

RENDEZVOUS

By Elizabeth Han

EPIGRAPH

Only real love waits while we journey through our grief. That is the real trustworthiness between people. In all the epics, in all the stories that have lasted through many lifetimes, it is always the same truth: love must wait for wounds to heal. It is this waiting we must do for each other, not with a sense of mercy, or in judgment, but as if forgiveness were a rendezvous. How many are willing to wait for another in this way?

The Winter Vault by Anne Michaels

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By the time the geriatric got up from the bar for the third time, it was nearly too late for Will to salvage the man's drink. To take a flight instructor's view of the problem, an accident once occurred should be regarded with reverence and compassion for the pilot, passengers, and craft. Finished in a heap of bodies, fuselage, dreck and debris, the accident is history; no more can be done in prevention. But watching the offensive ice cubes in the man's Glencairn glass drain agonizingly into an amber admixture of whiskey and water had hovered Will in the hummingbird moment between compassion and objection. The latter won out. He waved to the barman and ordered another Balvenie Doublewood, neat, and a whiskey ginger with lime in a rocks glass. Then he broke his other rule. At least he wore a simple Oxford button-down and jeans which Ella had bought him, and had switched his contacts out for glasses; he hardly ever spoke to passengers in the airport and, in the entirety of his three years with the airline, never while in uniform.

"She's coming back," Will said, when the man, looping on the same path with the use of a cane, resumed his seat and scoffed at the new drinks set there.

While waiting for his own scotch, Will had noticed the mismatched couple sitting a few stools away from him in the fancier of the two pre-security bars in the domestic terminal. The man wore a tweed suit a few sizes too big and a waistcoat with white socks and New Balances. The woman, modeling a mauve bias-cut dress in a shiny satin-like material and tall slingback heels, a Chanel cross-strap hanging from the back of her chair, sat with one leg crossed so tightly over the other that it would not have surprised Will if she were crunching Kegels at the same time. After the initial row over the stack of index cards they each held, the pair did not speak to each other, and after a moment, the woman left, noiselessly, while her counterpart examined the flatscreen which displayed the starting grid for that weekend's Grand Prix race at Bahrain. The volume was turned to medium, but white-on-black closed captions ribboned just beneath the single car in the front row and the oddly empty pole position. When the old man turned around to find himself abandoned, he had touched his companion's champagne glass with his fingertip where, at the inner rim, the imprint of lipstick remained. The old man had waited ten minutes, then left his drink unattended next to his stack of cards. He had hobbled to the nearest sign labelling a single unisex restroom. He swayed there, squinting at similar signs along the corridors on each side of the long moving walkways which led from the check-in counters to security.

"All these sodding toilets," the man said, on his return. "And unisex? Or is it trans-sex?"

"Don't drink that," Will said, pushing the diluted disaster in the Glencairn towards the side. "If you hate the Balvenie, take the whiskey ginger. Please, for my sake."

“It’s a modern-day Monty Hall problem. Or Schrödinger’s Wife, if Erwin were married. Was the cheeky bastard married?”

Will recognized he was not expected to know this, but felt embarrassed all the same. He picked at his shirtsleeves. Ella would have known; he had no doubt. She used all those strange facts she collected to fill in the gaps in her narratives, which always eventually transformed, like teeth connecting in the wake of a zipper tab, into real stories, poems, novels, and screenplays, entire worlds in degrees of verisimilitude to this one. When the two of them had flown together and used the Priority Pass Lounge, she had tapped away on her laptop in their preferred corner, close to the curved windows facing the apron and, in between paragraphs, made up backstories for all the passengers. Fortunately, she rarely went so far as to speak to anyone, which he was glad of. Will hated to draw attention to himself. Only once, on a flight to San Francisco, had she split a giant Kit Kat bar and two hours’ conversation with a woman attending a Bon Jovi Fans Convention, an incident which had caused him, in the aisle seat, to flee to the bathroom so many times the flight attendant had asked if he had a medical condition.

“Hold on, I’ll check,” Will said. He clumsily unfolded his hands. Somehow, despite the furloughs and the airlines hemorrhaging red ink, Pearson Airport had installed Wi-Fi-equipped iPads even at the bar. He rotated the device one-eighty degrees so the man could lean over, and verified, “He was—married, that is, to Annemarie Bertel, for forty-one years until his death.”

On hatching the idea in his bed that morning, Will had intended only to order a drink and watch the race in different surroundings. Then he would Uber back to the condo he and Ella had shared. The airport was his “local” bar, so to speak. He could admit now that he had missed it. It had been two months since management had reshuffled his schedule and he found himself assigned only to cargo and long-haul, with an entire month since the last pairing to putter around Toronto while everyone else went to work as usual. With this, he finally understood, proprioceptively, for the first time in more than a decade, how the other side had lived while he was in the air. Suddenly, Will, out of all his childhood friends, was the one without crazy travel stories and in a consistent time zone. Charged initially with ambition, determined to make the best of it, he had picked up a thousand-page book on pre-history England and ordered sheet music to practice on the keyboard his mother said might as well be a dustpan in his living room. But one could only flip through channels avoiding Ella’s favourite shows on his sofa for so long, his friends with deeply-installed families putting off his entreaties for meetups, no one wanting to drive from the suburbs to downtown in the January snow. So much for the bachelor life again. Once-Again Single Will craved crowds, colourful drinks, and the glass cockpit in between. This morning was a compromise—Bar Viola was not half as fancy as the restaurants past security, more of a kiosk, really, seating twenty around its bartop of black marble, and lit from above by a suspension of icicle-shaped beams encasing long twisted filaments glowing slightly off-blue. But when Will had exited the elevator to Departures level, the ticketing area’s familiar spa fragrance had rifled through his nose like a resuscitating injection of naloxone.

His stride automatically lengthening, he had signalled the barman with two fingers, in the process of garnishing a gin and tonic with a sprig of mint, a man he had never spoken to before, but who seemed to recognize Will as a first officer all the same. The elderly couple must already have been there. Ella had once pointed out the swivelling white leather-backed seats of *Viola*, just visible from the baggage drop-off point, as perfect for a meet-cute. Unlike his colleagues on the Dreamliner who, at this point in his career, rarely challenged him, she always somehow found a way to applaud and backhand him at the same time. Will pictured her saying that only he could treat ruined drinks like rescue missions. If only he could have risked more for her, before she axed the draft of the novel and moved back in with her parents, maybe their engagement would have stuck. Maybe Carlos had been right about everything.

“Tuberculosis,” the man read, running his finger beneath the highlighted Wiki paragraph. “Perfect. I bet Estelle wishes I had that.”

“*Beach reads*, not TB,” Will said, repeating the words on the man’s top-most card, from memory.

The man shook his head, seemingly unconcerned with how Will knew this. “I’m not a lecher. I can’t do this.”

“I think that’s the point of the game.”

Will explained to the man—who introduced himself as Edgar—that the plan of these things was to go along with it. Women loved spontaneity—to a point, at least. And this was a point the wife wanted to make. While the man still hobbled between the toilets, as though seeking the spoor of some wild animal, Will had leaned over, read a few of the cards, and made a calculated guess at what was happening. Edgar and Estelle, probably married nearly as long as Erwin Schrödinger and Anne-Marie, were role-playing. His cues were written on the cards, in a fine, red script, probably hers; farther afoot, her cards were entirely blank.

“Now, what in tarnation is a beach read?” Edgar asked.

“Did you ask her?”

“I did. And now...” Edgar pointed his head towards the puzzling bathrooms. “At least there’s the race.”

Will swirled the liquid in his glass. Ella had written what might be classified as beach reads. She had also mapped them out on index cards, the old-fashioned way, eschewing the laptop till she had a flexible skeleton. People looked down on such books, but the formula of carefree joy, compulsive readability, summer settings, romance, and low stakes, didn’t come as easy as they expected. She had fallen into it by accident, writing an early draft of the first book as a joke, until an editor friend at House of Horton brought it on vacation and called back a few days in, asking how quickly could she finish it. Will and Ella used to spend evenings after the dishes were done reading the choicest reviews out loud over glasses of Riesling ice wine, rating the adjectives from most to least flattering, and making up fake accounts to rebut the comments on Goodreads. Her last book in the series, published under a pseudonym three years before, though panned roundly by the press, had sold out. That’s when she had decided to make the change to the new book, her breakup story, the one which, she had said, like *East of Eden* for Steinbeck, would cement her reputation. Something to which she would be proud, finally, of attaching her real name.

