

quip

FEATURING

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Hello, readers.

We hope this letter finds you ~~well healthy~~ ~~pandemic-free~~. It's been a rough few months, and we appreciate that you're here with us. We opened submissions for Issue 3 over the summer, thinking surely things would be a little less tumultuous by now. Whether this belief was born from naivety or optimism or denial, we're unsure—but we're happy to have a respite with quip.

When we read for an issue, we tend to notice a theme across submissions. We don't request themed submissions per se, but there always seems to be a collective consciousness amongst our submitters. In a previous life at a previous magazine where we both worked, the inadvertent submission theme was—somehow—sad, half-hearted blow jobs. At quip, we've had a sentient fowl round and a President Turd round.

However, perhaps influenced by the unpredictability and disorder of our current atmosphere, the submissions for Issue 3 didn't seem as psychically connected as previous rounds have been, and as a result, neither did our issue. We always pick stories we like best, but we also try to think about the issue as a whole. We don't want stories that explore the same topics in the same issue, or stories with similar plots right after each other. But there has to be some kind of thread running through. And we thought perhaps Issue 3 would be the exception to this guiding principle.

Except, of course, it isn't. Like all great stories, the fiction that follows grapples with what makes us human, and specifically, how we cope with chaos, whether our own or that of the outside world. Do we try to predict it? Do we try to control our surroundings or the ire within ourselves? Do we

bear the pain and powerlessness until it becomes impossible? Are we passive, even to ourselves, and unable to move forward? The characters in these stories must face these questions, just as we must. We're at a pivotal point in time—one that will force all of us to choose: Stagnancy or action? Fear or courage? Hate or love?

We're offering up six beautiful stories this issue, stories influenced by the intertwined feelings of hopelessness and hopefulness that have made up 2020. "The Dreammaker," questions who has the power to punish and what gives them the authority. Moving from ethics and toward grief, "Friday at the Air and Space Museum" confronts a life lived in the confinements of an exhibit, while "Something" hypothesizes predictability and revenge. "Weight of the World" tracks a mother's trajectory from encumbered to unfettered, and "My Faceless Neighbor" features a protagonist struggling in the liminal space of his apartment complex. And, finally, "Rum and Diet Coke," with its cutting lines and family dysfunction, reminds us that even in the greatest of disasters, there is usually some glimmer of hope.

If anyone else feels hurled by reality, lost in the chaos of the everyday, we hope the pieces in this issue provide a momentary blockade against despair.

Yours,

Sarah & Anna Blake

P.S. Y'all better vote.



RUM & DIET COKE

Linda McMullen

PHOTO BY WALLACE CHUCK

By the time a woman reaches her late thirties, the anorexic mystique has evaporated. What looked waifish and perfume ad-esque at eighteen devolves toward . . . deflation. There were other reasons too, but Roger drew that one from his quiver, and pierced my shriveled heart.

With the polish of a maître d', he balanced Ginger in her cat carrier under one arm while pulling a trim Samsonite with the other. He called "Goodbye!" to Katie and Raymond—the former moist-eyed beneath the sofa, the latter napping. The latch clicked.

The first week: Katie's damp pajamas and rebuffed attempts to help her change, followed by googling "waterproof sheets" at 11:53 p.m. Fourth week: Raymond pulling himself up on the furniture for the first time while I laundered Katie's nightgowns. Ninth week: Raymond waking at midnight, three thirty, five o'clock, and a quarter after six, as I stumbled, bleary-eyed, to hurl Katie onto the toilet. Every Sunday: Katie passing the detergent, scrambling to rescue her books from Raymond's grasp, muttering, "When is Daddy coming back?"

Three months of 1,100 daily calories (thinness = desirable; organ failure = less so) and calendar-page activity:

- Easter baskets (kids only)
- Childcare drop-off/pick-up
- Splashing (every available puddle)

Me: 87.3 pounds.

Today, Saturday, the three of us have reached a tacit stalemate after an eight-hour tripartite cage match. I took the early lightning laundry round. Raymond won the hostile nap medallion. Katie threatened a late surge by refusing a walk at precisely the moment petulant hail spurted from the skies. Now, Roger calls and announces that our former nanny is pregnant, thereby taking the prize.

I say, “She’s going to gain fifty pounds.”

Roger says, “See you next Tuesday,” or similar, the exact imprecation lost beneath a seismic thunderclap. He hangs up.

I stifle a *word*.

Raymond catapults carrot mash toward the oven. Katie looks up from her meal, her face a question.

Then: a low whine, waxing into a shrill foghorn outside. Stretched gooseflesh across my frame. Katie's fork bounces dully against the hardwood. Raymond's spoon drops out of trebuchet alignment.

I mentally survey our townhouse's windows. No saving the second floor living room or third-floor bedrooms except by cracking everything open, and hoping. But as we'll be huddling together in the street-level foyer, I consider the frosted-glass panes in the front door.

"Katie, honey," I murmur, "can you please get the Cheerios boxes out of the recycling?"

She produces an Oscar-worthy moue. "What's that noise?"

"Now, please." I say, collapsing Raymond's pack-and-play with an origami petal fold. I hustle it into our Harry-Potter-style understairs pantry on the ground floor of our townhouse.

"I can't find any!" she calls from upstairs.

"Katie."

"Why're you downstairs?"

"We need to tape them over the windows, Katie. Please." I rummage through the toolbox Roger wants back. I told him I'd exchange it for child support. Oooh, duct tape!

The alarm again.

“Mom!”

“Come downstairs with the boxes!”

I rip off a series of sticky strips, forming dull tinsel bunting along the door frame. Katie arrives and I demolish the boxes until they lie flat, tame. “Stand on the—” I look around, knock sneakers and boots aside. “Here, use the shoe shelf, and start taping, please.”

“But—”

“It’s a tornado siren. We’ll be just fine down here.”

I race back upstairs, then re-descend with Raymond, my old college-relic boombox, and a copy of *Beezus and Ramona*. I unearth from the pantry an applesauce tube for Raymond, a juice box for Katie, a Diet Coke for myself. And I read, full-voiced, drowning out the unholy wail of the siren punctuated by hideous stillness. The electricity goes out. The afternoon gleamings filter down from the living room and bathe Katie’s face in green. I read with operatic volume over the sounds of exploding glass mingled with an oncoming train whistle and a rush of noise like the inside of a car wash, encircling a screaming child in each arm—

And—

When my eardrums and sanity press against the edge of collapse—

The sound stops.

I set the book down, but not the children. Now silence reigns again and the three of us look at one another, still unready to speak.

Eventually, the radio crackles an all clear.

Raymond squirms, so I set him down on the linoleum. He immediately pulls himself up with my shoulder. Katie says, “If Daddy hadn’t taken Ginger’s cat carrier, I could have stood on that.”

“You were really helpful, honey. Thanks.”

She nods, then nestles back against me.

I can just reach the Bacardi bottle to tip a little into my can. A well-earned sixty-six calorie splurge. Katie hands me the book so I can finish reading Chapter 4. She laughs when she discovers Ramona has taken just one bite from every apple in the dark cellar, chasing that fleeting bit of sweetness.

The image shows the interior of a boat cabin, likely a motor yacht. The cabin is dark, with dark wood paneling on the walls and ceiling. There are three large, rounded rectangular windows with dark frames. The view through the windows is a vast, calm sea extending to a distant, hazy mountain range under a sky filled with soft, white clouds. In the foreground, there is a dark, curved seat or bench on the left and a dark, rectangular table or console on the right. The overall atmosphere is serene and expansive.

THE DREAMMAKER

Abigail Wessel

PHOTO BY MATTHEW CSERNICA

The first time I created a nightmare it was an accident. I wasn't focusing. To tell you the truth, I was having an off day. The spill-your-coffee-on-your-white-blouse, drop-your-iPhone-on-the-sidewalk-and-crack-the-screen kind of day. Mrs. Turner was in for her Tuesday afternoon session, and we were sitting on my therapy couch, my palm on her wrinkled forehead as I put her under. Mrs. Turner breathed in and out, utilizing the techniques I'd taught her for faster submission. Within a minute I was in her mind, crafting her dream. But again, I wasn't really concentrating. And, I'll be honest, it wasn't my best work.

Yes, I'm a dreammaker. It's a highly skilled, incredibly difficult calling. It requires intelligence, diligence, empathy, and a certain amount of creative flourish. Some people compare the practice to psychology, but with a more direct approach. It skips over all that talking, figuring out the reasons why, and instead dives straight into the mind. Plus, dreammaking gets much faster results.

Some people don't like dreammaking. They think it's like a drug, that it should be outlawed because some people abuse it. I would make the argument you could say that about a lot of things. Anxiety medication, alcohol, food, relationships—none of those things are illegal. I help people, and I'm covered by most health insurance policies.

