



quip

FEATURING

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ALI WILDING

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EDITORS' NOTE

We started this project in the most “us” way possible: at a greasy Mexican restaurant in Greensboro, North Carolina, stuffing our faces with chips and salsa and bemoaning the end of our MFA program. Our impending graduation had left us feeling very “what next?” about it all—a real-life version of asking “so what?” at the end of the story.

In the previous two years, we'd become better readers and writers; we'd met our editorial soul mates (for us, that was each other); we'd become both more critical and yet more open-minded. But what was all that learning for? What were we going to do with it?

A few margaritas later, quip was born.

In this first issue, you'll find we've chosen stories in which we've seen ourselves: two millennial women battling against the “so what?” The man in “The Account Executive,” trapped in the drudgery of his job, craves purpose and connection with no clue where to begin. The twenty-something woman in “Love in a Changing Climate,” is so stricken with fear she cannot help but self-sabotage. The student in “Baby Castle” balances on the murky precipice between reality and fantasy. And finally, the man of “Odd That Way,” tries to catch his neighbor's eye for a second, tries to receive that quiet affirmation from a stranger. Indeed, we are all these fumbling, messy, aching characters. And that, as lonely as it sometimes feels, is plenty of “so what?” for us.

Thanks to our writers for the gut-wrenches, and thanks to our readers, who are willing to be wrenched.

Yours,

Anna Blake & Sarah



LOVE IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

Ali Wilding

I find it difficult to fuck someone after I've seen a rat. The problem is that even when we're home—tipsy, buzzing—I can't get its grotesque pinkness out of my head. The two of us clink fizzing glasses, but all I hear is that clicking rattle. When we kiss, the word *tail* loops in my mind like some febrile hallucination. I flinch at the touch of fingers on my flesh, imagining the scuttle of scaly feet. I glimpse a flash of midriff and see instead a rodent's supple torso writhing at the base of a trashcan, delicately licking the rim of a polystyrene carton or sucking soda from sticky pools. The thought of its wriggling bigness has me gagging and heaving all the way to the bathroom.

In Washington D.C., a great number of my dates end this way. I've told more white-lies to more near-strangers than even I am comfortable with. "I'm so sorry," I say. "It's not you—it's the shellfish."

"We didn't have shellfish," he says.

"I mean, I'm a celiac."

“You’re a celiac?”

“Yeah. Well, I suppose I should say ‘I’m a person with celiac disease.’ I’m still an individual; I don’t want to be defined by it.”

“Really?”

“I’ve had it for years. My mother had it, too, and her mother before that, and her—”

“So why did you order the pasta?”

“What?”

“If you’re ‘a person with celiac disease,’ why did you order pasta?”

“Celiacs can’t eat pasta? That’s terrible.”

The unsolicited celibacy of Saturday nights is especially bleak. More than anything, there’s very little else to do. One such evening, trapped somewhere between oppression and depression and cuddling a bottle of liquor in a grim parody of childhood, I text my best friend.

Elle is an actor, or would like to be. Her biggest breakthrough since drama school is the discovery that using Uber Pool for hookups is cheaper and more practical than any of the dating apps. On *Sapphic Antics*, the successful podcast she recently started, Elle describes

herself as a “rampantly polyamorous lesbian.” Privately, I think this makes her sound more permissive than she is. Her rigorous approach to even the most minor of relationship indiscretions has been compared more than once to the Broken Windows Policy. Elle’s never taken this as an insult. She insists that the proportionate, transparent repercussions of her system are fairer and more lenient than those grim punishments meted out by rancorous lovers who allow their grievances to fester. Whatever your view on the theory, it’s hard to deny that it works for Elle. If her podcast is as biographical as it seems, she had more orgasms between her July and August credit card statements than I’ve managed in the last six months.

Help me! I type.

Invulnerable to the time difference, Elle responds with a flood of WhatsApp messages. It takes a while to decipher her emojis—they’re not all as immediately intelligible as the eggplant—but the general thrust is that she thinks I should see a therapist.

It’s not me who has the problem! I reply. *It’s this goddamn city. It’s overrun with vermin.*

I know, says Elle. *But what about the rats?* She deploys the yellow winky face.

Seriously. The rats are fucking everywhere.

Exactly, replies Elle. *And you’re not fucking anywhere.*

It’s true, but I’m still not convinced. She sends me the fat little rat emoji and I nearly choke.

Did you gag? she asks.

Okay, okay. I'll go.

The therapist is tall and lean, and his glasses make him cute in a vulnerable kind of way. He asks me to call him James. He starts by posing questions about what he calls my “triggers.” I find myself imagining what his real name is, and what he'd look like in the shower with steaming water running off those sinewy haunches. I'm beginning to appreciate the potential benefits of therapy when suddenly he spouts the word “squirm” and I have no choice but to run to the toilet and grip the bowl like a greedy kid.

When I return—teeth chattering madly, a little milky vomit on my chin—he makes me tea and rubs my back. It doesn't feel entirely professional, but at this stage I'll take pretty much anything I can get.

We sit on the couch and talk about the bubonic plague, and charnel houses, and the SAS. He tells me that rats can squeeze themselves into holes the size of a quarter, and that his aunt once lifted the lid of her toilet to find a rat just basking in the bowl. It's starting to feel a bit like a date. I tell him about my first time seeing a rat, and how I fantasize about them dying in horrific ways. I tell him that when I watch people cutting the grass on the Mall, I hope their blades will slice clean through all the little heads lurking there. I scan the road for a glimpse of torsos smashed flat by the weight of a truck. I take walks by the river and peer into the mucky waters, longing to see a bloated carcass floating belly-up—engorged, or roughly chopped by the blades of a propeller. I tell him I want to poison them, shoot them, gas them.

He's looking at me quite intently. The hands on his mug are roped with chunky veins. The nails are bitten right down to the quick. Very sexy.

“I want to set them on fire,” I say. “I want to hang them, quarter them, tar and feather them. I want the rats to see the dead bodies of their mothers, their brothers, their great-aunts, the corpses of their babies, and then to die themselves in pain and abject misery. I want to see their carcasses nailed to walls or picked at by carrion, their innards laid neatly on the tarmac like offal at the butcher. They are foul. They are awful. They are a plague, an atrocity. I want them to know what an abomination they are. Does that make any sense?”

James nods slowly. “It's certainly helpful,” he says. “You're doing great.”

“I'm really not. I'd have thought that was obvious. I mean, I haven't had sex in months. *Literally* months.”

James nods again. I'm starting to wonder whether he's got full control of his neck muscles. He reminds me of that plastic Churchill Insurance dog that used to sit in the back window of people's cars, bobbing its head up and down as they drove. My father had one; it was the kind of corny thing that made him laugh. He collected garden gnomes, too. His second wife, a tyrannical bitch of a woman who worked as his secretary for just as long as it took to capitalize on his nervous breakdown, was not a fan. She would vandalize them while he was at the office. They were resilient, but not much remains impervious to a sledgehammer long-term.