“Why don’t you ask her again?” Will said.

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“Trust Ella,” Carlos had said to him, nine months before, stepping out of the same terminal and heading towards the parkade. They had just finished a pairing to Tokyo Narita, and Will had a few days at home before zipping back to Asia. Carlos, meanwhile, was scheduled for Dallas-Fort Worth with a stop at O’Hare. He had followed with their customary joke, “Here comes the danger,” and a fist bump. In flight school, they had started saying it to each other after landings, based on the popular misconception that the drive home was the most dangerous part of the trip. Before Will met Ella and Carlos had married his high school sweetheart, they used to talk hands-free on the way back, Will to Lakeshore, and Carlos to Richmond Hill, often about racing, Hamilton versus Rosberg, Webber versus Vettel. For some reason, pilots always loved to race, and F1 drivers dreamed of flying.

Forgiving Ella for using his childhood in Owen Sound in a contest entry could be said to be a matter of trust. He knew she was a writer when they met. Carlos had been there, was in on the courtship from the start, in the café where they queued for coffee before heading to the hotel the airline reserved for stays longer than eighteen hours, where they overheard her on the phone to Evan, her ex and then-editor, workshopping ideas, flouting etiquette by crunching on her own travel box of cereal with the flat white. Will had skipped his gaze up the line of the jacquard sheath dress she wore casually, sitting on a stool left of

the till, one foot slipping out of a red pump, her voice high and girlish. Carlos, catching his best friend's eye, said confidently that Will could give her better ideas than that guy. Half the fun of every date afterwards had been sharing it with Carlos, who, always so slick at union meetings, especially when management had tried to directly appeal to the pilots instead of the Labor leadership on the new concessions, fed him lines on what to say. Will realized he was falling for Ella when he came up with his own lines, cheesy as they were. When he bothered to learn what a Heathcliff was—surprisingly, a man, not a cliff—and, while exploring *toska*, bought her a limited-edition of War and Peace.

“What if she'd used something of yours?” Will had asked Carlos as they walked past Ground Transportation.

“I don't have anything to hide.”

Will was silent. Carlos had given full control of the joint accounts to Rebecca as soon as they started talking about marriage. He inked his then-girlfriend, an independent contractor, on his health benefits, while it had taken Will three tries to pronounce the phrase “domestic partnership affidavit” and Ella had never asked again.

“The other stuff, about other people. You never wondered?” Carlos asked.

“That's different.”

That fall, Ella had forwarded him an email from a guy she had gone on a couple of dates with, a pompous declaration of love and best wishes to all the guy's former girlfriends—after, coincidentally, they had all gotten engaged—with one fat paragraph dedicated to each woman. The lothario had ended with hopes that Clara, Mishi, Isabelle, and Dee would remember him fondly. Their husbands-to-be, he wrote, were the luckiest men in the world.

“But if that were true—” Will had read the email out loud and kept having to pause and resume again, his laughter shaking Ella's body, lounged against his after making love. He didn't laugh bodily often and never from below the throat. “Then why isn't *he* marrying them?”

“That's what I said!”

“Jesus,” he said. “He's bragging.”

“I wish I could say he didn't really send it,” Ella said, pulled her head and shoulders closer to his.

“Come on, let's read it again,” he said.

Will had not been able to believe a guy like that existed. It seemed like exactly the kind of thing that went into a story, something you could escape into after buying from the terminal bookshop. He found himself laughing every time he thought of the guy drafting the email, the subsequent inbox silence he must have interpreted as their not being able to trust themselves to answer. So when Ella had waffled for new ideas, Will had egged her on to include it in something. With a savage glee he had eavesdropped when she called the guy again, under the guise of catching up, so she could scout his mannerisms against their portrayal in text. The clown was pure entertainment, a good story. That was okay. But this other thing—that was Will's mother, his father, something sacred.

Carlos tucked the airline-issued tablet, where he checked the traffic on the Gardiner, back in the flight bag strapped to the top of his Samsonite. “Trust Ella. You either do or you don't. And if you don't, I have nothing to say. See you on Sunday, mate.”

She hadn't used Will's name or that of any family members in the story, mostly the event, and had changed the town. She had enough sense for that. Yet finding out in the cockpit that she'd won first prize and a \$25 000 grant from the provincial arts council when the Captain pushed a rolled-up magazine at him, had hefted a large gas bubble into Will's pharynx with the gulp of ginger ale he had just cracked open. Scanning the opening paragraphs to find the description of the incident had aligned painfully with the passing of the bubble, the nerves in his neck twitching for a few seconds afterwards. The whole crew thought it was so interesting his partner was a writer, and not a teacher or a nurse, like ninety percent of his other colleagues. As had he, until that moment.

At home, Will confronted Ella at her workstation, a comma-shaped desk which received a southern exposure, the evening light sloping across her high nosebridge, as she took off her glasses and faced him.

"Were you really so hard up?"

"What are you afraid of? When you fly into IMC and override everything—are you afraid then?"

He regretted, suddenly, giving her that aviation book. Her tongue suddenly snaked easily around attitude and yaw, instrument meteorological conditions, and service and absolute ceilings.

"Danger," she said. "Is internal. A pilot has only to survive himself. Also, congratulations, Ella. I'm so happy for you, Ella. Prosecco, Ella, etcetera, etcetera."

He had barely heard her. The question looping in his brain: were the co-opting of his story really not a big deal, why would she have omitted mentioning it?

"Cheers," he said. "Well done, you."

"Real mature. You want it changed? I'll call them up and change it. Fuck, I wish the barbecue were cancelled. Fucking Carbecca."

"You can stay home."

"Maybe I will. Maybe everyone will."

Pain mounting beneath his temples, Will had wanted to say, *The most dangerous part is driving back to you*. Instead, he had walked into the other room and hung up his uniform. He needed it dry-cleaned before the next pairing. He went to a Japanese place down the block, to Ryu, who did immaculate work, for which Will always thanked him with Soju brought back from Tokyo. Will usually asked Ella if she had anything she wanted him to take along, but that time he had not.

"No dresses?" Ryu asked.

"No dresses," Will answered, without a shred of remorse.

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No dresses. No sex. No kiss goodbye before Tokyo. No Carlos. No words. No barbecue.

The official report had sent splittings through the airline. In one version released weeks after the investigation, the limitations of the Airbus craft were cited before the first officer's mishandling of the rudder. In the other, the opposite order prevailed. The Pilots Association had been livid and penned an

open letter to the board lambasting the effect of the crash on the mental health of its members, the three simultaneous labour disputes in which the airline was embroiled notwithstanding.

Will was in the air and didn't find out until Narita. The last things heard on the recording in the black box were Carlos saying, "We've no..." and a fax-machine like crunching. All two hundred passengers and crew had perished when the craft collided with a suburban neighborhood in St. Louis, taking ten lives on the ground with it. Will had called Rebecca and ended with his phone plastered against his face with moisture. Then he powered it off an entire day and slept. For once, Ella had no moral high ground to speak of. Will knew it was irrational to think that somehow the universe had absorbed her flippant packet of poison and directed it in the path of the Airbus craft. And yet, no apology could possibly make up for what she said. In Tokyo, he let all her calls go to voicemail while he stayed in and listlessly devoured room service. An envelope taped to the front door, when he returned, contained a note that she'd gone to stay with a friend until he was ready to talk.

She had written it on slightly scented stationery and had drawn a rare heart around her signature in a different color, as though she'd hesitated and gone back to add it. Will told himself that was the reason, a year later, he still kept it in a games tin along with the other small things she'd left behind, a pack of gum, a tube of cherry chapstick, a brooch of the Catalanian flag from their trip to Barcelona for Carlos and Rebecca's wedding, scrunchies which she would wrap around her index cards when she lacked a binder clip, some still knotted with wisps of her black hair. She'd asked him to erase all evidence of her existence from the apartment, but he'd chosen the tin as something he could easily mistake for something else. He was in little danger of opening it, since no one ever came over for games anymore.

