

The Excellent Person

By ELIZABETH HAN

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*The rabbis wrote:
although it is forbidden
to touch a dying person,
nevertheless, if the house
catches fire
he must be removed
from the house.*

*Barbaric!
I say,
and whom may I touch then,
aren't we all
dying?*

*You smile
your old negotiator's smile
and ask:
but aren't all our houses
burning?*

“A Short History of Judaic Thought in the Twentieth Century” – Linda Pastan

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Once Ted pulled his body out of the cold pool, only his towel and robe still hung on the hooks. The rest of the bathers had left and the masseuses were cleaning their workstations. The hammam on the Calle de Atocha closed at nine on Mondays ever since the protests had started at the Puerta del Sol. The owner had rounded between the different interconnected pools and galleries fifteen minutes before time to warn the bathers in both Spanish and English. But she had tipped her head at him while he reclined, submerged to the earlobes in the freezing water, and made a sign with her hands and a flat oval with her lips as though blowing out a candle, so Ted knew he could stay a bit longer if he liked.

The owner knew it was his *cuarenta* that day and that he was alone. He had made his reservation weeks ahead of time, before even booking the initial flight to Madrid, on the phone with TripAdvisor opened on his laptop, inquiring about a birthday package. The receptionist put him on hold while the owner was consulted. She finally came to answer the phone herself. She said there was no such thing—*No hay venta de cumpleaños*—but was amused enough by his request to say she might make something up especially for him. He had told her it would be good for business. The business owners in the *barrio*, including Valeria, the host of his rental, were mostly women, and Valeria informed him upon his return for another short stay above her bar-resto, following his circuit of the country, that they were very amused by *El Canadiense* and his novel ideas.

“You’ve been telling Palome to expand to Andalusia,” Valeria said.

“She should. The e-bikes will be a big hit there to get around the White Villages,” he answered.

He had flown into Madrid, day-tripped to Segovia, Toledo, and Córdoba, caught a train via Atocha to Santa Justa in Sevilla on the way south to Granada and the Pueblos Blancos, and then to the hem of the

Mediterranean at Cadiz and Jerez. A flight with only standing room took him to Barcelona, then it was back to the capital for the final few days. He could never wrap his head around the asymmetry of flying into a country via one airport and leaving from another. Maybe Elizabeth could, but he was barely able to tolerate when she cut his sandwiches into triangles of slightly different sizes on her turn to pack lunches for work. She had seemed to forget his preferences even more frequently than usual as the day of his moving out approached. Whenever he brought up the sandwiches, Liz had rolled her eyes at his complaints behind her glass of gazpacho, her liquid breakfast every morning up to Day Seventeen of her newest cleanse. Thank Providence he had managed to lobby Morgan to set Ted up in the basement of his townhouse in Surrey before Day Eighteen, where there was a separate entrance and kitchen, his favourite cousin only too happy for the company in a home of four daughters, aged six to fourteen, and overflowing, in his words, “with lipstick, tampons, and nail polish wands.” Morgan also constantly brought up his opinion, as a lawyer newly admitted to the bar, that Ted could have gotten far more from Elizabeth for his half of their house, especially after the renovations Ted’s parents had made over the past year.

“And Marta is very flattered you think her sauce should be bottled and sold,” Valeria said, smirking in a way that the dimple in her right cheek deepened.

“It’s—” Ted made the sign of three fingers touching his mouth and smacked his lips. “—Chef’s kiss. She’ll make a killing.”

“I think you are a mistaken. We do not like killings,” Valeria said. “The protests are a bit raucous, but no one has been killed.”

“So I saw,” he said.

The city had abruptly cancelled the religious procession Ted had hoped to catch on the day he flew in from Catalunya. Instead of trumpeters and wax Madonnas, shouting men in red bibs and white signs lined the street by the Puerta del Sol and spilled over into the narrow spokes surrounding the Mercado de San Miguel. On the television in Valeria’s restaurant below his rented room on the Calle de Noviciado, the *alcade* announced, starting at eleven that night, a curfew, lasting until six each morning. The curfew would stand for the next two weeks at least, at the end of which Ted would be long-installed back in Surrey again. Earlier that afternoon, after unpacking his suitcase in his room, he had sat outside a boarded-up theatre on a step and crunched on the gummy tentacles of a *bocadillo de calamares*, the stationary compacted heat of July flaying red epaulettes on his shoulders, the rest of his skin now glowing bronze from a month in the country which seemed to have very few awnings. At the public chess boards in the square, the players had moved their pieces more slowly. Their bodies seemed to melt into the stone seats like candles recessed into their trunks. Most of the museums closed on Mondays in the city, including the Prado and the Thyssen, the latter of which he had not had time for in June and was running a special exhibition on Titian and El Greco. Without the paintings and with Lita not on shift till the evening, there had been nothing much to do until his appointment at the hammam except eat and buy replacement sunblock and steal wi-fi from MacDonald’s, standing across the street near the ATM of a Santander. His flight home left him three days to rectify anything he had missed the first time around.

Ted towed off his head, torso, legs, and feet and tied the robe at his waist. He liked the cold pool the best in the hammam. Two meters by two meters and perfectly square, the cold reservoir greeted the bather first when one entered from the changerooms, yet most people couldn’t sit in the bracing temperature for more than a few minutes. They quickly moved on to the medium and hot pools further down in what felt like the craven catacombs of the earth. Several bathers had come and gone in this pattern as he sat peaceably in the water, organs invigorated by the chill, revelling in the dim cape of light cast by a series of long twisted tapers tucked into an arched alcove and the gentle frothing of a round stone fountain installed in the center. He felt he could stay there for hours, but now it was closing and he did not want to disrespect the owner who had been so kind. One final time, he sniffed the essential oils blends set along the back wall beside flowerful descriptions written in variegated chalk colors. He was

aware he smelled deeply of lavender; the masseuse had worked the oil in so vigorously his bones had crunched like fall leaves, and followed the manipulation with a scrubbing so severe that, by its end, dead snowflake-like pieces of him littered the tiled floor beneath the table.

Changed back into street clothes, with the souvenir kessa mitt the masseuse had used on him tucked in his bag, Ted said goodbye to the girls at the desk and sidled his way back to Valeria's. The air outside was still sultry, the irregular bricks under his sandals exhaling their heat after suctioning it in from the sun all day. His thick brown hair, which needed a cut, would air-dry in a few minutes. Elizabeth had cut his hair with electric clippers for the last time a month before he left for Spain, just after they had spent a few hours working out the final financial details of their split. Now shaggy pieces hung over his ears again. When she first started cutting it as a fun little project after they bought the house, she had used the wrong setting and carved out two small craters in the back of his head; for a week he had filled the nearly bald spots in with some of her old, dried-out mascara and she would deliberately swipe at his repairs with her nails to annoy him before he caught her lips for a kiss. He should ask Valeria for a recommendation for a barber soon.

When Ted walked into Bar La Gloria, the towel hooked around his neck, Valeria was clearing a tray of olives from the bar. She shouted at the replay of a football match sprayed over the screen set in the corner of the room, where an accent wall of pistachio-green met the white ceiling. With one hand she gesticulated like a looping jet. Sevilla had drawn 1-1 with Valencia despite playing nine-tenths of the match in the latter's half of the pitch. The Andalusian side had squandered a late corner and the home spectators booed when the assistant referee's offside flag came down.

"Eduardo," she greeted him. "Look at this. All possession, no result." Valeria did not consider herself a real Madrileña. When she showed him to his room five weeks before, she said she came from Sevilla as a seventeen-year-old student to study hospitality and management. Madrid had lacked for authentic Andalusian food and so she had stayed. "Out of my charity," she said, touching her bosom. "This city is strange and full of strangers. Madrileños have a complex because their city is not old like Barcelona or Sevilla. I think they are right."

She had showed him how to work the windows, which opened in two directions depending on the edge from which one pulled, either from the side or the bottom. They lacked screens for there were no insects day or night in the city. A pulley mechanism controlled a tough metal covering on the outside to protect the house from street hooligans. "If you are going to be doing laundry, use these," she had said, pointing to a niche harbouring a set of three sturdy lines which could be pulled across the room and affixed to hooks in the opposite wall. Flipping a nearby switch kept the lines taut and prevented them from collapsing under the weight of wet clothing. The only other furnishings were a twin-sized bed, a bookshelf with Rick Steves' volumes on the Iberian Peninsula, a student's desk, chair, and lamp, and a full-size armoire with mirrored doors before which Ted dressed himself each morning in thinner and thinner layers as the summer approached its torrid zenith. On the second floor above the restaurant, the room received most of its light through a window facing the street. A second smaller window opened out over an inner courtyard. The courtyard was framed by a series of arches and, in its center, low walls of alternating height tiled in blue scenic *azulejos* separated overgrown beds of red carnations and *lantanas* from one another.

"I'm sorry," Ted said, in his bad staccato Spanish. "How does the table look?"

Valeria tended to answer him in English despite his repeated friendly attempts. "Third and battling with Atlético for second. We should sack Tuchel. He's no good. He's—how do you say it again—lost the dressing room. We should never have hired a German."

"Lita?"

"Dolores is with customers, but I will ask her to come when she is finished. Do you want something?" She made the sign of a spoon going into her mouth. Dinner hour typically began to pick up around ten, yet more tables in the inner dining area were occupied than to which he was accustomed. People trying to get in a last meal before the curfew went into effect. Valeria switched to loading the dishwasher set into the exposed-brick back wall and beneath the menu written on a set of whiteboards. A customer from the back asked for water, and she picked up a glass, held it to a machine that swirled liquid around the base, cleaning it. She stilled the glass under the spout to fill it again and then dropped in a few ice cubes. "You will have to sit at the bar."

Ted's stomach growled; the bathing had made him hungry. "I'll put this away first. Bring me *salmorejo*, please." He added, "And *vermouth casero*."

Upstairs, in his room, he pulled out one of the laundry lines and hooked the towel over it to dry. He removed his sandals and placed them in the closet, empty except for two hangers on which he had draped a white linen shirt and matching trousers. He had purchased two pairs of sandals in Sevilla and switched to the looser pair before dinner each day, spreading out his toes in the unaccustomed space beneath the front strap. Lita had said his feet were very perfect-looking, not like those of other men, whose second toes seemed always to extend beyond the lip of their sandals. She had said this the first time he had invited her to his room and they had kissed. At twenty-two years old, she was almost two decades younger than he was. She lived in a shared flat near Callao station, could speak passable English having once had a roommate from Oxford, and waitressed at Bar La Gloria while studying classics part-time at the Universidad Central on Calle de San Bernardo. In addition to her dark and petite beauty, the sort prized by the Spanish, Lita, whose real name was Dolores, was celebrated by the other customers and servers for her unique compliments. She thought Ted handsome and quite grown-up, but with a twinkle, mentioning Robin Williams in the tan car coat in the final scene of *Dead Poets Society*.

