, I gotta turn it on." He presses a button on the side of it. I lose track of how many times he clicks it after one or two.

“That’s how you smoke?” I ask. I can barely see him fiddling with it; the car is brighter, now, but the light can only do so much.

“Dude, did you think I kept a fucking gravity bong in my glove compartment?” He holds the pen up in the light so I can see it. I’m about to ask if it’s jammed, since nothing is happening. But then he holds the side of it again and hands it to me.

“You hold it like this,” he says. I try to hold it like a cigarette at first; he shakes his head just barely. “Here.” He reaches out and grabs my hand, shapes it differently around the pen. His hands are more calloused than I thought they’d be. God, I’m bad at this.

“Do I inhale here?” I guess I fiddled with it a little too much, because he tells me it’s upside down, and he has to adjust it in my hand again.

“Like that. So you’ll take a pull. Three seconds is good. Then you suck it all back in. Not too deep. Don’t wanna mess you up.” He smiles kindly at me. He doesn’t even look annoyed, which is so much worse. At least if he were pissed, I could understand that. “Think you got it?”

I put my mouth to the pen and press the side. I breathe in a little bit, and I think that maybe it tastes different, but I’m not sure. I can’t tell. I wonder if I’ll lose my mind. If I’ll forget more of my life. What if I wake up with amnesia? What if I forget my name? I put the pen down on the dash.

“I can’t do this.”

“Hey, you’re okay, it just takes practice.” Thomas picks up the pen again. “Need me to show you?”

“No, I mean I can’t do this. I’m bailing. Sorry.” I move to open the door, and he grabs my arm.

“Are you serious?” He still doesn’t sound angry. I wish he did. I wish he’d try to talk me into it, like on kids’ TV shows. I could feel like the good guy then. Instead, he just looks abandoned. “Is there, like, a reason, or.” He ends it there, bluntly, a non-question.

“Yeah. No. I don’t know. I feel like I don’t need a reason.”

“I should have known you’d do this.” He looks at the pen for a second and then, I think, powers it off. At the very least, he doesn’t smoke from it, either. Now nobody’s happy.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I don’t know why I’m asking. I know exactly what it means. I know I’m being irrational. I know my thoughts are getting the better of me. The danger isn’t real, but that panic sure is. “Look, I’m just trying to be careful.”

“Of course! Because that’s your whole deal, right, is being careful.” His hands are balled into pale-knuckled fists, bouncing restlessly on the tops of his skinny thighs, like a tic. “Listen. It doesn’t matter how fuckin’ careful you are. You can’t control anything. No one can.”

“I can’t believe you’re this pissed off that I won’t smoke weed with you.” I try to sound indignant. Really, I just want out of his car.

“You are so full of shit. You’re lying through your teeth. You know it’s not the weed. This is about the fact that you let shit get in your head, and you can’t drop it. You’re like, a slave to it. It’s sad—no, not even sad, it’s just crazy. Just straight up crazy.”

I open his car door.

“Yeah, it’s straight up crazy. But it can’t be crazier than going bareback and doing drugs all the time.”

I step out of his Chevy.

“I may be a dropout, but at least there’s hope for me. You? You’re a lost cause. You’re fucked.”

I close the door.

God, I could scream. Or kick his wheels. Or any number of stupid venting bullshit. I don't know whether to feel angry or guilty. Is it possible to feel both? I don't know anymore. This, frankly, is more emotion than I'm remotely comfortable with. If I were at work, I'd be the one volunteering to clean out the fryers right about now. Because, man, do I not want to think. Hell, I don't even feel all that upset about having to walk back to the store. It's got to be twenty degrees out, but screw it.

When I get there I unlock my bike, shove the key in my pocket, wrap my hands around the handles. The rubber is falling off of this damn thing. The only saving grace is my helmet, undisturbed. I guess someone could have taken it, but who would?

I have to ride against the wind to get back home. I'm so thankful that I could cry, even though if I did the tears would come out as ice cubes. By the time I let myself in the house, my face feels like a gargoyle's, and I don't defrost until the next morning.

When I wake up, I see that Mel has sent the schedule and I have four days off. I spend them on the scratchy sheets of my childhood bed, covered in sweat and pillballs by just day two. I eat, sort of, but barely sleep. I would like to make myself go to the library, but I feel too heavy. Sick, almost. Like getting the flu.

My obsessions pound in my head like I'm being hit with a hammer. I wish I had texted him to see if he got home safely. Instead, I am held hostage to my imagination. Mangled visions of his body atop the steering wheel lead to fantasies where he up and shoots himself because of what I said.

Other times, I think about him winning: getting me so stoned that I revert even further, like those stories you read about in religious self-help books. A part of me knows it's probably bullshit, but shit, who's to say I didn't smoke a joint in eighth grade? It could have gone horribly wrong. Who'd know better? Probably no one. Least of all me. He could have messed me up. That stupid piece of shit stoner.

But he's my best friend. Only friend. I don't know what to do.