Tilting the remaining scotch in his glass, Will examined the curtain of caramel legs which fell and recollected at the base. On one of the bar's six LCD screens, the race continued, an onboard with one of the midfield cars interrupted by an information box with the track conditions. It was searingly hot in Bahrain, cresting fifty degrees on the asphalt, and Edgar, his collar wilted, sweated watching it, his trainers rolled and creased, pedalling against the legs of his seat, as he, Will, and the barkeep, polishing a glass, eyed the Monegasque in the Ferrari overtaking his teammate down a straight at the end of lap 12. The old man exhaled when the move completed and his fingers twitched twice as though blinking.

For a moment, Will saw Edgar through Ella's eyes. His wardrobe. His vernacular. His "ghost." Edgar would have had his own subheading in a OneNote tab she kept for characters she hadn't called up yet. When she needed to create tension in a story, Ella added what she called a third character, sideloaded from the tab, triangulating the main characters. The character's *ghost*, she said, was his shadow self. The one driving him, his real motivation, the machinery of hurt. She said all stories were about hurt.

"This boy," Edgar said of the Monegasque. "Only seventeen. Unable legally to drive in his country yet but zipping around at 200 mph in a machine worth 12 million dollars. And fearless. What are they thinking of?"

"They don't," Will said. "At that level it's instinct. And trust in the car."

"Ah, yes, the ultimate proof of a man's trust in other men. They say that about maps too."

"Geologist?" Will asked. Edgar grimaced. "No? Should I keep guessing, then?"

"I don't refer to what the drivers are thinking, rather the team, bringing them in so green."

"Some would say if you're good enough, you're good enough."

“Nonetheless, *are you*, as a matter of fact? They’re cutting them loose before we can deduce whether they are, when they don’t tussle for points from the first. Raph could surely stand another year in F2. But Ferrari need their superstar. The window to show it is so narrow it’s a laugh anyone’s squirrelled through.”

By the end of the final sentence, Edgar had nearly wrenched his right foot out of its sneaker following the duel on screen. He reached for the whiskey ginger and took a deep pull. The Ferrari was attempting a move to the outside of the McLaren ahead, but had to settle for trying again on the next corner. “Ah, close. *Mais ceci n’est pas une pipe.*”

Will smiled behind his glass. “Big fan?”

“I am. And I was an engineer.”

With his body still half-turned towards the race, Edgar explained he had worked for the government for forty years on satellites to monitor the oceans. Yet, in the end, he estimated they had done very little of substance; the country was still setting temperature records and the wetlands drying up, the cod sluggish to bounce back since the moratorium. He had retired two years before, but still occasionally called in to meetings to give his take on new research projects and post-doctorate fellows under consideration for hire.

“Estelle dislikes it, thinks I’m bringing shame on myself. But who’s ashamed? I’m not. The real shame, the media lambasting Raph for some dodgy consistency in his first season.”

“Well, you know his family,” Will said.

It was hard to believe that the boy’s grandfather, a five-time World Driver’s Champion, hadn’t played a role in securing the seat at the famous Scuderia. Formula One had always been a rich man’s diversion, for the scions of scions or—or at the very least, for those with heaps of new and dubiously-earned money. Five of twenty drivers on the grid were popularly considered “pay drivers”; the rest had some sort of familial connection. It had been the same song and dance with the Monegasque’s father, Antoine, who dominated Formula 3 before switching to rallying. Will remembered the eruption of the scandal all over media, even before the internet really took off, when the switch was announced. Watching the races as a child, he had seen the patriarch tight-lipped in the background of press conferences in the weeks following. They had said the legend was waiting on the grandson ever since.

“Etienne? Miserable man. Estelle wanted a signature after that spectacular Silverstone ‘78 and he tried to pull her in the paddock.”

Will nearly spit out his drink. “Your wife, that lady who made these cards, was hit on by Etienne Barbeau?”

“Beautiful, isn’t she still? He thought her much younger. Enough to be his type.”

Will did quick math in his head. “‘78. Wasn’t that just after—”

“Odette had just had Antoine, yes. As far as we knew, she was still in hospital, but Barbeau had to race across the Channel. Estelle told him to fudge off and drive the damn car.”

Will couldn’t help laughing at the idea of a young Barbeau, cocksure in his racesuit, now considered one of the best of all time, turned down by a woman.

“We were often at races. Estelle came round to it quickly. Mind, she finds cars a lot less disagreeable than patients. Monza was always her favourite, the short drive to the mountains, a bit of shopping in

Milan. We had so many delights. But now it's as though she wants to punish us for it. If we'd had a grandchild—" Edgar paused to listen to the team radio of the race leader, mentioning increased blistering on his front left tyre. "He might have been Raph's age now."

Will was about to ask if their son or daughter was militantly child-free, but Edgar added, "I suppose we'd have had to have had a child in the first place. I still don't understand it. She wouldn't countenance a dog either, nor a cat, nor a fish, not even a damn gerbil and the plants all had to be plastic."

So that was it. Will shut his mouth and looked away. No wonder the woman had looked young to Barbeau.

"Dual income, no kids," Ella had explained, the first time he had heard the term. For her craft, she was au courant on the lingo and expressions, which also got their OneNote tab, to keep characters from all sounding like variations of herself. They had just returned from one of Carbecca's barbecues, when Carlos' mother had asked the dreaded questions. When were he and Ella getting married? Why was the engagement so long? Would they have kids? Will had flushed scarlet and even Carlos had quickly interjected, "Ma!" before Ella stated, glibly, "What did the Beach Boys say? Wouldn't it be nice? No, I'm infertile," and emptied the rest of her mimosa into her throat with a broad smile.

It was amazing how Ella could just say things like that. Will had always admired how forthright she was, and when she wasn't, what could come out of her mouth just to get a rise out of people. He could never give offense himself, shying away from the slightest scrim of controversy. Ella didn't and her ripostes had only grown sharper the more she drove into this breakup novel. As she slid out of her sundress in their bedroom that night, she explained the term was coined in the eighties, at the height of yuppie culture. She said the new novel, which she nicknamed "Del," was about a pair of DINKs in a Midwestern suburb. This was the first Will had heard of the plot or the characters since its inception. In keeping with her process, she let her stories germinate slowly, keeping them to herself until she was ready to explain them to him. This sometimes took months. Del was about the dissolution of a long-term relationship from the perspective of the man, she said. She wanted her protagonist to feel as though he were being slowly led to the scaffold, carrying his own block and blade.

"He keeps looking back, like Anne Boleyn, waiting for the respite from Henry—the royal pardon—that it's all a terrible, unfathomable mistake."

"But why does he want a woman who no longer wants him?" Will asked, pausing with his toothbrush in his mouth.

"Is that a real question?"

"I'd never beg. That's not realistic. Didn't you say this one would be?"

"No," Ella said. "You wouldn't, would you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Ella had kissed the wrist of the hand holding the toothbrush, declining to answer.

But he knew. After the accident—Will refused to call it Carlos' accident as it was unthinkable that Carlos bore any of the fault—he had not asked Ella to come back. He hadn't spoken to anyone, aside from his parents and what he felt was a duty to Rebecca. The funeral invitation arrived in his inbox and he could almost see, behind the blind carbon copy, Ella's university email address. Still, he procrastinated picking up the phone. Then, a week after he found the note on the door, they had nearly collided in the meat aisle in the supermarket, Ella driving her cart like an Olympic speedwalker, Will in his college sweats with a

canvas bag lumpy with two boxes of cereal and a carton of milk. He'd eaten six bowls of cereal within the previous twenty-four hours and inexplicably binged three seasons of *The Bachelor*. He stared into her cart.

"Why are you buying toilet paper?" he asked.

"I don't know, Will. You tell me."

She made to push on. She had nearly moved around the corner, when he blocked the side of the cart with his forearm.