Standing in front of the armoire's double mirrors, Ted skimmed a comb through his hair. His beard was growing in, but Lita liked that too, liked to rub her small smooth palm against it. Maybe his *cuarenta* hardly mattered when he had sported silver flecks in both his sideburns and beard ever since his early twenties, since before he met Elizabeth in graduate school. Liz had liked a bit of facial hair too, but by the time it was ending, she had hardly stood to touch him anywhere, much less his face; she kept to her half of the living room where she polished off *New Yorkers* and Booker Prize shortlisters and slowly transformed into an ever-emaciating column of extracts, elixirs, and emulsions. In the kitchen her ant-like path revolved around the blender, juicer, vegetable crisper, and mason jars of superfoods and antioxidants. She slept on the upper floor in one of the newly renovated bedrooms, in the one with the closet Ted's mother had designed especially for her, with a wall of cubical compartments enough for all her shoes and glittering metallic grids to organize her jewelry. From one of the hooks hung the engraved Tiffany bracelet he had given her for their eight-year anniversary: *Golden slumbers fill your eyes*, from her favourite Beatles' song.

Ted changed into the shirt and trousers and returned to the bar, where Valeria had placed an empty dish on a stool to save the seat for him. He handed it back to her. Already, the *salmorejo* sat on a woven placemat, a rich orange cream garnished with minced egg and pieces of *jamón*. A shallow dish with sliced bread accompanied it.

"Here's the drink," Valeria said, pushing out another order to a passing server while setting the cola-colored vermouth in front of him with a bit of ice and lemon. The vermouth was always served with a tiny tin cup of manzanilla olives and he popped one into his mouth, extracting the pit with his fingers and placing it on a napkin.

Though the bar could only seat six around it, three narrow steps under an arched doorway led from the entrance and bar area to the much more expansive inner dining space. Bar La Gloria was ten years old and had earned excellent reviews for not only its authentic Andalusian cuisine, but also for its pleasantly

Byzantine design. Valeria had knocked down a few walls and installed others, decorating it for intimate indentations and unexpected encounters. The ornate arch with small celestial faces painted on it at half-foot intervals, especially, had been her idea. Through its curvature, Ted watched the couples seated closest to him gesticulate and dip their bread in the locally sourced slightly greenish olive oil. He had visited the *aceite de oliva* outside of Ronda and photographed the machines which cold-pressed olive paste between layers of circular mats made from *esparto* grass, just one of the many impressive shots he was itching to show Lita that night, when and if she had time to see him.

Lita had not, she had said when she first served him, been very much around her own country. She had been born in a village just outside Madrid and her father had taken sick for most of her teenage years and she had stayed to care for him while her brothers went to work. Ted was excited to show her his improvement in skill compared to those shaky and discoloured monstrosities that he had snapped upon arrival, at which she had suppressed a smile behind her plump peach-glossed lips when she saw, and said, “Oh, Lalo, you will improve.”

While he could admit he still was no Ansel Adams, he was quite proud of himself. Photography, portraiture, and composition in general had baffled him until this five-week tour through Spain. Before this, Ted had never heard of the rule of thirds. He knew nothing of light and shadow. Ever since he was a child growing up in a country house outside Penticton with a garage and giant tool shed, Ted had preferred punishing scrap wood with his father’s drill, sander, planer, and table saw—building useful things poorly—to attempting artistry. When Elizabeth wanted a new house not too far from work in central Vancouver, he had pushed for the fixer-upper with good bones, citing the financial difference and what a lark they could have making it how they wanted, until she relented. Back then, he had made fun of her when she spoke of taking a photography course at the Y, but now he was unembarrassed to admit that, armed with a DSLR he purchased with some of the money from the buyout, he quite enjoyed this new hobby. On days when Ted could not find a meetup and had not booked a tour group, sometimes there was nothing much to do but take photographs and upload them to his online feed of sixty followers. He especially liked to snap pictures through pre-existing and natural frames—Córdoba’s blue flowerpots on the Calle de las Flores as seen through a portalway of white brick, trees clustered with ripe round oranges beyond a gallery in the upper level of the Alhambra, hills beyond hills from the narrow rectangular embrasure of a ruined castle.

Before Ted had left on the train to Andalusia, he had photographed Lita standing in the entrance to the restaurant with the afternoon sun slanted across her face. In the picture she was looking slightly away from the camera and touched a hand to her temple as though reassuring herself it was still there. He saw her now cross the archway and disappear with a tray of tapas, followed by another young woman, seeming like they were going to the same table, both in the uniform of La Gloria, a simple white blouse and knee-length black skirt with sensible black buckled shoes. Unlike the second server, who wore a greasy sheen on her nose and forehead, Lita carried the dishes daintily, almost as if walking on her toes. Both women donned pistachio-green aprons overtop, embroidered at the breast pocket with the large letter G.

A few minutes later, Lita appeared behind the bar and hung up her apron in a small nook in the corner. She tucked her shoulder-length black hair behind her ears, readjusted the pendant of her necklace which had gone askew beneath her collar, and stood across from him. She wore simple makeup, blush on her cheeks, and a smudge of charcoal eyeliner defined the grass-green stipplings in her eyes.

“Lalo,” she said. “You are back.”

“Don’t sound so surprised,” Ted said. He noticed she used *usted* instead of *tú*. “I told you I would be, didn’t I.” He pushed the glass over to her across the counter. “Take some.”

She wrapped her fingers around it, then removed them. “Later. I have a call soon.”

Valeria, from where she was adding marker lines to the drink special of the day, *tinto de verano*, turned her head to observe them.

Ted spooned *salmorejo* into his mouth three times.

Lita's lips seemed to part accordingly, brown eyes following the orbital motion, scooping, rising, entering, and the swallow. "You should eat more slowly," she said

"Look at all this bread," he said. "I think it was the baths."

"Still. It is liquid, but it is to be enjoyed. Dip the bread. Manzanilla is to be savoured. Did I not tell you that before?"

"Then take it with me. Sit."

She shook her head. "I am glad you are back."

"Come to my room in a bit. We'll have something," he said, pitting another olive.

"After my call," she said and reached over to gently touch the side of his mouth with a warm fingertip.

Looking beyond Lita's shoulder, he winked at Valeria whose dimpled deepened but whose lips stayed in a firm line as she placed another dish into the sink and ran the water in a tight stream over the slightly skewed stack.

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Ted's mother's initial impulse when he told her of his and Elizabeth's split was, "Aren't you going to fight it?" and secondly, "I put so much work into that closet."

Elizabeth had, in her incisive and analytical way that had always impressed Ted, identified the closet as a problem as soon as they walked in at the open house, one year before. On the floor plan which the realtor had provided at the door, the builder had labelled the room as the master, but its closet was no better, in terms of size nor organization, compared with those of the other two on the upper level, which he and Liz planned on using as their respective home offices. The house was already an outlier, nearly thirty years old, a dinosaur, on the quiet residential crescent. The rest of their neighbors were young families who had demolished most of the other original homes in favour of panelized constructions straight out of a *Dwell* or *Architectural Digest* magazine. Other potential options in the city that the couple had looked at up to that point, and which Liz had much preferred, had boasted walk-in closets with statement chandelier lights, plush seating, dedicated shoe systems, and built-in laundry chutes and ironing boards, among other amenities, all of which this one woefully lacked.

"I need more," she said, after each viewing. "And Ira agrees with me."

Of course he does, Ted thought. A junior partner at a management consulting firm, Elizabeth had spent years accumulating a vast collection of smart casual, business casual, and business apparel, and even black- and white-tie garb for the occasional gala or fundraiser. She had always loved dressing up in all its forms, playing with clothing, shoes, bags, and jewelry, but her obsession had inflamed into an incandescent inferno with the hiring of her colour specialist who, a few weeks before, had arrived at their 24th-floor condo in Yaletown to drape her in armfuls of fabric swatches. Ted could deal with most of Elizabeth's other friends, but Ira was something else. In Ted's memory of that first appointment, he saw Liz forcing him out of the building, pushing his coat into his chest, while beckoning Ira in, citing, "I can't

concentrate when you're here." He remembered Ira walking straight past him, gushing platitudes about Liz's beauty and taste in jewelry—"Darling, I'm going to make you so ravishing it's insane." More than his archnemeses of cilantro, goat cheese, and pineapple on pizza, Ted had come to detest Ira's name, profession, and influence on Liz, even more so when the man convinced her, over many subsequent appointments, to swell her wardrobe nearly threefold under themes of "going-out," "athleisure," and "fun, cute, and flirty," whatever the hell that meant—until she apparently needed a second bedroom to store it all.

"Two hundred dollars and three hours well worth it," Liz had said when Ira left. "And I'll never have to worry about my skin looking dull against navy blue ever again."

"Did it ever?" he asked. "You always look great."

"You just weren't paying attention," she said, shaking her head.

At the open house, Elizabeth had picked her way around the scratchy boards of the original closet, running her fingers over the long white bar, with her eyebrows nearly stuck together, imagining where everything could possibly go. He could see her interior gears turning, the consultant's mind moving and stacking and categorizing and calculating. A huge closet was one of her top three criteria for the dream home, besides stainless-steel appliances and dark hardwood floors. But Ted had pointed to the enormous ensuite in the master and its surprising claw-foot bathtub. He had taken her hand and pulled her onto the wide deck with the octagonal offshoot where they could install the barbecue and host dinner parties in the summer. He emphasized the nice tiles and wainscotting and baseboards and he saw her eyes brighten and her cheeks soften. True, there were not enough cabinets in the kitchen; the proportion of counter space could be improved. He painted the image of a marble center island studded with electrical outlets where they could work when they got sick of the home offices. Helping Ted's case along and seizing the opportunity of his excitement, the realtor had gushed about three good schools within either walking or bussing distance were they to entertain starting a family.

Ted led Liz outside to take pictures of their own for later reference. Situated on a wide corner, the lot on which the house was located was twice the size of its neighbours' and punctuated by conical topiary, five maple trees, and two decorative rock beds with bright yellow daffodils and purple tulips in their centers.

"Can we get rid of them?" Liz had asked, making to kick at one of the rockbeds with her new cream calfskin boots and then appearing to think better of it. She hated scuffs.

