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Author

Shoda, Taylor

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POOR CONNECTIONS

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BY

TAYLOR SHODA

ADVISOR: MONA SIMPSON

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ABSTRACT

POOR CONNECTIONS

BY TAYLOR SHODA

Poor Connections is a collection of short stories about women in the modern generation. These stories follow women at the onset of adulthood struggling with relationships, morality, and the rise of the digital world. “Do Good People Sleep at Night” follows a narrator’s obsessive desire to be a good person. In “She Has a Nice Personality,” a pair of longtime female friends confront the pressures of beauty as currency, the tension between them exploding in an unlikely conclusion. The penultimate story, “Retraction,” presents a relationship falling apart in the face of a life-changing decision. In “Going Nowhere,” the last story of the collection, the narrator reflects on the consequences of her internet addiction. These stories want to know how to hold on to each other in a lonely world.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Do Good People Sleep At Night?	4
She Has A Nice Personality	26
Retraction	52
Going Nowhere	70

Do Good People Sleep at Night?

Cezanne, sitting criss-cross on her bedroom floor with palms facing up on her knees. It is quiet. It is untouched morning. There is no care in the world. There is her even breath breathing easily. Breath in the head. Breath in the ears. Left to itself, it exhales four beats longer than it inhales, lungs emptying. Her right foot aches so she breathes into her foot. She imagines when it will be over, when she'll move her fingers and they'll be brand new, stretch out stiffly, then warm and pink. She pictures loved ones' faces in her mind's eye. She pictures Naomi. She envisions smiles on an open field. Smiles on the street. She says peace to you, peace to you, peace to you. Love, love, love. She tries to mean it. She thinks about what a person who actually means it thinks about when they think about love. She sees long hair and long nails—loved ones growing out their hair long and throwing their televisions off cliffs, washing their brains from screens and just breathing. She pictures roofs over heads. She pictures Naomi wrapped in a quilt napping on a sofa. It's all a dream.

Cezanne, sitting on her floor thinking about hair and sofas.

The timer sounds.

She opens her eyes slowly like it means something. She looks around her room with this pleasant face, like looking at a stranger who smiles back. Next to her is a white notebook with a green and blue hummingbird on the cover and a thin, black sharpie. She adds three tallies to the page, turns to the next, and adds three more.

Six times straying in her half-hour-long meditation is OK. The tallies for one session used to take up an entire page. She'd think about not drifting so much that she'd wade further and

further away until she'd deem that meditation unusable, and she'd have to try again at night before she went to bed. Google told her that starting is the hardest part and trying is the most important. Google is her lifeline. It tells her how she can be a better person. She wishes she had all the knowledge of Google so she really could throw her electronics off a cliff.

Cezanne flips to the back end of the notebook and dates the top of the page. She writes down three things that she is grateful for today (her house, the sun, the feeling that you've disappeared when sleeping; every day it's the same things). She writes down three things that she needs to work on:

1. Do not worry about your needs. Worry about others.
2. Do good things even if no one is watching.
3. Do not dwell on the past.

She has things to do today. Opportunities to be good. She takes a deep breath. She says, I'm safe, three times. She reminds herself that it's Wednesday, which means she's visiting Naomi after work. Every morning when she gets dressed, Cezanne tries to pick an outfit that seems approachable. She wants to be a magnet. She wants people to see her and approach her, maybe at the grocery store, *which brand of coffee should I try? I want to know what you think.*

She puts on a white shirt and blue jeans. She pulls her dark hair into a long, low ponytail. A woman does not quickly or easily convince herself that looks do not matter. Cezanne has worn makeup since she was a young teenager—concealer where her skin mottled in youthful redness, clear mascara that opened up her eyes, berry-tinted lip balm that rubbed off by the time she left the house. She'd quit most of the makeup because it felt like a frivolous purchase, though her mother wore makeup. Cezanne is still stuck on a particular piece of vanity though, the concealer,

and that of coloring her face to ghostlike whiteness. She hates her red cheeks and all that they stand for. But it's mostly the shame. It is enough to feel it, she doesn't need to look it too.

Early on, Cezanne learned that the body is a frightened place. Anne, her mother, told her that a woman must be cunning and clever, must be independent, but must be cautious, and must not need anyone. She told Cezanne that her body is all she had, so if she wanted to fill up on garbage TV and junk food and feed drugs and alcohol into her system, then there was a time and a place, but Woman was not the time nor the place. She told Cezanne that you must be good; you need to be a good person and you have to do what you have to do. She told Cezanne that it was almost impossible to be a good woman, and she probably wouldn't measure up, but it was her responsibility to do so anyway.

Anne said all of this with tight lips, the way she could say so much with a single look. She said she wouldn't tolerate a bad girl living under her roof. She said all of this on a nightly basis, the same words, kneeled beside Cezanne's bed, like prayer. Her mother would kiss her hair and then pull herself up, give Cezanne a long look, assessing the child she'd made and formed, then shut the bedroom door. The nightly talk was Cezanne's first routine.

When her mother wrote into her will that Cezanne could keep the house, the fine print was clear.

Anne's kitchen is warm hued. Yellow shelves house brassy orange and peach pink dishes, planked against deep red walls with gilded picture frames of mustard-seeded countrysides, tanned clay cottages, and straw hats and farmer overalls and brown boots. Anne had placed each painting with punishing precision. They were Cezanne's mother's mother's paintings from "the archive," Anne called it. Things from "the archive" were all the nice things in the house Cezanne

wasn't allowed to touch as a child. Along with goodness, Anne held propriety close to her heart and high above anything else. Anne said that her mother would have expected these paintings to hang on the wall until the walls themselves fell down, so that is exactly what they would do.

Young Cezanne stood next to her mother's long legs holding the torpedo level up towards Anne's hands. Anne's hair was thin, like jellyfish tentacles. Cezanne stared at it often. Cezanne was always staring at her mother. Anne wore slacks, even when she was home all day, and Cezanne stared at the threads fraying from the seam her mother would surely notice and cut by the end of the day. When Cezanne held the torpedo level up to the light, the kitchen expanded in the liquid of the vials.

Anne told her, "There is a certain way to do things. Things should be done right or not at all. Good things, at least." Cezanne would lift the level up to her mother's hand, then back down, hold the picture frame, then the other frame, then the level again, then wait, then up again, watching Anne place the level carefully atop the frame, staring at the bubble settling inside. Cezanne's shoulders were tender by the time she went to bed that night. In the midst of her aching—Cezanne wouldn't dare complain, but stretched her arms over and over again—her mother told her that good things ought to be felt.

This morning Cezanne stands at her sink filling up the French press while staring at the rising sun. Google says that if you stare at the sun in the morning, it aligns the circadian rhythm, and the circadian rhythm ensures fulfilling rest, and good sleep puts people in a good mood. Good mood people do good things. She wonders if good people drink coffee.

Cezanne wouldn't need coffee if she didn't have to go to work, but she makes up for it with the fact that her job does not make her much money. The Vedas taught her that you should

only make money from doing acts of grace because money is earned by expense of your energy. She borrowed a thick yellow book from the library about Vedic ways of life and, to her chagrin, merely skimmed the pages until she'd collected a healthy list of bullet points in her head. She consulted Google instead of finishing the book.

Cezanne had to quit her job at the luxury real estate investment agency because 15,000 square-foot houses are robbers of the earth. Dirty money is unimaginative. It's complicated, because Hinduism says something else about money, about wealth being good, but maybe she's not reading about that right. All the religions say different things and she wishes gods were more cut and dry. The gist seems to be that money is OK, but don't use money wrong. She wishes someone would just tell her what she's supposed to do. The easiest solution to avoid slip-ups in goodness was to quit her job and join a nonprofit. The nonprofit is called Home Sweet Solutions, and works with homeless shelters and the state to find housing for the unhoused. Cezanne found it on Google. The pay wasn't listed on the posting and was much lower than she expected when she landed the job.

Cezanne has enough money in Anne's home and assets that already burden her morality, but she hasn't yet figured out how she's supposed to be rich and happy and good all at the same time. There are just so many ways to acquire money, to use money, and to need it too.

When she thinks about it, Cezanne can't remember the last time she had a Good Time doing anything. She was always someone who got caught up in her own business, a little bit obsessive when she put her mind to something (third grade it was geodes, eighth it was the exact order of the periodic table of elements), and never had many friends that Anne approved of. Even so, Cezanne realized that most of her friends found her odd. There was a shift, maybe in middle

school, when everyone became more alike in one way or another, and Cezanne failed to fit. It happened as quick as a summer. She tried for a while, but the girls in her grade never allowed her to forget her strangeness (“Why do you wear those button shirts up to your neck every day? You look like my dad.”). Giving up on pursuing their friendship made Cezanne sigh with relief. This is something she’s been good at in her life, accepting solitude. Anne told her she was an awkward girl, a bit of a loner, but that she had time to shape up before she was on her own.

By the time Anne was dead, the few of Cezanne’s friends she’d somewhat kept had moved away. Calls came less. Texts, too. It just happens. She doesn’t need Good Times. This feels appropriate. She doesn’t know when, but at some point enjoying life started to equate to luxury, and Cezanne doesn’t do luxury. Her house and her clothes and her weekly groceries and her access to Google are enough luxury for a lifetime. She’s careful in this thought, abandoning happiness, because good people, in order to be good, should feel at the very least, neutral.

Cezanne eats an apple and a bowl of oatmeal for breakfast. The apple cutter slices the fruit into a perfect bloom on her plate. She downs two mason jars of water and a large, clay-blue mug of coffee. She does this standing up in front of the kitchen table that looks like a thick, flattened tree trunk and wooden chairs of the same tree, staring at the yard, the wind swaying the leaves, the clouds opening up to illuminate the lawn.

Without fail, every morning, after the first bite into her apple or her oatmeal, she feels sick at being fed while so many others are not and she can hardly go on. Anne hardly ate. Cezanne had never witnessed it. She imagined Anne biting into something, chewing it down, and it was like seeing your teacher at the grocery store. On days where the distress overwhelms her, Cezanne goes without anything and falls asleep in her bed at the end of the day and wakes up

feeling like she's repented. Other days she feels so bad that she wishes she wouldn't feel so bad, wishes she wouldn't care. But that makes her worse than the person who never thinks about starving people, so isn't knowingly doing any harm, right?

At some point, she figured, or perhaps someone told her, that if she can, she should. Sometimes she wishes she could broadcast herself on a worldwide screen and scream sorry again and again until turning blue in the face.

Cezanne walks to the nonprofit's rental space one hour and fifteen minutes away from Anne's house. She sold her car (pollution) and feels that particular pinch any time she needs to leave the city. Laziness is a luxury. Time, too.

The founder of the nonprofit, Evan, is a 4'10" retired traveling circus performer whose passion for helping the unhoused sprouted on the road. Her choice in homeless-adjacency with constant traveling—caravanning and camping along the side of the road with ten bodies packed into a bright yellow van—revealed itself a disturbing parallel to *actual* homelessness that drove Evan to quit the circus for good. She was an acrobat, and always has a hula hoop swinging around her waist, gyrating her hips while talking to the team.

Cezanne knows Evan is a good person. She looks like one. A mermaid-teal pixie cut, which she says cuts her shower time in half (water conservation), skin overwhelmed with freckles (time spent in the sun helping people; walking instead of driving), and an unnamable sense of approachable plainness, so unspectacular despite the brightness of her hair and the zest in the way she holds herself. She's camp-out-in-a-historical-tree-while-it's-bulldozed-under-your-feet kind of good. Spending time with Evan feels like drinking green juice in the morning.

Cezanne hopes it's true—the saying about becoming the people you spend time with.

“Hi, Evan.” Cezanne walks through the glass door to her desk. She’d observed at the real estate agency that people always addressed her with her name after every sentence then would look at her like, hey, I said your name, but she wasn’t sure why. She thinks they all read the same tip online about how to be a people-pleaser and now everyone goes around saying each other’s names all of the time. Cezanne tried to read Malcolm Gladwell and Dale Carnegie but she thought people would find her out if she started implementing all of their tricks. Fake good. Like plastic wine glasses. Her mother would say that a man’s version of good was not the type of good to strive for. She would say it was different for women, and be angry that Cezanne couldn’t figure that out on her own.

The office always smells like patchouli and freshly printed paper. The company is paperless, so it must be lingering from a previous renter, but they do burn a lot of incense. Cezanne has never asked what incense is made of. It looks like the residue of something. She assumes its moral properties are good, or at best neutral, or else Evan wouldn’t supply it. She plans to Google it when she has a moment. The office is minimalistic. Desks and chairs are simple and white, IKEA-type building blocks furniture. The walls are covered in the team members’ artwork. Paintings with limbs tangled around other limbs and scrunched noses and puckered lips camouflaged between. They have revolutionary titles like “The Enemy” and “Where Does Freedom Live?” From Google, someone said that art can make a person good. Evan saw her staring at them one day and said that if you get far enough away, or close enough, anything can become art. Cezanne didn’t know what to say. She doesn’t think about art much.

“Hey, girl. You look good today.” Evan looks up from her desk and smiles. Effortless. Cezanne could dream. Cezanne watches Evan in her periphery while staring down at her desk.

Anne would slap her wrist, tell her it was rude to not look people in the eye. She would say Cezanne was such an awkward girl, ask, how did that happen?

Evan is a fountain of compliments. She's never surprised at someone's "cute outfit" or "to die for makeup," but she says these compliments like she's never known beauty before. She's a little bit of magic, natural, *real* magic. Being good seems like magic to Cezanne. Like card trick magic. A trade. It requires practice.

Cezanne wishes sometimes that she could burn down the nonprofit's building, or maybe steal all of the funds, so she could see how Evan would react. So they could sit down and talk to each other, warm, about what the next steps would be. How do good people react in bad times? If she got found out, would Evan let her keep the money? Cezanne knows a good person doesn't have these kinds of thoughts. She knows that to be good you have to get rid of the bad, which means that every good transformation requires a little bit of destruction. How does a good person know when they've gone too far? Or does being a good person mean finding out how far you're willing to go?

"You look good too," Cezanne says back. Evan smiles at the tablet in her hand.

Cezanne's role at the nonprofit is to consult with property managers about possible homes for the people living in the shelters. Once a person is housed, for the first few months Cezanne is supposed to make sure bills are paid on time and that no one is going to swoop in and swipe the property from underneath their noses. Evan introduced the phrase to Cezanne—home equity theft—what Cezanne's previous company, Perez & Co. Real Estate Investments, had been committing. Cezanne pictured the real estate agency's website, her name and photo on the "Our Team" page. She planned to Google it later to see if her photo was still on the website. She'd left

that job out of her resume when she interviewed with Evan, though Evan didn't look at it anyway. She told Cezanne she hired by "vibe." She told Cezanne she had good vibes, she thought. When Cezanne first started, Evan told her that she wouldn't believe the number of companies that were itching to steal people's houses. Throw people onto the streets. Rob them. Her tirades reminded Cezanne of Anne—a controlled anger concentrated in a stern facial expression, a graveness. Cezanne wondered how Evan could care about something so much that she devoted her entire life to it. Cezanne tried to care, she did, but she couldn't tell when she was *really* caring, or just forcing it. Evan told her it was absolutely disgusting what these companies did. She said these people were the absolute scum of the earth. They didn't care who they hurt or where those people ended up.

"Can you believe it?" Evan had asked.

But good people do not lie. Cezanne stayed quiet.

Some days Cezanne goes with the rest of the team to the shelters to deliver goods and supplies. Evan says work shouldn't be alienating. They should all do a little bit of everything. Evan had Cezanne read a PDF of Marxist essays as part of the onboarding process. It went over her head, but it's under her belt, so there's that.

Today is an administrative day which means no outreach or visitation. Cezanne is thankful. Guilt is tenured in her mind.

"God, look at this." Evan shows Cezanne an article about a celebrity from an online magazine on her tablet. "A ten million dollar home as a 'vacation property.' Does anyone actually need *two* houses?"

Cezanne's mother's house is in the west side of town drenched in marble, in fountains, in polished light poles, and staircases leading up to every front door. The streets are quiet and lawns manicured. She could lick her sidewalk. The house is the vortex of her anxiety. The house is actually Cezanne's mother's mother's house, and what does that mean? She doesn't know if good people are allowed to own things. She doesn't know if her small piece of wealth, if she were to throw it away, would recycle to the right people. If the time comes when she has to sell the house, that'll be OK. She has her body, which she could say she owns, and she's making it good. This much Cezanne knows is allowed and is encouraged. She wishes she could flush away everything else and just worry about her body and making it good. She wants to apologize to everyone she's ever met. It always comes back to that. Is that how it works?