"No, you're right," he said, as other shoppers maneuvered around them. The tips of his ears flushed with shame. "Just set it over there."

After Ella had gone home with him that day, however, it was just different. They had stood without touching at the funeral. He repeatedly looked at her, as she kept to herself. First at the service, just slightly offset from him, and then at the wake, in a corner, with a cup of tea, her eyes moving keenly around Rebecca's living room. Fists sweating in his trouser pockets, Will couldn't help wondering if Ella were attaching post-its in her mind to each person who walked past, assigning them their *ghost*. All those in black suits and dresses murmuring and massaging Rebecca and Carlos' mother, or sobbing quietly in clusters of two or three. What if Ella knew something none of them did? Were there other stories locked up in a drawer, or worse, in her mind, ready to come true?

The idea made Will feel sick. Thankfully, when they returned to the condo, Ella, as though hearing his thoughts, spent more time in the bathroom, tidying statuettes and arranging flowers, and at her work station, adding post-its to the tree of the manuscript and chattering with her agent. She did not mention anything remotely related to aviation, friends, the investigation. All she did was speak slowly and leave margins, as though following behind a truck with gaping blind spots. Once, the image of clear communication and no mind-reading would have appealed to Will, when they would arrive at the same destination and have to leave their respective vehicles and deal with one another. But as the week passed, he wanted nothing more than to hide behind discussion of chores and trivialities. He dreaded each conversation. Only one thing, he knew, could really save him from that.

The algorithm. He and his colleagues used to make fun of its esoteric inner workings of the airline's duty pairing algorithm, a system that men much smarter than Will had devised. Yet there was a reasonableness to the mathematics of it, which, for years, at the regionals and then in reserves, he had never appreciated. Praying for a result that would keep him busy, to keep him out of that apartment and Ella's path and her perfectly terrible imagination, while ignoring the painfully pitying glances of his colleagues, Will put in his bids for the next set of assignments. Then he waited for succor.

"You should take some time off," the Captain had said, turning his rheumy eyes on Will.

"Maybe later."

"Talk to EAP. Don't put it off."

But wonder of wonders, a few days later, the portal had responded. Nearly every preference Will requested was granted. More than a vigorous shuffle of colleagues, confounding new software, and mandatory training that would eat up hours and hours of idle time, the schedule included plenty of new routes. The Canadian and European legs he had been tasked with for years and could fly them blindfolded. But that fall, Will flew the 787 into Hamburg, Baku, Sao Paulo, Osaka, Ho Chi Ming City, among countless others, for the first time.

In October, he stepped into the new terminal at Doha Hamad in Qatar and was floored by the scene. He marvelled at the traffic, modernities, the iconic teddy bear in the main concourse, the rich sheiks in white robes and headdresses and their elegant wives in black. No wonder the FIA were hosting Grand Prix in Bahrain and Azerbaijan, empires of oil and oligarchs feeding F1 into a truly international juggernaut. After routine legs back to bouncing between Vancouver, Calgary, and home, it was even more newness, the names blurring together as he worked them and crossed them off on the tablet, among other terrain previously classified as strictly flyovers in his mental map.

“You look like you’re having fun again,” one of the pilots in the jump seat teased. “Wicked Will, the fun-haver.”

Will turned red.

“No, no, it’s good to see,” and the other man turned to say something else to the Captain.

Playing tourist, Will took a new approach, too, on the ground. Once landed in each city, after checking into the hotel, he would only leave his airplane mode off for a few moments to scroll through his work email, then go full low-tech with a pencil and a paper map to navigate the unfamiliar streets. He lost himself in stumbling over his phrasebooks, powered on the fumes of local baked goods, attacking the transit systems and travel guides, leaving reviews for each place before moving on to the next.

Over voicemail, his new union contact kept urging him to talk to a psychologist. But there was no way Will was commenting on Carlos, the endless investigation, and the exhaust of gossip that trailed it. Will was fine. It was part of the job, something he and Carlos had never really talked about other than flicking their eyes down the paperwork of the basic and supplementary life and accident coverage, handing back perfunctory signatures. If Vettel or Hamilton worried constantly about getting into the cockpit, how would they have ever made it out of the paddock or even the sim?

No, the worries ebbed when Will was away. The worst part of all of it had been the long walk to the parkade, alone, and the drive home. Walking through that door. Letting Ella touch her mouth to his cheek, her girlish scent replacing the recycled air and essential oil blend of the aircraft. Allowing whatever she had popped into the oven so they didn’t have to cook when he was exhausted to digest in his stomach while they stared at their phones in silence. Subsequent days he would spend napping, tidying, and prepping for the next pairing.

Several times, Will had brought Ella’s dresses to Ryu but realized he had no answer to the question, “And how is Miss Ella?” until the well-meaning Japanese stopped asking. Until there was no point in asking because no one went and there was no more business at all.

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A *close call* was what Ella had called it, a *near miss*. This had been the fortnight between Ella’s moving out and the first of the catastrophic global hits, which the news outlets, after nearly a year of the rigmarole, had termed the Great Crucible. Saying it like that, a few months later, in a perfunctory phone call, made it clear she had moved on. He had mumbled something briefly, in agreement. Looking around the empty condo now, Will marveled at the timing. For six of both of their thirty-something year lives, they had shared these rooms. If the collapse of the external world had broken just the slightest bit earlier, who knew how things would have turned out?

Years of upward trend in the industry had lulled them all into complacency. At the time, people still believed that the recession of 2008 was the worst thing that this generation would have to weather in their lifetimes. None could never have predicted the series of events that struck, one after the other, since the previous January. From scraps of headlines, Will recalled the first tenuous reports of a mysterious virus in

the east, then another far deadlier one. This was followed by a spike in the price of oil, the exchanges in an uproar. Then another tragic accident in the skies that Labour, barely recovered from the first, fully blamed on the executives, who, lacking fingers to point, started resigning. None of Will's colleagues, even the oldest captains, had ever seen anything like it. Other airlines failed, producing knock-on effects up and down the industry. Cancellations rolled in, millions in vouchers and consolations handed out. Then the horror and fury of the furloughs.

Once, a passenger asked Will's colleague, on entering the cabin, what happened to the "young, pretty flight attendants in the smart skirt suits," and Will, readying the pre-flight checklists, had slammed the door to the cockpit to avoid hearing the answer—all laid off first, while the ones with seniority, middle-aged and cankled in well worn pantyhose, wove down the aisles, no longer caring to smile.

Nor were the pilots immune. He had witnessed, in the span of a few weeks, the ranks of his friends decimated up and down the chain, hundreds cut with little send-off, some of his closest buddies from flight school forced to move back in with their parents. Will knew he was one of the fortunate ones. Eleven months after *The Crucible's* prodrome, he was still doing what he loved. Perhaps being with the airline ten years, always with his head down, had driven this luxury. Even with drastically reduced hours, and unpredictable stretches of weeks in between, he felt safe enclosing himself amongst the instruments over transoceanic flights, their numerical, inscrutable faces bringing him a measure of comfort that he could not describe. These days, Will found himself flying each route with more and more care, trying not to think of how many days were left before the next break. The miring malaise, which was his. Only his, now.

For no longer could Will blame these things on Ella. After all, she was gone. Her voice. Her smell. Her chaotic writing. When he went home to the condo, following each pairing, though he felt a relief at not having to answer how his day was, knowing he could order in whatever he wanted and pile the dishes in the sink for a few days, he felt the emptiness. The corner which used to reverberate with the clicking of her keys, the scratch of a highlighter across an index card now held a drooping money tree. When Will's eye wandered to the games tin, he asked himself if it was possible that he and Ella, forced to spend time ensconced in the unit as the world seemingly shattered like a china cup, might have surmounted this thing together.

"It's not me vs. you. It's us vs. the problem," she used to say when they argued. They had a codeword too, "Heathcliff," when one or both of them didn't want to say sorry. Will would say it and they would hug. But it seemed they'd fallen over the cliff and not in an embrace.