At the start of our session, Mrs. Turner asked for a dream about her husband. I take requests for my regulars; that's not something all dreammakers can offer. I scanned through her top ten memories and found one with Mr. Turner: happy memory numero ocho. I like to look inside my patients' minds and choose the fourth or fifth happy memory hovering in their subconscious. I'm not big on the top three because people dream about those memories naturally. Happy memories four through ten usually hold that surprise and delight factor. I can dig deeper of course, but that takes time, and most days my clients are back to back. Unfortunately for me, and I guess for her, the happy memory I chose wasn't all that happy.

Look, I never mess up like that. I only watched maybe half of it on fast forward. That was my first mistake. The one memory I don't scan start to finish is the one that ends in a violent sex thing that did some lasting mental damage. And okay, my second mistake was to play up the second part of the dream. The first part was all boring beach stuff—good, but it doesn't tend to leave the clients with that lasting sense of calm I like to imbue. I figured that the second half was where the memory got really good, the part that made it a top tenner.

I'll admit it, on that count I was wrong.

Can I say something in the it's-not-all-my-fault department, though? If that's Mrs. Turner's eighth happiest memory, she's got some serious sorting out to do. She needs to see a psychiatrist. Dreammaking isn't going to cut it.

I made her forget it. I'm not proud of it, but after I realized that she was suffering and my dreammaking wasn't going as planned, I went back into her mind. I saw what she was seeing—that husband of hers is a real creep; he should be jailed, or castrated—and tacked on a little oblivion bend at the end. Unfortunately, once a dream starts, you have to let it play out. Not even I'm that good. Oblivion was really the only move. I don't like to do it—it's a bit like cheating—but Mrs. Turner was in real pain, and pain sticks with you a lot longer than joy.

“You should send your husband to me some time,” I told Mrs. Turner as she collected her purse to go, an unsure smile on her face.

I can't tell you where that comment came from. But the moment I spoke it, I knew what I wanted to do.

Mrs. Turner paused to consider the suggestion before saying, “You know, that's a good idea. He doesn't really believe in the whole dreammaking thing.” She rolled her eyes in that convivial *men—am I right?* way. “But he's been really stressed lately, and he's commented a few times about how well it works for me. I think I can get him to come around.”

Fun fact: most people who come in to see dreammakers are not great people. There's a reason they need me for their sweet dreams. There are too many bad memories, too many guilty ones that overwhelm the positive memories when they stop actively suppressing them. Say what you will about the subconscious, but very few people can avoid its consequences.

I was pretty upset when I realized that more than a few of my patients were shielding themselves with nice smiles and polite conversation, that they were hiding something rotten just beneath. It made me feel pretty bad about what I do. I had this minor existential crisis thing, questioning my entire career and who I was helping and what my purpose was, et cetera, et cetera. But when I emerged on the other side of those dark days, it was with that sense of calm that I used to like to see my clients come out of our sessions with. I figured that I may sometimes deal with scum, but there was something I could actually do about it.

The second time I created a nightmare, it was on purpose.

It wasn't with Mrs. Turner's husband. No, him I dealt with later. My first intentional nightmare was with a man named Patrick Lansing.

Now Patrick, how do I put this nicely? Patrick was a complete asshole.

“Welcome Mr. Lansing,” I said to him in my calm, therapeutic voice, gesturing for him to take a seat. “Now, with my new clients, I usually like to reserve the first ten minutes to discuss what you’re looking for out of the session. So that I can get a sense of—”

“Skip the mumbo jumbo crap. I know the deal. Put me under and give me a dream about my last vacation: African safari.”

“Mr. Lansing, in order to most effectively treat you, our first session should begin with—”

“First session? Trust me, you’re not pretty enough to keep me coming back, sweetheart. I’m a one and done kind of guy,” Patrick said, snorting. “Now, do what I’m paying you for, and put me under.”

I took a deep breath and put on my professional smile.

“Of course. Let’s begin.”

I sat far from his predatory, bulky build, but it wasn’t enough. As I placed my palm on his forehead to begin the process, he leaned in and placed his hand on my thigh.

“I hear it’s best to have more personal contact,” he said and then squeezed.

I snapped.

I flooded into his mind and took away his consciousness, forging the usual process where submission is mutual, shared between dreammaker and patient. Patrick had no more choice in this. I was in control.

I raced through his deadened subconscious searching for something murky, something toxic. I found the thick, slinking memories within half a minute. It's funny, I'd never done that before: looked for the painful memories, the ones that inflicted shame, but they were almost easier to locate than the good ones. Maybe it was because they were so close to the surface with Patrick, or maybe it was because I was meant to seek them out. It was like they called out to me, begged me to expose them.

There's something really satisfying about watching someone wriggle and squirm and sweat, knowing that for the next fifty-some minutes, they're in an inescapable nightmare. A mental prison of your design.

Now, I know what some of you men are thinking (some women too—and trust me, there's a special place in hell for women like you). All that for one little squeeze of the thigh? You don't know my history, and you don't get to. I made Patrick piss himself in fear. Luckily, he was my last appointment of the day.

“Barbara?” I called to my secretary after Patrick had fled. “Can you make sure to get the cleaning crew in here tonight? That last patient had a little accident.”

Barbara came in and widened her eyes at the dark spot on the floor (he'd fallen off the couch to cower on the ground about halfway through).

I smiled. "I don't think we'll be seeing any more of him."

Barbara gave a flighty little laugh.

"Should I cross off any follow-ups he may have made to free some time on your schedule?" she asked.

"Please do," I responded, even though I knew that Patrick hadn't made any additional sessions. He was a one-and-done kind of guy. And in this case, I was too.

Now I'm not saying I know best when it comes to right and wrong, nor that I should be the one who gets to draw that line, but I do know more people in this world need to feel what they've done, need to experience the pain they've inflicted on others. And I just happen to be in the position to deal out that justice. Who wouldn't do the same in my position?

After Patrick, I began to push my own boundaries. The thing is, going inside someone's mind is invasive. I see things that I'm not supposed to see. And once I started seeking out a different sort of memory, I realized just how many of them there were.

But Mr. Turner was a tough one. I'd thought I could pull his versions of events with his wife, amplify certain threads of the narrative to really heighten his suffering, and let the wave of shame do its thing. I wanted to manipulate his thoughts into dreams so that he could feel exactly what Mrs. Turner had felt in those last terrifying seconds as his hands tightened around her neck, and then her confusion in the moments after, as she regained consciousness, when he presented her with a diamond necklace.

I put him under and weaved my way into the maze of his memories. It was odd, though. None of them had the typical markers of guilt or the red pulse of pain. None of them had the softer, glowing qualities of happiness, either. They were all kind of an unorganized gray. I'd only seen that one other time in my life, when I went into my own mind, and that's only because it's harder to interpret your own thoughts than it is to decipher someone else's. At first, I thought I'd done something wrong, that I'd somehow imposed my memory structure onto his. Then I realized that his memories weren't positive or negative because they didn't have any emotions associated with them. They were neutral. His mind had warped what he'd done to his wife (and, as I also discovered, to his children) into something he interpreted as normal.

I have say, I was intrigued. He was my first sociopath. But that didn't stop me from figuring out how to make him suffer, of course. Did I mention that I'm the best at what I do?

I gave him something to suffer with. I'd never done that before. I've taken memories and molded them into something else, combined them, enhanced certain aspects and downplayed others, but never had I created something new.

I crafted completely new situations in which he was the victim and I the tormentor. It was fun to watch him deteriorate. Mr. Turner couldn't handle it. He talked to himself, pulled out his hair, hit himself in places where clothes would cover the bruises. I may have extended our session by half an hour. He needed it. I made a man who hadn't experienced real emotional pain in his life feel the culmination of agony he'd made his family endure.

That's how I knew I could get creative with my dreammaking. I didn't have to rely on my clients' past memories at all; I could implant something completely new. The best part was, to my delight, my mental grafts didn't dissolve like I thought they would. They seeped into the subconscious and took root. When Mr. Turner came back, I looked inside his mind and saw my creativity in there, throbbing and raw. He took the pain from our session and continued to experience it in real time.

It was incredible. Completely uncharted dreammaking territory. I couldn't tell anyone (they'd probably take my accreditation away), but it was revolutionary for the field.

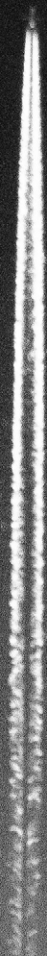
How do I feel about this transition in my dreammaking? I consider it more of an evolution really. I still keep my regulars, like Mrs. Turner, and give them their requested reprieves. But more and more of my time is focused on the nightmare side of my practice. I'd eventually love to do it full time. It's been rewarding to see the effects of my treatments over time.