The rest of the team trickles in. Cezanne is always early since she leaves extra time for her walk. She likes the first fifteen minutes before anyone shows up when Evan tells her about things like the ten million dollar house. The team eats lunch together at the back patio of the rental space, sitting on the grass on extra quilts Evan and the team made for one of the first initiatives when she started the nonprofit. Everyone talks about the earth and the next generation, and Cezanne is a fly on the wall. They talk about trading in their iPhones for rudimentary versions that don't access social media. They talk about Simone Weil and martyrdom. They talk about maybe having a potluck for lunch on Friday. Cezanne knows if she says something it could come out wrong, and no amount of meditation and soup kitchen shifts rids herself of the spiraling suffering of non-retractable words. It only takes one slip-up. Cezanne's mother would applaud this sort of measuredness. She'd say a good woman is selective with her tongue.

No one stays at the office after four o'clock. It's part of Evan's approach to detoxifying work culture. Cezanne wonders how early nights help the unhoused. Sometimes good people do good things for people who need help and she doesn't see the effect. Evan says they're planting seeds. Planting seeds and watering the roots for the next generation to harvest. Cezanne asked her, "What about the people on the planet right now?" Evan told her to have some imagination.

As Cezanne packs up her things, Evan asks, "Going to see Naomi?" She must appear jolted, because then Evan says, "It's Wednesday. I thought you mentioned something about Wednesdays and a woman named Naomi." Right, Cezanne thinks. Good people remember details about each other and bring them up later.

"I am. Just the usual haul. Groceries and water. Maybe a book." Cezanne has to repeat this twice for Evan to hear, who leans her head closer to pick up on Cezanne's low voice. Then Cezanne heads to the door, pulse spasming. She doesn't like to talk about Naomi. She remembers bringing her up to Evan at the job interview a couple of months ago. She remembers feeling like she needed Good Person Ammo to secure her position here. It left a bad taste in her mouth now, using Naomi like a pawn for herself. Is it that way? It got convoluted quickly: the bad used for the good, for the good of the bad, for the good.

"You're sweet," Evan says. "Have a nice rest of your day."

If Cezanne ran at Evan in fierce attack, body slammed her against a desk, would Evan fight back?

Cezanne shakes her head and hums, "Thanks, you too."

In her head: peace to you, peace to you, peace to you. Love, love, love.

She walks to the grocery store closest to Naomi. She picks up a few cans of tuna with pull tab tops, two jars of apple sauce, a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter, and three gallon-sized water bottles. She grabs a dark blue dime novel from the rotating rack by the registers and a King Size Milky Way bar. The receipt reads \$31.33.

This Wednesday routine is carried by different air. Cezanne wards off the threatening feeling of elevation as she walks. What's any good about a person recognizing how good they're being? Anne would tell her that a girl should not react to every shaking of her soul.

Naomi is sat up against a wall, asleep, her back curved like a budded flower angling itself towards the sunlight. Her hair is long and thick, tied back at the indent of her neck. She looks like a nice, approachable woman. She looks like someone's mom, someone's favorite aunt, or someone's weekly coffee date. Well she could look like these people, but Cezanne knows she doesn't. Wishful thinking has never done her any good. "Manifesting" has only ever produced momentary relief from the ugly she's always cowering from.

Cezanne imagines that when Naomi used to go to the grocery store, everyone would see her and ask her what brand of coffee they should try. She imagines that people could feel Naomi's warmth from a mile away. It's the look in her smile: unassuming, unbothered.

The cardboard sign leaned against her body reads, "I need a little help please."

Cezanne's timely visit is purposeful. She sets down the bags of goods in Naomi's shopping cart nestled behind her in the dip of the wall, the closest wheel resting under the gray blanket draped around Naomi's body. Up close, Naomi's skin has new spots of sun. Cezanne looks down each side of the street for witnesses, then snaps her head back to Naomi, smiling, aching. Naomi never wakes up anymore when Cezanne visits. The first few times Cezanne and

Naomi would chat, but Naomi sleeps more often than not. In the past Naomi'd ask Cezanne what new reality TV shows were on. She said she had only been out here for a little while, which Cezanne knew already, and that the first thing she would do after finding herself a place was buy a TV. She'd told Cezanne about her old house, and Cezanne's heart dropped to her stomach, engorged with stomach acid into a sticky, flaming, heap of meaty mucus.

Cezanne behaved poorly around Naomi. She couldn't help the grimace on her face, the pity leaking out in her expression. Naomi would tell her to knock it off. But sometimes instead, Naomi'd just say, "thank you" to Cezanne's "sorry" and "I wish I could do more." Cezanne knew that it wasn't this way. She knew when people said "sorry" you didn't have to say, "oh, don't be," but she wishes Naomi would, again and again.

Eventually Cezanne figured out the time of day that Naomi took her naps. Then she started only visiting during that time. Naomi has relocated five times to Cezanne's count. Cezanne finds her every time. Sort of by accident. The third time Cezanne lost her, she thought it was the Vedas telling her to let go. God saying, "You're forgiven." And as soon as she'd tried to listen, there Naomi was, outside the restaurant Cezanne wanted to try, outside the gym Cezanne received a coupon for, outside the grocery store Cezanne only shops at for her guilty junk food and cheap packets of ramen, Naomi sat against the wall, "I need a little help please."

She had an aching feeling this place wasn't meant for her.

—

At work the next day Cezanne arrives too early. She walked quickly to work with a travel coffee thermos and burned her hand when the coffee overflowed. Evan isn't inside and the office is dark. Around the back of the building there is a door that overnight custodial staff leave open

through the early morning. Cezanne doesn't know how to acknowledge the staff. She tends to mumble hello in a way that comes out as a hum.

Cezanne leaves the lights off when she enters the office and sits at her desk. She switches on her computer and stares at the rainbow letters on Google's homepage. She eyes the open tabs at the top of the screen and spots "Perez & Co. Real Estate Investments." She'd forgotten to quit the tab the day before when she'd checked the "Our Team" page, where, sure enough, she found her photo smiling back at her. It'd only been a couple of months, Cezanne reasoned, and hopefully they'd update the page soon and remove her.

There's a click at the door and Evan walks in.

"Oh? Hi, Cezanne," she says. She scans the office and Cezanne shoots out of her seat. She'd only been early to the office one other time on a day when Evan was away at a conference.

"Sorry, the door was open in the back so I just..." Cezanne points behind her and sits back down. She looks at the screen, her eyes in the photo, then switches to a different tab.

"Oh," Evan says. Cezanne hadn't fathomed the possibility that Evan didn't trust her, but here they were. Evan walks up to Cezanne's desk and sits at the chair across from her.

"I was working late last night at home," Evan says. "I'm exhausted."

Cezanne nods. The two of them had never gotten personal, not for lack of trying on Evan's part. Evan made an effort with each employee, but Cezanne, of course, wasn't reciprocal in the exchange. Cezanne understands that good people ought to connect with others, but she can't bear the thought of Evan thinking poorly of her if she knew who Cezanne really was.

"I was looking through these documents Damien somehow got access to last night. I don't even want to know what possibly illegal methods he used to get them—I mean I don't

know if it was illegal—but he got us a list of companies that had committed home equity theft. Well they'd bought the properties from the state auctions. Some of them even seized properties themselves. The luxury ones.”

Cezanne's stomach drops.

“And I mean, it's great. Now with the names we can actually get started on going after each company individually. It's a major breakthrough. Between the state auction records of the seized properties and this list, we're in a really good spot.” Evan stands up and walks to her desk. She grabs her hula hoop and loops it over her head.

Good people tell the truth. Good people forgive others.

“Hey,” Evan starts, “I want to tell you something.” Cezanne stares at the hoop blurred in purple and white swirling around Evan's waist.

“Oh, okay.”

Where do good people put their eyes when they can't bear to look?

Cezanne instead bounces her glance around the room catching the painting on the wall of a house on fire, the crosswalk outside the office, the sun reflecting off the glass of the building across the street, beaming onto the floor by her feet.

“I just want you to know that I think what you're doing is really good. Being here and all.” Evan stops the hula hoop and holds it in her fist, chipped turquoise nails matching her hair. “And, it's okay, you know? You can tell me anything. I'm not judging you.”

“I really appreciate that, Evan.”

“You could've told me, Cezanne, is what I'm trying to say.”

Cezanne takes a deep breath. She remembers when Anne ripped a poster off of Cezanne's bedroom wall to reveal the doodles Cezanne had penned on the paint underneath.

"Told you?" Cezanne asks. Anne told her to knock that dumb look off of her face. Told Cezanne she didn't raise a liar. Told her to take responsibility for her actions.

"Perez & Co.," Evan says, hula hoop back around her waist. The spin of the hoop bends the shape like candy rope.

"You're different now. You realized your wrongs. It's fine." Evan's face, like Anne's, testing, patient. "You should take the day off, I think. It's good to have days off. Work shouldn't be your life. It's good."

"No, I—"

"It's okay, Cezanne. You don't look good. It's okay," Evan says.

—

Cezanne, sitting at her tree trunk kitchen table reading the news on her phone. The windows closed and the blinds shut. The yellow light overhead a flaxen moon. She's easily upset by the things she reads so she goes through each article sipping a glass of red wine. Two glasses deep, eventually the headlines are just words. Can good people enjoy luxury in moderation? Where would all the wine go otherwise?

Anne drank wine. Anne drank too much wine. Anne called it boring, her wine problem. Before she died, and when Cezanne was old enough to understand, Cezanne told her mother that everyone had their things. In Anne's last days their dynamic shifted. Less of Anne telling Cezanne how good she needed to be and more of Anne regaling Cezanne on her own goodness escapades. The trips to Africa, the yearnings to join the Peace Corps, the donations, the food

pantries. Anne's insecurities exposed by illness felt existing, like the core of the earth, and had finally met the trigger that brought those feelings to the surface. Everything made sense. The rocking chair regrets came all at once: she wished she'd donated more of her time (food and money, well there was always more of that), she wished she'd reached out to her own mother more often, she wished she'd spent less time caring what other people thought, she wished, maybe, that she might have been a different mother. Anne wore a sky-blue nightgown in her last days. She looked like a different person.

Cezanne, drunk and fresh out of the shower, towel wrapped tightly around her body as she dots face cream into her skin, sends Evan a text that reads, *I'm so sorry, Evan. I wasn't trying to hide anything. I hope I can still work with you. I love this job.*

Her phone lights up with an alert, but it isn't Evan. The screen displays the Venmo account Cezanne made for Naomi several visits back. Naomi had told her that no one carries cash anymore, so Cezanne created an account for her and wrote down the username on the back of Naomi's cardboard sign. Now every once in a while she'll receive a payment with a caption, "food" or "donation" or "here ya go!" She tries to transfer the cash out as soon as she receives it to give to Naomi, but she hates looking through the page, hates seeing the occasional caption only reading "help." Hates, for some reason, the profile pictures of the random people sending Naomi money. Wonders if they think they are committing a radical act of goodness when they send an unhoused woman five dollars. Wonders where they live. Wonders if she can track their phone numbers or emails or home addresses from their Venmo accounts. Wonders what she would do with that information. Wonders if they have families. Makes a fake social media profile to stalk all of the names that show up on Naomi's Venmo page and finds out where they work,

what they do on the weekends, who they spend their time with, what kind of car they drive.

Wonders if they're regulars at a coffee shop. Wonders how often they give money to people on the street. Wonders if Naomi is ever anyone's "aha" moment. Wonders that if there needs to be someone to turn a bad person good, to make a bad person realize they need to be good, if that person for them is Naomi. Wonders if bad things have to happen for good things to happen.

Wonders how God, or whoever, chooses. Wonders about karma. Wonders why only good things are good, and if bad things can sometimes be good too.

Cezanne, asleep, lying in clean sheets while her phone lights up next to her head with an email.

Cezanne, up early, sitting on a patio chair in her backyard with the morning sun warming her face. The contours of her knees distract her fingertips. When she finishes the meditation, she marks fourteen tallies in her notebook. She'd gotten to ten, then was distracted trying to keep count. Not too good. She wishes quantifying goodness could be this simple, if not so deterring.

Rex, her ex-boss at Perez & Co., needs her to send a confirmation email about a property listing she'd done research for before she left the company. He'd emailed her last night at three a.m., a malignant and cold email that ignored all respect for sleep. He was sorry for reaching out like this, it's been so long, but business is business. Cezanne had checked her phone at three a.m. and felt the effects of that misgiving this morning, fourteen tallies full. Part of being good means forgiving yourself. But sometimes Cezanne wishes instead that she could separate and chuck off the part of herself that had received Rex's voice and unearthed mountains and drained oceans to fulfill his every request. In her mind, what she did for a living was separate than who she was

and what she cared about. Cezanne at work. Cezanne at home. Cezanne, Anne's daughter. Cezanne, Naomi's friend.

Cezanne had picked a side, the good side, on the inside. She'd joined the nonprofit. She'd wiped her past clean. She didn't tell Evan because that wasn't who she was anymore. She tells herself intentions matter. She thinks, shouldn't I get to explain myself, even if it seems like I'm doing a bad thing? Shouldn't people listen?

She stands up from the patio chair and walks to the lawn. She lies down and turns her cheek so the blades of grass prick her ear. The yard is silent. She looks up at the sun, feels warm. She crosses her arms over her chest as if in a coffin.

Number 3: Do not dwell on the past.

Cezanne rattles her arms and rattles her legs so she feels as though something is shaking inside of her. She slams her fists into the ground, up to the sky, then back down into the ground until the sides of her hands pulse in numbness and turn red, imprinted by the impressions of the grass. Her mind holds a memory, a photo, of a one-story house with a sparse lawn, a wraparound porch, and a chipped ivory gate surrounding it. She imagines Naomi checking the mail, Naomi sitting on that front porch, Naomi watering the plants out front. Naomi's creaseless forehead and tranquil stroll leaving the house and coming back home each day.

Cezanne throws a temper tantrum. She whines and bleats. She is a pig in a slaughterhouse. Something she got from her mother: the way her frustrations vocalize and physicalize like a child. At any moment, "it's not fair!" may fly out of her mouth. Her fists tingle at each impact into the ground. She grunts to feel the burn in her throat, each throttle in her neck sparing no effort to thrash the infectious thoughts out of her system.

Do good people need other people to talk to? Do good people go to the doctor? Do good people have nice mornings? Do good people feel bad sometimes? Do good people feel bad all of the time? Do good people make a chief discovery at work about a homeowner's premium lot location and its unpaid taxes, report it to their boss, get promoted, steal a woman's home, and not die trying? Do good people read the name "Naomi Bosch" and forget there is a face behind the name? Do good people refuse to close their eyes? Do good people think they're part of the problem? Do good people have to be good to themselves?

—

Cezanne, sitting on the sidewalk outside her mother's house with her knees jammed into her chest. Sitting on the earth, barebones. Sitting on Naomi's five o'clock nap.

Cezanne, leaving this planet, looking for one where this woman is good. Leaving this brittle, neglected ground, looking for room to stretch.

Cezanne, picturing Naomi's 5x5 space on the sidewalk rupturing and uprooting, eager plants underneath vying for sun, vines slithering out in the cracks of the walls, seeds germinating and flowers sprouting, hanging over her head. Apples and tangerines and nectarines shooting out of the cement, corn cobs materializing underneath her feet. New, soft dirt like a cushion underneath tired knees.

Picturing Naomi with shiny skin and braided hair, brushing her teeth, washing her hands. Picturing Naomi at home, a TV, lug the TVs up from over the cliff, yes, five TVs, long hair, food, sheets, sleep. Picturing Naomi breathing. Picturing Naomi holding Cezanne's hands saying, "don't cry."

Picturing Naomi outside on the sidewalk in the bitter January with fingers like chipped icy bark, crunching underneath mindless feet.

Cezanne, whispering to herself as the sun pounds heat waves across the asphalt, “This isn’t how it’s supposed to be.” Whispering, “I want to be good.” Whispering as the tree leaves renew in the drink of the rays, “Tell me how.”

Cezanne, picturing Anne in the sky-blue nightgown, “Tell me how.”

She Has A Nice Personality

I know some people in the industry who want to pay me to let them take pictures of me naked.

They say I have good body-face proportion.

I'd done something like that before on my own, but stopped. Lea had caught me.

She told me I hadn't been paying the full rent—she'd given me a fake number a few hundred dollars less than it actually was because she knew I didn't really have it like that. She said, "As your roommate, I need you to pay me the rent. But as your best friend, I don't want you doing weird stuff to get money." Then she said I didn't need to pay her back, something she loved saying, something only rich people could say. I told her that was ridiculous. I'd pay.

I'd been posting photos online to a site called BankedBabes. I put in the Google search bar, "make money with nudes" and clicked on the third result from the top; I didn't want anything too popular at the risk of someone I know finding it. Then I'd Googled, "how to take the best nudes," which yielded information about wet hair and downward angles. The articles always ended on some new-age sanctimonious girl-power spew about positive self-talk and the importance of safety. I just wanted to make some easy money.

