

Wild Stabs at Love Or Something Like it



Jessica Harman

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Whispered Emergencies

The pool tables in the bar named after a Jean-Paul Sartre novel were bathed in red light. Their green velvet looked like a deep black. I perched on the edge of the smooth wood of one of these tables. The shot was difficult, but if I shot with the stick behind my back, maybe I could manage the yellow striped ball in the left corner pocket. I imagined the trajectory as if I was a sniper and my life depended on it.

Analyzing geometry was fun, but it wasn't as much fun when you were trying to look beautiful. I knew I didn't look beautiful yet, tonight. I hadn't been able to switch on the light within me this evening. Everyone was feeling it. After all, Jimmy and Kevin were here with me because I had been so beautiful on the train, and at dinner, and now here I was looking like a facecloth on the floor. I was playing pool badly, to boot.

The reason I wasn't looking beautiful was because I was too nervous to look beautiful. A little voice within me was saying, "You're not it. You're not it." And "it" meant beautiful. When I was relaxed, it came almost naturally. I still had to pump myself up a little bit. I've learned that if you pretend you use really expensive four-hundred face cream, it's just as good as using the real thing. Mind over matter.

"Do you guys believe in Mind over Matter?" I asked suddenly, as I was perching my ass in tight black denim on the edge.

There was a three-second pause.

"I guess," said Kevin.

Jimmy said, "It can work, I suppose."

I remember around the antebellum mahogany table with a turkey in a state of being carved, the suburban Virginia darkness outside the picture window glistening a little in the rain in the darkness. My brother said, "Jodi Foster says beautiful isn't something she is. It's something she does." I've always remembered that, and my brother gazing into the turkey as if it were a crystal ball telling him that one day he would meet Jodi Foster, though he would not.

That was when I talked to my mom and stepfather. That was back when my brother would talk to me.

I prayed a little bit as I pointed my cue stick at the white ball. I felt Jimmy's eyes on me. In that moment when I wanted choirs of angels around me, but felt they weren't there, I took my shot, and missed.

I wanted to sink into the black wallpaper of Nausea, this cool bar, but of course that's impossible.

Kevin's turn.

I slid my ass in my tight black jeans off of the pool table's edge, to give him room. His grunge hair fell in twirling locks that verged on dreads. He was the kind of guy I dated in high school, not so long ago, who smoked pot but was still really good at math. Of course I couldn't ask him if he smoked pot, but he did smell of patchouli, which I took as a clue. He reminded me of a cowboy but without the hair on his horses, or cows, and with dreadlocks starting to form. He had large hairy nostrils. This was one of the reasons why I didn't find him to be good-looking, which is why I was trying to get Jimmy instead. Also, Kevin was tall, and I never like to be into guys who I feel could pound me into the earth. I like to have a leg up on them: I liked the shorter guys, the skinny ones.

I studied Kevin's features, almost too big for his face in a roundish way, as he walked around the pool table, deciding what to do.

He got a blue solid ball in.

Jimmy began walking around the table. I liked Jimmy's scarecrow thinness and pointy nose. He looked like a poet-lover-boy in a beret, back in Paris in the day, though he couldn't really speak French (whenever we came in contact with someone who only spoke French, like that waitress at The Shed Café, they called upon my shaky expertise, which might have been shaky, but was still there nonetheless). Jimmy was on my team: the two of us against Kevin as we oscillated turns.

I wondered if Jimmy was fixated on me secretly. I wasn't at my best tonight. He said something to Kevin and they laughed, but I couldn't hear, because a Metallica song started playing on the sound system. I wondered why there was heavy metal in a punk bar, but I suppose there's some cross over.

I went through the motions of the game. What was at stake? Coolness. Being desirable. I was young, only twenty-one, and I wanted to make some memories I could keep. I remember once meeting a sorority girl, who said her main goal was making memories she could have after she graduated, then she got old. It was lame, I knew, but I thought much the same thing. The memories I made were in a bar named Nausea, though, instead of at rugby matches.

What was also at stake was whether or not I could sleep with Jimmy. It meant something to me. I didn't want to marry him or anything. It was a sense of fate that was driving me, nonetheless. We had something we needed to tell each other, or learn from each other, or exchange, so that we could possess that, and go on to the next thing.

After our game of pool, which Kevin won, we sat at a table in the back of the bar, on a raised platform. We ordered a pitcher of beer from a waitress with a retro blonde beehive, which was certainly outrageous in a punk bar. Fifties in a punk bar? That takes guts. Her big smile broke my heart. I couldn't imagine smiling at people all night. In fact, I don't think I'd smiled much that evening.

"Ten dollars," she said.

I didn't have much money, but I was still able to contribute to the pitcher without being a mooch. I produced a blue five dollar bill from my wallet and put it on the table, where Kevin also put some money, and Jimmy was good for the tip (he bought the previous pitcher all on his own).

I was the kind of feminist who didn't want guys to pay for me.

I was the kind of feminist who was confused. My body was mine, I knew that. I could take it back from society. And do what? The world hungered for me as I hungered for it. I knew there'd be a time in the future when both of these things would be true. This is what it was to be alive, just sitting at Nausea with Kevin, the unattractive big grunge dude, on one side of me, and Jimmy, the thin rock star with long black hair who wore Drakar Noir, on the other side of me.

Jimmy made me want to climb a tree and jump off it, pretending I was a bird or an angel. Maybe I could fly. He made me want to be an airplane or a rocket ship going to Mars. It would be great to go to Mars. All that red soil to play in. Who knows? Anything's possible. He made me want to forget who I was and just be silly. We had not reached that stage in our relationship where silliness was allowed, though, and I wondered if we ever would. We wouldn't have time, though, I knew. He lived in a different city and was just visiting his Dad who lived in Montreal. Within a week, Jimmy would be back on the train to Virginia.

*

The city was as sad as a weeping willow in autumn. Reflections in store windows looked like the soft branches of a willow sweeping a blue pool of water, just barely choppy with waves. I saw maps of sad unknown states of mind coagulate and converge and then dissipate when I looked at glass windows. Cars were going by in the streets. I looked around me as the three of us wandered down St. Catherine Street with its expensive Canadian clothing stores and cafés.

The city was a bit of a wind tunnel, too. We could not escape its grayness, even though the three of us smiled a lot at each other, perhaps a little awkwardly. Sometimes we just looked at each other and wonder, lost in our own lives, as if the meaning of life was perhaps lost on us. We knew it, too. We walked side by side downtown after getting coffee at a small café called "Calories," and I wanted to take Jimmy's hand, but knew better. Something just told me not to.

We walked to the mall on *Rue Ste. Catherine*, called *Le Faubourg*, again, where the crêperie was making sweet-smelling confections next to the Arabic place that served mint tea in Styrofoam cups, with real mint sprigs were steeping.

There were kiosks of restaurants, much like a food court except it was a hallway. You got your food at a kiosk in the hallway then sat at one of the seating areas, which were also long. Montreal dealt with space differently than an American place. It was less convenient, but in the end, it worked out.

Soon, Kevin, Jimmy, and I sat in the food court's oblong table section again, eating crepes. There was a wall made of windows that looked out onto St. Catherine Street, and we could people-watch while we twirled whipped cream and maple syrup into our mouths.

Jimmy opened his wallet to reveal the Canadian money that his Dad gave him, which was good for him to spend on us, here in Montreal.

He said, "Monopoly money," which offended me. My country's money is not part of a game. Well, maybe it is. We're part of America's big game of Monopoly. It made me sad and angry, at Jimmy, in particular, for making me think these things and feel ashamed at the truth. Maybe I was angry at Jimmy for making me think a lot of things, or maybe I was grateful to him. It was hard to tell exactly what he made me feel and why, and this is what drew me to him.