To her credit, Will couldn't say Ella hadn't tried, in the final few weeks, to give him an in. She was never remiss in effort. Running shoes in hand, including his pair, Ella asked him to jog the Harbourfront with her. She was going to help a friend in the building, Lexi, walk her dog—did he want to come? A music festival was taking over Toronto Island, the same one at which they had once slow-danced in a roped off area, everyone with glowing headphones in, the DJ in the corner, part of an experimental evening installation. Five years before, at the end of the dance, Will had taken off her earphones, rearranged her inky hair, and bent her backwards in a kiss whose torque nearly made them lose their balance. But at her tiny outstretched hands, her last bids for affection, the leaden cylinders of his lungs had refused to make noises of assent.

He hadn't needed to ask how Del was going. He could hear it, Ella on the phone shouting at her agent, "I know, I know. Fuck. Sorry. Fuck."

The four-letter words built up. Unlike others in her critique groups who wanted for motivation, Ella routinely made mincemeat of deadlines and thresholds. Dropping a deposit in her bank of ideas, getting unstuck was her specialty and she had given talks at the writing program at the community college on those very topics. But the wheels had come off her writing. She stopped eating as much. Sentences took birth pains to push out. Naturally, everyone in the machinery needed to know what was going on.

Once Will even thought he heard her say Evan's name, either in complaint or directly to the guy. Will had stopped making his sandwich for a moment in the kitchen, staring at the pieces of bread like he'd picked two different shoes to wear. But found the name and whether or not they still kept in touch rippled little inside him, other than a slight sadness for her East of Eden. It and *The Grapes of Wrath* were the two Steinbecks Will had avoided since high school English for their length. He found he had never really known what she had meant about its place in the oeuvre.

Fall came and went. Just before Christmas, after a week in Seoul, Will came home to a nearly dim apartment filled with noise. Ella was zipping her books into boxes and clothing all over the bed, her side of the closet emptied. He sat next to her on the bed, and when he took her hand, she withdrew it and used the other to replace it with the ring. The sun had set before five and she had only left the bathroom light on. He didn't know how she was seeing well enough to pack. She had called her parents and she was going back to Halifax.

They had shared a chocolate bar and two glasses of wine in the dark. The ring burrowed like a mole in his pocket, with no light to make it sparkle. Will remembered when he had put it on Ella's finger, the pressure from his mother. But also sometimes, when Ella read poetry, even if he didn't understand, the cadence of it, like the whisper of air over the prop of his first Cessna when he was sixteen.

"Do you remember when we first talked about where this was going?" she asked.

Carlos had told him he was a fool if he didn't lock it down.

"I don't keep track of things like you do," Will said.

"You said you were looking for wholesome. Vanilla. You said, you know those old couples that have been married for fifty years? Like that one sitting on the bench in the park?"

"He was singing *Blackbird*."

"And playing the guitar."

"She did the little chirps."

"Alternating. You wanted to be that, you said, but it was too late."

Blackbird, fly. Will couldn't see Ella in the dark, just the glint of the moon and changing lights of the CN Tower off the rim of his own glass.

"You were, what, thirty-four?"

Thirty-five, he thought.

"Who were you talking about? It wasn't too late. That could have been us. How long do you think people live? Married men live longer. But now. This."

"Yeah."

"I don't know why you asked me to..."

There was the sound her thumb working a lighter as she lit a candle. They always had one on the coffee table. She set the lighter back in a candy dish, his eyes watering at the handful of fire.

“I’ll tell you,” she said. “If I ever write about you again.”

He hesitated. “You don’t have to promise.”

“But I clearly do,” she said sadly.

And she had swept from the room to finish packing, leaving him to pass his hand, which suddenly felt so strange at the end of his wrist, back and forth through the flame at various angles, like a student pilot trying to gain hours, the maneuver which, in flight school, they had called, disparagingly, *boring holes in the sky*.

Two

The morning of the Bahrain Grand Prix, Edgar Gaffney had had a dream of blood. A fresh bloom at the inseam of his pajamas, of sodden, inarticulate lumps and undifferentiated tissue. Now he couldn't stop talking about it to Will.

Whenever Will heard the word blood, he thought of Carlos in the wreckage all alone, bent, broken, dismantled. Before the funeral, the body had been recovered and cleaned up until it was pale and fairly Carlos-looking. The image had not haunted Will in the months since. He had been able to sleep. But the more Edgar went on, the more the edge of wan flesh flickered at the edge of his thoughts, the more Will swore part of his scotch had started to look red. He wished Edgar would stop. The old man explained that he had awakened scratching at himself, half expecting cinnamon crescents beneath his fingernails, a single question gnawing at his thoughts: *If it was true what Estelle once said before they married, that she and Edgar's dreams would become more similar the longer they stayed together, then why had it taken decades for his wife's horror to migrate the short distance between their pillows?*

"I don't know," Will said, no longer thinking himself an expert on transit of any sort. Ella had once called him a glorified bus driver before shame-facedly saying *Heathcliff* and running into his arms and hiding her eyes.

There was a certain way that people talked about the past. A filmy look. Edgar wore it as he described he and his wife's life. How Dr. Estelle Gaffney had finished her fellowship in radiology at the University of Western Ontario in autumn of 1983, and how, for a celebration gift, her young husband had surprised her with tickets to the races, the French Grand Prix at the Circuit de Paul Ricard just outside Paris. Left in the pocket of her white coat, the tickets had nearly caused her to yelp when her hand closed over them instead of the customary tin of Altoids. Emerging from where he had hidden behind a file cabinet in her office, Edgar had enclosed her in an embrace. He remembered Estelle's small white face, how he thought a radiologist should be more used to lumps and bumps.

"But not on my own person, dummy," she reminded him. "Paris, really. Only the Hungaroring and Singapore left, then?"

They had been crossing each track off their list, making it out three or four times a year.

"Let's do them all again when we're finished," he said.

The pains had begun when Edgar was off at concessions to buy Perrier and Ritter Sport chocolate, Estelle's favourites. Just as the first of the cars exited the pit to warm their tires on the track, Edgar had happened to scan his eyes over the grandstand and saw her drop to her knees, her blonde head bowling below seat-level.

Edgar ran. He had dropped the goodies, arriving just as a young man in the place next to them shouted in rapid French for the medics. By the time they wheeled Estelle into *l'urgence*, she could barely speak and clutched the hem of her cream sundress to the space between her legs.

Three hours later, a young female intern with a face like a sheet, called him into an empty room next to reception with frosted glass walls. The woman explained, pausing to point at translated words on a notepad, that the fetus had been unviable, attached to the fallopian tube, siphoning nutrients and growing into a space which could not accommodate it. Edgar had felt his eyes glaze over at the drawings. That Estelle could be pregnant before the trip has never occurred to him. *Not until after Dr. Gaffney makes attending*, had always been their easy response when questioned about children, and after that, as many as they could afford, for Edgar and Estelle both had come from large Irish families. According to that plan, they had always taken care with contraception. The intern had to be mistaken.

Edgar made to interrupt, but found the intern had already stopped speaking. He looked up. The laparotomy the Parisian obstetricians had performed, the woman said, boring straight in his eyes, was normally not complicated, but in Estelle's case had led to significant scarring.

His wife had stared at the ceiling tiles when he entered the private room in the OBGYN wing, in a section separate from Labour & Delivery.

"Who won the race?" she asked.

Edgar was speechless. *Significant scarring* still rang in his ears.

"Barbeau, I suppose," she said. "This is his home race. The crowd must have loved it. Has anyone ever drunk a shoe with a baby's shoe?" Then she turned to face the window. She had clawed the bedsheet to her chest so tightly that her wedding band disappeared beneath a fold.

They had cancelled the rest of the planned tour of France. The airline was unusually accommodating. Estelle slept in Edgar's lap the entire way back as he tried to concentrate, unsuccessfully, on the in-flight entertainment. Landing back in Toronto, they drove nearly immediately to North York General to consult a friend of Estelle's from medical school, before they saw other specialists downtown at Mount Sinai Hospital to confirm what they had been told by the Parisians. She would never have biological children. Not that way.

"We'll travel, then," she'd said, on the way to the parking, flatly, in the same voice she used to dictate her opinions on imaging. "That was the plan, kids or no."