BankedBabes was pink and girlish with polkadots, so you could imagine the clientele and their expectations. Most users wanted my face in the picture, even with the feet pics, an angle that forced me to contort my neck and torso so that my chin rested in the crevice created by pushing my knees together and unnaturally flexing my ankles so the entire bottoms of my feet were centered in the photo. But then I'd get a message like, *where boobs?* so I'd lock my ankles, spread my knees apart so my cleavage displayed itself like a crack in a wall, tilt my head

sideways to rest my cheek on my shoulder, and while impossibly tangled like a pile of ropes, somehow I had to think, *sexy, sexy, sexy, be sexy, sexy, sexy*, and then also actually look sexy. Showing my face in the photos was originally off limits, but then I thought, *maybe just the lips*, and the numbers went up, so I did the nose and my cheeks too, and the numbers went higher, and I thought, *no one's ever gonna see this*.

Selling my body wasn't the first option, but it was the only thing I could do quickly enough to pay Lea. Tips from the restaurant only covered the fake rent. I'd made over \$100 within the first week on BankedBabes. After I adjusted the settings on my account to allow users to submit requests for what they wanted to see, the money flooded in. The realization that men, many, many, men, looked at my body, studied my body, liked my body, liked it so much that they threw money at it, chiming and hungry, gave me a rush.

The rush was quickly squashed when Lea opened my door and found me sprawled on my bedroom floor posed semi-nude in front of my phone that was carefully perched atop a stack of old yearbooks and propped up by a bobblehead. She did this giggle-snort thing, and her hand flew over her mouth, and and then she shut the door. She laughed at everything.

"You're being a bad friend," I said. I'd thrown on a T-shirt and strutted out of my room.

"What?" Lea was on the sofa with her phone in her hands. Her icy blond hair was in a tight bun at the back of her head. Her lips were smooth, curled with knowing. She was pale but had soft, pink cheeks that made her look warm. She always tried. She always looked good. Good in the way that she didn't look like she tried. Normally I'd find fault with this, the voice inside confirming that yes, women looking good all of the time is actually quite anti-feminist, and Lea,

who are you always getting so made up for anyway? But it's the kind of argument I only get to have in my head.

"Well, first, you didn't knock." I stood awkwardly to the right and behind her. She had to turn all the way around to see me.

"That's my bad, okay. My bad. I obviously didn't think *that's* what I'd be walking into, so." She tapped her phone. She locked it. She smiled all in the eyes.

"You can't—" I rolled my eyes. I felt like a child. "You can't laugh at people when they're naked."

She laughed. "I know, I know. It's my bad, really. I didn't realize. Who's the guy?"

I got frigid then. I was a good liar but didn't like keeping up fake stories with Lea. I told her that it really was none of her business.

She wrinkled her forehead with her mouth open. She'd found me out, maybe.

Then, "Okay, girl. Whatever."

She was being toxically chill. We used to make fun of those kinds of people. Why was making a fuss so uncool? Why was it "making a fuss" to want to know things?

These industry people are different, though. I imagine Lea would take to them much differently than my online endeavors. Industry people are coveted to a girl like Lea.

Like this one guy, Paul, said he had a premonition about me, that we were working together on this project, and yeah, it was nude, well, partially nude, but it was very tasteful. He said all this while pressing his fingers into his temples, and I'd said, "is this how you get all the girls?" and he looked at me like a big kid looks at a slightly younger kid, shook his head, and told me his vision. I'd then asked about the money, of course. He'd said not to worry about it, as

in, trust me, I guess. There was no reason to trust him—a stranger—we’d only met each other because Lea dragged me along to these artist events. Rich people connections. Lea’s parents are art dealers. They’re more like socialites. Paul and I kept locking eyes, but really I couldn’t stop staring at his facial hair. His beard was like a bushy strap desperately trying to correct a receding chin with a dotted mustache patchy right above the lip.

When he approached, the gesture established in me some sort of romantic currency—Paul, with his tight shoulders like he’d fall apart bone by bone if he unclenched his body, a slim waist accentuated by his black long-sleeve shirt, hips that he alternated his weight on, with his overgrown fingernails on hands that did more talking than his mouth—was exactly the kind of man I attracted. But it was nice to have someone staring at me instead of Lea for a change, even if I was certain Paul wasn’t attracted to me. Something about the look; it wasn’t attraction, but some weird other intrigue, like I was a three-headed-something.

His voice was higher pitched and gentler than I’d imagined in my head. He showed me some of his work on his phone, spare hand flailing like putty.

It was all nude women.

Paul and I parted ways. I was staring at the back of his head, fuzzy dark brown, and asked Lea who he was.

“Paul Bowen. He’s a big deal, I guess. Maybe adjacent to a big deal.” Lea told me he owned a couple of galleries and an *insane* penthouse downtown. “He’s totally boring in my opinion, but maybe that’s just because he’s asked literally every girl I know to pose for him and I still haven’t gotten the call. I mean I’ve worked with some *big* people. I have a modeling

portfolio. It's not like I need him. I just don't get it," Lea said behind my ear. She towered over me in heels. She sipped down the last of her wine then gave me the eyes.

"Oh," I said back. My body blazed with achievement.

"Whatever. Whatever because do you know what my new philosophy is?" Lea turned to me, her lips just barely lifted from the rim of the glass. She asked me like I should know, and maybe I should've. I called Lea my best friend. I shook my head. Then she said, "My philosophy is to like," she looked up at the ceiling, high above our heads with geometric white slats, then widened her eyes, "just not care. Just not care about anything." She nodded in resolution.

I showed up at Paul's. I was desperate. I was eating too much fast food and couldn't keep up with my lifestyle anymore. I was working at the restaurant, yes, but it was the slow season, and maybe I was dropping shifts here and there, but I was over it. Jobs like that do that to you. I was shopping a bit, yes, but I'd always shopped. It wasn't something I could keep track of without grueling attention. The days of phoning home for extra cash were long gone. And even if my parents agreed to help out, I knew digging myself out of my hole with their help was really just digging themselves into a deeper one. It was uncharted territory. I had no idea where the money'd gone. I pictured myself needing to find a new place, selling my eggs, driving Uber. But then, nothing had ever not been okay in the end, and BankedBabes had been the means to such okay, pleasant ends. I knew myself. I knew I wouldn't starve. And then there were these angelically-timed-Paul-happenings. There was always a Paul to come and save the day. There was always money. There were always rich people. There was always Lea.

When I arrived to Paul's studio I was greeted by a lanky bunch of women clad in nude-colored underwear and tiny strips covering their nipples. In a group they looked like a tall field

of beige bamboo. Their hair was slicked flat and hard, plasticky, and all of their faces appeared as if they'd been pulled back and up from the sides (I'd learn later, after having it done to myself, that there was clear tape at the corner of the eyes pulling the skin back into the hair. It was supposed to make us look sharp but actually it looked like we were running very fast). I tried not to stare at everyone's boobs but they were all taller than me.

I asked one girl, "how much is Paul paying you?" and she said, "what do you mean?"

"Okay, unmask the nipples," Paul said. We did. I surprised myself with the ease at which I undressed as Paul's eyes bounced from tit, to tit, to tit. Then Paul asked that we act natural, talk to one another. So we did, or they did. I hovered on the outskirts of the circle, a circle fortified by conversations I couldn't understand. The way they looked, the way they talked, their lives were simple. Their beauty was easy to look at, like looking at Lea. It wasn't only their faces; it was the assuredness, their knowledge of what their beauty meant and where it could get them. I realized suddenly, violently, that these women were all hand-picked by Paul, too.

The models understood something about Paul's instructions that I had not. They were comfortable. They trusted him. I was never completely secure, but his effeminacy picked away at my hesitancy, my fear of what he could do with our nudity. It was his hand, small and flapping around.

In between talking the models' faces would do this inhale-pause-smolder thing. Then they'd relax and scan the set and talk about who would sleep with who. Paul ate it up. I did my best to copy them.

I wanted Lea, for a second. She had grace that curbed environments like these. And the recipe to start conversations about anything. I guess when you're not worrying about what you

look like you have time to build a personality. People say if you're pretty you don't have to have one, a personality, but I don't think so. Then again, Lea could talk about the color of a Kate Spade bag for twenty minutes.

Paul would barge into the group and manhandle different girls around, rearranging us like books on a shelf, with a measured sharpness that I assume was what vision looked like. He jammed random French into his sentences as he went, "you *gauche* and you *droite*. So *belle*, *belle*."

It scared me what he could do with the snap of his fingers, with a wad of cash.

His fingers gripped my bare arm. He dragged me behind girls, in front of girls. He assessed my breasts, my stomach, my hips. I studied his face when it drew close to mine, matte with a strange gray pallor, like his skin was thick, or his organs were slowly failing, and smelled something off in his breath. He'd lifted and dropped a girl's boob, as if judging if it could sit any other way. I couldn't tell if I was doing a good job. He only stared and then snapped a photo. I wondered why Paul picked me. I scanned all of the models' bodies and then my own in the mirror between takes.

When it was over the room let out a large breath. Everyone slouched. Boobs disappeared. Women were women again. I went home and I didn't think about BankedBabes. I didn't tell Lea.

—

A week later Paul and I ran into each other at an event. Lea was on a social calendar for these things and insisted on attending all of them because she didn't have a day job and needed something to do. I was a Professional Plus-One.

Lea'd been living off her trust fund for the past few years. She'd dipped her toe into random endeavors post-high school, every time proclaiming her new passions as if she'd already mastered them: she was a ceramicist, no, a performance artist like Marina Abramović, no, actually, a model, yes, she'd decided, that was doable. It made sense for her to explore the artistic sphere with her parents' connections, but none of it ever stuck. She didn't need it to. The mean bones in my body remind me where Lea ended up: a guest in the gallery, a photo to print in the tabloids with her last name in bold as a reminder of who her parents are.

She isn't vapid, completely. But if I asked her, Lea would romanticize her ennui and say something about a permanent vacation. I think she thought when she decided to become a model the road would pave itself in front of her feet.

Each year I have the thought, okay, the trust is surely about to run out, and since it hasn't yet, I think, god, Lea's family has so much more money than I realized. It made sense—her delusion that the modeling would immediately take off.

I only really started resenting Lea's wealth after we graduated high school. We had freshman P.E. together, both claimed period cramps, and were sent to sit against the brick wall of the locker rooms filling out health workbooks. We sat there and talked shit. All we used to do was sit there, watch people walk by, and talk shit on them. This was how we got to know each other, through what the other person made fun of. Lea stopped making fun of poor people when she realized I didn't have it like that. It was a horrible thing to do anyway—call the kid with hole-ridden hand-me-down t-shirts a “pleb.” I didn't know what it meant. Lea said she wasn't totally sure either, but her dad was always calling people plebs.

My parents didn't make much but made enough that more pressing teenage matters like acne and football games overshadowed any concern for money. Moving in with Lea after graduation is what did it.

The serenity of her days, the slowness of her concern, the complete lack of immediacy to get anything done, these were effects of wealth I hadn't seen until I started living with her. She was always there to let me know that if I needed some money, I could have some. She said it just so, "You could have some," like she was sharing her bag of chips. I didn't care about her massive closet (I cared a lot about the massive closet), I wanted the absence of responsibility. That's what it was, the money, permission to relax. Having noticed that, I started noticing other things.

Every couple of months Lea booked a photoshoot. She'd come home afterward and tell me, "This one's the one," while wiping makeup off her face in the mirror. She was unfazed each time it wasn't the one, because there'd always be another. How could someone be so unbothered? How didn't she interpret her unpopularity within the modeling world as a personal flaw? It was as if her brain registered the fact so it wouldn't process as hurtful. I thought about Lea like this, wired differently. But in the past I'd found it appealing and exciting to be her friend because of it. So unaffected. Some people who keep their heads up after being knocked down time and time again seem a little pathetic. Lea isn't one of those people. Now, I posit money as the reason she gets away with it. It always comes back to money when I'm confused about something concerning Lea.

At the event Paul came up and hugged me for a long time. His beard tickled my neck. I looked around for Lea, to catch the end of her glance, or just the flash of her tight, icy bun flicking away. I didn't find her, but I found the photo we came here for: Lea, drenched as if a

bucket of water had been thrown on her, seated on a bottom bunk bed in a crowded dorm room, wearing only a large-brimmed hat and an oversized checkered blazer. You could hardly tell it was her.

Paul released me and looked in my eyes. I could never get a read on him.

“You’re so huggable. Has anyone ever told you that?” he’d asked. I told him no one had, and he shook his head. I stared at Lea’s photo again.

“Lea March. She’s the girl you’re always with, right?” Paul followed my gaze.

“Yeah. We live together.”

“Oh?” Paul’s eyebrow arched up, nearly meeting his scalp. His forehead was squat.

“We’ve been friends since high school. It’s not like that.”

“I know her parents. Lea’s very beautiful,” he said. It was the least surprising thing I’d ever heard.

“What’s this?” I’d asked him. Paul’d placed a chunky manila folder in my hands slowly after asking me to hold out both of my palms, like something very precious. I don’t know, but for a second I thought there would be a hamster in there or something.

“It’s your payment. More importantly, it could be your answer. It will take you very far, if you know how to use it. You’re released.” He bowed.

I opened the folder and pulled out a series of images from the shoot. I scanned them and must have done a face because Paul made a disapproving clicking sound with his tongue. He said, “Don’t be so quick to judge. Really look at yourself. You’re pretty here, see?” He pointed at one of the photos where I stood in front. One boob sat glaringly lower than the other.

At the bottom of the envelope was a twenty dollar bill.

“Look, I have people to talk to,” he said. “Find me later.”

He started to dart off but I grabbed his sleeve. He looked at my fingers like a stain on his shirt. I asked him how he knew I’d be here. Then he winked at me.

“Next time, Mei. *Full frontal*.” Then he walked away.

—

I linger in my parking garage late after my shift because I’m calling Paul and he won’t answer. He’s been ghosting me for weeks. Over the phone I tell him, “I thought you were *paying* me. Twenty dollars, Paul?” I tell him, “You know I have to make rent, right? That shoot was like, six hours. What am I gonna do with a bunch of photos? Sell them? I’ll sell them. Call me.”

I grab a bottle of white wine from the fridge and go to my room. I open my laptop. My hands hover over the keyboard. I log into BankedBabes. I click on my profile. I have a notification saying my account was paused from inactivity. I scroll through my olds posts. I check old messages. I open my laptop’s camera and stare at myself for a long, peaceful moment. I feel silly, but then I don’t. And then it’s all business. I make faces: shy, coy, angry. I change into a black teddy. On my phone I take pictures with the front camera and the back. I zoom in and out, tap here and there. I move between the bathroom and my bedroom. Sweat warms my hairline. I get red in the face.

I post the best shots. I don’t think of anything watching the token count rise—an animated gold coin bouncing up and down in the corner of the screen.

I try to keep count in my head, whispering 156, 157, 158, between my lips. I move a lot, flinching and stirring. I flip around my bed a little. I remember how, whenever I transfer the money from my BankedBabes account and withdraw it to cash, I feel like someone might try and

take it back, that they might try to claim it as their own, or accuse me of some horrible thing. I keep my saved cash rolled up in an empty can of hairspray that I glued shut at the top with the bottom removed to funnel it through. My dad taught me. It's under my sink. I take it to my room to count every night placing all of the bills flat on my floor like laying fresh tiles.

I watch the count slow down. I start thinking of another pose I can do. I say, money comes and goes, and then, money comes to me easily, and, I always have enough money. I lose track. I get lost in the money and easily and enough and me.

I respond to private messages. I text Paul. I adhere to new requests. Kissy lips. Slow, attentive blinking. Pictures from the back. I discover new ways to contort my arms to reach the furthest regions of my body. I text Paul again.

A pounding erupts at my door. I jump.

"Knocking, knocking, knocking," Lea says. I rush under my covers with a plop into my bed and tell her to come in. She opens the door and squints her eyes across the room.

"Did you notice I knocked?" Her eyes dart to the stack of books in front of my closet-mirror. They dart to me, blanket cuffing my chin. I mumble, "mhm" and unlock my phone.

"Whatcha doin'?" she asks. She takes a long sip of out her glass. She's always drinking something.

"Nothing really."

"Hm." Then she says, "I'm bored." This means she wants to spend money. Then she says, "Let's go out."

Lea likes to shop late. I don't know why but it feels like a wealthy person thing. There's a string of stores that stay upon until two a.m. downtown intermingled between bars and lounges

colored by neon lights, with bass vibrating the sidewalk. Lea hugs on me as we walk and since her clothes are oversized and she's a good deal taller than me, I feel like someone is putting a t-shirt over my head. We hop between shops and bars. She calls it our Friday Night Tradition. We drink and spend and drink and spend and drink. The music eggs us on. The lights flash and won't let you stop moving. We're so drunk that everything we touch becomes ours. Lea offers to pay every time I approach the register. Watching my fingers count out the bills, I imagine the embarrassment of accepting her offer, and then the greater shame in making the responsible decision to cancel the purchase all together. So when the cashier looks between us, I giggle and shake my head, "What? No. I can pay for it." After every transaction I check my bank account on my phone. I really don't want to know, but also I need to. I scan the numbers fast, as if speed will change the amount.