When Dad retired to focus on his hobby, Jennifer ran off with her Zumba instructor—a

twenty-three-year-old Australian with a popular YouTube channel and some questionable views on race. Tyler's daily lifestyle vlogs tended to focus on how "blessed" he was in suddenly finding love. The fact that his visa would shortly expire was never discussed. His 800k teen subscribers were also unaware of the precise ways in which the "cashew milk" he promoted would indeed prove "life-changing." Tyler failed to mention that the main ingredient was an artificial sweetener so toxic that even the FDA acknowledged its links to a heinous new strain of bladder cancer. That she and Tyler were perfect for one another was the only point on which my stepmother and I agreed.

Before her departure, Jennifer heaped the remaining gnomes into a grinning pyre and dropped a match. Dad didn't bother pressing charges. Once the fire brigade had left, he sent an email to Tyler explaining that cashews produced juice, not milk; and that Jennifer would need her own bathroom for reasons best left unexplored. Then he strapped his great-uncle's coal-mining torch to his forehead and went down to the cellar. He unlocked a secret metal door which he'd had installed some years before (the kind better known nowadays for concealing hordes of pallid children who are each other's mothers and half-sisters at the same time) and spent the next five hours lugging boxes upstairs.

By the time the sun came up, over a hundred gnomes were carefully arranged amongst the scorched pots and rockeries of Dad's front garden. People assumed his collection was ironic because he was a decent horticulturist and an intelligent man, but really it was just his passion. He didn't care about the sneers of the neighbors, or the vulgar graffiti, or the hate mail from the residents' committee. Dad was a pretty strange guy, and there's no denying he made some bad decisions right up to the end, but he was wise enough to know that gnomes weren't the real problem.

"So," I say, remembering that James charges by the hour. "What can I do about it?"

"Well," he replies, with almost comic slowness. "It seems to me that you have certain preoccupations which are, at present, inhibiting your ability to live and work in the city. Do you think that's fair?"

Is he taking the piss?

"Yeah," I say, deciding to give him the benefit of the doubt. "I suspect that may be fair."

James is nodding again. At this rate, he's going to give himself repetitive strain injury. He takes a deep breath before posing his next question. "How would you react to the suggestion that these preoccupations are having a negative impact on your interactions with other people?"

Christ alive. "How would I react?" I ask, the sarcasm in my voice no longer disguised.

James inclines his head, just once, and brings his fingers together. He's really starting to get on my tits now. "Well, James, I guess I would react by saying that's pretty much what I just told you."

His face morphs into a cocktail of condescension and displeasure—the change is disturbingly swift. It reminds me of how my politics teacher reacted when I threatened to tell everyone about the time he'd fingered me in a cleaners' cupboard at the Christmas disco. I'll admit it was pretty horrible—*slut* was the descriptor favored by my mother after a few drinks,

and I'd heard it enough—but a nurse at the local sexual health clinic who spent her lunch breaks smoking weed with Elle was persuaded to steal some official-looking paper and an NHS envelope stamped PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL. My understanding—from Mr. Roberts's abrupt departure and the subsequent news of his divorce—is that his pregnant wife opened the letter, so it wasn't all bad.

I open my mouth to speak, but James holds up a finger. I'm not so keen on those hands anymore. "Take a moment to think about what I've said, please, Sasha," he says. "This is a safe space. There's no need for you to be upset." I suddenly realize I know exactly what kind of girlfriends he has: his mates all agree they're boring as hell, but no one ever considers what that might say about him.

I can hear James scheduling our next appointment as my heels clomp down the stairs. I wonder how long it'll take him to realize that I've left the room, or that myopia and decent-looking hands only get a guy so far.

Elle texts me on the way back to the office. *How did it go????????*

I type, *It never ceases to amaze me how mediocre white men can really get ahead in this place.*

That's the American Dream for you, she replies.

Another alarmingly warm fall sets in, and the city's pestilence festers. The air hangs heavy, like the weight of a grievous error, and the putrid stench of trash and piss lingers in even the most fortunate neighborhoods.

Nobody speaks. D.C.'s inhabitants drag themselves to work, their shirts dark with sweat and their faces pale from damp, sleepless nights listening to cockroaches skittering on the bathroom tiles and rats fucking on the roof. The air is wet, but Rock Creek has run stone-dry and the Potomac shrinks from its banks to reveal shopping carts and take-out boxes half-buried in the silt. Fish flounder in the filth, their bellies swelled with plastic, and rats slink forth in the fetid daylight to swallow them whole. They've started eating the squirrels, too, and the cats. There are rumors that in the South Eastern quarter, a pack of rats ambushed the terriers sent in to catch them and tore the dogs to shreds with rabid, greedy claws and shrieks of glee.

In the CBD, it's clear they're thriving. At rush hour, they clamber cheerily up the stairs from the metro. Some have learned to balance on their hind legs and can be seen wandering down the avenues clutching litter at their sides like tiny briefcases. In the evening, they bask in the clammy warmth of restaurant patios. A child's photo of a rat swinging playfully from the White House flagpole goes viral, and the internet bubbles with memes of various critters nesting in the artfully teased locks of the first lady. Elle sends me a gif of a rat king seething in the place of the president's toupee, but I've forgotten how to laugh. Their audacity astounds me. A video of a rat squeezing its way into the Supreme Court does the rounds on Twitter, and those who can bear the heat take their placards to the steps and chant. The president says he will not be intimidated. There's not enough water for the police cannons, so they use nerve gas instead.

My neck and shoulders grow tense from the stress. Every rustling leaf on the sidewalk has me paralyzed, so I stop walking to work and take cabs instead. I stay in at night and tell the men who message me that I've gone back to England for my grandmother's funeral, even though she's not dead and I'd be devastated if she were.

I can't sleep. I imagine filthy feet scratching around my house, ghastly hides crawling with ticks and lice and blowflies and sewage and death. Elle achieves a personal best for number of WhatsApps per day, but I don't know how to respond to any of them.

I stop taking lunch breaks and weekends and spend the time online instead. My boss notices how frazzled I look. She assumes it's the extra work for our current case and suggests I take some time off. They'll just about survive if I'm at home for a couple of days, she laughs. She obviously doesn't realize that I won't, or that working pro bono on sexual harassment cases is somehow the only thing that makes me feel good about life.

To avoid further questions, I head to the bathroom to apply some bronzer and the only lipstick I can find—a trendy mauve shade which conspires with the lights above the sink to turn me into one of those creepy dead girls who linger at windows in horror movies and once caused me to spend a whole month's salary on drapes (despite living on the 26th floor and knowing that zombies don't exist, pre-teen or otherwise). I send a selfie to Elle and she replies immediately: *WTF??? Halloween's not 'til the 31st, babe.*

Back at my desk, I down a double espresso and perform some typo-heavy Google searches in a frenzied attempt at self-diagnosis. I learn the terms *urban rodentologist* and *leptospirosis*. I read about how rats copulate twenty times a day with up to six different partners. It seems

wildly unfair that vermin should get all the play, so I go on Tinder and swipe right a few times, but the memory of my last date makes my stomach turn.

I try to focus on the facts. A *Washingtonian* article tells me that a single rat can produce 25,000 droppings *per annum* and take out the power supply to a third of D.C. with one swift bite. It says that, for a rat, a dog turd is like an energy bar. I learn that the biggest rats weigh in at an appalling nine pounds, and I crosscheck with a recent all-staff email to confirm that the healthy boy which Aisha from Accounts birthed last week did indeed weigh considerably less.

