ABSTRACT

NOTHING SWEET NOTHING: A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION

By Wei Xiong

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NOTHING SWEET NOTHING:
A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION

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It was marvelous how easy it was to be happy now that Claire was engaged. Now, happiness kept as well as cookies in a reachable jar and could be bit into every hour on the hour. She felt more complete, more completed. And this made her feel like keeping her feet pumiced smooth perennially, like being all that she could be. At the uptown bank where she worked as a teller, she now talked to the customers with more enunciation and took care to moisturize her hands after every few transactions. Each time her softened skin rubbed against a grainy spot of greenback, she thought more of riches, abundance, eternity. It was like her life path had just rounded a blind bluff and there lay Monte Carlo in panorama. If not quite Monte Carlo, then at least Miami, or Providence. Or, perhaps more to the point: no more blind bluffs.

“It was fate,” she told Dean, her British ex-boyfriend whom she still called a few times a month. “The same wavelength right from the beginning. I come in from the grill in 90-degree heat and he tells me I smell like the ocean.”

“It’s because you’re a hot piece of ass,” said Dean, cocky Dean, corporate analyst Dean. “I’d have married you if you had been as hard-up then as you are now.” They had had one of those undefined yet gummy-adhesive relationships when they were in college together. Even now, she heard his voice, stepped into the quick, bait-and-switch rhythms of his conversational flits, and felt young and teetering.

“We did it twice-a-day-every-day,” she said.

“Not shagging, you shagger,” he said. “Love.”

Claire’s fiancé, Jonas, wasn’t much to look at. But so much the better. Before him, her life was too careful. She wore too much beige and cleared her throat at the drive-thru before announcing her combo number. Now, with her aerobicized hip arching impudently into his hefty thigh at restaurants, the women looked at her twice askance and the men, three times. On their third dinner date, between bites of her Cobb salad, she told him that she and the British ex used to primp for dates in separate bathrooms, then unveil
together in front of full-length mirror to judge who looked better. Jonas put down his fork with an abrupt snap of wrist, his eyes blinking too fast, and leaned in toward her in a motion at once charged and flailing.

“I wouldn’t even try,” he said. “I would simply drop out of competition.”

At that, Claire leaned back in her chair and smiled up at the strobe lights on the lattice against the night sky. Later, when they went back to her apartment, she offered full sprawl at his first touch.

It hadn’t been a punchy proposal. No bullet of surprise sprung by a booby trap of a strategy. Instead, he had planted the idea between them and watered it with measured diligence, swatting away her thanks at his paying for her dry cleaning, emailing her medical journal articles with titles like “Skirting Death: New Research On The Benefits of ‘Till Death Do You Part.”” When she said idly that she’d like classic names for her children, like Elizabeth, like William, he pulled her to him slowly, as if they were shooting a bodywash commercial, and held her in an embrace so still that she could fall asleep. They were passing a jewelry store while Fourth-of-July shopping at the mall when he stopped, and held on to the sash of her dress until she staggered to a stop too.

“We’ve talked about getting married, right?” he asked, his feet together then apart. Together then apart.

“Yes.” She knew what was coming, and the maneuvering for solemnity on his pale round face made her want to laugh. But she stood firm and squashed down the tickle. At least she was wearing a dress, she thought. Oh, but it doesn’t matter. None of this men-are-from-Mars rubbish. It was his childlike not-checking-himself that she was charmed by anyway.

“I, uh, want to buy you a ring,” he said, like it had just happened that way. Like an urge to hum.

She had unusually small hands. So small that two fingers weren’t enough to work herself to orgasm. So small that the antique-style engagement ring they picked out had to be specially sized and picked up in a week. Jonas left for a week-long dermatology convention in California. Claire stood out on her apartment balcony to watch his
departing Buick disappear from view, and went in to clean out her bedroom closet, counting everything she had, bagging up blouses and pumps too without flaw to outright discard yet too off-kilter to wear without a sidelong eye out for disapproving tisk-tisking. She had mostly high-end stuff, merino wool sweaters and Italian leather jackets, immaculately dry-cleaned, looking rather incongruous on the misshapen wire hangers that she had planned for years to upgrade. Now the major life overhaul, she thought, snatching the dirty, discolored panties and sour socks from the jammed corner like pulling weeds.

“You’re a poof,” Dean had said to her once. “You color-code your laundry and then leave your wools to shrink in the dryer. You go to McDonald’s after a four-hour workout made you too tired to cook. You’ll die at thirty, Babe. Overdose. But in Gucci.” From their daily afternoon bar-chats, she had learned that “poof” was British for “gay man.” And the insouciance of his non-sequiturs disarmed her despite their tartness. Loosen her cinched jacket, her ironic smiles, her virtue. She didn’t have many close women friends then, but that was better now. Though she was still too slow to join in her female coworkers’ choruses of lunchtime giggles, she was never excluded from their compliments, dinner parties, office pop-ins. Taken in mountaintop view, her life after college was typical. Meticulous weekday grinds and alcohol-infused weekend flares. Choreographed dates and sex with clean-cut men she’d met on lunch breaks. All this surefooted day-to-dayness and still, before Jonas, she had felt anxious, floundering. Why did her four-year-old Toyota make that wheezing noise? Was Collette from IT giving her the fish-eye in the hall? Once, she woke up in the middle of the night with her heart pounding, and could only go back to sleep after aimlessly surfing the internet for an hour and finally, on whim, putting in a request for her credit report. She had hated these out-of-state conventions of Jonas’s before their engagement. She had bouncing, prancing visions of other, younger women picking him up.

The day after he left, before her ring was ready, she fell in the middle of the bank’s lobby and broke her leg. She was walking across the marble floor with a single sheet of printout, the mid-day sun easing thin thorns into her eyes when a stiletto heel slipped, scraped, and her view of the world collapsed to ground-level.
“I’m okay,” she said, after the air came back to her lungs, because she did feel okay, calm, even tender. The floor against her cheek was warmer than she’d have guessed and the alarm on her coworkers’ faces in a circle above her roused something maternal in her. “Now that everybody’s together in one place, I want to announce that I’m engaged,” she said with a giggle.

It was a simple fracture. Hairline crack. Tibula. At the hospital, except for a few jolts of genuine pain when the doctor kneaded her thigh and turned it in his hands like a vase when he molded the damp cast plaster, the feeling of calm persisted. The run through the full-body ultrasound tunnel was especially soothing. The unchanging hum of the conveyor belt beneath her, the rhythmic beeps not too fast or slow, the dim blue light that reminded her of atmospheric restaurants. In her mauve-walled, partitioned room, Ivy, the pigeon-toed, boxy-hipped college intern from the bank was reading *Newsweek* with admirable concentration. The nurse left after helping Claire settle onto her bed. She shifted so that her cast was comfortable and saw that Ivy was standing at attention, polite.

“I’m fine. Go home. Enjoy your evening,” Claire said with a balletic wave of hand.

“Laura said to tell you that she’ll visit tomorrow. She said to take all the time you need. I’ll bring you anything you need from your house right now. And congratulations on being engaged,” Ivy said, smiling properly at the last sentiment.

“Oh, it’s only two nights. There’s toothbrush and toothpaste and lingerie here,” Claire said, tugging her polka-dotted gown. Ivy guffawed, a phlegmy sputter. She really was a mess, Claire noted. Her black pantsuit fitted well enough upon a short glance but the dull gleam of the fabric was clearly polyester.

“Do you have plans tonight?” Claire asked.

“No really,” Ivy said.

“Could you keep me company for a couple more hours, then? Just until the Codeine kicks in.”

Ivy was a junior economics major, single, and probably wore baseball caps and Bermuda shorts outside her polyester-suited hours. She was a good girl, with friends and good friends. She sat on a chair at the foot of Claire’s bed clutching her magazine to her chest, offering to get coffee at every lull in the conversation.
“What’s the matter,” Claire asked. “Is this untoward?”

“What?”


“Oh no. Not at all,” Ivy said. Too many vowels made one sound nervous, Claire thought.

“Why is it that I’ve never talked to you at the bank?” Claire asked.

“Oh, I mostly work with Laura.”

“But you’re there to learn, no? If I were you, I’d use this opportunity. Talk to everybody. Initiative, you know?”

“I’m sorry. It’s just you seem so busy all the time.” The girl was avoiding her gaze, and it irritated her.

“Busy?”

“Yes, busy,” said Ivy. But when she looked up and saw Claire’s level stare she continued just like Claire knew she would.

“Very…together,” Ivy said. “You never take breaks, I don’t think. And you always look so nice.”

Claire smiled when she saw that Ivy was blushing.

“I’m playing hooky for three days. Today was the first day,” Claire said into the receiver. As long as she didn’t see the face of the woman behind the partitions, she didn’t exist, Claire decided. And anyway, it was late and she was probably asleep.

“Beautiful, I’m still at the conference, you know.” Jonas’ voice was hooded low.

“Is anything wrong?”

“It’s ten o’clock.”

“It’s, let’s see, only seven here,” he said reasonably. “You know, three hours of time difference, right? I told you I was in Cali, right? Cali’s in a different time zone, you know.”

“Isn’t it your first time there? I didn’t know you were on nickname basis already,” she said. She hated his attempts at strut and swagger. They faltered. He didn’t see it. But she always felt shot with goo, not knowing whether to hit him or be amused. But he laughed, unequivocally, and the stink lifted.
“What did you mean you were playing hooky?” he asked when he stopped. He would fawn appropriately if she told him, she thought. “Nothing. Decided to take a break. I love you. I have sick days stored up,” she said.

“You wanker,” said Dean. “I knew a shoe would be the downfall of you.” “Not at all.” Claire laughed. “It’s like a vacation. A day-and-night spa with more radio stations.”

“Has Mister-Mister lost his head then?” Dean never referred to Jonas by name. “He’s in San Francisco. It’s his heart,” Claire said.

“What in hell is the matter with you? That was an awful attempt at humor,” Dean scoffed, and then sighed. “Vacation. A couple more career moves in my direction and you could just about afford it.”

She had leave to stretch out here. No worries about her hair artfully splayed on the pillow. No spasmodic fingerings of lapels to make sure they were crisp, of pant hems to make sure they’re level. The linear gleams and calculated whiteness made her feel gridded, watched-over. The inscrutable, punctuating beeps of potent machines were as seductive as a jazz tune. Every hour, the padded automatic rollers in her bed undulated like waves against her back and she felt pure as Snow White in her see-thru sarcophagus, tended by invisible hands. No bedsores. No weather.

“Look, I can’t just give you more cake. All these trays are pre-made,” said the nurse. Claire had looked at her nametag the day before but remembered her, by her ninny voice, as Winnie.

“It’s a hospital. You’re supposed to accommodate the patients,” Claire said, batting her eyelashes with cartoonish innocence. She had not had cake in months, and this snapping of the rules made her giddy for more. Winnie flexed her pursed lips and picked up Claire’s clipboarded chart.
“You have a hairline fracture, you know? You can check out today,” she said. Claire’s fingers balled. In the bed beside her, the heavy, middle-aged woman awaiting a double mastectomy shifted.

“Oh good morning, Mrs. Bayer,” Claire sang. “Look who brought us cake.”

It was a good thing that Winnie never worked the night shift, because that was when Claire really wanted to rock the boat. It began with a problem. No matter how tired she was, her eyes perpetually misty in the aftershock of yawns, the minute the lights were out, her mind cleared, fine-tuned, stood at attention and saluted. Beneath her, the sheet was rough as burlap. Every nerve in her cast-encased leg squirmed in a melee of itch and ache. Her mouth tasted fetid, and she felt the hot rot tunnel all the way to her stomach. The whirr of the air conditioner flitted against her skin like nettles, and she felt the scrape of each sliver of cool air. It’s like going goddamn camping, she thought. It made her want to rip off her cast, her silk eye mask that Ivy fetched, her gown, and run through the hall like a banshee on flame.

“You’re too thin,” Mrs. Bayer said, out of the blue, between their comradely silence and mirroring bites of soggy meatloaf. That stopped Claire short, and the two women eyed each other uneasily until Claire recovered her presence of mind and launched into a fit of hiccups.

“Yes, I know,” Claire said apologetically, though she didn’t. She was a little in awe of the woman, who had opted for her mastectomy though her tumor had turned out benign. For the last couple of days, Mrs. Bayer had remained almost motionless, alternating between sleeping, eating, and reading a grizzled paperback detective novel that she had hooked from the lobby when her gurney was wheeled through post-surgery. Each time they wheeled her back in after the daily examination, Claire would try not to look at her flattened chest. But she was always blank-faced. And would only sigh heavily at Winnie’s pillow fluffing, open her book, and scratch idly at some old mosquito bites on her arm.

She thinks Mrs. Bayer would approve of her plan to elope. Despite the woman’s gently scuffed wedding ring, despite the way Mr. Bayer had came to visit with
supermarket roses and a box of doughnuts and shuffled eyes-to-the-floor in his wrinkled boots when he saw Claire sitting in her nipple-grazing gown, Claire believed she was the straight-plowing, clean-breaking kind. This woman thought in straight lines. When a mutiny fomented in her body, she brought out the big guns. This woman wouldn’t see the point of a wedding, with all that flaky, powdery pomp and circumstance diverting the point of the matter in a hundred directions. And the point is concentration. Viscosity. Horsepower. Claire could see herself in a spandex dress, standing up in an open-top convertible, whooping through a sweltering Nevada desert night. Jonas would be driving, looking adoring and sheepish in his rumpled shirt, men in passing cars would whistle and applaud. For this one case, she thought, the cliché only packed more punch to the scene.

Plus they would look odd in a wedding. Jonas didn’t have the posture for tuxes.

She didn’t know what he would say. Though Jonas was soft as dough in her hands, she had always refrained from going too far, wringing him dry. She knew he would want a real wedding, something deceptively effortless but covering all the bases. She had seen the undisguised delight on his face when they did anything as a his-and-hers pair. Entering the downtown techno club with her hand tucked old-fashioned-style in the crook of his arm. Pushing a shopping cart together at Whole Foods. Even when they walk past another couple, he would look the approaching man in the eye and smile to himself. One time, this way, they had run into Dean. They were standing side by side on a park bridge, leaning against the railing, when she heard footsteps stop at her back and turned around. He hadn’t changed. Same provoking smile, same sockless loafers. At the sight of beaming, leaning Jonas, he lifted his eyebrows in exaggerated, childish surprise and gave a single, dramatic nod. Claire was stricken with dismay, and fought the urge to finger-comb Jonas’s hair over his bald spot. When she finally worked up a smile he was already on his way, his hair perfect, his whistling triumphant. When Jonas asked in his casual way who that was, she wanted to slap him.

“Are you back to work yet?” Jonas asked.

“No.”
“Oh.” Claire could sense his momentary pause, and then the infinitesimal click in
the rear of his brain that let this one, too, slip.

“How is the convention?” she asked. She had been swabbed clean and fed and
the doctor had come in to tap tap tap on her cast. Outside her window, cars floated
soundlessly down the tree-lined avenues. She felt perfectly calm


He always said this. Claire felt a spike of annoyance, and to quell it, pressed her
wet, puckered lips against the receiver and sucked a sharp, hard kiss.

“Oh. That was weird. What was that?” he asked.

In the middle of the night, Claire heard Mrs. Bayer’s snoring stop, and then a
rustle of sheets. Except for the tiny crimson and chartreuse lights on the medical
machines, the room was completely dark.

“Does it hurt?” Claire asked, her voice small. A little mouse testing.

“Not really.” Mrs. Bayer said, composed without a snag of surprised silence.

“What does your husband say?”

“He understands. He’s a good man.”

“How long have you been married?” Claire was suddenly exhilarated by this
blind darkness, this simple talking.

“Twenty-one years.” She yawned. Claire waited until the rustling settled.

“That was my fiancé on the phone earlier. I’m getting married,” she said. But
she heard nothing more.