The crepes we were eating were filled with strawberries with whipped cream and maple syrup. As I put a bite in my mouth with the plastic fork, I thought for a moment that this was heaven. The

company of my newfound friends who I met on the train and a good breakfast after a night at Naus playing pool was all you could really ask of life. I knew it was all downhill from here. The sunlight came in the window of the food court at a certain angle, and I didn't know what to say to sound interesting, so I fake laughed at Jimmy's bad joke about Monopoly money. It struck me that that's how you played the game even if you were nervous. Why I was, I don't know.

"I'm having fun with you guys here," I said, then realized that was rather a dorky thing to say. They both kept eating, but did glance up and nod as if to say a sort of "yes."

*

Jimmy, Kevin, and I were going up in the elevator of Jimmy's Dad's building. I noticed there was no 13th floor, just 12 and 14. Musing on this, I stood between my two new friends. They were my warm-blooded American friends, who were shivering in this cold.

Kevin looked like a big loveable *Sesame Street* character with his wild hair. I didn't know if that was on purpose. I kept noticing his hair throughout our visit, because it disturbed me. He didn't do anything with it. He didn't care. His hair said, "I don't care." Later in life I would learn that this was a feeling for things, a deep feeling for the irrelevance of American capitalism. But back then, when I was riding in the elevator snug between Jimmy and Kevin, it was Jimmy who looked like some sort of gothic rock star medicine man who I wanted. He was clean shaven. His long black hair was combed back. I was in love. I wanted to find words for this love, but I looked over at him and no words popped in my mind. I couldn't tell him anything. Really, I had nothing to say. Desire sometimes has no words. It's all intuition and the scent of blood, or the scent of Drakar Noir, which Jimmy was wearing.

I thought it would be amusing if the elevator got stuck, and we were the last people on earth. I would have to choose who I would repopulate the earth with: Jimmy or Kevin. As the elevator went up to the nineteenth floor, I watched the numbers above the elevator door illuminate. I looked at that light like an idiot, even though I felt like I should be entertaining my friends with witticisms from Jane Austen novels or something. I felt like I should be literary and alluring. But I wasn't. I just couldn't find words.

That's when the elevator stalled.

I gave out a little yelp. Neither friend looked at me: they just kept looking straight ahead.

The doors opened and a lady with white hair dyed red walked on—her roots showed. She had a toy poodle in her large patent leather purse. She wore comfortable old-people shoes, unlike my boots with high heels.

I realized then that we were just at a floor, and we had not stalled. Nothing unusual was happening. I just felt weird, and I didn't know why.

We got off the elevator and the woman with the dog continued up.

Jimmy turned the door of 1909, and we were greeted by Jimmy's dad, who was short and round and bald, and looked nothing like Jimmy.

"Who's your pretty friend?" he asked.

I realized that he was talking to Jimmy and Kevin, that I had both of them. Did both of them want me? Was I being mean to Kevin? Did my meanness matter? What did Jimmy and Kevin say about me when I was not around? I didn't care, actually. But this old squat man insulted me, for some reason.

In we went, though, and sat down on the sofa and started watching TV. *Jo-Jo L'Astrologiste* was on. Jo-Jo was a buxom blonde who gave the week's astrological forecasts. Me and all my friends from Montreal loved her because she was so very Montreal in a wonderfully tacky way.

"It's Jo-Jo," I said. I wanted to say so much more, but I had no words for the hormones coursing through my veins.

I looked at Jimmy but he was looking at the TV, then he turned around to say something to his Dad which I did not catch.

*

Jimmy's long black hair fell in front of his face, and he said, "Kevin had to go back to Alexandria. We'll have to hang out alone, now." He smiled. His smile was like a bowl of cherries in spring sunlight. It was like the happiness of finding one's room warm and lit up after a long walk in the cold. It looked yummy and warmed me down to my toes, which were in boots, which was good because the first frost had happened last night. The sidewalks were a little slippery.

I was going to ask him why he didn't tell me Kevin was leaving when I had last seen them, but I decided not to. It was irrelevant.

The concrete apartment building where his Dad lived rose to the sky in the background of the image of Jimmy in his long black coat, which was appropriate for the weather, but also for his gothic vibe. His eyes were a dark chestnut color. I saw fire in them. He was beautiful. I wanted to tell him this, but I knew the words would fall flat. Besides, I knew he knew I liked him, because when we met on the train, I gave him a certain unmistakable look made of blue fire.

Before that moment when I first saw Jimmy in the café car on Amtrak as he sat across from his friend Kevin, I'd never walked into a room (or train car, etc.) and thought, "I can get that guy to sleep with me." Yet that's what I did when I saw Jimmy. I'm not sure whether I thought to myself, as I walked up the aisle of the train cars to the café car, "I'm going to sleep with the best-looking guy in the café car," and then selected Jimmy from the crowd of reasonable-looking strangers, or if I saw Jimmy first, looking sultry, and then got the idea in my head. All I know is that those words definitely went through my mind in a very audible way. A feeling rose in me like fire from a Bunsen burner in chemistry class as I walked past Jimmy and Kevin, whose names I did not yet know, and sat at a table where I was facing Jimmy. It wasn't the table directly next to them, but a few tables down. It was the only table left vacant in the café car, and it had a perfect vantage point from which to make seductive eye contact with the hot stranger.

Jimmy came up to me and asked, "Where are you going?"

It happened so quickly I didn't feel anything. I just began answering, "I'm going to Montreal."

"Us too!" Jimmy said.

Now here I was locked in eye contact with him, standing on Lincoln Street, one of the couple streets in Montreal named after American presidents. There were gold and red leaves on the sidewalk and the toe of my boot touched a place where someone had scrawled, "Love-Moi" in the concrete when it was wet, so long ago. "Love-Moi" was the name of a movie in French that was very popular among young people in Quebec. I saw the beginning once, and a girl was saying that as she was prostituting herself, she picked up her Dad's best friend. It was a movie about the harsh side of Montreal life, which luckily, I was spared.

I had a bit of money from when my grandparents passed away (my parents were pretty much out of the picture, now). I lived on Sherbrooke Street, across from Dawson College with its copper dome that had turned completely green. The downtown area was not too expensive, but it was not cheap, either. My place was not far from Jimmy's Dad's.

It was noon, and to the left of Jimmy's Dad's building, the neon sign of an oriental noodle place suddenly went on. I took the sudden illumination to be a sign that the light was going on in my mind or that there was a good vibe made of light between me and Jimmy. I didn't need to worry so much anymore. I could just enjoy this experience, instead of forcing it, or stumbling along to the way time was stringing moments together for me.

“Shall we?” I asked, offering my arm, elbow playfully out, first.

“We shall.” Jimmy said, hooking his arm around mine. “Where to?” he asked.

The wind came and made a miniature whirlwind with a bunch of gold leaves beside us, then the wind dispersed left the leaves to untangle. We smiled at this occurrence, acknowledging the power of the weather.

I was aware that I looked good in my little black jacket with the gold zippers on the pockets that added a dimension of chic. My long blond hair fell in steppes as the wind ruffled its ends, lifting them.

I was a city girl, through and through. I felt even more “city” with Jimmy, who I knew was such a suburban dude, because I was familiar with the area where he lived. When he wasn’t on Thanksgiving break in Montreal, he lived outside of the Washington, D.C. area, in Virginia, near my sister, actually. My sister has a big house with a white spiral staircase and a chandelier in the atrium that spans two stories. I pictured Jimmy from the same well-manicured neighborhood with its clean lawns that were green until the beginning of December, and in the whole city, not a tacky lawn ornament was to be seen.

We went back to the food court where we’d had crepes the previous day, and had more crepes. I just had one, this time, instead of two.

We tried to rent a video at Movieland afterwards, but neither of us had a credit card for security purposes. We went back to Jimmy’s Dad’s place, walking everywhere we went, within the downtown area, which was no more than a mile radius.

In the elevator, we kissed, and I knew that we were on our way, then. I had proven something to myself. This is all that mattered. It was only a matter of time, now. A flock of crows was let loose in my stomach when Jimmy kissed me, and even though I didn’t know how to kiss in any amazing way, it was good enough. It was real and fake at once. We both knew each other and didn’t. He was an upper-middle-class suburban dude, and I was within the same tax bracket (not on my own merit, though). We recognized the punk goth in each other. It was on this basis that we later made love on the roof of the concrete apartment building, steam from the boiler room escaping from a pipe and illuminating the night with a white cloud.