The rodent-related clickbait is astonishing. I try to resist, but like any common or garden addict, barely ten minutes pass before I'm gorging on lines of a monstrous *Huffington Post* article entitled "Rats Entered Corpses Through Vagina And Anus At D.C. Hospital". I vomit, again, right there at my desk, and the intern who's not allowed a lunch break comes over to ask if I need anything. He's good-looking, in an indecently young kind of way, and I wonder why I haven't noticed him before. The puke drips from the desk and together we watch it splash the suede of his new shoes. I find it weirdly moving how he pretends not to mind.

The fan wafts the scent of vomit gently around the space. The intern asks if I'm okay.

"I'm pregnant," I say. "But only eight weeks, so please don't tell anyone." Fortunately, the intern's pretty naïve and still in possession of that prep school penchant for the clandestine. I suspect he also rather enjoys my accent and its connotations, so I tell him that the father is also my mother's latest husband and that our tryst occurred on their wedding night, upon the very altar where the nuptial vows had so recently been uttered.

The intern's freckled cheeks flush a deep and rather fetching crimson as he stammers out a Boy Scout promise. Of course, there's no way for him to know that I haven't screwed anyone in months, or that almost a year has passed since my mother finally succeeded in drowning herself in gin. I ask him for some Kleenex to mop up the vomit and suggest we go for drinks after work. He seems confused but eager to please, so when he comes back with the tissues we agree a time and place. Once he's gone, I remember that his name is Rufus, or maybe Rupert.

Emptying a packet of gum into my mouth, I type *How do you cure a mortal fear of rats?* with renewed vigor. I'm about to click the link beginning, 'My Own Private Terrorists' when I spot an advert for a support group which meets every Friday night. *Anonymous drop-in sessions*, it says. *No commitment necessary*. I take a breath and note down the address.

When the Uber driver hears my accent, he asks how I'm finding D.C. He's older than I expected, and speaks in a slow, measured way that reminds me of a professor I had at Cambridge—several times, in fact: most memorably in his tiny office at the top of a dingy Sixties stairwell in which my fellow students waited politely for their supervision.

I tell him—Gregory—how I'm struggling with the heat, and how I've mostly stopped going out because of the rats.

"It's definitely bad," he says. "But that's like—what's that British idiom? 'Cutting off your nose to spite your face.'" His eyes in the mirror are tired and kind. "Don't you think?"

"I probably seem a bit obsessed."

"It's okay. I find it kind of endearing."

I ask him how long he's been driving and he says it's been nearly three years now.

"Oh—I actually just meant how long have you been out today?"

"Right," he says, smiling. "Since about half five. I'm a teacher during the day."

"You're a teacher?" I echo, pleased with my ability to slip into the rather basic configurations of D.C. dialogue.

"Yeah," he says. "I teach literature to young offenders. But my mom got sick, so..." He flicks the indicator gently and we turn onto M street. A rogue shaft of sunlight breaks through the smog and glitters on the golden dome of the Farmers and Mechanics Branch. It used to annoy me that there are no apostrophes, but somehow it doesn't matter right now. Hot shadows grow long over the tarmac. Everything seems impossibly sad.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I say.

"It's okay," he says. "The driving isn't so bad. It pays the bills. And, you know, I get to meet interesting people."

We sit in traffic and listen to the radio and the hum of the AC. From my window I can see a man sitting on the sidewalk, clattering change in a tin cup. His possessions are piled in plastic bags beside him and a cardboard sign rests against the stump of his leg. His remaining

foot sports the latest Nike trainer, gleaming white against the grime of the concrete. I can't decide what's more upsetting: that he did buy it, or that he didn't.

It says on the news that there's a storm coming.

"Thank God," says Gregory. I think he means it literally; a plastic rosary dangles from his rearview mirror.

I ask him what the rats will do. Does he think they'll rush inside in one huge teeming swarm? Will they have enough food, or will they turn on humans?

There's a pause before Gregory says that he doesn't know. He touches the accelerator and we roll forward before the lights change again. His movements are very deliberate. I realize I haven't felt this calm in a long time.

"Hey," I say. "Do you want to go for a drink some time?"

Gregory looks out of his window. "It's kind of you to ask," he says. "But I'm not sure that's a good idea right now. Thanks all the same."

"Is it the lipstick? I promise you I don't normally look like this."

I want to make him laugh but he only smiles. "I think the lipstick's great," he says.

We watch gaggles of bag-laden college girls swarm the crossing, unconcerned by the vermin which teem around them.

"Did you know there are more rats in D.C. than there are people?" I ask. "This city has the third highest rodent population in the U.S."

"Is that right?"

"After New York and Chicago."

"Huh," says Gregory. "My father was from Chicago."

"Did he say they were bad?"

"You know," says Gregory, "We never got a chance to talk about it."

"I don't understand how people can live with it. Why can't we just get rid of them?"

"I guess there's only so much the average person can do."

"But most people don't seem to do anything. Do they not see how bad it is, or do they just not care?"

He shrugs. "I guess they just get used to it, is all. Look, the traffic seems like it's pretty bad tonight. You might be better off walking from here."

"It's okay," I say quickly. "I mean, I'm not in a rush. Do you mind?"

"Sure. No problem." We take a left up the hill and I watch the storm drains for signs of

movement. I wish I could tell Gregory how tired I am of being tyrannized, but he pulls up to the curb.

I double-check the address and send the scared face emoji to Elle. She responds *You can do it!!!!!!* so I take a breath and ring the bell.

The host, a beleaguered man in a pair of rubber gloves, introduces himself as Garvin. He's middle-aged but looks even more drained than you'd expect. He ushers me downstairs to a large, starkly lit room where cellophane sheeting has been taped over the wooden floor and skirting. The windows and fireplace have been boarded up with sheets of steel. The chairs arranged in a central circle are white plastic, brand new.

"The meeting won't start until seven," says Garvin. "Would you like a drink? Everything's been sterilized."

I realize I've forgotten all about Rufus/Rupert. The thought of him at the bar just blushing quietly to himself makes me feel a bit bad.

I accept a large glass of white and look around. It seems like a bizarre fancy-dress party. Most people are sporting some level of hazmat gear, some almost weapons-grade, some delightfully homespun. Somebody shrieks and everyone jumps, but Garvin calls out that it's just a false alarm.

There's one surprising individual in the corner holding a glass of water. He's wearing a light gray t-shirt, dark jeans, no wedding ring. He sees me looking and walks over.

"Hey," he says.

"Hi."

There's an awkward silence in which we smile at each other for a little too long. I can feel my desperation mounting, so I look around at the others. "I didn't realize it was fancy dress tonight," I say.

It's lame, but the guy laughs anyway. Manners are obviously his thing. "I know! But at least you remembered the lipstick. Garvin's mad at me for forgetting mine. Friday's purple night, you see."

"Oh no! I'm so sorry I can't help you with that."

"You can't?"

"Nope. You see, this isn't purple. It's just that the lighting in here is really bad."

"Terrible lighting. The worst lighting."

"Alright, Mr. President."

Encouraged by his laughter, I introduce myself. He says he already knows.

"What?"

“We went for a drink,” he says. “About a year ago.”

“Oh, fuck.”

He grins. “We did go back to my place, yes. But then you—well, I guess you recall.”