She cupped her breasts and squeezed them hard. They were young and pert, the
pride of joy of first Dean and now Jonas. When she awoke the next day, Mrs. Bayer’s
bed was neat and empty. On the nightstand lay her paperback, open and faced down.
Claire reached for it, locking her fingers to keep the pages open, and started at the first
paragraph on the page. *He swung her struggling body into the trunk with more vim than
he had intended.*

How would it feel to be inside a trunk, she wondered. Mind, body, and life story
converged in terror, tipping upon the cusp of blazing pain, of once-and-for-all extinction.
A ragged throat. A cruel joke. A gash of scarlet upon an indifferent world.
How would he feel? A lifetime of lust and love clinched and spent in a slash, a
swing, a death scream?

She was dazed by the risks and finalities. What large passions must fuel them.
How total must the obsession be when a sliced toe or severed ear comes to represent the
whole of love?

“I’m starting to worry about you,” Jonas said. “Why don’t you ever answer the
phone?”

“The old one broke. The one next to the fridge. I’m calling you from the
payphone across the street.”

“Well, everything is going nicely here. I should be home on time.”

“I’m reading a book about a serial killer. He is on his twelfth victim. He likes her
for her bright blue eyes—it’s very corny. He gets most of his torture instruments from
medical supply catalogues,” she said. He was silent. Reasonably enough.

“Why?” he asked in a dignified voice, “are you reading a book about a serial
killer?”

“You like that smarminess, don’t you? Yum yum,” said Dean. “All that rape-
fantasy luridness. You just want to be prime meat however you can, don’t you?”

She wondered if she should get pregnant right away. A dynamite boom into her
new life. A kickstart. She asked the doctor, when he came to the examining room to
explain her third x-ray, whether he had children and he put down his pen, the one he’d
been prodding the plastic with, with a silver flash.

“What’s this about? Do you want to tell me?” he said quietly, sitting down beside
her wheelchair. He was about fifty, and wasn’t going to answer her question because he
was used to holding rigid his own course. She wondered how old she looked to him.

“I’m getting married.” Some of the cleanliness of her surroundings was
penetrating, girding her up, diagramming her enmeshed gears. Her sentences were
shorter now. Gone were the flapping, flouncing fins of adjectives. Plus she was in
conservationist mode. She was very tired.
“Congratulations.” He waited. And, when her only exertion seemed to be companionable silence, said, “your leg really is healing nicely. You can be discharged anytime.”


“Louise has told me you’re refusing phone calls.”

Was Louise Winnie? Whiney Winnie with her pimply skin and matching expression, who probably had a boyfriend she was wheedling with merry widows and hearty pot roast. Claire had pegged her for a tattler. Anyway, she wasn’t refusing phone calls. She was deliberating her next move. She was thinking about sending out her resume again. Perhaps she was hasty when she decided not to go for her MBA. She knew it was the bank calling, perhaps just to designate concern, perhaps starting to bristle with impatience. She hadn’t talked to her parents for a while. She really should give them a call.

“Claire. Whatever you’re afraid of, it’s okay. Everything is going to be okay.”

That was a nice touch, using her name, personalizing the concern, even though his very job was muting the rawest wound in gauze and then smoking a masturbatory cigar. Maybe this was why she had never gotten along with her father, who’d sigh and open up a newspaper every time her mother complained of rising prices, menstrual cramps, the weather, and why she never roused to indignation for her mother, who’d just kept on talking. Truly, that was the dumbest thing she’s ever heard. Everything will be okay. Live. Die. Okay.

“My fiancé is coming to pick me up at the end of the week, I’ll be out of here then,” she said, attempting to be noble, reasonable, a knight of reason. But his look of melting kindness was too much, and she jabbed.

“Out of here. Out of your hair. Whoops, pardon me. It’s not there.” She swiveled her wheelchair around and zipped out the door, feeling clunky and crazed. Like an old lady who’d just snatched a purse.
She was thinking about chatting up Winnie, finding out more about her relationship with men, when Dean came. Winnie, who had turned around after setting down Claire’s breakfast tray, saw him first. “Oh hello,” Claire heard her say, and knew by the oozing undulations of her voice that it was a man.

A boyish, stylish man. Blond, chiseled-jawed, navy pinstripes, spring in his steps. Claire tucked one stubbly calf under her blanket and looked around the room wild-eyed. She hadn’t looked into a mirror for days. She hadn’t seen Dean in almost a year.

“Howdy ma’am,” Dean drawled. Winnie tittered, adding to the irony. When he walked past her toward Claire’s bed, Winnie turned around to follow him with her eyes. When he sat down the mattress sagged and Claire’s orange juice sloshed. Winnie started to say something, thought better of it, and left. Dean smiled slowly at Claire, who instinctively leaned back against the bed frame. “Hello Princess,” he said, and then reached out to dispense the lightest possible poke to her stomach. “I see the impending wifehood has been having its way with you.”

“What are you doing here?” How many movie scenes began with this line, she wondered, and felt pulled limp by some undertow of inevitability.

“To offer my felicitations.” He swung his leather briefcase onto his lap, clicked the two clips open at precisely the same moment, and pulled out a book. He lay it upon her breakfast tray, squishing her scrambled eggs. Claire looked down at the cover. The Stranger Beside Me: Ted Bundy, The Shocking Inside Story.

“It’s a classic,” he said as she looked.

She said nothing, but that made her feel even more naked.

“He fancied them pretty and smart,” he continued. “Thought you’d be keen. Always pegged you for the torture-porn type. You spend so many bloody hours in the bathroom and then work as teller for a living. I see how a pickling jar might appeal.”

“How does it feel to be such a sadistic bastard?” She didn’t mean to be a cliché, thought the way out of it was casualness, but things were not shaping up to be that way. He chuckled indulgently.

“I just had a little time before work, my love. Thought I’d give you an engagement present. Knew I wasn’t going to be invited to the party.”

“I’m not having a party, or a wedding,” she said.
“Don’t be a child, Claire. You’ve made your bed, now you’ve got to lie in it. Show him off. Let him show you off. Get him off.”

“What are you doing with your life? Who are you seeing now?” She had rarely asked him questions about his life during their phone chats. He was always the one who asked the questions. She was pushing back now. But he ignored her.

“Pardon my unoriginality here, darling, but how original can one be, considering the subject? All I’m saying is don’t sabotage yourself. Make Romeo happy.”

“Is it still Elaine with the ass? The one your mother loved?”

“Now I didn’t come here to fight, Babe. Just a lark. How’s the food here? How’s the talent? The nurse’s uniform isn’t what I’d hoped but you might be able to make something of it, on better days.”

“Please. Go. Away.” she said through clenched teeth. Clenched everything. The breakfast tray table was still balanced above her lap, she shifted down a notch, being careful not to rock too much, and looked up so that she wouldn’t have to look at him. The ceiling was familiar by now. Flaking shreds of plaster. During an earthquake, the room would snow with each shudder.

“We’re all getting older and more ridiculous, including you,” she said. “Why does one person ever love another? It’s—“

“Uh-oh,” Dean interrupted. Claire looked up. He was looking toward the window, chin tipped up so that his head was almost horizontal, so that she saw into the dark enclaves of his nostrils.

“What?”

“Bluebeard. In a Buick,” he said. But it’s only Thursday, Claire thought, her heart quickening.

“And carrying a velveteen sack. Cornwall’s Diamonds. How fortunate. I wanted a glimpse at that thing,” Dean said, swiveling his head from the window to Claire and back again.

“Leave,” Claire said.

“Oh come, Love, we’ve never formally met. I won’t say anything if—“

“Dean. Hurry. Please.”

“—if it’s a microbe, even though he is a doctor, which is fortunate bec—“
She wanted to shout “now” or even “fuck you,” but there wasn’t enough time in her body to arrange it. Instead she snapped, rose like a wave under the moon, heaving her torso forward, lurching her arms up hard against her tray table. In the starry crash of ceramic crockery and golden eggs and the crisp book pages, she saw Dean tripping off the bed, a lash of fear across his face. He looked for once uncertain, eyes unfocused, one hand still held in front of him in alarm.

A great peace fell over the room. Claire looked to the door and saw Jonas, standing similar to Dean in stillness, a look of confusion and, for the first time, anger, on his face. Claire smiled sweetly at him, feeling the old sunshine on her face. Back from the abyss of uncertainty, the gutter of exposed flesh, the cesspool of swirling mind.

“Hello my love,” she said.
Though my mother was a flock of adjectives herded together from unlikely corners, there was no getting around the shepherding force of dignity. There was a geometric precision about her, so much so that when she entered a room doing anything—clapping shut her gardening shears, lugging a hip-propped laundry basket—it seemed an unveiling. So much so that when the divorce finally came, I wasn’t surprised, for “love” had always seemed somehow beneath her.

What I was surprised by, though, was the word “boyfriend.” Hers. Wholly. Named Dave. His devotion was so swooping that he’d offered to marry her the first time he walked into Toby’s Steakhouse and saw her saunter toward him with a pitcher of lemonade, her smile more efficient than friendly. His first line, “If I had enough money, I’d order you,” was a testament to both his plainness of mind and flamboyance of heart and she smiled, surprising herself. When she came home that night, she told me about him while I counted her tips.

“He’s fifty-something but doesn’t look half bad,” she said. “Two divorces. No kids. Owns a cattle ranch down on seventy-three.”

“You would really be a rancher’s wife?” I asked, picturing her Shakespearean Quarterly faced down in bales of hay.

“An aspiring concert pianist’s wife sounds better, doesn’t it?” she said dryly, stacked the bundles of singles into a criss-crossed leaning tower, and left the room.

My father came home everyday just before midnight. The stillness of the hour when he opened the front door made the walls’ lurch even more seismic. Beside me in bed, I could feel my mother clench in her sleep, and the fact that her eyes remained shut would frighten me even more than the trail of extravagant clamor that my father left in his wake of rifling the cupboards, slapping together a sandwich, kicking off his shoes. It was as if a fuse had been blown in the airy inertia of the Rachmaninoff and Bach concertos he’d been practicing all day and now his every nerve hankered for earthly creak
and groan. Yet the dissonance was more than irritated whim. I read the stakes in the hard clamp of my sleeping mother’s jaw: he was a loose cannon. We were a sinking ship.

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I was earnest and sodden in those days, the short end of thirteen. At school I sat in the first row of every class and raised my hand so much that teachers skipped right over me. At lunch I sat with Louise, who wore fishnet stockings on Valentine’s Day, and Jackson, her dreadlocked best friend. They marveled at the romance novels I checked out by the dozen from the public library and the perpetual whiteness of my Keds. “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Louise asked me once.

“A doctor,” I said. “Or a lawyer.”

“You’re smart enough,” she said, nodding. “But maybe too weird.”

At home, my mother flared up at me for little things. Coming to bed with my hair still in a ponytail, rubbing a hole erasing a sum on my algebra paper, praying with a face theatrically grave.

“Stop sleeping through life,” she told me. “You’re almost a woman now.”

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I startled awake one night in June. My mother leaned over me, holding an old corduroy coat much too big for me.

“Put this on tight,” she said. “Dave is outside in his truck and he wants to meet you.”

She herself was wearing a white nightgown so translucent that I could see the contour of her body inside it. Her hair was a loose maelstrom around her shoulders and, for the first time, I felt a revving of elements that made me dizzy.

“Are you going out like that?” I asked, before realizing that she had probably come in like that.

Out in the jasmine-scented air, my mother opened the pickup’s door, placed a hand on each of my shoulders, and ducked behind me so as not to compromise the effect.

“And this is Eve,” she said, as if they were already in the middle of a conversation.
He looked less oily than I’d thought. No buffed hair or shiny boots. Rather, he was as roughly hewn as a grizzly, the bushy fray of his eyebrows drooped into his eyes, the skin folds of his knuckles puckering fat like roses.

“Howdy ma’am,” he said with a nod and no smile, extending his hand toward me. When I took it, his sandpapery skin and anchoring grip made me understand a little why my mother liked him. I smiled to be polite but was mildly seasick.

“How is my mother doing?”

“She’s very excited about meeting the animals on your ranch,” my mother said, stroking my hair. I smiled harder.

“Well, it will be an honor for them to meet such a beautiful little lady,” Dave said.

On the last day of school, Louise and Jackson waved goodbye to me in the hall and continued on their way, their circuit of laughter and horseplay plugged and coursing, and I wondered if it was loneliness I felt. Every morning that summer, after my mother left for the restaurant, I would hear my father’s door yawn open. His noises were calmer in the morning, as if there’d been resolutions in the night. At around noon he left for the conservatory with his briefcase filled with fruits and sheet music. I pictured him in an empty practice room, threadbare in comparison to his former corner office with the polished Steinway piano. Here he would spend the best part of summer, entrenched in this sterile plot while outside, the ivy scrambled up the waterspout and the thistles mussed up the neat lines of the Georgian bricks. He’d kept to himself even before the layoff. Now, when he bumped into former colleagues amidst the halls’ echo, I imagined his corresponding expression of vacancy. A nod, a shrug, a “hi” indicating grudgingly little but magnifying absence without check.

I grew heavy with anticipation. Of what? My mother started coming home hours after her shifts ended. I watched her from the window, getting out of the red pickup, standing in her stocking feet on the porch and crouching down gracefully to put on her shoes. Did she know I was watching? Could it be all instinctive—the precision of the crook of her finger hooking into the heel of a shoe, the coltish tilt of her chin. When her path crossed with my father’s on the way to the bathroom or the kitchen, did his carefully-axised equilibrium trip upon her cocked elegance that had, even when they’d
first met, made beauty a moot point? I turned over what little I knew of the episode in my head: two overly-solemn sixteen-year-olds at an arts camp. She tickled by the stupor he lapsed into when he penciled in a treble clef, he ceding all at the steadiness of her hand under his elbow as she led him onto the darkened gymnasium dance floor.

Perhaps it was in keeping. Maybe they’d never learned to communicate through the blunt-beaked mimicry of words. And instead, they did what two overly-solemn teenagers do during a summer under a tree: felt moved though they merely touched. And, when they discovered she was going to have a child, went with what was instinctive and cosmic, and speculated that it was going to be beautiful.

——

“Is it about money?” I asked my mother. We lay in bed back to back. She didn’t answer immediately, but didn’t pretend I’d awoken her.

“Maybe,” she said, and then: “your father knows, you know.”

There was no impact, so I couldn’t have been surprised. What I felt then was a hard gallop in my chest and then a quicksand slide to tears. Though why, I wondered. I hadn’t talked to him for weeks. When I heard the clap of the door at his exit, I’d always felt relief.

“He’s your father and you’re too sensitive,” she said with a sigh. And then, when I said nothing: “I don’t want you to waste your life trying to figure him out, Eve.”

I didn’t cry. I was sleeping next to my mother who had a rancher boyfriend. Crying would have made it all a mockery.

——

When the day finally came to move to Dave’s ranch, we tried to make as little noise as possible. Dave didn’t enter the house out of respect for my father, and waited with his hands on his knees, his haunches leaning against the truck bed. I tried to time each of my emergences from the house to coincide with my mother’s, but I had also wanted to flee, and so worked faster. When I trudged up to the truck with a canvas bag of paperbacks, Dave took it from me and gave a mock grunt.

“How are you holding up?” he asked.

“Fine, thank you,” I said. “Are those too heavy?”
“What, these? No problem. Anytime you want any more of them, too, no problem.”

I was about to return inside when he caught my wrist. His grip hurt, but I saw that he didn’t know it.

“Listen, Eve, your mother is a good woman,” he said. I nodded. And then, wondering whether he meant it as persuasion or refrain, I said I knew.

He was silent. Maybe I sounded defensive, I thought, and was about to amend further when above us, suddenly, a harsh crash.

I looked up at my father’s bedroom window and saw an unfamiliar pattern of shadow and light, as if furniture had been rearranged. But I didn’t see him. Through the front door, my mother came trotting out.

“Last box,” she said. Though I knew it wasn’t.