Recently, I've begun to permeate my patients' subconscious with a temporary sense of happiness at the end of their nightmares. I hate to give these people even one shred of relief, but it's done wonders to ensure my patients come back, gluttonous for that temporary escape. They arrive more frayed around the edges, their mental facilities crumbling with each session.

I must say, it's been great for business.

FRIDAY AT THE AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM

Olivia Robertson



From inside of the spacecraft, his daughter's voice sounded abnormally shrill, and it put up his hackles immediately. She thumped against the exterior. "Dad. *Please* get out of there." He turned away and stared out the glass window panel at the front.

He could see pieces of the exhibit lit from below, an exhibit that had been designed around him, to tell his life story. His and that of his crewmates.

Nobody'd shouted at him from outside the spacecraft before. Before, through the tons of titanium and ablatives, all he'd heard was takeoff, and that was more sensation than sound. A feeling that tripped him awake just as he was falling asleep. And then, when they reached orbit, breathless silence. Certainly, there had been nobody out there to call to him.

An announcement he couldn't hear well came over the speaker system. He clutched the steering levers and sank further into his seat. Outside, someone yelled into a walkie talkie.

"Okay, Dad. I'm coming in."

He paused, and she took the chance while she had it. In a moment the door opened. She clambered in, tripping over herself and landing in a chair. Behind her, through the crack in the door, he could see the crowd growing, employees roping the area off, suited men rolling in on golf carts.

“I’ll be your copilot,” she said, and stabbed at a button. She jumped when it clicked, as if this thing still worked. “Where are we going? Mars? I’ll play along. What’s the mission?”

“No mission.” This old thing couldn’t handle it. The machine burned through the stratosphere like Wormwood, but time had eaten through it and left it as a shuck on a platform.

“No mission?” she asked. “Then what are we doing here?”

“I’m sitting. You’re sticking your nose in.”

“Well, can you blame me? The museum staff are losing their minds. This is a very expensive artifact, Dad. The maintenance is a nightmare, and you just climbed in wearing boots.”

“I was in charge of the maintenance,” he huffed. He was getting riled. “If it weren’t for me, it wouldn’t even be in here. I could—I could take a crap in here if I wanted.”

“Don’t do that. Listen, what’s going on? Do you want to get out of here and go talk? We can go to the deli. I’ll get you a pastrami on rye, set the kids loose in the playground.”

The intercom sounded. His daughter flitted a panicked eye to the door. When did he become this elderly father, to be placated by his children with sandwiches and museum trips?

“Andy died last Tuesday,” he said. He scratched his forehead.

“Andy?” Then her expression cleared. “Oh, *Andy*. Dad, I’m so sorry. Was he sick?”

He didn’t know. They hadn’t spoken in years. Andy was in those pictures with him, two scruffy, handsome young men in silly space suits. They’d gotten along as much as they had to but kept it brief. Andy didn’t have much sense of humor, took things a little too literally, and always found a way to work his theology into things. No hard feelings, but neither of them made any effort to keep in touch. It always seemed like there’d be another chance.

But there wasn’t. Andy died. Now, there weren’t any more like him. Feet planted in the gray-gravel desert of that alien rock, they’d hung upside down above the earth, and with their fresh eyes saw the planet for the first time.

“Can we talk about this over coffee or something?” she said. “Do you—can I do anything?” She smiled, then her face turned sad. “Please, Dad. You don’t want them to drag you out of here. You’re too dignified for that.”

“They wouldn’t,” he barked.

“You’re right.” She sighed. “They’re all scared of you. Maybe they’ve heard you bite.”

“I don’t bite.”

“You always bit me.”

“Those weren’t real bites. I was just eating your toes, remember?”

“Maybe they don’t want their toes eaten.”

“Sure, sure,” he said. “But they step foot in here, they better be prepared.”

His daughter smiled and he chuckled, though it came out a cough. She put a hand on his. Her diamond was obscene on her thin finger.

“Please,” she said.

“Fine,” he said. “I admit defeat.”

“You can never be defeated, Dad,” she said, already in a squat.

She helped him stand. “You know, it looks different in here from how I imagined. You never really told me about it.”

“You never asked,” he said, as if it mattered. He pulled down his hat and prepared to face the crowd.



SOMETHING

Joel Fishbane

PHOTO BY MATTHEW CSERNICA

I

Once she decided to do it, Justine went to see Kieran where he worked. He'd tweeted about Carlaw's when he started, but Justine had to come back three times before he was there. He had quickly become everyone's favorite bartender, for he protected the regulars and treated them as kin. She learned his schedule, and they developed a rapport. He was small and compact, like an oversized rat, but Justine knew he'd been a lightweight champ and could beat someone twice his size.

"We should check out the Music Hall," she said.

"Yeah?" said Kieran. "And why should we do that?"

Justine shrugged. "Presumably, because we both like music."

Justine licked the Belgian lace from the inside of her pint and caught her reflection in the window. She looked nothing like Viola, Kieran's dead wife, but she wondered if she might

be his type. Time had thickened her, but she wasn't yet thirty, and the dye took care of the premature dustings of gray. She had good skin and inviting green eyes. She took another drink and met Kieran's gaze. His mouth, little more than a slash, curled into a grin.

"All right, then," he said. "I'm free Monday night."

The next day was Thursday, and Justine's students were out of control. She had to fight for their attention.

"Let's talk about our good friend, phosphorus!" said Justine.

The students were disinclined to listen, but Justine knew how to hook them. Phosphorus, she announced, was discovered because of a mixture of magic, greed, and piss.

"Once upon a time," she said, "there was a German named Hennig Brand. He loved money so much that he dreamed of turning lead into silver. He found a recipe, but it called for boiling down urine. Urine contains phosphates. When heated, phosphates produce carbon monoxide and emit phosphorus as a gas, which then it condenses and solidifies. It gives off a glow, as phosphorus tends to do. That was the magic, at least to him. He gave it a Greek name that means bearer of light."

"Are we going to have to repeat the experiment?" asked a student. "I can help with the main ingredient."

Everyone laughed and Justine smiled. For years she had been giving this lecture and each time, someone made a similar joke. People were chemicals; you could always predict how they'd react.

During second period, she gave the sophomores a pop quiz and dawdled online, tweeting retorts to right-wing rhetoric and battling trolls. She signed an online petition demanding the resignation of a senator accused of sexual misconduct. She wanted to do more than enter her name on a screen, but as she started sharing it with friends, her sister sent a text. Iris was studying music in Montreal and had volunteered to play in the orchestra for a student production of *Sweeney Todd*.

Save me from actors who can't learn their lines.

Justine sent a happy face and added, *Can I borrow your leather jacket?*

The moment she hit send, she wished she hadn't. Iris would want to know the reason for the request. Sure enough, by the time Justine reached the cemetery later that afternoon, Iris had sent a slew of questions. Justine had been able to ignore the texts while she drove, but they seemed to assault her now as she stepped from the car.

You have a date? Have you and Darcy split?

They put him in solitary. Haven't talked to him in weeks.

What did he do?

Whole lot of nothing. Just guards acting like gods.

The ellipsis floated as Iris wrote her reply.

It was a blustery day, and the wind clawed at her, wrecking her hair. The cemetery was elegant, the headstones elaborate, large enough to encompass epitaphs that could have been books. Their mother's grave was far more conservative. She lay in the furthest corner by the fence; it had been all they could afford.

Does Darcy know? wrote Iris. *You need be honest. It's the one rule Anne-Marie has with Dex.*

Justine plucked a stone from the path and turned it in her hand. Iris had roomed with Anne-Marie her freshmen year, when her boyfriend was doing time in a Quebec prison (Iris had never told her what Dex had done—it was possible she didn't know). The story had inspired Justine to sign up for a prison pen pal program. Her mother was gone, and Iris was in Montreal, and Justine had been feeling the ache of solitude that bitching on Twitter hadn't cured. Justine knew Iris liked that she was dating a man on the inside. She thought it showed character. But her friendship with Anne-Marie meant Iris also thought she was an expert, and she loved to give Justine advice about how to endure.

Anne-Marie says it's impossible to stay pure, wrote Iris.

At the grave, Justine bowed her head and murmured the Mourner's Kaddish. Iris had little more than an echo of their parents' faith, but Justine often tried to distinguish between the wind and the whisper of their mother's ghost. When she was done with the prayer, she went to place her stone atop the grave—the mark all Jewish mourners leave to let the spirits know they were there. It was only then she noticed a stone was already there.

Justine sent Iris a picture of it, along with an exclamation mark.

One of her friends? wrote Iris.

Justine doubted it. Dad comes every year.