I seriously hope he’s kidding. “I’m so sorry. This is really bad.”

“Not *really* bad,” he says. “Just mildly humiliating. For me, that is.”

He is, thank God, still smiling. I look at his dark stubble and the neat line around his lips. A vague memory flounders in the goldfish bowl of my mind.

“Wait,” I say. “You’ve got that place in Adams Morgan, right?”

“Nope.”

“Columbia Heights?”

“Different guy.”

“Right. I’ve actually just made it worse, haven’t I?”

“Hey,” he says. “Don’t beat yourself up about it. You were pretty sick. How’s the stomach ulcer?”

“Ah. You’re Nick.” He nods, and I take a gulp of wine. “Ugh. That was a bad night.”

“How come?” His gaze is very direct. “Did I do something you don’t like?”

I think about him undoing my jeans, and his hot tongue, and, later, his deft fingers unhooking my bra. There’s a level of proficiency to which a woman on the dating scene is, frankly, unaccustomed. “Quite the opposite,” I say. My heart’s aping a fucking Jack-in-the-box, but Nick just smiles.

“Well, welcome,” he says, clinking his glass against mine. “I guess this is your first time?”

“It is! I’m excited but nervous. You know, nervously excited. Excitedly nervous.”

“Yes. I can see that.”

Any minute now the glass is going to slip from my sweaty grasp. “So…” I begin, in an ill-fated attempt to get a grip.

There’s a pause of not insignificant length.

“So,” echoes Nick, grinning. It occurs to me that I’ve never really thought of dimples as being sexy until now. “What are the chances, I wonder?”

“That what?”

“You know, that we both...” He makes a gesture that encompasses us and the room.

“Oh! Right,” I say, imagining the emojis that Elle will respond with later – probably fireworks, and the little yellow face with hearts for eyes, and almost certainly the water sploosh. “Yeah. I wonder.”

Obviously I can’t be bothered to work out the actual probability, but the more I look at him, the more I’m starting to realize that the chances I’m a complete moron are pretty fucking high.

I take a slug of wine and try to sound casual. “So does this place actually help?”

Nick shrugs. “I mean, the city’s still overrun with diseased, shit-eating vermin. But I guess this is about finding a way to live with it.”

I consider this. “Do you think that’s a good thing?”

He frowns. “I don’t know. I used to think it would make more sense to get to the root of the actual problem. But I guess—well, to be honest, I just got so tired.”

“Yeah. I know what you mean. Maybe that’s what happens with everyone at some point. But it just feels a bit like giving up, you know? Like, I’m not sure it’s the right thing to do. I mean, the people who talk about it say that it’s intolerable. But they do tolerate it. Life goes on, for them—and I don’t know how they can do it. I guess I’m just not like that. Maybe it’s naïve or delusional or whatever, but I keep on thinking there must be another way.”

Nick is nodding, but with a look that makes my stomach lurch with the horrible feeling of having done it again. My mother used to warn me about this, as though her lucrative divorces made her the expert in male taste. Elle does a great impression of her, lying back on the sofa with a heavily jeweled hand pressed to her forehead and nailing that languid, mid-Atlantic drawl. *That’s enough now, darling. I mean, really! Is it any wonder you don’t have a boyfriend?*

I suddenly realize that I don’t miss my mother at all. In fact, I’m glad she’s dead.

“Nicholas?”

“Sasha.”

“Do you want to go for a drink?”

Nick raises his eyebrows. “Right now?”

“Right now.”

“Well, yes,” he says. “I think I do. Have you got somewhere in mind?”

The tangle in my stomach loosens a little. “We could see what’s on Wisconsin, maybe?”

“Sure. Sounds good.”

I can't help but smile. "Okay then. Great. I'll call a cab."

"No need," he says. "It's only a couple of blocks. I think it might be cooler out by now."

I feel my pulse quicken. "There's actually meant to be a storm coming."

Nick just grins. "Then I guess we'd better make a run for it."

He puts our drinks on the table, calls goodbye to Garvin (too busy disinfecting the corkscrew to notice), and leads the way upstairs, ass indecently shapely in his jeans. When he opens the front door, the sky beyond the frame throbs with huge, violet clouds.

"Wow," he laughs. "That does seem kind of ominous."

I watch him, silhouetted against the glow. He looks back over his shoulder, one hand on the door. "Are you okay? Did you forget something?"

I'm gripping the banister, a few steps from the top. The corridor stretches infinitely between us.

I can't go forward.

"I'll be right with you," I say. "Sorry. I've just got to—" I try to turn around but my hand won't let go of the rail.

"Sasha?"

My vision tilts strangely. The air feels unbearably hot. "Just give me one second," I say, the words loud in my ears. "I think I—I just need—sorry. You go on ahead. I'll be with you in a second."



ODD THAT WAY

Emily McIntyre

He hadn't gotten a glance yet, and it was late afternoon. It had been four years, three months, and twenty-three days, and he had gotten a glance every single day no matter how much he had to work for it.

Even a sullen glance would do, the kind the girl in the coffee shop was likely to give him. It would be enough for a day's ration of living.

But she didn't glance at him, though he had watched her and sent eager thoughts her way for over an hour. Instead, she filled her journal pages with loopy writing and the occasional doodle. He wondered what thoughts poured through her mind like clear honey but did not have the courage to ask her. Soliciting a glance was enough. Curiosity, too much. He noticed that her back was straight—straight like outrage and orange-blossom debutantes and piano lessons—and that she wore practical shoes below the full skirt of her dress. Her fingernails looked as if they had been painted professionally, but weeks ago. Above her head the clock read 4:47—he had only thirteen minutes before the shop closed, and he'd be forced to search elsewhere.

When she removed her headphones a jolt went through him from fingertips to groin. He waited a few breaths so as not to appear overeager, then leaned across the narrow valley between their tables and held out his hand. She looked at it, sighed visibly, and did not take it. For a moment or two, it seemed she would just walk away, and his heart choked him in his throat. Then she turned a little toward him but did not meet his eyes. Her eyelashes against her cheekbones were soft like feathers.

“What’s your name then,” she said. He could hear a slight honk of East Coast in her voice, but also a softness of the South.

“Henry,” he answered, still holding his hairy-knuckled hand like an offering between them. “Of course it is,” she said. With efficient movements she coiled her headphones and stowed them in her purse. She wore a bright sundress that showed tan lines fading on her skin. Written over her face was language he couldn’t speak, clear and unreadable.

“I’m a writer,” he said as his hand fell to his side.

“Is that so,” she answered, still without looking at him. He wondered when in her life smile had turned so hard in the corners and why. He thought of asking her but didn’t think it would increase his chances of catching the glance he needed. Tension twisted his belly. Eight minutes left. He saw that the barista began stacking chairs and wiping tables. He always found it hard to be subtle on a deadline. Or anytime at all.

“You’re very—” *beautiful*, he almost said, but then he remembered the last time he’d said that and he bit down on his words so hard he hurt his teeth. That time he had almost missed the glance, since he had spent his hours working toward that one woman and ended up having to bump into an old woman on the street and chase mandarins from stabbing heels and yawning drains in order to catch her look of mingled annoyance and pleasure. You can’t compliment women nowadays, not full-on like that.