When Estelle's fellowship ended formally, a few months later, she was offered a position as staff radiologist. It was the same institution, Mount Sinai. Edgar had not thought it a good idea and proposed that there were other hospitals. But Estelle had assured him, once again, in Dr. Gaffney's voice, that there was nothing to worry about. They would enjoy moving downtown, she said, after the years in the southwest of the province. As though giving example, studiously, she avoided the ninth floor, maternity, at Sinai, and Edgar, following her lead, eventually ceased from lingering his gaze on that particular button as they ascended in the lifts to her office on the tenth.

With Estelle's greatly increased income as staff, the couple bought a condo a few streets away, a penthouse. She designed a home office with huge windows from which she could see the CN Tower changing colours, red and green for Christmas, pink and yellow for Easter. Between working, she planned vacations. She chose the next destination, Johannesburg, where, at the South African Grand Prix, Barbeau moved up the field after starting from the pit due to an incident in qualifying. A trio of faded Polaroid photographs Estelle had taken from the race still stood on their mantle in the house they upgraded to in the late 90s in Forest Hill, and which had turned out wonderfully. Edgar had memorized the pictures. Her dress of spring green. The white netted gloves and kitten heels. Himself, holding her hat, as she swept her own hair back from her face with the help of the wind.

"In every country," Edgar said to Will. "She left broken hearts behind in the stands."

Will remembered the mauve slip dress and then thought again of Kegels and crossed legs. "Why didn't you adopt?" he asked.

"She wouldn't speak of it. And I suspect, given science, there are other ways now. But she always changed the subject. Myself, I wasn't convinced it was over. We kept trying. Once, twice, in Italy. At Monza. Think of it. We might have an Italian. A boy. A Raph. There's something about a child, a child who knew you when you were young..."

Will sipped carefully at his scotch, one eye flicking back to the screens, showing the cars navigating a tricky chicane around lap thirty of fifty-two. “Well, he’s two-tenths off Morton, now. That straight line speed on the Ferrari is truly something to behold.”

Edgar, for a moment, stopped pedalling and smiled. “Just listen to Crofty. He’ll say—”

“The undercut is powerful here,” Will finished, synchronizing perfectly with the commentator.

“Cheers.”

They clinked glasses. Will did not drink, but Edgar did, deeply.

The barman appeared from serving another customer and began swiping a rag across the surface, occasionally also glancing at the race.

“*Beach reads*,” Will said. “But what’s the point of the game? When’s your departure?”

“Oh, we’re not flying,” Edgar said. “That’s the confounding thing. One morning, she told me to put on my suit and we were going to play and only if it went off to her liking we’d go somewhere.”

“To her liking. What does that mean?”

“Who knows? We’ve enough points we could go pretty much anywhere for free at a whim. But I don’t know how many times we’ve done this.”

“*Many times*,” the barkeep interrupted, startling Will, as they made eye contact.

“Oh, is that right...?” Edgar said, whipping around.

The barkeep shrugged. Then held up his hand. “Sorry, couldn’t help but overhear.”

“I really don’t remember,” Edgar said. “It’s rubbish, such games, anyhow.”

Will was silent. He followed the path of the rag as it zigzagged around the glassware and coasters. It had suddenly occurred to him that this was some sort of test. He wondered if perhaps Edgar had angered his wife in some way. And the phrasing—“if it went off to her liking”—so strange. But pressing the point to the old man to unravel the mystery seemed unsafe—like flying blind, as Ella had said that one time, into IMC. He couldn’t do that.

Will asked, “Where? Where does she want to go?”

A lifestyle of travelling and F1, untrammelled by children and responsibility. For Will’s younger self, that might have been the dream, a position to which he would have submitted a resume and part of what had drawn him to become a commercial pilot.

But then he thought of Del, the unhappiness of Ella’s DINKS, Anne Boleyn looking back at Henry for pardon. Travel was not a universal panacea. And these days, still such a tricky subject. News stories abounded of families torn apart by the Crucible’s shutdown in access; for those people separated for months, travel symbolized so much. Then there were the most virus-fearful, who thought it reckless to fly at all at this time, to be near a restaurant, a shopping center, much less an airport. This, however, did not seem to be the reason for Edgar’s wife. There were some countries opening back up to tourism. Mexico,

Costa Rica, Peru came to mind. In Europe, footballers in the big four leagues were footballing. F1 was back at the races, masks smothering the paddock.

"I wish I knew. I think we've been everywhere. There are the new tracks, I suppose. These pay drivers. These street circuits. That's the way it's going. They're thinking of getting rid of Spa, can you believe, in favour of adding another in the Middle East."

"Spa is iconic," Will agreed.

"Bah-rain," Edgar said, pronouncing each syllable. "Is what I would have said about the weather at Silverstone twenty years ago."

Will reached over again to the top card in Edgar's stack, flipped it back and forth. "Alright, so she's disappeared. You wouldn't play?"

"I'll say again: what in tarnation is a *beach read*?"

Will suspected Edgar did not know his wife's cards were blank.

"I'm no expert," he said. "But perhaps the answer is in the phrase."

Edgar looked at him blankly.

Will felt himself flush, but persisted. "Let's put it this way. How do you meet in a beach read? At the beach. Suppose..." Will pointed at the bottle of Bombay Sapphire just behind the bar. "You wear blue trunks. She tans on a red towel. You're spiking a volleyball with friends. The ball strikes the edge of her towel and...gets sand in her eyes."

"How rude!"

"That's right. So you go up and apologize and she's rubbing and tearful. Then...you get on your knees in the sand and you try to help her with her eye. You realize," Will said. "She's quite beautiful."

"Who?"

"Your wife, Estelle."

"She's always been beautiful."

"She wants to see you realize it again, for a second time."

"How could I ever forget? Unlike my damned keys."

"Nevertheless. That's how you play well." Will almost added, "You have to play in the first place."

Edgar looked pained.

"Now you give it a try. Apologize."

"For what?"

"Getting sand in her eye."

“I did no such thing!”

“Just say it. Humour me.”

“Must I?”

“You must.”

“Well—alright.” Edgar rubbed his ear. “I’m sorry for getting sand in your eye.”

“I appreciate that. Now compliment her. What is she wearing?”

“I like your...bathing costume.”

“There you go. You’re getting it.”

“But none of this is really happening!”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re just, vibing, playing off each other. What matters is being in the same...scene.”

Edgar swatted at a napkin. “I’m terrible at this. What if I’m in the scene, but I’m terrible at it?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Everything matters in engineering. Every millimeter. Every Newton.” Edgar made the sign of a pincer with his fingers.

“Not in this story. It’s your story. You fall in love. It’s not like a tire strategy or braking early into a corner. You can’t screw it up. If you play, you’ve won,” Will said. “And from what little I recall about engineering from flight school, you smarty-pants leave a ton of something called a factor of safety.”

“Monaco,” Edgar said. “Maybe she wants to go to Monaco. Doesn’t everyone? The party almost overshadows the race.”

“I don’t know. Do they?” Will asked.

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Ella’s piece about Evan Rankin’s twenty-year battle with chronic pain had appeared in the final issue of the tier one Canadian literary magazine, Porpoise, before it, too, shuttered due to The Crucible. Lack of funding for the arts was a continual refrain that had finally stopped singing entirely. With all government wherewithal directed to the economic recovery efforts for essential services and the search for a vaccine, more and more literary magazines and journals had decreased circulation, gone online, taken indefinite hiatus, or given up.

Of course, in lockdown, everyone had proudly posted on social media about their increased book consumption. Will himself, never a great reader, found himself listening to the collection of audiobooks that the local library system had opened for free to the general public, even to those living in other provinces, to boost morale during the worst of it. And it was this new reading habit, in fact, which had led to Will’s listening to the CBC Morning show, three months before, to catch an interview with the author of a new WWII memoir. Driving to the liquor store, he had nearly obliterated the brake when he heard Ella’s familiar voice after the first interview. Will had pulled over to the side of the road.

The host, highlighting the death of Porpoise, had asked, “Did you see it coming?”