We looked up, and saw stars, and felt the galaxy illuminated all around us. We felt the dark quietude of being on top of a high building.

As we stood next to each other looking out over downtown, we saw a fire in the old nunnery on Sherbrooke Street.

He said, “What’s that, burning?”

Finally, there was something to talk about, something other than the fact that we’d wanted each other so badly for reasons that we would never know because we wouldn’t have enough time with each other. And now here was something. Fire. Smoke.

I said in hushed urgency, “It’s the old nunnery, burning. But it’s just a part of it. Look—there are fire trucks there, and they’re putting it out.”

The city sirens blared in the streets below, sounding almost like whispers, or at least someone talking emergencies low into your ear. The emergencies were telling me something, but I didn’t know what, other than that a fire needed to be put out.

We stood there for a while and watched the action.

When the fire trucks left, there was just the city, and the damaged tower of the nunnery.

We leaned over the concrete railing that separated us from a thirty-story fall. Below, it looked like a Piet Mondrian painting in the dark.

Jimmy said, as if he were whispering an emergency, “Ants on fire for people.”

It made little sense, but I would go with it, because it was beautiful.

I said, “Rivers of black neon for streets.”

Suddenly, I felt very happy, as if what was needed to be accomplished was done, and what was needed to be said was said. It felt like my heart was a purring kitten in Jimmy's hands, and I was safe. Even if he was going to leave, I was not sad. I had this.

The Overly Critical People's Club

The living room and kitchen in our place in Brookline were beige. It was safer this way. No one could disagree on beige, we thought, so Val went ahead and bought the hide-a-bed and papasan in the neutral spectrum. We even had a concrete squirrel that was beige, and we put it next to the fake wood TV stand which, like the rug, was beige. It was all very boring, but it gave one the sense that people of good sense lived here, which was true, if you judged by my roommates.

I was crazy, but like all people who know they're crazy, I was a little less crazy than most crazy people who don't know they're crazy. It was still wonderfully boring in that house despite my craziness, and we were happy. Maria made her tea in an artistic tea ceremony that she insisted was particularly Russian; it had to do, she said, with the timing of when you drop the lemon slice into your cup. A certain amount of time had to elapse from boiling point of the water to lemon-slice interaction.

The tea was a part of us all, now. We drank Maria's tea at midnight when we were all awake discussing our boring lives. Sometimes we played chess. We formed an impromptu secret society we called "The Overly Critical People's Club," in which we could bitch about trivial matters that annoyed us to no end during our workaday lives in Boston. Women with strollers and old women with walkers were among our favorite pet peeves. People who talk about horses too much, subway drivers who closed the doors on you before you were in, people who thought that America was the opposite of France. We were still young enough then to not understand the foibles of the very young and very old, we had to care for no one but ourselves, and besides, we were spry and in our late-twenties, employed, talented, and pretty decent looking. We had no worries, really, except the possibility that our concept of grandeur for our lives wouldn't work out in the end (would one of us please hurry up and finally get a poetry manuscript accepted by the Yale Younger Series of Poets?). But of course, everything would work out in the end, because we were us, and life had pretty much worked out up until this point without our actually having to do any serious thinking or develop compassion.

One can be a poet without compassion, I realize now, but it's always much better to be a poet with compassion. This was one major thing we would have to learn, and that Al would help me to learn. I haven't mentioned Al yet. We'll get to him.

We were poets with a pleasingly beige living room. What more could we ask?

Maria told me that the squirrel made of concrete was once on the set of a David Lynch film, and I believed her. I was star struck.

One day, our fourth roommate Larry (whom we had little to do with because he was always busy and felt the same way about us), told us he got a promotion at work, and had to move from the Boston area to New York City, but we shouldn't worry: a mutual friend of all of ours (sort of), Al, wanted to move in.

Al.

Of course, I wanted Al to move in. He was Maria's hot friend (just a friend), and he was a foodie (into wine and cheese, therefore he understood my French Canadian roots, I believed), and he liked our beigeness. He wanted a piece of that beigeness.

Val hedged and was uncertain about Al, but I said he could move in whenever the hell he wanted. I had only met him twice out of a work context (I usually just saw him at Starbucks where he was employed), and on both occasions he was at our house drinking tea and playing Scrabble with Maria. He seemed to be able to hold his own in a challenging Scrabble game: proof positive that he would make a good roommate, in my books.

As we sat at the kitchen table, which we didn't like to admit we had bought at Target, I said, "What exactly is your problem, Val?"

With a flip of her russet bangs over her apple-shaped freckled face, she declared, "Nothing. He can move in."

*

The nearest Starbucks, where Al worked, was a block away. I just had to cross one street. Every morning I would drag my sleepy, not-yet caffeinated body there. The walk was pleasant, along state Beacon Street. There were brownstones, three or four stories high.

Once when Maria and I were taking a walk down to Coolidge Corner, the birthplace of JFK as well as a shopping area with a pretty good Trader Joe's, she said that she couldn't believe the brownstones were considered elegant when she first came over from Russia. They weren't ornate. To her, elegant and fancy were synonyms, but she would learn that to a Bostonian, elegant and fancy were opposites.

I suppose most cultures consider ornate things pleasant, and plain things boring, and I don't know how Boston got to be the opposite. Everything was very bland, on Beacon Street particularly, because it was a bastion of English history. At least that's what it seemed to me, but I can enjoy any area that is considered rich because what's upscale makes my bones tingle in a wonderful way. There's the bad tingle and the good tingle, and expensive areas of town made me just simply tingle all over! I didn't want to be materialistic, and I wouldn't have admitted it to most people, but I was a material girl. I was lucky to live in Brookline, even though it was a little boring. Sometimes I really craved nothing else but a magenta spiraling staircase on an orange Victorian mansion with aquamarine turrets, like they have on *Le Plateau* in Montreal, where I am from.

As I walked to Starbucks, I anticipated a crumbly blueberry scone and a hot coffee. I like Pike's Place, the medium blend, because I am a medium-anything kind of girl, just out of necessity, not out of nature. I can't usually afford extremes. There was also some philosophy behind my forcing myself to be moderate in all things; I remembered the teachings of Socrates. Don't super-size me: that's too American. And don't give me espresso in little cups like some euro-girl: I like my bang for my buck to take more time than just one gulp.

So I get my cup of *grande* Pike's Place every morning, and I have come to know Al from there, too. He is always a pleasant, shining face, but I like to keep him at a distance, even though (or since?) he is a friend of my friends. I'm weird that way.

*

I learned over a slow and painful process of hazing after moving here for work, that Americans want to know the practical application of everything. If you talk about God, they want to know what your beliefs can *do*. Everything has to be plugged into the wall and giving off a certain amount of heat or light. I suppose that's okay, but it didn't leave room for the things I cherish best of all: pointless poems written on bathroom walls in train stations, stained glass that was done with a tenderness beyond love, elaborate flower gardens with twenty-five different kinds of tulips for no reason at all.

antiques, costume jewelry, funny socks, expensive throw pillows (those especially make my left ventricle tingle), eating cheese as if it were an art. Call me a snob who is into an elitist aesthetic, opposed to a pristine utilitarianism, but I like what's simply beautiful and has no other use at all other than to shine.

However, even though I have champagne taste, I have a beer wallet. But I get my kicks.

*

One day when Al saw me at Starbucks, he greeted me exuberantly, and gave me a free coffee.

"It would be awesome if you lived with us," I said.

He had dimples underneath his five-o'clock-shadow at nine o'clock in the morning. I knew some things about Al: he wrote poetry, and he liked food, and his uncle Orvis owned a vineyard in Napa, California, and he was originally from Pittsburgh, and he liked the author Michael Chabon, too.

"Maria said I could." His smile brightened the room.