She picked up the stone. It was sharp and jagged, a piece of shattered bone. She threw it over the fence. Justine had a pitcher's arm—she'd played softball in her youth. She took a new picture and sent it to Montreal.

It must be exhausting being so angry all the time, wrote Iris. *You must take a lot of naps.*

Justine sent a GIF of a cartoon woman giving the middle finger. She put her own stone on the grave and walked away, bracing against another harsh gust that swept over her cheeks.

It's been two years, wrote Iris.

So what?

Again, the ellipsis floated as Iris wrote and re-wrote. Justine was already back in the car by the time the message finally came.

Next time, leave the stone. Spite is a petty thing.

That's not what this is.

Then what?

An urge. I don't know. A need to do something.

Justine started driving so she would have a good excuse to ignore Iris. She assumed her sister had forgotten the leather jacket but when she came home there was a message telling her Iris had sent it by special delivery—it would be there Friday afternoon. *If you want to “do something”,* wrote her sister, *try enjoying your date.*

The box was on her porch the following day. The jacket was tan and had creasing that gave it a vintage look, with epaulets and gunmetal zippers. She had worn the jacket the first time she and Darcy met; she knew she looked good in it. People were chemicals. The jacket had worked on Darcy. It would work on Kieran too.

Darcy had lost his privileges, but he could still receive mail, and Justine spent Friday night trying to finish a letter. The page, half empty, sat before her like a taunt. It should have been easy—their relationship, after all, had been forged in letters—but lately she'd been blocked. That half-empty paper had been half empty for a week. She chewed her pen and imagined Kieran gliding behind the bar, beads of sweat on the amber stubble that grew when he forgot to shave.

Sunset came, and she lit a Yahrzeit candle and said the required prayer. She ate cold pizza and listened to Kieran and Viola's band, Food of Love, a reference to Shakespeare she had needed their website to explain. The website hadn't been updated since their last show, two weeks before Viola was found in the apartment, bleeding from the head. Justine had long ago downloaded their demo. Viola wrote all the songs, and the lyrics had whimsy:

*Let's stay in bed and dream
of roller skates and banana cream*

The music was often languorous, minor chords lingering like smoke in air. Justine decided the songs hinted at a pain in the chest, some chasm that the music was trying to cross. On Saturday morning, she checked the mousetraps, paid some bills, and set up her home laboratory, arranging her flasks and test tubes before digging out the hazardous chemicals she kept under lock and key. Like Hennig Brand, Justine worked from a recipe, though hers came from her mother's father, who had been assistant to a French apothecary during the Second World War. Justine had salvaged his workbooks, and now she set to work creating one of his fabled mixtures as Viola sang.

Let's stay in bed and dream . . .

Justine paused when she came upon the phosphorus, which she sometimes used to kill mice. Magic. Greed. Piss. “We want to believe that science comes from virtue,” she told her students. “But scientists are just as human as everyone else.” Or, to quote Anne-Marie via Iris, it was impossible to stay pure. For the next hour, Justine worked with steady calm, mixing chemicals as the music played on a loop. She imagined what she and Darcy might be doing if they were out. A farmer’s market. An amble through an antique store. She tried to picture them arguing over a Queen Anne chair. There was romance in her finding him, and, as in all love stories, the slightest whiff of fate.

While waiting for her creation to cool, Justine made coffee and checked the mousetraps again. She spent half an hour shouting into the internet. Darcy’s letter sat forlorn on the table, watching her with an orphan’s earnest. “In a minute,” she kept saying, even as she dove deeper down the internet’s black hole. She googled Viola and Kieran. You are what you post, a digital advisor had warned the students at the start of the year. The internet never forgets! It certainly hadn’t forgotten Viola and Kieran. Justine liked to skip through old posts and pictures, the ones that predated Viola’s death. She had used these to piece together their romance, the seven-year story of them.

In her lab, the mixture began to crystalize, and she put it in an ice bath before setting the timer on her phone. If you truly are what you post, then Kieran and Viola were New Yorker cartoons, vegan dishes, a cycling trip through Thailand, comic book conventions, left-wing memes, concert footage, and a looping video of six seconds in a pub featuring Kieran

singing while Viola played a Di Giorgio guitar. The instrument had been a gift from Darcy and, indeed, if Justine scrolled long enough, she could find a picture from the day Viola received it. Darcy was in it, sitting in some restaurant, one arm around his sister and the other around Kieran. All three grinned at the camera while Viola was presented with the guitar, which bore an enormous purple bow.

Click! Below the sink, the mousetrap had caught its prey. It was a live trap—today, she had needed the phosphorus for other things—and the mouse scurried in the tiny box, squealing with displeasure and, she imagined, embarrassment at being caught. Justine took the trap into her lab where she released the mouse into a small cage lined with a medley of shredded paper and hay. She might have delivered him to paradise; there was water, food, and a wheel to save him from boredom.

“Kieran,” she said. “Kieran the mouse.”

Justine went back to the lab as Kieran squeaked. She sent her mixture through a Buchner funnel, producing a crude mulch that looked like the slush formed after the city dropped rock salt in the streets. Within a few hours, she had her result: five ochre tablets, each the size of a drop. She crushed one, then mixed it in with the mouse’s water which turned the color of a sunrise. That was unfortunate; she’d been hoped the pills would be colorless when dissolved.

Nonetheless, she proceeded with the test. She filled a bowl with food and waited for Kieran to emerge from his burrow and run for the meal. He ate and drank while she made a note

of the time. Later, she fixed dinner - liver and onions - as she studied Viola's pictures. Viola, who had been dark-haired and magnificent. Viola, who had had the elegance of a nereid rising from the sea.

After she died, Darcy got drunk and stole a car. A terrible mistake and yet its consequences had the whiff of fate. She was dead, and Darcy was put away. Justine would never have thought of the pen pal program if Iris hadn't met Anne-Marie, but Justine would never have had been able to write to Darcy if Viola hadn't met Kieran and had married someone else. And didn't she herself only exist because her father had once caught her poor mother's gaze? How was it that Iris could be so agnostic about the world? Life was as precise as a chemical formula, with every event measured so things happened exactly as they should. Fate was a terrible debt. Justine was only what she was because the recipe had insured so many other people had come together and broken apart.

She found Kieran dead, his stomach distended. She nodded, noting the time, and extinguished her mother's candle.

She slept with the light on, as she had every night since she was a girl and a night hag had pressed down on her in the dark until she shuddered awake. Bathed in lamplight, Justine dreamed of Darcy's hands pressed into hers, and later she woke still holding the image, like winter clinging to gray.

II

The Music Hall was a converted movie theatre, and they met beneath the stylish marquee. Justine wore a tight sweater, a crimson handkerchief skirt, and, of course, the leather jacket. Kieran whistled in approval and made a bad joke about teachers gone wild.

“Who’s playing tonight?” he asked.

“It’s open mic.”

“So this will be either heaven or hell.”

“Probably a little of both.”

He was rumpled but not unkempt, and she decided that the faded jeans and untucked shirt were intentional. She’d intended to go to the bar and buy the drinks, affording her a few seconds alone with them, but the server appeared almost as soon as they sat down.

“I heard you and Viola had a band,” said Justine.

“That’s right. She was the heart of the thing. Wrote all the songs and dragged me onto stage. That’s love, am I right? You do things you never thought you would.”

Kieran turned his attention to the stage and Justine caught the time on a nearby clock. In solitary, Darcy was allowed only an hour of exercise. It had likely past; right now, he'd be in the midst of his twenty-three hours of solitude in a room smaller than her bathroom at home. Justine had left her jacket on and she toyed with the gunmetal zipper, the one that led down to her wrist. It had a secret pocket, inside of which she had stored the four ochre tablets. She hadn't counted on Kieran drinking bottled beer; in all her scenarios, he had ordered something on tap.

"What do you think it takes?" she said. "To get yourself up on stage?"

"Same thing that gets you to stand in front of students."

"A love of the periodic table?"

"Courage," he said, and he raised the drink in her direction.

"It doesn't take courage to teach chemistry."

"You teach *teenagers*. That's like going to war. You're a tough girl. I can tell."

The first musician slunk away to sporadic applause. Justine maneuvered the conversation onto her prepared topics. Cycling. Ireland. Kieran wasn't without charm. She imagined him sitting with Viola on a date like this one, smiling as they argued over the best way to get from Dublin to Cork. They'd been nineteen when they married; Kieran was Viola's childhood love.

“These musicians aren’t very good,” he said.

“We can do something else.”

“Don’t you teach tomorrow?”

“We dragged ourselves out. Let’s make it worth the effort.”

“There’s something in that, at least.”

Their Uber had a smell tangled with disinfectant that stung her nose. They headed for a pub he liked, away from the areas Justine knew. Kieran and the driver bantered with ease, and Justine sat outside the conversation, frothing in agitation, toying with the zipper and trying to seem tough.