"I don't mind mowing more grass. And around them," Ted had said. In the meantime, he would order her a two-tiered clothing rack on wheels from Amazon. "You can get anything on wheels these days," he said.

"It is very close to work," she conceded. "And I suppose I could get all Martha Stewart for a few months."

"Martha is very sexy," he said and pinched the butt of her jeans. She flinched away from it, made a face at him, but laughed.

When the mortgage and all the paperwork were finalized, Ted's mother and father, Nancy and Cameron, took the ferry over from Nanaimo for a housewarming. His mother stood in front of the closet with a glass of champagne and agreed, excitement in her voice, with Liz that it was a disaster, but disasters could be rectified.

His mother had loved Liz from almost the very beginning of the relationship. She had always wanted a project for the two of them to do together, but for years before Liz made junior partner, the latter was too busy with work for the little crafting and knitting hobbies Nancy tried to suggest. The closet project was the ultimate victory, then; Elizabeth could have no excuse to decline. Before she and his father retired

from his childhood home to Nanaimo on Vancouver Island, Ted's mother had designed wedding gowns at a fairly successful boutique in Penticton. Together with her drafting skills and Ira's special software—the color consultant had insisted on becoming involved as well, inventorying all of Liz's items into an application that doubled as an outfit coordination system—Ted's mother quickly conceived an elaborate and efficient shelving system, while Elizabeth selected the fabrics, textures, color accents, and lighting.

Ted watched with amusement as practically overnight, the relationship between mother and potential daughter-in-law blossomed like the tulips in the yard. They constantly grabbed lunch and sipped lattes together in negotiation and drove down to the Lowe's and Home Depot. They spent hours on Pinterest collecting inspiration images and sorting them into themed boards. He liked to hear the small noises of the two main women in his life getting along so well. "Liz is so brilliant at wallpapers like you won't believe," his mother gushed when the subject was out of earshot. At the same time, he worked diligently on the ground level in the kitchen, adding cabinets, installing rotating storage, gluing a Grecian bevelled backsplash behind the sink, and dealing with the electrician on the new outlets and ceiling fan. He ripped out the carpet in the dining and living rooms so Liz could have her hardwood floors. He replaced the aging railing on the staircase, substituted the showerheads in the bathrooms and switchplates in the bedrooms, and caulked all around the windows.

When he got hungry, he munched on whatever snacks Liz had allowed that month from Costco and checked on the progress upstairs. Ted had to admit, as it took shape and resembled more and more the drawings, the closet looked like the kind of place where even he, who practically lived in the typical web dev's uniform of hoodie and jeans, wouldn't mind spending time while Liz tried on various outfits ahead of a party. His mother had included a simple rod and set of drawers recessed into a corner for his repetitive and paltry, at least compared to Liz's, repertoire of items. At various points in the relationship, Ted had considered trying to get more into men's fashion to match his glitzy partner. In the end, after fifteen years together, he had felt shame at how simple it had been—the matter of emptying his corner, the work of barely twenty minutes—when he packed.

"It's just a closet," Ted said to his mother with the phone wedged between his shoulder and ear, lying on the guest bed after he and Liz decided he would have downstairs until they sorted the living situation out, and popping the tab on a can of LaCroix. "She might as well enjoy it."

"But all that effort. Are you sure you can't work it out? Why won't you tell me the reason? Didn't you try counselling? I don't like the idea of you down there like that."

"It's just for a while. And then Liz will buy me out and she'll probably get a renter," he said.

She did, in fact, very quickly, faster than Ted even had anticipated. He had thought Liz would at least want to enjoy the quiet and emptiness for a few months before sharing. Yet she must have had the listing up before he even moved out to Surrey, for a few days later, Morgan said he drove by their address "in the name of research" and a medical student was directing a bunch of burly men beside a U-Haul truck to be careful with her portable fridge. Liz must have staged the rooms like a ghost and taken photographs when he was at work and put everything away before he came back. Several times in the weeks before moving out, Ted thought of performing a search on the most popular rental sites to see what exactly she had written to market the place they had overhauled together, but he always thought better of it. What good would it possibly do?

Unlike the business with the house, they split the vehicles easily, fifty-fifty. Elizabeth had upgraded the Prius she drove in college to a Toyota sedan a few months before. Ted had his old orange camper van; he spent a few nights in it when he couldn't sleep just watching reruns of building shows on television, until Rick Steves' Europe showed up on PBS and the blonde Boomer with the wire-rim glasses argued for the merits of Spain, the blackbirds winging across the Roman aqueducts at Segovia and the striped

arches of the Mezquita in Córdoba scaling upon one another in every which direction, imprinting them in the gyri and sulci of his brain.

Elizabeth had not come to the door as Ted drove away for the final time. He had wondered all day if she would. He had felt his stomach drop at least a few storeys at the lack of shadow nor wave as he pulled out onto the road. Yet over dinner that night with the wife and kids, Morgan said her non-appearance was for the best. He said that he was already thinking of keywords for Ted's online dating profile: *handy, athletic, a good plus one, permanently employed, can seduce you in C++, HTML, JavaScript and more; and interested in what you have to say*. Morgan said Ted needed better photos too, ones where he wasn't holding a fish and snowboarding and jetskiing like every other douchebag in the Pacific Northwest.

"Am I," Ted asked him. "Interested in what they have to say?"

"That's what they all want to hear," Morgan said. "You're just being more explicit about it."

"You sure?"

"I'm a lawyer," Morgan said. "Trust me. Every second you waste not getting new strange is Elizabeth winning this breakup."

"I don't care about winning. And, Jeez, Morg, your kids are listening."

"You should," Morgan said. "Everyone cares about winning. In the end, anyway."

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Ted lay on his bed. A desktop fan the size of a breadbox turned its buzzing head from side to side and danced the transparent cream curtains framing the balcony in miniature figure eights around the baseboard. The bar-resto had filled up even more as he finished eating, and now, even from a level above, the diners' conversations nearly covered the raw *soleás por bulerías* Valeria liked to play on the sound system connected to a turntable during dinner. The bawling in the *soleas*, she said, was so ugly it was beautiful and paired well with her signature prawn paella and a glass of white wine.

Ted still wore the linen shirt and slacks and had rolled up the sleeves of the shirt and the bottoms of the slacks. The cool *salmorejo* siesta'd peaceably in his stomach but the vermouth and olives had warmed him up. From the nightstand next to the bed, he picked up the hand towel he had passed under cold water at the bathroom sink and wrung out and swiped his forehead and collarbones with the edge. When he replaced it on the stand, the towel's care instruction tag wetted the corner of a postcard he had been writing before leaving for the hammam.

Addressed to Elizabeth at the old house, the postcard was the remaining of two identical ones he had purchased at the gift shop of the Prado during his first visit. Gracing its front was Goya's 1797 oil painting, *La Maja Desnuda*, a miniature print of which Valeria had chosen to decorate the wall above the bed, so that its unclothed female subject directed her straightforward and unashamed gaze straight out his balcony to the units across the way. The print had inexplicably enraptured Ted while he unpacked his shirts five weeks before in the same room. He had walked around the bed viewing it from all angles, taken in by the nude's realistic, separated breasts and the prickle of dark hair at the pubic triangle, her almost too-intense scrutiny of himself. He had resolved to find her as soon as possible in the Prado, and when he did discover the painting in room 036, in the lower level dedicated almost entirely to the artist, he much preferred the plump woman reclining on a bed of pillows with her arms behind her head to the traditional Goya favourite, *El Tres De Mayo* or The Third of May, depicting the execution of Spanish loyalists by Napoleonic forces, around which a cloud of schoolchildren had gathered, corralled by their harried-looking teacher.

Ted did not usually buy tokens and mementos when travelling. The winter he and Elizabeth went to Paris for a friend's wedding, he always followed her lead right past the *boutiques de souvenirs* in the Louvre and D'Orsay for she much preferred the high-end shopping in Printemps and on the Champs-Elysées for Chanel, Dior, and Christian Louboutin. But this time he was alone to wander as he wished, and among the many curiosities in the gift shop, the turning rack of postcards—and the stack with *La Maja* on the front—had percussed a certain meanness inside of him like a single dissonant piano interval struck and held.

He had returned to his room that night, downed two *tinto de veranos*, and scratched on the back of one the postcards, "Having an excellent time! --Teddy." He added a few smileys for good measure. The next morning, he dropped the missive, after consulting with Valeria for the correct postage, in the yellow hydrant-shaped postbox marked *Correos* and spent the rest of the afternoon splashing about in the Parque del Buen Retiro on a blue rowboat, finishing with more drinks and tapas among the crowds and street performers in the Plaza Mayor.

On the second card, the next night, and just a touch more sober, Ted had written an identical message and kept it for himself in a pocket of his money belt. This time, he etched the word EXCELLENT in all capitals and underlined it so deeply that the letters could be felt from the other side, just at the level of the figure's navel. That was the way it had been with all his college girlfriends; he would make mix CDs for them and burn a second copy for his own listening pleasure, at home and in the car, imagining all the feelings circulating through their bodies as they experienced his careful ordering of the tracks, how each told a story that blended into the next and always culminated in some little joke of a piece he added for fun, like The Beatles' *Her Majesty* at the end of *Abbey Road*. Ted wished he could be there when Elizabeth received it. To see her face.

"This—us, you and me. It's good," Elizabeth had said, that day in the kitchen, seven months before.
"Good but not great. Maybe even great, but not excellent."

"But what do you mean, 'excellent'?" He had been toeing off his sneakers and removing his earbuds, just back from the gym. She had dinner on the table, tossed salad and spaghetti and meatballs, waiting for him, and the announcement that she was unhappy. His earbuds had tangled and he picked the knot apart while trying to parse out her words. She stood, unbraced against any furniture, holding a wooden spoon and he wanted to match her. He hadn't wanted to sit down, as if that would somehow signal defeat.

"I mean, I'm looking for excellent. I want to feel fully comfortable with my partner knowing they accept and support me in every way and that I feel the same for them. We have some kind of shared vision. I want to feel so solid." She had waved around the spoon to emphasize the word *so*. "No niggling doubts."

"But I don't have doubts. Where is this coming from?"

Elizabeth had disregarded him, setting more cutlery and a pitcher of water on the table and shaking a little container of vinaigrette, which she had made too early. The layers had started to separate.

"What doubts?" he asked again.

"Your doubts are so obvious. Why are you yelling?"