"Oh, cool," I said, happy, but taken aback that Val had actually given Maria the go-ahead. "That'll be in two weeks."

"Yeah."

"You'll be so near your work," I said, making conversation.

He said, "Yeah, it's cool." There was a fat man wearing three scarves in a mild Boston September behind me, so I moved on, taking my coffee over to the table where you can add your own cream and sugar. "See you later."

I smiled, knowing I don't have a pretty smile, but what can you do if you don't have a pretty smile when you smile? You don't flash it for too long. Just a quickness in your face, then you turn away, hoping you've not horrified anyone for too long. This is how I've come to deal with not having a pretty smile. I do have a pretty face, even though I'm chubby.

You can't be all pretty. There's got to be something about you that's God-awful, because you're human.

I wondered if Al would make a good roommate, and I was suddenly uncertain and startled that I had not really considered the question seriously before agreeing, but it was all done and agreed upon. He turned around and waved before leaving Starbucks, and even though he was serving a lady in a fur coat who had a toy poodle in her bag, he caught my eye as he spilled some change into her extended hand.

Al.

I thought it would all be okay.

We could now all sit around at midnight and be overly critical together. He probably had some stories about Starbucks! But I wasn't sure. Now that I gave it some thought, what irked me about Al was that he wanted too much to be liked. Something about that made me not respect him as much as I would have respected, for example, Larry, who didn't give a damn what you thought of him. This actually worried me. Was I antisocial? Was it good to be liked and likeable, as Al certainly was?

*

He brought three bottles from Uncle Orvis' vineyard, with labels that said different crude things. One bottle of wine had a label decorated with flowers around the border that said, "Sexy Bitch Face." Another said, "Matt, I'm Constipated," and another said, "Uncle Orvis's devil-fart brew." I was left speechless at the tastelessness of all this, as he showed me each bottle's label, laughing. I laughed too, a fake sort of laughter at first, but then a real laugh, when I began seeing the joke-names were funny, if you looked at it a certain way.

“Can I help you bring your stuff in?” I asked, looking at the U-Haul truck out the window, parked by the curb outside our building.

A friend of his named Mike came in and put a box and a fancy bronze wine rack on the kitchen table, then smiled as I imagined all of Al’s friends did. He knew people-people, because he was a people-person with a nice smile. In fact, he looked pretty darned good-looking when he smiled. I was smiling then, in the kitchen, not for any other reason than that he was moving in, or alive, or something. I briefly wondered, as if a dragonfly were flitting into the tree-hole of my brain for just a moment, if I could handle someone so good-natured in proximity to me for extended periods of time. Maybe it would change me. Maybe I would finally do something like take my mood stabilizers, which I hadn’t been taking, as of late, which I knew was a mistake.

Wait a minute—I caught myself thinking (or even *feeling*?)—was Al’s moving in making me want to be a better person? A small alarm went off in my mind, and it occurred to me that I was actually attracted to Al. I like to think of myself as the Ice Queen. I’m attracted to no one. I don’t let anyone melt my ice. Nope.

And Al, of all people? Al of the devil-fart wine, which he tenderly placed in the rack on the corner of the counter? Al who might give me a sip of Sexy Bitch Face?

I wanted to say, “Wait, that’s where I put my cornflakes,” but decided against it, on account of being potentially bossy, which I know I can be (I didn’t like that about myself—another thing I wanted to change, and that Al was making me consider changing).

My question was still hanging there like a chad on a vote, and Al said kindly, to my relief, “No. We don’t have that much to bring in. No need to help us. I know I have a lot of kitchen stuff, but that’s about it.” He put his hands on his hips in a posture my mother called, “The peasant’s dance” when she was growing up, when she didn’t want me to do it.

*

After that, whenever I went in or out of the house, I looked at our mailbox in the vestibule of the apartment building. The light bulb in the old, high ceiling flickered like a candle being blown by the wind. Time was so freaky and fleeting, and I was feeling myself as being vulnerable, in those days, for some reason.

I looked at Al Maller’s name next to mine, Val’s, and Maria’s on the mailbox. He had written his name so tenderly in careful block letters. Al. Sometimes the letters would ripple and sparkle, and I knew it was because I wasn’t taking my medication.

But I stopped there every day on my way out and way in, just to look at his name.

*

He was always frying pierogies while drinking a glass of red wine, Uncle Orvis’ preferred vintage, apparently (I never saw him drinking white or rosé).

We didn’t talk much the first week; I was skittish around him.

His girlfriend came over one night. When I went in to make some coffee in the electric coffee maker that I used when Starbucks was closed, Al asked me to illuminate a point he was trying to make about Robert Bly’s light-filled translations as opposed to the darkness of his poetry. I said something vaguely intelligent while under the hellish red scrutiny of his girlfriend’s gaze.

I interacted with Al about poetry for a few moments as my coffee brewed, feeling that I had him. I had him! I felt his girlfriend’s jealousy, and it made me happy.

She said as my coffee machine was making burbling sounds, “I’m a musician. I play the saxophone.”

I don't know as much about poetry as you guys."

I was happy for Al that he had a girlfriend. Really, I was.

*

I only saw Al's big-boned girlfriend once, then I heard through the grapevine that they broke up. She had broken his heart, according to Maria.

I heard Maria and Al talking in the kitchen one day, and he said, "I'm throwing all the shit she gave me out. I want to be rid of it all. If she wants it back, tough shit."

That was the first time I had seen Al be mean or spiteful in any way. I chocked it up for future reference. I thought, "He's not all sweetness, smiles, and funny names for what has the fragrant bouquet of a pretty decent vintage wine."

It was at that moment that things turned around.

One day, nevertheless, I decided to be normal and say hi to Al once again, in a way that wasn't just in passing and out of politeness.

I was wearing black, because I always do. It's my signature style.

He was in the kitchen frying pierogies.

"Hi, Al," I said.

"Hi," he said. We didn't mention his girlfriend, or coffee, or wine. "Want a pierogie?" he asked.

"Sure." I did. I love pierogies. They're so simple with their doughy coating, yet so comforting with their meaty center. I wanted comfort food, because I'm always in a state of discomfort, and needing comfort. Such sweet, wholesome comfort! Too bad, I thought, that even the simplest things come with a twist that is the uncertainty that belongs to everything, and if they don't, there's probably something wrong.

We listened to the hissing of the pierogies frying in the pan, and for a moment, I was confused by my own happiness. It seemed so easy, all of a sudden. I didn't know if I'd be able to handle something that wasn't difficult.

I stared into the pattern of the kitchen table cloth—flowers. I didn't understand, and I didn't know what I didn't understand.

All of a sudden, there was a pierogie before me.

"Want some sour cream?" he asked, getting a plastic tub of good stuff out of the fridge.

I wondered if Al could be persuaded to enjoy the Overly Critical People's Club. I wondered if he was one of us, or what it would take for me to become one of him.

The Turtles

It was Halloween. Her red Mardi Gras mask was making her temples sweat, but she knew her eyes looked so green in the feline-eye-shaped holes of the red and gold mask. She was a Mardi Gras fire spirit for Halloween this year.

"I'll have a venti Pike's Place with room for milk," she said to the Starbucks barista behind the counter.

She was being smiled at. This was good. She liked being smiled at, even by complete strangers.

Suddenly, because she was ordering a coffee, all the world's wrongs had righted themselves in her brain.

The girl cocked her head like a playful puppy, and said to the Mardi Gras fire spirit's friend Sarah. "And for you, Sir? What can I get you?"

She referred to him as Sir. They were old enough to be Sir and Ma'am, but not too old to dress up for Halloween. They thought no one was ever too old to dress up for Halloween.

Suddenly, a bunch of wildflowers began falling from the ceiling, but then she noticed it was only the music. Rufus Wainwright and his quavering voice.

Sam said, "Just a venti skinny vanilla latte."

The barista said, "Sure," very comfortingly.