When Lea catches me looking at the bank app she grabs my phone and tsks at me. She says, "Money comes, money goes, Mei." I take this with great reverence. In the past I made a point of trying not to think about money, and it didn't leave me then.

Eventually our forearms pale from the bags' strings marking our skin, and we have to sit.

The lounge is our regular one. We assess the bodies with our tequila sodas in hand. We are matchmakers. We predict who'll dance with who next. We say, I wish he was taller and he should grow out his hair and he should wear looser jeans. Men walk by. They look at Lea. They come out of nowhere to look at Lea. Her big gray eyes are lights to mosquito-men. She walks into a room and heads snap up. For all the intensity of her looks, there is something soft about her. Like quiet music. Like the morning. I look at Lea and hope that she never gets that call from Paul.

I wonder how much colored contacts are online.

Lea sits up straight and holds her cocktail carelessly at her side while she talks to me. She plays with the zipper of her jacket, the ceiling light reflecting off its metal tip.

I watch the men move as if on a conveyor belt past Lea, all eyes. I used to have a crush on this guy until I found out he was the type of man that stares at women. The lounge men stare at her blobbed figure, her body obscured by a baggy jacket and baggy pants. Because it's her face. It's her face with her hair pulled back into that clean bun. Face as if taped up on the sides. I get the feeling there could be anything under her clothes and they'd still stare. She does not stare back. She looks at me intently.

"So I know your secret, Mei." She gives me the eyes.

"What?" I say. It was funny that even a years-long friendship sometimes permitted playing dumb. She's attempting to break apart the careful display of passivity sacred to our friendship. Like, I know she gets botox but I don't say anything about it, and she knows I sell naked pictures of myself online and she isn't supposed to say anything about it.

"You're a pornstar."

"What the fuck. No I'm not," I snort.

I wonder if Lea feels the looks but ignores them on purpose. I wonder how often she thinks about being both pretty and rich. I never used to think about it in high school because I was smart, but smart isn't the currency adulthood has so far demanded from me. Smart doesn't get better tips at the restaurant or more tokens on BankedBabes.

"If you need the money *that* bad, you know I don't care about covering you. Remember? My philosophy? I really don't care," Lea says.

Iciness sets inside but I keep a straight face. I say nothing.

“You could always call Paul Bowen, seeing as your *affinity with the risqué has piqued*,” she says in a British accent, and gives me the eyes, though with something coded underneath. As if calling Paul Bowen is such a ridiculous option that I couldn’t possibly, actually do it.

“I really don’t get why he hasn’t called *me*. I know he knows who I am.” Lea takes a sip of her drink.

“Why don’t you call him?”

“Models don’t call photographers. So tacky. *That* would seem like I cared.” Her face twists in disgust and she waves me off. She scans the bar and rests her cheek in her hand.

“God forbid,” I say.

A tall man with a buzzcut wearing a black t-shirt walks up to our table and says, “That’s a lot of bags. You guys clear out all the shops?” Well, he asks “us” but his body angles towards Lea, his eyes reveling in her face.

Lea lights up, like she does. He says his name is Robert. Their exchange is boring, unimpressive. He asks her what she does. She says she’s a model. He says, of course you are.

I could bulldoze the conversation, slip in that Lea’s face is chock-full of injections. Slip in that just minutes ago we ragged on his wrinkled shirt and scruffy buzzed head. I could blame it on one too many drinks. It strikes me as an ugly thing to do. It scares me. I tell myself I love Lea. Lea has done so much for me. I would never do that. They talk about the shops down the street; they talk about nothing. Robert’s eyes glow with a drunken sheen.

“Robert, we’re going to the bathroom real quick.” Lea cuts him off and grabs my elbow. We wade through the lounge and shove through the bathroom door before Lea sets the lock.

“God, what a loser,” she says. She tightens her bun in the mirror, eyeing me. “But he was totally checking you out.” She takes her hair out of the bun and then ties it back up.

“Mhm.”

“But seriously, Mei. The money thing. You know it’s not a big deal. It *is* a big deal to whore yourself out online for money.” Her eyes find mine in the mirror. I stare at the graffiti vandalized across the wall behind the toilet.

“Okay, whore is a strong word. But you know what I mean. It’s like—” Lea looks at the same spot on the wall, *smoke weed* and *lust* in purple ink. “It’s just kind of icky. You know?”

Here was the line where I could say something about her money, her life, her family, and how that made it so she didn’t get it. Then I’d say something about my lack of money, my long hours at the restaurant, my string of failed job interviews, my money-scarce parents. But we’d been friends for too long. I’d spent too much of Lea’s money as a tagalong on family vacations and dinners and clothes.

“I’m getting a drink.”

“Oh, *come on*, Mei. Are you seriously mad?”

I leave the bathroom, find a stool at the bar, order a tequila, and wait. My stomach bubbles. When I turn around a while later Robert’s arm is hung around Lea’s back, seated where I had been.

Lea gives me the eyes.

—

When we get home I remove all of my purchases from their bags and lay them out on my floor. I spent \$284 on new outfits and some lingerie for BankedBabes. I suppose I got a bit

carried away. I estimate I can make a profit if I log on for a few hours tomorrow. I sit on my floor and Lea gets in my bed, drunkenly petting my hair while telling me about Robert and how he persuaded her to go out with him next week. And how actually, he's kind of cute if you think about it. I've gotten so good at playing unfazed at Lea's surplus of men and the famine of my own that I'm robotic. I'm "awww" and "I'm so happy for you!" Dead in the face. Lea falls asleep reluctantly, nodding off then reanimating a few times, the money conversation hovering thick in the air between us.

When I hear the deep breaths of Lea's sleep, I undress and try on the new outfits. She sleeps through everything. I take test shots in the mirror. I run my hands down my body, drag my fingers along each curve. I pinch my cheeks pink. My legs touch in the middle so I lean my hips back.

I take so many photos that my phone prompts an alert that my storage is almost full. I closely inspect each picture, the shadows where my skin plumps with fullness.

I think, there could be a thousand dollars in my hand. And for what? I look at myself in the mirror. I look at Lea, in bed, through the mirror. I wonder how much money she would make on BankedBabes. I wonder how much money we could make together. I shudder at the thought. I imagine it already, all the comments saying, *more of the blonde girl, more*. How would we slice the check?

I used to think that if I didn't think about money that it would never leave me. But BankedBabes does something to me. My thoughts spiral. And being around Lea, it's all money, money, money. How much money does Lea spend? What is worth it; what isn't? How long does it take to run out? Do bodies go out of style?

I post the pictures. I get a message: *cute*. I get: *soooooo hot*. I get: *more*. I buzz like a sugar high. I want to run around the block. I want to wake Lea up and show her the pictures and the messages. Instead I lie on my back on the floor and set my laptop on my chest as the count rises. It warms through my shirt into my skin. Staring at the numbers, *my* numbers, bolded on the screen, my hostility towards Lea fades. I feel the same way, I imagine, those people feel who call their life's work their baby. My baby, indeed.

My phone pings and I'm shaken loose. Paul's name alights on the screen. The text says, "Mei! New project. 184 N 3rd Ave. Tomorrow. 12PM. Come."

I text back, "Payment this time. Real payment. Before I leave." Bold of me, maybe.

Then Paul, "Of course, *mon cher!*"

Something inside me rests. I place a hand on my chest and feel my heart rate slow. I feel like everything will be fine and okay and expensive. I still have a week before rent is due. Working at the restaurant and on BankedBabes is starting to blur together. My body is sore. My face is sore. Really, I go to Paul's because Lea's here, lying in my bed.

—

In the morning I take an Uber to the address and it's Paul's penthouse. I'm afraid he's going to say something about my voicemail and text threats but I get the feeling he didn't listen to them.

"Mei!" He gives me a hug. I feel his body against mine, my chest, my thighs, then my waist before letting me go.

He shows me his dog, a sluggish golden Cocker Spaniel that barely lifts his head when I crouch down to his level. "He's called The Divine One," Paul tells me.

“That’s his name?” I pet one of his floppy ears, the skin cold beneath the fur.

“Yes.” Paul pats his head with eyes on me. The Divine One sinks next to his owner.

He says, “Go get ready. Bathroom’s there,” he points. “The set is down the hall.”

I take this to mean, get undressed, and that the amount of clothes I take off will mean something to him. How much could I get for boobs but no ass?

I don’t think about it. I look in the mirror. It looks like me but it doesn’t. Something about the eyes—the longer I stare into them the less they feel like my own. I imagine what customers at the restaurant see when I serve them. If I look tip-worthy. It’s all the same. I plan to ask Paul for a lot of money. I repeat again and again, money comes to me easily.

I walk to the set wrapped in a towel I took off the rack. The ivory tassels tickle my thighs.

Paul says, “Sit.” I can’t think about it. I unwrap the towel and set it beside me. He walks forward and I stutter back—which I immediately regret because his face flares in satisfaction—and kicks the towel out of frame. He says, “Good.”

The photo set is blank white. Just me with my legs bent to my side. I’m keenly aware of the two of us by ourselves in his condo, windows for walls, quiet, cold. I feel impossibly far from the front door where I came in.

Paul starts. He squats and stands, sometimes smiling, sometimes not. I focus in the lens. Sometimes I stare out the window watching birds fly by thinking about all the things I’ll buy. A nice bottle of wine, maybe earrings. I think about the rent and I’m brought back to the set.

I don’t know how long we do this, but my stomach grumbles. There’s a staggering in my vision and in my head, like my perception is a beat behind real life. Paul takes off his jacket so

he's just in a white t-shirt. He has a tattoo of a dragon tail running up his arm. He suddenly looks like someone I would never approach. He looks like the type of man that stares.

He leans into his hip and then, "Should I get naked like you?" he asks, laughing. His phone rings and he pauses to answer it. He gestures at me with haphazard hands and walks into the next room with the phone pressed against his ear.

I get up, grab the towel, then kneel back down. The camera in front of me sits in silence.

A few minutes later, "Knock, knock." Lea's face, hair pulled back, appears from behind the wall, then her naked chest, then her bare body as it walks towards me. There's no signature Lea smile, just a water bottle in her hand.

I'm filled by a painful warmth.

"Hey," I finally force out.

"Okay, let's get back to it." Paul walks in and assembles himself behind the camera. Lea joins me. Paul tells us the same thing he said at the last shoot: act natural, talk to one another.

"Finally get the call?" I ask under my breath.

She doesn't answer at first. Everything has changed, clearly.

Then, "This morning. We had a long chat, me and Paul."

"Oh." It dawns on me that I've never seen Lea naked. This fact makes me think perhaps we aren't as close as other best friends are. She's pale and pink all the way down.

"I had to find my own way considering *somebody* neglected to tell me they'd been working with Paul for a while now," she says. I watch her move her body about, bumping shoulders with me occasionally. Her skin is cold. I fight the urge to move away, and Paul tells her to slow down. She speaks loud enough for him to hear which inspires in me a betrayal I hadn't

felt in our friendship before. I'm ambushed by her allegiance to Paul as we sit here together, nude.

"So, is that what all the naked pictures were for in your bedroom?" she asks. She finally looks at me, lips curled, knowing.

"No. Those were not for this," I whisper back. "Could you please talk quieter?"

"Please. It's not like he doesn't know." Lea stands up. Paul looks at her. He looks at me.

My body, Lea's body. They press together and move apart.

"What?" I think about my BankedBabes account. The attention I took to omit any personal information. The many, many photos of my face.

"I told him," Lea says. "It just came up. I wasn't, like, talking about you. I mean we were talking about naked pictures and naturally you came up, so. It's not a big deal."

"Wait, what?"

"A little too angry there, Mei. *Naturelle, s'il te plaît.*"

My face slackens. "What is wrong with you?"

"What? It's not like you have a private account. And you weren't exactly being secretive about it at home. It wasn't hard to figure out. You clearly don't care who sees it," Lea says.

"You know that's not the point," I say, amused somehow. "Of course you're here." I shake my head in disbelief. Flashes alight around us.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that—you don't need the money, Lea. You don't need to be here. I need to be here. Do you think I want to do this? With him?"

“*Please*. You have a job. You don’t need to be here either. I’ve offered to cover the rent every month, so, please. All you care about is money. It’s gross.” Lea’s cheeks grow pink as the words tumble out. “You act like you’re *so* poor, like, come on.” She grabs the water bottle by the side of the set and flails it around, crinkling it in her palm in scattered pops. “And you *know* how badly I’ve wanted to book more modeling gigs. And you *know* it hasn’t been easy. I told you so many times how I wanted to start taking modeling seriously,” she says.

“You’ve wanted to ‘start’ a lot of things, Lea.”

The line, there it was.

Her lips barely move. She cuts the air with each word: “Don’t act like you haven’t enjoyed every cent I’ve spent on you.”

Maybe I thought spending time with Lea would somehow make me rich too, or more beautiful. Maybe I thought BankedBabes was a portal to the world she lived in.

I’m not usually a crier, but here I am, throat-gurgling with puffy eyelids.

“What do you want me to say? I’m impressed? Good for you, Lea. You were born into wealth. You won the genetic lottery. I’ll say it again: good for you!” My words are inevitable, an avalanche on the brink gusted by wind. I haven’t received Lea’s anger before. It feels right. It feels right to give it back, too.

“Maybe, ‘thank you’? ‘Thank you, Lea, for all you’ve done for me? For saving my ass when I was bum broke?’”

“I never wanted your money. I never asked for it. I’m not defending myself anymore.”

Paul laughs. He takes a photo of what must be our faces turned quickly in his direction, mouths frozen mid-assault, wet cheeks inky with mascara, profiled breasts. He takes another and laughs some more.

I look down at The Divine One licking my leg. I imagine I'm salty with sweat, and feel the roughness of his tongue as an indication of this. Paul's laugh echoes thickly, and The Divine One runs to his side.

I almost forget where we are, what we're doing, where our clothes are. Paul's face moves from blank to grin and cycles again. His facial hair covers his lips so his teeth jut out like a dog's.

"I know your secret," he sings, eyes dipping up from the camera.

"Yeah. I get that," I say. He lowers the camera and Lea's body relaxes. I'm hyperaware of the hairs on my arm brushing against hers. I do my best not to blink. I stare straight into the lens. I reflexively reach for my shirt to pull over my stomach, but no, no shirt.

"BankedBabes is tacky, Mei. Slutty. Your pictures are cheap. Just because you're poor doesn't mean you need to be cheap. Come."

My body stills, but I listen. I get up clumsily like a baby trying to walk for the first time.

"Look at these." Paul shows me the pictures he just took. I look at my face and feel nothing. I look at my body. The pudge collected at my bellybutton. I look at Lea's body, tall and hard like a swimmer. "And now look at these," he says. He unlocks his phone to my profile on BankedBabes, primed, as if he'd been browsing it all morning. I almost stop myself from crying, but it doesn't matter. I feel as though he's ripped my skin off and placed it into a tray to dissect. My cheeks burn as the tears prickle.

"There's no class in these websites. It's debasing," he says. "Look at yourself."

“We don’t need to, like, look at the profile. Jesus.” Lea’s voice moves closer. “I didn’t show him the profile, Mei. I just mentioned it.” Her icy hair appears in my periphery.

My throat resists my swallow. “There’s money in ‘these websites,’” I force out.

“Money isn’t everything. Can you imagine if money was all I cared about?” Paul asks.

Lea makes this face, raises her eyebrows in a way I can’t discern. I’m unsettled for a moment by the strangeness of Lea and Paul here together, who I am between the two of them. How I fit into the world they’ve occupied as a birthright.

I say nothing. I look into the empty eyes on his phone and look away. I don’t like it. I don’t know what it is. Paul’s face sits close to mine and I smell that off-thing on his breath.

He becomes aware of something and huffs. He says, “You could at least do better. We could work together more, if you want.”

“Okay. Then I want a grand for this shoot and something for the last one.” I cross my arms over my chest so my breasts lurch forward. I look at Paul, determined not to squirm away no matter the redness spreading across my face.

His face wisens. For a second I think he’s impressed with me. He says, “Fine. Why didn’t you just ask? Here you go.”

He pulls out a wad of cash from the fanny pack sat by the tripod. He holds it like a treat to a dog. He watches me. I am fiendish. I grab the money. I look at the fanny pack. It leaves Paul’s hand for the floor with a thump of fullness.

“No more BankedBabes,” he says once I’ve brought the cash down to my side. I don’t count it, but I fondle the bills in my fingers. I look up at him. He’s drawing his eyes down my body. He’s drawing his eyes down Lea’s.

“One time I Googled that if you sold all of your body’s components, down to the chemicals and blood and everything, you’d get \$45 million,” I tell them.