"I'm not. You're the one who's raising your—" He backed off. "You know I don't do well with people being loud, angry, or aggressive at me."

"You avoid everything."

"Isn't this talking? Aren't we talking? Let me ask you again—what doubts?"

"There must be other people," Elizabeth said. Her eyes roamed the ecru-colored walls of the room, as if there were unseen passages stashed behind the prints hung there from earlier travels, his historical map of the world during the Age of Sail, her framed diploma in business from UBC. "With whom it would be excellent."

Ted considered himself a measured person; his friends had come up with a word for it—"Tedsible." He went into the office only a few days a month, since most of the coding could be done remotely, but his boss and colleagues constantly dropped by his cube for advice about XYZ client who must have such-and-such personality disorder. His friends asked him for his Tedsible opinion on additions to their houses, upgrades to their laptops and cell phones, and how to explain difficult concepts like indoor plumbing to their wives and internal plumbing to their kids. He was certain he had no such doubts like those to which Elizabeth referred. She was beautiful and clever; her voice had that thick, smoky Lauren Bacall quality. They paired so well in pictures together, for she knew when not to wear heels and how to match her dress to his suit. He could not even remember the last argument they had had, or anything even close to one. And so, in the following weeks after what to him seemed like the most unceremonious and abrupt announcement, Ted had tried to act the rooted receptacle, or at the very least, the steel pail catching the drips from the roof for her inexplicable venom. There was no need to panic. A perfectly logical explanation could be found. Liz sometimes went to lunch for a twenty-five-dollar soup with friends and returned with some new complaint about his haircut, some little project for him to do. She and Ira, when they got their ridiculous heads together, came up with all kinds of harebrained schemes—never Tedsible, always expensive.

But as he and Elizabeth continued with the renovations and unpacked the rest of the boxes they had brought from the condo, she, much to his dismay, only hardened in her decision. Even worse, she started her series of liquid cleanses. Always very thin and barely one hundred twenty pounds, even while swimming competitively during graduate school, her statuesque five-foot-eight frame began to resemble a coatrack more and more while she cycled through the iridescent concoctions—Soylent, celery juice, mung bean extract, gazpacho—something different one week to the next. She cut him off when he tried to ask for more time, another conversation, for permission to talk directly to her therapist about what must have come out in some irresponsible session.

Only once, when the closet was nearly finished, had Ted managed to extract a scrap of additional information from her, when, throwing up one hand, the other pressing down on the top of a NutriBullet, Liz said, "You're incapable of change." He had wanted to say then: What have you asked me to change? Why won't you work with me? I committed to you and only you for fifteen years and you're punishing me for it. You could be helping me with the grouting and spotting me while I stand on the ladder pruning the trees outside instead of discussing the Pantone Colour of the Year for the billionth time with Ira.

But he had nodded, trying to posture amenability in case that was one of the things he was incapable of surprising her with. Except it didn't seem to matter what he did. While Ted boiled and eddied around in a private hell, she looked more and more content every day, having said her piece, paying little attention to his wildly casted-about alterations in word and manner. He went on painting and sanding and tooling, but recognized more and more, he was renovating this house for someone else to live in. Existing around each other in minimally touching Venn circles did not unsettle her as she waited for him to accept her judgement. Elizabeth was often like that with clients. He had seen her stand up in a full boardroom once when he brought her a forgotten thermos at work, with a laser pointer in her fist, wearing a crisp white mandarin-collared blouse tucked into wide-legged Gucci trousers secured with a matching belt, one hard heel of an ankle boot driven slightly back into the floor. The only daughter of a commercial fisherman and an accountant, born to them when they were in their late thirties, a couple whose first pregnancies resulted in a series of late miscarriages, Liz had imbibed and nursed in all her parents' attention, and even more now that they had both retired. She had learned early to be confident and assured. In

graduate school at UBC, she was the same, only in a slightly less blatant way, had known what to order and with which wine pairings at restaurants, conversed with professors like old friends, vaulted between formerly far-flung networks on the back of sweet speech and weak ties. She sucked in library books like oysters, and once completed, never re-read them, their knowledge instantly macerated and re-encased into her machined expertise. Back then all these endowments had fascinated him. Ted had not lacked for female attention either at university, especially from the undergrads when he became a teaching assistant in computer science, yet her selection of him over all her other suitors had flattered his ego. Now her shape, which he had once reckoned so complementary to his, was like that of a shifting Gorgon he could no longer understand nor look in the eye should he turn into stone. It made him feel foolish, like a child shivering the reflection of the moon in a once-still pool with a spit-sticky finger.

They still took meals together. It was just easier to cook for two and pack the leftovers into lunches and avoid processed cafeteria food. But from time to time, Ted looked at Elizabeth's angular, elegant face, across the table, sipping, slurping, and ladling, and after the dishes were cleared, passing above him on the staircase, the eyes filmy and unagitated, her version of Tedsible, and felt like flinging his fists into the newly redone floor. Certain actions he had never noticed before stood out in sharp relief—the way she always began to clear the table of cutlery and plates before he finished eating, only dusted her Royal Doulton figurines and never his Lord of the Rings ones, and was not very careful of his succulents when she vacuumed, so that he had to readjust them for optimal sunlight afterwards. All of these things he found out too late, like discovering a carbon copy for a cheque he had forgotten he had signed. His capitulation, at last, was pre-ordained.

"You're right. I believe you," he told her one day as she shrugged one shoulder, which protruded, rawboned, from an impeccable-silky draped top in Ira-selected ivory, as though to say, *There you go*. And from then on, the split had paraded forward in fully formed lockstep, with the ease of pulling apart a thousand-piece jigsaw in a few simple folds and fumbles compared to its agonizing completion.

"You'll be fine once you're in Spain," Morgan had said. "I'll have my tailor—he's from San Sebastián—draw up an itinerary."

"No," Ted said. "I'll do it myself."

Liz would never have wanted to visit the tiny Pueblos Blancos, or White Villages, outside of Sevilla, named for the whitewash paint which, in addition, to presenting a cohesive aesthetic, according to the guide, imparted anti-bacterial properties to the houses. She would have complained about the plus-35 degree heat, the reapplication of sunblock, and the lack of natural shade at the more out-of-the-way monuments and ruins. At the famous bridge dividing Ronda, she would have declined to descend all the way down the unmaintained, switchback paths of the steep surrounding gorges, the only way to get the best angles and thus the best pictures. She would have wanted to see the flamenco the easy way in the square outside the Real Alcázar and throw a euro into the hat, and not at the small hole-in-the-wall theatre that Ted had ferreted out, hidden in a covered market, across the bridge in seedy Triana. She would have never purchased the castanets he now had in his suitcase and clacked at times for the pure joy of the sound, like breaking off the first joint of a fresh lobster claw to expose the tender meat inside. Here in Madrid for the second time, Ted told himself, it made him feel strong to probe around these streets with the languid lope of a local. To not worry about her stilettos caught in cobblestone. To roam the Gran Vía searching for gelato instead of a fucking cobbler.

Ted returned the postcard to the nightstand, text-side down, further from the towel this time. The shell of his left ear was oddly warm; a sneeze seemed to build up behind his sinuses. At the same moment, there came a knock on the door and he instantly felt his forehead, which had been, unbeknownst to him, stiffening with these thoughts, relax like a bolt of cloth unrolled. He did not want her to see what he had been doing, slightly embarrassed, as though caught, as a child, using the planer in the shed after hours without his father's permission.

He quickly smoothed out the creases in his shirt and rolled up his sleeves, as neatly as he could, one more time on each side.

"Come in," he said.

The doorknob turned and Lita stood framed in the doorway.

"*Buenos noches*," he said.

She brought in a tray with a glass of raspberry-coloured liquid on it, setting it on the nightstand. "*Tinto de verano*," she said. "While the summer is on."

"It is only beginning. Will you drink with me now? Sit down."

She had changed into different clothes, out of the uniform, into a dress of blue and white gingham with very thin straps and a square bodice which set off her deep tan. She seemed thicker than she was in June. She looked around, her gaze alighting on the different pieces of furniture, even though it was the same room as he'd had the last time they were together. Ted wanted to lift one of the straps of her dress and stamp a kiss there and let the strap snap back until her skin dimpled.

"A sip," she agreed.

He watched her drink. Then as she replaced the glass on the nightstand, he pulled her to him until she sat on his lap and she looped her arms loosely around his neck and he kissed her deeply. Her mouth tasted like spirits and something vaguely sweet and minty. He began to slide his hands up the side of her dress, searching for the zipper. Just before he managed to draw it more than a quarter of the way down, however, she pulled back from him and slid her silky hand across his brow, and seeing the towel on the nightstand, picked it up, and touched it again to his cheek. He turned his head to press his mouth to the inside of her wrist. "I missed you," he said. "In Sevilla. In Granada. In Ronda. In Sevilla. In Barcelona, I just wanted to sit in the Parc Güell with you and make fun of the tourists."

"Lalo, you are a tourist," she said, but moved the towel down the side of his face, almost to his neck. "You said Sevilla twice."

"I missed you twice."

"I will kiss you two more times just for that," she said. Yet when he reached again to slip his fingers under the curve of her bottom she shifted away from the contact.

"You're going to make my hair all wet," he said.

"Everything dries quickly in this heat." She stood up. "In fact." She walked over to the laundry line and pinched the edge of the towel he had hung there between her fingers. "This is dry," she said. "You should remove it."

"I'll get it later." Ted stretched out and pulled at her arm. She let him take her left hand, but bent her body in another direction and reached with her other hand to a small package she had in her dress pocket. It was funny, he thought, that her dress should have pockets, and not the false or shallow kind that most women's clothing had. He had learned that from Elizabeth. She had always asked him, when she didn't want to carry a purse, to put something of hers, like her signature Bobbi Brown lipstick, in his pockets.

"I have something for you. For your *cuarenta*."

"You didn't have to. Come kiss me again. Will you take off your dress?" He traced his finger up her arm and shoulder and to where each strap met the bodice.

There was a small button there and a similar one on the other side. He touched the pad of his thumb to it and stopped. An uneasy curiosity stole over him. The mother-of-pearl button dangled almost spherical with an equatorial braid of gold, and as he held it, its texture made him pause, draw back, for a recollection came to him of a shape very similar. He frowned.

"Lalo? Here it is," Lita said, but he did not reach out to take the package from her, still meddling the button in tiny circles.