____

I thought I’d be haunted. My mother was right, I was too sensitive compared to her. Yet on the drive to Dave’s ranch, the scenery grew so clear and sharp with each mile that I felt pierced numb with the brightness. It was like entering a new world. I didn’t look back.

____

My father died eight years later when a commuter plane skidded off the runway during landing at Washington Dulles. Out of eighty-four passengers, twenty-three fought their way out of the burning fuselage, their bodies leaping with live fire, and tumbled into the snow-covered flanking fields. My father was among them. By the time the ambulances came, the char had settled. He had stopped breathing.

The images were insistent, bounding across the Atlantic to my leaky, frigid student flat in Oxford, England. I had not kept contact with him. When my mother phoned me, the news was already three weeks old.

On the blank canvas of these gaps, then, I envisioned the flames. The sinews in his quiet body blooming bright like lit fuses, the riot in his cells dynamiting vast, outward. I realized how appropriate this was, the trumping of this single, soaring note over the old, meek enigmas: the hesitation with which he had held my hand at baseball games, as if the pose somehow embarrassed him. The humid, wordless months we spent
in that embattled house, misfiring with ceasefire. His blood’s swift wilt after it had first
tided him to upend a vase, a dresser, anything, to make a bit of noise, to imprint himself
onto the scene. Yet, I could not dwell on any of these particulars then. The indelibles
that dripping night were well worn, ordinary: my mother, at a crash that shook the rafters
of a house, breaking into a jog yet not a run. Her penny-by-penny re-bargaining with fate
after the first youthful, swooning consummation. Instinct versus instinct. Prodding.
Plodding.
“What?” she asked, impatient.

“What?” he said softly. Snivelingly, she thought.

“What time is it?” She whirled around to look at the clock and the phone slipped a little between her jaw and her shoulders. They had been talking for hours and she wanted to stop, read a book, watch a video, fumigate the sound of their voices out of her head.

“It’s just,” he began and then stopped. Such a predictable spot to stop, she thought, and sighed loudly, her larynx full of dust.

“You don’t seem sad at all,” he said. There was a quiver in his voice and she was touched, but the touch felt far away.

“I have moments of weakness. I just don’t show them to you,” she said before the tide of contempt came in again.

He sniggered. A short spurt of sniper air.

More than a year ago, they had first met. Less than a week ago, she had left him.

What?

There was never a blank canvas, not even in the beginning, when she would hole up for days in her bedroom in the apartment she shared with two other college girls, spending hours on the internet, clicking from designer handbag outlet malls to suicide prevention centers, avoiding the site she was afraid of, her dwindling savings account summary sheet. Every Friday night, she would hear her roommates chirping in the hallway, prancing from their bedrooms rumbling with bass to the bathroom mirror, gaping makeup compacts in hand, scrunchies in mouths. “Sharon!” they would call and bang out the rhythm of “Mickey” on her door. “Come out with us! Matt and Jaime are making margaritas. Get that skinny ass into something tight and let’s go!” She would pace manically at this, attempt to match her voice to theirs in insouciance, and yell back an unstudied retort about having better things to do. When they were gone she would
feel the walls breathe a sigh of relief, and would go into the bathroom, brush her teeth vigorously over the sink, and call him.

He would be over in fifteen minutes. In the morning, before her roommates woke up, he would leave without using the bathroom, stopping to put on his shoes on the landing outside her front door.

Nothing

There were no colors in the dark. There was no mind in movement. His body was large, heavy, but firm. The give in his flesh reminded her of bread, or soil, or anything equally basic and infallible. She liked him on top, liked the strained gasps of her lungs when his weight came down. At the moment of orgasm she squeezed her eyes shut and saw a world of crimson. Cells dividing. Veins dilating. When she opened her eyes again everything was very still. Each object in her room stood out with great clarity and she felt she could be happy then. Put on a plain cotton shirt and go shopping for apricots. Do laundry by hand. Pick a daffodil from her neighbor’s yard and pin it under his windshield wiper.

What time is it?

Between 11pm and 4am of every night of her last year before graduation, her insomnia hit. It was a white, heavy cyclone each time. Around the snare drum of her heartbeat, her mind cycled in whirls and drones. Ten months until her lease ends. Five months until graduate school deadlines across the country. She should’ve already been looking for jobs. She should have had counselors recommending her for internships, friends with contacts in leviathan corporate firms, a boyfriend for whom she could play martyr and follow across the country. Her days were numbered, she was sure. Yet when she turned off late-night TV, opened her window to the smoke-tinged, static-flicking autumn air, she would feel only this moment and this moment.

And appetite. Death-row appetite, huge, eyeless, and churning. For everything: one more glass of wine, thirty dollars’ worth of travel magazines from the college book store in one afternoon. Walking to classes, she’d feel appetite’s slow smolder and almost bent under it. For afternoon snacks, she made buttermilk omelets with a half-dozen
vegetables and three pungent cheeses. In the middle of the night, she’d wake up fevered and ravenous, thump downstairs to the kitchen only to realize that nothing looked good and it wasn’t hunger that gonged the blood to her ears. She’d marvel for just a moment, and then dash back upstairs to dial his number.

It’s just

When she attempted to broach the subject of him to her friends, nothing translated. They would look at her gingerly as she began with his name, his hair color, his job, their uh huhs growing more and more anemic until she panicked and squeezed forth a convulsive, break-the-spell laugh and said god, it was not serious or anything, they just fucked. She would graduate, god help her, and head out to Maine and be Stephen King’s short-skirted assistant. Yes, she had staked out a reputation for her coils of cynicism, her shoot-from-the-hip swagger. She could not say the sentences that she didn’t even allow to condense into words, that he was in her mind so constantly that she was on the lookout for him every time she turned a corner on the street, as if such intense concentration would automatically lead to conjuration. But—

What?

He was close to forty, all gristly arm hair and lean muscles. He lived in a yellow house overgrown with ivy with a yard strewn with disemboweled boats. In the summer, he wore a slew of identical rumpled tee-shirts and faded-khaki Birkenstocks, and in the winter, a black woolen coat ravaged by the elements and mismatched pleather gloves. He had been an IT analyst for a pharmaceutical company for a decade until a merger had laid him off. And then he folded. He moved into his parents’ house and lived with his mother until she passed away. The spring after her funeral, he turned her flower garden into a vegetable garden and grew shiny eggplants and peppers that he enjoyed holding as much as eating. His resume was still in circulation somewhere, an untethered satellite drifting through an ungravatied universe. He read books all day now, and fixed computers when someone called his tiny ad in the paper. Despite all this, he said “girlfriend” and put his arm around her like it was the most natural thing in the world.
She was pretty, a water-and-stone prettiness of smooth brow and cool eye. When she had first gone to his house with her incommunicative laptop, she sat waiting on the sagging steps of his porch and hitched her gauzy skirt up to her thighs to feel the evening breeze. After he inserted and started the reformatting disk, he came out to sit beside her, not too close, not too far.

“What do you think?’ he asked. About what, she didn’t know, but his tone was low, fitting into the summer evening. And she knew she wanted him, though it was not about wanting, but melting.

“I think it’s going to rain. I might have to stay here for a while,” she said, turning her face to him.

*Nothing*

Everyday she plodded on. Classes, lunches with project partners, kitchen banter with roommates, thick pools of fitful sleep. She wondered why she was smearing herself upon life so dark, volleying duties so efficiently with such reflexive dread. If she believed in nothing—not the cerebral-gymnastics social treatise she wrote for her political science class, not her bank teller’s lecture on the importance of credit build-up and the future acquisition of houses on hills—why couldn’t she just let go? Stop shoving her laundry into the washer with bi-monthly punctuality. Stop ushering him out of her apartment before sunrise. She didn’t care to let her roommates see, but sometimes she could sit and watch the snowfall outside her window for hours. Instead, she started checking herself against those two for alignment the way a sleepwalker felt his way along a railing. When Jen booked a teeth cleaning appointment, she bought floss and a new toothbrush. When Rebecca sent away for graduate school applications, she added her name to the request card.

What should she have said? That he was an original taste in her mouth by day, a bottomless sinkhole in her mind at night? That the arrangement of her world lurched now that he was in it, and kept on lurching, because she could not place him anywhere? “Are you seeing someone?” asked her widowed, high-school secretary mother when she had refused to be set up with her neighbor’s boy, who was in medical school now. And then, before she had decided on her answer, her mother inhaled in joy.
“What do his parents do?” she asked.
“No, there is no one,” she said.

One night, warmed to tenderness by a dream, she walked the icy mile from her apartment to his house in a white heat and stopped to catch her breath in his yard. The yellow glow of his bedroom light stained the snow. She crept to the window and inched her gaze above the bottom margin. He was sitting at his desk piled with books, reading. His neck bent forward and down in the same angle as his lamp and he sat motionless, absorbed in thought. She drew back, heart pounding. And then she knew that, more than anything else, she had seen the most private scene she could see. And then she walked home for fear of inching even closer.

*What time is it?*

Her insomnia eased after two seasons of darkness and light, and by spring, she felt steadier, more likely to put on earrings in the morning and to make herself occasional cups of tea. Options came. Graduate programs called her to talk about course loads, her guidance counselor offered to hire her as the department secretary. Rebecca and Jen knew better than to ask her to parties now, and still asked her to brunch every Sunday despite, unfazed by her sporadic nos. “You can bring him along if you want,” said Jen one day at Sharon’s hesitation.

“He’s thirty-nine, did you know that?” She said this expressionlessly, but could feel her heart thumping hard in her neck, her wrists. Jen started to say something and then stopped, and never mentioned him again.

She spent more time with him now, though the only times they went out in public were to the movies. In the darkness of the theatre, she’d lean against his shoulder, survey all the other couples in their irregular, welded-together shapes, and think, was this all actually easy? Was she the one making it hard? Walking down the street after the movie is over, he reached for her hand and she wiggled her fingers free, and then jammed them into her purse to fumble for a piece of gum. She watched him as he kept his stride even and his hand extended toward her, waiting. She folded the gum into her mouth and put her hand back in his. For the rest of the walk, she stared straight ahead, determined not to meet the eyes of anyone.
But when they were alone she unfurled again. In his living room of peeling wallpapers and sour carpet, he sat reading the paper and she stood observing him, her back against the window ledge. What was it about him? She tried to herd it together with adjectives and specifics: ginger eyelashes, precise enunciation, straightforward body movements, slow vigilance in sentence-formation. He looked up at her. She smiled and unbuttoned her blouse. He went over to her and cupped her breast watchfully, like a new fruit. She thought of how they looked: a strange statue in afternoon’s indifferent light, and wished they could be frozen this way.

It’s just

Her graduate school brochure came and it was wonderful. She flipped through the pages, saw the tall peaks and vast plains on the horizons of the Colorado campus and breathed deeper. She saw herself as she, as sideways glimpses of a third person who’s all silhouette against the horizon and departing swing of hair. She started getting up earlier in the mornings and made breakfast for her roommates. She threw out her stacks of travel magazines.

And him. He suggested he look for jobs in Colorado and she sneered. “You mean send out your resume?” When he didn’t answer she felt a bruise spreading over the space between them and went over to him. But when she ran her fingers through his grain-colored hair, the word that flashed through her mind was “raggedy.”

On their last night together she sat alone on his porch while he got ready for bed. It was where things first began and now here it ends, she thought, feeling apt, compact. When he pushed open the screen door she went in past him. When they made love that night, she kept her eyes open, and could almost see their sweat and saliva ferment into a hot, sharp stink.

You don’t seem sad at all

She could picture a life now after she cut him loose. Degrees, babies, dinner parties with friends in designer clothes where the men place their open palms on the bare backs of the women as if to steer them through the room. Plus he had never given her anything she didn’t give back. Plus she didn’t understand him, really.
She remembered when she was about five, a week before Christmas, her father took her to see Santa Claus at the mall. In the teeming waiting area in front of Santa’s cordoned corner, she stood holding her father’s hand. She only came up to his hip and all around her were the polyester slacks and tennis shoes of other adults. She let go of her father’s hand for a moment, bent down to tie her shoe, and reached for his hand again, only to feel unfamiliar calluses and look up. A strange man looked down, saw his hand in hers, and smiled. She let go of his hand and her face flushed hot. Above her head, the man and her father exchanged amused grins. When her turn came to see Santa she was still stricken, and let him scoop her up to his knees without even looking at him. On the drive home, she unbuckled her seatbelt, climbed up on the seat to reach her father’s ear, and whispered through her cupped hand to please not tell her momma. She wanted the moment of mortification to stay small.

Plus she had never, ever, been the shrugging type, and was only beginning to realize what that meant.

*Moments of weakness*

The body gives in first. When she falls into bed at night, her neck would remember the chafing of his chin. Her back would remember the soft of his belly. She remembered once, he was cooking in the kitchen and she walked from the living room to the bedroom. Passing his back, she could not stop herself from going to him, locking her hands across his chest and pressing her cheek against his spine. She could feel her heart lean in that position, and the weight of the world went both lighter and heavier.

That he read all day but never talked about a book without her asking. That he could absorb everything, even the heave and sag of her darkest and lightest moods, without fissure. That she could lean her forehead against the broad plane of his chest and feel her swollen pulse cool against his oceanic calm. That he stepped out of the world because he housed his own.

That the worst of her misgivings about him would gurgle up and not amount to much. Maybe she was the beauty and he the beast. Maybe he collected her the way a half-crazed hermit collected teacups and Russian dolls. Maybe he lost the game already
and would eventually drag her out. Yet the word “lover” had never been called to her mind with such unthinking lightness, and never would be again.

That waiting was all there was. That flight lasted only a season. That through days of good food and stirring conversations and wheel-greasing industry, she would only be waiting for the next reason to fall. That there was nothing more for her to say.

*What?*

Always more. She realizes now that it is obscene to complain, that’s she’s had second chances, that she had figured out her power and kept testing it to calibrate it, to keep it exactly the same.

“Why do you care what your roommates think if you’re moving soon anyway?” he’d asked her one morning. He was lying in her bed and she had just tiptoed back into the room, two steaming mugs in hand.

She paused. He had never asked why. About anything. She had always thought that it was because he knew the answer was ugly, and would rather swallow the brine than rock the boat. Keep on with the sailing across her smooth young skin rather than plumb to the heart of her and upturn it. She put down the mugs.

“Their names are Rebecca and Jennifer. They are both my age, 22. In about an hour they will go downstairs and eat cereal in their pajamas and talk about studying for finals. If you want to meet them, you can. I will go down with you and pretend everything is normal. And afterwards, when I’m alone with them, they will say that you seem nice and we seem sweet and who knows if they’ll mean it. But I don’t know what’s going to happen with me or you over cereal. Maybe we’ll understand that we’re both lying. That you only want me one way and I only want you the other way. If you want to test this, then let’s go now.” She gathered his clothes up from the back of her chair and dropped them in his lap, not meeting his eyes.

“What?” he said, simply, a bit dazed. She felt the moment push past, and let it go.

“Nothing.” She stroked his shoulder. “I have class until four today. I’ll come over then and we’ll have dinner.”

*Nothing*
Four days before her departure for Colorado, her apartment is all but empty. She has picked out the furnishings for her new apartment. Breezy, sail-white curtains and caramel-colored rugs that remind her of cats’ yawns. She touches the weave of the fabric and laughs at herself for thinking that just because her pillowcases will match, she will have what people call a lifestyle. Rebecca and Jen have moved out the day before. She is alone.