Something about her was bleeding on the inside. Her soul was in danger of becoming dark. Her soul, but also the barista's. We do the same things every day, and we're expected to do them with a smile, as if we mean it. Shouldn't we smile at the universe, though? Isn't it asking us to love it back the way it loves us? God, apparently, loves all of us? Such love is not free. You have to repay it. Existence is full of all such riddles.

She thanked the barista, and left a dollar tip as a token for good karma.

Karma overrode whatever would happen on Halloween.

The barista handed her the venti coffee, then the Mardi Gras fire spirit and her friend Sam went to wait by the other end of the bar, where the froo-froo drinks were served. Honestly, the reason she didn't want to date Sam was because he was so froo-froo. A venti skinny vanilla latte? Also, he couldn't pass a toy poodle without stopping to play with it for, like, five minutes. She had high standards. Genius lumberjack was what she liked. Sam maybe had a bit of the genius thing going. He was very smart. In many ways, he was actually so perfect for her. Maybe if she lost a little weight, he would date her?

"Starbucks corporation owns my soul," she said, waiting for the skinny latte.

He replied, "You and almost everyone else's."

He was in a plaid shirt, corduroy pants, and boots. A sign around his neck said, "I love turtles." He was the turtle-lover for Halloween.

A happy smile that felt good even though it was fake handed Sam his latte, and they sat down at a table that was made of copper. They got a good nook of the café. There was a lot of dark green. People were talking on phones, talking to each other, or gazing into the toxic neon mists of computer screens. It was not overly crowded today, but still full.

"Explain your costume to me, again?" she asked.

"You don't know the You Tube sensation? Well, there was this thing on the news, and a news anchor asked a six year old kid his opinion of the new dam that was going to be built in Worcester and the kid said, 'I love turtles.' It was rocking the nation for a while."

"Oh," she said.

A guy with a beard and tattoos came up to us and said, "I love turtles too, man."

Sam nodded an appreciative nod.

"Yeah, man, that's really cool," Beard Tattoos said.

She couldn't believe it, but he was serious. It was times like these that she just wanted to get away from it all, and see Tokyo, which is the brightest city and is visible from space.

The guy went on his own way, which was towards the bar of the café to get a drink, then out the door, but he waved at Sam before making his final exit. All the world's a stage, and there are many freaks on it. She was aware that she was being judgmental, but maybe also jealous, because Sam had the more interesting costume. His costume was weirder, it was true, and she was actually a little embarrassed of its weirdness, embarrassed for her and for him. Everywhere he went, though, Sam was able to weird people out in a good way, and instantaneously make a million friends, it seemed. She was always trying to be cool. Something about her effort drove people away from her. She knew she had to try a little less in life, and just have fun with it.

There were so many things to remember: accumulating good karma, having fun, being open, n

being judgmental, loving yourself so you could better love the beauty in others. It required coffee. Lots of it.

Once, she was lost. But then Thomas found her. That was years ago.

“Sam, do you think it’s a good thing to be lost?” she asked. “I mean, I don’t think I’m lost anymore and I miss it. I feel like everything’s set in place, and I just have to live it out. I feel like my capacity to embrace change with flexibility would be better if I were a little more lost.”

“So wander into a dark wood. Metaphorically, of course. Visit your soul somewhere you’ve never seen it before,” he said, warming his hands around the paper cup with a sleeve made of forty-percent post-consumer fiber.

“I know how to do that, actually. Process it by my strength, in many ways. I know how to change one thing into another, for example, sign into knowledge. Like, when I was with Thomas and he was being awful, sparrows would gather around me to make me happy. I knew they were there for me. I could see the signs as clearly as the writing on the wall. And when I read graffiti in bathrooms that says things like ‘You are loved more than you know,’ I know that’s for me, too.”

He nodded. She took this as a sign that he was listening. He was a good listener, and she was a talker, so she continued.

“If I wanted to get lost, I could. But it’s scary. I hate that feeling of flying, unanchored. But I think that’s where I’m going. I think that’s where I need to go. I want to be closer to the light, and the light is in new places, spiritually speaking. It would be so easy to remain the same. But I have all this pain I need to heal it, somehow.”

He nodded.

She was silent.

When he realized she was finished, he looked up, and gave her a little smile that she thought was cute.

She realized she had been waxing on and on about the inner process of her life while wearing a firm spirit Mardi Gras mask and a long pink wig. She wanted to take the mask off, because she was beginning to sweat, but she was here to be a spectacle in Harvard Square tonight with Sam.

A science-professor-looking type came up to us and stood at our table as if he were going to give a lecture, then exclaimed, “I love turtles, too!”

“Yes. We certainly love turtles. We’re glad,” Sam said.

“Wonderful. Have a good night,” the professor said, then went his own way, down to the bar for his grande pumpkin spice latte, which was, at that moment, being announced by the barista.

Ants

Talya’s house was the house I wanted to live in. It was so square, and had two floors. The address was in oversized numbers next to the door, which was illuminated by a large circular, flat light: a disc like the moon, but made of plastic, attached to the brick so that it looked like it was hovering. I would go over to her house at night, sometimes, fighting my way through clouds of gnats that like to swarm in Northern city summers. Gnats are attracted to me more so than other people, I have found, and it’s the same thing with mosquitoes. I suppose I like insects more than most people, though, so the feeling is mutual. I rejoice when a good luck ladybug lands on my forearm, for example, and I really don’t mind spiders at all, because they’re good luck, too. Talya didn’t like insects. She hated them. Once she spent a whole afternoon squishing ants by stomping on them while wearing her new sneakers. But she said the ants got their revenge. The next day, there were three times as many swarming the cracking concrete porch. Ants were pouring out of the cracks in the concrete, she said, and then she showed me. There were thousands, perhaps millions of ants making rivers of squiggling black along

her porch. She was afraid, and that's when the ants started to come into the house. Talya would take clean glass from the cupboard, only to find a couple of little six-legged friends on it.

Dance Therapy

Sometimes I think of things I'd like to put in poems, but I don't even know what they mean. As I lay in the hospital, I amused myself this way, sometimes in the afternoon, other times at night after they'd given us all our meds, and the sirens could be heard twenty stories below, wailing through the streets as life and light and darkness went on out there.

*Like a shard of fire from a sparkler falling away from the fireworks, flickering to its dark end
Dancing over the night, I have gained a momentary, luminous blazing.*

It wouldn't be too difficult to have a fake name in here, on the ward. All you would need was fake I.D. with your fake name on it. We were all on such tentative ground.

My roommates came up to me when I was sitting on the edge of the bed, now and then, looking around the room, because there was nothing else to do. I told them my name was Jessica Harman, which it is.

There was Joanne, one of my roommates, who had told me that she was from Niagara Falls, then she said she was from Greece. Then New York City. Can someone be from two or three places? Was she a compulsive liar? I didn't know. I considered myself to be from two or three places: Montreal, Maryland, California.

I slept for a bit and then a nurse who introduced himself as Arthur came to rescue me from one of those hazy nightmares when you don't get any images, but there's a weird feeling that accompanies sleepy, gray restlessness.

I thought of snack time, though it was early in the afternoon.

Snack time in the hospital was fun, because it was something you had to wait for, and although it wasn't super-amazing, it was good. It was like mealtime. It kept a sense of structure. And it was better than mealtime because it was a treat that they didn't *have* to give us. They have to give you meals. Give someone dinner, and they expect it. Give someone a treat, and it's the milk of human kindness. So we felt blessed and special, in a place that was mostly busy taking away our sense of specialness. It was like they were honoring our human, not our perceived as lower than human criminal side. It was totally crushing to sign your power of decision to a bunch of sadists, or people who had to guard themselves against becoming so. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. My stepfather always used to say that, maybe shedding light on his own evil nature. So snack was an antidote to the evilness. I took it as an act of love. Yes, I felt loved and special at snack time. And I shared my Graham crackers with Felix. Share the love.

We would have to wait, though.

Tears in my eyes. I don't cry often. I found myself in here, tearing up, sometimes. But no, I don't cry. In fact, it had been seven years. I keep count.