The pub’s name was scrawled in neon lights. She recognized the place as soon as they were inside. There was the stage from the pictures, the one Food of Love performed on in the six second video. People smiled at Kieran when they arrived; some even clapped him on the back.

“Hey-o!”

“The prodigal returns!”

“Like manna from Heaven!”

“Who’s your friend?”

“My chemistry teacher,” said Kieran, grinning. He dragged her toward a booth, chuffed by this tiny fiefdom in which he’d been greeted like a returning king. He signaled the server and soon they received two stouts, dark and rich in pint glasses with gaping mouths.

“Viola and I used to come here,” he said.

“How long ago did she die?” Justine asked, pretending she didn’t know.

“Going on four years now.” He waggled his ring finger and she saw, for the first time, the red line of discoloration from where his wedding band once had been. “The therapist made me take it off. It got kind of stuck.”

“You’re in therapy?”

“I’m not broken or anything.” He drained his drink and called for another.

“I’m all for therapy. I went for years.”

“What for?”

Justine’s hand trembled and her ring clinked against the glass. “My father shot my mother while cleaning his gun.”

“Well, shit,” said Kieran. “Was she all right?”

Justine shook her head. “He was drunk.”

“What happened to him?”

“He paid some lawyer a lot of money. They can do anything. Like magicians.”

She watched Kieran as she said this, this man who had, like her father, also been some lawyer-magician’s great trick. His mouth was pursed as he tried to think of what to say.

“Therapy’s a godsend,” he told her. “I’m glad I decided to go.”

In fact, Justine knew that seeing a therapist had been part of his plea agreement with the court. He had also promised to stop drinking. Now Kieran rose, red-faced and sweaty, and tottered off to the toilet. Justine unzipped the sleeve and two tablets dropped into her hand. Under the pretense of fidgeting, she positioned her hands over the rim of his glass. She thought again of fate, and of her mother’s grave and the stone she had thrown over the fence and then, suddenly, one of the rabbis from her youth and his sermons about God. For years now, it had seemed to Justine that God was everywhere, and she was often seeing signs. Or was this just her imagination, like when people swear they see Jesus in a piece of toast? Pareidolia. A fancy way of saying we make the world in our image. We see what we want. Her hand wavered. She pulled back, heart clenched, and in that pause she lost her chance: Kieran appeared at the other end of the room. He returned bearing another pair of shots.

A band walked on stage. They were a pop-folk quartet with a spunky singer who played a Di Giorgio guitar. Kieran kept drinking as he talked about the instrument, but Justine wasn't listening. She was stunned by her moment of doubt; she had accounted for everything except for the possibility that, when she came to the precipice, she wouldn't be able to jump. A rage swelled through her, the something she had told Iris about, the feeling she woke with every day, and, beneath the table, she beat her fist against her thigh. Justine tried to smile at Kieran, show that she'd been listening, but he didn't seem to notice she had ever been gone. He was still talking, his beer fueling a rant about music and art and poetry and love.

At last, he leaned forward, drawling as if his mouth were full of honey. "You should know, I don't usually date customers."

"All right."

"I don't usually date at all."

"I get it."

"I suppose you need to go home."

"I don't have to."

"Thank God. I don't sleep good. You're better than sitting up alone."

He thought he had complimented her. Later, when it came time to leave, he didn't seem to care she had hardly touched her beers. He drained her untouched shots and leaned into her as they headed into the street.

Kieran still lived in the apartment he and Viola had shared, but it appeared this was about to change. Everything was in boxes, and there were pale patches on the wall where pictures had been taken down. A familiar Di Giorgio guitar hung in the corner. There was a vague discoloration on the floor—the spot, she knew, where Viola had been found. Justine stepped over the stain.

“Moving soon,” said Kieran. “You can help clean out the wine.”

He opened a bottle and served it in two ornate glasses. They sat on the couch and, at last, he showed her the webpage for Food of Love. He played the song clips she already knew. His face took on the look that men get when they're ready to make their move. It was the look of wolves, she thought, just as they descended on their prey. She asked to use the toilet and fled as Kieran sighed and played another track.

The bathroom was oppressive. Justine splashed water on her face and the chill rattled her to the bone. Only four pills and she couldn't give him water—he might notice the color change. Of course, it didn't have to be tonight, but she choked at the thought of enduring another evening like this.

Justine felt the prick of inspiration. “I don’t sleep so well,” Kieran had said outside the pub, and inside the medicine cabinet she found the proof. The bottle of sleeping pills was almost empty. They weren’t quite the same as her ochre tablets but that couldn’t be helped. Perhaps he’d be too drunk to notice; her father had once been so far gone he poured himself a glass of bleach.

In the other room, Kieran had turned up the music and was standing by the couch, blocking the path to the door with his guitar in hand. He was snotty and red, and his expression was sour as he watched her, sucking at the inside of his cheeks.

“Siddown,” he said. “I wanna play you one more.”

“It’s gotten really late.”

“What happened to making the effort?”

“I teach in the morning.”

“You’re the one who wanted to do this.”

He pulled her back to the couch and planted her at the far end, turning himself into a roadblock as soon as he sat down. She thought he might be too drunk to play but the serenade was note-perfect and his voice was strong. He sang Viola’s words. *Let’s stay in bed and dream / of roller skates and banana cream . . .* Despite herself, Justine was moved. This, she realized, was how he had won Viola once upon a time. A ballad and a voice. She could

almost see the man beneath, the good person he might have been. She was so distracted that she didn't notice that the song had ended, and the look of wolves had returned. Then he was coming for her, pinning her against the armrest. At the last moment, the end of the guitar struck her wine glass; it rolled across the table and broke on the floor.

"It's all right," she said. "Let's clean it up."

"Leave it." His voice was a growl; here was the wolf at last.

She tried to scramble away. "It won't take a minute."

"Don't use your hands. You'll cut yourself."

"I'll be careful."

"You'll cut yourself. Don't be so fucking dumb."

He pulled her back, yanking her by the shoulder till she fell into him and the guitar made an unhappy sound as it was caught between them. Something cracked and Kieran cried out and shoved her to the ground. Justine watched from the floor as he inspected the instrument, then placed it out on the couch as if it were a sleeping child. He grabbed a magazine and hunched over the glass, sweeping the shards onto the paper with his bare hands. He tore out pages and attacked the wine puddle on his hands and knees. His cheeks were red and sweat dripped into the lines of his cheeks.

“Dumb, dumb!” he muttered. With each word, he smacked the pages against the floor. “Dumb! Dumb! Dumb!”

She stood up. “It’s just a glass.”

“It was a wedding gift!” he snapped. For the first time, it occurred to Justine that he might be as drunk as her father had been the night he’d been cleaning his gun; he was definitely as drunk as he had been the night Viola died.

“Is the guitar all right?”

“No. Something broke.” He looked up at her, as if she was entirely to blame. “I just wanted a kiss. What’s wrong with you? Don’t you know anything? You know what? I don’t want your dumb ass sitting at my bar anymore. I can’t stop you from coming in, but from now on, you sit at a table. You get me?”

“If that’s what you want.”

The threat had been an idle one. “C’mon,” he said. “Don’t embarrass me like this. Why don’t you stick around?” In his pleading, he reminded her of her freshmen on the first day of class, tiny and new, terrified of the world. Despite everything, she had the urge to go to him; she felt a maternal swell, as if he really was a student coming to her in grief. But, when he saw her hesitation, he threw the second wine glass and it smashed against the wall with such force that it didn’t just shatter, it screamed. She fled into the hall and clawed toward

the elevator like a character in a horror film. “Chemistry!” he roared from the door, and the word had such malice that she believed the slasher was her, that he was onto her, that he knew what she had done.

III

Justine thought she would sleep well, but her dreams were erratic. *Snap!* went the mousetraps in the night. Each time, she woke with a start. Justine called in sick the next day and, as it turned out, the rest of the week. Iris kept calling but Justine brushed her off, calling in sick with her too. She didn’t leave the apartment. Stayed offline. Finished the letter to Darcy. *Kieran died this week* . . . She could not be more detailed because of the prison censors. She had long imagined that writing the words would bring satisfaction, the sort that comes at the end of any great experiment when the hypothesis has been proved. QED. It is done. The volcanic surge, the unknowable something that had plagued her, seemed to quiet, and she decided the poison that had built up inside of her had only needed to worm its way free.

She finally left the apartment to mail the letter. She decided she would never tell Darcy her role in what had occurred. He would never approve. It would be better if he thought Kieran had died of natural causes. Together, they would forget him. She was certain until she reached the mailbox when, at the last moment, a cautious spirit prevailed. No. She shouldn’t send the letter until she was sure.