It is summer in the world and in the mind. After a day of packing, cleaning, eating takeout sandwiches on a chairless floor, she steps out onto the balcony and feels her sweaty skin twitter awake in the evening breeze. She shuts her eyes and all the world drops dead. She lifts her lids and all is born again. She scans the rooftops, clouds, and trees and nothing has eyes except her. She misses him, and sits down to put on her shoes by instinct.
I moved in with Lily in August after our junior year of college. It was a dilapidated yellow house with two low-ceilinged bedrooms and a nightmarish mildewed basement. But it was on a leafy cul-de-sac and had a big front porch. When we first came to look at it, I thought out loud of lazy evenings, droning cicadas, and sweating teacups of peach schnapps. Lily had smiled faintly, which was as close to full approval as she ever got. The landlord, who must’ve been used to college kids’ preoccupation with parking spaces and working microwaves, looked from me to Lily and smiled an uncertain smile. After the big trucks and our respective fussing parents left, we flung ourselves to the floor exhausted, our armpits hot and damp, our shins bruised from the stops and jerks of trudging bulky computer desks up the narrow, winding staircase.

We’d been neighbors in the dorms since college began. Neither of us made friends easily, and by the end of the second week we’d noticed each other’s solitary entries and exits, and started exchanging greetings in the halls. Outwardly, we seemed very similar: pretty, decorous. She was taller, thinner, with a dark blond fall of hair that came down to her waist and a schedule full of business classes because she didn’t know what she wanted to do, but knew she needed money to do it. In the shared bathroom, I’d once peeked inside her drawer and noted the brand of conditioner. In the dining halls where we began meeting for dinner, I was so lulled by her glacial composure, her lunar blue eyes and thin, pessimistic lips that our conversations sounded like one between foreigners speaking a common second language. And how do you like college so far? It is nice. Yes, the campus is beautiful in the fall.

I was a journalism major. Brunette. A little more clutter in my room, a little more staccato down the hall.

One weekend in the yellow house, Lily brought home a boy. I’d heard the front door squeak and came down the stairs in my pajamas. When I saw him I stopped. Lily had on dark lipstick and a slick leather jacket. The boy’s baseball cap had a tattered rim.
“I guess the Ralph Fiennes movies night is out,” I said. Though I had wanted to lighten the moment, my words came out dark. Lily sniffed the air, her nostrils barely flaring.

“Are you cooking?”

“Put on onion pancakes. I can’t sleep.”

“This is Maggie,” Lily said to the boy. He was tall with shaggy blond hair half-covering his eyes and had to tilt his chin upward to make eye contact.

“Nice to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you,” he said. Lily seemed embarrassed by this, and fidgeted with her purse strap. I nodded at him, feeling prim and proper and a little ridiculous. Lily went past me upstairs and the boy followed.

When I went up to my room with a plate of pancakes, I passed the yawning bathroom door and glimpsed Lily bent over the bathroom sink. She was dry heaving soundlessly, her crimson mouth agape. Behind her was the boy, his one hand stroking her back, the other holding her hair tight like a rein. The lights were off. The only light was from the moon.

In my room, after I finished my pancakes, I called Paris. It was 7 a.m. there.

“Mark, do you know that I’ve got posters for my walls now?” I listened to his silence.

“It’s midnight there, isn’t it? Can you not sleep?” His voice was calm, like always.

“I’m sorry. Did I wake you up? I wanted to tell you, I have the poster of the Eiffel Tower all lit up. It’s beautiful.”

“Come here in November,” he said. It wasn’t the first time he said this. Sometimes, I thought, I prodded as gingerly as I could to see if he would say it again.

“You don’t sound tired. Can we chat a while?” I asked, opening the window for a whiff of cool honeysuckle.

“Of course.” I heard a curt metallic grinding, imagined the saffron glow of his cigarette in the dark, and started telling him of Lily and the boy on the other side of my wall.
Lily had never had a boyfriend. When I first asked her why, she’d tossed her hair coolly and said she’d never gotten to know any boys well. “But is that the point? Getting to know them?” I’d asked, invoking a female confidentiality that seldom felt natural. I myself had been inexperienced then. My habitual expressions of arching my eyebrow and lifting a single side of my lips had provoked in males more uncomfortable shiftings than answering smirks. At the campus newspaper where I worked as a copywriter, the boys were friendly and expansive, but rarely came near me with their slapstick punning and their body-contact flirtation. Eventually, I came to know, and sleep with, a staff reporter. He had an easy sunniness, an encyclopedic knowledge of the Harlem Renaissance, and a knack for looking natural in photographs with his arm around everyone from the dean of students or the physics department janitor. Yet still, he’d been thrown by my occasional steely jokes, my solitary habits. The beginning of the end of our involvement came when he’d asked me to go to a Dave Matthews concert and I’d said no.

“Too much fussing around this week. I need to rest up.” I tried to adopt his offhand casualness, but privately, I envisioned crowds of salivating faces bloated with worship as a tuneless acoustic guitar lured them into slag, loose-limbed twirlings.

“You’re going to do nothing. With no one. Like always.” His voice took on a resentful twang, and, despite all my self-censoring care with him in our few weeks together, when it came at last to this, I felt no urge to sooth.

“Yup.”

“You know,” he paused and then began in deliberate slowness, “you say that Lily’s an anorexic ice queen, that you’re friends only because she’s undemanding. But you actually admire her, don’t you?”

“I respect reserve,” I said, a little rattled by his sudden mentioning of Lily.

“No,” he said. “I don’t think that’s it.”

After the boy left the next morning, Lily came downstairs while I was making breakfast and plopped down onto the couch. I spread her usual staples—grapes, soda crackers, and jasmine tea—out on the coffee table, and she ate with absentminded nibbles. The sun was pale gold on the windowsill and I examined her between bites of
my toast. Her lipstick was smeared, her hair was a tumbling tangle, and the dried powder on her cheekbones reminded me of pollen on a flower petal. I felt a slow turn in my chest. All these years that I’d known Lily, she had never come out of her room unless she was perfectly dressed and made up.

His name was Stuart. He was twenty-seven and had never gone to college. He lived an hour out of town and worked as a teller at a community bank. She had been walking home from a late-night project meeting and he had been leaning against the doorframe of a bar. He had looked at her, spread his arms, and said baby. She had gone into the bar with him and downed three whiskey sours. Later, after she’d thrown up in the bathroom, her ascetic body ejecting the sudden riot of effervescence, he had rubbed the nap of her neck and looked unfazed.

Lily drove to see him the very next weekend. When she emerged from the bathroom after three hours with smoky eyelid and a black Samsonite suitcase, I watched her sexual colors abrade the lumbering ordinariness of the day and an idea occurred to me that this is all like a movie. I went into the kitchen and stooped to feel for the bottle of champagne at the back of the top cabinet. Then I went out to the porch with two glass flutes filled to the top and waited. When she came out and saw me, she looked startled and smiled uncertainly.

“Bon weekend,” I said, handing her a flute. She gave a short laugh, took it, and sipped.

“Are you going to talk to the Paris Bureau?” she asked. This irritated me and I ignored it.

“On a chart from one to ten, how intelligent is this Stuart?” I asked, knowing this was’t champagne talk.

Her faced changed, only a little but I saw it. With a shrug and glassy eyes, she walked past me, set her glass down on the welcome mat, and swung her suitcase with ungainly clacks down the front steps.
When Lily and I first grew close, people would pull me aside at parties and ask me what’s with my friend. Scanning the room, I would see her standing stock still at the kitchen counter or against the arm of a couch, her Marlene Dietrich face expressionless.

“I have no idea,” I would say with a contemptuous snicker—for she did indeed seem contemptible in this view—and continue my conversations as animatedly as I could without looking unnatural.

Then one night, the unthinkable. I had done a newspaper story about the international student community and had been invited by a Turkish graduate student to a house party. When Lily said yes to my invitation to come along, I was surprised. The unfocused, streamlined languidness of her demeanor didn’t seem infusible with kabobs and accented gesticulations, beaded jewelry and dervish dancing. But as I chatted with the hostess under the strobe lights surrounded by the sharp smell of lamb, an absent flash of my eyes caught upon the sight of Lily, leaning into an Indian boy, dancing with him. His hands caressed her bare shoulder blades. The gaunt upper edges of her hipbones jutted out of her dark jeans with each hard lurch of her hips. Their dancing had no variation in movement, just rhythm upon rhythm, circling over and back again. I couldn’t look away. In an instant, the boy put one hand on her jaw, rubbed his thumb across her lips, and brought his mouth down on hers.

They disappeared together down the basement stairs. The hostess turned back to me, wild eyed, and then hurried off to the kitchen. On the walk home, Lily had a tired smile and lips that looked stained with red popsicles.

At Lily’s suggestion, we went out to a club the following weekend, and then again the following. At first it was like she was trying to break from our routine of contented confidences, but after a while, I realized that she still wanted me there, recording her highs and breaking her falls. I got used to the sight of her pale throat exposed in the tilt upward to meet strange mouths. The stinging intimacy in these kisses felt like intimacy between us.

“Would you have dated me if I wasn’t going to Paris in six months?”

“Yes.”

“Do you miss me?”
“Yes.”
“Then come in November.”
“I could.”
“Maggie—“
“How do I decide?”

I met Mark at the psychologist’s office at the Student Health Center. It was a year and a half until graduation and two weeks since the panic attacks shot up in public places, cracking strands of ocher into my peripheral vision and pumping lead into my lung. The counselor, Dr. Fey, turned out to be a kindly middle-aged woman and unexpectedly astute.

“You’re in the Honor’s College, I see. National Merit scholar. No clubs. No internships. Quit the paper when you were a sophomore. Tell me Maggie, what are you planning to do after this?”

I felt relief in reach then. Not because she got it, exactly, but because she said “after this,” like “this” wasn’t definite, definitive.

“Everything is accelerated now,” I said to her. I couldn’t articulate it then. But it had something to do with not scraping together enough interest in anything to grow it into commitment, and then identity, and then a life. I was blushing, knowing that my inarticulate earnestness must’ve been a very big cliché.

Dr. Fey smiled and launched into a practiced speech of taking time and exploring interests, about the president of the cosmetics company who had graduated with an engineering degree, the college drop-out who re-enrolled after his overdose and is now in medical school. I went home with a schedule of appointments. Sitting in the waiting room the next week, the dark-haired boy with a sweet-looking tangerine mouth looked at me, turned his Traveler inside-out so I could see the thousand twinkling lights of the Champs Elysses, and said, “do you think this would do the trick or was Milton right?”

“The latter. It’s all in the mind,” I said.

He had thought so too. He thought too much, too fast. He was a genius who read Proust for his eighth grade term paper and had insomnia because he couldn’t stop doing anti-derivatives in his head. Yet when we went out to dinner, he would describe the taste
of each ingredient I didn’t know with oceanic patience. And he read Proust out loud to me. And he was able to say “sweetheart” without irony.

We stopped seeing Dr. Fey on the same day. The panic attacks seemed long past then. Yet, I went to the library after saying goodbye to Dr. Fey and, from my third-floor vantage point, I caught sight of Lily walking across the courtyard. Her long, frail body swayed in long strides. Her black windbreaker was too thin and she hunched her shoulders together, eyes low, her medieval hair hiding her face, her stiletto heels etching a stretch of stark prints into the snow. When I finally turned away from the window long after she was gone, I felt, for a moment, back nowhere.

Stuart never came back to the yellow house. I wondered if he felt the strangeness between Lily and me, some lair of female insularity that he could not infiltrate. Instead, Lily went to see him every weekend, her blow-dried hair trailing after her like a comet. It was disconcerting to me, the way her face looked frozen in perfection yet her movements became frenzied, impatient. After a month, she would skip her international business class on Fridays and leave for his place Thursday afternoon. When she came home every Monday in the early morning light, I would hear the Samsonite being dragged up the stairs, its weight slamming against the wall of each stair, and pull the duvet over my head.

“So is it really a thing?” I’d asked her in the early weeks, when she came into the kitchen to get another can of Diet Mountain Dew while I cooked pasta.

“I don’t know. I don’t really care,” she would answer. But soon it became “maybe.” Before it became yes I’d stopped asking, annoyed at her hypocrisy and annoyed at myself for caring. I watched her walk about the house, pacing through the upstairs hallway in her heels, her cell phone perpetually tucked into her front jean pocket, the bulge so pronounced that she had to take it out to sit down. Whenever it rang, she would halt all and retreat upstairs without a word.

“Why don’t you just call him?” I asked.

“And say what?” she said, whether in complete honesty or in irritation at my intrusion I couldn’t tell.
The weather cooled. The house was old and creaky and we both took to hiding out in the space-heated enclaves of our bedrooms. The flower vase in the living room stood empty while the trash bin in the kitchen overflowed. I’d always regularly filled and emptied both, knowing that Lily never noticed such things. But now, when finally she took out the trash one evening, I saw her dragging the lumpy bag to the curb and felt like a satisfied bully.

The days grew shorter. By the beginning of November I gave up cooking. The cold of the kitchen, the darkness outside, the sporadic, wailing barks of dogs from outside each evening chilled me to the bone. I ordered carry-out from a deli on my walk home and turned on every light in my bedroom as soon as I entered. I stopped keeping track of Lily’s schedule. On most days, I didn’t even know if she was in the house.

It was late November and beginning to snow when I woke up from sleep to the sound of the ringing telephone.

“Mark?” I said into the receiver, sweetly.

“Maggie.” It was Lily. The background noise was deafening.

“Lily? Are you at Stuart’s?” I turned toward my clock. 11:27 pm.

“I’m in Minneapolis, in a bar. I don’t know where Stuart is. He has my car.” Minneapolis was two hours from campus.

“You’re stranded?” I sat up and turned on the light. She didn’t answer. A shrill, cracked moan came over the receiver. My heart pounded.

“Lily? Are you there?” The moan trailed off, replaced by heavy breathing. Finally there was silence. I felt paralyzed. Though I’d never heard Lily raise her voice, let alone cry, this moment felt somehow accurate.

“I had an abortion this morning,” she said.

On my drive to Minneapolis, the snowing began in earnest. I drove as fast as I could, holding tight to the steering wheel, yet the surrealism of first snow, the muffled whiteness of the roads, made the trip seem like a dream. My best friend was waiting,
perhaps in pain, yet time slowed in that car until I saw every flake in the interpolating street light superimposed onto my window. I would get there if I kept going, I thought. And it would all be, finally, okay. By the time I got to Lily, the waitress at the bar had already given her sleeping pills. On the drive home she slumped against the window of the passenger seat. The dry bones of the story emerged from my questions, which, goaded by the urgency of my curiosity and the unguardedness of her drugged state, were less than discreet. She had found out she was pregnant two weeks ago. Having it, feeling the cells in her body bulb big and then becoming two and four and eight, was never an option to her. Stuart, inexplicably, theatrically noble in his mind, wouldn’t hear of it. He’d offered to pay for her hospital fees, to care for the child himself. She had been crying every night, first silently, then in front of him, unable to withstand the enormity of his displeasure. Finally he stopped arguing, and even agreed to take her to the clinic for her appointment. After she was done he called her on her cell phone. He was at a bar, too drunk to drive. She took a cab to the bar and the waitress said he’d just left. She checked her voicemail and there was one message with one word. *Bitch.*

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I put Lily to bed, ushered her upstairs to her bedroom under my coat like a mother hen. Downstairs, with an afghan around my shoulders against the cold, I cleaned up the kitchen, mopping the oily floor and throwing out expired condiments from the refrigerator, feeling energized and satisfied. I put on the kettle for hot chocolate for Lily, though somewhere in the back of my mind, I seemed to remember that she never cared for it.

She was always fragile, I thought. Once, sometime during sophomore year, Lily and I went to a night club and saw a boy that she had met that fall. They had slept together a few times, even went out to dinner, and then, inexplicably, he stopped calling her. When I asked about him, she had been nonchalant. She never liked him much anyway. When we saw him, he was leaning against the bar, looking tanned and fit in his powder blue polo shirt with his hair slicked back. When he saw Lily he smirked, stirred his drink with a straw, and leaned over to whisper to a similarly dressed boy beside him.
His friend turned to look at Lily, punched him on the shoulder, and the two turned to the bar, their backs convulsing with laughter.

Lily had seemed nonplussed. She danced with boy after boy, the hollows of her collarbone became shiny with sweat. I was bantering with the bartender when I looked over and saw her, eyes closed, arms slack by her sides, pressed up against the wall by a middle-aged man.