On the design of Elizabeth's work overalls, months before, there had been such an embellishment on each side. She had ordered them from a shop specializing in utility wear. Ted had forgotten their existence until now. Perhaps, he imagined, in an act in keeping with her treatment of the entire breakup, she had thrown them out as soon as he moved away. It had made him smile slightly when she had opened the package enfolding the cream-coloured garment, after the UPS guy dropped it off, that Ira had had enough sense at least to recommend a pair, even if they looked ridiculously gaudy for any real sort of work.

Ted had tried to catch Elizabeth by the strap of the overalls and the unexpected motion had nearly caused her to fall. It was one of the days she had actually tried to help with the sanding, the two of them alone in the house, his mother at the hairstylist's and Ira busy with another client in Burnaby.

Seeing her on her hands and knees in the living room, in a dirty t-shirt, dust on her elbows, the front of the overalls sagging, he had dipped in for the strap, and then tried to grip her hips from behind, turning her around in his arms. His mouth only caught the rim of her chin as she ducked away with a gasp. "What are you doing?" she said.

It should have been obvious what he was doing, he had wanted to say. He had only wanted her to want to warm her hands on his body. Her cheeks were slightly rose, but not from him and not from work. Some other sort of emotion he was unable to name had tinted them. He had only wanted to prove theirs was a fire that had only been banked and not gone out.

"I have to use the bathroom," she said and walked away, wiping her hands on the thighs of the overalls. Left him standing there, until he made the tiniest notch with his nail in the coat of fresh paint he had put down the day before on the doorframe, just at the height of his hip.

"It is a big one, *la cuarenta*," Lita said.

Underneath her brown-eyed scrutiny, Ted shook his head. He did not want to think about Elizabeth. He moved his hand and charted the skin at the low neckline of Lita's dress, where there was a slight dip in her cleavage. The dress made very little attempt to hide the wearer's bust and the gentle round delineation of an areola sent a dopey wave of warming to the region between his legs. She did not shy away this time, but took the wandering hand in hers, turned it over so the palm faced up, pried back his fingers, and placed the package inside. Lita's dark skin was hot and, he fancied, it was not from the air or the *tinto*.

"What's this?" he asked.

She held onto his hand with the white crinkled material upon it and, when he still did not unwrap the tissues, shrugged and placed it on his nightstand. "It is a stamp," she said. "A lion's head. With some ink. I believe this is what you are."

“*El león*,” he said. He didn’t know that people used stamps as signatures anymore. “This made you think of me?”

“It can be your sign. Did you go?” she asked.

“I did.”

“The lions will be restored,” she said.

“Do you really think so?”

“I have faith.”

He laughed. “It’s archaeology. It’s nothing to do with religion.”

“Still, I have it.”

“Clearly, then, you’ve not seen Saint George in the church in Navarre, nor the wooden Virgin in Ranadouro, nor the Christ in Borja.” He named off the most famous examples he could think of, of terrible art restorations, of beloved pieces turned muppet-like and cartoonish in well-meaning rejuvenation.

“I saw it,” she said. “*Ecce Homo*. But the lions protect themselves. My...” she trailed off. “They know what they are doing.”

For a moment he bit the back of his tongue with a molar. Ted had asked her not to say the name in front of him, of her clever, well-travelled, multi-lingual, highly educated boyfriend. She knew, of course, of his *Liza*, but had not extracted any such equivalent promise from him. He had never asked why not. Or why she kept using the possessive to refer to Elizabeth.

The boyfriend’s name was Yağmur. He was a Turkish doctorate student in archaeology from the Universidad, had won a grant to perform on-site work on the restoration of the Alhambra, namely, of the three interconnected Nasrid Palaces built in the fourteenth century, when the Moorish Sultans still ruled parts of the Iberian Peninsula. He and Lita had been seeing each other regularly for nearly eight months before Yağmur travelled to Granada. Restoration work had been ongoing in the Palace of the Lions since the earlier part of the decade, where the ornate oblong courtyard displayed the famous stylized cats around a fountain of white marble. Yağmur was to stay in the city to work on the third of twelve lions in the series. For how long he was unsure, probably at least a year, or until the grant funding ran out. Lita had been vague about it to Ted.

“Did you speak to him?” Ted asked and the dryness of his own voice surprised him. He didn’t mean to sound accusing.

“Yes,” she said. “He called.” She touched the tissue-wrapped package. Its leaves rustled but did not reveal their contents. “They have moved the lion to the other building, where it is easier to use the tools,” she said.

“So I surmised,” he said.

In Granada, Ted had foregone his usual short-stay rental in favour of a youth hostel just off the Gran Vía de Colón. Grotty black spots of mold lined the tiles of the communal showers and the narrow mattress of the top bunk dug into his lower back, yet his intention panned out when he met a few Britons, an American, and an Australian who had also booked the eleven o’clock timed entrance slot to the palaces.

Together they climbed the tree-lined arcades past the Puerta de las Granadas and the Puerta de la Justicia and pledged to reconvene for *cervescas* later in the Old Town. His companions photographed him in front of the Patio de los Leones, where he counted the missing alabaster animal, which the guide informed them had been removed to the workshops of the Patronato for the restoration.

Ted had shaded himself in the covering of the surrounding low gallery with its filigree columns, staring at the water as it fell out the mouths of the lions and split at the fountain's base into four streams that ran perpendicularly towards the walls. Depending on the perspective from which one looked, the water tinged slightly green or brown or reflected the jewelled slate-blue of the sky. He stood there and a glancing idle inquisition had tickled him as he considered his appearance, the subject of a photograph among the stilted arches and honeycombed *muqarnas*, one of the many tourists, staff, and scholars who passed through each day. Had Yağmur moved in the same place perhaps only hours or days before? Walked the same tile and seen the same orange trees? Lita had shown him a picture in her wallet. The Turk was tall, taller than Ted, coffee-skinned like her with broad linebacker shoulders and wore his hair in a low ponytail and a moustache that half-obscured his mouth.

Ted's hostel confederates had kept jabbering in English with the guide, while exchanging light insults with one another, Tara, the Aussie, calling the one American "America" and poking fun at the stars-and-stripes badge sewn on his backpack.

To their questions, the guide responded, "The restorers are removing layers of calcium carbonate, invasive metals, and repairing breaks in the marble. They are also detaining any bacteria that may have grown and damaged the structures over the centuries."

"But I thought the Sultans purposely built in imperfections into the patterns," Romesh, the Briton from Oxford said, as America exclaimed, "What exactly is it, that makes me look so American? I'll have you know, my mother is half-Irish."

"The freckles. The bro words. You claim to be a 'digital nomad.' Fuck, you're wearing a UPenn hoodie," said Tara, plucking at the material as the boy ducked back from her hand.

"You are right, in that they did so because only Allah is perfect," the guide told Romesh. "But no one wants to lose the lions. That would be a tragedy for all the generations."

"This is from a thrift store!" said America. "So it's different. I didn't even go to Penn."

"I think that somehow makes it worse," said Tara.

"Nuh-un."

"Yuh-huh."

"Forgive my friends," Romesh said to the guide and making a face at Ted, who was still thinking of Yağmur. "They know not what they do."

Yağmur's impressive publication record didn't faze Ted. Neither did his doctorate. In Córdoba, Ted had sought out and watched a video on the internet of the young man bent over a guitar fingerpicking a *solea* with a blurring dexterity that would have dumbfounded even Valeria. He was probably exactly the type of person Lita should be with, twenty-five and exotically handsome, with an excellent career going somewhere even more excellent, notwithstanding Ted's suspicion of a difference in religions, easily surmounted if the boyfriend believed more in the scientific methods that he used rather than in a deity, which, Ted understood, was much the case with the new generation. Ted imagined the boyfriend probably made tools act excellent in his hands while chipping away at calcareous deposits and pencilling

excellent stenographic notes on each improvement in an excellent leather-bound notebook. The two of them, he and Lita, probably looked very well together in photographs, even without the ideal light and shadow and composition that Ted had been delicately learning all summer.

They would make beautiful children. They were beautiful children.

But Yağmur had left Lita. That was the crucial thing and the leaving was what emboldened Ted. The blockhead had accepted the fellowship, packed a bag, and taken a train south. He was there in Granada and she was in Madrid and she and Ted were in Bar La Gloria together sitting beside each other on a bed, the air from the window that was only just beginning to cool stirring pieces of her hair loose from where she had tucked them, the rouge on her cheeks wearing off in sweat, and the contradiction of goosepimples raised on her upper arms.

Ted leaned over and kissed her again on the shoulder, her answering shiver sending the sheets trembling.

"Take off your dress," he said again. He pulled the straps slowly off her shoulders, gifting her margin to decline. She only looked into his eyes, as though driving the stipplings in her own into his.

"It will take a long while," she said. "One lion at a time. And I have heard the basin cannot be removed."

"Then they will do it *in situ*." He planted an open-mouthed kiss to her collarbone. Her breath came heavily against him as she massaged the back of his neck, each vertebrae in sequence. "Are you counting?" he asked, amused.

"No."

How simple it could be to want someone, he thought, while pushing her body into the bed. The pillow lay upright against the headboard, where he had been sitting to read earlier, and so the back of her head when it struck the mattress was level with the bum of her dress. The tiny dark wells of her nostrils looked up at him, released sweet warm breath onto his face. They had not yet made love in June.

He began to ruche up the bottom of her dress, pushing past her thighs, slightly sticky with perspiration, and placed one hand on the waistband of her underwear. He stretched it with a finger.

"Stop," she said suddenly. "Lalo."

He kissed her mouth again.

"Stop." And she splayed her hand against his chest, latching on like the suction of a starfish.

"You don't mean that," he said. "Do you want to kiss some more first?"

"It's not that."

Silence. With his finger still gaping the waistband, he hovered over her. He was not sure in which direction to move or whether to stay like that, his elbows and knees like tentpoles driven unevenly into the soft springs. His arousal sawed and simmered back and forth. Slowly, he slid the finger along the interior of the waistband, edging against the simple cotton at its base. She watched him. He released it and the snapping sound as it struck her flesh made him aware of the lack of music.

"Listen," she said.

He did. Footsteps from the ground floor. The chinking of glassware and mutterings of *salud*. Sounds that could only be heard in the absence of all other sound.

Why was there silence? The *soleas* from downstairs had stopped. He looked to the door, which led to the staircase, at the foot of which a corridor sideswiped the main dining area. In the light of the lamp on the nightstand, his room's ceilings and walls looked dim and slightly peach. *La Maja Desnuda* appeared smaller in the lamplight. The sun set at almost ten in July and the tiniest flare from the doors open to the balcony illuminated her skin orange. The larger of the two windows, too, was still open and light shafted from the lower story and the low murmur of conversation from the restaurant was like the rubbing of fabric on fabric. Perhaps Valeria had gone for a cigarette and forgotten to change the record. People would be leaving for the curfew soon.