At Carlaw’s, Justine sat at a table in the corner with a good view of the bar. It only took a moment for to see that Kieran was not at his post. True, they might have changed his

schedule, but to Justine this was the smoking gun, the final proof of her success. She excused herself and ran to the bathroom where, in the stall, she vomited as if at the end of a binge. When there was nothing left, she stood in the mirror and splashed water into her mouth. It was done, she thought. She could be the old Justine now, the one she once had been.

She pinched her cheeks in an effort to give them color before stepping back into the hall, this time to the bar.

“Is Kieran sick tonight?” she asked the new bartender.

“Kieran quit. He’s leaving town.”

The world seemed to pale around him as if the color had been bled away. “Did he say when?”

“He’s already gone, I think. He’s been planning it for weeks.”

Another magic trick, she thought. Men learn so much from their lawyers. This time, it was how to disappear.

After that, things went back to how they had been. She watched Kieran online, waiting for some clue about his fate. She didn’t know what she wanted to find, if the something that had her would ever be expelled. *Snap!* went the traps beneath the sink; and each time, she sprang awake with a rage in her fists.

WEIGHT OF THE WORLD

Kelly Norene Dudzik



PHOTO BY WHERBSON RODRIGUES

She used to be skinny, they said. But then she got married and had a kid and filled out and she wasn't skinny anymore.

"Please eat your peas," the woman said to the daughter, holding out a spoonful.

"No!" the daughter yelled from the high chair.

The woman sighed and ate the spoonful of peas. Her jeans dug into her flesh.

"Would you try to reason with her?" she asked the husband.

He barely looked from his phone. "There's no reasoning with a two-year-old."

The woman ground her teeth. The daughter played with her doll, setting it down on the tray of the high chair.

“Eat your peas,” the daughter said to her doll. “Eat them!”

The daughter shoved the doll’s face into the peas, scattering them across the tray and onto the floor. “Look what you did!” she said, smacking the doll across the face.

The woman sighed and bent down to pick up the peas. She put each one in her mouth and chewed slowly. The husband didn’t notice. She ate her frustration. The husband didn’t notice that either.

She grabbed the daughter from the high chair and set her on the floor.

“Go play,” she said. The daughter ran off, dragging the doll behind. The woman ate the rest of the peas.

“Got to go to work,” the husband said.

“I don’t know why you agreed to the night shift.”

He didn’t respond. Just stood and kissed her on her wide cheek. He was as skinny as a bean pole. He never ate his feelings.

The woman cleaned up dinner, licking the plates before loading them into the dishwasher. She ate a sleeve of cookies for dessert.

“Oof, you’re crushing me, babe,” he said to her one night while she rocked her hips into his. She rolled off him, ate her sorrow, and gained ten pounds overnight.

“I don’t want to!” the daughter screamed at the top of her lungs a few days later at the store.

“Please, honey, you have to hold my hand or get in the cart.”

“No!”

People stared. She covered her ample face.

“Please, honey,” she begged.

The daughter toppled a display of apples and whacked a man across the shins with her doll. The woman ran after her, her colossal legs quickly filling the distance between them. She grabbed the daughter and shook her.

“You’re sitting in the cart!”

The daughter started crying. The woman lifted the sobbing child and put her in the cart. Everyone stared.

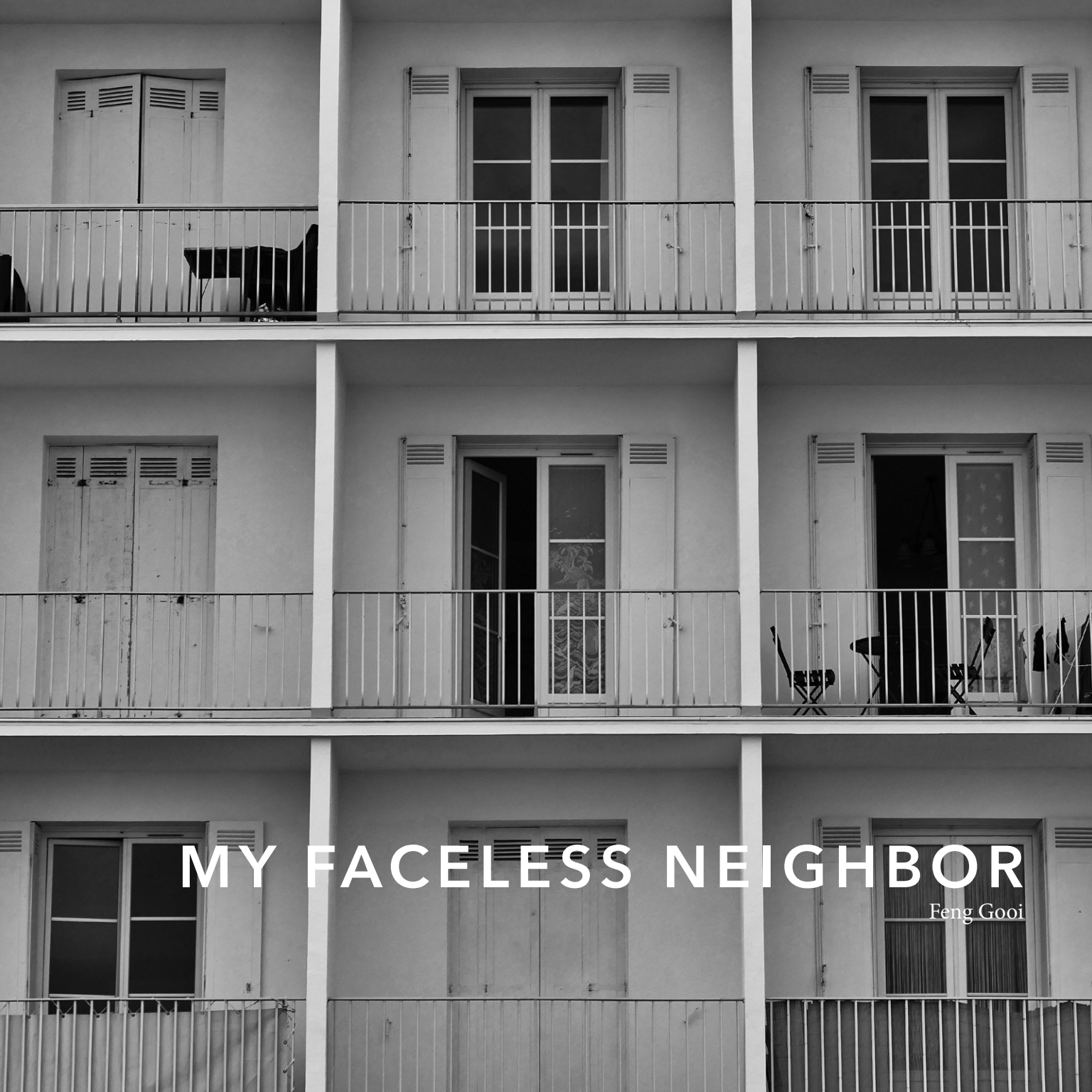
She ate their stares and gained fifty pounds while she stood, chewing.

Every night while her daughter slept and her husband worked, she ate. She ate the cookies hidden in the back of the cupboard. She ate the ice cream stored in the freezer. She ate the pie concealed in the oven.

She dared to eat in public, humming happy tunes to herself while she ate, moaning with pleasure. Soon, she couldn't fit inside the front door. She had the furniture moved outside and they ate dinner on the front lawn, her chins wiggling with each bite. She had to eat standing up or on the ground; none of the chairs were strong enough to hold her bulky frame. She ate everything in sight, licking her plate clean after every meal. People hated her for it. They talked. They called her obscene, revolting, disgusting. She ate all their comments, her body expanding with each whisper. The husband joined them. His jeers tasted most delicious. She ate all their disappointment. She ate their hate. She grew as big as their houses.

Committees were formed, petitions drawn up.

And then one night, they came at her with pitchforks, her husband joining them, their daughter on his shoulders. The woman grabbed at them with her pudgy hands and used a pitchfork to pop her daughter into her mouth, chewing slowly, relishing the taste.



MY FACELESS NEIGHBOR

Feng Gooi

Apparently my next-door neighbor was the most beautiful woman in the world. I wouldn't know; I never saw her. Her hair was a lustrous wave of black. Her skin was pale and glowed like moonlight. Her eyes were sparkling jewels filled with warmth and kindness. Her lips were the red of sunset. These details came from my other neighbor, Mr. Rahman, a middle-aged man with a balding head and a bushy, graying mustache. He lived three doors down at the end of the hall.

Mr. Rahman would describe every aspect of my neighbor from head to toe in the most passionate manner, finding new ways to paint the portrait of my mysterious next-door neighbor.