When I rushed to her side, her eyes lit up and she broke free of the man’s embrace and collapsed against me. Her weight plumbed into me, and I braced my hands under her armpits and half-pulled, half-carried her into the bathroom, where she fell to her knees onto the floor. I shifted her into a stall and locked the door. For the next hour, Lily drifted in and out of consciousness and I fretted, fetching her water from the bar and smoothing her hair away from her brow. When closing time came, she pulled herself up and leaned against me, her head on my shoulder, her arm around my waist for support. I looked at Lily’s bloodless cheeks, felt the desperate boniness of her rib cage, and felt a sour, almost nauseating twist of tenderness.

We turned the heat on in the yellow house. I made broiled chicken and emailed both our professors, claiming the flu. Lily pressed her cell phone into my palm. Keep it out of my sight, she said. Outside, the snow was unending. Wrapped in blankets, we leaned our foreheads against the icy windowpane. The conversation flooded out fast and hard. Have you thought about grad school? There’s still time to apply. My mother knows a guy in Merrill Lynch. I can get his number for you. You know, since my dad died I haven’t trusted anybody. I was feeling something like stability again. I thought it was him, but it was actually you. This whole fall I watched you burn up and I envied you. I wished I could stop bunching my life small and orderly and just fall.

At night I lay in bed and talked to Mark until I fell asleep. I didn’t know how Lily slept.

It was three days before Thanksgiving break when I told him that I had booked my ticket for Paris.
I didn’t know when the thoughts had turned the corner from away to toward, didn’t remember the date when I walked by my advisor’s office after class and, on a whim, went in. I’d left with an armful of graduate school guidebooks. Walking into the twilight torrent of snowflakes and traffic, I felt my heart beat firm in my chest.

I remembered in the beginning, that first freshman fall, the leaves burned blood red and I couldn’t sleep at night. I had wanted to open my windows and shout. *I am alive. Younger than I’ll ever be again. Nothing aches but the waiting.*

I thought about Lily. Her delicate, jagged body. Her ribs brittle, her hunger eating itself. A week ago, I had gotten up in the night to go to the bathroom and found her lying with her cheek against the tiles, clutching a bottle of sleeping pills. I love him but I don’t trust him but I love him, she said.

Stuart called daily, hourly. In my room, on top of the dresser, Lily’s cell phone lit up with fluorescent green and throbbed itself round and round in circles. I thought of him holding Lily’s hair over the sink, thought of my plane soaring into blue sky, and took the phone into the hallway and set it down beside Lily’s door. The next day I looked and it was gone.

I thought of Mark. In my mind he had no name, no complications, no plummeting thought. But everything was warmth and strong moon. And I knew this was only because I didn’t truly know him yet. And I was afraid it would change once I did. But I held myself steady.

He whooped for joy when I told him I was coming. When I told Lily over breakfast and she’d nodded and smiled. “What are you going to do?” I asked her. “Stuart wants to talk,” she said.

The winter of our freshman year, before parties, before dancing and panics of love, we had talked of the house.

“We should live together. Take turns cooking and doing laundry. Help each other with homework. Talk in the evenings. Throw parties and double date.”

“And by the time we graduate we would both be successful and in love. Lily and Magnolia, fairy princesses.”

My bags are packed for Paris. The morning before my trip, I look out the window and see Lily swing her Samsonite into the trunk of her car.
I take the champagne flutes out of my closet and hurry downstairs.
Nothing Sweet Nothing

Two days after Elise comes back to Rhode Island from seeing Peter in Hamburg, the thought surfaces in her.

“What if you die in an accident? How would I know? No one knows me. No one would think to tell me.”

“Is that what you’ve been thinking about?” he asks. “Come here.”

It is evening and no lights are on in her apartment. She hugs her pillow and rubs her nose against the telephone receiver.

“Should I leave a note hidden in my apartment with your phone number on it?” he asks.

“No, it was just a thought,” she says, suddenly realizing how inappropriate she is being.

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When they had parted at the airport, it was he who cried before releasing her and watching her spread her arms for the guard’s metal detector. Yet, somewhere above Iceland, it was she who grew excited at the thought of nothing beneath her during the long drags of uneven air. The tubby man across the aisle thrust his feet back into his loafers and clutched the armrest so that the flesh on his hands bulbed like pale sausages in casings. The shaking was enough to freeze the whole cabin, but not enough to make anyone burst forth in charges or wails. The sound cut out on the movie she was watching and she held her breath, remembering that on the flight over to see him, she’d been too jittery to even listen to her CDs. When the turbulence came she thought about the scratchy underwear she had on and looked at the half-eaten chocolate snowman on her tray table. On the movie screen, an actress she didn’t know was spinning in an awkward dance. And then she knew it. This was the way death came--with absolute randomness, without pomp or even belief.

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A week earlier, upon her arrival in Hamburg, she had first spotted him at the
airport lounge.

“You were supposed to be facing the other way, away from the crowd, or else I’d get nervous. We agreed,” she said. He was dressed in a wet-looking leather jacket and futuristic athletic shoes, looking leaner and more chiseled than in the pictures he emailed her. She felt her face tighten and couldn’t smile.

“Don’t be nervous,” he said, smiling. He didn’t touch her, and nodded when she refused to let him pull her suitcase. An hour-long tram ride later they were at his apartment. She went to the window, looked out across the empty courtyard to the church tower leading up to the sky. It was morning on a weekday and the whole world was at work. Honey-hued dust motes floated against the green-leaf patterned curtains and she took a deep breath. “It’s like you have a wife. It’s like we’re cheating on her.” She turned to face him. “This is a different world.”

After they finally got out of bed the next afternoon, they breakfasted at a faux French café. The menu was German, as were the sounds and flurries all around her. The fat German myth was untrue, she decided. The men were tall with broad, deeply carved features and the women were expertly made up, looking like grave-eyed Garbos against the pale-gold brocade walls. Peter himself was darker, quieter. He ordered them a deli plate and ate with soft-fingered grace. She was famished, and ate with everything clashing. With the comb of her fork, she tore her shiny salmon into angel-hair shreds and enclosed it tenderly between her tongue and upper palate before swallowing. When she rose from under the table after picking up the spoon she’d dropped, she hesitated a moment at the table-margin before rising to meet his eyes. Yet the amused familiarity in his gaze still hit her full force. It was like they’d known each other for years. When they got back to his place she went into his bedroom and shut the door. The room was getting dark. She took off her ballet flats and placed them on the carpet in a spot of light. There was a knock on the door. She unzipped her tattered parka, feeling dreamily sexy.

Back in Rhode Island, Elise’s brother Justin calls from the hospital hallway. Their mother has been there for a week now. Intensified radiation. The previous set of treatment has failed. Justin’s wife Joanna, a power-blonde with a severe jaw and impeccable table manners, is beginning to grumble about the number of hours he is
spending at the hospital.

“Mom’s pissed at the doctor. She thinks he should have authorized the higher intensity in the first place,” Justin says. Elise smiles. Her mother has always charged without fumbles. Every morning when Elise was little, she had dragged a hard-bristled brush through the entirety of Elise’s hair in four deep strokes. Elise can picture her now, tractoring through the snags of tangles, bobby pins wedged open at her teeth, rubber bands cat’s-cradled at her knuckles.

“How’s Joanna doing? Still alive and kicking?” Elise asks, baiting. Justin has a protective instinct about his wife. Or maybe it is defensiveness. Elise remembers a time when he went on marijuana legalization marches, jeering at the navy-suited office workers who stood to stare on the sidewalk.

“She’s working a big case and telling me to take the kids to McDonald’s. Not even Subway now,” he says. Elise sniggers and he joins her, dragging it out until she’s quiet.

“Listen ‘Lise, I hope the trip went well. Did you get a lot of research done?” he asks, his tone placating.

“Yes,” she says. Tense.

“Come see her more often. The doctor is refusing even to give percentages now,” he says.

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In her apartment, Elise stares out of her window for hours, watching for signs of first snow. She’d asked for three extra days off from work. They were meant for her to recover from jet-lag, traveler’s diarrhea, a dry floundering for adjectives when people asked how her trip was. “Don’t come back bow-legged and addicted to Codeine,” Jeff, her favorite co-worker at the video store, said to her on the eve of her trip. He had a fledgling goatee and a German ex-girlfriend who broke his heart. Her family had owned a pharmacy. She was the only woman he’d ever known who could orgasm without touching herself.

“Was that the sad conclusion of Heidi? After one handless orgasm too many?” Elise asked. Jeff was the only person she’d told the real purpose of her trip to. To her boss, she’d said visiting friends and to Justin, dissertation research. To the friendly
colleagues who knew her better, she’d said she was going to France. She had taken
French all through high school and college, dreaming of lights on the Seine. They only
asked that she send postcards.

“You’re pathetic,” said Jeff. “You have to go all the way to Germany to find a
boyfriend? And he’s not even rich. Heidi’s parents were millionaires.”

“God. Boyfriend. Can’t a girl have a fling?” She liked Jeff’s rough handling. It
made her feel zapped alive and resilient, a different person.

“So he can fuck anyone he wants.”

“But he doesn’t want,” she said, and then thought how vulnerable a sentence that
was. Not even a sentence but a fragment. Flailing for end.

“You know what I say to that,” Jeff said, grinning crookedly, intimately. He was
years younger than her, an undergrad Don Juan. She wondered what he really thought of
her, her zigzaggings lurches between naiveté and wisecracks.

“How did I say I met Peter, Jeff?” she said, slow and sugar-sweet. He tilted his
head and frowned at her.

“A friend of your ex-roommate’s.”

“I lied. I never met him before. I answered his personal ad on the internet,” she
said, savoring the entrenched blankness of his face that betrayed his brace against
surprise.

Now she wonders what Jeff would do if she shows up at work before her three
extra days are up, dispensing cupcakes and Christmas presents, with a face that says
nothing.

“What was it that you wore to the airport? What kind of shoes were those?” she
asks Peter over the phone.

“Merrell, I think. Why?”

“I was very nervous. Could you tell?”

“Yes. Elise, didn’t you ask me that once before?”

“Do you keep replaying it? I do,” she says, pulling her bedsheets over her head. It
is dark even outside her cloth cocoon. The days are getting shorter now, and she is
sleeping longer.

“I’d rather think about the next time. Should I come visit you then?”

“No,” she says, thinking about the coded, heady foreignness of the crowds on the streets of Hamburg, the slate-tinted waves off the waterfront glinting with Arctic severity, the mute, sealed intimacy of lying nude in an unfamiliar bedroom with an unfamiliar body. She had felt piqued in those scenes, concentrated though erupting in anonymity, poised upon the brink of some essential secret to life.

By her mother’s bedside at the hospital, Elise grows both numb and fidgety. Under the harsh fluorescent light, she sees her mother’s body in Technicolor luridness. The celadon trail of dried saliva at the corner of her mouth, the sallow puckers of skin around a scabbed-over lesion, the bare, voluminous forearms as unmoveable as a decaying manatee. Elise cannot make herself reach out and touch her. Instead, she picks at the lint on her carefully-chosen green sweater.

“How’s your paper coming?” her mother asks, her eyes steady, her voice hoarse from a lifetime of chain-smoking.

“Good.”

“How long until you get it done?”

“I don’t know, a couple more months.” A couple of months ago, Elise knew that her mother never would have left her line of inquiry there. There would have been follow-up questions, timeline breakdowns, dark hints at eventual, long-time-coming poverty and ignominy. But now she only nods.

“And then you get your diploma, right?” she asks. Elise doesn’t correct her.

“Yes.”

“Well, you’ll get a job then. And for now you still have your paper route.”

“What?” Elise asks, startled, then immediately wishes she didn’t.

Luckily, her mother doesn’t follow up.

“Or Justin can help you along,” she says. “You can always count on your brother.”

Justin had done what their mother wanted—gotten a job at a brokerage firm
immediately after graduating college and slowly toiled, climbed, accumulated assets like a turn-of-the-century cliché. Their mother, whose teeth-clenching resolve to see her children make good started the day after their father left them for the peripatetic lifestyle of a touring trombone player, was lulled into such a halcyon respite by the success of her son that when Joanna gave her a micro-dermabrasion kit as an introduction gift, she’d veered a glance at Justin’s unclouded face and then said “oh, my, thank you dear.” Elise had felt struck. Her mother had never said “thank you,” let alone “oh my” and “dear.” Something like loathing spiked in her, and she wondered if it was toward majestic Joanna, to whom her mother’s unquestioned assent felt close to prostration, or Justin, who missed the incongruity altogether. A week later, her mother regifted the kit. Wrapped it in shocking pink tissue paper and stuffed it into the smock pocket of Bob-the-burly-chef at the pleather-upholstered diner where she waitressed. It had been a long-standing joke that Bob paid a little too much attention to the crispness of his hat pleats, the nuanced tang of his special sauce. On the gift card, her mother had written, “come out, come out, wherever you are.” Elise remembers how, when she had learned of it, she had felt surprise at how subtly her mother had reworked the tale, dismissing the jabbing awkwardness for humor so readily that it was something like grace.

For Elise her approach was more wary. No fawning or goading, but everything in hints and prods. Askance. Elise remembers how once, as a teenager, she’d come downstairs for a Coke, a novel propped open with her index finger, only to shrink back at the sound of Justin and his mud-spackled friends in the kitchen. The unselfconsciousness of their rumbling octaves was so alien and forbidding that she turned to return to her room, only to be startled by her mother’s silent watching, her furrowed brow, and blush so violently that her hands shook. Minutes later, her mother came into her room without knocking, her eyes blank, and held the can of Coke out to her, keeping her hand extended dead straight until Elise took it.

Nowadays, when Elise flips through her photo album and sees her own thin, cringing frame half-slinking away from the camera and half-peering at it shyly, she compares it to the woman beside her with shoulders squared, eyes focused straight and baleful, and can understand her mother’s discomfited, erratic circumspection. What was it like for her to have a daughter so timorous, so self-monitoring that she stumbled in
shopping malls in her attempts to clear out of other people’s paths? With a fountain of
shame so inexplicable that she hid in the diner’s bathroom when asked to refill a
customer’s coffee mug. Did she fear for her? Did she hate the fear and love the hate,
having learned from her droning, sinkhole-studded life that the only way to win was to
pick a direction and then keep going this minute and this minute and this?

“So you weren’t dismembered and cooked,” says Jeff. It is Elise’s first day back.
In anticipation of Jeff’s questions, she had been working mechanically with her head
down, defying him to break the jazzy staccatos of the clicks of the DVD cases, the rustle
of the movie labels, the clackety-ding of the cash register.

“No.”
“And yet you still come back the walking dead.” He cocks his head to one side,
like he is Freud with a cigar and she, couch-ridden and petticoat-shrouded.

“It was lovely. A Fellini film,” she says. She has made up her mind to quit in a
month and so gives herself the freedom to say this.

Jeff snickers.

“Aren’t you mixing your geography?” he asks, and then, when she doesn’t
answer, turns his back to her and opens a box of labels.

“Jeff,” she says, feeling suddenly overwhelmed with tenderness.

“What?”

She wants to tell him that she’s quitting, that she knows, despite all his posturing,
that he likes her, that she appreciates that obviousness most of all. But the moment
passes quickly.

“I’d like to take home a Fellini film tonight. Which do you recommend?”

He recommends La Dolce Vita, whether or not to mock her earnestness she
doesn’t know. The next day is Thanksgiving and she leaves early for Justin’s to help
Joanna cook. Her aged Chevrolet sputters on a stretch of highway within view of the sea
and the hoary expanse of the waves makes her want to stop and walk along the
expressionless rocks, expose herself to the blunt winds.

At Justin and Joanna’s the Christmas tree is still wrapped in tarp, leaning against
the fountain in the front yard. Elise pictures Sylvia in the fountain, Marcello’s modishly extended arm, and is reminded of Peter. She hasn’t told him why she cannot talk today, just that she cannot. She hopes he doesn’t think she’s being mysterious on purpose. She hopes her explanation, that she liked to separate business and pleasure, is enough for him.