Lita reclined very similarly to *La Maja*, but she seemed fixated on the hem of his shirt, where a loose thread hung, one he had noticed before, but kept neglecting to cut off. The inexplicable hush broke the moment. Again, the tightness in his pelvis pierced him and somewhere in his neck a prickle of irritation began at the interruption.

"Can we," he said. "Let me."

She didn't say anything.

He knew what he should do. He recognized in her gaze something of his own, not too long before. His elbows hurt from holding himself up and he wanted to sigh. The joints about to lock and arguing with themselves to re-articulate and roll to the side. He knew everything about silences and what they forewarned.

All these glancing, oblique near-misses. Was everything to be so? Had he been stupid to expect? In June, after meeting the young girl, he had hoped for this. In Segovia and Toledo. In Ronda, he had hoped for this. In museums when he should have been paying attention to great art he had hoped for this. In the cathedral that the Christians had built in the Mezquita at Córdoba in an attempt to cover the odium of the Muslim infidels, he had hoped for this, like the basest man in a century before who had bent his knee and lighted candle after candle in a side chapel there against the same desires. Maybe it was a matter of deserving, of what gave him the right. In fact, when Elizabeth had turned away from him while renovating, it was not the first such incident, only the first after her stupid announcement of her need for *excellent*.

¡El Excelente! Morgan should really have written in Ted's profile. *¡Aceptando solicitudes! ¡Buscando La Excelente a Mi Excelente!*

Lita said, "I can't," and still did not remove the staying hand from his chest, though the press lightened.

Ted looked to a point on the sheets next to her head.

When Elizabeth was making the pivotal pushes to make partner, she had turned Ted down for sex on more than one occasion, arranging her reading glasses in a dish by the bed and saying the chapter had made her sleepy. He had accepted her excuses, while thinking with an aching in his lower parts how urgently they had once defaced each other, stretching each seam and tasting the metallic crush of zippers pulled down too quickly, the ridiculousness of button-flies on jeans and front-closure bras. After graduate school, when they first bought the condo, a fire alarm had pealed in the building at two in the morning, just a drill, and after they came back in the re-approved elevators, they had lain there for all of five minutes before she stripped off her clothing and dragged herself down his body to take him in her mouth, until he nearly sobbed with the jagged violence of the thunder voicing back and forth between his ears and tagging each vertebrae all the way down to his tailbone. The knotting of his fingers in her hair

where the expensively constructed ombré by her appointment-only coiffeuse transitioned from brown to blonde.

Never again had there been a moment like that. Work, girlfriends, shopping, Ira, a vacation to Cabo San Lucas when she still spent ages on her VPN answering work emails, and then a vacation from her vacation that was more of the same.

He squeezed his eyes shut against the images now. He had gone along with it. What else was he to do? He had gone on working and drifting from viewing to viewing with her. Then, one night, just before they closed on the new house, Liz had inexplicably wanted to make love. She drew near to him on the sectional and placed a hand on his thigh. She asked him if he wanted to go to their bedroom. On this subject, she could never directly ask for what she wanted, the only one for which that seemed to be the case. By this time, he had wanted not only to be wanted, but hungered for, and maybe, in a way, he had wanted her to beg. So he slid away from her, almost found an irascible vindictiveness in turning her down, and then a few hours later, as she slept soundly as though nothing had happened, sat on the toilet seat with his phone on Private Browsing mode to get himself off, in such a hurry he forgot the tissue, and had ended by splashing against the opposite tile like a child's fingerpainting.

Perhaps he could say now that that had been a problem; he could admit now that that had been a problem. And if one problem existed, then possibly many more had eluded his understanding. He hadn't seen it as one at the time, just something to be powered through. He had never named the frustration with a word such as "unfulfilled." Perhaps Elizabeth had expected him to. She expected everything of him so casually, his non-opinion on her eating habits, his absence when Ira was around, and then she expected him to be as unhappy as she, when the suspicion of his unhappiness never crossed his mind, as though he skated beside her on the surface of a smooth canal while, just over the sloped bank, she wore her sneaker treads down on a path of sludgy debris. She made him feel as though his fidelity to her was some vice, some brief impertinence, some corner of the old wallpaper not peeled away with the putty knife.

Again, Lita, beneath him, with her hot globular eyes, said, "I can't."

"Okay," Ted said. "Okay."

In the new house, Liz had never tried again. She switched off the light on her side and faced away from him in the bed, a Barbie-pink terry-cloth mask binding her eyes. She always fell asleep faster than Ted did. One night, after he moved downstairs, in the dark, he tiptoed to her room as she slept. Went to that nearly finished closet and shut the door noiselessly behind him, turned on the avant-garde pendant light some firm had custom-designed for Liz, and rooted around among the tens of thousands of dollars' worth of items. She had begun filling it a few days before with an exacting filing system and he turned a four-inch pump to the wrong angle here, undid a lace there, wanting to leave some infirmity, some sign of his existence.

After the months spent on the closet, its innards had already taken on a new smell, nearly supplanting those of paint and treated woods—that of her cologne, from the men's section. She had always said fragrance did not have a gender; those words and colours were just silly marketing, and it was with such a view that she had made her selection of her signature fragrance, the peppery, piquant notes of Viktor & Rolf. Spicebomb. So masculine. So Liz. When she first started sleeping over in graduate school, his sheets had taken all week to surrender the scent back to his own.

Lita, on the other hand, smelled like mints. Like a toothbrush.

Now, Lita's face, beneath him, so different from Elizabeth's, appeared indistinct and smudged, like a last bit of a chocolate bar melted into the wrapper after being carried in a jeans' pocket all day. It was

imperfect. A small mole divided the interval between her eyebrows unevenly. The beginnings of rings of Venus forked on her neck. She looked like she could arch against him and make sounds that would transport him to another place. He knew what he should do. Still, he found it troubled his throat that she would not remove her dress, would decline to conduct the train and all its coupled cars, and instead, she pulled the straps back up over her shoulders.

"It is not that I do not—" Lita said.

"You don't have to explain," Ted said. He was suddenly very tired.

"I want to."

"Dolores."

She looked at him. "Eduardo."

"I know," he said. "I know."

She seemed to consider this and then accept it. "*Momento*," she said and reached behind her head to sweep most of her hair to the side, making room for him. This time it was she who pulled him down. Instead of on top of her though, she rolled him to the side where her hair had been and just below so that his forehead was level with her chest. They lay together on the bed.

"Just put your arms around me. That's it." She pulled his arms and arranged them. He deliberately allowed them to flop and she struggled slightly with the weight. She lifted herself to slip one arm beneath her and drew the other across her stomach. The fingers could touch on the other side, but he didn't bother.

He pressed his face into the side of her dress. He felt like he had been thrown into a pit of bodies, all the parts and impossible positions and dirt shovelled over by crews which themselves would meet the same fate in due time.

"You know," he said. "I wanted to be burnt. This feels like a mass grave."

"*Como*," she asked.

He did not know the phrase for it, so he said, "*Muchas en un agujero*." Many in a hole. "I want to turn into dust and force someone to carry me around as a result of some stupid clause in my stupid will."

"Do not," she said. "It's not orthodox."

"This face," he said. "Won't be getting anything after another ten years. All ash in the end anyways."

"You are very good-looking, Lalo," she said.

"You are better looking," he said. "I think girls are better looking in general."

"You will find someone," she said. "Very pretty."

"I wish it were you."

"Eduardo, please."

And then suddenly again, he felt like making a stand for what he wanted, what he felt he should get, whether he deserved it or not. Morgan was wrong about all of that. He wasn't really interested in what anyone had to say. He only wanted to be called excellent for a while and to be told he was cute and to be made love to and to be offered a little chore or two around the house here and there. He placed his head against the spongy hamper of her stomach, and listened to her breath rifling in and out.

"It could be you. Do you not even entertain the thought?" he asked.

"We are not at the same place," she said.

"How so?"

"Do not get angry," she said. "I am very young."

"I might be ready. We are close."

"That is a nice story," she said. "Like the lions."

"I don't want to talk about the lions."

"I am sorry."

"And it's not a story." He paused. "Do you think you would be good for me? You can answer."

"I do not know. No," she said.

"Oh, of course you would."

"Eduardo, do not."

He was growing excited, the space between his trouser legs moist, and tilted his head back to look at the curve of her lips, the bottom of her chin. "What do you think I'm thinking?" he asked, touching her hip.

"You are thinking, what if your Liza was excellent," she said.

Your Liza. And that word. The stupid word. He surveyed her face, the colour swarming to his own. She faced the ceiling.

When had he mentioned that to Lita? He must have drunk too much, maybe the time they were in his room in June and she brought him the strong, distilled *orujo* to try in a series of *chupitos*. The shot glass had deceived him of the liquor's usual consumption by sipping and before she could stop him, the entire thing was inside him, burning, plummy, and like a stomp to his throat. The *orujo* must have inflamed in him a stronger anger than he had wanted to show. That night, she might have held him. He might have shouted. He did not think he had cried. He had woken without the dry calculous feeling tears would have left on his face. Still, he felt bitter at himself, as though that past Ted had hamstrung his now self.

"No, she wasn't," he stated firmly.

"But you were thinking it."

"It wasn't. It wasn't right. She was right. I shouldn't be like that. I kept trying, trying, trying, more than a hundred percent, trying to make up the percents. I could've kept my relationship alive that way but I would

have had nothing left for everything else in my life. If you're stressed about keeping your relationship alive, it's a big energy suck, you know?"

She shook her head. "I do not understand about the percents. What is an energy suck?"

"This is new now. I haven't dated in fifteen years, didn't need to, I had my person already and I guess—what I'm trying to say is—I can't screw this up. I don't want to be splitting in another five to ten years or so. I couldn't bear it. I wouldn't survive."

"What is an energy suck?" she repeated.

"*Muchas en un agujero,*" he, too, repeated, for lack of words.

She stroked his face, massaging his maxilla up to his temples, across his brows and down the bridge of his nose and spreading back across the cheeks to the bottom of the jaw. He felt the insides of his cheeks move against his lower gums.

"It is not me," she said.

He plucked at his own fingers from where they barely touched on the other side of her body. The forearm on which most of her weight lay was going numb, but he did not move it.

"Listen, Lita. Maybe you're thinking: my situation isn't simple, but—"

"No one's situation is," she said.