“Have you seen her?” he'd ask whenever we met.

My answer was always no, and he'd unleash his colorful descriptions. With each subsequent meeting, my neighbor's beauty grew stranger and more extravagant. Some of his descriptions were hacky, almost comical, but he stated them with such sincerity and conviction I couldn't

help but become entrapped.

“She’s like Mona Lisa and Madame X combined,” Mr. Rahman claimed. “A sad song after a heartbreak. The soft sounds of the piano that wrench and soothe your soul.”

“She’s like the clear night sky after a monsoon,” Mr. Rahman said on another occasion. “Like a gentle and cool breeze, a loving caress, but there’s power there too—to snap trees and shred your body. That is her beauty.”

Of course, the question of whether she was truly beautiful lingered in my mind. But why would someone so beautiful live here? The apartment was an old, sad thing. Most of the people living here were also old, sad things, cramped in tiny, crumbling rooms. And it was as dirty as it was cheap. There was a huge stain in the right corner of my bedroom. A big dark blob about the size of a coffee-table that seeped into the wooden floor. When I first moved into my apartment, I scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed away. It was utterly useless. I used almost all the cleaning chemicals known to man. Still, it remained. The stain was indifferent to my struggle.

“Have you ever seen Mount Kilimanjaro?” Mr. Rahman asked me once.

“No, can’t say I have. Where is it?”

“It’s in Tanzania, Africa. Never even heard of it? Hemingway? The Snows of Kilimanjaro?”

I shook my head.

“When I first saw it, I was overwhelmed. My mind, my soul—everything. I understood why people believe that gods, angels, and spirits live above us. It’s a titan rising above the plains, a bridge between heaven and earth with snow that—” he paused, flushed. “Poets and writers have described it better than I ever could, but that’s the kind of beauty she is. One that inspires even more beauty.”

I asked him to tell me more about his trip to Kilimanjaro. He said he’d never been. He’d seen the mountain on TV. There’d been a shot with giraffes roaming in the foreground that made it look especially majestic.

A mountain, a monsoon, a painting, a song. My image of her shifted with his words. Like ink in water, she would dissipate, and the pieces of her would coalesce together again into something new. Always different, always beautiful.

“Do you understand?” Mr. Rahman would say at the end of each soliloquy.

I would nod and say “I see” each time. Mr. Rahman always looked disappointed, as if he was sure whatever vision floated in my mind was nowhere close to the truth. He was sure that his words could not do her justice.

My beautiful neighbor was named Mrs. Lee. Mr. Rahman had little chats with her sometimes when they met in the hallway. From the way he described her, I was surprised he didn't fall to his knees before her. He learned that she was a widow, young, in her mid-thirties. Her husband died in a car crash, leaving her all alone. This of course only made her more beautiful. Tragedy enhances beauty.

“She's Venus de Milo brought to life. A part of her has been ripped away, yet she stands so strong, so dignified, a testament in marble,” Mr. Rahman mused.

I told him I'd read a news story once about FEMEN activists protesting topless in front of the statue. They hung a sign saying “Rape me I am immoral” on it in protest of a Tunisian woman who faced indecency charges after she was raped by policemen. To them, the armless statue symbolized the helplessness and vulnerability of women, even stone goddesses. Mr. Rahman frowned at the story.

I finally gave up and covered the stain with a cheap but tasteful rug. I couldn't see it, but I knew it was there. I could feel the presence of it. It wasn't alive, but it throbbed and pulsed in isolation. Even in the dark of night, I would glance to the corner and perceive a strange shape, darker than black.

I often pondered the origin of the stain. A water leak? Pet urine? Rust marks from old furniture? There were many possible answers, but I thought of it as an imprint of someone.

I was not one to believe in the supernatural. I'd shed my superstitions with puberty, yet an ordinary answer was something I refused to entertain.

Sometimes, in the strange place between sleep and consciousness, I would imagine the shape of a woman rising from the stain, enveloped in my cheap yet tasteful rug. She couldn't breathe underneath it, forcing deep, painful inhalations. I drifted to sleep listening to her muffled gasps for air.

I considered showing Mr. Rahman the stain but ultimately decided against it. Perhaps it was fear, though it would be comically fitting if the stain only existed in my mind, a hackneyed metaphor. Of course, as time passed, I learned to live with it and the strange thoughts it brought me.

In any case, a sad tiny apartment with a mysterious dark stain was suitable for someone like me, but not for my supposedly wondrously beautiful neighbor, Mrs. Lee. Beautiful people did not always deserve to live in beautiful places, yet you often found them there.

But then, she wasn't the only misfit. Mr. Rahman clearly did not belong either. It was obvious from the way he dressed, clean and impeccable. His precise mannerisms and natural eloquence marked his difference. He never flaunted his wealth. It was just a by-product of his being.

I remember the first time I met him clearly. It was the afternoon of the third day I just moved in. I was busy scrubbing the stain when he knocked on the door. He stood there

with a big smile and a big bowl filled with rambutans, mangoes, bananas. Even a pineapple.

“Hello neighbor! I’m Rahman bin Abu Talib. I have the apartment at the end of the hall. Just thought I’d stop by and give you a little housewarming present!” he said with odd enthusiasm.

His smile was confident, flashy and infectious. The visit was a surprise; the apartment building didn’t seem like a neighborly place. I thanked him and invited him in for some tea. He eagerly accepted.

Mr. Rahman’s eyes expressed his own surprise when I brought out my little Chinese tea set. The gaiwan and teacups were a soothing white porcelain adorned with exquisite hand-painted lotuses. Its opulent grace languished in a stark contrast to my sparse surroundings.

He watched intently as I heated the electric kettle and mixed the tea leaves in the gaiwan. We sat in peaceful silence as the tea steeped.

When it was ready, I poured him a cup. Mr. Rahman brought the steaming teacup to his lips delicately and sipped in a slow measured pace. But he didn’t stop. He didn’t set the cup down. Sip by sip he emptied the cup without looking up. It took a while, but when he was done, he let out a heavy sigh.

“It’s very good. What is it?” he asked quietly.

“It’s a type of oolong tea, *Tie Guan Yin*, Iron Goddess of Mercy,” I explained.

“I see. It was fantastic. Is tea-brewing a hobby of yours? Are you an expert in tea?”

“No, not really. Couldn’t even tell you what water temperature goes best with what tea. I just know what tea I like and how to brew it. I learned from videos on YouTube,” I said with a shrug. “Someone gave me this tea set and I just thought I’d better start drinking tea.”

“That’s a fantastic mindset! Life always presents with us with so many opportunities to learn new things, but we just don’t see it.”

I nodded and poured him another cup.

“Say have you met your other neighbors, yet?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“Well, most people here keep to themselves. Nobody visited me when I first moved in. What about your next-door neighbor, the one on the right? You haven’t met her yet?”

I shook my head again.

“Ah, you’re in for quite a sight, young man.”

“How so?” I asked.

Mr. Rahman gave a big flashy grin and said, “You won’t believe me until you see for yourself, but she’s the most beautiful woman in the world. Let me try to describe her to you.”

That was the first of many tea sessions between me and Mr. Rahman.

I lived in that apartment for two years and never saw her. I worked the evening shift at a hospice taking care of the elderly, every weekday from five in the evening to one in the morning. I came home to dimmed lights and silent halls.

I wasn’t sure what she did. Some nine-to-five job. As she worked, I slept. When I worked, she slept.

On weekends, she went back to the mainland to visit her parents. Every Friday, she left the island immediately after work. I imagined her, my beautiful neighbor squeezed among lines of car after car, slowly crossing the sea inch by inch on the bridge. She told Mr. Rahman she found the jam highly exhausting; sometimes she wished a titanic wave would rise from the sea and sweep her car perfectly to shore. She assured him no one would die in this fantasy scenario.

“What car does she drive?” I asked.

“What car would the most beautiful woman in the world drive?”

“I don’t know. A Mercedes Benz?”

Mr. Rahman laughed. “A Mercedes Benz? Oh, you know nothing about cars or women do you, young man?”

I never did find out what car the most beautiful woman in the world drives.

There were holidays, days when I was off, days when she was off, weekends where she would stay in, but I suppose it was just a strange coincidence that we never met. Our lives were parallel lines, never intersecting. We were star-crossed neighbors, separated by both a wall and the fickle strings of fate.

For the first few months, I doubted her existence. Nary a sound ever drifted from her apartment to mine. No voices, no laughs, no music, no whirl of machines or chatter from television. It seemed unoccupied. Silent, dead, empty. It wasn’t just a lack of presence; it was absence.

If Mr. Rahman was not pulling an elaborate prank on me, I was half convinced he was meeting a ghost. Maybe that explained her supernatural beauty. Maybe she had died in the car crash with her husband.