Joanna is wearing Italian wool crepe despite the dinner being only family this year. “How is your dissertation going?” she asks by way of greeting. Having gone to Brown for law school herself, Joanna treated academia as the default icebreaker with Elise.

“Dandily,” Elise answers, surveying Joanna’s flawless chignon, her hand holding the wineglass with her pinky flaring. If this is the image of satiation, she thinks, she can’t do it.

In the sitting room, Justin is reading a picture book to Carolyn, who is sitting on his lap. He lifts her off when Elise sits down and she scrambles over to the TV.

“How’s Mom doing?” he asks.

“Did I see her last? What day is today?”

“‘Lise, what are you going to do if she passes and you didn’t get to say goodbye?”

Joanna comes in, heels clicking.

“Justin, I’m going to need you to carry the boxes in,” she says. When he leaves, she sits down beside Elise and leans in confidentially.

“Listen. Elise. I hate to be insensitive but I need a favor. Your brother and I are both swamped at work and you are, after all, on vacation. Would it be unreasonable to ask that you spend more time with your mother to relieve Justin?”

“Why does he need relieving?”

“Pardon me?”

“She is less awkward with Justin, but I don’t think she would mind if neither of us were there,” Elise says, wondering if she sounds as blasé as Sylvia, as pithy as Peter.

Joanna gives a subtle snort.

“Look. Elise. You’re still young, I give you that. Your mother may have had her faults. Maybe she paid more attention to Justin because he was a boy. Maybe she wanted him to be the man your father never was. But she’s dying now. Don’t you think
you ought to put aside your differences for these last few days?”

“Oh, okay,” Elise says.

“She did the best she could,” Joanna continues, ignoring her tone. “She couldn’t give you whatever you wanted as a child, but she was working as a waitress, for god’s sake. Look where you are now. It’s time to make peace with the past.”

“Truth be told, I don’t remember exactly how Mom was with you,” Justin says with his after-dinner cognac, playing “Heart and Soul” single-fingered on piano. “But I remember you always avoided her. One time you even climbed through the window after school because she was in the kitchen.” He pauses and nurses his drink pensively. Such an exact, unthinking pose of pensiveness, Elise thinks, that it’s the easiest thing in the world to love him.

When the tables are cleared, Joanna leads Elise to the spare bedroom. She had over-indulged in the chardonnay, she says, and under-indulged in everything else. Elise looks out the window at the wooded backyard. The meshes of gaunt branches are veined with pale frost. The sun is disappearing. She is nowhere. Surrounded by her childhood cast of characters, she feels the inertia of unmoving time cloak her into a similar deaf-muteness. She will forever be ineffectual at specifics. Her dissertation is a tangle of thorns. She wants to just be a princess trapped in a tower. She wants to fly over the Atlantic again.

She wants to go home, call Peter. Exchange sweet nothings. Not worry about phone bills, plane tickets, unit, summary. She wants to spend a life or two in airport terminals, eluding the crosshairs of time and space. She wonders if this is the result of the years of avoiding her mother’s eyes. She wonders if this is her father’s blood, tiding up and in.

The bedroom walls are papered with jutting curlicues of unfolding wildflowers. There is a leviathan canopy bed, a coy-legged dressing table, a phone. She picks it up and dials Peter’s number.

“How are you feeling?” she asks when he answers, sounding sleepy.

“Hey. Where are you?” he asks.
She climbs into the bed with her shoes still on. The one good thing about him speaking such good English, she thinks, is that they could talk on the phone across an ocean.

“I want you to come to me when I’m asleep. I want you to pretend that neither of us have faces and you’ve just come back from a long train trek through Siberia,” she says, falling asleep.

She stops by the video store on her way home in the morning. Jeff isn’t behind the counter. She asks Jason, her boss, to check the schedule.

“He switched with me,” Jason says. “He wanted to work on Thanksgiving, I think as an anti-American imperialism statement. Actually, he said he might come in sometime this morning. Want to hang out and wait?”

She thinks about this, says no, and asks to leave a note. On a post-it, she writes, “Dear Jeff, my mother is dying…” then crosses it out, writes, “I’m quitting next week,” crosses that out too, and finally writes, “thank you for everything.”

She finds another Fellini film on the shelf and checks it out before she leaves.

Justin had remembered it wrong. She had climbed out of the window, not in. She had been fifteen then, and wearing a new skirt split up to the thigh. At school the day before, she had learned that the football halfback, a junior, was going to ask her to homecoming. She’d recounted her sources: Alex the yearbook photographer, Cassie the popular girl who had never spoken to her before, and, most trusty of all, Shawn, who was also on the football team, who had, without touching her, trapped her with both his arms against a locker and said she really was cute, that Troy knew how to pick ‘em.

It was the first time she had been that close to a boy, a boy whose focus and purpose was solely her for the moment, and the exhilaration she felt had less to do with the excitement of biology and more to do with the relief in finding that she could let go, sail down the path of their pushing, smile, clear out opportunities for Troy to step in, buy a new skirt with the mottled singles from under her mattress, saved up from years of birthdays and Christmases, get a job, a paper route perhaps, and buy a suitable dress. As she straddled the window ledge that morning, one bare leg still warm in the house and the
other nipped by the October chill, she thought about her mother at the stove, cigarette
dipping low over the eggs and sausages in the frying pan, and how she would behave
when Troy came knocking in his immaculate tux, corsage in hand. Would she be
brusque and stony, turn off the porch light as soon as they exit the front door? Would she
fidget? Crumble her faded apron into a wad in her fist, and usher Justin downstairs to
mollify the strangeness? Elise couldn’t say, and decided that she would ask Troy to pick
her up somewhere else. A thought had flickered in her mind, that perhaps reactions were
what was missing between them, but then she had swung her leg too wide on her landing
hop and it struck against the window frame. The pain lit, dimmed, and life went on.

It is snowing now. Elise shuts the door of her bedroom and turns her electric
heater to high. She dials Peter’s number, waits until the beep and then his voice
recording in indecipherable German making him seem even farther away. Seconds after
she hangs up, the phone chimes to life in her hand. The fluorescent window reads:
“Memorial Hospital.” The room is completely dark, yet by the square of chartreuse light,
she can still see snow.

She unplugs the phone. It is easy.
I have no sense of place here. Haven’t had any since Tuesday, when my cross-country homeward drive passed through Tennessee’s twangy, sun-dappled streets, past Kentucky’s ivy-laced rusting trucks, into the ominously nondescript landscape of cornfields and video stores. The Midwest, my birthplace, bredplace, saps me limp but won’t go for the jugular. What is there to say about Indiana besides that Chicago is close? What is there to say about me against this continuous smear of Wal-marts and steakhouses across my Toyota’s windows except that I don’t fit in, probably, like former high school teachers have told me, because I’m too smart, but obviously not assured enough in my smartness to pole-vault over these petty incongruences altogether. Instead, I am felled by the blanched skyline and post-Thanksgiving numb, into the brewing vapidity that is self-loathing.

“What is the problem?” my mother had asked me over the phone. I’d been packing, pulling my dusty winter parkas from the back of the closet and looking out the window at the drowsy New Orleans evening light and the women who still, as late in the year as this, wore espadrilles and capris.

The problem was it would be a three-day drive, and then a week’s worth of earnest-eyed Tom Hanks movies before the returning drive in post-Christmas traffic.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Did you get my package?” she asked. She’d sent me clippings from the town newspaper. Mostly engagement announcements of my high school classmates. A couple of horoscopes, some in my sign, some in my dad’s, portending calamities. She’d double-enveloped it, the outer one bore the postmark and my address, on the inner one, in thick black lettering, she’d written “WOW.” I had paused at that, before good sense returned and I flipped the envelope around. “MOM,” it read. Still nowhere coherent, I thought. But I felt better.

“Yes,” I said. “Reminds me of home.”

“By the way,” she said, “Miranda Monk keeps calling here. Six times in two weeks. Good thing I have caller ID now. You can call her yourself when you get back. Give her your college number. Tell her we’ve moved or something.”
“Six times?” I asked. Miranda was runner-up to Homecoming Queen. I was voted a backhanded “Most Unique.” We were best friends in middle school before the fork in Puberty Road, but I haven’t talked to her since some high school football game.

“She got married, you know. There was nothing in the paper about it, but I heard at the hair salon. Her horoscope on her wedding day said she would regret it.”

I arrive home in the frigid evening. The air smells of lingering smoke, and John, our thirteen-year-old Irish setter, is barking in the back yard, whirling himself around and around like a berserk, untouchable machine. Inside the living room, my dad is splayed in open-mouth sleep on the couch and my mom, who makes a motion to get up, sits back down with a hard-lined mouth when her scanning gaze comes to my thigh-high stiletto boots.

“How much did those cost?” she asks.

“Everyone has a pair in New Orleans,” I say, “except the juvenile delinquents and the unwed mothers. You’d never, for instance, see a streetwalker in these.”

She is silent. Stony, not volcanic. Still, I squirm a little. Perhaps I’d gone too far. Then, with the studied nonchalance of a seasoned poker player, her mouth and only her mouth moves.

“Miranda’s in your room,” she says.

I pause on the creaky landing of the stairs, out of the light of the living room and invisible from the second floor. Once upon a time, that sentence from my mother was certain death. I picture Miranda at thirteen, her blonde hair in perpetual, alluring disarray and her laugh a booming, splattering bass. The first time I invited her home after school, I’d begged her to at least wipe off her lipstick, at least say we were going to do algebra together. She had complied with a vaguely contemptuous amusement, and, at dinner after Miranda left, my mother had asked wary questions but did not pronounce judgment. Yet after a string of boisterous school night phone calls lasting hours, my mother steeled.
“That girl won’t amount to much,” she’d said. “And yet you drop everything and run to her like a mangy dog.”

I’d hated my mother then. My own giggles entwined with Miranda’s, I’d felt buttressed, egged on into invincible euphoria. Of all the girls she could’ve chosen as her sidekick, she’d lit on me, the bookish one with mismatched clothes, who calculated her every social exertion into stuttering miscalculation. Crowned with Miranda’s attention, I’d felt expansive and well-combed and tender with the world. In the hard lurch of my mother’s perspective, I was the worst kind of desperate.

And she didn’t let up. By freshman year, when Miranda and I would only talk in gym class, the drama in my mother’s dark warnings against my corruption fanned me wild with humiliation. I’d told myself it was her officiousness that made me act like a template-teenager, but even then I knew better. I was prime for the corruption, ripe-to-rotting for it, and still Miranda’d passed. The irony made my whole world a joke. To escape, I drowned myself in English papers and chemistry labs. By the time Tulane extended their early admittance offer, I needed only to load the contents of my closet onto my Toyota before sputtering off. New sheets, three-hole binders, a pleated skirt that’d made me feel like a fresh-faced, fresh-minded schoolgirl, an Eastpack with my initials embroidered near the zipper. I’d been collecting these supplies like talismans since sophomore year.

“Well, stranger, how have you been?” is her first line. I don’t know what I had expected, but her vehemence, bristling in everything from her crisp lapels to the flexed arc of one akimbo arm, scratches jagged through my dazed languor. She is the tiniest hint of plump now, a reality highlighted by the pinch of her navy jacket, the stenciled precision of her inky eyeliner. Against the tableau of my faded gingham bedspread and teeming trophy ledge, she juts out like a carving.

“I’m okay,” I say, consciously channeling nonchalance.

“I heard you were going to be back in town and decided to drop in on you,” she says. “I love your boots. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in anything except flats.”

I gnash inwardly, feeling silly and embarrassed.
“Oh, I just threw on whatever,” I say. And then, feeling myself edging toward
shrill, I ask, “what are you doing here?”

Her grin falters but she catches herself. “I’m just bored, you know. Jacob—that’s
my husband—is in Mississippi on business and I don’t have anything to do. Sheryl—my
assistant—is sick with mono, so I’ve been jazzed all day at work and now I can’t mellow
out.” She sits down on my bed. “So tell me about college. How is New Orleans?”

The rapid-fire speed of her effusion evades specific. I take note, and sit down at
my desk at an angle from her.

“Very nice. My classes are hard but well-organized. The people come from all
over. It’s a whole different world down there,” I say. And then, before I can stop myself:
“T feel so much freer.”

“I know what you mean,” she says. “Last summer, when Jacob and I were
honeymooning in Vegas, we loved driving in our convertible with the top down.”

An uncomfortable pause. I look out my window at the familiar view of gnarled,
stark willows. The winter has drained the stems brittle, and they appear frozen in crazed
mid-whirl, Medusa after tasting her own medicine. Back in middle school, Miranda and I
had kept a poetry notebook together and each added one poem a week. “To Cassandra,”
I’d titled one, inspired jointly by “To Helen” and “Ode to a Grecian Urn.” Miranda’s
poems had always rhymed. “What rhymes with ‘excruciating’?” she’d whisper in social
studies. “What rhymes with ‘love’?”

“How are you, Miranda?” I ask, moving my chair a little closer.

“You’ve never met Jacob, have you?” she continues, buoyant. “He went to
Wilson, in the same grade as us. Did you ever go to the basketball games? He was the
center.”

“I never went to the basketball games,” I say. “How is married life?”

She sighs dramatically.

“Remember how in high school I always said I never wanted to get married?” she
asks. Though I don’t, I nod.

“Well, I still don’t,” she leans back against my pillows, smug. “I know you didn’t
expect me to say that, did you? But Jacob said let’s prove to everyone that married
doesn’t have to mean married, you know? Let’s get married to be different from
everybody else who’s married. Dress up for dinner dates. Have sex every night. He is
my rock. He inspires me.”

“Yeah. Yes.” I say, feeling stupid.

“But enough about me.” She brushes at pantomime mid-air clutter, her wrists
snapping. “What about you?”

“What do you mean?” I ask. “New Orleans?”

“No, no, you’ve told me already, remember? I mean, are you seeing anyone?
Engaged?”

“No, I honestly don’t have time for it,” I say, busying myself with unzipping my
boots, annoyed at her slapdash stabs. “I have scholarships to keep.”

“Oh, Jo. I’ve always said you were so pretty, but you never believed me.
Remember how I called you to ask you to come shopping with me for prom? Your mom
said you were studying for college, and didn’t have time for that. How is college, by the
way? Everything it’s cracked up to be? I would go too but it seems so routine, you
know. You know how I’ve always hated being told what to do.”

There is a knock on my door. I shoot up, seized with the familiar alarm when my
mother and Miranda were within earshot of one another. Behind me, Miranda yawns.

“Tell your mom Jacob’s out of town, so she doesn’t have to worry about me
getting home too late.”

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On the living room couch, my mother is uncharacteristically composed. I rub my
ankles, feeling vulnerable without my boots. She gestures toward the coffee table. There
is a tray. In it, she’d placed sliced oranges, a plate of Christmas cookies, and two cans of
Pepsi.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“I was right,” she says, theatrically terse. I want to scream. Have I walked into a
movie set?

“What are you right about?” I am mocking the script, I conclude, by following
the script.
She shifts closer to me and smiles a fond, confidential smile. “She is pathetic, you understand? She didn’t want to tell me that her husband is a construction worker, but I knew it from Julie in the salon. Julie also said she works at Beau n’ Babe, cutting hair. He’s off somewhere south now, digging ditches, and she gossips all day with all the bored housewives, minding everyone else’s business because she can’t bear thinking about her own.” She reaches out, brushes my hair from my eye. “You, on the other hand, are so above and beyond now that nothing she does will ever affect you.” She leans toward me. I flinch but hold still. She kisses me on my forehead, her hands on my shoulders.