“The end?” Ella’s voice was still high, still girlish. Will could practically see her inky black hair shine against the headphones she was probably wearing. “How could I not? I was still in denial, I suppose, in the way we all were about this virus when it all started. But I’m honoured to be in the final issue. And you never know—a porpoise could turn phoenix. It could come back.”

“It could, you’re right. Now, let’s talk this piece, Ella. It’s so lyrical, I forgot I was reading about a real person. I think it’s a question I’ve come back to now and again. Maybe you can shed some light. What really is the difference between fiction and creative non-fiction?”

“Don’t ask me that!”

“Well, I’m glad I asked then. Must be the right question.”

“Fine. Here’s the MFA answer. We use the tools of fiction—dialogue, scenes, whatnot—and we use it to tell a true story. But for me, I don’t know. I wasn’t working on this at all when I started. There was a novel, but don’t ask me about that either. I don’t know what I intended. I’m aware I’m much more known for my...lighter fare. Yet I suppose I always intend on writing fiction with a capital F. And literary fiction, to boot, with a capital L.”

“Yes, we all want to be Jennifer Egan, first published story in *The New Yorker*, yadda yadda.”

“Right. But then I realize whatever fiction I’m writing—it’s my real life. Honestly, sometimes I just submit under a category and figure the magazine will decide if I’ve messed it and let me know. Oh, okay, but I know the look you’re giving me. What if there are no magazines, like *Porpoise*? Who, then, will be the arbiter?”

“Well, I’m nobody, but I would agree that you got it right this time. Creative non-fiction—that is what the piece is.”

“You sure?” Ella teased.

“But Evan Rankin, of course, is a real person, and now an activist. From what I know, you were together once. He was even your editor, if I’m not mistaken. Is the piece an apology?”

“To Evan?”

“Sure. I know Rankin is more and more involved in raising awareness about the opioid crisis and whatnot, but this piece is more from your call-and-answer as a former couple as he dealt with his medical condition. I think that’s what makes it special. And heartbreaking.”

“No, not an apology. We did that long ago. I didn’t think I would be writing this. But I guess the world was on fire last year and Evan said it was alright. He said he wanted me to have it. Even though he said, and I knew, too, that it was already mine. I had been there with him. He even said, I don’t know, maybe it’s a bit dumb—”

“Well, you have to tell us now.”

“He said—” Ella hesitated. “He said that for some reason, when he pictures himself, he always saw himself at that age, the age he was when we were involved.”

“That’s...” The host seemed to search for the right word. “Sweet.”

“Perhaps. He gives me too much credit. He says it was the age when I cared for him, like a carer. But it was mutual. He cared for my stories. He watered them.”

“Your story collection will be out from House of Horton next month, is that right? And long-time fans are going to be surprised, you said. The departure from the romances.”

Ella laughed. “I guess I finally reached a point. To depart from romance, all the coming-togethers, is maybe to arrive at everything that’s broken.”

“Well, we certainly look forward to it.”

“The brokenness?”

“Is there anything else?” the host said, and Will, despite realizing he was gripping the key so hard his knuckles were white, saw a crumpled face, his own, reflected slightly in the side mirror.

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“What age is she?” Will asked Edgar.

“Hmm?”

“I mean, when you see the beach. In this...scene. How old is your wife?”

Will’s scotch was finished, a tiny amber border at the base of the glass hinting at what had previously been. He also checked the old man’s and was glad to see the same. No more rescue mission needed for the moment.

“Well, I suppose, the same as the day I married her.”

Will could imagine the woman in the mauve dress, this time in a white gown, nothing gaudy, maybe a long column slip dress, finished in satin ivory with little buttons all the way down the back. Ella’s taste in wedding dresses was much the same. After the engagement, Ella had started a little collage of dresses cut out from magazines pinned to a spare cork board, one of the ones she usually used to rearrange scenes from stories, written on note cards so she could move them around. Sometimes, she joked she would custom-order a blood-red one, just for the shock factor. Will’s mother’s face.

“She was so angry at me that day,” Edgar said.

“Angry? Why?”

“I’d forgotten the rings. Miles, my best man, had to run from church to go get them. She trained me as we went on, over the years, not to be so scattered. So it infuriates her even more now, the baking, the thing with the library.”

“What thing with the library?”

“I was supposed to meet her at the library at the Womens’ Hospital. I got turned around. I don’t know. There didn’t used to be a roundabout before it.”

“And the baking?”

“We cook together sometimes. New things. But I’ve been adding the sugar instead of salt. The neurologist doesn’t think it’s the end of the world, but Estelle does. Literally—the end of *travel*.”

“Travel?”

“Yes, *travel*! No place on earth will do until I satisfy her. I wouldn’t mind going to Barcelona again to see the progress on Sagrada Familia. But apparently, I must do *beach reads* instead.”

“Edgar,” Will said. “is this your anniversary?” He pronounced each word carefully.

Will had been processing the word neurologist, staring at his palm, the criss-crosses, the pink separate tributaries meeting in thicker troughs.

“Anniversary. Heavens, no.”

Well, that was a relief at least.

For a moment, Will hesitated. Should he go forth? How many times had he neglected an anniversary of his own and attended that of another? He had never taken much notice of them, except for that once.

It had been Carlos and Rebecca’s second anniversary, celebrated with another barbeque, when he had noticed Ella and Carlos slip away, had noticed they had gone off by themselves into the garden.

Will remembered how it had alarmed him. That Carlos would say something. Something dangerous. For years, Will had, without quite meaning to, separated his best friend and his girlfriend. If she had a question for Carlos, he went with her or he’d ask for her. He had found Carlos scribbling on a napkin, the flight pattern for landing at an airport, and Ella listening with her palm cupped against her face, asking a question.

Will had waited, holding his drink, just off to the side of the trellises

“Carlos,” Ella had said, finally, picking up the napkin and turning it around three sixty degrees. “Do you think he will? Ask me? I know, I mean, there’s your friend code and all, but, as a man, in general, what do you think are the odds?”

Carlos had laughed. “It’s not math.”

“No,” she agreed. “It’s Will.”

“Men have their own timeline.”

“Yours just happened to line up.”

“With Rebecca’s?”

“I don’t have Rebecca’s grace. I’m impatient. That I can’t write my own life.” She crumpled the napkin into a ball. “I sometimes tell myself. After Calgary, after Montreal, after St. John’s. Sometimes I think it’s a Freudian thing. You know he’s taking his mother to that tulip festival in some dumb place called Chilliwack. I’m going to be home! In Toronto! That woman fucking hates me.”

“Don’t think so hard, Ella.”

“Ha. It must be fun.”

“What must be?”

“To be so unafraid.”

There was a plate of popcorn shrimp to Ella’s side and she picked one up, before offering it to Carlos.

“What makes you think I’m not afraid?” he asked, taking one.

She smiled. “We’re talking. We’ve been talking and there’s nothing I can’t see about you. Where’s the ghost, Carlos?”

“You know what they say. I gave it up, I guess.”

“Lucky you.”

“I am lucky,” Will’s best friend had said. “Unbelievably so.”

Will now looked again into the bottom of his glass, the bartop filmy beneath it. Like a drink garnished with mint, its aroma meeting the liquid and ice, the entire picture finally simplified to him.

This was the reason. He imagined a hospital, the explanation of the images. The amyloid collecting in the old man’s brain, squeezing out myelin, the tangles like the flight paths shown at the end of *En Route* magazine. An elegant, straight-laced woman told what she already knew but denied, like the emptiness in her womb.

This was the reason for the anger, the disappearance, the game. Blank cards. Beach reads.

Whiskey, women, and their ways.

“Are you sure?” Will asked.

Perhaps in the life of every couple came a threshold of what one could accept, the repeated hits, until one stopped believing and boring holes in the sky didn’t cut it. When one needed some kind of reciprocity in reminding of what knit one of the pair to the other.

“Like, certain?” he pressed.

Ella had put it another way, in the notes of a lecture she was delivering in a creative writing course: the identity of the shared ghost sometimes vanished for that person. And would for the other, when it was too late.

Edgar looked indignant. “Am I sure? I’d never forget! It’s September, September twenty-second. Here, I’ve it written in a card in my wallet. September, September, the early fall...”