My whole body aches when I get out of bed, but I'm not worried. I'm not going far. I yank open the drawer attached to my desk and palm around in the dark until I find the bottle of sleeping pills. It's a rare thing. Really. I pour four of them in my hand and swallow them dry, remembering too late the story I read on an airplane about a woman who ruined her throat from taking Advil that way. Microtears, the article called them. Bloody, open wounds.

When I fall back on my bed, onto the same sweaty patch I'd been in, the thoughts about Thomas tire themselves out, as they always do if I'm willing to wait long enough, and one thought recurs the most:

I could stop these obsessions if I remembered when they started.

Not exactly an epiphany, but more like a desperate itch. The stuff I can't access. I might as well be Miss Advil. Full of holes, and all.

The next time I'm on-duty is a Monday, and Thomas is off-duty. So it's not until that next Friday that we're scheduled for the same day.

I get there later than I'd like; if Mel asks, I'll tell her it's traffic, but the real reason is that I didn't want to come. I wonder if Thomas will tell me to eat shit and die. Probably not. He'll

probably just not talk to me. Yeah, I can imagine that: the big, empty store, full of silence, just like his car. It feels like my heart dropped into my stomach, right into the part with all the acid.

I spend a good five minutes fumbling with the keypad before I remember that it no longer works. No one's bothered to fix it. I push the door open with my shoulder, avoiding the stack of pizza delivery bags that the drivers keep in a pile in the corner. Some of the line cooks are standing around on their phones. It'd be my business if I were a manager, but even then I can't imagine I'd care.

Before I know it, I'm clocked in. I catch myself thinking something about muscle memory before I get annoyed at myself. More obsessing about memory. *That's cool. That's really done a lot for you, huh, asshole? Great strategy.*

I find Thomas easily. If the shaved head didn't do it, the circles under his eyes would have. Those things look painted on.

He's in the middle of folding a pizza box. I decide to wait til he's done, or until he looks up. I end up waiting through eight more boxes, which is as awkward as it sounds: all I can do is watch his hands. The nails are chewed down to stubs. The knuckles are knobby and freaky looking. He folds the boxes fast, though. Gotta give him that.

"You're getting good at this," I say. "You'll be manager for sure when Mel gets promoted to district. Or kills herself. Whichever comes first. I'm sorry, by the way."

"God, you're smooth," he says. "Save some pussy for the rest of us, why don't you." There's no humor in his voice, though. In fact, there isn't much of anything. He sounds like a text-to-speech program from Windows XP.

“Okay, that’s fair. Still, though. I was an asshole for no reason.” I pick up another sheet of cardboard and try to shape it into a box. “If one of us is the fuck-up, it’s not you.” Apparently, I do not know how to fold pizza boxes.

“Don’t talk about yourself like that.” He takes the half-shaped cardboard out of my hand and flawlessly folds it into the right shape without even looking at it. “It’s not a big deal. I thought we had plans, you weren’t up for it, that’s fine.”

I walk over to the storage cabinet and take the broom and dustpan out. “You shouldn’t forgive me that easily.” I angle the brush to get under the pizza box rack. There’s a roach way back there, in that hard to reach place. The process of getting it in the dustpan is harder than I thought it’d be.

“I haven’t,” Thomas says. The pizza box rack is almost full up of boxes, and I wonder what he’s going to do when he can’t squeeze another one in. “But trust me, this shit isn’t worth beating yourself up over.” He obviously doesn’t know how capable I am of beating myself up over shit: I imagine one of those Tom and Jerry gift boxes where a spring-loaded boxing glove hauls up and smacks you in the face. But it’s a nice gesture.

“We’ll have to try again sometime,” I say.

“Yeah. And next time, we’ll walk. I’m a shit driver.”

“Yeah, you mentioned.”

“Well, it’s true.” Thomas folds another box, looks up at the rack, which is completely packed with empty boxes. He looks down at the box before beginning a stack on the floor, right where the roach just was.

The fibers of Thomas's carpet poke into my forearms. If I lay there long enough, they will turn my arms pale-pink. The only noise in the room is from his ancient laptop, which wheezes like it has a respiratory problem and only stays together due to copious treatments of shiny black duct tape. Thomas told me once that he got in in junior high, that it's nine years old.

"Which is, like, sixty-five years old in computer-years," he said. "It's an old man. It knows more than I do."

"Of course it does. It's a computer." I was uncomfortable, then, with seeing Thomas outside of the kitchen. Let alone in his apartment, which unlike his car he actually smoked in for real, resulting in a perpetual cloud of pot smell that not even his strongest stick of incense could ever hope to overpower. It really is the kind of thing you get used to, though.

Today, though. Today, he comes back with a bag of salt and vinegar potato chips and a half-empty liter of store-brand cherry soda. He nudges the door behind him shut with his elbow.

"It's quiet in here," he says. "I said you could put on music."

"Your laptop is still booting up."