I’d never liked gumbo, but in New Orleans, I’d order a side of it in cafes just for the way it looked. The way it nicely complemented the dark, mournful faces of the buskers with their buttonholes jammed with flaming roses. The way I’d feel both exotic and street-wise when I sunk a clean, curved spoon into the glutinous, almost obscenely crimson bone-and-gristle. I can see myself there now, reading on the dilapidated balcony of my student apartment, Bubba-the-bartender waving at me from below on his cigarette break. “You’re working too hard, cute little girl like you,” he’s say in his gravelly, teasing voice. There, my responding titters do not magnify themselves in their uncleverness. There, without the smudge and smear of myself and myself against myself again, there was no making sense, just senses, waves and other waves.

I carry the tray into my room. Still sitting on my bed, Miranda has inserted one bare leg into the shaft of my boot. She’d rolled one navy pant-leg to her thigh and with her right hand looks to be reaching for the zipper until interrupted by my coming in. I set the tray down. She looks embarrassed.

“I really, really like these,” she says.

“Thank you,” I say.
Apple4466 has logged on

Jb88: bonjour madame
Apple4466: Hey! Nice to see you again. I thought you were British not French.
Jb88: I wouldn’t call myself British, although that’s where I live, and what my accent embodies. (handy for persuading young American birds for a bit of phone fun, as apparent)
Apple4466: 😊 what time is it there?
Jb88: half past four. the night is young.
Apple4466: Did you go out?
Jb88: yes, drank lagers in Picadilly and other shenanigans. stumbled home by the light of Big Ben.
Apple4466: mmm, I love that.
Jb88: what, shenanigans?
Apple4466: Your British antics. I know you play it up for me but it works. You should read the journal entry I wrote about you last night. “Talk me a pub. Peel me a grape.”
Jb88: now this is interesting. you actually hung up the phone, dredged yourself up out of your post-orgasm viscosity, turned on the light, opened to a pristine sheet, and inducted me into the recordbook of your life?
Apple4466: “viscosity” is…too graphic a work choice here. The accuracy of it is a bit smug. But yes, I record everything, let alone a six-hour phone conversations with a Brit I’d met in a literature chatroom. What is it that you’re protesting? That I wrote about you or that I still had strength left to write?
Jb88: 😊 I’m not protesting. I’m flattered. Yet I was so exhausted that I rolled right to sleep.
Apple4466: I’m very fucked up sleep-cycle-wise.
Jb88: why is that? you do this often?
Apple4466: Accept suggestive invitations for phone “fun”? No. But I have developed an addiction to chat lately.

Jb88: or maybe your body just likes British time.

Apple4466: 😊 hmm…

Jb88: So what did you write about me?

Apple4466: Oh…I went on tangents. Mulled over how the internet is changing all our lives. I thought that was a trite slogan of Big Media before but now… I understand how it is rearranging the steps of build-up to intimacy and how it feels both heady and disorienting at the same time.

Jb88: I see. did you have a good time then, my dear?

Apple4466: Yes. You painted incredibly vivid pictures.

Jb88: with the story of my tumbles in the sand of St. Tropez?

Apple4466: That especially, yes, and your poetic waxings about Cate Blanchett. Nobody ever answers Cate Blanchett as celebrity crush.

Jb88: I liked your moans.

Apple4466: Now there’s a line.

Jb88: I liked when you stopped giggling. it was like your mind thought: I’m going to cum now, so stop giggling, just breathe hard.

Apple4466: Shut up. You’re making me sound ridiculous.

Jb88: Not at all. It turned me on. You came very quickly.

Apple4466: Well, I was…fermented beforehand.

Jb88: indeed. “fermented.” nice word. suggests a sort of churning inside. bubbling up, seeking release. fancy doing it again sometime?

Apple4466: lol. Dude, you’re starting to sound like a parody of yourself.

Jb88: (sighs) point taken.

Jb88: and what are you doing tonight? it is Friday night.

Apple4466: Yes well, I didn’t get much sleep last night, so I crashed today right after econ class. only woke up just now.

Jb88: ah. am I keeping you from some sort of American uni girl weekend debauchery then?

Apple4466: not at all. I’m happy to see you on.
Jb88: thank you. likewise.

Apple4466: Am I keeping you from some sort of pre-trial meditation…or whatever it is that civil lawyers do?

Jb88: bloody ‘ell. don’t believe everything you see on telly.

Apple4466: Alright then Jonathan, what would you like to chat about tonight? (Do you prefer Jonathan, by the way?)

Jb88: yes, especially from you. I like the formality. sort of like saying “vous” in bed to your French lover.

Apple4466: Yes. I wish we had a “vous” equivalent in English. So, what’s your pick for chat subject?

Jb88: I dunno. well actually I do, and it has to do with the one track of my mind after the lagers as well as the searing memory of last night. yet I’m sensing that you require…finesse, and I’ve got high hopes for you, and will thus make the attempt: your choice, mademoiselle

Apple4466: I can’t pick just one. how about a game of virtual truth or dare? do you have that over there?

Jb88: oh yes. however, the aforementioned lagers have got me in such a state…I’m in a singlet and boxers amidst rather squalid bed sheets, on my stomach, barely holding my head to my laptop. I’m afraid if I attempt a dare I’ll drop off and never come back.

Apple4466: Right, I see. How about just “Twenty Questions” then?

Jb88: all right.

Apple4466: Simple rules: I ask you a question, you answer, and vice versa. These can range from stultifyingly superficial to uncomfortably personal. The key (and the art) is randomness. The purpose is mutual amusement. Okay?

Jb88: why do I think that you’ve done this before? go on then. question one.

Apple4466: 1. Are you a dog person or a cat person?

Jb88: dog.

Apple4466: Do you have one?

Jb88: no, small flats, city life.

Apple4466: I see. I like both. Your turn.

Jb88: okay…
Apple4466: Hello?
Jb88: bloody difficult this is. right, 2: what is your favorite color?
Apple4466: (Oh god) Blue.
Apple4466: 3. If your personality were a season, which one would it be?
Jb88: winter, I think.
Apple4466: Huh…I would’ve guessed summer. Diametrical opposite.
Jb88: why summer?
Apple4466: Well, your British effluences…reminds me of entangled vines, ivy thick on thickets, starry nights of insects. Lot of meandering sentences, verbal embroidery, etc. And through your thick weave of clever repartee and poised irony I feel like I feel thrilled but barely catching my breath.
Jb88: wow. that’s quite a dissection. no wonder you were in the literature chatroom.
Apple4466: Yes…yet you hold to winter?
Jb88: as lovely as it would be to cede all at your feet, madame, I won’t. I believe in the harshness of truth than anything false but softer.
Apple4466: And you call yourself a lawyer.
Jb88: haha.
Apple4466: Sorry, had to say it. Don’t take that seriously.
Jb88: that’s not unlike saying “don’t think of a dragon,” is it? what is the first thing you’d think of then?
Jb88: hello?
Apple4466: Yes, sorry, went to put on my watch.
Jb88: you don’t have a clock on your ‘puter?
Apple4466: I do. But I like the feeling of having my watch on. I like the analytical mode it puts me in, especially when I’m typing at the computer. I feel like if someone took a picture of me right now and put it into a magazine, people would look at it and think, “yes, first female secretary general of the UN preparing a brief.”
Jb88: 😊 that gives me an idea. 3: are you dominant or submissive in bed?
Apple4466: lol what do you think?
Jb88: I’m not sure from last night. you were polite and giggly at first, which suggests sexual naïveté.
Apple4466: Well I am 19, and what are you? 40?

Jb88: thank you. I was about to say that though you seem inexperienced you knew what you wanted to talk about. all your questions about European culture. what did you say you were studying? journalism?

Apple4466: Business. I switched from journalism last year. Before that it was literature.

Jb88: why?

Apple4466: Seeing my sixth-year senior neighbor has gotten me into a panic about practical vocation. I guess it all comes down to money, not for greed but for independence.

Jb88: which returns to my question.

Apple4466: You’re saying that my wanting independence in life makes me dominant in bed?

Jb88: I’m just probing, my dear, laboriously probing.

Apple4466: I think I read about a theory saying how we are in life is the opposite of how we are in bed.

Jb88: you believe it?

Apple4466: No, not really.

Jb88: do I sense that you don’t want to answer the question?

Apple4466: I don’t know how to answer. I almost feel that we are speaking different languages on the topic.

Jb88: what do you mean?

Apple4466: For example, “how is she in bed?” what does that mean? Does it mean: how does she feel naked? How enthusiastic is she? How experienced is she? How did her movements and moods fit with yours?

Jb88: all of the above, I would think.

Apple4466: No, it should be all of the above. But what it means is actually only “how skilled is she?” like that’s the only thing that determines how the experience is, when really it has so many other elements: what’s going through your mind, what you think must be going through his, where does the encounter fit in the story of your life, etc

Jb88: (thinking: your watch is more fitting now than ever)

Apple4466: 😊 Do you understand why I can’t answer your question?
**Jb88:** you don’t like being reductive? you feel that sex is more drama than fleshly sensations? you’d do well with studying literary theory, little girl, you’ve got a gift for convolution.

**Apple4466:** (I’m going to ignore that) My turn.

**Jb88:** hang on. you never answered my question so here’s another: what happened last night?

**Apple4466:** what?

**Jb88:** in your own words. from your own perspective. what was going through your head? what did you suppose was going through mine?

**Apple4466:** okay...I thought you sounded alert. you didn’t ask me to “tell you about myself” and instead just asked how my day was--you didn’t ask blanket questions but started at a random point and invited capers. I liked that. I said that I’m addicted to chat. I don’t think it’s wanting to make friends as much as wanting...just capers, pleasantly occupied hours, volleys of levity.

**Jb88:** with a worthy partner

**Apple4466:** yes, and you were that. you kept me on my toes. and after my day of dredging through microeconomics I felt as though a part of my brain was being shaken awake again.

**Jb88:** and the phone fun?

**Apple4466:** it’s embarrassing to you too, isn’t it? or you wouldn’t keep phrasing it that way.

**Jb88:** I don’t find it embarrassing, personally. I’m phrasing it innocuously because I sense your skittishness. you wouldn’t stop giggling at first, even though I was sure you knew what you had agreed to when you gave me your number.

**Apple4466:** I was thinking: god what should I say? he’s 35 and British and a lawyer. I’m outmatched, I should just listen. Oh he must be regretting this, he must be fumbling for a polite way to hang up. and then you started with your stories and I relaxed and suddenly realized that my eyes were closed and that you could hear my breathing. and I thought: so I’m turned on. he can hear that I’m turned on. is he turned on by that? I hope he doesn’t think I’m acting, or that I’m a cliché.
Jb88: but being turned on is a cliché, Kate. sex is a cliché. I was thinking bugger, she sounds a lot more nervous than I thought she would. (because you were very witty in chat. maybe this is why you prefer chat to real life interactions?) and I remember when you must have first realized that I could hear you breathing, and you stopped short.

Apple4466: and you laughed, you bastard.

Jb88: I was amused, or maybe more than amused. I kept your number, you know. I’ve never done that before.

Apple4466: Enough with this topic! It’s my turn for a question.

Jb88: touchy. go on then.

Apple4466: a nice reductive one for you: 4. what’s your life’s philosophy summarized on a T-shirt?

Jb88: nicely put. uh, “it’s not personal, it’s business”

Apple4466: Well think about it for a minute at least.

Jb88: it’s for a tee-shirt. what would yours be?

Apple4466: “Don’t be a slave to anything.”

Jb88: (shakes head) would never sell. don’t go into business. You’re too earnest.

Apple4466: Your turn, Shakespeare.

Apple4466: (waiting)…(I love ellipses, btw, so evocative, misty.)

Jb88: 5: if there were no concerns of practicality, money, parental expectations, social conventions and such, what would you be doing with your life right now?

Apple4466: Mmmm, good questions, so freeing, makes me want to take a deep breath…let’s see, I see a lake…and a little house surrounded by deciduous trees. Lots of white linen…curtains, tablecloths, bed sheets. Fresh flowers, fresh fruits in bowls, a gray cat. Taking out the canoe every evening while there’s fog on the water, watching the sunrise every morning wrapped in a heavy shawl sipping coffee. lol it’s pathetic how much I get visions of my dream life from coffee ads in magazines.

Jb88: beautiful. a woman of leisure then?

Apple4466: No, tortured poet.

Jb88: with fresh flowers?

Apple4466: Contradiction adds to the mystique, don’t you think?
**Jb88:** but it is not realistic. a tortured poet would live in a basement flat with graffitied walls, a sheet thrown over the curtain rod, single mattress for a bed, used condoms on the floor.

**Apple4466:** ewww never

**Jb88:** that’s how you have to live to be a tortured poet. your dream life belongs to a romance novelist.

**Apple4466:** ewww NEVER

**Jb88:** lol

**Apple4466:** Didn’t they teach you Milton at Oxford? “The mind makes its own hell” or something to that effect?

**Jb88:** hmmph, you’ll be a pretentious poet yet. Milton on a Friday night.

**Apple4466:** (Sighs) My turn, what is it now, 6?

**Jb88:** believe so.

**Apple4466:** 6, Which city in the world would you like to consider your city?

**Jb88:** Tel Aviv, actually.

**Apple4466:** ohh. I meant to ask you about this last night whether you felt any affiliation for Israel, but I got the sense that it was a touchy subject.

**Jb88:** Not at all. I feel more Israeli than British.

**Apple4466:** Is that a political statement?

**Jb88:** Not that I’m aware.

**Apple4466:** I’m sorry…hope I didn’t offend. I’m trying not to ask any questions that would reveal how shamelessly little I know about Israel.

**Jb88:** such an American

**Apple4466:** Thanks

**Jb88:** I’m kidding. I’m sitting here smiling at the ‘puter. (you are making me smile alarmingly much for a 19 year old) I started to tell you this last night. you are notably well-informed and well-spoken for someone so young. yet you think you are ignorant and keep treading softly, makes me smile.

**Apple4466:** lol why are you repeating yourself?

**Jb88:** for effect. I thought a would-be poet like yourself would appreciate finely crafted dialogue.
Apple4466: Didn’t seem that finely crafted to me.
Jb88: oh you bitch!
Apple4466: Stop, you’re turning me on.
Jb88: oh reeeeeeaaaallly?
Apple4466: Uh hem…so, you lived in Tel Aviv until when?
Jb88: 7, went back there when I was 16, and finally moved to London at 24.
Apple4466: Oh, I remember what I was going to say…I asked whether your affiliation with Israel is political because it seems that whenever Israel is mentioned anywhere it’s in a political context.
Jb88: yes, that is true. it’s a shame.
Apple4466: Yes, it makes it seem so…gray, like it doesn’t have a landscape or cuisine or popular songs—only government buildings and synagogues.
Jb88: and bomb shelters?
Apple4466: Have you ever seen one go off?
Apple4466: Oh god, that sounds American, doesn’t it? Please ignore.
Jb88: that’s alright. I never have but it’s not uncommon.
Apple4466: And last night when you were talking about playing soccer in the meadows, I actually thought, “Israel has grass?” and then literally blushed--I felt like such an ass.
Jb88: lol do you know what I’ve noticed? people will respect culture but not politics. everybody has an opinion in political debates, even if they know next to nothing of what they are talking about.
Apple4466: like what?
Jb88: like my colleagues here. they would never ever think of running down, for instance, Indian curry, but Ariel Sharon is fair game even if they don’t how to pronounce his name. why must they always have an opinion? I can’t see why people can’t just admit they don’t know much about a subject and sod off.
Apple4466: Yes…this fear of seeming blank…lassoing a sophisticated identity onto the social stage with all their might, kicking and screaming.
Jb88: lol nice.
Jb88: yes, and this almost competitive urge to appear set in one’s conviction, regardless of correctness. there’s almost a capitalistic fervor it that.
Apple4466: god yes…all these Lacoste-wearing blond boys in my international business class…I can’t talk to them without answering a checklist of questions designating my views on everything from Communism to vegetarianism. I’m so afraid to tell them that I don’t know, that I’m not sure. God, sometimes I’m not sure of anything. Maybe this is why I like chat: no checklists.