“Jesus. That’s insane,” Lea says.

“Okay, yeah. Mhm. Go back to your mark,” Paul says.

We go back. We sit down.

“No, stand, actually. I want to try something.” Paul looks into my eyes. I tuck my hands behind my back. The Divine One lays down at Paul’s feet, stuffs his nose into his paw.

“Here’s what you’re going to do. I want you to run at me,” he says, “like you’re going to attack me. And make a face, *sauvage*, like you’re wild, like you really want to.”

I pause. I look at the dog looking at me. I look at Lea whose lips part slightly. Up close, her eyelashes are almost translucent.

“Um. I don’t know,” I say.

“Mei.” He looks at me, looks at the money in my hand.

I say, “I don’t want to scare the dog.”

Lea’s face is blank. I wonder if she’s bought into this. This being something I imagine we would make fun of. What are we doing here?

I think about the money I owe her. Not just the rent, but if for some reason I needed to pay back everything she ever spent on me, the amount would pile up to the size of a mountain.

“You won’t scare the dog,” Paul says.

“I really didn’t give him your account, Mei. I wouldn’t do that,” Lea whispers next to me. When I look at her, I don’t know, but it takes me out. She gives me the eyes.

“I’m gonna count you off. Don’t be afraid to really go for it,” Paul says, voice far away.

“I know. And I’m gonna pay you back,” I tell her. “Eventually. For the rent.”

She’s on the verge of something else, but then she’s all eyes, says, “Okay.”

Paul’s body vibrates stiffly. A rock in an earthquake. He bounces behind the camera.

Lea looks at Paul and then back to me. “He should totally shave his beard.”

I’m disappointed in her, and me, too.

But she’s right. He really should. I think, he isn’t fooling anybody about that chin of his trying to run off his face.

There’s a look in our faces that I think the camera might catch, what are we doing here?

I smile. I don’t say a word, just for now. I give Lea the eyes.

“Okay, my ladies. 3, 2, 1.” Paul’s mouth hangs open.

We’re released.

—

I’m not sure what the shot was like. I don’t think I’ll get a manila folder this time. I think Paul needs to find something to cover his eye. Lea and I get in her car. It’s new, actually, a black Mercedes with a convertible top. I put the stack of bills in my lap, pressed between my clothed thighs. I think we’ll go for a spin.

My phone pings. A new message. BankedBabes user carlxxx: *more? where u go?*

Retraction

She'd given me that little pill and expected me to down it quick. "Just do it. One go. You think it's like jumping off a cliff and maybe it is a little, but not really, because there's water below. And it's not that far a jump. I promise. One good swallow and there! You'll be done and won't be up so high anymore and you won't have to be scared. You'll be in the water and you can float. That sound good?"

I'd nodded. It was easier that way.

"See. Then just one go. Go for it."

My mom is the kind of woman who looks like she's always ready to pull her hair out. She's tall. When she'd stood above me like that as I sat in the chair below her, I could see up her nose, the clean canals of tiny hairs, and I'd wanted to take the little pill and shove it up her nostrils.

I didn't, of course. But I didn't swallow it either. I wanted to tell her that I wasn't scared like that. I'd been okay at taking leaps. But Mom kept moving her hands and arms in this flailing way, like a kite cut loose, that made her hard to disagree with.

I'm twenty when I call her to come home for a few days. I'd only been moved out for six months. She believed that a girl needed to learn how to make it on her own, but I'd said something like "I can't deal with Dane right now. We won't stop fighting. I think it might be over," and she hates Dane so she told me to come. She was absolutely hysterical when I let her in on my little secret, even though I'd asked her, fruitlessly, to try not to react or anything. Her whole body reacts to things like she's boiling inside. Dane always tells me that I care too much

about what she thinks, that we have a toxic relationship, that she is a very angry woman, that I come home angry after spending time with her, but he's wrong. I just don't want her to break her back for me.

I told her I couldn't take the pill, especially when she spoke to me like that. She'd asked, "like what?" like she didn't know, and I'd rolled my eyes and made a face. "Just do it, Clare. Do it." I didn't do it, and she'd gotten pissed off the way she always did so fast, and walked out of the kitchen to the living room. I shouted at her that I was in pain, that I was crampy and the most tired I'd ever been in my entire life. I'd started to cry, not even forced, and she wouldn't come back. She yelled my name again and again after I said anything.

I waited a little bit and looked out to the yard at the dead garden Mom had tried to plant, and then I followed her to the living room and told her that I did it, and I was relieved, and she'd said she was too, thank God. Effusively, she told me that I'd really dodged a bullet coming to her. It was a good thing to leave the man out of it, sometimes. She'd given me a hug and said into my hair, "Life is full of tests." I gave the hug back, my palm grabbing at the fabric of her shirt, unaware that by returning the gesture I was saying, "I'm okay. We don't ever have to talk about it ever again. I don't need you to ask me about it or try to make me feel better." But that's what she heard, I'm guessing. I'm still having a baby in eight months.

I'd fallen asleep on the living room couch feeling as though I'd endured and then conquered some very great thing. I thought of the King Palm trees in the front yard receiving whip after whip of aggressive wind, persisting, through the rare California storm, sustaining.

I hang up on the lady a third time. It's not like I know the woman. Dealing with Mom yesterday engendered a rotten mood today. She left for the day and I plan to leave soon.

The lady calls back. She tells me to just hold on and let her talk, please.

She needs me to schedule the appointment and I try to comply from my bedroom floor. I made a pillow bed in the middle of the carpet. My insides suspend in an uneasy halt, running up to a cliff and stopping right before the fall. I always surprise myself at being such an easily unnerved person. She goes on talking, and I try to listen but I keep getting distracted by the movement inside me, like a fish running into the glass bowl that is my stomach, again and again.

The lady says that though the consultation will be in person, the doctor will give me the details and tell me what I should expect through a Telehealth phone call in a patient room. Yes, the phone call has to be at the office, in the patient room. Over the phone because the doctor is only in-office every few weeks.

It all feels very pointless then, like maybe this is one of those signs I've been asking for.

I want to cry, "Over the phone?" but I stay quiet and take a deep breath. Sometimes I forget I have to be an adult about things.

"It's just that, I know you've called before. And I'm not saying any of this to scare you, but you need to know that time isn't on your side. It's important to have all the information before you make any decisions. You know, look before you leap."

What is up with all of the leaping? I raise my brows and she goes on, "This isn't something that's going to go away on its own. It's not a cold. It isn't a sickness. You can't just ignore it." The receptionist chooses her words like Mom does—careful and tight, like each word is a fragile piece of china. I wonder what she sounds like talking to her kids.

I set the phone to speaker and put it in my lap. I flip off the screen to see what it feels like. I listen to her with this face on like a little kid. But I want the lady to say it, say the actual word instead of “treatment” and “procedure” and “*this choice*.” I want to hit her like a piñata and watch the truth scurry out of her mouth in a mess on the floor.

I picture my mom in her magenta pajama shorts with the bow in the middle, too young, a big belly stretching a pink tank top to its last stitch.

I’d been getting these gatherings in my gut for the last few days. Some sort of rush. I couldn’t tell if it was baby or me. The cramp turns a little bit and then the phone goes quiet. I think about telling the lady about the gatherings, but then she might say something about it being normal. I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to be pooled into a category that confirms what’s happening to me.

“Clare, are you still there?”

“Yeah. Sorry. I’ve been having trouble focusing.” I get up to try and appease the ache and pull apart my curtains and open the window. Every time I stand up I picture tiny little teeth and fingernails spilling out of me. Last night I had a dream of its skull rolling around inside of me, and its sausagey intestines, the teeth, the fingernails, and strands of hair, crashing and conjoining together, then ricocheting off the walls of my stomach lining. The dream wailed and whimpered, assuaged by the rub of my belly, the coo of my lips. I ate breakfast this morning with an elevated purpose. I’d looked in the mirror at my eyes, the bearer of such early life. I want to tell the receptionist that.

“I’m wondering if maybe you can talk to someone about this. Are you in contact with the father? Maybe a friend or a family member you trust?”

“Yeah. I’m gonna come to the appointment. Thanks.”

The receptionist sighs and I feel bad for a second. I flipped her off like four times. Then, “That’s great. Okay. We’ll see you then.”

We hang up.

On my phone Dane sends me pictures on Instagram. They’re stupid but they make me laugh a little. I wish he could distract me fully without me knowing that’s what he was doing. He *doesn’t* know what he’s doing—he doesn’t know anything—but he knows something’s up. I know that because he texts, “are you coming back?” Later, “everything okay?” I text back that everything’s fine, and so then he tries to FaceTime me. I don’t think I can look at him without spitting everything out. *Baby, baby, baby, baby* running through my head, assembling in my throat. The decision hovers over everything. Hovers, clouds; I can’t look at anything without seeing a big round belly plopped in the middle of my vision. I can’t even have my morning coffee. Seeing Dane face to face is too perfect a catalyst for a confession.

Instead I message that I’m leaving my mom’s in a minute. I also ask him what he thinks about going camping maybe. *Storm in a teacup*, Mom always says. I’m seeing what sticks. Dane can be unpredictable, even to me. A trip feels good, sounds good. I haven’t been able to make any decisions lately and this one is immediately soothing. Right like a good pair of jeans. I’d had few of those lately.

Dane is a good boyfriend. He doesn’t need to make the effort because he’s naturally even-tempered. I told him that once, along with that it was relieving he always knew what he was doing. I told him that it put me at ease. He said he was glad I didn’t worry. He said he had

me. Sometimes he could get angry at things—the world, the TV, his game—but never me. But it was like watching your parents fight, or get too drunk. I wanted it to stop but had no right.

I wonder if I still feel all those things for him. I marvel and maybe even enjoy, for just a moment as I'm driving back to the apartment, at how quickly everything has changed. It's almost incredible.

When I get to the apartment Dane is on the sofa with his back hunched over his phone and a bowl of cereal on the coffee table.

I look at his profile and imagine our baby, somehow too white and too big to make sense, and see it in my arms, a little girl, dressed in light pink and white gingham. I can't see its face but it has that baby mouth where the lips are always pursed.

Looking at him now I'm confronted by a deep knowing. I know what Dane would say. He's good at calming me down, at saying things he feels are mobilizing and powerful, and he would get me, he really would. I'd do whatever he told me to do. He'd say money and young and money and career and money and hurry and please and Clare, Clare, Clare. He would never say baby. He'd probably be angry, but he'd say it's because he cares, and then probably hug me and then grab his hands onto my shoulders like he does sometimes when he thinks I'm not listening to him.

But I'm too hormonally warped to bring it up. I'd feel needy in a childish way, tugging at the fabric of his pants from the floor, help me, help me, tell me what to do, asking questions that feel so important, concerns, but no concept, hanging on every word. Yes, the sky is blue. No, I don't know why.

I couldn't feel like that now.

When I think about a baby, really, really think about it, I'm so sure it's all I've ever wanted that I can't believe I thought I wanted anything else. I can almost trace the instinct, or the infiltrator, inside my body probing at my heart and my brain, kicking every morsel of my body into some protective mode, a "keep me!" "keep me!" swarming every thought, nervously guarding my womb as if it's being held over the edge of a cliff.

I look at Dane and I'm thinking of nothing sometimes.

I don't know if the apathy in our relationship is Dane-caused or my own. Before we were in love he could be so hard to reach. He was always on his phone but never answered texts or picked up phone calls until the last second acceptable within romantic propriety. I never knew what he was thinking or if he wanted me in a serious way. Every time we found ourselves spending time with one another it was happenstance, which made the meet-ups simultaneously precious and almost burdensome on his part, like he'd just barely squeezed me in. Our relationship happened faintly, almost by accident, like slipping to the floor and then staying down. As if Dane couldn't, wouldn't, take responsibility for our coupling, but was merely complicit, then slowly grew to rely upon, maybe even enjoy in a satisfying way, my partnership, my admiration, my dependence, my body.

We talk about camping, that he can free up some time and go tomorrow. He asks no questions. He looks at his phone a lot when he talks but I think he makes a point of looking at me when I talk. I tell him about Cypress Lake, how it's only a couple of hours away, and that I've always wanted to go. He says something like, "You and your lakes," and it's cute. It's pleasant, like floating, to feel so known. I press into the feeling like packed snow.

He mentions something about his day, work, a coworker, then looks at me to maybe talk about my own. I don't, and he is amicable with my silence. Short-lipped. He knows I'm withholding, so he withholds back.

I get in the bath. He leaves me alone. The suds spread across my body like moss over a rock. I look at my belly. There's some little thing inside me, whatever it is. What a thought to have. What a thing to feel. I miss being bored, because now it's just baby, baby, baby. I Google how much childbirth costs at the hospital. Like 25k. I start feeling like I have to use the bathroom so I get out of the tub. I lotion myself all over, too fast, and my face turns blotchy and red. I press my palm into my stomach and try to send a signal or something. I don't know. I think about having a glass of wine while I get ready for bed, so out of my character, like with a towel wrapped around my hair and gliding lotion up my leg, like a movie, and everything's white and I'm skinny and there's no fleshy bits of me sticking out anywhere, and the wine perches in my fingers like it weighs nothing.

I'd stopped drinking after finding out. Dane will bring beer on the camping trip, and I'll have to say something. We are big drinkers, for occasions. He thinks we're fun together when we drink. He said, couldn't I tell that everyone gravitated toward us at parties? He said we're the fun couple. I could tell this meant a lot to him. He walks into parties with his arms and mouth all wide, without a care in the world, and ushers me in, presents me like I'm very special and important to his entrance, a mound of meat to the centerpiece of the table. Maybe they'd eat me.

I don't imagine these attributes—fun, unattached, carefree—would survive in fatherhood. I think about never seeing Dane smile again. I picture his head in his palms, his hands trying to hold up what he can't on his own.

I hear a rustling, and then Dane opens the bathroom door. I close my towel. I want to cry. My face aches like a sore muscle. He leans in the doorframe to watch and study me like a hippo might a butterfly. I stare at myself in the mirror then catch his eye in the reflection.

“Flâneur Dane is my least favorite.”

“Flannel?”

“Flâneur. It means you’re hovering.”

He wonders at me. He tilts his head.

“What time do you wanna leave tomorrow?” He tells me that he dropped everything to go on our camping trip. It was convenient that he had the weekend off from work and I’d called in all of my sick pay at the restaurant this morning, two and a half weeks worth. I’m doing my best to trap myself, puppy guard my mind into a corner so that I’m forced to do something, make some sort of choice, I guess, do anything.

“Whenever.” I close my eyes and its water. I take a big breath.

“You okay?”

“Yeah? A little tired, but that’s it.”

“Y’sure? Have you drank enough water today?”

“Yeah. I need to pack.” I feel him behind me as I walk to the bedroom. *Ask again*, in my head. *Ask again*.

I make quiet work. I wish he would leave and stay at the same time. I suppose that is to say that I want him around but I don’t want him with me, and somehow those things amount to the same one feeling. Summer is still warm but I pack big, loose sweaters and shirts, piling them

into my duffle bag, then force it to zip shut so it heaps in the center like a pillow stuffed underneath a little girl's shirt.

"Shouldn't you pack too?" Dane is a last minute person. This attribute makes him seem easy-going, but he's actually just lazy and then necessarily fleet-footed when he's ran out the clock. Our child would be late to everything. It would grow up with an impatient look on its face, like its mom's and its mom's mom, always a hand on its hip and its gaze darting, watching dad, go, go, go.

Dane sits on the bed. He looks at me. I turn away quickly and catch a tear as though I'm rubbing my eye. I feel like a whale. A container. A clump of organs choked on a table. I want him to try and reach for me so I can jerk his touch away. For some reason I thought he would be able to tell. I'm hot inside and out. I'm angry over the possibility of waiting for him. Bitter.

"Go pack, Dane. Seriously," I snap.

"Okay, okay."

He gets up slow.

—

We pass a huddled group of raccoons as we drive through the park, dusk's dim field making their eyes appear struck and vigilant. They scamper up a tree as I stare them down. My mom calls me twice and I ignore both of them. She sends me texts asking how much I'm bleeding and that if I'm bleeding too much then I should go to the clinic. I've finished three stacks of saltine crackers when Dane parks the car. Our site is under a large oak and beside a dirt hiking trail. We didn't talk for the two hour drive except he'd asked me why I wanted saltines instead of actual dinner and I said my stomach hurt and felt some relief at that small truth. The

silence, instead of restful or unintended, is preparatory, tiny foreshocks making tiny cracks in whatever peace remains between Dane and me. His quiet is a fortifying battle practice. Mine is the slow drying of bricks stacking higher and higher.

First Dane does the fire. I set up our tent and put a checkered table cloth over the lunch table. It is so quiet I can hear my heartbeat. I can feel it in my gut. My stomach is hard. The site next to us is a still, orange glowing tent.