A pink bracelet with my name printed on it in computerized block letters was brought into my room one day, after a few days of being there. Arthur showed it to me, and I nodded, and he snapped it on my wrist as I outstretched my arm. It was official, now. It felt official with a bracelet on.

"You all have identification bracelets in here," Arthur said, because he had to say *something*. And there was not much more to be said.

JESSICA HARMAN was written in block letters on my bracelet. Then my date of birth, but they got the month wrong. I'm a Libra, not a Scorpio. They said "10" instead of "9." Go figure. I was actually a month premature, and I should have been born in October, but there was no way they had

knowing that. It was a mistake people often made, as if they were putting my cosmically right birthday down, not my birthday in reality.

I didn't say anything. It doesn't really matter, I thought.

*

The halls didn't smell musty, even though it was an old building. The room was dark with Venetian blinds muting the beige New York City light as it trickled into the room, leaving pools of cool muddy looking shadows behind the bureaus and desks, beds and chairs. It was all very plain, but not uncomfortable as some places. We had enough space to put our belongings in drawers.

I left the room. Little powder blue slippers graced my feet. The nurses had given them to me. They were of a material that was between paper and plastic, but they were fine for walking the halls, for scuffling around the polished floors.

It was sort of up to us all how we'd spend our time, though they did have activities, discussion groups, and times when we could do gentle exercise.

I went into the dayroom but there weren't many people in there. A girl in a wheelchair was watching Jerry Springer, sullenly, which is an unusual reaction to that show. People were screaming at each other on TV. There was an old man hunched over, drooling, in a corner on a chair. The big room was otherwise empty, until a man my age entered, claiming he was Queen Elizabeth. He was shouting it, to whomever was around to listen.

I went up to him.

"I'm Jessica." I said.

"What? Not Martin Scorsese?" he said.

"No." I said. "Just Jessica."

"Well, Jess. Let me tell you one thing. I might be from a falling down shack in the middle of the woods. I might be a racist from the Deep South. But let me tell you one thing. I can tell you think like me on this one, just by looking at you for a moment: I get up every day and I decide to be happy. I tell myself, 'Eric, you're a great person,' and I give myself a little hug. Let's leave the unhappiness to the rest of these people."

I had no idea what he was talking about. I always think of myself as a rather pessimistic person.

Eric swept his arm to indicate the entire world, or at least the rest of the ward. "No one's going to ruin my fun. And that's the way it is."

"What's your name?" I asked.

"You can call me Dustin or Eric. Or Queen Elizabeth." Dustin/Eric/Queen Elisabeth covered up an embarrassment he might have in fact had by screaming, "I'm the Queen of England, God dammit! That was Dustin/Eric for you, I would quickly learn."

I was saved by Kara, a hospital employee who was there to interact with us, as she came into the dayroom and said, poking her head in an interrupting us, "Dance therapy in the A.T. Room."

"There's the spirit." Dustin said as he got up and left me there abruptly. "I'm leaving you, now, Jessie. I'm going to go and dance."

As I quietly slipped away too, in the other direction. I wasn't sure I was quite up for dance therapy with The Queen of England there. I was kind of overwhelmed and needed some space after meeting him. I stayed in the dayroom and watched some TV. Jerry Springer becomes the ambient noise of psych wards.

In about five minutes The Queen came out of the A.T. room, back into the dayroom, and addressed me: "They aren't doing disco in there. I thought we were going to disco! Lame! Lame! They're just doing gentle arm motions."

Since The Queen of England was no longer in dance therapy, I decided to do a good thing by joining. ~~Groups are always better with people in them. And besides, it was general knowledge on the ward that if you participate in groups you get to get to Level Two, and then you can go to the roof for fresh air.~~

I brought my lazy bones into a standing position and walked to the A.T. room, which stood for “Art Therapy,” or something. I never did figure it out for certain.

I was glad I replaced Eric/Queen of England in dance therapy because there only two patients, none included. It was just me and Mr. Petersen, the scientist who was sent to drug me with the truth serum and there were also two dance therapists, Kara and Cara.

Kara and Cara. One couldn't tell them apart by name when you addressed them aloud, but they were actually very different. Kara was elegantly Strawberry Vanilla, wearing biking pants and shirt that were tight and sleek, and Cara was Peaches n' Cream in long drooping knit artsy sweaters. I liked them both. All of Cara's sweaters reminded me of how I liked to dress when I was teaching. That's what I did, teach, when I was not in insane asylums.

Behavioral Centers, as they were called now. As if being vague would make the place better. After all, no one really knows what goes on in a “Behavioral Center” except some behavior, if you just judge by the name, and no one says whether that behavior is good or bad.

I was hesitant to say this, but I addressed Mr. Petersen, an older gentleman in F.B. I. glasses: “You know a lot about philosophy and science, I hear.” Mr. Petersen wasn't an ice-cream flavor—I paid him too much respect to even say he was Vanilla White Chocolate. And he knew a lot about a lot of things only professors know. Philosophy. Science. Literature. (It disturbed me that I referred to woman as ice cream flavors but not men, as if the sexism of society had gotten into my brain and rotted it).

He mumbled academic jargon under his breath at all mealtimes, and sometimes when he was watching Jerry Springer, which was always on, it seemed.

I found out things through the grapevine, and also by listening in on Mr. Petersen's insane ranting to himself or his meatloaf. I knew he was on the ward to follow me.

I continued addressing Mr. Petersen: “My uncle Bob is in the FBI.”

“The FBI?” Mr. Petersen responded to the ether rather than to me as Kara and Cara were leading us in making little circles with our arms as the music was playing some song that was soothing. “The FBI doesn't scare me. I was with the FBI, and the Kent shooting in the sixties –”

Kara quickly cut Mr. Petersen off, bringing him into the here and now, “We're going to do some dancing, okay, Mr. Petersen?”

He said in a disgruntled moan: “Yeah, okay.”

But I was the only one dancing when the music started, swaying the room, gently rocking like a ship on rolling waves. I like to think that the whole room is moving to music, even though I know it's not—that's in motion, when I dance. For some reason, visualizing things this way helps me get into dancing.

I remember my raver days in the nineties. I'd dance, being a machine, a snail, a bolt of lightning. You had to gauge what you'd be by the feel of the music. It was an intuitive process. I suppose acting creatively with your intuition is very joyful, and this makes it therapeutic. A happy person is a functioning person, I heard in a night school class I once took on Shakespeare and experimental theater, and when you dance, you smile and are happy and functioning.

“Mr. Petersen, aren't you dancing? Let's loosen up our arms!” encouraged Kara, doing little gymnastic exercise circles for warm-up. I was unsure whether or not we would be doing some heavy-duty dancing, or only just gentle repetitive motions. Were we going for the big kahuna, the whole effect of dancing, or were we just doing gentle body movement? Sometimes they were really gentle on us there. When we could handle more. After all, we had the weight of the world on our shoulders.

Mr. Petersen barked, "I'm not going to do any dancing!"

~~"Come on, Mr. Petersen, you're in the room. The first step is showing up and you've done a great job! Let's see if you can keep up with this gentle arm motion, just little circles, there, that's it!"~~

Mr. Petersen obliged Kara, and began laughing when he started doing circles with his arms.

"What's so funny Mr. Petersen?"

"Oh, I don't know," he sighed, smiling uncontrollably like a self-conscious gargoyle.

"It feels good, doesn't it?" Kara encouraged the kindergartener within us all.

"Yes," giggled Mr. Petersen. He was having trouble just letting himself have fun, and if you move your arms in gentle arm motions, like little circles, you can't help but have fun!

"What shall we be as we dance?" Cara asked me, joining the conversation, and watching some fancy legwork I was doing, which was coordinated techno-style gyration-wise with my arms.

I said, breathlessly as I danced: "I'm a tiger in the forest of the night and I'm burning bright."

Kara exclaimed, "Let's all be Tigers!"

"Rarr," Mr. Petersen said, albeit mostly to himself or the wall. He sounded so stilted.