“Hm?” Her eyebrows, scribing their lovely arcs on her bones, raised a little. She had nearly finished packing her bag. In seconds she would zip it closed and walk away. Three minutes remaining.

He looked around the café for inspiration. Was she curious because he didn’t finish his sentence? He tried to think of the best answer and settled.

“Intriguing,” he said.

The smile on her face softened. She paused, pondered for a moment, then leaned back into her seat. “Why do you say that,” she asked.

“I—” He swallowed. “You move so slowly.”

“That’s an odd compliment.” Overhead the record he’d long ago tuned out ended, bringing

a kind of pause to the room, so that her words rang out perhaps louder than she intended. A faint blush rose along her cheekbones.

“I’m odd that way,” he said when the music began again.

She started to say something, seemed to think better of it, and stood. He felt his hope leave with her as she began to walk away. He stood, his throat aching. Visions of his lonely room filled his mind—and then she turned on her heel and looked him straight in the eyes. It was a level glance.

“You really are odd,” she said, with a hint of a smile in the corners of her lips. The interest in her eyes was too slight to be called curiosity, but it was enough. He could almost imagine the air growing golden with the power of that glance, his soul bestowed with meaning beyond the too-small chair and the too-small table in the cramped corner of a coffeehouse. And then it was over and she walked out the door, and he was back to being just himself, but seen.

He would try here again tomorrow.



BABY CASTLE

Julia Naman

Pride Night in Paris, the Marais strung up head to toe with rainbow pennant flags, and you join some friends joining their friends. None French or—that you know—queer. Your thick-soled shoes are the only ones that haven't covered you with blisters but, on the cobblestones, they prevent you from keeping up. That's okay: in social settings, you prefer to tether like the tail of a lizard, able to release yourself at any sudden anxiety.

It is too warm for midnight. In the outdoor cafés, men's bare chests glisten with sweat and gold glitter. You're all walking two kilometers to the next bar because someone has decided to take charge, and this is where he is unapologetically leading. When you arrive, your shirt is bruised with sweat stains. Half the group goes in. The others finish bottles of wine on the curb. You really want a cold, cold beer. Inside, someone pays for your pint, which confuses you, the small stack of euros moistening in your palm. You eventually say thank you, which you fear comes across ungraciously. A girl with blue powder from eyelash to eyebrow sits next to you. She motions to a guy sitting at the end of the table in elbow pads, rollerblades on his lap.

Do we know this person? she asks.

I don't know him, you shrug, though you don't know her, either.

Bizarre, she says.

You introduce yourselves and you immediately forget her name. She rolls and unrolls a receipt like a cigarette and tells you that she is your age, from the middle of a Texan nowhere, somehow working as a concert promoter in Paris while you have yet to find a summer internship in the states and instead are overstaying your student visa, babysitting. The professor who did not need you to do research in the archives this summer does need you to watch his seven-year-old.

When she asks, you tell her no, you're not seeing anyone. You left someone behind in a dusty California town. She wants to know more about him. Who was this boy? Why was he special?

You think of your sunny first date when you tried talking in the choppy ocean, but the current kept pushing you both apart until he finally put his arm around your waist. You think of giggling into each other's necks. Of the book he gave you about Paris before you left, a note written for you in the first three pages. You remember thinking it read rather like a school assignment.

What happened? she asks. You start to think she is genuinely curious.

I moved to France. And there were other things.

Are you on good terms now?

You consider, checking your emotions the way you check knees and hands after falling. You find love's bitter aftertaste has numbed, washed down by several months of French wine. I think we are, you say.

The world outside is half-dressed and spinning. You're caught up in the spectacle of it—the dancing, the wigs, the bare breasts. A one-and-a-half-legged homeless man snoozes on the sidewalk, wet curls against his cheek, a pride flag gently tucked into his shirt pocket. The girl with the eye shadow slyly asks the others in the group if they know the rollerblade guy. She returns to you and confirms: he is not one of us. He isn't talking to anyone but when you look at him he opens his mouth, he is missing several teeth, and gives a punctured smile.

The drag show, a rather predictable tribute to Whitney Houston, will not start for another fifteen minutes. The walls and floors of the club are a deep black, so dark you almost feel it touching you, like there are hands everywhere, and you all decide to wait outside. The group sits down in the small street overrun with cheery liberation. The girl in velvet takes out a bottle of twist-top wine from her bag and passes it around the circle. Some of you sing

an ABBA song. A French girl leans in to ask for a light, hears your voices, and sings along for a few beautiful seconds.

Your group manages a good spot on the sweaty dance floor when the show begins. None of the Whitneys look alike, nor do they look like Whitney herself, and you quickly lose count of performances.

Among the throbbing bodies you fight the urge to stand near an exit, resist that primal sense of self-preservation you get in big crowds. A fear you aren't proud of, but one that isn't entirely irrational. You can't help the world you live in. The grand finale is "I'm Every Woman," and all the Whitneys, big and small, the beautiful and the less convincing, emerge on stage. They put their arms around one another, an embrace the crowd mimics. Then they each take small plastic bags out of their bras, filled with what you assume is baby powder, and spread it underneath their noses. At the end of the song, all of the Whitneys are sprawled out, dramatically overdosed, and despite the thunderous applause, the sticky clumps of powder on their chins fail to amuse you.

The drinks are much too expensive in this drag club so the group moves on with a collective urge to dance, put on pause when you pass a crêpe stand, the scent of luscious batter rising above body odor. In line in front of you is a very tall thin black girl with a tiny waist accentuated by her cargo shorts. You stare until you notice the note she's written in Sharpie on her calf muscles, one word per leg: Fuck Off. You feel shame and wonder, if she is sexualized even by a straight young woman, what future awaits. You order grande frites.

In the next bar you happen across, Leo Sayer plays and people dance. You order another beer and carefully dance with it.

You notice, in this sticky crowd of sports bras and leather shorts and spray-painted hair, that the rollerbladed man is no longer with you. You note: the lizard releases the tail, not the other way around.

Waiting in line for the bathroom, you connect to the Wi-Fi. Even though Michael Jackson is blasting, you message him: *Prince is on right now and it made me think of you. You send it before you let yourself think.*

Gradually, the DJ switches to only songs without lyrics, as if everything has already been said, the words wrung out of the music, and the energy wanes. One boy leans in and announces: Not gay enough. He leads you all out to the curb.

Two women in black bras hold each other's hips, staring at each other, smiles radiating. Their happiness throbs in your peripheral vision. Someone pushes you from behind, a glittered drunk woman, hunched like a witch in a fairytale. She flies to the couple and brazenly kisses each of them on the rear. You recognize their stupor. By the time they realize what she's done the woman is already too far away. Their smiles spoil, as though they've been robbed.

Around four, you walk back to St. Germaine with your friend and a friend of hers, a boy you don't know. You pass Notre Dame, who, when you first arrived in Paris, would remain lit up all evening, spilling dizzy light onto your wine by the Seine. Now, post-fire, she is surrounded by metal walls and scaffolding, like a cast for a broken arm. Your friend and the boy laugh intimately, and when she asks him for a piggyback ride, you drift behind.

When you get home you stand in the doorway. He's responded to your message and you have to read it several times.

Mmm baby I remember how you used to squeeze my lemon.

This is the first thing he's said to you since December. Although you have an early morning, you shower and brush and floss and trim your nails. You don't know how to respond.