"Ah. Never mind. Didn't realize he was being difficult." I balk at that. Sit up real quick, no longer laying down.

"Thomas. It's a laptop. Don't call it a 'he'."

"What? Why not?" He laughs a little, but I can tell it's out of nervousness.

"Because it'll be so much worse when it dies on you." He doesn't say anything, and I keep talking to fill the silence. "I know how you are. It'll break your heart."

Thomas sits at his computer chair, a plastic purple swiveller with only two out of three functioning wheels. He puts a hand on the laptop.

“Nah, I don’t think so.” He lifts his left thumb to chew on the nail, then puts his hand down. “It’s different. When it’s a person. Okay, actually, never mind. I don’t want to bum you out.”

“What is it?” I stand, no longer wanting to look up at him like that. There’s nowhere else to sit in the room, anyway, unless you count his mini-fridge. Or the bed, which is more intimate than I’d care for.

“I was sixteen, you know? Parents wanted me to get my license. Now, I was fucking scared to drive, but Greg—Greg is my cousin—he said he’d come, too.” He stops all of a sudden. He looks like one of the rags we use to clean the counters. “And all I’m gonna say is that there’s a difference between letting your laptop die and letting.” He scrunches his eyes tight and balls his hands into the same anxious fists I saw way back in his car.

“Shit, you don’t have to say anything else. I’m sorry.”

“You’re good.” Thomas makes a gesture like he’s trying to dig his nails into his arm, only it barely leaves a mark. I imagine it probably hurt the stubs of his nails more than it did his arm. I walk over to him, reach out to touch him, then yank my hand back.

“You’re, uh. You’re okay, dude. It’s me. It’s Cody.” Thomas nods and opens his eyes again. He looks up at me from the office chair.

“I know. Thanks.” He makes a jittery, shuddery noise that I only belatedly realize is meant to be a laugh. “It’s not your fault. It’s mine. I just never think about it. Never. Why do you think I smoke so much? Fuck around with other guys?”

“You want a distraction,” I say. I shove my hands into my pockets (shit, that looks clinical) and take them out again. I fold them behind my back. Then in front of me. “I do it, too.

It probably won't make you feel any better, but I do it. That's what the sevens are. And the memory exercises."

"The sevens," he repeats. "Yeah, I forgot about that."

"I can't remember a thing before high school," I say. It is the first time I've told another person. Not even Mom knows. I'm surprised at how bare it sounds, almost naked. "You probably wish that were you. Shit, I—I didn't think."

"Of course I don't," Thomas says. He takes out a packet of cigarettes from his pocket, but he doesn't actually take a cigarette out. He fiddles with the box, staring at it instead of me. "Like, of course I wish I could forget. About Greg and all. I mean, can you imagine? But I wouldn't want to forget everything. Not like you have."

"Then which one is better?" I ask.

"Why does one have to be better? Why can't it all just be terrible?" He puts the cigarettes back in his pocket. "You know what's better? Never being fucked up in the first place. Normal people, period. All the people whose memories are perfectly fine and they never did anything worse than tackle kids on the playground. That's what's better."

In all honesty, the library has still seen better days. In fact, that's putting it mildly. The walls still smell like mildew, the carpets still ball up in places, and the snowman is just as sun-dried as he always was. Although I guess he's got better odds in sunlight than an actual snowman would.

The woman at the front desk calls my name.

"Nice to see you again," she says. "Got your usual spot all ready for you."

“Thank you very much,” I say. I know how stilted it sounds, but can’t help it. I guess I’m still caught off guard by people actually talking to me.

My usual spot, indeed, is all ready for me. From memory, I type the library login credentials. They’ve changed the wallpaper this month: it is a big pink sunset. Poor Thomas will be heartbroken. The last time I took him here, the screen displayed a trio of gourds, which Thomas cheerfully said looked “like cocks”. I take a picture of the screen with my phone for the next time I see him.

The GED research hasn’t been much easier. I didn’t expect that. I’m in the middle of reading an article of statistics about people who have to take the test more than once when the thought occurs to me: what if there’s a long passage? What if I have to read it seven times? What if I have a panic attack during the test? What makes me think I can do this?

“Shut up, Timmy,” I say. Thomas suggested I give that voice a name. Admittedly, “Timmy” is probably not the best thing I could have come up with. But hey, progress is progress. I can’t tell yet if it actually helps, but it seems to be better than obsessing about the obsessing.

I stay at the library until it’s 6:00 PM, when they close for the evening. I text Thomas: “library closed. about to head back.” Although he insists that my staying on his couch is the farthest thing from mooching, I still have plans to move out. Maybe once I’m eligible for jobs that need a GED.

I sit by the bench in front of the fountains. He texts back in about a minute: “i think i can handle a five min drive. omw.” After googling his last acronym since “on my way” wasn’t in my vocabulary, I put my phone in my pocket and try to spot birds hopping around the fountain, but I realize there aren’t any: they’re all gone. Instead of feeling sad, I’m proud of them. I’m glad they could move on.