"No, I know, but—"

She lifted her chin. "I will not always be a waitress. And Yağmur—"

"That's not what I was going to say." He didn't care what Yağmur was or wasn't going to do.

"Tell me."

"I'm forty. I have more time but I don't want to be forty-five and starting a family."

"It will happen when you are ready," she said. And rubbed his hair. He nearly whimpered with the gentleness of it. Knifewipes of self-loathing crossed him, first in one direction and the other, opposing each other, then faded as though the flesh in a flash had scissored apart then rejoined itself. From downstairs, the *solea* started up again along with handclaps and the cricketing of castanets. The agony of it. He reached for her fingers and tried to read in her handclasp some note of regret.

"What will," he asked, his mouth half-buried in fabric.

"Your stuff." She did not know the word for it. She said *tus cosas*.

"What *cosas*?"

She was silent. The *soleas* wept.

"Everything of mine, you mean."

"Yes."

"You don't even know all of my *cosas*," he said.

"*Todas*," she said. "I have faith."

"It's already July," he said.

"And?"

"Summer is falling through." He had lost the words to say *ending*.

"Do not say that," she said.

"Why not?"

"It feels like the death of somebody loved."

"Who are you talking about?"

"I do not know. Maybe somebody loved is always dying. Somebody good."

"Do you think love can make somebody good?" he asked.

"If there was already good inside that person," she said.

"You think there is something good inside everyone."

"That is true," she admitted. "So yes."

"Alright."

"If there was already good inside that person, maybe love can perfect them," she said.

Ted looked up at her chin again. "Why did you use that word?"

"What word?"

"Perfect. Nothing's perfect."

"I suppose I was thinking of God. How he will perfect us one day, when we are face to face with Him." She rolled her feet slightly. "Oh, I do not know. Lalo, your questions. They are too many."

"I was a half of something good," he said. "Once. Is that good enough?"

"Then you can be again," she said.

"Do you really think so?"

"Lalo," she said. "Lalo, I have to go. The curfew."

"You don't have to. You can stay."

"This day is the birthday of my roommate. Her *treinta*. I have already been here for your *cuarenta*."

"You didn't say before," he said.

"It was your *cuarenta*," she repeated.

"I guess that's fair," he said.

"Finish the *tinto*," she said as he looked at the tray where the condensation had long ago dropped in streams down the side of the glass and made a rim of water at its base.

"Shoot, I forgot to show you the pictures," he remembered. The camera in its case hung by a strap from a knob at the closet.

She touched his hand before he could rise. "No matter. I know you were there." She got up to leave and made for the switch on the fan. "You do not need this. The temperature is perfect this time of night."

"Leave it on," he said. "It's still warm to me. And the towel."

She nodded. And then the door shut and only the shallow imprint of her dress on the bed remained and the towel still hanging there on the taut line in the niche swinging slightly with the withered motion of the air as she had passed, like a telephone wire after the final bird had flown away.

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Now it was the half-hour before the curfew. Still partially reclined on the mattress, looking out the balcony, Ted saw the bricks on the buildings across from La Gloria at ground level had dimmed from orange to a bluish colour, so he knew the restaurant had closed.

Another knock on the door, longer and unhurried. "*Soy yo*," Valeria's voice, heavy like a rag soaked in dishsoap, said.

For a moment, he didn't know who it was, for she hardly ever spoke Spanish to him. When choosing a place to stay, Ted had selected her listing for its centrality and proximity to Gran Vía and Puerta Del Sol and for her pose in the profile photo, her direct gaze with the kitchen in the background which made him think of pressing a rolling pin deeply into a lump of dough. On meeting she had not disappointed. When La Gloria had surpassed 4.5 stars on TripAdvisor, Valeria had stopped humouring the tourists and their little phrasebooks. She did not usually visit him either; he paid for his accommodations by credit card online, and when he required advice and directions, he made his way down to her.

Slowly, he levered himself to his feet and opened the door to admit her. Like Lita, Valeria carried a tray, yet this one held a single glass and a pitcher of water. She balanced it expertly in one hand, the other carrying a small portable radio he had seen behind the bar but had never heard play before, only the phonograph connected to the speakers in the corners of the restaurant and the wall-mounted flatscreens presenting La Liga and La Segunda División on Movistar+.

He moved aside to allow her entrance. She first shifted the tray Lita had brought to the student's desk, scraping aside the pile where he had thrown some maps and the red diamond of his transit multi-card. Then she set the pitcher on the nightstand and from it, filled the glass three-quarters of the way to the top. Next to the glass she also placed the radio and pulled out its telescoping antenna. Her caramel-coloured shoulder recalled to him a single slab of maplewood used as a butcher's block.

"*Canadiense*," she said. "Happy birthday. *La cuarenta*, no?" At his silence she said, "I have brought you the water you need."

"And a radio?"

She shrugged. "For myself. Drink."

"You saw Lita come down," he guessed. Without touching the water, he returned to his perch on the bed. He pressed a cushion between his back and the headboard. He, too, had watched Lita leave from the balcony, the young woman's dark, violin-like shape walking down the *barrio* and disappearing along a side street, her purse at her hip, empty of the lion she had given him, and swinging from her wrist, a net bag of small oranges. They were like the ones crowding the trees in the Jardines de Daraxa of the Alhambra.

Valeria nodded. "So," she said. "You and Dolores."

"Yes," he answered. "In a manner of speaking." He considered the improbability of hiding anything. "And if you're thinking—no, we haven't."

Without asking, she pulled out the chair from the table and sat down, stretching her legs straight out in front of her. She rotated her shoulders one at a time and smoothed her interlaced fingers down the fabric of her long skirt, like two children holding hands to negotiate a slide in the playground.

"I do not make a judgement," Valeria said. "You are very different."

"Right," he said.

"She and the Turk. Different also."

"Muslim," he said.

"No, not that. There are things other than religion. But that, too," she admitted.

"You like him," Ted said. He rubbed at his forehead. A coil-like cramping had begun there as he had held Lita before on the mattress, and in his arm which had been driven into its springs by her back, the scaffolding of insensateness remained like a spectre. His legs quivered. He still did not want to say the name, though there seemed very little point in the forbearance now.

"I like her," Valeria said.

"So do I."

Valeria smiled. She said, "Eduardo, why did you come here?"

This being not the question he had expected, Ted wondered if it were a test of some sort. If it was, he did not care much to pass. Slightly irritated, he said, glibly, "To see the museums."

"What did you learn?"

"The *Reconquista*."

"You mean the blood."

"What blood?"

"There is blood everywhere in this country."

"In every country. In every person." The cramp in his forehead redoubled and elasticated and moved back on itself. He continued to rub in harder circles. "Your point?" he asked.

"I am thinking, Eduardo, that you have bled," Valeria said.

"Sure. I guess so. I don't know if there is much blood left in me. She—my ex—she stole everything."

"So you said before."

Had he? Then he had really done poorly with the *chupitos*. Perhaps on multiple occasions. "Oh, well. I don't remember it if I did. Anyway, she did. She stole everything and the house and the damned closet. And upset my mother. And upset everything, really." He didn't mean to sound as angry as he did, but a choked sort of raspiness stuttered in his voice.

"I see you want to talk. If you are going to talk, then I need a drink," Valeria said.

He reached over to push the glass in her direction. "Then this is your *agua*, not mine."

"No. A real one." She reached behind her to the *tinto de verano* and took a deep pull. Then she made a face. "This is warm. It has stood too long. You two either made love or it ended very badly."

He shrugged. "*Salud*. Take a guess."

"You think you are funny, maybe. You think that maybe you are the first *Americano* or *Canadiane* to say that to me. Every summer. Every spring. Every fall. Every winter. You are year-round funny men."

"I'm not fixing to be funny. I haven't laughed in a long while," he said.

"No?" she asked.

"Not since I was with her."

"You are speaking again of Dolores."

"Who else?"

Valeria wiped at the condensation on the glass. "He came to see her, the Turk."

He cut his gaze sharply to her, twisted so hard his back lifted from the wall. "He did?" he asked. "I don't believe it. You're just saying that so I'll forget about it."

"While you were away. You thought he would not."

From the way Lita had spoken of Yağmur, the young man had seemed so focused on the grant, applying for it, writing it, planning out every part of his year that not a word was mentioned about visits. Then again, Ted couldn't remember asking.

"Science," he said to Valeria, without really thinking about it. "Methods." He did not know what he was trying to say. "Well, then, I was wrong. Just another thing. Another wrong won't spoil it any further than I already have." The phrase he had used before came to him once more. "They are beautiful children. *Son hermosos niños*." The words tasted like anise in his mouth.

"Eduardo, let me tell you why you have come to Spain," Valeria said. "For the blood."

"Why do you keep saying that?"

"Have you been to *Del Sol*?" she asked. "The plaques."

Ted nodded. On a walking tour, the guide had highlighted two commemorative plaques in the front of the Royal House of the Post Office, the first one devoted to the neighbours of Madrid who rose up against Napoleon, the events depicted in *El Tres de Mayo*. The second memorialized the victims of a series of simultaneous train bombings of the 4th of March, in 2004. He had photographed both. He made sure the words could be read in the pictures.

"I did. We have plaques too, you know," he said.

"Plaques memorializing what? You have no wars," she said. "You have no wars because you have no history. Only a fistful of centuries."

"Have you seen our trees?" he said. "You wouldn't say that if you did. They are living history. And I'll bet your bottom dollar they've seen some stuff."

She seemed to consider this. "Maybe."

"A fistful is more than enough," he said.

"You told me you went to the Prado. Did you see *El Tres de Mayo*? Did you see the blood?" she asked.

He knew what it depicted, knew very well from the Rick Steves' audio guide to which he had begun listening on the plane in preparation for the museum. He had learned from the Louvre, with Elizabeth tottering precariously in Louboutins, the misery of underplanning, especially once they discovered the lack of side-by-side English translations on the plates describing the works. But with Rick Steves' geeky voice in his ear, Ted found the easy commentary in short, American-friendly chapters just detailed enough. In 1808, Napoleon, then-Emperor of France, had burrowed his fingers into Spain on the pretext of conquering Portugal, while meaning to install his brother Joseph on the weakened Spanish throne. Six years passed before the French were finally expelled from the country, and then Goya had approached the provisional government with a request to commemorate the events in brush. In the foreground of the oil-on-canvas, a French firing squad pointed their rifles at a group of Spanish resistance fighters backed up against a hill. The central figure, a condemned man in plain workers' clothes, a white shirt and yellow breeches, raised his arms in a wide V as he knelt among a pile of corpses already executed. Others around him clutched their faces and crouched away. Blood furrowed the ground and splashed on the dead.