When you lie down, your gut turns as a memory bubbles to the surface: waking up in the middle of the night next to this boy, his face transfixed, washed in phone light, and at first your sleep-logged eyes thought the thrusting bodies on his screen were boats. Boats trapped in a storm.

In a sun-filled flat in the nineteenth, Ella tugs you up from a pile of pastel LEGOs.

Trampoline, she says.

You resent the idea of movement. On the terrace, the trampoline has been draped from side to side with pink scarves knotted into the mesh.

What is this? You jump as best as you can at a ninety-degree angle, your brain rattling.

Stop, she commands, you'll wake the babies.

And then you see, the pink scarves are not decor, they are hammocks, and there are small plastic bodies inside them.

Ah, is this a baby castle? you ask.

She considers. Yes.

What do the babies do?

They sleep.

All day?

Yes.

Don't they want to play?

No.

Do the babies work?

No.

How do they eat?

She shrugs. She hasn't considered this question. They have food.

What if they run out?

You—once a middle class white child in a quiet California suburb—remember fabricating wildly popular games around disasters, starvation, shelterless winter, thieves. Your mother's favorite game of yours had been called *Famine*, when you and your little brothers would prod the yard for weeds, dead leaves, sticks, fruits rotted like moldy eye sockets, and heap it into a massive pile to prepare for impending hunger. A game so pragmatic, Mother thought she had invented it. Though, hearing your jubilant cry of "Let's play *Famine*!" must have rang a sour note in her ear.

Ella shrugs again. I dunno.

Then how is this baby castle going to sustain itself? you snap. Followed by another cheap shot: What do they do if bad guys come?—though this also has no effect on her. She has you tie another scarf along the wall, which hangs straight down. She goes behind it.

This is the shower, she says.

Did you paint her lips? you ask, picking up a doll. Neon blue eyes dart open, heart-shaped mouth a hemic red, candied eyelashes bobbing. You don't remember dolls being so glamorous. At one point or another, yours had turned into muddy organ donors, their stomachs left snowing into the grass.

Ella goes *chhh chhh chhh* behind the scarf. Shower noises.

Maybe the shower is where you get superpowers, you suggest. She ignores you.

Ella, now freshly clean, comes back out. She commands you to wait there and bobs inside, running on the pink balls of her feet. She returns with her mother's deodorant and a toothbrush and toothpaste. She takes another imaginary shower, this time to shave. The strokes along her tubby legs are so slow and meticulous that you *chhh chhh chhh* to remind her you're there. Ella forgets the invisible razor in her hand and rub-a-dub-dubs her face, scrubbing fiercely at her skin. Finally, she looks back up at you, gilded eyes adjusting to the world around her.

She pretends to hand you the razor.

Careful, she warns. It's sharp.

THE ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE

Nicholas Plasmati



An Account Executive walks into a bar. He's a young man still, in his late twenties and relatively healthy, with the look of a polished and sturdy businessman. To see him, slipped snugly into a Gitman Bros bespoke tailored dress shirt with chinos creased to a knife's edge, is to understand the phrase "business casual." This particular bar is one the Account Executive visits often. With its thick mahogany countertops and sharp light fixtures rescued from the modern art world, he can sidle up to a barstool and order a drink—a rusty nail with Aberfeldy 12 Year, his regular—and scroll through his phone without looking out of place. On occasion he'll talk with nearby patrons, offering well-to-do tourists his opinion on the best seafood in town, or else chatting up his fellow working professionals in their arid social language, all salary and scope creep. But more often than not, it is the Bartender he converses with.

"Another drink?" the Bartender asks him, to which the Account Executive nods.

"Your regular?" The Account Executive nods again. The Bartender, too old for his stubbled chin and spiked hair, is nevertheless a Food & Bev lifer, a consummate server who, even

on a slow night, will brandish his strainers and muddlers and church-keys with the perfect blend of flair and effortlessness. He is, in the opinion of the Account Executive, the best bartender in the city.

“You’re the best bartender in the city,” he professes after his third rusty nail.

“What makes you say that?” the Bartender says, wiping the counter.

“Well,” the Account Executive says. “You’ll cut someone off if you’ve already heard the story they’re telling. That, and you hate the Yankees.”

On his way home from the bar, the Account Executive asks his Uber driver to drop him off three blocks north of his apartment. He prefers to walk these three blocks, to breathe in the sting of the crisp city air. Also, there’s a homeless man known to perch atop a nearby stoop and offer advice to passersby in exchange for a dollar. The Account Executive can vent about anything he’d like—his frustrating work accounts, Ohio State’s failure to cover the spread, the embarrassing song he lost his virginity to—and the man will sit and listen patiently.

“I was recently promoted,” the Account Executive reveals after handing over a crinkled bill. He now has a window-paned office, an extra digit in each paycheck, and twice as many angry emails to address each day.

“They never slow down. Some guy down in sales retired last year. Apparently he convinced IT to blind copy him on emails from all his old accounts. To help with the transition, he said, but really, he’s doing it for entertainment. I heard he just sits there, down at his condo in Florida, secretly watching the emails go back and forth all day. I mean, can you imagine?”

The homeless man nods, before offering the same advice he always does: “A boat which sails with the current will miss the most poignant moments of the night. You know what I mean?”

The Account Executive has no idea what he means. He’s never understood the phrase, though he’s Googled it on numerous occasions. Still, the advice sounds comforting enough, so once the homeless man has dispensed his wisdom, the Account Executive thanks him, returns to his apartment, and drifts off with the image of an ambiguous, allegorical watercraft swirling in his head. He suspects the phrase means nothing at all, but he’s already committed close to thirty dollars in singles toward its validity. To question things now would only serve to ruin what little sleep he gets.

One day at work, an invitation to the Account Executive’s ten-year high school reunion shows up. It arrives not in the mail, as his 18-year-old self imagined it would, but via an email link to a digital invitation service, requesting his presence on a Friday night in late February for a “celebration of all that’s transpired in the ten years since we graduated.”

The Account Executive doesn't respond right away but instead sits in silence, letting his work emails pile up while he watches his computer screen, following along as his classmates reply. Within the hour nearly everyone has sorted themselves into a category: those who will attend and those who won't.

He finds it amusing to track the predictability of his classmates' decisions. These are people he could have cataloged in high school as the *Hads* and the *Had Nots*. The Hads are those who post with great eagerness about attending the reunion. They cannot wait to see everyone again and catch up. It won't be a problem, they assure the group, to change their work shifts or arrange for a sitter to free up their schedules. But the Had Nots, by and large, post only their regrets. Their loud and complicated lives will not allow time for a class reunion this year. Maybe at the twentieth.

Before long, the Account Executive is one of only a handful of invitees yet to respond. In his head, he's been crafting the post that he himself will write:

Dear Class,

I regret to inform you that my professional obligations as an Account Executive will keep me from reuniting with you all. February is one of our busiest months, and my role is vital to the long-term viability of our firm. Thank you, however, for thinking of me.

It's a pompous reply, he realizes, and also not all that impressive. Many of the Had Nots have excused themselves with rather exorbitant regrets. They claim they'll be presenting at

academic conferences, or trekking across Europe, or closing on a new house. It's as if a game is being played to see who can concoct the loftiest cop-out, and the Account Executive feels he can do better.