“Come sit with me.” We put a blanket next to the fire and brought cushions from our balcony chairs to sit on. He’s housing a beer and one of the turkey sandwiches I made before we left. I think about nothing as I sit down next to him.

“Does your stomach still hurt?”

I shrug.

He pulls me into him, steers my body until I’m sat between his legs with the top of my head pressed into his chin. Everything smells like fire. I wish that we had never left home. I wonder why I put myself through it. No place to escape, how tonight we’ll have to sleep next to one another, close with our bodies glued to stay warm. I wonder what I’m doing. I mouth silently, *I’m pregnant* again and again and then just *preh preh preh preh* feeling my lips touch and depart over and over. I have the sudden urge to get in the car and lock the doors. I imagine the whole thing. I love locking doors. I love looking at locked doors.

“Penny for your thoughts?” His voice a ceiling falling lower, lower.

“What.”

My body runs cold. My chest picks up.

“I feel like I can physically feel your mind racing.”

I could cry. I could cry and then he wouldn't ask that many questions. He'd have to attribute the tears to a whole mess of other things, dispense one of my problems like a gumdrop from a coin machine. My mother, my stress, my insecurity, my lack of direction, my anger, my stubborn resolve.

"Talk to me, please. You've been distant. I tried to give you space but you have to talk to me. I wanna help. I hate seeing you like this."

Where's the pull? Where's that trigger that's supposed to fire when the man I love lends me a hand, says, I'll carry that weight for you?

The word between my silent lips like *prehg-nin*, *pregh-nin*, taking impossibly long to say, taking such a toll with so much tongue work, a whole mouthy procedure of precise movement and perfect timing to say one word. Where's the pull? When will I give? How far could I go, how long?

"I'm pregnant." I don't know how it comes out. I don't feel it. I feel like a very large clot trying to squeeze through a tiny tube.

"What? Are you being serious?" My mind parses out the insult in this response. I feel my fuse shorten, cut off at the waist. I see the easy way out with *that* fight, *that* rehearsed conversation, so trivial now, a drop in the ocean.

"Mhm."

"What?"

"What?" I repeat back to him.

"No, not *you* 'what.' *Me* what. Are you serious?" He pushes me up from him and moves to look at me as I steady myself with my hands behind my back. I feel sticky. His face is alert, a

siren. His face is the instant “Clare” becomes “Clare, pregnant,” inseparably. He looks all over from my forehead to my cheeks to my chin, I think, to see if I’m cracking a smile, on the verge of a laugh. I get red and hot.

“Why the fuck would I joke about this?”

“You have before!”

I don’t remember. It feels only like something I could do, not something I have done.

“Dane.”

“Okay, sorry. Okay. Are you sure?”

I tell him about the two tests. I detail the humiliation of buying the tests. How I’d worn my mom’s ivory cable cardigan and her dark cherry loafers, tied my hair into a bun, I don’t know, tried to look old enough. I tell him about my mom’s house. I tell him I lied to her.

I am a flood.

I tell him when, approximately, and he goes *Ohhhh okay*, casual. I tell him I’m so tired that I always want to cry. I tell him I feel like I’m not in my body. I tell him I don’t feel like myself no matter how hard I try and I feel lost and I can’t find my head and I don’t get it. I tell him I’m sorry I couldn’t say it earlier and I’m sorry I iced him out. I tell him I’m a cold person. I tell him I don’t know what to do.

“What do you mean—like, do you mean like, what, like you don’t know what to do how? Like you want to keep it?”

“No! I mean I don’t know. Why don’t you think I would’ve thought of every possibility? I don’t wanna talk about this.”

“Clare—what? We have to take about this.” He grabs my shoulder after I shrink down.

“Look at me. You know this wouldn’t work. We’re like—we’re practically still kids. You were a teenager like three months ago! How would this even work? I mean, it wouldn’t. We can’t.”

I wish I never said anything. The remnants of the impulsive blurting smolder like heartburn, from my chest all the way down into my stomach. The wind changes direction and smoke courses between us. I hear the wild all around us, small sounds.

Dane stands up. For a long time he paces around the fire pit as if circling his prey. “Clare, you know we can’t. Don’t make this hard on yourself. Now we’re like—I mean what the fuck are we doing out here? We’re frickin—two hours from the nearest clinic. What are we doing?”

“Like I’d go and do it right now? Are you kidding?”

“I don’t see why we’d wait. I don’t get why you didn’t just do it at your mom’s house.”

“I can’t believe this.” The tears tickle my neck like fingers tapping against my skin.

Dane squats down in front of me. I sense he’s come into his thoughts rationally. His demeanor has shifted back to its usual ease, if only for a moment, as if I’ve barely disrupted his life, as a bird might fly from a falling tree.

We’re quiet then. He does not move to touch me. He falls back from his squat into the dirt.

I imagine I could move to a small town and get an apartment and a good paying job. If I can’t get an office job maybe I could waitress or bartend, when I turn 21. People make their livings off things like that. I have skills. I can cook all right and learn most things quickly. I really do. I almost have a degree. Or I could move to the coast. Or I could live in the country in the middle of nowhere. Maybe a farm. In the middle of nowhere I could probably afford a house,

a modest one. The baby would grow up in nature. We'd know flora and fauna and the feeling of good silence. Mom would come around. She is hardened but she is moveable. She'd take one look at the baby and understand.

Dane takes off one of his shoes and chucks it into a tree. He yells like I haven't heard him. I startle. The glowing tent next to us stirs. I tell him to stop, please. I cry harder and he mumbles at me. I thought I knew every Dane. I'm somehow periphery to his thoughts in a way I thought was no longer possible. I don't know when it happened or if it has always been this way, but somehow, we've ended up a couple who survives their battles stood side by side, but not hand in hand.

"I'm not having a kid, Clare. You can't do this. There's too many things going on. We don't have enough money, for starters. My job now only just barely covers the rent. You—you're in community college, Clare. You're a *waitress*, Clare. I want to be perfect when I have a kid. I want *us* to be perfect. I want you to be—to be good." He says something else then, deeply in his chest, that I can't make out.

"You want me to be perfect?"

"Clare, no. Jesus. Seriously? You know what I mean."

"Yes, you do. You want me to be perfect. That's what you meant to say."

"What? No! I'm just saying that I want us to be good before we even *think* about having kids. If we even have kids. We're not ready. You're frickin' twenty years old!"

I'd have a baby shower and invite every person I know. I'd meet rich people, quickly. I'd tell them my story. I wouldn't spend a dime. I'd say, no, no father in the picture. I'd take what I could get. I'd collect welfare. Mom would help as much as she could. I could live at home. I

don't have to move. I could stay with Mom and we could replant the garden with a little baby cheeky and giggling.

"When, then? When will you be ready?"

"I don't know? What does that have to do with anything? That's not the point. We wouldn't even be talking about this if—"

"But we are. You act like having the baby isn't a possibility."

"Because it's not. It shouldn't be."

"Because I'm not perfect yet. Right."

"Clare, I swear to god. Not that this like, matters. You know I want to be with you forever, and I love you, but. We've only been together for a year. I mean. I don't know."

Something inside me zips up, if at first I was flayed for whatever of Dane's pickings.

"I know I'm supposed to say that it's up to you. And like, I would—I mean—I don't know. I don't know. We can't do this, Clare. Please."

Would I look at my baby and always remember her dad begging her away?

His eyes unable to meet mine as he told me to vacuum out my insides?

Would she look like him?

"Say something." He sits down next to me. I look at him to see how it feels. I stare. I let that sit.

"You think I would be a bad mom."

"Clare, please."

"You do."

He opens another beer. I hadn't noticed the pile, five or six, growing behind us.

“I think my life would be over.” His face is the moment a bee realizes its sting.

What a poisoned way to start a life.

I want to walk away, storm off dramatically, but I’m someone who cannot help getting lost. And I don’t want Dane to have to help me. He had wanted to avoid labels when we first started dating, but when we moved in together, something changed, and he made me promise we wouldn’t give up, that we’d always be kind. He’d said couples could get so ugly. He said when people are in love and it gets fucked up, they turn on each other that much harder. I feel what must be a misplaced sense of relief, or perhaps some form of hysteria, that all of this time he always could have, but never did until now, really hurt me.

I stare at the fire for a long time. Dane does too. He offers me a drink of his beer and I look at him. Probably out of pride he doesn’t retract his offer or move the bottle back into his chest. Eventually he takes a sip. He attempts to reminisce on our last camping trip, when we saw a bear walking along the shore of the lake. All of the campers swarmed to the parking lot as children cried into their shirts, while the bear sniffed along the rocks and algae clomping one large paw with great effort in front of the next one, not looking up at us, not looking at anyone, not even once.

We somehow watch the fire give out, walk to the bathrooms and get ready for bed, lie in our sleeping bags on our phones, and finally turn out the lantern without speaking. Dane somehow falls asleep.

My stomach turns. The nausea waves over me. I can only lay on my side otherwise it feels like a stone is pressing me into the ground. I want to wake Dane up just to tell him how tired I am. I want him to say, I know, and turn back over, maybe rest his hand near me, so I can

touch it if I want. Tomorrow I am eight weeks. This means, according to the lady on the phone, that I have one more week to take the pills. Otherwise they'll put the vacuum inside of me. I can't imagine an actual baby-looking thing sucked up in the vacuum-looking thing, suctioning down a tube, I think because I know somewhere inside that it might not really be a baby thing, not quite. But I feel that my anger, that Dane's anger, and the culmination of energy from this very violent moment, discussing the life or death of the unborn *thing*, I guess, has certainly infected the entire pregnancy, maybe even the *thing* itself, the confusion, stress, and complete lack of desire for its fruition, absorbed right into my belly. I wonder when love is enough, how much you need. I wonder how to explain, or how to make sense for myself, that it isn't one way or the other, want or not. But mostly I wonder how I know that I would make it all right, with or without Dane, with or without my mom, just me and kid. This, more than anything, prompts the decision to begin unwrapping itself in my head, spread over my brain coating every inkling of want, distrust, tenderness, hesitation, and love, somehow always love, driving deep deep, until there is only the duty to do the Right Thing.

And yet.

Going Nowhere

I dated this man when I was 23 for four months. Though since then there have been other relationships and men who left their impressions in their own way, I want to talk about this particular man because he doesn't know what he did to me and never will, but he's always stayed with me. His name was Joe.

This time of my life isn't exciting to talk about because when I was 23 I was a shell. If you looked at the world closely, everyone was. I'd been at my first real job out of college processing environmental permits for the state. Construction companies always wanted to rip trees out of the ground for new builds. I'd been given vague instructions from my doctor that because I worked remotely and I was fairly inactive, my lifestyle was very sedentary, and I needed to get up to move as much as I could. I'd also been given a warning from my optometrist that I was teetering a little too close to myopia, staring at screens all day and night. I remember how he said that to me, spoke about *my generation*, saying something like, so when you're sitting there texting for hours and shopping online, you're ruining your eyes, wasting them away. He said we were never made to look at screens this much. Something like that. I don't have a lot of the details because at that point I was never paying attention. It wasn't that long ago, so I should remember. But I didn't ever look around me. I didn't notice anything. Didn't think too much about anything except what was right there dangling in front of my face. I'll have to smudge some details here and there, but the details don't matter that much. So maybe I'd been onto something.

It was supposed to be every twenty minutes that I looked away from my laptop and my phone, but I remember feeling indignant over such a time limit. It wasn't my fault that this was what I had to do—stare at my laptop all day—yet here my body was, telling me no. Oh, the indignation. I was full of it. It was all I was; it was how everyone was. It still kicks up in me today. Social media stirred that up in people. It's because you constantly saw what everyone was doing and heard what everyone thought about everything. There were many things to feel wronged over. We're all self-centered in that way, taking everything personally. I was always bugged. I was bugged or I was nothing, sitting on my phone frozen in space.

I'm not sure what they wanted me to do about all of it. That whole generation, my optometrist's generation, my mom's, was holding onto something called "the real world" that they loved to tell me I didn't know a thing about. Walking outside and talking to each other was "the real world" from what I gathered. I do plenty of that now, though not because anyone shames me into it. What I wanted to say was that my mom and my optometrist were old heads and "the real world" had no loyalty to humanity or any of our desires if they hadn't noticed. We were moving on. The world was phones and laptops and social media and learn how to use it. But I was outnumbered. Most people of that generation thought my generation, the "phone people," would destroy the world with our social-media-melted brains. That's what my mom called me, a "phone person." If I could've calmed her down enough from her anti-technology tirades I might've been able to tell my mom that this was how the world was. Get in or jump ship.

She'd moved out to the middle of nowhere, three hours inland to the desert, and sold my childhood home because it was too close to the telephone towers. I'd only been to that house in

the desert twice in the year she'd been there. It was a long drive and it always felt like I was driving nowhere, like I'd never get there, like I'd never get anywhere. And then I did, and I felt like I was nowhere. When you went out to her porch, all you could hear were your own body sounds, churning away. I didn't understand how she did it. I didn't realize at the time the similarities in our lifestyles then—the solitude, the extremeness.

She received my rare texts, and I hers, at random, displaced times. The only way I knew she had a phone was because every so often I'd get a voicemail asking me, "Just who have you become, Samantha? This phone person! Why don't you stop and smell the roses?" I saved all twenty-one of the voicemails just because. I thought maybe one day I could knock her out of it.

Looking back now, there was something a little sick about the way I was always on my phone. I won't sit here and admonish myself because like I said, that's how the world is. I had an alarm on my wristwatch that went off when I needed to start moving. I'd get up from my desk and start shaking my wrist—I have the tiniest, flimsiest wrists—until I felt the bones cracking and my joints loosening, and then the watch would be satisfied for another hour. I'd shake like that while staring out my window, and I can still remember the feeling because the difference was so obvious and drastic, the way my body felt when I looked away from screens: the ache behind my eyes would immediately settle and I'd feel like I'd blinked for the very first time looking at the sun, and the throbbing at the center behind my forehead would reduce to a humble thumping. I looked at people outside through the sliver of the drawn curtains, only a strip of life revealed down the middle; everyone going somewhere, as they always would.

There isn't anything interesting to say about how I spent my days. It was Instagram, then YouTube, then Instagram, then YouTube, and, my favorite one of all, my photo roll. That was a

reflex I still have, tapping on that photo app to open up my life in a perfect, precise display in front of me. I'd sit there for hours looking through anything that popped up on the screen. I liked scrolling through the camera roll, fast fast fast, swiping my finger up then down, then stopping on a photo to jog up the memory, and collapse into that moment of my world. I remember a photo of Joe and me on my couch from that apartment. It was a theater-style couch with two worn, brown leather recliners attached together, with cupholders in between the seats sticky from years of spilled wine and soda. Hideous. Twenty dollars online from a guy in the valley. That's what the internet could do. I furnished the whole place like that. It was an ugly apartment, but I didn't care.

I didn't do well at that job at first. This estimation startled me when I heard it. My boss told me I was easily distracted. He said he saw me during the meetings over video, how I was always looking down at my phone. I'd been a good kid for the most part, and never had been reprimanded by authority figures. I had been a good student. I'd paid attention. My mom didn't have to worry about me coming home late. I drove the speed limit when I turned sixteen and Mom got me a tan 2004 Toyota Camry. I got into a good college.

It wasn't something I noticed I did, reverting to my phone, so I couldn't stop myself doing it. I didn't say that to my boss, of course. He didn't bring it up again, but I watched his face in that square during meetings, the gray specks in his dark hair, silver-wire glasses, trying to judge where his eyes were landing.

I'm a much better employee now. My boss and I are almost friends. He says he values a young person so devoted to something outside of themselves.

I remember this one particular night towards the end of our relationship because Joe was different than the previous four months we'd spent together. It was a Thursday night, which were the nights Joe and I went out together. Joe was a busy person. He was always doing something.

I checked the weather app several times for what to wear. I checked so many times because each time I looked at it I wasn't really looking at it, wasn't truly absorbing what I was seeing. Then I'd finally digested the number, 60°F, and got dressed accordingly. I'd put on my short-sleeve black dress, I assume. I assume because I wore it all of the time. Half of the photos of myself on my phone, and probably Joe's phone too, were of me in this black dress. Joe called me a creature of habit. He always pushed my phone out of my face and tapped my nose when he called me things like that. A homebody. Of my habit of looking through old photos, he called me a reminiscer.

I loved checking my work email on my phone and on my laptop. I loved having something to do and answering someone who needed me. Refreshing the page, looking through old chains, rereading emails I sent that I thought were well-worded and dignified and adult. "Adult" was what I was always trying to prove. That's natural for 23. Attempts at Adulthood were rare things that I clicked into, that brought me out of my phone haze. Answering a phone call with my full name. Buying bulk paper towels and toilet paper from Costco. At the time I'm sure I understood somewhere inside that my phone addiction wasn't Adult, but I didn't do anything about it until much later.

Addiction is addiction. What do they say? You can't stop unless you really want to.