"I didn't have a proper look. School children," Ted lied, looking away from Valeria, at his sun-brown hands and nails which needed a trim.

"Goya was not afraid to show blood," she said. "It is so fresh that you can practically watch it oxidizing two hundred years later."

"So?"

"Blue to red, red to brown, brown to black."

"It's blood. It does that," he said.

"There is not a lot of blood in some other things. Napoleon sent his brother to rule us. Then there is a picture like *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* by the artist David. When the Emperor was really on a *mulo*. Goya would never. He shows all of the blood."

Ted imagined the simultaneous volley of shots, lead balls and black powder propellant. Crumbling bodies, liquid pooling in boots, the blousing shirt of the frontmost man dragged down with the weight of crimson, that explosive spring blood of May. Tiny bone ornaments spitting into the air. Darkly meated hearts emptying.

"Do you have to see blood?" he challenged. "For there to be carnage? Perhaps to cross there was no blood."

She smiled. "Now you are sounding like a man."

"I wonder how Goya would have painted Franco," Ted said. Then he answered his own question. "He would not have. He would have been executed long before that."

"You are probably correct," Valeria said. "But do not change the subject."

"Who's changing the subject? I thought we were talking about blood."

"Yes," she said. "Why you have come. You have bled and you have come to get the blood moving again."

Ted faced her squarely and hated the pitying moisture in her soft olive-like eyes and the wet crescent of sweat gathering in the draw between her breasts. "And if I have, what's wrong with that?" he asked.

"Eduardo, you are thinking you have bled enough. You have not bled enough," she said.

"Yeah? You think so? Then I need to drink more and fill up the tank. You will bring me more *chupitos* and more *grappa* and *orujo* and *ginjinha*," he said, making the motion of taking shots over and over with his right hand.

"*Ginjinha* is Portuguese," she corrected.

"It's all the same inside."

"You have not bled enough," she said again.

"Suppose I accept what you say. Suppose I say I have not bled enough. How do I know when I have bled enough?" he asked.

"When you do not think of yourself anymore."

He laughed. "That sounds suspiciously religious."

"You are in Spain." She emptied the pockets of her skirt and showed him two objects, one wooden, another one smaller, in silver. "You see, I have two rosaries, just in cases."

"Don't tell me you believe in the lions too," he said, rolling his eyes.

"What lions? In Granada?"

He did not answer, stopping himself when he found he did not want to explain once more. But he looked at the rosaries she held out in the dim light. They were in fact very different, not only in material and size, but in shape and arrangement. One appeared to be the typical five-decade rosary he had seen his grandmother carry, with an ornately carved crucifix and pink stones set into the beads, the other strung with seven silver medallions depicting miniature Marys in odd conformations of sorrow.

Valeria caressed the largest Mary, the main pendant, with her thumb. "Do not joke about that. It's not handsome," she said.

"You mean *becoming*." Words were starting to come back to him.

They were both silent for a moment. A light flared briefly from a passing vehicle in the street below, which threw up a long shadow whose edge could be seen just above the concrete floor of the balcony. Then Valeria patted the radio, though she did not switch it on. "You are not completely wrong," she said. "There is blood without carnage. I guess that is the way we are fighting now. The modern way."

He shrugged. "What are they protesting?"

"You would not understand," she said.

"Oh, that's rich. Maybe you don't understand yourself."

"Eduardo," she said. "I am *Madrileña*. I understand."

He could not help but smile. "I thought you said you weren't and that no one has been killed."

"I know what I said. I know what it is about. And none of it is good. No one has been killed, it is true," she said. "But there is blood."

"Blood unseen," he said.

"Sometimes," she said. "I think I am *Madrileña*. *Un poco*."

"Yes," he said. "I see that."

Valeria finished the *tinto de verano* and placed both glasses on one tray and stacked the trays on top of each other. "Tomorrow, Eduardo."

"*Mañana*," he said, teasing her, deliberately pronouncing it to rhyme with *banana*. "What about tomorrow?"

"Go," she said, the dimple appearing in her cheek, and he knew that she was not upset. "Look again at the paintings. When the museums open again. *Ella espera por ti*."

She waits for you, he translated to himself. "Don't you mean they?" he asked. The soldiers, the men in the painting, the spilled hearts and those tiny flecks of heads and torsos in the background still awaiting their turn in front of the fusillade, waiting for over two hundred years and who would be for many more in the basement of the collection, among all the great halls and the curators monitoring the rooms, getting up and sitting down, tourists pointing, scholars studying and comparing and footnoting.

"I mean *her*. You will go look at her again first. I know it," Valeria said.

"Her?"

"*La Maja*." She gestured with her chin towards the print above his bed and he, too, tilted his head backwards, remembering it hung there. "Your sweetheart."

"Right." So she had noticed his interest then, perhaps had seen his card held in hand on the day he asked for the correct postage, watched from behind the bar as he skipped to the postbox on the other side of the street and spat at the card lightly and dropped it through the slot. How long had it taken for the spit to dry inside that dark hydrant, among those other cards, bound for other places? She must have thought him crazy. And yet, his face did not warm.

"What did you think of her?" she asked.

"*La Maja*? In reality?" he said. "So strong. She filled the entire room. I felt full, as if I had eaten something."

"And still you hungered for it."

He had not really thought of that. But Valeria's words made sense. He had taken time on the bench in front of the painting and sensed the expansion and contraction of his stomach, and upon exit had hunted down the nearest stand vending *churros con chocolate* on a paper plate. And then as a result of the sugar had required something salty and finally something liquid to chase the lacking each taste left. He ended on a bench back in the Buen Retiro, heaving into a public trash can.

"I will be careful," he said.

"And then them," Valeria said, smiling as if she knew just what had happened.

"And then them," he said.

Valeria rose from the chair, and on sandalled feet, the hem of her skirt skimming the tile, walked to the balcony. She grazed the railing lightly with a finger and then walked back inside, circulating among the articles of the room, sometimes touching them, sometimes only sweeping her gaze across them. She stopped before the closet, with one foot half-inside. Her hand on the knob where his camera bag hung.

"This closet, it smells like lavender," she said. And turned around to look at him. "I placed no sachets of lavender."

He remembered the hammam and the violent scrubbing. "That's me," he said.

"That's you," she agreed. "That is Eduardo."

And then she touched the edge of the towel on her way out, as though in an act of sanctification, and left the door slightly ajar. He heard her soft footsteps shuffle back down the staircase.

After a few moments, a rapping sounded from below, the thump of a broom handle being driven into the ceiling. "Curfew has started," he heard her call, sounding muffled and very far away. He checked the time on his phone and confirmed it.

"*Graças*," he muttered.

In all the time he and Valeria spoke, Ted had not shifted from the bed. Lita in her beauty and distress had left his bones inarticulate and floppy. Now he sat forward and tested his knees, encircling them with his arms, pressing on the patella on each side with the corresponding thumb. Looping his shoulders and

neck as Valeria had done, he stood, and taking a few steps backwards, reviewed *La Maja*. Her fine dark eyes still punched into him, her nipples that must have been so tender to touch. He picked up the postcard on the nightstand as he switched the lamp off. He thought back to the words he had written in anger and drink.

When Ted had first mailed the postcard to Elizabeth, he imagined her waking up in the master bedroom which was now hers alone, selecting the perfect blouse, skirt, and heels for work from the behemoth of a closet, running the various appliances in the kitchen, and approaching the mailbox at the end of the driveway with her liquid breakfast in hand. She would retrieve the stack of mail, toss the advertisements into the box they had kept in the foyer, and find *La Maja* at the bottom, running her finely lacquered nails over the image and turning it over. She would read what he had written and turn ashen. He fancied she might need a moment to sit down on the sectional, her head bent, gold teardrop earrings pendulous, forming an acute angle with the line of her neck. She would fumble on the counter for her phone, still holding the postcard, her eyes re-navigating the letters and words, and dial his number. Several times. Waiting. Tapping her foot. He would let the calls all go to voicemail. He supposed it was a fantasy all along. The scenes appeared to him as indistinctly now as the other side of the room through the seaweed-green glass of a bottle of *Rioja*—what was once so clear, now jellied and murky. He would never see her receive it. When he returned on the fifteen-hour flight back to YVR, Morgan promised to pick him up in Ted's own van, the orange camper. They would switch places in the front seat so Ted could drive it back using the route he preferred. They would drive through the suburbs. The weather would be cooler in Vancouver, but still swing in the high hammock of summer. They would not pass by the Dunbar-Southlands neighborhood where Elizabeth and her medical student lived. They would drive in the perpendicular direction along the BC-91. If she had received it already, he had not been there to see it and never would.

He studied the card in his hand. He wondered if he should send it to himself at Morgan's. The edge of the E on EXCELLENT had smudged from the brief dampness of his sweat. If he mailed it now, it would not arrive until at least a few days after he did. Morgan's kids usually raced one another to get the mail; he would have to somehow beat them. Or maybe it did not matter who got there first.

Ted turned and walked out to the open balcony and the railing. A fine mist fell, the railing wet. It was almost fifteen minutes past the hour of the curfew and the lights from the buildings across the way were dimmed behind their own balcony curtains. Those neighbours never appeared, not to smoke, eat, kiss, nor fight, not in June and not now. The sky shimmered brighter outside than inside with his lamp extinguished and the last pale colors of the signs were milky along the lane. Black water bled in the lines between the paving stones. All the shuttered bars and cafés appeared like abandoned abbeys of worship. Slender shadows of street lamps and dark beds of spring blooms complied with the curve of the empty street. He sensed last cigarettes being extinguished beneath awnings, the scroll and click of doors locking, solid-panel security gates ratcheted down.

The morning, *la madrugada*, when it came, would come on quickly. The laminar colours of the early sky surmounting and succeeding one another, dragging the sun behind them, comforted him in their constancy. He would sleep in his clothes tonight. When he rose, he would breakfast and fix himself up a bit at the sink. Then he would take the old path, across the street, past the yellow pillar of the *Correos*, to the red diamond of the metro sign at Noviciado, and glide beneath to the gates, to where a deduction on his transit card would return him to Banco de España station and the Prado. There, he would descend the stairs again to the basement of the museum, rest briefly at the nude woman, and then enter the room where the other painting hung, and stand directly before it, with the attention due to a first viewing although it was not, nursing at the blues, red, browns, and blacks, for his health, for a time, for the moment.

END