“Alright, alright.”

The race, on the screen, had reached its fortieth lap, and to Will’s surprise, things had shuffled without his realizing it. The Monegasque had made his undercut stick and overtaken a Mercedes and Red Bull on the track. The Red Bull was trying to fight back, its Drag Reduction System flap wide open, but the Monegasque managed to hold on down the long back straight and then went ahead by more than a second. DRS did not activate unless a driver was within one second of the car ahead.

Edgar had forgotten all about the race as well. Was digging around in his pockets, first his waistcoat, then his trousers, and only candy wrappers were surfacing, starting to litter the bartop in front of them.

Will eyed the bathrooms. He exchanged a glance with the barkeep. The man shrugged. Will thought about it.

Schrodinger's Wife or something. But it wasn't. Not at all.

Three

“Blast it all,” Edgar said. “Card’s gone. Wallet’s gone too. Well, you’ll just have to take my word for it. September 22nd.”

The barkeep must have got the wrong idea seeing the old man pat down his clothes. “You want the tab?”

“No. Well, yes. I have to find my wife first though,” Edgar said.

“I’ve got it,” Will interjected. “The tab.”

“Oh, you don’t need to do that. I’ve just misplaced—”

Will had had enough. “You. Go get her. No more wasting time.”

“What?”

“The one on the left, the single-stall by the fountain. That’s the one she’s in.”

He was tired of concealing. Before the great scotch rescue, as Edgar had watched the race, Will had seen Estelle choose. Perhaps Edgar was wondering why Will had not said anything from the beginning. Will didn’t think he himself knew. The drink seemed important. The race. His own itinerary for the day. Not so now.

“How did you...?”

Will watched the expressions move across the man’s face, the lift of the overgrown brows and slight flaring of the nostrils and droop of chin. The seams of the ancient blazer pulled wide.

Will had seen the wife hesitate between the regular washroom, from which one woman, then another exited, and the single-stall, uni-sex. As Will had pondered the drink rescue, he had wondered what she was waiting for, someone with such singular purpose in her frame. But the question was apparent to him suddenly. Could the long-suffering Dr. Estelle Gaffney have imagined her husband ever entering the space of the opposite sex, looking for legs beneath the stall doors?

Will shrugged. “Can you do this? Go over there?”

“I...”

“Can you do this for me?”

The pedalling stopped on the stool. Edgar pulled at his collar.

“For you?”

“Edgar, there’s nothing to explain. It would take too long. But you need to go. Go. Play the game.”

The two men looked at each other for a long moment. Then, with a dubious glance back at Will, Edgar maneuvered off and started walking, clutching his cane. The old man looked back at Will a few paces from the fountain.

Will gave another signal with his pointer finger. Yes, that one.

A few more rocking steps. Will rested a finger against the rim of his empty glass. At the same time, Edgar rested in front of the door and knocked.

A tense moment. The old man's mouth moved and Will couldn't read the words he spoke. The wrinkles rippling on Edgar's profile, reminding Will of air traffic shouting at one another on the tarmac as he and the Captain for the pairing went through the last of their post-flight checklist.

Will's finger made a complete orbit around the rim of the glass, the motion emitting a small squeak. The door of the washroom opened a crack. Then Edgar entered.

The door shut behind him, air-tight.

+

Will imagined the scene. How had Ella done this all those times? With the corkboard. The notes. The ghost. In her head. That endless imagination.

The single washrooms at this terminal were roomy. He knew. Will preferred them as well when he travelled alone. The four walls and grey light, soft inoffensive scent.

The woman in the mauve dress had spread toilet paper across the lid of the seat which she had pulled down. She sat upon it, her legs still crossed, a pointed knee peaking the satin material above the level of her waist.

Edgar, squatting, facing her, was bringing his hand up. The edge of his thumb grazing across her face, and with it, almost against her will, she turned towards him.

Ella had once said a funny thing. She said Will could write. If he wanted to. If he wanted to, he could do anything he wanted. He hadn't wanted to. Only once had he wanted to write, after the drycleaning, that one time after Ryu had shut down.

Will had tried to go to a new place, tidy and well appointed, but not the same.

The proprietor was a lady, wearing three scarves and some sort of poncho, the ends of her hair dyed purple, crystals around her neck. Three long wrinkles ran horizontally across her forehead.

"It comes," she said with a quality of mysticism in her voice, "*The danger.*"

"What?" Will said, pulling back from rifling through his wallet. "What did you say?"

"This uniform is not good quality," she said, thumbing at it.

His heart slowed, yet stayed too high in his chest. "It's from the airline."

"Not a good airline."

"How would you—" Will stopped his own protest, the word *know* dying on his lips.

It was true. What kind of airline tried to cover up two accidents and blame his best friend for something he didn't do? His heart climbed higher into his voicebox.

"You captain?"

Will shook his head.

“You married?”

He could back away. He could take his dry cleaning and leave with a polite thank you, but, paralyzed, he said no.

“You want no married?”

At the time, Will had stuttered. I want... I wanted. He hadn't known what he wanted.

There was a girl with long black hair sewing in the back room.

“My daughter,” the woman said, intercepting his gaze. “I introduce?”

“No. But. Thanks, thanks, thanks,” he kept repeating and slowly backed away from the counter. The chimes of the door announced his departure, and he found himself speedwalking, like Ella had, that day in the grocery, when he'd asked her to come home.

In the apartment, he swung open the lid of his laptop and started writing, what, he had no idea. A stream of consciousness. He wrote about Carlos. The furloughs. His mother. Cankles.

“Ella,” he said out loud. As he side-loaded himself as a character. A type. Wasn't that what Ella called it?

He would make a funny character. A pilot. A uniform. Wiping sweat off the brim of his cap.

He had written on. He inserted odd line and paragraph breaks. Testing the wheels of his Samsonite as Carlos and he walked to the parkade, laughing, thinking of the women at home, and walking too quickly, easily, shoes shining, so hopeful.

Like danger was a rendezvous they'd never make.

He didn't know where the document was now.

Will mouthed the words to himself, “There's sand in your eye.” As he imagined Edgar saying them to Estelle.

The barkeep looked at Will.

The race was over. In parc fermé, Crofty said something about the promise of the Monegasque and that real racecraft can't be bought, while Brundle, the other commentator, headed to the paddock to search out Barbeau.

The young Monegasque had switched out his helmet for the Ferrari cap and was bending the sides of the brim to his liking. With his racesuit partially unzipped, he met his teammate, who had finished P6 and they embraced. Afterwards, as Raph headed towards the press, he looked through the stands as though scanning for his grandfather.

“Scotch?” the barkeep asked. “Sometimes I like the commentary after. Buxton's a laugh, though they're all too partial to the Brits.”

“Sure,” Will said. “But let me get something to read.”

“Go. I’ll keep an eye on their...things.”

In the terminal bookshop, just past the moving walkway, Will’s eye caught on something blue on the bestseller’s shelf, a hardback of something with gold lettering and a blue bird, the feathers raised on the cover. It was not Ella’s book. She always had her favourite artist, a family friend, do the covers and preferred hard, abstract art with huge bold letters for the title, her name smaller underneath. Still, he rubbed his hand over the cover, over the bumpy lines of the wing.

It was still amazing, he thought, how birds did it—flying. It was amazing how airplanes did it, even though they had studied all that in flight school, one of the earliest lessons and the first to be forgotten with their hands on the throttle. How could such an unwieldy thing, a collection of rivets, plate, people, and little bottles of wine and spirits, generate lift. How could it not require a rescue mission every single time?

Will paid for the book, tucked it under his arm, and brought it once more to Bar Viola.

The unisex bathroom door had not budged.

“I’ve read that,” the barkeep said, eyeing the cover. He had Will’s drink waiting. On a new coaster. Edgar’s glass cleared long ago.

“Was it good?” Will asked.

“Do you like happy endings?”

Will shrugged. “Ask me when I’m done.”

Will tested the weight of the book in his hands. As though on its own, it opened to a dedication, which he did not skip.

He turned, facing away from the bathrooms. And he read and read, till the scotch turned warm.

END