What I remember well and resent today is how fast my days went by. I guess I can say I wasted my youth. It's more heartbreaking to think about than it is shameful. There was little I

knew about the world of daytime. These days I can slow my days down if I put my mind to it. Recognizing the position of the sun in the sky at what time of day is a peaceful pastime. When I'm far away on my phone or laptop for work, the sun helps me remember the earth and where I am in it. The sun is something I track throughout the day, in the backyard of my home. I have a setup out there with a fuchsia canvas seat cushion in an industrial patio chair and a marble table crowded with succulents and pothoses in clay pots. The nursery employee says these plants hate dying. I'm still getting used to taking care of something other than myself.

I had no plants back then. Not for the fact that I wouldn't have enjoyed them, but because I hadn't thought to buy any.

Before I talk about this night, I have to talk about our first date. After this first date I found that Joe was an easy person. People smiled at him when they met his glance. I first saw him from afar, before he saw me, at The Big Red bar. I recognized him from the dating app but from afar his eyes were much smaller and pinched than in the photos. From afar, he was smiling, and the crinkles of this smile made his eyes appear as if he was generating tears, squeezing them together to force the cries out.

I think about this face a lot, always pulling it up in my mind from the photo roll only left in my head.

When he walked up to the table where I was waiting, there was a burden in his gait. He seemed to walk with great effort. I didn't think about this walk he did in the moment, but now I consider it a trademark of who Joe was. Joe's great physical attempts to move through the world seemed acutely felt and, of course, metaphysically involved too. Metaphysical in that I think Joe had trouble existing in the world. I learned later that he couldn't stand it, the modernity of our

reality. He spoke about it as if he'd been placed on the wrong planet and knew there was no way out, and had to force himself through it. He spoke about how he worried for his mind, his spirit, and his higher self.

I used to brush him off, but I think about the world in this way now, of myself and others as “beings” with internal “selves.” I think about how much our insides rip apart on a level we don't fully see or understand, from the things we do to ourselves on the outside. Melting the brain, perhaps. I cherish this retrospective. I've forgiven myself by adopting this way of thinking. I could go on because I find this sentiment important, but this isn't about me.

On the first date Joe asked me questions about things I'd never thought about much: was I a city person? I wasn't sure. Here I was, though. Did I like to dance when I went out? I didn't go out much. I imagine I wouldn't dance, though, no. Was I an anxious person? I don't think so. I've never thought about it, so I guess not. Joe said he very much was. He said he got anxious all the time, but he was working on it. He said, “I mean look at the world, how can you not be?” He said he had a therapist, did I? No, I didn't. I didn't get a therapist until much later, after Joe.

I found his transparency alarming. I didn't know what to do with it. But he took my hand afterwards and smiled at me, eyes scrunched.

We took a selfie on my phone.

We got along. It wasn't something I thought about, which later Joe told me was how he knew I was comfortable. Overthinking was one of his anxious traits. He'd said, “I can talk to you without the discomfort. I feel like we click.” He said this was rare, and I guess when I thought about it, I felt so too. Neither of us had been with anyone in a while. Joe told me how lucky we were, because, “really Sam, it's really hard to meet people these days.”

I didn't know. I didn't think of it as something you tried to do. I had one good friend from college, Mira.

I said, "I suppose so."

He was looking for a girlfriend. It just happened. It's funny because Mira had told me to steer clear from dating apps because they were full of weirdos, but things had a way of working out for me back then, until they didn't. Joe wasn't a creep. He wanted to take walks with me after dinner. He pointed out a cloud if it was shaped like a rabbit or a dragon. He filled his gas tank at half-empty. He, I must have acknowledged at some point when we were still together, was Adult.

I'd gone home with him on the first date, but we didn't sleep together. We'd gotten all the way naked and looked at each other. His room was dark except for a neon green lava lamp. I felt like I was in high school sitting so awkward and naked like that in front of him. Who would touch who first? It felt like a very telling answer. It was quiet and weird and my breasts were out, so I asked, "What kind of music do you like?" Joe laughed then took out his phone and started playing Prince. The music flooded from a miniature speaker sitting on his dresser, the sound reaching across the room like a voice in a tunnel. He brought that speaker everywhere he went, he told me. He took long walks in the canyon behind his neighborhood. He had a pair of sneakers designated for those walks, yellow with a blue stripe on each side. They sat at the front door with mud scuffed around the edges and dried grass glued to the sides.

In his navy blue sheets, he told me we didn't have to do anything, which, for some reason, though I thought I *did* want to do something, made me not want to at all. I was a strange person. There were so many things I didn't understand about myself. It wasn't the abstinence that made me strange, I want to note. I wasn't sexually shy, and I'd slept with men who knew me less

than Joe did. But I don't know. I remember I'd looked at his body which was easier than looking at his face. He sat with his back curled and his palms open. He was thin and soft. The line of hair down his belly button was almost black in color. He was comfortable being quiet, or if he wasn't, it didn't show. Then I didn't say anything for a while so he repeated it, "you know, we don't have to do anything." He looked at his legs, then mine. He touched my shin with cold fingers. I noticed him noticing my hair, brushing his hand up against the grain. I think he thought something about me looking at my unshaved skin, something bohemian maybe, but I was just lazy.

I think of these things now, my unshaved legs, my unkept curly hair, my loose and mismatched clothing, my rainbow disaster of an apartment. It shouldn't have surprised me what Joe thought about me. That maybe I was worldly and outdoorsy. Now, I don't feel so much misunderstood by him than I feel he chose to see me in the best light, or perhaps the light he thought best suited himself.

"Your roommate is home," I'd told him in the bed. "Do you wanna watch a movie?" And that did it. I couldn't reactivate the moment even if I'd wanted to.

We instead spent the rest of the night lying next to one another, elbows kissing, watching videos, sometimes sharing a screen, sometimes not. We went through each other's Internet search histories, I guess as a joke, a different yet also sacred intimacy, as our nude skin reminded us it was bare every time we shifted positions. I kept pulling the comforter up to my neck and Joe laughed that he wasn't looking, don't worry.

That night I learned that the earth might be spinning faster than it ever has before, and that astigmatism never goes away, and that the eyes are the only body part fully grown at birth.

Joe pulled up photos on his phone of bloody and gangling eyeballs, some of them removed from their head, some floating in space, others sat on tables with their long nerved tails dragging behind, the pupil shocked and wide, looking as though its wandered into some dangerous place.

We didn't get dressed until Joe decided it was time for me to go home.

He'd looked at his phone then said, "It's two already. Should you get going, or?" I'd learn later that Joe cared deeply about sleep. He paid for my Uber and watched the car drive off from his window.

I remember in the car home thinking I'd never see him again. He wouldn't call, I thought. I wasn't exactly kicking myself, but I felt mad at myself for not performing. I thought of myself, how odd. I thought deeply about the movement of sex, the physicality, where my legs would go and if they'd touch his, where I might look, in his eyes or not. What he might've asked me to do. What he thought our sex would mean, and if it would mean the same thing to me. I didn't make any sort of proclamation and didn't land on the conclusion that I wouldn't ever sleep with Joe, but I set that thought aside to let it be, I guess, and opened my phone, tapped on Instagram. I didn't think about it for almost four months.

But this particular Thursday night date, four months in, Mira texted me as I was putting on my makeup and watching a YouTube video on my iPad. I used to wear the heaviest foundation caked over my skin because I was very insecure about acne, and I had very dry skin, so up close I looked like a cracked egg. Mira texted me asking something like, "is tonight THE night??" She asked me this almost every Thursday night. She was terribly interested. We didn't talk much, me and Mira, but almost constantly communicated through sharing posts on Instagram and sending YouTube video links over text. I'd texted back that I don't kiss and tell. I

knew she thought I was being a prude. Much later, well after Joe, Mira asked me what had been different about Joe than all of the other men. I told her I was being weird. I told her I didn't know; I hadn't thought about it.

Some things don't need to be thought about to death, my mom always said. But then she also said, *Maybe if you could get off your phone you might spend some time with your thoughts*.

All of the units in my apartment building surrounded a courtyard of palm trees and water-rotted-wooden benches. I'd sit out there for FaceTime calls. I wasn't concerned with vitamin D which goes without saying, but subconsciously I must've gravitated towards these benches every so often. I trust my cravings and reflexes. If I'm craving a saltine cracker I assume it's because I'm drinking too much water.

The arrangement of the tall walls of the complex—or perhaps it was something to do with the layout of the courtyard—made the walk from my apartment door to the sidewalk especially windy and dark like a cave. I can't remember ever seeing anyone in that courtyard, but I can tell you the color of the tiles lining the planters, bright cerulean blue.

On the street, dogs roughhoused in a frenzy on the browning grass, birds froze from the loss of the baked day in the dead droppings of the trees, leaves and dirt blew to the ground from storefront canopies. I took many pictures back then, probably a few per day. I loved getting pictures of weird dogs, one of those genetically-modified ones where the tail was too long and the legs too short.

I passed by Coco's Restaurant and remembered a photo of Mira and I drunkenly posed in front of its window. I remembered this moment often because it was one of those nights where everything was right. Those nights when the world feels large and you feel that you've explored

it. I'm sure I scrolled through to find the picture and I'm sure I gave up after a few seconds. I opened Instagram, I'm sure. I was one of those people who stared down at their phone as they walked, nearly tripping over cracks in the cement and acting as a roadblock to anyone who crossed my path. This image of me makes me squirm. It's an image I like to shake out and avoid, an image that haunts me when I'm trying to sleep, trying to ward off anything uncomfortable, which of course, lays the perfect breeding ground for an ambush of uncomfortable thoughts.

I got to the bar, our meeting spot, before Joe. The bar was dark red and packed like the inside of a mouth jammed with extra teeth. The Big Red. Framed photos of celebrities who'd visited overtook the walls in gaudy golden frames. It always felt claustrophobic in there, but I noticed it only when I looked up. My mom would tell me that it was a good thing to be around other people like that. I ordered our usual—the same bottle of Cabernet with a ghostly figure of a woman's back covered in tattoos on the label and a Caesar salad, extra dressing, with two plates to share. I stared up at the TV broadcasting a basketball game as the bartender grabbed the wine. I had no patience for waiting. I hated it. My phone probably lit up with notifications in my palm: emails from work, a new Instagram follower, breaking news from *NYT*. I indulged them all with fervor. It's not a stretch to say I could've been tapping my foot.

I sat somewhere in the back at a booth and placed a secure hand on my laptop in my bag. I brought my laptop to these dates because after the date we'd go to Joe's apartment, and he fell asleep early, and I'd get bored.

While I waited for Joe I played a game called Virtual Families. I loved this app. I fell into frequent obsessions every few months. The game worked like this: You chose an avatar and they moved into a shabby house that you needed to fix up with money earned from their randomly

bestowed career, fruit examiner, for example. You waited for an email that gave you a list of six eligible partners. You picked one. You married them. You dragged one avatar on top of the other and they jumped on the bed, shook their heads and bodies and romped together, then, “A New Baby!” You raised the baby. You had one, or three, or seven more. You died at 56 or so. You chose one of the kids and you started over with them. You kept playing and regenerating until your family tree was a full, lush behemoth of an oak. If you left them alone for too long, they died. I’d done this a couple of times. I’d abandoned them and opened the game weeks later to find them translucent and gray on the bed. You got to start over. Then there’d be a random avatar walking into your home, your eighteen-generation upgraded home with virtual Persian rugs and virtual bananas on the counter, and the oak wiped itself from your screen, and you started over with this single avatar, a stranger to all the history there. I’d normally quit then.

“Sorry, sorry. I stayed at work for a couple extra minutes.” Joe always kissed my cheek when he saw me. I found this a dated greeting, but it was charming.

Joe was a programmer and spent all day on the computer. He’d just been prescribed these special preventative eye glasses, the kind my doctor told me maybe I needed to look into. Joe wore them all of the time, though, these black boxy, thick glasses that looked heavy on his nose. They didn’t quite fit, or maybe they weren’t quite adjusted, because one side sat lower than the other. Asymmetry in the ears.

I told him it was fine. His untucked tie, his corporate button-down, the wine bottle sat between us. I thought, we’re Adults now aren’t we?

Joe typed something in his phone while he moved into the seat across from me. He then shut his phone off, something he asked that we both do for our date nights. I never really shut

mine off, but I put it in my bag and did my best. I reveled in the regularity of our Thursday evenings, almost procedure-like. Another woman might have wanted spontaneity, but I'd always romanticized the patterns in things. The stockpile of posts and videos I wanted to show him on my phone cycled through my brain. I poured him a glass and a drop of wine dotted the wooden table between us.

"Have a good day?" he asked, and I nodded.

"You?" I asked him. He shrugged. I took a sip of wine.

I was thinking about a video Mira sent me. I remember it even now because it was scarring. The video was of a Golden Retriever doting at her single pup attached to her breast, the voiceover informing that the rest of her newborn puppies were burned in a barn fire.

Joe was chugging his wine. It was something about limiting the acidic exposure to his teeth. The quicker the better to get the wine down. He ate large, slow bites and hummed in delight. It used to annoy me, the hums, but I mostly ignored the sound. He thoroughly indulged in every experience to its fullest. His bites were loud and crunchy and wet, leaving dressing dripping from his bottom lip.

"I just want to show you this one video," I said to him. "We're not talking about anything, anyway." I'd said something like that. I should've known. I should've detected the glitch in his expression. It must've been there. I can't remember this face of Joe's, can't conjure it up in my brain, but I can imagine well enough what it would've looked like. The tranquility of his pleasant, resting face, but hitched in some way, intensely drawn in the center as if pressurized from underneath the skin, and of course, eyes pinched.

"Okay, fine. One video," he said.

Joe found the Golden Retriever video disturbing. He asked why I would want to show anybody that. He shook his head in a kind of paternal disappointment. I should've felt small, but I felt indignant instead, like our relationship was prescribed by Joe's wishes only.

I don't remember if we talked about anything else. This failure of memory haunts me. I sit here and think, how could I forget? How wasn't I paying attention? And this makes me feel that because I didn't know who I was back then, how could I know who I am now?

I do remember, with great vividness, after the bar, at Joe's apartment.

When we got there I turned on the TV. Joe used to say I liked to nest. I'd prop up the pillows around my body, cocoon myself with blankets and sheets. I'd squirm until I'd landed comfortably with my elbows perched into the mattress holding my phone up in front of my face. Nesting, he'd made it sound creature-like and endearing. He always saw good.

I remember him lying down next to me. For some reason, I remember him being still, his body under the navy sheets like a calm, flat lake.

I remember my eyes aching and looking at the ceiling, doctor's orders. I squeezed my eyes when they ached—crow's feet recently settled into my skin—and I looked at Joe. His hands were folded over his stomach and he was staring up at the ceiling, too. His breath raised his chest up, then down. His profile was stubbled with black dots and pimples.

"What are you doing?" I chuckled. My feed refreshed. I heard the laugh track on the TV.

"I'm just bored," he said.

Mira sent me a photo of us from graduation, one year ago from that point. I sent her a heart and opened Virtual Families.

He said, “I’m going out to the desert next week so I can’t meet for Thursday. It’s Will’s bachelor party. He wants to go dirt biking, I guess.”

“Oh, okay. Who’s Will?”

Joe was quiet. My virtual family was gathering at the kitchen to eat a meal together.

“You met him a couple months ago. My best friend from college.”

Joe took my phone. He snatched it. He nicked my pointer finger with his nail. He put my phone on the table next to the bed. He didn’t lock the screen. I saw the blur of my virtual family’s home. Joe folded his hands over himself. I had the displaced thought of wondering if he fell asleep like that, face pointed straight up to the sky.

I looked at him, shocked. I couldn’t remember the last time someone took something out of my hand. Maybe my mom when I was a kid. I felt an immediate stir of rage, being told to go to my room or forced to drink the entire glass of milk.

Then he’d said, “We went to Will’s birthday party, remember? And I went on that Euro trip with him after graduation.”

I didn’t remember Will. I could have pretended, but I didn’t. I felt hot. I had no great skills in handling temper. Absolutely no patience. Of course I didn’t. I had everything at my fingertips on my phone, rapid fire.

I hadn’t met many of Joe’s friends or any of Joe’s family. He’d never met mine either. We were still sort of new, I suppose.

I remember reflexively reaching for my phone several times, my hand falling flat against my pocket and around the bed. I remember how it looked peeking over Joe’s body on the table, like a rare sighting of some previously unseen creature.

A couple of months in I started sleeping over. Joe told me that every so often he'd wake up after feeling the bed shift quickly, then see me sat up straight in the bed, jolted, eyes wide open and resolute, he said, like I'd been hardwired for a mission, earphones wrapped around my head and neck, phone clutched in one hand and the TV remote in the other.