Dancing, Cara instructed me: "Guide us, Jessica. Tell us what we're doing."

I hesitantly said, while trying to have some assurance that I knew, "We're now in an underwater coral reef."

"Yes!" Cara said.

"And what are we doing in the reef?" Kara asked.

"We're swimming through the schools of silvery fish, and then there are schools of tiger-striped tropical fish. We go through the reef, and then we enter a tunnel in an underwater cave. The tunnel is glowing with some light that makes its way into the cave. We can magically breathe underwater. We swim deeper. Now it's total darkness, but we keep swimming. We swim deeper through a tunnel in the rock. It's narrow, but we fit through. Suddenly we come up to a light at the end of the tunnel. We swim towards the light. We're not going down anymore, we're going horizontally, swimming towards the light. We reach it. There is a flash as we go through the glow. The light at the end of the tunnel was a glowing mirror. We see ourselves close-up before we go through it. We see our faces, then we go through the mirror as we lift our arms and surrender to the other side. On the other side of the mirror we're in a dream. A deeper dream. We're swimming through our delta state, deep sleep. We're asleep, then, and we know we're dreaming. In the dream, we're riding bicycles, each one of us, in our own visions of our childhood neighborhoods, yes, we're riding bicycles down a sunny street in a suburban place. We're children again. The spring wind dallies the coins of the leaves and there are dogs barking in the near distance. Red-roofed picket-fence cookie-cutter houses. Suddenly, we're naked. We're bicycling, nude. Then we wake up," I said.

We all opened our eyes at the same time and felt a sort of little shock between everyone. We shared that, and to share anything on the hospital is magic. We were all so alone.

"Can we make our circle wider?" Kara asked instructionally. She took a few steps back. We all did. "Let's give ourselves a lot of room."

Kara and Cara guided us through some leg motions that were like ballet.

Mr. Petersen was babbling through this all, and he began telling us, or telling the wall—it was unclear who the intended audience was—about how he was abused as a child.

We brought the tension into the room, and let ourselves dance it out.

*

Where is God?

There were several layers of meaninglessness that I was aware of, lying in bed. Beneath my skin

felt the shame in my bones, and was uncomfortable with it (the shame of being in this hospital, and everything, this illness, this stigma, this life), and I wanted to go back to feeling empty of meaningless thoughts. I took out my pen and wrote in my notebook, something between a memory and the present feeling:

Thank-you for my love of sleeping like water

*

Here I am, caught between darkness and light. The sun flows in through the curtains, which are not curtains. They are Venetian blinds across barred windows.

Is this a prison?

Do you see bars on the windows?

No! Yes! Maybe.

I am just waking up after a dream. I was drowning. We were swimming in deep water, and the rags came in waves I was floating up towards the surface, like a diver returning from a treasure hunt. Had I found the treasure? I wasn't sure.

Snowy Day

The pain was in the snow this morning, and I didn't know if I was a tiger or a spider plant. Being human being seemed out of the question: too little money for a cup of coffee today of all mornings. Starbucks gleamed in the blizzard like a lighthouse out at sea, and that's when I changed into a shiver. Water sloshed over my frozen starboard ribs, and I screamed inside. I didn't let any sound loose as I trudged in my Uggs down Brattle Street, appearing unaffected by the wind. I had not been knocked down or hit by a mad bicyclist—I was merely imagining the worst as the best was happening (often the situation with me). I was freaking out because my doctor had left a message saying my lab tests were abnormal, but I had not actually talked to her about that yet. I wanted to cry on my way to teach my English as a Second Language class, but I was silent, for the most part. Maybe a sigh hissed from my lips. It's hard to remember now.

I was unhappy about going somewhere. Tin-colored ivy snaked around the winter sun. I wasn't in love with anything or anyone, and that seemed a little odd to me. I'm always full of some type of romance, but today, I wasn't. I wanted to be dead. It just seemed easier.

I was going somewhere. I was taking the bus and then the subway to Wellington with its orange line signs and friendly neighborhood faces. Everett was such a neighborhood. The faces seemed familiar even though I'd never been there before. I had learned that yesterday, when I taught my first English as a Second Language class at a community center. I'd never done that before. I'd never stood up there and said, "I am, You have, I want," so directly, as if there were nothing to it but memorization.

There's a structure under the structure, but that's called feeling, and you cannot teach it.

You cannot teach the desire to learn, but there the students all were, looking eagerly at me. I stood in front of a white board and wrote things next to little drawings of the sun and the rain. We were small talking about the weather, because they didn't know how, and I was teaching them to do that. I had visions of them at the grocery checkout counter, saying to the cashier, "Cold weather we're having today, isn't it?" It's not as simple as it looks. They kept saying "Thank-you" in the wrong context in our mock situations, in which I was them, and they were supposed to be me. I said, "Don't say thank you. It's not necessary." You do not thank someone for saying it's been quite a rainy spring. It seemed funny to me, but somehow wonderfully formal.

It went well yesterday. I felt loved. I felt like I learned something about Haiti, where they were a

from. I wanted the students' voodoo, their beaches, their wars, their search for life in a new land. The gave me all that in just a day, but that was yesterday. The serpent twined like branching ivy around the sun in my dreams, and the snow became blood, and I was re-born as a rabbit chased by the wolf-moon but I won the race, and won the world.

But I couldn't face them today. I didn't know why. Was it the snow? Was it the lack of coffee in my bloodstream? Was it my dumb fear of everything meaningful that might define me so that I'm no longer just a floating cloud?

Halfway through the snow, I called Eric, the director of the school, and said I just couldn't do it. My heart had become ice inside. The world had at last got to me, and I was unable to give of myself without breaking down, cracking.

He said, "Feel better soon," and hung up without a goodbye.

*

I am at home after my adventures. I just came home and slept, and thought about my former students. Did they miss me? Was I loved, or was that merely part of their routine? What will become of all the heat in the world, going around, warming people up when they least suspect it? And what will happen to all this cold that gets in the heart and makes passion useless?

*

Inside me, I have Eden, and there is Eve, listening to the snake. I don't know what this has to do with anything, except that it explains a certain amount of fear that I feel. The fear has no other explanation. I shake sometimes just thinking about walking down School Street, which is in a very modest suburban area, and taking the bus. I've done this many times before. Nothing ever happens. But it's the fear that has got me with its bear trap claws around my ventricles. I'm uneasy with the concept of love, too. I just don't want to be a shipwreck in somebody else's arms. I don't want to face you, or me, or anyone. The voices are talking about me. They aren't asking me any questions. The voices aren't there to listen to me—they're there to correct, criticize, and fill the beautiful world with a terrible sea made of blood.

I take my medication, but it just masks the monster. The weather continues.

I was afraid, today, that I didn't have enough coffee in my veins to be awake. When I'm asleep, I'm more insane. If I don't have my coffee, I can't think like a human being. I didn't have coffee this morning because I ran out and couldn't afford any more. I can get some more on Thursday. Until then, I'm sinking.

I know that there is, technically, great beauty in the world. We leave continents of time and space to go to new places, and then we see what it's like there. It's always different. If we grew up in a red city, then we move to a blue one. Some people don't, but some people, like me, are innate travelers. We have to learn the new language of the place, its customs of acceptable eye contact. The codes we use keep me going. They fascinate me like Slinkies going down stairs. They are waterfalls of things that are not water. They move like grace itself.

*

I came here, to Massachusetts, eleven years ago. Boston was a place I'd never been to before. I just picked a place on the map and went.

The first thing that happened in my new city, as I walked out of the train station, was that someone

in a truck for a landscaping company or something asked me for directions. I told him I'd never been to Boston before, and that I just arrived two minutes ago. He was nonplussed, and drove away with a stubbly frown. I didn't yet know that he didn't need to know about me, as people in Montreal would have. I just needed to spew a formula that I'd yet to learn, and say with a smile, "Sorry, I don't know where that is. I'm not from this area." No need to launch into my life story complete with shifty eyes, which my friends say is my hilarious signature facial expression (I'll be saying something really banal but my eyes get all shifty. Little do they know what thoughts I'm covering up with what boring things I let spew from my mouth).