Jb88: again, with a worthy partner. how many times have you been asked what you looked like?

Apple4466: ah, I get your point. why didn’t you ask?

Jb88: I never ask that question. I never plan on looking at the women that I chat up here

Apple4466: and so if you don’t ask you can imagine what you want?

Jb88: 😊 precisely. ok, number six…

Apple4466: seven

Jb88: 7: tell me about a time when you scared yourself.

Apple4466: mmm, what a great question.

Jb88: slash that. tell me about a time when you scared yourself sexually?

Apple4466: lol (I’m thinking “one-track” is right, Jonathan) by the enormity of my lust?

Jb88: or the baseness of your needs, the incorrigible deviance of your perversity

Apple4466: lol

Jb88: well?

Apple4466: I’m sure this is not what you’re looking for, but it happened when I was 15. a sort of sexual awakening type deal. is that titillation enough for you.

Jb88: nice, quite pervy yet understated. go on then.

Apple4466: I was a junior in high school and had a huge crush on my English teacher. He was one of those men who could wear snowflake sweaters and use expressions like “if you will” but still get to chicks like me because he wrote just the right comments on my compositions. So, one day after school, I was sitting with my friend Tara in her car in the parking lot. We saw him get into his car, and for a long time he just sat there and I said to Tara, “let’s go over and talk to him.”

Jb88: and?

Apple4466: Tara had always thought he was a dork, so she said, “no way, he’s probably jerking off in there,” and we started laughing.
Jb88: lol

Apple4466: but the thing was, I got a mental picture of him hunched over the steering wheel, breathless, and was sort of haunted by that image for days.

Jb88: you were turned on

Apple4466: it took me days to admit that. I haven’t even begun to use the word “crush” to myself back then.

Jb88: 😊

Apple4466: And the next day, Tara and I were hanging out in his room just before class and I said, hey Mr. Tannenbaum, guess what Tara said about you yesterday?

Jb88: oh wow

Apple4466: I wasn’t going to tell him, I just wanted to see Tara squirm, but she kind of gasped and blushed completely red

Jb88: you didn’t expect that, eh?

Apple4466: no and he saw her and kind of guessed where it was coming from and started blushing too! and I was a bit horrified at what I’d caused and wouldn’t look him in the eye for several days.

Jb88: lol sexy story

Apple4466: sexy? isn’t it a bit mild for your tastes?

Jb88: it is sexy, Kate. innocence is sexy.

Apple4466: my turn

Jb88: alas yes

Apple4466: 8. what would be the title of your autobiography?

Jb88: what, do you pick these questions out of a book?

Apple4466: no, I just use all your pauses to think of really good ones

Jb88: oooohhh bugger “How I Almost Fulfilled My Potential” Numero 9…

Jb88: what do you look like?

Apple4466: 😊

Jb88: I’ve been to the states 4 times, never to Iowa, but if in a month I called you from your favorite campus coffee shop and asked you to meet me, what would you say?

Apple4466: that’s two questions

Jb88: yes, and I don’t know which one I’m more scared to have you answer. you pick.
Apple4466: I’m too tall, too thin, long dark hair that I’m always touching, dark eyes
Jb88: lovely. tell me more
Apple4466: like what?
Jb88: your hands, your neck, your bum, elbows, cheekbones, cuticles, bum, teeth, bum
Apple4466: lol my turn
Jb88: lol
Apple4466: 10. what’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?
Jb88: the very worst I can’t tell you. but a few years ago I had a girlfriend. she didn’t run in my social circles. I met her at a rather vile pub. she used her supposed bisexuality as lure.
Apple4466: and what happened?
Jb88: one night, on a lark, we decided to go to this bordello-type place. there are masses of prostitutes here in London, from the thousand pound a night call girl to the illegal immigrant streetwalker, and this place was somewhere in the middle. we picked this busty Eastern European woman. she had pale blue eyes and dark protruding nipples. she and I started touching each other, and my gf dragged off the bed into the corridor, where she cried and begged for us to just go. we’d only been together for a month at this point, and she’d always acted tough. so I was surprised then that her vulnerability didn’t touch me in the least, but rather annoyed me. her makeup was running down in streaks and she was sniffing and the air was wheezing through her nose ring and all I felt was disgust.
Apple4466: what did you do?
Jb88: I told her she could leave if she wanted, but I was staying.
Apple4466: what did you do with the prostitute?
Jb88: what do you think?
Apple4466: why?
Jb88: for the experience, maybe, the curious power relations in such an arrangement
Apple4466: I see…was it good
Jb88: not really. but it satisfied a curiosity.
Apple4466: what happened with your gf afterwards?
Jb88: we went on for a while, but I could never respect her again
Apple4466: I see
Jb88: what do you respect? 11: name three qualities that must be present in the man that you would want to live with indefinitely

Apple4466: I enjoy the phrasing of that. do you not believe in marriage?

Jb88: marriage is a legal term, Kate. you’re asking if I think I could be with someone happily for life and the answer is I don’t know

Apple4466: I see. Okay: perceptiveness, capacity for intimacy, and an essential kindness

Jb88: not intelligence?

Apple4466: perceptiveness is intelligence plus intuition, no?

Jb88: okay, maybe. not good looking?

Apple4466: keeping my fingers crossed that he won’t be great in every other way except looks, but either way, looks doesn’t rank in the top three essentials

Jb88: fair enough, your turn.

Apple4466: 12, what is something that, if you don’t do, will haunt you on your deathbed?

Jb88: Find out what people think about me, how I am seen.

Apple4466: that’s the one thing that you have to do? why?

Jb88: to be sure that there is not some huge discrepancy between the way I’m seen and the way I see myself. I guess it should be done much earlier than just before the deathbed. It’s something that’s weighing on my mind lately. It can be isolating working the long hours of a lawyer, and in isolation you become uncertain of who you are anymore

Apple4466: don’t you work with people?

Jb88: yes, busy bees of people, loaded with purpose, and they come to you because you can do something for them and you do it because they can do something for you. very machine-like. what do you think of me?

Apple4466: well, I don’t know you that well, and you know I hate being reductive

Jb88: just from what you know then

Apple4466: you’re smart, honest, cynical, but your instinct for sensitivity seems to be kicking in just in time. is that satisfactory?

Jb88: would have to be, I suppose. 13: what would you do for a million dollars?

Apple4466: what do mean? name everything in the world that I would do?
**Jb88:** no, let me rephrase. I need some espresso, btw. this is inspired by your gem of a question earlier: what would you do sexually for a million dollars

**Apple4466:** hmm…sleep with a stranger, perhaps an unattractive stranger, as long as the meaning of the transaction is intact and I’m not required to pretend anything

**Jb88:** like what? tenderness? love?

**Apple4466:** or any fetishistic posturings

**Jb88:** for a million bucks I would sleep with George Bush

**Apple4466:** LOL really?

**Jb88:** ☺ yes. 14 is it?

**Apple4466:** yes…are you tired, btw? we can finish this another day

**Jb88:** no no, I’m in the midst of this now and can’t tend to more amorphous things like sleep until we come out at 20

**Apple4466:** god, it’s not a war. 14, if happiness were a color, what would it be?

**Jb88:** back to fanciful questions, I see. white…or black

**Apple4466:** why?

**Jb88:** white for purity, for absolute innocence and lightness, and black for sophistication, for having experienced the whole world

**Apple4466:** that’s an interesting answer. I’m so glad you didn’t say red, or pink.

**Jb88:** what is your answer?

**Apple4466:** blue. I wrote a journal entry once, very pretentiously mourning the passing of my childhood: “tell me that all the misgivings from this primordial Paradise Lost can be harvested to forge another happiness, a happiness that is a deeper shade of peace than innocence.”

**Jb88:** and that shade is blue, hmm…that’s lovely. you really are a Milton aficionado, apple4466

**Apple4466:** I like the idea of the fortunate fall—that only a self-made happiness in spite of the loss of innocence is substantial and lasting

**Jb88:** so the “apple” the forbidden fruit has another layer of meaning

**Apple4466:** lol I hope so

**Jb88:** I like you, you know.

**Apple4466:** ☺
Apple4466: your turn
Jb88: right, 15: who do you admire most in life and why?
Apple4466: my ex bf Peter. he had such a deep understanding of the flaws of human nature but yet still remains so kind. He called himself a pessimist, yet he didn’t use it as an excuse to be an asshole or even a bore.
Jb88: that’s lovely
Apple4466: oh screw you
Jb88: I meant it you slippery fish
Jb88: silence?
Apple4466: is it my turn?
Jb88: why is he your ex then? what happened?
Apple4466: he was British, and older, and I was just starting college. he thought way too much of me way too quick. I couldn’t handle it.
Jb88: so you left him?
Apple4466: I ended things, yes.
Jb88: because he came on too strong?
Apple4466: no, because he lived on the English-Scottish border, and skis every winter in France and motorcycles every summer across Spain, and I was eighteen without a bank account, let alone a passport. and he was so sweet and sad and lovely and perfect and I was away from home for the first time and not knowing what I wanted to do with my life.
Jb88: and it was too overwhelming
Apple4466: yes
Jb88: how old was he?
Apple4466: 29
Jb88: and you were only 18?
Apple4466: I’m only 19 now, and you are 35, and you “talked” to me last night, didn’t you?
Jb88: fair enough. what was he doing in Iowa?
Apple4466: he was an agronomist, and lecturing about the foot-and-mouth disease at my university. I was dispensing cupcakes at the post-lecture reception.
Jb88: and he went back to Britain after his lecture?
Apple4466: after a week, we actually got to know each other over the phone. Hours and hours of talking deep into the night. “With a pulse of the telephone my world lurches from its axis.”

Jb88: is that another journal entry?

Apple4466: yes

Jb88: so you didn’t even sleep with him?

Apple4466: no. I would have. He didn’t try

Jb88: fool. Did you love him?

Apple4466: yes

Jb88: have you loved anybody else besides him?

Apple4466: no

Jb88: your turn, mademoiselle

Apple4466: 16, have you ever been in love?

Jb88: yes. And here’s something: I understand your decision

Apple4466: you do?

Jb88: love is love, you get tangled up with it and pay for it with your heart, but you don’t need to pay with your life

Apple4466: yes…

Jb88: here’s a question. 17: imagine you were with someone that you love. You’re living with him and everything is brilliant, and then he is in an accident and loses his limbs. Do you stay with him?

Apple4466: lol how many limbs?

Jb88: don’t laugh, I’m interested to know

Apple4466: It depends on whether other things change. Whether he becomes bitter, whether our relationship becomes more political than organic, whether we cry together or alone.

Jb88: I see. What about sex?

Apple4466: 😊 sex doesn’t have to follow a script. If we were in love to begin with, it probably never did.

Apple4466: what are you thinking?

Jb88: about whether I’d answer the same way. I don’t think I would. anyway…
Apple4466: 18…

Apple4466: who was the love of your life?

Jb88: she was my second girlfriend, the one I had right before I went into the army. she was full of beauty and clarity. whenever I think about her I feel like crying, including now. the day I left her was the day that I left myself. her name is Avia.

Jb88: hello?

Apple4466: god

Jb88: yesterday you laughed that I go to literature chatrooms but never read, but I’ve got a poem in mind right now

Apple4466: which one?

Jb88: Peeling An Orange by Virginia Hamilton Adair, she’s American. If you want to know anything about me, you should read her.

Apple4466: what’s the poem about?

Jb88: should I type it out for you?

Apple4466: sure

Jb88: Between you and a bowl of oranges I lie nude

Jb88: Reading The World's Illusion through my tears.

Jb88: You reach across me hungry for global fruit,

Jb88: Your bare arm hard, furry and warm on my belly.

Jb88: Your fingers pry the skin of a naval orange

Jb88: Releasing tiny explosions of spicy oil.

Jb88: You place peeled disks of gold in a bizarre pattern

Jb88: On my white body. Rearranging, you bend and bite

Jb88: The disks to release further their eager scent.

Jb88: I say "Stop, you're tickling," my eyes still on the page.

Jb88: Aromas of groves arise. Through green leaves

Jb88: Glow the loftysnows. Through red lips

Jb88: Your white teeth close on a translucent segment.

Jb88: Your face over my face eclipses The World's Illusion.

Jb88: Pulp and juice pass into my mouth from your mouth.

Jb88: We laugh against each other's lips. I hold my book
Jb88: Behind your head, still reading, still weeping a little.
Jb88: You say "Read on, I'm just an illusion," rolling
Jb88: Over upon me soothingly, gently moving,
Jb88: Smiling greenly through long lashes. And soon
Jb88: I say "Don't stop. Don't disillusion me."
Jb88: Snows melt. The mountain silvers into many a stream.
Jb88: The pranges are golden worlds in a dark dream.
Jb88: the end.
Jb88: Kate?
Jb88: what are you thinking?
Apple4466: I’m looking up “pranges”
Jb88: oranges, silly apple
Apple4466: lol
Jb88: lol
Apple4466: I love it. I feel tears. Thank you.
Jb88: ☺
Apple4466: Who left whom with Avia?
Jb88: I left her
Apple4466: Why?
Jb88: I’d finished with my secondary studies and would go into the army.
Apple4466: But you could’ve stayed together.
Jb88: yes, but it felt like a crossroads. I thought I needed to experience more then, more travels, more friends, more women
Apple4466: I see.
Apple4466: Do you regret it?
Jb88: I can say yes, but it is a very infantile yes
Apple4466: What do you mean?
Jb88: I mean, with everything that I know now, I see that it was more favorable to chose the other way, but I don’t actively wish to go back, it’s pointless
Apple4466: How long ago was this?
Jb88: more than 15 years
Apple4466: Do you know how she’s doing now?
Jb88: a couple of years after we ended I heard that she went through a really bad time afterwards and then married someone that she didn’t love. she’s divorced now.
Apple4466: Did she go through the bad time because of your breakup?
Jb88: yes, I believe so.
Jb88: was your ex upset when you ended?
Jb88: hello?
Apple4466: I’m here.
Jb88: what’s going through your mind?
Apple4466: How do you feel about all this?
Jb88: there’s a fair bit of guilt. I never thought that what I do would have such an effect on anyone. maybe this is why I watch myself now. I don’t want to be responsible for anyone else’s.
Jb88: I think it’s your turn, but I have a question for you. you take the last one.
Apple4466: Alright.
Jb88: 19: what do you think of me?
Jb88: still there?
Apple4466: Yes.
Apple4466: I think you have stories.
Jb88: took you a long time to come up with a rather opaque sentence. can you explain?
Apple4466: I think that from everything you told me, it’s clear that you embrace life’s complexity, and I love that. I remember what you told me last night about your first kiss tasting like cigarettes and not being able to decide whether you liked that memory until years later…that kind of letting ambiguity stand as is…is beautiful. Yet I realized that even through this chat, there are so many times when I’m sure if you are being manipulative or sincere to the point of vulnerability…maybe through all your experience, you lost some essential simplicity.
Jb88: that’s a bit harsh, isn’t it? I sound…unredeemable.
Apple4466: That’s not what I meant. Truth be told, your sophistication is so dizzying that it scares me. Yet so much of what you said about your younger years reminds me of
myself that I wonder what I’ll be like at your age… Do you really think it’s better to live without any ideals?

Apple4466: Are ideals traps?

Apple4466: Hello?

Apple4466: Jonathan?

Jb88: yes kate, I’m here. but I’m getting very tired now…I’m going to go

Apple4466: Of course, what time is it there?

Jb88: a little past 9 in the morning

Apple4466: Well, this has been interesting, to say the least.

Jb88: yes

Apple4466: I really didn’t want to answer that question, Jonathan, please don’t take what I said to heart.

Jb88: don’t think of a dragon

Apple4466: I don’t know what to say…but have a good sleep.

Jb88: bye Kate, I wish you a good night

Apple4466: Bye Jonathan

Apple4466: hello?

Jb88 has logged out