In that moment with my phone in Joe's possession, I imagined wielding the TV remote over his face, climbing over his body, and bashing it into his nose again and again. I was never a violent person, but these thoughts, I reason now, were as a result of my screen time. I like to believe I would've never had the idea of such violence had I not seen something of a similar nature online prior.

But then Joe moved in to kiss me. It caught me off guard. His lips were chapped and his mouth tasted like wine. His hands moved around. The blankets slid away from my chest. My mind flew when we were kissing. I was never in the moment. I can't imagine that now. When my head strays now, I root it back in place like an anchor. During that kiss I thought about everything one could think about while kissing. I thought about those flavored lipglosses I used to buy when I was a teenager. I thought about the aisles in Target. I thought about my walk home that night. I was still angry of course, but also struck by Joe's passion and perhaps the sentiment of his urgent desire for my body, so urgent that he had to steal my phone out of my hands.

Joe's lips moved to my neck then back to my mouth. I suddenly felt our kiss for exactly what it was: layers of skin dragging and rubbing against each other, touch on touch that we're meant to make something of. I wondered what other people thought about when they kissed. I wondered how they felt.

He broke away and said, breathy, "Let's go on a trip."

I laughed. “You’re already going on a trip. Will’s party.”

“When I get back. Let’s go somewhere together. I love to travel. I want to travel with you. I think you’d love it. We could go to Paris and London. Do the whole Europe thing. Everyone should do the Europe thing at least once. Or we could go backpacking. See the world. You’d love it.” He went back to kissing me. He pulled my body over his. I kissed him, but then I grabbed my phone. It was right there. Then I pulled away. I didn’t like kissing much. It felt like nothing. It felt like brushing past a wall.

For a second here I searched my brain; I don’t know what for. I don’t know why. I just remember that I did stop, for a second. I remember I immediately opened Instagram and searched for Will from Joe’s followers list. I followed him. I scrolled through the app then switched to Virtual Families. The parent avatars were asleep in separate beds. They did that sometimes.

Joe was silent. I knew what I’d done but I didn’t think it was a big deal. I couldn’t see the whole situation. I was used to a zeroed in reality, the world of the screen, so collapsable and clear and defined. I remember looking over to him. When I think about this face Joe had on, I want to thrash my body around. I felt some urge to make amends. It was a simple thing to do but it was like my tongue was chained to the roof of my mouth. Like my fingers were strung in place, tight. I didn’t know what that was about.

Now I know what that was. It was the pathetic tragedy of having nothing to say. It was induced by apathy and maintained by an attachment to the digital world. The inability to connect, to get close to someone.

“Please come here, Sam.” He opened his arms and I moved into them with my phone pressed into my chest. I curved into his body and he sighed. We stayed like this for a minute. I waited for Joe to say something but he just sat there. I looked up at his chin and his face was still. Not restful still, focused still. I didn’t know that face. I suddenly felt what four months knowing someone really felt like and I didn’t feel so bad that I hadn’t slept with him yet. How long was four months really? What was Mira talking about?

Looking back I realize how forgiving Joe was. It is a rare trait amongst a cold world. He was truly a good person, truly interested in having something with me, scavenging something real out of me, the me living in a deluded reality inside my phone.

He kissed me again. I thought about pulling away again, but I thought he’d stop soon. He hugged me into his body and it was nice, actually. I remembered when we first started seeing each other, how we’d hug like this, and I’d go home with that unique feeling on skin of being touched, of being desired, lasting, like his hands were still there, as if my skin was tightly wrapped, taut so every touch was a tingle. Like getting more likes than you’ve ever gotten on an Instagram post. I knew that was shallow, but tell me it didn’t feel good. What was a like but an affirmation that you were doing something right, that they liked how you made them feel?

Joe pulled back and cupped my cheeks, studied my face, made a face of his own like he was searching for something, released me and looked around as if he’d find it someplace else.

I remember this well. I remember tapping my phone screen and it staying black. I remember thinking, weird, it was just on. I remember tapping it again and again and again and nothing.

“Can I say something that might be tough?” Joe sat up in the bed.

“Yeah, sorry. Lemme just plug my phone in.” I tangled out of Joe’s grasp and walked to the wall outlet to plug it in. I tapped the screen again and nothing.

“Sam.”

“Sorry, it’s my phone. It was fully charged but now it won’t turn on.” I remember the redness in my finger and the hot and tingling impressions in the pads of my fingers from pressing the side buttons, tapping the screen harder. I remember the immediate panic.

“Can we talk for a second?”

“Yeah, sorry. I’m just confused.” I tapped it again and again. I was so stupid. I played out all of the steps that a panicked person does in a time of crisis. I ignored all rationale. I ignored what was really important, what was right in front of me.

“Well can you figure it out later?”

I looked up at him. “I need my phone to be on. Can you look up what I’m supposed to do to get it to turn back on?”

Joe gave me a look, a look I knew well. It set something off in me, like he’d been holding his finger over the button and finally pressed it. He was going to say something about the present moment, how far I was from it, how addicted I was to my phone, how this was “the real world” and I was not in it. He was about to say something like my mother might, with that face on. I always knew he had it in him.

But actually he said, “I don’t think you want to be with me.”

“What?” I looked back to my blank phone. I frowned in its reflection. I looked at Joe then back down again. I begged silently, *please, please, please, turn on.*

“You don’t want to hug me. You don’t want to kiss me. You don’t want to have sex with me. And that’s fine. And I wouldn’t say anything if I thought it was for a different reason, but I don’t think it’s because you’re not ready. I think you don’t want to be with me. Please correct me if I’m wrong.” He looked like he was going to say something more, then didn’t. His mouth hung open just enough to suggest that he might, at any moment, discover something else that had been bothering him, and shoot that out as well.

I tried to ignore the feeling rising up inside, the anger idling in my throat waiting to be let out, and instead kept my attention to my phone. I don’t know. But it was like he was asking me to prove it and I didn’t know what and I didn’t know how. How I had gotten four months in with this man, I still can’t understand.

“Well, that’s not how it is,” I told him. “I don’t know how it is but it’s not like that.” I felt myself on the very edge of something.

“Could you come here? Forget about your phone for a minute?”

I unplugged my phone from the wall and brought it with me back to bed. For the life of me I wished I knew what he was saying right then because I knew he was saying something that mattered to him, but I was too busy trying different combinations of buttons, different lengths of holding them down, tapping as discreetly as I could.

“Does this mean anything to you? Sam?” I did catch this. I hear this question when I’m going to sleep. I hear it when I’m staring at the sky, at clouds that look like rabbits and dragons.

“I’m really sorry and I want to have this conversation but I need to deal with this. Look, anyone could be trying to get ahold of me right now.” I had set my phone down and I’d took my laptop out of my bag. Opened it. Black.

“What the *hell*,” I said. Something dropped inside my chest. I’ll never forget what I felt. How seriously I felt it. Like my whole life had wrapped up and smashed itself into a wall. I pressed every key I could think of on my laptop. I dragged my fingers across the keyboard.

“This is exactly what I’m talking about. All you care about is your phone and your computer.”

There it was. My mother’s voicemails figuring themselves into Joe’s voice.

“Oh my god. Don’t start. I hate that ‘holier than thou’ bullshit. You use your phone just as much as I do. You sound like my mom.” None of this was true. Joe was never on his phone. He made an annoying point of it. It still annoyed me a little bit if I thought about it. But it’s a misplaced annoyance. A projection.

“I wouldn’t know. I don’t know anything about your mom. I don’t know anything about your life. I know your Instagram username. You don’t know anything about my life. You didn’t even remember meeting my best friend.”

“Can you seriously please just look up what I’m supposed to do to make them turn back on? Please? I have years of photos and messages and documents on here. I haven’t backed up anything to my laptop in forever. I’ll lose it all. Please.”

I remember Joe’s face, deep red. When we’d gotten to his apartment he’d changed into a t-shirt with a band I’d never heard of on it. His hair had lost its rise and the gel collected like sediment on his scalp. I was confronted by the thought that if I’d known Joe before, maybe a few years ago, I didn’t think we’d be together. I wasn’t sure if I was attracted to him. I don’t know if I could’ve named anyone I was attracted to.

“Answer my question. Does this relationship mean anything to you, really?”

“I can’t think about that right now. I know my phone shouldn’t be my whole life, but *everything* is on here. All of my memories. All of my life. If I could just get it to turn back on we could talk. Imagine how you would feel if this happened to your stuff. I know you’d be freaking out.” I tapped and tapped and clicked and pressed and nothing.

“Do you ever think about how maybe,” Joe had said, “reminiscing on memories and photos on your phone all the time means you don’t have a life at all?”

I should’ve given him something. He was asking for so little of me.

Joe asked me to leave. This was the last time I saw him.

The next day I’d gone to the Apple Store.

Nothing you can do. They’re gone. That’s what the guy had said. Sometimes this just happens. We’re very sorry. There’s nothing we can do. We can get you new ones. Start fresh.

I fell asleep crying. Some voice inside told me I was being dramatic but I didn’t think so. I still don’t think so, because memories are precious. And even if I had a misguided way of relishing in them, I feel sorrow for what I lost. The photos of Joe, the photos of Mira, the photos of my life so much more alive on the screen than it actually was back then.

I had to buy a new phone. I posted on Instagram for everyone to text my new number, because I’d lost all of them. Joe sent me a text, just his name. I think of that text as an almost ridiculously kind thing to have sent.

My boss told me he would get me a new laptop and I’d have to come in to meet with an IT guy to set up all of our software. My boss said it wasn’t the end of the world.

On the day I got the news, I'd been watching Netflix almost all day. I was switching between my TV, my iPad, and my phone. I was grieving. I missed the photos desperately. I watched YouTube. I watched collegiate a cappella trophy ceremonies. I clicked clicked clicked on whatever popped up. I watched the last two minutes of every NBA final's game since 1992. I watched "Best Airport Reunion Moments." I picked up my phone and tapped on Photos and there was nothing of course, but I kept doing it. I watched reality TV because it felt like there was someone else in the room. I texted Mira and she FaceTimed me, consoled me, told me that she'd send over as many photos that she had of us as she could. She said at least I still had Instagram and YouTube.

I need to explain something before I can talk about what happened to Joe.

Here's how I know I didn't know myself. Not one bit. I do not know what Joe saw in me on that first date. I don't know why he thought we clicked. Here's what I think happened. Joe was lonely. Joe was a real-world guy in a world full of virtual people. Joe identified leaves by the pattern of their lines, their colors according to season. He drove four hours by himself to state parks and forests for something fun to do on a Saturday. I'm not saying that these things make someone more worldly or alive. This was just who Joe was, what he was interested in. Joe wanted somebody. He wanted someone to brave the virtual world with him, attempt to dismantle it, knee-deep in mud, to frolic among the skyscrapers and gray streets of the concrete jungle. He was trying to do something different with someone, and he'd made an error in choice. Maybe it was my unshaved legs or my black dress, the stains on the chest. Maybe I'd been focused and intent on that first date, more than I remembered being, stared deep into his eyes while he spoke, or fudged the details of my aptitude for adventure. Maybe he was just desperate.

I don't know if Joe thought I was someone that loved the things he did. Or if he had the twisted assumption that he could change me. I never got to know him well enough to find out.

I remember refreshing Instagram, dragging my finger down the screen.

Will had posted.

It was Joe.

Joe on Halloween dressed as Woody from *Toy Story*; Joe and his friends in a jeep parked in the shallow edges of a river; Joe and Will posed in front of a redwood tree, the tip out of frame; Joe, this man he was before me, helmet strapped around his head, body attached to a harness and zip line, on the edge of a square wooden platform, nothing but sky and space surrounding him; Joe's of all sorts that I didn't recognize doing things I didn't know he'd ever done, posing with people I'd never met.

Joe in the California sun stood in front of a lake, tan with an impromptu smile, the photo faded, foregrounded by large, cryptic font: "RIP JOE."

Of course I didn't believe it at first. Nothing was real online. I knew that at least. I remember all the comments, the repeated iterations of "RIP" and "Joe will be missed" and "he was such a great guy." I took a screenshot of the photo and then the comments, opened my messages and sent the photos to Joe, with an *lol what is this* typed beneath. It was just like me to ignore the hostility between us and send "lol" despite the fight we'd shared days before.

I tapped the call icon on Joe's contact and put it on speaker. I looked through the accounts of the users who left comments while his voicemail played. I called him again. I texted him again. I sent a message through Instagram to Will. I felt ridiculous. I didn't, but then I did.

Acutely. The laugh the boys must've been having. I imagined never speaking to Joe again. A four-month ghosting is cruel, but it isn't hard to do. I was so indignant.

I tapped on my photos, but nothing, of course. I went to look through my mom's voicemails. But they weren't there either, of course.

It was all so ridiculous. Some friends Joe had. Who thought this was funny? I opened Instagram and stared at the photos again. Ridiculous. My heart beat like it had lost its way, fervent and confused.

I wondered who else had seen the post. Joe's family. I checked my work email. I opened Virtual Families. Everyone was dead. There was a stranger in my house.

I called Joe again. I called my mom. It didn't even ring once. I did all that I could, I guess. Who was I, anyway, to Joe? A four-month fling with a girl who wouldn't even put out? Somewhere inside the truth settled. But back then I was numb. It was the natural reaction to the influx of trauma constantly flooding through my screen.

I remember packing up my things.

I don't think people are meant to remember nothingness, or the long amount of time spent without a distinct emotion to identify with. There's nothing to remember when there's nothing to feel. I only remember movement. Clothes in my backpack. Laptop in its case. Phone in hand.

I ordered an Uber. When I got in the car and loaded up my life right there next to me, I was filled with a safe kind of peace that everything could get so small. I think that's what I'd say to my mom about the appeal of phone people; she always asked me. I remembered an article my mom had sent however long ago about the adverse effects of social media addiction. It was accompanied by a voicemail I'd wished I could pull up and listen to. She was softer in that

voicemail, a new, gentler angle probably produced out of desperation. She really thought she was losing me back then.

I typed the title of the article into Google with the best of my memory. I found one, not sure it was the same and it didn't matter, but I read for a while before getting car sick. I opened my photos, nothing. I opened the article again and tried to read. *Poor stimulation. False sense of reality. Zombielike. Desensitization. Loss of empathy.* I texted my mom that I was coming. The green delivery line at the top of the screen stuttered in its slow crawl to the end. I went back to the article.

The screen refreshed to blank white.

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That's how I knew we were close. Almost to nowhere. I switched my phone off. I tossed it into my luggage pile next to me. I thought about another one of those voicemails Mom had sent, something that stayed with me. She'd said I needed to confront my reality, but unfortunately, I'd somehow ended up the kind of person who could only confront their reality once they'd been triggered by something.

I thought about Joe. All of those times I'd wanted to pull away. How I couldn't stand a hug. How I'd sit there bargaining. All of the times I couldn't be close, couldn't get close, didn't know how to be close and open up, at the same time. All I ever really wanted to do was let go. But in that hug, remembering it really, that feeling of being touched, sometimes I thought, I better just hold on.

It has not been that long since all of this happened. I never looked into Joe's death seriously. I followed the incident like a scared child down a dark hallway through Will's sparse

Instagram posts. They were very close the two of them, I came to know. I've never pried into the details because I like to imagine Joe as he was pictured to me the very last time, in Will's tribute post. And as for the pictures of mine that are gone for good, I've accepted it. I don't need a reminder of what I was up to. Instead, here's what remains in my mind: Joe among the forest, Joe along the beach, Joe outside, making his way through the real world. I think—if it's true what they say about the roll of film that plays your life in your eyes before you die—Joe will make an appearance, there in the trees.

When I'm sitting outside in my yard doing my work, sorting through permits saying no, you cannot chop those trees down, no, that is a sacred, protected space, I look up from my screen and take in what's in front of me. I haven't gotten to travel yet, but I plan to. The whole Europe thing. Of course I use my phone; that's the real world, isn't it? The real world—I think I know a bit about that. I'm not interested in escaping anything. My photo roll is much smaller, however. Weird dogs with different colored eyes, massive trees that can't fit in the screen. I go on walks now, in the canyon behind my house. I bring my phone but that's because sometimes Mom calls me, and for some reason, I get great reception out here. My walks are long and sunny. I've got the freckles to prove it.

REFERENCES

On page 11, I mention Malcolm Gladwell in the context of the subject matter of his 2019 book, *Talking to Strangers*.

Also, on page 11, I mention Dale Carnegie in similar nature regarding his 1936 book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

On page 14, I mention Simone Weil not in reference to any specific work of her career but in honor of what she wrote and accomplished concerning moral justice.

On page 33, I mention Marina Abramović in reference to her career as a performance artist.

On page 77, Joe plays music by Prince.

On page 81, Sam plays a game called Virtual Families. It is a mobile app developed by Last Day of Work.

On page 84, Sam shows Joe a video of a Golden Retriever. I found that video on the internet somewhere.

On page 94, Joe is dressed up as Woody from *Toy Story*, directed by John Lasseter in 1995.

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