I've learned a lot by being in Boston. I've learned about having a sense of community. Montreal is not so big on community. They're about coffee one-on-one. Cafés are always full of the coppery sheen of people talking. Things get done over cappuccino. I like that, but I also like the way an issue is probed in depth, often to find out what its true nature is, in a certain light that would catch prisms. In Montreal, people want to know what things are, just as they also do in Boston, but Bostonians are a little more forward-looking and practical than Montrealers. Montrealers want to know how one can heal the rift that runs through everything broken, and everything that's real is already broken in some way they believe. Only unreal things are perfect. They don't pretend as if it were otherwise.

*

I wanted to teach a language because I wanted to talk to a part of myself that I have forgotten. But it didn't last more than a day on the job. I wasn't like jelly at my center, but close. I was snow. I was just the snow coming down and I had nothing to give to anyone else today except a cold deafness. I felt unfit to talk about words, which are warm things that connect us. I was disconnected, and lost in the sky on the moon.

*

I feel bad about it as I shuffle in my slippered feet through my rough-looking kitchen. I throw out the trash. I notice we have no more garbage bags. Had I had any money, I would have bought coffee, so how I'm going to afford trash bags, I don't know. Ask one of my roommates, maybe? The orange on the walls looks like spaghetti sauce mixed with vodka. They've really begun selling vodka spaghetti sauce at Superfresh. It's a new flavor of Prego. It's the exact same shade as our walls.

There are both fake plants and real plants in the kitchen. My roommates like plants, real or fake—doesn't matter to them.

I am lost. I feel like the moon, so out there, in orbit—sinking into the blackness, but held in place by something. I'm at a loss to say exactly what's holding me in place, but let it suffice to say that just as the best minds in science also cannot explain gravity in any sensible way, neither can I.

Something to do With Fate

Halloween was over and she sat on the concrete stairs in Harvard Square, waiting for Sam. She didn't yet see his baseball-capped silhouette and bulky form. He was a skinny masquerading as fat. "Bigorexia" is what he called his condition, and it made him a little lopsided, like an overstuffed scarecrow.

The moon was out.

Her toes were cold in her gold sparkling shoes, which were made of some new-age lightweight

fabric. Fairy dust over crusty silk.

~~She should have worn her boots, but it was too late to think these things now.~~

It began to rain. Then it stopped, all within the space of seven minutes.

She thought, inexplicably, of a square in Europe, where they painted the pigeons crazy colors, like magenta and fluorescent blue, as a part of a celebration for a centennial of some sort. She didn't catch the details or the city. Was it somewhere in Italy? All she remembered was the magenta and blue wingspans of birds that were gorgeous as she gazed at her friend's Facebook post. Eden must have been that beautiful.

She was not that early to meet Sam. He should be appearing at any moment.

The kids in the pit, the area around the concrete stairs, were calling each other "Asshole" and making their pitt bulls play. The kids were laughing, and it struck her as weird to see homeless kids laughing. They laughed more freely than people with jobs, she thought. They had nothing to hide with their laughter. It was one-dimensional.

The sun was setting slowly. The clock on top of the shopping mall where they got coffee at Starbucks was always glowing. The numerals of the hour were digital orange fire. The sky behind the clock on top of the building was periwinkle and so delicate.

Was God around? If so, what was His plan for all of this?

There were leaves swirling in the wind that skittered across the street like crumbled gold tissues.

"Hello, do you have the time?"

Someone was talking to her. She couldn't believe it, because the way he asked was urgent. He wanted to know. The stranger with the freckles that were visible in the waning light, the man with the gold-black hair, the man in a scarf tucked into his jacket as if he were a European, the man she did not yet know, this man right here asking her something as if he wanted to know her, was her fate, and she knew it. She was afraid.

She looked at the clock above the shopping mall, which said, "5:47."

She said to him, looking into his eyes that looked like fog, "It's 5:47."

"Oh, thank you. Do you live here?"

She had met men on the street before. It usually worked out, because she had a screening procedure that usually worked. Someone was an automatic yes or no, without giving many clues. She thought she could tell. It was, after all, the way she met Sam. She said "No" to a lot of people too, and there was no way to verify scientifically if they would have worked out as friends (or more) if she had given them a chance. A lot of people talked to her on the street, even though she was not that beautiful technically.

This man standing before her now was a "Yes."

She said, "I live in the Boston area, yes."

He said, "I just moved here. Is it good?"

She detected an accent mingling with his Parisian as he stumbled over his tongue to speak English. He didn't pause, so he was fairly fluent as far as grammar and vocabulary was concerned. You can always tell how well someone really knows a language by how quickly or slowly they speak a phrase. His accent was made of many places. He'd been around. He knew things. He was looking for a place on Earth where he would fit in. He was like her. A lot of information came at her just from how he said a few words. That's always a sign. Meaning was happening. Meaning, that thing that was so scarce in contemporary life, in her life.

"It's all right."

They laughed at the plain honesty of that statement.

"Oh yeah?" he asked, and lifted his eyebrows as he leaned forward slightly. He looked into her eyes. She saw that his eyes were blue, with gold around the pupils.

The moonlight, which went on like a streetlight, was bright enough for her to make out colors which there was still a little sun, too, lingering along the edges of the sky along with the streetlight.

She felt like she was no longer breathing underwater, but drowning in the air, and letting herself go into death as the indescribable substance flooded her lungs. She welcomed the sensation. Some people, you know right off the bat, will kill you, and you know you will let them.

A pair of sparrows circled her head like a halo, then landed on the concrete stairs behind her.

She was standing. She didn't know exactly how she got to be standing. A moment ago, she had been sitting on the concrete stairs. But here she was, standing, and in conversation with a gorgeous stranger from out of town, from Europe, and from some other continent or subcontinent before that. He was a mixture of wonderful things, like an elixir.

She was also a mixture of things, so this gave her the confidence to answer him and keep the conversation moving.

"I mean, yeah, it's good."

They laughed.

She asked, "Where are you from?"

"Paros," he said, mispronouncing "Paris" in what must have been his native accent.

She knew he was only sort of telling the truth, but that was okay. He was a puzzle, and he presented himself that way.

"I'm from Montreal," she said, and smiled.

"Ah, no!" he said. His smile was life in rose. *La vie en rose*.

Life through pink-tinted glasses. It was all a happy thing, so why did she feel so nervous?

"Yeah," she said.

He said in French, "Do you want to go and have a beer?" It sounded better in French.

She shook her head.

He looked very surprised.

She explained, in English, "I'm waiting for a friend."

He looked as if his house was being destroyed by a wrecking ball. "A boyfriend?"

She was quick as water rushing in to fill a hole, "No. Just a friend."

"Hi," Sam said. He was out of breath and suddenly by her side, smelling of maple-walnut ice cream as he always weirdly did.

There was a moment of confusion that she now told herself she had to smooth over, because she was the hub of this situation, and therefore in charge. Awkwardness was happening, and no one knew where they stood, or where the others stood. The three of them, Sam, the woman, and the stranger made a triangle in Harvard Square near the pit and concrete stairs.

People were milling all around them, going shopping, going to class at Harvard, or moving from some other place to another. The pit bulls were now growling playfully at each other, and the homeless kids wearing torn jeans and torn leather jackets were still laughing ridiculously.

"This is my friend," she said.

Sam said, "Hi," as if he wanted the stranger to like him. He was so kind and social, she noted herself with pride. She could always count on him for that.

The stranger stood there with a grin on his face that let her know that he didn't really know how to proceed in that moment.

"I'll give you my phone number, and we can get together soon," she said, fumbling in her purse for a paper and pen. Once she'd produced the physical objects of torn pharmacy receipt and leaky Bic, she had an awkward time finding a flat surface to write on. She gave up trying to find a ladylike solution and bent down to use a concrete stair for a writing surface. It would be okay, because it had to be. It was acceptable to make do in awkward situations.

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