My other next-door neighbors were a family of five. Not even the faintest sound drifted from Mrs. Lee’s apartment into mine, but they, on the other hand, made their presence

known. From their side I was bombarded by the laughter and screaming of children, the fiery arguments of husband and wife. Regardless of intent or emotion, it seemed the family communicated only through the uncaged power of sound.

Their faces were no mystery to me. The children looked like children. I did not know how to judge their appearance. Sometimes I saw the mother ushering them down the hall. She was an average looking woman, but there was an intensity to her. She seemed to be a woman of goals.

The father I saw rather frequently late at night when I returned home. He had a body of forgotten muscles buried in fat and a surprisingly elegant face. Even at two in the morning, he would wave a hand at me as he took languid puffs in the hall.

Mr. Rahman didn't think much of the man.

"Why is he smoking in the hallway? Nobody's allowed to smoke in the hallway!" he would fret.

I wasn't particularly bothered by the smoke, but the noise? It felt strange to listen to the cacophony of lives so close yet so distant from my own. I was the reluctant receiver of information both intimate and mundane. I knew that the big sister kept stealing and hiding the little sister's plush elephant. That the little brother's refusal to eat any food on the spectrum of yellow greatly perplexed and vexed his mother. I knew they argued about the apartment, and that the father's mocking imitation of the mother's boss always made her laugh.

“I saw you talking to that woman from 3B this morning,” the mother said once to the father. There was no hint of jealousy in her voice.

“Yes, I did. Just a greeting.”

After a long pause, the mother said, “I feel sorry for her.”

After an even longer pause, the father responded with a somber, “Me too.”

Though it did confirm that Mrs. Lee was not a ghost or some imaginary woman that existed only in Mr. Rahman’s head, this conversation made her infinitely more mysterious. Why did they feel sorry for her? My mind spun elaborate theories. Perhaps it was a lie: my beautiful neighbor was not so beautiful after all. What if the tragic car accident that took her husband left her horribly disfigured or crippled? Or both? Or maybe it was something else? Maybe she was suffering from something that couldn’t be seen? A terminal illness? Financial woes? An irrational fear of the world? Could it just have been a comment on her widowhood?

My questions led to more questions. An endless maze of inquiries. I didn’t bring up the conversation I overheard or the thoughts pounding on my head to Mr. Rahman the next time I saw him. Instead I listened to him wax poetic about her beauty yet again. This time, he compared her beauty to the power of free market capitalism.

Besides my beautiful next-door neighbor, the other mystery of my apartment complex was the curious case of Mr. Rahman. As I've said, he did not belong. He was clearly wealthy, educated, and there was an aura about him that indicated a life of success despite his present surroundings.

Mr. Rahman would knock on my door and ask if I was available for a visit. As always, I would say yes. Weekday or weekend, it was usually two in the afternoon. I would look at the clock, and if it was 2:05 and there was no knock, I knew he would not be coming. I didn't have work until the evening and Mr. Rahman appeared to be unemployed. This happened three or four times a week.

In any case, our tea sessions would always begin with his ballads of Mrs. Lee's indescribable beauty. Then, he would speak about the doom and gloom of the current state of the world. The words "these days" were used very often. He would ask my opinions, of which I had little. I told him I would digest news but never really processed it. He thought this was good.

"There are too many opinions in the world," he said. Still, this didn't stop him from relaying his own. Of course, he wasn't happy with the way things are or the way they could be.

Throughout, Mr. Rahman would sip on his steaming cup of tea like it was an ice-cold glass of whiskey. The Iron Goddess of Mercy turned to Johnnie Walker. With each sip, he would get sadder, seemingly drunker, and like a dutiful bartender I would pour him another while listening to his laments.

One cup after another, Mr. Rahman tried to drown his sorrows away. Instead, it intensified them. The hot tea would drip down his throat and melt into his heart, and then a wave of melancholy would gush forth.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m a monster,” he would sob quietly. “I’m sorry, Adnan. I’m sorry, Ashraf. I’m sorry, Nur. I’m sorry. I’m a monster.”

From what I managed to gather, Adnan and Ashraf were his two sons and Nur was his wife. According to Mr. Rahman, he had done something monstrous to them. Living alone in this dark little apartment was his penance. Whether the monstrous thing was truly monstrous, I never knew. He never shared and I never pressed him. I listened to his sobs in silence and without judgment.

I would let Mr. Rahman cry until it was time for me to get to work. He would look deeply embarrassed as he left, but the next time I met him, he acted like it never happened. His sobs, his self-flagellation—they all never happened until they happened again.

Things repeated. I poured Mr. Rahman cups of tea. He spun poems of Mrs. Lee’s beauty. He sobbed. I worked nights at the hospice. The husband next door smoked in the hallway. He waved at me. I overheard his wife complaining about the apartment. They laughed together. I scrubbed the stain. I poured Mr. Rahman a cup of tea. All the while, I never saw or met my next-door neighbor, the most beautiful woman in the world.

Mr. Rahman stopped coming for tea. One night, I realized he had not visited for more than a week. The next day, I looked at the clock and waited for 2:00 to turn into 2:05 and then 2:15. My porcelain teacups were polished and gleaming; the water was hot and boiling. He didn't come that day or the day after.

I tried to search for a reason for his absence, to recall what happened the last time I saw him, but all my tea sessions with him melded together. I poured through each one, trying to remember if I had given any offense. I scoured for anything significant. I could find nothing. They were all the same.

I could have knocked on Mr. Rahman's door, asked him what was wrong, invited him for some afternoon tea myself. He was only three doors down. But I never did.

On a Saturday morning, maybe two months later, I came back to my apartment with two bags of groceries. When the elevator door opened, two men waited for me to get out before attempting to fit in a black leather sofa. Behind them another two men waited, carrying an ornate wooden armoire.

"That's the last of furniture, Dad," came a voice at the end of the hall. The man was tall, handsome, and bright faced. I could read his future just by looking at him: a life of happiness and success. I wondered if this was the elder or younger son. He looked absolutely nothing like me.

"Good, good," said Mr. Rahman. He locked his door up and faced the hallway. He saw me but didn't look at me. Together with his son, he passed me by without acknowledgement.

His face was blank; he stared straight ahead. They stopped in front of the elevator and waited. I unlocked my door and went inside, and as Mr. Rahman descended, I remained in my room. As he walked out of the apartment forever, I turned on the kettle, poured tea into my porcelain teacups, and drank alone.

No. Not alone. I peeled back the rug, and though she did not rise from the stain as she did in the darkness, I knew she was there.

In another month or so the family next door also left. Strangely, their departure was not sudden. The loudness that drifted through the walls faded slowly. Each day, their conversations softened until all I could hear were muffled whispers. It was as if they were preparing me for their eventual exit out of my life. Then they were gone, and all that was left was silence.

Now, it was just me, my stain, and the most beautiful woman in the world. Just as before, I could not feel an iota of her presence. There were no sounds, no signs of life. Stillness besieged me from both sides. Maybe she had left too, and I didn't even know it.

I thought about her sometimes as I lay beside my stain. I brushed my fingertips over the carpet, cycling through my mind for the various portraits of her that Mr. Rahman had left me, but with each retrieval the details would fade. Her face became blurred, like a smudged painting, and then she turned into a mere impression, a silhouette, less than a shape.

When I first heard the knock, I was staring at the darkness on the floor, waiting for her. I spent a lot of time doing that these days. I no longer hid her under the rug. She was always there with me, and in the night, she arose from the stain—walked in slow circles around my room, and sat, unmoving at the edge of my bed, as if waiting for me, too. And as each memory of my neighbors receded, as I slowly forgot the sounds of the family next door, forgot the ways Mr. Rahman described our beautiful neighbor, she solidified, her outline growing clearer. Will a time come when she gains a mouth? A voice? Would she lament her sorrows to me while I poured her a cup of tea? I would listen; she was all the company I needed.

The knock on my door came again. It was late, not the time for food deliveries or health inspectors. Reluctantly, I wrenched my eyes from the stain and stumbled to the door.

“Hello? Are you there?” said the voice behind the door. “It’s your neighbor. I’m sorry to bother you but I need your help with something.”

My hand froze at the handle. I remembered the soft sounds of a piano. I remembered a world of majestic African mountains, raging monsoons, and marble statues of goddesses, but I felt the woman rise from the stain, beckoning me back into the room. Again, the world outside my apartment began to slip away.

“Hello?” she asked again as she knocked. Time dilated to an eternal suspension. Behind the door was Mrs. Lee, the most beautiful woman in the world. All I had to do was open the door to see if Mr. Rahmand was telling the truth, to meet her at long last.

I gripped the doorknob. Waited.

MY FACELESS NEIGHBOR

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