Dear Class,

I'm writing to you from my villa in Aspen.

I'm writing to you from atop the Pyrenees.

I'm writing to you from aboard the international space station. I won't be back on Earth for some time, so regretfully I'll miss the ten-year reunion. Raise a glass in my honor. PS—the view up here is to die for.

Ultimately, he decides against posting anything. He worries that as soon as he clicks send, he'll come up with something better. He can sort his reply out later, and he needs to get back to work. In the hour that's passed, fifteen new crises have escalated in his inbox.

On Halloween the Account Executive goes out dressed as himself.

"Who are you supposed to be?" a blonde-haired Powerpuff Girl in a form-fitting dress asks him. "Patrick Bateman?"

They're at a costume party staged in a converted warehouse, and her eyes dance with mischief behind face paint. She begins to playfully massage the twill sleeve fabric of his Gitman Bros dress shirt between her fingers. "That's not very original," she says with a smile. "I've already seen three others in here dressed just like you."

"I came straight from work," the Account Executive explains. "I didn't have time to find a costume."

"That's too bad, Patrick," the Powerpuff Girl says. She pirouettes her hips to return to the costumed throng assembled all around them. "One of my rules: never trust a boy who can't be bothered to dress up for Halloween."

On New Year's Eve, the Account Executive goes out dressed as a success. He buys a \$250 ticket to a rooftop party with towering heaters, bonsai trees, and dim lighting. At the party, he meets a colleague, as planned. But the colleague brings along his fiancée, and by 11:45 the entirety of the party appears to have coupled up. The Account Executive buys a drink and circles the party, stumbling along beside a brick parapet in search of a stranger he can lock eyes with. When he finds no one, he returns to the bar, buys another drink, and conducts another lap. He comes up empty once again and returns to the bar where he asks a female caterer if she'd like to dance.

"I'm working," she explains. "We're not really allowed to dance with patrons. But I can get you another rusty nail if you'd like."

On a Tuesday night, the Account Executive goes out dressed for a funeral. At least that's what a group of flannel-clad college girls think.

"Who died?" they ask him, giggling at how out of place his black Givenchy blazer is in their grimy dive bar.

"It's business casual," he says. "So, what's your major?"

The girls roll their eyes and slink away. He finishes his drink quickly and leaves. He takes an Uber across town to his regular spot where he orders a rusty nail with a double shot of Aberfeldy.

"What have you been up to tonight?" asks the Bartender.

"Acting my age, I guess," the Account Executive replies, before ordering another drink.

The Account Executive doesn't understand why the reunion is scheduled for a random weekend in February rather than Thanksgiving, as is customary. He tries to convince himself that he cannot afford to fly home so soon after the holidays. Or that it would at least be financially imprudent to do so. He's been meaning to cut down on his expenditures. He often wakes on Sunday mornings and winces upon review of his credit card activity.

But somehow, these late-night dents to his bank account never linger. Within two weeks everything has been replenished like magic. He uses this process as an example to help explain the worldwide banking system whenever his dry cleaner asks him about stock derivatives.

Eventually the Account Executive decides to purchase a flight home for the reunion weekend. His regular business trips afford him enough frequent flier miles to travel almost anywhere in the continental US for next-to-nothing. He also purchases tickets to LA and Miami for the exact same weekend. Just to keep his options open.

He calls his older brother to ask if he attended his own ten-year reunion.

“I sure did. If I recall correctly, the old wrestling team got together and did a ton of blow in a bathroom stall.”

He asks the Bartender the same question.

“I went to mine,” the Bartender says. “We had a class of 200 kids, but it felt like everyone I knew ended up becoming a bartender. I spent most of the night talking about work.”

On his way home, the Account Executive stops and asks the homeless man on his block if he attended his high school reunion.

“A boat sailing with the current,” the man replies. “Will miss the most poignant moments of the night.”

“Can’t you give me something different, once in a while?” the Account Executive asks, but the man only shrugs.

“When you stop paying for this one, I’ll come up with something different.”

On the reunion event page, his former classmates have taken to posting updates on the last ten years of their lives. There are, by the Account Executive’s estimate: forty-three marriages, twenty-one babies, and three divorces. Titles acquired include Staff Sergeant (estimated annual salary: \$46,000), DPW Administrator (\$54,000), Field Service Engineer (\$76,000), and Miss March 2012 (\$115,000). His own salary exceeds nearly all the estimates he computes, and he’s ashamed, slightly, by how giddy this makes him.

He’d like to think he’s done a better job staying in touch with his college friends. Many of them live among him in the city. They have brand name possessions, accountants for their taxes, boats they never use, season tickets, annual passes, Labor Day cookouts, Holiday gift swaps, Kentucky Derby parties, bouts of restlessness, and neuroses about the future. The Account Executive meets them occasionally for lunch or coffee or drinks, so they can ask each other how work is going.

“Work is a joke,” a Senior Content Producer reveals at one such rendezvous. “At this point I’m just mailing my projects in.” Her work lacks fire, lacks purpose. She has semi-seriously considered quitting, selling her possessions, and moving to Montana to work on a farm.

“Totally off the grid,” she informs the Account Executive between bites of kale salad. “With any luck, this is the last you’ll see of me. You won’t hear from me ever again.”

The Account Executive goes out on a Friday night and meets a Junior Data Strategist. They talk, buy each other drinks, and eventually go back to his apartment, where she examines all five hundred fifty square feet of studio space. She studies the framed W. Case Jernigan painting on his wall, strums the strings of the Fender guitar he never plays, and wraps herself in the Arsenal F.C. scarves he collects on his London business trips.

“You’ve got some nice things,” she tells him.

Afterward, lying in bed, the Account Executive asks her whether she’ll attend her ten-year reunion. She laughs.

“God, that’s so far off.” She’s twenty-three, she reveals, and hasn’t thought about tomorrow’s workout, much less her ten-year reunion. When he tries to explain that time will accelerate for her over the next five years, that her twenties will pass by before she knows it, she wrinkles her nose at him.

“You’re not one of *those* people, are you?” she says. “Live each day as if you might die tomorrow? Anyway, the type of person who would go to a high school reunion isn’t the type of person I’m interested in reuniting with.”

The Account Executive can’t think of anything to say to this, and their discussion ebbs. Before long they are both absorbed in their phones, only occasionally trying to reignite a conversation. Eventually the Junior Data Specialist summons an Uber to take her away, and the Account Executive is left alone once again.

Unable to sleep, he thinks back to his first apartment, a dull and creaky brownstone basement. When he first moved in, as a reward for finally living on his own, he signed up for a subscription to the *Wall Street Journal*. It was a status symbol, he posited at the time, to have such a prestigious newspaper delivered to his door. Only he never read it. The papers stacked up and cluttered his coffee table, so he canceled the subscription and stuffed the unread papers into unused drawers in his kitchen. It wasn’t until three years later, when he began to pack for the move to his current apartment and was wrapping kitchen items in newspaper, that he finally began to read the news. It took him three hours to box two shelves of glassware. “Pluto No Longer a Planet,” one headline read. He could only imagine what else he’d missed.

With only weeks to go until the reunion, the invitation page reveals dissension. A faction of classmates want a venue change. Another group is demanding gluten-free catering. The organizer of the event, their former class president, implores the procrastinators to RSVP so they can have an accurate headcount.

The Account Executive’s name is one of those still listed under Yet to Reply. His avatar—a

giant white question mark backlit by a stock blue outline of a human head—is nestled among the handful of other non-responders. Their digital inaction has linked them all together, an odd assortment of alumni who would have rarely interacted as teenagers, and who he’s rarely thought about since. Most of them, the Account Executive can barely remember.

For a long time, he considered himself to be above his old classmates. It’s an opinion he can trace back to at least high school, when they voted him Most Likely to Change the World and then immortalized the accolade in their yearbook beneath a photo of his eighteen-year-old-self holding aloft a classroom globe. But in the ten years since, all he’s managed on the Change the World front is an MBA from a safety school and a few tax-deductible donations to the ASPCA. Now, every time he recycles a soda can or passes the organic foods section in the supermarket, he wonders how beholden he is to his title. He can’t help but think of a former classmate who missed out on all the yearbook superlatives, but who did accept a dare at a house party to lick dog shit on someone’s front lawn. At the time, the kid probably assumed he was participating in some sort of trade-off: a swap of temporary oral discomfort in exchange for fifty dollars and a few laughs. Instead, he’d unknowingly entered into a lifelong pact. Fast-forward ten years. This kid could stand in front of his former classmates, name tag on chest, Heineken in hand; he could regale everyone with any number of impressive post-high school accomplishments—he’d blossomed into a brain surgeon, into a United States Congressman, into the point guard for the New York Knicks. None of that would matter. He was and would always remain a shit licker, in the same way that the geek, the jock, the popular girl, the nerd, the dweeb, the doofus, the ditz, the introvert, those most likely to succeed, to become a star, to fall flat on their ass, have all remained frozen in the Account Executive’s memory, unable to escape what they once were.

Which is why the Account Executive still feels obligated to change the world. Or at least put in more of an effort to recycle.

Dear Class, he writes.

I very much want to attend our preordained, bound-by-tradition class reunion. I fear, however, that I’m not yet capable of saying what needs to be said. I’ve spent the last ten years working on my conversation topics—well, working on my apologies. To [NAME REDACTED], for laughing along with everyone else at your wardrobe. To [NAME REDACTED], for staring back in cruel silence that time you asked me to prom. To all the friends I abandoned and let slip away out of arrogance; to all of you, really, for losing touch, for not once ever truly being there when you needed it, I know I need to apologize. But I’m still not sure how to. Perhaps some sort of extension is in order. What I’m really asking is, can we reschedule?

Yet again, he deletes the message.

After the homeless man fails to appear for three straight weeks, the Account Executive has his Uber driver transport him from the bar to the police station so he can file a missing person’s report.

“I don’t know his name,” he admits to the officer who takes the report. “Or his age, or his height or weight. I would describe him as ragged looking.” When asked why he wants to file a report, the Account Executive explains that the man owes him an explanation.

“Or I should at least get my money back,” he says.

Back at his apartment, the Account Executive catches up on non-work emails. His mother has sent him one with the subject line, “Classmate of Yours?” linking to a news article from her local paper. The headline: “Feldman High Alum Passes Away at 28.”

“She labored in quiet dignity,” the article explains, “before finally succumbing to her illness.”

He immediately checks the reunion page for confirmation and discovers the news is true. The page has been turned into a sort of digital shrine for the deceased student, with thoughts and prayers pouring in, post after post. He scrolls past those entries to the RSVP section. He wants to confirm how she’d been categorized, whether or not she’d been planning to attend. He finds her name right below his own. Another Yet to Reply. Another question mark, an unknown who, right up until he heard about her death, could have been anywhere, doing anything.

The Account Executive wishes, suddenly, there was someone else beside him, anyone, a stranger even, who might register the reaction on his face, who could glance down at the screen on his phone and comprehend the gravity of the exposed headline. The stranger

could ask, “Was this your friend? Was this your childhood sweetheart?”

“No,” the Account Executive would reply. “I really didn’t know her at all.”

But it’s the middle of the night, and the Account Executive is alone, so he stumbles out of his apartment and heads down the street to a 24-hour deli that serves late-night food drenched in grease.

“To say I didn’t know her at all isn’t really true,” he says to the deli clerk after he’s ordered and paid. “We knew each other, went to high school together, hung out with the same crowd. Same parties, same bonfires, same beers. Only we weren’t friends, not really. We never spent any time together, just hung around in the same vicinity. I never cared much for the girl, if I’m being honest. I always thought she was catty. I probably called her a bitch behind her back on several occasions. And now she’s dead. How wrong was I? So, yeah, I guess I didn’t know her.”

The deli clerk slides the sandwich across the counter. “Take sandwich and get fuck out, pal,” he says.

The Account Executive walks outside. The sandwich meat has the feel of rubber in his mouth, but the hoagie roll is fresh and warm. He opens the roll like a book, dumps the meat and toppings onto the street, and engorges the bread in a succession of quick bites.

His stomach begins to ache, so he turns and walks back to his apartment where, once he arrives, he doesn’t post on the reunion page, doesn’t search for flights or arrange for funeral flowers, doesn’t text his oldest friends or call his mother. Instead he slumps onto his couch.

His sits there listless, slouched to the side, for what feels like days, weeks even.

Sitting and waiting for another decade to pass.

An Account Executive walks into a bar. He is weary and ragged looking, or at least as ragged looking as one can get in a Gitman Bros bespoke tailored dress shirt. A thousand miles away, his former classmates walk into a function hall at a Days Inn. One by one they enter, and from a check-in table they pluck name tags adorned with their high school yearbook photos. They congregate and mingle, hesitant to interact at first, but slowly, as drinks are consumed and people relax, they begin to talk and laugh. Before long, they are all dancing together.

“You look upset,” the Bartender says once the Account Executive has settled onto his barstool. “Can I get you your regular?”

“I’d like to switch it up, actually.”

“Sure thing,” says the Bartender. “What would you like?”

The Account Executive pauses. “Something new,” he says, finally. “Anything. You pick.”

The Bartender mixes him a drink, a clear, fizzy concoction garnished with a lemon peel, and sets it down in front of him on the bar.

The Account Executive takes a sip and purses his lips. “Have you ever been to Montana?” he asks.

The Bartender shakes his head. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m thinking about moving out there,” the Account Executive says. “Go off-the-grid for a while.”

The Bartender chuckles. “You don’t strike me as an off-the-grid kind of guy.”

“No?” The Account Executive asks. “I think it’s exactly what I need. Sell everything I own. Simplify my life. Live off the land or something. What do you think?”

The Bartender shrugs and picks up a rag. “Just let me know if you want to close out.”

The Bartender drifts to the other end of the bar. Alone again, the Account Executive spins the base of his glass atop the counter, slowly, watching the liquid within gently oscillate. He reaches into his pocket and retrieves his phone. The final message on the reunion page, posted over three hours ago, reads, “Can’t wait to see everybody tonight!”

He pockets the phone and returns to his drink. After each sip he places it back on the counter, where he can gauge the liquid level’s progress as it gradually descends down the glass. He pulls out his phone and calls up the reunion page again. He hits refresh a few times, but nothing changes.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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